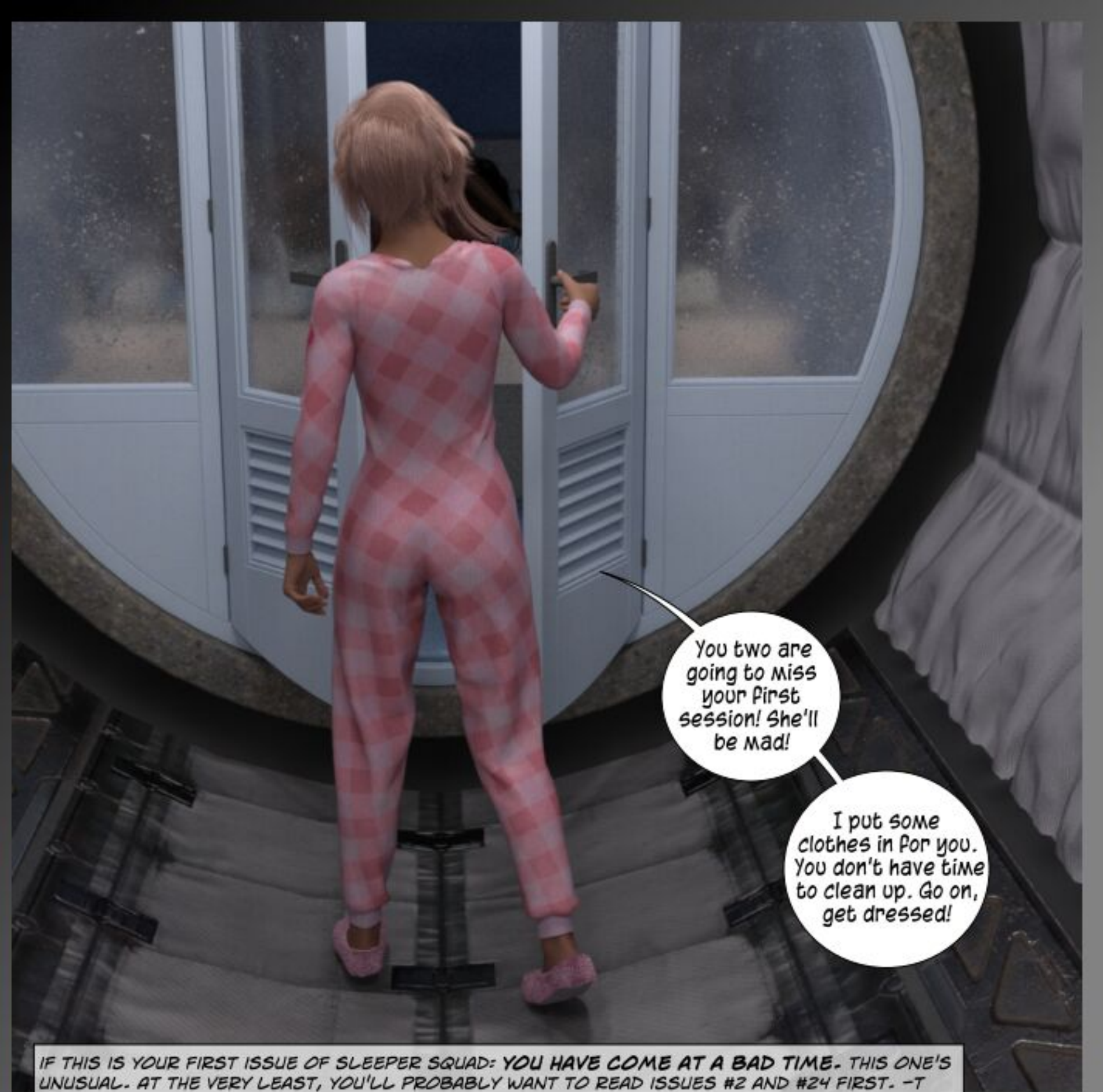


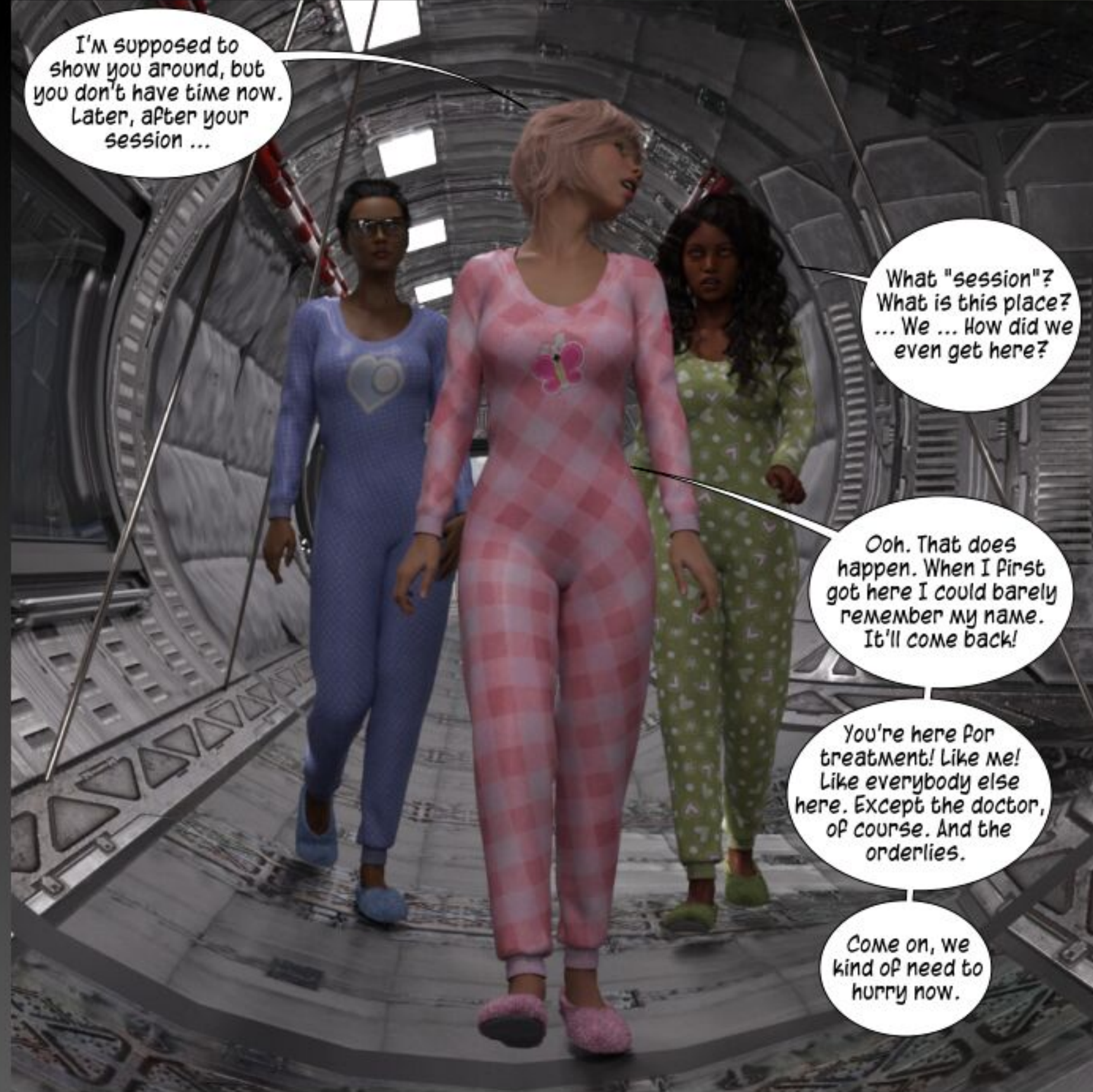
Hey!



You two are going to miss your first session! She'll be mad!

I put some clothes in for you. You don't have time to clean up. Go on, get dressed!

IF THIS IS YOUR FIRST ISSUE OF SLEEPER SQUAD: YOU HAVE COME AT A BAD TIME. THIS ONE'S UNUSUAL. AT THE VERY LEAST, YOU'LL PROBABLY WANT TO READ ISSUES #2 AND #24 FIRST. -T



I'm supposed to show you around, but you don't have time now. Later, after your session ...

What "session"? What is this place? ... We ... How did we even get here?

Ooh. That does happen. When I first got here I could barely remember my name. It'll come back!

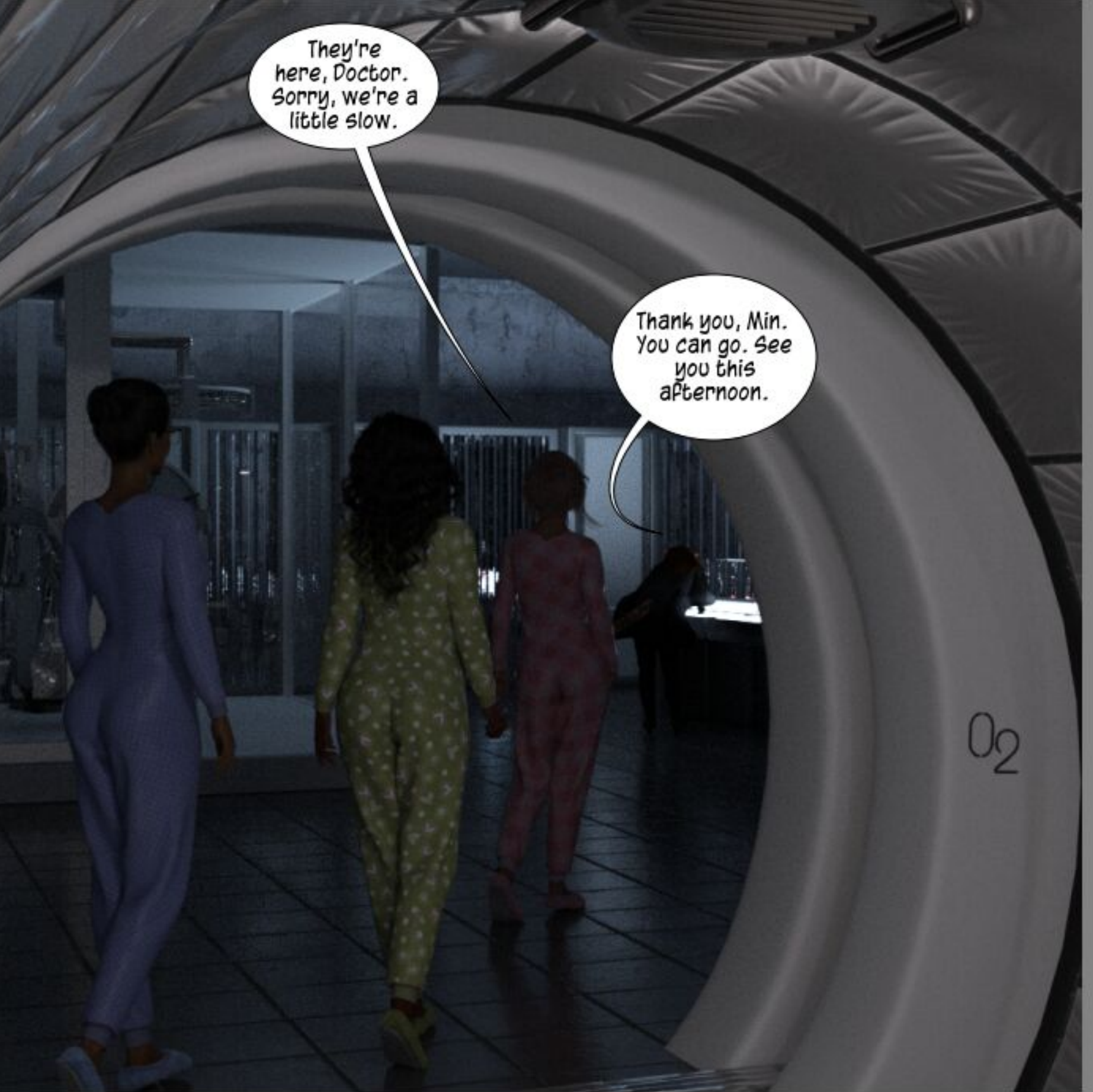
You're here for treatment! Like me! Like everybody else here. Except the doctor, of course. And the orderlies.

Come on, we kind of need to hurry now.



Ladders? What is this, a space station?

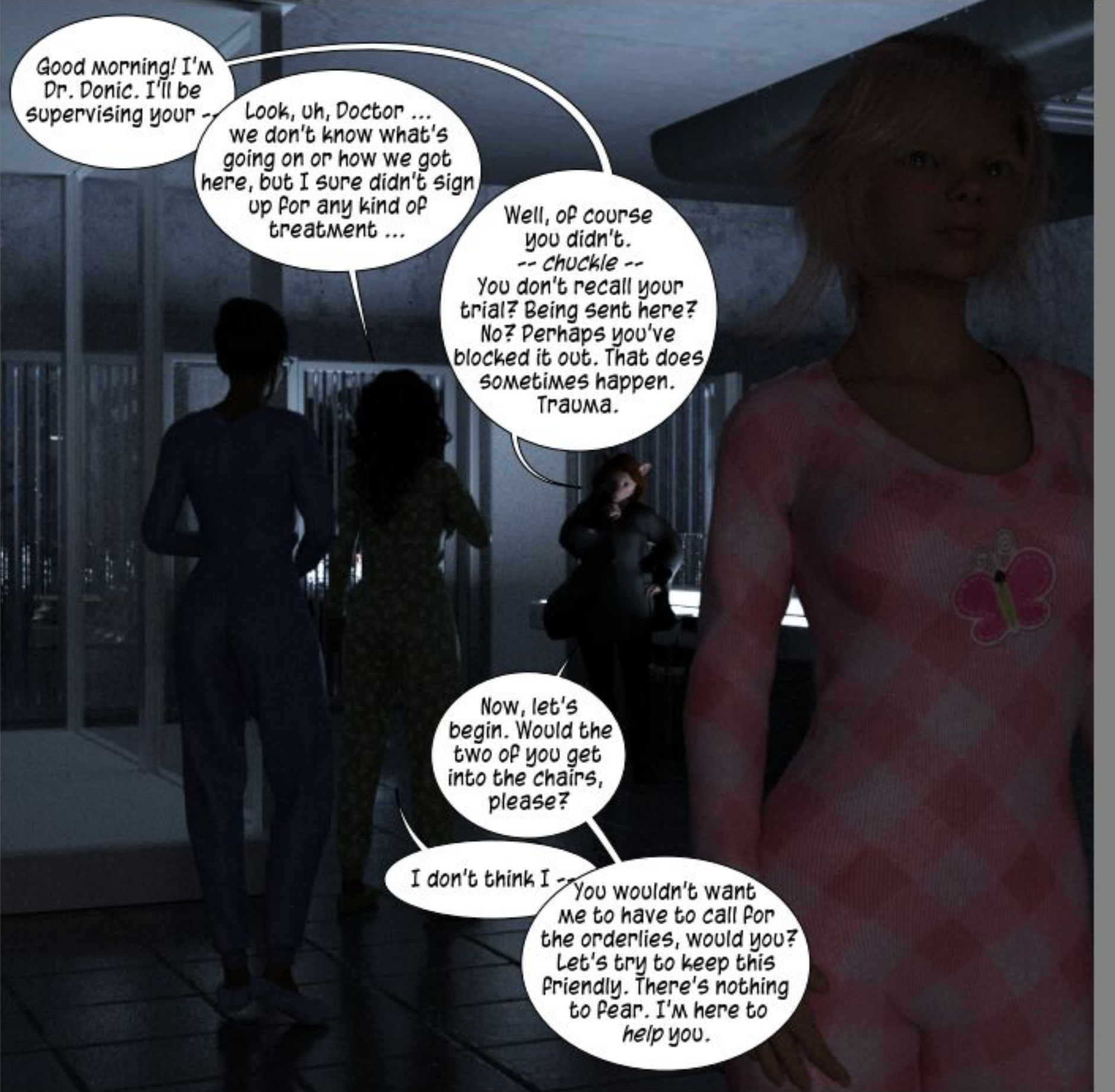
It's kind of a weird place, yeah ... but it's nice! There's stuff to do, and the food's good, and you get to walk around in your pajamas!



