



You like a lot bigger place than I do.

Not really.

I guess you could say I inherited this space. This is how my mothers had it when I was growing up. Ruth and Rachel liked to have parties.

This is what was "home" to me, so when Rachel died and Ruth moved to her farm, I kept it. I figured I might throw a few parties myself.

Turns out I'm not that social and I hate to cook.

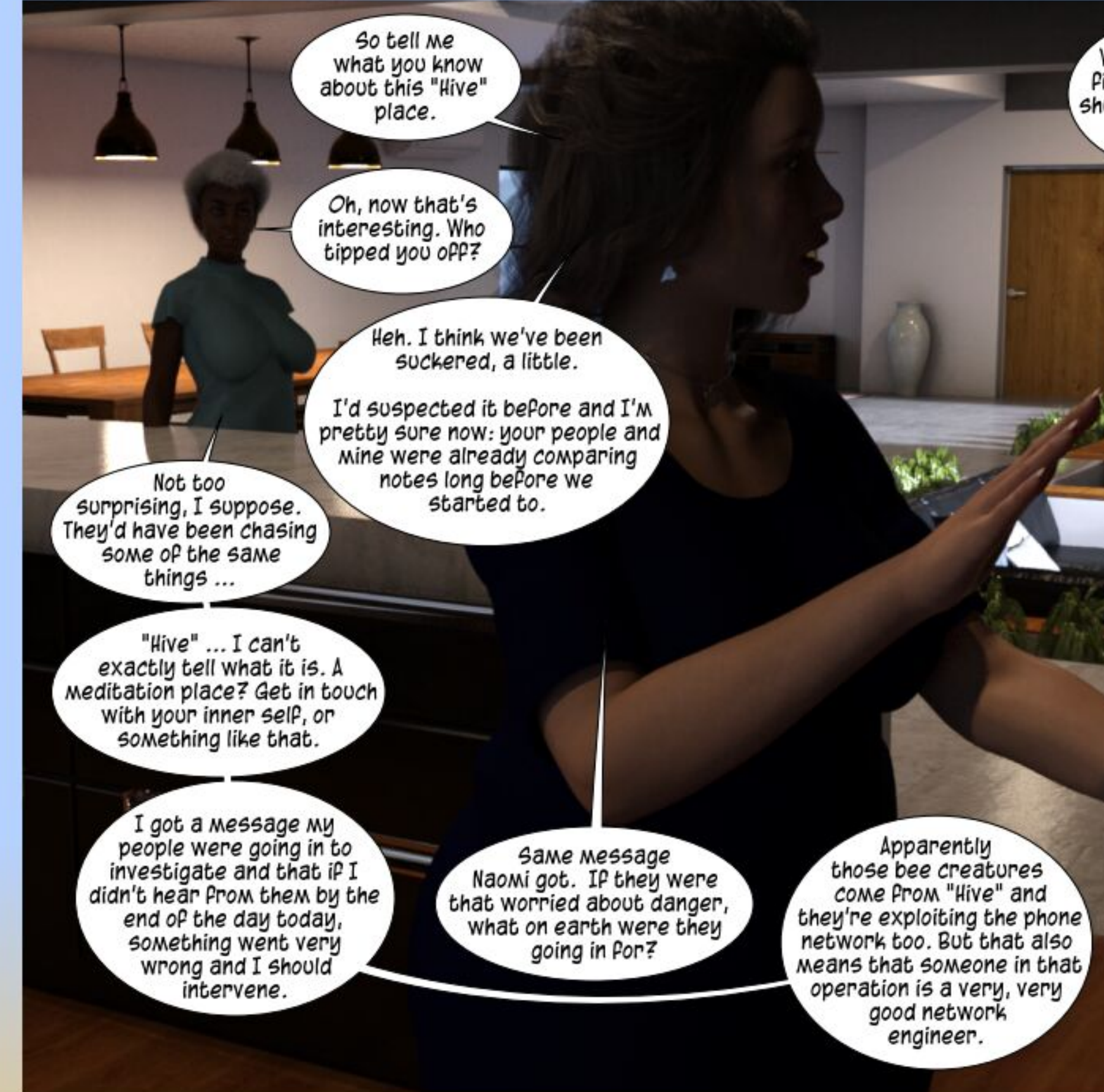
I can make us some coffee, though.

Anyway, I thought you might not want to have a private meeting in the boardroom.

Probably wouldn't have mattered. It's been deserted. Josiah is the one who gets everyone to show up there, and he ...

... Well, I don't know what he's been like for you, but for me it was getting hard to get any business out of him even before the phones and the patrollers knocked everything sideways.

I'm starting to wonder if he's thinking about retiring.



So tell me what you know about this "Hive" place.

Oh, now that's interesting. Who tipped you off?

Heh. I think we've been suckered, a little.

I'd suspected it before and I'm pretty sure now: your people and mine were already comparing notes long before we started to.

Not too surprising, I suppose. They'd have been chasing some of the same things ...

"Hive" ... I can't exactly tell what it is. A meditation place? Get in touch with your inner self, or something like that.

I got a message my people were going in to investigate and that if I didn't hear from them by the end of the day today, something went very wrong and I should intervene.

Same message Naomi got. If they were that worried about danger, what on earth were they going in for?

Apparently those bee creatures come from "Hive" and they're exploiting the phone network too. But that also means that someone in that operation is a very, very good network engineer.

Which we need to fix the phones and shut down the patrol ... I see.

But which may also mean shutting down the bees ... if they take that person away ...

Oh. Got it. Who controls the access to that business? It's a public business, right?

Yes, public, connected to a common space, data rents, so on. Josiah's the rentholder.

I don't think he knows or cares, honestly, but it does mean that if we wanted to do a forcible closure, we'd have a hell of a time. Josiah hates doing that even more than the rest of us. We'd need something ironclad.

Anyway, they've got most of a day left before we're supposed to panic, so I'm not thinking about that yet.

"I just hope they're all right."





Oh, no.



Give it a moment, your head will clear.

I'm sorry. I don't know why she did this.

Uhhh?

Let me get the other hood and those bags off, and then I'll get you out of here.



You don't want to manipulate some clothes?

It'll be a lot easier to beat the shit out of you if I'm naked.

Unless you have a really, really good explanation.



An --

I'll be happy to explain anything I can, but honestly, I don't know what it is you imagine I've done.

Well, for starters, who the hell are you? What are you doing here? What's your connection to this cult?

And don't give me the "nothing suspicious here" business. If nothing's going on, why did Penny lock us up and put our brains on buzz loop?

I'd like to know that too! We have nothing to hide. This is *not* a cult. It's a group of people trying to learn how to become a collective consciousness. I've been pursuing this project for years.

I thought Penny was a trustworthy person to manage this Facility. Until now, she has been. We had agreed on--



Keep going.

Me? Me in particular?

You in particular. Penny's been tracking you for a while. She said you'd change in when we were at a delicate point and interrupt us without waiting for an explanation.

The Pocus crystal was my idea. I needed to get you out of the way for a few weeks, but I wanted to do it in some way that was beneficial to you. To show my intent wasn't hostile.

But now we're ready! I knew you'd come in, and the plan was to show you everything so you'd know there was nothing going on here that needed intervention. Not lock you up!

I'd love to get you into the program. I think you'd be able to do amazing things with the abilities ...

Well, I'm going to manipulate some clothes, even if she isn't ...

-- sigh --
On how to handle you. And that wasn't it.



You mean the fake abilities?

I have a friend out there in one of your bee costumes who thinks you've figured out telepathy.

Sooner or later I'm going to have to tell her that you haven't, and I'm not going to enjoy that.

All you've done is set up a private phone system. Everybody talking and listening at once, on the same channel.

It produces the same results! And it's as close as we're likely to get ...

Also, I just think group minds are a bad idea. The last time I ran into one, it didn't go so well.

The Euphorics, yes. But we're not anything like that. Among other things, there's no --

Wait.
Penny told you about the Euphorics? And you still decided to work with her?



Lady, you are either very dumb or you're blinded by your own optimism.

Penny was the recruiter for the Euphorics. She was in it up to her eyeballs. And she resents us for spoiling her fun.

You think she's looking at your bees and thinking, "Ooh, a bright new future where we have a shared consciousness and everything is sunshine and roses?"



AAAAAAGH!

It really pisses me off when she's right.



I'm going to have to find a better place to put them.

Penny, what are you doing? This isn't the way! This is *not* what we wanted!



It's not what you wanted, Jeanne. What you want and what I want aren't the same.

I've been waiting for the right time to tell you, but these two have changed the schedule.



Judith?



Judith, wait!

JOSIAH BARKER IS HAVING A DREAM. OR A NIGHTMARE. HE DOES THAT A LOT THESE DAYS, AND IT'S OFTEN HARD TO TELL WHICH IT IS.

THE WORST ONES ARE THE ONES THAT HAVE HIS DEAD WIFE IN THEM.

THESE ARE ALSO, IN A STRANGE WAY, THE BEST ONES.



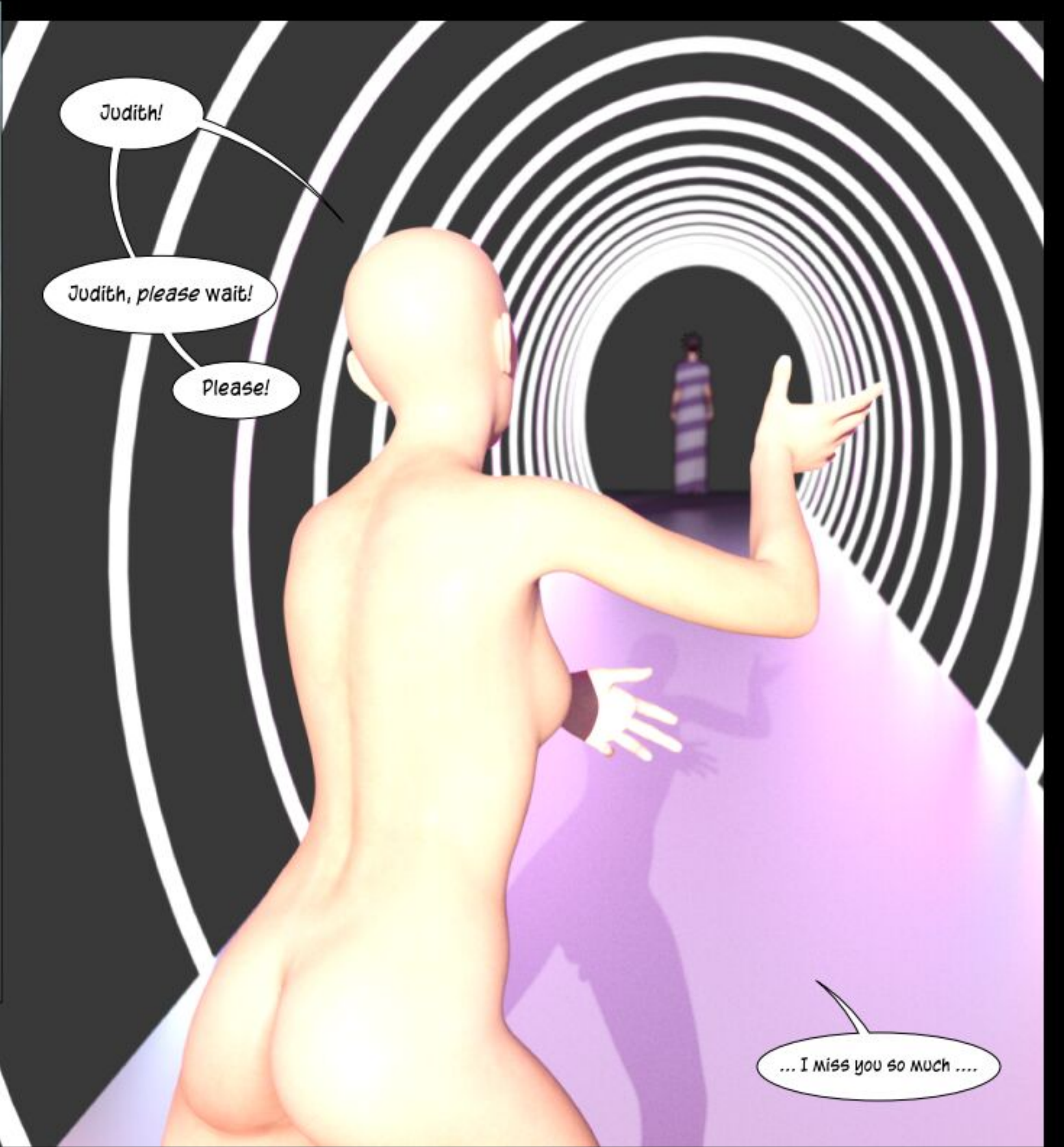
Damn it!



What --?

No, I don't want to dance. I have to find Judith!

THIS ALL MIGHT MAKE A LITTLE MORE SENSE IF YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO JOSIAH IN #11, AND SAW THE NIGHTMARE HE HAD IN #12. ... OR IT MIGHT NOT. -T

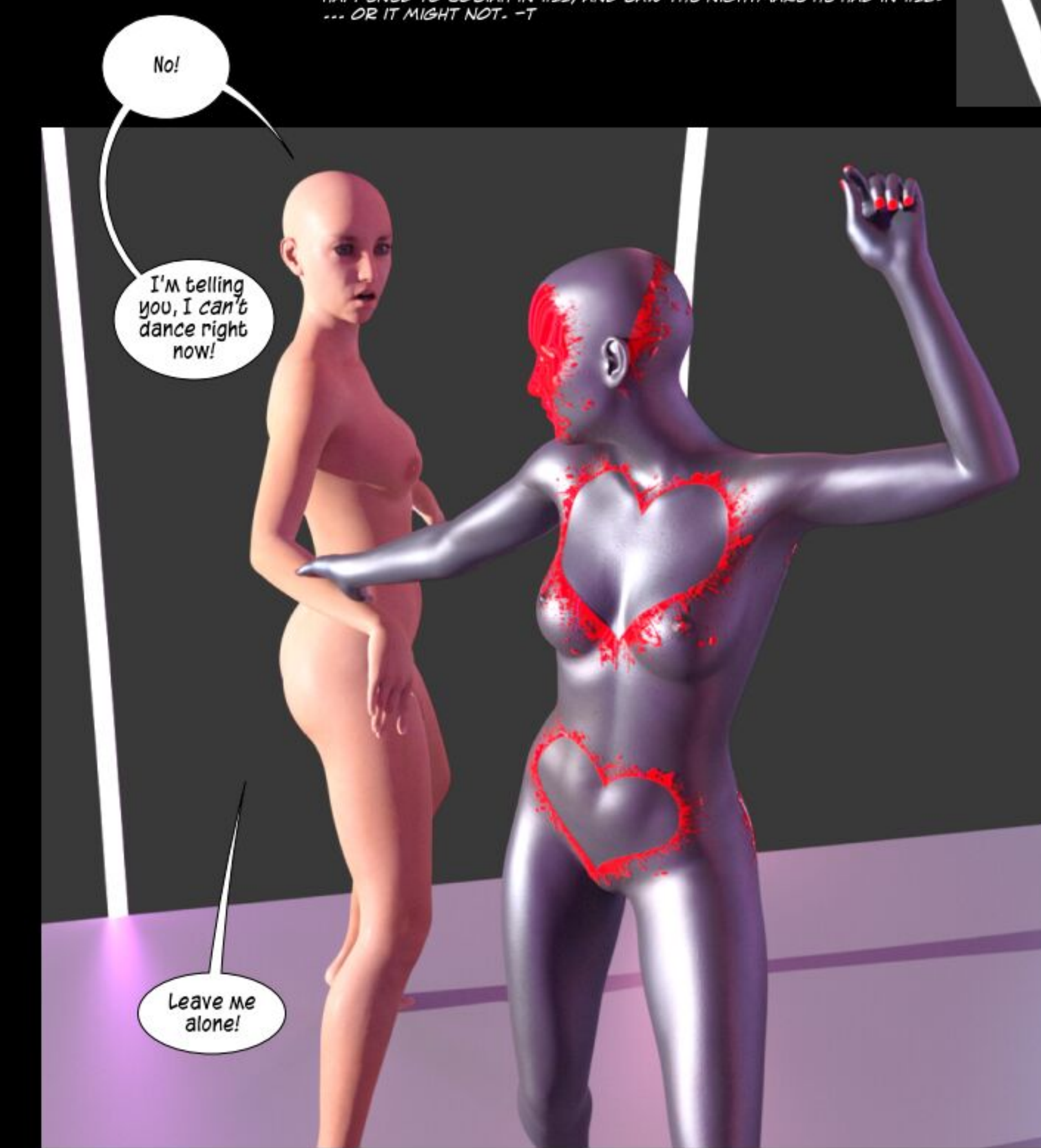


Judith!

Judith, please wait!

Please!

