

SLEEPER SQUAD

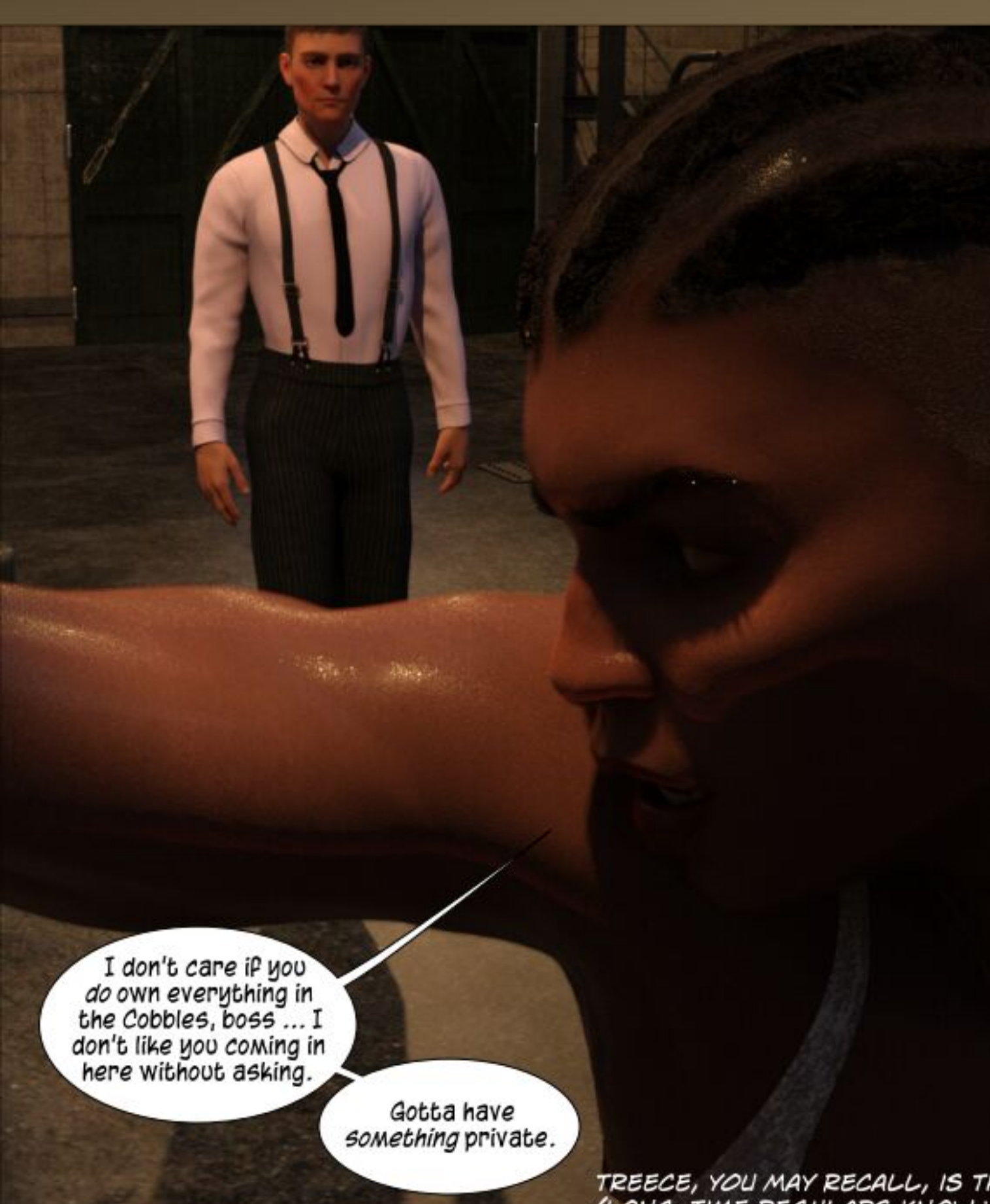
AN OUTSIDE OBSERVER COULD BE EXCUSED FOR WONDERING WHY SOME PEOPLE IN SLEEP EXERCISE REGULARLY.

AFTER ALL, THEIR PHYSICAL BODIES ARE KEPT IN REASONABLY GOOD SHAPE BY THE SLEEP BEDS, AND EXERCISE IN SLEEP DOESN'T AFFECT THEIR ACTUAL PHYSIQUE AT ALL. SO WHY BOTHER?

THE ANSWER SEEMS TO BE: FOR THE SAME REASONS THEY EAT FOOD, EVEN THOUGH THAT ISN'T REAL EITHER. THEY MAY FEEL A NEED TO DO IT, EVEN IF THEIR BODIES DON'T ACTUALLY DEMAND IT. THEY MAY USE IT AS A WAY OF FILLING TIME. MAYBE IT'S MEDITATIVE. MAYBE THEY RELIEVE STRESS THAT WAY.

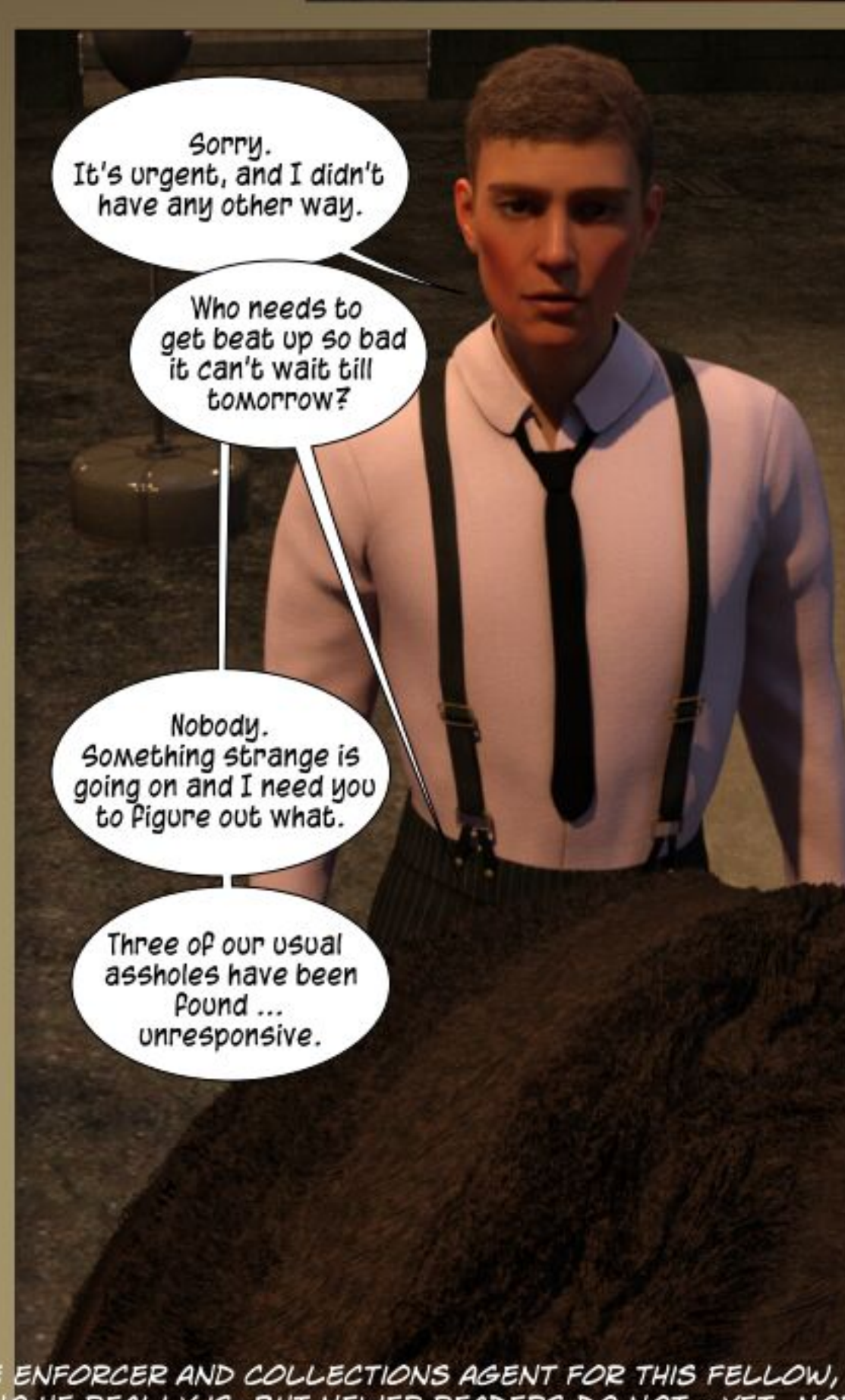
OR MAYBE, LIKE TREECE, THEY JUST ENJOY IT.

BESIDES, TREECE HASN'T GOTTEN TO BEAT ANYONE TO A PULP FOR A WHILE, AND IT'S PROBABLY BETTER SHE POUND ON HER BOXING EQUIPMENT THAN DO SOMETHING HORRIBLE TO SOMEONE WHO MAY NOT DESERVE IT.



I don't care if you do own everything in the Cobbles, boss ... I don't like you coming in here without asking.

Gotta have something private.



Sorry. It's urgent, and I didn't have any other way.

Who needs to get beat up so bad it can't wait till tomorrow?

Nobody. Something strange is going on and I need you to figure out what.

Three of our usual assholes have been pound ... unresponsive.



You don't mean dead. What do you mean?

I mean unresponsive. They're not responding. To anything. Not moving or talking.

It's got to be something somebody did to them on purpose. Find out how, why, who, and deal with it.

You know how this place is. Rumor Mill's already got hold of it. Makes me look bad.

I don't want a fourth.

TREECE, YOU MAY RECALL, IS THE ENFORCER AND COLLECTIONS AGENT FOR THIS FELLOW, "THE BOSS," WHO RUNS THE COBBLES. (LONG-TIME REGULARS KNOW WHO HE REALLY IS, BUT NEWER READERS DO NOT--YET. NOR, FOR THAT MATTER, DOES TREECE.)

JEX'S FIRST TRIP TO CENTURY* WAS A BIT MORE OF AN EXPERIENCE THAN SHE WAS PREPARED FOR, AND SHE HASN'T VISITED IT SINCE.



Why this place always got make it hard ... askin no good, han't none know ... no list or some ...

Han't none else ever try find any? Folk just an't look for other Polk? Rosh, like usual--

--huh?



AAAH

Run!



Aw no ... an't time get in slide today ...

Go shoot some else, skel ...



Rosh ass place. All time some shit ... an't want even be here ...

Guess it Pound some else to mess up tho--

AAAAAA



Not even close to open yet ... get outta--
AAAAAA!
Treece!
Didn't see it was you. What do you want? IP Matty didn't pay this week it's not my--

--oh god please don't hurt me



Don't piss your pants, Marlon. I just want to know about last night. Word is you Pound Matty in the storeroom.

I didn't find him. Suzy did. And it wasn't last night, it was this morning.

But it happened last night.

I guess? He was still here when the rest of us left.

What was Matty into lately? Trying out any new drugs or anything like that?

No idea.

Know anybody who might have wanted him out of the picture?

... no idea.

Uh-huh.



C'mon, Treece!

You know how it is around here. The less I know, the better! I don't want to know what Matty was into! It's safer!

OK, Marlon.

IP anybody asks, I didn't talk to you about this.