They're here, Doctor. Sorry, we're a little slow.

Thank you, Min. You can go. See you this afternoon.

O2



Good morning! I'm Dr. Donic. I'll be supervising your ...

Look, uh, Doctor ... we don't know what's going on or how we got here, but I sure didn't sign up for any kind of treatment ...

Well, of course you didn't. -- Chuckle -- You don't recall your trial? Being sent here? No? Perhaps you've blocked it out. That does sometimes happen. Trauma.

Now, let's begin. Would the two of you get into the chairs, please?

I don't think I --

You wouldn't want me to have to call for the orderlies, would you? Let's try to keep this friendly. There's nothing to fear. I'm here to help you.



There, nice and comfortable. Sorry about the restraints. Sometimes there's a little involuntary muscle motion and we don't want you to hurt yourselves.

Just relax and let the program work. Like I said, there's nothing to be afraid of.

We'll have you all better in no time.





We have two really nice pools -- there's another in the other big dome -- and you can see we have all kinds of exercise equipment, and there's lots of other stuff too. There's a room with a big screen where we can all watch a passive --

How do you go outside? Where's the exit?

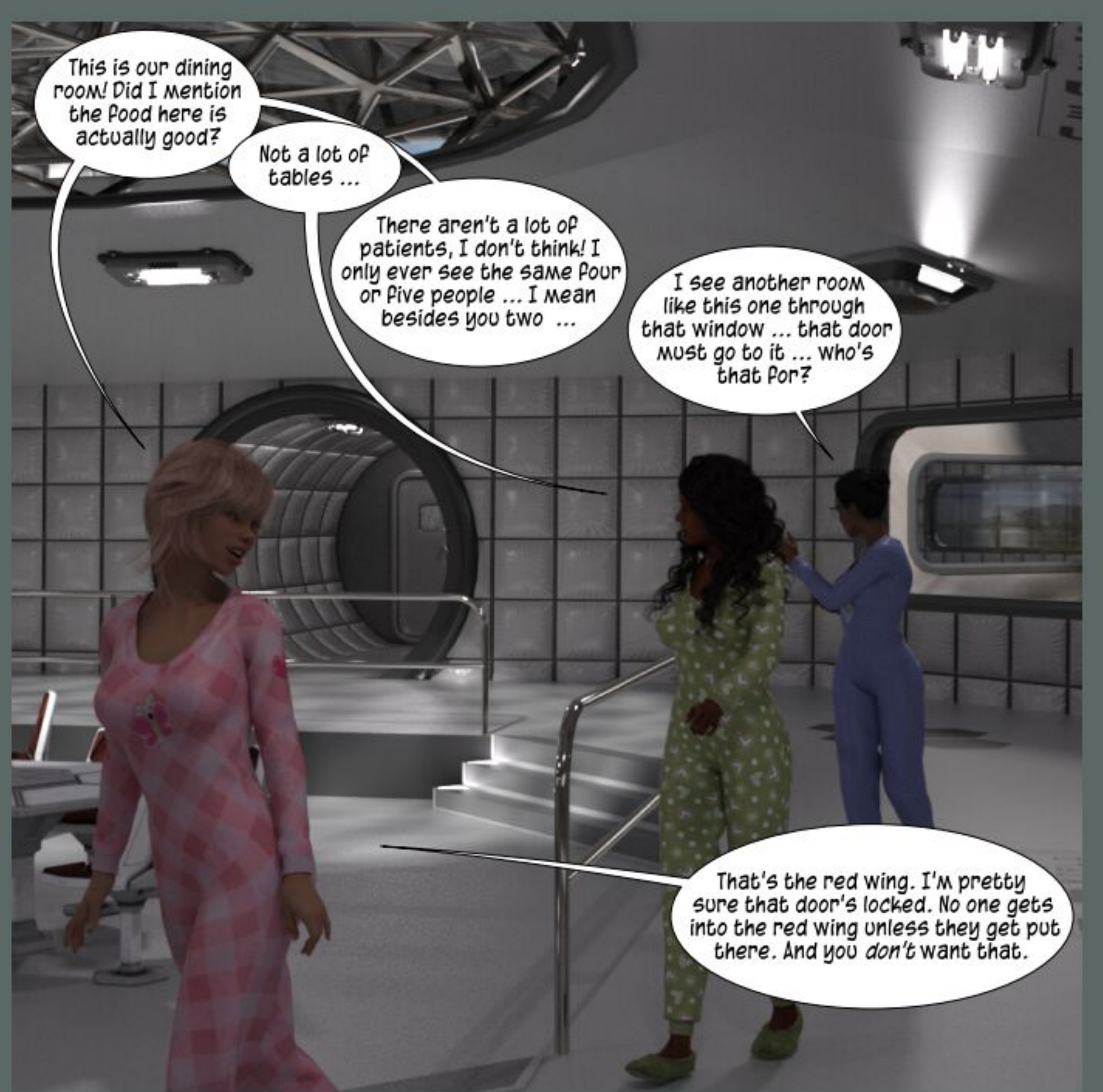
I, uh -- I don't know? I don't think there is one! I mean, I could be wrong --

Wait ... weren't we just in the room with the chairs?

I didn't -- I don't recall --

Your session's over! That's why I came to show you around. Are you OK?

No. No, I am not.



This is our dining room! Did I mention the food here is actually good?

Not a lot of tables ...

There aren't a lot of patients, I don't think! I only ever see the same four or five people ... I mean besides you two ...

I see another room like this one through that window ... that door must go to it ... who's that Por?

That's the red wing. I'm pretty sure that door's locked. No one gets into the red wing unless they get put there. And you don't want that.



Why? Is that where they keep the procedures they don't want to admit --

Sssh! It's not good to talk about. Especially not with them around!



Those are the "orderlies"? They look more like prison guards.

Fetishistic ones.

Gotta agree.

Though, really, that's redundant.

They're scary! And they're really mean, too. Don't make them mad.

I have to go to my session now. I'll see you both later!

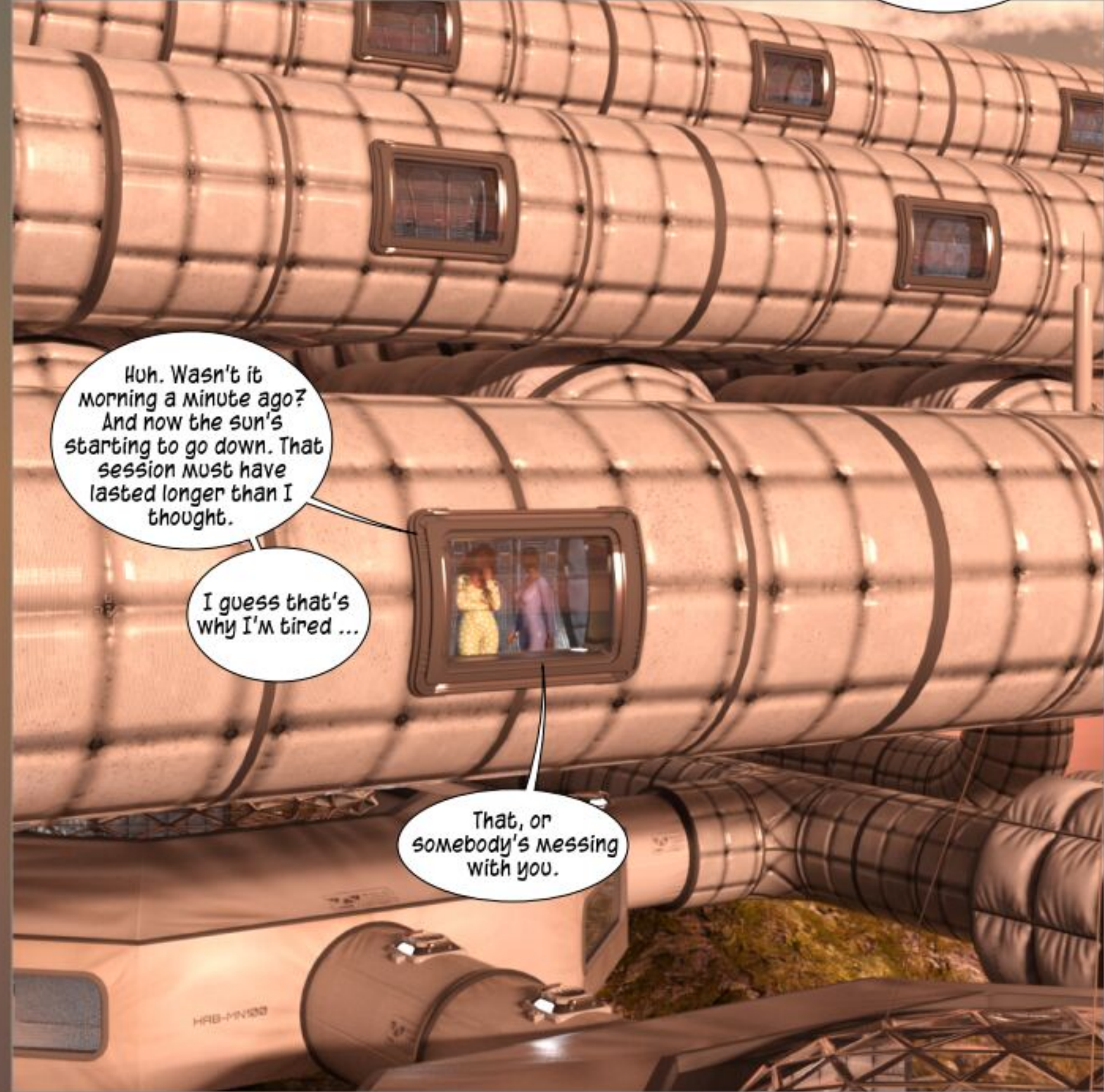


It's just wrong. No one builds a rehab facility like this. Even in sleep, it's ridiculous. And the idea that we're serving some kind of sentence ...

Well, what if we are? I mean, hell, we can't remember how we got here. What if that did happen and we deleted it?

For what, Ruby? What's the crime? What did we do?

Uh, well ...



Huh. Wasn't it morning a minute ago? And now the sun's starting to go down. That session must have lasted longer than I thought.

I guess that's why I'm tired ...

That, or somebody's messing with you.

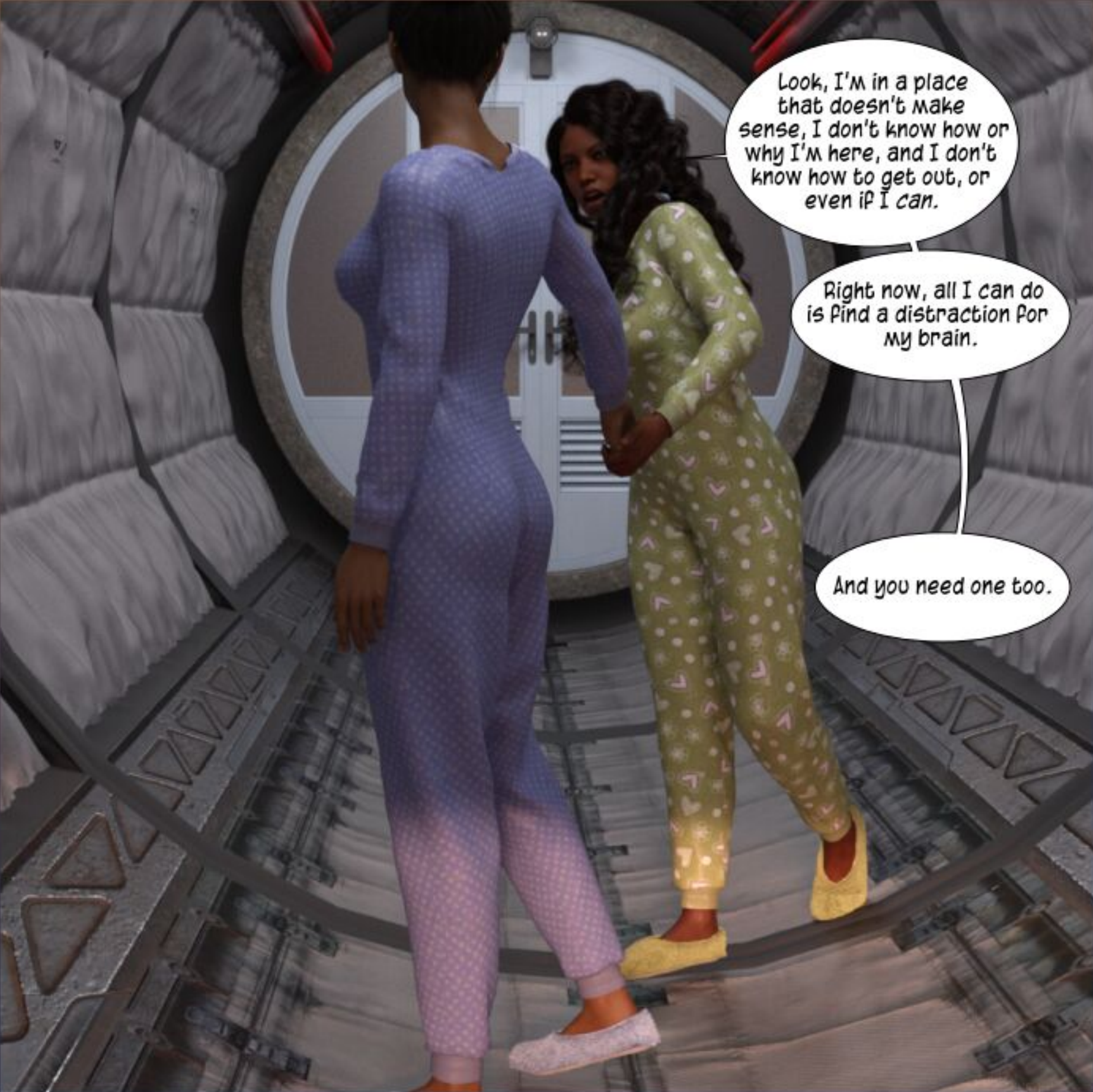


I'm not too tired to play.

