



Whoa!

Careful on those turns, Dasher! We just lost some payload!

... Ah, well.

Ho ho ho!!

Tinseltop's True Tales of Transformation



I can't believe this.

Noelle, where have you been? The greenscreen tech isn't here yet, one of the photographers can't make it, and your techbro hasn't shown up to hand out gifts ...

Damn you, Ethan Casaba! What kind of businessman just breaks a promise like that?

What do I tell everybody? What do I tell the kids? "Sorry, no presents, Santa blew us off. He decided to go to Aruba instead."

Uh ... yeah. Revi ... about the gifts ...

Oh, the gifts are fine ... no thanks to the delivery people. They just dropped it all outside! In this neighborhood! We're lucky none of it got stolen ...

I'll say this for your dude, he took your list of kids and really ran with it. Every single package is tagged by name.

... I didn't give him a list.

Huh ... well, they're definitely ...

Uh ... Casaba can't make it. And I need to run the line for the sleigh photos. You're going to have to be Santa's elf, Revi. Evie can't talk to kids as well as you can. Tell them one of his reindeer got a cold or something.

And we're going to hope no one went to this much trouble to make trouble.



AND SO ...

Where are the reindeer?

They're invisible right now! But you'll see them in the photo.

I swear Evie has pulled more packages out of that bag than it could have held ... but everyone likes their gifts and there's no bombs or anthrax or anything ...

A FEW HOURS LATER.

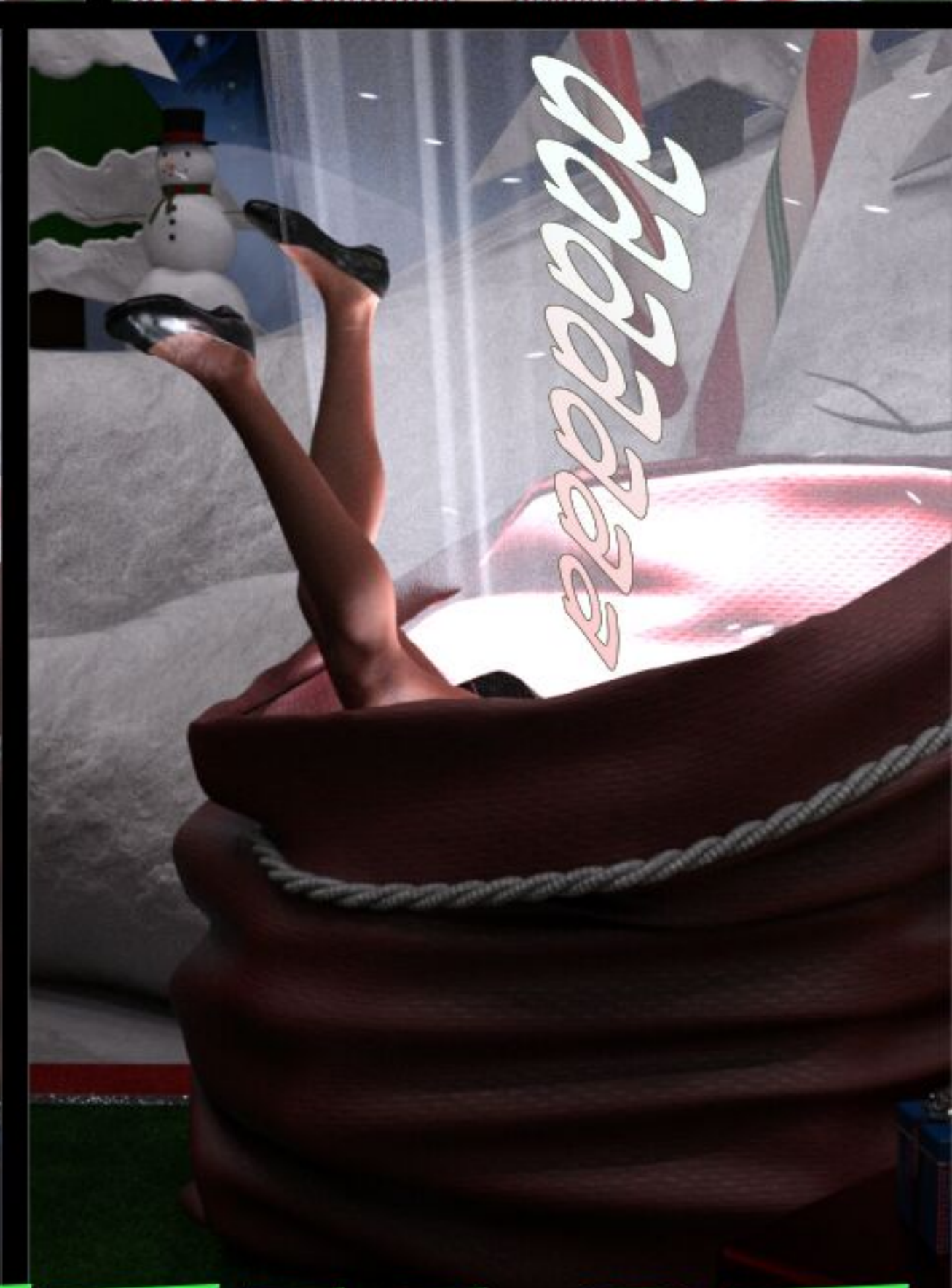
We did it!

Another Christmas in the City accomplished! Five hundred kids with gifts and photos and full stomachs. Almost like we know what we're doing.

I say we get a drink.

Definitely.

Damn it, where did it come from?



No way it's Casaba. His people made it sound like he didn't even remember he agreed to sponsor ...

... Hey, there's something weird about the bottom of this bag ...

It's kind of whoaaaaaa

ELF DEFENSE

Story and Images by Trilby



... and that's the final version for the naughty list.

Even if they decide to suddenly make nice, they don't have enough time now to undo the past year's mischief.

So that's it for the night, then?

Unless something goes wrong, that's it for the year.

Gotta tie up all this other stuff so everyone can focus on getting ready for the big ride.

I know. I'm surprised they don't ask us all to come work in the shop for a week.



Wouldn't need to, not this year. Everything's on quota and on time.

Should be nice and smooth. Knock wood.

You go on, Goldbright. I'll take the lists to the boss and close up.



PRIVATE



You know, if the boss catches you in here, he'll be peeved.



It was a waste of time anyway. I can't make the thing work right. It won't focus.

You're the queen of gadgets, Eyebrass ... have you got something that'd let me look in on someone?

You're looking for someone specific? Who?



A friend. From ... before.

I know it sounds weird, but I keep feeling like I'm getting ... messages, I guess. That something bad's happening. To her.

Well, we pick up all kinds of signals. That's one reason we're based where we are. Atmospheric anomalies.

But, ah ... were the two of you really close, then?

We weren't really close. We were friends. We worked on projects together.

I didn't have anybody who was really close. That's one reason I just decided to stay up here. There didn't feel like much reason to go back.



But she was a friend, and even if it's crazy, I'm worried about her.

I wish I could go check on her.

So go check on her! It's not forbidden, it's just we elves don't usually have any reason to go down.

You're pretty much done with your rush for the year anyway, right?

Hmm. There'd be a transportation problem ...

Oh, good point. The boss only lets someone use one of the reindeer in emergencies, especially this close to the day ...



Oh, wait! I know exactly what you want!

And I've barely even gotten to use it!

I'll take you down. I don't really have any work until next year either, unless something explodes.

This'll be fun!



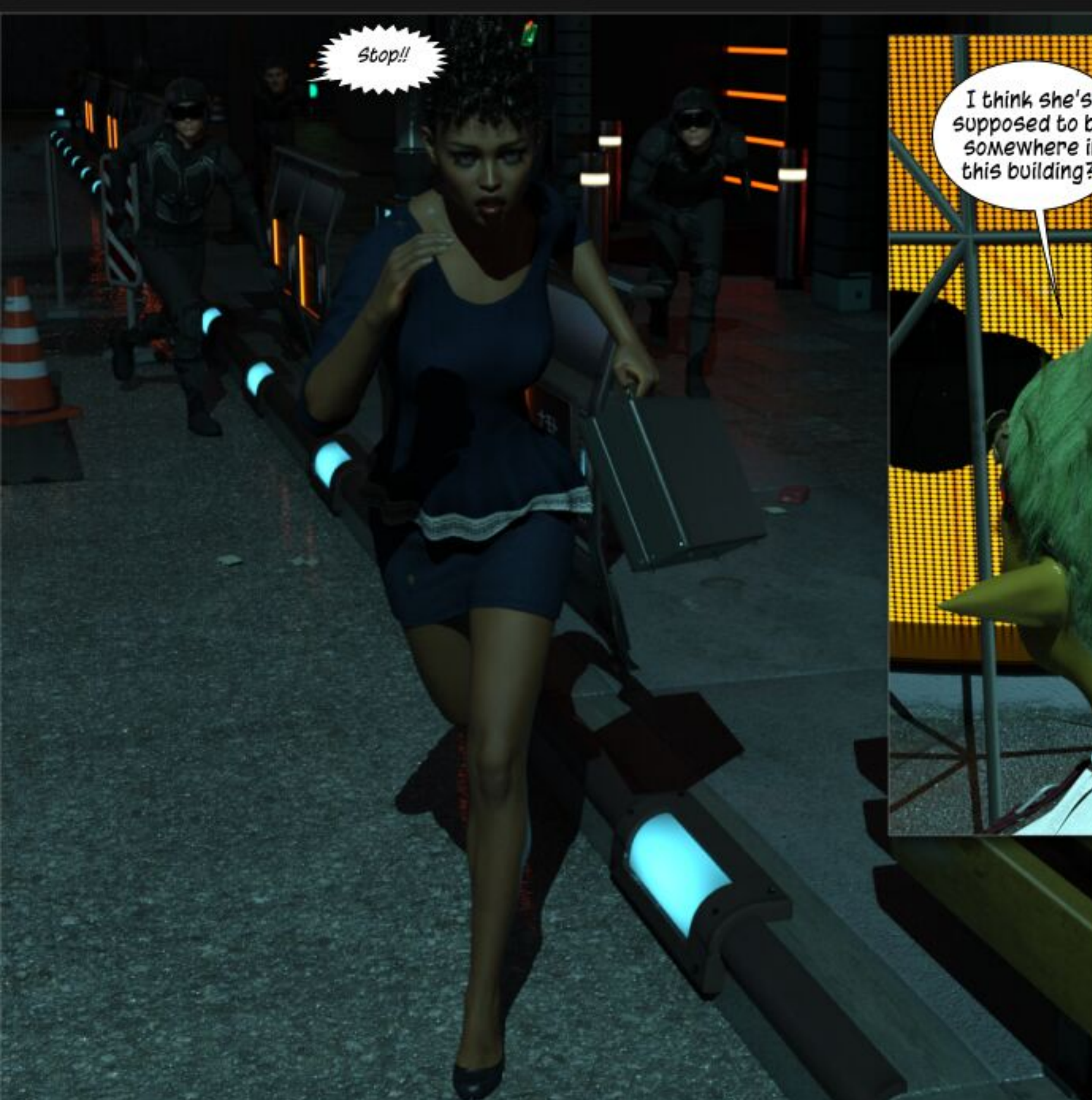
Well ... it's less scary than riding a reindeer.

