ROBERT STANEK

BATTLE for RUIN MIST



REBIRTH

A DAUGHTER OF KINGS

COMIC #3

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BATTLE FOR RUIN MIST: A DAUGHTER OF KINGS, Comic #3. First printing 2011. ISBN 978-1-57545-886-1. Published by Reagent Press, LLC, P.O. Box 362, East Olympia, WA 98540-0362. **Copyright © 2011 Robert Stanek. All rights reserved. All characters featured in this issue and the distinctive names and likenesses thereof, and all related indicia are trademarks of Robert Stanek. The stories, characters, names and incidents mentioned in this book are entirely fictional, and any similarity which may exist to any actual locale, person or event is entirely coincidental. Original printing in the U.S.A.**

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A decade before the events of the bestselling author Robert Stanek's epic Ruin Mist, Kingdoms and Dragons books, a princess named Delinna Alder touches one of the Four Orbs crafted by Dnyarr, the last great Elf King of Greye, and is transformed forever. But Princess Delinna Alder has much to learn about the lethal price of being both within time and outside its bounds.

The special edition comic, Rebirth (A Daughter of Kings, Comic #3), is the third of four and tells the never-before-told story of Delinna's journey into exile. Threaded through all four comics are the tragic romances that will eventually tear nations apart and destroy worlds. Read Betrayal (A Daughter of Kings, Comic #1) first, continue on to Deliverance (A Daughter of Kings, Comic #2), Rebirth (A Daughter of Kings, Comic #3), and Discord (A Daughter of Kings, Comic #4).

Robert Stanek is the bestselling author of the epic series Ruin Mist Chronicles, which includes Keeper Martin's Tale, Kingdom Alliance, Fields of Honor, and Mark of the Dragon. Ruin Mist Chronicles was also released for young adults as The Kingdoms and the Elves of the Reaches #1–#4 and In the Service of Dragons #1–#4. He has also written many other novels and short stories, and is well-known for his Bugville Critters children's picture book series.

It's been a fairly open secret that Robert Stanek is the name of the more familiar bestselling author, William Stanek. His books have been bestsellers on Amazon.com, Barnesandnoble.com, Audible.com, and Apple iTunes. Robert's "Stormjammers" received a full-page review in The Journal of Electronic Defense. A review by the JED is as high an honor as it gets with a book by a military flyer.



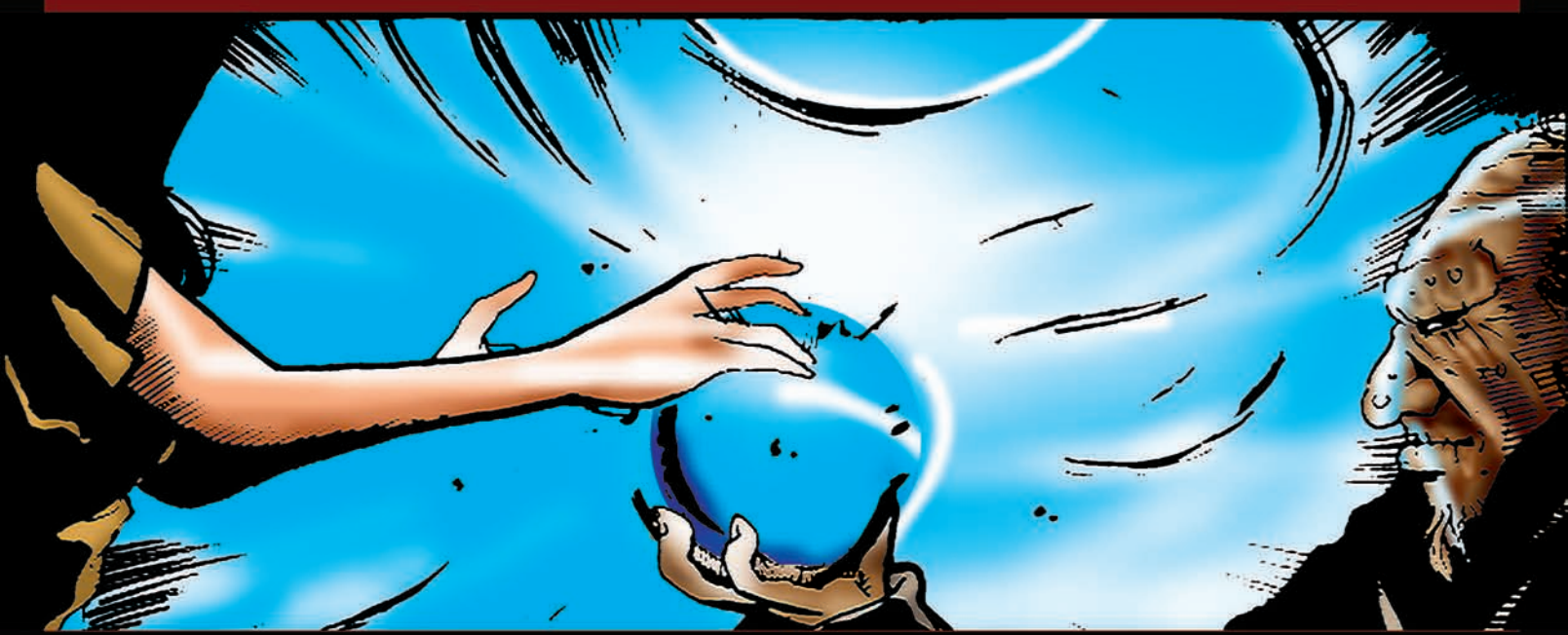
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In an age long since lost to myth and memory, a race of supreme giants known as titans ruled over all the lands of Ruin Mist from their homes on Over-Earth. Without question, titans were the masters of the gates. They moved freely between realms and across lands. Darkness came to mark the end of the age of the titans as surely as there was ever light at the beginning. During this time of darkness, known as the Great Purge, it was the greatest of all titans, Ky'el, who gave men, elves, and dwarves their freedom.

By the end of the purge, the only known gate to Over-Earth was sealed for all time, ushering in a new beginning. A new age. An age of men, elves, and dwarves. After countless wars waged against themselves, each other, and the other races, men, elves, and dwarves settled in to an uneasy peace within their divided lands. In time, like the titans before them, dwarves became folk of myth and legend, leaving only absence like a darkness where once there had been a great presence and a light.

