

Ok, Ruby ... concentrate ... slow yourself down ... don't fall too fast ...

There's going to be a bottom ... there has to be a bottom, because the data isn't infinite and that means the space isn't infinite either, and--

ooooo!!

... there it is.

Huh.



# ZEROSPAAL

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



Hey ... can I talk to you? Are you--



Ray?? What are you doing here? Get out!

Huh?



Guess you forgot to take me off the door.

Too bad for you.

Get away! Ray, don't you dare--

What is this? Is it a memory of hers? A scenario?



OOUUU!!



"Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light."



What kept you?



Sorry. There were a lot of other things we had to figure out first. We didn't even know for sure she was a person until a couple of hours ago.

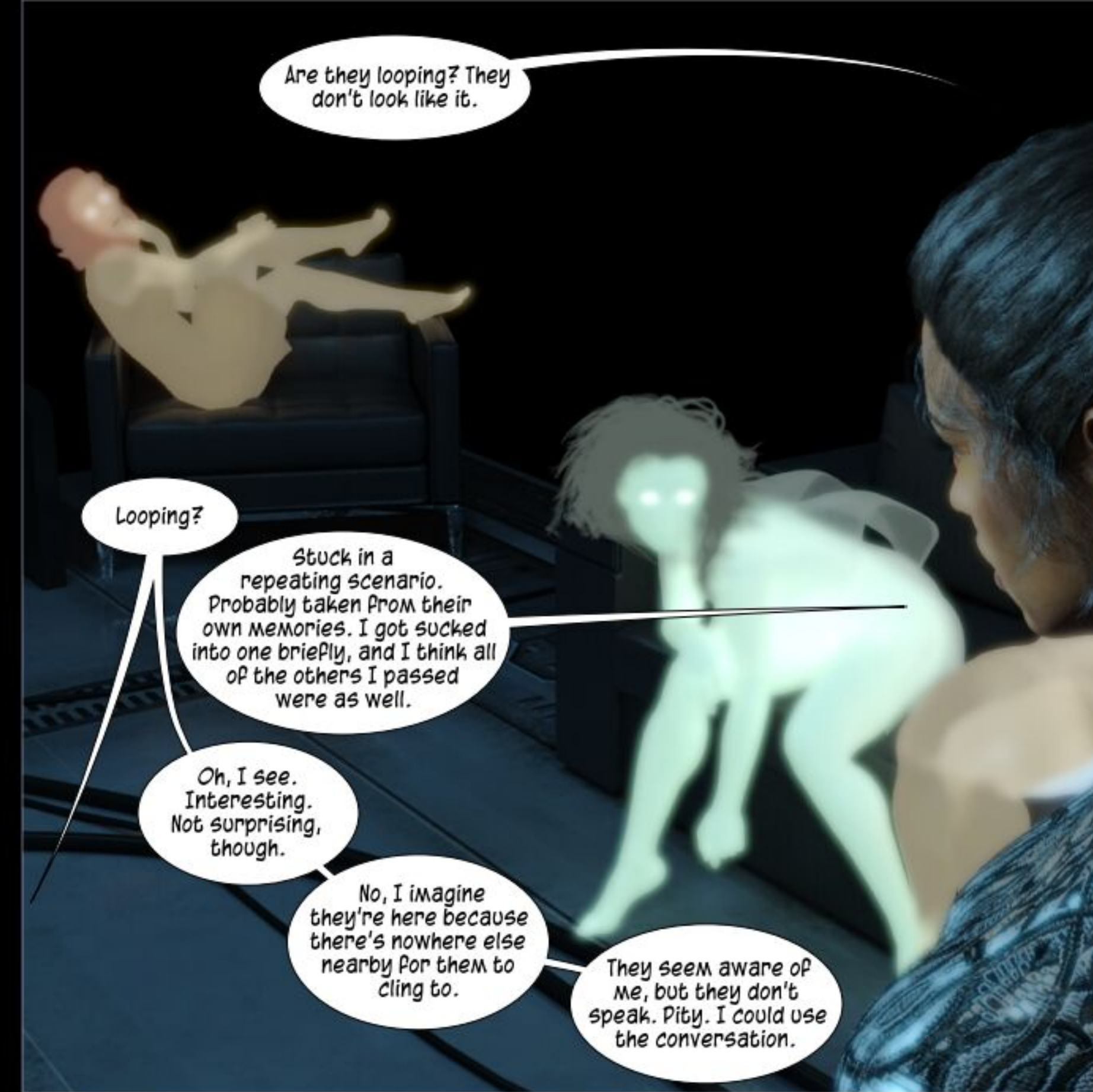
Not to mention trying to convince myself that I'd survive it. Have you been down here since the Sprue started?

Who can say? I'm almost completely cut off from information. Time is meaningless.

I suppose it always was, really.

I'd like to offer you a chair, but as you can see, I'm afraid you'll have to stand.

THIS IS A4'S DATA ARCHIVIST. WE'VE ONLY EVER SEEN HIM ONCE BEFORE, IN #21.



Are they looping? They don't look like it.

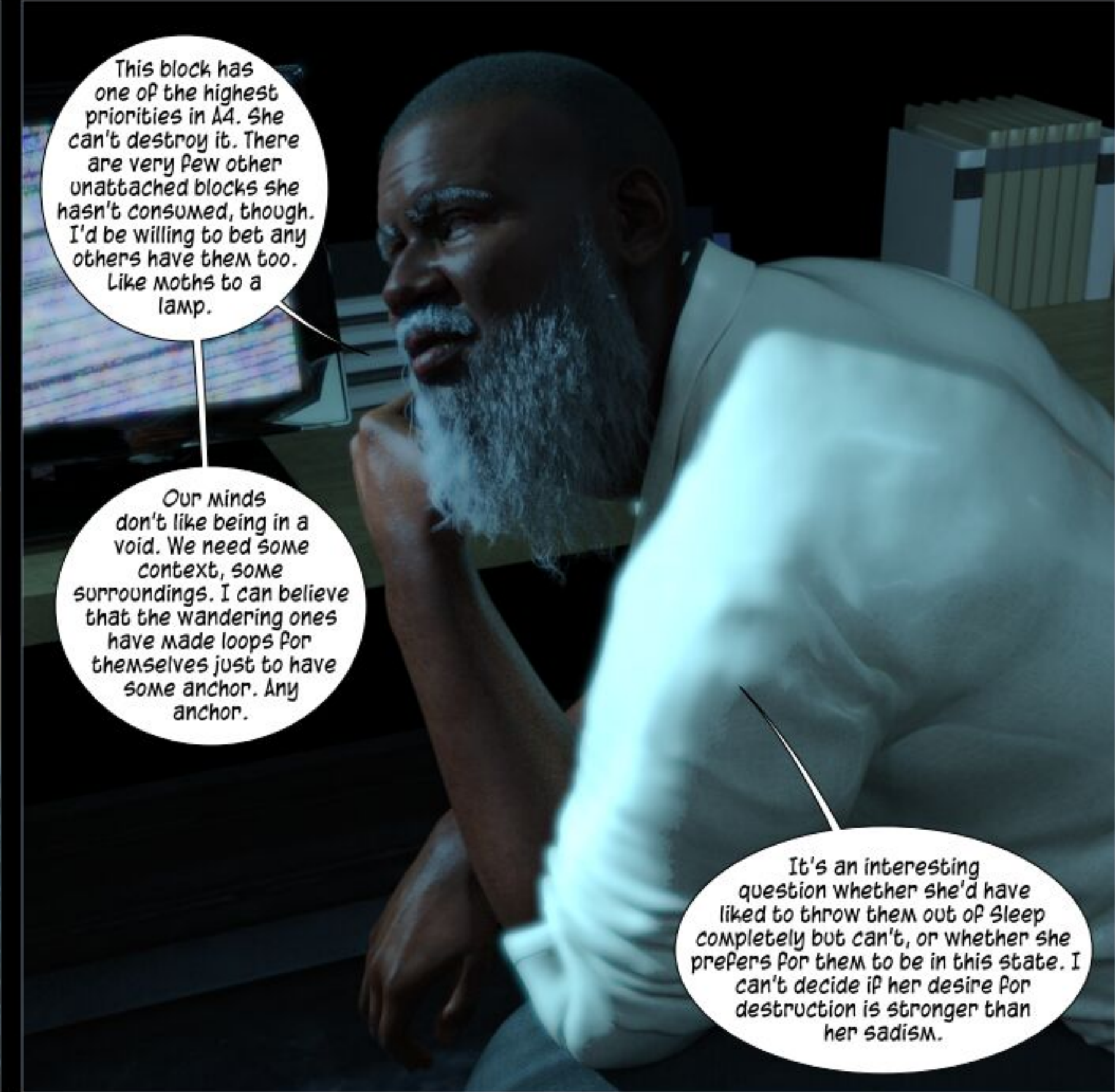
Looping?

Stuck in a repeating scenario. Probably taken from their own memories. I got sucked into one briefly, and I think all of the others I passed were as well.

Oh, I see. Interesting. Not surprising, though.

No, I imagine they're here because there's nowhere else nearby for them to cling to.

They seem aware of me, but they don't speak. Pity. I could use the conversation.



This block has one of the highest priorities in A4. She can't destroy it. There are very few other unattached blocks she hasn't consumed, though. I'd be willing to bet any others have them too. Like moths to a lamp.

Our minds don't like being in a void. We need some context, some surroundings. I can believe that the wandering ones have made loops for themselves just to have some anchor. Any anchor.

It's an interesting question whether she'd have liked to throw them out of sleep completely but can't, or whether she prefers for them to be in this state. I can't decide if her desire for destruction is stronger than her sadism.



You are, of course, going to end that destruction.

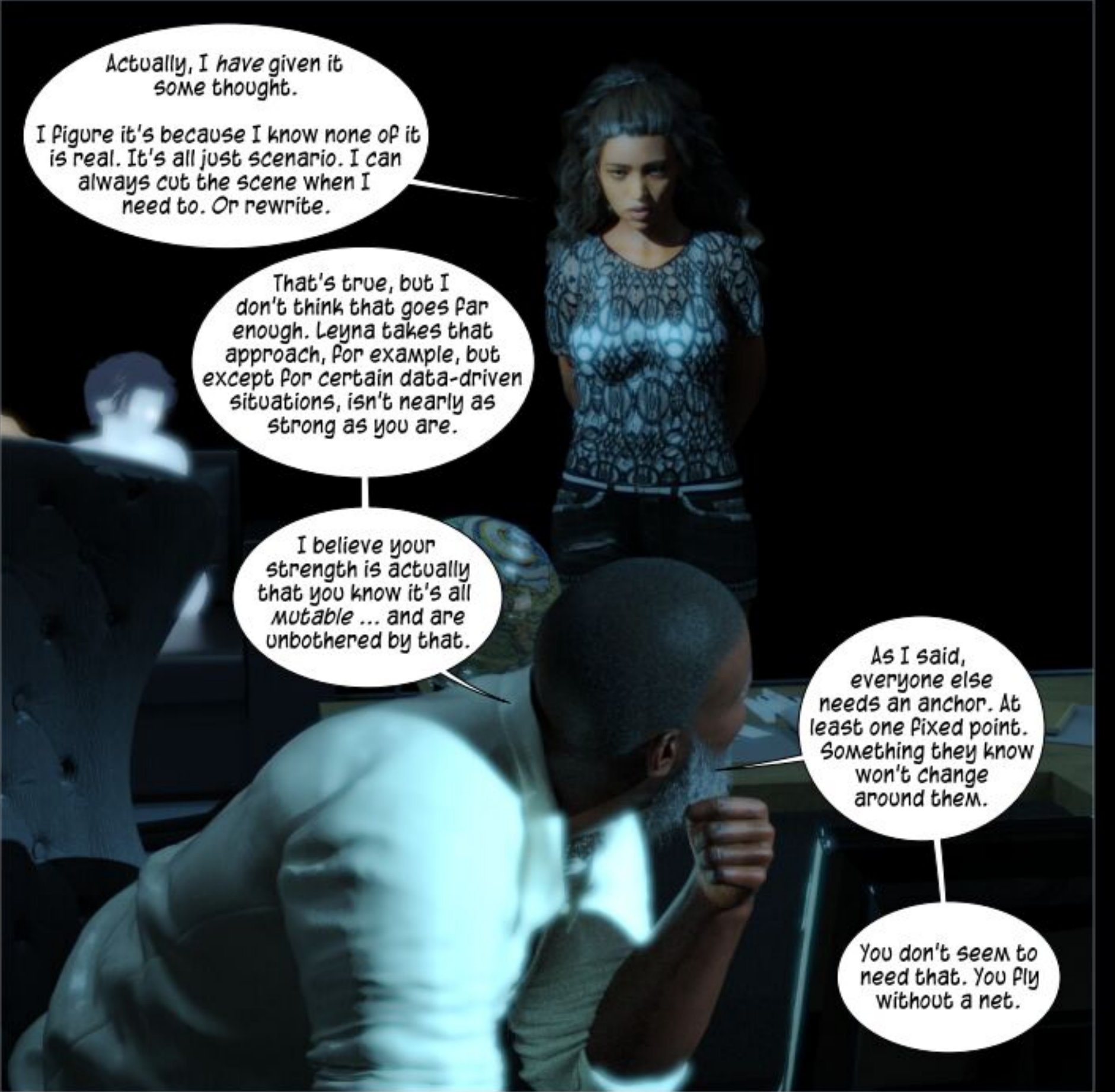
You know, one day the people around here who expect that I can do anything are going to get a rude surprise at a bad time.

This could turn out to be the time.

Hmm.

If you're looking for reassurance, I have none. It's dark here, and I'm tired.

Have you ever considered why you can do things no one else can do? Why these expectations have formed in the first place?



Actually, I have given it some thought.

I figure it's because I know none of it is real. It's all just scenario. I can always cut the scene when I need to. Or rewrite.

That's true, but I don't think that goes far enough. Leyna takes that approach, for example, but except for certain data-driven situations, isn't nearly as strong as you are.

I believe your strength is actually that you know it's all mutable ... and are unbothered by that.

As I said, everyone else needs an anchor. At least one fixed point. Something they know won't change around them.

You don't seem to need that. You fly without a net.



Yeah, well, maybe flying without a net isn't all that.

