

**SLEEPER SQUAD**

RETURNING READERS: YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS. NOT ALL OF THEM WILL BE ANSWERED TODAY. PATIENCE!  
NEW READERS: YOU'VE COME AT A GREAT TIME! ALL THE RETURNING READERS WILL BE JUST AS CONFUSED AS YOU ARE.



Teel!  
--hPP--  
Slow up, skel!

Got' haul for the jump, Jex!  
Flag it!



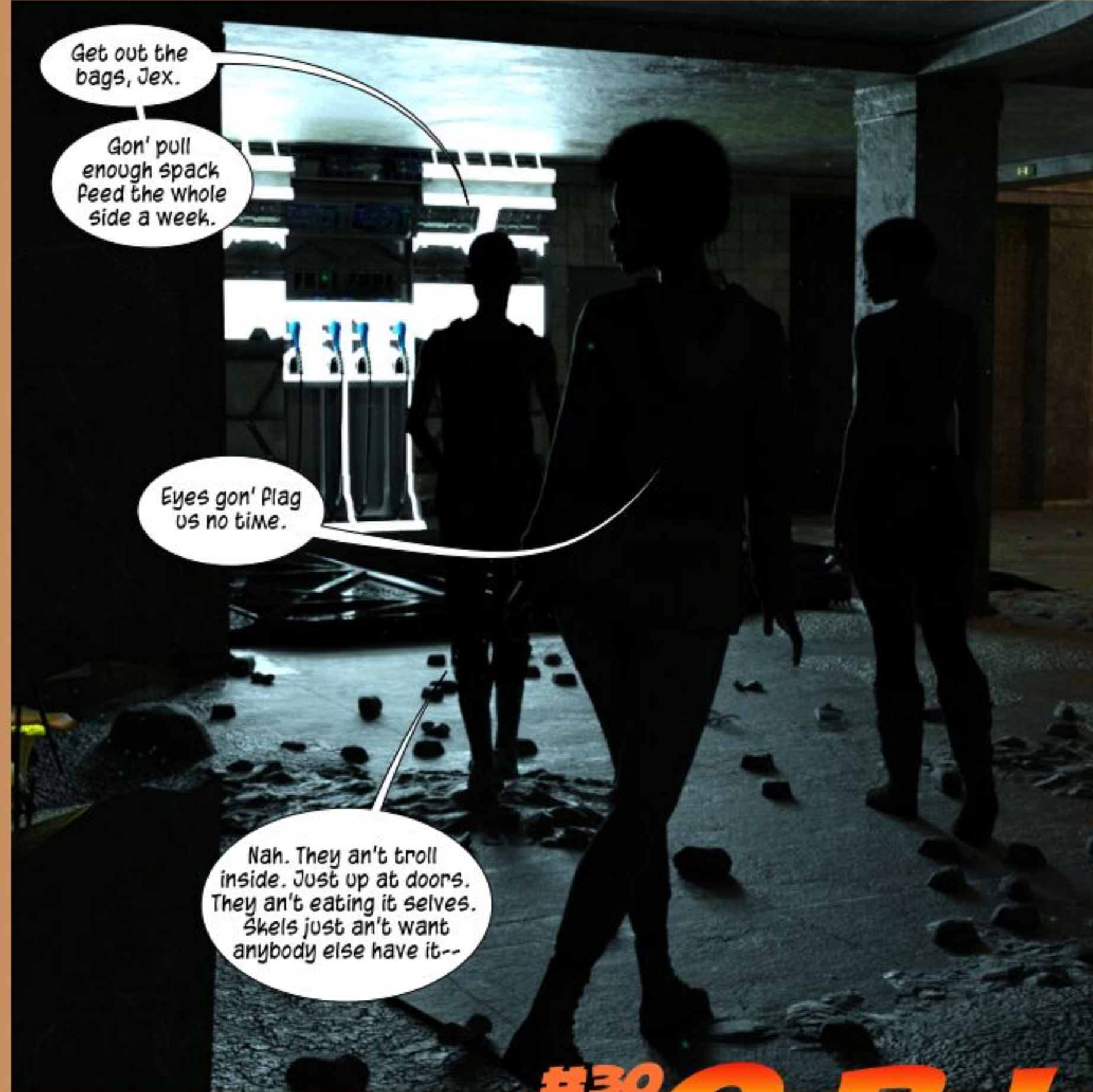
Hooooeee!!

Yaaaaii!

Big jump. Not style, cho.

IP I'd said, you wan't done it.

That's why Eyes han't care they got a hole in back. Jump's only way at it.



Get out the bags, Jex.  
Gon' pull enough spack Peed the whole side a week.

Eyes gon' flag us no time.

Nah. They an't troll inside. Just up at doors. They an't eating it selves. Skels just an't want anybody else have it--



Oyo!

You ePPn scrapers just made a big Mistake!

Shit!  
Haul!



AAAUH!

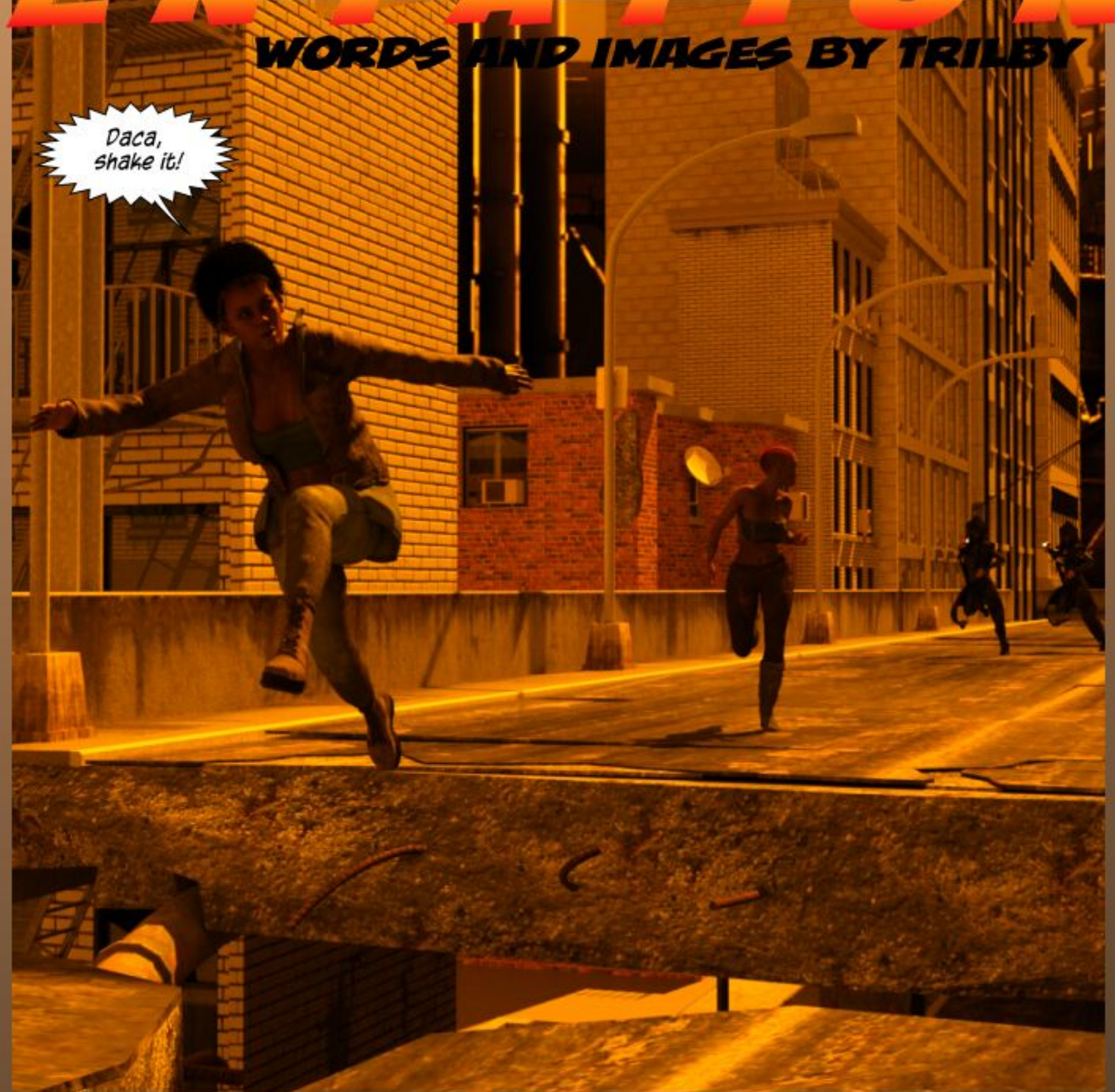
Teel!

**#30 ORIENTATION**  
WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



Jex, they shot--! I think Teel's--

Haul, Daca!  
Shit!



Daca, shake it!



DACA!

EEEEEEEE!!



Daca, no ...

Shit!

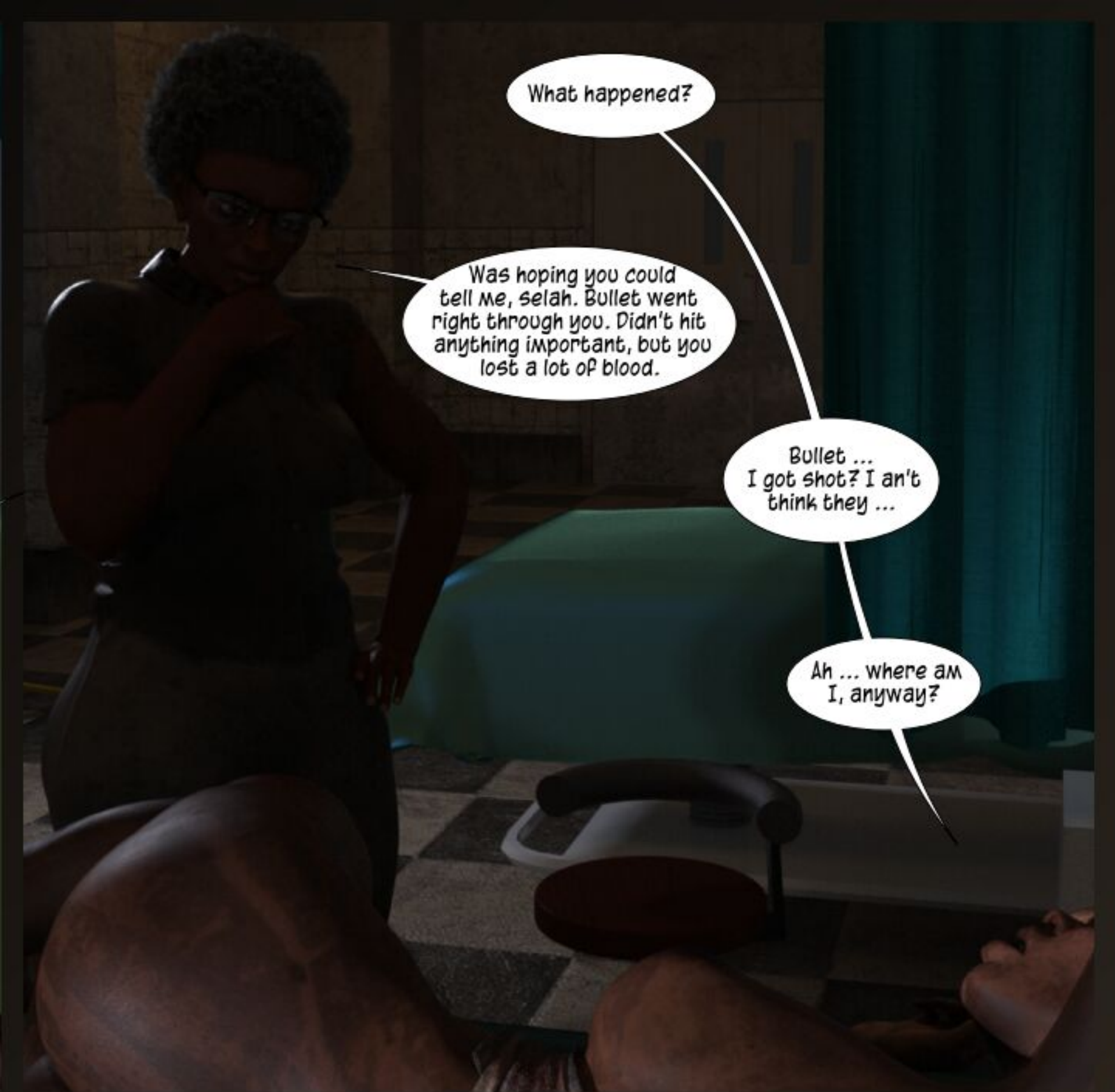
gotta haul  
gotta haul  
... Daca ...  
ePPn Eyes ... shooting Polk now  
... Shit!

why'm I ...  
what's going ...  
Peel like ...

uugh



Coming around?  
Good.



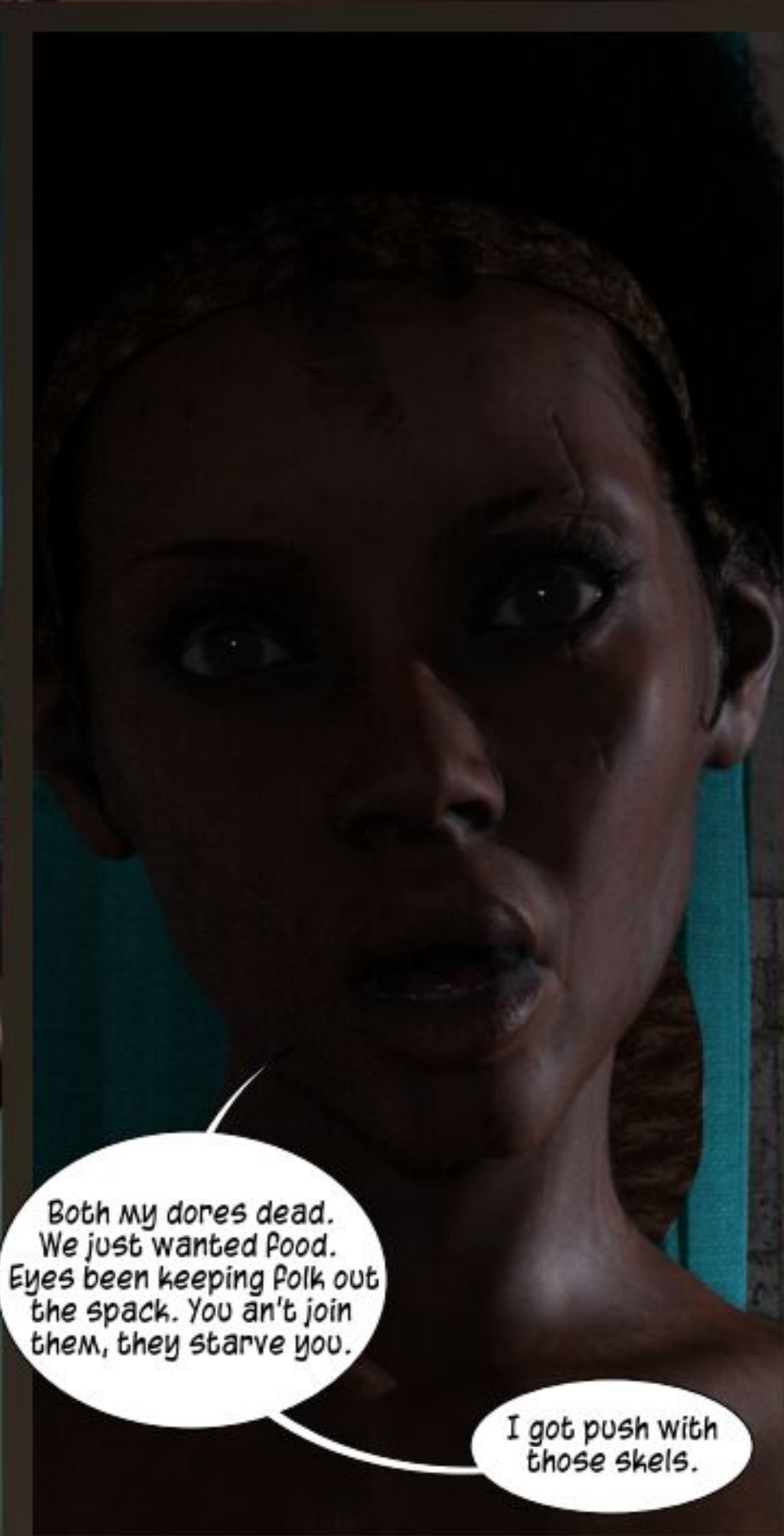
What happened?  
Was hoping you could tell me, salah. Bullet went right through you. Didn't hit anything important, but you lost a lot of blood.  
Bullet ... I got shot? I an't think they ...  
Ah ... where am I, anyway?



Safe.  
Only Polks with guns on the street are Wide-Eyes. Surprised me when some of our Polks brought you in. Han't heard they were using them. Something new to worry about, I imagine.  
So let's us have some faith in each other, and you tell me what happened.



You an't --  
--Uugh--  
Go slow, now. I patched you up, but you'll feel it a while.  
No Wide-Eyes here. Some that used to be.  
What I heard, there were always two kinds of Wide-Eyes. Few years ago the bad ones got worse, and the good ones left and started up this place.  
So you an't holding me? I can go?  
'Course you can go, child. ... You in a hurry?



Both my doers dead. We just wanted Polk out. Eyes been keeping Polk out the spack. You an't join them, they starve you.  
I got push with those skels.



... Got your clothes over here. You want a shower?  
I tell the street Eyes right up shooting Polk, I'll get help.  
You got push, can't disagree ... but you can't fight the Wide-Eyes. Not by yourself. And most Polks here can't show on the street. Wide-Eyes were none too happy they left.  
I imagine you will. And I imagine the Wide-Eyes know that. They'll be looking for you. They'll want to shut you down.  
What you going to fight with, child? Sticks?  
Stay here. Keep low. For a while, at least.



An't gon'--  
What's your name, anyhow?  
Just call me Miz Annie. Everybody does. What about you?  
Jex.  
Miz Annie, I han't got the juice. Stay here, do what? Hide and grind. Go back street, scrape and grind.  
Folk dying all the time ... crushed in a pull, slit by synth-heads, go hungry, got the wrack, now maybe get shot ... can't no more.  
Least if I go after Eyes, better than walking into the river. Might do something.  
You feel that way, why not go sleep? Get out completely.



