

SLEEPER SQUAD

HIGHPOINT.
A SCHOLZEN SQUAD IS ON ONE OF THEIR REGULAR RAIDS UPON THE DELP ESTATE.

THE SQUAD'S MORALE ISN'T GOOD. THE LAST TWO RAIDING PARTIES HAVE NOT COME BACK.



We're entering their territory. Look sharp, now ...

... What the hell are those?



Attack!

... But, sir--

I don't know either, but they're solid, aren't they? Hit them!



No!!

aaag!

yaaa!

uoww!



Yeow!

can't ... get close enough ...



Damn you, Piends!!

FUWUM



I'll take you all myself if I--

-- glurgh! --



The new shadows are tremendously effective! Not a single raiding party has gotten in, nor escaped ...

And the defenses we've added to our outer walls seem to be holding back any direct assault.

This is amazing. We've gone from in danger of being overrun to nearly impregnable.

We couldn't have done it without the Order's help.



I know.

And now it is time to begin repaying us for it.

A BEAUTIFUL MORNING IN SERENITY ... PERHAPS SOMEWHAT LESS SO HERE IN ONE OF RUBY'S SCENARIO STAGES.



OK, now concentrate.



Shit.

Might just wear eFPN box.

Wear one on head too.

Aw, come on. You're improving. It's just taking a while.

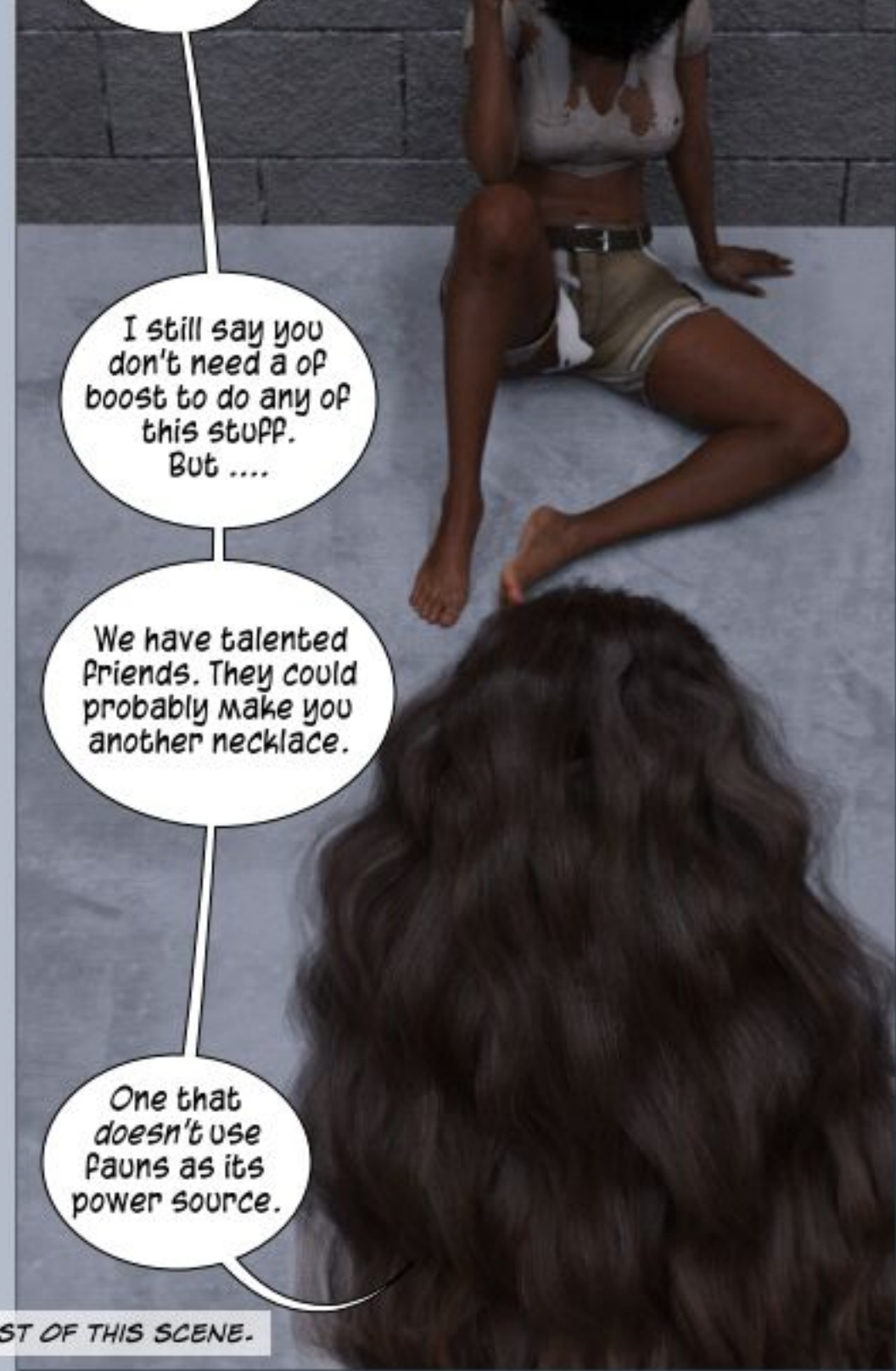


Han't yank Me, Ruby.

Gon be pissen cho han't do none ... han't make clothes ... han't make portals ...

EPFN snot eIF han't believe it ... "what you mean, han't make clothes, thought were style ..."

Hoped after necklace, could do better, seein way how and all ...



You know ...

I still say you don't need a of boost to do any of this stuPP. But ...

We have talented Friends. They could probably make you another necklace.

One that doesn't use Pauns as its power source.

JEX IS REFERRING TO EVENTS LAST ISSUE ... AS IS THE REST OF THIS SCENE.



Bad idea.

Thanks, tho.

Did real skelly stuPP with necklace on ... liked it. Had Pun. Bad.

Put some on gain, who knows what. Might big slide.



You were being controlled!

You weren't in your right mind! You can't assume you're going to go all evil-villain whenever you get a little power because of that!



Think?

Ruby, lot skel bitch said ... sound like Me.

She han't get Polk want play orc or Paun or what ... I an't get it either. Might never.

Maybe skel bitch too.



But you didn't want to change them into monsters just because you don't understand why they play their games.

That's a big difference. And while you were controlled does not count.

You haven't seen Leyna nag me about not wanting to do anything, but I'm sure you will. She doesn't let up.

Huh?

It's not a tangent. Trust me.

I haven't told Leyna why I don't want to go out on Missions much anymore.

I'm bored as hell with most things I do around here--I get bored pretty easily, just like you--and I like screwing with people sometimes. Maybe too much.

I figure I'm just one really bad day away from disappearing into the Yards or somewhere during a mission and becoming an evil witch in a castle and not looking back.



Now got me real Messed! Thought you were telling me doing witch stuPP was aright? Now sounds like sayin bad?

You gon run off play witch ... Think I should too? Sayin OK or what? An't get it.

I'm not telling you a damned thing about what you should or shouldn't do.

I'm saying I realize very much that the temptation exists, and your Pears are legit. And a good sign, by the way. Because it means you have a conscience.

But I also think that learning how to Manipest clothes and cast portals isn't going to put much temptation in your path, so you should stick with it.

FASHION STREET, WHICH HAS APPARENTLY BEEN REASSEMBLED AFTER LAST ISSUE'S SPRUE INCIDENT.



ooh!



How much?

Absolutely Free. Have a great day.



MMM!
Is this extra good or what?

You think it tastes better because you didn't have to pay anything.



Oh, very Punny -- Hey! -- hee hee -- You've got -- ha! -- You've got ice cream on your head!

Well, so do you!

I do?

Yeah! -- ha ha ha -- and it looks really dumb! -- hee --

Swirlbrain! -- hee hee! --

Mintbulb! -- ha ha ha! --



No, I really think it -- uhhh --

Oops! Brain Preeze! -- hee hee --

Not a lot to Preeze.



You know, I realize anything can happen here.

But.

Yeah.

Least there's no question where the problem is.



Hello! Why not take oPP those helmets and have some delicious ice cream? It's Free!

You must think we're really stupid.

Fun's Fun, lady, but now it's time to undo all this.



