



I don't like the look of this place.

At least the gate's open. I forgot to bring any siege engines.

I might have to change clothes. If the people are in period with the buildings, I'm going to get unwanted attention. Diamond, too.

I could use a change myself. No offense, Amber, it's a good outfit, but this skirt is dragging the road.



Is it ... deserted?

There are people. Look over there in that shadowy corner. They're trying to stay out of sight.

I didn't think we were that scary.

They might not be scared of us.



Hoy!



Strangers.

You'll come with me.

For questioning.



Run, idiots!



Argh!

Definitely have to do something about this skirt.

Halt!



Why, bless me! Visitors!

Out of breath, too. I can guess. The patrol doesn't like strangers.

You picked the right spot. They don't come in here. They know I'll kick their butts.

I'm Bernice. Will you be wanting some rooms?

Pleased to meet you. The patrol just walks around and arrests anybody they want?



Oh, it's worse than that, hon. If they take someone in, we don't ever see them again. We don't know what the patrol does with them. I don't think I want to.

Most everybody down here in the low town is scared to death. You want to be extra careful at night. They don't say there's a curfew, but ...

I don't guess the high-toned Polk up in the castle have to put up with any of this nonsense. It's class warfare, is what it is.

Anyway, they'll forget they were after you in a little while. But best to avoid them.

Now, about those rooms. We haven't had visitors since Forever, so take your pick. Only ones you can't have are the two on the lower floor at this end. There's a couple of sugar ladies bring their customers to those.

You might want to stick to the other end. Quieter.



I want one of the rooms up high!

You want to climb all those stairs?

Bath's down here. If you want one, give me twenty minutes' notice so I can get Bernadette to fill it.

I'll rustle up some supper about six.

Thank you.



What do you think?

It's got bunnies!!

Yeah, two right on your cheeks.

Everybody's gonna call you "Bunny Butt."

No, they won't!

Amber, be good.

What about you two? Any adjustments?

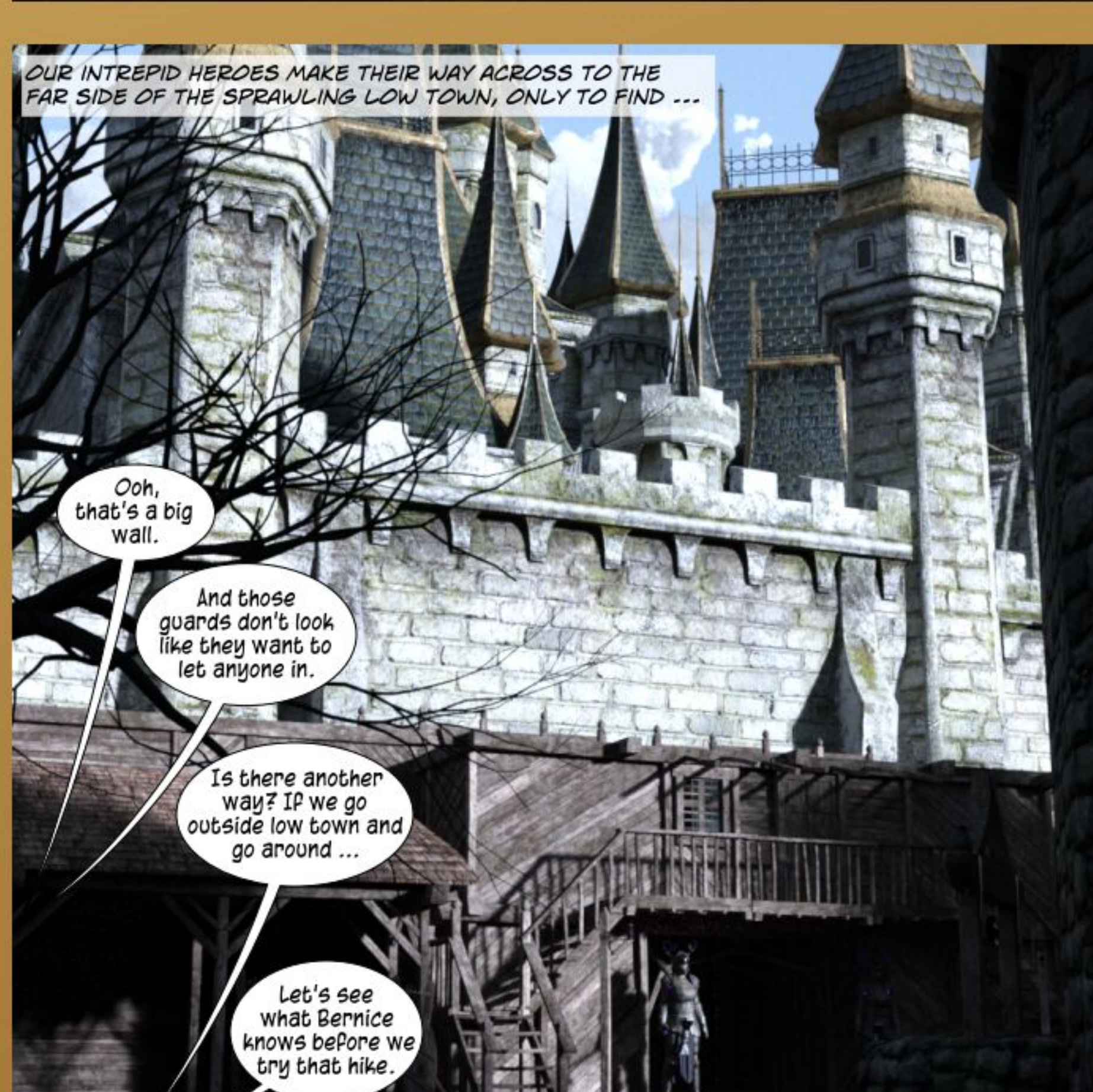


I'm going to rip some of the ruffle things off these sleeves, they're a pain. But I'm OK besides that, I guess.

I was really thinking more like "pants," but this is fine. At least it won't drag in the mud.

So ... we figure Amethyst is going to be up in the castle, right? I guess first thing is to see how we get in there.

If we get in there.



OUR INTREPID HEROES MAKE THEIR WAY ACROSS TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE SPRAWLING LOW TOWN, ONLY TO FIND ...

Ooh, that's a big wall.

And those guards don't look like they want to let anyone in.

Is there another way? If we go outside low town and go around ...

Let's see what Bernice knows before we try that hike.



AS THEY NEAR THE INN ...

Let go!

MULLIH!

There's gotta be a drain tunnel, at least ...

I know you want excitement, but let's get intel first. Especially if I'm going to crawl through a sewer pipe.

... Isn't that the woman who warned us to run?



Why did you help those strangers?

Because nobody deserves to be dragged in by you rustbags! Let me go!



aaark!

-- oop! --



I'll smash your skull for that!

Ow!

Tally hooooooooo!

What --?  
-- uuh! --

WHOWIP



-- huff --  
Damn you!

aaaaa!



All right.  
First your beating.  
Then hers --



-- !!! --



Wow.

She ran off as soon as she got loose. We couldn't stop her.

What do we do with this?

Bullies piss me off.

What happened to the woman? I wanted to talk to her.