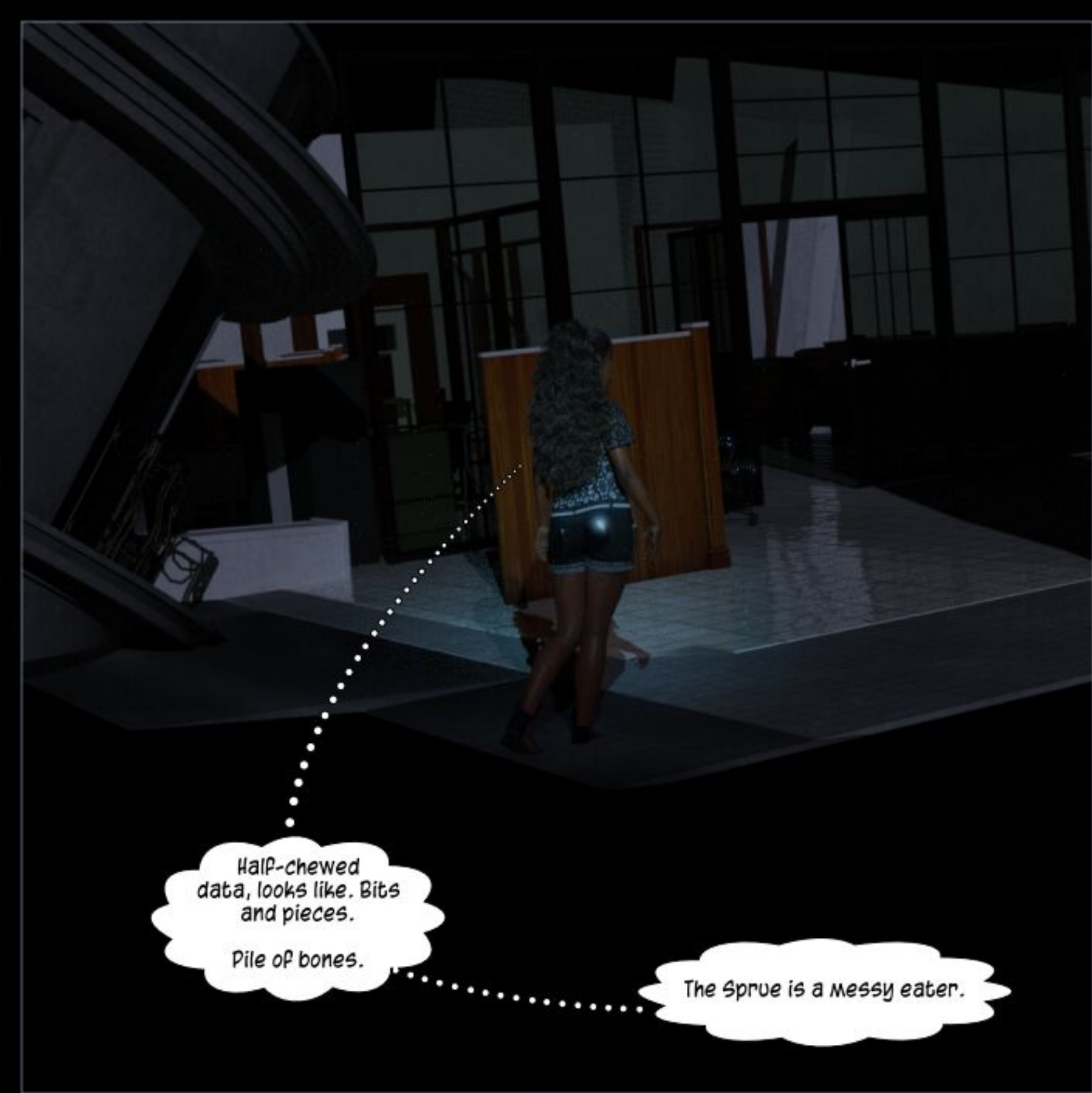
Maybe that's another thing about me that everyone's getting wrong, that's going to bite them on the ass one day.



... Good luck, Ruby.



Ok, now what's this? Wreckage?

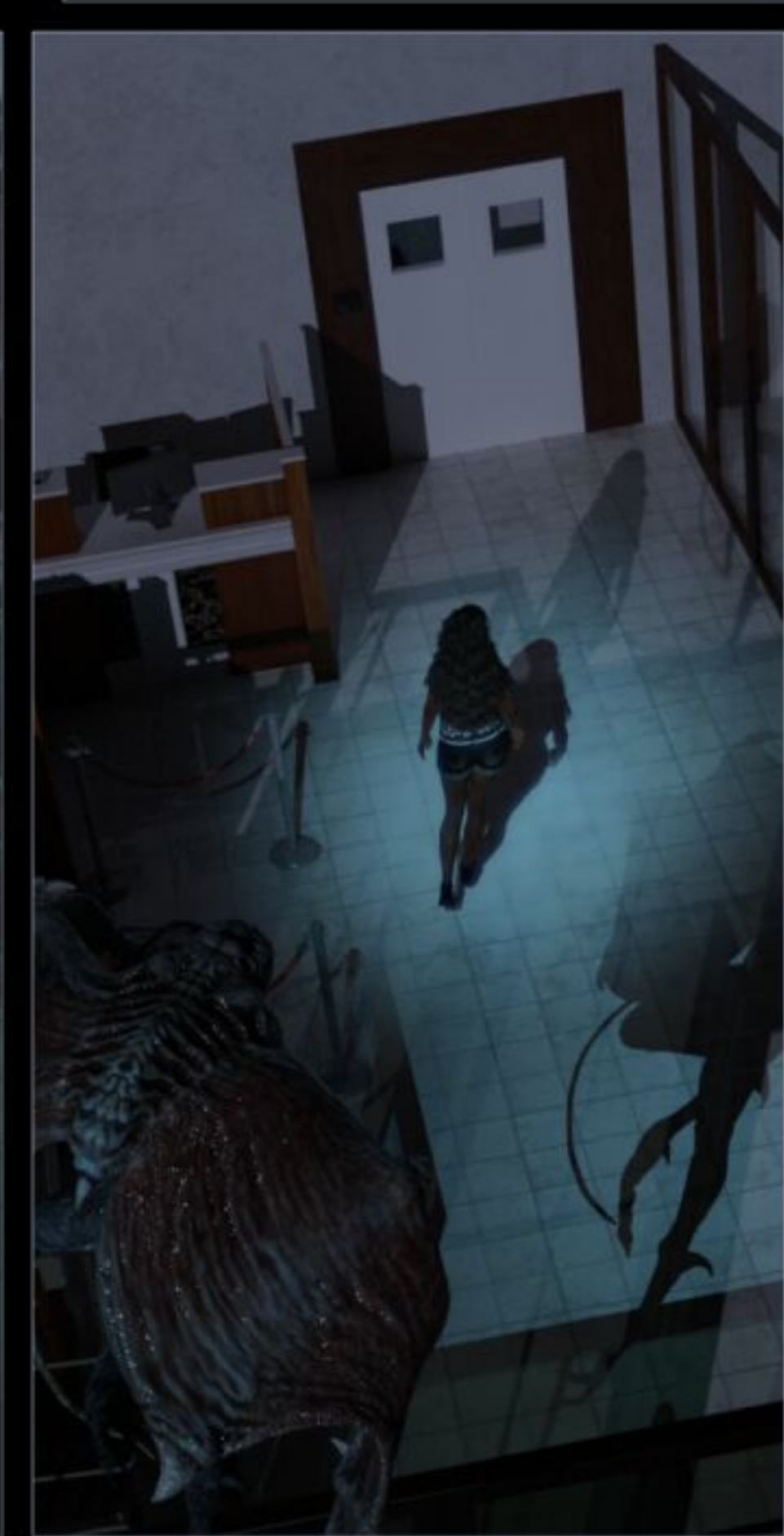


Half-chewed data, looks like. Bits and pieces.  
Pile of bones.

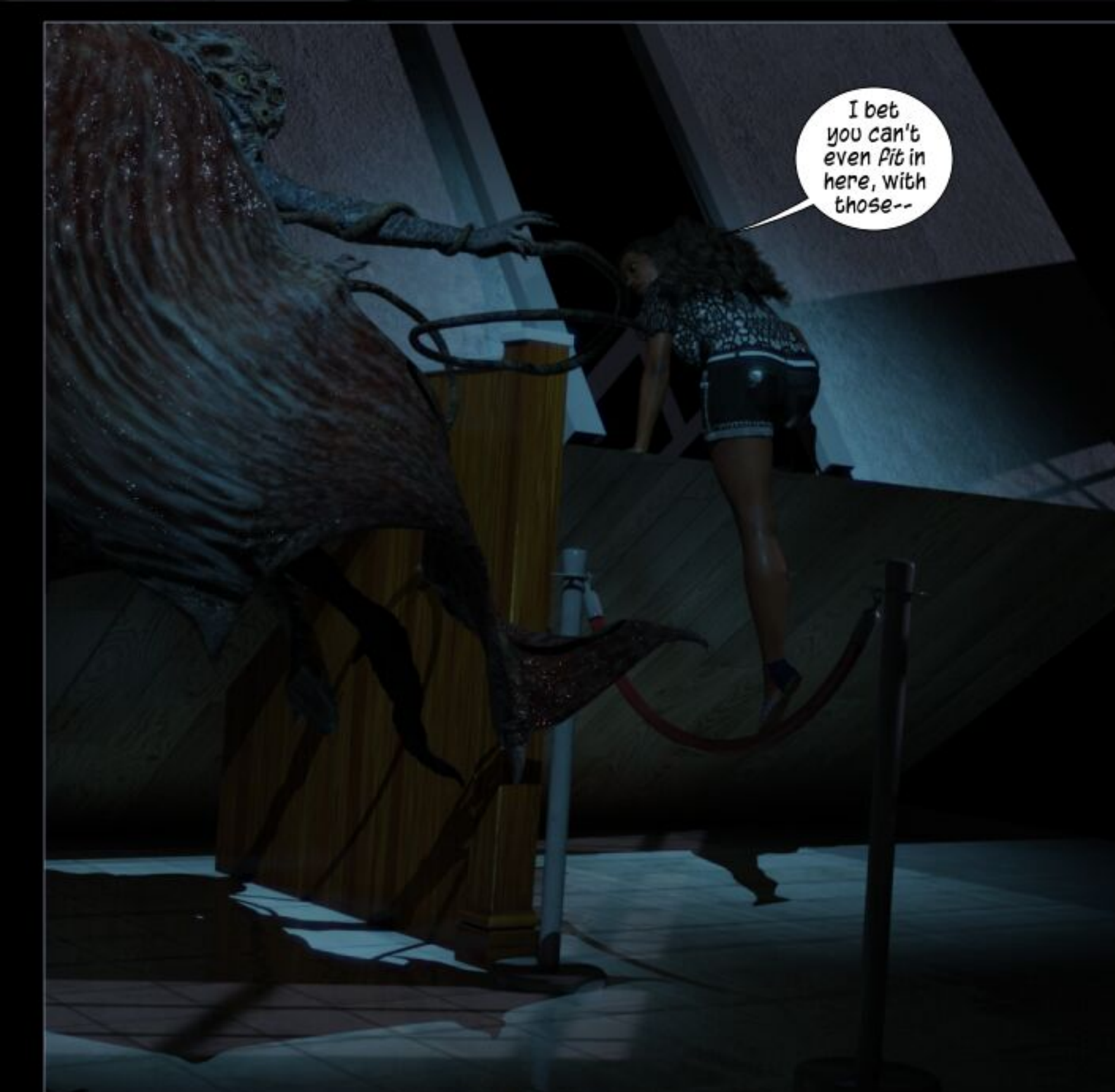
The Sprue is a messy eater.



If I want to keep heading that way, I need to get through it ... Maybe back here ...



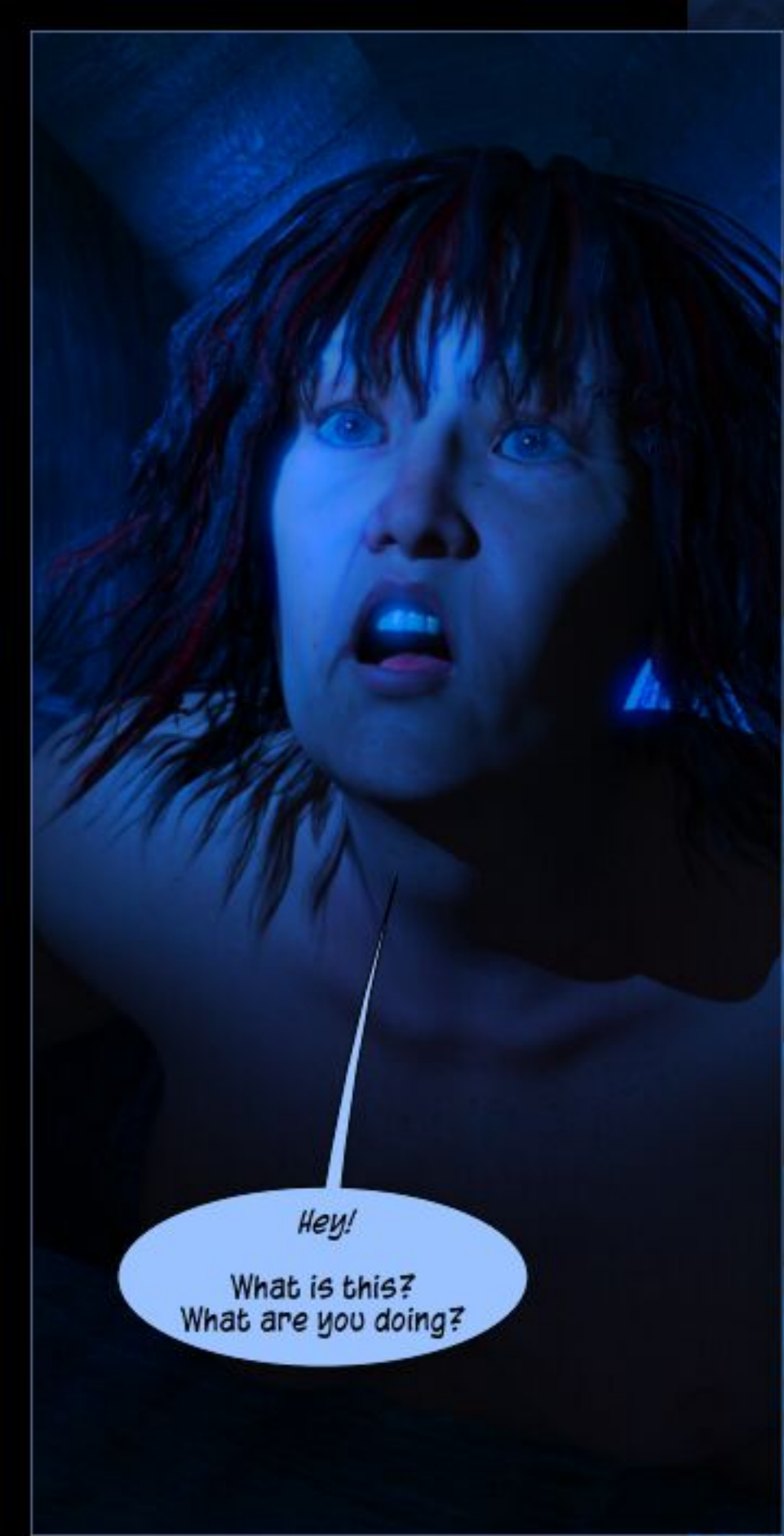
Whoa!



I bet you can't even fit in here, with those--



YAAAAA!!



Hey!  
What is this?  
What are you doing?

