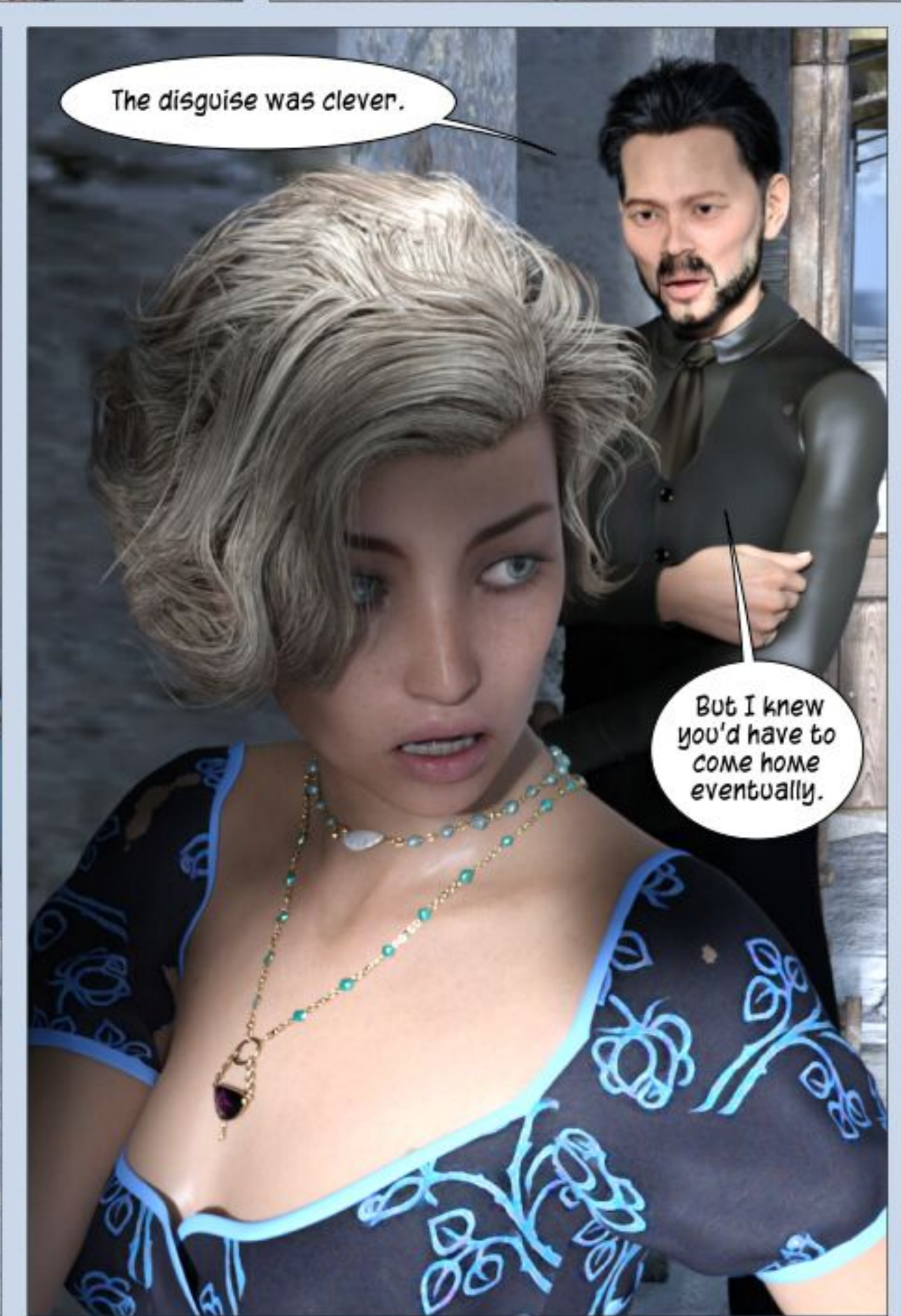


**SLEEPER SQUAD**



THIS IS JANICE GRELL. YOU MAY HAVE SEEN HER AT THE END OF LAST ISSUE.



The disguise was clever.

But I knew you'd have to come home eventually.



OK, Fell, you found me. Now get the hell away from me.

I'm not going back to him, and if you try anything, I'll--

Hold on. I just thought, since you'd obviously spotted me, we could talk for a moment and save us both some trouble.

... OK, talk. But stay over there.



Look, he was doing pretty well while you were hiding here in Serenity. He might even have gotten over it one of these days.

But then you show up in the Cobbles going around with Jonah Uister, of all people? Dancing and dining and rubbing it his Pace?

How did you think he was going to react?



Fell, I have no idea what you're talking about.

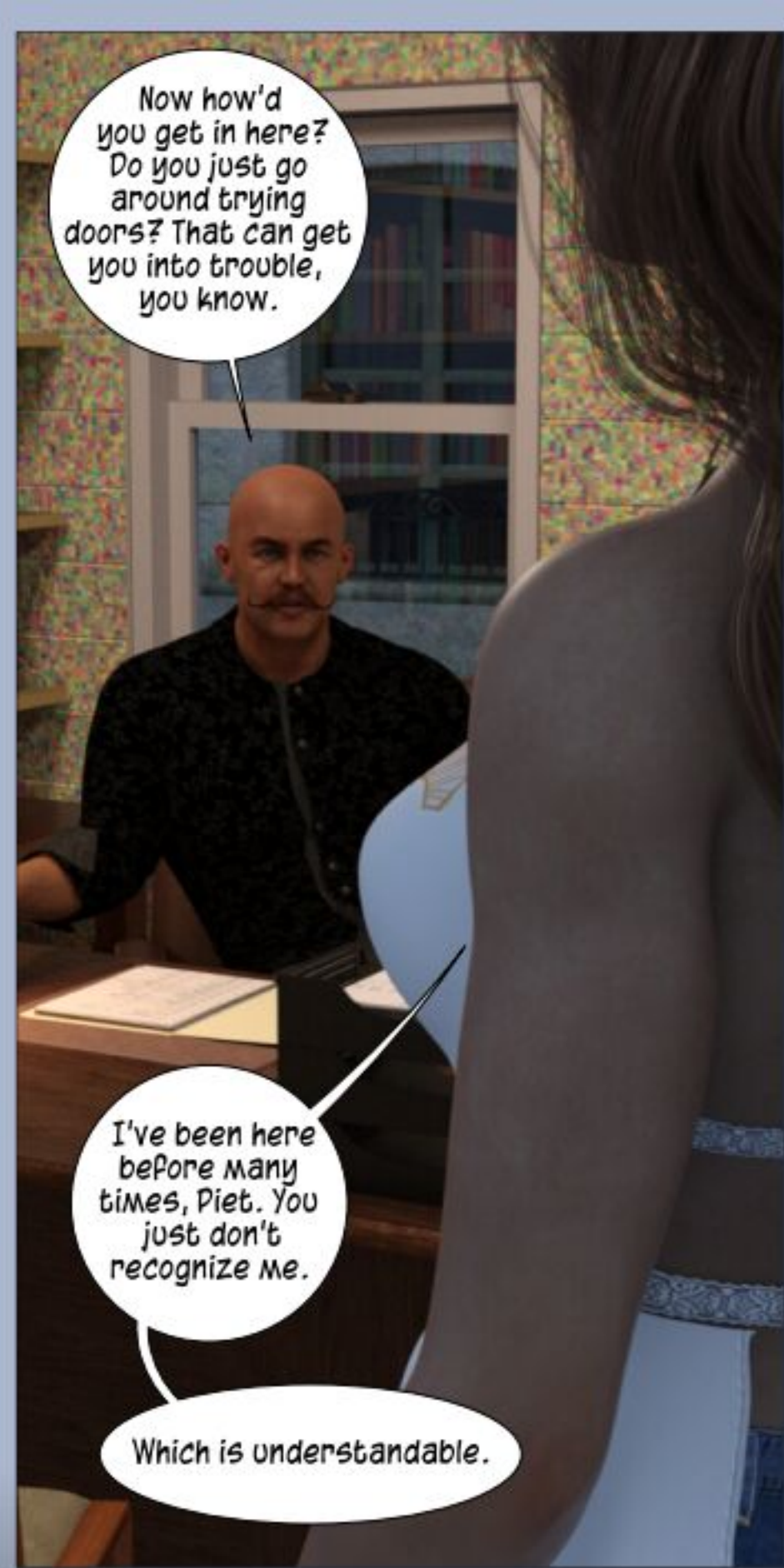
Once I left Blake, I didn't come out of my private space for ages.

I only decided a month or so ago it was safe to come out once in a while. But I haven't left Serenity. At all.

And I don't know who Jonah Uister even is.

Now please go away.





Now how'd you get in here? Do you just go around trying doors? That can get you into trouble, you know.

I've been here before many times, Piet. You just don't recognize me.

Which is understandable.

I need a favor. Not a big one. I just can't do it myself.

I'm going to need more than that to go on, Ms--

Just call me Janice. Don't worry, I'll give you all you need ... but you have to promise that most of it doesn't leave this room.

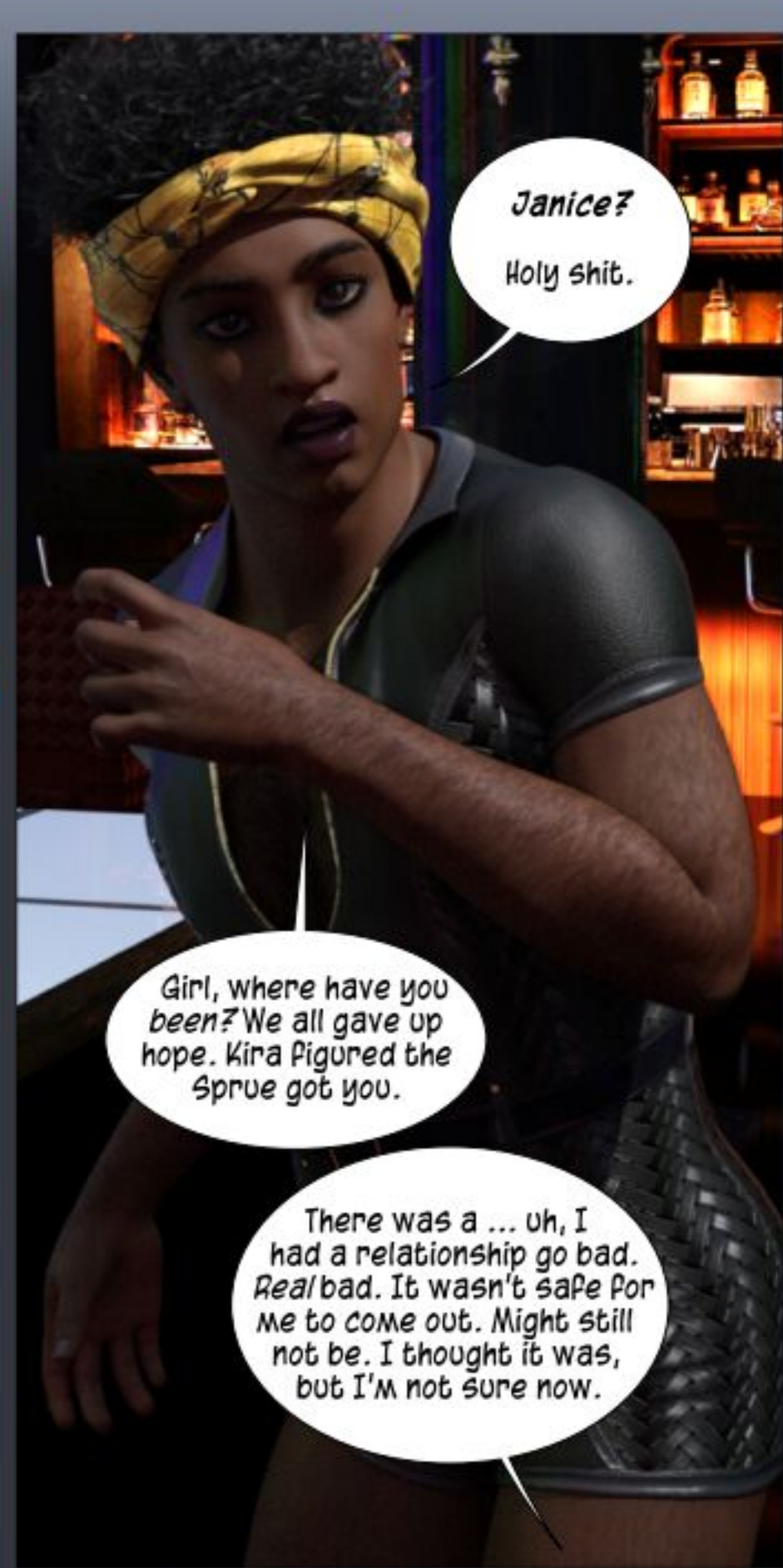
... AND WE RETURN TO SERENITY.



We won't be open for hours.

I came to find you, Cas.

I wasn't sure you were even still working here, but you were the best chance of finding somebody I had ...



Janice? Holy shit.

Girl, where have you been? We all gave up hope. Kira figured the Sprue got you.

There was a ... uh, I had a relationship go bad. Real bad. It wasn't safe for me to come out. Might still not be. I thought it was, but I'm not sure now.



Kira's actually the reason I'm here. I need to find her. It might be important.

You're not sure?

I'm not sure about anything right now, Cas.

Well, I can't help you. Kira's done a vanishing act too. Not like you, but we've barely seen her the last two years. Somebody probably knows where she is, but I don't know who.

Hell. All right. Thanks.



That's it? "Hi, where's Kira, sorry no one's seen me in like four years, bye?"

People were searching for you!

... I ... Cas, I didn't know who I could trust. I felt like I was completely on my own. The only thing I could come up with was to hide.



But you don't have to go back into hiding!

He's not over it, Cas. I learned that this morning.

OK, so get us in on this. You have friends there, Janice? You have a network. We can all keep watch for him, or something.

Maybe. You're right, though, I can't keep hiding. I need to deal with him, one way or another.

RUBY HAS AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.



Piet, I should get this clear right up front: I don't like the Cobbles, and I don't like most of the people in it.

I understand. I feel exactly the same way about Serenity.

Touché.

But what I mean is, why should I take on something in the Cobbles at all? I don't care what the people there do to each other.

And on the word of a stranger--! I mean, not a complete stranger, your reputation precedes you and it's not bad, but I don't actually know you. Why risk it?



Because she insisted you were the only person who could do it.

I have friends there who handle that kind of thing all the time--I can send you to them--

That's not the point. She asked for you. She went to some risk to come to me to ask me to get you.

Listen, you and I don't trust each other, that's understandable. But knowing what I know, I trust her ... and it seems she trusts you.

And if she's right about what's going on, she's not overreacting. This is something that could go beyond "what the people there do to each other" very quickly. Even if you don't like the Cobbles way, I assume you don't want this slopping into the other zones. Or do I misread what you think of as your duty?



That was low, Piet.

They don't sting if they're not accurate.

... All right. It won't be today; I've got other commitments. I'll go tomorrow.

And I'm not making any promises. I might not be able to keep them.



A BACK ROOM IN THE COBBLES. JONAH ULSTER IS HAVING A QUIET DISCUSSION WITH AN ACQUAINTANCE.



Stop! Please!!

Give me a reason.

You annoy me, Jimmy. Seems like everything I do these days, there you are, in my face.

I get it. It's a little pond. You figure the best way is to latch onto one of the big fish.

But you need the right temperament for that, Jimmy boy, and you don't have it. Look at you.

But I'm sympathetic, Jimmy, I am.

You want to move up? I have a way. Position in my organization. Big opportunity for you.

Not exactly what you had in mind, and it'll take some adjustment. But I'm sure you're up for it.

Or I can just make you bleed every day until you see some sense. Your choice.



What ... What do you want me to do?

Put this on. And don't take it off for love nor money.



All right, now wh--



--Whaaaaaaaaa??



Perfect.

Careful on the shoes now.



I ... this is really weird ... boss.

My head's messed up too ...

That'll pass in a minute.

OK, but why do I need to look like this?



You're not the only one who wants to climb up around here.

I got tired of doing it the rough way. You can beat these clowns to a pulp and it won't teach them a thing.

There's more than one way to do it, though. I'm going to give you your own personal operation.

Welcome to the Sirens.



ELSEWHERE IN THE COBBLES.



Damn it, Fel, I was just about to have lunch. If you tell me something that spoils my digestion--

Nothing spoils your digestion, Blake. You really should avoid eating in places where your shirt matches the tablecloth.

Says the man who only wears shades of gray. Anyway, it's an entirely different pattern. What did you get?

I tailed her for two days. She only went out to have meals and shop a little. She never left Serenity, so I gave up and just talked to her.

She hasn't left Serenity in a long time. She barely leaves her private space. She hasn't been to the Cobbles. And she doesn't know who Jonah is.

And you believe that?



As a matter of fact, I do.

Why would she try a lie that big? She could have just said "go to hell." She could have said nothing. You don't claim you don't know somebody when it's easy to check, unless you're stupid, and she isn't.

Bullshit! If it's so easy to check, why didn't you check it, like I asked you to do?

I saw her! I hope you're not going to claim I've forgotten what she looks like--

No, of course not. And I'm not saying you didn't see what you saw. But I think, whoever you saw, it isn't Janice Grell.

So who is it? You're saying Ulster's going around with a woman who looks like Janice just to get under my skin?

Blake-- that's a pretty big leap. I don't know if Jonah even knows who you are.

Everybody knows who I am, Fel.

SERENITY, LATER THAT NIGHT. LIAM HOLMES' PRIVATE SPACE.



Already undressed and on the bed. Foreplay is a lost art.

Like you've ever needed it.

Besides, I'm desperate. You don't get enough nights off. I haven't seen you in weeks.

Desperate, my ass. You've got how many regular lovers right now?

Yes, but none of them are you.

Flattery will get you everywhere.



Speaking of your immense and horny social circle, isn't Kira Westvine part of it?

Uh... well, she was. She's practically been a recluse the last couple of years. I think she's been busy acting--

Yeah. I hadn't seen her either. I was wondering if you knew where she was.

... why are you looking for her?

I'm not. Janice Grell is. She came back from the dead today.



She's the one who disappeared just before the sprue?

A few months before. She'd been off and on even then. She said today she was real involved with some guy. I guess it didn't end well.

She showed up at the club this morning. Looking for Kira. She and Kira were pretty close.



You OK?

Huh?

... Oh. Yeah. Just thinking.

C'mon, bring that over here. Hit the lights, would you?







I don't want to hear it! When I tell you to do something, I Pucking well expect you to Pucking do it!

But, Mr. Purcell ... he refused to--

Did I not just say I didn't want to hear it?



Get that concession. Do whatever you need to do. Don't show your Face to me until you do.



... Hello?

Hi there!

Come in like that, you'd better be ready for it to get real personal.