You don't know if we have that kind of relationship. For that matter, you don't even know if we have any relationship.

All you know is we woke up naked in the same bed.

I don't care.



Look, I'm in a place that doesn't make sense, I don't know how or why I'm here, and I don't know how to get out, or even if I can.

Right now, all I can do is find a distraction for my brain.

And you need one too.



What if -- MM! -- what if they don't approve of the inmates doing this kind of thing?

Cross that bridge when we come to it.



-- SHZZXX --



... What time is it?

Might as well ask what day it is. There's not a clock in the place.

Come to that ... do you have any idea how many days it's been? How many sessions?

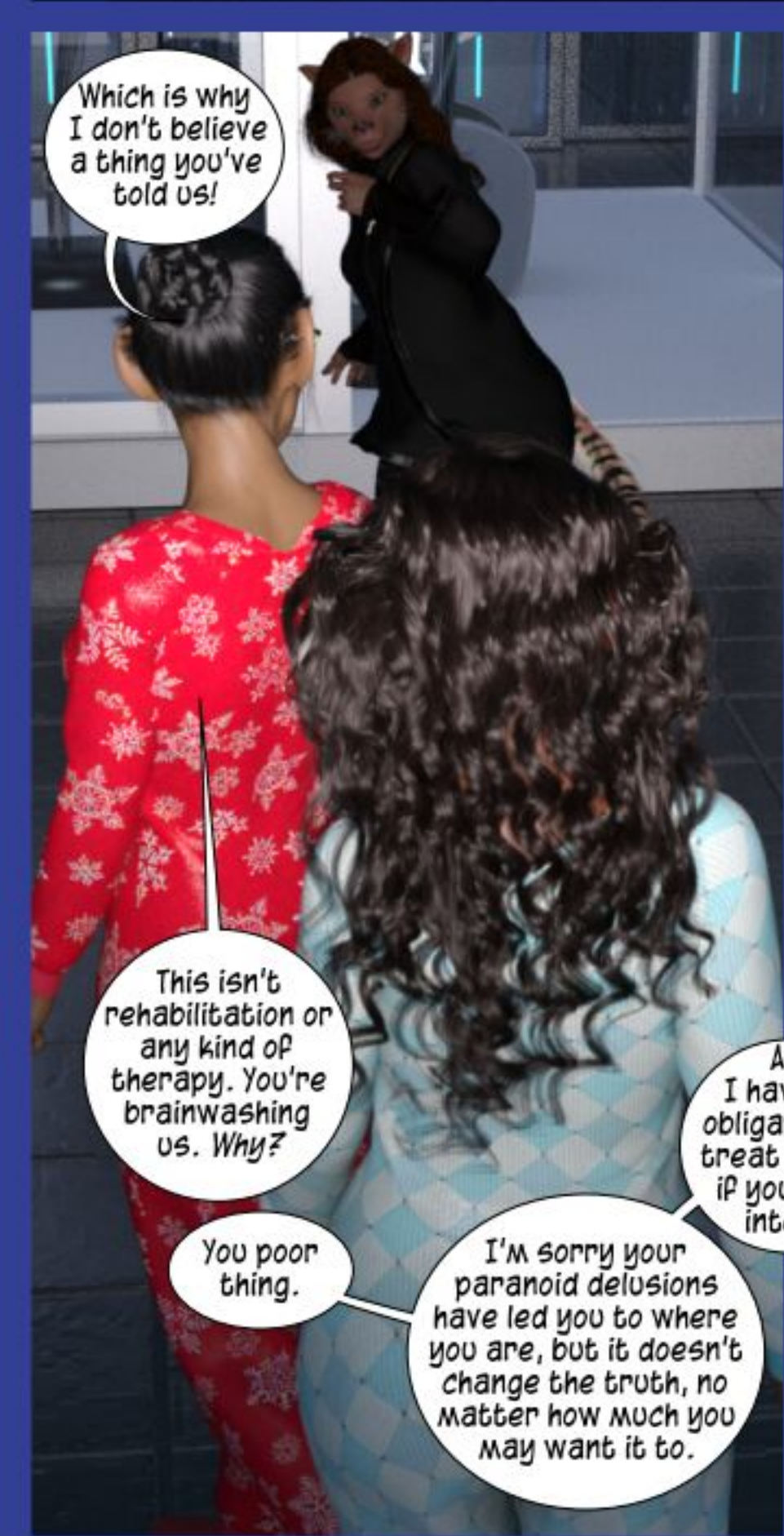
No. Do you?

Five, I think. Maybe six. It's getting harder to keep count.

We base more of our mental framework than we know or admit around perceived duration. If the framework of elapsed time is gone, then everything else becomes much less certain. More malleable.

It makes us easier to manipulate.

That's also why you feel so tired.



Which is why I don't believe a thing you've told us!

This isn't rehabilitation or any kind of therapy. You're brainwashing us. Why?

You poor thing.

I'm sorry your paranoid delusions have led you to where you are, but it doesn't change the truth, no matter how much you may want it to.

And I have an obligation to treat you. So if you'll get into --



I am not getting in your chair again! You can bring in your horrors to drag me ...

Oh, we won't need to do that.

I don't think you understand.



Aaauhh!

How did you --

You're far enough along at this point that I don't really need your conscious cooperation.

Let's begin, shall we? We're running behind.



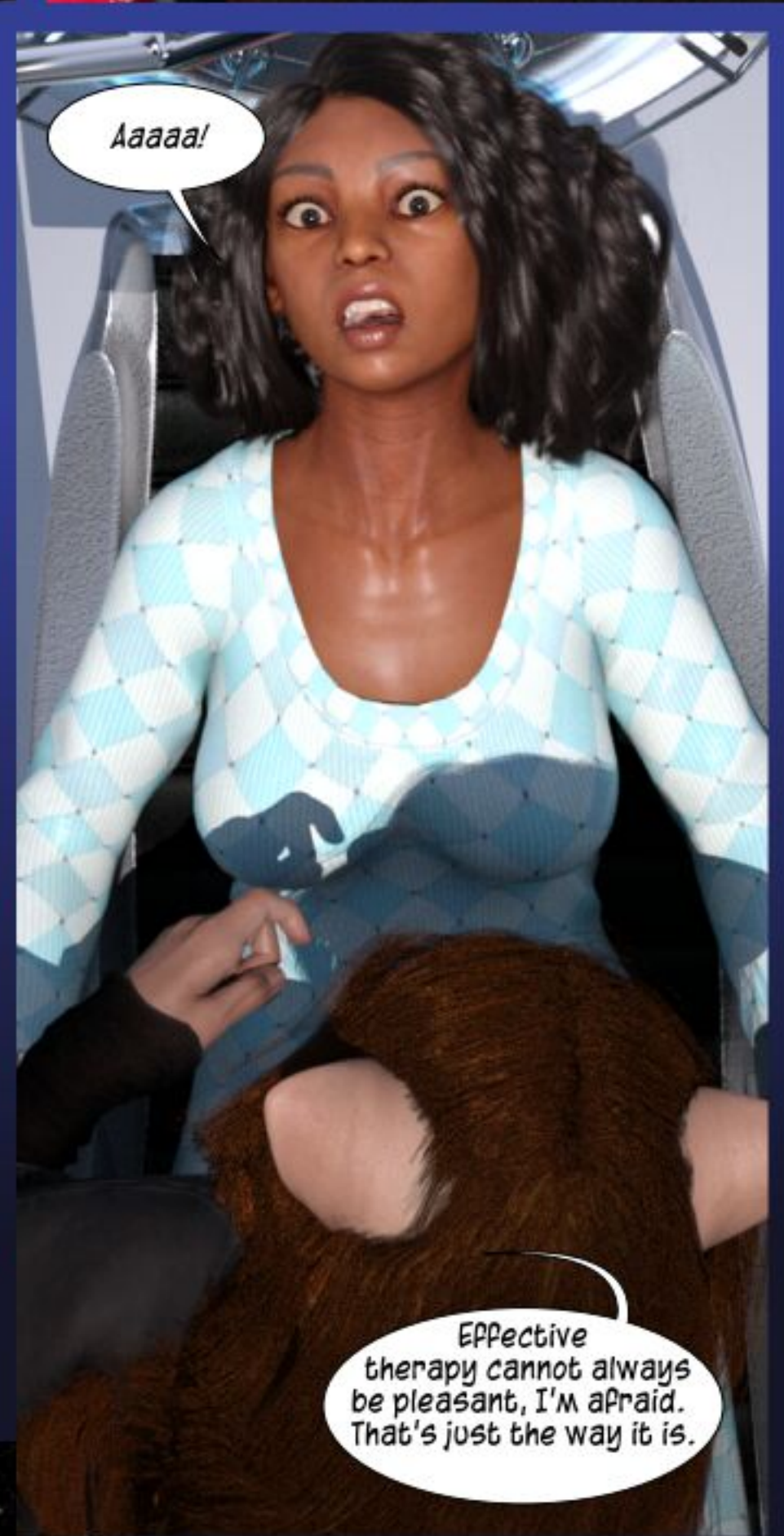
Hey, stop it!

ggggghh!

uuurr

aaaah!

Oh, now, don't you start being difficult, too.



Aaaaa!

Effective therapy cannot always be pleasant, I'm afraid. That's just the way it is.



If you're concerned about her well-being, why don't we look in on her?



RAT!

RAT!

RAT!

RAT!

Let her go!

You didn't listen at all, did you? Sometimes it can't be pleasant.

RAT!

MMMMhmm
MMhhhh!

RAT!

MMghph!

And you ... will have to wait your turn.



Hey! How are you doing?

How do you think? ... What did you do to your hair?

Min cut it! She says it looks a lot better this way. She says it shows off my ears.



Shows off your ears?

Oh, good. Our whole world is coming apart, but your concern is a hairstyle that shows off your enormous ears.



Are you saying you think something's wrong with my ears?

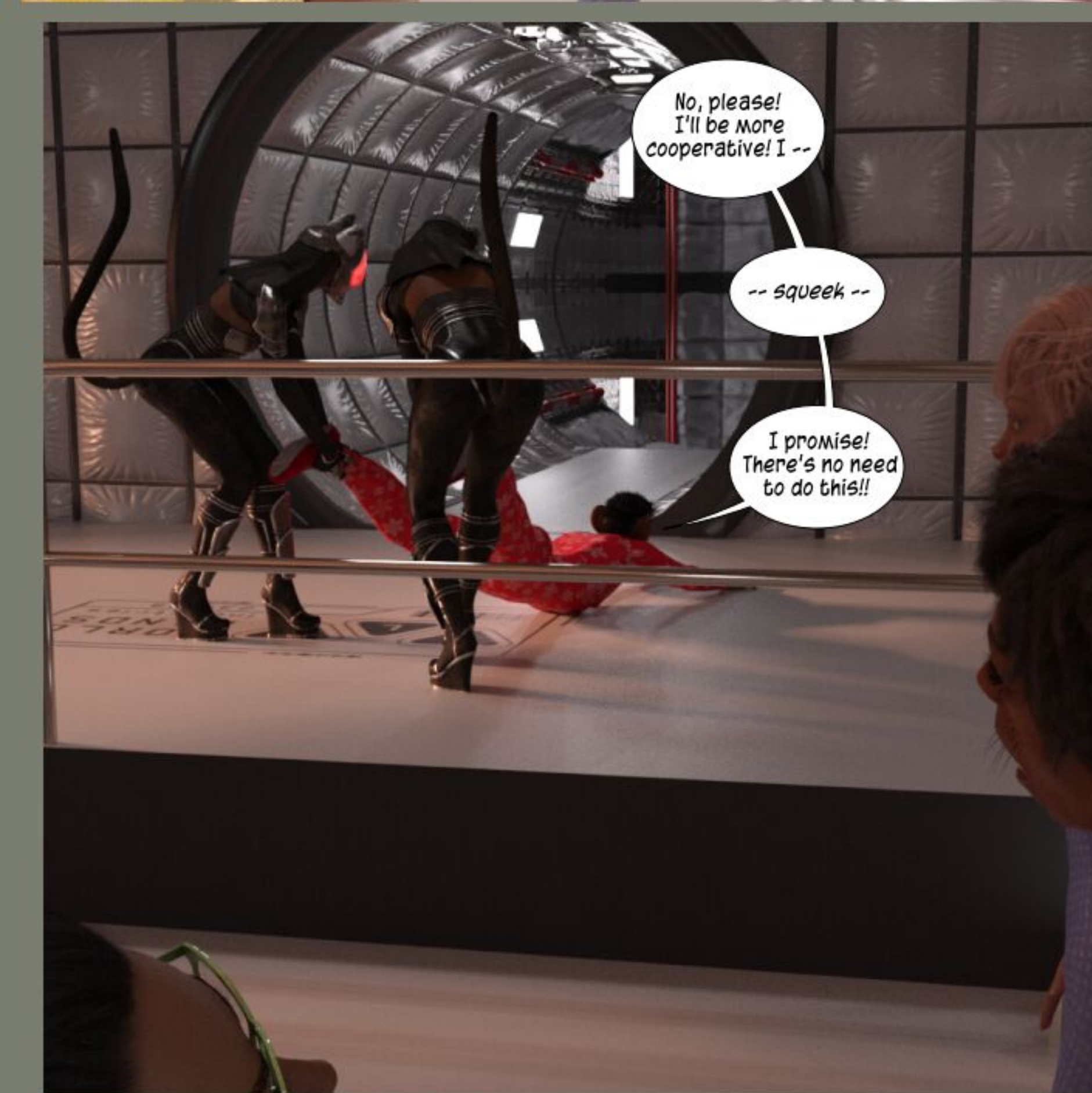
No! ... Yes! They're perfectly fine ears. But they're not supposed to be that size! They never were before! Just like our faces weren't this shape before, we didn't have whiskers before ...



I'm tired of you just taking everything that's happening here like it's normal! La-la-la, all's well, I think I'll get a haircut!

And I'm tired of you making up these stories about things changing that haven't! I think Dr. Donic is right -- you're going paranoid and you're just coming up with excuses for it!

Nooooo!!



