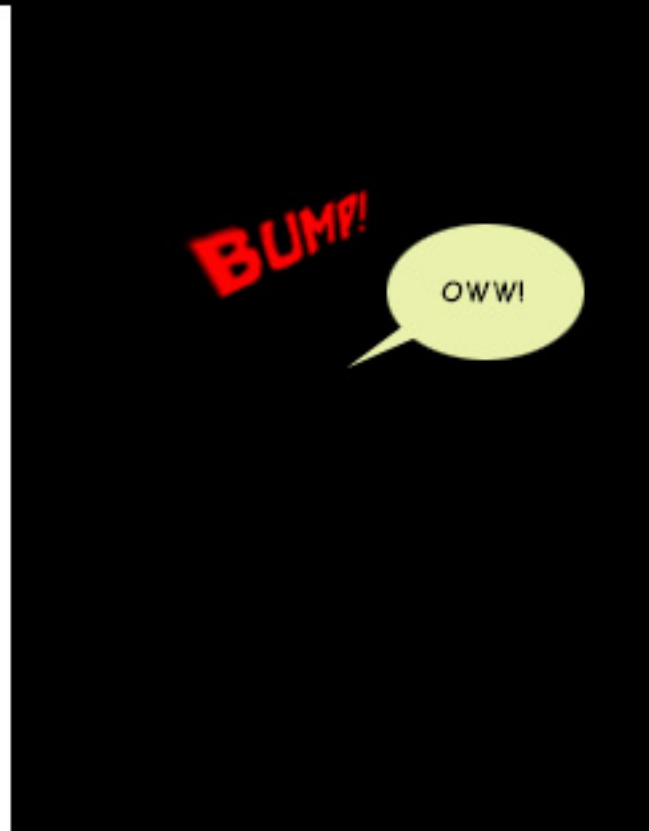




Is it just me, or is it especially foul-smelling up ahead?

No, I think you're right. Smells like something dead.



BUMP!

OWWI



... and there's still the occasional projection. Sorry, Wolf Cub.



Okay, okay - stop a minute.

It's not feeling quite as close here. Let me try again ...

Lunadeia ...

A A A A A ...



Ligatah!

Awesome!

Eh!
About as bright as a dead firefly - - but at least it shows we're moving in the right direction.



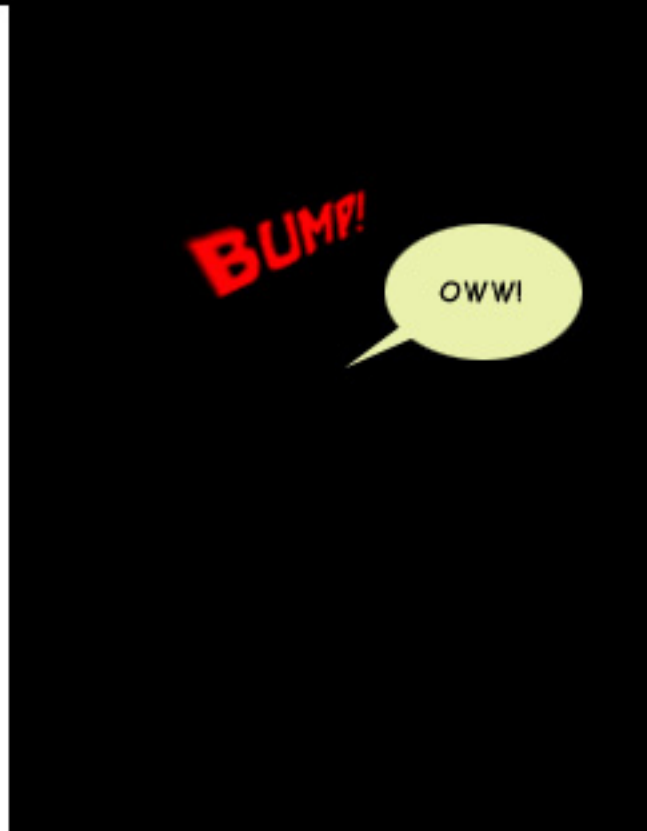
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Awesome!

Eh!
About as bright as a dead firefly - - but at least it shows we're moving in the right direction.



Whoa.



Urtt. Dead for weeks.
Broken leg - broken hip .

No,
not broken -
crushed hip. Wow,
look at that! Looks
like he ran into
something really
big, survived
just ..

Nhhl

... just long
enough to drag
himself here
... and die.

What was he
doing this far from
the main tunnels,
anyway?



Maybe we'll find out.
We're going in the direction
he came from. Whatever he met along
the way, it's big enough to smash
an urtt's bones like eggshells - and
it might still be there.

Terrific.
I'm impossibly far from
home and looking forward to my
imminent death at the hands of
something unnamed and gigantic.
If that's not the definition of
"adventure," I don't know
what is.

Did I mention
what a great time
I'm having, here?



You could
have stayed
in Normos.

Who knows,
Yanora might
have made you
one of her
favorites.

Don't
even joke.

Yanora made
a play for him?

So did half
the women at court --
and Tethik.

He sang a
love song.



Ah, of course.
Yanora's ...

ngl

... very good
in bed, I hear.
Reputation for being ...
very open-minded
for a Kivalian.

I wouldn't
know.



Wow,
that's an
historic event!
I'd pay good
silver to have
seen her
face!

You
said "no?!"

I
dunno.
I think
she's all
right.

I just ...
didn't wanna
go there.



You
are definitely
from another
world, Mentl.



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Broken leg - broken hip .

No,
not broken -
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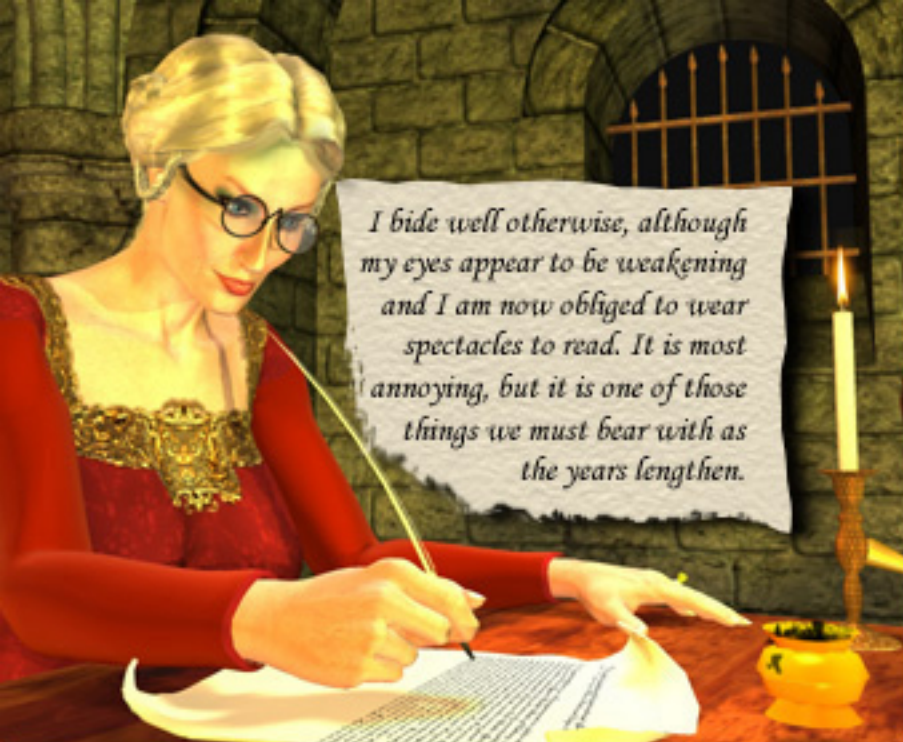
You
are definitely
from another
world, Mentl.

To my dearest sister queen and longtime friend, Ipola Thantic-Ravonna, Queen of the Moon Tribe and Liege-lady to all Erogenia I send greetings.

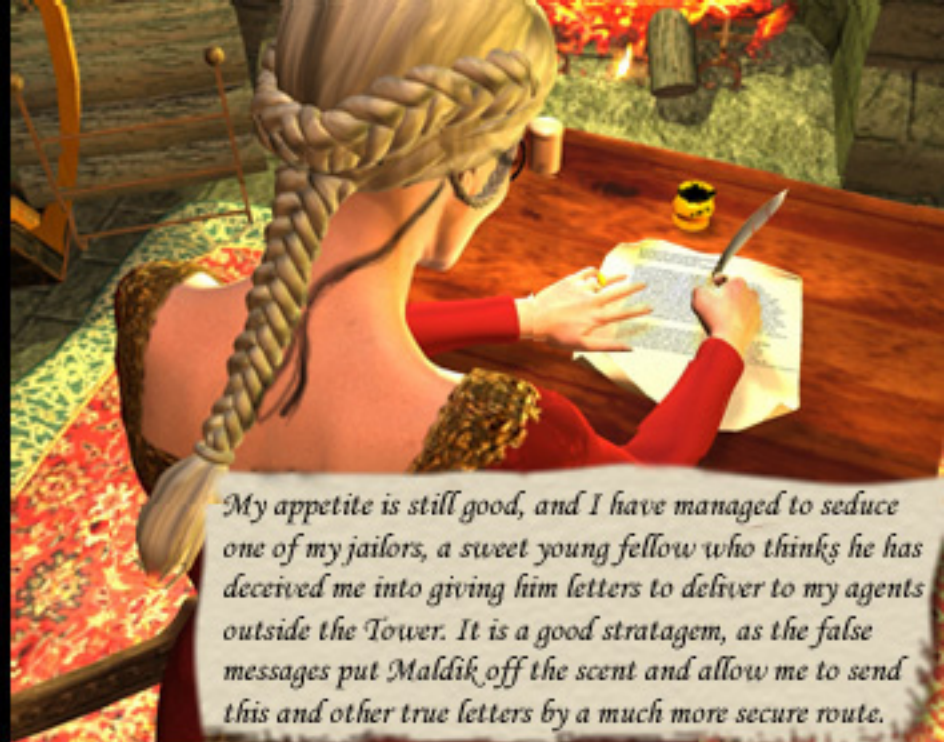
I fear I send bad tidings to you. I am imprisoned on a false charge of murder by my younger son, Prince Regent Maldik, Duke of Tellany, whom you may remember as the sour-faced snotty boy who narrowly survived his own uninvited attentions to your young daughter, the princess Tula Uthic-Ipola, (good health, fortune and gracious days to her.) when she was here as our guest. Part of the reason you may know this to be a false charge is that I am accused of ordering the death of your eldest daughter and champion, Zona Zonn-Ipola, (long life, fortune and glory surround her) and heading an anti-Erogenian conspiracy. Firstly, you will know by our long association and mutual respect that it is patently absurd for me to wish the very beneficial alliance between our kingdoms to be weakened or broken in any way at this perilous time. Secondly, my younger son has stated that Zona is, in fact, dead. I know as a mother and a queen it may cause you concern to hear this, but know that Zona's body is not in evidence, and as we are both aware, many such stories have been heard over the years that the tall princess has been an active wanderer and your champion, and never have they turned out to be true. It is even possible that she is by your side now, as quick as ever, as you read this.

I pray it is so.

I beseech you to be on your guard, because this plot of my son's is obviously intent on dividing us and eliminating his own enemies and obstacles to the throne, in which company I fear I find myself. Count Tetlik is also, even as I write this, accused for complicity in the death of an Erogenian nobleman, which I likewise have no doubt is as false as we both know the good count to be just and true. I speculate that my eldest son the King will be the target of assassination that will be contrived in such a way as to implicate Erogenians, exploiting the fear and mistrust that many of the common people of both our nations have still toward each other. Use your own renowned wisdom and forbearance in all your dealings with my son or his agents and be as mistrustful of rumor as you would a viper. I cannot stress this more strongly: Do NOT trust any messenger of Maldik's no matter what they may tell you.



I bide well otherwise, although my eyes appear to be weakening and I am now obliged to wear spectacles to read. It is most annoying, but it is one of those things we must bear with as the years lengthen.



