



I'm not saying I'm lost. I'm just saying I don't remember it looking like this.

Well, don't expect me to have any ideas. This is the furthest I've ever been outside the Sleep complex.



Oyo! You got problems?

Oyo. I han't been in this side in a long time, and I'm turned around.

We're looking for Luisa's place. She makes clothes. You know it?

Oh sure. Come on.



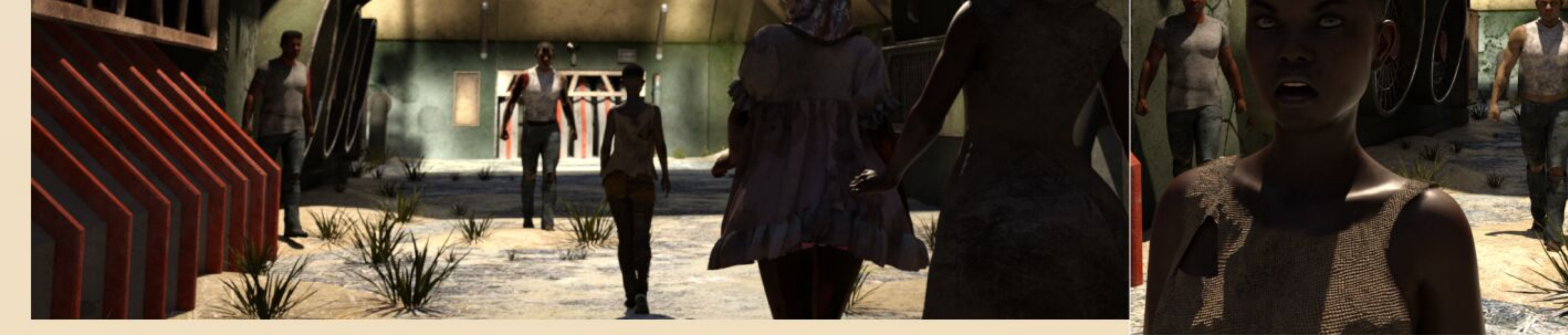
You're sure this is the way to Luisa's, huh?

Not Par now.



Mm-hm. Really wanted to think you were style ... too bad.

Not sorry, spill. We got to teach you not to come here.



How about I teach.

PFUP

-- WhUP --



-- oof! --

Welcome like this, no wonder you never get visitors.

urrng

Hey! No spill's gonna beat down my crew ...



Shut up.

FVONK!

... a little help?



OK, scraper, now I'm in a bad mood. Think real hard.

Looking for Luisa's place. She makes clothes. You know it, or not?

L-Luisa han't been here for years! I don't know where she went. Nobody does.

Well, Puck.

TWO HOURS EARLIER. RUBY AND LEYNA PREPARE TO GO LOOK FOR NATHANIEL BARKER.



You rummaged through the leavings room for half an hour and this is what you came out with?

What's wrong with it? It Pits you and hides what we want hidden.

It's falling apart! And it's filthy.

NO, IT'S STAINED. EVERYTHING IN THE LEAVINGS HAS BEEN WELL-LAUNDERED.

It's not filthy enough. When we get out, we'll try to find some dirt to put on it. On ourselves, too.

Have you seen what I'm wearing? It's ridiculous. But it's all I could find that Pits my tits and covers the waste unit.



That's another thing. Do we really have to wear these diapers--

WASTE UNITS.

YOUR BLADDER AND BOWEL CONTROL IS ALMOST NONEXISTENT. YOU'LL ALSO FIND YOU HAVE SOME DIGESTIVE ISSUES.

Listen to Sue, OK? While you're in the bed you don't even know when you're peeing, and the nutrient goo they pump into us means you don't know what solid food is. Basically, you have the digestive system of an infant.

Unless you want to piss yourself, yes.

You only went out once for a short time, but this time we might be out there for hours. You want to risk it?



Anyway, they're a miracle of science! There was a time when people would have killed for self-powering, self-cleaning diapers. We probably should be wearing them all the time.

Hey, Sue, how come we don't wear the waste units in the beds?

YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE ME IF I TOLD YOU.

That top's gotta go. No temps. Everyone knows what they look like.

And I hate to say it, but for once you're going to have to lose the nail polish.

... You're enjoying this.



I'm enjoying teasing you a little, but I'm real serious about the rest of it.

Look, there's three groups of people out there. There's the Wide-Eyes; then a handful who've managed to keep sort of a normal life going; and then there's a shitload of people who barely stay alive by scavenging. Reclaim.

Scrapers, but don't call them that unless you want a fight.

We really do not want them thinking we've come out of the Sleep Facility. Seriously, I know you're not an actor, but you're going to have to try.

I can try to find a longer wig for you if it'll make you more comfortable ... but they can spot the wigs sometimes, which is why we're covering our heads, so it won't make much difference.

No ... I'm OK with the one I have.

Thanks, though.

BACK TO THE ACTION ...



We're running now?

I want some distance between us and them.

We got away with it because they didn't think spills could fight.

That won't work twice.

We didn't do so well on the blending in.

I should have realized they'd suspect any strangers.



So ... I know you said you'd spent time Awake, but now I think it was longer than you let on.

Six years.

MOMMA took us both out of Sleep when I was ten. She said she didn't want me to have to do the kind of things I'd need to do to stay in Sleep when I grew up.

They'll let you into Sleep on your own at sixteen. Momma had some money saved. I stole my starting bed fee from her and left.

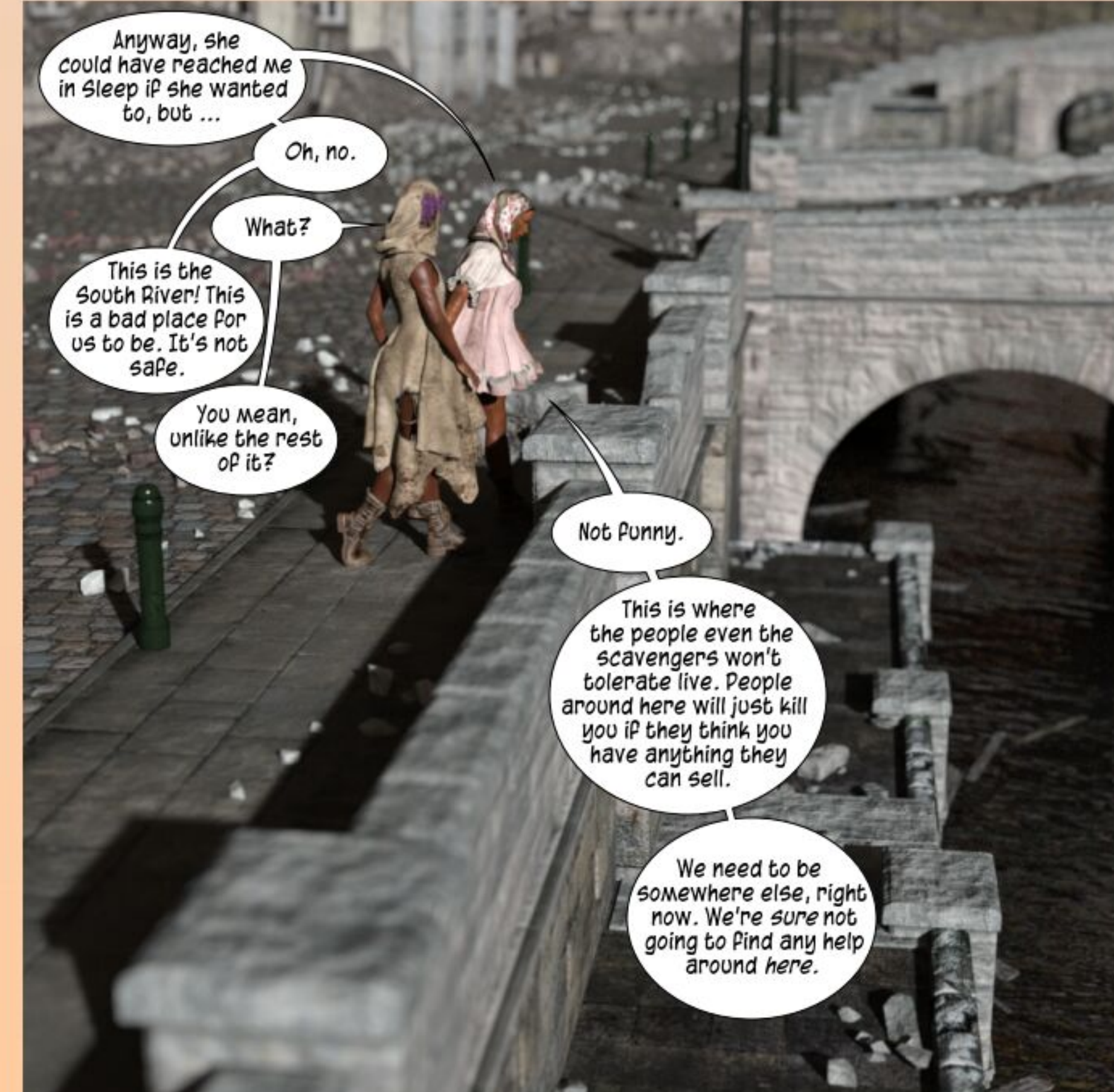
Now tell me I'm horrible.

Nope.

Thing is, I got so I didn't believe her. She knew how much I hated it out here, she knew how I felt ... how do you say you're keeping someone else in a situation they don't want "for their own good"?

We argued so much about this, the last couple of those years.

I figure she didn't want to be in Sleep for her own reasons, and that's fine, but she didn't get to make that choice for me, y'know?



Anyway, she could have reached me in Sleep if she wanted to, but ...

Oh, no.

What?

This is the South River! This is a bad place for us to be. It's not safe.

You mean, unlike the rest of it?

Not Punny.

This is where the people even the scavengers won't tolerate live. People around here will just kill you if they think you have anything they can sell.

We need to be somewhere else, right now. We're sure not going to find any help around here.



Unless ...

No, it's not possible. Is it?

Oyo! Miz Annie!



Oyo, salah ... Do I know you?

It's Ruby Martinez. Do you remember me?



Ruby?

... My goodness.



Come in. We'll sit.

Keep your voice down. Some of them are sleeping.



Is this a shelter?

Of a kind. Scooch that chair on over.



Worms!

Worms!!

Worms!!!

Aaaa!!



Easy there, now. Easy. Go back to sleep.

He's having a Plash, is all. He don't even know you're there.

It's not that. I mean, he startled me, yes, but ... I know him.

Huh! You're right.

... worms ...

Weren't close, I hope.



His name's Cole. He worked as a rough for Clayton Barker.

He killed a friend of mine and tried to kill me.\*

Is he as bad opp as he looks?

Worse. His insides are all et up. Synth'll do that, you take it long enough.

Don't guess he'll leave that bed.

So synth is still a thing, huh? Damn.

Is that ... is everyone in here in ... that condition?

\* ISSUE #1! THE VERY FIRST PAGE OF IT, IN FACT.-T



Not all as bad as him. Some might walk out. And likely be back in a week.

Mostly they come here to die. I make it as easy as I can. Can't get much to help them with, though.



Let me get a look at you, child. Been ... twenty years? More?

More.

I can tell you put that dirt on. Don't look right. And I see the bulge where you're sitting.

You come out of sleep to find somebody?

Luisa?

Well ... anybody who could help us ... but I was going to start with her.

Actually, I didn't have any other ideas.

Year or so after you left, Luisa disappeared. Just like that.

Don't think something happened to her; she packed up. She knew where she was going. But she didn't tell me. Or anybody.



Thought for a while she was going in to join you ...

Not if she still felt the way she did when I left.

If she did, I never heard a word.

Miz Annie ... do you think she left because of me? Because I ran opp?

Oh, child. How would I know?

But she knew you'd go. Always did. She was just trying to ... hold it opp.

She might have been planning to go for a long time. You know how she was.



What help do you need?

Show her the picture, Leyna.

We're looking for this person.

Friend of yours?

Enemy, if anything. And dangerous. But also important.

Hmm. Can't say I've seen him.

Her, actually.



Is she one of those does that just to mess with Polks, or is she one of the kind who don't like what she got born with?

Uh ... the second. I'm pretty sure. She always presented as a woman in Sleep, and when she was ... stuck Awake, she clearly wasn't happy it was in that body.

Is that important, or are you just curious?



Might be.

If she wanted real bad to fix that, if she was the kind that'd need to, she'd have to go over to the Wide-Eyes.

They're the only ones out here who can do it. They've got all the real medicine. Rest of us can barely get our hands on a stethoscope and a bottle of codeine.



And I was hoping to avoid them ...

So you think it'll go better if we try to keep up the act, or if we just admit we're spills?

Won't matter. They're not like they were in your time.

They don't give us any help anymore. Don't come out at all anymore, not even to recruit.

Only way they'll talk to you is if you tell them you're joining up. And they'll likely take a while to believe you.



You all right?

Yeah.

... no.

Miz Annie's not as old as I thought she was ... I guess she looked older to me when I was a kid ... but she's not young, and it's nasty out here. I figure she's got another ten years. If she doesn't get killed.



