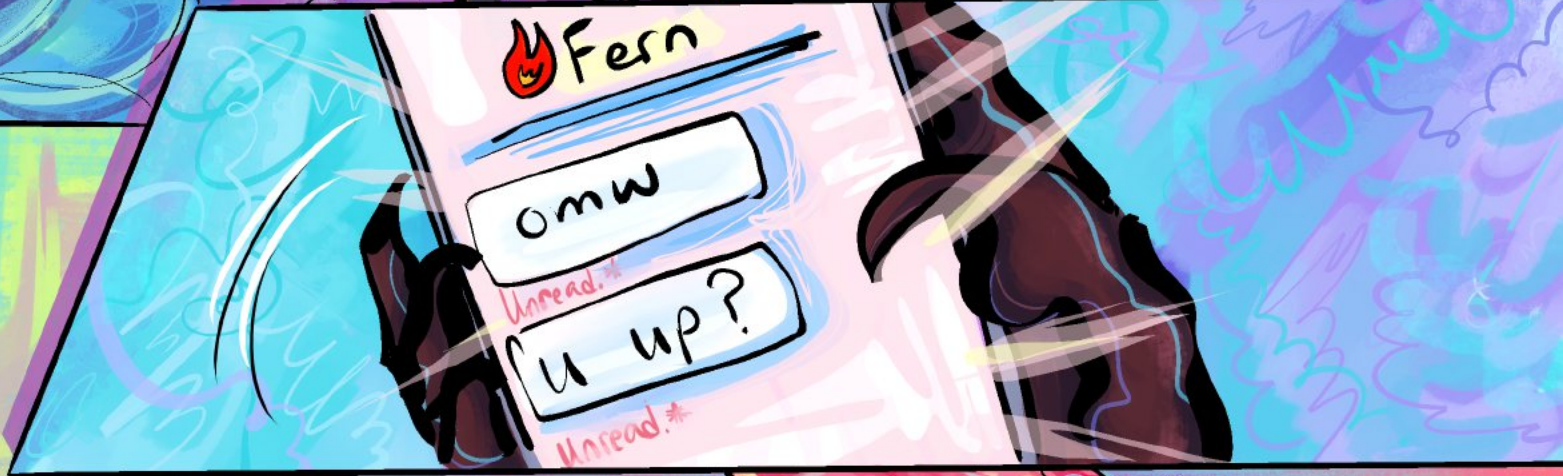


"... AND THE SPIRIT IS SO CLOSELY LINKED TO THE BODY AS A THING THAT THE BODY NEVER CEASES TO BE HAUNTED ... IF DEATH REDUCES IT TO THE CONDITIONS OF A THING, IT IS MORE PRESENT THAN EVER. THE BODY THAT HAS BETRAYED THE SPIRIT REVEALS IT MORE CLEARLY THAN WHEN IT SERVED IT."

- Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*





Fern....has
problems.

I mean, I do too,
bigtime problems,
but right now-

Geh!

Oh! It's you, sir.

G-good morning.

Two of
them...

I'm really
sorry, sir. It's
my fault -

No, no.
You're not in trouble.
It's not my job to-it's just-

Please, please
don't fire us...!!

It's just that
one thing led
to another and-

Uh-

He's
very...
rational,
sir....

Um-I don't necessarily need
or want to hear the details,
so, please just stick to, uh,

what am I getting
into, here...??

I mean,
for example,

was he drunk?

No...

We only
drank a bit,
afterwards.

He was
clear about
what he wanted,
and, we...uh...
obliged him.

Okay. Thanks
for telling me.

But this can't occur again.
Lemanerial will be changing
your assignment.

Thank you, sir.

Please don't thank me.
This wasn't in your job
description, right?

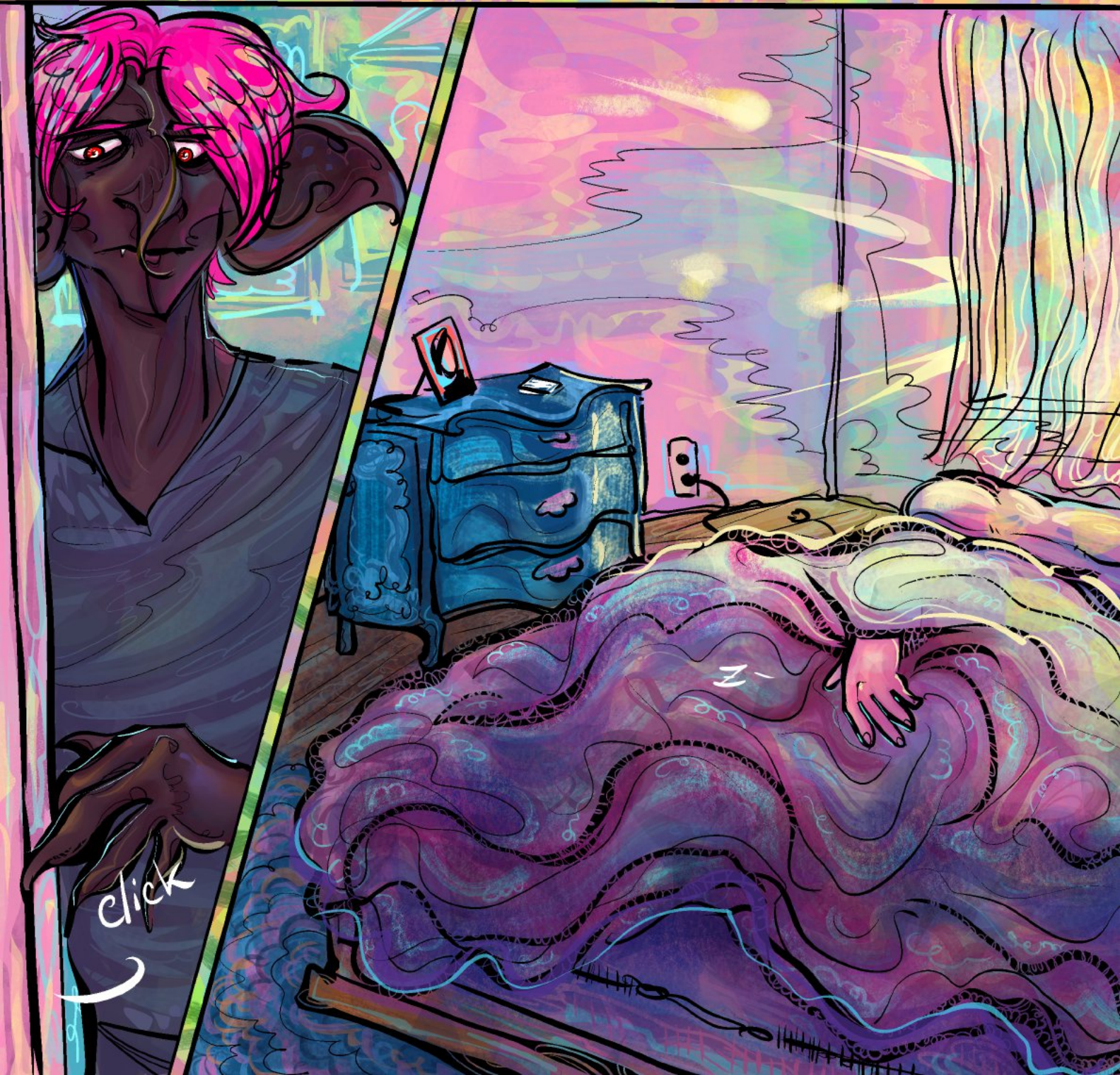
Er, well, we're not
about to complain-

Hopefully, this is
the end of it, okay?

Did you guys
already eat?

Thanks, but,
we actually need
to roll out...

All right, I'll
be in touch.







Mm...



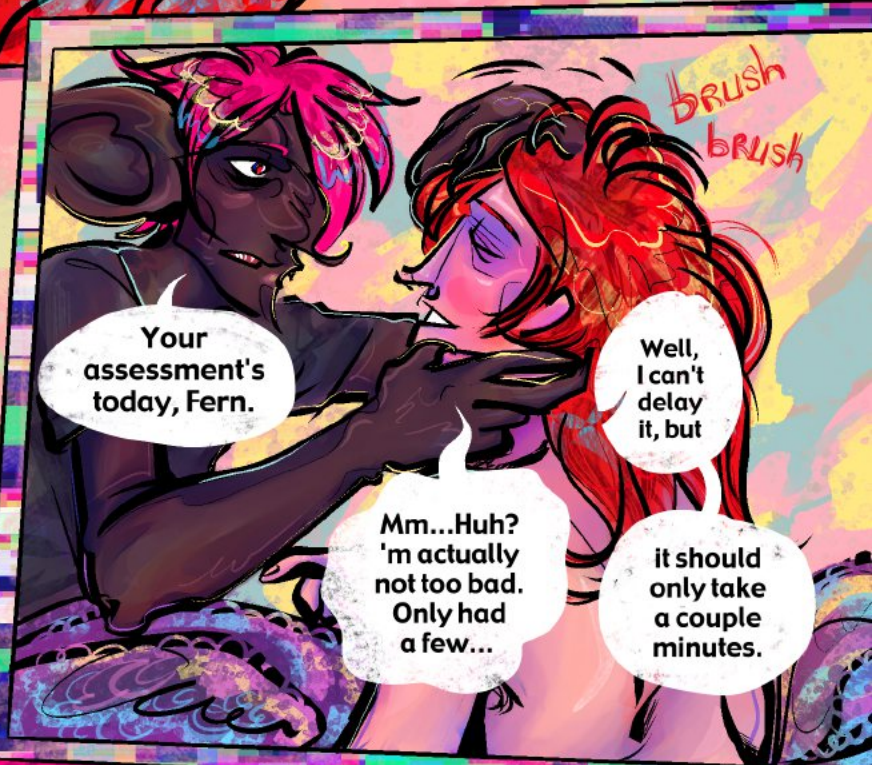
Rae...?

Yeah, it's me.
Time to get up.



How are you
feeling?

Ugh....Why?
Isn't it Sunday?



Your
assessment's
today, Fern.

Well,
I can't
delay
it, but

Mm...Huh?
'm actually
not too bad.
Only had
a few...

it should
only take
a couple
minutes.



Hop in
the shower.
I hung clothes
for you.

Aight...




If you need
to smoke,

yawn~

use the
cigarettes
I left in the
kitchen.

They won't block
your aperture.

Right...right...



Did those guys
feed you?

I think
so.

Where
are your
glasses?

That, I don't
know...

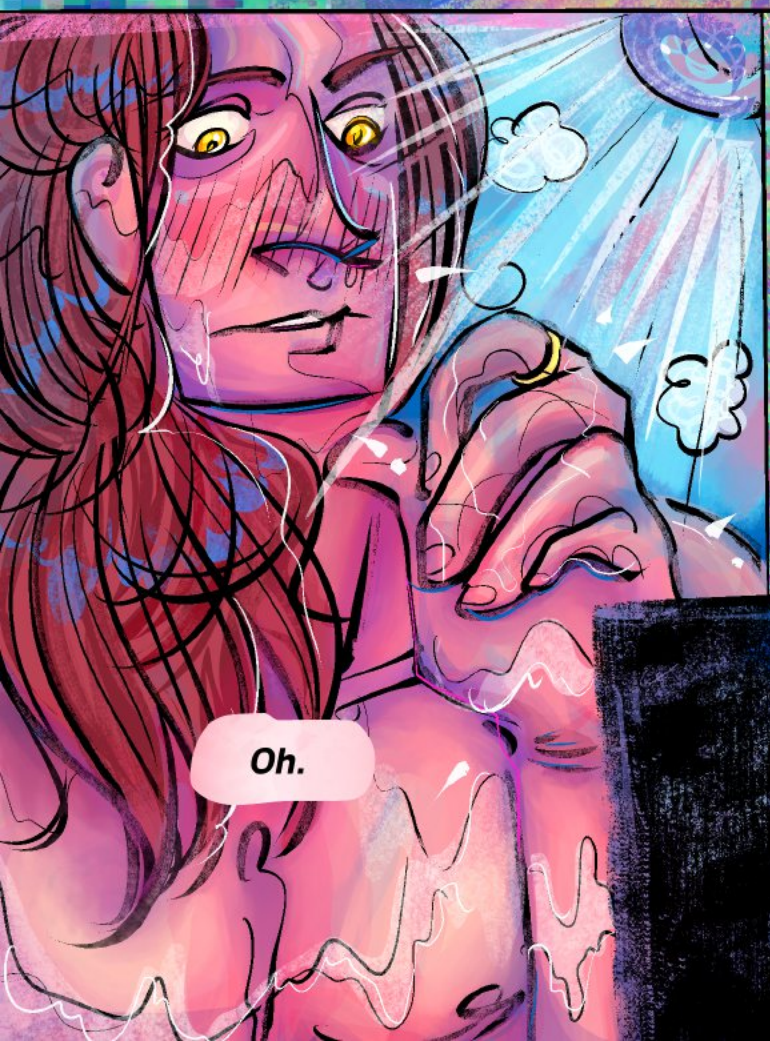


I'll look for your glasses & make breakfast.



I'll check on you if you're not out in ten.

Okay. Thanks.



Oh.



Yeah.

A week ago, I saw him.

We met in the garden
of the old house.

Lem, Rae, & May
were all there, too.

We had some time together,
by ourselves, within sight
of the others...

We talked for a bit.
He gave me a ring.

But I sobbed
so hard he couldn't
understand me, so

we had to
stop.

Embarrassing.

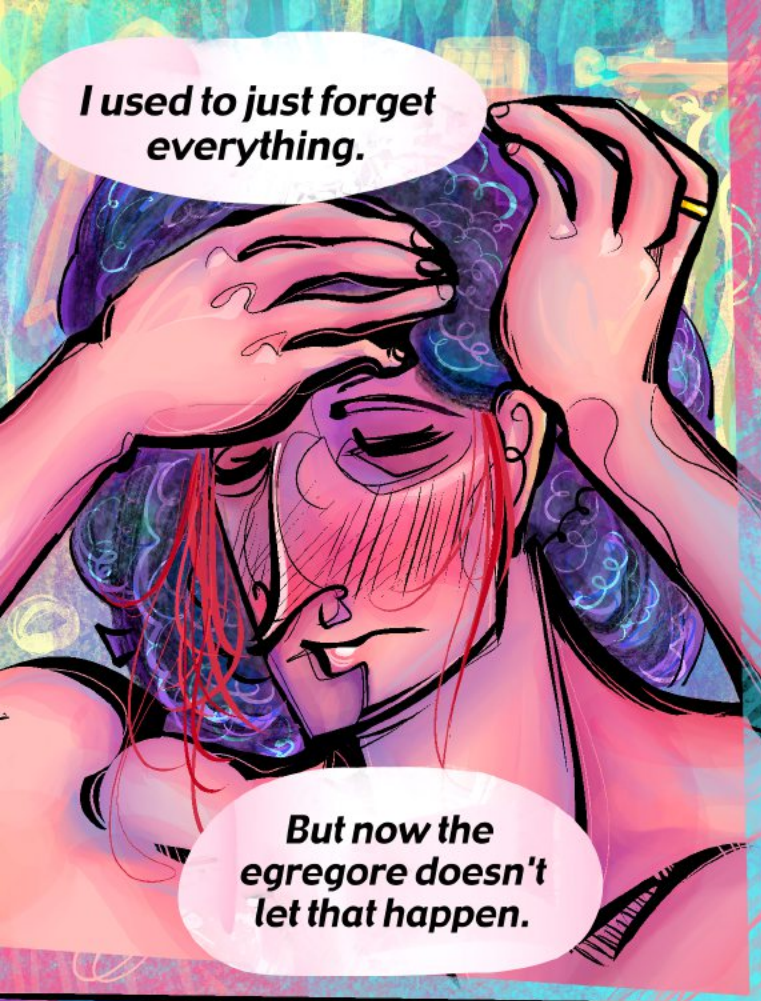
Because I
couldn't control
myself,

we weren't
able to make
any progress.

What's worse,
I'm only realizing
this because...now
I realize things.

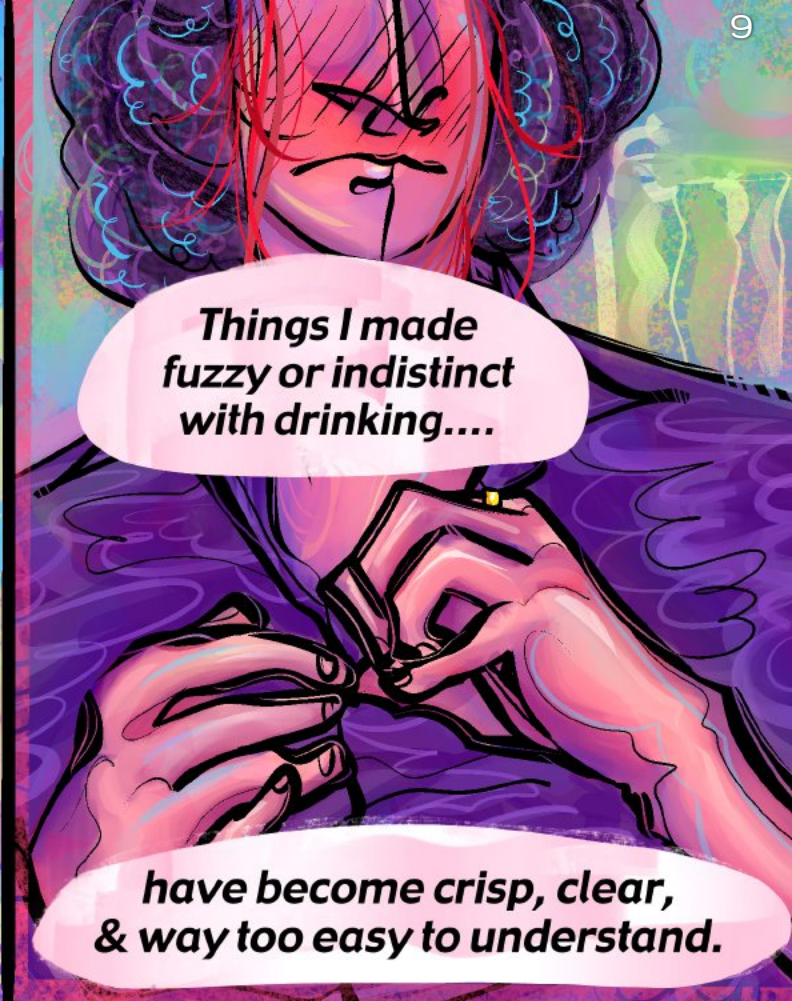
I'm realizing
I'm having realizations.

Terrible.



I used to just forget everything.

But now the egrecore doesn't let that happen.



Things I made fuzzy or indistinct with drinking....

have become crisp, clear, & way too easy to understand.



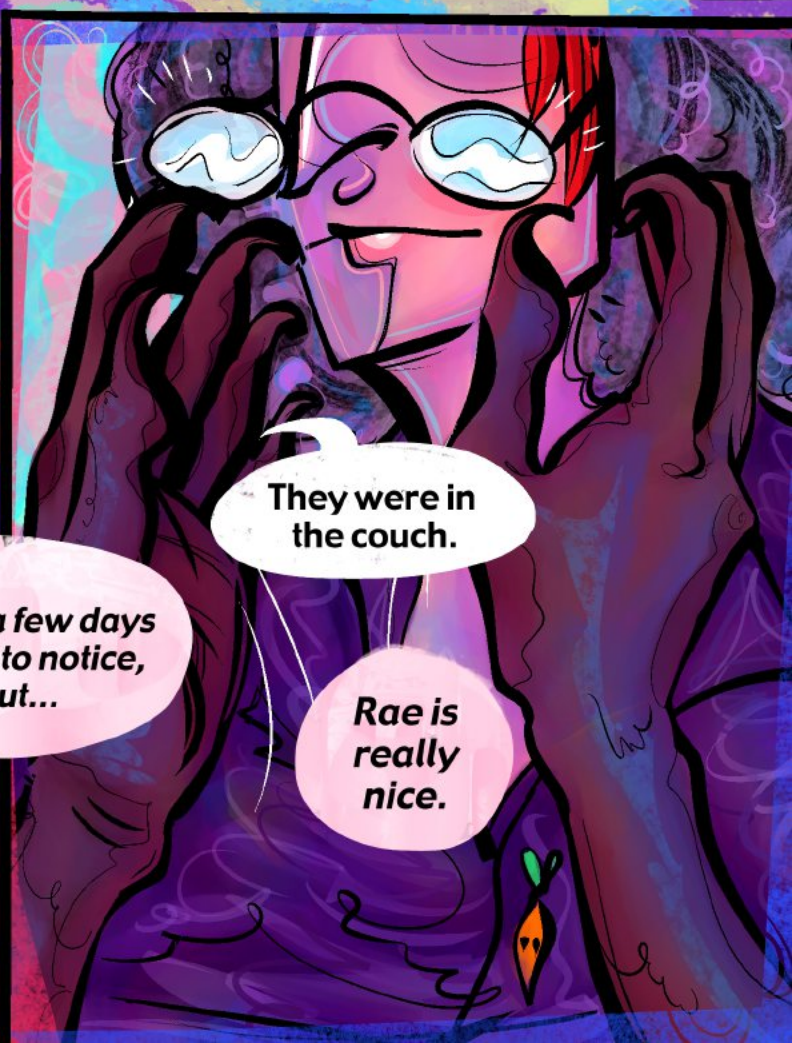
And, I mean, some of these memories...

are really something.



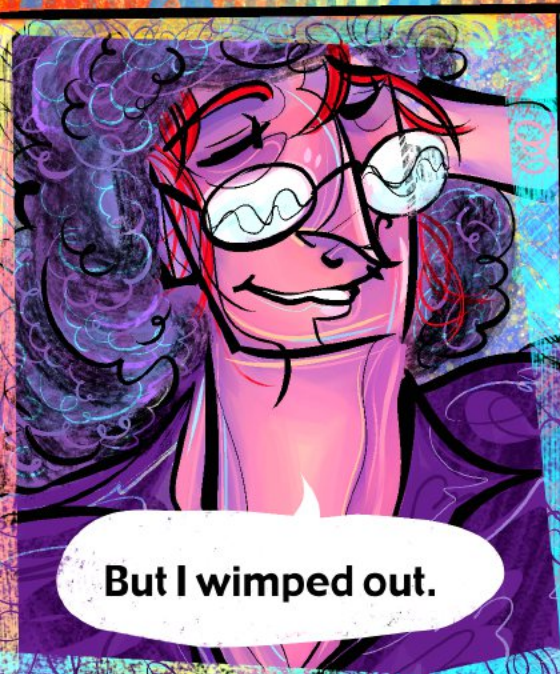
Rae is ...nice.

It took a few days for me to notice, but...



They were in the couch.

Rae is really nice.



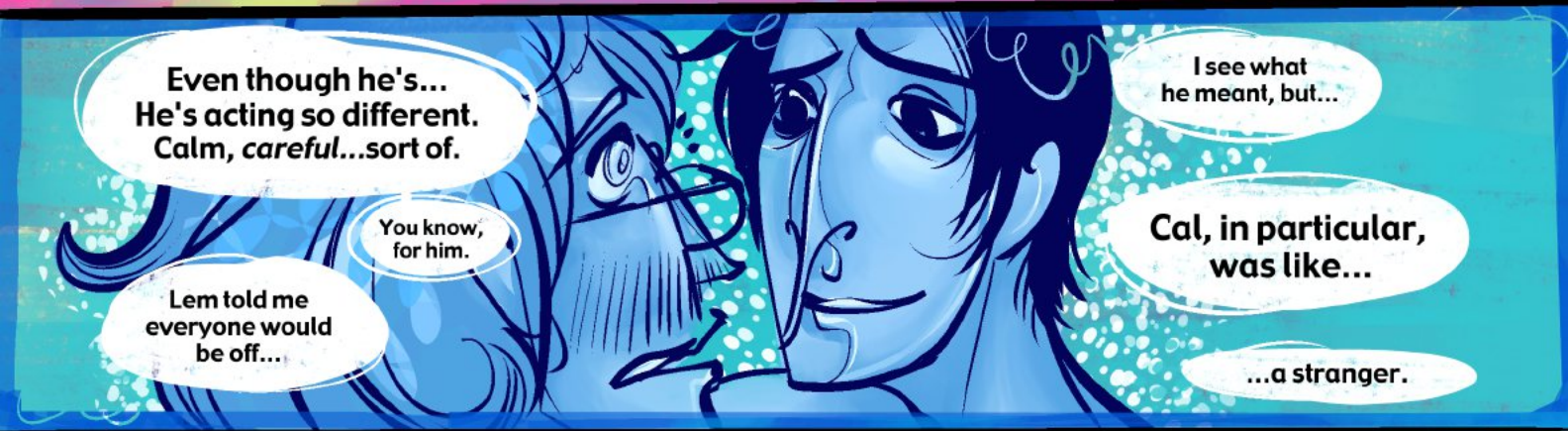


I should've gone.

If I don't prove to myself
we can still talk casually...



He'll always be a
monster under my bed.



Even though he's...
He's acting so different.
Calm, careful...sort of.

You know,
for him.

Lem told me
everyone would
be off...

I see what
he meant, but...

Cal, in particular,
was like...

...a stranger.



We talked about it, &
I know he's still himself.
I mean...I'm different too.

But he also
saw being
strangers...
as a positive.

He said we're
"getting to know
each other for
the first time..."

Because we
didn't really,
before...



But I...

S...sorry.
I'm going on
and on again.

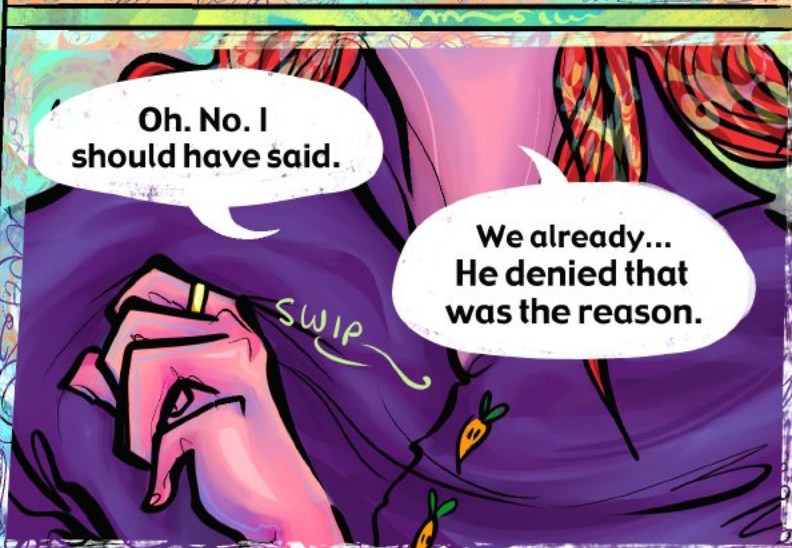


You must be
sick of hearing
about this...



I'm not sick of
hearing about it.

I'm here to listen.

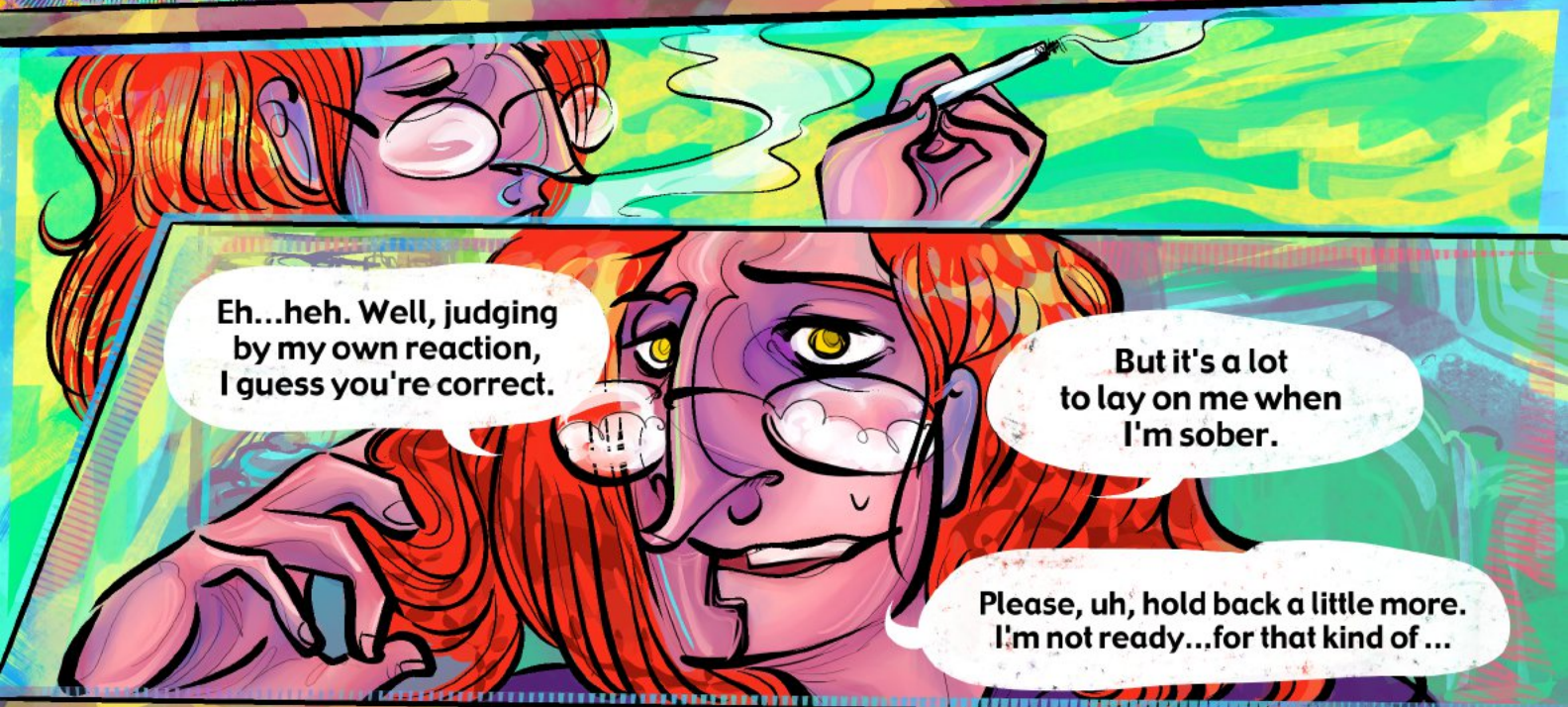




Do you roll them yourself?

I've never seen them so tidy.

May & her family. Cal helps some-times.



Eh...heh. Well, judging by my own reaction, I guess you're correct.

But it's a lot to lay on me when I'm sober.

Please, uh, hold back a little more. I'm not ready...for that kind of ...



Um...

You, me, Lem...We have many experiences that we have in common to discuss.



There's a lot, and I'm eager to get started, so...

Thanks for letting me know I'm overstepping.

I say too much.

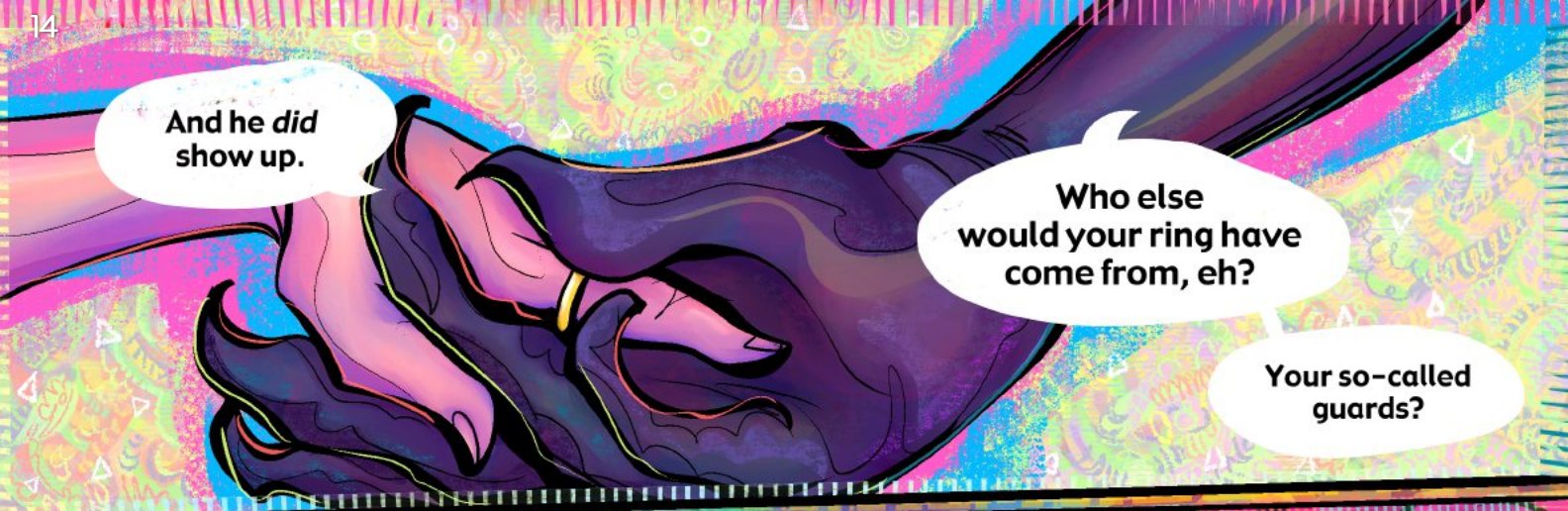


Cal is Cal.

Just less... "energetic."

You'll adjust to him.

14



And he *did* show up.

Who else would your ring have come from, eh?

Your so-called guards?



You're joking, but... those guys were really serious...

Fern, um...



Oh, it's fine to be disgusted with me.

You wouldn't be wrong.




Don't put words in my mouth.



Like I said, I'm here to listen, if you want to talk about it.



Eh...



I'm better than ever.



It's... y'know.

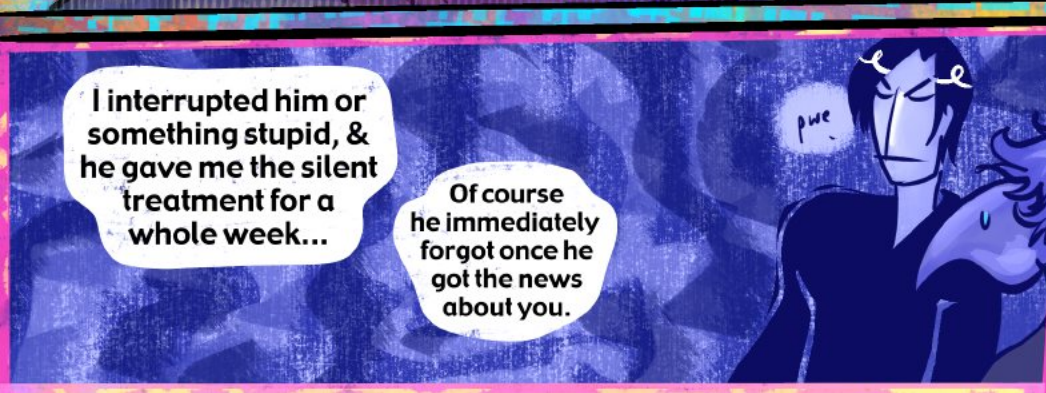
'Bad habits.'

What are Cal's 'bad habits,' lately?



Ugh....

Um, recent example.



I interrupted him or something stupid, & he gave me the silent treatment for a whole week...

Of course he immediately forgot once he got the news about you.



That does sound like same old same old...



Just like home, huh?

Well, if you're all set...

Should get your assessment out of the way.



Where do we need to go?

Just outside.



Did you practice lining up your aperture with anyone this week?

Yeah. Fola enthusiastically volunteered, & Ell helped me too...

How'd it go?

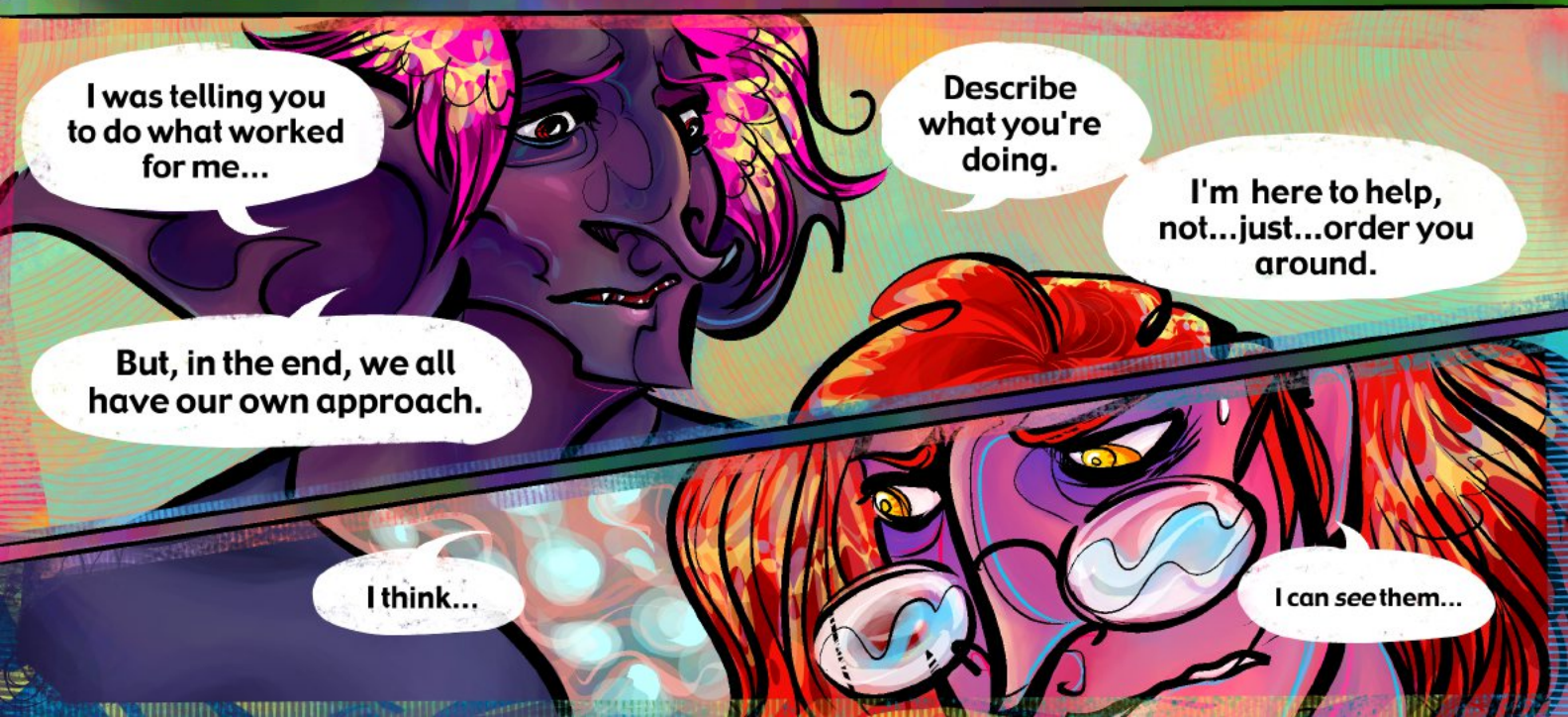


This is far enough.

Square up.

Ok.... I guess.....

Hmmm.





Whoa.
Cool.

I'm sorry
I didn't bring
it up earlier,
I wasn't
hiding it on
purpose or
anything,

I
really
thought I
was only
seeing
things!

Fern...
Even if you
think you're
only seeing
things...

if you experience
something that
frightens you-

I am
NOT scared!

Hold on!

Just-

Hey!

Lined up?

Yeah...
J...just like that.

Your aperture...
on your back?

Yeah. I put
it there so it doesn't
keep me awake.

You *also* control
your aperture's location
by yourself?

Fern...
you gotta
tell
me this stuff.

...Yeah.....

I am
really
sorry

your
observations
matter

I can't
help it

SHIVER

Ugh. Fern,

you have this incredible ability.
If Cal hadn't...we could all have
been....this whole time...

....
Sorry.
I shouldn't
be thinking
like that.

The assessment.

We'll keep it very
simple, okay? Just to
see how it goes.

Right now, I'm drawing energy
from your aperture into mine,
& casting it, right?

When you take over, I'll have you
pull energy *back* from my aperture.

Your damaged aperture
can't control or stabilize
your plasma, so we're
using mine instead.

We're casting
a small, but very
intense flame.

I will
slowly increase
the amount I'm
drawing...

...for a hotter flame.
Just let it add to
itself.

How does that
feel? Do you think
you could replicate
that by yourself?

It doesn't
hurt...

It feels...
surprisingly
smooth. It's not all
rough & random
like usual.