My appetite is still good, and I have managed to seduce one of my jailors, a sweet young fellow who thinks he has deceived me into giving him letters to deliver to my agents outside the Tower. It is a good stratagem, as the false messages put Maldik off the scent and allow me to send this and other true letters by a much more secure route.



That is, as soon as I discover or invent one.



Uncharacteristically, Maldik appears to be displaying some actual depth and complexity to his thinking. He has prevented my message birds from reaching me by some means, and my attempts to contact you by the other method that we had established long ago also seems to be blocked.



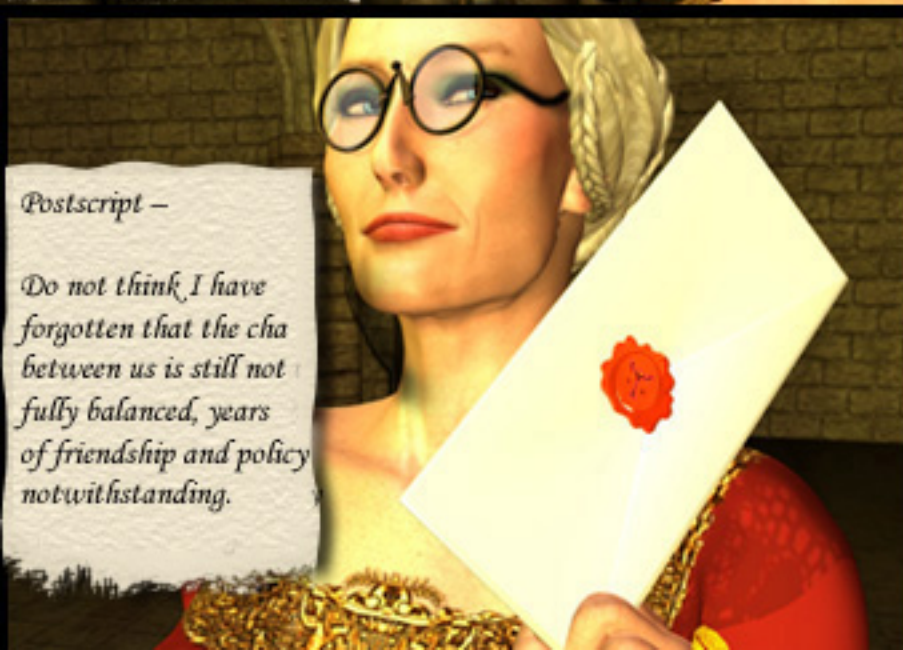
Still, there are things, even in this tower, that Maldik has no knowledge of, and I trust that one of them will eventually turn to my advantage.



To the bearer of this message I bestow my blessing and a reward of some good boon that it will be up to you to judge and me to requite when I am able.

Yours in eternal friendship and hope of receiving word from you soonest,

*Yanora Of Normos,
Queen Of Kivalia*

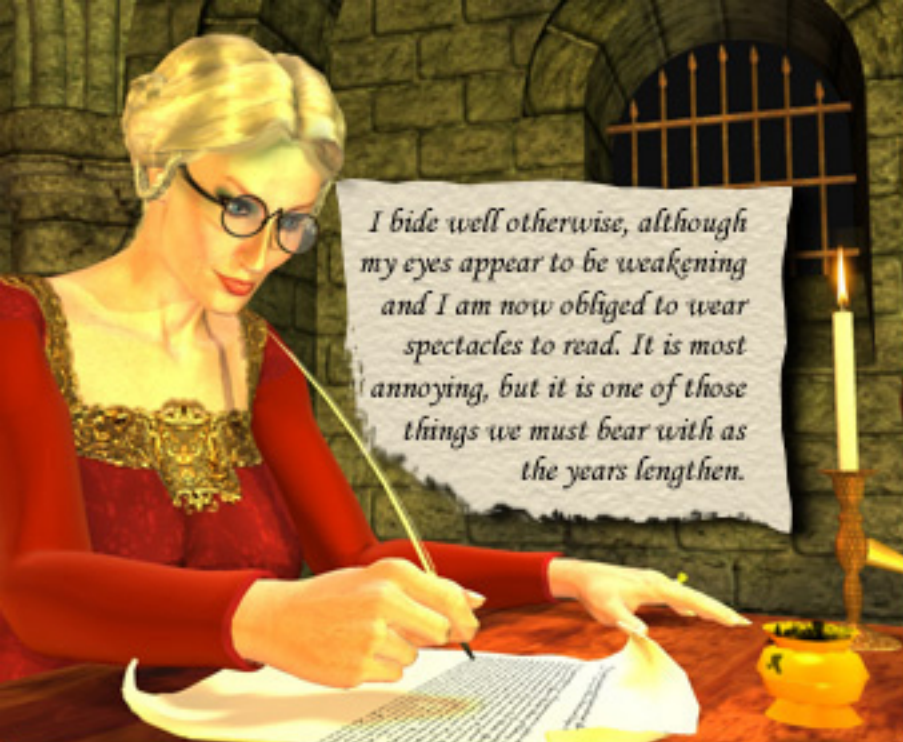


Postscript –

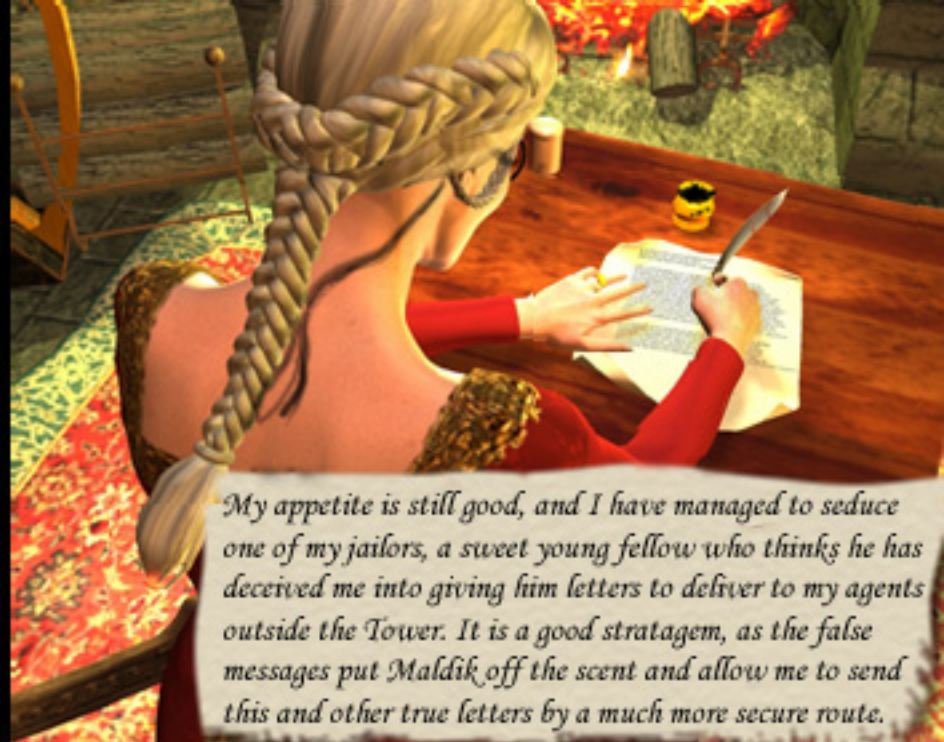
Do not think I have forgotten that the chaos between us is still not fully balanced, years of friendship and policy notwithstanding.



**SCRATCH!
SCRATCH-SCRATCH-SCRATCH!
SCRATCH-SCRATCH!**



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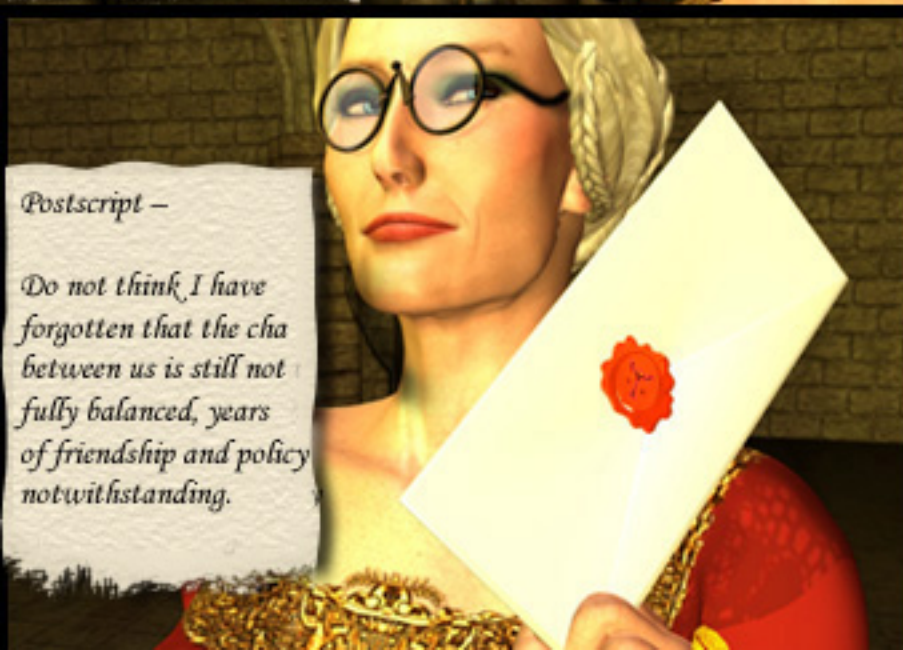
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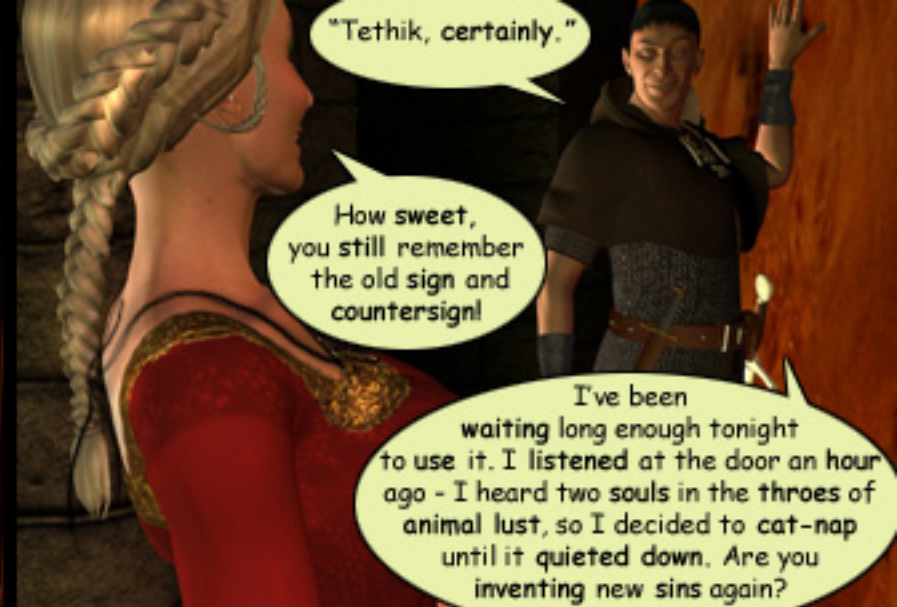
**SCRATCH!
SCRATCH-SCRATCH-SCRATCH!
SCRATCH-SCRATCH!**



"Ahh. Thrasu has heard my prayer!"

"Thrasu? Mayhap."

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"Tethik, certainly."

How sweet, you still remember the old sign and countersign!

I've been waiting long enough tonight to use it. I listened at the door an hour ago - I heard two souls in the throes of animal lust, so I decided to cat-nap until it quieted down. Are you inventing new sins again?



Just keeping my hand in.

So to speak.

It also tires him out so he sleeps on duty. I think as long as we keep our voices down we're safe.

So - Kendrik's passages are still clear?

Mostly.



I don't want to trust it twice, though. They might not be fooled for long by my little improvisation with the rope.

Rope out the open window? Oh, Tethik! They do that in pantomimes!



They were breaking down my door, cousin. I didn't have time to be brilliant.

So, what will you do?



I think I need to take a holiday from Normos.

To your holdings in Dell, then?