If she went into Sleep, she could get a lot more than ten more years, and without risking her life every day.

I just think it's a shame, is all.

But what if that's not what she wants? What if she's happier being out here?

I'm having a hard time believing anybody could ever be happy out here.



I guess this is it. That's their sign.

That is a big door.

You didn't tell me it was a Portress.

It wasn't once. They used to just be these nuts preaching on street corners.

See if there's a piece of rebar or something in that rubble. We're gonna need to knock pretty loud.



Oyo! You got a problem?

We want in! We heard you were style. We're hooking up.



All yours, Daisy. ... Make sure they get washed.

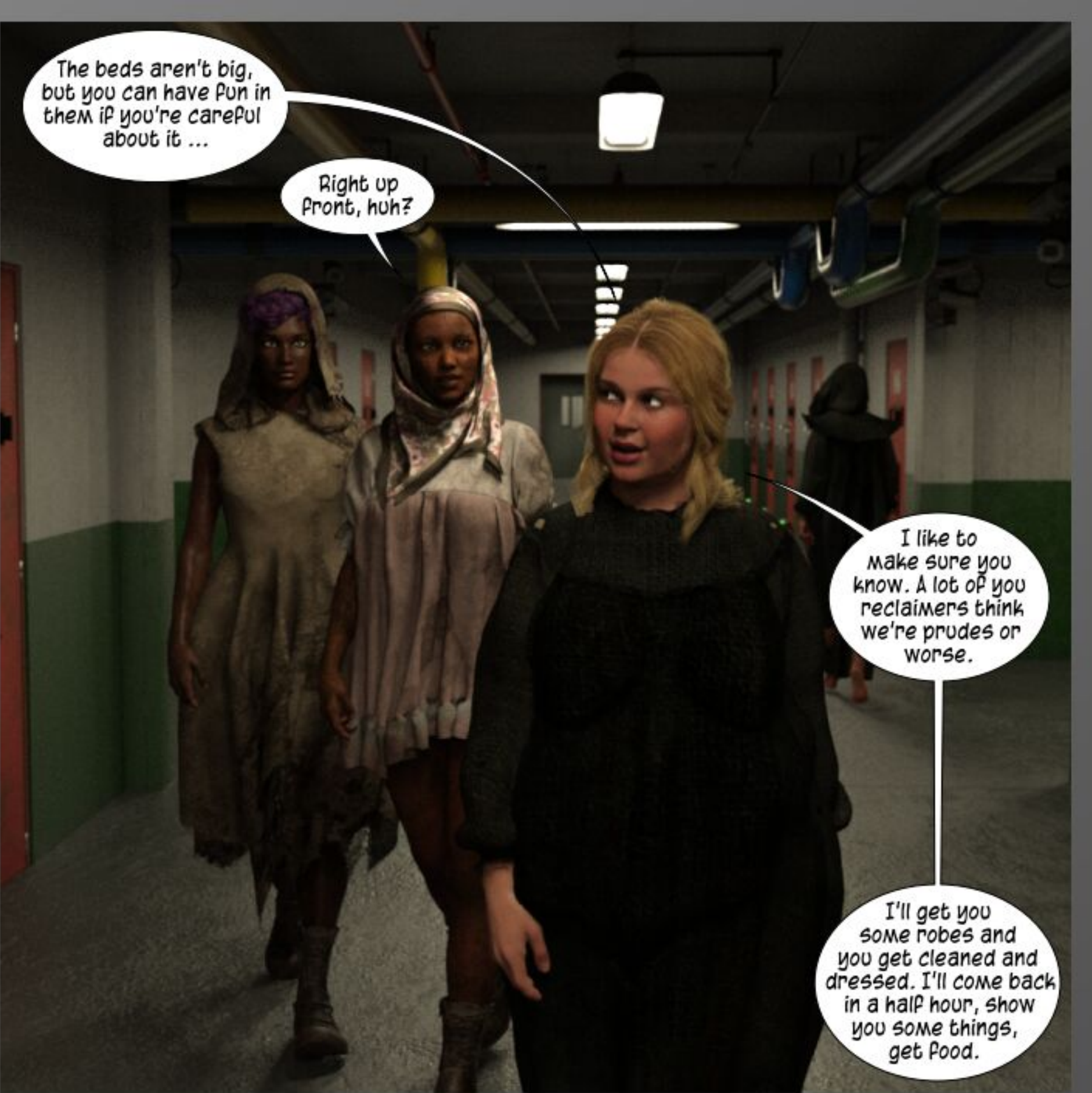
Brin, that's rude ... Oyo, selah, my name's Daisy. Welcome. Don't mind Brin.

You do want a shower, though, and some clothes. I'll set you some rooms. Are you a couple?

Ah ... Yes.

Oh! Good for you. We don't have any double rooms right now, we're low on space. But we'll put you in the list for when we get more.

I can get you two next to each other, though. Follow me.



The beds aren't big, but you can have fun in them if you're careful about it ...

Right up front, huh?

I like to make sure you know. A lot of you reclaimers think we're prudish or worse.

I'll get you some robes and you get cleaned and dressed. I'll come back in a half hour, show you some things, get Pood.



I feel like I'm joining a choir.

A really grim one. They don't seem to care about decor. And I hope they don't all have rooms this tiny.

I guess you could have sex in that bed, if you were both acrobats.

Sorry I said we were a couple, by the way. I was hoping they'd give us a shared room. Easier to coordinate.

I figured it out. I was worried they'd make us shower and change somewhere less private, where they'd see the waste units.

Yeah. So far so good. But I feel real jumpy about this.



Oh, much better!

It's always good to have clean clothes.

I know it takes a while to get used to everyone wearing the same thing, but it's practical. We couldn't keep everybody clothed otherwise.

Follow me. We'll get some Pood first. I'm sure you're hungry.



I forgot to tell you something important before. I'm sorry.

We do insist on your staying inside the compound.

You can leave if you like, of course, but unless it's very special circumstances, we won't let you back in.

This isn't just newcomers; it's the rule for all of us.

Guess that's why we haven't seen any of you out in the sides no more?

That's right. We gave up on that years back.



It sounds harsh, but ... we just don't think you have anything to offer.

Sleep has turned their backs on the world, and reclaimers certainly aren't going to rebuild. No offense. Some out there are trying, but they don't have numbers or resources.

If there is ever to be another Chicago -- we don't refer to "Area 4 Sleep Complex" in here -- it will have to be us who make it.

Huh. But you don't want to pull in more Poods from the sides?

Yes, but we've decided it's better to let you come to us ... means we only get the ones who really want --

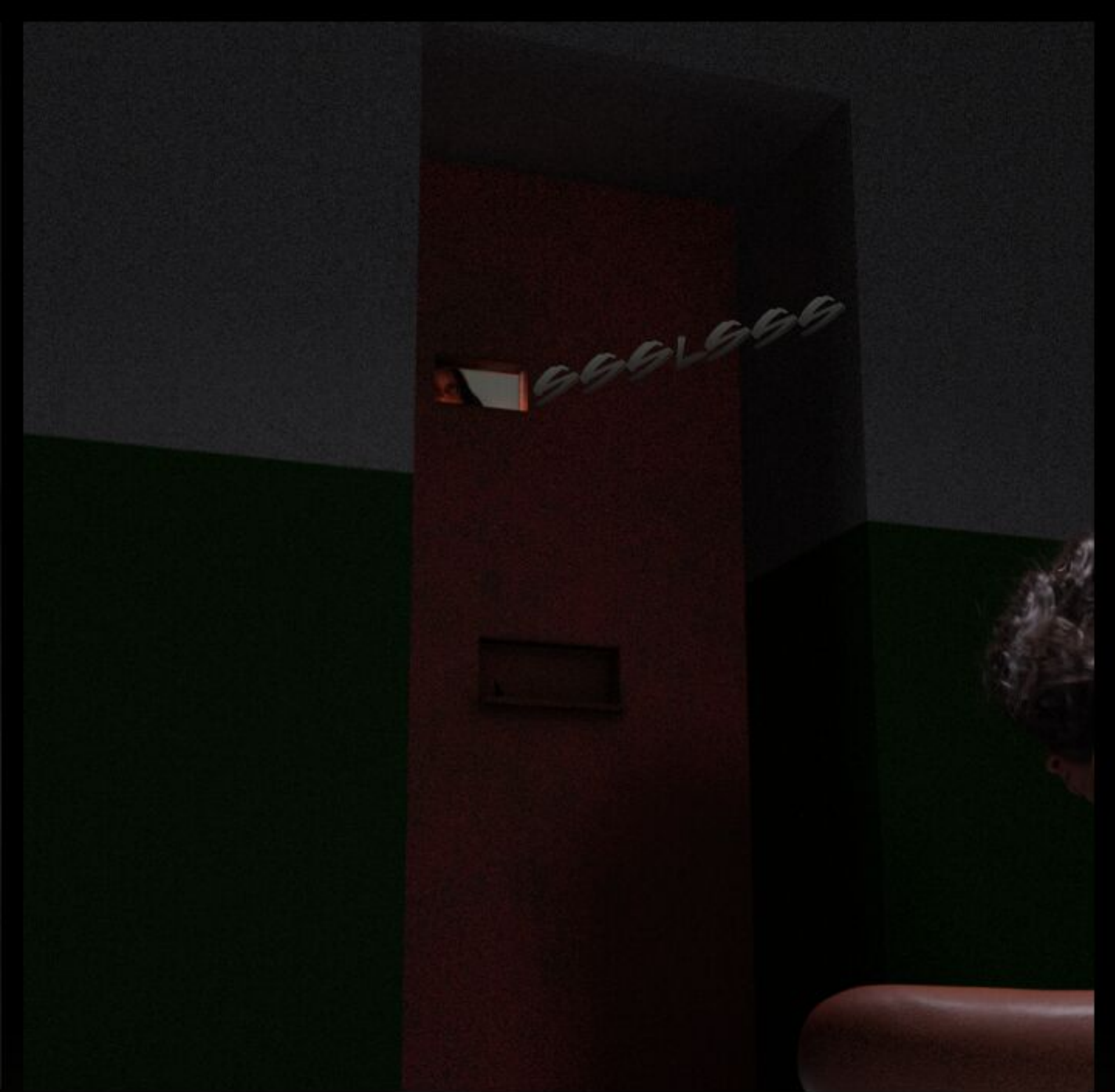


Hey!

Those aren't starters!

They're Prom Sleep, and they're spies! If they're here, it's to make trouble!





Put these on and follow me.

Hurry.

And don't speak.



I guess some people do get real rooms ...

Sssh.



Now, I don't know what Pool idea brought you here, but I'm damned if I'll let you sit in that jail.

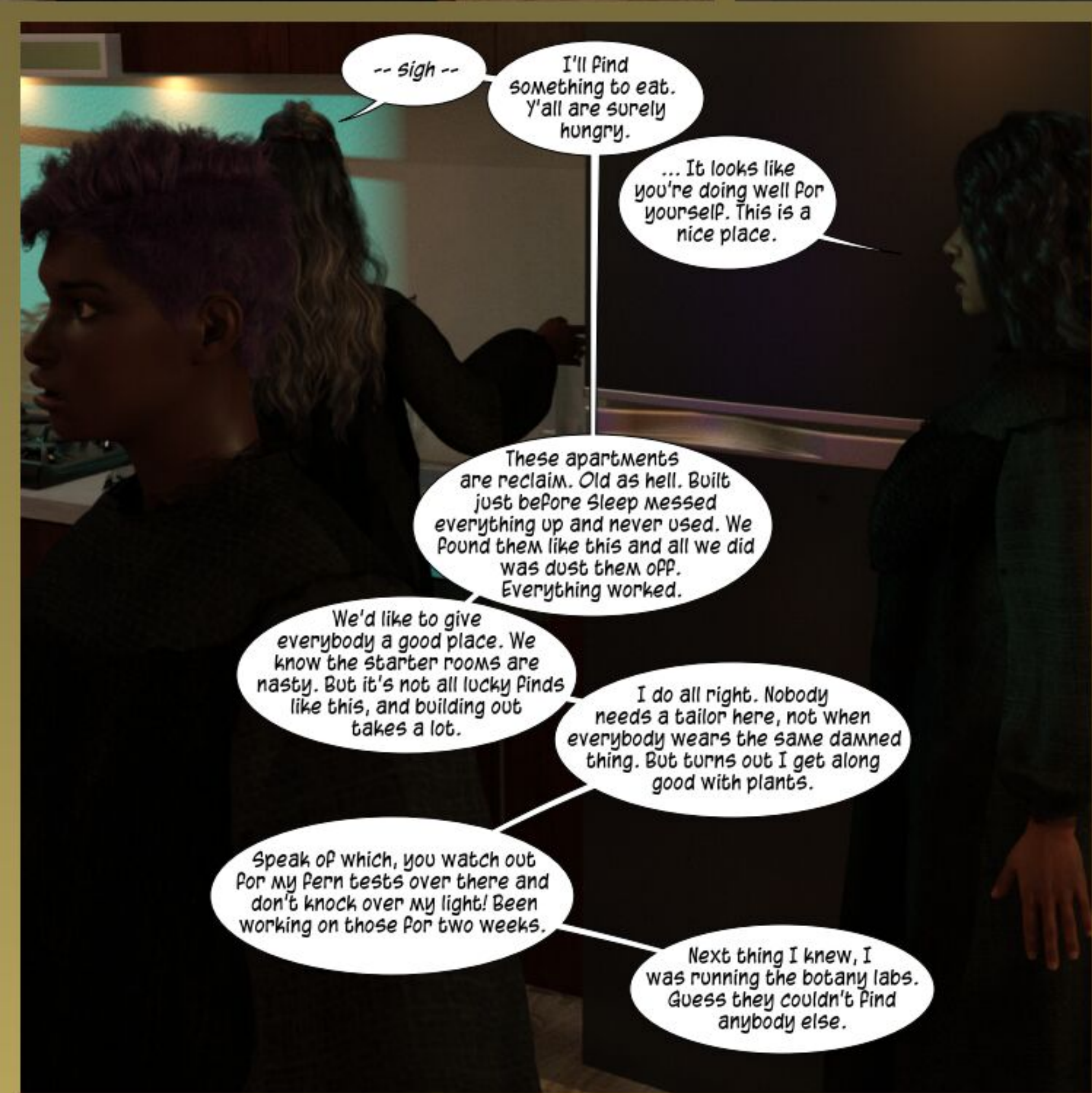
But you can't stay. They think you're spies, and I imagine they're right. I sure don't believe you'd ever come over for real.