Hey!

Not the right answer.



urg!



Must be out cold ... her little shack disappeared.

Effects didn't go away, though ... and since they're probably from eating the ice cream --

Algorithmic. Yeah. Our disruptors won't help.

Leyna should be in the ops room right now ...

You go. I'll watch everybody.

OK, but ... ice cream? You're serious?

You think I could make it up? I'm not that creative.

Ruby could, probably.

Well, I'm not sure what I can do. We may not even be able to hang onto the troublemaker ... if she's smart, she recalls as soon as she comes to ...

I think Gina was planning on zapping her a lot.

Hope she doesn't pry the woman's brain.

We can't undo the effects if they're algorithmic, and you're surely right that they are ... even the person who did it probably can't ... all we can do is wait and hope it wears off like the clown whiskey* ...

Can we interrupt them?

* ISSUE #36.

No.

We've got to stop being as cavalier about interrupts as we've been.

They're an emergency measure. A last resort. And they're not without risk. Interrupts are a shock to the brain. They can cause memory loss, cognitive damage, and sometimes even coma.

It's a small miracle we didn't see more effects when the Anomaly Patrol was interrupting people left and right hundreds of times a day ...

Anyway. No. Not enough of an emergency.

Remember the other day when I was saying how we urgently need better methods for this kind of thing?

It's been a problem from the beginning and the situation's gotten much, much worse since then. Now just about anybody can walk around turning people into ice cream cones.

We need a way to hold them, and we need a way to punish them.

Ruby will be here in a minute. Make sure you get her to fill me in on whatever I miss.

I'm going with Ranza to round up the victims and put them somewhere they won't walk into a Sprue hole.

Sorry for the sudden change. I hope it didn't startle you.

Gina and Esperanza work with, and for, Midnight. They don't know she's me, and they've never seen me in here.

Though, really, at this point, there's no reason I couldn't tell them.

I figured it out. But ... ah ...

By any chance, did Ruby design that Porm for you?

No, I stole it from her.

When I began working with Ruby, I didn't want to tell her who I was. I needed another identity, and I wanted to pick one she wasn't likely to encounter anywhere else. Something hard to impersonate.

I was monitoring her private space at the time, and saw her design it for her scenario with you.* Sorry I never told you.

I just kept using the Porm after that. I like it.

... Yes, so did I.

* WAY BACK IN ISSUE #3!

Did I just hear my name? Talking trash about me?

Oh! Huh.

I didn't know you were visiting, Pauline. Nice to see you.

And where's Leyna?

Leyna had to go deal with a problem. She said you should fill her in later.

I asked Pauline to come because I know you wanted more information on the situation in the Yards after your recent adventure.

First off, the woman's name is Braga. Braga Bradamante. No joke.

I had to give Leyna access to Yards data, and then we spent twenty minutes combing location history, to learn that. We aren't as ... structured ... as you are.

Mostly we like it that way, but it's got some issues. She should never have gotten as far as she did without someone calling it to my attention. I mean, I grant I'm hard to find, sometimes, but ...

The problem is, we need someone in the Yards to keep an eye out for trouble like her and, ideally, take care of it.

We need your team. Or its equivalent.

Well ...

... even putting aside any personal objections I might have ... it'll have to be 'equivalent.'

We're stretched way too thin as it is. Hell, you can see that Leyna's so busy fighting Pines she couldn't even be here for this.

You need ... ah ... local talent.

I agree, but it isn't an easy bill to fill. Not only is there a trust issue, they need to be highly proficient manipulators themselves ...

... or at least very good at resistance and recovery. Yeah.

I don't know what to tell you. I'll keep on the lookout for prospects, though.

While you're here, Ruby ...

Pauline, do you mind if I take a moment?

I was asked again about Zinnia James.

Uh-oh.

OP course not.

You and Leyna tried to trace her in the Souk, found out she'd been thrown to Highpoint ... and then dropped it.*

-- Sigh --

That bad?

She was kidnapped by Scholz' people. They'd have changed her to one of their damned chess pieces as soon as she got in.

So we go in with goggles and scan everybody, hoping for an ID, while at the same time not getting caught. Could take days -- if we can do it at all.

We don't have a portal into Scholz territory, and the one set portal we can get to goes to neutral ground in Highpoint. So we use that and hope we can sneak into the Scholz estate ... or we get Leyna to run a blind portal into hostile data, which might go real badly.

I feel bad, but it's just too big a mess.

* ISSUE #31.

Hell, just disrupt all of them.

Snap them all out. Tell them all to recall.

... wow.

Who are you, and what have you done with Serene?

Hmph.

I think we can safely assume everybody on the Scholz estate except the ones at the very top aren't there of their own will. I don't have a problem interfering with that.

OK, but if Brendan ever found out you'd authorized it --

What gives you the slightest idea I give a good goddamn what Brendan thinks?

We're falling apart and Brendan is off playing king with his little group of cocksuckers --!

o.o.p.

... I'm sorry.

It's not you I'm yelling at.

Wouldn't have worked anyway.

Mass disruption, Leyna's mass revert tool, even mass interrupts ... all those would need to affect Brendan's beds, and would need Brendan's consent.

And if we wander through and disrupt them one by one, that's the same as your going around for days with the ID goggles.

Maybe not.

If you feel that strongly ... I might have a way.

It's still the person-by-person approach, and it's still going to take a while, but we can cut back on the risk, at least.

I'll talk to Leyna about it.



FOR THOSE WHO HAVEN'T MET HER YET -- OR THOSE WHO HAVE FORGOTTEN -- THIS IS ORCHID.

RUBY RESCUED ORCHID FROM JULIA GREENE'S EFFECTS BACK IN ISSUE #1. THEY BECAME FRIENDS, AND SOMETIMES LOVERS, THEN NOT FRIENDS, THEN FRIENDS AGAIN. ORCHID IS NOW LIVING HERE IN CENTURY. RUBY HASN'T SEEN HER SINCE THE SPRUE.



Thank you, Jasim.

Orchid, they said? Do I remember you from somewhere?

I was in the Hive, Ms. Laval.

Call me Jeanne. Glutton for punishment?

I thought you had good ideas.

Not your fault about what she did with them.



Actually, it was. But I appreciate the thought.

This project doesn't work like that. It's a different approach ... and a safer one.

Among other things, that means you won't just start right away. We have to find the right people to put together. You'll go on a list. You could wait a few days; you could wait a year.

Let me show you around, explain what we're trying to do, and then if you're still interested, I'll sign you up.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN SERENITY ...



Genuinely curious, no criticism.

Do you refuse to get a personal space because it makes you harder to find?



Han't figured where yet is all.

What slide now?

Now, why would you say that?

Only come find me train or slide. Did training already.

Tell me wrong.

-- Sigh -- ... You're not wrong.



It wasn't always like this. I used to actually do stuff with people. You know, Fun. Leyna and I are supposed to be friends. We talk about socializing more, but it never seems to happen these days.

I thought for a while it was all me ... I've gotten so tired of things, especially after ... well, never mind.

Anyway, a lot of it turns out to be Leyna. She's very invested. She thinks all of Serenity is her personal responsibility. Sometimes I think she thinks it's all of A4.

You can't think so, tho. Why keep on it?

I don't know. I guess because nobody else will. Or can, sometimes.

Or maybe it's just so I'll have something to do.

And speaking of that ...



We tried to find a missing person in the Souk a while back. It turns out that the same two assholes who tossed you into the Scholz estate did it to her too. We really need to go get her out. But it calls for an infiltration, and I need help.

An't bein' bait.

Special not for blue queen lady. Got big push that skel.

Yeah, she's a real piece of work. But don't worry, "bait" wasn't what I had in mind for you. Wouldn't ask you to do that again, not after Honor Delp.*

I'm not saying you're going to get to throw with Lady Scholz, but you'll get to help piss her off.

But, listen: I haven't forgotten what you said. There's no pressure here. I mean it. If you don't want in, you don't have to be. I just thought you might be interested.



K but same again: Why me?

Still han't do none. No good. Why not Leyna? Or suit ladies?

You're not going to need abilities for this one. We've got a setup ready to go.

Yes, I could get Leyna or the Jumpers. If you say no, that's probably what I'll end up doing.

