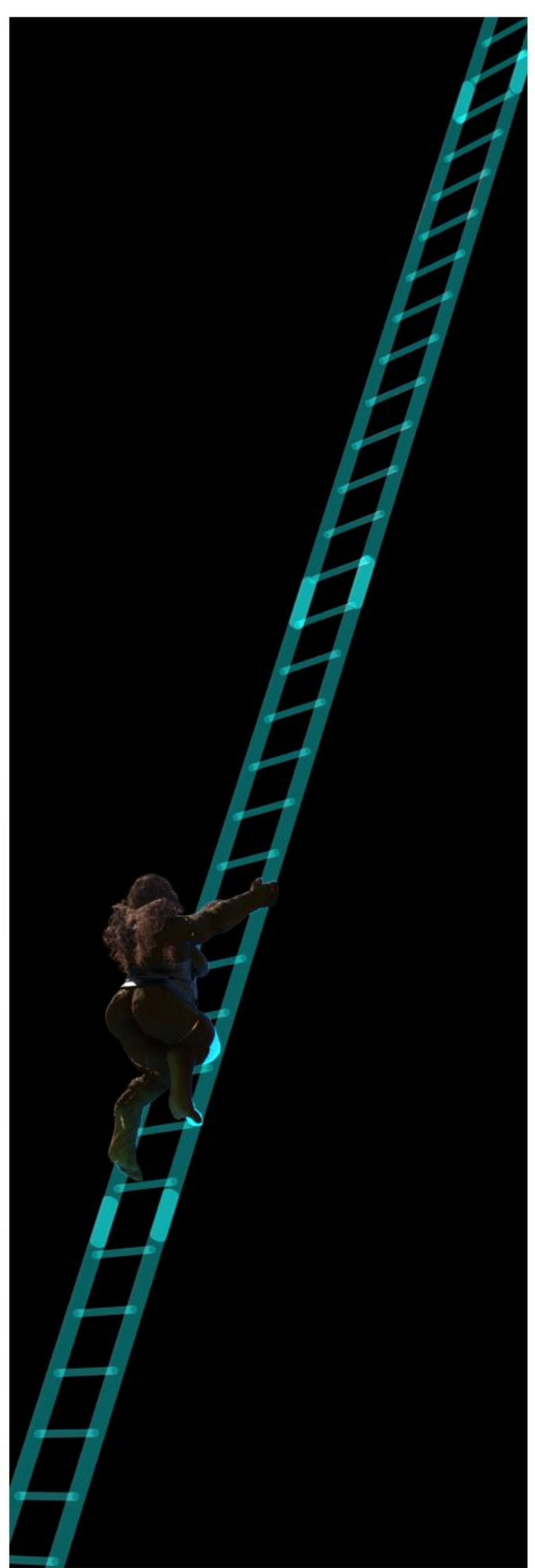
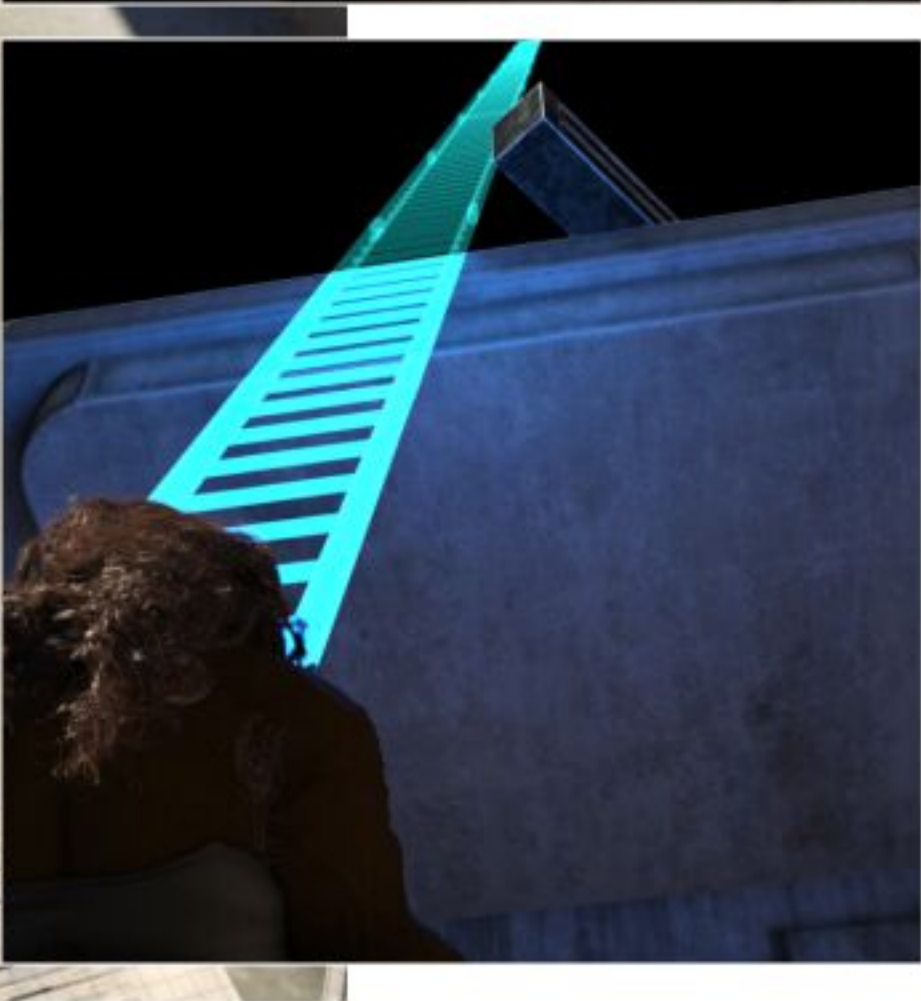
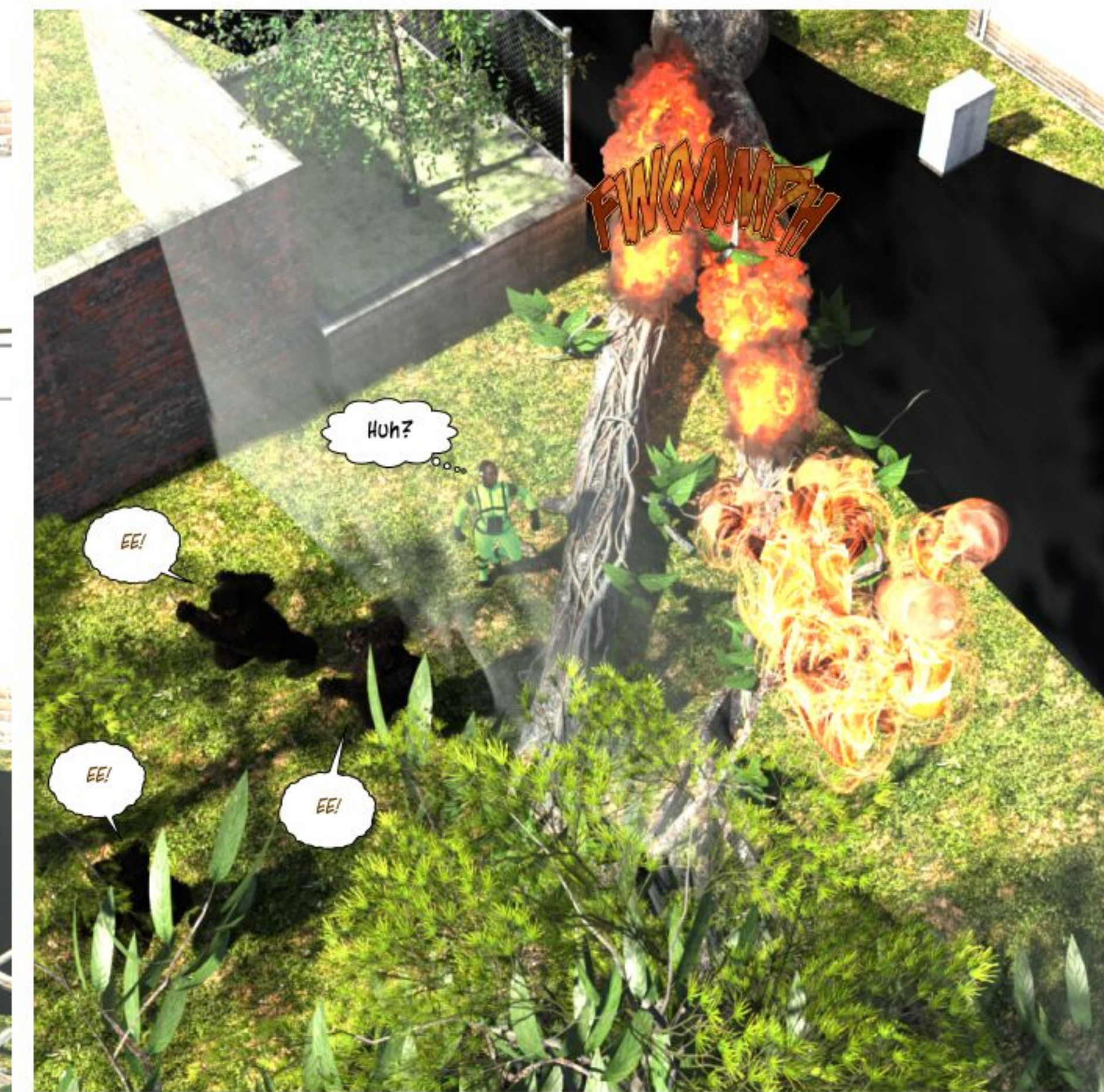
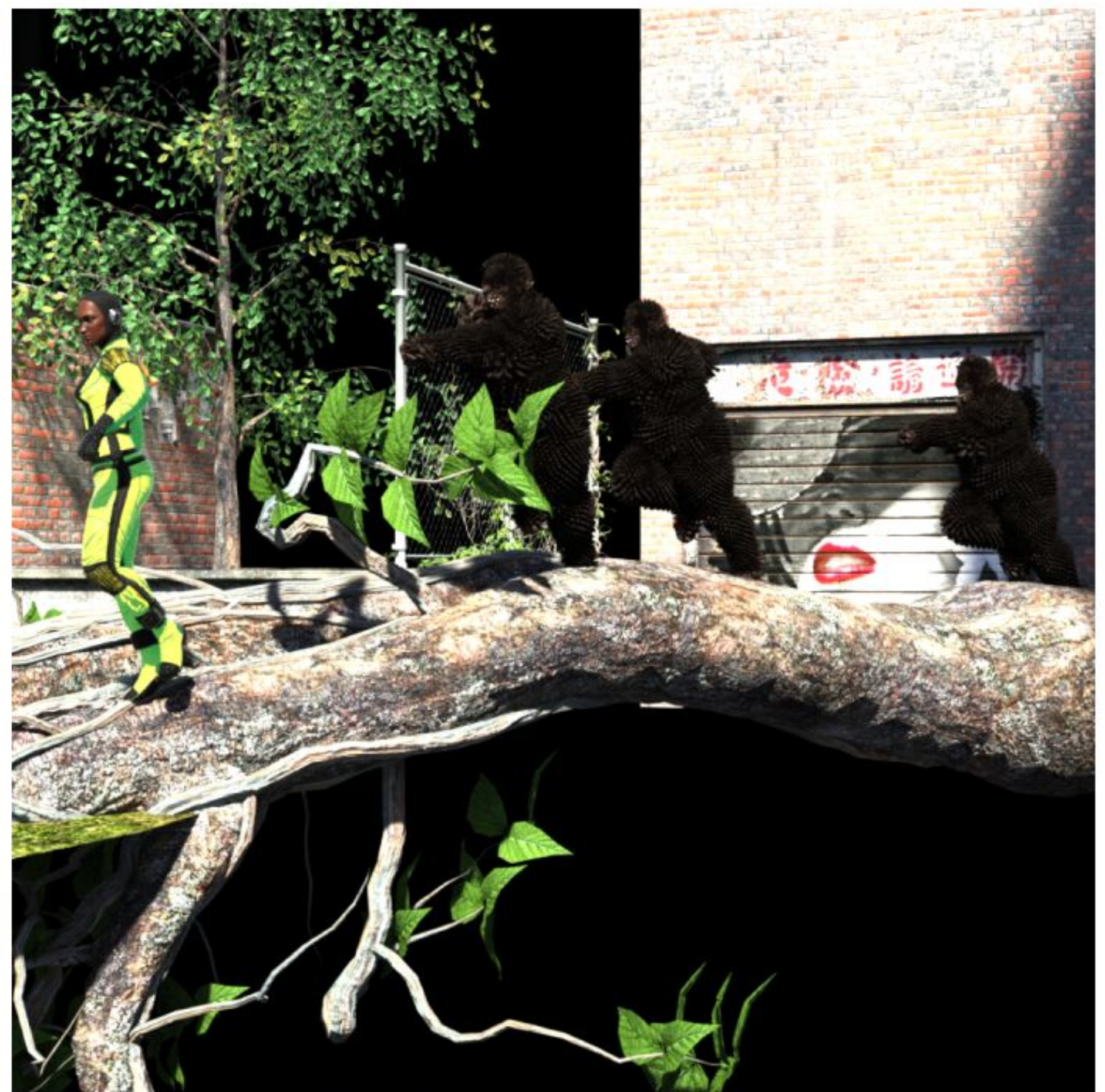


MEANWHILE, NOT FAR FROM THERE ...



AND DOWN IN "THE PIT" ...





AFTER THE SMOKE HAS CLEARED AND THE TROLLS HAVE RETREATED ...



... So you think this isn't the way things are supposed to be? And there's something in here causing all this?

You don't believe me ... but you must have been something else before ...

I don't remember that. But ... maybe, if you're right, that's why I don't remember. I don't know.



But if you're right, I know where your whatever-it-is must be.

There's a part that's ... well ... stranger than the rest of this place.

