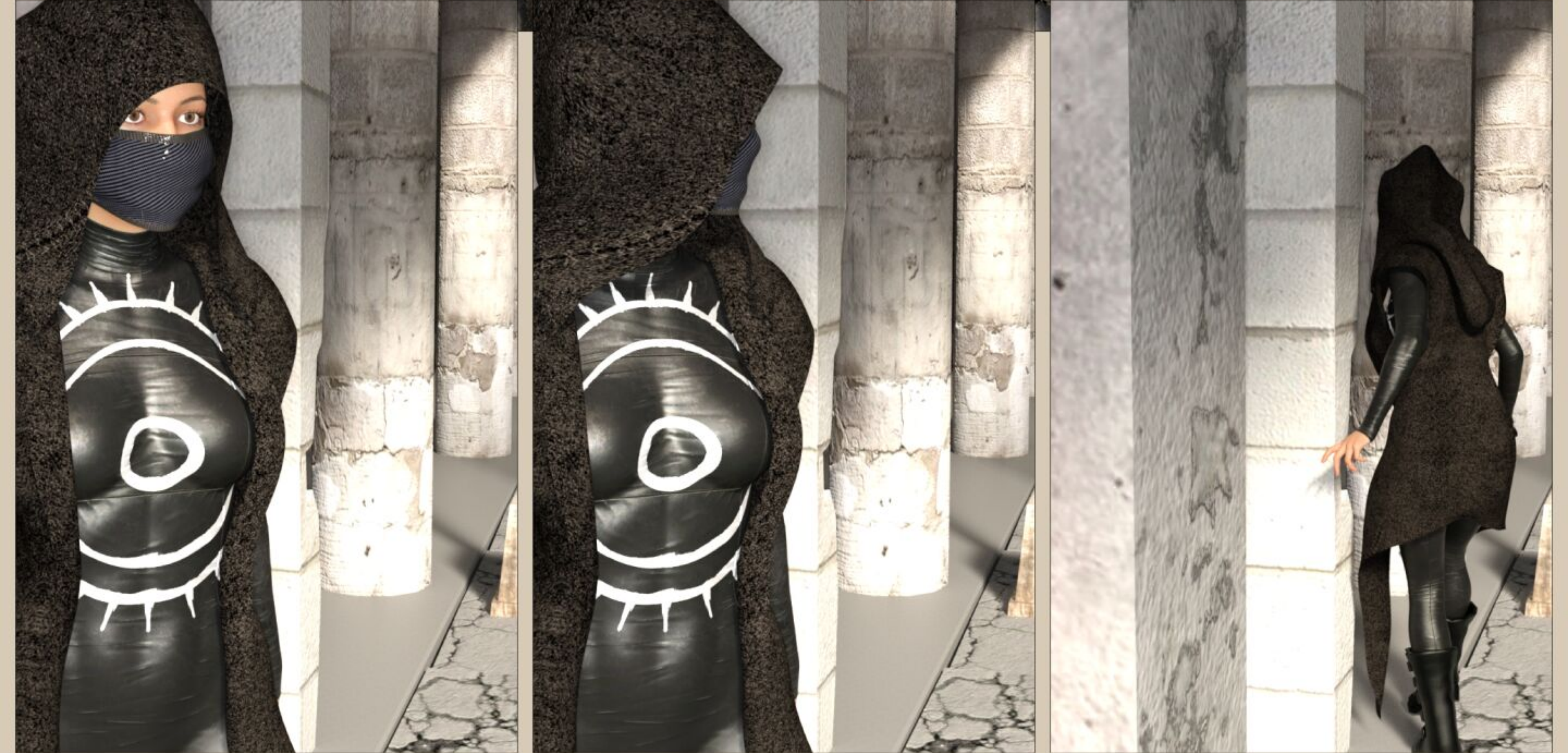


SLEEPER SQUAD

THE AWAKE WORLD,
SUCH AS IT IS.
IF YOU DON'T
REMEMBER WHO
THESE PEOPLE ARE,
ESPECIALLY THIS ONE
WITH THE BAT, HAVE
PATIENCE.



EYES SHUT WIDE
STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



You know, that didn't even occur to me! I forgot you'd never seen her!

Under the circumstances, I'm surprised you were willing to go with her ...

Well, she very clearly knew who I was, and she'd managed to get there ...

It was obvious that one of you had sent her, once I got over ... ah ... the initial shock.

Besides, she was right. I needed to get out of there. I haven't decided whether to go back.

You know, Mr. Sheridan, I'd love to hear what some of the other centers are like. Have you been to all of them?

No, no. Just A1 through A5, counting this trip. And I haven't been back to A1 since leaving it; the transatlantic voyage is very difficult to arrange.

They wanted to send me to A7 two years ago, but I don't speak any Japanese.

Not just sulking, but sitting as far from one another as they possibly can ... and everyone says I'm the one with an exaggerated sense of drama ...

Do you think Josiah looks ... Uh ... tired?

Why, Zeke! Don't tell me you're worried ...

I'm allowed to be, aren't I? I mean, he's not really my grandfather, but it feels like it.

He probably changed to look more like his actual appearance.

Yeah. That's why I'm worried.

Don't be. I'm betting on him outliving us all.



Mr. Sheridan, I owe you an apology.

I stepped away from active management of A4 for an extended period. I didn't expect that would mean no one else here would communicate.

Ah, well. It seems I would have likely had to come out to consult in person anyway, given the problems you're having.

You should send Aldwen Barker a message, though. He'll be relieved to hear you're all right.

You know, I didn't get to ask the other day ... you've changed your look a lot ... can I know about it? Or is it too personal?

You were hard to recognize too! I'd never seen you with short hair.

It's not too personal, but it's also not all that fascinating. You've seen me Awake; you know I wasn't born female.

For years I thought the best approach was to try to look a lot like my real body. It felt more honest, I guess.

But one day I just thought, "You know, I'm not looking the way I really want to look, and there's no reason I can't look that way, so why am I sticking with an appearance I'm not happy with?"



Hello, everyone! Sorry we're running behind.

Lucius!

How are you doing? We haven't seen you since ... ah, before ...

I'm getting there, thanks. It's been a long recovery.

A lot of days I still don't feel like I'm myself.

... But we should probably get started.



No, Serene.

You sit at the head of the table today.

Oh, Josiah ... I don't want to take your spot ...

You're the only shareholder who's tried to do a thing to keep A4 from falling apart for the last few years. Even this meeting is only happening because of you. As far as I'm concerned, you're leading it.



Now wait just a minute! If you're going to abdicate on seniority then let's go by number of shares, and I'm the one who gets to run the meeting.

I didn't come here to listen to her tell me what to do. She tries to do that enough as it is.

Yes, yes, you have the most shares. I know. I gave them to you. And what have you done with them lately?

I'll bear responsibility for disappearing for so long. But I also thought you could do better than this.

Do you know how it feels to find out, not just that A4 has been falling to pieces in my absence, but that my son has done absolutely nothing about it? That he's spent the last three years hiding in a zone playing king for the *droit du seigneur*?

Let the people be in charge who actually care to run the damned place, will you?



Fine. But I don't want this chair anymore.

Are you six years old, Brendan?



Well, I'm happy to sit here.

Kiss-up.

Winning friends and influencing people as usual, huh, Brendan?

-- ahem -- Perhaps we could get started?



I'm told you're all up to speed on the Sprue at this point--what little we know about it, at least.

Eliminating it and repairing the damage it's done is going to require drastic measures, including possibly rebooting A4, if that turns out to be useful--

"If it turns out to be useful?"

I know rebooting is a last resort, but I also thought we knew it would fix the problem?



Would you like to take this part?

Oh ... well ...

We think there's a pretty good chance that the Sprue is an autonomous process. So, ah, we reboot, restore some data, start A4 back up ... and the Sprue starts back up too and just starts eating data again.

A reboot might not clean it out of the system. We're not sure yet what will.

Then why the hell are we here?

To give permission.



I'm not clear that I want to give blanket permission for anything you might try, especially not if it's something destructive that might not actually help.

Asking for specifics would be a different matter, of course.



Well, but you agree it's necessary to get A4's data reunified at any cost ...

Hold on, hold on! I do not agree. I refuse to reunify my data.

But, Brendan ...

Uh-uh. That's the main reason I came today, I knew one of you would try something like that. You're desperate to get your fingers all over my zone so you can make it the same crap as Serenity.

I like having my zone that I can run my way. I like having to portal there; keeps the trash out. You don't like it, too bad. We're not going back.



Seems to me like that's something we need to settle first.

Who doesn't want their zone to be reunified? This is an actual vote.

I'm ... uh ... iPPy.

Me, obviously.

Me.

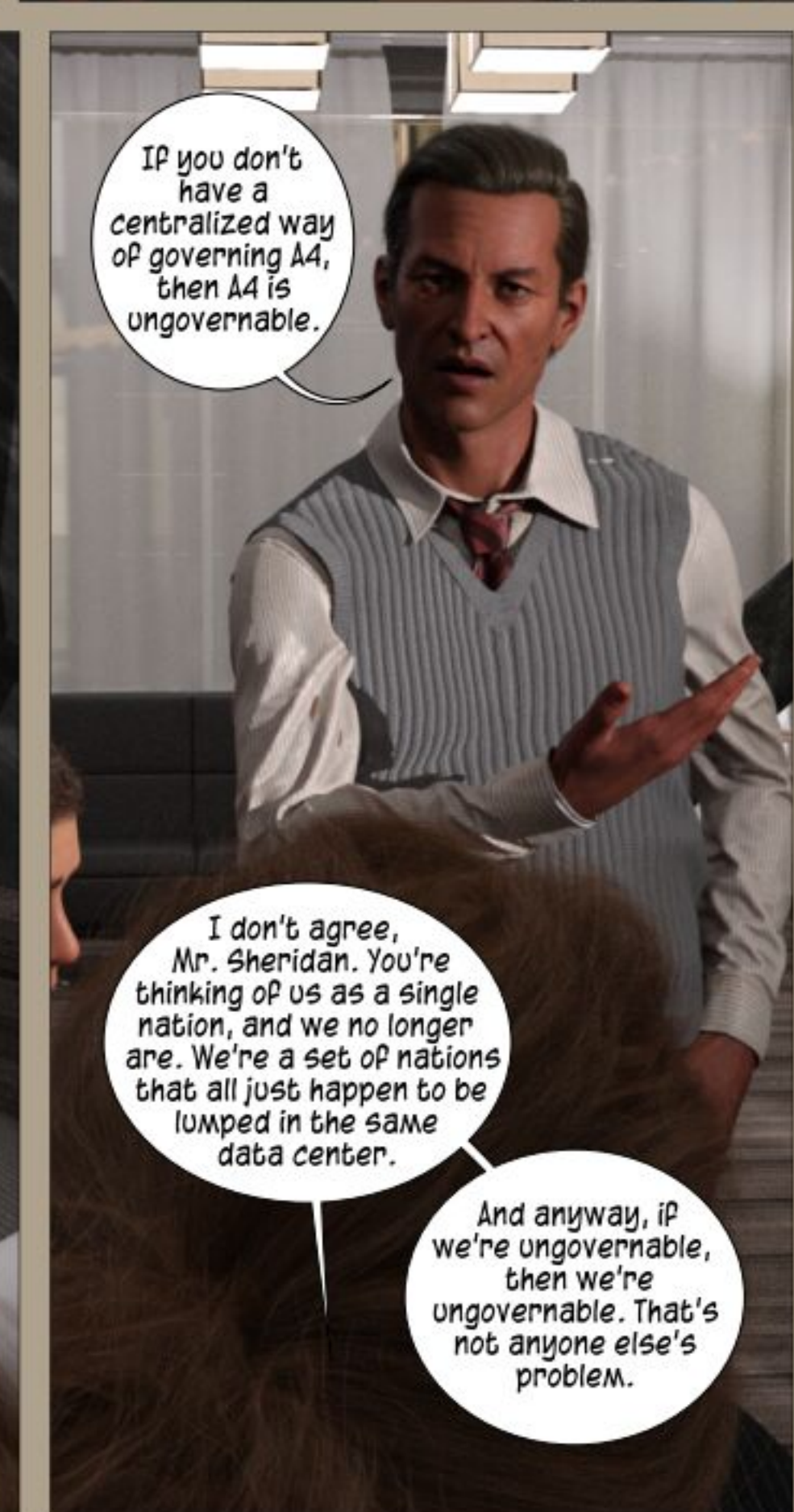
Me.