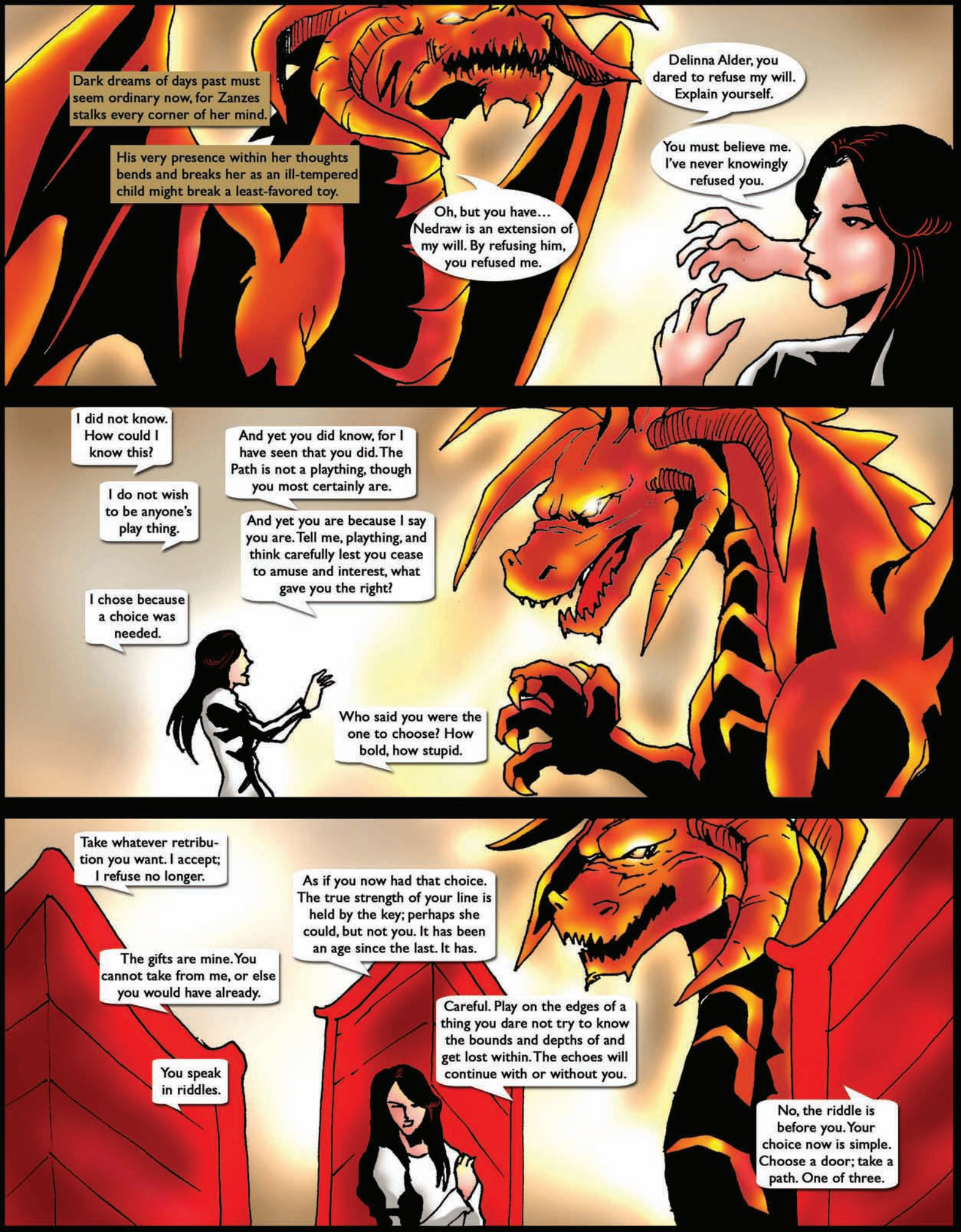
The age of men and elves had arrived, its arrival marked by the coming of the Great War. Some would call this war Dnyarr's war, after the elven king who started it. Others would call it the War of the Thousand Year Siege. Those who fought and died would call it the War of Ten Million Tears. Victory for men above all others brought little joy, even though it ushered in a new age. The age of men.

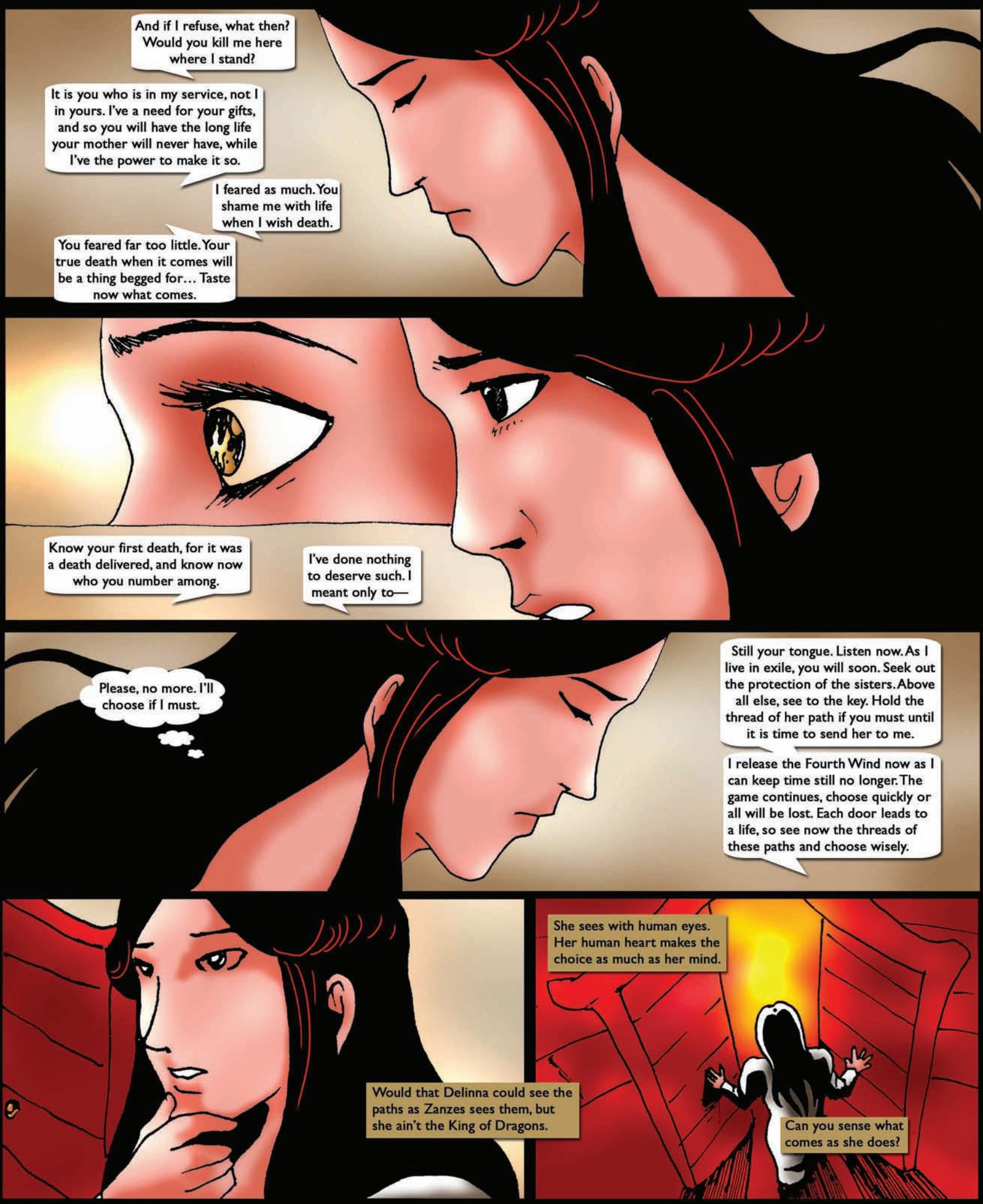
There are some who fear this age to be Ruin Mist's last. For if men succumb to darkness, there will be no beginning, and darkness will surely rule forever. It is in this time, at the twilight of the age of men, that those long lost have returned to thwart the darkness. They are the fallen sons of ages past and present. They are the keepers, the watchers, and the guardians. They are those who hold the key to Ruin Mist's future.