They tried to get me to do that once. Didn't go well.

I agree, but I usually can't convince anybody else up there.



The boss loves technology, but he doesn't really understand any of it.





OK, you're done. Hand over the briefcase and come with us.

Back off!!



oorg!

RAAAA!



Noelle!?

Yeah.

Explain later.

Noelle, they've got guns!



Damn right.

Casaba wants to talk to her, but you we can just shoot.

NO!



... huh?

hee hee hee



Guess your guns got nerfed!

Decisive victory! your squad has been eliminated!

I don't know where you came from, you little freak, but I'm gonna ram that cannon up your--

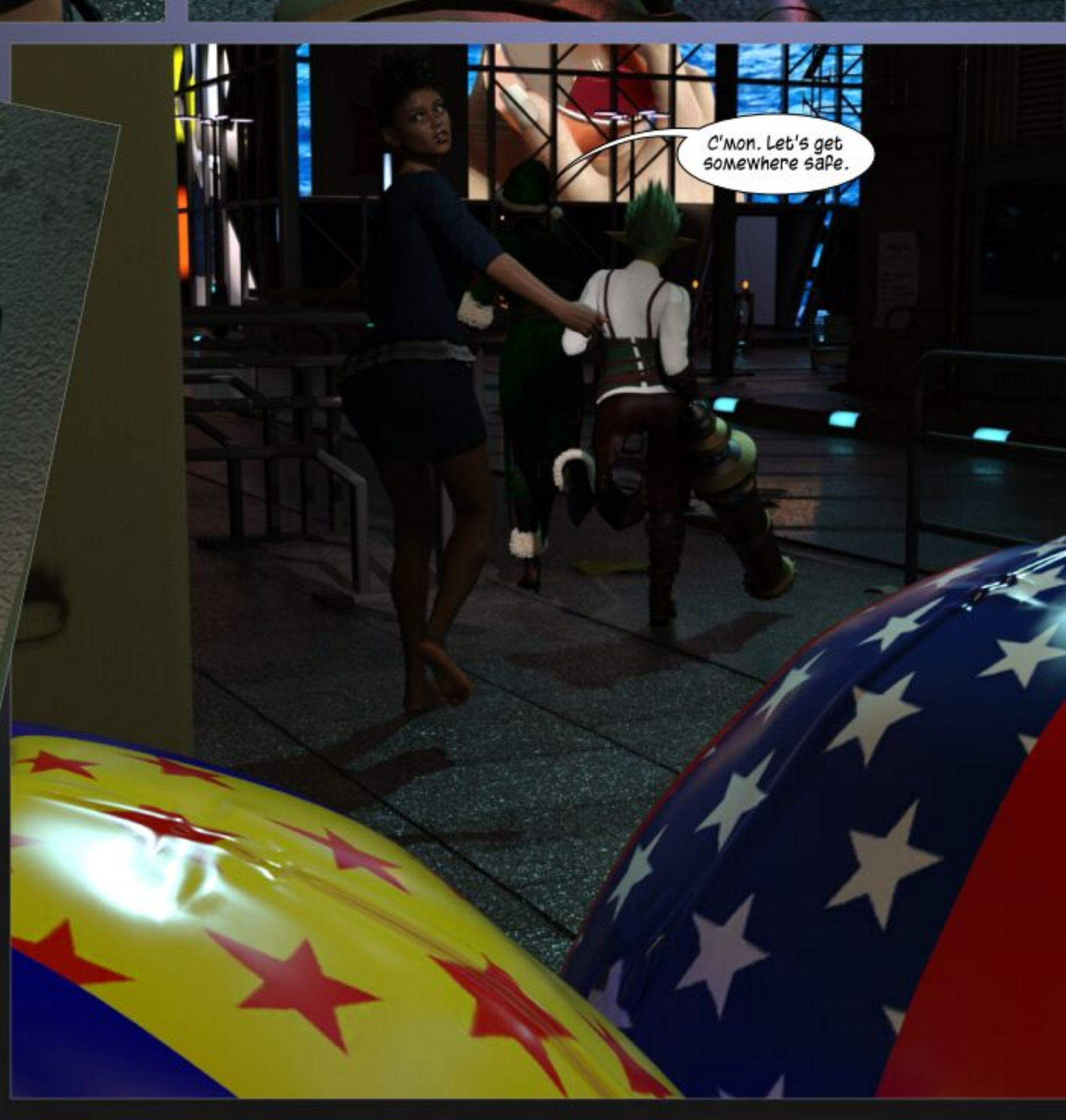


AAAA!



They get knocked down, but they get up again! -- giggle --

Fun for all ages!



C'mon. Let's get somewhere safe.



Nice place.

You must be doing well for yourself. Whatever it is you're doing.

I don't live here.

And I don't have any money.

Eyebrass arranged this. I don't know how. I don't ask how she does things. Maybe someone owed her a favor.

That man mentioned "Casaba." Are you working for Ethan Casaba?

Well, I was until an hour ago. Don't change the subject.

There was a subject?



Noelle, where have you been? What happened to you?

You disappeared that night and no one could find you ... it's been five years! I thought you were dead! And now you show up suddenly, dressed like a leftover from a Christmas special, with a weird little green woman ...

I'll tell you, but you're not going to believe me.

These are my work clothes. I work for Santa Claus. Eyebrass is a Christmas elf. She works for him too.

That bag of presents didn't come from Casaba. He wretched. The bag was an accident. It fell off Santa's sleigh.

The bags have some kind of portal in them. So they can get refilled in the course of the night. I fell into the portal and came out at Santa's workshop.



... riiiiight.

Told you you wouldn't believe it.

Anyway, I'm good at keeping track of things and scheduling and so on, and they really did need some help in logistics ... so I just decided not to come back.

I mean, I didn't have anything down here ... didn't like what I was doing ... no family left, no relationships, no close friends ...

What??



I had the police looking for you! I could barely sleep for months, wondering about you!

We worked together on Christmas in the City for three years! I was always asking you to do things with me, go have a drink or dinner or go do something together ...

At first I thought you just weren't very social, and then I figured you weren't interested in a relationship ... and now it sounds like you decided to walk out on all your friends and everything because you were just clueless??

That hurts, Noelle!



Ooh, this could be really bad! Maybe. Probably.

What could, Eyebrass?

What that Casaba person is doing. The data that your friend took. I've been going over the tech specs.

You understood all that stuff?

Oh, sure! Simple. But very clever.

These implant things, they're just receivers. The important bit is the protocol. Instructions not just for the body, but the brain. You can change somebody completely with it. Personality, everything. And the implants are constantly receiving instructions.

"The people who have implants are probably already changing a lot. I wonder if they notice?"



Posing, huh? Hot!

Not Punny.

Aw, OK, What's wrong?

-- sigh --



What do you think? My body's doing all kinds of weird things lately. I'm losing muscle ... my waist's changed ... my pecs have gone completely nuts ...



"Pecs." Donny, you can't call them pecs anymore. Face it. They're breasts. You're growing breasts.

That, and all the other changes ... you know perfectly well what's happening, you just don't want to admit it.

I told you not to get that BodyX thing.

It's supposed to make me better! Why would it turn me into a woman?



Sometimes I really don't know why I stay with you. Especially when you say things like that.

Or when you won't shake off this Ethan Casaba cult you're in.

It's not a cult. The man's a genius.

He's a swindler.

By the way, your dick's been getting smaller too.

Don't remind me.



'Course, if you're going to go all the way, I guess that could be fun ... they're really cute on you--

--unhh-- Don't!