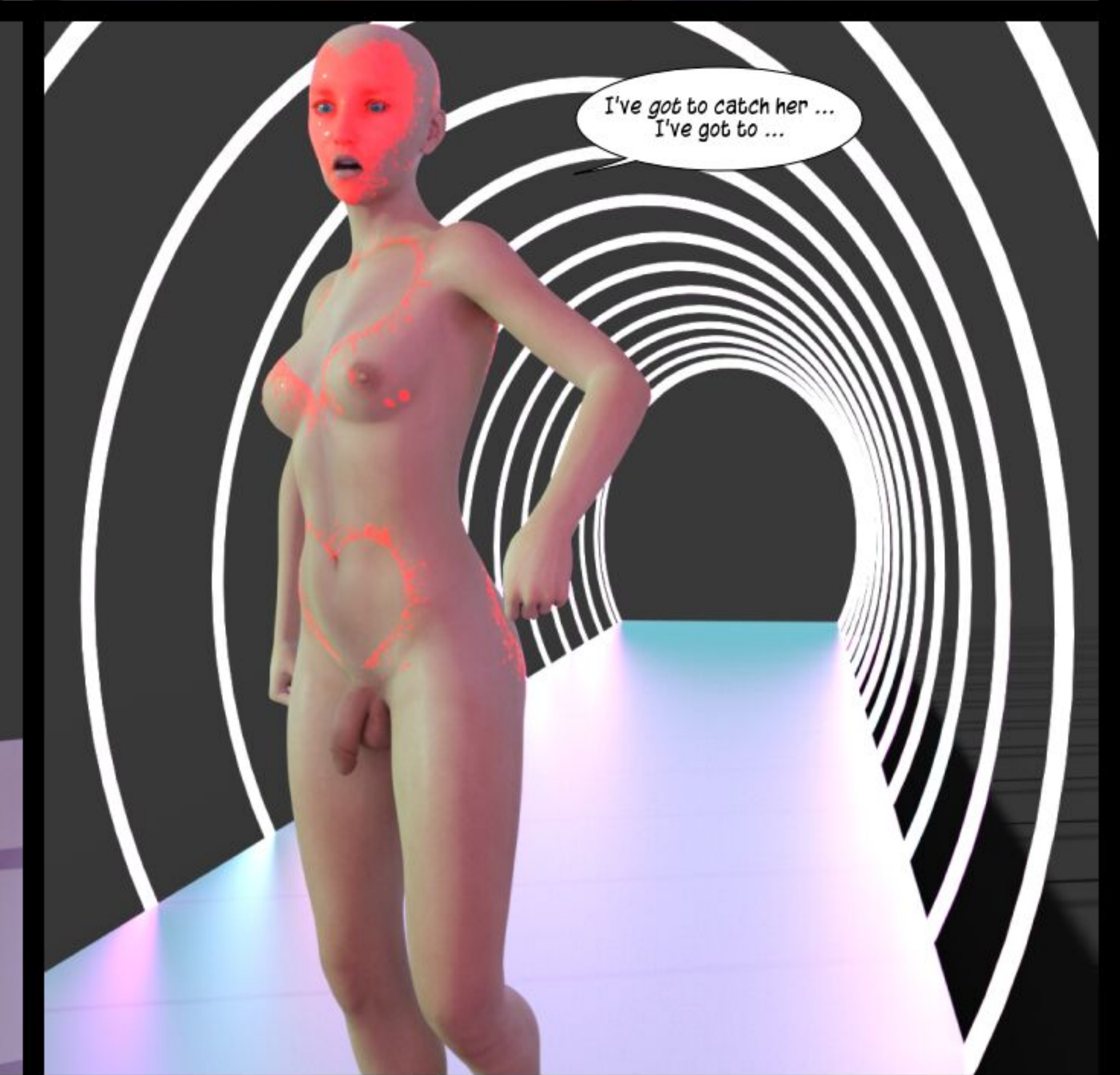
... I miss you so much



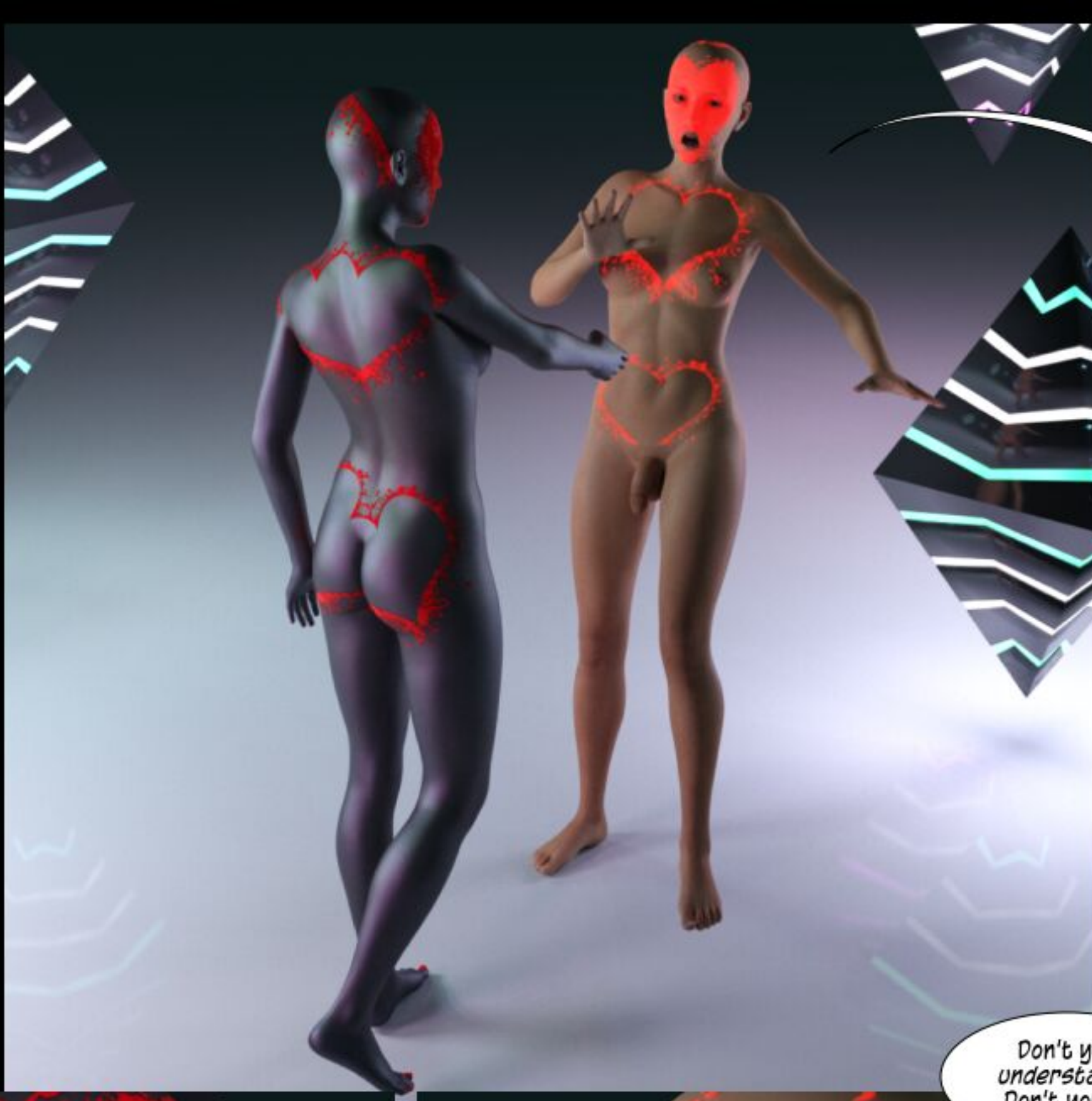
No!

I'm telling you, I can't dance right now!

Leave me alone!



I've got to catch her ... I've got to ...

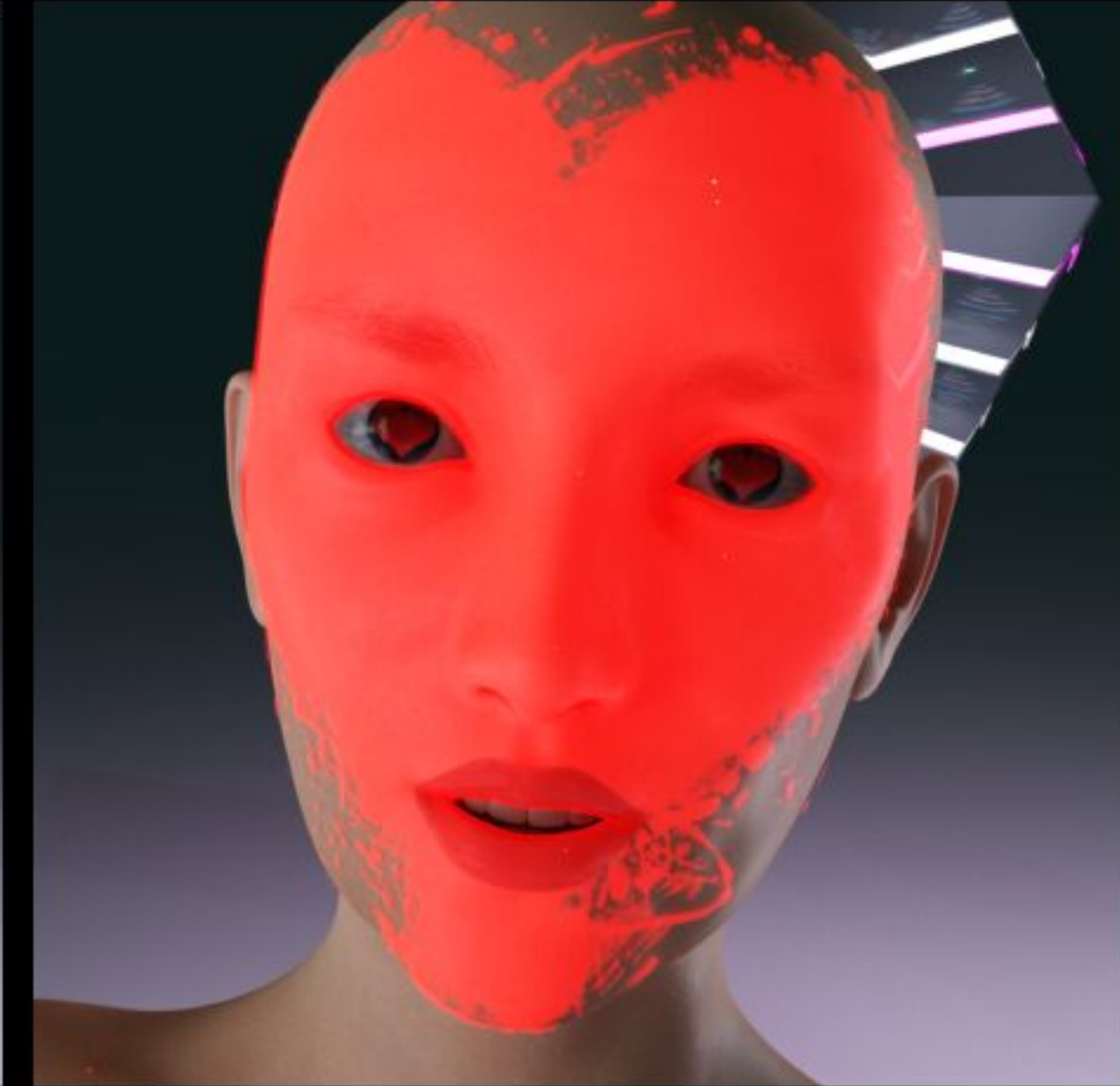
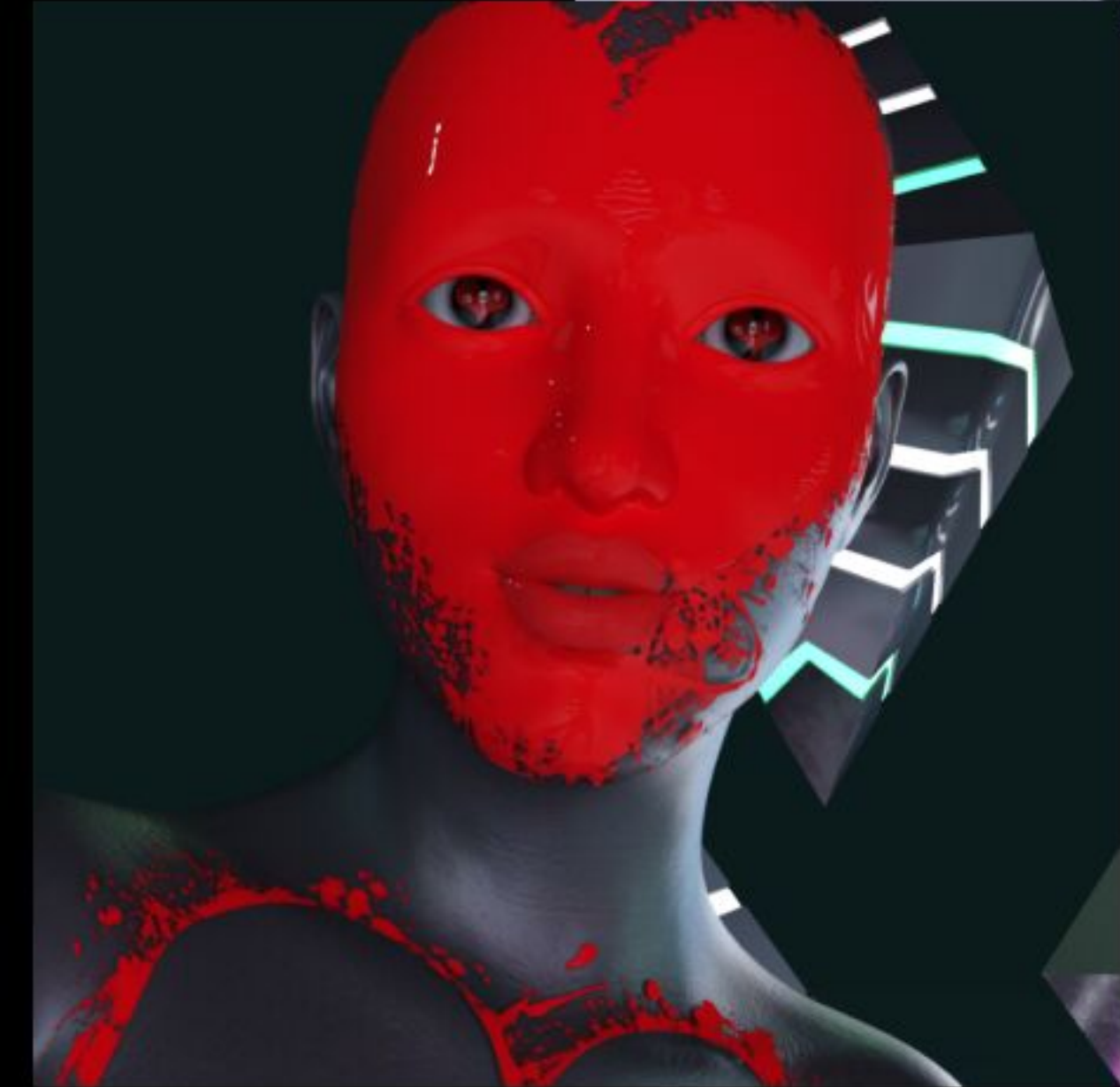


No, no, no!!

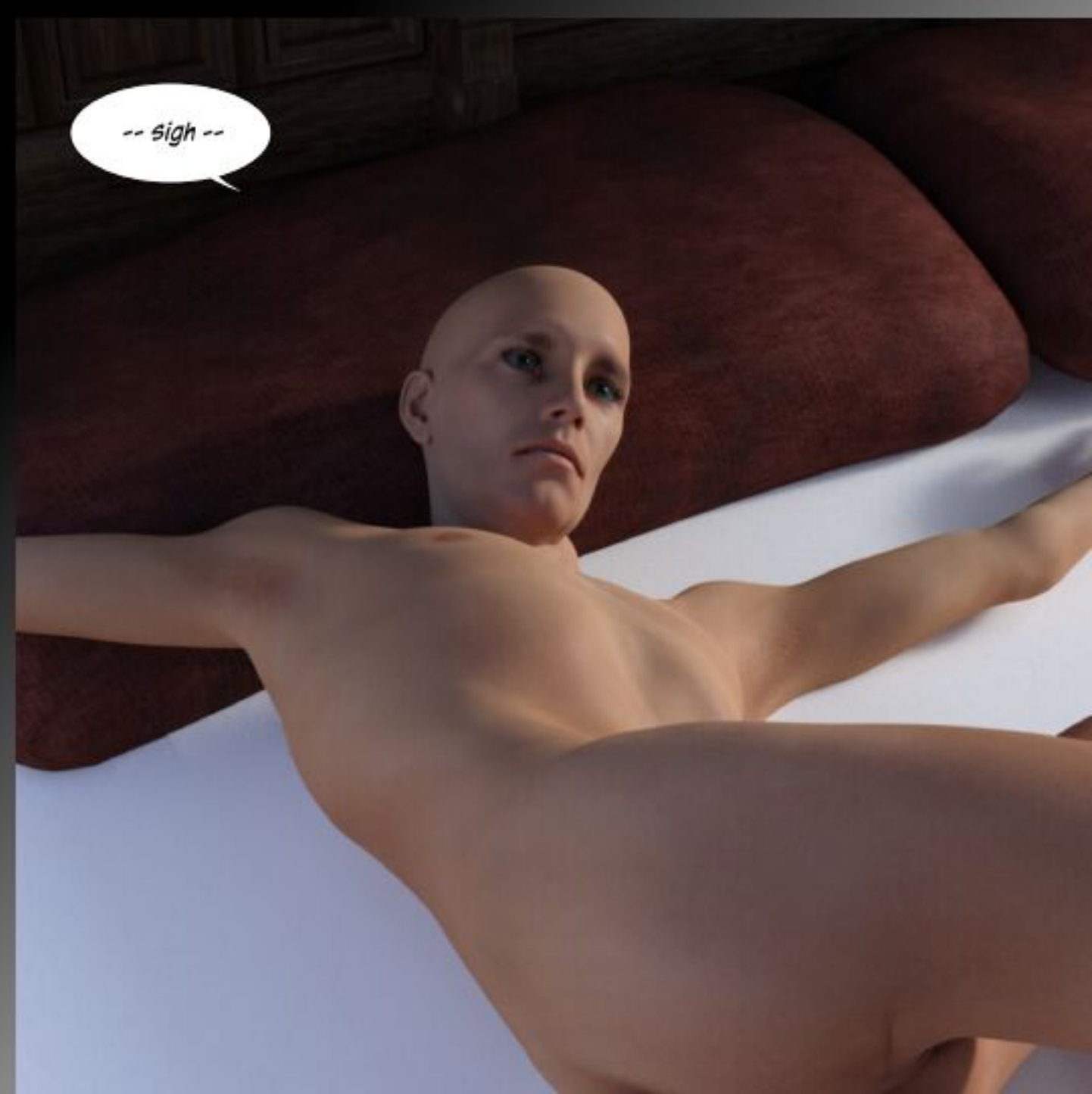
I can't waste time dancing!