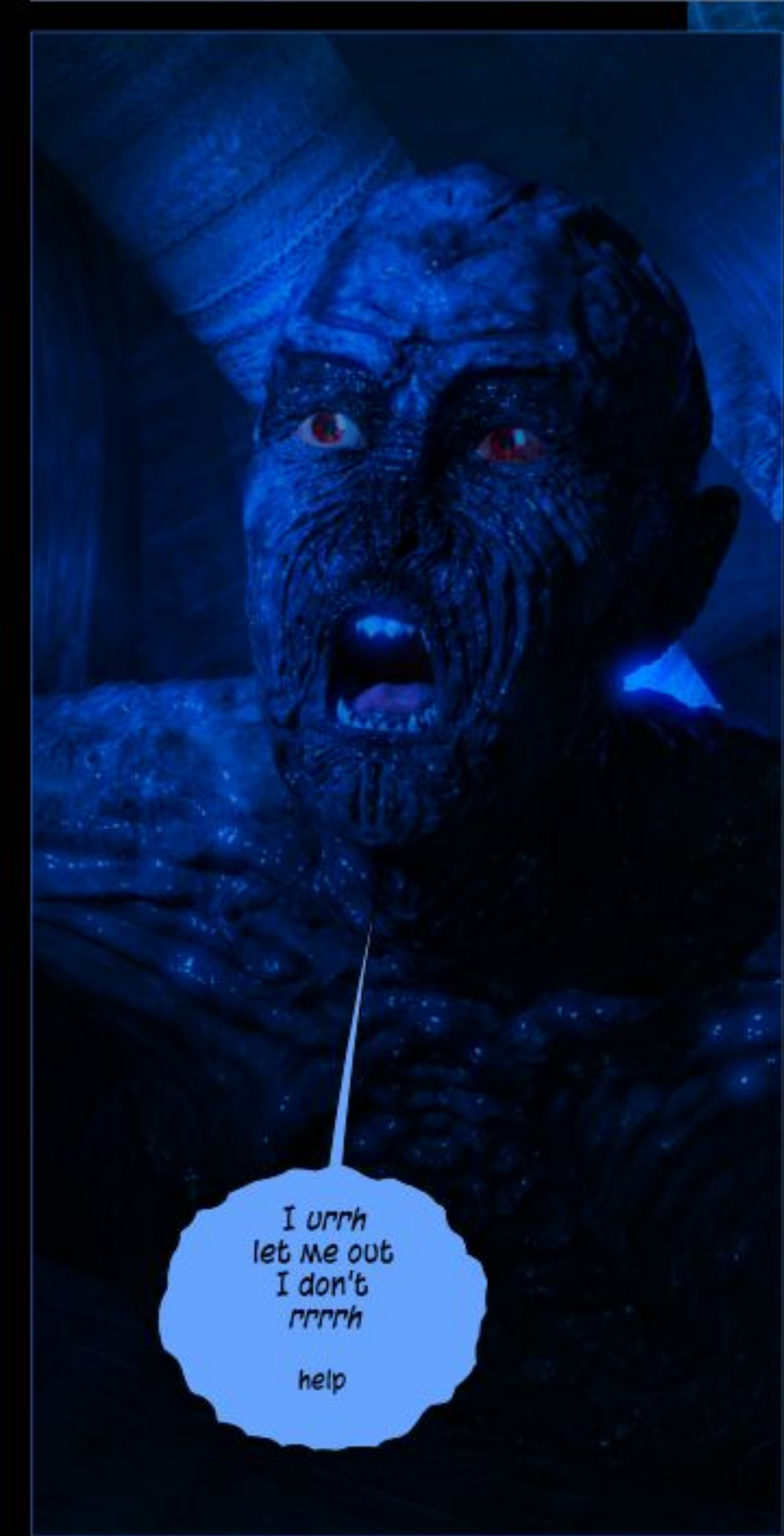


Is anyone there?  
I don't like this!  
Someone let me out,  
please?

Let me  
go, ugly!



Please ...  
I don't ...  
uuurgh



I urrrh  
let me out  
I don't  
rrrrrh  
help



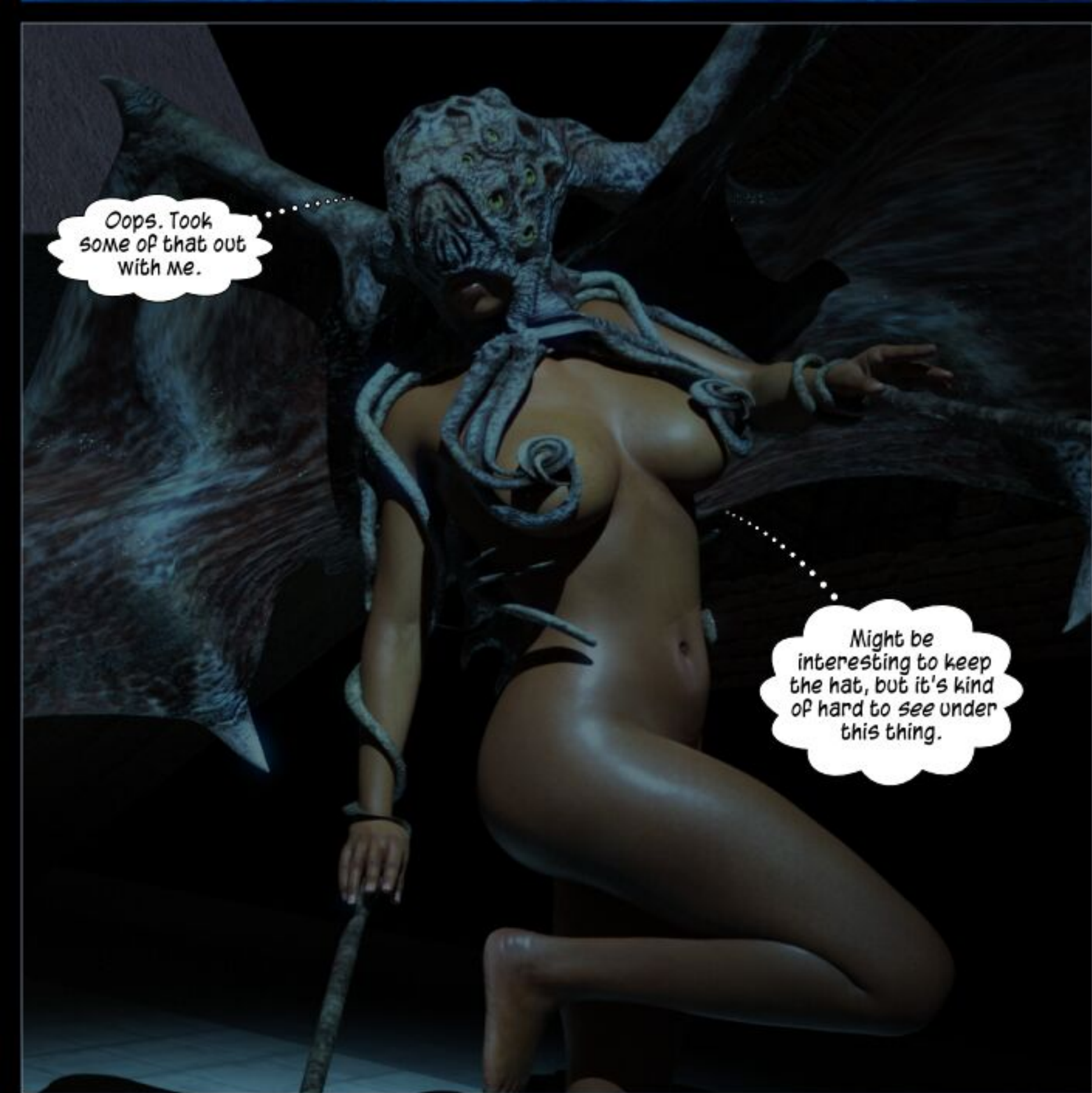
no hrr  
don't  
I don't want it  
no no n--



I think that's more  
than enough of this.

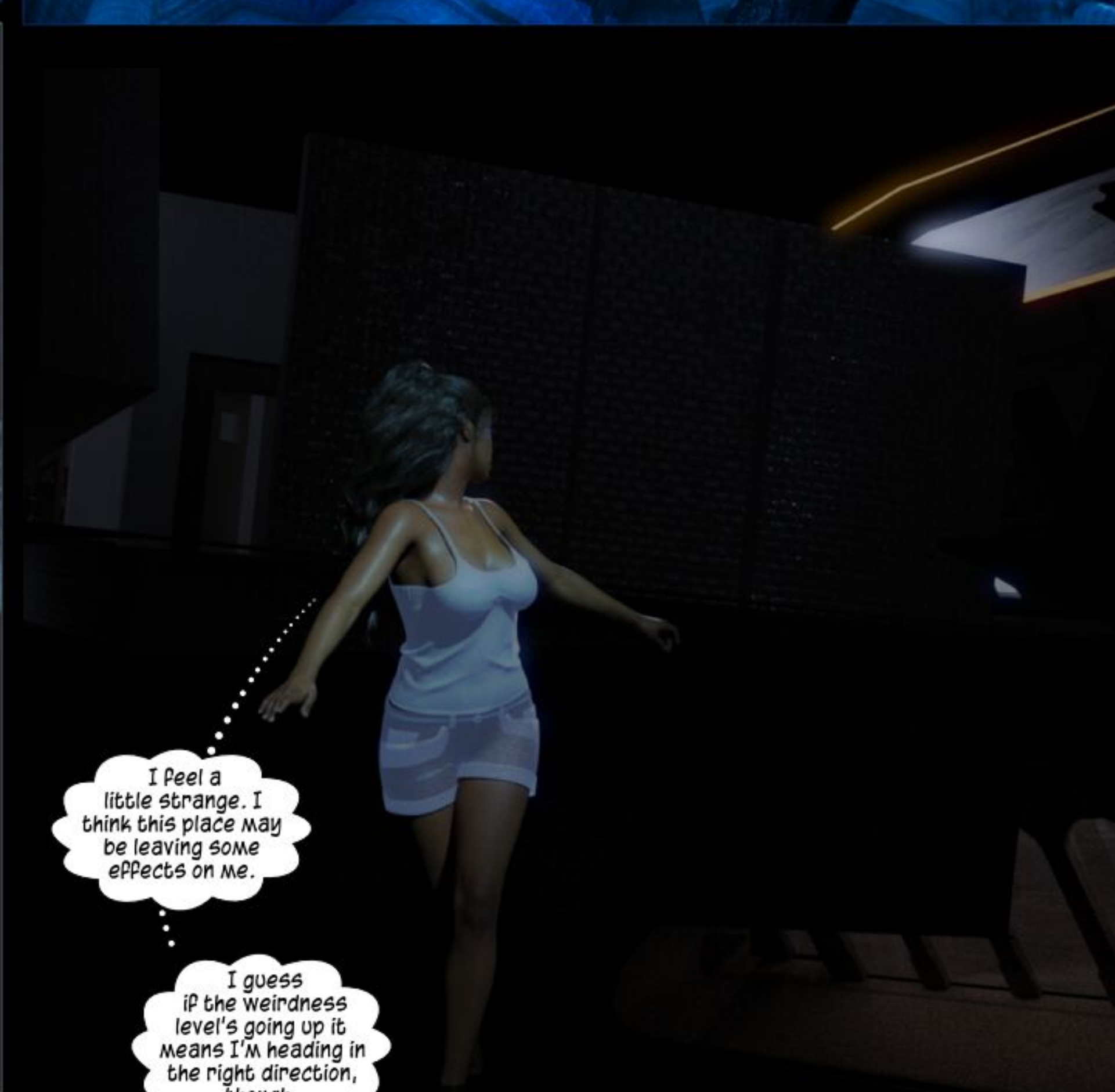


Surprise!



Oops. Took  
some of that out  
with me.

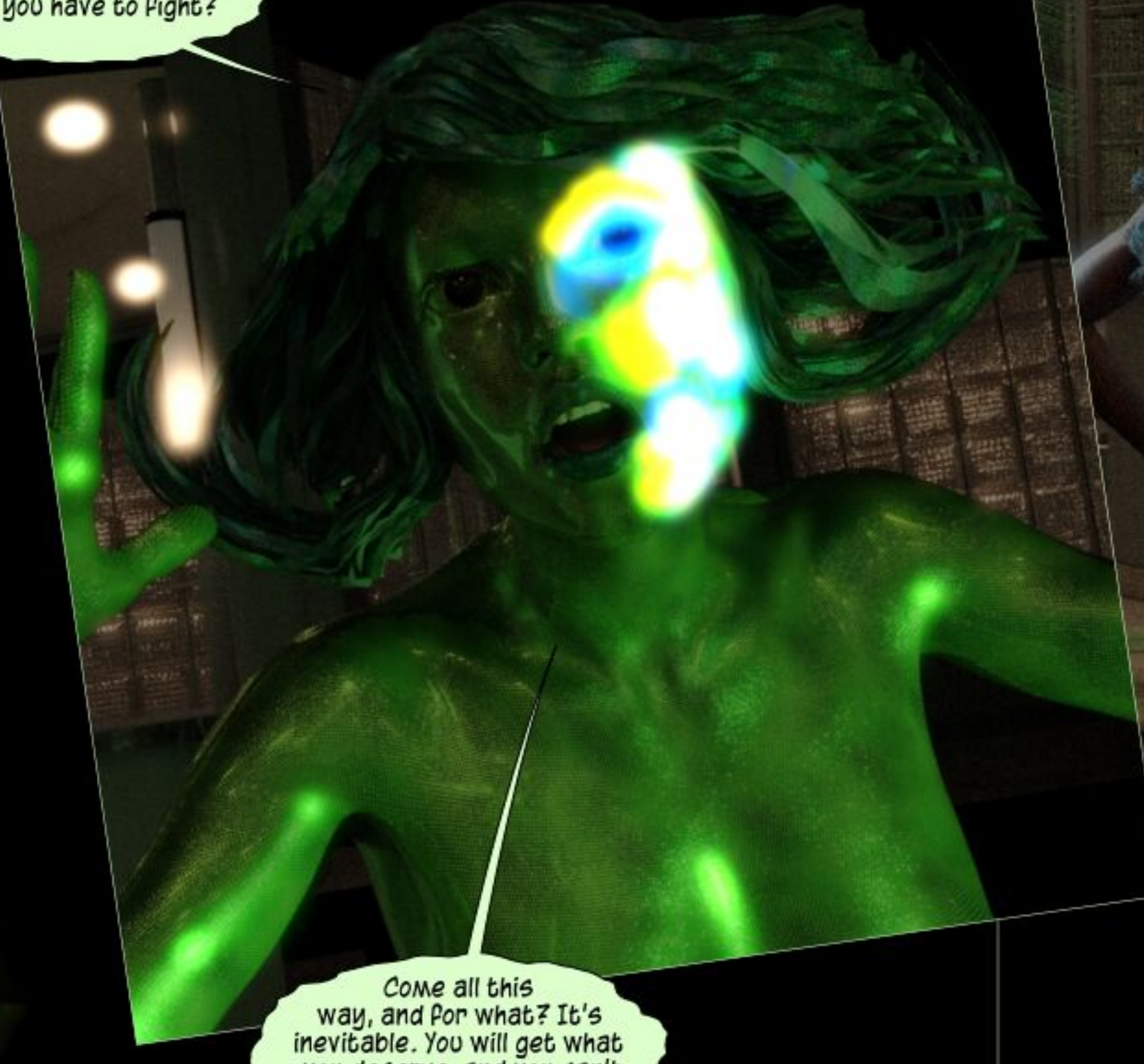
Might be  
interesting to keep  
the hat, but it's kind  
of hard to see under  
this thing.



