



Ooh, new people! Welcome!

SLEEPER SQUAD

How do you know? You remember everybody?

Oh, no, it's the way you walk in.

Nobody's nervous after their first visit.



Miki, are you sure this is a good idea?

C'mon. It'll be fun!

If you don't like it, we never have to do it again.

It's completely safe. We've never had a problem.

And it's totally anonymous. No one will know who you are. If you decide you didn't like it, no consequences.



Though I don't think we've ever had anyone who didn't like it. Some people say later that they wouldn't want to do it very often, but they do enjoy it. Some people come back nearly every night.

I'm in!

... OK, I guess.



It lasts a little over three hours, so if you can't be here that long, now's the time to say no. We come get you and take you out at three hours so you can recover in private.

Drink it all at once. But wait until you get into the changing room. It works best.



Share a changing room, if you don't mind. We're pretty busy tonight.

Any open door.



Not much of a changing room. Not even something to sit on while we wait for it to kick in ...

Maybe they don't expect us to wait very long. She did say it worked fast-- I--

--I can feel it! Something's happening!

Did you drink yours yet? Drink it! Hurry!

OK, OK ...

My head--? It took my hair?

Took your clothes too, in case you didn't notice ...

Wooaaah!

th's vuhv strahg ...



Miki, can you see why M' Muth Pe's Pany? Ws ih doin'?

Miki?



VACATION #43 WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILEY



Come on now, that's right!

Lots of people waiting to see you!



Out you go! Pick anybody who wants to play. We'll come get you in three hours.

# DOLLS



## DOLLS ONLY

Have Fun!



# SEX DOLLS

All right, now, there's three rules.

First rule is don't hurt the dolls. Don't hit 'em, don't knock 'em around, any of that.

Second, there's a dress code: when you're in the main rooms, you need to be dressed. The dolls can walk around with their bits out, but not you.

Third, stay as long as you like, but don't be greedy. If you've gotten off once tonight already, give a chance to someone who hasn't first.

And don't play in the showroom unless you're prepared to put on a show.



Well, well ... Wouldn't have figured you for a customer, Treece ... Unless you meant to go in the other door, maybe? Always wanted to be a doll?

I don't have a sense of humor, Heather.

So you charge people for the algo drugs on the other side of the block and charge people who come in on this side to play with them?

Do your "dolls" know they're also your unpaid labor?



Now, now! It's not like that.

Nobody would be a doll just for the change. They come for the sex. They come for the sex. They come for the sex. And I have to charge for the drugs; I pay a lot for them.

That wouldn't work out if they didn't have someone to play with them, now would it?

Fine. But if you're going to make the money twice, then I'm going to be adjusting the cut.



Treece, come on ...!

You want me to go tell the boss you're holding out instead?

Who's your supplier?

Fella name of Marc Hayah.

I'll be talking to him. Sounds like he's been holding out too. You people know the rules.



TWO DAYS AGO, HAVING REALIZED THAT THE SPRUE WAS AN ENTITY THAT COULD BE CONFRONTED DIRECTLY, RUBY PLUNGED INTO INTERSPACE TO DO SO. IT WAS A DRASTIC SOLUTION, BUT IT WORKED. AH IS GRADUALLY PICKING UP THE PIECES AND RECOVERING.

SOME PEOPLE DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE. TREECE, FOR EXAMPLE, HAS BEEN TOO BUSY. BETWEEN HER REGULAR DUTIES AS COLLECTOR AND ENFORCER FOR THE COBBLES' BOSS, SHE HAS ALSO BEEN TRYING TO SOLVE THE CASE OF THE FOUR PEOPLE FOUND COMATOSE, WHO HAVE NOT YET RECOVERED.\*

THE PRESSURE HAS BEEN LESSENERED BY THE FACT THAT THERE HAVE BEEN NO MORE VICTIMS, BUT SHE KNOWS SHE HAS TO KEEP WORKING ON IT. SOONER OR LATER THE BOSS WILL ASK HER FOR AN ANSWER, AND WHEN HE DOES, SHE HAD BETTER HAVE ONE.

\* SEE #39, AND ONE SCENE IN #40.



Hello, Jeanne. What's up? Your message didn't say ...

Oh, I hate messages. I'd rather talk about things in person.

We've found a match for you.

You have? That's great! Is this her?

THE HEADQUARTERS OF JEANNE LAVAL (BARKER)'S LATEST PROJECT, WHICH ORCHID SIGNED ON FOR IN #38.