But if I do, it'll be a lot longer before this can happen. They just have too much to do. Serenity is getting hit by so many things these days ... especially all these Sprue incursions ...

"I wonder if any of the other zones are having this much trouble."



Huh?



Whoa

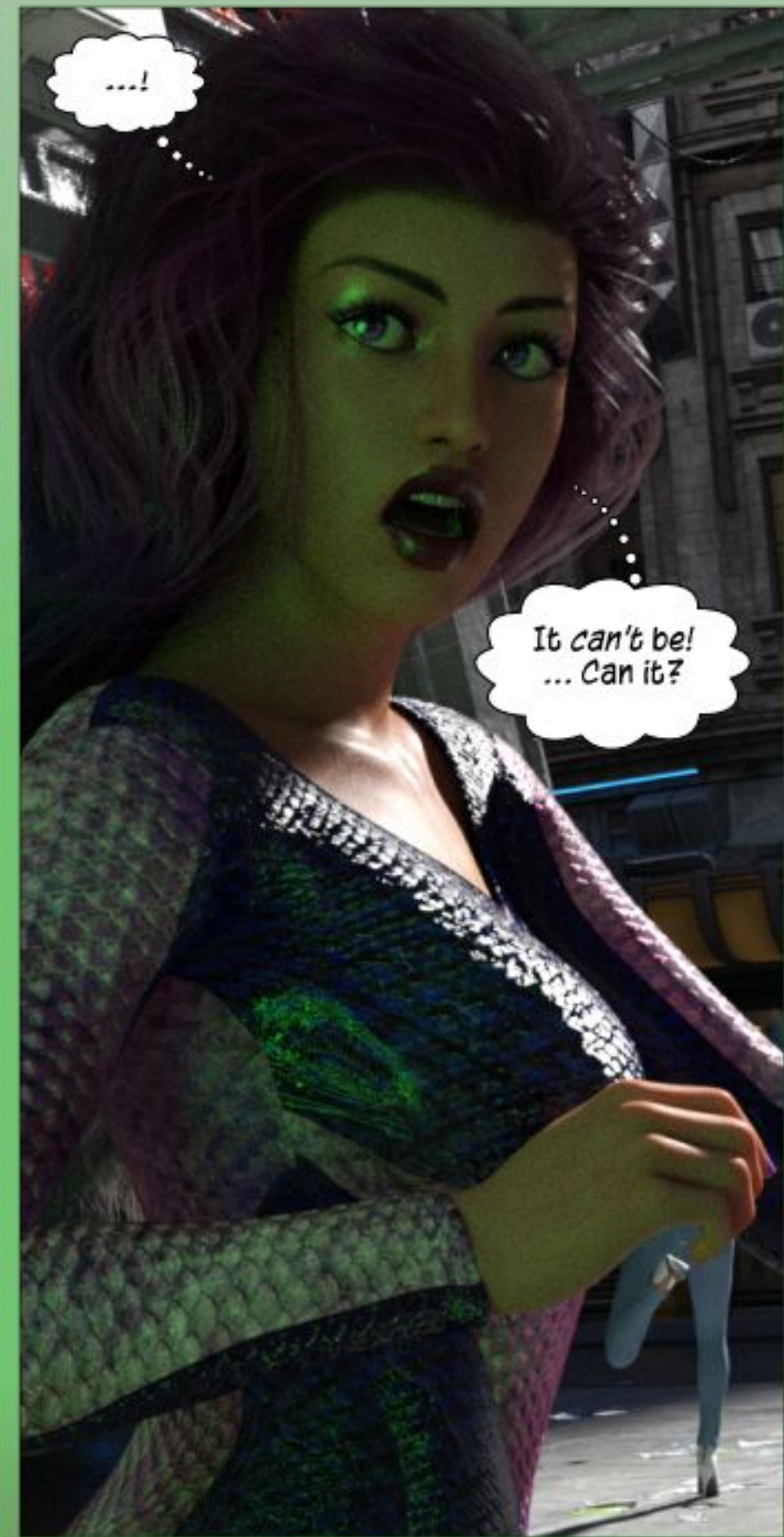


I bring the inevitable!



Don't try to run! You have nowhere to go!

This is your Fate! Accept it! It must all come apart! The void will claim you all!



It can't be! ... Can it?

HIGHPOINT.
THE SCHOLZ ESTATE.



What do you mean, you don't know?

I expect better from you if you ever want to be promoted!

A vital part of your job is to know every noble in Highpoint!



She's not of Highpoint, your grace.

She's not? You're sure?

I would know if she were.

Is she hostile?

... Well, she's not carrying any weapons.

Very well. Open the gates.

Ah ... how do I announce her?

Make something up.



The right honorable ... ah ...

Ruby Martinez??

Hi!

I was hoping to impose upon your ladyship's hospitality for a bit.



An emissary kind of thing. I'm representing Serenity.

... But Serenity is no friend to Highpoint. And you are no friend to this estate.

Well, we're not exactly enemies either, though, are we?



The fact is, there are people in high places in Serenity who don't know what to think about you. They just don't have enough information. Only rumors.

It would definitely help our diplomatic relations if I were to get to know you better.

Possibly much better.



I ... I'm not sure that's a ...

What could it hurt?

Allow me to stay for a few days, your grace, and I'm sure by the end we'll be very good friends.

INTERLUDE.

THE SOUK. THE MOROCCO CLUB, RUN BY THE DAUGHTERS OF SEKHMET. SERILLE, THEIR LEADER, IS GETTING BAD NEWS FROM EMILY, HER LIEUTENANT.



Three of them?
You're sure? They couldn't have fallen in a hole?

The street cats know the souk better than anybody.

I'd find it hard to believe one of them falling in a hole, let alone three.

And none of them were unhappy with their positions, as far as I know. Very much the opposite.



So you think they were taken. But by whom?

Well, that's the question. There are rumors about a woman who wanders around the souk after dark making trouble. I encountered one of her victims a while back. * But no one she picks on remembers much about her afterward. They can't even describe her.

* ISSUE #31.

There's someone I'm going to ask, though. She sees a lot of things happen and nobody pays much attention to her.

Prissy. Poor thing. I can't untangle her brain. I think she'd be happier as a kitty, but she refuses the idea.

You'll need to be careful approaching her. She's scared of us.

I know. I certainly can't do it wearing this.

I'll go out in plain clothes around sunset.