No - then he'd come after me with an army, and a stupid siege on Dell Keep is the last thing my uncle wants. Besides, it's the first place anyone would expect me to go.



To say nothing of the waste of resources with the Urts advancing.

I can't understand it. Maldik never has this many dimensions to his schemes.

I've always been able to stay ahead of him with only a tithe of my full attention before.

I suppose I really am getting old.



You'll outlive us all, my dear, and die in bed with a pair of nubile youths.

No-no. This isn't Maldik. Someone else is lending him their wit, and whoever it is ... is quite good.





My son.

And what he's done ...

Not your fault.

No - no, there you're wrong, my lord. He is the man that I helped to make. And if what you suspect is true, then he's a mistake I shall have to correct.



Let's not do anything drastic, now.

No - not drastic. Not yet, at any rate.

I have to go.



I'm going to visit an old friend. Someone needs to warn them.

Here, I've written a letter.

Good. Your seal will carry some weight, at least. But I don't intend to go directly there - again, that would be another place I might be expected to run to.



I'm going to visit an old bull-headed fellow first.

Oh - I see. Well, you know best. I thought you'd had a falling-out?

It was a trifle.

Not to him.



I'll deal with it.

Besides, a good fight in the open air with the risk of getting spitted by barbarians ...

Like the good old days.



Hm. Sometimes I think the only thing good about the old days is that we weren't old.

Isn't that good enough?

Fare well. And keep safe.




I do love you, long shanks. I should be very angry with you if you got killed.

Likewise. As the Erogenians say, "cha na amanh."



CLICK!


Your Grace?




Your Grace?

I ... I thought I heard voices.

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There's no one here but me.



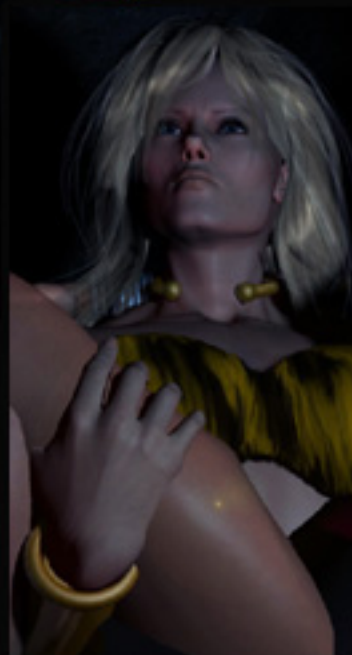
Oh ... you weren't drowsing on duty again, were you?

I ... certainly not, Your Grace!



Don't worry. I won't tell.

Why don't you come in and Mum will tell you another naughty little story?



Hello, hello!



At last!

UTHIEN
LUNADEIX ...



(Looks like
somebody's
store room.)

(In a cave?)

(Bandits -
maybe ogres.)



(With you hurt, I don't want to fight if I don't absolutely have to. We need to find someplace safe - preferably Erogenian - to heal you and to rest up.)

(No argument.)

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(Okay, let's inch our way out of he --)



I ... I didn't mean ...



Famous
LAST words!

STINKING LITTLE
THIEVES!!!



Oh, Jesus
poached on toast!



I'LL SQUASH
YOU FLAT THIS TIME!!





Again, I am SO sorry - I thought you were Urtts! Every now and again, I find some of the nasty little creatures stealing from the stores, and it just drives me crazy!

Well, as far as we know, that passage is pretty well blocked, now.

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Melted, actually.

I don't think you'll have any more problems from that direction.

But this place is so nice, Keltan!



Oh, thank you, so much! Such a surprise to see you, Zona, but with you, one can always expect the unexpected.



It's been two years since I last saw you, and you never took up my invitation to visit the Valley Of The Moon.



Oh, you know me - I'm shy. Most people aren't like you, you know.

It's not as if I can't handle an angry mob with torches and pitchforks now and again, I just hate the judgment and rejection, you know?

I guess I'm too sensitive.



People can be so small-minded.



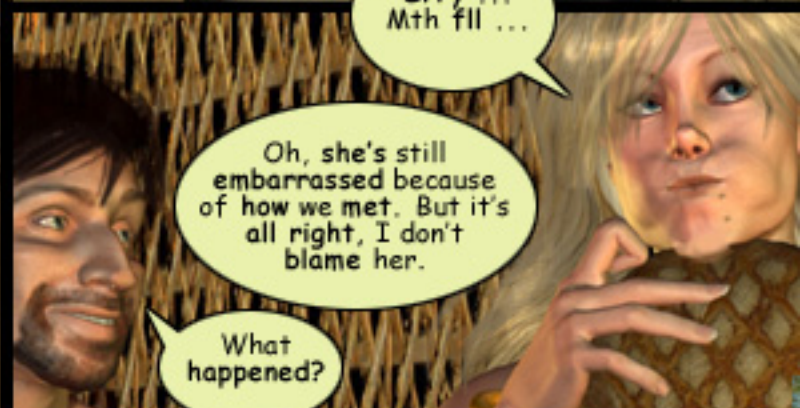
Well - I know I can, for sure.



Oh, don't be that way! That's all water under the bridge. Have a biscuit.



What's water under the bridge? What haven't you told me?



Srry ... Mth fill ...

Oh, she's still embarrassed because of how we met. But it's all right, I don't blame her.

What happened?



This was about six years ago ...

sigh I was in a hurry.

Tula, you remember when Arogond forced the Challenge to the alliance?

Of course.

Well, naturally, there was only so much time to complete all three challenges, and the whole alliance is at stake, so ...

I was in a hurry.



I was also just not in the mood, that day, let me tell you. I'd found a nice, private spot to settle in the wilderness just outside the Bull Tribe's territory. It was quiet and I liked it.



And who just barrels right on in without a how-do-you-do, but this one, here --



--straight through my carrot patch without stopping!



I decided right then that a certain someone needed a talking-to!



I was running late, as I said.
As I recall, I wasn't really very
nice about it.



Well, be fair - neither of us was
in a particularly reasonable
frame of mind at that point.



Things kind of
went ... uh ...



... downhill from
there.



Yeah. That's one
way of putting it.



I guess I sort of got
my back up at that point.



So, one thing
led to another ...

The way it ... you know ...
sometimes just does for me.



Well, at that point,
I sort of stopped
thinking rationally.



Okay - to be perfectly honest,
I just stopped thinking at all.



She was like nothing I'd ever seen.
So fast - I couldn't even react.

She kept hitting my legs, my
arms, so I couldn't stand
anymore, couldn't fight back.



Eventually, I couldn't
do anything at all.



All right.
Just ... get it
over with.



Why

Why didn't you just ...
get out of my way?!



This is
my home.



I ...

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I've committed a
terrible offense
against you.

Please,
let me bind
your wounds.





Anyway, you do remember how I was always so lonely?

Ahm-hamn ...

Well ...

**THOOM!!
THOOM!!**

KELTAN!
Give me a hand
with these groceries,
can you, please?



I have
a girlfriend,
now!

Hang on -
I'll be right
back.

Lambkin,
we've got
company!



Who? HER??!!

HERE??!!

It's fine -

I can't!
I just can't!



It's all right,
they're my
friends,

No, I --

Come on ...

Are they
going to ...

What?
No, of course
not. They're very
nice. That's
my girl.

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HEMI Ah,
everyone, this
is my girlfriend,
Liri.

Liri, this is
Princess Zona, that
you've, ah, heard me
mention, and her sister,
the princess Tula,
and Mentl ...



Oh, my...
ah ...

How do you do,
your ... uh ... high
exalted-nesses?



Not especially
exalted, just now,
actually.

Sorry for not
getting up ...



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If you can get it, I can use some - hunh! - white willow bark, yellow flower, black cohosh, feverfew, fire pepper -

Hang on, hang on, please -



I'll get my notebook ...

Isn't she great? She reads and writes. And she can do numbers, too!



I just have to write this down or I'll forget.

We have a nice little garden, but some of this I have to go into the woods for. I picked some fire peppers just now, in fact.

... white willow bark, yellow flower, black cohosh, feverfew ...



Good, good. Also, lavender is good, and numbwort or mandragora, if you can find it.

I'm deeply grateful, Keltan, for the fresh bandage and the wine, but right now it's pretty much taking all I have to mentally control the pain in my leg.

If you get me just half of what I asked for I can ... nhhl ... whool ... Make a preparation so I can concentrate enough to take care of myself magickally.



Ah - Puh - princess Zona, could you ... could you please ... help me?

Uh ... Some of the stuff is hard for me to reach.



Of course!



Do you need -



NO!

I mean, thank you, my L - Mentl, but no.

Just the two of us will be fine.





Besides, what do you mean I'm the only woman he's ever known? What about you?

Oh, Well - I -- I've never ...

Oh ...



Zona, he wants to DO things!

He ... he wants me to ...

DO... **THINGS!**

So? What's stopping you?



I've never been with a man!

I mean, LOOK at me! Keltan's the first person, man or woman, I've ever met who was as big as me.

I've never had anybody! I don't know anything!

What if I do it wrong? What if it hurts?

What if ... what if he laughs at me?



Keltan would never do anything like that! He's a noble soul.

Besides, he knows I'd kick his ass.

Liri, come on - it's just obvious he adores you. Anyway, you're beautiful.



Oh ... no.

Your body is big, but it's strong and fine-looking - and your face is very pretty.

You have some really nice gifts for love-making - with the right man, of course.

Don't ... don't kid around.

Erogenians don't lie, Liri. We don't believe in flattery. And I can see the way your man looks at you.



I don't even know what to do with it. Nobody's ever cared for me.

Even my family. They stopped using my name when I was eight and just called me "The Lump."



They ... couldn't have been serious.



No. They hated me.

When I was five years old, I was already bigger than my father, and I just kept growing bigger and bigger, all the time.



The whole town were afraid of me, especially the priests - they called me an abomination before Thrasu.

When I was ten they drove me out of town.



I -
to disown a child of your
body just because of how
she's made? I can't even
imagine.



But - then last year, I found
Keltan! And he ... he was big like me,
and he liked me. And then we
found our little home.



We've been so happy,
but ... he wants .. to do.
Things.



And nobody's
ever told you...

Well - uh, ...
uh, please,
I'm sorry.

Let's just
forget about
it.

We're wasting
time, and we should
be getting back
to your sister.

She's resting,
she'll be all right
for a little while
longer.



I just ... I feel
stupid, now, talking
to you like this about my
stupid little problems.

Here you are,
a princess and everything,
and I'm not anybody -
I mean, I'm just ...

Liri ...



... I'm sorry, I ...

Liri!

I ...

JUST --

STOP!



BOOM!



You just listen for a minute, okay? Then if you want, you can smack me one to balance things.

There's lots of people in the world. Some big, some small, some friends, some enemies, and a lot of in-between.



But there isn't one of them - not one! - that doesn't matter somehow.

Of course you're somebody, of course your problems are important- don't be silly.



And, to at least one man, you are the most important person in the world.



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And nobody's ever had a talk with you about sex.

Okay, then.

Let's start with some of the basics ...



Wait!

Uh ... uh ... uh ...



Let me get my note book .



THOOM!

OOHHH!!

THOM!

OOOH!!



THOOM! THOM!
THOOM! THOM!
THOOM! THOM!



Jesus, how long
is that gonna go on
in there?

I don't know.
They're strong,
healthy people.



THOOM! THOM!
THOOM! THOM!



Understatement of the
fricking century.

Umm - is she still
supposed to be
glowing like that?

Yes, it's the spell.
It heals her body
from the inside out.



She's totally
focused inwardly - at
least that's what
she said.

Oh - Liri, are ...
are you sure it's okay
to do that there?

Let me
check ...

When she's like
this, nothing can
disturb her.

Wish I could
cast it on me so
I could sleep.



Yes, it's
right there in
my notes ...

Okay- ohh -

Oh, wow!!

OH!


WOW!



Pretty damn proud
of ourself, are we?

Yep!





Well, you saw, I ... I had to use my magick. But before that, I - they gave me to Ginsha.

I guess I was kind of like the rest of the second-hand junk they gave her.


Anyway, she .. I tried to talk to her and she got really vicious.