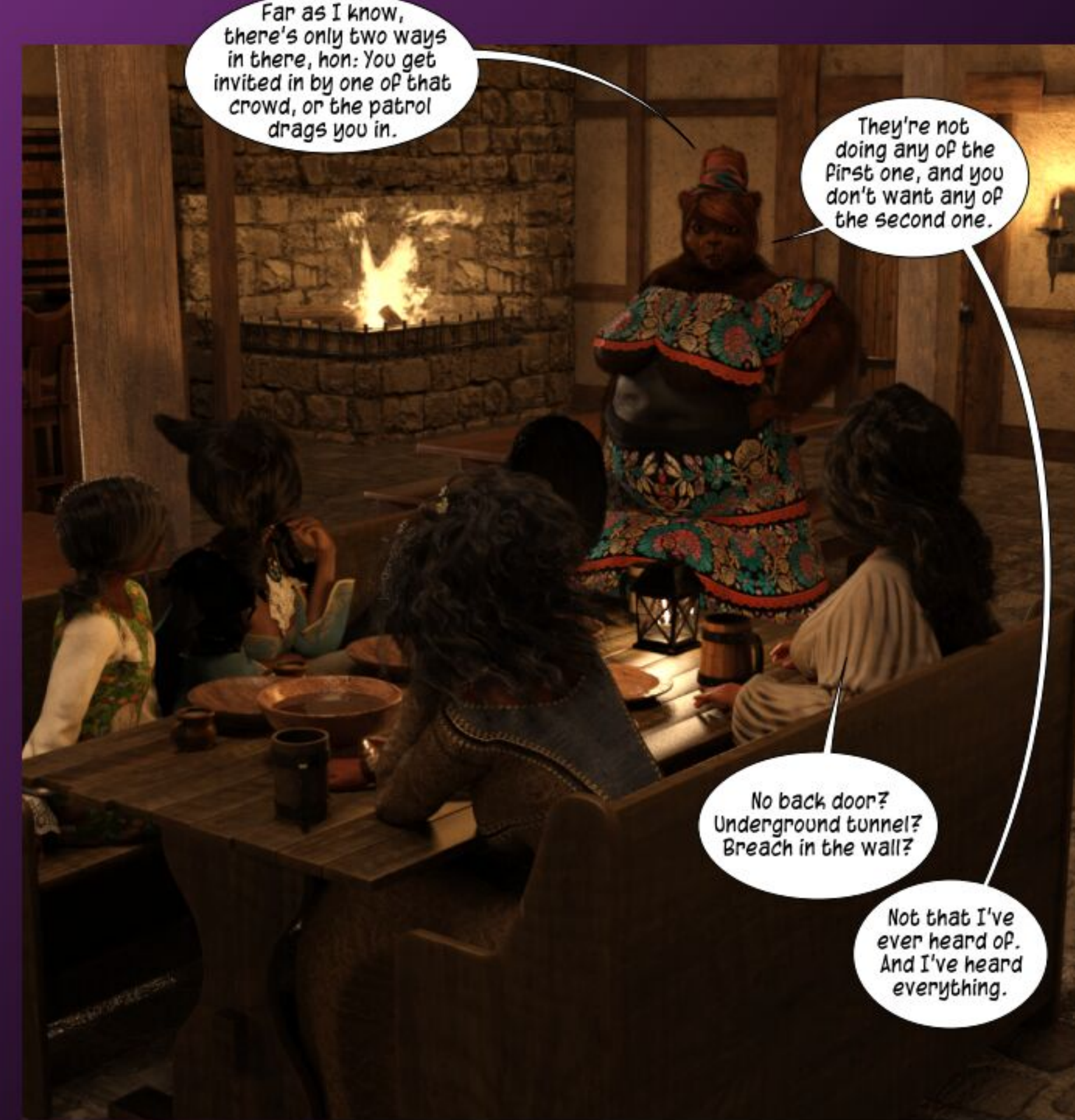
Strip off her armor. We'll take it and the hammer. I don't think she'll be as ready to pick a fight without it.



This stuff is heavy! If I had to walk around in this all day, I'd be mean too.

Hey ... you think one of us could put this on and use it as a disguise?

I wouldn't want to risk it. It'd probably turn us into one of them, or something.



Far as I know, there's only two ways in there, hon: you get invited in by one of that crowd, or the patrol drags you in.

They're not doing any of the first one, and you don't want any of the second one.

No back door? Underground tunnel? Breach in the wall?

Not that I've ever heard of. And I've heard everything.



So we're all just calling it a night early?

Di's out of steam and Amber's pretty close. Sapphire needs alone time, and I have a couple of sketches I want to do.

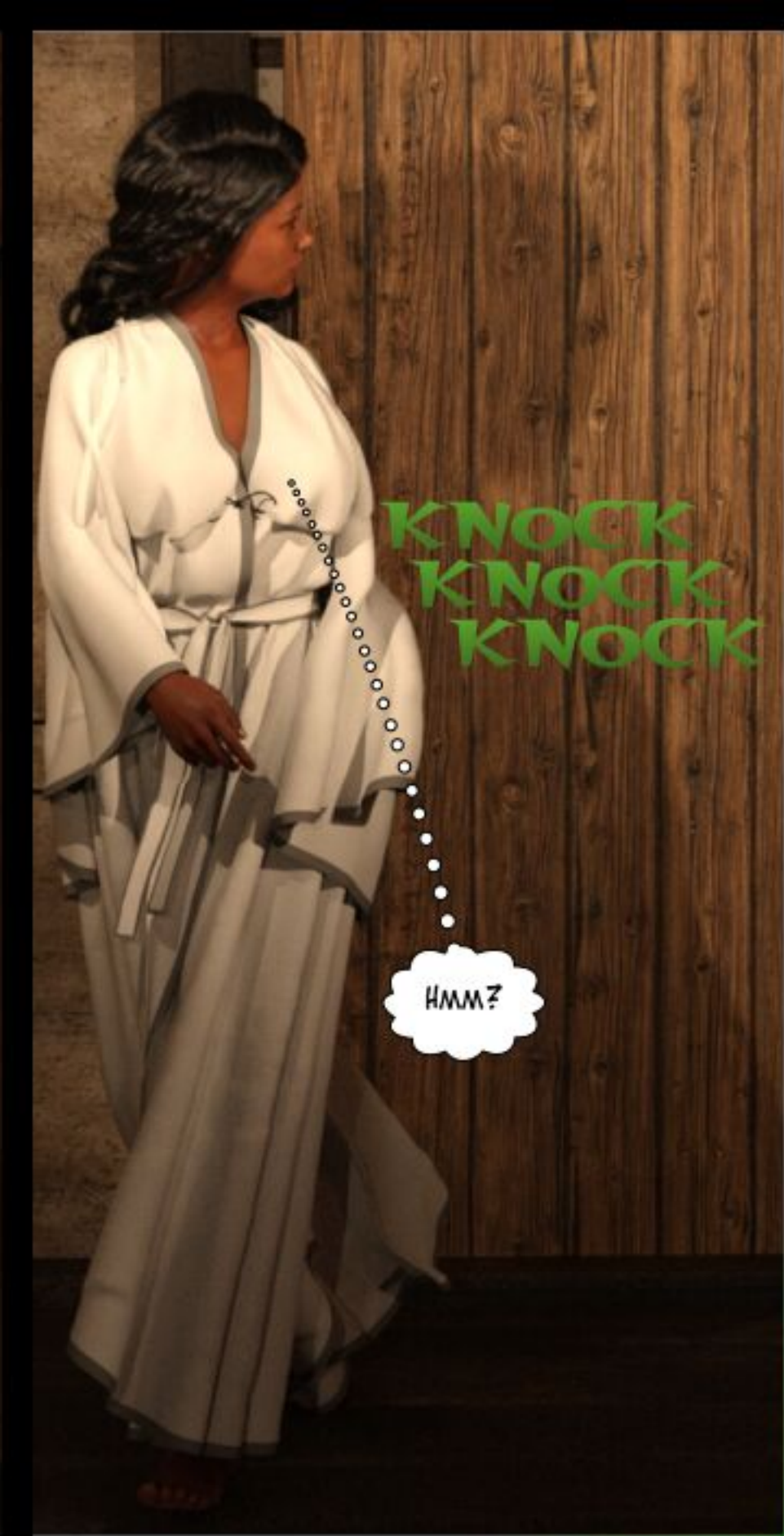
Hey, Di, did you think that woman with the cow looked like Topaz?

It was her. But she's in too many pieces to fix.

Bernadette says that bath's ready.

Oh, thanks, Bernice. Maybe that'll let me wind down too.

AFTER A REFRESHING SOAK ...





MMM ... so good ... and so cooperative ...

I'm supposed to take you to Amethyst, but I think I want to rub you between your legs for a while ... you should get some kind of reward for that ...

I have something different in mind.



You're ... You're not ...?

Nope. I'm not really much of a sub, but I can fake it. I needed to find out what you were actually up to.



-- ah! --  
Now, when we get done ... MMM! ... you're not going to even tell Amethyst you saw me.

-- ooh! --  
You understand?

