

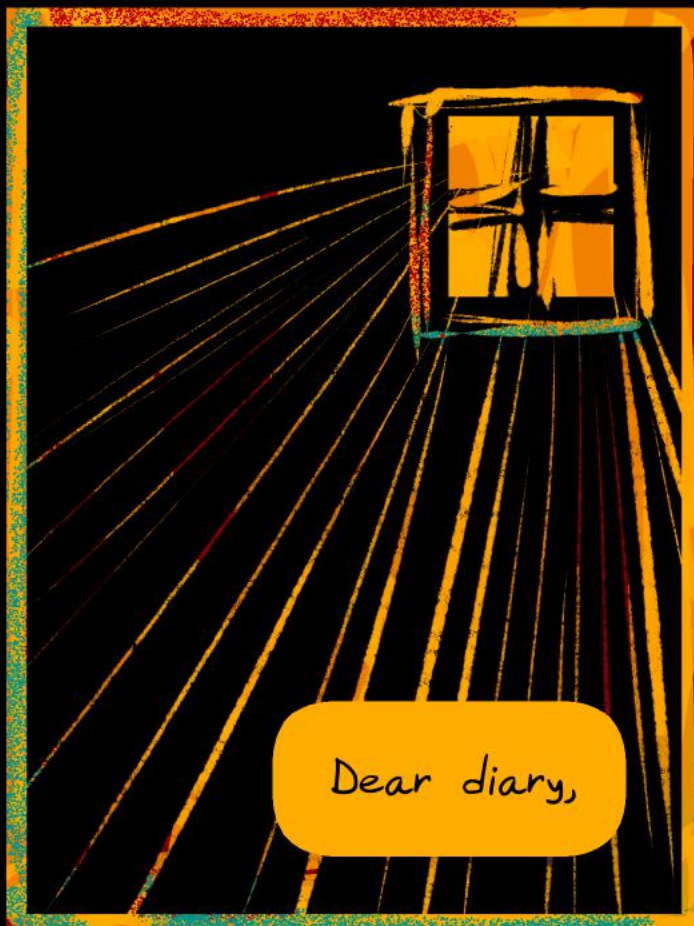






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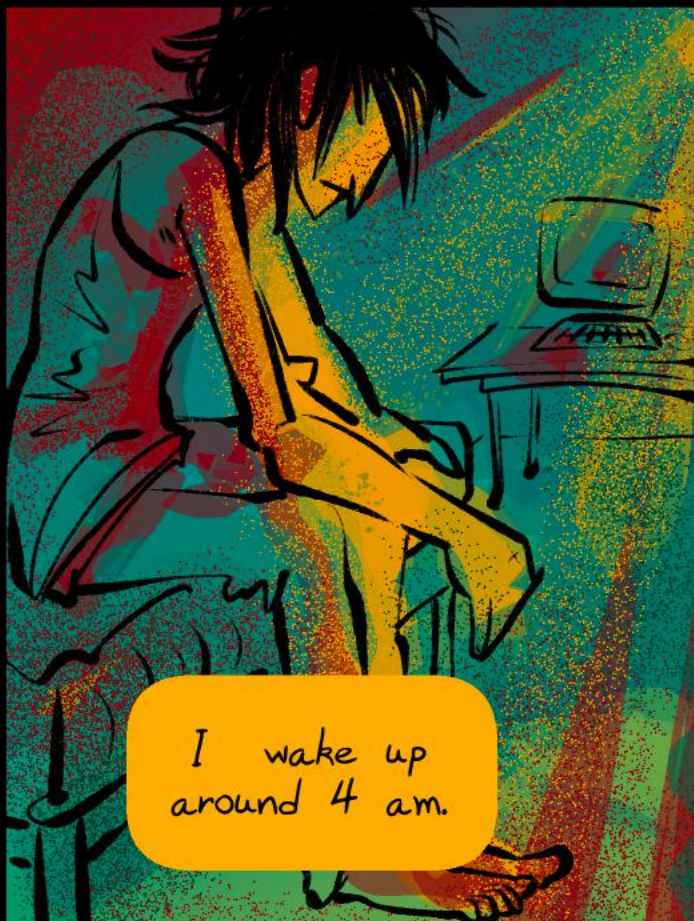


Dear diary,



Here's what I do  
every day.

(So I don't have  
to keep writing it.)



I wake up  
around 4 a.m.





I tend to the lorriams  
first thing.



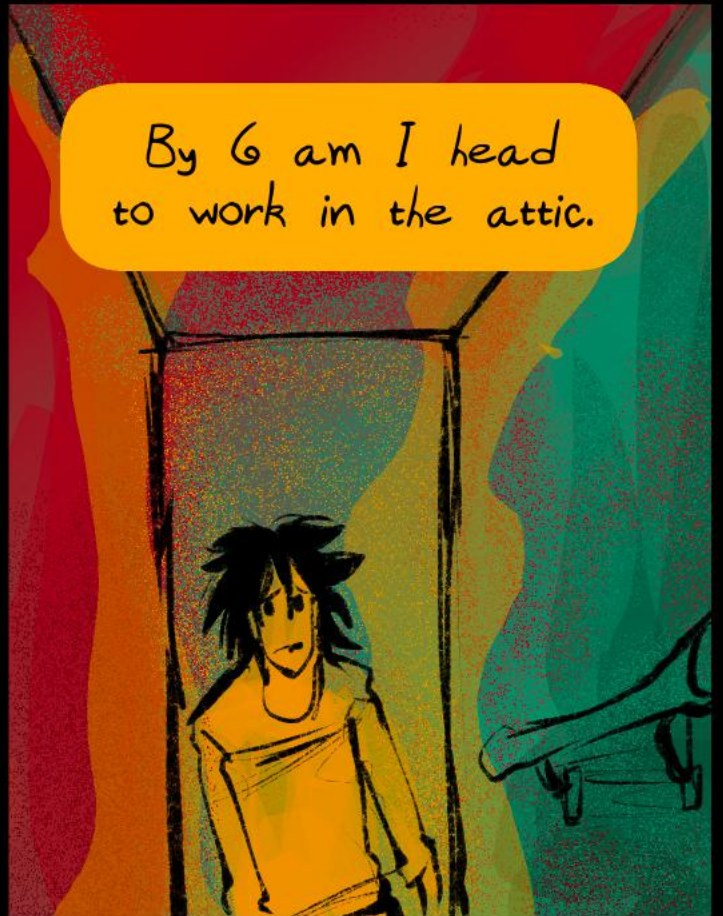
Collect the milk



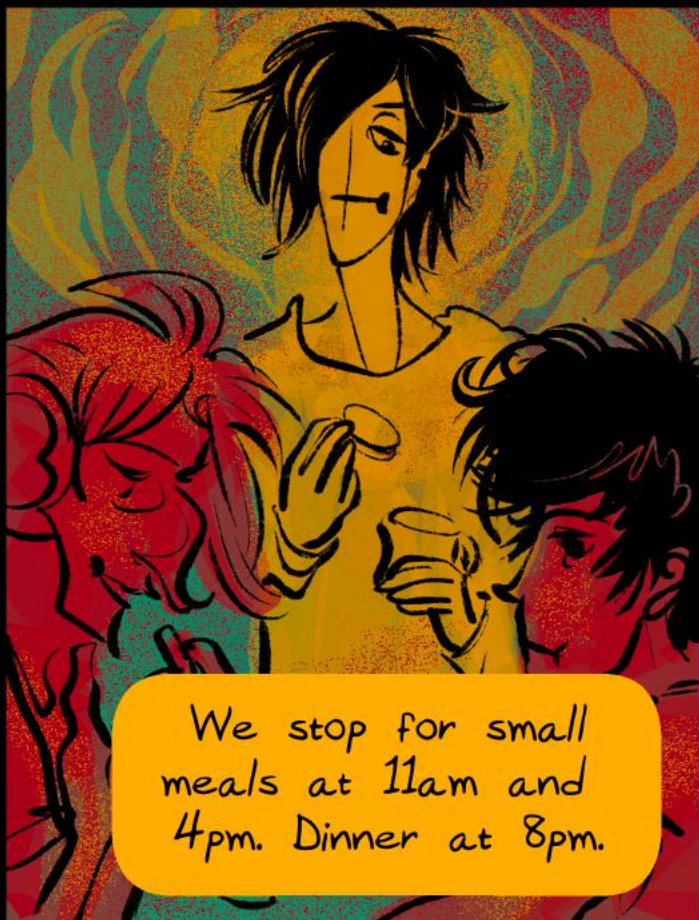
Then I eat  
my breakfast  
in the kitchen.



By 6 am I head  
to work in the attic.









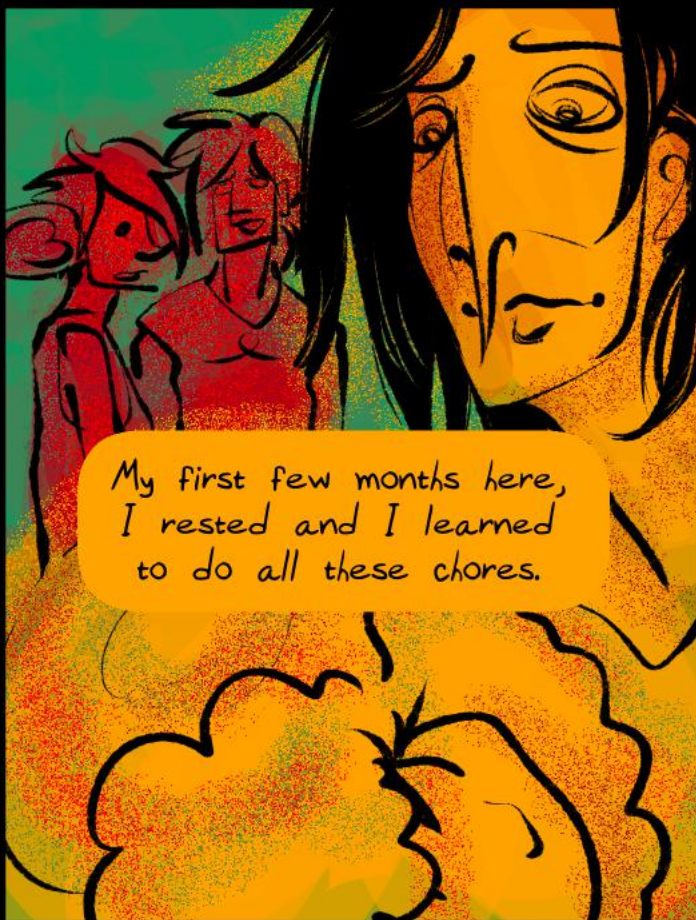
The last Friday of every month,  
I walk to the village with our crops  
to contribute to the food co-op...



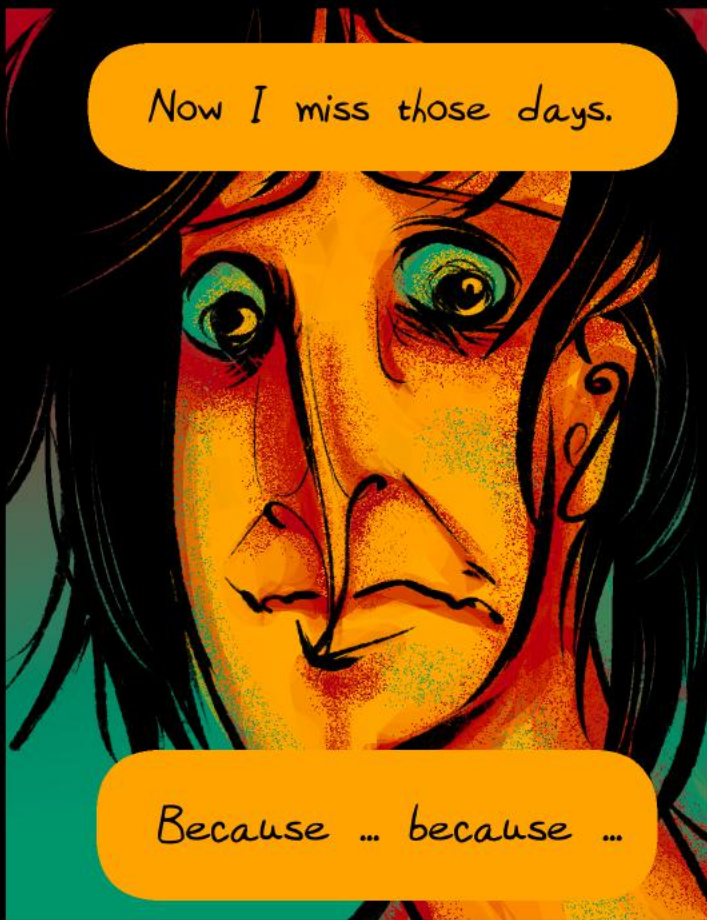
I really hated the idea  
at first, but I came to enjoy it.



My first few months here,  
I rested and I learned  
to do all these chores.

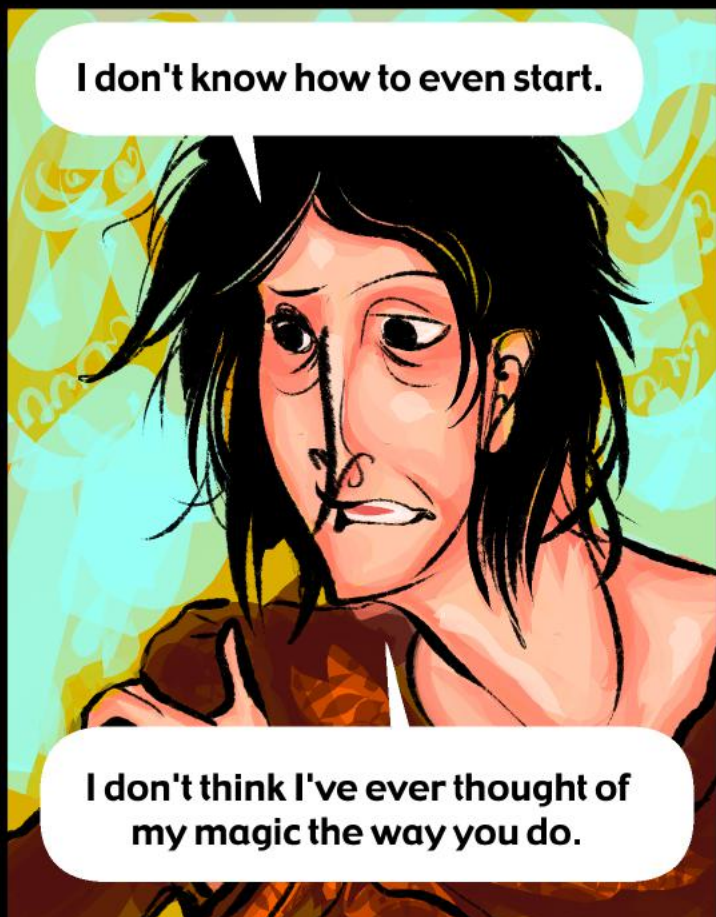


Now I miss those days.

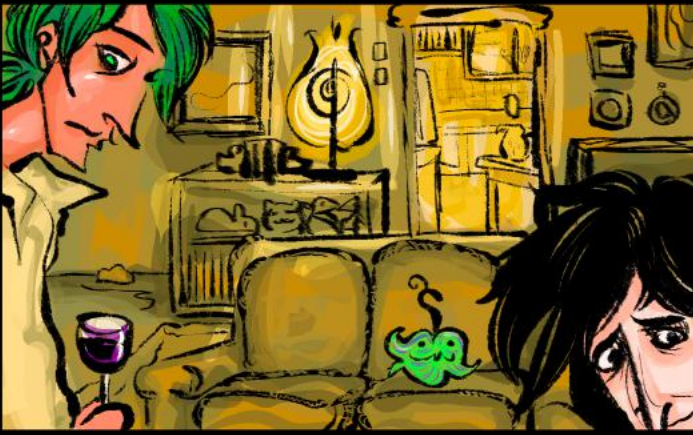


Because ... because ...

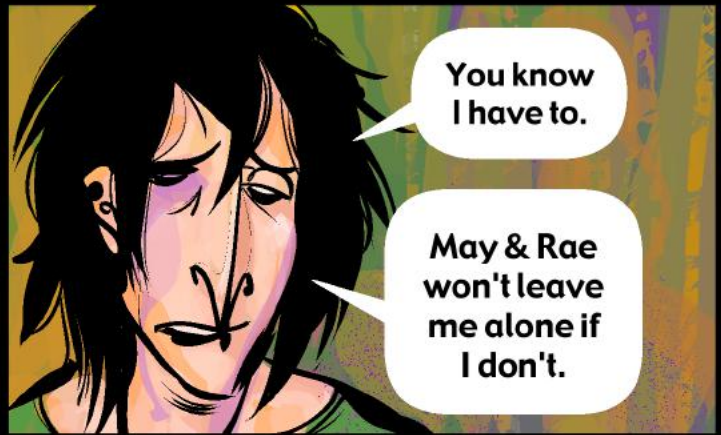








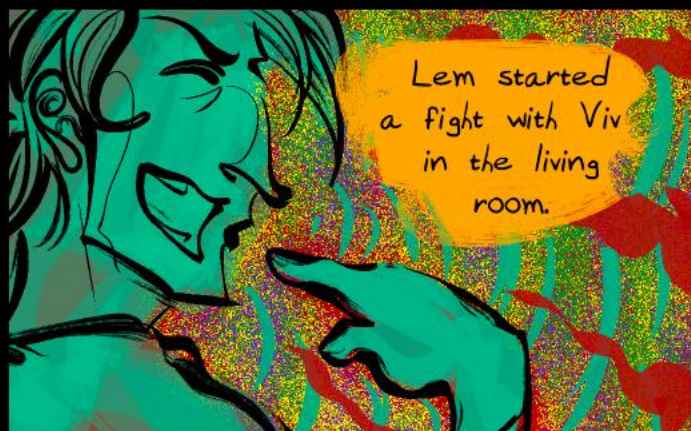








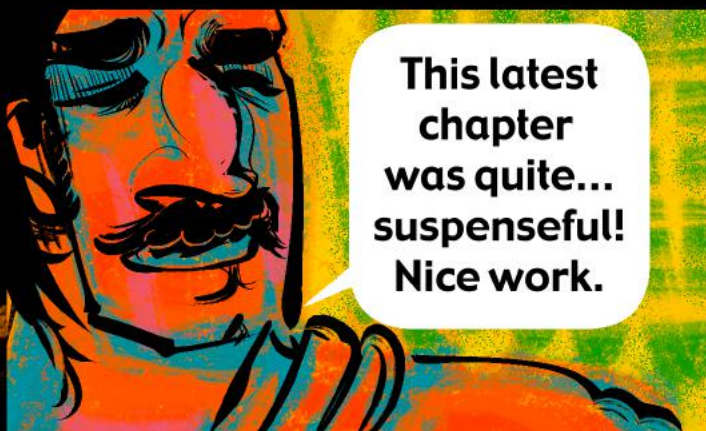
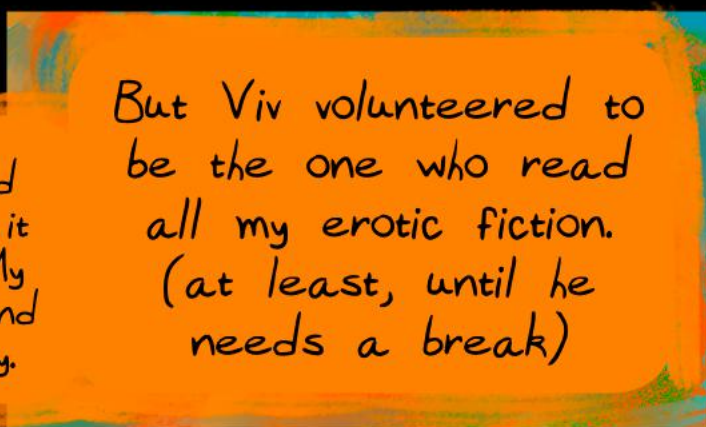
Lem came over with soul samples and talked A LOT.







May and Rae do it mostly. My letters and my diary.





After that, we got to talking about the souls Lem had dropped off for me, and how I was having trouble isolating and identifying them.

Observing them in the first place is hard.

They can appear or disappear apparently at random. It's only by chance that Lem catches them at all.

We have certain attractants, he tells me, but...

We need a tracking, monitoring system of some kind, or a test we can perform to determine where they gather...

Viv thought about it while I ate cheese.

Then, he started talking about how his scientists look at creatures too small to see with the naked eye.

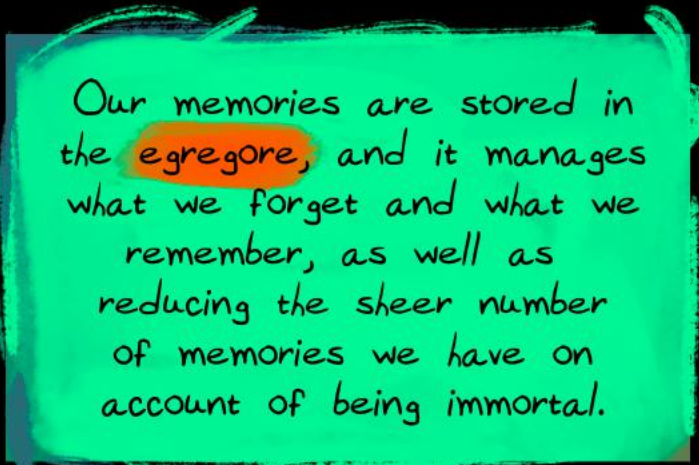
Seems like an imaging issue. You can try dying the souls to make them visible, or shining weird types of light on them.

You may not be able to see them, but a camera could.

Oh! It's that easy!

What a fruitful day this turned out to be!







It was the past,  
when we originally  
lived together.

I was holding a  
leek a particular  
way. I felt the  
leaves on my back  
and shoulder.



I saw Lem in the  
distance. He was  
very small.



Green hair,  
and liquid all  
around him,  
on the ground.



I didn't  
know what  
was going  
on.

I didn't  
want to  
know.

I was  
terrified.



But I had no choice.

I went  
closer



He turned  
to see.

He looked  
so empty.







I looked down  
at what Lem  
was doing -



And a wave of relief  
crashed over me.

It was just another  
leek. He was holding  
it a lot like I was.



It was weird, because none  
of us cooked, but that's  
fine. It's just a dream.

So it turned  
out to be a  
nice dream!

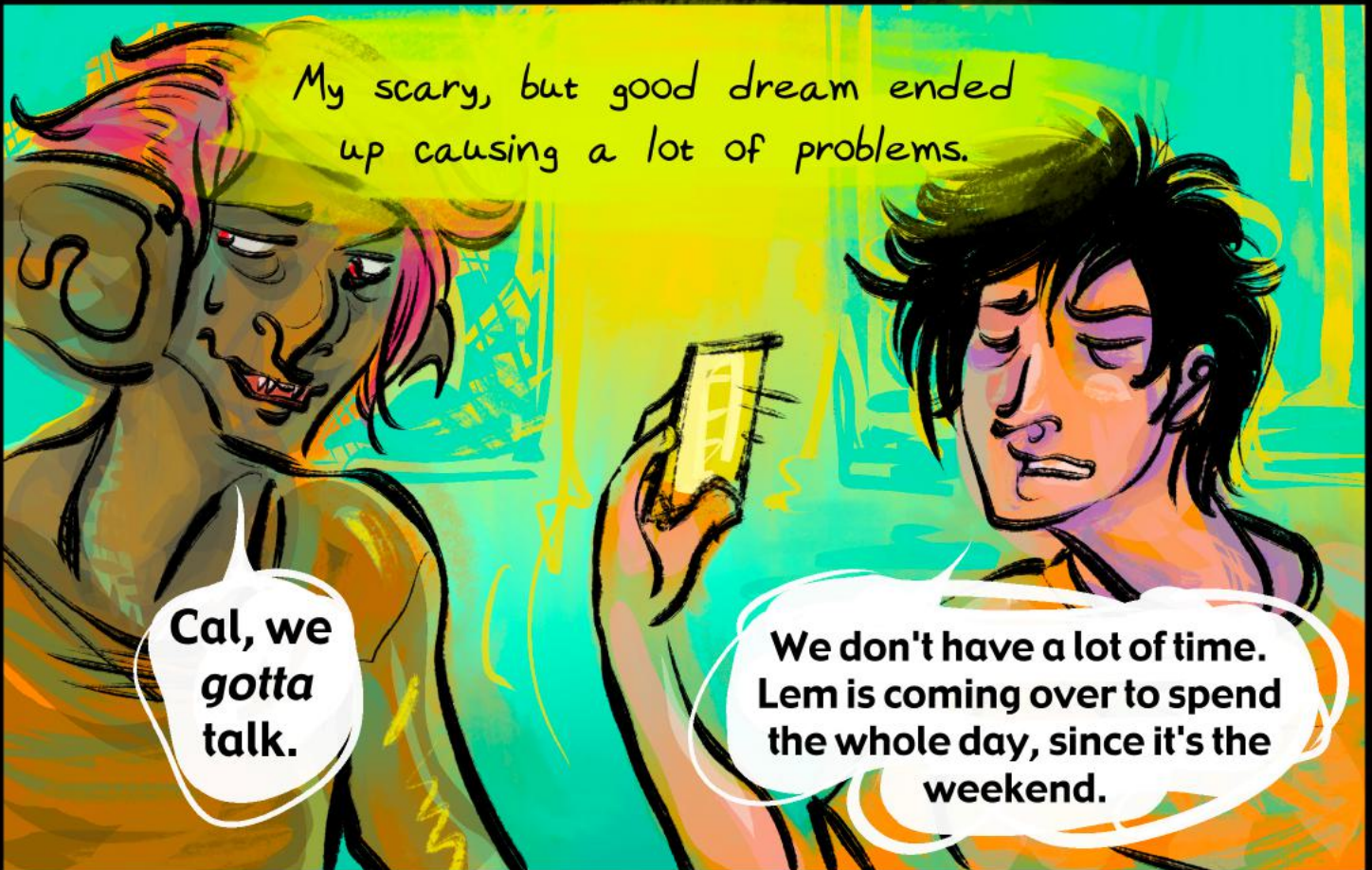


LIVE  
Laugh  
LOVE

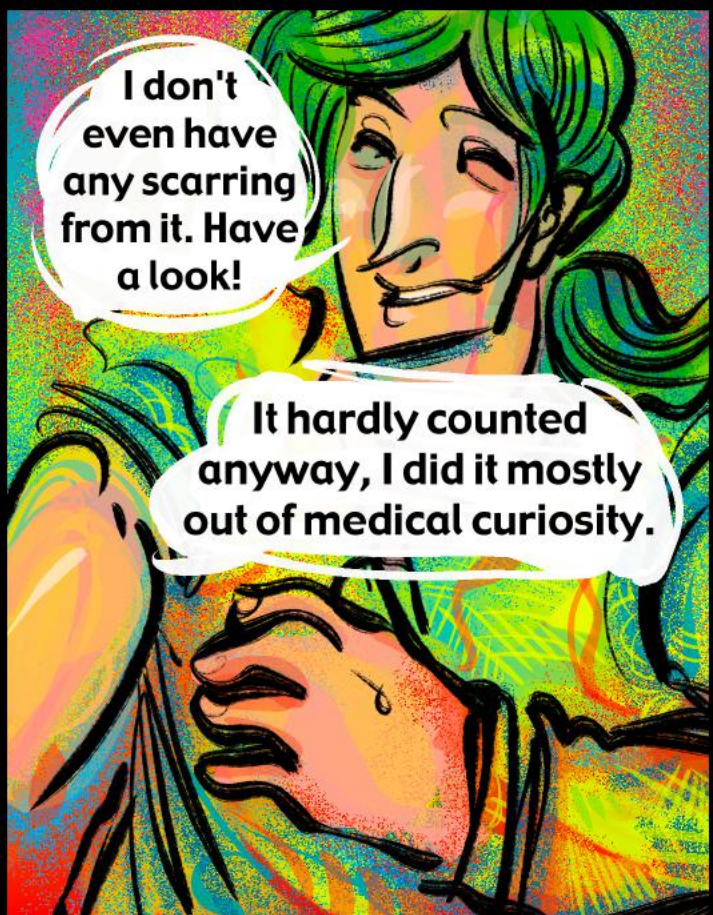
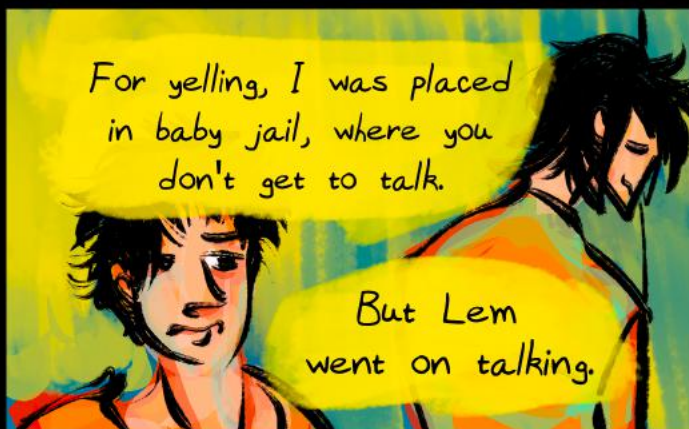
#1  
BRO!

Everything  
was fine.













By the time I got out of baby jail, they were playing video games.



I've already talked about this with May, but Lem and Rae are getting along surprisingly well.



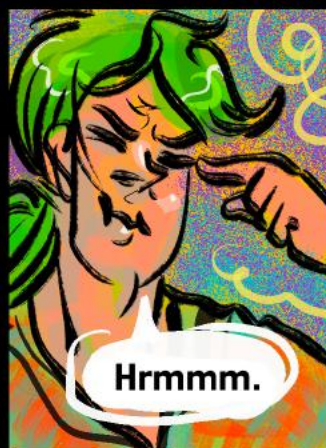
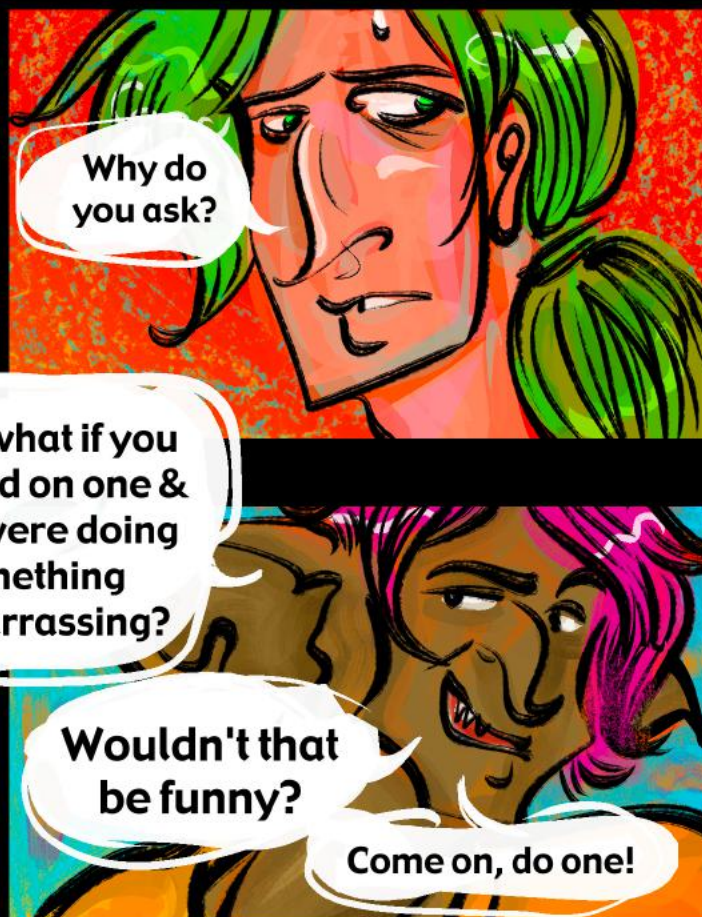
They started talking again like nothing happened.

They spend a lot of time together.

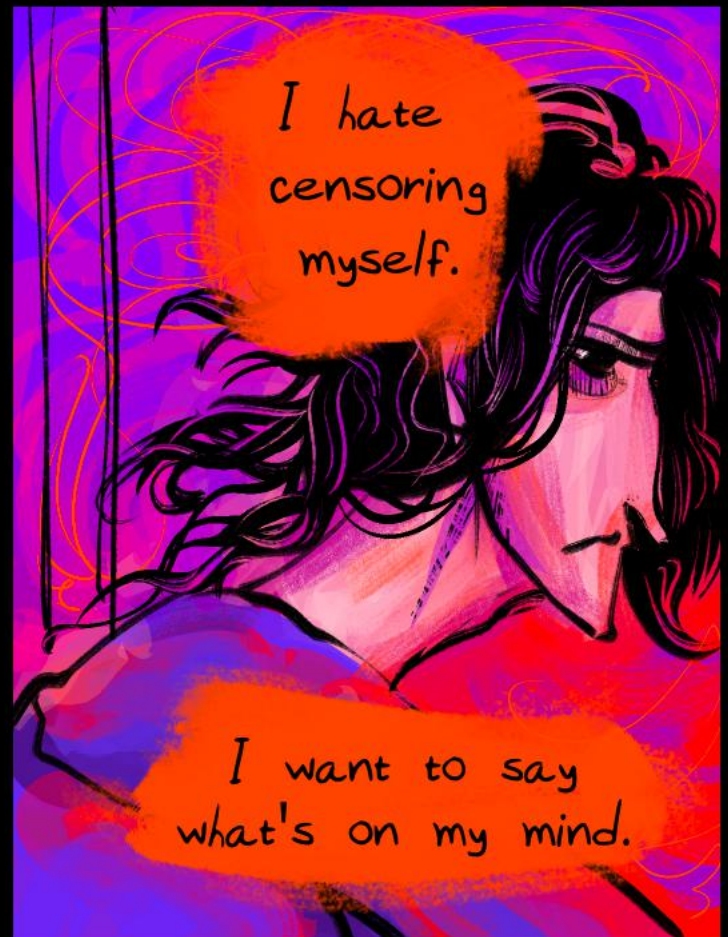
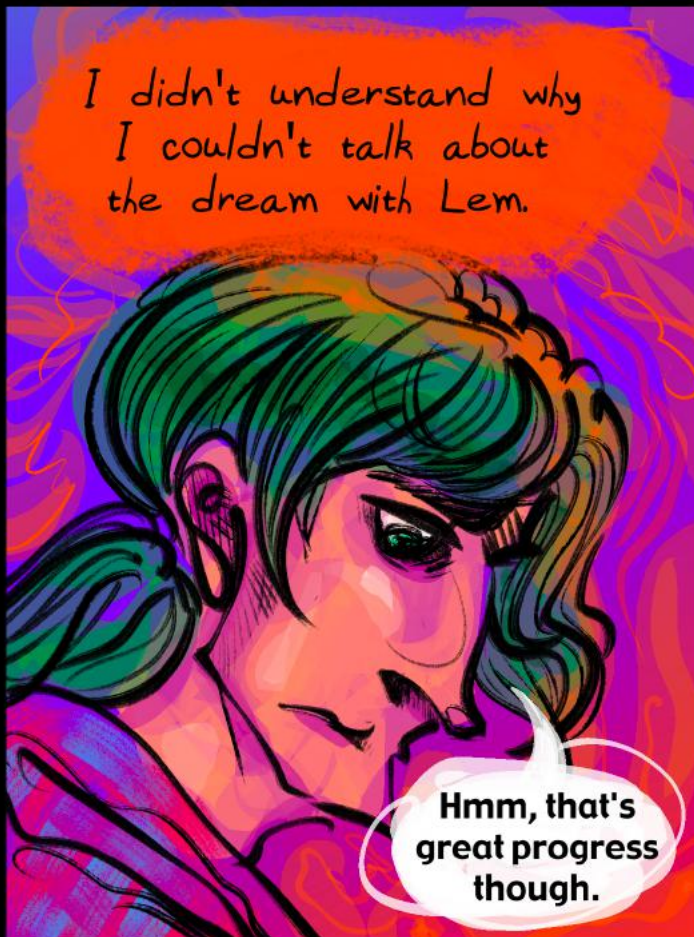


May says that as long as they don't talk about anything serious, it's easy for them to get along with each other.