She said she was going to kill me and eat me. But before that she was gonna ...


and she did start to .. kinda ...

... mess with me.

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So ... you defended yourself.



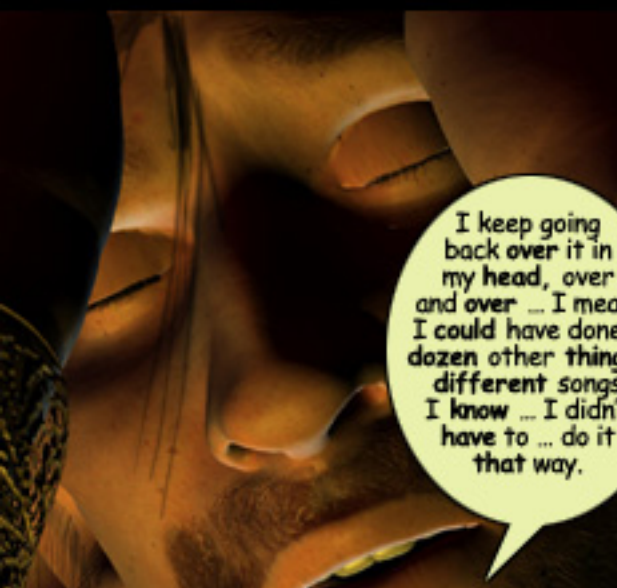
I ... I ... couldn't think of anything clever. I just made her ... crazy with ... with lust and ... I sort of took her over. I thought I could just knock her out or something ...




but ... I ...



I see.

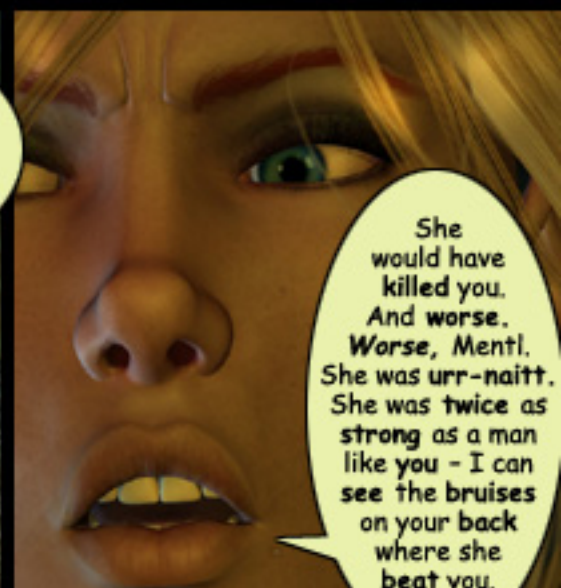


I keep going back over it in my head, over and over ... I mean, I could have done a dozen other things, different songs I know ... I didn't have to ... do it that way.




I can't see where you've done anything wrong. You saved yourself from a deadly enemy.


I ... I never killed anyone before. And she wasn't like the rest of them. She wasn't just a monster. I think she did have a human heart.



She would have killed you. And worse. Worse, Mentl. She was urr-naitt. She was twice as strong as a man like you - I can see the bruises on your back where she beat you.




I don't feel any pity for her at all. If she were here right now, I'd kill her with my bare hands and hang her corpse out for the black corbies to eat.



You used your power the only way you could, and you defeated her. You should feel good about yourself.

I wish I did - or maybe I'm glad I don't. I don't know -



Do you understand?



No.

I don't understand.

But --



Your ways aren't ours.

And I don't always have to understand something in you to accept it.

You're having a very bad time, that's plain - this is all new to you.

But I've seen you grow so much in such a short time.

You meet our challenges with a courage that makes me ...



Mentl, every time.

Every time when it matters most, you act to make the difference.

For me.



Mentl, back there you said you would die with me.

Yeah.

You don't -

- you couldn't --

-- know what that means to us. So, I won't hold you to it. But that's not a promise that a man makes to his lover lightly.

Well ... I meant it. That wasn't "lightly -"



I know, I know.

You should know, though -

if you were Erogenian, Mentl, that promise isn't ever given unless you mean to walk the Golden Path.



Oh.

It's a sacred vow to us. We never say such a thing unless we mean to be together, with no other lover ... for life.

Well...

I ...



No ... don't try to explain.

I cherish what you said. And I think I do understand how you meant it.



I love you, baby.

I love you, too ...

... "Baby."

Just ... hold me, then?

No problem.



They have lots of stamina.

Ya think?

KELTAN, DON'T STOP-

DONTSTOP DONTSTOP!

OH-GAHHDS!!

Morning ...



SNAP!



AAHH!!



Hah!
Stop it!
Stop it!



You're going to
scrape my face
off, you big goof!
Ah-hah!

They found me
just now as I was
getting water from the
well. Just started trotting
beside me like they'd
known me all their
lives. Strange.

This one, of
course, I do
know. All right,
Stormcloud?

Oh, he loves
his belly-rubs!
Yes he does!
That's my boy,
he loves his
belly-rubs!

NN-HNNN!!

Ohhh ...
aren't you cute!
Such a sweet
little girl!





Keltan, can we have a cat?

PLEASE?



I don't know, lambkin. The cats in this area are all wild ...

We can't just steal cubs from their pride, we have to live here.



Come to The Valley Of The Moon in the Spring, that's the best time.

You'll be our honored guests, and if you don't take at least two of the best yearlings home with you I'll be very much surprised.

I can already tell they like your auras. I've never seen them act like this for strangers.



Ohhh!

I just want to keep this precious little baby!

AWRRP!

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How do you feel?



Good.

Not perfect - I'm still limping, but I can ride, if that's what you're asking.



That's funny.

I know we took all the tack and baggage off these guys.

We always do before we make camp.

Maybe we've got a friend.

Ahh - hm.

Well, whatever, it's all here and if it doesn't smell fishy to you, I guess it's okay.



Oh, don't go by me - not anymore.

Ah, don't be so hard on yourself.

You just wanted to give somebody the benefit of the doubt, because you're a good person.



We came out all right - more or less.

You sound like him.

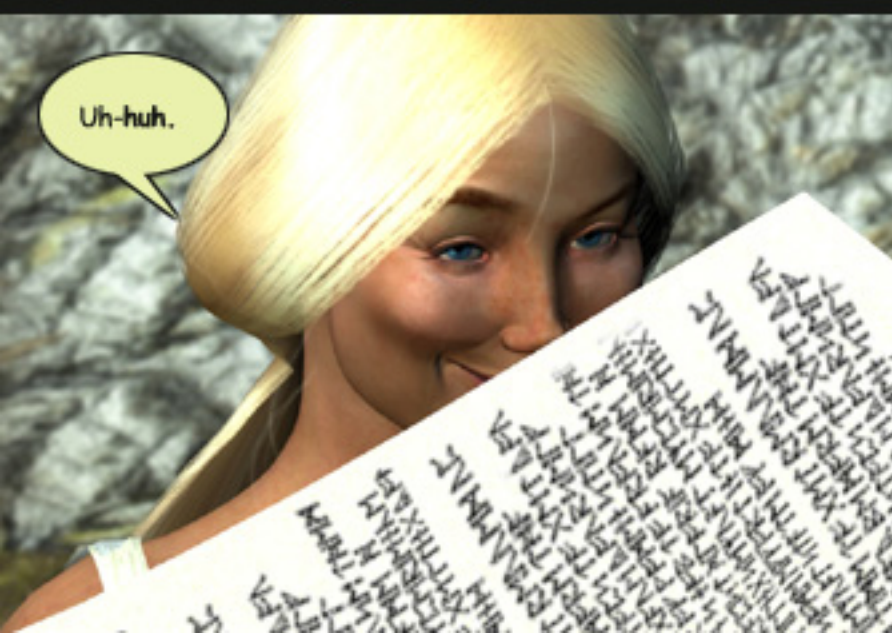
"Him."

"Him?"

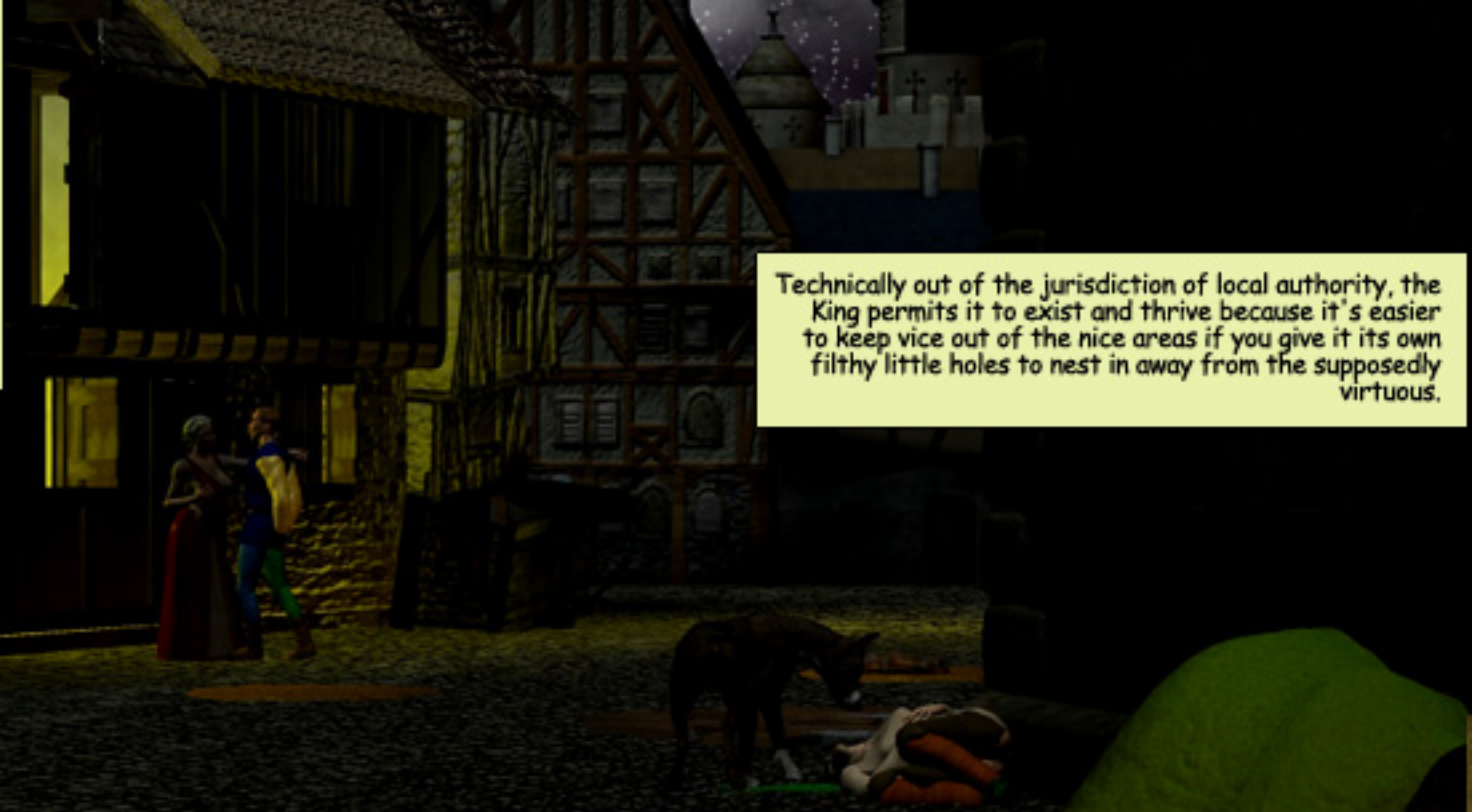
Him" - Oh! Him!

Mm-hm.

And - thanks, Mentl, I do appreciate it.



West of the river is a part of Normas called "The Tanners." Centuries ago it was where leather tanneries set up outside town so that the smells of that urine-driven trade didn't offend the cityfolk. These days, virtuous people are supposed to avoid the area completely. The tanneries are mostly gone, but other, less respectable trades are plied there, now,



Technically out of the jurisdiction of local authority, the King permits it to exist and thrive because it's easier to keep vice out of the nice areas if you give it its own filthy little holes to nest in away from the supposedly virtuous.