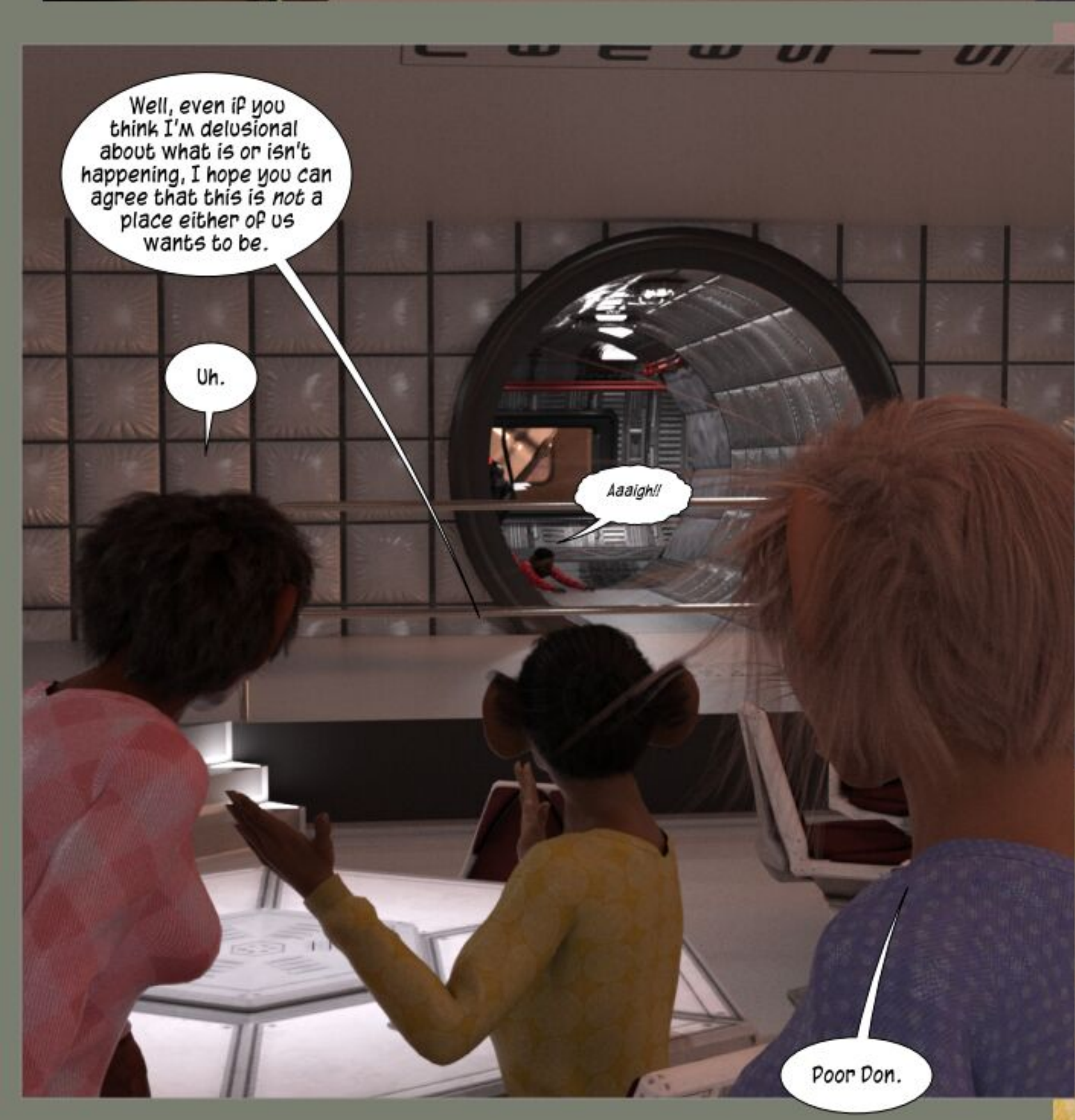
No, please! I'll be more cooperative! I --

-- squeek --

I promise! There's no need to do this!!



Don't just sit there and -- squeek -- watch! Help me! Don't let them put me in the red wing!!



Well, even if you think I'm delusional about what is or isn't happening, I hope you can agree that this is not a place either of us wants to be.

Uh.

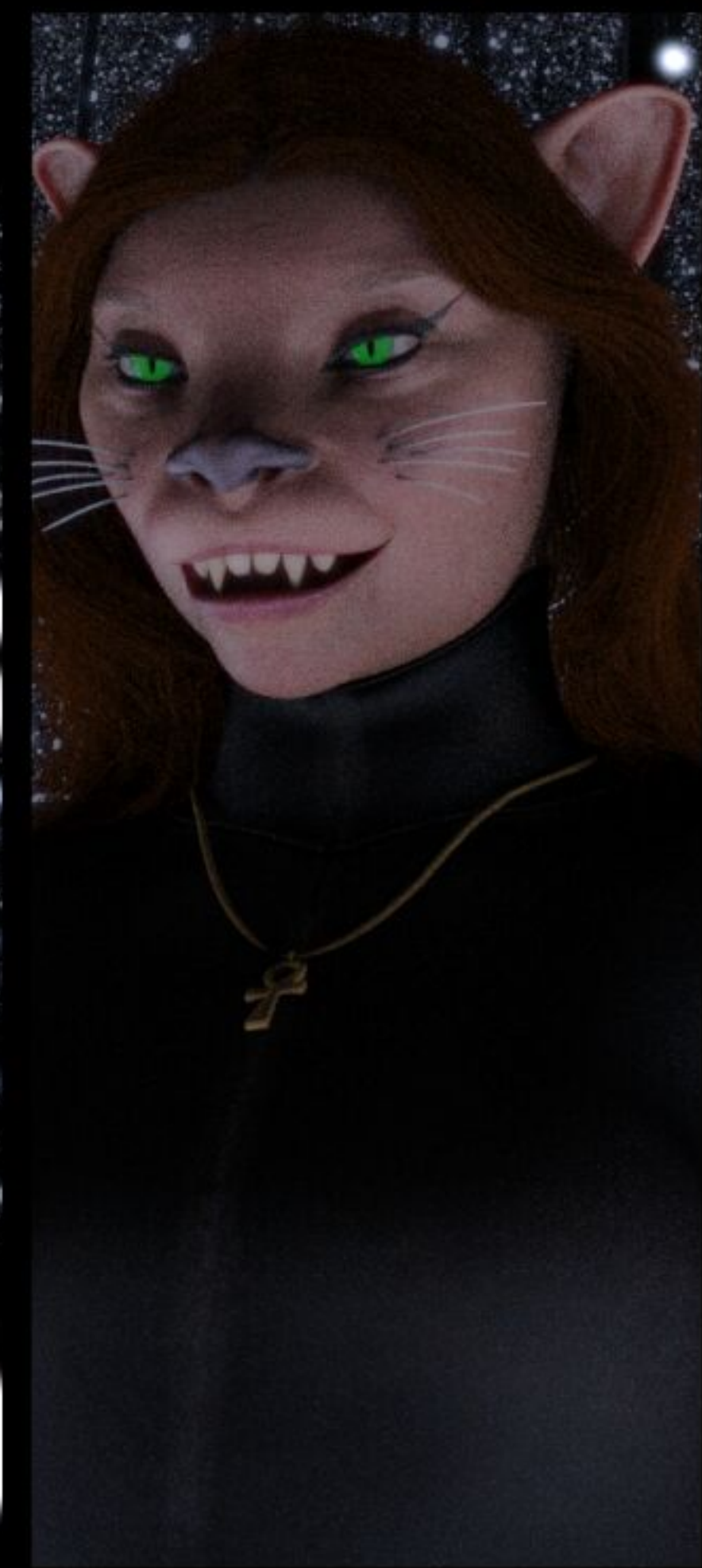
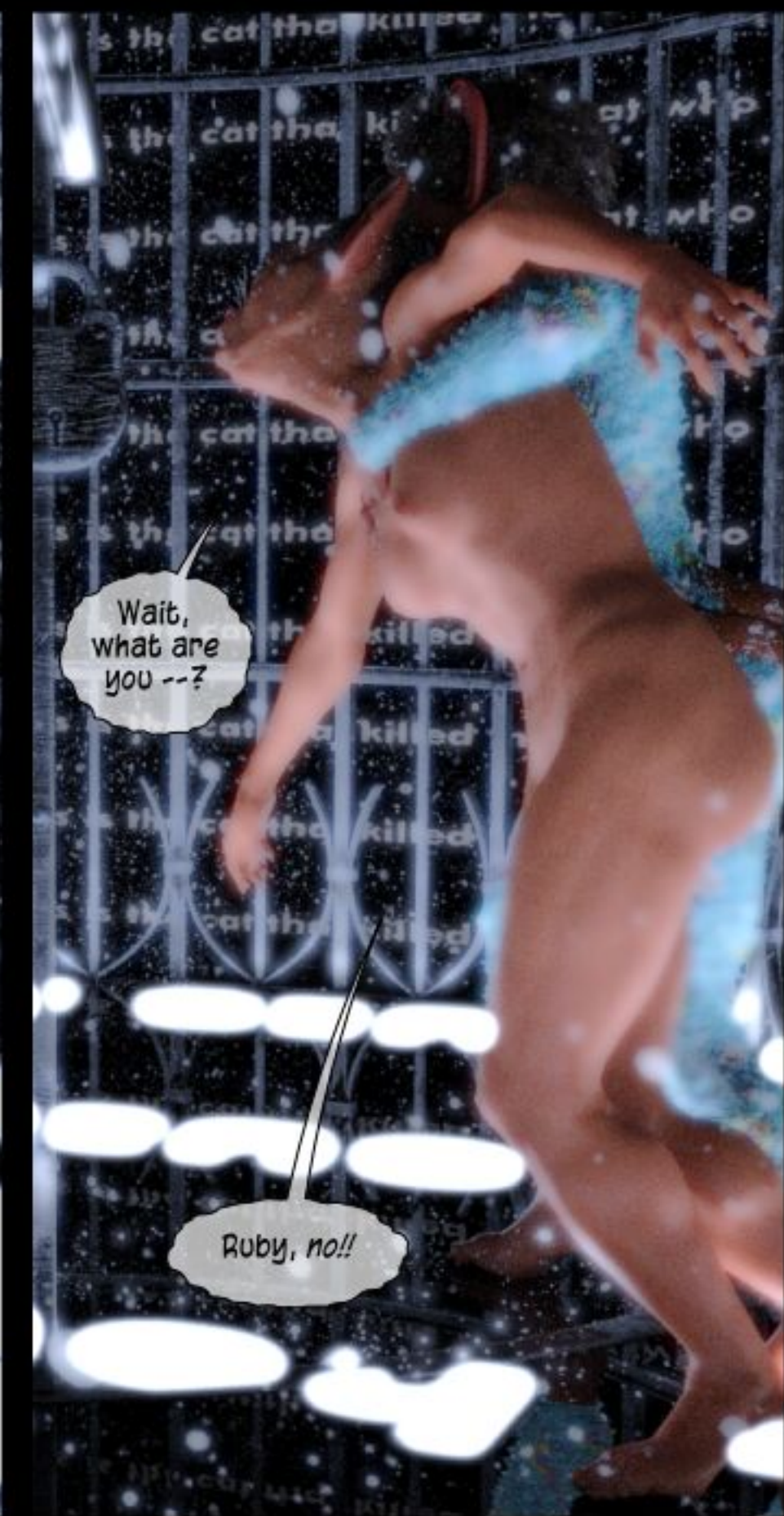
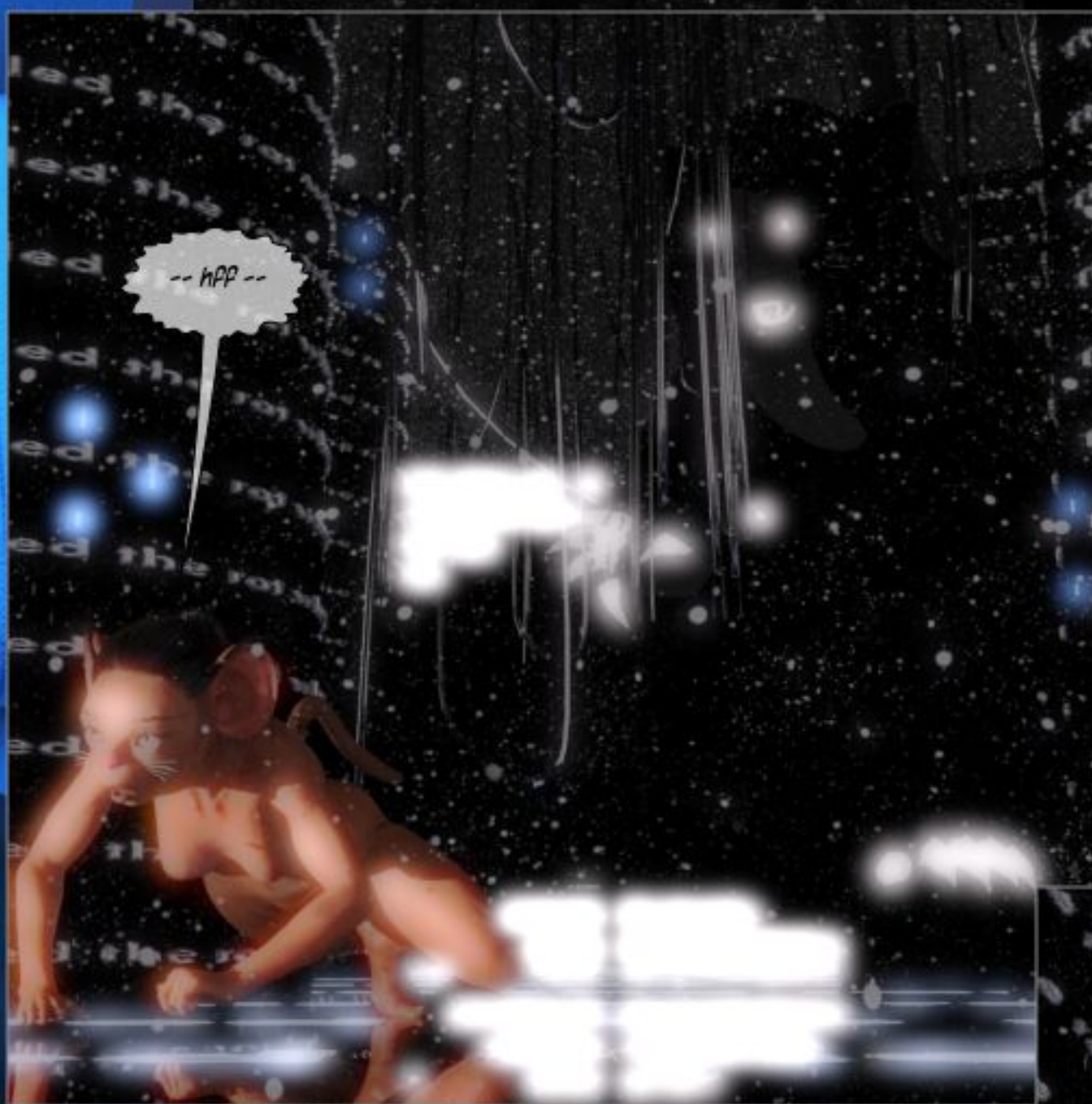
Aaaigh!!

Poor Don.



And you had better be careful. Talking the way you do ... you're lucky they haven't hauled you into the red wing already!

You want to keep going on about people changing or how horrible this place is, don't do it when I'm around, OK?





Run
run
run

It's Pun
to run



You're
cooperating with
them!!
Why are you
cooperating?

Yiiii!



If we don't
cooperate, we'll never
get better! It's therapy!
It's supposed to be --
we're supposed to
cooperate! They're
trying to help us!

But it isn't, Ruby!
It's not therapy, and she's
not trying to help us.



We're looped! We're stuck in
someone's scenario. There was no judgement,
no punishment -- it's all a lie! It's designed to
keep us running around and around in it until ...
until our minds give up. Or some other end
condition. I don't know what.

And you're usually the first one
to notice when you're in somebody's
scenario and break out of it, so I'm not
sure why you're falling for it this time ...
but I need you to see through it! Fast!
I can't break out by myself!