That's the idea.

We're going to have a really good time.



You know, I usually try to know a little more about somebody before I take them home ...

Aw, don't worry, honey. I'm harmless. I just want you to have some Fun.

Let's get you out of that. I bet you look even better with your shirt off.



You get right to it, don't you?

It's what I'm here for.



... damn ...

So ... ah ... any chance we can do that again ... some time real soon?

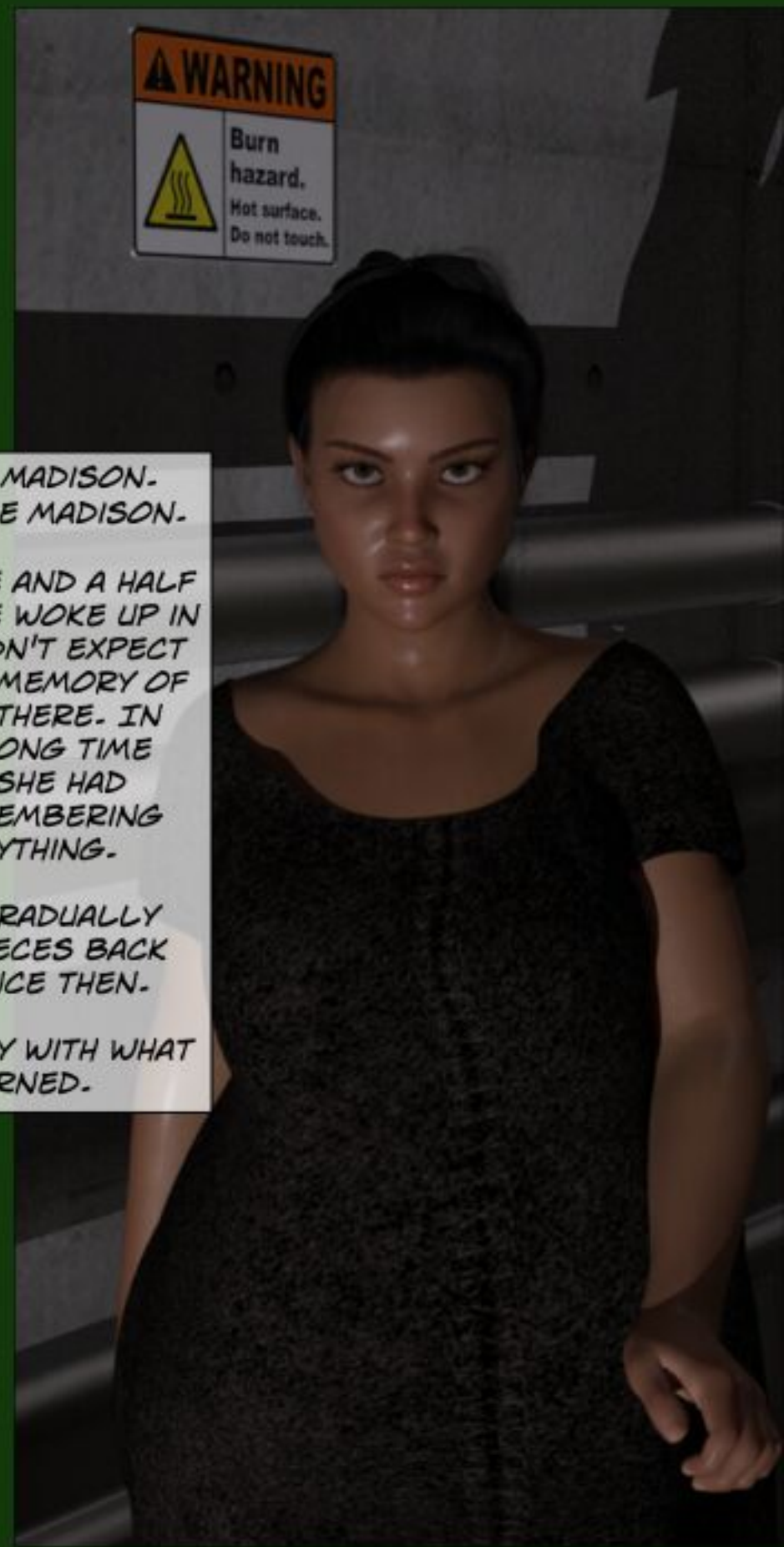
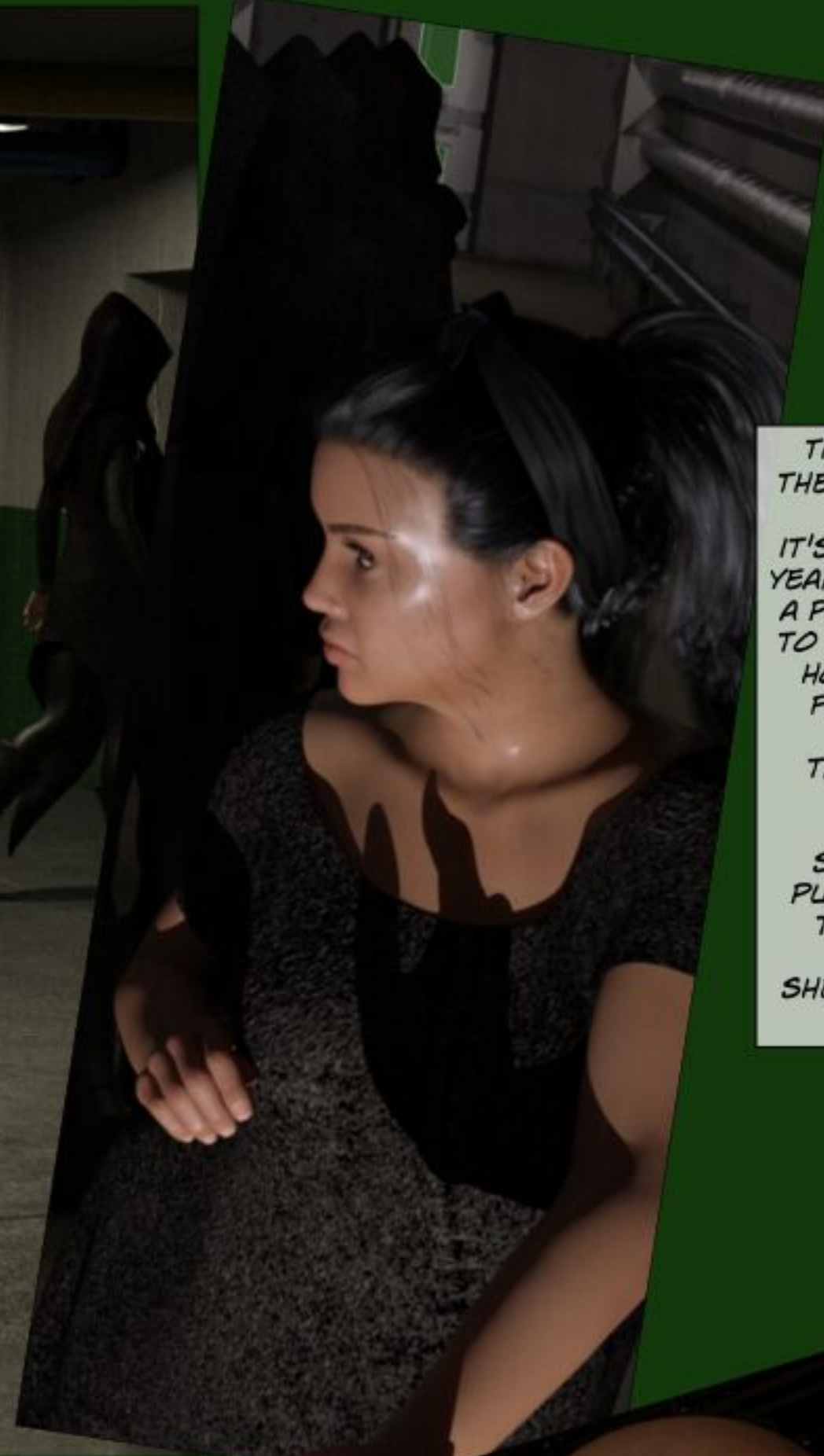
Oh, don't worry, honey ...

I'm not going anywhere.



INTERLUDE.

THE WIDE-EYES COMPOUND, OUT IN THE AWAKE WORLD.



THIS IS JOLEE MADISON. THE REAL JOLEE MADISON.

IT'S BEEN THREE AND A HALF YEARS SINCE SHE WOKE UP IN A PLACE SHE DIDN'T EXPECT TO BE, WITH NO MEMORY OF HOW SHE GOT THERE. IN FACT, FOR A LONG TIME AFTERWARD SHE HAD TROUBLE REMEMBERING MUCH OF ANYTHING.

SHE'S BEEN GRADUALLY PUTTING THE PIECES BACK TOGETHER SINCE THEN.

SHE'S NOT HAPPY WITH WHAT SHE'S LEARNED.



Hello, Striver.

Try anything, or make any loud noises, and this goes right into your fucking neck.

I finally got somebody to admit you were the one to ask. So. Tell me the truth. The whole story.

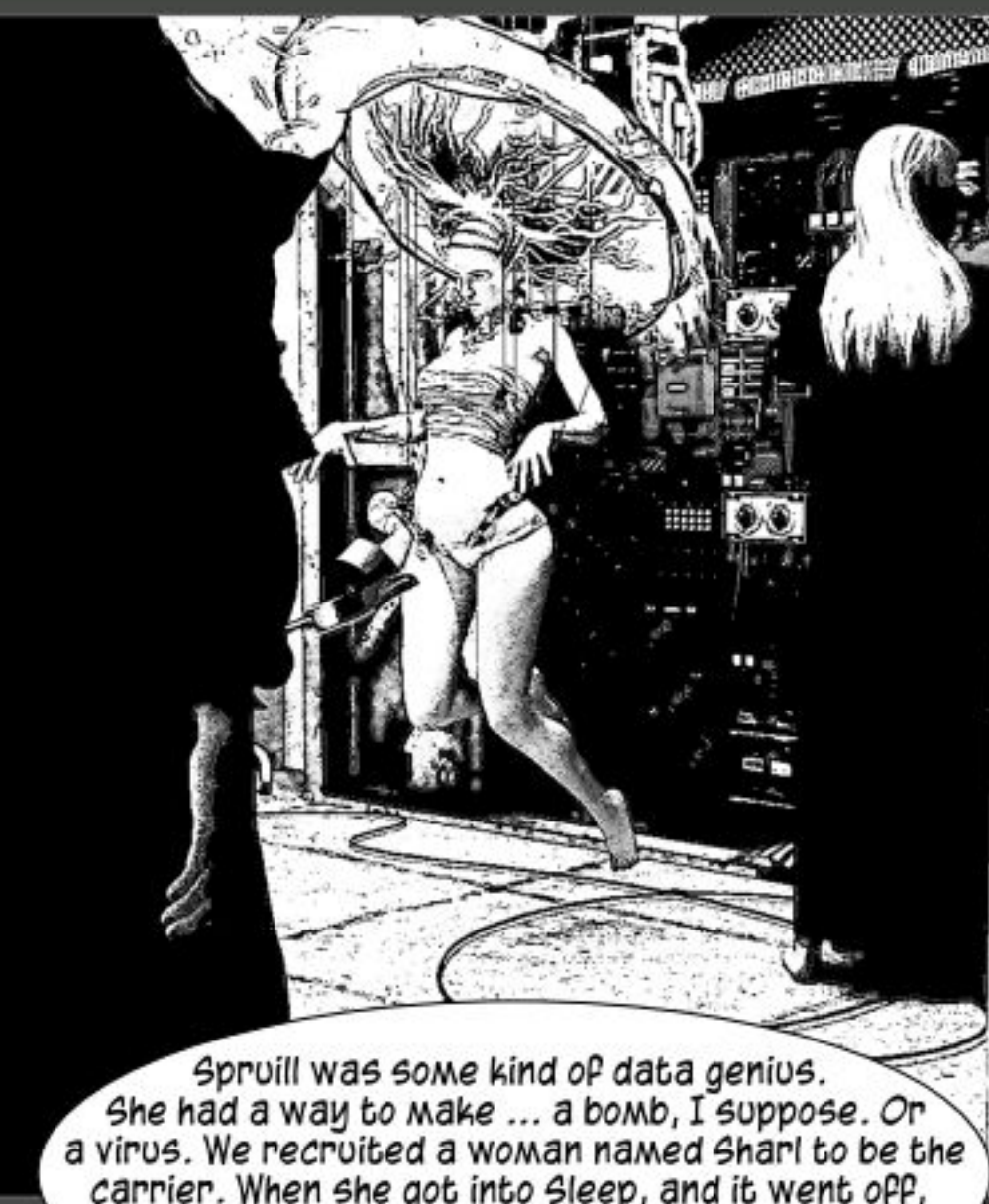
I ... I don't know what you mean--

The Fuck you don't!

They tell me you were the one behind it. You and Nat Spruill. It was just the two of you. Nobody else.

And I can't find Spruill, so it's gonna have to be you.

What the Fuck did you two do, and why'd I get dragged into it?



Spruill was some kind of data genius. She had a way to make ... a bomb, I suppose. Or a virus. We recruited a woman named Sharl to be the carrier. When she got into Sleep, and it went off, Sleep would be destroyed. It would come apart.

THIS SCENE: ISSUE #25.



But to get Sharl into Sleep, they had to take advantage of some kind of security flaw ... I never got the details, but they swapped you for her, so the system thought she was you. Then Spruill brought you here.

THIS SCENE: ISSUE #27.

No ... it ... ah ... it didn't work.

What??

Well, I mean ... Sleep isn't destroyed ... there would have been people flooding out ... I don't know what went wrong. Maybe Spruill does ... Maybe she did it on purpose ...

Where is Spruill?

Gone.

Word of what we were trying got out. I don't know how. There'd always been a group of Wide-Eyes who didn't actually want to destroy Sleep, who didn't like our focus on that. When they realized what we'd tried, they attempted to throw our group out of leadership. Blood was shed.

You missed all of it, because you were mentally in such bad shape that you never left the infirmary during the whole thing.

They left--with most of our supplies, the traitors--and once we'd pulled ourselves back together, we realized Spruill had escaped during the fighting.

She told me she'd been banned from Sleep, so I suppose she's out there somewhere, if she managed to survive.

That's all I know.

Thank you.





I wish I could have found Kira. She'd know what to do.

God, my feet don't even want to walk up these stairs. My feet are smarter than I am.



There's no way around it, though. If he hasn't given up on it after all this time, he never will.

I'm going to have to deal with Blake once and for all, or I'm never going to get any peace.

I just wish I knew what the hell I was going to do.



I hate this place. Bunch of wanna-be crimelords spending their days running gript and beating the shit out of each other ...

Why am I doing this, again?



Doesn't help that I have no good place to start ...

Piet asked me not to talk to Janice directly--too risky for her.

I need to talk to someone who has their ear to the ground and can maybe throw me a clue about what Ulster's up to. Ash and Maire might have something ... if I can find them.

Though ... there might be someone else I do know how to find ...



Ruby Martinez. This is somewhat unexpected.

Ms. Lee. Nice to finally meet. Your reputation precedes you.

As does yours.

Thank you, Dorie, you may go.



... and that's the situation. Anything I can get is more than I have.

Normally this is where I'd ask why I should give you any information at all. You have a great deal of unofficial jurisdiction in Serenity, but none here, and I don't imagine the Boss will welcome your presence.

"Normally." But?

But ... I agree with Piet that this is serious. I've been watching Jonah's activities and they're starting to alarm me.

Does the Boss know what's going on?

I haven't told him. He avoids direct contact, which is fine with me. His agent, Treece, misses very little. Either she's told him and he's dismissed it, or she's decided it's not worth telling him about.

I don't have much to give you, mind. Only one suggestion. Not all of Jonah's people are "on assignment." He keeps some of them as general street force, apparently. There's a particular bar where they tend to go when they're not needed.



This is bad. This is very very bad.

I've got to find her before it gets worse.



She probably has absolutely no idea that it's gone to hell.

I'll try the apartment first. Postpone the inevitable just a bit ...





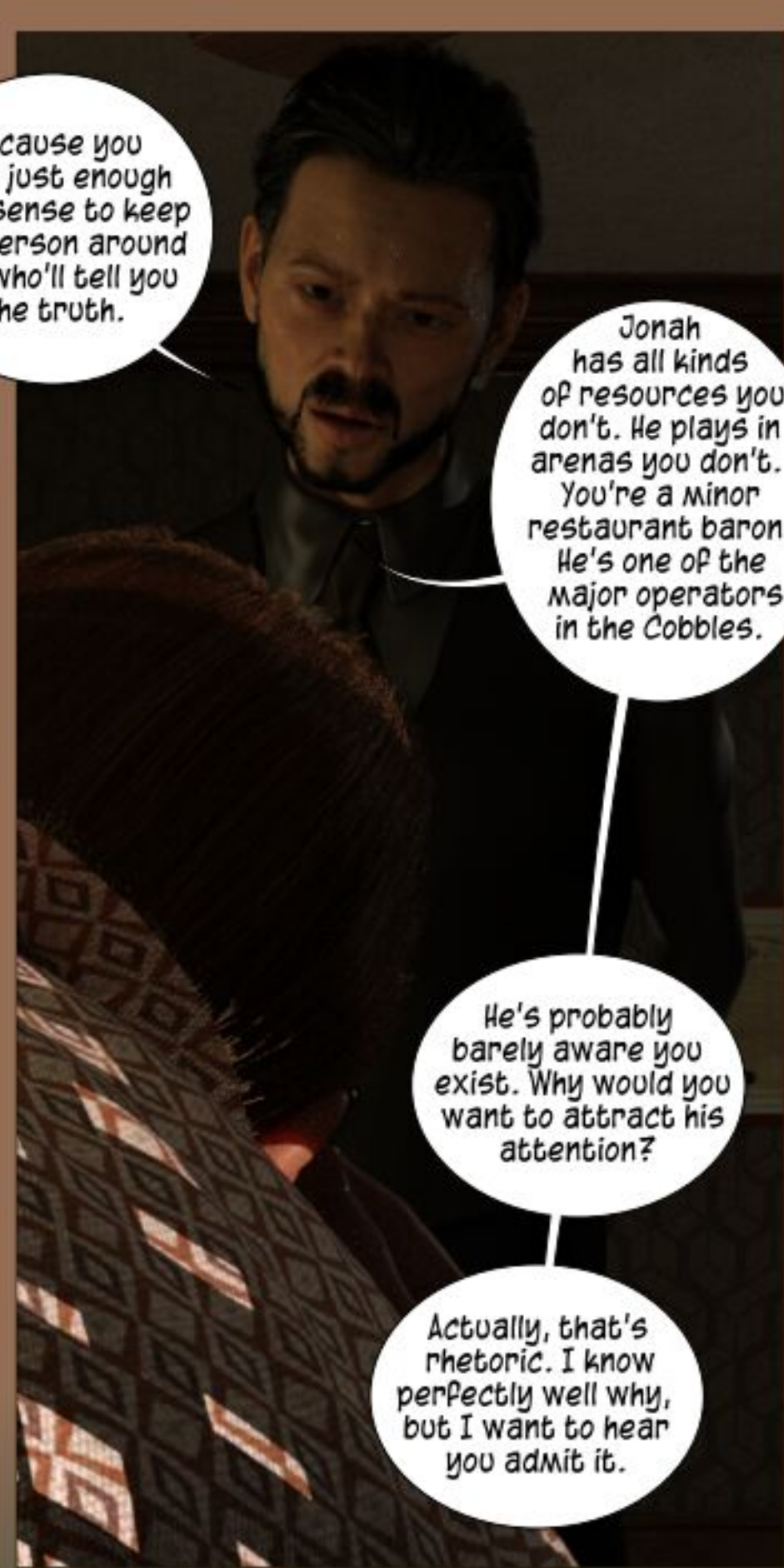
Fell, I've decided.