The Tanners is where clean, respectable people go to find dirty, unrespectable entertainments.



They then quietly sneak home again to their clean, respectable world secure in the illusion that they, still truly belong to it.

Then, again, there are people in The Tanners who make no pretense of belonging to the clean, respectable world at all.



Evening,
Share the table?



Nobody else in the seat, yeh?

Thanks.

Order me one of what you're having.

Don't want to raise your voice, yeh?

Fine.

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Oil
Another one of these so-called ales - and **HOLD the ROACHES,** this time, yeh?

Ahh, go eat shit, yer little prick!

Thot I already was, yeh? Tastes like it anyway, yeh?! Thrasu's bloody arse, wench, learn to cook!

Place is filthy, yeh? Dunno why I come here, yeh?



Oh, I don't know - you seem pretty well at home here to me, Morcai.



That's as may be,
my lo - my friend,
yeh?

You stand out
like a fly on a
tablecloth, though,
yeh?

Thank you.

Oo, now, see,
that's what I like!
Som'uddy wi'
manners!



And some
money, yeh?

You in the
Tanners lookin'
f' a good time?
I could -

Ah --



Shog off, you!

You shog off!

Always got
somethin' nasty to
say, you! What's
wrong -

This one don't
buy what you sell,
Dandelion, yeh?
Barkin' up the
wrong tree, yeh?

Wha --?



Oh.

My mistake.
No offense.

None taken,
I assure you.



See? `Least
he's nice.

Don't hardly
never get nobody nice
here, `specially you,
little rat-man!

I'll "nice"
you up yer --

Ahhh-
promises,
promises!

SHOG!!



I suppose
I should have at
least worn the
rusted mail...

Wouldn't help.
It's you, yeh?

Just the
way you stand,
way you walk.

Posh, yeh?

Well, we'll
make this quick,
then.



Suit y'self.

Me, I'm s'prised
you're still in town, yeh?
Nasty business last
night, I heard, yeh?

Yes.

Poor, pretty little
Yerggo boy, yeh?
I s'pose you had yer
reasons, though,
yeh?



If I'd actually
done anything,
I would have.

But I didn't.

Someone
else did.

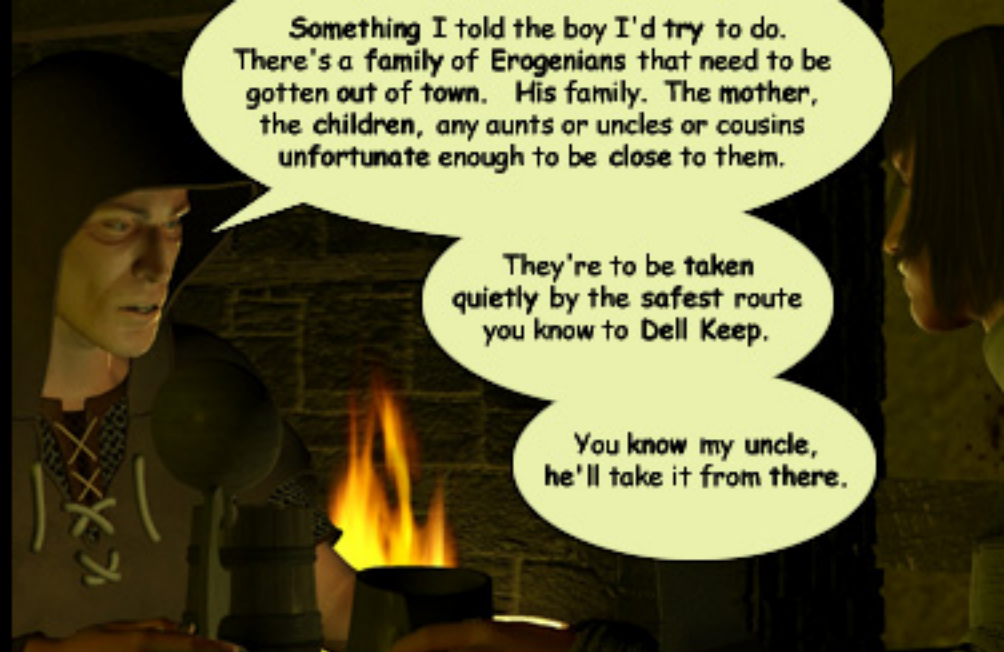


Well, none of my business either way, yeh?

So - you just come in here for the atmosphere, then, or --?

One last thing I need to take care of before I go, and I'm hiring you to do it. Tonight.

True? What's so important, yeh?



Something I told the boy I'd try to do. There's a family of Erogenians that need to be gotten out of town. His family. The mother, the children, any aunts or uncles or cousins unfortunate enough to be close to them.

They're to be taken quietly by the safest route you know to Dell Keep.

You know my uncle, he'll take it from there.



Ah, well, that's an expensive job, yeh? And I can't do it by meself, yeh?

I'm afraid you'll have to, Morcai. You're the best I've got, and the only one I can be absolutely sure my cousin isn't watching - yet.



Aaaahhhh, I dunno.

I'm not like you, yeh? I ain't overflowin' with love for the Yerggos, yeh?

Bloody moonhowlin' barbarians can all sod off for what I care, yeh?



I know.

But I also know what you do love, Morcai, and unlike most decent people, I don't judge you for it.

And at the end of this job, if everyone's alive and safe in Dell, I'll arrange a bonus for you of ... *that*.



True?

True. Multiples. A regular.



If you get them all safe to Dell.



Yeh, all right - - knocks.

Bargain.



Good.

Here's for your expenses, plus half the regular fee. The rest when you're done.

The bonus if nobody dies or is taken

What's the name, yeh? Where are they in the city?

It's in the bag. In the old cypher, you know.

Farewell.



`Ta.

Weeeell, m' lord, lookee-lookee, yeh? You are a sport, a'nt you? All by meself, yeh? Okay, we'll getcher precious Yerggos to Dell Keep, yeh.

But if they try any of their nasty moonhowlin' tricks, I'll have t'teach 'em manners, yeh?

Yeh.



Third watch. Sun should be coming up, soon
They wanted to let me sleep,
but I've had a couple nights
good rest, and I'm fine.

Besides, I'm damn tired
of feeling useless.



RRRRUH!



Sniff!

!

SNUFF!
MRRR?

RUHH!RR!



nae hoesta-sha,
lunadeia!

hoesta-sha
tonari!!

tonari!
tonari!!

--the FUCK?!



Tula!!

What is it?!



SHOW
YOURSELF--



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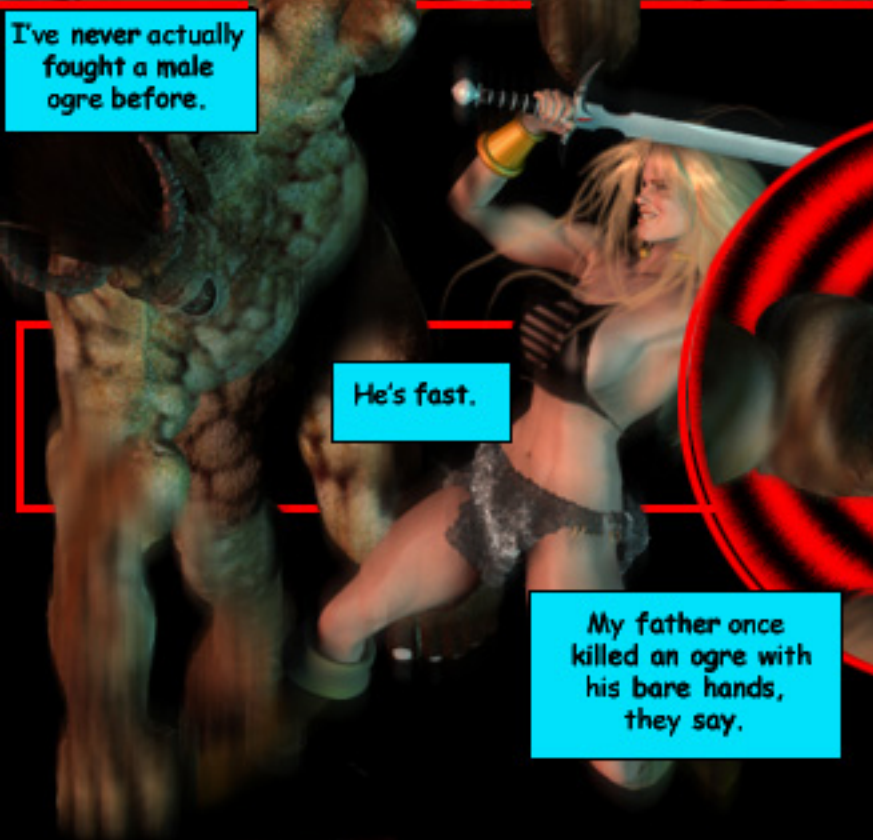
paio!



GROSHA-KEKHA!

SHUAKHA
KSHANGO-KU!!

I've never actually fought a male ogre before.



He's fast.

My father once killed an ogre with his bare hands, they say.



Another thing they say is never let the ogre get his hands on you.

Oh, well. We just have to teach him not to be so grabby.

CHOCK!



Okay
okay
okay
okay
okay ...

Concentrationintent
emotionalenergy,
concentrationintent
emotionalenergy ...

Although ...

Just at the
moment ...



We seem to be doing just fine ...



Wait --



SH--

SHOTGUN!

SHOOT 'IM
'FORE HE RUNS,
NOW!

POOMM!



Thank you,
Mentl.



<WHAT?!>



HA!

POOM!

DO THE
JERK BABY!

DO THE
JERK, NOW!

POOM!

HEY!



DIE!

KFWASSH!

PRAKA!

pak eyal!

sszowwww!

Oh, no, you don't.

You have to deal with ME first, "owner!"

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AN-SHUAKH-

en kava, lunaDeia!



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<I swore to Shuach that
I would gut you myself, animal,
and so I *will*!>



<How flattering!
Are you sure you're not afraid
of getting beaten by an "animal?">

<Again?>



Come ahead, then.

nae
hoesta-sha
ela!



PUT ON YOUR RED DRESS
AND THEN YOU GO DOWNTOWN NOW

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I SAID BUY YOURSELF A SHOTGUN NOW



WE'RE GONNA BREAK IT DOWN BABY NOW



WE'RE GONNA LOAD IT UP BABY NOW



AND THEN YOU SHOOT 'IM 'FORE HE RUNS NOW





PUT ON YOUR HIGH HEELS SHOES

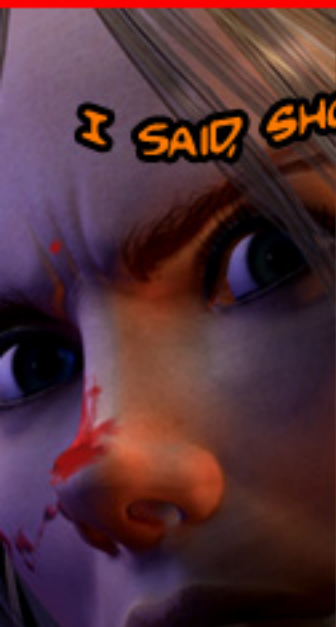
I SAID WE'RE GOIN' DOWN HERE LISTEN TO EM PLAY BLUES



WE'RE GONNA DIG POTATOES

WE'RE GONNA PICK TOMATOES

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I SAID SHOTGUN

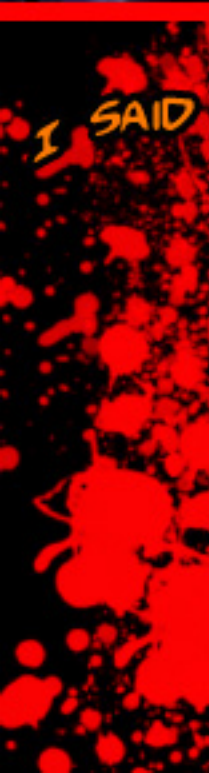


SHOOT 'IM 'FORE HE RUNS NOW



DO THE JERK BABY

DO THE JERK NOW
HEY!



I SAID IT'S TWINE TIME



I SAID IT'S TWINE TIME
I SAID IT'S TWINE TIME

TIME
TIME



ELA
GON-KA!!

ela Treya
kum!