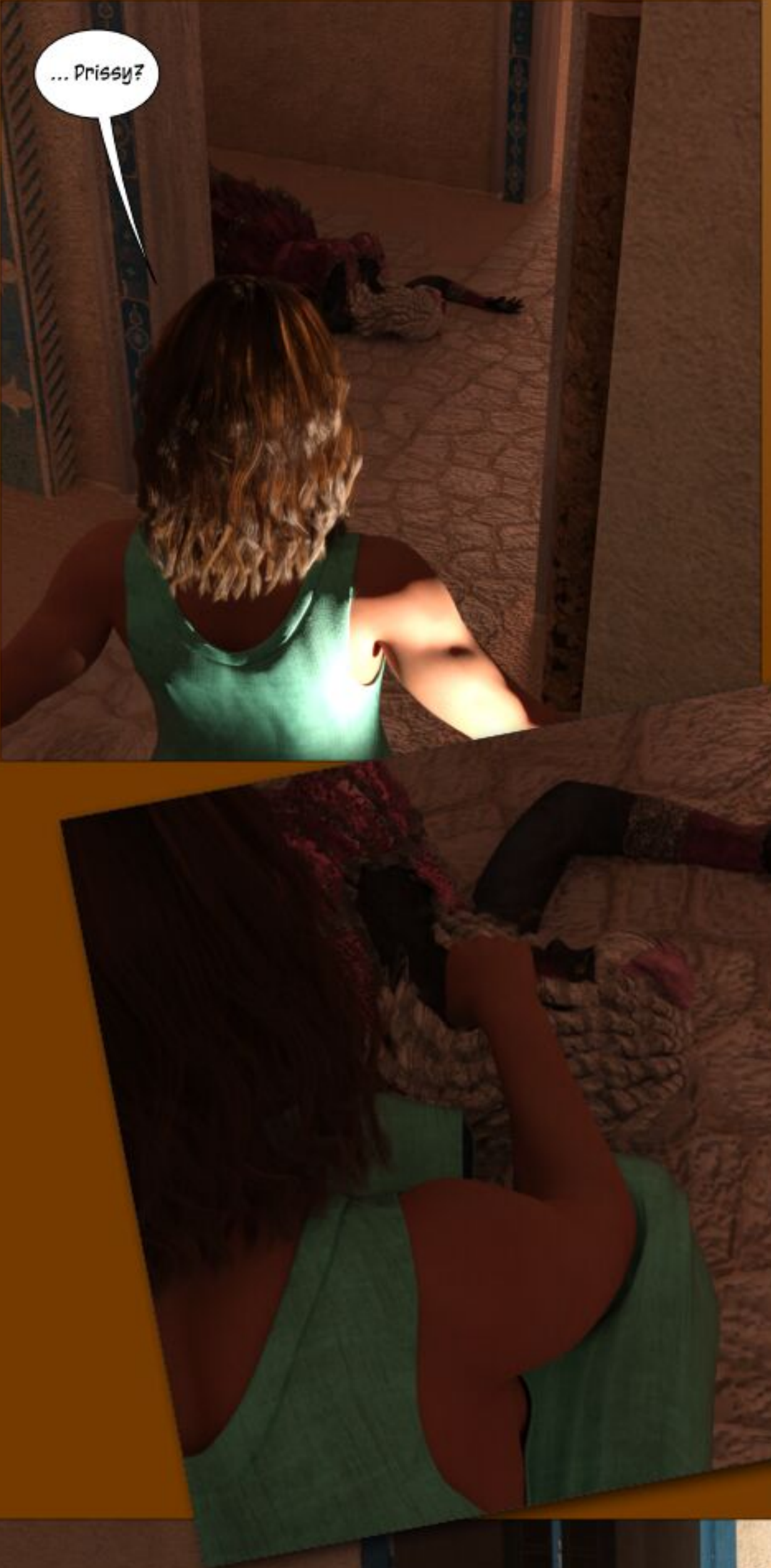


"The hard part will be finding her."

la la la
la la la

AAAA!
Dog lady!
Don't like dog lady!
Let go!

It's a surprise.



... Prissy?



YAAAAARRRR





... wait.



Hey!



Too soon.

Your time will come.



AND NOW BACK TO OUR PROGRAM.



Not a very exciting tour, I'm afraid.

It's a big ugly pile of stone.

Was there any other part of it you wanted to see?

Your bedroom.



You're not very subtle.

I didn't get the impression you were interested in subtlety.



OK, this is unexpected.

Like I said, the whole castle's a big ugly pile of stone ... and it isn't that way by my choice.

This is the one room in the place that looks the way I want it to look.

Brae, this is Ruby. She will be our guest for a few days.

Yes, Mistress.

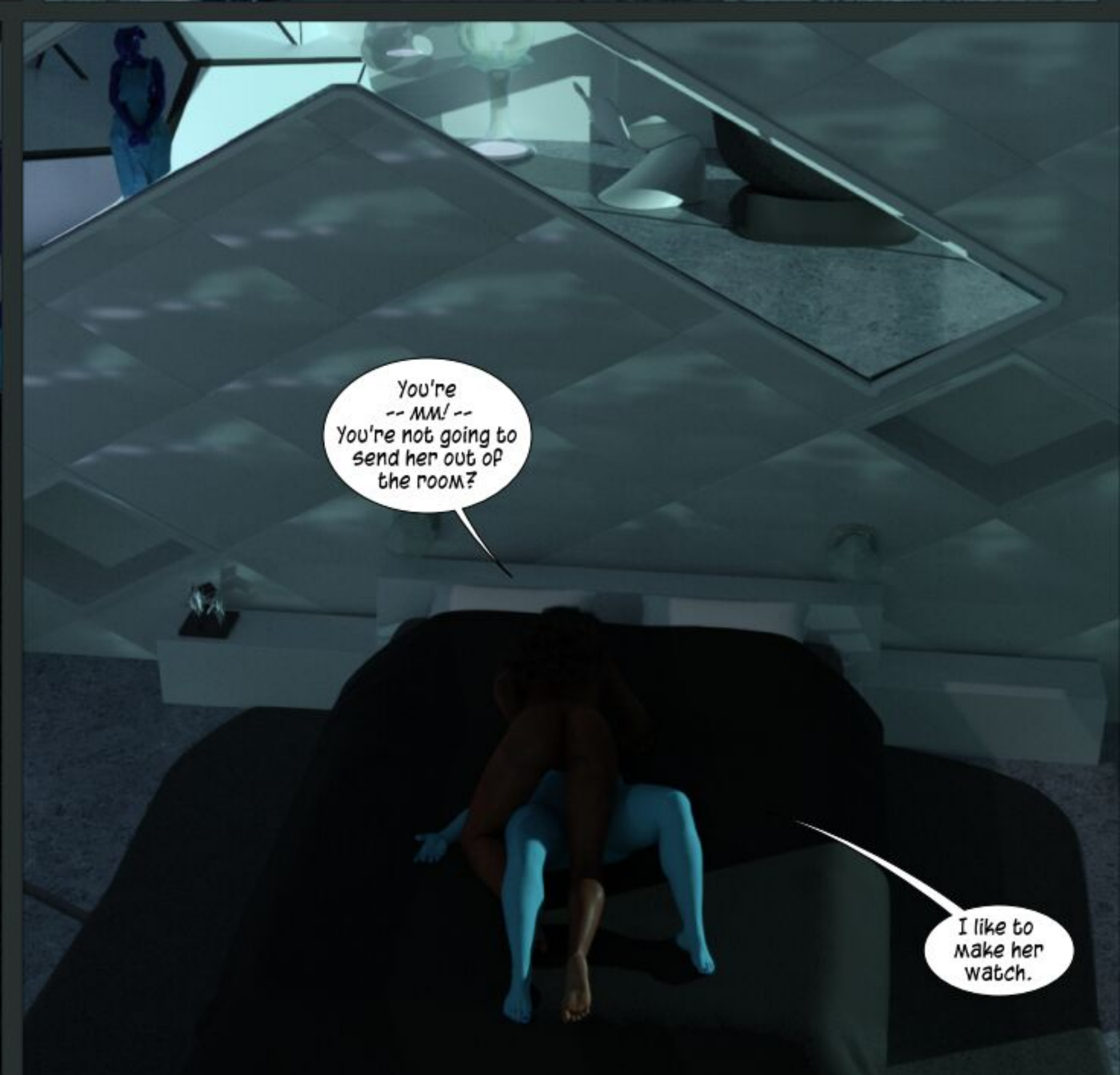


You'd better be really good.

I do all right.

Do I get to see what you look like under all that stuff?

Don't push your luck.



You're -- MM! -- You're not going to send her out of the room?

I like to make her watch.



DAWN.

Well, she didn't try to do anything to me while I was asleep, so I guess that's a good sign ...



Oh, it's still really early ...

Brae, do you have any idea where her grace is?

There was something urgent to attend to, ma'am. A bishop came to the door, and they both left in a hurry.

Hm.

May I make the bed now, or are you still using it?

No, I'm up. ... Thank you.



You and I are definitely going to have a private talk later.



Hit her!

Aaaaaii!

Oh, there you a-- uh.

Stand down, you idiots! Stop this right now!



Don't!

She won't open the doors, make her!

We're going to get into the armory one way or another!