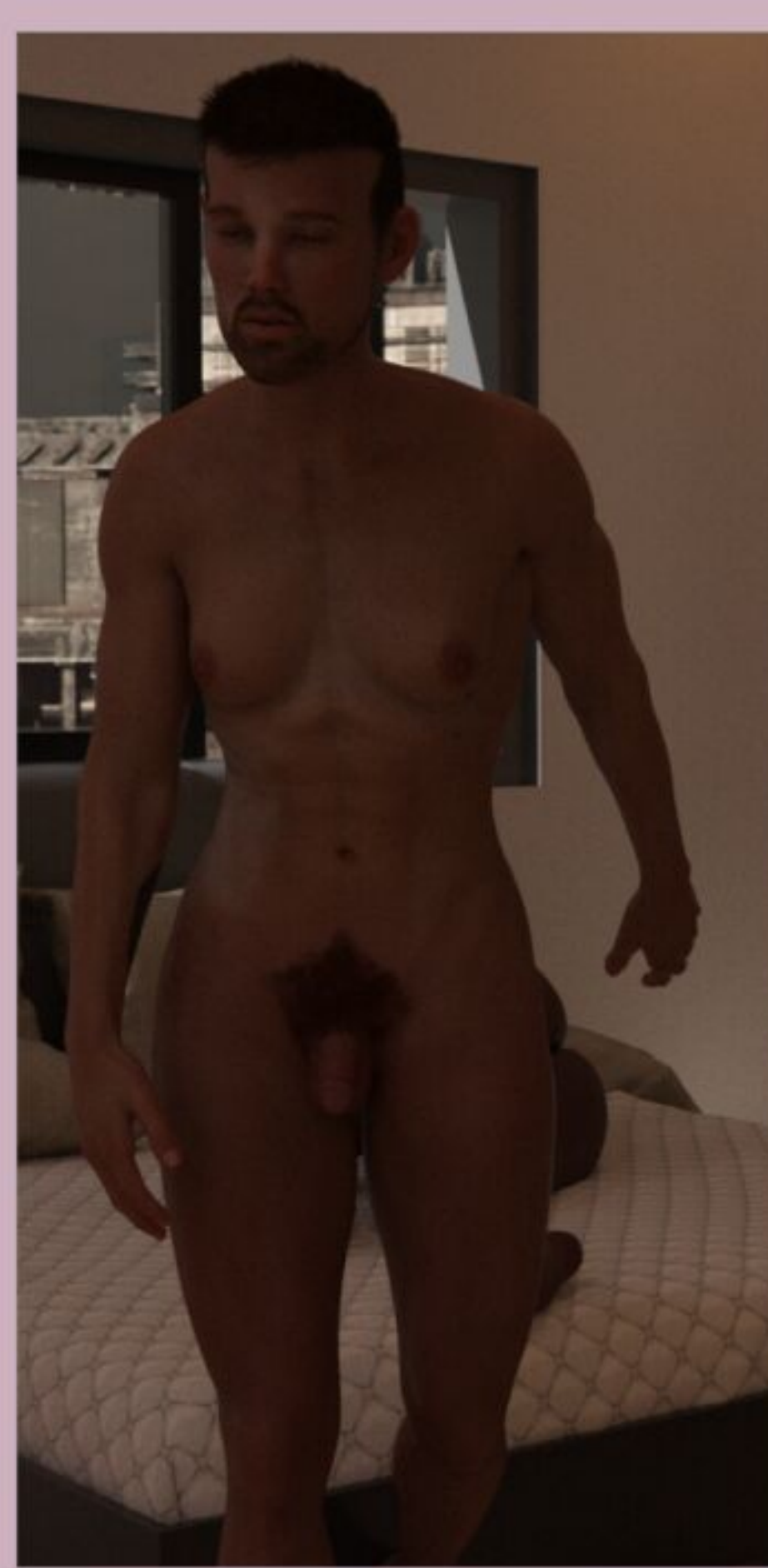
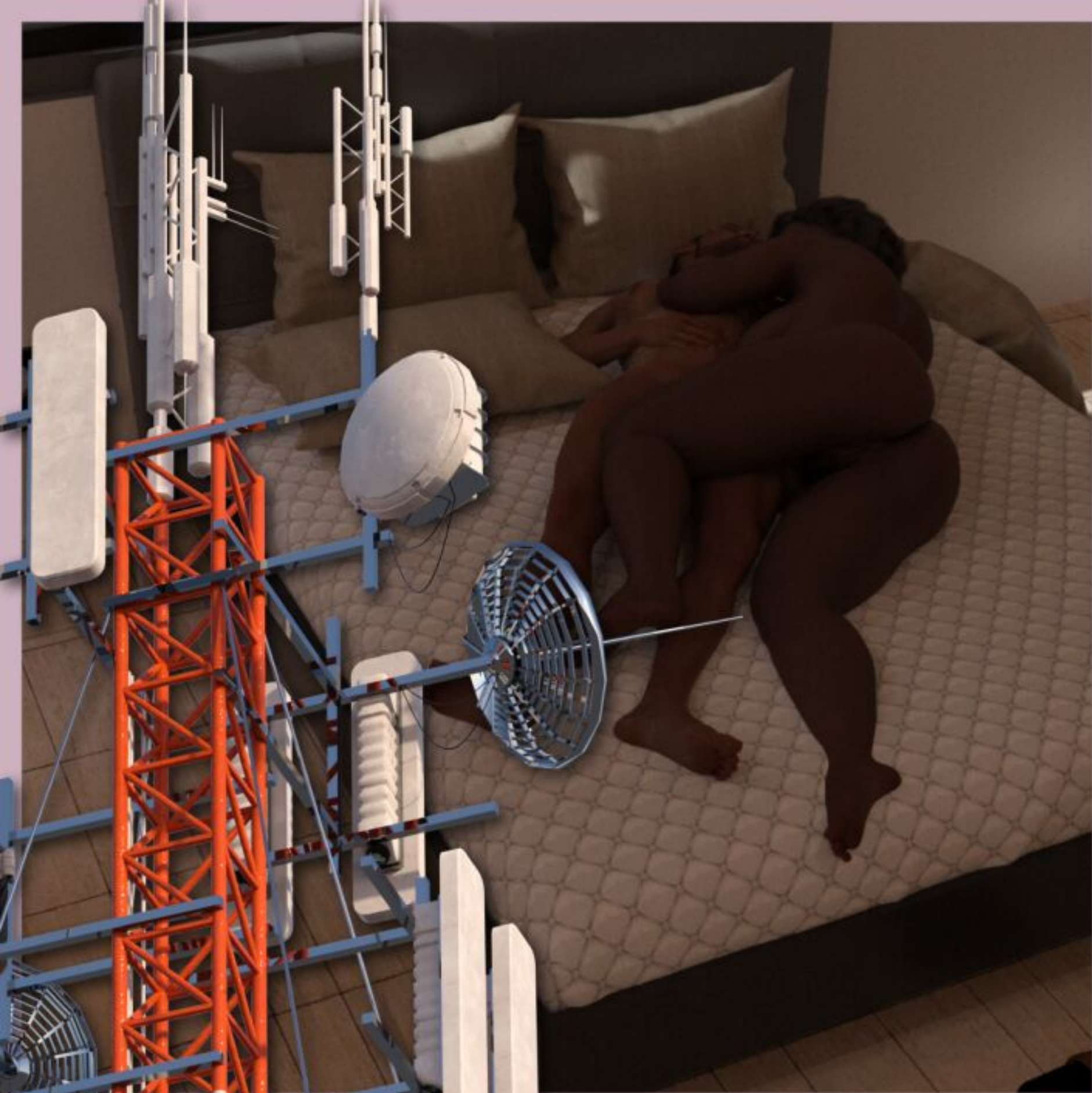
Ooh, are they sensitive? Have you been noticing when they rub against your shirt?

What happens when I -- Mmmm -- do this?

