

Chelle ... I decided last night. I'm going today.

Well ... if I can make myself get into the portal.

I can't live here anymore. It's ... I just ...

... You should come too. I think ever since it happened, your dreams have gotten worse.

Serenity will be better for both of us.

I made a decision too.

Though I wasn't sure until two minutes ago.

I keep telling you I'm not a seer, but ... what if I am?

What if I'm not supposed to be trying to ignore these dreams?

What if they won't get any better until I learn how to handle them?

Where are you going to go?

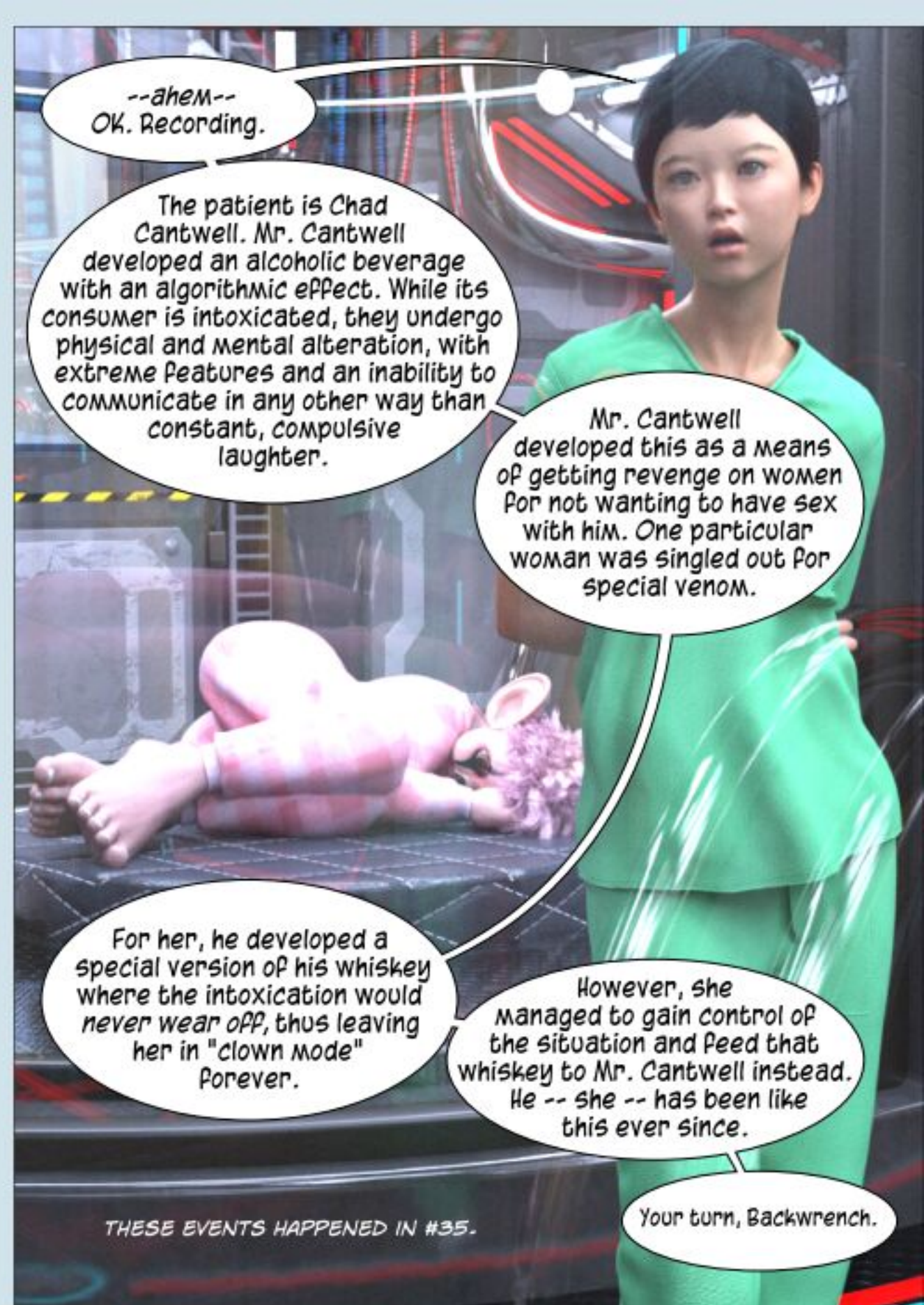
There are some people in the Yards. I've heard stories about them.

... I'm sorry I can't come to Serenity with you.

Just be careful, OK?

And come see me when you can. I'll miss you.

I promise.



THE OPS ROOM, WHERE LEYNA IS NOT HAVING A GOOD MORNING.





Well, ah ... that's certainly interesting information, and I'm glad you told us.

But I don't think it changes the situation.

We can't do this full time anymore. It's making us crazy. And honestly, you'd need more people than just us even if we could keep going full time.

We can't be the only answer.



Leyna ... We're not completely cutting out. We're available if you really need us.

But you've got to find other help. One day you're going to need us one too many times and we're going to have to tell you no.



I can't believe this.

And they know how thin I'm stretched. I've been making mistakes. Things I should have seen to that fall off the edges instead.

You know, when the Souk thing happened, I called them out for not telling me Serille had approached them for help. Except ...

... Ruby and I had to talk to Serille about getting to Spindrop, and she asked us to help her deal with Input. Directly. In so few words. And I forgot completely.

I can't slip up like that.

Because you have to be absolutely perfect all the time?



Mother!!

Honey, I'm always concerned about Serenity, and A4 ... you know that ... but I'm also always concerned about you. More so. You are a lot more important to me than anything in A4.

And you're coming apart at the seams.

Anyway, they're right. You need more people. You've known it for a while. You want my blessing? You want some money? Go find what you need. For your own mental health. And mine.

You're not very good at delegating, you know.

It has to be somebody I trust ...

All right, then find people you can trust. Train them up if you have to. This place isn't going to fall apart while you do that.

But you're burning out those two ... and Jex doesn't really want the job ... and Ruby ... well ...

You really can't find her?



Nowhere that I've been able to look.

I've done block scans of Serenity and the Souk, obviously ... and Monica let me do one of Century ... she's not in any of those.

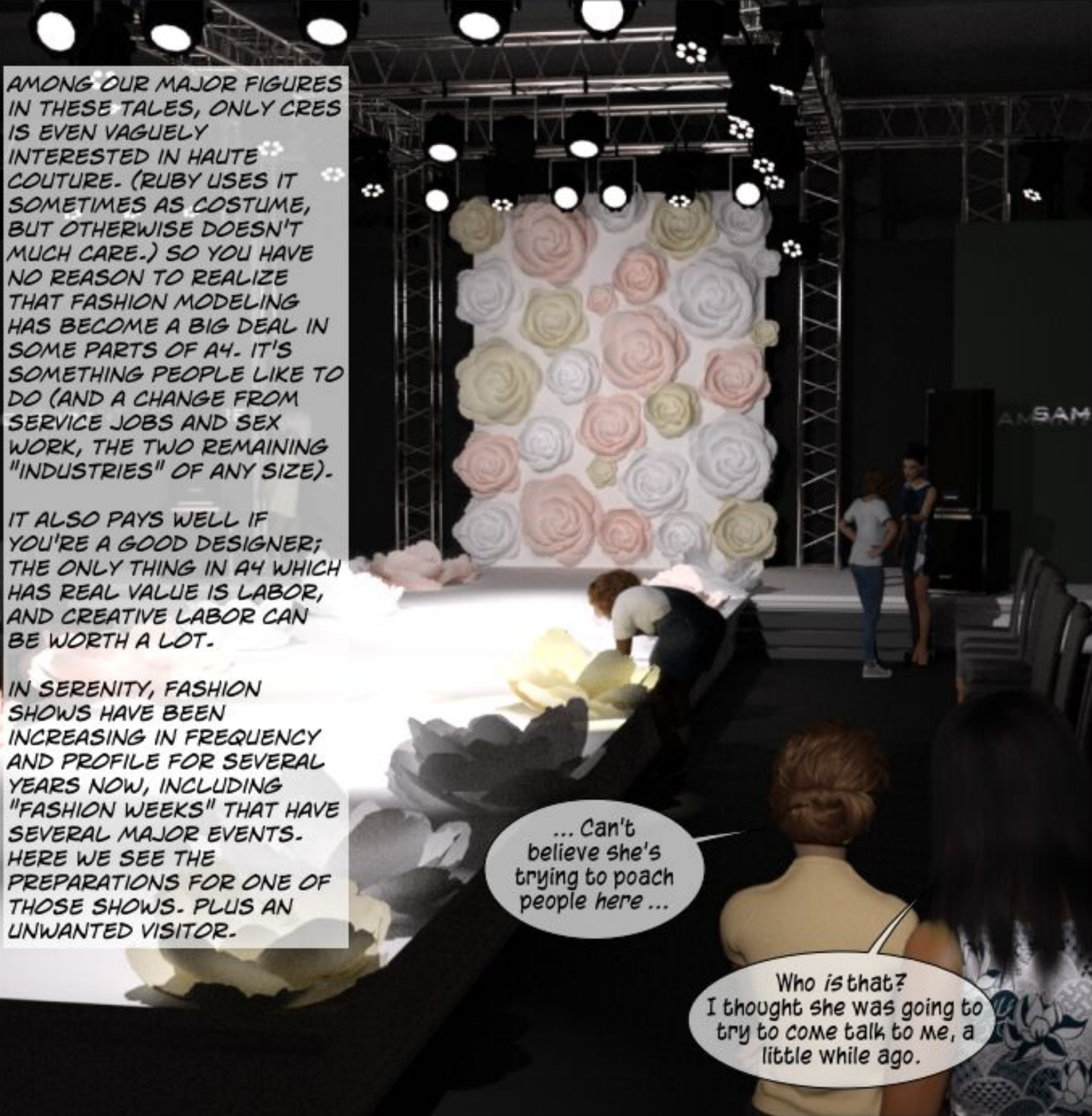
Pauline isn't responding to messages, yet again ... and I'm not likely to get permission to scan Highpoint or the Cobbles, even if I could find Brendan or Clayton to ask them.

And it may not matter anyway.

We already know a scan for someone won't work if they are operating as another identity strongly enough to make it stick. She could be posing as someone else right now. She could not know who she is right now. She could be under mental control ... in a coma ...

... or she could just be adrift in interspace somewhere.

We have no idea.



AMONG OUR MAJOR FIGURES IN THESE TALES, ONLY CRES IS EVEN VAGUELY INTERESTED IN HAUTE COUTURE. (RUBY USES IT SOMETIMES AS COSTUME, BUT OTHERWISE DOESN'T MUCH CARE.) SO YOU HAVE NO REASON TO REALIZE THAT FASHION MODELING HAS BECOME A BIG DEAL IN SOME PARTS OF A4. IT'S SOMETHING PEOPLE LIKE TO DO (AND A CHANGE FROM SERVICE JOBS AND SEX WORK, THE TWO REMAINING "INDUSTRIES" OF ANY SIZE).

IT ALSO PAYS WELL IF YOU'RE A GOOD DESIGNER; THE ONLY THING IN A4 WHICH HAS REAL VALUE IS LABOR, AND CREATIVE LABOR CAN BE WORTH A LOT.

IN SERENITY, FASHION SHOWS HAVE BEEN INCREASING IN FREQUENCY AND PROFILE FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW, INCLUDING "FASHION WEEKS" THAT HAVE SEVERAL MAJOR EVENTS. HERE WE SEE THE PREPARATIONS FOR ONE OF THOSE SHOWS. PLUS AN UNWANTED VISITOR.

... Can't believe she's trying to poach people here ...

Who is that? I thought she was going to try to come talk to me, a little while ago.



Trust me, she'll find you. She'll be hoping you're too new to know about her. She can't sell anybody else. Lil's about to tell her to pound sand.

Her name's Kaolin.

She's horrible?

Besides being hell to work with? She's got weird ideas. She thinks I'm too small to be a model ... and that Chelsea's too big ... and that Emmy's too brown.



Eww.

Right? We've all pretty much frozen her out. No one wants to work for her. So she's getting desperate.

I mean, Shani, do what you want ... I'm not in charge of you ... but ...

No way. Especially not since Sama gave me this gig.

Yeah. Sama's actually nice to work for.



Nora.

I see you warning everyone away from me, you know.

You wouldn't see it if you weren't somewhere you're not supposed to be.

If Sama finds you here she'll probably strangle you.

And I might clap.



You think it's fine to ruin my business just because you can't admit the way things actually work?

No one wants to see you model clothes. You're not what they come to look at.

But because you can't deal with that, I've had to cancel two shows, and probably the other two. Is that fair?

I think you owe me restitution. I think you're going to have to come work for me.



I-- You --

You have got to be out of your mind if you think --

It wasn't a suggestion.

Ugh, but you're so tiny! I don't make children's clothing.

I guess I'll figure something out.

THREE DAYS LATER
PIERTOWN, THE YARDS.



The Gaja, huh?

Well, you're probably taking the right approach ... easier than trying to go south from Graytower, across the desert ...

Yeah. I went to Graytower first, and learned that. Then I had to go back to the Souk to try to find a portal here. Started completely over.

Usually when we need to do something like that we find somebody who can portal us. But it's harder for a stranger.

Anyway, it makes a big difference. Not only is this route shorter ... Crossing the desert -- well -- not many people can do that. And not many people are foolish enough to try.

But at least with the desert route I had some idea where I was going.



I know I have to go down the coastline ... but the coast is isolated from the rest of the Yards, isn't it?

Not completely. The cliffs calm down at the north and south ends of the coast, and you run out of beach.

Hold on, I've got a map.



You just follow the cliffs until you run out of cliffs. As they start to flatten out, it'll stop being beach and start being hot swamp.

Jungle wetlands, if you'd rather. We call it hot swamp because the one up north is the cold swamp.

And because it's hot.

How far is that?

On foot? Six, maybe seven days to get to the swamp.