Jonah Ulster is a problem. I'm going after him.

That's a horrible idea.

Oh, thanks a lot.

Why do I even let you talk to me that way?

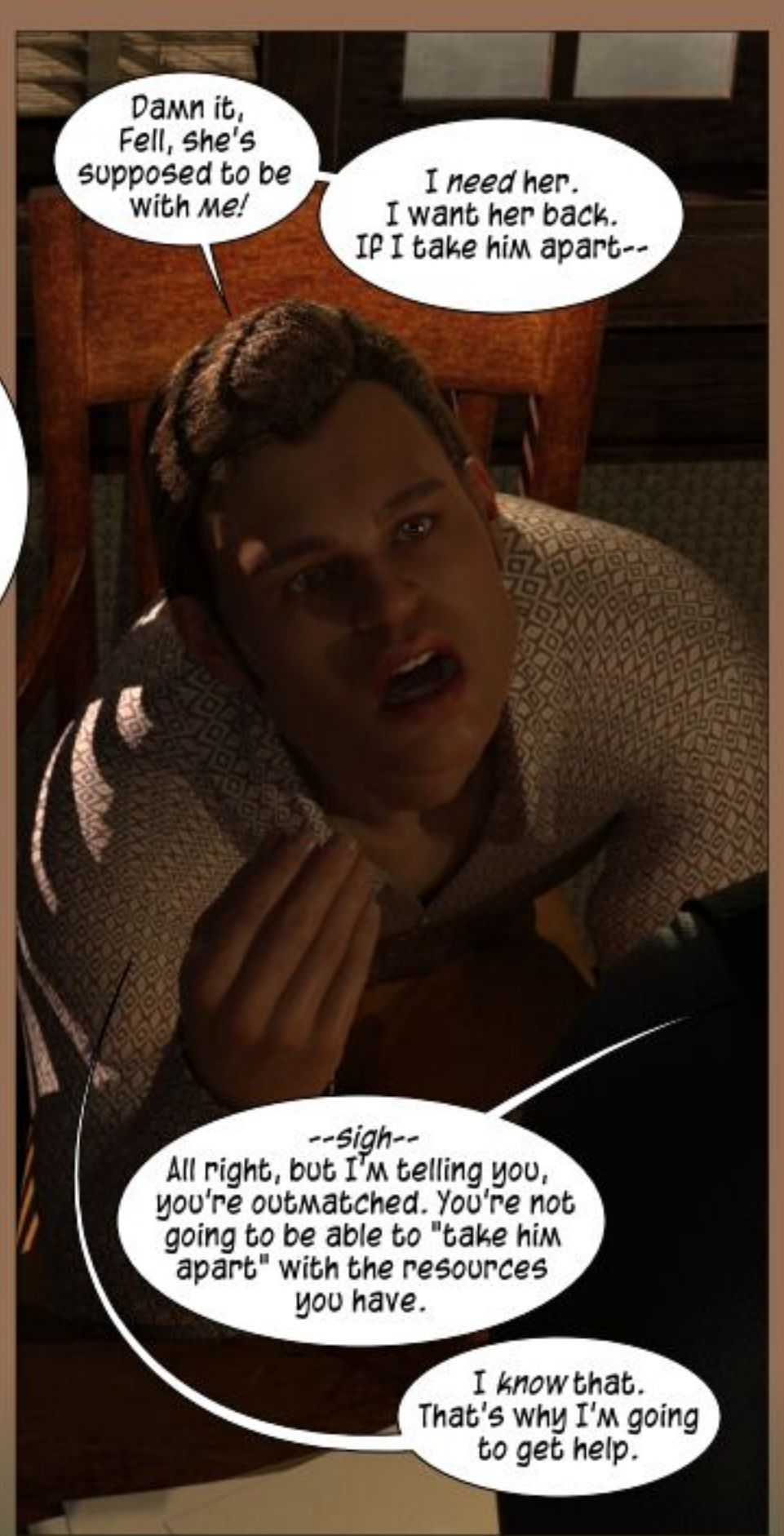


Because you have just enough good sense to keep one person around you who'll tell you the truth.

Jonah has all kinds of resources you don't. He plays in arenas you don't. You're a minor restaurant baron. He's one of the Major operators in the Cobbles.

He's probably barely aware you exist. Why would you want to attract his attention?

Actually, that's rhetoric. I know perfectly well why, but I want to hear you admit it.



Damn it, Fell, she's supposed to be with me!

I need her. I want her back. If I take him apart--

--sigh-- All right, but I'm telling you, you're outmatched. You're not going to be able to "take him apart" with the resources you have.

I know that. That's why I'm going to get help.



Look, it just sounds like a pretty good gig, y'know? I want in on it, s'all.

It's by invitation only.

Yeah, I know. I mean, I got that. What I want to know is, who do I gotta talk to to get an invite?

If you don't already know that, then you're not likely to get one. Sorry.



Fine.

Just wanna keep the good shit to yourselves.

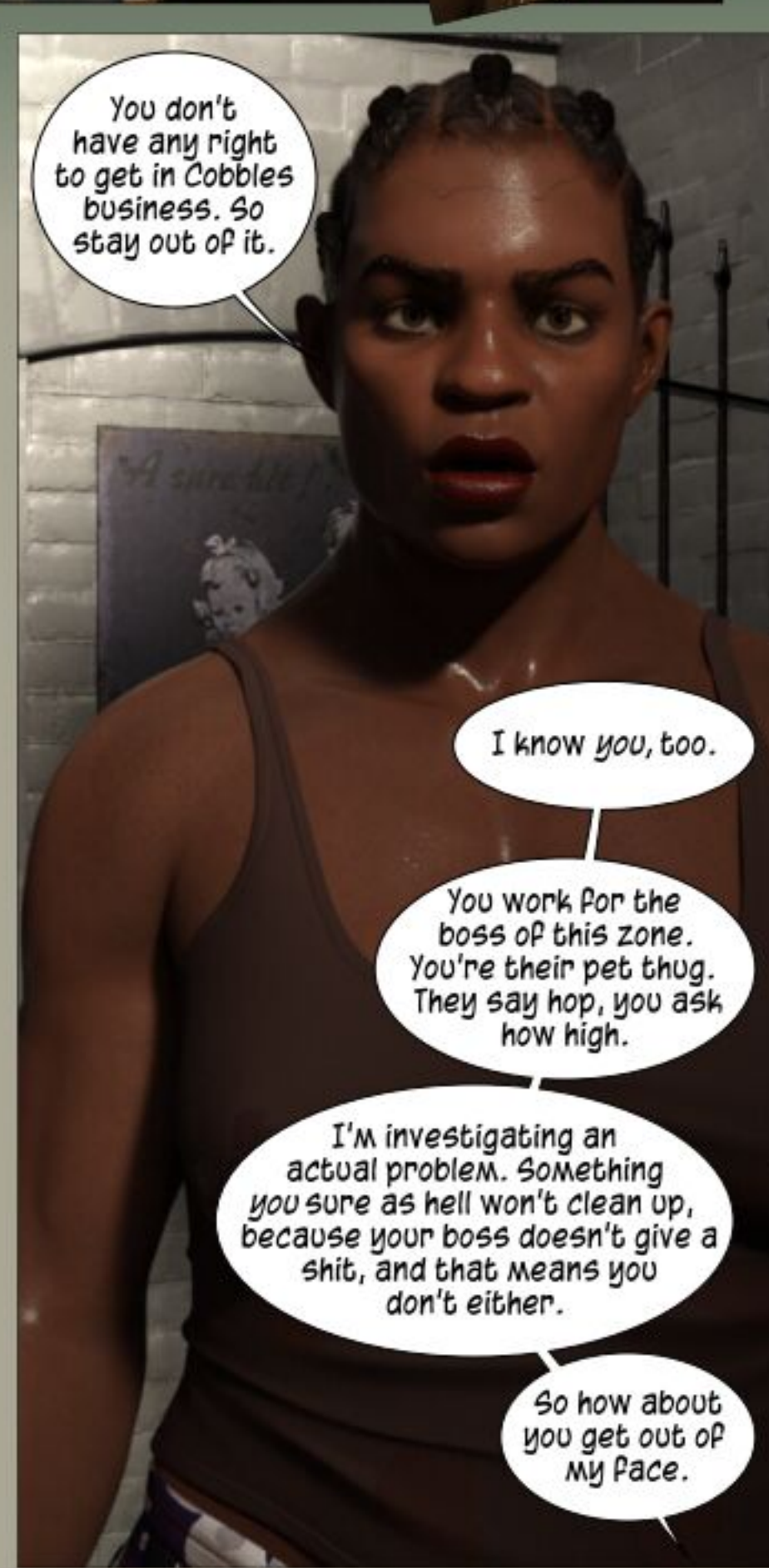
Well, see if I care.



Hold up.

I know you. You're one of that crew from Serenity who thinks you can mess with anything you want.

I don't know why you were handing them that line of crap, but I do know this:



You don't have any right to get in Cobbles business. So stay out of it.

I know you, too.

You work for the boss of this Zone. You're their pet thug. They say hop, you ask how high.

I'm investigating an actual problem. Something you sure as hell won't clean up, because your boss doesn't give a shit, and that means you don't either.

So how about you get out of my face.



You must really want your ass kicked.

No ... but if kicking yours will shut you up, let's get it over with.



SWON

oof!



hhh

... I might have picked the wrong fight.

Bitch!





Can barely stand after that one ... She connects again, I'm not getting up ... got to keep her off ...

Check this shit out!

Damn, is that Treece?

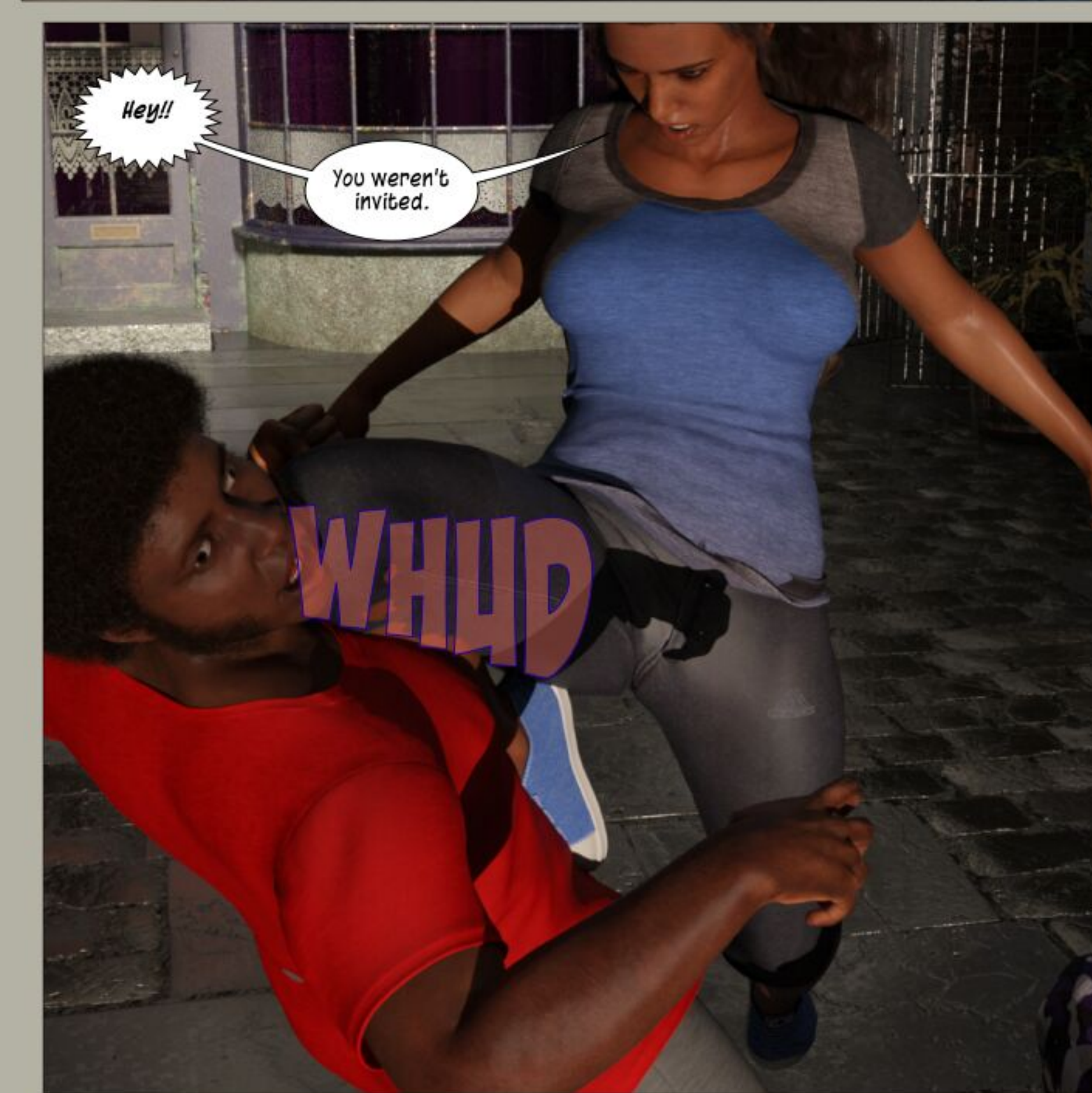
Yeah, and she's down!



Hey, Treece, can anybody play?

Yeah ... I owe you a lot ...

Ouuww!



Hey!!

You weren't invited.

WHUD



And don't you get any ideas, either.

HWOK

oog



Clear out!

Right behind you.



AAAARRRHHH!



Uh.

Guess we'll call it a draw then.



Blake, what the hell? Since when do you come to my private space?

Sorry, Danny. Couldn't find you anywhere else and it's important.

Look, we have to do something about Jonah Ulster or he's going to drive us all out of business.

I'm trying to get a group together.

ah ...

Well, see, the thing about that is ...



Danny, what are you doing? You're not going to keep me waiting, are you?

Of course not, sweetheart.

We were just finishing up.



Yeah, yeah. I get the picture. See you around.





Boss?

Sorry to disturb you ...



A woman was asking about joining the Sirens.

Except ... I know her. She's Ruby Martinez. You know, Prom Serenity?

Also, Treece was there. Listening. I think we weren't supposed to see her.

I don't know if they were together, but ...

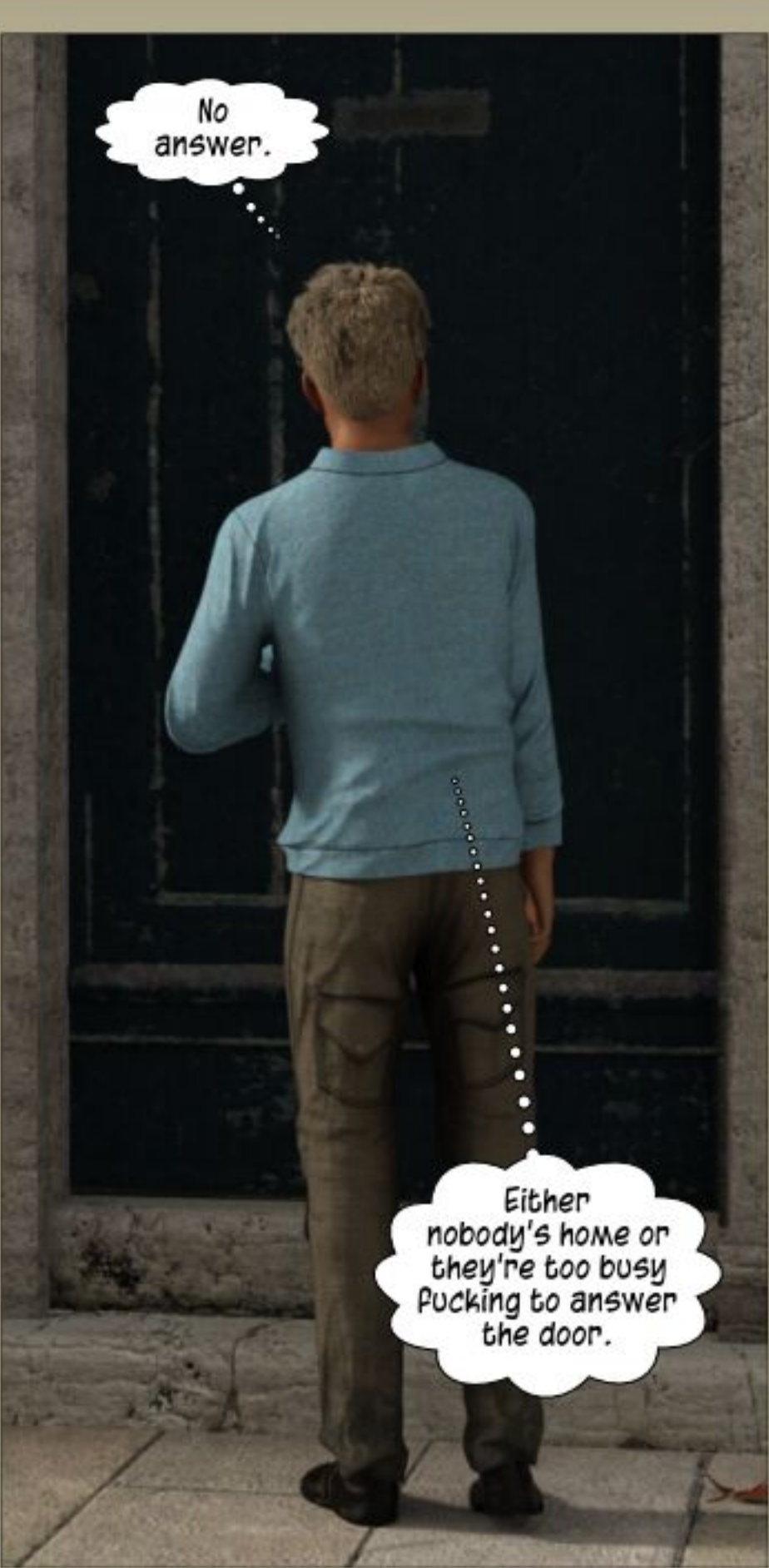
Hmm. Thank you for telling me. Treece has been sniffing around for weeks. If she's escalating ...