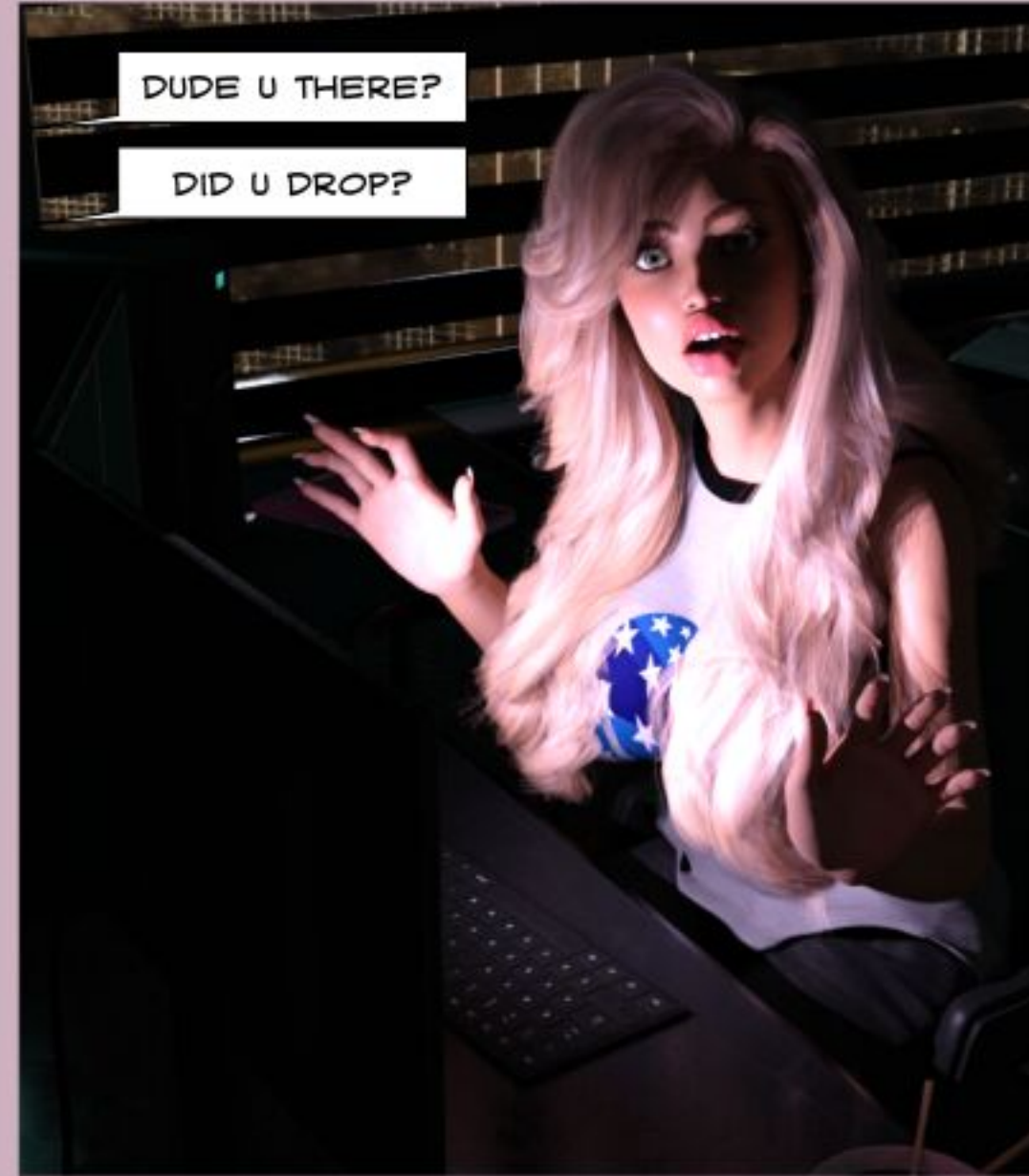
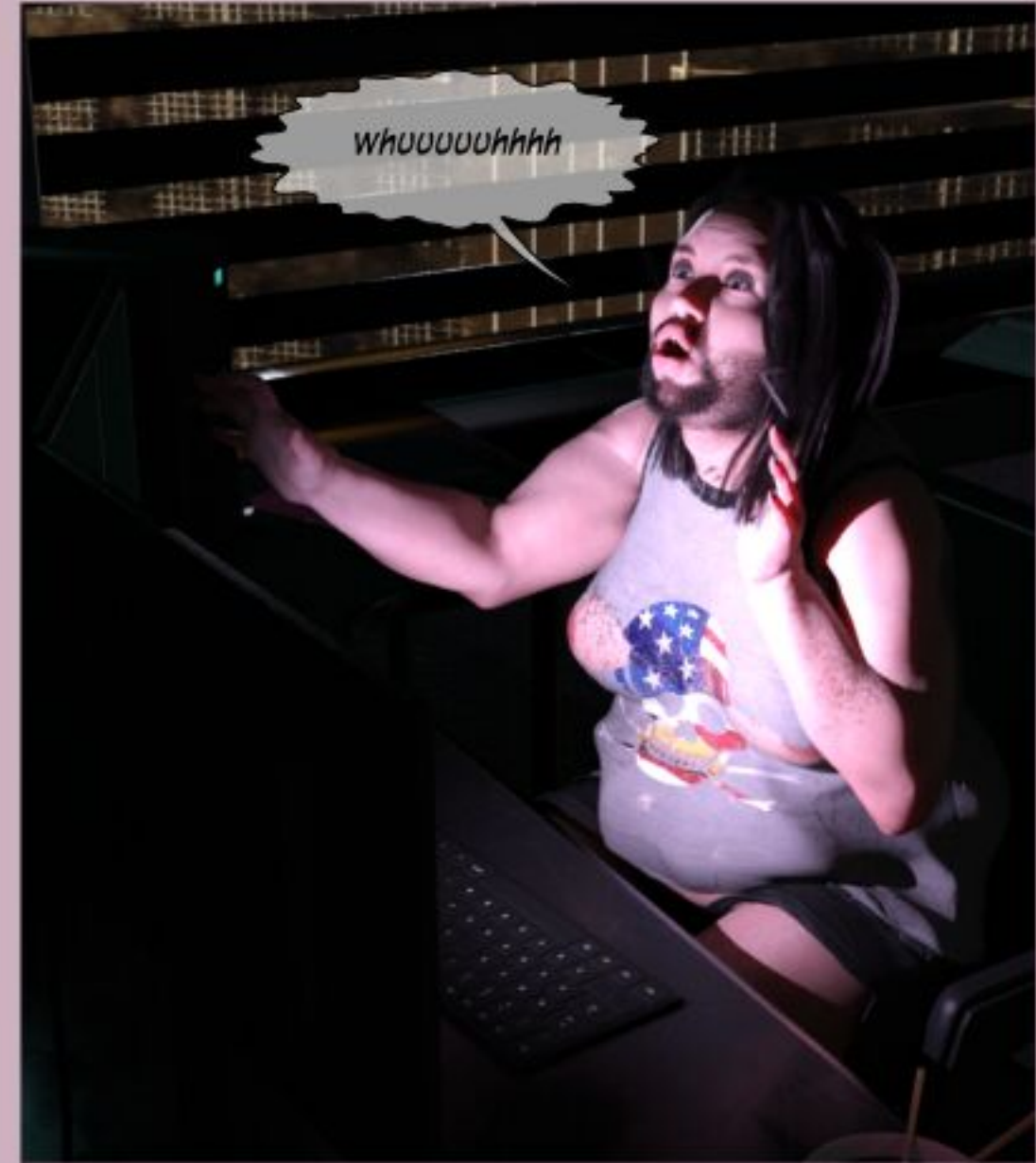
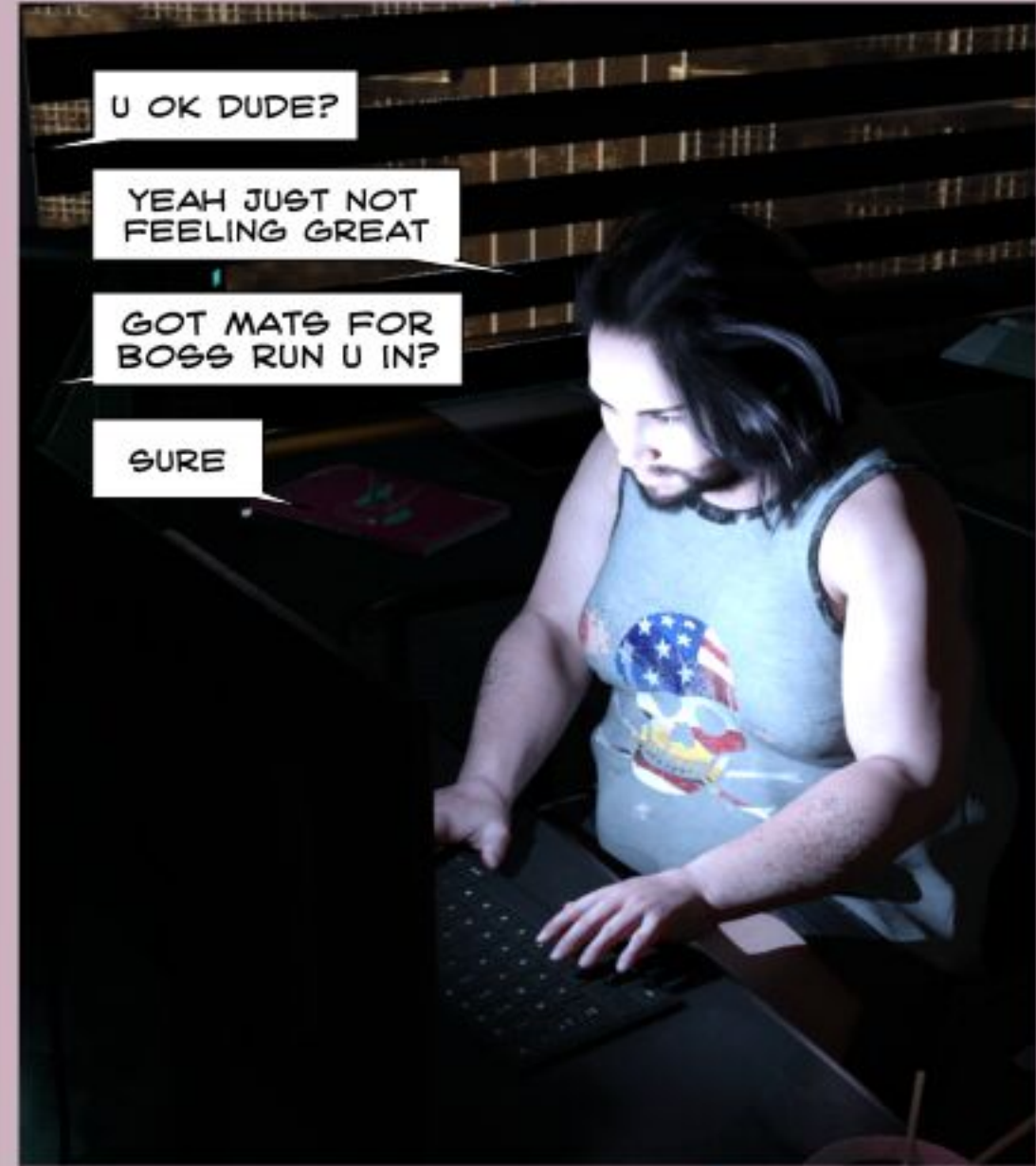
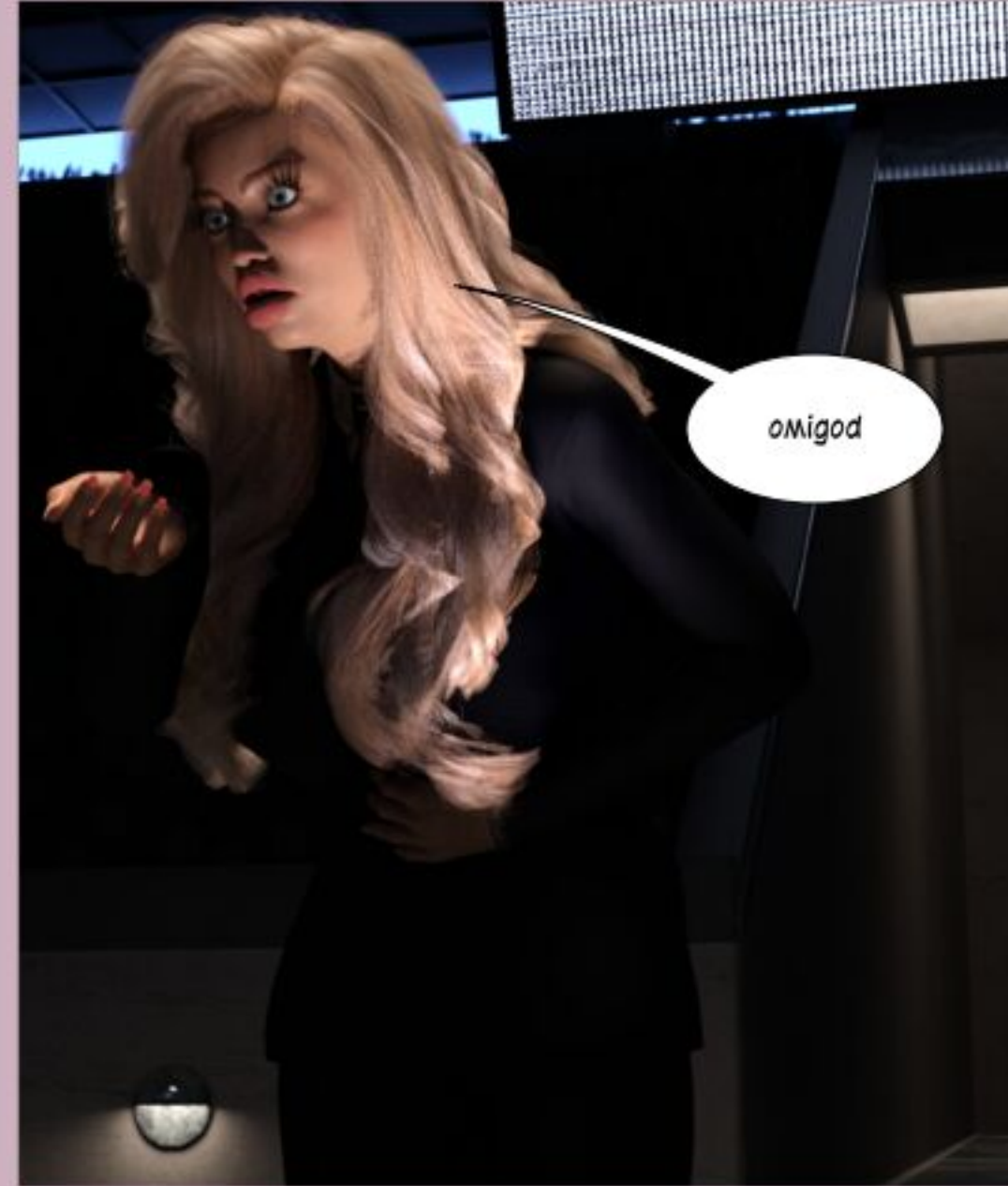
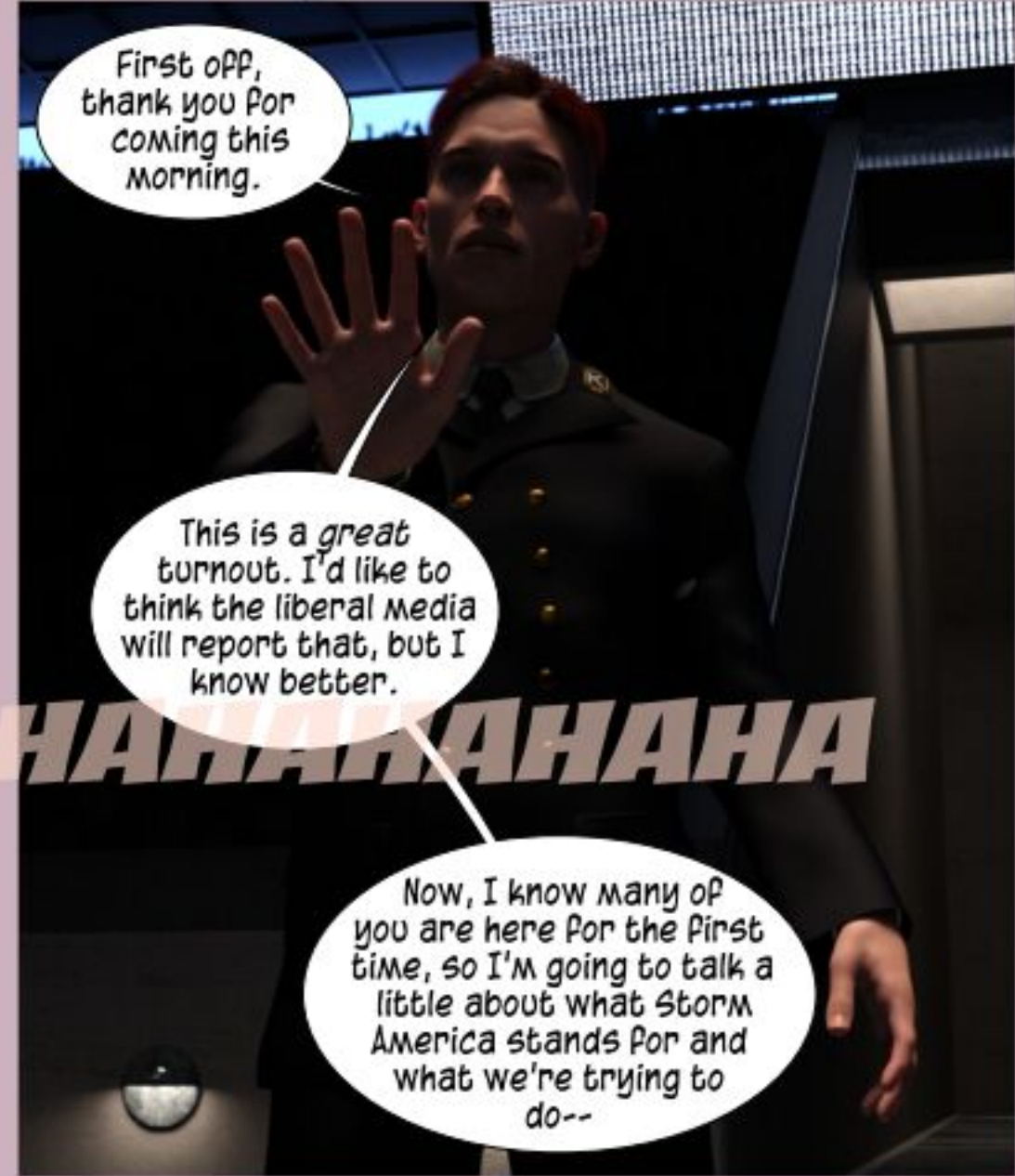
--oouhhh!--

