

PREVIOUSLY ON
SLEEPER SQUAD

RUBY HAS BEEN AWAY ON AN INVOLUNTARY ADVENTURE THAT TURNED OUT TO BE ENTIRELY INSIDE HER OWN HEAD.

UPON RETURNING, SHE GOES TO LOOK FOR ORCHID, WHO GAVE HER THE "FOCUS CRYSTAL" THAT SENT HER ON THAT TRIP, TO GET SOME ANSWERS.

EN ROUTE, SHE ENCOUNTERS A PACK OF ANOMALY PATROLLERS, WHO FIRE ON HER WITHOUT PROVOCATION -- A NEW BEHAVIOR, FOR THEM.

THESE, IN TURN, ARE AMBUSHED BY ... THREE FLYING BEE-WOMEN? WHO SEEM TO HAVE SOME WAY OF DISRUPTING THE PATROLLERS?

ALL OF WHICH LEADS RUBY TO ASK THE VERY REASONABLE QUESTION:

What the hell is going on?



BUT ANSWER COMES THERE NONE. THE BEES HAVE ALL FLOWN OFF, AND THE PATROLLERS LEAVE NO TRACES WHEN DESTROYED.



RUBY CONTINUES TO THE CIRQUE DIABOLIQUE TO FIND ORCHID. WHAT SHE ACTUALLY FINDS IS:

"All performances cancelled until further notice."

Still, April or someone might be in there. I'll try around back. I don't think April ever turned off my access.*



* FROM WHEN RUBY WORKED WITH THE CIRQUE IN SS #8. -T



Uh ... anybody home?



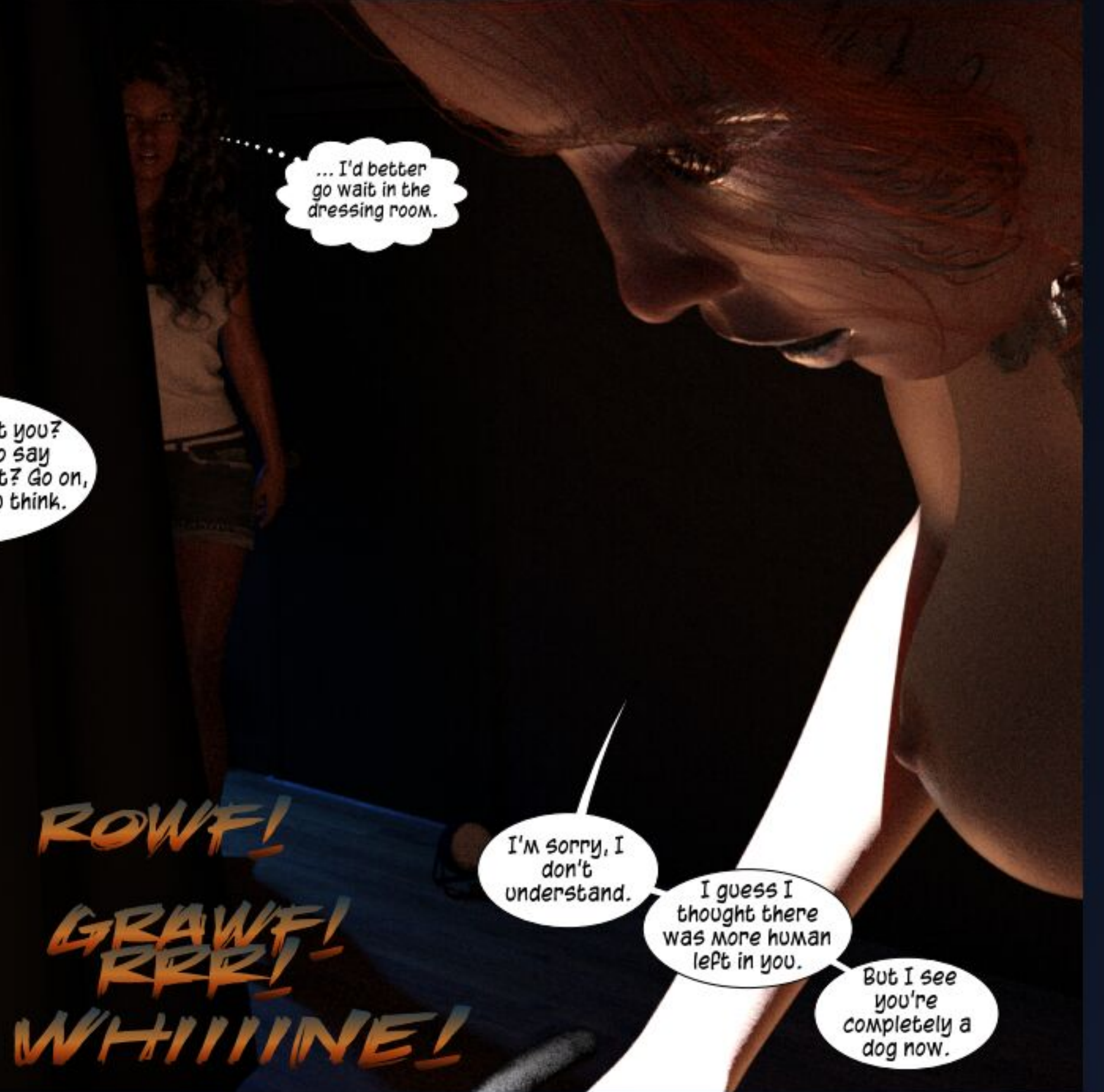
Now there's nothing human left in you. You're not Pit to be a human. You're an animal now, nothing but a dog ... your mind is clouded, nothing but instincts left. Food. Sleep. Running around. Finding a bitch to hump.



They're out there, you know. Watching you become a dog. Laughing at you. They think you're ridiculous. Not good enough to be a person! Trapped as a dog! And they know you deserve it. And they know you deserve it. They think that's the funniest part of all.

Can you hear them laughing? How does that make you feel, to be so ridiculous? Knowing you can't escape? That you'll be a dog forever and ever?

Does that upset you? Do you want to say something about it? Go on, tell me what you think.



... I'd better go wait in the dressing room.

ROWF!
GRAWF!
RRR!
WHIIINE!

I'm sorry, I don't understand.

I guess I thought there was more human left in you.

But I see you're completely a dog now.



I saw you, you know.

Sorry. I backed out as soon as I caught on.

It's OK. The client didn't notice.

With the circus unable to operate, I've had to fall back on my old career as a hypnodom for a bit.

I don't figure you're too shocked.

Actually, I was thinking I should have got you when I needed someone to dom a customer and turn them into a cow.*

April, I've ... ah ... been away for a while. Why can't the circus operate? Is it the patrols?

Yeah. They can go into any accessible space. A lot of clubs and such have gone private so the patrols can't raid. They give out access points so you can just jump there, and you have to get them to admit you.

That approach won't work for the circus, though. If I have to be appointment-only I might as well just dom.



So I guess if the circus is dark, Orchid wouldn't have any reason to be here ...

I have a couple of things I need to talk to her about.

Do you know a place called "Hive," over in the Shibuya district?

Orchid was spending a lot of her time there even before we went dark.

If she's not at home, I'm willing to bet that's where she is.

Be careful. I had a look at the place and didn't like it. It could just be me, Orchid thinks it's great ... but something about it just doesn't feel right.

SS #14 -T



I'm positive there used to be an access point just up the street from "Hive" ... Did they close it down?

This one's a lot further away ... I hope I can get there without running into --



Ah, hell.

ANOMALOUS.



Yiiii



ERROR



That's a good trick.

Right?

Took us forever to figure out what would work ...

Ruby!!



It is you ...

Where the hell have you been?



I, ah, got stuck in something I couldn't get out of ...