Pauline??

Sorry, Serene. I wouldn't put it the way he does, but I like having a zone I can operate my way. Most of the people who live in the Yards live there because it's not like the other zones.

And it's not like we're putting walls up. People can go back and forth.



If you don't have a centralized way of governing A4, then A4 is ungovernable.

I don't agree, Mr. Sheridan. You're thinking of us as a single nation, and we no longer are. We're a set of nations that all just happen to be lumped in the same data center.

And anyway, if we're ungovernable, then we're ungovernable. That's not anyone else's problem.



OK, but we've got to unite at least enough to fix the Sprue, or there won't be any zones to govern.

Agreed, but you haven't offered a method yet for how to fix it. We can't unite around something that doesn't yet exist--

Good morning, Polks!

Sorry to barge in, but I'm afraid I need to muddy the waters. Or clear them. Not sure which just yet.



You don't have any business being here ...

I bring crucial data, Brendan, so hush up.

This gent is Johan Morell. He's got an important story to tell you all.



Go ahead. Tell them just like you told me.

You're sure this is the right way to go?

Well, you can tell them all at once, or you can tell them each separately. This seems a lot easier.

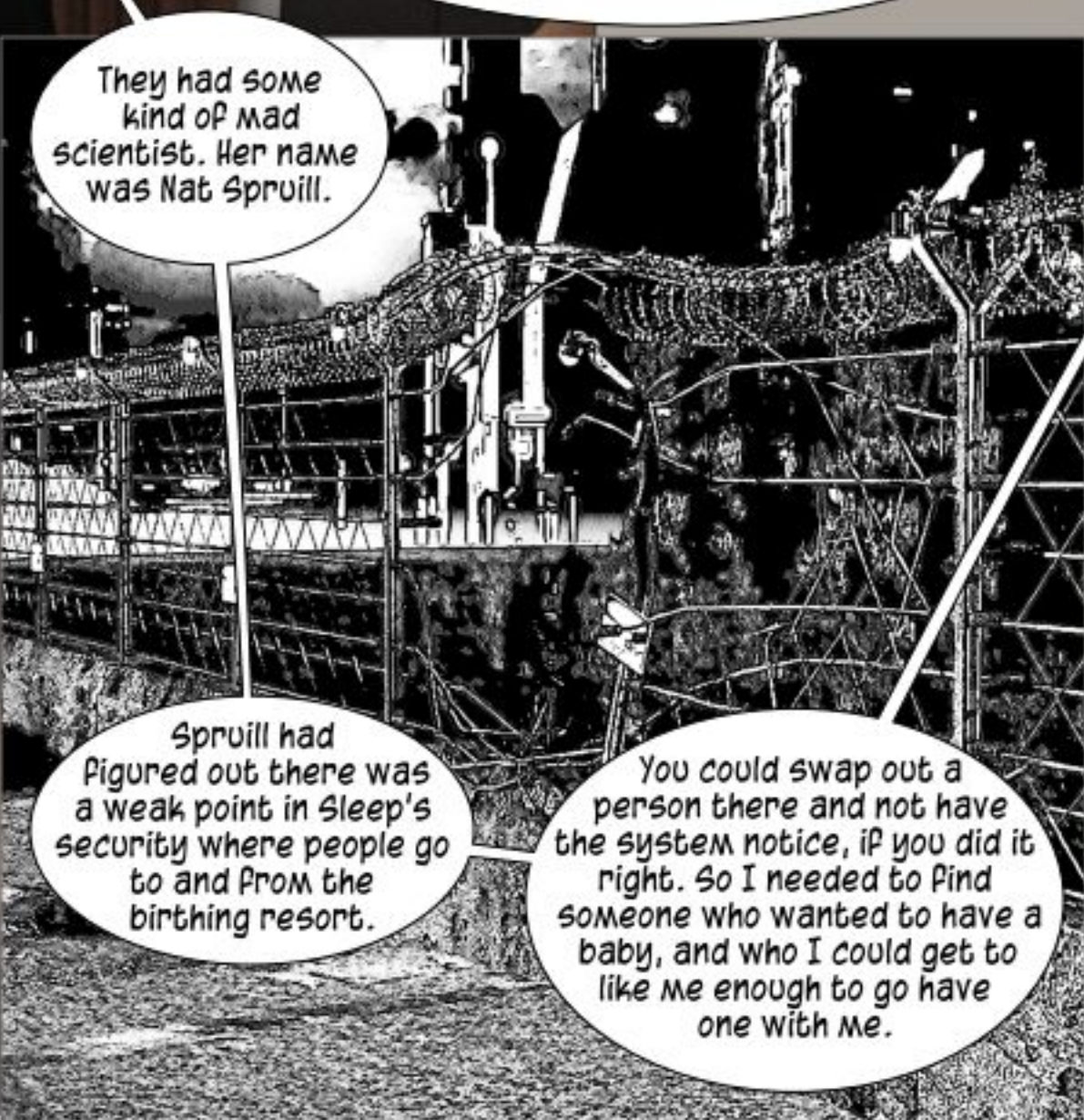


OK, well ... The Wide-Eyes took me in when I was eight.

Even as a kid, I knew some of them wanted to get rid of Sleep, but I didn't think about that. They fed me and gave me a safe place to live, and that's all I cared about.

About ten years ago, they asked me to come live in Sleep and send them messages about what was going on in here. A spy, I guess. But they didn't put it that way.

That was it for a long time. Every so often I sent a report, and they never asked for anything else. Until about, uh, six months before the Sprue. They had found a way to destroy Sleep, they said, and they needed my help.



They had some kind of mad scientist. Her name was Nat Spruill.

Spruill had figured out there was a weak point in Sleep's security where people go to and from the birthing resort.

You could swap out a person there and not have the system notice, if you did it right. So I needed to find someone who wanted to have a baby, and who I could get to like me enough to go have one with me.



I worked on my relationship with Jolee for months. That was her name, Jolee Madison. I started to have doubts, because she was really a sweet person, and it felt pretty cold to do that to her.

It didn't help when her replacement switched in and she was ... uh ... well ... I didn't know what to make of her.

She didn't seem happy about the sex, and I gave her a chance to opt out, but she didn't take it. She said it might look suspicious if I didn't get her pregnant.

THE TWO SCENES ABOVE TAKE PLACE IN ISSUE #27. THE ONE BELOW IS FROM #28.



She was ... very driven. I guess she'd have had to be.

She said Spruill had done something to her brain, that she was like a bomb ... When it activated, something would happen in her mind that would destroy Sleep.

I found that hard to believe, but what I mostly thought about was that she wasn't sure she'd survive it, and she didn't care.

She was going to do whatever she had to do to destroy Sleep. Have sex with somebody she didn't like. Get pregnant. Die.

I asked her why she wanted it so badly. I remember her answer word-for-word.



Everybody I cared about went into Sleep.

There was ... she and I ... I thought we were going to be forever ...

She went in here and never came back. I never heard from her again. I don't even know where to look for her. She threw me away. My parents ... my sister ... they all came in here to hide from everything and turned their backs on everything they had.

Sleep is destroying the world and it needs to die.

You're supposed to be one of us. You're supposed to be just as invested.

I just don't think it's that simple, is all.

I'm not sure that Sleep made the Awake world what it is, and I'm not sure destroying Sleep will fix it.



And that's when she zapped me.

I don't know what she did, but I woke up floating face down in my pool and it was days later.

And by then the Sprue had happened.

She knew I'd have tried to stop her, so she got me out of the way.



"Nat Spruill," huh?

I figured you'd catch that in a hurry, Monica.

I'm just thinking about how much it must piss Nat off to have to use her father's name.

Of course, it's Nat. She may think she's making some kind of point.

She usually does.

Anyway, we already knew she was using that name with the Wide-Eyes. Even Nat's not crazy enough to let them know she's a Barker.



We really should eliminate the birthing resort here. A2 did years ago.

The last generation that felt indirect insemination was "unnatural" has died off now ...

Not entirely, they haven't, Mr. Sheridan!



Why didn't you come out with any of this sooner?

It's been more than three years and you're just now deciding to tell anybody?

I didn't think it was still a problem!

I figured, OK, Spruill's thing didn't work, there was a little damage but Sleep's fine, nothing to see here ...

I didn't know it was still eating the place until I overheard two of you talking about it in a public space the other day.*

Also ... I didn't want you to throw me out. I like Sleep. I think the Wide-Eyes have it wrong. I don't want to go back.

* SPECIFICALLY, LEYNA AND LON SHERIDAN. YOU CAN FIND IT IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE.



All right, so the Sprue is an entity. A human in a bed. We find that bed and interrupt her.

She never told me her real name. I called her Jolee even after the switch.

That doesn't matter. The bed will be registered to Jolee Madison, no matter who's actually in it.

Our bed ownership data is a mess too. It could take a long time to find.

More importantly, I'm worried that if her mind is somehow entwined with our data, then pulling the plug on her could cause structural damage to A4 that could require not just a wipe, but take weeks to repair.

Well, damn it, you don't leave any options! You're not going to be able to do this without running the risk of damaging something!



Now you've done it, Leyna. You've gotten Mr. Sheridan so annoyed he actually said a bad word.

Hmph.

The only remaining idea I have is to go out, find this Nat, and make her come in here and repair it, since she seems to be some sort of genius.

We tried that once before. She told us to go to hell.

I wasn't suggesting you give her a choice.



Even if we drag her in here kicking and screaming, we can't make her fix it.

And she's very stubborn.

Yes, I'd imagine it's genetic.

Still, you'd have a much better negotiating position with her if she were here, don't you agree?

-- sigh --



... So I guess we're going to have to try to get the Wide-Eyes to take us in again, just so we can get to Nat ... How we get her out is another--

Han't work tho, Ruby!

Eyes an't like were when. Gone big skel now. Wan't let you in. Shoot you maybe.

Now, come on ... I know they got a lot more reclusive, they were like that last time we went out* ...

* ISSUE #21, WHICH IS WHEN RUBY AND LEYNA WENT OUT TO FIND NAT THE FIRST TIME.



Han't ever ask bout why came in Sleep first place.

No. I figured you'd tell me about it when you were ready to. I'd guessed that something bad had happened ...