Then probably another four to get to the far side of it, where the real jungle starts.

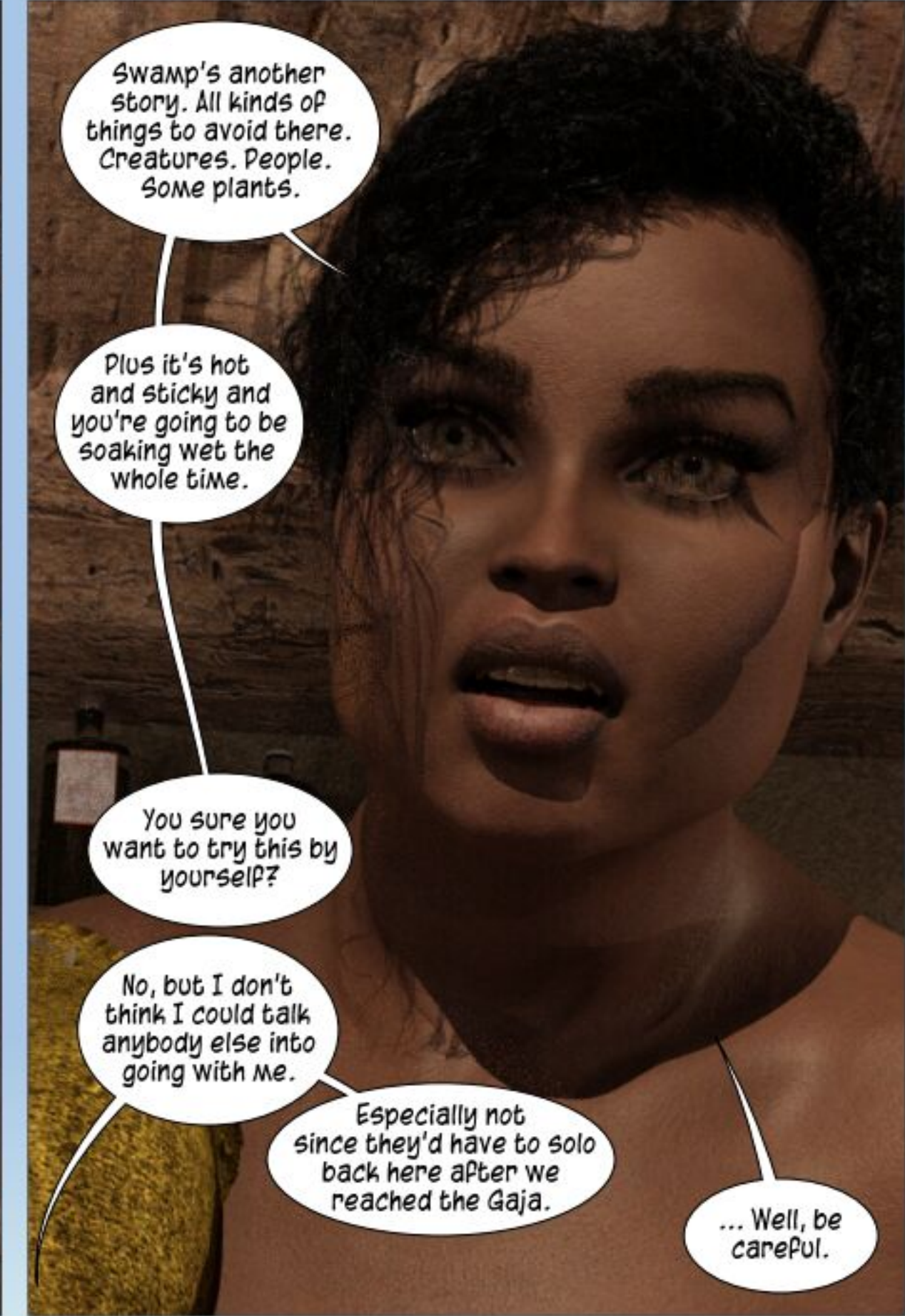
There, at the edge of the swamp, that's where the Gaja live.



OK. That seems simple enough.

How dangerous is this going to be, do you think?

Shouldn't be anything for the beach part. Maybe a giant crab or two to avoid, but that's it.



Swamp's another story. All kinds of things to avoid there. Creatures. People. Some plants.

Plus it's hot and sticky and you're going to be soaking wet the whole time.

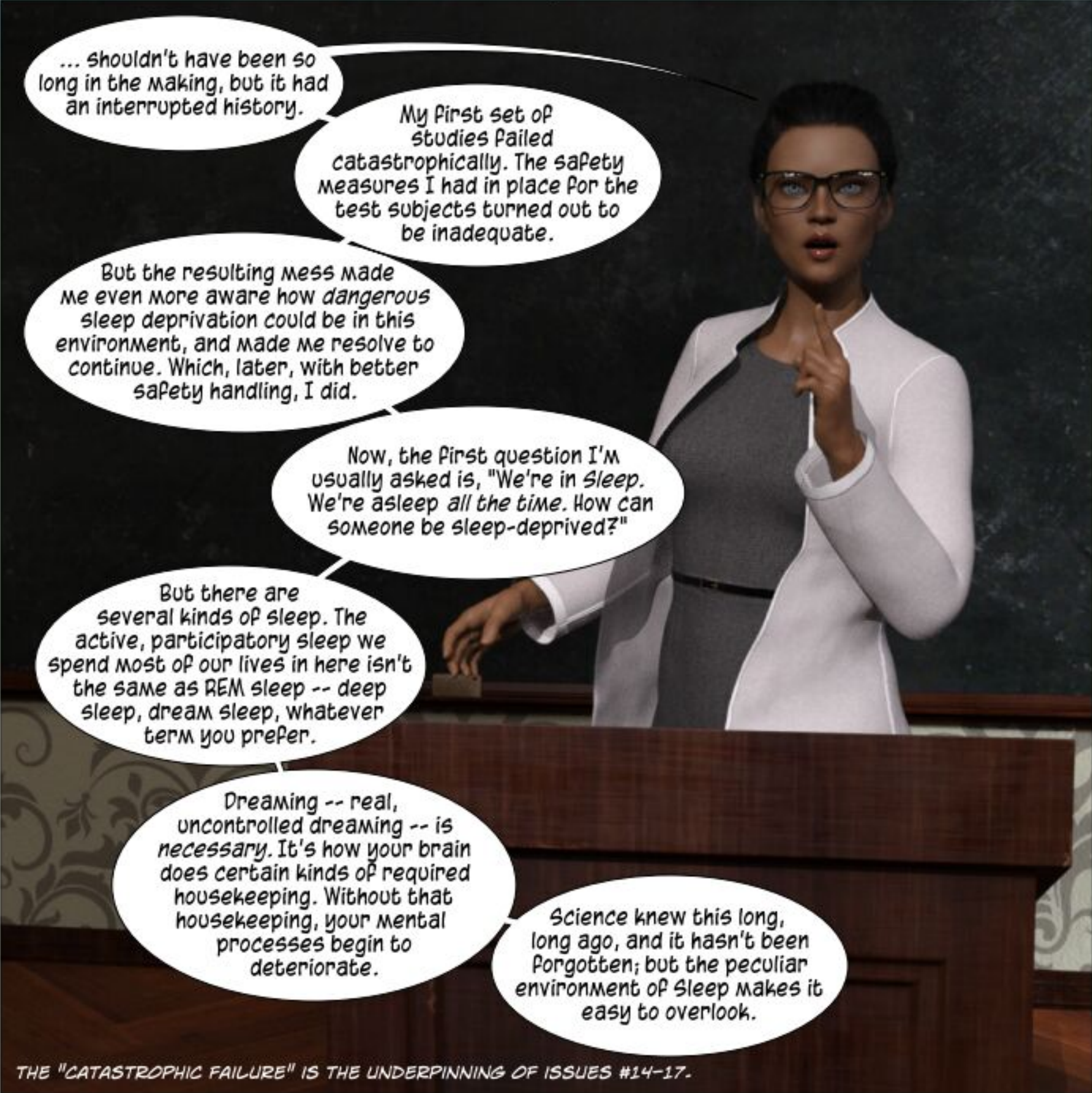
You sure you want to try this by yourself?

No, but I don't think I could talk anybody else into going with me.

Especially not since they'd have to solo back here after we reached the Gaja.

... Well, be careful.

SERENITY. A LECTURE HALL AT THE COLLEGE, WHERE DR. CHAPMAN IS PRESENTING HER FINDINGS.



... shouldn't have been so long in the making, but it had an interrupted history.

My first set of studies failed catastrophically. The safety measures I had in place for the test subjects turned out to be inadequate.

But the resulting mess made me even more aware how dangerous sleep deprivation could be in this environment, and made me resolve to continue. Which, later, with better safety handling, I did.

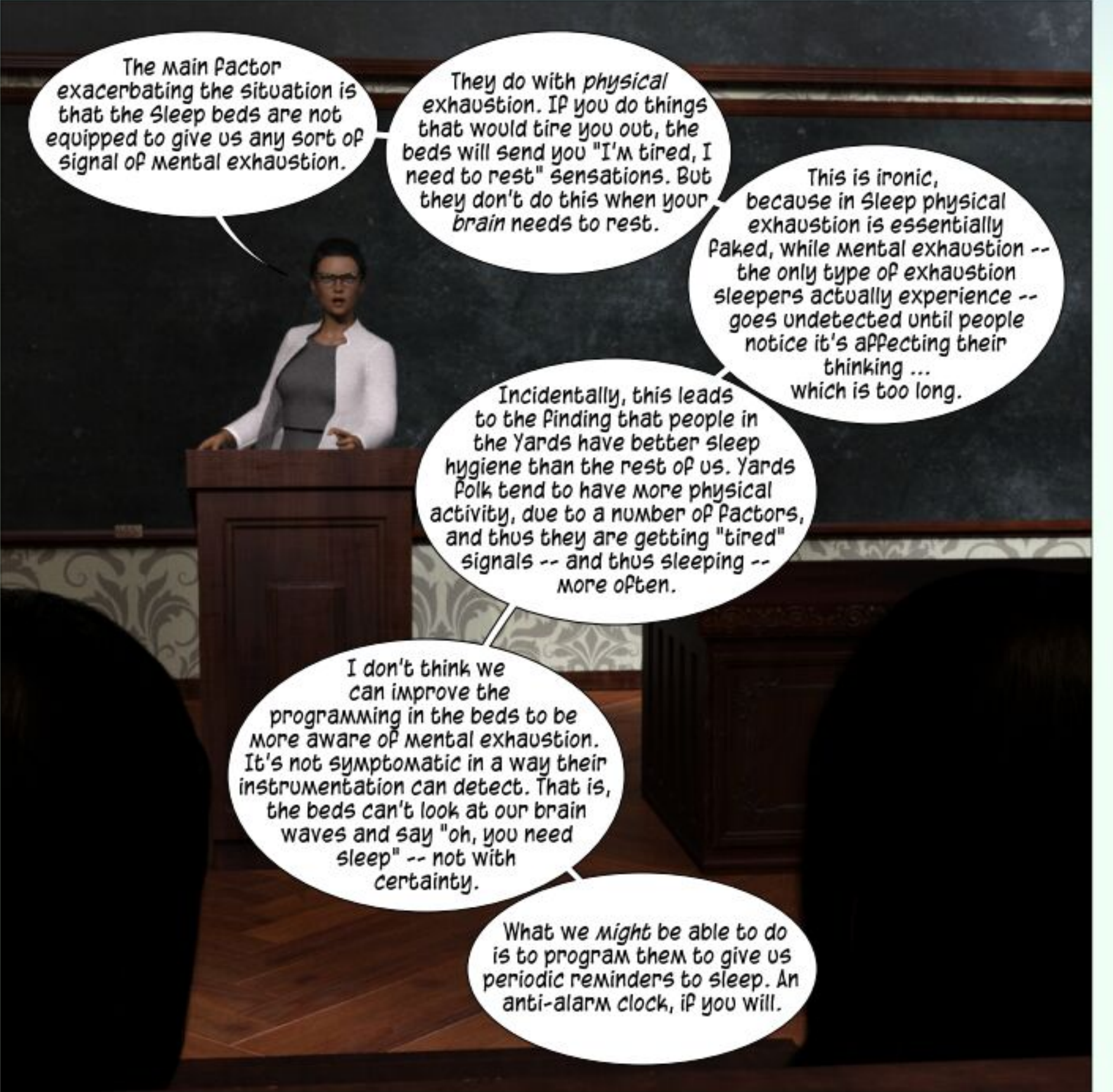
Now, the first question I'm usually asked is, "We're in sleep. We're asleep all the time. How can someone be sleep-deprived?"

But there are several kinds of sleep. The active, participatory sleep we spend most of our lives in here isn't the same as REM sleep -- deep sleep, dream sleep, whatever term you prefer.

Dreaming -- real, uncontrolled dreaming -- is necessary. It's how your brain does certain kinds of required housekeeping. Without that housekeeping, your mental processes begin to deteriorate.

Science knew this long, long ago, and it hasn't been forgotten; but the peculiar environment of sleep makes it easy to overlook.

THE "CATASTROPHIC FAILURE" IS THE UNDERPINNING OF ISSUES #14-17.



The main factor exacerbating the situation is that the sleep beds are not equipped to give us any sort of signal of mental exhaustion.

