

SLEEPER SQUAD

LON SHERIDAN, AN UNEXPECTED AND IMPORTANT VISITOR FROM A2.

IT TOOK HIM A WHILE AFTER ARRIVING TO GET THE ATTENTION OF SOME BARKERS. ONCE HE DID, HE SPENT THE REST OF THAT DAY AND SOME OF THIS MORNING GETTING THE A4 SITUATION THOROUGHLY EXPLAINED TO HIM.

NOW THAT THAT'S HAPPENED, HE HAS REACHED A CONCLUSION.

This is really quite bad.

Well, we knew that.

Yes, I imagine you did. Which makes me wonder why you didn't ask any of the other centers for help.

Do you realize how dire this had to seem for them to send me out? It's a hazardous trip, you know. They were concerned that A4 had failed utterly. I wasn't sure what I would find.

Among other reasons, because I didn't expect the other centers would care.

Also, I'm not the person who usually had contact with them. I assume he stopped doing that well before the Sprue, when he went into seclusion.

I didn't think they'd be very receptive to a message from me out of the blue, since I'm only a Barker by marriage.

And because of ... other factors?

Oh, are we going there?

They don't have any idea what I look like. But, yes, if they did ... The history isn't very good, you know.

Oh, I know.

But that hasn't been the case in A2 for a long time. If you saw what the Barkers look like these days, you'd know why.

A1 is still fairly racist, I'm afraid, though we see signs of improvement.

At any rate, it's moot. All the centers have a vested interest in keeping each other in good operation. If you had sent out a distress call, no amount of prejudice would have interfered with a prompt response.

For that matter, you could have contacted A2 when you were forced to take down your network. We have a solution for your very problem, you know.

We did know. And we were told you had charged A1 a fortune for it. We didn't think this lot would be willing to pay that, especially since the older Barkers aren't fans of the phones anyway. Josiah would have said "If A3 and A5 can do without, we can too."

As it happens, A3 changed their minds a few years ago ...

Well, it doesn't matter right now. We absolutely can't restart the network while the Sprue is active. It's already made several attempts to exploit our dead one. I don't want to think about the damage it could cause if it got in.

We have to fix the Sprue first.

LEYNA KNOWS HOW THE OTHER CENTERS DID OR DIDN'T DEAL WITH THE NETWORK-EXPLOITATION PROBLEM BECAUSE THE DATA ARCHIVIST TOLD HER AND RUBY ALL ABOUT IT BACK IN #21.

Which is a problem. You've done far more diligence on this than I have, and I agree with all your assessments. This is not any sort of malfunction I've ever heard of before. If it's a virus, it's a new and extremely sophisticated kind I don't think anyone knows how to fight.

The only possibility I can think of is a complete reboot.

Only as an absolute last resort.

You may be closer to that point than you realize.

Your daughter's findings on long-term outcomes are not optimistic, as I'm sure you're aware.

But this is all speculative chatter as long as there are only five shares in this room.

No offense intended, Ms. Barker. These are major decisions. Adding on the network tech, a reboot, any other solution we might possibly arrive at ... none of them can be done without a huge impact on all of A4, and as such, they really do require a majority of the shareholding Barkers in A4 to decide to implement them. You know that as well as I do.

We need to get all the shareholding Barkers in A4 to the table.

THE BARKER HUNT

#40 story and images by trilby

That's going to be really tricky.

For political reasons?

No ... Well, yes, but before that, there's a problem finding some of them.

What with the rights and ownership situation we've had to resort to, plus the holes in our data caused by the Sprue, we have no idea where they are. Or even if they're OK.

Hmm, so the Sprue corrupts the block catalog too, eh? ...

Have you considered implementing a separate block sweep as an independent process? Makes its own block catalog, and I don't think the Sprue would be able to get at it.

That's ... ah ... beyond my level of expertise.

Oh, mine as well ... but there's already code for it. I can download it from A2. And since it's just information that any Barker here should be allowed access to anyway, I don't mind installing it on your mother's approval alone.

The only problem is ... it will require root console access to install.



I don't know whether you know what that entails ...

Three people with Barker blood.

Ah, good. The first time I had to consult in AS, they thought root console was a myth. We'll need to find its location here ...

No, I know where it is. We've had to use it before, unfortunately.*

Monica is probably the easiest one to get at this point. Who do you think we should try for the third, Ruby? Hamilton?

* IN #11, AS A DESPERATE SOLUTION FOR MELINDA'S MAYHEM.



Him or Lucius, though I assume there are reasons we'd rather not ...

We'll have to produce him eventually, but, yes, I'd prefer to try Hamilton first.

Well, Hamilton may be slow to respond.* I can follow up on that while Leyna and Mr. Sheridan go talk to Monica.

* RUBY HAS NOT TOLD LEYNA OR SERENE THE SECRET SHE LEARNED ABOUT HAMILTON'S ACTIVITIES AT THE END OF #36.



Actually, would you mind coming with us to Century?

Ah ... sure?

Let me recall real quick to send Hamilton a message first, to get that rolling.



You said you know where to find her. Why does it take three of us to do that?

It's getting to her that's the complicated part.

How so? This doesn't look dangerous ... a bit tawdry perhaps ...

... Why is this space so empty?



Make way! Make way for revolution!

Same answer for both questions.



We are the army of cogs!

We are the future! We are the present!

Lose the pretense! Kill your illusions! You are a cog! You are part of the machine! Be a cog!



Now see here, young woman ...

No, wait!



WHAaa--!



Everyone is a cog! Everyone must be a cog! The machine owns us all!

--sigh-- This place ...

That was Punny, though. "Now see here, young woman" --WHUMP!

Ruby.

OK, OK. I can't go punch out the drum major, though; can't get close enough.



Not today, sorry.

Hmph. You know, it's not nearly as much fun when they don't make any noise.

Sadist.



THE ASTONISHING Dupli-Kate

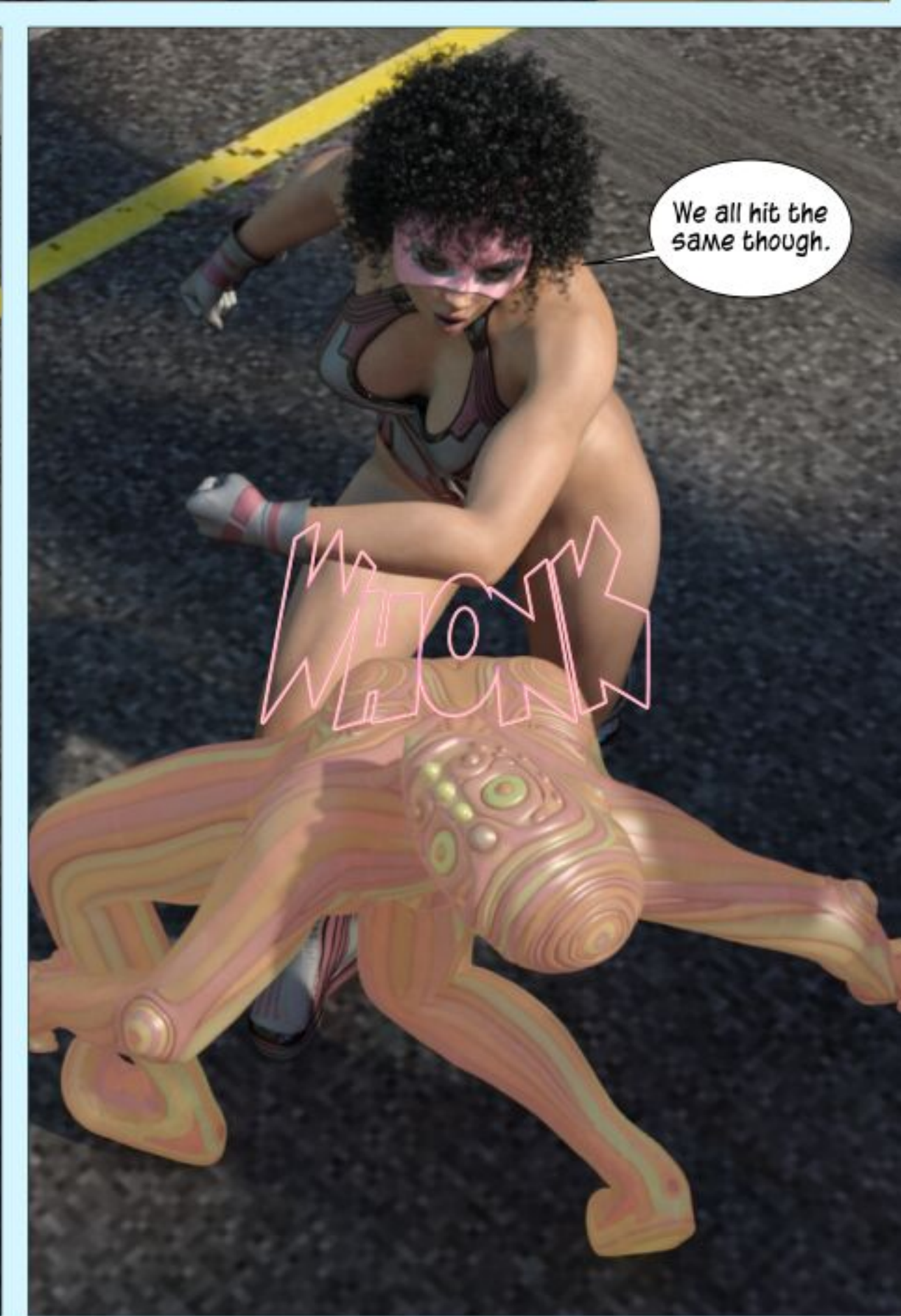
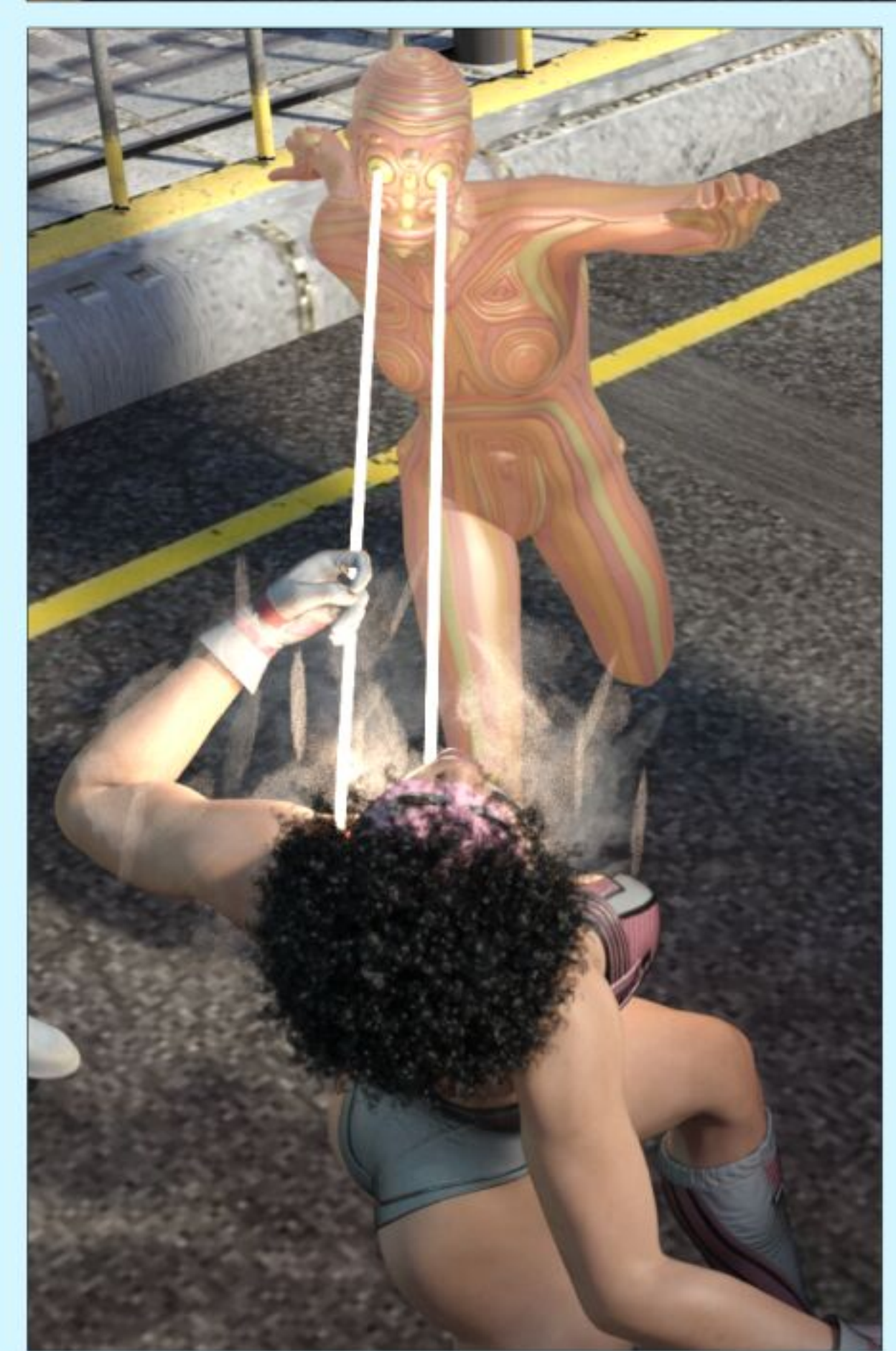
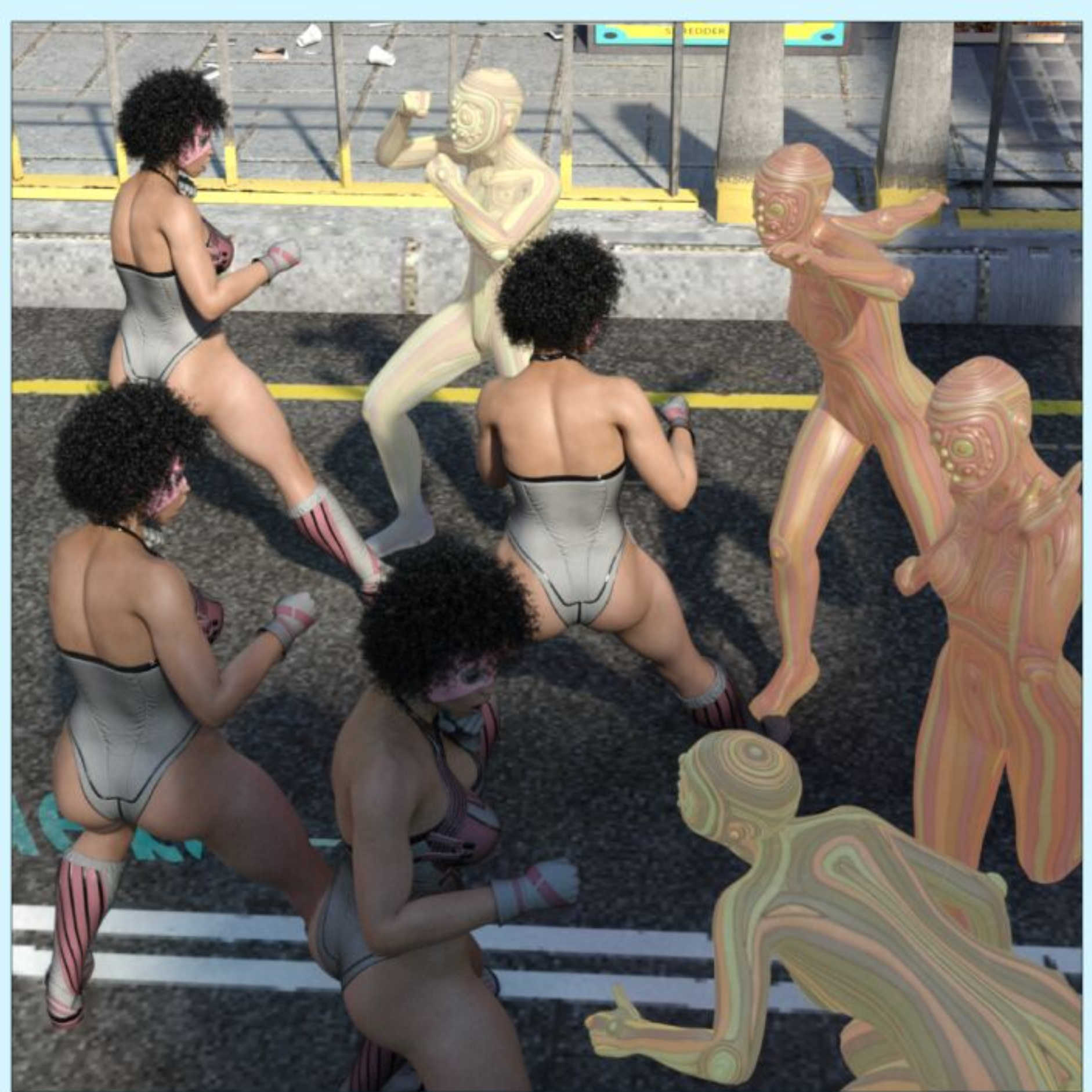
It's time for you to face the consequences of your actions!

All right, troublemakers, that's enough!

Oh, good. I was worried things might be getting too normal.



Eenie
Meenie
Miney
No
Pick a Fight
and
OPP we go



Gussed wrong!

I'm the real one.

Maybe.

We all hit the same though.



No! You're destroying the machine! This isn't right!

You have to stop--



HRKH!

We have to stop you.



And that's why I wanted you to come with us.

Let's see about Mr. Sheridan.



Hey!

... I wanted to thank her.

Mr. Sheridan?

urrrgh

I'm all right ... just need a moment.

And my clothes.



Welcome to Century.

This sort of thing does not happen in AZ.

Sounds peaceFUL.

Sounds boring.

Ruby!

... What?