That's it? That's all you have to say?

What's wrong? I mean, I see a lot has happened over the last couple of days --

"Days"?

You've gone for over a month. You didn't answer your phone, your personal space wouldn't let anyone in ... and you turn up now like "oh, hi, what'd I miss?"

Everything completely falling apart. That's what you missed. Thanks for the help.



C'mon, Jumpers, let's go.

Ruby, if I'd realized it was you we were helping, I'd have let them zap you.

You can just take care of yourself. It seems to be what you do.



OK, never mind Orchid for now.

I have got to talk to Serene.

I hope she's not going to be mad if I go to her door, under the circumstances.

SERENE BARKER, FOR THOSE JUST JOINING OUR STORY, IS THE PERSON WHO SOMETIMES GIVES RUBY AND LEYNA ASSIGNMENTS. NORMALLY, TO AVOID ANYONE FINDING OUT THAT A BARKER IS DOING THIS, SHE COMMUNICATES WITH THEM STRICTLY USING HER "MIDNIGHT" IDENTITY.

SERENE IS ALSO LEYNA'S MOTHER. THAT'S A SECRET.

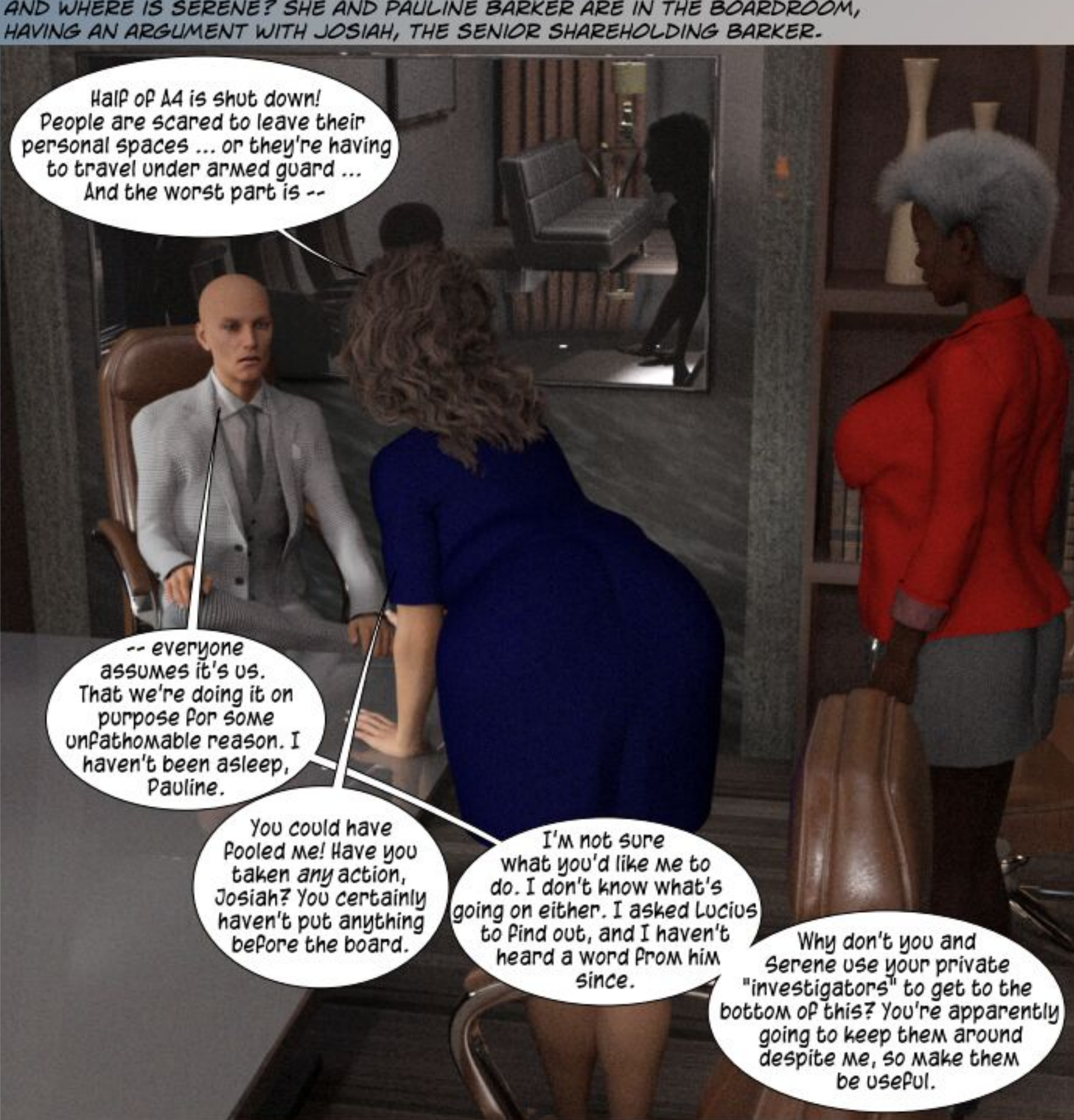


WHETHER SERENE WOULD HAVE BEEN ANNOYED BY RUBY'S BREACH OF PROTOCOL IS MOOT. SERENE IS NOT HOME.

Hmph.

OK, maybe back to looking for Orchid after all.

Somebody is going to have to give me some answers sooner or later.



AND WHERE IS SERENE? SHE AND PAULINE BARKER ARE IN THE BOARDROOM, HAVING AN ARGUMENT WITH JOSIAH, THE SENIOR SHAREHOLDING BARKER.

Half of AA is shut down! People are scared to leave their personal spaces ... or they're having to travel under armed guard ... And the worst part is --

-- everyone assumes it's us. That we're doing it on purpose for some unfathomable reason. I haven't been asleep, Pauline.

You could have Pooled me! Have you taken any action, Josiah? You certainly haven't put anything before the board.

I'm not sure what you'd like me to do. I don't know what's going on either. I asked Lucius to find out, and I haven't heard a word from him since.

Why don't you and Serene use your private "investigators" to get to the bottom of this? You're apparently going to keep them around despite me, so make them be useful.



I hate to admit it, but he has a point.

Oh. Is this the part where we confess to each other that we've set up that sort of thing?

I think it's a bit late to conceal it. And I'm worried now. I didn't know he'd asked Lucius to investigate, and I haven't heard from Lucius in weeks.

The problem is, I also haven't heard from my people in weeks. One of them seems to have gone into retreat, and the other is never home.

And with the phones out, so are my usual means of reaching them.

I have the same problem ... but I haven't tried going to her personal space.

Come with me and we'll see if we can find her.



She's a block up the street.

I didn't realize you didn't have an access point at her door ... I'm a little nervous about going anywhere overland right now.

... Then you probably don't want to know what's behind us.



ANOMALOUS.

Run!

In these shoes?



OK, calm down, Pauline ... keep your breathing quiet ...

Why is my heart beating so hard? It's not that bad. If it zaps me, I interrupt, I wake up, I come right back in again ... No big deal ...

I feel ... really strange all of a sudden ...



Pauline? They've all given up. They're gone.

Where are you?

WHNEIHH

!!!

no, no, that's not --

WHEINNHH



There you are!

Are you OK? You made a weird noise.