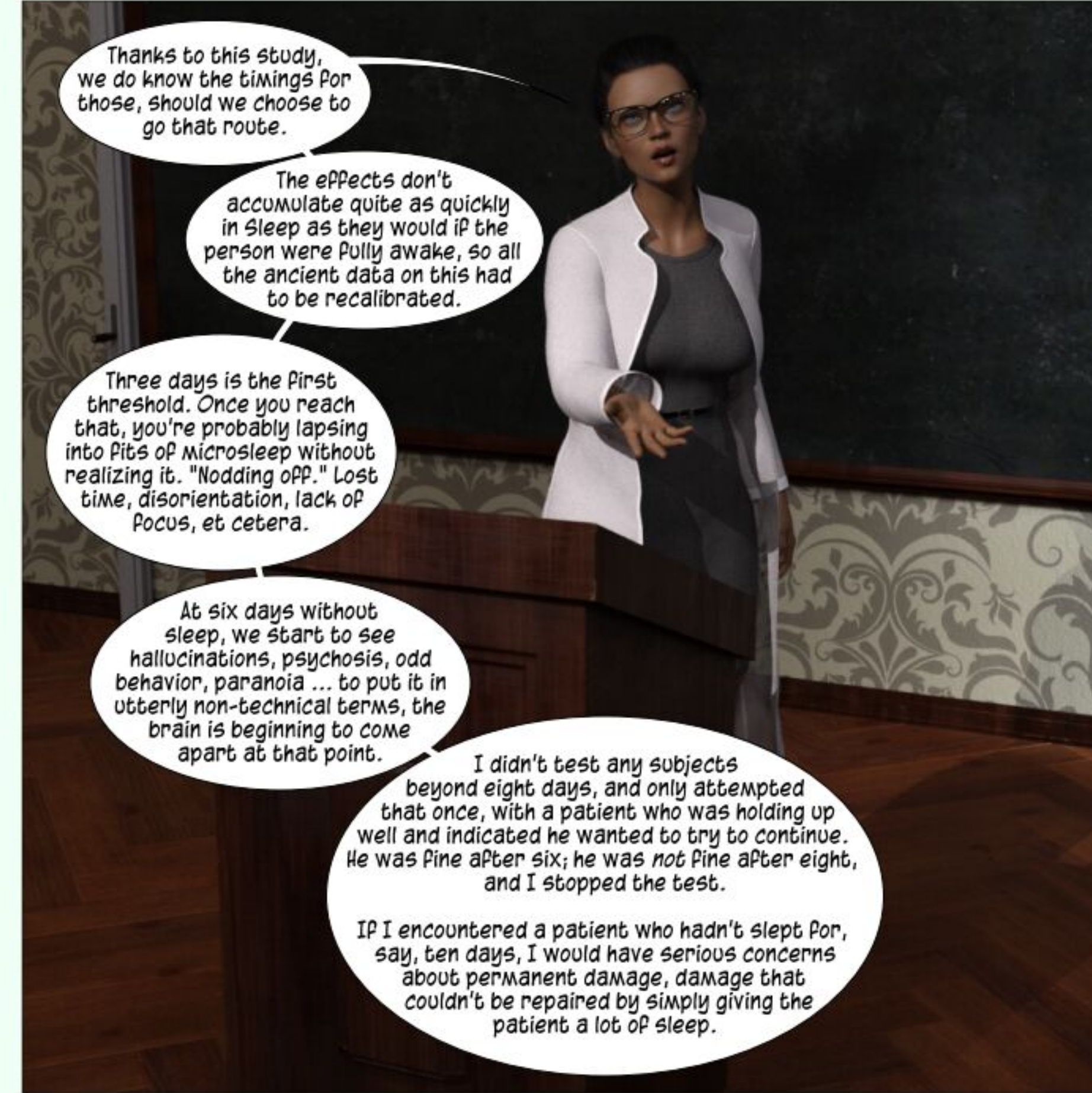
They do with physical exhaustion. If you do things that would tire you out, the beds will send you "I'm tired, I need to rest" sensations. But they don't do this when your brain needs to rest.

This is ironic, because in sleep physical exhaustion is essentially faded, while mental exhaustion -- the only type of exhaustion sleepers actually experience -- goes undetected until people notice it's affecting their thinking ... which is too long.

Incidentally, this leads to the finding that people in the Yards have better sleep hygiene than the rest of us. Yards folk tend to have more physical activity, due to a number of factors, and thus they are getting "tired" signals -- and thus sleeping -- more often.

I don't think we can improve the programming in the beds to be more aware of mental exhaustion. It's not symptomatic in a way their instrumentation can detect. That is, the beds can't look at our brain waves and say "oh, you need sleep" -- not with certainty.

What we might be able to do is to program them to give us periodic reminders to sleep. An anti-alarm clock, if you will.



Thanks to this study, we do know the timings for those, should we choose to go that route.

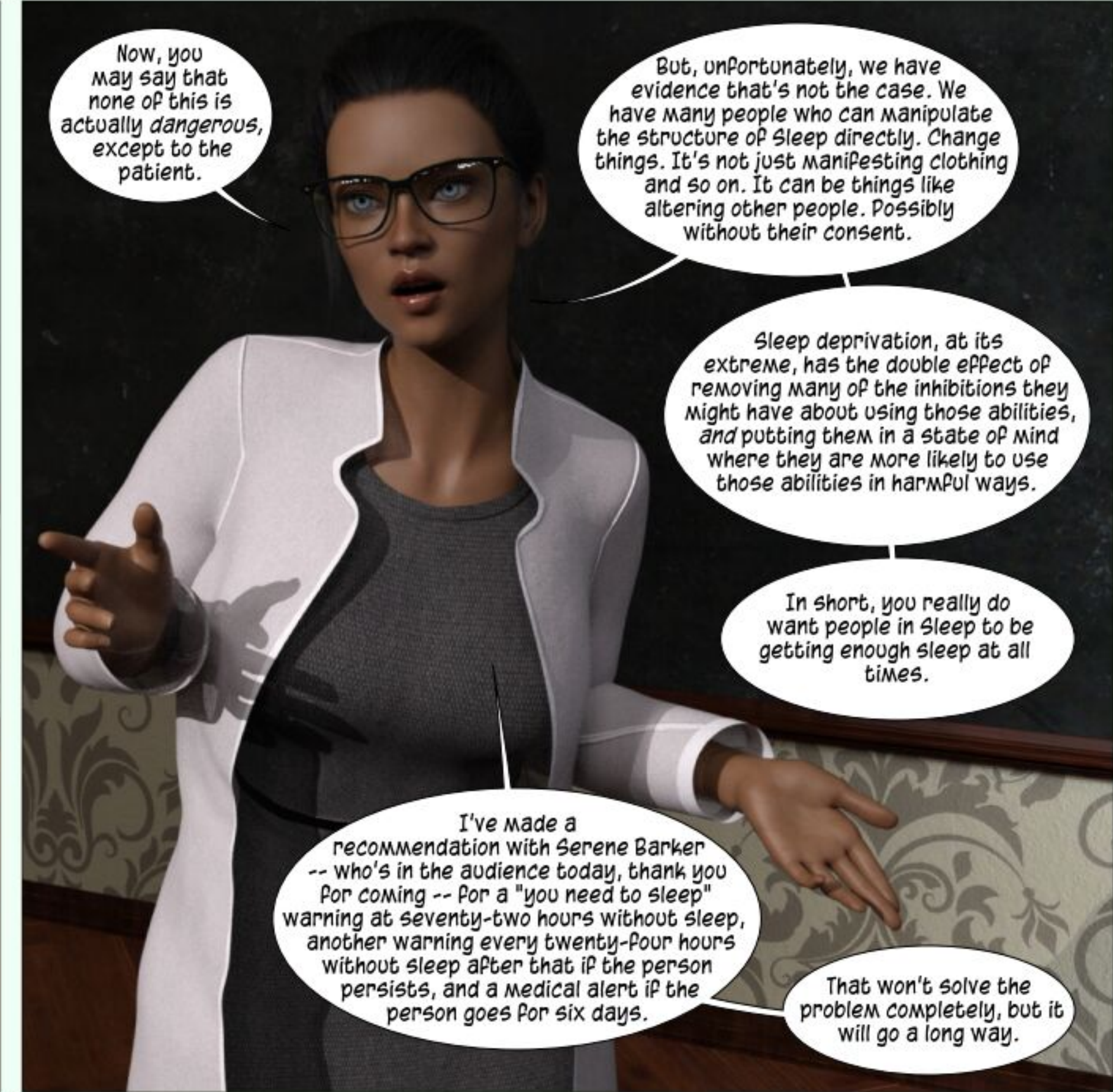
The effects don't accumulate quite as quickly in sleep as they would if the person were fully awake, so all the ancient data on this had to be recalibrated.

Three days is the first threshold. Once you reach that, you're probably lapsing into fits of microsleep without realizing it. "Nodding off." Lost time, disorientation, lack of focus, et cetera.

At six days without sleep, we start to see hallucinations, psychosis, odd behavior, paranoia ... to put it in utterly non-technical terms, the brain is beginning to come apart at that point.

I didn't test any subjects beyond eight days, and only attempted that once, with a patient who was holding up well and indicated he wanted to try to continue. He was fine after six; he was not fine after eight, and I stopped the test.

If I encountered a patient who hadn't slept for, say, ten days, I would have serious concerns about permanent damage, damage that couldn't be repaired by simply giving the patient a lot of sleep.



Now, you may say that none of this is actually dangerous, except to the patient.

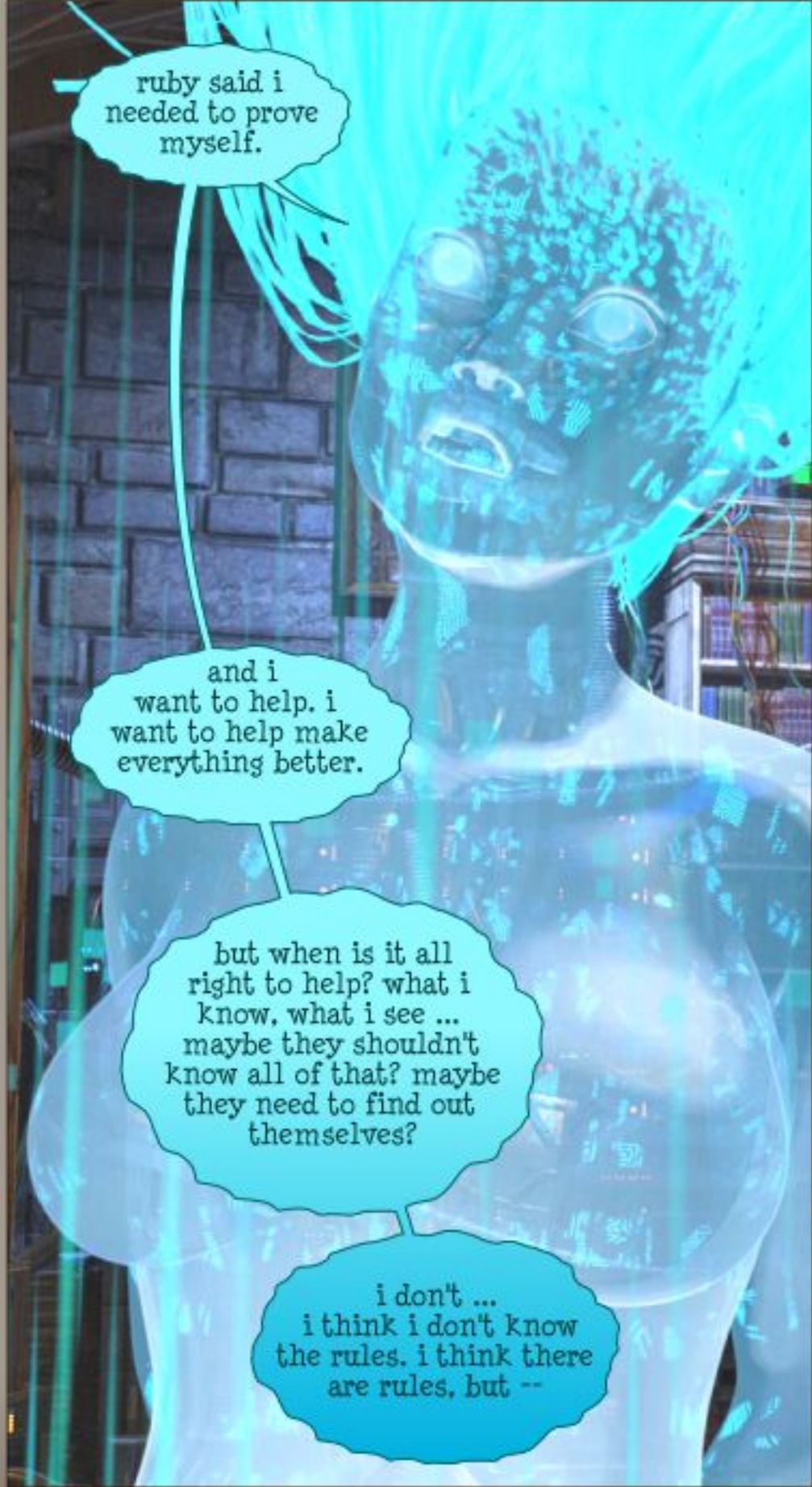
But, unfortunately, we have evidence that's not the case. We have many people who can manipulate the structure of sleep directly. Change things. It's not just manifesting clothing and so on. It can be things like altering other people. Possibly without their consent.

Sleep deprivation, at its extreme, has the double effect of removing many of the inhibitions they might have about using those abilities, and putting them in a state of mind where they are more likely to use those abilities in harmful ways.

In short, you really do want people in sleep to be getting enough sleep at all times.

I've made a recommendation with Serene Barker -- who's in the audience today, thank you for coming -- for a "you need to sleep" warning at seventy-two hours without sleep, another warning every twenty-four hours without sleep after that if the person persists, and a medical alert if the person goes for six days.

That won't solve the problem completely, but it will go a long way.





FOUR DAYS LATER





THE COBBLES.



SERENITY. LOU LAURENCE'S OFFICE.





SOMEWHERE IN CENTURY.

Very good.

y - yes ...

heh.

No, I mean you're making good progress. You really did well on Pocus that time.

You're coming together much faster than I expected.



Missing, though ... so much ...

Don't worry about that. It'll come back to you later.

It's probably better to not have any of that getting in the way right now.