Oh, just in the Facility? That's fine. I thought for a second you wanted me to go ... out there. I never have.

Do you need me to come with you right away?

No. No point until we get Hamilton. But we'll want to do it as soon as we can after that--is that all right?

Yes, certainly. I'll check messages as often as I can, and come as soon as I hear from you.

Ms. Barker, Porgive my asking.

Why do you operate this zone in the way you do? People wreaking havoc on one another in the streets--can't go anywhere without risk of being accosted--



You'd be surprised, Mr. Sheridan.

No one comes to live in Century without knowing what they're getting into. The residents are mostly happy with it the way it is. Disruptions and all. It's the visitors who have problems.

As to why, it's simple: People need something to do. They explained to you that we don't have bed fees anymore? There's no economic structure in Century. Playing heroes and villains all day is all there is, except for sex.

Mind you, there are limits. Our robotic factions here have been crossing them a lot lately. I don't mind temporary mischief, but some of them are trying to do things that are a bit too ... permanent.

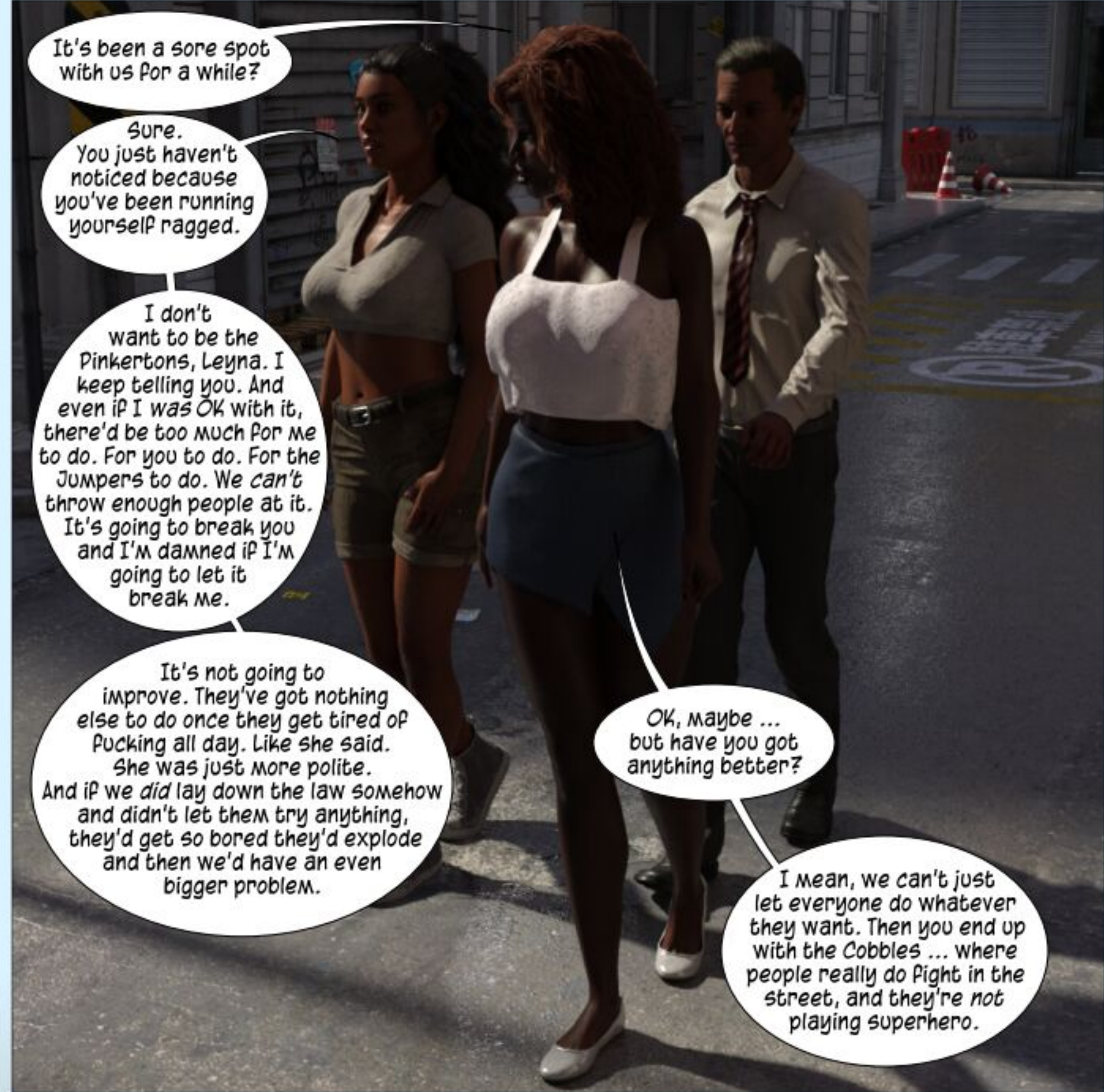
I have a person who acts to stop these things before they get out of control.



Mhm. Does she know you think of that as her job now? Because she and I talk, and I don't think she does. And if she did know, she probably wouldn't like it being her job any more than I like it being mine.

... Sorry. Didn't mean that to come out as hard as it did.

It's been a sore spot with us in Serenity for a while, is all.



It's been a sore spot with us for a while?

Sure. You just haven't noticed because you've been running yourself ragged.

I don't want to be the Pinkertons, Leyna. I keep telling you. And even if I was OK with it, there'd be too much for me to do. For you to do. For the Jumpers to do. We can't throw enough people at it. It's going to break you and I'm damned if I'm going to let it break me.

It's not going to improve. They've got nothing else to do once they get tired of Pucking all day. Like she said. She was just more polite. And if we did lay down the law somehow and didn't let them try anything, they'd get so bored they'd explode and then we'd have an even bigger problem.

OK, maybe ... but have you got anything better?

I mean, we can't just let everyone do whatever they want. Then you end up with the Cobbles ... where people really do fight in the street, and they're not playing superhero.

"I mean, I still haven't figured out why anybody in their right mind would live there. Or even visit."



THE COBBLES.

So ... if it's not too personal or anything ... why did you change the way you look? I mean, it's pretty, uh, dramatic ...

I never changed the shape of my face. Only the skin.

It's not too personal, but let's wait till we're somewhere else. I don't want to get distracted.



You don't like this zone.

Not a bit. I avoid it. Have you been here before?

No.

The longer we stay here, the greater the chance someone will try to give us trouble.

The problem is, I don't know how long it will take to find her.



oorg

You don't know where she lives?

Wouldn't matter if I did. She's all over the zone all the time. She could be anywhere.



Wait!!

But here's two people I know who probably have a better guess where to find her.

They ... uh ... look kind of busy right now.



Damn it, stop!

We just want to talk to you, jackass!



Yeah, but I don't want to talk to you.

You know, I wasn't sure you'd be dumb enough to Fall for that.

We're tired of you asking about stuPP that's none of your business.

So we're gonna beat the crap out of you. And if you come back on our turf, we're gonna beat the crap out of you again.



Think you brought enough people?

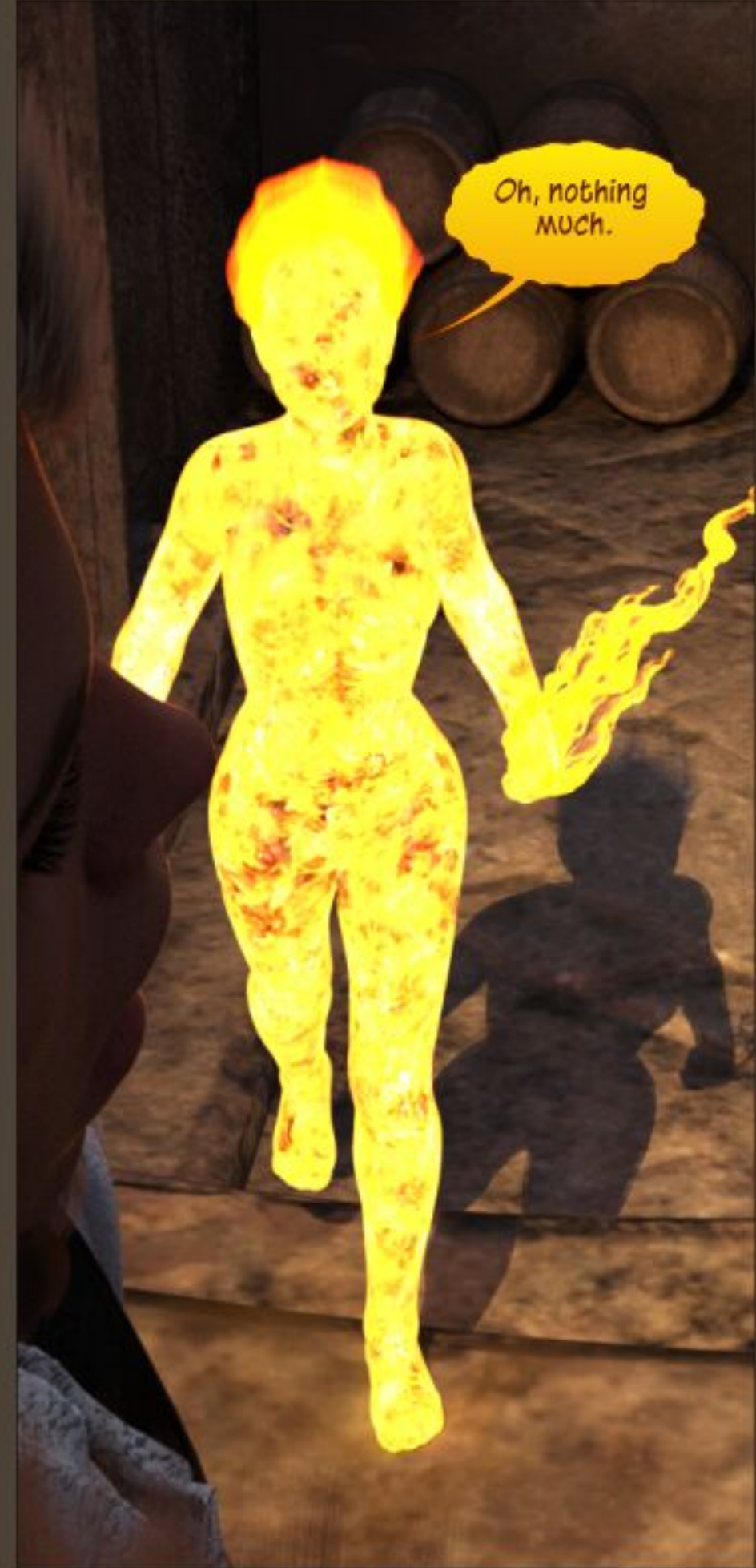
You must really be scared shitless of us. Brought your whole pissant little gang. Sad.

Ash ...



--ahem-- Those are Friends of mine you're threatening.

Yeah? What have you got to say about it?



Oh, nothing much.



And what brings you to our little corner of paradise?

Sorry! You wanted to get information from them, didn't you? I blew it. I didn't think they'd all run like that.

They're chickenshit.

... Excuse me ...



They sure got out of here fast, huh? They're such assholes. They don't have an angle, you know. They just go around making trouble.

One of these days they're going to piss off somebody big and it'll be ugly.

I heard what you've been asking people. You want to know if somebody was with Hal Berg in his club that night.

There was.



He brought somebody in with him.

I think I better not say anything else. You want more, you should go talk to Ms. Lee about it.

She might tell you, if you give her a good enough reason.



Can't find anyone who saw anything. How'd you do? Who's this?

Hey, Treece.

Berg had somebody with him that night. We're supposed to ask Ms. Lee about it.

Also the Mutton Choppers are all pissed at us. Big deal.

This is Naomi. She's a Friend of ours.



Naomi Coleman. You remember me, but I didn't look like this then.

This is Molly Coleman. You two missed each other by about a year. She's trying to collect what people remember about Lydia.

I don't want to remember anything about Lydia.

... Ah, hell. You were OK, I guess. I'll try to see if I can think of anything.

But not right now. Right now I've got to figure this shit out before my boss comes after me.



Let's go find Ms. Lee. Sounds better than grabbing more people in the street.

Yep.

You OK?

Are all the other zones ... weird?

Compared to Serenity? Yeah.

... I'm guessing you haven't been to the Yards yet.

IF YOU'RE UNCLEAR WHAT TREECE, ASH, AND MAIRE ARE WORKING ON, SEE LAST ISSUE.



HAMILTON BARKER USES LIAM AS HIS IDENTITY WHEN HE DOES EXTENDED BODYSWAPS AS A MEMBER OF THE PROTEUS CLUB. SO LIAM AND KEL ARE EACH OTHER HERE, AND THE REAL LIAM IS ACTUALLY HAMILTON. THIS MAY BE CLEARER IF YOU'VE READ #36 ... OR MAYBE NOT.

THE SLEEP FACILITY. SPECIFICALLY, THE VIP PREP ROOMS, FOR BARKERS AND OTHER SPECIAL PEOPLE.



THESE EVENTS TOOK PLACE IN ISSUE #11.



* ISSUE #28.

JEX'S AUNT RO'S PERSONAL SPACE, CENTURY.



Still han't get past it.

Past what?

Look same last saw you outside. Ten years?

Oh, more than that. How old are you now?

... An't sure.

Well, let's see ... I came in here when you were twelve. I was twenty-four. Leelee was ... thirty, I think? She had you real young.

I've been in here sixteen years, so that makes you twenty-eight now.



Makes you Party.

You don't think I could be Party? Lots of Polks look this good at Party.

You can look like anything you want here. I know a couple people go around like teenagers who haven't seen the underside of sixty in a long time.

It's a lot easier to get the business looking like this. I'm not ashamed of it.

You want some sugar?

Huh?

Sugar. For the coffee.

Oh.



You got to give people what they're looking for. Most of the time, anyhow.

For instance, you stay in Sleep, you're gonna want to talk the way Polk here do.

-- sigh -- EPPn snobs is what.

No! ... Well, some of them are. But mostly they just don't know what do so with something that isn't what they know. Makes them not trust you, see?

... Might not matter. If an't stay.

You're not sure if you want to stay?



An't sure any.

Sleep ... well ... han't figure Polk any, all kinds rosh, all kinds slide ...

Awake prob just get killed ... real bad out there now.

But Peel some like runnin off ... Peel like mama would be mad ... giving up, know?



Well, I don't think I can help you decide that.

But I will say I think Leelee made a mistake not coming into Sleep with me. And bringing you.

If she'd come in, she'd be alive now. And you wouldn't have had to go through some of the things ... I can only imagine.

Maybe she would think you were running away from something. But, you know, maybe she'd be wrong.

I know it's hard getting used to this place. Took me years. I'll help you any way I can.

I'm just glad you came to find me. It's good to have a family.

THE OPS ROOM, BACK IN SERENITY.



How'd it go? Get anything good?

I'm still cross-correlating. The block scan only tells us internal identifiers, so I'm having to match up by hand, like "Oh, that block's part of Serenity" and so on. It's going to take a while.

But I can tell you that the Sprue has eaten close to half of A4. Those blocks show up as decommissioned space. Empty.

And it looks like it has less trouble eating smaller blocks. I think that's why it tries to take apart the large zones ... has to do that in order to eat them. Not many little blocks still floating around.

Well, that's very interesting, but have you learned anything that'll help us find Barkers?



Find? Yes.

Josiah's got a single data block left. I don't know why it hasn't gotten eaten. He has the highest priority in A4, though, so maybe even the Sprue can't get at it. Anyway, he has to be there.

We already knew Zeke had a small set of blocks. Looks like they're mostly what used to be Shadyside. He's in those somewhere.

Here's the Pun bit. Guess who owns the Cobbles?

Well, I would have said Brendan, until I realized he was barely even bothering to run Highpoint. So I'm gonna have to go with Clayton.

Damn. And I was hoping to surprise you!

Anyway, so, he's got to be the mysterious "boss," right?



That's great! That's all the ones we couldn't find.

It's not good enough, though. We don't have any way to get to Josiah's fragment.

Zeke's zone surely has a set portal somewhere, but I don't know where. Maybe the Souk. Could take a lot of looking.

And knowing Clayton is running the Cobbles doesn't help us get to him, especially since it seems like he's trying not to be found.

OK, well ... never mind Josiah or Zeke for the time being. And I'd like to wait a little on Brendan, too; he's going to be a pain in the ass. Who else do we need to chase?

Lucius.

No, Lucius will show up when we need him, Mr. Sheridan. Trust me.

We may have to go after Pauline. Serene says she hasn't replied to messages.

So Clayton and Pauline? Let's go find Clayton, and give Pauline a little more time. I know who'll know where to find him.

I can't go right now. I really want to finish this data.



HMM.

Well, Mr. Sheridan, haven't you always secretly wanted to see the Cobbles? It's another of our more interesting zones.

Am I going to be attacked by supervillains in the street?

No, just solicited.

And possibly beaten up, but I'm a pretty good fighter, so you shouldn't be too worried.



... and I don't care. Being the boss' bully doesn't entitle you to make me violate my clients' privacy.

I'm asking for the boss. Why the hell else would I be asking? And he's entitled to anything he wants.

Then you send him to me. I'm sorry, Treece, but for once, that has to come from the man himself.

And we'll see how badly he wants to ruin one of his most reliable titles. Because that's what you're asking for.



We're not finished with this.

Sure. Come back when you're prepared to be reasonable.

I'm not being unreasonable!

Neither am I.



Not a good day for it.

Is it ever? And this is business, I'm afraid.

I need to see your boss. It's important. Very important, or I wouldn't be asking.

What? No!

Doesn't matter how important it is. If I brought you to him, he'd fire me on the spot.

I can't do it, Ruby. No way.



Sorry, I didn't mean to cause a fuss in your house. Ash told me Treece was here.

You don't happen to know why Treece wants to know who some of my people were with three nights ago, do you?