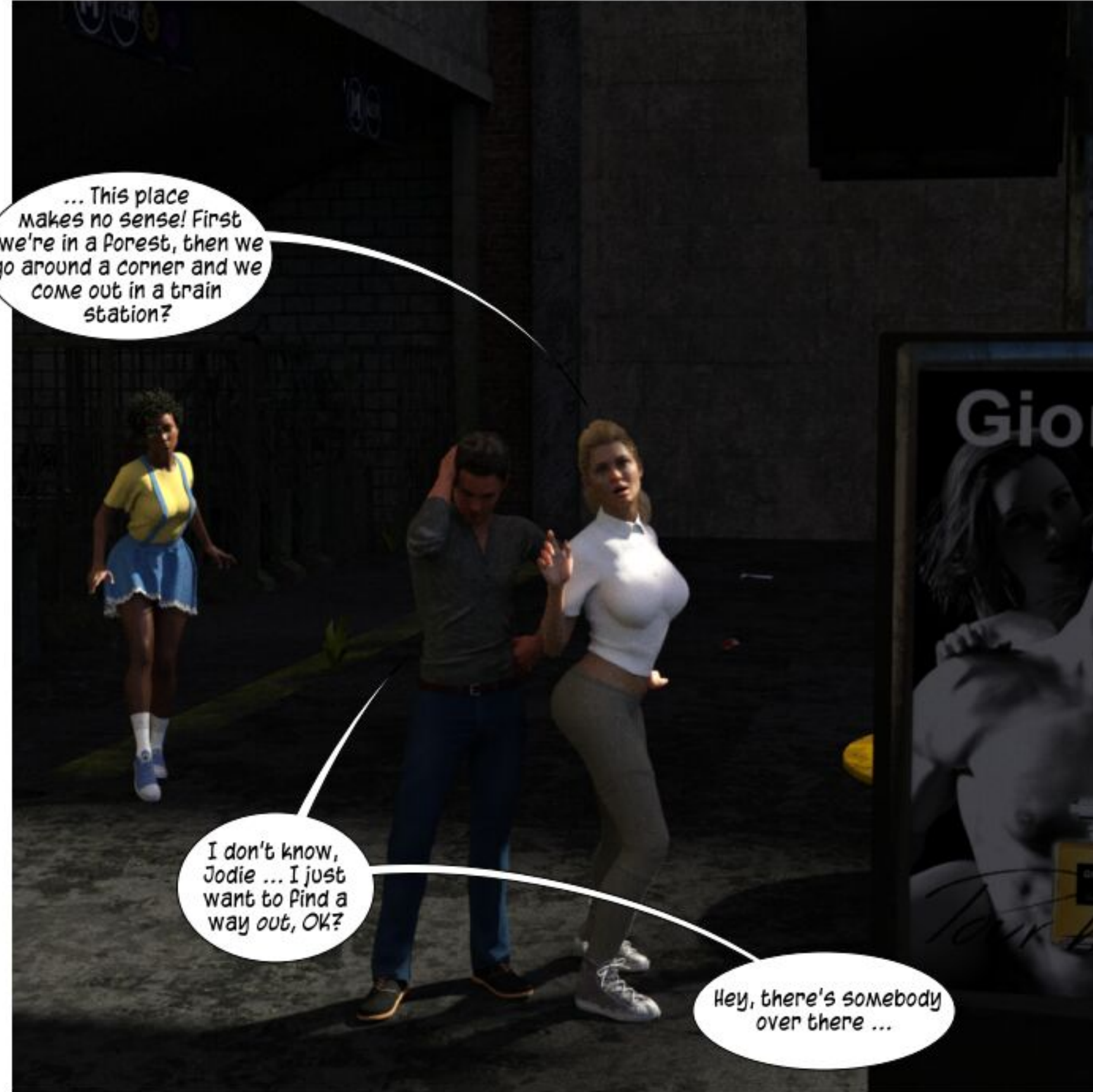
That's saying something. Is it Par? Can you show me how to get there?

It's not too far, and I can take you ...

... but we may have trouble getting you there. There are some crossings I'm not sure how to make.

I just fly over, but you can't fly, can you?

ELSEWHERE:



... This place makes no sense! First we're in a forest, then we go around a corner and we come out in a train station?

I don't know, Jodie ... I just want to find a way out, OK?

Hey, there's somebody over there ...



AAAAAAA!

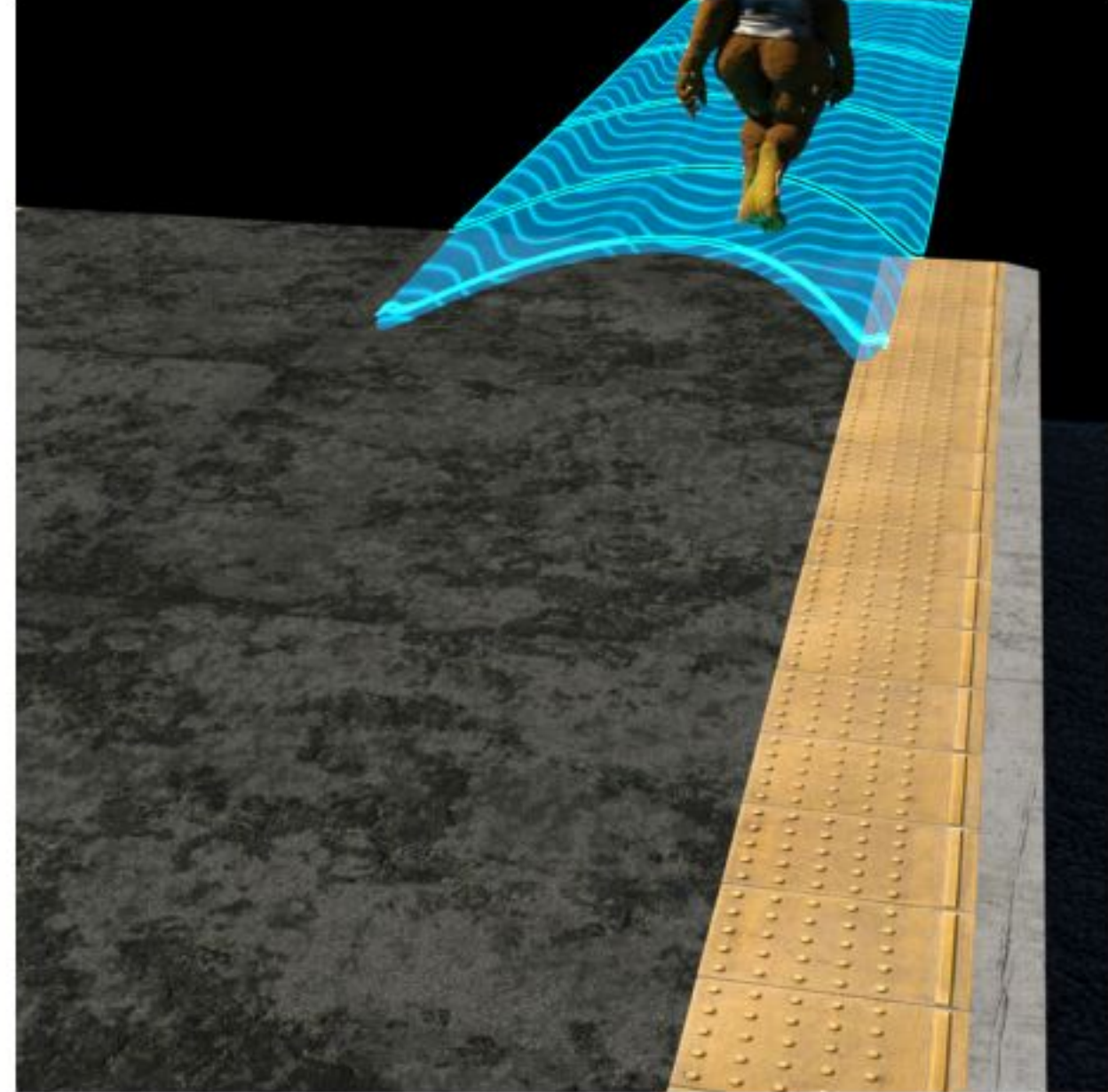
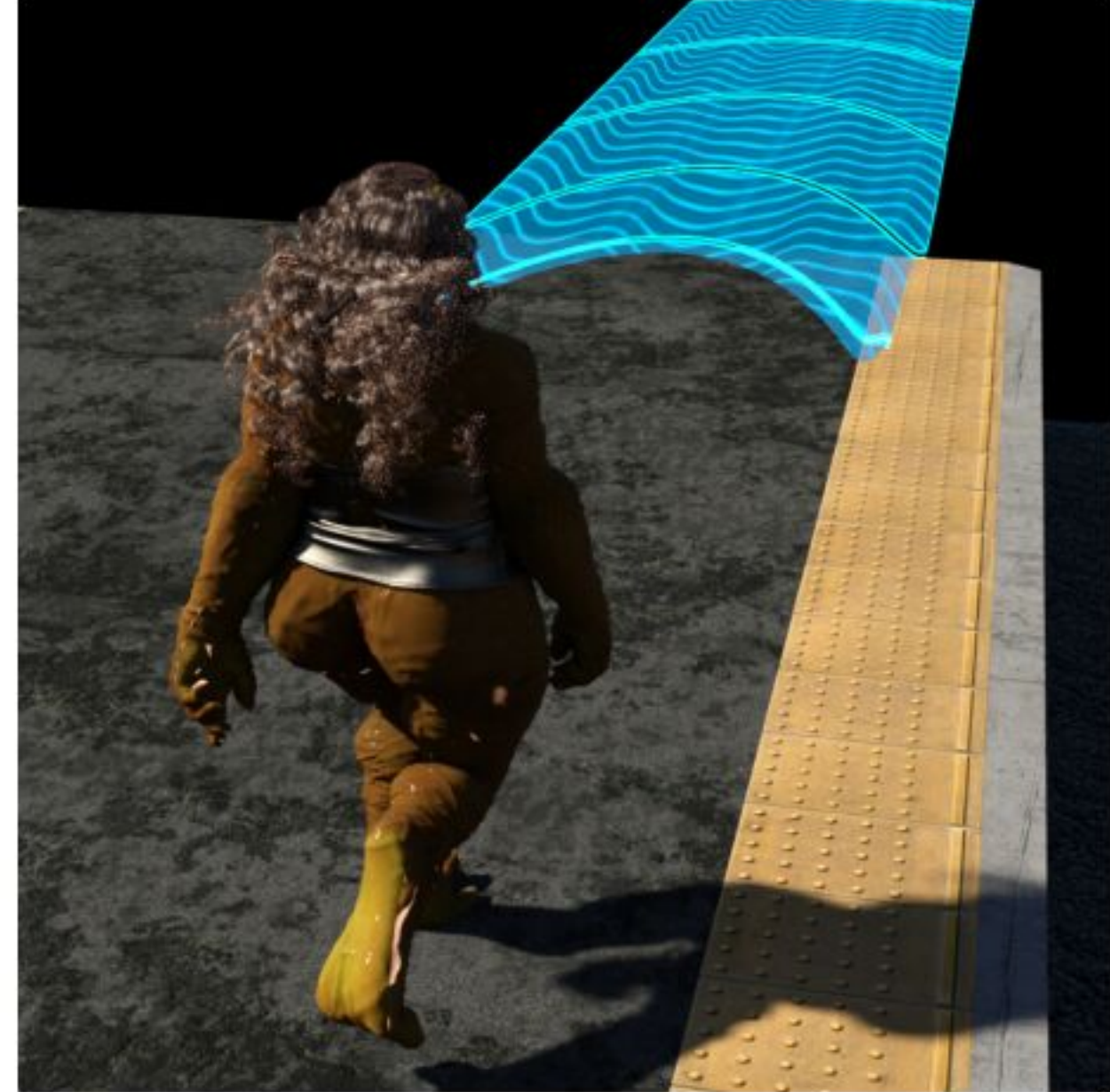
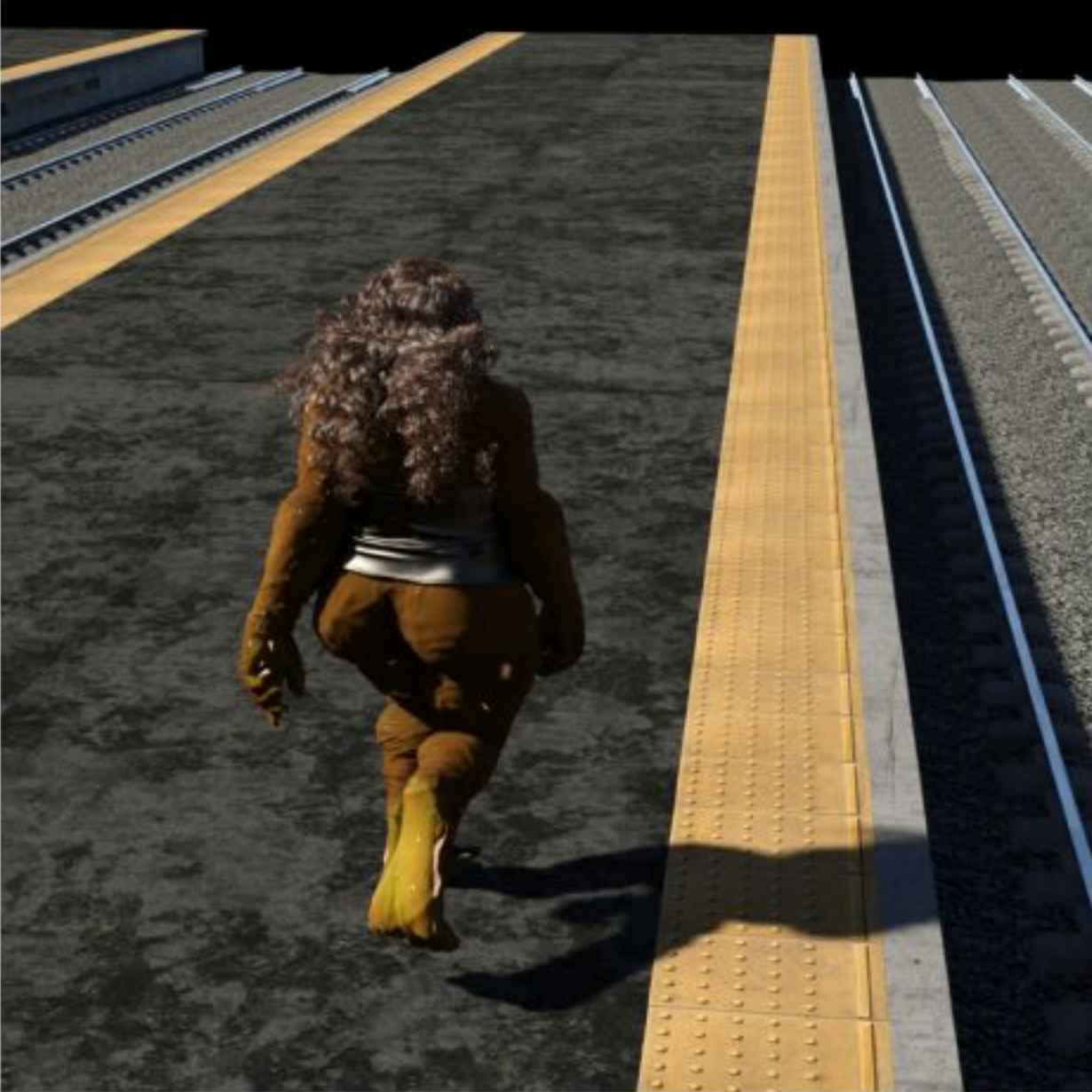
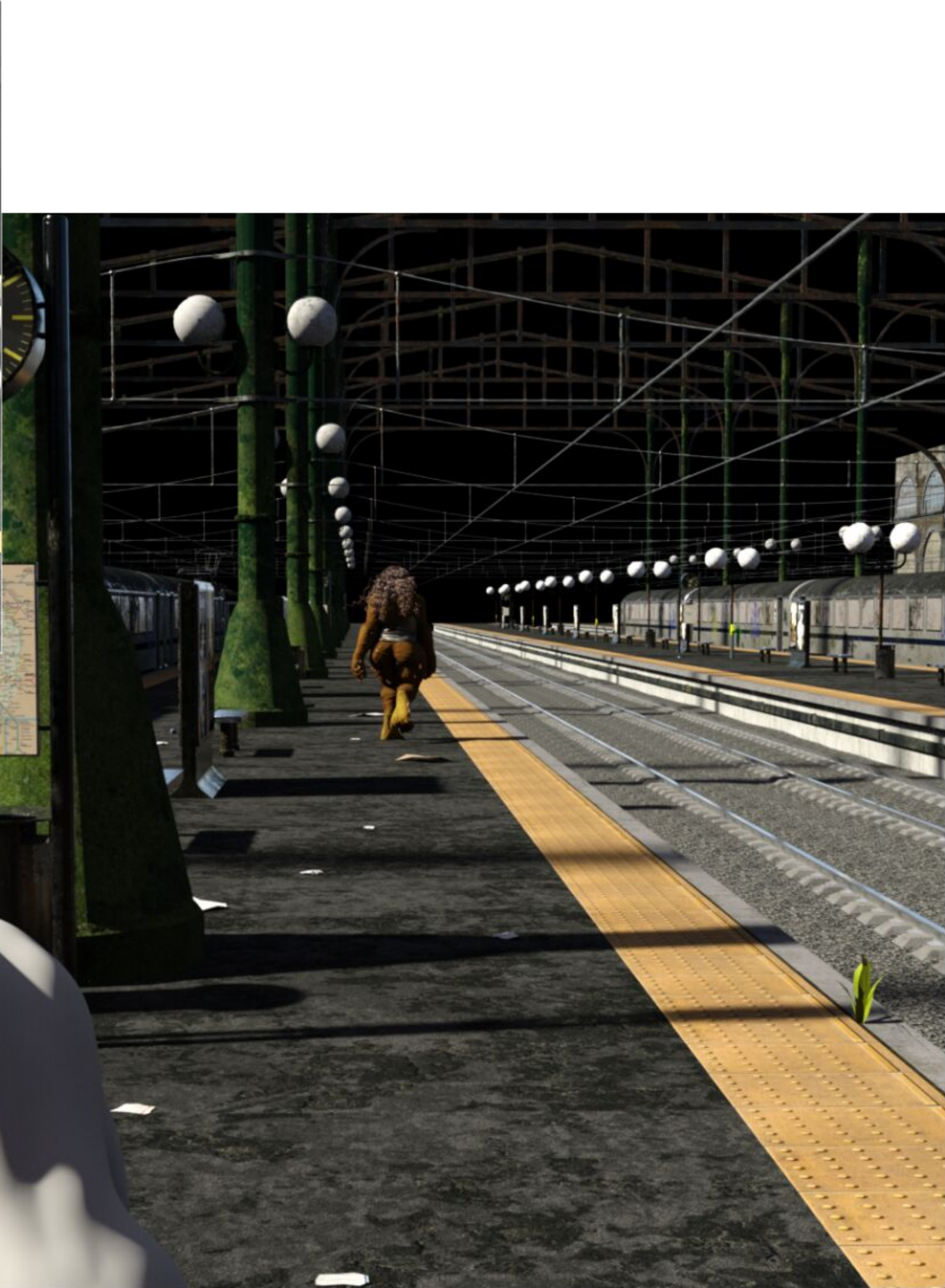