Oh, this is gonna be fun.





CASABA'S NEW INSTRUCTION SET GETS BROADCAST ALL OVER THE AREA. THE RESULTS ARE IMMEDIATE ...





I'm sorry about the outfit. All we had on board was Eyebrass' engine-repairing clothes.

It's all right. Better than trying to go do whatever it is we're doing in that dress.

And it wasn't like I could go home for a change of clothes ...



Noelle, why did I do this? What was I thinking?

I can't go back to my apartment! He knows my address! He's probably got goons watching it already!

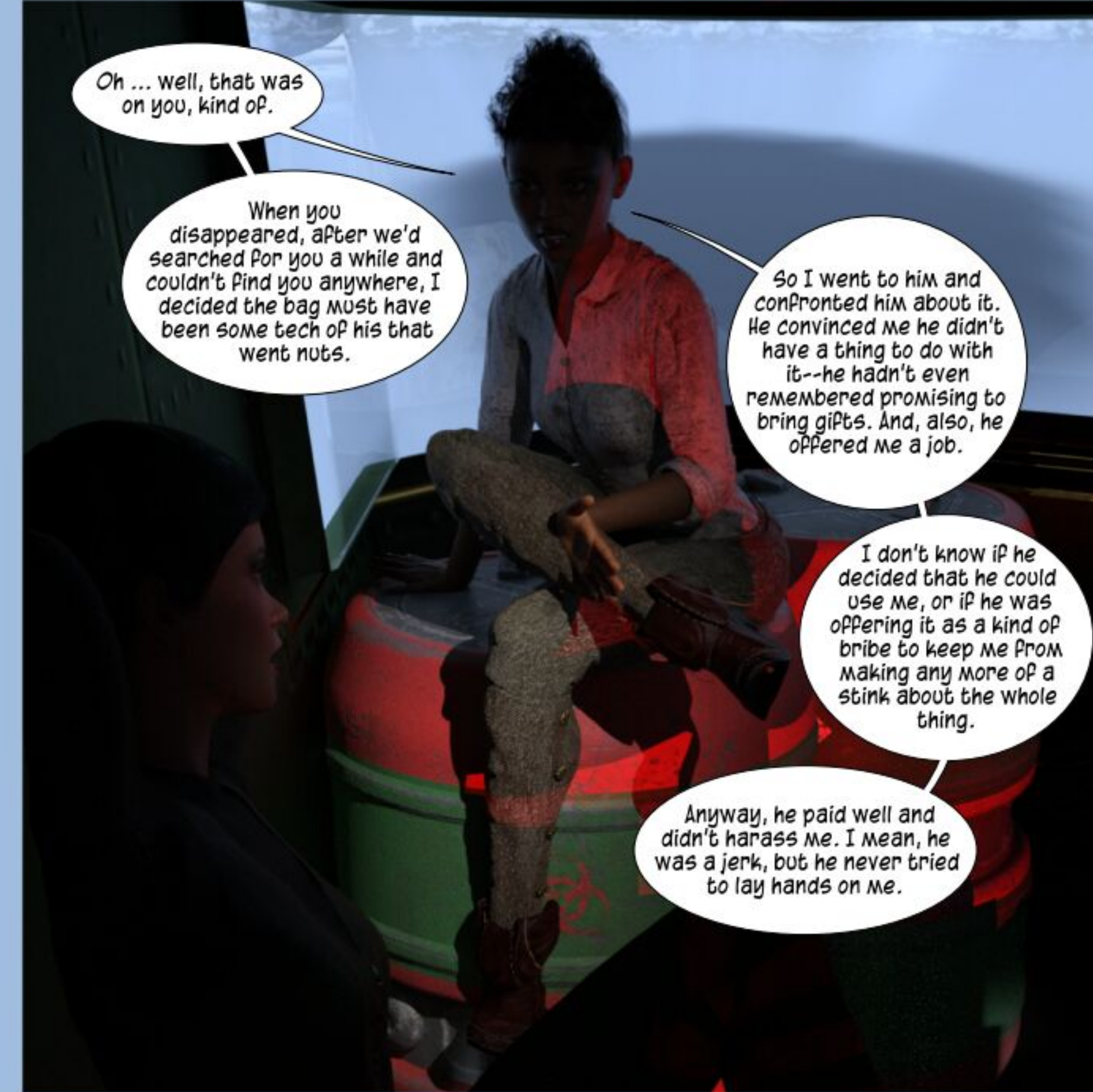
He's going to keep after me forever! I'm not going to have anywhere to hide! My life is ruined!



We'll figure it out. There's got to be something we can do about that asshole.

I'm not going to abandon you a second time, Revi. I promise.

How did you get tangled up with him in the first place?



Oh ... well, that was on you, kind of.

When you disappeared, after we'd searched for you a while and couldn't find you anywhere, I decided the bag must have been some tech of his that went nuts.

So I went to him and confronted him about it. He convinced me he didn't have a thing to do with it--he hadn't even remembered promising to bring gifts. And, also, he offered me a job.

I don't know if he decided that he could use me, or if he was offering it as a kind of bribe to keep me from making any more of a stink about the whole thing.

Anyway, he paid well and didn't harass me. I mean, he was a jerk, but he never tried to lay hands on me.



Noelle, this is all real, isn't it? I'm really flying in some kind of steampunk blimp being driven by an elf?

You really do work for Santa Claus?

We usually just call him "the boss."

How do you deal with the weirdness level of all this?

You get used to it. The first year was pretty disorienting.

"Piloted." You drive cars.