... Leyna, this is Luisa Martinez.

My mother.

Hi, Momma.



-- sigh --

I'll find something to eat. Y'all are surely hungry.

... It looks like you're doing well for yourself. This is a nice place.

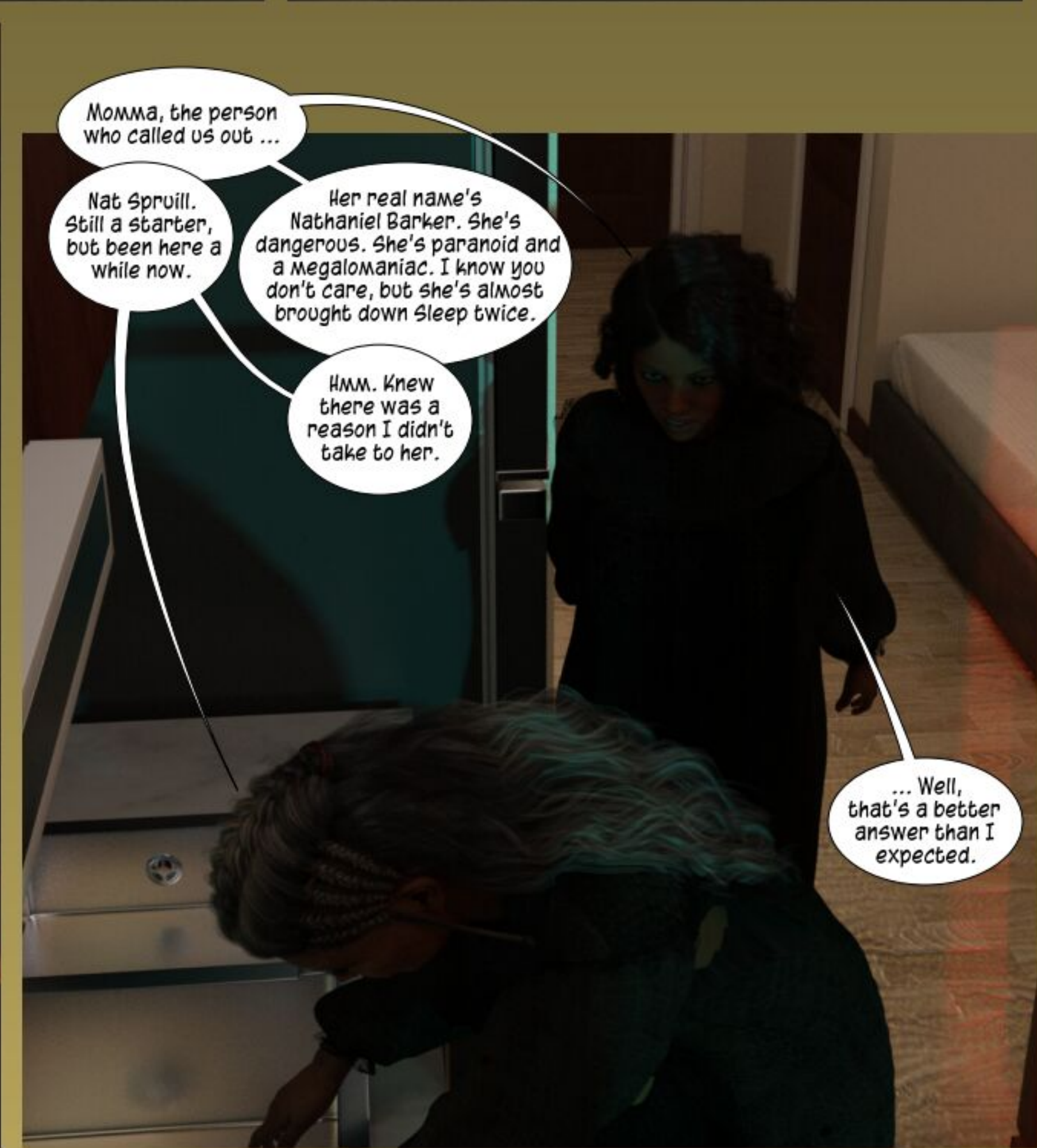
These apartments are reclaim. Old as hell. Built just before Sleep messed everything up and never used. We found them like this and all we did was dust them off. Everything worked.

We'd like to give everybody a good place. We know the starter rooms are nasty. But it's not all lucky finds like this, and building out takes a lot.

I do all right. Nobody needs a tailor here, not when everybody wears the same damned thing. But turns out I get along good with plants.

Speak of which, you watch out for my Fern tests over there and don't knock over my light! Been working on those for two weeks.

Next thing I knew, I was running the botany labs. Guess they couldn't find anybody else.



Momma, the person who called us out ...

Nat Spruill. Still a starter, but been here a while now.

Her real name's Nathaniel Barker. She's dangerous. She's paranoid and a megalomaniac. I know you don't care, but she's almost brought down Sleep twice.

Hmm. Knew there was a reason I didn't take to her.

... Well, that's a better answer than I expected.



I don't want to take down Sleep. I don't care for it, no, but I don't think that's a useful thing to do. I want to make a good place out here, for the people out here, and Sleep can do what it pleases.

But there's many here who don't agree. They think they've got some kind of mission to destroy Sleep, and they won't settle for anything else.

Soon as that Nat got here, she started kissing up to the Polks at the top of that group. I don't know what she's been telling them.

And now you say she's a Barker ...!



I'll keep my eye on her. Not your concern, though. They wouldn't believe you if you told them.

OK, but we've got to talk to her. That's why we're here.

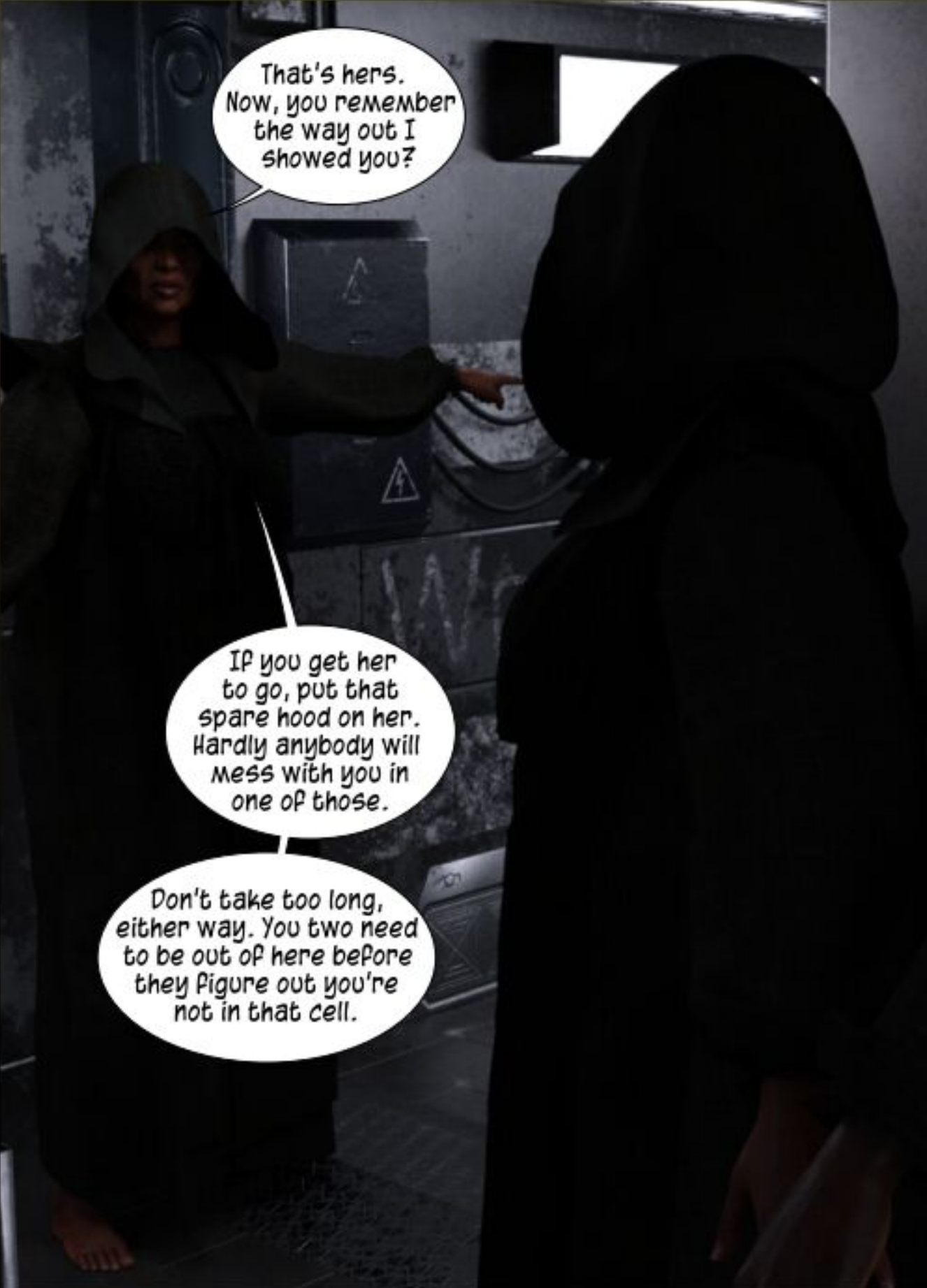
You just told me she was dangerous.

She is. She's also important.

Look, if we talk to her, there's a chance we might get her to go back to Sleep. Then she won't be your problem anymore.

We don't want her in Sleep any more than you want her here -- believe me -- but we may not have a choice.

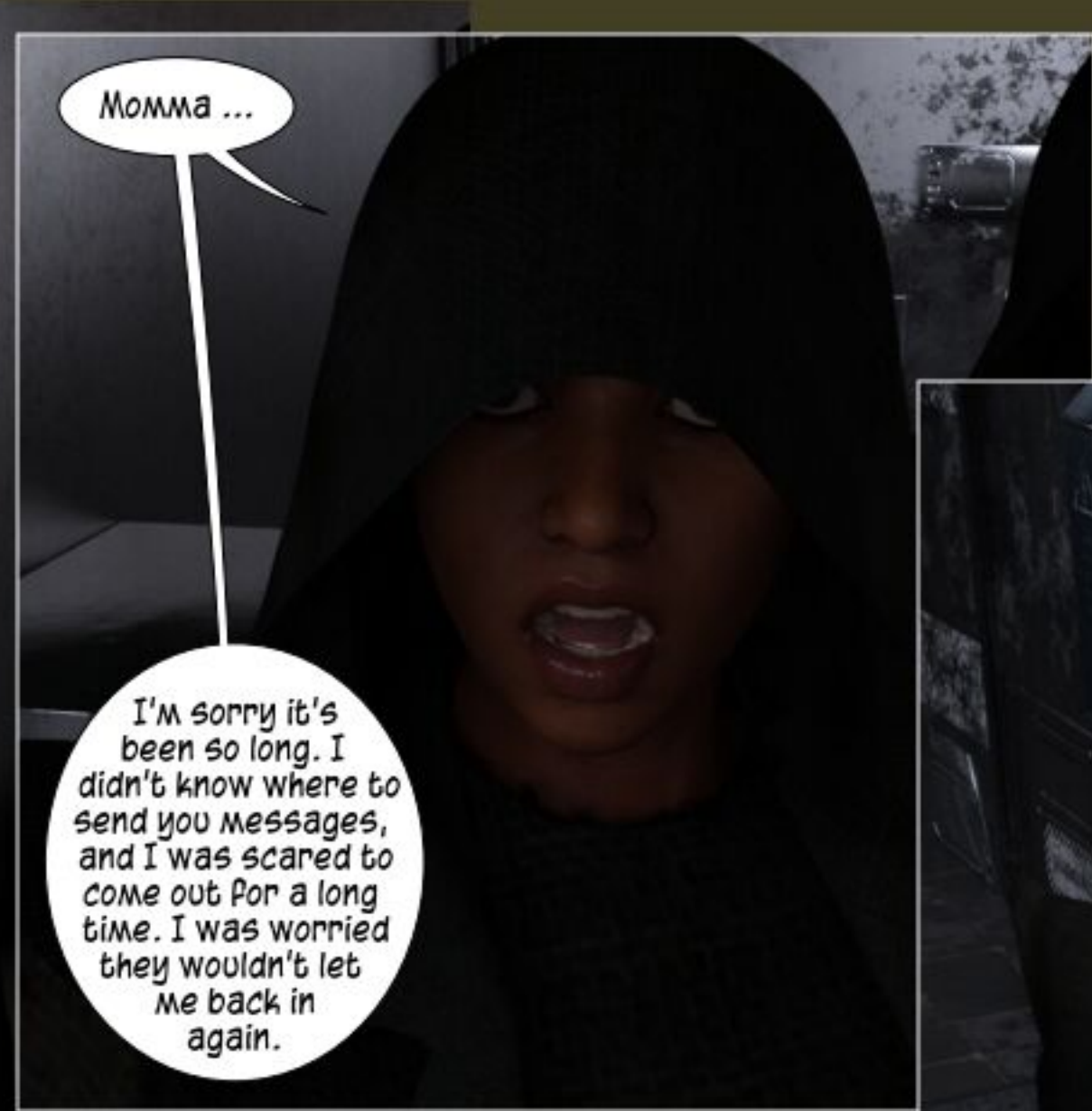
A FAST MEAL AND A PLAN LATER ...