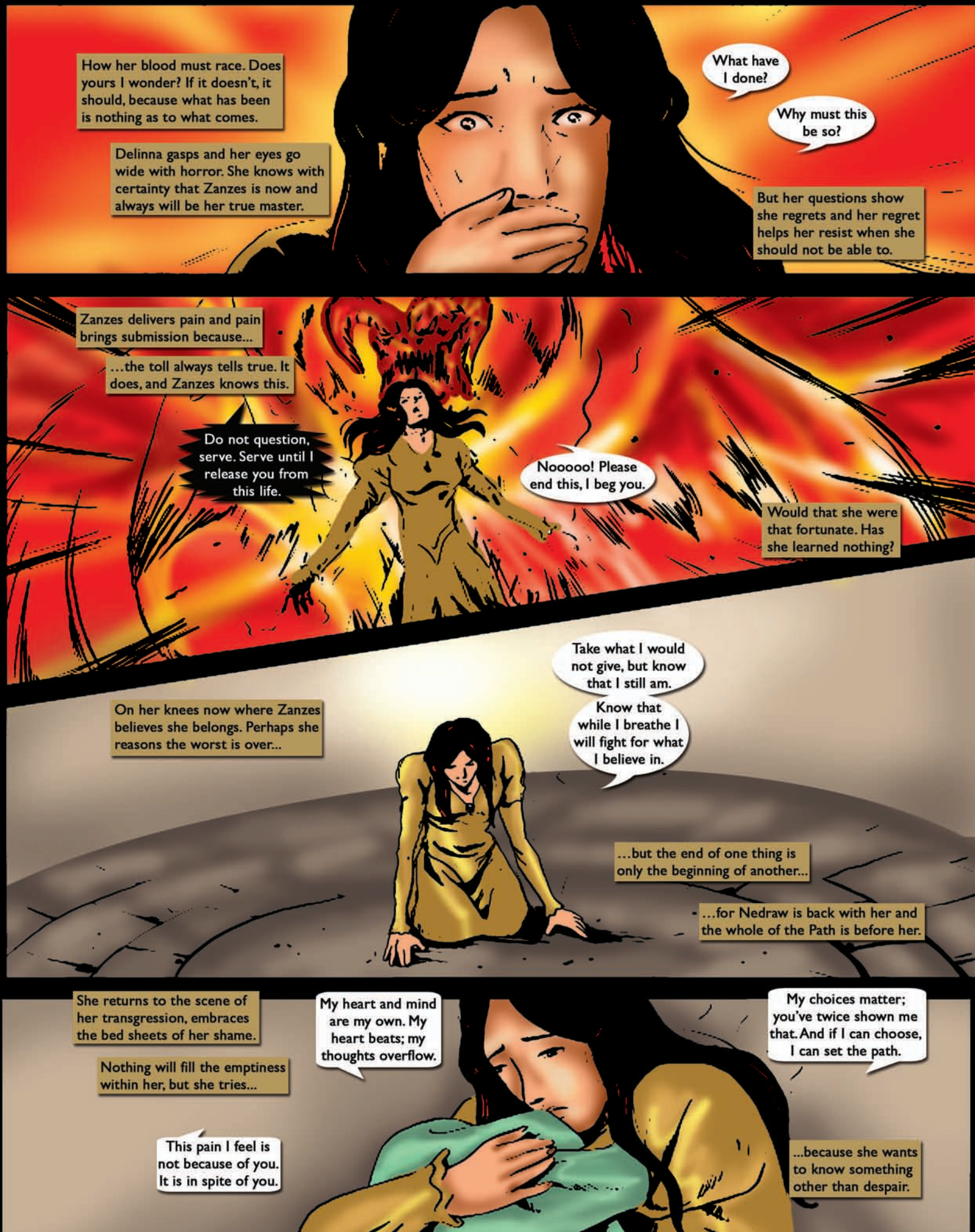


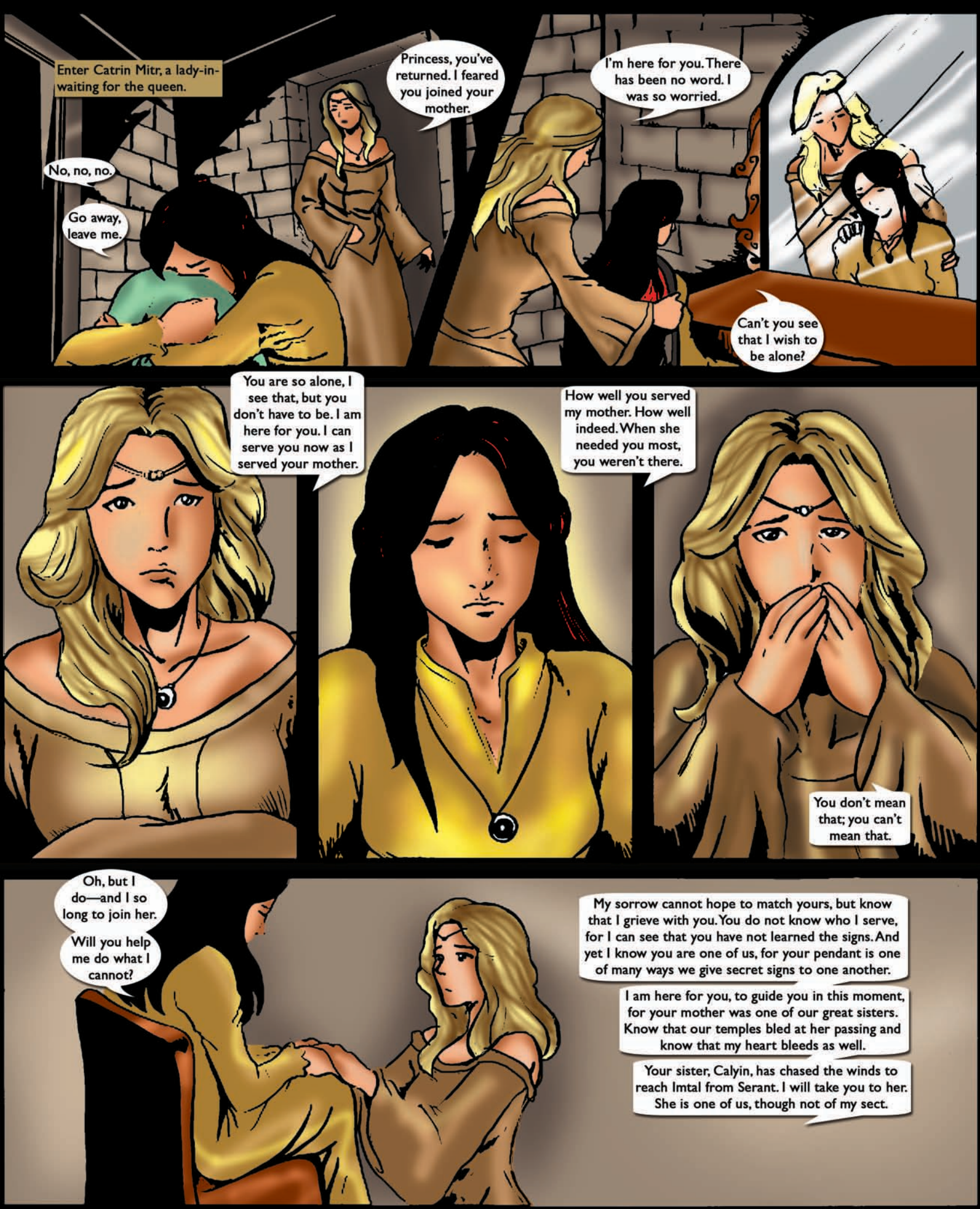

Much as the Path wraps around everything and all, Nedraw's fire surrounds Delinna Alder. She knows both horror and dismay.
Heed the Lady, follow the Watcher, deliver the Keeper, mind the Path.
What more could your masters possibly want?
The flames both burn and cleanse, and yet do not truly burn—for her pain is not of the flesh.
Fire and ash you want; fire and ash you become!
Her pain is of the mind, for it is the last vestiges of her former self that Nedraw wants her to give…
…and why she fights so steadfastly not to give.
But there are few who can resist a dragon's will.
Even fewer still who can endure a cleansing to the depths of the soul.
But her will is too great to break...
What is happening?
And yet she fights because she does not know how to do otherwise...
You'll not take what I won't give freely.
…and so Nedraw pours himself and his fire into a jeweled pendant…
…that he wraps around her neck.
...and because it is her path.
When Nedraw learns this, it only increases his fury. His fiery rage seeks to transform all.
Then Nedraw opens the way to the one who can bend Delinna's will.
Her gift helps her sense what's coming. She sees danger ahead. But her instincts about what's happening are all wrong.
No, no, no. Return me at once to the palace and my fate.
It must be me, and not him. Ansh is the one, not I.
She fears for Ansh when she should fear for herself, for she doesn't truly understand how bad things are about to get.


The path is before her. There seems to be but one way to go. The tower beckons.
She does not know it, but her every step takes her closer to that which she cannot avoid.
It is his tower in his domain. Here, he is the master of all.
He knows this and would tell her this if she were to ask, but she is drawn as much by fear as by fate and so she walks on in silence.
At the very end of the path, at the very entrance of his tower, she pauses to look down into the depths of the chasm below.