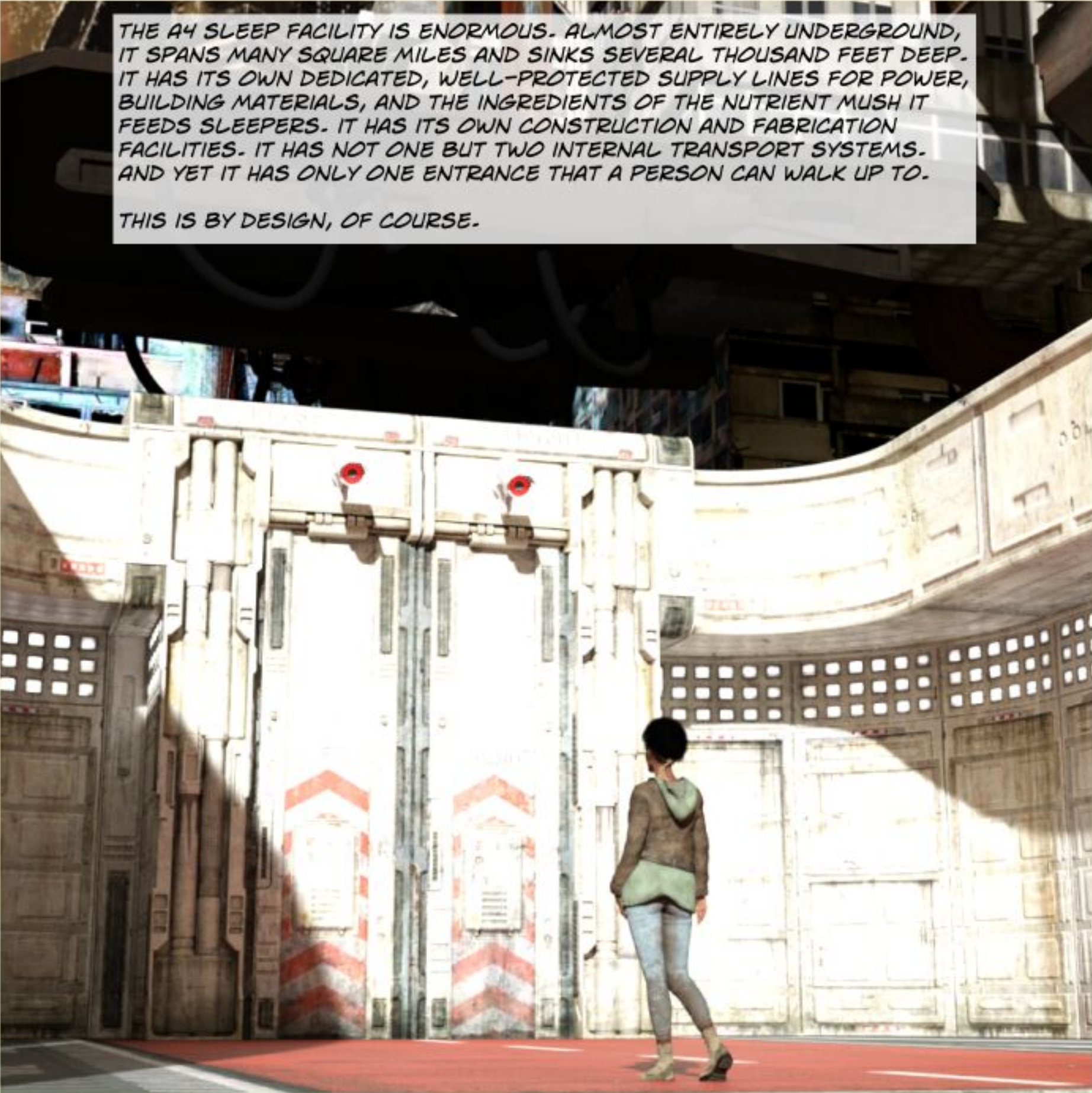
Han't got the sub.  
No sub. They did away with the bed Pees. Long about the time the bad Wide-Eyes got worse. Could be what set them opp.  
Not surprised you han't known. Wide-Eyes won't say, they an't want anyone going to sleep, and we Polk here can't get out street to tell.



You an't yankin' me? Crux?  
Don't know why I'd tell you lies.  
They'll let you in. If that's what you want, you should go ahead and do it.  
You want a shower first?

THE A4 SLEEP FACILITY IS ENORMOUS. ALMOST ENTIRELY UNDERGROUND, IT SPANS MANY SQUARE MILES AND SINKS SEVERAL THOUSAND FEET DEEP. IT HAS ITS OWN DEDICATED, WELL-PROTECTED SUPPLY LINES FOR POWER, BUILDING MATERIALS, AND THE INGREDIENTS OF THE NUTRIMENT MUSH IT FEEDS SLEEPERS. IT HAS ITS OWN CONSTRUCTION AND FABRICATION FACILITIES. IT HAS NOT ONE BUT TWO INTERNAL TRANSPORT SYSTEMS. AND YET IT HAS ONLY ONE ENTRANCE THAT A PERSON CAN WALK UP TO.

THIS IS BY DESIGN, OF COURSE.



PLEASE STATE YOUR BUSINESS. YOU ARE BEING MONITORED.

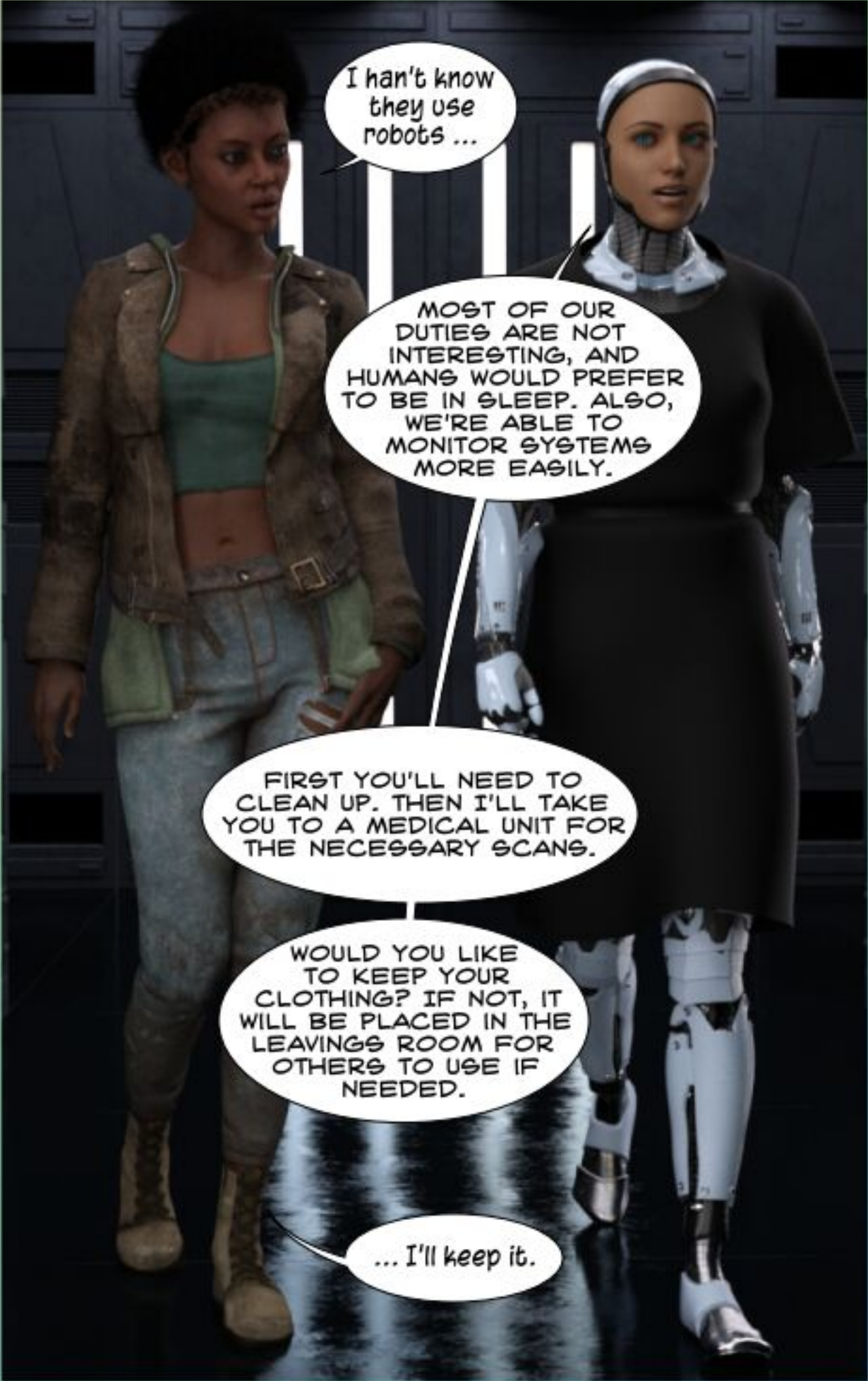
I want in.

YOU WISH TO BE ADMITTED TO SLEEP?

An't that what I said?

ORDNANCE AND EXPLOSIVE SCANS ARE CLEAN.

PLEASE WAIT. SOMEONE WILL ARRIVE TO ASSIST YOU SHORTLY.



I han't know they use robots ...

MOST OF OUR DUTIES ARE NOT INTERESTING, AND HUMANS WOULD PREFER TO BE IN SLEEP. ALSO, WE'RE ABLE TO MONITOR SYSTEMS MORE EASILY.

FIRST YOU'LL NEED TO CLEAN UP. THEN I'LL TAKE YOU TO A MEDICAL UNIT FOR THE NECESSARY SCANS.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KEEP YOUR CLOTHING? IF NOT, IT WILL BE PLACED IN THE LEAVING ROOM FOR OTHERS TO USE IF NEEDED.

... I'll keep it.



REMOVE EVERYTHING AND PLACE IT IN THIS LOCKER. IF YOU CAN'T REMEMBER THE LOCKER NUMBER, YOU'LL FIND IT IN YOUR PERSONAL DATA.

THEN BEGIN YOUR SHOWER. I'LL JOIN YOU IN A MOMENT.

Join me? I an't need help ...

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT I MAKE SURE YOU'VE CLEANED PROPERLY. ALSO, I WILL NEED TO APPLY THE DEPLICATORY.



You han't said you'd take my hair!

I TOLD YOU I WAS APPLYING A DEPLICATORY.

I an't know what that meant!

I'M SORRY. HAIR INTERFERES WITH THE EQUIPMENT IN THE BEDS AND IS HARD TO KEEP CLEAN.

YOU'LL BE GIVEN A CESSATION OF HAIR GROWTH. IF YOU LEAVE SLEEP FOR AN EXTENDED TIME, WE CAN TURN IT BACK ON AGAIN.

WOULD YOU LIKE TEMPORARY CLOTHING TO WEAR TO THE MEDICAL AREA?

Just gon' strip me again we get there?

Nah.

YES.



THERE. WE HAVE A BASELINE, AND I'VE REPAIRED THAT WOUND. NO OTHER ISSUES TO FIX, UNLESS YOU WISH TO REMOVE YOUR FACIAL SCAR. BUT YOU'LL BE ABLE TO REMOVE THAT IN SLEEP MORE EASILY, IF YOU CARE TO.

Got all the good shit here, huh?

I NEED YOUR FULL NAME TO ATTACH TO YOUR DATA, PLEASE.

Jex ... Ah ... Jessamine Haley.

THANK YOU.

WE'RE READY TO PROCEED TO YOUR BED NOW.

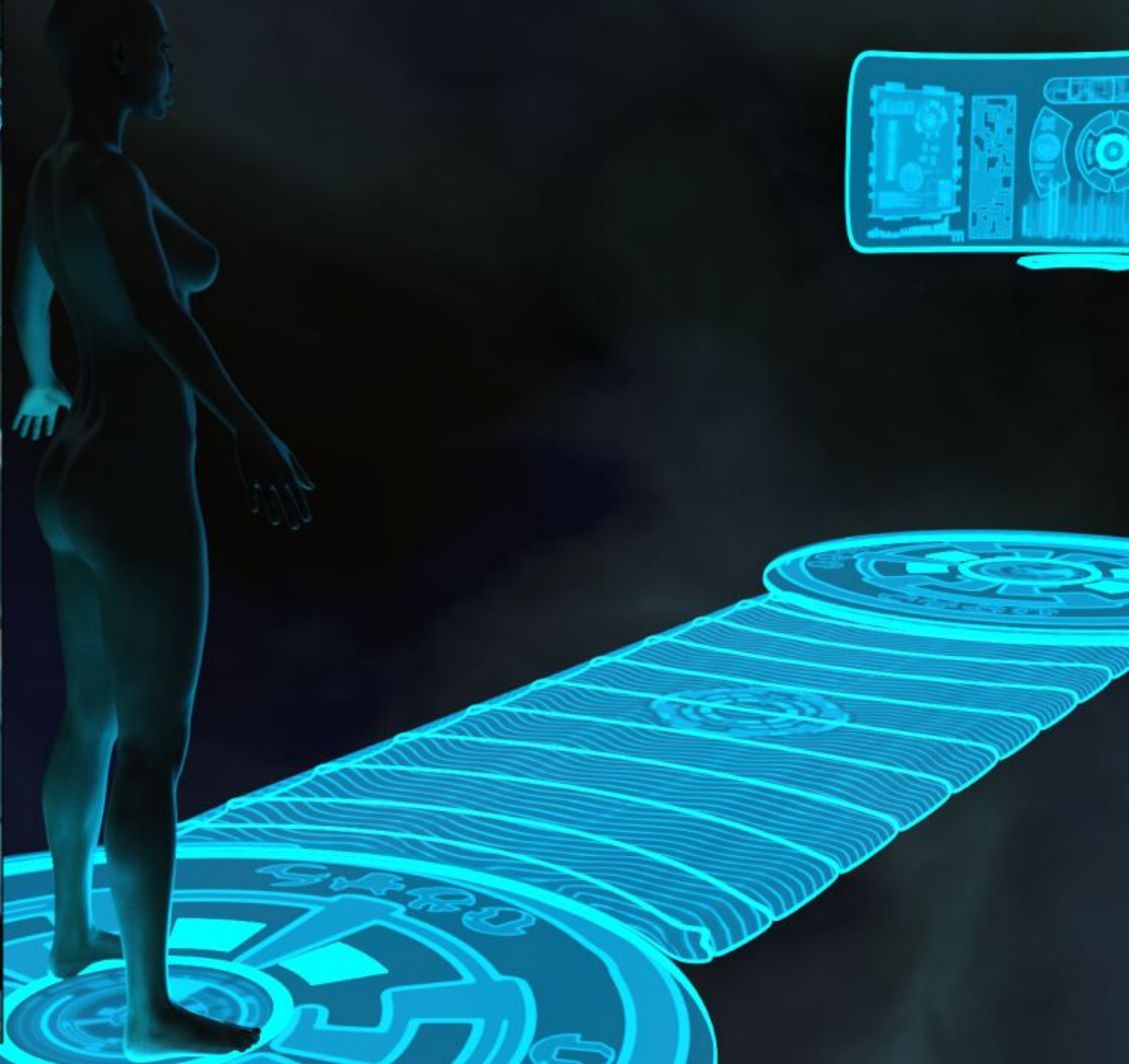


I an't know how any this works ...

THERE ARE INSTRUCTIONS. YOU'LL GET SOME AS SOON AS YOU GO IN.



I'M CLOSING NOW, MS. HALEY. SLEEP WELL.





YOU ARE NOW IN YOUR RECALL SPACE.

THERE ARE THREE MODES OF SLEEP: THIS SPACE, WHICH IS A HALF-AWAKE STATE, ACTIVE SLEEP, WHERE YOU WILL SPEND MOST OF YOUR TIME, AND DEEP SLEEP, WHERE YOU DREAM.

IN RECALL YOU CAN DO MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES: WAKE UP COMPLETELY, LOAD PRESET APPEARANCES, READ AND SEND MESSAGES, AND MANAGE DATA SUCH AS OBJECT MANIFESTS.

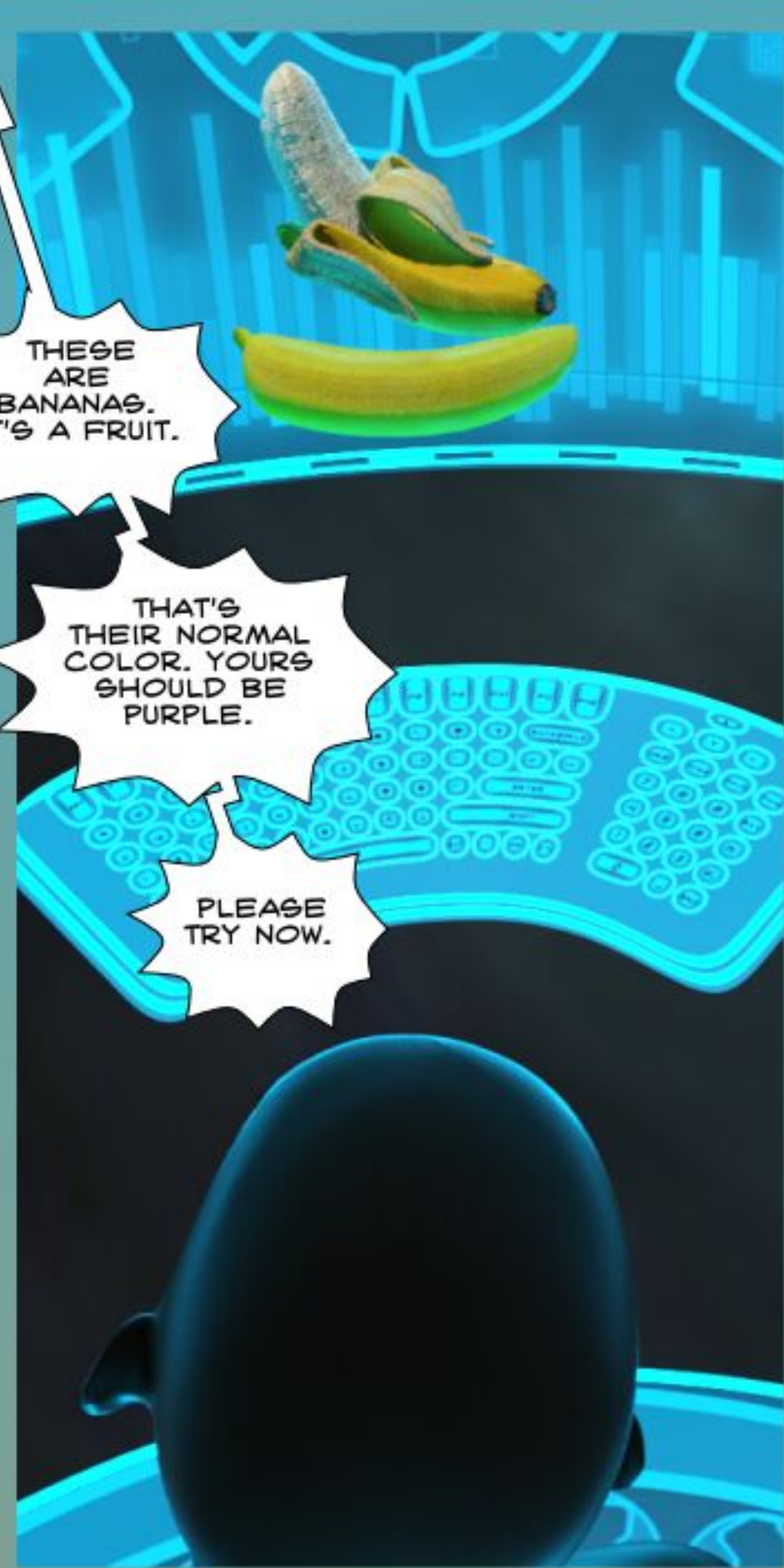
YOU MAY RETURN HERE TO LEARN HOW TO DO ALL THOSE THINGS AT ANY TIME, BUT FIRST IT IS VITAL TO TEACH YOU HOW TO RECALL.