Yes, this is Madeline. Madeline, meet Orchid.

Your compatibility ratings were exceptional, so I have confidence this will work out well.



From here on, I'll want the two of you to come for training sessions together at least three times a week.

Hi.

Hi!

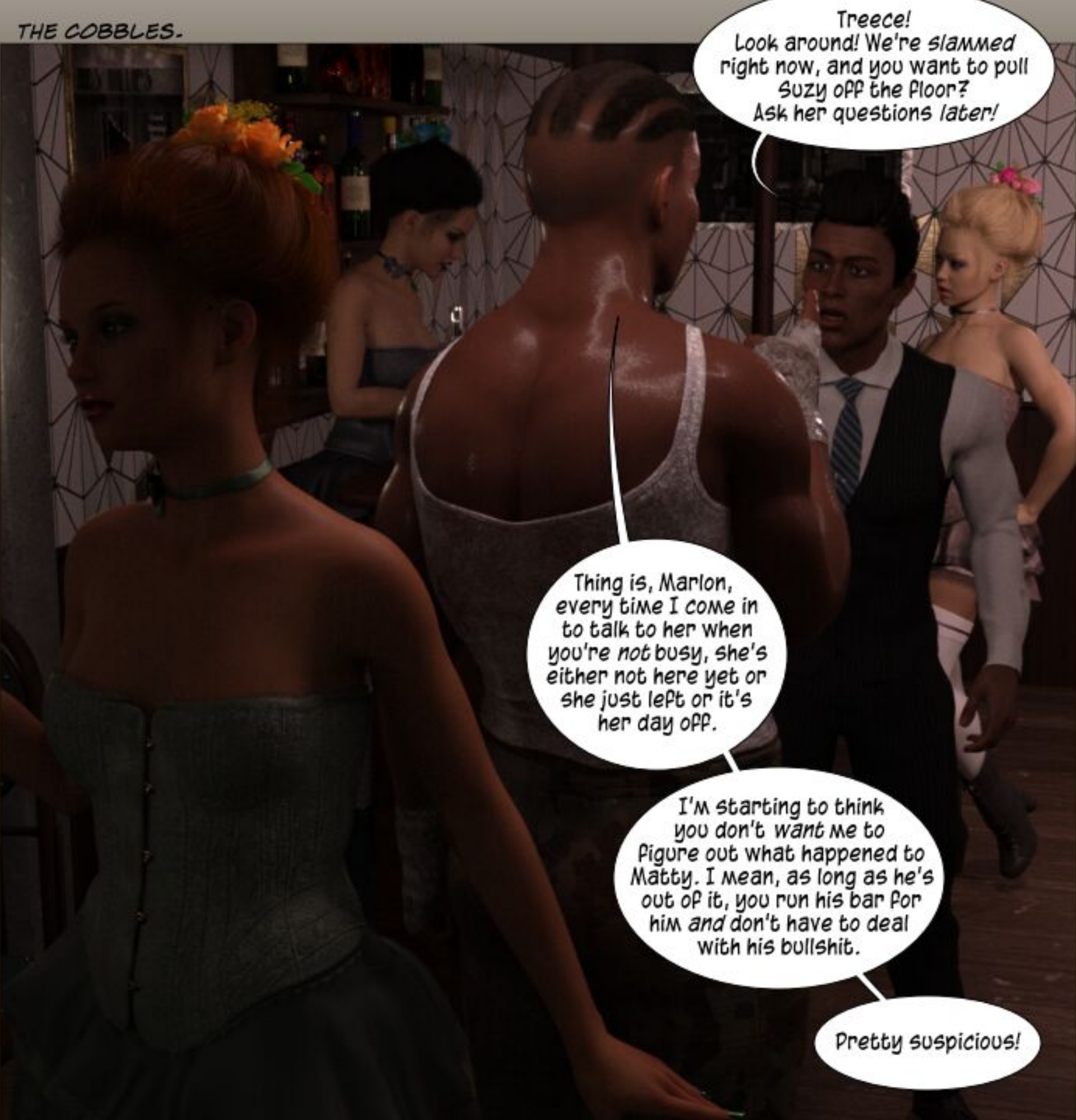


You know, if this is going to work, we'll have to get to know each other really, really well.

I can't wait!

Then let's not. Are you free the rest of the night?

Completely.



Treece! Look around! We're slammed right now, and you want to pull Suzy off the floor? Ask her questions later!

Thing is, Marlon, every time I come in to talk to her when you're not busy, she's either not here yet or she just left or it's her day off.