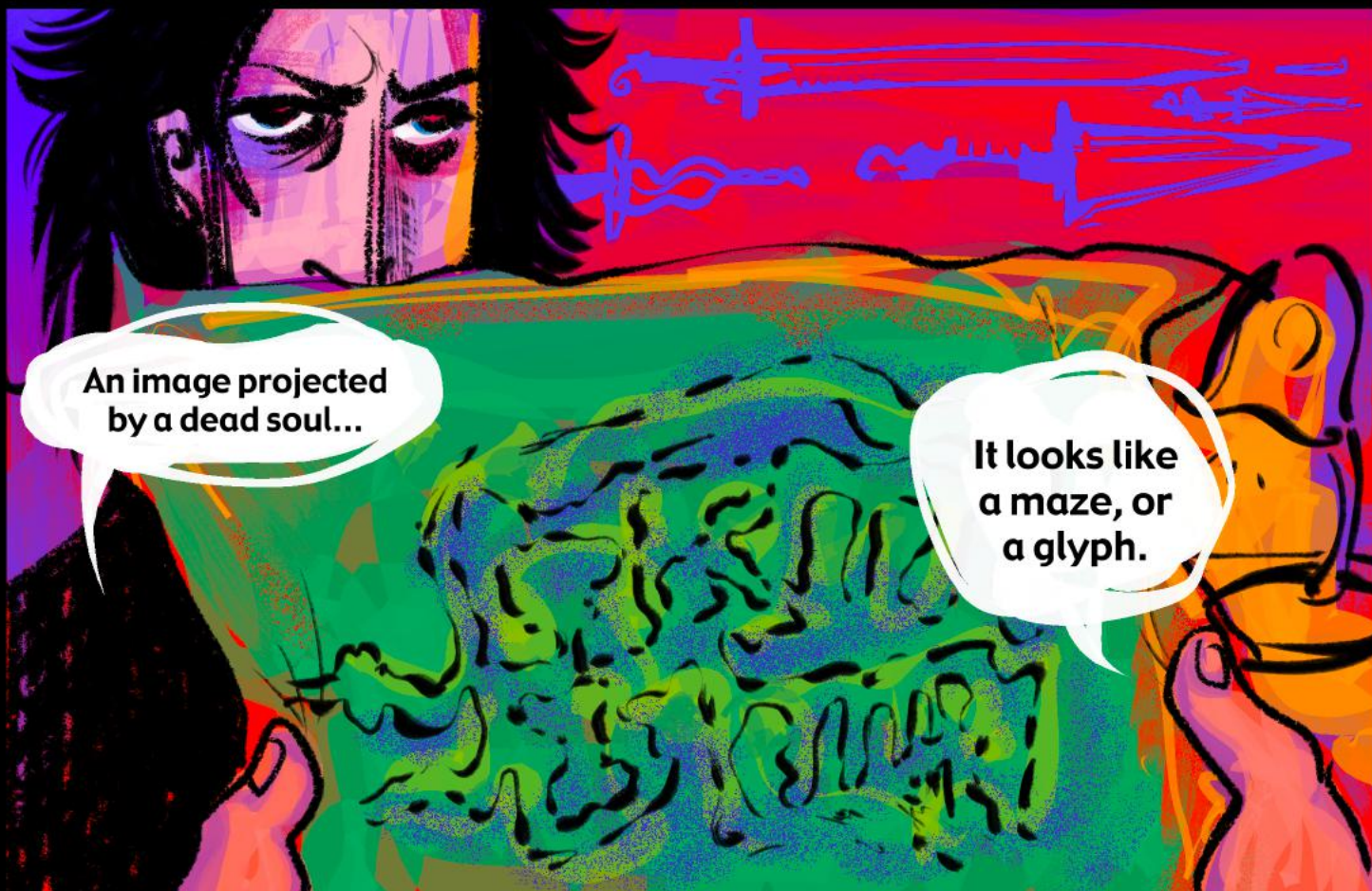




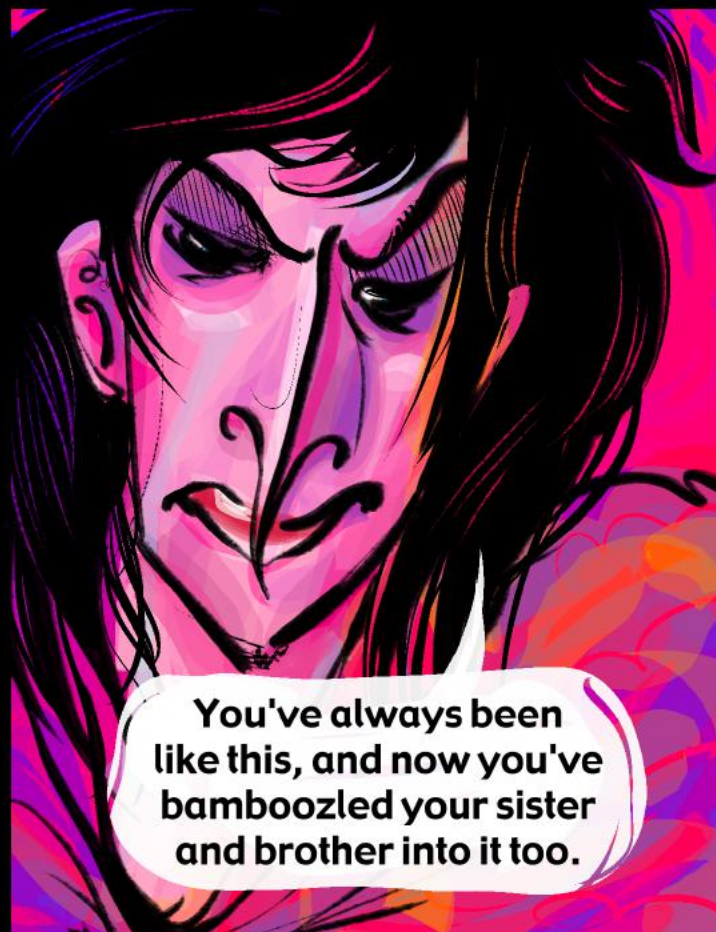
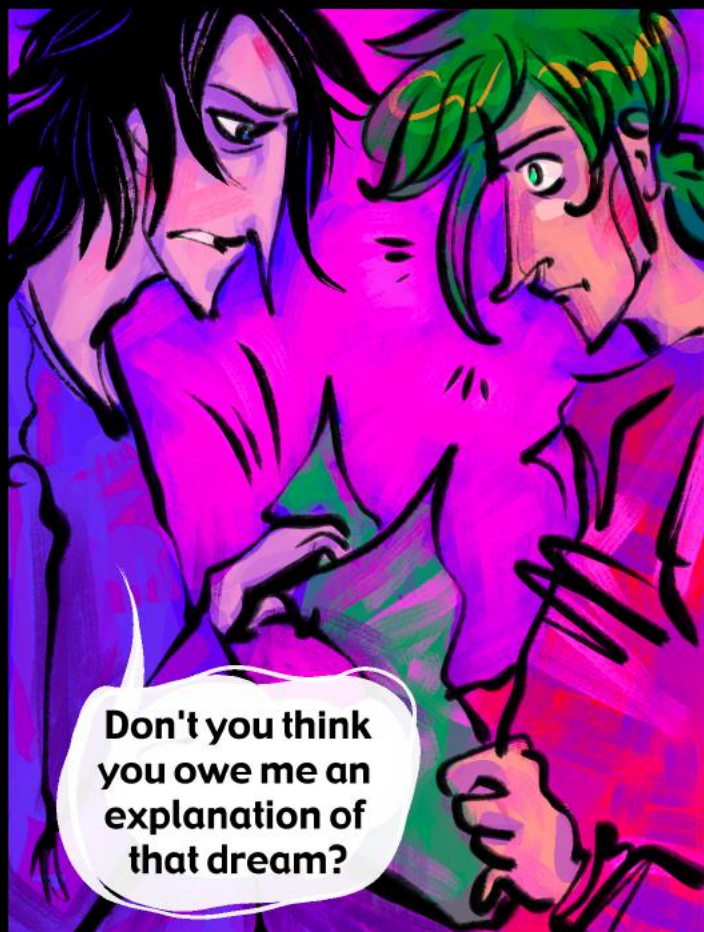




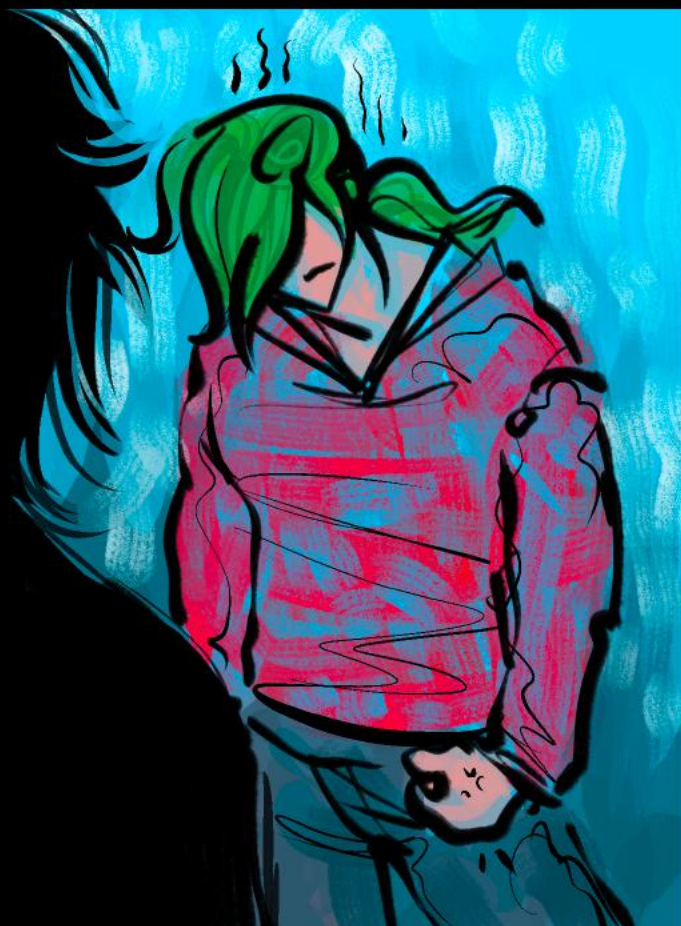
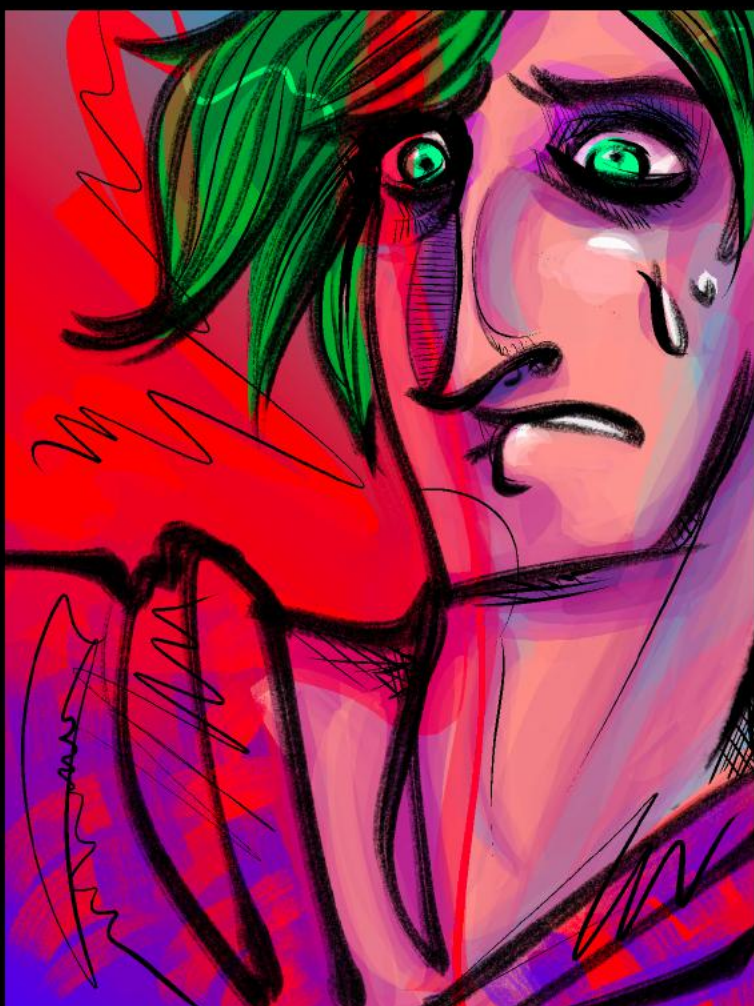












gulp

Look at him  
rolling his  
eyes at me!



Turning  
his nose  
up at me  
from his  
*throne*.

It's too much  
for my feeble  
heart to bear.





**Cal, I don't want to fight.**

**You have made an incredible discovery today!**

**Think whatever you want to think about the dream!**



**Please don't derail the work over nonsense right now.**

**You can talk about the dream later with Rae and May if you want!**

**But the reason I'm here is to help with magic.**

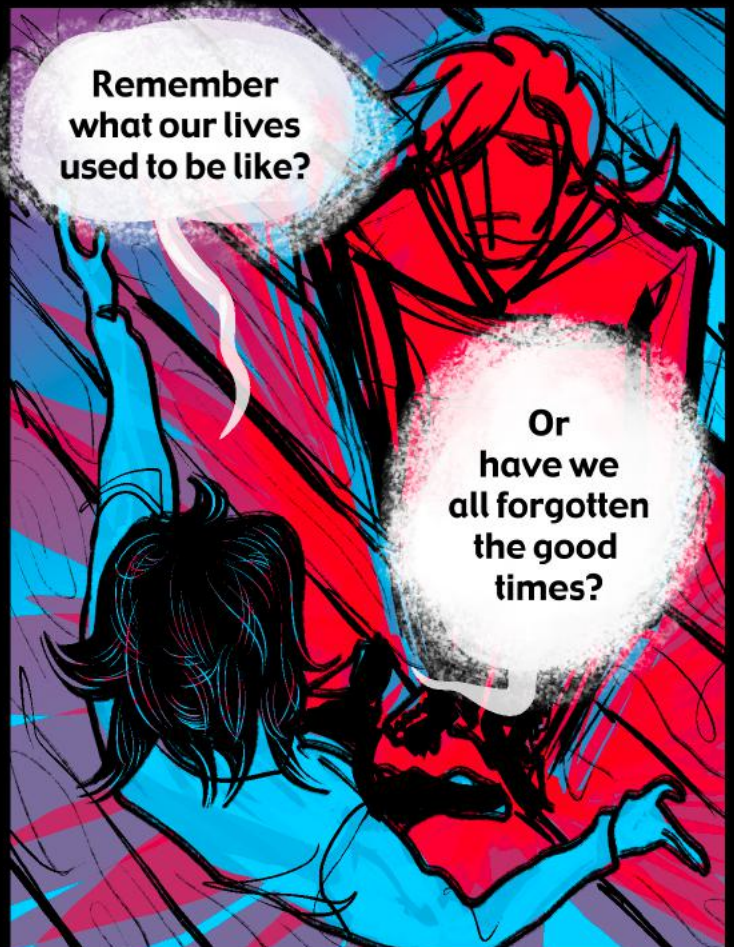
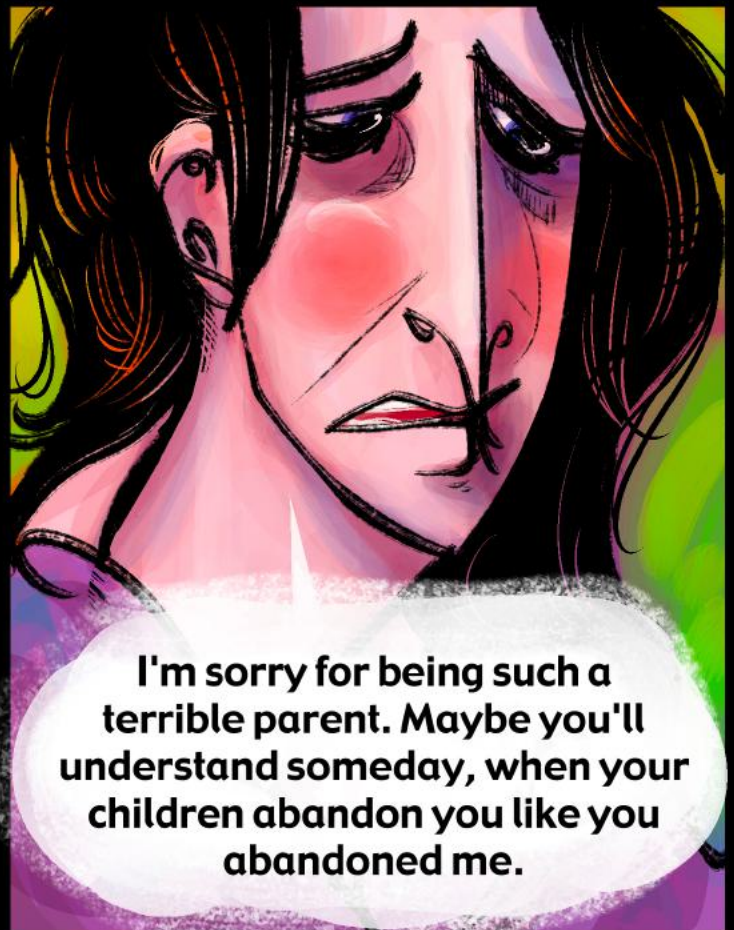
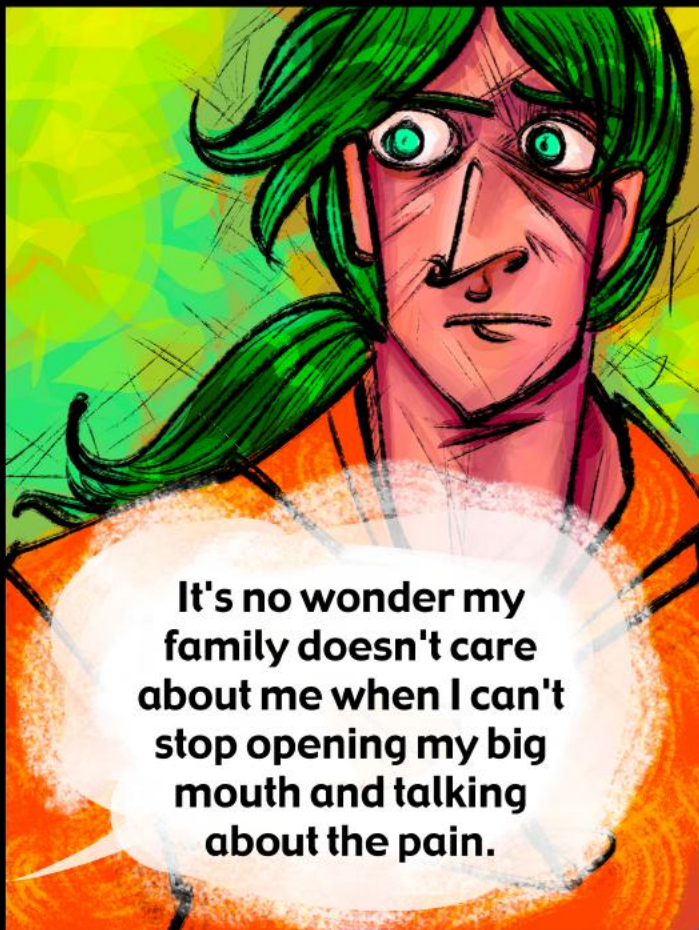
**If you're not going to let this go, I have to leave.**

**I don't want to leave, we have so much to get done!**









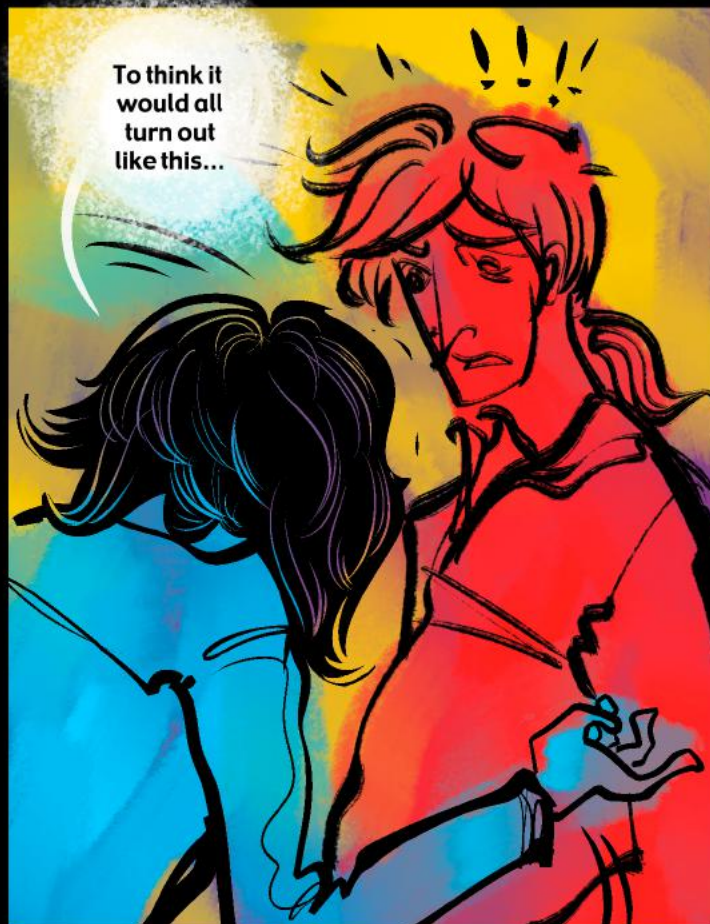




**You were such  
a beautiful, happy  
baby.**

**I knew the moment  
I saw you that I loved  
you, that I would love  
you for the rest of time.**

**Raising you and  
your brother became  
my reason for living.**



**To think it  
would all  
turn out  
like this...**



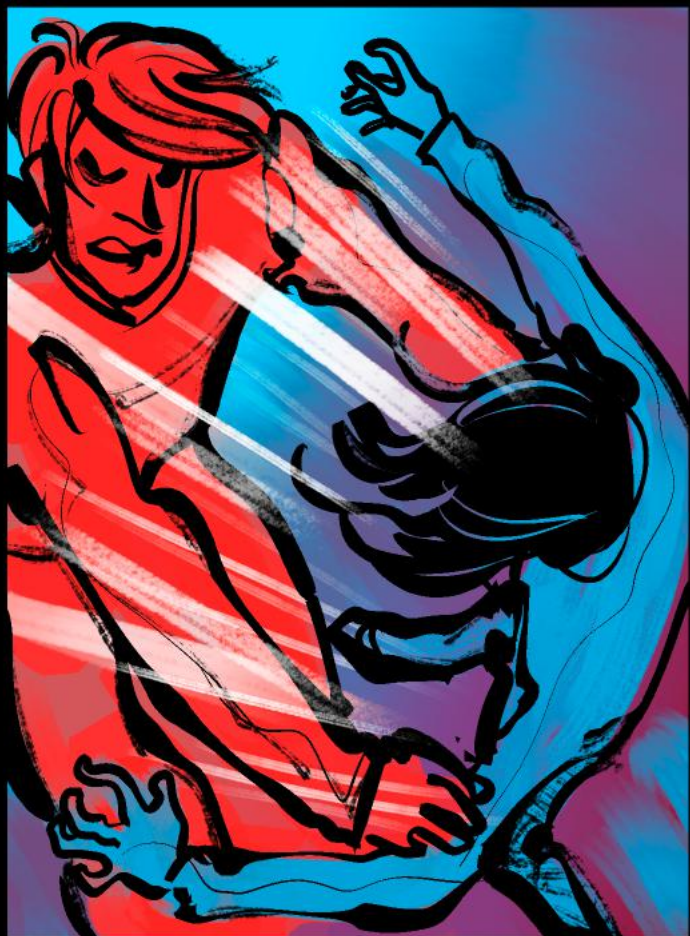
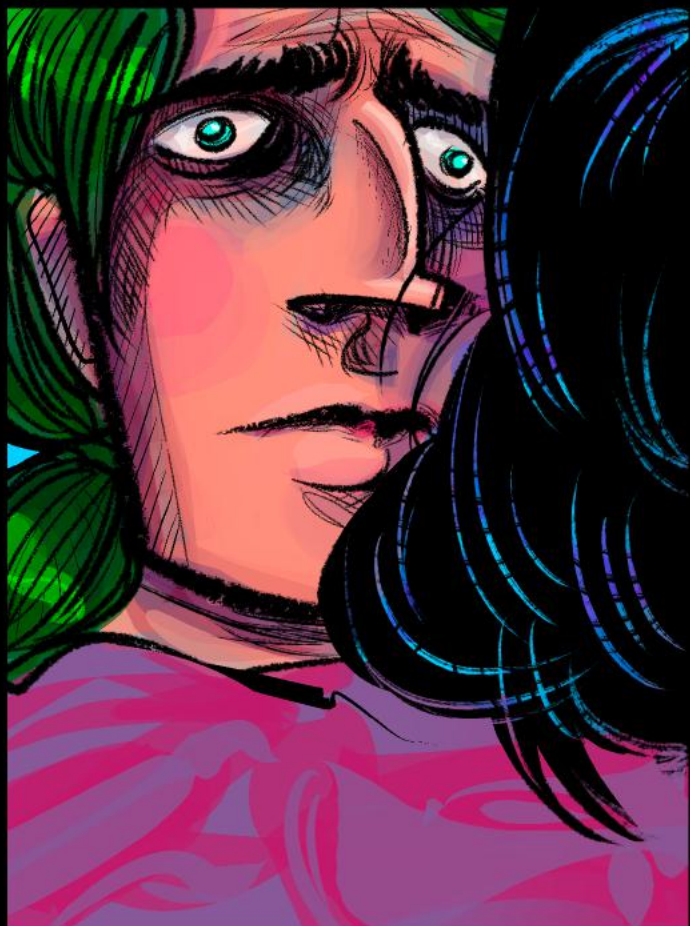
**How can I apologize  
for what I've done?**

**It will never  
be enough.**










**You stupid child.**





Lem always had this ability to heal others by touching them.

Finally, ugh. You made me work for that one.

He touches you and bam, no pain, no sadness, you're good as new!

In the old days, he'd heal me all the time!

But for some reason he stopped.

How long has it been?



It's him or me.

Does anyone really expect me to choose him over myself?



Oh, stop blubbering. It's embarrassing.

You were always a sore loser.

Now, I'm neurotypical and won't have any trouble doing my job. They'll probably have to let me out of here in a couple days.





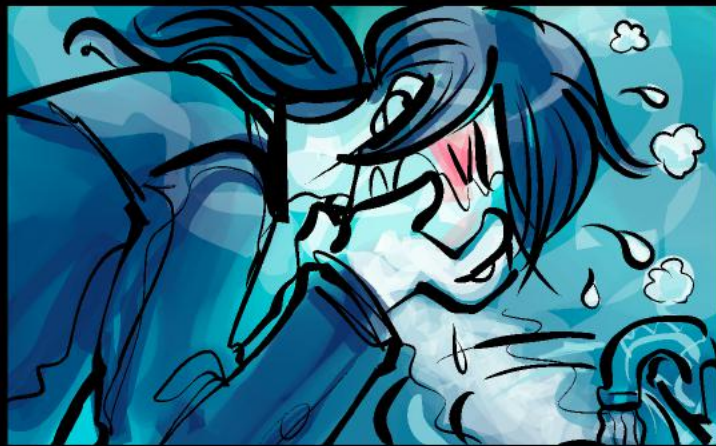
Enough.



Cal...

You're a monster.









Yeah?



Um,  
Lem,  
are  
you  
ok?



Yea.  
I'm ok.



That was...  
I mean...  
Do you...I....

D-do you  
wanna...



Ehm.

I'm  
done  
crying.  
Sorry to  
freak  
you  
out.



May & I were monitoring  
your mental state, like  
you asked us to.

Nothing  
appeared to  
be wrong until  
it was too late.  
Then it was...

It was like, a lot,  
all at once.  
Really fast...



Hey. Uh.  
Let's get out  
of this house  
for a bit.

You wanna  
walk through  
the woods?









The colonists usually have a bonfire going on Saturday night if I remember correctly.

Let's go get smashed. It's only natural.

Yeah, all right.



You been smoking like I told you?

Ah, I can't really roll my own cus of my...

Oh come on. Just bum off May.

Meh, then I wouldn't have to bum yours!

I see how it is.





Have you gone to the colony much?

No...I'm still pretty nervous about leaving the house...

These are nice people. They'll like you.

Yeah, May says so too.



What?

Lem...  
Uh...

Do you wanna talk about what happened?

Maybe in a bit...Though honestly it was nothing special.

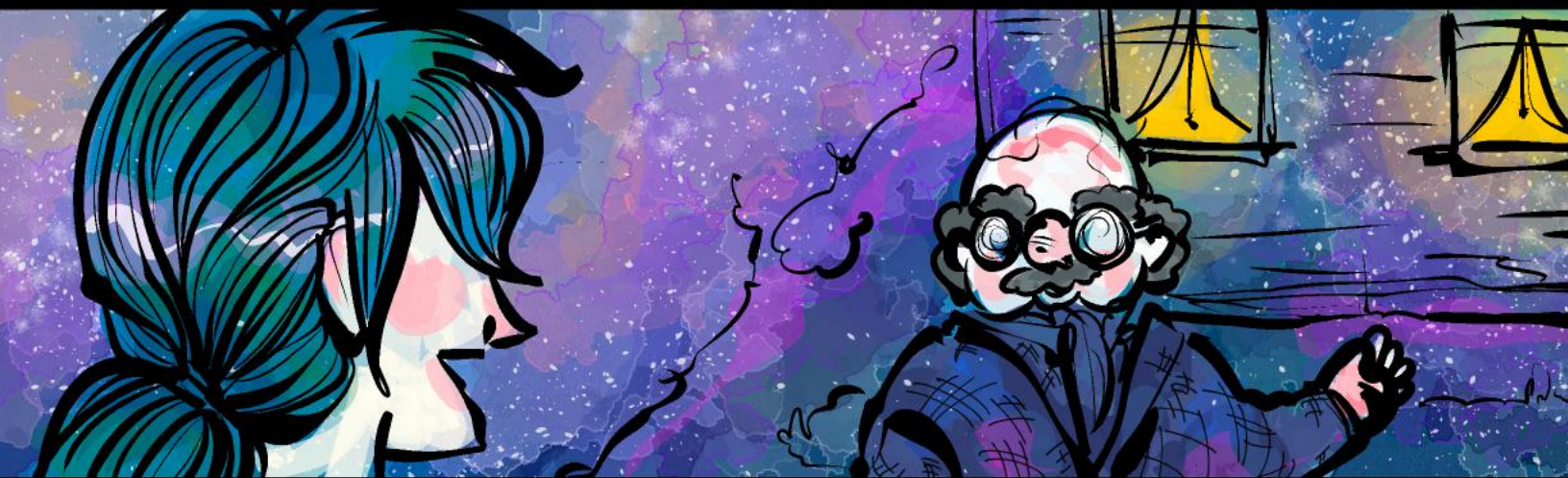




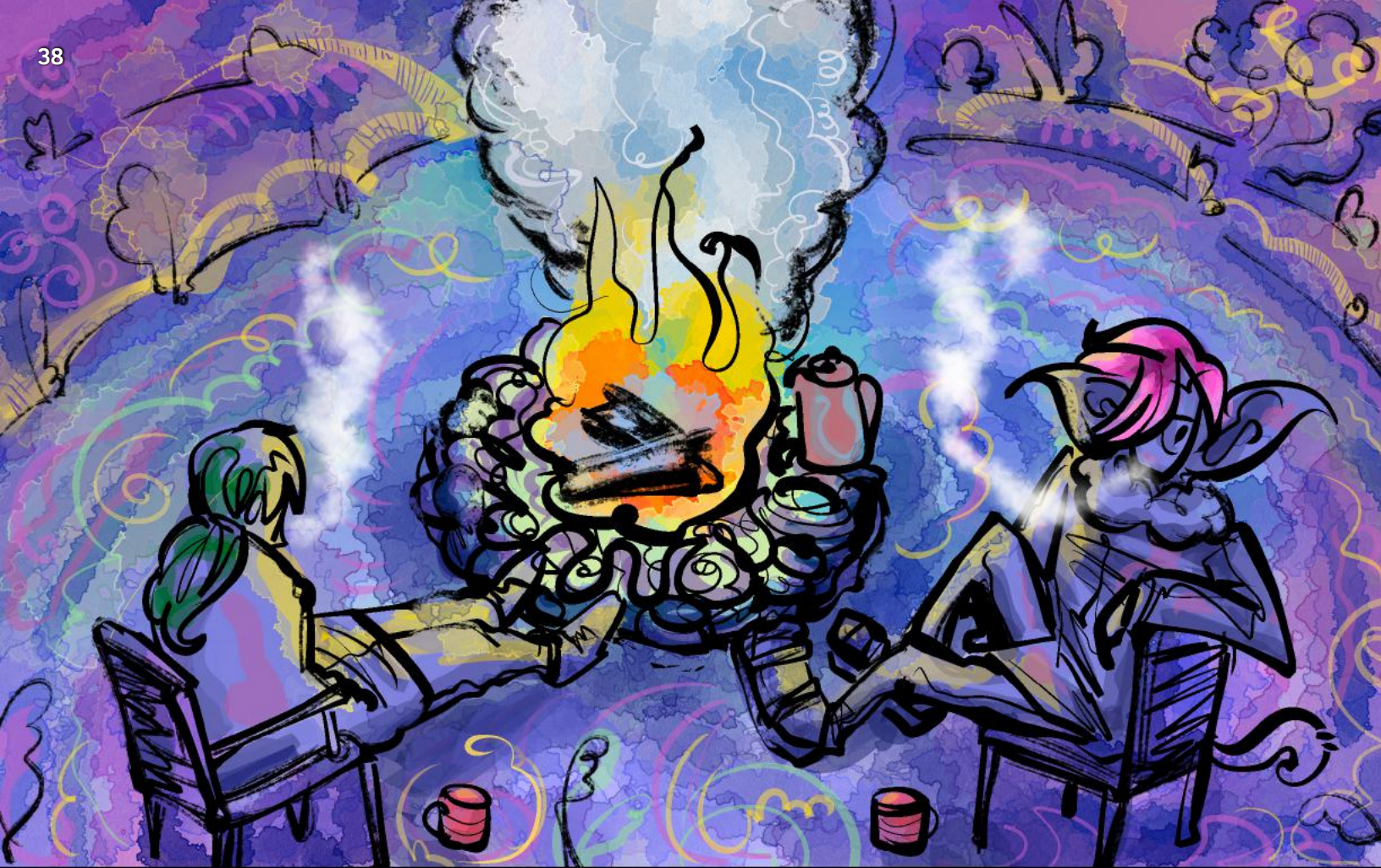
















Wow!  
That's  
tasty!

Mulled  
cider.



Well, I guess I feel stupid, cus  
I thought I'd get you to talk, and I  
would help, & I'd accomplish what  
I think May wants me to do...

I'm supposed to help you,  
and instead you're having  
to help me. It's fucked up.

I know  
I wasn't  
the one  
in hot  
water  
but...



Oh,  
honey.

You think  
this shit is easy  
or something?

You're  
not stupid, just  
inexperienced.  
That's how  
it is.



I know,  
but...

Somehow  
that doesn't  
make me feel  
all that better.

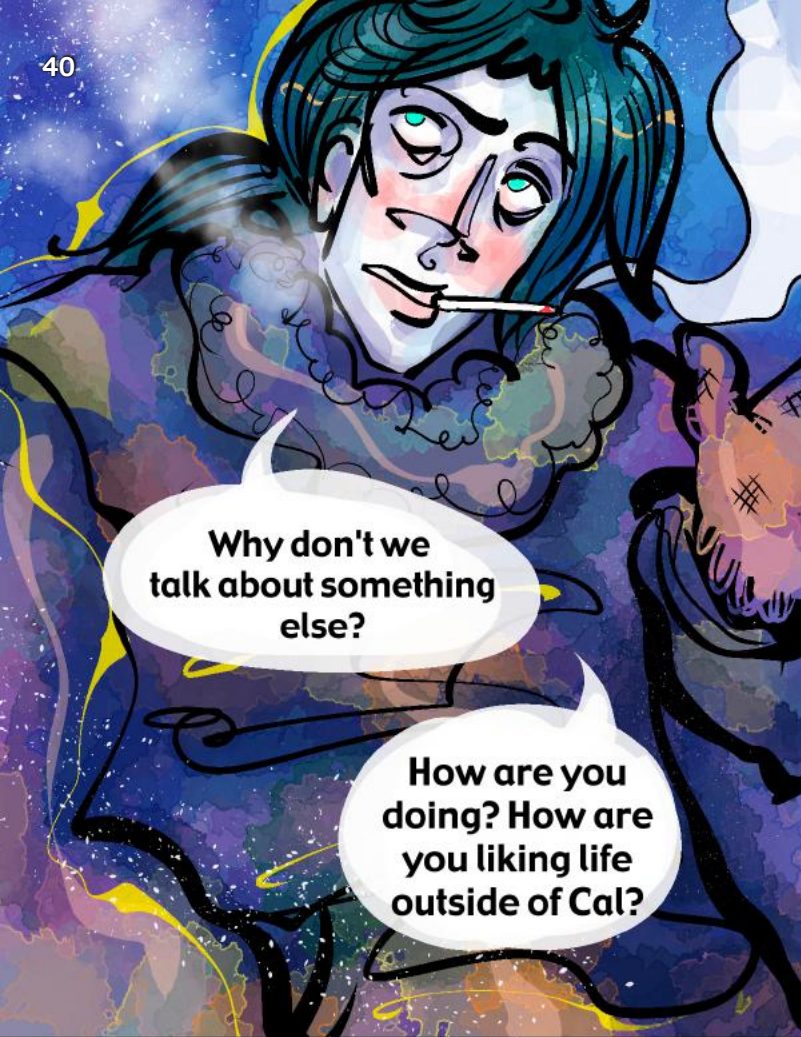


I'm not being nice  
enough to you, buddy?