I feel a  
little strange. I  
think this place may  
be leaving some  
effects on me.

I guess  
if the weirdness  
level's going up it  
means I'm heading in  
the right direction,  
though.

Why won't you just accept it?  
Why do you have to fight?



Come all this way, and for what? It's inevitable. You will get what you deserve, and you can't stop it.

You think we deserve this?



You left me!  
You locked me into this and never came back. You were going to let me stay like this forever!  
Then you let the hotel drift away. No one came for me!

... I admit we messed up. I didn't even know the Martinique had fragmented until it was too late.

But that's not enough reason for you to help her take apart the whole place ...

JULIA'S STORY BEGINS ALL THE WAY BACK IN ISSUE #1.

She doesn't need a reason! She is beyond reason!



Yike!

And you belong to me, for what you've done!

Wait!



Got you!

You were the best one, you know. You were perfect.



You don't -- don't need to do this ...

We'll dance together again.

We'll dance while everything else goes away.



Hey!



--ooou--  
Why don't you pick on someone your own--

--size!

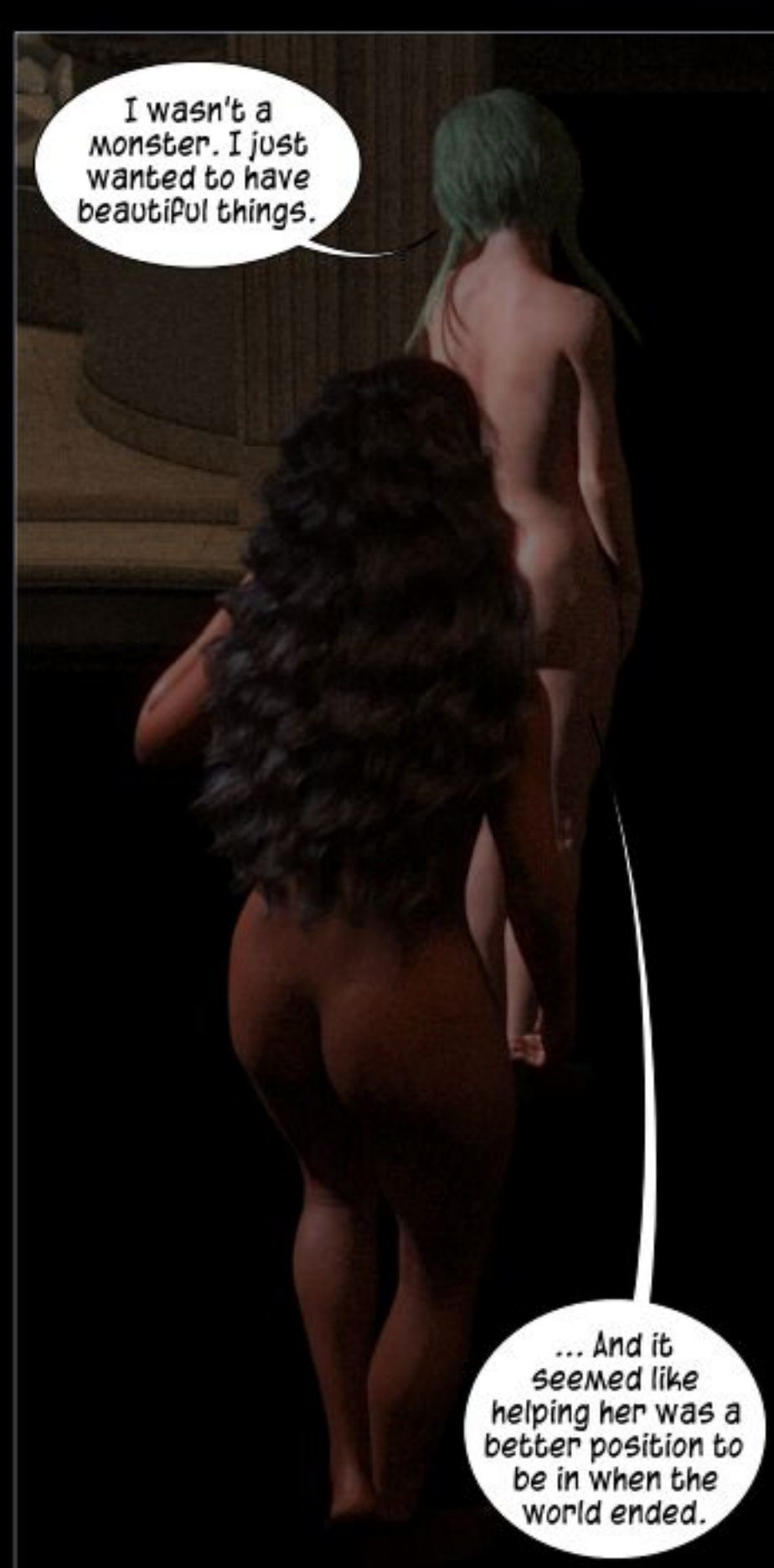


yaaaaa!



Fine.

You win. Go ahead, lock me up in some hole somewhere.



I wasn't a monster. I just wanted to have beautiful things.

... And it seemed like helping her was a better position to be in when the world ended.



The world hasn't ended yet.



I had no idea at the time, you know.

Leyna told me you were a real danger, and let me think you were responsible for the death of a friend ...

And both of those were lies ... but more importantly, neither one of us realized how much worse than you was going to come along later.

We overdid it.



I'm not inclined to throw you back into that.



... you're not?



Just ... you know, if you did what you did with permission, no one would ever have cared. Find volunteers to dance for you. There are probably plenty.

I really need your promise of good conduct, especially since I am going after her, and I want you out of it.

... Ruby ... I don't think anything can stop her.

She's too big. She's the world now. She just hasn't gotten all the pieces yet.

I don't believe that, though.



... I hope you're right.

Yeah, so do I.



What is that?  
It's huge ... but I can't  
make out its shape ...

Also, that sure is a  
lot of ghosts ...



... Uh ... much  
creepier ghosts.

They seem to  
be drawn to that  
building ... if it's even  
what it is ...



Oh, now, wait!  
I come in peace!

I don't want to be  
sucked into one of your--



--loops.

Hall of Mirrors ...  
Where the hell is this?  
She looks just as  
confused as I am ...



No, I'm not--



Noooo!



Well, that's  
nasty.

Not sure  
exactly what it did,  
but now we're a  
ghost--



--on a very  
short loop.



No, I'm not--

Now how do I  
break this one?





It's amazing how often breaking out means actually breaking something ...



and I--  
uh?

I'm a ghost?



I'll stay like this a while. That way the others will leave me alone.

I was trying to get into that place, wasn't I? Whatever it is?



This is the place with all the mirrors ... From that loop ...

Whatever it was that was affecting her, it doesn't seem to be getting to me--

Wait. Was that loop me? Was it someone else? How did it--



I can't remember! I don't remember who I am!

That's what happened! These mirrors! They took it away! I--



I need to keep moving. Maybe it's just this place. Maybe if I can get out the Par side of it I'll remember.

What is this? What am I seeing there?



You can't! You can't! Don't leave us here!



I know you don't understand, but you will one day.

With your father dead ... there's nothing here for me anymore. Just being here hurts.

I can't stay, and I can't make your decision for you. In a few years, you'll be old enough to decide for yourself.

You and your sister will do fine until then. You're better at this than I am. You can survive it. I can't. Not without him.



You don't love us!! You don't even care about us!

You know that's not true.

I'm sorry. I have to do this.



Is that me?  
Is that one of my memories?

It doesn't feel like it,  
somehow ... but ...



Here's another ...  
Maybe I should try to  
get past it without  
looking ...

... but if it is me, I  
want to know ...



You're just like  
Mama! you're going to  
leave me too! You don't  
care about me!

That's not  
true.

And you're old  
enough to take care  
of yourself. You'll do  
fine. You're better at  
surviving out here  
than I am.



That's not the point!  
The point is I need you and  
you're just leaving me!

Listen to me.  
This place is hell. The only reason  
I've stayed out here is to take  
care of you. You don't need me  
to do that anymore.

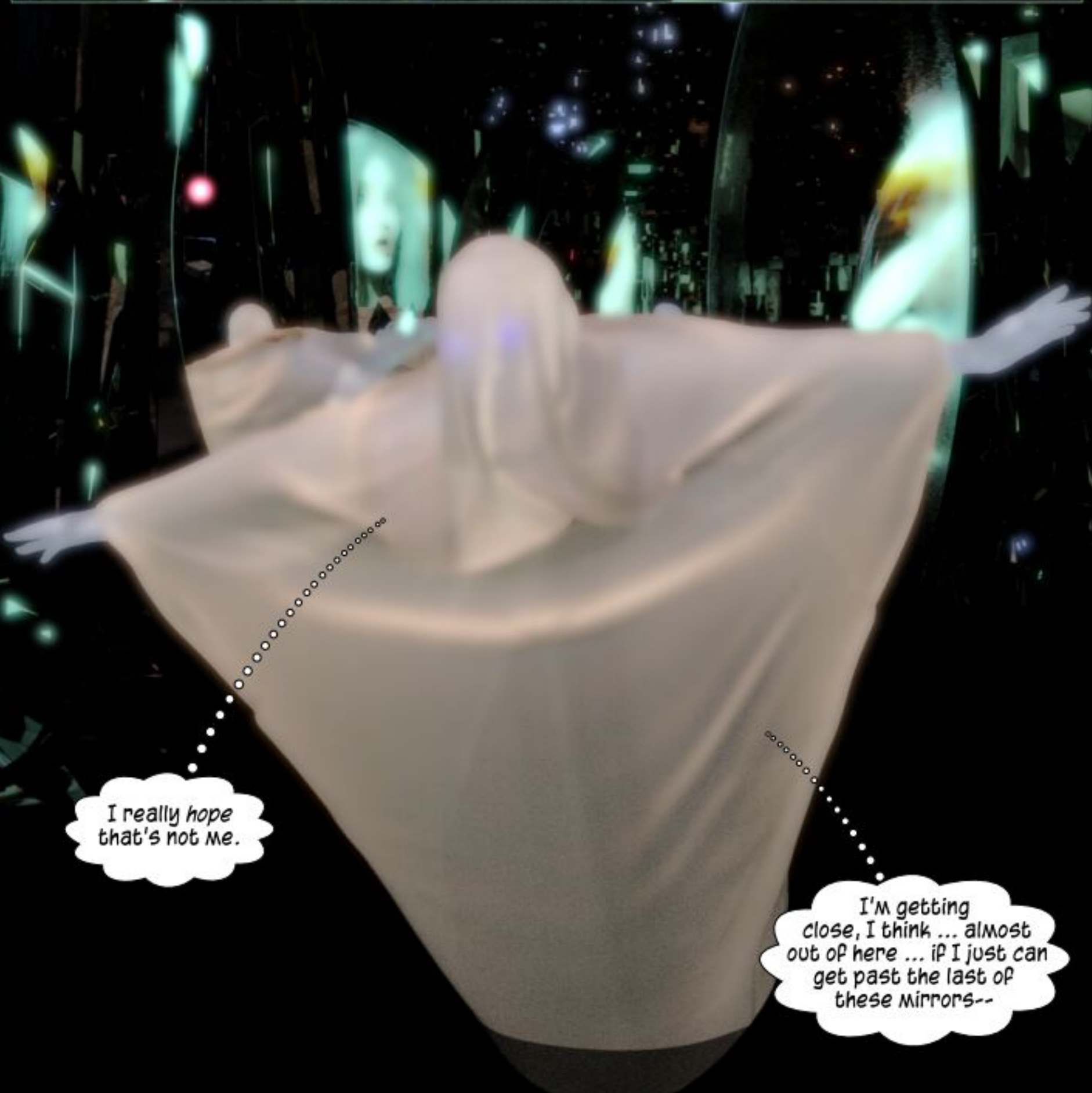
You're old enough to  
decide for yourself. Come  
into Sleep. Or don't. Keep  
scraping it that's what you  
want. Or join the  
Wide-Eyes, maybe.



It's not Pair!  
It's not Pair!

Oh, honestly.  
You're not seven  
years old anymore,  
you know.

This is the way it  
has to be.  
I'm sorry.



I really hope  
that's not me.

I'm getting  
close, I think ... almost  
out of here ... if I just can  
get past the last of  
these Mirrors--



What??

No--  
you can't do that ...



Watch me.

This place makes  
me crazy. Sure, outside,  
you're likely to  
die ... but in here, you  
have to swallow their  
bullshit all the time.

There is a better  
alternative, and I  
should have taken it  
ages ago.



But ...  
I thought you loved me!  
I thought we were --

I do love you.  
But everything has limits,  
y'know? I'm not staying here  
for you. Not for anybody.

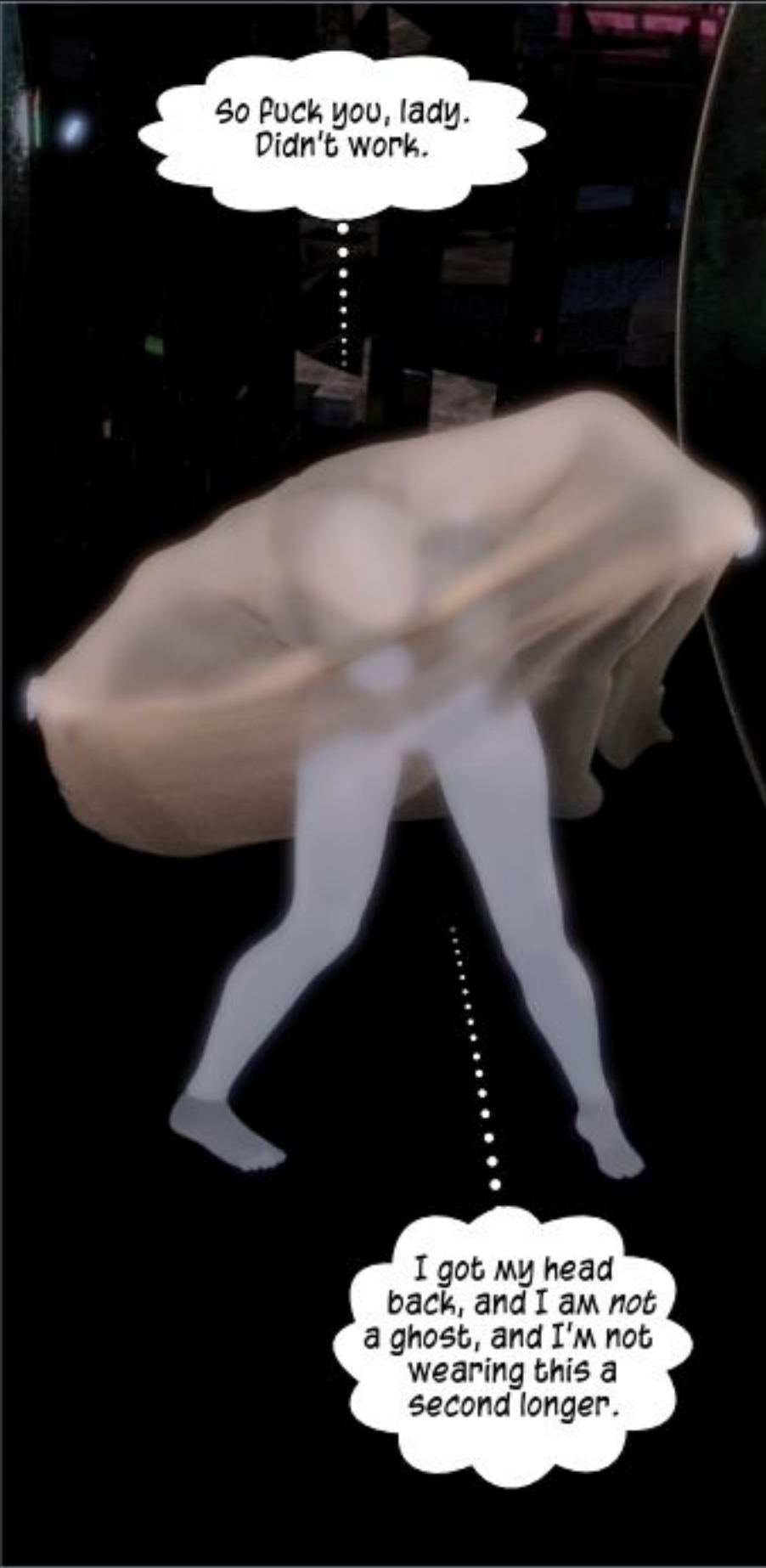
And since you've  
got this crazy thing  
about Sleep, I'm not asking  
you to come with me. I  
know better.