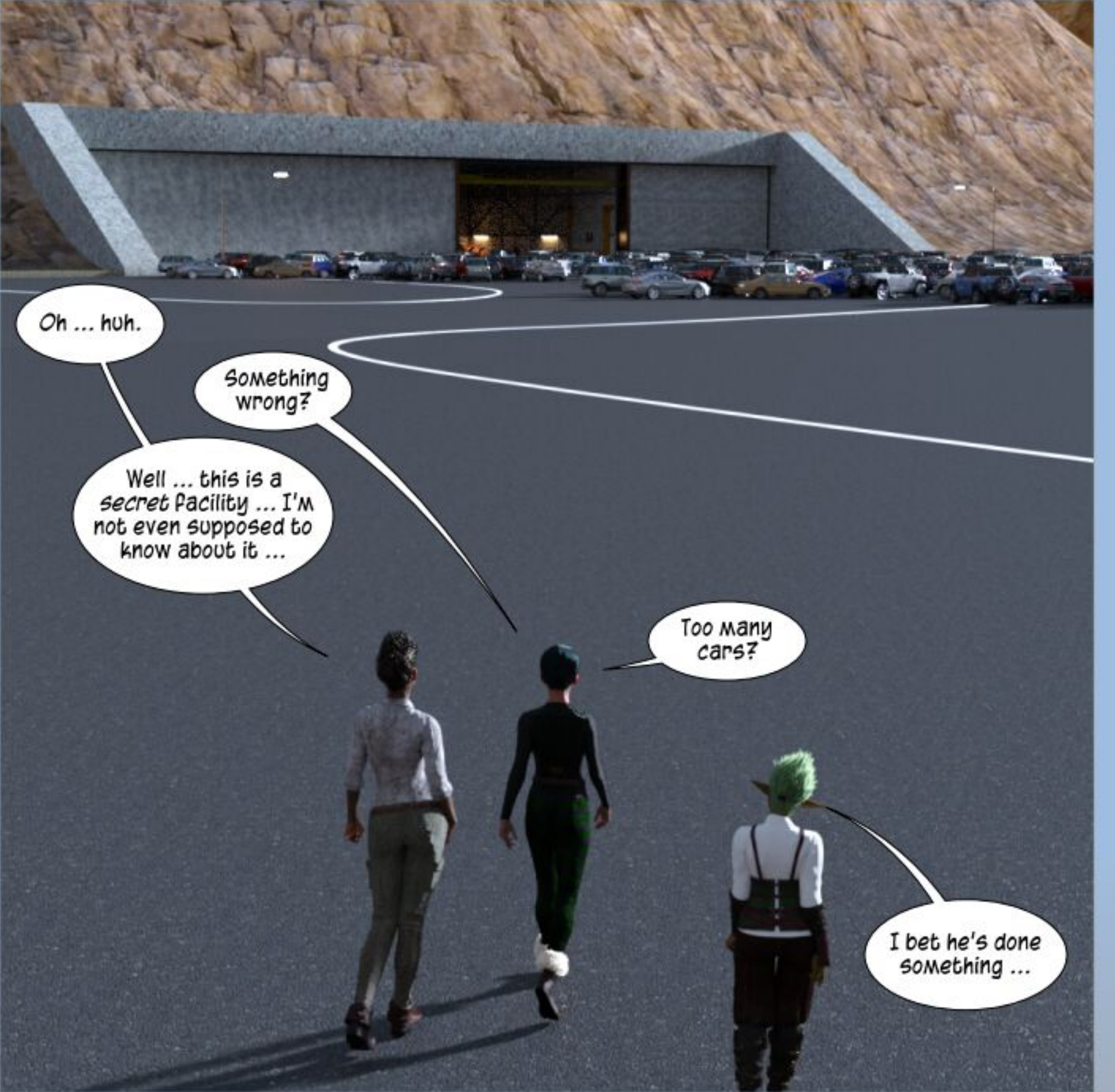
And it's a zeppelin, not a blimp.

Get ready, we're making our descent.



Is this gonna be OK? Got a car alarm for it or something?

Nobody will see it unless they're looking for it.



Oh ... huh.

Something wrong?

Well ... this is a secret facility ... I'm not even supposed to know about it ...

Too many cars?

I bet he's done something ...



Oh, shit. We're too late, aren't we?

Maybe not. Look down there at the end. They're going to one room, changing clothes it looks like, then heading to another.

I think we can get through these other rooms to have a look without anybody seeing us.



Your new clothing is over there

Leave your old things behind

When you've changed, go to the room across the hall



Please come up and take a headset

We must wear these so we can communicate at all times

It's what Ethan wants

Ethan needs me

For Ethan



We may even get messages from Ethan himself

ooh



At least they're not paying a lot of attention ...

They're focused on their instructions, I guess. Problem is, she's not saying what those instructions are.

If I've got the layout right, that door has to go to one of the big rooms. The one we came in through had a control booth ...



Whoa.

There are a lot of them. What are those things lined up over there?

Probably something we don't like.

One of them is giving a speech or something, but I can't hear it.



I bet we can hear it with these.

They were here on the table ...

Noelle, no! I don't want you to turn into one of those ...

She doesn't have an implant. And I'm pretty sure the headphones are just a radio.

But if I start saying how much I love Casaba, take them off me, quick.



Each team will be issued dart guns and an implant booth

Knock people out and put them in the booth

They won't want it, but they will change their minds

This is what Ethan wants

For Ethan

For Ethan

For Ethan

For Ethan

For Ethan

For Ethan

For Ethan

For Ethan



So?

They're going to wander around the city shooting people with darts and dragging them into those booths to get implants.

Oh. Well, that seems bad.

Yes. Very naughty. Let's see what we can do about it.



kiss me

we want you

oh, Ethan

-- ahem --



Hogan, I'm busy, damn it!

I can see that, sir.

But we have three unauthorized people in the facility, and one of them looks like it might be Ms. Dupuy ...

Then take care of it! What do I pay you for?



Finally getting some appreciation and he has to come barging in ...

ooh, undress me, Ethan

We appreciate you, Ethan

No, undress me, Ethan



I didn't know server rooms looked like this.

I don't think they do.

They don't. This was built by someone who was more interested in whether it looked good than whether it was usable.

I wouldn't want to be the person who has to maintain these.



Especially not after what I just did.

That's going to chain a Failure. We probably want to leave. There might be a Fire. -- giggle --

Casaba's transmitter is off the air, and it'll be a long time before they get it back on again.



ooooh, Ethan

You're so

so

uuuh



You bastard! You made me Puck you!?

How could you do this?

I'm going to claw your Pucking Face off!

AAAIGH!!



Didn't change them back ...

I didn't think it would.

But it'll keep him from making new ones.

Do you think we need to destroy the booths? I've got some explosives in the ship ...



Hey, bimbos!

Are you blind? Do you not see those three intruders right over there behind you?

How about you go grab them, huh?

YIIIIII!

Hogan, you shitheel! Did you know what he was up to? I bet you did!

Beat the shit out of him!

No! Make him take us to Ethan!

And then beat the shit out of him!

Yeah!

Ooh! Better than I hoped. The Mental control's broken.

Should we still destroy the booths?

No, let's just get out of here.



Hogan!!

They've gone nuts! Get them away from me!

Fink!

Asshole!

You're going the wrong way, idiot! There's a lot more of them out here! Turn around!



You can't talk to me like that--

It we get out of this alive, you can Fire Me.

oogh!

Not even you would be stupid enough to turn off the transmitter, so I'm assuming our intruders sabotaged it. You need to get it running again, Past.

I don't know how! Ozawa did all that. Find him and make him turn it back on.

Ozawa looks just like all these others now, remember? And you think he's going to help you after you did this to him?



Back off!

AAA!

OK, then get the ones who sabotaged it! They broke it, they can fix it!

Seal all the exits! If we're lucky, they're still in here.



Uh-oh.

What?

I think they've locked us in.

Everything I have that could blow that open is out on the ship.



Well, they're on our team now, right?

Maybe they can open doors?

Worth a shot.

Hey!



It's them!

The intruders!

Stop them!!



-- hrr --
So some of them like being his pet robots? On purpose?

Stop!

Catch them!

Everybody's got a kink.

There's got to be an exit somewhere you can get open.

Probably ... just need to find it. We don't know what's over in this direction yet--



There they are!

Grab them, Hogan, before they get away again!

Oh, poot.



Get them!
Don't let them get away!

Stop!

There he is!
Get him!
Don't let him get away!

Ethan, you son of a bitch!

MEANWHILE ...



Tinseltop!!

Get in here!



What up, boss?

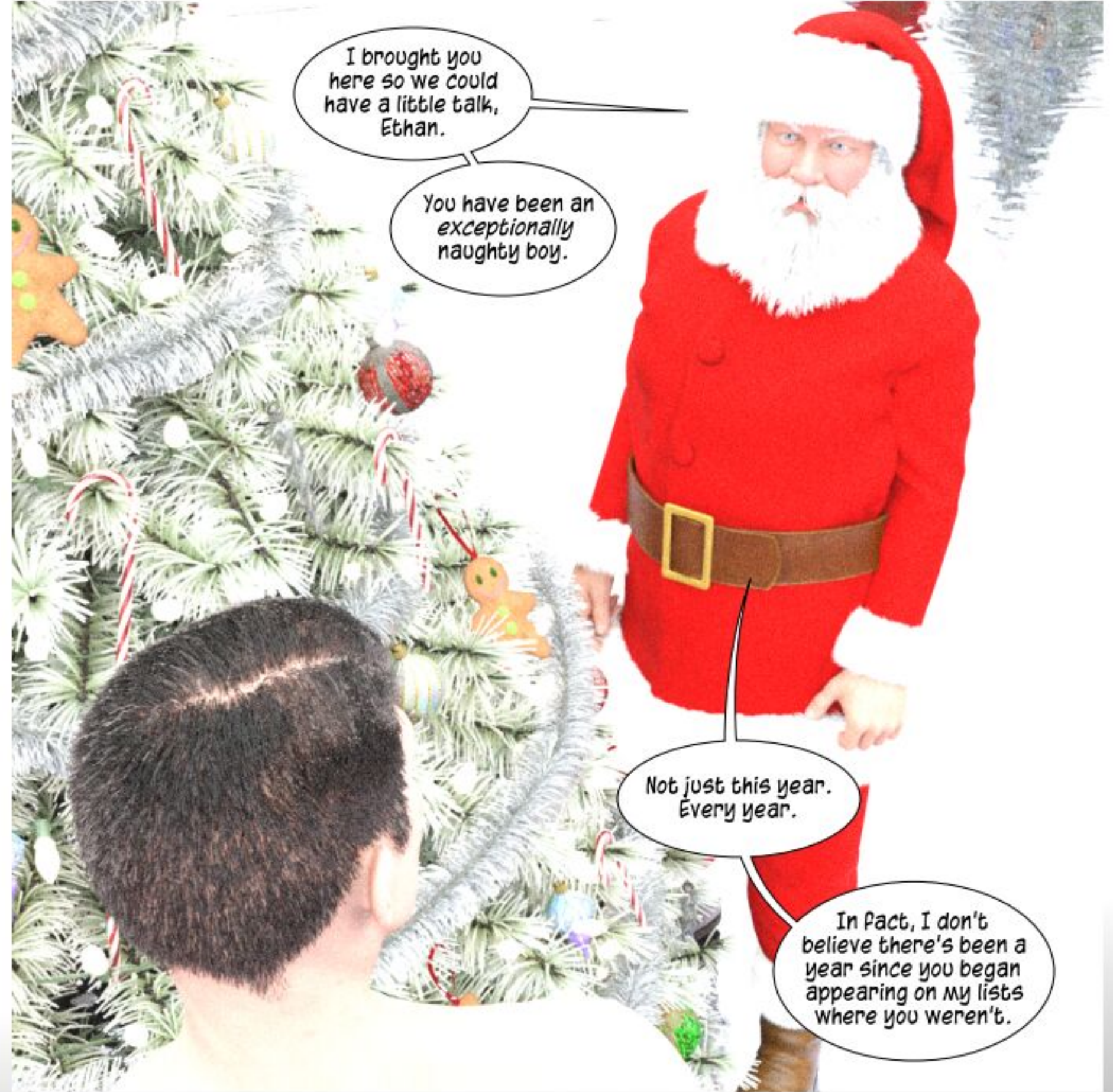
Would you care to tell me where Noelle and Eyebrass are at this moment?