Mother, forgive me. I did not see as fully as I should have seen. So many branches, so many turnings. Knowing now does not make it any less bitter.
What virtue is there in any of this, Keeper? I've done everything and still it is all dirt and ash.
Wha-a-at is this?
That's when she hears the flutter of thousands of wings as they shoot skyward from the depths...
...where they blot out the light of the heavens and cast all into shadow. And from this host of thousands...
We are Zanzes, King of Dragons.
He comes.

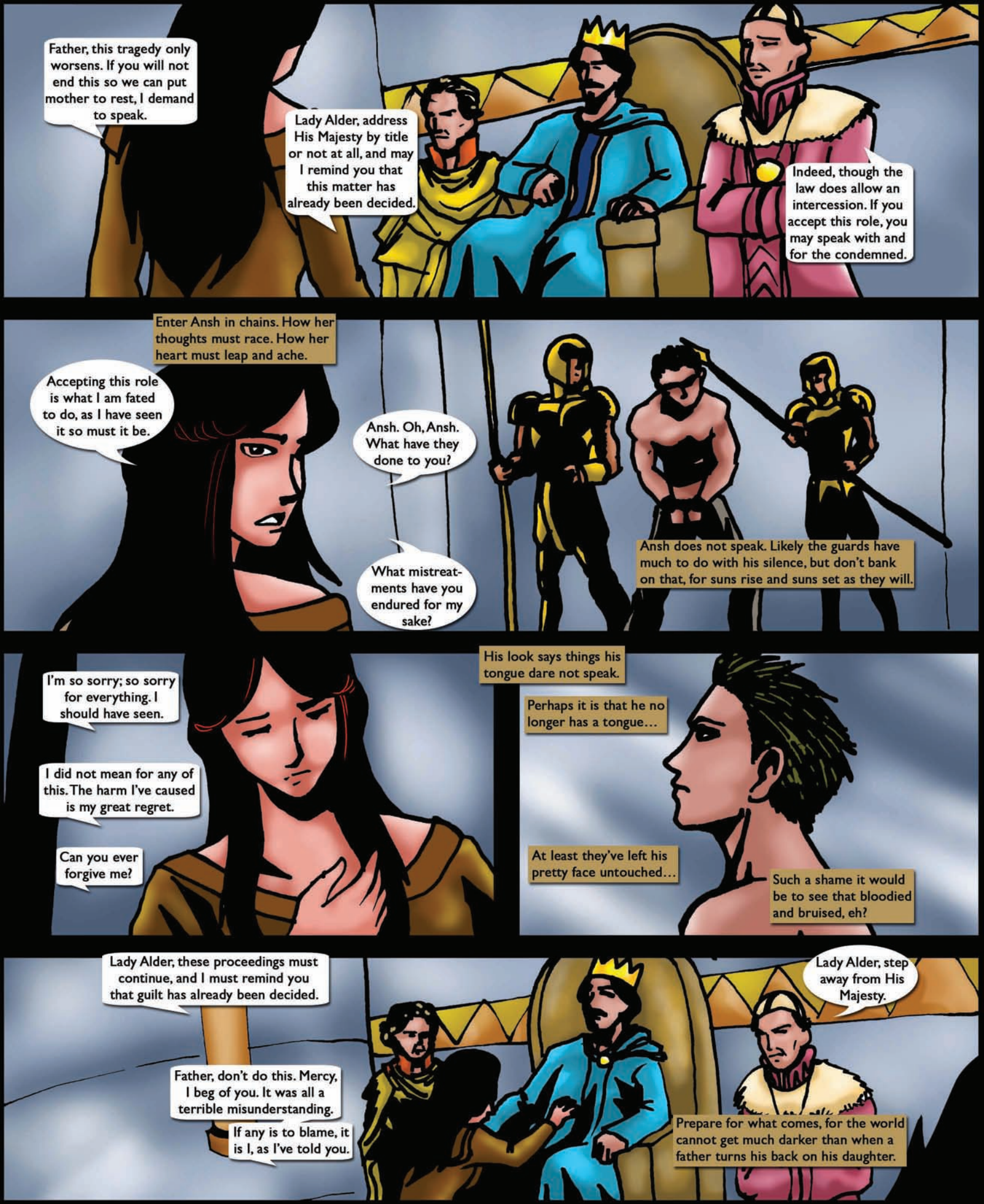

Dark dreams of days past must seem ordinary now, for Zanzes stalks every corner of her mind.
His very presence within her thoughts bends and breaks her as an ill-tempered child might break a least-favored toy.
Delinna Alder, you dared to refuse my will. Explain yourself.
You must believe me. I've never knowingly refused you.
Oh, but you have… Nedraw is an extension of my will. By refusing him, you refused me.
I did not know. How could I know this?
And yet you did know, for I have seen that you did. The Path is not a plaything, though you most certainly are.
I do not wish to be anyone's play thing.
And yet you are because I say you are. Tell me, plaything, and think carefully lest you cease to amuse and interest, what gave you the right?
I chose because a choice was needed.
Who said you were the one to choose? How bold, how stupid.
Take whatever retribution you want. I accept; I refuse no longer.
As if you now had that choice. The true strength of your line is held by the key; perhaps she could, but not you. It has been an age since the last. It has.
The gifts are mine. You cannot take from me, or else you would have already.
Careful. Play on the edges of a thing you dare not try to know the bounds and depths of and get lost within. The echoes will continue with or without you.
You speak in riddles.
No, the riddle is before you. Your choice now is simple. Choose a door; take a path. One of three.