Δι, lunadeia
Thul-tukuun!



URCH TATHU
RASHKALANH!



Now, you DIE,
by Shuach!

Idiot! Do you really
think to best me with the
left-over toys of a god my
goddesses imprisoned in the
Otherwhen *three thousand*
years ago?

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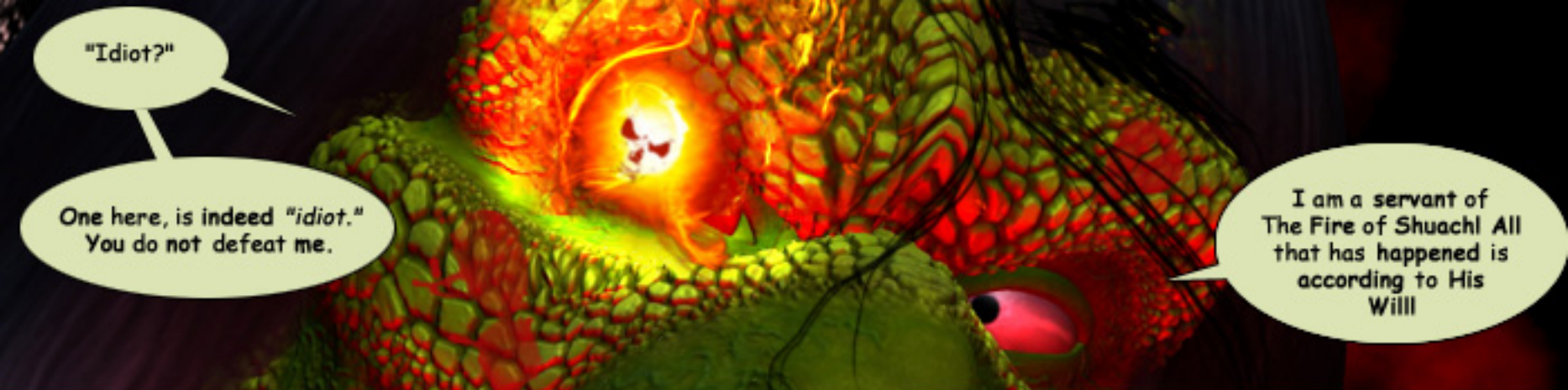


Enochthu
paio-la-luna
pah!



ELA SHUA-

AAAAHHH!!



"Idiot?"

One here, is indeed "idiot."
You do not defeat me.

I am a servant of
The Fire of Shuach! All
that has happened is
according to His
Will!



"Toys?!" WOE unto YOU,
moon-worshipping pagan animall

The least finger
of His mighty hand is
more than enough to
deal with you.

My god
IS GOD!!



And Zona
thinks that I
talk too mu -



**BAVAL
SHUNKANSHAI!**

Eyal -

Shun-ya-Ah -

AACH!





«Praise be
to Shuach!»



POOM!
POOM!

«By the Holy Fire --
the others still live!
For the plan to succeed,
I cannot tarry here!»



«May it please
Shuach that the
Moon Priestess' heart
still beats when
I return.»

«The fall has
surely broken her, but I
should still love for her
to watch me tear it from
her living breast.»



«And what of the
little man? Where
does this magick
come from?»

Pity he must
be destroyed
first. I should
like to study --



NYAAARGH!!



ΑΙΑΑ ΝΑ ΤΕΡΙΑ-ΔΕΙΑ!
ΒΕΛ ΚΡΟΝΗΑΛΛΑ ΝΟΧ ΤΟΝ-ΚΗΑ!





Shuach is a vile
perversion of the
universe that my
people rejected
millenia ago.

We deny him.
We abhor him.
We despise him.

We will perish
as a race before
we acknowledge
him again.

Tell him that
for me -

- as I send
you to him
in his prison.

Hahahahaha ...

Tell Him ...

...yourself ...

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He ...
is coming ...

**SHANGHO-
CHU!**

paio!!

HA-HAHAHAHAA-HA!

SH-FOOSH!



This is a screenshot from the video game Resident Evil 4, depicting a scene where the protagonists, Leon S. Kennedy and Ashley Graham, have successfully defeated several enemies in a dark, wooded area. Both characters are heavily splattered with blood, indicating a violent battle. Ashley, on the right, has long blonde hair and is wearing her signature red dress; she is celebrating triumphantly with her arms raised, holding a large combat knife aloft in her right hand. Leon, on the left, is shirtless and wears his standard brown tactical pants and silver belt. He appears exhausted or relieved, with four speech bubbles containing the sound effect "*Huff!*" floating near him. The ground is littered with severed limbs and bodies of defeated enemies, including a large blue boar-like creature. In the background, a grey tiger is roaring. At the very top of the frame, a jagged, red banner contains the text "AAAAAYYYY EROGEN CHA HAAAAAAAA!!!!!!". The overall atmosphere is one of chaotic victory and gore.

Huffl

I'm Okay --

Every time, my love.
Every time, when it
matters most.



PRIEST GORSHASH.

I AM DISPLEASED.





<I admit my faults, Dread Lord.>

**AND WHAT IS THAT FAULT,
IN YOUR OWN MIND?**

<I failed to complete
my own plan to deceive
and weaken the humans,
and to visit vengeance
on the Moon Priestess.>

<I was weak -
my power and my
will were not equal
to the task.>

<I was defeated.>

**THEN, YOU THINK THAT
THE POWER THAT I GAVE YOU
WAS INSUFFICIENT?**

**THAT MY ASSESSMENT
OF YOUR WILL
WAS INCORRECT?**

<No, Dread Lord!>

**YOU THINK THAT
MY UNDERSTANDING
IS IMPERFECT?!**

<NO, Dread Lord!>

I AM GOD!


**I AM THE AUTHOR
OF YOUR EXISTENCE!**

**WHEN I GIVE YOU
PLEASURE,
YOU WILL PRAISE ME.**

**WHEN I GIVE YOU
ENDLESS SUFFERING, YOU
WILL PRAISE ME!**

**WHEN I GIVE LIFE,
YOU WILL PRAISE ME!
WHEN I GIVE YOU DEATH,
YOU WILL PRAISE ME!**

**YOURS IS NEVER TO QUESTION ME, LITTLE MORTAL WORM!
YOU ARE MY PLAYTHING, YOUR EXISTENCE IS AT MY WHIM!**



<Yes, dread lord!
Praise your name, all-powerful,
all wisel Naturally in you
there is no imperfection
or weakness! >

<Only I say that --
that somehow, in me,
there must be a defect
that made my defeat
possible.>

**THERE IS, INDEED.
AND I SHALL TELL
YOU WHAT IT IS,
PRIEST GORSHASH.**

**YOU HAVE INCORRECTLY
USED YOUR HATE AND
YOUR RAGE. YOU HAVE LET
THEM DISTRACT YOU
FROM YOUR PURPOSE,
RATHER THAN FUEL
YOUR WILL.**

**IT SEPARATED YOU
FROM YOUR TRUE GOAL,
AND ALLOWED HER
TO CALL UPON THE POWERS
OF THOSE ACCURSED SISTERS
WHO DARED TO RESIST ME,
AND SO YOU WERE DEFEATED.**

**YOUR MISTAKE WAS
TRYING TO DEFEAT THE
MOON PRIESTESS YOURSELF.
SHE IS AN ENEMY - SHE
DESERVES NO SUCH HONOR.**

<You are all-wise
and all-knowing, Dread Lord,
praise your name. >

<But, what of the
strange one with the
strange magick?>

**HE IS
THE ONE WHO
SHOULD NOT BE.**

**YES.
THE ENCHANTER.**

**IN TIME, HE WILL
BE IN A PLACE WHERE
WE CAN BEST EXERT OUR
POWER, AWAY FROM THE
MOON PRIESTESS AND HER TRIBE.
THEN WE WILL DEAL PROPERLY
WITH HIM.**

**SCHOOL YOURSELF
IN PATIENCE, PRIEST
GORSHASH.**

<I understand, Dread
Lord. Next time ->

**THERE WILL BE NO
THIRD ATTEMPT FOR YOU,
PRIEST GORSHASH, AND YOU
WILL PAY IN PAIN FOR YOUR
FAILURE AT THIS ONE.**

<I - I
understand, Dread Lord.
Praise your name. >



YOU WILL WAKEN.

WHEN YOU WAKEN, YOU
WILL NOT CALL FOR AID
TO HEAL YOUR BROKEN
BONES OR STOP YOUR
BLEEDING.

YOU WILL NOT CRY
ALOUD OR SPEAK, SAVE
TO REFUSE HELP.

YOU WILL MOVE ONLY TO
SCRAPE THE BROKEN EDGES OF
YOUR BONES TOGETHER, AND YOU WILL
FEEL EVERY MOMENT OF THE PAIN:
YOU WILL USE YOUR ART
TO REMAIN AWAKE AND ALERT
CONSTANTLY.

FOR THREE DAYS
YOU WILL DO THIS, AND
THANK ME FOR EACH
MOMENT OF YOUR
AGONY.

AT THE END OF THIS TIME,
IF YOU STILL LIVE, YOU MAY
CALL FOR A HEALER TO MAKE
YOU STRAIGHT AND WHOLE AGAIN.

<Thank you, Dread Lord.
Praise your name!>

IN TIME, I WILL
MAKE MY WILL KNOWN
TO YOU AGAIN. THEN YOUR
PURPOSE WILL BE RENEWED
AND YOUR PART IN MY PLANS
WILL PROCEED.

<THANK YOU, DREAD LORD!
PRAISE YOUR NAME!>



So - how much farther?

A couple of days, that's all.

I'm kind of nervous. Meeting your mother, and all, and ... your whole tribe.

My love - you've got nothing to worry about. Does he?

Tula?



Eh?
Oh ... sorry.

Yes.
Yes, it'll be fine.

I'm sure they'll like you, Mentl - at least as much as people like anyone.



**HALOO!
GEN TURAN!**

Gen turan.

Who comes?

Well, if all Erogenians are as cool as you guys, I guess it'll be okay.

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The prince of the Fire Tribe.

Well! Zonal

And the little priestess, Tula.



Hello, Pontagar.





Carshik -

- Brantik.
Gen turan..

Gen turan, Suvremani.



This is our friend, Mentl.

Hey.

Okay. So not all Erogenians are as cool as my gals. I notice how the big guy just looks right through me.

Notice how he sort of sneers at the girls, without totally sneering at them.

And in his eyes. I've seen that look before on the street - in gangsters and bullies. I decide I don't like this guy much.



Pontagar.
Please, share our fire.

Well, bless
your courtesy.
We will.



What brings you
this far south?

Gonthargs!

Promised someone I'd get
horns and hide for them
to show off at Solstice.



You?

Scouting.

The Urtts are moving
in Kivalia - and it looks
very big, this time.

Very bad.



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How if I did?!

Some say that we're *all*
fools to give up the old ways
and follow a womanish path!

Some say that
Ipola used magick to
bedevil the other kings and
queens' minds and that no *true*
Erogenian would agree
to such a thing!

"Some say?"
"Some say?!"

Speak plain, Pontagar!
What do **YOU** say?
And be sure to make it
an *insult*, so I can
knock you down!

You?

Knock **ME**
down?!

HA!

**THANK
YOU!**

BAM!!





What - what just happened?

Just a little cha being balanced.

Are we all right?

Of course.



Hey -

Have you guys eaten?



No.

Not yet.



Well, there'll be more than enough when this pig is done.

Start on this!



Many thanks!

Uhhh --



We've .. uh .. got a jug of mead.

Here, I know you like the Bear Tribe stuff.



Outstanding! Thanks!

Here, let me take care of that for you ...

Okay. This might take some getting used to.

But I think I like it.



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I said, I'm not a boy - yours or anybody's. Fucking get it yourself.

Dick!

You --

Mentli is my friend and my lover, Pontagar. And you're being rude.



What - NO!!

You and this little ...? By the gods!!

HA-HA-HA ---



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You don't diss me in front of my girl.

Understand, jackass?