This is important! It might be my only chance!

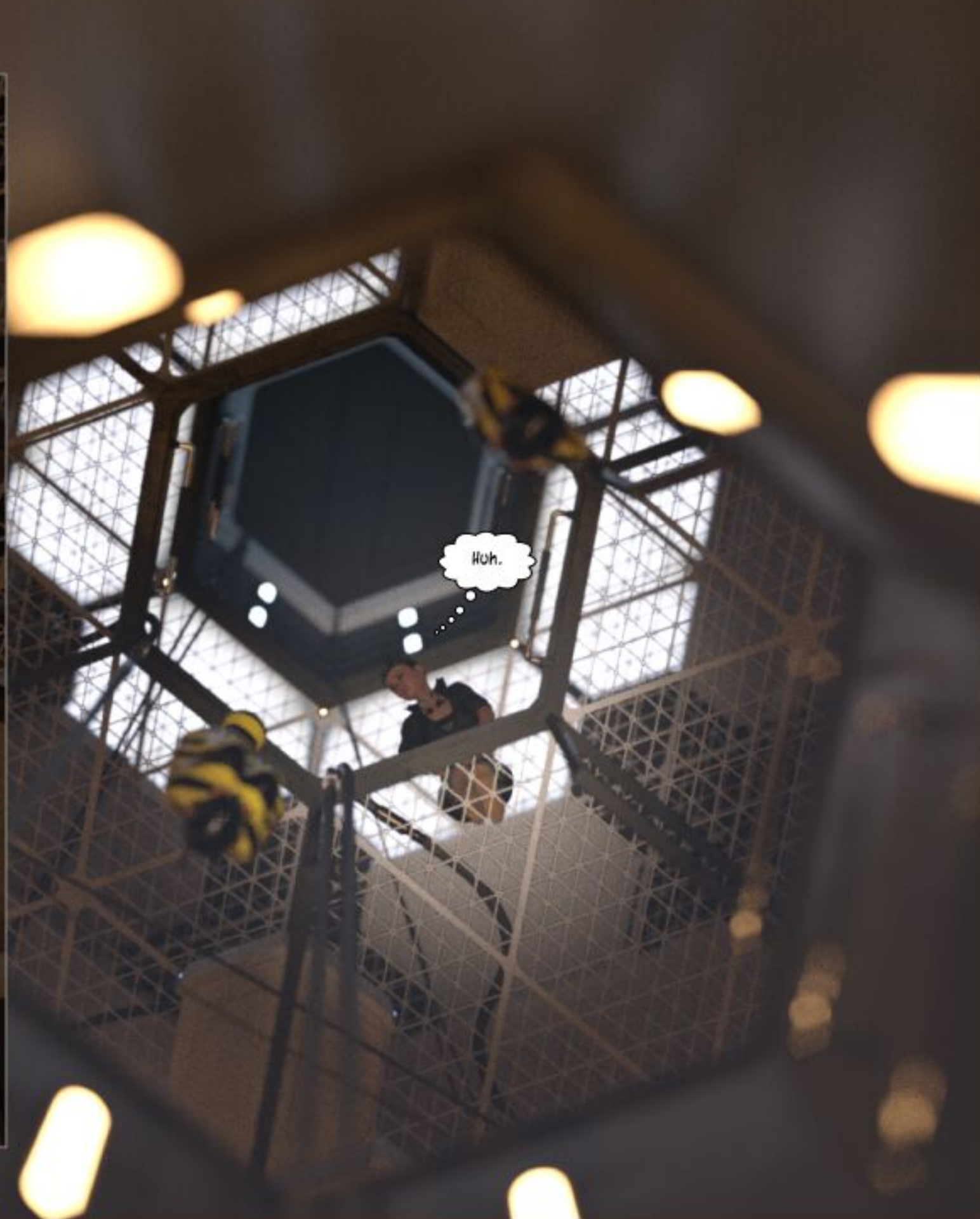
Don't you understand? Don't you --



-- sigh --



AND NOW BACK TO OUR PROGRAM.



Huh.



No, don't fidget. You don't want to roll into that hole. It's a three-story drop.

I'll have these ropes off in just a second.

She was really thorough, huh? Bagged and buzzed, and the hood locked on, and hung upside down in a place where no one ever goes.

What'd you do to piss her off? I want to take notes.

Uh... she hates us from way back.

If no one ever goes here, how'd you find us?

I have an access point no one knows about. Comes in near here. Lucky I noticed you down there.

My boss didn't meet me as arranged and she's in here somewhere. That's enough to make me not want to come in the front way.

Makes sense. Is your boss a tall woman with very long black hair who dresses like a Petish nun?

Ha! Yeah, that's her. Her name's Jeanne. I'm Snub. Any old enemy of Penny's is probably OK.

Snub! You're the person we came looking for. Dina told us this is where we'd find you.

I'm Ruby, and this is Leyna.

Leyna? Like Leyna Otis? You're the one who came up with the disruptor gun, right? That was a nice job!

LEYNA USES HER MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME TO AVOID REVEALING SHE'S A BARKER.

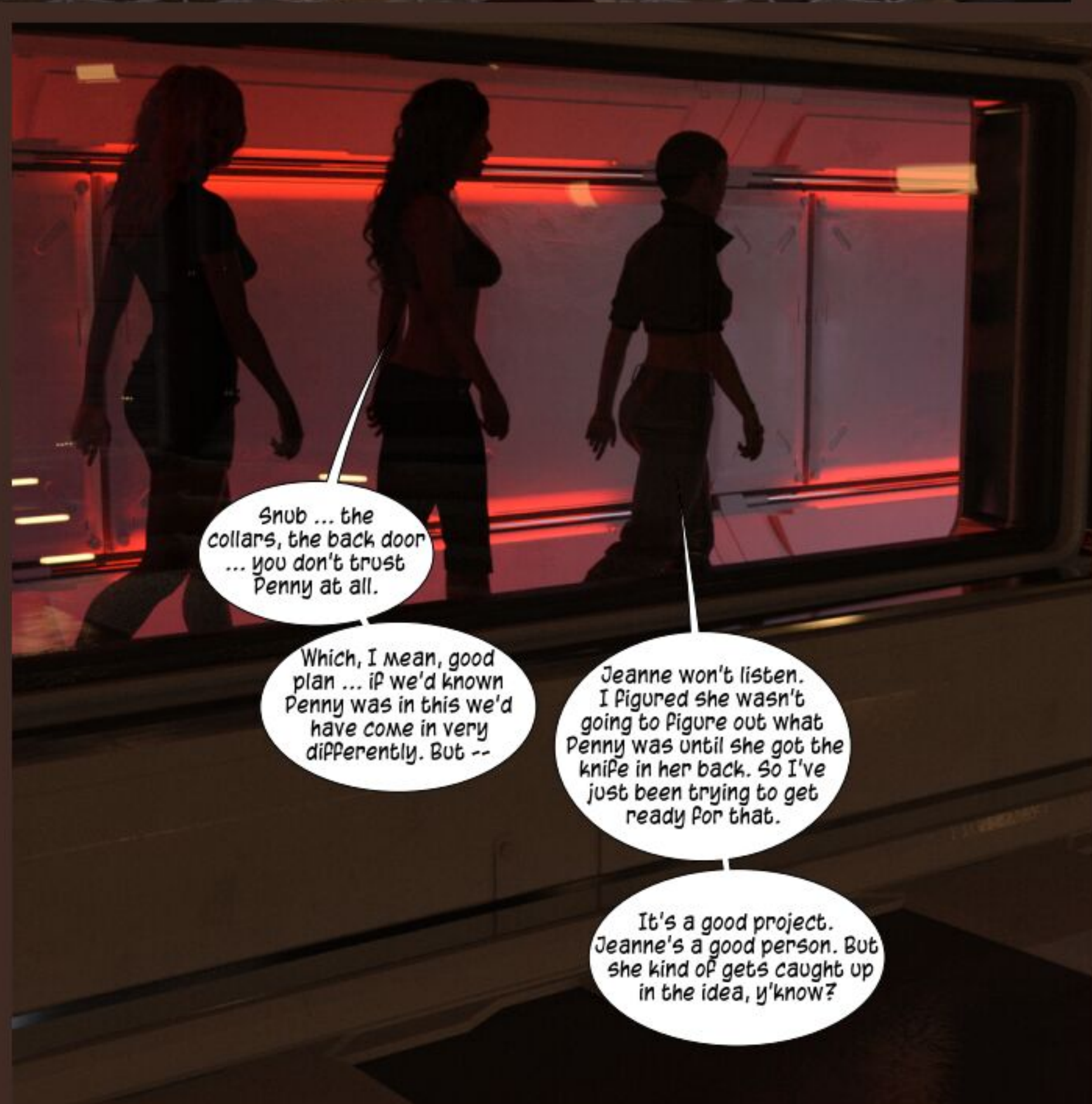


Oh, thanks!

Uh... we're about to look for Jeanne, right? And I bet wherever she is, Penny is. I think we need protection.

Or she'll just buzz us again and who knows what she'll do to us this time.

No problem. You just need some collars like mine. One hundred percent buzzproof. Give me a minute.



Snub... the collars, the back door... you don't trust Penny at all.

Which, I mean, good plan... if we'd known Penny was in this we'd have come in very differently. But --

Jeanne won't listen. I figured she wasn't going to figure out what Penny was until she got the knife in her back. So I've just been trying to get ready for that.

It's a good project. Jeanne's a good person. But she kind of gets caught up in the idea, y'know?



This is bad.

Why?

All this buildout down here. I didn't do this. And Jeanne hardly ever builds. It's got to be Penny.

I need to go see if she's Pucked with anything in the network room. Try some doors, but be careful. I don't know what any of this is.



I didn't realize you were famous now!

Don't give me grief. It's nice to get appreciated for once. Especially since Penny apparently doesn't think I'm any threat. She ignored me completely.

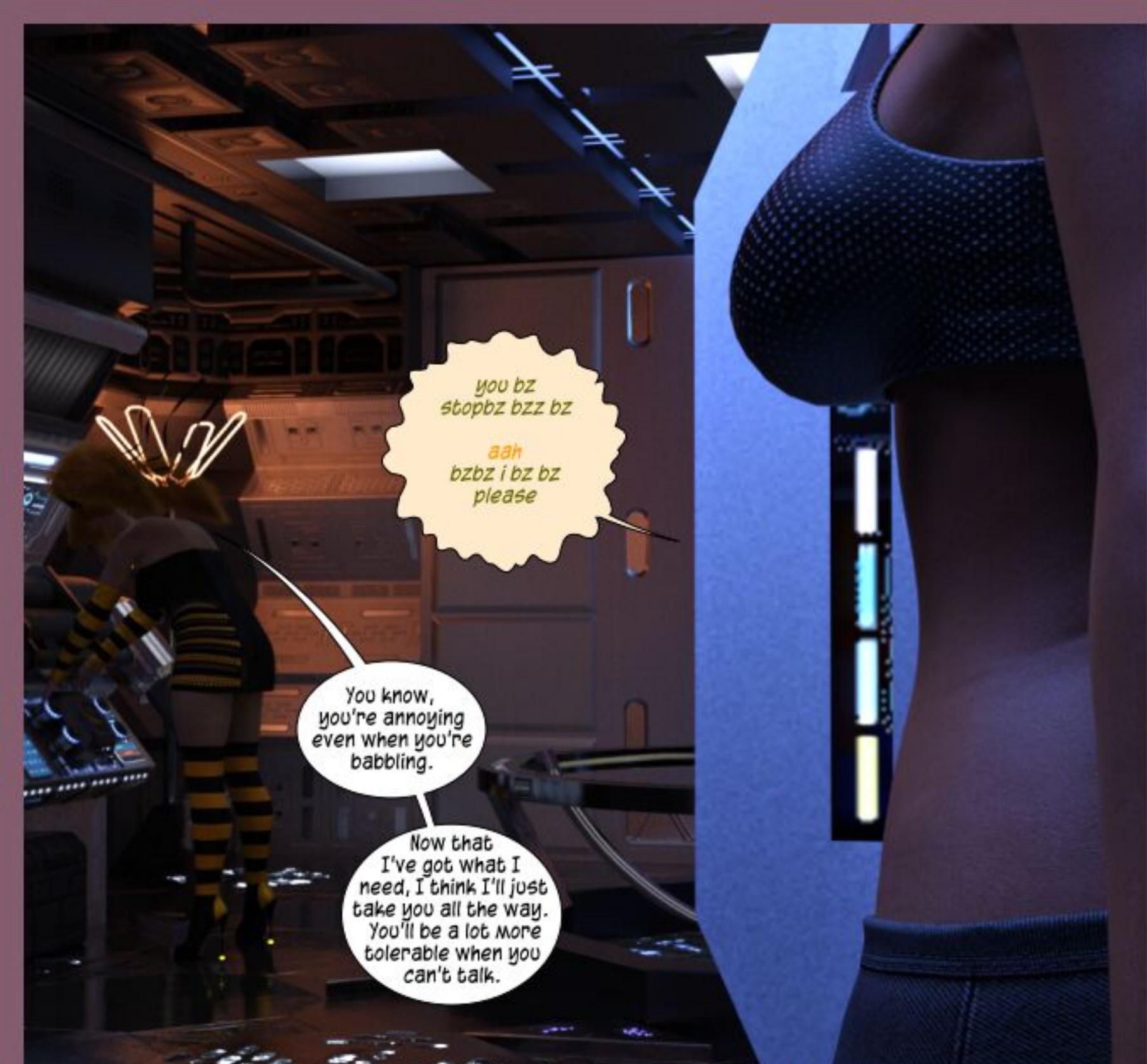
Yeah, I noticed. We may want to use that to our advantage.

Anyway, I'm just teasing. I think it's good you get some appreciation too. You've been busting your ass.

Do you think it's safe to split up? There are a lot of doors here.

As long as you promise to yell if anything happens.

Loudly.



you bz stopbz bzz bz
aah
bzbz i bz bz please

You know, you're annoying even when you're babbling.

Now that I've got what I need, I think I'll just take you all the way. You'll be a lot more tolerable when you can't talk.



Nooo i bz bzz
Eeeee!
youbzz bz don't bz
AAAAH!
Can't Bz you bz bzno bz
Oooooh
bzbz helpbzbz i bz



-- HRP --

AAAAAYIEEE!



You!

Now, where's the "oPP" button?

How do you do that?

I'm going to rip your arms off!

I wouldn't try if I were you.

Oh, yeah? Why?



Well, that sure was "loudly" --

Oh, hell.

oh.

bzhelP bz
bzzz i bz bz
eeee

Doesn't look like she messed with anything --

Jeanne!



Shut it oPP!
Shut it oPP!!

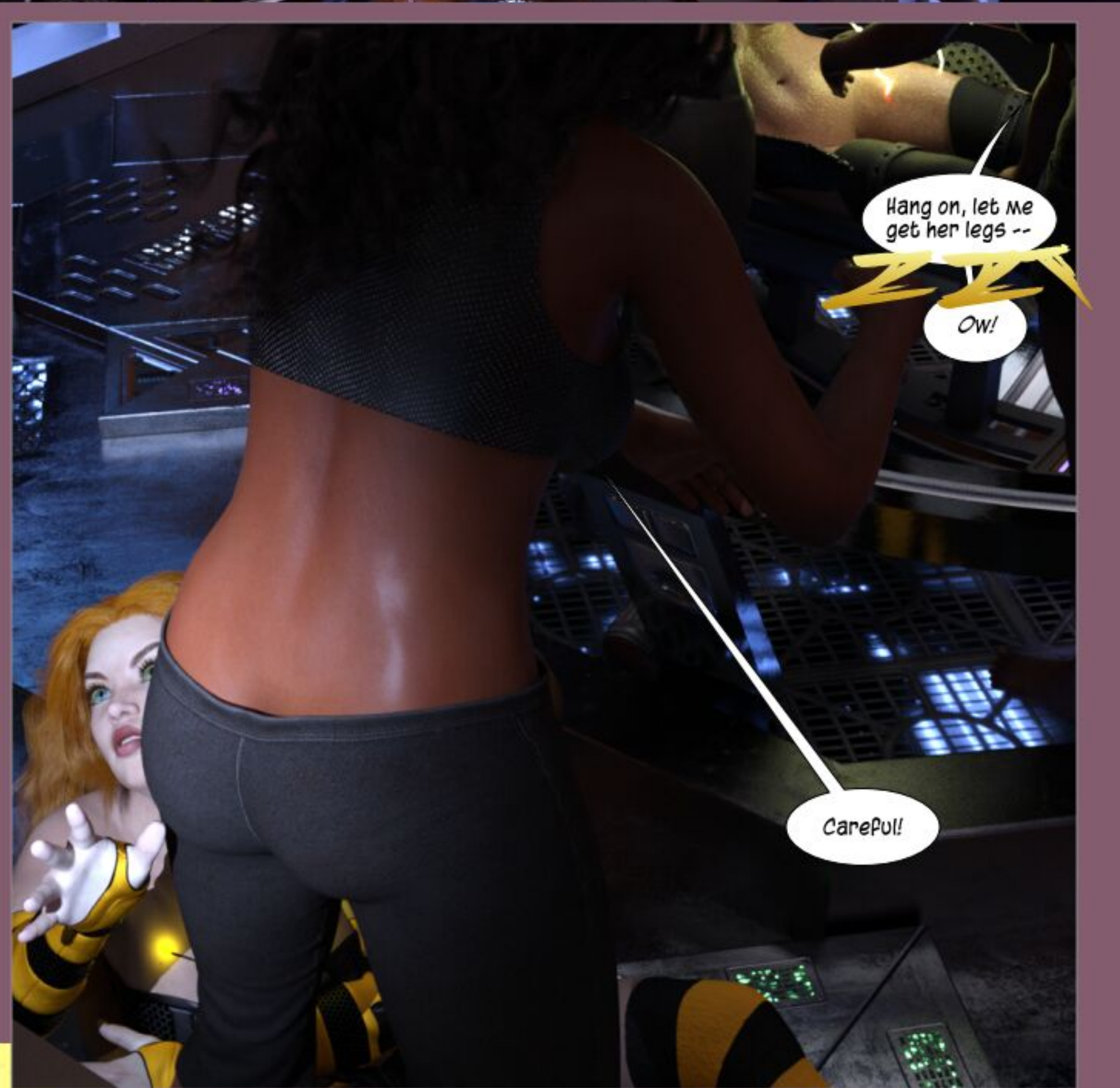
I can't figure out how! I don't want to make it worse --

No, don't you help.