THERE'S NOT ENOUGH SPACE TO EXPLAIN THIS, BUT THERE ARE SEVERAL SCENES IN #49 WHICH ARE A GOOD START.



I want you to be as if you didn't exist before this. Beginning again. You're a brand new creature.

Would you like to pick a new name? Maybe we should do that.

SERENITY.



... so I tried doing passives, but people keep saying I can't act ... and after that I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I didn't really expect to land here ...

But it's nice so far! Some of the people in passives can be really nasty, y'know?

Oh, yeah, this is a good crowd.

Wish she wouldn't hang these so high ...

Nobody gets jealous or petty or anything. I think it's because there's enough work for everybody, and the designers are good about sharing ... Sama even offered me this job because she couldn't give me enough runway work until I got more practice.

Well, almost nobody. Kaolin's horrible. I don't know what her problem is.

Yeah, I heard that.

Chelsea, do you think she had anything to do with Nora and Lil disappearing?

Dunno. But I'd believe it.



OK, just her left. She's a pain to dress. Can't ever wear pants, and any top has to be able to slide under her left hand there.

Wish sama would replace her with one with joints.

Gotta go get her outfit. I'll be right back.



Sorry it took a while. I had to steam it a little. Sama just kind of left it in a pile. She's usually a lot neater than that --

-- Shani?



Shani? Where'd you go?



Ah. Sama's Pat charity case.

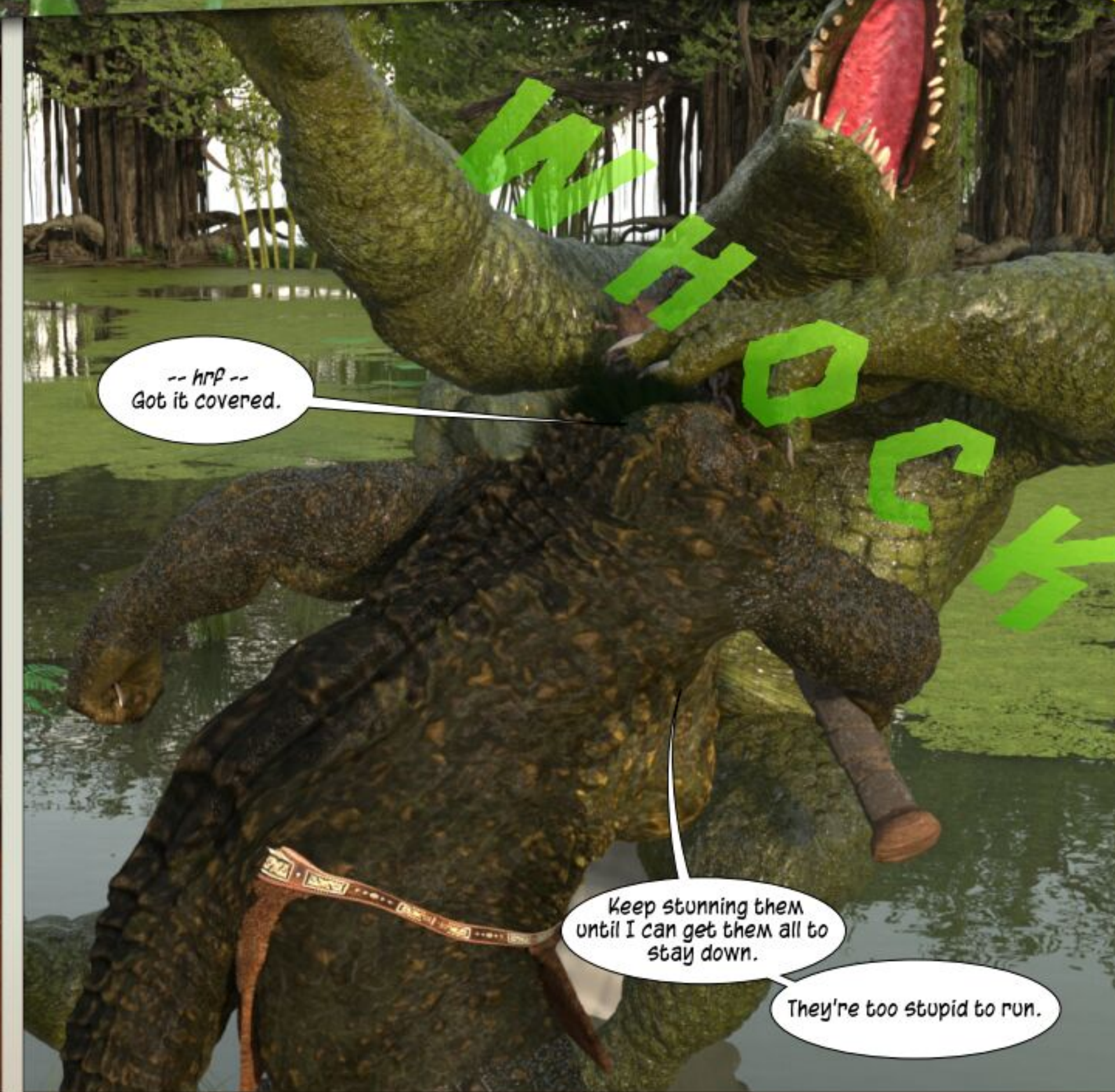
She won't tell you the real reason she won't let you walk more. Meanwhile I tell the truth and get punished for it.

I'd like to put you into better shape, but it doesn't work. It didn't work with Nora. Sets too quickly.

Still, I'm sure I can find you something to wear.

FOUR DAYS LATER

THE YARDS. CHELLE AND T'LAU ARE WELL INTO THE JUNGLE WETLANDS.



CENTURY.

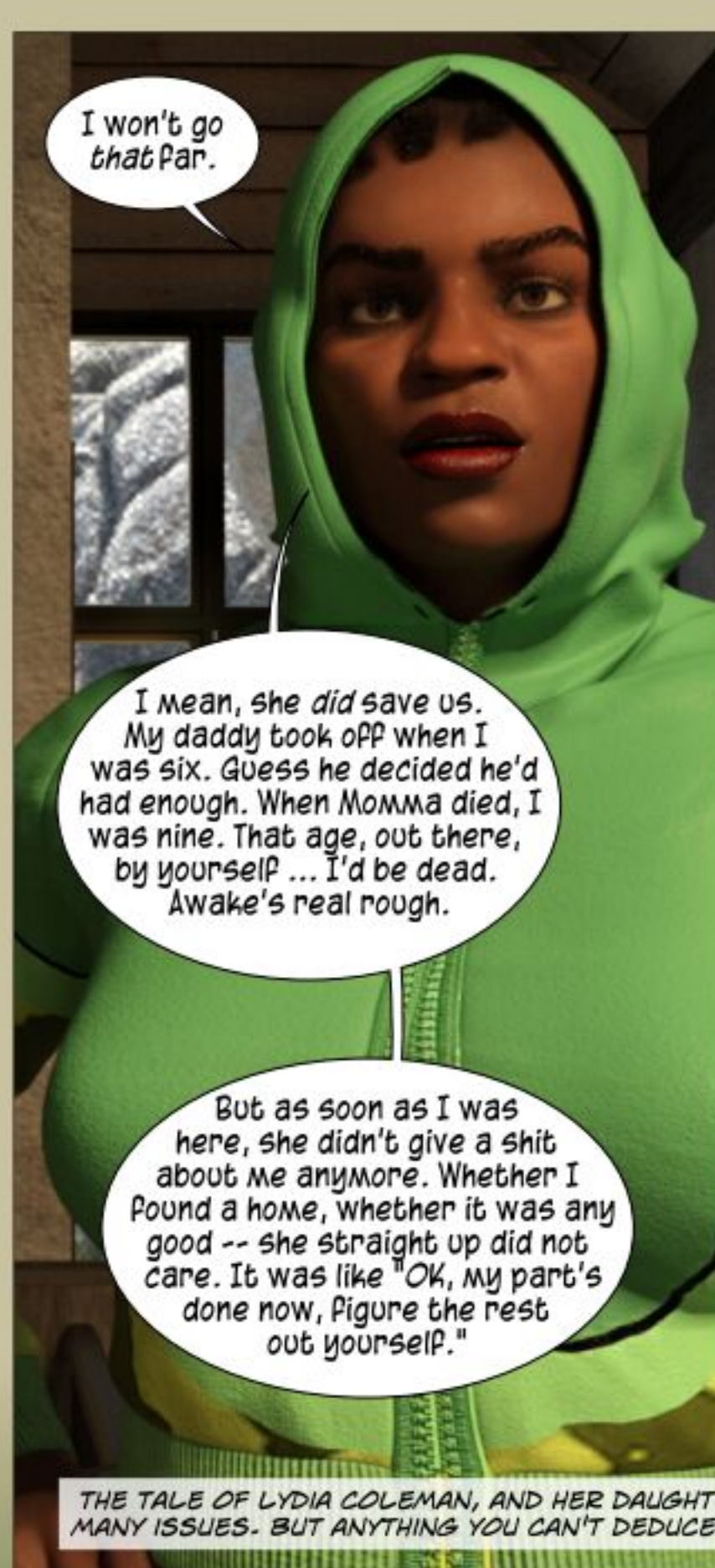




I'm not here for bullshit either, Treece. I don't want you to sugar-coat anything. I just want to know.

I barely remember her. Even before she left, it feels sometimes like she wasn't really ever there.

I take it you think she was a bad person.



I won't go *that* far.

I mean, she *did* save us. My daddy took off when I was six. Guess he decided he'd had enough. When Momma died, I was nine. That age, out there, by yourself ... I'd be dead. Awake's real rough.

But as soon as I was here, she didn't give a shit about me anymore. Whether I found a home, whether it was any good -- she straight up did not care. It was like "OK, my part's done now, figure the rest out yourself."



I can't remember now if I ever even saw her again after she brought me in.

Naomi doesn't like to hear it, but I just about thought she was my mother. She and a couple of the other older kids were the only ones bothering to take care of us.

And we were doing a lousy job of it. Too young to know how.



Also, like Treece said, when someone did come along wanting to adopt one of us, Lydia didn't bother to investigate them.

There were some people who, even as a kid, I could tell they were bad news.

I worry sometimes about the ones who ended up with those. I hope they came out OK, but seeing how messed up we are in some ways, I'm thinking they probably didn't.

THE YARDS. T'LAU DECIDES THEY NEED A BETTER SHELTER FOR THAT NIGHT'S CAMP, AND MANIFESTS SOMETHING APPROPRIATE.



Haven't seen any wisps in this area ...

... up on stilts will keep out all the animals ...

Nice!

... and the torches will keep away the mudbacks.

-- Sigh --

They're scared of Pine now.



T'lau ... I'm sorry if this is an offensive question, but ...

The mudbacks ... are they related to your people?

They are my people.

Or used to be, anyway.

Something's been changing us. Uh ... devolving, I guess is the word. Becoming more like animals. I can't figure out what. I don't think it's the wisps. They do wild shit, but not like this.

I went to Piertown to ask a seer what to do about it.



Can I know what she said?

Sure. Something about a war of five ... even she wasn't sure what that meant ... and that when the swamp was blue the problem would solve itself.

But even if that means anything -- and I can figure out what it means -- we might not be able to wait for that.

Everywhere I go in the swamp, all I see these days are mudbacks. There may only be two or three of us left. Hell, I might be the only one.



You're not sure?

We're not a tribal people. We don't form villages or nomad groups or anything like that. We roam alone, and only meet each other by chance. So it's hard to tell.

Maybe the ones that are left are hiding somewhere. Maybe there's none left. All I know is I haven't seen another for weeks now.

And I miss them.

... We have a custom, when we encounter one another ...

... well, never mind.