Zoe ... that's ...
I just don't ...



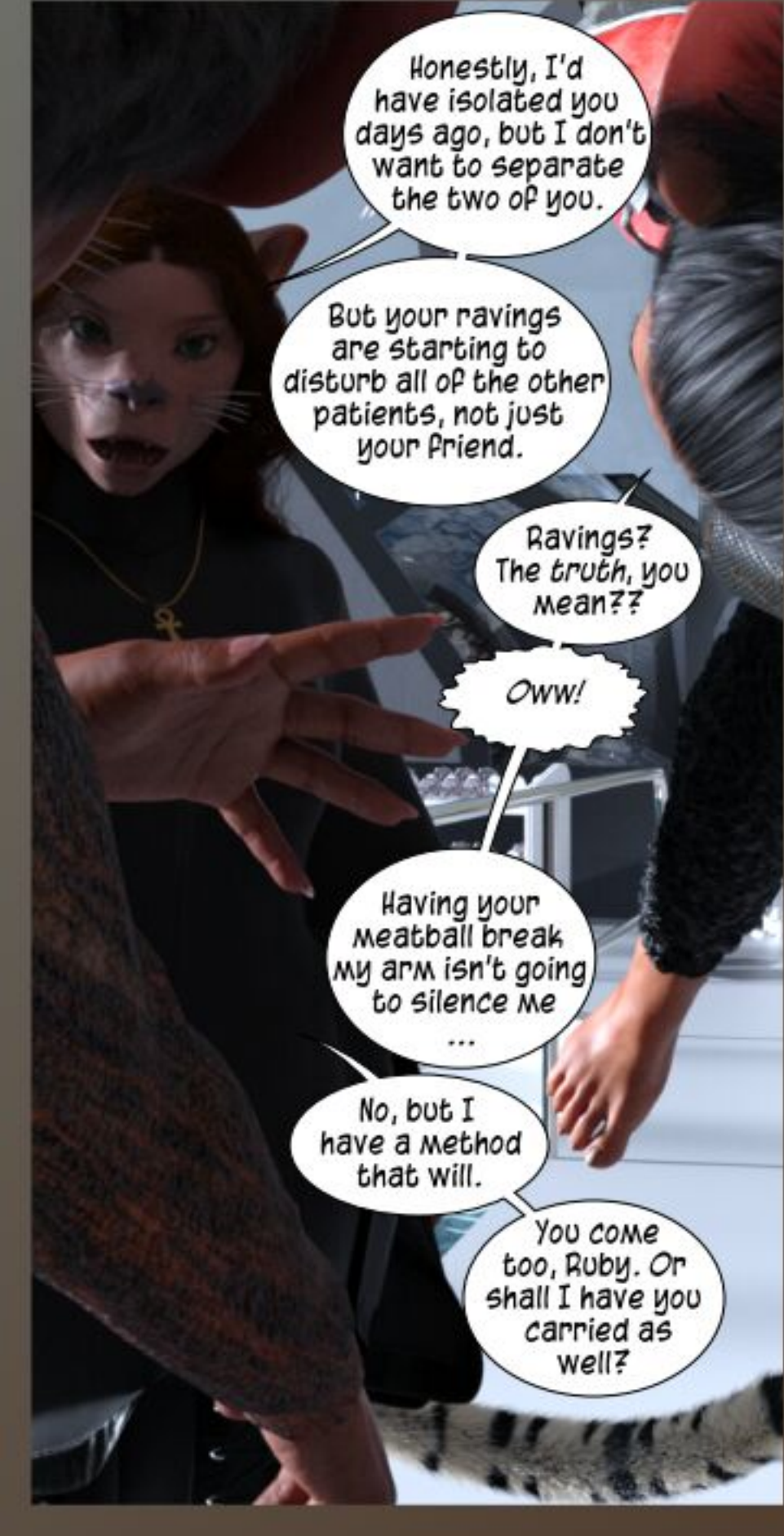
Hey!!

Put me down!

Bitch cat!
Tell your goon to
let me go!

Not likely.

I've had
enough of trying
to be reasonable
with you.



Honestly, I'd
have isolated you
days ago, but I don't
want to separate
the two of you.

But your ravings
are starting to
disturb all of the other
patients, not just
your friend.

Ravings?
The truth, you
mean??

Oww!

Having your
meatball break
my arm isn't going
to silence me ...

No, but I
have a method
that will.

You come
too, Ruby. Or
shall I have you
carried as
well?



I really hadn't
wanted to resort to this,
you know.

Let me go!

Let me go!!

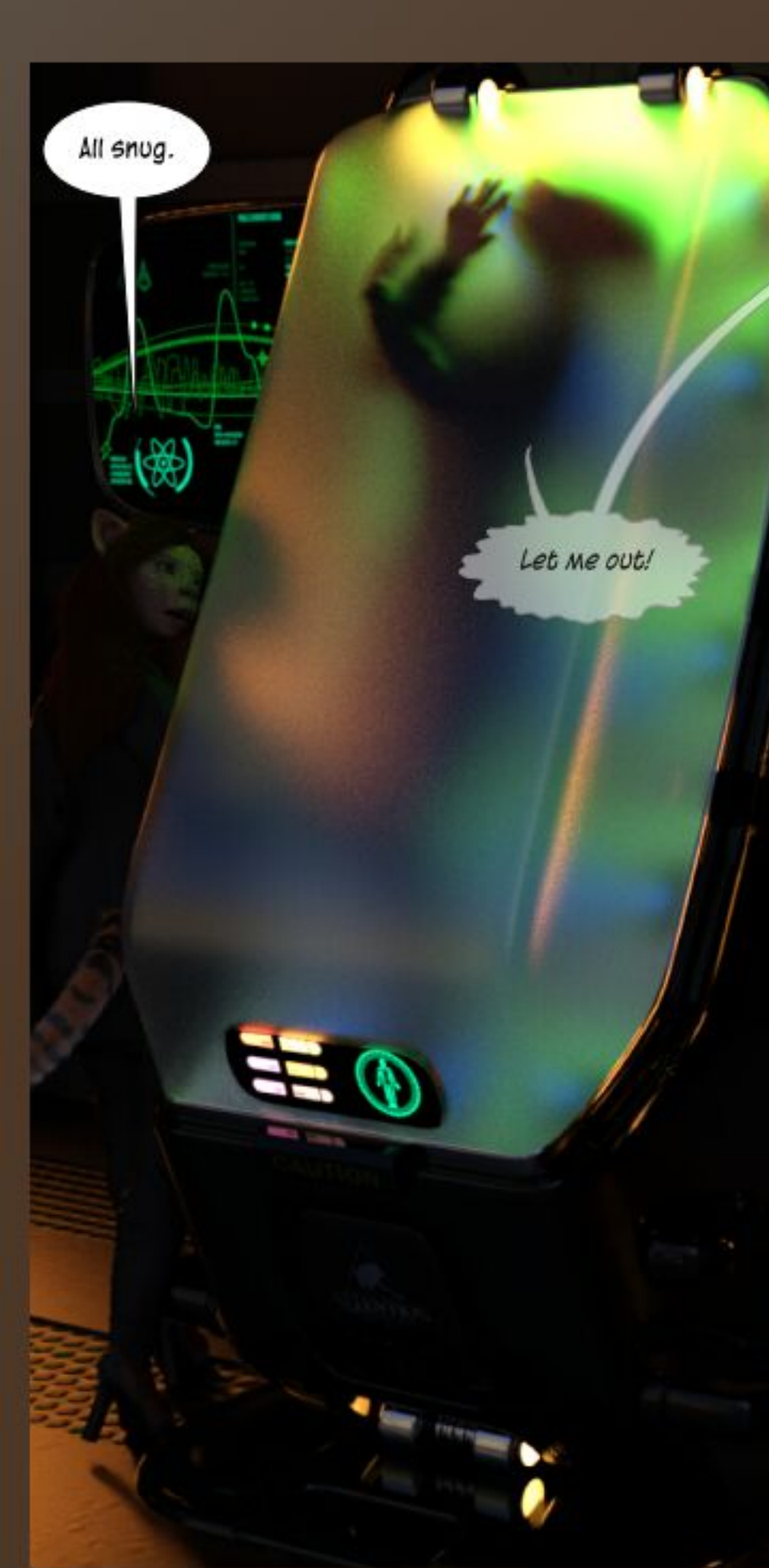


Keep her
still until I can
get the lid
closed.

No!

Noooo!

And keep
everybody's
fingers clear,
please.
Even hers.



All snug.

Let me out!



Let me oooooout!!!

Do you know what's
going to happen?
... I'm going to tell you
what's going to happen.

Let Meeeeeeeeeeekhhh

... ..

No!
Don't do that!

Too late.
Let's see how it
turned out.



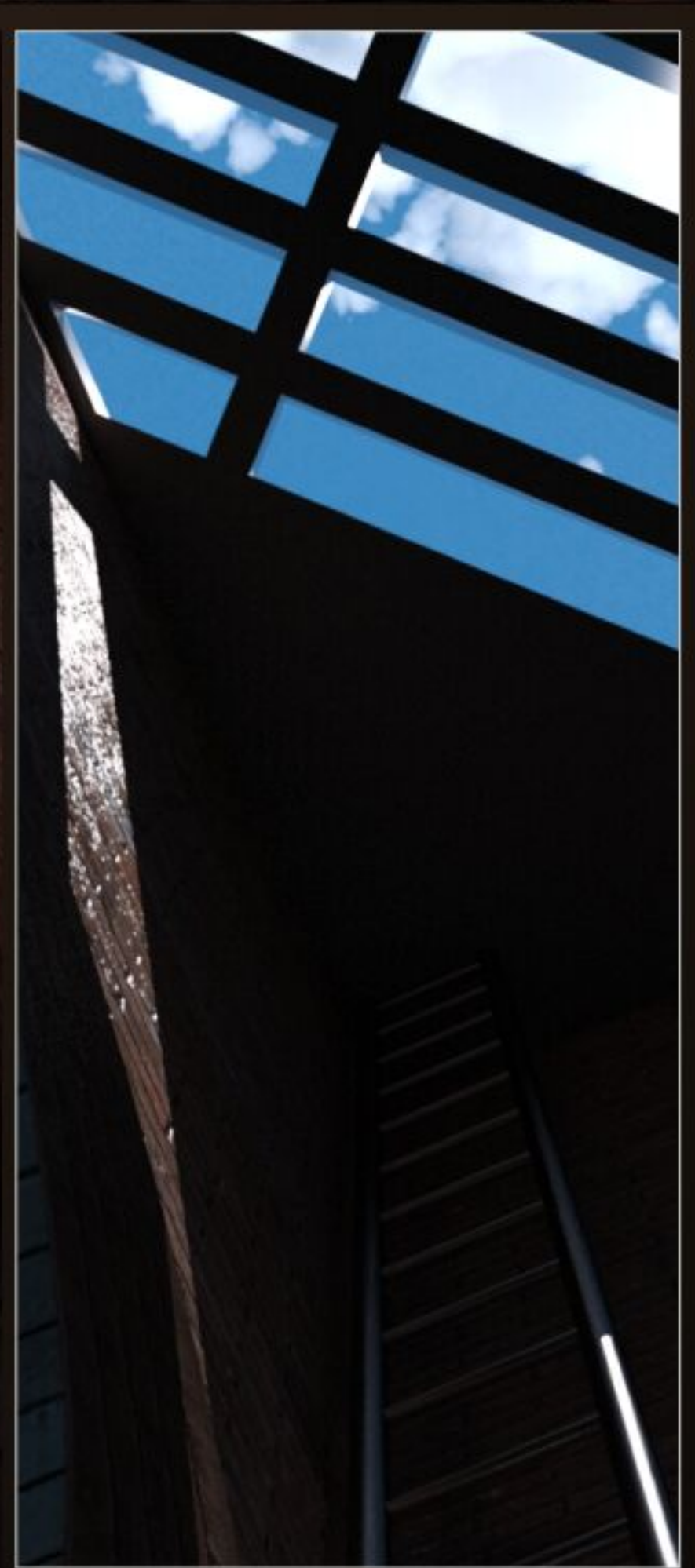
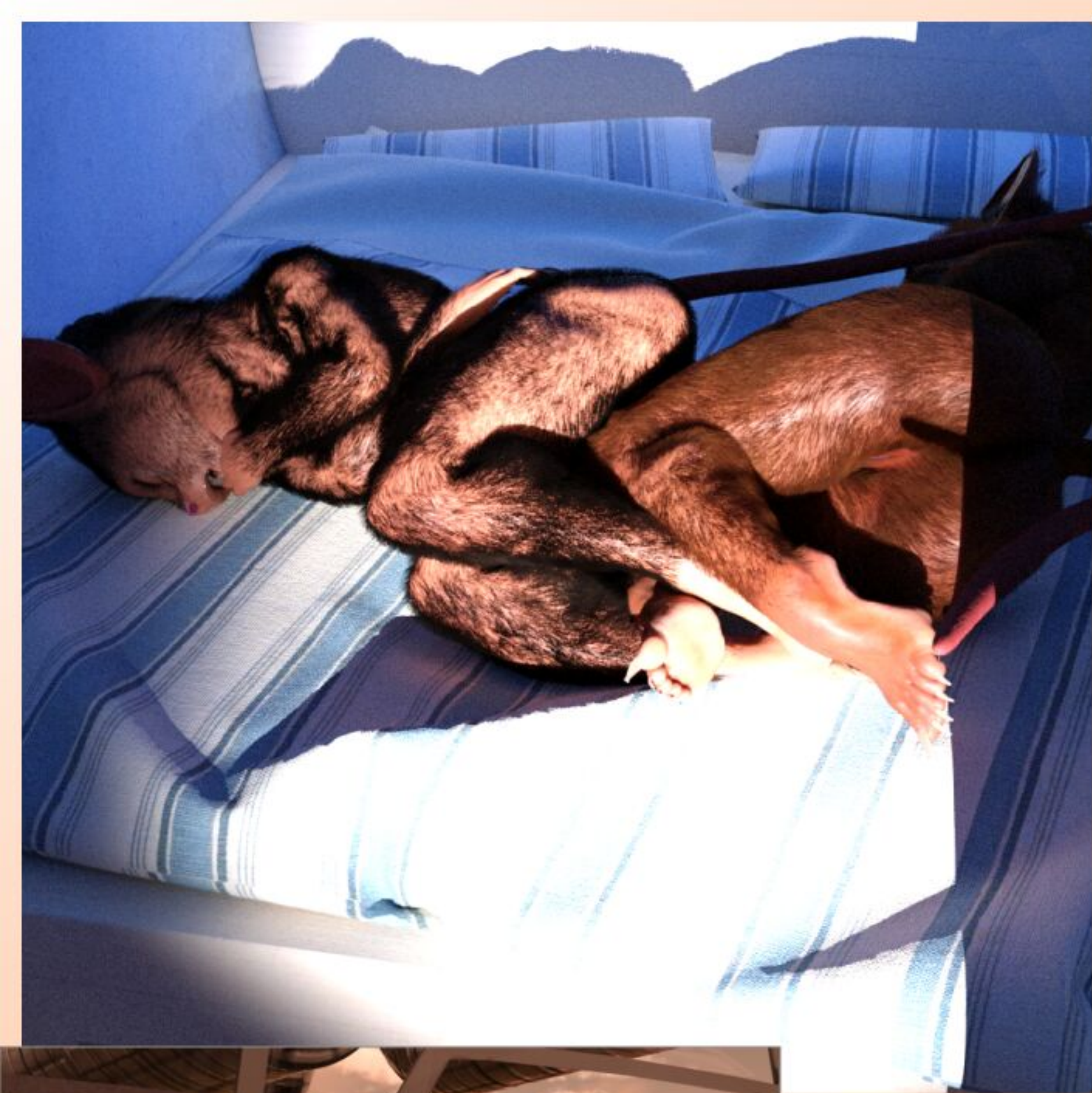
Skreeekhh!