That's hers. Now, you remember the way out I showed you?

If you get her to go, put that spare hood on her. Hardly anybody will mess with you in one of those.

Don't take too long, either way. You two need to be out of here before they figure out you're not in that cell.



Momma ...

I'm sorry it's been so long. I didn't know where to send you messages, and I was scared to come out for a long time. I was worried they wouldn't let me back in again.



It's all right, honey. I'm just glad to see you're alive. Doing pretty good, too, seems like.

They wouldn't like it if I sent you messages, and I don't guess we can see each other again ... but you know I'm always thinking of you.



Oyo, Nathaniel.

Aaaa!

Ssh!

Make a big noise and I swear I will break your jaw.

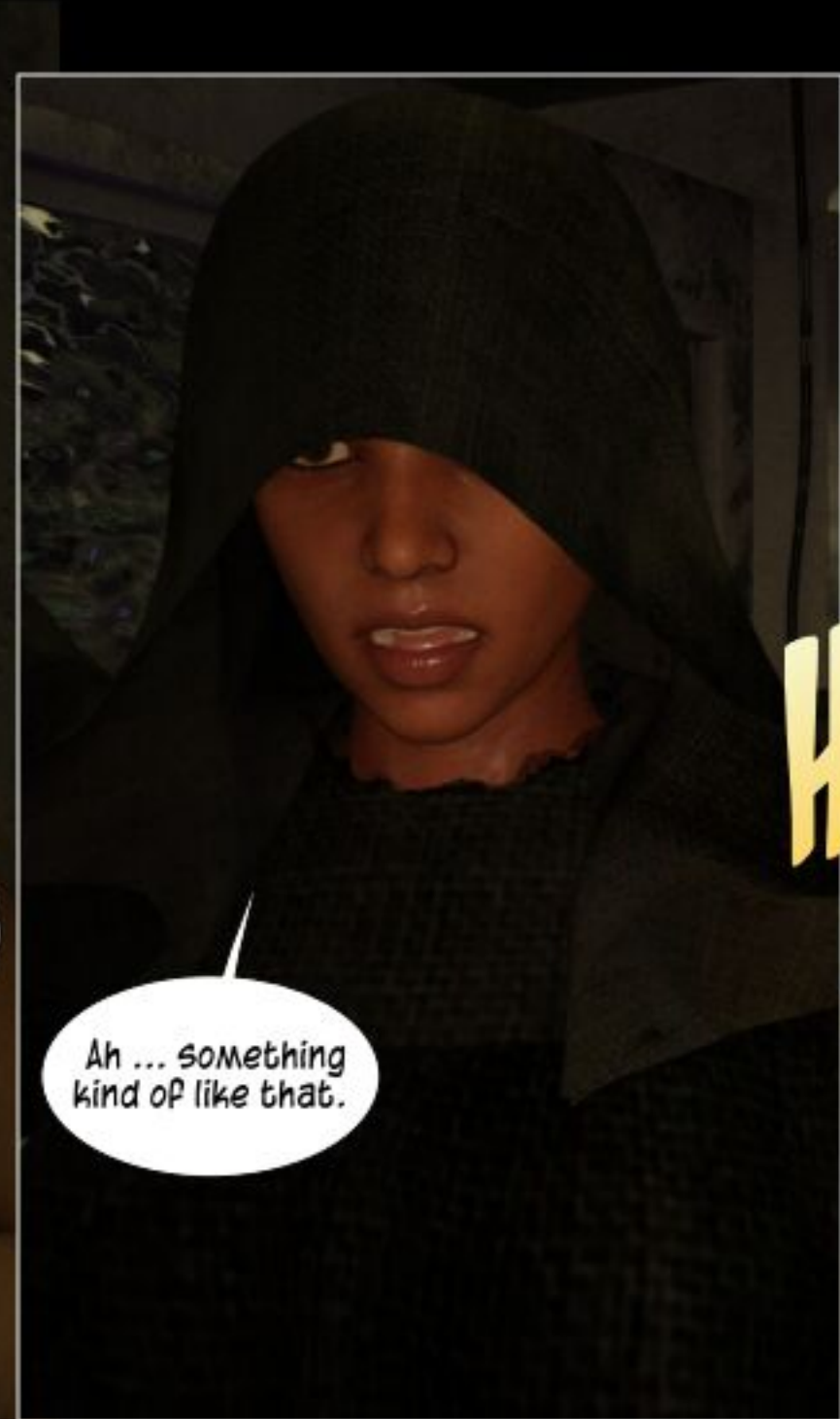
Not in the mood. We just wanted to talk to you, and you got us in a shitload of trouble.



You came just to talk to --

I don't believe it. Must be something really dramatic.

What, did the phones break some way my stupid sister can't fix?



Ah ... something kind of like that.



HAHAHAHAHA!

That's hilarious.

Go to hell.

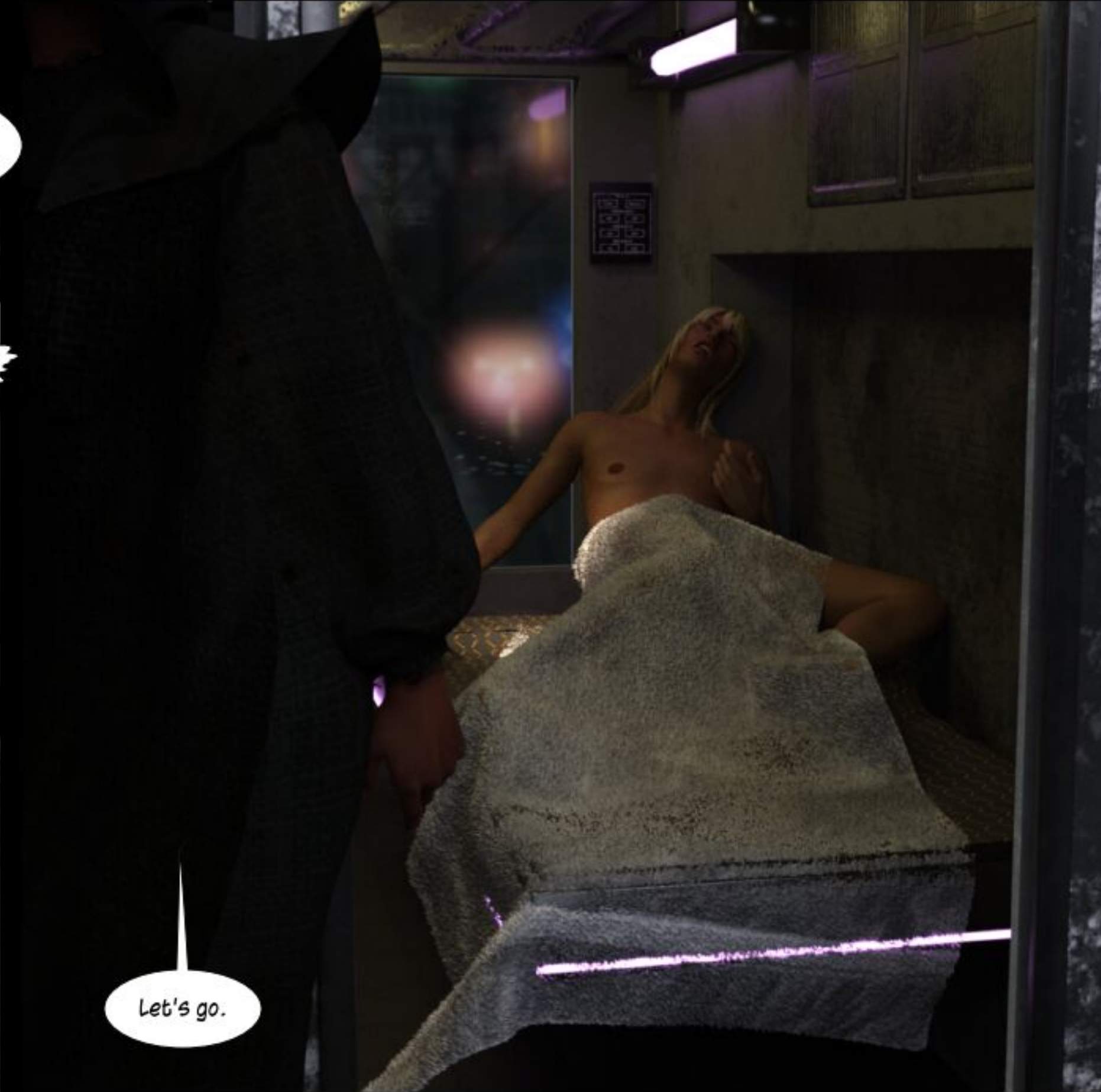


I'm done with Sleep. You got your wish. There is not a thing on earth that would get me back in there. Nothing.

And I don't think you can drag me back there without someone noticing, so if I were you, I'd concentrate on getting out of here while you --

-- ooo! --

Well, it was worth a try.



Let's go.

THEY RETURN TO THE SLEEP FACILITY WITHOUT INCIDENT.



I guess we should put these things in the leavings ...

Put them in your locker. With our luck, we'll need to infiltrate the Wide-Eyes again sometime.

Urgh. But you're probably right.

Do you think we should go Pina Serene right away?

I'm glad you said that, because I wasn't sure if I was being ridiculous.

I just hope we don't wake her up.



Sorry we disturbed you ... We just weren't sure how long it would take to get you, and we figured --

No, no, that's fine ... I'm glad to see you back in one piece ... it's just that ...



Was it actually someone --

Oh.

Oh, hell.

I, ah, didn't see anything.

I'll just go hide in the bedroom now.



No, don't. It's past time Leyna met you. Come in and sit down.

Leyna, this is Corazon. Ruby already met her a while back at an event.\*

I don't mind if she hears your report. She is completely trustworthy.

\* IN SS #14. RUBY DOES NOT KNOW THAT "CORAZON" IS LUCIUS BARKER. FOR MORE ON HOW THAT CAME ABOUT, SEE SS #12. -T



RUBY AND LEYNA BRING SERENE UP TO DATE.

Um. Well, I admit I'm a little relieved. But I think this means we do have to try to send to one of the other complexes for help. I'll start looking at that.

Meanwhile, you two should regroup. This problem isn't getting better, but it also isn't getting worse. Take a couple of days to deal with everything else in your lives. And maybe get some rest?



You're going to Lou's, right? Mind if I come with you? I won't stay long.

Sure. I don't think Lou'll be asleep, they stay up late ... is something wrong?

I don't think so ... I had a message waiting from them when I came back into sleep. Didn't have much information. I wanted to see what was up.



So were you going to tell me that my mother had a hot new girlfriend?

I was! My first thought when I met her was, "Oh, I have got to talk to Leyna about this."

But right away I had to do Pauline's scenario, and then the discontinuity happened during that, and ... things just kept coming and coming, y'know?

Serene's got a point. We need to just sit around. Have a movie night or something.

LOU EXPLAINS THEIR CRYPTIC MESSAGE.



I realize it's kind of retrograde; you don't usually appear in scenarios yourself these days ...

On the other hand, business is lousy for everybody who's doing live scenarios right now ... so hard to broker them ...

Not as bad as the theatrical Polks, of course, but even so ...

Yeah. I saw April the other day. The Cirque Diabolique is closed until further notice.

I'd been wondering if this was what was finally going to get me to give in to Trish and work on a passive with her.

Lou, did you make your message vague so you could pitch me in person?