-- MMM! --  
-- MMM! --

Good girl.



I wasn't about to tell her how much I needed that.

Huh. What's the commotion down there?



This time it's different, Bernice! They're going into houses. Knocking down doors.

They're pulling in anybody they catch in the street. They're not bothering with an excuse. And there's a woman flying around on a dragon --

What's going on?



You!

You're what caused all this. If you hadn't attacked that patroller ...

You mean the patroller who was threatening you and had you in an armlock?

The one you were screaming at to let you go?

Huh. I thought I was helping you out. Silly of me, I guess.



That ... ah ... that's not the point!

We can't do anything that pisses them off! It's not safe for any of us! Look at what they're doing now --

So I should have let her take you?

You know, hiding and trying not to upset them isn't going to work. They seem to be dragging in an awful lot of you anyway.

But we don't want it to happen faster!

That's definitely Topaz.

Uh-huh.

Same as ever.



They're coming!

They're headed straight for here!



You've got some nerve.

You can't come in here!

Hold on there, people. I'm the only one who gets to say who can and can't come in here.

Bernice, she's one of them! She's just here to rat us out or backstab us --

I wasn't always a patroller! They changed me! That's what they do to the people they haul in -- they turn them into more patrollers!

When that woman stripped off my armor it was like my head cleared. I'm not a patroller anymore! I don't want to be one! I never did!

Please! I'm telling you, they're almost here!



I should punch you right through that door --

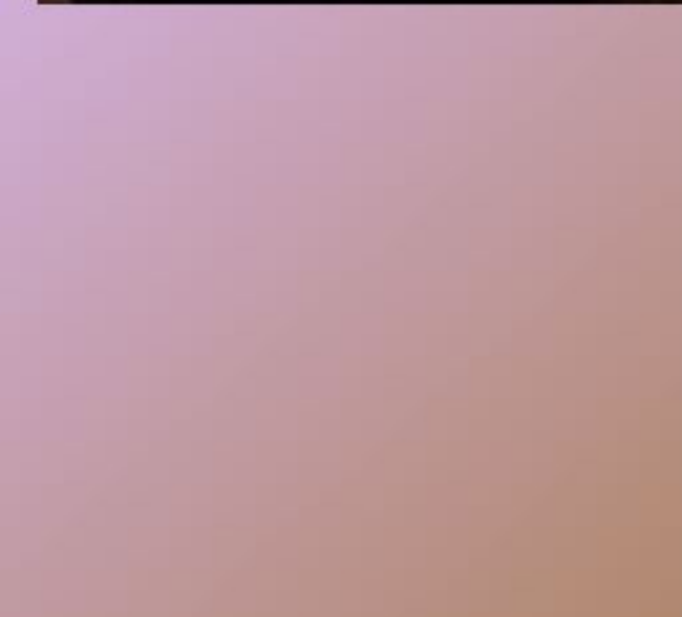
Don't!!

Di, what do you think?

She looks like Amethyst.

She's not!

She's been changed ...



AFTER THE DUST HAS CLEARED ...



Little higher ... there, that's got it.

Bernice, I'm sorry about all this. It really is my fault.

Amethyst knows we're here; they came to get us. Everyone else was just a bonus.

We need to get out of here before they try again. I don't want the inn torn apart because of us.

Psht! Stay as long as you need. If they come back, I'll throw them out again.

If we're lucky, some of the ones we stripped will recover. But Di thinks some of them are probably bits of Amethyst herself. Those'll stay bad. And they'll come back worse.

I've got to figure out how to get up to her, and Past.

Hrm. Wish the Moon Priestess was still around ...

Moon Priestess?

AT THE BAR, BERNICE POURS RUBY A DRINK AND TELLS THE TALE.



The Moon Priestess is ... was ... what you might call the protector of the low town. She knows all kinds of things. If anyone knew another way into the castle, it would have been her.

You sound ippyy on whether she's in past tense.

Well, she *might* be alive, for sure. But the Moon Temple's haunted. Or something. No one who tries to go in comes back out, and people claim there's a ghost wandering around there.

So even if she's alive in there, no one can get to her. Hell, maybe she's the ghost.



I think I had better go check that out. Where is it?

You serious? After what I just told you? I don't know if you're brave or crazy.

Could be both.

Look, so Par on this adventure, every time somebody's said "Oh, that's the thing you'd better not do," that's turned out to be the thing I need to do. Why stop now?

Heh. Temple's on the east side, back of the Narrows. Might work out, actually; the patrols hate the Narrows. If you can get that Par.



I don't think I should wait to do this, but it also means getting across low town in the dark without being spotted.

Amber, I'd like you to come with me.

K.

No Par! How come Amber gets to go and I don't?

Because Amber can fight, Di. And move quietly.

Di, Bernice needs you to help with these people. And protect the inn if more patrols come. OK?

... Sapphire, I think you should come too.

-- sigh --



THE NARROWS.

I don't like this.

Yeah. I can see why the patrols don't come in here. They could barely fit down some of these alleys.

No, I mean it's creeping me out.

That, too.



Huh?



You OK, Amber?

I thought ...

Uh, never mind.



That's gotta be it.

It's got to be something, anyway ... c'mon, Sapphire, we're going in.

... Sapphire?



Sapphire!!

No, wait, don't run away!

Damn it!

**AAAAAH!!**

...Amber, what --?



Ruby -- Behind you --!



Yiiii!