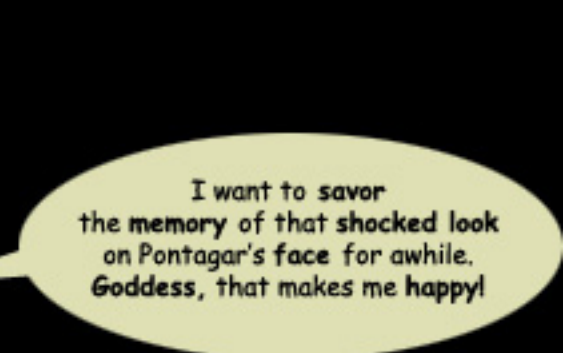


Why, you - I'll BREAK you in HALF!

DON'T GIVE US NONE OF YOUR AG-GRAVATION ...

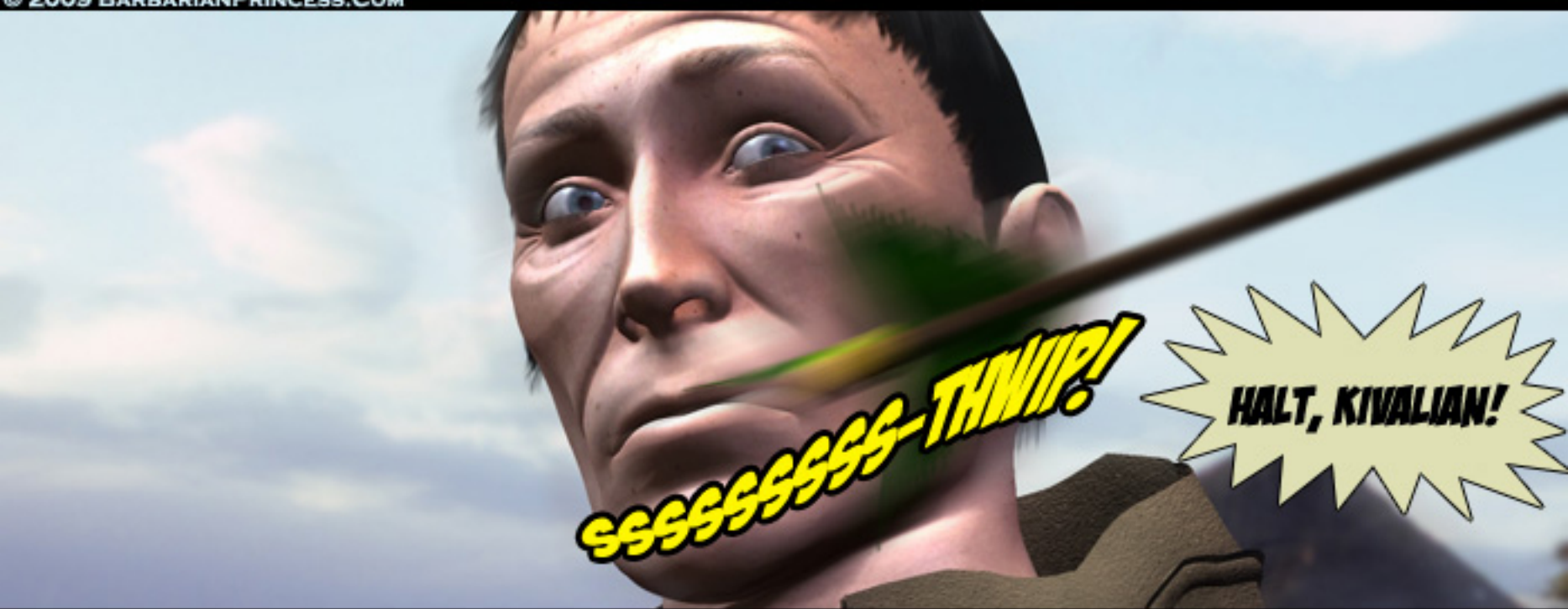
MENTLI!







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You're in Bull territory, Kivalian.

Explain your business.



I am here to see King Tor.

I have messages and counsel for Kivalia's friend and ally.

Your name?



I'll tell that to your king. Take me to him.



I don't think so.

What kind of man won't give his name when he's asked honestly?

What do you have to hide?

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Our enemies have found their way into many unexpected places.

I trust Tor, but -

Well, we don't trust secrets, Kivalian.

sigh



Very well.

I am Count Tethik of Dell - I'm known here, or was, once.

The time was when I was treated with a little more courtesy in this country.



That was before my time, Count. Get off your horse and prepare to be bound.



No.

I am a friend to King Tor, and I will fight the man who tries to bind me against my will.





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WHIFF!

He wastes a lot of motion, a lot of effort. He's young.



CHUFF!

Like all Bull Tribe, he's massive and strong, and bases his technique on aggressive attacks.



WOOSH!



KRACK!

Fighting like that, he trusts he can take a lot of punishment.



And, of course, he can.



I raise bruises,
welts and cuts everywhere
I strike -



-but it doesn't even
slow him down.



Meantime, my wind
really isn't what it was
twenty years ago.



Fortunately, I think
I know how to
end this quickly.



Before I start to
tire and get --



-- careless.



Who's a "boy,"
now, old man?

Never you, young man.



BUT --

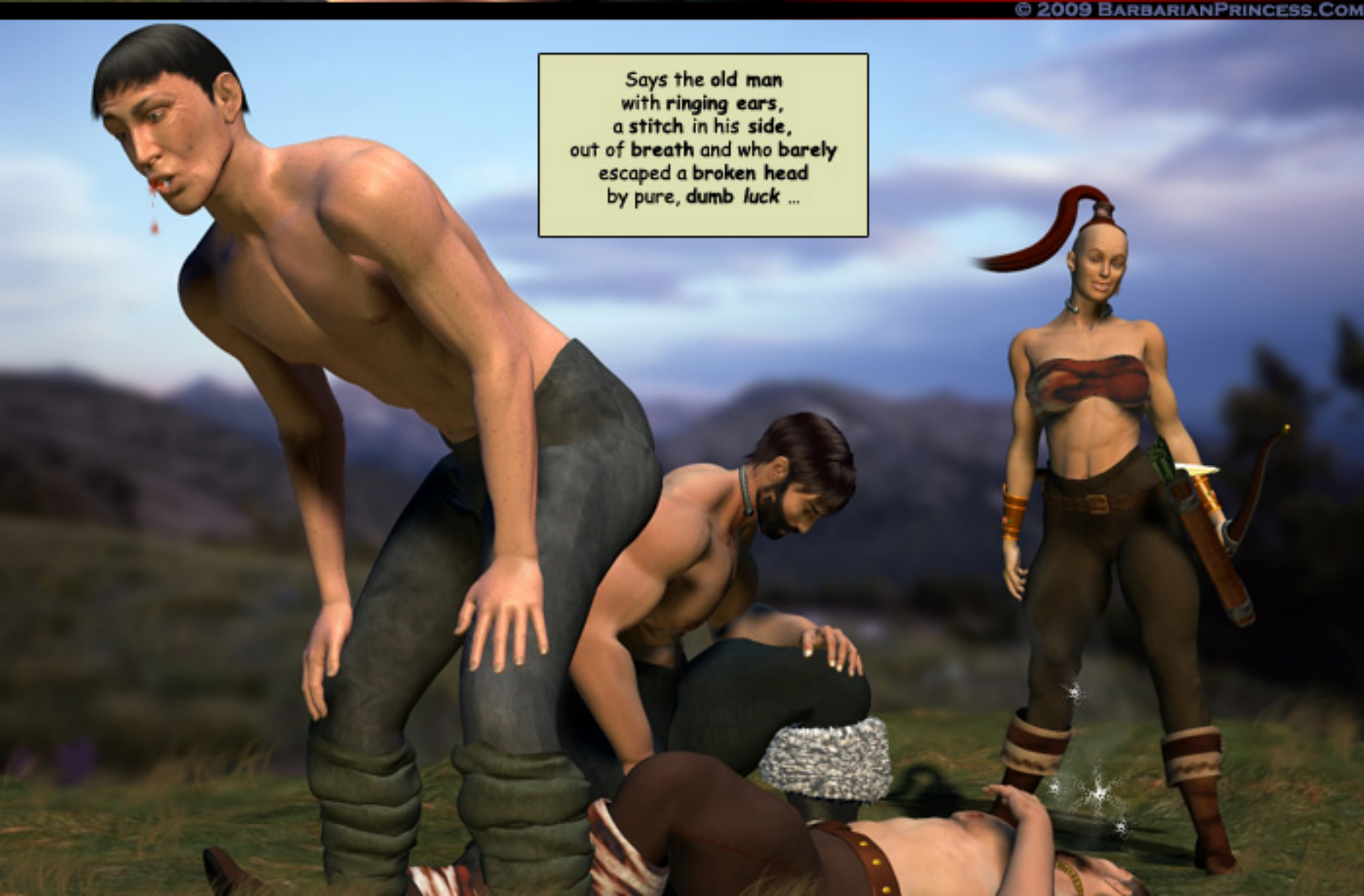


I'm not *such*
an old man, after all --



am I?!

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Says the old man
with ringing ears,
a stitch in his side,
out of breath and who barely
escaped a broken head
by pure, dumb luck ...





Up there - see?
The small star with a
bluish color.

No ...

Follow my finger.
All right, I'm pointing
at The Hand, yes?

Okay, yeah.

Now, follow down and
a little right, and those
three in a row are the tail
of The Cat. You see her body,
that's those four stars,
then look and you can see
her paws in front, there.

Yeah.
Yeah. I see.

So - if you know that,
you'll always know which way is North.
Kunuta, The Hand points left to
Netarana, the North Star, and the
tail of Sheshari The Cat
points up to her.

It's ... it's like home.
Like the Little Dipper and
the Big Dipper - but ...

Hm?

They're not quite right.
They look almost - but it's different.
It's like they're shifted a little.
Squashed - or some stars missing
or something.

Goddamn ...

I only ever got to Webelos, but I remember at least how to find The North Star.
The stars aren't the same, here. But they have a Moon. And it looks like our Moon.
Except it has air and oceans and people on it

What?

Ah - It's not my sky.
I mean, I've seen it like this,
all bright and more stars than
you can count - like in the desert,
or up in Idyllwild. I've seen the
stars, but - they're
not the same.

Are you all right?

I .. guess it's finally
really hitting me.

This is it.

I'm not
in Kansas
any more.



"Kansas?"
I thought you
were from --

It's just an
expression - means
I'm really not
home, anymore.

It, uh, it comes from
an old movie - which was from a
bunch of old stories and books.
It's about a little girl who gets caught
up in a whirlwind and then dumped in
this whole different world called Oz,
and how she's trying to go home
again - to Kansas.



Anyway, it's
dangerous
and a wicked witch
is after her and stuff
and all kinds of
impossible things
happen on
the way.

Oh.
Is she
all alone?

No - no,
she makes
friends right
away.

Strong friends
and smart friends and
brave friends. They help her out.
And eventually, they beat
the witch and the girl
goes back to Kansas and
it's all right.

Well, you know,
it's for kids and it has
to have a happy ending.



So -- she
leaves her friends
behind.

Well, she goes home,
she kind of has to.

Can't have a
talking scarecrow or
a tin man in Kansas.



Ah - I suppose not.



But, y'know,
in another book she
goes back, and then
she lives there in Oz
with them forever.

Really?
That's how the
story goes?

Yup.



Good.

So, we kept on for a couple more days.
As we got closer, I got even more nervous.
Every Erogenian we met was tall, buff,
and gorgeous.

The women all looked like they could beat
the crap out of me with their eyes shut.

They were mostly Bull Tribe, Zona said.
Nice folks, generally. And I could definitely
tell that I was traveling with celebs,
the way they treated Tula and especially Zona.

It was different from the
court at Normos: There people gave
her respect like a snotty waiter
in a high-priced restaurant. This was
like being with the home team's star
players. Still, some of them looked at
me like I was the trained monkey.

Oh, they were good-natured about it, but I got the distinct impression they
had no idea what to do with me. Still, the closer we got, the more the gals
talked and joked and relaxed, and the more apprehensive I felt.

Okay, let's be totally honest. I was shitting bricks.