We're not nearly ready for a big move yet. And they absolutely cannot know about the lab.

But I'm expecting some new equipment any minute now that may solve this.

Once it's ready, it could be worth the risk to take steps to deal with those two.



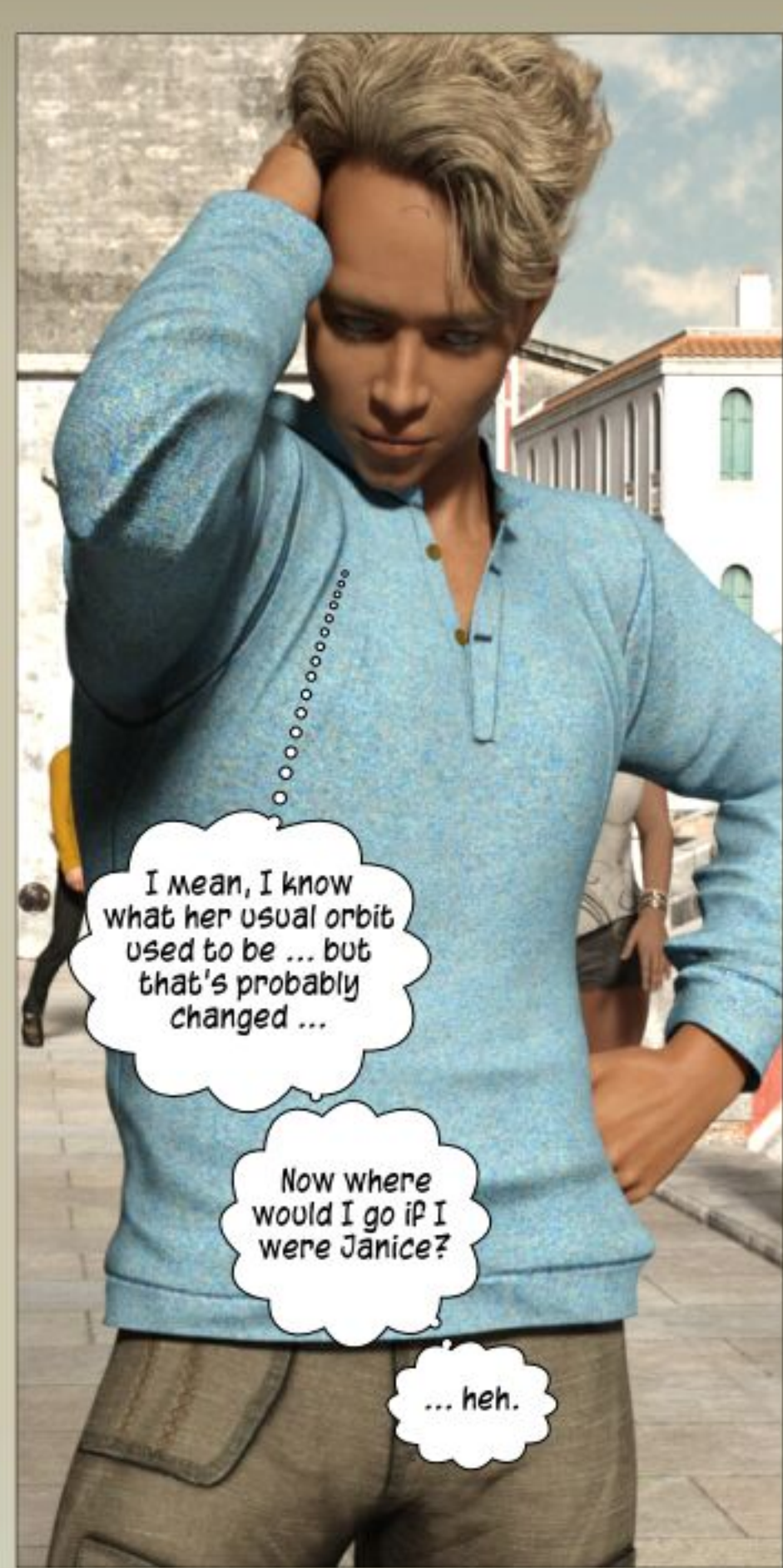
No answer.

Either nobody's home or they're too busy fucking to answer the door.



Well, that solves my going into a tailspin over what I'd say if Jonah answered.

But Janice wasn't at the apartment either, so now I have no idea where to look for her.



I mean, I know what her usual orbit used to be ... but that's probably changed ...

Now where would I go if I were Janice?

... heh.



Hey!

Grell!



I want to know everything you know.

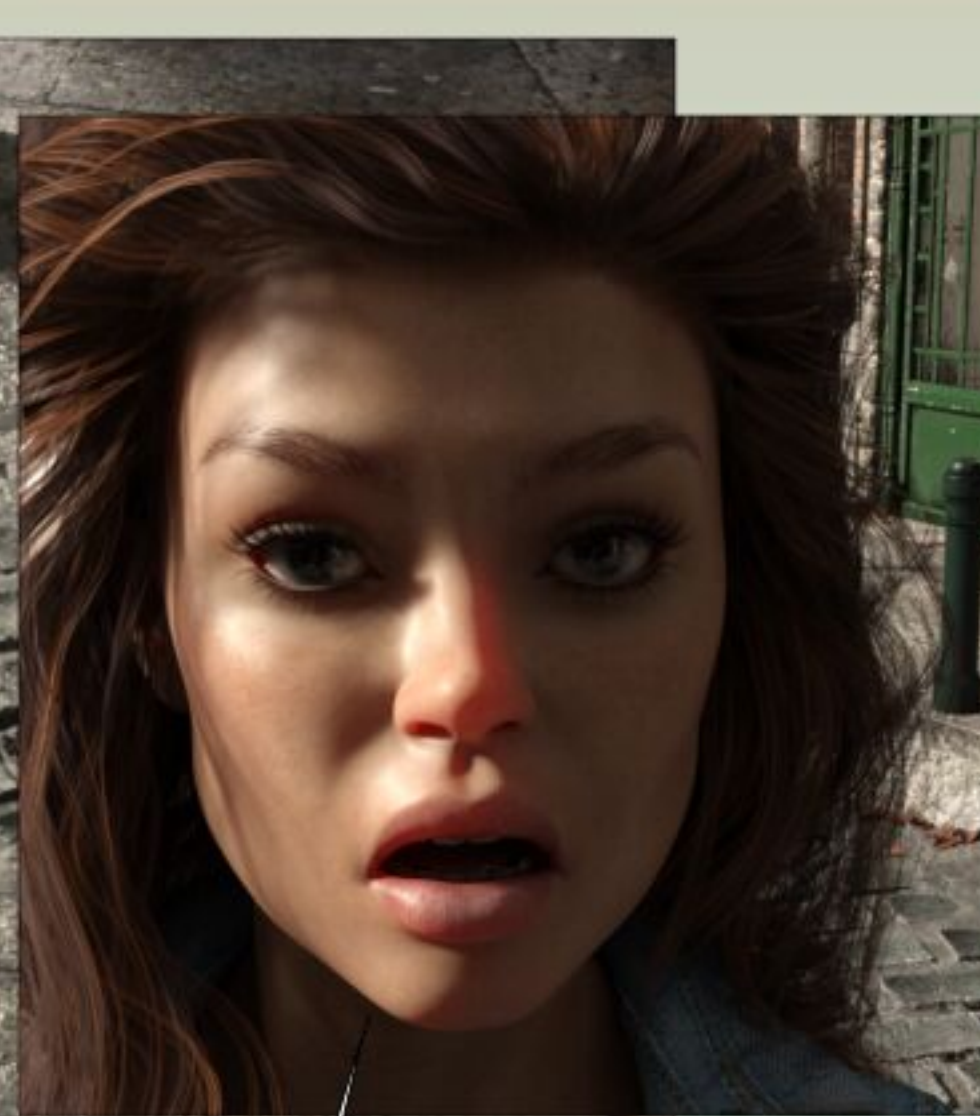
I don't give a damn if you think it's a risk. I'm a bigger risk to you, if you don't tell me.

What the hell is Ulster doing?



Ulster, like Jonah Ulster, right?

That's twice in two days somebody thinks I've got some kind of connection to this guy ...



You're his goddamn lover! You're in his bed every night!

I most certainly am not.

I don't know what's going on here with all you crazy people, but I never heard of Jonah Ulster before yesterday morning, and I definitely have not been to bed with him.



You ... uh ... Damn, I think you're really serious.

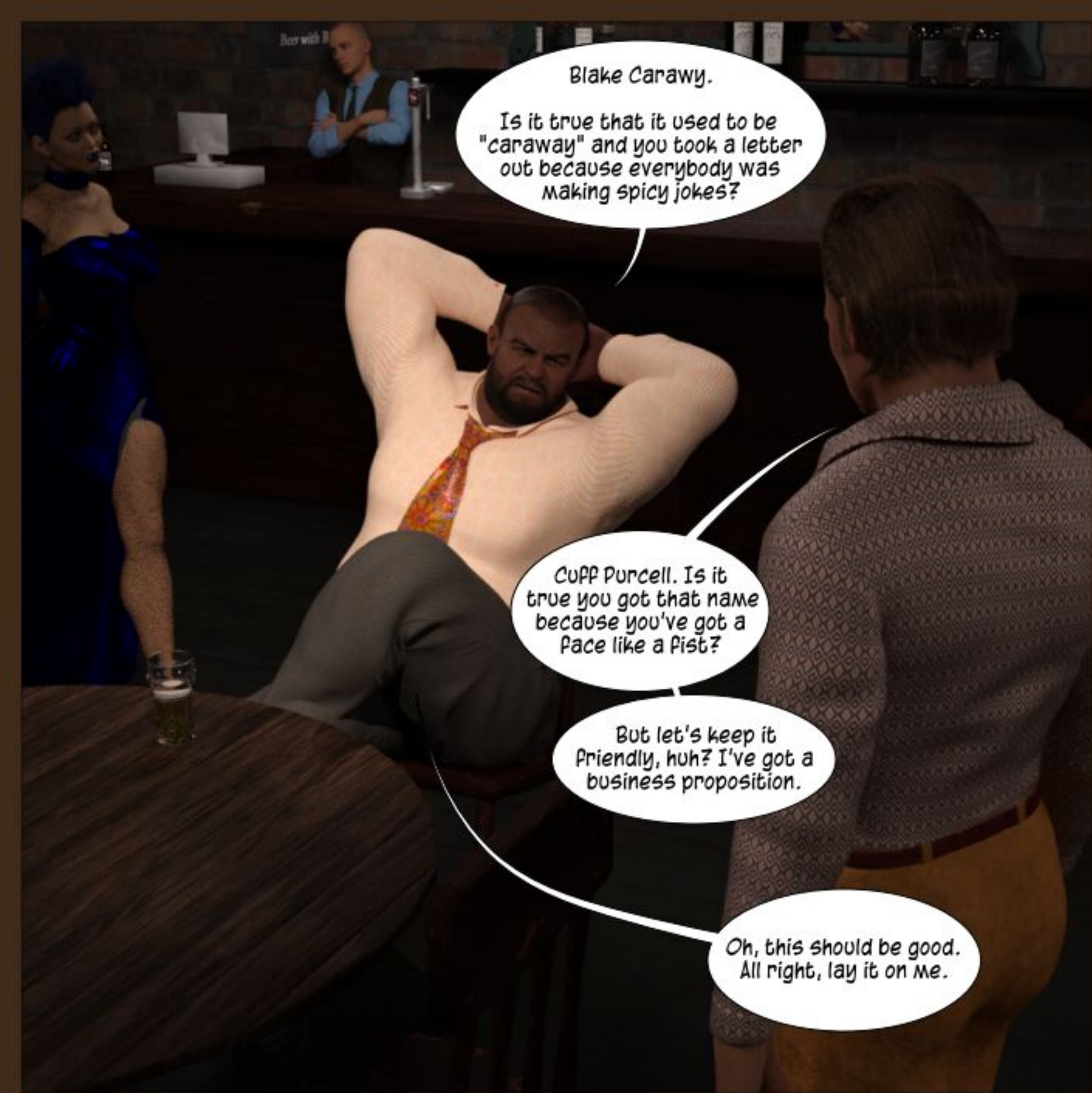
You stand here and say that--to me--with a straight face and expect me to believe it?



I don't give a damn what you believe, lady. Whoever you are.

I'm going back to Serenity, where I belong. You want to ask me any more weird-ass questions, you'll have to do it there.



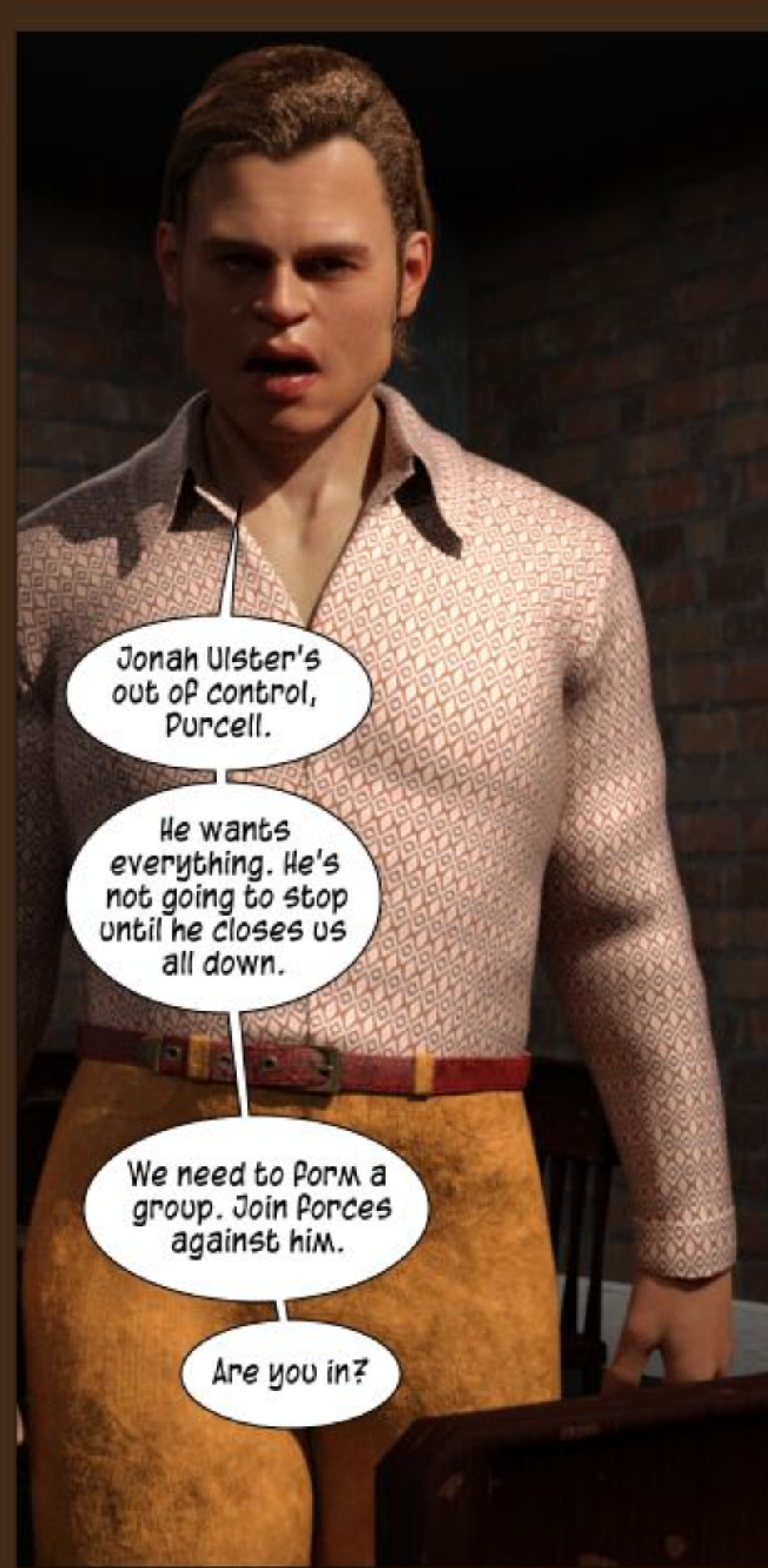


Blake Caraway.  
Is it true that it used to be "caraway" and you took a letter out because everybody was making spicy jokes?

Cupp Purcell. Is it true you got that name because you've got a face like a fist?

But let's keep it friendly, huh? I've got a business proposition.

Oh, this should be good. All right, lay it on me.



Jonah Ulster's out of control, Purcell.

He wants everything. He's not going to stop until he closes us all down.

We need to form a group. Join forces against him.

Are you in?



Well, I gotta say, that'd likely be a "no."

See, that doesn't match up to what I've been hearing about Ulster.

What I'm told, he wants everybody to be able to do business. Not interested in shutting anyone out.



Uh-huh. And where'd you get that information?

Oh ... a reliable source.



So you're going to use your dick to make decisions ... right up to the time when Ulster comes along to cut it off?

Hey! Just because you haven't had a love life in years is no reason to--



You don't know shit about my love life, Purcell.

Go to hell.

Hey, how do you sound when you're not keeping it friendly?

Just curious.



Fil, is that new gear ready? Looks like we're going to need it ahead of schedule.

Sure, it's good to go ... if I decide to let you have it.

Now what's that supposed to mean? You better not be trying for more money. I've paid you a fortune.

