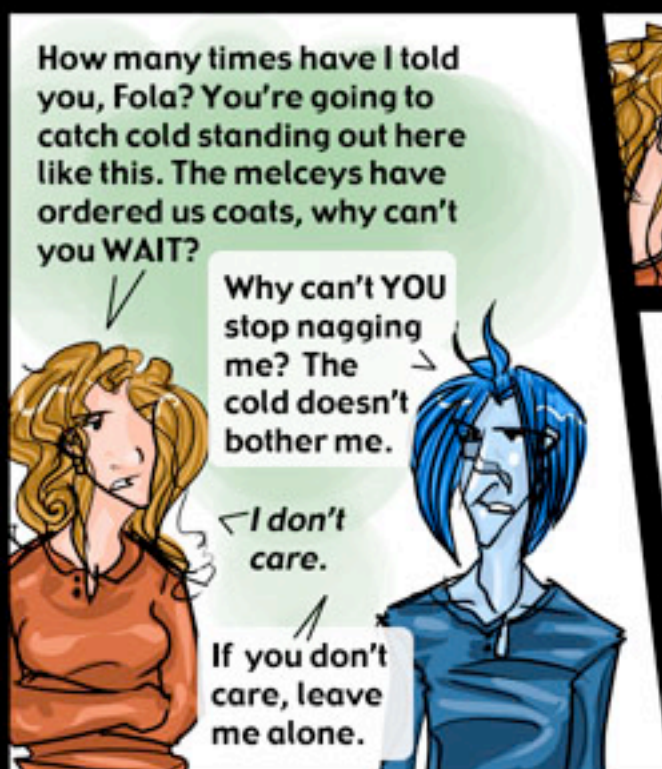
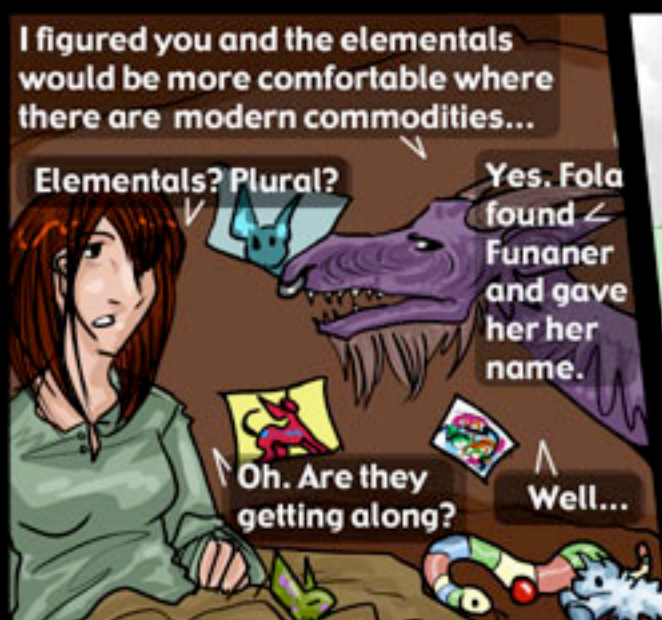
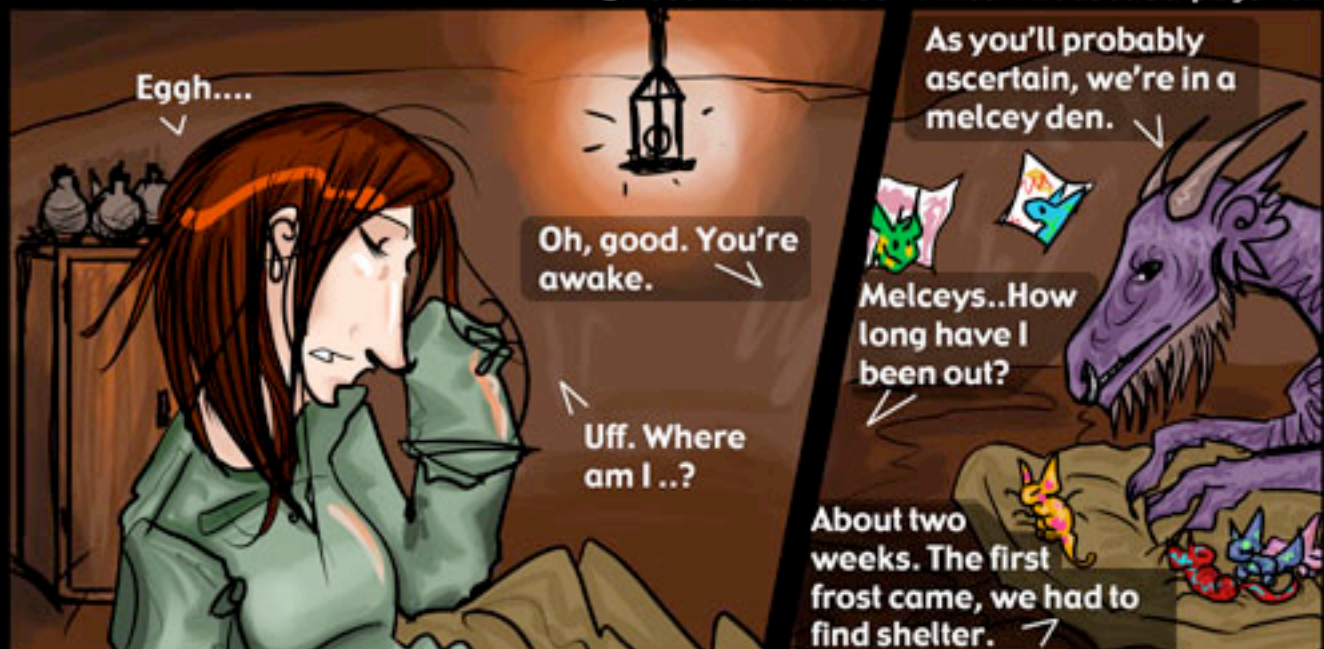




Grayling
Arc ?

Because
You're
Young



Okay. I've called everyone here so we can make some sort of plan.

Right now, it seems like all of the elementals were scattered after the destruction of Arduc. We need to find them before we can figure out what to do next.



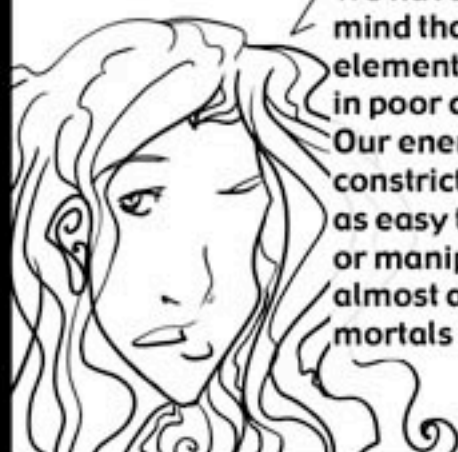
We can't go very far from the melcey colony during the cold break. So I guess we'll have to do short sorties to whatever energy signals are strongest, because those are bound to be the closest. Right?

That's right.

The colony will act as our ...base, then. It's the only place large enough for all of us.



We have to keep in mind that a lot of the elementals may be in poor condition. Our energy is being constricted. It's not as easy to access or manipulate. We're almost as weak as mortals in this state.



Should we split up? As Fola grudgingly demonstrated, it seems elementals can name each other--

I'm not grudging. I'm never grudging during a state of emergency.



Breaking up might not be such a good idea. We're out in the wilderness, after all...

Where are we ultimately headed? Most of the signals seem to be centralized around Tower--

This place you call "Tower" is cursed. Are you seriously considering going there?



Why, if there are elementals there, of course. I imagine the 'curse' is all the chaos energy Rae must have failed to clean up before his memory was erased...

Well. Um, let's cross that bridge when we come to it, okay? Do we have a strong signal right now?

Yes. To the northwest, half a day's walk from here.



That's our next project, then.

The next day--a march through the cold rain.



Well, I would have liked to have waited for the coats. But we're in a hurry...and though they're kinda heavy...these fire melceys are even better than coats, really.

It was very kind of them to offer their time.

How close are we? It's been hours.

Not far now.



Morse... can we break a minute?

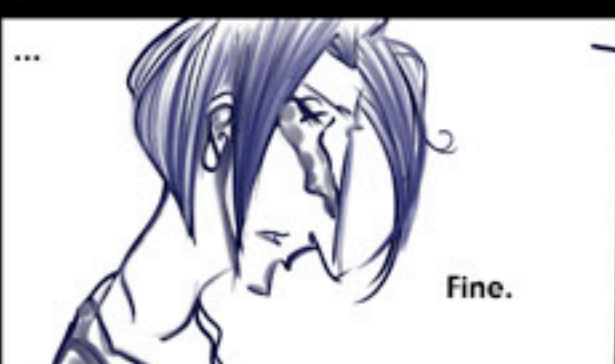
Okay. But only a minute.

I know. I'll fix it.

We're not making good time.



Fola. I know how uncomfortable it is for you to be carried. But without your magic, you're going to damage your foot even more, and you're delaying us. Please change.



Fine.



Och, my feet are killing me.

At least the melceys keep us dry.

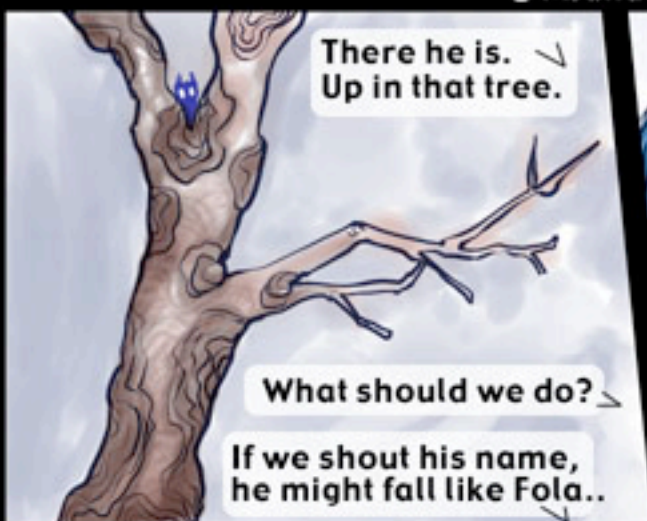
A stream.

We're right on top of it now. I'm pretty sure it's Viv.

That should make you happy, Fola.

Muh.





Gosh, it's good to be back with you guys.

Why? You couldn't remember us to miss us.

I didn't say I missed you. It's just good to know my place again.

....So I think we can safely assume squirrels have no access to razors.

I look great with a beard, thank you.

Well how come Fola doesn't have one?

HAHAHA!

HIM? With FACIAL HAIR?

HAHAHA!

You don't have to be so *boisterous*, you know.

Sorry to interrupt, Viv... But which elemental do you expect this next to be?

Oh. I apologize, Morse. This's no time for festivity.

We're headed that way. The rumors all point there.

Given the nature of the area, I would say it's Fern.

That area's been riddled with underground coal fires for awhile.

It's a wasteland. The soil is toxic. No one goes there.

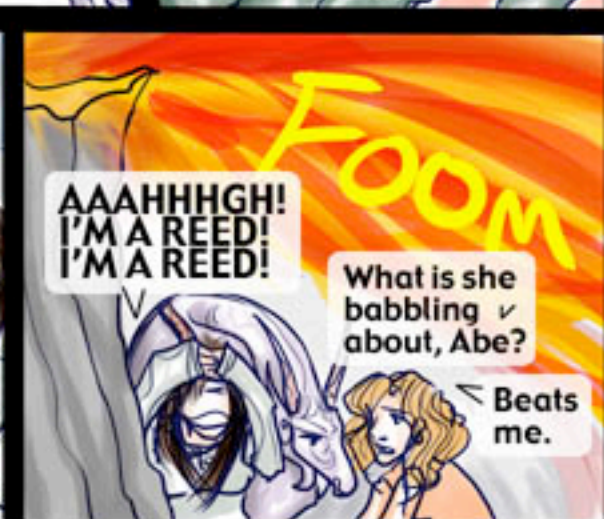
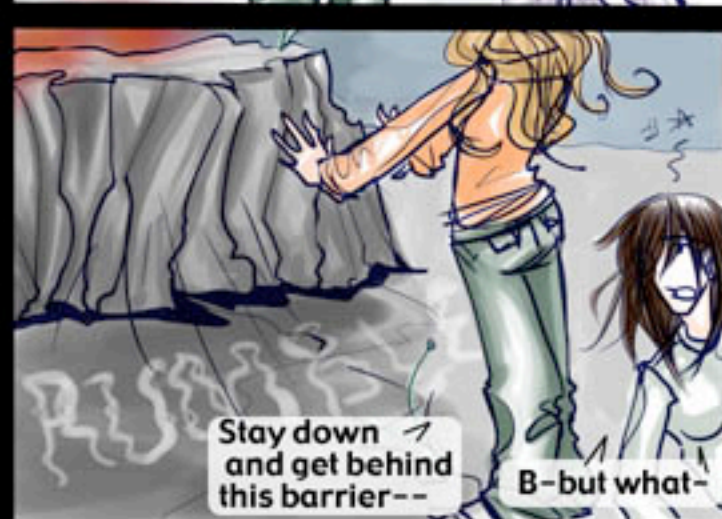
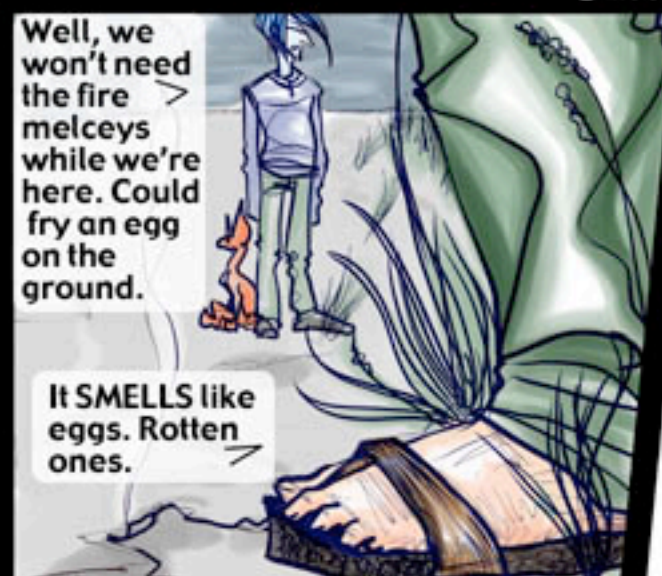
Which is a very good reason for Fern to choose it to lay up in.

But Fern enjoys amenities... why...

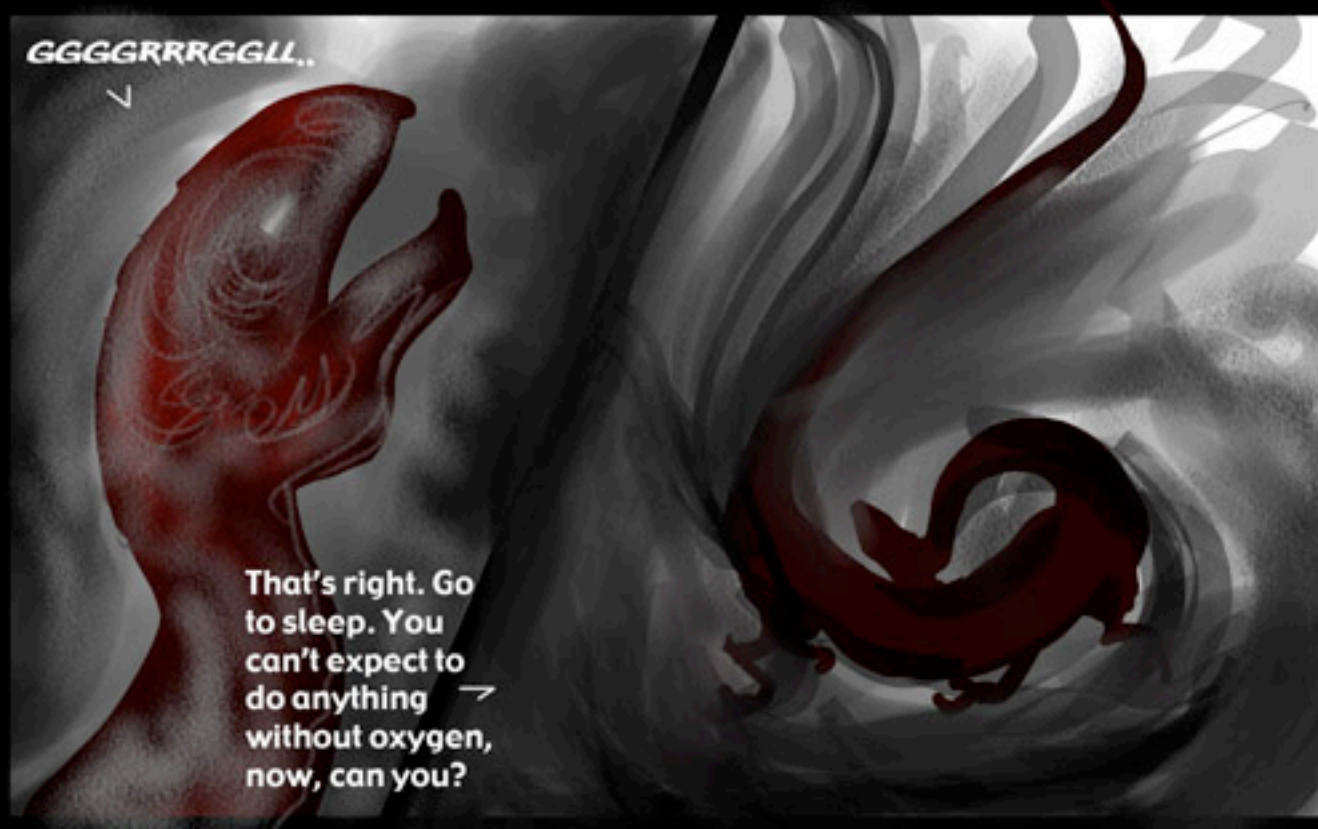
This could be very dangerous.

Well..we may be weakened, but we're not helpless. If it gets too dangerous, we'll leave you two in a safe spot.

I'm not staying behind, Abe. Let's go.







You didn't fight it too much. That's good. Moranerial.

It's quiet--did he get him?

The smoke's just dispersing--

Gotta wait for Fola to give the word.

ALL CLEAR!

Hey...

HEY! Why aren't you breathing?! You have air n--You lost your crestil. Oh shit, you lost your crestil--

HE HASN'T GOT HIS CRESTIL!

I did what was NECESSARY!

FOLA, you TOOK TOO MUCH!

Fola, give him air--

HhhhHHAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Yeah, something like that.

Relax, Fern. It's okay.

Easy..Don't talk, get your breath.

pant
pant
pant

God... fuckin..g... ass...hoppers.

MORSE!!!
HE'S OKAY!!!

Please.. let me...forget again... >

Later at the melcey burrow...



Here, Fern.

Gin?

Water.

All I want is a bath and a drink.

You're emaciated, dehydrated, and you want to get sloshed. Perfect.



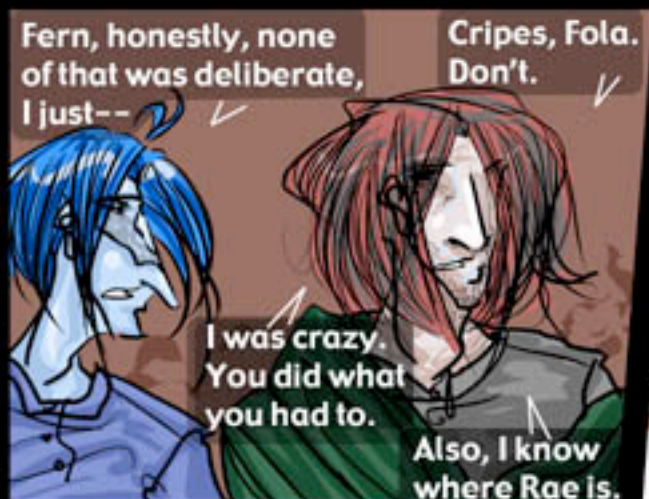
What I really need are Baz and my glasses.

I wonder where the minions are...they could help a lot.

And certain parties need to stop letting personal bias affect their work.

Funa...I thought you were going to run a bath.

Yeah yeah..



Fern, honestly, none of that was deliberate, I just--

Cripes, Fola. Don't.

I was crazy. You did what you had to.

Also, I know where Rae is.



Wh--You know where Rae is?! >

Well, he might have moved by now..the dragons might've...We were together for awhile...

Together?! You got along?

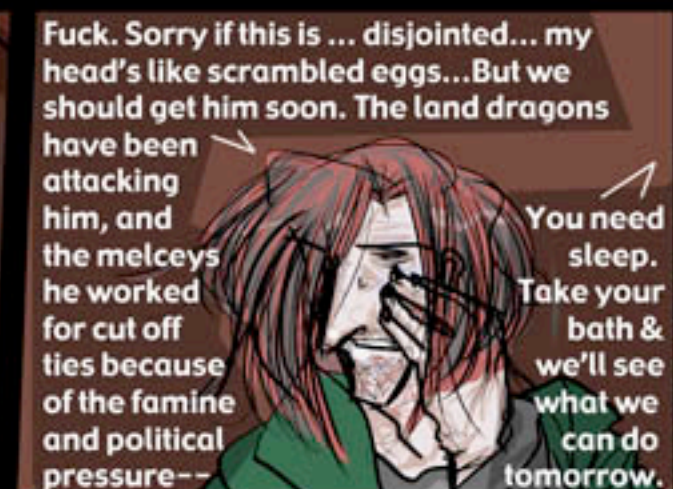
I guess? We just knew we'd both lost our memories, and figured we were connected somehow...



He...made a place in the woods near here...Been there a long time...I left when I started going batty again...Figured I should go somewhere isolated...

Bath's ready.

Fern's been with Rae, Funa!



Fuck. Sorry if this is ... disjointed... my head's like scrambled eggs...But we should get him soon. The land dragons have been attacking him, and the melceys he worked for cut off ties because of the famine and political pressure--

You need sleep. Take your bath & we'll see what we can do tomorrow.



Good grief. Rae wouldn't have an animal form to hide in, would he...

I'm worried about how we'll handle him if he's as sick as Fern...without Cal or May to help us.

Or Mid. I wonder what's happened to all the minions...



I wouldn't be surprised if they were all dead.

All right, let's not jump to the worst conclusions possible for the moment, Fola.

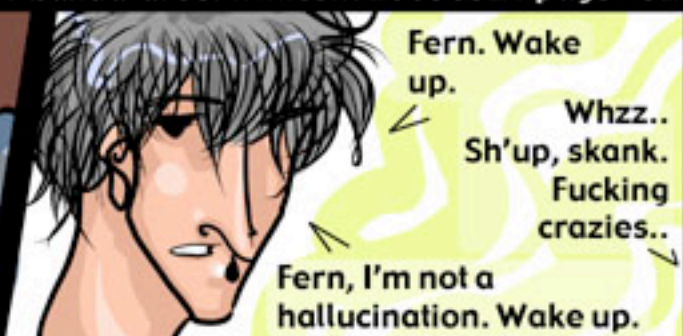
I'm just being realistic.

But the minions aren't likely to be Rhodes' idea of a prime scapegoat.