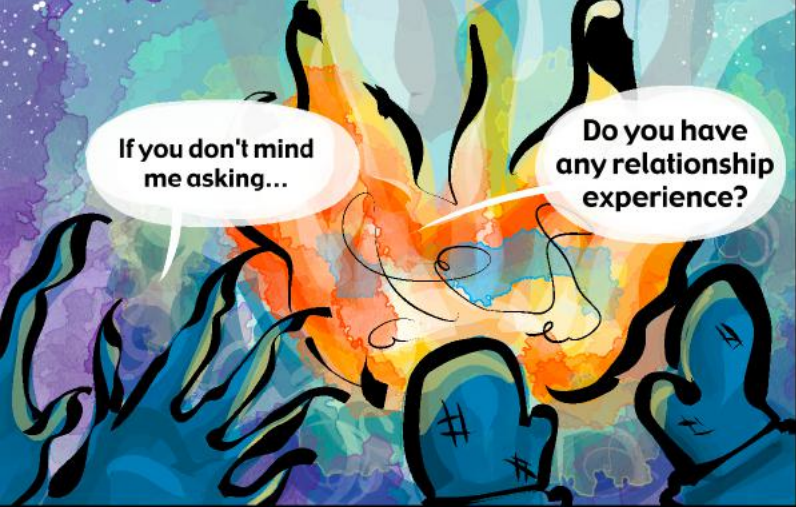
No...  
I don't  
know what  
I'm trying  
to say.

sorry u\_u









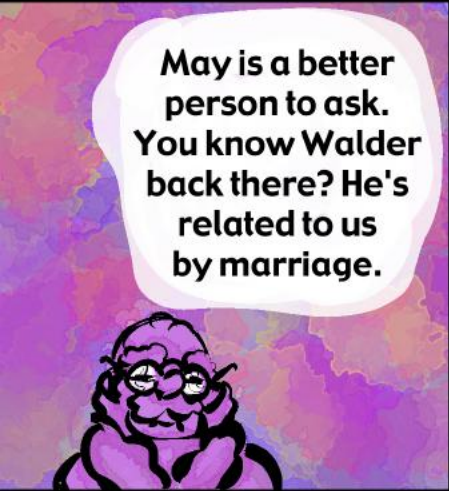
If you don't mind me asking...

Do you have any relationship experience?




Eh...I've had some weird experiences.

But no, nothing going on with me.



May is a better person to ask. You know Walder back there? He's related to us by marriage.



Generations back, one of his ancestors & May were married, & the extended family settled nearby.



May has dated lots of artists & writers over the years, so the colony grew.

So, you see, we can have a positive impact on the world.



I'm ugly though.

I'm not having that talk with you again.

Just uh, stick to it, Rae.

And don't make the obvious mistakes. Like participating in your own cult.



Are you talking about yourself?




Absolutely not.

I'm talking about Fola

You're lucky you don't have secondaries





Cal, you're staying in your room the rest of the day.




Fine, punish me, browbeat me, whatever.



I'm used to your ill treatment.

Far be it for me to object!



You are all so small minded. You act like mortals half the time.

It's a wonder I get anything done at all....

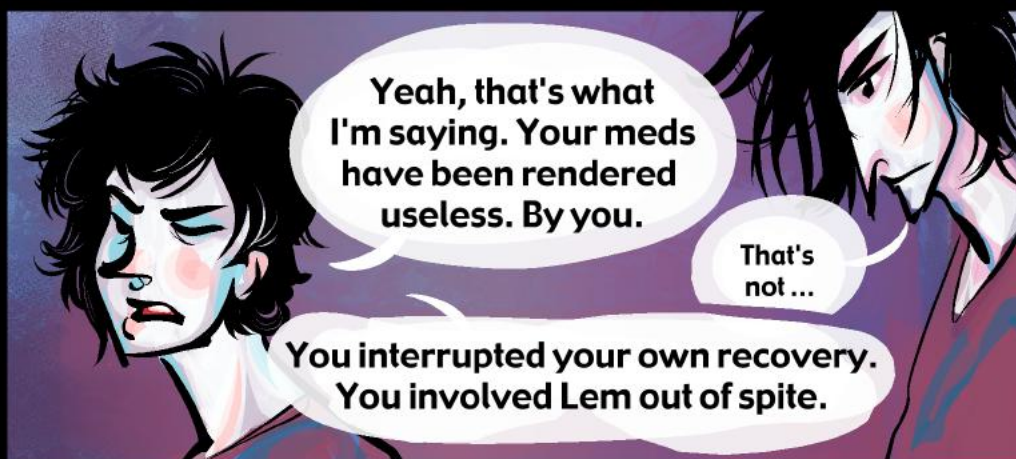


I don't feel bad, if that's what you're trying to do.



Why? It didn't hurt him! He's fine!

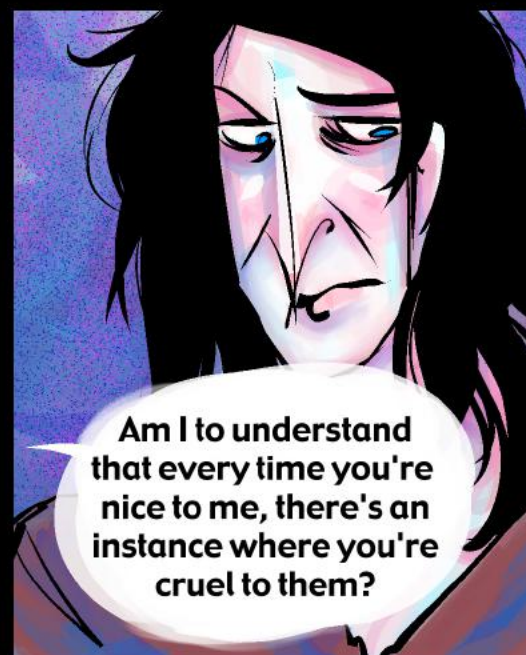








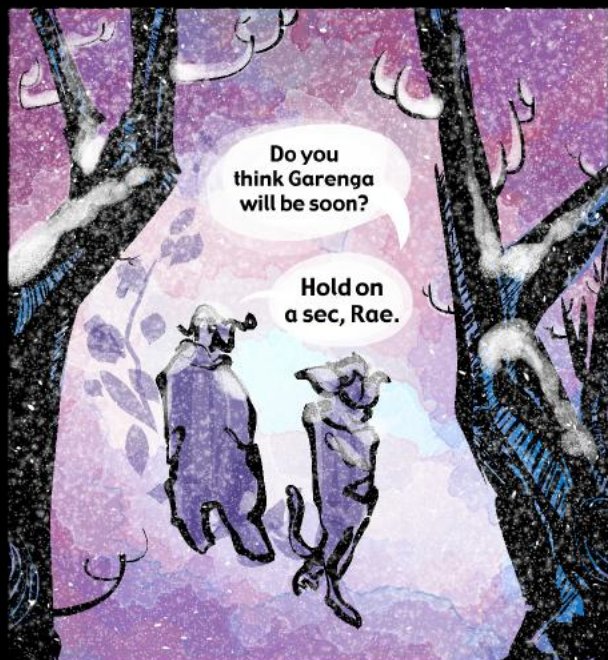
















Whoa!

What is that?!

Steady on,  
it won't hurt us.

It's some type of  
carsekel'ek, uh,  
an ice dragon.

You normally don't  
see them at all.  
They hide.

Where does  
something like  
that hide?!

When  
it snows,  
they pace  
about,  
gathering  
the flakes  
in their  
wings for  
water.

Whoa.  
It's fast.

Why is the  
tail like that? It looks like  
a pancake.

I have no idea.



Didn't you  
make it?

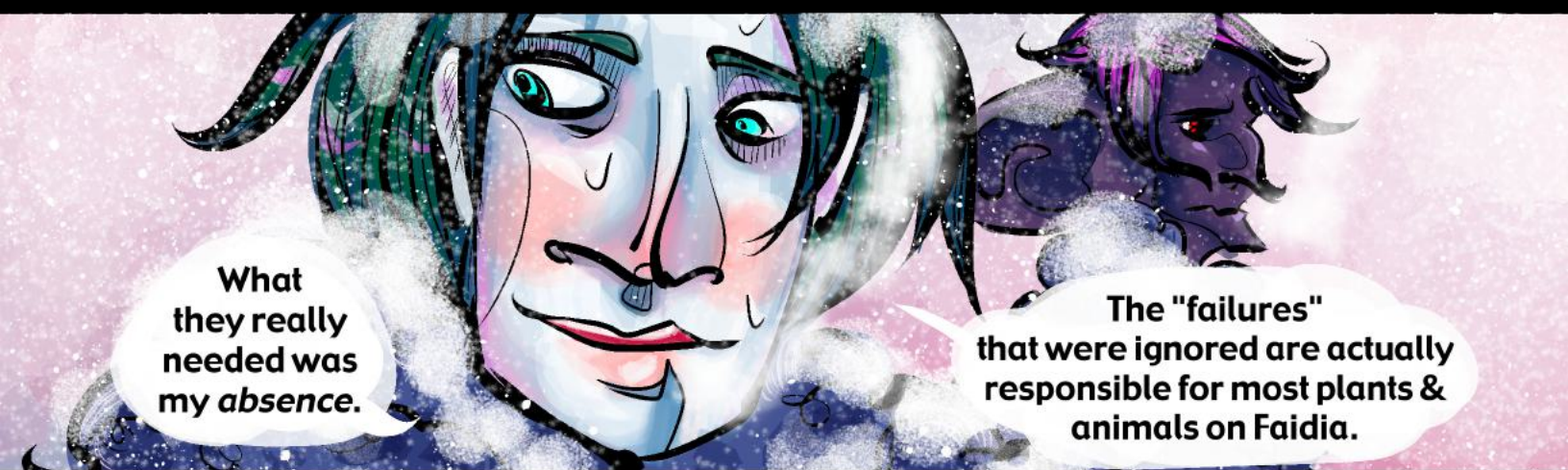
Oh, no.  
Not that  
one.



Guess I'm  
snatching my  
own wig,  
but...

I don't  
design  
most of  
them.





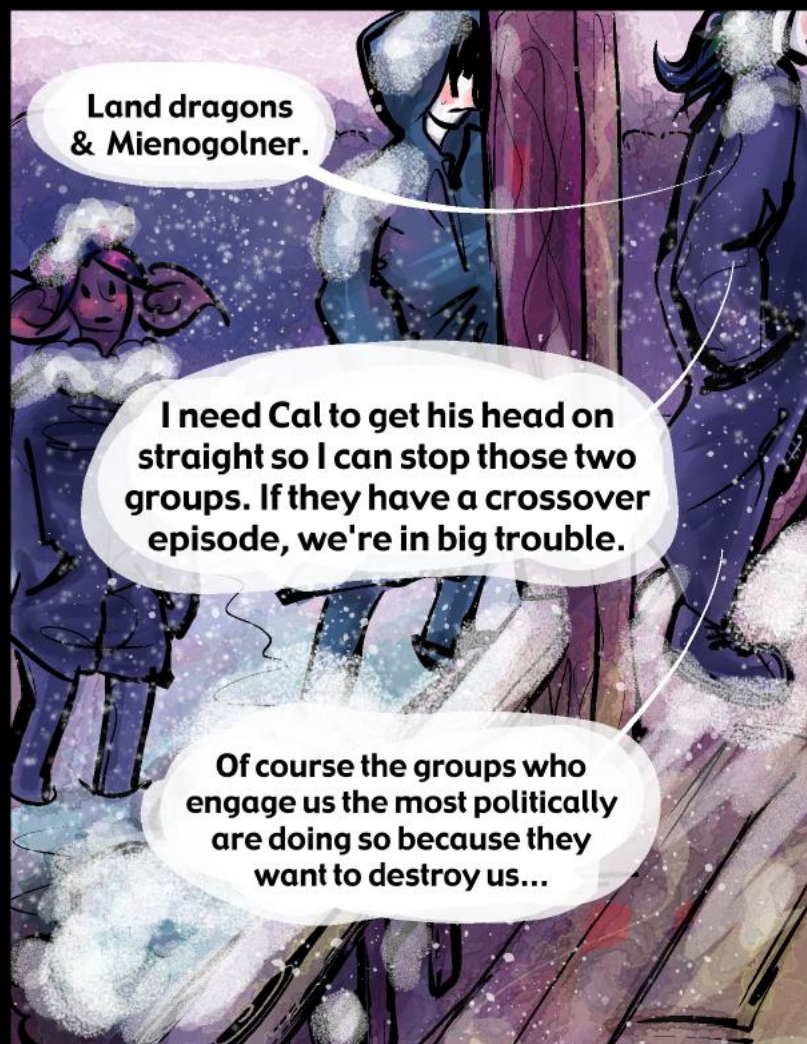
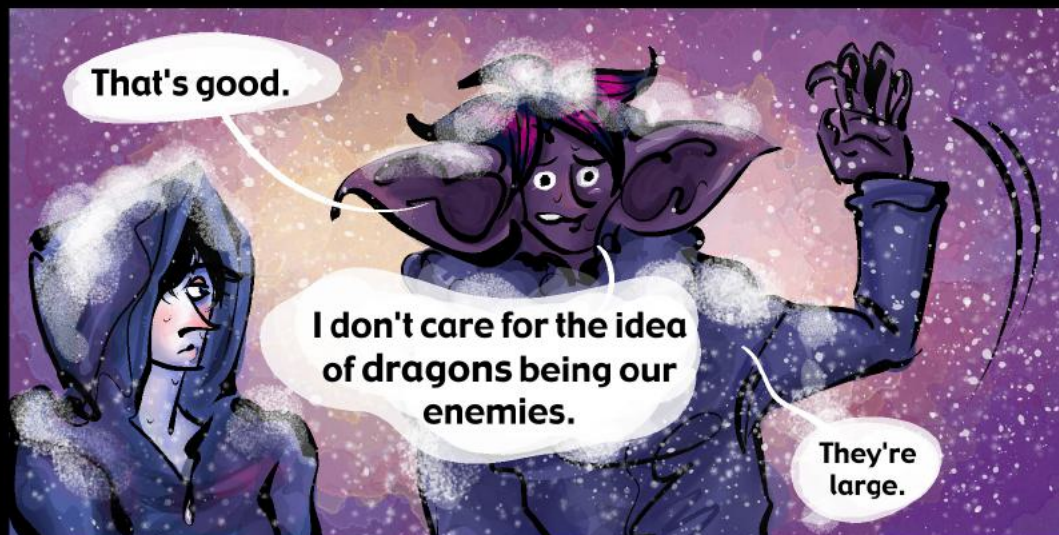




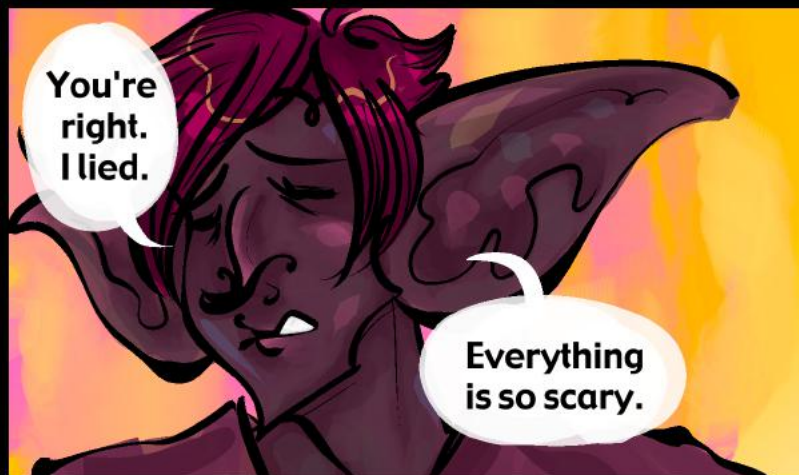




















Yes, go ahead, make merry where I can hear everything.

Kick me while I'm down.

Make sure I know how much you all love it when I'm not around.

Soon, you'll all be sorry...





Cal.

Cal.

Cal? Wake up.

Nn...Quiet,  
quiet.

I'm  
'wake...









Dear diary,  
It's been a long  
time since I last wrote.  
It's spring now, and  
Fola came over to see  
the progress I've made  
on the soul recycling  
project.

At first, it'd gone like  
I'd expected...



I worked  
like a madman,  
for weeks.

It was like my  
mind was on fire!  
I stayed up day and  
night to get the  
infrastructure  
built.

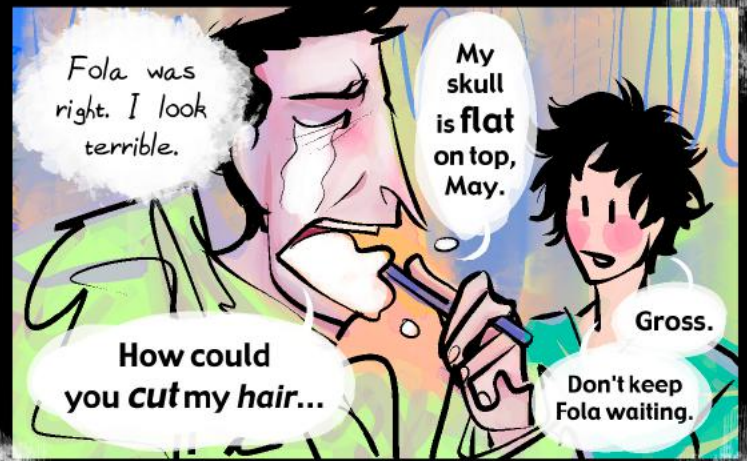


Right before I finished, I  
ran into a problem I couldn't  
solve. Only a hair away  
from freedom. Stopped  
in my tracks.

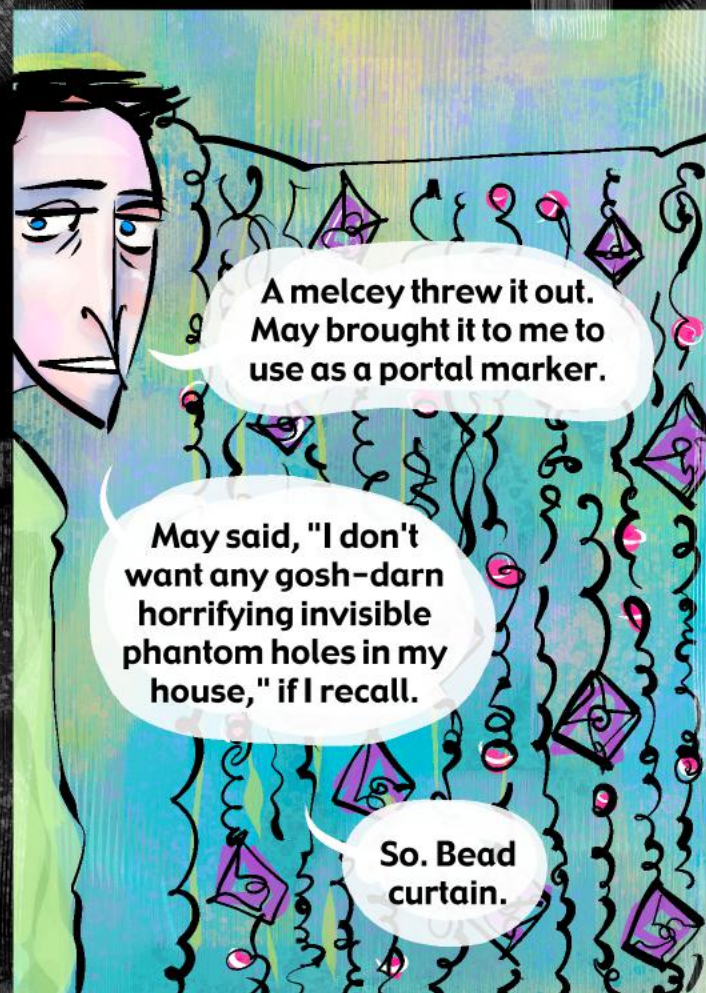
I got  
really  
sad.

Before I knew it,  
4 months had passed.

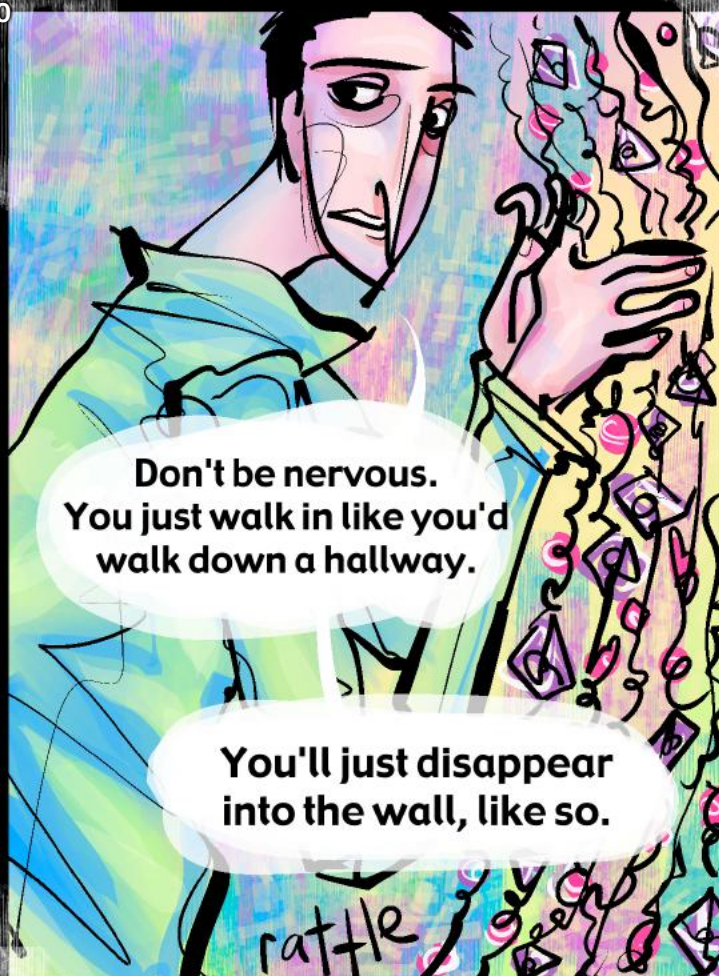




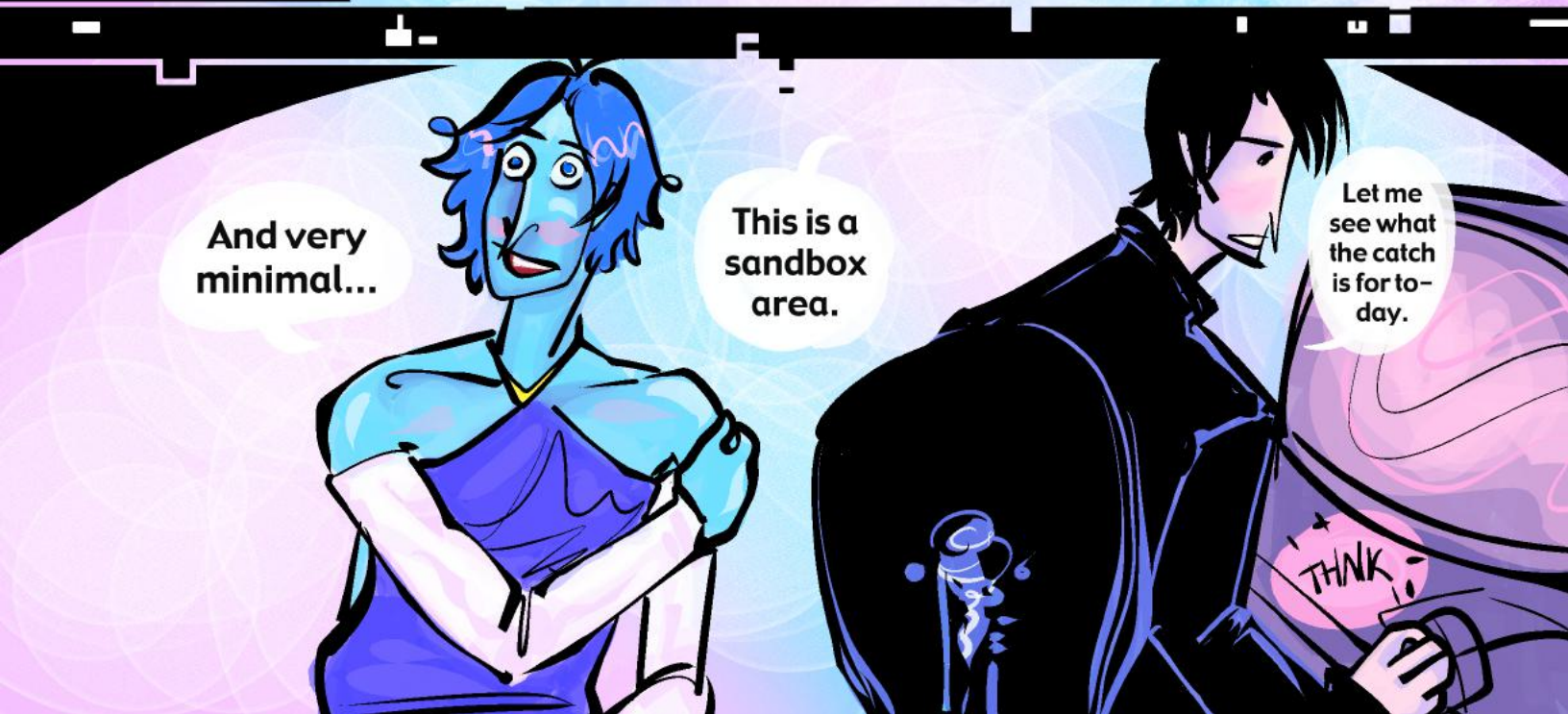




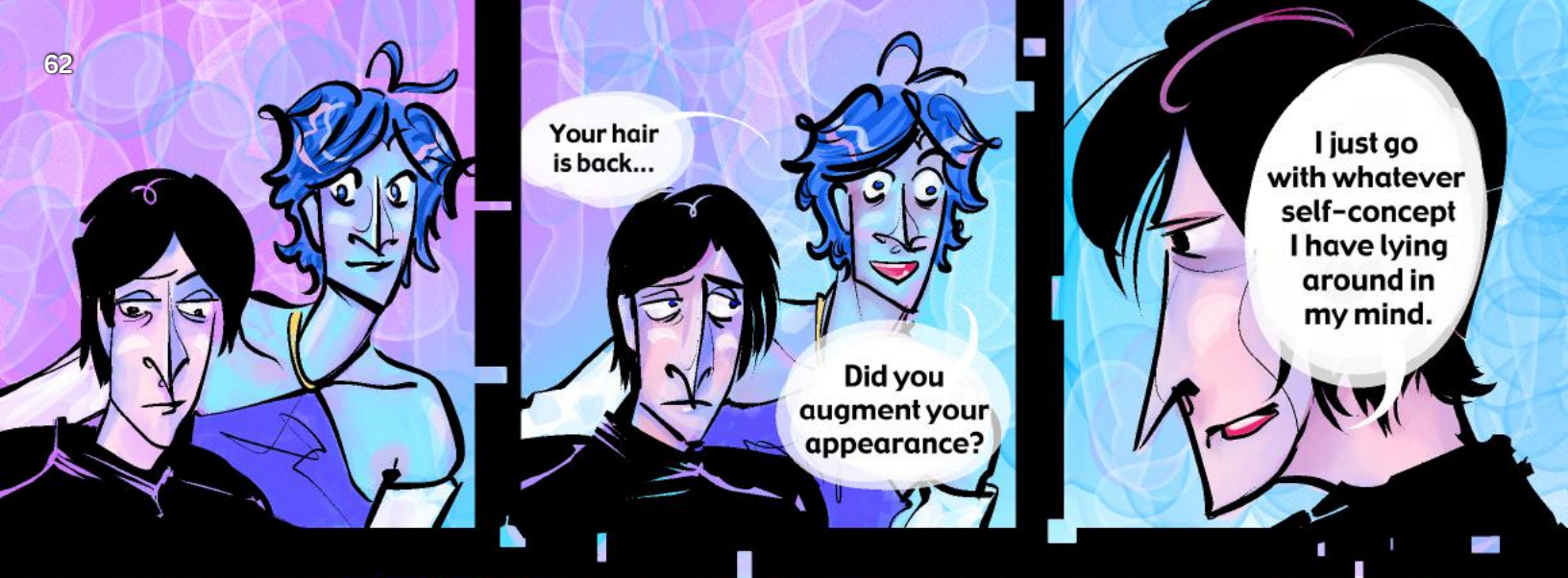





















Haven't you given him reason to worry, though? A moment ago, I said that your interests are dangerous.

Are you already dabbling in dimensional magic? Are you doing something involving the lagoon?



It hardly counts if the experiments are unsuccessful.

So, I guessed correctly. You need to stop immediately.




But I have workers. Employees.

Give them different jobs.



There's plenty of environmental work to be done.

Are you neglecting your own element?



All of that stuff is so easy for me to do. Especially with melceys to help...



Am I really that weird to be so interested in this type of magic?

Like. Am I crazy, or is this system full of strange loopholes that we could easily exploit for more resources...?



You're...not wrong.

Sorry, I seemed to lose my breath for a moment.

I'm not sure if you're aware, but Lem has always had a personal interest in this end of magic, from when he was about your age...

I remember him saying things like what you just said, to me.

What?

No, he must have meant something else.

This was all my own idea, he has no interest in it whatsoever.

I can assure you, he meant the same as you did.

How do you think he managed to defeat me in the old days?

Lem didn't just talk about loopholes.

He used one.

It's hard to believe, but once you put it that way...

I think I might have figured out why Lem & you don't get on.

You ...

remind him of himself.

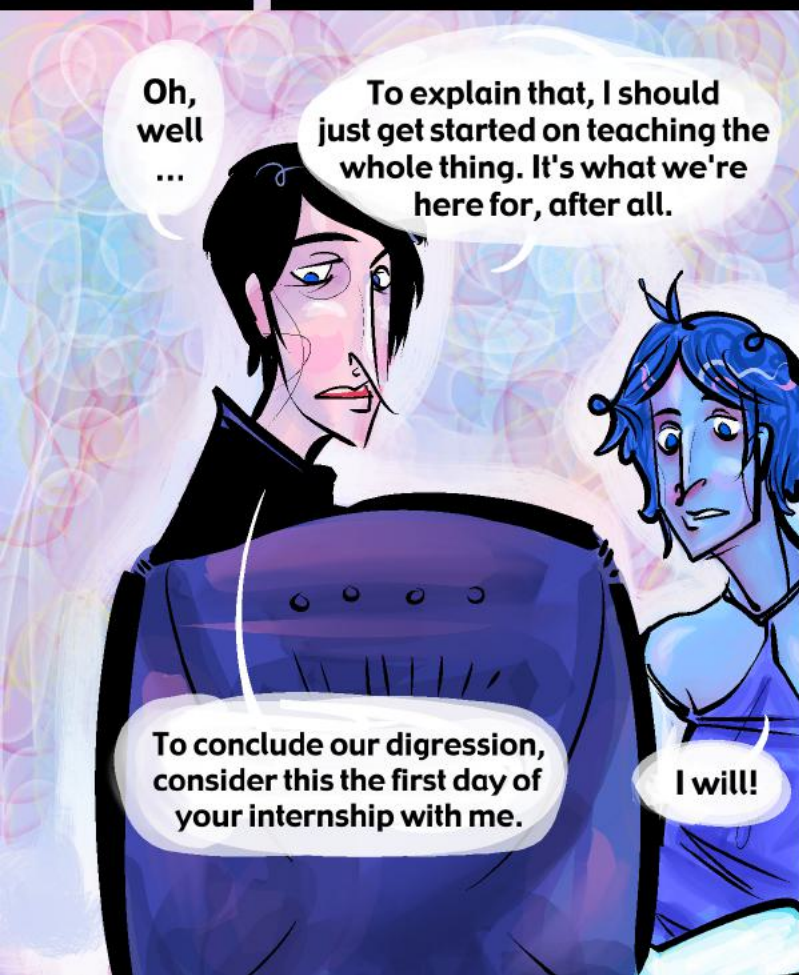




You might also cause injury to reality as we know it.

Like me & my portals & all the other issues this system has...

I have to be very careful.







We'll go through the process of resolving a single soul.



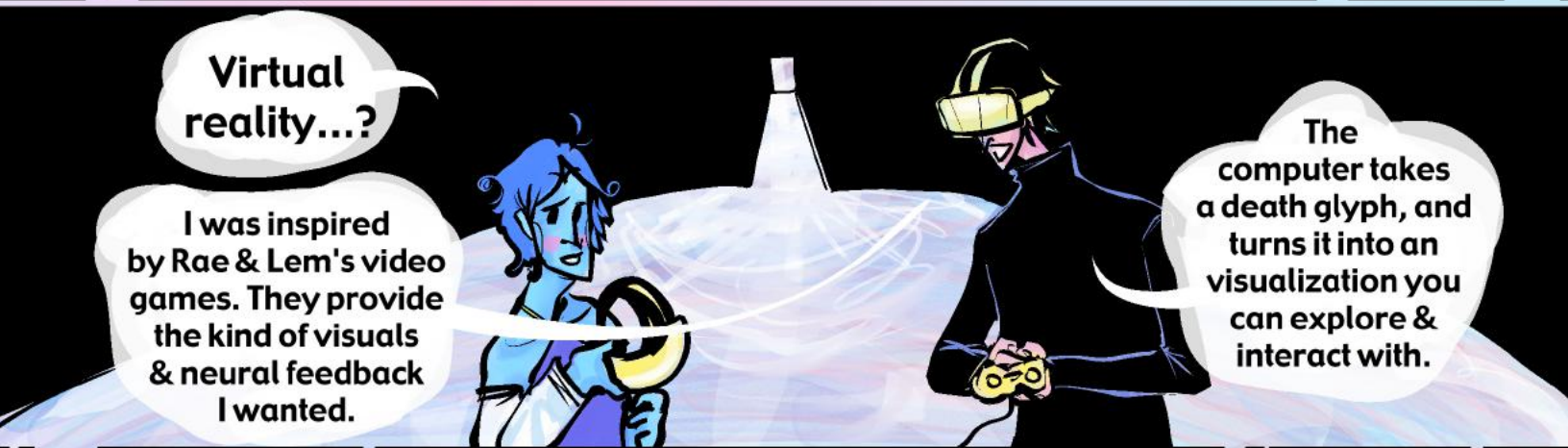
Do you have any issues with motion sickness?

Not that I know of.



Good!

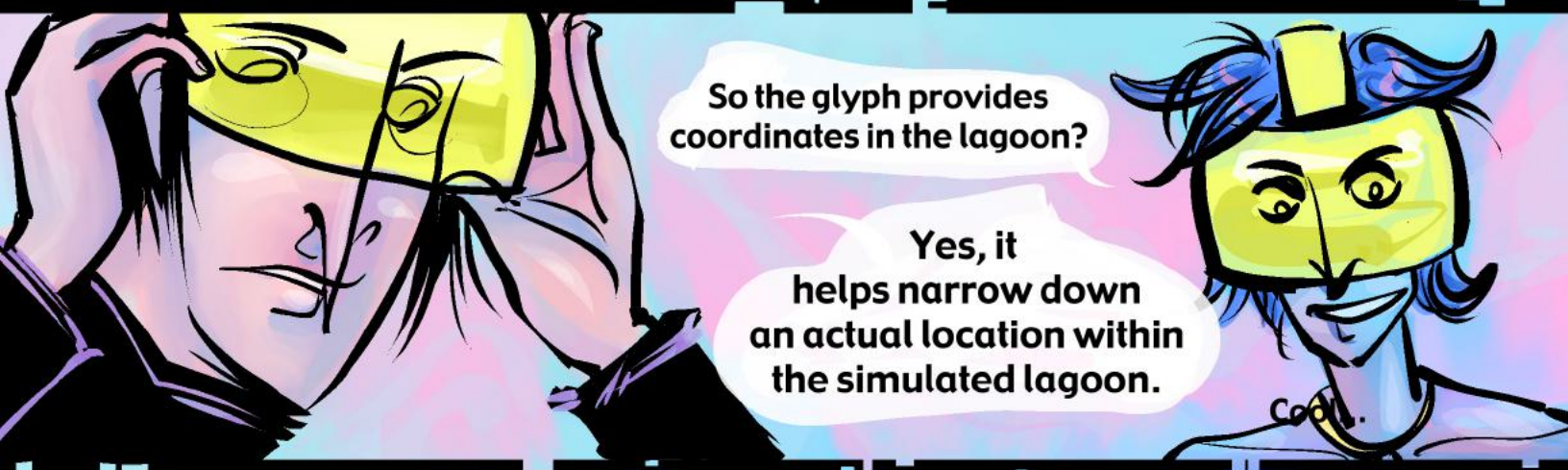
And I know you have experience with this equipment.



Virtual reality...?

I was inspired by Rae & Lem's video games. They provide the kind of visuals & neural feedback I wanted.

The computer takes a death glyph, and turns it into an visualization you can explore & interact with.



So the glyph provides coordinates in the lagoon?

Yes, it helps narrow down an actual location within the simulated lagoon.

Cool.