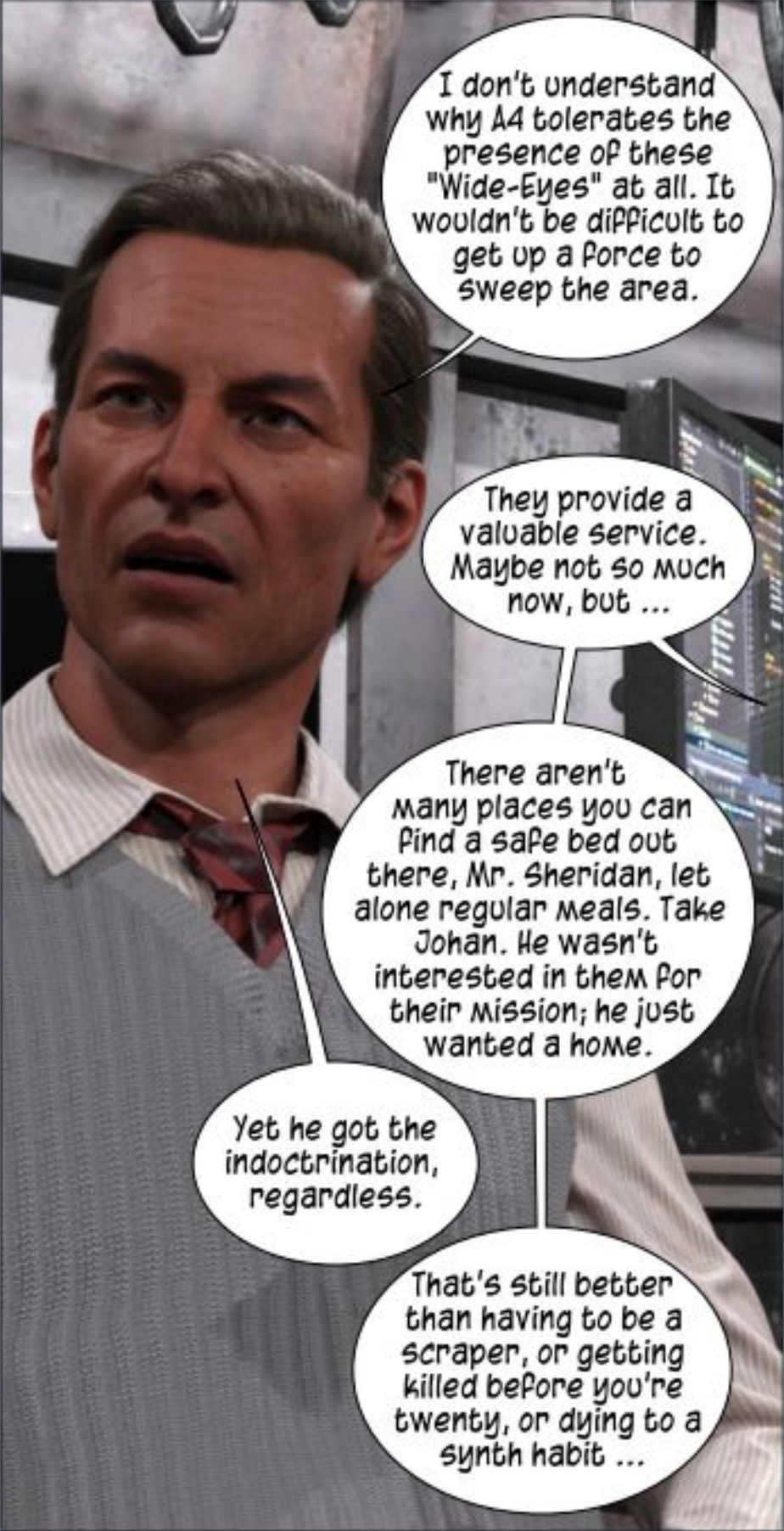
Eyes lockin up spack. They figure han't get Poed, got to join them or starve ... Some us doin pulls, sneak in, bag spack, get Polk Ped.

Eyes Pound us on pull. Han't grab us, han't tell us get out ... just rightup shoot.

Teel dead, Daca dead ... I got hit but an't know ... passed out, woke up some else with bullet hole one side ... some han't Pound me, be dead too.

That's how Eyes run now.

JEX IS TALKING ABOUT EVENTS IN ISSUE #30.



I don't understand why A4 tolerates the presence of these "Wide-Eyes" at all. It wouldn't be difficult to get up a force to sweep the area.

They provide a valuable service. Maybe not so much now, but ...

There aren't many places you can find a safe bed out there, Mr. Sheridan, let alone regular meals. Take Johan. He wasn't interested in them for their mission; he just wanted a home.

Yet he got the indoctrination, regardless.

That's still better than having to be a scraper, or getting killed before you're twenty, or dying to a synch habit ...



I don't know what to do now. I believe you, Jex, but that makes this so much harder. And it wasn't going to be easy before.

Now it's going to be super-dangerous. I almost Peel like I should go by myself, just to keep the risk down ...



No indeed! Have you lost your mind?

Having it be more dangerous means you need backup more, not less.

But, Leyna ... Look, I don't want to sound like I'm giving you grief, but you know the problem ...



You want me go with, but you han't want ask.

Yeah. I'm sorry.

I mean, you were just telling me what you escaped from. I don't want to throw you back into that again.

But it really needs to be someone else who's spent time Awake ... Leyna is way out of her depth out there ... sorry, Leyna ...

No, it's true.

... and I don't know anyone else besides you who qualifies.

I spend a great deal of time Awake. And I'm not intimidated by cultists.



I appreciate your volunteering. I really do. That's above and beyond the call of duty.

But ... I think we wouldn't have compatible methods. Let's be polite and leave it there.

I don't understand what you mean. I've never had any trouble Awake that I couldn't handle.

And I'm betting you handle it with a gun.

Your point? Am I supposed to wring my hands over a few dead scavengers and addicts?

Maybe, maybe not ... but you've just found my point. We're not going in that way. No matter who I go with.

Some scrapers good Polk! An't their fault got to scrape.

Walk round look money like that, might jag you too.

Should just asked, Ruby. Kind hazzed you han't trust more.

Big slide, got Pix it any way can. I'm in.

Long's he an't come.



AND HERE WE ARE.

Thanks so much, Sue. Sorry about that, Jex; I forgot I didn't know which prep room you'd be in. This is SU3. She helps us a lot.

I was going to ask if you needed to dig through the leavings room, but I see you found something. Are those the clothes you wore in?

Yeah. How I look?

Filthy. Perfect.

And we both managed to get our pants on over the diapers, so there's that.

WASTE UNITS.

SLEEP BEDS DESTROY YOUR BLADDER AND BOWEL CONTROL. SEE #21 OR #27 FOR DISCUSSION OF THIS.



SHALL I RAISE AN ALARM IF YOU'RE NOT BACK SAFELY WITHIN AN AMOUNT OF TIME?

That's a lovely thought, but I wouldn't be able to tell you what that amount is. We could be out two days, or it could be two weeks.

And if we're out any longer than that, then Leyna will probably be sending out everyone she can find anyway.



Last time, we left the Wide-Eyes complex by a hidden back way. We might be able to get in there ...

Mwmm.

Are you still pissed off about Sheridan?

... yeah.

I don't think he's a monster. He just thinks like a Barker. To him, anybody out here isn't important, because they're out here.

I worry sometimes that--

BANG BANG

Shit. Grab cover!

That's a new thing for them, right?

Yeah.

Where the hell did they find that truck? And what are they running it on? Spit?

Ruby, got get them out!

OK, then haul.



Movin!!

Slow as hell though.

Jump onto the back!

Big rosh.



Oyo! Here to get you out.

Damn. These need a screwdriver to pop open.

... Think you can jump and roll OK even with all that on?

Shit yeah.



Han't say you gon pull cho shit ...

Well, if they'd gotten away we'd have lost our chance. And better to jump than have to fight them when they get wherever.

But we need to keep hauling. Soon they'll figure out there's nobody in the back and they'll turn around.

You know the place better, Jex. Where should we go?



Jex?

Shit, it is. Where you been?

Caryn! Han't get look at you before.

Too long tell now. Later.

This is Ruby. Got business. Big push.

Push on Eyes, Fine with me.

Oyo, Ruby. Shir and Abe there. Long one's Abe.

Nice to meet you.



Thinkin Low Drive--got Polk there bust those ...

Low Drive han't none more.

Eyes went Low Drive while back, rightup trashed it. None there now. All gone some else.

Well, shit. Where else we got?

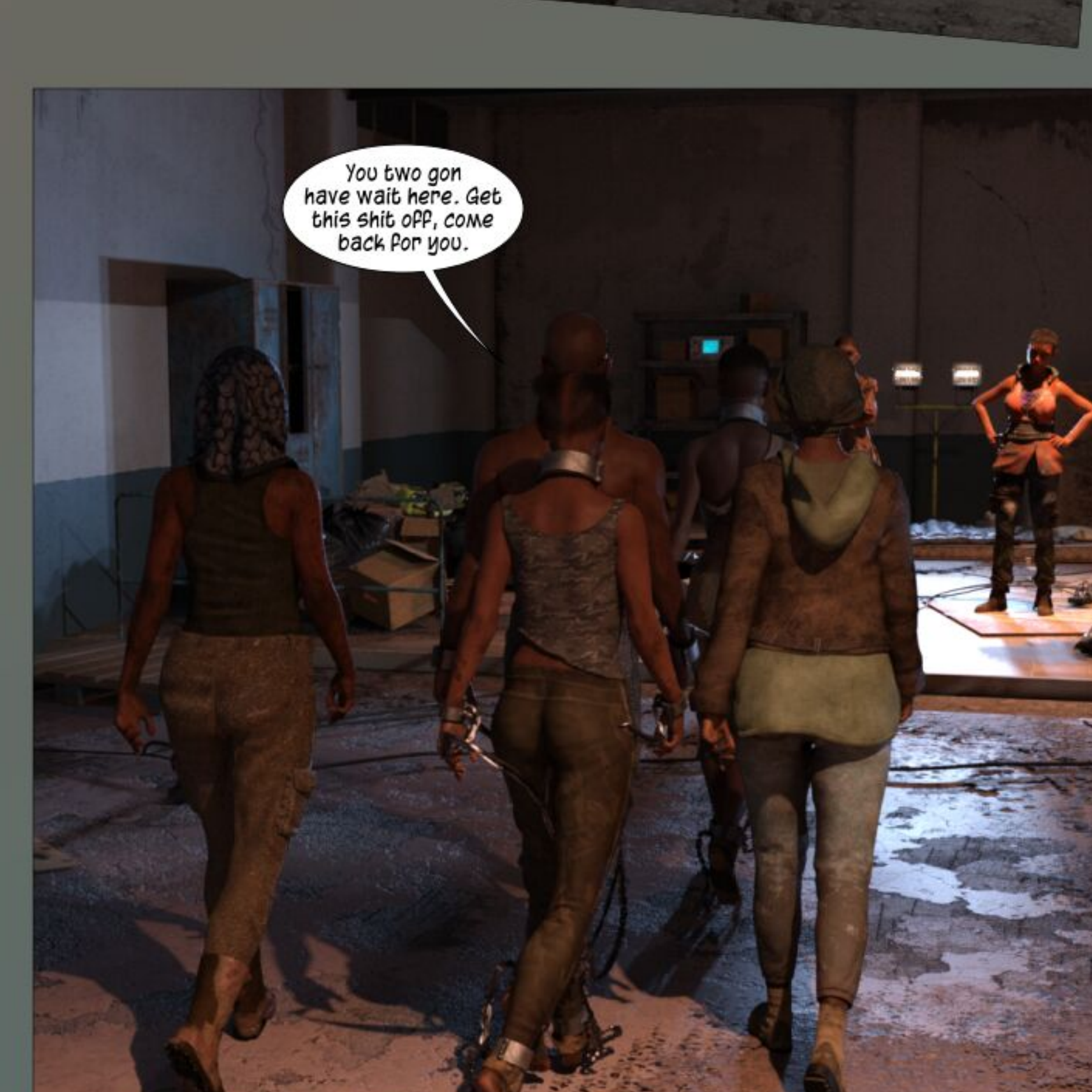
We know place. Come on.



Any Eyes on way, you two got drop em.

Han't let them see where goin, and han't push in this shit.

K.



MONICA BARKER'S PERSONAL SPACE, CENTURY.



... no, nothing quite like this.

The situation here, it seems to me, was brought about by a unique combination of political fracture and revoking the bed fees.

A1 and A3 have both experimented with revoking some fees, and A2 has had such disagreements among Barkers that there was civil war for a few years, but nowhere else has both.

Not that some of the other centers don't have quirks. I'm told that in A7 they have a whole area for people to indulge in ... escapist behaviors. They call it their theme park.

So it's a lot like Century.

Or the Yards.

Hmm, I suppose so ... though I think it's considerably more ... well-contained.



I suppose it must surprise you that we know so little about the other centers.

It did at first, but then I realized that was just the result of your history.

What do you mean?



Well, as I understand it, Malachi Barker wasn't on speaking terms with the rest of his family when he began A4.

He wanted nothing to do with A1 or A2 at the time, so it isn't surprising that he passed on a certain amount of, ah, isolationism to his offspring.



Wait, are you telling me that A4 was schismatic?

As was A3.

The original plan was to open a second North American center on the west coast, and only fill in smaller markets between them later. The west coast center ended up being A5.

You were never taught any of this?

No. I guess Malachi didn't want to tell his kids about it. Or maybe Joseph didn't. Grand-dad was a real piece of work. Josiah probably knew. He'd have gone to dig out the facts for himself.

And she's on the side of the family that's always cared about that kind of thing.

I don't remember ever hearing any family history from my mother. Then again, she wasn't on good terms with her dad or her aunt, and everybody else was dead by then.



We've been sloppy here, haven't we? I think Josiah is the only one who ever really cared about the history ... or communicating with the other centers ...

So bad they had to send a troubleshooter ...

You could be much worse. At least you had Josiah. And he didn't break the ground; his father reestablished contact and mended fences to a degree. So while Joseph Barker may not have wanted to tell his children about it, he did know the history.