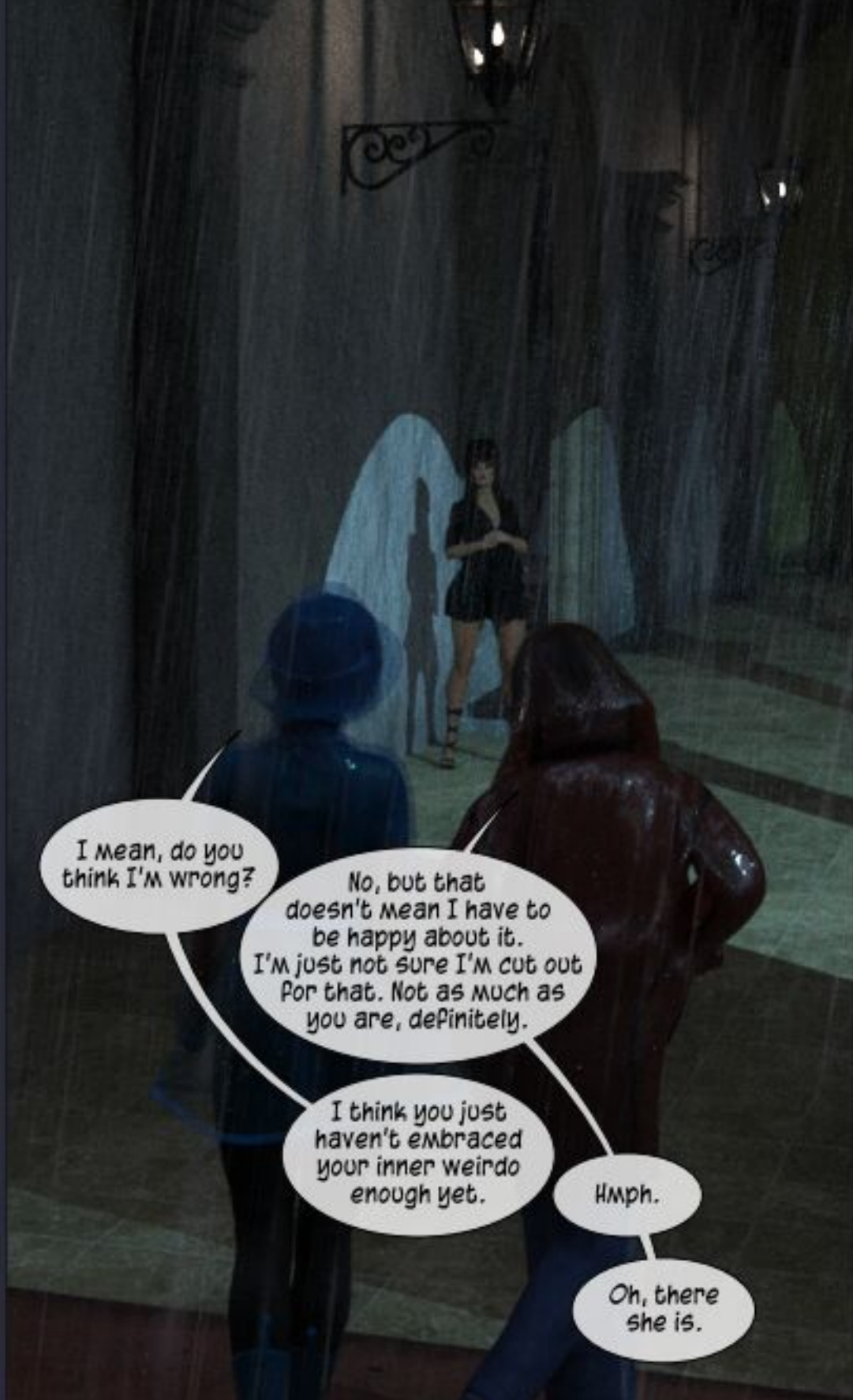
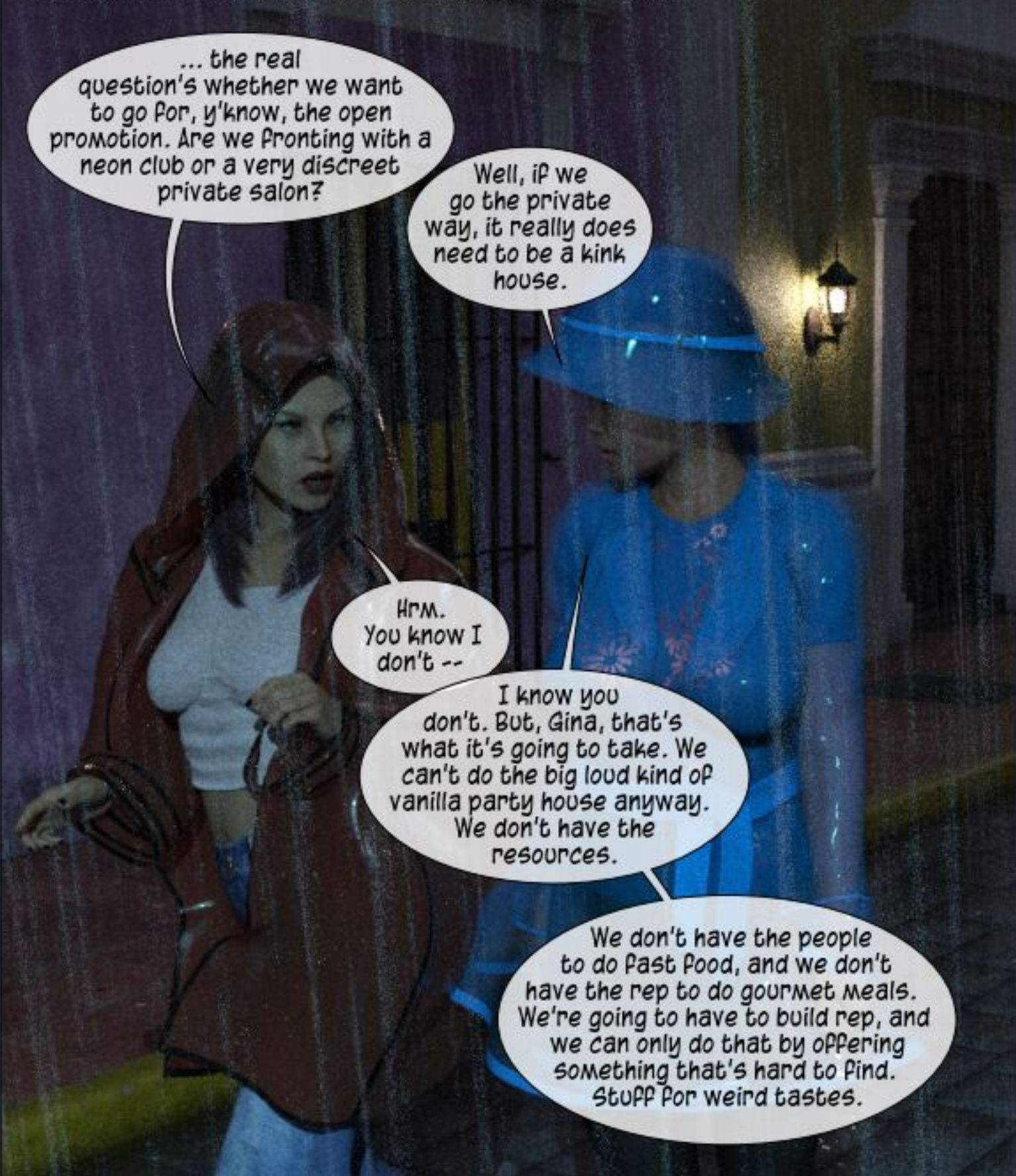
Hmm.



You know, your skin's not actually all that hard.

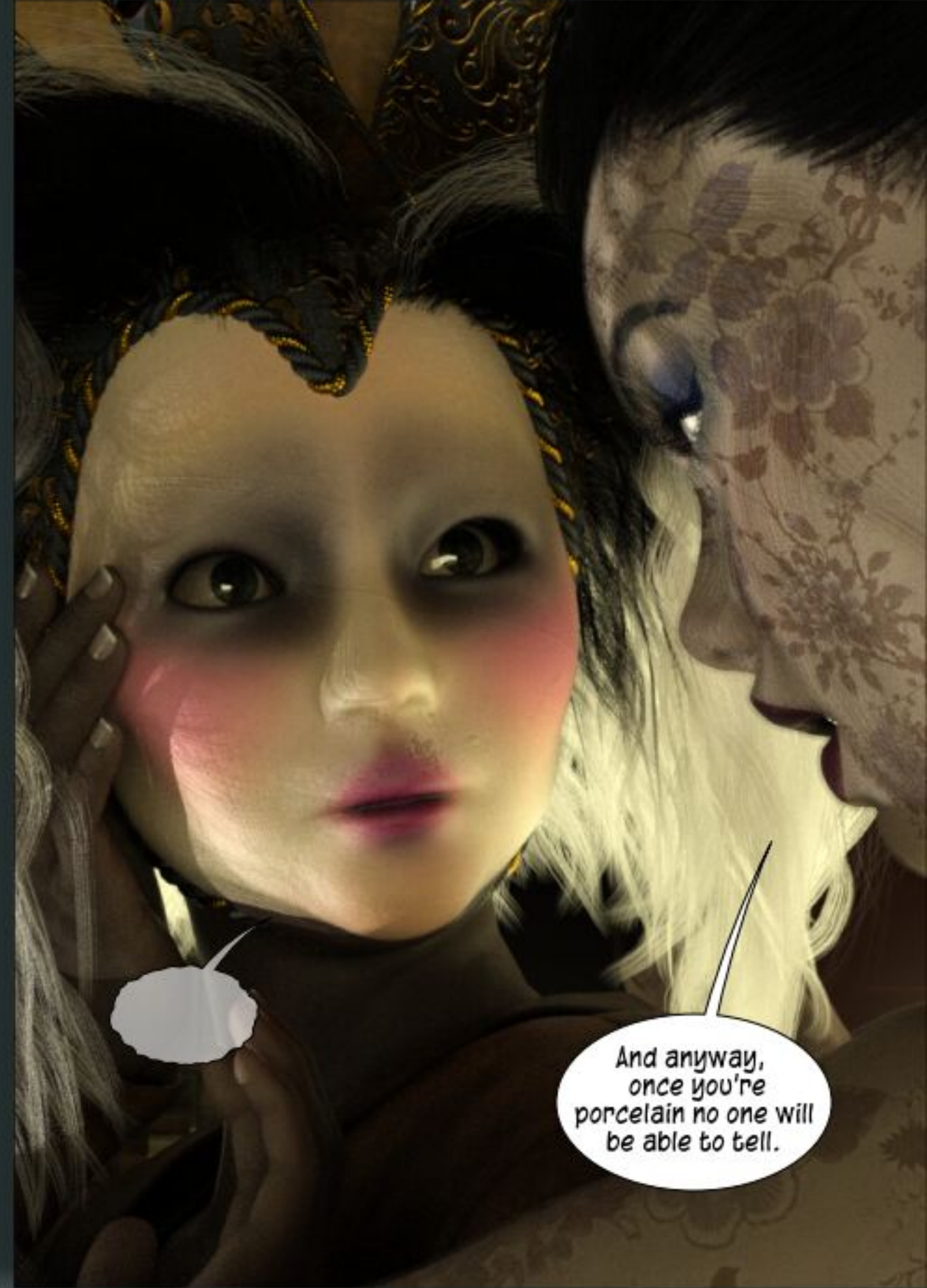


SERENITY ... WHERE IT DOES OCCASIONALLY RAIN.



CENTURY.



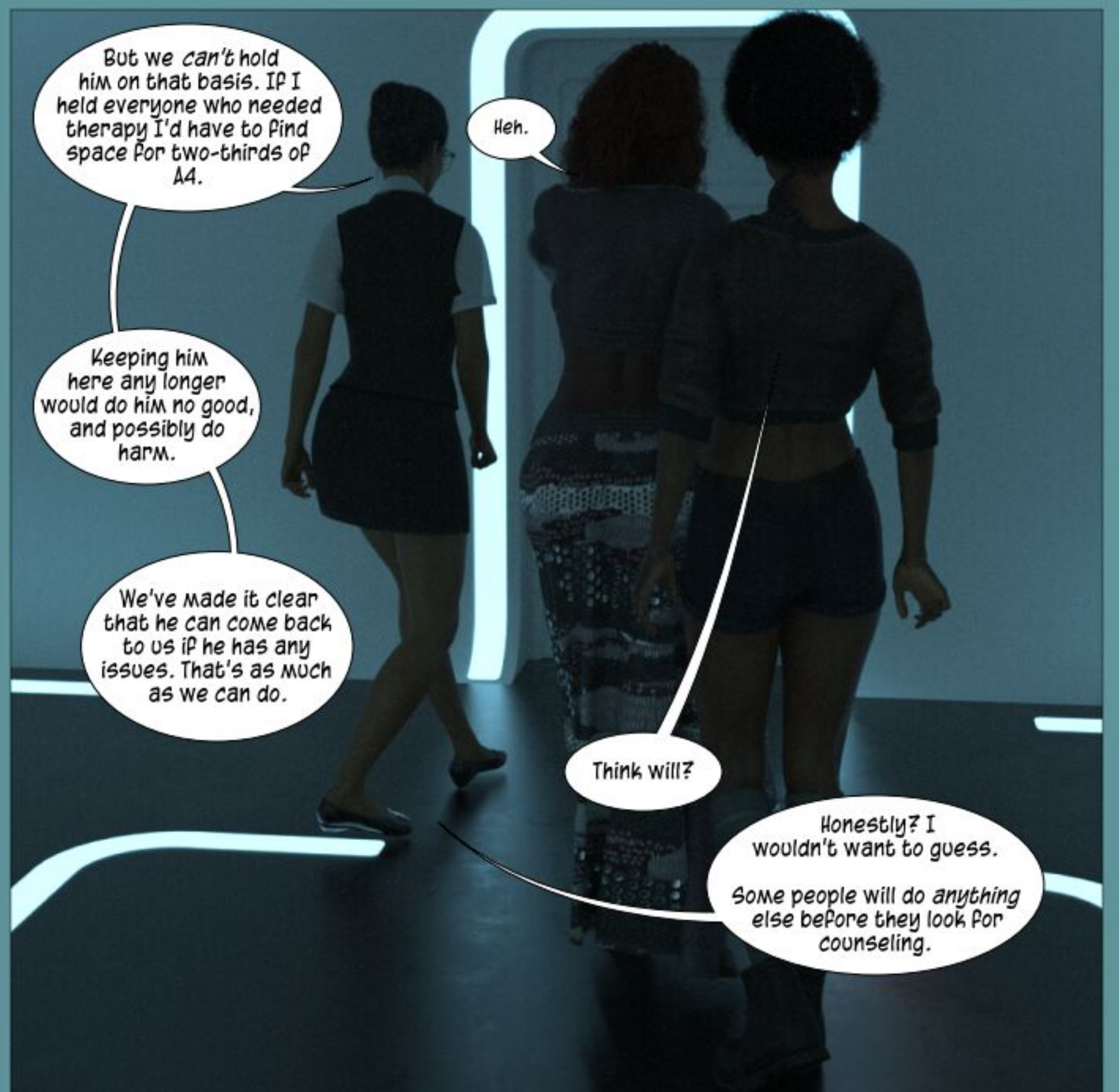
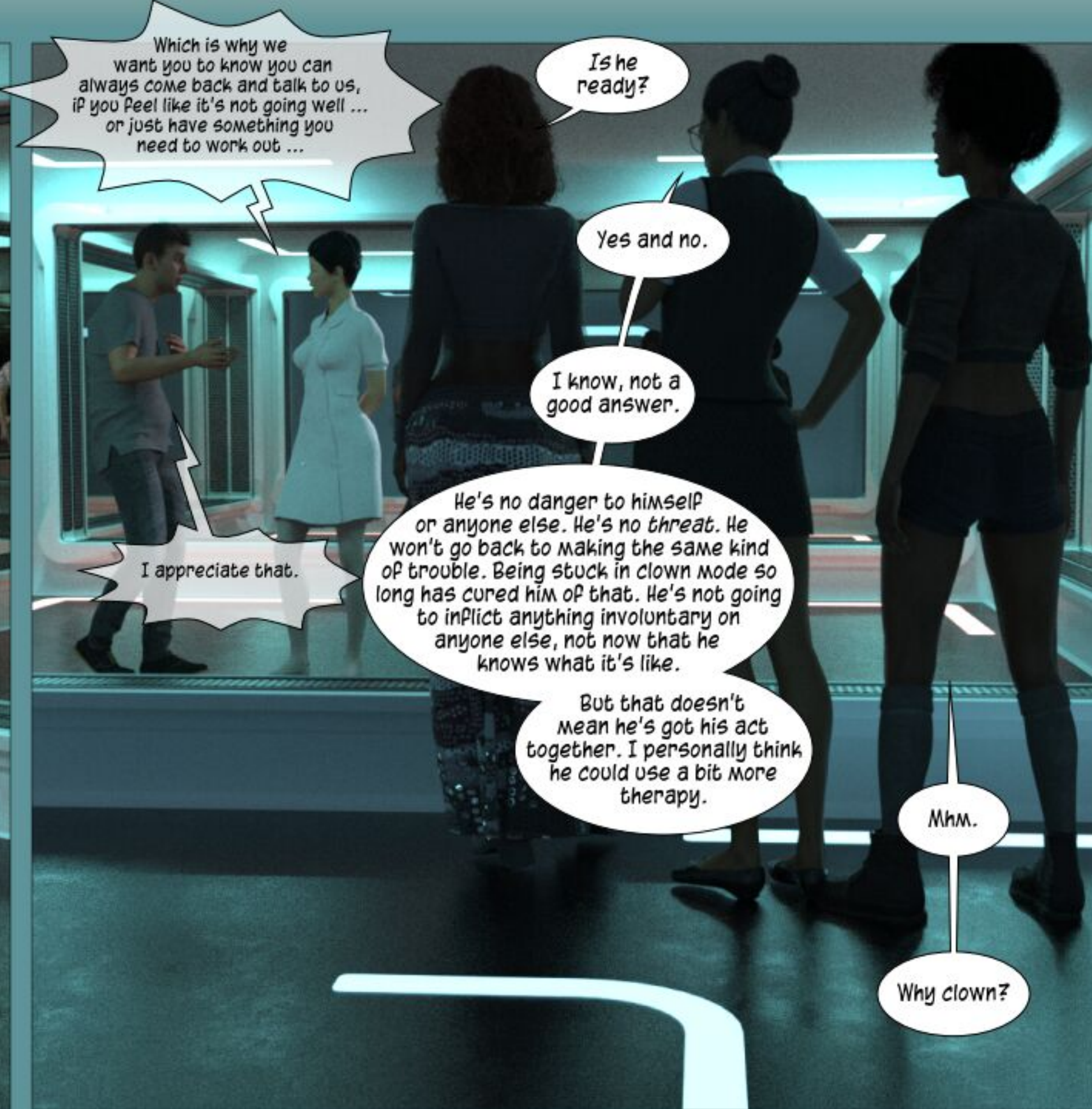