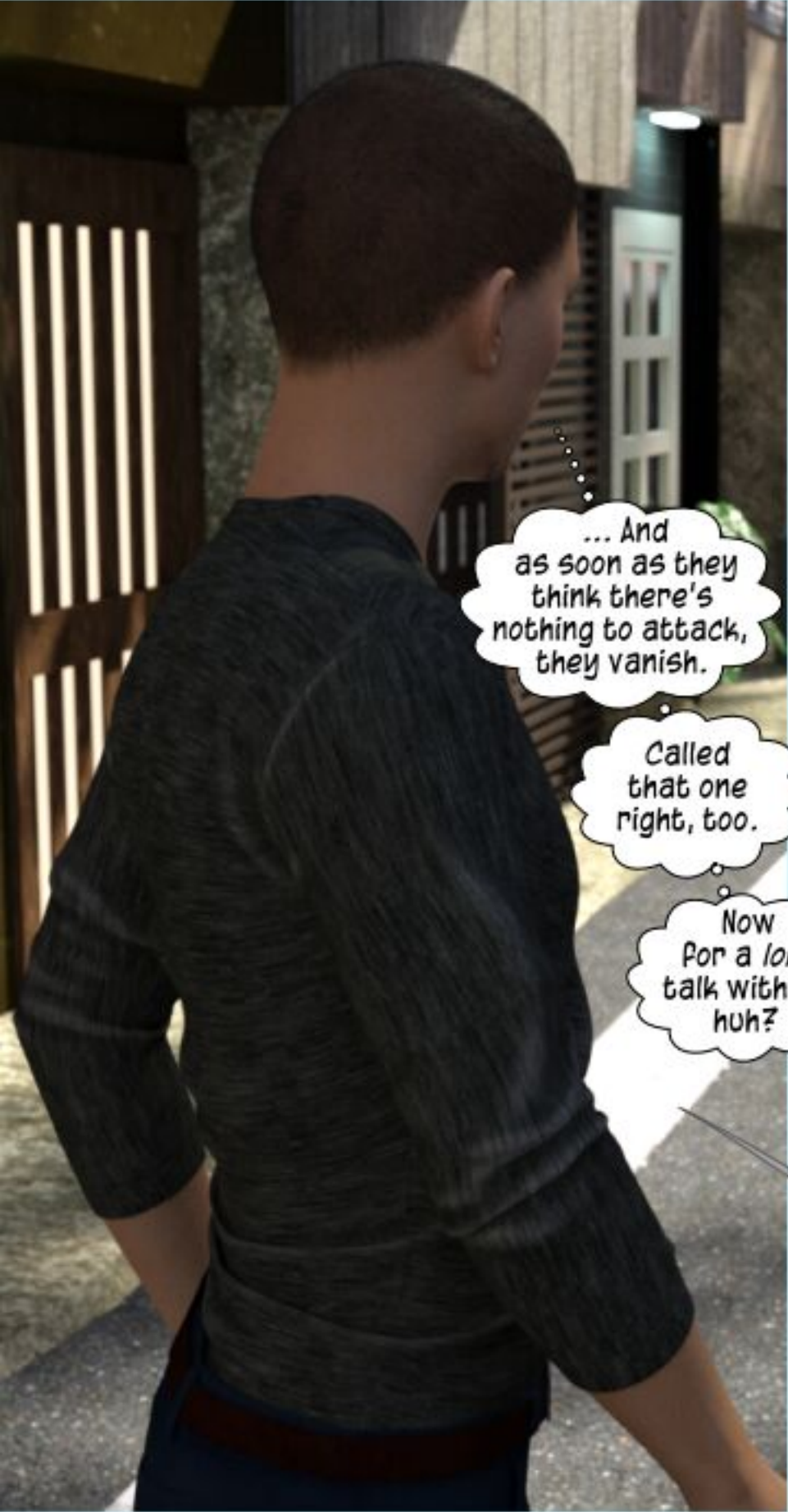
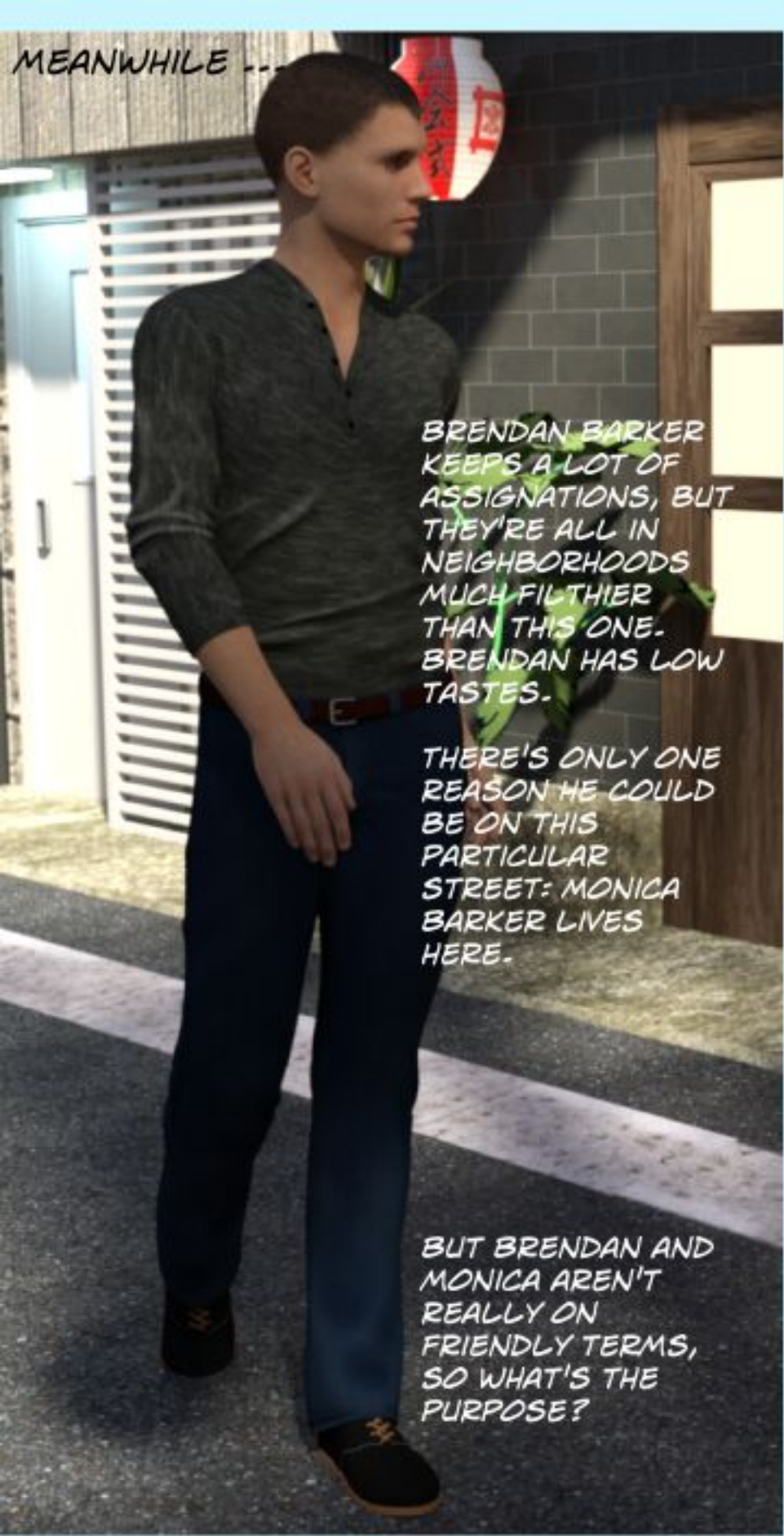
... I'm fine. Just a little hoarse.

-- cough --

All that, and she's not here.

... I'm not sure what to do next, then. Any ideas?

THE BACKSTORY BEHIND PAULINE'S HORSE ISSUES IS SCATTERED THROUGH ISSUES #14-#17 -T





So you've gone all the way?

Hello, Ruby.

It seems to be useful. My fire doesn't take them apart like Leyna's guns, but they don't like it and it keeps them busy.

Leyna offered me a gun but I was scared I'd melt it.

I've gotten better at controlling it. Here, let me turn it down a bit.