Here comes somebody!

Help!!



Nothingness is salvation. Emptiness is peace.



A CORRIDOR IN A BUILDING IN THE PREVIOUS FRAGMENT TURNS OUT TO CONNECT UNEXPECTEDLY TO A NEW LOCATION.



Pieces of the area around the club entrance, again. I wonder if it's because that's where the break happened?

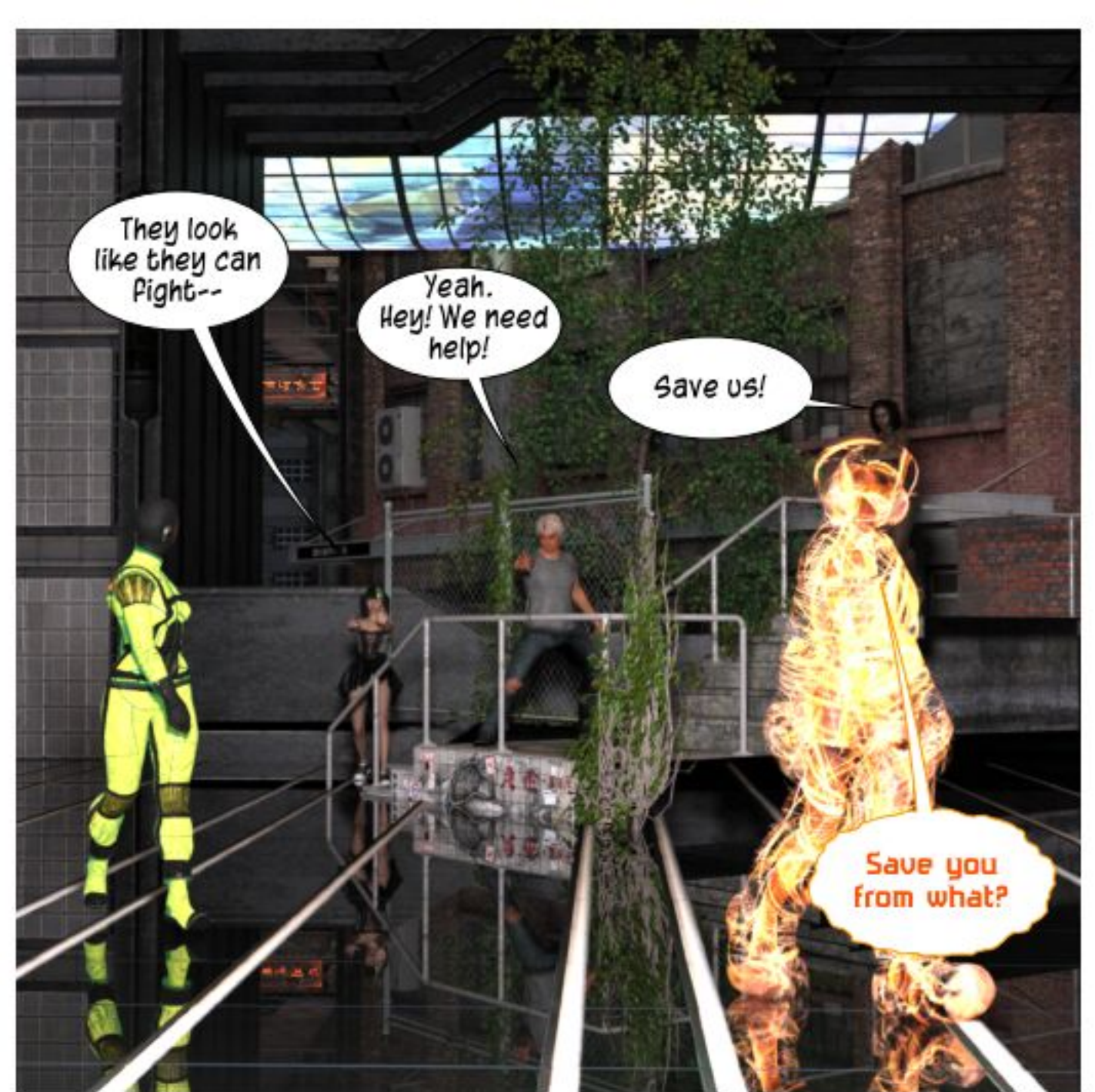


Follow me. The next fragment is over here ... but I'm not sure how you'll get to it.

They look like they can fight--

Yeah. Hey! We need help!

Save us!



Save you from what?



uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

uurh ...

Ah.

No! Get away! Don't touch me....



...eeee!!



I uerrngh



ughr!!



... Uhhh?



Oh!



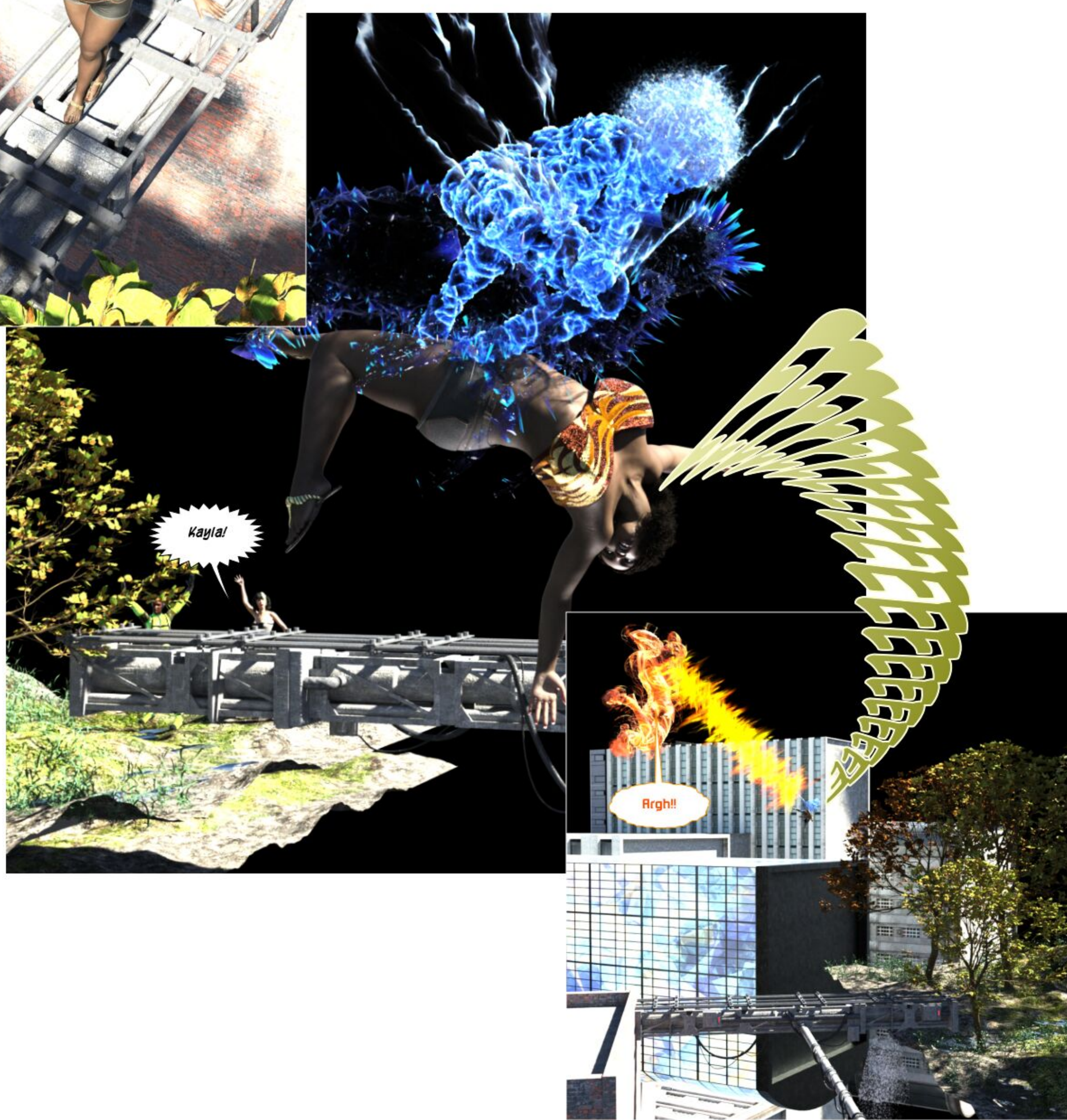
Oh, god. Help Me!



I've got you. Let's go.

Get off her!









I'm sorry. Her bug thing flies faster than I can.

If it helps, it doesn't seem like she's getting one of the worse outcomes.



What does that mean?

Nobody stays intact here very long. I've been watching. The zombies or the trolls get you, mostly, and you end up becoming one of them.

But you end up becoming something. Some things are better than others, I think. The electric woman's got an agenda, but her creatures seem OK with it. And the gorillas just want to be gorillas.



Or the floaters ... see over there?

Even the electric woman leaves them alone. They just fly around.



Okay. That sounds good.

Hey, wait --

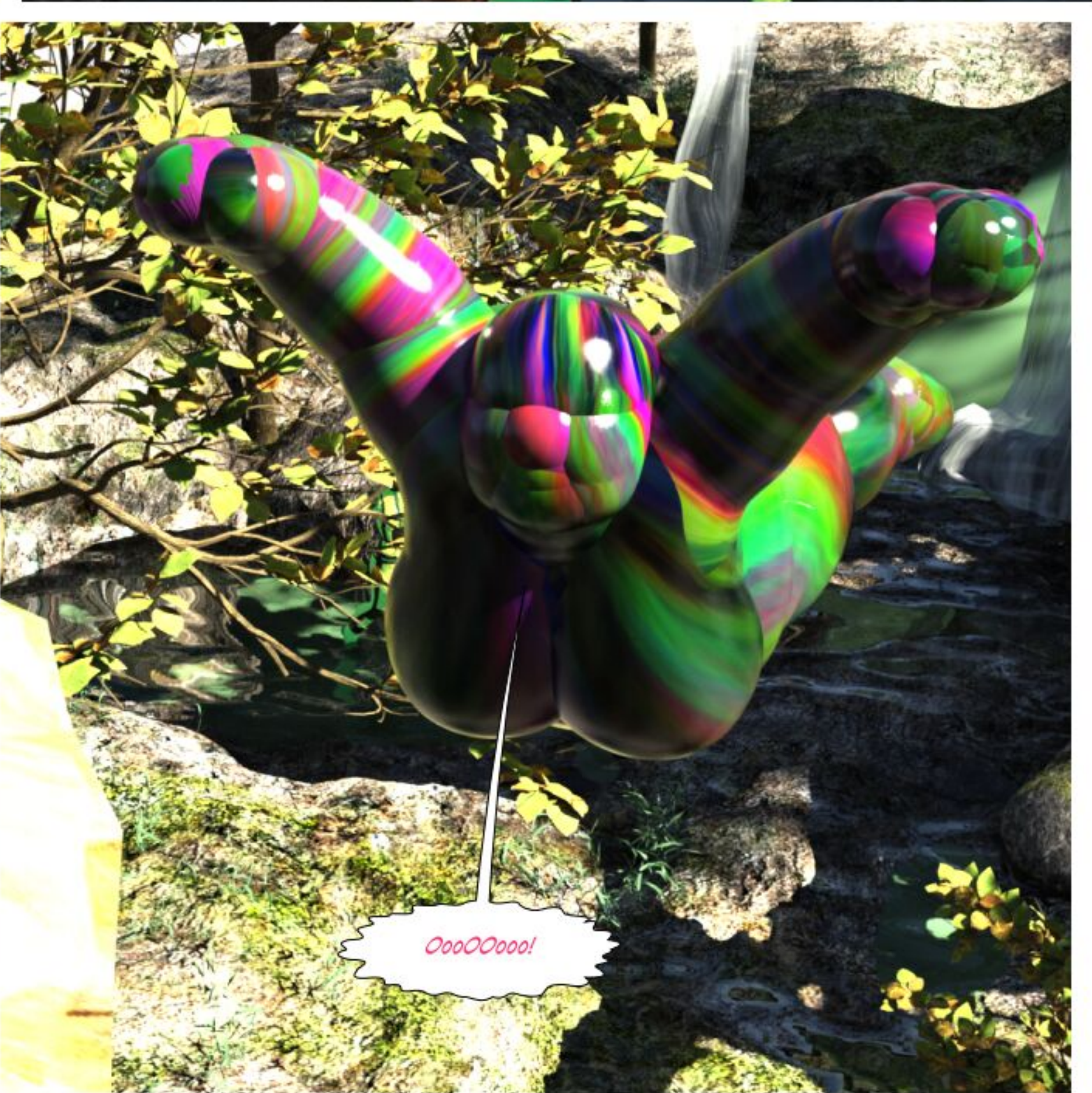


I am *not* going to be a zombie again. Ten seconds was too long.