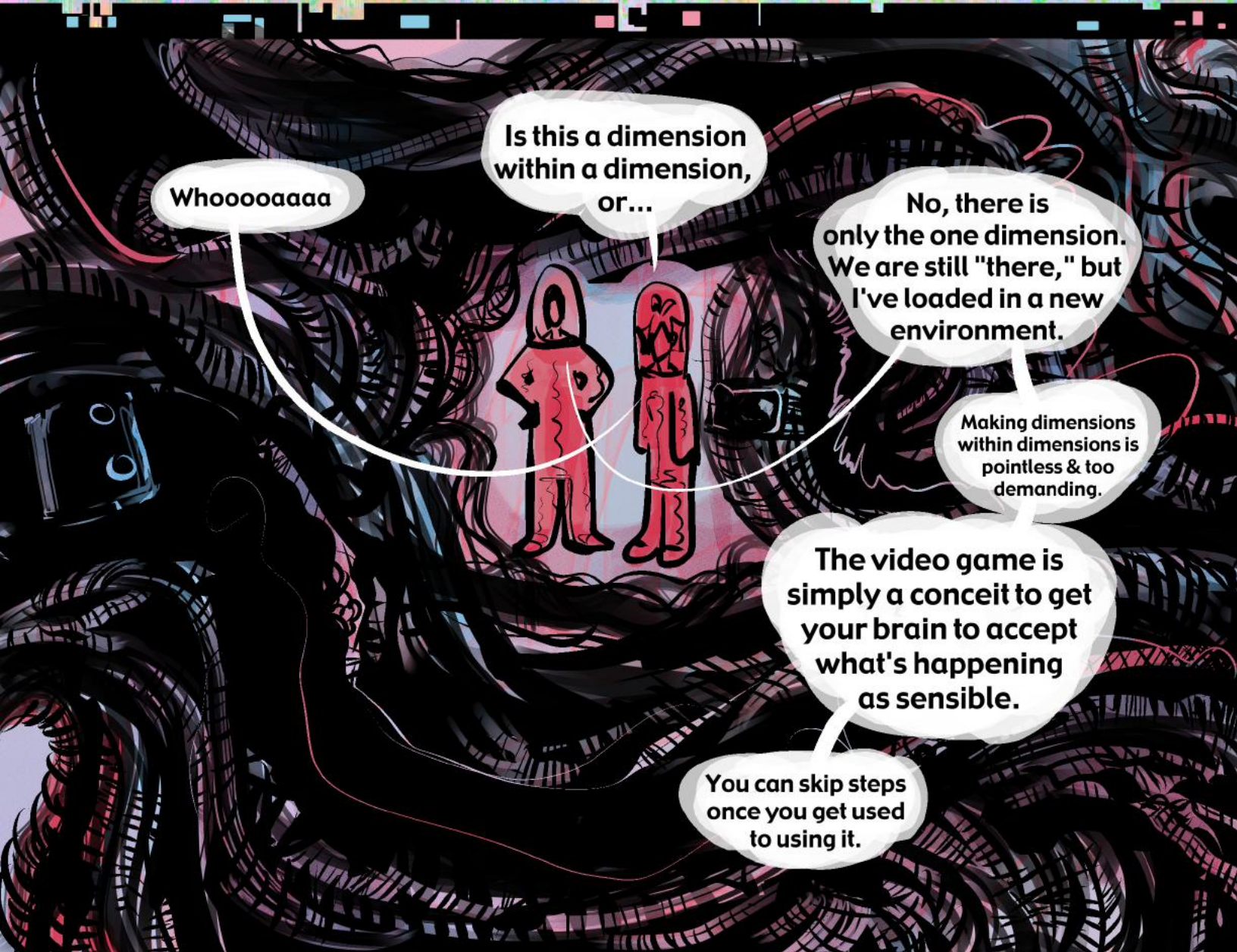
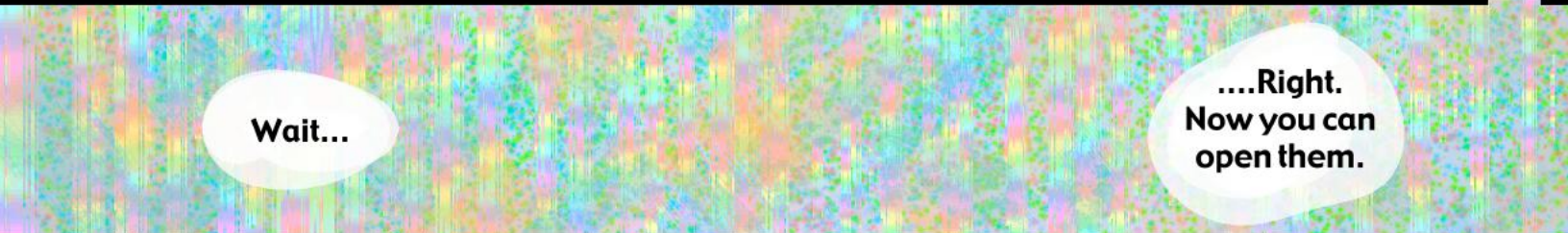
I guess we'll need chairs at first.

Now, I won't lie to you. This can be very frightening, but no harm will come to you.

Lem would never do anything as cool as this

Oh?









This reminds me of one of your earlier tangents.

What was it?  
How we should *live* inside pocket dimensions?

That's something you could argue used to be true...

Used to be...?



Way back when we didn't live on Faidia at all, just used it as a hub.



Living in a place I made seemed like a reasonable solution back then, when Faidia was nothing but a barren rock.


Seemed very inhospitable and uncomfortable back then.



Hold on to my hand. The gravity is strange in here.

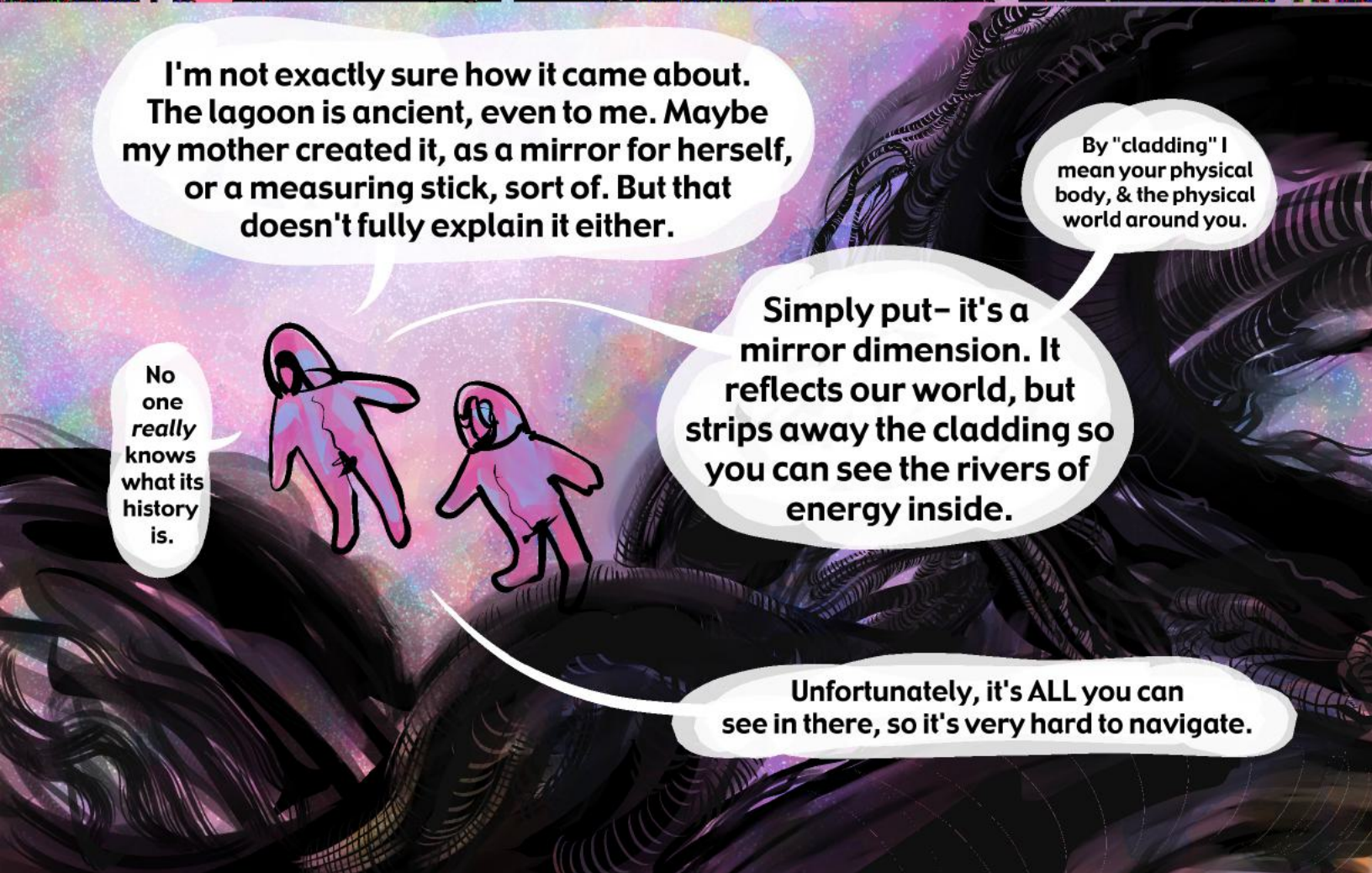
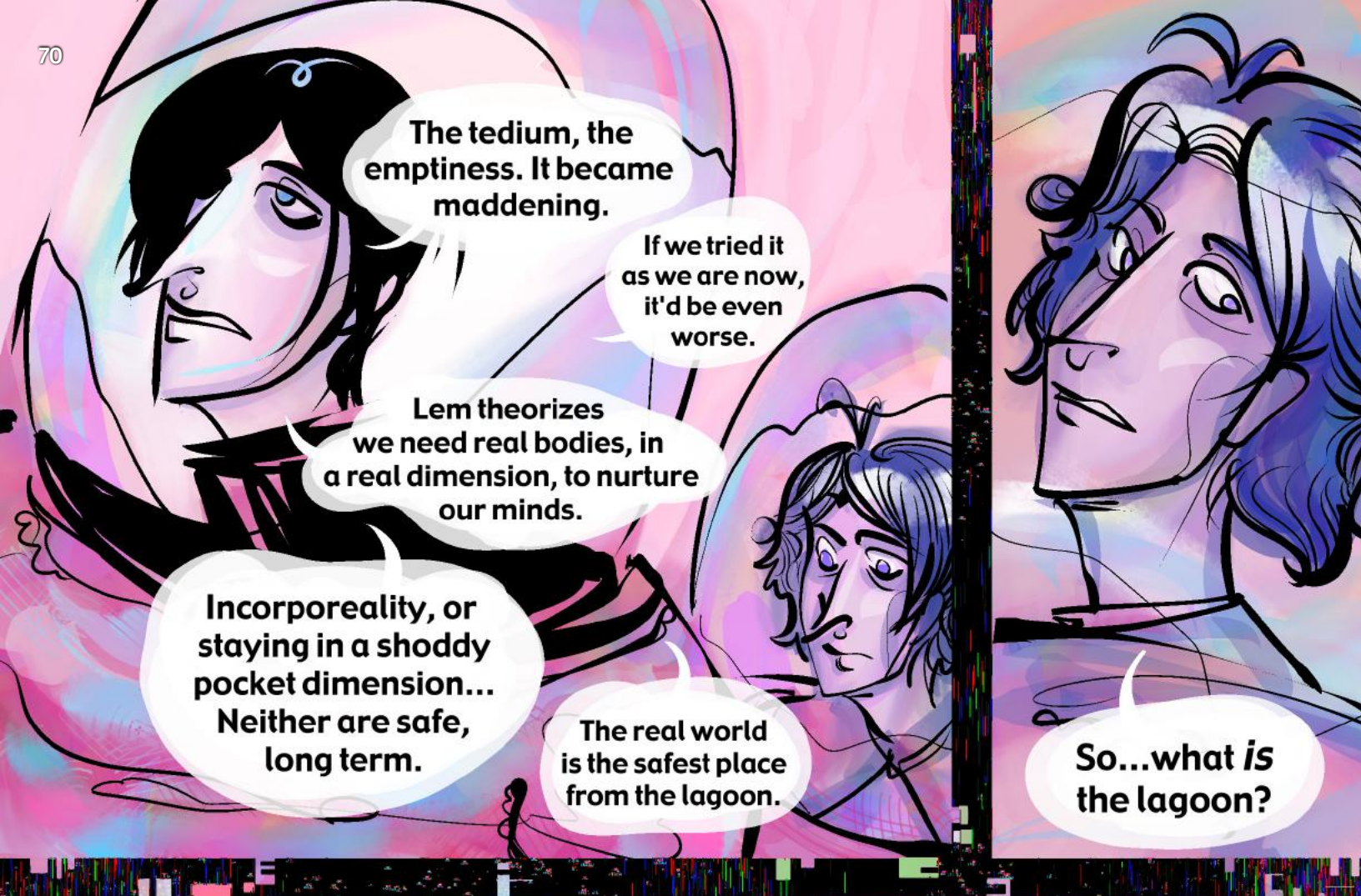
The problem with fake dimensions is that you're in charge. Nothing you didn't imagine takes place.

S-sempai...



We struggled to maintain a sense of time, so it was impossible to get a rhythm going.









And because it was seminal to life in Faidia, through Lem, everything alive has been grandfathered into its structure.



It could also be a bridge to other worlds like our own.

But it's a very dangerous thing to permit young beings to access.

We primaries have a theory the lagoon may have taken certain subconscious wishes of ours and made them manifest in the world.

So some weird things happened without us meaning it.



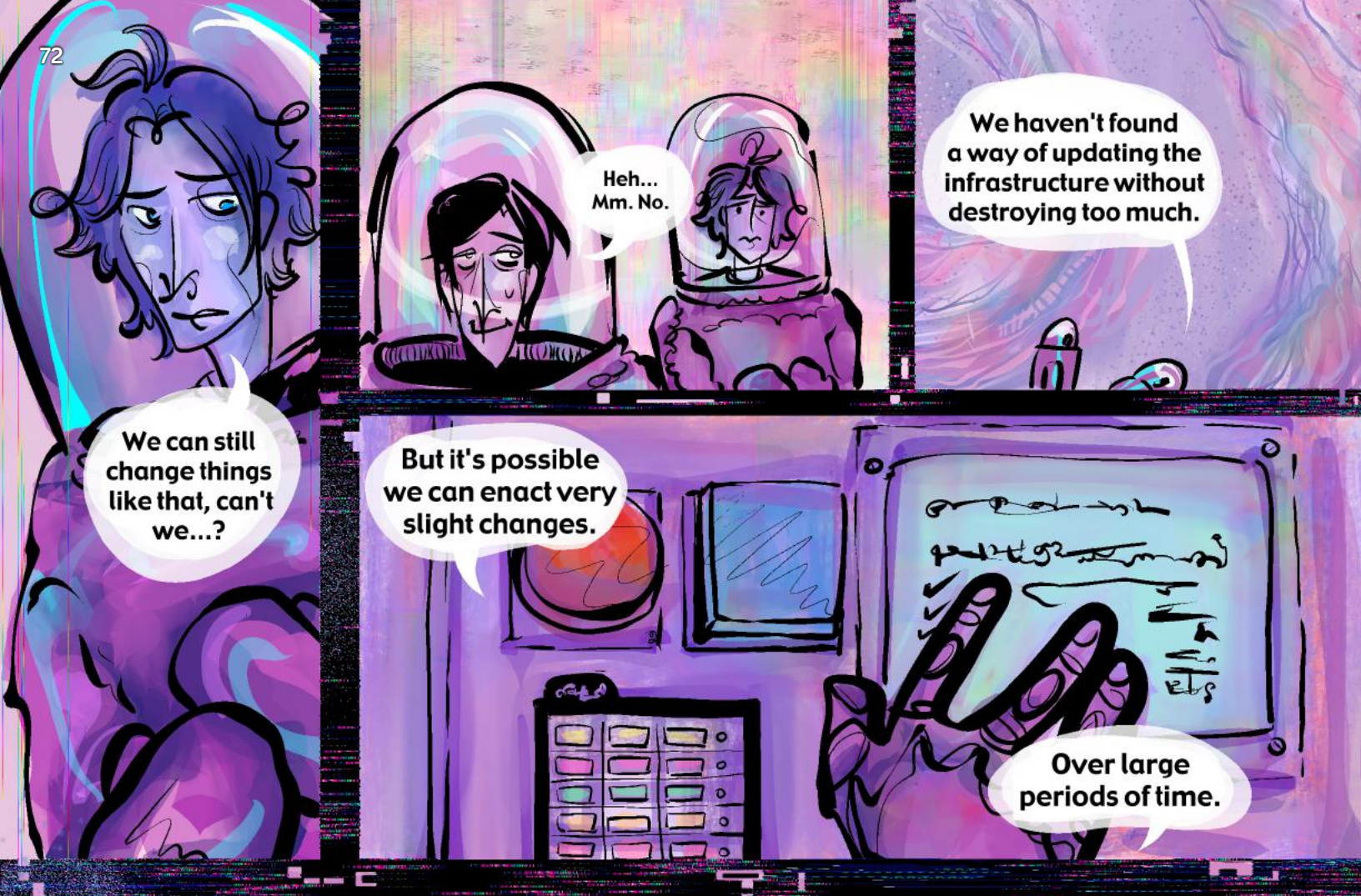
Lem thinks that's where elementals came from, in fact.

It could be that some passing thought caused this world to start manifesting avatars of its magic in people, creating elementals.

If that's the case... if we had been aware of what we were doing, we would have made better decisions.









Oh, it might be time to switch up the skin. This is an aspect I was looking forward to showing you!

This cable & gravity suit look is just the default theme.

There's also...

Fairy theme...

Mermaid theme...

And...

For some reason ...

A minecart sewer theme.

And the one I thought you'd fancy.

The standard cable one, but cool hacker robots instead of dome suits.

You were right. This is my fav.

Careful, though.

The gravity is still wonky.

Oh...You're not in control of that?

It's buggy for whatever reason.

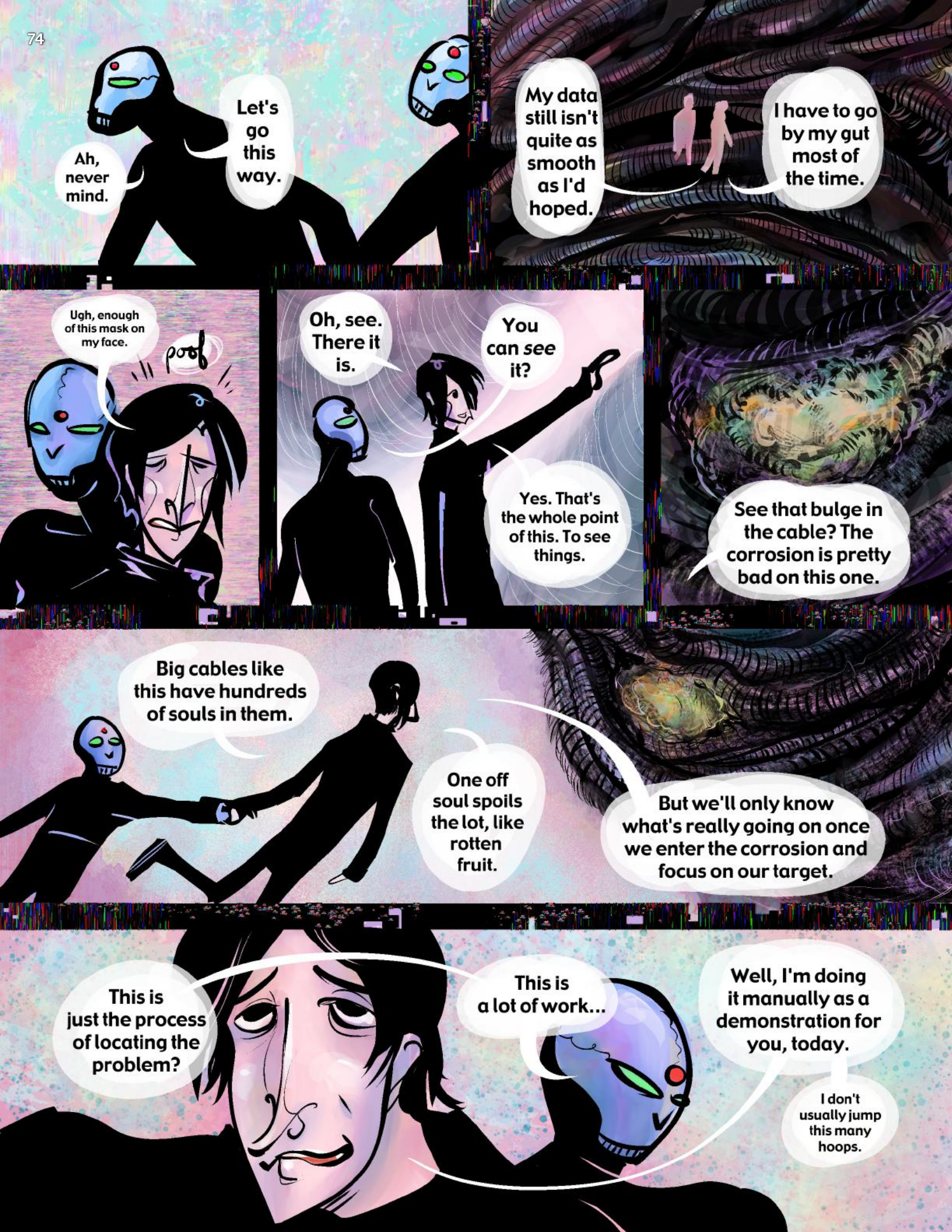
Hmm... That's lame.

I would have fixed that by now...

That's all it took for you to lose faith...?

You really are a kid...





Ah,  
never  
mind.

Let's  
go  
this  
way.

My data  
still isn't  
quite as  
smooth  
as I'd  
hoped.

I have to go  
by my gut  
most of  
the time.

Ugh, enough  
of this mask on  
my face.

Oh, see.  
There it  
is.

You  
can see  
it?

Yes. That's  
the whole point  
of this. To see  
things.

See that bulge in  
the cable? The  
corrosion is pretty  
bad on this one.

Big cables like  
this have hundreds  
of souls in them.

One off  
soul spoils  
the lot, like  
rotten  
fruit.

But we'll only know  
what's really going on once  
we enter the corrosion and  
focus on our target.

This is  
just the process  
of locating the  
problem?

This is  
a lot of work...

Well, I'm doing  
it manually as a  
demonstration for  
you, today.

I don't  
usually jump  
this many  
hoops.



Now,  
please do  
not touch  
anything  
yet.

Interacting with it  
might suck you in before  
you're ready.

Uh, so, what  
are we in for?

At this point,  
I can only guess  
at what's inside  
based on some  
readings.



Hm...  
Not too  
weird.

It looks  
extremely  
disgusting.

Everything  
here is aesthetic.

Even so,  
I made it to look  
bad because it  
IS bad.



Common, small  
problems can be  
handled remotely  
from my console,



and mostly accomplished  
with the aid of bots.

A massive corruption  
like this requires me  
to handle it personally.

These instances occur  
when really bad things happen  
to a lot of living things.

Disasters  
erode the integrity  
of these channels,  
destroying the  
relationships that  
connect these  
living things  
together.

I try to restore  
them as best as I can.  
I oversee the  
channels...

And  
Lem controls  
the flow of energy  
through them.





But for these funky areas, extra steps are needed.

It's not just a material repair job, but a psychic one.

*poof*

A stick?

I'm gonna poke it.

Some of them are incredibly hard, and I have to saw them open...

Others, like this one, are pretty soft.

Next I make an opening just big enough for the two of us...

*scrape  
scrape*

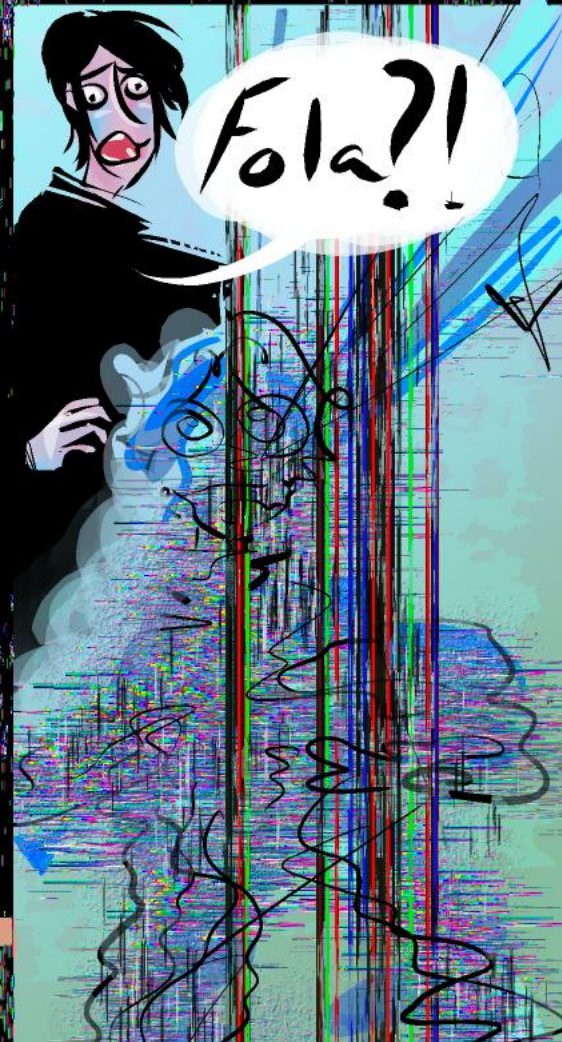
There. All done.

Now, we jump in.

Just like that?!

Uh huh.













This is a type  
of spirit emanated  
by vast quantities  
of life.

They  
protect  
the bed of life  
they sprang  
from.

They  
are strictly  
incorporeal  
thus far.

They're  
the closest  
thing to a god  
I've encountered  
yet on Faidia...  
besides us  
I mean.

God...

Their existence  
is certainly a surprise,  
isn't it?

They are mostly  
peaceful, but if there's  
been any conflict,  
I've withdrawn to  
avoid fighting.



Are any  
of the mortal  
religions aware  
of these spirits?

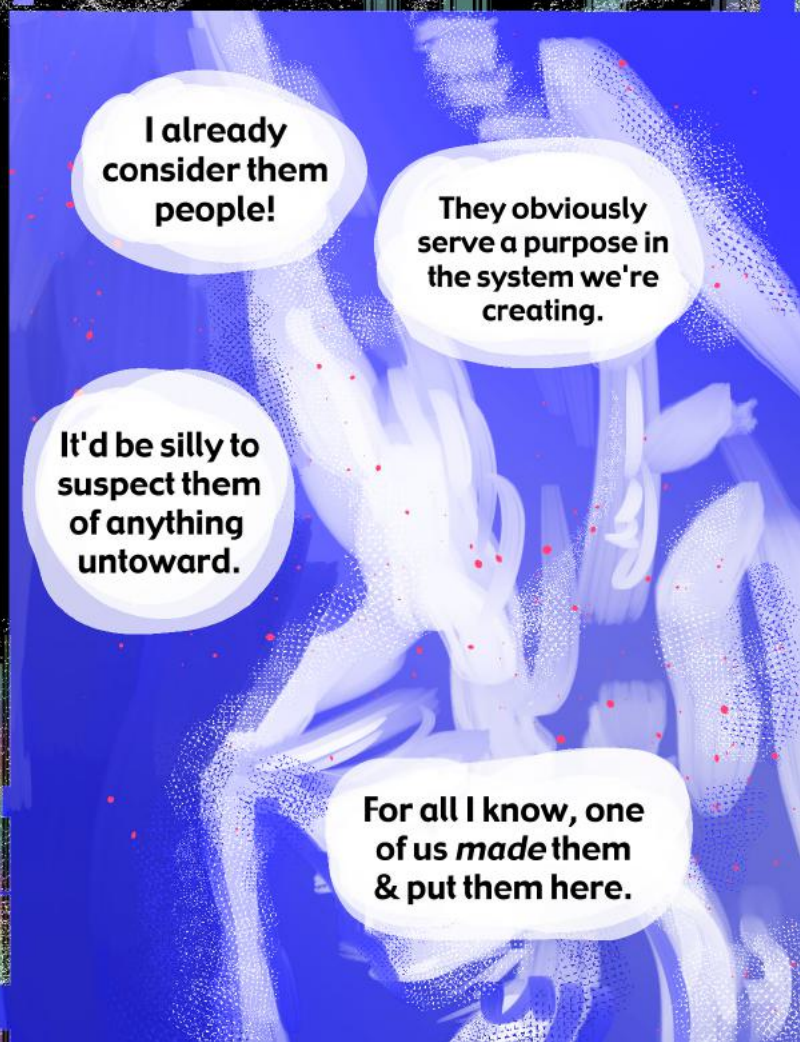
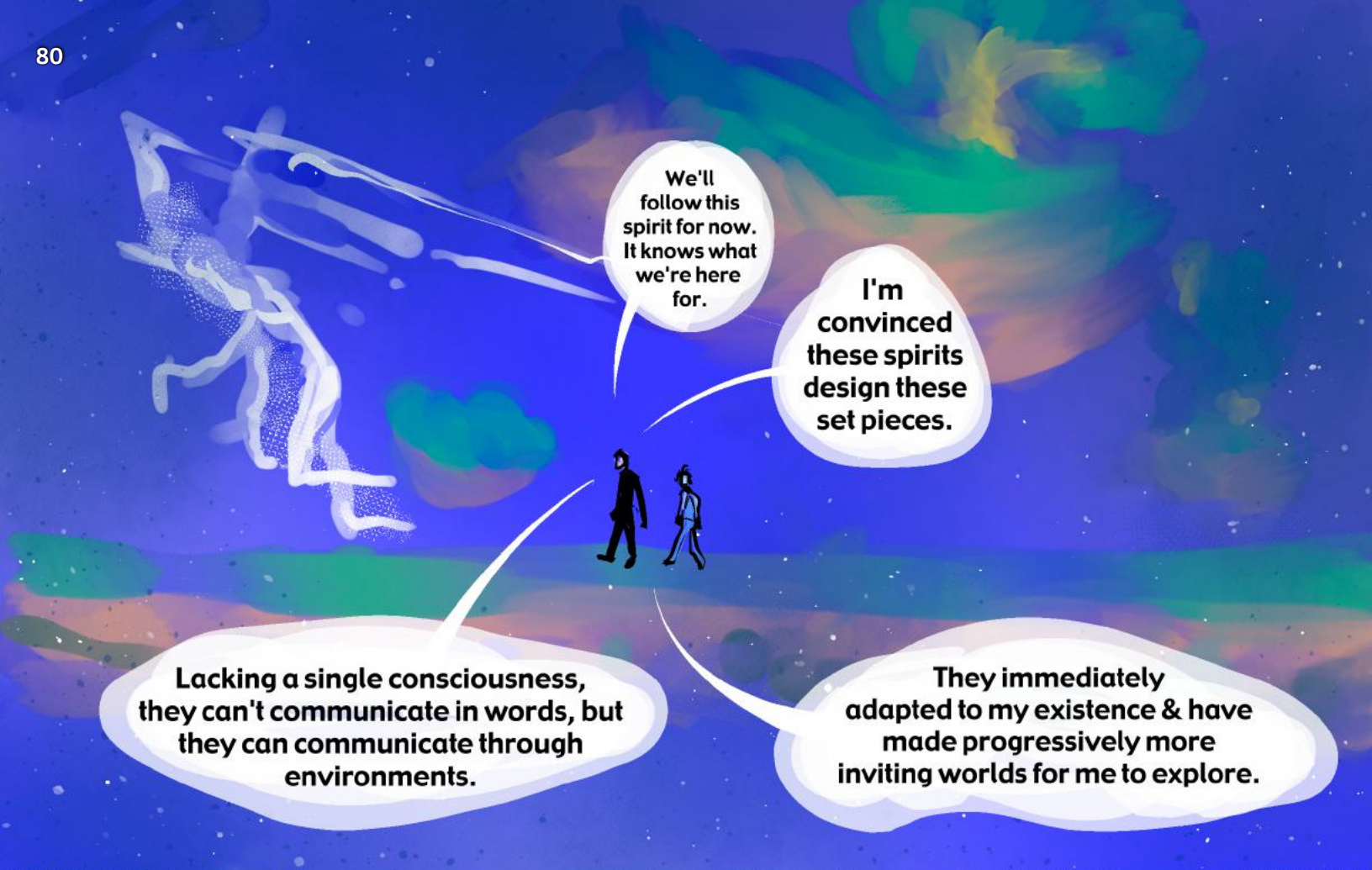
To some  
degree.

But you can  
ask Lem about it.  
He likes mortal  
religions.

I'm confident by now  
they are a benevolent  
force, even in badly  
damaged locales  
like this one.

They want  
the dead under  
their watch to rest  
even more than  
we do.









How embarrassing would it be if we attacked one of our own creations for no good reason?



But sir.

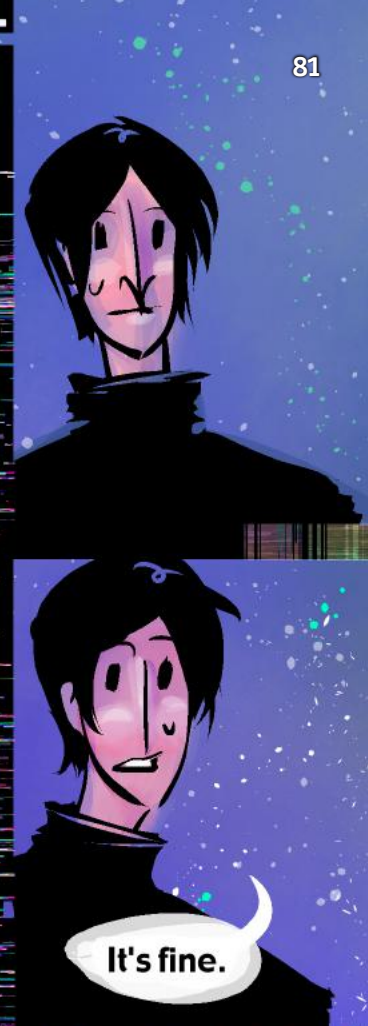
If you say it that way... Aren't you in prison for doing something just like that? I mean...

There's already a precedent because you...



Er, I'm sorry. I have this habit of just saying things that pop into my head when I'm confused.

I don't mean to offend.



It's fine.



I was confused, myself.

I got fixated on the "creation" aspect. I never created anything.

But I see what you mean, now.



You should try creating something!

It's **VERY** rewarding.



I'll take that into consideration.

I am quite enjoying gardening...

Lem likes that, too! He does it all the time.



Um, Fola...

Is there something else on your mind, still?

I let it drop, because I thought it upset you. But you keep bringing Lem back up.

Oh. Well. Thank you, but ...

Since the trial, it's been really obvious to me that Lem is nasty because of you.

It'd make MY life a lot easier if he were like, stable.

Seeing this today, now I know it'd be better magically, too.

I've learned the value of "teamed" work, you see.

So, while I appreciate you being nice to me, it'd help a lot more if you treated *everyone* nice from now on, not just me.

Otherwise, your favoritism will only create problems for everyone.

A-ah.

Good points, Fola.

I-I'll do my best, but are you sure you're not repeating something you've heard? Something May said?

Nope! It all came from my own mind.

I think what I experienced today is what they call an "internalized scream."



Anyway, here we are at the spirit's "challenge."

Solve the puzzle, save the soul.

The spirit has linked the snarled soul we're after to this puzzle.

The snarl is cleared, mana flows once again, yada yada.

There's a very shallow amount of water in the pool.

There's a small pitcher.

And a cistern floating in the air above.

So we take the water and pour it in the cistern?

Easy.

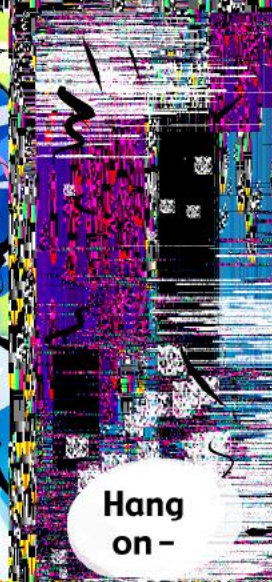
pinky....

Nice.

Secondaries are so good at these feats.