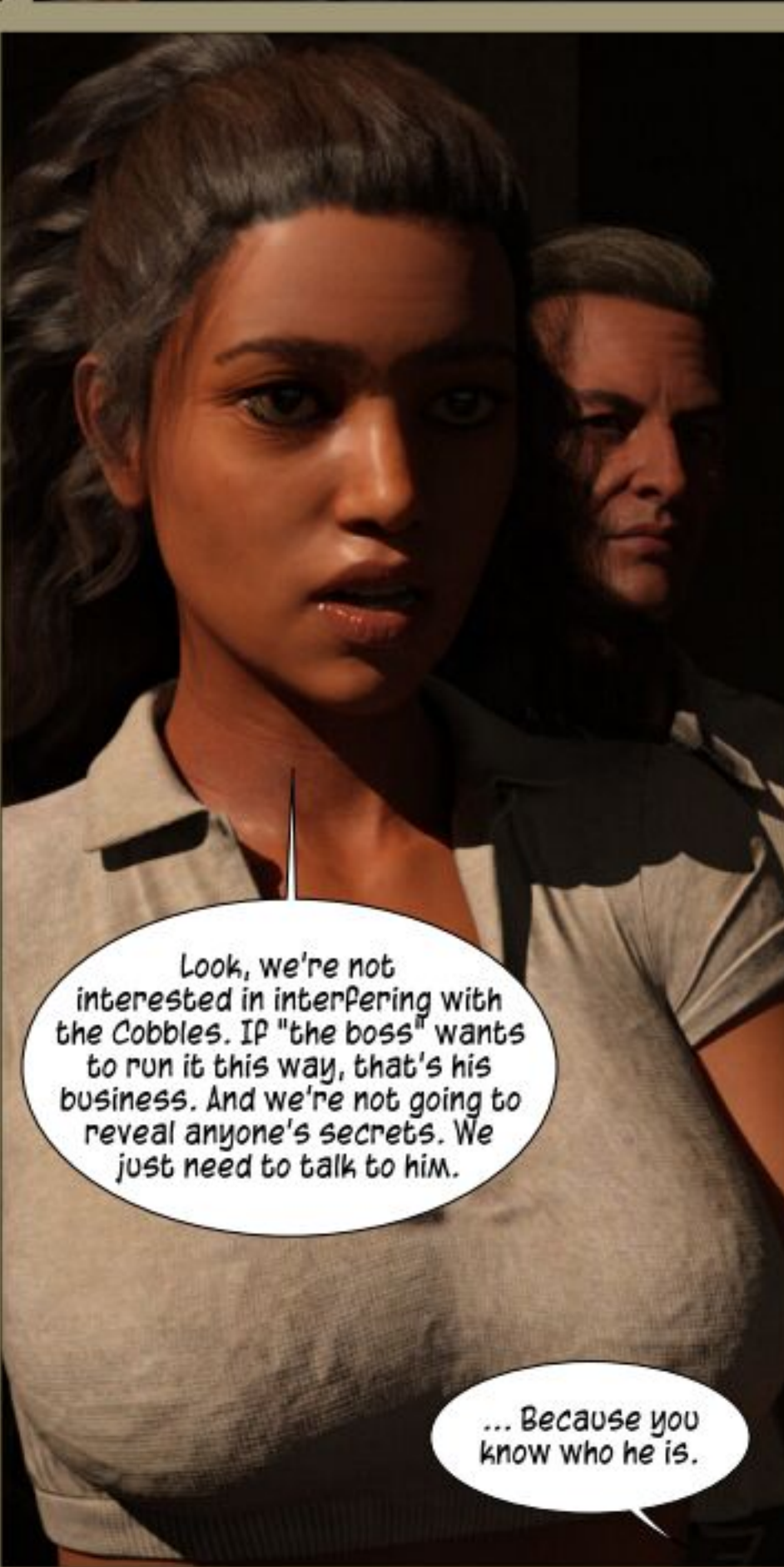
No idea. Whatever it is, I'm not here about that.

Hmm. Who's your friend?

This is Lon Sheridan. He's come from A2 to try to help us put this place back together.

The Sprue's going to get all of it sooner or later unless we can fix it ... but some of the things we need to try need approval by all the Barkers.

Ah. I see the problem.



Look, we're not interested in interfering with the Cobbles. If "the boss" wants to run it this way, that's his business. And we're not going to reveal anyone's secrets. We just need to talk to him.

... Because you know who he is.



It's all right. I know too. And I'll assume we can keep this conversation to ourselves.

Clayton's office is much less of a secret than his identity. People do talk to him directly from time to time. I've been there.

But you can't get to him that way. He'd just refuse to let you in.

There's another way which would work ...

But it would be better if it was just you.

No offense, Mr. Sheridan. Ruby has a reputation here and you're an unknown. The Cobbles keep a lot of secrets.



You OK with that?

Of course. Results any way we can get them. Should I wait, or go back to Serenity?

It could take a while. I'm happy to offer you the services of the house for the evening ...

Oh ... ah, no. Thank you, though.

Do you need me to get you back to the set portal?

No, I'll recall. Good luck.



It's very important that none of this happened.

If it gets out that we helped you, it could endanger one of my employees, and that's unacceptable.

Your story is that you searched and followed him and found his front door on your own.

I understand.



So then she told me that he'd never actually done that before ...

Oh, good. I was fairly sure she hadn't left yet.

Darla, a word, please?



Darla, have you met Ruby Martinez?

She has crucial business. Important to all of A4. She needs to talk directly to the boss, and he'll turn her away from his office. She needs you to show her the front door to his home.

To his--

If he thinks I led her there, I might as well leave the Cobbles.

We'll make it look like you weren't involved.

She's as good at keeping secrets as anyone in my house. Possibly better.

Well, on your say-so, Ms. Lee ...

You're just in time. I was about to have to leave anyway.

She has to hurry home and put on her prom dress.

And my makeup. And start dinner.



So, you're ... ah ...

... he pays for you to keep house for him?

Oh, we have sex, too.

It's not very interesting sex. He doesn't really care whether I enjoy it.

But that's the contract, y'know? He wants someone to smile and dress the way he likes and hand him a drink when he gets home, and make him dinner, and listen if he wants to gripe. And have sex with him.

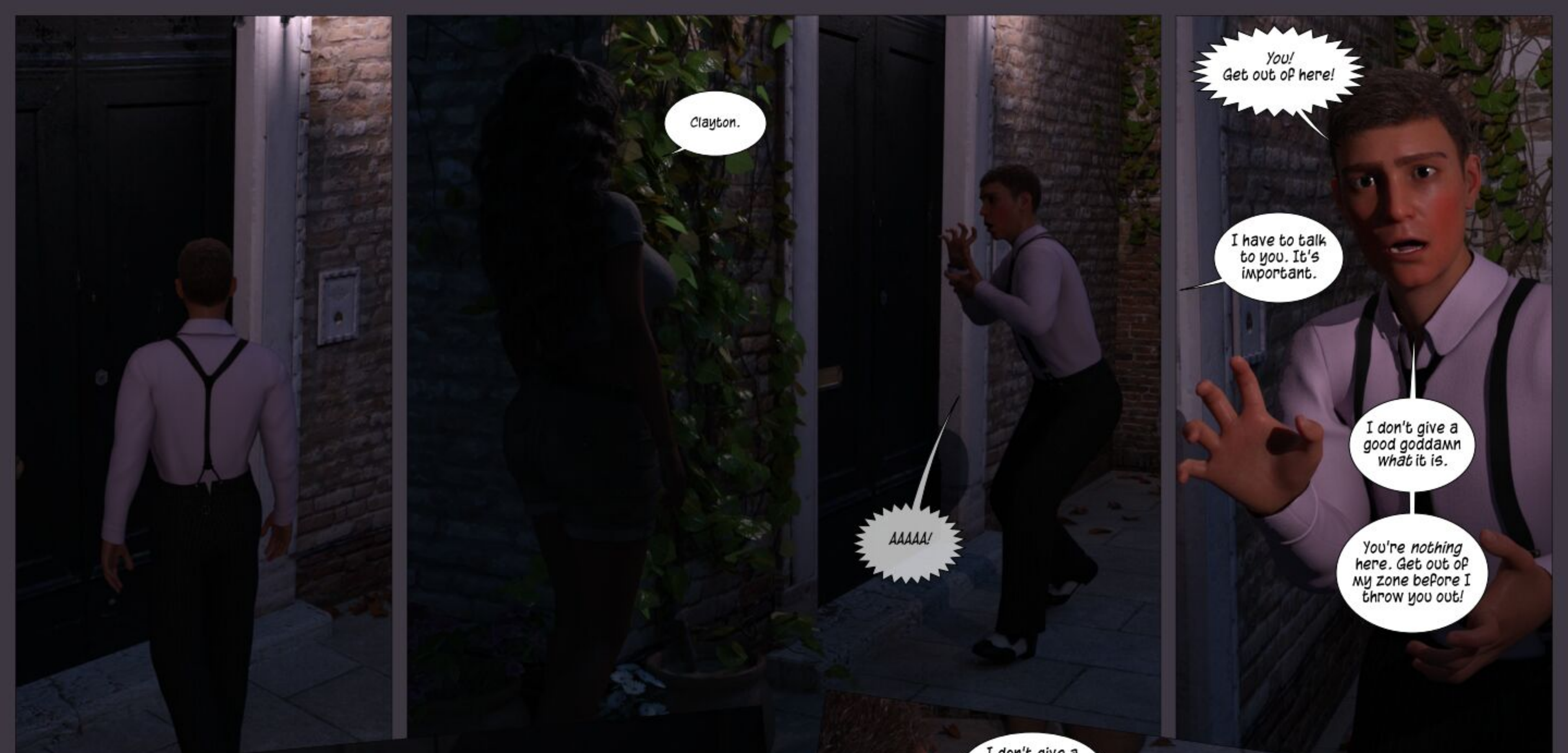


I think he's one of those people who needs emotional support, but doesn't want to have to give any back.

I'm not sure he'd know how, honestly.

It's probably not healthy, but on the other hand, he knows what he wants and he pays an awful lot of money to get it. So.

This is the door. Remember, you never saw me.



Clayton.

AAAAA!

You! Get out of here!

I have to talk to you. It's important.

I don't give a good goddamn what it is.

You're nothing here. Get out of my zone before I throw you out!



Shut up and listen to someone else for once in your life, asshole!

YAAAAH!

I'm not here for a fight, but if you want one, I'll give it to you.

I don't give a sloppy fuck how you run this zone. You can keep your little secrets. It's not always about you.

But Sleep's coming apart and we need to fix the Sprue and we need a consensus of Barkers to do that.



I don't give a damn about the Sprue--

Well, you should. It's eaten half of A4 and it's not going to stop.

You're going to have a real hard time being boss when there's nothing left to boss.

You are a shareholding Barker. That means you have responsibilities. You don't like them? Tough. Do something to justify your bullshit.

Now, there's going to be a meeting, and you're going to show up for it, so you'd better start checking your messages again.

It took me a long time to find you, but that's nothing to the time I'm willing to take to track you down and kick your ass if you blow this off.

Do I make myself clear?

MORNING IN SERENITY (NOT THAT YOU CAN TELL FROM INSIDE THE OPS ROOM).



That's great! I'm so glad you decided to try to find her. I'd like to meet her one of these days, if you're all right with that.

Sure! You'll like her. Lot same, think.

That's what we were just discussing. I still don't know what to do about Josiah, and I'd like to leave Brendan till later because he's more of a political problem and I think the logistical ones will take more work.

That leaves Ezekiel and Pauline. With Zeke, we're going to have to go to the Souk and try to find a set portal. The Daughters might know where it is--if there is one.

And Pauline's a problem because while we have a few clues where she might be, she could be anywhere in the Yards.

So Pauline's officially on the problem list now?

She still hasn't responded to any messages.

Maybe she's having one of those periods where she's just not paying attention ... or maybe she's gotten caught up in some mayhem.

Momma can't decide whether to be worried or pissed off.

Either way, we need to find her.

Mr. Sheridan, this is Jex. Jex, this is Lon Sheridan, Prom A2.

Here stop slide, Ruby said. Oyo.

So, where goin'?



OK. Jex and I will go sift the Souk while you and Mr. Sheridan go to the Yards ...

Alright with Yards.

OK, then. We might be a few days.

You're sure?

Yeah.

I'd, ah, really prefer not to go to the Yards.

You don't like the Souk either, though.

I like the Souk a lot better than I like the Yards. I've barely ever even been there, and you and Jex both have --

Jex is the reason I wanted you to take the Yards. She's been through a lot of rough time there. Or did you want to take Jex to the Souk and I'll go adventure with Mr. Sheridan?

Don't fall in a hole.



I think the portal back here is the best one for us.

I say "best," but we're going to the Souk, so who knows ... but I think this one gets us closest to where we want--

I bring the inevitable!



You cannot escape it! You cannot deny it!

Oblivion is all! Darkness and silence!

EEE!

--sigh--



Now what is this? Part of the Sprue business?

... We're not sure. This is a person we've dealt with before.

Your future is to have no future!

You must accept nothingness!

We can't tell if she's acting on behalf of the Sprue--as it were--or is doing this for her own reasons.

We won't get to ask. She'll disappear as soon as we apply the Ruby method.

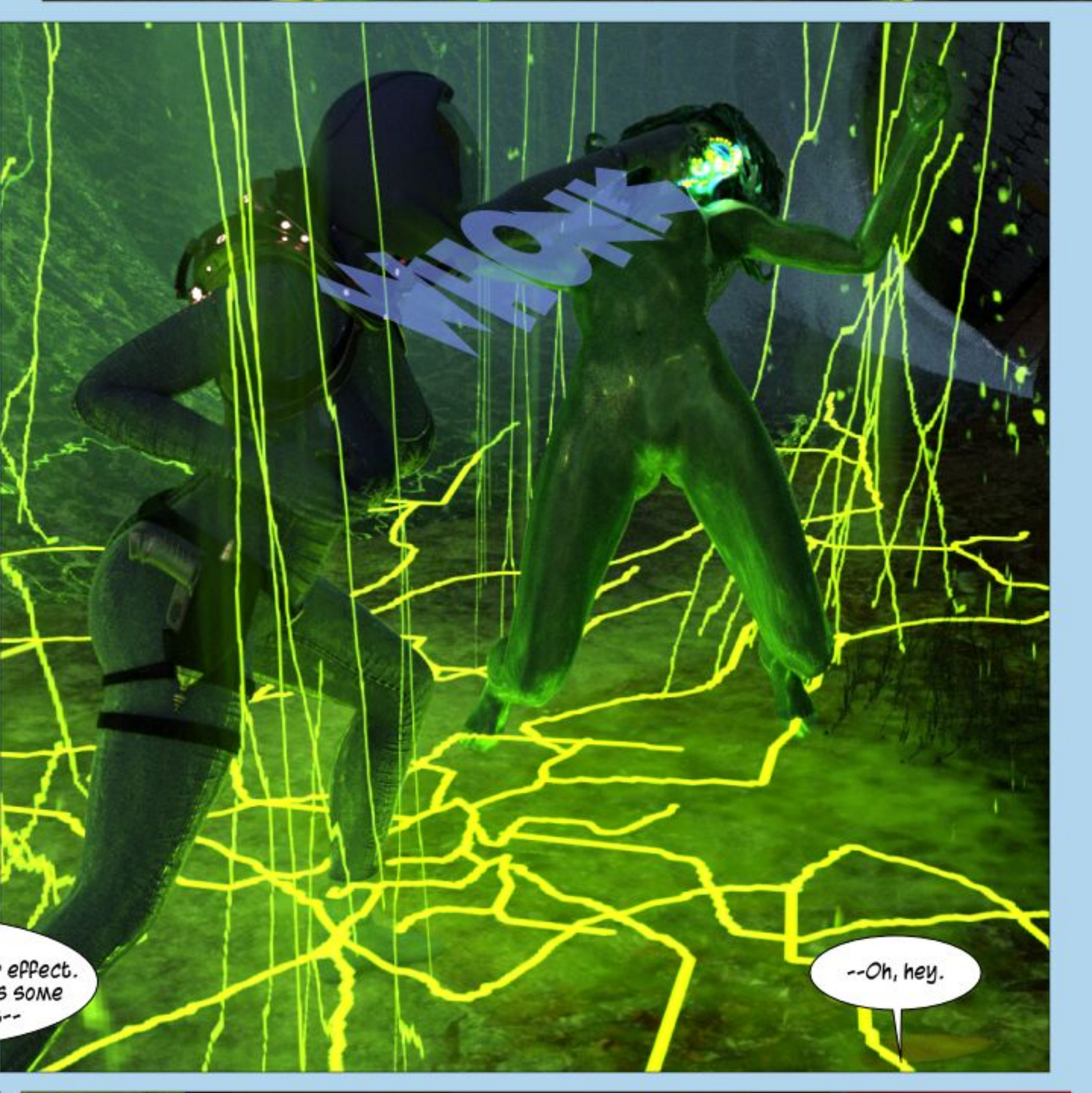
Which is what?

Hit her really hard.

Oh, well, if that's what's required ...

No, wait! You could get pulled into her effect. We need someone who has some resistance equipment--

--Oh, hey.



Excellent timing.

The only good thing about her is that you can see that vortex or whatever it is she makes from a long way away.

We came a-running.

What about all this data displacement?

After the third or fourth time, I set up a scan to check for displaced blocks every so often and automatically reset them. It's just connectors here anyway.

She'd be a harmless annoyance, if it wasn't for the danger of her sucking someone out into interspace.



You didn't mention her when you briefed me.