Skreeek!
Kreee!

-- chitter --

Skweeeeeeeeeee!!

CAUTION





Hold on, I'll get you out of this ...

Shkree!

No! You can talk! I know you can talk! I'm messing with the rules and I say you can talk!!

I ... I ...

Oh, thank you! I can't tell you how horrible that was ...

Ruby, I'm sorry I ran. I didn't think I could convince you, not when I couldn't communicate ...



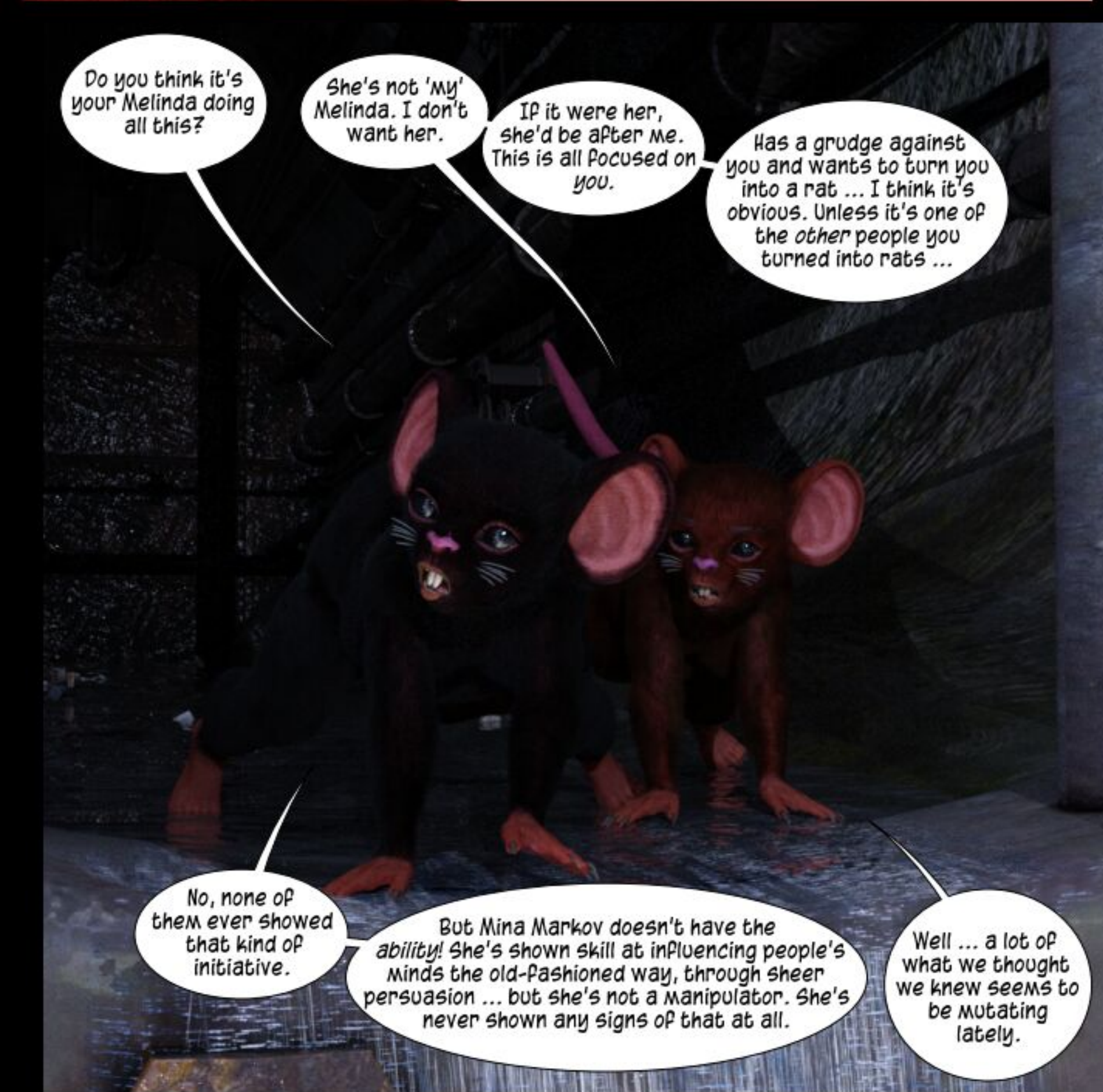
Is that what got you shut in here? You tried to escape?

Yes! And I think I found a way out. But the cats got to me first.

So I guess you've decided I was right about this all being a big show?

I always thought you were right. I just keep ... losing that.

She likes to make me forget things. She almost had me all the way ... I almost forgot I was a person. I think that's what she wants, for us both to forget we're people.



Do you think it's your Melinda doing all this?

She's not 'my' Melinda. I don't want her.

If it were her, she'd be after me. This is all focused on you.

Has a grudge against you and wants to turn you into a rat ... I think it's obvious. Unless it's one of the other people you turned into rats ...

No, none of them ever showed that kind of initiative.

But Mina Markov doesn't have the ability! She's shown skill at influencing people's minds the old-fashioned way, through sheer persuasion ... but she's not a manipulator. She's never shown any signs of that at all.

Well ... a lot of what we thought we knew seems to be mutating lately.



Aaagh!

EEEEEE!

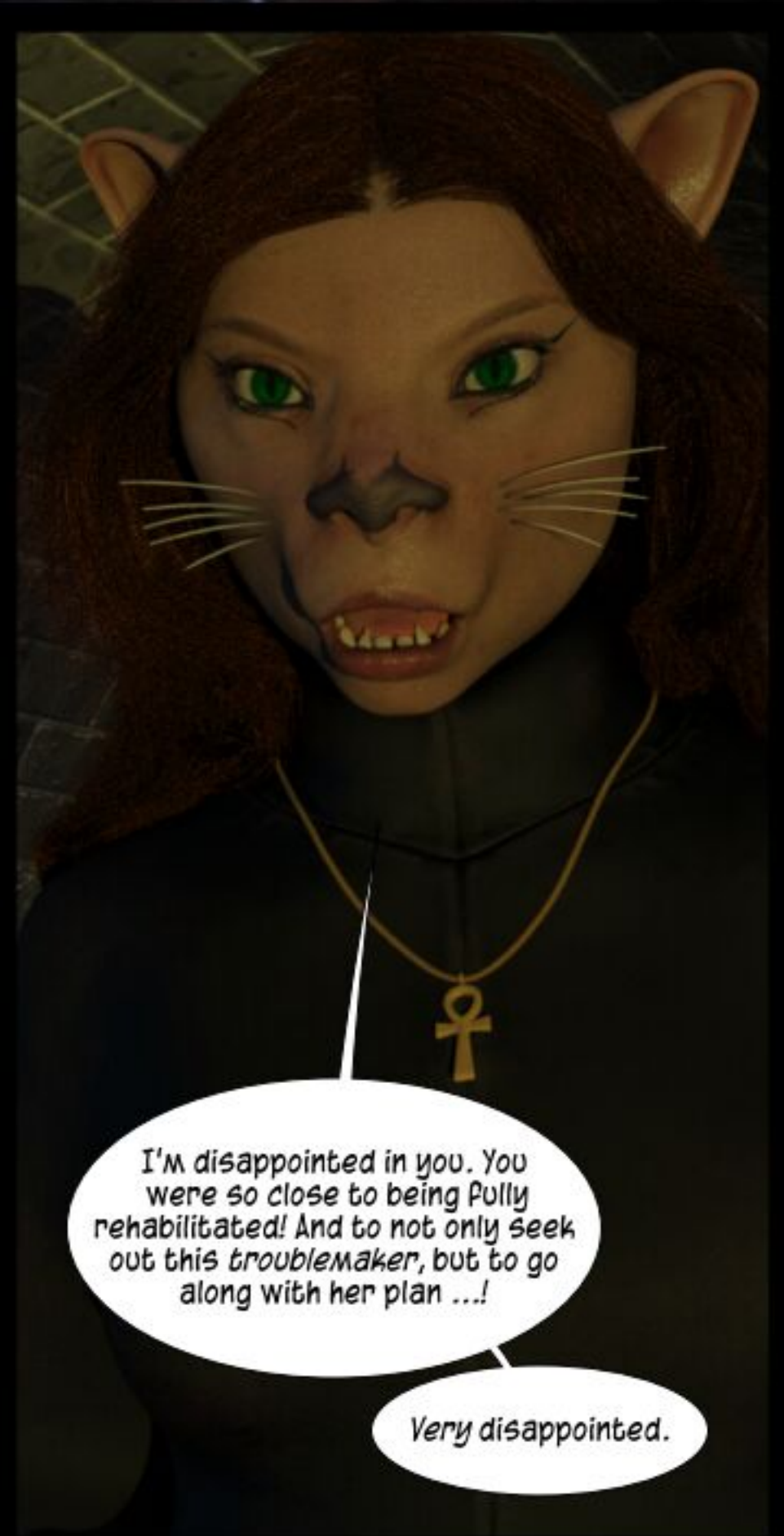


Break out of it, Ruby!

I can't!!

No, you can't, and you never will.

Just like you can't do anything here without my knowing about it.



I'm disappointed in you. You were so close to being Polly rehabilitated! And to not only seek out this troublemaker, but to go along with her plan ...!

Very disappointed.



I think the only course of action open to us now is a complete reset.

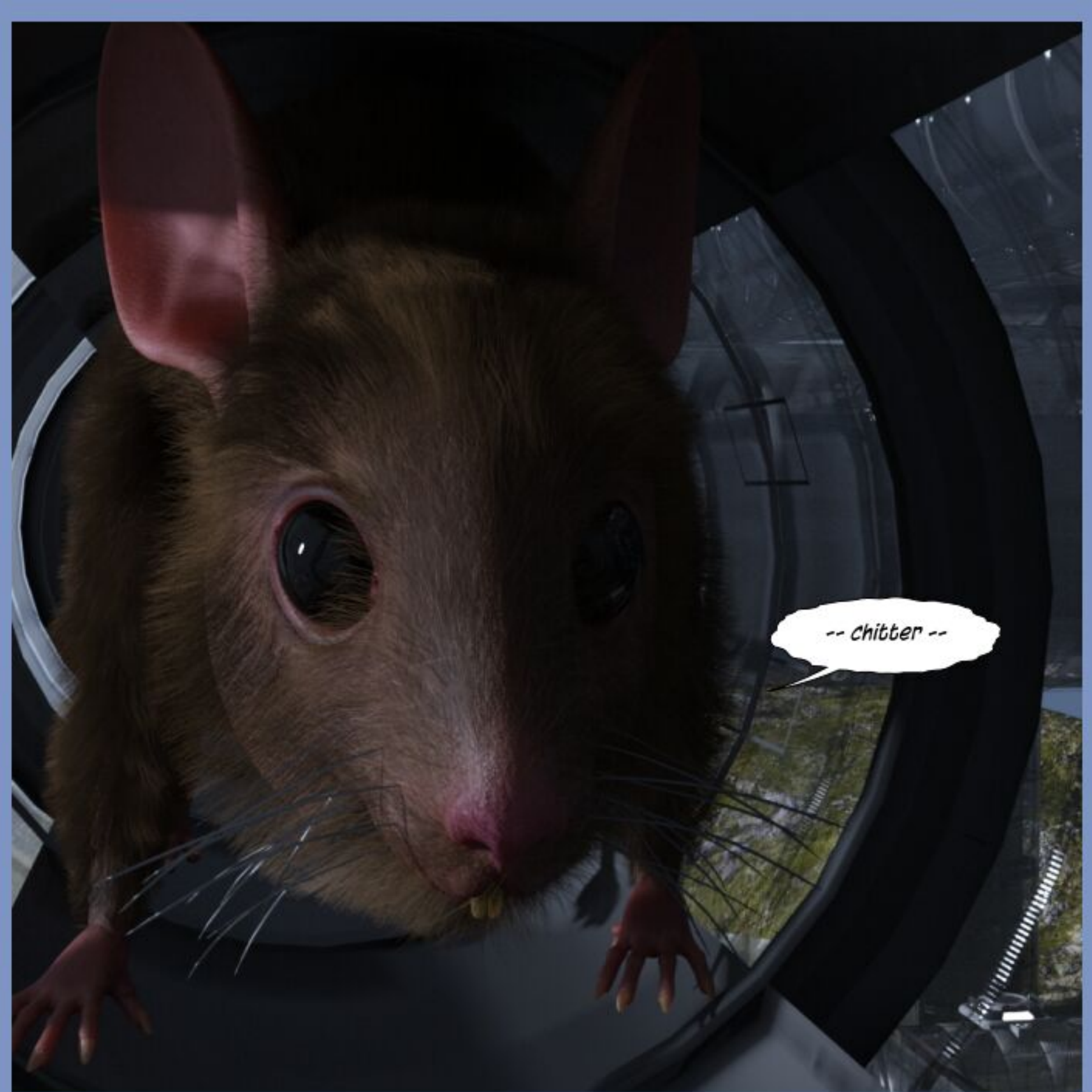
Definitely a drastic measure ... but remember, you brought this on yourself.

There will be some pain, I'm afraid.

You're a twisted bitch. You know that, right?



Skreeeeee!!



-- chitter --



-- Munch --

-- crunch --
-- crunch --



-- squeek --

-- squeek --



!!!



... ah, shit.