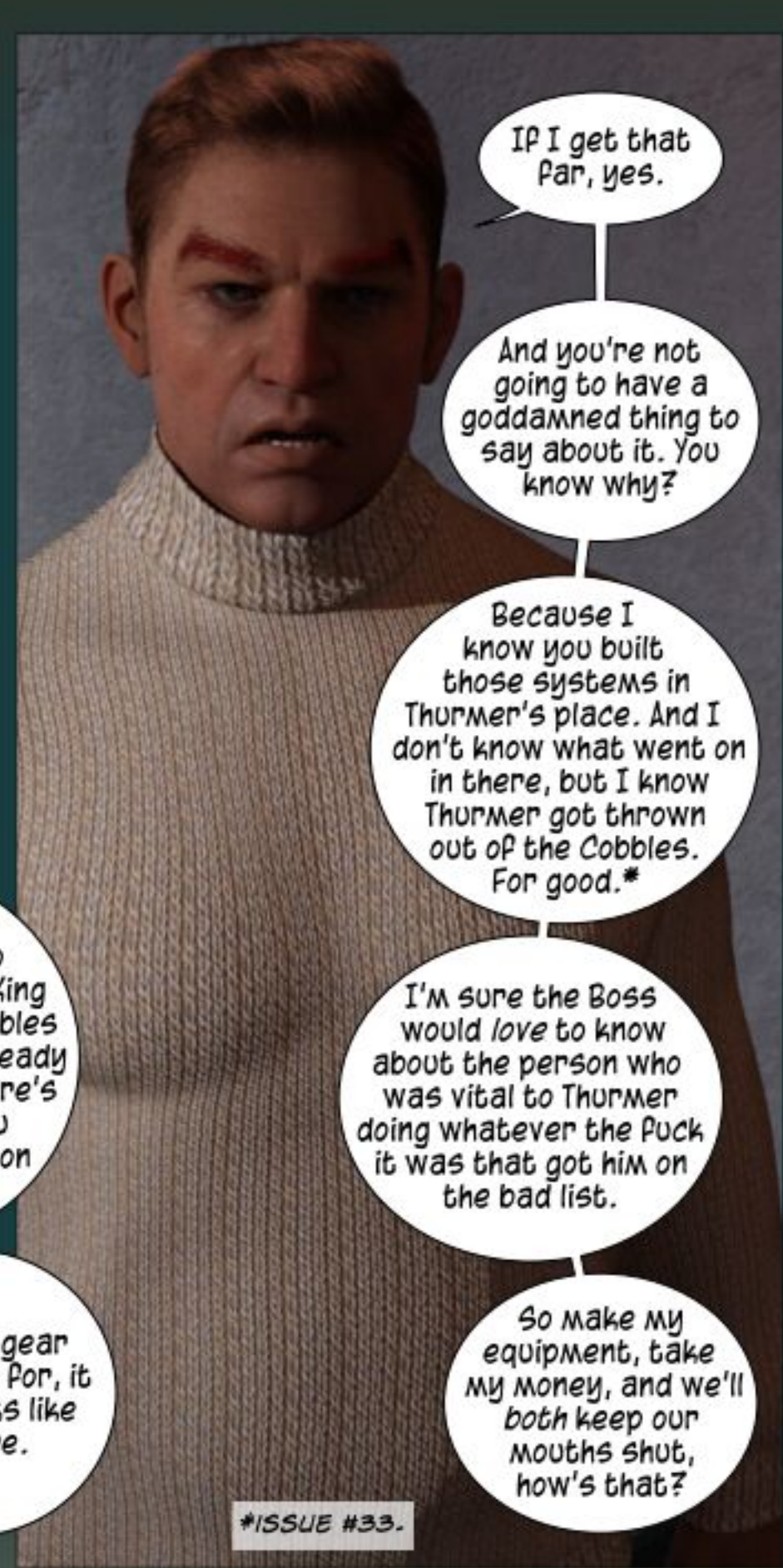


It's not the money.

Look, I'm not going to take any kind of high ground here. I mean, I made you the rings.

I'm just not sure I want to help you become King of the Pucking Cobbles any more than I already have. I mean, where's it stop? Are you planning to take on the Boss?

This new gear you asked for, it kinda looks like you are.



If I get that far, yes.

And you're not going to have a goddamned thing to say about it. You know why?

Because I know you built those systems in Thurmer's place. And I don't know what went on in there, but I know Thurmer got thrown out of the Cobbles. For good.\*

I'm sure the Boss would love to know about the person who was vital to Thurmer doing whatever the Puck it was that got him on the bad list.

So make my equipment, take my money, and we'll both keep our mouths shut, how's that?

\*ISSUE #33.



Boss!  
Boss!!



Look, I know this is ... ah ... personal ... but I thought you'd want to know.

A little while ago, I saw Treece talking to your lady Janice.

Treece was trying to get her to tell what she knew about the Sirens. Janice said she didn't know anything, and she left.

But she went out the portal to Serenity!

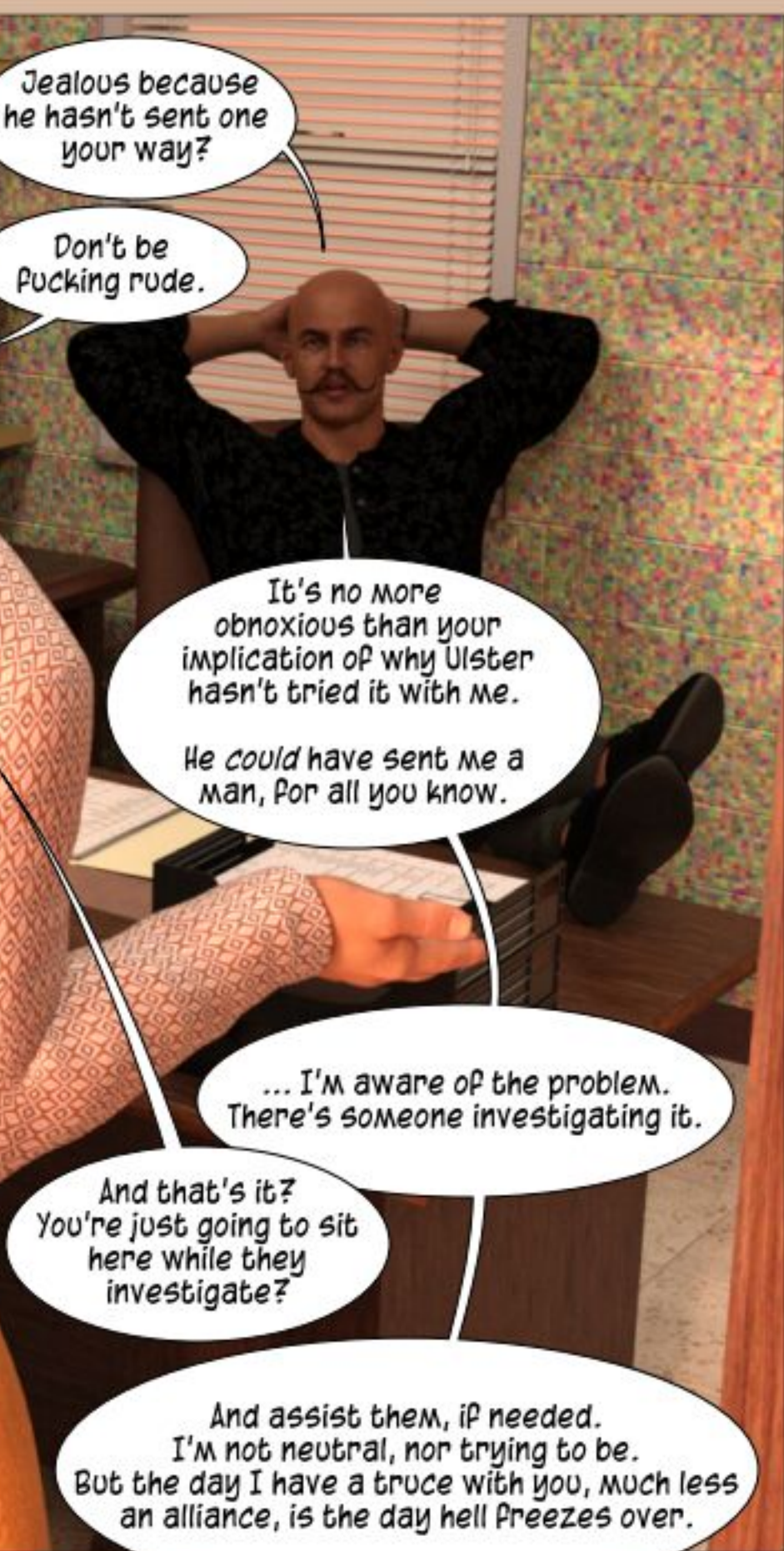
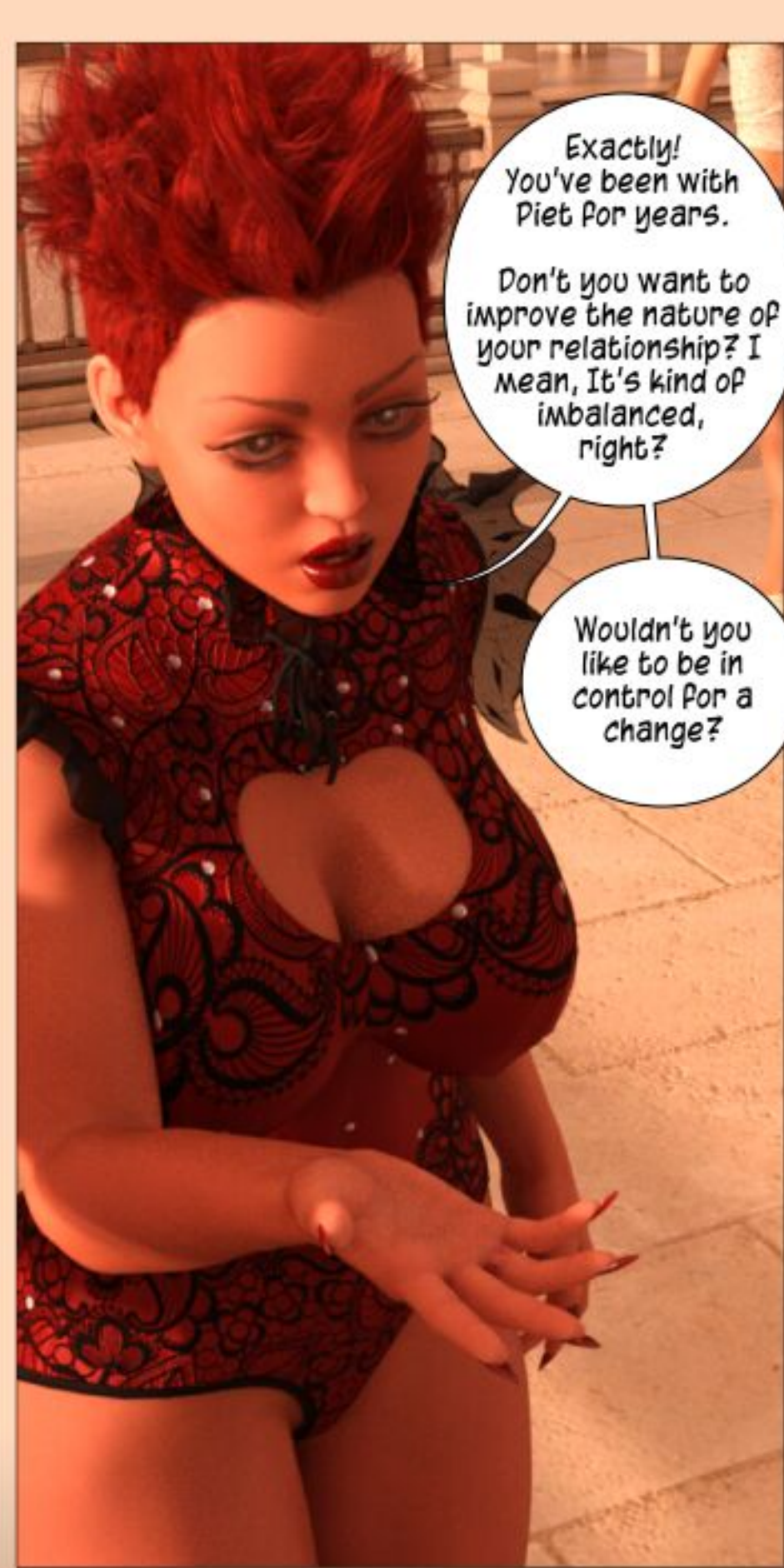


So? I don't keep her under lock and key. Maybe she wanted to do some shopping there. She buys a lot of clothes.

I appreciate your keeping an eye out, but right now we have more important things.

Go meet up with the others. They're arranging something to deal with a couple of problems, and they'll need everybody who's at large.





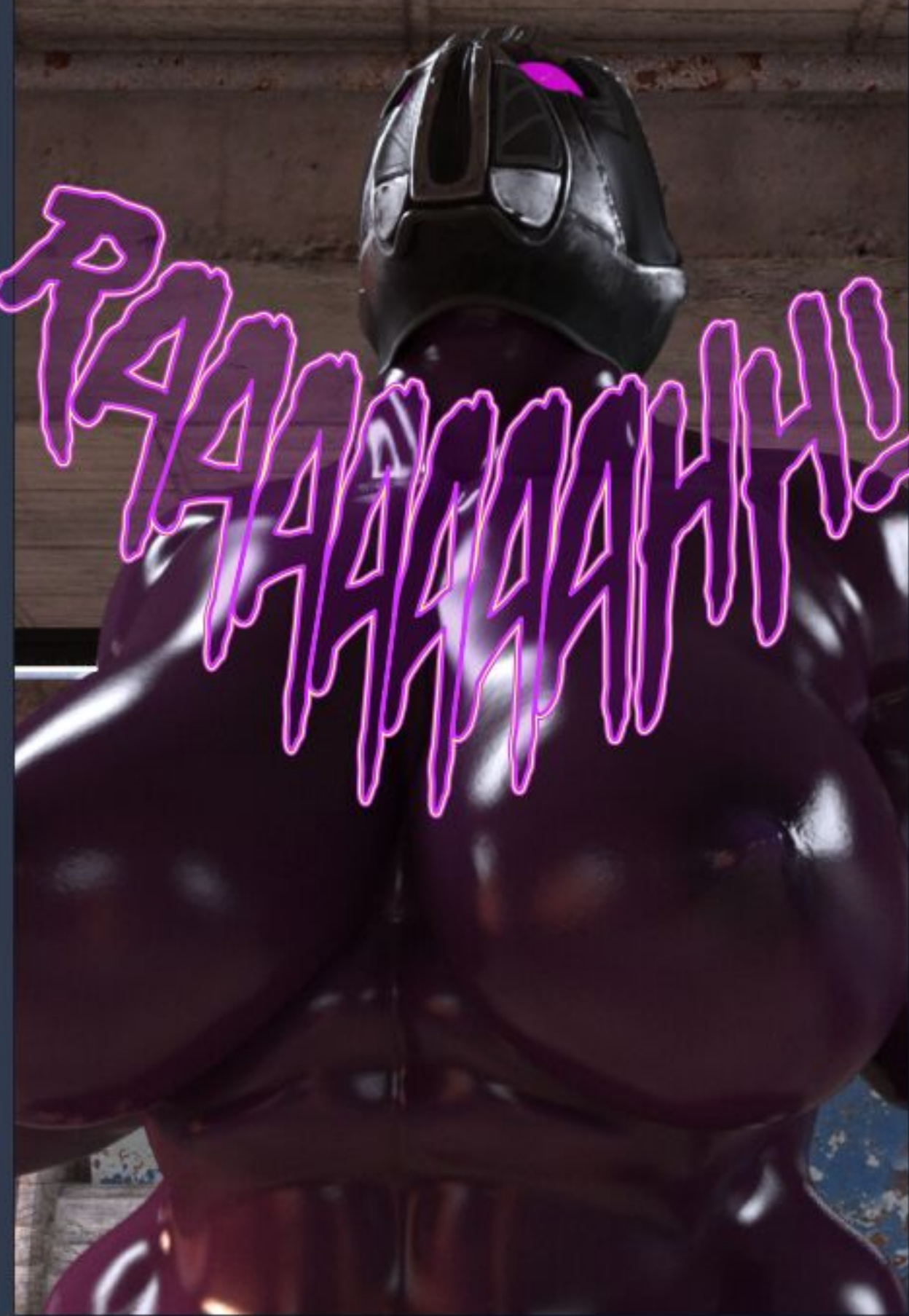




... just --UMPH-- get this on and ...



AAAARGFH!!



RAAAAAAAAAHHH!!



HRRRR!

Oh, joy.



urk

This is not good ...

They're huge, strong, and Past.



UH!

WAAHH!

On the other hand, they can't fight Por shit ...

And Treece is just about as big as they are ...



OW!

WOOH!

But we're going to need one or two of them to stay down or the math's gonna--

Ugh!!



GET THE GOO! GET THE GOO!! --URGH-- QUICK!

AAAAHH!



GOT IT! TRY TO HOLD HER STILL!



aagh! --spit--





THERE, THAT'S GOT HER. BRING A HELMET!

WUH...

COMING!



AGHR!

Nope.



If you're going to cheat, then I am too.



Come on, Treece! That didn't disrupt them as much as I'd hoped. We need to get out of here before they recover.

Peel... real bad...



Here you are, Pinally! I was beginning to worry.

Why, Jonah! I told you I was going to be here a bit late tonight.

Did you forget?



I suppose I did.

A friend of mine said they saw you talking to Treece today.

I hope you didn't tell her anything useful.

You know I'm opposed to any cooperation with Treece, on principle.



Your friend's either lying or they made a mistake.

I don't think Treece has ever said so much as a word to me.

I haven't seen her in days. I definitely haven't seen her today.

I'm going to go upstairs. Come up when you're ready.



MMHh... oh... why are you so good?







Hey ...  
Forgot to tell you at dinner.

I try to ignore the politics, you know ... but have you heard about what Jonah Ulster's up to?

... I'm aware of it.

Why?



Because one of his "siners" tried to recruit me this afternoon.

HMM.  
What did you tell her?

I told her to go away. Not interested. For lots of reasons.

Why hasn't the Boss shut all that down yet?



He--or she, I suppose--seems to not want to get involved until it affects them personally. A bit shortsighted, in my opinion, but I wasn't asked.

Trece surely knows what's going on--she misses very little--but she may not be able to convince the Boss to take action.

So you really turned them down Plat, eh?

Of course I did! Were you worried I wouldn't?



Not in the least.



... Uh.

OK, where the hell am I?

And why am I naked?

You're naked because they insisted on you taking a shower. You were pretty gross. Also, we wanted to wash the goo off.

You were awake for it--you undressed yourself--but I'm not surprised you don't remember. You were barely here by that point.

We were going to give you something to sleep in, but all they had was silk floral nightgowns and I figured you'd actually prefer to be nude than wear one of those.

You're at Ms. Lee's.  
I needed a safe house, and I don't know a lot of options in the Cobbles.



You're about a foot too long for this bed. Sorry about that.

They ... they were going to put one of those helmets on me? Right?

Yeah. I stopped them. I didn't figure you wanted to work for Ulster.

Also, honestly, you're a very big person as it is. If you'd gone through those changes, you probably wouldn't have been able to get out the door.

... Ha!



Look ... I know we're not going to be best friends or anything but-- mhrmmm!

... OK, then!





THE NEXT DAY.

It's disgusting, Fell!

All of them just rolled over for a little pussy! Letting women get into their heads like that--letting somebody else make their decisions for them ...

--cough--

Yeah. Appalling.

And meanwhile, Ulster's going to stomp all over this place and nobody else will stand up to him!

I admit it, Fell. You were right. I can't take him by myself. But I can't get any help!

So ...