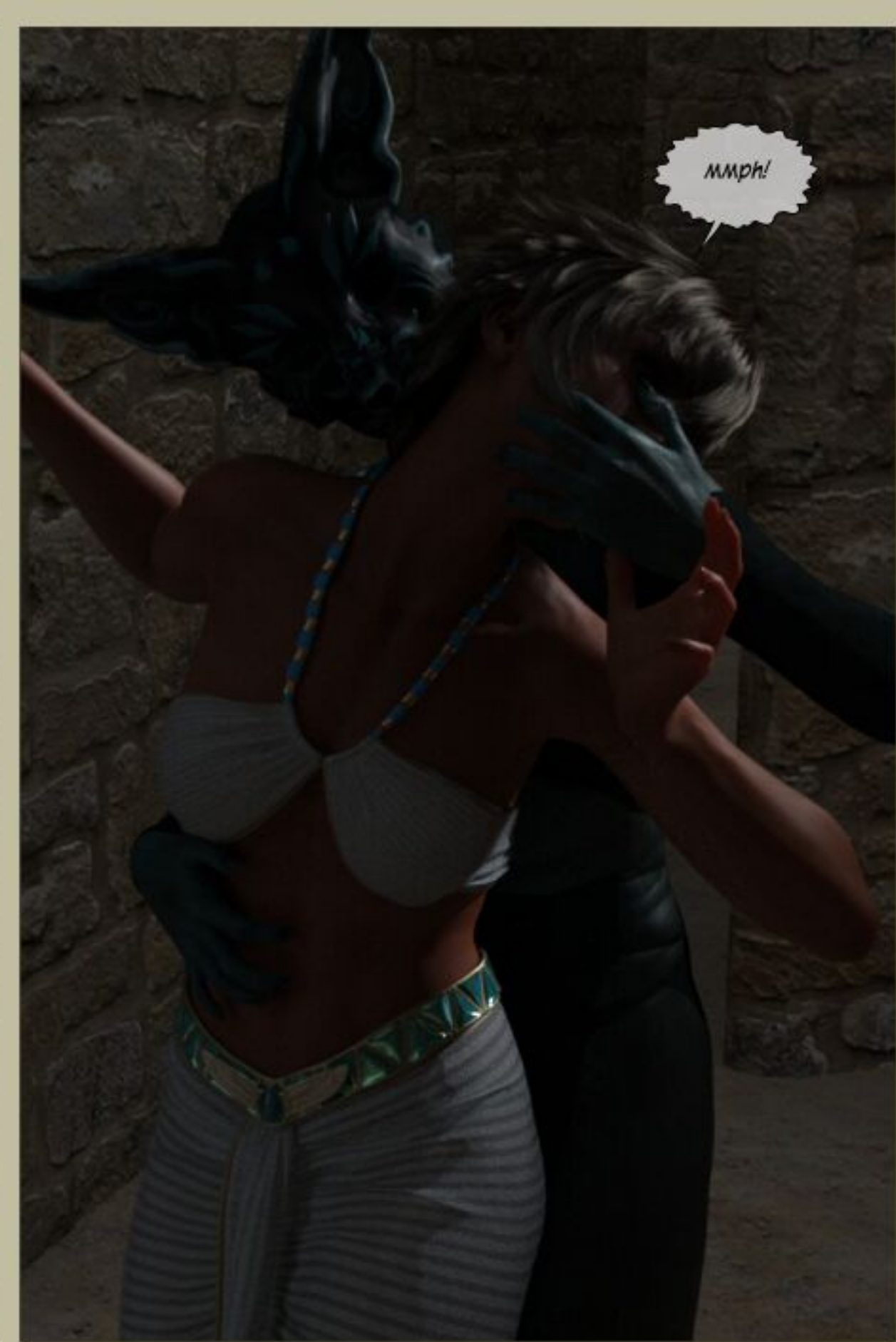
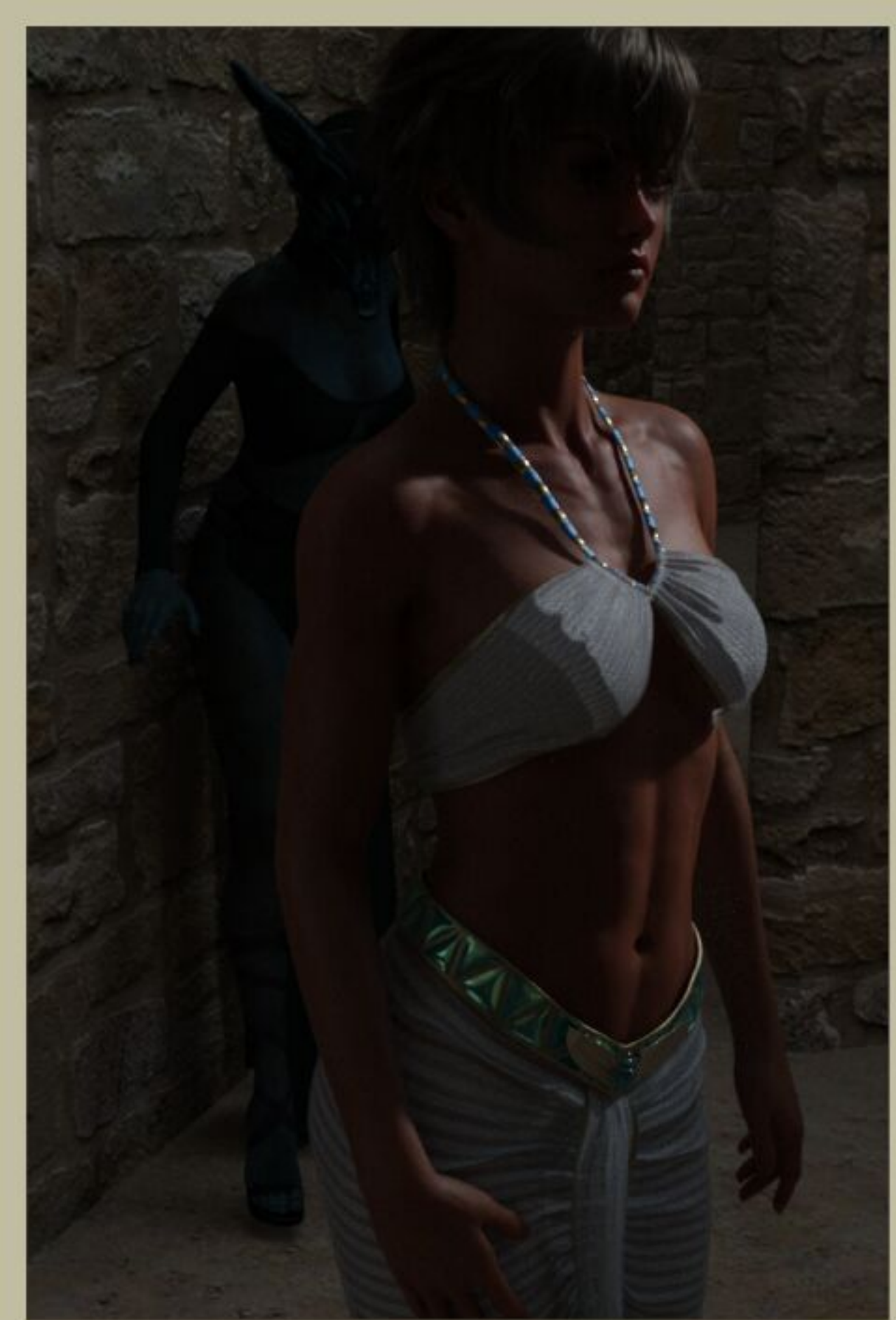
I thought I had? Well, it doesn't make a difference. She might as well be part of the Sprue. She seems to be trying for the same things.

She's easy enough to deal with, but I worry that every time she comes in, she weakens things a bit more. Making it easier for the Sprue to pull blocks apart.

We're getting where we have so many problems it's hard to keep track of all of them.

MEANWHILE, IN THE SOUK ---





It is not a problem you can help with.

Why are you here? Were you looking for me?

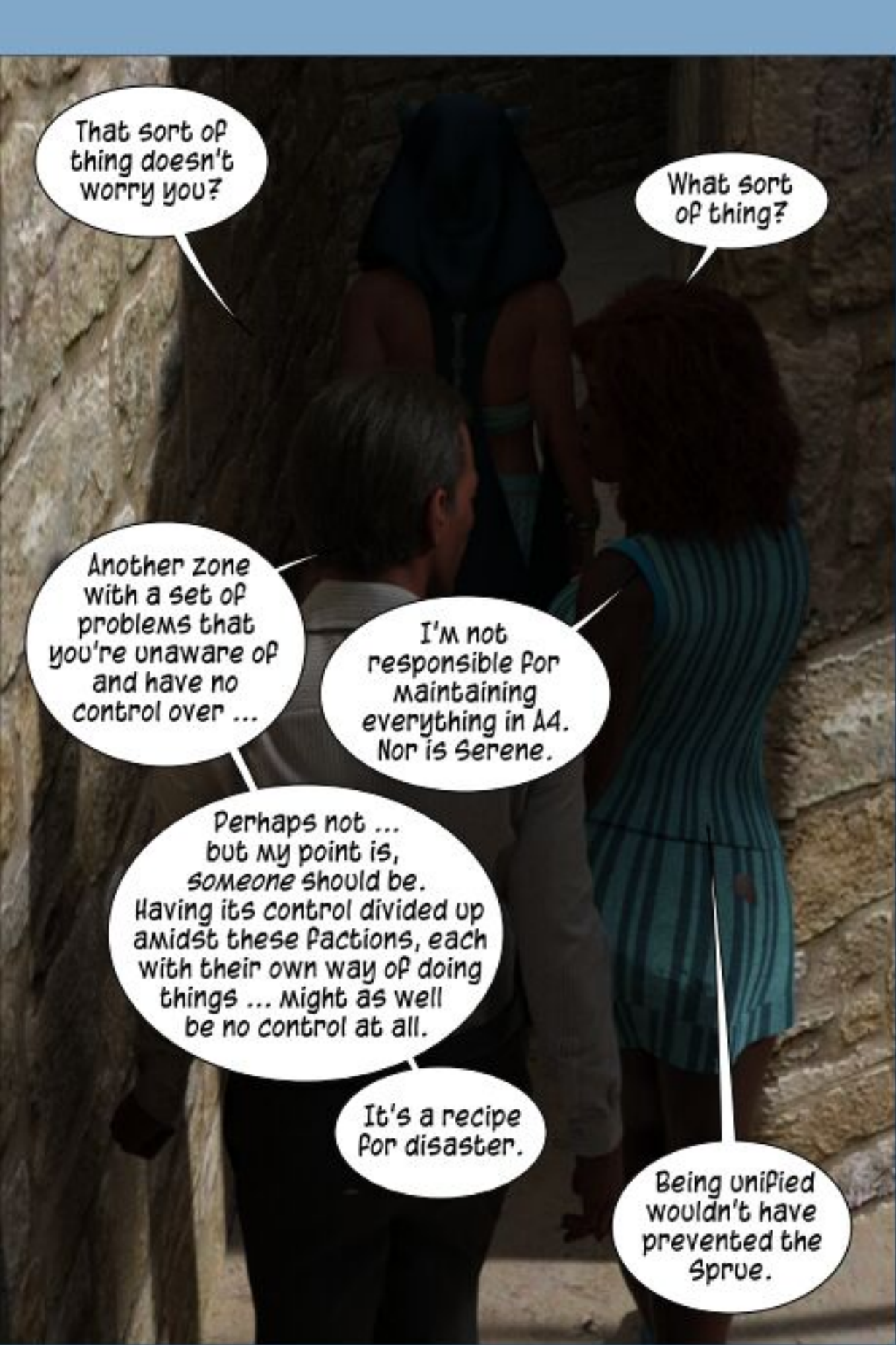
You, or any of the Daughters, really.

We need to get to a small zone called Shadyside. If it has a portal anywhere, it's likely to be here ...

There is one. My second will take you to it.

Excuse me now.

I must go think.



That sort of thing doesn't worry you?

What sort of thing?

Another zone with a set of problems that you're unaware of and have no control over ...

I'm not responsible for maintaining everything in A4. Nor is Serene.

Perhaps not ... but my point is, *someone* should be. Having its control divided up amidst these Pactions, each with their own way of doing things ... might as well be no control at all.

It's a recipe for disaster.

Being unified wouldn't have prevented the Sprue.



No, but it would have enabled you to respond to it with definite action much sooner.

I still can't believe you have shareholding Barkers with whom you've had no contact in years. If that's not a sign of systemic breakdown, what is?

Well, again, some of that precedes the Sprue. We've tried to find Josiah more than once. He had become reclusive well before then.



Now, Zeke's a different story.

No one's seen him since the Sprue because no one's had any reason to go look for him.



Ah ... Pardon me, ma'am ...

Don't you think marigolds will look nice as borders?

Are you here to visit someone, or are you interested in relocating?

If it were the second one, who would we talk to?



The town manager. Turn right at that next street, and go to the big house all the way at the end. You can't miss it.

Thanks.

Say, uh ... do you like living here? How is it?

Oh, it's wonderful! It's so peaceful. You never get any of that weird stuff happening like in the other zones.

I don't have to worry about anything ever interrupting my gardening!



Can't decide if they're all being mind-controlled, or just fanatically normal except for their hair choices.

Mhmm.



Do you often have to deal with entire zones under mental control?

I wouldn't say 'often.'



Hey! They can't hear you knocking down there. The music's on. What do you want?

We were told to ask for the town manager?

I'm Mr. Hartwell. What can I do for you?

You were? Huh. OK. Give me a second, I'll get him.

Well ... we were trying to decide whether we wanted to come live in Shadyside ...

There's a definite type of person who wants to live here, and you're not it.

Besides, we only accept applicants who come personally recommended by people we trust.

No, you weren't.

I don't know what you're actually doing here, but I recommend you leave immediately.

The house is contiguous with this space ... we could just walk around and find another door ...

Not sure what good that'd do. They'd just turn us away no matter how we got in.

If we're going to go in by force, I'm going to want more than just the two of us for that.

But I don't think that's the way. I think we need a different approach here.



Still can't figure why these were.

It doesn't always make a lot of sense, no.

Somebody had to have decided they were going to want a particular portal often enough to bother making a set one.

In the Yards that usually means they're in or near villages, or at crossroads.

What annoys me is times like this, when you've got to portal four different places just to get to the one you want.



"East Road." "West Road." Can't help.

We need to go east. Down the road a bit to a village called Sawfish.



Sawfish?

I didn't name it.

We ask people there when the Rovers last passed through and which way they were going. Then comes the hard part.

Done this one?

Nope. Naomi gave me some hints. You remember Naomi?

Saw her other day. Helped find Aunt Ro.

Oh, nice! Well, keep this quiet, but Naomi is basically Pauline's daughter. She comes to check on Pauline sometimes.

Should get her come help ...

Naomi's not too happy with Pauline right now. I figured I'd better not ask.



Isn't much village.

None of them are. There are only two big towns in the Yards. Three, if you believe the stories about the elf citadel.

I keep meaning to go visit Piertown. I hear it's wild.

Let's knock on some doors.



None here?

Doesn't look like it.

Maybe it's just me remembering the swamp, but this Peels bad.

What's that by your foot?



"Palliard and Caitipp's Spectacular Zoological Virtuoso Exhibition."

Too much word.

Trained-animal show. Or a circus, I guess. Or both.

If I read this right, they've set up just down the road. Maybe everybody's there.



Rosh.

It's a circus tent. Old school. Very old school.

There was a troupe that toured around A4 in one, for a while.

Then they decided they'd make more doing scenarios. I hired them a couple of times. Acrobats can be useful.



Hear Polk inside ...

Sounds like the show's already in progress.

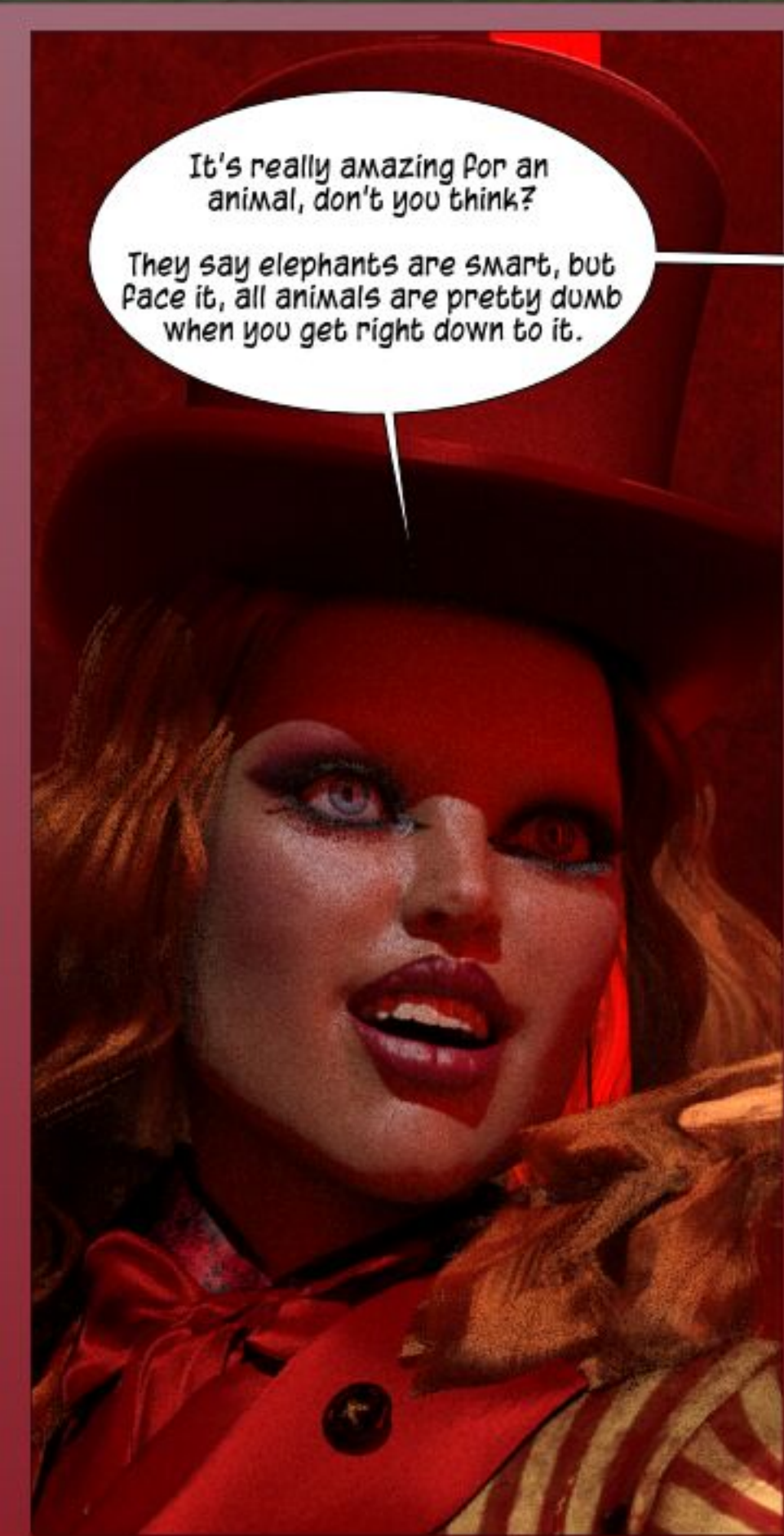
Look, maybe I'm crazy, but this is giving me a bad Peeling.