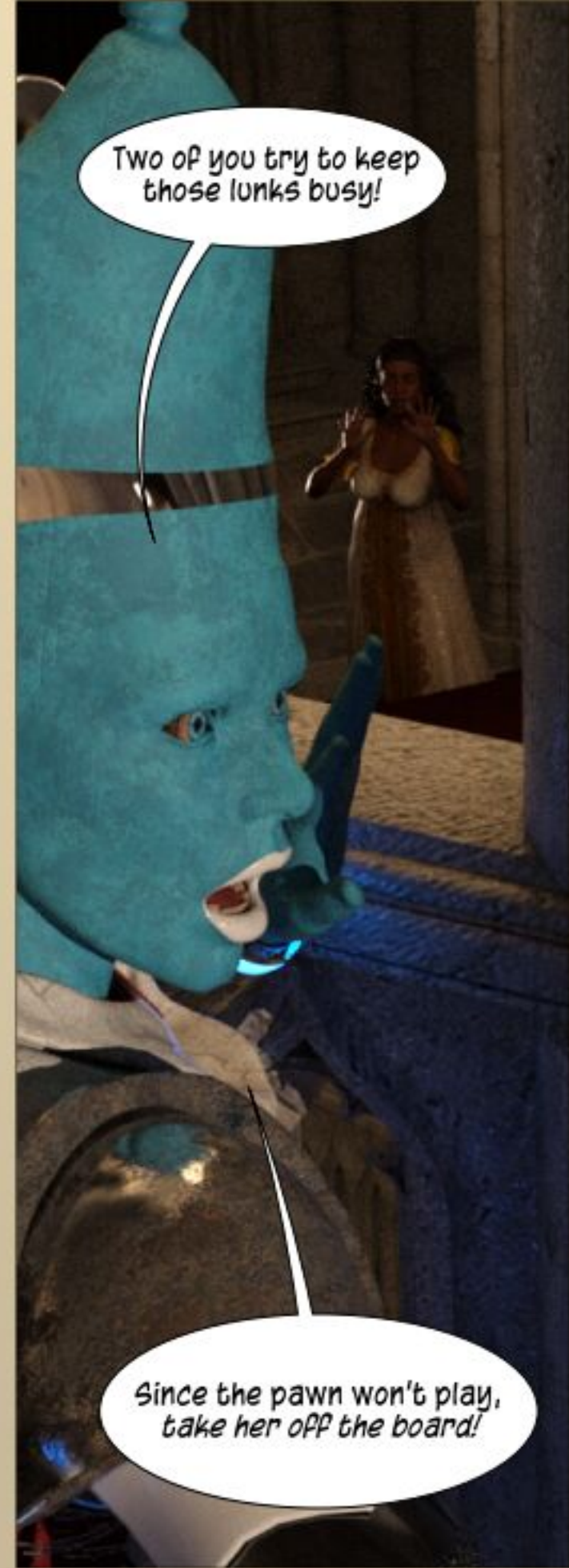


Get them!

And move the pawn off the door square, quickly!

Rooks! Shit!

Uuurrh!



Two of you try to keep those lunks busy!

Since the pawn won't play, take her off the board!



Not the staaaaaiirs!!

AAAAA!



Break them down! Keep pounding!!

This is our only chance to --



waughh!



uup!

Rebellion's over. Sorry.



I don't know what went wrong, but I'm going to make sure it doesn't happen again ...

-- hhh --
Think so, do you?



Recalled.

Shit.



I don't understand it. There's never been any ... ah ... dissent ...

You don't have to dance around it. I know what you really mean.

You're not going to judge me for it?

I'm not here to judge. I'm sure you have your reasons.

Right now I'm much more concerned with getting some breakfast.

Oh, well, that we can definitely do.



We do keep a good kitchen ... army travels on its stomach and all that ...

... uh?



Where are the kitchen pawns?

Uh ... no one's sure, your grace. They left?

They can't leave, you idiot! They can't move on their own!

I don't know! I'm sorry, your grace, but I don't! I know a lot of people seem to be missing this morning --



-- sigh --
I'm afraid I can't presently offer you breakfast.

And I'm going to need to take my leave of you for a while. I apologize.

I have to investigate exactly what's going on. And possibly find new kitchen pawns.



Not sure whether that means she trusts me not to get into trouble ...

... or whether she'd rather risk that than have me see whatever chewing-out she's about to do to her thralls.

Now let's see. What messes can I make?

HOURS LATER, LADY SCHOLZ RETURNS TO HER CHAMBERS, EXHAUSTED AND DEPRESSED.



Ooh!

What a good idea, Brae. Well done.

A nice, long soak is exactly what I need right now.



So good to get out of all that for a while, too ...

Brae?

Come in here. I want you to wash my back.

... Brae?



You unspeakable cunt!

I trusted you! I let you into my life! I shared everything with you! And what do you do?

AAAAA!!



Let go!

You're going to change me back. And then I'm going to throw you out on your ass. And when the king hears about this, you'll be lucky if all he does is ban you from Highpoint --



Not a chance, you unspeakable dick.

I didn't spend two years pretending to be madly in love with you to give up everything I did it for now.

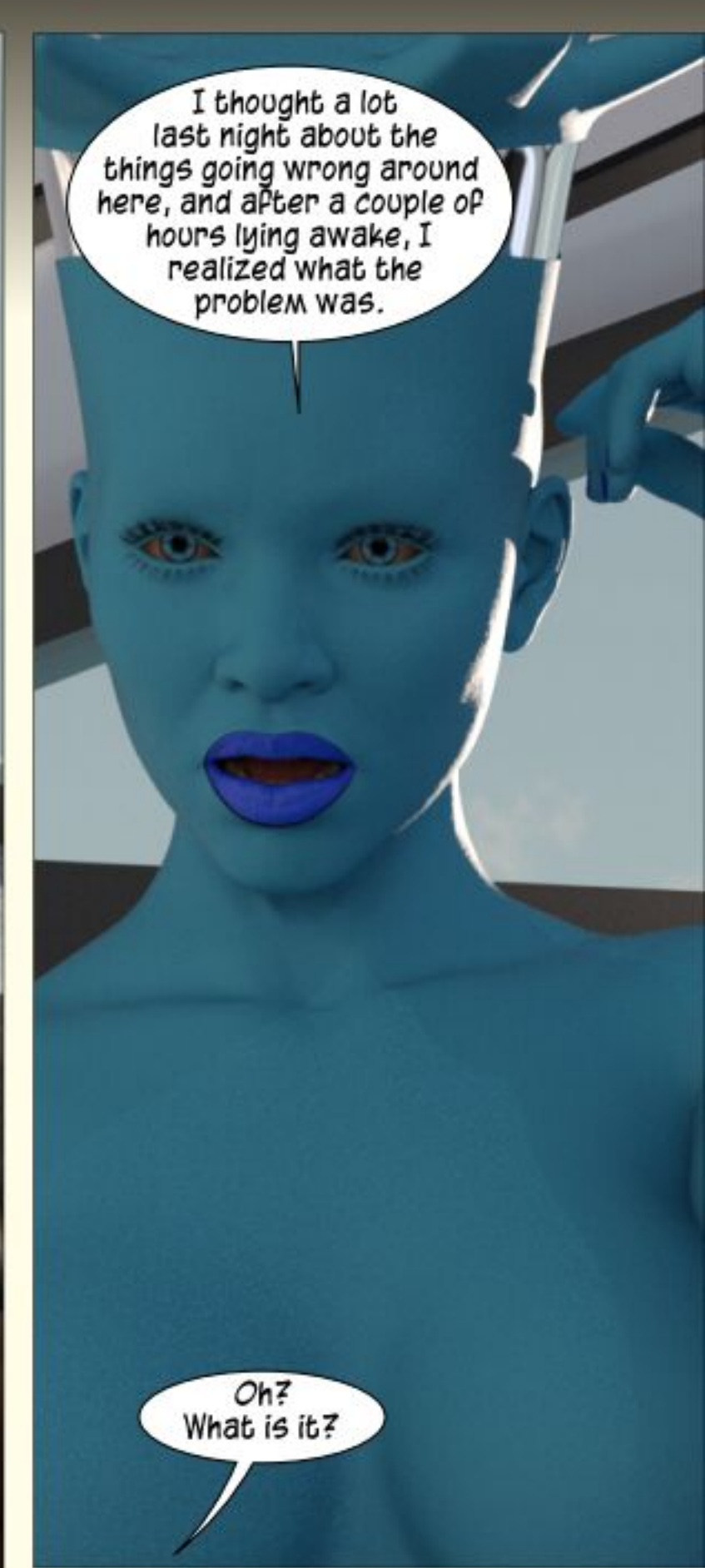
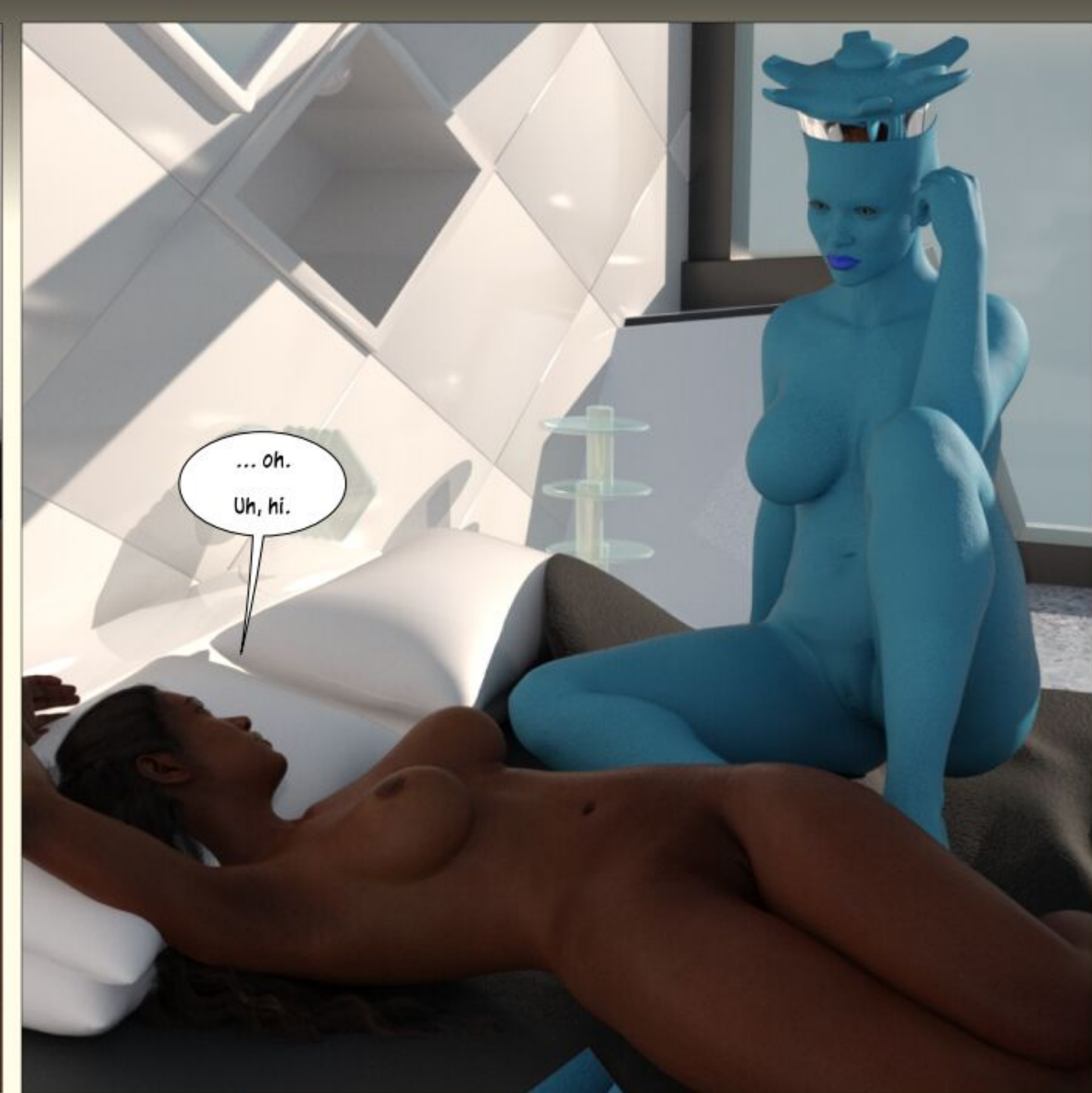
Two years of sucking your cock, literally and figuratively -- you think I'm going to walk away from this? I earned this. I worked for it.