... I almost shudder to ask ...

... what are you going to do now?

I'm hoping the answer is "ignore Jonah and stay under his radar," but--

I've got some ideas.

Nothing you need to worry yourself about.

I can't believe I'm back here. I must be nuts.

But something really weird is going on, and I'm not going to be able to get it out of my head until I figure out what.

OK, this is the place they told me.

I hope I'm not doing something really stupid.

Knock, knock ... anybody home--

Huh?

The door opened?

OK, I'm a little reassured. I have definitely never been in this place in my life.

People insisting I know this guy, door opens for me ... I was beginning to wonder if I was actually somebody else--

A bit early for you, isn't it?

Uh ... look, there's been a mistake ...

Yes, I'd imagine so.

Oh, no, don't go yet.

I'm glad you stopped by. I have a gift for you. Let me get it.

I commissioned this pendant for you a while ago.

Just waiting for the right opportunity.

What do you think? Do you like it?

... well ... yes, it's very nice ... but ...

Listen, I'm not who you think I am--

Ssh.

It's all right. I don't need to know.

I didn't want to do that. But I don't feel like I have a choice.

All right, I've got a lot of things to do.

I don't see any reason why you should need to leave this house ever again, do you?

Of course not, dear!

Good. I'll see you tonight.

Have a wonderful day!





What I don't get is why your boss hasn't done anything. I mean, he has to have noticed, right?

He doesn't interfere.

He says it's the Free Market in action, and I guess he figures that if it goes far enough for one of these clowns to try to take him, he'll kick their ass.

Or he'll get me to do it.



Keep this to yourself.

He doesn't like mind control. He'll put up with anything else, but don't mess with people's heads.

Huh.

If I can prove Ulster's doing that, he'll listen to me and shut Ulster down--but I have to be able to prove it.

And so Par I can't. I mean, these people could be in it because they want to be.

Yeah. It's an opportunity for them. He might have just said "Hey, join my team and I'll get you your own private crime lord to boss around."

If he is playing dirty, I'm not sure how to prove it, though. It's clear we're not going to get a damned thing from the sirens. Controlled or not, they're loyal.



And I don't think tackling Ulster directly's going to do any good.

I was thinking of having another try at his lover, Janice Grell.

She's got to know something, the amount of time she spends around him.

And when I tried to talk to her yesterday, she gave me some really weird answers.



Ah ... thing is, Grell is how I ended up looking into this.

She tipped off a friend of hers that Ulster was up to some nasty stuff, and asked him to come get me.

And he specifically asked me not to talk to Janice because he was worried it would put her at risk.

Well, I didn't get asked that.

If you don't want to come, Pine, I get it.

But I think we're going to have to risk the risk, y'know? Because we don't have anything else.



Well?

I can't find him!

I checked all his usual places.



He's got to be somewhere ...

Sure, but we can't check all of A4. Or even all of the Cobbles.

He might be in his private space, but he never told me where that was. Did he tell you?

y'all!

Something's really wrong! I took off the helmet but the effects didn't--

Oh.



What are we going to do?

How should I know?

... Hey, can you recall?

Sure, I-- Uh--

...Shit.

Yeah, we can't remember either. Gold can't even remember what her name used to be.

-- sob --

Look, I used to do a little of this stuff. Not complicated like this, but ... I think the helmet and the ring must have interfered with each other somehow.



So we just have to take the rings off, then! OK ...

Oh, hell.

What?

I can't take it off!

It won't come off?

No, I mean I can't take it off. My hands won't do it.

Try it yourself.

... I'm going to kill that son-of-a-bitch.









AAAAUUHHH!!



Pestilent insect!

Does your kind never have aught better to do than wreak havoc?



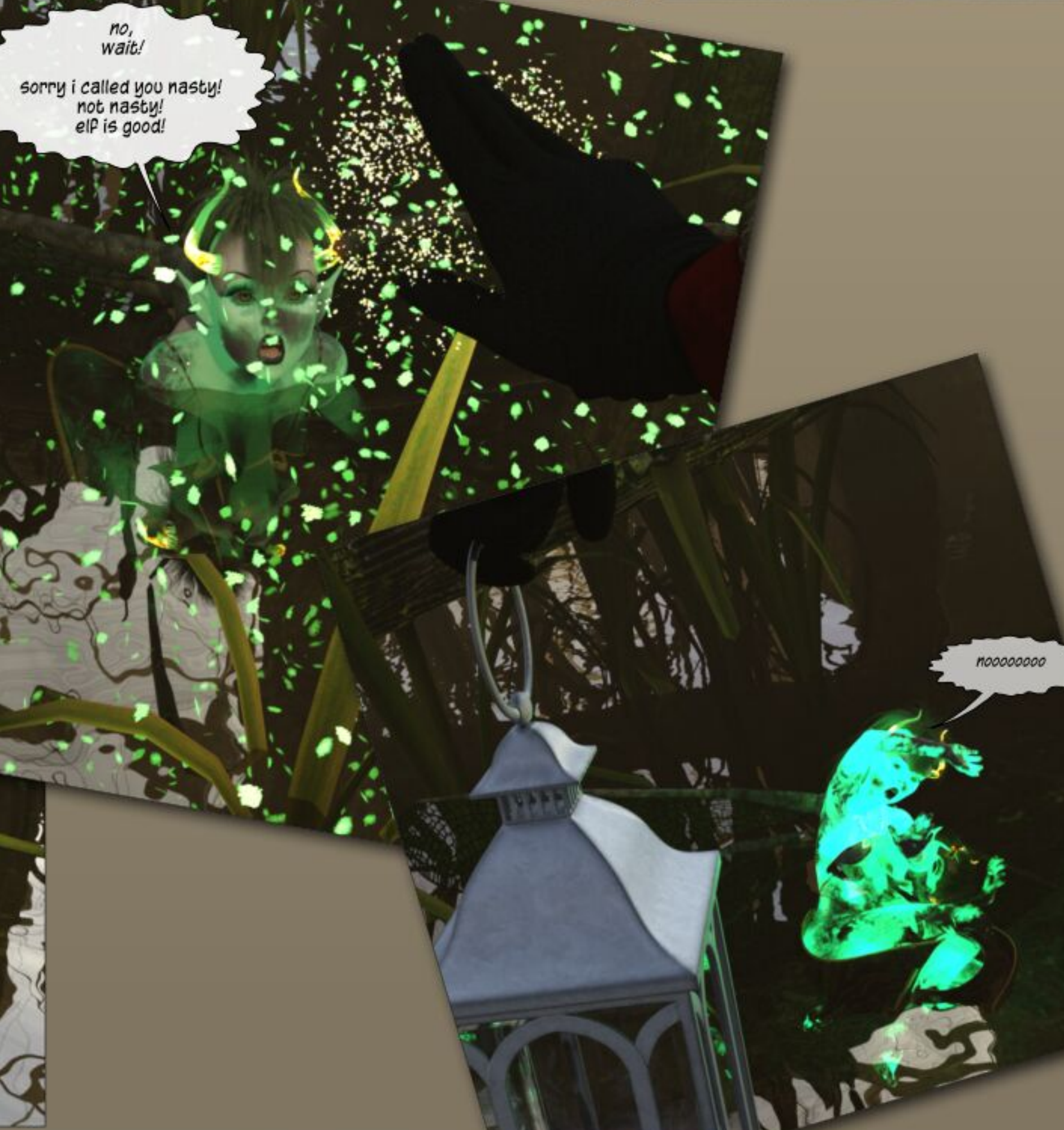
nasty elf!

look at me! covered in mud! i hate mud!!

Make you suffer for that!

i'll--

--what are you doing?



No, wait!  
sorry i called you nasty!  
not nasty!  
elf is good!

noooooooo



Now you are useful, insect.

What of you two? You appear to be far from your habitat.

I warn you, you interfere with me at your peril. I have a mission and will not be stayed from it.

We don't want to make trouble! We're looking for friends of ours. A lot of people have disappeared into the swamp ... carried away by monsters, we think ...

Yes. A dark power has arisen deep within these lands.

I intend to find it and eradicate its evil.



Then we have the same goal!

We could travel together ... I don't know about you, but we could use the help ...

Party with Pauns? I think not. You'd work mischief while I slept. Your lot is not to be trusted.

However, if you'd like to aid my mission, I know a way in which you can be of great assistance.



The insect had a point. This terrain does not suit me.

NoOO!!

ErOOO!!  
rOOuu!  
get hOOOOellp--

I require a sure-footed mount.



Sssh.

That's a good dumb beast.



THAT NIGHT.



been in love with a dreeeam ... la la la la dee dee ...



been in love with a dreeeam ... la la la la dee dee ...



!!!



Need to find Liam ... Need to find Liam right now ... He's the only--

--oof!--



Just the person I was looking for!

Come on. We're going to go to a quiet place where we can talk until I get answers I like.

--Mmphh!--



I mean, now she won't even answer the door ... and we can't get anything on Ulster any other way, unless he does something dumb ...

I can get in. But now I think we won't get anything from her anyway.

So it's a wash.

I'm going back to Serenity.

Hey!

Someone just carried off Janice!



The real Janice?

I don't know! It was right outside Jonah's--could have been either...

Who took her?

Don't know the guy. Big, square head, slicked-back hair, wears ugly pants.

Blake Carawy.



Just from that?

No. He's been trying to recruit other people against Ulster.

Hasn't had any luck, from what I've heard.

Ah. Can't take down the man, try to get at him through his lover.

Any idea where he might be taking her?



Fell, you coward!

You can call me anything you like.

I'm here to keep you from doing stupid things, not help you do them.

You know what? You're fired.

Can't fire me. I quit five minutes ago when you brought her in.

Good luck with your consequences, asshole.



You see how it is? I can't depend on anybody. Not even you. I thought I could ...

You still love me. I know you do. You have to. Tell me you still love me!

... I'm sorry ... but ... I have no idea who you even are.



OWWW!

Bitch!!





I'll make you love me! That's what I'll do!

If Ulster can do it, so can I! I'll get somebody to build me some gadget and then you'll--



FHWONK!

It's her zone, so she gets to hit him.  
Ah.



Liam?  
Am I glad to see you ... but what are you doing here? How'd you know?

Let's get you out of these first ...



AAAAAH!

AHHHHHHH!!

It's good to see her having fun.

Is that what that is?

Who is that guy, anyway? He's got issues.

... I'm not sure.



Now listen to me good, you piece of trash.

You mess with her ever again--you come near her ever again--and I'm gonna find you and break you into pieces.

Then I'm gonna break the pieces into smaller pieces. And then I'm gonna get you thrown out.



But he knew who I was ...

There's an explanation for all of it. But this isn't the time or place.

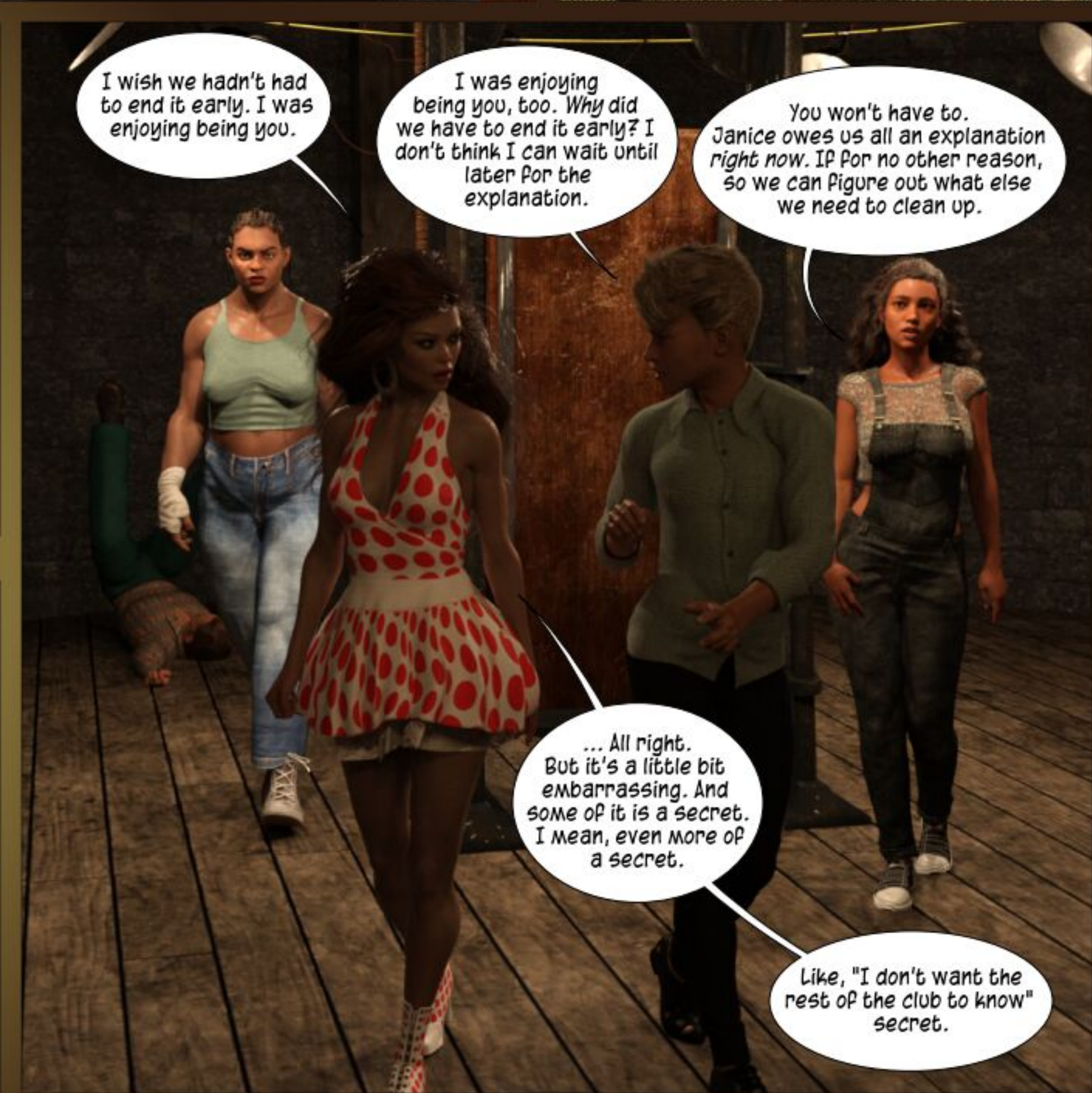
What's important right now is, do you have your ring?

Always.

Before we do anything else, we need to switch back.

But they--

They know. I had to tell them. You were in danger. Maybe.



I wish we hadn't had to end it early. I was enjoying being you.

I was enjoying being you, too. Why did we have to end it early? I don't think I can wait until later for the explanation.

You won't have to. Janice owes us all an explanation right now. If for no other reason, so we can figure out what else we need to clean up.

... All right. But it's a little bit embarrassing. And some of it is a secret. I mean, even more of a secret.

Like, "I don't want the rest of the club to know" secret.



I'm not Janice Grell. I mean, I am, but ...

When I joined the Proteus Club I knew I didn't want to do swaps as my real identity. I'm actually Kira Westmine.

Right, you're in the business.

I liked that passive you did with the robots. You should cast me sometime.

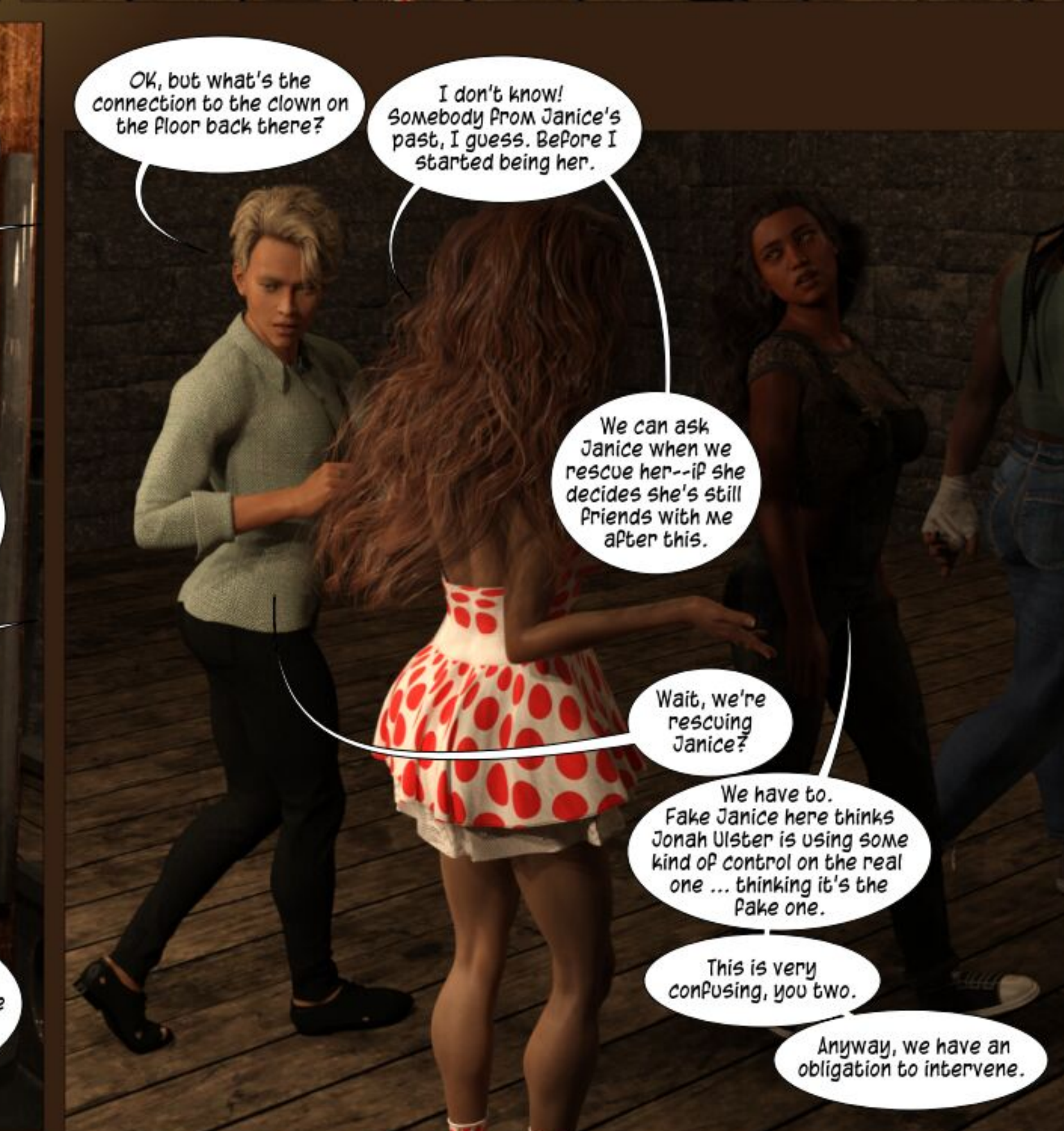
When we swap, we swap completely. What if someone decided to tank my acting career while they were me?