There, that's probably easier on you.

Glad I came by when I did. Usually I don't bother with that stretch because the bees take care of it.

I've ... been out of it for a while, and I seem to have missed a whole lot. The bees come from "Hive"?

Yes. And the patrol knows it. They keep trying hard to get in there. It's not a locked space! But whatever the bees use on them, they also have inside. If they get in, they come apart.

Hmm, so if I can make it in ... good to know. Also, thank you for saving my butt, I --

Do you have a name? I don't think you want me to keep calling you "the phantom."



I don't know, I kind of like "Phantom." Leyna didn't tell you? My name is Naomi.

I, ah, haven't managed to find Leyna yet. I guess she's moving around a lot.

That's why I don't -- Uh-oh.

A little too much. Between us, I think this all personally. She's running herself and her team ragged.



Who is that?

Trouble. And it looks like she has a target. Quick!



I'm not sure about this ...

C'mon, we've made it this far. "Hive" should be just around the corner. Close enough to run for it.



Wait, who --

Aaaa!!



Damn it!

And she's gone. Probably ported out. I didn't see her anywhere from above.

Who is she? Is she with the patrols? Has she been doing this a lot?

No idea, we think probably not, and as far as I can tell, she does this several times a day.



The more weirdness I see going on, the more I think I was taken out of circulation deliberately.

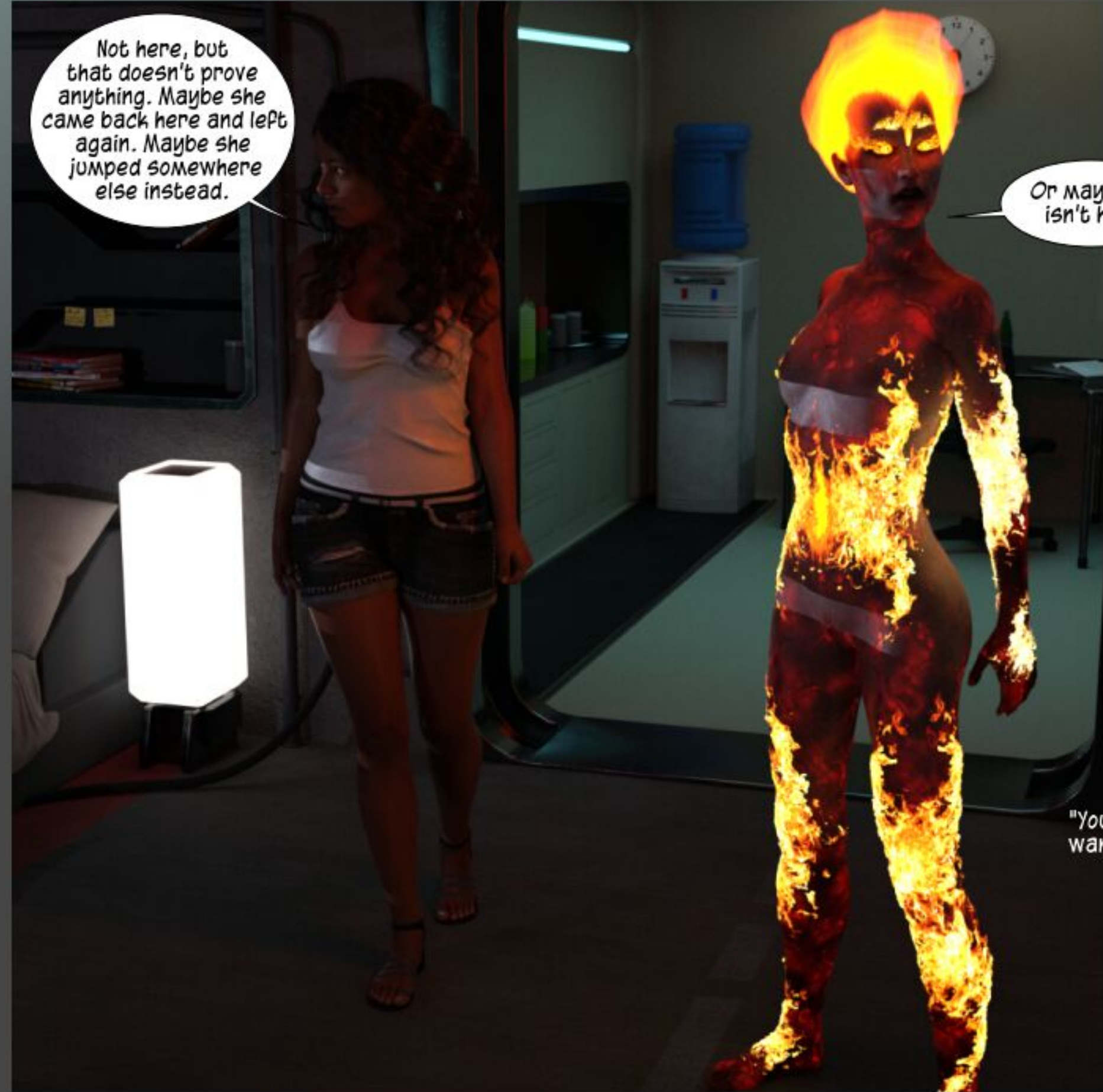
So they'll just wander the streets like that?

They're completely unresponsive, so no recall, and no one's figured out how to restore them.

Actually, I'm not sure anyone's tried yet. We've all been busy.

Naomi, does this Peel at all familiar to you?

"You mean, does it remind me of the woman in the discontinuity, the one with the X across her face?"
"Exactly. Same methods and same sort of result."
"She turned out to be a friend of yours, didn't she? Do I remember that right?"
"She is, and I have access to her personal space ... or at least I did. She and I hadn't spoken for a while even before I got taken out of the action, and I was already worried about her."
I think we should go take a look."



Not here, but that doesn't prove anything. Maybe she came back here and left again. Maybe she jumped somewhere else instead.

Or maybe it isn't her.

"Or maybe it isn't her. Yes."
"You don't sound like you want to believe that."

"Oh, no. I definitely want to believe that. I'm just having trouble bringing myself to do it."



AN ESCORTED GROUP MAKES ITS WAY THROUGH THE BACK ALLEYS OF THE "SHIBUYA" DISTRICT.

OK, they often spawn around the next corner, so remember the rules.

If we're attacked, get somewhere they don't have a line of sight to you as fast as you can. Any place you can find.

Maire and I will yell for you when it's clear. If we don't do that in fifteen minutes, we've been zapped, you're on your own.

And try not to get between our guns and --



ANOMALOUS.

ANOMALOUS.

ANOMALOUS.

Ambush!!

Eeee!

THIS IS MILLIE. WE DIDN'T LEARN HER NAME AT THE TIME, BUT SHE WAS RESCUED BY LEYNA IN THE DISCONTINUITY, AND LATER RETURNED THE FAVOR. SEE SS #15-#16. -T



-- oop --

Oh, no.

Not the weird bloating again ... this is not a good time, stomach ...

-- Uhhh! --

this is bad ... this is the worst it's been ...

... What the hell is wrong with me?

Wait, I --



IooOoooh!

Oh ... oOoh ...

It's like it was in that place! I Peel so ... so ...

... so hard to think ... like my head's just pull of ...



ooooooo!

just let it ... let it ...



ooooooeee!!!



This whole phone thing is really a problem.

If I need Naomi again, I can't call her, I might not be able to find her ... I can go into my recall space and leave her a message, but she'll have to recall to even see she has one ...

I don't think I realized before how much we depend on --

-- What is that sound?



ERROR

Ah.



E R R O R



Hey! Ruby! Where've you been?

You do that to them for a few seconds and they just come apart! Isn't that cool?

Orchid?? Is that really you?