This is my estate now, Brad, and I'll do anything I have to do to keep it that way.



Now I'm going to have to get out the emergency hat, the one I probably should have put on you in the first place.

I wanted to give you something better than that, but you leave me no choice.



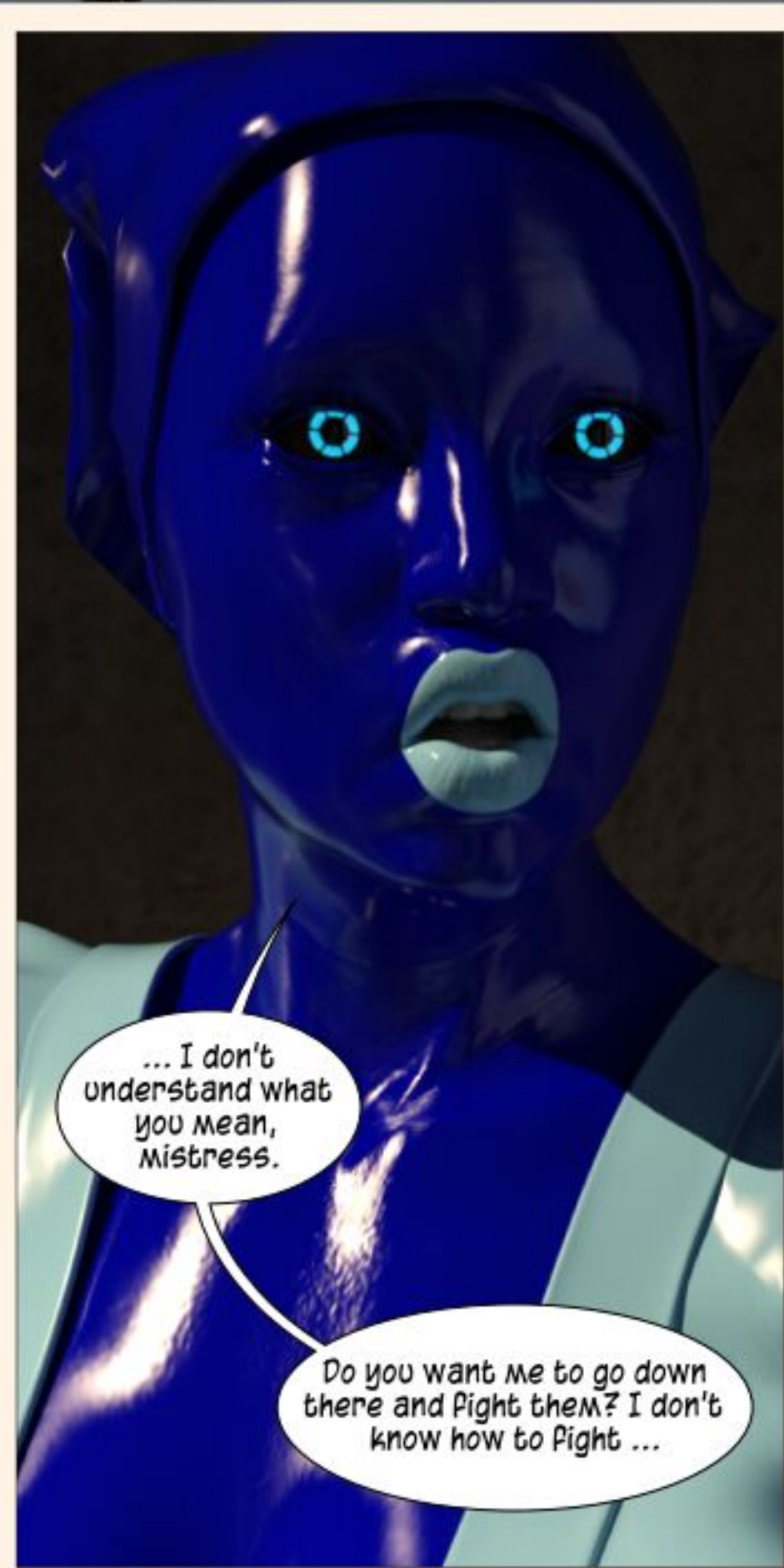
INTERLUDE.

JOSIAH BARKER, PATRIARCH OF THE A4 BARKERS.

HE HAS NOT BEEN SEEN BY ANOTHER LIVING SOUL IN NEARLY FOUR YEARS.



BACK IN HIGHPOINT ...





IF YOU LIKE, YOU CAN GO BACK AND TRY TO FIND THE FOUR PLACES YOU GOT A GLIMPSE OF INVISIBLE JEX BEFORE THIS PAGE. -T



Hadn't expected the clothes to come through ... Maybe it counted as reapplying them myself ...