I'm starting to think you don't want me to figure out what happened to Matty. I mean, as long as he's out of it, you run his bar for him and don't have to deal with his bullshit.

Pretty suspicious!



What? No! I didn't have anything to do with that!

Then you better start helping prove it, huh?

... Fine.

Just don't keep her too long, all right? We're drowning here.



MATTY LENDLAW WAS FOUND IN THE STOREROOM OF HIS BAR. HE'D BEEN THE LAST ONE THERE THE NIGHT BEFORE, AND AS FAR AS ANYONE KNOWS, HE NEVER LEFT THE BAR, AND NO ONE ELSE WAS WITH HIM LATER THAT NIGHT, IN THE SMALL HOURS WHEN IT HAPPENED.

... but there had to have been. We think a drug did this. Somebody had to be there to give it to him. I can't think of a reason he'd take it on his own.

No, I think there was. Somebody with him, I mean.

Why?



Because of the way he was when I found him.

He was lying on his back. He was naked. And he'd spread out a blanket on the floor.

That means he brought somebody back here to have sex with, right? I mean, he wouldn't take off his clothes and lie down on the floor back here for any other reason.

I don't know why he'd do that, unless there was somebody else he didn't want finding out.

Could have been. None of us knew anything about Matty's love life. We figured it was better not to.

THREE DAYS AFTER THE PLUNGE.  
THE PERSONAL SPACE OF SUSANNE AND MARTIN BARKER.



... I'm sorry it's been so long, Susanne ...

Oh, well, that's mostly on us anyway. We knew we were going to do a disappearing act when I gave him my shares.

You're here to see Dad?

Yes.

How is that working out? Him staying here.

Is he being ... ah ...



A pain in the ass? Not as much as you'd think.

Actually, it's been nice. I've barely seen him for years, so I feel kind of like it's making up for that.

I think he'll probably get bored with us long before we get sick of him, but we'll see.



Hello, Serene. Is this a social visit, or business?

Hello, Josiah. I'm afraid it's business, though I did also want to check in on you. I'm happy to see you doing well.

Susanne says she hasn't needed to murder you yet.



I'll let you two talk shop.

Joking aside, she's handling this very well. If I suddenly moved in with Leyna there'd be explosions.

Yes, I appreciate her tolerance. I don't know that I'll be here much longer. We've renewed our relationship; I'd hate to jeopardize that by outstaying my welcome.

What can I do for you?



One of the recommendations Lon Sheridan gave was that we change to indirect insemination, and retire the birthing resort. You may remember; he mentioned it during the meeting. I'm inclined to agree, for security reasons if nothing else.

I also remember you were the only one who seemed to object to the idea.

I'm not pleased about it, no. It just seems wrong to me. But the point's well made. How do the others feel?

I don't think they much care. The replies I got were along the lines of "do whatever."

Well, I won't stand in the way of progress. If that's what you think we should do, go ahead.

THE COBBLES.