The next day....

~~~~~



Fern. Wake up.

Whzz..  
Sh'up, skank.  
Fucking crazies..

Fern, I'm not a hallucination. Wake up.



The day after that...



Ss...s....Smoke?  
That really you?

You've been asleep for three days. Mid and Delye are with me.

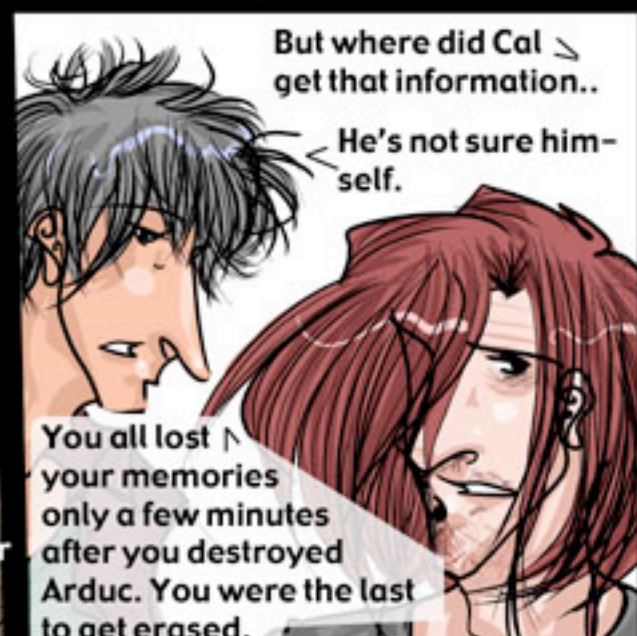


Why you -- you sly dog!  
How the hell did you get here?

I grabbed the minions and went to the next best moment.

Bullshit!

Well...I got the marker from Cal, and I was six months off...



But where did Cal get that information..

He's not sure himself.

You all lost your memories only a few minutes after you destroyed Arduc. You were the last to get erased.



But why? Time slowing down, our minds wiped--

Rhodes wants to end the world without killing anyone.

Suspend it, like a specimen in a jar. We will never change again.

Sounds fun. They tell you about Rae?

Yes. They're eager to go. Do you need to talk about anything?

I'm.. gonna need your help with something, Smoke.





Is that Fern's voice I hear? He better be up for a jaunt across the frosty waste tomorrow so we can get the boyfriend.



Oh, quiet.. I'm worried about everyone.

So um, what did you guys do with Smoke in Asize for 6 months?

**ROADTRIP!**



Really? You had fun?

Wasn't bad when we weren't obsessing over what became of everyone.

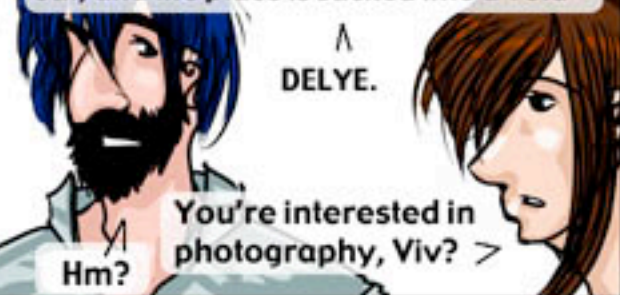
And let me tell you.. the way Tower has just been wiped out of the culture in so short a time.. It's eerie.



Tower's beautiful, amazing markets... will I ever see them again?

Delye, don't be so irreverent.

Who's irreverent? I had a special relationship with those stores! I'm stuck in a mental hospital for years, I get out, and the place is sucked into a void--



DELYE.

Hm?

You're interested in photography, Viv?

Oh--no. I'm just going to take snapshots of this historical trip.



These melceys have amazing amounts of junk... But it's good junk, and they're generous.



Yeah...Uh, Viv? I have something kind of strange to ask you.

I like strange questions! Shoot.

Cal showed me what he could..of your story..the elementals, I mean...and there was one memory with him and Smoke...



I think they were talking about a...a time when Cal locked Fern in a trunk...I don't think he got out for awhile. Smoke found him, but he refuses to tell Cal about the details.

Smoke controls all the memories, and if Cal doesn't know something, I can't know it--but in this memory Smoke said.... You knew all that could be known about it.

.....Oh.

I see. >

Well...I can't say I know very much! Every year I've invited the others to come stay at my place on the beach for a few weeks in the summer, but the Callanerialians always turned it down... Until one day, Smoke showed up, very bluntly told me that he wanted to take me up on my offer, since Fern was sick and needed a holiday. Of course, I said yes...



I promised Smoke I'd make sure they weren't disturbed, they spent the summer, Fern recovered, and in the fall they went home! Oh. Sleep well, Fola?



No.

That's *it*? Surely there's more!

Well I told you the reality of it-- I promised Smoke privacy, he trusted my discretion, and I...really don't want to spread gossip...



Oh, really? I didn't get that feeling when you *told me all about it*, Viv.

That was different... I was searching out commiseration.

I'll tell her what you can't, then.

Viv did see Fern briefly that summer, when he first arrived with Smoke. He was sick, much as he is now, but many times worse. Not himself at all.



He also had a fresh body, meaning he'd just recently damaged his old body beyond repair. Very suspect. We're not mortal, but our bodies are, and if they're neglected, they die.

Viv doesn't want to tell you our guess-work. I'll tell you, since it's probably true.



That trunk Fern had been locked in was a special one...It was part of a baby shower gift the Moon sent to Cal when the Sun abandoned Lem. It had contained baby clothes, toys, little things...but the trunk itself was magic. I know, because for many years, Lem sought to obtain it as an heirloom.

Elemental magic and the Sun herself cannot penetrate that box.



Any elemental locked in it is locked away from all magic, all communication. I imagine that Fern would have suffocated or starved after a few weeks, his stamina gradually running out...

Then spent a decade trapped in a corpse, utterly alone, with the worst to come --when he got out, the reintroduction to the elemental network was probably like having a piano dropped on his head.

Cal and Smoke let this happen to him.

Imagine how embarrassing that level of neglect has to have been for the branch.

Really can't blame Smoke for keeping it hushed.





Imagine only realizing Fern was missing after ten years of oversight. Combing everywhere in an attempt to find him without the use of magic because the trunk obscured Fern's whereabouts. Finally discovering the trunk. The dawning realization of what's inside. Then having to cope without your primary's help. It should have been Cal's task, but Smoke did it alone.



Morse, look--this are all tall tales. We don't KNOW what really happened. We guessed because it was convenient.



It's mostly the minions who cobble together these rumors. They become part of the culture.

The Cals have always had a bad reputation-- There are countless horror stories, many unwarranted.

... Are you guys talking about what I think you're talking about?

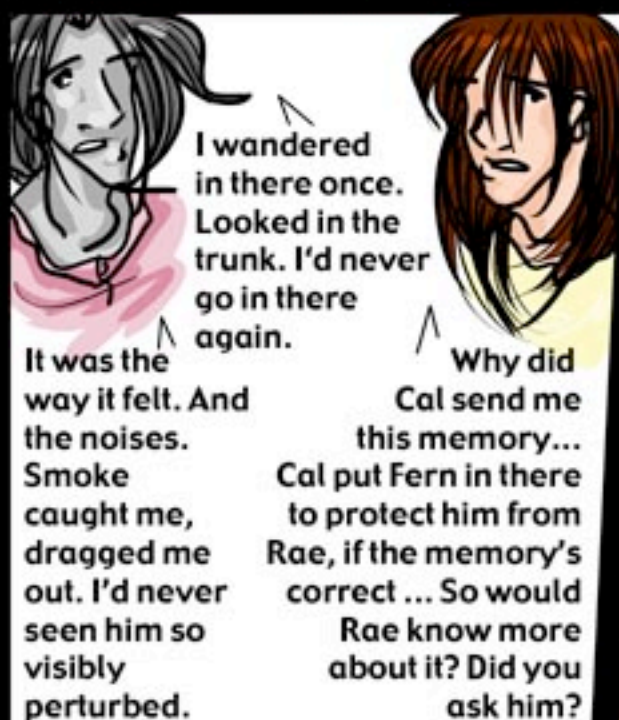
Sorry, Mid. We'll stop.

No. To be honest, I'm as curious as you. I'm the "baby," remember-- I don't get much of the truth if it doesn't happen right in front of me.



What's your slant on it, Mid?

All I know is the room. It's haunted. I mean, the house has a lot of ghosts, but it's a bad one in that room. The living and the dead can leave ghosts, and elementals..



I wandered in there once. Looked in the trunk. I'd never go in there again.

It was the way it felt. And the noises. Smoke caught me, dragged me out. I'd never seen him so visibly perturbed.

Why did Cal send me this memory... Cal put Fern in there to protect him from Rae, if the memory's correct ... So would Rae know more about it? Did you ask him?

No..we didn't have a lot of time then.. I guess those four really need a talk, don't they?



Quiet, everyone. They're coming.

Yeah, Mid, I think Smoke, Cal, Fern and Rae have things to work out. Just a few.



Ugh, god.. Tell your melcey friends to dig bigger burrows, Smoke...



HI FERN!!!!!!



Delye, what the fuck is going on?



Oh, they were talking about you.

Oh, I okay.

FERN! You're up! Excellent timing! Our camping supplies just came in. Each of us gets a canteen, a sleeping bag, a poncho--



What? We have to WALK?

I'm afraid so.

No vehicle at all? How did Smoke get them here?



He got our location from a messenger necco and hired a supply van. It's been gone for days.



How far are we from Tower?

About 250 miles.

WHAT?

We'll take it slow..

It'll be fun, Fern!



FUN? I'm crazy, Fola's a gimp, and who the fuck knows what Rae's condition is --



Nevertheless, it's what we have to do. It's too late to set out now, but first thing in the morning, we're off.

Think positive, Fern.

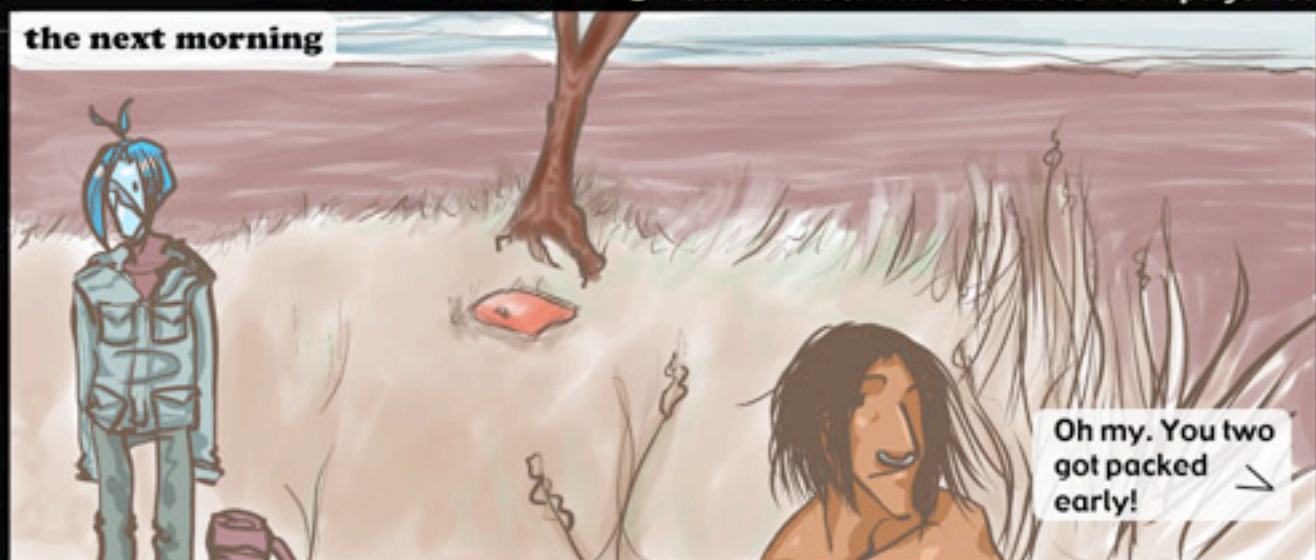
I'm thinking HALF-COCKED is what I'm thinking.

All the technology in this area of the country's been abandoned. There's necco mail running out of Asize, but supply trucks just don't go out this way anymore, except by special order of the melcey colonies...

Maybe we can get some help from the chevei in the woods. They could carry gear.



the next morning



Oh my. You two  
got packed  
early!

But please put these on,  
Abelarde. Fola's uncom-  
fortable. >

Huh? No! I  
don't care!



Sure you don't, Fola. ^

But I DON'T! ^

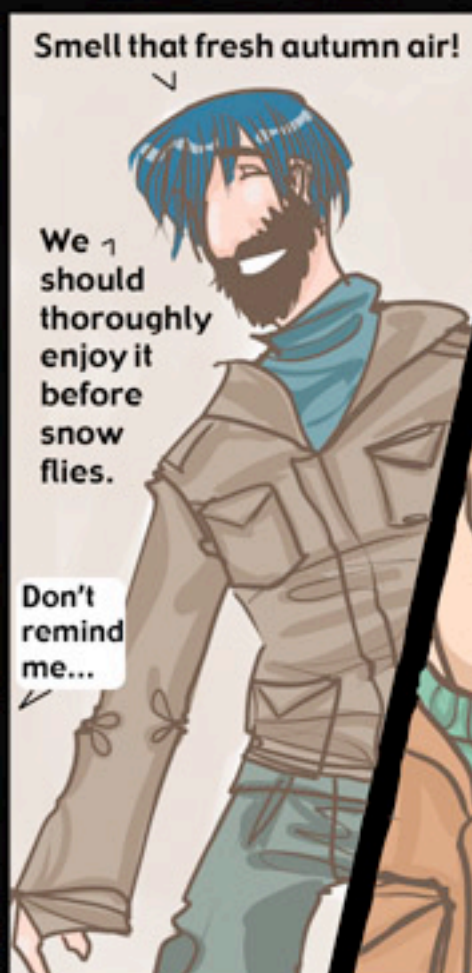
We'll have to  
break at least  
one night before  
we reach the  
woods... >



Smell that fresh autumn air!

We should  
thoroughly  
enjoy it  
before  
snow  
flies.

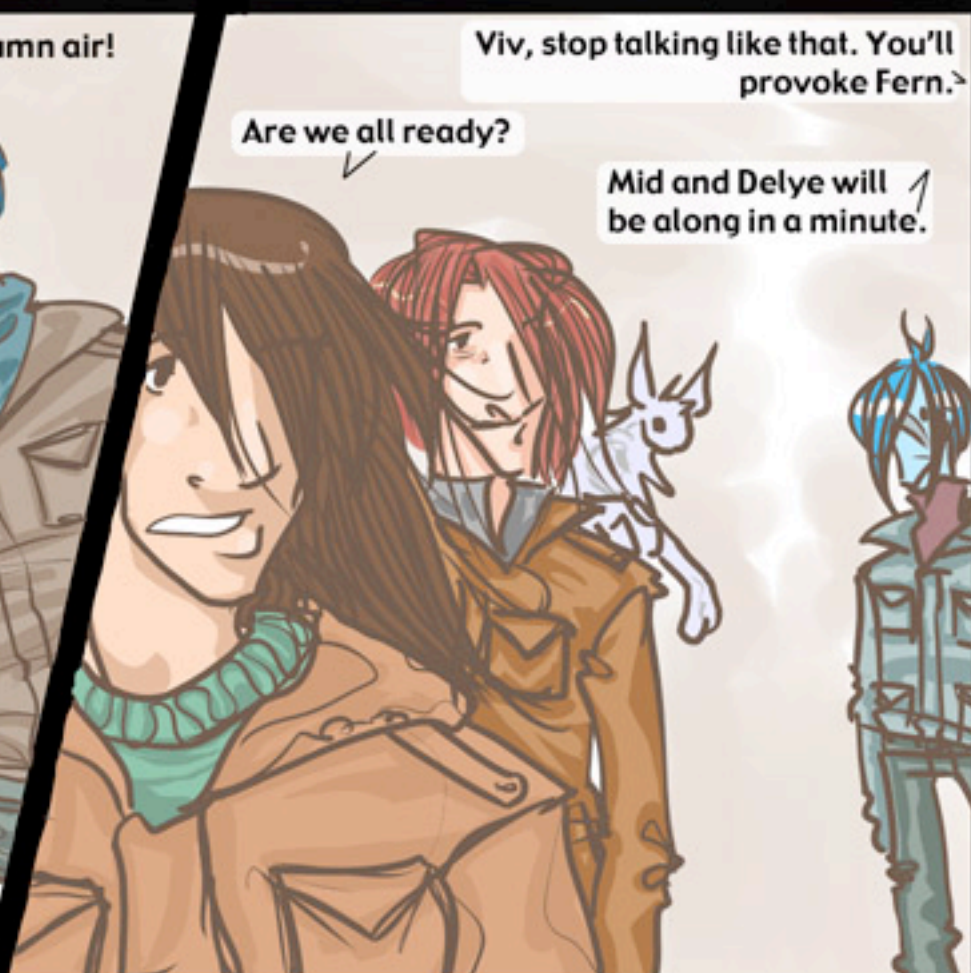
Don't  
remind  
me... ^



Viv, stop talking like that. You'll  
provoke Fern. >

Are we all ready? ^

Mid and Delye will  
be along in a minute. ^





## Much walking commenced



Smoke?



Hey!

Smoke,  
STOP that!



You're falling behind.

Where did you  
get that hat?

I'll probably fly  
after we stop  
for lunch.



Look in your left pocket.  
Everyone got one.  
It's gonna rain soon,  
so whenever you  
feel up to looking  
like a bag lady...

This, however, is  
not standard issue.  
Care for a sip?

Yes. Thanks.



Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't be any of my business. But I have to think of the party's safety now.

It's come to Smoke's attention that you have a touch of memory corruption.



A problem not unlike mine, in fact. When did it start? After you got back from the lions?



Yes. Lem patched me then, but I've noticed these days that I'm feeling sick again...bad dreams...

You guys were transferred properly, so you're not susceptible like me. But that also means Lem doesn't have that much experience actually dealing with the problem.



It's not a one-time thing. Without frequent, repeated buffering after damage's been done, your brain might as well be a lump of sugar on a beach. You'll melt away.

What do you suggest?

Well--hey. Take it easy on the sauce.



I suggest that you permit the first primary we find to help you. We can't wait for Lem, especially if he does shoddy work anyway. Even Rae should have a better idea of it -- Cal's the expert, so Rae might have absorbed something.

No...Honestly, I have enough additive behaviors already.

Have you been drinking a lot?

Heh. I hear that. Why aren't you at Viv's heels like usual?

He's...irritated with me.

Oh.

That night.





AAAAUGGGGGHHHHHHH!!!

Good god! Is that Fola again?!

Wuh?

Yes. It's all right, go back to sleep.

What was that?

Fola, wake up.

Hhnn...  
Wha? What's going on?

You were screaming in your sleep again.

Can we go back to sleep?

Yeah, yeah, everything's under control.

Don't look twice, but Fern and Smoke're gone.

WHAT?

Mid, you got a note.

Read it, Mid.

Right, right. "Mid, I am not crazy. Am with Smoke. Please don't go after us--too many people will scare him. We'll meet you at the next melcey colony on our route. Please wait for us there, Fern."

Mid,  
am not  
crazy - Am with  
Smoke. Please don't go  
after us - too many people  
scare him. We'll meet  
you at the next  
melcey colony on our  
route.

He's probably not sick. Smoke wouldn't let him come to harm like that.

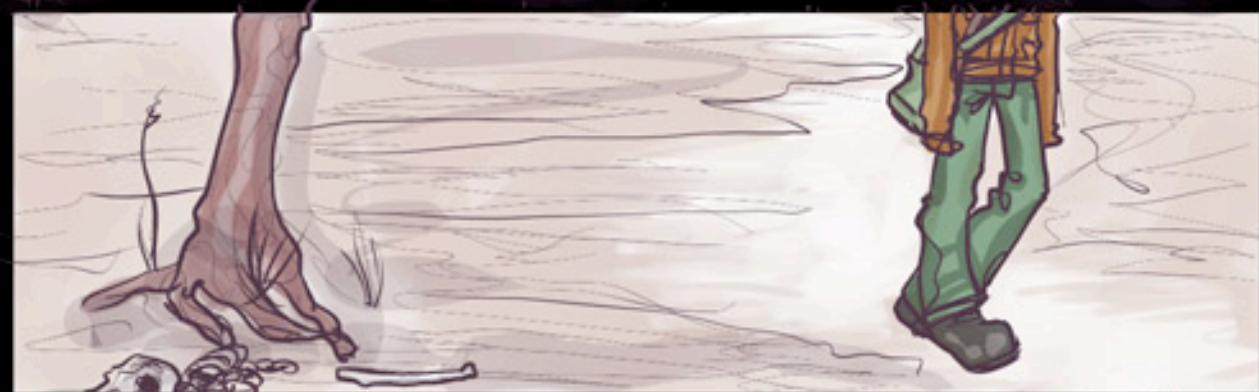
We'll just have to trust Fern's word. He obviously knows something we don't.

How far is the colony?

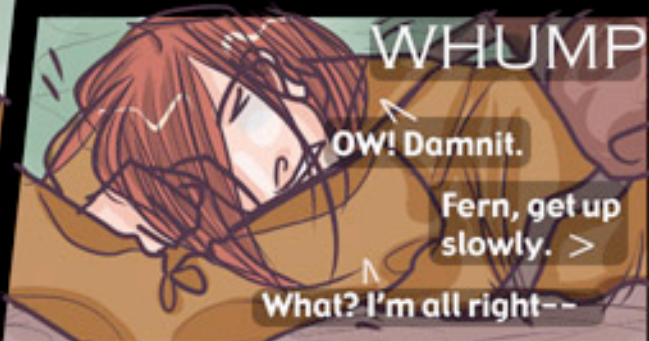
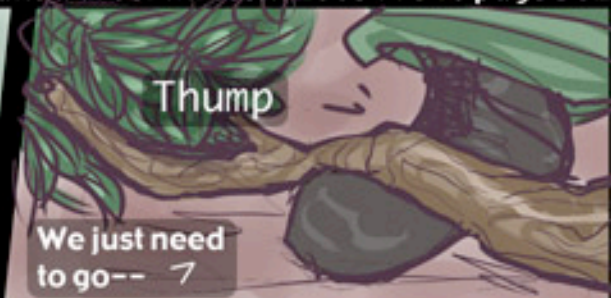
These are tough orders to swallow, though...

We could reach there late afternoon, tomorrow.













So you remember me? I brought food. Here, take my coat--

Trap. 7 Drugged.

Oh, BRILLIANT.



Don't move, this will come off in a jiffy. Is it poison?

No...just...makes... sleep. Gotta sleep it off.



How the fuck could this happen? Who would manufacture traps, much less SET them?!

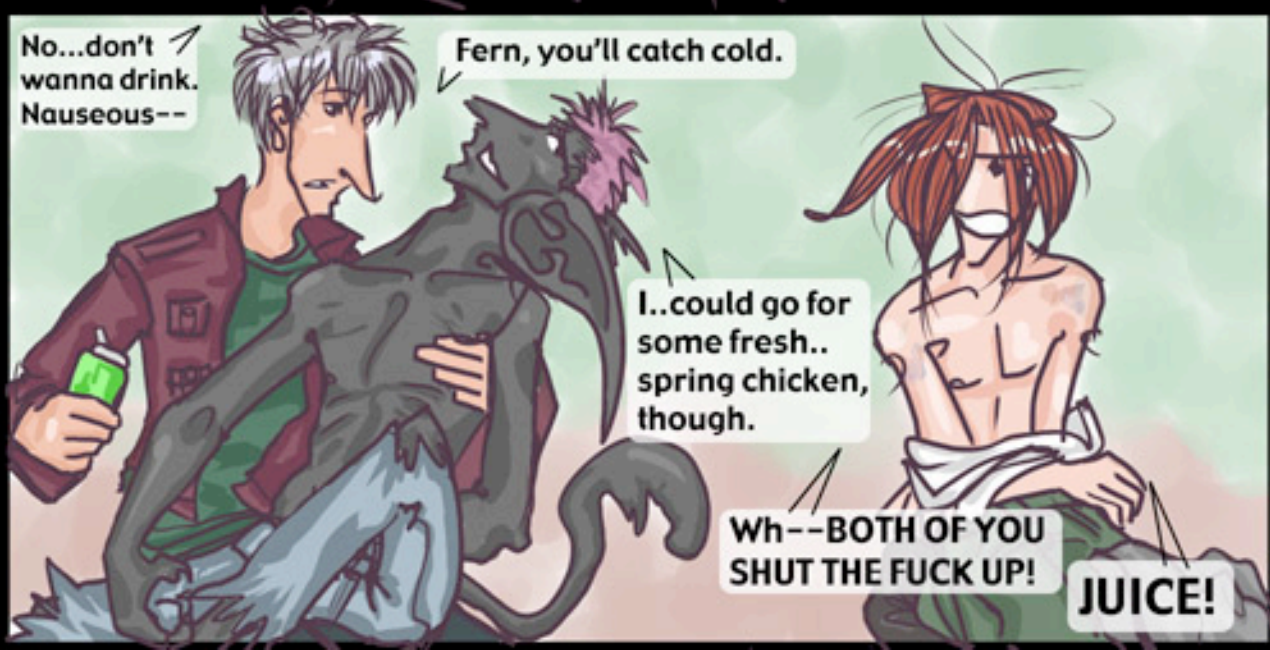
Ohh. So ... bad. But so...good.



We need food in him FAST. If he goes to sleep with that dope in him--

I...think...I'm gonna lie down now..

Stay awake, Ra-Ralph. I have to make a sling, my undershirt's pretty clean--Smoke, look in the bag, there's a bottle of juice, try to get him to drink--



No...don't wanna drink. Nauseous--

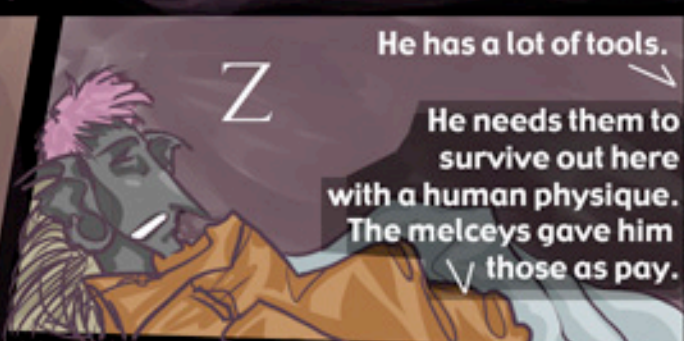
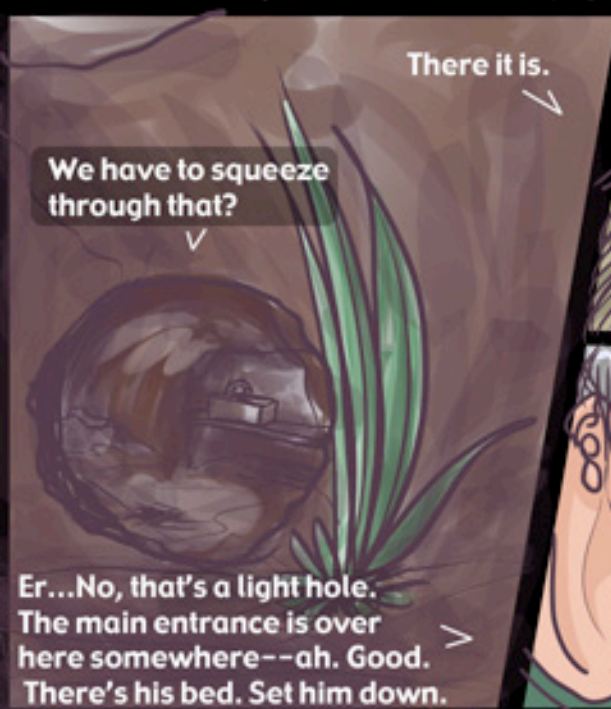
Fern, you'll catch cold.

I..could go for some fresh.. spring chicken, though.

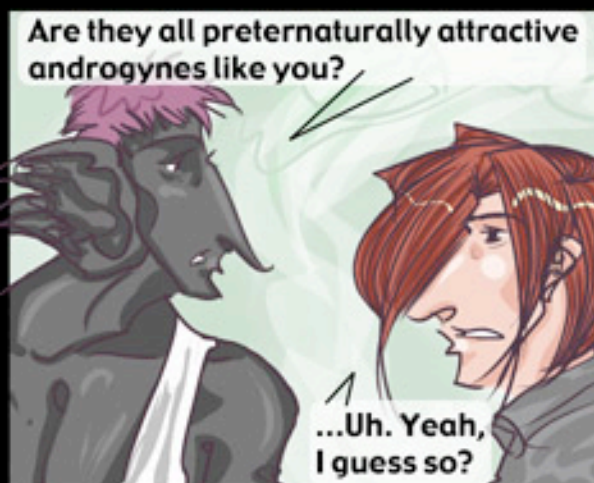
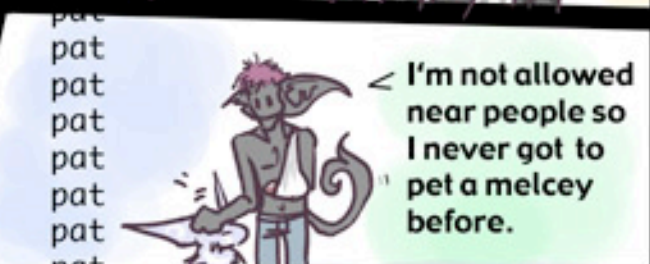
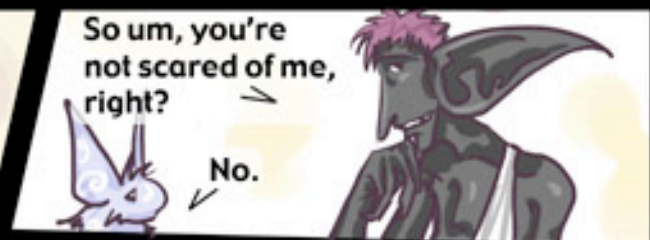
Wh--BOTH OF YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP!

JUICE!

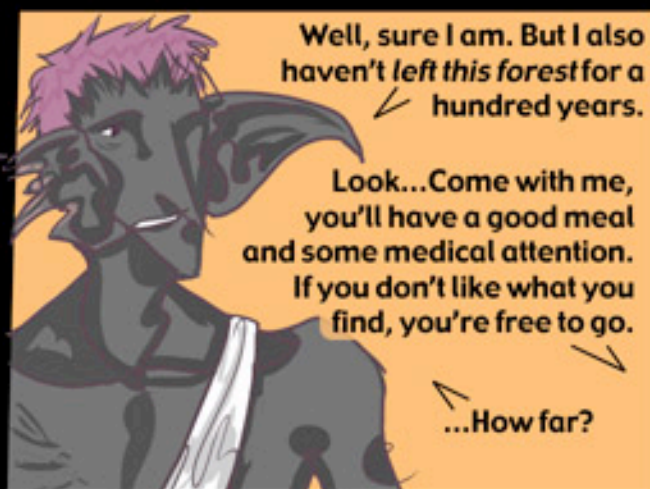














I thought you'd work things out after you got back from the lions, but you're worse than ever.

You pack away every horrible thing he does to you in your cheeks like a masochistic hamster, so even when you haven't seen him for a CENTURY, you've still got something to chew on.

What are you going to do next time your cheeks get so full you can't stand it? Let it all out at once and try to destroy the world again?

You've run out of methods, you know.

I won't have to.

What do you mean?

The wiwen's going to do it.

You don't think we'll succeed? Well...I expected you to think that...but...

But it would be uncomfortable to lie around waiting for it to happen. We're alive, it's in our nature to struggle to the bitter end. I'm not being pessimistic for no reason. I heard things while I was up there. They could be false..A lot of it was false. I don't know anything for certain. I'm just tired.



You've never really talked about what it was like.

I'm not imaginative enough. I can't describe it.

Not even for Lem?

He didn't ask.



Look! Fags!  
Does that mean we're close?



Let me think. Do  
I need to look?  
No, I don't.  
Yes, we're close.



Smoke, run ahead and tell everyone  
about that uh...thing... I told you  
about. Send Mid out first, he'll know  
what to do.

I don't trust the Lems  
with this at all. Keep 'em  
back.



If you cop out now, it  
would be rude.

I'm really  
not sure 1  
about this...

Also, I  
would  
hurt you.



Remember, you can't just  
fall all over him, Mid.

I know. I'm 7  
not a complete  
idiot, Funa.



Hi there. My  
name's Mid.

Hi.

It looks like  
you got badly  
hurt there.  
Come in and  
have some-  
thing to eat,  
and I'll see  
what I can do  
about it, okay?

Okay...





Did you enjoy your meal?

Mmm. Amino acids.

The dragons ripped your ear, did they knock those teeth out, too?

Yeah... Aren't you a little young for a doctor?

Heh. I don't think you need to worry about that. Did the dragons cut your hair?

Uh..No. That was me. Keeps down the fleas, y'know.

Ah. You won't have to worry about that anymore.

Now, to heal you, I need to restore your memory.

Fern thought it'd be best if we made you comfortable first, to reduce the trauma as much as possible. I'm sorry. Raenerial.

Oh, I *felt* that. He said it, didn't he?

Shhh. I'm listening.

He's not happy, but I think it's going to be all right...

If he were messed up, we'd be in pieces right now.

Shhh!

Rae?

Cal...we don't know where he is? Or Lem?

No, but I'm sure we'll find them. We've had good luck so far.

May?

...No, we don't have May, either. Not yet.

Ah ah ah, you have to sit a little longer.

Are you okay?

Yeah. I might puke, though. Where's Mor-- where's Fern?

He's outside. I think he's expecting you.

But you have to sit down and let me fix you before you're free to go.





I know you have Big Important Things to talk about, Rae, but please keep it short.



It's late, it's cold, and you men are tired and sick.

Yyyyeah, uh yeah, sure.

Nice ear. You get fast action.



But then, Mid's first aid crestils are uncomfortably strong. Wouldn't you agree?

Why did you do this?

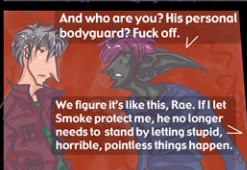


You didn't have to help me alone.

If you think that everything's forgiven just because of this, forget it.

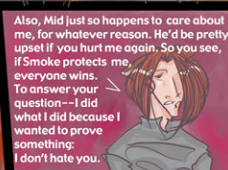


And who are you? His personal bodyguard? Fuck off.

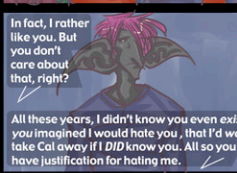


We figure it's like this, Rae. If I let Smoke protect me, he no longer needs to stand by letting stupid, horrible, pointless things happen.

Also, Mid just so happens to care about me, for whatever reason. He'd be pretty upset if you hurt me again. So you see, if Smoke protects me, everyone wins. To answer your question--I did what I did because I wanted to prove something: I don't hate you.

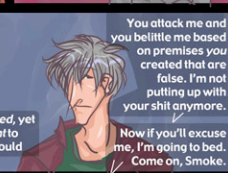


In fact, I rather like you. But you don't care about that, right?



All these years, I didn't know you even existed, yet you imagined I would hate you, that I'd want to take Cal away if I DID know you. All so you could have justification for hating me.

You attack me and you belittle me based on premises you created that are false. I'm not putting up with your shit anymore.



Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed. Come on, Smoke.



Are you almost done with your bath, Rae?

Yeah. Drying off. Why? >

I need your help for a few minutes.

Fola needs treatment for white noise. Could you contribute some blood? ✓



Now Mid. Why d'you want to hurt me that way? You know semen works just as well. ✓

You're back in form. ✓

A couple of drops of blood won't kill you.

Are we sure this won't make him sicker? ✓

We'll just have to see. >

Here, Fola. It's mostly cranberry juice, you'll barely taste it. ✓

Thanks.

Later

Rae, you're still awake? ✓

Yeah. I can't stop thinking. ✓

Anything specific? ✓

Are you and I all right? ✓

I don't see any reason why not. Do you? ✓

No. Just making sure. ✓

Is there something else? ✓

Just thinking about ancient times, really. You know I'm all about making amends with you and Cal but. There's something with Fern. That bothers me. ✓

Oh. Then you should talk to him. ✓



NO!!! I --

Sshhhh! Lower your voice! You'll wake someone. Why not?

I can't talk to Fern about anything **SERIOUS**. He's scary! He sits there and **GLARES** at you like he wants your head to fall off.



Rae, Fern glares at everything. He glares at nillits.



How about Smoke? He's always there, staring with those creepy, dead, pale blue eyes--

Rae, Smoke does not have "dead eyes," he's reserved and you don't know how to read him.

What I think you're really trying to say is, you've wronged both of them and you're frightened that they will retaliate if you try to make amends. You're feeling guilty.

Rae, your eyes are crimson, your tongue is a foot long and your hands are the size of dinner plates.

Why can't we just leave it at "They're creepy?"

So what?

...Look. Deep, deep down inside, Fern is a reasonable man. He even said he liked you. You can talk to him.

That's the point. He won't like what I have to say. At all.



## The next morning

I know Cal doesn't. For something as little as finding the remote, he'll GRAB my arm and physically DRAG me away.

...and the funny thing is, even after all these years, they STILL have no sense of personal space!

Funa was just saying Lem does it, too. We should give it a NAME at this point. May even does it, and mind you, she hates being touched--

Rae grants us a live demonstration!

Hey, Fern. We should have. You know. A seance. Or a discussion. Something like that?

Rae, we're leaving in a few minutes.

Yeah, well. I'm the primary here, and I want to talk to Fern.

Or uh. I could just talk to him as we're walking. If that's all right.

Rae, I said I liked you because in many ways, I recognize that I've known you through your brother, and you share personalities to some extent.

But that means you also often piss me off like your brother does.

Can you stifle your crippling social awkwardness until a time when we don't have an audience?

And when I say "talk," I mean "scream at the top of our lungs." You give me agita, and if I'm not allowed to get angry, I'll never get a word out.

No. We need to talk now.

Right. That's mutual.



Now listen carefully. I'm not gonna say this more than once. I'm assuming you know as well as I that Cal tends to use his abilities as an actor to coast through situations he can't really handle by being himself.

When I was a part of him, it was natural for him to call upon me as a resource for his acting, when necessary, like he used any other information he had stored in his head.



I also don't need to tell you how physically shy he was. Make no mistake--he wanted to be with you, more than anything. You never pressured or forced him into anything.

He wanted you, you wanted him, and in the beginning, he saw nothing wrong in putting his best foot forward.

Which was me.

Rae, why are we talking about the old days? None of this matters now.

It does matter or I wouldn't be talking about it, jackass. Figure it out, Fern.

When it came to sex, you were never with him. It was me. That's the truth.

I would have liked to talk to you too, you know. I was as lonely as Cal was. But he'd been told I was dangerous, and I was too stupid and childish to ever demonstrate otherwise, so he kept me locked up except for...I had fun being with you, it was the only opportunity I got to do anything real--and you were ...But, it always bothered me because you didn't know, and Cal never asked my consent.

So, I am not supposed to take this as a practical joke?

I knew you wouldn't believe me. All right, you asked for it.

You hate sloppy kissing. Your favorite position is a long, slow fuck on your side, but what you really love to do is give head, and what's more, you're *obscenely* good at it --

OKAY, RAE, I THINK I GOT IT.

Uh. You're not going to cry or puke or something, are you? You went white really sudden.

Why are you telling me this?

Because it's the reason he went loopy. I don't know where he learned it -- from you, from all those books he read -- but Cal realized it was wrong. He felt guilty for using me and he felt guilty for lying to you, but he didn't know what to do next, and he just... cracked up. That's when everything started going downhill. He stopped letting me out, I had to throw a tantrum to get any freedom. Do you remember this?

He changed so suddenly. He was so anxious --

He couldn't get it up.