There was no one like that in A3, and reestablishing ourselves with them didn't happen until much later. Our generation.

Incidentally, I wouldn't characterize myself as a troubleshooter.

How do you describe your job, then?

More like an envoy.



Well, I had better get going. I have some things I need to get back to in the Yards.

But I'll stay on call for further news.

It was a pleasure talking with you, Mr. Sheridan.

Likewise.

I'll see you out, Pauline.



You know, you should come spend some time in the Yards.

Oh, I don't know ... that might not be for me ...

Well, that's the thing ... you can't really tell unless you plunge into it.

But I think it might do you some good.

You think I need to get out more.

Well ... yes, but that wasn't exactly where I was going ...



Honestly? You need to see more people.

I know it's been hard ... but I also don't like seeing you spend all your time by yourself ... sorry to be blunt ...

No, no, you're right.

... Actually, I was just thinking about that.



I should probably be going as well.

You could stay a while longer if you liked.

You could even stay the night.

A proposition, Ms. Barker?

Well, you're an attractive man, Mr. Sheridan, and ... ah ...

... yes. Yes, it is.



I don't want you to think I'm not flattered, Ms. Barker, because I am. I appreciate the offer.

But I work for the Barker family. All of the Barker family, as far as I'm concerned.

And I maintain a strict policy of not sleeping with my employers.

Good evening.



... well, it was worth a try.



What happened was, some Folks caught on about what Striver and that Nat Spruill were doing, and they got Mighty upset.

Only some of the Wide-Eyes were all about doing away with Sleep. The rest just wanted a good place to live. I told you that before, didn't I? Last time you were out here.

Well, when they found out about the Spruill business, there was a big fight. Spruill got the hell out to save her ass--both sides were pissed at her. The ones who just wanted to make a home, they tried to throw the others out of power. Didn't work, so they left. Including me.

Took all the tech we could haul. I got all my seed banks out.

I ended up being in charge of this place. Not sure how that happened. Guess nobody else wanted to do it.

We call it Haven.



We're almost self-sufficient on food! We still depend on two spack pumps we control, but in another year we won't.

That's if we can keep the Wide-Eyes out.

We've enclosed a safe space, and they know it, and they keep trying to find it so they can wreck us.

That ... doesn't sound like them.

Eyes right up skel now. All good ones gone.

Caryn's right. While we're trying to learn food and medicine, they're making guns and ammo. They can't destroy Sleep, so they're trying to destroy anybody they can't force into joining them.



You say Nat left the Wide-Eyes? That complicates things.

Oh, goodness, are you out here looking for her again?

Afraid so. Last time, she wouldn't help. This time I'm told to drag her back if I have to. She didn't destroy Sleep, but she broke it bad, and she might be the only one who can fix it.

I'm happy to not have to infiltrate the Wide-Eyes ... but now she could be anywhere.



Yes, indeed ... and I don't have a clue to tell you where to look, or even where to start.

That's if she's even alive. It's been near four years and I haven't heard that anyone's seen her.

Can offer you a bed, though. Got plenty of those. Sun's going down soon and you don't want to be looking around after dark.

Pleased to accept.



Got Presh jug stiv my room. Good batch. Want in?



--Whoo-- Def good batch! Han't taste like dirt.

Coz han't make from spack now. Cept one. He still makes that way, says he likes better.

Rosh.

His rosh tho, s'long he an't make none else drink ...

Now tell.

Friend's a spill ... you spill now too? Rightup went off to Sleep han't tell none?

An't style, Jex.

Wan't like that ... han't get chance to tell ... big slide ...



Some Pound Dacca.

Fell. Wan't good.

Han't Pound Teel. Or you.

Thought prob dead.



An't gon Pind Teel.

Eyes shot him. First time ever saw them shoot any. Caught us bad.

Shot me too. Han't know. Tacked out. Woke up some place, lady name Miz Annie Pixed.

Miz Annie! Here in Haven. Keep us all Pixed.

Dores dead, Eyes prob lookin for me ... Pig better go. So went.



Eyes an't all that. We'll kick em. Safe here while we do. Han't have go back Sleep ...

Might want go back tho. Han't decide. Sleep's big rosh ... but like it. Some. Some parts an't.

Not worry about get killed all time good too.

K but bet han't cusk near as good ...



--hahaha-- ... Hey! Gon tack jug!

Han't. Anyway get more jug, need.



Hold up hold up!

An't do. Forgot. Wearin rosh ...

Rosh huh? Let see ...



Diaper?!

Kind oP? Sleep beds mess with you ... han't keep it in ... got wear this while out.

Well, take it oPP Por while ...

Han't better. All kind goin on there. Tech shit. Might not get back on.



Take hair, take piss ... han't peel any I do this?

--UUUUH--

Oh yeah? Aright. Got clear then.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER.



Ruby?

Sorry to wake you. Someone came trying to get into Haven a little while ago.

... I think you want to talk to her.



I don't talk to everybody who tries to get in. Not enough hours in the day. There are a couple of things they might say, though, and if my people hear one of those, they come get me.

Like what?

Well, your name, for one. A few other names they might mention.

One of them's "Nat Spruill."

... oh.

Her name's Jolee Madison. Seems she's been looking for Spruill, and ran into some trouble.



Jolee Madison?? You're sure?

That's what she said. What's that mean to you?

If it's really her, it means our problems just got dropped right into your lap.



I tracked Spruill as far as the West Roughs. Word was she'd gone out to the Abandons.

But I can't get to the Abandons. The Wide-Eyes have set up a base. There's a wall blocking the only clear road west. Every other way is days around the wreckage in the Roughs. Maybe longer.

I just need help getting past the base.

Why's it so important to get to Spruill?



We have some ... personal business ...

Nat's plan swapped her for somebody else on her way to the birthing resort.

She woke up out here, with no idea where she was or what had happened. Probably in care of the Wide-Eyes, since she's not dead.



How -- how do you know--

Relax. I'm not an enemy. At least I don't think so, especially since I don't imagine you're with the Wide-Eyes now. How many of them did you have to wreck to get out?

Uh ... just one. But there have been more since then.



Ruby, I can't let you bring any of my people on this Pool thing you're about to go do.

I wouldn't have asked. Not their risk to take.

The thing is, Jolee, I'm also looking for Nat Spruill.

Great! Let's go. I can take you there, and you can help get past the wall--

Well, hang on, though.

See, I strongly suspect you want to rip Nat into little tiny pieces.

And I need to take her back to Sleep. Alive.

She made a big mess and now she's going to have to clean it up.



OK, so you bring her back to sleep and she cleans up her mess. Then can I kill her?

Vindictive, aren't you?



Wouldn't you be?

My life was going really well for the first time! There was someone who loved me! I was even going to have a baby! She destroyed all of it!

Put me out here and someone else has been living my life for years and who knows what they've done by now --

I don't think destroying your reputation has even been on her agenda. She's been too busy destroying Sleep.

You see? This is important. Honestly, I wish I could let you take Nat apart, but I can't. And I can't bring you unless you can promise me you won't, and mean it.

DAY TWO.



You didn't tell me it would just be two of you ...

You heard Luisa. She didn't want me bringing any of her people, and I don't blame her.

They'll shoot you in a second, you know.

Oh, I know. But I had a friend of mine get shot dead while I was standing right next to her. Jex had two very good friends get killed by Wide-Eyes, and nearly got killed herself.

Yeah, well, I had principles too, before I got out here ...

I've spent years more time Awake than you have. Don't lecture me.

But you don't even have any weapons! We've got a Portress to break ...

We can't break it. We'll have to try to get past it.

And I don't want to shoot anyone.



The fact that they play it that way is all the more reason why I won't.



... Hang on. I hear something ahead.



Move your ass, scraw!!

Stop, assholes!



Hey, shitheads! Over here!

Cho, what?

It's OK, Jex, I get it.

Back in, quick, and get hidden.



Oyo, skels! Fore shoot, got some big crux tell you.

Oh yeah? What's that?



You're fucked.



uuuu

hoogh



If you're gonna do something like that, warn us, OK? If I hadn't picked up on it, we might be dead now.

Yeah, yeah ...

Haven't worked in a team much, have you?

What, out here?

JOLEE MET THESE TWO IN #39.



Oyo! An't dead yet, huh? Thanks for pull.

Find your lookin Por?

Ran into a problem.



Can strip them, you han't want?

All yours.

Not even to pick up a gun.



uuugh ... should have taken some boots from them ...

Wondered why han't.

Since Jolee's too pissed at me to introduce us, I'm Ruby, and the other's Jex.

Stela. He's Scray.

Way out Por spill. Alive, least. Got business?

I wasn't always a spill, but yeah. Been a while.

We're looking for the same one Jolee is. Need to get out to the edge of the West Roughs.



Got two more days then ... special if pickin thru Roughs ...

Eyes an't too bad here, we been messin them lot, takin their stuff. But han't want be out open night drops. Worse things than Eyes.

Still got while get back our lock. Stay there night. Safer.



STELA AND SCRAY'S SHELTER.

Goin thru slews, huh? Rosh.

Told em that.

I don't know what slews are.

Access tunnels, culverts, that kind of thing. Back ways. Like we were using.

It's Paster. And I don't get lost. And the Wide-Eyes don't go there.

Eyes han't go slews for reason tho.

Huh. Is it worse now? In my time all you got was synth heads and maybe a jagger once in a while ...



Eyes han't done much, but did sweep lot skelly sides.

Like South River. Went thru, shot any han't want pull in ... now jagers and synthers and stibs and such all in slews.

Still, made it this Par, so got through big slide part. An't much more slews from here tho.



But ... train slew not far here, goin out Roughs.

Wan't get you all way ... blocked off. Building Pell in it. But get you most there, pretty Past.

What do you think?

If it's Paster than picking our way through rubble and wild dogs, I'm willing to try it.



You know, the tunnels didn't make me nervous, but this does.

Yeah. Anybody up there wants to take a shot at us, we're in trouble.

Bout gon run out slew anyhow. Where we go up?

Whoa! Where'd that come from?



Go! Go! Go!

Watch out above!

Arms ready!

... OK, then.

We in this push?

I hope not.

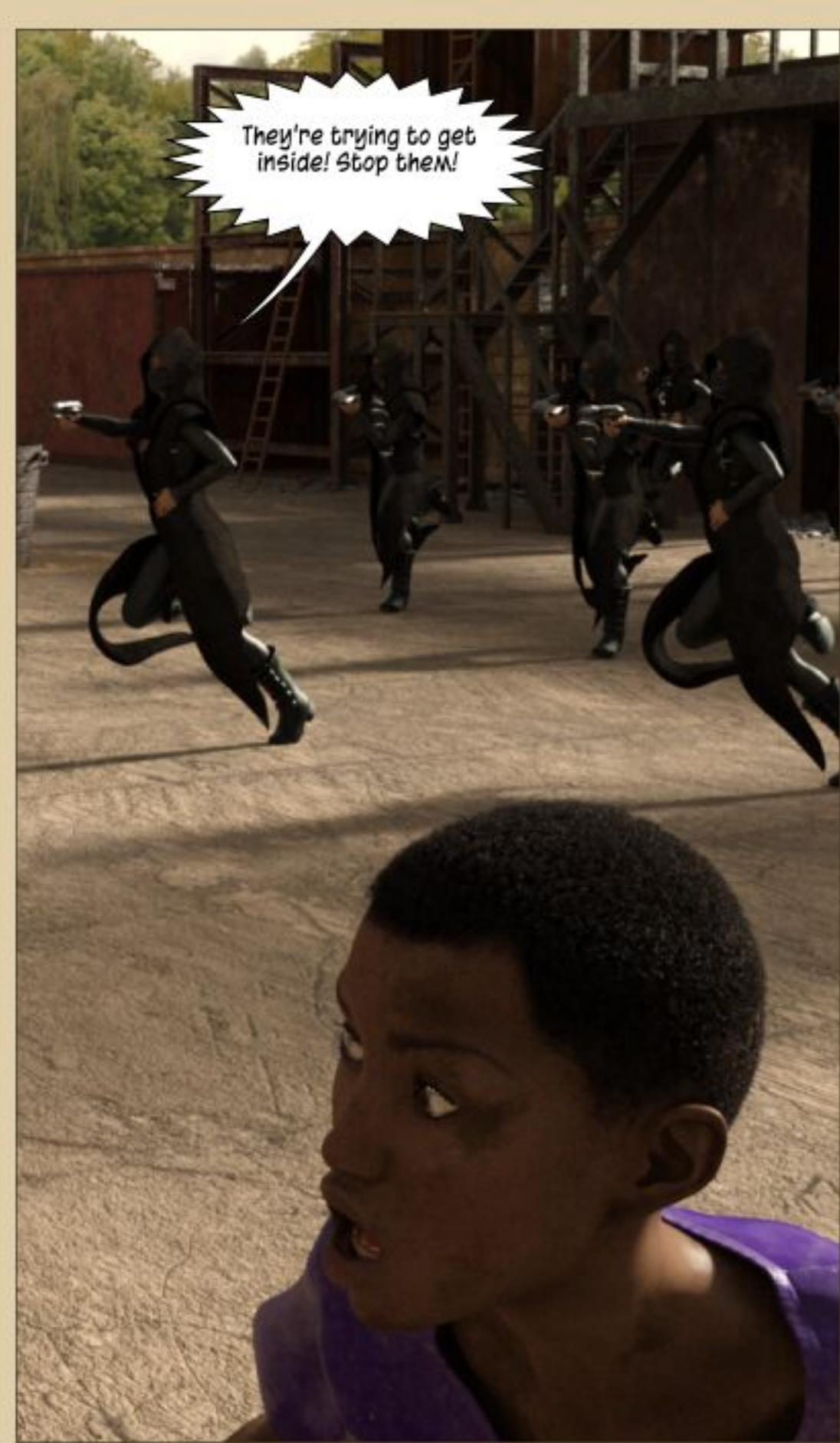
BLIWW



Mari!! They blew the gate!