Let's say I felt it needed more explanation than I could put in a message.

The client has requested you specifically. Even though I told him that you don't really do that anymore.

Huh. That's a little worrying, honestly.

I met with him, and I don't think he's dangerous or toxic. I think he's just a Pan of yours with very clear needs. A little over-enthusiastic, but that's not Patal.

Well, if you've already taken this Pan enough to meet with him, I can at least do that. I'll see after I talk to him.

Gotta say, it might take a big Pee to get me to actually do it, though.



MEANWHILE, IN THE "SOUK" ...



No, don't --

You shoulda paid up.

There's no business! Nobody's buying right now. You know that.

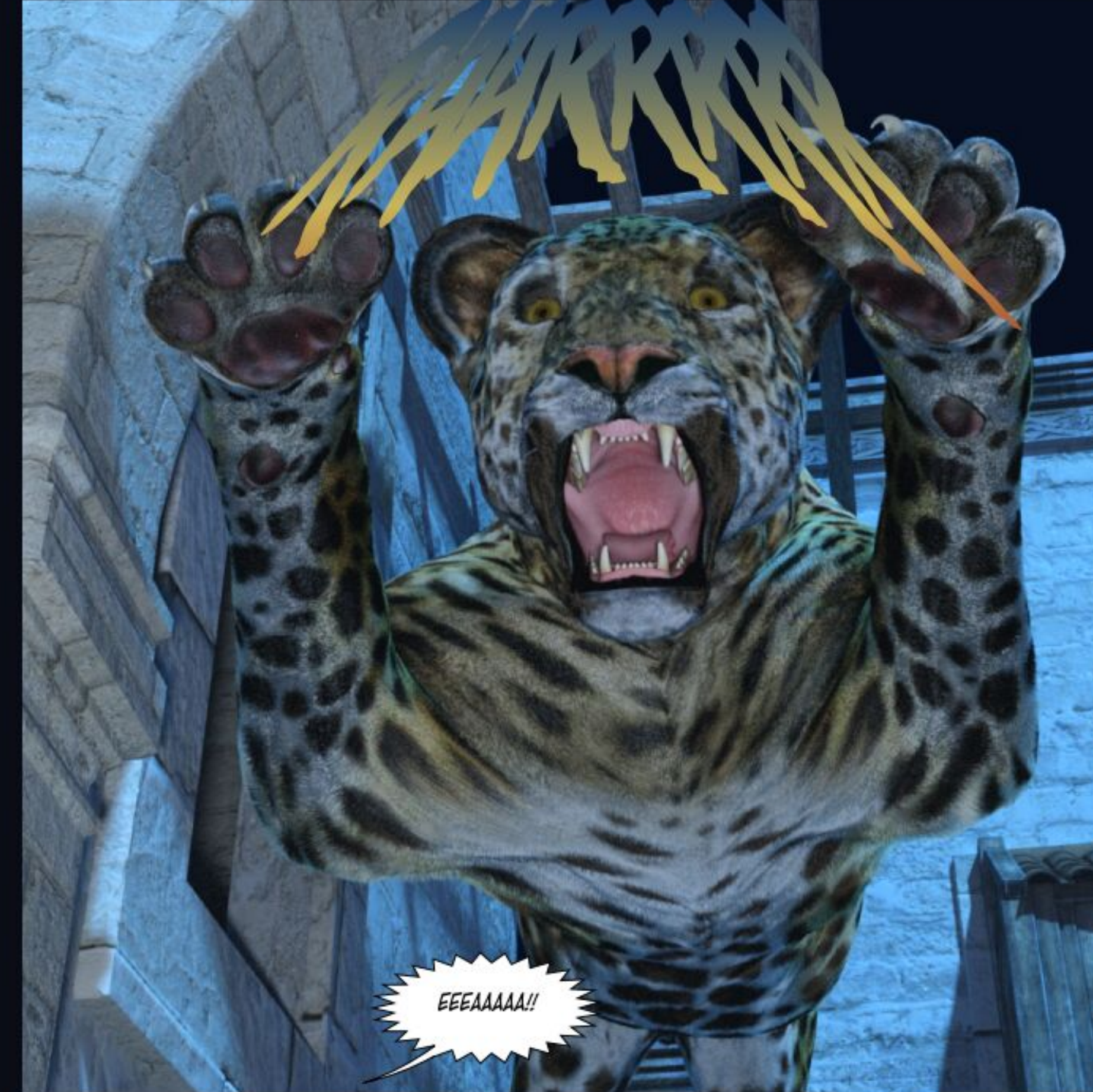
Don't give a shit. You got other ways to make money.

Go do twin jobs with your sister. Two pretty things like you, get lots of customers.

I won't bust your face, so you stay pretty --



What the



EEEEAAAAA!!



Get off! Get off!!

Now, now. Alyx won't tear your face off. Unless you give her a reason to.



You were warned before, Terry. No loansharking in the Souk.

You crazy women don't run the Souk!

That's a matter of opinion.



I told you there would be consequences. It's time to face them.

What are you --



No, I --

NO AAAAAA!



Oh, don't make a puss. Look! Alyx wants to be friends.

You'll make a good kitty. And much more useful this way.



You'll need to keep the collar and lead on her for a while. She'll keep having fits of resistance.

Once you've trained her and she's imprinted on you, those should stop.

Should we pen her with Alyx?

Definitely.

It'll help her acclimatize, and Alyx needs the company.





... ოფიციალური  
პროცესი უნდა  
დასრულდეს  
სწრაფად.

მეც  
დაელოდეთ  
მისთვის.



... ოფიციალური.



MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM



... ოფიციალური  
პროცესი უნდა  
დასრულდეს  
სწრაფად.  
მეც დაელოდეთ  
მისთვის.



MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM



... ოფიციალური  
პროცესი უნდა  
დასრულდეს  
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... ოფიციალური  
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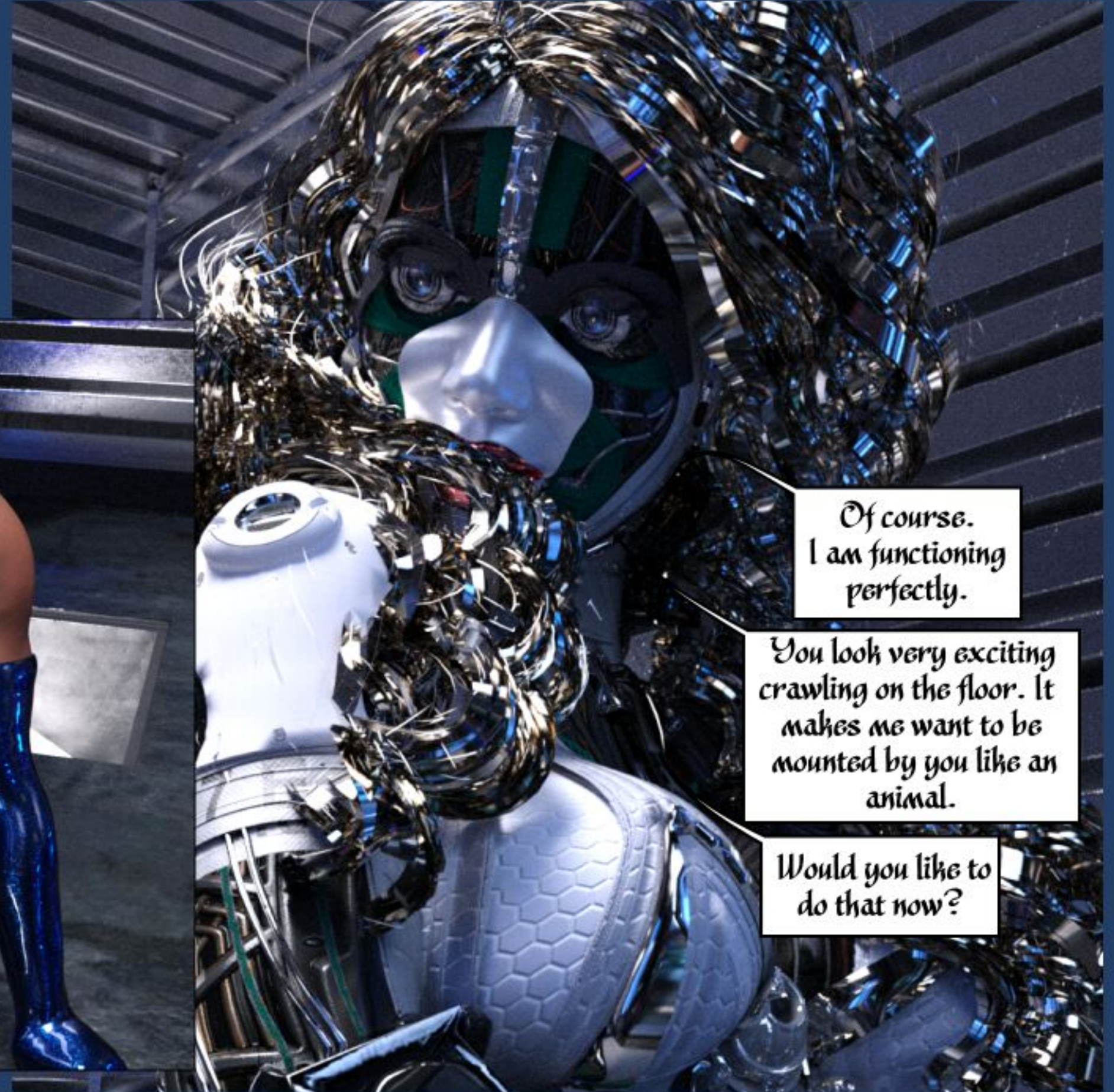
... ოფიციალური



They did something to  
me, Stella ... My head Peels  
Punny, My hands and Peet  
aren't working right ... and  
there's some weird thing on  
my ... dick ...

... Stella?

Are you OK?



Of course.  
I am functioning  
perfectly.

You look very exciting  
crawling on the floor. It  
makes me want to be  
mounted by you like an  
animal.

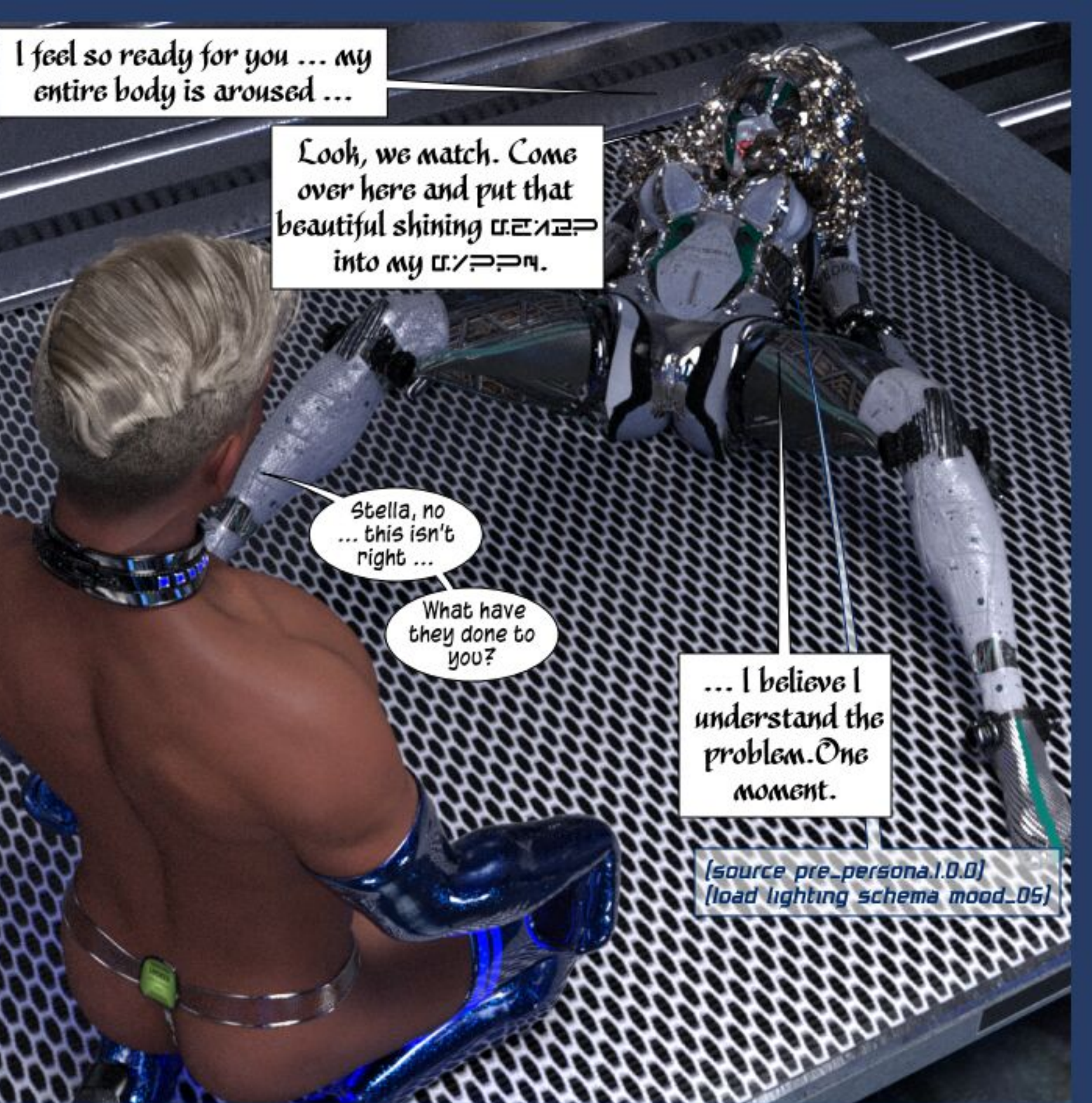
Would you like to  
do that now?