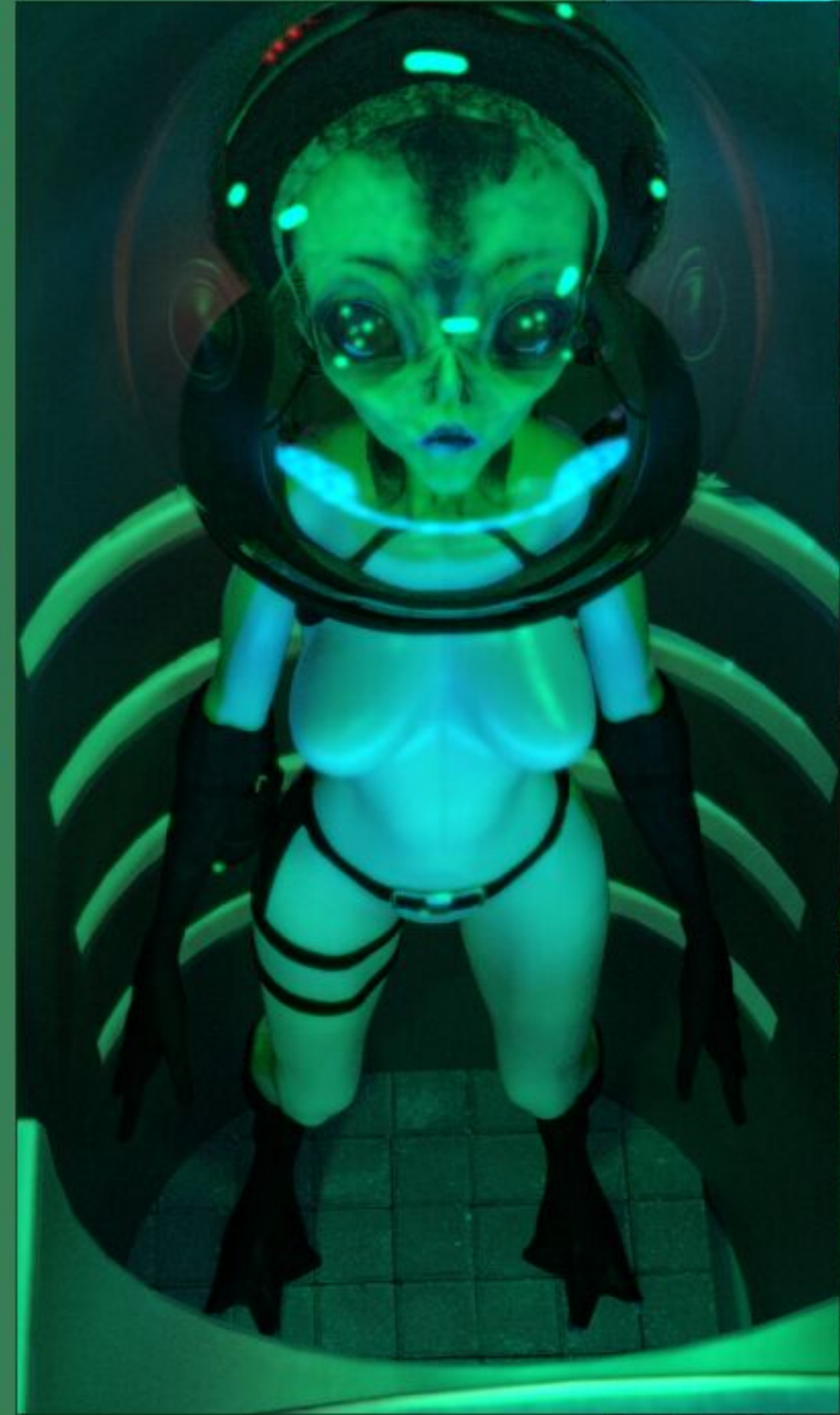
Go put on some dry pants.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN CENTURY ---



An't Punny, skeis!!

Let Me ou



THE COBBLES. CUFF PURCELL'S GRUBBY BAR HE USES AS AN OFFICE.



I'm telling you, it's gonna change all kinds of things ...

Yeah, and it's gonna piss off some of the big boys too. Not sure I'm ready for that.

Of course it'll piss them off. That's part of the point. And we can handle it--if we're a group.

Once we get past that, you'll be one of the big boys.

But we'll have to finish discussing it later, Tyrone, because I have an unwanted visitor.

What the fuck do you want? I'm paid up through the end of the month.

I was just coming in to see what you'd heard about Matty Lendlaw.

Lendlaw? I haven't heard shit about him, and I like to keep it that way. Why should I know anything about Lendlaw?



Because he was found on the floor in the back room of his bar this morning. Not moving, not talking. Comatose, except he's awake.

If he'd been trying one of those weird-ass drugs, could have been his own fault ... but nobody thinks he was into that kind of thing. He didn't even drink much.

So it was somebody taking him out.

His bar competes with yours--

Like hell it does! I get serious drinkers who don't give a shit about decor. He gets people so busy looking at the wallpaper they don't notice how crappy his booze is.

--and word is the last time the two of you were in the same room you tried to throw him through a wall.



That wasn't business.

He was being an asshole to Jenny and I'd had enough of it.

Over and done. Not something'd make me want to do anything permanent to him.

Anyway, what do you want from me? If I did have a score to settle, do you think I'd tell you?

You think anybody's going to tell you anything you don't beat out of them?



Thing is, he's right.

Everybody in the Cobbles is scared shitless of me. And I'm no good at this kind of thing anyway.

I need help.

BACK IN CENTURY, IT LOOKS LIKE JEX ISN'T THE ONLY PERSON TRYING TO FIND SOMEONE.



Oh, no, don't apologize. I knew it was a long shot.

I figure somebody's got to know, sooner or later. Thanks for your time!



Whoa!

おはよう こんにちは さようなら

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO FLEE



Need to be somewhere else right now ...

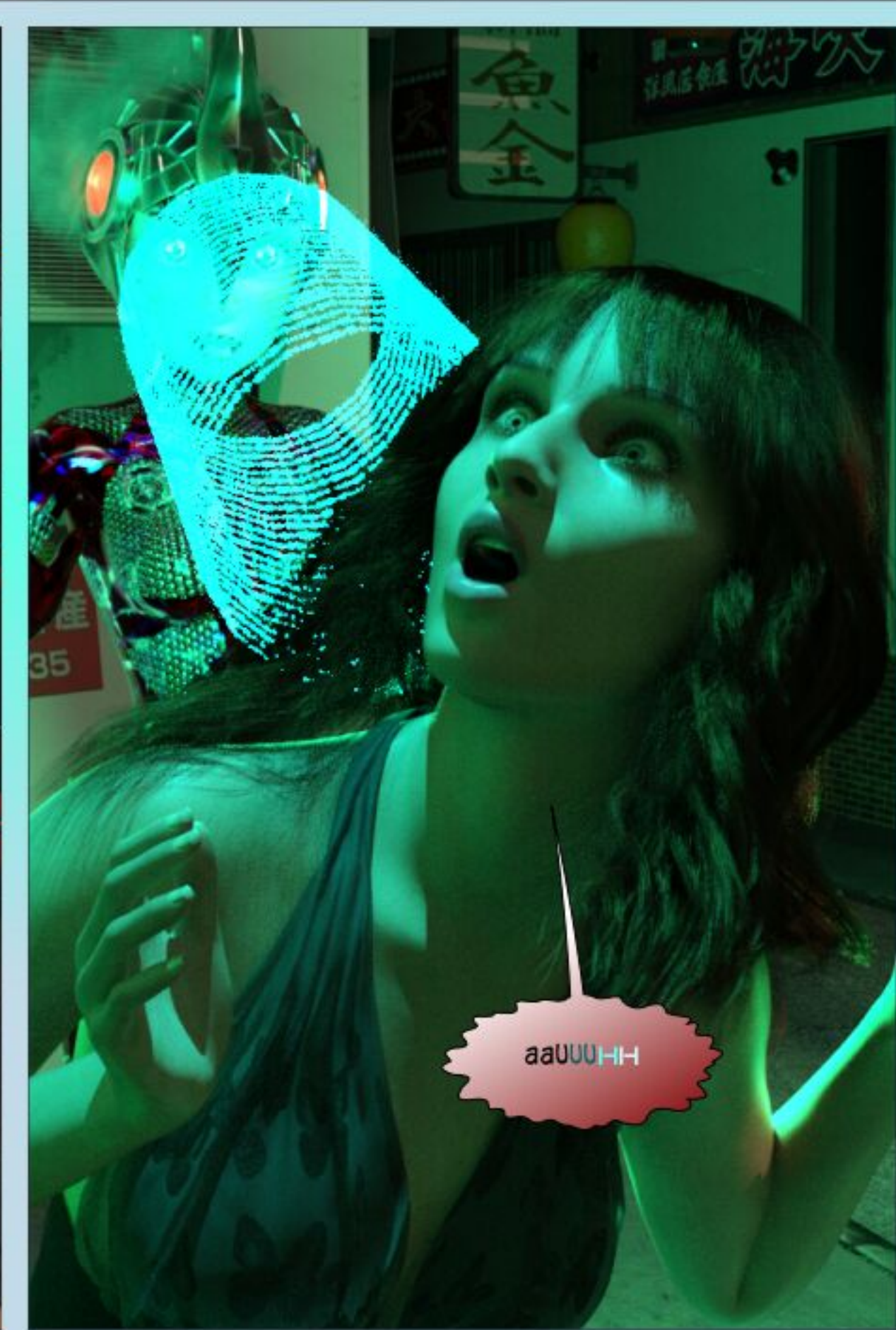
YOU LEAVE ME NO ALTERNATIVE BUT FORCE



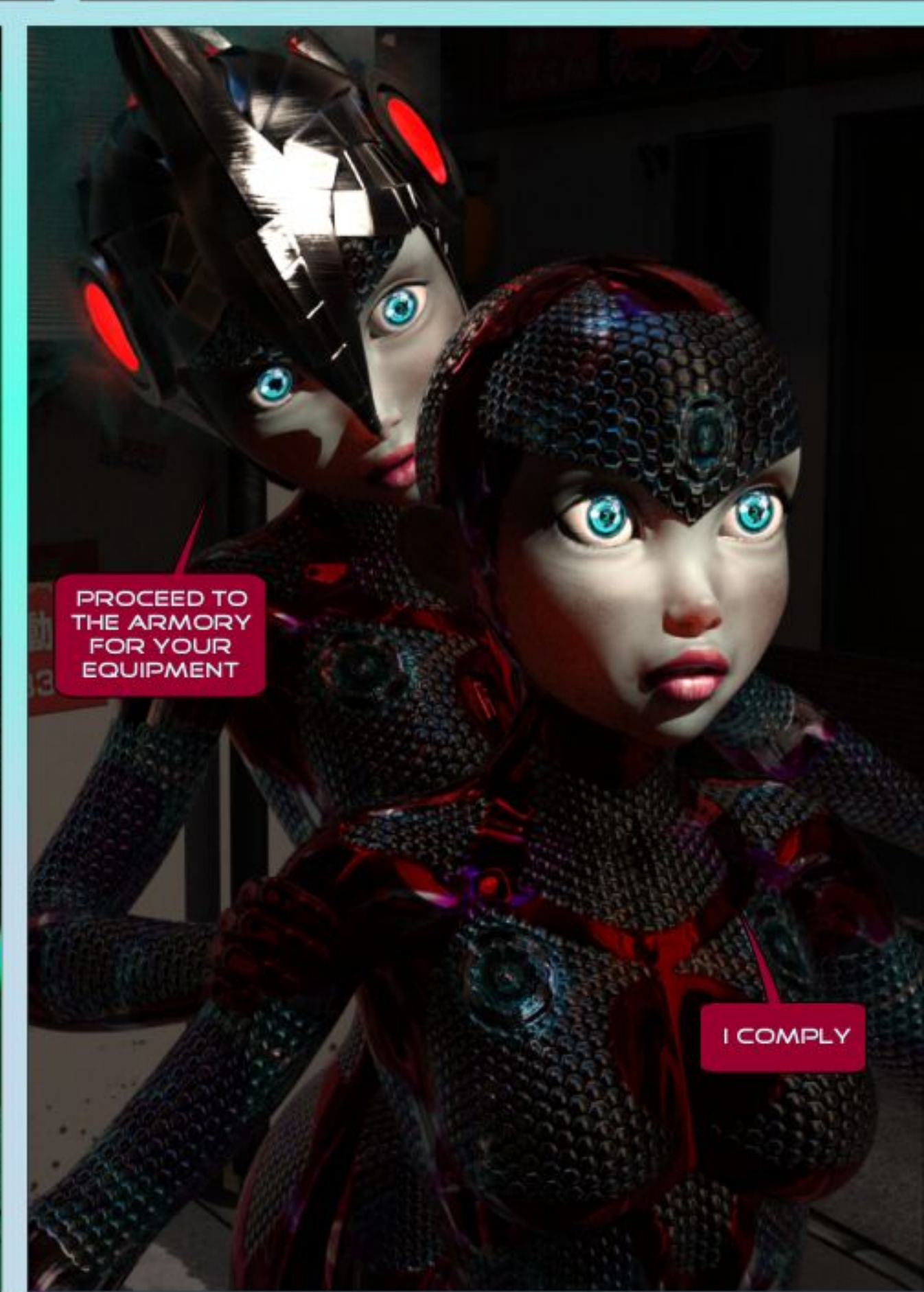
HALT, MISCREANTS

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS REQUIRED TO AID OUR EFFORT

huh?



aaUUHH



PROCEED TO THE ARMORY FOR YOUR EQUIPMENT

I COMPLY

THE COBBLES.