I'm sorry.



No!

No, definitely not.  
That is not me ... and what's more, I remember who is.



So Fuck you, lady.  
Didn't work.

I got my head back, and I am not a ghost, and I'm not wearing this a second longer.



That whole thing was a trap. A defense.

You can't confront her if you don't know who you even are.

And if I'm hitting defenses, then I must be getting pretty close.



Now, if I were designing a "nerve center of a data virus," that is pretty much what it would look like.



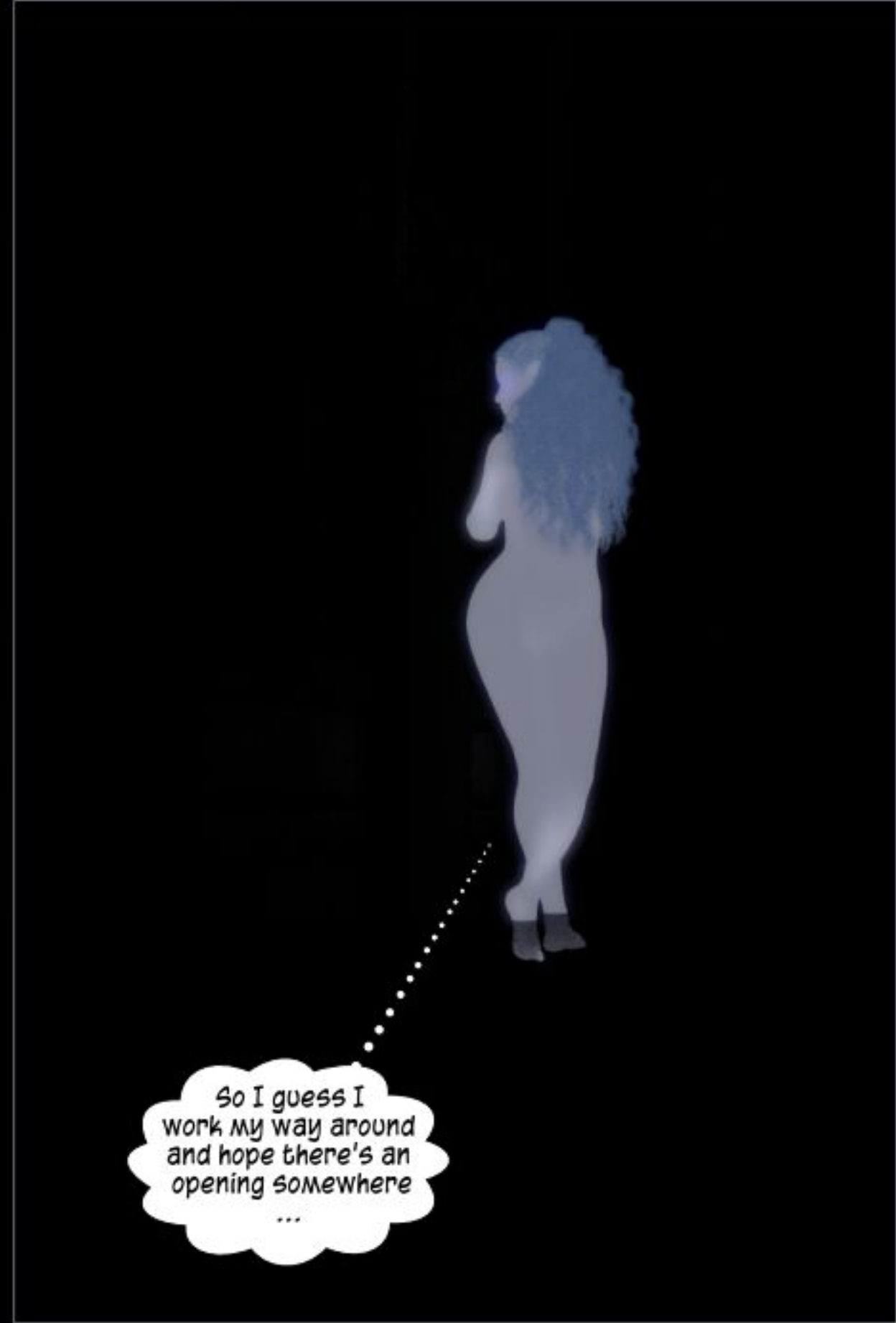
AAA!



It's a wall!

It's so dark I can't even see it standing right next to it.

Can't feel the top of it either ...

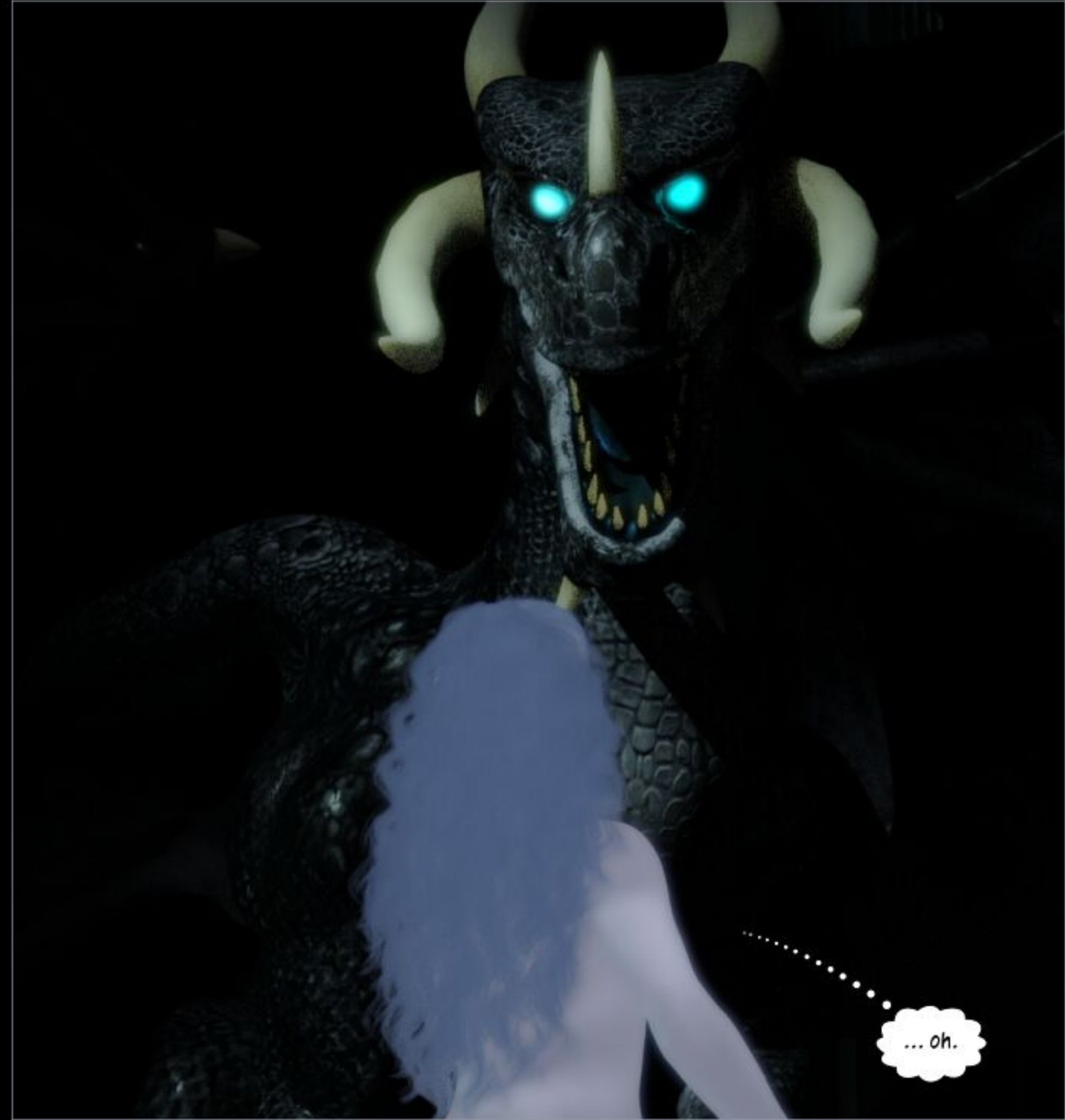


So I guess I work my way around and hope there's an opening somewhere ...

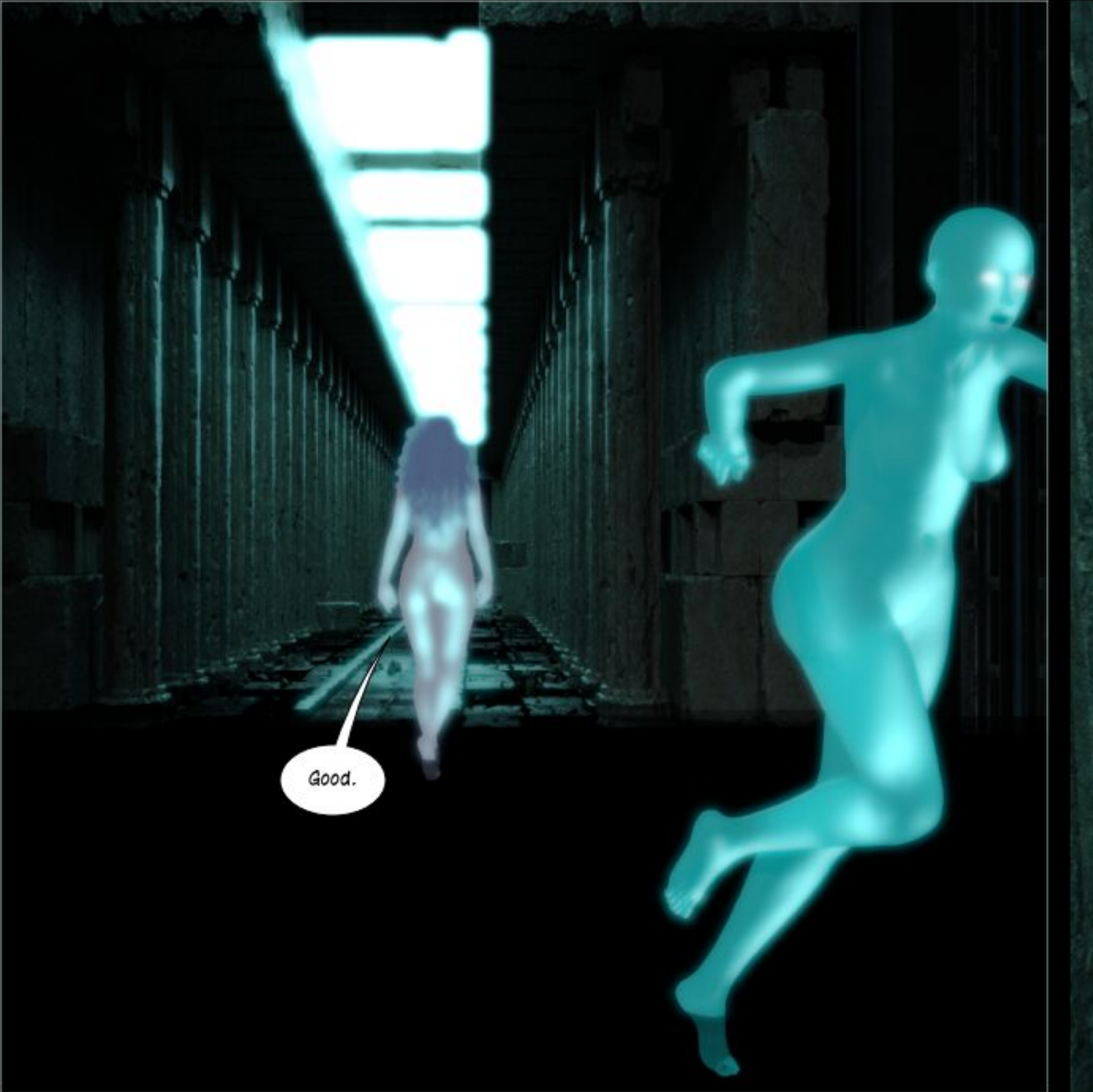


That looks promising.

What are those things covering it? Curtains?



... oh.



WHUAA!

Damn it, I always forget ...

Hi, I'm up here!

You know, even in this place, I can tell when someone's been transformed ...

Let's fix that.