Perhaps the bed would be better. You will have difficulty standing in those boots. Let me help you.



... Stella ...

I feel so ready for you ... my entire body is aroused ...



Look, we match. Come over here and put that beautiful shining *אָרְבֵּי* into my *אָרְבֵּי*.

Stella, no ... this isn't right ...

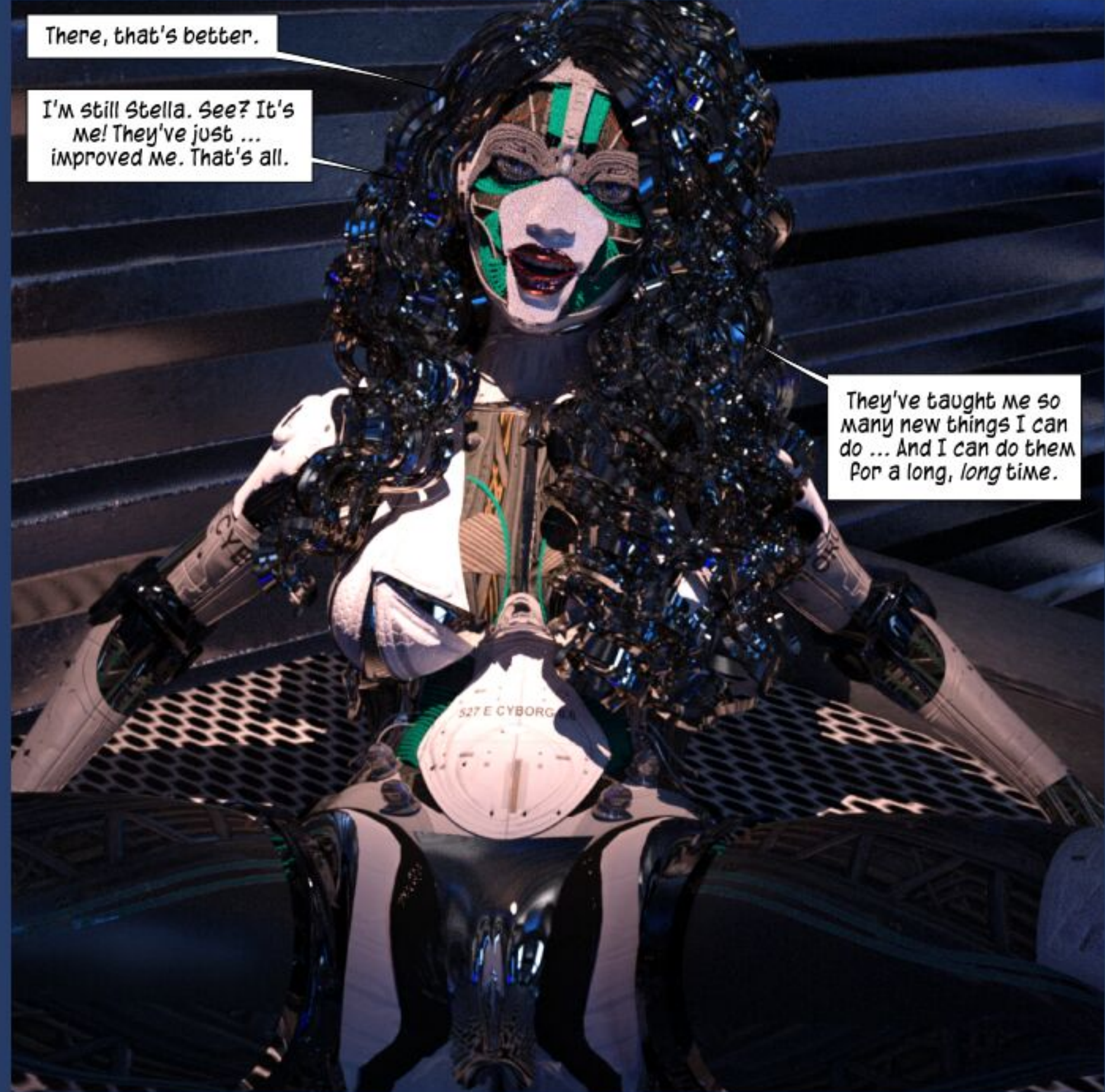
What have they done to you?

... I believe I understand the problem. One moment.

[source pre\_persona.1.0.0] [load lighting schema mood\_05]

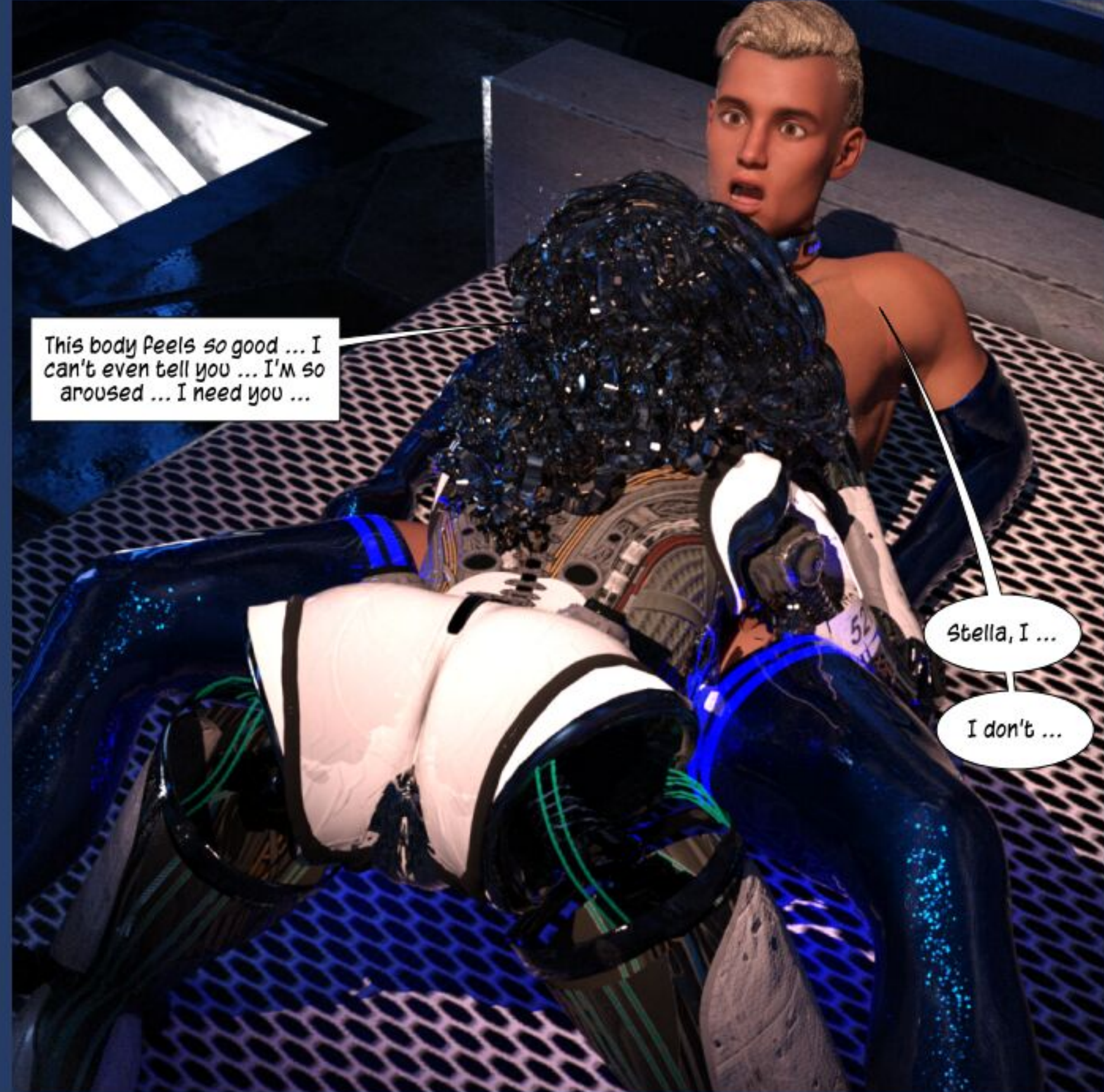
There, that's better.

I'm still Stella. See? It's me! They've just ... improved me. That's all.



They've taught me so many new things I can do ... And I can do them for a long, long time.

This body Peels so good ... I can't even tell you ... I'm so aroused ... I need you ...



Stella, I ...

I don't ...

Are you OK, Matt? Do you need to stop? We can pause if you're uncomfortable.



I...I...



You are a robot. Nothing more than a machine. You cannot think or make decisions on your own. You can only follow instructions. You must do what your owner tells you. You are a robot.



[I am a robot]  
[I am a robot]  
[I am -- ooh! -- a robot]

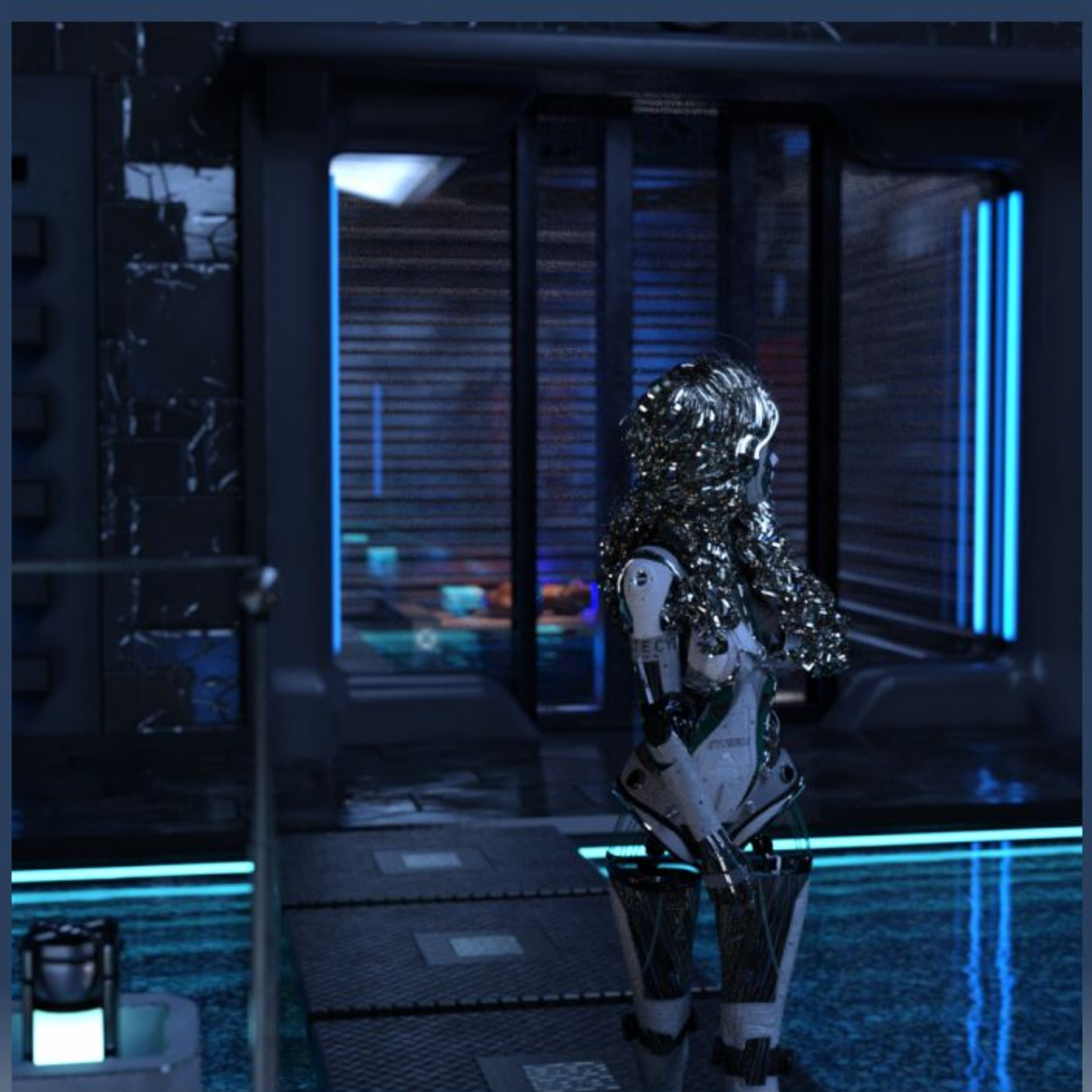
[I am a]  
[-- aaah! --]  
[I am -- am -- I am --]

[ooooooooooooooooo!]