And I don't think I want to risk any of that other stuff either. I'm not immune like you, and I can't fly away like her. These things at least look happy.

If you manage to do what you were telling me about, great. If not, I'd rather be stuck as one of these.

Good luck with your quest.



OooOooo!

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE STILL-NORMAL PORTIONS OF A4 ("NORMAL" BEING A RELATIVE TERM) ...



... no fault of yours. The cordon is going well, you're doing excellent work ... but it's spreading so quickly that I don't think a hundred more of you could move people out fast enough.

Can we do something about the people inside? What about the thing Ruby mentioned?

An "interrupt."

That.



It's a good idea, but there are three problems with it.

First, we'd have to get all the Barkers in on it, and I'm reluctant to alert them any more than they are. When they realize how serious this is, they may do something worse than what we have now, hard as that is to believe.

Surely they've already noticed ...

You'd be surprised. Only a couple of them pay much attention to the actual data structure.

They notice when someone complains, but no one affected is complaining to them, for obvious reasons.

Second, I'm not sure at this point whether we can even send interrupts into that mess.

And third, even if we do interrupt everyone in there, we don't have any reason to think that'll fix the corruption.



"So we don't do anything else? Hold the cordon and wait?"  
"For a little while longer. We're not out of time yet."

How on earth did you know a cave was going to turn into a subway exit?

The connections are easier to see from the air.

The next fragment will be down at the ends of the platforms.



What are those?

Nulls! That's bad.

I don't see her anywhere, though. A gray woman with a white X across her face. Avoid her.

She takes away everything. Like these.



You could try to do the same trick you did on the woman. But don't be surprised if it doesn't work. There may not be anything left to restore.

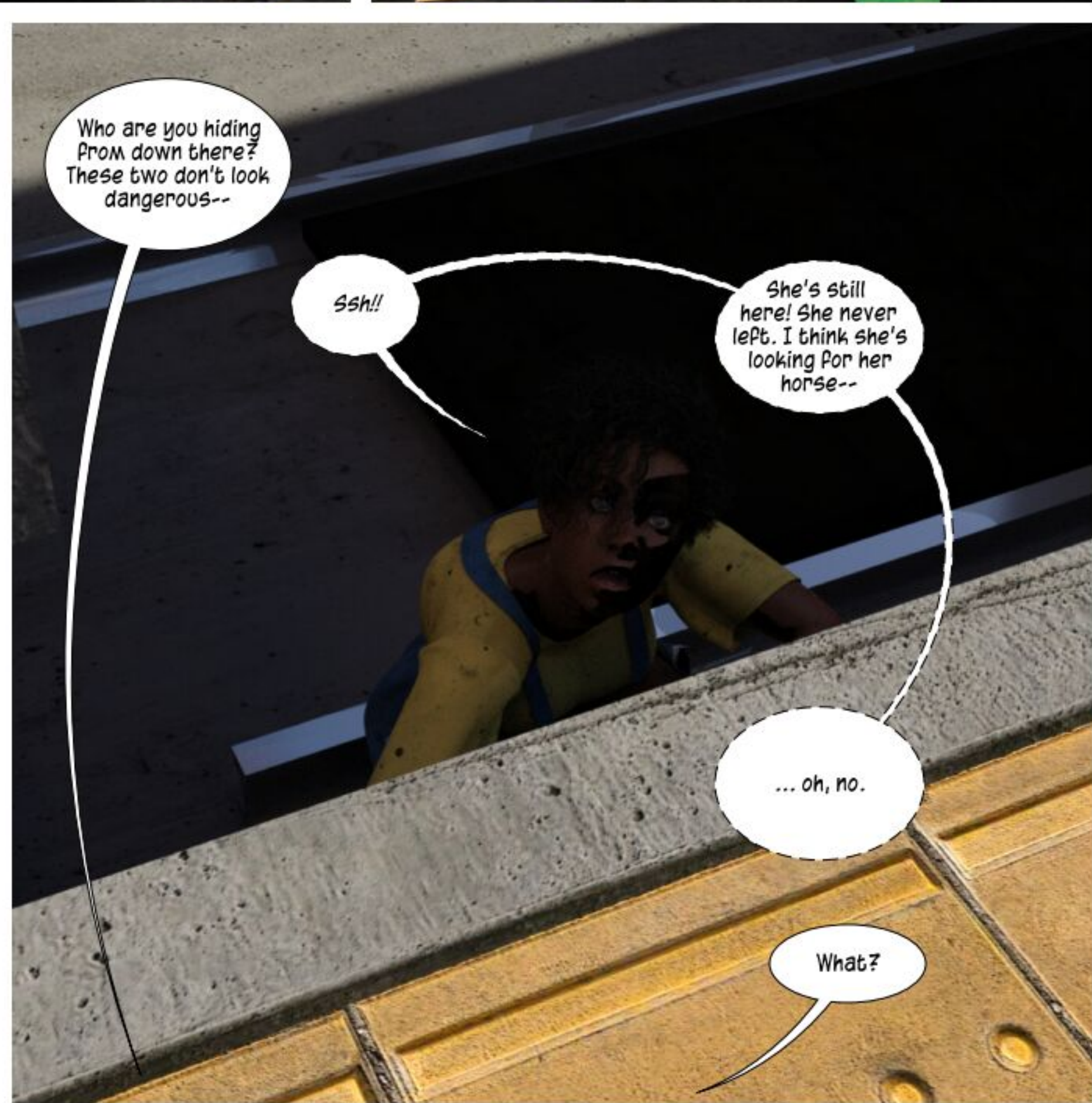
I'm going to look for ways across.



I guess it couldn't hurt to try ...

-- rustle --

Wait, what was that sound?



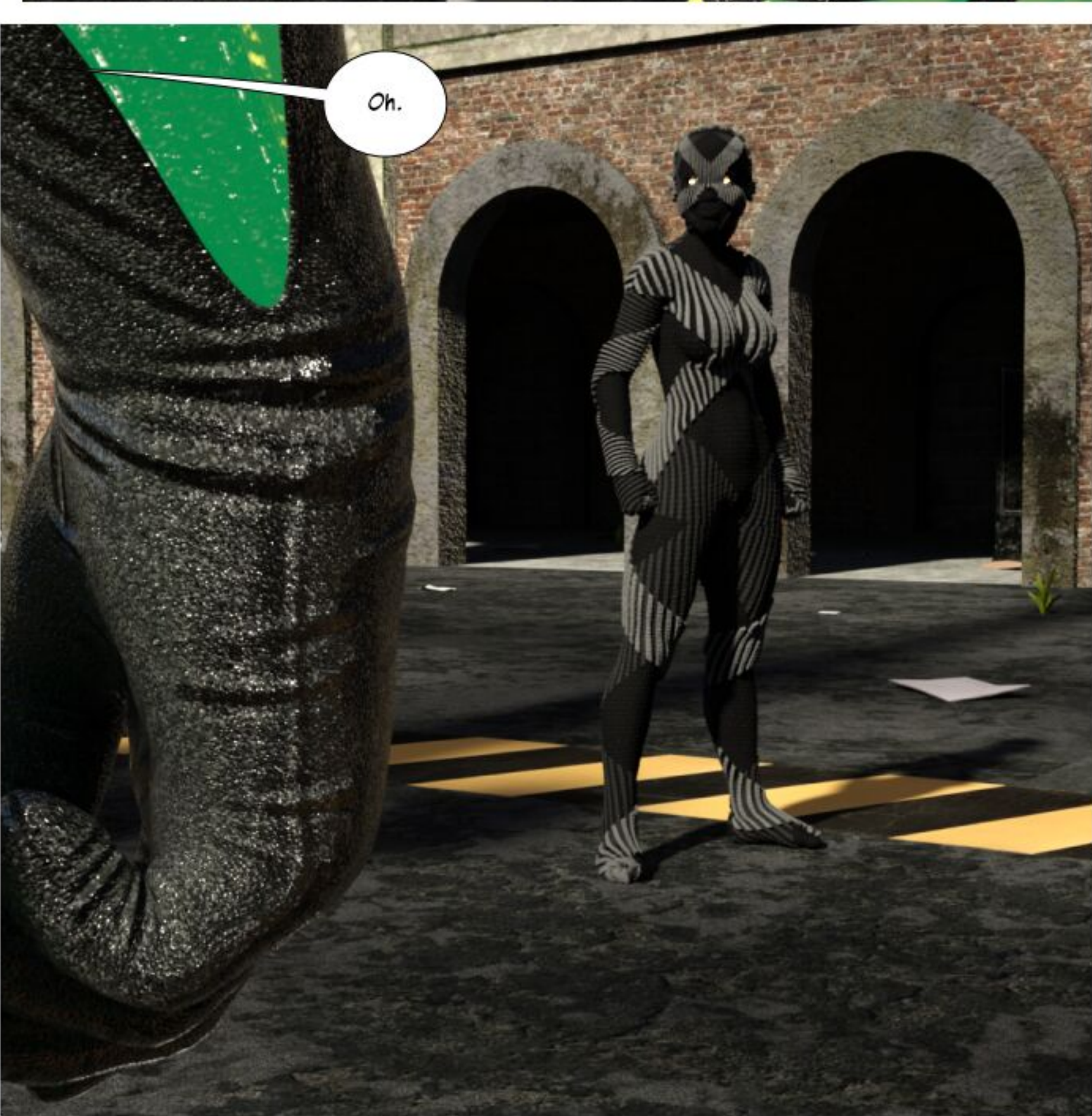
Who are you hiding from down there? These two don't look dangerous--

Ssh!!

She's still here! She never left. I think she's looking for her horse--

... oh, no.

What?



Oh.



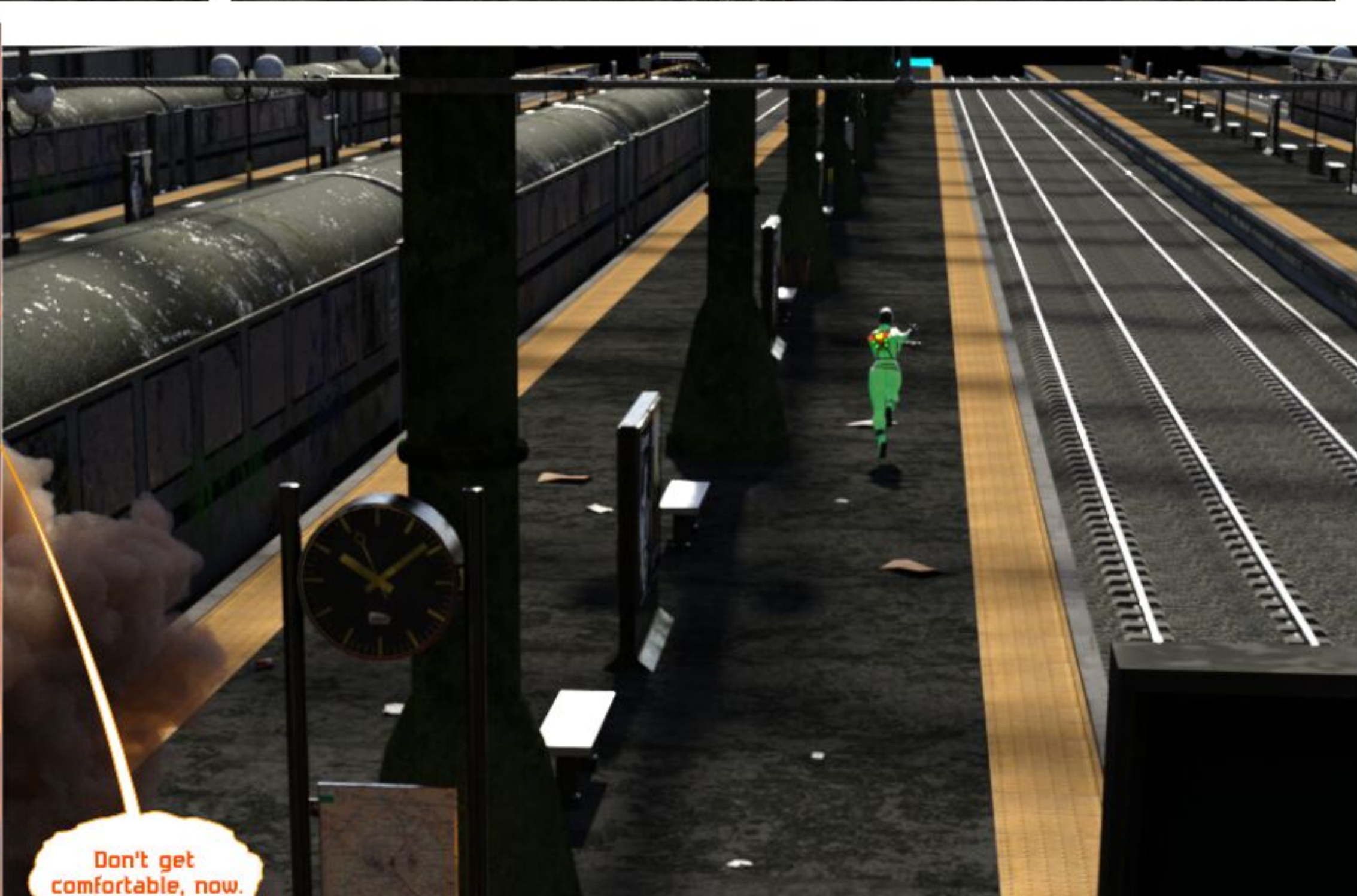
AAAGH!



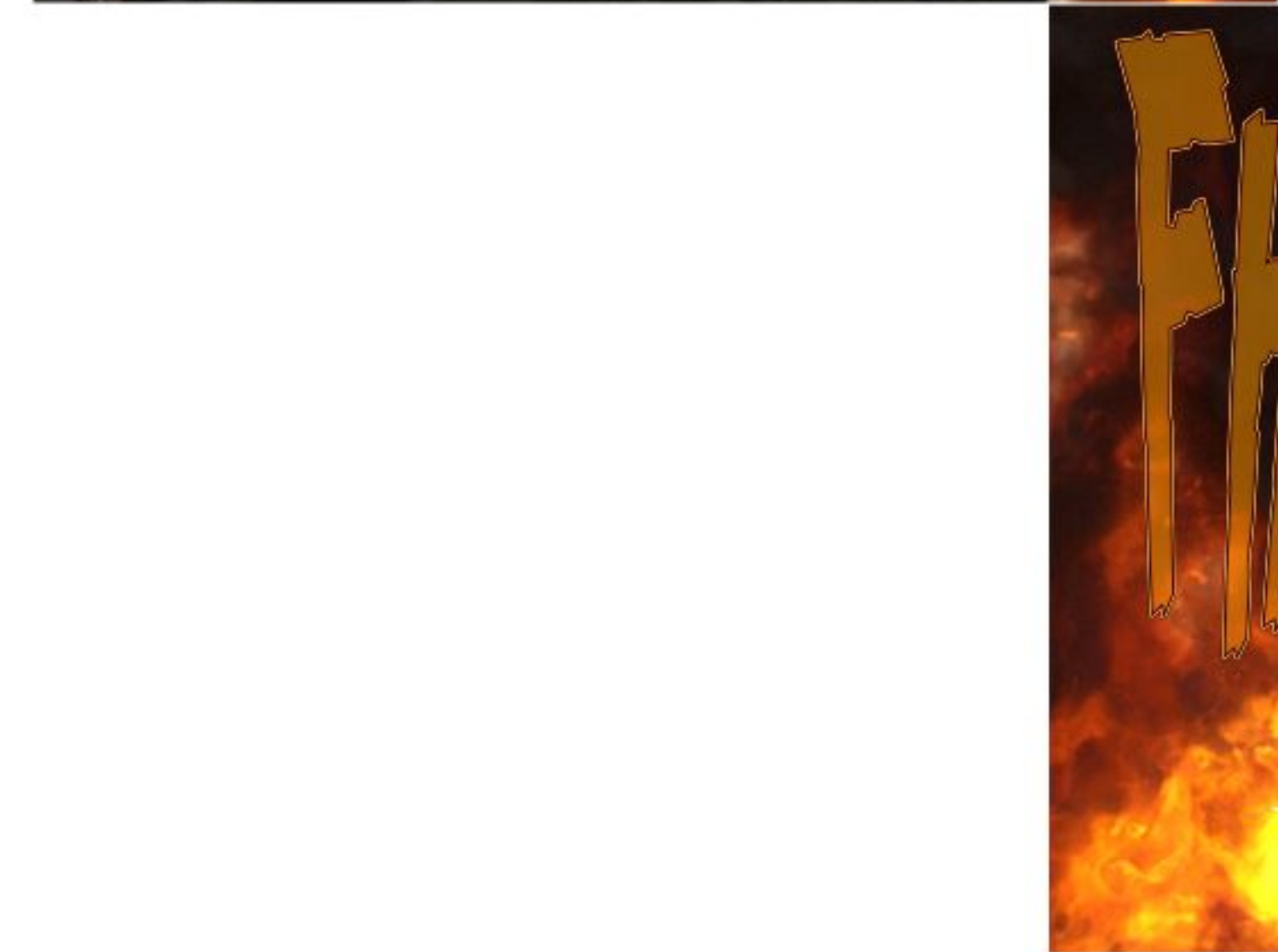
Someone left a bridge down at the end of the platform! Go! I'll keep her busy!