Han't should told bout suit. Might need gain.

Well, I'd have had to have you become visible anyway. I needed to make sure you were there before I opened the portal ...

But I also wanted her to know there were two of us. I want her to think I have plenty of volunteers. I want her to think there's a whole lot of people lined up, ready to Puck with her.



So, did you have Punz?

Yeah! ... Glad gave me that job tho. An't think could do other.

And here I was going to apologize for giving you the hard part. You had to avoid being spotted while zapping people for three days. All I had to do was make trouble.

And cusk with skel.

Oh, I've done worse. I'll tell you some stories sometime, if you want.

Anyway, she wasn't bad in bed. Lot of faults, but not that.

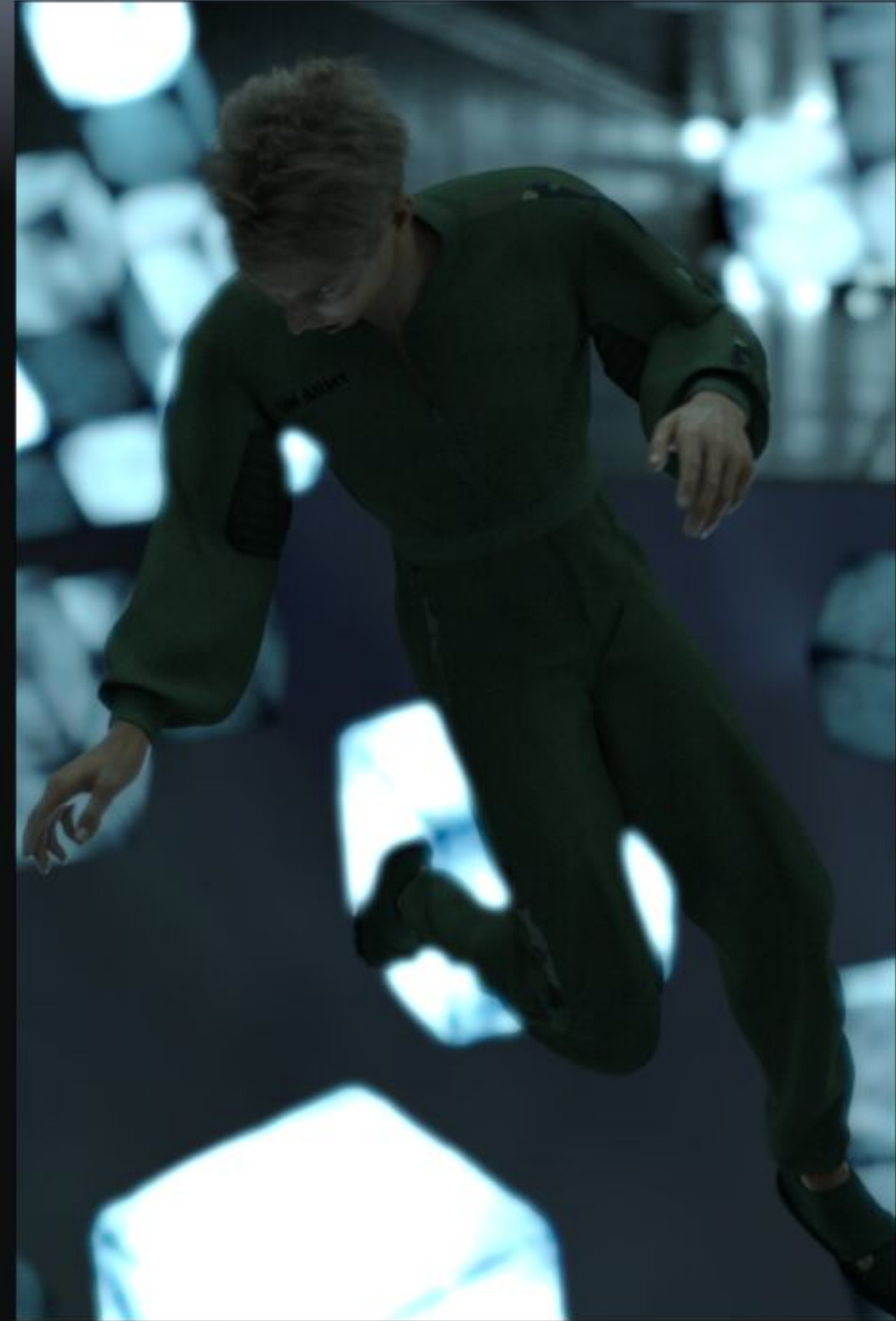
She done now, think?

I wouldn't bet on it. She's smarter and sneakier than I realized.

I figure you left her about a tenth of her people. That's just enough to mount a defense of the castle, if her scheme works.

I think it will. Then she'll regroup and try some new nasty idea.

MEANWHILE, ELSEWHERE IN SERENITY ...



... Damn.



I'm sorry, Dr. Chapman. I tried to hold onto it, but it just --

There's nothing to apologize for, Charles. This isn't a test.

Let your eyes readjust before you get up. I'm going to go turn some lights on.



Wait ... you don't have to shut it down. Give me a minute, and I'll try again.

No indeed. You know the rules.

That may have been a minor event, but it was still an event, and we never push past an event. The consequences can be severe.

... Trust me on that.



You're out for five days. Come back then, and we'll start a fresh series.

Yes, ma'am.

And Charles ... I'm going to check your logs when you come back. I want to see that you got plenty of sleep. Real sleep. REM sleep. If I see signs that you've been overextending yourself, I can't use you.

I understand.



Good. Looking forward to --

HM.



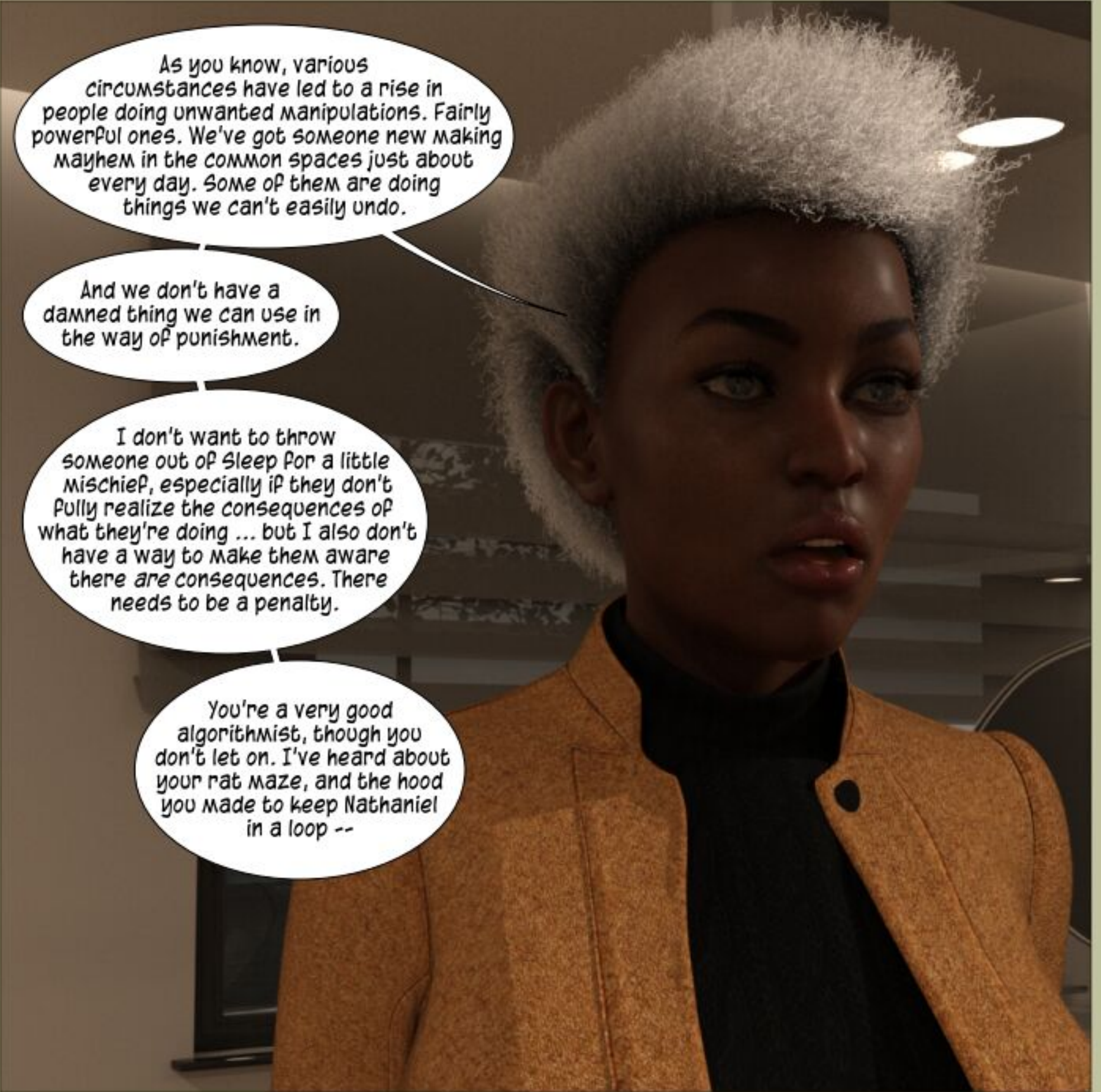
The study's going well?