Get inside and seal up, quick!

Zara! Get the hot sauce!



They're trying to get inside! Stop them!



Pump as fast as you can. We need a hard spray.



What--

OK, light it up!



Good coverage.

Come on, we'll need to go clean up whatever's left.



Hey, bitch!

Turn around and take it in the Pace!



BLAM



"I don't want to shoot anybody."

I don't. There wasn't time to do anything better. What's your point?

I know you've had it bad, but try to cut down on the attitude, OK? It's not a great look.



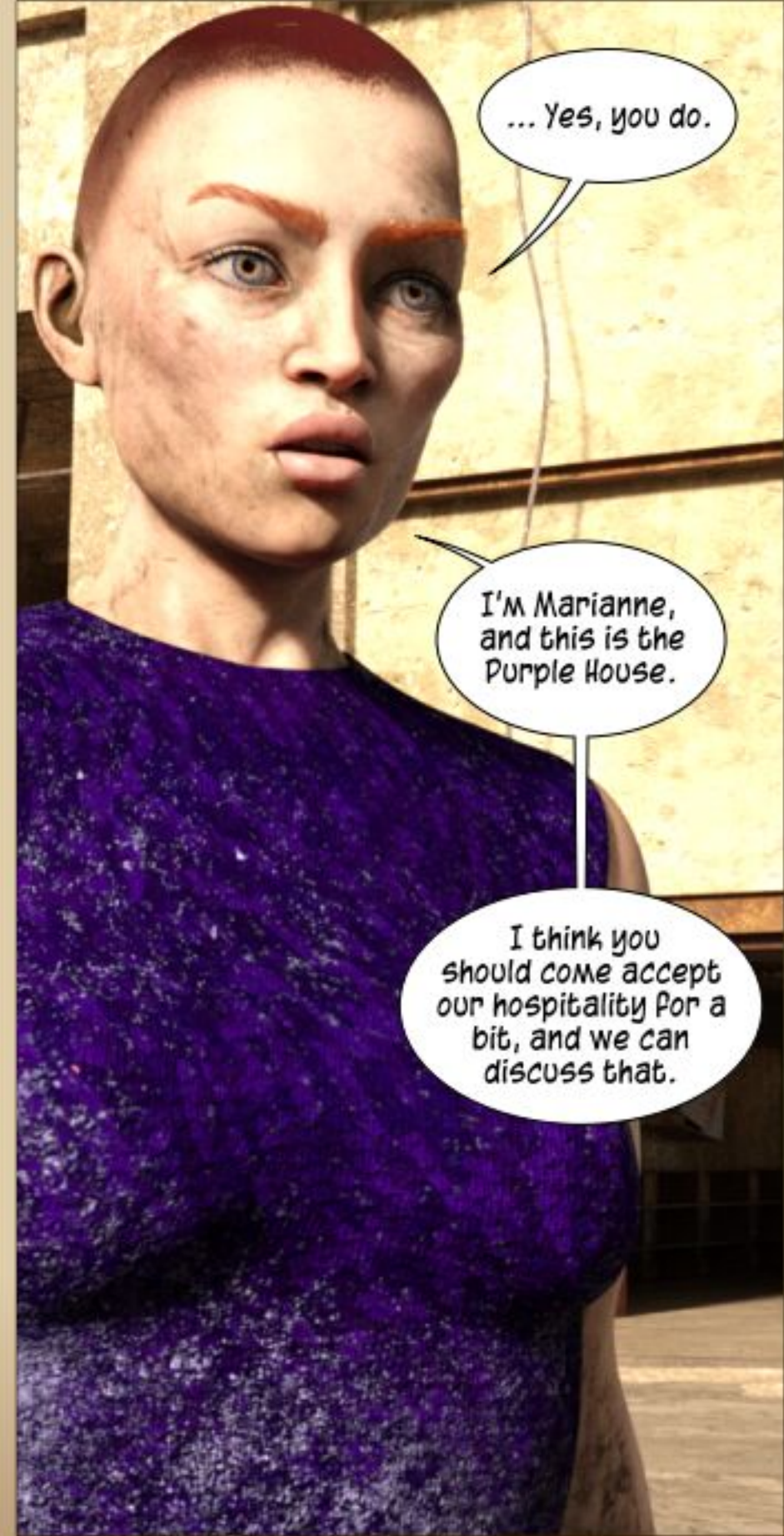
Whoever you are, I owe you.

Not sure if that was a really good shot or a really bad one ...

Hey, Kerry, this one's got a bullet in his shoulder. Treat the burned ones first. And make sure they're all chained down.

I don't guess you're out sightseeing.

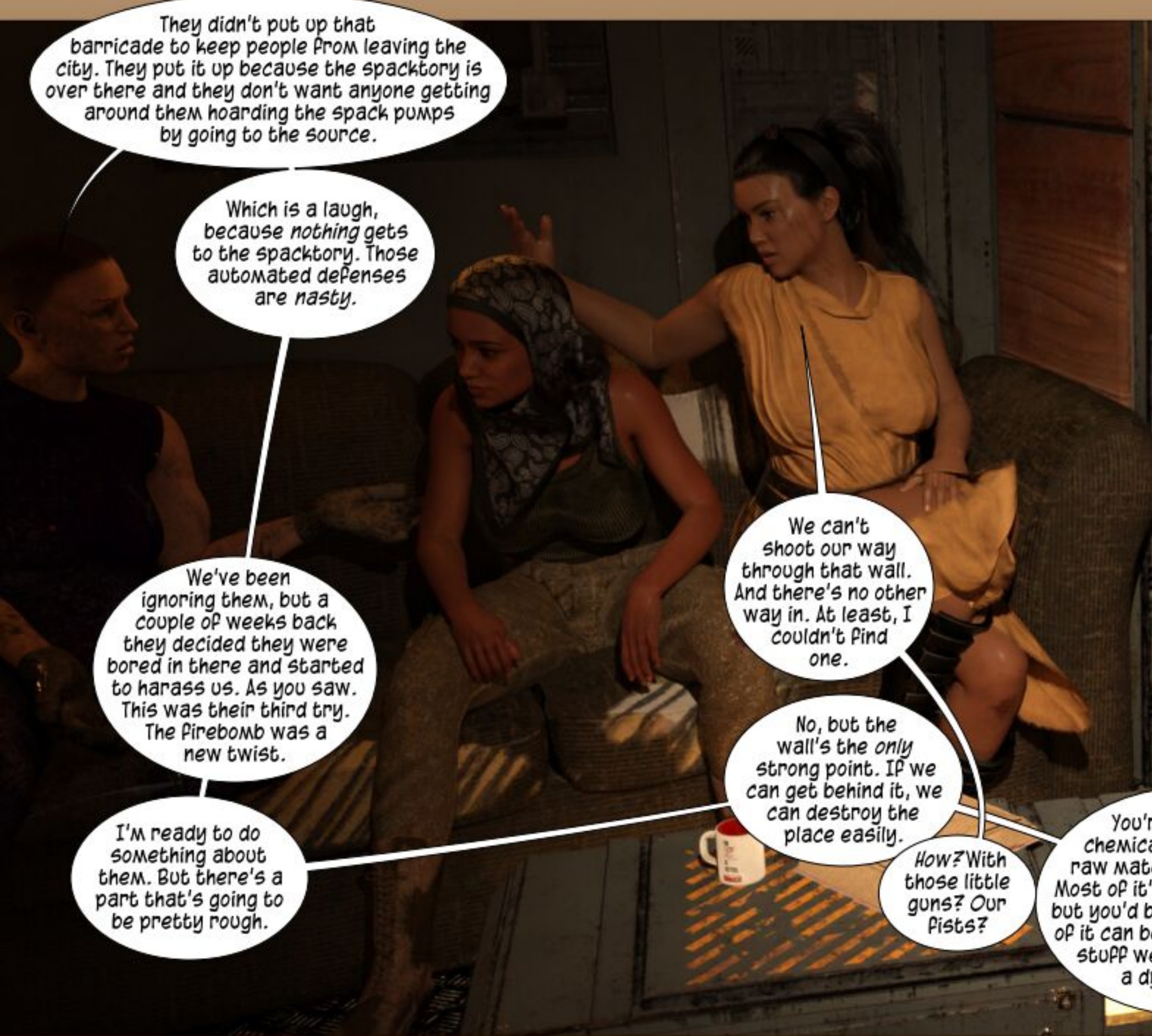
Just passing through. We're trying to find someone we think is in the Abandons. But we have a little problem.



... Yes, you do.

I'm Marianne, and this is the Purple House.

I think you should come accept our hospitality for a bit, and we can discuss that.



They didn't put up that barricade to keep people from leaving the city. They put it up because the spacktory is over there and they don't want anyone getting around them hoarding the spack pumps by going to the source.

Which is a laugh, because nothing gets to the spacktory. Those automated defenses are nasty.

We've been ignoring them, but a couple of weeks back they decided they were bored in there and started to harass us. As you saw. This was their third try. The firebomb was a new twist.

I'm ready to do something about them. But there's a part that's going to be pretty rough.

We can't shoot our way through that wall. And there's no other way in. At least, I couldn't find one.

No, but the wall's the only strong point. If we can get behind it, we can destroy the place easily.

How? With those little guns? Our Pistols?

You're sitting in a chemical plant. Lots of raw material left in here. Most of it's for textile work, but you'd be amazed how much of it can be repurposed. That stuff we used today was a dye mordant.



Got lot of rosh colors, right? Fig make all our things purple, always know who's us ... han't none else purple ...

Oh, K, get it.

LATER.



I didn't expect you to volunteer for the hard part.

Honestly? Your part scares me more. At least with ours, I know what's what.

So this person you're looking for must be pretty important, for a couple of spills to come all the way out here. What's the story?