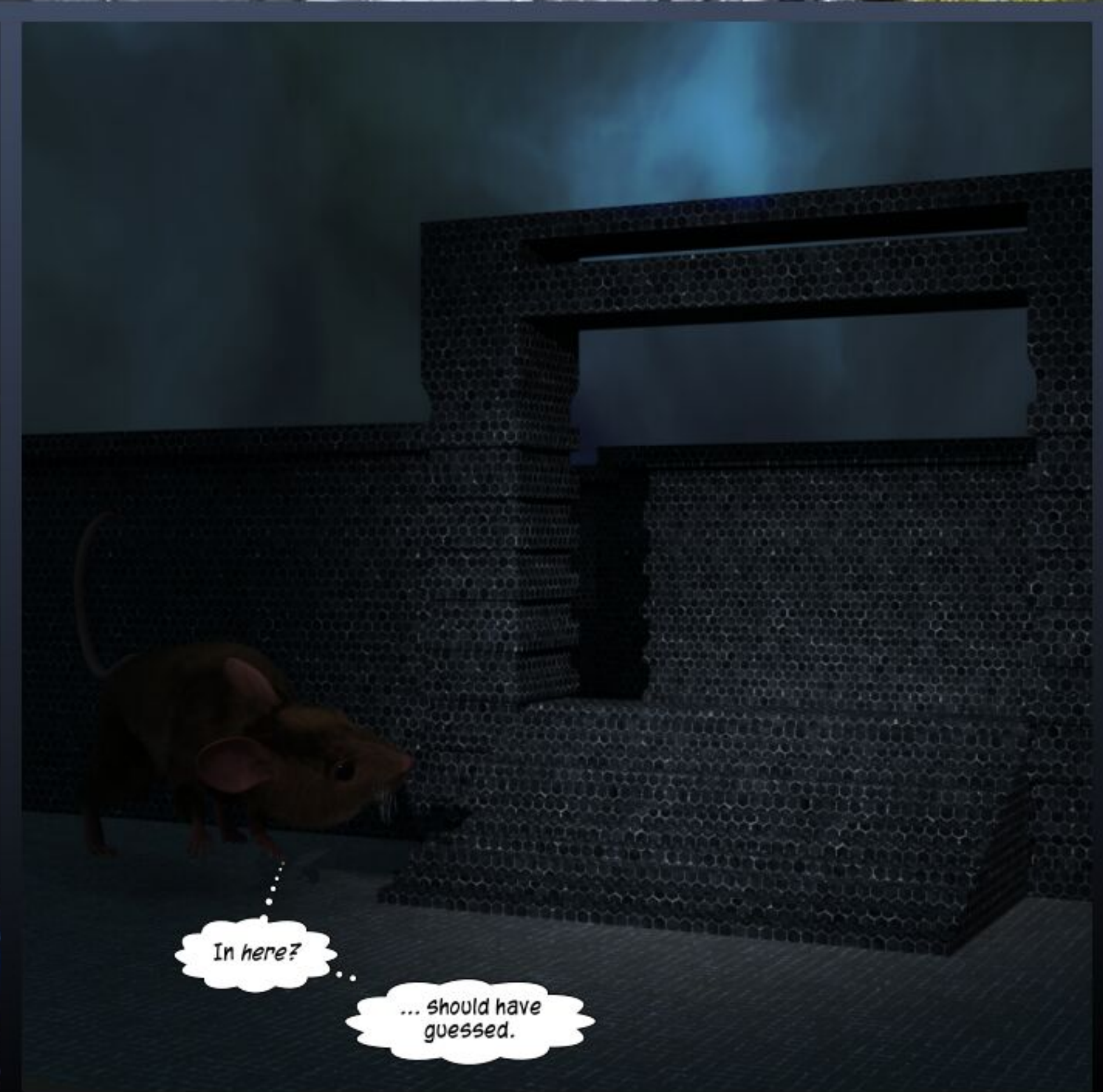
... running around in plastic tubes all day ... I'm gonna kill her.

But first I need to find Zoe ... none of those others were her ... and Donic could be hiding her anywhere ... I could be looking for days ...

-- sniff --
-- sniff --

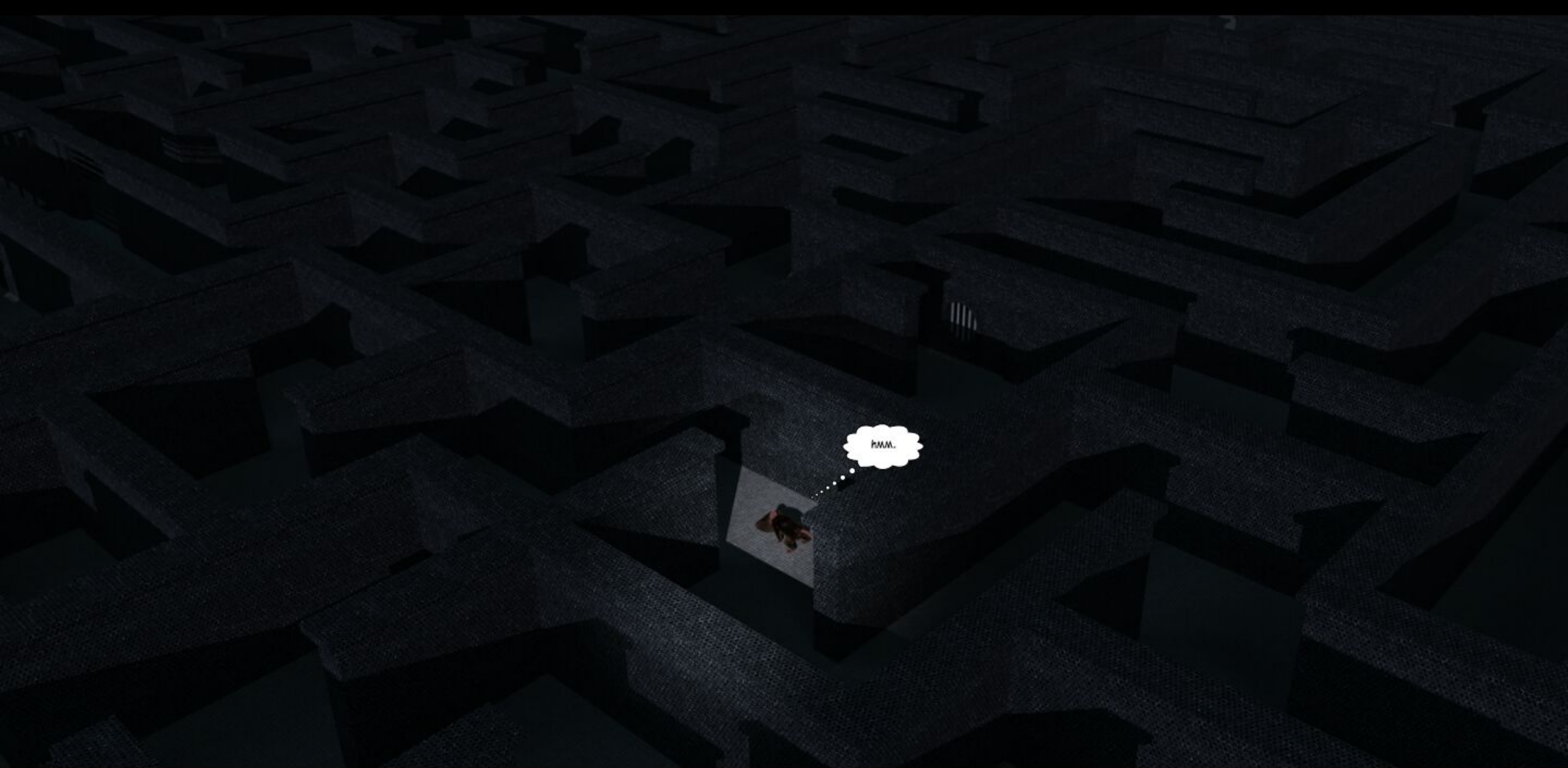
Huh!
Or I could just follow my nose. That is definitely her smell.

Guess there's something good to be said for this rodent thing after all.



In here?

... should have guessed.





I think we've got enough distance. Can you spare a second to tell me what's going on here?

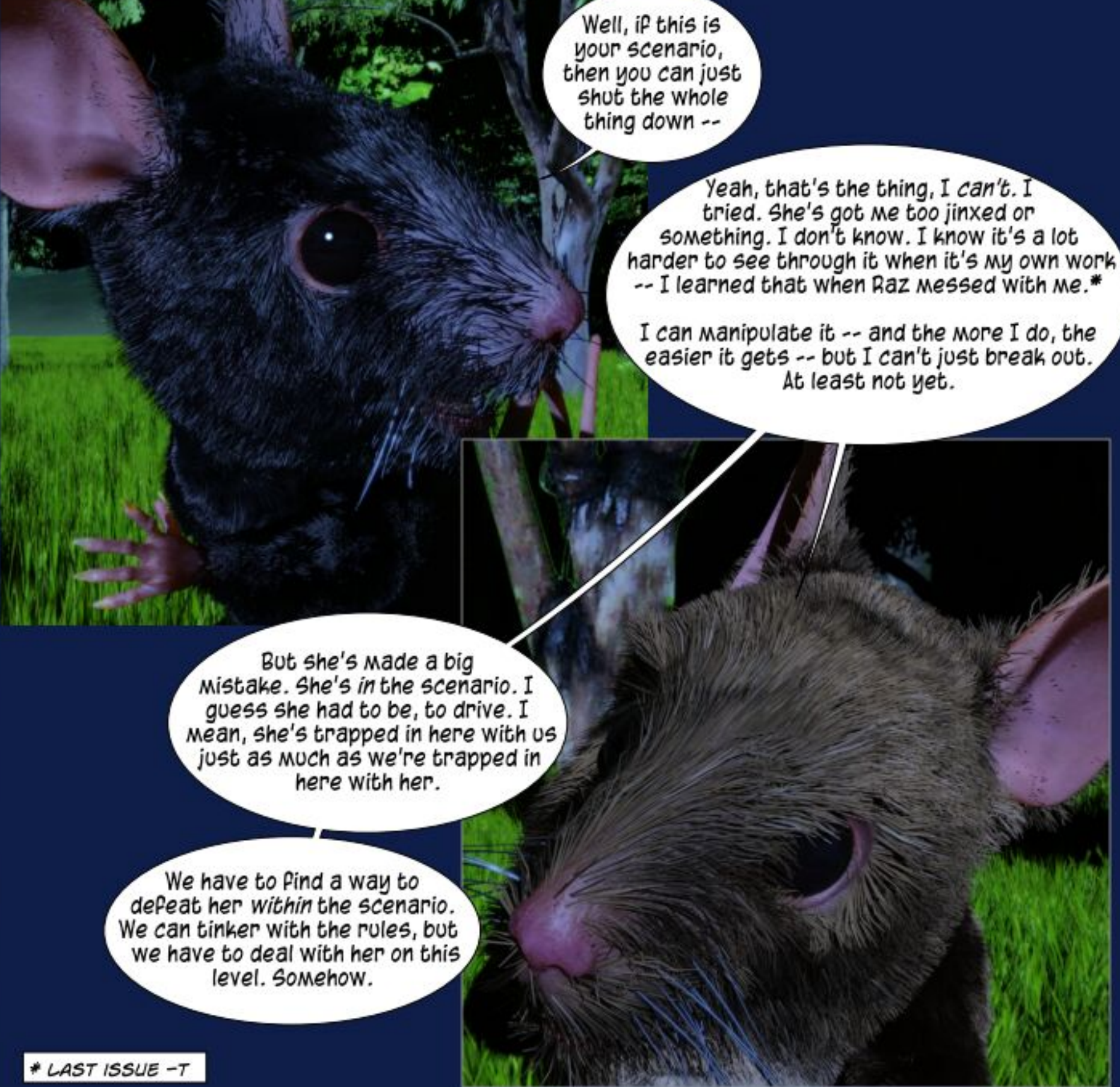
I figured out how Markov is doing this. She's not. Like you said, she can't manipulate a whole scenario like this. But she doesn't have to. She just has to manipulate me.

I'm making all this. She's gotten into my head and she's told me what to do, what she wants. And I've been cooperating with her without knowing it.

That's ... Are you sure?

I'm about ninety percent sure. It finally clicked when I realized: she's after you, so why does she make me watch what she's doing to you? Sadism? I mean, yes, probably, but she also needs me there ... what happens to you is because of instructions she's giving me.

When she took away your voice, it didn't happen until she whispered to me what was going to happen. She wasn't gloating; she was giving me instructions. She put the idea in my head and then it happened.



Well, if this is your scenario, then you can just shut the whole thing down --

Yeah, that's the thing, I can't. I tried. She's got me too jinxed or something. I don't know. I know it's a lot harder to see through it when it's my own work -- I learned that when Raz messed with me. *

I can manipulate it -- and the more I do, the easier it gets -- but I can't just break out. At least not yet.

But she's made a big mistake. She's in the scenario. I guess she had to be, to drive. I mean, she's trapped in here with us just as much as we're trapped in here with her.

We have to find a way to defeat her within the scenario. We can tinker with the rules, but we have to deal with her on this level. Somehow.

* LAST ISSUE - T



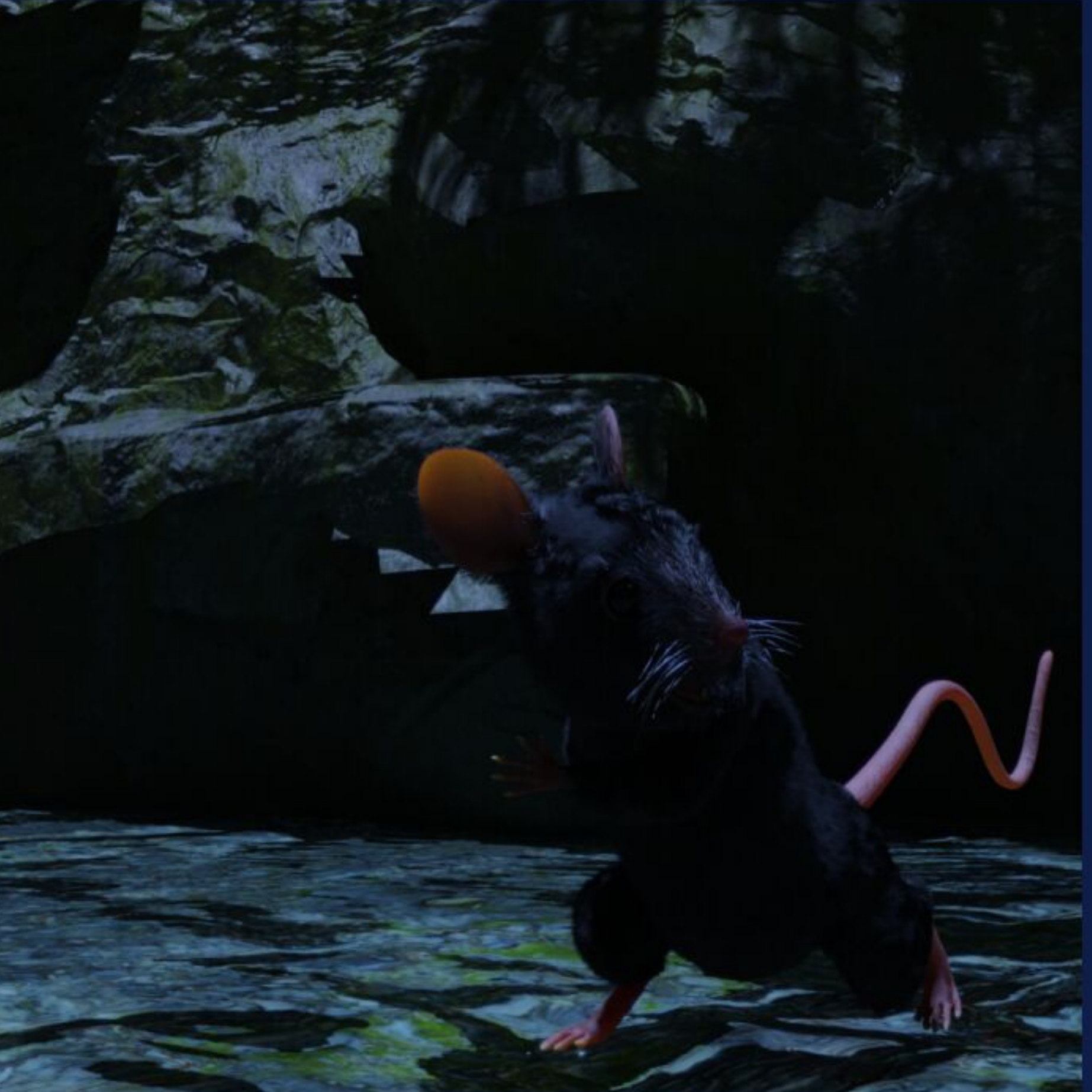
There they are!