PLEASE FOLLOW THE PICTURE THE FOLLOWING THREE OBJECTS IN THIS ORDER: A BLUE GUITAR, A PURPLE BANANA, AND A PINK ELEPHANT.

PICTURE THEM AS ACCURATELY AND VIVIDLY AS YOU CAN. RECALL REQUIRES CONCENTRATION SO THAT YOU DON'T DO IT ACCIDENTALLY.

'k but what's a 'banana'?



THESE ARE BANANAS. IT'S A FRUIT.

THAT'S THEIR NORMAL COLOR. YOURS SHOULD BE PURPLE.

PLEASE TRY NOW.



GOOD!

EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN RECALL CODE, AND ONLY YOU CAN USE YOUR RECALL. IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER, BECAUSE WITHOUT IT YOU HAVE NO WAY TO RETURN TO THIS SPACE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

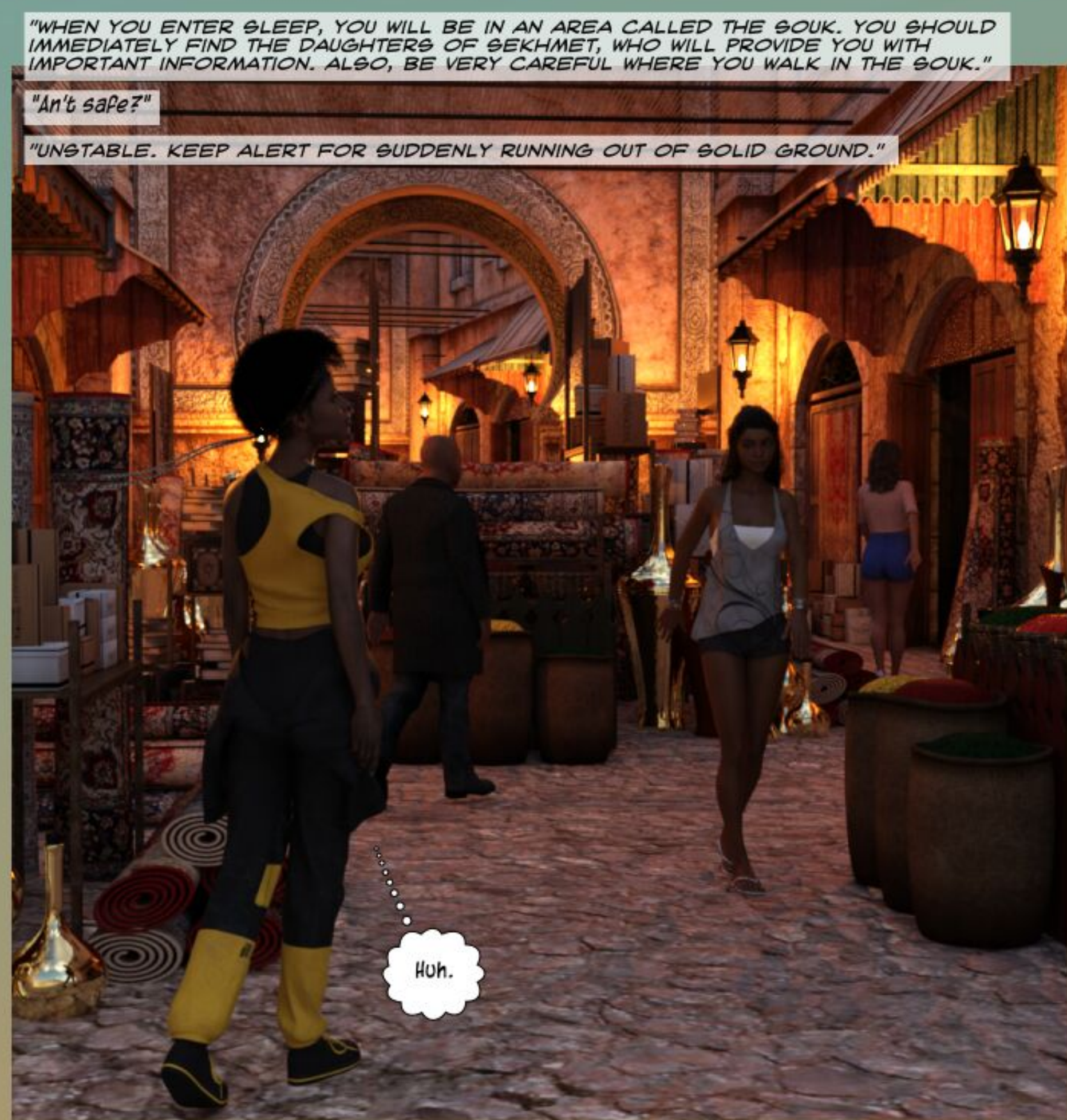
's'crux 'cause else I han't get back here.

What else?



YOU WILL WANT TO PICK HAIR AND CLOTHING TO WEAR FROM OUR STANDARD SETS UNTIL YOU LEARN HOW TO MANIFEST YOUR OWN.

ONCE YOU DO THAT, WE WILL REHEARSE YOUR RECALL AGAIN TO MAKE SURE YOU'VE LEARNED IT.



"WHEN YOU ENTER SLEEP, YOU WILL BE IN AN AREA CALLED THE SOUK. YOU SHOULD IMMEDIATELY FIND THE DAUGHTERS OF SEKHMET, WHO WILL PROVIDE YOU WITH IMPORTANT INFORMATION. ALSO, BE VERY CAREFUL WHERE YOU WALK IN THE SOUK."

"An't safe?"

"UNSTABLE. KEEP ALERT FOR SUDDENLY RUNNING OUT OF SOLID GROUND."

Huh.



Oyo! Looking for Daughters of ... uh ... shit.

Sekhmet.

Up the street. Probably. It was a little while ago.

Just tell people you're looking for the kitties.



New arrival, eh?

Let me propose you set up your personal space in the lovely Scholz holdings. No pressures, no obligations, a wonderful place to live. No one is turned away.

I'll be happy to send you there right now to look the place over, if you like.



Don't do it! They're horrible! Go get a place in Serenity instead!

Who asked you, Carmen?

Sure, Serenity's nice--if you want to live in the most boring part of A4. Now, if you want to enjoy life ...

's'posed to go talk to kitties. B'sin.



Maybe start over? If I can get back ...



JEX DISCOVERS THAT THE SOUK IS FRUSTRATINGLY NONLINEAR AT TIMES.

Eppn street sepps ... turn around an't there ... different now ...

Guess that why she wan't sure ...

skelly place is yankin' me hard ...



EY!!

Jook ...  
-- oop --  
this is a bad idea ...

Cats catch us  
doing this, we're  
Pucked ...

Let off,  
skels!

EPPn heggers  
lookin' for push ...

If we don't bring  
in some new intake,  
we're just as Pucked. His  
Lordship's getting  
impatient.

When was the last  
time you saw a new  
arrival? This is our  
best chance.



Yeah, but ...

Owww!

Stop hitting me!

Hit you ePPn  
bleed!



EPPn heg! Shit head skel!  
Hazzing pissar! I'na push  
you till you an't move!

AAAGH!

Jook--!

Working on it ...  
you know I can't do  
this in a hurry ...



All right,  
now.

-- hkkk --



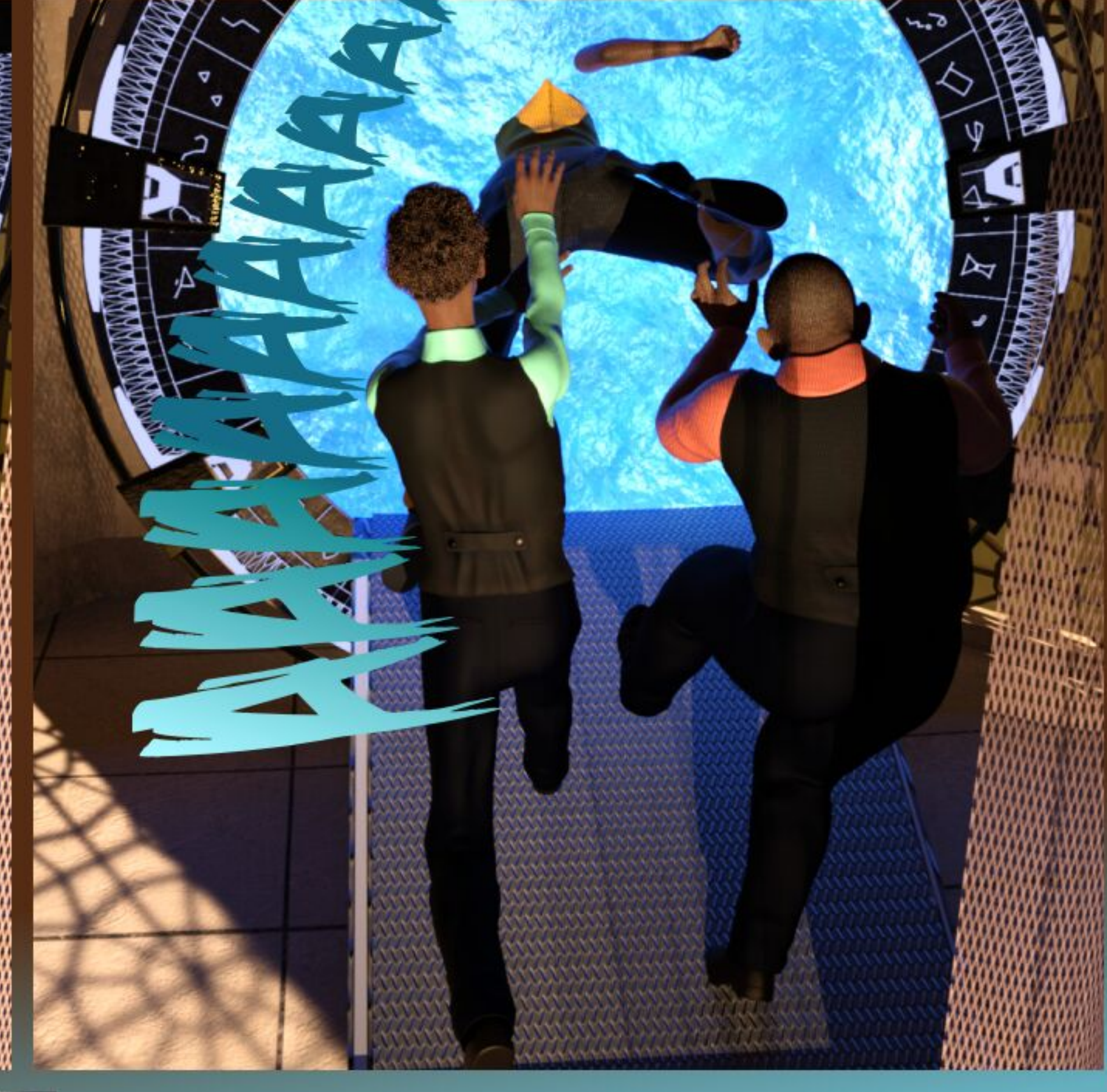
Come on, you ... we can't keep  
this open very long or--

Shit yourself, skel!  
Hope it blows up!

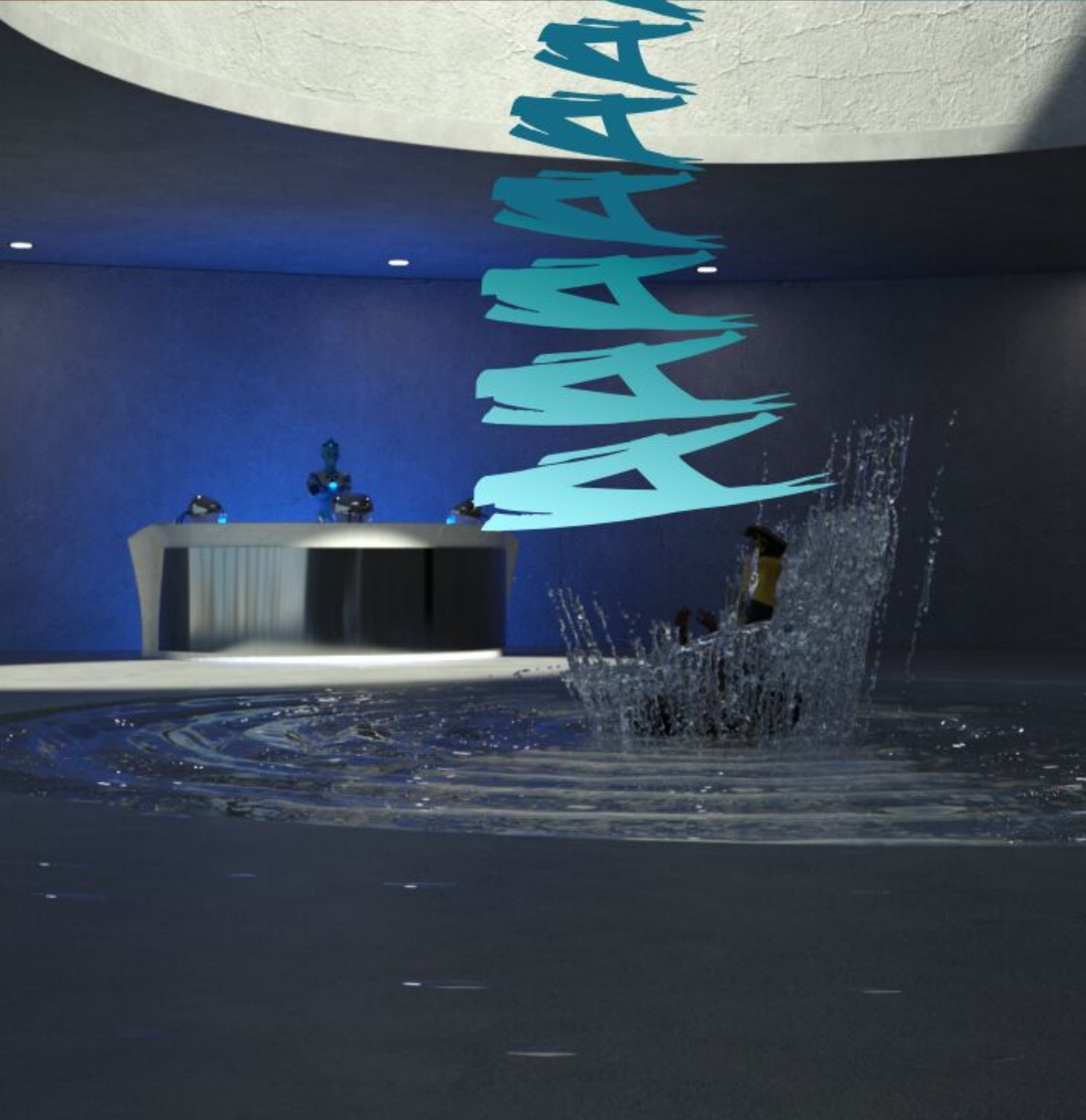
You hegs gon!--

Coop!

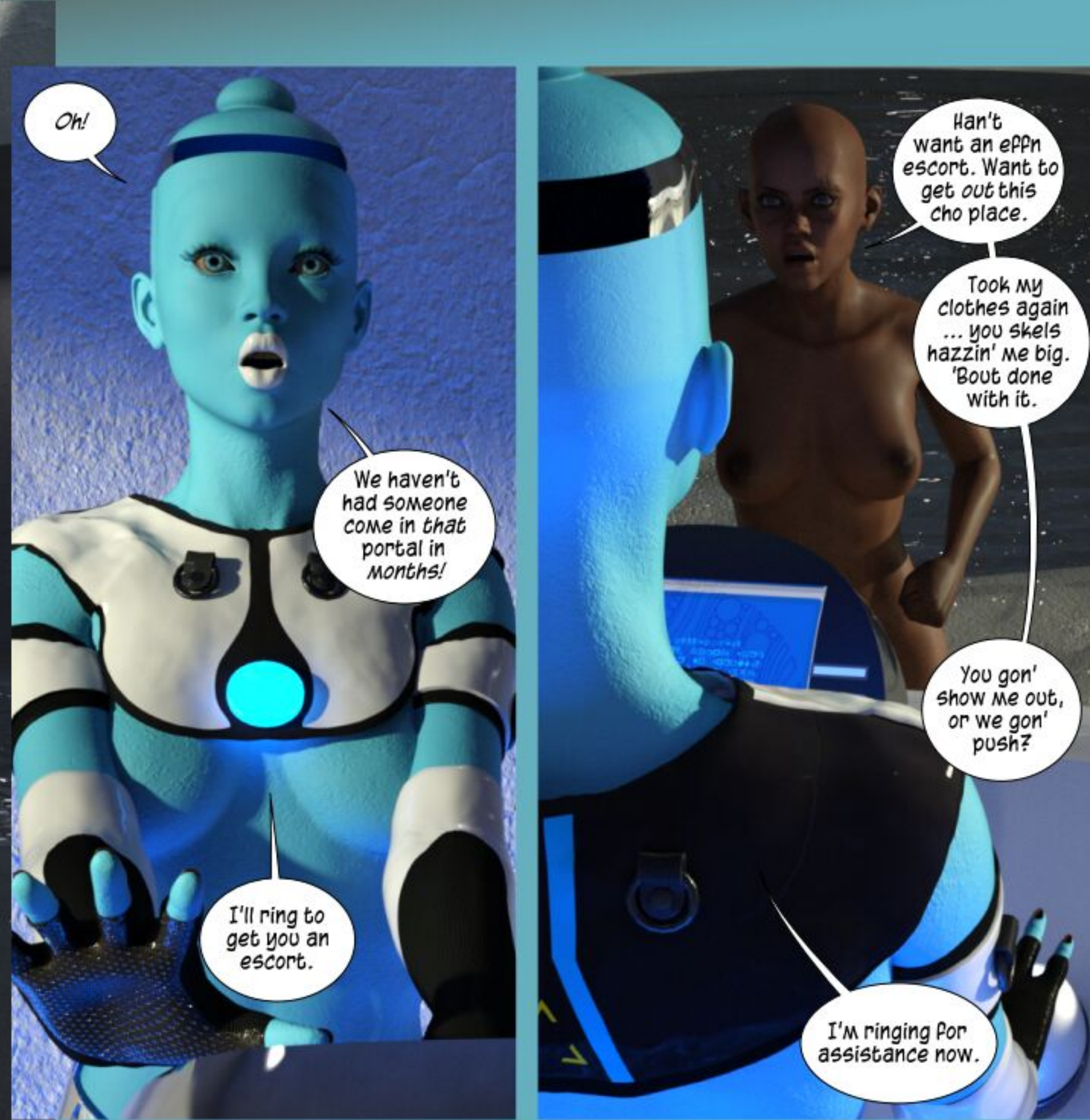
AAAA!



AAAAAAA



AAAAAAA



Oh!

We haven't  
had someone  
come in that  
portal in  
months!