The very last time we tried, he had to leave the room and throw up --

He let you think it was your fault, because he couldn't tell you the truth.

It was a fucking *nightmare*! He wouldn't say what was wrong!

He kept TRYING, so I finally told him I didn't want to anymore, and he was relieved. RELIEVED! What was I supposed to think?!

Don't cry, I don't know what to do--

I'm not CRYING. My brain is spontaneously combusting and I'm putting it out!



So you're telling me that the few instances I thought we were actually happy were fake.

Not fake. Just...with me.

It makes too much sense.

He knew I'd hurt you no matter what, so he started driving you away, letting me mock you and so forth. We didn't expect you to stay in love with him, though, and when you killed Mid, he felt guiltier than ever. I forced him to punish you and recreate Mid. He was so bad at courting Mid himself, I finally relied on dreams.

You weren't a very good actor.

I thought he'd made a personality to drive me away.

No. I could tell you knew it wasn't him.

What else? How about when he dissected me?

That, uh, was Cal's scientific curiosity--and I sorta told him you wouldn't mind.

How about the trunk, Rae? He hid me in there when you tried to escape. Why didn't he come back for me?

He was too exhausted. That was my greatest attempt to take control and it wrung him dry. He was already very weak and after getting you into the trunk...I can't believe I didn't think of that...He went dormant for a long time.

I would have preferred you torturing me, really.

That's why you're claustrophobic now, isn't it? Cal was in torment, Fern, you need to understand--

I'll "understand" when I have the facts. What about the shovel.

...What shovel?



Vivisected, bludgeoned with a gardening tool, shaved, cursed and locked in a trunk.

And you're apologizing for giving me a good time in bed. Figures.



He brained me with a shovel, Rae. You had no knowledge of this?

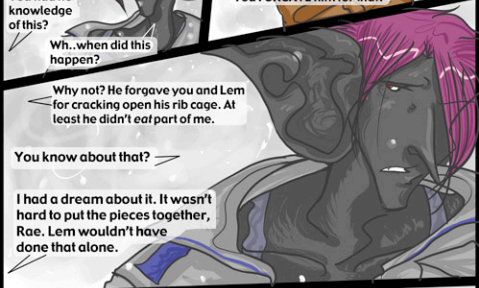
Wh..when did this happen?



I don't fucking remember--  
↳ we weren't together long.

The shovel was more towards the beginning--

You FORGAVE him for that?



Why not? He forgave you and Lem for cracking open his rib cage. At least he didn't eat part of me.

You know about that?

I had a dream about it. It wasn't hard to put the pieces together, Rae. Lem wouldn't have done that alone.



We're burning daylight here. Let's get going.



What's taking them so long?

Hold on, here they come.



Our host melcey volunteered to provide us with a guide, and even contacted a chevel to carry our food supply.

Great. At least there are a few traditional folks out here.

Let me introduce you.

Rae. Is everything okay?

Huh? Oh, yeah! They're terrific!

If you say so ...

Nice to meet you, Porcelina, Graham.

They're along as far as the river. Then we're on our own.

We're going to run out of food partway.

I know.

Well, mortals eat first. Speaking of which, do you know why Abe is still with us?

If you ask me...I think he fancies the girl.

Hmmm.

All right, everyone, let's get moving!

Hey Fern!

Walk with me in the back so we can continue our completely normal, sane conversation?

Rae, I really don't feel like it anymore, and I think you're upsetting Mid.

He's concerned, not upset.

Whatever. Why do you have to spill all of this just this minute?

My motive is entirely selfish, I assure you. Cal is the world's leading guilt manufacturer. I was crammed into his skull for five millennia vying for space with this huge, throbbing mass of emotional baggage.

Lucky you.

Also, now that I've told you, you're ready to have a nice long discussion with Cal.

Now that I'm out, I'm not going to spend one more second feeling obligated, guilty or ashamed for anything if there's a way I can toss it off. I'm a free man!

NO! Why do you think I even bothered doing this?!

Why would I talk with Cal?

You're getting back together, aren't you?

Are you joking?

You're supposed to get back with Cal and make him happy!

Okay, Rae, I understand how you're a primary and therefore necessarily retarded, but this takes the fucking cake.

Did you somehow miss how Cal treated me with utter DISDAIN even after you two were separated?

He's made it perfectly clear that I'm incapable of making him happy.

I told you, that was an ACT to push you away, to keep you safe!

Rae, you're telling me he's a liar and to have confidence in him in the same stroke. It doesn't work that way.



It would work just FINE if you weren't such a picky bitch!



GOD, why does he even like you?! You act as though I'd WANT to make this up. I was in his head, what more evidence do you want?!

You didn't know he smashed my skull to smithereens. Obviously he could be hiding other things from you.



He TRIED to hide this from me, but it was too pervasive. He's crazy about you!

"Crazy" is the key term here.

Fern, why d'you think I'm so envious? He loves me, fine, but all he wants is to see me happy, with anyone. But YOU. He YEARNS for you. When I cut your hair for killing Mid, I tossed it in the garbage--he went and picked out every last strand and stashed away your pretty locks in a hope box like an old maid. It's mouldering in his SHRINE to you to this very day.

So what? He likes my hair because it's bright and because it resembles yours.



What have you got, shit-tinted glasses?! I'm telling you FACTS, you can't change them!

I don't need it, Rae. Neither does he. I do my job and I take care of my minion. That's all I can ever hope to accomplish now.



But you ALWAYS got back together before! I once caught you in your underwear and called you a *matchstick*. You two turned it into an affectionate *pet name*. You're just going to give that kind of durability up?

Are you listening to yourself? This is so perverse it's disturbing--you've been idolizing what you've tried to destroy all this time?

You know what I call that "durability"? Sickness. We're sick, Rae. It wasn't forgiveness or tolerance or love. It's not sweet, it's not romantic. We're sick, deprived and twisted. I think Cal figured that out a long time ago and tried to put a stop to it. It's about time I caught up.



Don't tell me about "sick." The morning we left for the trial, he offered me his flesh. You've never done anything sick in return, okay? That's why it's important--

I'm not going to cure your sacrificial lamb issue with your brother, Rae.

Rae, I think that's enough. You're acting like a baby.

He won't listen, but I'm the baby?!

You can't just tell two people to get along, and you're holding up everyone.

I didn't tell him that! I'm being completely reasonable!

Rae, short and sweet-- what do you want him to do?

I just think he should talk to Cal. That's all.

Fern?

All right, fine.

Good. Now we can get somewhere.

You've probably known since the curse broke, hm?

Yes.

It's a grand world.





Huff...the snow's just getting worse. Shouldn't we have snowshoes or skis or something?

Yeah, Funa. Why didn't you order snowshoes?



Are you joking, Delye? Snowfall out here is completely unpredictable.

You want them *now*, but the rest of the time it'd be **CONSTANT** whining, "Fuuuuna, whyyy do we have to carrrryyy theeeese? They're sooooooooo heaaavvyyyy!!"

Everyone just remain calm.



It isn't showing any signs of stopping soon. Maybe we should bunk for the night, see what we can break for a trail in the morning.

Quiet. Does anyone smell that?

Smell what?

Something large, alive, and afflicted with BO.

That'd be **YOU**, Rae.

Ha, ha.



Hello? Viv? Fern? Somebody?  
It's whiting out.



Where is  
everyone?  
Why is it so  
quiet? ✓

crunch



crunch

crunch

Steady! He won't  
hurt you! ✓

W-w-what IS  
that?!?! ✓

It's a cargin, a tooth  
dragon. They're  
gentle. ✓



AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA



Now we're in luck! The cargin migrate along the river this time of year on their route to their southeastern feeding grounds. If we ride with them we'll make it in no time at all.

There are enough for us to ride two by two, and Graham can use the trail they break.



If they're gentle, what are those teeth for?

They use them to rake up grass and leaves, and to dig up roots.

Fern sure has an affinity for tall, ugly things.

Like Cal?

NO! Like Kezper.

Oh. Kezper.



Rope, rope, lots of rope—

Fern, you must be joking. Not all of us are used to riding and if one of us fell, we'd break a leg or worse--

Do you wanna make Tower or do you wanna lollygag out here for months, Viv?

Cargin aren't easy to ride but we'd be damn fools to let this chance go. I take personal responsibility for Morse.

Fern?

Yeah?

I'll be able to feel my legs again later, right?

<Yeah, maybe.





I know your arms are tired, but it'd be better if you held on tighter.

Oh, oh. Okay.

Don't want to fall asleep up here. We'll camp soon anyway.

I'm sorry--

I get the feeling you're nervous, and not about the dragon.

No, no. It's all right. I know Cal's shown you a lot. I don't need to know specifics. I didn't consider it at all fair for Cal to have dumped all of this baggage on you.

And at one time since this debauche began, I could have wrung his neck. But that's no help at all.

R-right.

And I think I've figured out the one way this does make sense. Somehow, that information is something you need to get out of this intact. So I want you to look out for yourself, right? Don't worry about us, don't worry about saving the world. That's not what anyone wants you to do, it's just not feasible. Look after yourself. Don't stick your neck out for anyone.

That sounds a bit... um...callous.

Maybe. But the rest is luck, and you can't be lucky if you're dead.



We need a couple more tarps up here, Viv. Then we should have enough cover.

that night

Are you sure they don't mind being tents? What if they wake up first in the morning?

Quit your bellyaching! I talked to them. Where's Fola, by the way?

He went for a walk, his leg was hurting.



"I realize that the biggest.." No, the largest? "Hurdle for you will be telling Lem--"

"I'll wait for however long you need, Fola, but--"



"Please be assertive."

He's right. Assertive. This is what I want, and there's nothing Lem can do about it.

That's what an assertive person like Fern would say. Have to be more like Fern. Grr. Rr.

Should I curse?



whump

Ah!



Well, I hadn't planned on doing that, but it seemed the most natural thing to do at the time.

No need to explain.

Heh. Then humor me a little.



Don't get up. You know, Cal's always pitied you, knowing how you're basically still an asexual, stunted, illiterate 7 year old street rat deep down inside even after all these years--

But to me, you're just a useless little worm.



And what's this? A marriage proposal to yourself?

A-a letter I was trying to remember--

It's of no importance, please just--give it back-- Say we drive a deal. Though you might be a worm, you're the only one who knows what the lions are like. It's looking to me like I might see 'em soon, and I'd rather not go in blind, so to speak.



B-but that's ridiculous-- none of us are going to the lions, Rhodes is going to stop > time--

Folo, Folo. It's a simple inquiry. You don't have to lie there s-stuttering.

Oh god please don't--

I'm just looking. Don't be such a prude.

Look, I just--you need to--

How DID they accomplish these scars? Do you have them all over?

N-no--yes! They're nothing to see, it's the same all over--

Okay! Okay I'll talk! Stop it STOP IT! Wire, and you look like one!

....What?

Th-they did it with wire--

No, the second part. What exactly > do you mean by that?

Th-they're monsters, like you. I mean, you're a bit screwed up with the halfling thing, but you act a bit like them, and you're an illusionist like them. The first time I saw you I knew you were probably one of them originally, but they sent you down for some reason--







You better not be making this up just to get me off your back.

It's true! Well ... as true as anything the lions do.

# OMPH

DELYE!  
I'm busy here!

You guys are making snow neccos, huh?



My glove's gone...



This is really bad timing.  
Delye.

MIDI!  
Get this thing off me!



Olly oop.  
On your feet, Fola.

I lost my glove.  
It is bright green.  
Do you see it anywhere?

Don't mind your mitten,  
we'll find it later. You're  
okay, Fola.

I lost my glove.

Yes, but  
right now,  
we need to  
stand up.



Are you hurt?

Vivi! Before  
anything else  
happens--

I accept your offer!

...Uhm, Fola--

You forgot?  
You forgot.  
Nevermind then.

I didn't forget.  
You're just a  
bit off right now.  
Let's get back  
to camp and talk.



Mid, Fola says  
I'm a lion. Know  
what this means?

Thanks, Delye.

Yeah, I do.  
Jack shit.

What do  
you mean?!  
You've studied  
the lions-

Lions are strictly non-corporeal entities  
that act as guardians of the sky. You're  
neither. There's no such thing as  
destiny in Faldia, Rae. Maybe you  
came from lion stock, but that doesn't  
mean a thing now. The lions lack free  
will. You have it. Maybe you should  
use it instead of  
trying to shrug  
responsibility for  
your actions off  
just so you can  
get cursed again  
because you're too  
cowardly to control your own life.

Frankly I think you should be more concerned about how you just  
molested your colleague.

You call THAT  
a colleague-?!

Yes, I do. You can't  
do this, Rae. You  
can't present a  
danger. We can't  
tie you up and carry  
you. You know it's  
wrong and we're not  
about to ignore  
your indulgences  
at others' expense.

...Sorry.  
I just think  
it's pathetic  
he doesn't  
stand up  
for himself--

You're deliberately missing  
the point again. Stop it.

You just thought you'd get  
away with it because you  
didn't think anyone would  
bother to protect him.

Now come on, dinner's  
nearly ready and  
I'm starving.



I apologize  
for what  
just  
occurred,  
I lost  
control  
completely  
and I--

Fola. Stop talking.  
Take a few deep  
breaths. It wasn't  
your fault.

C'mon, Fola.  
Have some-  
thing to eat.

Potatoes and salt,  
salt and potatoes.  
Such variety.

Mid handled  
that well.

Yeah, he did. Rae's  
panicking even  
worse now,  
though.

If we get past this scrape,  
we need to remove  
Col, Rae and Lem's  
adrenal glands  
or something.

What about me?  
I'm a lot of things,  
but I don't think I'm  
paranoid.

What about you?

You've been  
very tense.

I'm starting to think it was pretty  
dumb to promise  
Rae I'd confront  
Col. If he's  
in the same  
mood I left  
him in, I won't  
get far.

You promised  
to "talk." That's all.

True, but  
Rae knows  
I know what  
he meant.  
Wordplay  
won't spare me  
from getting  
pureed.

Fern, I wouldn't  
worry about  
Col for now.

Yeah. You're  
right. As always.

several days later

Ten minute break, everyone.



Look at it, Abe.  
It's like we haven't  
progressed at all.



It's cold...it's gray...and  
it's going to last us...the  
rest of our lives...



Rae, cover your  
ears, they'll get  
frost-bitten.



Mmm.



Does anyone else hear that rushing noise?

Yeah...sounds like water.



We can't be at the river, can we?  
I can't see anything.





I can't tell where the snow ends and the sky begins. Is that a rise?

Well, don't just wander aimlessly.  
Oh, great. Where's Roe?

crunch  
crunch  
crunch



Why does he have to wander away like this?!

Calm down, Mid, here he comes.



Right, Roe has a swan. I wonder who it could be.

The river is over there! May was trapped in the ice! Is she hurt?!



Why do you say that? She looks fine to me.

Something could have come along and eaten her...



I don't think May would have sat still for that.



Moyaner.



Wow.



Aaaaa!!! riiight! I'll just obscure your cleavage and go find a smaller coat from the baggage!

Too much hair.



God. It's like. A mile long.





I screwed up.

I know. But you won't do it again.

It's always been our responsibility to protect the secondaries.



The record's bad. This time, we'll follow through.

The area around Tower, May. How are we going to protect them from that?

The energy left over from my battle with Sutiyenner is tainting the place. Raw chaos energy. We'd need years to rebalance the entire area, and we're too weak right now to even start.

Yes. But we'll take care of it.



We had reached the river. The cargin left us, heading southeast along their migratory route. Graham and Porcelina also returned to their homes, wishing us luck.

We headed northeast, following the river. For the next four or five weeks, we marched.

Little food, poor sleep and increasing exhaustion started to catch up with us. The weakness the elementals had felt before grew exponentially as we headed up the river.

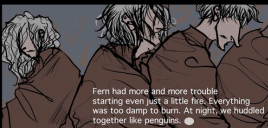
The secondaries all started behaving strangely. Dull, listless, lethargic. Even Viv, who was usually so energetic. It was pretty apparent why most of them fled this area a hundred years previously.

When we camped at night, they just flopped down on the ground and didn't move again until morning.

The temperature started to rise. The cold, fluffy snow turned into cold, clinging, seeping slush that soaked us to the knees.

One morning I woke up and Abelarde was gone. He hadn't said a word, hadn't written a note.

I don't know. He hadn't seemed like a person who'd do something like that.



Fern had more and more trouble starting even just a little fire. Everything was too damp to burn. At night, we huddled together like penguins. ●





I'll wipe your nose.

With what? Everything's soaked anyway. Find Cal yet?

No, Fern.

Then I'm going back to sleep.

Why are the secondaries so sick? None of us feels well, but they're so...lethargic.

It's the time slowing down.



Think about it. They control physical energies that take time to gather in one place.

When they use concentrated bursts of their magic, they're also using a bit of time magic to build it up. Without that little bit of time travel, their magic trickles at a painfully slow rate.

It depresses them, makes them feel ill. They rely too much on time, in my opinion. They'll adjust.



So...you consider that cheating, to combine one's element with other elements?

● He seemed jittery, so I encouraged him to talk.

No. That happens all the time, necessarily. The elements are constantly combining with each other, so intricately and tightly they're nearly impossible to separate. Even the blasts of "pure" energy I used for fighting were just cores of my own energy with skins borrowed from other elements to give them form and movement. You can't exactly aim chaos, now can you?

But there's necessity and then there's over-reliance, and I think they're over-reliant on time. Just look at them.



Chaos must be a very um...inconvenient element to be.

You're telling me! How would you like it, "Here, your super power is to have absolutely no control over anything." Oh fine, good, thanks!

I thought you could control dreams?

Bah, that's an accessory role. Someone else could do it. But my prime energy, I'm stuck with. Despite of which, I'm as fucked as any of the others once we reach Tower.

You're not safe from your own magic?

Of course I'm not. Nothing conscious is safe from it. I have no idea what effect I have on actual living things and living land. I haven't thrown my energy around since prehistory. If only I could have cleaned up right away after the fight--

I'm sure it'll be okay, Rae. You have everyone here to help you. They won't make you deal with it alone.







Are you sure about this, Fern? We could waste a lot of time mucking around this place if he's not here, and we've already lost a set of shoes to this mud.

Believe me, he's here. If we work in groups, five of us can search while five rest. It should only take a few hours to scour this area of the river.



Pardon me. Are you folks lost?



Or he could just show up, defying every other instance when he's gotten lost, just so long as I look foolish for trying to anticipate his behavior.

Wow! ... His beard's bigger than Viv's!



Hi. Yes, we're lost.

Come here, Smoke.



You all look in sore need of rest.

I don't have much, but I'll help however I can...



Why?

Would you do the honors? He'd like that.



Oof!

Collateral.







Thank you, Smoke. I'm all right, don't fret.



It's so good to see you all.

Though I certainly wish it were under better circumstances.



Fortunately, my house isn't far from here.

But first, where's Fern?  
You found him, didn't you?



Yeah, uh.  
I'm here.













This should amuse you. Since I was a funny old homeless man, I thought that it was only appropriate that I have a large, tumultuous beard. After that, it just grew in.

That didn't strike you as strange at all?

Well, no. It was appropriate, wasn't it?

Only you, Cal. It isn't too hard for me to guess how you got your human form, now.

I remember that day specifically! I'd been living as a crow for some years. I'd built a really lovely nest in a tree. I'm afraid it has blown down since...



But anyway, I'd been hunting along the river's edge when I found some glass pebbles polished to a frost by the sand.



They were terribly pretty, but I couldn't carry them all. I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice if I had a way to pick them all up at once?" And before I knew it, I was human. It was quite simple then.

Absolutely no reason to believe you're anything more than an ordinary mortal, and you still do whatever the hell you want. Inspiring.