And if I refuse, what then? Would you kill me here where I stand?
It is you who is in my service, not I in yours. I've a need for your gifts, and so you will have the long life your mother will never have, while I've the power to make it so.
I feared as much. You shame me with life when I wish death.
You feared far too little. Your true death when it comes will be a thing begged for… Taste now what comes.
Know your first death, for it was a death delivered, and know now who you number among.
I've done nothing to deserve such. I meant only to—
Please, no more. I'll choose if I must.
Still your tongue. Listen now. As I live in exile, you will soon. Seek out the protection of the sisters. Above all else, see to the key. Hold the thread of her path if you must until it is time to send her to me.
I release the Fourth Wind now as I can keep time still no longer. The game continues, choose quickly or all will be lost. Each door leads to a life, so see now the threads of these paths and choose wisely.
Would that Delinna could see the paths as Zanzes sees them, but she ain't the King of Dragons.
She sees with human eyes. Her human heart makes the choice as much as her mind.
Can you sense what comes as she does?

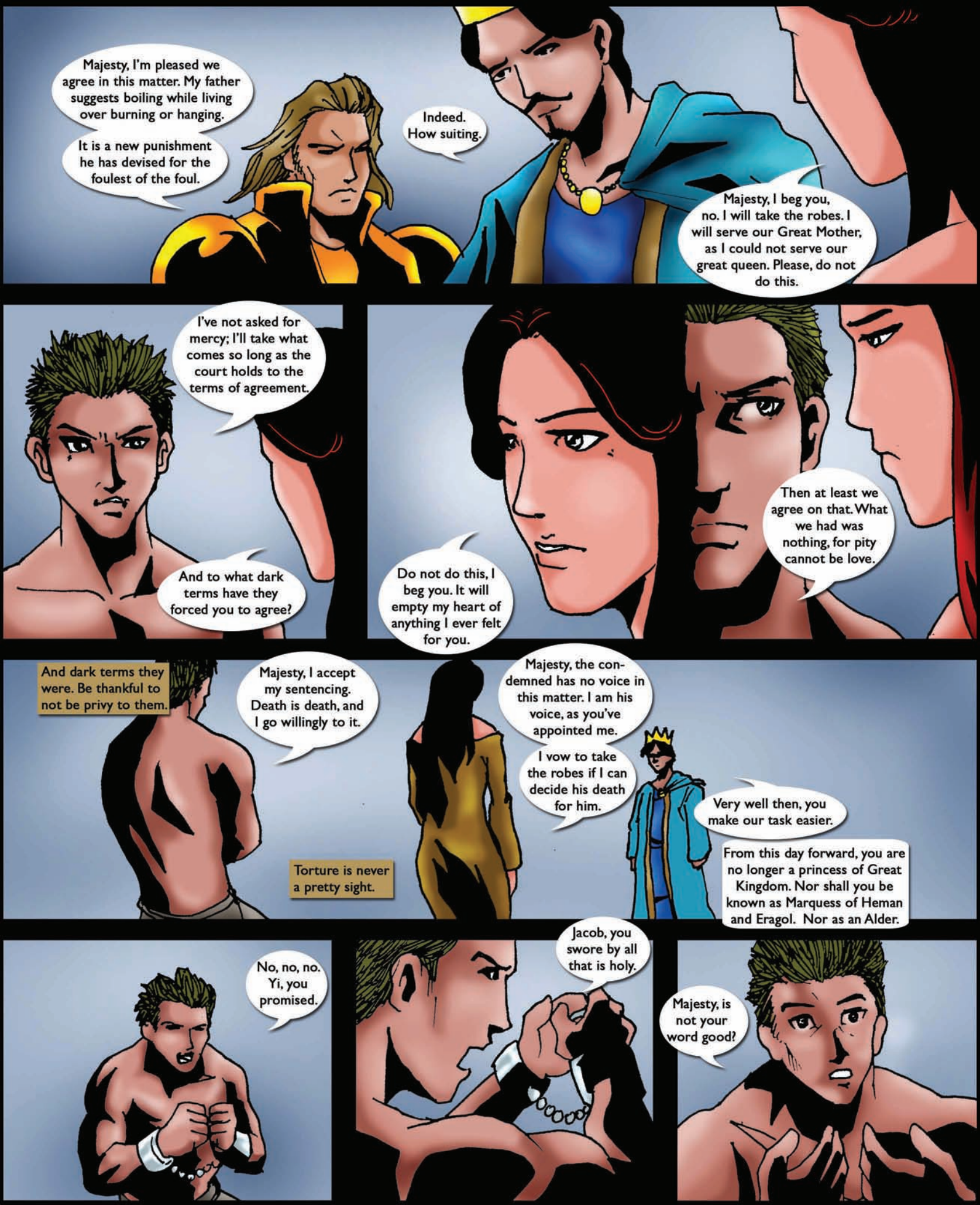

How her blood must race. Does yours I wonder? If it doesn't, it should, because what has been is nothing as to what comes.
Delinna gasps and her eyes go wide with horror. She knows with certainty that Zanzes is now and always will be her true master.
What have I done?
Why must this be so?
But her questions show she regrets and her regret helps her resist when she should not be able to.
Zanzes delivers pain and pain brings submission because...
...the toll always tells true. It does, and Zanzes knows this.
Do not question, serve. Serve until I release you from this life.
Nooooo! Please end this, I beg you.
Would that she were that fortunate. Has she learned nothing?
Take what I would not give, but know that I still am.
Know that while I breathe I will fight for what I believe in.
On her knees now where Zanzes believes she belongs. Perhaps she reasons the worst is over...
...but the end of one thing is only the beginning of another...
...for Nedraw is back with her and the whole of the Path is before her.
She returns to the scene of her transgression, embraces the bed sheets of her shame.
Nothing will fill the emptiness within her, but she tries...
My heart and mind are my own. My heart beats; my thoughts overflow.
My choices matter; you've twice shown me that. And if I can choose, I can set the path.
This pain I feel is not because of you. It is in spite of you.
...because she wants to know something other than despair.