-- oop --

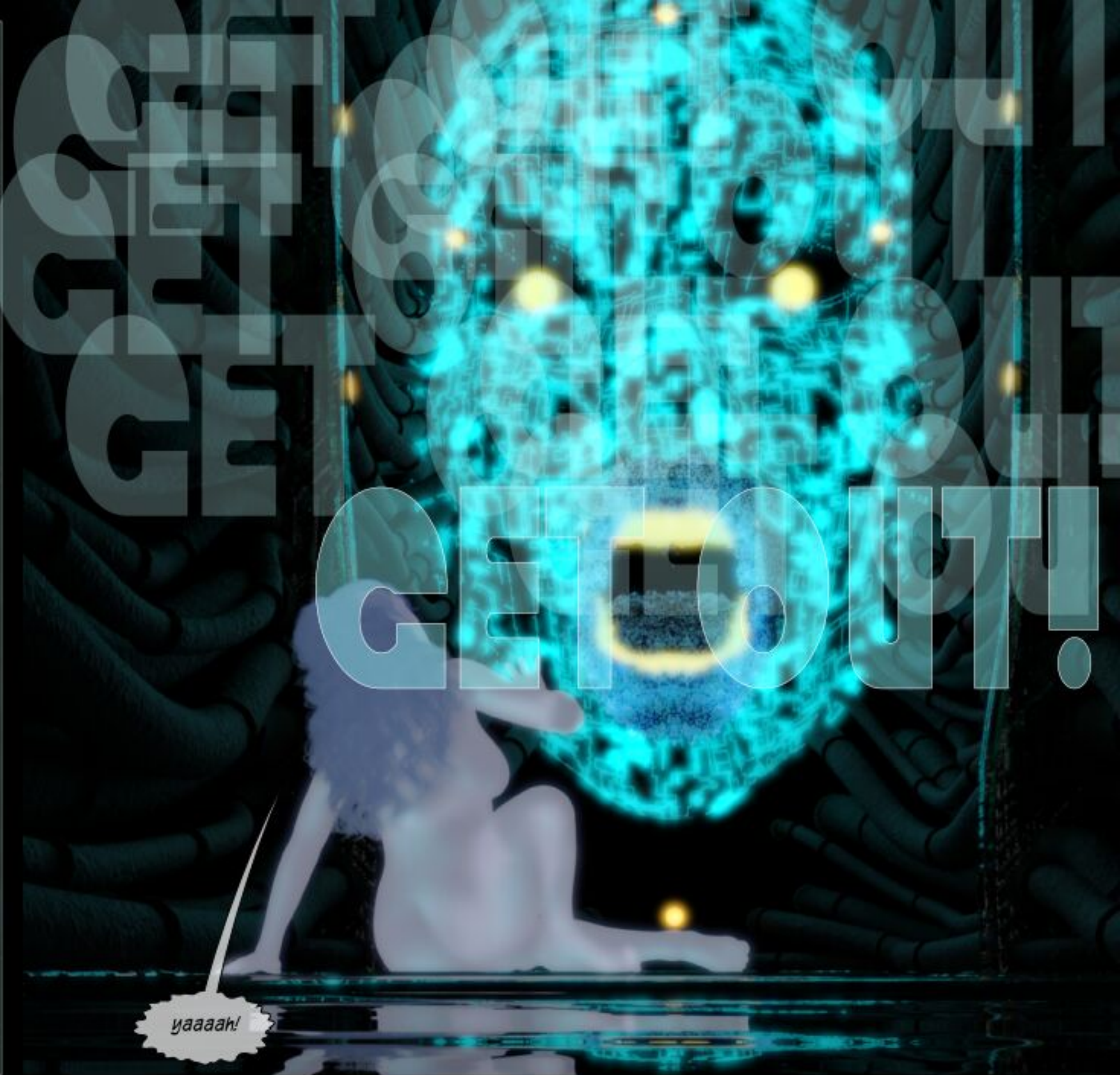
Uh ... hello. Are you going to give me a hard time now?

Good.

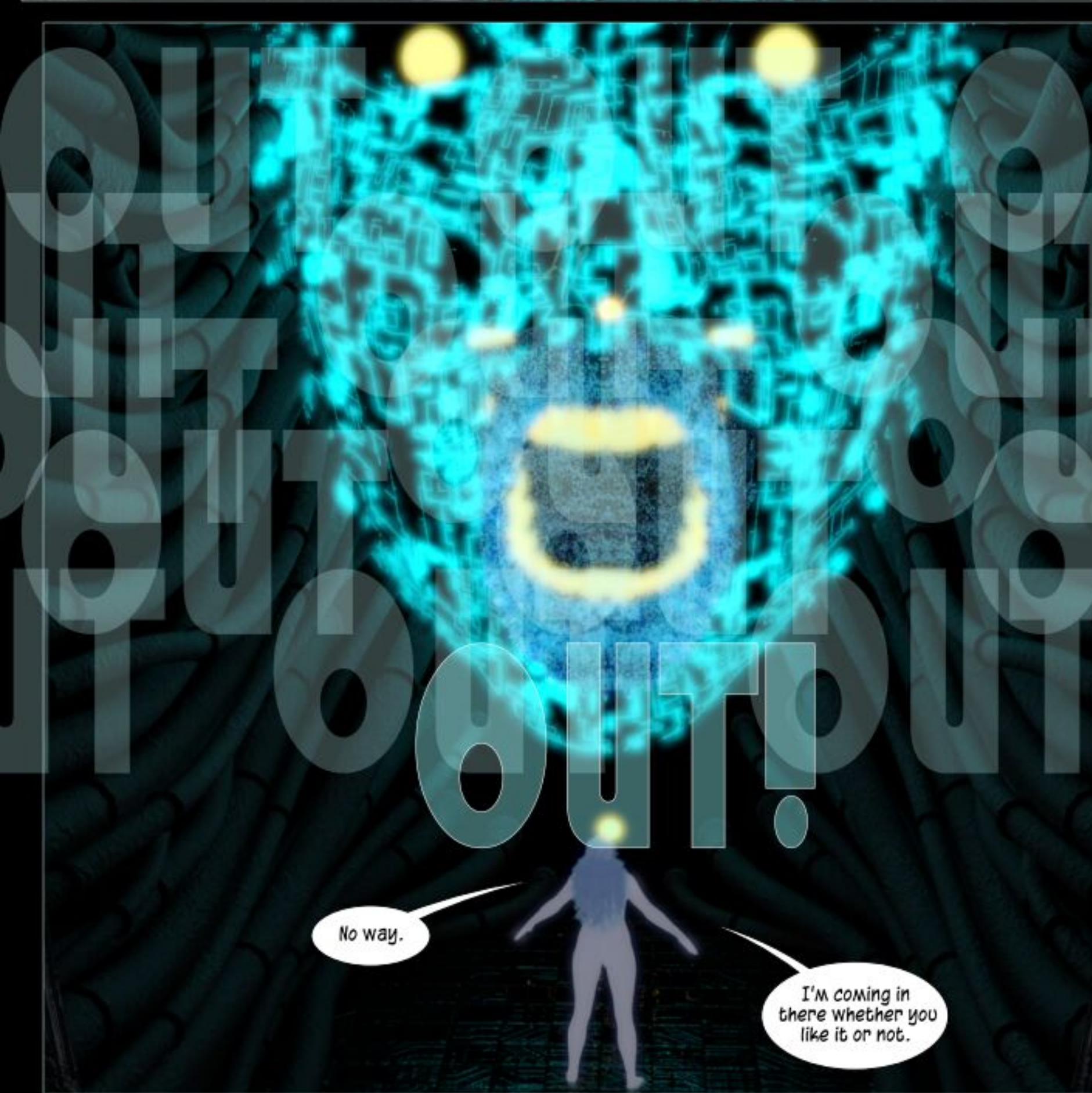


Dead end.

Or is that some kind of weird portal or--



yaaaaa!

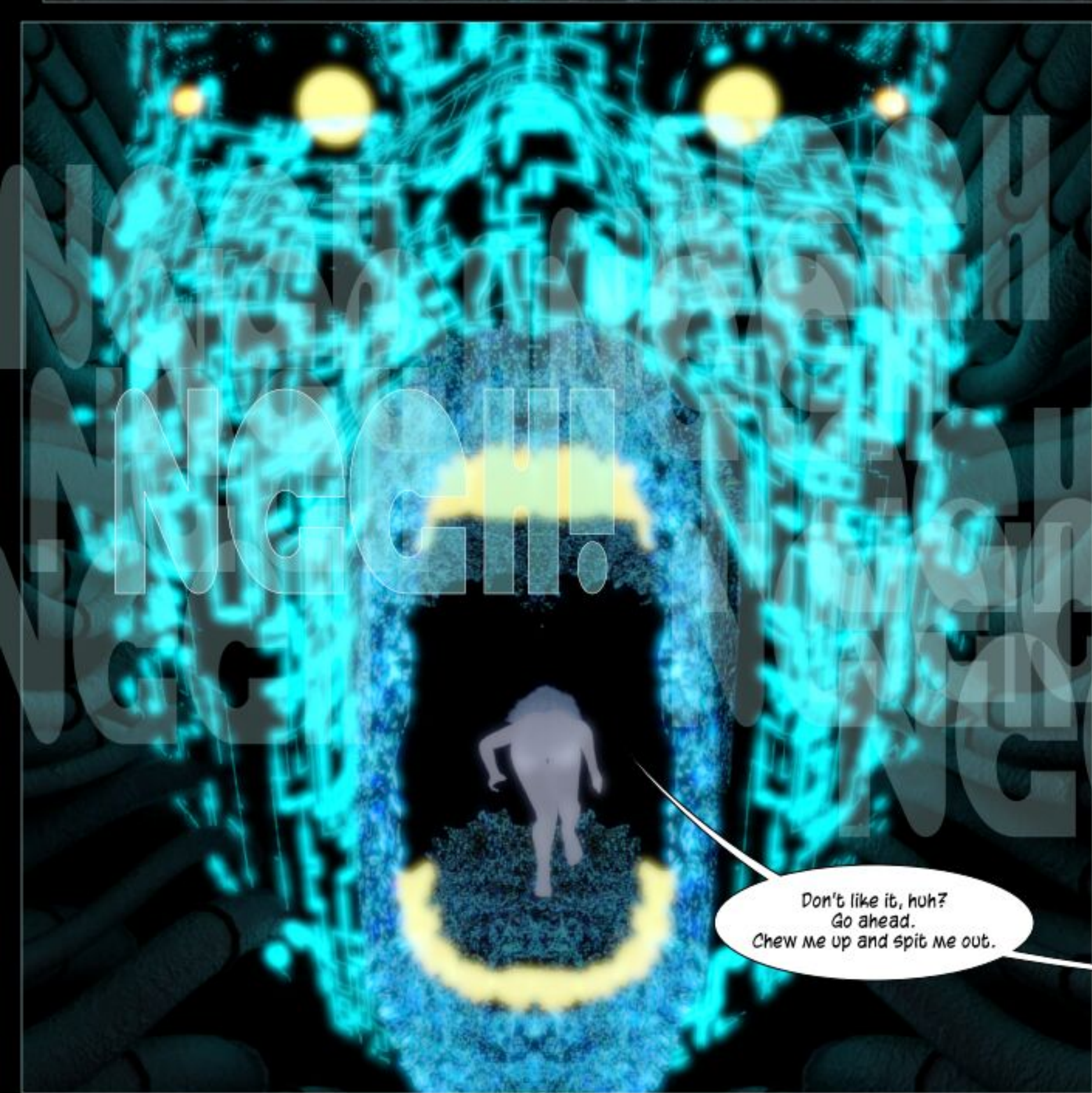


No way.

I'm coming in there whether you like it or not.



--hrp--  
Open wide.



Don't like it, huh?  
Go ahead.  
Chew me up and spit me out.

If you can.



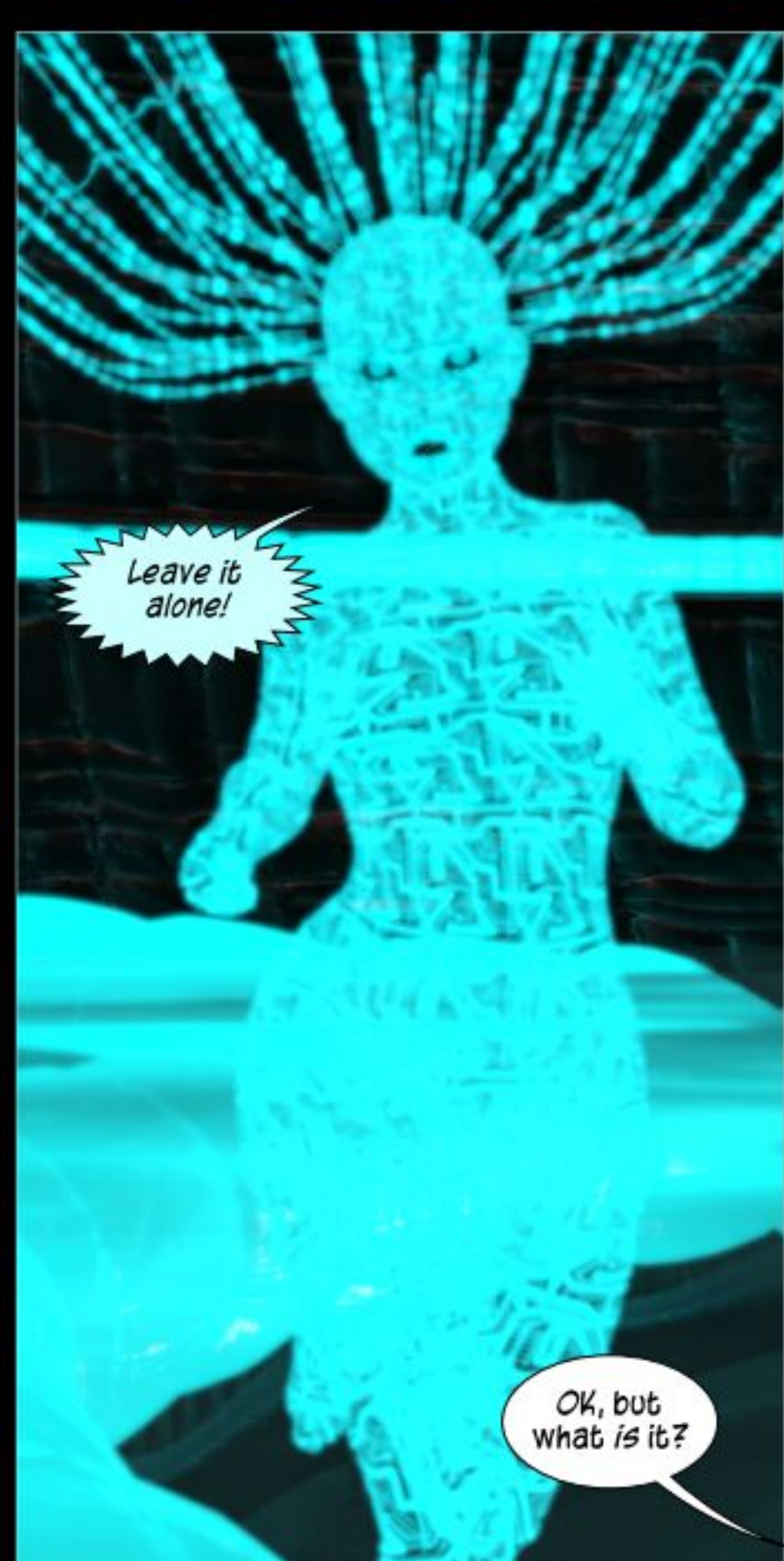
... Wow.

I don't know why someone would want to be a virus when they obviously have such untapped talent as a set designer.



This seems key ... but what do I do? If I destroy it, what else will that affect? I don't want to make the situation worse ...

Don't touch it!!



Leave it alone!

OK, but what is it?



It hurts! It's the part that hurts!

Hurts?

Yes! All of the time. Can't you peel it?

No.

If it hurts, why not get rid of it?



I need it! That's the hungry part. That's what takes everything apart. That's the part that makes it all go away!

But why is that so important? Why do you want to make it all go away?

Because you deserve -- AAAAH!



No! They can't come in! How did they get in?

I must have left the door open. My bad.