-- giggle --
I guess I'm kinda hard to recognize in all this, huh? Sorry!



Let's get out of here before anything else happens.

Hey, Ash, did we lose somebody?

Orchid ... We need to talk.

Sure! Let me turn off the headset ... it's hard to hear anything but the other bees with it on.



Why did you want me out of the way? Was it because of "Hivez"?

... I don't know what you mean. Out of the way? You did disappear when you tried the Pocus crystal, but ...

I disappeared for more than a month. That's why you haven't seen me.

I didn't know that was going to happen! I didn't even know you'd vanish. I just wanted to help you sort out your head!

... Did it help?

... Actually, yeah, it did. But --



See, the thing is, you didn't know what it would do, but whoever gave it to you did.

That was somebody at "Hive," right? What if they wanted me out of the way so they could do ... something, I don't know what?

And then you turn up in this bee suit, like you've gone all the way over ... what am I supposed to think?

Ruby, it's not like that!

They gave me the crystal because I told them I was worried about you. They wanted to help you!

And they're great! Ruby, they've figured out telepathy! We can talk to each other with just our minds! It's amazing! And we can do all kinds of stuff!



I know what you're thinking, but it's not some kind of cult. No one there's ever made me do anything I didn't want to do. They've never pushed me, never told me I couldn't leave ...

I like it, Ruby. You should have a look. You might like it too. A lot of people are joining us now, especially since they know we're the only ones who aren't scared of the patrols.

I have to go catch up with the others. I'll see you around, I hope.





Well, she may be pissed at me, but she didn't cut off my access to her personal space.

Leyna?
You here?

It doesn't look like she's been here in weeks, actually.

I wonder where she's sleeping. Lou's, maybe.

If she's sleeping.



Sorry to do this, Leyna, but I know you've got access to people's locations, at least if they're not someplace private.

I have to find you. And when I do, we're going to talk about this, whether you like it or not.



I don't know how much longer I can do this.

You know ... we're probably not taking the right approach.

No ... but I can't think of any other way to do it. I realize we're just treating symptoms but --

-- ahem --



Didn't you get the hint before?

Leyna, listen to me. I didn't intend to disappear. Someone tricked me into it. I was stuck. It took me that long to get out.

I think they did it on purpose, to get me out of the way --



Right. Because when you're not here, the rest of us can't find our asses with both hands, is that it?

You're so goddamned capable that all you have to do is disappear for a month and the place goes completely to hell and the rest of us just have to sit and watch it happen.

And now you think you're going to ride in to the rescue?



I'm going to take a little walk over on the other side of the roof. So I can calm down.

Don't be here when I come back or I might throw you off it.

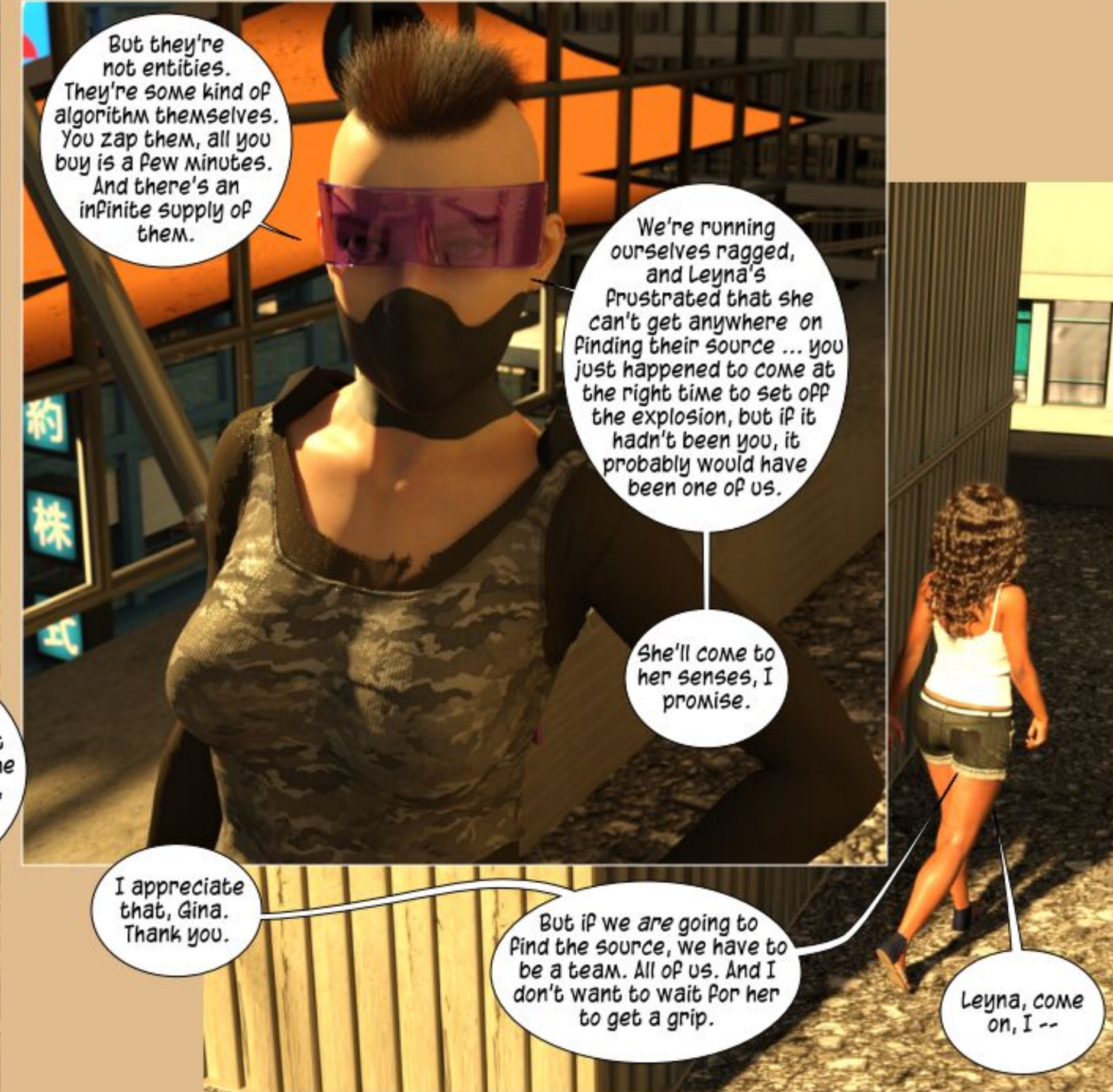


Leyna, what the fuck?

-- Sigh --

Ruby. The patrols started to go after everything, we figure, not long after you disappeared.

Leyna was really brilliant. Figured out what would zap them, got an algorithmist to make the guns and her jump armor, distributed the gun method as much as she could ...



But they're not entities. They're some kind of algorithm themselves. You zap them, all you buy is a few minutes. And there's an infinite supply of them.

We're running ourselves ragged, and Leyna's frustrated that she can't get anywhere on finding their source ... you just happened to come at the right time to set off the explosion, but if it hadn't been you, it probably would have been one of us.

She'll come to her senses, I promise.

I appreciate that, Gina. Thank you.

But if we are going to find the source, we have to be a team. All of us. And I don't want to wait for her to get a grip.

Leyna, come on, I --



... Oh, hell.

Gina!
Esperanza!



Oh, no.

Damn it,
how'd the gray
lady get up
here?

Probably
the
old-fashioned
way, like Me.
Stairs.

Never mind that ...
she's gone anyway.
But Leyna's going to
wander right off the
roof if we don't corral
her somehow ...



You're kidding.

They love to
do this shit.

We've got to
get back to the
guns!

ANOMALOUS.
ANOMALOUS.



Ruby, Move!

Leyna!!



All right, that's it.