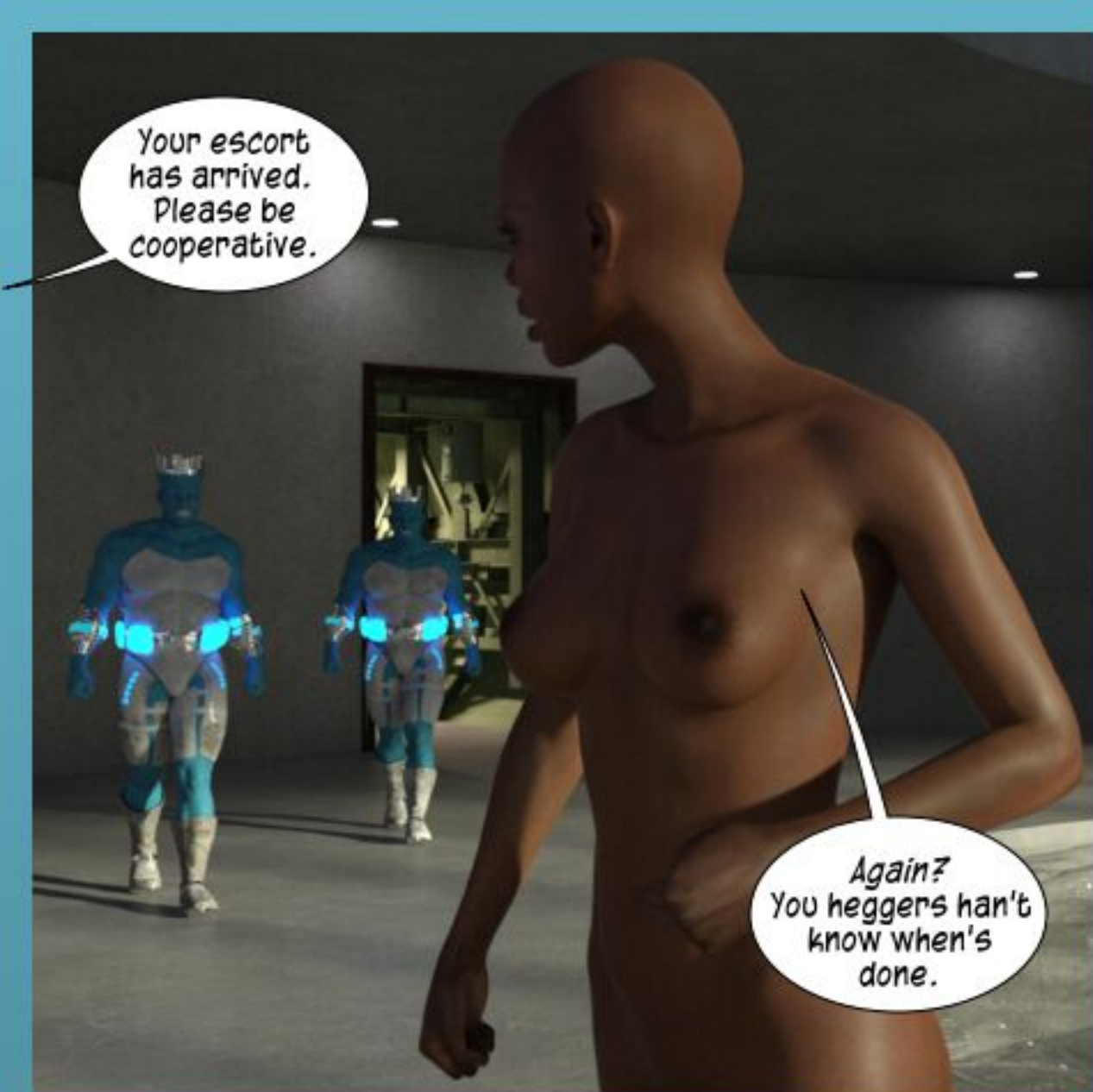
I'll ring to  
get you an  
escort.

Han't  
want an ePPn  
escort. Want to  
get out this  
cho place.

Took my  
clothes again  
... you skels  
hazzin' me big.  
'Bout done  
with it.

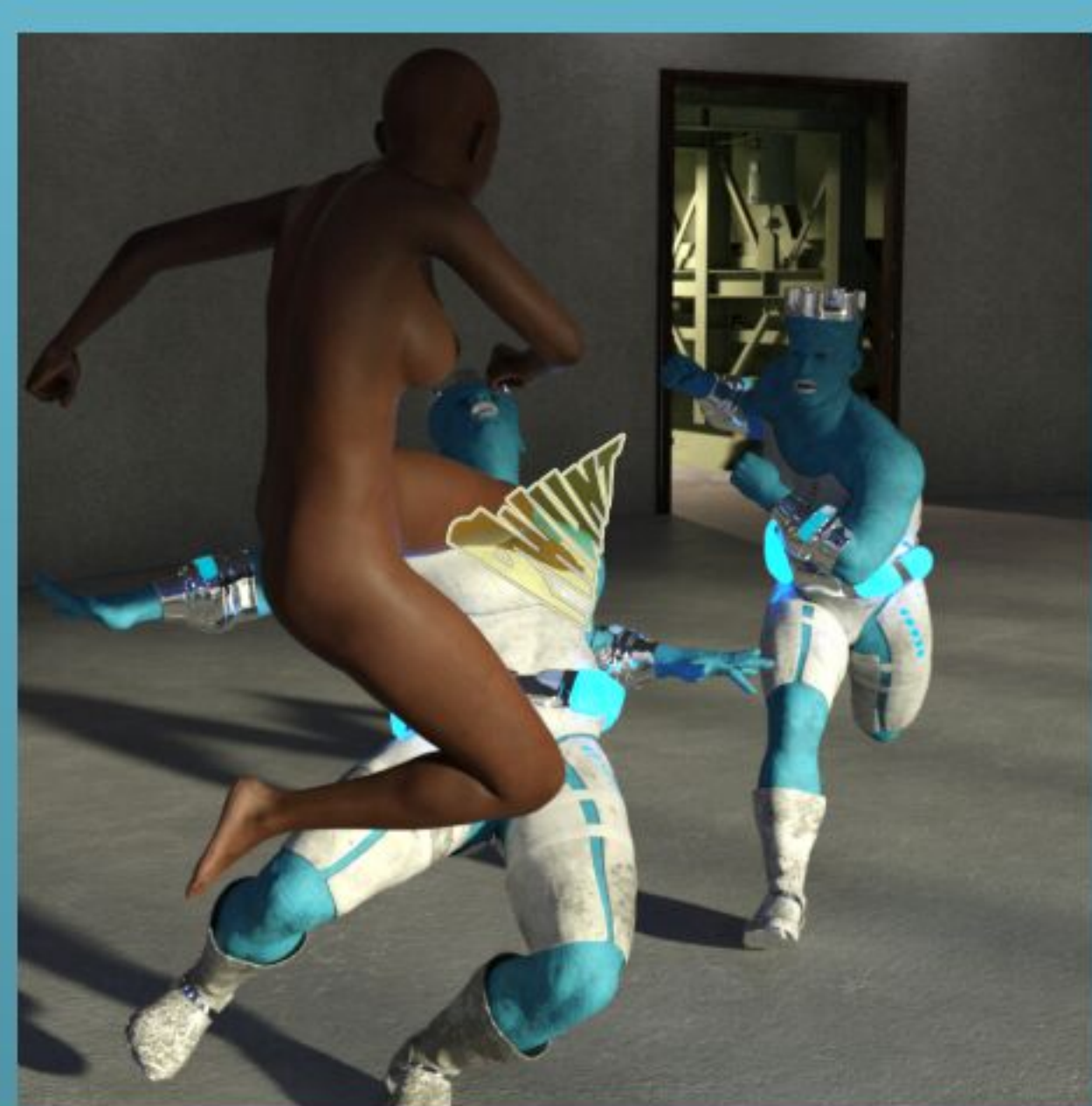
You gon'  
show me out,  
or we gon'  
push?

I'm ringing for  
assistance now.



Your escort has arrived. Please be cooperative.

Again? You heggers han't know when's done.



Ey!

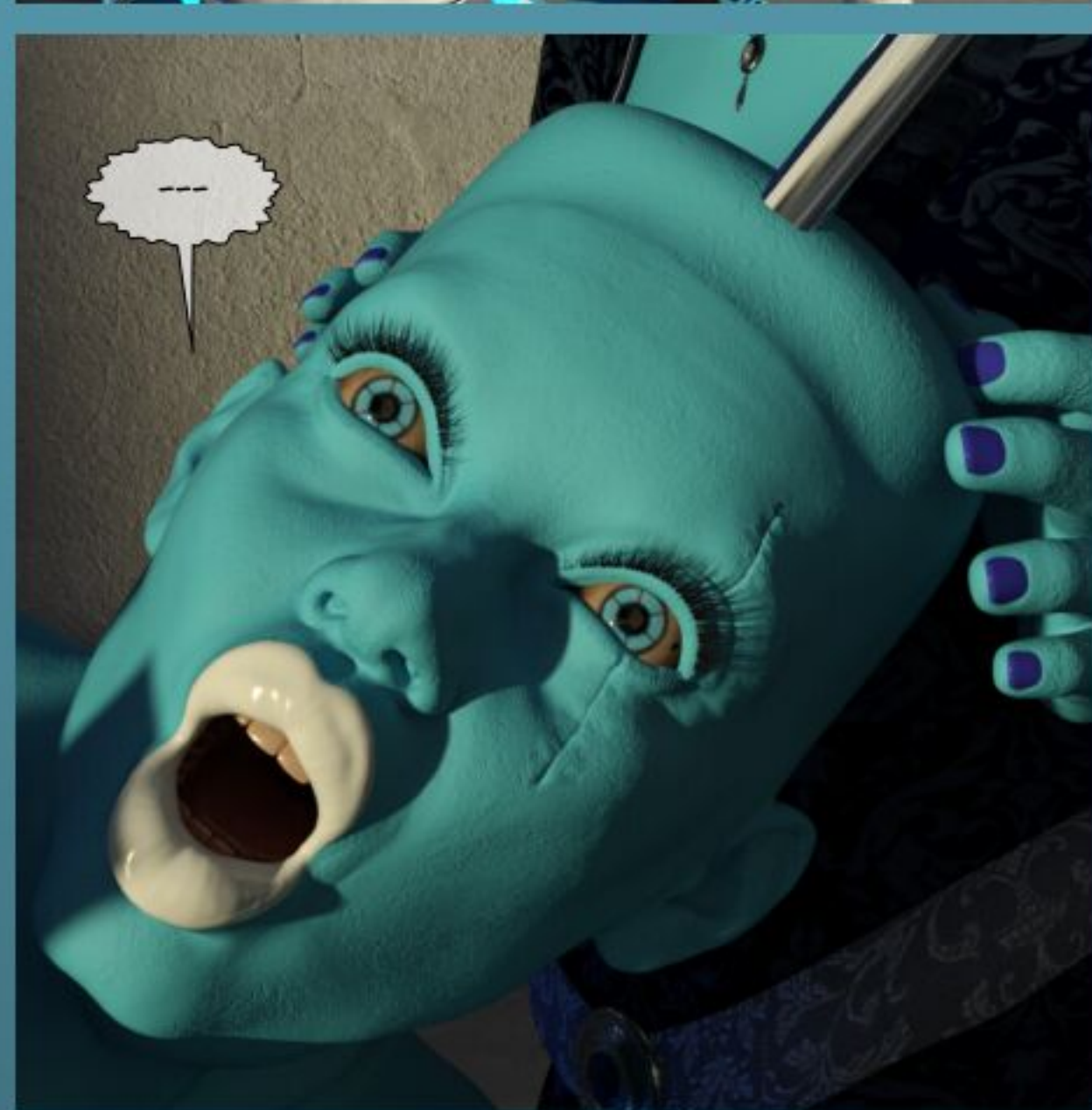


Do I have to do everything?

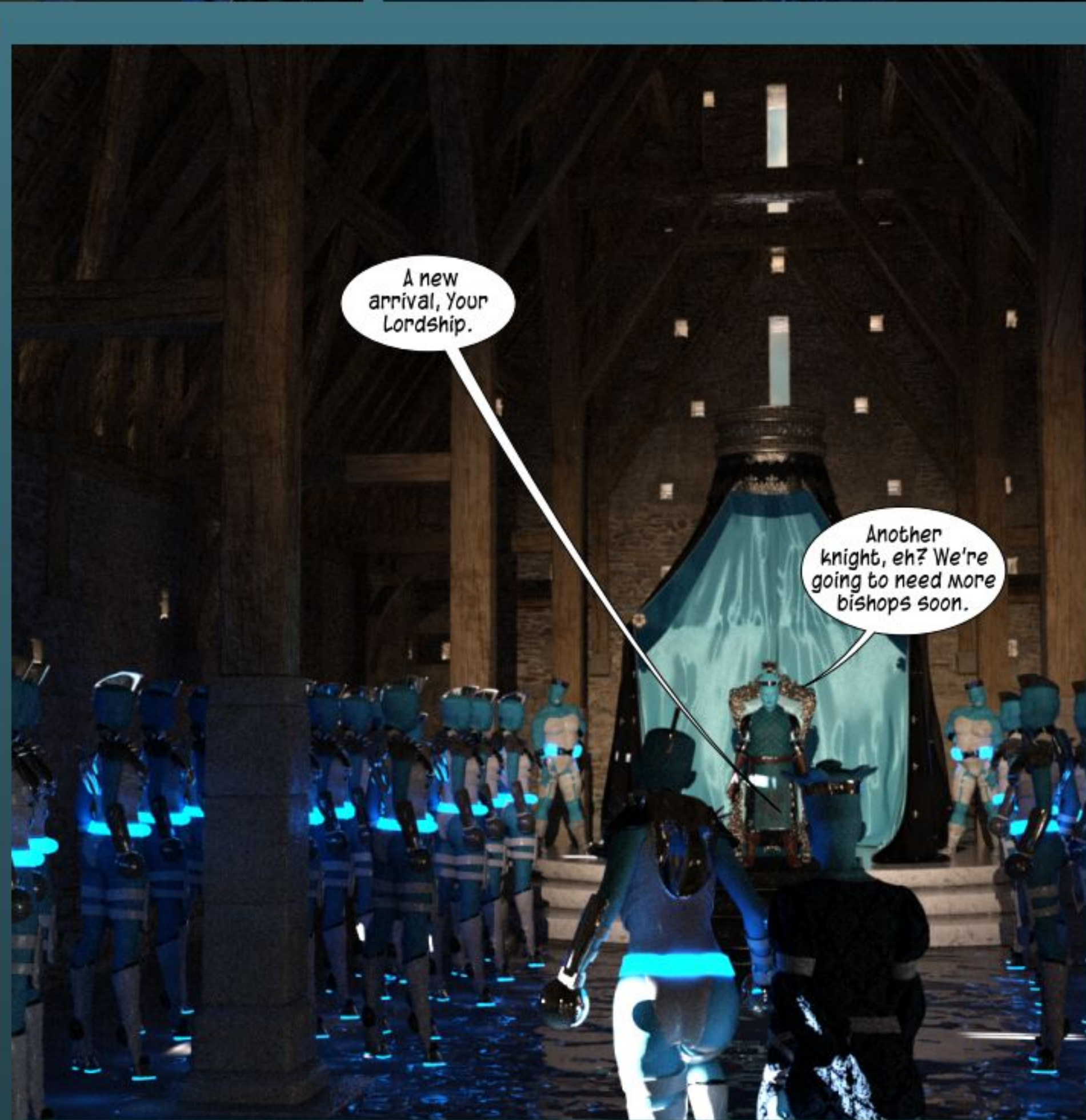


You're Peisty. I think you'll be a knight.

Haul off, you--



Now, we have to hurry and get you equipped. You've arrived just in time for the next sortie.



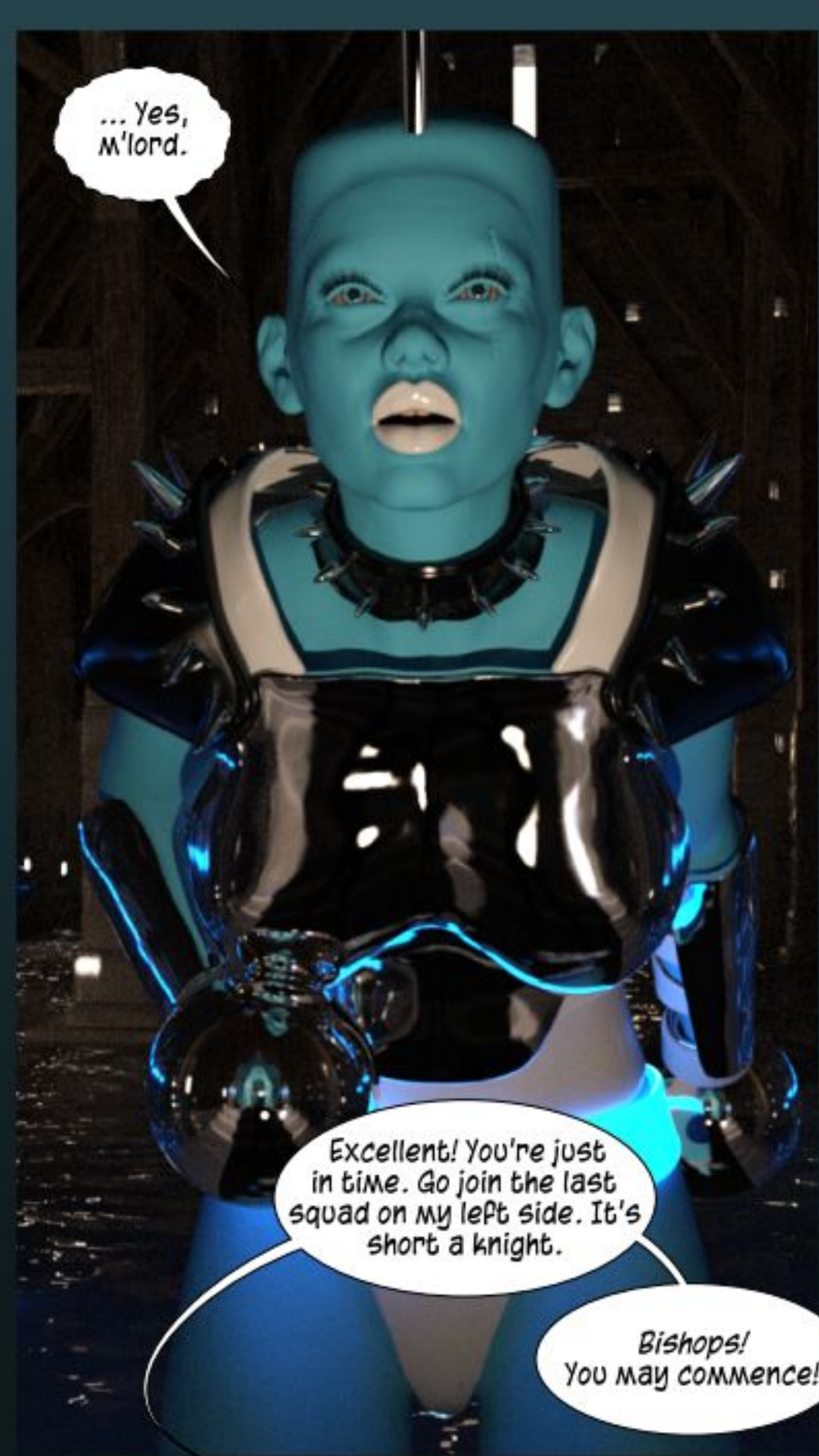
A new arrival, Your Lordship.