Shaaaaa

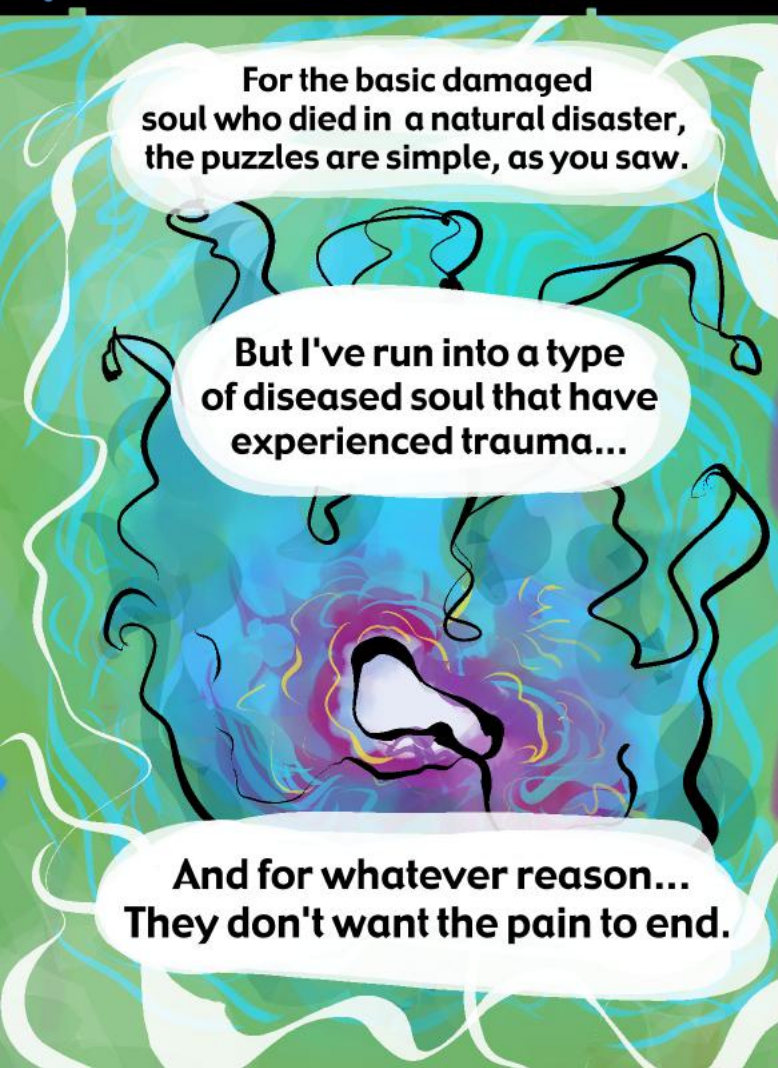
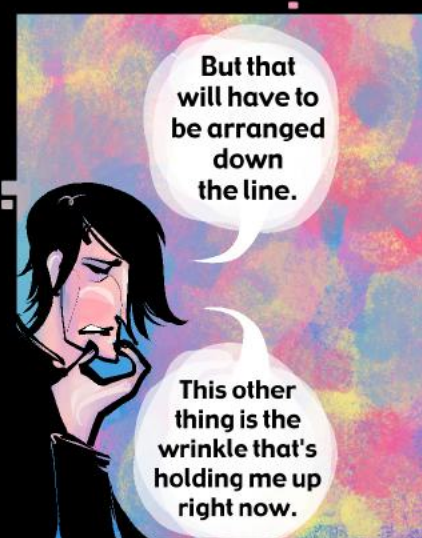




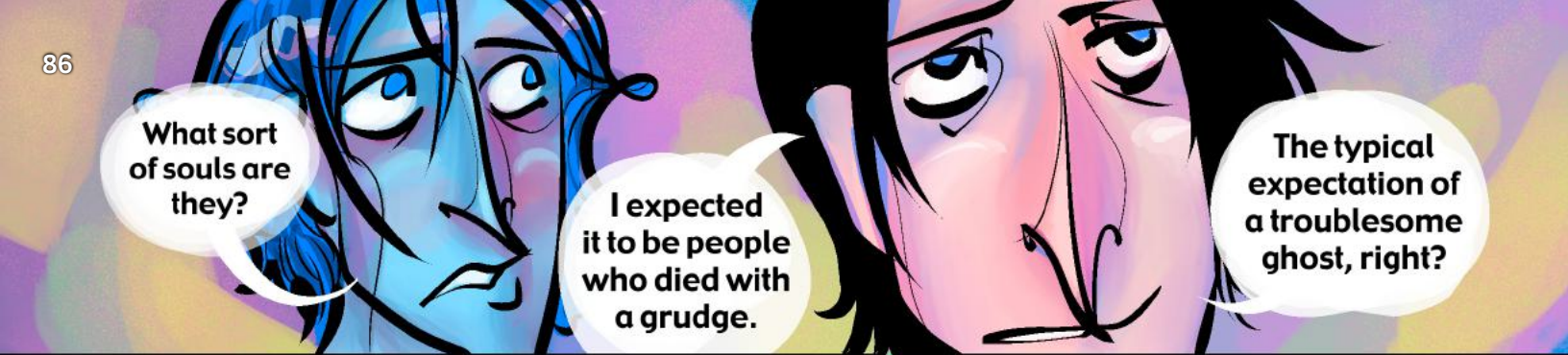




Unfortunately, there are *millions* like them.








What sort of souls are they?

I expected it to be people who died with a grudge.


The typical expectation of a troublesome ghost, right?



But those are satisfied with a simple revenge story. A little attention, and they're on their way.


No, the truly troublesome ones sought to meld with other living things *before* death.

It doesn't actually make mortals live longer...but they can get strong in weird ways.



They suck sap from the living souls of their neighbors, instead of from the stream through their aperture, like they're supposed to.

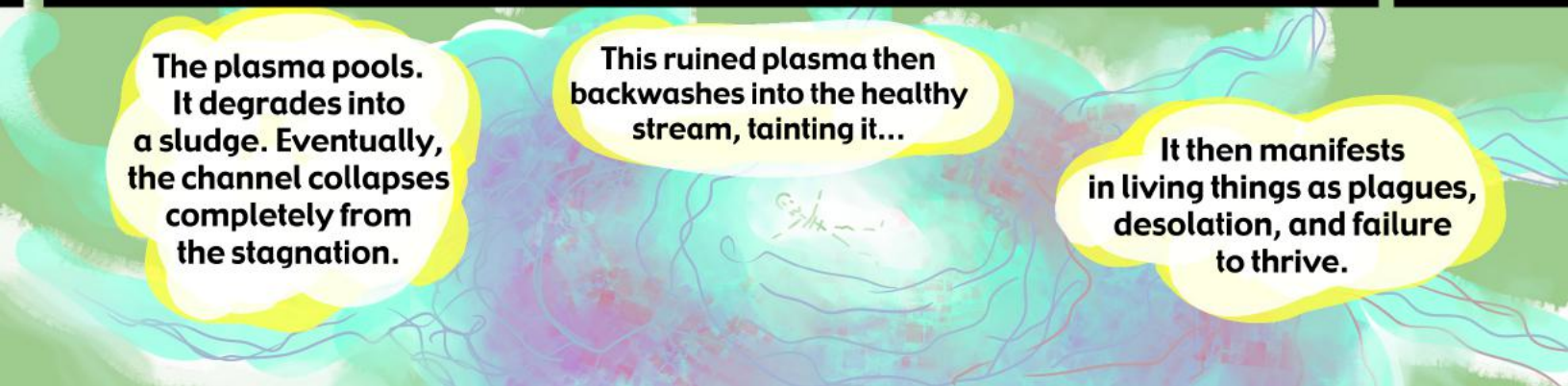
After dragging down everyone around them for however long, they die. Normally, a dead soul dissipates, leaves an empty channel & a solidified aperture, through which plasma continues to flow.



But these souls are stuck in place by virtue of their illicit attachments.

These instances are inevitable, but I have to get them under control somehow.

These souls can't *use* the energy, because they are dead, but their "zombie" aperture continues to draw on the living. The connections may tear from stress, increasing the rate of the leaks.



The plasma pools. It degrades into a sludge. Eventually, the channel collapses completely from the stagnation.

This ruined plasma then backwashes into the healthy stream, tainting it...

It then manifests in living things as plagues, desolation, and failure to thrive.





So that's what's holding me up.

I would need a whole other **system** just for these situations!



Do you know what conditions lead to this?

Not exactly.

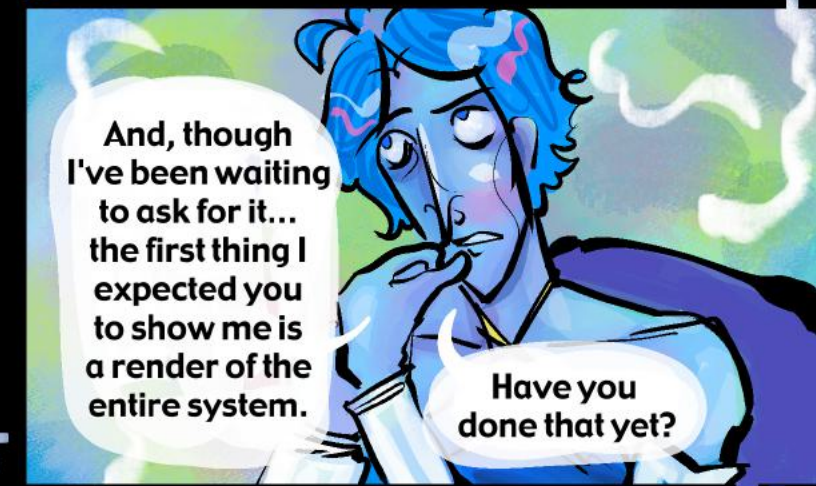
I have some leads, but finding examples we have full knowledge of...



How about looking at your family with this?

Have you looked at your own soul?

learn



And, though I've been waiting to ask for it... the first thing I expected you to show me is a render of the entire system.

Have you done that yet?



Not...yet. To either question.



Why not?

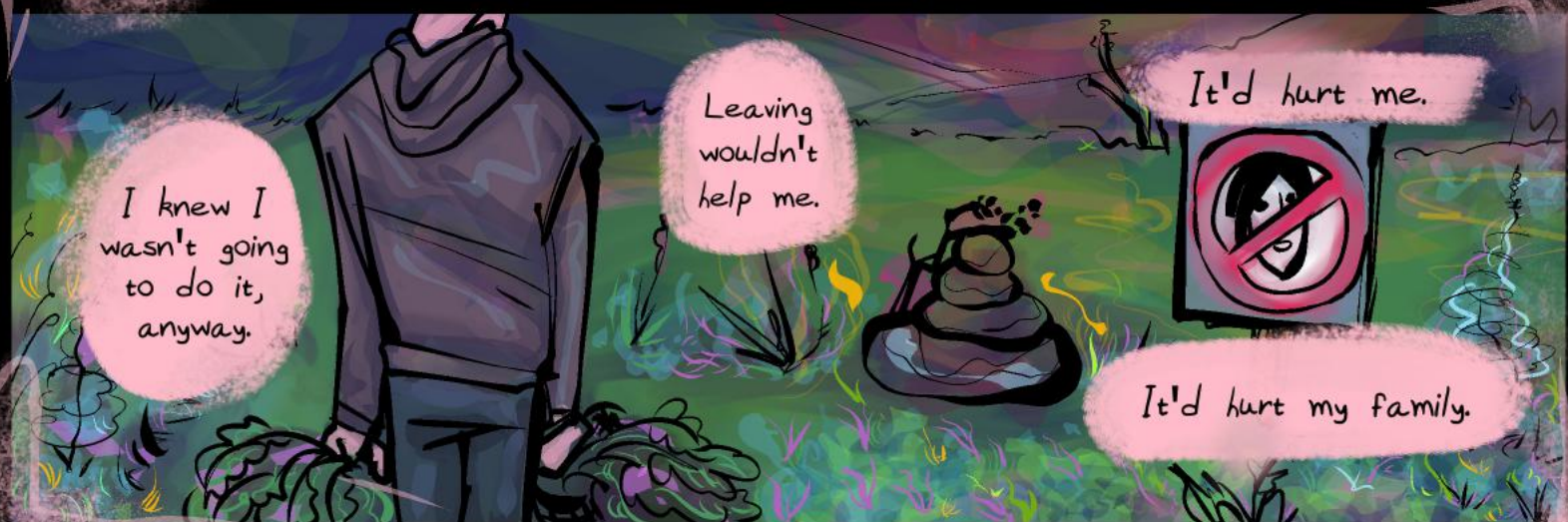


I'm sorry, but...




I think we're out of time for the day, Fola.







A person with dark hair and a purple shirt is holding a green plant stem with both hands. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of green, blue, and purple.

If I understand anything, it's pain.

Receiving it.  
Giving it.

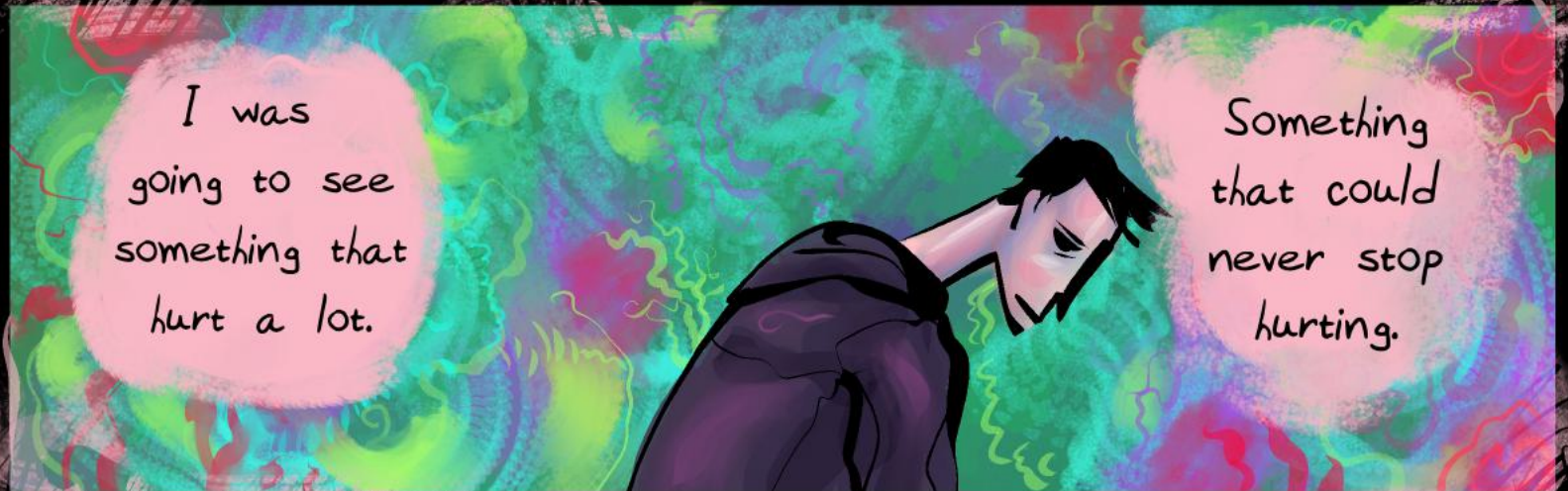
A close-up of a person's face, looking down at a green plant stem they are holding. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of green, blue, and purple.

What things will  
cause what sorts of  
pain, and how much.

How  
much pain I have  
to give to others  
before I'll feel  
less of it  
myself.

A person is holding a green plant stem with both hands. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of green, blue, and purple.

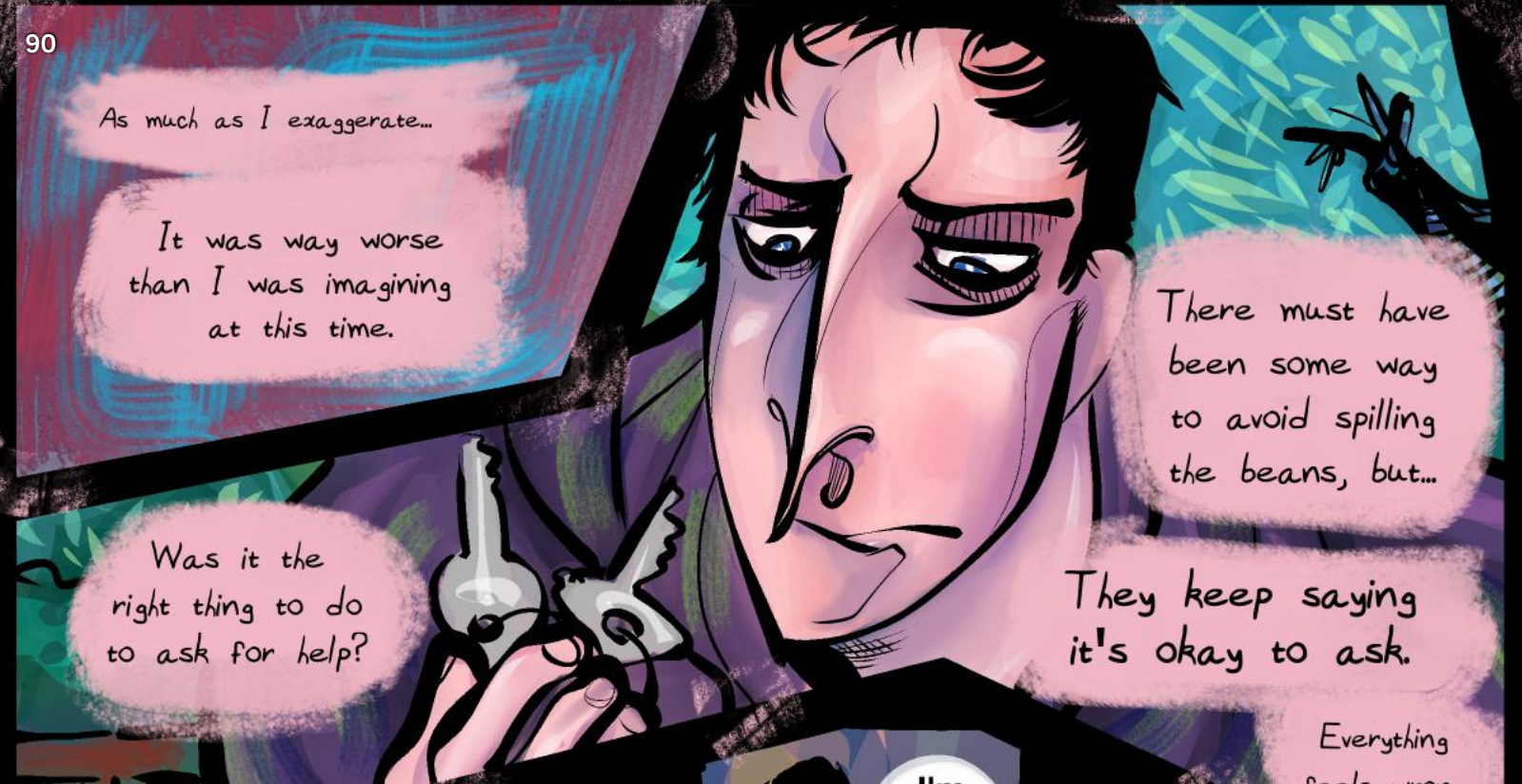
So I knew  
right away that if I  
did what Fola had  
suggested....

A person is holding a green plant stem with both hands. The background is a vibrant, abstract mix of green, blue, and purple.

I was  
going to see  
something that  
hurt a lot.

Something  
that could  
never stop  
hurting.





As much as I exaggerate...

It was way worse  
than I was imagining  
at this time.

Was it the  
right thing to do  
to ask for help?

There must have  
been some way  
to avoid spilling  
the beans, but...

They keep saying  
it's okay to ask.


Everything  
feels wrong



I'm  
home.

Sorry to ramble.  
I know this doesn't  
make any sense.

Rae says  
it's the brain  
damage.



Around this point,  
I thought, "maybe  
it'll be okay."  
I didn't actually  
know anything for  
sure yet.

Wow, you found a lot.  
Put em in the kitchen,  
please. Rae said he'd  
rinse them in a bit.

I was  
just assuming,  
after all.









And they still show  
kindness to me like this.

When you experience pain when  
something nice happens...doesn't that  
mean there's something deeply  
wrong with you?

What normal person would  
react to goodness this way?  
Isn't it natural to wonder?

I know there  
is something wrong with me.

I've known  
since the beginning.





I  
guess I've  
given it away  
already, but  
I also don't  
even know  
how to say  
it...

I've given  
it up.

I surrender.



May,  
please...

May, promise me...  
Promise you'll have  
mercy on me.

Oh, Cal,  
why are you  
crying?!

Please have  
mercy on me.





Oh my gosh  
Cal what's wrong  
what's going on  
Cal what-

Rae, stay calm.  
Send Lem a necco.  
Might be nothing  
but better safe  
than sorry

R-right.

I'm sorry...



I didn't  
mean to get  
so emotional...  
I'll try to...  
to "chill  
out."

I need to  
ask you two for  
help. It's something  
I have to do...but I'm  
scared to go  
alone...

It's...like this....





That's all?



You want us to look at something in your video game?

Sure. Easy!  
But what's so upsetting about that?



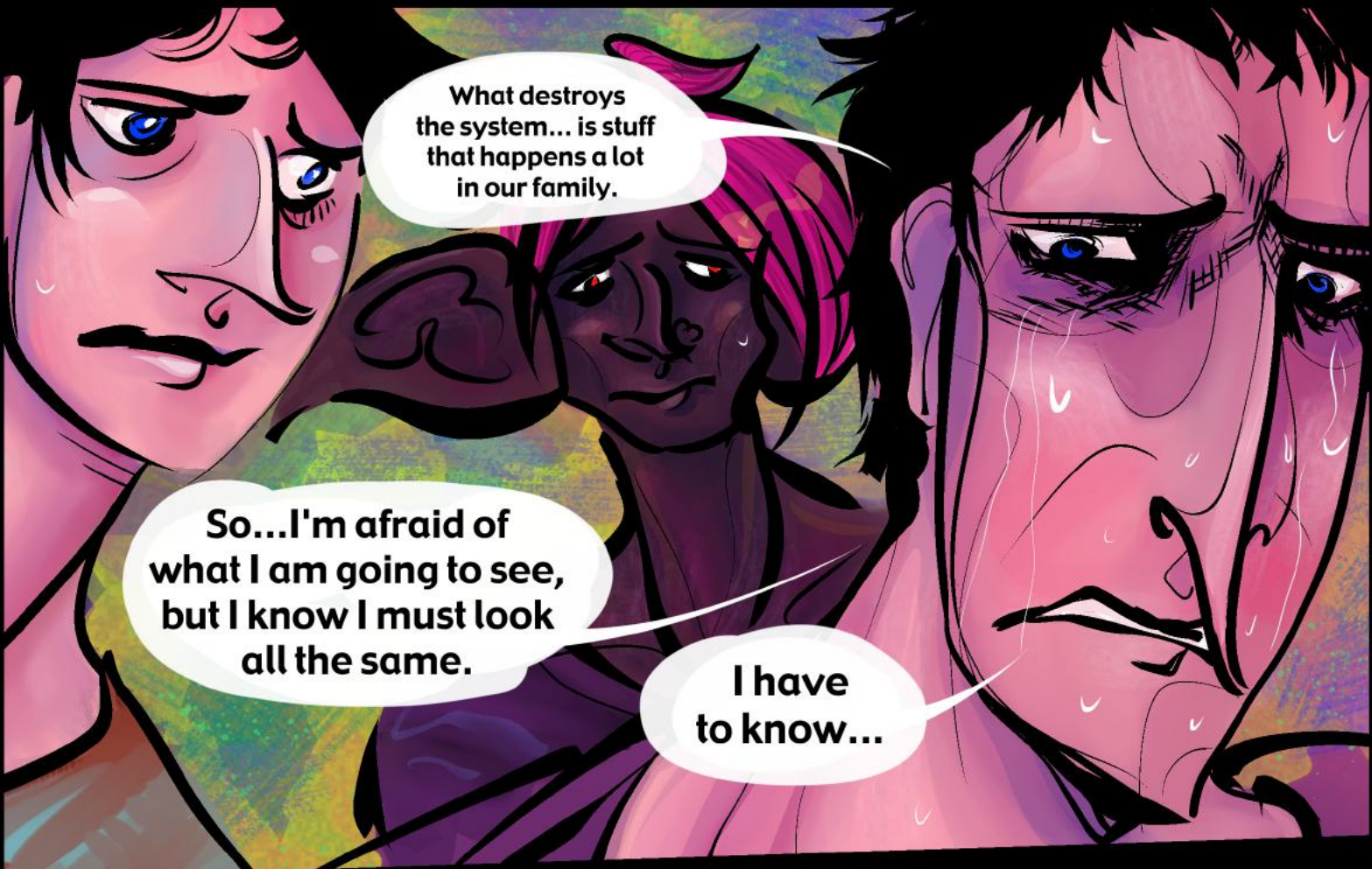
It's not just a game.  
It's a real model of the plasma flowing through Faidia.



Fola asked if I'd ever looked at my own soul in the model.

Or the souls of my family...

I hadn't even thought of doing it...



What destroys the system... is stuff that happens a lot in our family.

So...I'm afraid of what I am going to see, but I know I must look all the same.

I have to know...





I could really use a cigarette right about now.

Let's go have a look.

Lead the way, Cal.

We're going after all...?

I really hope this is nothing, Cal.

Hold my hand, Rae. We have to go, but I'll protect you, all right?

M...Me too..

















Lem...

I've been looking for you since yesterday.

You've been... working in a *bar*?

Do you have any idea what we've been through in the past 24 hours  
....



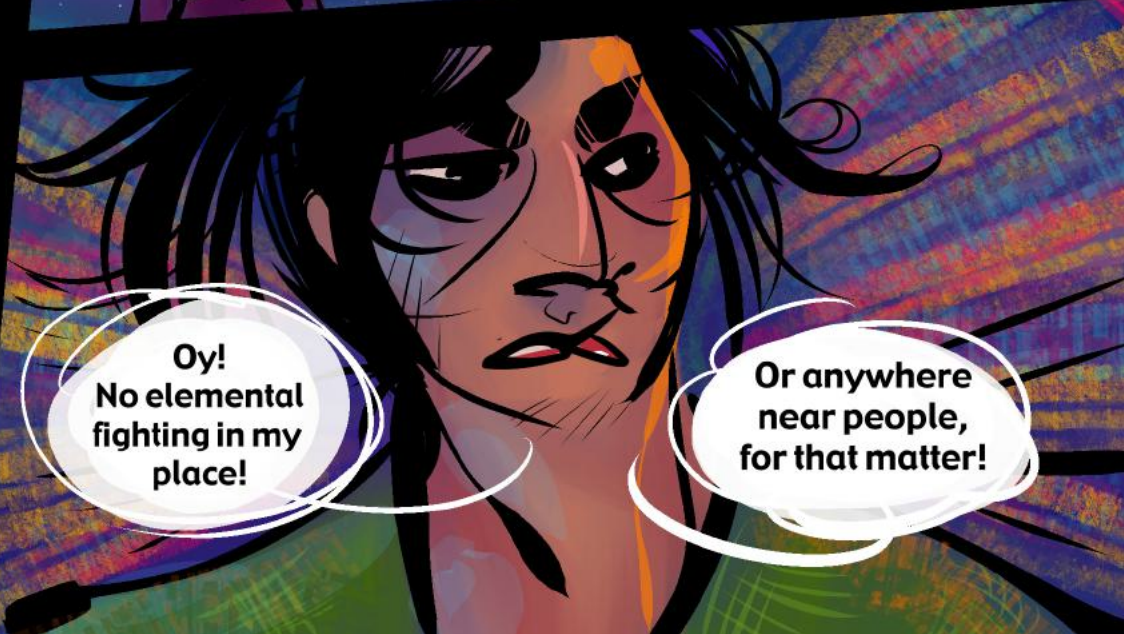
May.

What...

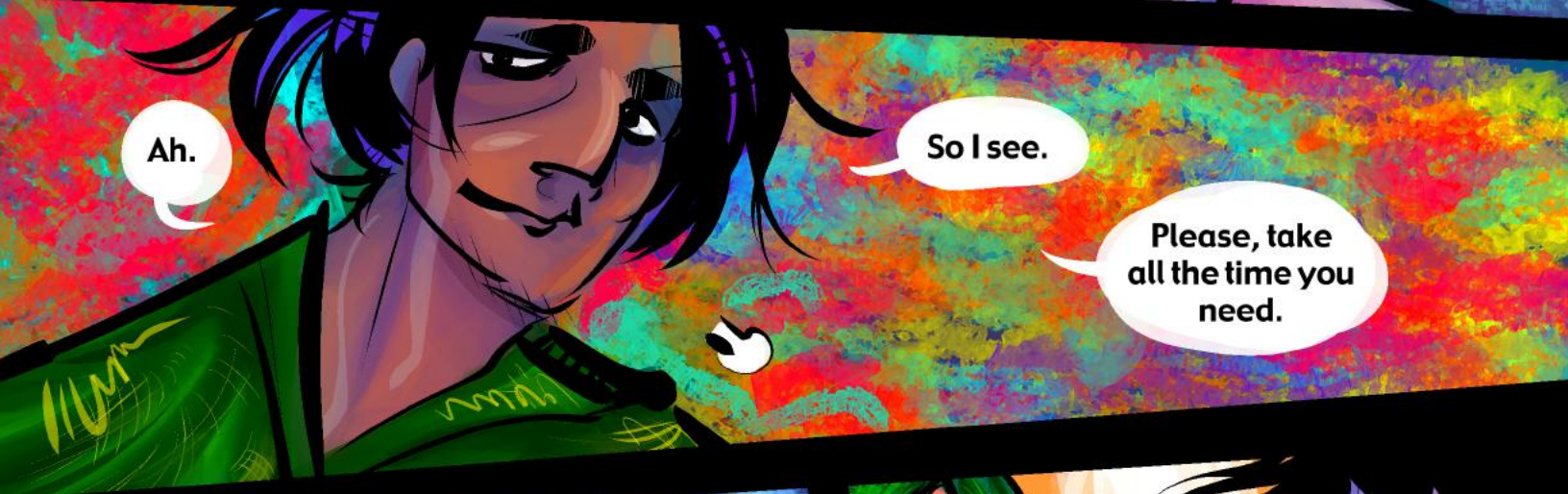


Oy!  
No elemental fighting in my place!

Or anywhere near people, for that matter!











Are you getting drunk?

No. I'm not getting drunk.

Barlowe's family has owned this tavern for generations. They're vampires.

I came here once when it originally opened.

He wants me to reverse engineer a cocktail I had then.

We have a bit of a fetch quest going with each other.

Oh.

Well, I'm getting drunk. As if I'd want to be sober while I interrogate you, of all people.

I don't want this to be happening & I don't even know what it is.

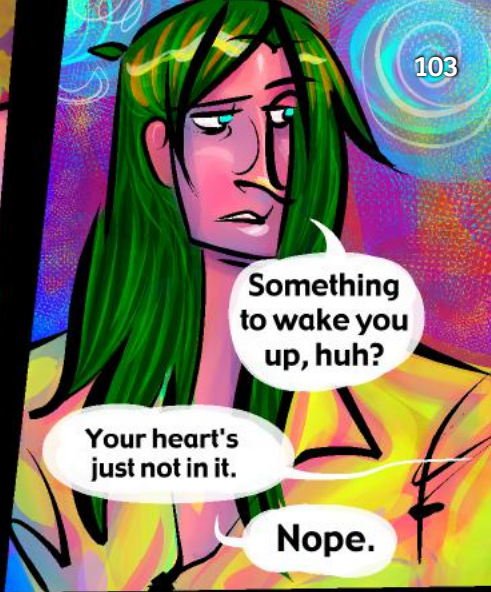




Bottoms up.



Hahhh.  
Smooth.



Something  
to wake you  
up, huh?

Your heart's  
just not in it.

Nope.



Lem....

I shouldn't have  
said that stuff to you.  
I'm sorry.

You  
need to  
be able to  
get away  
when you  
need to.  
I agreed  
to it.

Ah. It's fine.

Since  
you didn't tell me  
anything through  
the egregore...

Uh  
huh.

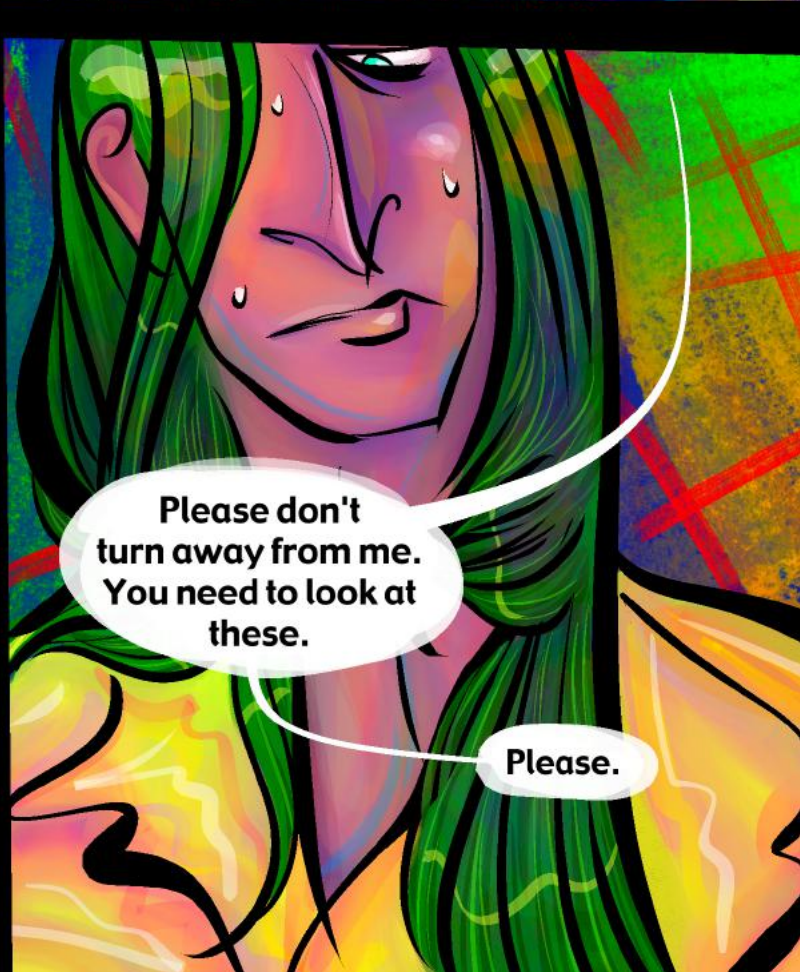
**You're  
in the  
hot seat  
tonight.**



I know this  
is embarrassing.

I'll just  
get to the  
point as fast  
as I can.

I have  
pictures.



Please don't  
turn away from me.  
You need to look at  
these.

Please.







First picture should be a familiar one. This old engraving.

One of the oldest pieces of Faidian mysticism.

It depicts the "tree of life," and shows the three known primaries, Lemanerial, Callanerial, and Mayaner as the three great roots of the tree.

It's outdated now, of course, because of Rae.



Oh wow, this old chestnut. I haven't seen it in so long.

I always found it so quaint.



It's a little more than quaint, it turns out.

As you'll see from... not that one..this one.





Cal rendered an ideal tree of life, like the engraving, using the engine he made to interface with the tree...

It's a huge gnarled mass and it took a lot of adjustments to get a legible picture... But here it is.

Four big roots. The primary elementals.

Just like the engraving, but Rae is there.

Where is the real one?

Ah.

Here.

That's what the real tree looks like.

So.

Now you know.





Know  
what,  
Lem?



SNIF  
You know  
what Cal's  
theory is?

He seemed  
to understand  
right from  
the start.

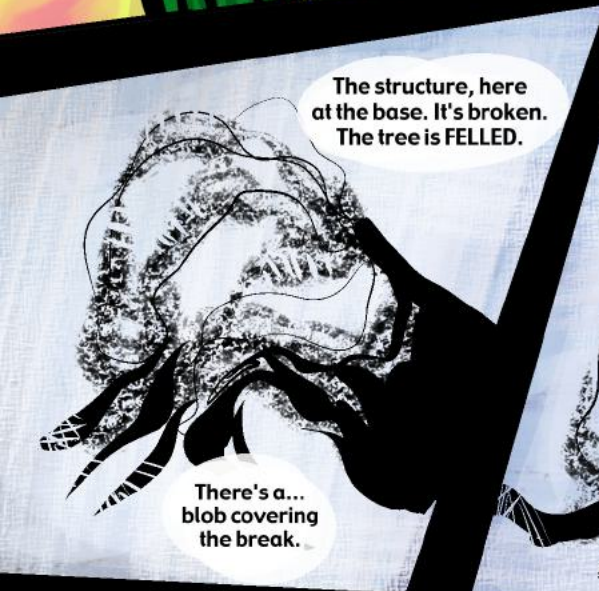


What are  
we looking at,  
here?



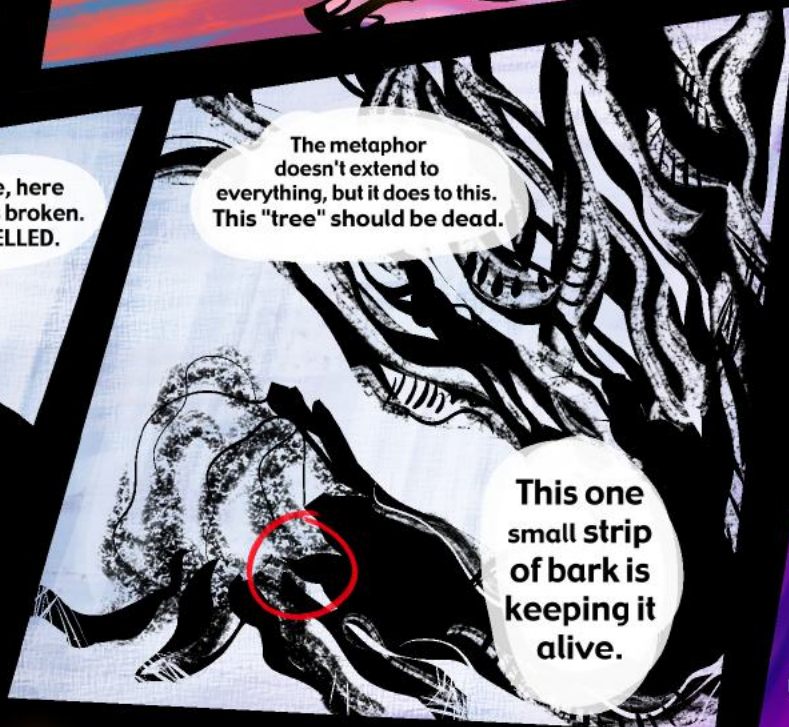
But it  
wasn't  
easy to get  
it out of  
him.