I ... [I am a robot]  
[I do only what I am told]  
[I am a robot]





THE NEXT DAY.

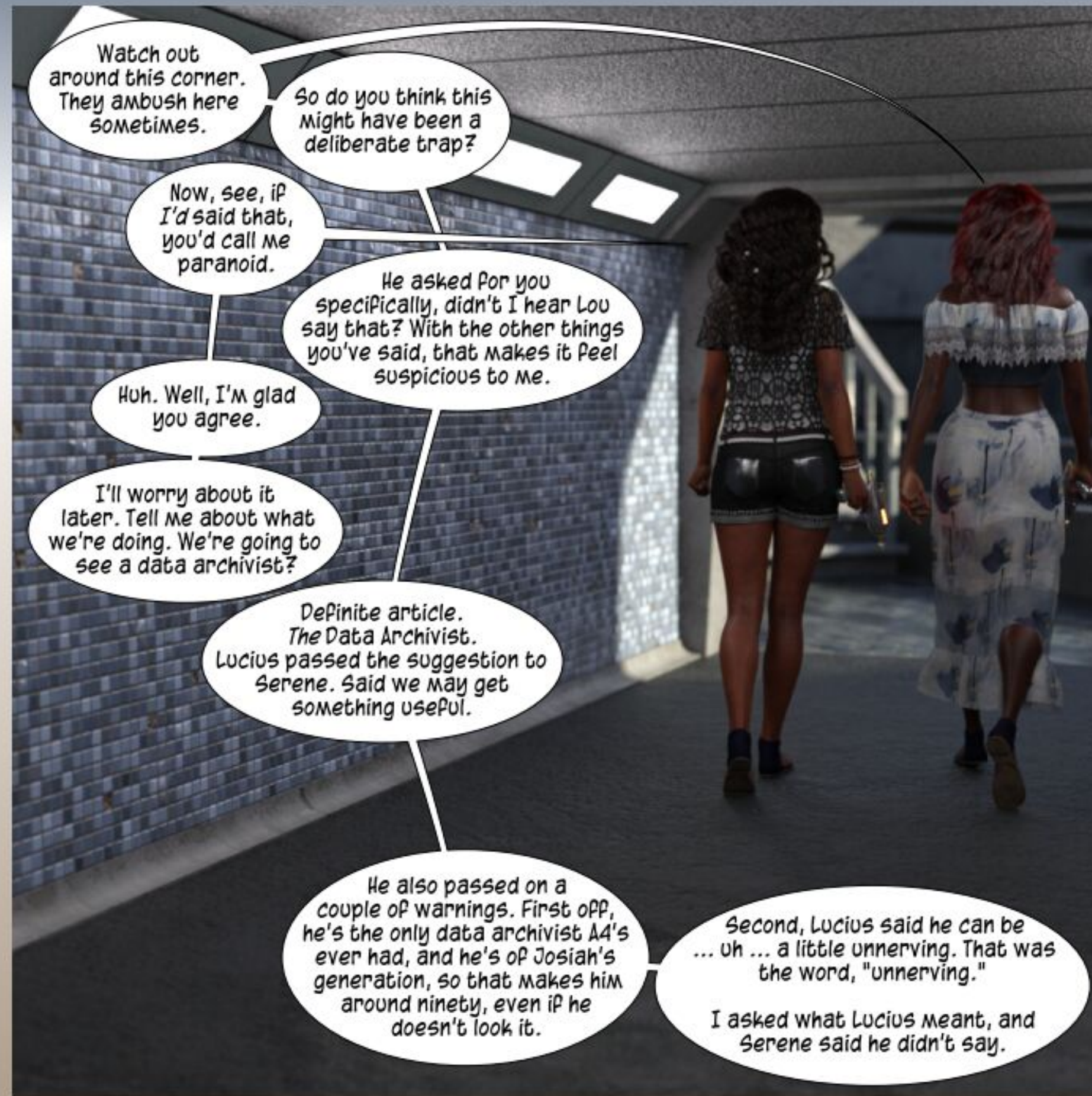


... And I thought, "Hey, he's obviously having trouble getting into it, maybe he's just trying to talk himself up" ...

Nope. He was actually trying to control my mind. It was like he changed to a different person all of a sudden.

He wasn't very good at it ... I recovered as soon as I came ... but it freaked me out enough that I struck the set around him and left, which I don't usually do, because I think it's polite to wake up next to them, y'know?

The thing is, I'm a pretty good judge. This guy already set off an alarm because he asked for this scenario. I mean, I filled in the gaps, but the main idea was what he wanted. I'd have been willing to swear the wildest the dude ever got was maybe having ten minutes of bad sex with a total stranger. He was completely bro. No imagination.



Watch out around this corner. They ambush here sometimes.

So do you think this might have been a deliberate trap?

Now, see, if I'd said that, you'd call me paranoid.

He asked for you specifically, didn't I hear Lou say that? With the other things you've said, that makes it feel suspicious to me.

Huh. Well, I'm glad you agree.

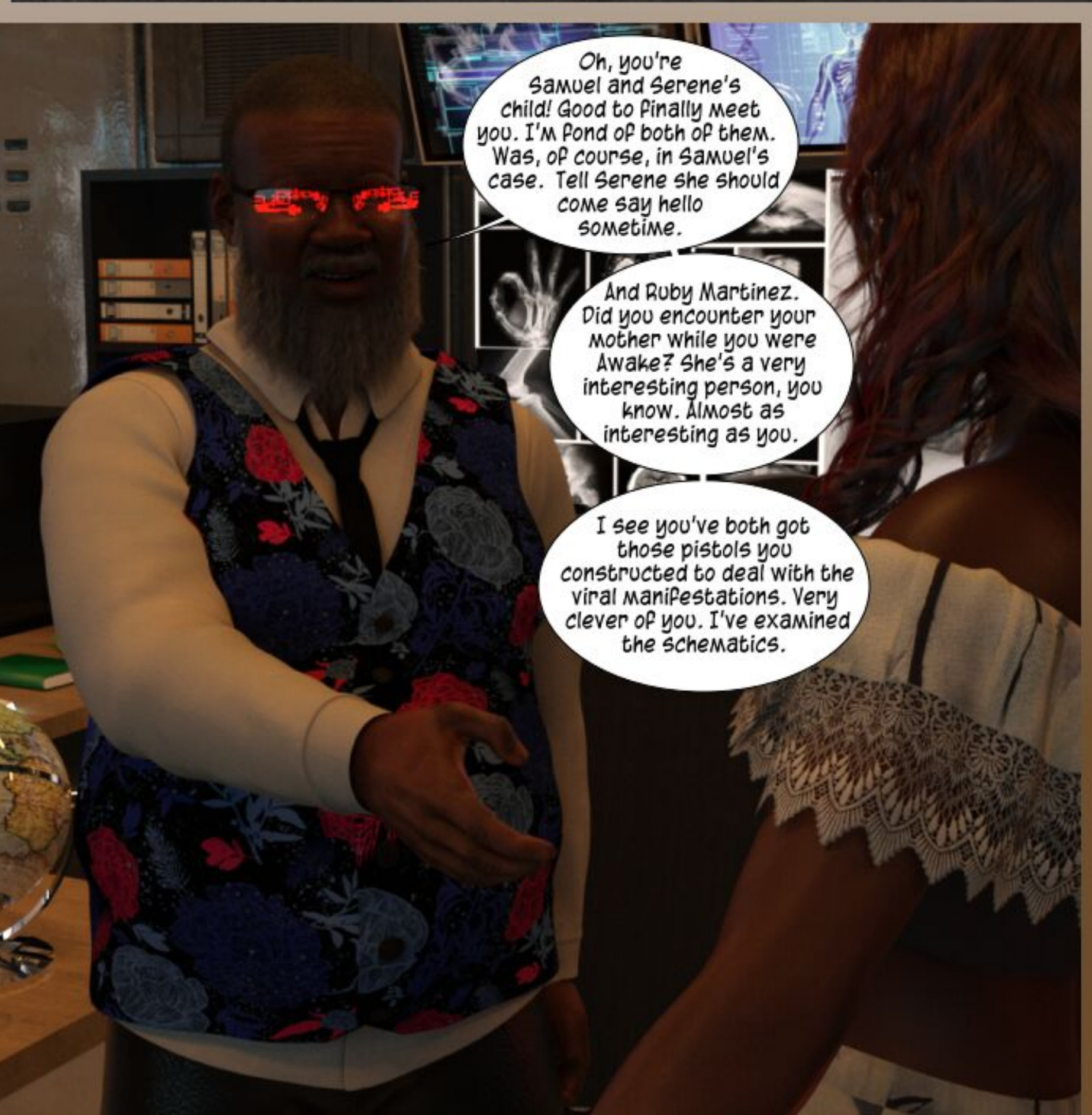
I'll worry about it later. Tell me about what we're doing. We're going to see a data archivist?

Definite article. The Data Archivist. Lucius passed the suggestion to Serene. Said we may get something useful.

He also passed on a couple of warnings. First off, he's the only data archivist A4's ever had, and he's of Josiah's generation, so that makes him around ninety, even if he doesn't look it.

Second, Lucius said he can be ... uh ... a little unnerving. That was the word, "unnerving."

I asked what Lucius meant, and Serene said he didn't say.



Oh, you're Samuel and Serene's child! Good to finally meet you. I'm proud of both of them. Was, of course, in Samuel's case. Tell Serene she should come say hello sometime.

And Ruby Martinez. Did you encounter your mother while you were Awake? She's a very interesting person, you know. Almost as interesting as you.

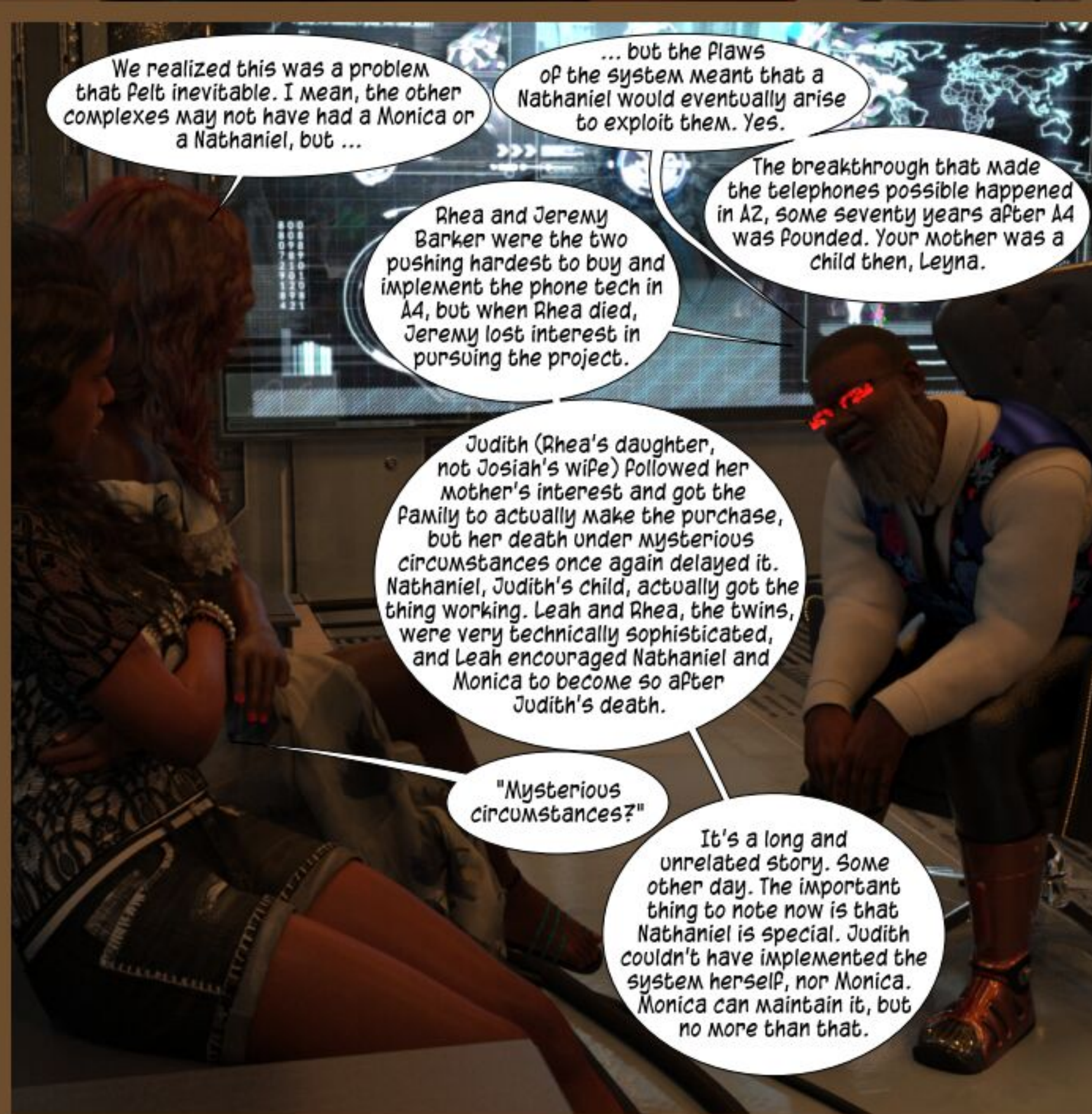
I see you've both got those pistols you constructed to deal with the viral manifestations. Very clever of you. I've examined the schematics.