I told you, I don't do that!

You don't pay me enough to do that, and I don't think you ever will.

You think I care what you think?



AAUUH!



What the Puck, Spid?!

You work for me, Cheel. That means if I tell you to do something, you Pucking do it. You're lucky I pay your skank ass anything at all. And if you don't like it--



Yeah, what if she doesn't like it?

We wanna know about that part, Spid.

While we're at it: What if we don't like it?

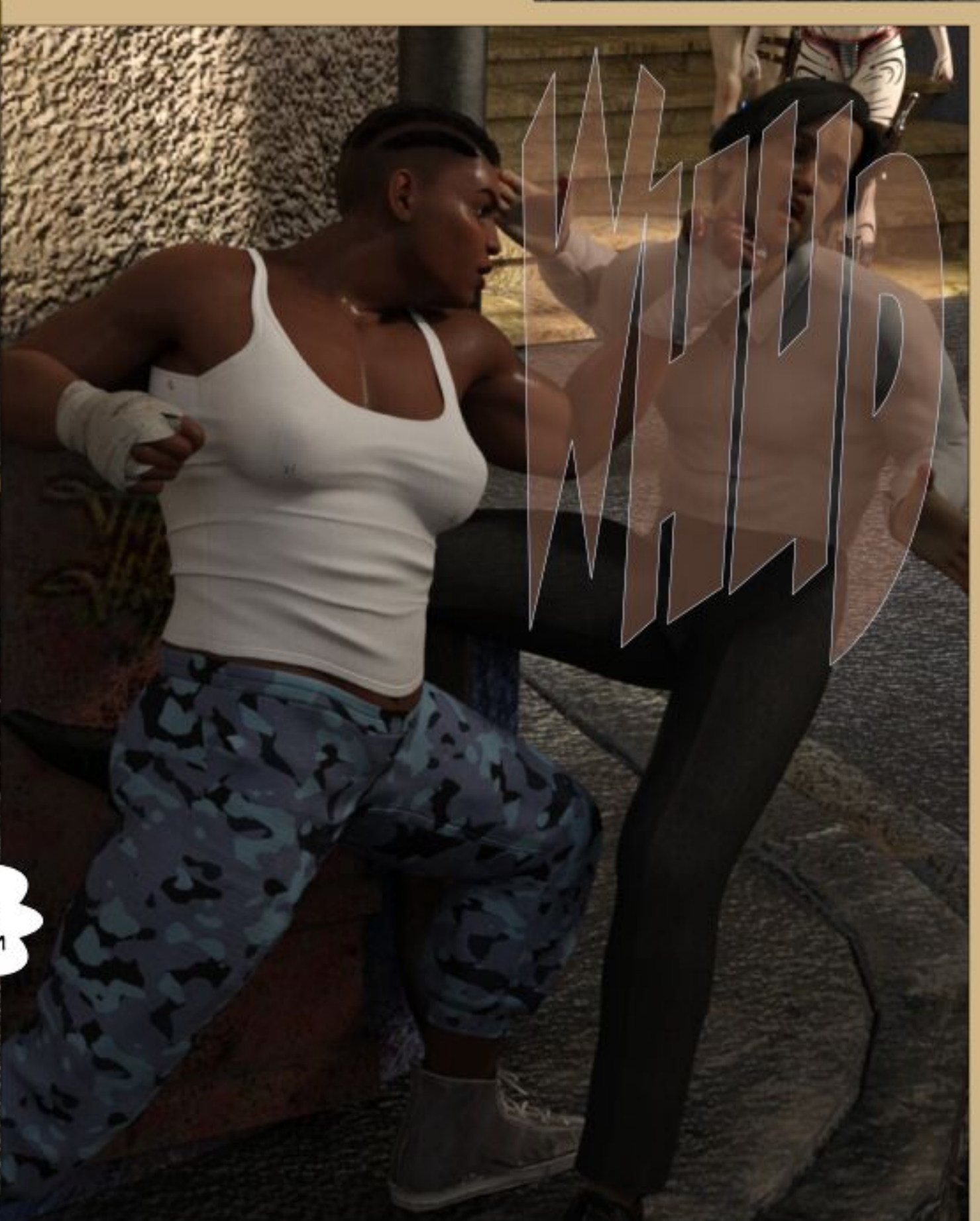
Ah, shit.

ASH AND MAIRE, SKIN-ART ENTHUSIASTS AND UNOFFICIAL FORCE OF COBBLES JUSTICE.



How 'bout you two bitches mind your own business?

No way I'm letting them lay a hand on me ... I'll deal with Cheel later, when they're--



WHIP



Treece. Ah ... to what do we owe the ... pleasure?

Yeah, yeah. Feeling's mutual.

But I need some help, and I think it's something you'll want to help with.

... Huh. OK, let's hear it.

SERENITY. RUBY'S PERSONAL SPACE, WHERE SHE IS NOT EXPECTING A VISITOR.



hmm?



Orchid! Damn, it's been ages.

I checked for you after the Sprue hit, but you weren't in Serenity anymore ... I was worried you'd--

No, no, I'm Pine! I'm in Century now. Have been for a while.



After the Sprue, April decided to start a new show in Century. She didn't think Serenity was the right place. I went along to be in it.

Didn't play in Century either. She thinks the show would have worked in the Cobble, but she won't operate there. So she went back to her dom business or something like that, and I just--

--uh, you seem to be missing some walls?

I'm finally redesigning the space. Been putting it off for years. I'm going to add an actual office, and connect my change room to the rest of it.

I know what I want, but I haven't quite figured out how I'm going to arrange it.



Of course I'm thrilled to see you, and I'm sorry it's taken me so long, and that I'm not just here to say hi--

Just as much my fault as yours. What's up?

What was ... uh ... what's the last you know about Julia Greene? After we, um, dealt with her* ...

I'm ... pretty sure she's lost. Why?

Has Serenity gotten any ... uh, attacks, I guess ... from a green woman who tries to take public spaces apart ...

... and talks a lot about accepting the inevitable. Yeah. I haven't seen her myself. The Jumpers have pushed her out three times now.



I saw her.

When Serene Barker had to consolidate Serenity spaces to hold them together, no one came forward as the owner of the Hotel Martinique ... because the owner was dancing around the hotel and not aware of any of it.

The hotel was abandoned by then--it had already gone out of business--and became a Pragment. So we lost track of it. We forgot about Julia. I think she was still in there.

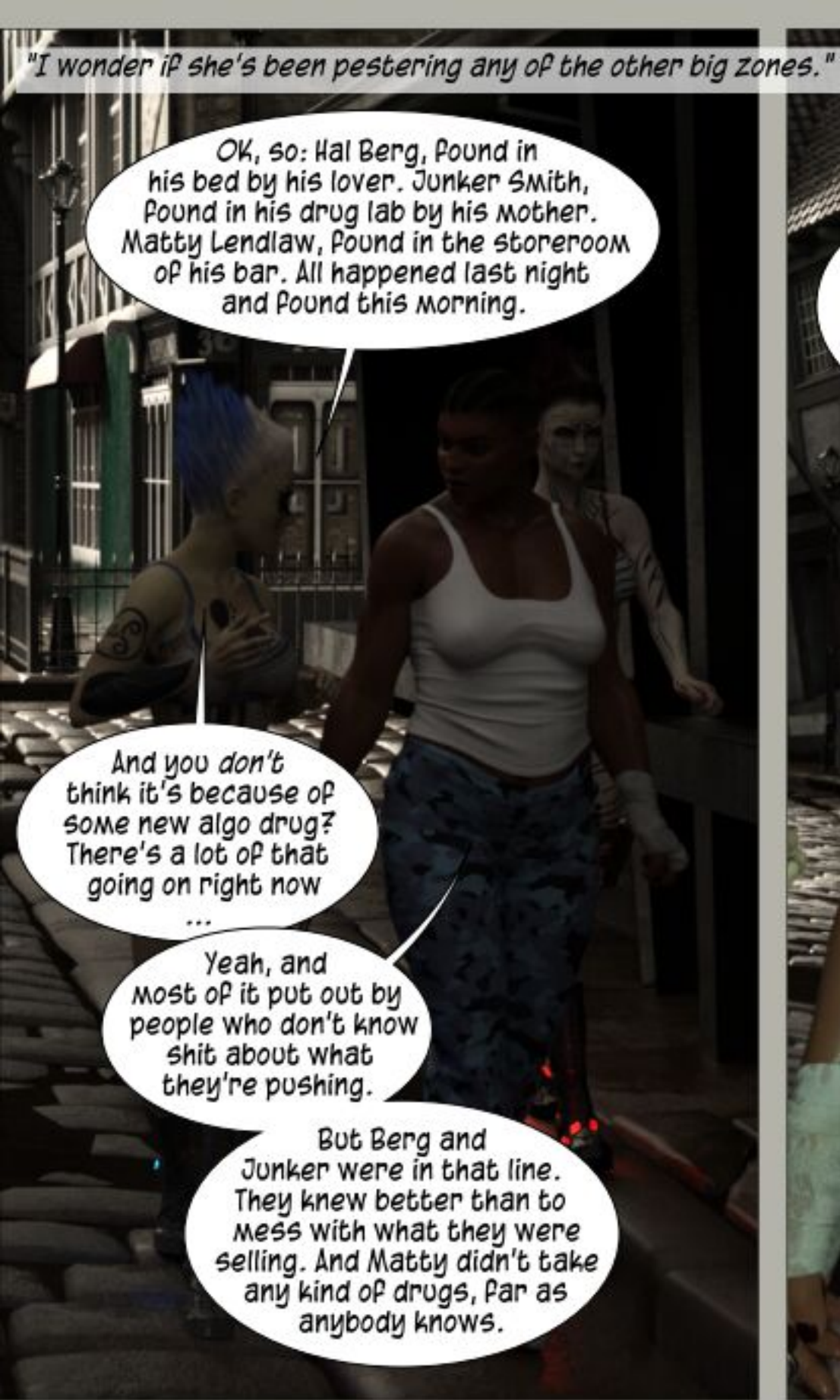
The Sprue gets most Pragment's if they don't have a defender ... I figured it had eaten the place by now. Maybe not? Maybe she recovered on her own and got out?

Ruby, it's Julia! Or someone who looks exactly like her. The way she looked when we left her as a dancer.

Are you really sure she's lost?

Well, no. I said "pretty sure," but--

So the green woman's been showing up in Century too. Hmm.



"I wonder if she's been pestering any of the other big zones."

OK, so: Hal Berg, found in his bed by his lover, Junker Smith, found in his drug lab by his mother, Matty Lendlaw, found in the storeroom of his bar. All happened last night and found this morning.

And you don't think it's because of some new algo drug? There's a lot of that going on right now ...

Yeah, and most of it put out by people who don't know shit about what they're pushing.

But Berg and Junker were in that line. They knew better than to mess with what they were selling. And Matty didn't take any kind of drugs, far as anybody knows.



I think it had to be someone trying to take them out--

Aw, now? Really?



This one again.

I bring the inevitable!

There is no escape!

You know her?

Wouldn't call it that.



Why do you fight it? It must all come apart and collapse!

It is the only way! You cannot deny the future!

Had to deal with her before.



Gotta play detective and deal with assholes trying to take the place apart.

What about all this ... damage?

Not my problem. Someone'll reset it when they figure it out.

--ahem--



Ethel wants to see you.

'Zat so?

And what are you gonna do if I don't want to see Ethel?



If you don't-- Uh ...!

Shit, Treece! I'm just delivering the message, OK? Don't take it out on me!

All right, calm down. Matter of fact, I do want to see Ethel.



There you are! What have you been doing, sitting around with your thumb up your ass? And who are these two Ploozies? Put some clothes on, for pity's sake!

What the Puck do I pay that bastard at the top of this shitheap Por? This is what you call protection and safety? Somebody can't to this to my boy and nobody says boo, and you don't even show up to find out about it until I send Por you?

We've been on it all morning.

You Pound Junker in his lab. He ever take anybody there? Girlfriend of the week?



No! He's a good boy!

... All right, he's a little asshole, but he's my little asshole.

And he takes the business seriously. He barely lets me have access to the lab. He'd never bring one of his hookers there.

Now listen. When you find out who did this, you come tell me, you hear? First thing.

Because whoever it is, you better believe we're going to have some settling up to do.



Oop.

No wonder Junker turned out like he did, huh?

I mean, can you imagine having a horror like that for a mother?