KONK

agh!

See if you can pull her out of it. Without getting fried.



Hang on, let me get her legs --

OW!

Careful!



Whoa!

PPPP!

aaagh!

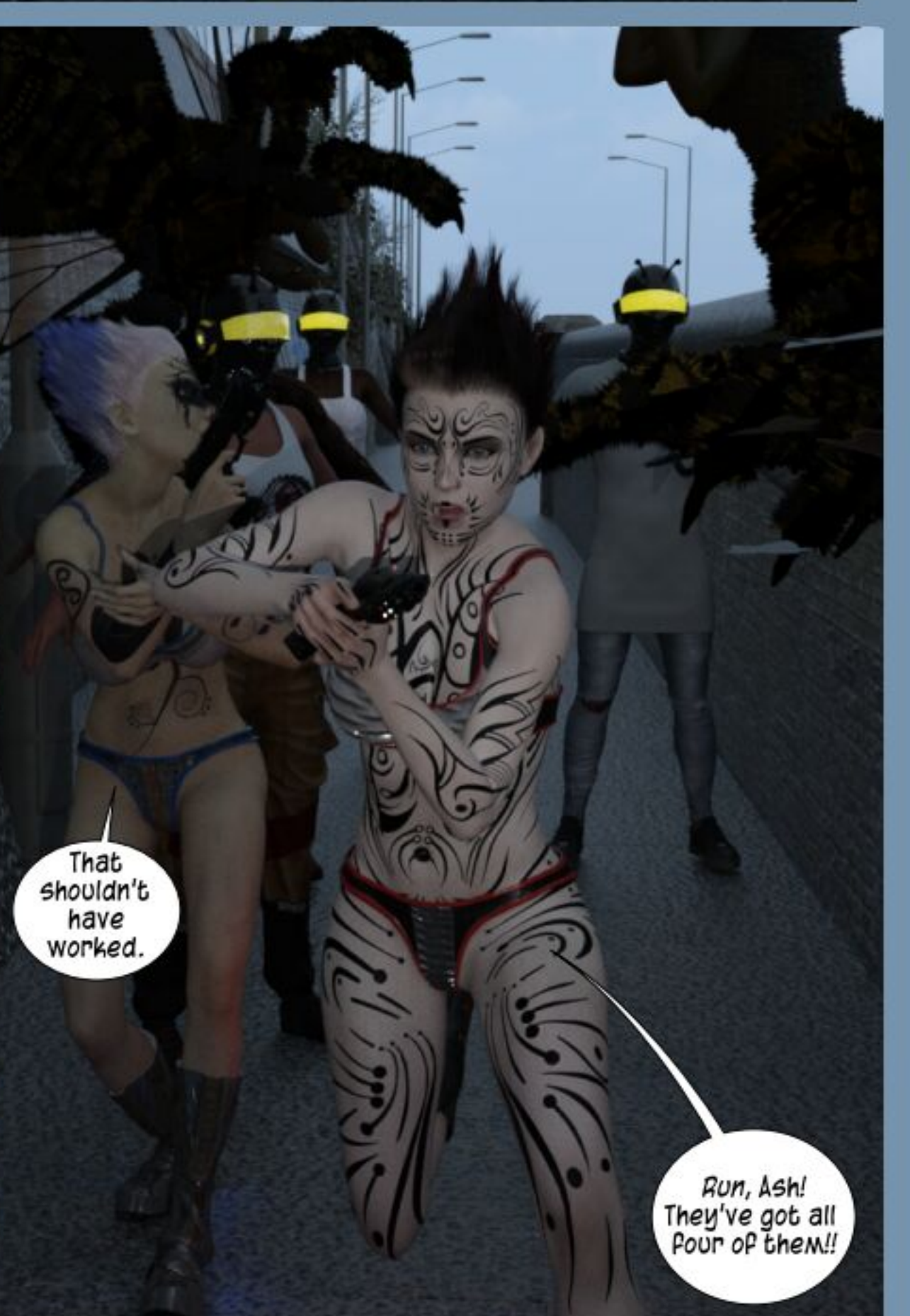
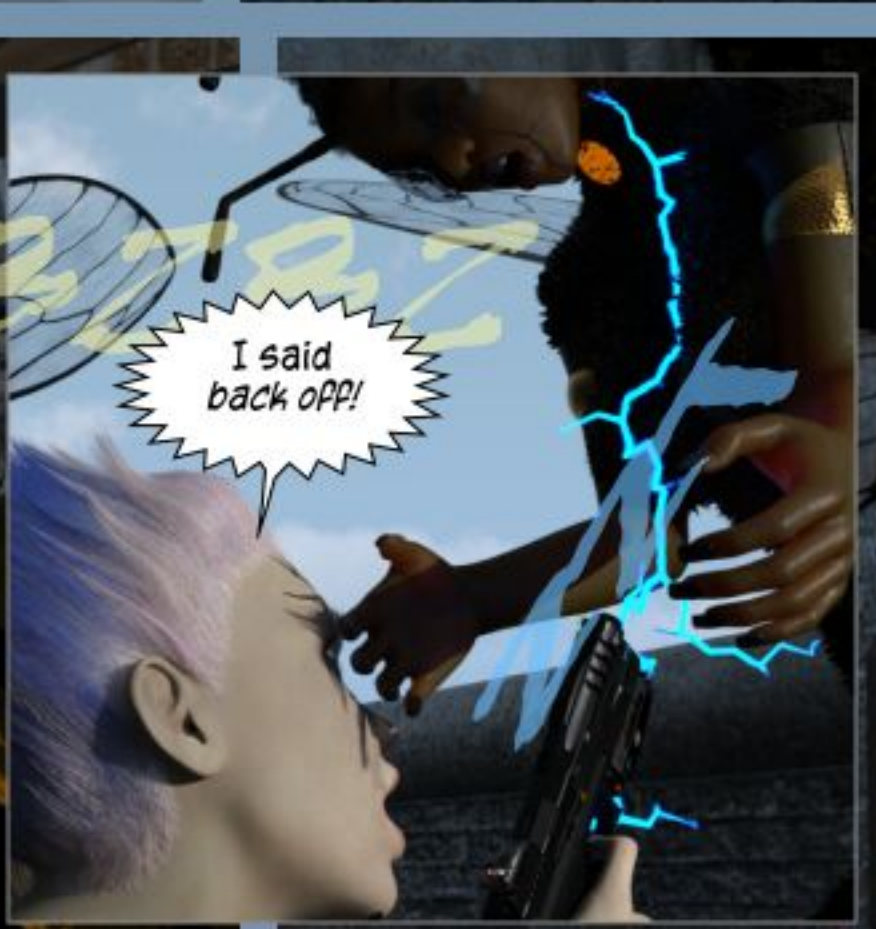
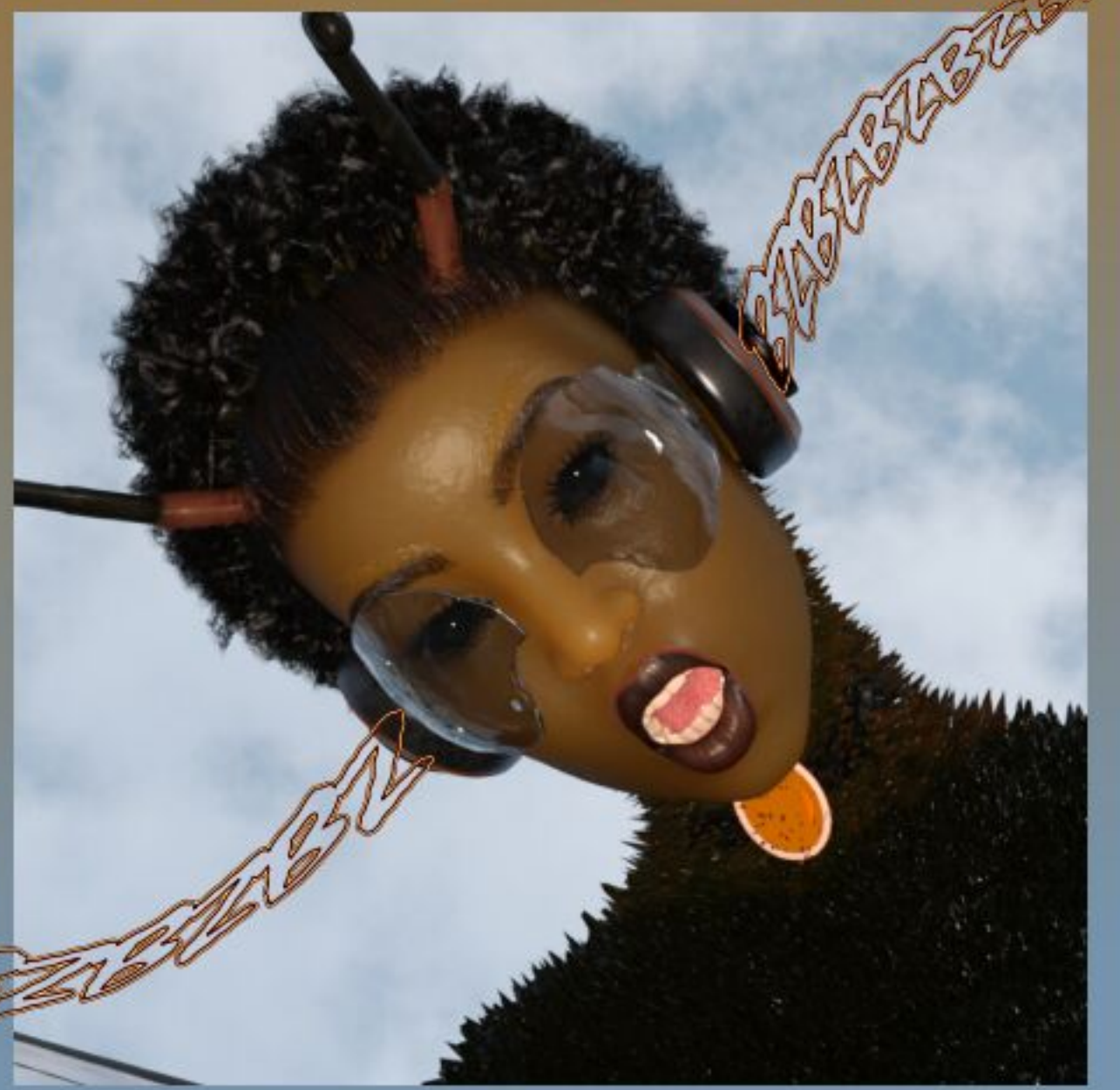