She might not even have been able to affect me--

Why risk it? And the bridge may not stay forever. Run!



Don't get comfortable, now.

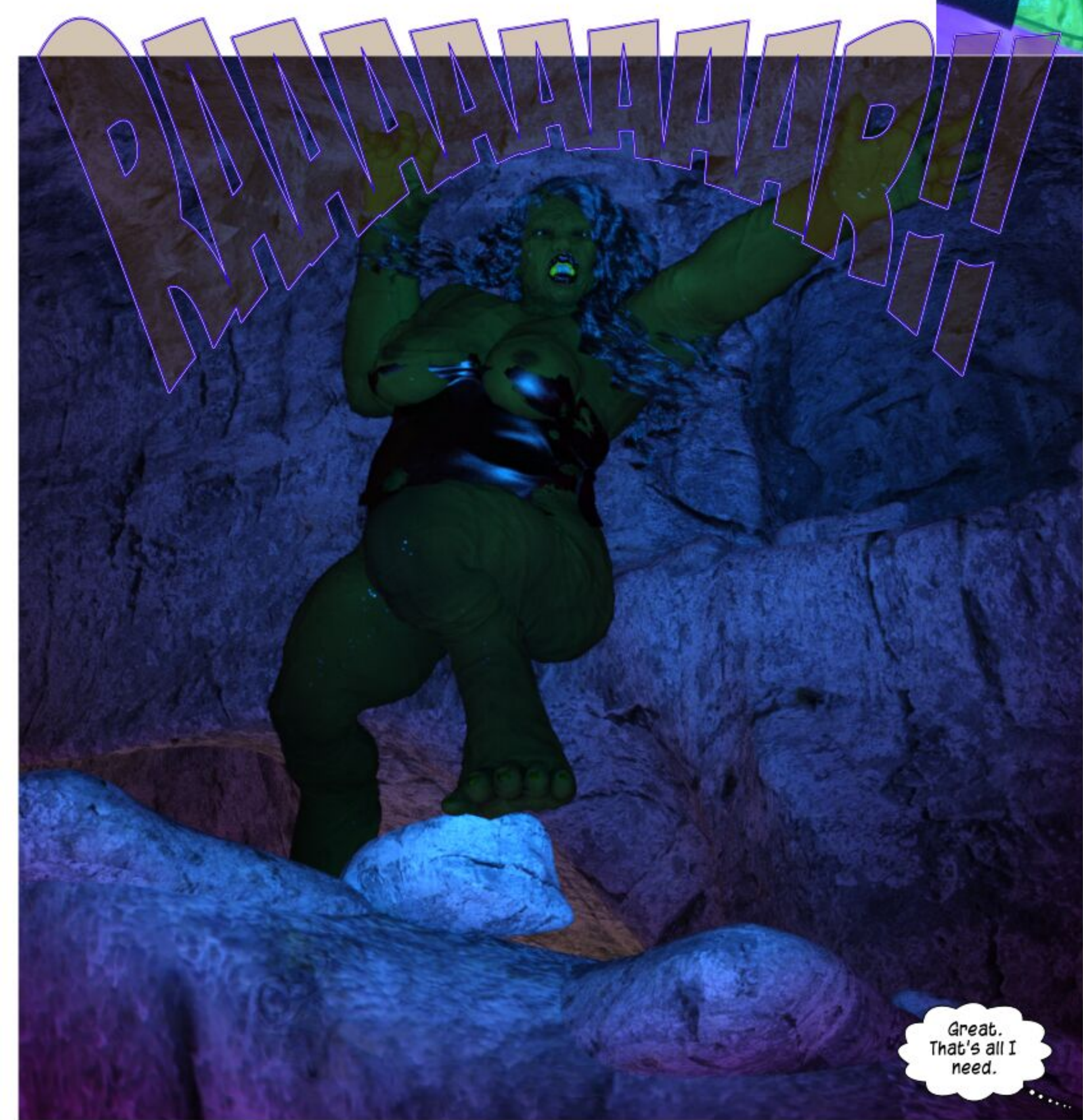
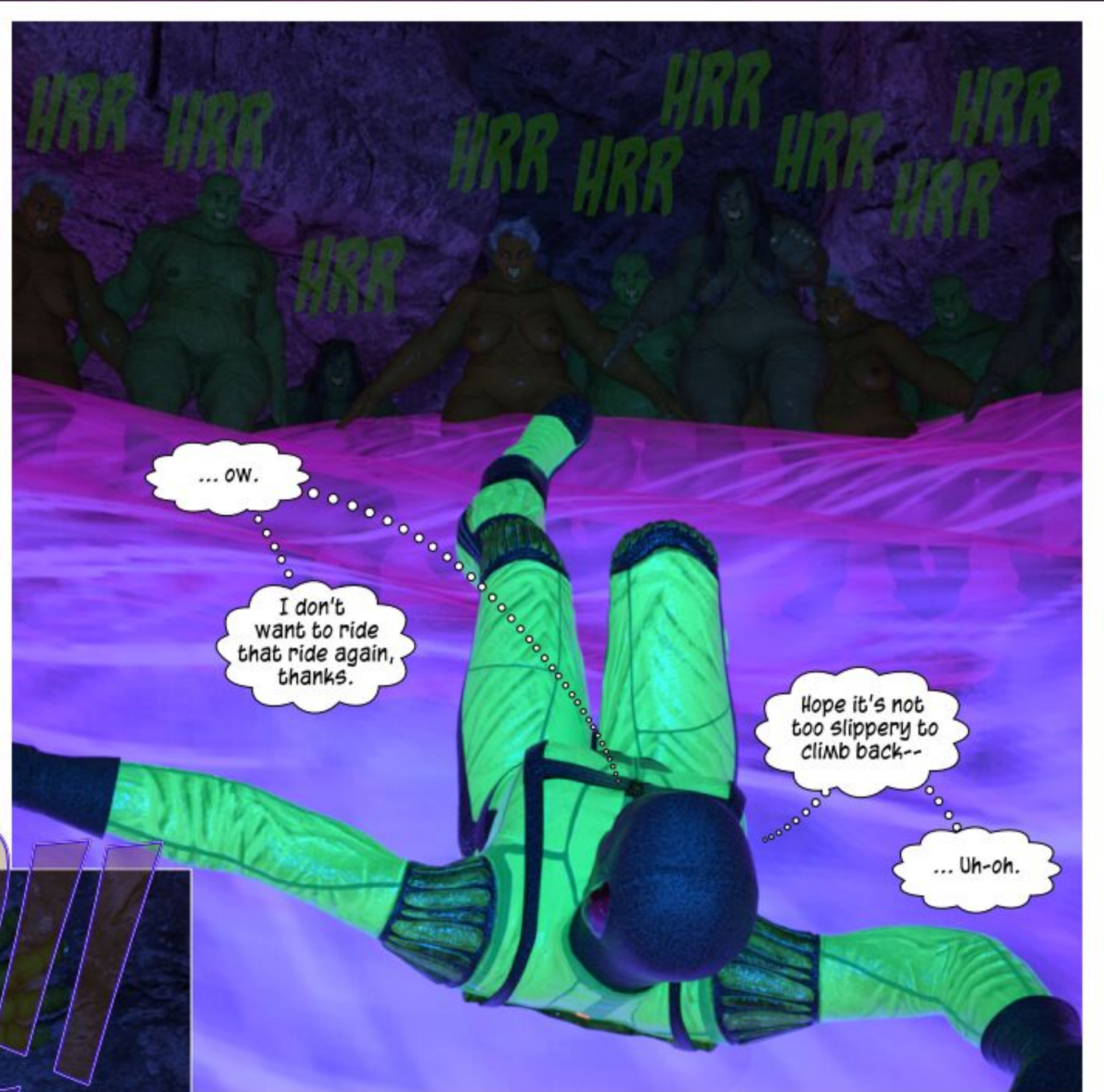
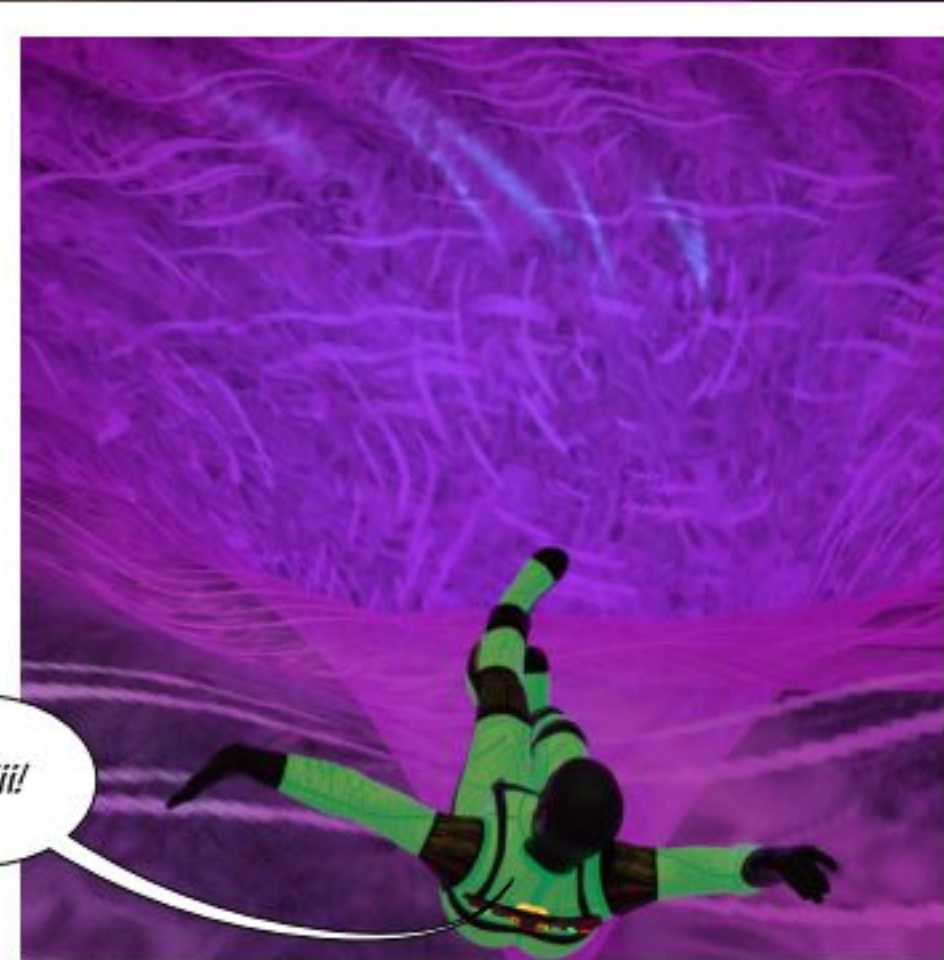


ALEEE!

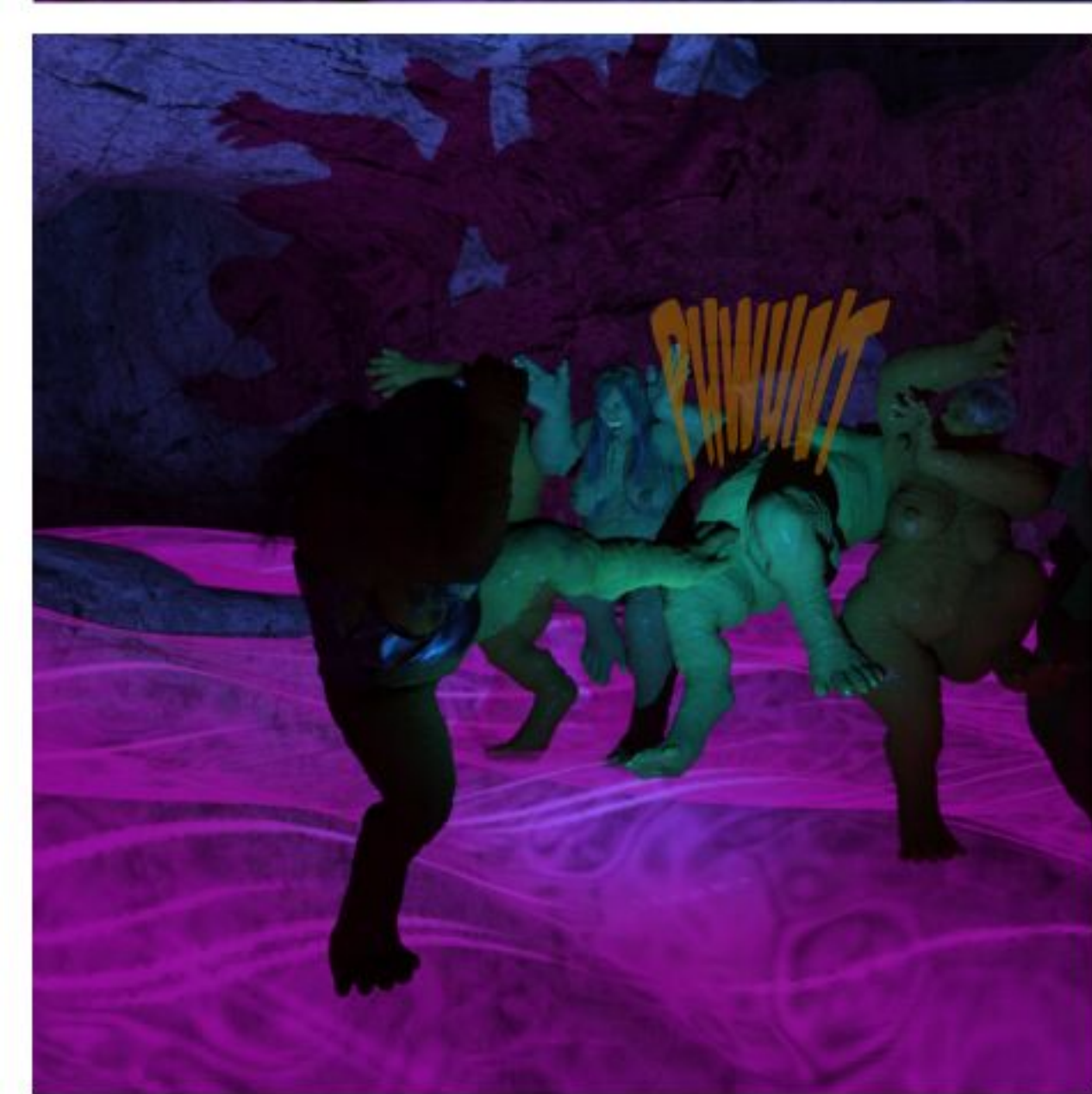


Nothing ominous about this at all.