I needed to set up an identity just to use for Proteus stuff. But I'm not a scriptwriter, I'm an actor. I play characters other people make. I couldn't come up with one of my own.

So you decided to be Janice.

No one had seen her for years! I was probably her best friend, and I hadn't heard anything from her. Neither had anyone else. I figured she either left sleep or the sprue got her.

It seemed like a safe bet, is what I'm saying. And it was, for a long time. I don't know what made her suddenly decide to reappear, but she started looking for Kira and someone told me--as Liam--that, and I knew the shit was about to hit the fan.



OK, but what's the connection to the clown on the floor back there?

I don't know! Somebody from Janice's past, I guess. Before I started being her.

We can ask Janice when we rescue her--if she decides she's still friends with me after this.

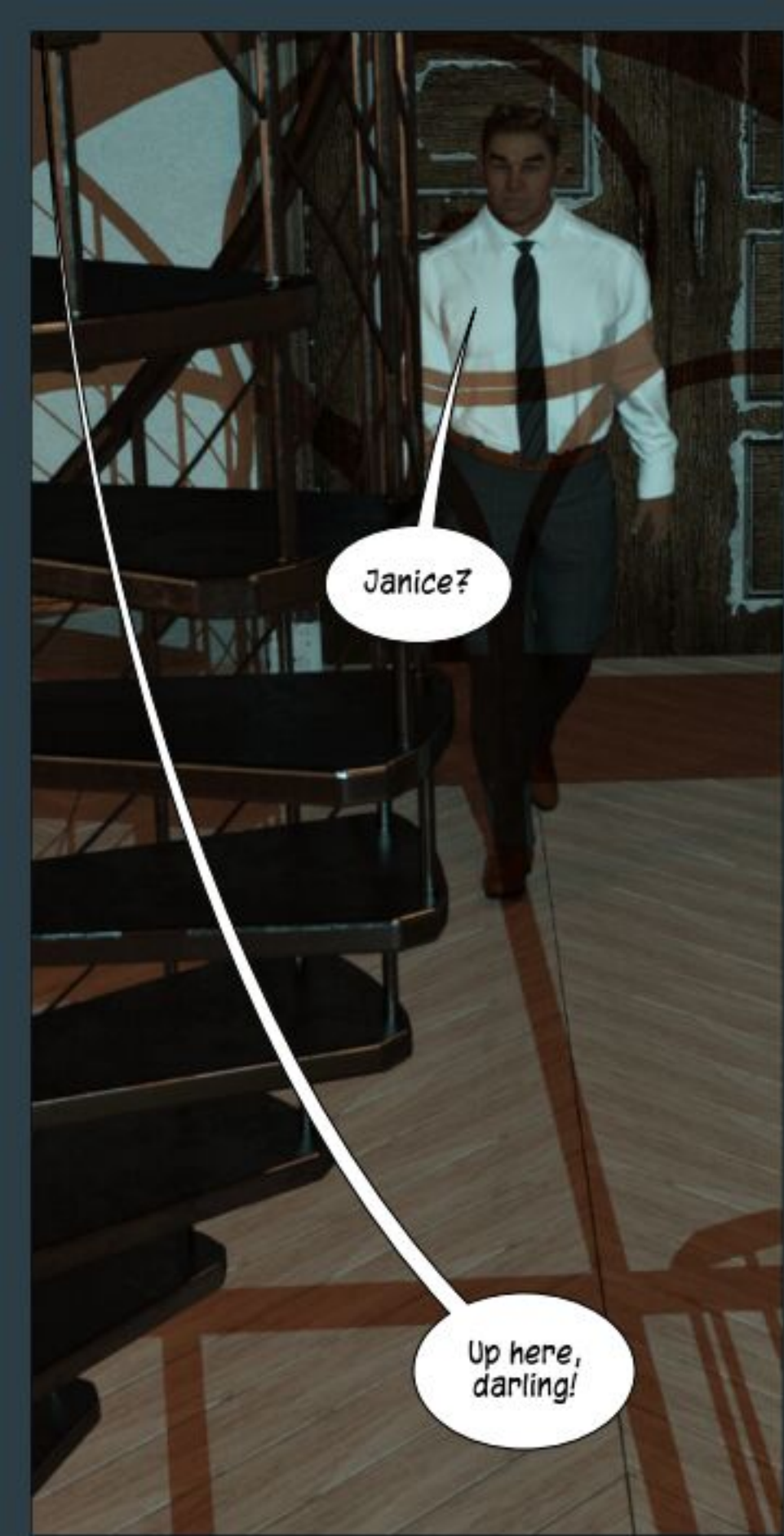
Wait, we're rescuing Janice?

We have to. Fake Janice here thinks Jonah Ulster is using some kind of control on the real one ... thinking it's the fake one.

This is very confusing, you two.

Anyway, we have an obligation to intervene.



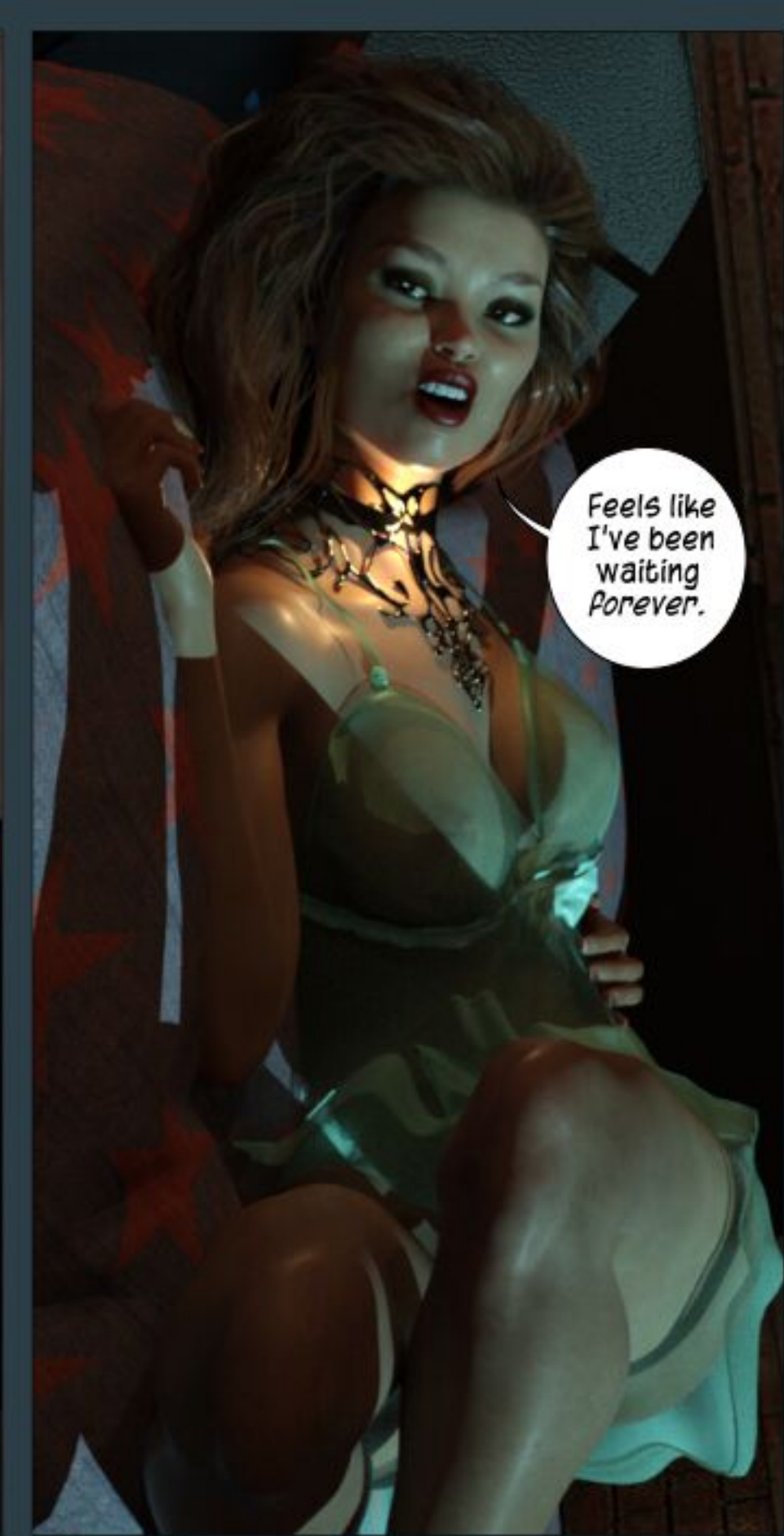


Janice?

Up here, darling!



Hi there.

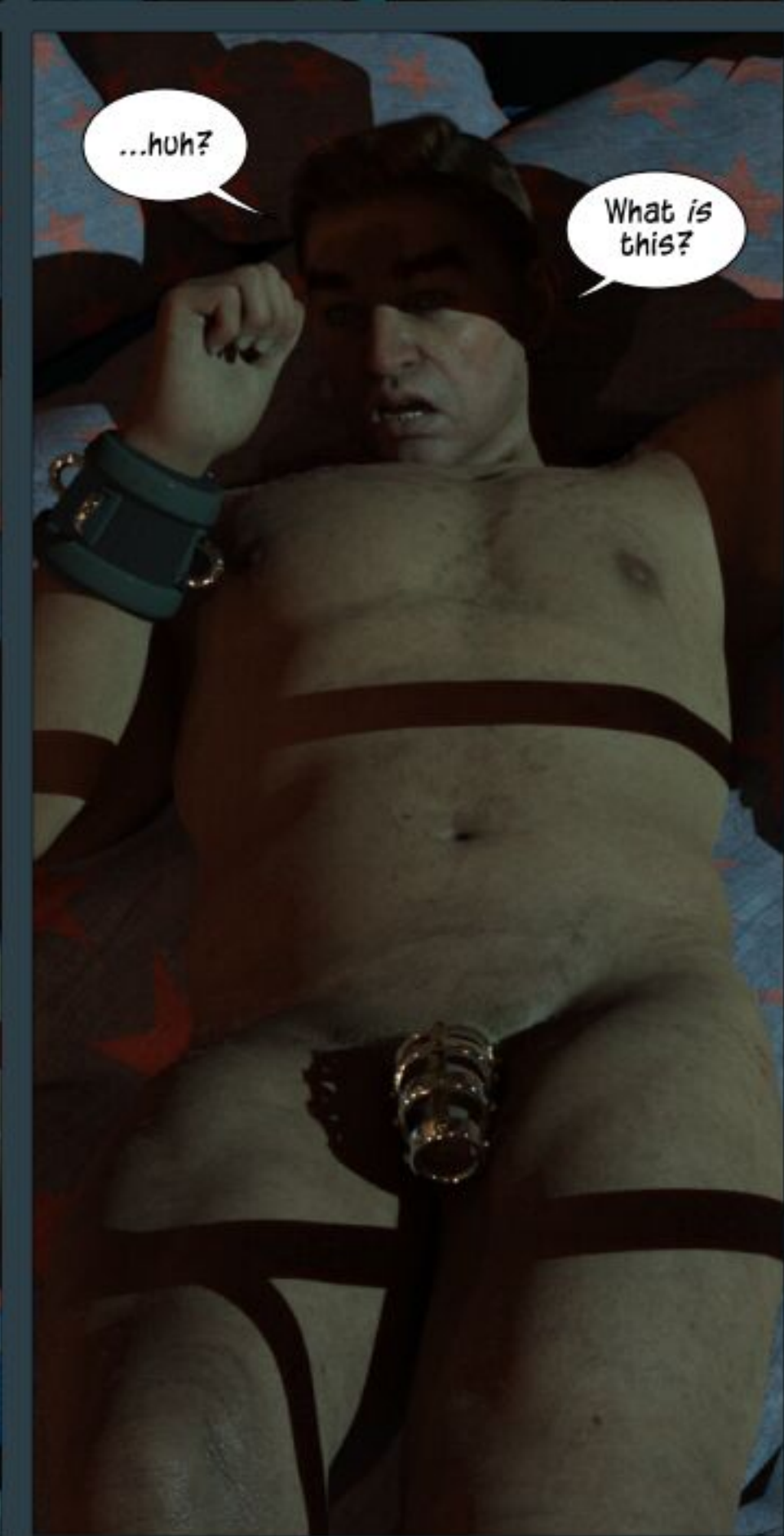


Feels like I've been waiting forever.



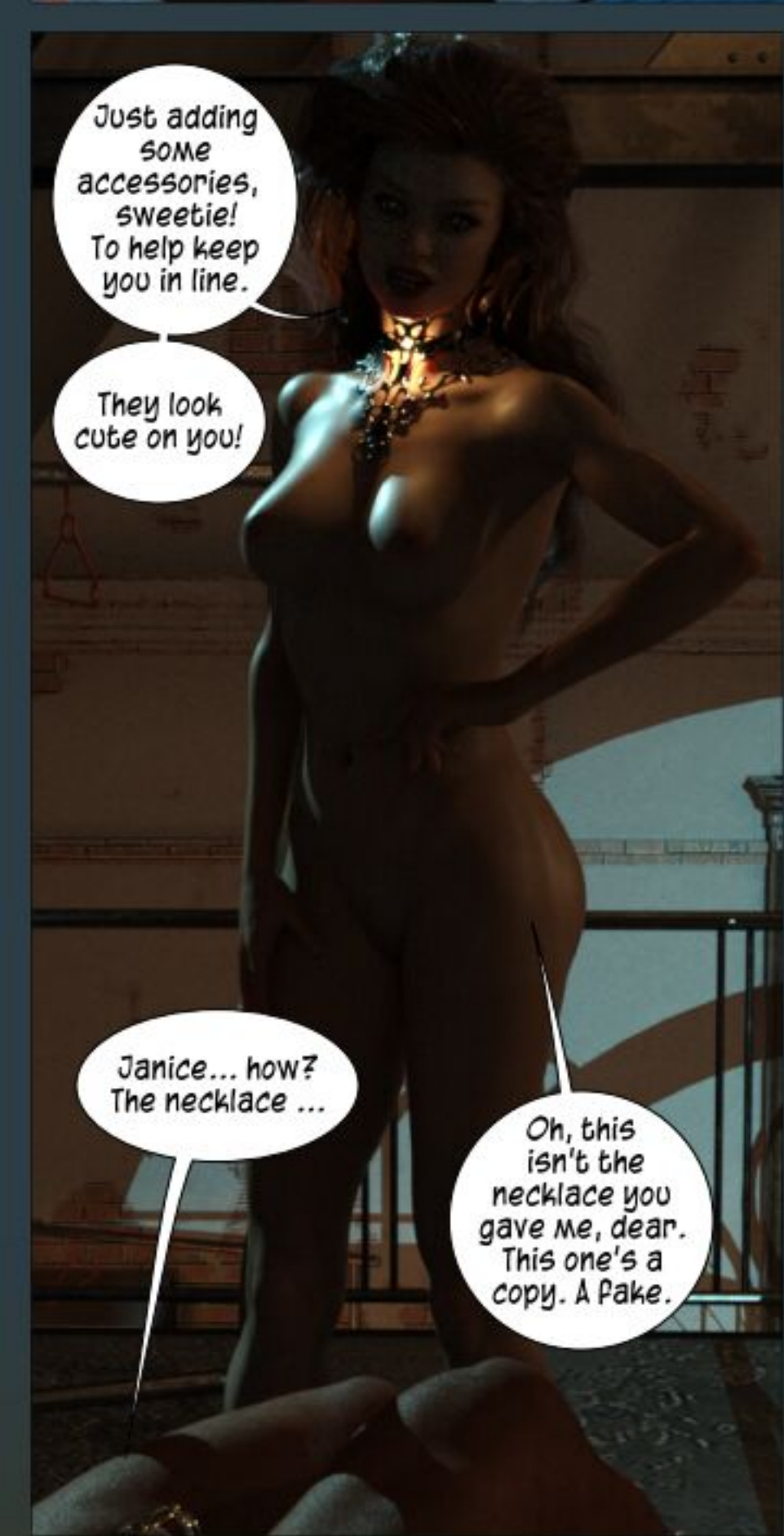
LATER ...

uhmm?



...huh?

What is this?



Just adding some accessories, sweetie! To help keep you in line.

They look cute on you!

Janice... how? The necklace ...

Oh, this isn't the necklace you gave me, dear. This one's a copy. A fake.



I am too.

What?? Why?

It seemed like the best way to get you with your guard down, and I wasn't going to ask Janice to do it, not after what you did.

But it was fun, if that makes you feel any better!



AAAAAAH!

Lucky she talked me into doing it her way, Ulster. Mine wasn't fun.

You're not the only one who has access to some interesting toys, you know.

Now, the cups are just so you can't recall. We have a lot yet to talk about.

The other item ... well, if you ever want to have that kind of fun again, you'll have to get one of us to take it off.

Once you tell us everything, and you clean up your mess, and you don't cause any more trouble ...

... We'll consider it.

... We'll consider it.



I should have changed back first. This is the weirdest thing.

You think? Imagine how it feels to me.

Janice, I'm so sorry. I really did--a lot of us thought--you were dead. Basically.

I would never have if--

No, no, I get it. I mean, I don't really understand why you wanted to be somebody else at all, but ... I guess I'm kind of flattered you picked me ...

I guess if you vanish that long you're Pair game.

Uh ... So, speaking of that ...

Why did you vanish? What happened? Does it have to do with that Blake asshole?



The thing is ... I didn't tell any of my friends when I started seeing Blake.

I don't know if I was embarrassed about it, or if I knew even then, in the back of my mind, that he was trouble.

And then, when it really did go bad and I left him ... I didn't have anywhere to go, Kira. I didn't feel like I could come to you, or anybody else--I mean, when I hadn't even told you in the first place--



I ... Janice, I don't know what to say.