I have had

ENOUGH!

of this shit!!



... wow.



Uh, I hope you
aren't hoping I
can repeat that
trick, because I
don't know how.

Look, without the
phones ... can we set
up a place and time to
rendezvous
tomorrow?

We already
have a regular
spot. Morpic Labs
at ten.

I guess you're
leaving? Need an
escort
somewhere?

No, I'm going Awake Por
a bit to check on Leyna.
I'm hoping that her getting
interrupted cured her
getting grayed.

If it didn't --
well, let's not worry
about that until we
have to.

RUBY HAS A SHORT CHAT WITH HER BEDDER SUE3 (AKA SUE).

I'M SORRY I DIDN'T COME SOONER. THERE ARE SO MANY INTERRUPTS NOW, AND MOSTLY WHEN THEY WAKE THEY JUST GO RIGHT BACK IN.

It's OK. I came out to check on Leyna. She got interrupted a short while ago, and she ... well, she wasn't here! at the time.

YES, I TRACKED IT. SHE RETURNED TO SLEEP IMMEDIATELY.

Oh, good. I don't think she'd have been able to if she'd still been grayed ...

SHALL I RESET YOUR BED, THEN?

No, I'm not going back in right away. I have someone else to check on out here first.

THE SLEEP LAB WHERE DR. CHAPMAN IS ATTEMPTING TO REPAIR THE VARIOUS RESIDENTS OF THE "COMA WARD."

Has there been a crisis?

Why do you ask?

Neither you nor Leyna has checked on me in over a month. Leyna's been distracted, and I was ... taken out of circulation all that time.

HMM. Looped?

Not exactly. I'd love to tell you about it ... later.

The phones aren't working, so your messages didn't pass through. I didn't see them until just now when I recalled.

Pleased to hear about the progress, though.

I'd tell you more about Clayton Barker, but he's on his own schedule right now. His brain is sorting things out internally, and it'll take as long as it takes.

Meanwhile, I think I may have a breakthrough with one of the Euphorics. If it works, I can apply the same method to all the others.

... But I get the impression you're not terribly interested right this moment.

Sorry.

There is a crisis, which I guess you've missed completely. You haven't been in sleep at all?

I've only gone in long enough to sleep and maintain digestive cycle. I don't care to wear a waste unit while I work. They're bulky.

Among other things.

OK. You didn't notice when the "anomaly patrol" started appearing because you were stuck at the bottom of the discontinuity.*

At first they seemed to be looking for unauthorized manipulation. Mess with someone without their permission, they show up, zap, you get interrupted.

Then they started going after any manipulation in public. Even if you were just fixing your makeup.

Not long after I was sidelined, they started firing without provocation on everyone they could get to -- which is pretty much any public space in A4.

They're not entities; they're barely simulations. No one knows where they're coming from or how to shut it down.

Have you checked the phone system?

* SS #14, THOUGH WE DIDN'T KNOW WHERE CHAPMAN WAS AT THE TIME. -T

The phones? Why?

We've discussed this before.* Though, to be fair, I didn't spell it all the way out then.

What does a "telephone conversation" mean in Sleep, where everything is already happening inside your head?

It's a secondary system which bypasses most of the other mechanisms of Sleep. No need for visualization, for simulation ... it pipes its signal straight from person to person, from mind to mind.

That makes it incredibly dangerous. And also ideal for a networked virus.

But the phones are down ...

Why are they down? Does anyone know?

Uh ... you know, I haven't had a chance to ask.

What if they're down because all their bandwidth is being eaten by something else?

* SS #7 -T

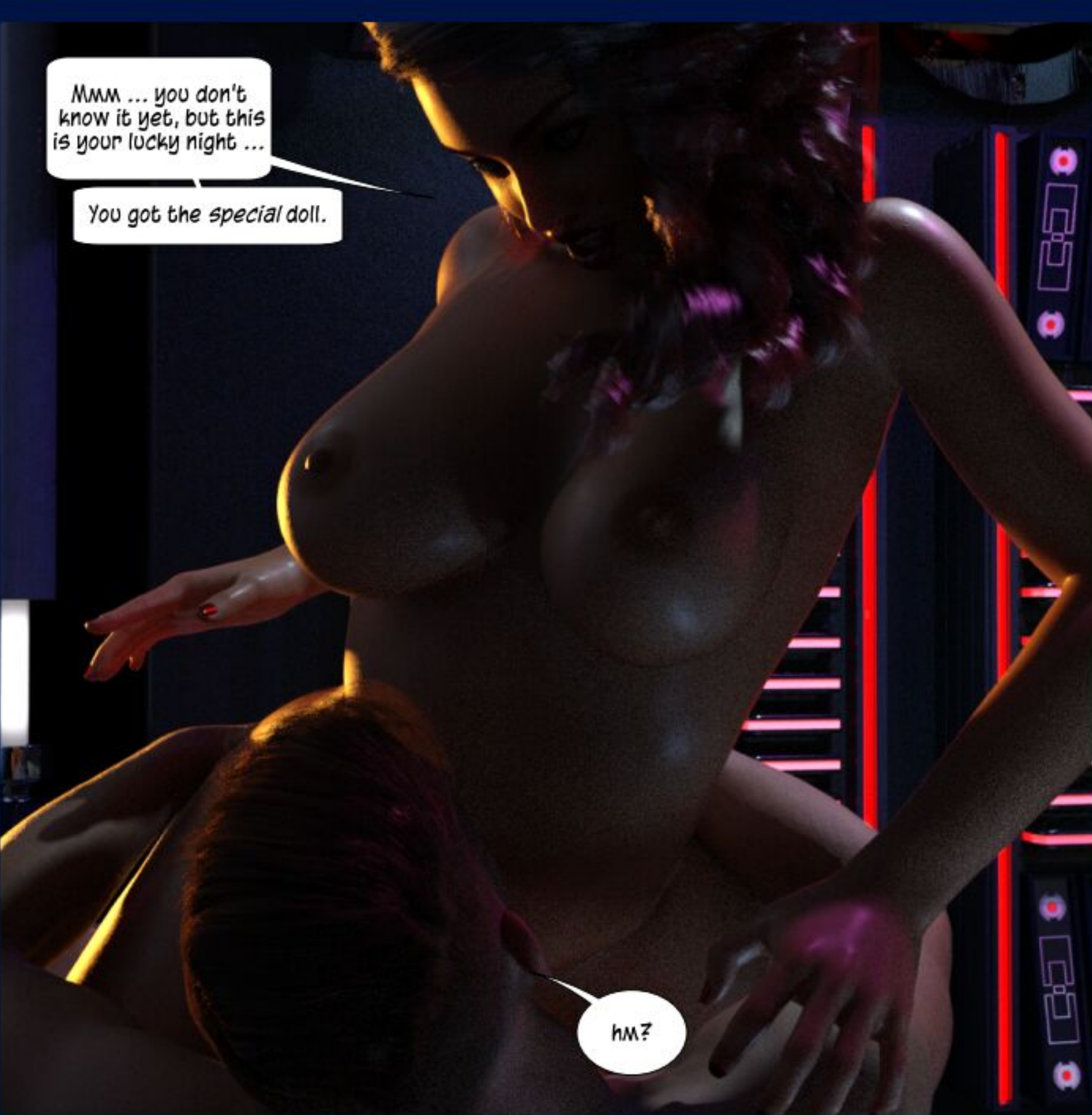
MEANWHILE ...

A CUSTOMER AT ALICIA'S CLUB (FORMERLY MELINDA'S) MAKES HIS SELECTION.

HMM.

That looks good ... maybe a little more up top ... and dark hair.