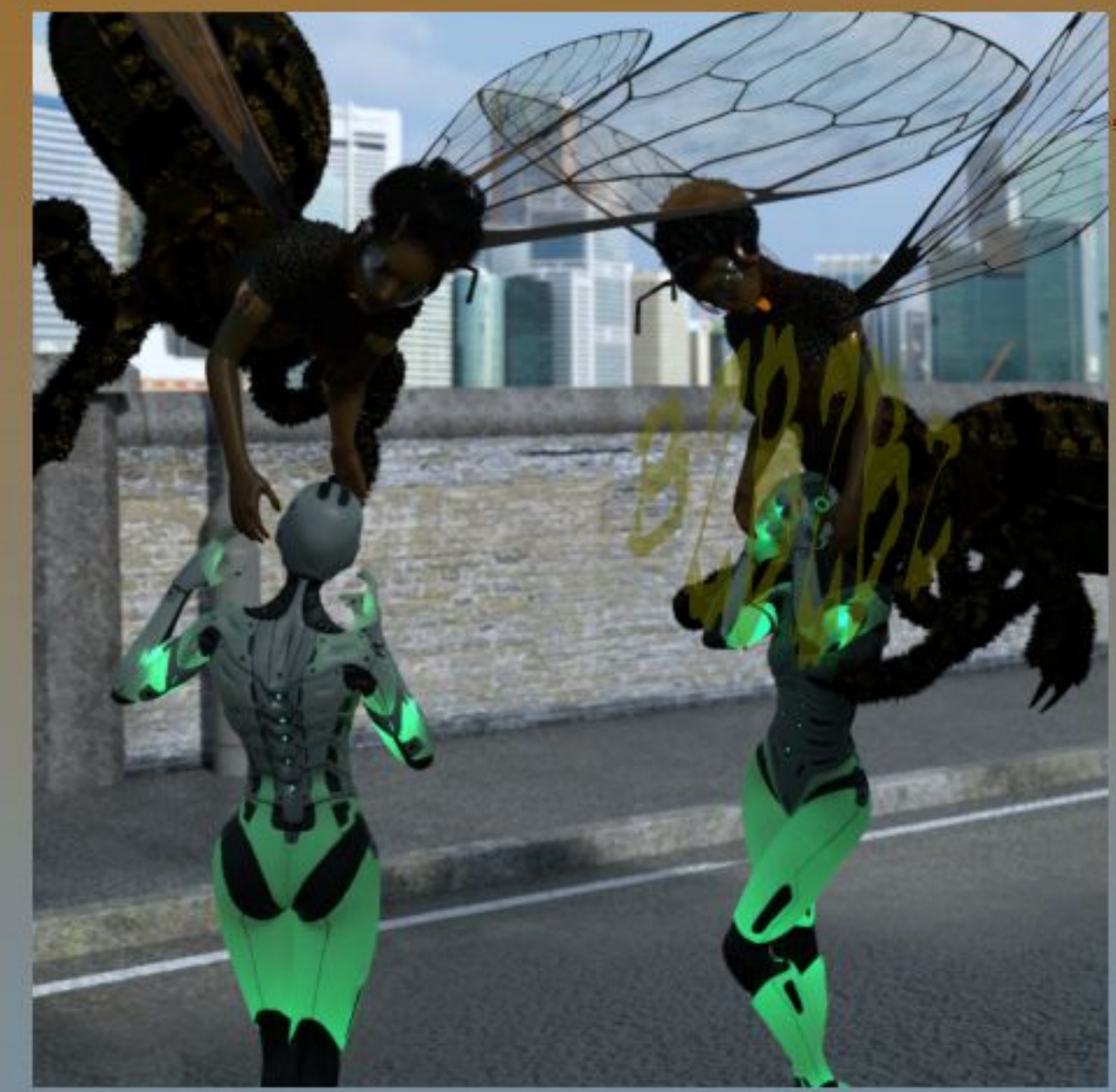
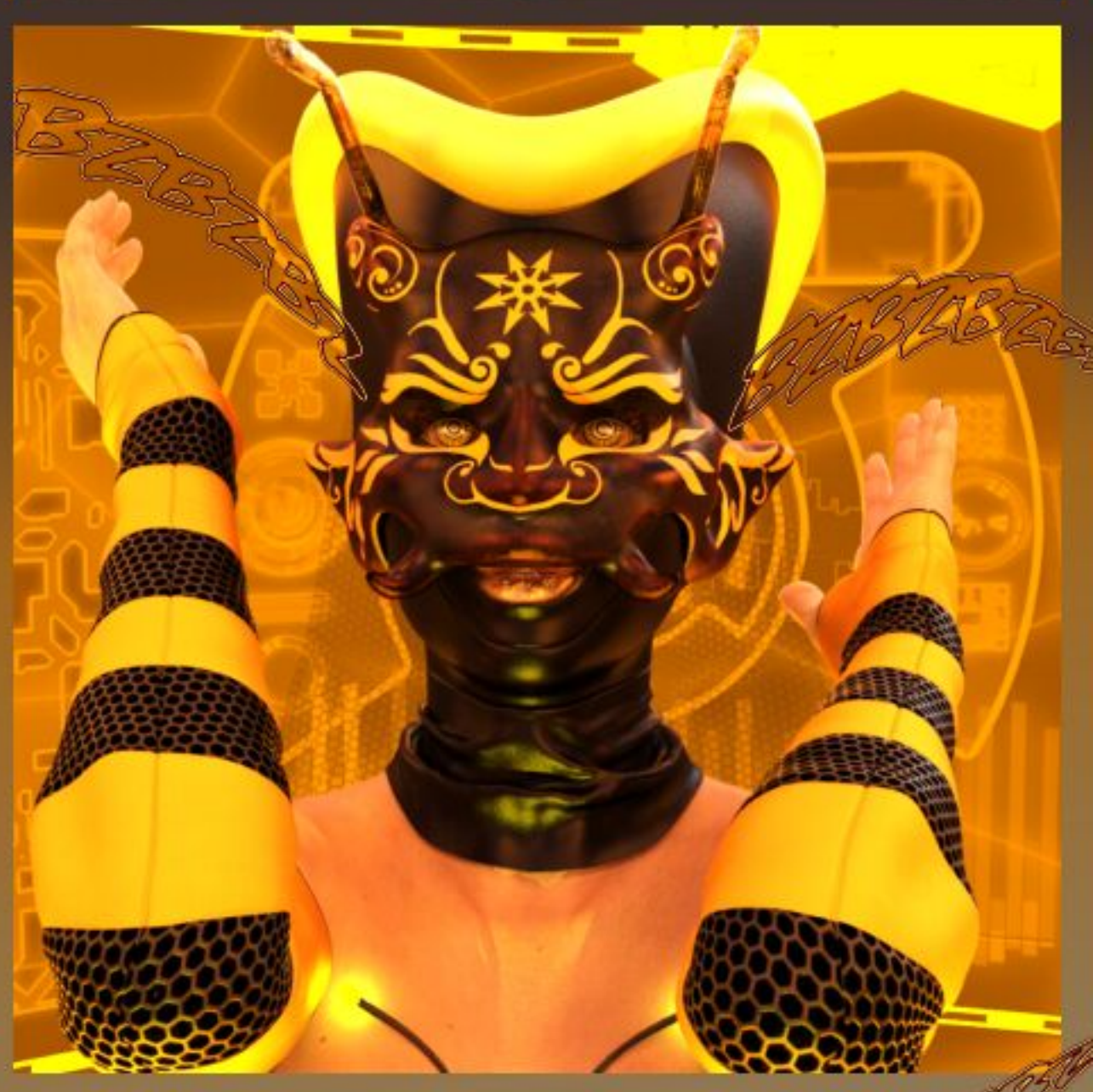
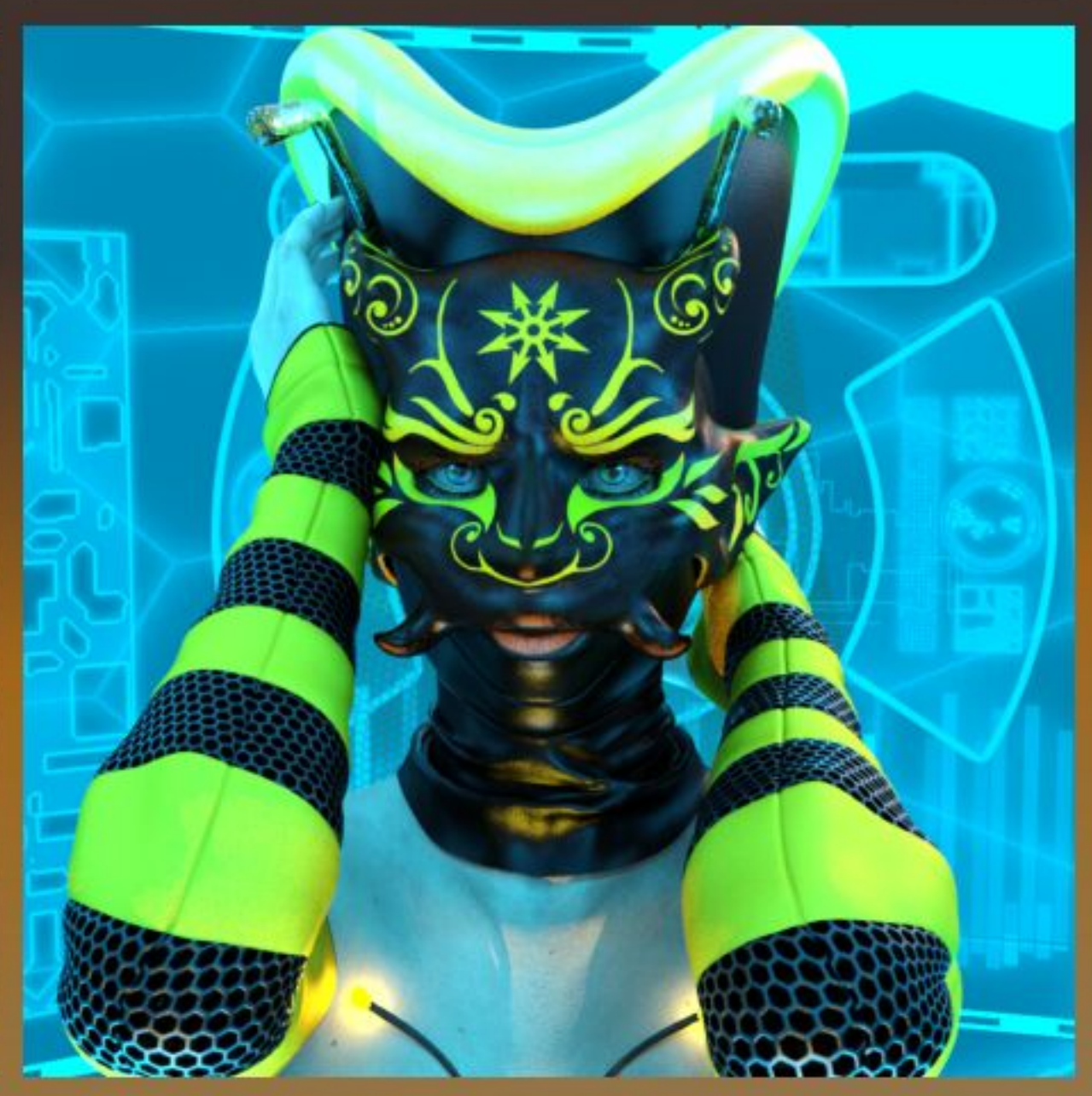
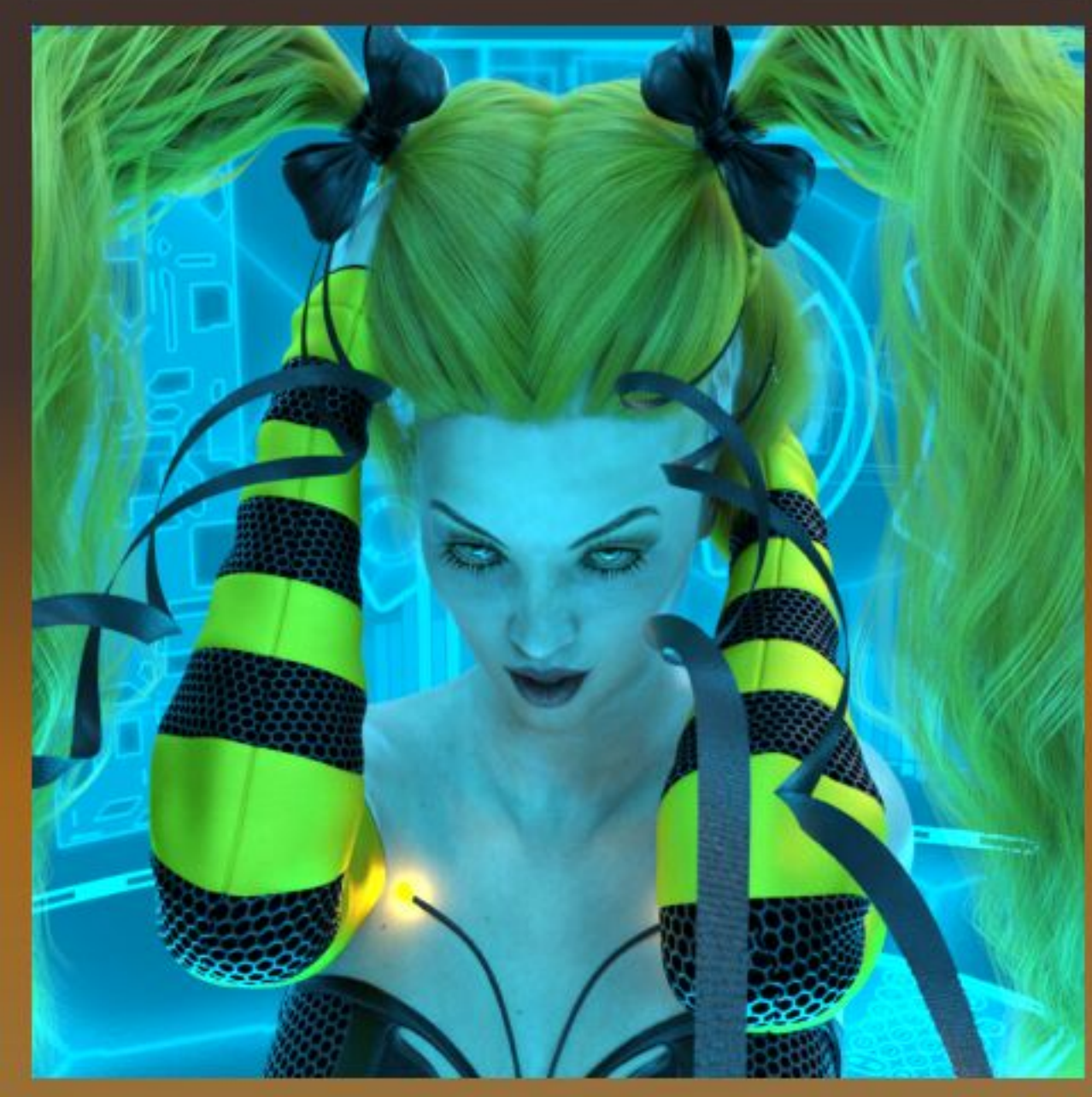
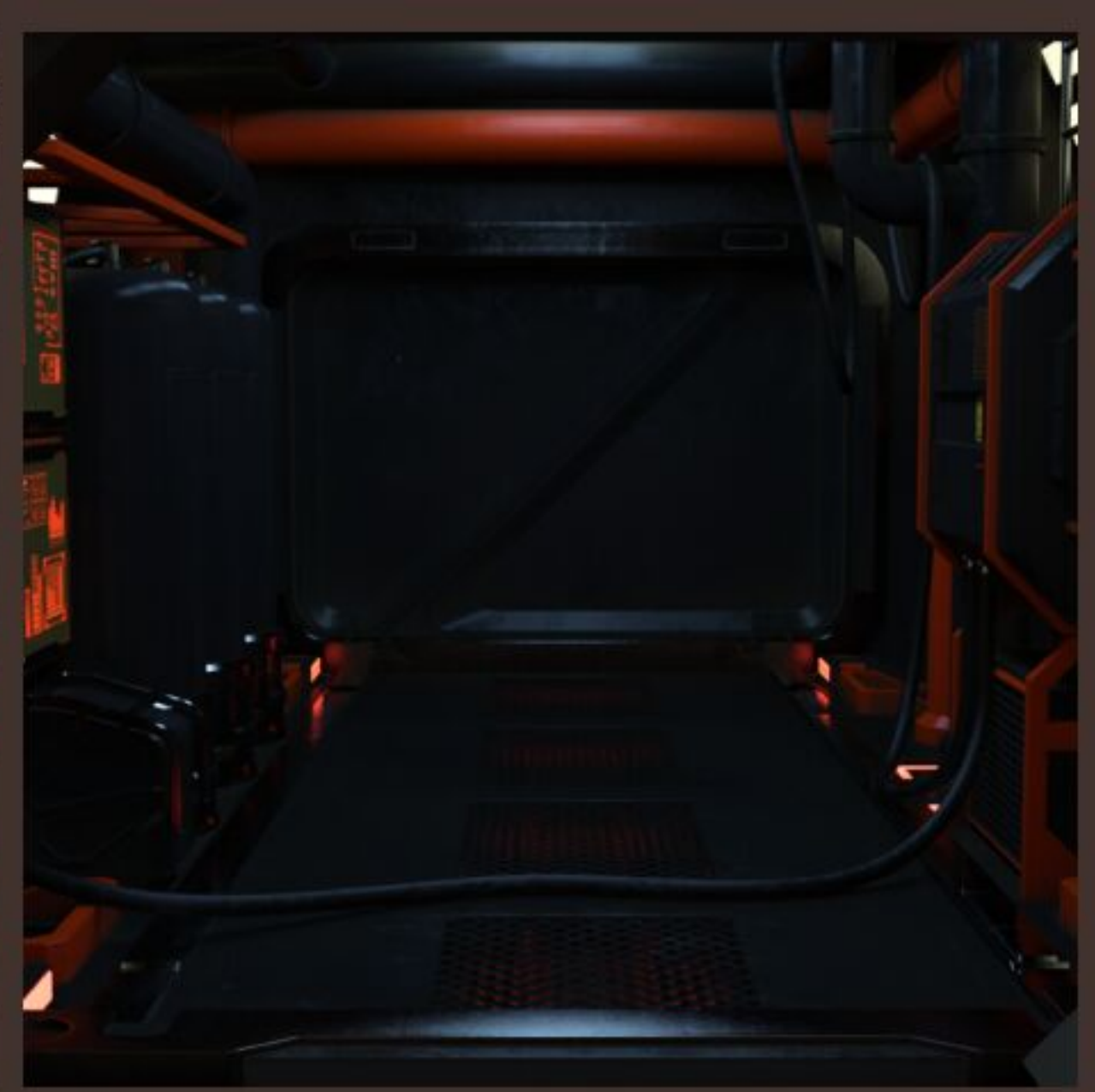
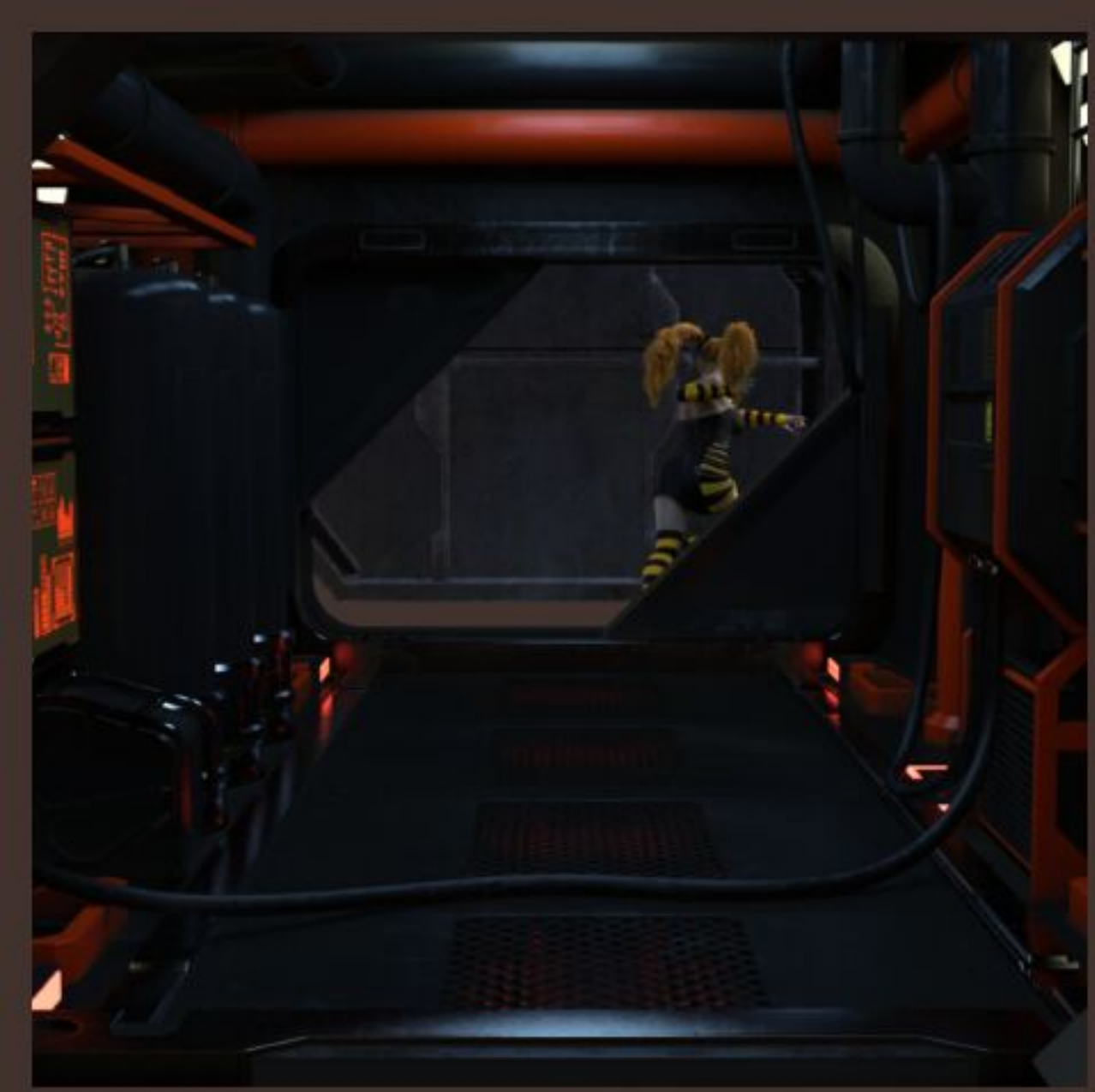


Penny!