He's been  
hysterical...



The structure, here  
at the base. It's broken.  
The tree is FELL'D.

There's a...  
blob covering  
the break.



The metaphor  
doesn't extend to  
everything, but it does to this.  
This "tree" should be dead.

This one  
small strip  
of bark is  
keeping it  
alive.



Lem.  
Tell me  
what this  
means.

Please.



Does  
this  
have to  
do with  
...

Back  
then...  
I saw the  
bodies.

What  
happened?





Sigh

The jig is up.

I'll....tell you....

But I won't be able to tell you everything.

I've hidden some information from myself.

I can't & won't get it, so don't ask.

Jeez, Lem.



Here it is.

Say it. Say it. Say it. Fuck.

C...Cal became so weak his aperture.... crumpled, and detached...

Faidia's connection to the lagoon was broken.

Cut off from the magic that sustains it... sustains us.

The entire thing started to collapse from the center...



Everything was going to die because Cal was dying.

I just... I did what needed to be done.

I attacked Cal. I wrenched control of his own aperture from him.

I used my own aperture to bypass it. Ever since that day... All of Faidia's magic has only come here through me.





What...

Lem...  
How?

You must have formed  
an attachment so large to  
the lagoon that... you're  
basically a part of it.

You should be dead.



Nevermind Cal,  
what about YOUR  
aperture?

I mean, your memories,  
your soul...should have  
been destroyed.

Cal was only able  
to do it because he was  
born in that position.  
His aperture was  
acclimated.

To do it  
so quickly...

How did you  
survive? How are you  
surviving it even now?



Lots of things.  
Hypervigilance,  
mostly.

Redirection,  
constant healing,  
constant...

Lem...

Does it  
hurt?

D...don't  
worry about it...

I...I can't....



I can't  
say any-  
more.

That's the  
truth.

I'm genuinely  
sorry I can't tell you  
the rest.

I hope you'll  
understand  
someday.





Can we at least help you? Or will you refuse that too?



I assumed you wouldn't help me.



Cal would refuse to help me if he felt like I was lying or withholding information.

Funnily enough, it turns out he thought I was lying 100% of the time...



I'm sorry.

But...it's different now.

We've all worked hard to make it different.

We can fix this.



You... wanted him to find this, didn't you?

You wanted him to see it in a way he wouldn't be able to deny.



Well. This wasn't exactly a righteous decision I made.

I put everyone in danger and covered it up. I'm a liar.



Do you think I'm as bad as he is?

Lem.





You canNOT convince me you really think that.

Do I seem like someone unpoisoned by doubt to you?



To be honest... yeah.

Oh. You really are my sister.



You know...

You can be angry at me.



I let you down.



I lost your trust.



I didn't believe you.

Fuck.

gasp

I'm sorry.

I'll try to do better.





I'm sorry  
if this isn't  
helping.

I wasn't  
sure if you  
wanted to  
hear me  
say it  
or...

I...d-did.  
I'm just...angry  
at myself for  
crying at  
work.

In front  
of my friend.

He seems  
like a good  
friend.

I don't  
think he'll  
be mad.

Mm...

I've been talking  
to him for a long time  
about that glass I  
told you about...

Oh, he's that  
guy? His aperture  
is strange.  
It's really small.

He's half  
vampire.

Ah, that  
explains it.

Sigh  
Can't  
say I've  
enjoyed  
this  
talk.

But...  
thanks.

I love  
you, May.





Oh, buddy.

I love you, too.



I'm sorry about the bad timing of this. I hope Cal wasn't too hard on you.




Well.. That's the other thing I needed to tell you.

Cal - very melodramatically, mind you - has announced that he "surrenders."



He's finally submitting his testimony.

"Confess to everything."



But he won't show it to any of us until you're back.

So I don't know what's going to be in it...

Mm, Rae's face was the same, haha.

I'm scared.



Oh, no.



# Cal's Story



## WARNING

Depictions of:

- incest <sup>-cannibalism</sup>
- abuse
- body horror
- violence
- suicide,
- murder/death
- self-harm
- suicidal ideation

please be careful when someone loves you








Dear diary,

I was born  
in a void.






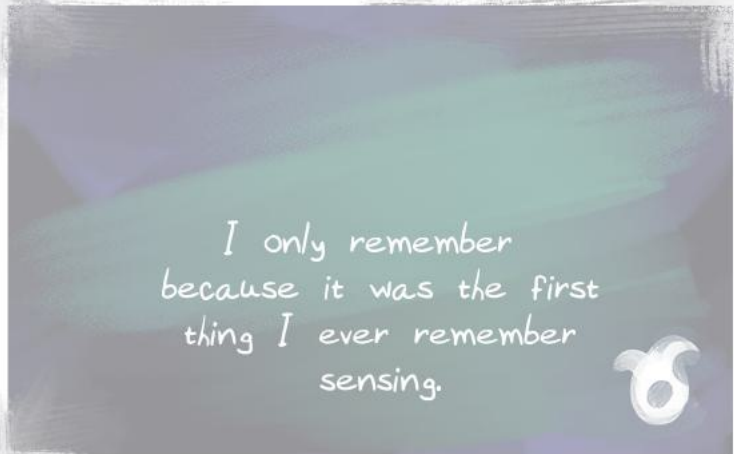
I became  
aware of my  
own thoughts  
at some point.


I remember  
hearing a voice,  
but I couldn't  
understand the  
words.




It faded  
quickly.

I only remember  
because it was the first  
thing I ever remember  
sensing.




I noticed May next.  
We sensed each other somehow.




I was so glad I wasn't  
alone, but...

She was like me,  
incorporeal. We were apart,  
and couldn't communicate well.



I came up  
with the idea of bodies.



"We keep passing through  
each other...maybe we should  
STOP at each other, instead."





I can't really explain  
how I did it at the time,  
with so little knowledge,  
but I made us bodies.



It was like something  
was helping me, but not enough.



May wasn't happy  
with what I'd done to her.



The world was cold.  
Our bodies were vulnerable.



After I touched  
her, she ran away.



I thought she  
was gone forever.



I started making dimensions.

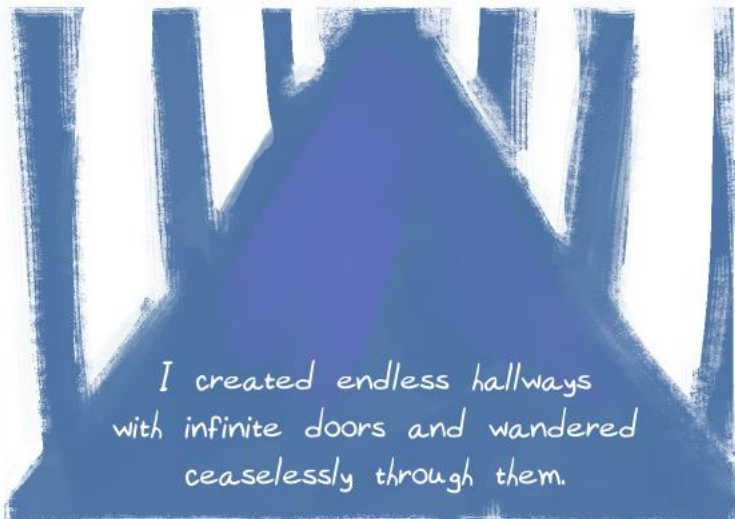


I had made myself a doll,  
and now a doll house.

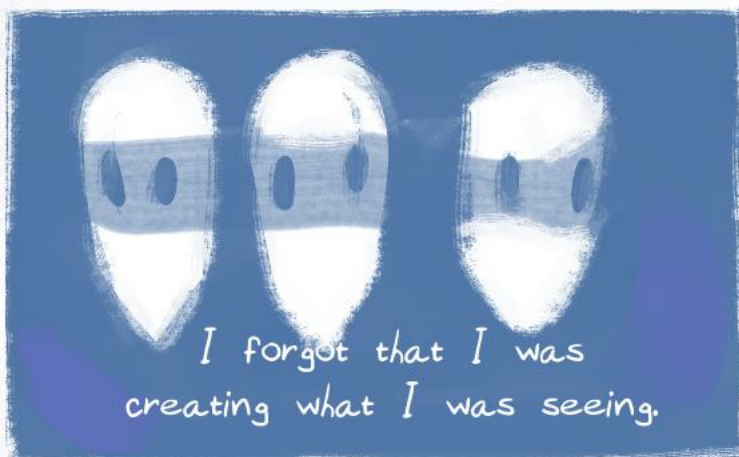




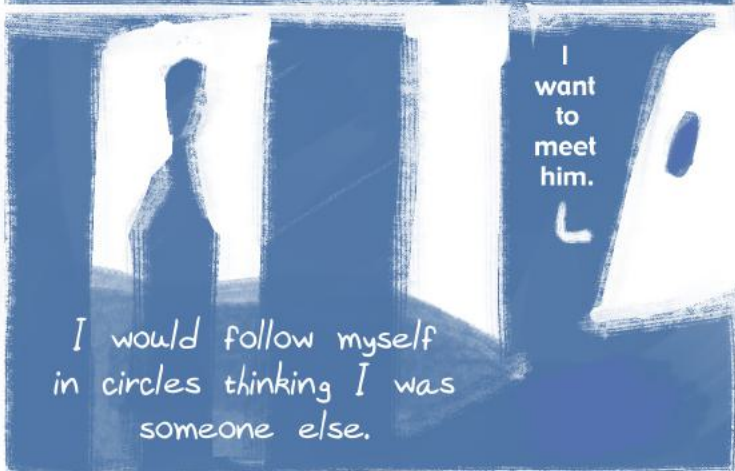
With no one to talk to,  
I became lost in my head.



I created endless hallways  
with infinite doors and wandered  
ceaselessly through them.

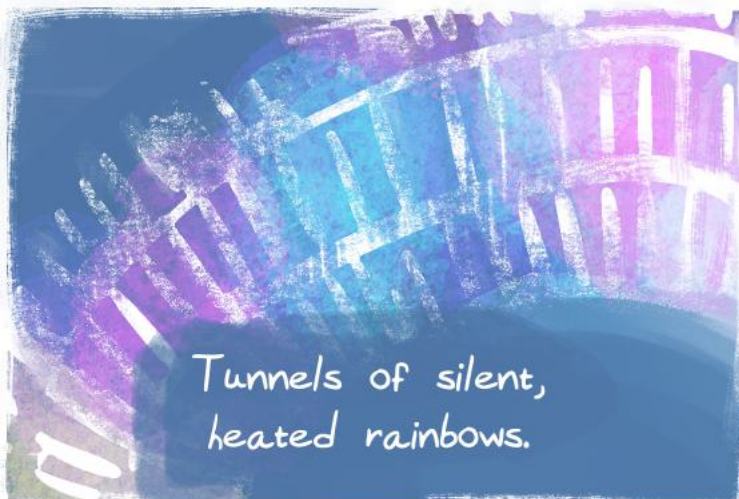


I forgot that I was  
creating what I was seeing.



I would follow myself  
in circles thinking I was  
someone else.

I  
want  
to  
meet  
him.



Tunnels of silent,  
heated rainbows.



Every doorway opened on  
an individual screaming darkness.



I couldn't stop myself.

I was  
exhausted.



Then I heard a baby crying.



I followed the sound  
and found Rae.



He already had a physical body.



Rae was amazing.

He  
didn't  
leave

He  
likes  
me



May even came to meet him.



But  
Rae  
needed  
caring  
for.



I did the best  
I could.

Our bodies were amorphous,



and didn't  
need food or water.

But I held him

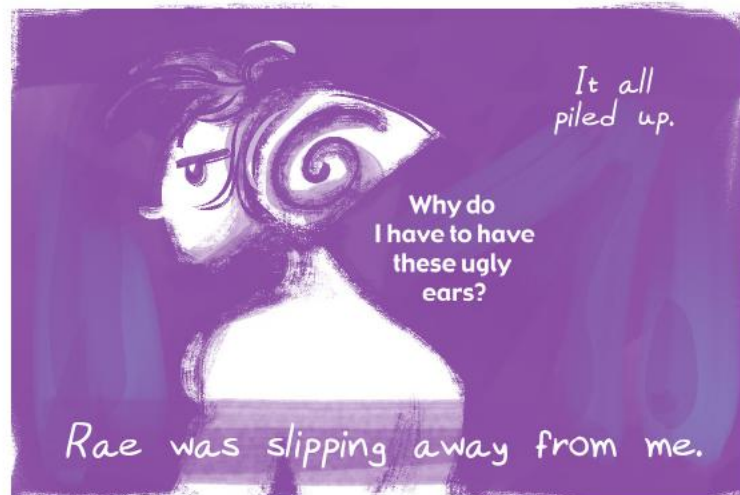
Played  
games  
with him



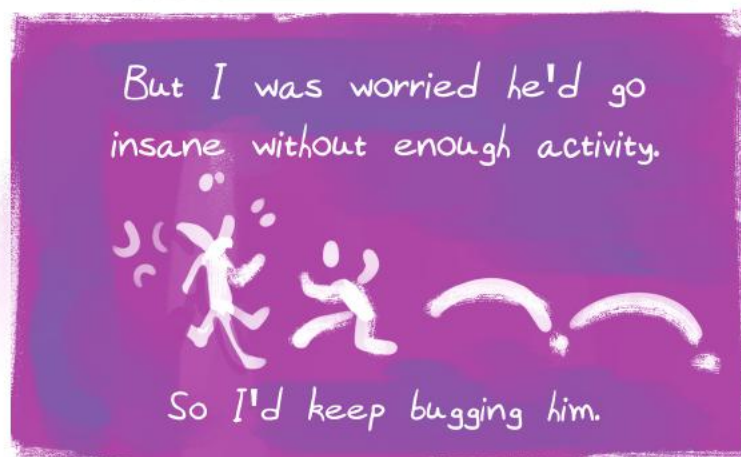
And  
taught  
him to  
speak.

















I  
struggled  
to  
answer  
him.



These  
were  
things  
I  
thought  
about  
myself.

Was  
he...



talking  
about  
me?

I'd tell him he was good, that there  
was no reason to believe he was evil...



While inside I was gnawed with the fear  
that Rae would realize I was the evil one.



In my head, I  
knew I was keeping  
them prisoner.



I had  
no intention  
of ever  
letting  
them  
move  
out.



That's how I knew  
I was evil.



But,  
I  
thought,



Even  
someone  
like me  
deserves a  
family,  
right?





That was, it turns out,  
the tallest imaginable order.



We stumbled into another method  
of expression one day.

Rae stop  
spinning I'm gonna  
baaaaaarf

Rae and Lem were rough-housing.

It was getting a little wild, so I tried  
to get them to calm down --

I'll catch  
you, Lem

I couldn't speak, but even if I could...

Lem's heel pushed my nose up  
into my skull, and I started drowning  
in my own blood.

None of us knew what to do or  
what was happening.

After a  
few minutes

I was  
dead.



For the first time, I had been ejected from my physical shell.



I had to make a new one after years of not having thought about it at all.



It's my fault!  
My foot...!

I was at least still in our dimension,



Be quiet!

but I needed to leave anyway to gather raw material for a new body!

I tried comforting them as a disembodied voice, but they were even more confused.



I'll be back soon!

His voice fell out...

That can happen?!

All in all, it took several hours for me to leave home, get lost, find the raw materials, get back, and regenerate.



Once I was finally back...

Does the new one even match?

I'm so heavy.

I hope they recognize me...

I got rid of my corpse first thing.



I told them it had only been a game, that they'd done nothing wrong.



They weren't very convinced.



After that, Lem and Rae  
started hurting themselves.  
It started small.



But accelerated.



Lem started dissecting his own body

Rae would leave for the planet's surface



and smash around until his bones snapped

If I managed to find and monitor one, the other



would slip away. I was constantly chasing them.

I  
was weak  
and tired.  
Stuck in  
another  
maze.

I begged them both to explain why they were  
doing this. Rae was the first one to respond.

I have all this  
energy I don't know  
what to do with.

I want...  
weird things.

I feel  
sick...

Weird  
things?

I don't know...  
Messed up  
things.

We  
can make  
them okay  
things.

We can  
do anything  
we want.

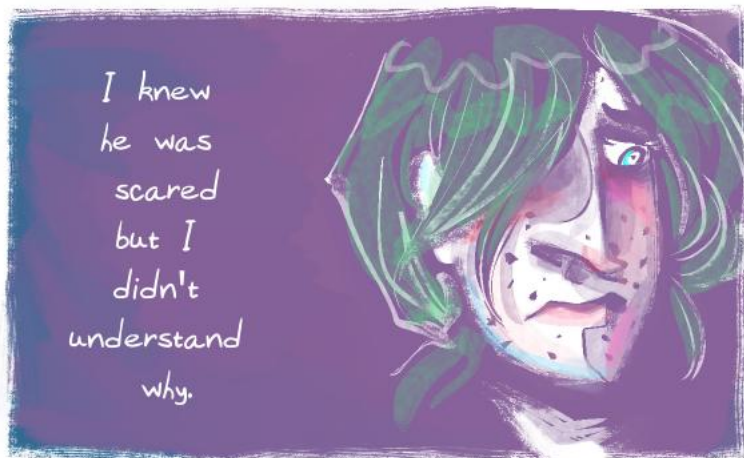
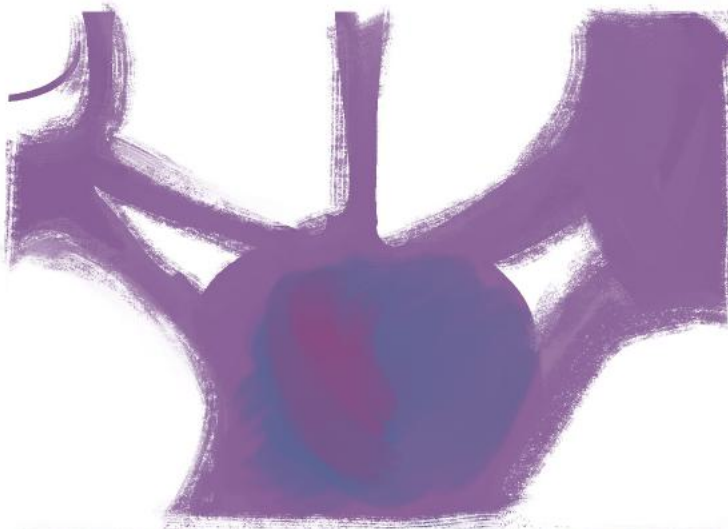
I want  
weird things,  
too....

Can we  
really...

I thought  
I was the only  
one.

...







Where one issue might be temporarily resolved,

Rae.

You  
and  
Cal  
...

What  
were you  
doing...?

dozens more sprang up in its place.

Are you okay?



It's serious adult stuff.

You wouldn't  
understand.



If you know  
what's good  
for you...



You better stay  
clear of it.



Or you'll  
be next.





Everything went so fast after that.

No, no! Not like that!



Can't you even hug me right?

I thought I was...?

It's different... I want the old way back!



I can't tell what I'm doing differently....



Maybe it's that you feel differently about me now...?



Why didn't you say that would happen?!

I-I didn't know it would happen....



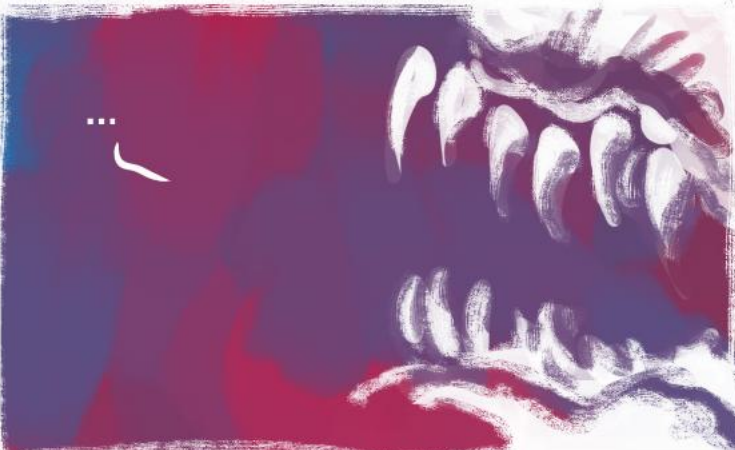
Just...

Don't touch me.

Whatever.









Lem healed him,  
but he was always  
on the brink.



Rae,  
stop!

Do it  
to me!



Lem can  
heal us.

Whether  
I hurt you  
or myself.

What  
difference  
does it  
make?



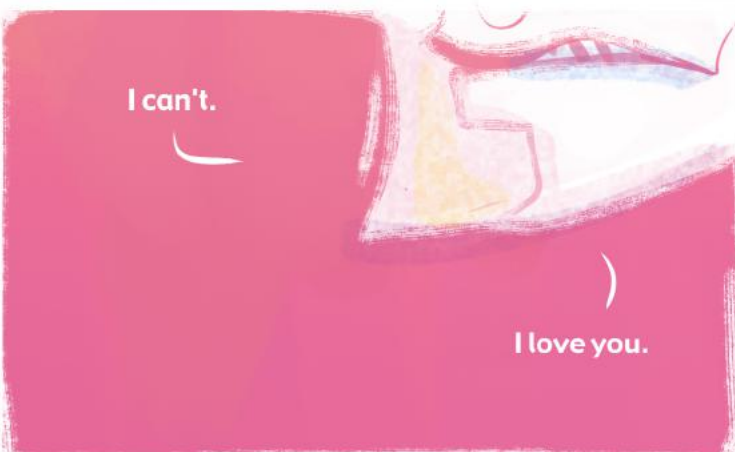
You  
wouldn't  
have to  
suffer.

I'll take  
it instead.



I can't.

I love you.







No one  
had ever told  
me they loved  
me before.

That's...



gulp.

But all I could muster was fear.



By saying that,

Cal  
...

Rae had already surpassed me.



If he found out  
I had nothing to offer

Please...



Say you  
love me.

he'd leave forever.




You do,  
don't you?



Cal?






How could...  
I love you?



W-what?




"I love you,"  
he says.

How  
convenient.



It's just so you  
can get out of your  
obligations to me,  
right?



Love is just  
an excuse  
to be a lazy  
coward!

You know...



I sacrifice  
enough to earn  
some respect  
around here!

But you don't  
value my input!



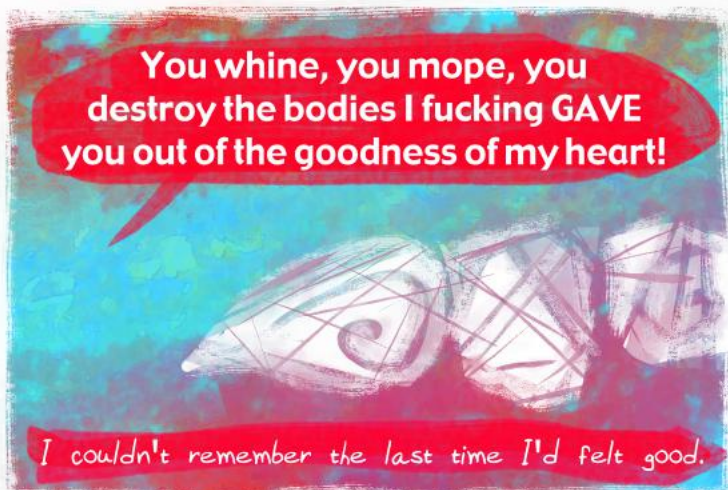
Look at the two of you!  
I've raised a pair of  
**BLEEDERS!**



S-stop...

Stop yelling.









Lem.  
Get over  
here.



I'm only gonna  
say this once,  
so listen carefully.



I'm taking  
charge around  
here, got it?

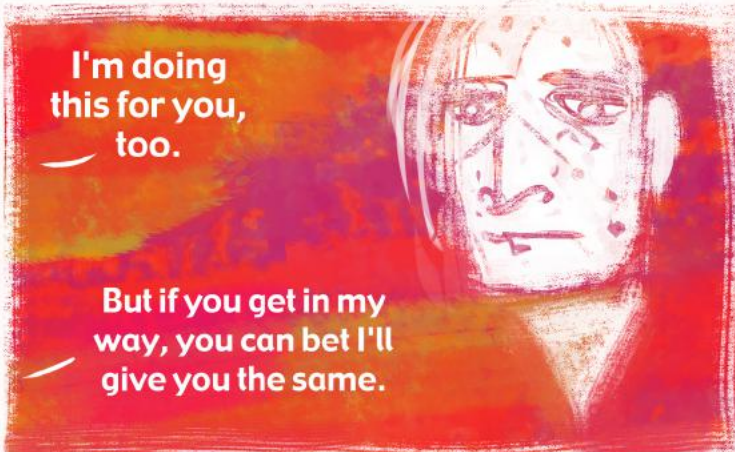
Stop  
obeying  
Cal all the  
time. Defer  
to me.

If he comes back,  
& starts talking like  
that again....



I'll do him  
like this.

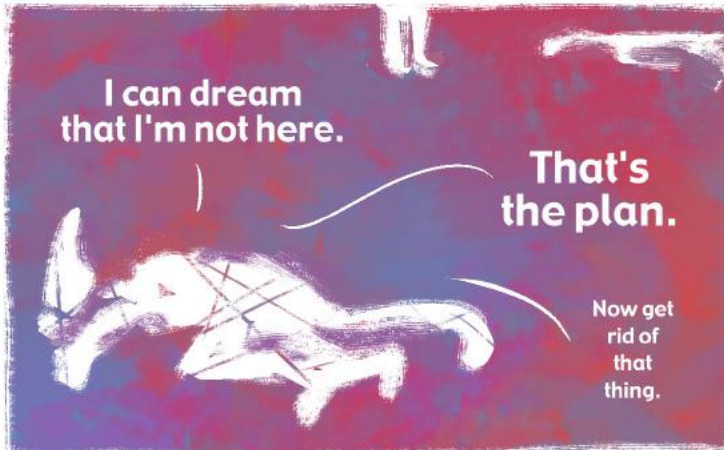
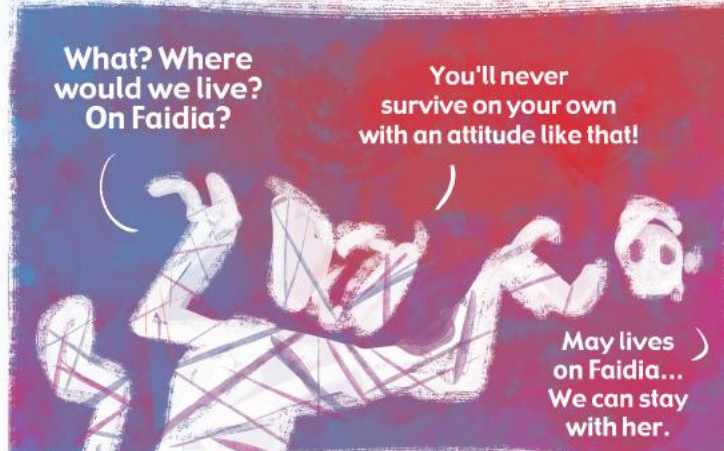
As many times  
as it takes to shut him  
up for good.



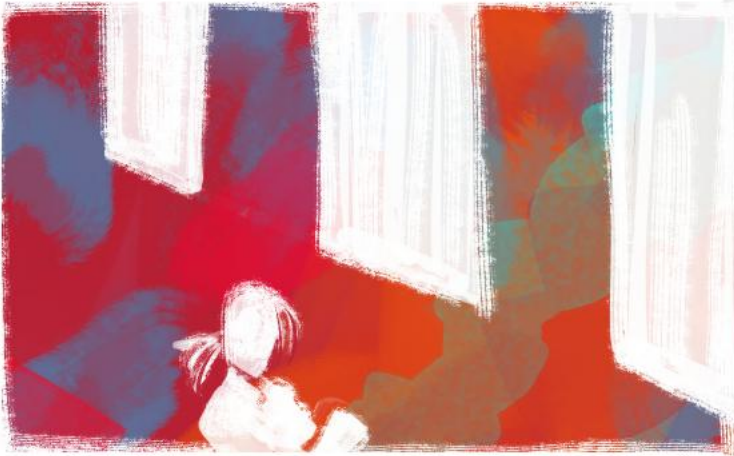
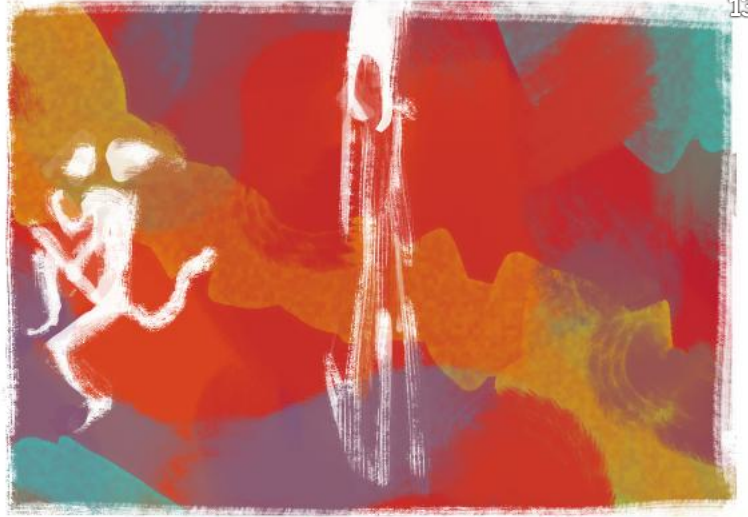
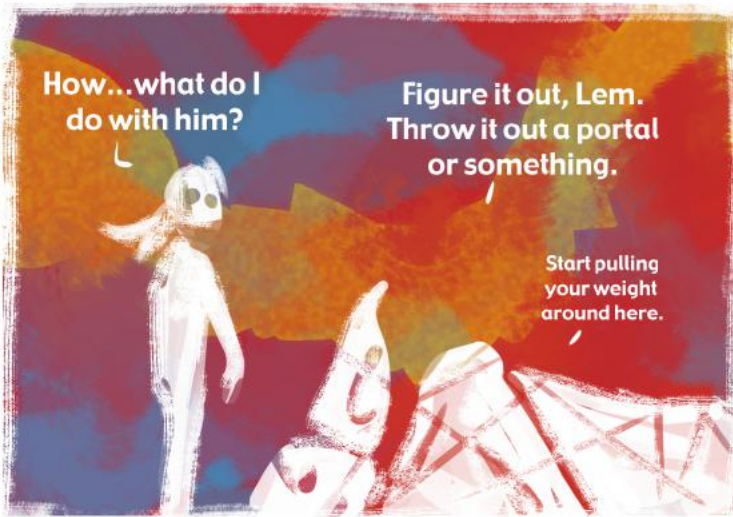
I'm doing  
this for you,  
too.

But if you get in my  
way, you can bet I'll  
give you the same.

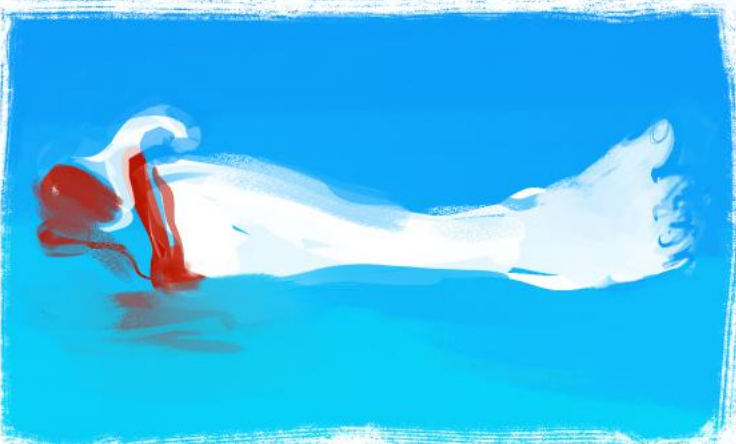
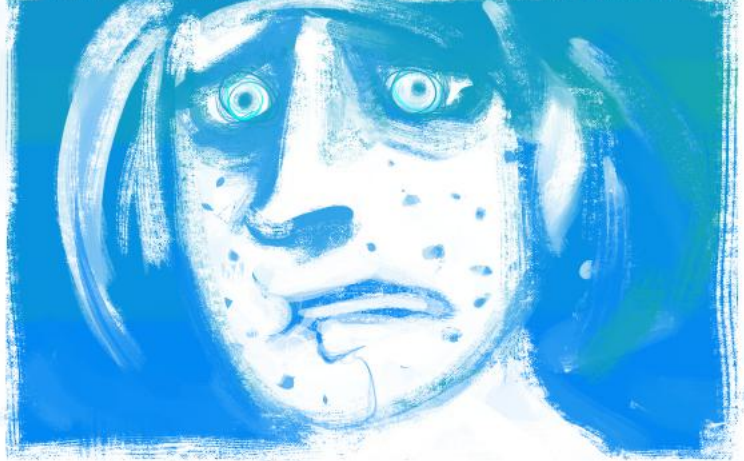




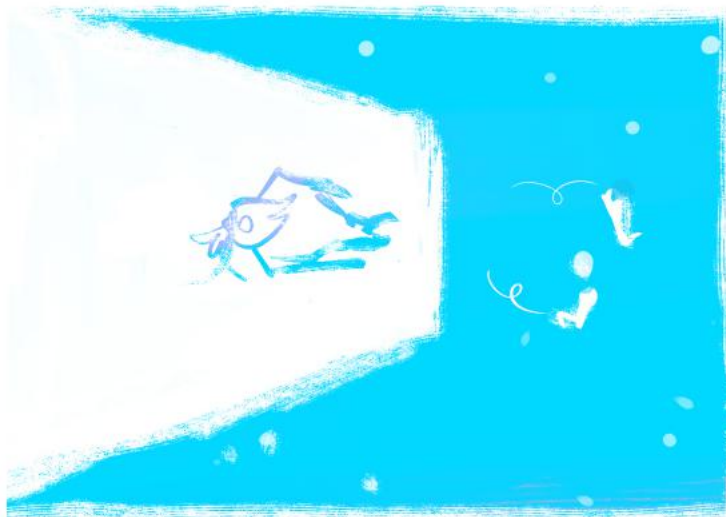












That was only  
the second time, out of  
hundreds of thousands of  
times, that I died.

I would regenerate,  
come back home, and if I was  
quiet, Rae would sleep and  
ignore me.



But if I woke him up, usually  
with a quarrel...



Rae was good to his word.

He stopped rising to the same insults.



I had to keep him  
focused on hating me,

so I became even  
more cruel and  
demeaning



to  
compensate.



Lem had complained about the portals having sharp edges.



That just gave Rae an idea for how to get rid of me more quickly, for a longer time.



and scatter my body parts in outer space,

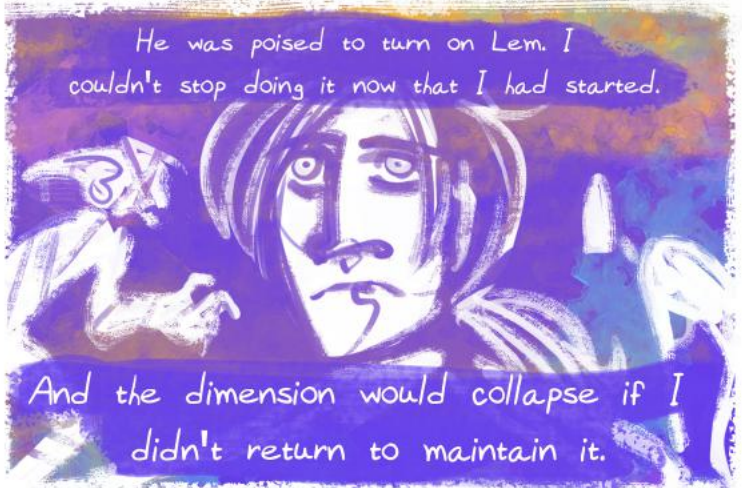


forcing me to make a new body without any ready material.

But no matter how long it took, I always came back and provoked him again.



He was poised to turn on Lem. I couldn't stop doing it now that I had started.



And the dimension would collapse if I didn't return to maintain it.

I remember once getting a glance back at the portal my head had been flung from,



My blood pouring out of a hole in the sky.





If Rae were preoccupied or asleep, Lem would nurse me.

Why so mopey? You should smile more.

Yeah. I'll try that.



He tried to reason with me.

We can just go.

Tell Rae you're lying.

Stop saying horrible things on purpose.

Rae just wants to be left alone. He needs rest.

We're all going insane. We need to stop.

Fight back when he hurts you, he might stop.

May will understand if you tell the truth.

Things don't have to be bad.

I just brushed all this off as amusing naivete. I told myself I couldn't believe any of these reasonable things were worth trying.

Nah.



Some things just can't be helped, Lem.

I mean, maybe you're right about everything, but acceptance is part of being a grownup.

You'll be fine. You're a smart boy.

The thing was... I loved dying.



There was always a brief, blissful moment of unconsciousness as the soul left the body...



sweet oblivion

Something precious since we could no longer sleep.

That became the only thing I could think about getting, over and over, again and again.