My mother died when I was six. I can't remember what she looked like now.



So I guess there are worse things.



Hey!
Treece, I'm sorry ... I didn't mean--

Huh?
Oh. No, it's OK. You're right, Ethel is a horror. I was just saying.

I'm not mad; I'm trying to figure out what the hell we do next.
Ethel's got nothing, I got nothing on Matty, and I'm not sure it'd be worth checking Berg's private space even if we could.



"Even if we could?" You're the boss' agent, can't you get into anywhere here?

Well ... yeah. But I hate doing it unless I've got a really good reason.

I mean, what are we gonna find there? A confession from whoever did it?

... I guess it wouldn't hurt to check.

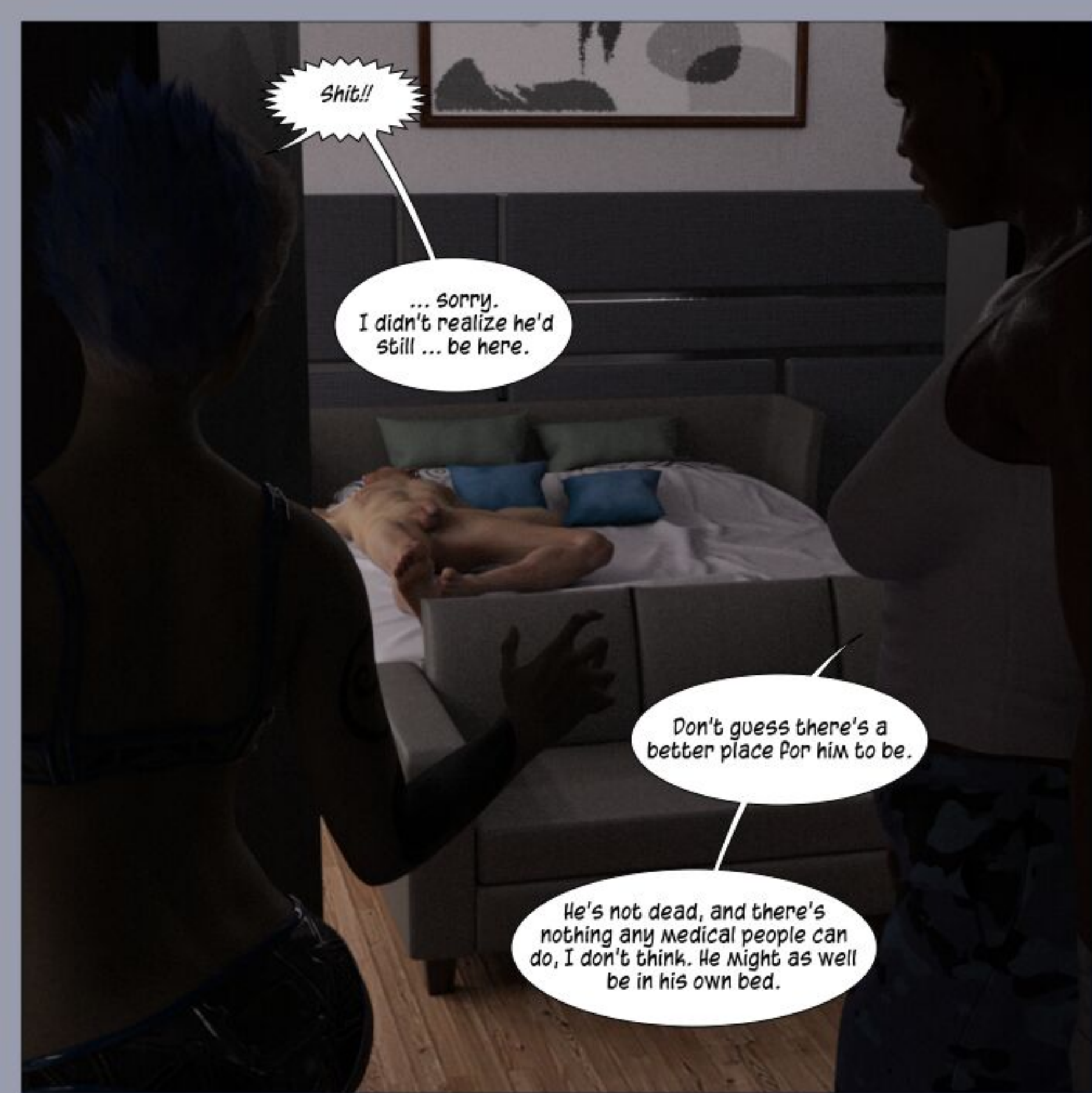


This is a really nice place. A little cold for me, but beautiful.

I thought you said Berg was a drug pusher.

He is.

Delusions of classiness.

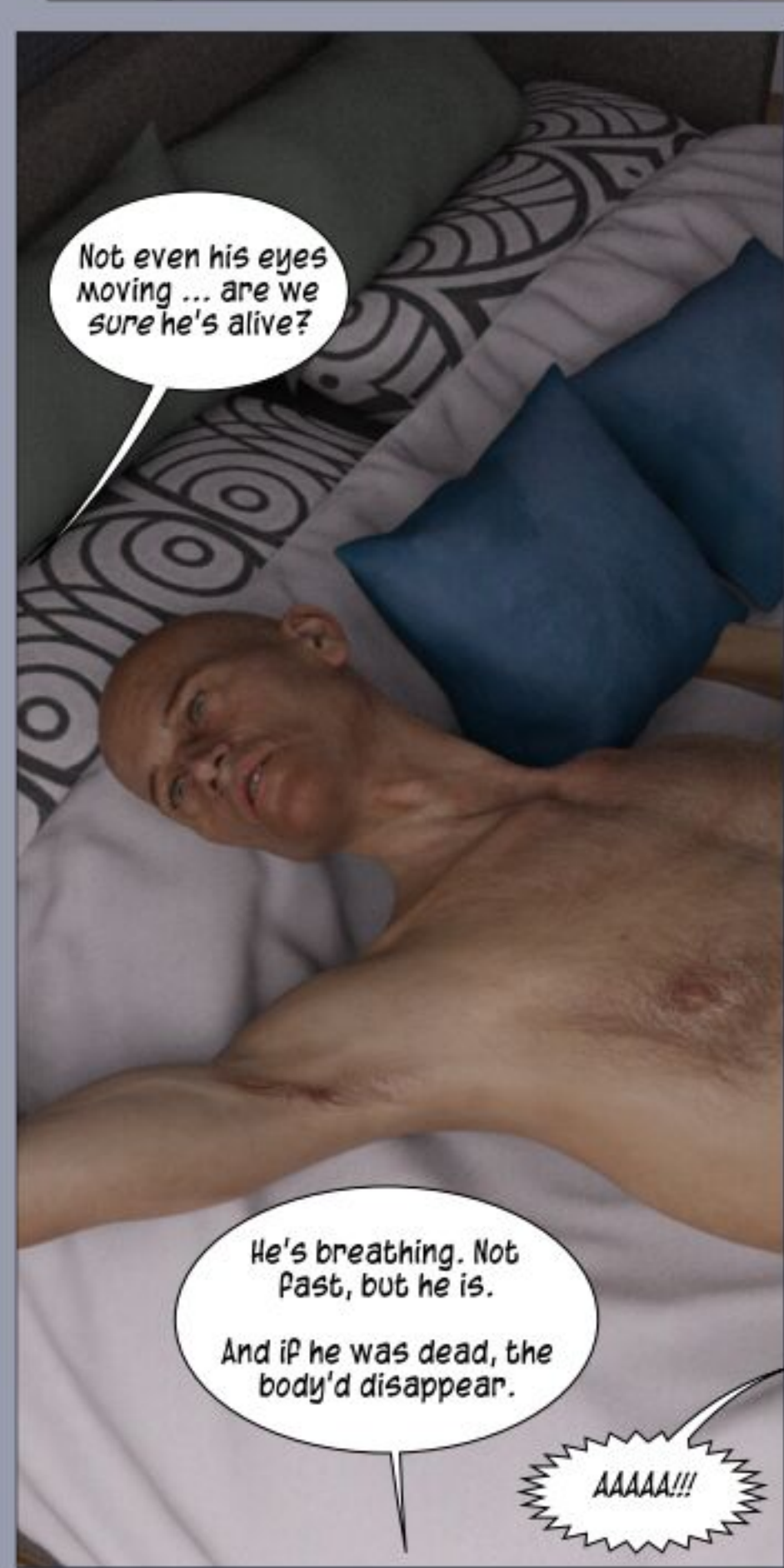


Shit!!

... sorry. I didn't realize he'd still ... be here.

Don't guess there's a better place for him to be.

He's not dead, and there's nothing any medical people can do, I don't think. He might as well be in his own bed.



Not even his eyes moving ... are we sure he's alive?

He's breathing. Not fast, but he is.

And if he was dead, the body'd disappear.

AAAAA!!!

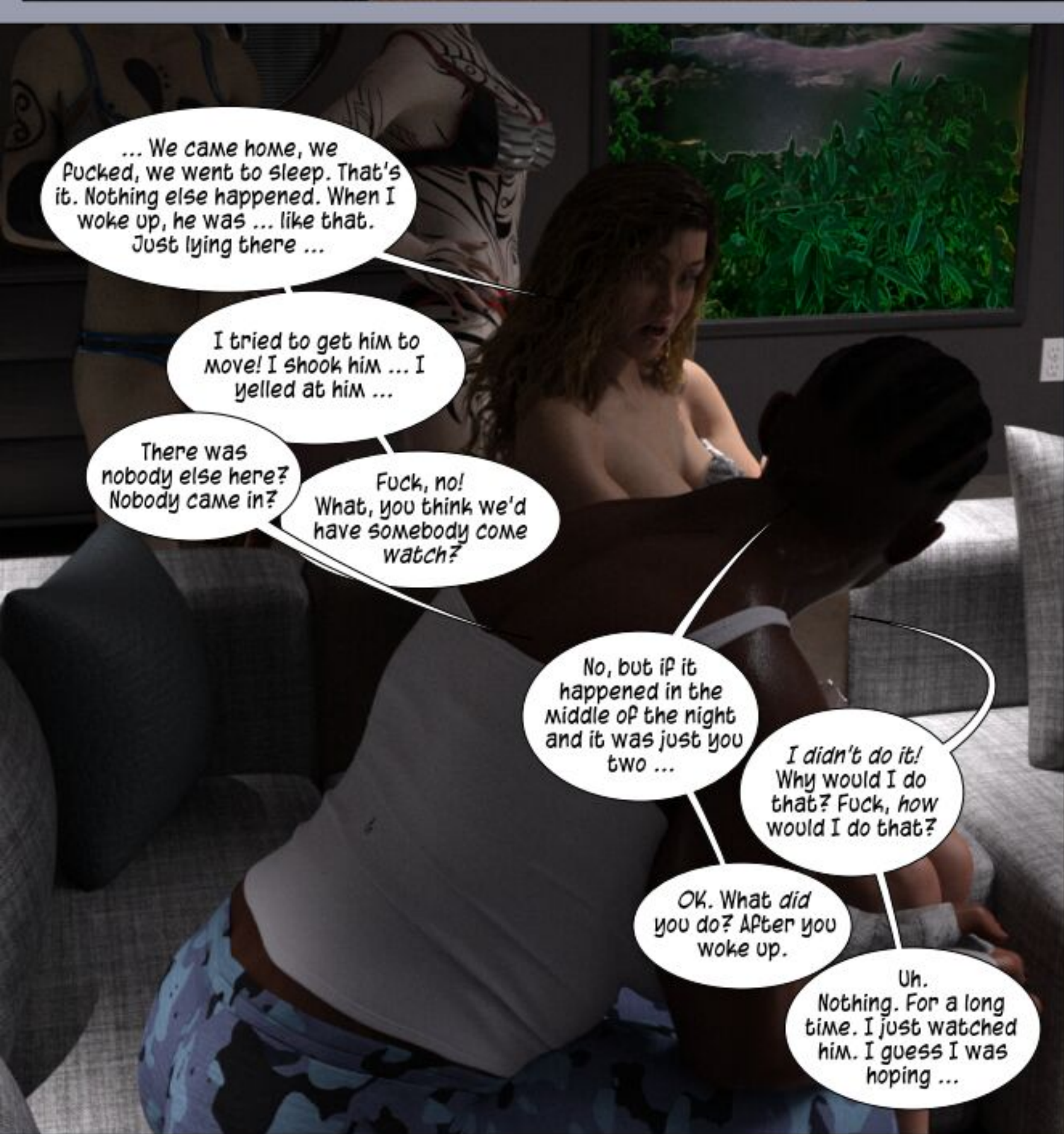


Who the fuck are you, and how'd you get in here?