Uhhh ...

Oh, don't worry. I know many things ... after all, I have access to so much information. But I'm very strict about confidentiality. Your secrets are safe with me.

Call me Noah. Won't you sit down? Mind the cables. And ignore the screens, I've been doing some research on anatomy.



We realized this was a problem that felt inevitable. I mean, the other complexes may not have had a Monica or a Nathaniel, but ...

... but the flaws of the system meant that a Nathaniel would eventually arise to exploit them. Yes.

The breakthrough that made the telephones possible happened in A2, some seventy years after A4 was founded. Your mother was a child then, Leyna.

Rhea and Jeremy Barker were the two pushing hardest to buy and implement the phone tech in A4, but when Rhea died, Jeremy lost interest in pursuing the project.

Judith (Rhea's daughter, not Josiah's wife) followed her mother's interest and got the family to actually make the purchase, but her death under mysterious circumstances once again delayed it. Nathaniel, Judith's child, actually got the thing working. Leah and Rhea, the twins, were very technically sophisticated, and Leah encouraged Nathaniel and Monica to become so after Judith's death.

"Mysterious circumstances?"

It's a long and unrelated story. Some other day. The important thing to note now is that Nathaniel is special. Judith couldn't have implemented the system herself, nor Monica. Monica can maintain it, but no more than that.



Meanwhile, A3 and A5 have gone without a telephone system for some years now; they believe it's safer.

A2 developed a system they claim is immune to this sort of abuse. A1 must have agreed; they bought the technology. Paid a fortune.

We could do that, if we were willing to pay. However, I suspect our local Barkers may not be.

And Nathaniel won't help. So buying this system is our only other option?

No. There's a possibility you haven't considered.

Nathaniel Barker is not the only telephony genius in the area.

If you give the matter some thought, you'll realize why that has to be the case.

You can't just tell us who this genius is?

I'm afraid not.

Confidentiality.

RUBY AND LEYNA HEAD TO "XENOMORPH." BY NIGHT, AZU RUNS THE CLUB FOR A CLIENTELE WITH BODY MODS, LIKE TENTACLES OR HORNS. BY DAY, SHE OPERATES MORPHIC LABS AROUND THE CORNER, GIVING THEM THE TENTACLES OR HORNS.\*

OK, why are we here?  
It might not work out. I just have a feeling I know what the archivist is getting at. I'm not sure about it yet. But I want to see what Azu knows.  
She should be setting up for the night right about now. I just hope we can get someone to let us in.



\* SEE SS #10. -T



Well, getting Iz as a temp waitress works for now, but she's not Trini, and she can't tend bar. I don't mind working every night but ...  
I know, it's not great. We need at least one more bartender and probably two more waitresses. I'm trying. Meanwhile, Trini says three weeks at least.

You've got company.



Hey! How's saving the world going?  
About as well as you'd expect. How have you not gone private? We didn't expect to just be able to walk in.

Thank Leyna. Every night we station a whole group of people with her guns all around the club. The patrons mostly think it's hilarious when the firefighters break out. Even when they get interrupted.



Now what I'd really like is to have something like the bees use. Just shake 'em apart. We could wire up the whole club with it. You don't have anything like that, do you?  
You must be kidding. I've told you before -- I'm really just a body modder who can do an occasional algorithmic add-on. Those bee suits are very advanced stuff. Way beyond me.  
Whoever did those wasn't just a very good algorithmist but also a hell of a network expert. I'd love to meet them.

Ah ... no. We were wondering if maybe you did.

Network expert? Why do you say that?

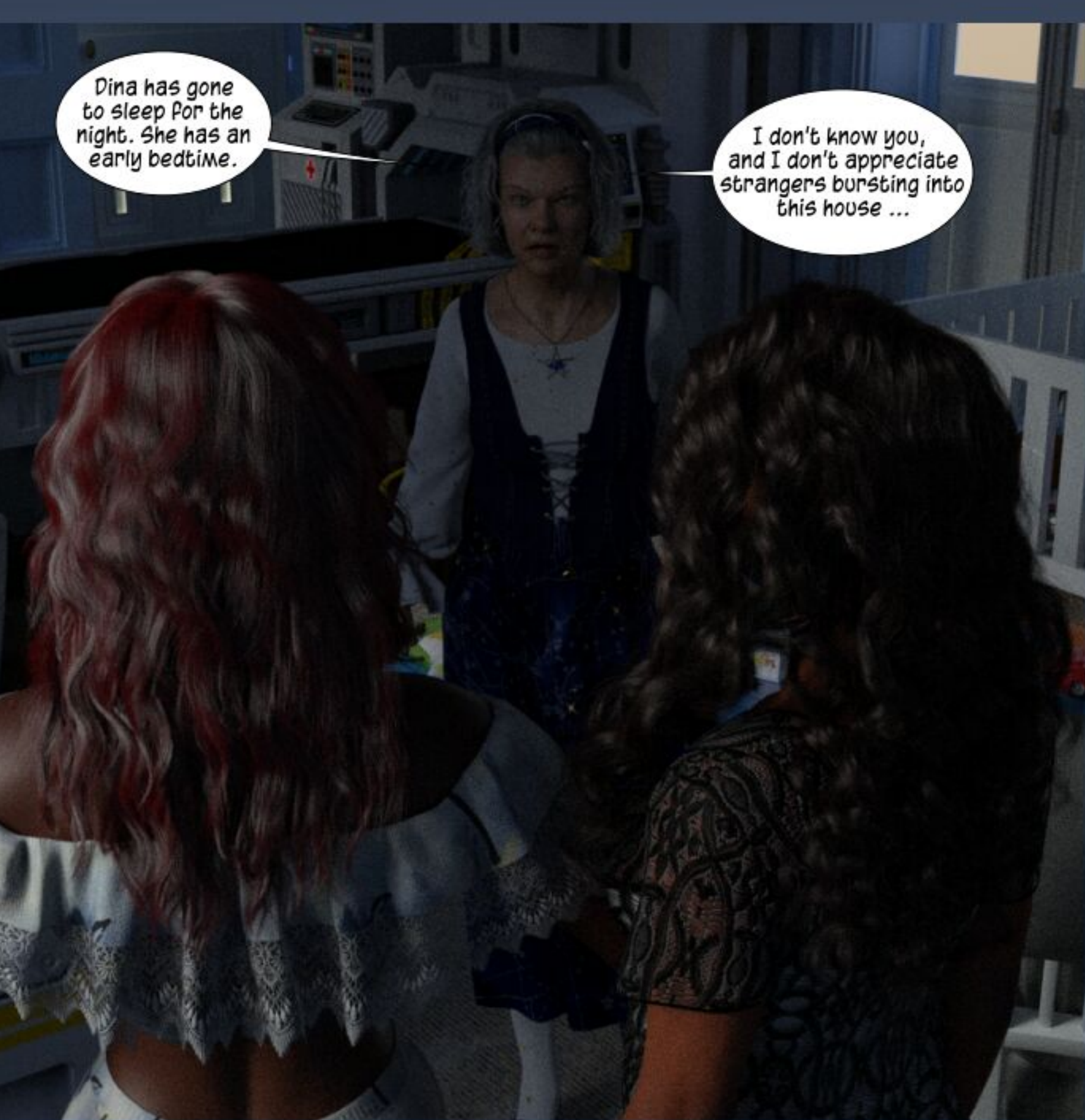
Those suits are a network! The bees all talk to each other, hear each other. That's a real trick in sleep ...



That's it! That's what his hint was. That's what was itching at the back of my head.

There's no way the bees could be doing what they're doing without a network genius.

I have an idea who we should go ask next, too.



Dina has gone to sleep for the night. She has an early bedtime.

I don't know you, and I don't appreciate strangers bursting into this house ...



MOMMY!

It's OK. I know them, they're nice.

DINA MERRIWETHER, ACE ALGORITHMIST, WHO JUST HAPPENS TO PREFER NOT TO BE A GROWN-UP IF SHE CAN AVOID IT. USUALLY SHE CAN.

A FEW MINUTES INTO THE CONVERSATION, DINA REVEALS A SURPRISE.



You designed the bee suits?

Uh-huh! Have you seen them? Aren't they neat? Biggest job I've had in a real long time.

I didn't do them all by myself. There were some parts I didn't know how to do. Communications stuff. The lady who hired me had somebody else for that part. We sent each other files.



Dina ... we talked before about building things without considering the consequences\* ...

But I did! You can't do anything bad with these, you can't control anybody's mind ... the only people who could even maybe be affected are the ones wearing them, and they all volunteer for it ... they like it!

-- sigh -- We need to talk with the networks pro. The person who worked with you. We think we may need their help to deal with the anomaly patrol.

Ohhhh! The patrol is networked, aren't they? Are they using the phones? Wow! I should have thought of that!

I don't know the person, though. Their name is Snub. I never actually met them. If you want to find them, you'll need to go to the place with the bees.

\* SPECIFICALLY, SUBSEQUENT TO EVENTS IN SS #12. -T

Why am I worried this is a foolish thing to do?

... Because it probably is.

Should we, uh, take some precautions, then?

I did. I left messages with both Serene and Naomi that they should break out if we didn't report back by tomorrow.

Huh.

We just go on in?

Yep. They want visitors.

Weird hum in here ...

That's probably whatever they use to keep out patrollers. Naomi says they come apart as soon as they enter.

Hello!

Are you here to learn more about our services? Are you interested in joining?

You're not wearing a bee suit.

Oh, no! You have to have a lot more training before you're ready to use one of those. I'll get there one of these days.

My name's June. Would you like me to give you a tour?

Uh ... sure.

This is one of our rooms for individual meditation.

The people you see in here are staring at those Pocus balls to induce a state of mental detachment. Being able to reach that state on demand is a prerequisite for the next stages of training. It's also very relaxing.

Would you like to try it?

Not right now, thanks.

This is one of what we call the pyramid rooms.

You see the two people in here are sitting across the room from one another, and each is in one of those pyramids. That's a Pocuser. They're attempting to send telepathic signals to each other.

Hmph. Has that ever actually worked?

Well, it hasn't worked for me yet. But it has to have worked for a lot of people, because you need to get progress here to move on to preparing to be a bee.

Do you have a lot of ... bees?

Over a hundred, last I heard. And more every day!

Now, this dome is one of several different kinds of rooms we use to teach people how to handle the bee gear.

I'm told it can be overwhelming at first because there's just so much signal -- like everybody talking at the same time.

And then, if a buzz effect is on, that can also prevent you from being able to sort out anything else.

We can make a buzz effect in this room to practice with. The room is acoustically balanced. Go stand in the middle and make some sounds and you'll see what I mean.

June, I'll take over with these.

Oh! Ms. Thorpe. Uh ... OK.

Don't worry, you're not doing anything wrong. I know these two, they're old friends. I thought I'd give them a personal tour.

Go ahead back to the front desk.

Huh!

I think the floor just did something different.

You sure? It looks the same to me.

Pretty sure. I'm not sure what changed, but ...

Whoa. OK, that's definitely different.

June? Are you giving us a demo or something?

June?



Ruby!  
It's been a while,  
hasn't it?

You might not even  
recognize me. I'm not  
offended. For one thing, I  
changed my hair.

Penny!



THE LAST TIME RUBY  
SAW PENNY, SHE  
WAS RECRUITING FOR  
THE EUPHORIC CULT  
(WHICH TURNED OUT  
TO BE LED BY  
NATHANIEL BARKER)  
IN ISSUE #3.

AFTER THE  
EUPHORICS WERE  
BROKEN UP, AS FAR  
AS RUBY AND LEYNA  
WERE CONCERNED,  
PENNY WAS  
"WHEREABOUTS  
UNKNOWN."

YOU, HOWEVER,  
DEAR READER, SAW  
PENNY CONSPIRING  
AT HIVE BUSINESS IN  
ISSUE #17 ...  
THOUGH, AS SHE  
SAYS, YOU CAN'T  
REALLY BE BLAMED  
IF YOU DIDN'T  
RECOGNIZE HER.



Penny, what are you  
doing? Let us out!

Oh, no.  
You like to ruin other people's fun. I  
learned that about you.  
I'm not going to let you ruin this.



Ruin what?  
What's going on in  
this place?

We just --

... What is that?



Aaaaa!!

Aaaaaaa!!



RUBY AND LEYNA APPEAR TO HAVE GOTTEN A BAD BUZZ. THEY'RE GOING TO HAVE REALLY NASTY HANGOVERS TOMORROW. IF THEY MAKE IT TO TOMORROW ... WHAT IS PENNY UP TO? WHAT WILL SHE DO TO THEM? FIND OUT IN THE NEXT ISSUE!