Yes, I think so. Progress is slow due to the precautions, but obviously those aren't negotiable.

Thank you again for the permissions.

What can I do for you?

I was hoping you could help me with a problem.



As you know, various circumstances have led to a rise in people doing unwanted manipulations. Fairly powerful ones. We've got someone new making mayhem in the common spaces just about every day. Some of them are doing things we can't easily undo.

And we don't have a damned thing we can use in the way of punishment.

I don't want to throw someone out of sleep for a little mischief, especially if they don't fully realize the consequences of what they're doing ... but I also don't have a way to make them aware there are consequences. There needs to be a penalty.

You're a very good algorithmist, though you don't let on. I've heard about your rat maze, and the hood you made to keep Nathaniel in a loop --



No.

No, you can't? Or no, you won't?

Mostly the latter.

Though I'm also out of practice. I gave up on my algorithmic work quite a while ago. For ethical reasons.

Well, ethically, don't you feel an obligation to help make this a better place?



I am helping.

I'm doing my best to fix all the damaged people you bring me.

I'm doing this study to try to prevent a genuine disaster from happening.

Don't try to manipulate me. I wrote the book, and I'm better at it than you are.

... I'm sorry. But I really do need your help.

Ms. Barker, I know about "Midnight." And before you ask, no, Ruby didn't tell me. It wasn't hard to figure out.

You use her as an identity when you need to come out on the streets and do the meaner parts of running this place.

It's partly about secrecy and safety, sure ... but it's also about shame. Embarrassment.

You don't want to do your dirty work as yourself. You don't want to do it at all, if you can avoid it. You've farmed out a lot of it to Ruby and Leyna for years.

If you're ashamed to do the policing, how can you in good conscience ask anyone else to do it?

I'll help with anything else I can, but I will not be your jailer, your torturer. Find another way. Or at least find another person.

HIGHPOINT, SEVERAL DAYS LATER.



... decimated! They disrupted anyone they could. Most of those recalled immediately. A few of them tried to stage a revolt! We barely have anyone left!

And you're surprised?

... what?



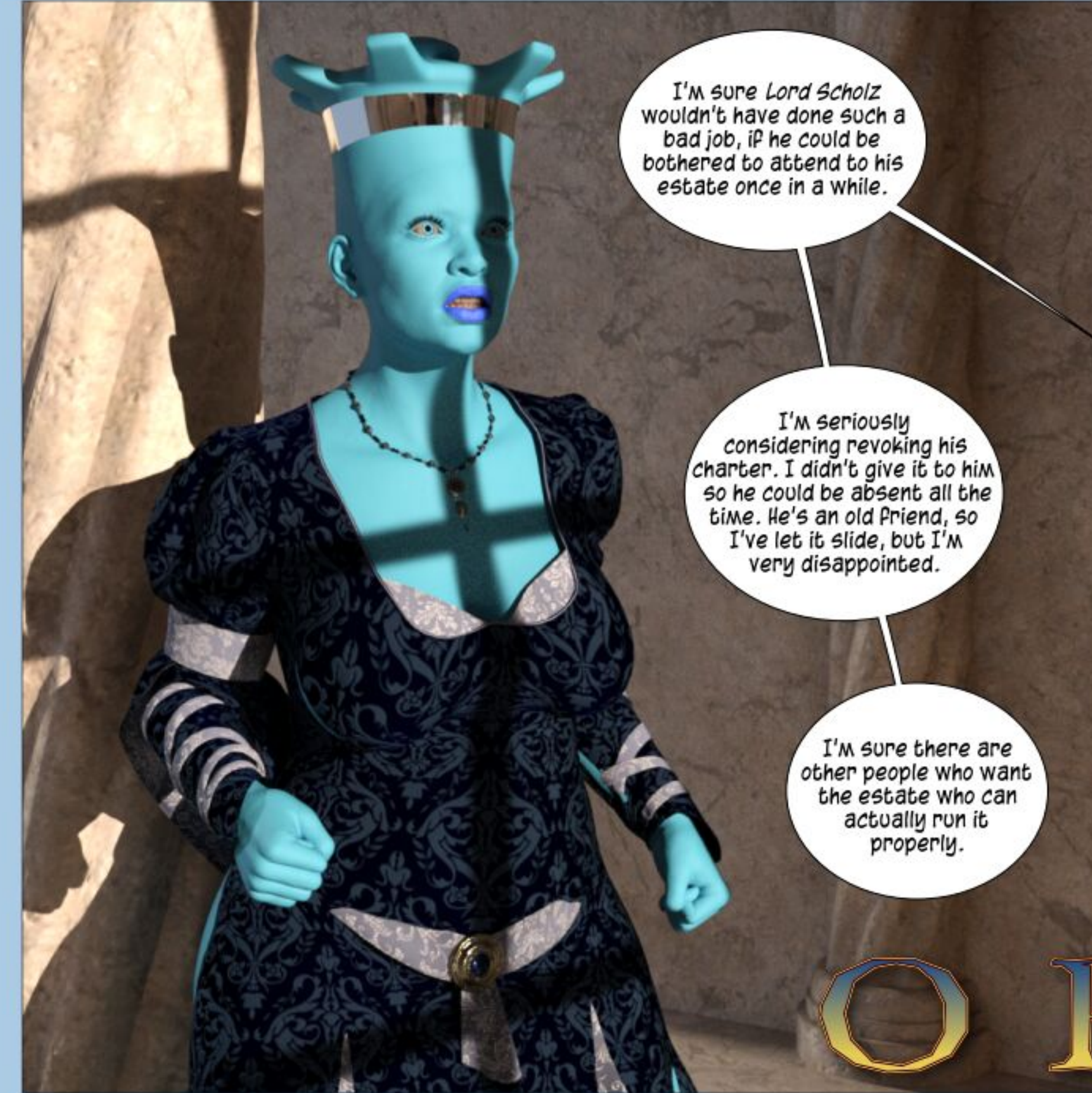
I'm not thrilled to learn Ruby Martinez has been interfering here ... but it does feel a little inevitable.

Of the people she disrupted, how many had you stolen from neighboring estates? How many had your press-gangs brought in involuntarily?

I don't tell any of you how to run your affairs ... you're free to play it your way. But that doesn't mean I approve of your approach.

You know, it is possible to maintain an estate where people want to serve. I'm no soft heart, but it does seem to work out better if they do, don't you think?

And making enemies of all your neighbors ... that was just stupid. Very bad strategy.



I'm sure Lord Scholz wouldn't have done such a bad job, if he could be bothered to attend to his estate once in a while.

I'm seriously considering revoking his charter. I didn't give it to him so he could be absent all the time. He's an old friend, so I've let it slide, but I'm very disappointed.

I'm sure there are other people who want the estate who can actually run it properly.



In the meantime, the rule is the same as ever: You fight your own battles.

I'll keep that in mind.

Your Majesty.

NEXT: ORPHANS