As for your beard, I just don't trust you to take care of it, and even if you did, I wouldn't trust you with the necessary sharp objects.

I would accede to that.

I'll trim it for you.

Oh! All right. The scissors are in that box.



Later

I feel much lighter, but I'm so  
...peaked.



If you can buy  
clothes through  
necco delivery,  
why were you  
wearing that  
disgusting rag?

Well, it's  
muddy out.  
And it's not  
as if I was  
expecting  
guests.

Oh. Huh. I'm probably  
stupid from exhaustion.

There's one left  
left, it should fit us.

It's a bit cramped. Low ceiling.  
Will you be all right?

Think so. Hey. About earlier.  
I apologize for getting  
mad. I was just  
shocked, is all.  
It wasn't your  
fault.

It's forgotten.  
You've had a  
hard time.

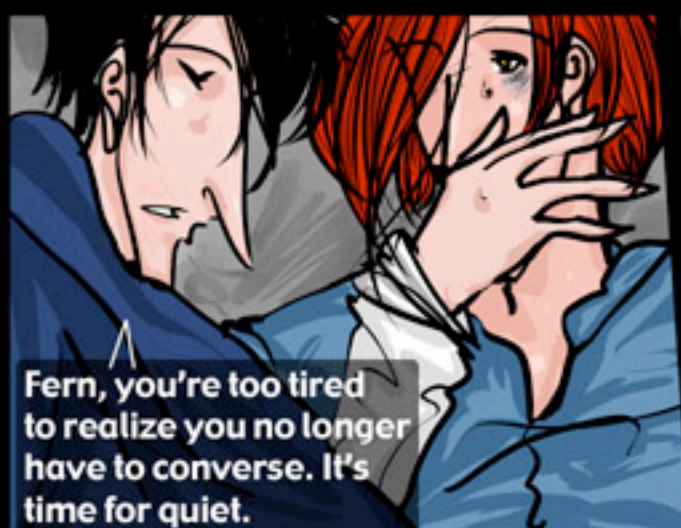
Heh, yes.

The irony of it is, Kezper'd  
probably be tickled pink to  
know he could be of some use,  
however macabre.

Hmm. Anyway, it's not  
so much the small  
space as knowing  
this hollow was filled  
with brain jelly at  
one point.

What did you think  
this thing was? I mean,  
you had to notice the  
impressions of arteries  
in the walls, right?





Fern, you're too tired to realize you no longer have to converse. It's time for quiet.

Oh. Yeah, I s'pose you're right. Sorry. Sleep would be good.

Yes. Go to sleep.



the next morning



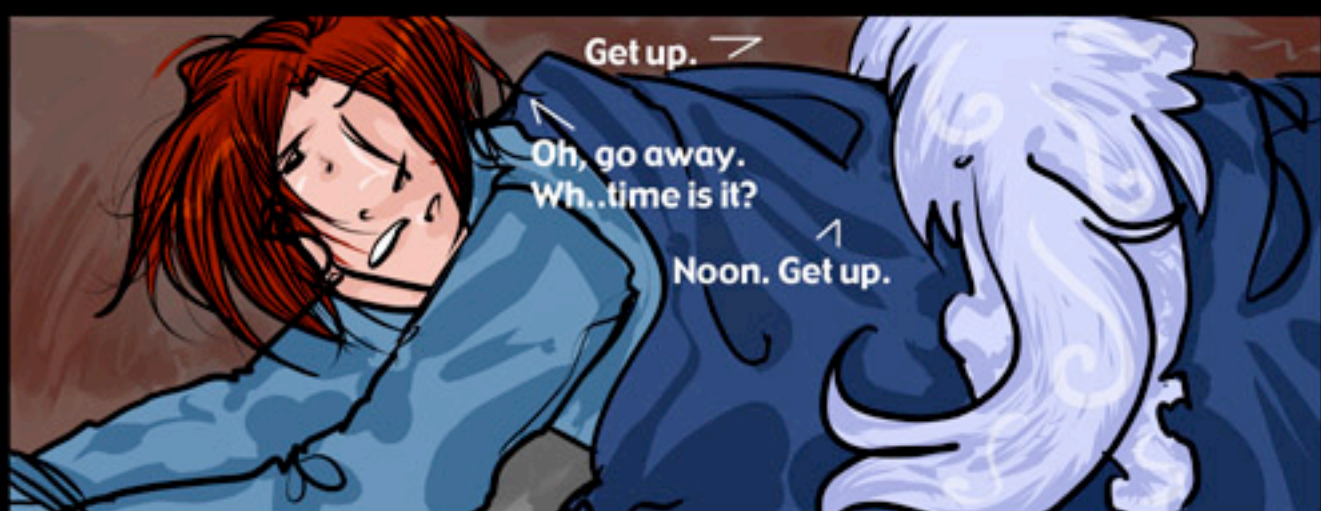
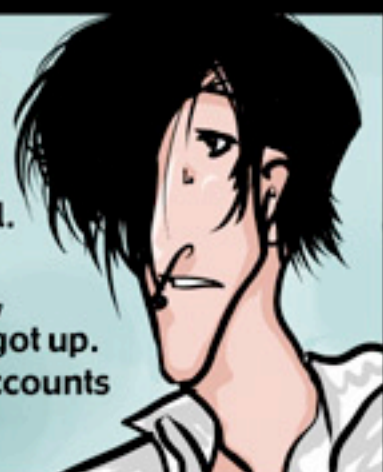
Twenty, thirty... and that's it for my shoe string budget.



How much will that buy us?

Next to nothing. We ate everything I had last night, and this won't buy us another meal.

But I sent a necco to Asize before you got up. Hopefully, my old accounts are still open.



Get up.

Oh, go away. Wh..time is it?

Noon. Get up.



There isn't even any coffee. I don't hear anyone else up. Why do I have to be awake?

You always regret sleeping the day away.

...So?

So if everything goes according to plan, we're staying here for awhile?

About a fortnight. We'll rest and get ready for the last leg.

Hey...Did you feel that, just now?

There's something in here with old magic of ours.

Th...This is it! The original growth box! I spent that entire night knee deep in viscera looking for it--

I think he's been using it as a bookstand.

If we ever revived Kezper, we'd need this drive...It has the most current and complete body of his memories.

Cal must know it's here. He'll want to destroy it, like he did back then. I can't steal it, either--he'd wring my neck--

Why not ask him to give it to you?

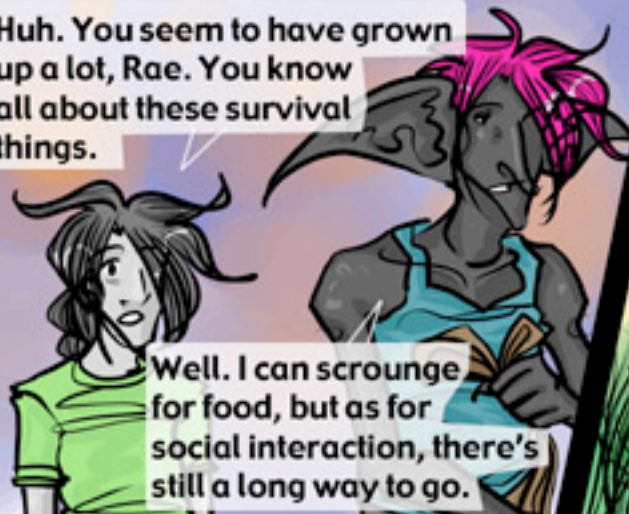




This is a digging stick. Because we ate everything, you have to dig up some roots if you want to eat tonight. Poke around in the dirt with it.



Huh. You seem to have grown up a lot, Rae. You know all about these survival things.



Well. I can scrounge for food, but as for social interaction, there's still a long way to go.

I wish you'd stop talking like that. Are you mad at me or something?

No! Why do you say that?

You're just so insecure and moody.



Smoke, could you give Fern and I some time alone?



I need to talk with him about a certain important issue.

All right.



Did you see that? He smiled.

Where is your god now.





All right. Is this about work,  
or is it interpersonal?

I've had enough  
of this with Rae.

Interpersonal.

Look, Cal. We get along really well  
when we don't talk about our. Thing.  
I hate talking about myself and  
you hate talking about yourself.  
There's no use in it, so let's just...not.

Don't walk away!  
You haven't even  
heard my bribe  
attempt yet.

Bribe attempt?  
For what?

What you just said.  
I know you don't want  
to talk about it, so I'm  
offering something in  
exchange.

The next of many  
offers I can't refuse,  
most likely. But why?  
There's nothing  
to talk about.

There's too much  
to talk about, you  
mean. But we need  
to start somewhere.

I promised I would.

You don't make  
promises, Cal. You  
can't keep them.

Are you so low you promised Smoke  
we'd get back together? Is that it?

No! Of  
course  
not!

Smoke doesn't  
want us back  
together.

He wants what's  
right. It's not  
the same thing.

I guess I'll just  
PRETEND to  
be happy then, if  
being HONEST  
bruises your  
DELICATE LITTLE  
FEELINGS that  
badly, even  
though you're  
always whinging  
about how we  
should tell each  
other the truth!

Can't you just take a  
compliment and shut  
up?!

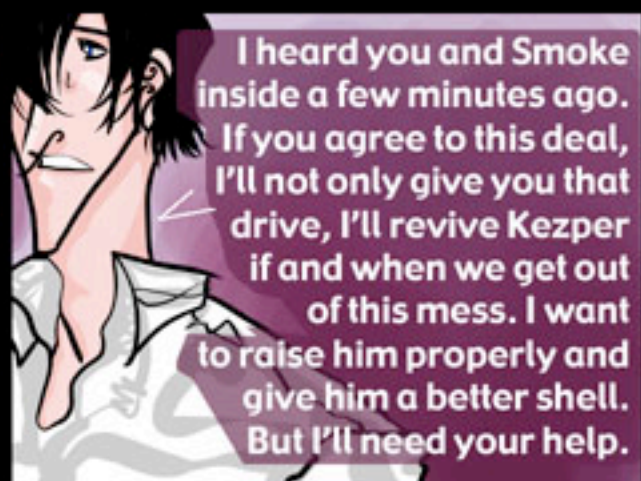
Maybe if you stopped  
mentioning how FUCKED  
UP YOU ARE at EVERY  
opportunity you'd start  
feeling BETTER ABOUT  
YOURSELF!





Don't give me any credit. It's all Smoke's doing.

I promised him I would ask you a question, not that anything would actually turn out well.

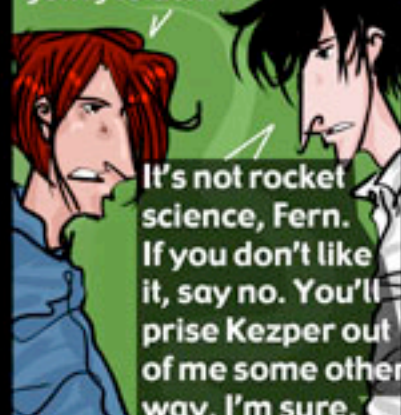


This must be a rough exchange if that's what you're willing to offer, Cal. Is this bribery or blackmail?

That didn't last long. I don't know, Fern, consider it what you want.



How can I accept before I even know what you're going to ask?



All right. I agree. Ask your question.

If you had the chance to become my secondary all over again, would you consent?



What's the point--?

Please don't scoff. I need a serious answer.

Mm...

Knowing what I know now, I'd have to be an idiot not to consent. Rationally, it's like asking whether or not you'd stick your hand in a meat grinder. The answer is obvious. But....

But? >

I'd want to consent, and I know I should, but I don't know if I can.

I don't think I have it in me to consent completely, and that's what it requires, right?

Yes. You would need to trust me utterly. And you don't trust me, do you.

....No. I wish I did. But I don't.

There you have it. The only reason Smoke has ever been angry with me.

What do you mean?

I thought it was because of how I destroyed our relationship, but... what goes on between two people is their own business, and Smoke understands that.

This isn't our own business?

This is about your well-being, not us.

Now that we've established that you don't trust me, let's go somewhere we can be alone.

Way to bridge a conversation, Cal.

It's not like that! I just don't want to be interrupted. It took awhile to work up my nerve, you know.

Oh, I know. I know.



This is the rear shed.  
Where'd I leave that  
bucket...

Cal...Is this a  
primitive still?

Of course not. It's a  
well-improvised  
still. It's the only  
cash cow these  
days, sadly.

Please  
have a  
seat,  
Fern.

Now to business. I'm going to tell  
a story you already think you  
know. It's important that you  
don't interrupt me, because ✓  
I'm positive there  
are facts you need  
to be reminded  
of in no uncertain  
terms.



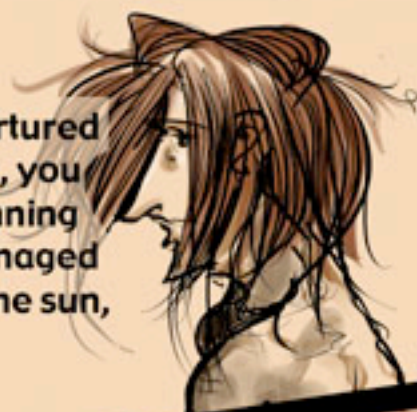
When you died, like every other  
elemental, you were absorbed by the  
sun. I managed to catch you after a  
lot of fumbling, but then, we wasted  
precious time discussing who should  
take you on.

This was the first mistake. Being  
in the sun for so long made  
you very, very ill. The  
total time couldn't have  
comprised more than  
5-6 hours, but half an  
hour is too much.



Any time spent in the sun erodes the grip you have on your own conscious.  
Then we made another mistake. I did not ask your consent. You  
were incapable of informed choices because we'd destroyed your ability to  
think, so I forced you into my branch, forced you to yield.

Because we had tortured  
and frightened you, you  
weren't exactly running  
into my arms. I managed  
to drag you out of the sun,  
but only partway.



I'm telling you this because I  
know you like to think these  
things were your fault.  
This isn't true, but I think  
I know why you imagine it  
to be.

It's better to feel stupid, ashamed  
or guilty than to know you have no control, isn't it?  
I suppose that's also why you're an alcoholic.  
When you can't remember what happened yesterday,  
it's better to think it's because of that bottle you  
bought and raised to your lips - not because you've been  
irreparably damaged, forever, by other people,  
and there's *nothing* you can do about it.



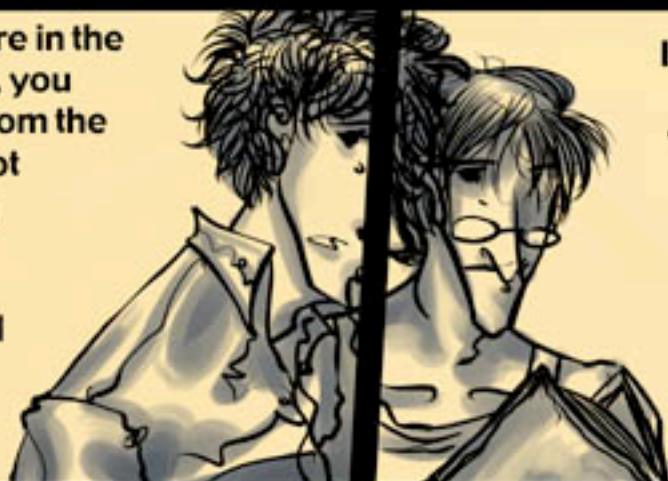


Because your connection to me is so weak, we constantly have to concentrate to maintain it. It's a perpetual strain on our energy. Yours and mine.

We put up with it for a long time. We liked each other so much, it didn't seem all that inconvenient to think of each other always.

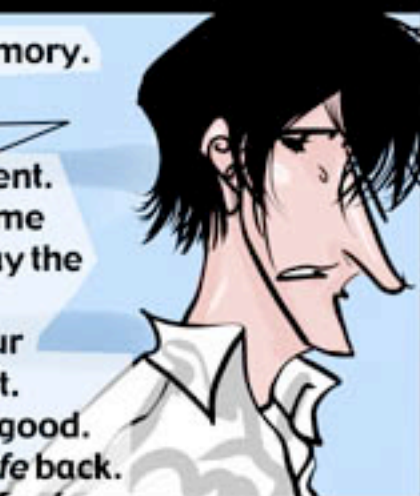
But we know what happened with that.

When you were in the trunk, though, you were cut off from the sun. You forgot about bracing yourself. But Smoke opened it, and let in all the noise of the world.



It was worse than when you were aligned, wasn't it? You lost *all* of your memories. All of them. You probably didn't know rudimentary things like...how to read. How to get dressed.

Smoke took you to Viv's to work on restoring your memory. You know better than I how hard it was for him. Even before you were completely recovered, he'd started work on his project to repair your alignment. I inferred what happened from his research. He gave me the abstract, without a word. His work is...stellar, to say the least. This problem needs to be fixed, Fern. Your cancer, your memory problems--it's all because of your alignment. If we fixed it, you could leave home if you wanted, for good. You'd have your independence, your strength, your *life* back.





You want me to move out?

Out of everything I said, you picked out that?

It seemed to stick out, yeah.

Of course I don't want you to move out. I want you to be able to move out.

All right, then. Maybe you could try being more succinct.

Everything else aside, this will be incredibly painful.

It will. But briefly. I'll do it correctly. Smoke thinks the convalescence should take two or three months.

And you need to win my trust.

Yes.

I stated my terms a long time ago, Cal. Did you forget?

No. I thought you may have changed your mind.

Sorry, I haven't.

You're positive about this? What you promised me, I'd possess—

I want you to.

Oh. Please, let's not think on it anymore just now.

Yeah. I could use some time to mull it over.

You... You smell really good.

Relax. Let me turn around.

You're so used to being sad, you don't know when to stop.

I know you're scared of having more power over me. But I need the truth, and that's what I'm willing to exchange.

I'm not going to leave you, either. There's no need to keep punishing yourself.

No, he won't. Uh... Is that Rae and Mid arguing up there?

I should have been calm. Smoke will be disappointed.

Yes, yes it is.



You're not going up there?



No. Not yet anyway.

They could use a fine, rousing lovers' quarrel without interruption, especially mine.

You sound a bit annoyed.

I'll confess, I'm not happy with Rae at the moment. But I'll get over it. He's having enough trouble without my rubbing in anything.

Rae was generous with his critique when it came to my shortcomings in life. But now that he's out here, discovering that it's all as difficult as I described, I can't help but feel a little...

Satisfaction?

Yes. There's no need to say, "I told you so."

That's natural, Cal.



Also, I heard about his... revelation to you.



Oh yes, his revelation. Got it off his chest, he did.

I won't parse words with you, Fern. He *did* exaggerate.

I figured.

I wish he had waited. He did it for the sake of his own pathos.



In the process, making it sound like my penis fell off.

Hmf. Hm.

It's all right, laugh it up.





I don't mean to hammer it in. I know it may not be important to you anymore, but it is to me.

It wasn't like I wrote up standard protocol and tacked it up beside the bed.

Sex With Fern

75% Cb

15% Rae

1 L.B. condoms

I compromised your dignity, after all. People who love each other don't do such things. But it was such a murky mess--

Thanks for the mental image.

I'm going to change the subject appropriately, okay?

You haven't mentioned anything about this. How does it feel to be without Rae?

Uhh. Should I not have asked?

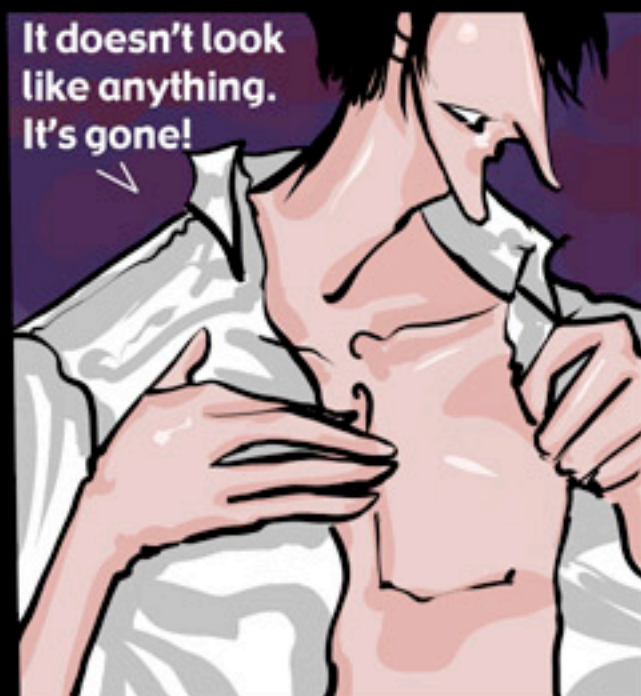
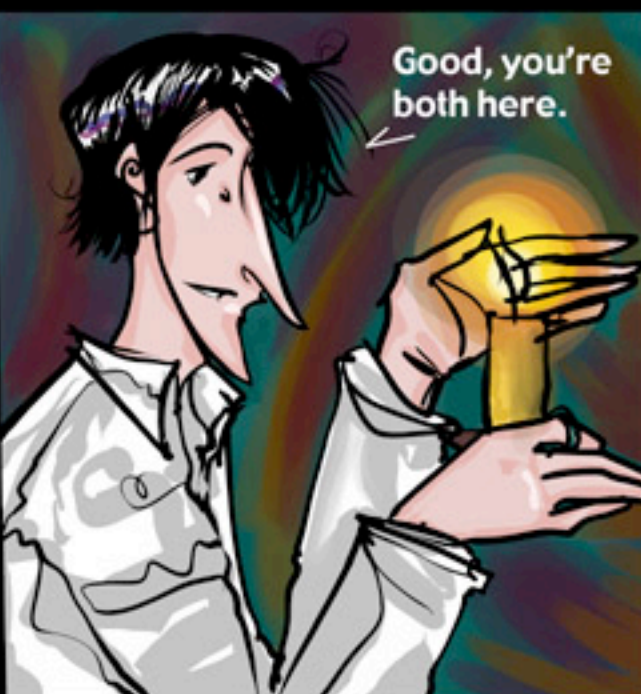
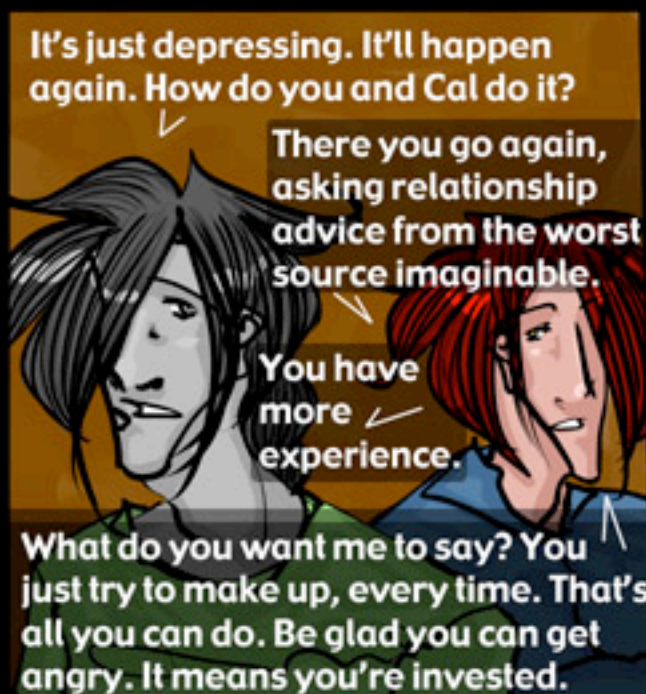
No...It's wonderful that you asked.

I'll show you later.

Let's go upstairs, before the others wonder where we are.

I need to give you something before I forget.

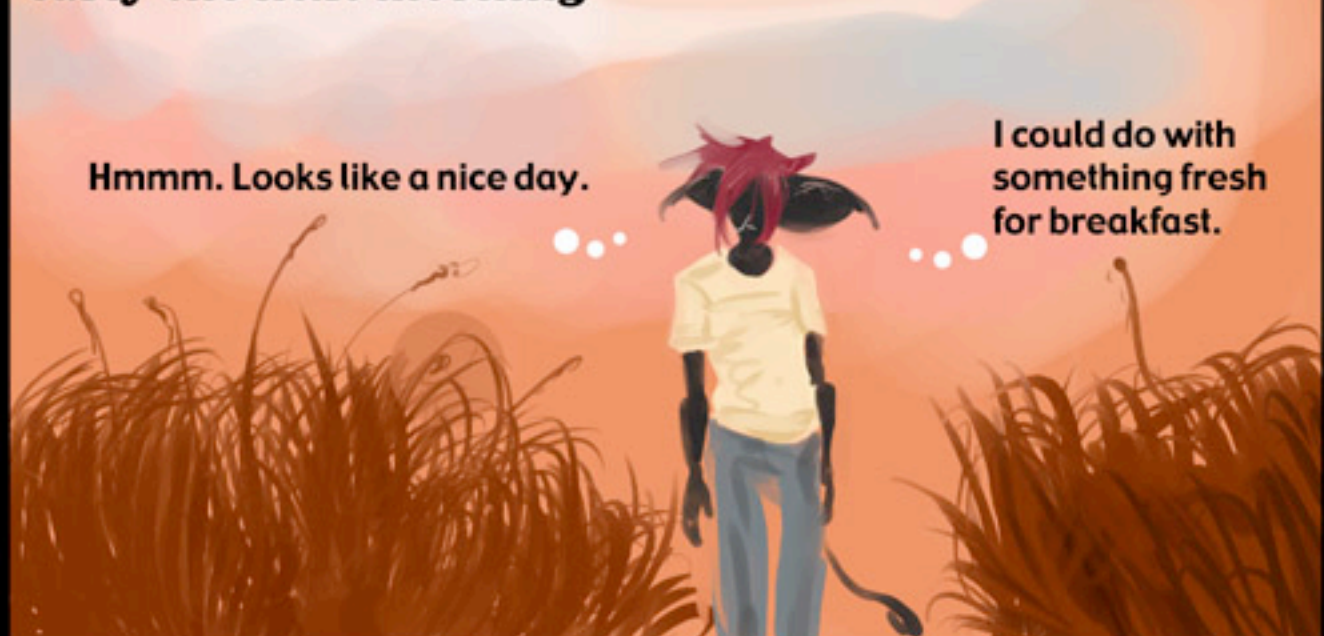









## early the next morning








That's strange.  
None of the  
crickets are chirping.

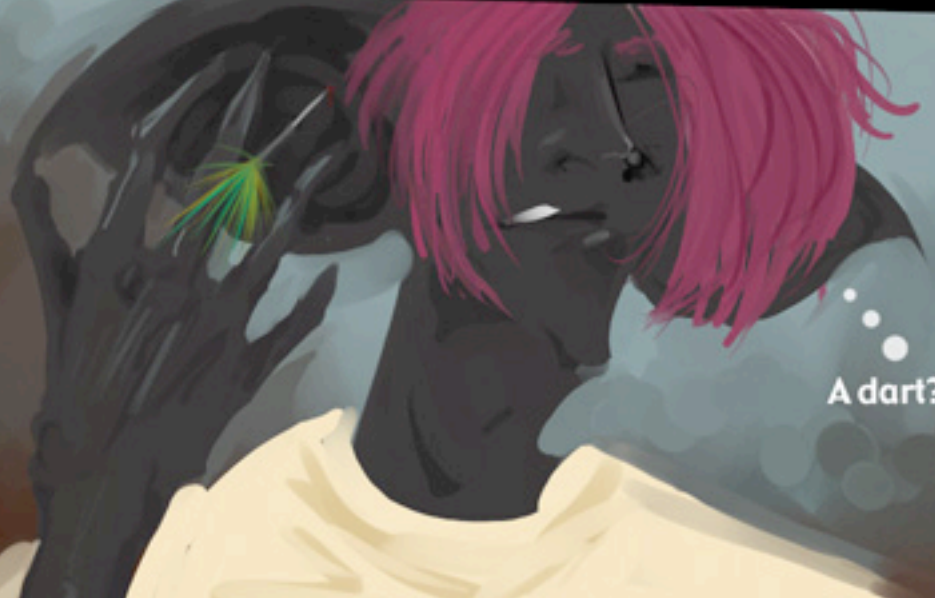
Frost must've  
killed them.



Nafalo...nuriep...or necco,  
roasted with a little wild  
parsley...

thoomp

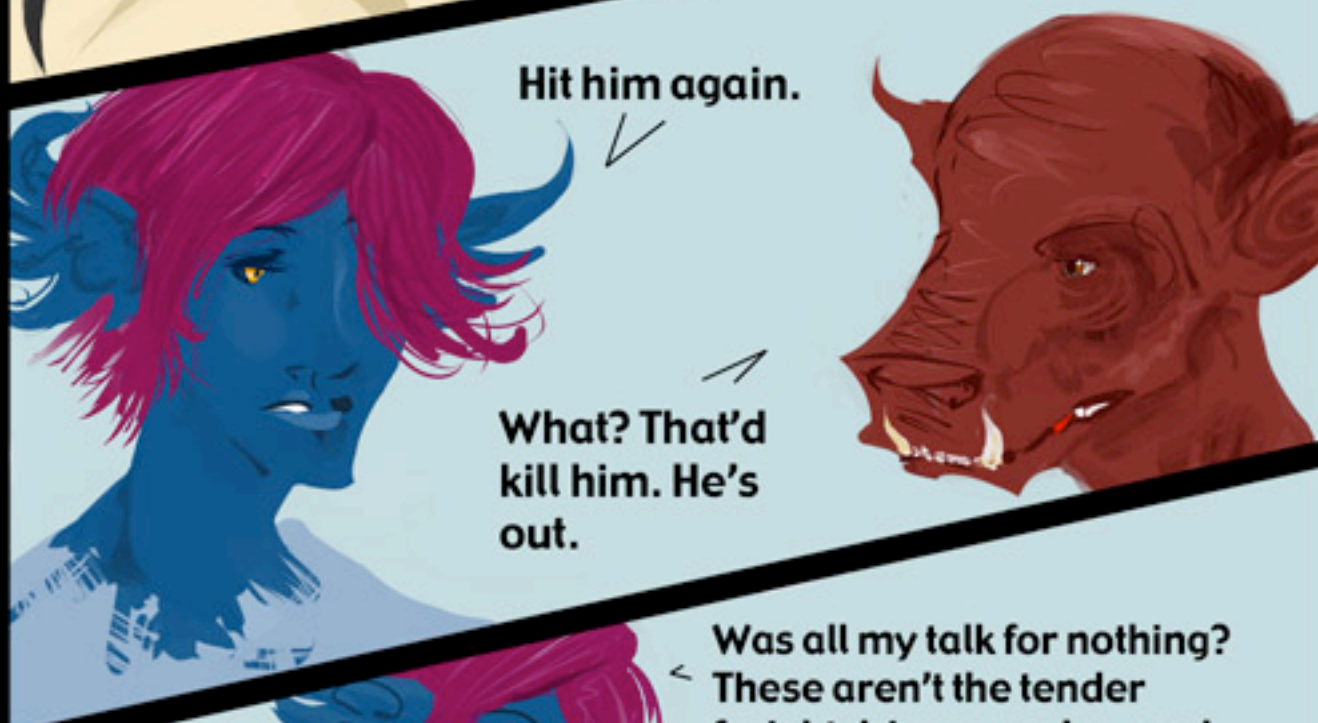
scratch  
scratch



Ow!  
My ear!

A dart?!





Hit him again.

What? That'd  
kill him. He's  
out.



Oh, Provost.

Was all my talk for nothing?  
These aren't the tender  
freight drivers you're used  
to robbing.

These are elementals.  
Breaking their skulls just  
makes them angry.

Give me the club. I'll show you  
how it's done.



See? Gentle as a kitten.  
Now put the cuffs on  
him.

We really lucked out.

This isn't luck.

This is weeks  
of planning.  
Now the boy  
will come out.

You really  
believe that?

Remember what the dragon said.  
The aksandriate has a minute bladder  
--and here he is.

yaaaaawn

I have to grab  
you. Sorry.

whump

Please, if  
you could  
stay quiet.

Mycroft has him.  
It's all ready for  
you, Rosalyn.

Like stealing candy  
from a baby.





I have no idea who you people are, but I'll be your best friend if you'd *just* let me take a leak.

What the fuck is taking him so long?

Wait, Roz. Remember the deal.

Mmph...Hi there. You're... You're Abe's nafalo friend! Is he here?

You want me to follow you? Is Abe outside?

I guess I won't wake anyone if I go out the back...



OW! Abe! Take it easy!


Run.

Where have you been? I was worried!

W-what's going on? Why?!

Don't talk. Just run as hard as you can.






Rosalyn! I just saw the dragon leave.

What are we--

Finally. Oh--damnit, Mycroft, you hold him. I'll keep the knife.


You down there! I know you're awake. We have your boy. I want to see Callanerial. Send him out.



Well! I just so happen to be the one you're looking for.

It's a fine morning, wouldn't you say?

Unseasonably warm.



I want all of your people out here, now.

If we meet any resistance, as you can see, we're prepared to cut your boy's throat.

I see. And there's Rae. You gave him a concussion?

He'll mend.

Pray don't concern yourself with the matter of resistance. We'll cooperate.



I'm glad to hear that.  
My intention is to take  
your operation hostage.  
We will travel to Tower to  
retrieve the remaining  
elementals. Your plan is to  
reclaim Faidia from this dark age,  
but we're aware of how weak  
you are. Using you, the halflings  
will be commandeering  
Faidia's fate from now on.



And while you  
may say you  
cooperate, I  
know what  
you're capable of.



At this moment,  
my associates  
have your  
friend Delye.

This is my necco, Brot.  
If Brot does not deliver  
an encrypted signal  
written by myself to  
my associates at a certain  
time every day--kkt.  
They'll cut your little  
friend's throat.

Now I want you to  
order the others out  
into the open. Form  
a line. Any delay will  
just make things  
worse for your less  
inviolable companions.

I assure you, I will do whatever  
I can to avoid bloodshed.

Communicate what you  
want, and we'll do our best.



Why did Cal want me to hide  
in here? They have Rae!

They also might have Morse  
and Delye. They're your priority.  
Leave Rae to us. Because you're inorganic,  
they shouldn't be able to scent you.  
No matter what you hear, stay in there.





## Soon...

Look, I have a grand idea. We break our handcuffs and have ourselves a fine, old-fashioned elemental blitzkrieg. We could be walking away from these morons' wizened corpses within minutes. Who's with me?

Cal, we're elementals, not school children. I won't lie down for this.

Fern.



You'll lie, Fern, and I'll tell you why. You haven't the strength to kill anyone with your magic right now, despite your big mouth.

They have Delye. They're in a position to hurt us *all* very badly.

So you're going to stand down, Fern, and you're going to *stay* down until I say the word.

You said yourself they're morons. We'll play them.

Fola! How's Rae?

Right. How stupid of me.

He's sitting up?



Lemme tell ya something about Cal that I've ne'er told anyone, not even me. He's scary 'cause he's a mother figure. There's nothing scarier than a mother. But don't tell him I said that, aright?



Stop dragging your feet!

Abe! Abe, I n-need to stop!

pant

pant

I'm out of breath!

Tell me what's going on. Why did we leave the others behind?

They were attacked.  
By halfling bandits.

Why didn't you wait?! We could have helped them!

Look, I don't want to lie to you--

Abelarde. What did you do?

Let me explain. I'll try to be quick.

This halfling, Wazoven, was my student years ago. He was doing well until he fell in with this other halfling...A woman named Rosalyn. She's no good. A corrupt extremist.

I lost him to her group. When I left you, it was so I could check on what Rosalyn's gang was doing. My worst fears were realized--they were planning on attacking the elementals. Rumors have been spreading like wildfire.

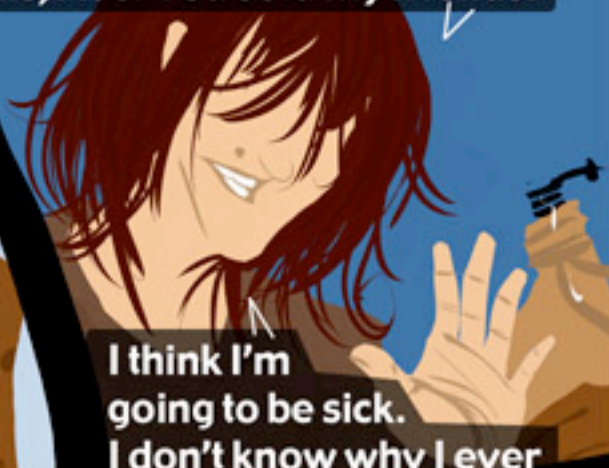
I tried to convince them not to go through with it, but I failed.



So I fed them information instead. They think the area around the city isn't as bad as the rumors say. They'll die without the elementals.



You had better talk faster than this, Abe. You sold my friends.



I think I'm going to be sick. I don't know why I ever trusted you.

I'm trying.>

I suppose I should have blown up your home world, destroyed everything you've ever known. Then you'd trust me, right?



Your friendship won't help the elementals. > They don't need a friend now.

Look at you. Are you even thinking for yourself anymore?



Did you know it's forbidden for the elementals to initiate contact with the higher entities? That's why Faidia uses messengers.

No...What does that have to with anything?

It means that as long as you're with the elementals, you don't have a chance in hell of contacting Rhodes.



What?! Says who?! Cal would have mentioned that. I don't believe you.

It's a convention from the oldest legends Faidia has. Oral traditions, things everyone knows for no reason. Certain rules are followed in fairy tales, aren't they? This is like that.

The elementals ignore most legends because they see clearly what parts of the stories are false. Unfortunately, they end up disregarding what IS true in the stories, as well.

Aside from that, I don't think Cal had a clear idea of what he was going to do, anyway.

The last time someone cited fairy tales near me, it didn't turn out too well.

Look. My motive has no bearing on the fact that the halflings back there are murderers and thieves, and that you're just one more mortal they could use as a hostage.

Is that what you want? You think the elementals would thank me if I let you go?

They would have attacked whether I was involved or not. I'm doing the best I can.

You lived with me for six months! Maybe I'm an irritating prig, but not I'm not a terrorist.

There's a small cave on the southern continent. It's not deep, but the voice of Faidia is close to the surface there. It's where the dragons listen for her messages.

She's the closest we'll get to Rhodes. She's a bit younger than the primaries, but her memory is better. More importantly, she's not entirely self-centered. She'll know something.

I've lined up a carmor to carry us.

...Agh. How did I get into this.

All right. Enough. What do you suggest we do? You better have a fantastic idea.



Roz, I've cleaned the place out. I can't find a single one. They must have gotten away. →

←  
All right. That was expected.

Go ahead and divide them. Primaries in one group, secondaries in another. Then we march.

←  
Rosalyn. I don't care for how this is going. You broke from the plan. I was supposed to do the talking.



Now, Waz. You know that they'd take one look at you and laugh in your face.

←  
You're as passive as that pathetic dragon you admire so much. Just let me handle it.

Anyway, it'll work out better if they don't know who's the brains behind our operation.

**Hours later**

Roll call. How's Fola, Viv?

Well, you're so damn quiet I don't know where you are. How are you?

I can hear you, you know. →

My foot → hurts and I'm tired.

He's fine, Fern.

Psst. Fern. Did Mid make it?

I think I can feel him a little. Yes, he made it.

But-funny-I don't know where Smoke is.





They're not coming back.  
I haven't done any sort of mission in  
a very long time. Am I up to this? ●

No point in wondering that. ●



● If only Cal collected something useful.  
Look at all of this junk.

He had to have found something  
functional, at least by accident! ●



● The trail is easy enough to follow,  
but I haven't any weapons,  
no advantage.



Whoa. Fern left Kezper  
behind. Probably on  
purpose. Safer here. ●

Hey... ●



● Hmm. Maybe I can play  
up to my strengths this time.

This is like my system, but a lot more cluttered. Cal must have reached for whatever was lying around.



I hope you're still knocking around in here, Kezper.

- Transferred him to the laptop and
- turned on all the reason centers.