Damn it, I only looked away for a second.

She overloaded it on purpose. Are you OK? Are they OK?

... I think so.



OUR HEROES, BEING UNSURE WHAT OTHER HAZARDS MIGHT LURK INSIDE 'HIVE' AT THE MOMENT, HAVE LEFT THE FACILITY AND ARE REGROUPING NEARBY.

I can't believe she would do this ... I trusted her ...

I'm sorry, Jeanne ... I --

Don't apologize. You tried to warn me.

Ms. Leyna! We've got trouble!

Hey, uh ... Ash, right? What's wrong?

The bees! They've gone crazy.

They're buzzing people now! And they're ... they put some kind of hood on them. I think they're trying to convert them, or something.

We just lost a whole escort group!

Oh, no.

She's transmitting ... she's got to be sending to them. Overriding the signals.

How did she get the access she'd need?

I don't know! I went to a lot of trouble to keep her out ... unless ...

Jeanne, did you give her the codes?

I might have? While she was doing ... that ... to me ... I don't remember what I said ...

Shit.

Do we have anything to use against them?

The guns work on them! They get really confused and can't do anything. That's how we got away. But it doesn't last very long.

Oh, that makes sense ... signal disruption, right?

Sure. Same network. The patrollers are all signal, so disrupting it destroys the instance completely. But the bees are human, under all the gear. Best it can do is cut them off from the messages for a minute or two.

Broadcast the disrupt over a wide area?

I don't think that'll be good enough. We can't get it everywhere.

We're going to have to take down the entire phone network. Completely. At least until we can safeguard it. If we can.

But ... the bees ... we worked on this for so long ...

Can't you just find a way to lock Penny out?

And then what happens when the next Penny comes along?

The system's too vulnerable to bad actors. You can do too much damage with it. I should have realized this from Nathaniel.

I'm sorry, Jeanne. I know we put a lot of time into this. But she's right. The network's got to be taken down.

If we can even take it down.

It's intertwined with a lot of other systems at this point. There may not be a way to halt it outright without also rebooting large chunks of sleep.

Yes, so I learned. I'm hoping you can see something I missed. I'm not a networks pro.

I'll give it a try. I'll also look into trying to broadcast disruption. As a plan B. But I could use some help on that ...

Jeanne, is that algorithmist Dina available?

She damned well will be available. As far as I'm concerned, she has a moral obligation to help Pix this.

C'mon, Snub, I'll take you to her now. I think it's past time you two actually met.

And on the way I'd appreciate it if you could give me access to that back door of yours. I still have business in Hive to see to.

... Could you meet up with me after dropping off Snub? I think I need to be in on that trip.

I should warn you that Dina has some ... ah ... unusual lifestyle habits.

Doesn't everybody?

Heh.

Oh, hi, Ruby! I got some new cars. I like the green one best. Did you figure out the bee thing? Who's this?

This is Snub, Dina.

Oh, you're Snub! Neat! You do good work. You're cute, too.

Oh! Are you here to work on something with me? Is it about the bees?

Uh ... yes.

... Well, I'll let you two figure it out. Keep us informed, OK?



Look, it's your place, you've got a right to be here ... but I'm not sure it's a good idea.

It's OK for you but not for me? You think I'm not capable?

Oh, no, I'm sure you can take care of yourself. But I have more experience at wandering into the lion's den. Not by choice, it just seems to happen.

I also have some ... ah ... defenses you probably don't have.



I have an obligation. As you say, it's my place. If people are in here and can't get out ...

You think people might be trapped in here?

It's possible. None of what we're walking through should be here. This has all been rearranged. Very recently.

For example, I have no idea where that doorway ahead leads.

Penny's been busy.

Yes, and the fact that I don't know to what end alarms me.



!!!

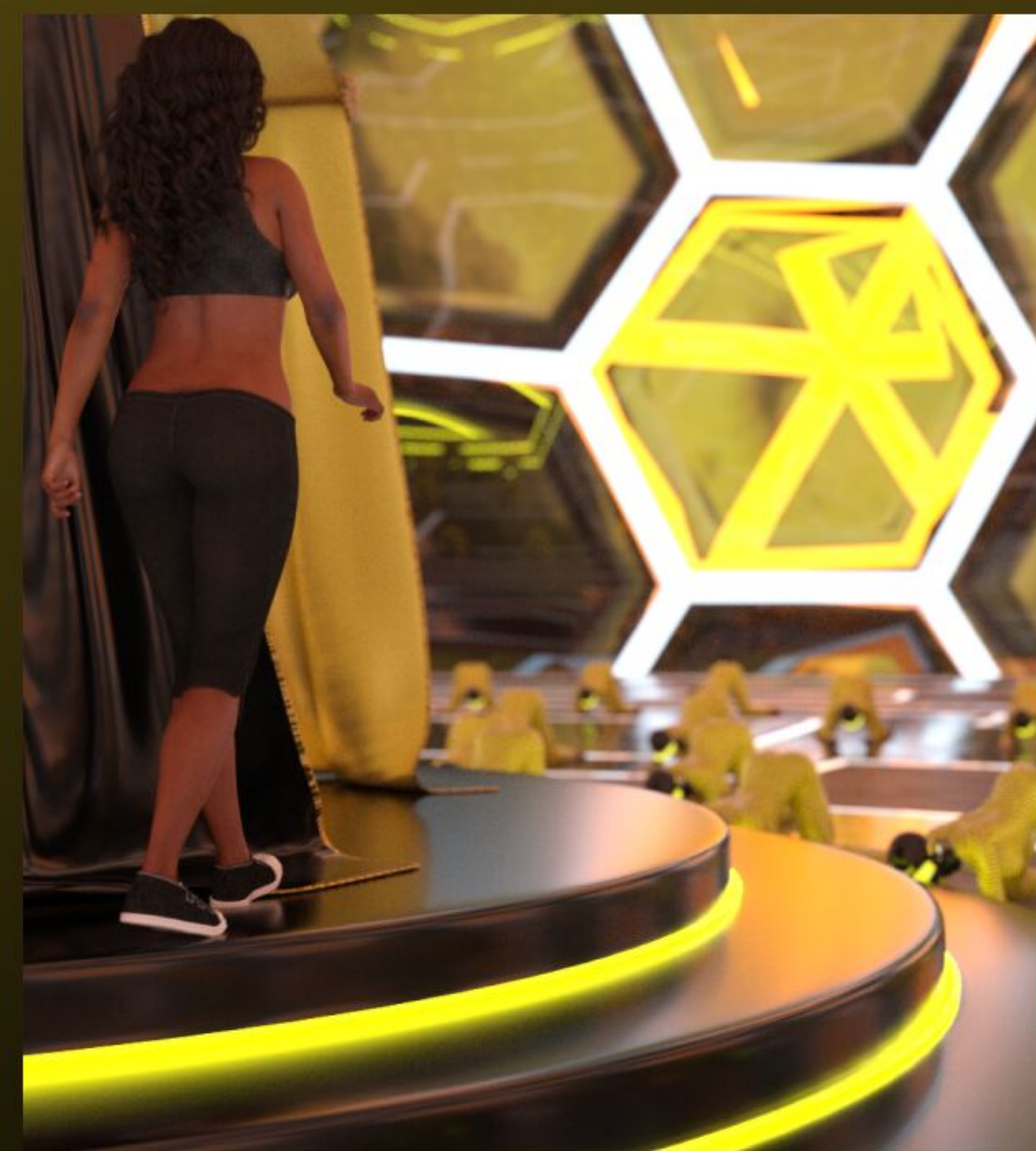
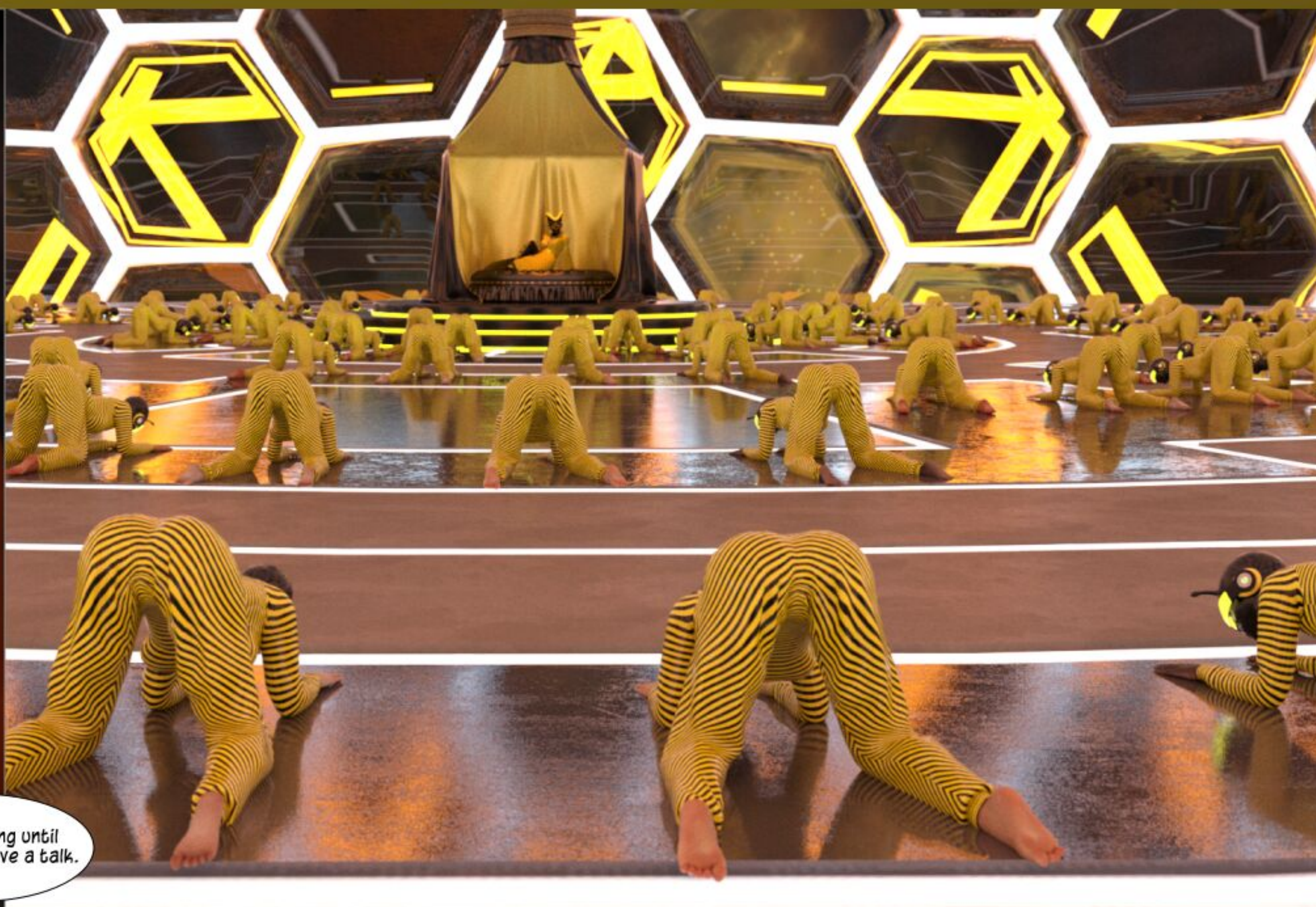
... Jeanne, you should recall out right now.

You can't rescue any of these people.

What about you?

I'm not done here yet. Find Leyna and tell her what's happening.

I'm not leaving until Penny and I have a talk.



You've got them so busy worshipping you they didn't even notice me walking through them.

That's all right. I was expecting you to show up. Let's move somewhere we can be more private.



Huh.



You're a lot better at construction on short notice than I'd have thought.

Everyone underestimates me. Always.

When Nathaniel Barker made me her recruiter, she didn't think I was smart enough to get into her locked Piles.

She never realized that I knew her identity, much less any of the other things I found out.

I was on the verge of taking over the whole thing, did you know that? I was going to displace her. It was going to be mine.

And then you came along and ruined it.



And now you're trying to build the same thing again.

Don't get me wrong: I think Jeanne had a good idea. I think a group mind is the way to peace and happiness for everybody.

I just disagree with her about who should be in charge of it.

Actually, I think she doesn't want anyone to be in charge of it, which is ridiculous. She often is. Did you know she was in a religious order? I didn't know those still existed.

Leaderless utopias don't work, because most people need leaders. Their brains don't work right without them. They need gods to survive. Or queens.

I don't.



Are you sure?



The buzz can do all kinds of things. Some take longer to kick in than others. Right about now you should be feeling that you like me a lot more than you thought.

In fact, you adore me, don't you? I am your queen. I am the center of your existence.



I think you should come worship me now.

On your knees.



MMM ... oh, yes ...

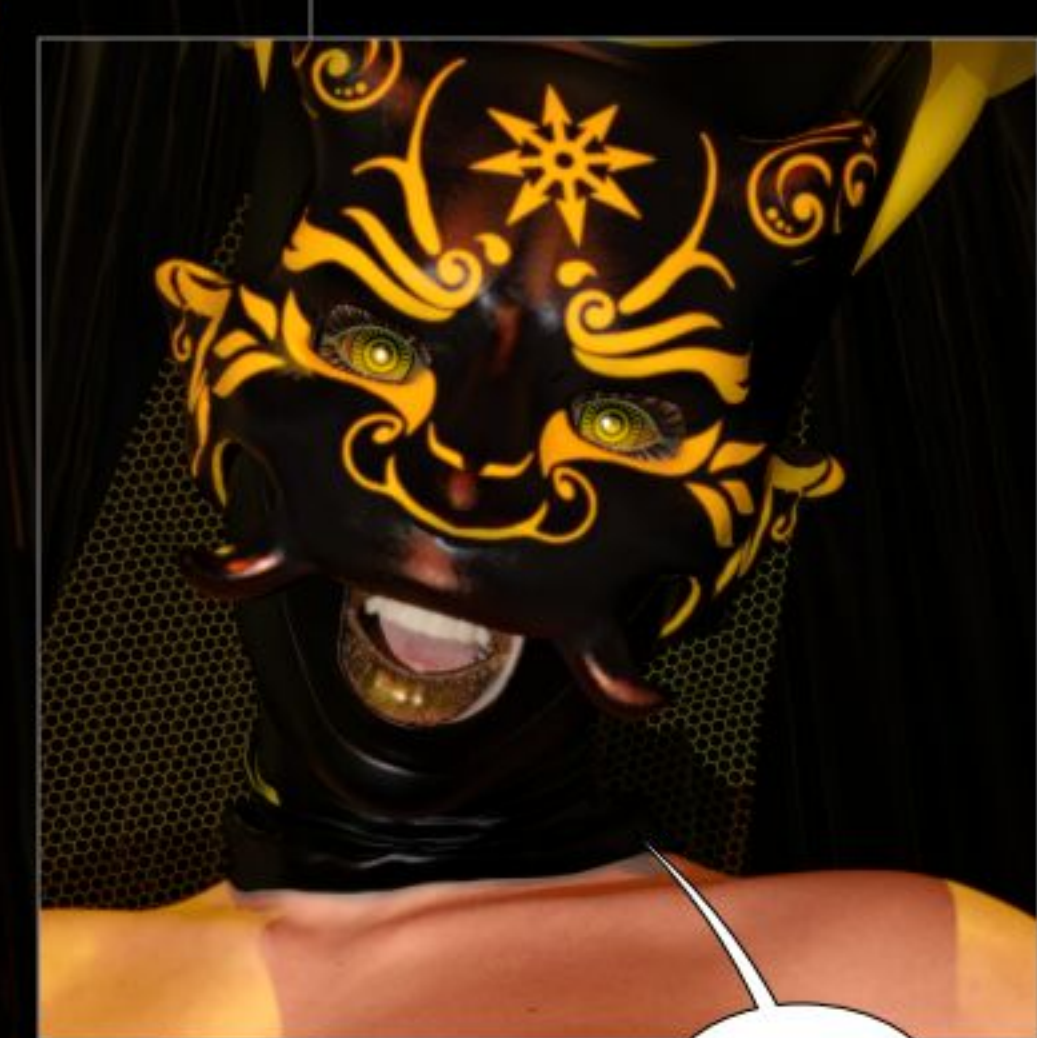
I knew you'd be good at that ...

There's something else I want from you. Only you. I'll show you ...



The first night you were in the full suit. Do you remember? I do.*

I'd had sex with so many people in that room, in and out of the suits, but none of them has stayed with me like that time.



I want that again.



* SS #3 -7



What --

No! Don't!

Get away!



I may have forgotten to mention: I'm buzzproof.

I had fun, if that makes you feel better.

Anyway, you needed to believe. It was obvious. All these other worshippers aren't good enough. You wanted me.

C'mon, just let me take that silly thing off your head. Wanna wrestle for it? That's fun too.

You were Paking?

I hate you so much.

No, don't you touch me!

I'll just make another one.

Back off!



You're not going to ruin everything this time!

And when the bees find you, we'll see how buzzproof you are!

You can run, but you can't hide, Penny!

Especially not in that hat.

WHILE ALL THAT IS HAPPENING, LEYNA GOES TO SERENE'S TO BRING HER UP TO DATE.

... We never seriously looked for Penny after the Euphorics, but I did check on her once and couldn't find her. Turns out I wasn't using the right name. Her name's Penumbra, of all things. Penumbra Thorpe.

But she's not the owner of record of "Hive." That's this other woman, the one Penny had fooled. Jeanne Laval.



Jeanne Laval?

That's right. Do you know her from somewhere?