Go in in and see what's happening, while I take a look around out here. Unless you'd rather swap ...

No. Want see this.



All right, everyone, let's have a lot of applause for Priscilla and her Peats of balance and grace!



It's really amazing for an animal, don't you think? They say elephants are smart, but face it, all animals are pretty dumb when you get right down to it.



Though I think she might be smarter than a few of you in the audience ...

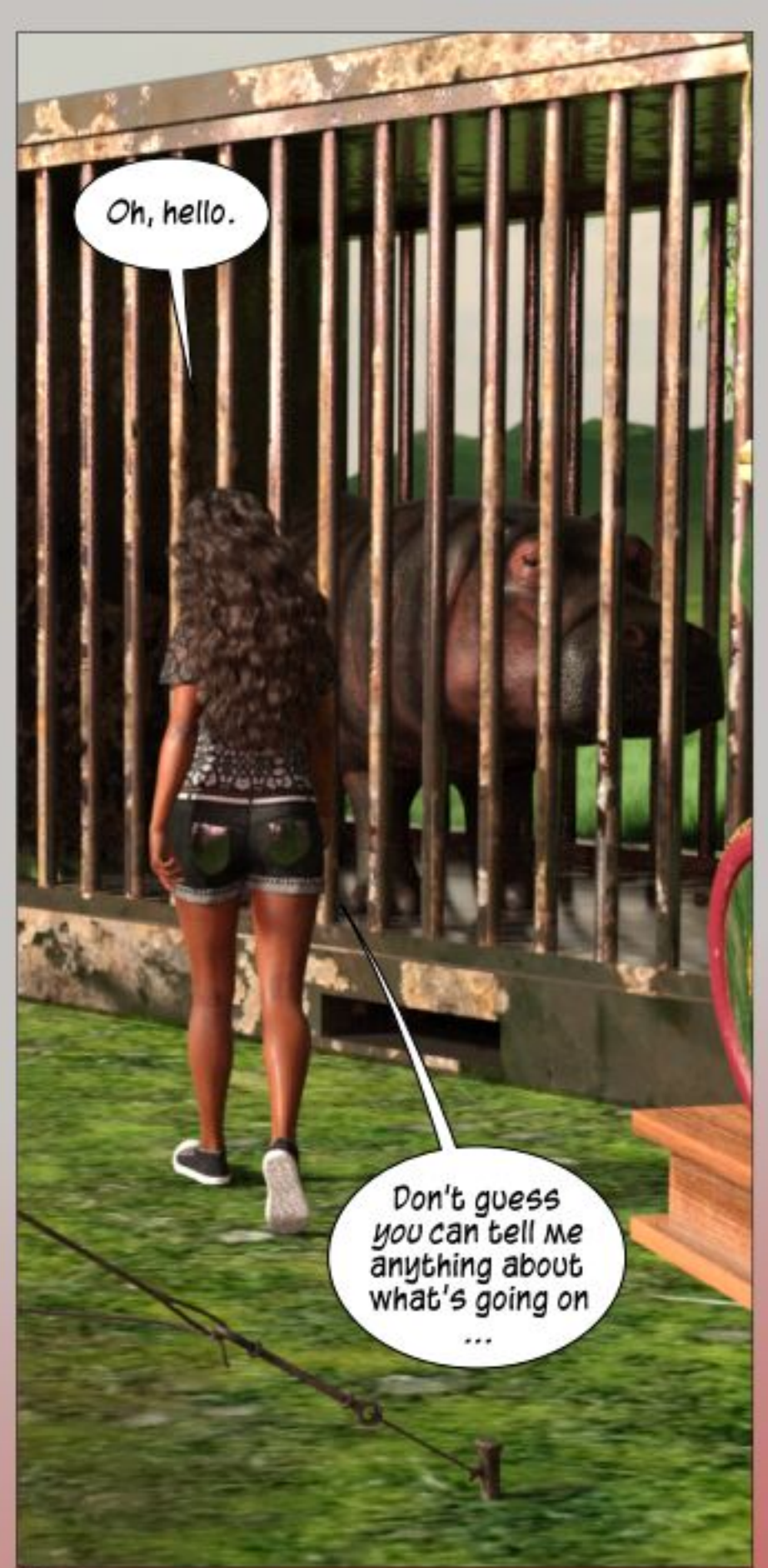


And now, let's welcome our next act!



Way too quiet back here.

They're in the middle of a show, there should be people running around moving props and herding animals and trying to get the next act ready ...



Oh, hello.

Don't guess you can tell me anything about what's going on ...



Huh.



Who's a good dog, hmm?
Are you a simulation?
I sure hope you are ... but why do I get the feeling you aren't?



I'll help you find out.

Wha--?



No, wait!

I just want to hrrghpp!



I'm tired of shorthairs.

I think you'll look good with a nice thick coat.

hPgrOOOOOw



-- Whine --

Hush.

Once Palliard gives you some training, you'll be thrilled to be a dog.

You won't know you were ever anything else.



May we present: Princess Christina and her Royal Horse Brigade!



CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP



Know her!

She with this thing? Can't peel right ...



And that concludes our performance for today!

Thank you all very much for attending.

I'd like to ask our special guests to remain seated while everyone else leaves ...



... not that that will present any difficulties.

Poor stupid creatures.

I'd be surprised if you could walk upright, at this point. You were such good listeners.

It's all right. You'll be on all Pours Prom now on anyway.



... Cres?



Jex?

What are you doing here?

Could ask same.

You with these Polk? Feel kind skel ...

I don't know that word.

Bad.

Oh, not even "kind of." They're rotten. I was looking for a missing person and got caught off guard. I broke out of it this morning, but I was playing along until tonight, when they're asleep.

Gon kick their ass?

Try to, anyway. Want to help?

Got Ruby here too. Find her, three of us, kick ass right now.

CRES HAD AN ADVENTURE WITH JEX IN #37. IT HAD ITS UPS AND DOWNS.



I don't see her anywhere.

No. Maybe went check tent?



Much better now that we've gotten those clothes off, hmm? You're not supposed to wear clothes. You're animals. Remember that. Keep repeating it in your head.

I want you to forget you ever pretended to be human. You weren't doing a very good job of it anyway, were you?

You're animals, and once CaitiPP gets her butt in here, no one will ever mistake you for a human again.

We've got so many dogs already, though. I wonder if we should add a dancing bear act? Put some extra weight on you ...

Palliard messes with their minds; CaitiPP does the bodies.

Wh. Where is CaitiPP, anyway? We may need to--



I'm right here.



--hrrrk--



Good call.

Don't let her get close to you. She needs proximity to do her thing.

Get real close to Pist, han't watch out.



What on earth?

Did Cres manage to--

Looks like it.

I don't know where the other one came from. She might be with the one I caught poking around. She's in the kennel now.

I know how to take care of these two.

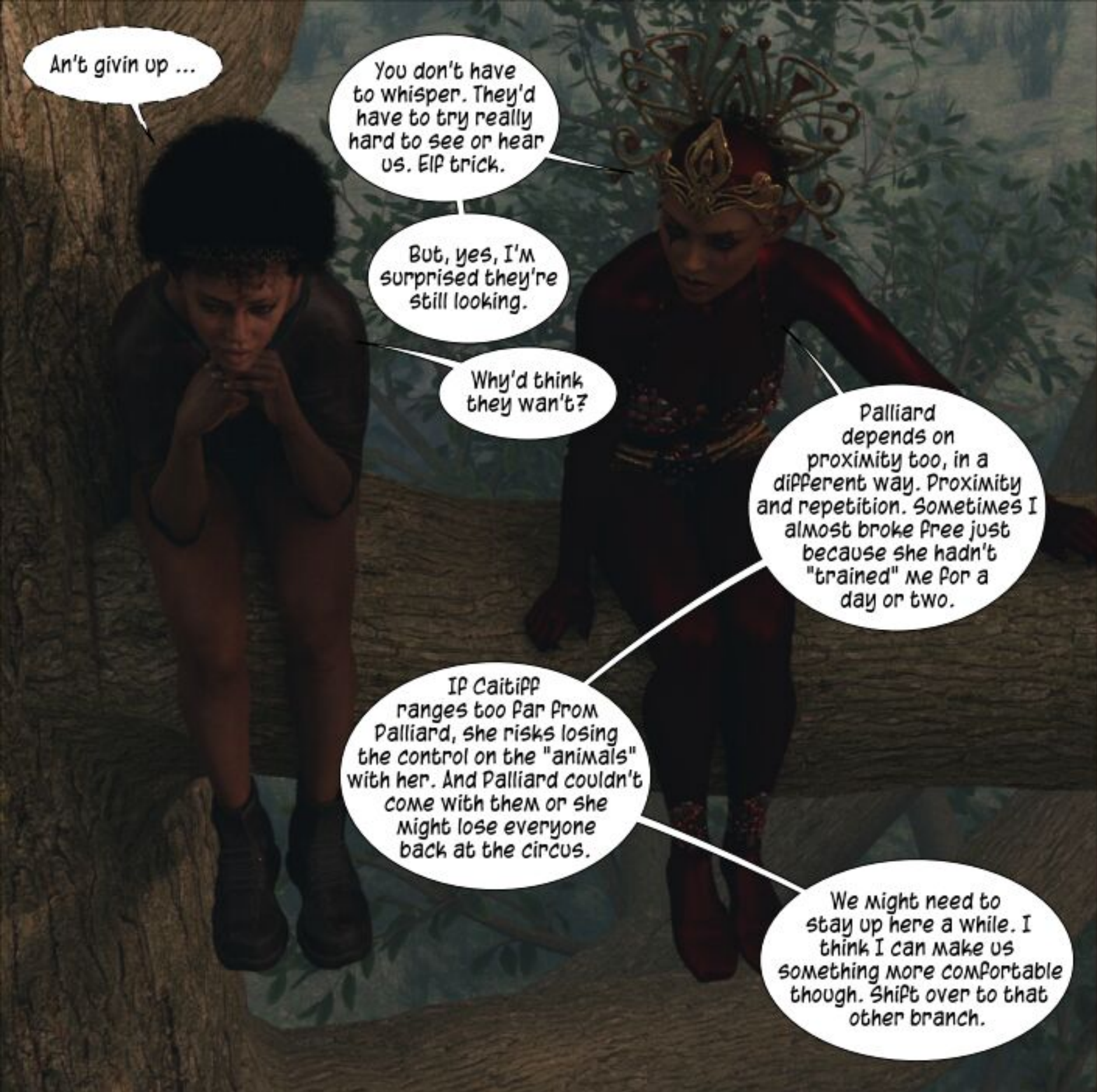


Get them!

AAAAA!



Faster! She won't let them come too deep into the woods. She'll call them back.



SERENE BARKER AND CORAZON ESTILO'S PERSONAL SPACE, SERENITY.





Any day now, we're going to have to produce Lucius.

I know you're not happy about the idea, but--

It's not about "happy," I don't mind doing it.

I'm worried I won't be able to fake it well enough to be believable.

You're not going to be faking! Whatever else has happened, you're still Lucius Barker ...

Theoretically.

It's just not real. It's like there are stories in my head about how once upon a time I was this Lucius person, but I don't quite believe them.

I've tried so hard, Serene. Ever since coming back from the coma, I've been trying. It never works. I don't think Lucius is ever going to be real to me again.



And the horrible thing is, I'm pretty sure a big part of the reason I can't make it real is that I don't want to be Lucius.

I don't think that's so horrible.

Certainly you can be whatever you want to be, and I like what you want to be, anyway.

But we are going to have to play this stupid game, for political reasons. If we say "Lucius is gone" right now, there'll be a fight, and that's a distraction we don't need.

I'll coach you. It'll work out.

DAWN.



Gone?



Huh. They never bother to move this early in the day.

I wonder if they were trying to get away from us.

Fast job.

Oh, they don't pack it all up. Palliard has a way of portalling the whole thing. Not sure how.



Could be any place then? Ruby--

Don't worry. I know their route. They have a planned tour schedule. I don't figure they'd break from that.

Over the last year or so I've learned portal locations all over the Yards. I can get us pretty close.



All Polk still sleep?

Palliard's not. I hear her in the tent.



Good girl! You've almost got it!

Now, remember, you're just a dog whose job is performing in a show!

You like to do what I want you to do, because that means you're a good doggie!

You're such a pretty puppy too ... I should get Caibipp to make longhairs more often ... though they're so much harder to keep groomed ...

OK, let's try it again! When I say--



whuggg



Hey!

urgh



--rrkkkk--

Whoaaaaa!!!



Coward!

Other too. Recalled.

Catch her before she starts letting out animals ...



Back off!

I can open all the cages at once. You hear them? They don't like you.

I don't think you should do that.

Oh yeah? Well, you can't stop me!

AAAAHHH!!!

All the conditioning stopped when Palliard recalled.

It's you they don't like.



And the other one chickens out too.

Kind of amazing she managed to recall with you all at her throat like that.

The Rovers, I presume?

Verily!

Well, some of us. They appear to have caught quite a few others besides ...

Are you to whom we owe thanks for freeing us from those scoundrels?

Not directly. That was these two. I was busy learning to jump through a hoop.

We came to find one of your group for an urgent matter.

One of us? Whom do you seek?



Ah ... Can someone open this cage for us, please?

Let's wait a moment on that until we get everyone sorted out.

I guess the horses were actually horses ...

Our mounts! They're all right!

Have I seen you three before?

Yes. You threw me into a fence.

She did not. You charged her and missed.*

Oh, right! Huh. You mostly operate way southeast of here, right? The circus got around.

Wonder where else they ganked people from ...

I have to do the next part in private.

See if you can keep everybody else busy cleaning up, OK?

* ISSUE #35.



I wasn't sure seeing me would cue you enough.

I hadn't realized it would either. I know seeing Naomi does. And Lilac can always call me out of it.

I can't always come out by myself ...

Yes, I gathered. Those two didn't know any of the horses weren't simulations, so they never actually did anything to you ... but you didn't break out.

I'm not even sure what happened. I was running around a ring with the other horses a lot? And someone was jumping around on our backs?

Oh, dear. Have I missed something important?

Anyway, Serene's likely to be a lot less mad if it was out of your control.

Not yet ... but you probably want to not be a horse for a while, and stay somewhere you can get at your messages in a hurry.

There's a man in Prom A2. He wants to help us fix the Sprue, but before he can, he needs a shareholder meeting.

All of us? Have you found Josiah?

Not yet. We're working our way down the list.

Pauline! Are you all right?

Consider me on alert.

Thank you for being discreet. None of the Rovers know except Lilac.

I guessed that.

You might keep an eye out for the circus pair; I have a feeling they're just going to start over.