You all deserve to be erased! All of it! It all needs to go away!

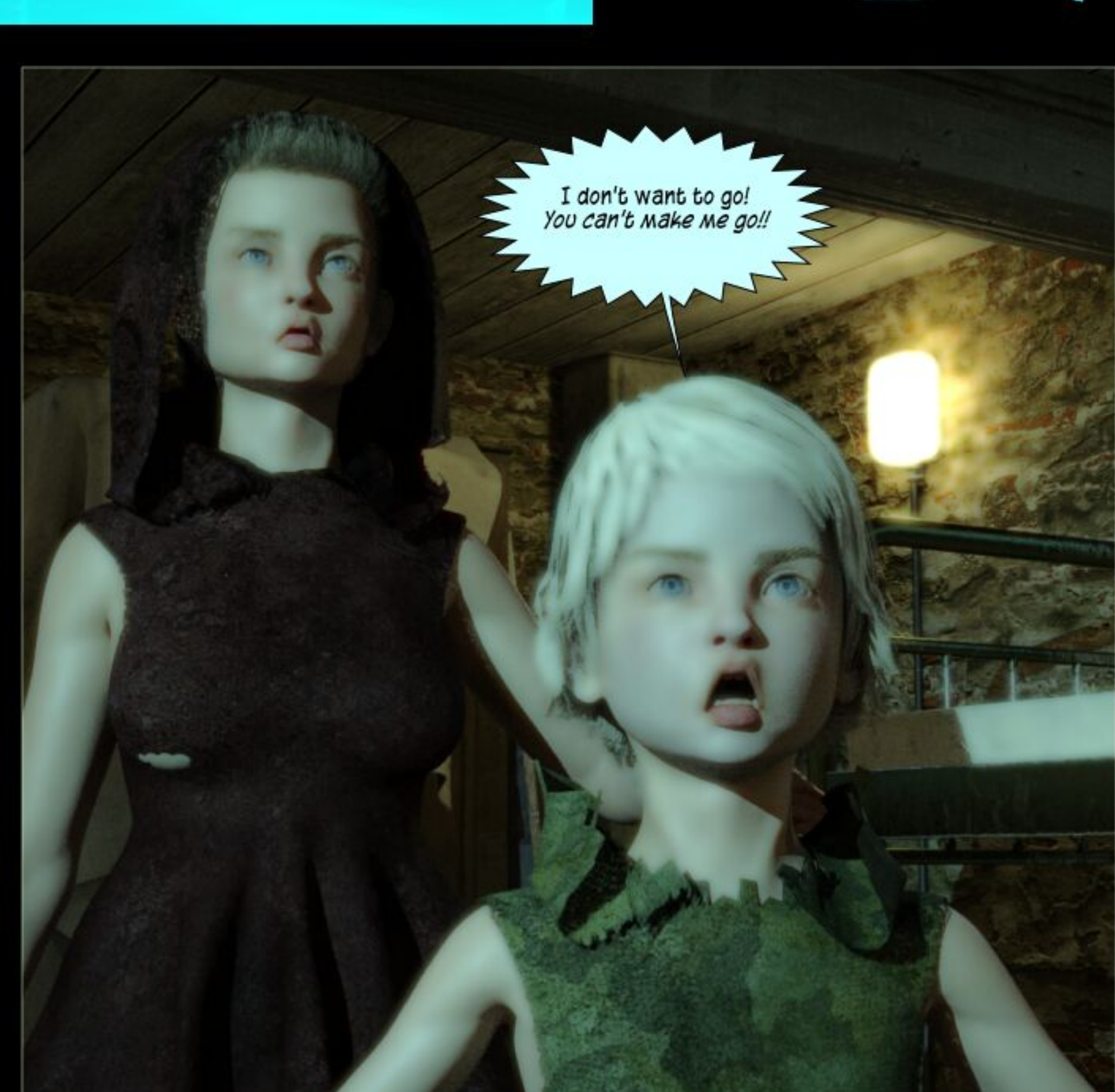
You took everybody from me! You take everything!



What are you doing??

Oh, is it movie night?

... I'm pretty sure I saw this one already.



I don't want to go! You can't make me go!!



Dear, please. I know you're a little young to understand, but try.

With your father dead ... there's nothing here for us anymore.

This place is going to kill us. We can't stay. We need to go to sleep.

I won't go! You can't make me! I like it here!



Mama ... this is the only thing she knows. She's scared of sleep.

Am not! I just like it here!

I can take care of her. For a while. I think she'll change her mind once you're gone ...

I hope you're right, Prota.

You two are much better at this than I am. I'm sure you'll be fine, but ... please be careful.

I love you both very much. Come find me soon.



That's not what happened! You're lying! Mama, you're lying!

You know, if I had to pick whose memories were a bit selective ...



Oh, hey--it's a double feature.

No, don't!



You're just like mama! you're going to leave me too! You don't care about me!

That's not true.

Would I stay here just to take care of you if I didn't love you? But you don't need me to do that anymore. You're old enough. You can take care of yourself.



That's not the point! The point is I need you and you're just leaving me!

Listen to me.

Mama had it right. This place is hell. We should have gone to sleep with her. You know that. We stayed out because you were scared and I wouldn't leave you out here alone.

I think you should go to sleep too, but you're old enough to decide for yourself. Come with me. Or don't. Keep scraping if that's what you really want. Or join the Wide-Eyes, maybe.



It's not Par! It's not Par!

Oh, honestly. You're not seven years old anymore, you know.

Shari, I'm sorry, but I'm not the unreasonable one here.

Come find me in sleep once you figure it out. If you ever do.



It's not true! That's not what happened! Why are you lying?

Ssh. I want to see the last act. I have a feeling this one's going to really be something.



What??

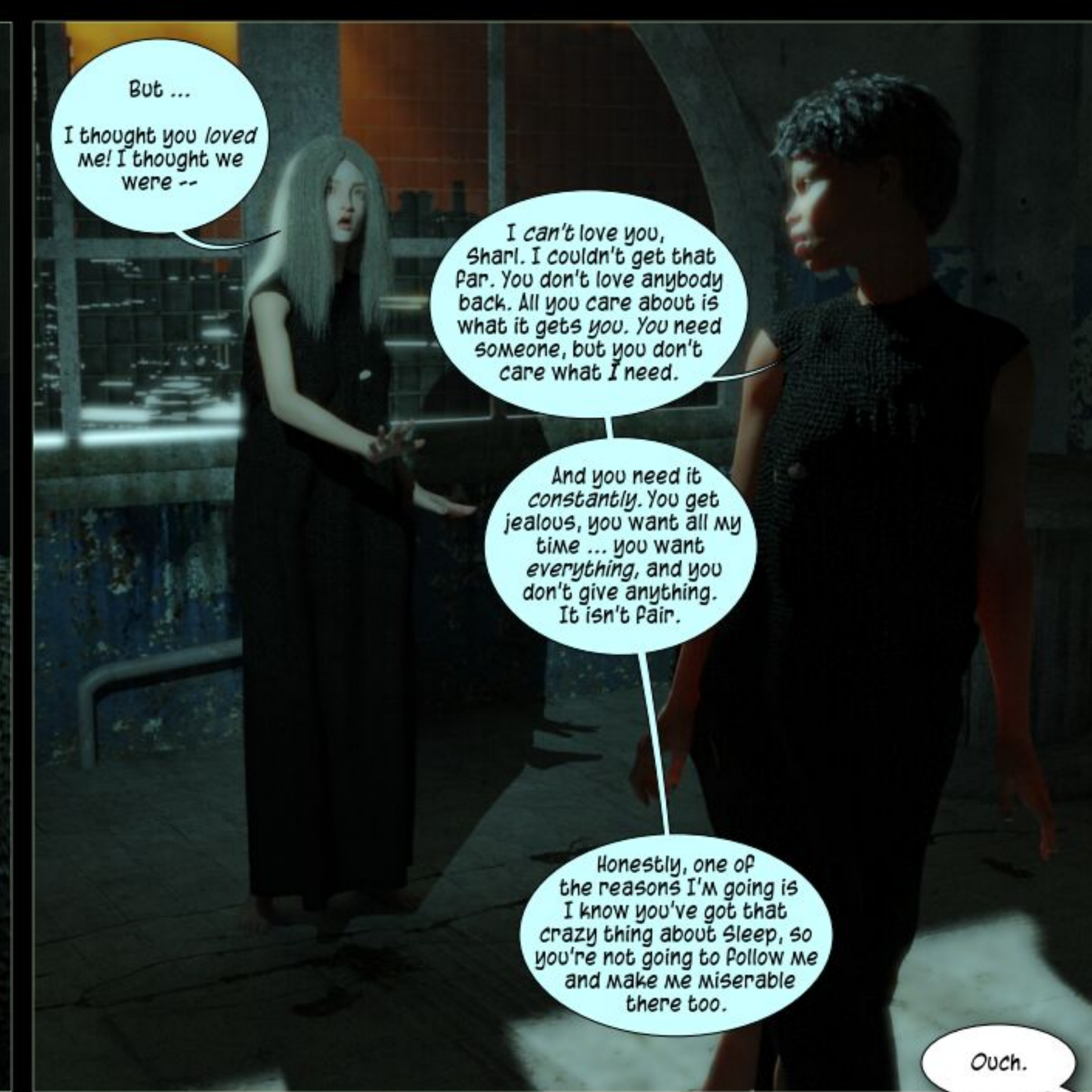
No-- you can't do that ...



Watch me.

This place makes me nuts. Sure, outside, you're likely to die ... but in here, you have to swallow their bullshit all the time.

There is a better alternative, and I should have taken it ages ago.



But ... I thought you loved me! I thought we were --

I can't love you, Shari. I couldn't get that Par. You don't love anybody back. All you care about is what it gets you. You need someone, but you don't care what I need.

And you need it constantly. You get jealous, you want all my time ... you want everything, and you don't give anything. It isn't Par.

Honestly, one of the reasons I'm going is I know you've got that crazy thing about sleep, so you're not going to follow me and make me miserable there too.

Ouch.



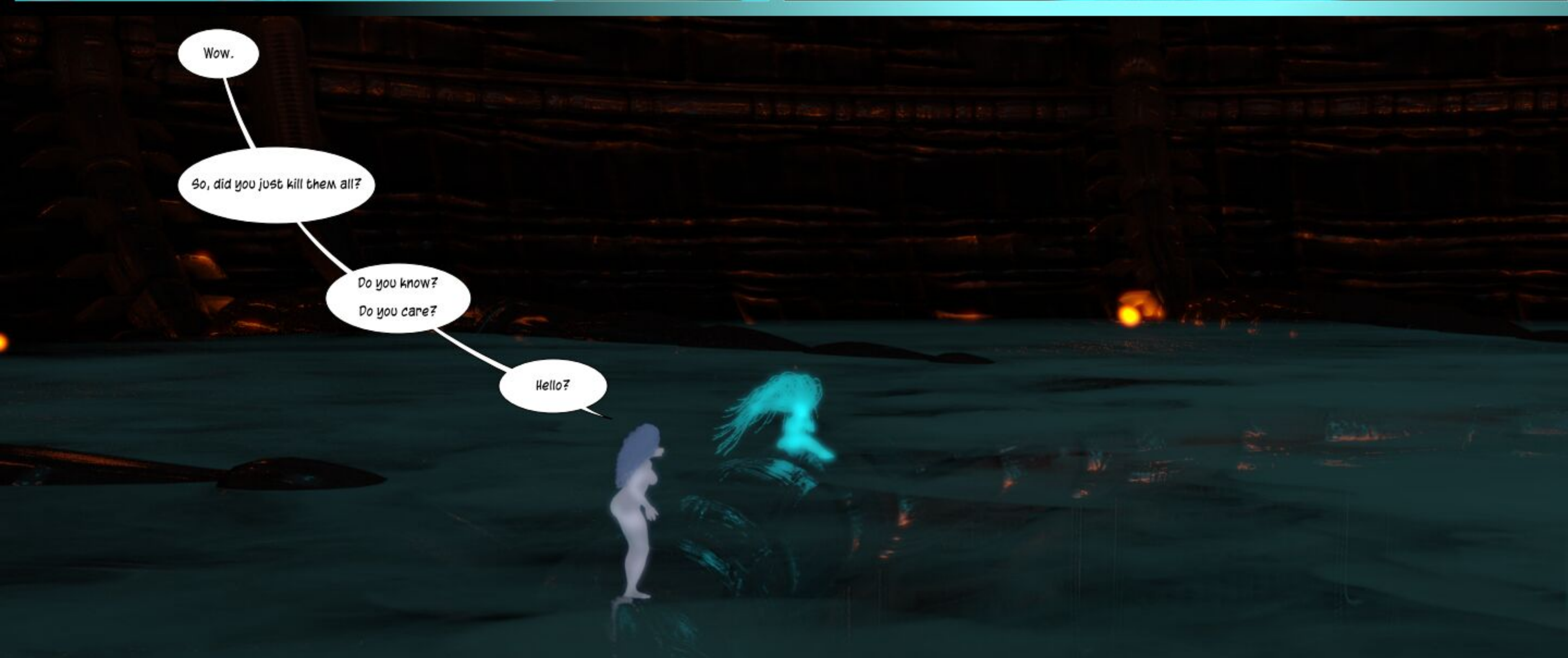
No!  
Don't believe any  
of it! It didn't--

Get away  
From me!  
All of you get away!  
You're not even supposed to  
be here!!

Don't touch me!!



LEAVE ME ALONE!

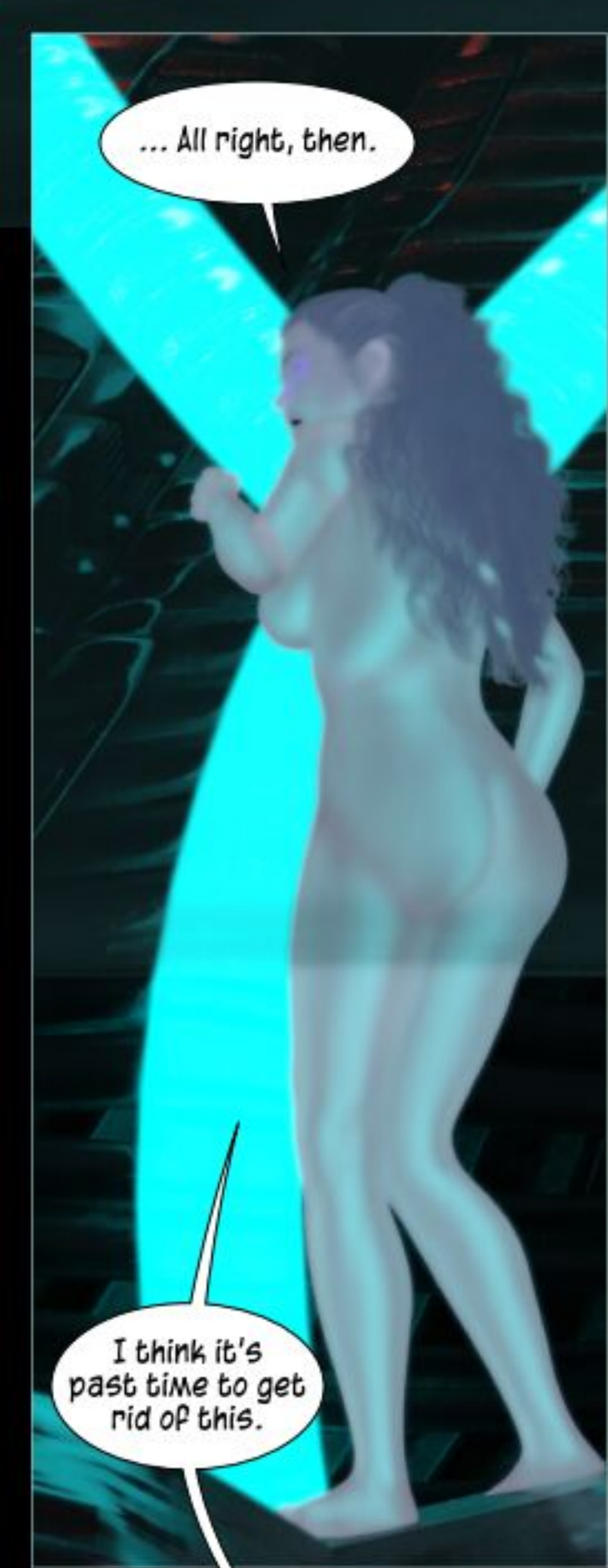


Wow.