I mean, I don't want to be--

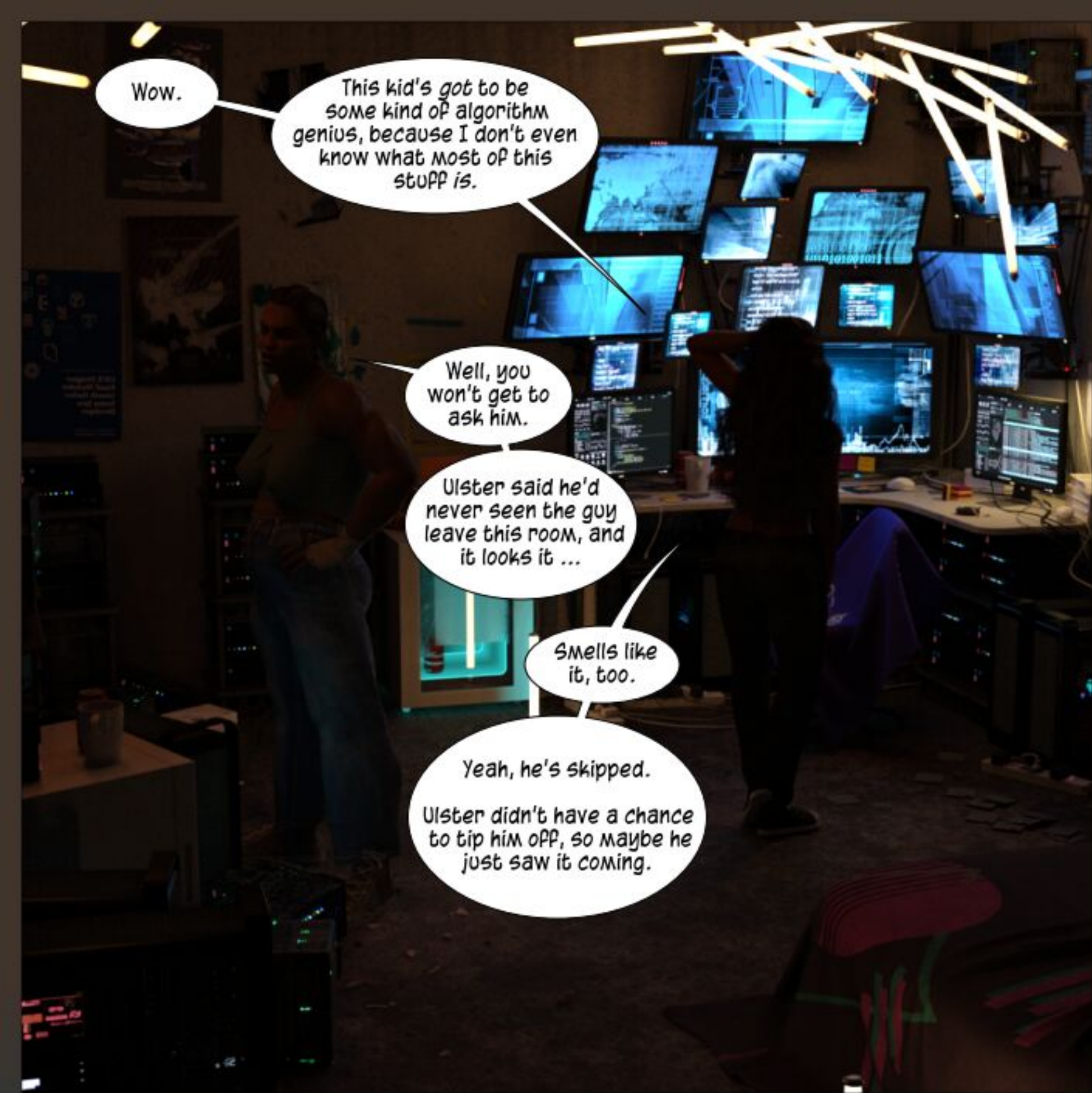
You think I was really dumb.

Yeah. I was.

And now it's too late to pick up the pieces.

No, it isn't.





Wow.

This kid's got to be some kind of algorithm genius, because I don't even know what most of this stuff is.

Well, you won't get to ask him.

Ulster said he'd never seen the guy leave this room, and it looks it ...

Smells like it, too.

Yeah, he's skipped.

Ulster didn't have a chance to tip him off, so maybe he just saw it coming.



I can't tell if there are any other items in here.

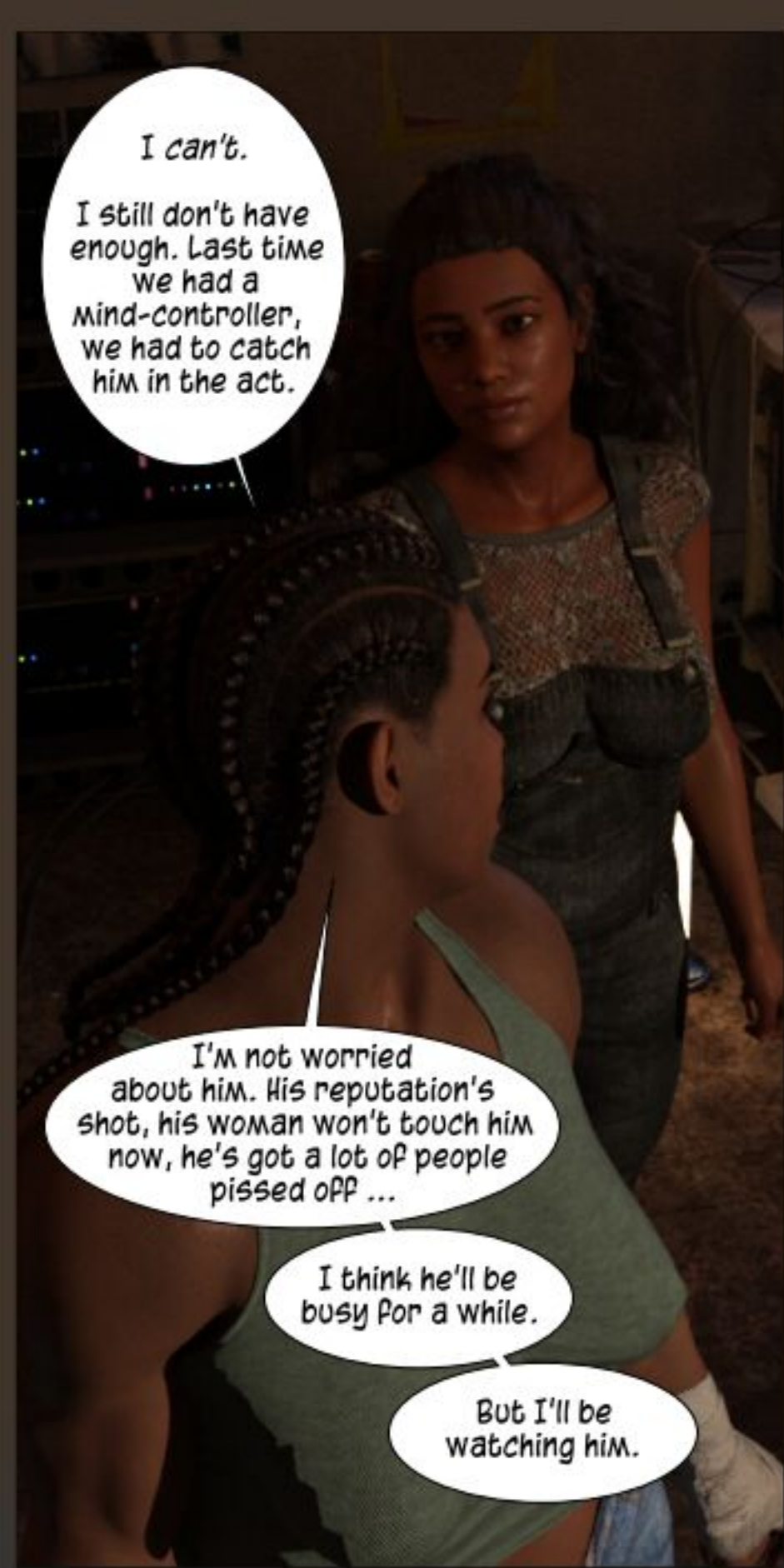
I have rights to just mark this all for deletion. I'm not gonna sort it out.

Probably the best idea anyway.

Won't set the guy back any, but it'll make it harder for Ulster to find him.

I'm thinking he might get a little vindictive, especially once he realizes there are other people who know how to take that gear off.

And that you're not going to get your boss to throw him out.



I can't.

I still don't have enough. Last time we had a mind-controller, we had to catch him in the act.

I'm not worried about him. His reputation's shot, his woman won't touch him now, he's got a lot of people pissed off ...

I think he'll be busy for a while.

But I'll be watching him.



We never did finish settling up for you getting in my business.

No, we didn't.

Look, you don't have to worry much about my getting in your business. I avoid coming here.

I don't like the Cobbles, and I don't care who knows it. I don't like most of the people in it, I don't like the way your boss runs the place ...

... and I don't like your job, the things you do.



But I do like you.

See you around.



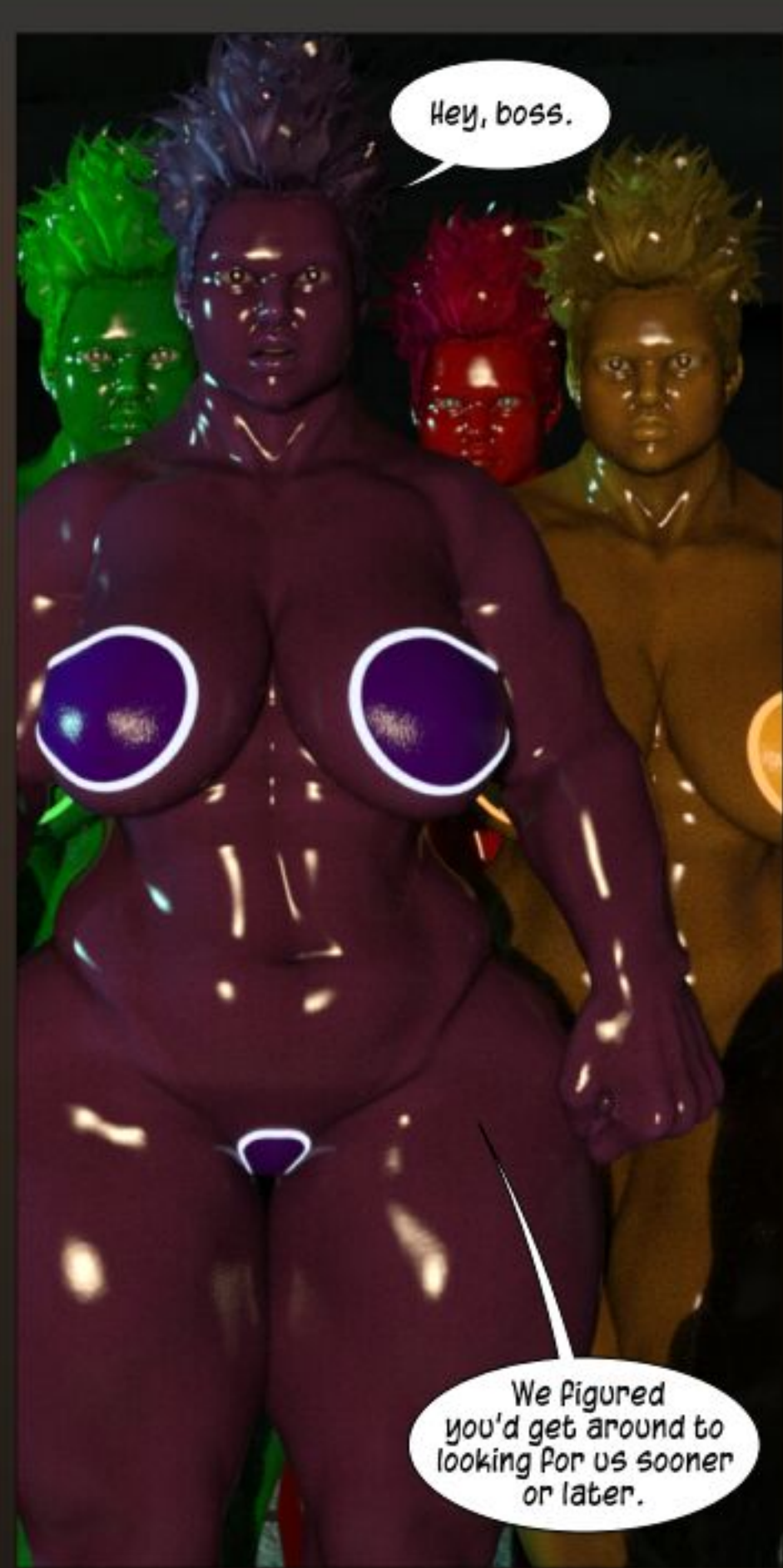
"Fix your mess." "Take off all those rings and delete them."

Not a word about what if I can't fix some of it because I can't find the damned people.

Not in their bar, no one's seen them on the street--where the hell did they go?



Hello?



Hey, boss.

We figured you'd get around to looking for us sooner or later.



Seems like there were some things about our agreement you didn't tell us.

Now wait! Hold on! I'm here to fix it! I can make everything right-- I can --



aagh!

--OOP--

OWWWW!

AAIIIII!!



SERENITY, FOUR DAYS LATER.



I really need to remodel my private space. I'm thinking an office ... people end up coming to find me here anyway ...

That's not aimed at you, though I'm a little surprised to see you again.

Well ... I thought there were a few things where you deserved an explanation.

Like how you ended up getting me involved to begin with? You were being "Janice" when you realized that Ulster was doing something you couldn't ignore. So you went to Piet to ask him to fetch me ...

Sorry I had to do it that way. I was worried if I went to you directly, Jonah would get suspicious. He didn't think I knew anything about what he was doing with the sirens, and I needed him to keep thinking that.

But what made you come to me at all? You didn't even know me ...



Sure I did.

OK, so, you heard how Kira used the Janice identity for Proteus Club stuff, because she didn't want anyone to swap to Kira?

Kira's not the only one who does that. I wouldn't be surprised if there are several people who do. Trading identities for three months is a little bit of a risk ... that's part of the fun ... but there's some risks people probably don't want to take, even then.

And, ah ... my real identity has even more at stake in it than Kira's.



Hamilton Barker! You cut off your hair!

Yeah. I don't spend a lot of time as myself these days. It's easier to deal with this way.

Do you remember when I pretended to be Honey Melone so I could save my show?\*

That was ... I didn't realize it would be, but I'd never had a thrill like that before. Acting is great, but the real challenge is being someone else, out in the world.

So you started the Proteus Club?

Yes, and please don't tell anyone. It's a much better-kept secret than my "Hamilton Sparks" theatrical company was, and I'd like it to stay that way.

Anyway, that's how I knew to go to you. And Piet's been a friend of mine for a long time. I knew I could trust him. Once I managed to convince him it was me! You can't undo the swap unless both of the people are there, so I had to do it as Janice.

\* ISSUE #11 AND THEREABOUTS.



Well, it's interesting, but I think I'll stick with my kind of acting.

Actually, I don't do much of that kind these days either.

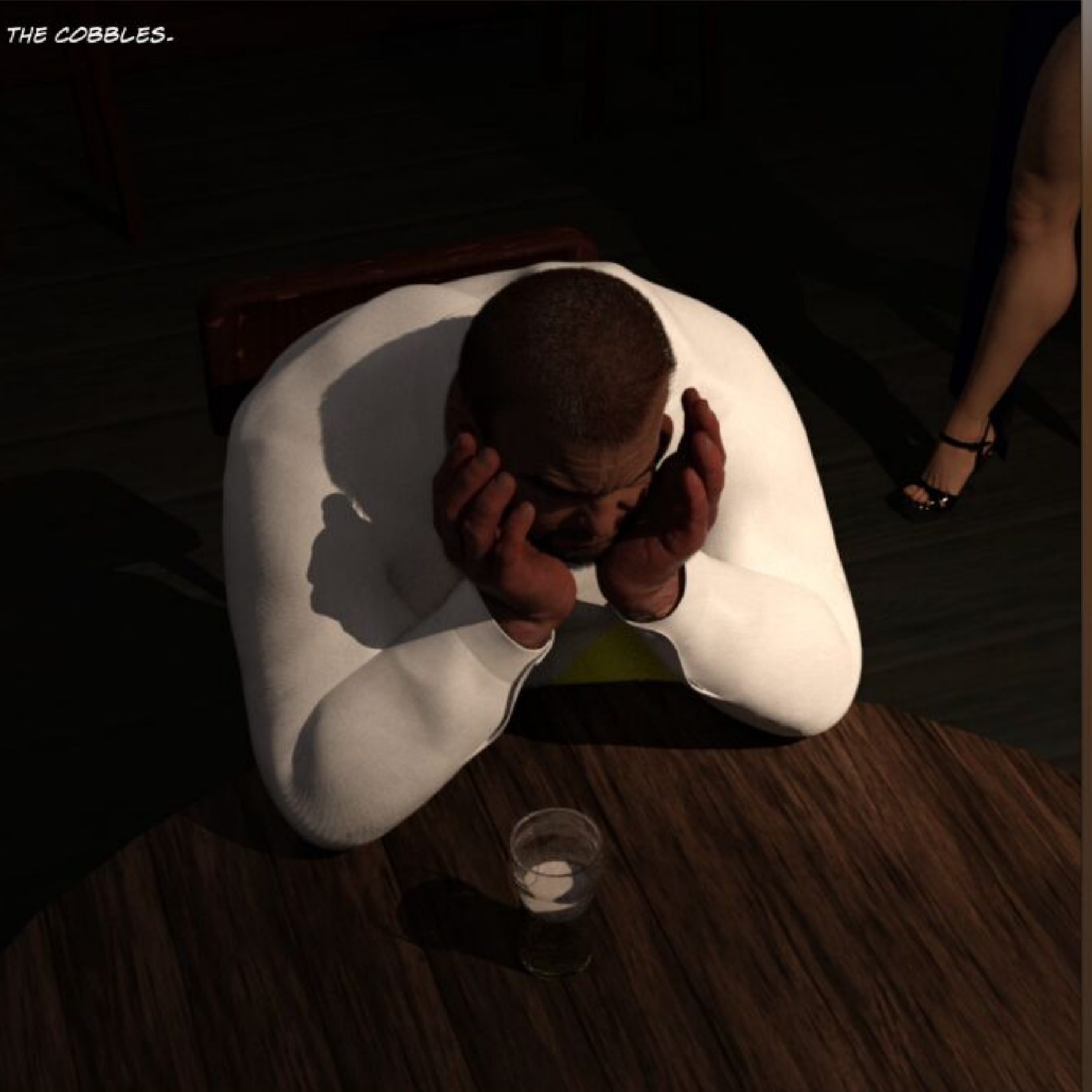
You know, people have been trying to find you.

Serene is about ready to put you on her "Missing Barkers" list.

Yes, I figured.

Honestly, one of the attractions is not having to be Hamilton Barker. Liam Holmes has a much simpler life.

But I suppose I should at least send Serene a message letting her know I'm not lost in space.



THE COBBLES.



Aw, honey. Don't look so sad.

It's you! But I thought you--



I'm not working for Jonah anymore, no. I'm sorry about that. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

But the thing is ...

... I really liked being with you. I like helping you, and I didn't ever try to steer you wrong, even if I was working for Jonah.

And the ... other parts ... those were fantastic.

I'd like to come back.

If you'll have me.



Yes! Absolutely.

Oh, I'm so pleased.

Think of all the trouble we can get into together! We're going to have all kinds of fun.

NEXT: SWAMPED