Enter Catrin Mitr, a lady-in-waiting for the queen.
No, no, no.
Go away, leave me.
Princess, you've returned. I feared you joined your mother.
I'm here for you. There has been no word. I was so worried.
Can't you see that I wish to be alone?
You are so alone, I see that, but you don't have to be. I am here for you. I can serve you now as I served your mother.
How well you served my mother. How well indeed. When she needed you most, you weren't there.
You don't mean that; you can't mean that.
Oh, but I do—and I so long to join her.
Will you help me do what I cannot?
My sorrow cannot hope to match yours, but know that I grieve with you. You do not know who I serve, for I can see that you have not learned the signs. And yet I know you are one of us, for your pendant is one of many ways we give secret signs to one another.
I am here for you, to guide you in this moment, for your mother was one of our great sisters. Know that our temples bled at her passing and know that my heart bleeds as well.
Your sister, Calyin, has chased the winds to reach Imtal from Serant. I will take you to her. She is one of us, though not of my sect.


Enter Calyin Alder, the eldest Alder.
Sister, I so feared for you.
Are you well? Is it true?
Ansh, what of Ansh?
It is true then. I feared as much. Father makes judgment now. The tribunal—
Delinna, wait. It is too late for him, but you—I am here for you. We must—
Without him, there is nothing. This you do not understand, sister.
Oh, I understand. I understand love as well as any, but you should not do this thing. It won't go as you wish.
You can't know with certainty. I must try. I know I can save him.
Not a happy reunion between sisters, but likely as best as can be expected. The ever-headstrong Delinna seems to have heard nothing of what Zanzes told her.
But I do know, sister. You should've listened. I came to prevent this, and now my journey is for nothing.
Ever the impetuous one. How many deaths will it take for you to see? It is you who matters, and not him.
He is but a fool on the board. Even his gambit won't save you or him. And the fool's gambit is the fool's only hope.
So many things mother never told you. You should have been better prepared. Your fate is yours and you only make matters worse.
Words Delinna should have heard, but does not, for she only thinks of him.


Father, this tragedy only worsens. If you will not end this so we can put mother to rest, I demand to speak.
Lady Alder, address His Majesty by title or not at all, and may I remind you that this matter has already been decided.
Indeed, though the law does allow an intercession. If you accept this role, you may speak with and for the condemned.
Enter Ansh in chains. How her thoughts must race. How her heart must leap and ache.
Accepting this role is what I am fated to do, as I have seen it so must it be.
Ansh. Oh, Ansh. What have they done to you?
What mistreatments have you endured for my sake?
Ansh does not speak. Likely the guards have much to do with his silence, but don't bank on that, for suns rise and suns set as they will.
I'm so sorry; so sorry for everything. I should have seen.
I did not mean for any of this. The harm I've caused is my great regret.
Can you ever forgive me?
His look says things his tongue dare not speak.
Perhaps it is that he no longer has a tongue…
At least they've left his pretty face untouched…
Such a shame it would be to see that bloodied and bruised, eh?
Lady Alder, these proceedings must continue, and I must remind you that guilt has already been decided.
Lady Alder, step away from His Majesty.
Father, don't do this. Mercy, I beg of you. It was all a terrible misunderstanding.
If any is to blame, it is I, as I've told you.
Prepare for what comes, for the world cannot get much darker than when a father turns his back on his daughter.


King Andrew's foul mood only worsens when Delinna tries to continue speaking.
Enough of this prolonging of justice!
Join these proceedings properly or remove yourself! And you will henceforth and for all time give proper address.
Father, I wish to speak before the sentencing. Ansh needs a voice—
Lady Alder, the proper address is Your Majesty or sire.
See the pain in her eyes. Know how her heart breaks when she looks into her father's eyes.
Father, do you mean all this implies. Do you deny me? Do you take my birthright?
Know this and listen well, we indulge for Calyin and Valam's sake and no more. Both begged leniency, if not clemency.
How his words must cut into her heart. That she keeps her feet shows the strength of her resolve.
Enter the lover spurned. His eyes also are cold toward Delinna.
And Your Majesty, my indulgence, I hope, for I have come to speak before the court.
How the prince guards his expression when he speaks to the king. One wonders what he plots as payback.
Indeed, welcome Prince Jarom, your words will help us decide this great matter.
Your Majesty, there are those who beg mercy and leniency when none is deserved or earned.
Only with great pain and suffering can there be any hope to cleanse our conscience and this wretch in this matter.
In this, we are in agreement.
Majesty, the condemned's soul must be cleansed. The punishment must fit this great crime of murder.
Delinna stands quietly but you know her thoughts spin wildly.


Majesty, I'm pleased we agree in this matter. My father suggests boiling while living over burning or hanging.
It is a new punishment he has devised for the foulest of the foul.
Indeed. How suiting.
Majesty, I beg you, no. I will take the robes. I will serve our Great Mother, as I could not serve our great queen. Please, do not do this.
I've not asked for mercy; I'll take what comes so long as the court holds to the terms of agreement.
And to what dark terms have they forced you to agree?
Do not do this, I beg you. It will empty my heart of anything I ever felt for you.
Then at least we agree on that. What we had was nothing, for pity cannot be love.
And dark terms they were. Be thankful to not be privy to them.
Majesty, I accept my sentencing. Death is death, and I go willingly to it.
Majesty, the condemned has no voice in this matter. I am his voice, as you've appointed me.
I vow to take the robes if I can decide his death for him.
Very well then, you make our task easier.
From this day forward, you are no longer a princess of Great Kingdom. Nor shall you be known as Marquess of Heman and Eragol. Nor as an Alder.
Torture is never a pretty sight.
No, no, no. Yi, you promised.
Jacob, you swore by all that is holy.
Majesty, is not your word good?


Hope is crushed. She feels only the weight of the Path.
What promises were made?
Truly speak for me, Delinna. Decide now swiftly and fairly, but...
...make them hold to their promises, for Emel's sake.
A just upbringing, and later service in the guard.
Her pain is reflected in her eyes and in her tears, but tears can hide as much as they reveal.
Emel, Emel. In all this, I've forgotten you.
Forgive me. Know this, know you were loved, for I did love you.
Death at once by the king's hand and blade is my judgment.
I accept this death, Your Majesty.
So be it.
Pity Ansh. His life forfeit, he can only grasp at whispered promises made by those who mercilessly tortured him.
Perhaps Ansh should have thought of the brother he raised as his own before he bedded a princess.


Judgment, as Your Majesty wished. I beg of you one thing and one thing only. If you ever loved me, keep your promise of care for Emel.
Chew off my hands and then kiss the stumps? You play at a dangerous game. Know this, all name and land are forsaken you as are all titles save that of Lady- forfeit that upon taking the robes.
She realizes too late her mistake. Without station and title, she can have little hope of influencing events to come.
Please, father, I implore you. Find what you once felt for me in your heart.
His rage takes over.
I beg you, no.
Step back and away.
His grip is not kind.
Father, please. You're hurting me.
My sword... Justice. Don't ever forget what you see.
How boundless her despair.
Majesty, a final plea. Is there nothing for me now save the robes?


The final plea shall be the condemned's.
Your promise to take Emel into the guard—
Any last words?
—will be kept.
Pity the king now, for hatred feeds his anger and anger drives his desire for revenge.
May your blade strike true, Majesty.
On that, be sure as well.
This blade has never failed.
His revenge will come at a price. Oh yes, it will.
Prepare him!
May our Great Father forgive you.
May he forgive you, for we do not!