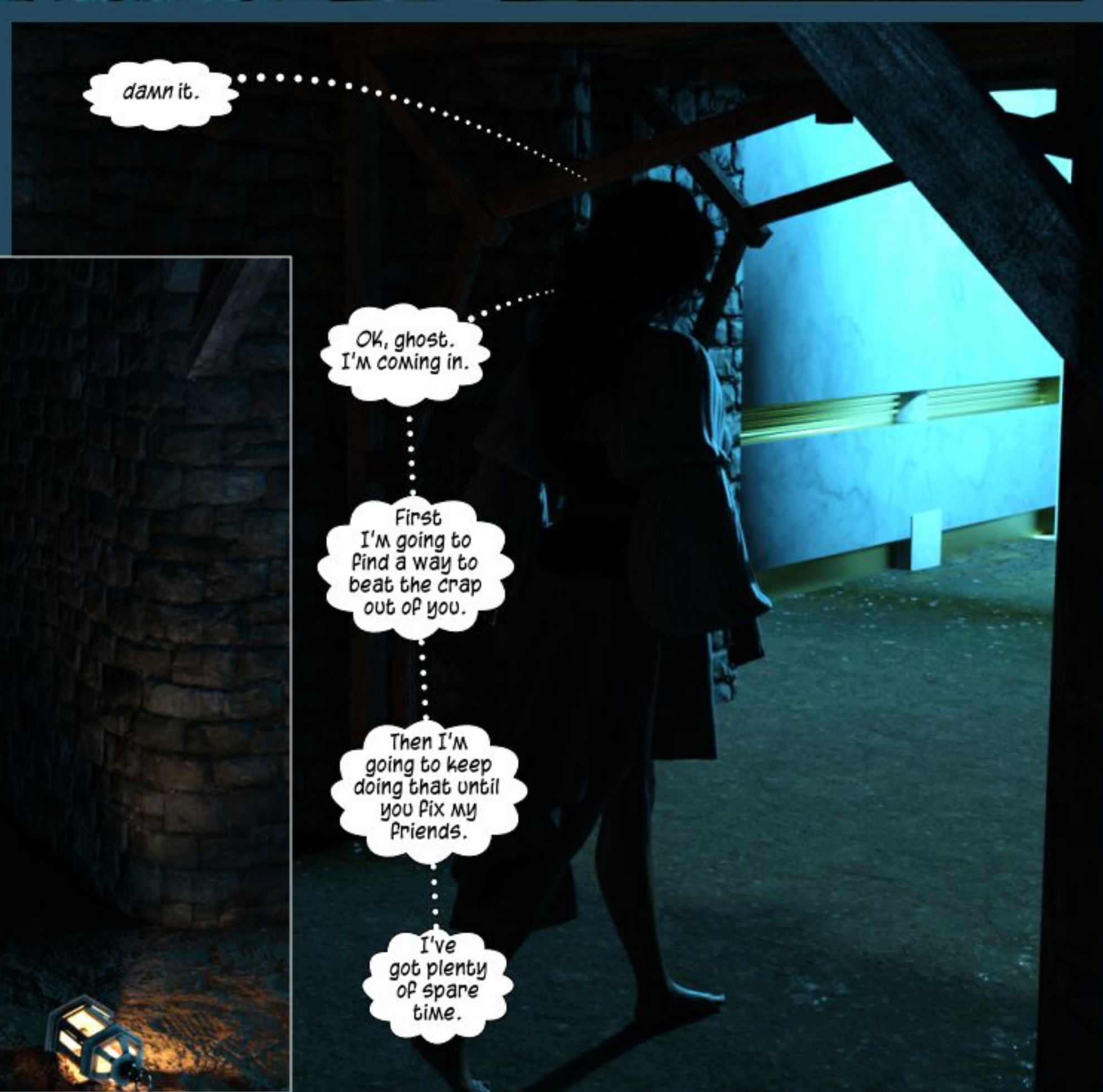
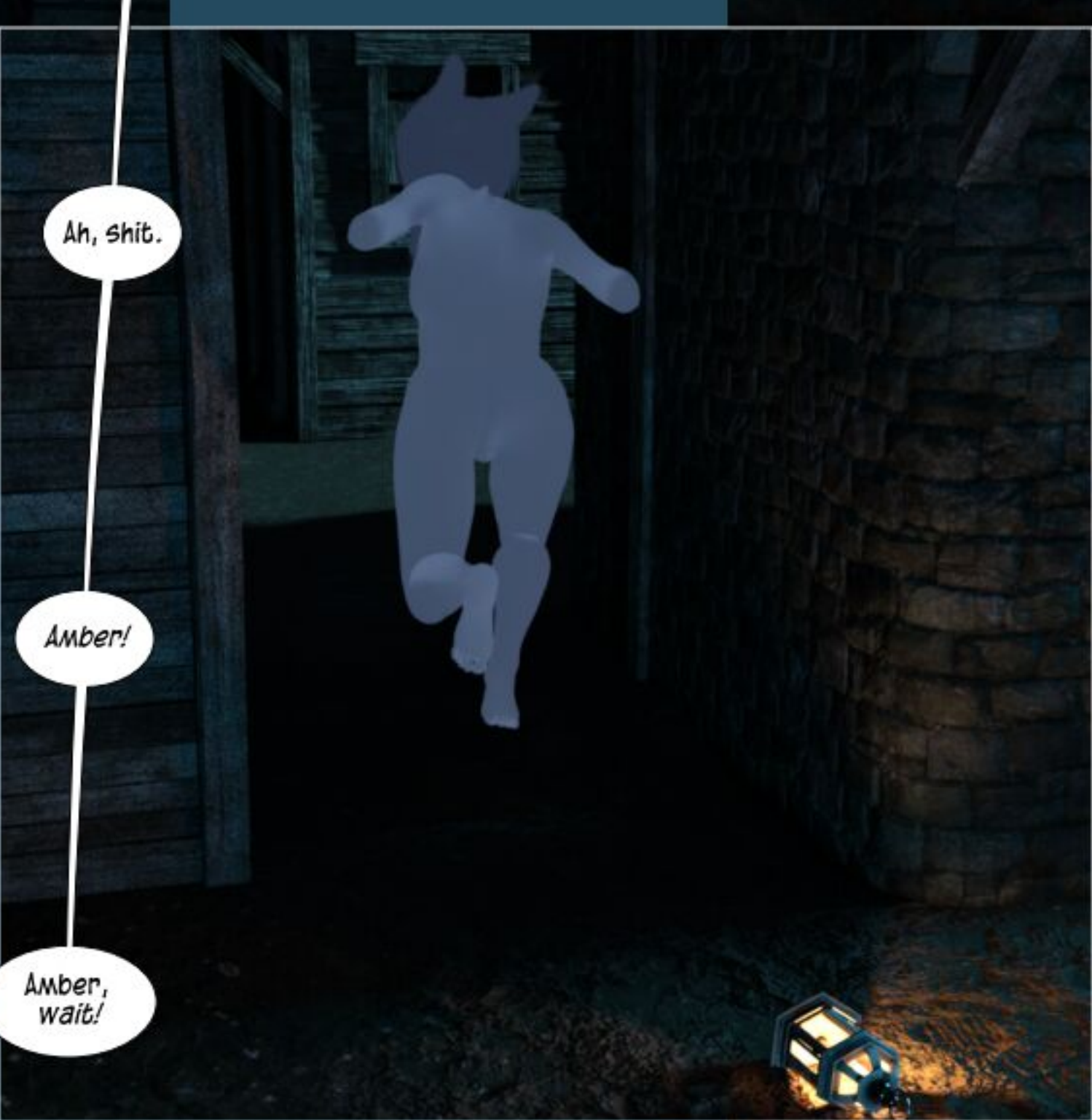


Missed me, you --

Ah, shit.

Amber!

Amber, wait!



damn it.

OK, ghost. I'm coming in.

First I'm going to find a way to beat the crap out of you.

Then I'm going to keep doing that until you fix my friends.

I've got plenty of spare time.





... Nice try.  
I guess this is what you don't want me to mess with, then.  
Too bad.



Oh, that's MUCH better.





Well, sorry to have interpered with your ghosting ...

It's not that. I'm pissed she managed to trick me.



I mean, how much damage did I do while I was ... like that?

Hmm. Looks like you don't need to worry about it.



So now that you're back to being the Moon Priestess ...

Moon Priestess?

This is Opal.

And this is no Moon Temple. It's the entrance to the Archives.

Everything's all messed up, Opal.



Damn it!

I mean, I'm glad you're back to normal, but I was hoping for someone who could give me some hints on what to do next.

Instead it's another dead end.

Well, you're on top of the Archives. Our memory. All kinds of information ...

Nobody can find anything in it but Garnet ... but I'm pretty sure she's down there.

Anyway, it can't hurt to check ...



Uh, this hall doesn't have any other doors ...

That's the way in. Let yourself sink.



Let myself -- I don't see how --

Oh! OK. I get it.

I sure hope there's a way back up!



This is not what I expect an archive to look like.

There's someone over there ...



Oh, there you are.

I was wondering when you'd decide to come down.

... Momma?



I'm not your mother. I'm part of you, just like everybody else here.

She probably doesn't look like this now. You really should get in touch with her again, you know.

That might be difficult.

Are you my conscience, too?

No, just your memory.

But you can't have a conscience without a memory.

Which is why Amethyst put Opal up there to prevent anyone from speaking to me.

Amethyst's ambitions are incompatible with conscience, and she knows it.



What are Amethyst's ambitions?

Hmm. I think I've already said too much. Memory isn't always impartial, but it's best when it is.

Opal. Amber. Sapphire. Good to see you're all well.

Remember, all of this is you deciding what you want to be. It's just taking an unusually physical form.

Ask Amethyst what she wants, when you see her. I'm sure she'll be eager to tell you.

Well, about that ...

We can't figure out a way to sneak into the castle.

Ah.

The Archives connect to everything. Come back when you're ready, and I'll open a way for you.

THE GROUP BEGINS THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE INN TO PLAN THEIR APPROACH.



It's got to be almost dawn ... if we're lucky the patrols have all called it a night --

Get them!!