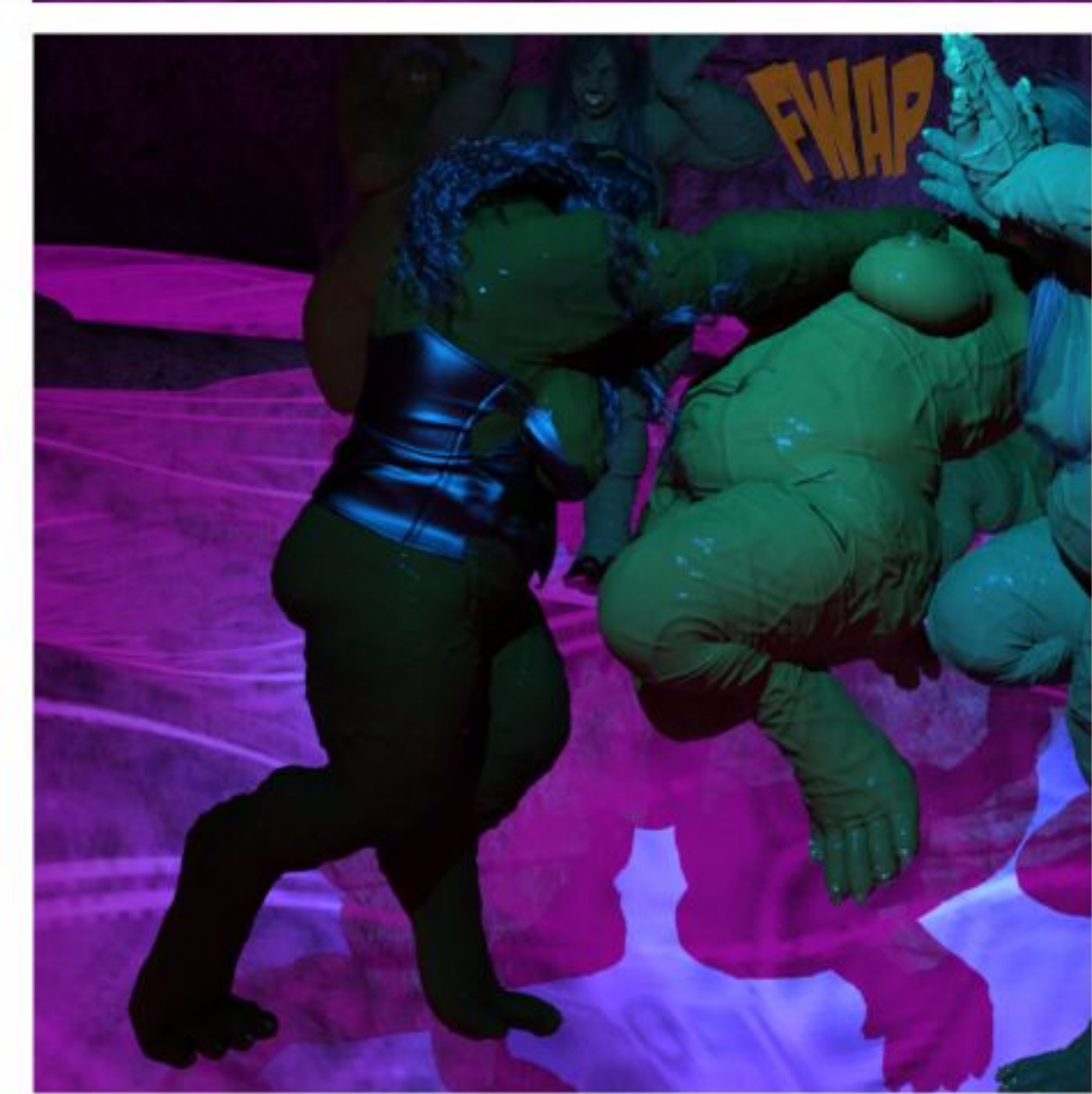
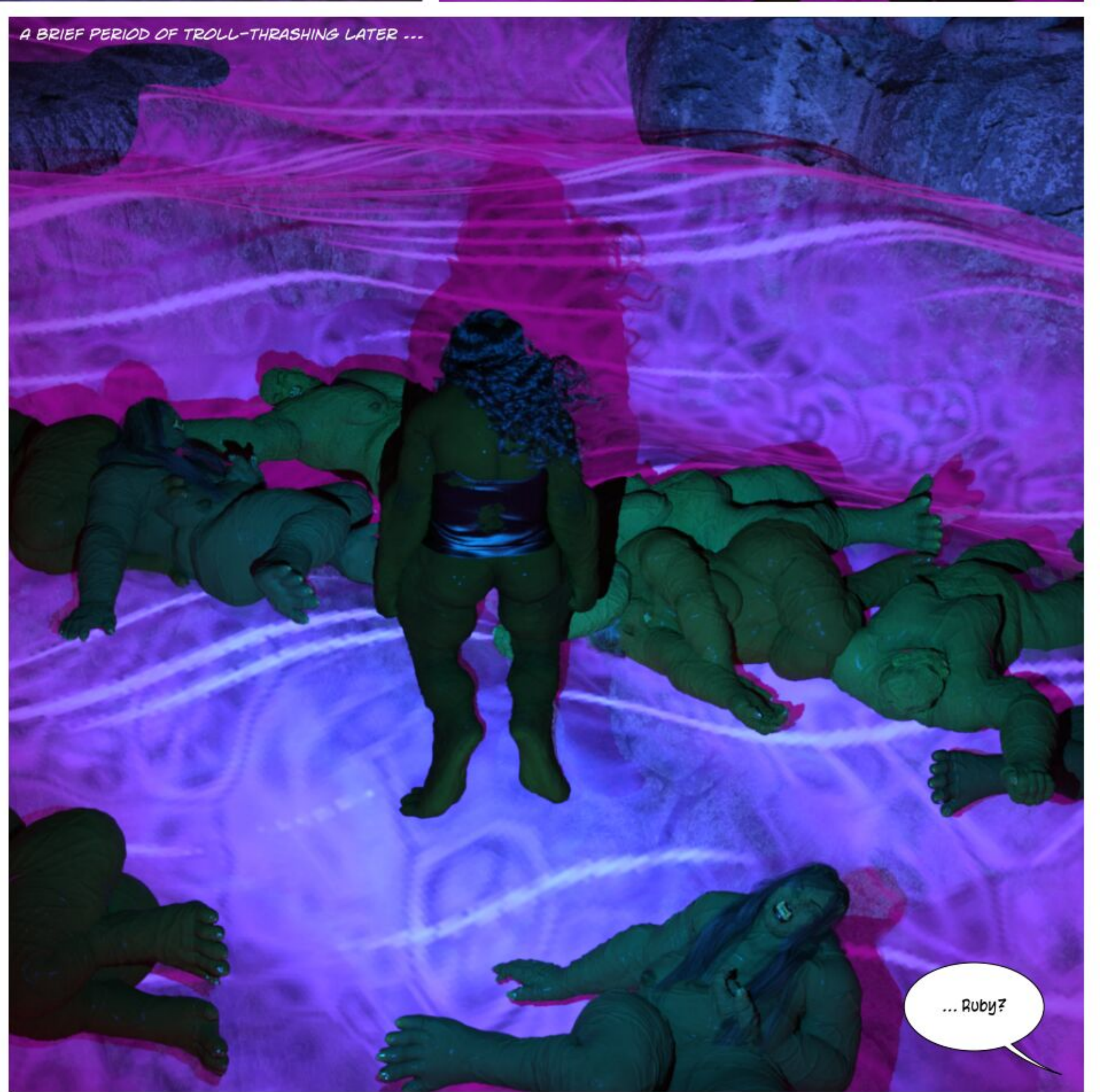
And I have no idea which way to go--



Great. That's all I need.



A BRIEF PERIOD OF TROLL-THRASHING LATER ...







She did say it got even stranger.

Another completely not suspicious big open space. I wonder how many trolls are going to appear this time.

There's something moving over there. Look!



You're no FUN yoU don't KNOW how to HAVE aNy fun

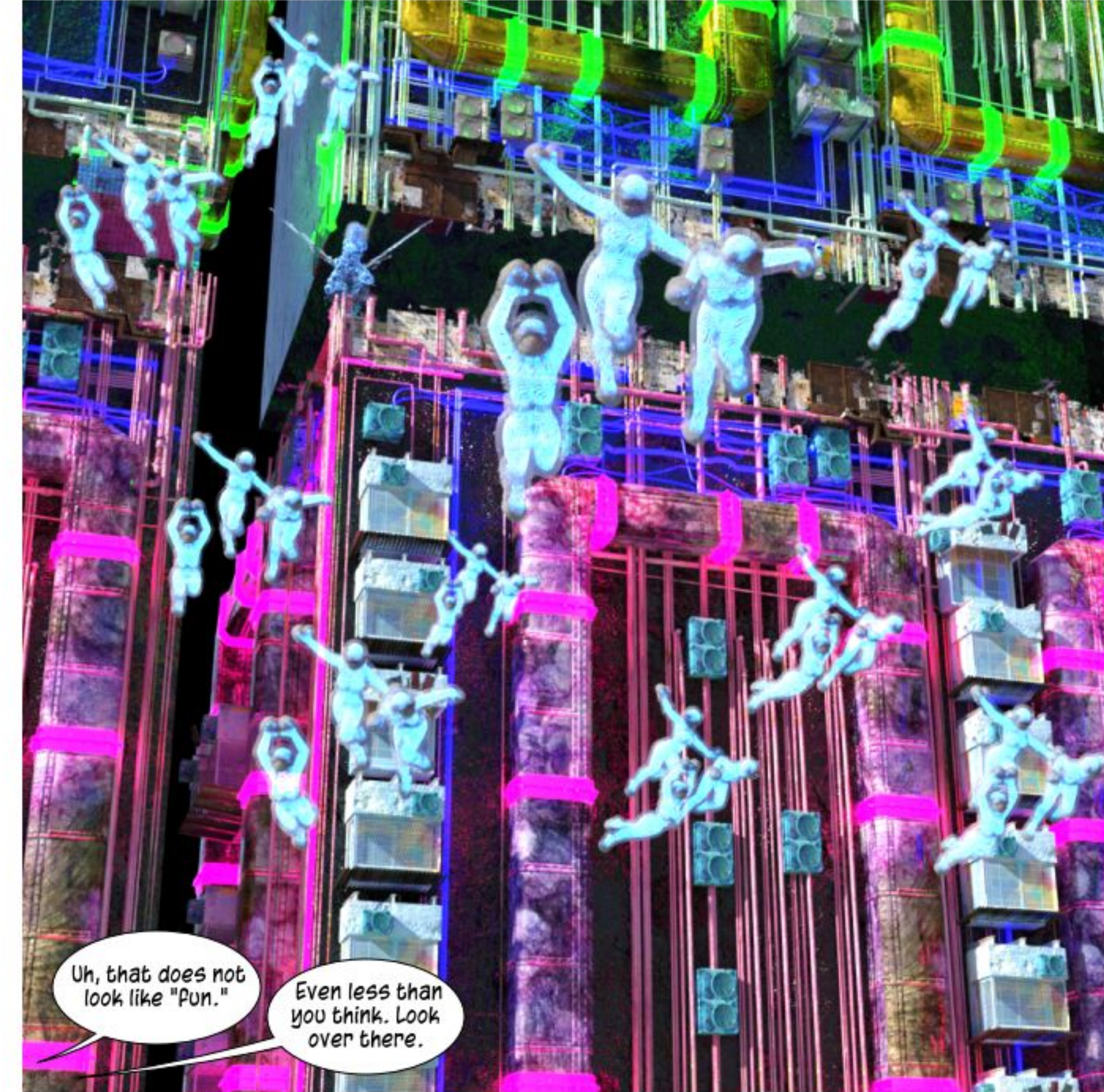
We have TO make you HAVE fun we'LL show YOU we'll teaCH you what'S fun

no SLEEP no sleep neVER sleep only FUN alWAYS fun

That can't be the person--

No. It's her spy or her remote camera or something like that.

The last time I heard that voice, I got tossed in the pit and ended up a troll.



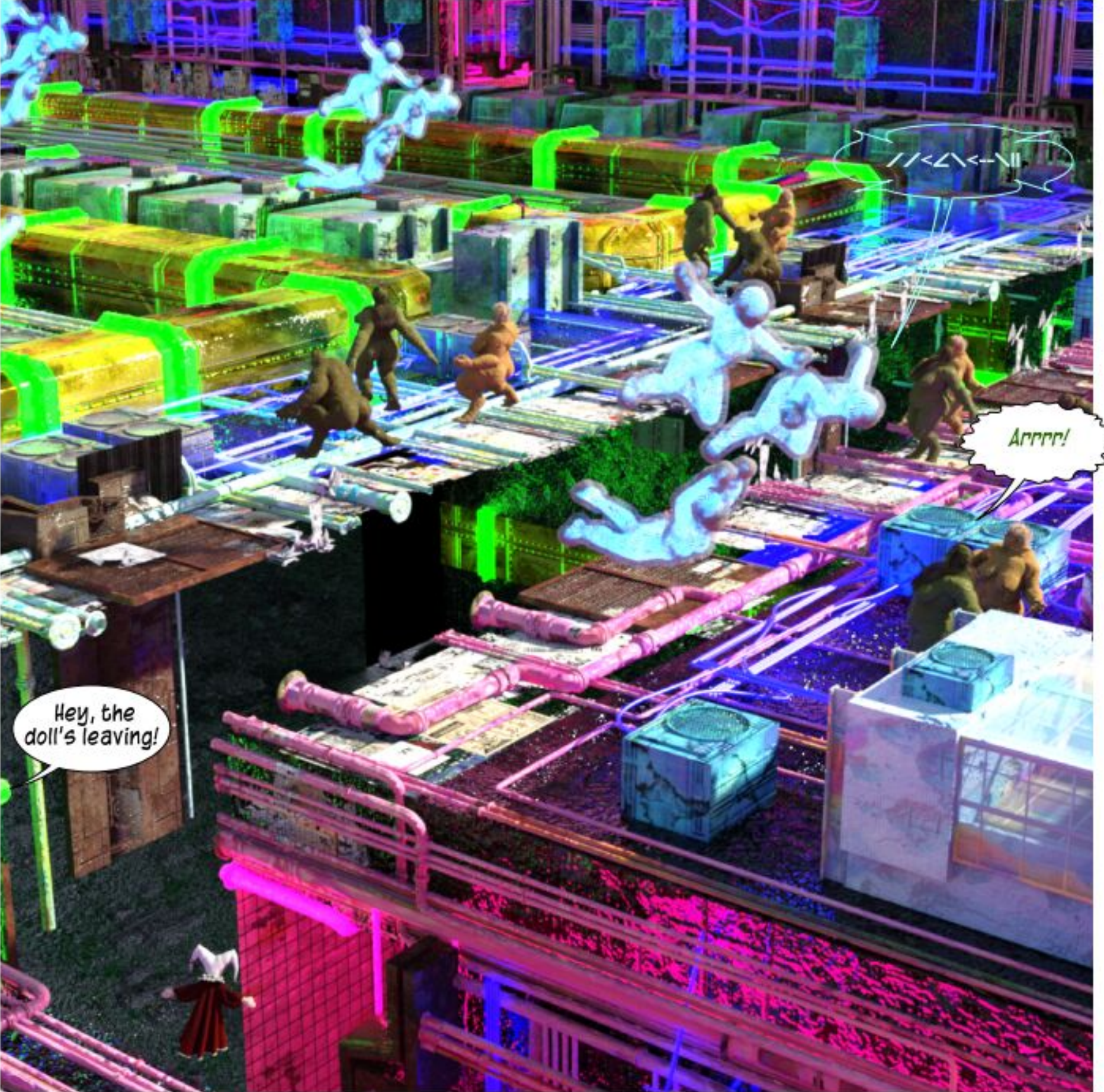
Uh, that does not look like "Fun."