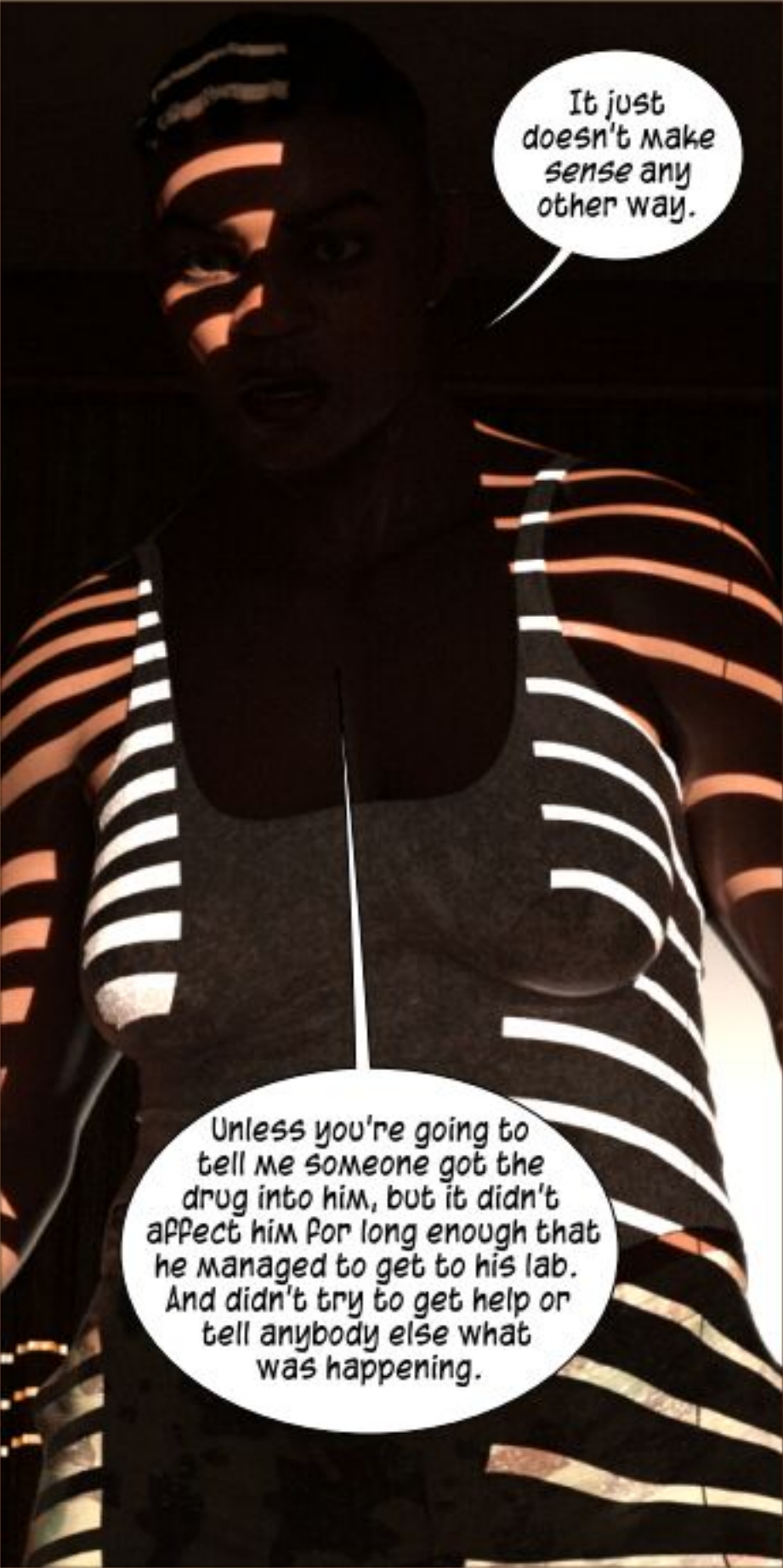
JUNKER SMITH WAS FOUND IN HIS DRUG LAB. HIS MOTHER ETHEL, ONE OF THE COBBLES' MANY MINOR BOSSES, INSISTED THAT JUNKER WOULD NEVER BRING ANYONE INTO THE LAB.

Are you calling me a liar??

No.

I'm just asking if you're absolutely sure.

If you can even be absolutely sure.



It just doesn't make sense any other way.

Unless you're going to tell me someone got the drug into him, but it didn't affect him for long enough that he managed to get to his lab. And didn't try to get help or tell anybody else what was happening.



--sigh-- Such a little shit.

He definitely liked the hookers. Why he couldn't just find a nice girl, I don't know.

But he never brought one into the lab before ...

... no, I can't be absolutely sure.



Hey! Treece!

Got something.

ASH AND MAIRE HAVE BEEN HELPING TREECE WITH THE INVESTIGATION.



OK, so, nobody in the Cobble is giving Jonah the time of day after what he pulled, right?

Word is he went out and found himself a lover from Serenity, who either doesn't know he's on the shit list here or doesn't care.

So he could have had somebody there that night ... do we know who this person is?

\* SEE #36.



Not a clue. I'm not sure anybody here knows.

Well, we can't go ask everybody in Serenity ... look, I have something else, but you're not going to like it ...

Both Matty and Junker did have somebody with them that night, no matter what people said before.

Sex workers?

Maybe. Ninety percent sure for Junker, but with Matty, who the hell knows?