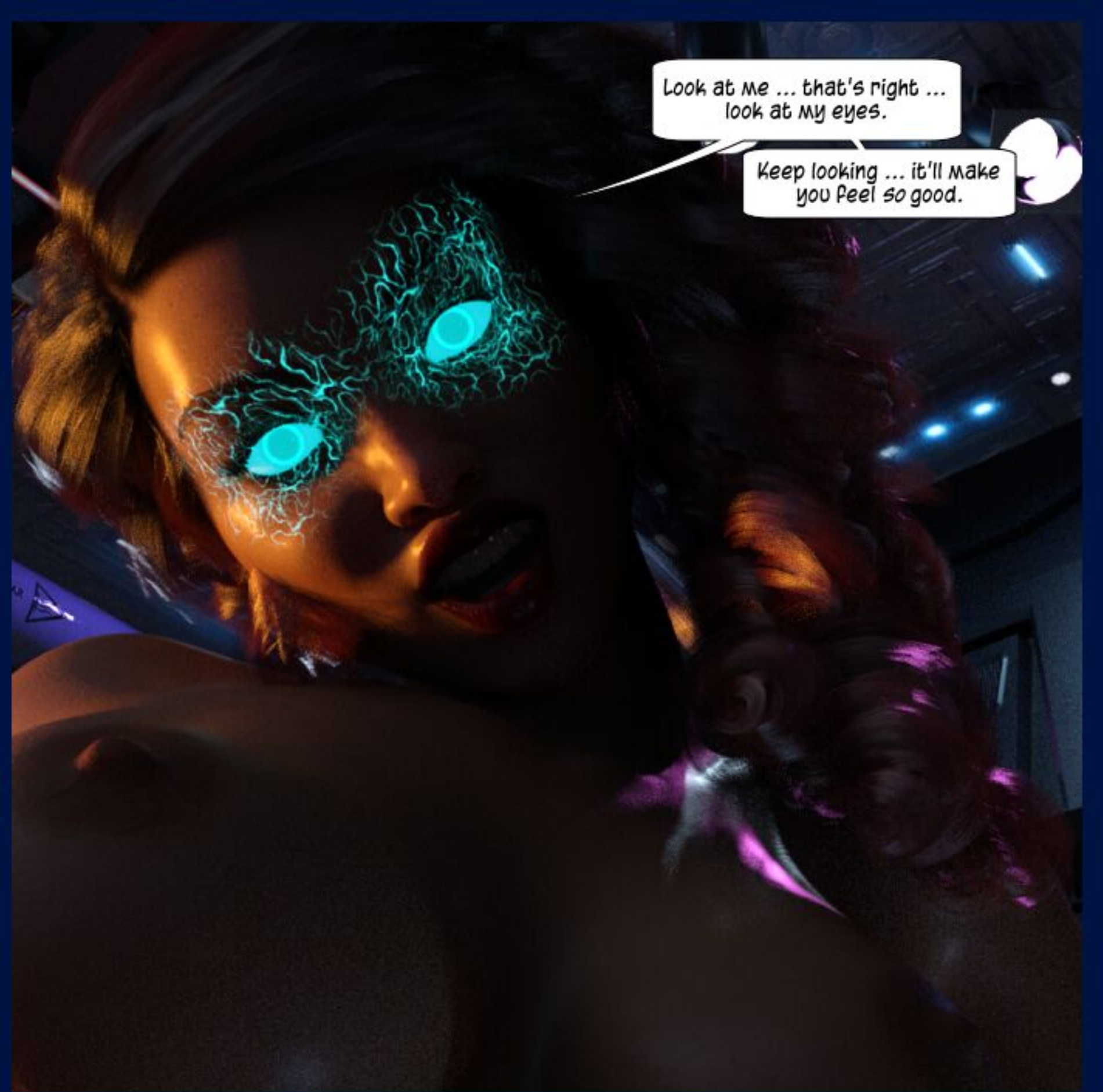




Mmm ... you don't know it yet, but this is your lucky night ...

You got the special doll.

hm?



Look at me ... that's right ... look at my eyes.

Keep looking ... it'll make you Peel so good.



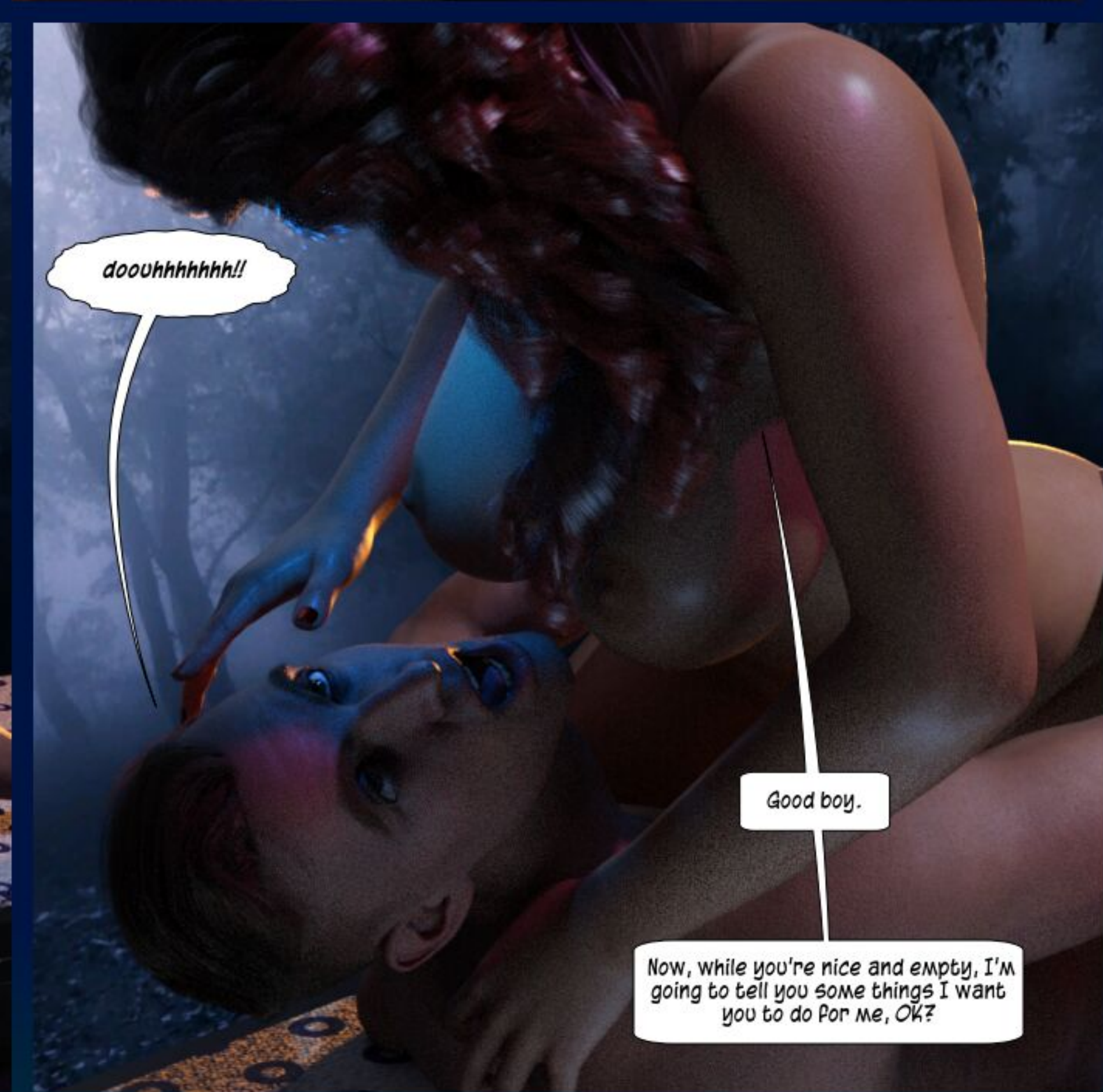
The Peeling's building inside you ... and as you get closer and closer, your head gets emptier and emptier.

emptier and emptier. No thoughts. Nothing but the wonderPul, wonderPul Peeling.