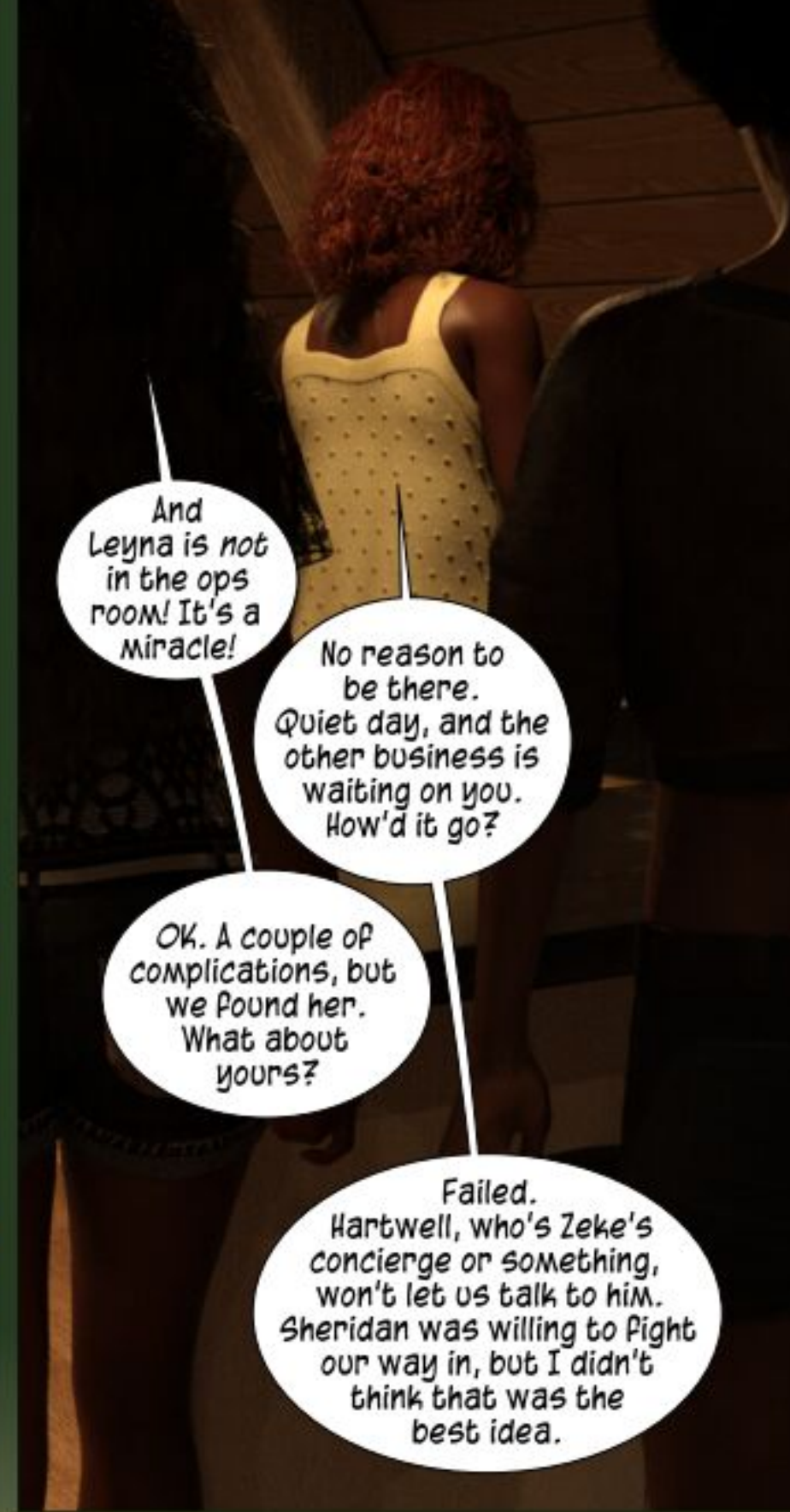


So she was Rover? But wan't tell who?

That's right, and I'm sorry I can't.

She's keeping it pretty secret. I think only four people know besides her.

It's probably going to cause trouble for her one day, but that's her business.



And Leyna is not in the ops room! It's a miracle!

No reason to be there. Quiet day, and the other business is waiting on you. How'd it go?

OK. A couple of complications, but we found her. What about yours?

Failed. Hartwell, who's Zeke's concierge or something, won't let us talk to him. Sheridan was willing to fight our way in, but I didn't think that was the best idea.



I think it's going to have to be an infiltration. I hate to ask you to do this one too ...

Well, I don't mind, but I don't want to go in there alone ... and I know you hate the disguise jobs, and Jex doesn't like them either ... I'll need to find somebody else, and right off hand I don't know who.

Can do job.

... You're sure? It's not just going to be a disguise. We may have to do some obnoxious things. Like, act like we love Zeke.

S'good. OK with it.

All right, then.

Leyna, give us directions, and we'll see about tackling it after we get some lunch. My last meal came in a bowl on the ground.



OK, so what happened?

Huh?

You've told me several times you don't like looking like anything but yourself.

And you haven't been thrilled about doing this kind of job either ... not saying you don't have good reasons ...

Yet here you are volunteering for two of them in a row ... one in the Yards, where you have bad history, and another that's going to need an appearance change ...

Something's different.



Got Messed by skels in Century other day. * Got back to right look by self. First time.

Do it one time, know can gain. Makes lot better. An't mind look some rosh know can get back.

Other part, uh-- Need help, seems crux, who else you got, right?

Told Aunt Ro an't decided stay. She said Sleep han't gon do me much if hide all time. Got do some.

Sides, Yards han't all bad history. Got good there too. Thought bout goin stay there.

* LAST ISSUE.

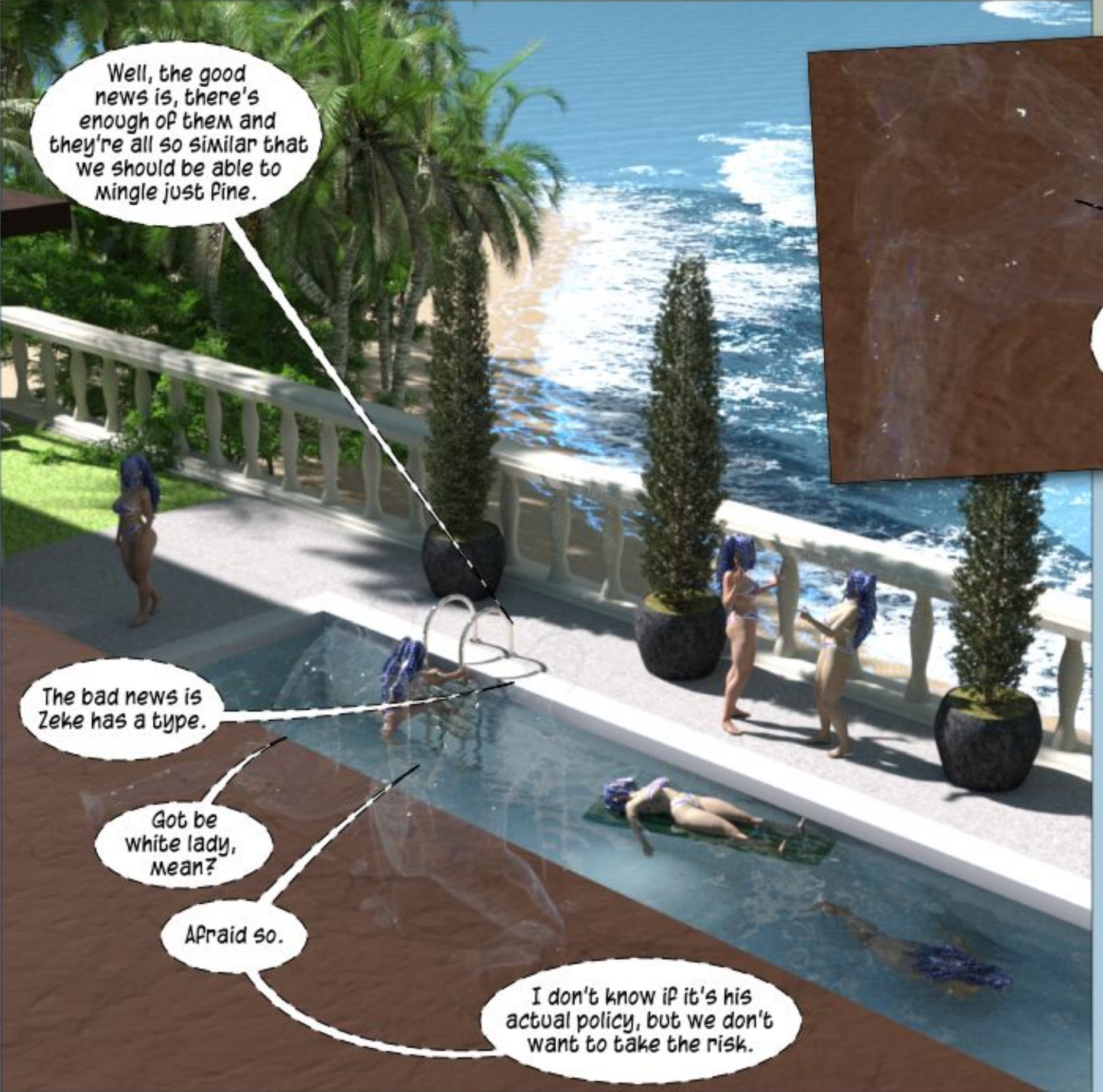


Well, if you decide to live in the Yards, look out. Pauline needs someone to police it. Badly.

Yeah, kind got that.

Anyway, I'm glad you're here today. I hope this isn't going to be too horrible for either of us.

We'll load the suits when we get up to the portal.



Well, the good news is, there's enough of them and they're all so similar that we should be able to mingle just fine.

The bad news is Zeke has a type.

Got be white lady, mean?

Afraid so.

I don't know if it's his actual policy, but we don't want to take the risk.



Got suits ... why han't just go in like this?

Remember all the warnings I gave you for the Scholz thing? Not standing too close? People running into you or closing doors on you? This'd be even worse. Invisibility isn't all that.

Folk like this?

Well, Zeke seems to, anyway.

I'm told he never had much imagination.

An't gon know which is you!

We're going to stay together, believe me.



Party.

I guess!



Han't know what looks like ...

He's kind of hard to describe. No strong features.

I figure there are only two men in the house, him and Hartwell. Hartwell's older, thinner and blonde. Avoid him.

Let's try looking in the bedrooms.



I'm going to rip the hat off every single person in this town, Hartwell. Right now.

And if any of them is surprised, acts like they haven't been in control of themselves, I'm going to tell them to find you and beat your sorry ass.



You know, you pull something like this, it always goes badly when they recover.

You don't know a goddamned thing. He's going to be in Por a shock. All the headwear does is minor reinforcement. Everybody who lives here wants to be here. Everybody in this house likes the gig. And he got exactly what he wanted.

I wonder if he knows that, though.

Look, before you vanish, like I'm sure you're about to do ... would you humor me and answer one question?

You had him. You had his power at your disposal. Why didn't you do anything with it?



What, like the kind of things they do?

This wasn't about that.

Like you said: I had him. I had him to where he couldn't walk or talk. Only part of his brain still working was the part attached to his dick.

I destroyed a Barker. And my only regret is that it wasn't more of a challenge.

Next time, I'm going to pick one of the more difficult ones.

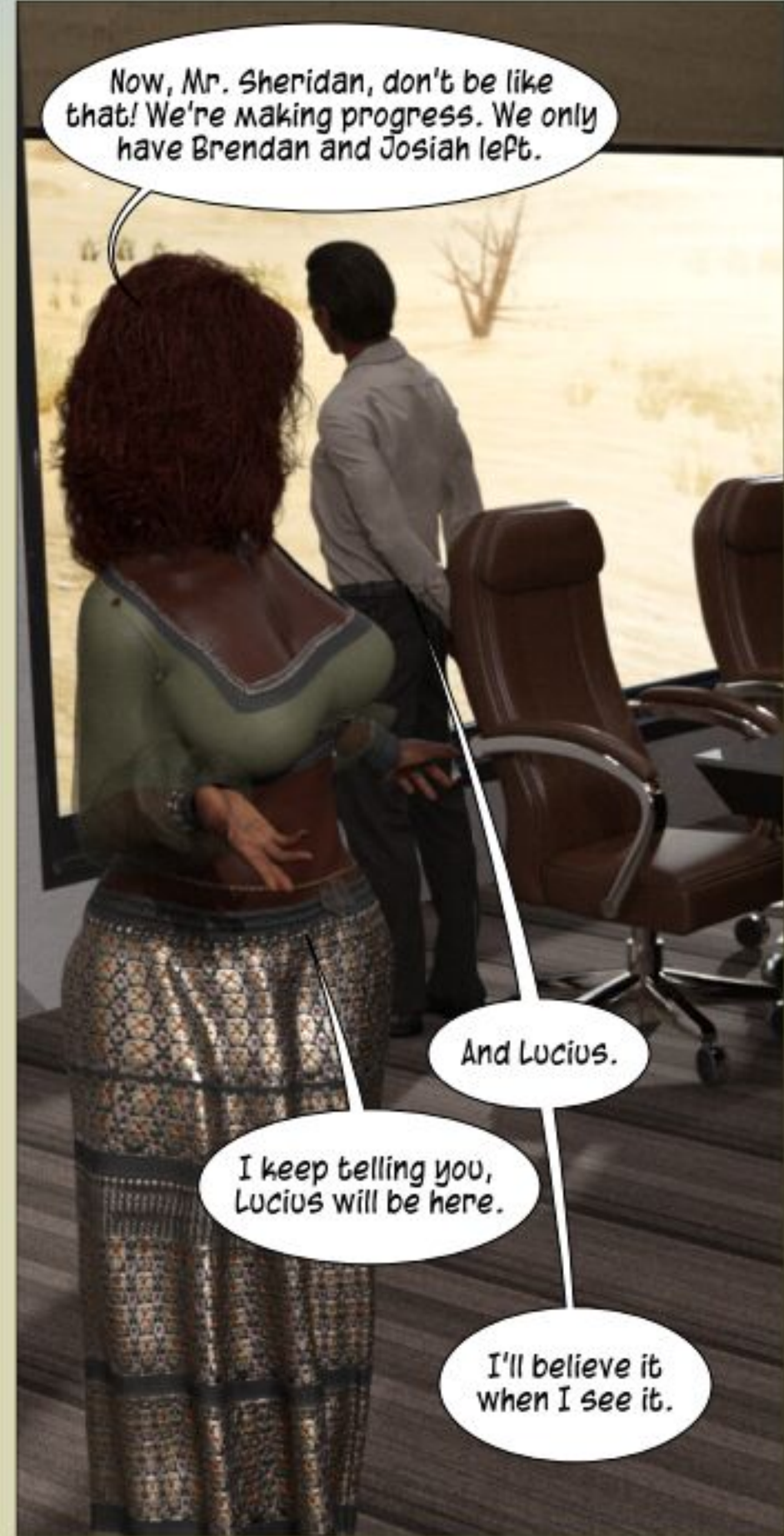
SERENITY, THE NEXT DAY.



Oh, hey, this looks familiar!

Turns out we had a manifest for it! We just needed to dust it off and regenerate it.

Prematurely.



Now, Mr. Sheridan, don't be like that! We're making progress. We only have Brendan and Josiah left.

And Lucius.

I keep telling you, Lucius will be here.

I'll believe it when I see it.



Uh ... he's been sitting idle for a couple of days, and I think it doesn't agree with him.

Anyway, so, Brendan. I have good and bad and semi-good news.

Good is I was able to figure out exactly where Brendan is right now from what little Highpoint data I have.

Sounds to me like someone was getting at things she's not supposed to have access to ...

In a good cause, right?

Besides, hacking doesn't help much here. Brendan is paranoid. He's got the tightest rights setup in A4 these days. Even the Cobbles is easier to crack.



Let me guess: the bad news is we can't get to him.

It's almost like you've done this before.

In lock? Or han't portal near?

Both. Set portals into Highpoint are few and far between, and there's only one neutral one that anybody can access.

And we don't have too many known locations there to cast portals to.

Highpoint's semi-contiguous--I mean, you can walk from one estate to another ... but Brendan's on an estate right now that's not likely to let us in if we walk up to the door and knock.



OK, surprise me.

Well, when I was doing the results of the block scan, I found out something interesting about Highpoint.

I think it'll give you two a way in.

There's a ... logistics problem, but I bet we can find a way to solve it.



"You two"?

Oh, no, no. You're not sitting out again!

I'm not blaming you for dropping Shadyside on us ... but you didn't want to go to the Cobbles ... you didn't want to go to the Yards ... it's the same way with everything now! You want to sit in the ops room and be the mastermind and never go out and actually do any of it!



But you're much better at that! My skills are all in data--

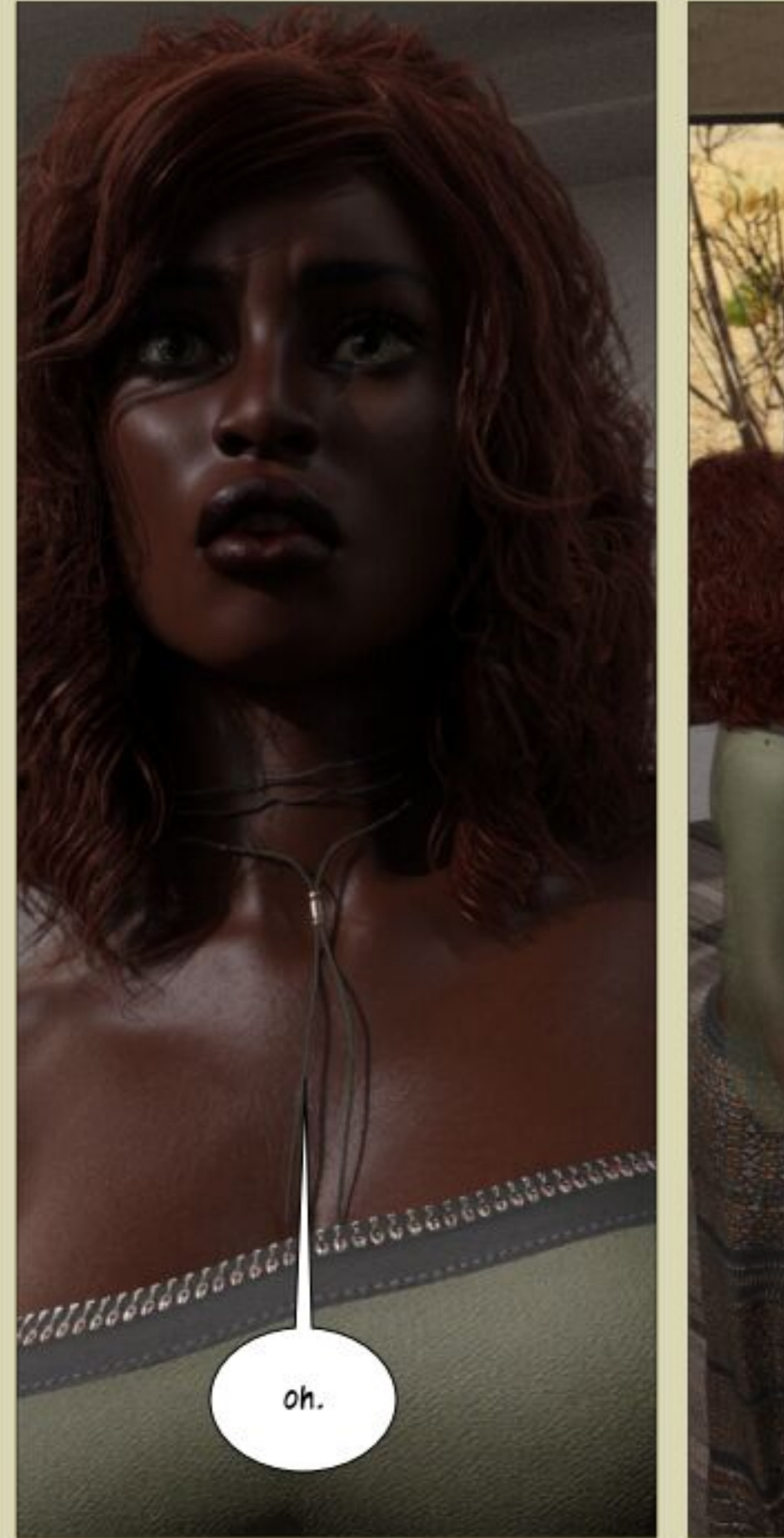
Then learn the skills!