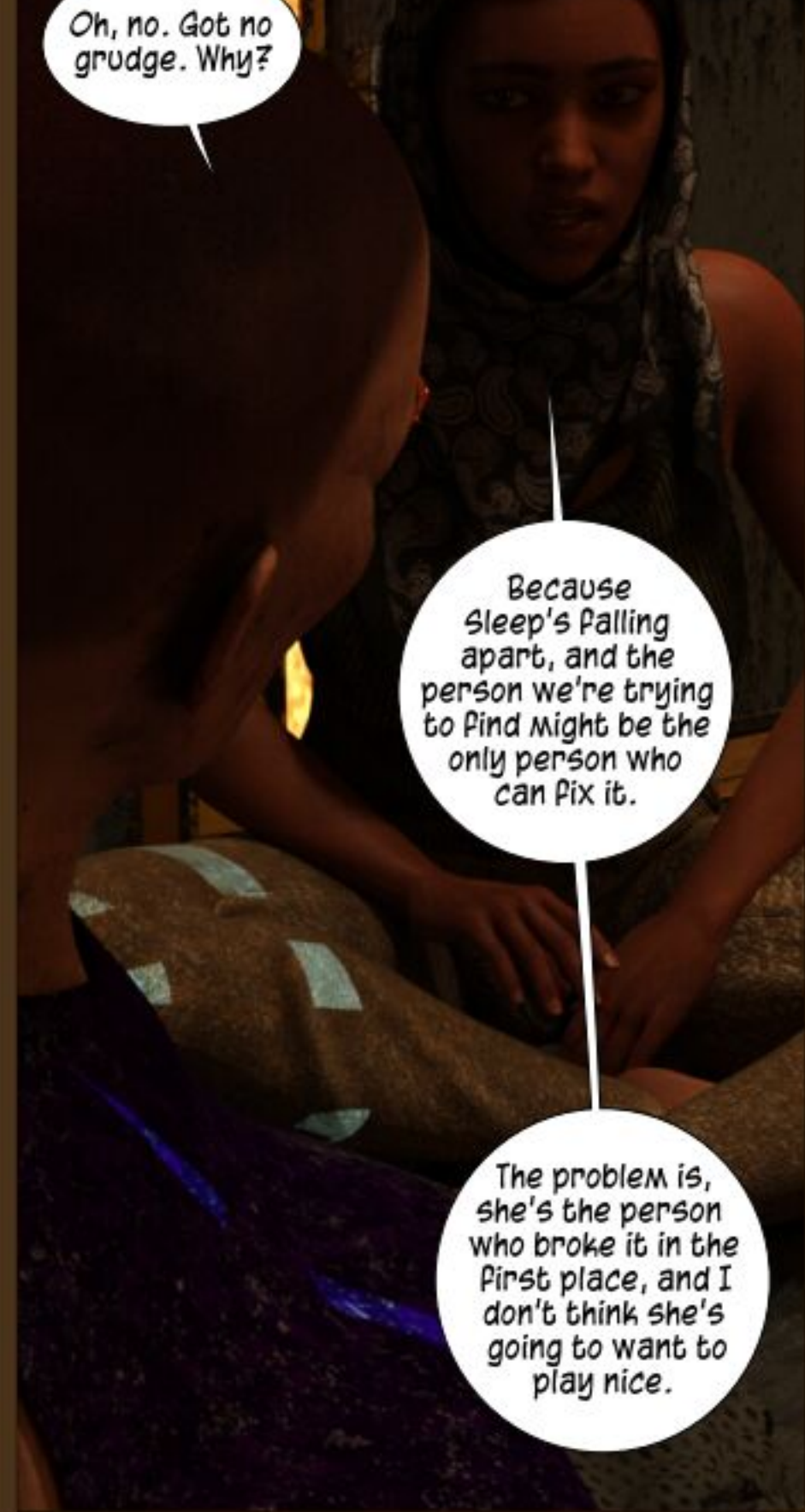
I think you should go first. How long have you been Awake? Why'd you leave Sleep?



Yes, I guess it doesn't happen often, does it?

I'd like to say I grew a social conscience or something, but the truth is, I just got bored. Different set of experiences out here. And I never wanted to live hundreds of years anyway.

But you don't think Sleep should be eliminated or anything like that?



Oh, no. Got no grudge. Why?

Because Sleep's falling apart, and the person we're trying to find might be the only person who can fix it.

The problem is, she's the person who broke it in the first place, and I don't think she's going to want to play nice.



I hope the people back in Sleep appreciate you.

... I'm not sure they do, but I must be kind of dumb, because I keep helping fix their shit anyway.

No. I'm not sure what you are, but I know you're definitely not dumb.

We can't go until dawn. We want enough light to see by, but we want most of them to still be asleep.

So we have some time to kill.



Wait ... I'm, ah, wearing a ...

Waste unit?

We can work around that.

DAY FOUR (BARELY).



Here we go.



AAAA!

What the--



???



What was that?

Somebody threw a bomb or something at the doors? There's some fire outside, but I didn't see anyone.

Probably those purples. Damn it, I bet that means we were right.

Yes, I think we have to assume the sortie isn't coming back ... but now what do we--



wuaaaa!

Again?

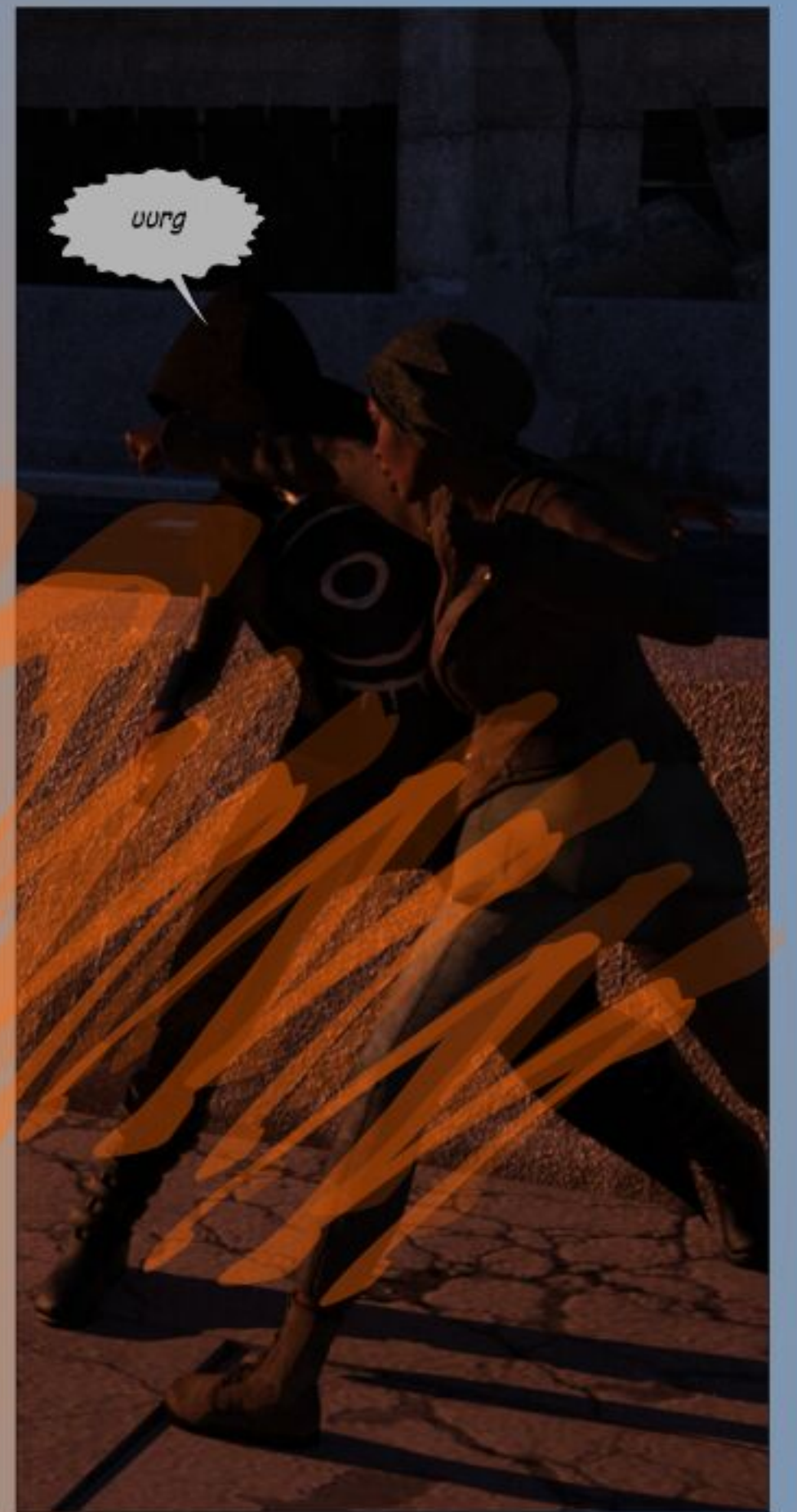
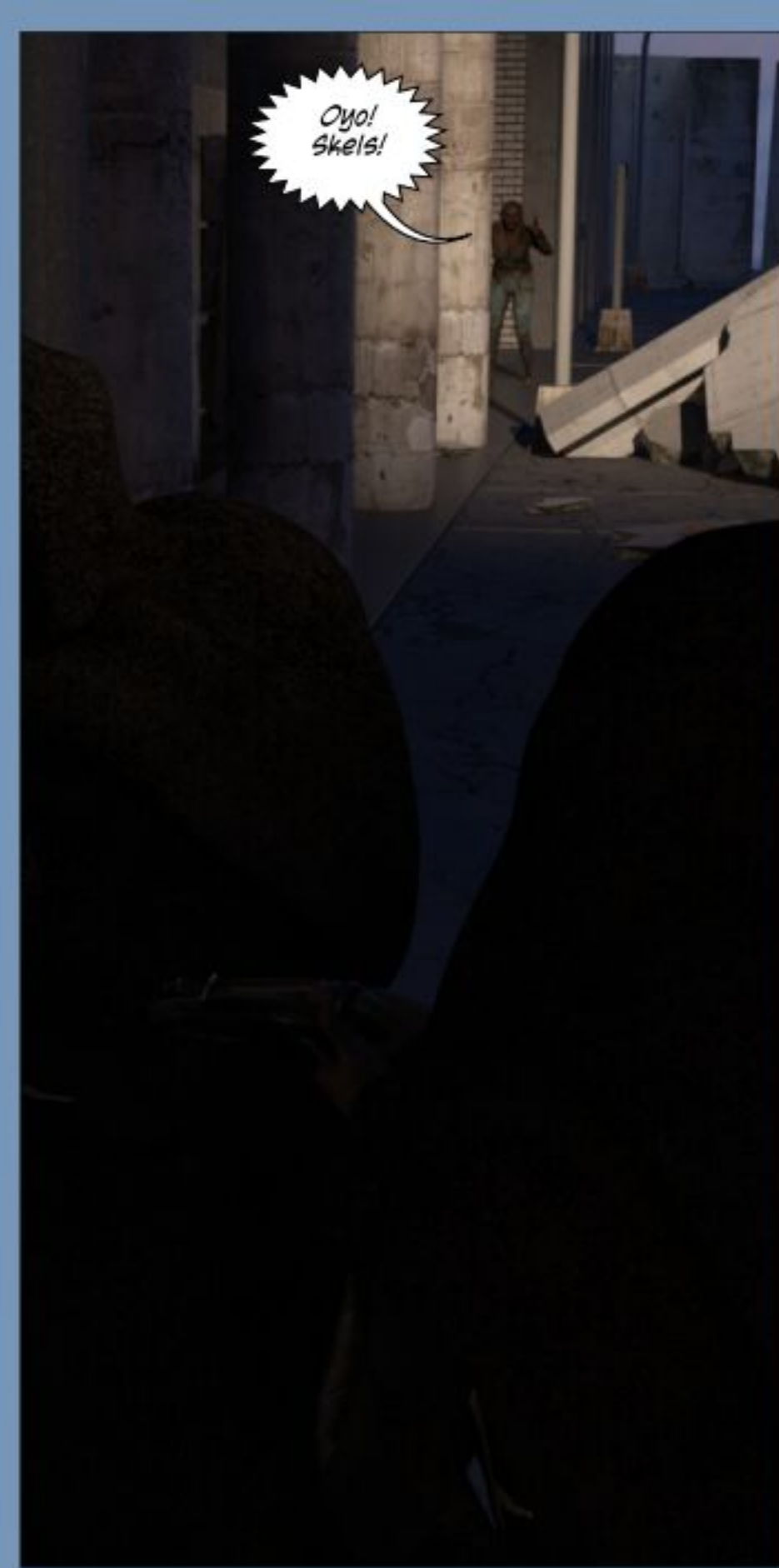
Damn, that's loud. OK, get Menden. We're going to sweep the area.

Is that a good idea?

No. But if they have any of ours still alive, and we can grab one of theirs, we might be able to get them to swap.



And if I have to hear them tossing bombs at the gate all day I'll lose my mind.