```
./routines
What do you want
to do with directory
numbers?

select task
-----
direct: This command recal
patters. Please use cal

Format: XXX
-----
***
All routines proper or
accessible.

Do you wish to customize
these settings?
yn
-----
100 Return to Main Menu
101 Adjust Here Settings
```

+Kezper? Are you awake? Are you getting any of this?

who is it what is it

+It's Hid. Do you know about me? I'm another strutter OS Cal built, remember?

i remember. what am i running on? i don't recognize this

+You're on my laptop.

I can't believe it. It works.



Are there any other adjustments I can do to make you more comfortable?

i feel terrible. i feel terrible. this computer is very strange. but what happened to the city? did i kill people?

+Oh man. Ok, I'm going to direct link to you. That's the fastest way. You'll find everything you want to know in my memory bank.

+But Kezper, remember that right now, more than anything, I need your help with a mission from Cal.

easter??? i will do anything!





Our lift?

Yeah. Our first, anyway.  
It'll take three cormors to  
get us down there.

Hmm. Well, thanks  
for putting your  
clothes back on.  
What's that old  
ugly thing on the  
ground?

It's across the planet, after all.

I don't know. This is getting more  
and more complicated...

It's commonplace. Or was.  
Don't worry about it.

That is what we'll  
be riding in. You  
didn't expect to sit  
on his back, did you?

Well, it doesn't  
look very safe.

Once it has the harness on,  
you'll see it's very safe. Two  
steel rods are inserted into those  
slots, nearly impossible to break off,  
and the harness consists of sail canvas.  
Strong and breathable.  
Of course, there are more  
aerodynamic designs--

Okay okay. All I want  
to know is whether it  
will work. Let's go.

You don't want  
to hear the rest  
about the thing?

No!

Rae. It's I, Smoke.

Checking on the  
secondaries. We have  
about five minutes.  
What's the word?

They're giving us  
practically nothing  
to eat, to keep us weak.

Brilliant.

The guard?

Yeah. Where the hell have you  
been?

Gathering data  
on the toxic conditions  
you will soon be  
entering.

Instead of rescuing  
Delye?

These were Cal's orders.  
Here's the data. Keep it  
hidden.

I'll stuff it up  
a nostril or  
something.  
Plenty of room  
in there.

We can't rely on our  
memories anymore,  
so I wrote it down.  
Don't lose it.

What about Cal and--

Don't wake  
them. I have  
to leave now  
anyway.

Cal will show you  
how to work out  
a strategy based on  
this information.

Right. Thanks,  
Smoke.

But at least  
visit Fern before  
you're off again.

If he finds out later you talked  
to me but not him, he'll do that  
passive aggressive thing  
where he converts his  
jealousy into self-loathing  
and then sarcastically  
forgives you and accuses  
you at the same time. I hate that.

Right.

Begging your pardon,  
lady, but I wish you'd  
eat something. This isn't  
natural.

next  
morning

Thank you for your  
concern, but we are  
resolute in this regard.

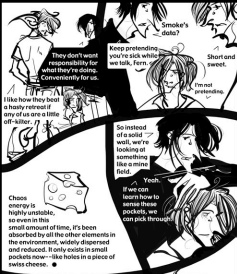
Our rations go to the  
secondaries.





It stands to reason that they'd be even stranger than the tales tell. Even their voices are odd. It's hard to understand them.







I'm so out of shape. This place better be out here. My lungs are about to collapse. ●



That's the Strutter Preservation Society Museum? A rundown shack? ●



It's the sort of place Fern would opt to live in. ●

Stop right there, stranger.



What?!!  
D-don't shoot!

Oh my god. Is that a gun?  
Those aren't even manufactured on this continent.

I have my ways, doughboy.  
Who sent you?



Hey there! We don't  
get visitors often.  
Don't mind her. I  
just keep her around  
for protection.  
Heheh. You know how it is.





Damn it. How do I say this.  
This is a great collection even  
now, but I have to tell you,  
a lot of these are  
Lemaneriallian knockoffs.

Seriously?



Yeah. If it's not  
too much trouble, is  
there any more in the  
house? You might not  
know you have them.  
They're small.

Let me look. I'm glad I didn't  
try to open the museum with  
these.

Is this what  
you're talking  
about? It was  
in a kitchen  
drawer.



Yes! ➤  
That's it!

That little thing is a growth box?

Sure. A good one. I should  
be able to get a phase sixty  
fighter or better out of this.

Wallasec. You're  
actually going to GROW  
that thing?!

Oh. Yeah.  
I forgot to ➤  
mention that.

Um, I'll take it  
to a safe  
distance, of  
course.

Uhh. It's a long  
story. But I have a basement  
full of these at home. If I ever  
get there again, I'll pay you back  
in kind for  
this favor.

Well,  
great, but--

Download's  
finished. ➤  
Sorry I can't  
explain, but  
I'm in a hurry.

I don't mean that, I mean how?  
Nobody has the operating  
system for these things.



two hours later...



Kezper! Can  
you hear  
me yet?

Make sure you  
build a voice box!  
And don't make  
yourself too big,  
we're only fighting  
people, you know!



No more  
armor, Kezper,  
it'll take hours  
and hours to  
harden as it is.

Do I look okay?

You um, look  
just fine.











I know you have no reason to do what I say, Kezper, but you could at least give me some common courtesy.

I didn't mean it! I'm just used to operating by my own rules most of the time.

Fern loved to jump! I don't know why you don't! We used to have lots of fun.



Sorry, Kezper, I guess it's an acquired taste. I've never really thought about it, but Fern's a bit of a thrill seeker...when he's not on the couch.

Don't tease him. He doesn't like that.

Oh, I know.

Didn't Fern give you orders?

Hardly ever! Fern came out to check on how the game was going, but I made most of the decisions. Callanerial built me to operate independently so he wouldn't have to give orders.

Do you still have that scent, by the way?

Of course! A hurricane couldn't blow it away. What are we going to do when we find them?

It shouldn't take much. A glimpse of our faces should suffice.







This is all because the idiot lorliam freak is wrapped around that woman's little finger. These mortals won't bend to reason, but they'll drop everything if a female blinks.



Looks like rain.



And what do these women do? > They exploit that all they can. Vile, manipulative bitches, every one.

Not this misogynistic shit AGAIN. Rae, you've had this a long time coming.

Aside from your mythologically sadistic aunt, what have women ever done but bend over backwards to make your life better?!

When have you ever even KNOWN any real women?!

May's a woman!

Are you joking? May's as much a woman as I'm a man, that is to say, not at all.

This is all because of your imagined abandonment issues. Your mother nearly killed herself just to make sure you ended up safely in my hands, and your response is to hate women?! Grow up!

W-what was that about?

You were stuck together for how long, and you don't know? >

Come on, we have to do some work.





I told you to get  
the others, where  
are they?

Provost and the  
others are  
gone, Roz.  
Deserted.

Deserted?  
Their  
money...

They didn't  
think they'd  
live to see it.

It's over, Roz.  
Let's get out  
of here while  
we can.

They don't know the  
others deserted.

How long do you think you  
can keep that up?

What have I got to lose?



I can't think with Wazoven pawing at me like that. ☹





A slit  
in midair?



This must be it. The poison in the land  
affecting my mind, like the elementals  
warned us about. ●



It's only in my head.

A hallucination.

Still, I wonder what's  
on the other side. ●



It's not really petals,  
more like flecks of color.



cough  
The smell...



There's  
too much!

I know it's not real. So why  
can't I breathe?



I'm dying.  
I'm dying.  
I can't  
breathe!



It's gone!



Help me someone,  
help me! Help me!  
Oh god, I can't-  
I can't breathe-







Oh dear. You stepped into a nasty spot.

SCHOOOF



And here is my smug rejoinder. Your gravest mistake, Rosalyn.

You took us for a lot of hackneyed politicians, looking out for our careers. But we're just living things, as you are. Our prerogative is survival. In fact, we invented it.



Rosalyn,  
where are you?  
**Rosalyn!**



White smoke...?



The poison is  
stirring.



That will be  
enough to keep  
you safe if you turn  
back now.





What about  
Rosalyn?  
Please, tell  
me where  
she is!

I'm sorry for  
everything.  
She's not an evil  
person, just—



She's close by, but it  
may be too late for her.

We're too weak  
to do any more  
for you.

Goodbye.



Rosalyn...  
Rosalyn...



Rosalyn?  
**ROSALYN!**

Can't you hear me? What'd  
they do to you?



It's not over yet, Rosalyn. I promise.  
We'll find some other way.

As long as you're alive, there's hope,  
right?

....

↳

◀ Come on. Let's get out of here.





Hold it. Where are Cal and May?

May used her magic on the halflings and this water.

It exhausted her so much, Cal didn't think she should backtrack. He's headed for an underground tunnel into Tower. We don't stop to rest until we're out of this.

We can't see the chaos energy because the nature here has absorbed so much of it.

Like I said, it settles into pools, like holes in a sponge. But the introduction of outside material, like us or the halflings, can tear those pools open. Then we're in trouble.

But I think if we tease the pools with a little bit of a clean mojo, we can make them reveal themselves. Folc, you're the cleverest alchemist here.

Any ideas?

Uh. Some form of weather, if it's brought in quickly enough...

Fog, or rain, if it's clean, may pick out the bad spots. I think Viv and I could do that.

Wallasec. What if these masses are so delicate the rain rips them all open? We'd be REALLY fucked then.

Well... The rain actually might absorb the worst of it, allowing us to slip by.

Baiting the beast? That sounds like a plan to me. Be warned, though. If you see a flash of red...  
You're probably already poisoned.

No time like the present to try it!

Nothing like the prospect of playing with toxic waste to get you moving.

elsewhere

Well, I hadn't forgotten after all.

Here we are.

The sewer.

It'll only take a few hours from here.

I thought he was going to sleep.

He is.

He has no eyelids. You get used to it.

I can't believe I went through all this and you had already talked those halfings into letting you go.

Yes, well, Mid, when your mind turned to a violent solution, I used the power of ideas to vanquish my foes. Let that be a lesson to you.

He's a lifesaver anyway. We can get away from this area now.

Get away? We're not catching up?

The area is toxic, remember? We'll be a lot more useful getting the hell out of here. We can go back to Cal's "house." They finish this themselves.

I can't believe we're in a fucking sewer.

We know one thing, at least. None of the electricity in Tower is working. The sewer lights are on the emergency circuit.

Look, the technique we figured out was effective, why don't we just continue on the surface?

Because you and Fola are already exhausted, jackass.

We can't see anything, we don't know what's down here, what if we get lost?

Don't say that word.

Remain calm. We'll find a light.

If we follow the largest lines we can find, it should eventually lead into the central sewer right underneath the city.

Everyone, I just put my hand on something...alive.

Rae, that's me.

Oh. Sorry, May.



I'm going to backtrack and get some of that wood for torches. Better than nothing.

Fern, is that you?

Yeah.

I'll come with you, Funa.

Your eyes used to glow sometimes, did you ever figure out how to control that?

If only it weren't night already!

Not really. But I can try, I think, without hurting anybody.

How's this, Col?

Good. Can you see?

A little, but any brighter than this and I won't see anything.

Hmm. Not really practical.

What was that?!

There were glowing eyes, didn't you see them?!

That was FERN, Funa! You hit Fern!

Everyone shut up and sit still. Where is he?

I'm here...on the floor...

I found some---

AAHHH!!!!

THANK

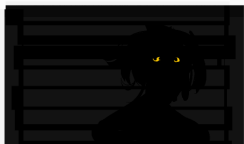
Where'd you get that, Smoke?

It's not my fault, I didn't know!

Nice work, Funa.

I'm all right...

I thought it was broken, but the batteries were just turned around.



Is that a light, or am I  
hallucinating?

It feels like we should be under  
Kurhe, by now.

It's real.



I'll go up.



We're here.  
We're in the city.







I've only felt this sort of stagnation in the air a few times before.

Ell's experiments?

Yes.

She never got far with those, did she?

Ell refused to experiment on living subjects.



Ell was always terrified of herself.

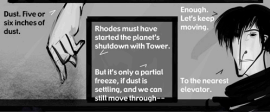
Wouldn't you be?

There's a body here.

It's one of the sub level mechanics, no mistake.

Asleep?

What is this stuff?



Dust. Five or six inches of dust.

Rhodes must have started the planet's shutdown with Tower.

Enough. Let's keep moving.

But it's only a partial freeze, if dust is settling, and we can still move through--

To the nearest elevator.



Fuck this. I'm taking the stairs.

Rae, do you have any idea how far up it is?

I don't care! This thing looks like an ancient relic!

Don't bash our elevators! They're the pride of our city!

Only the doors are old, Rae. The inner workings are replaced regularly.

If the crestis isn't exhausted, it should work even now...

So how do we open this thing?



Two magical words:  
manual override.



Where is it?

I thought as much. The elevators default to upper floors if they detect an emergency.

Prevents a ground invasion.

I was right all along! Lem is a moron!

This leaves... what? Did anyone keep Tower plans in their memory?

Smoke. The old fire escape. Is it still intact?

The original ten floors.

Oh, yes! After the sentient lifts were installed, they forgot about that old thing.

It's almost as old as we are. How appropriate.

One of the elevators should have defaulted to the fourth floor.

Thank you everyone. I believe we have a plan again.

We'll take the escape shaft to the fourth floor and check the elevator.

With any luck, our journey will be at an end within a few hours.

It's just a closet with a ladder in it.  
How could they evacuate a city  
with just this? It was only for  
construction workers.

Cal, can we talk a  
minute?

I know we need to find Lem.

But why are you  
putting all of the  
secondaries  
through this?

Even if we have enough time left by the time we reach the top, which  
I doubt....How are we going to get back down again?

You know I can't tell you that, Rae.

But what are you expecting to do up there, Cal?



What would you  
have me do, Rae?

I'm going to try  
and talk to  
them.

Our parents, you mean.  
It's never going to happen, Cal.  
You should let the secondaries  
spend their last moments as  
they choose. Instead you're  
marching them to  
nowhere.

Rae...

May, it's all right.

You're wrong, Rae.  
We have to try, and the  
elementals all deserve  
to be there.

It's our only chance.  
We need to take it.





Fern?



Y—you had  
better go first.



Get on there, NOW!



Stop talking nonsense and come on.

Ewww. Fern, you're all cold and slimy.

I don't want to be doing this. I'm telling my limbs to move. But they won't.

Why me? Why didn't the others realize you'd be scared?

Look, be reasonable. You know I can't leave you here.

Talk to me. What can I do? There's got to be something. What does Smoke do to calm you down?

No, I don't know.

Smoke's presence calms me down.

Fern, would it be so excruciating for you to have some pity for once?

I—I apologize. But I can't think of anything. I can't think at all.

I see. Okay. You had your chance.

You're not going to like this, but there's nothing else to do.

Come on!

What?

Hey!







*pant pant* Break time. Yeah.

Being that this is our worst experience together, ever, and how that's saying a lot, how are you doing?

The only food you've had in the past weeks has been a few shrivelled potatoes, Roe.

You're telling me?

But I'm a primary, yeah? Cal hobbled on without a heart for how long? We can drive our bodies in strange directions, can't we?

You're shaking with fatigue as we speak. This is not how we're going to get up there.

Wait, May.  
Can you hear  
Roe and Fern  
down there?

They're far behind, but I can hear their voices faintly. They don't sound like they're in trouble. Should we wait for them?

I'll wait. I forgot about something.

All right...  
I gotta...



I gotta stop for  
another  
minute.

You holding  
on okay?



I think I can...

Climb by yourself? Are you  
sure about this?



Roe? Fern?  
Can you hear me?  
Are you two all right?



Er, yeah,  
we can hear  
you!

We're fine. What  
level are you on?  
I've lost track.



This is the third floor. Only one more.



You two were so far behind, I got worried and waited.

Is everything okay?