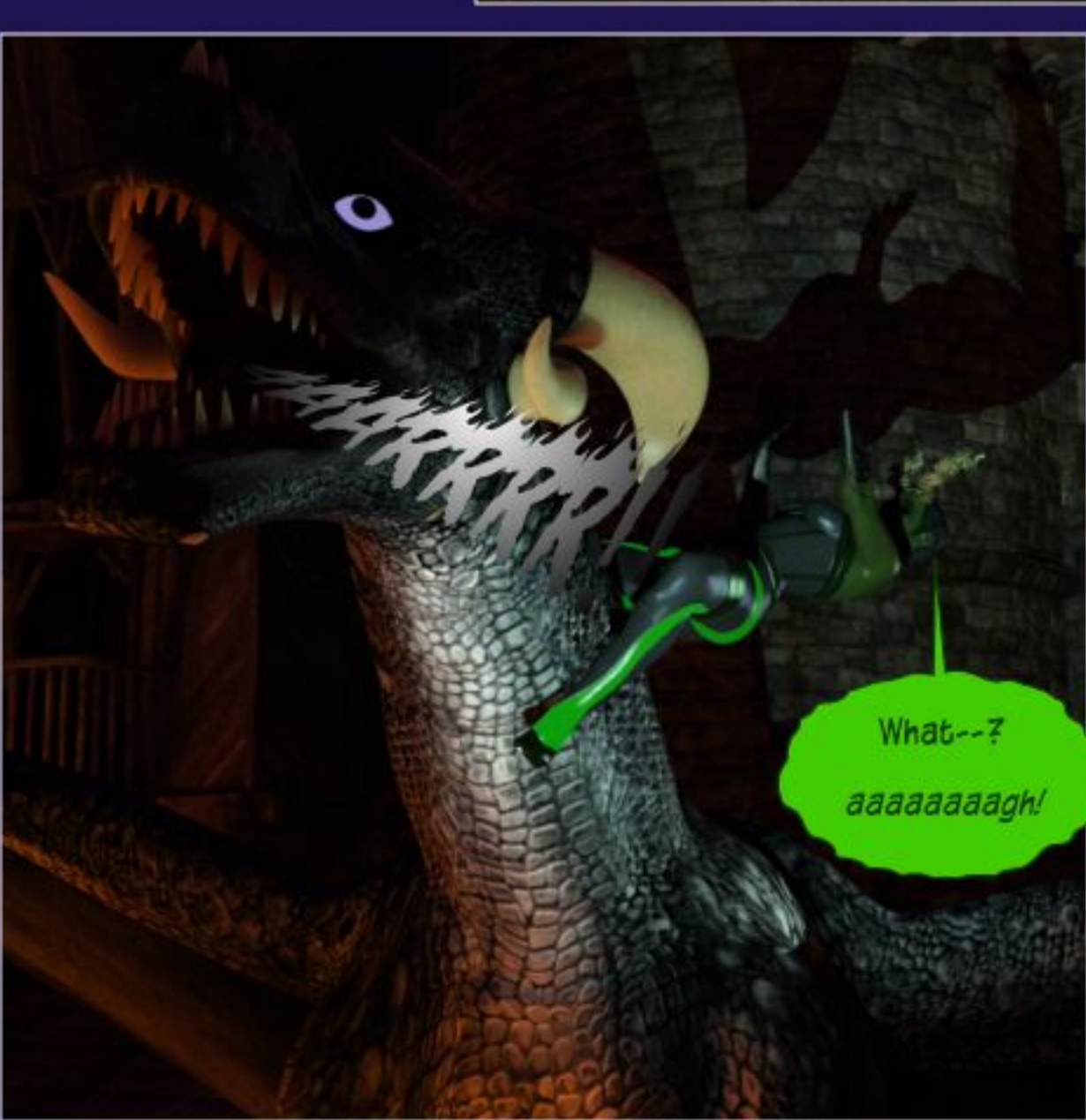


Aaaaaah!

Move!



Use your breath, stupid -- What are you waiting for? Blast her!



What--? aaaaaaaagh!



Oops! Dropped my sword.

Little bitch! When I -- UMPH -- When I can get up, I'm going to turn you into a worm!



-- giggle --



Splitting up was not the smart thing to do, but that's panic for you.

I need to get back to the others before something --



Oop.

"Everybody is somebody else." That's what Di said.



Wouldn't you rather be a person again than stay a monster?

Do you like being a monster?



NO ...

Oh!

I didn't know you could talk!

Come on, bring your head down here.



CAN TALK IF SHE NOT HERE ...

WHEN SHE HERE, HEAD GO BAD ... ALL DARK ... BAD ... HAVE TO DO WHAT SHE SAY ...

NOT WANT DO WHAT SHE SAY ...

Can't say I blame you.

Look, I don't know how to change you back, but I think I know what we need to do first.

IF you're willing to cooperate.



Not laughing now, I see.

I knew you'd try to come rescue them. You're so valiant. And reckless. And predictable.

Next Ruby is going to come try it too, and then I'm going to turn all four of you into earthworms and you'll never bother anybody again.

rphm!

mpm!

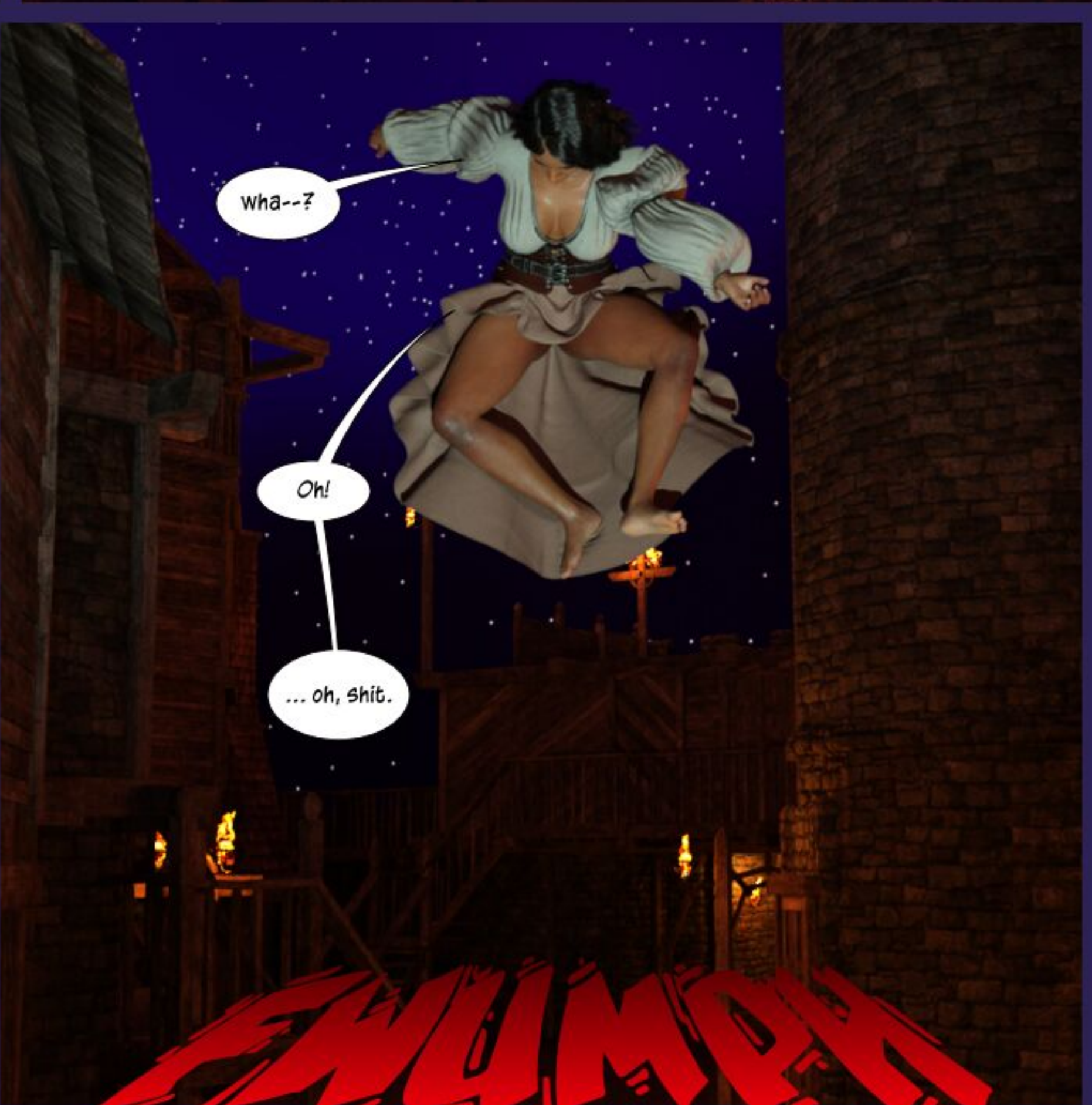
mph!