Uh ... Noelle had a friend she wanted to check on, and Eyebrass took her down in that airship of hers.

They were both done for the season, so it wasn't a problem. Why?



You're probably wondering where you are.

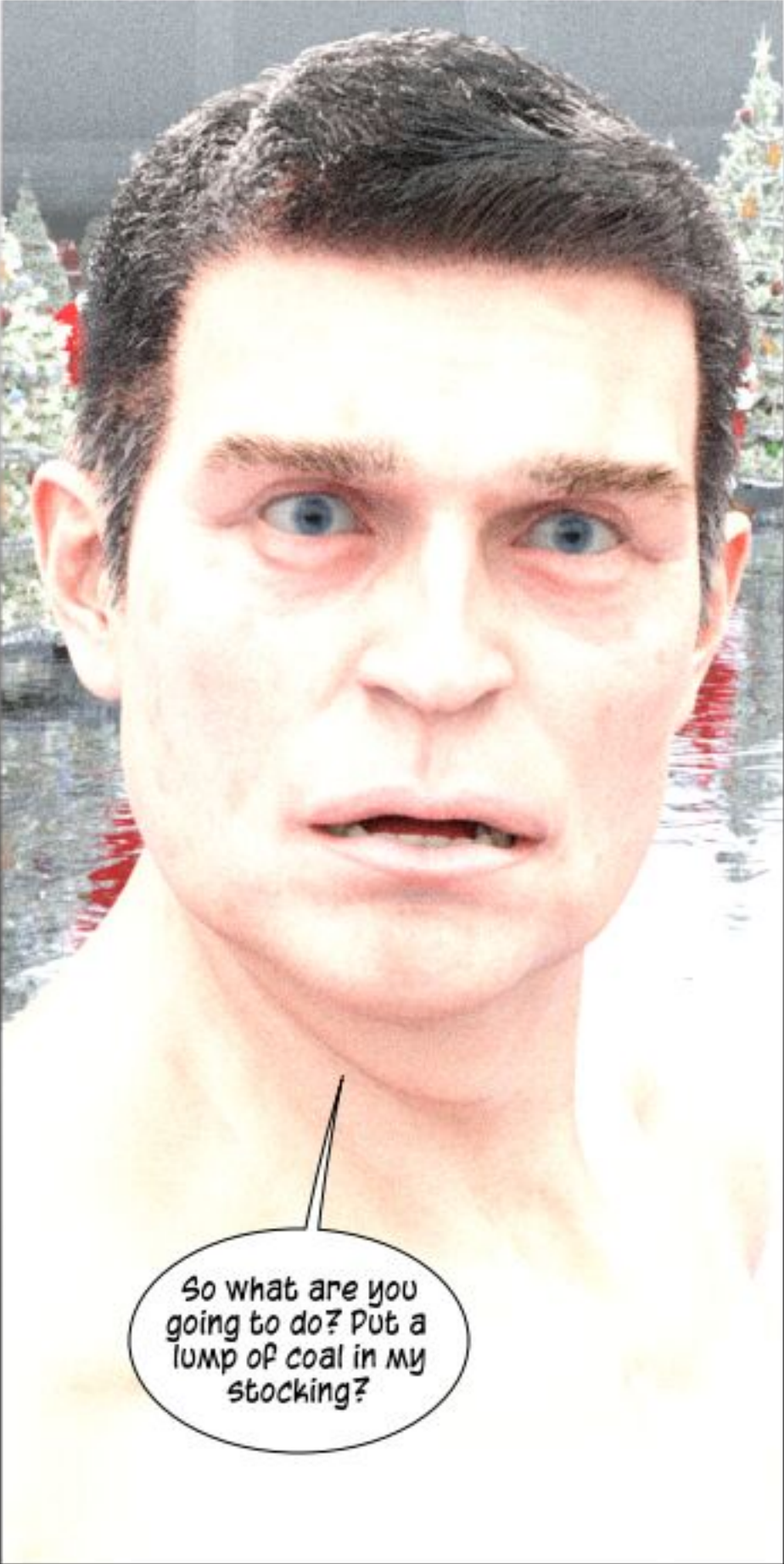


I brought you here so we could have a little talk, Ethan.

You have been an exceptionally naughty boy.

Not just this year. Every year.

In fact, I don't believe there's been a year since you began appearing on my lists where you weren't.



So what are you going to do? Put a lump of coal in my stocking?



Would that work?

No, no, you don't actually want to be nice. You never have.

I don't think there's anything I could do that would make you want to be nice.

We're past that, I'm afraid.



But I could be mistaken. It has been known to happen.

So I'll be sure to check on you in a few years. Just in case.

Wait ... In a few years? What do you mean?

What's going on? What are you doing?



You know, I still can't believe you didn't pick up any of the clues, all those years.

The Punny thing is, part of me did, I guess.

Eyebrass was surprised when I told her I had been getting ... signals. She said it happens, but it has to be someone you're very close to.

And, I mean ... it sure wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been thinking about you. Uh, pretty often.



Well, that makes two of-- Hey! You got glitter all over me!

You're the one who wouldn't let me wash off before we jumped into bed ...

The real problem's getting it out of the sheets.

You'll get used to it, though.



Uh ... that's if you're staying, of course.

Are you staying?

Am I allowed to? Have you asked him if it's OK?

Oh, goodness, no. This is the worst possible time. He's getting ready to do the big ride, and he's a mess.

I'll ask him after Christmas.

But you've got useful skills, and Eyebrass is prepared to vouch for you, and I think I can get Mrs. C to help convince him ... I'd say it's real good odds that if you want to stay, you'll be allowed.



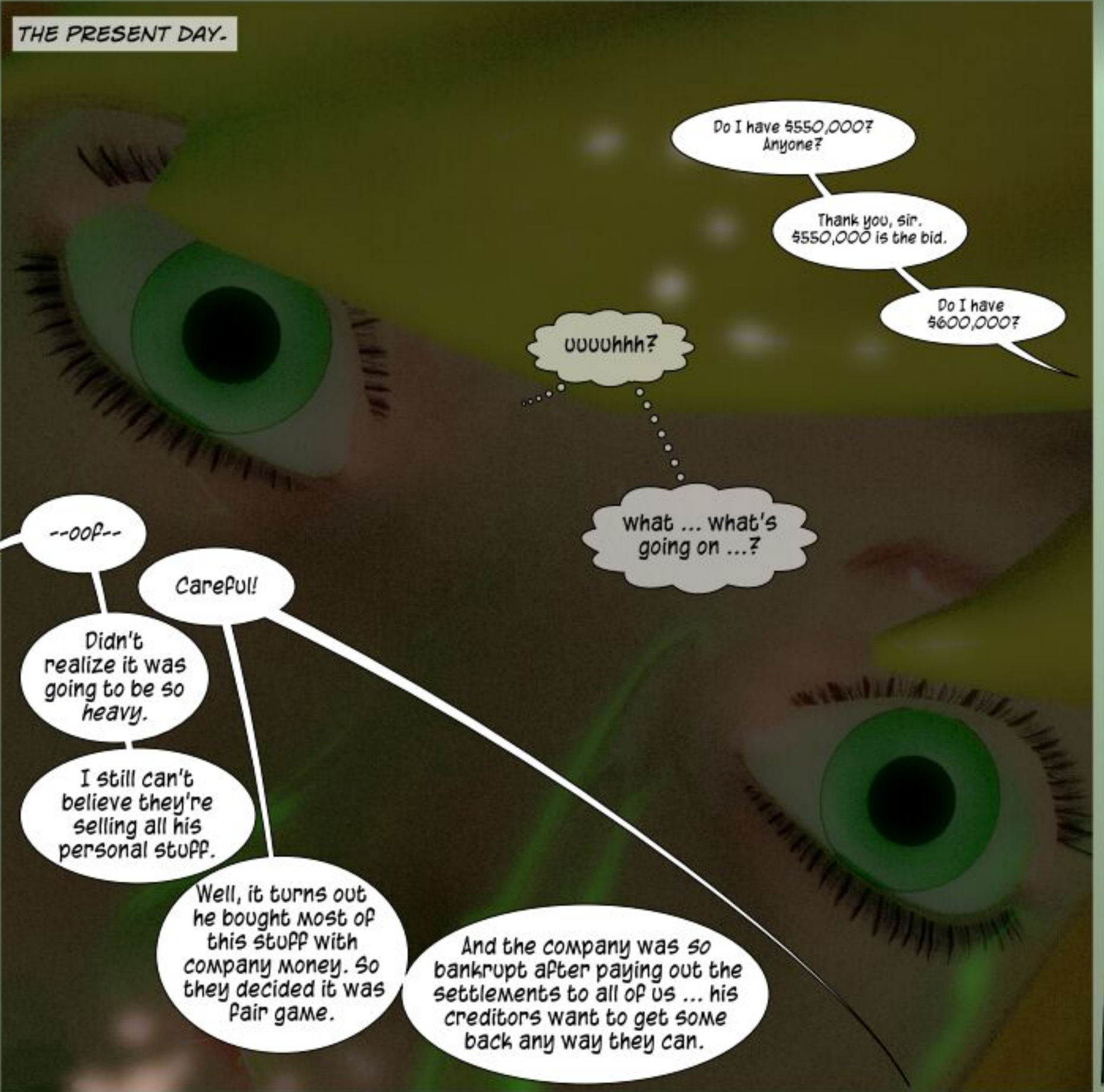
... I'd like to. If I can.

Everything wasn't the same without you, y'know? And this seems like it's an interesting place to be. A lot more than where I was.