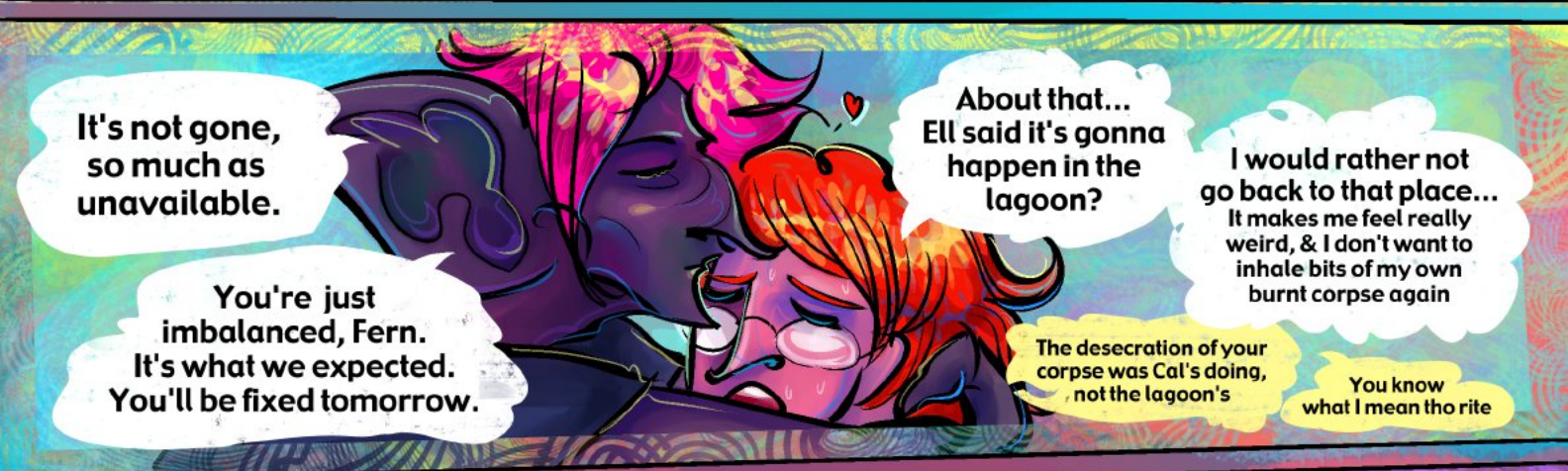
Good! I'm glad you
can feel a difference.

Okay, now you
give it a try.

Only go as far as
you're comfortable.

Just remember to pull *from* me,
don't cast directly.

fwip





Take a break. After, if you're not tired, we can do something fun. We can go anywhere you want.

You've been stuck in Tower for a week cus I told you to stay put...

So, how about it?

After my lame performance, I don't feel like I deserve it....

It's not a reward. We're hanging out.

Being friends.

Ah..h...yea...

Any place you wanna go?

Hmmm....

I want...

...to see the grave.

CLAP

Your colony?

Don't say that about your-self.

- flick
I said "something fun."

Your idea of fun is visiting that place?

Grief is my...road to being able to have fun again!

And if all that's left to grieve over is an empty field...

I'm nuts, & you asked.

That's the thing. It's no longer an empty field, Fern.



What?

What's different?

I'll start by saying this.

I know you want to know what happened.

You wonder if anything survived it... what it looks like, there, now.

That kind of thing.

Plus you have your family to consider.

I get it.

So, weigh the options.

Recklessly exposing yourself to it before you're ready could be unnecessarily rough.

We can't entirely predict what pain it may cause you at a delicate point in recovery.

If you'd rather wait, I fully endorse that decision, and that's definitely the safer path to take.

But...this is a matter of popular awareness.

It is possible you'll encounter it out in public when you don't expect it.

flick

I...haven't really given this that much thought, even though I've been so...preoccupied with it...

Well, we know why that's so.

Few can deal with this kinda thing alone

and you were far worse off than alone.

I think you're like me... You need hands-on experience to really digest things. So...

It might help you to see this, with me to help explain, & keep an eye out for you.

I feel like... delaying it will just make me nervous.

I don't handle dread well.

So...let's go right now!

You're fast when your mind's made up, huh?

I'll preface this with a bit of history.

We have a weird timeline with mortals at this point.

Way back when,

the mortal population was puny,

and they were largely wary of elementals.



Mortals avoided us, physically & ideologically.



We didn't feel obligated to communicate much with each other.

But around the time you were murdered, the symptoms of Cal's neglect had become obvious to everyone. People started to connect the dots that it was an elemental-caused catastrophe.



Plagues, famines, villages evaporating seemingly overnight, withering forests... This sort of devastation was more & more common.



We decided that it would be best to disclose the truth, so we could explain how we were trying to fix it.



We revealed Cal's abuse, my existence, everything.



Many terrible things happened.



Mortals rose up against us & voiced their anguish. In art, in massive gatherings. In Tower, there were riots.

The idea was to hold ourselves accountable, & give the people of Faidia the truth about their existence.



Things were a bit wild for awhile...

I...bet...

But we were prepared with a huge relief effort that Funa & Viv spearheaded...

The majority opinion shifted steadily when we got the crops growing again, you know?

Lem was so worried there would be war, but we managed to avoid it, with some luck...



We have a lot more eyes on us now. A lot more infrastructure in general.

Put up the hood, to cover your hair.

Defining our role in mortal affairs is still an ongoing process, of course.. But it's considered at all, unlike before.



Faidia still isn't ideal, of course...but things have been peaceful since we restored the environment well enough.

It's a good time for you to have woken up in.

Right then, this should do!

A weekend afternoon should be pretty quiet, so I'm not worried even if we are recognized.



With the lagoon purified, populations rose & prospered, & there was an explosive cultural renaissance.

People wrote books, plays, songs based on us. Uh. Lots on you specifically.

You ready?

I'm ready. I'll try to keep it together.

I'll be with you no matter what. We can also leave anytime. The safety word is "nillits."

That's... Um.

Rae, can we go already?



Hold on to my hand real tight.



Are we gonna teleport?

Yeah

Tell me when.

Now.

Now now?

Or now a second fro-

pop

All I did was get hit in the head with a shovel...

Well, of course you see it differently. You actually lived your life.

These people are just telling stories.

Many were quick to forgive, and life was pretty good & getting better.

In places like this, deliberate elemental worship began.

Mortova.
The town built on the location of your colony.

Give or take 1-2 miles.

They swapped to stone construction at some point.

Smart move... Fuck... It's chilly here today.

This place has actually experienced about 4 more devastating fires over the past 200 years, since your initial accident.

Are you kidding me? Did I curse this place?

No, sweetie. Old wooden cities tend to burn down.

Eesh...

I mean, they worship fire because of me right?

OK, I'll concede to that.

That's *fucked*, but not a curse.

Is 'fucked' the technical term?

Yes.

Popular interest in your story is what drew people to come & visit this place, & of course a population kept resettling it.

The fact you were gone & may or may not return made you very appealing to the public.

It was sad and romantic, and in your absence, they could project what motivations & interiority they wanted on to you.

I have no doubt sharing a face with Lem made it a lot easier for people to transfer their cultural fixation.

Even though Lem also sacrificed so much, he's been very... aloof.

The lack of information makes him a lot more difficult for the public to get attached to.

Ah... well, I don't begrudge him his uh... privacy...

I try not to, either, but I'm real worried about him.

Y... yeah... So I gather...

There it is, over there. The pride of the neighborhood

and the oldest church in town.

The apartment buildings are, of course, newer construction.


There used to be a large garden.

It's sort of small, isn't it?

This is just the entrance. It continues underground.

This is the, heh, *original* Moraneriallian church. You're worshipped here. Check out the door.

Ehh...h?



Well, it's a little faded since I last saw it.

Th....This....



What am I doing!?

You are... uhh...mastering the art of the flame, ...or whatever.

hue hue hue

Moraneriallian artworks tend to have a certain... uh...aesthetic.

You're supposed to look uh...cool?

Quite a lot of nudity..and crying... and blood.....

Sorry... um, I am... I have something in my eye.



Have we endorsed this religion?

Absolutely not. Don't worry. You don't have to act the diety for anybody. It's a rule.

Are we actually going in there?

Don't have to. We can go home or head someplace else right away.

.....
N-no, I should go in. We came all this way. I can't back down now. Right?

Fern, we didn't walk here, we magically teleported. We can biggity bounce.



You say that, but...

I can't quit being an elemental, now can I?

One day at a time, buddy. One day at a time.

The handles are so worn away....

I...I'm not touching it.... You do it.

Fern, are you listening to me?

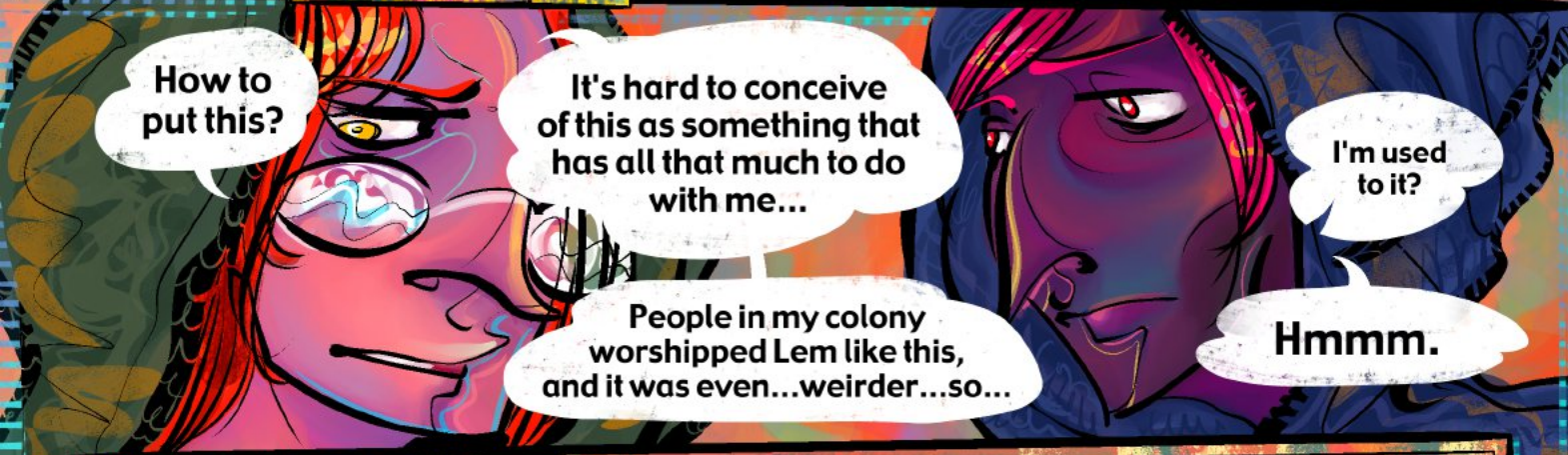
Maybe consider not going inside. We can just go home.

Just seeing this picture & thinking about what I've said is more than enough for one day.

After all,

the door is only the beginning.

It's just... I don't really want to be beaten by something so... pathetic.



How to put this?

It's hard to conceive of this as something that has all that much to do with me...

I'm used to it?

People in my colony worshipped Lem like this, and it was even...weirder...so...

Hmmm.



Practiced in ignoring my likeness because it's uh...not "mine," anyway.

Can't believe I'm actually saying this...

Uh... This door is not as old as you are, grampa.

I want to go in but I have to work up the nerve

the door is so old already

I think I can go in, I just need...

Please um. Make fun of me. Mock me or something.

It would make me more comfortable right now.

Ah... Thank you.

That's the stuff.

I know
what to do.

No, no—

Too late.



CREEEAK

Yep, that's
really, really
hot. Hate it.

Mm, it's
pretty dark,
too.

It won't be
dark for long.
You can smell
the candles,
right?

I smell em...
Are they making
candles in here?

They might
as well be.

Ugh, this
heat...

Will there
be anyone
in here with us?
It's really cramped...



He's
supposed
to keep Cal
company
while you're
with me...

Cal
is
fine.

Not likely. Place is
unpopular right now,
for a lot of reasons,
some we're bitching about
right now. I expect we'll be
on our own.

A new church
across town just
stole the spotlight.

Fresh art
& lots of space.
Electricity.

Unfortunately,
you'd be mobbed.
I'd have to arrange
private hours to tour
that one...

Eh, I'll pass.



You know a lot about this stuff, huh?

I've been studying up.

I'm easing into relieving Lem of the Elemental Mandate. I ended up being into this stuff, & he wants a break, so...

If I remember aright, it gets cooler deeper down.

So you think it's okay to eat in here?

You can do whatever you want, Fern.

Pretty sure it's always your birthday in here.

What, really?

Mostly we gather information & run our own independent audit, all because.... the churches can get pretty fucking handsy sometimes.

One church tried to claim I was a fake, & the real Raenerial was still stuck in Cal, or something.

We had to run counter literature for, like, 50 years, to get this silly idea to finally go away.

The real thing isn't real enough?

Huh?

There was a movement over it! People cared deeply about freeing the "real" Rae.

A few people tried to kidnap Cal, didn't know him that well, I guess

I have to go with you? I-if I must...

Elemental News

help me!

Not real

Kidnappers

Lem has even more to say because he's been dealing with mortals directly for so long.

There was a time when Lem received dozens of marriage proposals as part of some weird church schism.

Holy fuck. That's pretty invasive.

In terms of values, it was exactly the kind of thing we wanted to avoid. That's why he decided to form the mandate.

Can't we just ban church?

I mean...we thought about it, but like, we're not that strong

and it's a cruel & pointless endeavor to try & put a stop to it anyway.

Tower is where our official authority over culture begins & ends, but we can help people even more *through* the churches.

Tower is a big deal, but there are dozens more capitals like it across Faidia that are *not* related to us.

The people of Faidia are used to their independence, so us making overt demands on their behavior falls apart quickly.

The mandate instead targets the churches themselves.



If a church meets our standards of worship, it receives elemental accreditation.

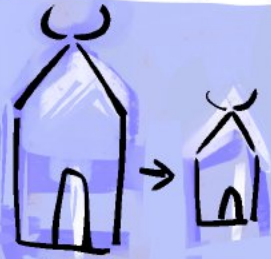
Accreditation isn't required, but to gain popular attendance, it's considered normal.

Always ironing out the wrinkles, of course...

But now there's clear & regular lines of communication between us and mortals, & we can work out how to help each other more often.

It means we're consciously watching each other, you know?

We placed a limit on the size of churches, which helped more than anything, I think.



This is where my spies come in. They audit the services.

Spies...Weird to think we have spies. Bit...seedy.

If it makes you feel any better, most of them are neccos.

All this *devotion* is surprising though?

Mortals have good reason to dislike us.

Who wouldn't want revenge after all this?

Wanting revenge is only to be expected, but

enacting revenge is rarely in the best interests of anyone involved.



Um, Fern, can you wait here for a minute?



This is where the artificial tunnel ends. It's a natural cave from now on.



Smoke can whisk you away if needed.



I want to scout ahead a bit. Make sure it's safe & empty.




OK.




I'll be right back.



I met Rae for the first time



I've spent many hours with him since then...but...



Never talking too much or too deeply about the weirdness.

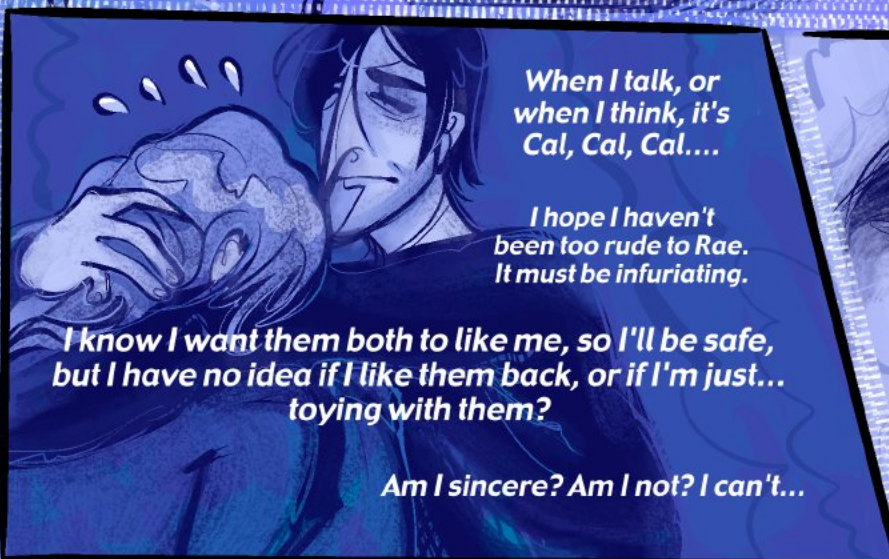
...all the stuff with his... his...

I can't get any momentum thinking this over...

Brothers. Yeah. Cal told me... they're still



when he came to pick me up, last week.




When I talk, or when I think, it's Cal, Cal, Cal....

I hope I haven't been too rude to Rae. It must be infuriating.

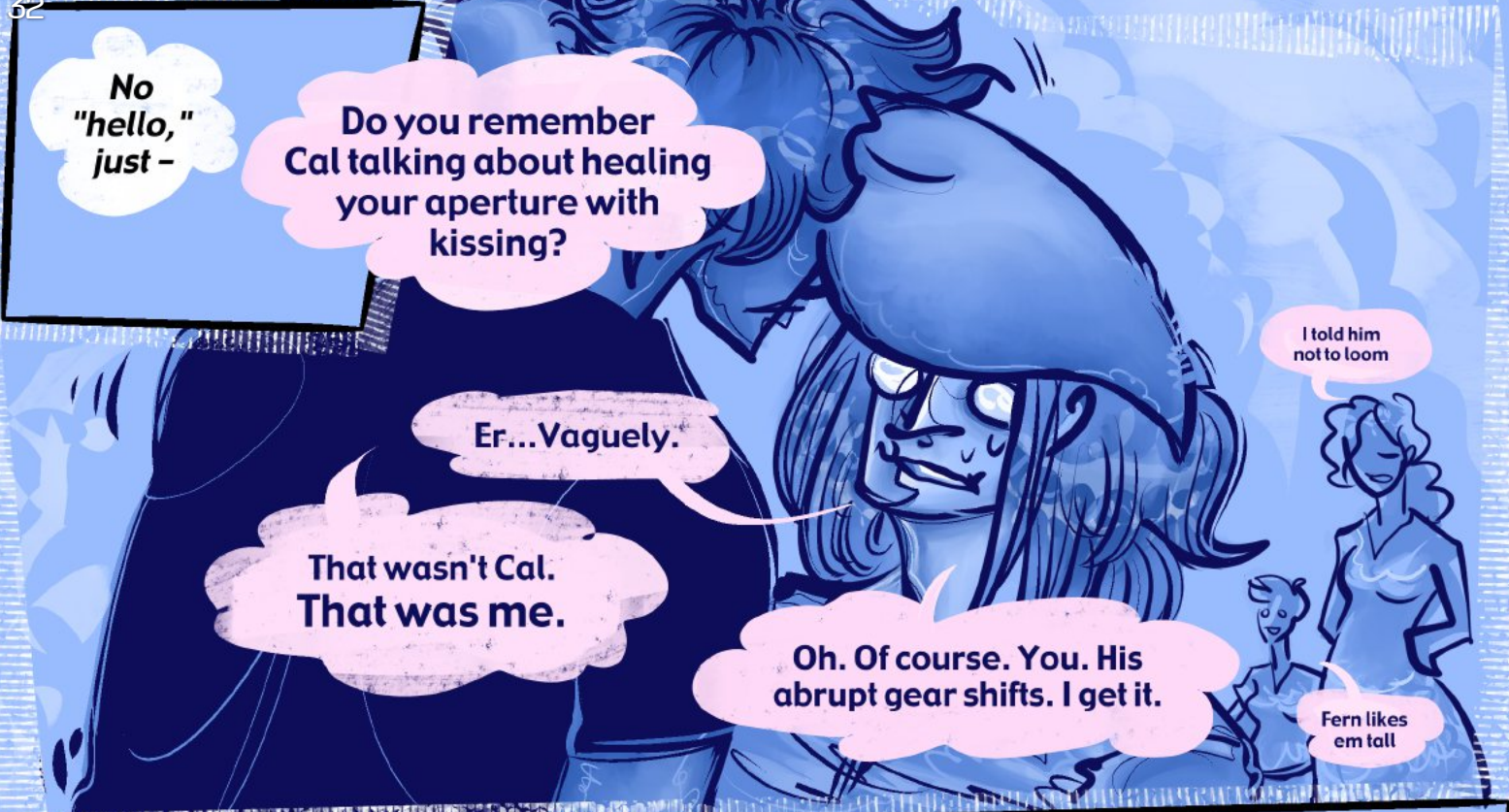
I know I want them both to like me, so I'll be safe, but I have no idea if I like them back, or if I'm just... toying with them?

Am I sincere? Am I not? I can't...



Fuck. What am I trying to remember?

Back then, Rae only talked to me for a second. What was it he said?



No
"hello,"
just -

Do you remember
Cal talking about healing
your aperture with
kissing?

Er...Vaguely.

That wasn't Cal.
That was me.

Oh. Of course. You. His
abrupt gear shifts. I get it.

I told him
not to loom

Fern likes
em tall



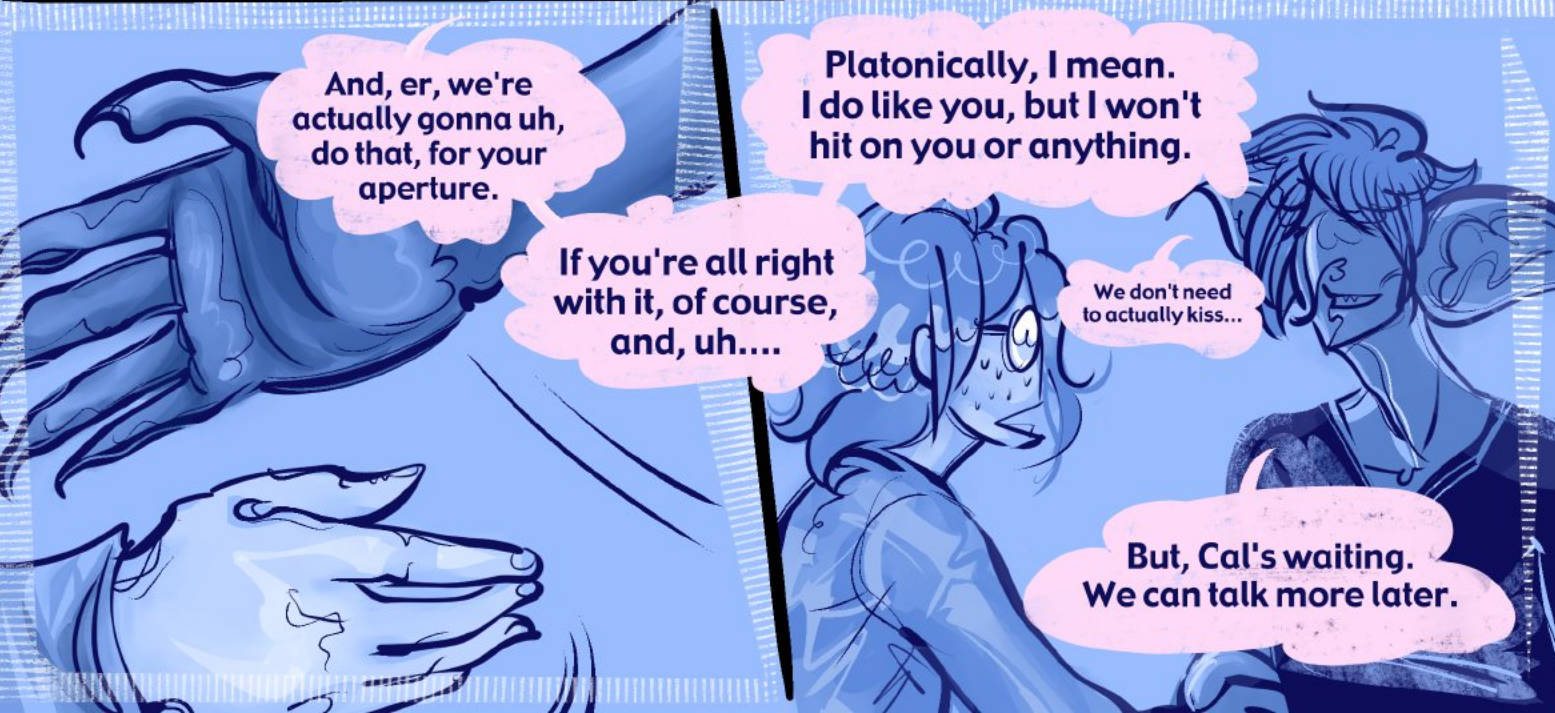
Oh, just one gear
he didn't use much.

Sorry to be
so abrupt.

I just want us
to get to know
each other...

...and that was one
of the few times we
talked.

It was so...u-uh...
embarrassing, I
reckoned you'd
remember it.



And, er, we're
actually gonna uh,
do that, for your
aperture.

If you're all right
with it, of course,
and, uh....

Platonically, I mean.
I do like you, but I won't
hit on you or anything.

We don't need
to actually kiss...

But, Cal's waiting.
We can talk more later.



Cal did tell me that Rae...



Rae had access to Cal's memories of me because... They were lonely, so they decided to....



to... share.... me...



Or um, something like that.

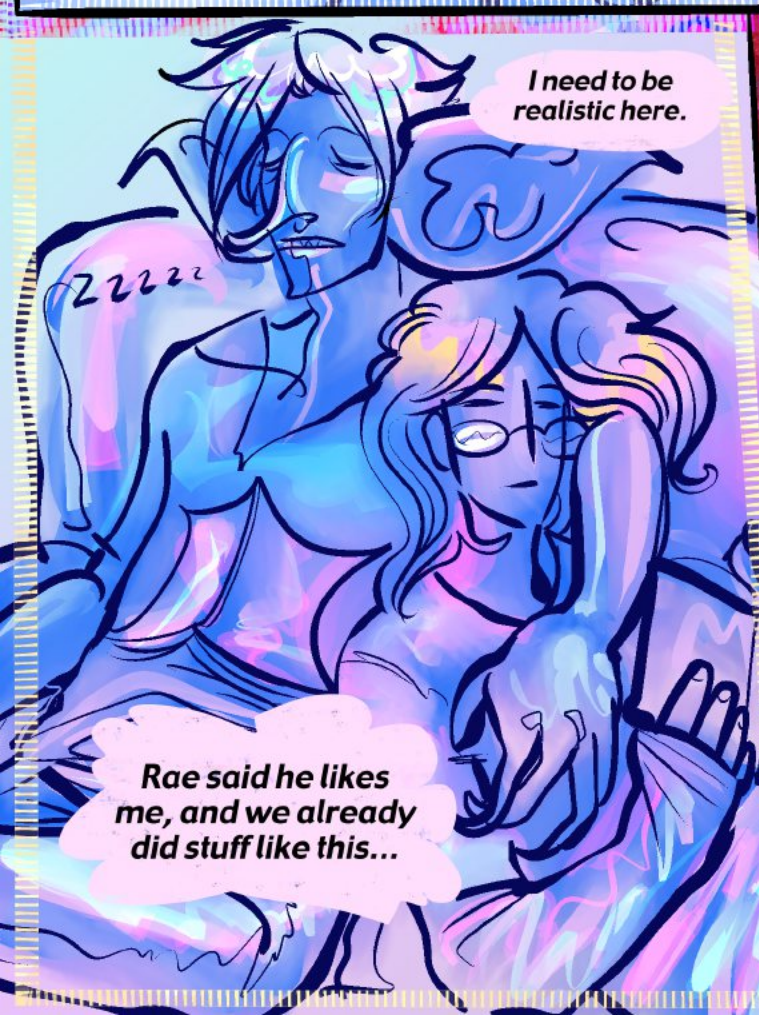
It didn't work out back then, obviously

but that was something they both agreed to at one time, so maybe it's...okay to uh, consider an option on the table?

...they were settling, of course I know that, but to think they had a plan involving me...even if it...

Uhhhhhhh
I don't know!
I don't know.

Of course it will seem nice in my imagination.



I need to be realistic here.

Rae said he likes me, and we already did stuff like this...



And that was enough!

My aperture is healing!

There's no need to go overboard, probably.

I'm nervous about getting dependent, I guess...

Hey Fern!
All clear.

I don't know when I'll be cut off from all this.

Come on.

No point in getting all worked up.

There's candle tenders, so I thought... But I checked & it's all clear.

Just enjoy it while it lasts.

Whoa ho ho...

I hope you brought a stretcher.



'Cus I'm not gonna be able to climb back out of here.

Don't worry. We'll just teleport home from the bottom.

A cave with dragon remains... no wonder they made a church.

Was this seriously always here right under their noses?

I thought carmors were only this big in Miavra.

There was a time they were this big everywhere.

Those clowns would have loved this so much...

What clowns?

Eh...Nothing.





Clowns aren't nothing.
Tell me about the clowns.

Well...

I don't really remember everything, but I remember how this place made me feel.

My life here...
wasn't...good...

I recall certain decisions I made, because ...they took a long time to make.



Now I have to live with what I did.

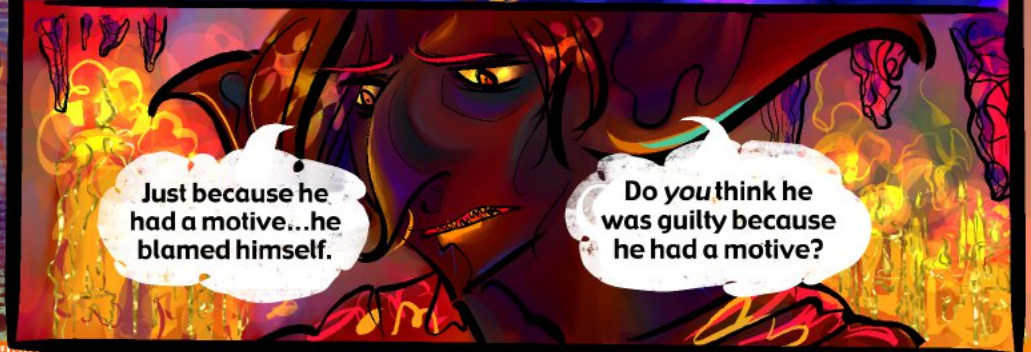
Those peoples' deaths weren't your fault.

That's true regardless of the framing.




Cal told you it was an accident. That wasn't a lie.

Fola killed his father by accident.



Just because he had a motive...he blamed himself.

Do you think he was guilty because he had a motive?



Fola was a kid, though. I was an adult.

That's not the only reason he's innocent. He didn't do it on purpose, and neither did you.

You feel responsible because you were victims who survived. That's all.



Just because you have complicated feelings about these people,

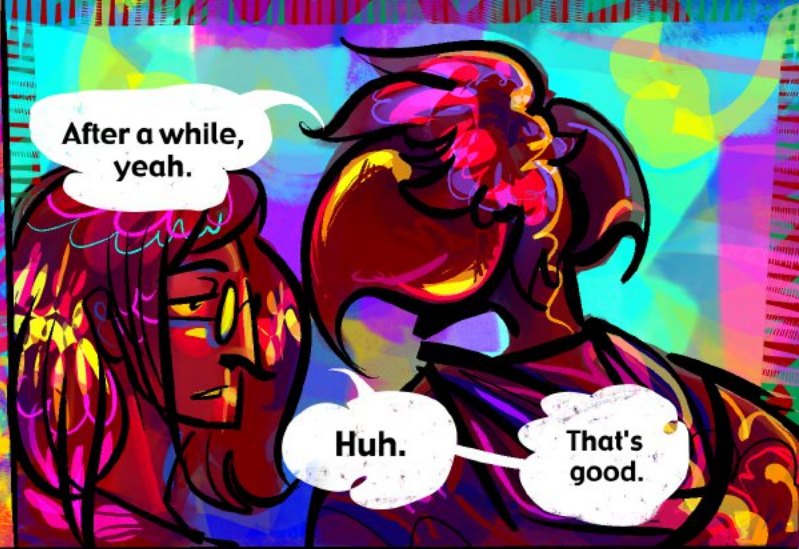
maybe even wanted to hurt them,

that doesn't mean...



Did Fola
accept
that?

After a while,
yeah.

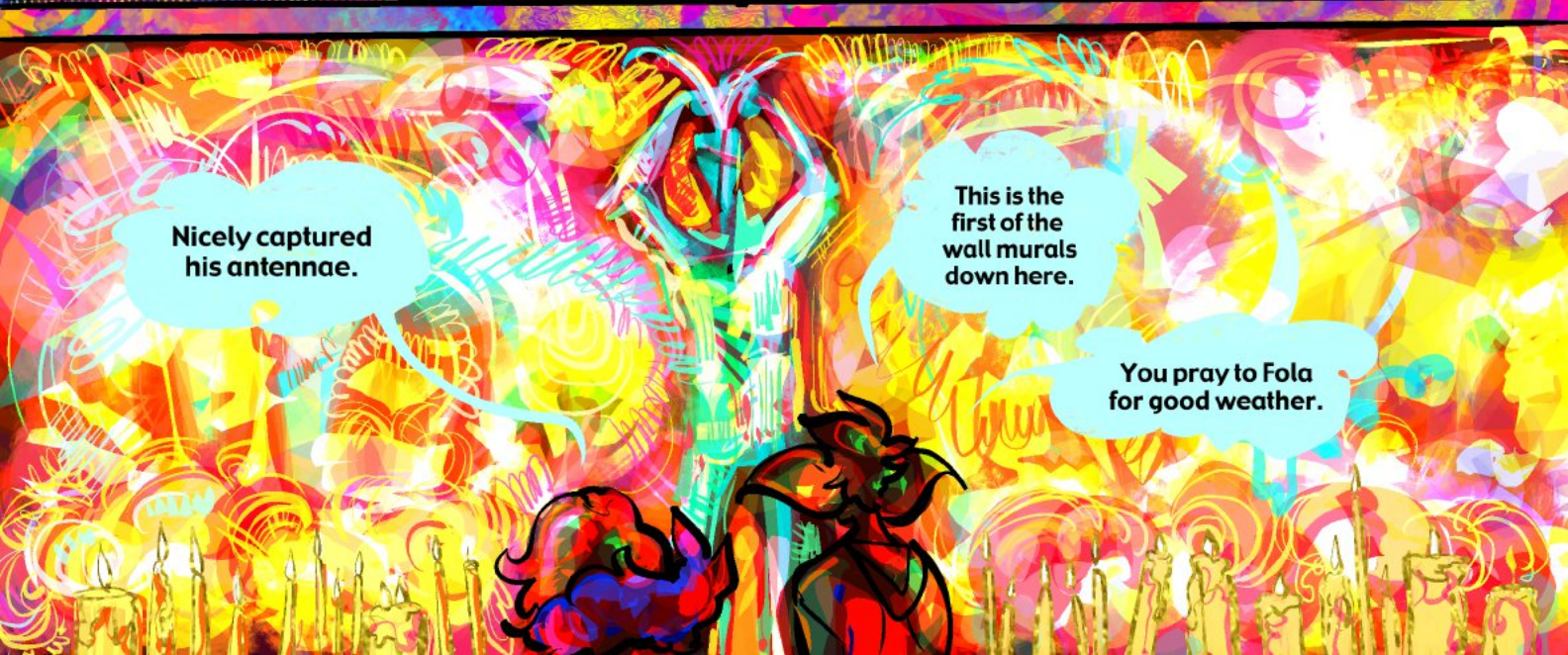


Huh.

That's
good.



Look, there
he is.



Nicely captured
his antennae.

This is the
first of the
wall murals
down here.

You pray to Fola
for good weather.



Funa, Ell, Viv...



May...Lem.

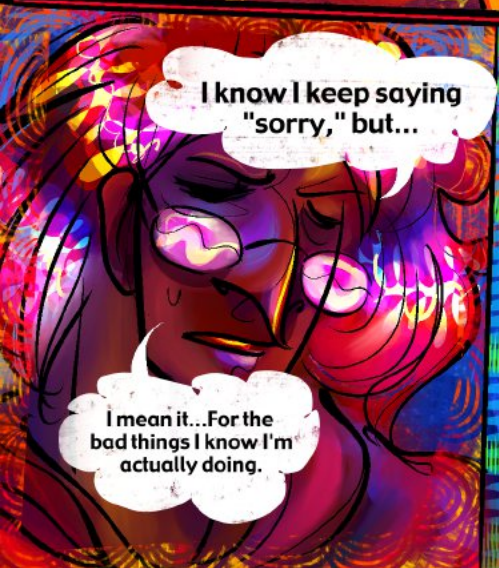
Not as much
emphasis
on them.



The secondaries are
simply more popular.

The biggest mural is dedicated
to Cal, you, and I. It's the deepest
one, at the extreme end of the cave.

It's...like...Um.
The most sanctified place.
Where the dragon's tail ends.



I know I keep saying
"sorry," but...

I mean it...For the
bad things I know I'm
actually doing.



I keep pushing
away.


You're trying to help,
& I don't even know
how to respond, how
to even...accept it.

And instead of
figuring out what
to do...

I just think, "if
only he knew
the truth..."



Fern....



You're not hurting me.

I feel lucky you're even speaking to me.



When we heard you were back, of course, Cal & I talked...

I was convinced you'd hate us. I was glad if it meant you'd be okay.



But Cal said you'd think you were in love...I mean...

You'd be in a lot of pain.

He said...

"I know what I did to him."



I have to admit,

That really got under my skin.



Lem told me to stop believing what was convenient for me...

Lem can be a gigantic dick.
Not like Cal, but he's cruel.

Well, either way,
it jogged something
in me, you know?

It's not that I killed
them...It's that I wanted
to leave, anyway, but
stayed.

Growing up I realized I
only really liked men.
When I was a teenager,
I said as much...

They told me everyone
was expected to have children,
so, that didn't "fit."

Even the others like me
didn't stand up to it.

I should have left,
but I was scared!

I didn't want to be alone,
I wanted to be with people.

They told me, "Later, we'll
let you get what you want," but I was
waiting for something that'd never come.

The others were content
doing it secretly, even though
it hurt so much.

Before I knew it, ten years
had gone by, & by then, my children
were trapped in it too!


When does "later" come
if they're the ones who decide?
Why would they give *you* what
you want, if they can just keep
taking what *they* want?

But I didn't know I
was an elemental. That
it would kill *everyone*.

I WANTED to leave! If I hadn't
been a coward,

if I'd made the
hard choice.

If only I'd left—



Why am I, of
all those people,
still alive?

I caused their deaths
clinging to a life I didn't
even want.

I'm not supposed to exist.

What if absorbing abuse
is all I'm really for?

I don't even know
if I really love Cal.

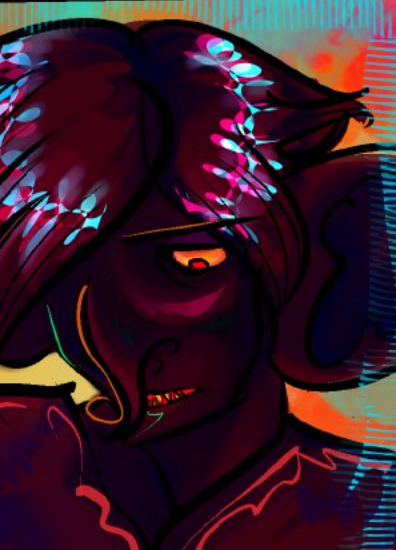
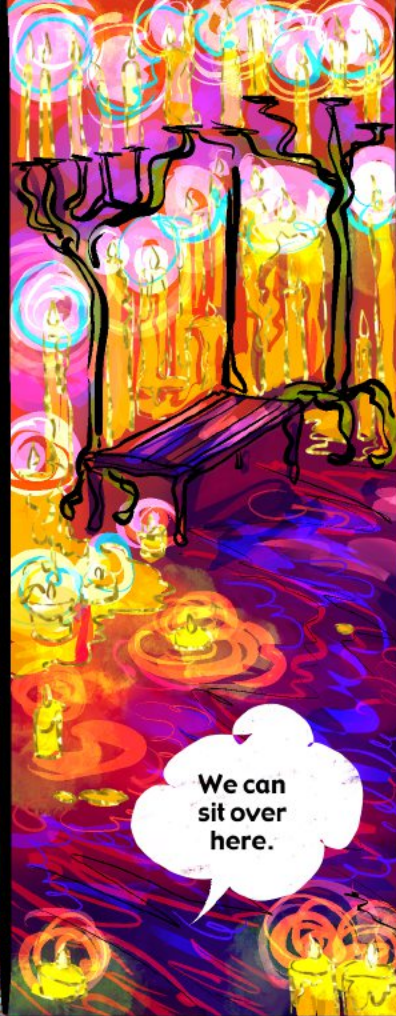
Maybe I assumed
he wanted me to, so I did.
Just to have a place.