Get her!



Aaieeeee!



Wha--?

Oh!

... oh, shit.

**FWUMP!**



uuugggh ...

There has got to be an easier way to sort out your head.

Tell me about it.



Hey, Ruby!

Have you been properly introduced to Jade yet?

-- urg --

Why does she always take the clothes? Does she have a thing about clothes?

... why ... did you have to burn so much ... was just trying to ...

Arnaah!

-- oof! --

And this is Onyx.

Turn me into your pet dragon ... get up so I can hit you again!

I hope you're not expecting me to make Onyx apologize.

C'mon, get up. The sun's rising, and we're all going back to the inn for breakfast.

And if you don't behave, I'll let her knock you into next week.

-- buh --

You know, you could have come with us ...

I didn't decide I wanted to check on everybody until after you left.

Also, I took the route without a dragon. Onyx, Jade, I hope you're both recovered.

One of us didn't have anything to recover from.

That's not quite true, Onyx ...

Now, I know you can't see the future.

Of course not. But as soon as something happens to any of us, it becomes memory.

Well, does your memory of what's been going on up in the castle have any helpful tips for me?

There's no reason to be angry with me.

Maybe she doesn't think there's any room for neutrality, Garnet.

-- sigh --

I just think it's better if Ruby learns things for herself. You can do the math. Eight of us are here. That leaves four.

In the castle, besides Amethyst, Emerald is lurking somewhere. The rest of the people you'll find there are all fragments of either Pearl or Topaz, same as down here.

Yeah. Di said she can't merge them ... why?

They're too fragmented. They lack a common set of drives like the vixens. And they're not entirely in that situation against their will.

They're not? The Polks here didn't seem like Friends of Amethyst. What's motivating them to cooperate?

Scooch over a little, would you, Di?

Topaz is chickenshit, and Pearl is a kiss-up.

Onyx!

Tell me I lie, Opal.

-- ahem --

Topaz feels that the best thing is to go along with whatever's happening. Not rock the boat. Friend to everyone, but very passive.

Pearl ... Pearl is your "social climber" part. She wants to be part of the group that's on top, no matter what that group is.

Garnet, you said the same thing I did but you took four times as many words.

"So what motivated Jade? Is she just horrible?"

"No one is 'just' horrible, Ruby. And Jade told you her motivations herself, though you may not have been in a position to notice at the time.

Jade is very cynical. She believes that you can't succeed by playing by the rules. Amethyst's argument was that the rules need to change. That had a natural appeal to her."

"Hey, Garnet, if you're solving mysteries, Sapphire and I still want to know about Bernice. She sure doesn't act like a fragment of Topaz or Pearl ... even Di can't figure her out."

"Bernice is a piece of Amethyst."

"Amethyst?"

"Part of Amethyst rebels at her own ideas. And that is all I'm going to say."

Go away.

No.

I don't want a lecture. You don't even know what Amethyst is trying to do. You just came in and went on the attack. And now I get to be the monster.

Jade ... I plan to learn what Amethyst is trying to do. But don't you see that her methods -- and yours -- kind of undermine the message?

I mean, why would you need to do the things you did? If you had something good enough, you could just say, "Hey, let's do this," and have everybody else say "OK, sure!"

Everybody's mad at you and they should be. You did mean, horrible things. Now: Why did Amethyst want you to do those things?

You think she was using me. But she wasn't! She wants to change us, and what she had in mind ... doing things her way, we could actually --

Actually what? What did she want to improve? You know, we're not having a bad life. We're not miserable. We're not broke. We're not bored. We're not usually lonely.

Look, I get that you and Sapphire are in charge of all the negative feelings around here, but you have to stop sometimes and actually see facts. Sapphire has.

I'm taking Opal and Onyx with me into the castle. While we're gone, I don't want you making any more trouble.

If you do, I've told the others they can do whatever they have to do to keep you in line.

But I'd rather you got there willingly.



When you said the Archives connected to everything, I didn't realize you meant actual secret passages.

Through the back of a wardrobe? Really?

It's your metaphor. Don't blame me.

You're going to want to stay out of sight until you can find some of the others here, to see how they're dressed. You'll definitely want to blend in.

Good luck.



If nearly everyone here is a Pearl or a Topaz, aren't we going to stand out anyway?

You better not be asking me to look like Pearl.

Huh!  
I think ... that's not going to be a problem.



Wow. Are they even real?

... I'll do it, but I won't like it.



You can duplicate that, right?

Yeah, but not casually. It's going to take Pocus, especially the masks. We need a quiet place where we won't be disturbed. Ideally with a mirror. Where are the bedrooms, you think?

Oh! You're not Mistress Beatrice!

No, I'm not. Will you help us anyway?

You can't walk around wearing that! It's not acceptable!

Funny, that's exactly what we need help with.



First, we must get you out of these things ...

Hey! Uh, you're very direct ...

Guess you got what you came for, Ruby.

You know we're going to be next, right?

Get all that hair up out of the way ... Much better ... and into something more suitable ...

All right ...



And of course we mustn't forget the mask.

!!!



... Ruby?

You're next!

Wait ... I don't think this is

Perhaps the mask first, this time.



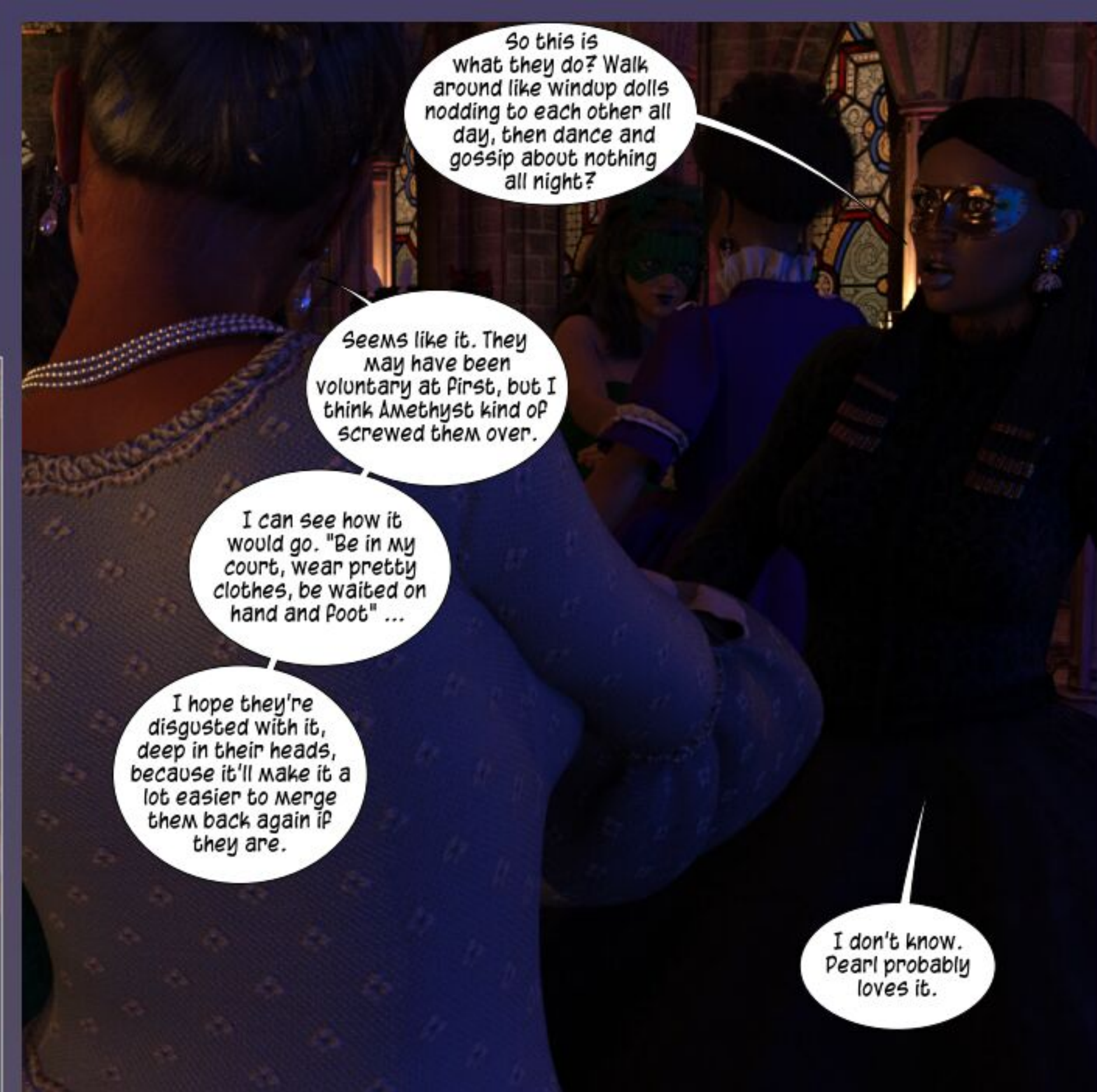
Hey! Leave her alone, you can't

You as well.