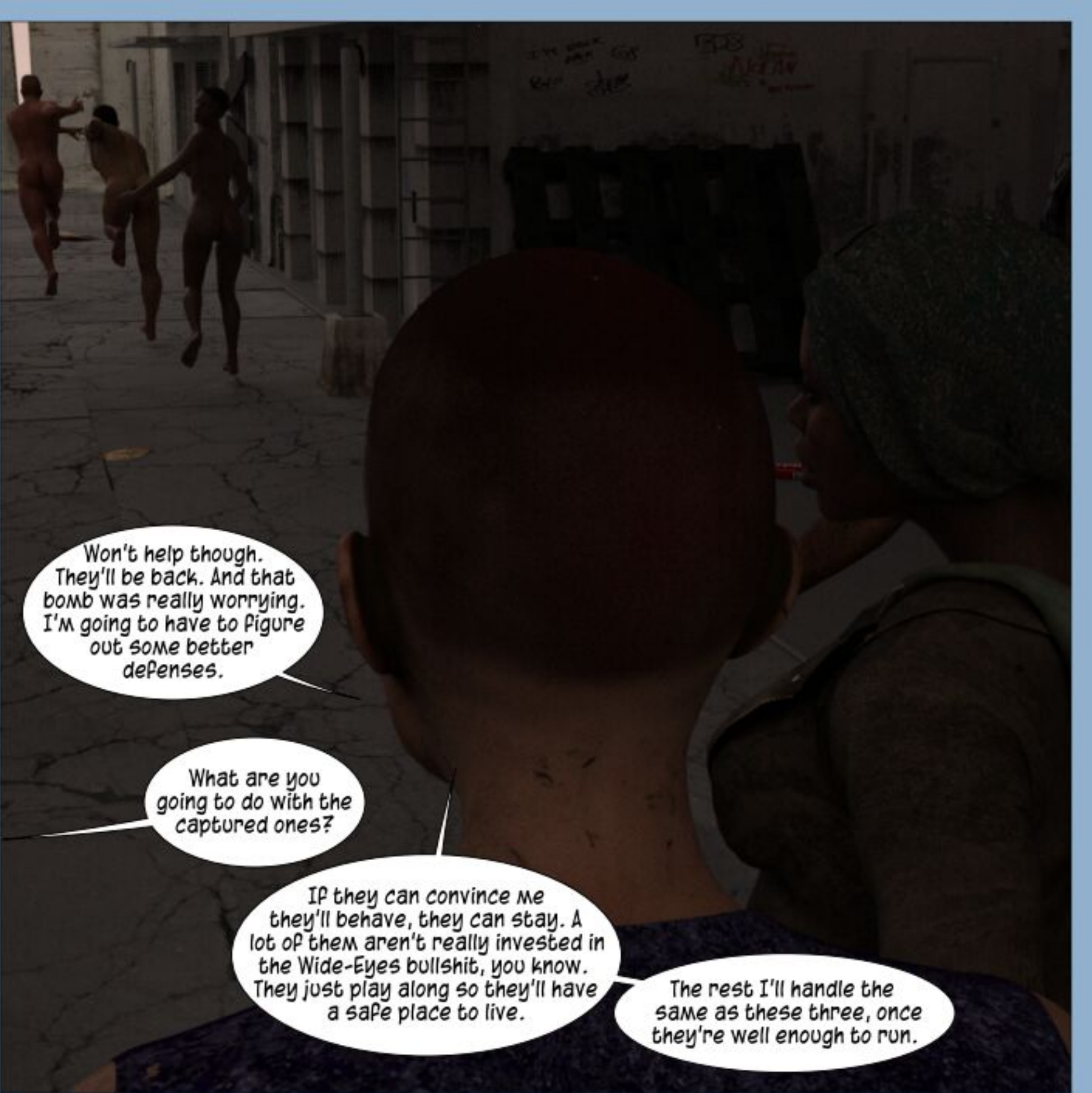


OK, strip. All of it opp. Then I'm letting you go.

If you watch out for each other and don't do anything stupid, you should be able to make it all the way back to your main base in a few days.

I don't want to see any of you out here again.

And I want you to remember that we decided not to kill you because we're nice people.



Won't help though. They'll be back. And that bomb was really worrying. I'm going to have to figure out some better defenses.

What are you going to do with the captured ones?

If they can convince me they'll behave, they can stay. A lot of them aren't really invested in the Wide-Eyes bullshit, you know. They just play along so they'll have a safe place to live.

The rest I'll handle the same as these three, once they're well enough to run.



It's already burning out.

You should be able to pick your way through it in a few minutes. Might have to hold your breath in that smoke though.



We owe you big time.

Nah, we're even.

What you can do for me, if you find a way to?

Report back. I want to know how this all comes out.

THE ABANDONS.



Oh, for pity's sake.





Where do I have to go? The ends of the earth?

Where's your secret Barker Friend? Making you do the dirty work?

Leyna's too busy trying to keep the mess you made from tearing the place apart.



She should quit wasting her time.

You know, I never hated Sleep. I just thought my Family was doing a horrible job running it. Especially Josiah. I should have been running it.

I didn't want to destroy it until your friend threw me out of it.

And the Wide-Eyes--! I might have made something of them, if they'd let me.

But instead you ran when it got too hot.

I leaked what we'd done to the other Faction. I'd gotten all I was ever going to get there. I started the fight and left.

Then I found these people. They just want to make a sustainable community. They're not zealots, and they don't care about power.

But you do. How convenient for them to give you a void to fill, huh?



Do you have any idea what it's like out here? My shower is that bucket behind you. I haven't been clean in years.

Farming is tedious and makes your whole body ache. Everything here is boring as hell. These people have never read a book in their lives. There are three books in the settlement. I know them all by heart.

Their idea of a celebration is to gulp some Poul homebrew and their idea of recreation is to Puck. Badly. They have no imagination and no drive. They need somebody to lead them.

If I'm looking for power I certainly picked a strange place to try to find it.



You know, I don't completely agree with the Wide-Eyes, but ...

They think Sleep destroyed civilization. Sleep didn't destroy civilization, but it definitely destroyed it outside Sleep.

My Family decided Sleep was going to be civilization from then on, and they didn't care what happened to everything else.

Yes, I destroyed A4 because I was pissed off. But, all things considered, I don't think I made a bad decision.

Well, the thing is, I like Sleep. And I think it's worth saving. And you haven't destroyed A4 yet.



Don't kid yourself. I never thought there was more than a twenty percent chance it was going to be immediate and total. The odds always favored a gradual collapse.

I went to a lot of trouble to make sure you couldn't stop it. I can't stop it. There is absolutely nothing I can do to undo it at this point. So get that out of your head.

Besides, you'd have to tie me up or something. I am never going back to Sleep voluntarily. I mean it.

But believe me when I tell you that even if you did drag me back, it wouldn't do you any good.

-- sigh -- Unfortunately, I do.

We won't give up, though. We'll take the whole place apart and start from scratch if we have to. You don't get to win.

Who says that wouldn't be a win?



And that's it? We just leave her here to run her little farm? She doesn't get any kind of punishment for destroying Sleep? For destroying my life?

I did not destroy your life. You're not dead, are you? I could have just killed you when I pulled you out of the bed, you know. Left your body in a ditch somewhere. I even made sure you got somewhere safe.

You've probably got years of Sleep left before it dies. Go back in, forget all this happened, live your soft spoiled life, have another goddamned baby--



AAAAARRRRRRR! # # # # #



Enough.



--moan--

Feel better now?

Not really.



I just can't believe you're letting her get away with no penalty ...

I let you beat her half to death, didn't I?

Oh, hey-- you may want to go check on your Fearless leader. I think she might need a little medical attention.

Sure, we could have killed her. That's way too easy on her, and doesn't do anything to satisfy us for fifteen seconds.

Or we can leave her here, where she's absolutely miserable, has enemies everywhere, and might actually accomplish something good despite herself.

OUR TRAVELLERS ENCOUNTER NO TROUBLE ON THE WAY BACK AND THIS MANAGE THE JOURNEY IN A FAST THREE DAYS, REACHING HAVEN ONLY MINUTES BEFORE SUNDOWN ON THE THIRD DAY. THEY STAY THE NIGHT RATHER THAN TRY TO THE SLEEP FACILITY IN THE DARK.



... so you might want to at least establish contact with them. They seem like they're good people.

Definitely. I don't like to admit it, but I believe we're entering a time when we'll need every ally we can get.



There's a place here for you in Haven, if you want it.

I appreciate the offer ... but ...

Nasty as she was about it, Spruill was right. I'm going back to Sleep to start picking up the pieces.



And what about you? I didn't want to ask, but I know you've been unsure where you're going to land ...

Yah. And Caryn wants me stay. Big.

But Peel like Sleep's where need to be. Right now, anyway. For while yet.

NEXT MORNING, IN THE PREP ROOMS.



RUBY?

Sorry, Sue. I'm being slow today. Long shower.

I know those dia--uh, waste units--are supposed to be self-cleaning, but they really peel gross after a couple of days.

NO, THAT'S NO TROUBLE. WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH YOUR FRIEND, THOUGH.

IT'S IRREGULAR, BUT I'M HOPING YOU CAN HELP CLEAR IT UP?



Jolee? What's the problem?

They won't let me into a bed!

WE CAN'T PUT HER IN A BED UNDER THAT IDENTITY BECAUSE THE SYSTEM SAYS SHE IS ALREADY IN ONE.

Oh. Oh!

You need to take us to this bed. I know what this is.

JIL, PLEASE EXPLAIN THE SITUATION TO MS. MARTINEZ. I'LL VOUCH FOR THE PRIVACY WAIVER.

IT'S VERY SIMPLE, BUT MAKES NO SENSE.



Folks, you are looking at the Sprue.

Sharl.

Her name's Sharl.

Striver told me.



Let's unplug her.

BASED ON HER BRAINWAVE ANALYSIS AT THE MOMENT, AN INTERRUPT WOULD CAUSE HER PERMANENT MENTAL DAMAGE AND WOULD POSSIBLY BE FATAL.

She's basically a human virus, right? I don't care if it kills her!

Honestly, me neither, but it's not our call.

Especially since there's a chance unplugging her would also wreck a lot of A4.



But at least now we can find her.

You need to rescan this bed and change the designation from "Jolee Madison" to "Sharl." No last name known. On "Sprue." Whatever works for you.

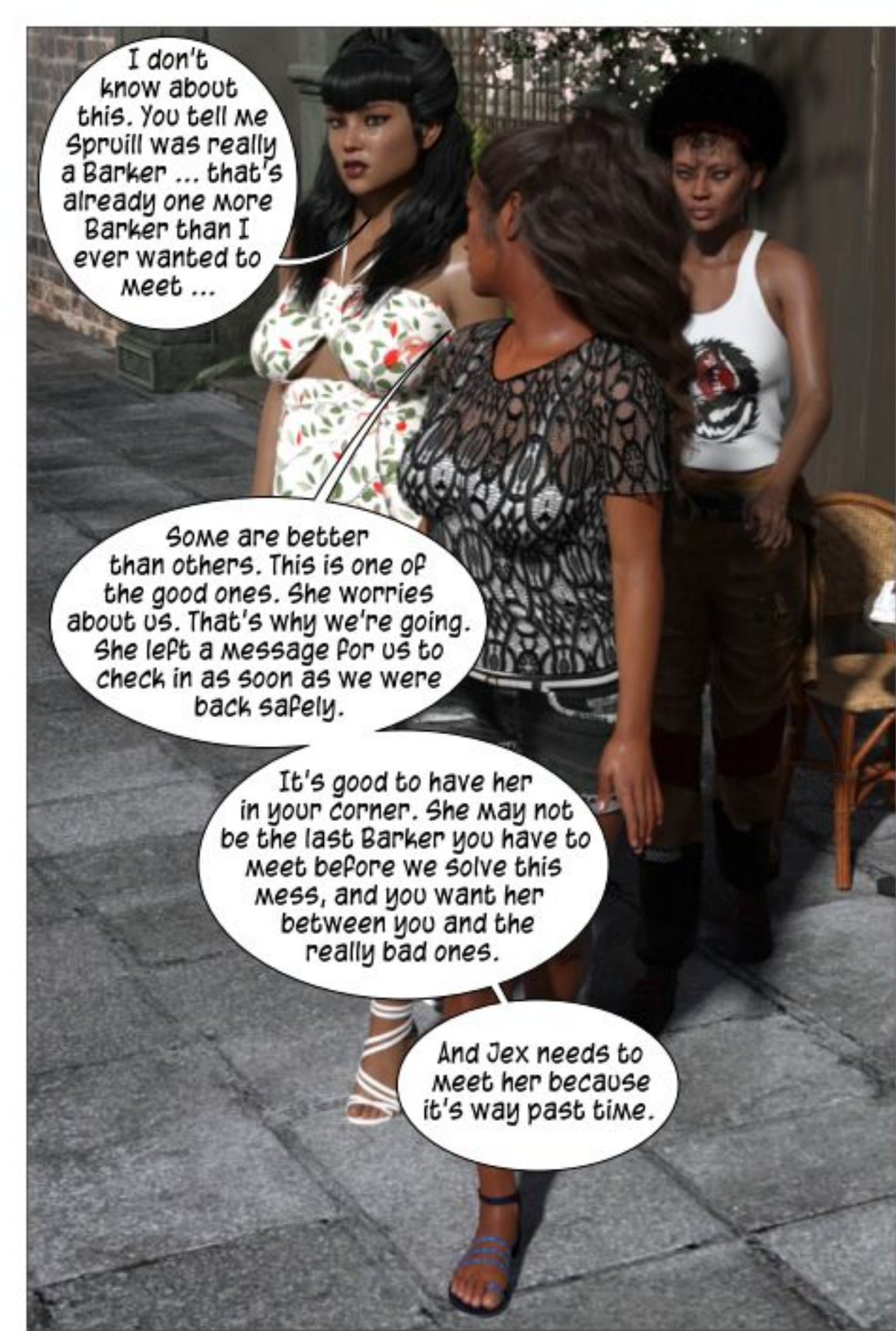
Ask the bed owner to confirm if you need to.