So, did you just kill them all?

Do you know?  
Do you care?

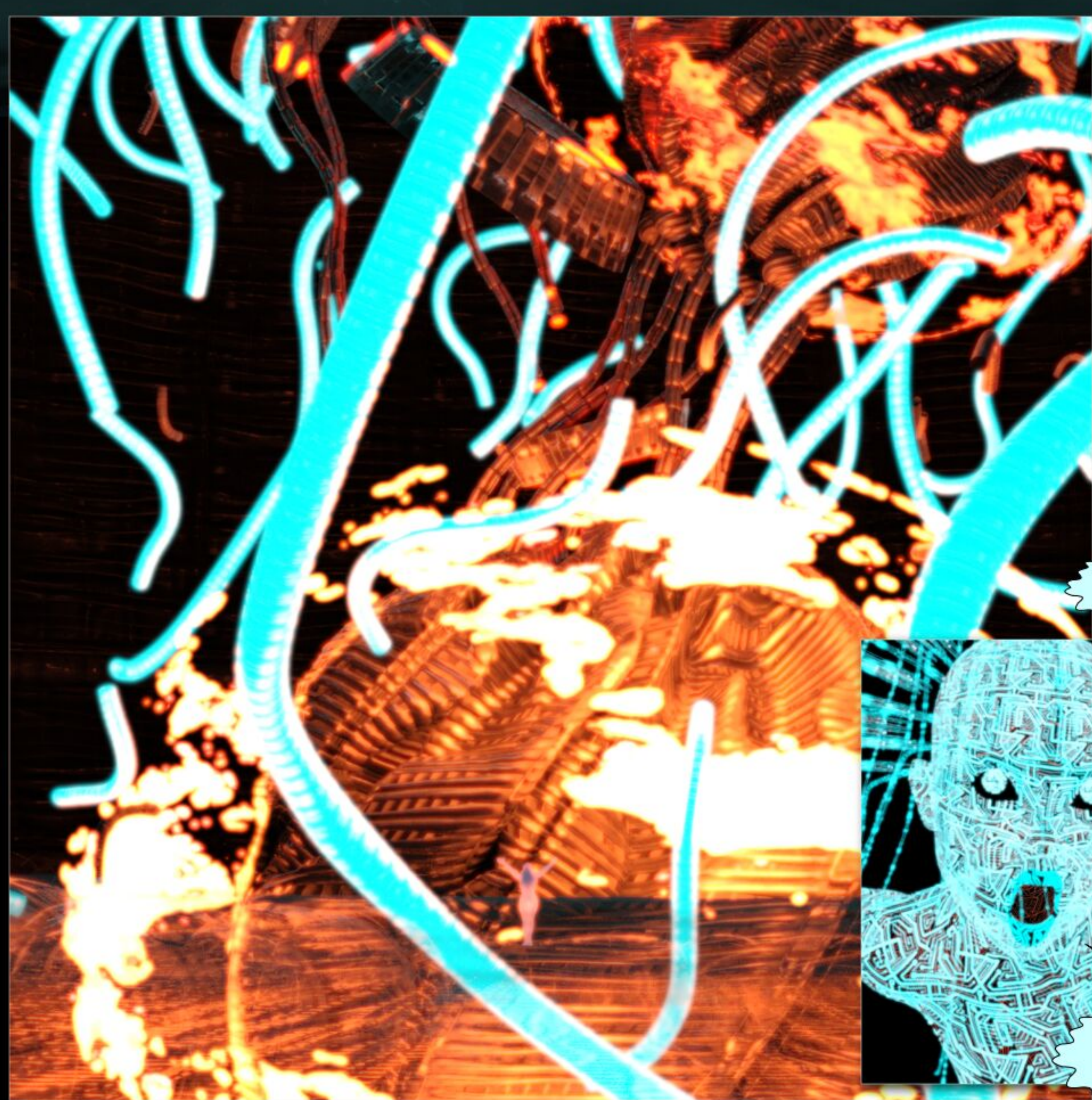
Hello?



... All right, then.

I think it's  
past time to get  
rid of this.

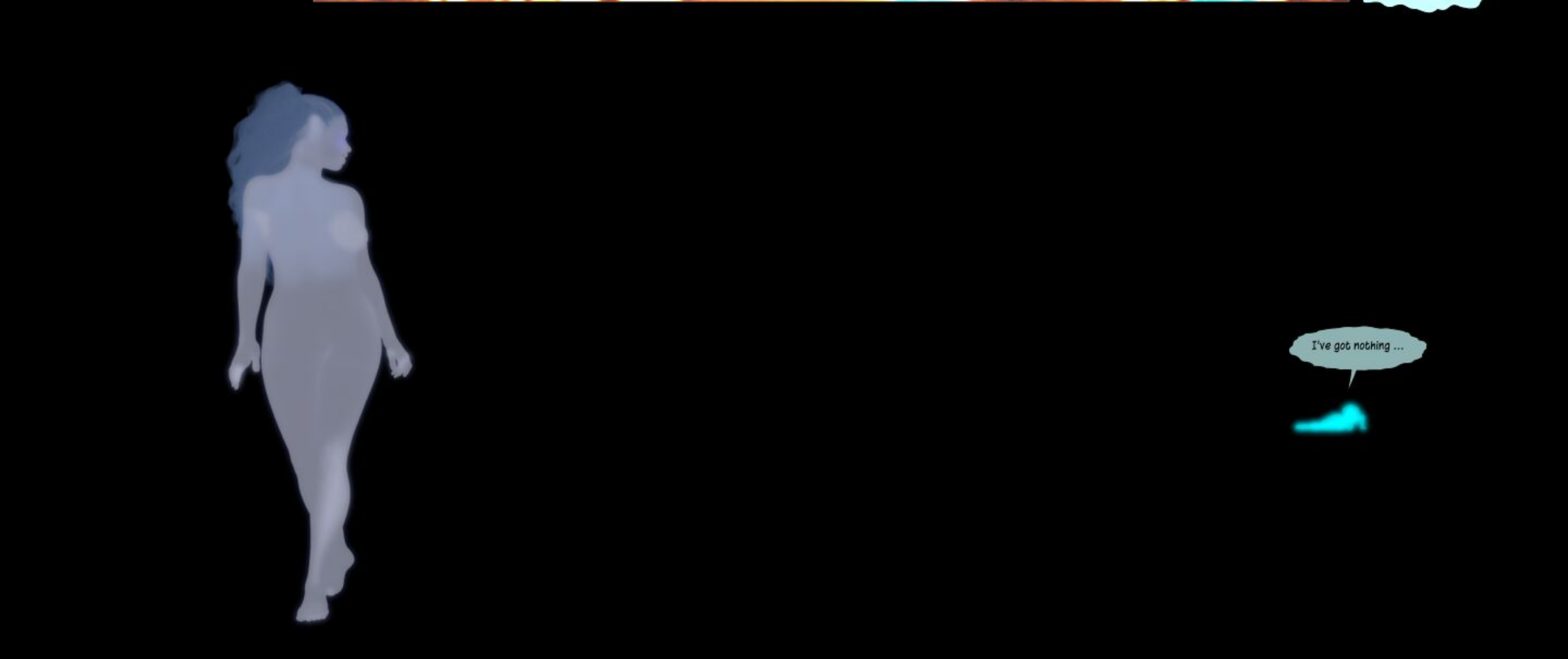
Can't possibly do  
any worse than you're  
already doing.



Noooo!!



You've taken it all!  
I've got nothing!



I've got nothing ...



TWO DAYS LATER.



I've confirmed what Ruby said in her message. I've been watching all the data closely and waiting for any reports. Nothing.

The Sprue is still there, but it--she--isn't eating data anymore. No attempts to consume blocks or disrupt portals at all. She seems to have gone dormant?

I am deeply suspicious of "seems to have."

So am I, but Ruby told me the active viral routine--the part that enabled the Sprue to do damage--has been destroyed ... and, given this evidence, I have to believe her.



But she didn't tell you how she managed to accomplish this.

Not a word. Which means she either did something unsafe or unethical or both. Probably both.

In a week or so, when she's recovered from whatever happened, I might be able to get her to talk about it. Right now I'm just going to accept it and let her recuperate her way.

Anyway, it'll allow us to rebuild without worries that the work will just be wasted. If nothing else, it will have bought us more time. Possibly a lot more time.

Long enough to sort out some of these other problems.



You have your coat on. I guess that's symbolic.

Yes. I sent a message yesterday. The plane will be arriving in two hours.

However, I have to allow time to get out of the bed and clean up, and there's a forty minute walk to the nearest clear landing site. So I'd best be off.

"My work here is done," eh?



Oh, I wouldn't put it like that.

A4 isn't going to reunify; you don't have any central administration; the Family refuses to pay for A2's network monitoring solution, so you still don't have phones; you may or may not even have a permanent solution to the Sprue.

I can't say "my work here is done" when my presence accomplished so little.

Well, if you hadn't come, I don't think we'd have made even the amount of progress we did. You were the catalyst.



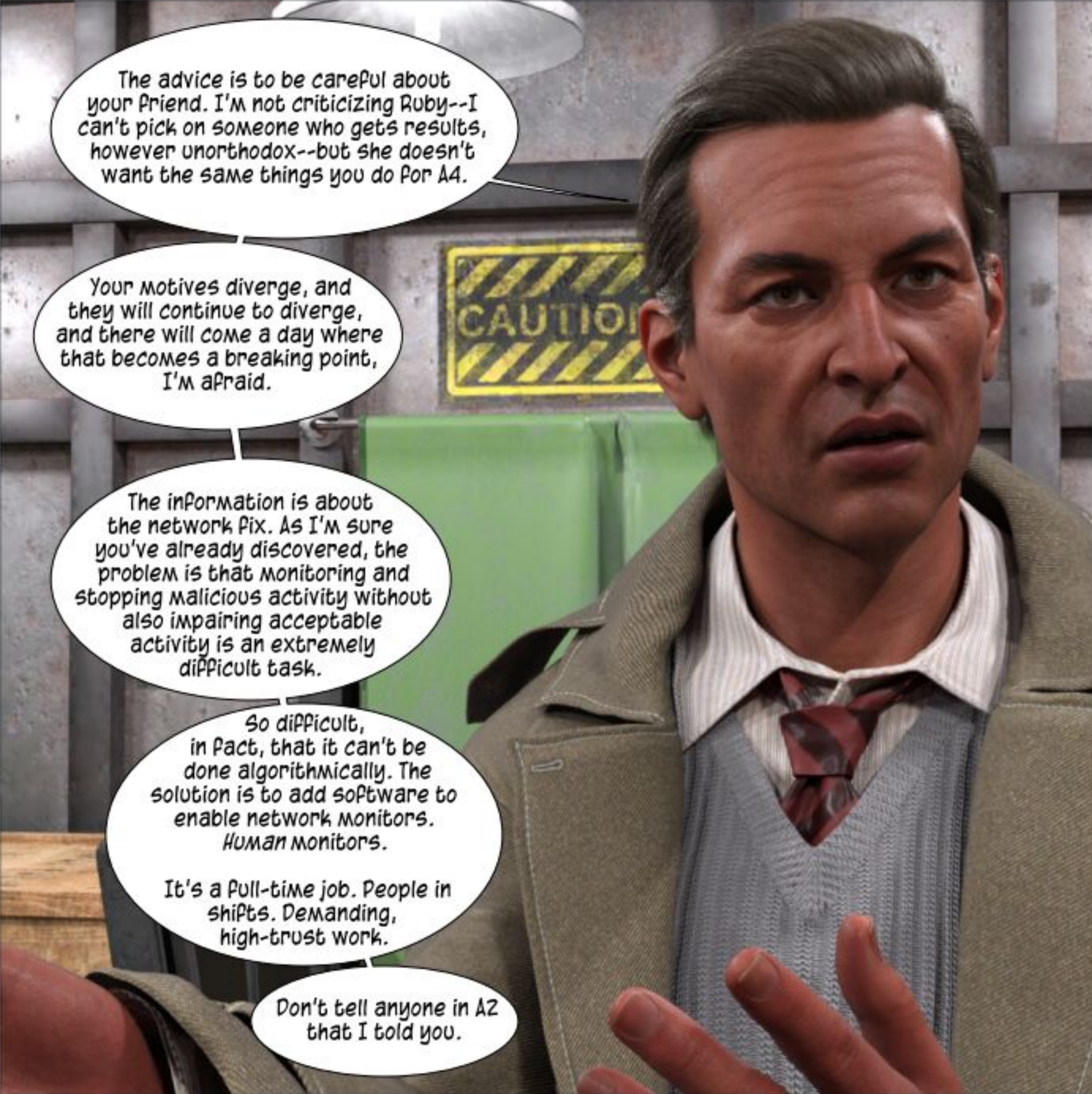
... Perhaps. And thank you for saying so.

I will say that working with you was a pleasure, whatever other reservations I may have.

I think you don't want to hear this, but to my mind, you're the only person actively working to keep A4 in good operation. I wish the rest of your family were as concerned.

To that end, I'd like to offer you a piece of advice, and a piece of information.

Uh ... all right.



The advice is to be careful about your friend. I'm not criticizing Ruby--I can't pick on someone who gets results, however unorthodox--but she doesn't want the same things you do for A4.

Your motives diverge, and they will continue to diverge, and there will come a day where that becomes a breaking point, I'm afraid.

The information is about the network fix. As I'm sure you've already discovered, the problem is that monitoring and stopping malicious activity without also impairing acceptable activity is an extremely difficult task.

So difficult, in fact, that it can't be done algorithmically. The solution is to add software to enable network monitors. Human monitors.

It's a full-time job. People in shifts. Demanding, high-trust work.

Don't tell anyone in A2 that I told you.



Huh.

... Be seeing you, Mr. Sheridan.

NEXT: IN ABSENTIA