Now, let's see. What shall we wear?

Don't worry, Mistresses! I'll make sure there's someone to dress each of you for the ball!









Emerald. It didn't work on me last time, what makes you think it would now?

I wasn't even trying that! I was hoping you'd, y'know, just want to.

Amethyst told me I could pool around all I wanted. But they don't get horny! None of them likes sex but Jade, and she's always busy. I have to mess with their heads if I want to play, and they're still not into it, even then.

You're pun. They're not.

So Amethyst cheated you, too? Sounds like she gave bad deals to everybody.

Emerald, I can't play right now. I need to find Amethyst. Do you know where she is?

Sure! I'll take you to her ...

... but you have to come to my room and lick my pussy first.

-- giggle --

-- sigh --



Is she softened up?

-- giggle --

Oh, yeah! She's completely out of it.

uh?



Now I'm going to go put you somewhere where you won't be any more trouble.

uh?

And now that Emerald has fucked you incoherent, you won't make a Puss about it.



I suppose I should have expected that the two sluts were the only ones who could get any traction with you.

Sex is your weakness, you know. Once I'm completely in charge, I'll get rid of all those parts of our personality.



Augh!

One of your weaknesses is you have no imagination.

That's why you had to have Jade do all your dirty work for you. She's a lot more inspired about it.

Never occurred to you I might be faking, or that Emerald might be sick of your bullshit too.



You know, I've been trying to keep telling myself "Hear Amethyst out! See what's eating her!"

But you never intended to play fair. You've cheated and lied to everyone else here. Why did I expect I could have a straightforward talk with you?

Don't hit me again!

I gave them all what they wanted! Even the ones who didn't want to cooperate! Amber got to have adventures all the time, Sapphire got to sit in a horrible place and put ...

OK, I had to lock Diamond up, but I couldn't affect her and she was never going to listen to reason. I don't think you will either.

I'm listening.



OK, here's why you shouldn't be in charge: You're wasting our lives!

You found out you're probably the most powerful thing in sleep. You could take over the place! You could get rid of the Barkers!

And what did you do after you found out? You whined about not wanting the responsibility! You've done nothing! We've got everything and you won't use it!

You make me sick!



This is what you have in mind? Some kind of dark queen?

... That's as far as you can go, isn't it? You don't really know what you'd do with it either. You just know you want to be in charge.

Also, it's cliché as hell.

You just don't have the brains to appreciate it. Everyone knows I hold most of the intellect here.

And most of the ego, apparently.

It's called "self-assurance," MUSHMOUTH, something the rest of you whiners know nothing about.



I said what I --

-- ouch!! --

You're not the only one who can take.

You know, you made a mistake coming into your head like this.

It means that I have the option to deal with you physically.

I'm going to beat the shit out of you, until there's nothing of "you" left.

And no one is going to save you.



You sure about that?



Oh.

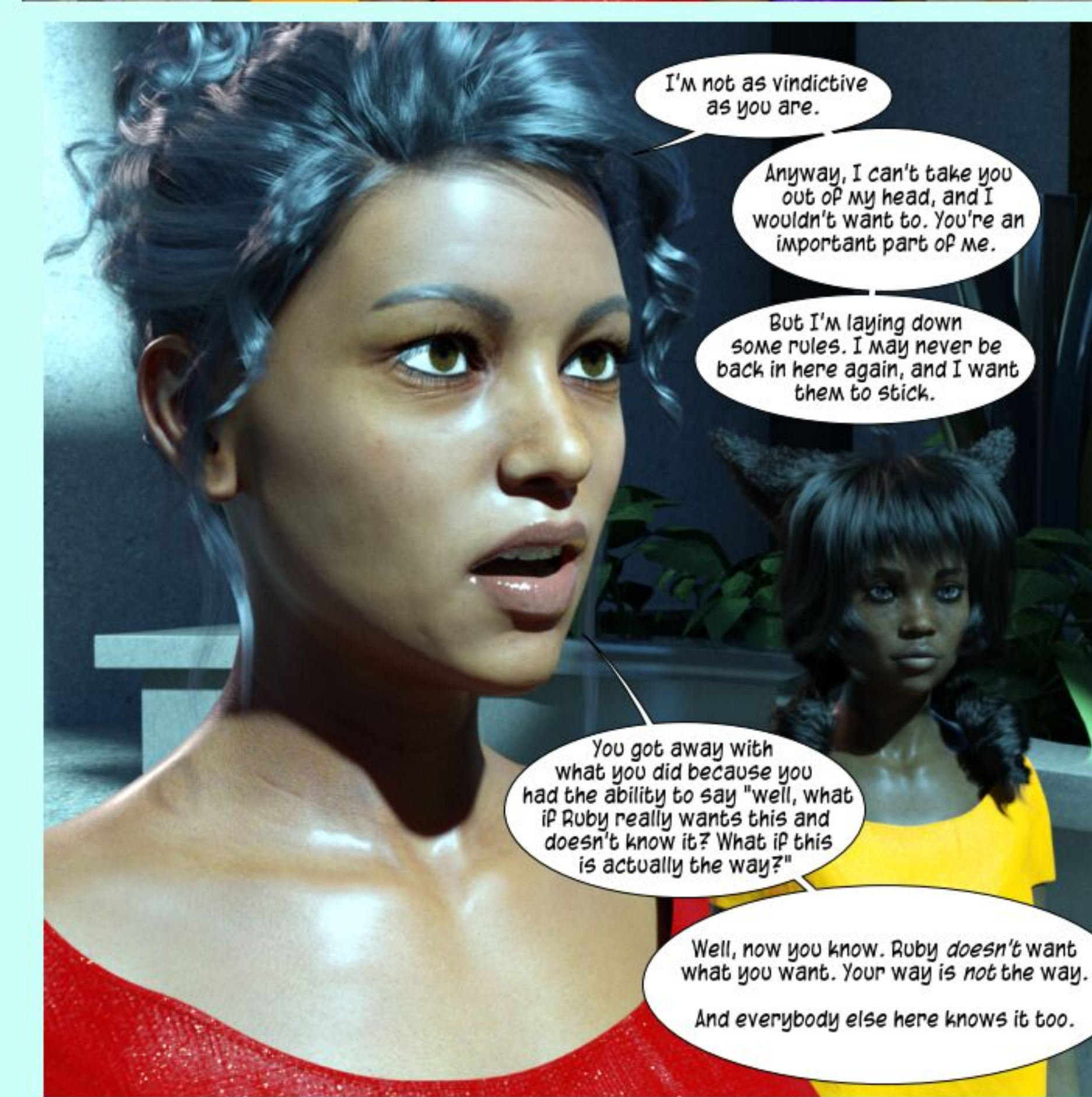


... Fuck.



So this is the part where you get rid of me?

And they'll all bless it. Nice and easy.



I'm not as vindictive as you are.

Anyway, I can't take you out of my head, and I wouldn't want to. You're an important part of me.

But I'm laying down some rules. I may never be back in here again, and I want them to stick.

You got away with what you did because you had the ability to say "well, what if Ruby really wants this and doesn't know it? What if this is actually the way?"

Well, now you know. Ruby doesn't want what you want. Your way is not the way. And everybody else here knows it too.