Lem was also addicted, and tried to get me to stop with him repeatedly.

If we can stop for a week, we'll have a party.

I'll write a song for us to sing. It'll be fun.

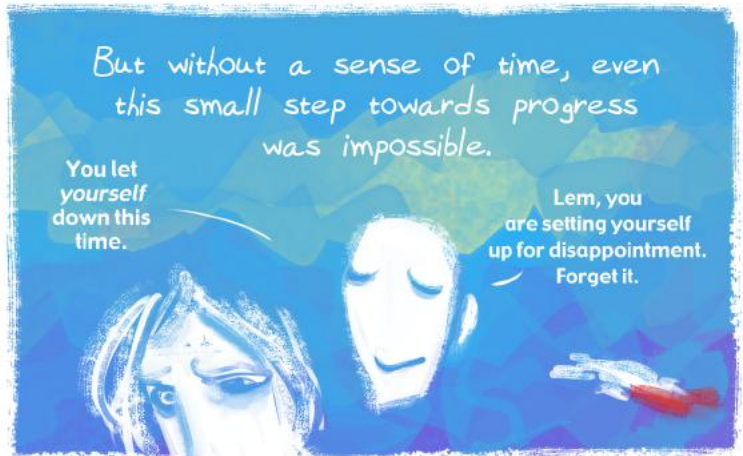
Corny.



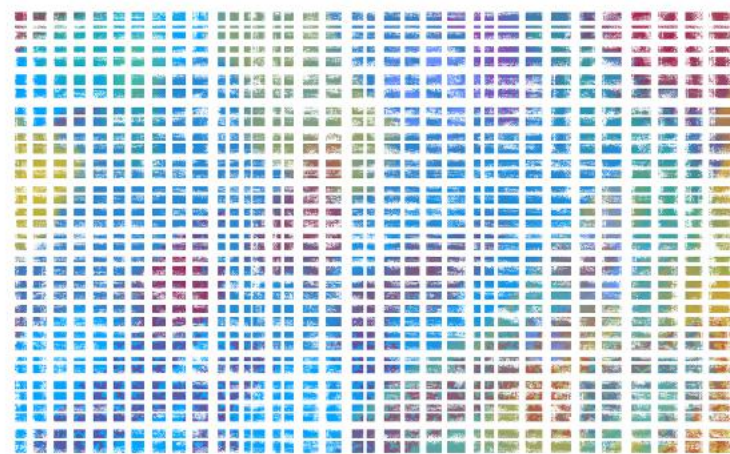
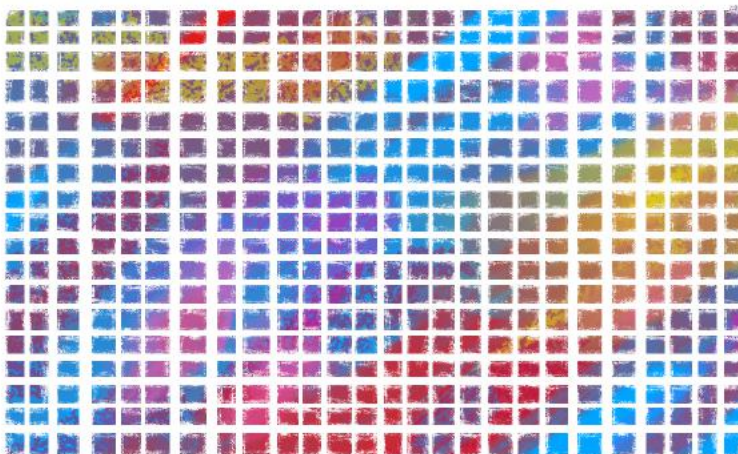
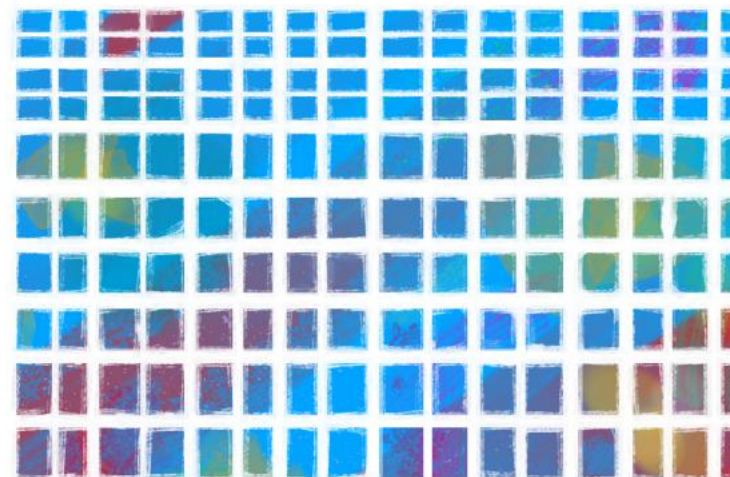
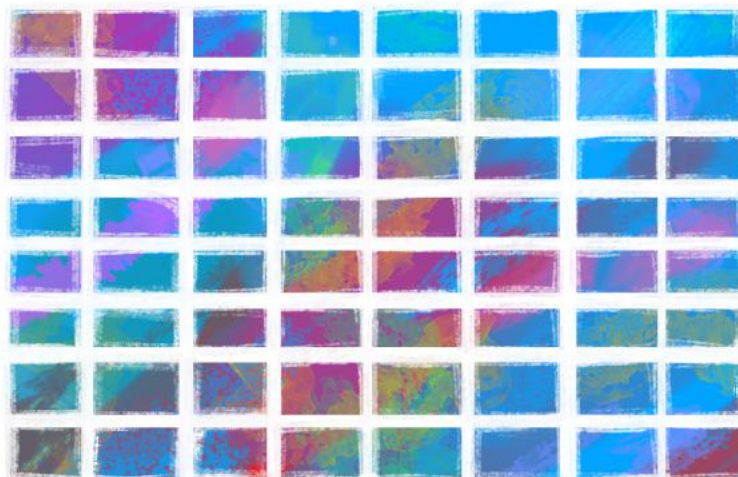
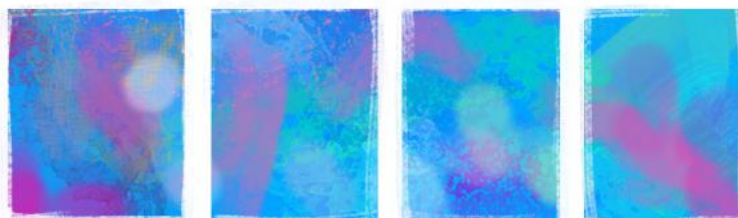
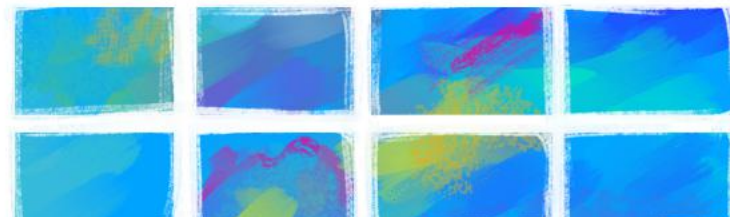
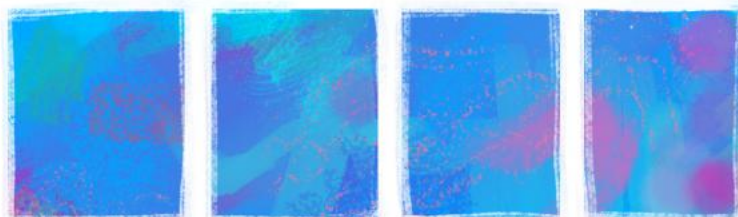
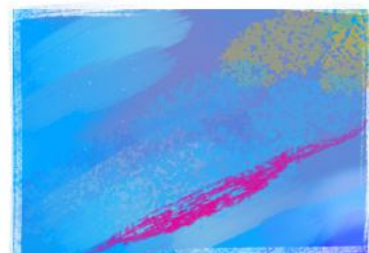
But without a sense of time, even this small step towards progress was impossible.

You let yourself down this time.

Lem, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Forget it.



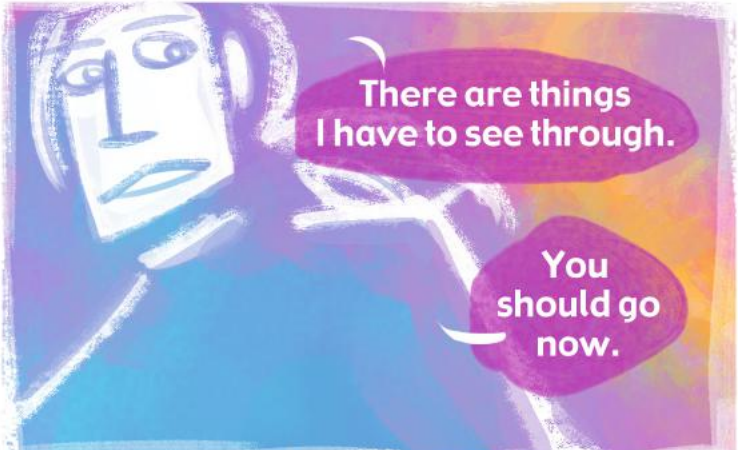














Somewhere, along the line,  
Rae started to eat my corpses  
instead of throwing them away.

OK....  
Let me know  
if you ever want  
to talk, Lem.



Which, given his established  
behavior, wasn't that big a deal  
at first glance.



— Yeah. I will.

But what we didn't know was that  
elementals can exchange energy



by devouring one another.



Phew.

It's not terribly efficient. Only a  
little gets through every time.



But I was dying a lot, and Rae  
was comfort eating all the time, and it  
just ... sort of snowballed.

Cal, did  
you hear  
that?

Just like I  
told you! We're  
running out of  
time.



I regenerated one day,  
and my fingernails and toenails were  
missing.

Can you  
not speak  
today?

And if  
you don't  
want her to  
find out...



They wouldn't regrow, no matter what I did.

...

Let's get  
you sat up.



It was strange, but I ignored it,  
and carried on like usual.



Each time I regenerated, however,  
I lost more and more of my hands  
and feet.

Let's go see Rae, Cal.  
Come on.

I see  
you have  
an elbow  
today.

Can you  
hang on to me  
at all?



Then, they were gone.  
Various other organs were  
soon to follow.

Lem...it hurts...

I know.  
I'm sorry.



Lem stopped killing himself cold turkey  
and started nursing me all the time.

Lem...  
I want a  
'break'...

We're not  
doing 'breaks'  
anymore,  
remember?

We can  
stop for a  
second for  
you to rest,  
though.



But we had already  
gone too far.

Your body keeps  
getting smaller, remember?

Rae is taking  
all your energy.

You do  
remember Rae,  
right? We haven't  
seen him for  
a bit.

Oh...I forgot....

Let's go see what  
he's up to, okay?





Rae's body had also changed.

Rae?

We come in peace.

We just  
want to talk.

shf

ssssssssss

Hoooh?

You're  
finally back....



My beloved....after  
so long, too....



How ironic that my most favorite child  
in the world is so neglectful...



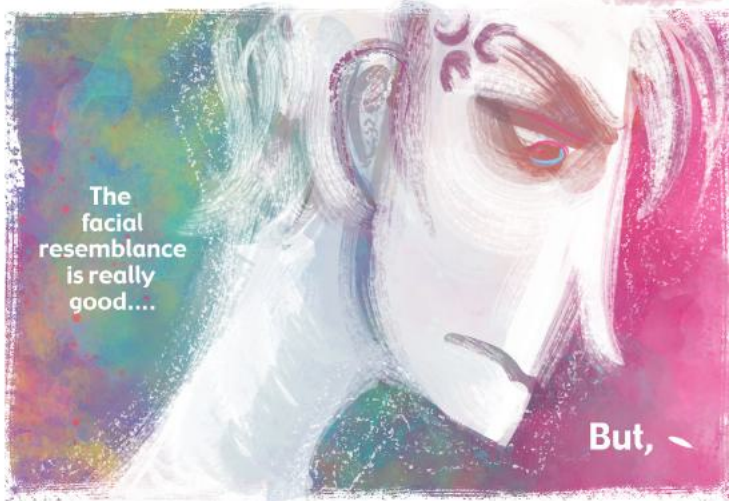
You're not the real  
Cal. I'm holding the real  
Cal in my arms.

Moreover, aren't  
you a little too big?  
Scale is off.



The  
facial  
resemblance  
is really  
good....

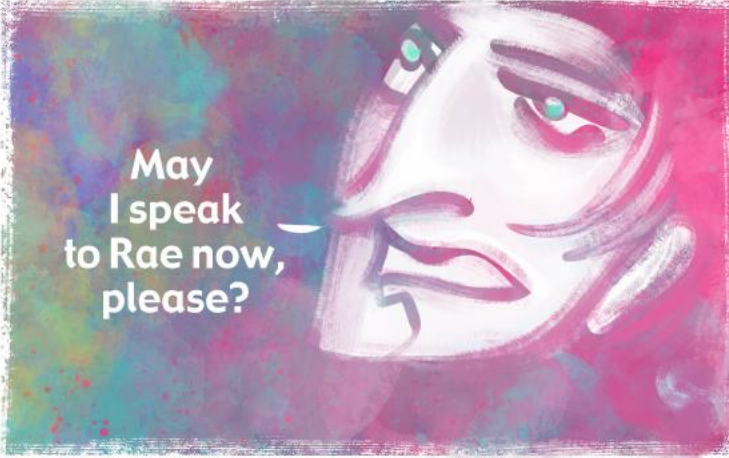
But,



you & I  
both know  
Cal is incapable  
of beefing up  
even that  
much.



May  
I speak  
to Rae now,  
please?















What...  
what do you  
want?

It's over.  
You have to  
give the power  
back to Cal  
somehow.

Even if Cal has  
to eat you in return,  
it NEEDS to get done.

And once he's  
recovered, we NEED  
to have peace.



If you  
keep devouring  
him and not giving  
any of the energy  
back, Rae...

Cal will  
disappear  
forever.

I know you  
don't believe me.

You've  
been really sick,  
& I know it's hard  
to understand.

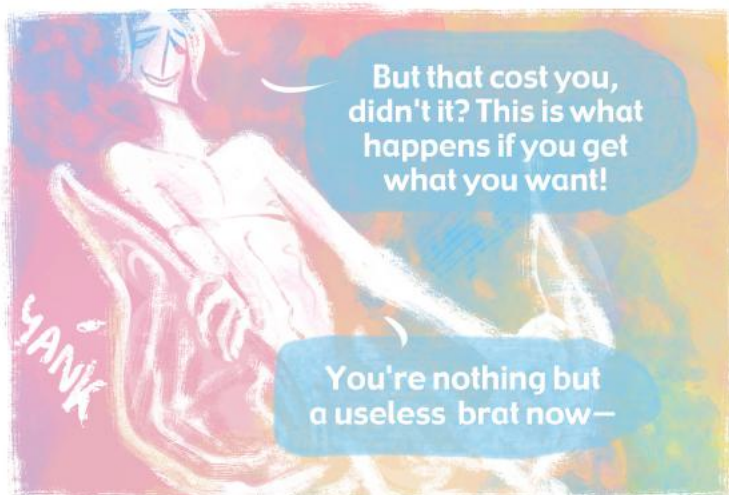
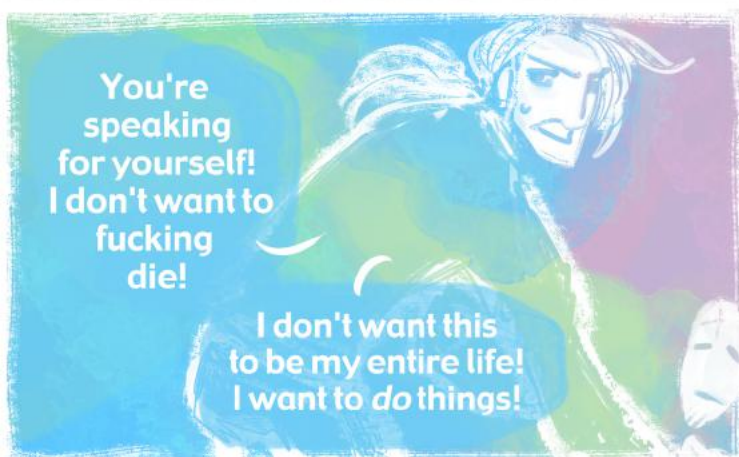


But I...wanted to give  
you a chance to fix this  
because...

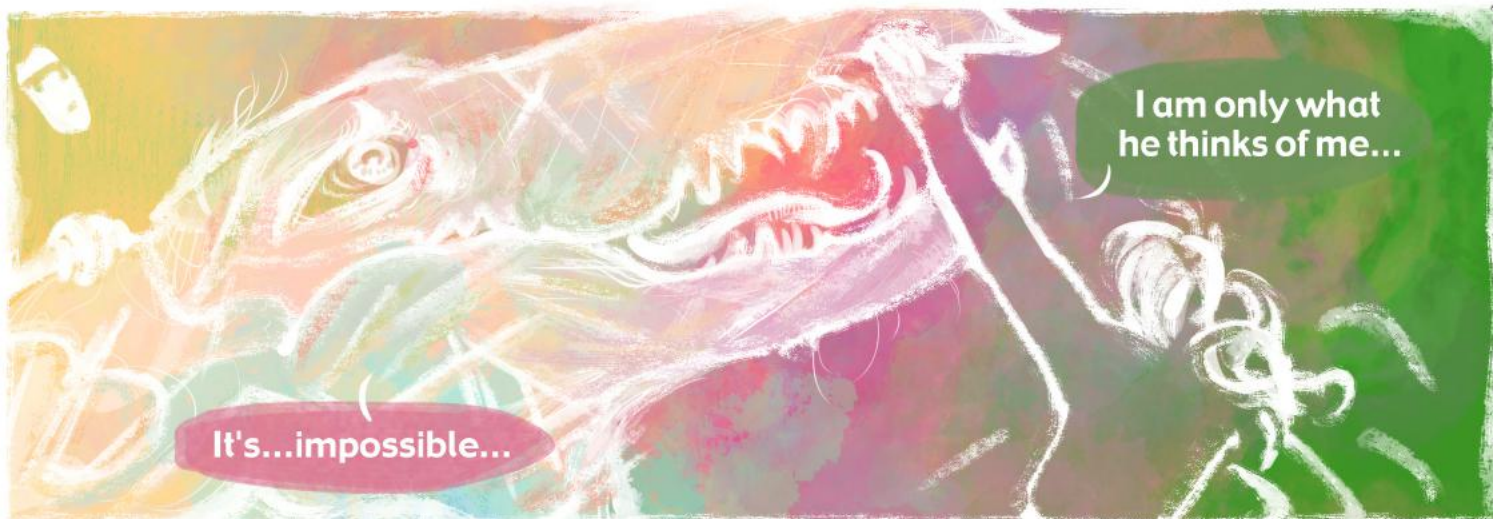
I know you still  
love him very much.





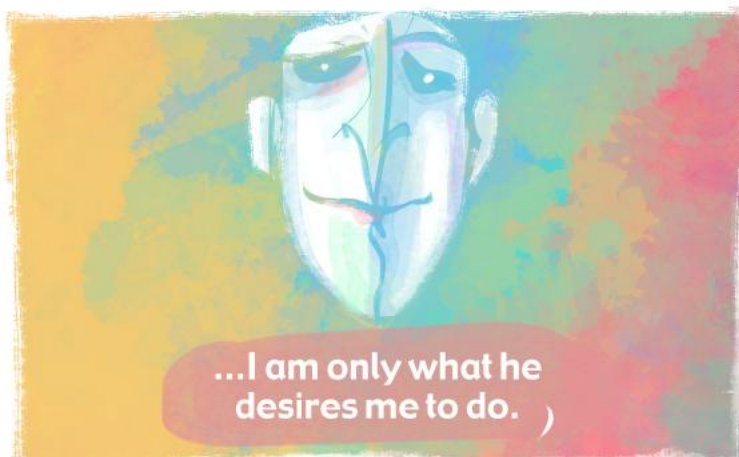






It's...impossible...

I am only what  
he thinks of me...



...I am only what he  
desires me to do.



Rae.



Humor me for  
a minute, okay?

Let's .... chill.

Take a step back  
from the situation for  
a second with me.

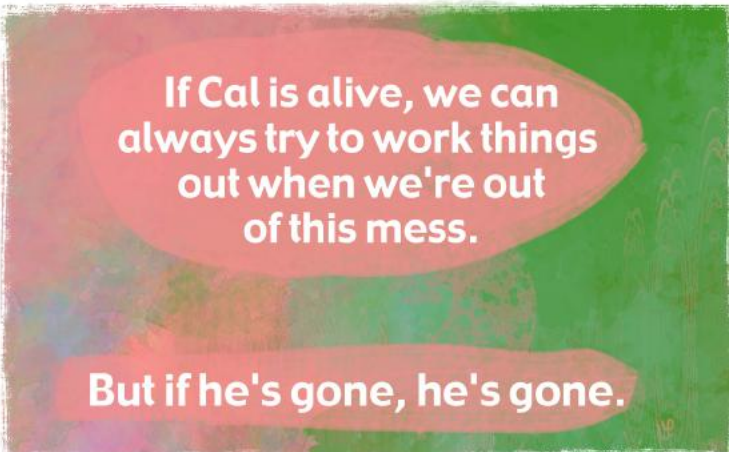
Regardless of whether  
Cal loves us, wants us, will  
take care of us, whatever...

You and I love him, and we  
love each other. We love our  
family.



Our own  
lives have value.

We have each other.  
We have May.



If Cal is alive, we can  
always try to work things  
out when we're out  
of this mess.

But if he's gone, he's gone.









Wait, he can't  
give consent-

I  
want a  
'break.'



What a *refreshingly*  
concise response.



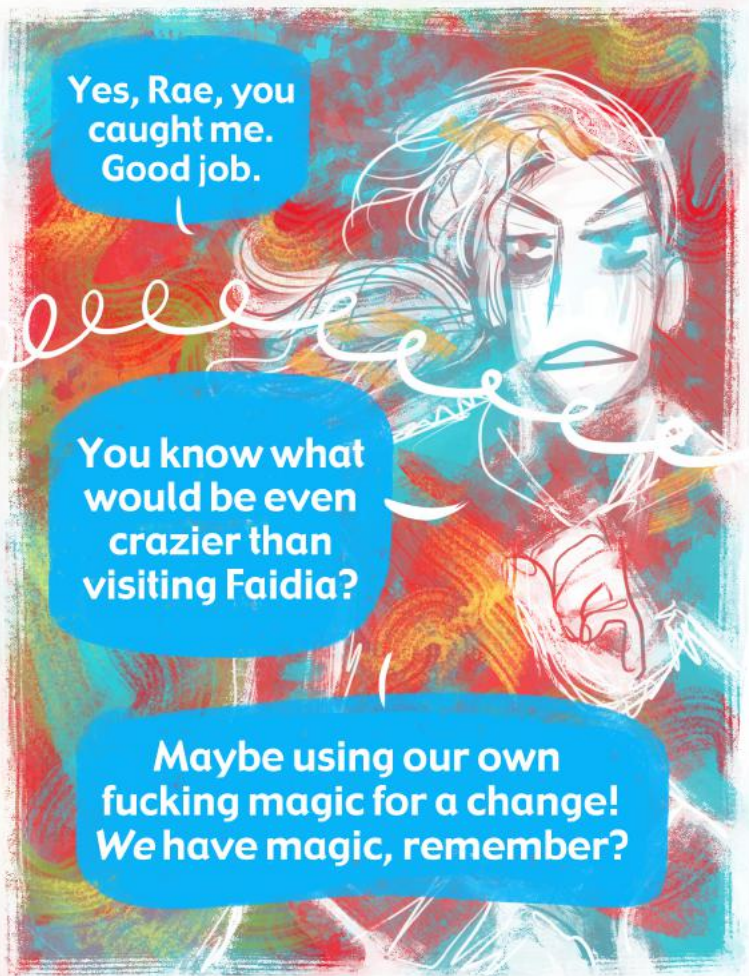
Rae -
















That's -  
Your magic  
doesn't even  
work -



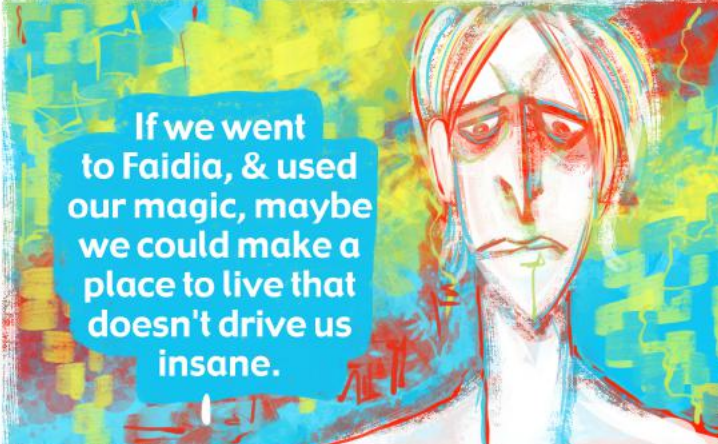
My magic  
works ON  
Faidia, not  
in here.

That's probably true  
of you, as well!



We don't  
have to stay here.  
CAL doesn't have  
to stay here.

May is FINE.  
We can live like her!



If we went  
to Faidia, & used  
our magic, maybe  
we could make a  
place to live that  
doesn't drive us  
insane.



I'm  
afraid  
to go...

Your fear is meant  
to keep you safe,  
but this isn't safe.



If fear's putting you in danger...  
doesn't that mean it's malfunctioning?

Fear isn't the  
only guidepost  
we have.

We can be brave.  
Try something else,  
together.



What if this is  
as good as it gets...

Believing  
that will kill  
us all.



There's no  
choice but to  
make a choice.

Will you  
lie down &  
die, or will  
you fight?



Everything Cal has told us  
was just meant to keep us cooped  
up here, too scared to leave him.  
Can't you see that?

We've  
been used.

We're not allowed to leave.  
Nothing new is allowed.

But we're just stuck  
repeating the same  
horrible things over  
and over like this!

Right now, you should fear  
being locked in here more than...

What's  
out there...

Fear will...  
it'll keep....

...my ...voice  
is ...going....

Rae.

I can't  
fight the both  
of you forever.

I'm tired.  
I'm hurt.

This  
is bad.

This  
is a  
bad  
life.

There *must* be a  
way to make this  
better.

Cal needs  
"better,"  
Rae.

Don't you  
want to be  
happy with  
him?

Not just a puppet.

The real him.





Lem.



Come  
here.



You talked  
him back down  
twice.



Well  
done.

You're  
never going  
to let me win,  
are you.



The only  
thing that matters  
to you...



...is whether  
or not you get  
what you want.

However  
insane it is.

For that....



you'll  
annihilate us,

yourself.

Everything.



Just to have  
the last word.



But admitting you're wrong  
about anything is way worse than  
annihilation, isn't it?

Somehow. For reasons.

Lem!  
Enough!

The  
sickest thing  
is, I can tell you  
know exactly  
what you're  
doing.

You've  
had your  
fun!

You fucking  
think I'm having  
fun right now,  
Cal?

I guess that does  
make me laugh,  
so maybe I am.

You've become surly,  
provocative, and violent.

You raised your  
hand against your  
own family.

Cutting off your own  
brother's arm with a  
primitive weapon...

You've  
changed,  
Lem.

Oh?  
Is that  
so?

I didn't  
raise you to  
act this  
way.

Nothing is  
more important  
than this family.

Blood is  
thicker than  
water.

Yeah,  
well.

You're  
a stump.

If you kick me out, no one  
will take care of you.  
You'll force Rae to eat you.  
You'll vanish.

So  
this is  
goodbye  
forever  
maybe.

Get  
out.

No one else  
will say it, so I will.  
I did a good job.

Get out,  
& never  
come  
back.

I worked hard,  
& I did my best.







If Lem had  
stayed, Rae would  
have killed him.  
Right?



Rae...  
darling...

I told myself,  
"I kicked him out  
to save him..."

Come...  
eat...



Come eat  
dinner.

It'll heal  
your arm.

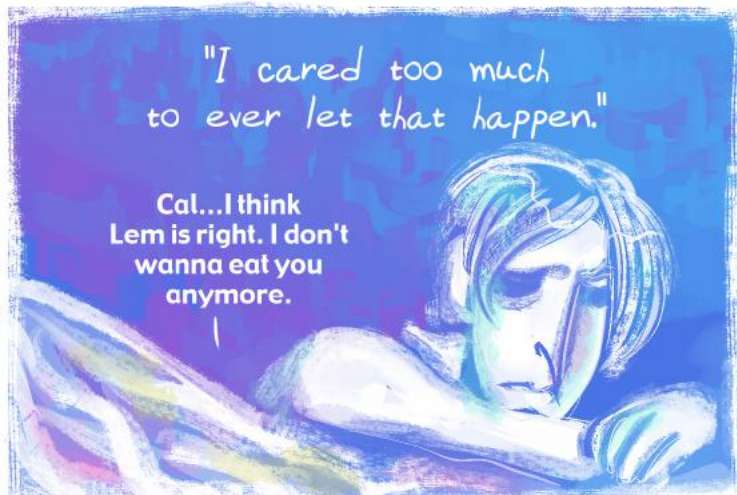


"I couldn't bear seeing them fight."



"I cared too much  
to ever let that happen."

Cal...I think  
Lem is right. I don't  
wanna eat you  
anymore.



But  
honestly...

it was  
all bullshit,  
like always.



sigh

Whatever.  
I'm tired.

Fine,  
darling.

Have it your  
way, like always...

If you  
really feel  
that way,  
fine.



I was furious Lem  
had me pegged.

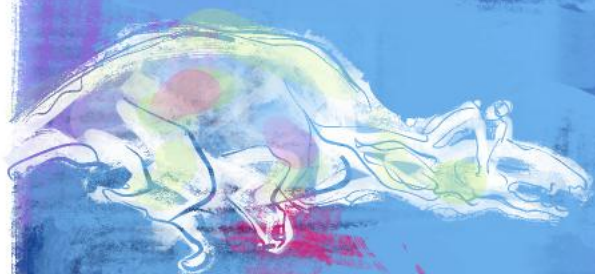
Lem...  
He's not  
coming  
back.

I can't believe  
he actually left...





I don't know what Lem did during his banishment on Faidia. He has never told anyone. But he was gone for a long time.



At some point, Rae's resistance finally weakened, and so I force-fed him my body again.



Generating another body took a long time, and once I did, I was nearly senseless.

Apparently, at this point, my aperture ruptured, and my magic simply spilled out of me.

I was little more than a spine and a head.



Rae no longer moved and neither did I. My tattered skin was covered in a scum of sweat and tears.

I had just enough energy to keep me alive, but completely helpless.



But, one day, Lem returned.



The legend about this day makes it sound so epic and grand, like Lem stormed in and had a devastating battle with Rae and I...



In truth, there was no magic. No fight.

With the collapse of my aperture, our world was running on fumes.

I had no idea at the time, and neither did Rae. We were in no condition to monitor the situation.



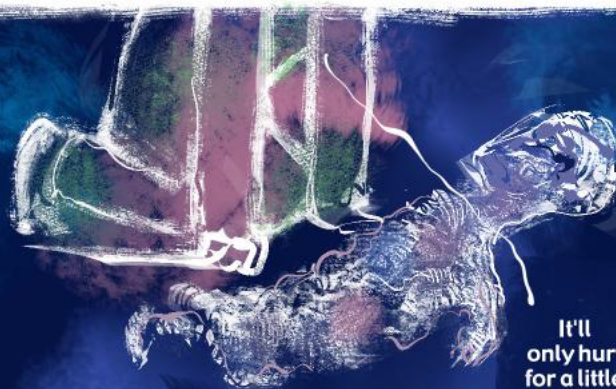
Lem's knife was black and shiny...



He whispered to me.

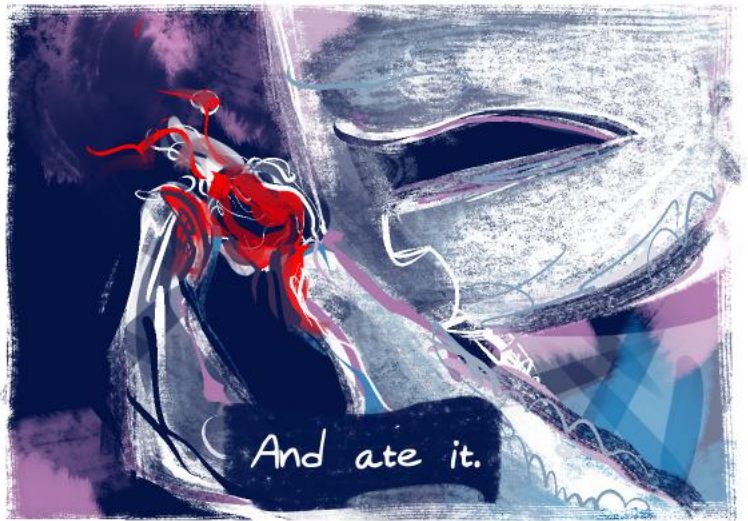
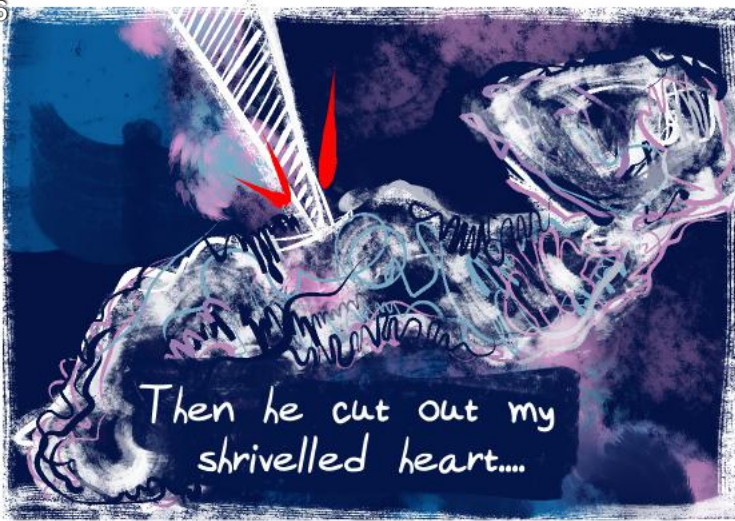


Sorry, but...

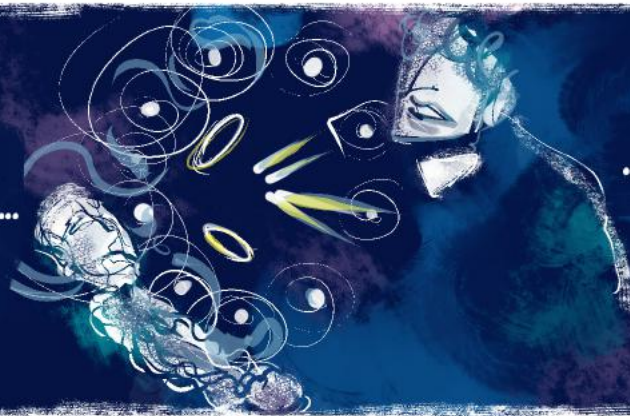


It'll only hurt for a little longer.



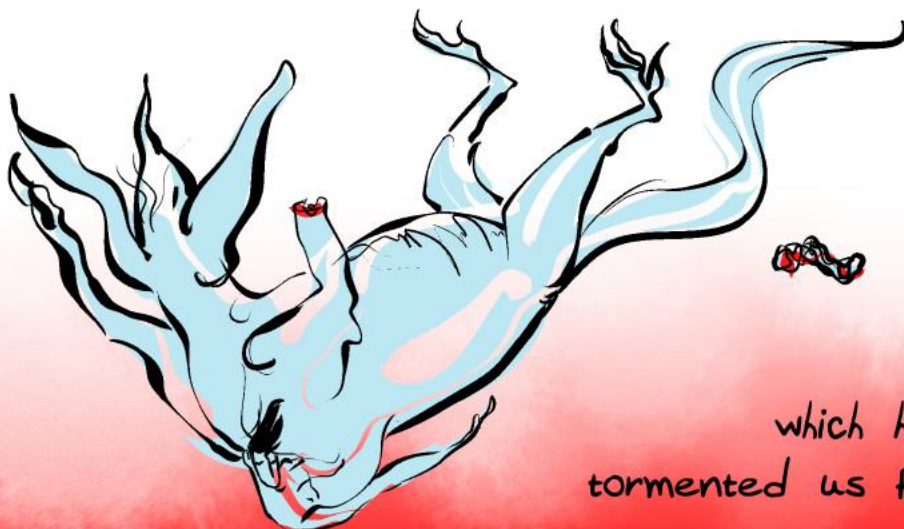


There was a feeling, a sound...  
like something strong...



...cracked apart with sudden and incredible force

My dimension



which had tormented us for so long...



Was immediately and completely destroyed.


We were spat out of a ragged hole  
in the sky above Faidia.



WHAT THE FUCK?