That's how I *survive*.
Stay empty, want nothing,
obey.

But if I wasn't *like* this,
I wouldn't be so wretched.
I wouldn't have been *drunk*.

He wouldn't
have touched me.

I wouldn't have freaked out.
He wouldn't have hurt me.
I could have stopped
all of this from...

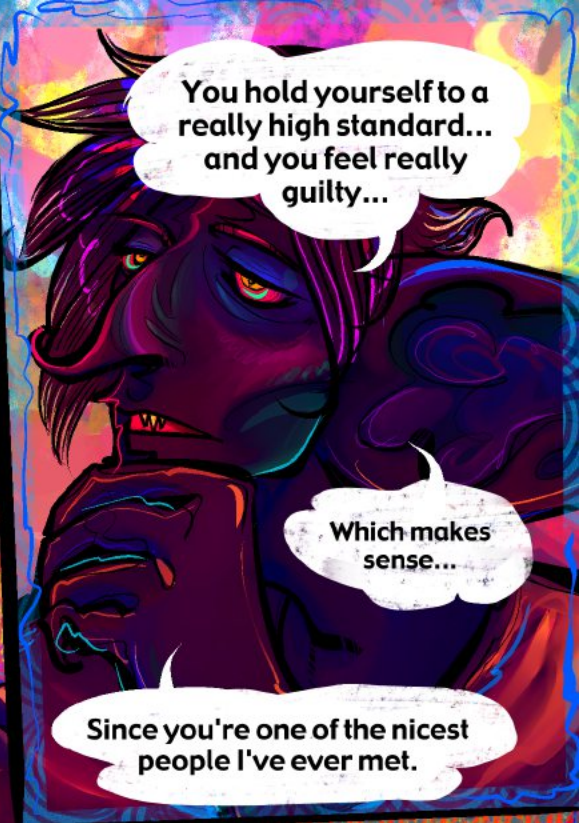




Thanks...

Are you ready
for me to respond?

Y...
yeah...



You hold yourself to a
really high standard...
and you feel really
guilty...

Which makes
sense...

Since you're one of the nicest
people I've ever met.



I know that isn't much,
coming from a shut-in
weirdo such as myself.



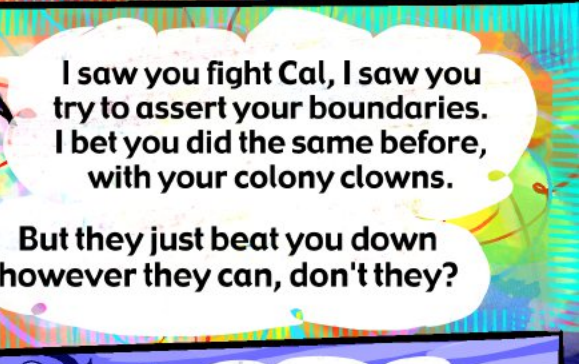
But I've met a lot
more people recently.

And it's still true,
all right?



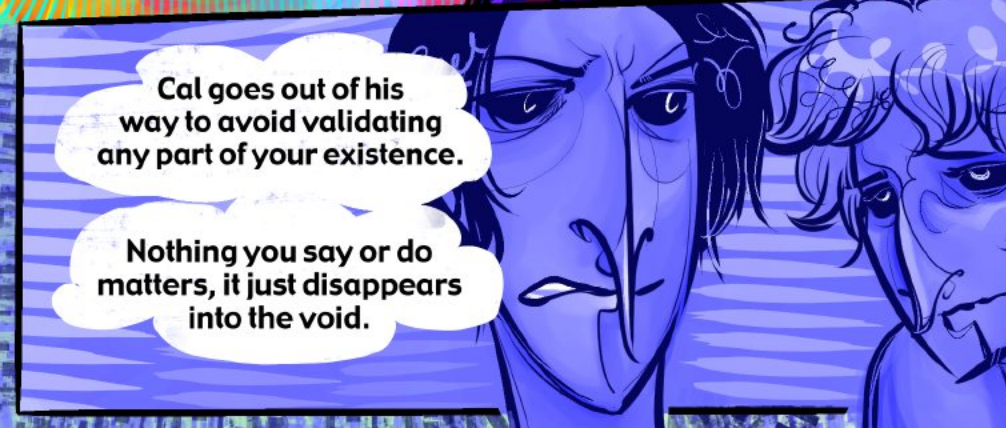
You're very
passive, & you go
with the flow, yes.

But there's more
to you than that.



I saw you fight Cal, I saw you
try to assert your boundaries.
I bet you did the same before,
with your colony clowns.

But they just beat you down
however they can, don't they?




Cal goes out of his
way to avoid validating
any part of your existence.

Nothing you say or do
matters, it just disappears
into the void.



There's no indicator
you've done *anything*.
He flushes it all down
the fucking toilet.

Giving yourself credit is
hard when you're down,
& they make it *impossible*.



The fact is, you are fucking wasted on us.

Fern, don't you realize that I'm only out here *because* of you?



We're indebted to you.

We couldn't get it done on our own. Cal brought you home, & things *changed*.




After only a few weeks with you, he was relenting on so many things already.

He admitted he wanted company beyond just family.

That was a stunning reversal.

The fruit of *your* labor!



I'm not saying, "your torment sure was useful, keep going."

I'm not building to that. There's no justification for your suffering.



I'm saying you're a gentle soul.

You helped a surly, sick man without hesitation, without anything to gain.


You showed patience & kindness again & again in the face of hostility & fear.



Being gentle & kind is wonderful and worth protecting. It's not a weakness.

It's normal to expect other people to have your back. Anyone who says otherwise is against nature.

You should never have had to deal with any of this on your own.



On your own, even if you were strong in every conceivable way,

what chance did you have if no one was going to be on your side?

It's painful to realize how universally you've been let down. You don't want to depend on anyone.

You bend over backwards to blame yourself for everything.

Especially stuff your abusers really did.

You want there to be justice so much you'll take it out on yourself.

You can berate *yourself*, and you know you'll take it.

And you can hurt yourself in ways your abusers could never imagine.

But that isn't justice.

It's just...

Your "break."

Oh my god.

That's...

Eh! Sorry, I went too far again.

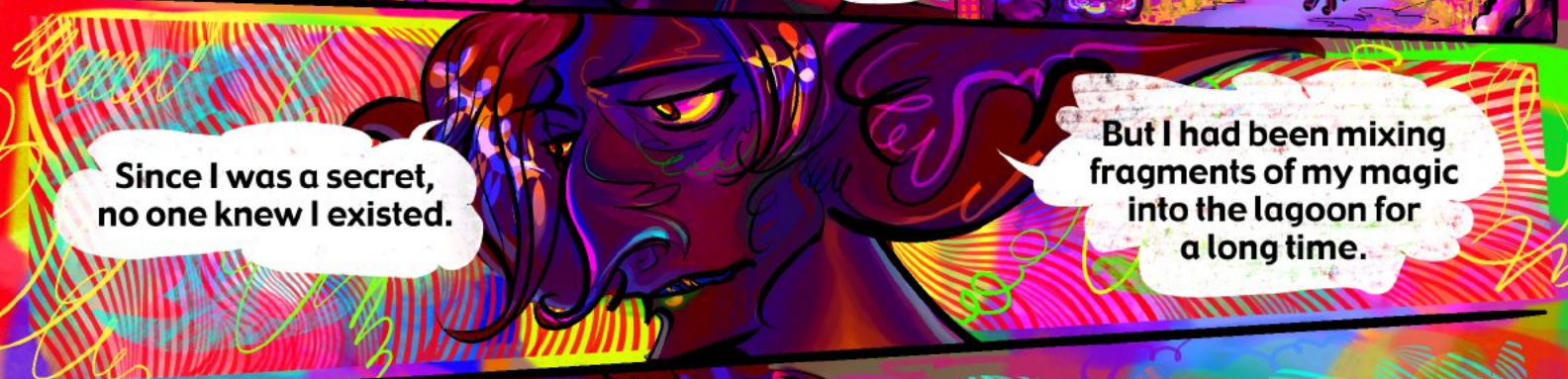
You're not-

No, I get it.

You're right.

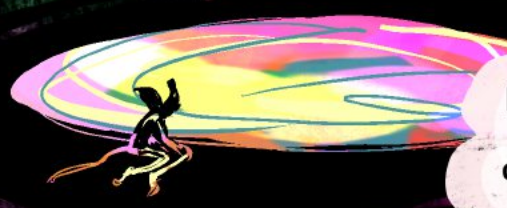
You're right.

I need to stop doing this shit to myself.

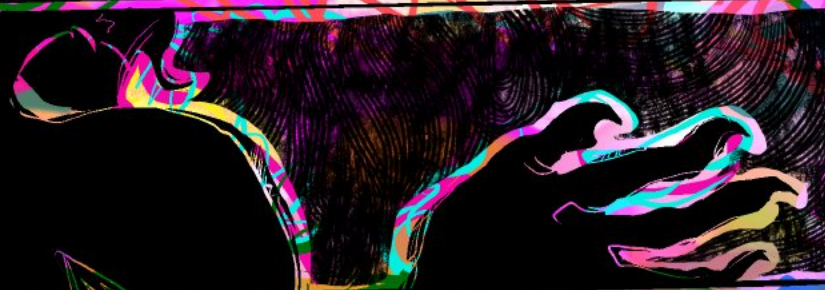


I was hoping against hope someone would realize I existed.

I wanted to be a part of the world so badly.



Because of that, though, I inadvertently gave myself an extra job. The arbiter of dreams in Faidia.



Whoa, really?

A minor ability, like Cal's portals.

Not as strong as that though.

To be fair, I haven't really used it much yet.

There's not a lot of justification for meddling in peoples' dreams.

Yeah, people do that well enough on their own.




I didn't know if I'd had any effect at all on the world until Lem & I got to talking one night.

He told me about this weird little sect in the Hrayan mountains. They knew about me.




Some mortals had actually become aware of my presence, & created a mythology around me...

Even though I was still hidden inside of Cal, they had started deifying me!




Lem agreed to take me to see their temple, since this was before my prison sentence was up...

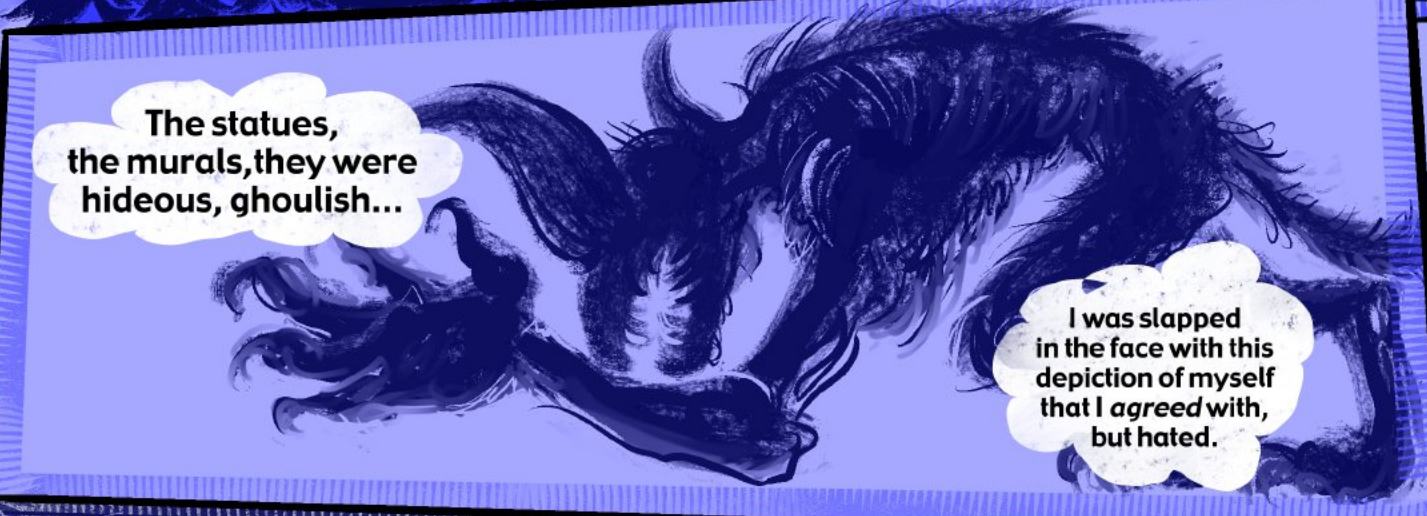
It was a big deal for me to just get out of the house. I was really excited.



But the church disappointed me at first.



It was dark, like this one, & creepy.



The statues, the murals, they were hideous, ghoulish...


I was slapped in the face with this depiction of myself that I agreed with, but hated.



A filthy, ravenous, slaving,

disgusting abomination...


I was crushed. I felt the fool for expecting something flattering.



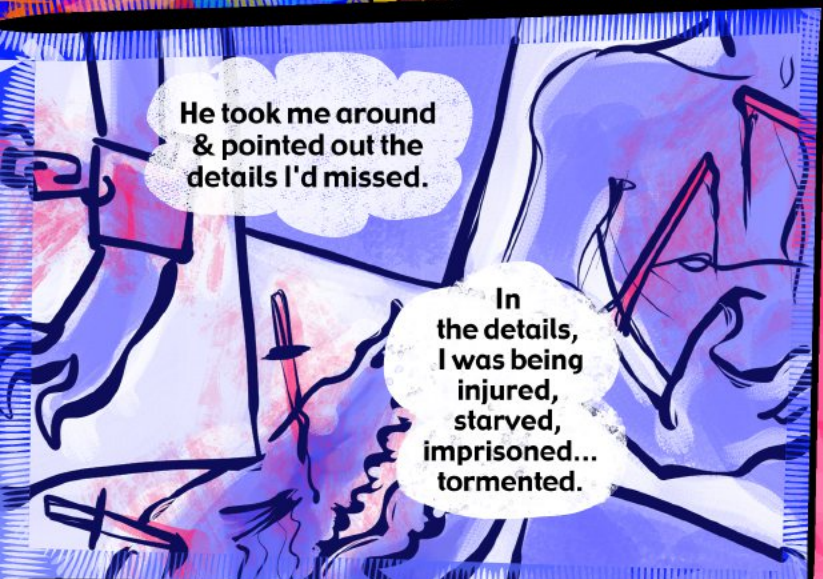
I was
dismayed
Lem took
me to
such a
place.



Almost thought
he was playing some
sick joke on me.




But he said,
"Take another look."



He took me around
& pointed out the
details I'd missed.

In
the details,
I was being
injured,
starved,
imprisoned...
tormented.




All painful
things that I
tuned out
because...

I thought I
deserved them.



"There's more to this than what
you're assuming right now."



"You're not angry or
violent in these."



"You're in agony, imploring the viewer for help."



To be dragged that hard by strangers...

Right??

They nailed me and I wasn't even real yet.

Not like my insecurities are a secret.

Thanks to Cal's story, everyone thinks they know me.

And, mostly, they do. Sort of.

That really fucking sucks.

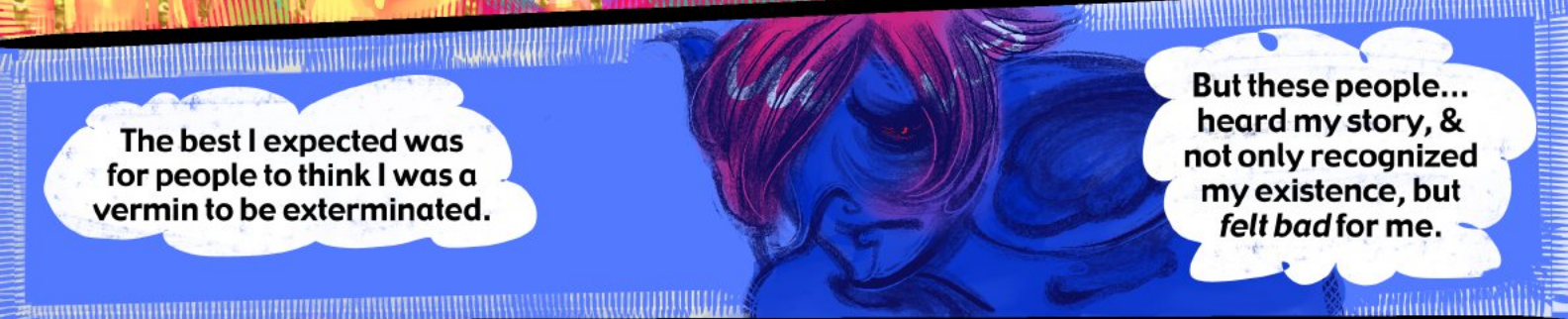


I've had a bad life.

It's a heavy burden.

I hate inflicting it on others.

My desire to be known was also lashed with the guilt of knowing I'd have to make other people contend with it...



The best I expected was for people to think I was a vermin to be exterminated.

But these people... heard my story, & not only recognized my existence, but *felt bad* for me.



The grisly paintings were an emotionally accurate reflection of my own bad life.

It made me wake up to the fact I wasn't really aware of everything to do with myself.

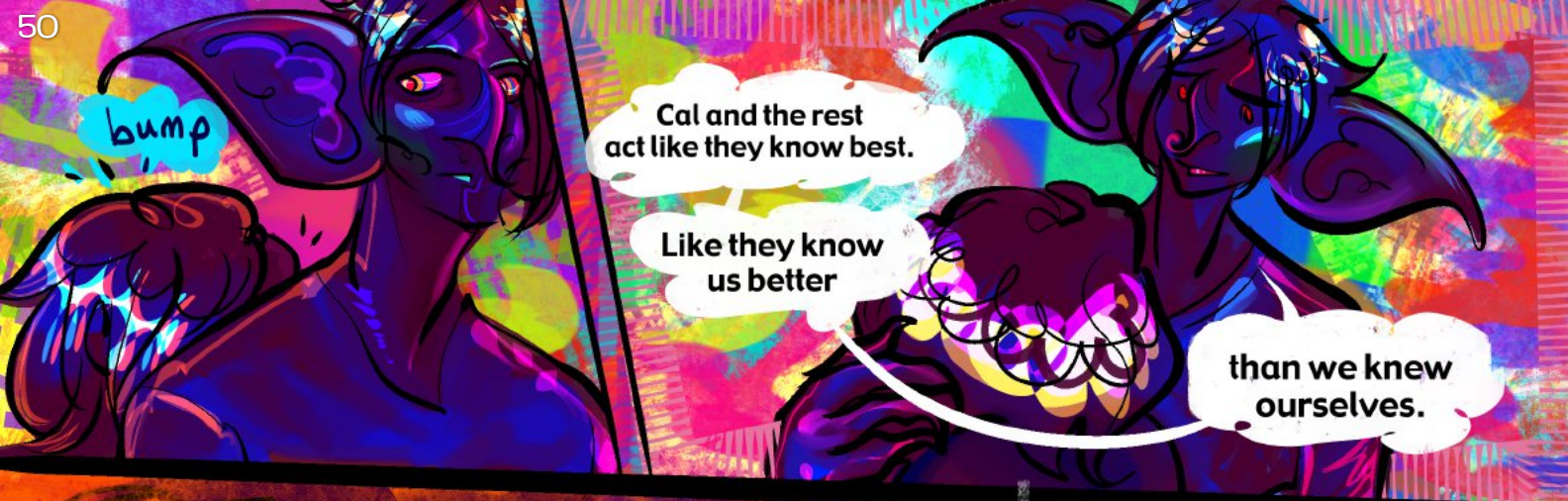
We think we know ourselves so well, but we kinda don't.



I realized I'd been looking at myself through the eyes of a bigot, someone who hates for convenience. Someone like Cal.

Not the kind of person you want to be, especially if you've had a bad life.

For the first time, I felt shame for always being so mean to myself.

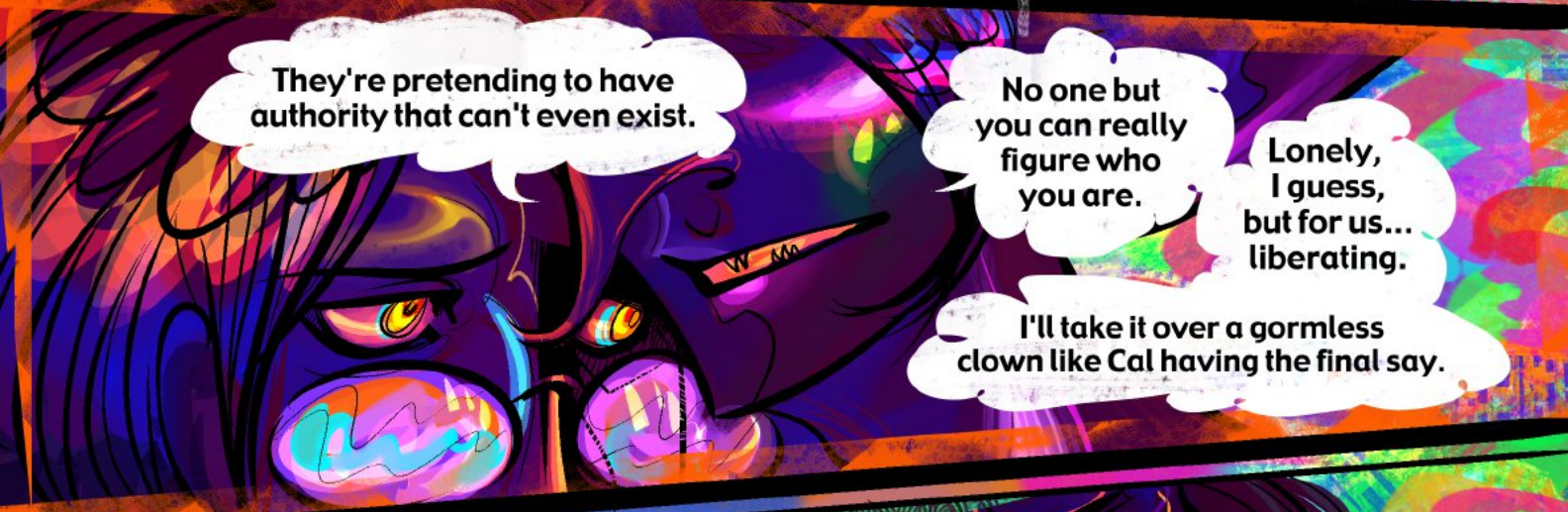


bump

Cal and the rest
act like they know best.

Like they know
us better

than we knew
ourselves.

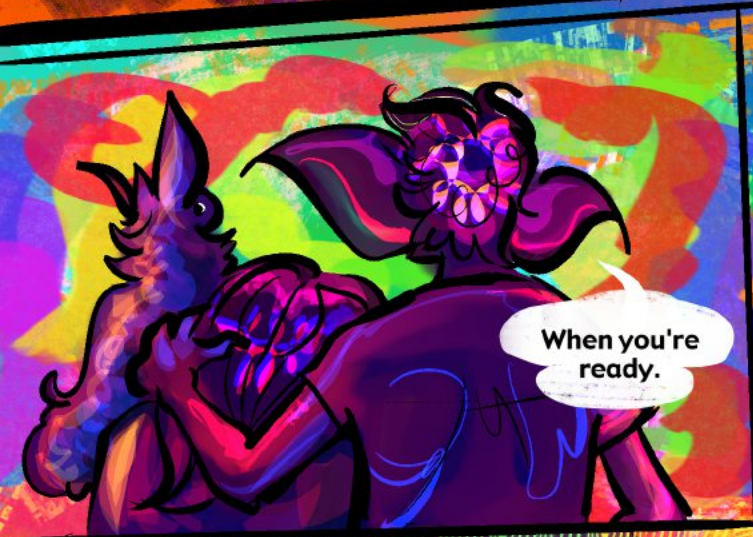


They're pretending to have
authority that can't even exist.

No one but
you can really
figure who
you are.

Lonely,
I guess,
but for us...
liberating.

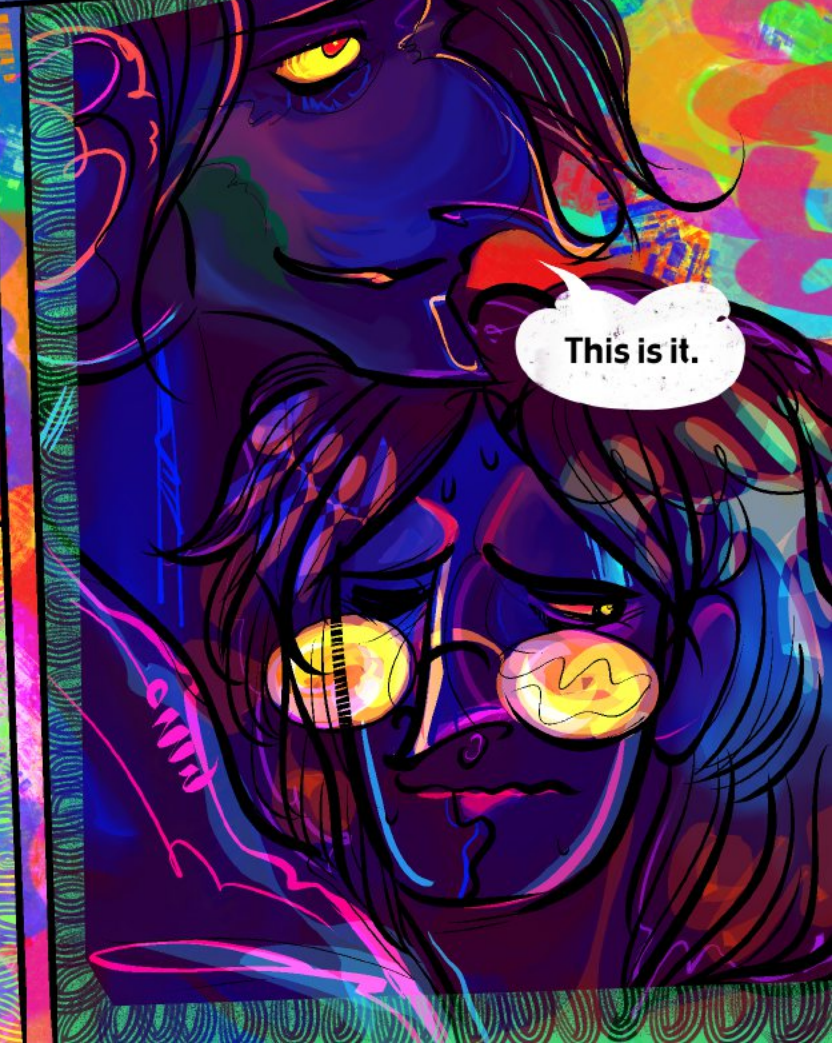
I'll take it over a gormless
clown like Cal having the final say.



When you're
ready.



Is this it?



This is it.



Has Cal
seen this?

Fern, come on.
Use your brain.

He has a framed
copy of it in his office.



This isn't exactly how I remember it.

According to Moranerial fans, after you were slaughtered by Cal,

you sprang back to life, & rained down divine fire from the sky to purify the sins committed against you.

There were a lot of t-storms around that time or sommat.

Cal tried to use me to defend himself, but he *miscalculated*.

You soothed me, & we both rode against him.



You hit him with the shovel he'd used on you, but it snapped in two on his thick skull.

I love that part.

Then you stuck him with your spear, right in his *black heart*, & vanquished him.

Why...?

Because *fuck Cal*, that's why.

They're just symbols of what you *actually* accomplished, Fern.

No one sensible thinks you literally attacked Cal... mostly it's kids.

You defeated a bad man.

It was cool, so it gets a cool story.

At the end of the story, you went to sleep,

to return someday when you're ready to protect Faidia again.





I don't see Lem getting any credit in all of this. That's weird.

Like we were saying...Lem is fine with less attention.



Lem isn't their favorite, Fern. You are.

The folks who like this stuff aren't exactly doing it out of fair-mindedness.



They barely give him credit for your face, which they definitely like, but also definitely came from Lem.

But we can't really control that kind of thing. We can only get on with each other, you know?

Most of peoples' engagement with this isn't that deep.



Are you doing OK? Do you need to sit again? Snacks?



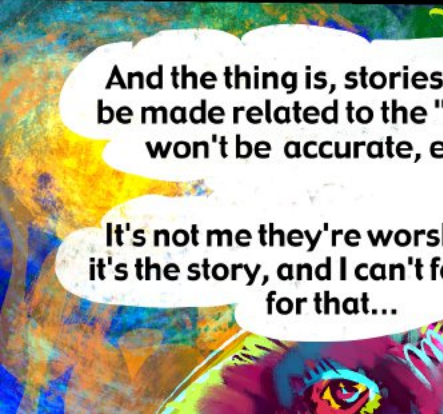
Ah...Sorry. I'm just thinking. For once.

I'm OK.



I think I see what you mean about... interpretation.

Versions of things...



And the thing is, stories that will be made related to the "real" me won't be accurate, either.

It's not me they're worshipping, it's the story, and I can't fault them for that...



With a story like this, who wouldn't?

And while I'm worried I won't meet peoples' expectations... Who could?



Thinking anyone could actually do this stuff is a different issue...

I guess I can just enjoy the story for the themes...and not sweat the details.

Yeah! I mean...

Within reason, of course.



You're not upset about the use of violence here? That was what I was most worried about.

Stabbing Cal has its appeal.

It's not great, but it makes emotional sense.

I'm defending Faidia, which softens things.

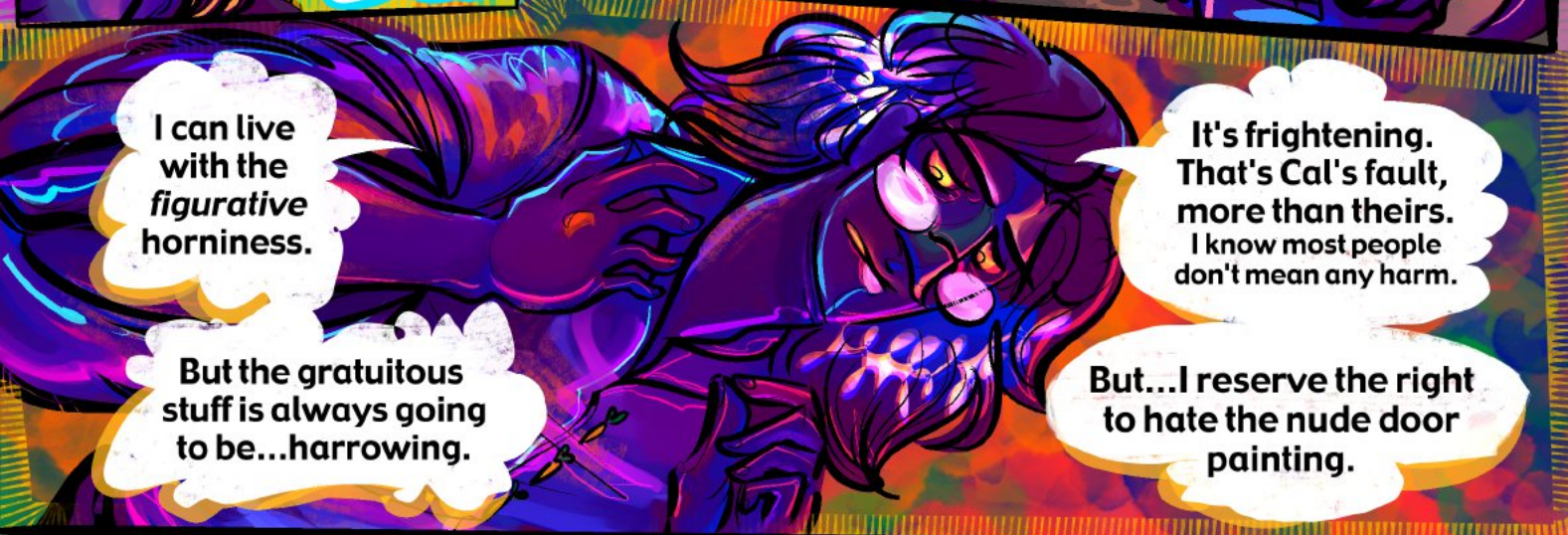


He certainly acted like I'd done violence to him by calling him a rapist.

What's more complicated for me is... It's...kind of horny.

You don't have to qualify it with "kind of." It just is.

That's def what Cal likes about it.



I can live with the figurative horniness.

But the gratuitous stuff is always going to be...harrowing.

It's frightening. That's Cal's fault, more than theirs. I know most people don't mean any harm.

But...I reserve the right to hate the nude door painting.



That's fair.

This big one is the far more famous painting, fortunately.

I mean... I can see why.

It's bullshit, but you believe it.

Huh. Wow.

A mural of me killing my fuck boy boss, who killed me, is now a historical landmark in my home town...

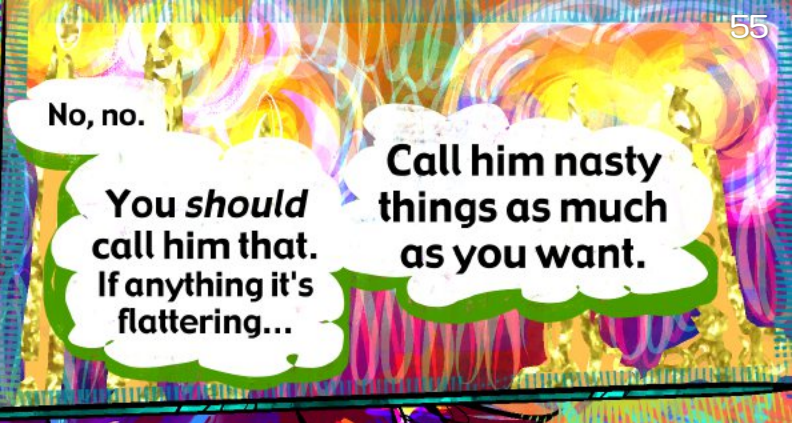
It really makes you think.



Cal's a fuck boy, huh?

Well... u-uh...

S...sorry...



No, no.

You *should* call him that. If anything it's flattering...

Call him nasty things as much as you want.



O...okay...

W...what about you? How do you feel about this picture?

U-um.

Y..you mean, like, uh. Professionally, or...



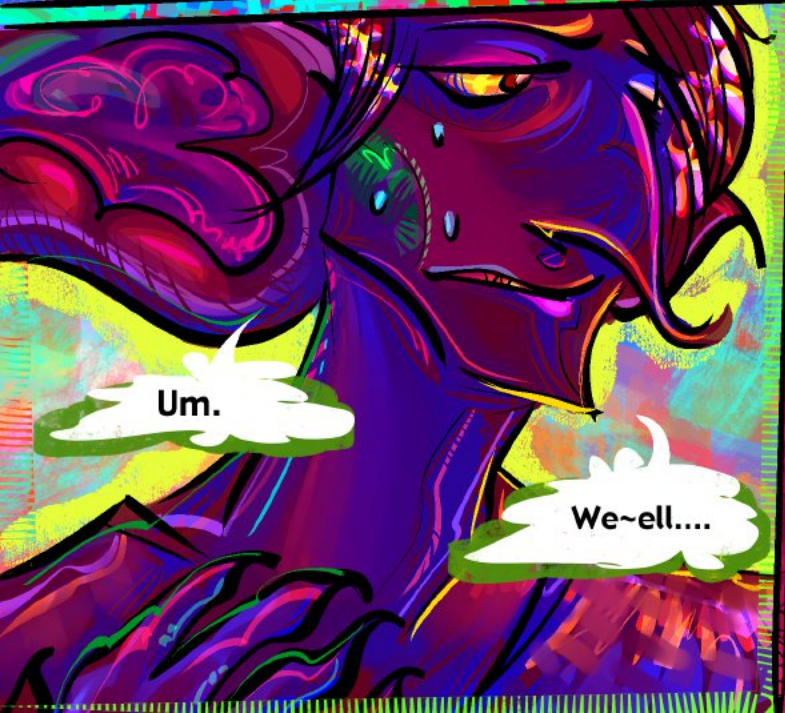
Personally. Did you find it insulting to be depicted like this....?

I'm...like....



Mounted on you,

...riding you...



Um.


We~ell....



Fuck.

I'm sorry.





I guess you know what I mean when I say I have a big mouth now...

I swear this isn't a case of sexual harrasment, I'm just stupid!


Forget about it, it's fine.



Is there a hole nearby for me to crawl into?

...I tend to d-dislike art like this, generally speaking, yeah.

I stick to my form to show solidarity with other halflings.



But that's just a gesture, not reality.

The reality is, of course, that I'm an elemental with magical privileges.

It is what it is.

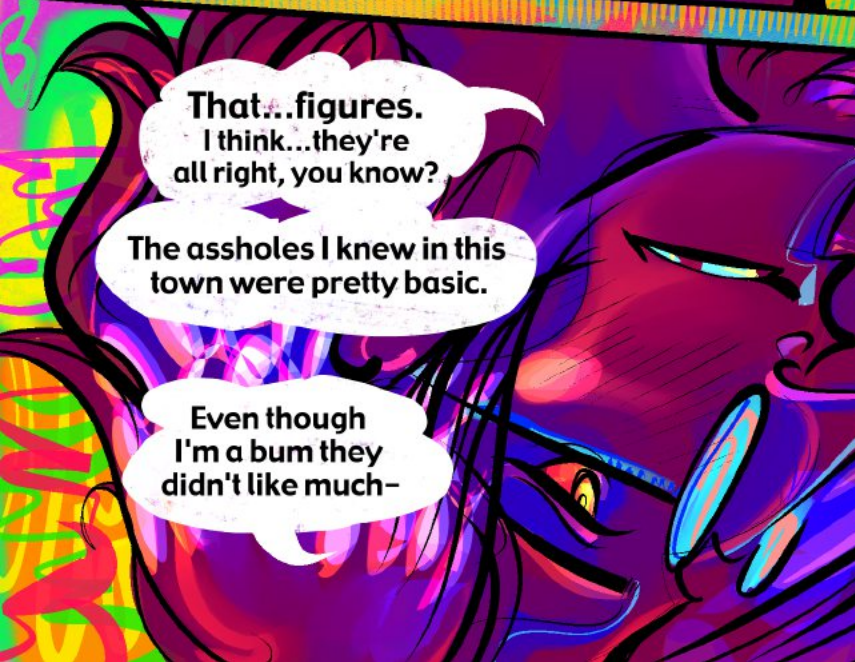


Is there any representation of my village here, then?

Historic town square, there's a memorial to the unnamed villagers who died.

Of course, there's also a huge statue of you, that I wanted to warn you about.

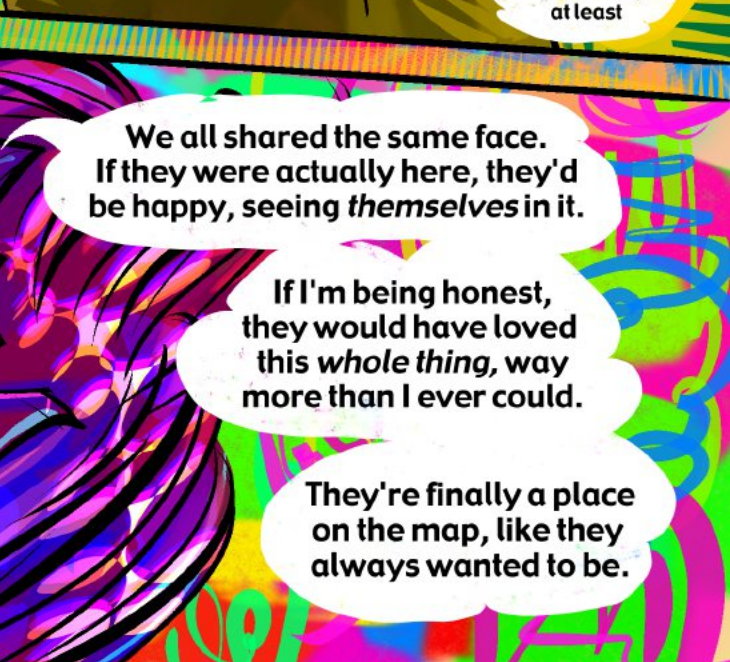
It's clothed, at least



That...figures. I think...they're all right, you know?

The assholes I knew in this town were pretty basic.

Even though I'm a bum they didn't like much-



We all shared the same face. If they were actually here, they'd be happy, seeing *themselves* in it.

If I'm being honest, they would have loved this *whole thing*, way more than I ever could.

They're finally a place on the map, like they always wanted to be.




But my family is another story. I'll come back another day...

I'll have a look at the memorial.

I can remember the names of my children & my wife because of the egregore.

Maybe the names can be added... It'd make me feel better.



That's a wonderful idea.


I'm sure the city would agree.

It... doesn't feel... great. It doesn't do anything for them.