Aagh!

Move!



Eeeee!



oop!



Ah ... you know ...

She's got you trapped in here like everybody else.

You shouldn't ... uh, that is, you don't need to do everything she tells you to do ...

You didn't ask for this, did you? I don't imagine you did.



Zoë? Did you come down into this gully?



Oh. Hi.

Don't guess you'd be willing to talk about this ...



I'm tempted to tell her to back off.

Given how completely you've ruined everything, I think I may want to take you apart myself.

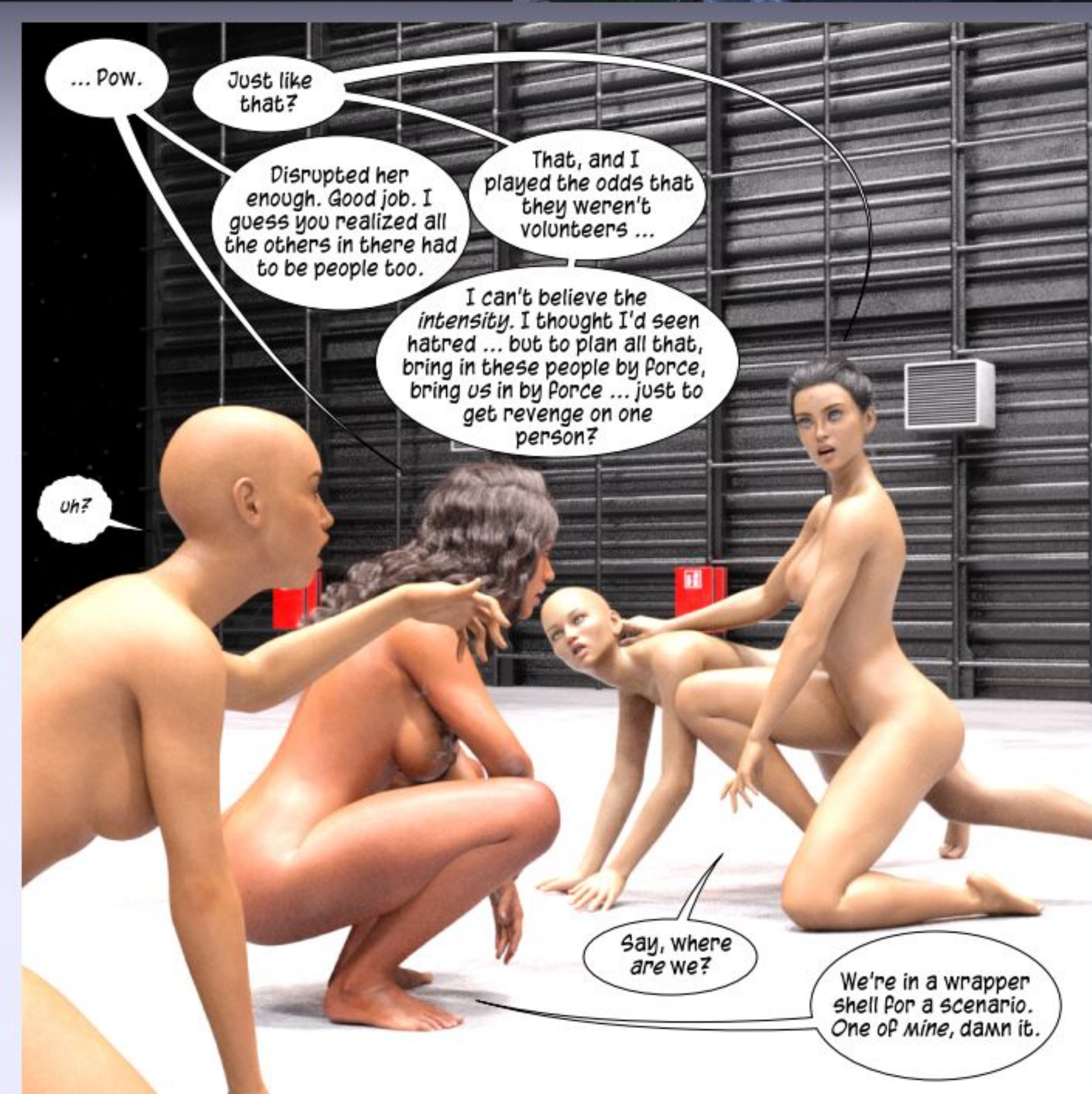
With my bare claws.

Do you have any idea how hard --



KYAAAAAA!

AAAAEEEEEEEEEEK!



... Pow.

Just like that?

Disrupted her enough. Good job. I guess you realized all the others in there had to be people too.

That, and I played the odds that they weren't volunteers ...

I can't believe the intensity. I thought I'd seen hatred ... but to plan all that, bring in these people by force, bring us in by force ... just to get revenge on one person?

uh?

Say, where are we?

We're in a wrapper shell for a scenario. One of mine, damn it.

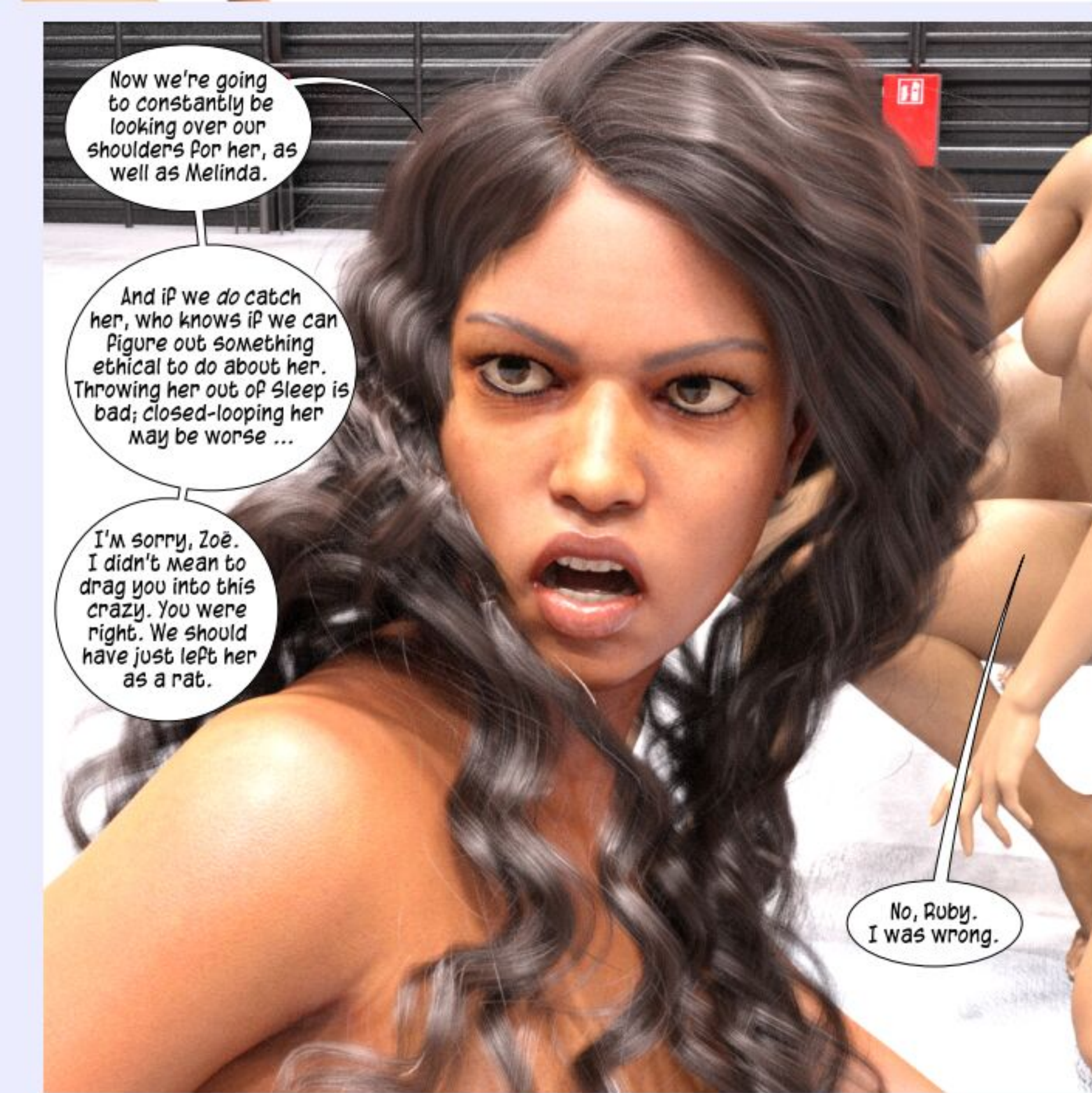


The two by us are clearly the cats ... and I see five other 'patients,' which is about right ...

But I don't see anyone who looks like Markov. Or like Donic, for that matter.

She must have recovered in a hurry and recalled.

Shit!

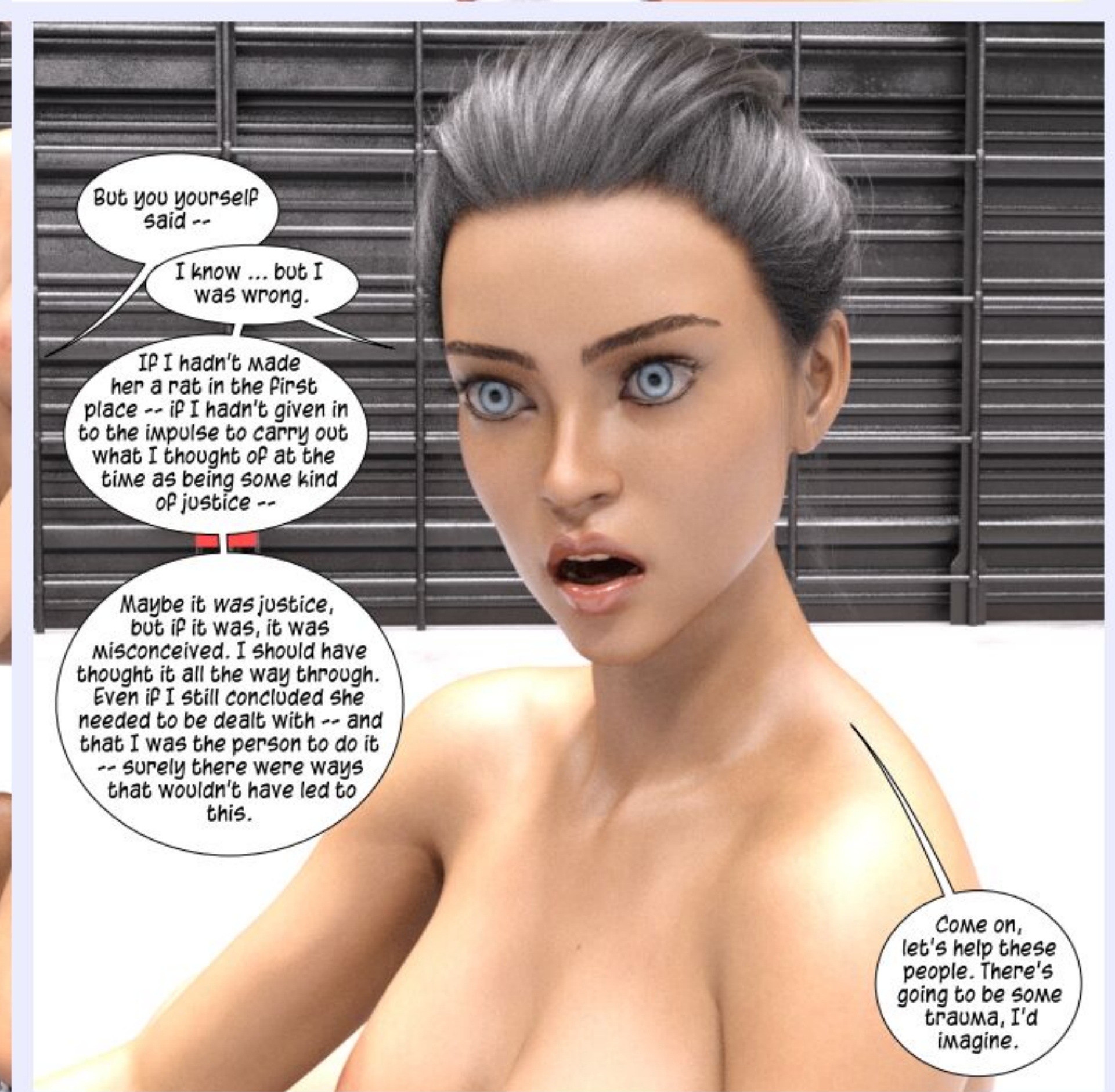


Now we're going to constantly be looking over our shoulders for her, as well as Melinda.

And if we do catch her, who knows if we can figure out something ethical to do about her. Throwing her out of sleep is bad; closed-looping her may be worse ...

I'm sorry, Zoë. I didn't mean to drag you into this crazy. You were right. We should have just left her as a rat.

No, Ruby. I was wrong.



But you yourself said --

I know ... but I was wrong.

If I hadn't made her a rat in the first place -- if I hadn't given in to the impulse to carry out what I thought of at the time as being some kind of justice --

Maybe it was justice, but if it was, it was misconceived. I should have thought it all the way through. Even if I still concluded she needed to be dealt with -- and that I was the person to do it -- surely there were ways that wouldn't have led to this.

Come on, let's help these people. There's going to be some trauma, I'd imagine.

THREE DAYS LATER.

Everything all explained to everybody? Did we miss anything while we were 'away' I should know about?

I'm starting work on Forbes. I think, for her, I'm definitely going to have to use an isolating loop during the treatment. Quarantine. I want to be certain before I let her anywhere near the normal data space. We can't have another discontinuity --

Hmm. What's wrong?

Mina Markov is dead.

Leyna did a little looking for her, to see if we could figure out where she was hiding ... and then it occurred to her that it couldn't hurt to check with the medical section.

We didn't see her when we came out of the scenario because manifestation stops when the person actually dies.

It, ah ... well, CLO thinks that when the cat leaped on her, it must have literally scared her to death. Sudden heart failure. The bed couldn't catch it in time.

I'm sorry.

I--

You know I never wanted that, right? I swear to you I never wanted that. I just wanted to punish her. I didn't want her to --



NEXT: COPING WITH CHAOTIC COMPLEXITY