In a second you're going to come, and when you do, anything that's still in your head will just vanish, poof. There'll be nothing left in there at all.

And it'll Peel Fantastic.

uhh?



doouhhhhhhh!!

Good boy.

Now, while you're nice and empty, I'm going to tell you some things I want you to do for me, OK?



LEYNA CALLS IT A NIGHT AND GOES TO LOU'S.

This has not been my best day ever.



... Oh.



You know, when I first got you involved in all this, I felt guilty. It seemed like something you didn't want to do ...

But then something changed, and it started to Peel like ... not just that you were the main one doing this, but that I was ... unnecessary.

And this has never been as important to you as it is to me ... I guess I just got resentful.

Leyna, there's no way I could do this by myself. Yeah, I have abilities. So do you. You do things I can't do. Hell, half the time I wouldn't even know what to do if it wasn't for your information.

And this is important to me. It's just ... there are a lot of other things that are important to me too that I won't give up. This is not going to be my entire existence. That doesn't mean I don't take it seriously.



May I join this conversation?

Hey!

Midnight!

I was wondering if my message would reach you.

I've been checking in recall space regularly, once I remembered I could do it the old-fashioned way.

We've become far too dependent on the phone network. As should now be obvious to everyone.

Though, honestly, I should have realized Leyna would show up here sooner or later.



You must be Lou. I'm Midnight. Sorry to barge into your personal space. Finding each other has been difficult.

No need to apologize. In this case I think the general good requires a general meeting.

Yes, that's well put. First, I'd like to know if you two have any information or progress.



Not really. The Jumpers and I have been trying to keep the patrollers out of the common spaces, but that's just because I haven't figured out something better to do, and it's not accomplishing much.

This is some kind of networked program. It's not a person, or people. It's a chunk of software that's monitoring and interfering with everything. I can't tell who built it, how they got it running in the system ... and I sure don't know how to turn it off.

After I went Awake to check on you, I also talked to Dr. Chapman.

Her first response was that we should look into the situation with the phones.

Why are the phones out, by the way? Does anyone know?



No. And Dr. Chapman isn't the only one who's had that idea.

But communications have been so bad ... it's just about impossible to get word of what anyone else is doing in a timely way ...

Rumor is that Brendan Barker decided to go talk to Monica* about this on his own. Brendan is an ass, but he can be very clever.

He hasn't been heard from since.

Additionally, I know for a fact that Lucius Barker was asked by Josiah to investigate the matter. That was apparently weeks ago. He also hasn't been heard from since.

It doesn't mean they ran into trouble when confronting Monica, or even that they got that far. The streets seem to be full of hazards these days, after all.

I guess no one's heard anything from Monica, good or bad?

* MONICA BARKER CONTROLS THE PHONE SYSTEM, AS WE ESTABLISHED BACK IN SS #7. -T



As I think you've already gathered, Monica was having ... issues ... well before this. I doubt anyone has actually seen her since the "Bliss" business,* and she's barely communicated since then.

Barkers all have their reclusive periods, and none of them would have cared until she missed board business repeatedly.

If you go find her -- and it looks like that's what you'll need to do -- I have no idea what to tell you to expect.

We should arrange a check-in first, so I'll know if it goes badly.

... Please also keep an eye out for Lucius.

* SS #12 -T



... So I got grayed, and then I got interrupted too?

Yup! And the interrupt ended the gray effect. Which is good, because Naomi said no one's figured out another way to break it.

I wasn't even sure the patrollers would bother to fire on somebody who'd been grayed.

Ah ... you don't think that's Doreen, do you?

I'd like to say no, but I can't.

We'll have to deal with that. After we figure out how to deal with this.



This was definitely not here last time I visited.

You're the burglar -- can you get past it?

I think so. If I can disable the maglock, then it's just a question of whether we have enough brute force to pull the doors open.



OK, pull when I say ... Now!

Whoooooa!!

Leyna



WHUMP!

WHUMP!



-- urgh --

Yeah. Sorry about landing on you.

... I didn't expect those doors would open so easily.

Or that there wouldn't be anything on the other side. At least it wasn't a bad Fall.

Where do we think we are? Binaryland?

Something like that, yeah. I mean, all spaces are representations of data ... this place is just being very liberal about it.

Are we inside the algorithm?

Not sure.



Yikes!

... I'mna call that a "yes."

Leyna, I don't know if I can do anything in here ...

Hang on. Don't move. See what it does.



Thought so.

I don't think they're really "activated" in here. This would be, y'know, like cold storage for them. Dormant.

If we leave them alone, they'll ignore us.



I guess the goggles don't tell you about anything that isn't an actual entity?

They pick up some simulations, normally, but all they tell you is it's a simulation. Animals and such.

Except ... what am I seeing over there? We need to move closer to get an ID ...

Lucius!

Not dead and not turned into a rat or something. Good.

Now, how do we get him out of that?



I think ... I can take out part of this wall. HopePully that won't crash everything here ...



But there's no floor under him! We can't just get him down; we're going to have to hang onto him and pull him in. Without falling in ourselves, please!

OK. I think I can just about reach ... I'm going to try to brace on the wall ... ready?



-- oop! --

Got him!



C'mon, help me, he's heavy ...

Ruby ...

We got their attention.



Run?

And leave Lucius?

OK, what did I do last time? All I remember is I was super pissed-off ...

FZZZZT



I'm impressed.

Yeah, me too. I wasn't sure it'd work.

Come on, Lucius, wake up so we can all recall out ...

Well, hang on. If you can do that, can you just take down all of the algorithm? We could end it from in here ...

I don't think that'll work.

Why not?



Because the wall I took out has already fixed itself.

Oh.



... Uhhh ...

He's waking up! Lucius, recall! Recall now!

... Wha? ...

We'll explain later! Do it!

OUR HEROES REGROUP AT SERENE'S THE NEXT DAY.



You know, I'd given up believing that you'd ever actually get a sofa in here.

Have you heard from Lucius? Is he all right?

It's only taken me ten years ... what are you, impatient?

Lucius is fine. Embarrassed at being caught, but fine. He sends his thanks. Since you went in there with your Faces concealed, I didn't tell him your identities. We may want to let him in on it one day, but there's no hurry.

So. Now we know that Monica is definitely entangled in this, and it doesn't seem like we'll get her to shut it down ... what are our other options?



Get a quorum of Barkers, go out to the root console, and shut the phone network down from there?

The problem is, it's not an access problem. If I knew how to do it safely, I could shut it down from here. Or from anywhere.

The phone network is very complex and it's entangled in a lot of other systems. Going to root and using a blunt tool -- I wouldn't want to risk it.

What we actually need is expertise. Someone who understands the damned thing.



We can try to send to one of the other complexes. That occurred to me days ago. We may not have a specialist, but I guarantee A1 or A2 do.

You can do that?

We don't exist in a vacuum. That's mostly Josiah's doing; he's reluctant to even communicate with the other complexes. But I care less about what Josiah thinks every day.

But they may not cooperate, and even if they do, long-distance travel Awake is very tricky to arrange these days. It would take a while. We could use a Paster solution.

Huh. Well, I have another possibility to offer.

You do?



Sure. But there are two really big problems.

First, she's not the least bit trustworthy.

Second, we banned her from Sleep.

Oh.

Oh, hell.

ARE THEY REALLY DESPERATE ENOUGH TO GO FIND NATHANIEL BARKER AND BRING HER BACK INTO SLEEP? YOU'LL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL THE NEXT ISSUE TO FIND OUT!