TWO DAYS LATER





SERENITY, WHERE CHAD CANTWELL HAS JUST LEARNED ...





All right, vile villainess, your villainous villainy is about to be ... Uh ... vanquished.



Your horrible schemes can't stand up to the cunning of the Leopard--



-- huh?

Damn it, my title card must be broken.



Didn't anyone tell you the rules, little kitty?

The only person who gets a card in here is me.

Ananke

MISTRESS OF COMPULSION



You need a better name anyway. So unoriginal. And that outfit looks more like a cheetah than a leopard.

Actually, you could use a new outfit too.

Uh ... prepare to face your ... my skills and cunning will ...

It's so cheap. Look what happens if we change the material a little ...

Now it's the dipped-on vinyl outfit on a drugstore action figure. Something you'd see on a low-quality, second-rate toy.

You know what that makes you.



You really did think you were a superhero, didn't you? Silly thing.

You're a toy superhero. A pretend hero. For children to play at being superheroes with.

How could you possibly be a real superhero? You don't have enough mind to even move on your own. You depend on real people to move you and pose you and make up stories for you.



You're a toy. You've always been a toy. You'll always be a toy. You've never been anything but a toy.

Now, put on a nice smile, puppet, and we'll get you set up.



In tonight's episode, the Leopard takes on the sinister Dr. Brainwash! Will she leave the Leopard with even less mind than she began with?

Our story begins at --

You really enjoy this, don't you.



Not as much as she will.

Anyway, of course I enjoy it. You think I do this for the money? I'd charge a lot more if I was.

Do I know you?

Hmm, wait ...

ix, isn't it?

You shouldn't be in here right now. If you're here as a customer, my next available time's tomorrow afternoon.

Don't Platter yourself. We robotics don't need to play these kinds of games.



It's taken me months to find out what happened to Briset.

Nobody knew anything. Nobody saw anything. Finally I found one person who'd heard you might have her.

Though, really, I think she's got to be here, because by this point I've looked just about everywhere else.

I want to talk to her.



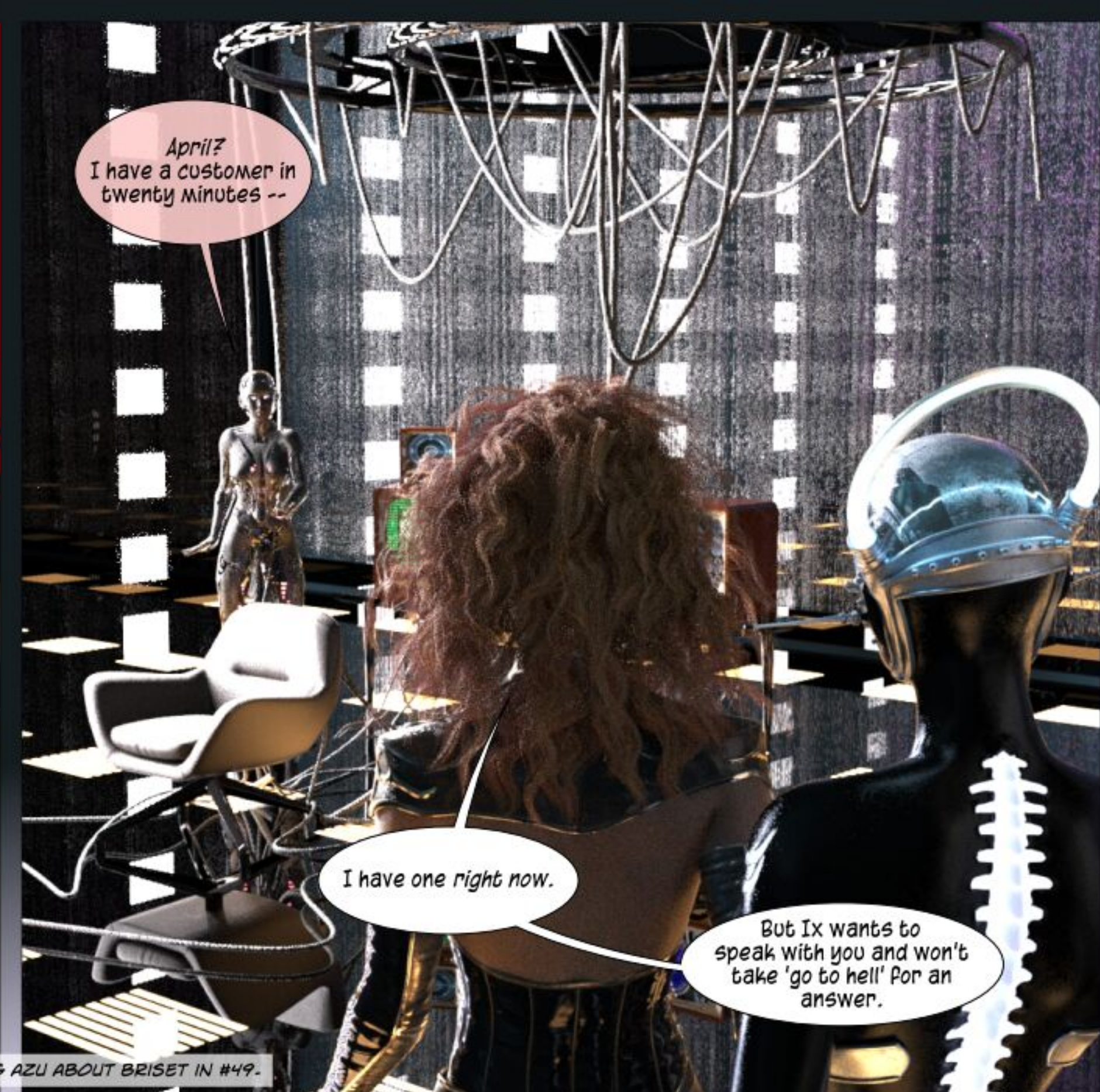
In case you didn't notice, I have a customer. She paid for this. I am on the clock.

I can't just leave her hanging while I --

I'm not leaving. Would you like to try to make me?

-- Sigh --

Fine. Come on.

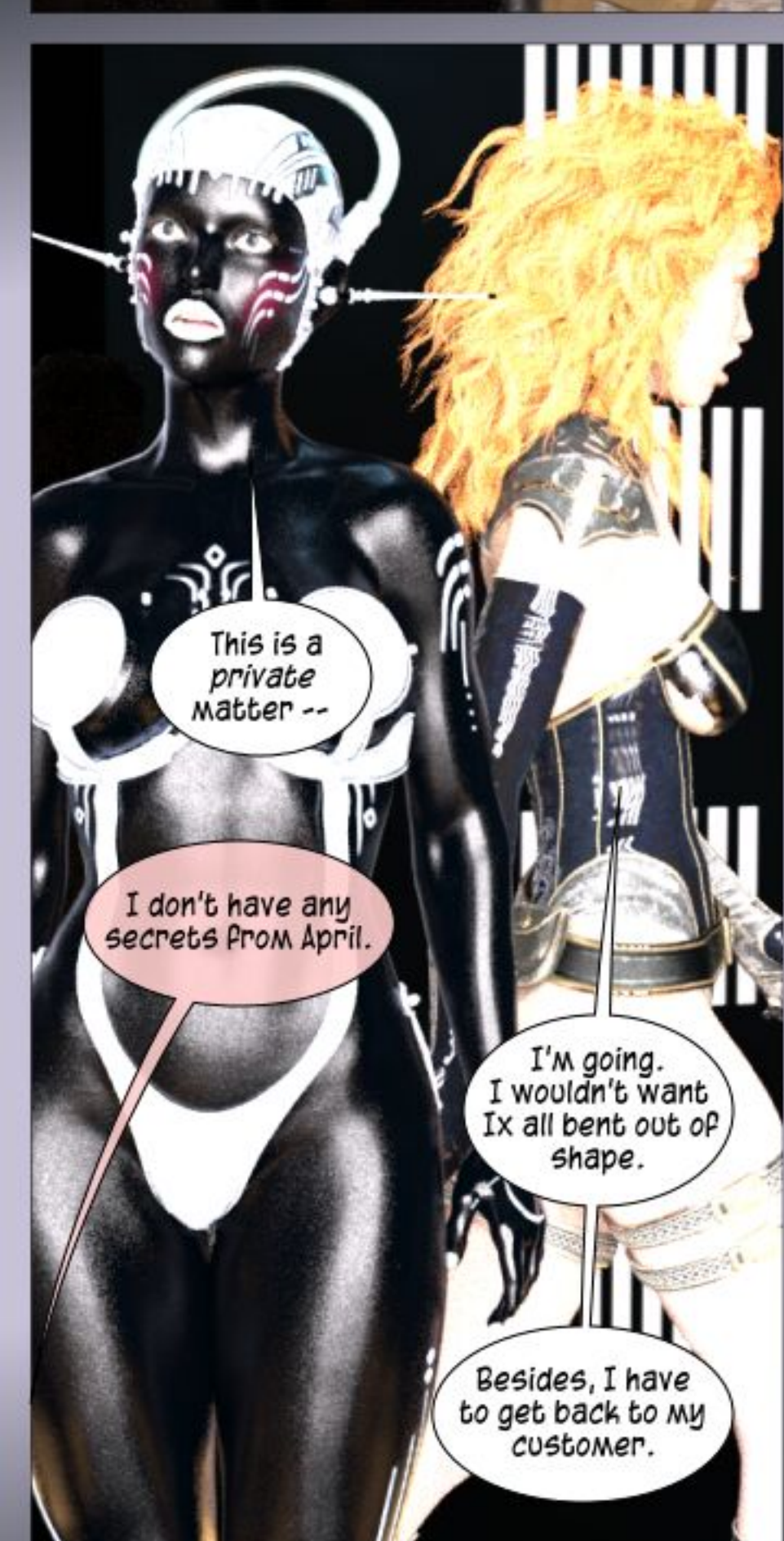


April? I have a customer in twenty minutes --

I have one right now.

But Ix wants to speak with you and won't take 'go to hell' for an answer.

FOR THE STORY OF BRISET, SEE #34. IX HAS BEEN AROUND MUCH LONGER THAN THAT, AND WAS LAST SEEN ASKING AZU ABOUT BRISET IN #49.