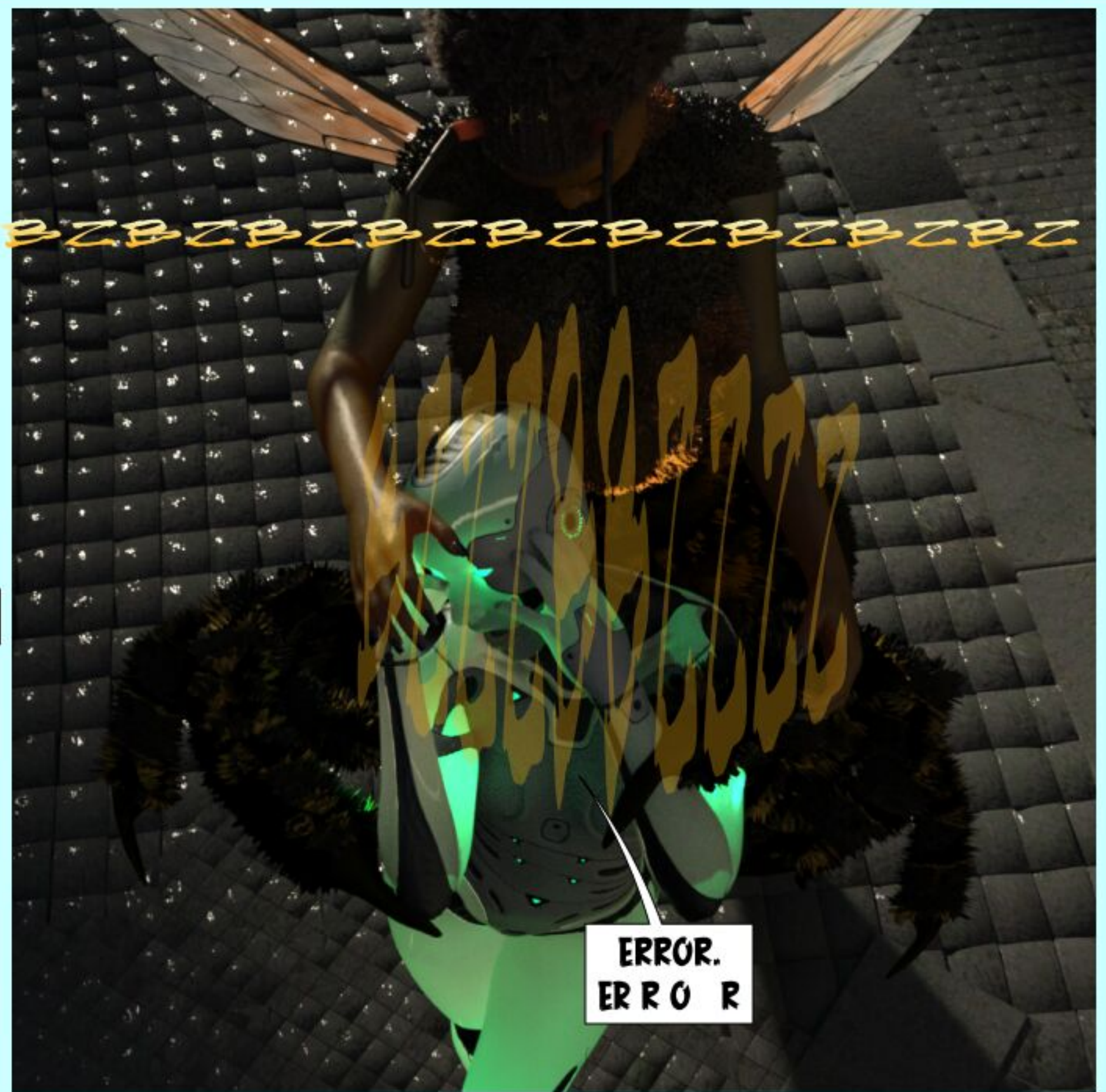
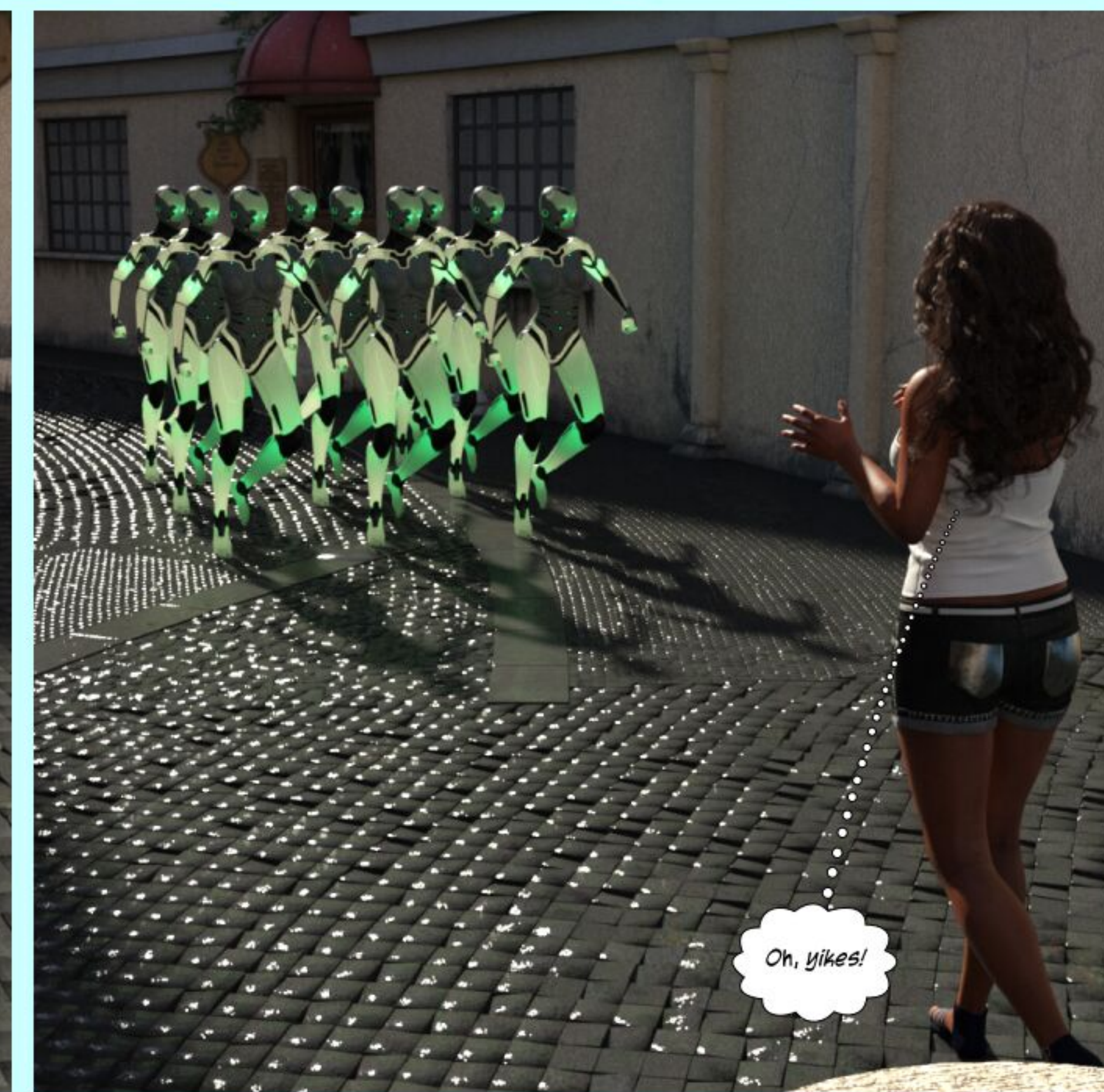


You're not going to cheat all your sisters a second time. They're on to you now.

Behave, and everything will be fine. Don't behave, and they have my permission to team up on you and do any kind of ass-kicking they need to do.

Get it?

... I get it.



THAT'S AN EXCELLENT QUESTION, RUBY ... BUT THE ANSWER WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL OUR NEXT ISSUE! DON'T MISS IT!