... It's probably just coincidence. Go on.

Well, anyway, Penny is now using whatever communication method the bees have to send them all ... commands, I guess. One-way commands, and they don't seem to be resistable. The only way we can get the victims out of the influence is to take off their gear ... and if another bee comes along, they'll likely just put it back on again. They're making the gear spontaneously manifest on people ... not the bee suits, but the hoods on the victims. They just appear!



I've got to tell you, I'm starting to wonder if it isn't a bad idea to restore the phone system. Assuming we can take it down. Maybe it should stay down.

I had no idea it was this powerful. I mean, yes, it's a direct line into the brain, but to be able to control people that easily with it? ManiPest algorithmic items?

And then I thought about it and I realized it was there all along, if I'd looked. Of course the network can manifest things ... that's what it does whenever we make our phones appear. Every ability the network has was built in from the beginning.

It's super-dangerous, and yet we installed it on purpose.



Well, you know I never liked the damned things to begin with.

But I think we may have gotten where we can't do without them, honey. People will riot.

Do you think this network hacker can pull off a miracle? What was her name? Snit?

Snub.

Based on what she's done so far, I'd say she's pretty brilliant. And she's working with probably the best algorithmist in AA.

Anyway, it's not like there are other choices. We have to take the network down, at least for a while. And if they can't get it back up safely, then we're out of talent here and I guess we go beg AZ for help.



MEANWHILE, IN ONE OF THE PRIVATE ROOMS AT ALICIA'S CLUB (FORMERLY MELINDA'S) ...

I'm a little nervous ... I haven't done this before ...

Your first time? Ooh! Exciting. Don't worry. We'll go as fast or as slow as you like.

Oh, no, I don't mean my first time at that! ... I've just never used one of you -- uh, I guess they call you "dolls," right?

A friend of mine suggested it because none of my girlfriends wants to play with me while having, ah ...



Special equipment?

-- gulp --

I do hope you like it. After all, you picked it out.



And I want you to like it very much. I want you to get completely wet between the legs for it.

uhh?

The more excited you get, the softer your mind gets. The more aroused you are, the more obedient and empty you become.

You're going to have the best time. And once you come, then I'm going to tell you some things I need you to do for me.



Now, you're going to do everything I want you to do. Aren't you?

ooohhh!
Yes!
Yes!
Yes!



TWO DAYS LATER.



Had to search Por Leyna's location again ... We need to do better, especially if the phones are going to stay down ...

I've haven't been in this area much. I hope I'm in the right place.



... Yep.



Here, let me get that off you ... Hold still!

-- Sigh -- You can't even hear me, can you?

ANOMALOUS.

Oh, great.



Oops!

Too bad.



Stupid things.

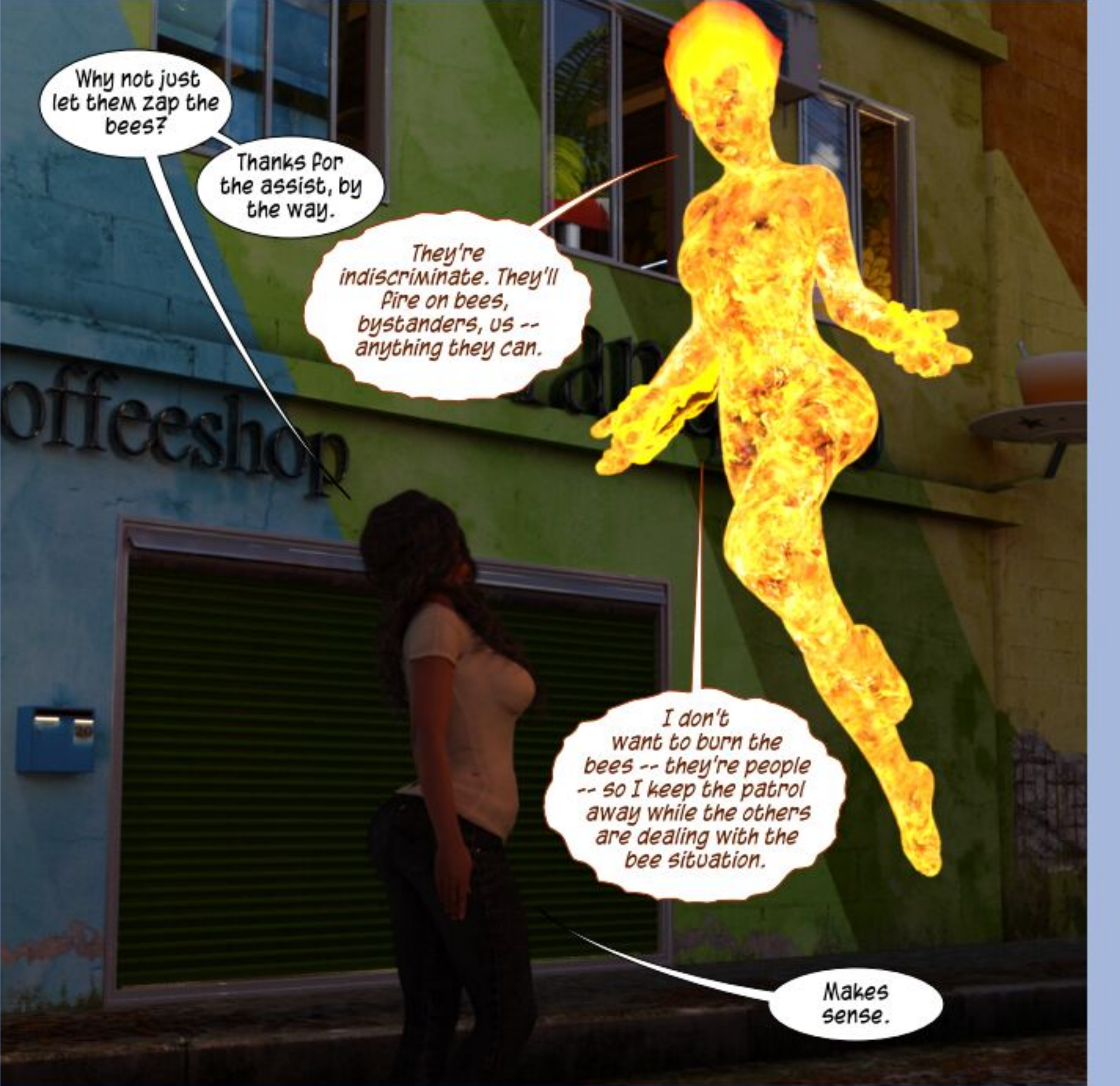
ERROR

There you go. Now recall, quick, before something else tries to get you ...

Yes, ma'am.

They want the bees very badly, so if we fight the bees, they usually show up. Often several times. They don't seem to retain that I burned them five minutes earlier.

They're pure algorithm, right? I don't think they really have brains.



Why not just let them zap the bees?

Thanks for the assist, by the way.

They're indiscriminate. They'll fire on bees, bystanders, us -- anything they can.

I don't want to burn the bees -- they're people -- so I keep the patrol away while the others are dealing with the bee situation.

Makes sense.



Ruby!

'Scuse my not turning around. Those two are going to recover and I'll need to zap them again.

No problem. Where's Leyna? I don't see her.

OK, that was super weird.

At least.

She went to collect data. She wants to know if there's a pattern if the bee movements that we can use.

I saw you got the hood off that other one, thanks. Why's the fourth one still ... Gina was going to get that ...

Huh. I don't see Gina either ... she was down here a minute ago ...



Gina!!

Oh, hell.

How did that bitch even do it? I never saw her ...

Damn it, we don't need this on top of everything else!



I know, I know. I still can't find Doreen.

You watch the bees. I'll keep Gina safe.

Ruby ... in the discontinuity, didn't you undo the same effect, more or less?

I didn't. Leyna did*, and she had that suit that created a change-proof bubble ...

Still. Could you get the same result? Create an area that undoes local alterations?

No, you don't!

Couldn't hurt to try ... if I can figure out how ...

* RESTORING DR. CHAPMAN IN SS #16. -T



Ruby?

That was really, really strange ...

I don't know what 'strange' means anymore.



THE CREW TAKES RESPIRE ON A NEARBY ROOF.

For creatures that fly, they're not very good at searching up.

Gone off to look for a place with someone to convert, I guess.

Good. We all need time to breathe.

... so once Penny left 'Hive,' Jeanne and I could rescue the people who didn't run out after her ... and then we shut it down. I mean really down. It's not there now.

Snub's network intercept equipment was in there, and we were hoping that'd cut off Penny's signal ... but no. Apparently she has a self-contained method in that thing she's wearing. I don't think she's a genius, but she's a really good tech thief.

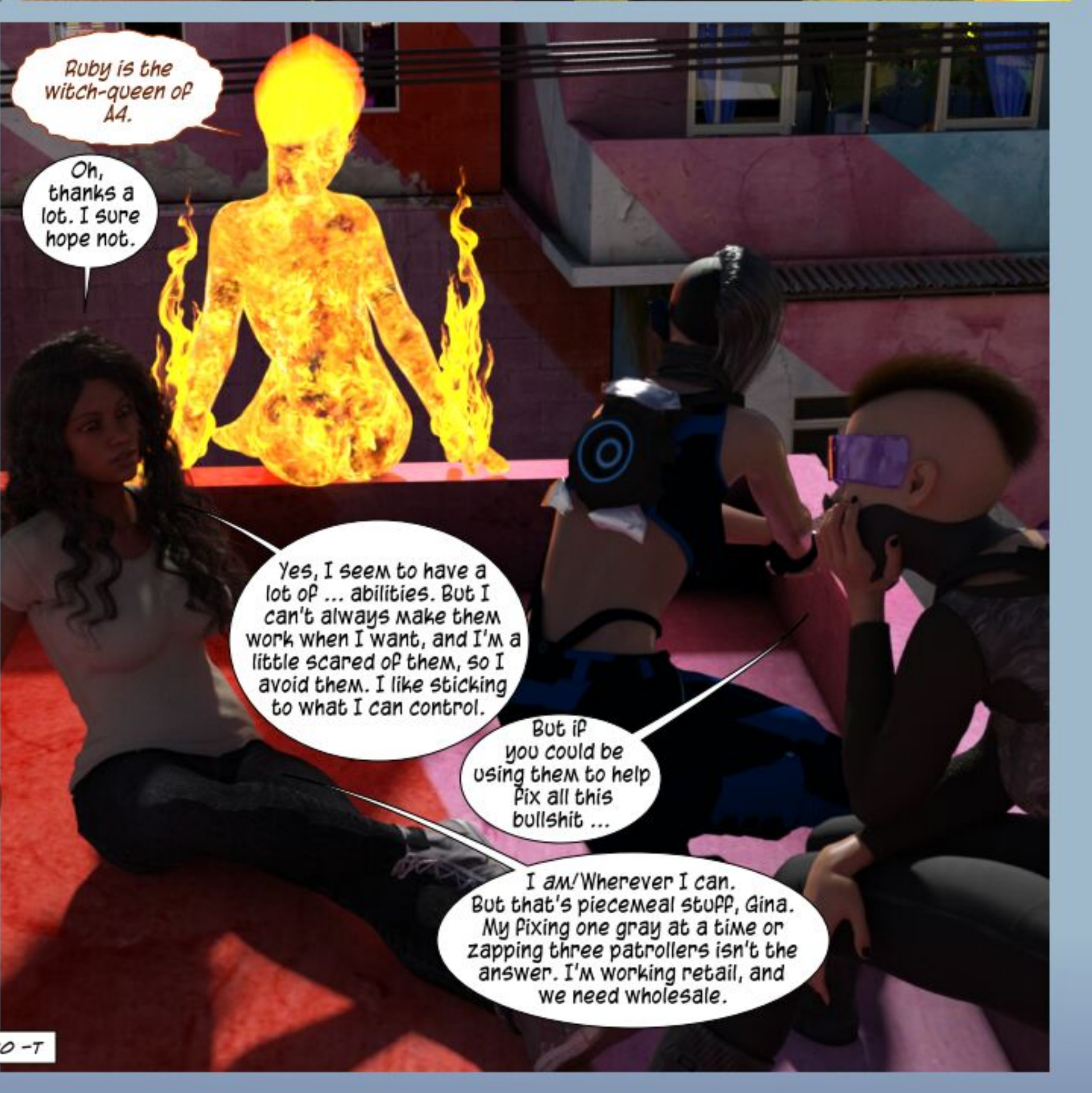
And now we don't know where she is, and the bees don't have a home base, so it's hard to say where they'll go ...

Yes. Leyna's looking into that.

I'll tell her all that when I see her, but right now I'm more interested in how you did what you did.

I haven't forgotten you making patrollers vanish without a disruptor, either.*

* SS #20 -T



Ruby is the witch-queen of A4.

Oh, thanks a lot. I sure hope not.

Yes, I seem to have a lot of ... abilities. But I can't always make them work when I want, and I'm a little scared of them, so I avoid them. I like sticking to what I can control.

But if you could be using them to help fix all this bullshit ...

I am! Wherever I can. But that's piecemeal stuff, Gina. My fixing one gray at a time or zapping three patrollers isn't the answer. I'm working retail, and we need wholesale.



OK, maybe we're coming at this the wrong way.

We can't find a non-destructive way to take the whole network down. But what if we don't take it down? At least, not all at once.

Nodes go in and out of use as traffic moves through the system. What if, as soon as a node's not active, we block off its connections?

The node can't go back into use again then, not without another intervention, and the whole network shuts down by atrophy, one node at a time.

That's ... wow.

I think you've got it!



You're a genius!!

!!!

Oh! ... uh, oops.

I'm sorry!

I got a little ... carried away.



Don't apologize, you're adorable.

But I assumed you didn't do any of that kind of thing. I mean, seeing the ageplay ...

I do! Or I used to.

But most people aren't very interesting, or very smart.

And they want you to be dumb or boring too, to match.

I got tired of trying. That's one of the reasons I decided to just stop being an adult.

Also, I figured you wouldn't be interested ... I mean, I know I'm weird.



All the interesting people are weird.

C'mere.

WHAT WITH FIGURING OUT THE FINE POINTS AND THE DIFFICULTY OF GETTING MESSAGES TO PEOPLE, IT'S FOUR DAYS LATER WHEN EVERYONE GATHERS FOR A COUNCIL OF WAR.

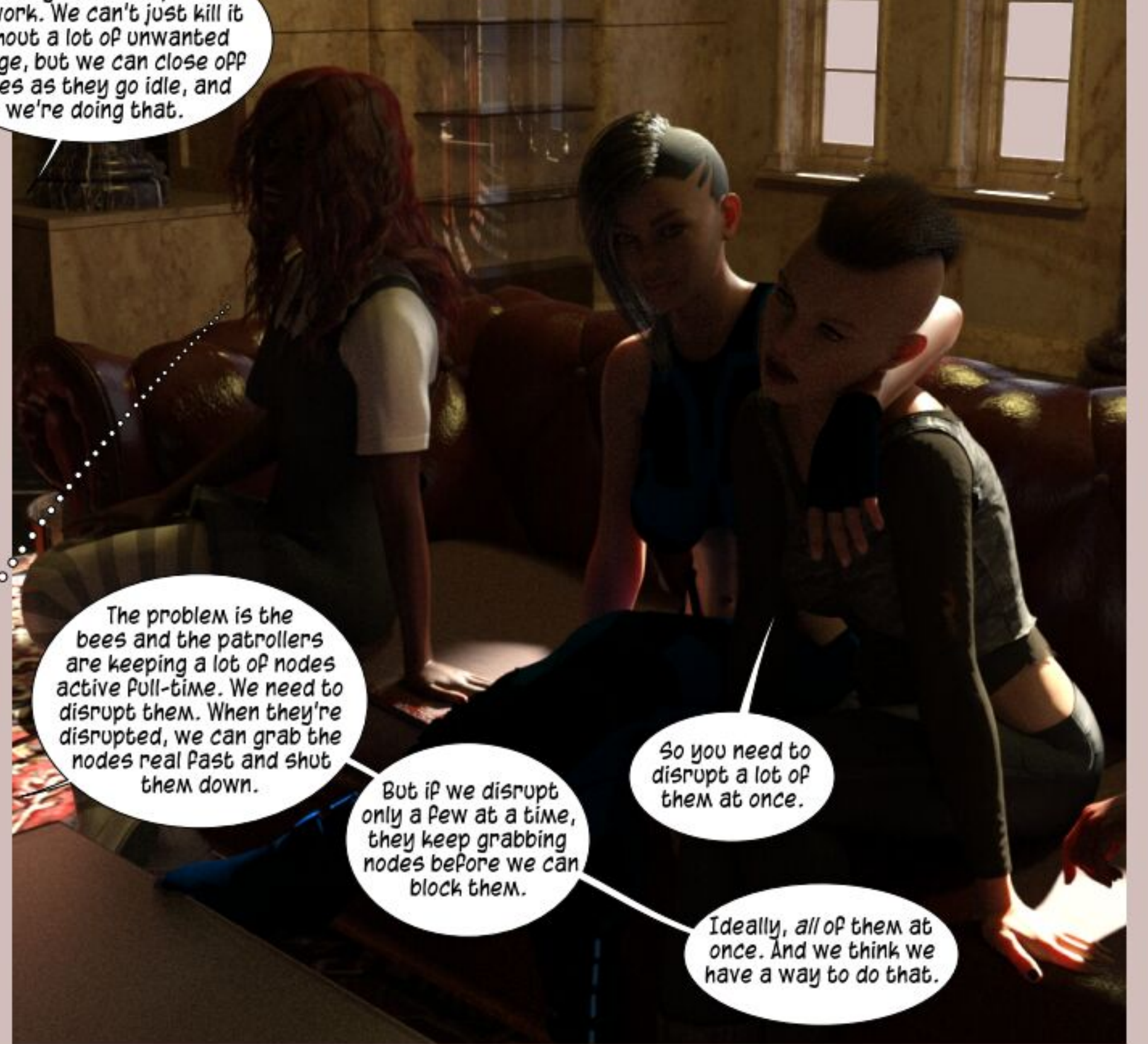


Um ... Hi. I'm Snub. Some of you don't know me, but Jeanne, Ruby, and Leyna will vouch for me.