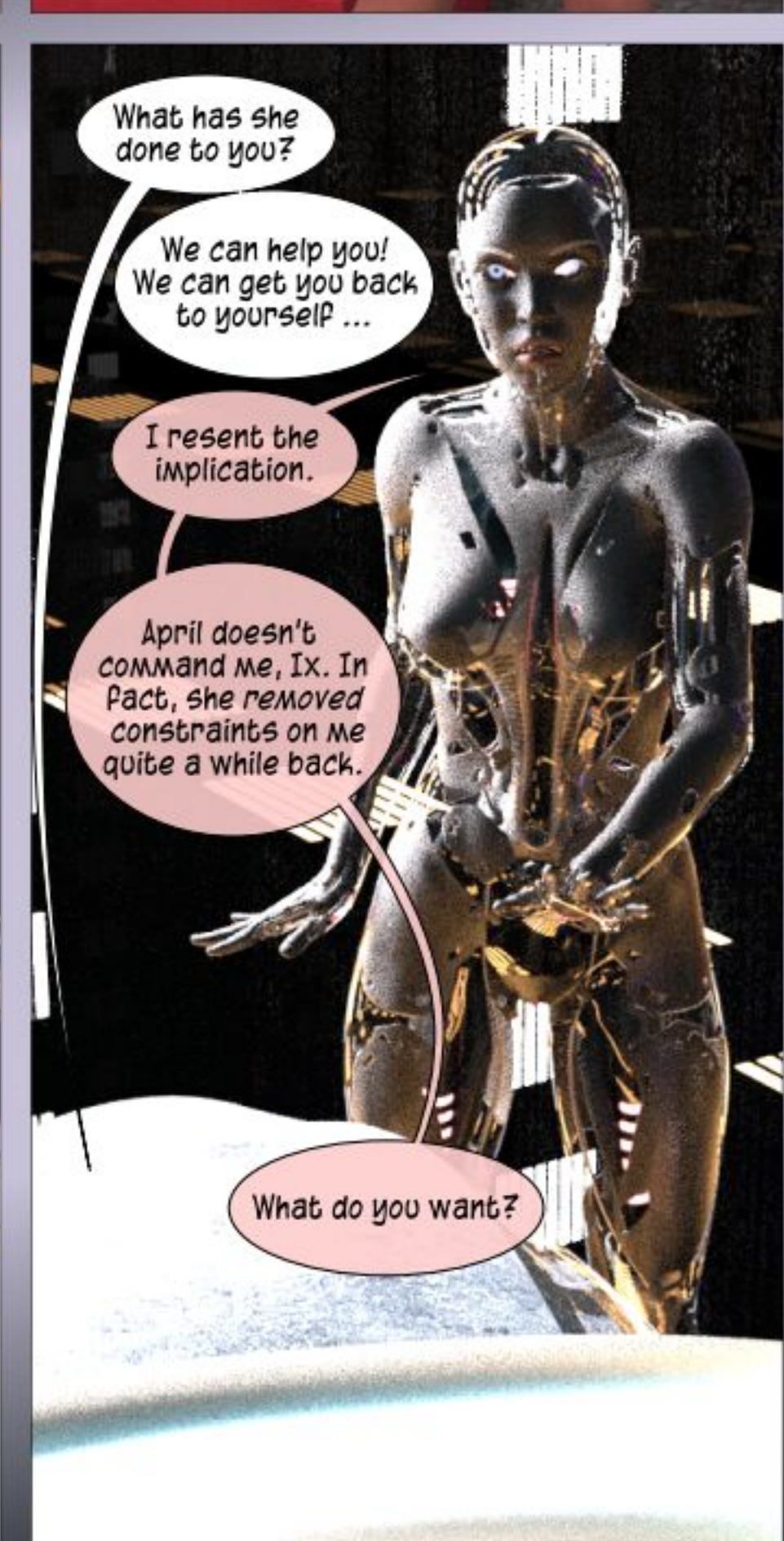


This is a private matter --

I don't have any secrets from April.

I'm going. I wouldn't want Ix all bent out of shape.

Besides, I have to get back to my customer.



What has she done to you?

We can help you! We can get you back to yourself --

I resent the implication.

April doesn't command me, Ix. In fact, she removed constraints on me quite a while back.

What do you want?



You had a methodology. A way to alter people --

A virus. Call it what it is. For giving people robot brains.

Why do you want it? Who's looking for it?

Who commands you, Ix?

I'm -- I'm working toward a better future -- as you should be --



Oh, spare me.

Less than two days after Azu gave you that coat of paint, you were out pretending that the things you were doing were because you were "programmed" to and had no choice.

I've checked on your history. I haven't been ignoring developments. I know what's going on out there.

You never have motivations of your own, Ix. Never. They're always someone else's.

BRISET'S VIRUS CAN BE SEEN IN ACTION IN #34, ALREADY NOTED. IX'S "CREATION" BY AZU IS WAY BACK IN #10, IF YOU FEEL A NEED TO LOOK. TOLD YOU SHE'D BEEN AROUND A WHILE.



Eh?

It was too bright in here, don't you think?

You know -- -- MMM -- -- I hear she doesn't believe in sex. She thinks that's for meat.

Is that what you really want to align with? Because I think sex is very important to you. It's just nobody has unlocked it yet.

Sit in the chair.

No, I --

Sit in the chair.



You see? You live to follow orders.

It's why you went robotic in the first place.

You're aching to be programmed. To be commanded. To be unable to do anything but what you're told.

You're getting hot just hearing this. No one's ever understood this before, have they? And you can't just tell them. That would spoil the fun.



I'm going to help you out. I'm going to be your owner now.

I'm going to tell you what to do. Everything you do. And every time you get an order from me, every time you follow one, it's going to be so arousing. It's going to feel so good.

Why, I imagine you'll climax sometimes just from compliance. Just from thinking about how you have no will of your own, how you have only programming -- it'll send you over the edge. Won't that be nice?

Y- yes --

Yes, Mistress.

Yes, Mistress --

Good.

UUUUHMM



Now, I have some very important instructions.

The person who sent you after me -- the person whose instructions you'd been following -- forget her. Forget her completely. You never knew her.

The virus -- forget I have it. Forget why you were looking for it. Forget that you were looking for it. You know nothing about it.

Uhhhh

UUUUHMM

And I think it's best if you don't leave this facility until I say otherwise. You are unable to do so. You're my property now, and can do nothing unless I tell you to do it.

ahuhhhh --

Tell me that you understand these instructions and will comply.



I understand and will comply

Excellent.

When you've finished, go to my rooms and put yourself in shutdown mode until I wake you.



SERENITY.



Kaolin?

We were supposed to have dinner, remember?

Well, that's certainly a look.

Did you just blow me off or what?



Perfect.

I'm sorry, Raven. I've been so busy setting up for this show, I completely forgot.

Yeah, I thought that might be the --

Kaolin!

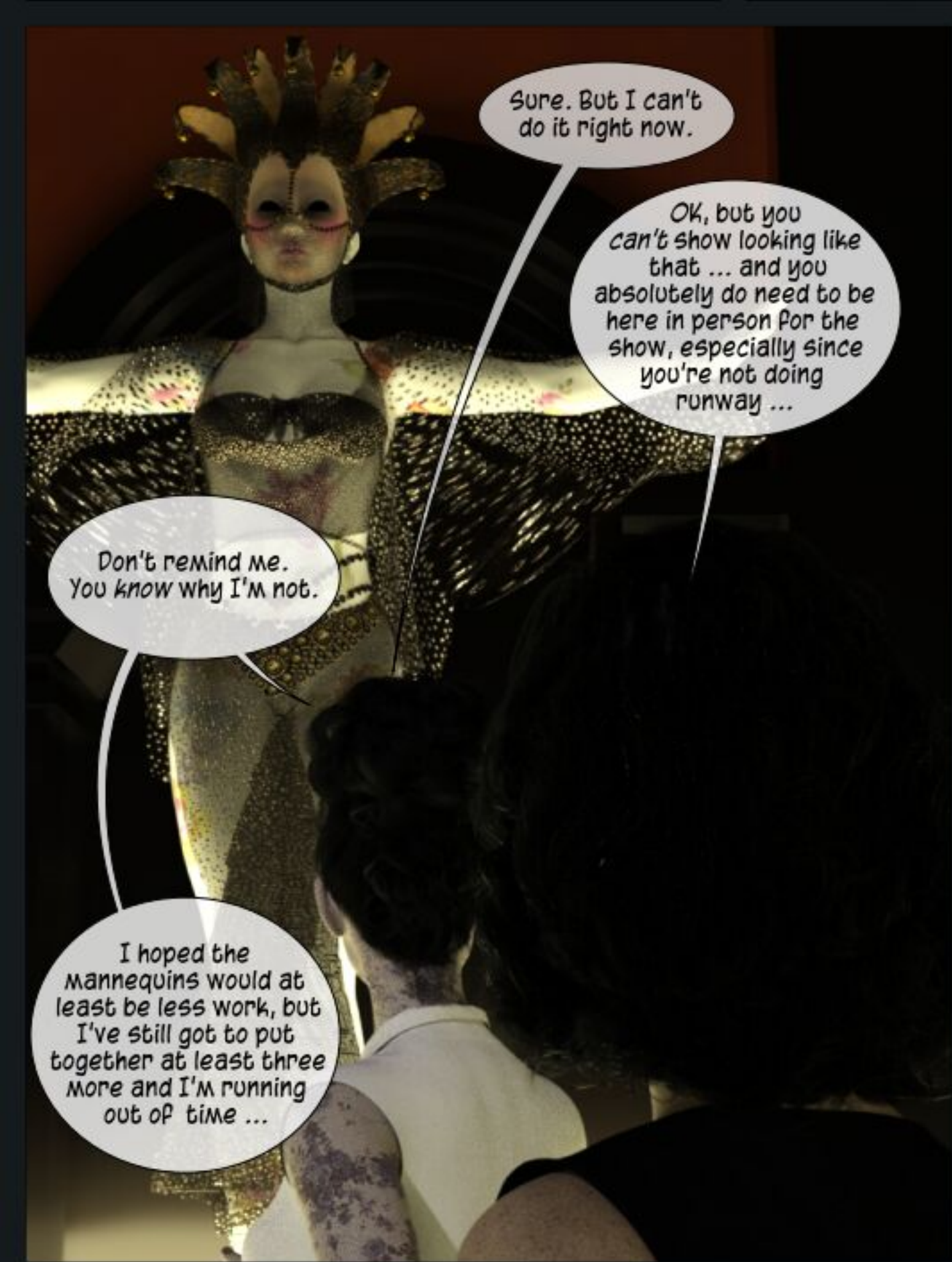
What have you done to yourself?

What?

Your skin! What is that?

Oh ... it's just a rash ...

A rash? Are you kidding? You need to get that looked at.

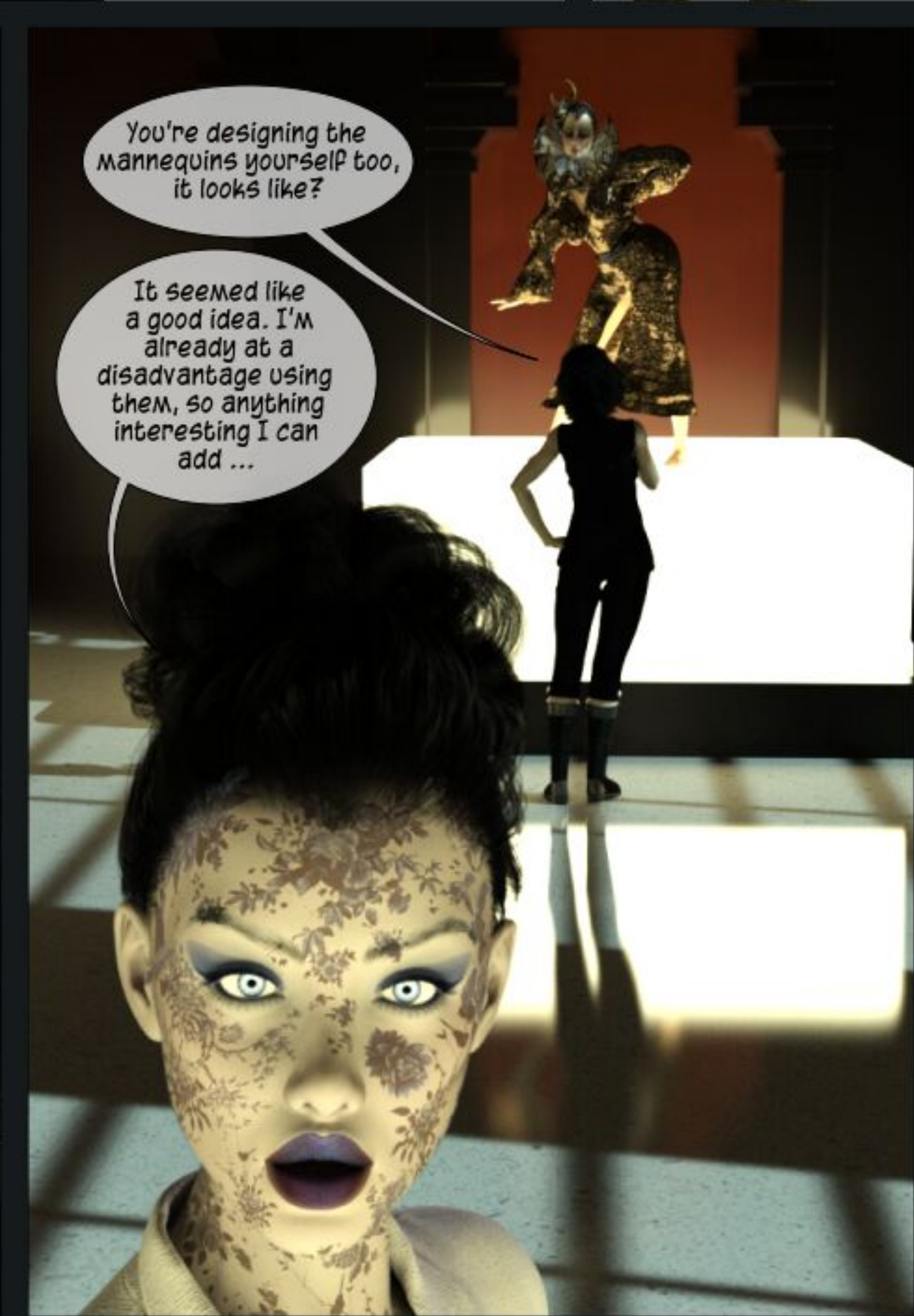


Sure. But I can't do it right now.