Another knight, eh? We're going to need more bishops soon.



So, newcomer.

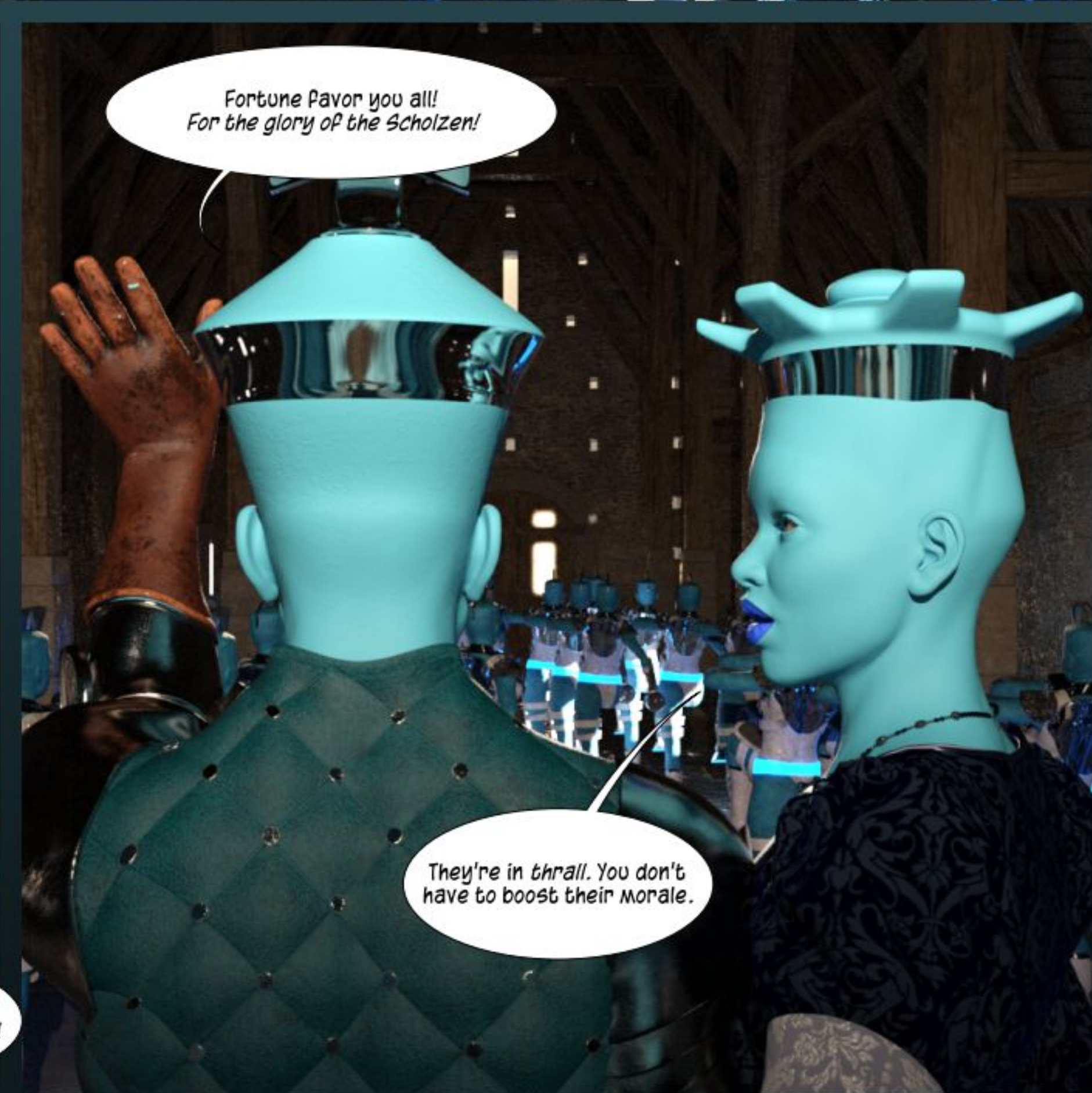
Are you prepared to become a citizen of the realm of Scholz and dedicate yourself to its service?



... Yes, M'lord.

Excellent! You're just in time. Go join the last squad on my left side. It's short a knight.

Bishops! You may commence!



Fortune Pavor you all! For the glory of the Scholzen!

They're in thrall. You don't have to boost their morale.



CarePully now, squad. We're coming into their territory.



AAA!  
Look out!

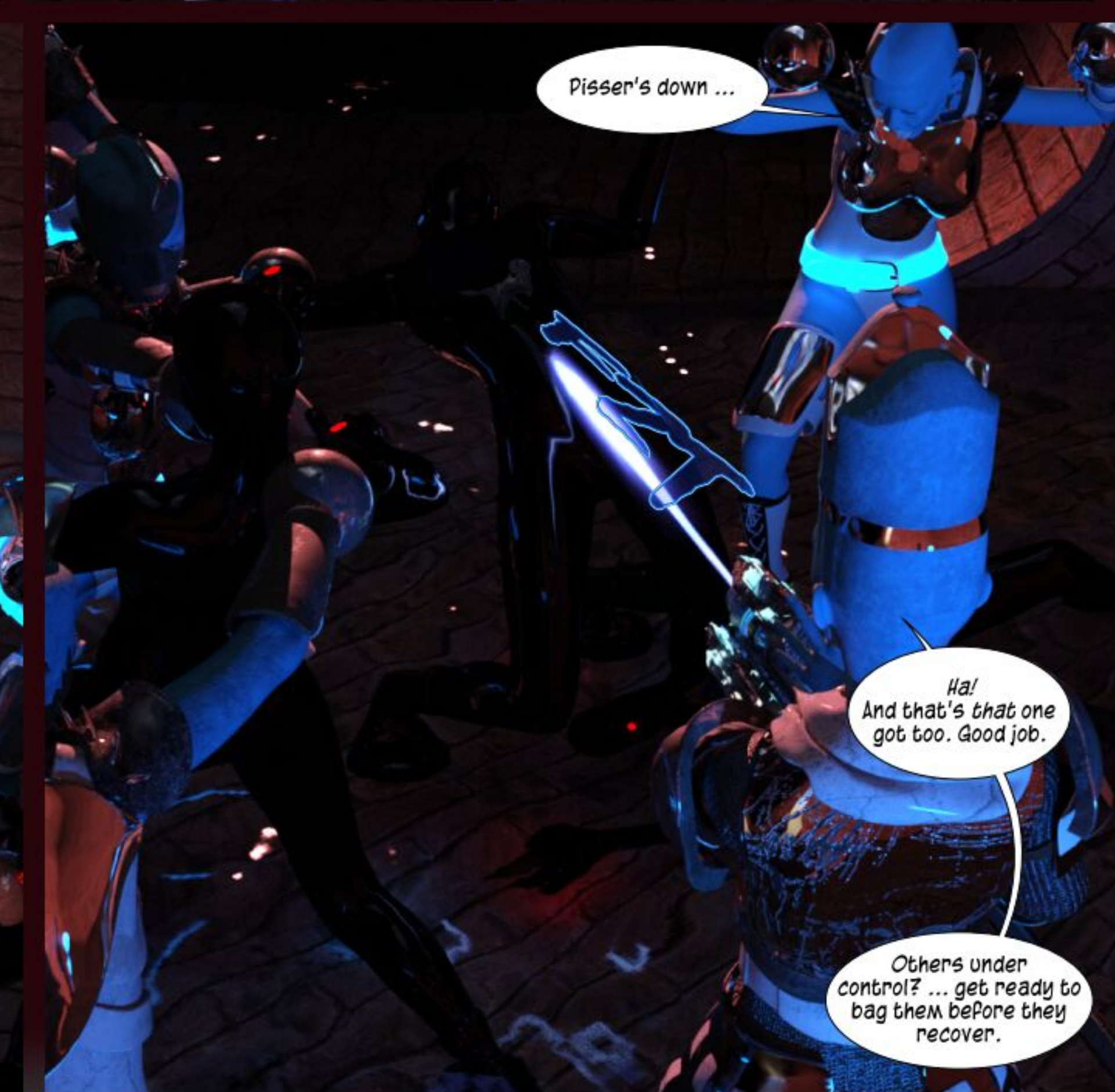


I need a  
clear shot!



Oh, no, you don't!

BOMB



Pisser's down ...

Ha!  
And that's that one  
got too. Good job.

Others under  
control? ... get ready to  
bag them before they  
recover.



A glorious day!  
Your raids were a  
tremendous success.  
Fifteen captives who  
will become  
productive  
Scholzen!

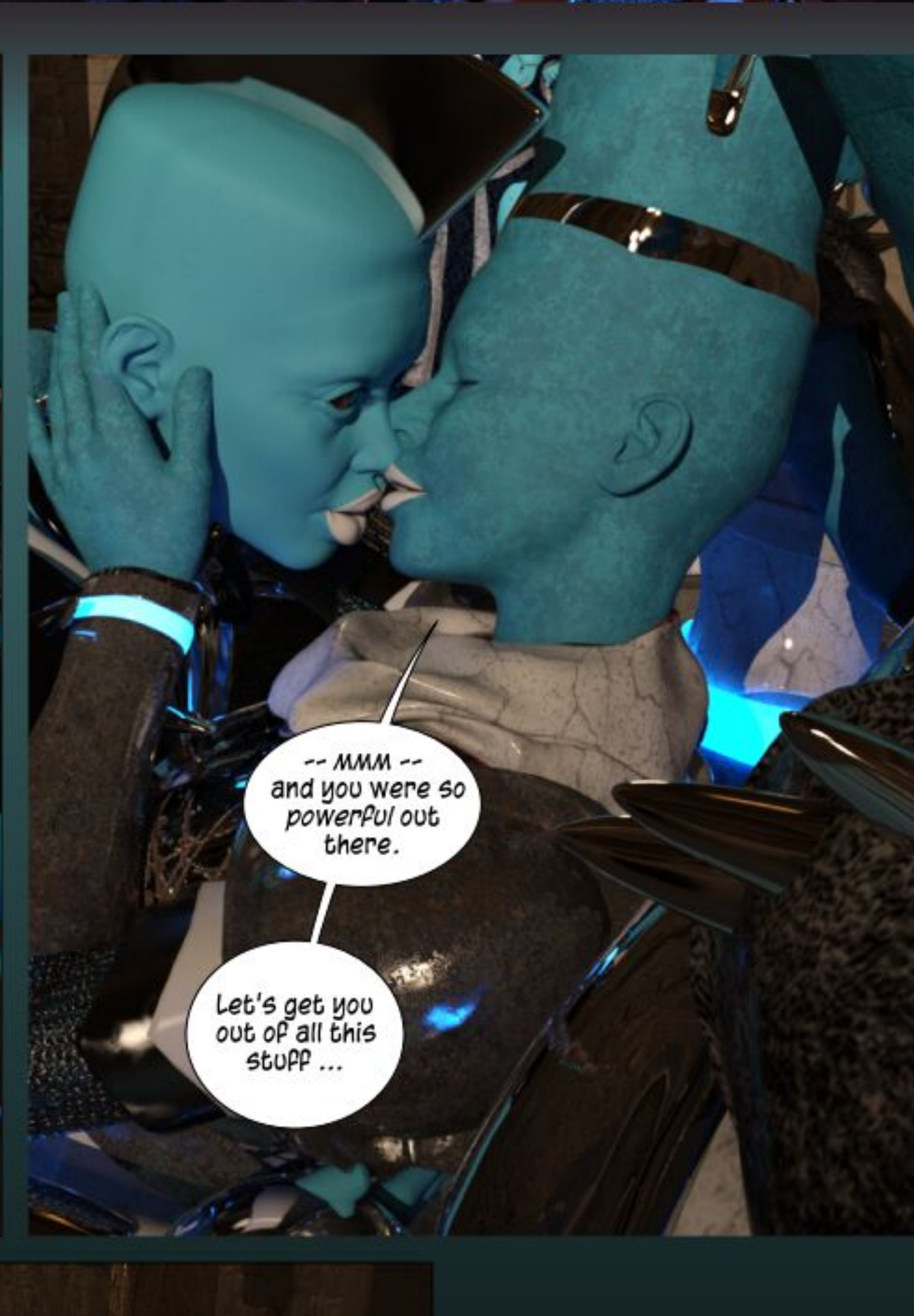
And now it is  
time for  
celebration!



Revelry!

ooohh!!

ohhh, yes ...



-- MMM --  
and you were so  
powerful out  
there.

Let's get you  
out of all this  
stuff ...



Animals.

May I remind my lord that if you give  
them no reward, it's easier for them to break  
free. They don't have to love you, but they  
shouldn't hate you, or their life here.



Let's go have  
a private  
celebration of our  
own. That'll improve  
your mood.

HOURS AFTER THE REVELS, WHILE THE SCHOLZEN SLEEP IT OFF ...



AAAIEEE!



Got' get My stuff ... push these skels ... Fight For Lord Scholz ...

Fight ...

Fight--?



Shit!!

EPPN skels rightup messed my head!

Got big push with blue queen. Big push.

aright aright ... an't time now ... Plag that, get her ass later.

Clear now, that's crux. Now got' get out this ePPN place ...



Folk goin' all cho ... an't see me haul ...

Han't go out way them pissers come in ... prob as big skels as blue ones ...



Aaah!

Haul off, skels! Let go!

Kick your ass you an't let--

---



... don't see why you called me down here. I expect you to manage the process without my help.

It's just this one, M'lord. She was the only captive not in their colors. I was concerned she might have been, say, a guest of Lord Scholz who got taken by accident.



HMM. Well, I applaud your political instincts, Thed, but I don't Peel it makes any difference.

Guests of Lord Scholz are Pain game as well, and I doubt she would be usePul as a bargaining chip, nor have any vital inPormation.

Shadow her like the others.





Hold her steady now, she may be a mite crabby when I take off the stay hood ...



You eppn skeis! You han't got no better than mess people's heads? You all big chos or what?

Imna mess you so bad han't be seen --

There.



What I like best about you shadows. You don't make any noise. At all.

Go over and join the ones lined up against the wall.



--huuu--



Now, listen, you, we'll have none of that--

ooooer!



-- urrrr --

All right, then.

Clear you need some reinforcement. I'll make sure not to leave a thought in your head this time --



aaarg!

KIKKAD

Sorry, Thed.



You know, if you can break out of the effect, then you can probably talk now, too.

Too eppn hazzetto talk!



They're just going to keep coming. The whole place is on alert by now.

Try to keep them back while I open a portal.

Who are you?

I'm on your side. Tell you the rest when we can breathe.



C'mon! Hurry!



Owww!

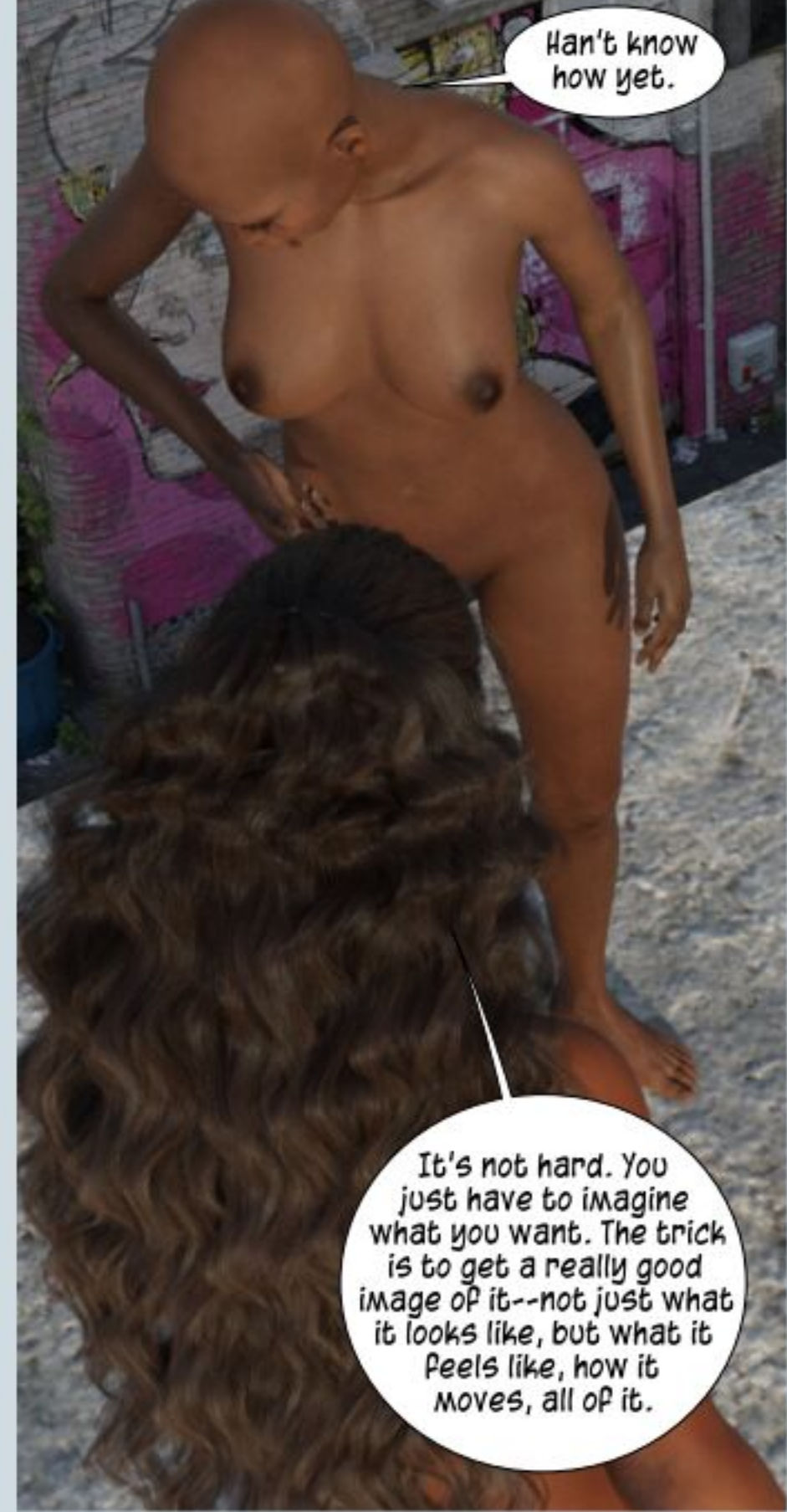
Sorry. Sometimes they don't come out at the height I want.



Where we at now--yaiii!

Careful! I use this roof as a landing zone a lot because nobody else does, so it's always clear.

I'll take you down in a second, but don't you want to put on some clothes and hair first?



Han't know how yet.

It's not hard. You just have to imagine what you want. The trick is to get a really good image of it--not just what it looks like, but what it feels like, how it moves, all of it.



Hmm. Got the hair clear, anyhow ...

It takes practice. I know that design--you were trying for one of the stock outfits, right? I'll set you up.



Thanks!

Welcome. What's your name?

Jex.

Just 'Jex'?

Yeah. You?



Ruby Martinez.

Let's get off this roof and maybe find some breakfast, and you can ask me questions.



... I han't thought it be like that, s'all.