WE'RE HAVING SOME DIFFICULTY DETERMINING THE BED OWNER.

All the more reason to keep close track of her.

That won't matter, ultimately. If they decide to interrupt her, it'll have been by majority vote.

I have no idea how likely that is to actually happen.



I don't know about this. You tell me Spruill was really a Barker ... that's already one more Barker than I ever wanted to meet ...

Some are better than others. This is one of the good ones. She worries about us. That's why we're going. She left a message for us to check in as soon as we were back safely.

It's good to have her in your corner. She may not be the last Barker you have to meet before we solve this mess, and you want her between you and the really bad ones.

And Jex needs to meet her because it's way past time.



Serene? Corazon?
We're alive. And we have a guest.

In here, Ruby!



We thought you should probably see the person who--



Dolores!!



Does she ... uh ...

... does she do this a lot?

A WHILE LATER, IN THE OPS ROOM.



So, Dolores thing. Big rosh or what?

Oh, I don't know. I'd almost be willing to bet you I know the answer. Though it's a little hard to believe.

I bet Serene got there too, but I don't think she's ready to admit it yet.

There's no need to yell at me, Mr. Sheridan.

I do not yell. But I am extremely frustrated.

Over a week gone and we have nothing! They brought back nothing! Time completely wasted!



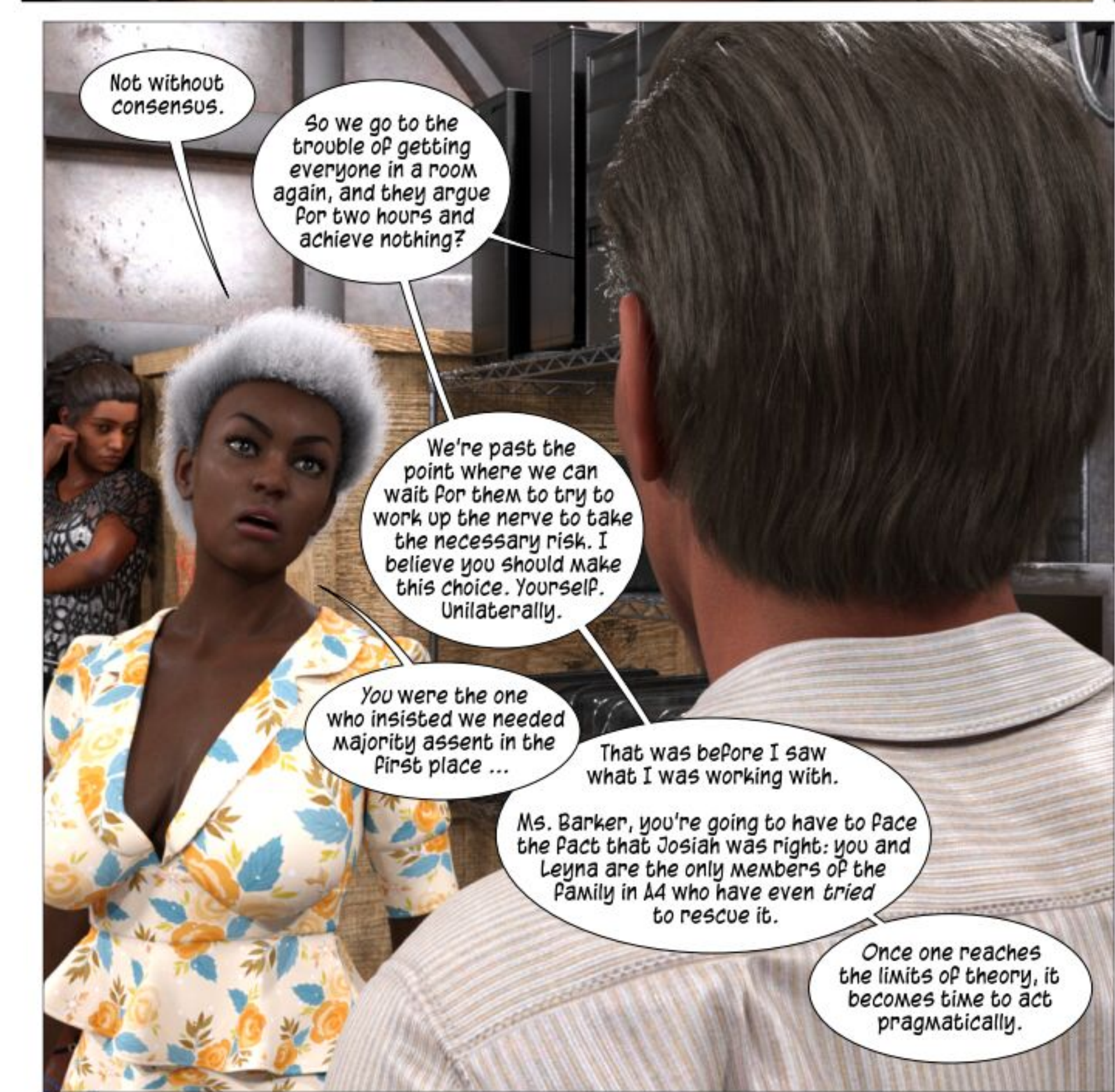
If Ruby says there was no point in bringing Nat back, then there was no point. If she believes that Nat couldn't have done anything to fix it, then I believe it too.

And you're willing to ignore any thought of justice being done ...

What sort of justice did you have in mind? I tend to agree with Ruby on that as well. There's nothing we can deal Nat that could be worse than what she has dealt for herself.

Can we move on, please?

Very well. Since the one positive thing to come of this ill-begotten expedition is that we now know which bed to interrupt, we should interrupt it. There are no other alternatives left.



Not without consensus.

So we go to the trouble of getting everyone in a room again, and they argue for two hours and achieve nothing?

We're past the point where we can wait for them to try to work up the nerve to take the necessary risk. I believe you should make this choice. Yourself. Unilaterally.

You were the one who insisted we needed majority assent in the first place ...

That was before I saw what I was working with.

Ms. Barker, you're going to have to face the fact that Josiah was right: you and Leyna are the only members of the Family in A4 who have even tried to rescue it.

Once one reaches the limits of theory, it becomes time to act pragmatically.



Where goin'?

I have some personal business in the Souk.

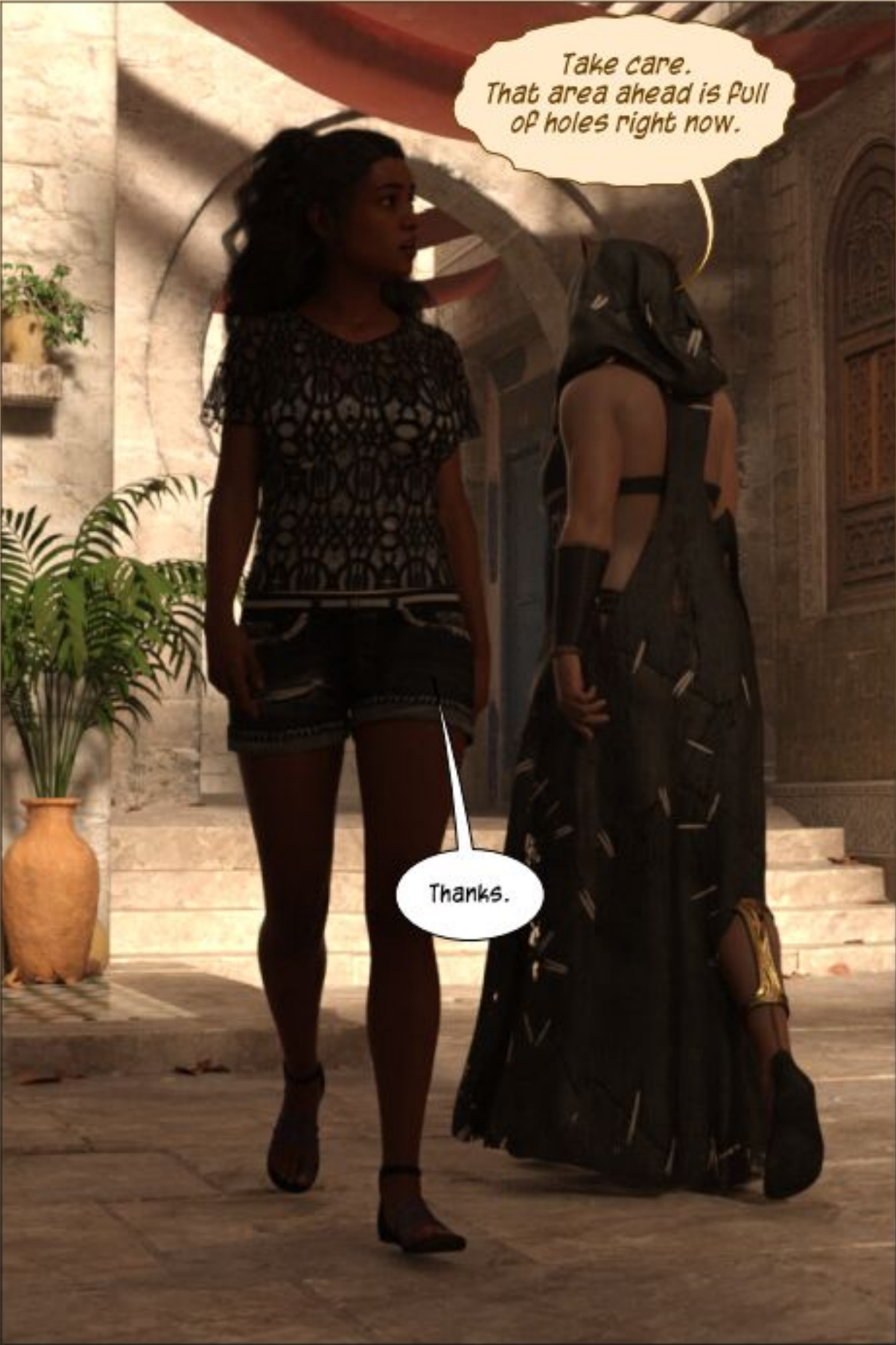
Leave if you want. They're going to argue for a long while yet, and eventually Serene will win.

And normally I'd agree with you completely, Mr. Sheridan. But now we know the risks and we know how high they are. If we have a huge mess to clean, it'll affect the rest of the Family too ... and if they didn't opt for that, there's going to be blood.

I understand that. What I'm trying to tell you is, with only one option left, there's going to be blood regardless.

Take care.
That area ahead is full
of holes right now.

Thanks.



NEXT:
INTERSPACE