Could ask you the same things.

I'm his fucking girlfriend, you--

Oh, wait. You're Treece, aren't you? I know about you. Are you trying to figure this out? That's good. Sorry.



... We came home, we fucked, we went to sleep. That's it. Nothing else happened. When I woke up, he was ... like that. Just lying there ...

I tried to get him to move! I shook him ... I yelled at him ...

There was nobody else here? Nobody came in?

Fuck, no! What, you think we'd have somebody come watch?

No, but if it happened in the middle of the night and it was just you two ...

I didn't do it! Why would I do that? Fuck, how would I do that?

OK. What did you do? After you woke up.

Uh. Nothing. For a long time. I just watched him. I guess I was hoping ...



!!!

I don't want to leave him here! OK?

He'll just lie there and nobody will be able to get to him. Somebody could fix him, maybe ... but they won't be able to get to him ...

You can't get back in?

Fuck, no! Hal never gave anybody his door. Not even me.



I guess we tell her.

We have to.

Ah, Treece? We see a kind of big problem.

Two.



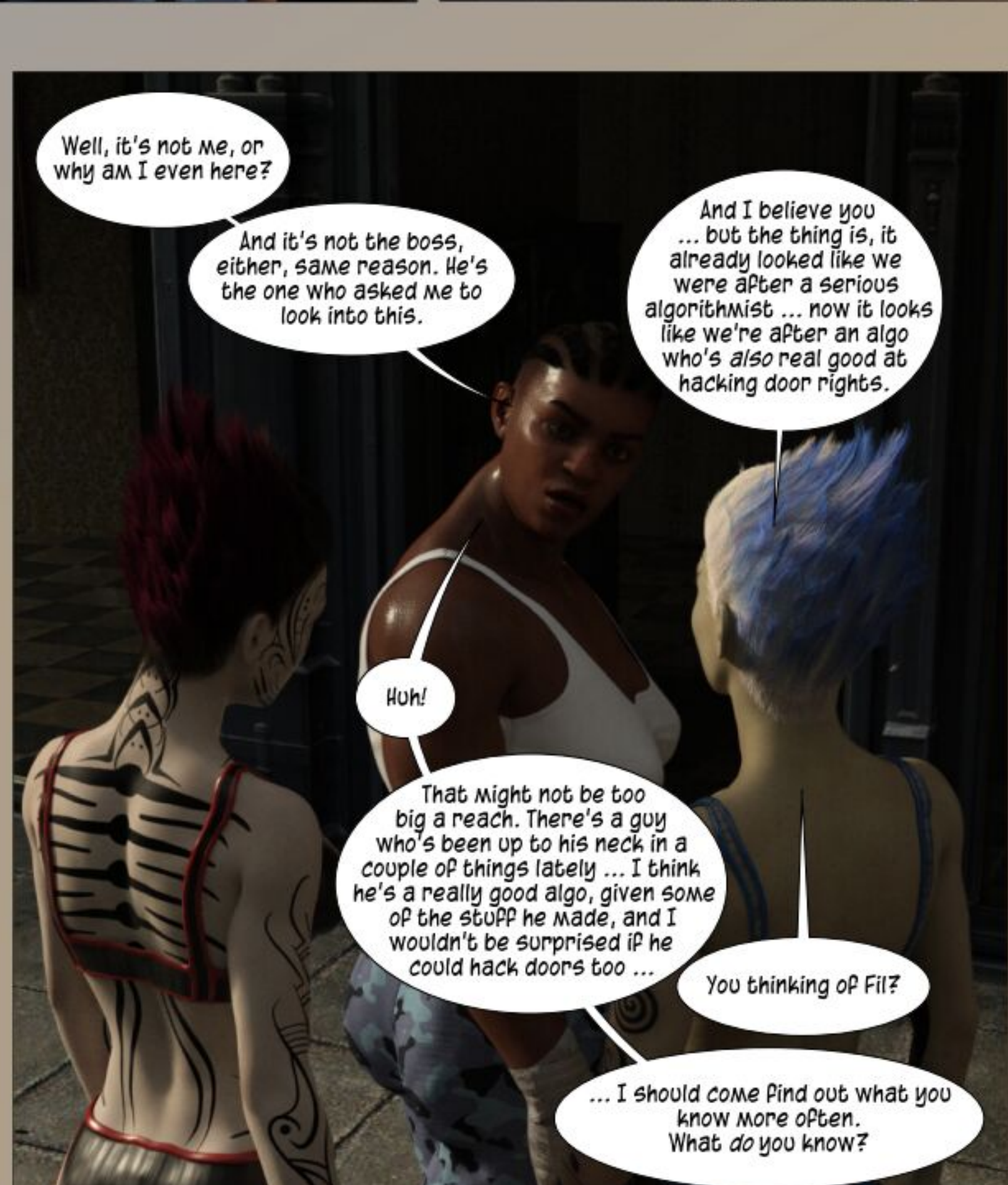
Two?

If she hasn't left his space, how does anybody know he's one of the victims? Who told them?

Oh. Yeah, that's a good one.

More importantly, we've got serious access issues. If we believe all the obvious people didn't do it, then whoever did come in and do it was able to open all kinds of doors. Doors not many people could open.

If Berg really did never put anybody else on his door, that leaves ... uh ... the boss. And you.



Well, it's not me, or why am I even here?

And it's not the boss, either, same reason. He's the one who asked me to look into this.

And I believe you ... but the thing is, it already looked like we were after a serious algorithmist ... now it looks like we're after an algo who's also real good at hacking door rights.

Huh!

That might not be too big a reach. There's a guy who's been up to his neck in a couple of things lately ... I think he's a really good algo, given some of the stuPP he made, and I wouldn't be surprised if he could hack doors too ...

You thinking of Fil?

... I should come find out what you know more often. What do you know?



We tried to figure out where Thurmer went*, and found out he was the guy who did the mind-control wiring for him.

And it sounds like he might have been in on whatever Jonah Ulster was trying? Haven't got the story on that yet.

Hell, you know more than I do. Except that Thurmer's been thrown out of the Cobbles.

Thrilled to hear it. Don't know where Fil is now, though. Do you?

No. But I know some people we can ask.

* #33 AND #36, RESPECTIVELY.

INTERLUDE.

THE AWAKE WORLD.

WHEN WE LAST SAW JOLEE MADISON, SHE'D FINALLY BEEN GIVEN THE LAST THINGS SHE NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT HER BEING KIDNAPPED OUT OF SLEEP BY THE WIDE-EYES TO FURTHER NAT (BARKER) SPRUILL'S SCHEME TO DESTROY IT.

SHE GOT THAT INFORMATION FROM STRIVER, NAT'S CO-CONSPIRATOR. SHE THANKED STRIVER BY STABBING HIM WITH A SCREWDRIVER THROUGH THE EYE.

JOLEE LEFT THE WIDE-EYES COMPOUND IN A HURRY SHORTLY AFTER THAT.



There they are!

Dodge, Scray! Han't just haul!

Tryin!



Not getting away this time ... you've got it coming ...



Caught in a corner. Like a rat.

Good. After what you did last week, we don't have a lot of ammunition left.

At this range I just need one.

Shit!



YAAAAAA!

PWANK

urk!



What are you doing?

Takin clothes. And gun.

I wouldn't wear their clothes if you paid me.

No. Can use cloth. Good boots too.



Stela! Thought they got you!

Han't talk street ... you a spill?

No.

Well, I was ... but I've been here a while now.

Wide-Eyes captured Me and I had to break out. Long story.

Huh.

Can spend night with us in shelter. Look alright. Sure an't look like 'Eye.



Lookin for real haven, tho ... long way gone. Day. Maybe two.



Yes, I've heard the rumors. I'm not looking for that.

I'm trying to find someone.

MEANWHILE, IN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT PART OF A4, MUCH CLOSER TO THE FORMER CITY CENTER ...



PLEASE STATE YOUR BUSINESS. YOU ARE BEING MONITORED.

I'm requesting a priority admission.

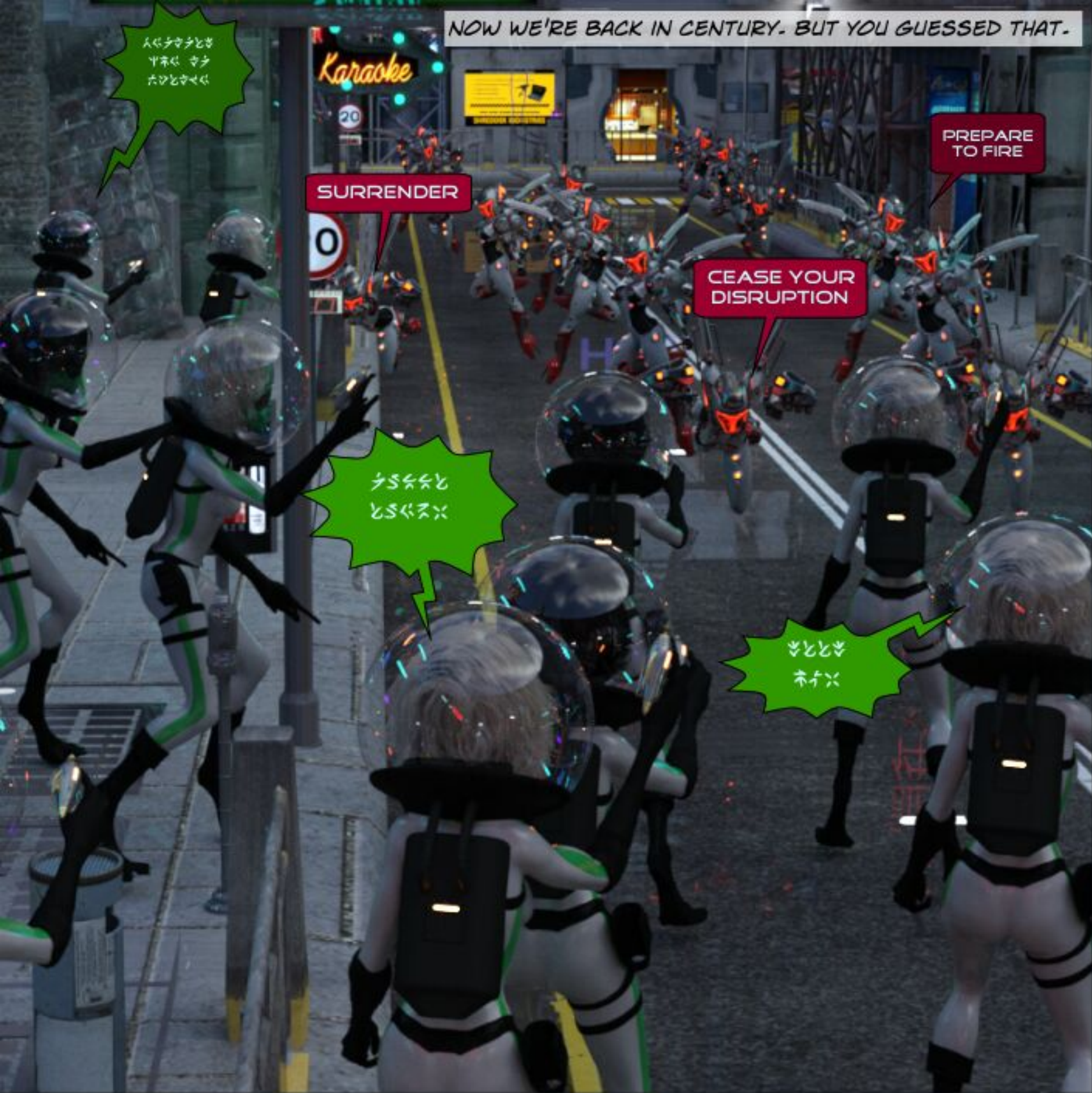
Alonzo Sheridan.

PLEASE WAIT WHILE WE CHECK THE INFORMATION.

... THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE, MR. SHERIDAN, YOU WILL BE ADMITTED IMMEDIATELY.

THE ORDNANCE RESTRICTION IS WAIVED, BUT WE MUST ASK THAT YOU LEAVE IT IN YOUR LOCKER.

NOW WE'RE BACK IN CENTURY. BUT YOU GUESSED THAT.