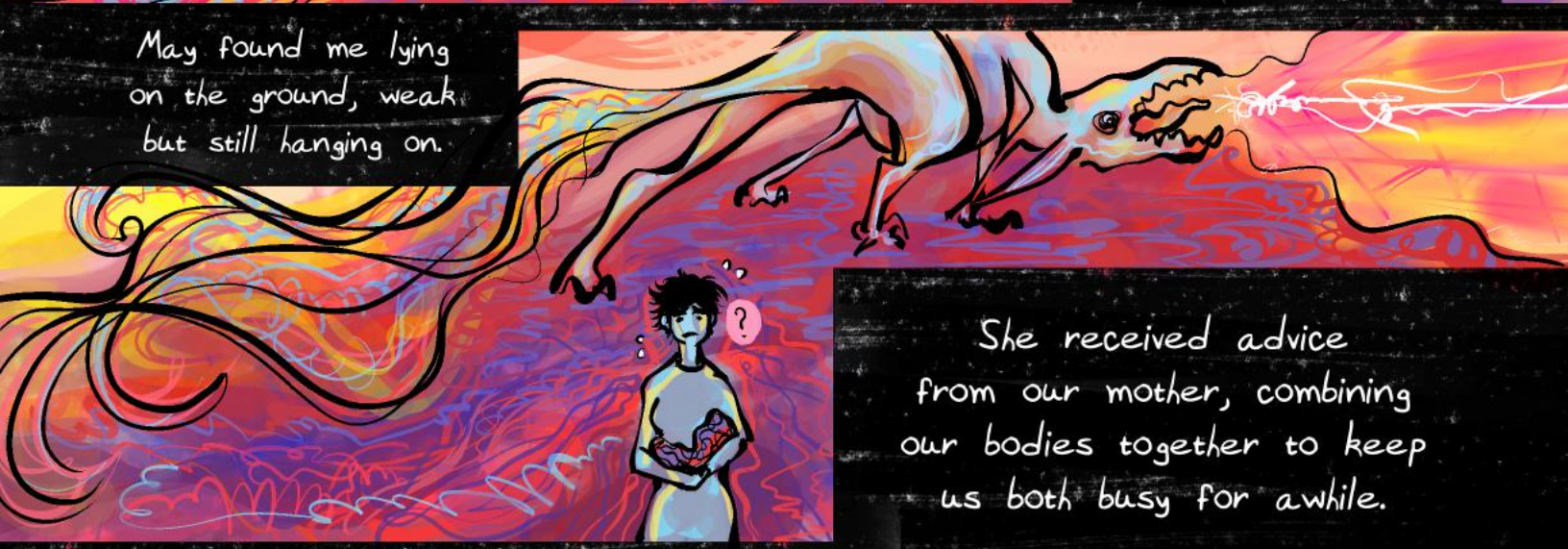
All this ruckus awoke May,  
who had to deal with what  
she found on her own.






Rae created a new body, but he was still insane, and started to rampage the surface of Faidia, casting swathes of chaos magic left and right...

May found me lying on the ground, weak but still hanging on.



She received advice from our mother, combining our bodies together to keep us both busy for awhile.

After all that effort Lem went through, we ended up being one creature anyway.



Lem disappeared until much later. None of us really understood what had happened, and Lem didn't explain...



May eventually set us up with the house, and we lived there, and then we met Fern...



Things are different now.  
So that's why I've confessed.

Physically, I'm feeling a lot better these days.  
I have the ability to think about what happened  
and what I did clearly for the first time.

My own invention  
presented me with  
the irrefutable  
evidence.



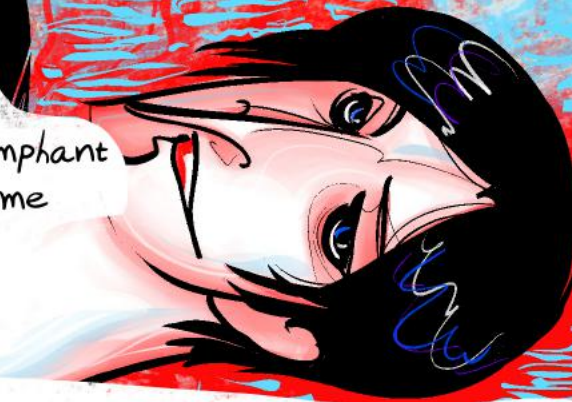
I knew the way I did  
things was horrible, but...

I thought it at least  
worked. I thought it kept  
me and my family alive  
against bad odds.

It not only didn't work, it  
actively destroyed everything we  
cared about.



After tormenting them for so long, indulging in their pain, exhilarated and triumphant whenever I made any of them feel shame and guilt for things they didn't do...



Being nasty had just become a habit when I could get away with it. I was so starved for any pleasure, it was fine with me.

Reliable,  
sensitive,  
devoted.



Rae, Lem, and Fern...  
I know they'll put up with it  
no matter what I do to them.

I made myself  
into a poison and now  
I seek an antidote.

The souls I find in the  
lagoon who cause rot...

I am the same  
as them.

In fact, I might  
be the worst one yet.



It's up to me to  
find a way to fix this  
and keep it fixed.

Let's just  
put em through  
again. They can  
assist you to  
speed things  
along.

Really?  
You'd help  
me do that?

Sure. We  
won't get  
anywhere  
working  
solo, & you  
need a lot  
of staff.

Lem and I have agreed  
that, like me, the souls  
will be rehabilitated.

Maybe seeing each other  
will help them the same  
way it helped you.





I will spend the rest of my existence making up for what I've done.

Sure, this will take a long time, but...

...we're immortal for a reason right?

Rae insisted on being held accountable for his role in this disaster, alongside me, but I personally feel he is blameless. No one is to blame but me.

You ate only the veggies again.

You know...

I can't eat any-more...

The only way to apologize for something like this is to devote your entire existence to that endeavor.

So that's what I'm planning on doing alongside my regular work from now on.

You can just be a vegetarian, Rae.

Oh...I didn't think of that.

I have several cookbooks.

Can I keep eating bugs, though?

Of course.

You know what we say in this house.

"Be a slut, do what you want."

That's right.

I know I'm going to backslide.... but now I know to let my family help me out.





Rae, are you absolutely sure?



When Rae had found out I'd murdered Fern...

He tried to tell May and Lem that he must have done it, not me.

Cal was never physically violent like that...but I have history.



When I saw him blaming himself for that, something unexpected happened to me.

I wanted to pursue Fern just like Cal did, so maybe I...

I normally would have let him take the fall.

I can't remember but

I might have blacked it out



No. No more.

**It was me.**

But now I couldn't stand it.

I felt possessive of my crime. I wanted it to be mine. Maybe out of masochism, but...



Rae only spoke to Fern. He's innocent.

When I acted on that impulse, quite by accident,

**It was all me.**

my defeat began.



I don't know if Fern is ever going to come back.  
I don't know if he'll ever even read this.

Whoops.

klak

Careful,  
Funa...

I think I have condemned myself to love someone  
I have destroyed my relationship with before it  
even started.

Sorry...That was  
a close one.

It couldn't have been any other way,  
with how I am. This is the bed I have made.

spit

Er...

But if he never comes back at all...  
If his life doesn't get better after  
what I did to him...

Hi  
Funa,  
hi  
Ell.

Fern?!

Is that you?!

That would be the worst.



I think it's  
okay to still  
be selfish  
sometimes.

I'm back.

Oh shit.  
Lem told you  
guys I'd come  
to, right?

Did I just -

Relax, Fern,  
we knew! We're  
just so happy to  
see you!

It's been  
so long!

We're so  
glad you're  
all right!

Have a  
seat!

Thanks!

Besides  
Lem, you're  
the first of our  
folk I've  
seen.

Oh my  
gosh,  
Fern!

Cute  
melcey!

His name is Smoke!

I'll let  
my assistant  
know to clear  
our schedules.



Because of what Lem did to save Faidia, he lies prone inside the body of the lagoon, constantly being burned away.

After you were murdered, some mortals decided you were a god & started worshipping you!

There's no need to make such a fuss over me...

Fern, you don't get it.

There is so much to go over....

Haven't any strangers harassed you yet?

Er...

? ?

He only continues to live because of the biomass of Faidia constantly replenishing him through the propagation of algae and other microscopic, plentiful life....

Funa...please...

Ah - sorry. I'm just saying, you have to be more careful now!

People recognize us in the street all the time. You have to be on guard!

Oh...now that you mention it, I have gotten some weird looks. But I mostly stick to myself anyway.

This is a very delicate situation. Our first goal is to restore Lem to a proper elemental form, wicking the excess plasma from his shoulders...

Ugh...I was worried it would get like this.

Whatcha gonna do, am I right?

It's kinda sad. We have this gated neighborhood...

You have to put a lot of effort into making disguises if you want to go out...

Are Fola & Viv around? If we're gonna talk shit all night, they should be here too...

...and lifting him from the lagoon, so that he may take his place beside us on the shore.



Yes! I'll call them right away.



Just think!



All the secondaries together again!



How exciting.



While I'm doing that, though, Ell, could you set up Fern with the court record?



Funa, that'll ruin the party!

I mean, we can have one or the other, but not both.

I want it done before we get too blotto to figure out the computer stuff!

Grr, oh fine...



You don't have to read it tonight, Fern. I'll tell the boys you're not ready to talk about all that stuff yet.

Hmm, well. It will probably upset me, but I'll want to talk about it with all of you...so how about I wait until after dinner to read it?

That's an excellent idea! No pressure if you change your mind either way, though.



These cookies are delicious, Funa.

Aren't they though?

Ell made them with Viv's recipe.



I've had a really good appetite since getting back...

I wanna eat everything, haha.

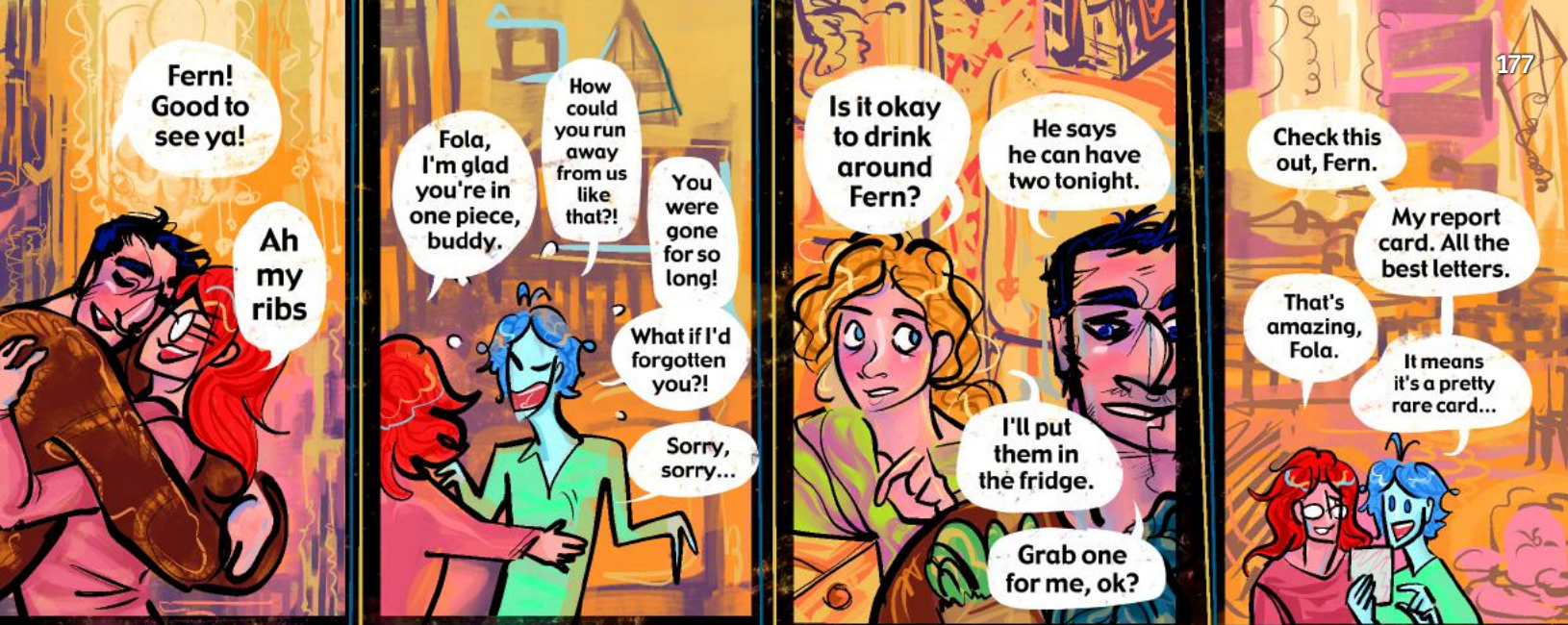


I'm confident we'll figure out a solution together.

Eat as much as you want, Viv always makes way too much...











To imagine it was that bad.

Fern,  
you OK  
in there?

Need  
anything?

Oh...I'm finished.  
I'll clean up and  
come out.

There's no rush,  
sweetie. Take all the  
time you need.



Wh...what?  
For a second...

Is that  
really me?

How can I not  
recognize myself?



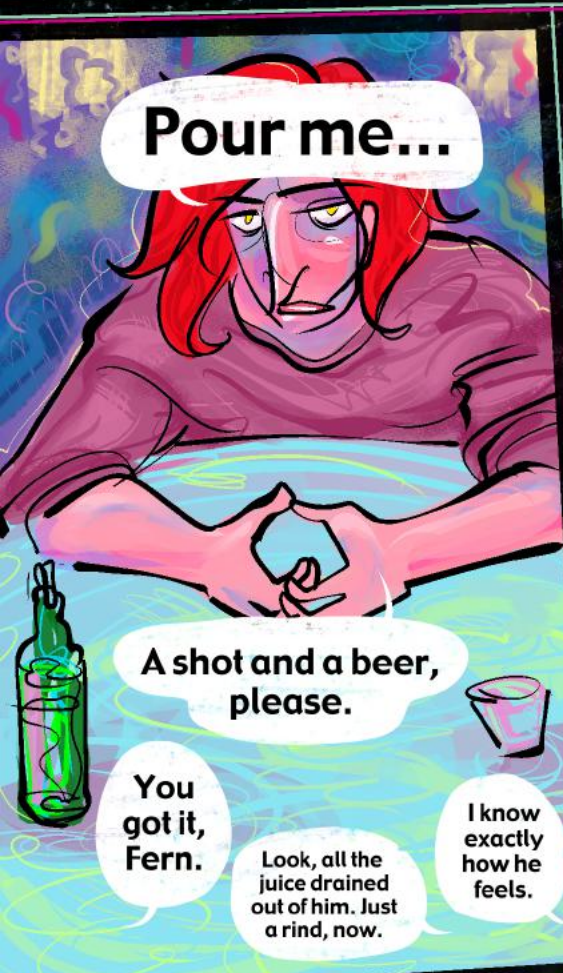


Was Fern coming out-

**BANG**



Oh nevermind, there he is.



**Pour me...**

A shot and a beer, please.

You got it, Fern.

Look, all the juice drained out of him. Just a rind, now.

I know exactly how he feels.



What a ghastly account.

To be honest, I haven't reread it in a lot of years... It was too much.

there there

When Lem dropped the bomb Fern was back, I touched up a bit.



Honestly, I'm at a loss for words.

How does one even react?

What do you say to someone who did those things? Went through those things?



Keep in mind, Fern, some of the hardest work is already done.

Looking them in the eye is going to be weird for...uh, awhile,



but Cal's been really well behaved and is as gentle as a lamb when we see him.

That's a matter of opinion.

OK! In my opinion, he has demonstrably improved.



Cal's finally moving back to his own house, right?

I gotta use the john

You don't have to announce it, Fola.

Don't I?

Well, sort of. Granny Corwin still occupies the main house...

Ohhh yes, that was going to be a hold-up, wasn't it?



There's a newer structure, a guest house, where he'll be staying.

Renovations are needed in the house anyway~

Well at least he's out.

May has put up with Rae & Cal long enough.

She hasn't been able to hold an orgy or whatever she does in her own house in centuries.

Hey, wait.

Are you saying I can't move back to my room at Cal's?

I wanted to go to bed there...

Ruffle

Fern... It's been a really long time. A lot of things have changed.

That was the room you were murdered in...

Did you forget?

The bed was comfortable...

Fern, of course you're not going back there right away!

We're setting you up in an apartment here in Tower for now.

Practically next door, actually.

We could go look at it tonight if you wanted!

Are you three...

living here together?

Like. Together, together?

Yep!

We're both dating Ell.

Gosh... I'm sorry I missed that.

I'm happy for all of you.

We've had our ups and downs.

But here we are!

That's wonderful.

Well, I ask because...

I don't know if I can deal with living by myself... right now.

Oh, don't worry, you won't be!



There's kind of a soft rule now that none of us lives on our lonesome.

Fola lives by himself, but he writes everyone a lot, so.

In fact, I think Lem can't stop him from emailing him at every meal time.

Speaking of Fola... I'mma check on him.

I'll come with ya in case he's rowdy

He's had 1 whole beer...he's probably passed out someplace.

Okay... so... who am I rooming with???

Er - Well - Funa sort of gave it away already.

She just can't keep anything back...

I explain but it does nothing

When she was rambling just now about Cal and...

...

Rae?

Yes!

The secret primary I haven't met who is also a criminal like Cal is & was in Cal's body the wh-

Yes!

He's real and you're going to meet him!

Maybe I shouldn't have told you while you were drunk...

I mean, you *have* already met! In a way.

think

You just weren't aware of it at the time.

But don't worry, we've arranged for another meeting before the actual move.

We're not *that* reckless, for goodness sake...

Come now, Fern, we're all actually in envy of you right now!

Rae is troubled, but he's taught us so much.

You just learned the truth, so you're spooked, but it'll be okay, I promise.

I'll take your word for it, Ell...

I just...this isn't what I was looking forward to, if you know what I mean.



Ell...  
Can I  
ask you  
some-  
thing?

I know you lived  
a full mortal life.  
Did you have a lot  
of relationships?

Of course...  
I raised a family,  
or two, sort of.

Then...you probably have the most  
wisdom out of all of us with regards  
to something like this.

Shoot.

Do you think...  
Cal and I....

After  
everything  
we've been  
through...

Is there  
a chance  
for us?

Hmm...

Just like you to ask  
so directly. You're a peach,  
Fern. Well...What do you want?

I guess it was obvious  
I'd immediately go crawling  
back to him...even though  
I'm still angry at him.

Two  
things can  
be true,  
Fern.

As objectively as you  
can, do you *think* you should  
have a relationship with him?

No. Absolutely not.  
I should cut him off,  
never talk to him again.

Sure, sure.

We elementals are kinda stuck  
with each other, though, wouldn't  
you say? Avoiding him is...

...oh.





Lem really ground it into me that I didn't need to see him at all.

But that sounds unbearable to me right now.

Do I think I'll smooth over the fight we had if we...?

that's so stupid

Am I just using him to feel better from what he did to me? How could that possibly work?

I know I should be happy for his friendship, but that also seems unbearable... I want him to fuck me. I want him to snap me in h-

FeeEEEEern... This is going to be a very long, arduous process any way you look at it.

But - Sometimes -

**SOMETIMES.**  
the things that are the hardest to get can be the most rewarding in the end.

I'm saying this specifically about the handsome & dangerous men I've had in my life...

Cal isn't as handsome as he is dangerous, but, just for you, I'll count him.

Thank you

Your relationship is this horrific mess, but you're still trying to detangle it, at this stage! That has to say something in itself.

You're scared it's another scam, scared of the pain that might come...

But I assure you, I agree dating Cal is worth a try, on a couple of levels.

Your heart has brought you to a place you don't want to be, & maybe you're bound to leave, but for now, all you can do is put one foot in front of the other.

Expectations should stay basic, of course... however!

To be honest,

I expect you two will break up & get back together many times.

It doesn't have to be perfect to justify an attempt.



Lots of people are gonna discourage you, because it seems doomed, but I say it's YOUR decision.

Fola's in bed.

Oh, are we talking about this finally?

Cal is dangerous. Don't let your guard down.

That's what I have to say about it.

Is Ell horny about abusive boyfriends again?

I'm not remarkably more horny than usual

Viv praising him like that sickens me. Cal was *always* well behaved at work. It's his family & lovers you have to worry about!

Don't have the wrong attitude about this situation!

Might as well hang a "FRESH MEAT" sign around your neck!

Cal doesn't deserve your gratitude just for treating you with basic decency. He owed you that from get-go!

Don't deify him for saying please & thank you while the rest of us got it right in the first place without a big-

Uh-

He's trying but you're also really vulnerable.

I have May here on the phone.

Funa... Party....

Haha heyalp

She's asking if Fern's OK.

I agree with you, Funa, but don't yell

I'll stop yelling when you start listening!





May?  
Seriously?

I...I'm fine!  
Just drunk...

AH! Of course!  
He tripped the  
egregore.

May,  
here's  
Fern.



Th-thanks,  
Viv.



I'm sorry,  
Fern!

I really  
should have  
thought of  
that...

Let him  
go, it's  
OK.

H...hello?



Hiya Fern. It's May.  
How's it going?

Sorry about the  
dishwashing  
noises.

That's OK,  
I can hear  
you...

Y'all sound  
like you're having  
fun over there.

Y-yeah, we're partying.  
But Funa's saying something  
about the egregore...?



Yeah, so, a thing about  
the egregore, the memory  
management thing...

It has alarms that go off if it notices an  
elemental is in intense distress...



There was a big spike in  
distress from you a little while ago.  
Do you know what that could  
have been...?

O-oh...I'm s-sorry, I think  
it's because I read...I read  
the court record.

Hmm, yeah, that'll do it...!

May...I'm sorry...  
I'm really drunk....  
it's so late, I'm ....

Shhh.  
None of  
that.



Fern, there's no  
need to be so formal.

Is there anything we  
can do for you?

Rae & Cal are  
here with me, & Lem  
is awake & can come  
down to yours...

Oh...Um...Maybe there's  
something...

Sorry, this is  
crazy, but...  
I need to know  
Cal isn't...hurt...  
right now.

Of course.  
After reading  
that, I needed  
reassurance  
too.



Would you like  
to hear his voice?

Y...yeah.  
Please put  
Cal on.

I can  
put him on  
if you want  
me to.

*grip*

Go on, Cal.

Hi, Fern...  
It's Cal.

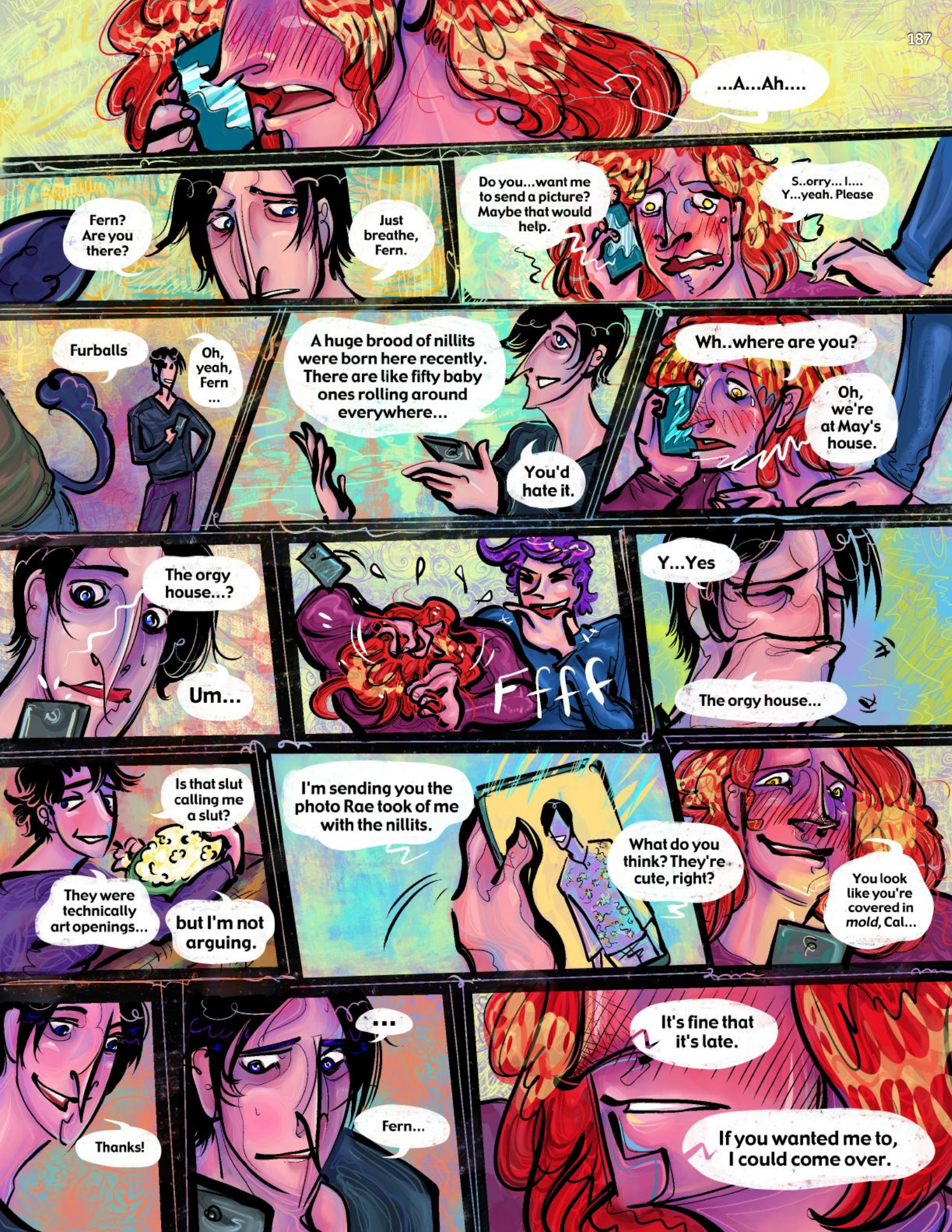
Rae is here  
too. He can hear.  
Is that OK?

Mm!  
H...hi...Rae.

*Squeeze*

H...He...eyy.







I....

I'm way too tired.  
It's finally hitting me.

Soon,  
though...

No...it's  
all right.

How about tomorrow?

Yes.

Please.

Rae will  
be around at noon  
to pick you up,  
then.

I'm still not  
permitted to  
teleport, so  
he helps me.

Right...I'll  
be waiting for  
him.

I'm...  
really hurt...

And what you've  
done is...so...awful.

But  
also...

Thank you for...  
being so calm, & talking  
to me. Sorry I'm not...  
speaking properly...

There's nothing  
to apologize for,  
Fern.

Cal...

What is it,  
Fern?

I...miss you...  
so much.

I really  
need to see  
you.



Fern...I...

thump

F...Fern?  
Are you there?

Ahhh, Ell speaking.  
Fern's fast asleep.

I think that was a little  
bit too much for him.  
He conked out.

It's okay, he was  
already on the bed.  
I tucked him in.

Th....Thank  
you, Ell!

Then...We'll  
say good night!

Good night.  
Thank you for  
calling.

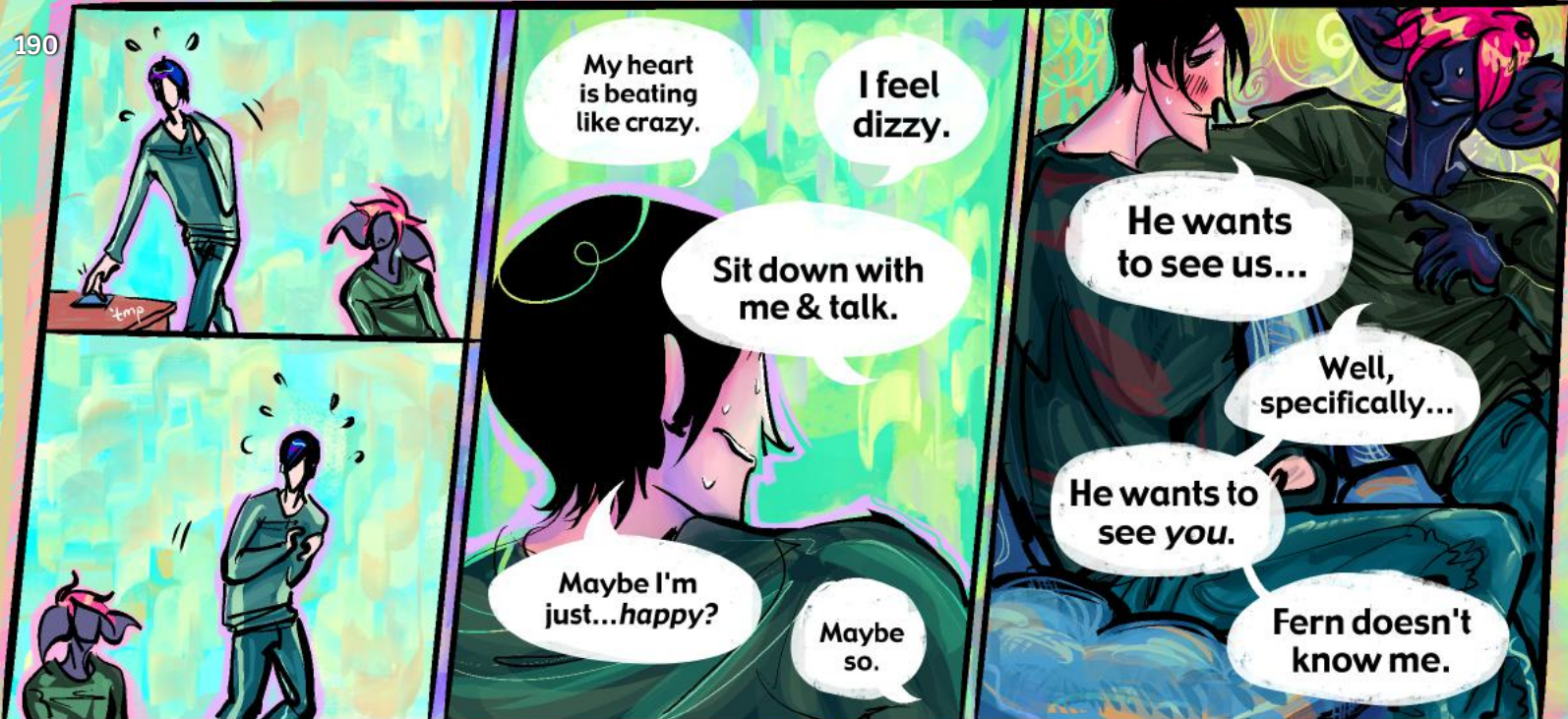
I think you  
did well.

R...really?!

G-good night!

paf







I know I can't predict or control this, I know, so...

Cal, come on.

If this goes horribly—no matter what—

No.

promise you'll blame it on me.

That's not what we're doing, and it never will be.

We're not going to be that desperate.

We face our mistakes together. We don't need to run away if we love & support each other.

Hmmm?

...I'm sorry I make you repeat yourself so much....

I'm not thinking about you & how you want to take care of Fern...

Even though I know...

It's scary.

Should focus on the fact Fern will give us a fair shake. He'll be kind.

Mm hm.

What are we going to tell him...

...about us?

Huh? He knows. He read the thing.

Raaaaee, don't play dumb!

What we're like now.

Er...genuinely confused, though.

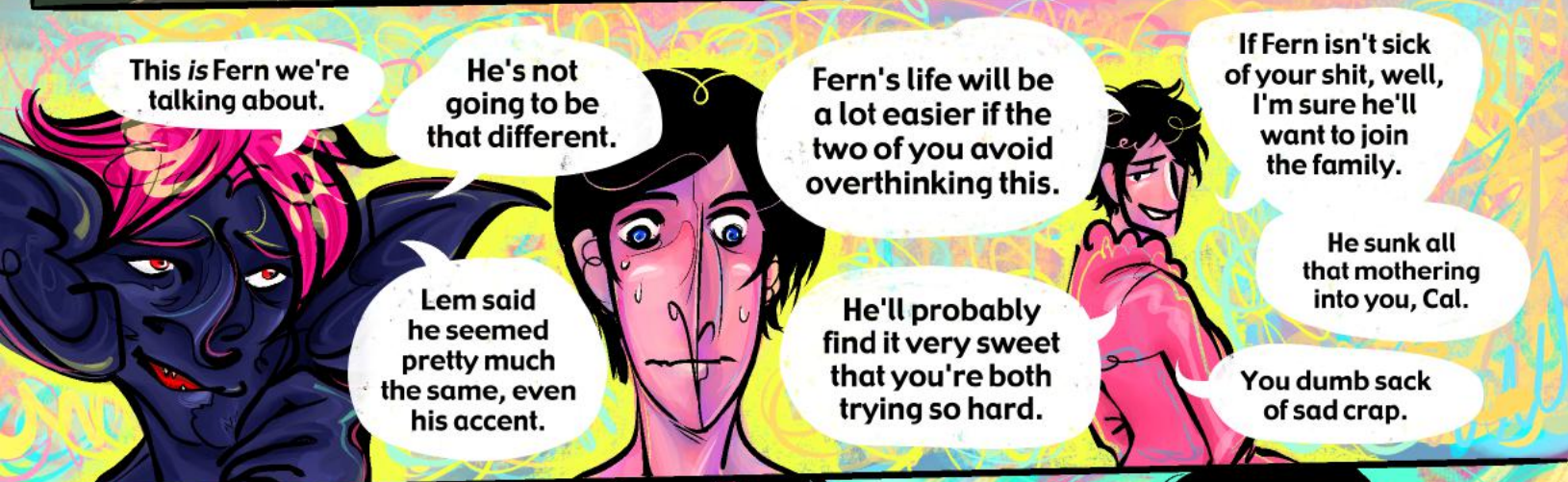
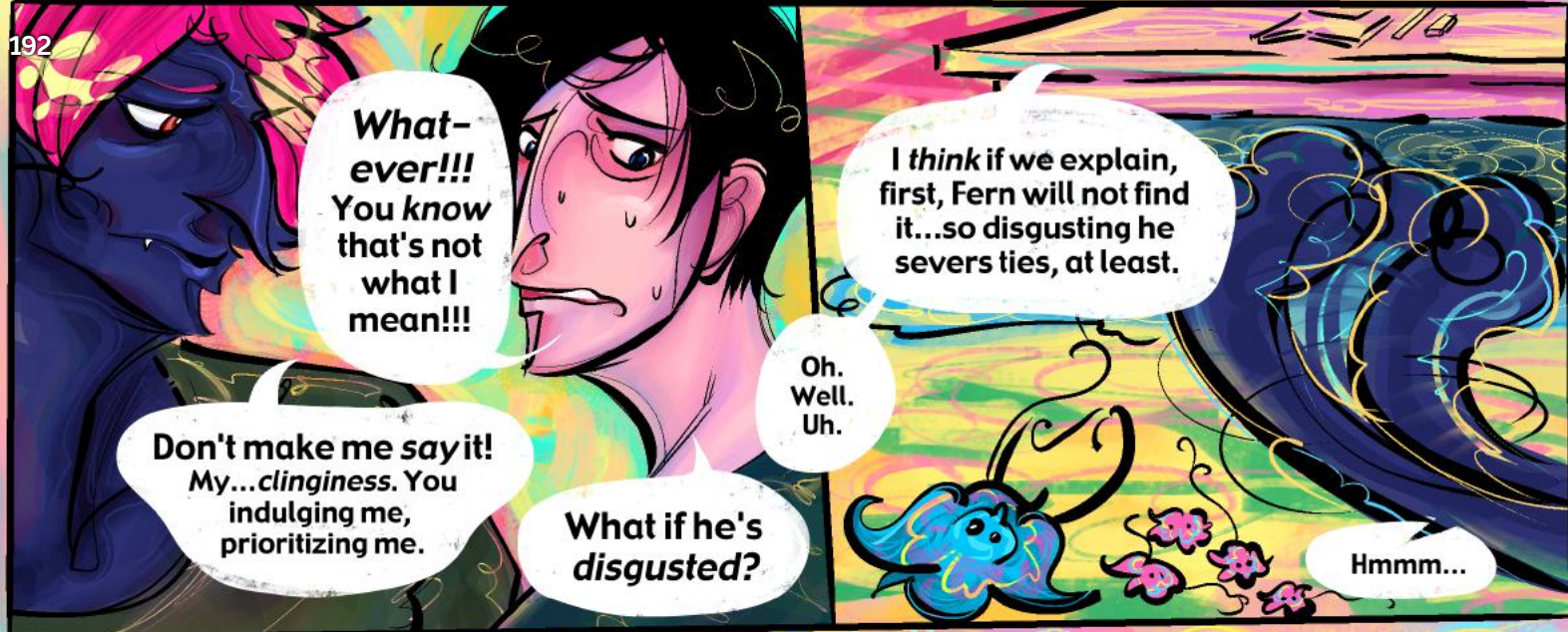
Fern learned about our past tonight, so... That's on my mind.

What's objectionable about the way we are now?

I mean...

We're not...









Expressions of anger & fear are exhausting.

Lem connected him to the egregore.

He'll be experiencing fatigue.

He'll be off for days while his brain absorbs all that info.

We should encourage him to keep pacing himself like this. If he's not ready, he's not ready.

Don't lose patience & provoke a fight. You'll both get hurt, just because you couldn't wait.

If the urge to hurry him along becomes unbearable, let us know right away.

We'll do what we need to do to keep you both safe.

Yes...

Understood.

I'm so relieved you two are here to help me.

Lem too.

Thank you.





I do...

I do wish  
Lem were  
here...

Only seeing him  
him about work is...

Cal.

There's no  
rushing this.