Your refusing to get your feet wet is putting a burden on me. On the Jumpers. On me. On Jex, if you got your way. You aren't doing your part.

And that's really going to bite you on the ass when circumstances change!

Like what?

Like when I leave!!



oh.



Patience, Mr. Sheridan. We'll keep you informed.

Obviously, you don't have to come ... but we could probably use three here ...

Wan't miss it. Long as an't Scholz lady.

Definitely not.



Every time I go through that portal, I question my life choices.

How can you hate the Yards and be OK with this place?

Oh, I hate this place too.

So what's your surprise information?



Well, you remember that Brendan controlled the Aerie. Bertram ran it, but it was Brendan's.

Turns out that hasn't changed, and the Aerie got incorporated into Highpoint.

Huh. How do we get to it?

That's the problem. They don't have a place on the ground providing wings anymore, and none of the people we know up there are responding to my messages.

HMM. I know this location pretty well by now ... I could go up, and open a portal to down here to bring you two up ...

You can go up? How?



When we did the whole Aerie thing ... remember Serene said you could fly if you just ... uh ... rejected the idea of falling enough?

I ended up having reason to test that. And it worked. You have to Pocus pretty hard, but it can be done.

And you never mentioned this.

It never really came up.

Ruby ...

OK, OK. Truth is, I didn't want it to become part of my repertoire. I didn't want you or Serene saying "Let's send Ruby on this, she can fly ..."

It's less useful than you think. Mostly it just means I can fall off high things safely. I've only needed it a couple of times since then.

RUBY AND LEYNA WENT TO THE AERIE TO SOLVE A MURDER IN ISSUE #9. THEY HAVE NOT BEEN BACK TO VISIT SINCE THEN.



I probably should have thought up another way.

Still, it doesn't feel like I'm having any trouble sustaining it ...

I just can't let myself think about how it can't possibly work.



Wow. They have definitely changed the place ...

They need to learn how to use some color other than white, though. This is blinding.



Hey!

Who are you? What are you doing up here?

Uh, how are you up here?

Visiting?

I'm looking for Glynis, if she's still here.



I don't know what the rules are about this ... I sure hope it's OK ...

Never had to deal with a stranger before ...



It's all right, Cinnamon. I know her.

Though it's been so long I've almost forgotten her face.

I've changed a bit anyway. So have you.



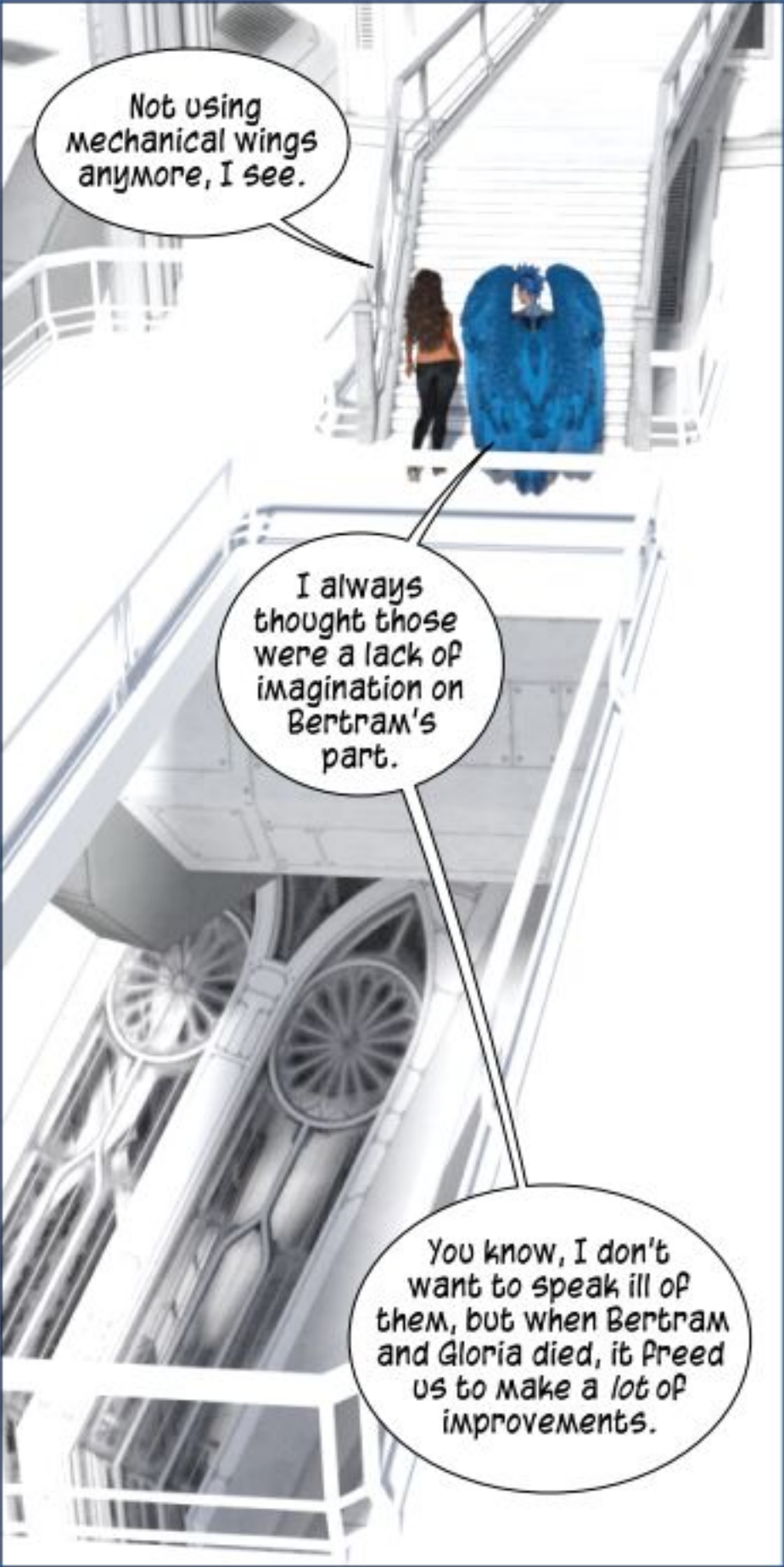
We heard all kinds of interesting stories about you when the Sprue hit ...

Thor and I were both hoping you'd come visit us.

Well, you don't make it easy.

-- sigh --

Yeah. We were going to work on that. Then the Sprue came. And we got moved to Highpoint, where nobody wants to go. I don't think anybody remembers we're up here.



Not using mechanical wings anymore, I see.

I always thought those were a lack of imagination on Bertram's part.

You know, I don't want to speak ill of them, but when Bertram and Gloria died, it freed us to make a lot of improvements.



ONE PORTAL AND AN EXPLANATION LATER.

... Well, we're no friends to Brendan up here, we don't like how he runs Highpoint ... but we need to keep on his good side, obviously.

My worry is if he gets the idea we were involved in this, he could throw a fit and delete our space.

I'd never put you at risk of that.

Interesting place, huh?

Mhmm. Rosh built it way up in air tho.

I've got some equipment that will let us drop gently. We'll glide down to the outer courtyard of the Bonisova estate. No one will be watching the skies for us, and no one will think that's how we got there.

They'll assume we snuck through the gates somehow.



OK. I'll take you to where you need to drop.

On one condition.

You have to promise to come visit us some time when there's not a crisis.



Almost there.
Highpoint isn't actually all that big ... at least not the contiguous parts. I think most of the estates are bigger on the inside, though.

Might not be a good idea to lean on that railing ...

Got lean on some.

Are you OK?

Be OK on ground.



Oop! Heads up!

Whoa!



Never seen any of them this close before ...

Come out Prom none?

They do that. Appear out of nowhere, fly past, disappear again.

On to the next zone, I guess.

You think they can cross zones somehow?

Well, it's the only explanation that makes sense.

This is your stop. You ready?

WE'VE SEEN THE LOONERS IN SEVERAL DIFFERENT ZONES IN VARIOUS ISSUES, BUT ALWAYS, AS RUBY SAYS, WAY UP IN THE SKY.



I notice you decided to wear one of the vests.

Flying takes a lot out of you, apparently. I wouldn't want to run out of juice halfway down.

Also, gotta conserve energy in case your stuff fails and I have to try to lift all three of us.

Han't say that!!

THE LANDING IS ACHIEVED WITHOUT INCIDENT.



An't dead!

Ye of little faith.

Now we just have to figure out where Brendan's hiding ...



Hoy!

Shit.



We're looking for Brendan.

Are you going to be a helpful boy?

It's his lordship's chambers!

Please don't kick me again!

And how do we get there?



If that's the quality of resistance, maybe we should have just stormed the gates.

Han't want fight all tho.

What Jex said. Let's see if we can get up to Lord Bonisova's rooms without attracting any more attention.



This should be it up ahead. I think we're in the clear.



His Majesty and Lord Bonisova are conferring and are not to be disturbed.

Yeah, well, this is official business. Barker business. So either step aside or --

ALLAMAGOOSALUM!!



OK, lady, remember you picked it.

aaagh!

-- UHM --



Still want to make trouble now?

I think I'll drop you in a trash barrel.

... Wait, where's the other one?



hey, let me show you a trick.



Whump.

AAAAOOOWW!!!



Now, you can recall, and we go in.

Or I can change you into something that can't interfere, like a cockroach or a bag of dirt ... and we go in.

I don't want to get you fired. Which do you think will play better with Brendan later?

I'll recall! I'll recall! Just get off me!!



I don't think I've ever seen you break out that fast.

She's not as good as she thinks. Plus she gave me warning.

She'll get stronger if she practices, and one day she'll realize she doesn't have to use stupid magic words. Then she'll actually be dangerous.

Hey, Brendan! Stop Pucking around for a second! We need to talk to you.

What the-- Who's there?

You've got no right to be in here! I'll have your ass for this!



You!

Even if you are a Barker, you can't just charge in--

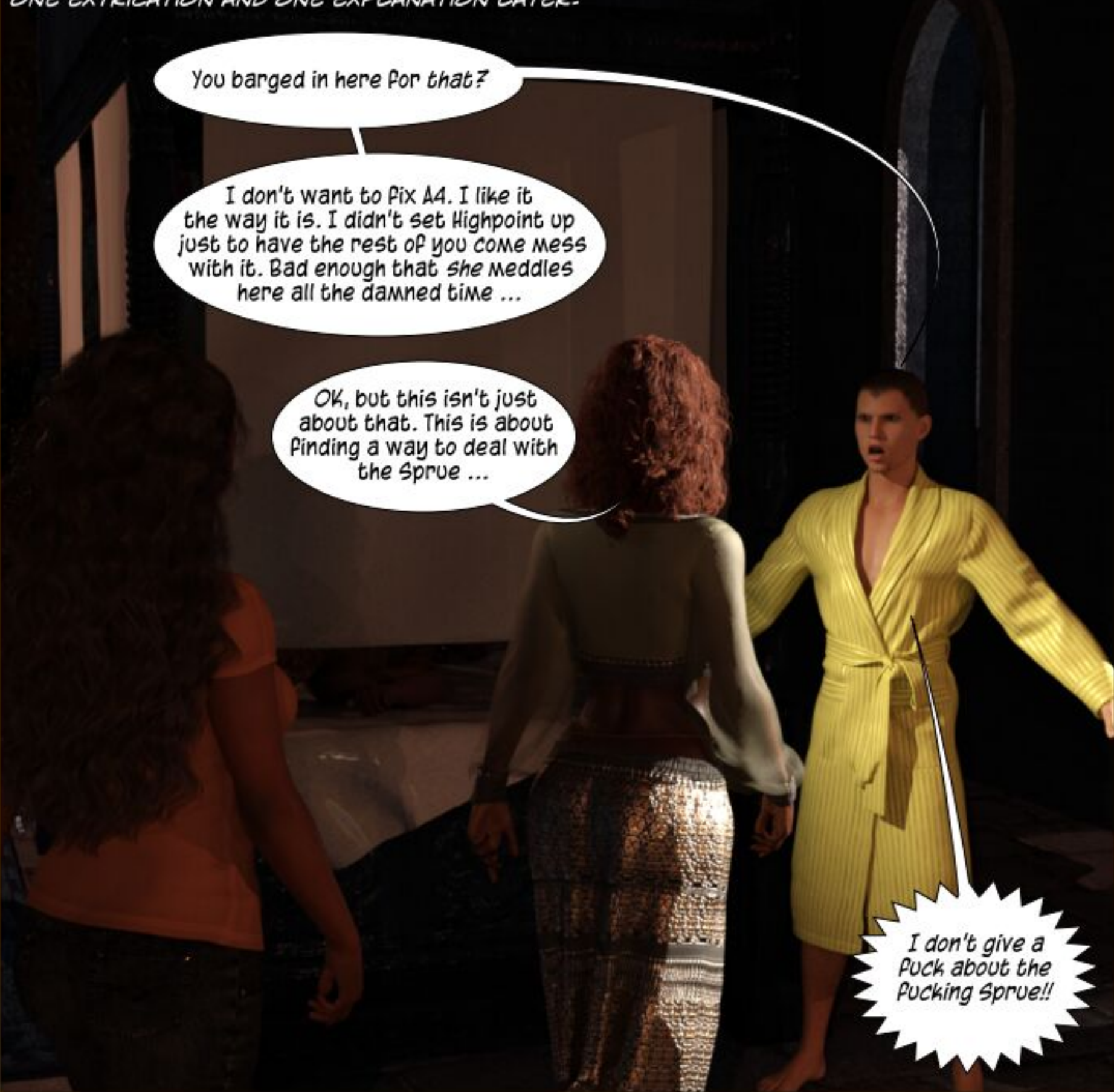
Uh, Brendan, can we--

Shut up, Alex.

This is Family business, Brendan, as you'd know if you let me tell you.

And it's important. You want me to come back with three or four other members of the Family? I can do that ...

-- Mhhh -- So to speak.



You barged in here for that?

I don't want to fix A4. I like it the way it is. I didn't set Highpoint up just to have the rest of you come mess with it. Bad enough that she meddles here all the damned time ...

OK, but this isn't just about that. This is about finding a way to deal with the Sprue ...

I don't give a Puck about the Pucking Sprue!!



Well, you should.

Because it's going to eat the whole place. Highpoint too. It won't give a shit if you're a Barker.

You can't be king of anything if all your real estate keeps dissolving. Or if all your subjects keep getting sucked into interspace. Nobody comes back from that, you know.



What I know is I have even less interest in anything you have to say than I do her.

So you can just--

She's right, though, Brendan. We've lost half of A4 and it's not slowing down.

-- Sigh --

All right, I'll show up. If only to keep all of you shitheads from doing something to me because I wasn't there.

Now get out.



That was actually a lot easier than I expected it to be. And didn't take very long.

Now we just have Josiah.

Maybe we should wait until tomorrow to think about that.

OK, but why? Plenty of day left. If we take too much longer, Mr. Sheridan's going to explode.

I do not explode.

... You don't want to do it, do you?

No, but not for the reason you think.

OK, let me lay it out.

Josiah seems to believe in privacy through accessibility, not permissions. That is, he doesn't keep his space locked, but made it hard to get to. It never did connect to any other data blocks, even before.

There were only ever four people besides him who knew how to get there, as far as I can tell. His wife Judith has been dead for many years. His brother Prentiss is off in a drifting single-block fragment himself, and we can't get to that either.

Nobody knows where his sister Ruth is right now. Pauline replied to a message about her saying she was pretty sure Ruth was in the Yards, somewhere, but even she doesn't know where her mother is for certain.

His mother Jeanne ... she's in a small set of blocks she controls, which we have no idea how to get to, and she's not answering her messages.

His children apparently never visited his personal space.

The only way I can see to get to him is to do a blind portal based on the data.