Uh. I was having some trouble, and uh. Rae helped me out. We're fine.



Oh. I'm glad to hear it.

All of the others are waiting at the top, and if the grape vine is true, it sounds like the elevator is in fine working order.

That's definitely encouraging.

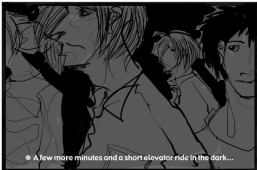
Thanks, Rae.

Anytime.

Um.







● A few more minutes and a short elevator ride in the dark....



'We're finally here.'

→



Are you awake, Abe? I think we're here.



This is the southern continent.

Another desolate wasteland. I'm starting to wonder if this is worth the trouble.

God, my whole body aches.

Come on, don't talk like that. It's not always like this. It's winter.

You mentioned that this place was forbidden. What's the story behind that?

According to legend, the southern continent is where the elementals first touched down on Faidia. This is where Lemanierial did his first experiments with life forms, for example... And where Callanierial was murdered.

Whether they simply left, or they were explicitly told to leave, we don't know. But Faidia made it clear they could not return here.



That's it? A hole in the ground?

It's a sacred spot, not  
a tourist attraction.

I thought there'd be  
dragons here.

There are. Many eyes  
are monitoring  
us as we speak. They're  
shy of humans.

Lighting the torches means  
the cave is occupied. No one  
will interrupt us. Let's go.

We're not bringing any  
light with us? It looks  
blacker than pitch down  
there.

You complain  
a lot, don't you.

There are plenty of  
lights down in the  
grotto.



Morse,  
this isn't right.

We should  
have reached  
it by now.

Can...can  
you find  
the walls?  
They  
suddenly...

Don't let go of me.

Even if we wanted to, I don't  
think we can find our way out  
of here. We can only keep  
going.

There's no echo. What are  
we walking on?

I can't tell.

F-Faldia?

Are you here? Please...we came to see you.  
Please help us!

Oh.

4



You came. 7  
I have been  
waiting.

Are...are you Faidia?



Huff. Interacting  
with mortals is  
so...  
I'm exhausted  
already.


Yes, I am Faidia.

Oh. Oh. Oh. Um. Please  
don't go to sleep, Faidia.  
We need your help, please.

You are mistaken. We  
are the ones in need  
of your help, are we not?







Well, Cal has seemed to think I could be of some help from the start. Abelarde thinks it's all for some purpose, so he's brought me this far.

Don't mistake Cal's actions for anything complicated.

He brought you along based on his instinct.

Instinct? What sort of instinct are you talking about?

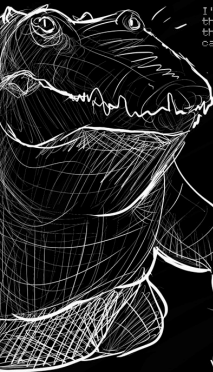


What do you think is important to someone as old as Cal?

As old? Are you talking about my age?

Cal could sense you were connected to this world, and yet you were older than everything in it.

Including the wíwen.



I'm probably just confusing the issue. All I am saying is that nothing in this place can harm you.

What is this place, anyway?

This is the root of the world. This dark emptiness was what Cal and May were born into. If you follow this path to the beginning, you'll find Rhodes.

According to Abelarde... This is your "sacred abode" or something. Were you born here too?

No, I am guarding it.

Guarding it against...the elementals?  
Can you explain why this place is forbidden to them?

Ah...  
Rather than listen to me carry on, why don't you see for yourself?



Follow that light up ahead. Don't worry about getting lost, but don't separate.



And, before you leave,  
I have a gift for you.

What did she give you?



A...  
stuffed animal.



Wouldn't you think it was a sacred artifact of some kind?

Abe. I'm pretty sure this is a child's stuffed toy. I had one like this in my room, before Arduc got blown up.

But what is it representative of?

It's a dog, of course.

What's a dog?

W... You don't know what a DOG is? Don't you have dogs in Faidia?

I'm almost positive I've never heard of these before.

But there are foxes... Funaner's animal form...

Why would you have one kind of canid, and not another? Strange.

Why is there so much light in here?



Part of the temple roof fell in.



Why did that happen?  
Shouldn't the curse have kept things like that frozen?

The temple is one of the first buildings built on Faidia. Maybe the curse's influence is weak against it.



Everyone split up. We'll rest once we find him. I promise.



Hmm. Smoke  
and I will check  
out the green house.

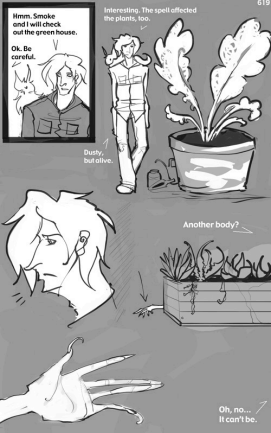
Ok. Be  
careful.

Interesting. The spell affected  
the plants, too.

Dusty,  
but alive.

Another body?

Oh, no...  
It can't be.





Fern...?



It's Darcy.



I think he's dead.



Don't say that.  
He's starving,  
but that doesn't  
mean he's dead.

Col, he's so dehydrated,  
how--

I know, I know!  
If we can get  
just a little bit  
into him, though--

Viv, hand me your pocket knife!

Just a little,  
Darcy.

Please,<sup>7</sup>  
Darcy.







# THUNK

For god's sake, Cal, he's dead!  
It's not going to help!



Darcy? Darcy! He's alive!

Someone bring some water, now!  
He'll lapse if we don't get him  
hydrated!

...arcy?

Darcy?


Darcy, wake up.



Just for a moment, then you can go back to sleep, all right? Are you awake?



*I feel like I'm in our bed. Was it all just a bad dream? Couldn't be...*



L-lem... Our apartment...?  
Was it a dream?

No. I'm sorry. You  
passed out after  
showing the others  
where I was.

Oh... But... You're okay?



Cal thinks he may have broken  
your ribs reviving you.



Please take these  
and get some sleep.



You need to  
sleep in order  
to heal. Do  
you want  
more  
blood?

No. My system  
couldn't handle  
more right now.

Darcy... Why did you  
do this to yourself?



I-I don't know.

I had found  
you, but,  
you didn't remember me. I  
was going to wait for you  
to recover, but I became  
depressed, and I stopped  
eating... There's no logic to it.







It's  
over.



It's finally  
all over.





Care to rephrase that, Lem?

Don't tell me  
the thought  
hasn't passed  
any of your  
minds.

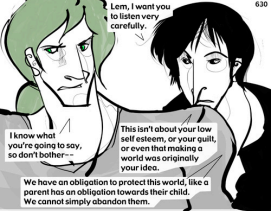
Maybe this  
situation isn't  
bad.

Think about  
it.

May never thought  
this project was  
any good. She  
knew how much  
suffering it would  
entail.

Maybe she's  
right, and  
wiping it  
all out...  
is the most  
humane  
option  
now.





That just depends on how you look at it, doesn't it? Can't you see what's happening here?! Even if we keep going, this world is going to destroy itself.





Nothing to say?  
What is it exactly  
that you people  
want from me?

I really  
want to know.

For now,  
I want you to  
calm down.

And stop-licking on me.

Of course, you want someone to blame. Anyone would, wouldn't they? But we've all made terrible mistakes, haven't we?



Especially me. You  
probably think  
I'm the worst,  
don't you?



Blame  
isn't going  
to get us  
anywhere, Lem.

But let me tell you something.  
As bad as our problems are, we  
wouldn't be in trouble with the  
wiwen if it weren't for a certain  
special someone.

I repeat, we wouldn't be on the brink  
off utter destruction if not for this person.



Fine, Lem, fine!

Since you're determined to go on with this, then spit it out. Tell us. Who is the guilty party whose identification will solve everything?



I'm more than glad to.

It's him, that pathetic worm standing over there.



Come here, Fola.



Oh no.



He's the one who came up with the wiwen system in the first place, and then worked out how to manipulate it.

He's guiltier than any of us!

Fola! Why are you just standing there? Come here!

Do as I say!



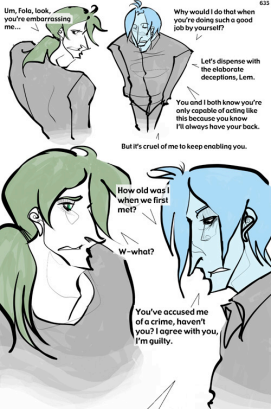


How long have you  
been standing on  
my neck?

I think it's about time  
you stopped,

wouldn't you  
agree?





But I think I should explain everything from the beginning.

So, how old was I when we met?



I forget?



Of course.



Can you tell me what you DO remember?

When we first met? Uh, you were kind of slow. You were my first secondary, and I was very disappointed, to be honest.

We put all that information into your head so there wouldn't be so much of a delay, but you were totally helpless. It was really irritating because there was a lot of work that needed to be done.

So I asked May for advice, and in the end we put you under Yiv's care, and he taught you how to read and such. Which turned out to be a poor idea, he's been a bad influence on you...

I'm standing right here, you know.



I didn't understand it! You turned out to be smart, so I guessed you had just been playing dumb for some reason.







It might have  
been because

I was six  
years old

you moron.

And I haven't  
grown a day since  
then, you know  
that? How could I?

How much time, Lem?  
I have flushed down my entire  
life by spending it with you.  
How many times did I sit up with you  
all night, playing ridiculous video games because  
you were too scared to sleep and couldn't make any  
real friends, and the entire time acting as if you  
had to beat me into submission to keep me there!

**Why? Why did you treat me that way, when you didn't need to?!**

**I adored you! For me, you were the only person that existed! My entire existence depended on you. I would have done anything you told me -- And I did! I still do!**

**I was a kid, which was the only reason I didn't realize sooner I'd sold my soul to an idiot.**

**You wanted Fern in my place, so I did what you told me to do, not even knowing what it meant.**

**For my trouble, I made a fool of myself. I alienated myself from my peers, made myself look like some sort of brainless stooge!**

**For you, all for you!**

**What more could one ask for?**

**How could I go any lower? Tell me how, I'll do it.**





But you still ground down, didn't you?

Not once have you let up on me.

You ground down until there was nothing worth spitting on.



But you realized that, right? One day I think we both woke up and realized we had a sociopath on our hands.

That's when I hurt Mid.

Neither of us knew what was happening then. I can't really blame you for that.

I could tell you didn't know who I was anymore when I came back.



For all you did, you were never physically violent. So, I'm sorry for hitting you. It's the first and the last time.

But it's not just about me, either. You made Ell abandon Mid, and only after I'd convinced you not to kill him.

You had so much trouble letting us form emotional attachments other than you. Can't you see how much suffering that's caused?



There's your brother. I don't think you really meant to hurt him that badly, Lem. But the way you treated him after you killed him was inexcusable.

Even you couldn't stand it most of the time. You made up ridiculous, wasteful competitions like the strutters just as an excuse to keep interacting with him.

Has it ever occurred to you that you would feel a lot better, and be a lot less likely to hurt other people, if you just stopped lying to yourself?

Cal, shouldn't  
we...

Shhh. Let him finish.

Wish I had  
some popcorn.

And that's why I've got to tell you, even though it may not matter anymore, that I'm leaving.

I am going to move  
out of my windmill  
and live in a place  
on Viv's land.

This doesn't mean  
anything, except,  
you'll have to  
go through  
Viv anytime  
you want to  
see me  
after hours.

If you object...  
Well, May has agreed  
to realign me under her.  
I'll leave you completely.

The only reason  
this hasn't happened  
already is because  
I'm psychologically  
damaged. Isn't that  
a nice thought?

I also held back because I thought you'd turn your "attentions" to Funa and Ill once I had left. I was so used to shielding them from you, I was terrified of abandoning them.

But Viv was right. Someone had to stand up to you, or it would never end.

But none of this is important.

This indulgent, petty social dysfunction has distracted us from what really mattered for the past five thousand years.

From the beginning, Lem was obsessed with eliminating death. He wanted all his creations to live forever. But his power wasn't infinite. Every living thing in existence had a small part of his power invested in it. As long as they were alive, they needed that power. The only way to free that energy up for the creation of more living things was to recycle it -- death.

Lem assigned me with the task of discovering a practically infinite supply of pure elemental energy.

It sounded impossible, which is why he probably chose me to do it.

I tended not to talk back, at least until I had some evidence.

There were plenty of theories to go on as leads. Too many.

The difficulty was in devising ways of testing them, seeing if they were really applicable to the real world.

One of these was the wiwen theory.







I spent many, many years figuring out how to apply that theory. When I think back to that time, all I can see are the many instances I came up against a wall and couldn't progress any further.

I could have stopped so many times. But I kept going. I kept going. Inch by inch, step by step, towards the precipice.

It's useless to think about it, but the idea sometimes makes me feel like I might go insane.

The wiwen system turned out to be easy to tap. Wiwens run in "families" of similarly structured worlds. We're in a family of worlds that are all run by elementals.

I was able to penetrate these worlds with our own magic. I started draining them, converting the energy into a form we could use.

At first it was just energy, numbers on paper. I knew vaguely that this power was very likely coming from worlds like our own, and that I was killing them. I waited for someone else to object, to inquire where this energy was coming from.

But none of you did. You simply took it.



And Lem said, "Good job, Fola. Keep it coming."

I had been doing well up to that point, actually. With Viv's help I had started developing socially.

It stopped there, however. I wasn't the way I had been before; I was worse.

My relationships with Funa, Viv and Ell decayed.

No one would listen to me about what I had done. Lem told me not to talk about it.

Even Viv, trying to help, told me that worrying about it would accomplish nothing. But if it wasn't my responsibility, whose was it?

We sanitized the process a bit as the technique improved.

Instead of destroying worlds, we'd only eliminate their elementals, and assimilate the world into our own so we could keep milking it...

That sort of thing.

As if that was more humane than complete annihilation?

I knew it was still wrong. It was all wrong.

I knew I had to do something about it.

I hit the books, looking for a loophole that would put me in contact with the wiwen. For this reason, I hurt Mid. It was hard to do. Harder to do than the bigger crime I had committed.

It was poorly conceived, anyway. What I did, made no actual difference because Rhodes was still unaware of the existence of Faidia in his subconscious.

I couldn't get near him.

Instead of confessing to Rhodes, alerting him to what was going on, I was detained and tortured by the lions.

The lions have less to do with us than we think. They're not our punishers.

Everyone has a defense against their unconscious. Wiwens especially. It's often a wall, or a locked door, some other symbol...

^ Rhodes has the lions. They protected him from me.

I'd like to say it was terrible. That would be easier for the people who care about me.

But if I am honest, I can only say it was nothing I wouldn't have done myself, if I had the nerve. It's like that in my head. Everyone thinks it's the lions' curse. But it's probably mine.






Finally, the  
ax I had been  
anticipating  
fell.

And that ax was Sutyenner.

If you understand that  
wiwens run in families, then  
you know that it was inevitable  
that we would stumble across the  
origin of our own wiwen, Arduc.

We didn't realize it in time,  
and murdered their elementals...

Except for Sutyenner.



It just so happened that Sutyenner loved  
his fallen comrades and had the cunning  
and drive to figure out why Arduc  
was dying. He followed our trail all the way  
back to Rhodes, and took him captive.


Sutyenner didn't understand  
everything. He thought Rhodes  
had full control of Faidia already  
and was playing innocent.  
Rhodes didn't know a thing.  
He was just a kid then.

What Sutyenner should  
have done, rather than  
dragging it out, was kill  
Rhodes immediately.

By destroying Rhodes' conscious, he  
would be forced to discover  
the world he had created.  
The delay in killing Rhodes  
simply made it worse.

There was no need to frighten Rhodes.  
He reacted as any normal person would  
to realizing they'd been committing  
murder in their sleep.





That's the simplest way of saying it. When you want to cover up a crime, Fern, what's your first priority?

Destroy the evidence?