Not him, Father. Meeeee...
Delinna's piteous screams fill the hall. You know they do.
Majesty, you've killed her.
What have I done?
What have I done?
My queen, my queen. What am I to do? Have I become what I most hate?
I meant none of this. I longed only for you.
Delinna's screams fade and become as nothing compared to the king's despair-filled utterings.


Ansh is first to her side.
He fears the worst.
But needn't, for she is protected.
Delinna, you shouldn't have... Not for me, I'm not worth it.
In that, you are wrong—so wrong. You are everything.
You live—your wound… How? Is it even possible? Is this but my dying dream?
All is possible and impossible—and this is no dream.
Nedraw's desire to live was simply greater than my desire to die.
Your death I wrought. I saw this. What dark magic is it that lets you live?
How fleeting his despair. How quickly his desire for retribution returns.
The question you should ask, Majesty, is why I live and not how. I live because our Great Father wills it and not because of any wizardry, sorcery, or witchcraft.
Whether divine providence or the work of a dark hand, it matters not. That murderer will die today.
Even the mark of your blade is gone, Majesty.
He lives because I say he lives. Resist me in this, Majesty, and you will learn firsthand whether the divine or dark are at work.
See the king's eyes. Know his great fear of the dark and his great reverence for the light.

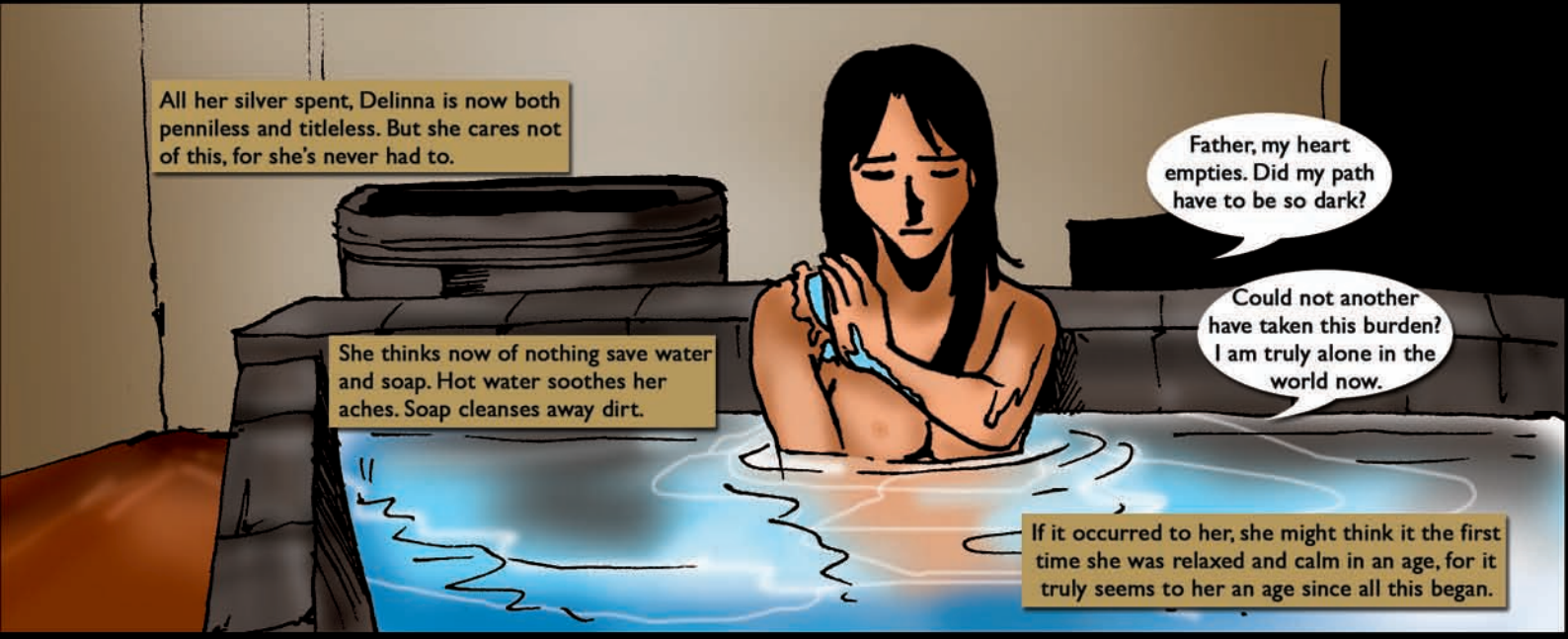

Know that he weighs their lives on the scales and wonders why the Great Father would deny him.
If the divine, a judgment has been passed on me this day.
And if the dark, capital punishment must be given.
Pray side with me, father, for there's no darkness at hand. Only goodness and light. Our Great Father wishes Ansh to live as much as I and so he spares me as you must spare Ansh.
It is his will. I feel this; I know this. He wants me to serve the Mother, and so I intend. The robes await me. You've only to do what is just and then to command me.
Leave Imtal at once. Return only on pain of death. Do you hear me?
Majesty, this is not justice. They must pay.
And of Ansh? Of Emel?
They live to serve from this day forward. You do not. Leave before the sight of you makes my anger take control.
Credit grace. The king is denied justice, his heart aches, and yet he decides to spare all save her.
When he looks back on this moment, and trust me, he will, he will decide that she'd have been better off dead.


Do you feel it in the air? That shifting, that sense of transference all mixed in with distant certainty. That's how it always is when the Path shifts.
For all I know, it may mean the future is as yet unwritten—or that perhaps it has yet to be rewritten. In any event, Delinna senses the change as she leaves Imtal.
Though she is denied most of her worldly possessions, she is able to take Thunder away from the stables.
She makes her way through High King's square, following the masses as they leave the markets at day's end.
Her heavy cloak and its cowl help to disguise her, but there is no way to mask her troubled state of mind.
With her former life behind her, she worries about what awaits her. She longs to touch the orb so that she may know the turnings of the Path.
Yet thoughts of Ansh are what weigh most heavily on her mind. She knows she did the right thing, for he lives...
...but this knowledge alone does not lessen her great sadness.


Race on, Thunder. Chase the winds.
She tells herself that she has triumphed this day, even if at great cost to herself.
Ansh is free. He and Emel will live in service to the crown.
This is as it should be—and yet she cannot be with him as she longs to be.
Her path takes her south toward the great crossroads. There is a temple in Ispeth...
...where she hopes that she will be accepted as an initiate.
Arrival of night and a waning crescent moon do little to help her mood.
Easy, boy. No fear; we ride on.
That's the last of the foothills. Trees ahead, the forest.
Feelings of loneliness, despair, and isolation begin to overwhelm her.
She begins to see things that are not there, but Thunder's presence gives her the courage to continue.
Steady, Thunder, slow your gait. Only shadows.
We'll camp here, boy. Easy now, the night is nothing to fear.
She chases back with fire the darkness that envelops her.
Fire that warms and soothes, but does not ease worries.