Maybe having something physical to grieve over will help make it feel... real.

There is something more I can do I'm sure.

But for now ... it's anything.



None of us had much say in the way we had to live, but within my family... I had a lot of accountability


Being what I was, doing what I did... I made their lives harder & there was nothing they could do but put up with it.

It's not easy to have a shitty dad.

I tried, but it was nowhere near good.

I don't want their love to go to waste.

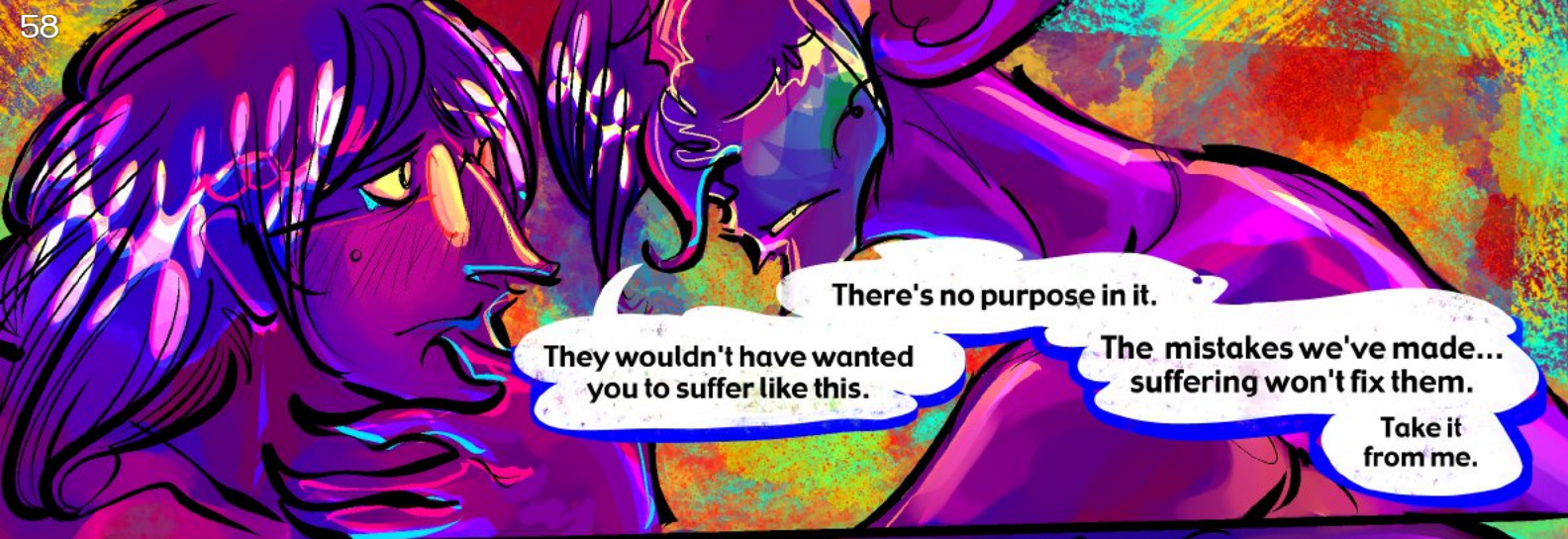
Even if I'm struggling to accept it...



I'll let it sustain me because...

I'm the only one left who can remember them.

I can't let myself overwrite it all with my self-loathing.



There's no purpose in it.

They wouldn't have wanted
you to suffer like this.

The mistakes we've made...
suffering won't fix them.

Take it
from me.



Oh...Rae...

I wish I could
go back in time...
and make their
lives good....

I know,
sweetie.

They're
resting now.

I didn't
think it'd
be too late
so soon...

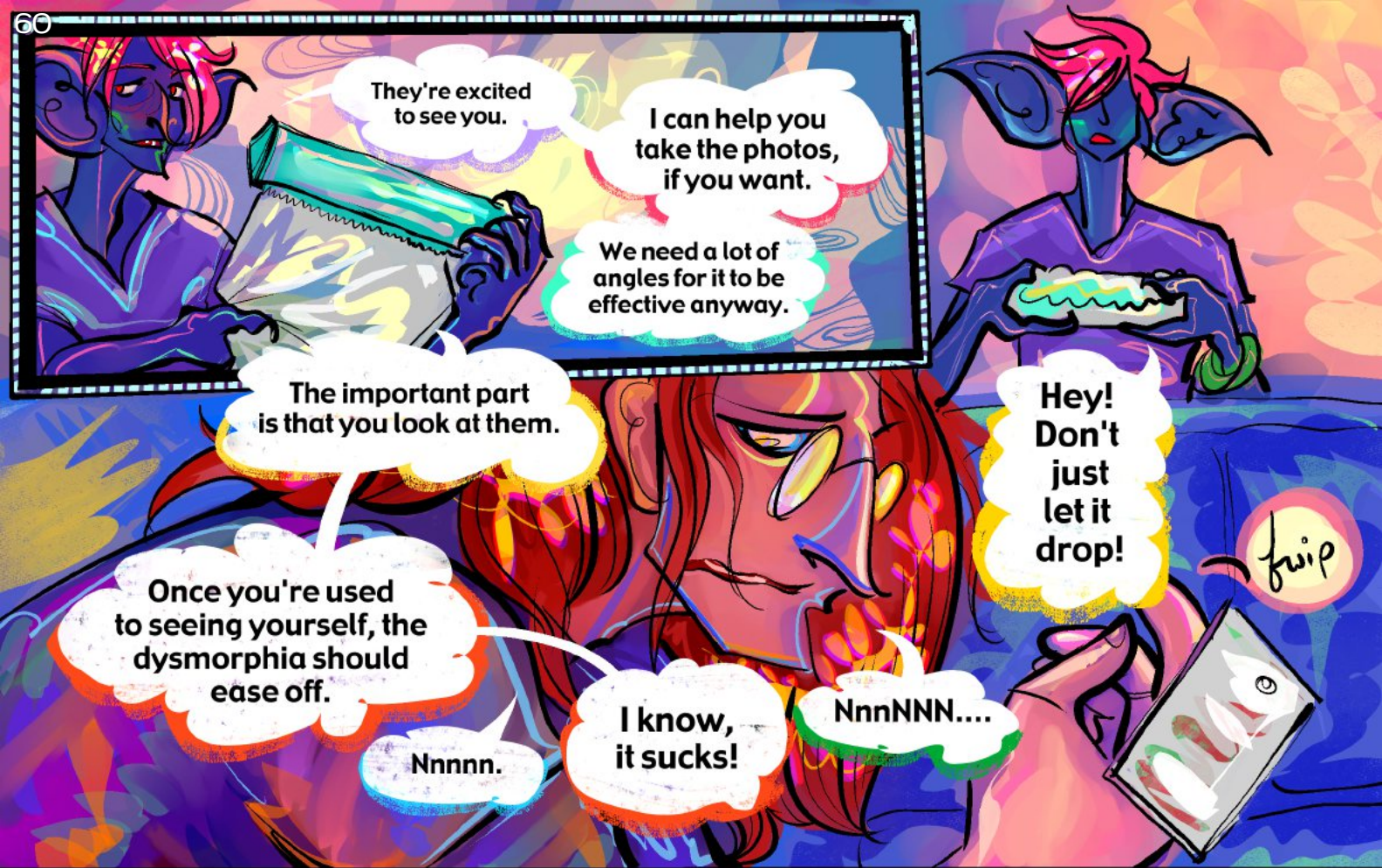


It's not
too late
for us.

Let's make
the best of it.







They're excited to see you.

I can help you take the photos, if you want.

We need a lot of angles for it to be effective anyway.

The important part is that you look at them.

Once you're used to seeing yourself, the dysmorphia should ease off.

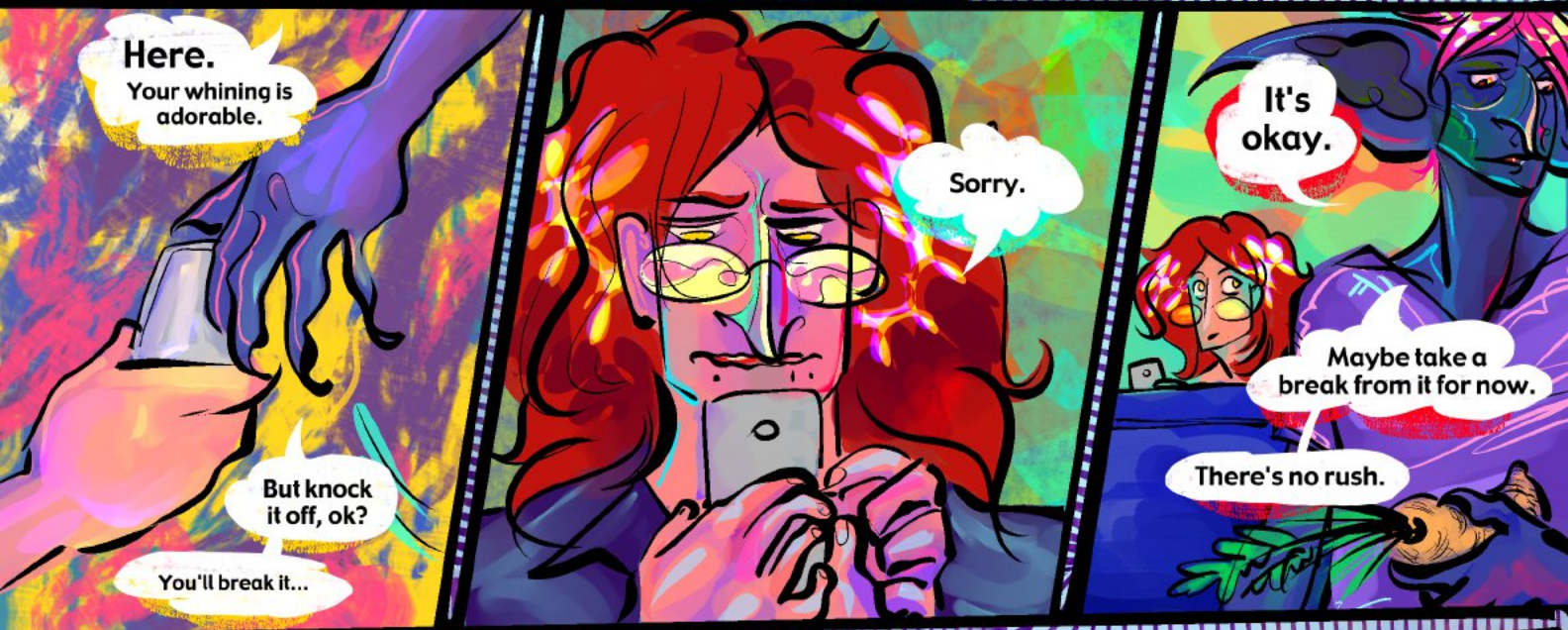
Nnnnn.

I know, it sucks!

NnnNNN....

Hey! Don't just let it drop!

fwip



Here. Your whining is adorable.

But knock it off, ok?

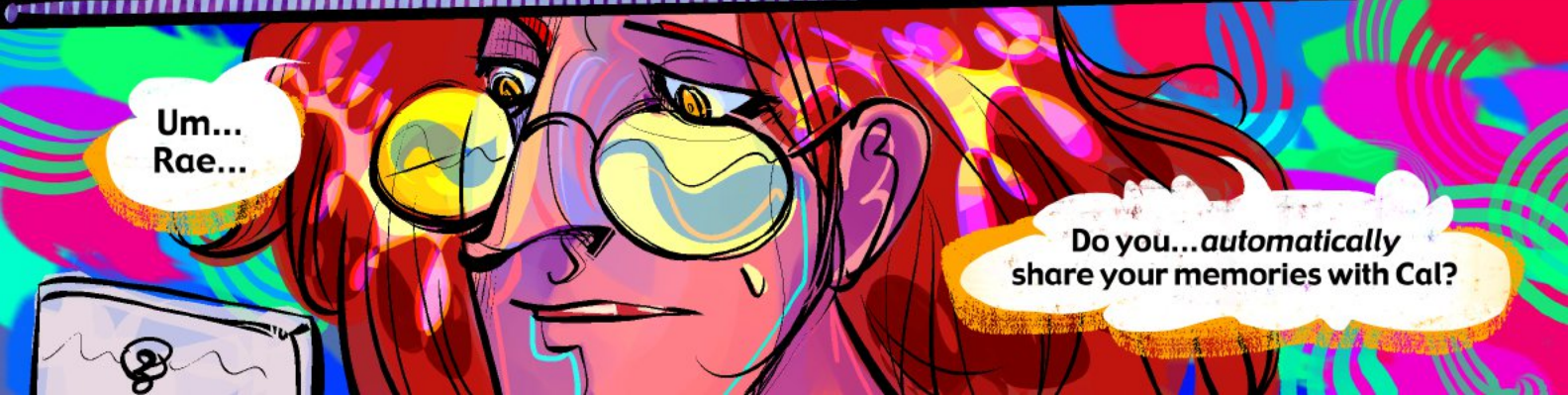
You'll break it...

Sorry.

It's okay.

Maybe take a break from it for now.

There's no rush.



Um... Rae...

Do you... automatically share your memories with Cal?

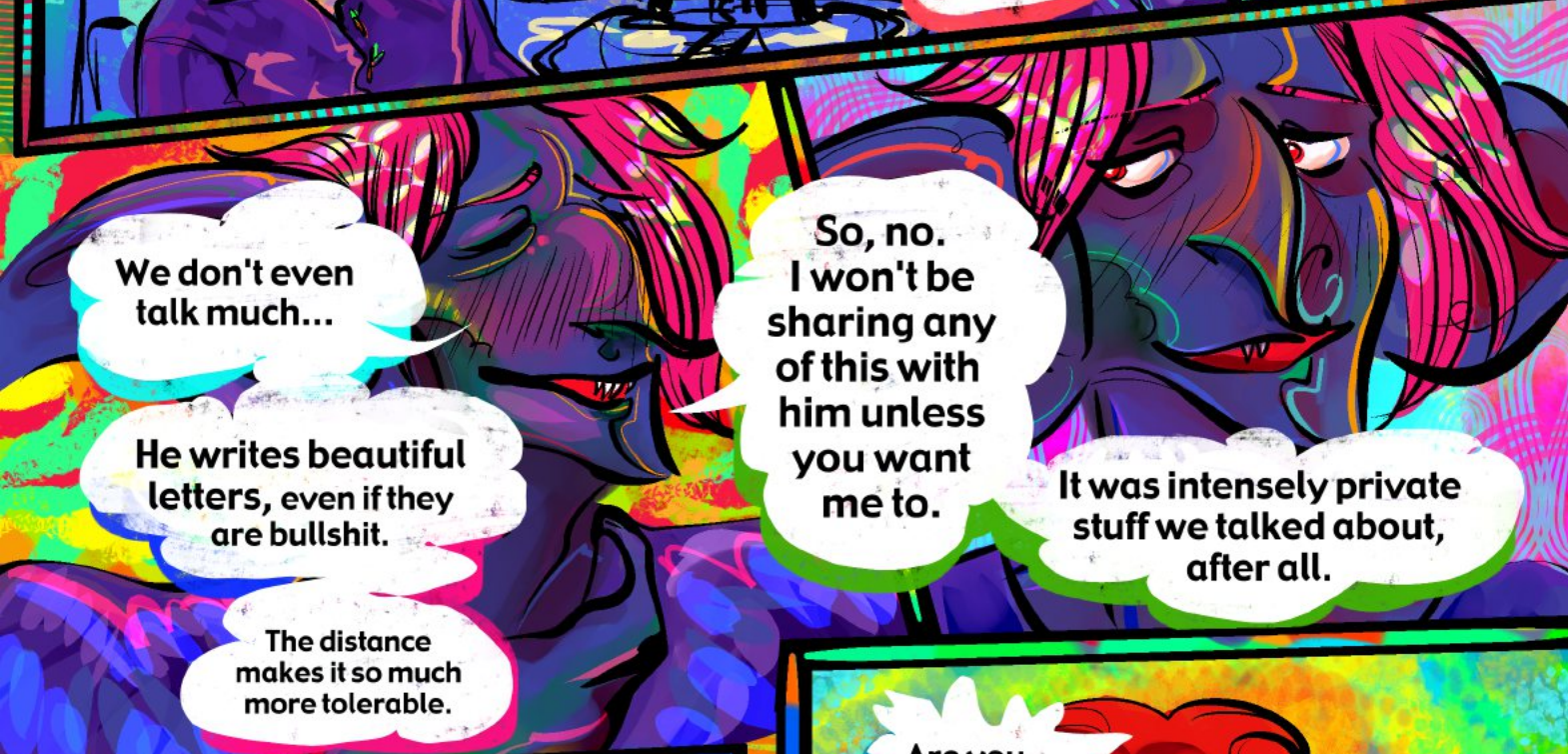


No. We don't do that kind of thing now.

We had to work hard for what little we have in terms of individuality, so...

We avoid tampering with our memories & personalities using magic.

"chop chop"



We don't even talk much...

He writes beautiful letters, even if they are bullshit.

The distance makes it so much more tolerable.

So, no. I won't be sharing any of this with him unless you want me to.

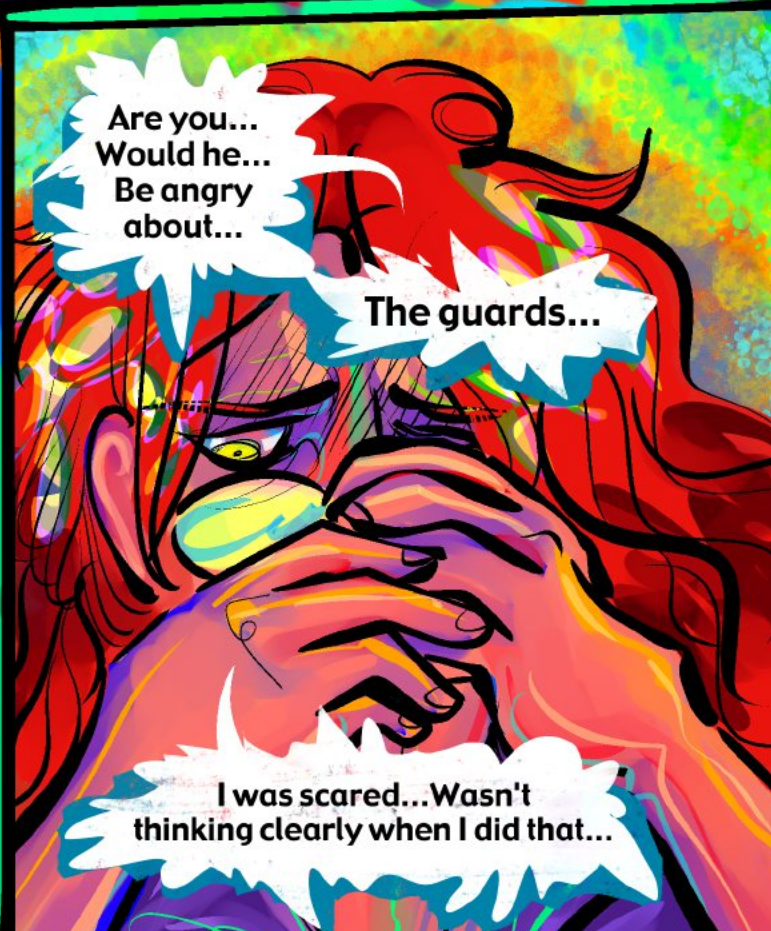
It was intensely private stuff we talked about, after all.



Why do you ask?

What's worrying you?

I kn-know I might be totally off-base here, & I don't really... I don't understand anything, so I'm just gonna say it....



Are you... Would he... Be angry about...

The guards...

I was scared... Wasn't thinking clearly when I did that...

Oh. Oh.
No. This isn't
even Cal's
business.

What you did
wasn't okay,
Fern, & Lem is
probably going
to discuss it with
you...

But we resolve
these things
sympathetically
now, we *avoid*
hurting people.

You say that but...
Cal could still be really
upset....

What if it affects his
perception of me?
What if he thinks
I'm a whore?

Um. Fern.

This is both
a non-issue
& a foregone
conclusion?

Cal read many of
your personal thoughts
way back when, so...
um. He probably
already knows...to
some extent...

Ah...h..h.
Y..yeah.

I'm sorry.

I know how
this must
upset you.

No, it's...
good to have
confirmation.

I'm...I'm
aware you
primaries
are all kind
of walking
to the beat
of your own
drum, so...

I know Cal's not
going to reject me for
having other partners,
not necessarily.

That's not
really what I'm
upset about.

I don't feel safe with
people unless I've
given them some-
thing they want
from me.

It ends up being
this compulsive thing
every time.

I get wrapped
up in my own reasons
for doing things.

I'm not having any
regard that Cal
could get hurt too...

And to expect a someone to put
up with that isn't reasonable...

It's more
like...

I've never been in a
relationship I
wanted before.

So I'm not used to
conducting myself
in a normal way.

I'm acting shady because
I don't know how else to act.



Fern, take a deep breath.
Here, drink some water.


Like I said...

Cal isn't
the issue
here.



I know you're thinking
Cal has done a lot worse to me...

But that doesn't
mean I'm incapable
of mistreating him
too...



I yelled, I called
him ugly... It must
have hurt his feelings.

What if he
backslides
because
of me?

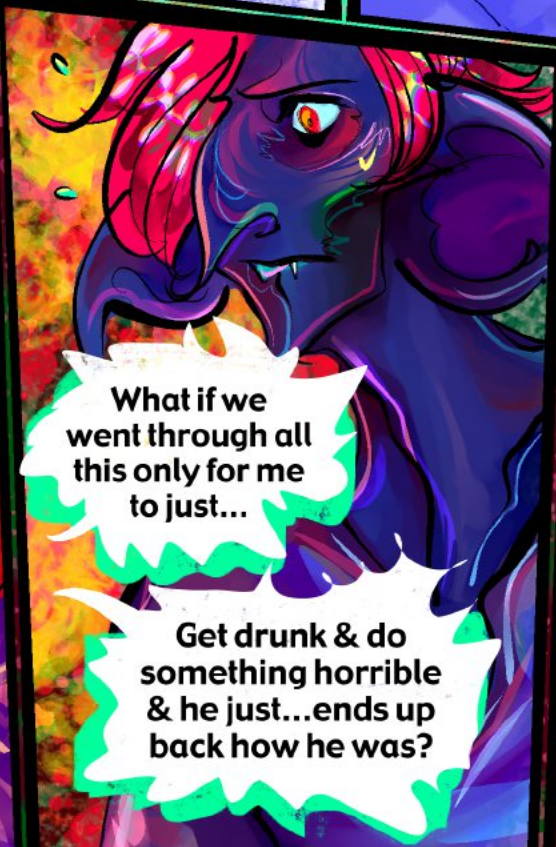
What if he hurts
someone else?



He's sensitive,
he freaks out
over anything.


Now that I
know what he's
capable of...

The stakes are so
high, I feel paralyzed...



What if we
went through all
this only for me
to just...

Get drunk & do
something horrible
& he just...ends up
back how he was?



I'm accountable
because he cares
about me?

But how am I
supposed to control him if...

Fern...

You're so vulnerable, it's agonizing.

What Cal does is his own problem.

You're not responsible for his actions, he is.

You say that, but...

No, seriously. Your actions are not a *carte blanche* for him.

Cal controls what Cal does, not you.

Knock
Knock

Agh, god... he knocks so loud

Just a sec.

Y..yea.

Viv!

Hey hey!

Good to see you both.

How are you doing?

Oh, okay. I just wanted to check in on you guys.

I made a quiche.

Fuck, that smells amazing. Set it down anywhere.

I'm making pasta!

You might be able to help Fern with his phone.

Sure, what's the problem?

You really don't have to, Viv... I hate this thing.

Take it easy, Fern. Ohh, your pasta with the peppers? I love that one...

snif
snif

You're welcome to join us.

Lem & Fola are on their way over, too.

Ah.

I'll be leaving then.



Sorry...

It's OK.
Later!

Bye~



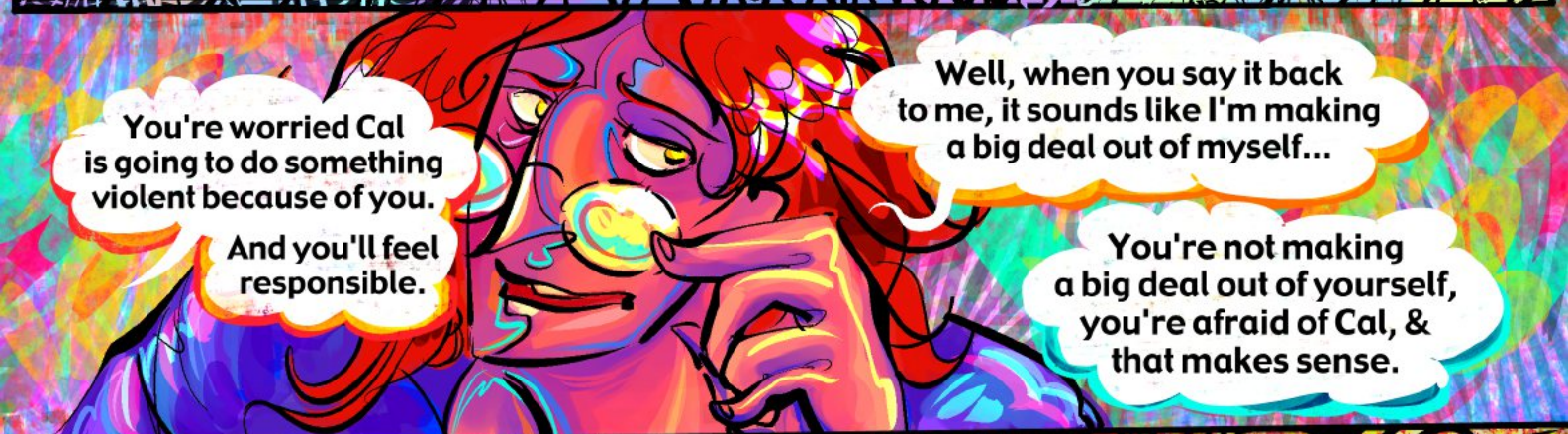
Wait,
he left?
Why?

Well.....lll...
Because of Lem.
That situation is...
mm. Weird.

Anyway



What were
we talking
about?

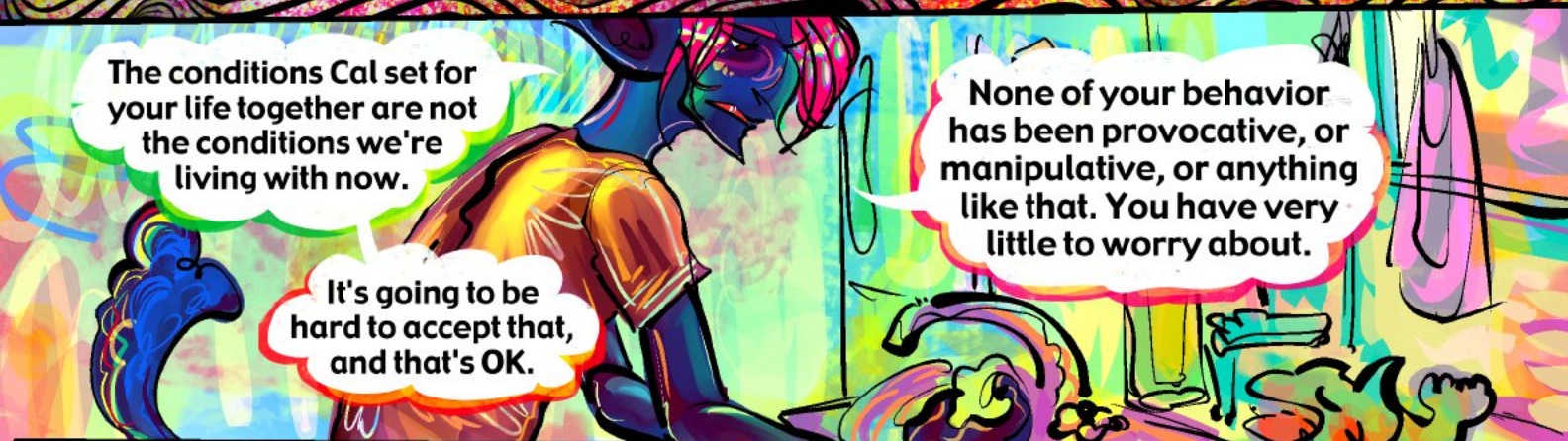


You're worried Cal
is going to do something
violent because of you.

And you'll feel
responsible.

Well, when you say it back
to me, it sounds like I'm making
a big deal out of myself...

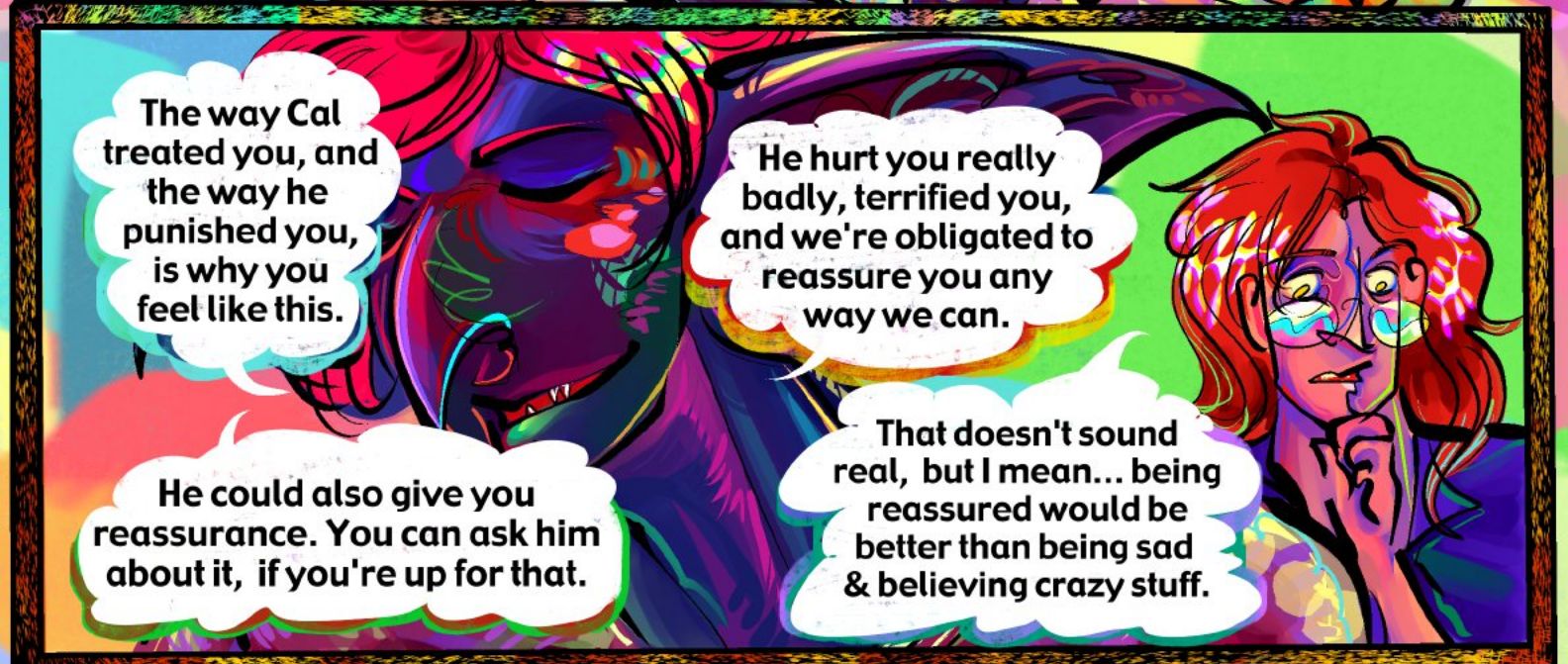
You're not making
a big deal out of yourself,
you're afraid of Cal, &
that makes sense.



The conditions Cal set for
your life together are not
the conditions we're
living with now.

It's going to be
hard to accept that,
and that's OK.

None of your behavior
has been provocative, or
manipulative, or anything
like that. You have very
little to worry about.



The way Cal
treated you, and
the way he
punished you,
is why you
feel like this.

He could also give you
reassurance. You can ask him
about it, if you're up for that.

He hurt you really
badly, terrified you,
and we're obligated to
reassure you any
way we can.

That doesn't sound
real, but I mean... being
reassured would be
better than being sad
& believing crazy stuff.

Yeah, that's the idea!

Right, right...

Maybe now it's nap time.



zzzzzzzzzz

~Rustle~

Mwee hee hee!

Who's that ghastly laugh belong to?

HaHAha!

Sounds unhinged.

So I said hello TWICE!

Who does that?!

Lots of folks, Lem...

Anyway- what I'm saying is that-

Easy, bud.

Hahaha!

I'm all right, I'm all right...

Lem...?

FERN!

Did I wake you?!

Aaaa

I'm sorry,
I'm making a
lot of noise.

It's OK...

Lem, come sit
on the couch.

Fola,
what's the
deal? Is he
all right?!

Is Lem
ever all right?
He's always
had his mood
swings...

It's fine,
he's going
through
stuff.

I've never
heard him
laugh
before.

He's giddy.

That much is an
appropriate response.

Tomorrow we finally haul
him all the way out of the lagoon.

Smoke some
weed & calm
tf down

You talked
me into it

But he hasn't been
the same since we started
balancing the lagoon,
to be honest.

Oh. Yeah,
of course!

I forgot it was a big
day for him too.
Really...big....

Fola, give me
a hand with this?

Sure,
Rae!

Even if Lem said it was all right,
the idea of breaking the news
to anyone is kinda...overwhelming.

But...I do want to know
what it's going to mean...

I like your
outfit.

Thank
you!

But uhhh
I can hear
your thoughts
loud & clear,
Fern.

You're
telegraphing.

Because you want
to communicate with
me, it's coming through.

Ahhh fuck -

Don't panic.
It's okay. The
others aren't
getting it.



Just play it cool.
It's no big deal.

I got your message earlier.
I'm guessing Rae wrote it
with your permission?

Yeah, sorry. I'm useless with electronics,
so Rae took dictation for me & sent it.

We think I can
see apertures.

Then...do you mind keeping
another secret for me?

Whatever
my aperture
looks like,
please don't
mention it
to anyone
just yet...

Just my paranoia
talking, but, I imagine
it doesn't look very
good, does it?

It's...pretty
strange, yeah.

It's....
um...

Please don't
describe it to
me, either.

I'm sorry
to burden
you with
so many
secrets.

I actually don't really know
what will happen, tomorrow, to us.

But we'll find out
soon enough.



Ugh, I've had this gig at a friend's bar the past couple centuries.

Quit your job? A good quit or a bad quit?

Are you telling Fern about quitting your job?

But it kinda fell through today. So it goes.

He tried to ask a girl out and was awkward instead.

So he quits just like that.

I refuse to be embarrassed about being embarrassed.

You shouldn't be embarrassed at all is what I'm saying.

It's not that bad.

You're leaving out like half the story, asshole.

I said hello, **FOLLOWED** her, & said hello again.

I am a man-made disaster. It's all fucked. Fire me into space *right now*.

I met her at that concert, she was very nice.

Obviously well-versed in your bullshit.

You should just do what you obviously want to do.

Shut upppppp

I'm a weirdo I can't

What did I just say? She knows. Just ask her out.

I'll get my job back, it's not like I've never quit before...

Should I be hearing this?

Ask her out.

This isn't why I told you the story, Rae!

Lem's aperture

wasn't just one wavering, furtive light, but....



It was a whole, scintillating cloud of them.

Lem, c'mere.

**Huh?
Am I
that
bad?**

**You're good,
I just need to
talk to you for
a sec.**

**Most of them didn't
seem to be real...or rather...**

**If any were real,
I couldn't distinguish
them.**

**I guess I could see
the advantage of that.**

**Either hide in plain sight, or
hide that you are hiding.**



Aren't you secondary sitting?

Afksdjfk

Fola, Fern!
We're stepping
out for a second.



Go ahead and
get started on eating.

All right.



If this is about
the guards, I
haven't even
brought it up.

I'm not that
much of a boor.



I just want to
discuss an aperture
thing with you.

Oh, I get it.

Aperture stuff is
suddenly *super* interesting
now that it's related to
Fern...

Lem, put a
sock in it.



You got
my message
earlier, right?



Yeah! I was
just talking about
it with him before
you cut in like a
total bastard!

You fuckers never let
me hang out with Fern.

Another
wasted
opportunity.

I wanna talk
about these things
too, y'know.

There's something
I didn't write in my message.

Mm hm?

My ass is a little
haunted, to be
perfectly honest.

Only a
little?



So, when elementals line our apertures up,
both elementals need to consent, right...?

Uh...yeah!

I know you
don't do it very
much, Lem.

Hey, I do it
sometimes.
Just mostly
never.

Then we can
use each others'
magic, exchange
data, & all that...

Uh huh



Well, the thing is,

Fern did it instantly.
He didn't need to wait for me.
It was like...

His aperture
commandeered mine.



Did he make you do something?

Of course not. He didn't appear to notice what had happened at all.

After a beat, I just proceeded like normal, but...

He could have stopped me anytime.

I could feel him like... gripping my magic by the throat.



He didn't tighten his fingers...

It's innate then... an automatic property.

...but it was still pretty disturbing.



A...master key of some kind?

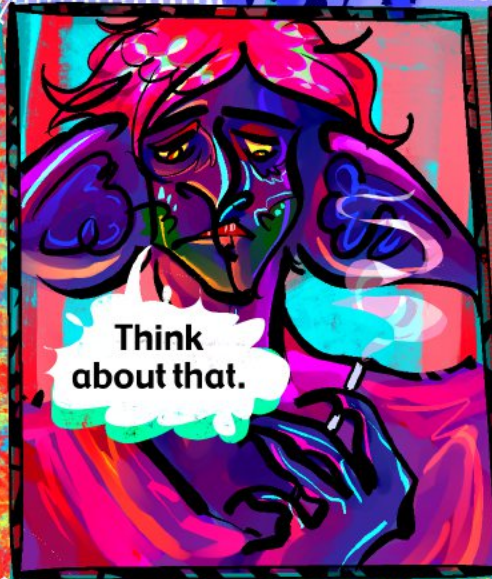
Like...Someone in charge just points him in a direction.



He's already in charge, if you want to split hairs.

Lem, I don't know. All I can think is, what if he'd been a different kind of person?

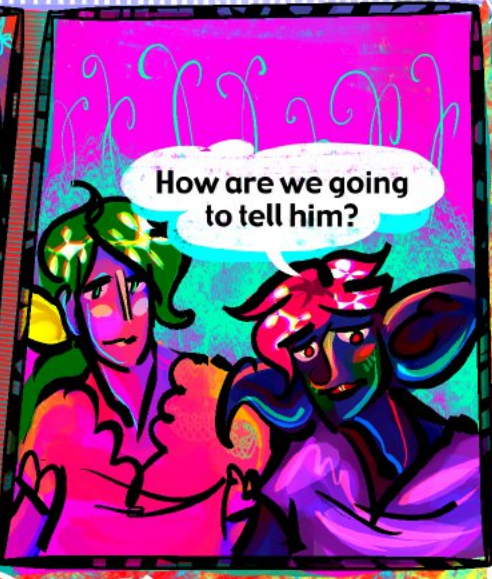
Cal treated Fern like he did, WE ALL treated him like that, & this whole time, Fern could have just...eliminated us.



Think about that.



sirk



How are we going to tell him?





...

I used to really um, grind the idea into myself that...

I shouldn't expect a rescuer.

The other colonists expected you to return & reward us for surviving...

They were presuming a lot, based on nothing, & it disgusted me.

They used that presumption to justify all kinds of ridiculous stuff...

So I told myself I didn't expect any intervention.

Maybe I was just lying to myself though.

Maybe I was waiting for you, too, but for other daft reasons.

What would you have done if you'd come?

Well, your colony was treating people as livestock...

I'd depose the leadership,



then disperse the people to other colonies.

I'd already handled situations like that before. but to quote someone who ascertained the situation...

"I had spread myself too thin in a paroxysm of self-flagellation."

I took on way too much responsibility.

I wasn't aware of how little I could actually handle.

I completely lost my way. People like you...and Viv...paid for it.

That's probably why Viv is still so angry at me.


 A close-up of two characters, Viv and Cal. Viv is on the left, looking towards Cal on the right. Cal has a somber expression.


Viv was here earlier.
He left when he heard
you were coming.

Have you
apologized to
him, yet?

Well...


 A close-up of Cal, looking down with a thoughtful or sad expression, his hand near his face.

Here's my
end of things.



 Viv and Cal are in a room. Viv is sitting at a table, looking at Cal. Cal is standing and looking down. There are flowers on the table.