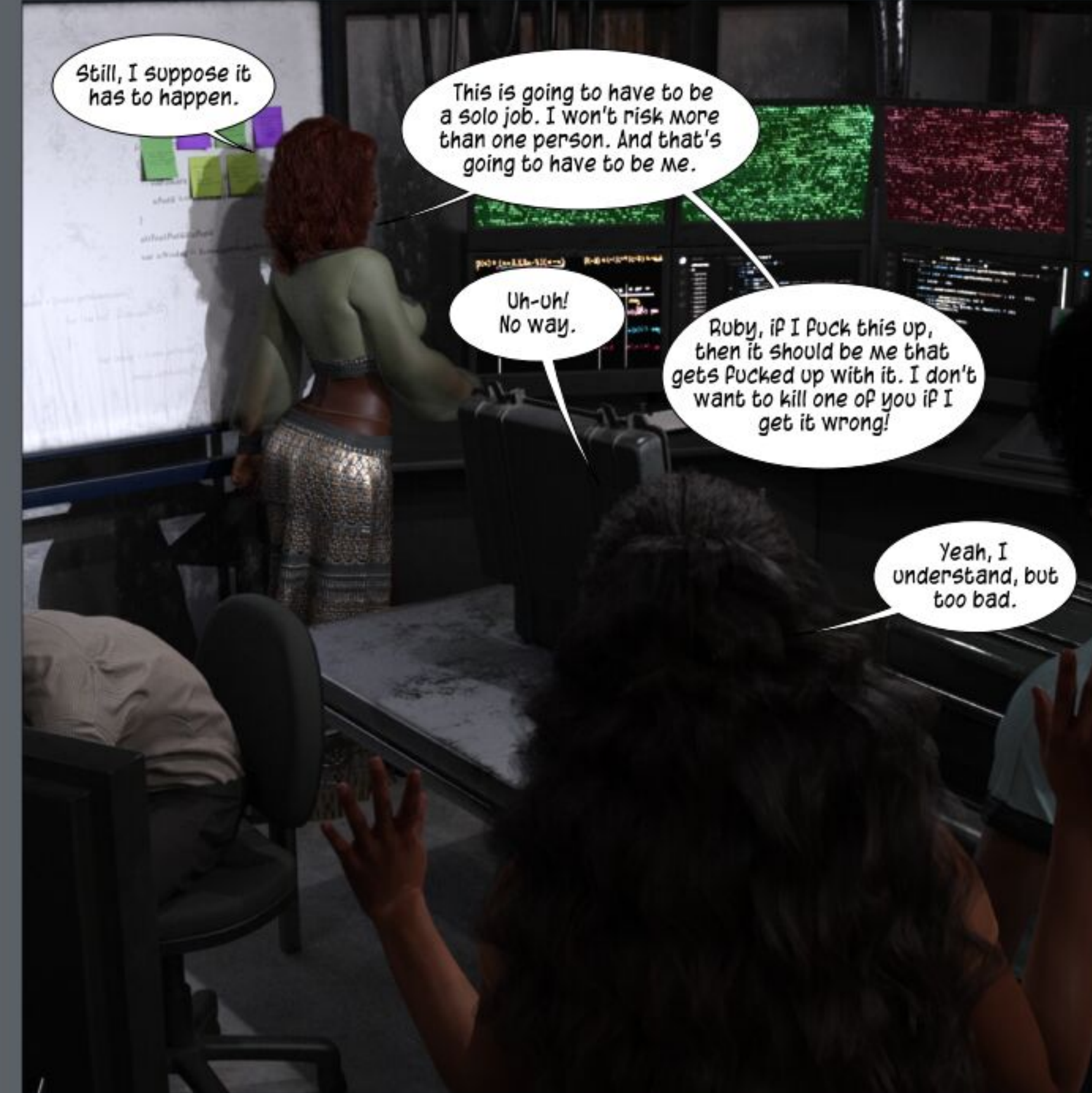
Which no one else has ever managed to do, as far as I know.

Bad?

Dangerous.

I've done it a couple of times, but it's a calculation, it's not the same as actually having been to that place ...

And if I get it wrong, the portal goes somewhere we don't want. Middle of a wall. Or interspace, more likely.



Still, I suppose it has to happen.

This is going to have to be a solo job. I won't risk more than one person. And that's going to have to be me.

Uh-uh! No way.

Ruby, if I Puck this up, then it should be me that gets Pucked up with it. I don't want to kill one of you if I get it wrong!

Yeah, I understand, but too bad.



Leyna, you're essential, like it or not. If I disappear in there, that's one thing, but if you disappear, a whole lot of stuff grinds to a halt.

Honestly, you'd be a better choice--it's more likely Josiah will talk to you than me--but you can't. You're almost the only one holding this place together.

And if goes bad slide, Ruby might be only one can get out.

All right, all right. But you'd better come back in one piece.



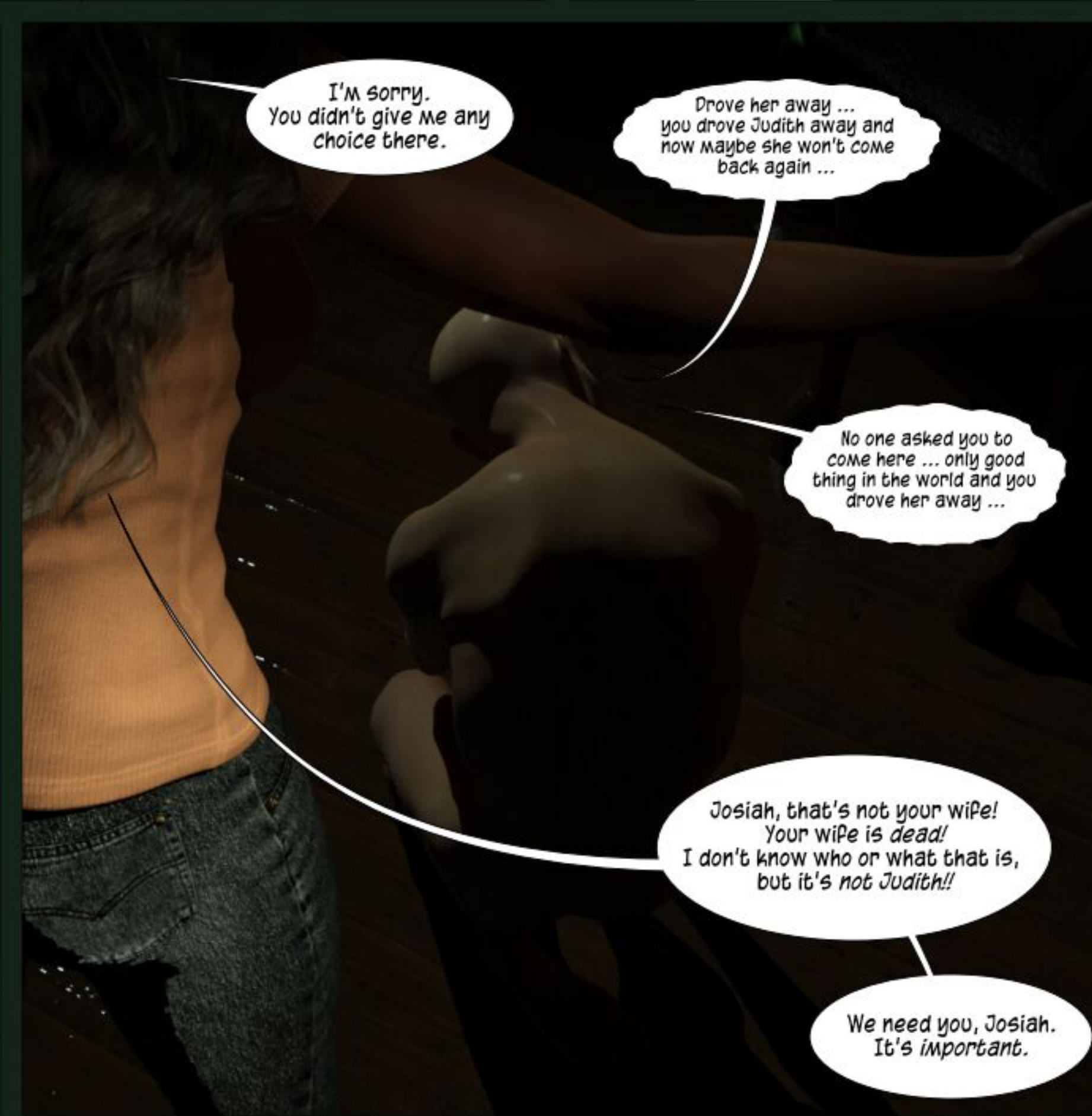
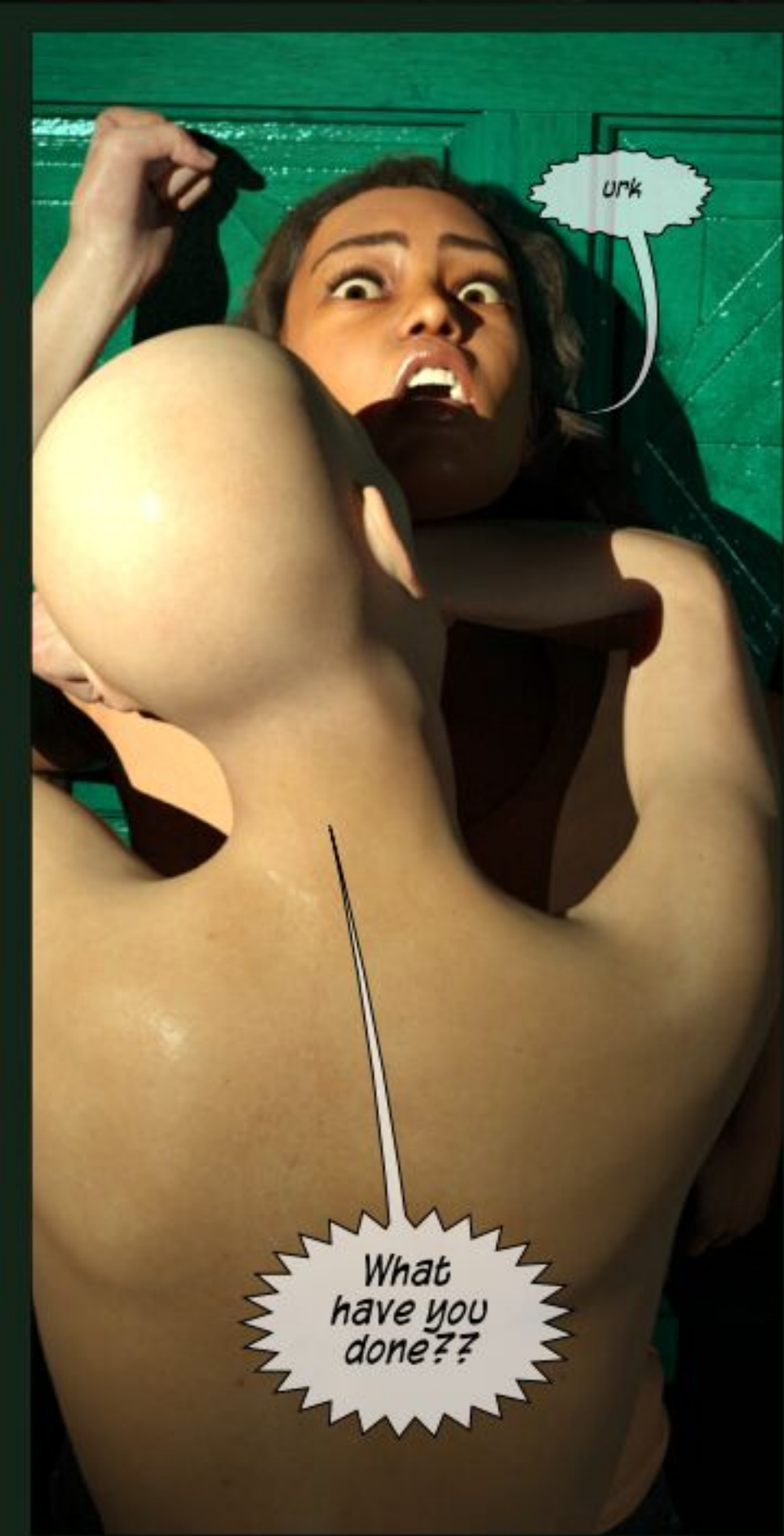
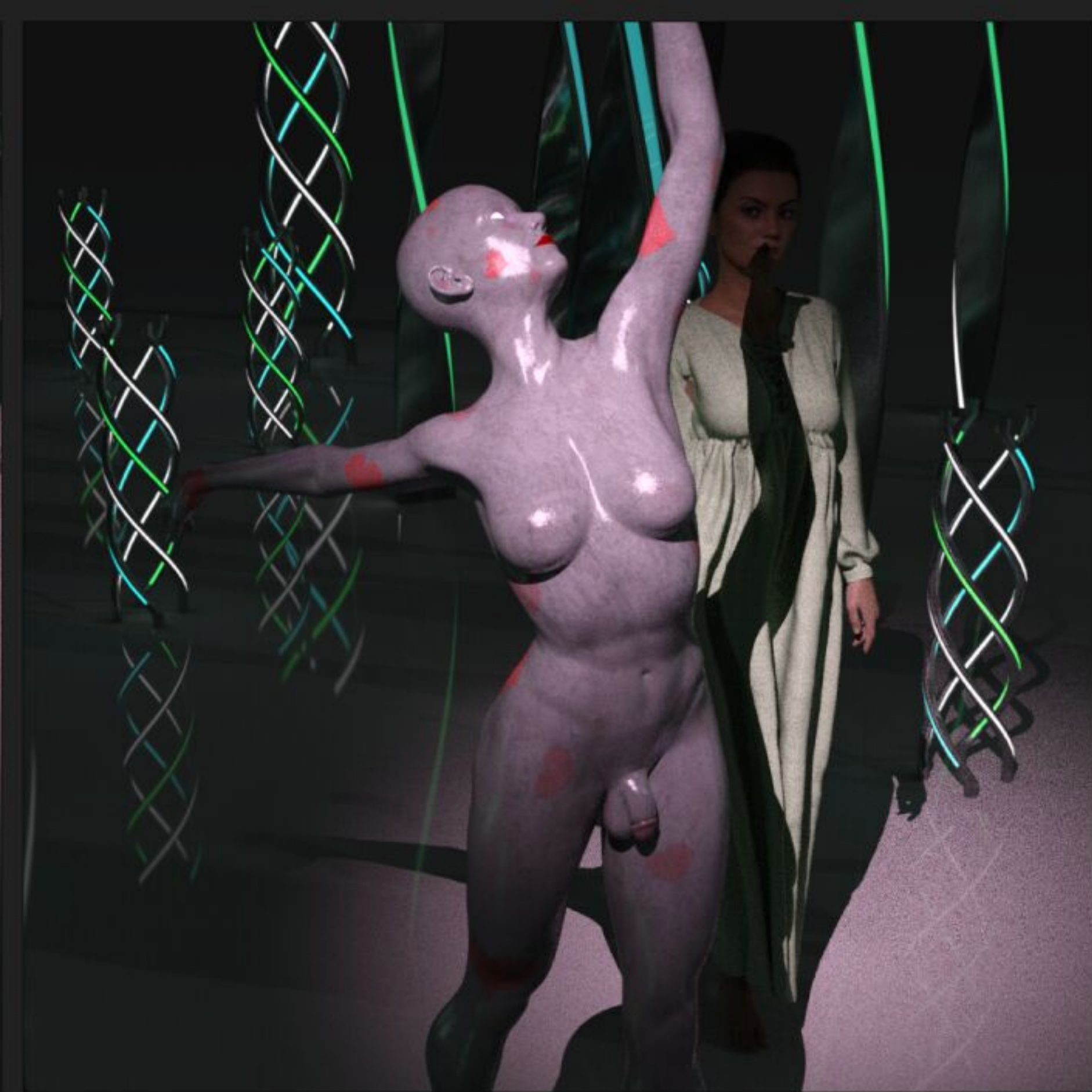
I'm not worried.

If I get stuck, I'm expecting you to invent some way to rescue me.



Well, that worked ... but ... uh ...

What are they, and what are they doing here?



urk

oooPP

What have you done???

FWENT

... Josiah?

I'm sorry. You didn't give me any choice there.

Drove her away ... you drove Judith away and now maybe she won't come back again ...

No one asked you to come here ... only good thing in the world and you drove her away ...

Josiah, that's not your wife! Your wife is dead! I don't know who or what that is, but it's not Judith!!

We need you, Josiah. It's important.



Nothing is important!
Nothing!
There's nothing without her!
You don't understand!

I don't care if she's a ghost!
I don't care if she's a monster!
I don't care about anything but her!!



Do you care about A4?

Whether it survives?

Because that's what this is about.



... yes.

I suppose I still do.



What is it you want exactly? Am I needed to meet with the others?

Very well. I'll resume checking messages. Just tell me when and where to show up.

Actually ... Josiah ...

I don't think you should stay here.

Why don't you come with me?



You drive my wife away and want to drive me out of my home too?

It's not like that. First off, I don't think it's safe here. I have no idea what's kept the Sprue from eating it for this long.

But mostly ... I just don't think it's good for you to sit here in the dark with your ghosts.

... you may have a point.



They're not my ghosts, though. Except for Judith. I don't recognize any of them.

And they never speak, so I can't ask.

How long have they been here? When did it start?

Oh, I couldn't say. I stopped keeping track of time years back.

Josiah ... do you have anywhere to go? We're not sure where Ruth is, Pauline's very difficult to get, and Brendan or Prentiss ... well.

Do you need a place to stay?

I appreciate the offer, but I'll find somewhere until the meeting.

Perhaps I'll call on my daughter. That should startle her.



... no, I've never heard of anything like that. They were all over the place?

Everywhere. Just sort of wandering around.

I mean, I don't think they could be actual ghosts ...

Oh, I hope not! I know all things are possible in this place, but we've got to have some limits ...

Anyway, it just didn't seem like a good idea for Josiah to stay there. He's going to find somewhere else to wait until the meeting. After that ... I mean, we can't stop him.



Well, now that everyone's found, the meeting's going to be as soon as possible.

I don't think we can manage it today, but it'll probably be tomorrow morning.

Where are you off to?

Home. I was in the middle of redoing my personal space when all this came up.

I want to get back to that. And maybe some solid sleep, y'know?

I don't think I'd be welcome at a Barker meeting anyhow. I know you'll keep me informed.



LATE THAT NIGHT.

Now who on earth ...



Gina?

Sorry to come unexpectedly ...

This guy needs to talk to Leyna, and I don't know where she is right now.

Well, I can't invite you in. I kind of don't have a house at the moment.

I guess it's pretty important?



This is Johan Morell. He knows things about the Sprue.

I'm sorry I didn't speak up sooner.

...

Let me put some pants on and then we'll go find someplace to talk.

NEXT: ALL LABOARD ... FOR A TRIP SOMEWHERE YOU MIGHT NOT BE EXPECTING.