SURRENDER

PREPARE TO FIRE

CEASE YOUR DISRUPTION

人かナヲヲヒキ
ヲヒキ ヲシ
ハナヒカニカ

ナシカニカ
ヒシカニカ

ナシカニカ
ヒシカニカ



SHRE
BEA



DO NOT ATTEMPT TO FLEE



OOF
THE BARRIER
THE BARRIER



ウウウ

AAA



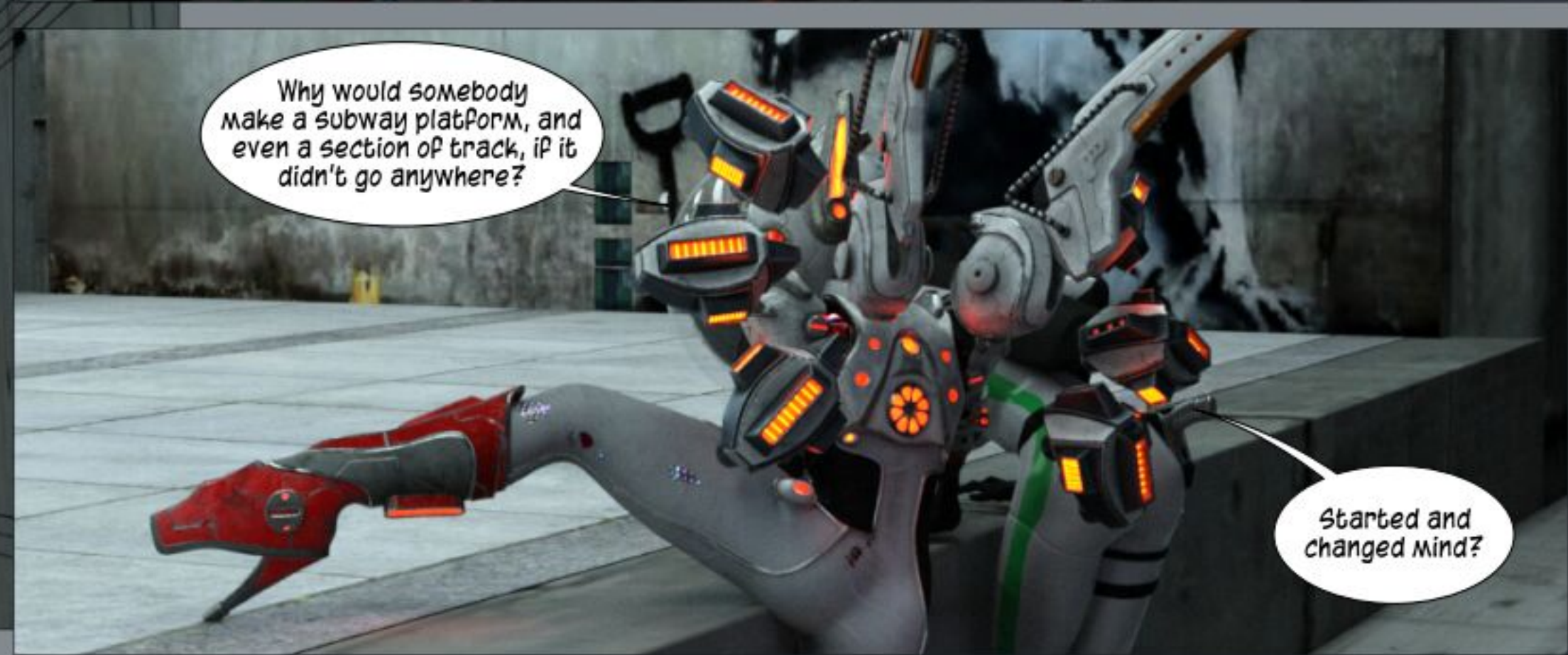
Urgh.

Where are we?
... are these tracks?
Are we on train tracks?
We have to move!

No train.
Han't go none.

Huh?

... Oh, you're right! The tracks just lead to a wall.
Weird.



Why would somebody make a subway platform, and even a section of track, if it didn't go anywhere?

Started and changed mind?



Glad to have that knocked out of me, anyway ... I need to get rid of all this junk before I do anything.

Hate look some else ...



Yeah!!

That good?

Han't could before. Tried lot.

HM. You're pretty new to Sleep, huh? You talk like it ...

Some. But suck at it too.



FROM THIS MOMENT
DESPAIR ENDS
AND TACTICS BEGIN

You might be too hard on yourself. It took me years to be able to do that. For the longest time I'd have to recall if I wanted to even change my hair.

If those stairs don't go somewhere useful, we might have to recall anyway.



What is all this? There's no reason for any of this underground stuff to be here!

Some else for Polk to fight?

Ha! Probably so.

Century is definitely a weird place. I haven't spent a lot of time here. Have you?

No.



I'm only here because I'm looking for someone. Her name's Naomi Coleman.

Lookin for some here too.

Naomi Coleman ... huh. Know name ... an't remember where tho.

Well, if you do remember, tell me!

What's your name, anyway?

Jex.

Hello, Jex. I'm Molly.

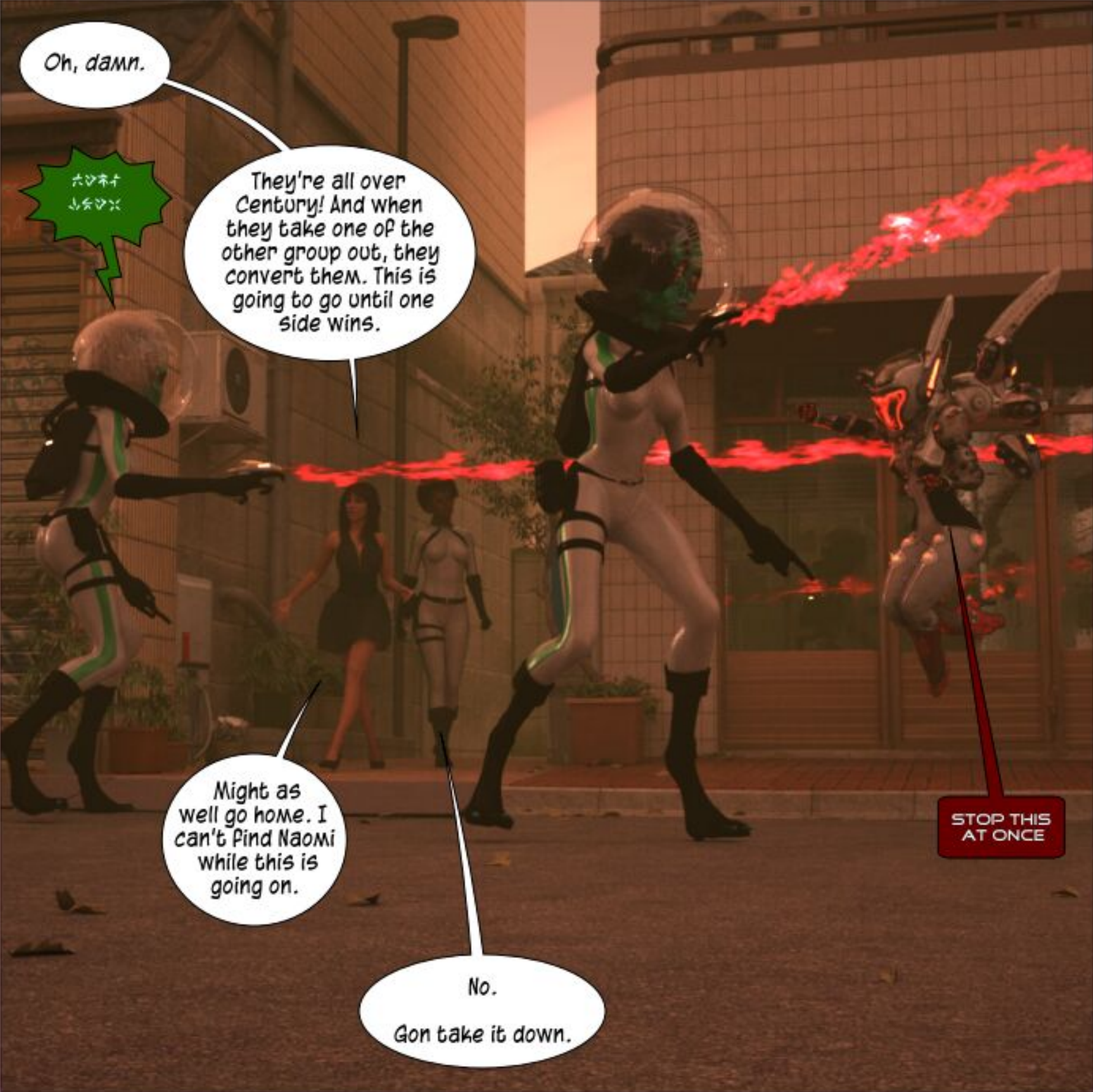


I suppose we could just recall.

But then I have to go back to a portal to get to Century again and start all over ...

I don't know, it just feels like giving up ... also, I kind of want to see where this leads ...

Same.



Oh, damn.

They're all over Century! And when they take one of the other group out, they convert them. This is going to go until one side wins.

Might as well go home. I can't find Naomi while this is going on.

No. Gon take it down.



Huh?

Had it with these skulls. An't like bein messed.

Gon send whole thing slide.

Want help me?

THE THALLIUM ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.



Please, make yourself comfortable. Would you like some tea?

Lady Thallium, don't try to make this feel like a social call.

I don't like Highpoint, I don't like any of you "lords" and "ladies" much, and I try to avoid coming here if at all possible.

Say what you need to say and get it over with.



Yet you were willing to come in long enough to completely wreck Lady Scholz' operation ...*

Should I ask where you got that? I know you didn't hear it from her.

That was a rescue mission. It just happened that I had to tear up the place to do it. I was only really after one person.

And if Scholz hadn't had press gangs kidnapping people, it wouldn't have even happened.

But the point is, you are willing to act in Highpoint if you think it's for a good cause ...

It has to be a damned good cause. Especially since Brendan Barker hates me.

And if you're about to make a pitch for yourself, forget that right now.

None of you estate holders is any good. Spoiled, egotistical, and vicious. You and Lady Scholz both took your husbands out because you wanted to be in charge. You'd stop at nothing.

You want to be feudal lords, but that's not very rewarding for the big labor base you need, so you have to get them to work for you involuntarily. It's rotten.

There's no difference between you and Lady Scholz.

* LAST ISSUE.



That's not true!

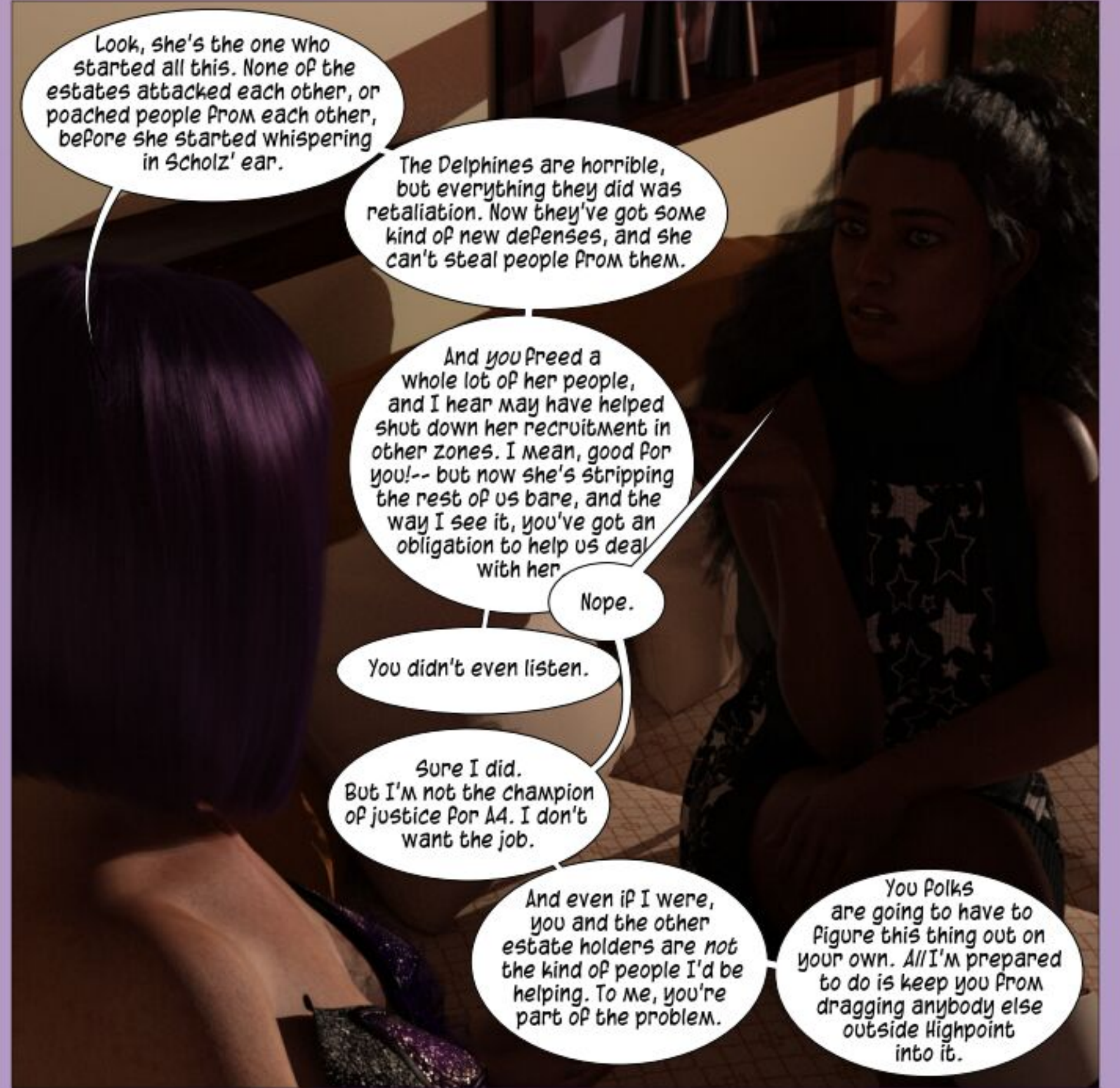
I run a small estate on purpose. Everybody here is here because they want to be. I try to keep it so they enjoy working here.