When Cal's story broke,
Viv came to see me about it.

Rae
seriously

He...Urhh...


I have no pics
of them together
you can't stop me


 A close-up of Cal, looking down with a somber expression.

He uh...er....he
begged *me* to
forgive *him*.

Viv said a lot of stuff,
like, he'd been mistaken to
blame me for his kingdom's
fall, and uh, stuff like that.


It's hard to remember.


 A close-up of Cal, looking down with a somber expression.

It wasn't really his
fault, I mean, and
I was hostile, so what
else could he have
thought, but...

He's one of those
people who wants to do
the honorable thing, so.

This sort of
thing is important
to him I guess.


 Viv and Cal are shown in a close-up, looking at each other. Viv is on the left, Cal is on the right.

It bothered me seeing him like that,
so I got really...I admitted...I'd
done many bad things—so he
shouldn't—

Th—the rest
isn't important.

We made up, & decided to
create a city, together.

That sounds...
good.

Yeah,
that's
what I
thought,
too.
But...

We got the project rolling, & then...
he started stonewalling me.

We managed to complete the
project through proxies, but...

...but he won't
talk to me at all
now...

What can
you do?

You win some,
you lose some,
I guess.

Ugh...Scuse me.

I gotta take a piss.

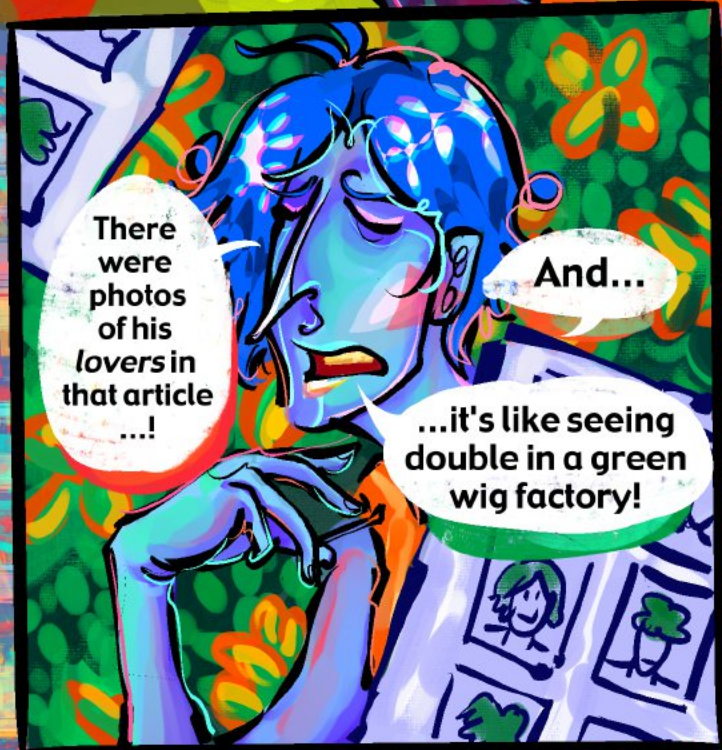
Fola...
I know, but
you really
oughta...

Will he even
listen to me?

He'll believe
you where it
comes to Viv!

Um, hello?

Care to
patch me in?





Wait,

I've returned!

Who wants a refill~?

what?



Did you hear us just now?

Yeah... I did, I did.

Lem, gimme. You're going to drop it.

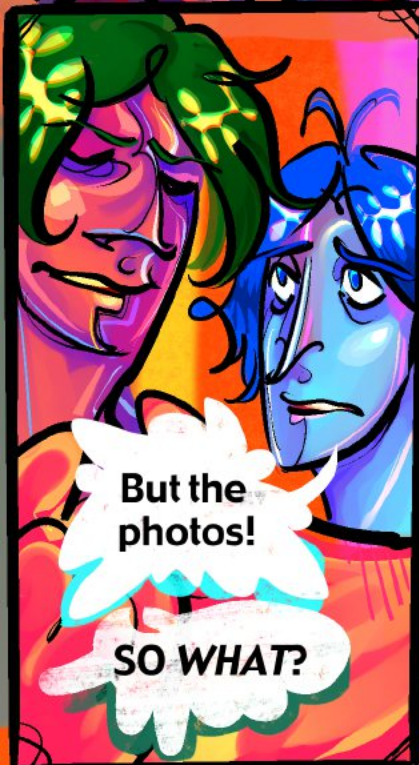
Hee hee... yeah...



That article. Bullshit.

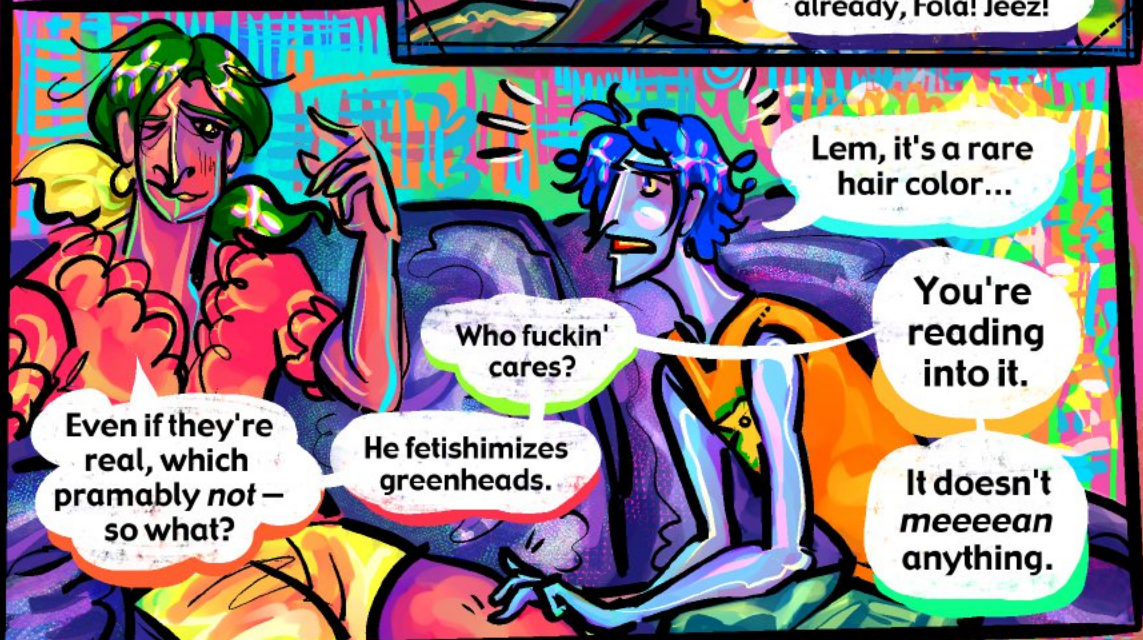
They're NEVER real. They make all of it up!

You know this already, Fola! Jeez!



But the photos!

SO WHAT?



Lem, it's a rare hair color...

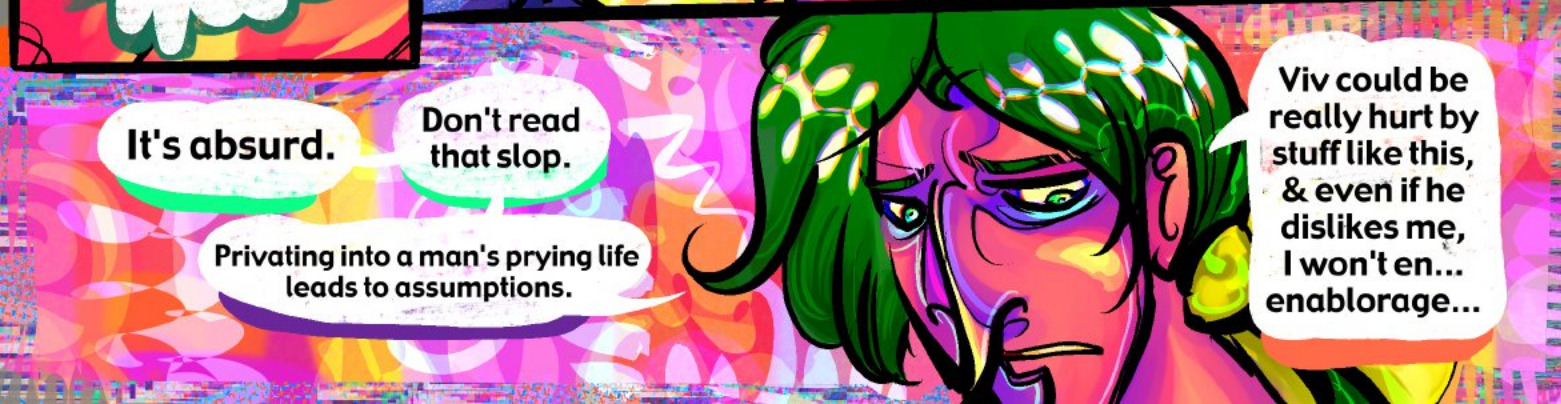
You're reading into it.

It doesn't meeeean anything.

Who fuckin' cares?

He fetishizes greenheads.

Even if they're real, which pramably *not* – so what?



It's absurd.

Don't read that slop.

Privating into a man's prying life leads to assumptions.

Viv could be really hurt by stuff like this, & even if he dislikes me, I won't en... enablorage...



Er, Lem...Forget the article for a sec.

He's formal with people he's not on good terms with.

You know how pedantic he is...

Even if he did change his mind, he'd make a big deal about it, give a speech.

I don't think Viv is one to renege on an apology, especially with you.

He wouldn't *withdraw*.

It's just not his style.



Just try to talk to him tomorrow.

The article is a good excuse to bring it up.

You're both my friends & this is really fucking weird.

Think about how I feel once in a while!



I know I've already asked a lot of you but...

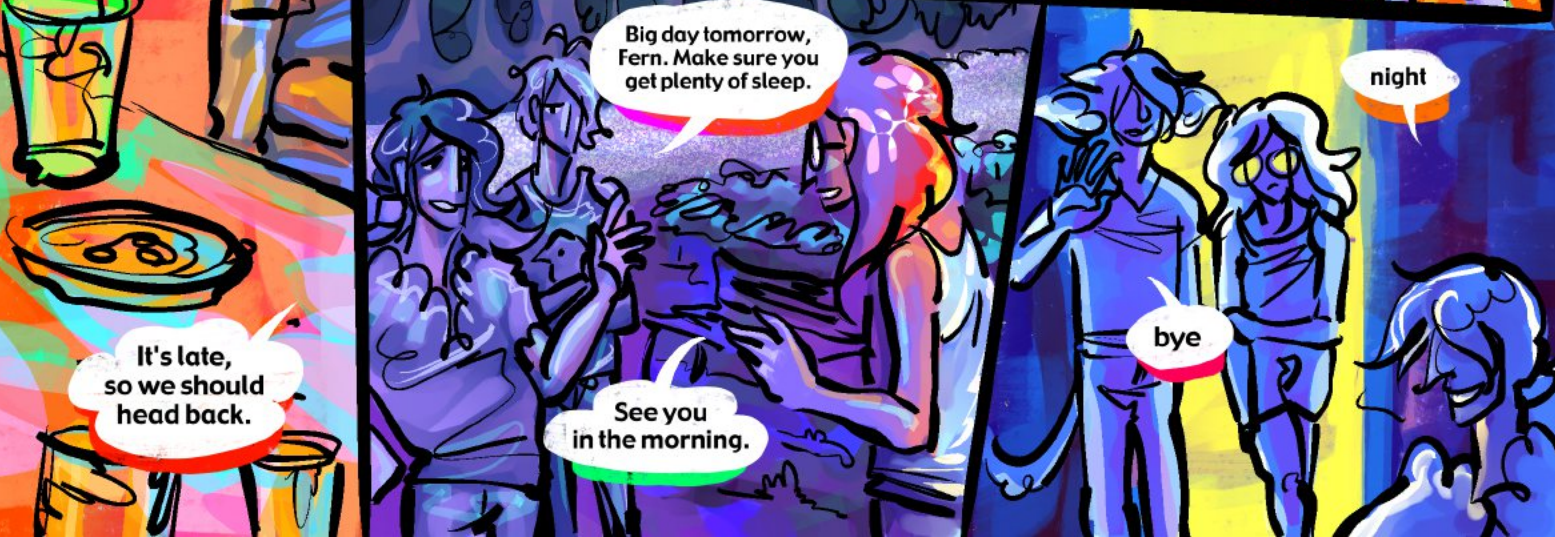
At least try to work it out for my sake.

You're right, Fola.

I'm sorry.

I'll do what needs to be done.

Thank you.



Big day tomorrow, Fern. Make sure you get plenty of sleep.

night

It's late, so we should head back.

See you in the morning.

bye



You...were
a bit of a mess
in there.

But, that's
not the end
of the world...

Please...

You
don't
need to
placate
me.

You know...

Even though you
weren't sentenced
to rehab,

you could
still do it.

Once I'm out of the lagoon,
things are gonna change.

I know
that. That's
not what I'm
talking about.

You're just
carefully avoiding
saying a lie, like
you always do.

While I'm trying
to comfort you, too...



Are your secrets so bad...

I'll never be ready enough to hear about them?

Fola...
You can just say it.

Everythin' points to it.

I know. I'm a lot more sim...similarly to Cal than I wanted...want to think I was....Uh...you get what I mean.

That's not exactly..

A lot more.

Jus' look at Rae.

Doin' really well. Not like me, the trash dismaster.

Didn't you help Rae recover? Isn't he doing well in part because of you?

Ehh....
I barely did anythin'...

How did you get here from what I said?

Your brother complexes are...

...something else.

You think Rae doesn't have problems??

Look, I don't know Rae as well as you do, obvs.

But I know Fern has had a big impact on Rae...

Fern is so open. He'll tell you how he really feels, whether you want him to or not...

Das true.

Er, Fern's ... different than mine... Just cus he has my face...don't lump us—

When I met Fern, he just...announced his problems would be affecting his work.


It was uncomfortable.

I was distracted by my own ax to grind at the time, so I didn't really appreciate it, but...



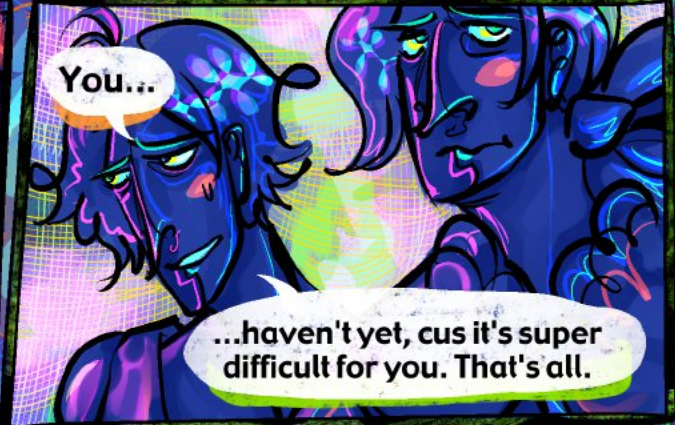
To even get to that conclusion,

Fern had to admit he was sick.




And then, a bit later,

Cal had to admit that, too.



You...

...haven't yet, cus it's super difficult for you. That's all.



It doesn't mean you're worse or a hypocrite or whatever, so shut up.

H-hey...



Even if you won't admit it, cus it sucks to think you're less competent than Cal...

I certainly refuse to accept that you won't rest.

You need it really badly!




Isn't this what you would do, in my position?

If I'm overstepping, then say so.

Fola—


Otherwise—



Fola, don't. Please.

Don't be upset.

I promise, no matter what.




It's going to be

It's not all right!



Please. PLEASE.


Stop talking around me...



I believe you, I believe it's gonna be okay...

but you're still not telling me what's going on.

I need to know how it's going to be "all right," not just that it will be!



I can't ignore that you're keeping me in the dark. It hurts me.

I know you didn't ask for this, but you are my family.

Even with how
we started out...

We've known
each other for
a long time.

Isn't it reasonable
to care about each
other by now?



Wanna
hug?

Ya.

Better
than telling
you...

If you stick with
me tomorrow...

...I'll
show
you.

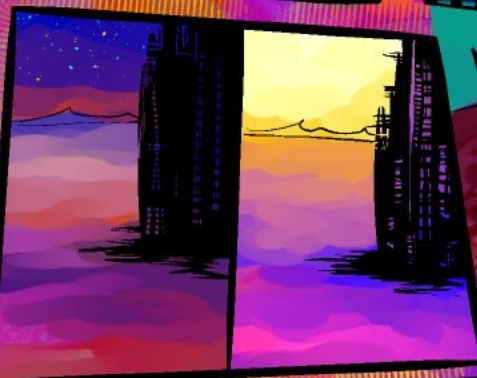
I wouldn't
know how to
explain it
in words,
anyway.

Oh, so it's
like that.

Ohh, yeah.
It's Like That.

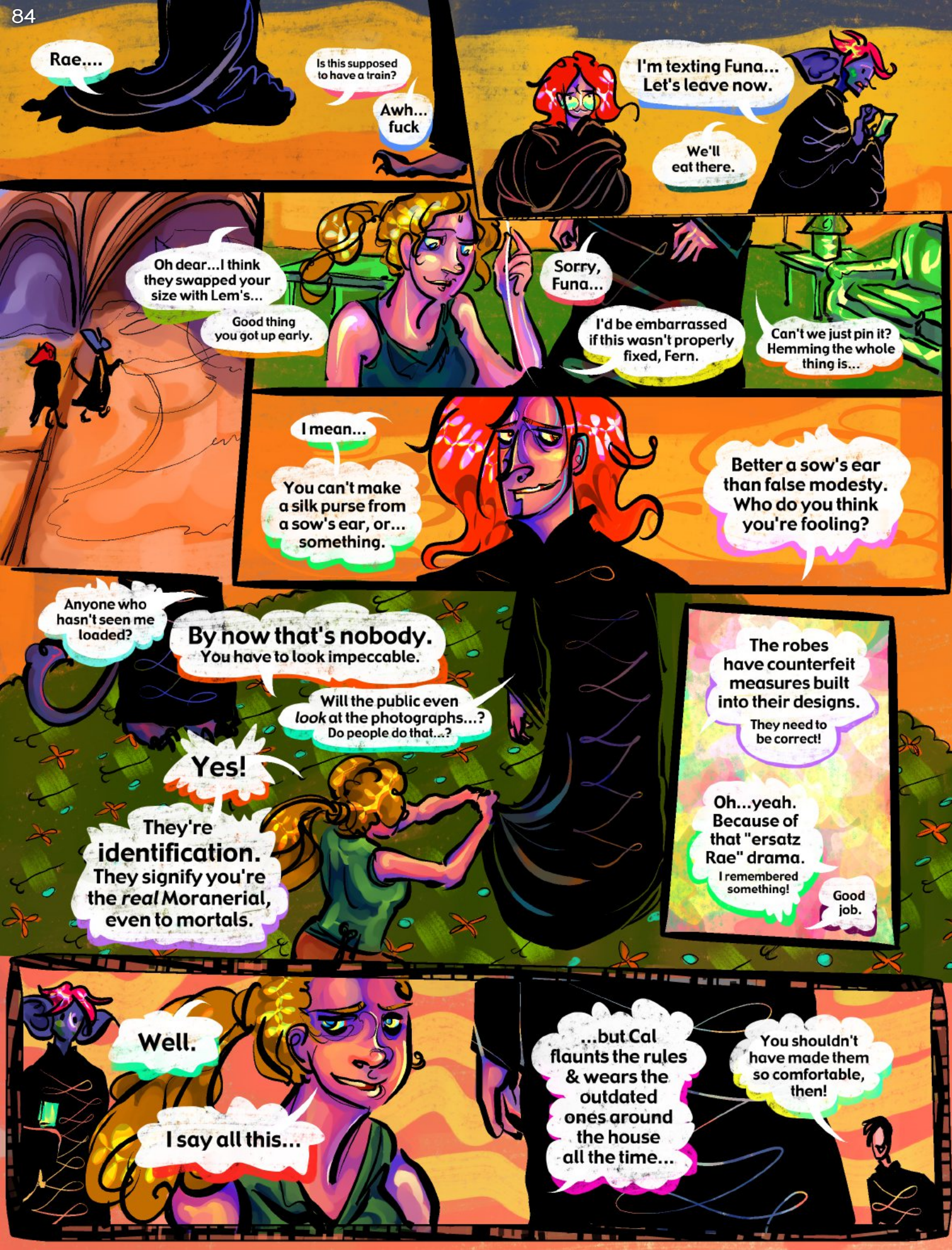
It sucks
a lot.

I guess
that figures.



fwip

Hmm.



Rae....

Is this supposed to have a train?

Awh... fuck

I'm texting Funa...
Let's leave now.

We'll eat there.

Oh dear...I think they swapped your size with Lem's...

Good thing you got up early.

Sorry, Funa...

I'd be embarrassed if this wasn't properly fixed, Fern.

Can't we just pin it? Hemming the whole thing is...

I mean...

You can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear, or... something.

Better a sow's ear than false modesty. Who do you think you're fooling?

Anyone who hasn't seen me loaded?

By now that's nobody. You have to look impeccable.

Will the public even look at the photographs...? Do people do that...?

Yes!

They're identification. They signify you're the *real* Moranerial, even to mortals.

The robes have counterfeit measures built into their designs. They need to be correct!

Oh...yeah. Because of that "ersatz Rae" drama. I remembered something!

Good job.

Well.

I say all this...

...but Cal flaunts the rules & wears the outdated ones around the house all the time...

You shouldn't have made them so comfortable, then!

Cal...!

Good
thing I just
finished...

I'm sorry...

I...I didn't
visit you like
I said I
would...

I really wanted
to, but I got cold
feet.

Fern, it's
all right.

You expect
too much of
yourself.

To be honest...

I was miserable.

The
waiting
was hard
on me.

I was
driving
May nuts.

But we both
got through
the week.

We're together
now, & it's good.

Cal....
um...

You look
great...

Hah!
Fuck off...!

I mean
it though.

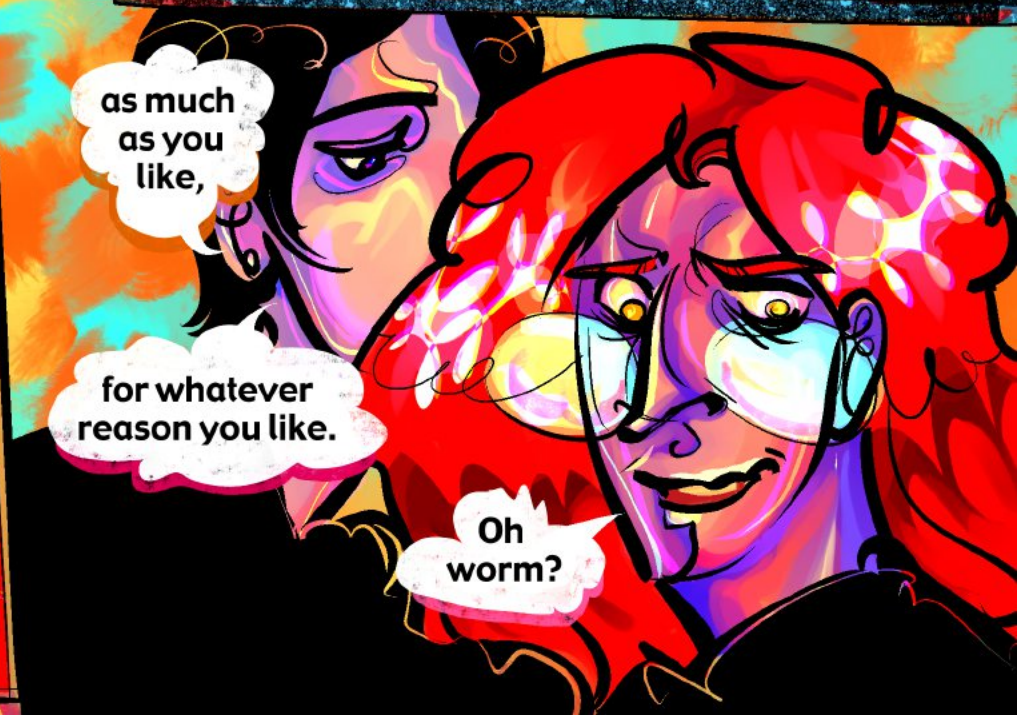
Do you want
to eat together?

Really?
Can we?

I told
you I
eat now

Really pouring it
on, isn't he...

It's all he
knows how
to do.





A-ah, well, I'm just dabbling...

B-but if you want to call me a scientist... or a doctor... or both...

I don't mind...

Cal ...

If these actually work, it's a lot more than dabbling.

I'm impressed!

I want to see them in action.

I'll bring you to the lab some-time!

We usually spend meetings talking about our projects...

The prosthetics would have been my presentation.

They are part of the recovery efforts related to the Stryva Wasteland.

It's just a minor update, though, a formality. We're skipping it this time to welcome you back.

These printed minutes have all the details, so just read it when you have a moment.

It's a good overview of everything we're up to.

Thanks. I'm looking forward to this now!

Hm.

What?

Well...

You have a "work voice" now, eh?

Ah, do I...!?

Sick! D-don't point that kind of thing out...!

Now I'll be self-conscious at the meeting...

Hahaha, jinxed you.



Ah, the others are sitting down. We'd better -

BUMP

Oof!

...

It's all right.

gasp

I-I'm sorry

for reacting like that...

You didn't do anything.

You're safe.

I apologize for startling you.

We're with our friends.

...But...Fern... I did.

My brothers and I... we all make each other flinch.

So I'm used to dealing with this. I'm not going to get angry or blame you.



I pose a danger to you, & there's a part of you that recognizes that.

It makes sense.




But it must...

Of course. It doesn't make me feel good.

But that's not your fault. I'll suffer it gladly.


...hurt your feelings...




I'm responsible for this pain, not you.

Additionally...

It's minor compared to how I hurt you.




Fern... I'm not sure if I'm going to do it correctly,



but I'm trying to love you... actually take care of you.

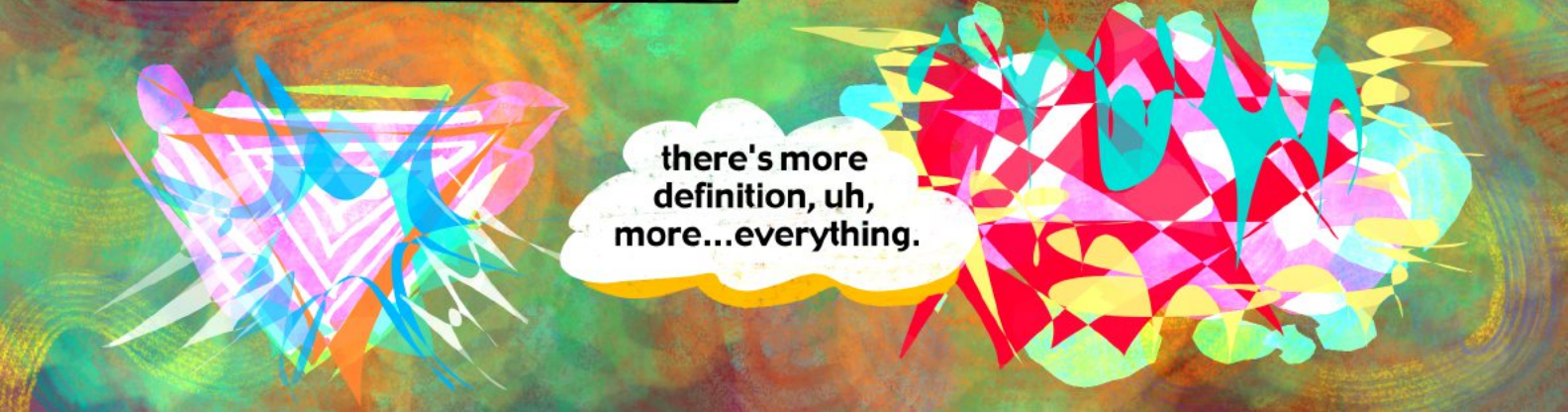
I will not permit a situation where you numbly tolerate something frightening,

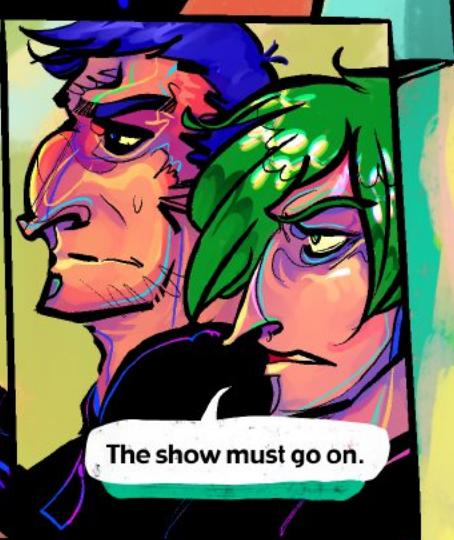


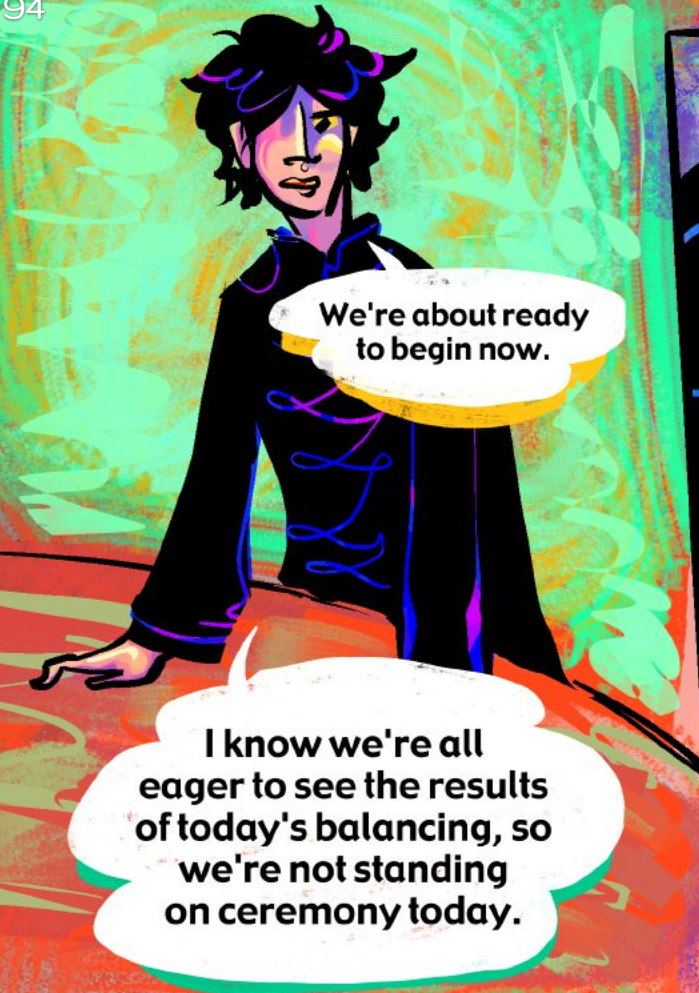
or place your safety at a lower priority than my feelings.

I don't want that for you ever again.



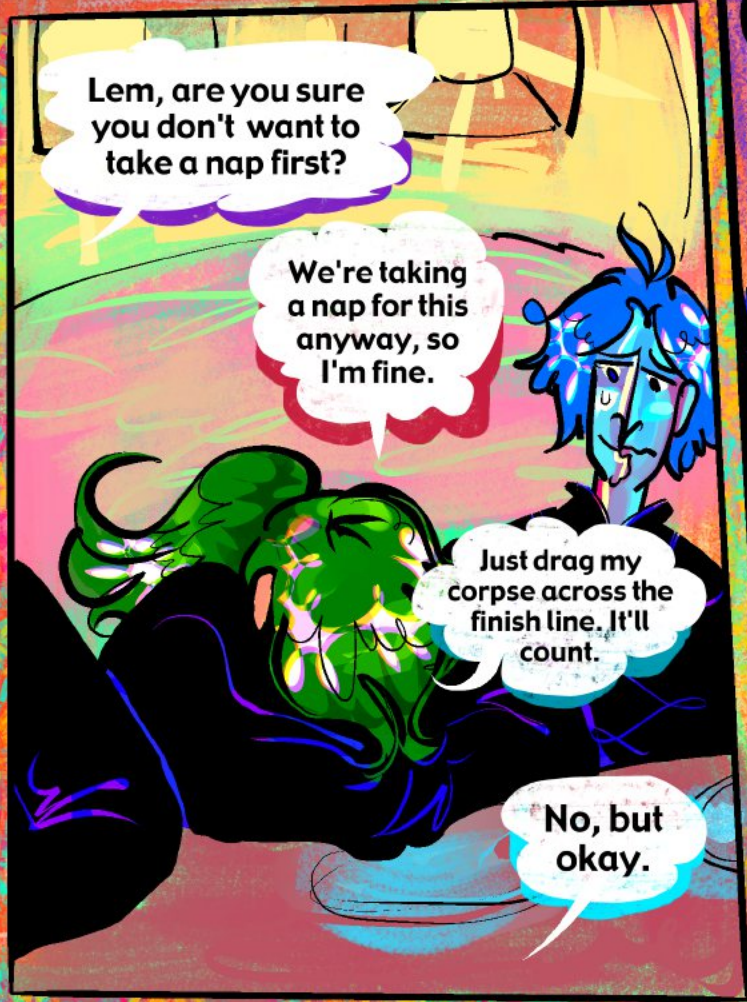






We're about ready to begin now.

I know we're all eager to see the results of today's balancing, so we're not standing on ceremony today.



Lem, are you sure you don't want to take a nap first?

We're taking a nap for this anyway, so I'm fine.

Just drag my corpse across the finish line. It'll count.

No, but okay.



Fern, it's your first time participating at a balancing!

Cal will be escorting you through the whole process once you're in there, but we will all be able to help you in case anything goes wrong.

Are you ready to proceed?

Will I need my glasses?

Um. No.

I didn't have glasses when I went in before, so....

It doesn't matter, Fern. Do whatever makes you comfortable.

Okay! Then, I'm ready.

Everyone,
heads down.

I'm going into
the lagoon. If I'm
feeling weird...
he'll find out.
I won't know
what to say.

You sure
you're ok?

Y-yeah!

Fern, we're finding
a comfortable position
to briefly sleep in.

We're not *quite*
going to sleep...
despite what
Lem said

But your body
will become slack
while you're in the
lagoon, so take care.

Shouldn't
we have recliners
for this already?

Leave that in the
comment box, Fola.

Fie on the
comment
box. I'm the
only one
who checks
the darn
thing.

I mean, Fola
has a point.

I'm going
to count down
from five.

Just forgive
him quick.

On the
beat after
one, we'll
go under.

5 ... 4 ...

3 ... 2 ...