OK, but you can't show looking like that ... and you absolutely do need to be here in person for the show, especially since you're not doing runway ...

Don't remind me. You know why I'm not.

I hoped the mannequins would at least be less work, but I've still got to put together at least three more and I'm running out of time ...



You're designing the mannequins yourself too, it looks like?

It seemed like a good idea. I'm already at a disadvantage using them, so anything interesting I can add ...

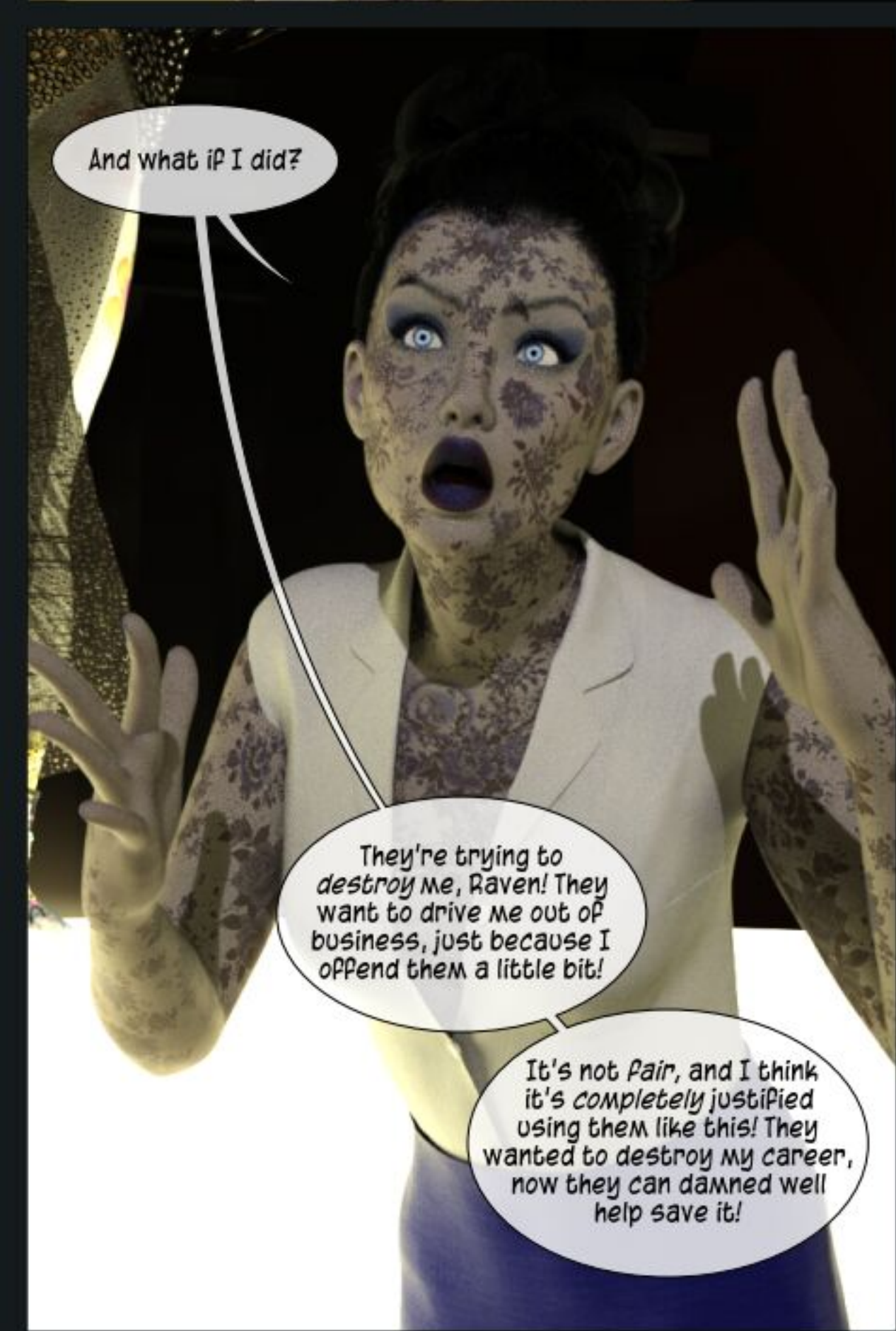


They certainly are that.

... and some shapes I wouldn't have thought you'd go near ...

Oh, no.

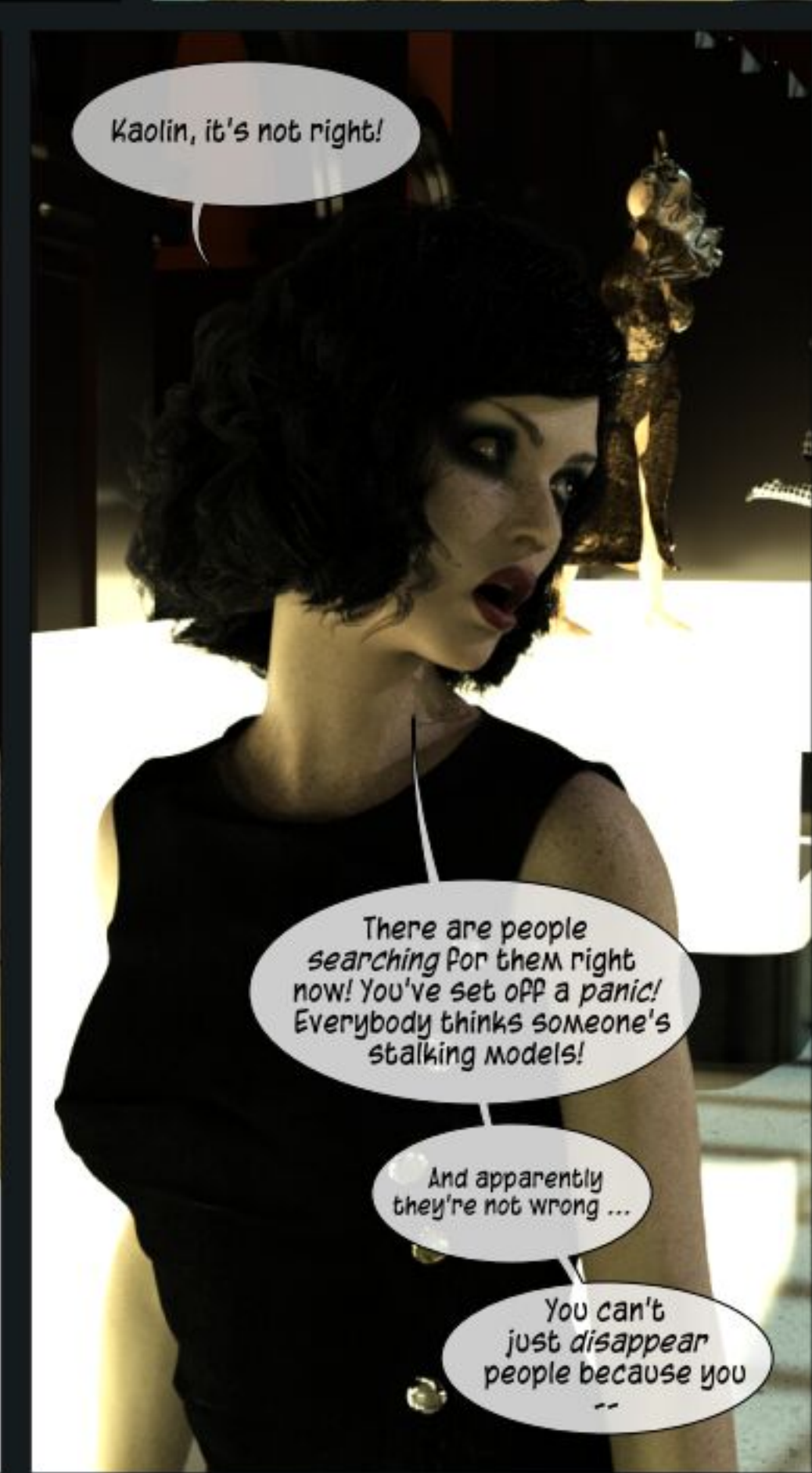
Kaolin, you didn't!



And what if I did?

They're trying to destroy me, Raven! They want to drive me out of business, just because I offend them a little bit!

It's not fair, and I think it's completely justified using them like this! They wanted to destroy my career, now they can damned well help save it!



Kaolin, it's not right!

There are people searching for them right now! You've set off a panic! Everybody thinks someone's stalking models!

And apparently they're not wrong ...

You can't just disappear people because you --



AAAARRH!!

-- hrrh --



Damn it, -- ka! -- that hurt!

You were going to leave! You were going to leave and go tell people!

Kaolin ... you can't do this.

Why don't you just turn them back? We can find a way to recover ... there's got to be a way ...



You know, I don't trust anybody else anymore ...

... but I thought you, at least, would understand.



TWO DAYS LATER
GAJA LANDS, THE YARDS.



I had a dream about
you last night.



A good one, or
a bad one?

A true one.

I think.

Tasa would
like to speak
with you.



Understand, there is
no choice here that doesn't
change you.

Unless your choice is
to make no choice, and I don't
think you came here just to
walk away.

If you want to be rid of
the visions, we can help you shut
out those parts of your mind. But in
doing so, you'll also have to shut out
many other parts. You won't be
the same person.

If you want to learn to
handle the visions -- to become a
seer -- we can teach you. But we
don't teach outsiders, so, for a time
at least, you must adapt to our
ways ... and after that, you
won't be the same person.

I ...
I don't think trying to
turn off my brain is the
right answer.
Do you?

There isn't a right answer.
And the decision has to be yours only.

But, yes, I think you'd be
unhappy with that choice. You'd need to
shut down many of the things that make
you interesting. Dreams are
inseparable from imagination.

However, the other
path means you will
have to adapt.



I think ... it
sounds like you
consider that a lot
more of an obstacle
than I do ...

I mean, I
already was
prepared to live
among you if I
needed to.

You don't seem like you
bite, or anything.
What am I missing here?



Oh.

You mean
really adapt.



This is going to take
some getting used to.

THE SCHOLZ ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.

ARIANNA, LADY SCHOLZ, HAS UNDISPUTED CONTROL OF BOTH HER OWN ESTATE AND THE VACATED/CONQUERED DELP ESTATE. LORD DELP IS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND AND NEITHER IS MOTHER CORVEN OF THE ORDER OF VISION. VICTORY WAS TOTAL.

YOU'D THINK ARIANNA WOULD BE HAPPY WITH THE SITUATION, WOULDN'T YOU?

WELL, YOU'D BE WRONG.

Where the
FUCK
is he?

Milady,
I've finished the
designs for the
soldiers --

Ivy! That's
not important
right now.

Don't you
hear me
ranting? We've
got other things
to think about
first.

You said
that making a
stronger force
was our first
priority.

That was
before we
couldn't find
Brendan!

What good's an
attack force if we don't know
where the person we want to
attack is?

And if you
did defeat him, a lot of
Highpoint would probably
disappear.

Attacking
Brendan isn't a good idea
anyway, Milady. You can't defeat
him. He'll flee first, and then
delete your holdings.

You know, I let you be my
assistant because you were the
one person out of your group of
devout idiots who seemed to
have a grasp of tactics.

I don't have to
defeat Brendan. I just
need to hit him hard
enough to distract him. Only
for a few seconds. That's all I
need. Then I turn him into
something that can't talk or
move or recall, and I lock him
in a box somewhere. I've
got a special hat ready
for him.

He'll still be in
Highpoint, he'll still be
alive, it won't affect
anybody's property ... and I'll
be in charge of the whole place,
whether everyone else
knows it yet or not.

But first I have
to find him!
You're sure all the spies
have reported in?

Yes,
Milady, though I
remind you again that
we didn't infiltrate
Bonisova --

And I'll remind
you that Bonisova
wasn't worth the trouble.
Highpoint's charity case, hiding
up in the mountains with the
men he keeps around as his
harem ... Brendan wouldn't
go there in a million
years.

And don't
get sarcastic
with me, Ivy. You
want me to lock up
your button
again?

No,
Milady.

There's
always the
possibility he's not in
Highpoint ...

Word is he hasn't left
Highpoint except when
absolutely needed, for an hour
or two at most, for years. He
hates the other zones. And
they hate him.

Then I
propose
another
approach.

You were
eventually going to
have to take on the
other estates anyway.
Proceed with that. It will
attract Brendan's
attention, and he'll have
to come intervene.

HMM.

... Ivy, I apologize.
You do understand
tactics.

All right, let's see these
new designs of yours.

SERENITY.

-- Sigh --

Why, that looks
almost like remorse!

Or do you
just have a
headache from
your brain cells
vitriPying?

Y'know, I kinda feel like I
had a prior claim on the whole
harlequin schtick.

I may have to sue you.

What the --?

Who the hell
are you?

Me?

I'm a
conundrum.

ASTUTE READERS SPOTTED CONUNDRUM'S SILHOUETTE, WATCHING BOTH EMMY AND RAVEN ARRIVE AT KAOLIN'S SHOWROOM.

Fun's fun, but
every party has to
end sometime.

Eventually
you run out of
cocktail weenies and
little paper
umbrellas.

Huh?

If I thought
you were going to
have your show and
then turn them back,
that'd be different, but
you can't now, can you?
You're in way too
deep.

It's time to quit while
you're behind. I hate to
shatter your dream, but
that's the breaks.

And you think
you're going to
make me?

All I have to do is --

I wouldn't.

You're not big on
self-awareness, are you?

And here I thought
everybody in Fashion spent
a lot of time looking in mirrors.
That'll teach me.

Sometimes, when
you do things like this,
they leak.

You really haven't
noticed?

Been having a
little trouble moving? A bit
stiff in the joints? Seen your
nipples recently? Have you tried
to change your high-pine hairdo
in the last couple of days?
No?

Your best bet is to undo
all of this right now. If you
can. Maybe that'll fix you too,
before you're just like all your
models here.



CENTURY.





NEXT: I , BOT