I admit I have some unusual rules, but ... I recruit people who like that kind of thing.

As for my husband ... Brendan won't give charters to women. My husband didn't want to run an estate and I did. We have an arrangement.

Not like Lady Scholz, who climbed into Lord Scholz' bed just so she could take over the place!

I don't want the same things she does, and I don't do things the same way she does.



Look, she's the one who started all this. None of the estates attacked each other, or poached people from each other, before she started whispering in Scholz' ear.

The Delphines are horrible, but everything they did was retaliation. Now they've got some kind of new defenses, and she can't steal people from them.

And you freed a whole lot of her people, and I hear May have helped shut down her recruitment in other zones. I mean, good for you! - but now she's stripping the rest of us bare, and the way I see it, you've got an obligation to help us deal with her.

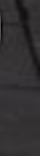
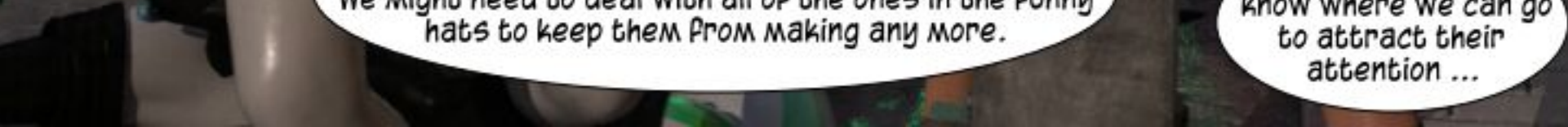
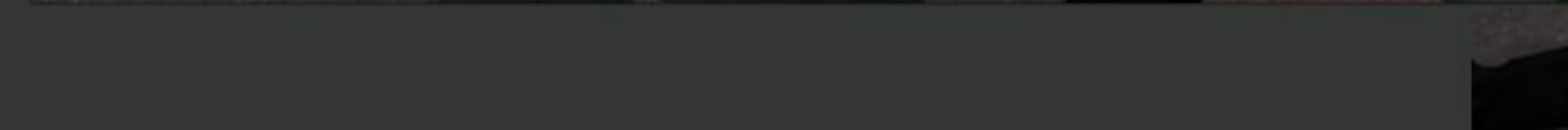
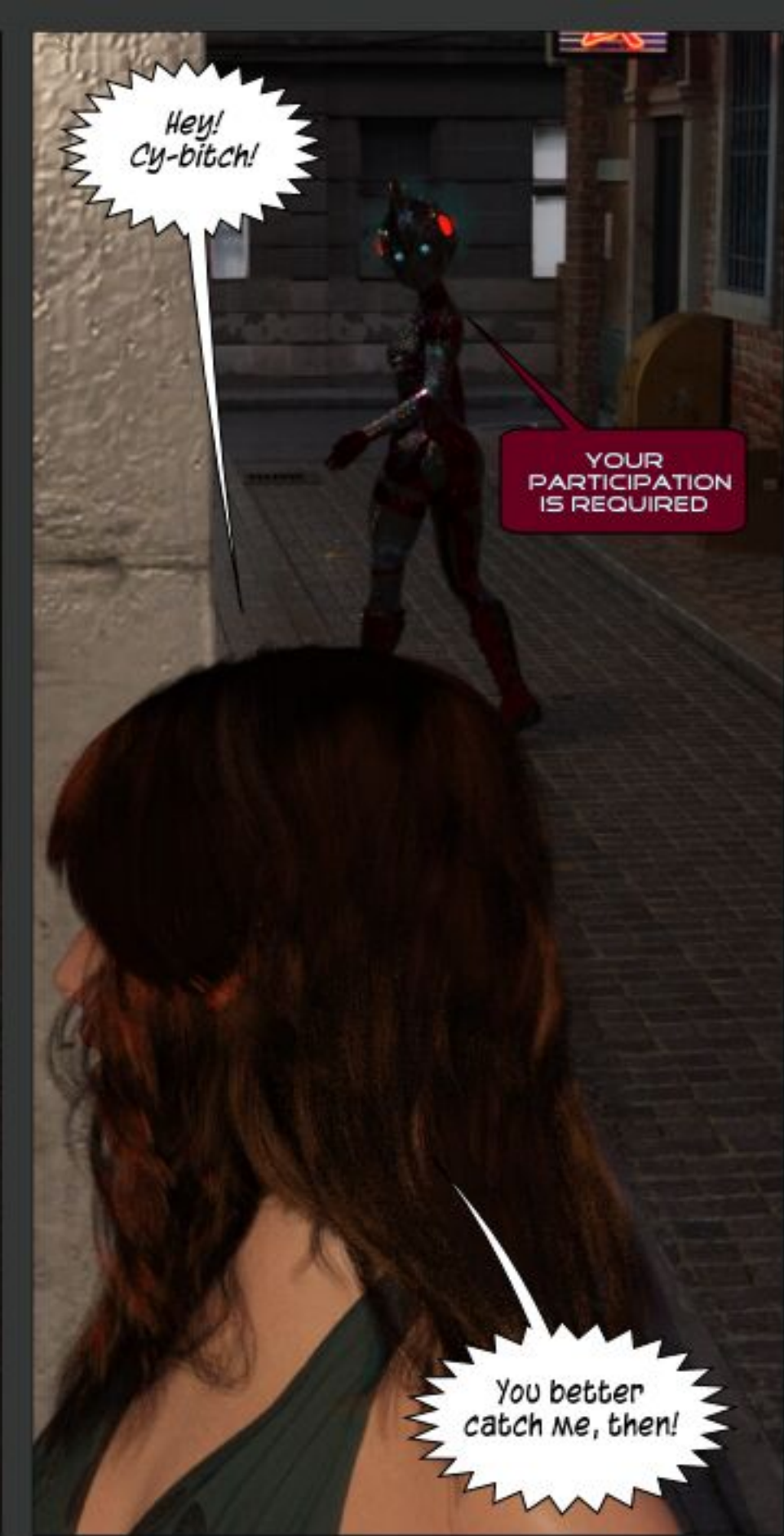
Nope.

You didn't even listen.

Sure I did. But I'm not the champion of justice for A4. I don't want the job.

And even if I were, you and the other estate holders are not the kind of people I'd be helping. To me, you're part of the problem.

You folks are going to have to figure this thing out on your own. All I'm prepared to do is keep you from dragging anybody else outside Highpoint into it.



SERENITY. THE JUMPERS ARE HAVING A SLOW EVENING, WHICH IS FINE WITH THEM.



I just ...
Look, after all the business with Joe and Bianca and Percy collapsed*, we were going to run our own house, and if we hadn't needed to hide from Melinda ...
And then all of a sudden we're full-time troubleshooters and street patrol for Serenity, and I'm still not sure how we got here.
You don't like what we're doing?

* WAY BACK IN #6



That's not really the point. The point is I didn't commit to do this forever. Or at least I didn't think I had.
Well, I don't Peel like we can quit until we solve the Sprue problems ... if we do--
Hang on. Something just went really weird. Look.



Did that just ... appear?
Yep.
AAAAA!



That's not very nice.



Whoa!
Didn't get through the suit. Sorry.
How good's yours?



What the hell?



Ruby! Where'd you come from?
Highpoint.
Lemme guess: that street just appeared?
Uh-huh.
That's a data collision. That street's in Century. We need to toss them back in there before it drifts away, or they'll have to portal back.



--oof--
OK, collision I get, but why the invasion force?
Who knows? It's Century. Could be anything.



Poop. Got 'em all just in time.
Huh.



Pardon me, but you three seem to be in a position of some authority here ...
Whether we like it or not. What can we do for you?



I'm trying to find someone. Several someones, actually.
I'm hoping you're able to direct me to them.



They make you go to the armory to get all your equipment ... so I figure if we mess with it, they'll come running ... problem is, I'm not sure what we can do to it ... these guns seem like they're mostly Por--

oh.



Just remembered where--

Here they come!



You burned her?

It doesn't do any permanent damage. It hurts a lot, so they can't focus on making trouble, and usually they pass out.

Hello, Jex.

It's Jex, right? I did remember?

You did!

Was sayin, figured where got name.

Molly, this is Naomi Coleman.

Been lookin for you, Naomi.



You're ... Jex, are you sure this is the right person ... you don't look anything like the one I know ...

Well, I didn't always look like this. Though I haven't changed it in years. And I don't know you either. I don't know anybody named Molly.

Oh! Ah ... no ... it was Mark when you knew me.

I haven't seen you since we all separated ... after ...

... Mark?



And you talk about me looking different! But, you know, it's been so long ...

I'm glad to see you again, of course, but why come find me now? Is something wrong?

No, no ... There is a reason, but ... ah ... it'll take a while.

K, got you two sorted ... got go back lookin for mine now. B'sin.



Hold on, Jex.

You're looking for somebody in Century too? Who?

Rosalie Haley.

Don't know the name. But there's a woman ... she works for Monica Barker. She keeps records of everybody in Century.

I'll give you the address. Go see her in the morning. She doesn't give out the information to just anybody, but if you tell her I sent you, she'll look up your person for you.

... Thank you.



NEWER READERS: AS USUAL, PRISSY JUST TAKES TOO LONG TO EXPLAIN. ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW AT THE MOMENT IS: HER HEAD IS REALLY MESS'D UP, AND SHE'S GOT A HISTORY. DON'T WORRY, HER DAY IS COMING SOON.



CENTURY. NAOMI'S PERSONAL SPACE.



So I guess you're a pretty important person now.

What makes you say that?

Well, it looks like you fix things--you were doing the same thing Jex and I were doing ... and I think you do that for Monica Barker, since Jex could use your name to get inPo ... and you're some kind of superhero, too?

Half the people in Century are superheroes. Or supervillains. Sometimes both.

I don't work for Monica. She knows of me because I sometimes fix things, not the other way 'round.

She tolerates a lot here, but sometimes things do get out of hand, and there are a few of us who step in when they do.



I guess it's no surprise; it always did seem like you knew what you were doing. Wish I did.

I wish we'd all been able to keep in touch ... when Lydia didn't come back, and Pauline Barker Pound homes for us, she didn't seem to want us to be in contact with each other ...

Oh, she was following Lydia's instructions on that. Lydia didn't want to take the risk that we might become some kind of family of our own. Once we left, she didn't want any connections bringing us back.

That's ... a little harsh, don't you think?



Lydia was a fraud, Molly. She wanted an excuse to go Awake and have adventures, and she loved having people in Sleep tell her what a great person she was for rescuing all those orphans. That's as far as she went.

She didn't really try to find us foster families; it happened despite her. And she didn't want to be our family, for sure. She was completely uninterested in running a household. She just assumed we'd figure it out ourselves.