It's easy

1

fuck



**must stop all
dumbass brain activity
before Cal shows**



hi Fern

Aaahh

**that was
quick**

**I've become
real accustomed
to navigating the
lagoon ha ha**

**well it's
already way too
late for that**

**but um
let's get started
repairing things
around here ok**

**Cal
I'm not going to
say anything weird**





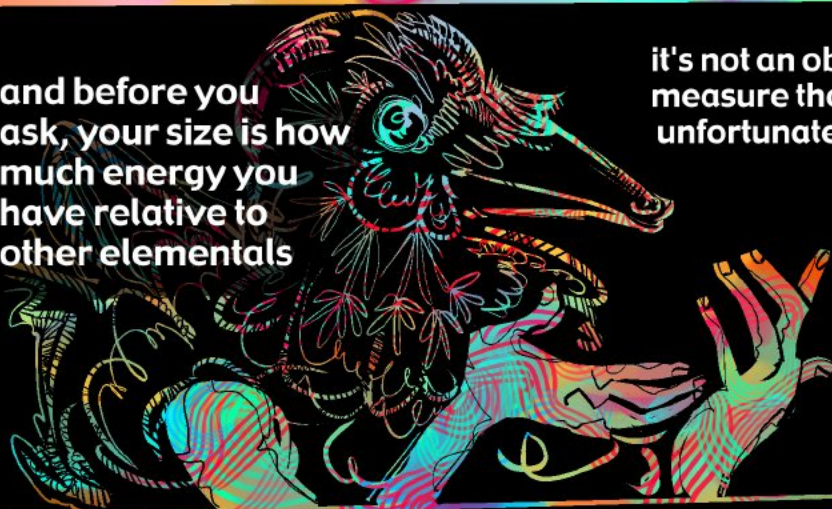
why do I look
like a man when
you get to be a bird



the more balanced
you are, the more like
an animal you will appear

and before you
ask, your size is how
much energy you
have relative to
other elementals

it's not an objective
measure though
unfortunately



where are
we right now



we're hanging out in
your subconscious

your aperture is
close nearby just
not easy to see



and the lagoon is
on the other side right



yes but remember
your aperture is more like
a filter or vent than a doorway
you're not supposed to
literally go through it



OK

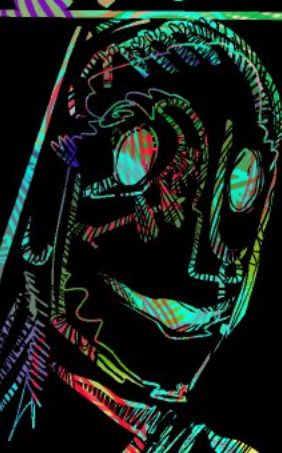
please don't smash
through it this time ok



I will not smash
through it and I won't
tell you how upset I am



...



fuck

you are
upset then

I thought
so

are you reading
my mind again
the nerve

no your mood &
expression changed
earlier at breakfast
and you stopped talking
I used the power of observation

it's stupid

I can't tell you
or you'll know
how stupid I am

I doubt that
Fern

well I can probably
figure it out since I said
some

spicy stuff

hmm what did
I say to you this
morning so far

oh yeah
hmmm

I told
you I was
trying to
love you
and wanted
you to be safe



if that has caused
you pain I am sorry

no

it should be
all right for you
to say that stuff

I'm just angry
at myself for
not being harder
on you I guess


I feel like
I'm betraying
myself

no one's even said anything
but I can't help but feel wrong
and angry and out of place




Fern

this wouldn't have
even happened if
you had someone who
treated you properly
instead of me




I know
I guess



but I would rather be
angry at myself than be
angry at anyone else
even you

because it
feels dangerous



it's dangerous
to be angry
at yourself, too

anger leveled
at me is properly
placed anger



but regardless of
what you're feeling
I promise your safety
& choices will be
respected



if it's what
you want

if you want Rae
instead of me
that's OK



you don't have to
talk with me at all
once the magic stuff
is resolved

I want you to be **free**
at least as free as you can be

even if you don't
want to be with me
I will care for you

you don't owe me
a single thing
whereas I owe you
anything I can possibly
give you



it's not proper love
but
it's love of a kind

...

we can't touch
in here can we

I wish we
could hug

hugging would
have been very nice

but we can't
it's too risky

but we are going
to touch a little bit anyways

but it turns
out we should actually
have been doing it
on purpose all along

it used to be forbidden
because we thought it would
result in our bodies melding
together like Rae and I which
terrifies and mortifies us
both to this day

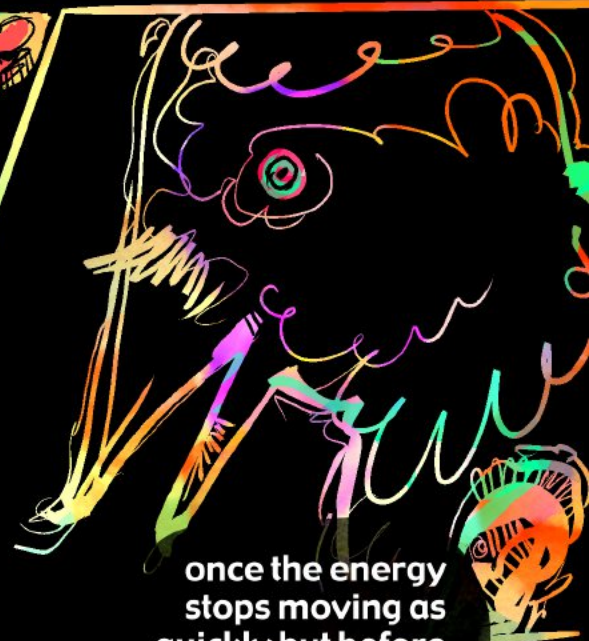
that's how the
balancing is done

go figure

we had to start from square one
to figure out how to actually
maintain the lagoon properly
and get Lem out of it
here's how it's done

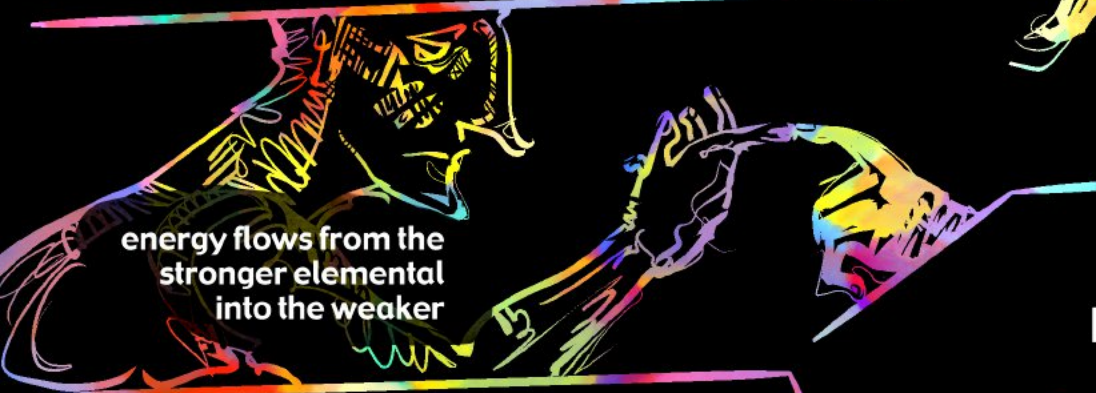


you touch
lightly
just a finger
is enough



once the energy
stops moving as
quickly but before
it's gone inert

you gently
pull apart from
each other



energy flows from the
stronger elemental
into the weaker

voila
you and
I have
balanced



that was
kinda intense



I mean we're
literally touching
our souls together
I guess it would be

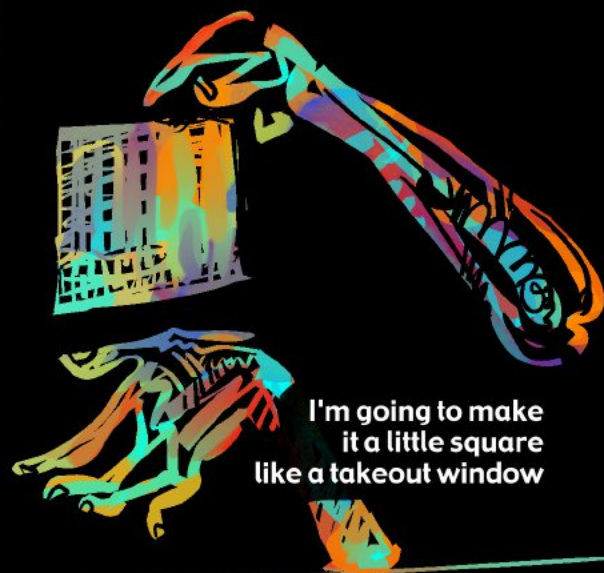


the first one
is always the
weirdest so it
should be
easier from
here on

as for time to give it
your a new shape
aperture



I'm going to make
it a little square
like a takeout window



don't order fries
we don't have any

with the exception
of Lem and I

you'll be
interacting with
everyone through
this small opening



that way
you can talk
more normally
& there's less
danger of melding

even
tripping
could cause
an accident

I have to leave for
safety reasons

but just wait here
at your window &
listen for the others

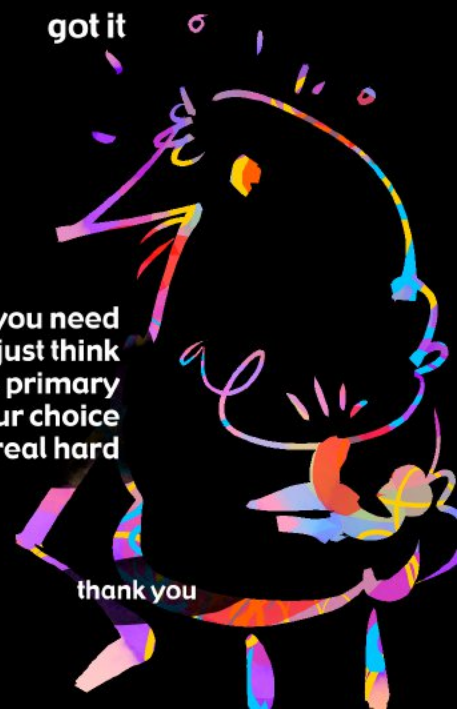
you're gonna
do what we did
with everyone else



got it

if you need
help just think
of a primary
of your choice
real hard

thank you





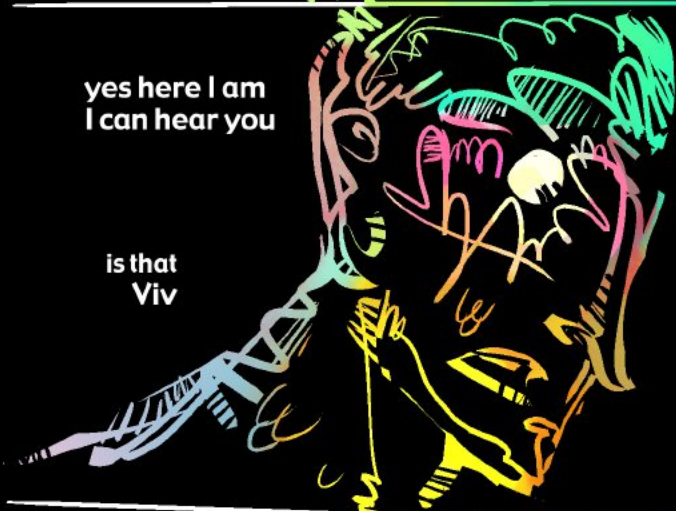
hiya Fern



are you
there

yes here I am
I can hear you

is that
Viv



yarp it's me

you like my
one human ear



it sure
is a look

haha this
is weird
huh

put your hand up here and
we can do the balancing thing

weird in
what way

you're my complementary
elemental

well like
I can't help but
feel really awkward



but we've barely interacted
we've never talked one on one
hahaa

well it's not like that was
up to the either of us
we can just move forward now
I'm sure we'll get along fine

that sounds nice
um so
you really think
Cal is better now huh



well yeah

my view of Cal is ameliorated
quite a bit by my developing
view of Lem

you really don't
like Lem huh
not like I don't
see the sense in
that but

I don't think Lem is like
a bad person or something
or maybe I do a little bit



all I know is
it's been hard
and I'm tired
I'm so fucking
tired Fern

like
what is
the deal
with you
two



I feel like a crazy person
talking about this but like
humor me a bit ok
around the time Lem and I made up
god this sounds so crazy
this other Lem showed up



I don't know how he's doing it
but there's more than one and
when he realized I understood
he asked me to keep it a

like what the hell **secret**
what am I supposed to
do with a secret like this

he had hoped I wouldn't
pick up on it but it was
really obvious

his other self seemed
to not understand at all
and is hurt over it but

he made me swear
not to interact with the
ponytail one

only him



I'm terrified what he's done
is he playing with time magic
is he caught in a time loop or

it's clones

wait what

Lem told me all about
it when I came back

he said I could tell people
but I haven't had the nerve yet



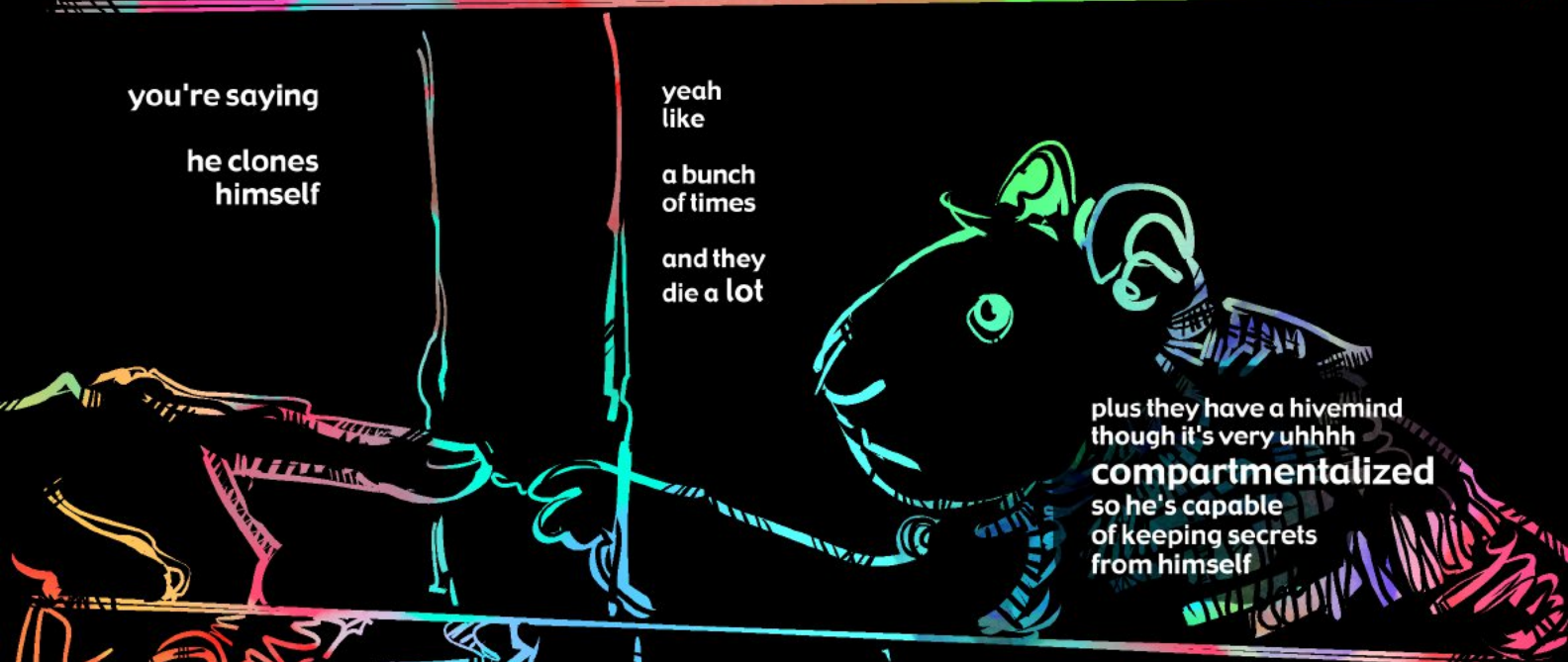
you're saying

he clones
himself

yeah
like

a bunch
of times

and they
die a lot

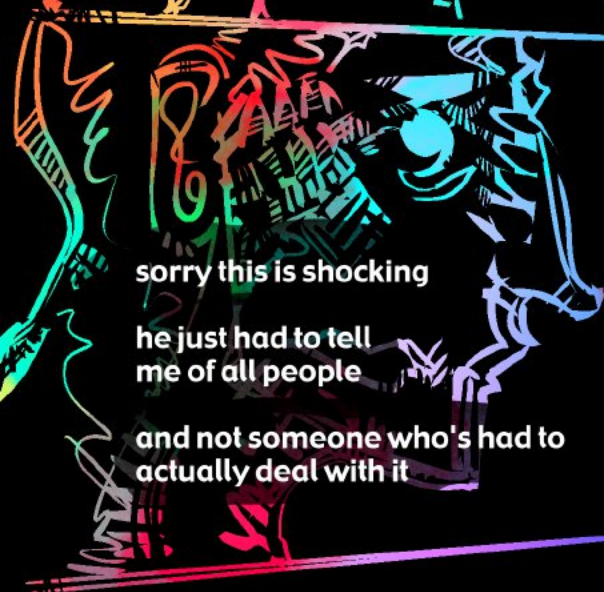


plus they have a hivemind
though it's very uhhhh
compartmentalized
so he's capable
of keeping secrets
from himself

sorry this is shocking

he just had to tell
me of all people

and not someone who's had to
actually deal with it



it's ok
thanks for
telling me

I'm not gonna
freak out I'm just
processing a lot
of things right now



it's done
Fern I

gotta go



ok



um the next person in
should be May so look out for her

good
luck



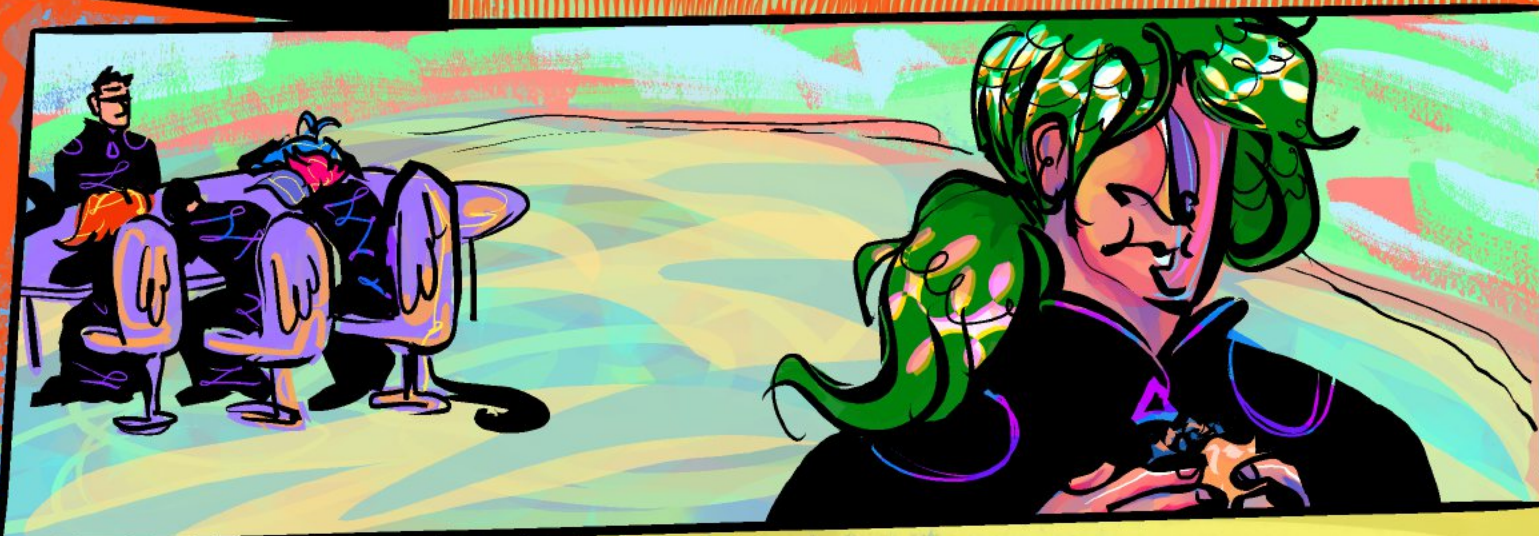
thanks



hmm



sure hope I
didn't make a
mistake just now



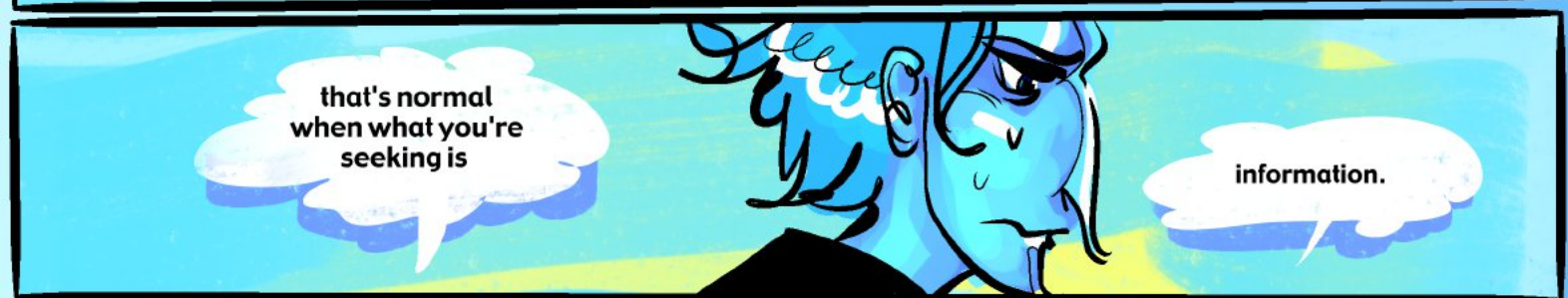
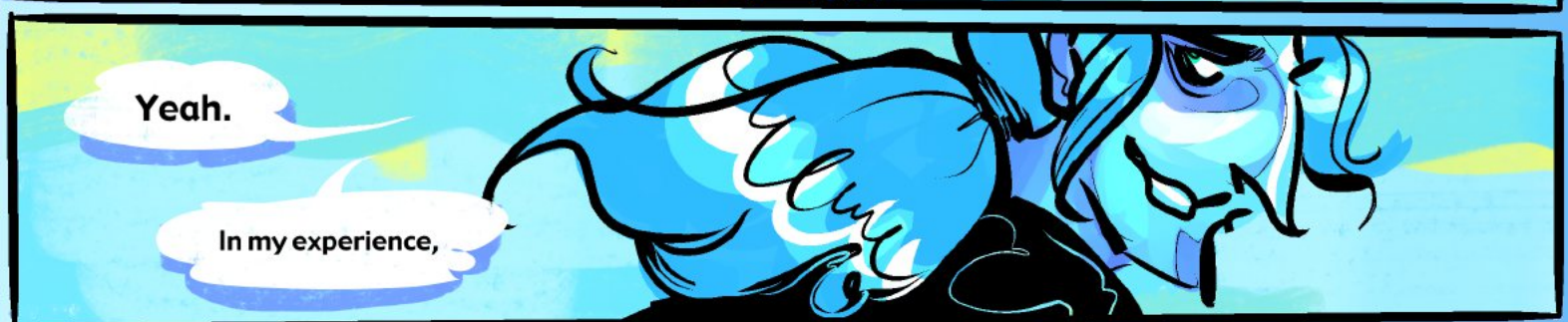
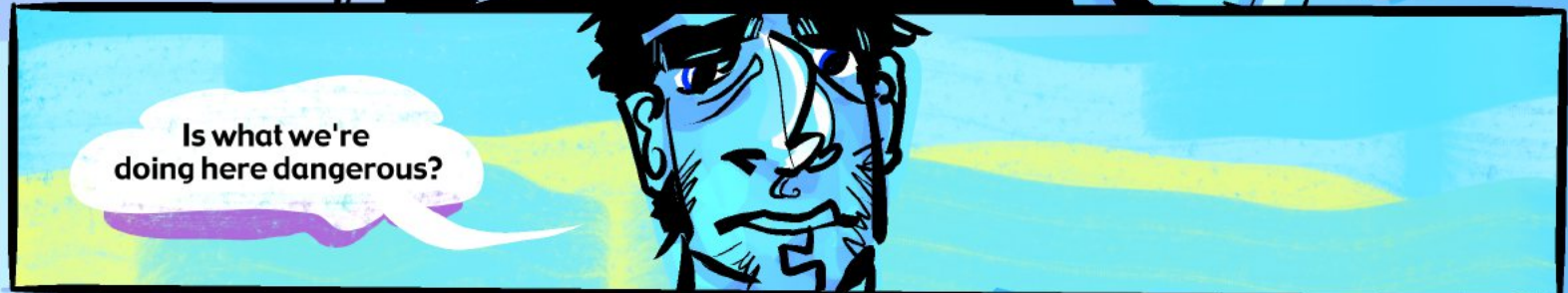
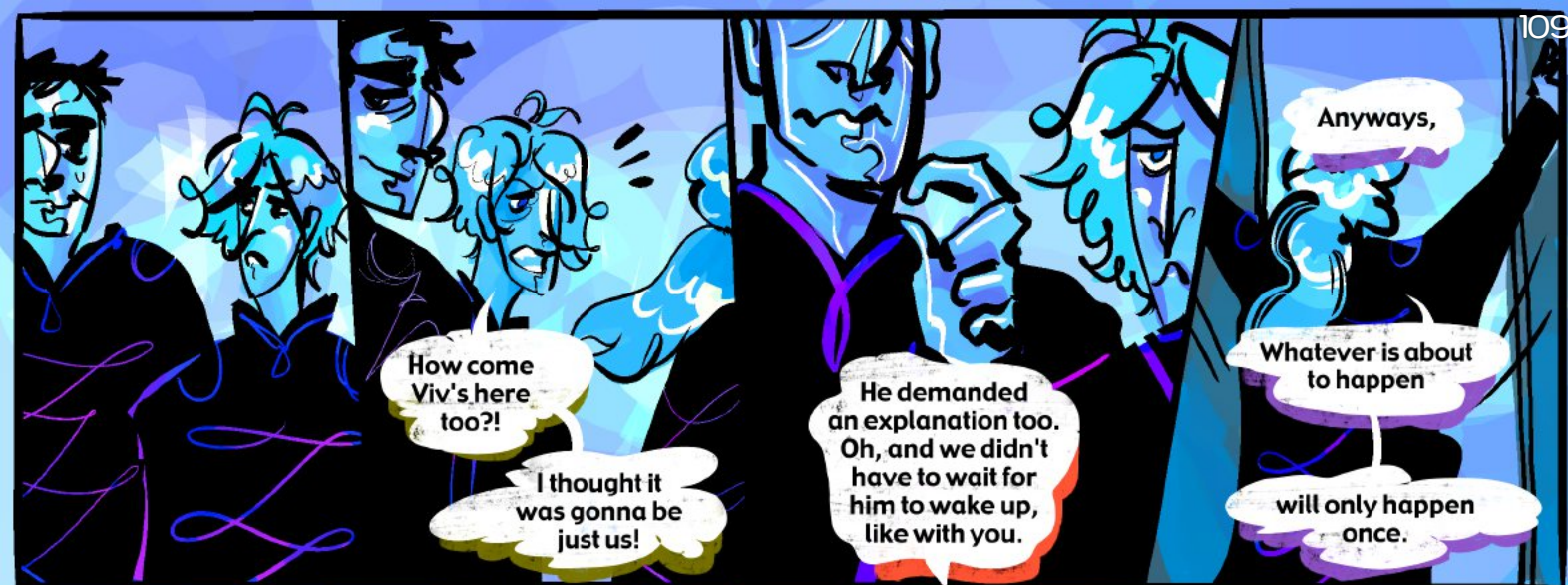
What are you
doing?

Creak





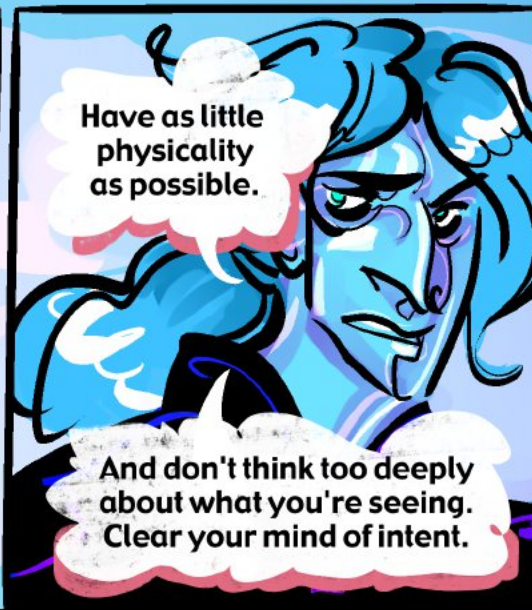






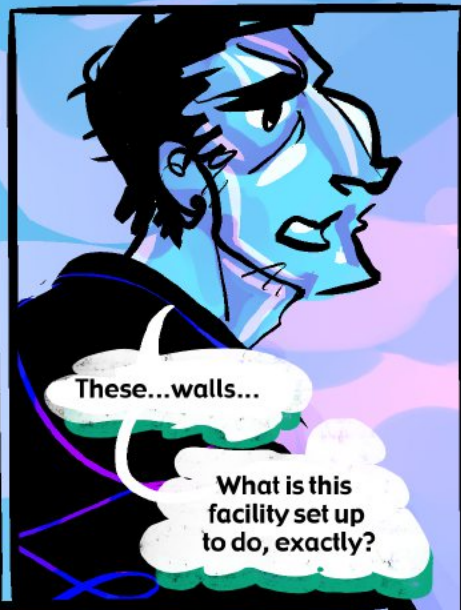
You'll want to change to your spector forms for this area.

Keep 'em on the entire time you're here.



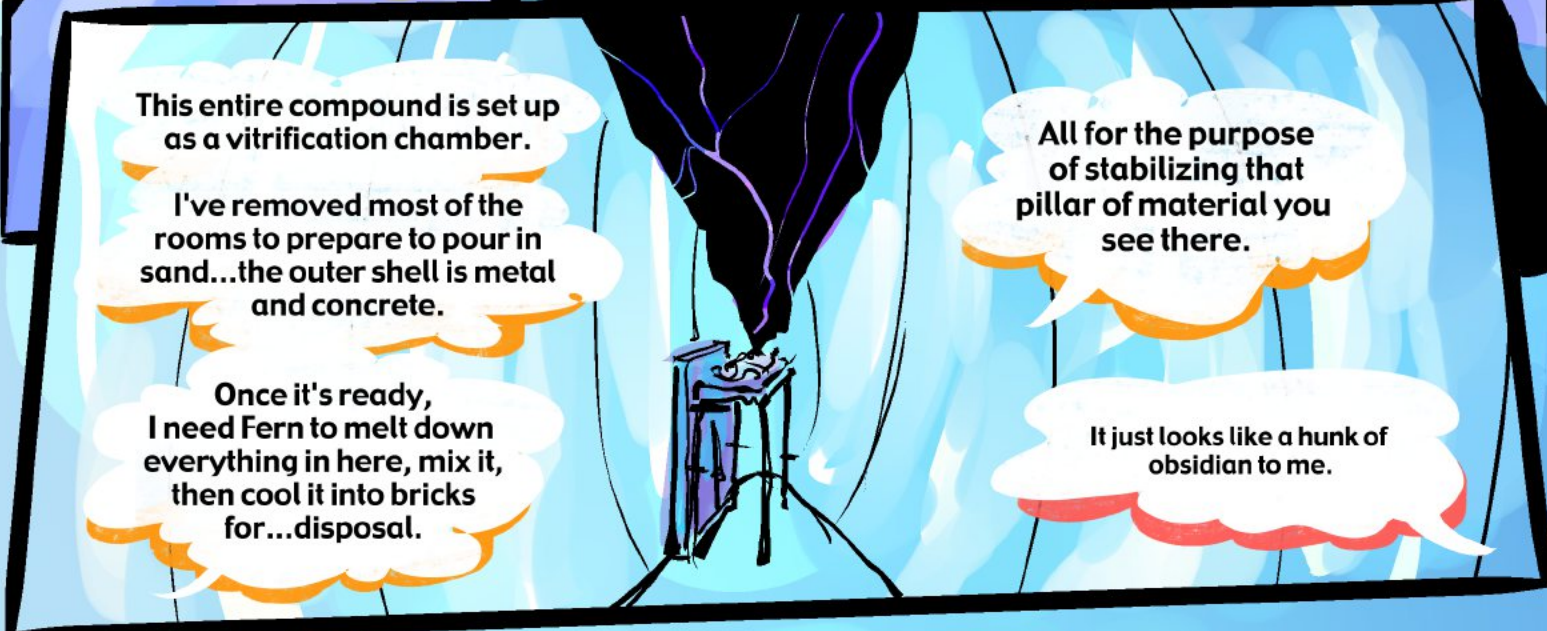
Have as little physicality as possible.

And don't think too deeply about what you're seeing. Clear your mind of intent.



These...walls...

What is this facility set up to do, exactly?



This entire compound is set up as a vitrification chamber.

I've removed most of the rooms to prepare to pour in sand...the outer shell is metal and concrete.

Once it's ready, I need Fern to melt down everything in here, mix it, then cool it into bricks for...disposal.

All for the purpose of stabilizing that pillar of material you see there.

It just looks like a hunk of obsidian to me.



It's not just obsidian. It's material from a higher power that can break boundaries.

Any kind of boundary. Souls...bodies...reality. Anything.

Wow...sounds kinda...

It could be.

...if it were stable.
Which I might be able to accomplish here.

What's on the platform?

Useful.
Haha.

not like I want some or anything

Is that the "body?"

Um...so...

The original Lem...

was swallowed by the glass when it was formed. Energy, his body, his soul, all fused together into one...thing...

This was "bad" for him, as you can imagine,

We thought balancing the lagoon would make him feel better...y'know... not having all that elemental energy blasting through him all the time.

I'm lowering the platform, watch your heads.

Instead, he's had more & more trouble using his physical body since the balancing got started.

And after Fern left a few days ago, he hasn't been able to move or speak...

but there's been this recent, rapid deterioration that we didn't expect at all...

whinn
rrrr

...only message us a little bit in the lagoon. He still seems sharp in there, but his body's just...an inert shell.

Oh. Uh. Sorry, I forgot to mention.

We cut him in pieces to try and free him of the glass...

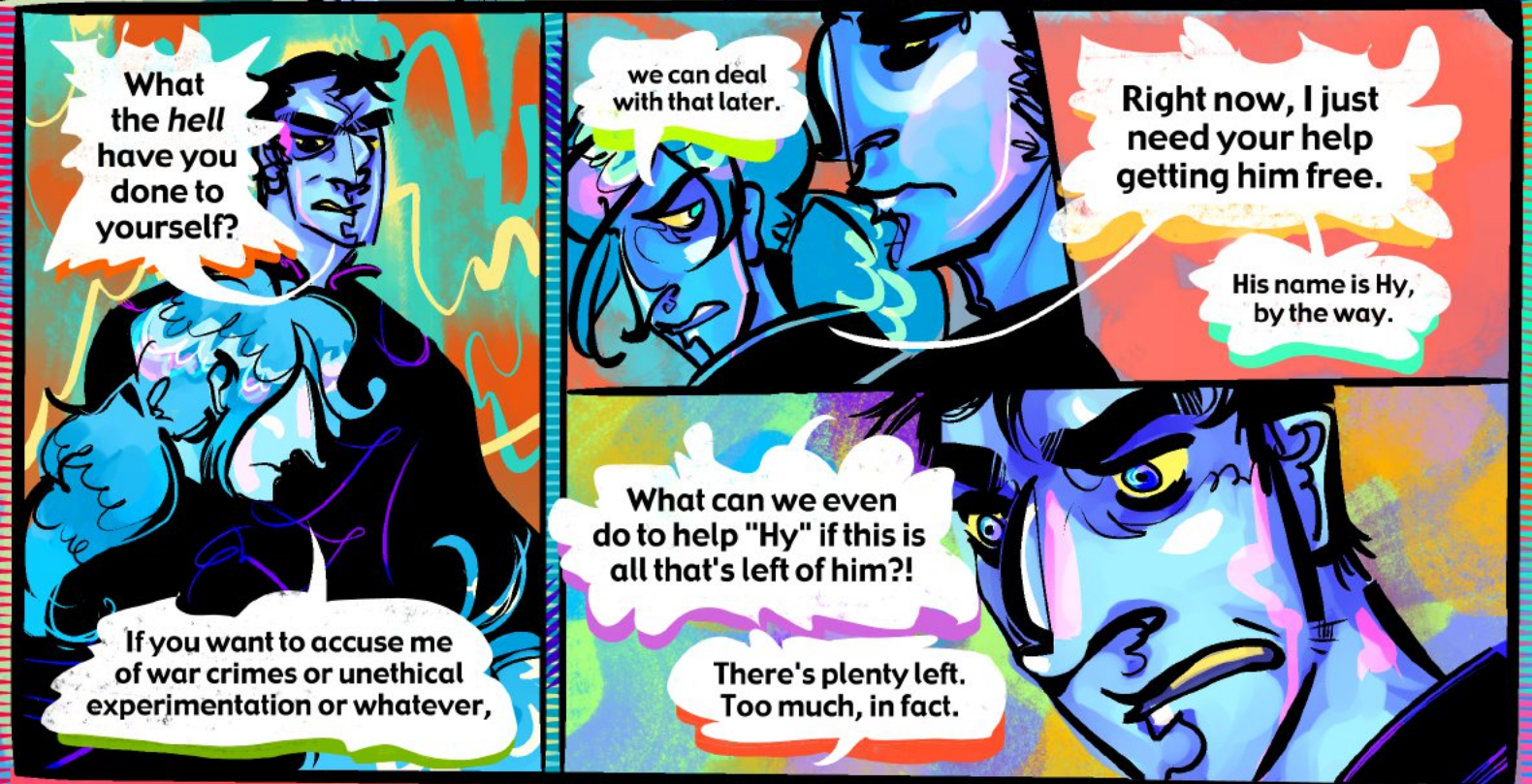
I mean, we've tried a lot of things.

But since his soul was also fused...



Well...um...

Either way, we couldn't get him out of this room.



What the hell have you done to yourself?

we can deal with that later.

Right now, I just need your help getting him free.

His name is Hy, by the way.

If you want to accuse me of war crimes or unethical experimentation or whatever,

What can we even do to help "Hy" if this is all that's left of him?!

There's plenty left. Too much, in fact.

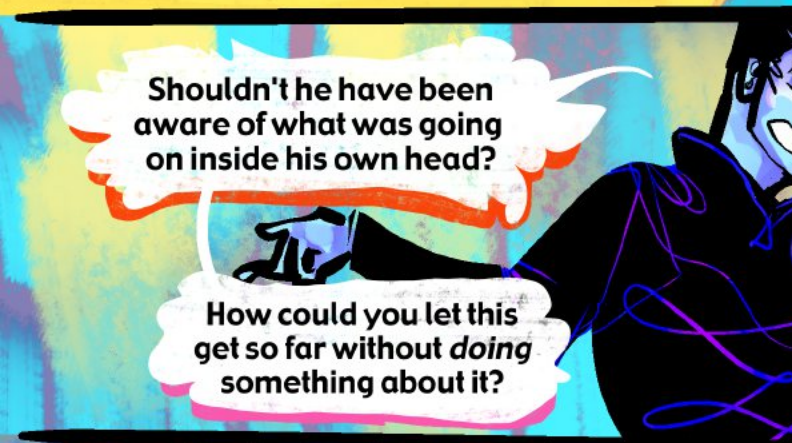
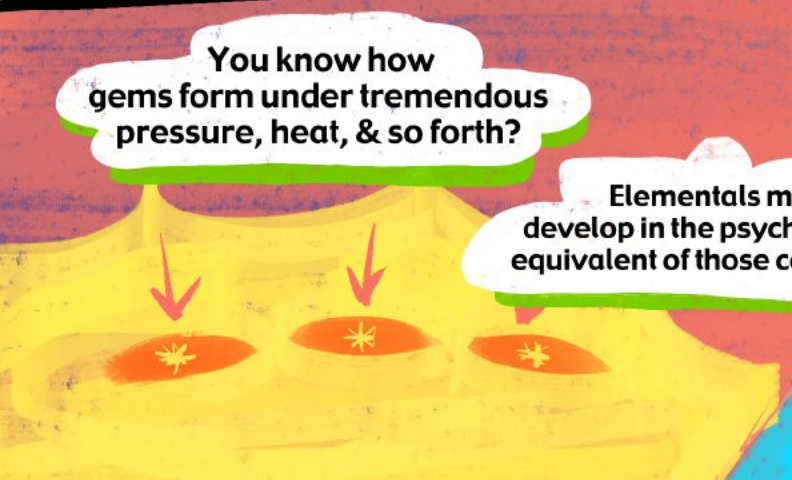
As I said, he can still talk to me via the lagoon, & he's identified part of the problem.

With all the excess energy receded...Hy could see his soul's shape had become extremely... labyrinthine.

A normal Faidian soul is shaped like a maple seed. Two wings, attached in the middle, with the aperture as a 'stem' connecting it to the network.

It had developed pockets and extra wings where energy got trapped and developed strangely.

He's not alone in there. There are at least two other entities inside *with* him.





Glad I can bring you so much satisfaction.

I need you two to enter that dimension & retrieve the two new elementals.

Anyway, I've augmented Hy's soul into a spacial dimension.

It's too risky to continue any treatment on Lem until they're actually out of there.

The structure could collapse around them all at any time, and then they'd really be trapped.



How do you know we can get them out?

We could be risking it all for nothing!

Because they're alive, we have to try...

And because a third one already came out on its own, so I know it's possible.



There's a third one already??

That melcey of Fern's... Smoke. It's another elemental that formed inside Hy.



Smoke was close to the surface...so it managed to wiggle free.

The other two are too deep inside to make it out on their own.

Are you saying Fern's emotional support animal is an elemental???

Yeah.

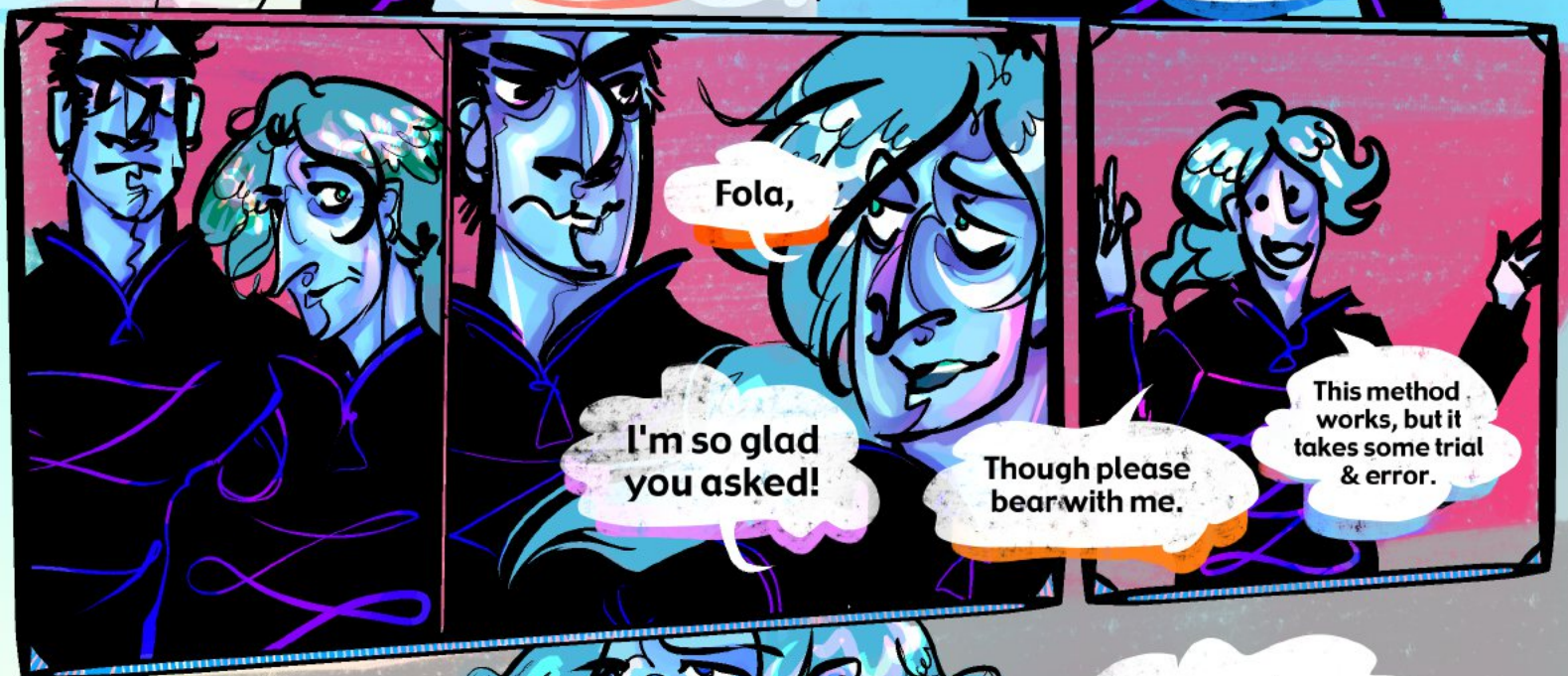
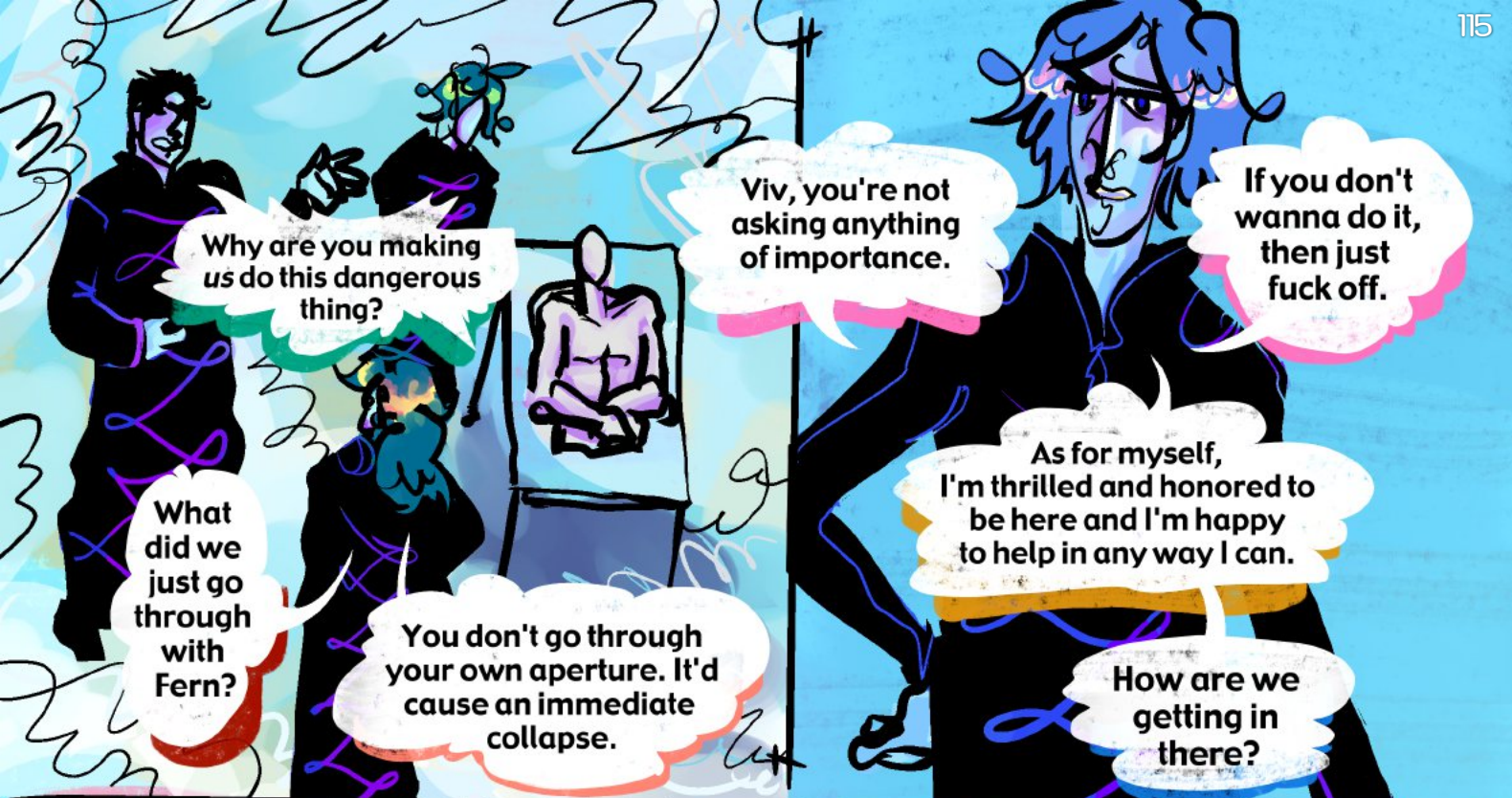


Three new elementals.