Well, it wasn't like that. Everything changed about three years ago. We'd like to get the bedders to update their briefing, but there's ... anyway, we hope the kitties get to warn newcomers before they get into trouble. Not that there are many newcomers. I guess word hasn't spread about it being Free now.

What happened three years back?

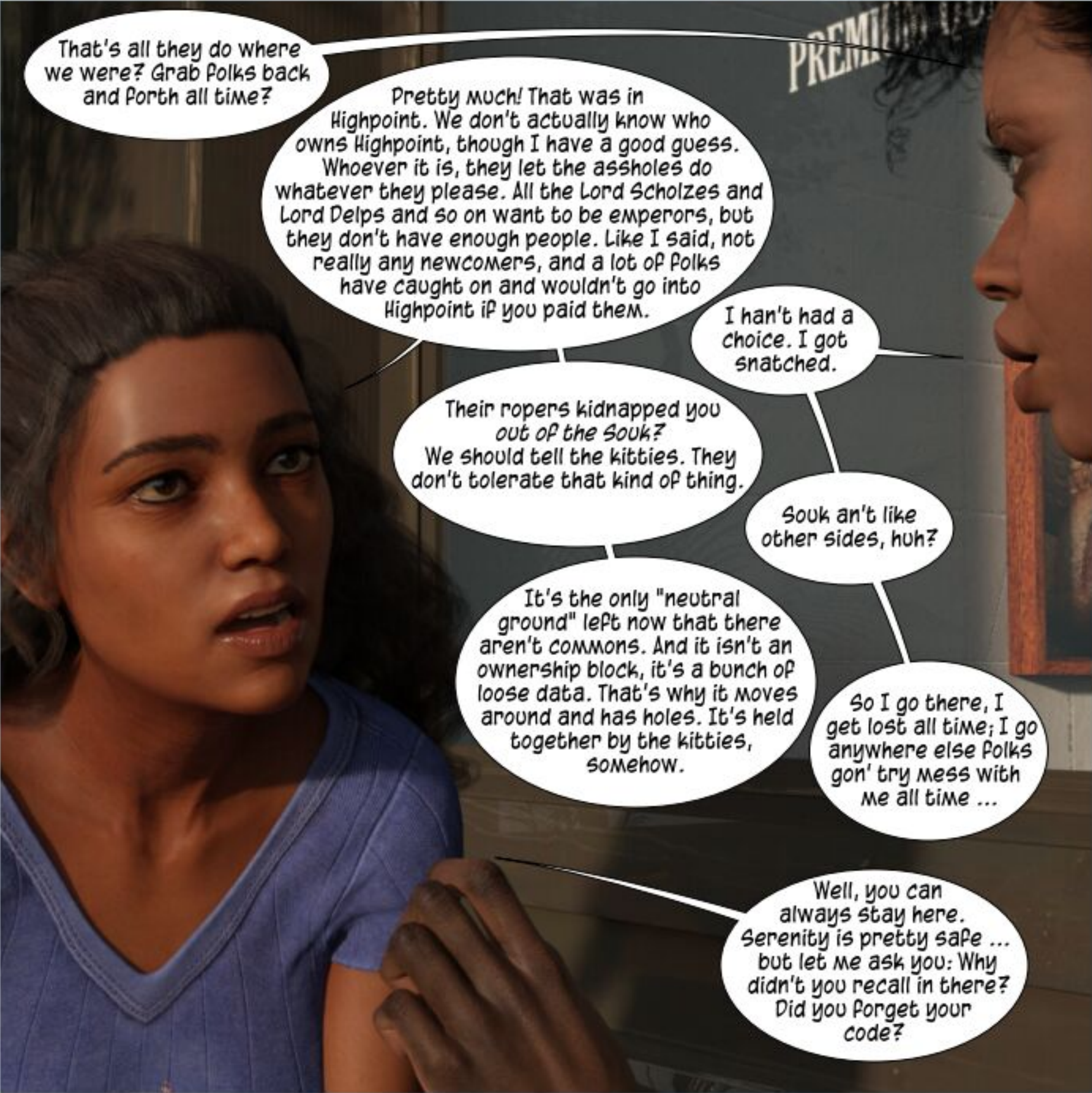
We're not sure. My friend thinks it's a virus.

One day all of a sudden, parts of A4 just started to disappear. Fast. We had to do emergency evacuations, move people to safe places, figure out a way to protect those ... I don't really remember much of that week, I was so frantic.

We call it the Sprue. It wants to eat everything. We can protect contiguous spaces of ownership pretty well. But there used to be common areas--streets and things--public spaces that you could connect other things to. Those are all gone now. Either we moved them into private space to save them, or the Sprue got them.

What we do is, we found a way to let you have private space, but without owning it. Like where we are now. This part of A4 is called Serenity. Serene Barker owns it. You can have space here that you control, but she'll still own it, so we can keep the data block together.

So now there are a bunch of these big blocks, and some of them are OK, and some--like where we were--aren't great. And there are people with little blocks floating around too, trying to hold their own. We don't know how many. We didn't ever find everybody after the Sprue hit. Our data records are a mess, like everything else.



That's all they do where we were? Grab Polks back and Porth all time?

Pretty much! That was in Highpoint. We don't actually know who owns Highpoint, though I have a good guess. Whoever it is, they let the assholes do whatever they please. All the Lord Scholzes and Lord Delps and so on want to be emperors, but they don't have enough people. Like I said, not really any newcomers, and a lot of Polks have caught on and wouldn't go into Highpoint if you paid them.

I han't had a choice. I got snatched.

Their ropers kidnapped you out of the Souk? We should tell the kitties. They don't tolerate that kind of thing.

Souk an't like other sides, huh?

It's the only "neutral ground" left now that there aren't commons. And it isn't an ownership block, it's a bunch of loose data. That's why it moves around and has holes. It's held together by the kitties, somehow.

So I go there, I get lost all time; I go anywhere else Polks gon' try mess with me all time ...

Well, you can always stay here. Serenity is pretty safe ... but let me ask you: Why didn't you recall in there? Did you forget your code?

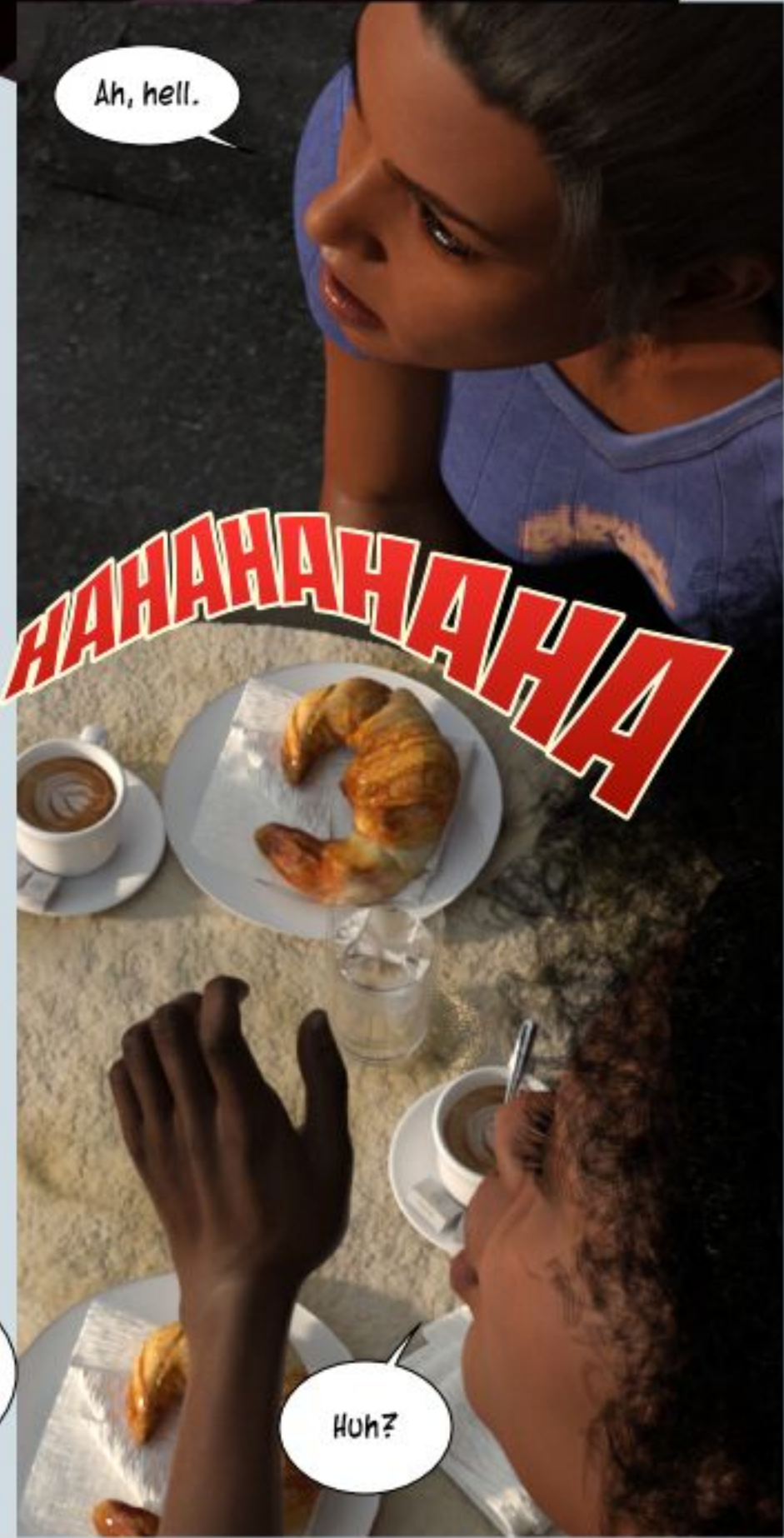


I ... uh ... shit.

'Cause I'm a cho, s'pose.

Nah. I don't think you're anybody's Pool.

It's hard. You get caught up in the scenario, it doesn't occur to you sometimes to even try to break out. But you did! And that means you probably don't have to worry much about being messed with, because--



Ah, hell.

**HAHAHAHAHA**

Huh?



You're worried about her. But you can't have known her very long--she hasn't mentioned you--

Just today.

Only Polk wan't skelly. Got me out bad shit. That makes her selah.

Hmm. Were you stuck in Highpoint? Did she get her rescue out?

An't know about any rescue.

I'll ask her later. Highpoint's pretty bad. Sorry you landed in it.

How come you han't fix it, then? Why you let them skels do all that shit?

Well, for one thing, we can't. We don't own it--we don't have the rights to go in and make big changes.

We can sneak in and do local things--rescue a person, or maybe try to put some asshole out of commission--but we can't just go clean house.

But also ...

Sleep operates on very harsh rules. If you are better than someone else at manipulating, or manipulating, or algorithmic work, or any of it ... then you've got more power than they do. And people are continually realizing they have power and trying to use it. Sometimes for rotten things.

It's all our little crew can manage to keep this kind of trouble out of Serenity and keep the Sprue from eroding it. I'd just as soon have people playing their little king games in Highpoint, where they're not our problem, and spend resources rescuing people from it instead.

SOMEWHERE IN HIGHPOINT, LORD DELP AND HIS DAUGHTER ARE MAKING A STRATEGIC VISIT.

... I don't like it.

Nothing I've heard about the Order of Vision is good.

And if they help us, you know they'll ask for something in return. Maybe something we can't spare.

We don't have a choice, Honor. Scholz' witch is taking us apart. The two of us are the only real casters we have, and both of us combined aren't as powerful as she is.

We could find a new technique. Her way isn't our way.

We could, and we may ... but we need help now.

Ah, Mother Corven. Thank you for receiving us.

I realize this is extremely irregular ...

Indeed. I was startled to get your message. Tell me, why should the Order intervene for either side in your little battle?

The Scholzen don't operate the way we do. We have units we keep under mental control, yes, but no more than we absolutely need.

Scholz and his woman control everyone. They are the only two with unfettered minds in his entire domain. If they overwhelm us, and they come for you, they won't respect your order. You'll end up blue thralls like all the rest.

And you will respect the Order if you win?

I have no interest in claiming your territory. Or any other territory in Highpoint, really. I just want to be rid of Scholz before he destroys me.

Very well.

Holly!

Holly, this is Lord Delp and his daughter. You will travel with them to their territory and assist them against Lord Scholz' incursions.

Yes, ma'am.

Huh. Are you for real?

Holly is one of our acolytes. You'll find her abilities most useful.

I can send you more, but let's see what can be done with just one first.

So what do you acolytes do for Pun? Do you ever have Pun?

Of course we have Pun! We're not robots.

Prove it.

Honor, please behave yourself.

THE PRIVATE SPACE OF SERENE BARKER AND CORAZON ESTILO.

Anybody home?

In here!

Hey, Ruby.

Wuby!

Hi, Lor. Whatcha got there?

A twain!

Solo parenting this afternoon?

Cora had to run a few errands, including getting the latest scans for Miss Dolores here.

Nothing wrong, I hope?

No, no. Wellness check. As far as we know she's in perfect health.

How'd the rescue go? Is she going to need any rehabilitation?

I didn't get her.

I was interrupted, and the method I was using wasn't working out anyway.



So what's plan B?

I don't know if there is one. She's been in there for more than two years now. Even if I can find her, she may not be ...

Now, Ruby, that's not like you. You don't think we have an obligation to try?

It's not that--I just wonder if it's a good use of my time. I could be searching for her for weeks, and I've lost three days on this already.

Thwee!



You know, Lou and I had one of our regular meetings the day before yesterday.

They tell me you gave Trish Carter enough scripts for your passives that she has a directing backlog, and you haven't done anything on that since then.

They also tell me you haven't had any private scenarios in play for quite a while, at least not that they know about.

So my question is: What exactly is this keeping you from doing?



I think I resent that a little.

Neither of you is entitled to push on me ... even if you're right.

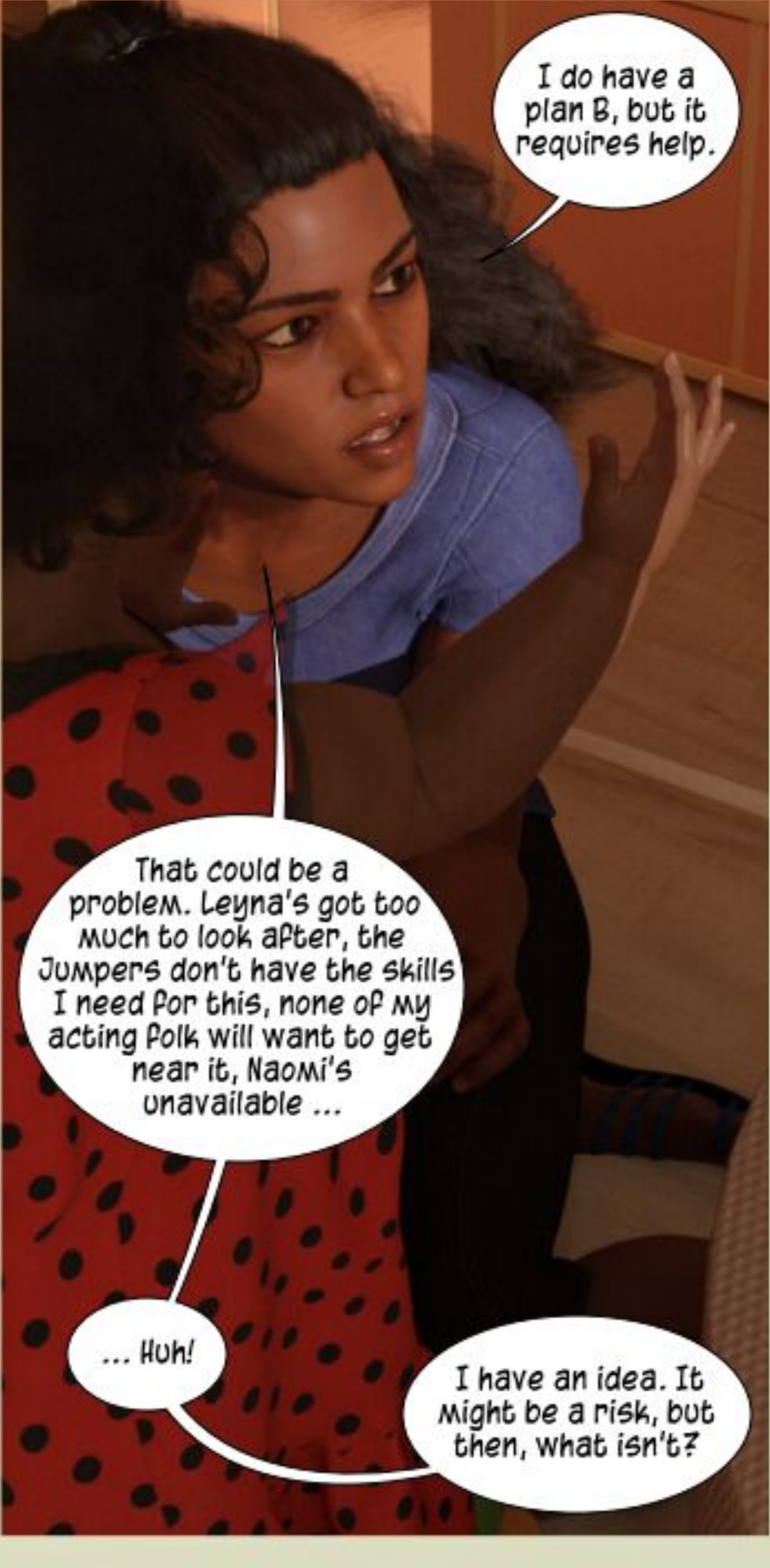
We're your friends, Ruby. Sitting idle is not good for you.

So I should go spend more time hunting for this woman just so I won't be bored?

-- sigh --

No, no, I realize it's not just that, and I don't want to let her sister down ...

NEW READERS: SERENE IS THE MONEY BEHIND LOU LAURENCE'S PRODUCTION AND TALENT-AGENT BUSINESSES. RUBY HAS WORKED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY THROUGH LOU FOR MANY YEARS.



I do have a plan B, but it requires help.

That could be a problem. Leyna's got too much to look after, the Jumpers don't have the skills I need for this, none of my acting Polk will want to get near it, Naomi's unavailable ...

... Huh!

I have an idea. It might be a risk, but then, what isn't?



HOURS LATER ...

Good morning!

... hmhm?

I looked for you all night. Eventually I had to get Leyna to track you.

Did you sleep out here? Why didn't you set up a private space? Or stay at a hotel?

An't know how to do first one, han't got sub for other.

None of the hotels charge anymore. The only things of value are things people make or do. Space is free.

You didn't go get a briefing from the kitties, did you?



Han't got chance! Skels grabbed me too fast.

So you don't know how to do anything yet ... OK, we'll have to work on that, but first, I have a proposal for you.

Come on, we'll go to my place. You can use my shower.



Maybe should sepp the scar ...

So what do you think?

Shit no! An't go back that side again ever. Skels crazy.

I mean, I agree ... but you know whatever happened, I'd be able to pull you out of it. And I would. I promise.

Got' have some Polk better for it ...



You'd think, but no.

Look, I don't want to go in there either. Lisette Dunn's been stuck among the Delphines for a long time, and who knows by now? She may have gone over. She may have forgotten herself. These things do happen.