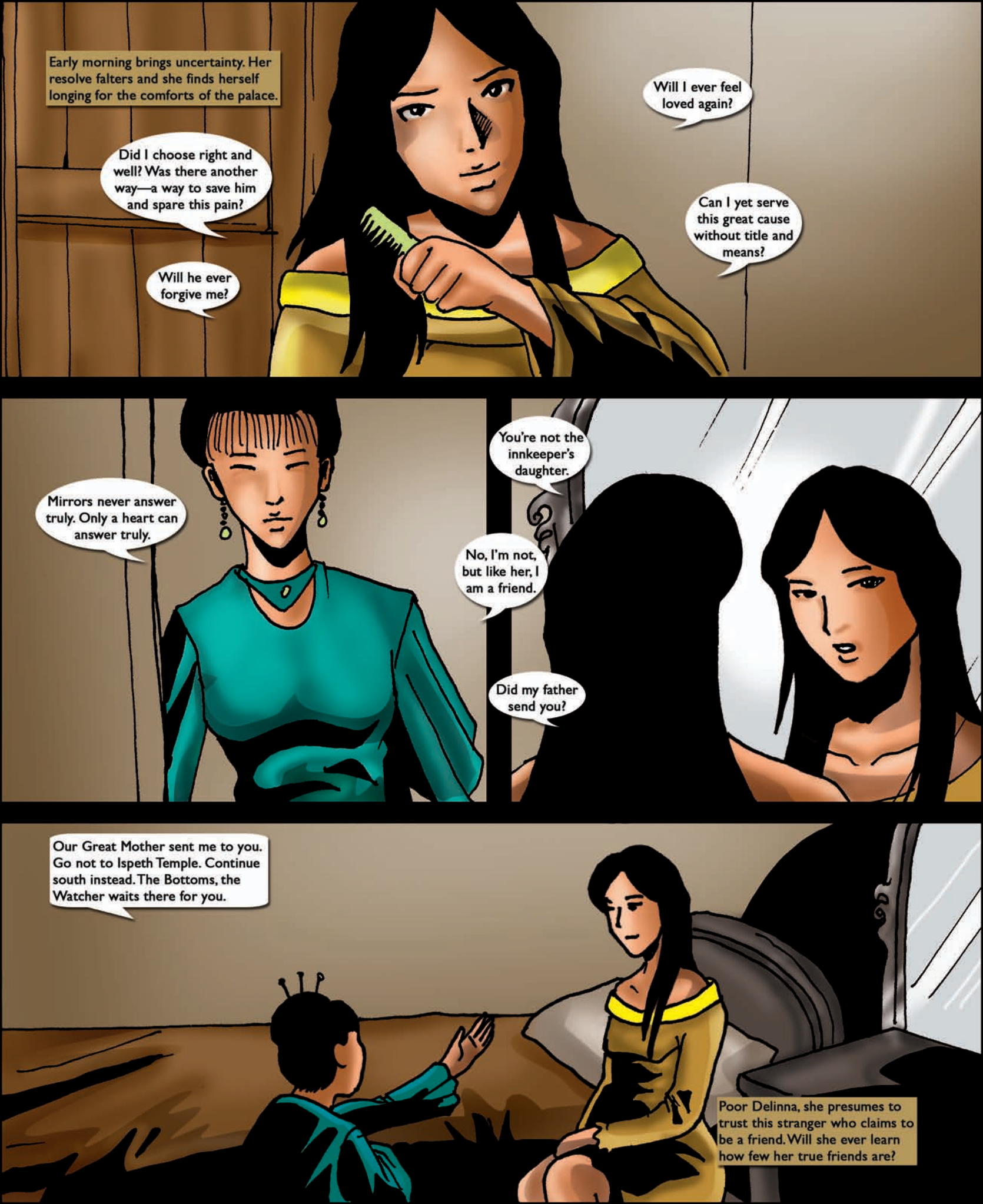

Dark dreams of orbs and dragons are her constant companions through the night, and morning comes all too early.
Morning and sunshine. Thank you, Great Father.
The sound of Thunder grazing reminds her that she is not alone. Her growling belly reminds her of her great hunger.
She longs for honey cakes, eggs, and ham, but settles for the foodstuffs in her satchel.
Thunder, be thankful your grass is fresh and plentiful. This is days old.
How the cooks must have hated me.
She washes down dry bread with the last of her water.
A stream flows not far off and so the search for more water is brief.
Drink deeply from the cool waters, Thunder. It may be awhile before we find more.
Oh, Watcher, where are you when I need you most? So many questions… and only you to answer them.
Thoughts of all that has happened since the Watcher's return occupy the long hours from morning to afternoon.
Her reflections so preoccupy her that she forgets the open road can be dangerous, especially for those traveling alone.
Fortunately, Thunder has better sense. He helps keep her safe by distancing them from others.


At day's end, Delinna finds herself nearing the inn at the great crossroads.
The inn at last. A bed, Thunder, a bed awaits.
When she enters, the innkeeper looks up from his own supper.
And for yourself?
My horse to the stables. Brushed down, and fed.
I'm road weary. Private lodging. Food, drink.
Delinna eats her meal quietly, separating herself from the other patrons.
She eats and drinks until contented never thinking of the cost, but reality has a way of crashing in on dream. Oh yes, it does.
Meal, drink, lodging, stables, and I suppose you'll need a bath, and breakfast in the morning?
Yes... the bath especially. I'm covered in dust, and sore.
Payment's up front, mind you... a loke and a half. Gratuity if you've a mind to.
Here's what silver I have. You're welcome to it if you'll fill my saddlebags with food and drink in the morning as well.
You'll be well taken care of here, dear. My daughter will show you to your room, and then the bath house.


All her silver spent, Delinna is now both penniless and titleless. But she cares not of this, for she's never had to.
Father, my heart empties. Did my path have to be so dark?
Could not another have taken this burden? I am truly alone in the world now.
She thinks now of nothing save water and soap. Hot water soothes her aches. Soap cleanses away dirt.
If it occurred to her, she might think it the first time she was relaxed and calm in an age, for it truly seems to her an age since all this began.


A warmed robe, milady. I trust you are finished, yes?
Why yes, yes I was. Thank you…
We don't get many proper ladies here. You must forgive us if all is not up to your expectations.
Be at ease. I'm nobody whose displeasure you should fear. Your inn is well presented.
But milady, I know who you are. You are—
You've mistaken me for another.


As you say, milady, but—
The hour is late. I wake and leave before the dawn.
Very well, milady. Not to worry, I'll not tell a soul.
But know I mourn your great loss. The whole of the kingdom mourns with you.
While her tears wet her pillow, Delinna knows with certainty the king in Imtal puts his queen to rest among the kings and queens of old.


Early morning brings uncertainty. Her resolve falters and she finds herself longing for the comforts of the palace.
Will I ever feel loved again?
Did I choose right and well? Was there another way—a way to save him and spare this pain?
Can I yet serve this great cause without title and means?
Will he ever forgive me?
Mirrors never answer truly. Only a heart can answer truly.
You're not the innkeeper's daughter.
No, I'm not, but like her, I am a friend.
Did my father send you?
Our Great Mother sent me to you. Go not to Ispeth Temple. Continue south instead. The Bottoms, the Watcher waits there for you.
Poor Delinna, she presumes to trust this stranger who claims to be a friend. Will she ever learn how few her true friends are?


BETRAYAL
DELIVERANCE
REBIRTH
DISCORD