Exactly. Aside from any ethically motivated horror he no doubt is experiencing, he considers us evidence of a crime he's committed.

If this goes on, Sutyenner will only be the first of many who will attack and attempt to destroy Rhodes. He is destroying us to safeguard himself, and all other wiwens.

And there it is. I'm finished.

You know why we are standing here today, why I am a shell of a person now incapable of having even the barest shred of respect for myself, and why we will all soon die.

It was my doing, for the sake of gaining the slightest gesture of acceptance from that man over there.

I've never talked so much in my goddamn life.  
I'll be back, I'm getting some water.



sigh

/



Lem.



Look at me.



Lem, this could be  
all over, right now.

Please.

I'm the same person  
I ever was.

Can't you tell me what's troubling you?

I want to help you, but...  
you're always hiding from me.

Don't...talk  
to me like  
that.

Like what?

Gently. I can't  
bear it. Don't do it.

You're...you're  
lying too. Isn't  
there only one  
way to fix what  
I've done?





Right after I hurt my brother, I was really young and just pushed the event out of my mind, like a lot of children do. I made up complicated lies.

But lies aren't enough, when you're the liar. I got older and once I started thinking about it, I couldn't stop.

By then, I had already created living things that relied on me. I couldn't accept punishment without abandoning them, so I kept lying.

How could I tell the truth?

"I tried to kill the only person who ever cared about me."

How can you admit that to yourself? To the people who have faith in you, who think you're someone else?

The punishment for death is death, right? You don't need to lie to me, I know. I know so well. It's better to end it now. I can step back from myself and see it that way.

I've worked hard, and I'm done.



Do you really  
want to die?

Because I'll  
kill you.

Right here.

Right now.

*What do I do?*

*I have to do something.*

*Think!*



Would  
you  
really--



What did  
I just say?







It's rude to interrupt.



Siddown.



Young wild west.

637

That was close.

Viv, this isn't  
good for my  
heart.

Tell me about it. They're  
not done yet, either.



I'm back.  
I found  
some  
food  
that  
might  
still be  
ok to  
eat.

Anyone  
hungry?



...What's  
with that  
look?

Who'd I  
say?



You don't need me to tell you this, but that was bad. Really bad.



I know why you did it, but you know you can't threaten one of us without threatening ALL of us. Lem's our kind, we protect our kind. It's in the magic, it's in our blood, it's our instinct. It's not a matter of neatly picking him off. It's never like that.

Why am I lecturing you? You understand this stuff better than anyone.

I know.

I just needed to say it. That was the only time I could.

No worries there.

Ah, Smoke, your uncles are terrified of you.

I would like to kill him. It'd make me happy.

I know it wouldn't last. But I wanted him to know that's how I feel.

So, your rep is exactly where you want it.

Anyway, apologize to your father later. You both have lost enough family already, don't make it worse.

Lem, I know you wouldn't think of that alone. You'd never consider death for yourself. Where did you get that idea?





Er. Rae came to me  
in a dream one  
time.

We argued for a  
bit and then he  
told me that  
I could only  
fix things if  
I died.



Rae?

Rae?  
Rae?



Rae?  
Is this  
true?

Uh.

Um.

Don't get the  
uh, wrong idea,  
uh--

But yeah, that's  
pretty much. Uh.  
True.



Rae.

Rae.

Rae.

Rae.



I'm sensing that  
I'm in danger.

I'm sensing  
it too.





Okay okay, you don't have to beat it out of me. I'll explain myself.

I said that because I wanted you to feel as bad as I did. I didn't really think you'd believe me.



It was a bluff! I was trapped, nothing but a brain in a can, I didn't expect you to take me so seriously!



You're my older brother. Of course I believed you. "I didn't mean it, it's your own fault for believing me."

What sort of stupid excuse is that?

Oh, there's the snot-nosed brat we all know and love.



I'm not trying to make excuses. I'm just explaining why I was careless with you. I just wanted to see your knees knock a little.



I certainly wouldn't have done it if I knew you'd hurt other people because you were so scared.

So...killing me won't fix anything?

God you're stupid. Of course it won't. It would cause more problems.



But that still doesn't explain why you would ever want to die. Your stubborn, bull-headed perseverance is admired and reviled by all.

And your relationship with us is a mess, sure, but what about Darcy?

How could you just abandon him like that? That's just selfish.





Oh yeah. Your passive aggressive bullshit is almost exactly like Fern's.



But anybody who finally gets to stand next to you learns the truth.

You set yourself up this way, and yet you have nothing to actually offer these people. They'd find no sympathy in your face.

I'd like to see what you'd have to say to someone with no home, no money, their life destroyed by one of your insect populations gone awry. You'd probably just stare at them stupidly, or refer to a script Fola wrote for you.

You've made yourself into a politician, but you forget, nobody expects a politician's "promises" to be fulfilled, so don't keep parroting that like it matters.



What are you driving at, Roe?

You haven't answered Smoke's question, Lem. Do you really want to die?

Or do you simply want to escape the horror of your own violence, and the consequences of it?

Or rather, how would you answer Smoke's question, if you knew you could be forgiven and given another chance?





But that wouldn't happen.



You can't forgive me  
for what I've done.



Says who? You? You're in  
no position to talk.

And if we wanna forgive you,  
how would you go about  
stopping us? Pretty arrogant  
of you, Lem.

And just like  
that...



You'd let  
me off?

Sure, why  
not? You  
act like we  
have no  
power  
over  
these  
things.



You're going  
to have one  
surly nephew  
on your hands,  
but that's beside  
the point.

Well, I guess...if that  
were the case...

I wouldn't choose  
to die.



I'd want to live.



That's what everyone needs from you, Lem. Nobody knew about "wanting to live" before you came along. Who'd want to inhabit a dump where the origin of all life wants to be dead?



I can see the sense in a lot of things now. It must have been convenient having somebody around who made even YOU look good, eh? People could make any nasty assumptions they wanted about him, and he would never defend himself.

I was tricked too! I barely knew the guy, and I disliked him off the bat because I assumed he was just your dumb welcome mat.

I molested him, and Mid gave me an earful... But Cal found out later, too. He said, "Stop needlessly destroying things you don't understand. You may need his help someday."







< Lem...

> Does this mean you'll finally tell me why?

> I mean, why you left home?



> Yeah. I want to know that, too.

> Uh.

> I don't wanna talk about that.

Lem, I've been wondering this for millennia, beating myself up over it.



< I still have no idea what made you leave home. Please tell me what it was.

< If it was something I did to hurt you, maybe there's something I can do to help.





It was the incest.

What?

I left because  
of the incest!



The incest!

Stop right there.  
Don't make any  
weird assumptions.  
I'll explain it,  
all right? All right.

Don't you dare think for a moment, for example, that  
I'm talking about jealousy. I wasn't jealous.

Think back to that  
time. I was a lot  
younger than you  
and Rae. I was in  
that ideal state  
called the latent  
stage.



I didn't  
want to sleep  
with anybody,  
much less  
my siblings.

Rae had gotten stropky when he hit his teens, and things were rough for awhile...Then, suddenly, you and he had this strange, new physical thing going on.



I didn't think it was wrong. Of course not. There was no standard of "family" to go off of then.

I was just confused, disoriented. We had all just acted like equals up until then.



But I didn't know what I was supposed to do anymore. Was I supposed to follow suit? Was I not?

How was I different from Rae? Was I unwanted because I couldn't or wouldn't do...whatever it was you were doing?

I thought all these things.



I should have talked to you, but you have to understand... I thought I was the anomaly, the wrench in the works. Your relationship with Rae had improved and I didn't want to botch that. So I thought I should just stay away and play by myself.

I kept doing it more and more, and finally, I just left, and spent all my time creating things, like Cal had taught me. And then my mother found me.

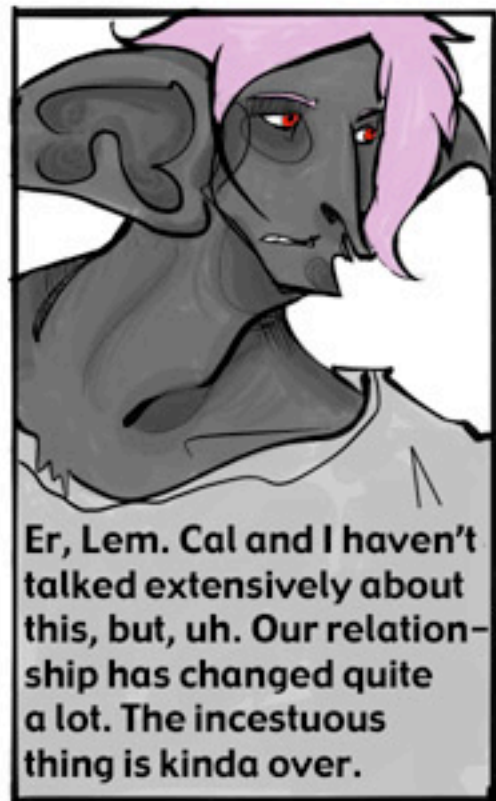
I had thought I'd "dealt" with it and I was okay, but in the end I think I just repressed it all and resented you both for it. See? It's dumb and childish.

And that's why I left home. It doesn't matter now, I know you did nothing wrong, I should have told you it bothered me and I didn't. It still bothers me, I guess.

And you shouldn't have to stop doing it just because of me.







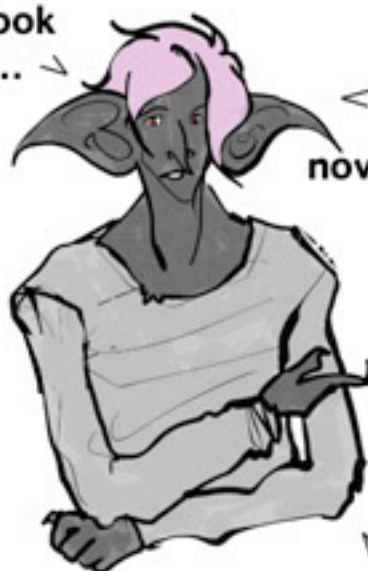
But don't you still love each other?

Of course we do, but we don't need to have SEX.

I mean, we agree with you--it wasn't healthy.



If you look at it all...



Cal is dedicated to repairing his relationship with Fern, and I have Mid. It'd be weird, now that I know more about it all.

And the reasons we started in the first place were bad.

For me, it was just a way to manifest control over Cal, and for him, it was just a way to placate me.

We don't need that sort of thing anymore. Do you agree with that, Cal?

Yes. That sounds right to me.



Lem, I knew you didn't like the incest, but there were so many other things, I was never sure.

I hope you can forgive us now, if we promise we won't be doing it anymore?

Th-this still isn't right.  
You're asking ME for  
forgiveness?



What about Asne?  
What about Corwin?

It's going to take a  
long time for you  
to figure these  
things out, Lem.

Time we may  
not have at  
our disposal,  
soon.



But we can accomplish simple  
things we do have time for.

...Darcy and I talked  
about this, awhile ago.

We don't think you really  
understand why you did  
some of these things, and  
if you don't understand...



You  
can't  
be sorry.

For example, you haven't  
hugged me since you  
were eleven.



Huh?





Before it  
was too  
dark. Now  
it's too  
light. Hurts  
my eyes.



Maybe we'll  
run into the  
Sun? ✓



I hope not. Besides  
probably being  
too bright, she  
sounds like a  
rough customer.



There's  
something  
coming up.



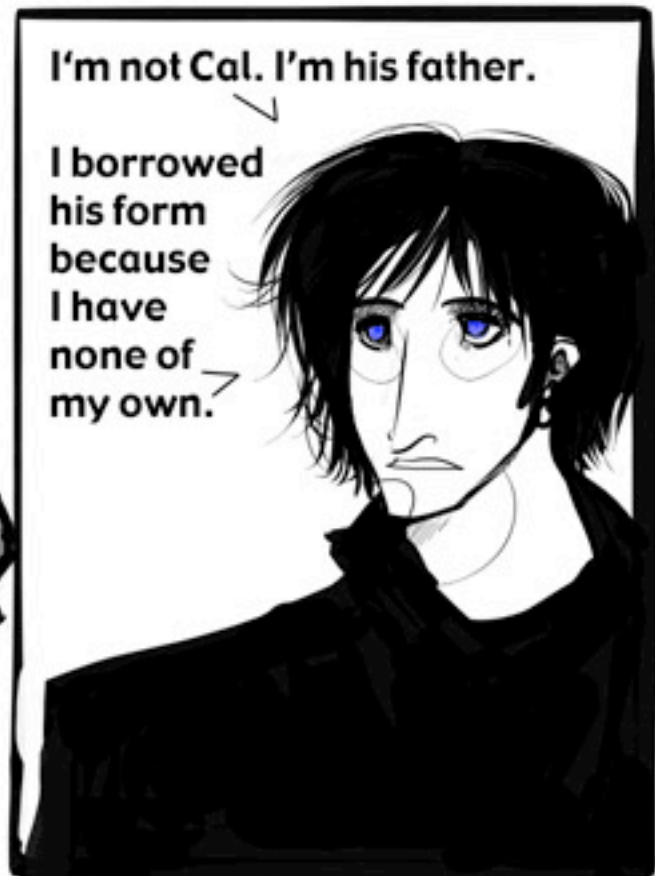
Cal?  
Is that  
you?



Who are you?

I'm not Cal. I'm his father.

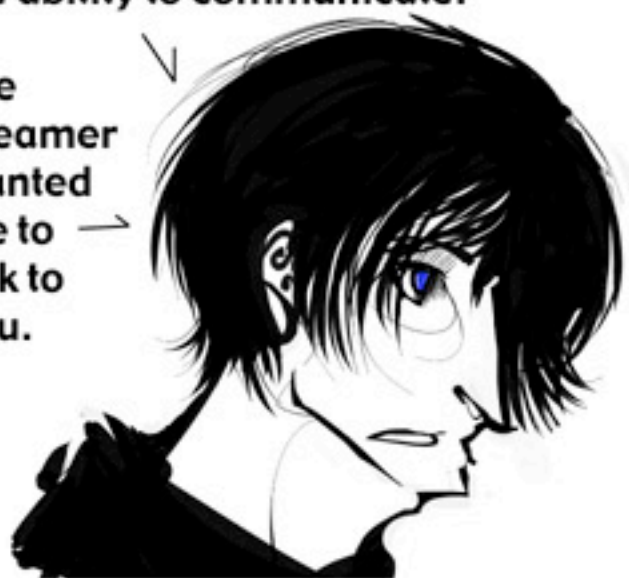
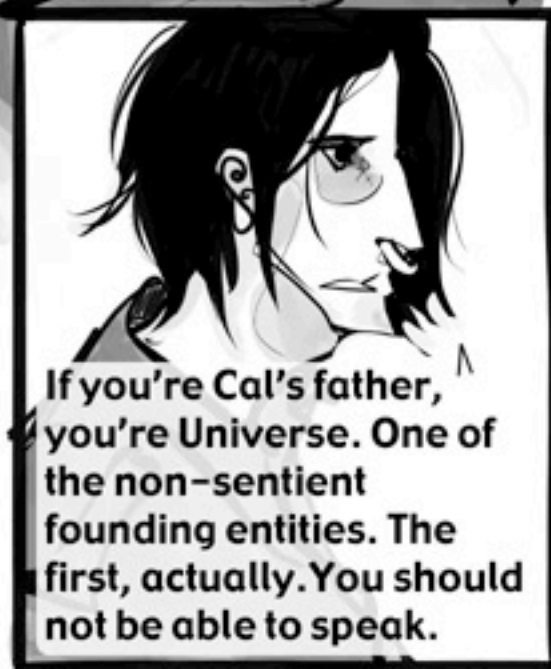
I borrowed  
his form  
because  
I have  
none of  
my own.



I've been temporarily granted  
the ability to communicate.

The  
dreamer  
wanted  
me to  
talk to  
you.

If you're Cal's father,  
you're Universe. One of  
the non-sentient  
founding entities. The  
first, actually. You should  
not be able to speak.



I think this is my only chance to explain why  
the elementals are forbidden to enter this place,  
and why the Sun and I have been poor parents.

You see, we are too simple to confront them.

The Sun and I are merely ideas. In the early days we all flirted with the idea of being "people," it's true.

The Sun in particular wanted influence that would require her to be a sentient presence in the world.

But after a lot of meddling and trouble making, she began to notice that interaction with the world was weakening her.

Since we are merely ideas, and not people, we can only think of ourselves. That is the nature of our existence -- constant perception of ourselves, and nothing else.

You mortals can hold any number of thoughts in your minds without flying to pieces. We cannot do that.

If we stop thinking about ourselves, we cease to exist.

This is why we eventually abandoned our sentience, and fell dormant. Our children wield and manipulate our power, not us.

Our children never understood this because they assumed we were stronger than they were and would not suffer from such a trivial problem.

It's true we have great strength. We are the ideas that allow the world to exist. The Sun is the source of all matter, of all energy, and I am the space in which it all exists.



But this world runs on a basic principle.

The more strength you embody, the less control you have over it.

Strength destroys sentience. Supreme strength destroys sentience utterly.

Ultimately, we are weaker in mind than any mortal.



Supreme  
strength  
destroys...

Does that  
apply to  
Rhodes?



I see  
now.

Why  
you came  
here.



You can see the truth, can't  
you? You have no silly  
expectations about god or  
creation. No offense to your  
companion, but because he  
is from the place, he has  
certain ideas that keep him  
from really seeing what  
a slapshod affair this is.

Morse recognizes that creation is a violent, horrible  
mess. A discarded orange peel has more  
meaning than anything your origin has to offer.

You are nearly at the end.   
I won't keep you any longer.





That was harsh.  
Do you think I did  
something wrong?

Didn't you hear what he said?

They don't know how to be  
kind, and anyway,  
your reverence isn't  
what they need  
right now.

Don't take it  
personally.



What's next? Universe is the oldest second to  
Rhodes, right? We should be at the end then.

No. No, there's something else.  
The lions.



We're in trouble,  
aren't we.











St...St...

< Stay back!


Morse! What do we do?

< G-gimme a sec. Don't make any fast moves. Uh, Abe.

What?!

< Isn't there supposed to be more than one of these?

Two! There's supposed to be two!



Look, Abe.  
There's the  
second one.

Oh, that's  
comforting.

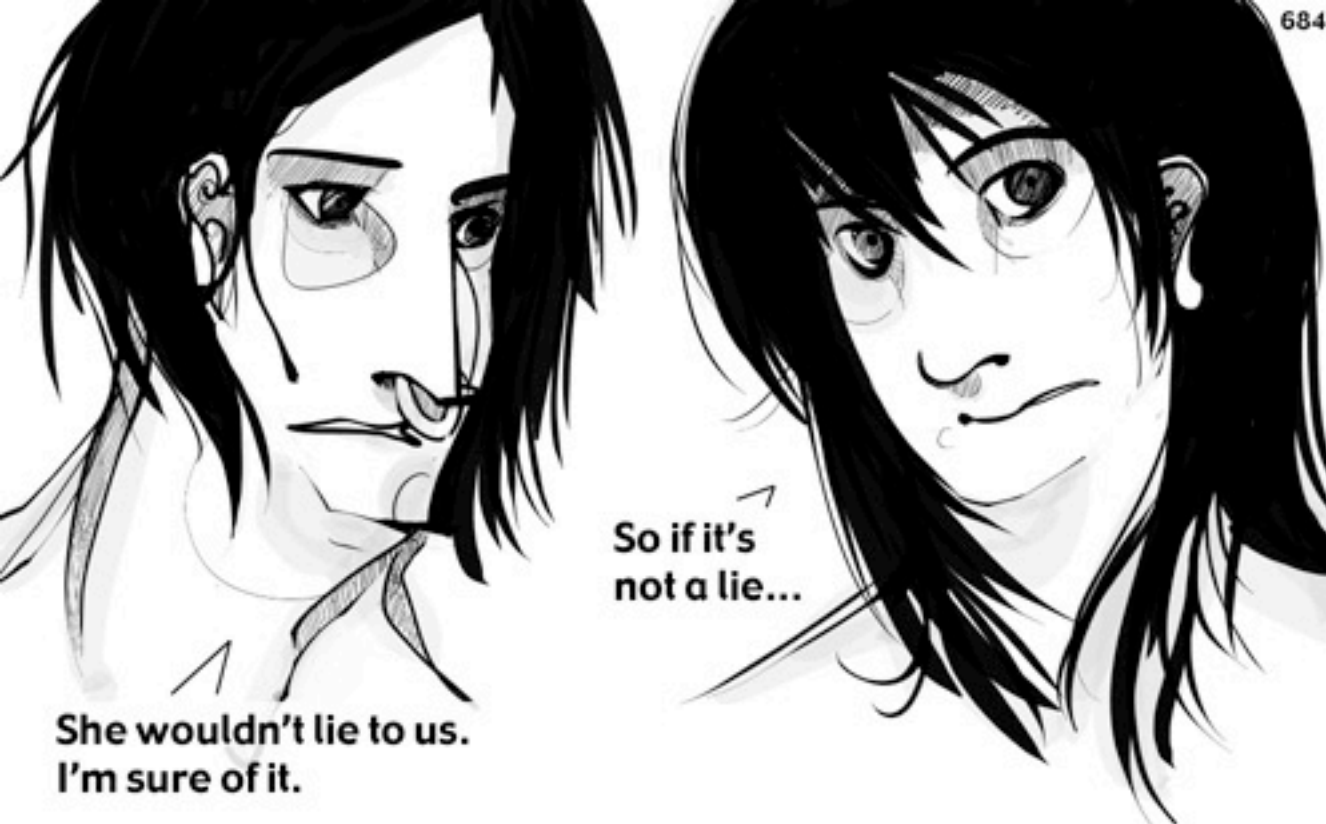


What ... What  
do you think  
they'll do to us?

What are  
we going to  
do then?

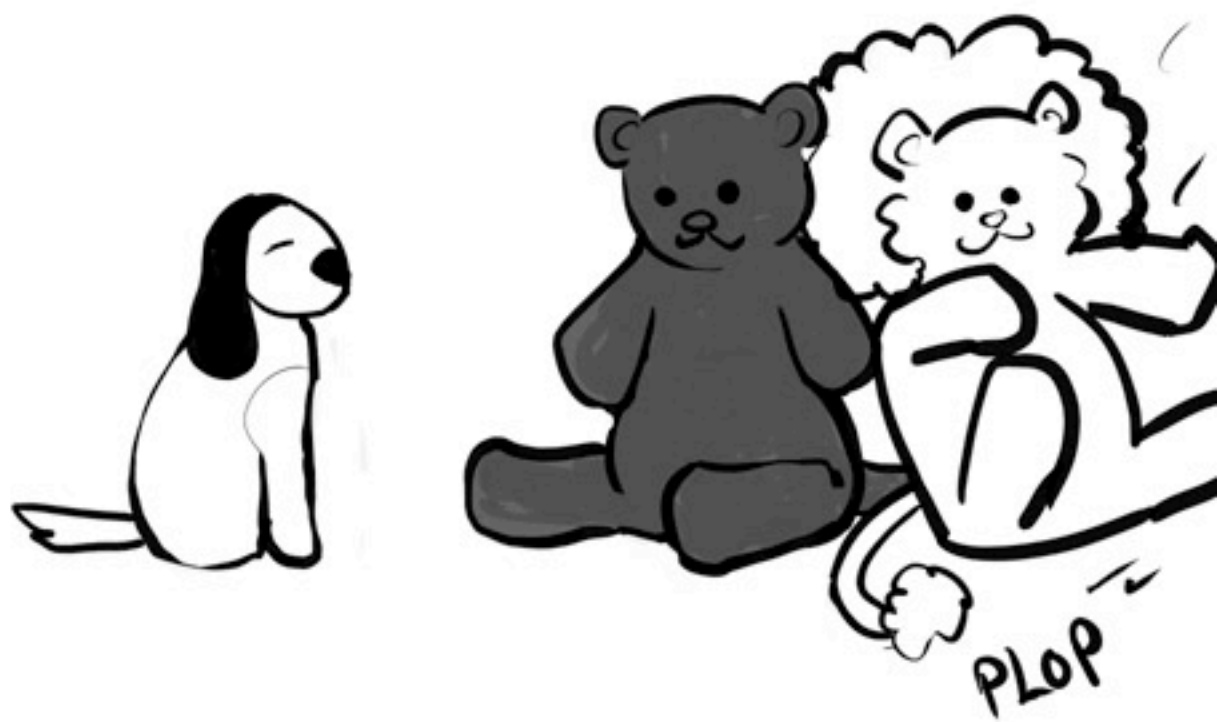
Nothing.  
I don't plan  
on losing.  
Not this close  
to the end!

I'm thinking!  
F-faidia said  
that nothing  
in here could  
hurt us. Why  
would she lie?









Toys...They were ALL toys!

Now I sort  
of remember.

Rhodes was scared of  
dogs. He got chased by  
one when he was small.

What a dork. Only one of  
these is actually a lion. This  
one is a panther.

Easy. He was probably  
really young when he  
first conceived them.

Yeah. That would also explain the  
irrationality of creating protectors  
that couldn't protect him from  
something he was terrified of.

He probably  
wanted something  
to familiarize  
with. Lucky  
for us.



Where'd the door come from?

Are we  
going  
in there?

The lions must  
have been in  
front of it.

No.

I need to go alone.

You're not going in there alone.  
I'm coming with you.



What? You  
can't.

I have no idea how  
"delicate" Rhodes is  
now. He might  
not want to  
see any  
of his...



Creations.

I'm not  
leaving  
you.



I've come this far.

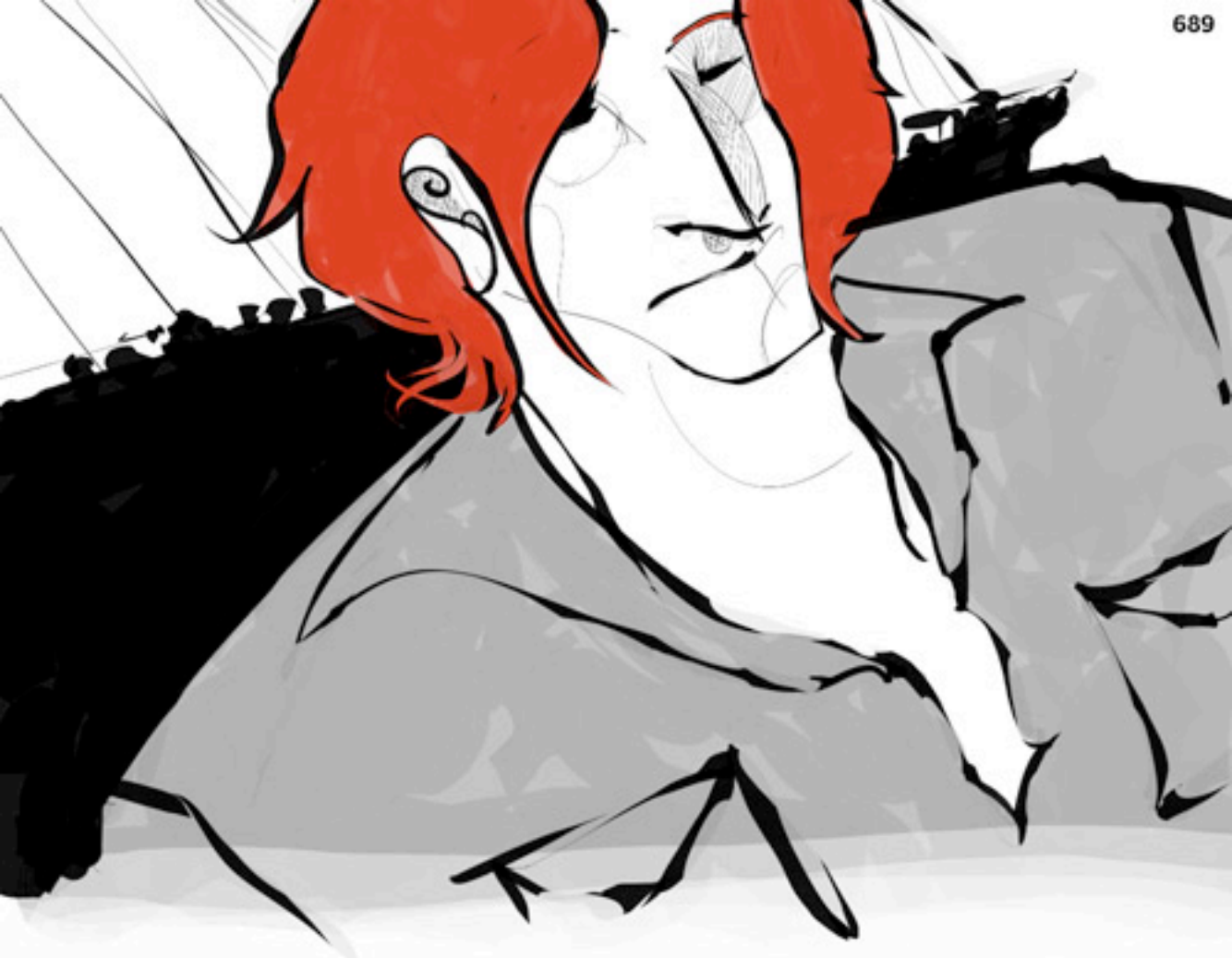
Okay okay.  
No need to  
get stroppy.  
Sorry for  
suggesting it.



Maybe we're past the point of having  
the luxury of petty squabbles.

Yeah. Let's be off.





Fern?

Are you awake?

Am now.



Lem went back to be with Darcy.

The others  
are working  
on finding  
food.

Do you want  
anything? I'll  
get it for you.

Mm. No thanks.

I just want to sleep.



I thought I'd want to be  
awake for the end of  
the world, but I can't  
think of anything I'd  
rather be doing.

Except having  
sex. Want to?



End of  
the  
world  
and all.

I'm...I'm too  
upset. Sorry.

Just  
thought  
I'd ask.



You know, your  
hair looks funny.

Fern, could  
we talk?

You know I love to talk.  
You and Rae going to  
psycho-  
analyze  
me some  
more?



No, let's  
talk about me.





No, I need to do this. I want to take you up on that offer. I just need your help. I know I keep things from you and that's why you're upset. But I need to know which specific things.

I'm serious this time. I'll tell you everything.



You've always acted through our relationship.

It's in your nature to disseminate the truth, and I don't blame you for that. In a lot of ways it makes life with you, ah, interesting.

But you hide important things, like your anger towards me.

It's not that you never picked fights. To obscure the real reason you're angry, you devise ways of confusing the issue.

You get upset about trivialities you don't actually care about. You sic Rae on me to fling insults you couldn't in my face. Or you make it "about work."

I rarely got to have a real fight with you.



Healthy relationships involve a certain amount of arguing. They don't involve...