But her sister is very worried about her, and I did agree to try for the rescue.

When I found you, I'd been in there for a couple of days, playing a shadow. I have gear to scan people to find out who they really are. None of the people I scanned were Dunn.

But the shadows aren't allowed up in the parts of the castle where the humans live. So I couldn't go search up there without finding some different disguise.

The problem with being upstairs is Delp's daughter, Honor. She's very clever and she knows how to spot people who aren't what they seem. And if she spots me I'm in real trouble. Delp and I have history and it's not good.

I don't need you to be a spectacular actor. I have a way to play it that won't be a big stretch. I just need you to distract Honor for a day or two, while I search.

Might even be fun, if you're interested in that kind of thing. Honor's got a reputation.



Sepp'd my hair 'gain ...

Yeah, sorry. I don't like going without it either. This is the way you'd look to match your story, though. Don't worry; if you get her attention you won't look like that for long.

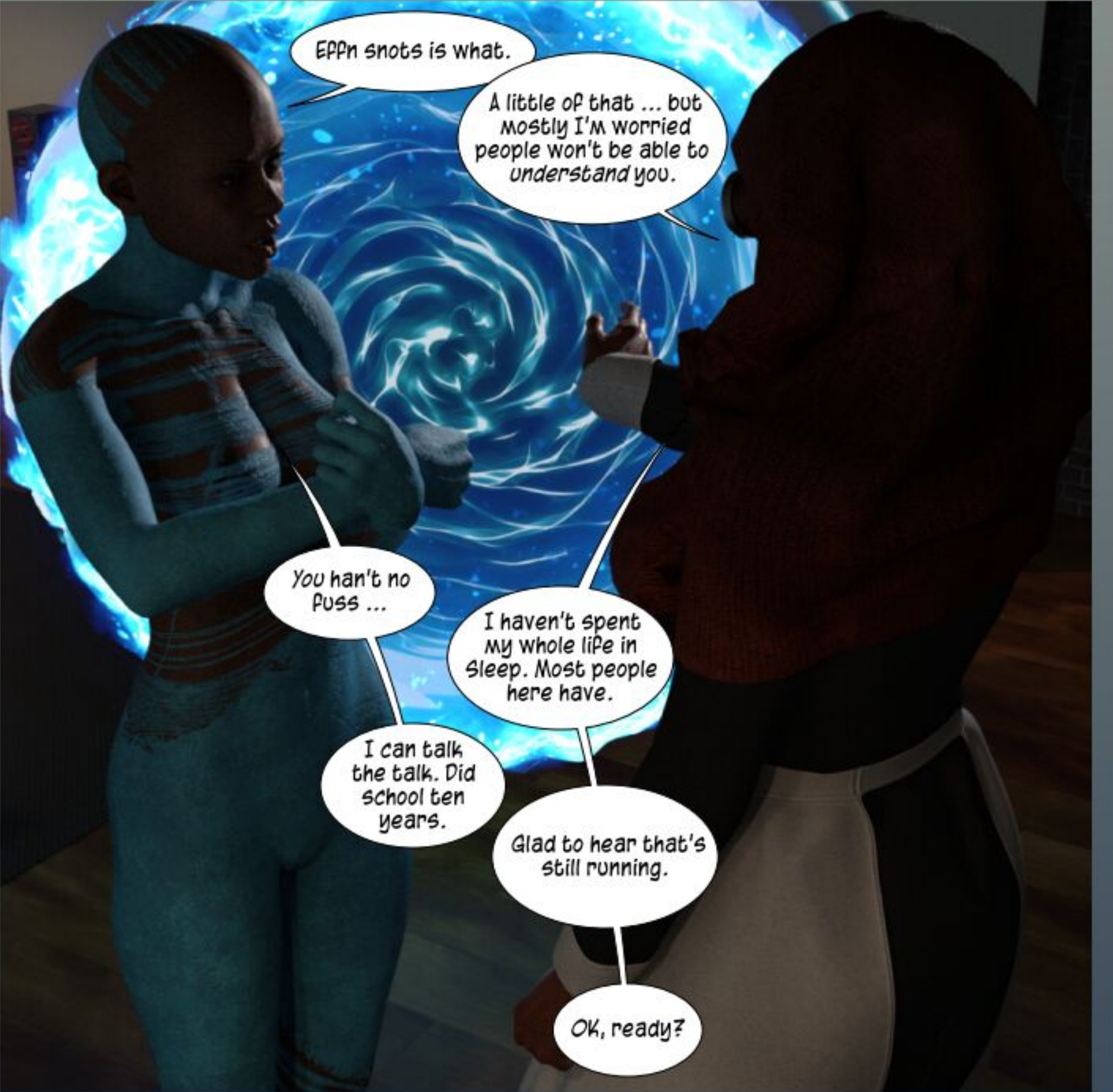
It's better than what I have to wear. Apparently the Delphines really don't like their servants to be able to speak.

Speaking of that, I don't think it'll blow your cover ... but if you can do it, it might be better to try to sound a little more like someone who's been in sleep a longer time.

You want me talk like my gramma.

No, I want you to use your grammar. Ha, ha.

Seriously, though, it does make a difference. And I know you learned some, because you don't have any trouble understanding it.



Eppn snots is what.

A little of that ... but mostly I'm worried people won't be able to understand you.

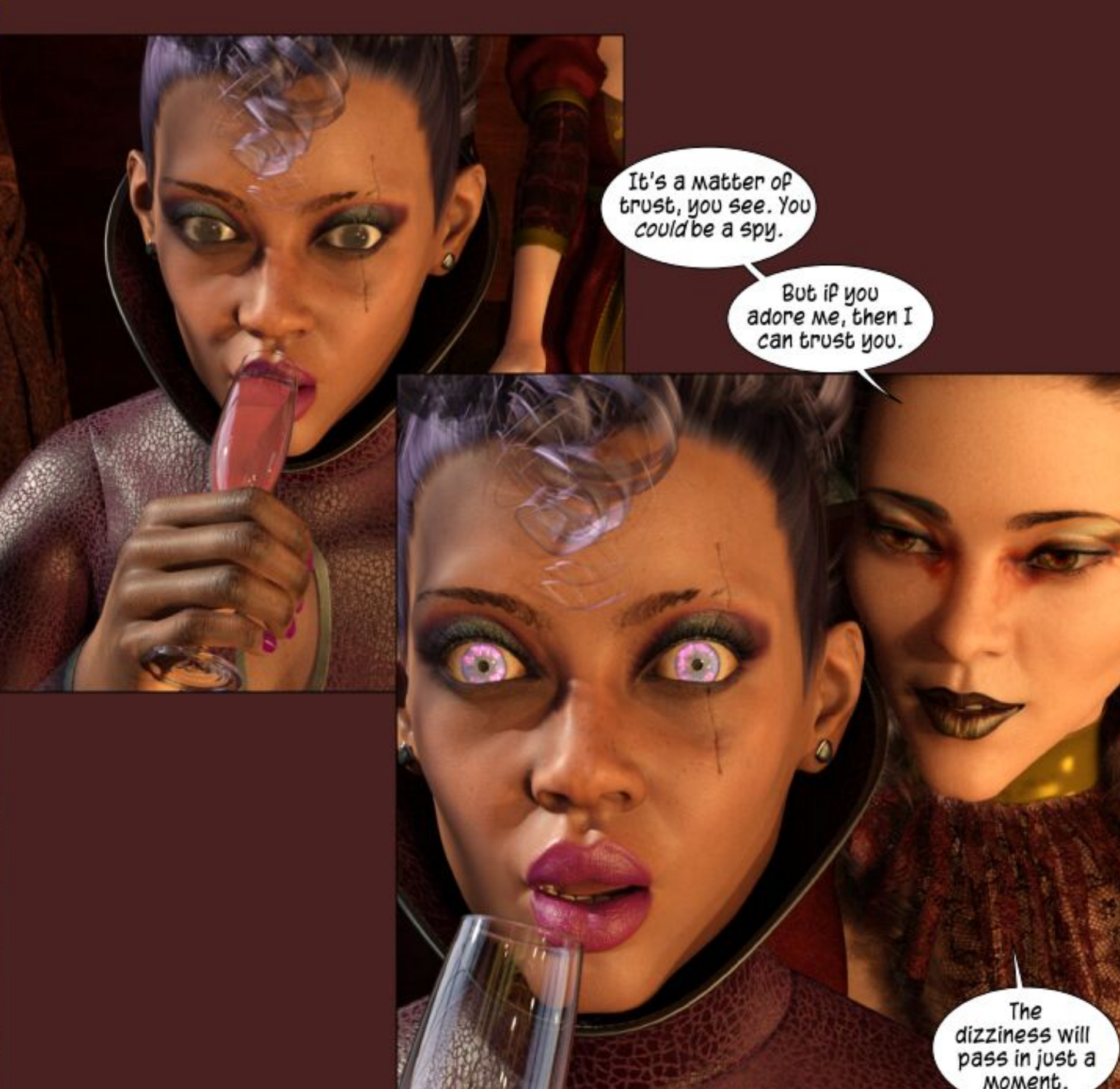
You han't no fuss ...

I haven't spent my whole life in sleep. Most people here have.

I can talk the talk. Did school ten years.

Glad to hear that's still running.

OK, ready?





I went ahead and dressed you because we only have a short time for me to show you around before the party.

Party?

Yes, Daddy's having a get-together this evening. All the important people--well, all the people who think they're important--will be there. They wouldn't dare risk missing something. Daddy doesn't do this often.

I don't especially want to be there, but I don't have a choice. Anyway, you might as well learn who's who.



Don't worry too much about keeping track of them, though. Just smile and look vacant. Then they'll think you're harmless.



Ah, Lady Delp. A pleasure to be in your presence, as always. And who is this lovely creature?

Lady Barigault, Lord Barigault, may I present Lady Haley.

Charmed!



He's completely full of shit at all times, and she's a complete nothing. I expect the first time she does anything interesting in her life will be when she finds a way to murder him.

You called me 'lady.' I am not a lady.

You're a lady if I say so.

Besides, everyone's a lord or lady here. It's the convention. If you want to run with this crowd you have to play along with their little fantasies.



Lady Sterling, Lord Sterling: Lady Haley.

Oh, my. How interesting.

I'm so pleased to meet you.



Isn't like her. She's sweet just on top.

Your instincts are good. She's a scheming bitch. Don't trust her with anything.

So she's Pound another, eh? I had begun to wonder. That was a long dry spell.

They brother and sister?

They say they're husband and wife. There are rumors. Best not to go there.

Wouldn't it be amusing to tell the new toy what happened when dear Lady Delp got bored with the last one?

You risk it. I like all my limbs where they are.



And now the shadowy end of the room.

The man glaring at everyone is Lord Pulter. My cousin. He's constantly pissed that he doesn't have Daddy's ear, and he hates me because I do.

The woman with the ridiculous train--don't step on it!-- is Lady Derrrow, who's been chasing Daddy for years--

Oh, hell, she's seen us. Smile and look cute.



Honor, do you suppose it would be too much to ask for your father to attend his own event?

I'm terribly sorry, Lady Derrrow, I have no idea where he's gotten to. You know how Daddy is.

I'm sure he'll be along soon--



Good evening, all! Thank you for being here. I have someone I'd like you to meet.

This is Acolyte Holly. She's on loan, you might say, from the Order of Vision. She's going to help bolster our defenses against these damned Scholzen raids.



Even no eyes I can tell she isn't impressed with these Polk.

Then she and I agree on something.

Come on. We've done our obligations, now we can go have some fun.



Something wrong?

Han't see how take this off ...

How to -- Oh! There aren't any Pastenings. I'll just dematerialize it.

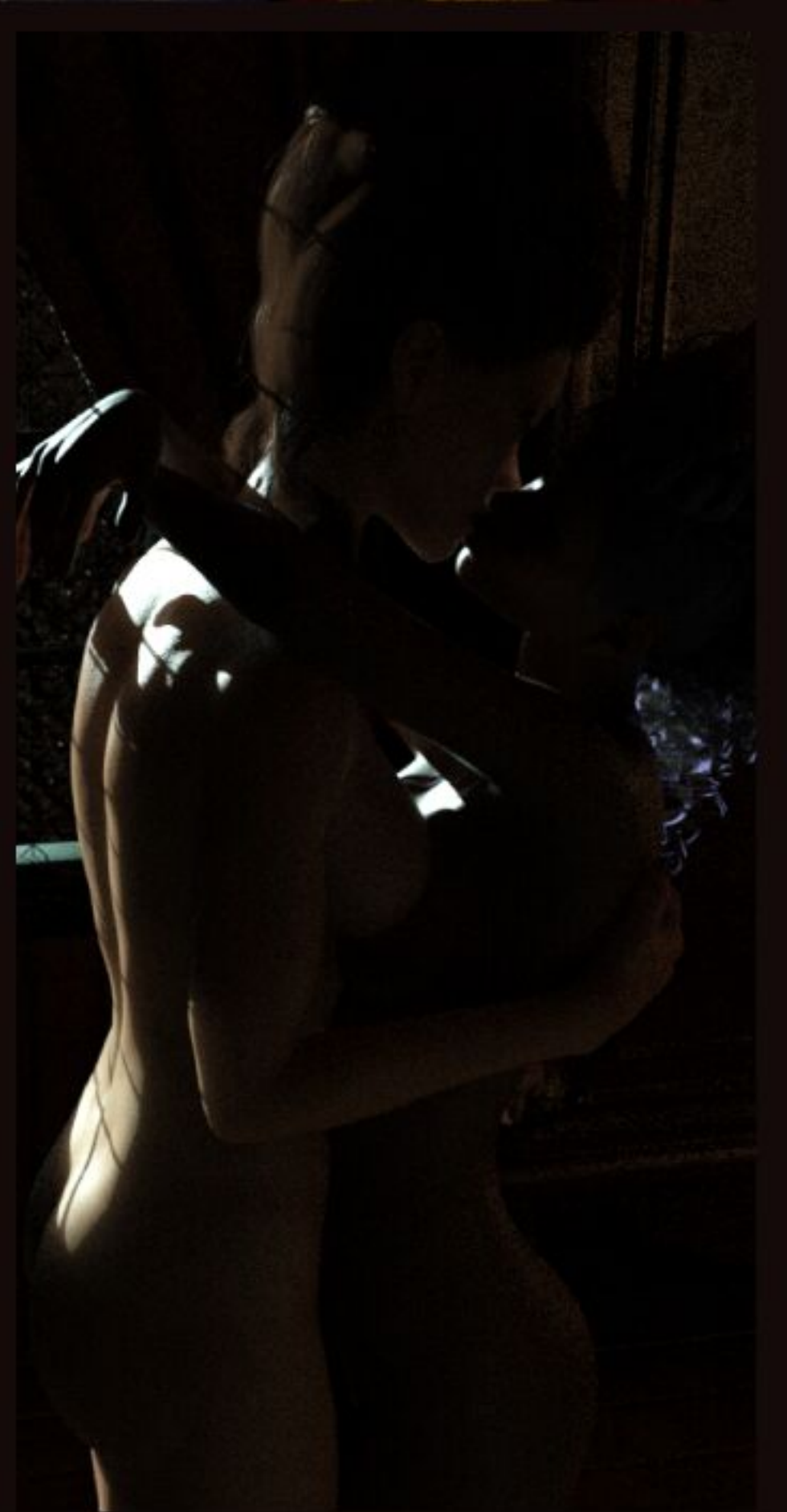
You are new here.

Scholzen skels grabbed me soon's I got in.



I suppose that means I need to take yours off too.

Uh-huh.



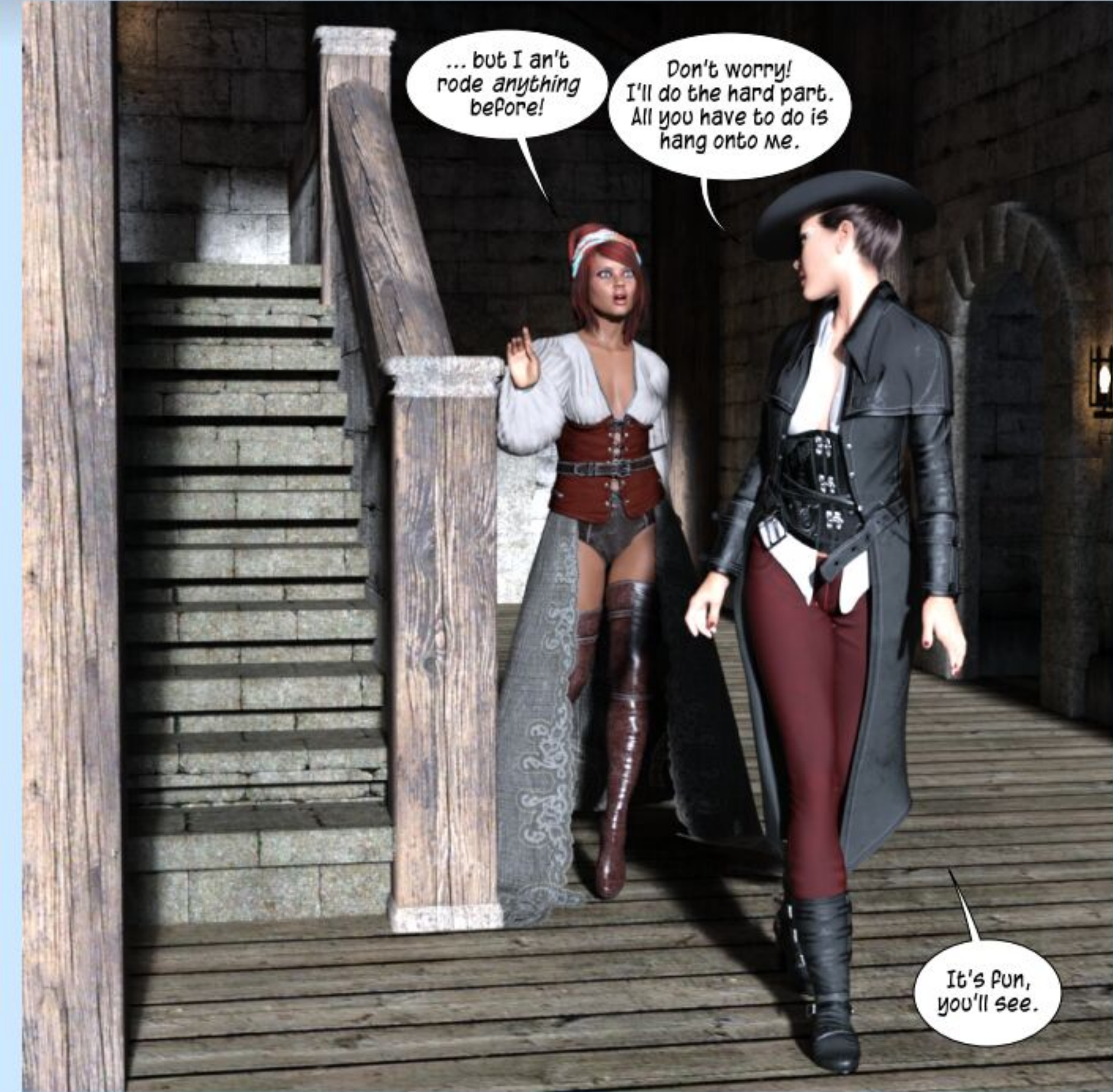
Are you nervous? Don't tell me you're new at this too.