If it hadn't been in Sleep--if it had been Awake and she'd left it to us to find our own food and clothing and so on, she wouldn't have been a hero; she'd have been shut down for child abuse. ... Well, she would have if anybody Awake cared.



--sigh-- You may be right.

Did you know Lydia had a daughter?

No! Lydia? Are you serious?

Her name's Elaine. Lydia got started on the orphans when she was thirteen, and from then on, Elaine says, it was like Lydia didn't have a daughter anymore, the way she acted.

Elaine left when she turned sixteen and never spoke to Lydia again.

She didn't find out Lydia was dead until two years after it happened, well after we had all separated.

I guess she, I don't know ... I guess she woke up one day and felt like she had missed something.



She found me, somehow, and once I'd told her everything I could tell her about what life with Lydia was like--or wasn't like--she asked me if I could find any of the others to talk to. She didn't know we couldn't even find each other.

You were the one I figured would know the most. You were pretty much in charge at the end--

I hate to disappoint you, but I don't think I know any more about what Lydia was like than you did. I don't think she was the kind to let people see any of that. It was ...

... let's just say it wasn't until very recently that I realized I had learned a lot of the wrong things from her.

I can connect her daughter with a few of the other kids ... I know where some of them are, just by chance ... but I don't think she's going to get much from them either. And a couple of them will absolutely refuse to talk about it. They'd rather forget the whole thing. I don't blame them.

THE COBBLES, FOR THE FINAL TIME TODAY ...



Well, I'll say this for Fil, when he disappears, he really does a good job of it.

Not a single person knows anything they'll admit to ...



I know one more person to ask. But he's not going to want to talk to me. He's still pissed off about what I did to him.

Even though he deserved it.



Jonah?

Yeah. I don't expect he'll know anything. He's the one Fil was getting away from. But maybe Jonah caught up with him. Hell, maybe this is Jonah's new scheme.

Anyway, might as well try.

FOR WHAT TREECE (AND RUBY) DID TO JONAH, SEE #36.



Jonah? Need to talk to you.

... Jonah?



Oops.

Shit. The boss is not gonna be happy.



OK, so Jonah did know where Fil was, and Fil, or somebody else, got to him to keep him from telling anybody ...

You don't know that. He's probably been like that since last night. Could just be part of whatever the villain's plan is.

Who cares.



... Treece?

Wandering around the whole damn day and got nothing ...

So far we've only had two ideas, can't get anywhere with one, and the other just doesn't make any sense ...

And if we do get somewhere, probably turn out we can't do a f*cking thing about it anyway ...



You're starting to think the boss is involved in this, aren't you? Why?

I think Fil left the Cobbles. He'd have been smart to, and Fil's smart.

He wouldn't have come back just to take out the guy he punted on. Too risky. Jonah probably wants to strangle him.

And nobody's talking to Jonah right now. Everybody's pissed at him. Word is he can't even pay somebody to come home with him. He keeps his space locked up ... Who got in there to mess with him?



What gets me is, the boss wants me to keep after this. He made that real clear.

But if it's him ... then what the hell do I do next?

THE BOSS' PERSONAL SPACE.



There you are!

I was almost starting to worry, honey!



Well, sit down and get comfortable while I fix you a fresh drink.

I had to pour the other one out. The ice had all melted.

Then we can think about what we want for dinner ...

I don't feel like eating anything, Darla. You do whatever you want for yourself.

I'll just have the bourbon.



Are you all right? Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?

Hmm? ... Oh. No, I'm fine.

Some things aren't going the way they should, is all. Need to think them out.



Just leave me alone for a while.

CENTURY, THE NEXT DAY.



Prob real bad idea ... gon say she han't know me ... been too long ...

An't know her ... Might not be able tell is her ... an't sure why doin this ...

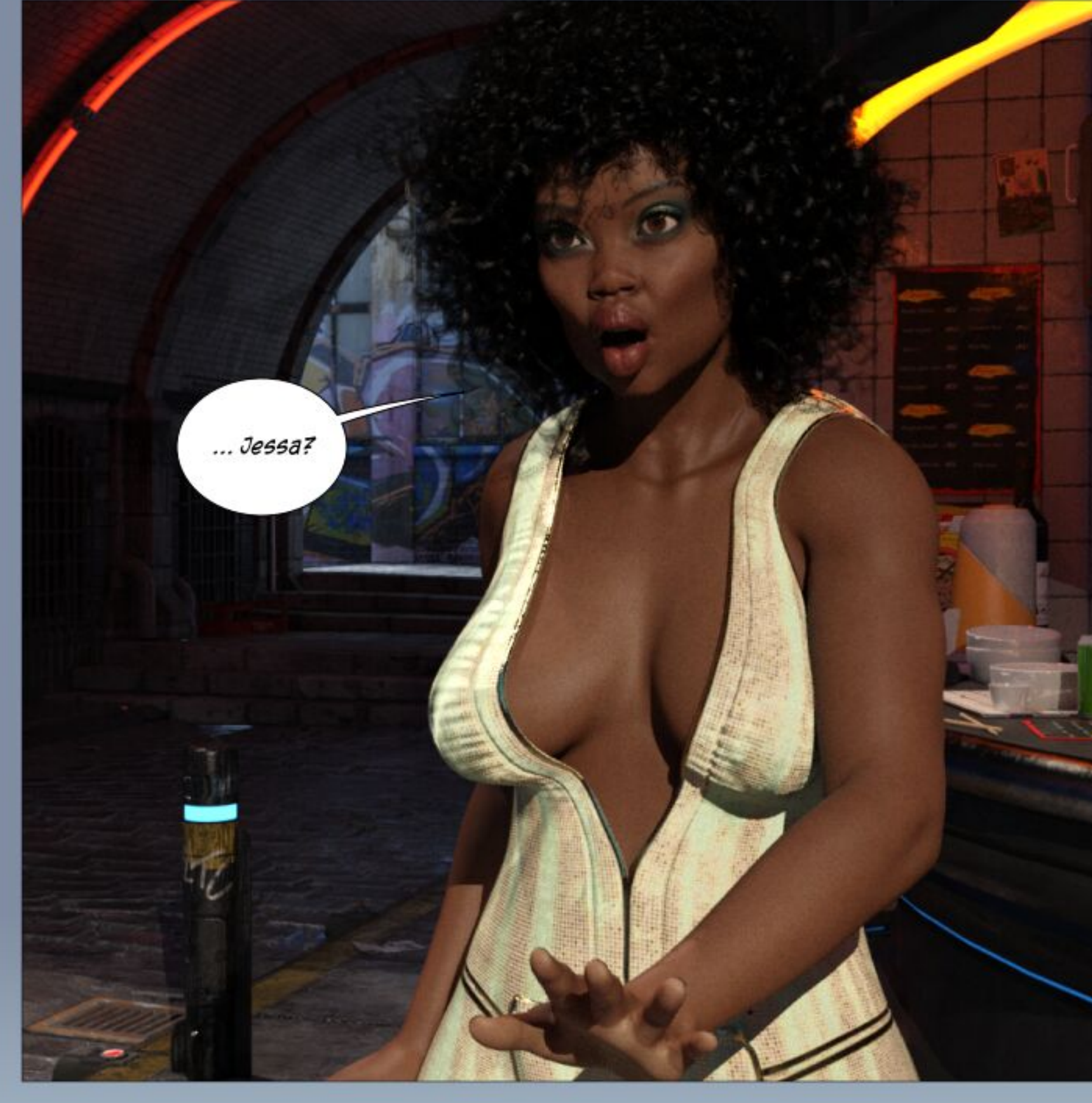


Hold up! There she is! Looks just like I remember ...

But that an't crux ... be older now ... not like in my head ...

Maybe not her ... Might as well tho ... worst she say "an't me, cho" ...

Aunt Ro!!



... Jessa?



Anyway, it all checks out ... When I ran his ID the system spit out some values I'd never seen before.

That's him?

Yeah.

Mr. Sheridan!



This is Leyna Barker.

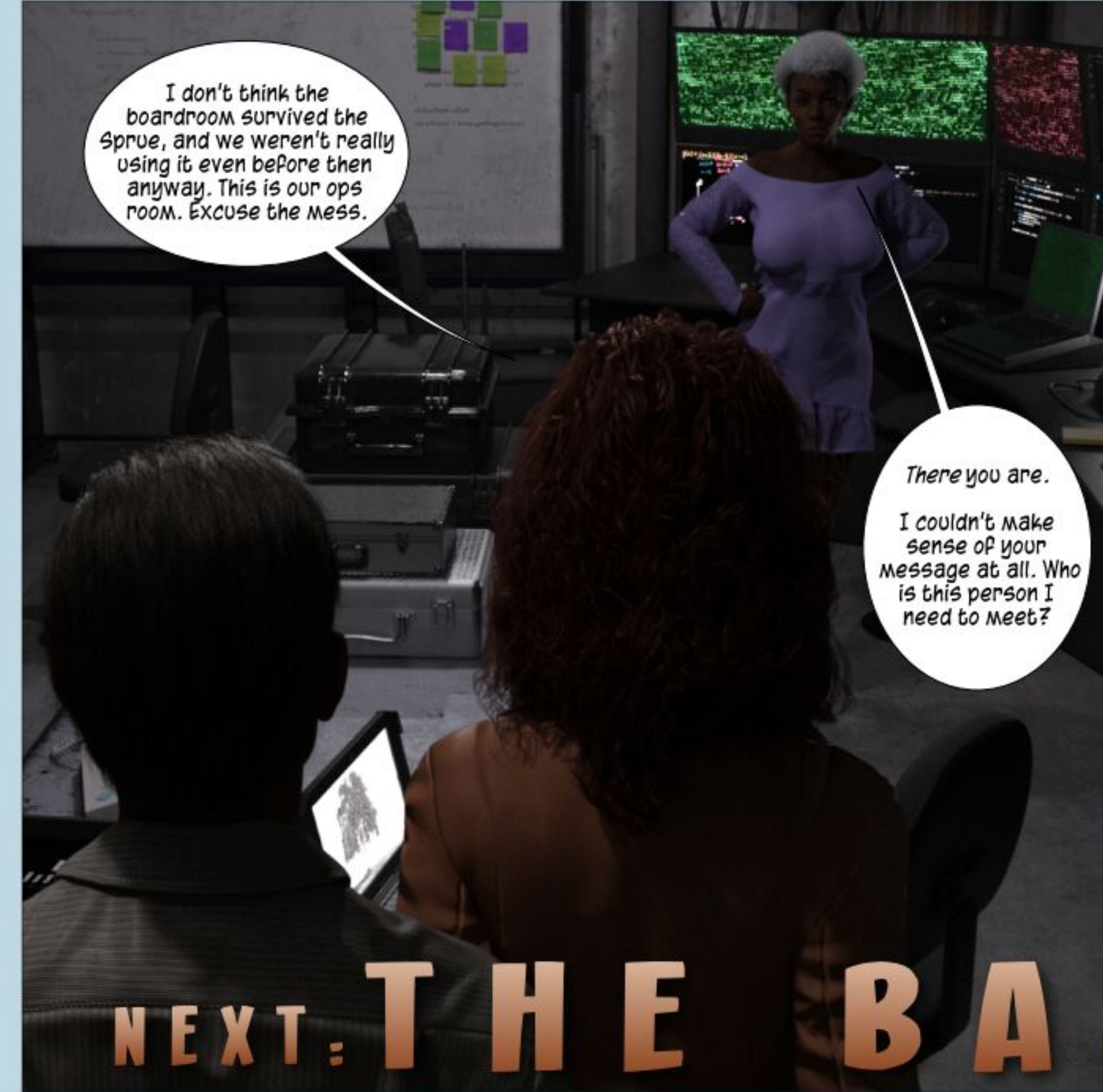
Sorry for the trouble ... I'm afraid our protocol has sort of broken down ...

To say the least.

I arrived, and was directed to consult with some sort of cat cultists and to watch my step ... and they couldn't tell me anything useful about how or where to find any of you ...

What on earth has happened to this place?

That is a long story. To say the least. And I'm probably not the person you want to talk to. Come on.



I don't think the boardroom survived the Sprue, and we weren't really using it even before then anyway. This is our ops room. Excuse the mess.

There you are. I couldn't make sense of your message at all. Who is this person I need to meet?



This is my mother, Serene Barker.

Momma, this is Lon Sheridan.

He's come all the way from A2 to talk to us.

NEXT: THE BARKER HUNT