But eventually --

Wow.
Is that ---?

Yes.
It is



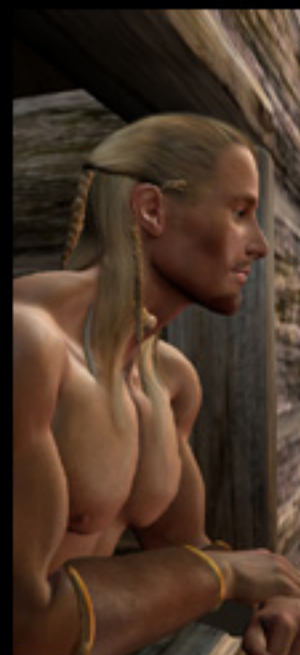
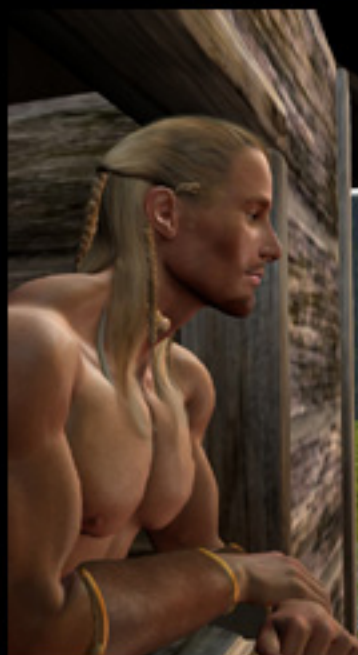
Home.





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Gen tal,
Frantic!



Since you were away,
I've been practicing!



All right,
let me see.



Good!

Jesus ...

Hey,
I can, too!
I want
next!





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Did you kill him?

Oh, no, he fell into the ravine and his armor saved him. Besides, you don't kill people just for annoying you! But I hope I gave him something to think about.

Later, I promise. There's enough to tell for lots of nights, okay?

What next? Tell more!

Yeah, what happened after that?



... what?



Nothing, really. Just -- it's nice. I like the way you are with the kids. It's ... nice.



Zona says we're all her kids!

Is that so?

Yeah! On account of she can't have any kids of her own, ever.



Oh.

Yes. I ... just can't.

The crones say my male spirit is too strong.

Oh.



But that's okay, because I get to take care of all of you!

YEAH!



It ... it is okay, isn't it? Mentl?

Oh .. oh. Baby, of course! I mean ... yes, of course.

It's just that ... we never talked about it, and I ... I kind of wondered.

Why I never took precautions? That's why. Do you ...?

Zona. I said I love you. Whatever else goes with you -or doesn't - that's what I mean.



My Mentl...

Are you Zona's boyfriend?

Sure am!



You're not very tall.

Well - I try to be.



MAKE WAY!

My Zona!
My Tula!

Ohboy.
This has got to be Mom.

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Thank the Goddess
you're both still
in one piece.

It was a little
touch and go, there
for awhile, Mother.

As usual.

There's a
lot to tell you.

I already
know some of it.

Oh! My girls!

We need to celebrate.
I've ordered a feast.



Mother, this is ...

Mentl.

The man from
another world.



Uh - yeah.
Yes, I am.

Ha-how
did you --?



A little bird
told me.



I hear good things about you, Mentl.

I hear about loyalty, about love and honesty -- about courage even in the face of death.

These are things that a true Erogenian values more than life itself.

I make you welcome here, and so long as you obey our laws and treat our customs with respect, I make you a friend in all the Nine Tribes of Erogenia.



This is my favor. It will make you free in our country.



Wow.

Wow - Thank you. Your Majesty.

I've ... I've never - I'm ... honored.

You've brought honor on yourself.



All of Erogenia thanks you for the service you've done for my daughter.

Oh, no - don't bow your head, not to me.



If Zona hasn't taught you this yet, then learn it now: In the Nine Tribes we look each other in the eye, always.

From the greatest to the humblest of us.

I ... that's very cool, I like that.

Your Majesty.

Ma'am.







ALL RIGHT!!

Oh, yes it is.





No.

Zona,
I think you
should let him
prove himself.



WHAT?!

Just a
wooden duel.

A test.

Gracious queen! I -



Ah-ah!
There are conditions.

Firstly, you must
acknowledge that Zona
is telling the truth. That
she never challenged anyone
in the way you think, and
that the... the rest of
that story -

SNIDE!

SNICKER!

HEE-HEE..

- is something that
you are mistaken about.



Please do.

Because
if you don't at
this point, you
would be telling
me to my face
that my champion
is a liar, and then
you would indeed
fight her, but
to the death.



Do you
admit as much?

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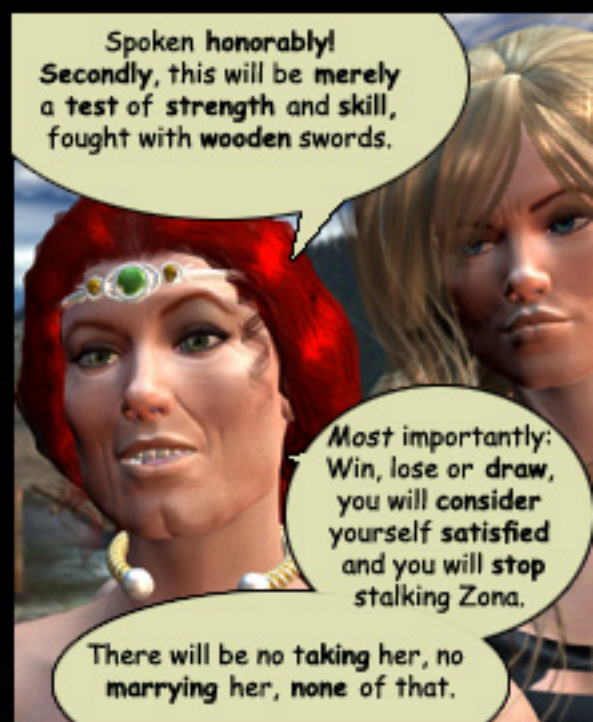


I --



Very well.
I must have
been mistaken.

Zona
is no liar.



Spoken honorably!
Secondly, this will be merely
a test of strength and skill,
fought with wooden swords.

Most importantly:
Win, lose or draw,
you will consider
yourself satisfied
and you will stop
stalking Zona.

There will be no taking her, no
marrying her, none of that.



You will be allowed
to leave in one piece -
and believe me, you
should consider
yourself very lucky
to get that in
any event.

Agreed?

I so agree
and swear, by -
by my father's
soul.



There, you see, Zona? Sometimes
it does help if you just talk
these things through.

Now - beat the snot
out of him so we can
get on to the feast.



I dunno.

I mean, he *is* out where the buses don't run, but when he calmed down a little, he didn't seem so bad.

He's a crazy fool.

But I never heard that just being a fool made you evil, or an enemy.



Don't worry.

I won't really hurt him much, and if he's as good as his word, we're finally rid of him.



For luck.



Thanks, venerable shaman!

I'm actually the high priest.

Oh.

Ah - sorry.

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Oh, that's fine. I do the shamanistic stuff, too. We dress the same, anyway.

We tend to cross-train, as the disciplines compliment each other very well. The Universe is One, you know, that kind of thing.

Oh, well. An honor indeed, most venerable ... ah .. one.

Don't worry, son.

We're very good at healing broken bones and bruises, here.



HA!

Do not be concerned, pious one. Your princess will not be harmed - permanently.

Oh, right, of course.



The first to be
disarmed loses
the contest.

This
is but a test of
strength and skill.
There is no dishonor
in defeat here,
today.

May the gods bless that
when all is done the cha is moved
toward balance, not imbalance.





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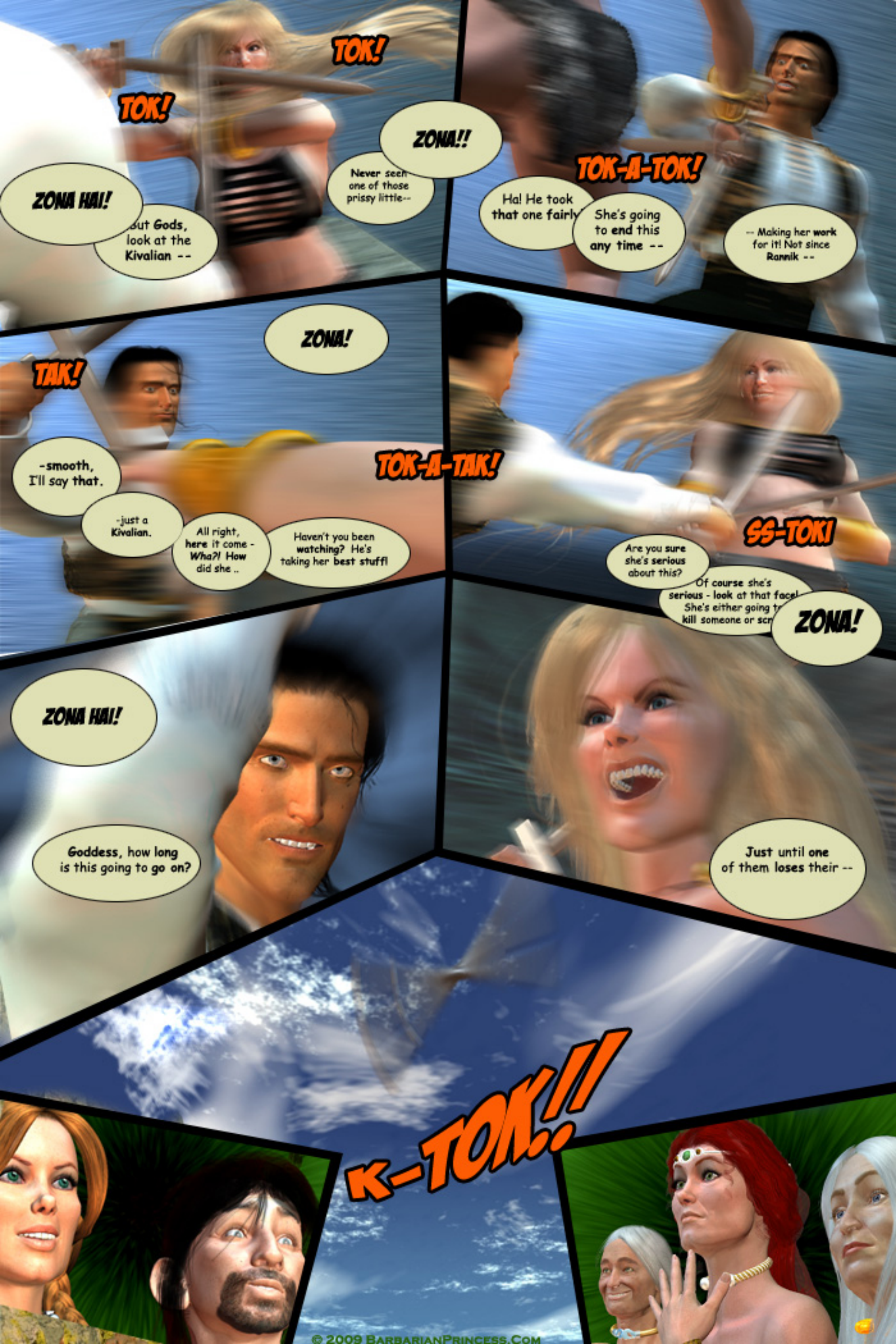




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TOK!

TOK!

ZONA HAI!

But Gods,
look at the
Kivalian --

Never seen
one of those
prissy little--

ZONA!!

TOK-A-TOK!

Ha! He took
that one fairly

She's going
to end this
any time --

-- Making her work
for it! Not since
Rannik --

ZONA!

TAK!

-smooth,
I'll say that.

-just a
Kivalian.

All right,
here it come -
Wha?! How
did she ..

Haven't you been
watching? He's
taking her best stuff!

TOK-A-TAK!

SS-TOKI!

Are you sure
she's serious
about this?

Of course she's
serious - look at that face!
She's either going to
kill someone or screw

ZONA!

ZONA HAI!

Goddess, how long
is this going to go on?

Just until one
of them loses their --

K-TOK!!