Even less than you think. Look over there.



What, did the doll summon them or something?

I don't know, but we're going to be caught in the middle.



Arrrrr!

Hey, the doll's leaving!



Ruby, what are you doing?

Arrrh!

It's going back to whoever controls it! We have to follow it!



Ruby, wait!

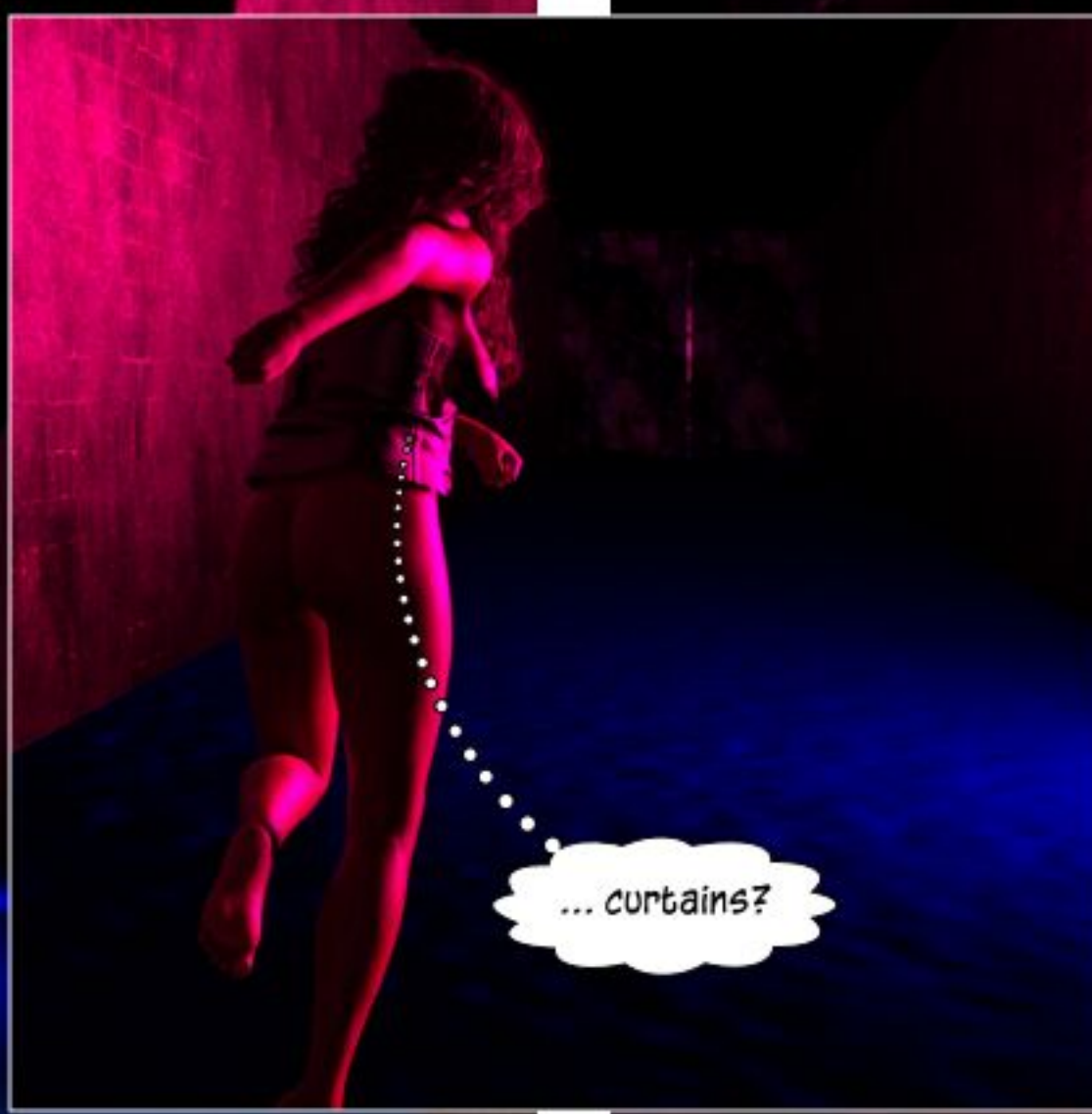
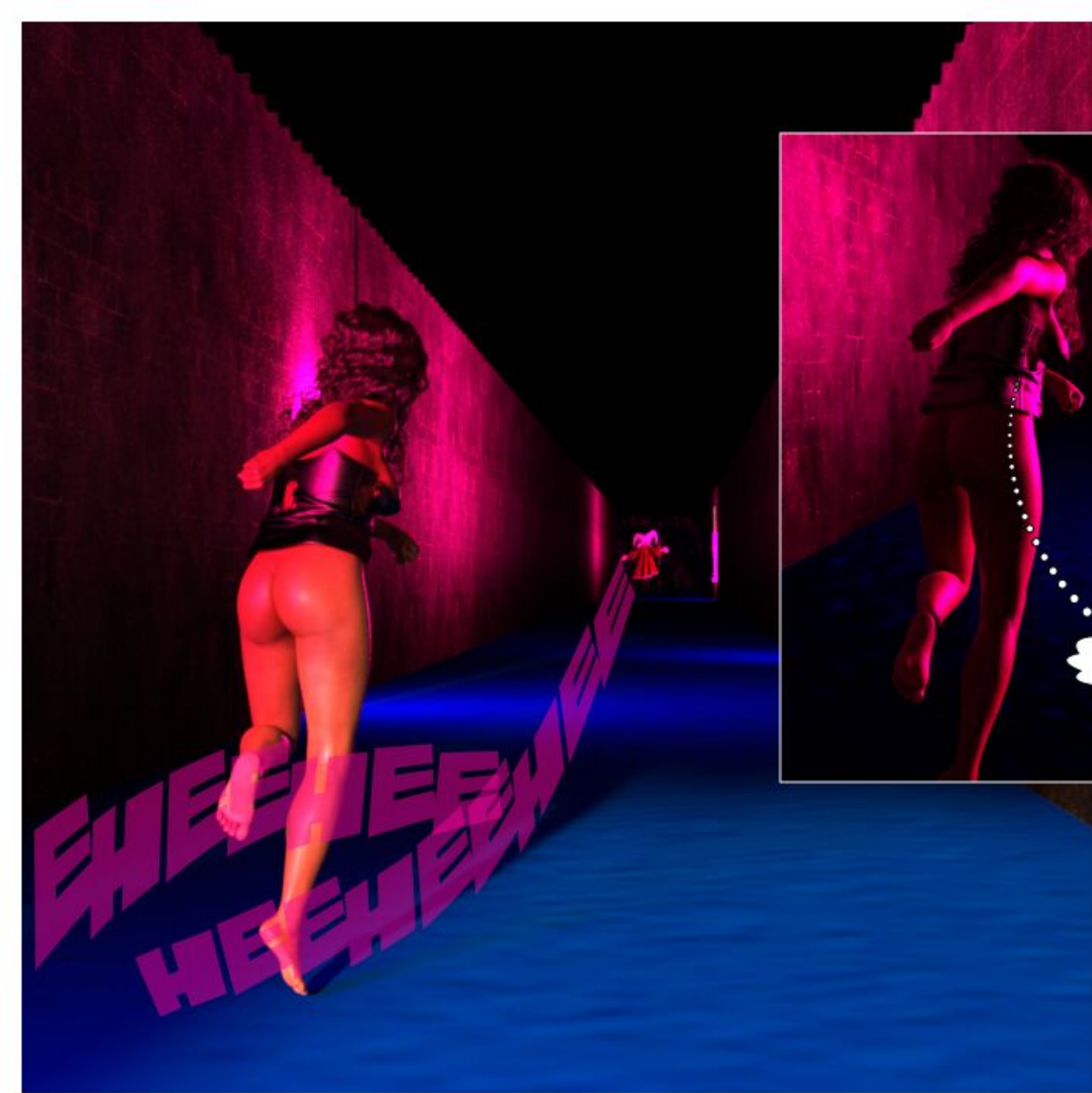
-- Sigh -- I wonder if spending time as a troll has made her even more impulsive.



OK, Ruby, just one more jump ... take it slow ... don't think about the fall if you miss ...

There!

And now ... I have no idea what's going to happen.

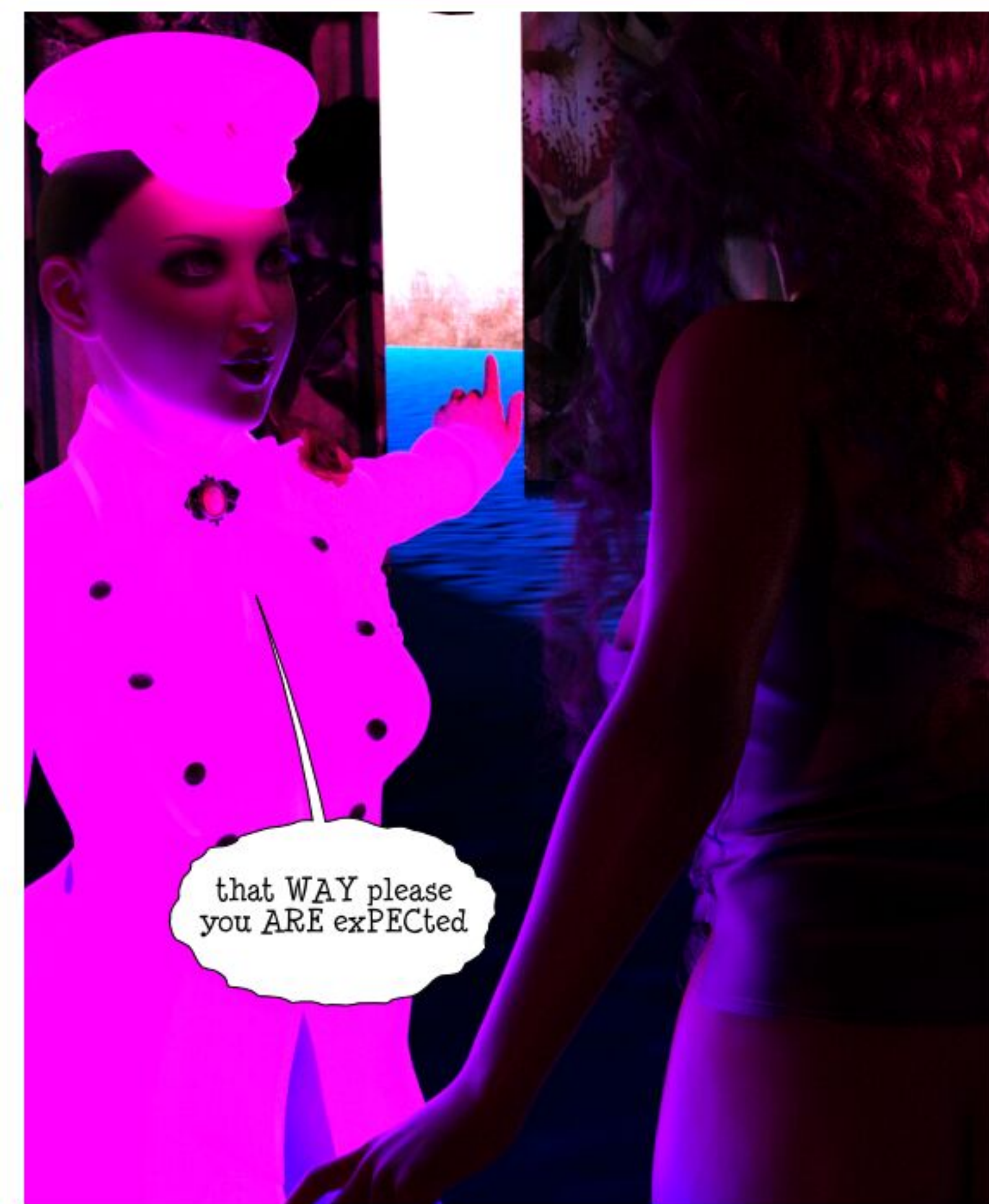


... curtains?

Oop!