This is Dina. Same deal. If you don't know whether you should trust her, ask them.

Barely recognized Dina ...

We have a solution for both the bees and the patrollers. One part of it's already in action. The other part's going to take ... ah ... a group effort.



We're slowly shutting down the phone network. We can't just kill it without a lot of unwanted damage, but we can close off nodes as they go idle, and we're doing that.

The problem is the bees and the patrollers are keeping a lot of nodes active full-time. We need to disrupt them. When they're disrupted, we can grab the nodes real fast and shut them down.

But if we disrupt only a few at a time, they keep grabbing nodes before we can block them.

So you need to disrupt a lot of them at once.

Ideally, all of them at once. And we think we have a way to do that.



Uh-huh. Who's going to be in the honey pot? Me?

If you think that'll do it. Or Jeanne. Or both of you. Or me, but I don't think she has as much of a grudge against me.

I'm not sure a grudge will do it. I think she's past that. I think we have to show her something that's threatening.

I can provide that.

Dina's got some equipment ready for you ... among other things, it'll make you buzzproof. You'll still need to dodge patrollers if they show up. And they will.

I can keep the patrollers off, if you don't need me for the rest of it.

Well, that brings up a thing. We really could use another person. Two more, if you're on that. You'll see why when I show you the stuff.

Ash and Maire?

I think so. They're already involved, and they're reliable.



Great. I think that's it, then. Any questions?

Once the network is completely shut down, is it shut down for good? Do the phones ever come back?

... I don't know. Dina and I are going to try our best to see if we can get them working again safely.

But even if we do, it could take a while.

THE PLAN COMMENCES.



OK. The boom box is going to cause a lot of interference with her signals. She'll notice.

We'll try to watch your backs when it gets rough, but we don't want to attract too much attention. We want them to focus on you.



Uh ... that isn't actually radioactive, is it?

Oh, no, that's just the only case design I had around that fit it right.

Good luck!



... Coming from over here somewhere ... what the hell is it?

Oh.

You.

I should've known.



Are you just doing that to annoy me or --

Yeow!



Back off!

-- oop --

I told you, even if you get this mask off I'll replace it!



I don't know what you're trying to accomplish --

Owww!!

Damn it, that really hurt!



Aaagh!

THUNK!

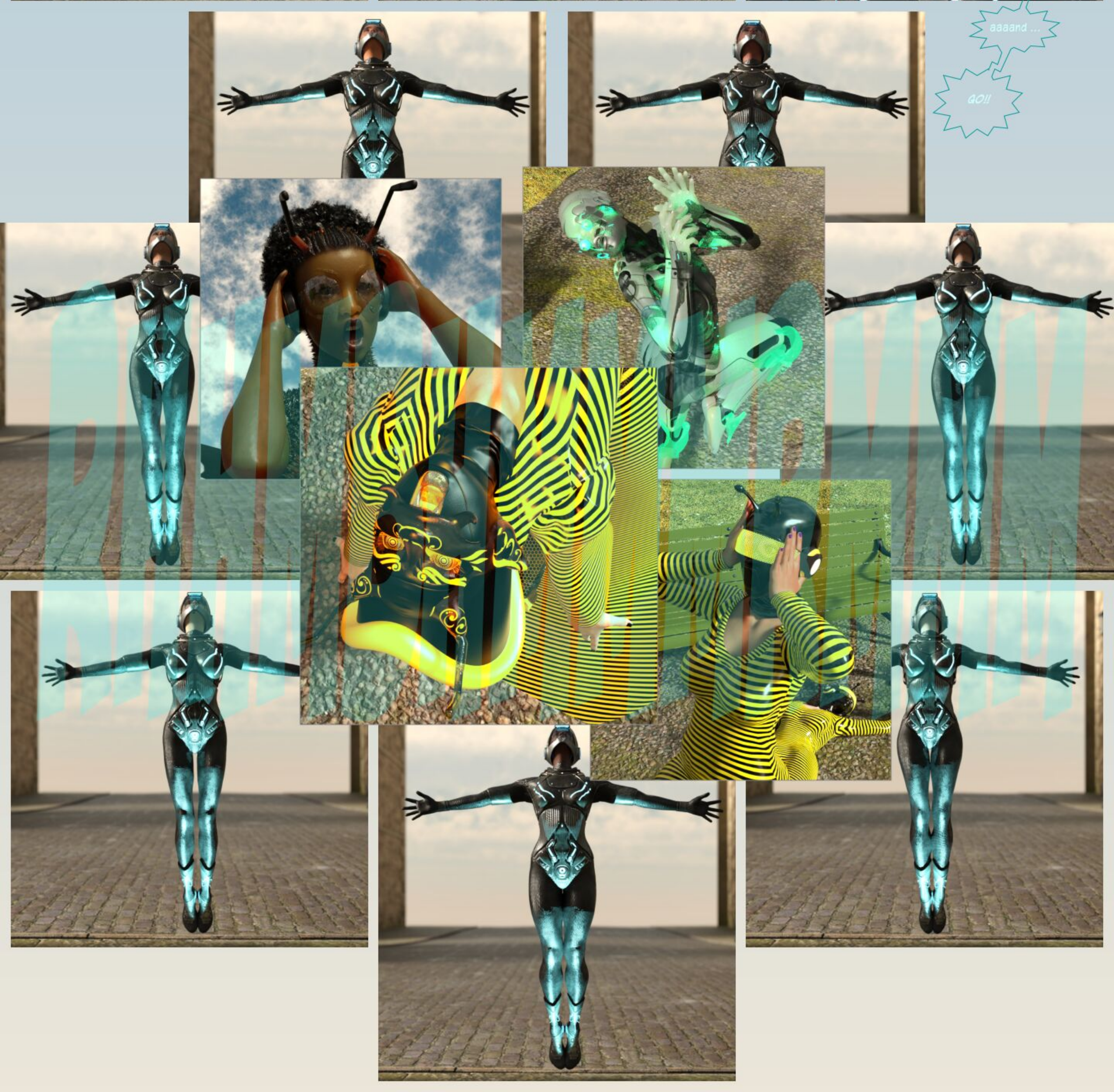
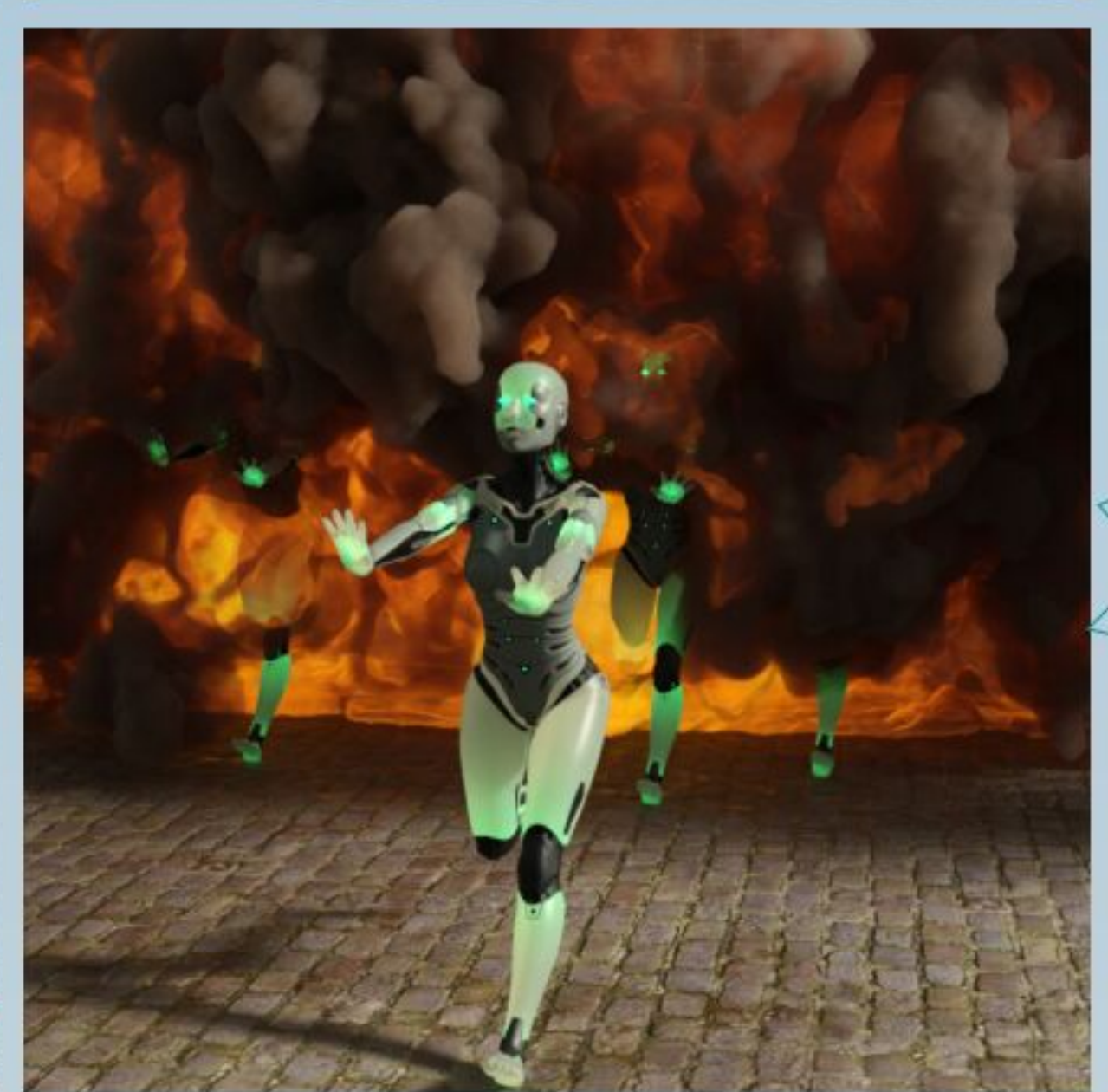
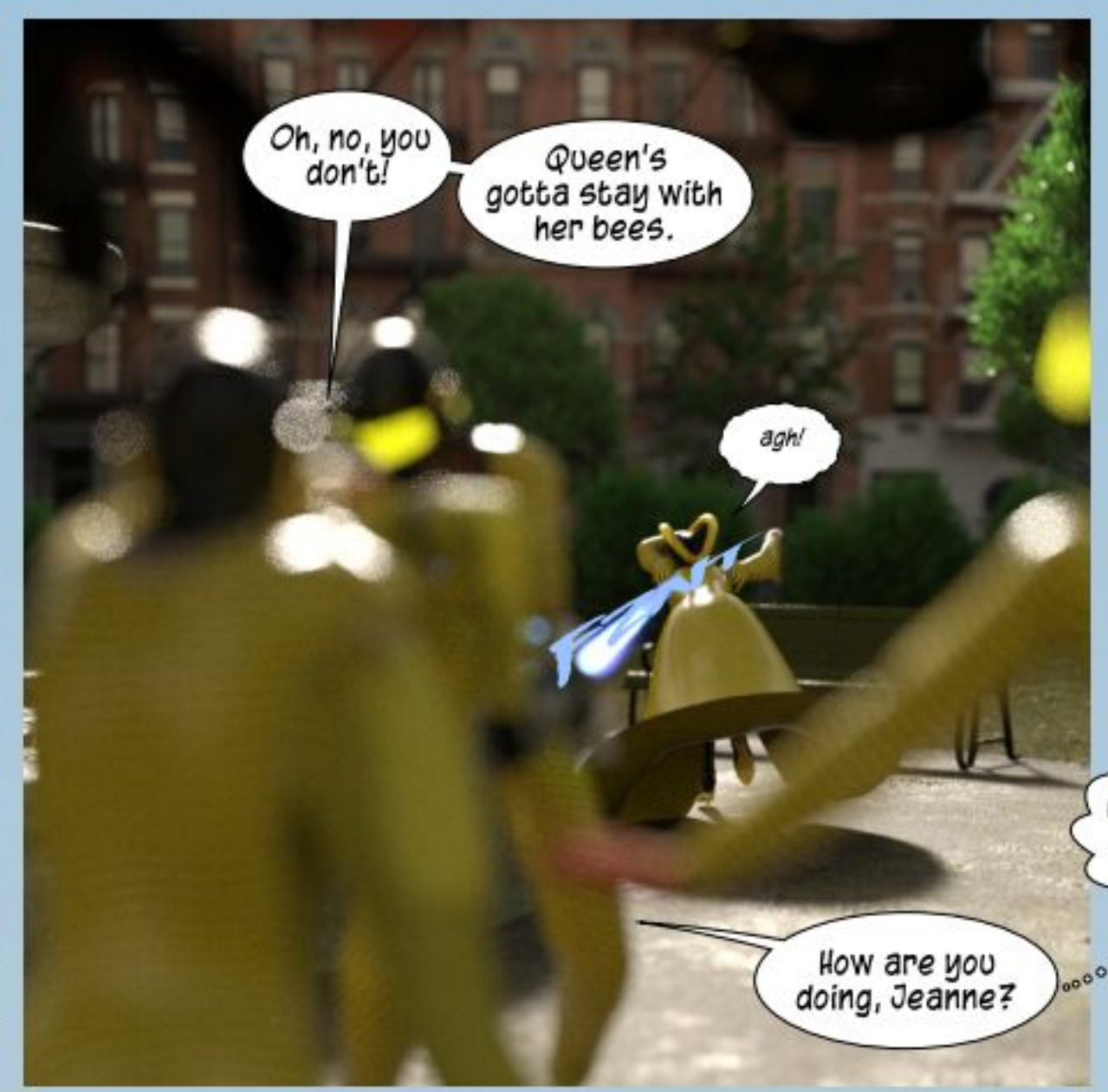


You -- HRP -- You just don't get it, do you? I'm the queen bee! I have an army!



It's working! She's calling them in!

OK, everybody keep your guard up and be ready.





not sure I want to know what just happened.

I guess it worked.

Guess so.

ugh



... I don't care whether it solved the problem or not, you were out of line and you owe me an explanation.

If you'd responded to my messages, Josiah, you'd have had the explanation well in advance.

We know you hate it when "ignore it until it goes away" doesn't work, but ...



Oh, no.

I have to vanish, Ruby. I'll talk to you later.

But ...



Gone.

I wonder which of them she didn't want seeing her? Could have been all of them, I guess.

Come to that, I don't think I want Josiah knowing my face just yet either. And I see Leyna and Naomi have already vanished.

Let Serene and Pauline explain the mess.



Ruby!

I'm so sorry ... we didn't know she could do that ...

Honest, I'm sure none of us meant for this to happen ...



Orchid.

You know, I ...

... No. I'm not going there right now. There's no point, and I'm tired.

I'm happy you're OK. I'm happy everybody's OK. And I'm not even really mad.

But I can't right now. I just can't.

Give me some time. Then we'll talk.



Oh.



We got enough of the nodes closed down that there wasn't a lot of bandwidth for patrollers to spawn. Your Friends are picking off the last of them now. The phone network is basically shut down.

And when Penny stopped broadcasting, any of the bees we didn't catch snapped out of it. Most of them were pretty disgusted when they realized what had happened.

Everything worked out very well. Good job on the plan. And on the equipment. If we hadn't all been buzzproof it would have been really bad.

I wish we all hadn't had to vanish from the scene so quickly, though. Especially Jeanne. I had some questions I wanted to ask her.



Well, go ahead and ask them.

Oh!

I should have guessed! You didn't even change your name much!

Did you take the job to spy on me?



No, dear. I took the job because I needed a safe place to be. There are some people who don't like me very much. And I knew about you from hiring you to work on the suits.

Also, I really do enjoy taking care of you.

I'm sorry I won't be able to do it anymore. I need to go off and ... well, figure out how to approach things.



You see, I still believe that mental communion is the way. I don't think we will ever know true peace, or realize our full value, until we have it.

This was a bad attempt. I see it now. I was so desperate to make it work I overlooked the flaws. I have to find something better. But I'm not going to stop looking.

It seems to me that you're in good hands, though.



Uh ... -- cough --

Snub and I are going to be so busy trying to figure out how to fix the phones that I don't think I'm going to need much babysitting for a while, anyway.

You're not giving up on childhood completely, are you?

'Course not! It's fun.

But I don't guess I need to be a little kid all the time ...

I understand.

Ruby? You had questions for me?



Actually, I think you've answered my two biggest ones.

I don't think I agree with you about the group mind -- the idea gives me, excuse the phrase, hives -- but I wish you the best of luck. Just try to make it more evil-proof next time, OK? There seem to be an awful lot of Penumbra out there.

Speaking of which, do any of you have a clue what happened to Penny? I know she didn't run before the disruption, because I saw her react. Badly. Like it was all backfiring into her head.

I wonder if it was so bad she spontaneously had an interrupt. The next time I looked over there, she was gone.

And Leyna can't find her with her locator stuff.

Hmm. No, I have no idea.

"Is it uncharitable of me to hope somehow she's gotten what she deserves?"



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NEXT ISSUE: BAD BLOOD BETWEEN BARKERS!