Besides, I don't know if it'd be safe for me to go back anyway. Casaba's still out there. He's probably got a strike force looking for me.

Oh, I don't think that's true. When we got in, Tinseltop told me the boss had wanted to settle Casaba's ledger for a long time.

"Honestly, I'd be very surprised if anyone ever saw him again."



THE PRESENT DAY.

Do I have \$550,000? Anyone?

Thank you, sir. \$550,000 is the bid.

Do I have \$600,000?

UUUUHHH?

What ... what's going on ...?

Careful!

Didn't realize it was going to be so heavy.

I still can't believe they're selling all his personal stuff.

Well, it turns out he bought most of this stuff with company money. So they decided it was fair game.

And the company was so bankrupt after paying out the settlements to all of us ... his creditors want to get some back any way they can.



No one will give me \$600,000? Do I hear \$575,000? No?

Last chance on this fully restored 1931 Admiral in pristine condition ... anyone?

Sold! For \$550,000 to Mr. Leno.

Admiral? My Admiral?

Hey, wait! You can't just sell off my things!

Set it down right here.

Besides, nobody's seen him for a year, he's missed his window to object ...

Yeah. Where do you think he went?

Somewhere with no extradition.

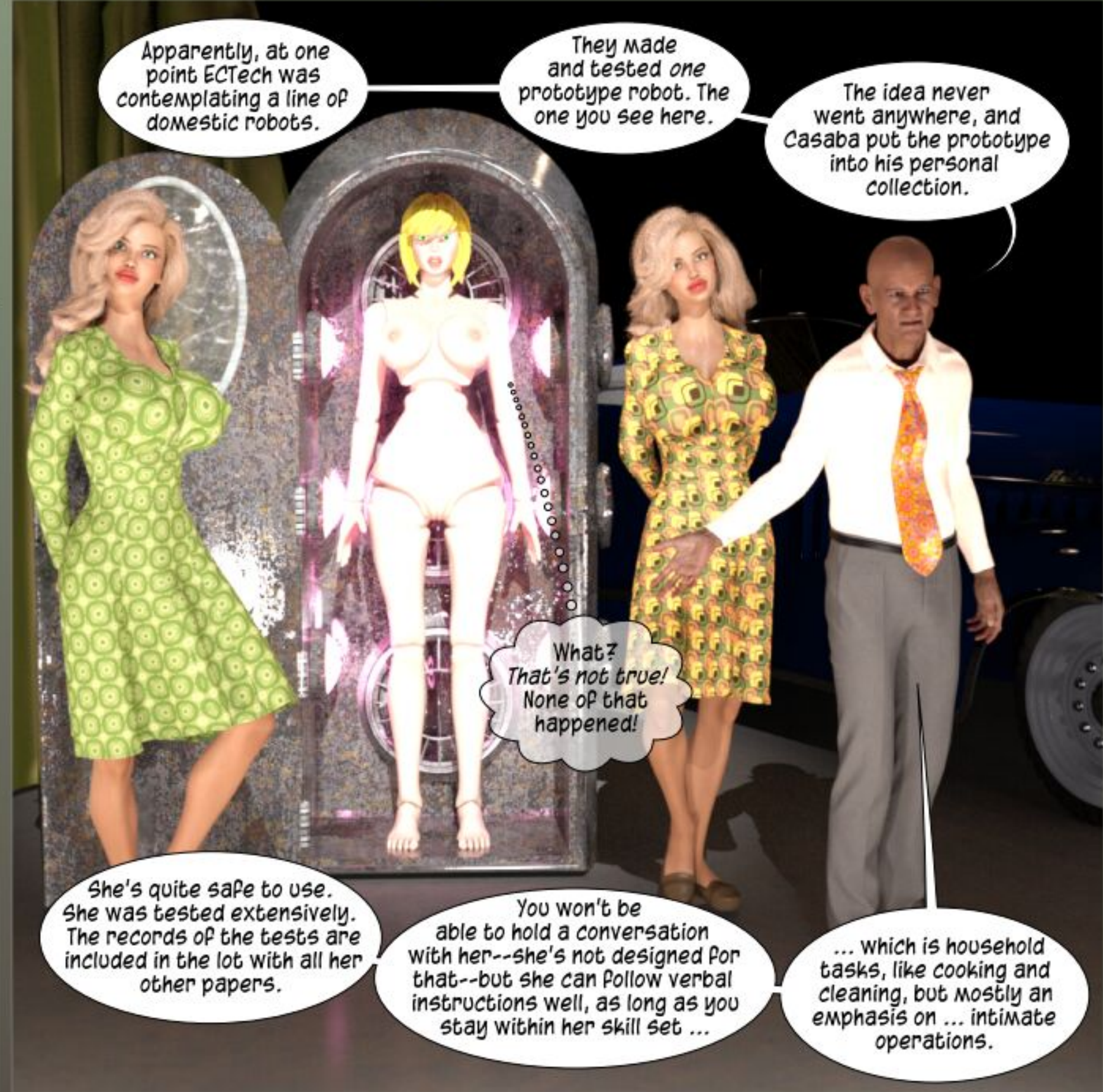
Ah! And here is our final lot.

Open it up, please, ladies?



!!!

Now, even among this collection of unusual and interesting items, this one takes a bit of explanation.



Apparently, at one point ECTech was contemplating a line of domestic robots.

They made and tested one prototype robot. The one you see here.

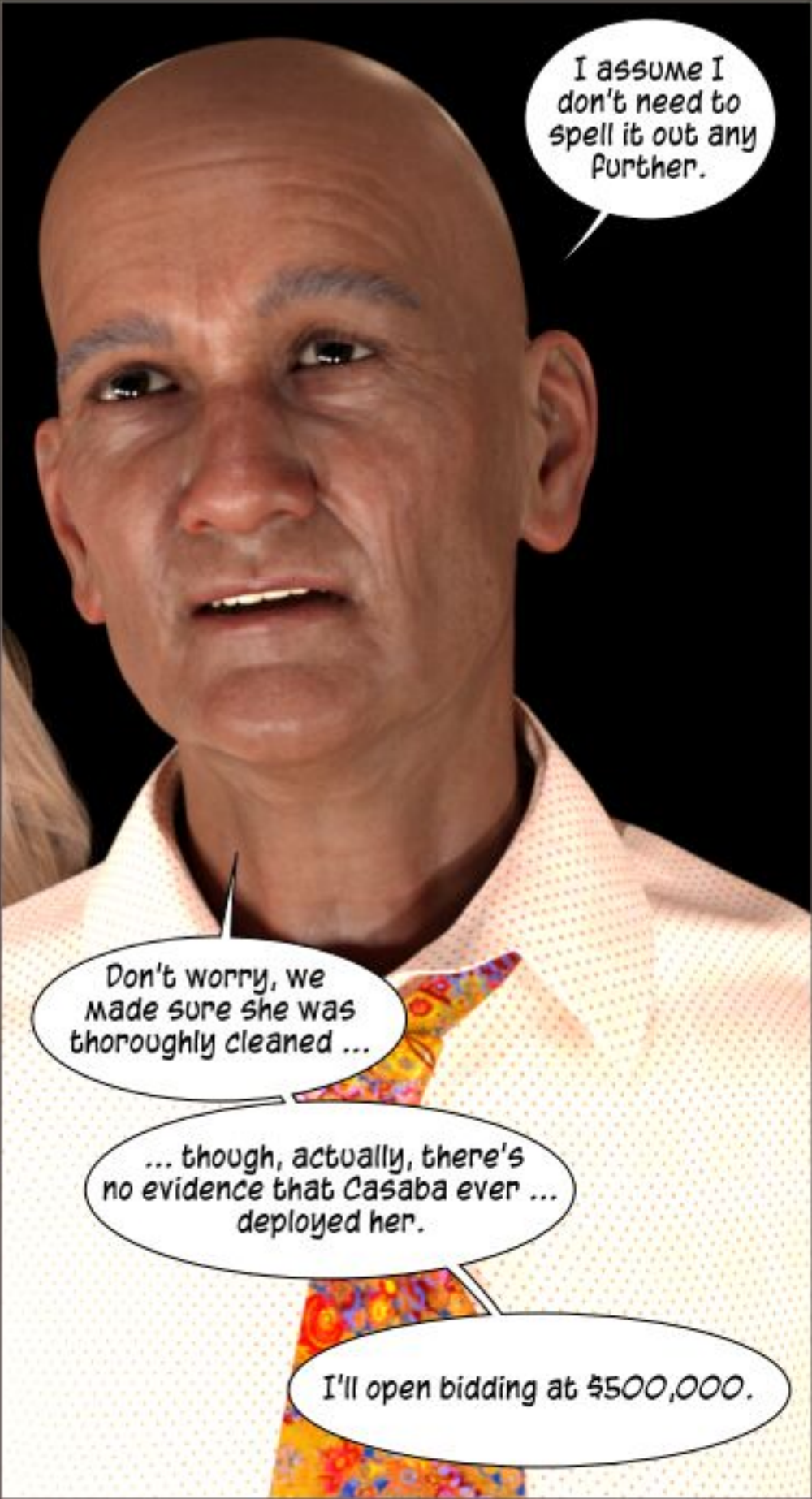
The idea never went anywhere, and Casaba put the prototype into his personal collection.

What? That's not true! None of that happened!

She's quite safe to use. She was tested extensively. The records of the tests are included in the lot with all her other papers.

You won't be able to hold a conversation with her--she's not designed for that--but she can follow verbal instructions well, as long as you stay within her skill set ...

... which is household tasks, like cooking and cleaning, but mostly an emphasis on ... intimate operations.



I assume I don't need to spell it out any further.

Don't worry, we made sure she was thoroughly cleaned ...

... though, actually, there's no evidence that Casaba ever deployed her.

I'll open bidding at \$500,000.



... oh, no.

Thank you, sir. Do I have \$600,000?

\$700,000?

Very good. \$800,000?

\$900,000?

Do I have one million dollars?

Much obliged, sir. How about one million, one hundred thousand?

I have \$1.1 million on the table. Do I have \$1.2?

\$1.3 million? Excellent.

\$1.4 million?

\$1.5?

No.

No!

No!!

No!

Noo!



\$1.8?

Going once. No one will give me \$1.8 million?

Sold! For \$1,700,000 to Mr. Gates.

Now, I realize you might not consider this a good ending.

But think about it this way: For the first time in his life, Ethan Casaba is going to make sure someone has

A very merry Christmas!

See you next year!