Maybe it's just me, but I think if you were driven to hurt me that badly, there's something I did to upset you. But you won't tell me how I contributed to that.

Even if I hadn't been sick and drunk most of the time, you'd still need to tell me.

It wasn't your fault!

I didn't want to hurt you, b-but I can't have you think--

Cal, you don't want to hurt me right now.

But you *did*. You wanted to kill me.

I know you don't want to remember it. But we need to know why you did it, so it doesn't happen again.

I refused to tell you I loved you, and that's when it happened.

Why did you feel like I didn't love you?

What made you lose faith in me?





You and Lem pretty much have the same problem in the end, though, right? He was able to finally break through it, you will too. It's just a matter of being ready.

No, no. It's completely different from Lem.

Oh? That's a start.



Let's do the short version of this, Cal. Tell me your entire life story. From the top.



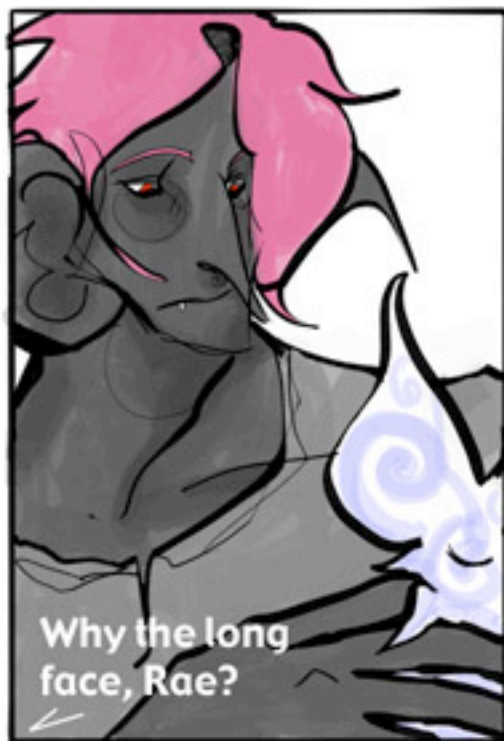


Wait, eat?  
Did you find  
food? Is it  
good?

Uhh, it's mostly  
granola and will  
take some chewing,  
but it's edible.







I'm just thinking about Mid.

I wish he was here, at least.



But what's worse is knowing

how he may not finish college like he always wanted to now.







When I was born, I don't know how long I was in the dark. ●

I don't even know  
how I got the idea  
that I existed. ●

I suppose it's ●  
bound to happen  
to anything that thinks.

But I remember my earliest  
wish was that if I existed,  
that others exist as well. ●



●  
But even before everything  
started, I was afraid.

I knew that the hunger I felt  
might be limitless.


That I might not be able to  
control myself if I started  
damaging what had been  
previously perfect.

● But knowing all this

I went ahead and did it anyway. ●



I awoke my sister to the fact we existed. Everything that was born after us didn't need to be told. ●



● I regret it.  
It hurt her.

She was so much like  
our parents. She didn't  
have my recklessness,  
my need to explore. ●

I relished ●  
the idea that I  
was no longer  
the only one  
in the world

but her pain  
● kept what  
I was afraid  
of, inside me,  
at bay.



Then we had a world, and my brothers grew up, and I thought that surely, what I was scared of would happen with them. ●



● But it didn't. I waited, but it didn't happen.

I loved them, but as long as they were ● happy, I was content.

They left, and still, I ● felt nothing.

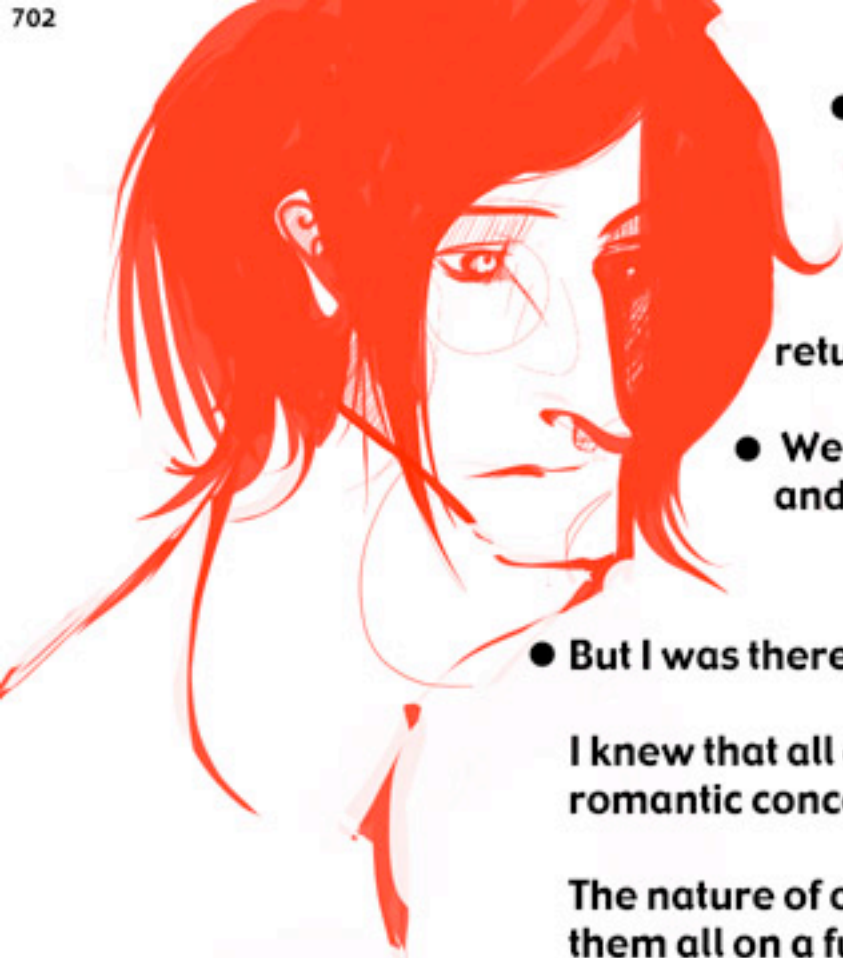
● Not happy

but ● not destroyed, either.

● I thought to myself, "I did it. I managed to resist it."

● "It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

● That was arrogant. I still hadn't known loneliness.



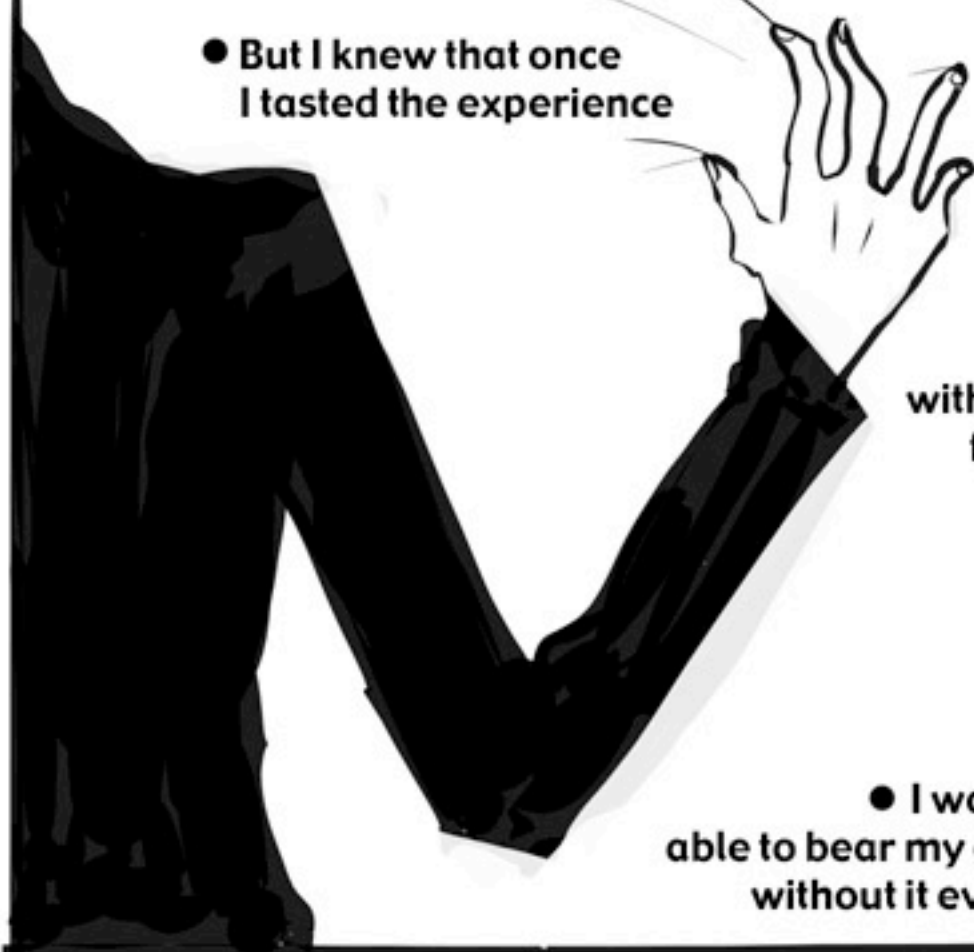
- Then you came along.
- You cared about me, you didn't want to be apart from me. You returned all of my feelings.
- We took care of each other and tolerated many things.
- But I was there from the beginning.

I knew that all of the usual romantic concepts weren't real.

The nature of our existence defies them all on a fundamental level.

For example, no one stays together forever. ●

- But I knew that once I tasted the experience



of really  
● being  
with someone  
for the first  
time

- I wouldn't be able to bear my existence without it ever again.

But just like I had done  
in the beginning, even  
though I knew it was ●  
wrong, I did it anyway.

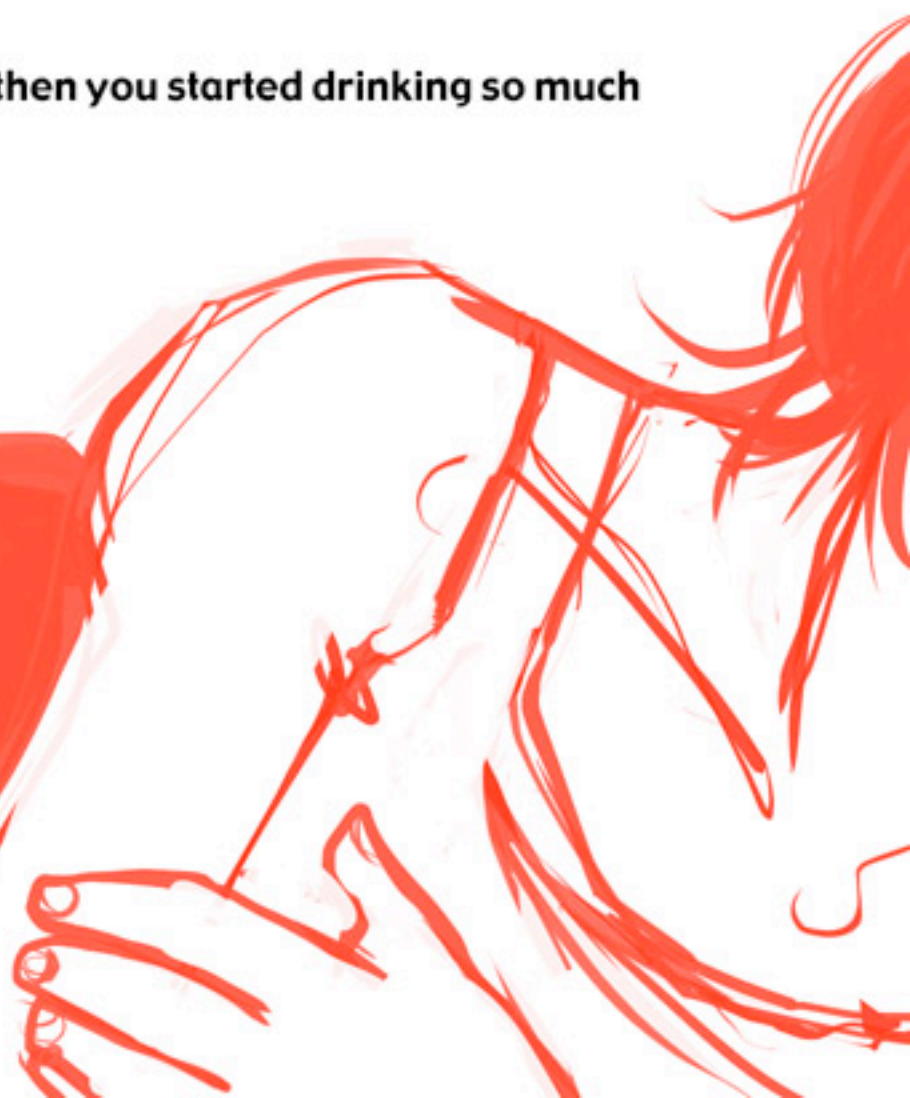
●  
I was sick of being alone.

And for a time, I felt  
like I could do it. Things  
went well. ●

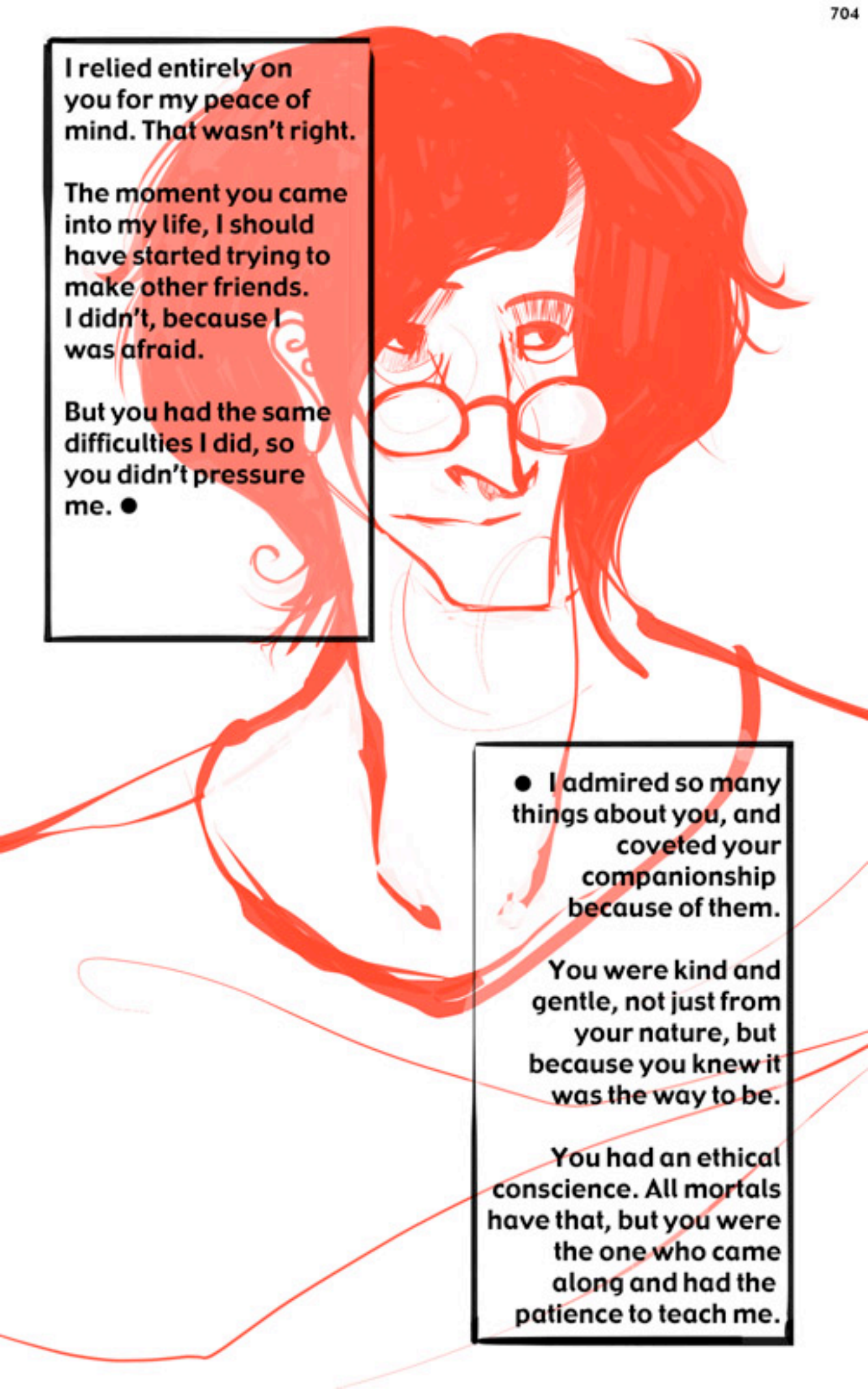
● But then you started drinking so much

●  
that you would  
fall unconscious.

I couldn't  
wake you  
up. ●







**I relied entirely on you for my peace of mind. That wasn't right.**

**The moment you came into my life, I should have started trying to make other friends. I didn't, because I was afraid.**

**But you had the same difficulties I did, so you didn't pressure me. ●**

**● I admired so many things about you, and coveted your companionship because of them.**

**You were kind and gentle, not just from your nature, but because you knew it was the way to be.**

**You had an ethical conscience. All mortals have that, but you were the one who came along and had the patience to teach me.**



Your independence was something I had never encountered either. You thought ● for yourself, made your own decisions.

You obeyed me only, I knew, if you agreed with what I had said. ●

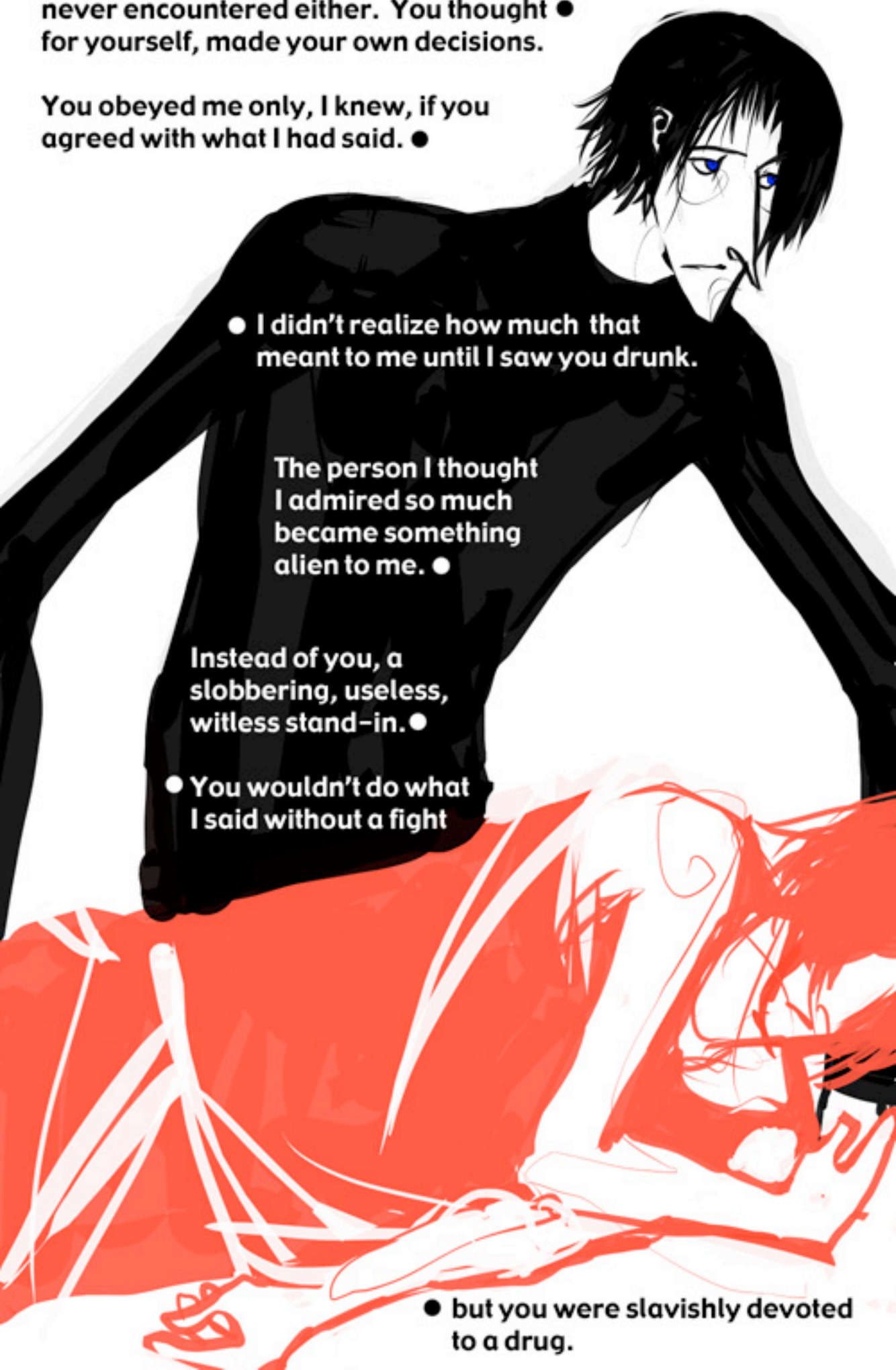
- I didn't realize how much that meant to me until I saw you drunk.

The person I thought I admired so much became something alien to me. ●

Instead of you, a slobbering, useless, witless stand-in. ●

- You wouldn't do what I said without a fight

- but you were slavishly devoted to a drug.

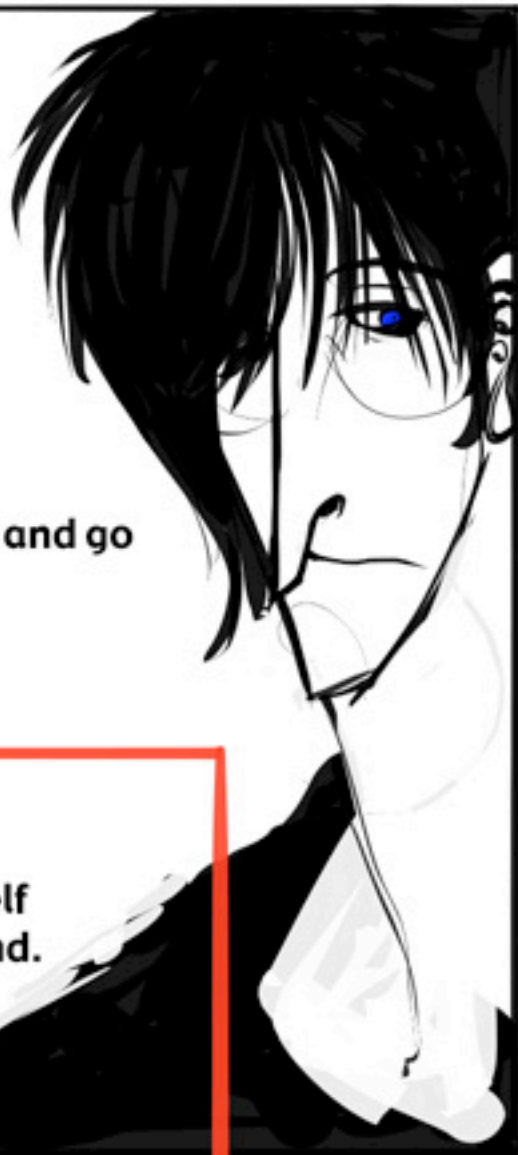


I was responsible, too. ●  
Rae and I were hurting you,  
your work was hurting you.

It wasn't as if you lacked  
reason to drink.

So I blamed myself and tried  
to turn a blind eye.

You seemed in control. You'd get up and go  
to work in the morning, after all.



●  
I told myself  
I didn't mind.

●  
I told myself I didn't  
mind thousands of  
times.

I was prepared to disappoint myself, but I wasn't prepared to be disappointed by the one I loved. I was prepared for you to leave me because I wasn't good enough for you. ●

But you abandoned me by drinking. You abandoned ● everything, especially yourself.

Disillusionment?  
Is that even ● enough of a word?

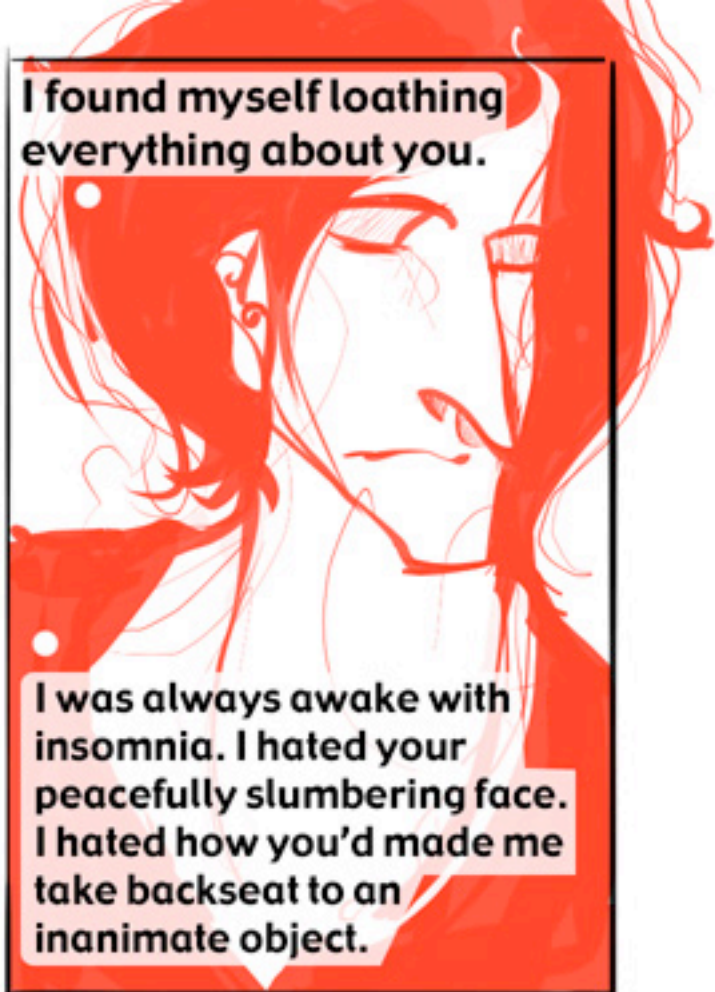
● I should have been forgiving you, helping you. You needed my help.

I just blamed myself some more. In place of faith, which I didn't even know of, I had my lies, my convictions.

● By then I knew my judgment was bad, so I doubted everything. Even when you were clean, I doubted you.

● I sneered inwardly at your every lovely gesture.





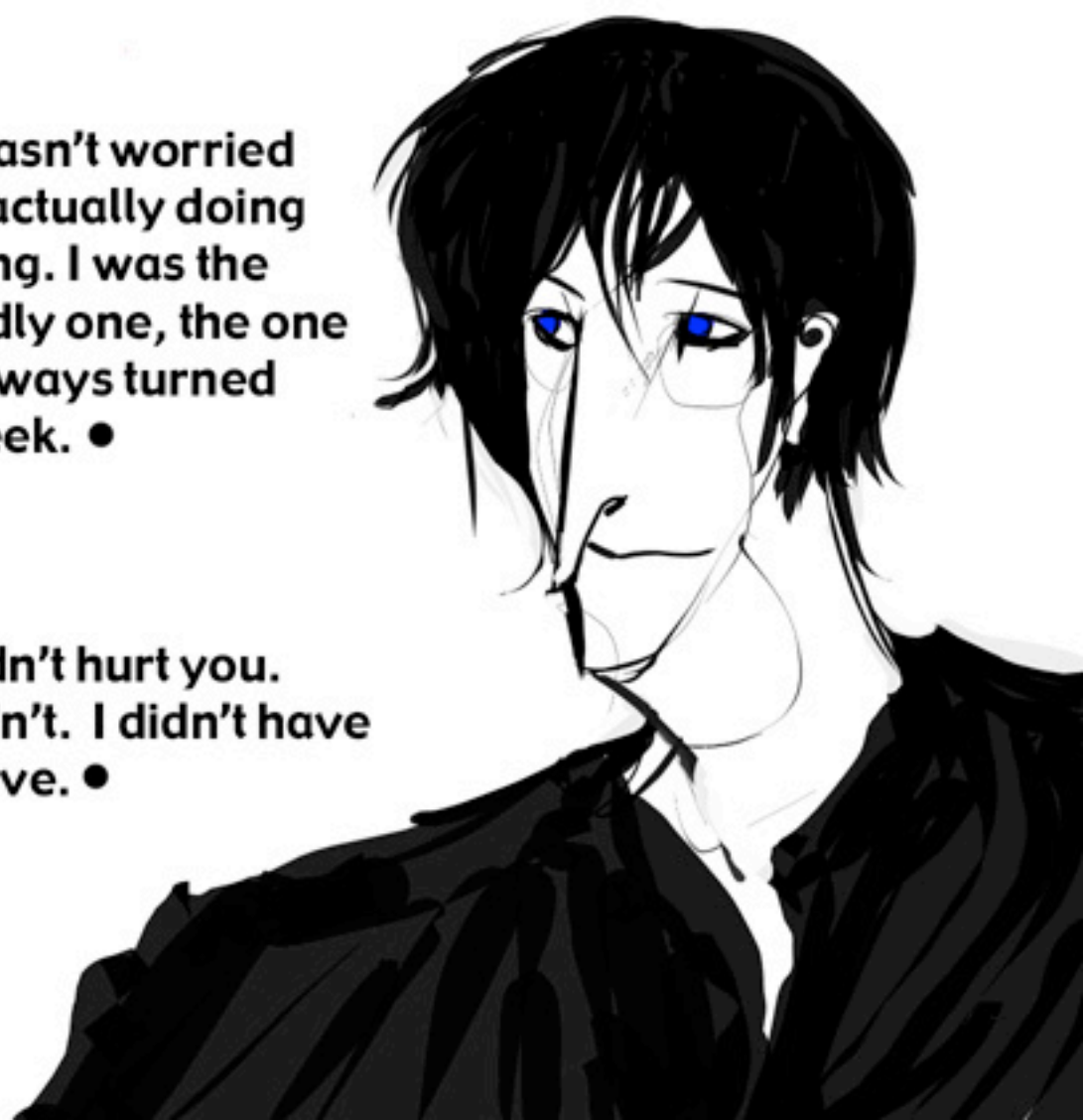
I found myself loathing everything about you.

I was always awake with insomnia. I hated your peacefully slumbering face. I hated how you'd made me take backseat to an inanimate object.

For the first time I understood what my brothers had felt about me. ●

But I wasn't worried about actually doing anything. I was the cowardly one, the one who always turned my cheek. ●

I wouldn't hurt you. I couldn't. I didn't have the nerve. ●





● I was  
wrong



● about  
it all.

● Nerve  
has  
nothing  
to do  
with it.



● In fact, it's  
a supreme  
state of  
numbness,

● desperation,



● and  
fear.

● And  
you  
know  
what  
was  
the  
worst  
thing?

In those moments  
after I'd cracked  
your skull ●  
with the  
flat of the  
shovel

● I enjoyed a  
total detachment  
from reality.  
All my troubles  
disappeared.

●  
For a few  
seconds  
I felt free.

● It was the most  
wonderful feeling  
I have ever had,  
before or since.





So that's  
why you  
wouldn't  
talk about it.

It felt that  
good.



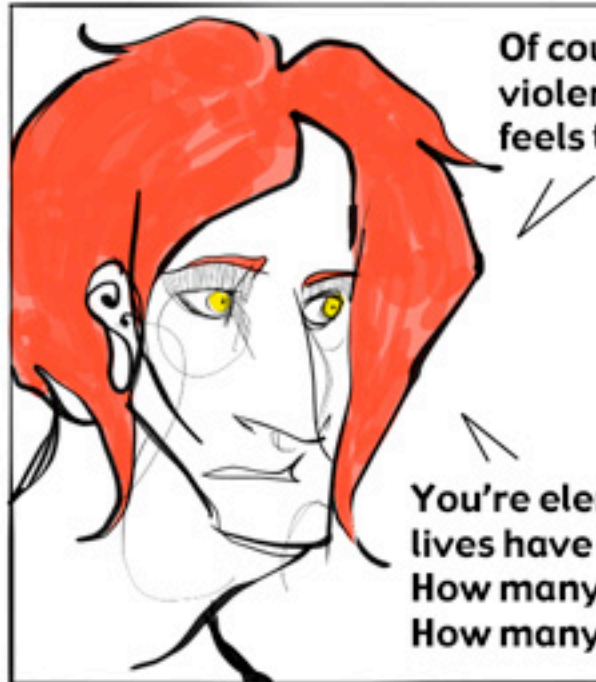
Afterwards was a different story.  
I shook so much, I thought I would  
just...crumble away.



I was so disoriented, I  
literally went through  
the house calling your  
name,

not yet sure  
whether I had  
just imagined it all.

Of course it felt good. Why did you think  
violence was wrong, Cal? Because it  
feels terrible for the aggressor?



No, I didn't. I just...  
I didn't know it would  
feel that way. Didn't  
know if it was that  
way for everyone.

You're elemental of death, Cal. How many  
lives have passed through your hands?  
How many were murdered by their spouses?  
How many were murder-suicides?

Crimes of passion happen.  
Couples do horrible things to  
each other. We're not unique,  
we just can't die. Okay?

Violence is seductive. Everyone  
forgets that.

But not you, now, huh?

No. No.







What now?

I dunno. It's a lot to take in. We should make a plan.

But what about...?

The world hasn't ended yet, Cal.



I can't promise I won't ever drink again because that's not realistic.



But it still feels hypocritical for me to say this.

Cal, you can't ever hurt anyone like that again, ever. There's no quarter here.

Not me, not anyone. Don't promise me; promise yourself.

I promise. >

I'll never doubt my ability to hurt others again.

Fern, after that day, I felt like I'd lost something I'd had inside.

It's not a bad thing, really. Just disturbing.

Almost as if I'd had this deep wound forever,

but it had only just then been exposed to the air.







It'll be all right.





**Fern?**



**Yeah?**



**Do you ever wish that  
we were innocent again?**

**That none of this had  
ever happened?**



**What, so we could do it all over again?**

**I don't think so.**

**Innocence is overrated.**



**Yes. It is.**

Rhodes?

Are you here?





**YES.**

**HOW DO I LOOK?**



SORRY.  
I CAN'T SEE  
MYSELF.  
THESE LINES  
ARE SO HARD  
TO CONTROL.

I HAVEN'T BEEN  
ABLE TO REMEMBER  
WHAT I LOOKED  
LIKE

MUCH LESS ESTABLISH  
A FORM FOR MYSELF  
TO TAKE

I CANNOT GRASP  
ANYTHING OF MYSELF.

That's fine, Rhodes. >

We don't care what you look like. >

We're only here to talk. >





Is it true, Rhodes? Did you kidnap  
Ell? Are you using time to destroy  
Faidia?




**IT IS A  
MERCY  
KILLING.**

If you really believe that,  
why did you allow me to  
come here?

**I DID NOT JUST ALLOW IT,  
I DID WHAT I COULD TO  
EASE YOUR PASSAGE TO  
THIS PLACE.**

**I WANTED YOUR OPINION FIRST.**





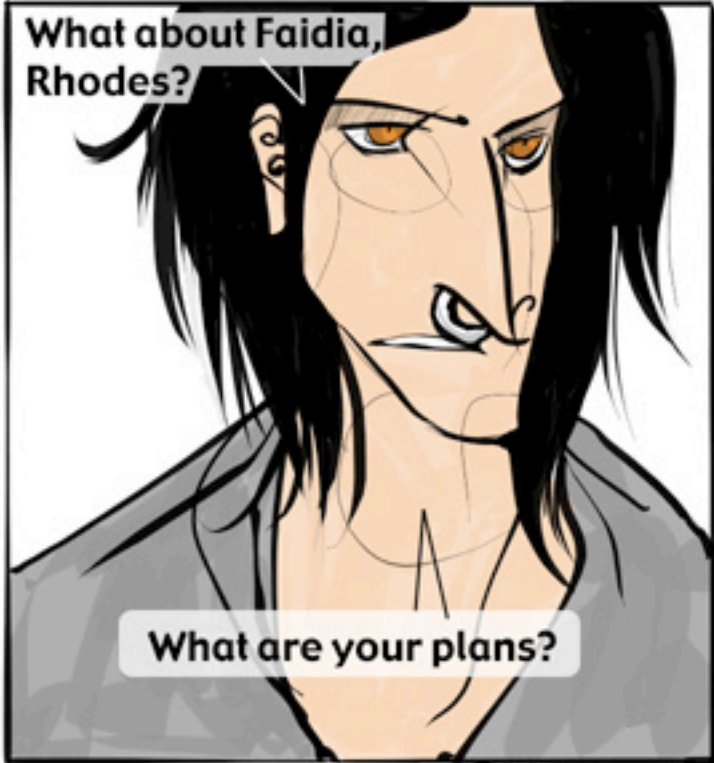
Are you  
sure it's  
my opinion  
you want,  
Rhodes?

Let me guess.  
Aside from you,  
I'm the last  
Arducian, and  
you expect me  
to want revenge.  
You expect me  
to agree.

You can forget about that.  
I've already seen one world destroyed.  
You'd have to be insane to think I'd  
ever want to see such a thing ever again.

**YOU WOULD NOT  
HAVE TO SEE IT!  
YOU HAVE NOT  
HEARD MY TERMS!  
I WILL SEND YOU  
AND YOUR FRIEND TO  
ANOTHER WORLD,  
WHERE YOU COULD LIVE  
HAPPILY.**





What about Faidia,  
Rhodes?

What are your plans?

**DESTROY IT.**

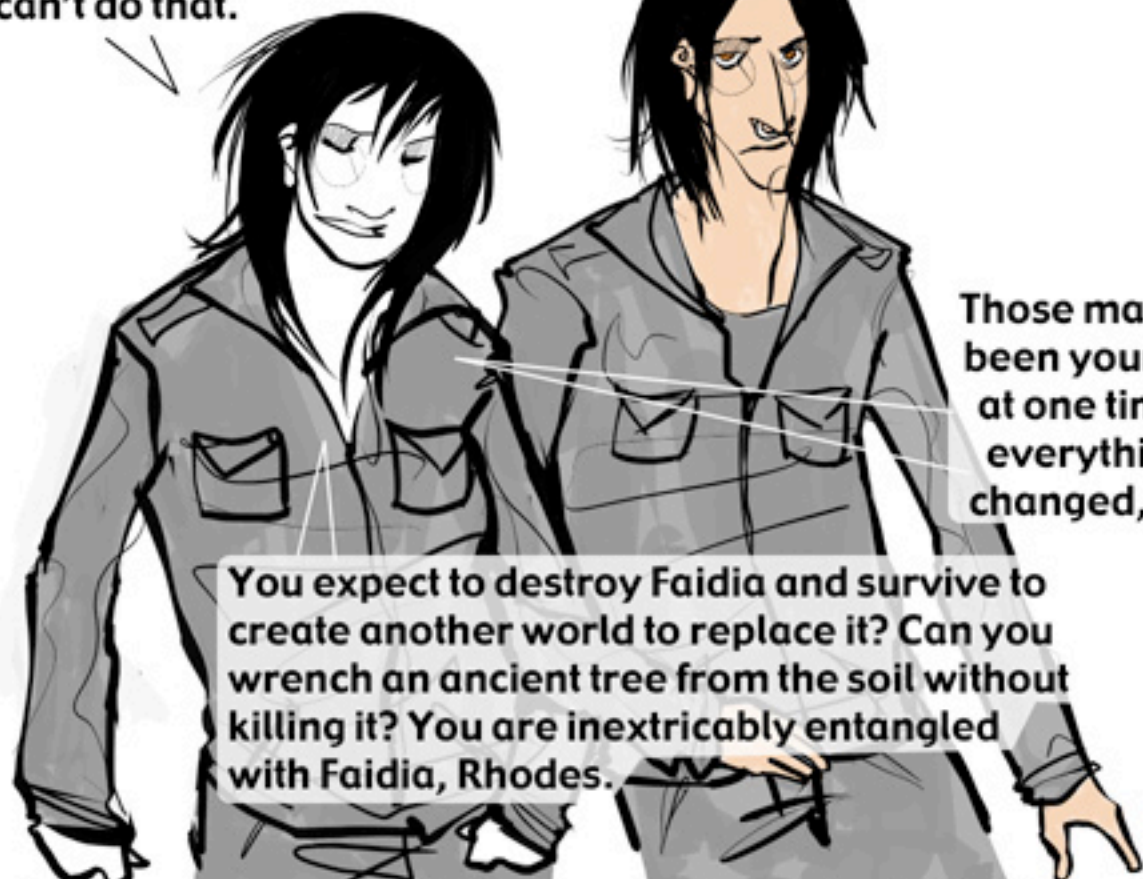


**RECYCLE THE ENERGY  
BACK INTO MYSELF**

**AND START A  
BRAND NEW WORLD.**



Oh, but Rhodes. We know you can't do that.



Those may have been your plans at one time, but everything has changed, hasn't it?

You expect to destroy Faidia and survive to create another world to replace it? Can you wrench an ancient tree from the soil without killing it? You are inextricably entangled with Faidia, Rhodes.

This world is you. If you destroy it, you destroy yourself. You'll do it anyway, won't you?

You really think you can delete everything and no one will ever know what happened here.



You'd rather not exist than face it.

But I'll know what you did, Rhodes, and though you let me live so I could justify your cowardice at the end, I won't do it.



You'll have to kill me, because I refuse.



**I CANNOT DO THAT**

**I NEED SOMEONE TO TELL  
ME I AM DOING THE RIGHT THING**

**It ISN'T right! >**

**You are going to  
kill millions of  
people, an  
entire planet!**

**The elementals have  
struggled so hard--**



**ENOUGH!**

**WHY SHOULD I  
NOT KILL THEM?!**

**THEY MURDERED GOD!  
IT ALL ENDS HERE,  
WITH ME! THEY  
DESERVE ANNIHILATION!**

Do you even know who "they" is, Rhodes? You don't know what you're destroying. Look at you. You can barely hold yourself together. Your consciousness erodes with every passing moment.

You have no IDEA what you're destroying. This world may have sprung from your mind, but do you know all the minds now within it?



How many wizens with worlds of their own are living on Faidia right now, Rhodes? Had you taken that into account? How many worlds will you destroy without meaning to, like dominoes, falling into space, maybe infinitely.





**You sit up here in your white tower as some morally superior force. But you can't righteously destroy something when you don't know the width and berth of it.**

**That's why it's wrong, Rhodes. You don't kill because you cannot possibly know what it is you are killing, and you can't take it back.**

**Destroying lives means you have let your ignorance run loose, not your reason.**

**This entire world may have sprung from your mind, Rhodes, but the truth is, any mortal can stand toe to toe with you.**

**You can't deny them the right to live. They have just as much a right as you do.**





You may think you're mortally  
justified in destroying this world.



But all I see is  
an arrogant coward,  
presuming to know  
what he cannot.



A sadistic child, crushing ants.

**THE ARDUCIAN ELEMENTALS DID  
NOT HARM OTHERS. SUTIYENNER TOLD ME.**

You seriously think he was telling  
you the truth, Rhodes?

UM.

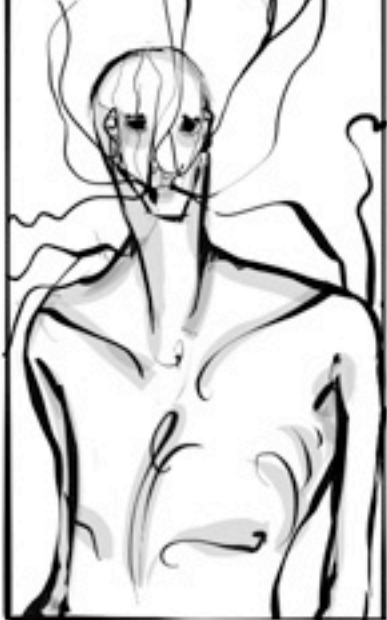
Here's a question.  
How old were the  
Arducian elementals?

**SEVERAL MILLION  
YEARS OLD**

I THINK.

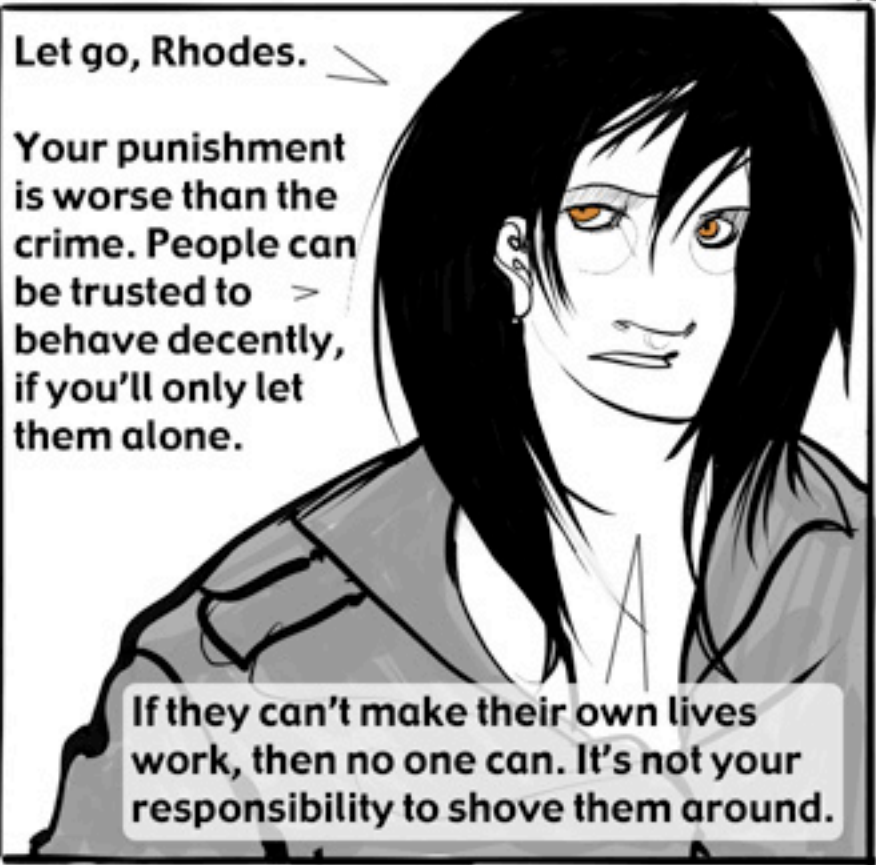
Maybe that's why  
the Faidian  
elementals are  
so imperfect.  
They're still  
very young.  
They need time  
to grow up.

**WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO?**

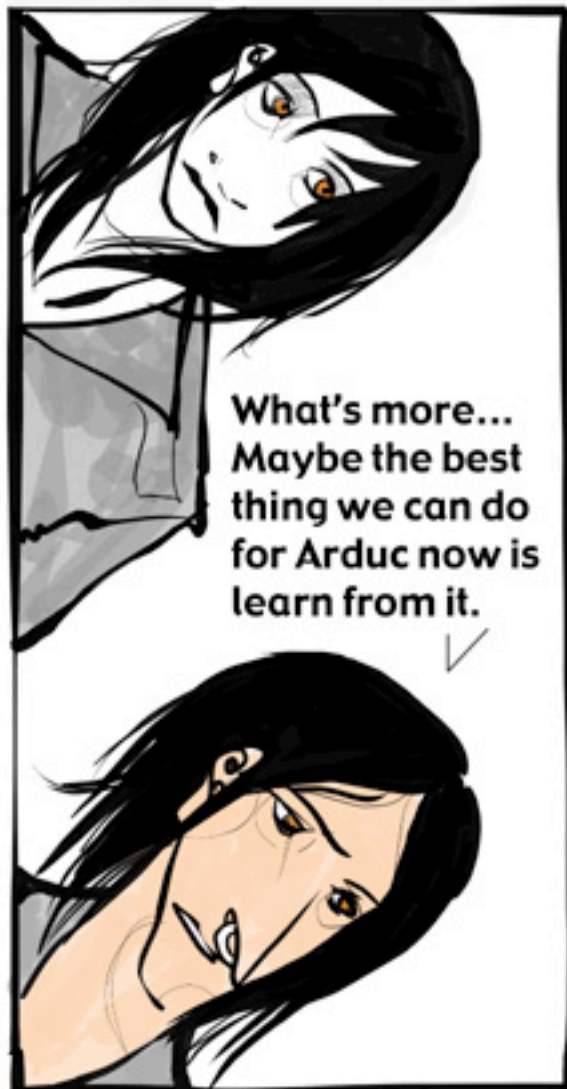


Let go, Rhodes. >

Your punishment is worse than the crime. People can be trusted to > behave decently, if you'll only let them alone.



If they can't make their own lives work, then no one can. It's not your responsibility to shove them around.



What's more... Maybe the best thing we can do for Arduc now is learn from it. ✓

What did the Arducian elementals do that made their world work? ✓




**I SEE.**

**A COMPROMISE.**







**LET ME GUESS. YOU STOPPED  
HEARING, SEEING AND  
FEELING NOT LONG AGO.**

**THAT IS BECAUSE TIME HAS  
SLOWED DOWN SO MUCH**

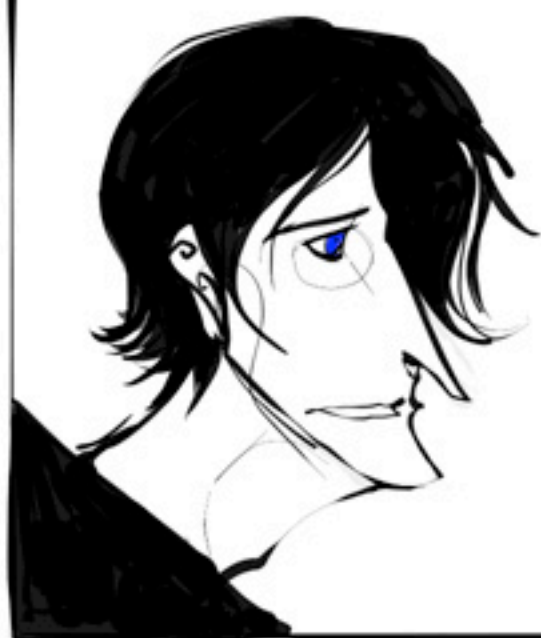
**YOUR NERVE IMPULSES  
HAVE SLOWED TO A  
CRAWL.**

**JUST HOLD ON.  
IT SHOULD BE  
FINE AGAIN IN  
A MOMENT.**



**THERE.**

**BETTER?**



**Ell!? Is  
she all right?**

**I WILL LET HER GO  
IN A SHORT TIME.  
FIRST, I HAVE SOME-  
THING TO TELL YOU.**

**THROUGH THE EFFORTS  
OF MORSE AND  
ABELARDE,  
I HAVE BEEN  
CONVINCED TO  
SPARE FAIDIA.**



**BUT I HAVE  
CONDITIONS.**

**WHY ARE YOU LOOKING  
AT ME LIKE THAT?**



**ARE YOU  
LISTENING?**



**You didn't  
keep Ell  
anywhere  
scary, did  
you? She's  
very delicate.**



**OH FOR THE LOVE OF-**

**SHE IS JUST FINE. SHE HAS SPENT THIS  
ENTIRE TIME FROLICKING IN A MEADOW,  
OBLIVIOUS TO THE FATE OF THE WORLD  
AND A GOOD DEAL HAPPIER THAN  
ANY OF YOU.**

**NOW LISTEN UP.**



**THE ARDUCIAN ELEMENTALS LIVED IN SECRET.  
THE MORTALS IN THEIR CHARGE WERE  
UNAWARE OF THEIR EXISTENCE. THEY HAD  
CONCLUDED, AFTER A LONG TIME, THAT IT  
WAS AGAINST NATURE FOR IMMORTALS TO  
MINGLE WITH MORTALS.**

**SO...THEY WENT UNDERGROUND. THIS IS WHAT  
I WANT YOU TO DO AS WELL.**



**Underground...  
What purpose would  
that serve?**

**SEVERAL.  
AN END TO  
THE POLITICAL  
CONFLICT WITH  
THE FREE PEOPLE.**



**CRUCIALLY, IT WILL FORCE  
YOU ELEMENTALS TO ACTUALLY  
MAKE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS  
WORK, INSTEAD OF USING  
MORTALS LIKE SOME SORT OF  
EMOTIONAL BACKUP**

**AND THEN  
GETTING  
THEM  
KILLED.**



**Point taken. >**

**YOU AND YOUR BROTHERS, LEM ESPECIALLY, HAVE WASTED MUCH  
ON YOUR CONTINUED DESIRE TO BE MORTALS WITH BENEFITS.**

**YOU ARE NOT MORTALS WITH BENEFITS, YOU ARE A COMPLETELY  
DIFFERENT ENTITY, AND YOUR PERSONAL MEDDLING IN MORTAL  
AFFAIRS IS UNACCEPTABLE. HOLD TO YOUR OWN ELEMENTS AND  
UNDERSTAND YOURSELVES BETTER.**

**IT HARDLY WARRANTS MENTIONING, BUT A FURTHER CONDITION  
IS THAT YOU NEVER USE THE WIWEN SYSTEM FOR HARM EVER  
AGAIN. IF ANYTHING, I WANT YOU TO MONITOR IT FOR MISUSE.**

**ESTABLISH A POLICY OF  
NON-INTERFERENCE  
WITH THE MORTALS.**


**THE SPECIFICS  
I LEAVE TO YOU.**

**I AM TELLING YOU THIS**



**BECAUSE OUT OF ALL THE OTHERS,  
YOU WILL UNDERSTAND THE MOST  
CLEARLY WHY THIS IS NECESSARY.**






**YOU ARE THEIR  
LEADER. THEY  
LOVE AND  
TRUST YOU.**

**I FIND I TRUST  
YOU TOO. YOU  
DID COME TO GET  
ME, AFTER ALL.**

**But Rhodes...  
What will you do?**

**I HAVE ONLY ONE USE LEFT.  
ACCORDING TO MORSE, ANYWAY,  
BUT SHE IS RIGHT. I WILL DIE.**



**Who is going  
to watch us  
then? You trust  
us that much?**

**NOT THAT MUCH.  
I HAVE ALREADY  
MADE ARRANGEMENTS.  
THERE WILL ALWAYS  
BE SOMEONE WATCHING.**

**SPEAKING OF WHICH, IT IS TIME FOR ME TO TAKE OFF.**

**Wait, Rhodes!  
I still need to  
ask so many—**

**IT WILL BE FINE. YOU WILL  
FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO.  
ELL CAN RESTORE THE  
TOWER DENIZENS.  
GOODBYE.**



Oh, dear.

I've been out of commission  
for awhile. I hope nothing  
terrible has happened.



N....no, not really.

It's going to be fine.



Come on, let's get the others  
and I'll explain.



We have a lot of work ahead of us.