THERE you are we WONdered when you'D show UP



that WAY please you ARE exPECTed



you'RE special AREN'T you i can TELL you are HAVE you LEARned how TO be FUN yet let'S find OUT

come DOWN don't be shy WE are going to have FUN and no sleep NEVER sleep



i don't KNOW look AT you i DON't think YOU know hoW to BE fun yet but i caN TEACH you



you NEED better cLothes FUN clothes

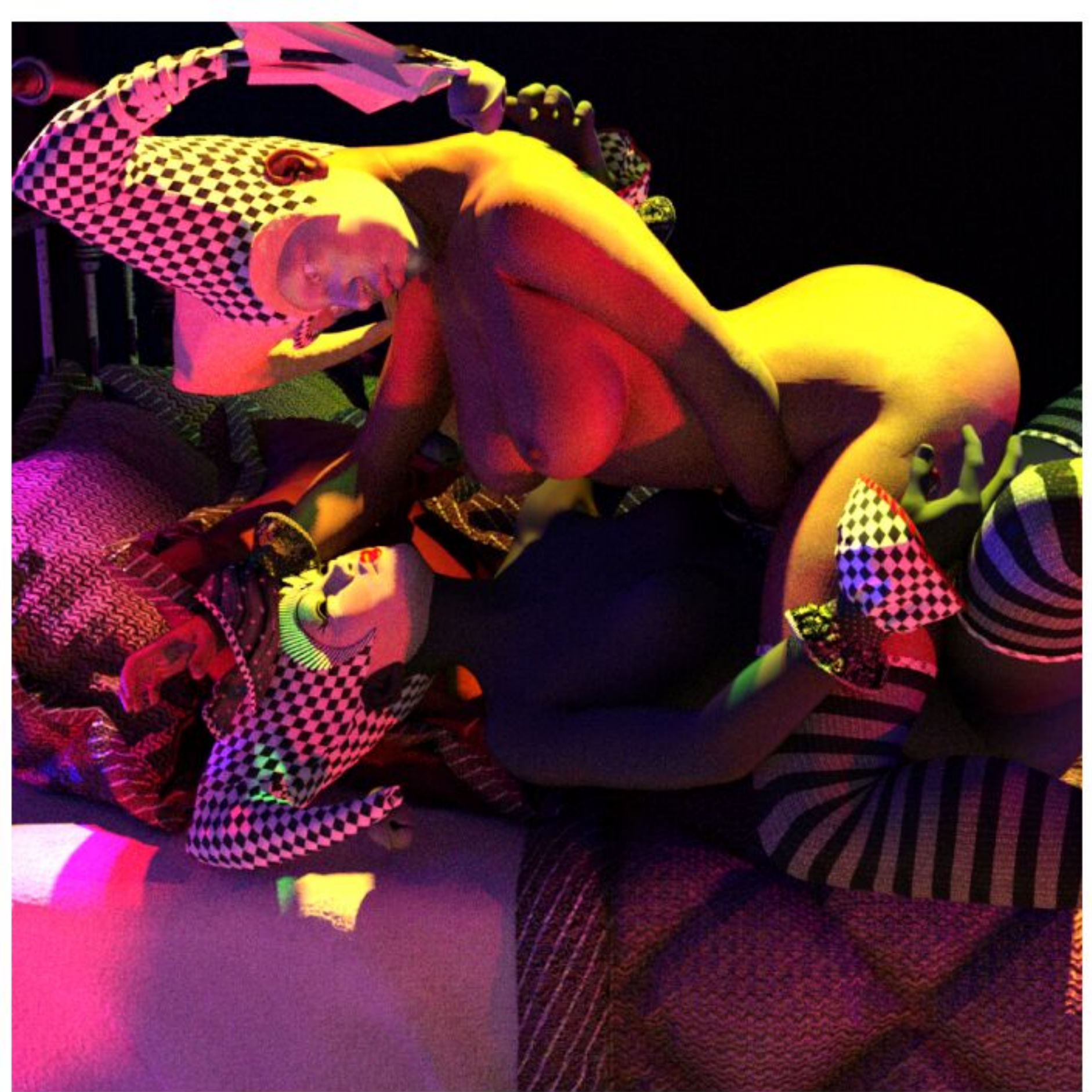


you SEE you'RE more fun ALREADY i can TELL by LOOKing at you

we JUST need to FIX up yoUR face a BIT



THERE now yoU look SO fun i want SO PLAY don't YOU want to play



LATER ...



... MMM ...

Sometimes it's a lot easier to just play along.

More Pun, too.

Now that she's passed out, I can see if I can figure out anything about her.



Damn it.

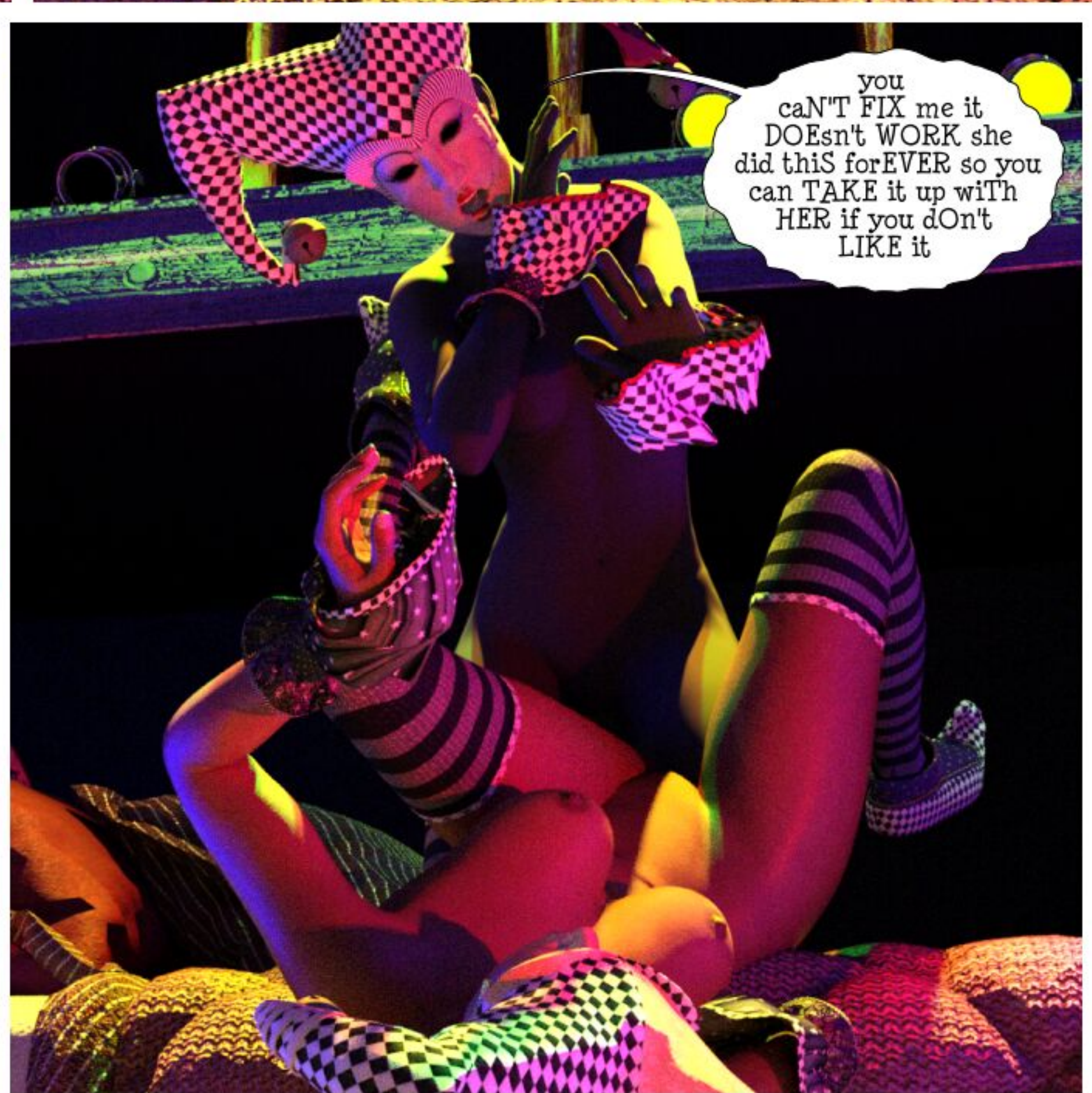
It's the same problem I had trying to get out of troll mode. There's nothing to "undo." Whatever she was before, it's not available to me. This is her normal, at least in here.

I mean, I assume she was something else before. She's not a simulation --



NO!

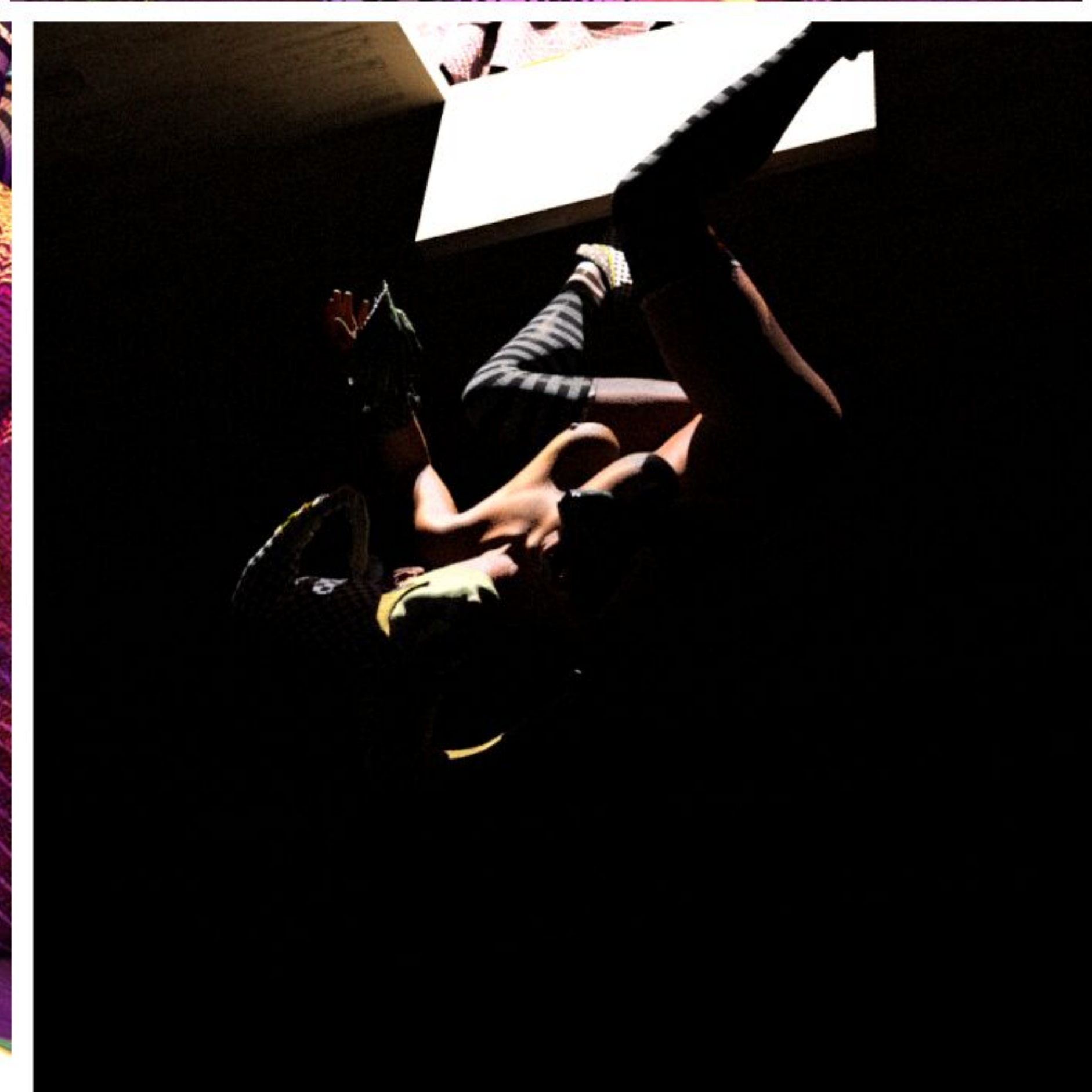
NO sleep never HOW much this is WHAT there IS this is ALL there is



you can'T FIX me it DOESN'T WORK she did thiS forEVER so you can TAKE it up with HER if you dON't LIKE it



YOU are NO fun and i NEVER want to SEE you AGain EXIT stage BOTtom





Okay.

This is a really long Fall.

Long enough that my brain's going to act like it's lethal when I hit bottom.

If there is a bottom.



I hope I can do the trick I did in the Aerie.\* I need to at least slow my Fall.

Then try to get back up again ... except ... wait.

Is that ... is something down there?

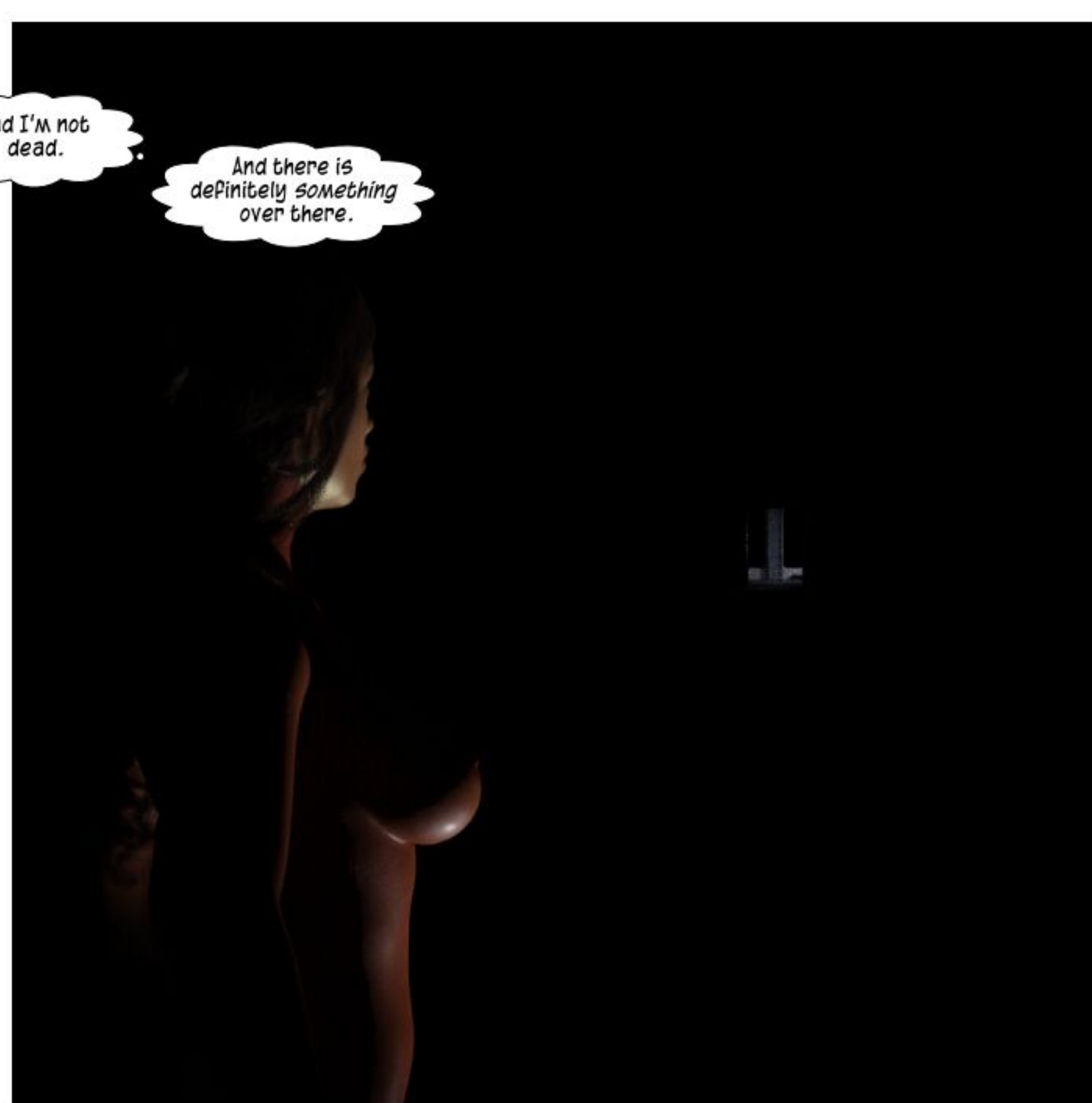
#SS #9 -T



OK. There's a bottom.

And I'm not dead.

And there is definitely something over there.



Why does this seem vaguely familiar?

There's someone in there!



... of course.

I probably should have guessed that would happen.

DR. CHAPMAN IS LITERALLY AT THE BOTTOM OF ALL THIS? CLEARLY THE CONCLUSION OF OUR THREE-PART TALE IS NOT TO BE MISSED! SO DON'T FORGET TO COME BACK FOR ISSUE #16. IT'S REALLY GOING TO BE SOMETHING!