No ... just han't figure how to go yet.

I'll give you directions.



TWO MORNINGS LATER.



... but I ain't rode anything before!

Don't worry! I'll do the hard part. All you have to do is hang onto me.

It's pun, you'll see.



Gon' ride that?

This is Lilli! She wouldn't hurt anybody. Unless I asked her to. She adores me.





Lady Delp!  
Lady Delp!

--sigh--  
What is it, Thed?

Your Pather's  
looking for you. He's  
been asking all over  
the castle ...

Oh, honestly.  
It's not like there  
are all that many  
places I could be.



There you are!  
Where have you been?  
The Scholzen are about  
to invade! A major  
attack in force!

Daddy, that's  
ridiculous. They  
always do small  
raids, and never in  
the daytime.

I'm telling you,  
it's happening!  
Holly says--

Something  
here isn't  
right.



The woman up there  
is not what she  
appears to be.

And a maid has  
no business down  
here ...

Thed! Grab her!

I've got her.

Ah, hell.



That's a  
good trick.

You Order  
Polk are a big Mystery,  
you know? Guess you don't  
just like to wear weird  
clothes after all.

You have  
no idea,  
interloper.

Now let's  
see your  
face, shall  
we?



You!!

Hiya,  
Tommy.  
Moving up in  
the world,  
huh?

Why, seems like  
just yesterday that  
I got your ass banned  
from production  
because you were  
extorting your own  
actors.

What was it  
really--fifteen years,  
now? You must have gotten  
pretty desperate for a  
new grift.

Never knew you  
had a kid. Have you  
told her about your  
colorful past, or am I  
the first?



Now I remember where I've seen  
you! You were the one who came in  
different. The one who broke out!

And this other is the one who  
rescued her! I recognize her voice.  
They must be working together!

Spies, eh?  
Come to try to  
sabotage us? Are you  
working with Scholz?

Honor, my dear, have  
you let a spy into our  
castle in your haste to  
warm your bed?

No, that can't be true--  
She fled the Scholzen! She hates them!  
I don't believe she could lie to me --



She's not working with me. I don't know her. Leave her out of this.

You see--

I'm sorry, Honor, but I simply don't believe her.

Neither do I.

Nobody asked you, Thed.

Honor, I an't no spy! S'truth!



Well, there's an easy way to prove it.

Take this and stick it right through her heart.



You're hesitating.

You want me to kill her?

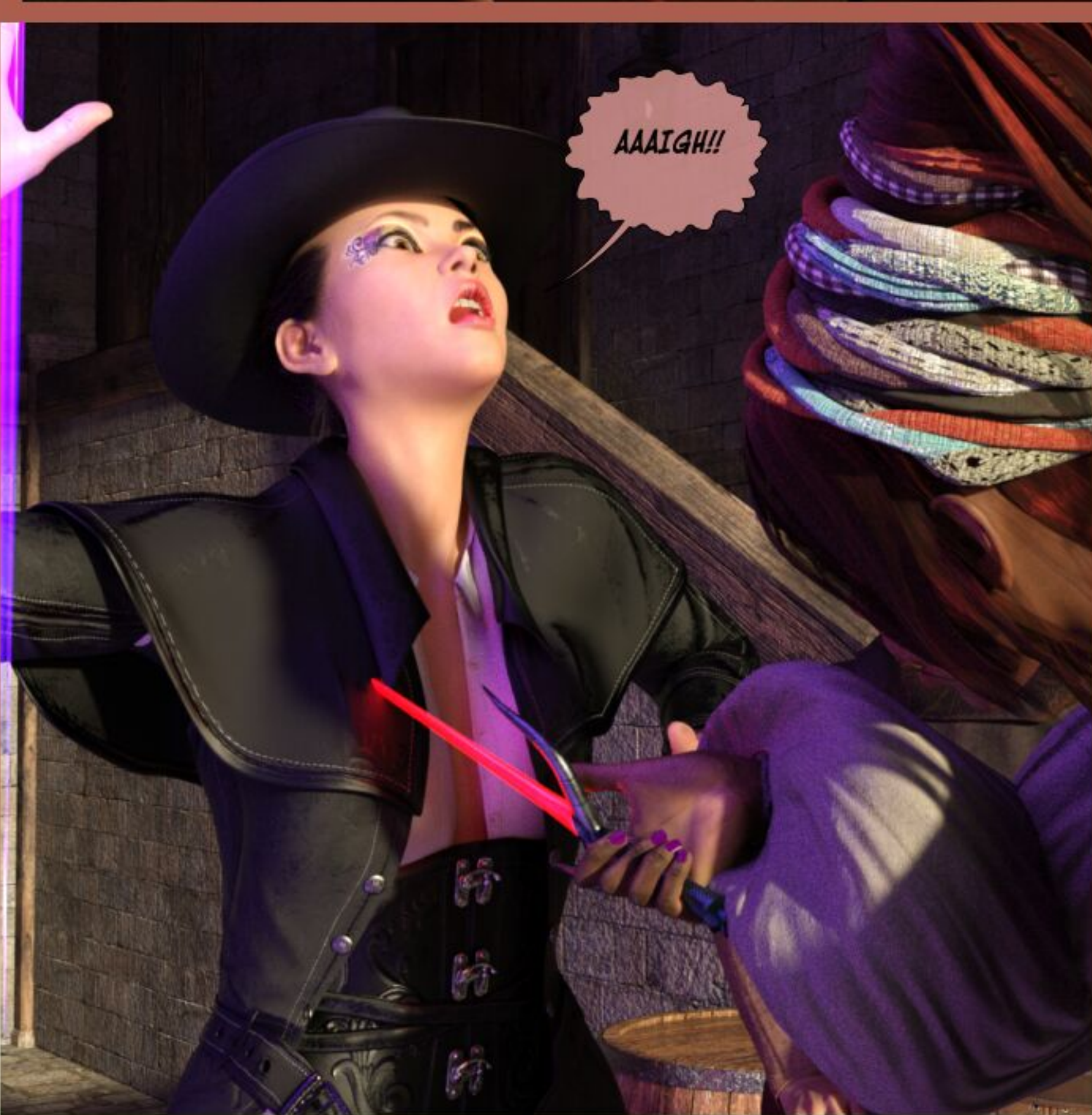
I do. I don't care what she is or isn't. I want you to prove your loyalty. Your love.



I want you to do it because you adore me and would do anything for me.

Absolutely anything.

...



AAAIGH!!



Haul off, you! Stay back!

OK, OK ...

... she stabbed me!

Honor!

Jex, watch out for the creepy nun!

She's the dangerous one--



The gates!



Run! Everyone!!



I can hold them off ...

Not here. Upstairs. There's a better choke point.

If you got overwhelmed down here, your order would have my head.

Quickly, now.

Theo, get all the shadows out here! Hurry!



... she stabbed me ...

Lady Delp, we have to get you to safety--

Get your hands off me, Theo.

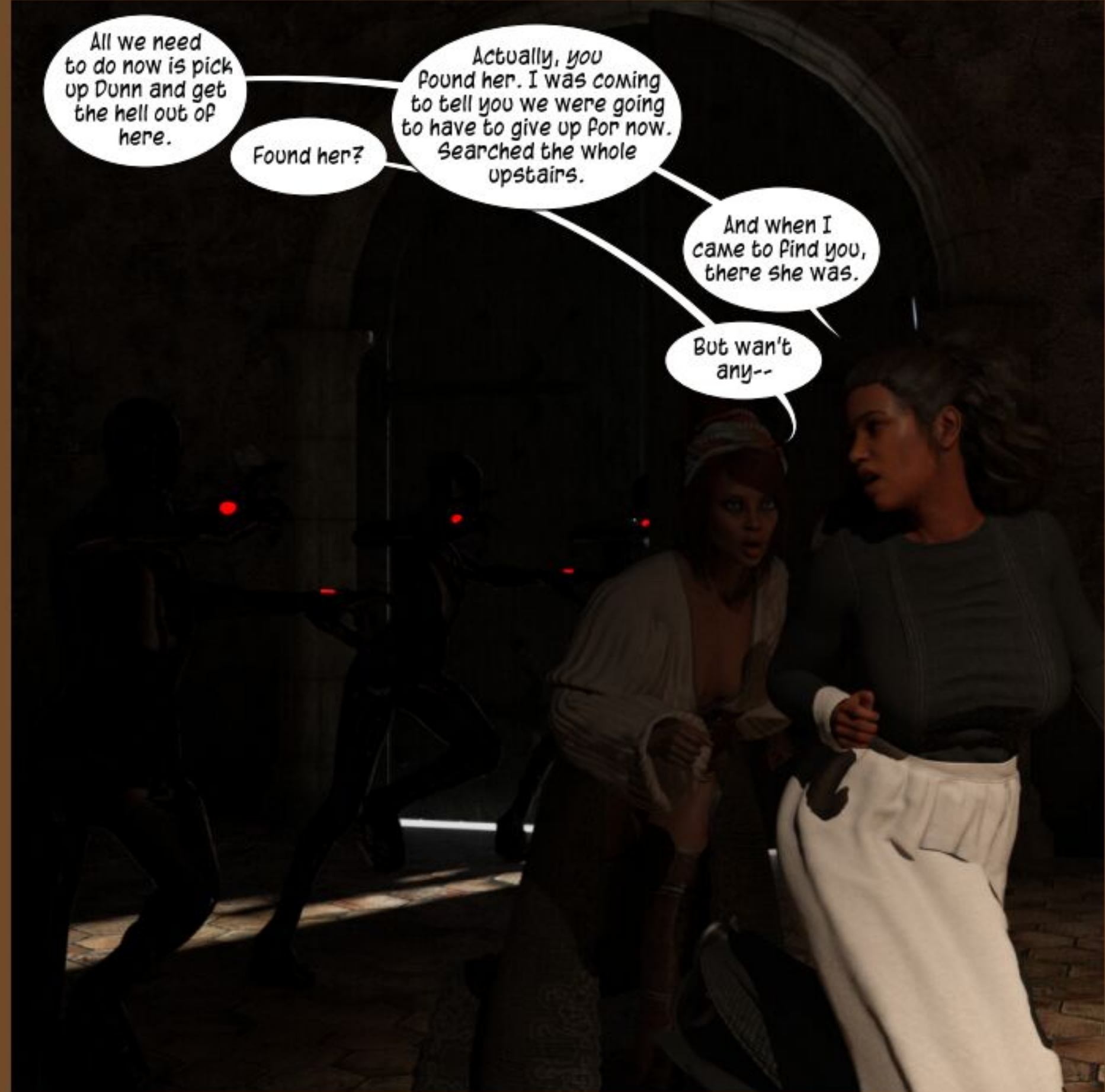
Not that way.



You got out! Figured to make her--

Thanks. But Honor's too strong for you yet, and that damned nun might be too strong for both of us.

I could always get free. I can't explain now, they're almost on us. This door over here, quick.



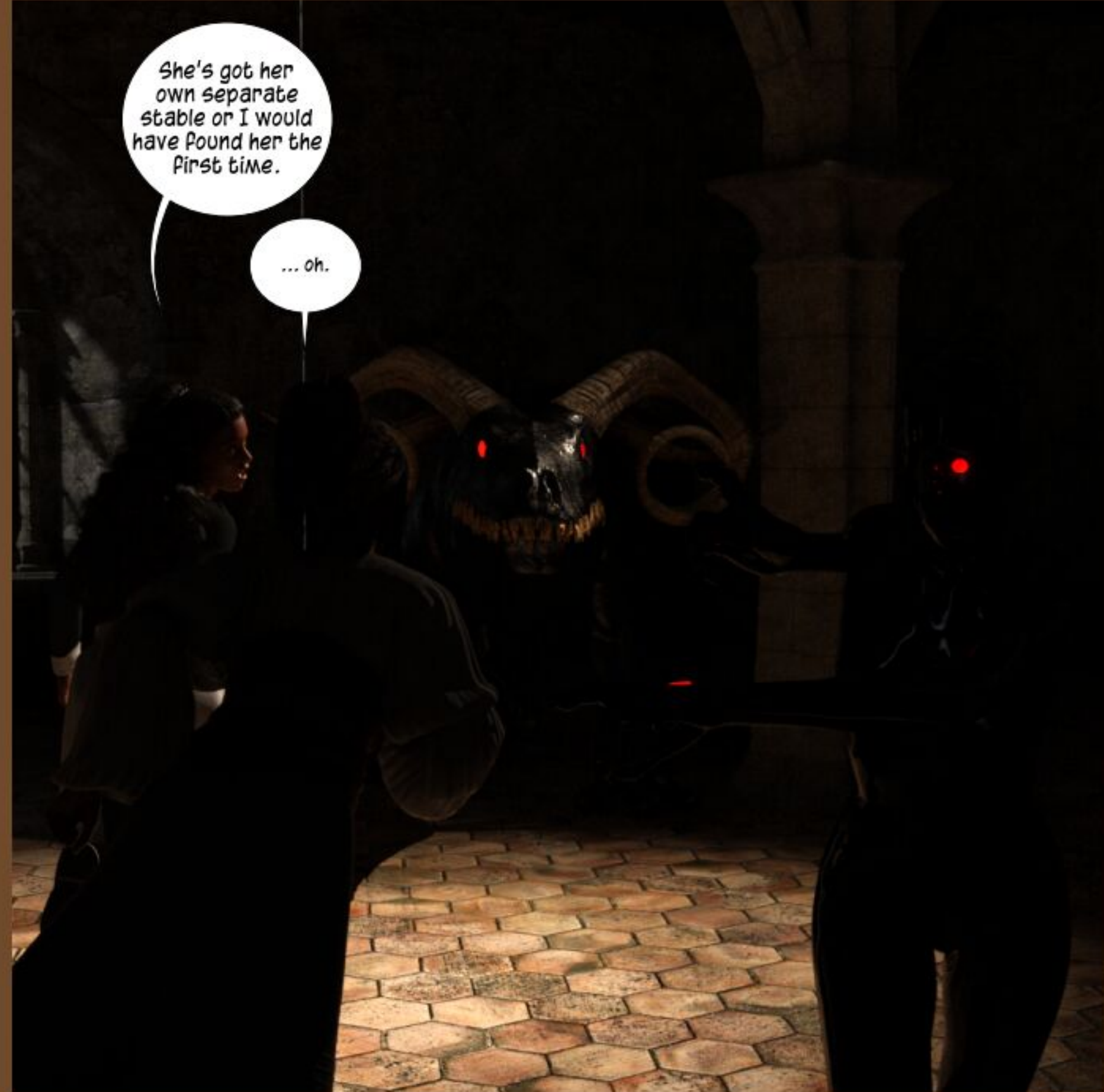
All we need to do now is pick up Dunn and get the hell out of here.

Found her?

Actually, you found her. I was coming to tell you we were going to have to give up for now. Searched the whole upstairs.

And when I came to find you, there she was.

But wasn't any--



She's got her own separate stable or I would have found her the first time.

... oh.



There, there. See? Friendly. That's a good monster.

I hope I can revert her. If I can't, we can still get her out, but it's going to be hard as hell to get her through a portal.



Woo!

We win.

auhh?



How come you still got clothes?

Did Honor dress you? This kind of portal cancels a lot of imposed effects.

I put these clothes and hair on myself, so they're not imposed.

auhh?

She gon' be OK?

It'll take a while. She was a warbeast for a long time.

I've got a friend who'll be able to fix her up, though.



Look, I know we need to talk about a lot of things, but right now I need to get her taken care of.

Why don't you recall? You can load a preset so you'll be dressed again, and you can add a destination for the location where you recalled.

Or you can go from recall to the souk. There's a set portal to Serenity in the souk, and it drops you a little closer to the useful stuff. Ask about it. Carefully.

Maybe go to the property office in Serenity to look into a private space. I'll find you--tomorrow, or the day after.

THE NEXT DAY, OR THE DAY AFTER.



Got push with you.

"We gon' throw" kind of push, or "we need to talk this out" kind?

An't first kind, hope.

Sent me in there to be her toy, and you knew it!

White lady, too! Not stbyle.

Well, if it makes you Peel any better, I had to be a maid.

I hate playing servants. Sometimes it's got to be that way, though.

But, yeah. I'm sorry.



For the record, I didn't warn you about being enthralled because I didn't expect her to do that. I didn't realize she was quite that ... insecure. Or suspicious. Or both.

I did expect I was sending you in to have sex with her. It didn't occur to me until it was too late that ... ah ... I hope it wasn't your first, let's put it that way.

Out street, people get up that pretty early ... or they did when I was out there.

Wan't my first.

Ah ... cusk was real good, you want to know.

Never had any pay that kind of attention before. Daka always too tacked when we did, Teel always Past and done ...

Well, good.

I'm glad to hear you at least got some Pun out of it.



Could have killed you, tho! IP han't broke out--

No, you couldn't have. First off, it's very hard to kill someone in sleep. You have to make them really believe something has killed them.

A lot of things in sleep are like that--to do it, you have to convince the person that's what's happening.

Second, I'm kind of the champ here for breaking out of things. I get sucked in, yeah, but usually not for long, and it takes a lot more than that. I went along because I wanted to see what that nun could do. No one has any dirt on the Order.

Anyway, that silly-ass dagger was never going to do anything much to me. I was concerned about you. You believed it was actually lethal. IP she'd decided to run you through with it, that might have been bad. IP she'd tried it, I'd have jumped on her head.



That's how it all works, huh? She turn that woman to a monster by making her think she was hard enough?

She might have had tools to make it easier to do that. Some things carry more force than others. There are some algorithmic items pretty much no one can resist, for example.

But, yeah, under the surface, that's the gist of it.

Now an't know if I want be in sleep after all.

Got some real skels this place.

Well, you've seen some of the worst bits first, you know.

Parts of it are great, and as for the bad bits ... you already have a lot of resistance. Remember, you did break out. Three times.

Hell, if you wanted, you could probably help us deal with some of those bad bits.

"I mean, even if we just say 'let the troublemakers do what they want in their own space,' we still end up doing things like that rescue ... I don't like it, but I don't see that changing anytime soon."



A complete disaster! Not just repelled, but lost fifty units ... and these idiots can't even tell me what happened!

Surrounded by incompetence ... wonder why I bother ...

You're tired. Let's get out of these things, I'll pour you a drink, and draw a hot bath for you ... you'll Peel much better.



You're right ... this does help ... very relaxing ...

Oh, good! Lean your head back. I'm going to wash your hair.



Doesn't that Peel nice?

Mmm, yes ...

Silly, though ... barely have any hair to wash ...

Oh, it's not to get it clean. This is to get rid of that hair so I can make you look pretty.

That special drink's really hit you, so I don't think you'll be any trouble.



You know, it's not them who are incompetent.

Most people would have figured that out by now.

You're not just bad at being king. You're a horrible strategist and you're lousy in bed and I've had enough of it.



There. I think that's much better, don't you?

Move over. I hate to waste a hot bath.

You can wash my back.

... Yes, Mistress.



Oh yeah.

Things are definitely going to change around here.

NEXT: SOUK AND YE SHALL FIND!