An odd number... One isn't paired.

Um, well, uh. That kind of conjecture is maybe kinda pointless right now.

We don't have enough info. So, another reason to send you two in there, hah.





I'm cool.

Okay. Cool.

Are you guys fucking kidding me



And before you object, Viv, hear me out.

You won't have to eat him directly, okay?



This could be quite pleasant.

If you avoid thinking about it too much, which you should be doing anyway when you're in here...



buzzzzzz



buzzzzzz

Bbbbz

Bzzzzz

bzzzzz



His chest cavity tends to generate bees...and milk.

The bees are way better. The milk is absolutely disgusting.

Hy has had to use life magic to heal his body for thousands of years.

His flesh has been perpetually burning this entire time.

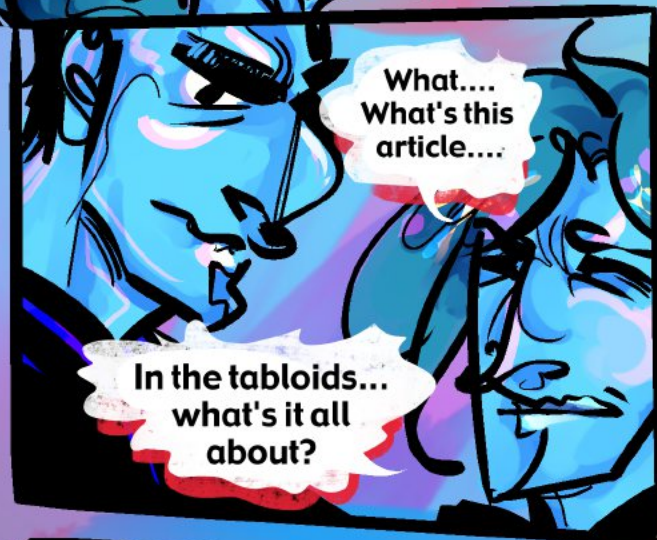
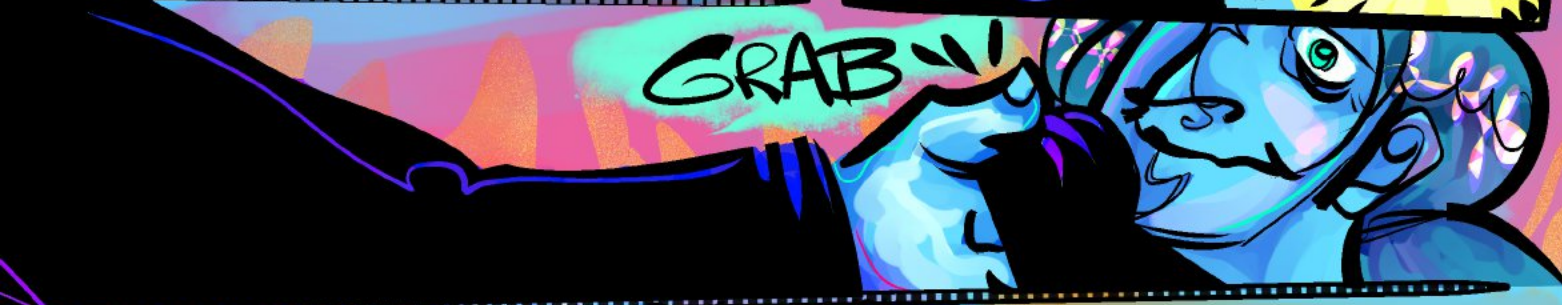
After a while...the magic... started malfunctioning. Sort of...wearing out.

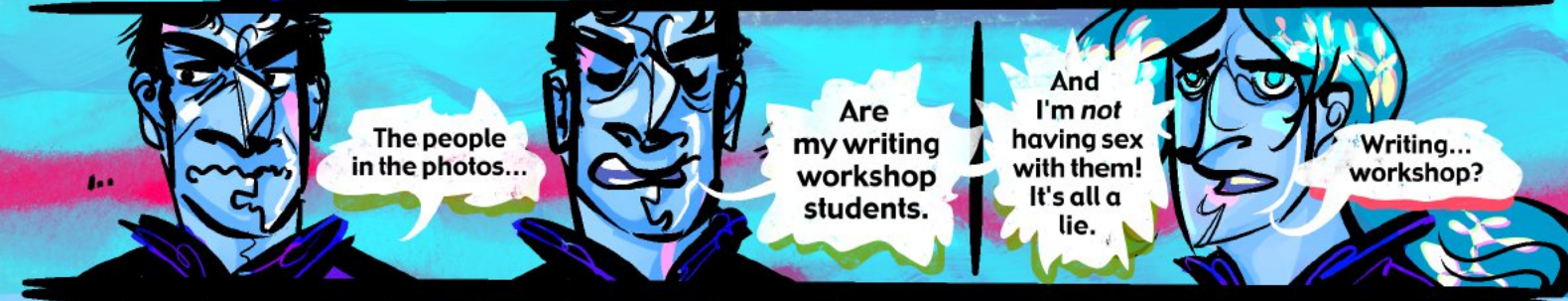
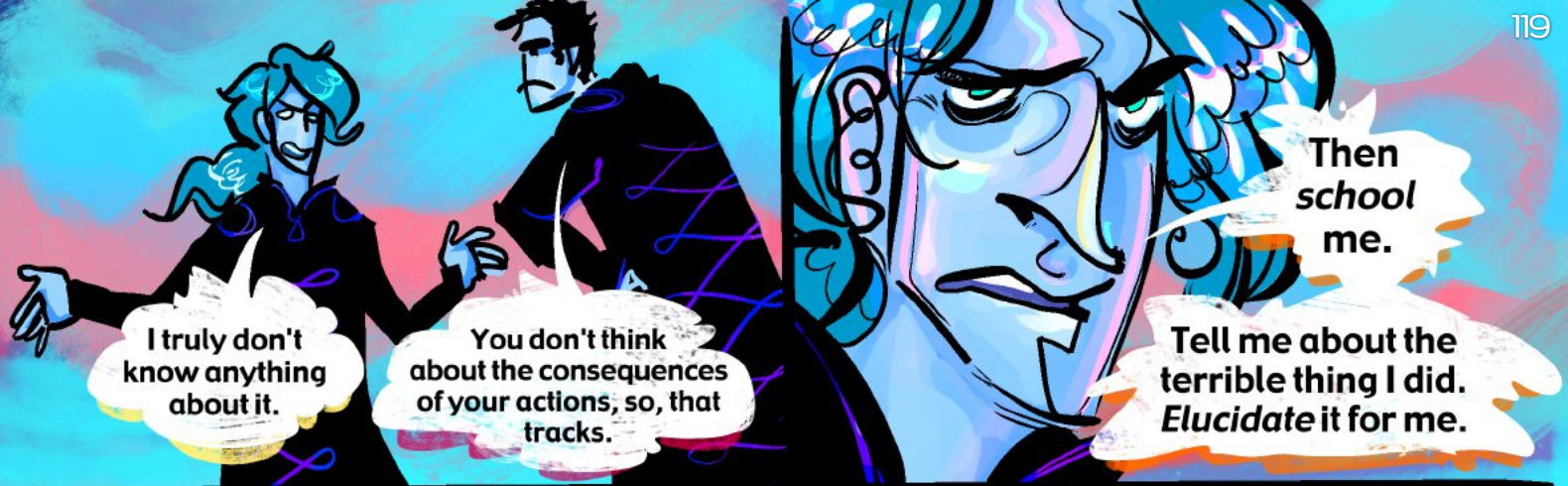
So...instead of a heart, or a liver... A swarm of bees. Crabs. Fish.

Normally, of course, you wouldn't want to eat any of this. It's... affected. Malformed.

But it's probably the safest way to access his soul now.







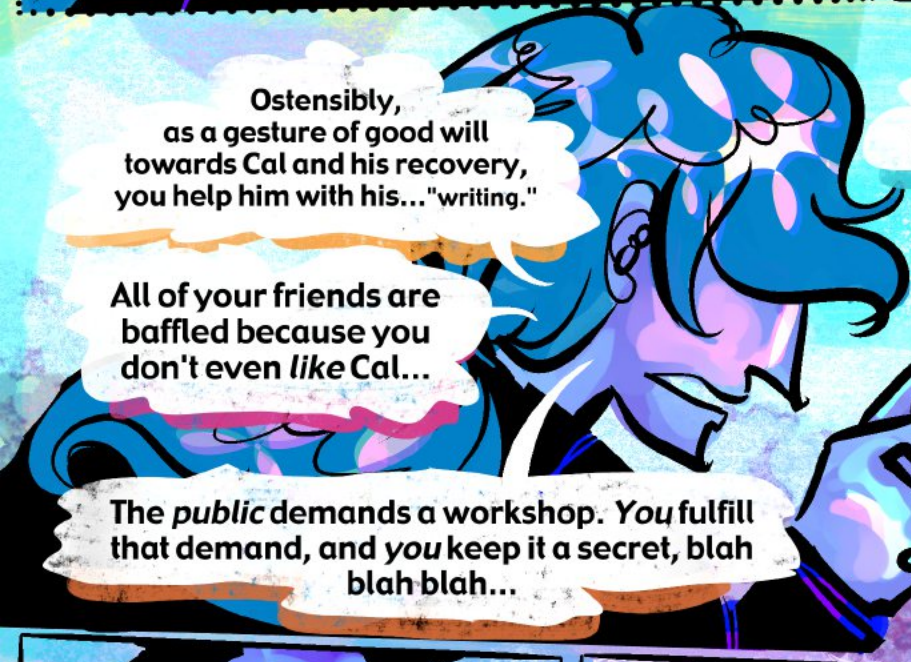


So, is this a *stupid* story, or...

This wouldn't have happened if not for you!



Let me get this straight.



Ostensibly, as a gesture of good will towards Cal and his recovery, you help him with his... "writing."

All of your friends are baffled because you don't even *like* Cal...

The *public* demands a workshop. *You* fulfill that demand, and *you* keep it a secret, blah blah blah...

Cal spills the beans *repeatedly* to the public that this has occurred, which he didn't need to do...

Where in all of this was *I* making decisions?



No wonder you can't respect Fola's choices.

You don't even respect your own.



What do I look like, a waiter?



Fine. I don't know what I expected.

Give me the fucking honey.



Get it yourself.

...disappear
like that?

They probably just
went off on one of their
field trips.

But in the middle of
a balancing??

What if there's
an emergency?

Well, but...
everyone else
is still here...

I'm sure Fola pulled
him away on some
kind of lark, that's all.

Oh, Lem's
awake.

Whoa.

Did it work? Are you
out of the lagoon?
Did it make your
hair curly?

Well,
I'm not the
same Lem
as the one
who was
here earlier,
but I think I
still count.

I've
got the
right
robe, see?

Uhh.
Yeah.

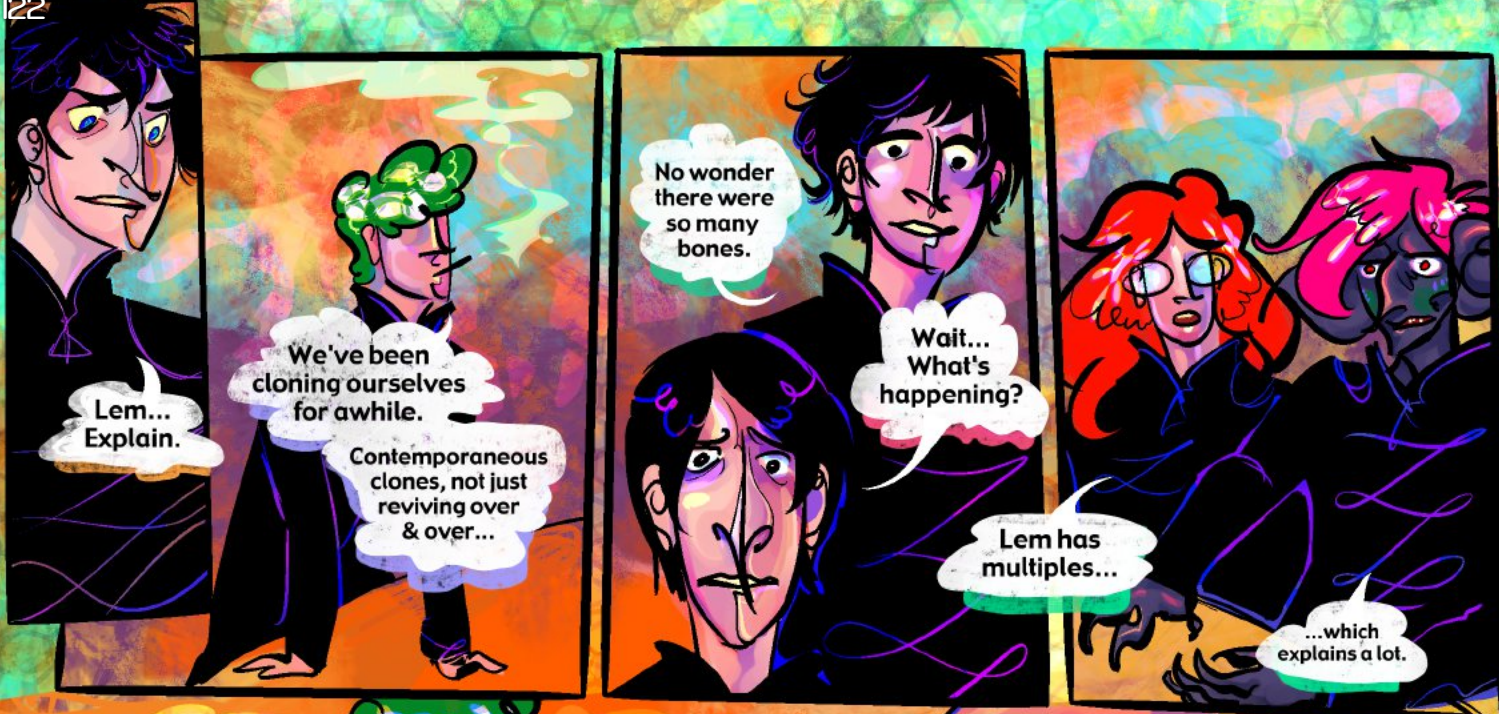
I'm... free &
clear, thanks to...
help. That's me.
I'm Lem.

Uhh...

Seriously,
you look
different.

Don't worry about Fola
& Viv, they're on an errand
and should be back soon.





Lem... Explain.

We've been cloning ourselves for awhile.

Contemporaneous clones, not just reviving over & over...

No wonder there were so many bones.

Wait... What's happening?

Lem has multiples...

...which explains a lot.

I can explain as much as you want in time.

I'm in a hurry.

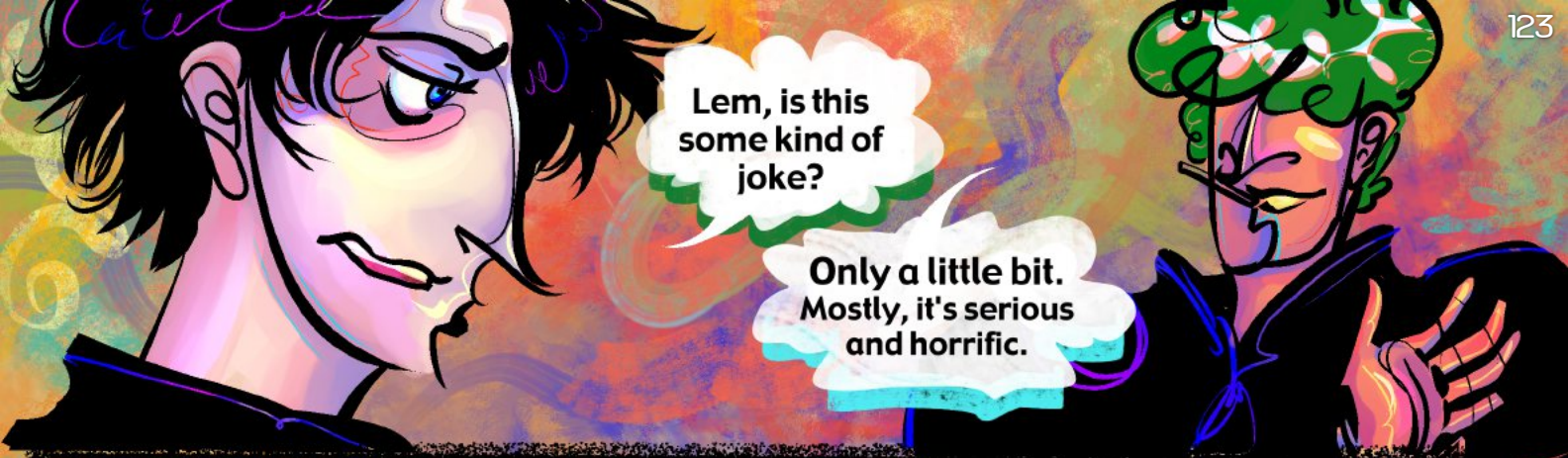
Right now, Cal needs to eat this.



CLACK

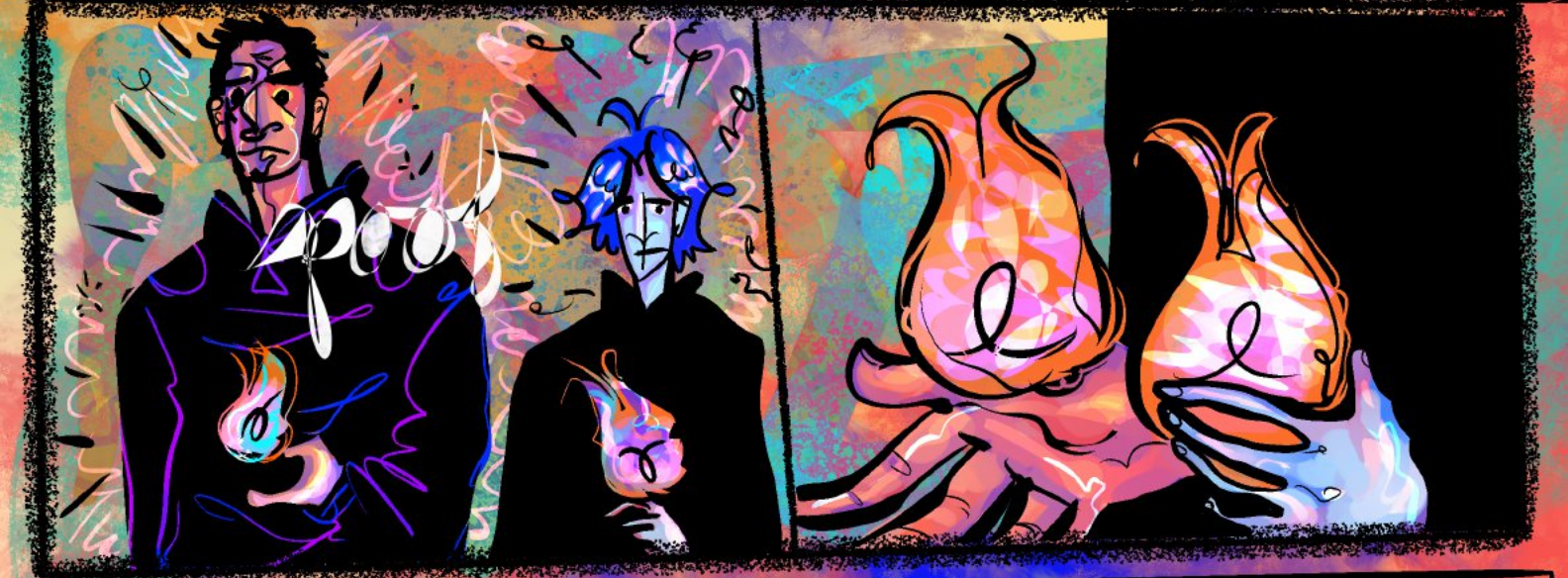
Eat... What is it?

Poison.



Lem, is this
some kind of
joke?

Only a little bit.
Mostly, it's serious
and horrific.



Ah, the boys
are here,
right on time.

...two baby elementals.
Aren't they cute?

I have jars right here
for them, so let's go
ahead and...

Wonderful, wonderful.



Viv and Fola
were just with
my progenitor,
and have now
successfully
rescued...

Thank
fuck I'm
alive.

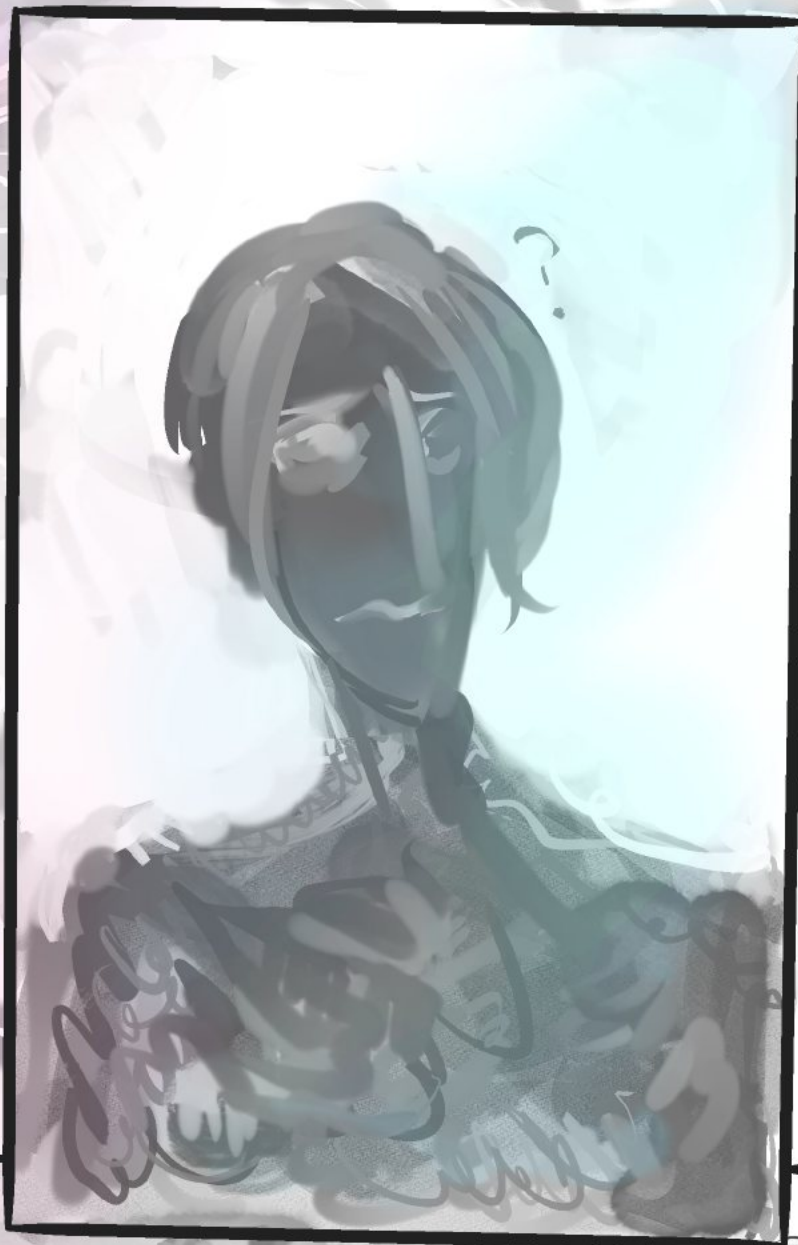
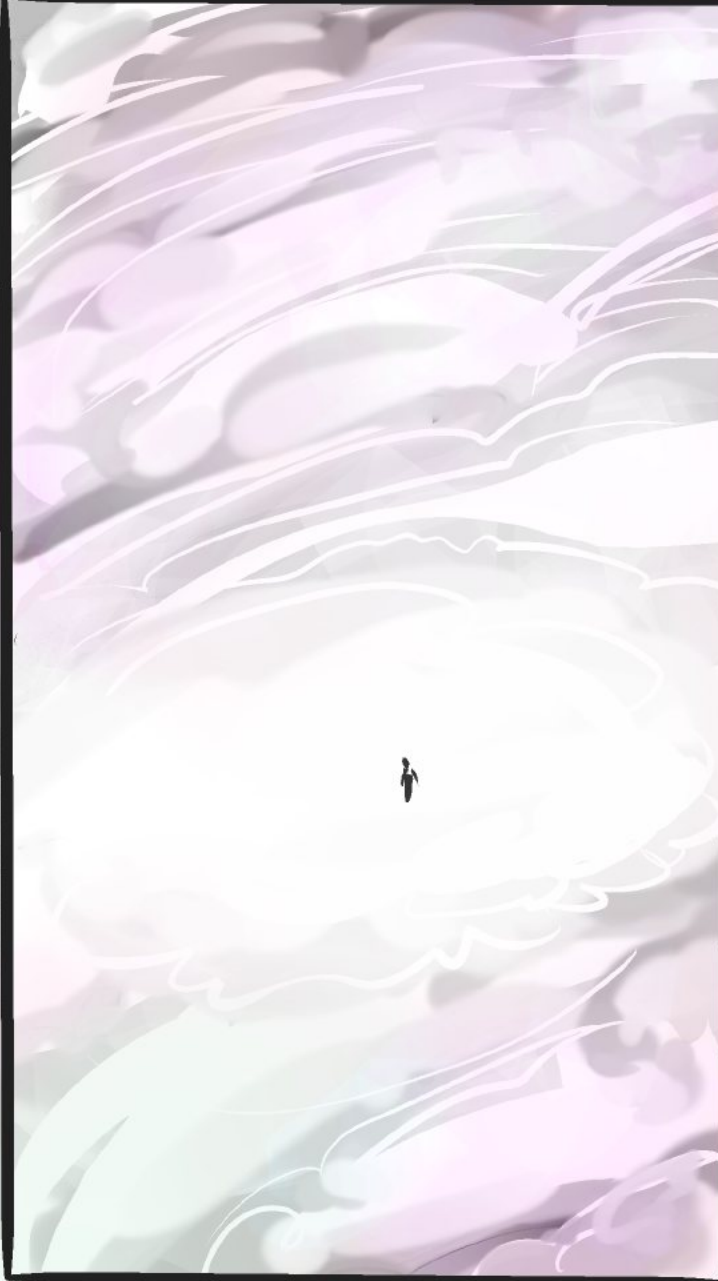
I don't
remember
a thing.

Do you?

I remember it,
more or less.

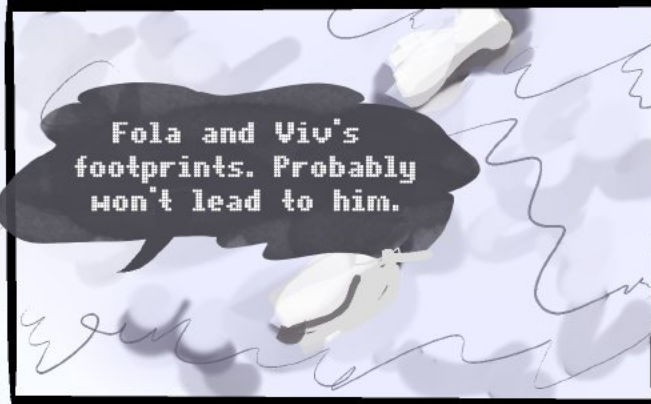
Kinda wish
I didn't.





Lem?

Are you
here?

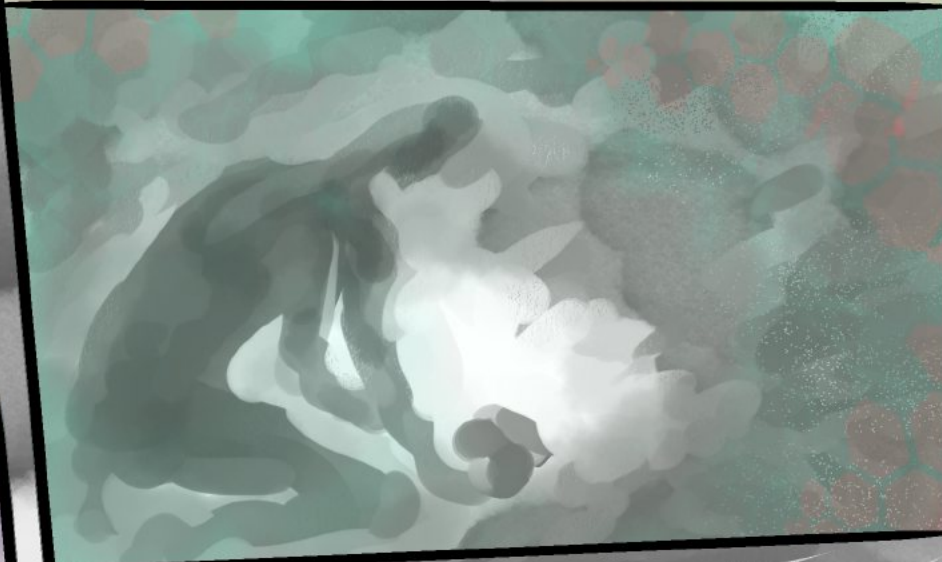


Fola and Viv's
footprints. Probably
won't lead to him.



Bingo.





There's almost
no definition here.

You're...

This is...bad.

You weren't
exaggerating.

Did you do this to... Show me the
error of my ways...?

NOT EVEN A MINUTE
IN AND YOU'RE ASKING
IF IT'S ABOUT YOU.

Well-I mean-

YEAH, YEAH. YOU CRAWLED SO
I COULD WALK, YOU WERE A WORM SO
I COULD BE...A FLAP OF FACE
LEFT IN THE OVEN TOO LONG.
I GET IT.


THE WAY I SEE IT, WE
HAVE TWO OPTIONS HERE.

ONE: IF YOU'RE LOOKING
TO GET RID OF ME PERMANENTLY,
THIS IS A GREAT CHANCE.

I'M JUST A LITTLE
GLOBULE OF JELLY. LIKE
A RAW EGG FELL FROM
A BASKET AND BROKE...
MAYBE THE MEMBRANE'S
HOLDING IT TOGETHER.
YOU CAN'T EVEN PICK
IT UP WITHOUT
DESTROYING IT THOUGH.


JUST SAY YOU DID ALL YOU COULD.
YOU'LL GET AWAY WITH IT.

EVEN MY OTHER SELVES
WOULD HAVE TO ACCEPT
THAT.



...No...that's...
not what I want.
I didn't come
here for that.

I JUST WANT YOU
TO MAKE AN INFORMED
DECISION, CAL.
TRY, IF YOU CAN,
SEEING IT FROM MY
POINT OF VIEW.




I KNOW YOU CAN ONLY CONCEIVE OF
TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS. ONES WHERE YOU
PROFIT AND EVERYONE ELSE (THE CHUMPS) MUST
PAY AND PAY AND PAY.

YOU COULD SAVE ME TO WIN GOOD BOY POINTS
AND THEN IMMEDIATELY START TORMENTING ME
AFTER BECAUSE I ~OWE~ YOU.

YOU RAISED ME TO *DREAM* OF REASSURING YOU ENOUGH
THAT YOU WOULDN'T HURT US ANYMORE. IF ONLY I COULD
FEED ENOUGH SWEAT, TEARS, BLOOD, AND TIME INTO YOUR
GOD HOLE, WE COULD FINALLY BE A FAMILY. BUT
WE KNOW BY NOW THAT WON'T HAPPEN :)

YOU'D RATHER JUST SCRAP IT, WOULDN'T YOU.
IF THERE'S A CHANCE YOU'LL FEEL SAFER,
ISN'T MY LIFE WORTH THE GAMBLE, YOU
FUCKING COWARD?





YOU MAY IMAGINE YOU
LOVE ME, BUT WHO CARES
IF YOUR FUCKING FIGHT OR
FLIGHT OVERRIDES THAT ANYWAY?

C'MON. BE HONEST WITH
YOURSELF. HAVE I NOT BEEN
A SOURCE OF TERROR & SHAME?

WHY WOULD I WANT TO LIVE
JUST FOR YOU TO REGRET SAVING ME?

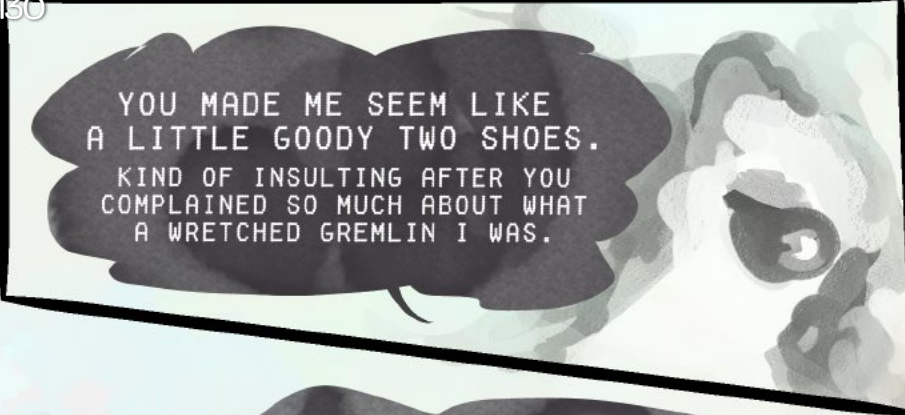
I READ
YOUR STORY.

Oh...What did you
think of it...?





I'D SAY IT WAS A VERY
CONVENIENT, USEFUL TEXT...

FOR YOU,
I MEAN.

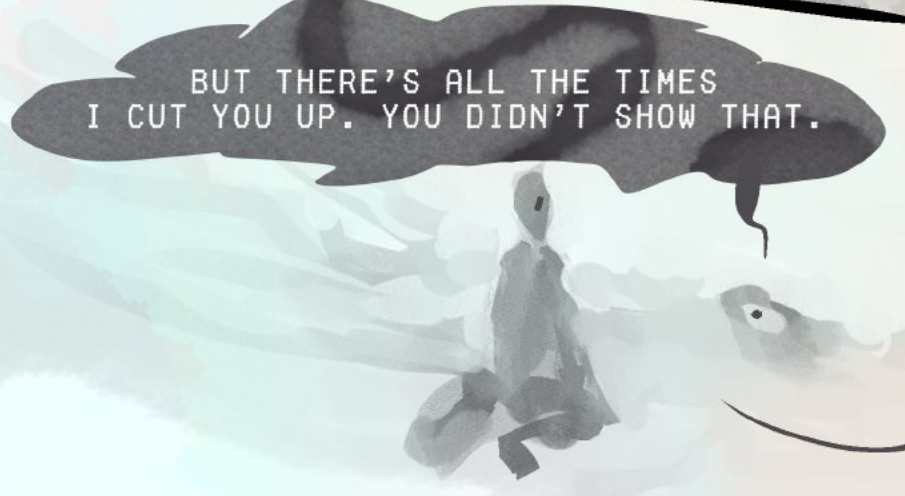


YOU MADE ME SEEM LIKE
A LITTLE GOODY TWO SHOES.
KIND OF INSULTING AFTER YOU
COMPLAINED SO MUCH ABOUT WHAT
A WRETCHED GREMLIN I WAS.




There's a little of
that. I mean. It's hard
to completely hide
what a wretched
gremlin you are.

HMM...
YEAH.




BUT THERE'S ALL THE TIMES
I CUT YOU UP. YOU DIDN'T SHOW THAT.

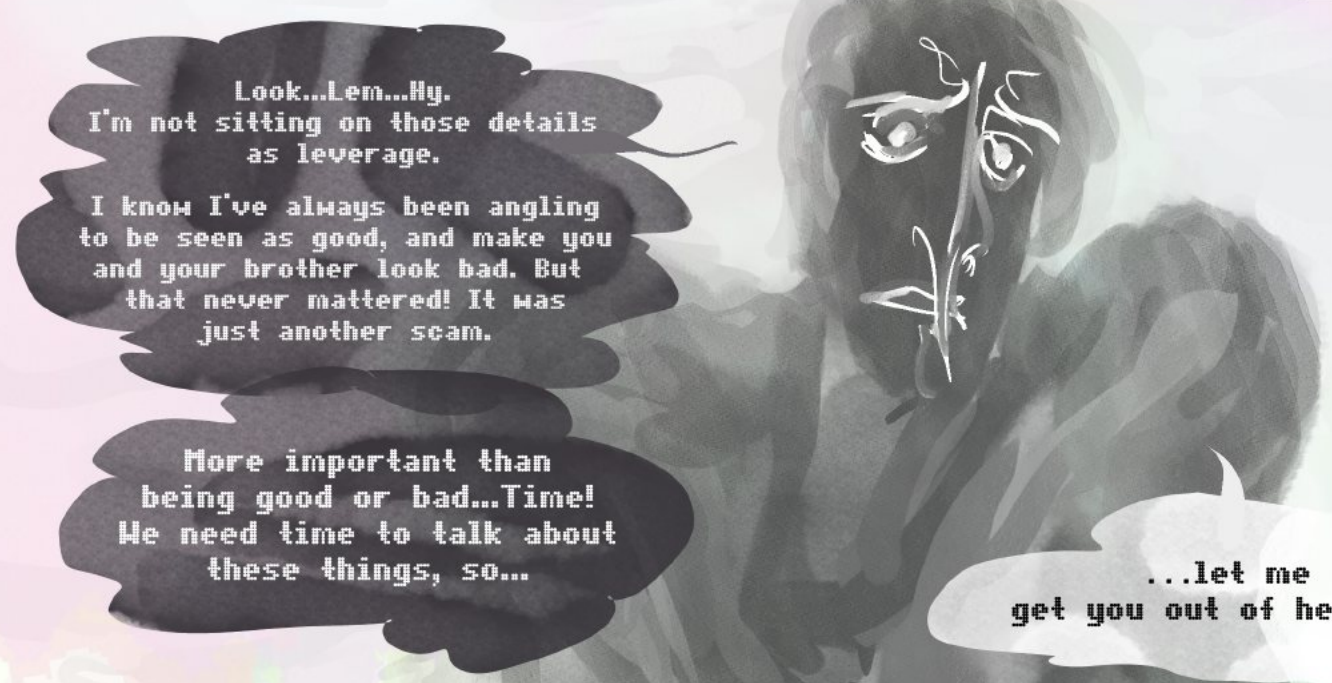
The story...was about the
bad things I did.



If you want people
to know how you cut me,
you'll have to confess
it yourself!



HUH. I HADN'T
LOOKED AT IT
THAT WAY.

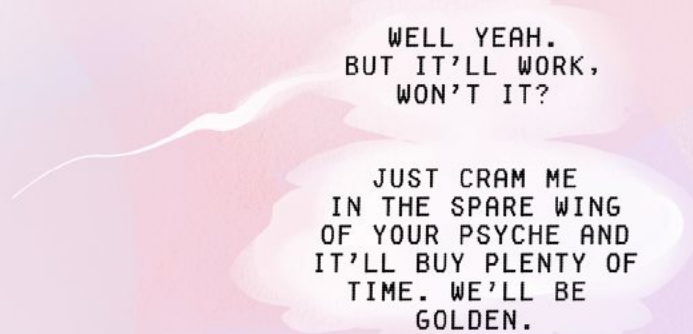
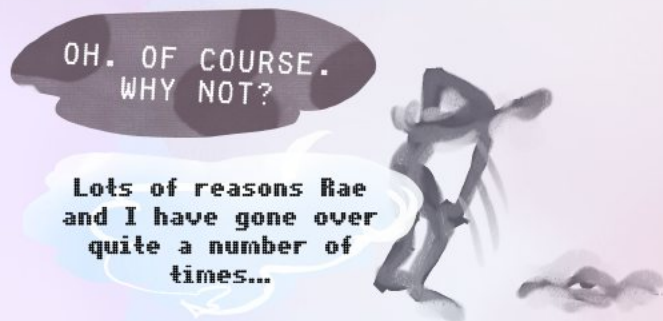
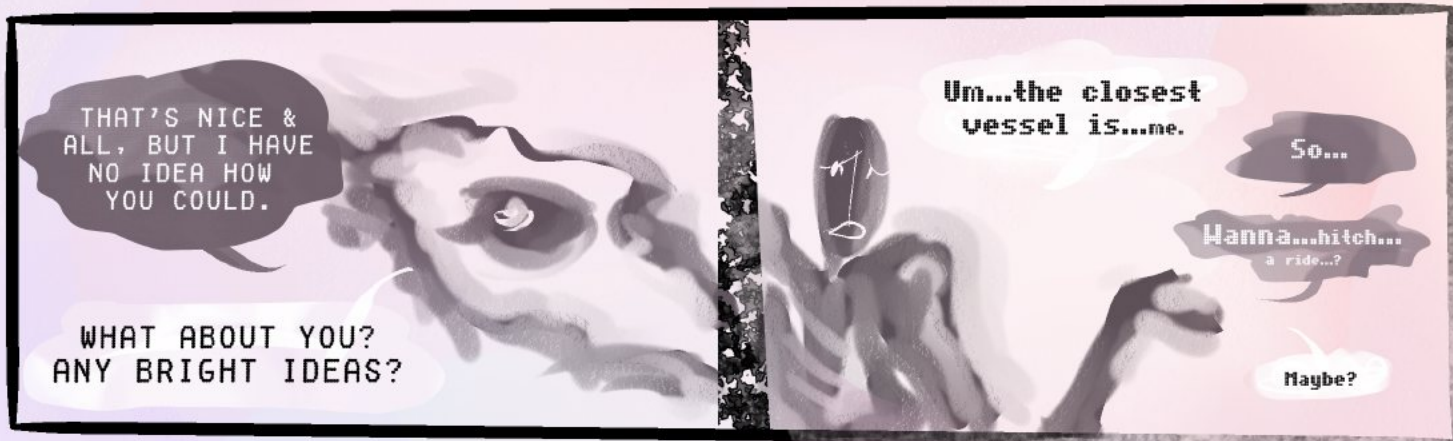


Look...Lem...My.
I'm not sitting on those details
as leverage.

I know I've always been angling
to be seen as good, and make you
and your brother look bad. But
that never mattered! It was
just another scam.

More important than
being good or bad...Time!
We need time to talk about
these things, so...

...let me
get you out of here, OK?



THERE IS NO WAY IN HELL FOR ME TO TRUST YOU IN THIS MOMENT EVEN IF IT'S TO SAVE MY OWN LIFE,

AND IT'S YOUR FAULT.

THIS NIGHTMARE IS WHAT YOU WANTED OUR LIVES TO BE. YOU DID THIS.



Another secret?
Something even
worse than this?

ONCE WE'RE TOGETHER, I SHOULD
BE ABLE TO SHOW YOU WHAT I SAW
AND DID WHEN YOU KICKED ME OUT.

THE FACT IS-WHILE ALL MY SELVES PUT A LOT
OF EFFORT INTO KEEPING IT A SECRET-I DON'T
REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED, EITHER.
I REMEMBER IT, BUT I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT.

SO I NEED YOU TO HAVE
A LOOK AND I NEED YOU
TO DO YOUR JOB & HELP
FIGURE IT OUT WITH ME. OK?

O..of
course.
Thank
you.

I'll be ready
for it, I promise.

SCOOP ME OUTTA
HERE, THEN.

S-sure. How would
you like to do this?

PLEASE
NOTHING EVEN REMOTELY
RELATED TO FOOD OR SEX.
I'M TRYING TO FEEL POSITIVE
ABOUT STAYING ALIVE, HERE.
I DON'T NEED ANY EXTRA
CHALLENGES.

TURN ME INTO A KICKBALL AND
SCORE A GOAL, THAT SHOULD
FEEL FUCKIN' NATURAL ENOUGH.



Okay. I have a
pretty good idea,
I think.

FUCK ME UP, THEN.
BUT DON'T FUCK ME.

I
get it,
Hy.




REGARDLESS
OF WHAT
HAPPENS,
AT LEAST I'LL
FINALLY BE
OUT OF THIS
FUCKING
PLACE.

WHAT SHOULD I
CONCENTRATE ON?


You're...a pair of glasses.
Show me the memory you want me to
see once I put them on.

YEAH OK.




IF YOU DON'T LIKE
WHAT HAPPENS,
JUST TAKE THE
GLASSES OFF?

That's the
idea.



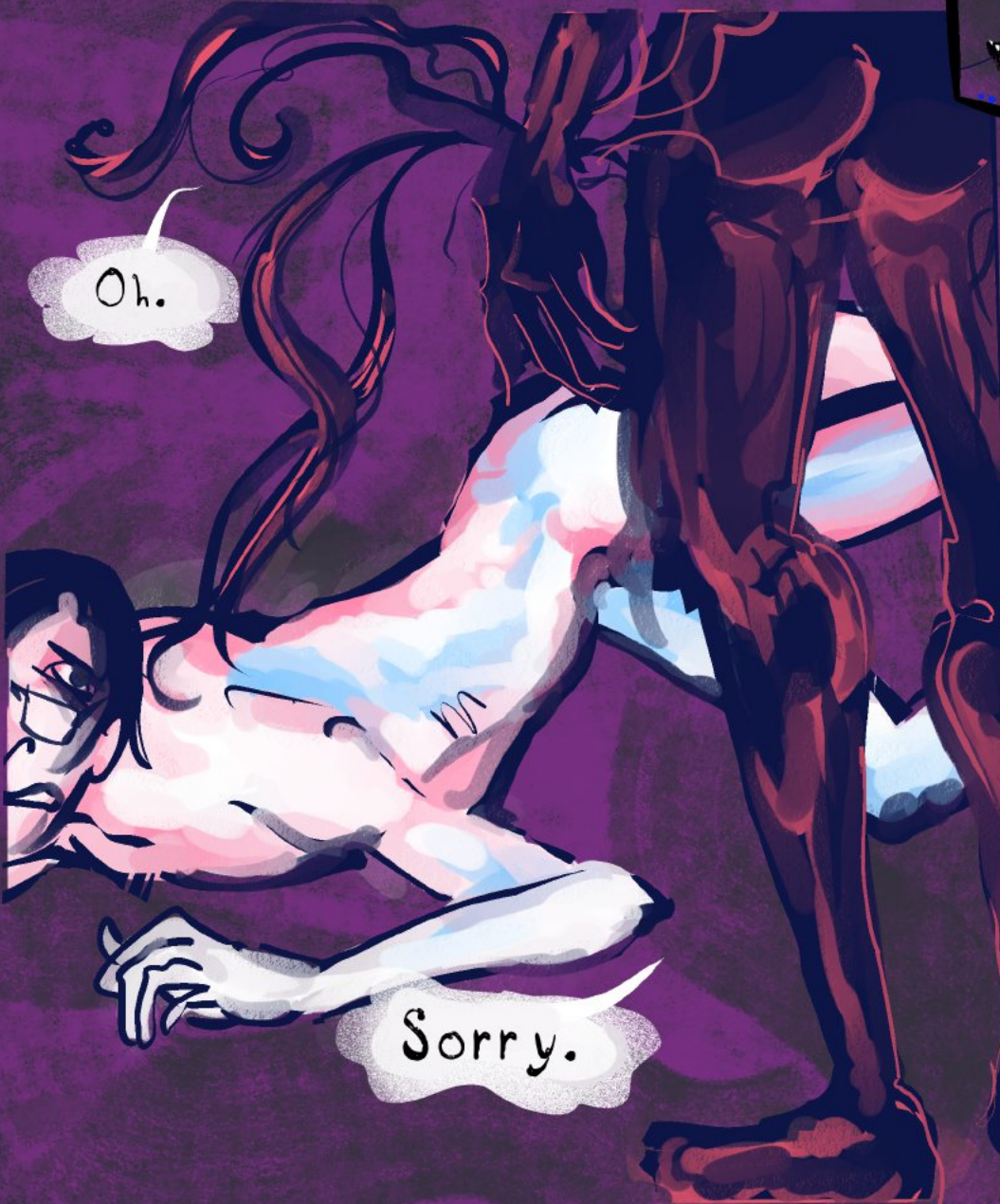
It's really
dark.

THAT'S-A ME!



SEE YOU ON THE
OTHER SIDE.





I-I'm real...
But this isn't
actually happening.
It's a memory.

Huh.
That's new.
No time
travel, still?

No time travel.

Balls, is what
that is. Balls.

I'm not sure it'd
fix anything, honey.

I s'pose.
Might get a few
kicks out of it,
though.

Haven't we had
this conversation
before?

We're always having
this conversation.

What...what did you
think I was?

Aren't we
alone here?

Faidia was
barren at
this point....
I thought...

See, if you knew
your fossil record,
you'd know how
stupid you sound
right now.

So there's...
creatures?

Besides you,
you mean?
Yea.


Um...

Are they...
bite-y?

Mmm.

I wonder.






They talk.

I thought
you were one...but
you're too...

on model.



You're
very...

Muddy.

Patching myself up.

Mud is all
there is here.



I...I...

I don't understand!

Your creatures
never stayed
alive before!

And now you're
saying they eat??

That was just...fumbling.
Spontaneous generation
occurs naturally when my
element combines with other
elements. That's all it
actually takes.

Since I'm exposed,
bleeding...

I can't sleep
or stop moving.
The newborns
will take it all.

I can't stop
yet...There's still
so much to do...



She just said, "going to the help desk was what all the others did."

What others?

Ba ba bo.

Ugh....

Um...I think you're underestimating your contribution to the creative process if this is what they look like on their own.

Maybe. There's just not a lot of magic to go around. Nothing's coming out right.

Bo bo go

be bo be

heeby beeby

What is it trying to say?

Nothing. It's hungry and trying to lure prey.

It sounds like a baby...

It is a baby. A completely randomized baby.

I don't want to feed
the baby my meat,
but I also don't
want to see
the baby get hurt.



Picky,
picky.

Well, you
said this was
a memory,
right? Is
that true?

Very likely. Well,
that is to say, it
definitely is.
I hope.



Okay.

I'll try skipping to the relevant sections.
Otherwise, we'd have to feed or kill a lot of weird babies
while going insane in the process, if I'm remembering
correctly. Ugh. Was this my idea?

CHOMP

Y...yeah.

What a shit
show.



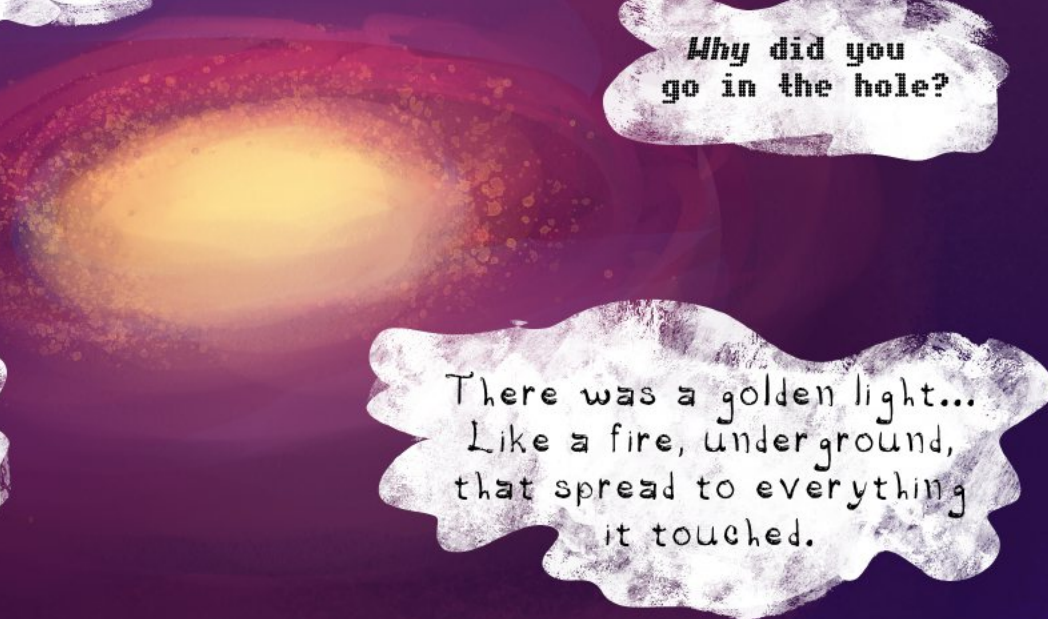
Gotta work with what
you got I guess.

Anyways, let's try
some fast forwarding.

Why did you
go in the hole?

I remember I walked across
the wasteland for awhile...
Then I found a deep hole,
and went down it, and some
more creatures came...

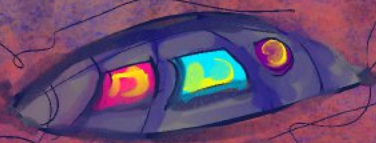
There was a golden light...
Like a fire, underground,
that spread to everything
it touched.



This seems kind
of familiar.

Please be
quiet now and
hang back.

This is the part
you need to see.



CLIK



-SSAGE. IF YOU CAN
HEAR THIS, PLEASE
REPORT TO BASE
REGARDLESS OF
YIELD PERIMET-



Can anyone
hear me?



I'm trying...to contact
the help desk. I need...
I'm in trouble.



I'm...



I'm...a life elemental.
On planet Faidia.

There are three others.
We're all dying.



Please, if anyone
can hear this...please help.



-ES, HELLO? YOU
SAY YOU'RE A LIFE
ELEMENTAL?

YES! I'm a life elemental!


COOL COOL

Please, we need—

YOU ALONE?

Yes...I'm alone.







Hehehe!
You weren't
kidding, huh?

All out of juice.

You want
more juice?





I... I think so.
If by "juice,"
you mean...



Yeah. Magic!
We all know.

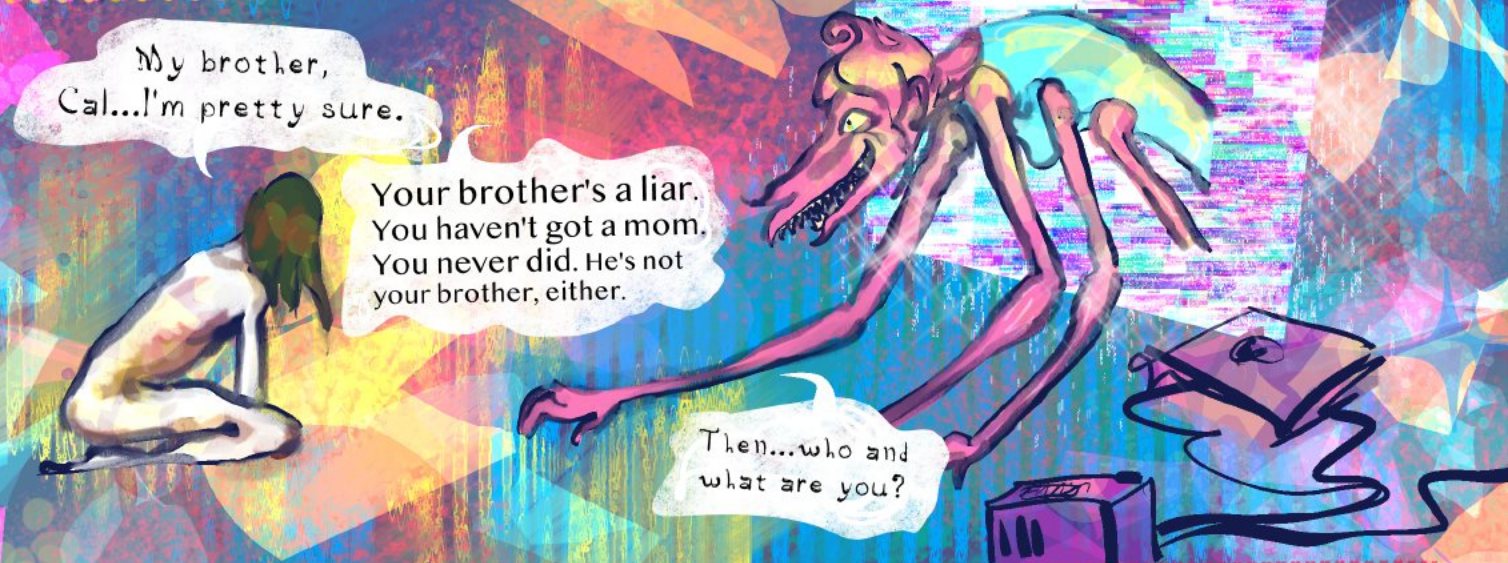
I can give
you as much
as you want.

Just say the
word!



our
mother?

Are you...
do you know...



What's your...
predicament?

Ohh, well, I have
all this extra mojo!
People have sooo
many thoughts!

It gets *super* overwhelming.

So I have to vent my surplus magic
into off-world elementals sometimes!

It restabilizes my whole deal AND gives other
worlds a much-needed boost!


See? It's that simple.
I scratch your back,
you scratch mine!

Hehehe.

A wise guy.

That doesn't sound
true at all.


How unlucky
can one girl get?



So you're not the type to accept a pretty lie, huh? You should start taking better care of yourself.

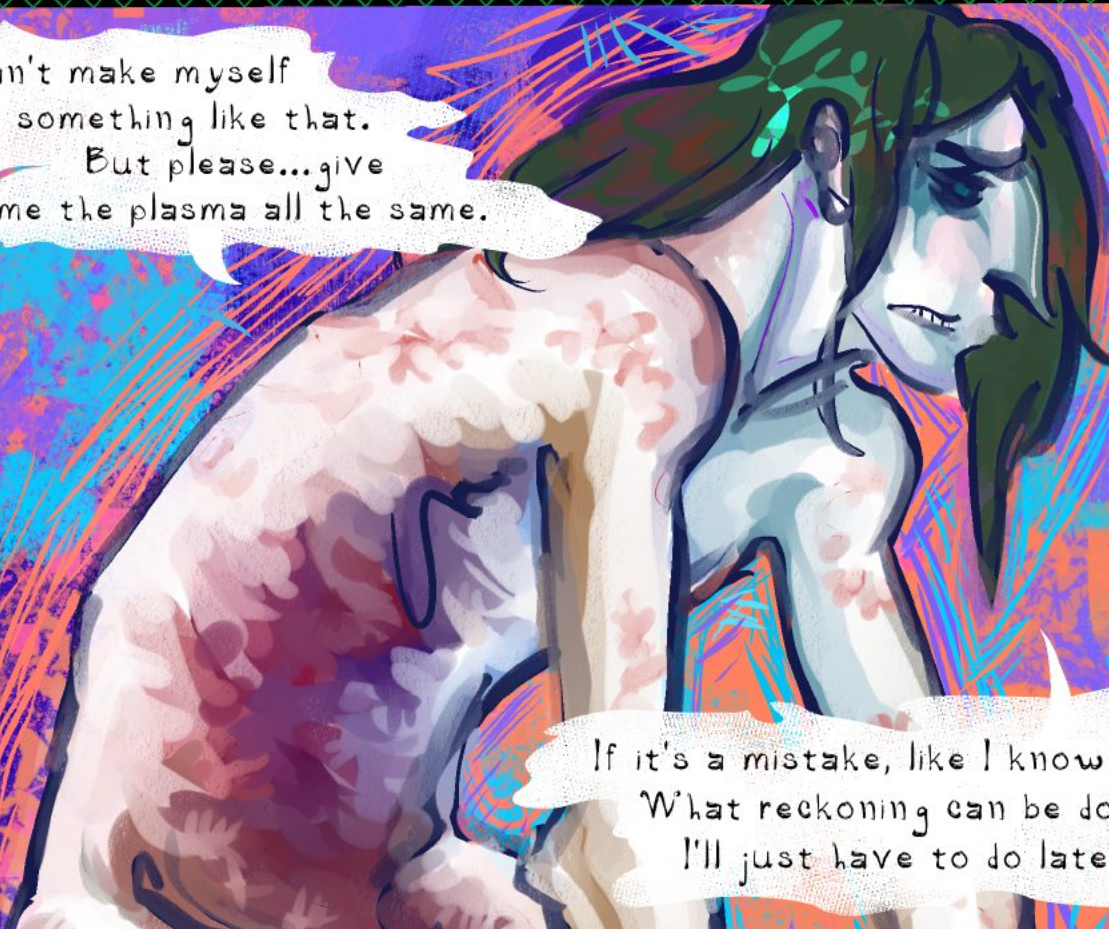
This doesn't have to be so ugly and bitter. You could be smiling right now, too.

You could be viewing me as your savior. Much easier on the mind.



You're worried it's stolen? You're worried it's other, murdered elementals? I won't confirm that one way or another. See, you're off the hook!

You're not in a position to turn it down, so you might as well enjoy it.



I can't make myself believe something like that. But please...give me the plasma all the same.

If it's a mistake, like I know it is... What reckoning can be done, I'll just have to do later.



Okay, edgelord.
Have it your way.

I'm going to give you enough to
dominate your bros,
guaranteed. It's a real steal.

And since you're not interested
in pretty lies, you might as well
know—



I'll be back to get it sometime,
and I *will* collect interest.



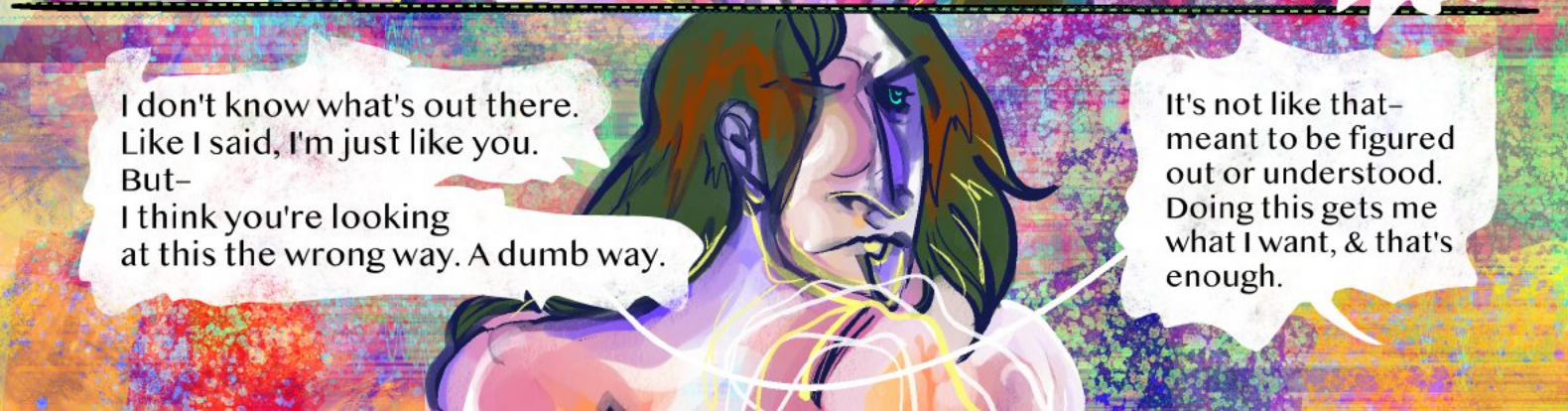
So do a good job, okay? Or die
quick & give someone else a chance.


Is this just a game?



Is this all there is?
This bull shit?








There's got to be something better than this.


Ohh, you're more sad than mad.



You're thinking it's just a coincidence that someone like your brother would be your first encounter with off-world. Otherwise, it'd be just too. Fucked. Up. Right? Well,


You don't have to finish. I get it.

I'm just saying it'd be better if you accepted it, that's all.



Keep up that resentment, and you'll be just as crazy in the end. Maybe even worse. I've seen it. Uuugly.

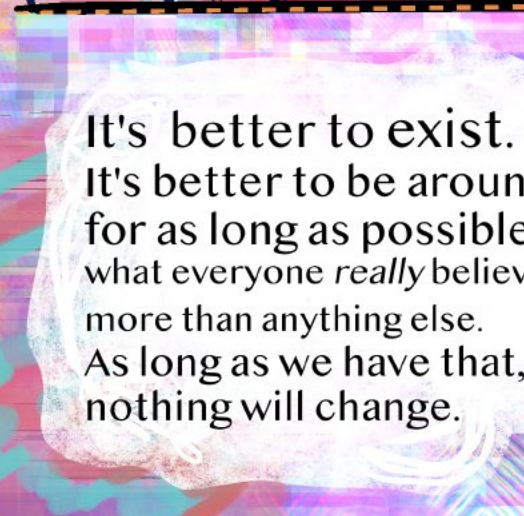
But that's the trick!
Too weak & you get eaten.
Too strong & you go mad.
We are what we are & what we are works well enough.
So we just keep on getting away with it.



I don't understand what reason
you have to live if everything
is as bad as you think it is.

Aren't things bad because
you're making them bad?

It's better to exist.
It's better to be around, and
for as long as possible. That's
what everyone *really* believes,
more than anything else.
As long as we have that,
nothing will change.




And what is your existence?
Trolling old communication
lines for easy pickings?

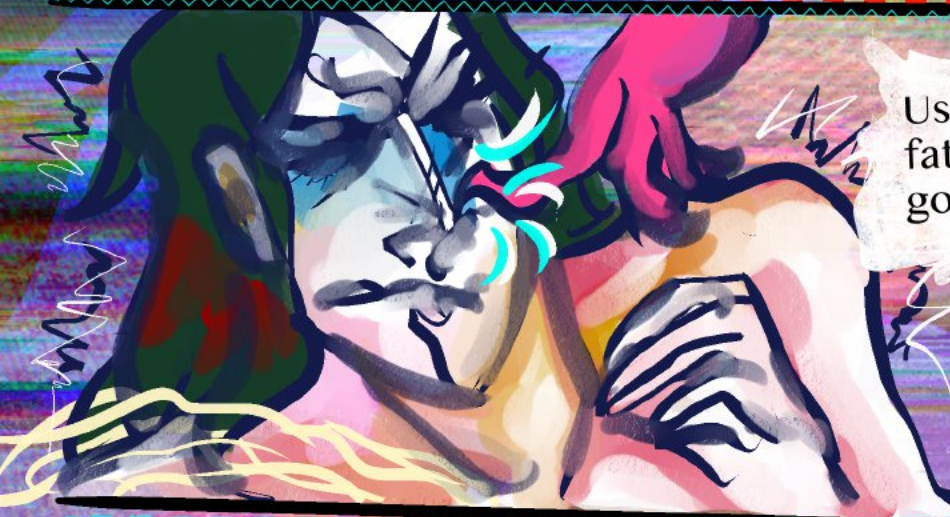
Using that ridiculous
form to disguise yourself?

Let me guess!

You're
on your
own, too.




Oh, *fuck* off.
Everything you're
hoping to achieve is
pointless. Give it up,
or keep paying
the consequences.



Use that needle. Make a nice,
fat, pleasant world for me to
gobble up when I stop by next.

If you turn heel,
go mad, your meat will
be all the sweeter for
proving me right.



Bye bye!



Ok. I'm done. Simulation over.

But the needle!
Where did you
put it! What
happened?!

I put it in myself.
I made a clone.

The rest is private.

What?!!??


How can you expect me to
help you when you won't
give me the whole story?

if you can't
accept those terms,
then you can't help.

You're just as difficult
to deal with as ever! Of course
I'm going to help! I'm just
saying it's rude to expect-

I don't want a
relationship with you.

You don't mean that! You
want the same thing as I do!



We're the same. We're life and death, and...
I've changed...We could still be family
to each other, if we both tried.

My element
has changed.

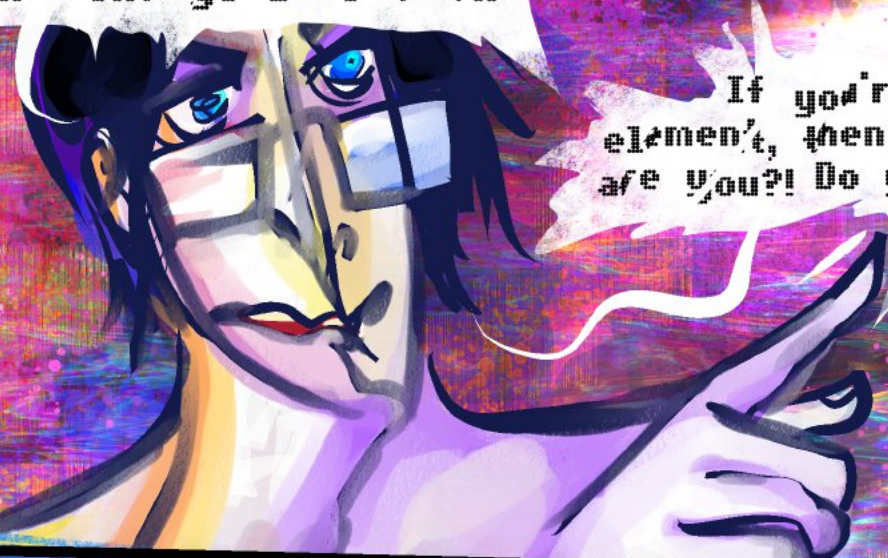
That can't...No. That can't be true.
You have to...you have to be...

U...what?
What do you
mean?

Exactly what I said.
My element is no longer life.
My other selves are, still...
But I'm not. Got cooked
in the oven too long.

You expect me
to believe you've
changed...?

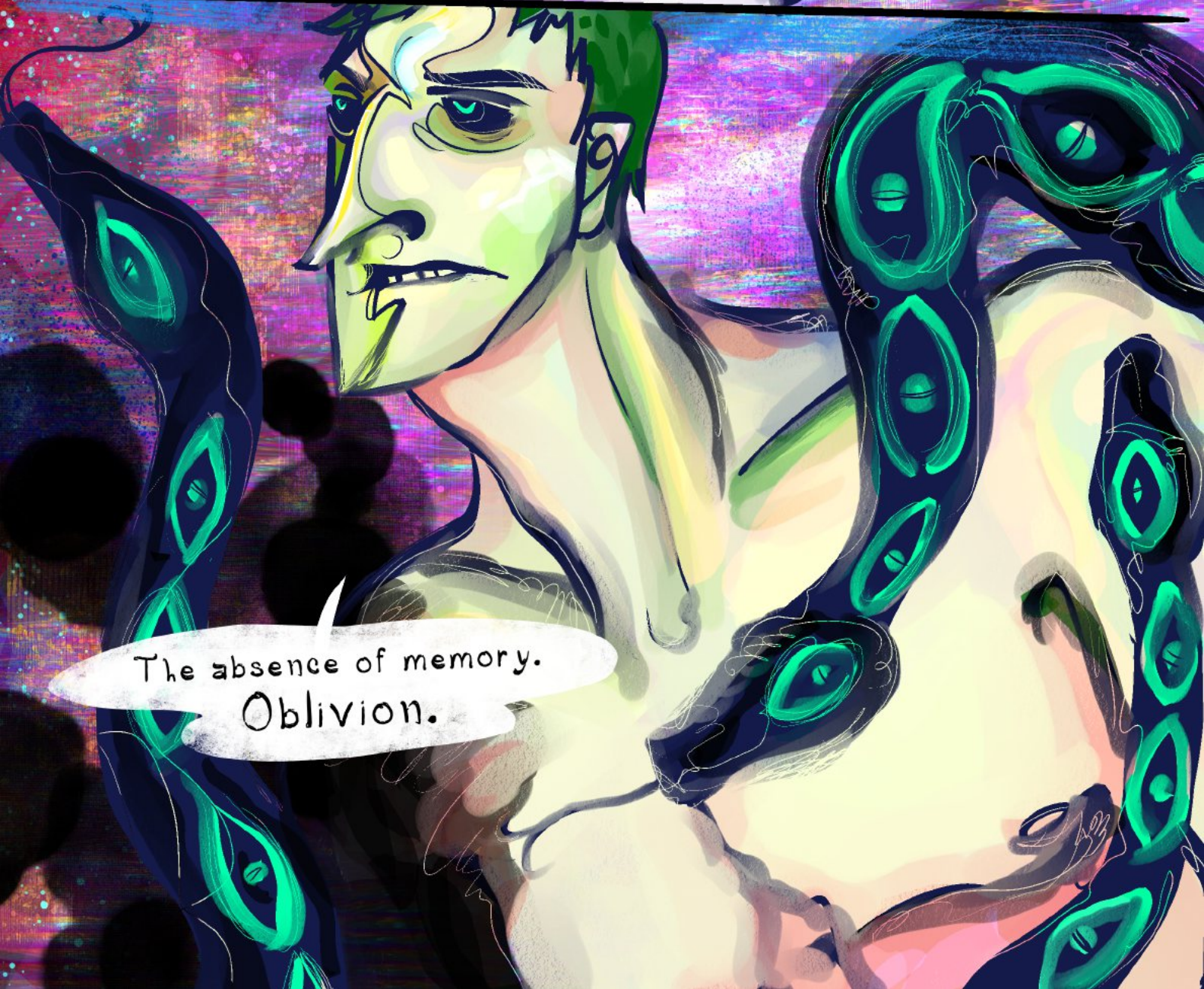
Look at what I've become.

A character with long, dark purple hair and a purple shirt is shown from the chest up. They have a distressed expression, with wide, light blue eyes and a slightly open mouth. Their hands are raised in front of them, fingers spread, as if they are pleading or trying to explain something. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of purple, pink, and blue with a grainy, textured appearance.

I can't...I can't do that, I'm-
I can't change like that!

If you're a 'new
elemen't, then what element
are you?! Do you even 'know?

Is it SNAKES?
Are you just a pile of
SNAKES now?

A character with short, bright green hair and a green shirt is shown from the chest up. They have a serious, almost menacing expression, with sharp features and a slight smile showing teeth. They are surrounded by several large, dark blue snakes with bright green eyes. The snakes are coiled around the character, with their heads raised. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of purple, pink, and blue with a grainy, textured appearance.

The absence of memory.
Oblivion.



I have trouble
enough keeping
my own memories.

Imagine what
I could do to yours.

So if you're so
angry at me,
just ditch me
like I knew you
would.

Um. No.
I'm sure we
can do something
to fix you...

I'm not
asking to
be fixed the
way you're
thinking.

Let's leave that decision
to people who know what they're
doing, okay?

I know
what I w—



What happened?
Is everyone OK?

For...now...?
How long have
I been out?

Not long.
Maybe fifteen
minutes...

It feels like it's
been months.

Did he just
move...?

Hy?!
Can you hear me?
It's Lemojo, I came as
fast as I could. Are you
occupying this
body again?

Blugh. Pah.
This mouth feels
fucking terrible.

We're all good. Cal is kindly
getting me out. Just burn the
corpse with the rest of the slag.

Oh, it's the water boy.

Hy, uh, don't.
We need-

Did you know
I fucked your
mom? Oh, and
your dad, too.
Dreadful story.

W...why would you
say such a thing

Cuz it's true.
And it pisses
you off. That's
the real reason
you hate me, no?

SNRK

I could have been
your dad... Who knows?
Maybe I am!

It's not as though
it matters. You were
raised by a fucking maid.

Anyway~
Remember,
destroy this corpse.
It has to go or it'll keep snagging
on me when I'm trying to do magic.

Bye bye!



He's gone....

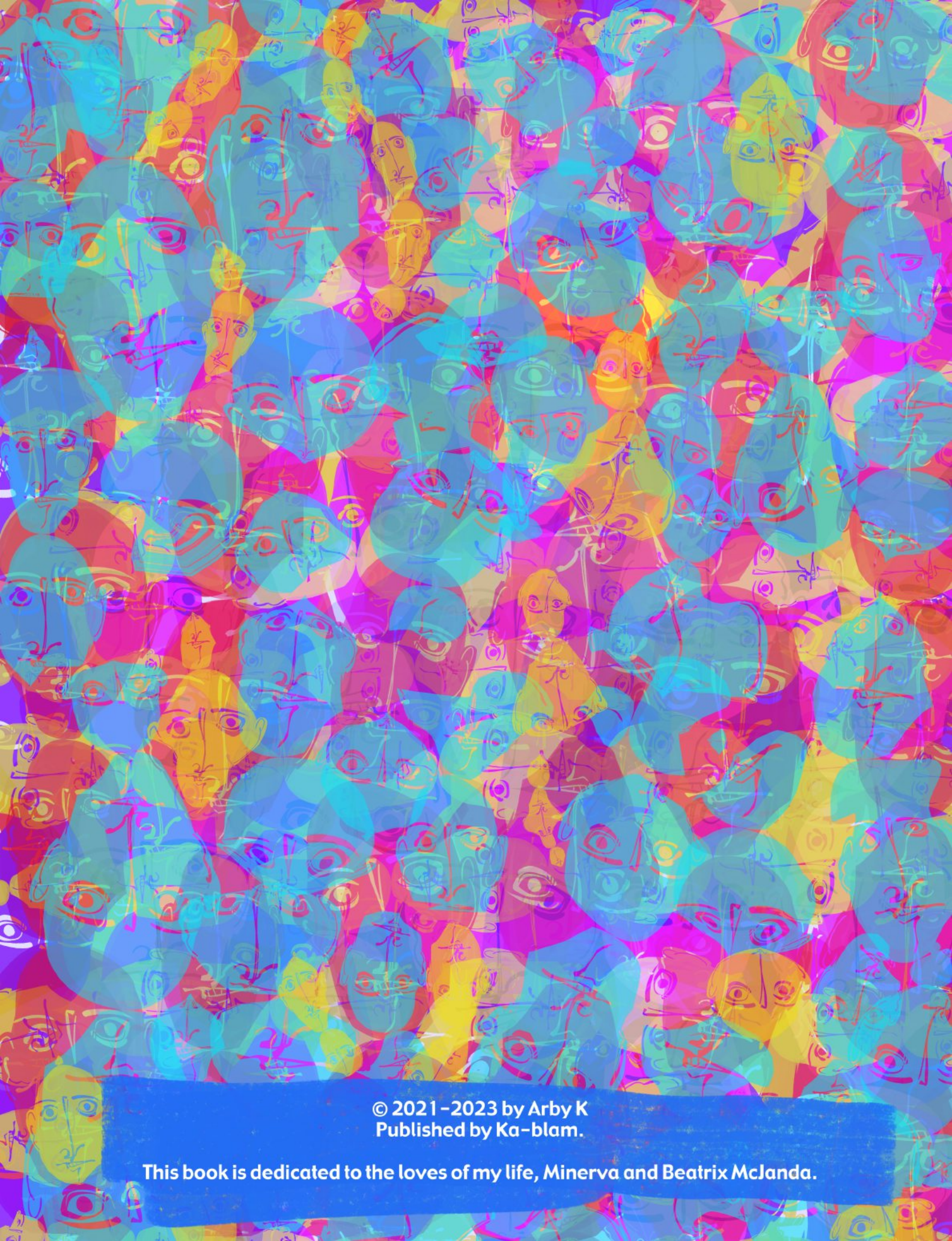
I'm....really,
really sorry.

Please...um. Ignore
that last bit, uh.

We still need your
help with the geomelt.

the end





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Published by Ka-blam.

This book is dedicated to the loves of my life, Minerva and Beatrix McLanda.