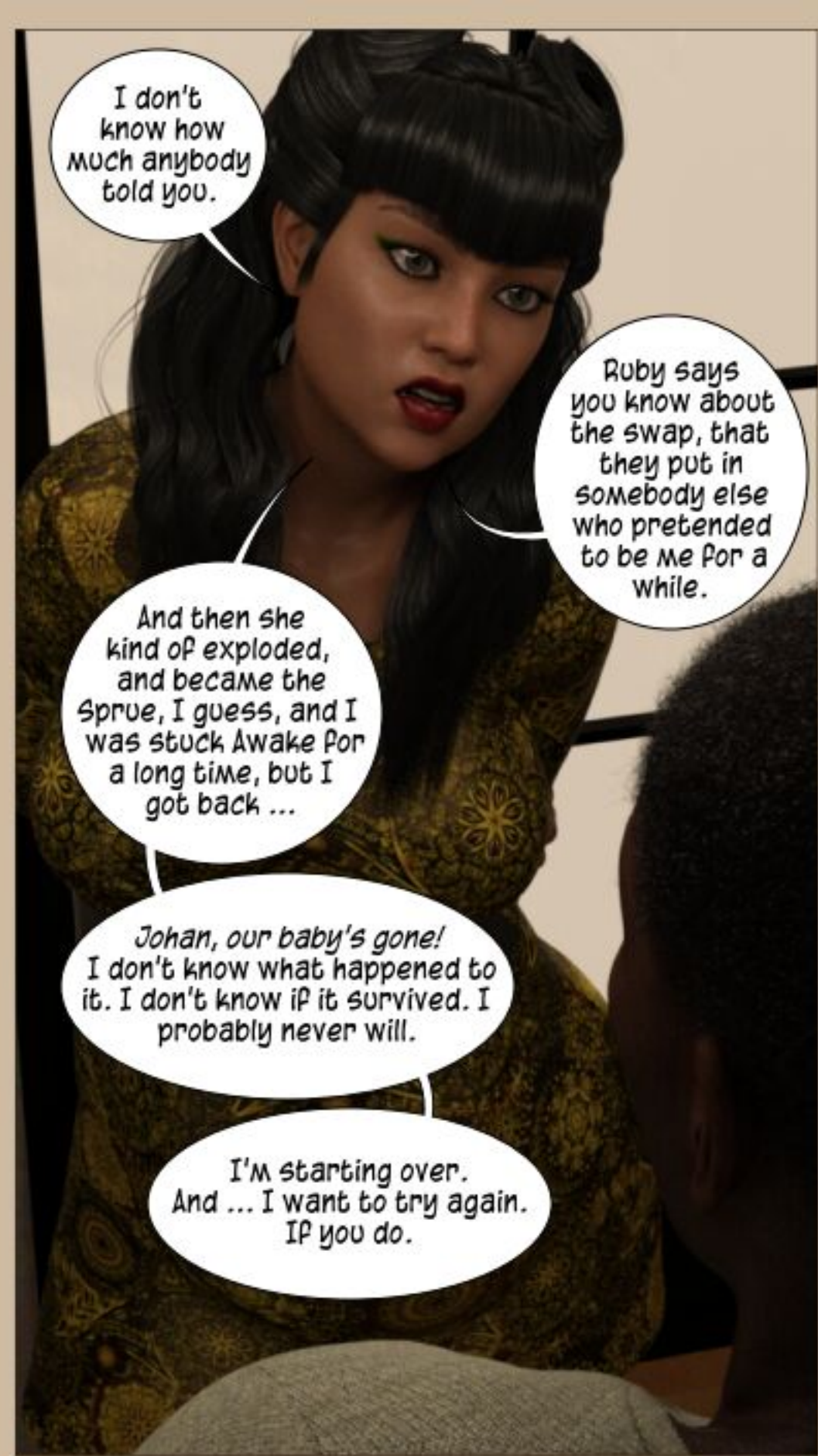
We can start asking ... but, Treece, it could take days.

Yeah, I know. Will you give it a try? I'm going to try too, but you know they don't like to talk to me.

JOHAN MORELL'S PERSONAL SPACE, SERENITY.



Jolee?  
You're ... uh ... well, alive?  
... I'm sorry I couldn't come find you sooner.  
It's been a lot.



I don't know how much anybody told you.  
And then she kind of exploded, and became the Sprue, I guess, and I was stuck Awake for a long time, but I got back ...  
Johan, our baby's gone! I don't know what happened to it. I don't know if it survived. I probably never will.  
I'm starting over. And ... I want to try again. If you do.



Jolee ...  
Look, they didn't tell me exactly what would happen. I didn't know until she got here.  
And then, when I found out, I was going to stop her. But she got to me first.  
They asked me to get you to love me, and I did. They asked me to have a baby with you, and I did. And when I got to know you, I liked you a lot.  
But I don't love you. And I don't want a baby.  
I'm really sorry.



RAUUUAGGHHH!



... I accept your apology.

FIVE DAYS AFTER THE PLUNGE.



But I'm not buying it.  
You think I did it.  
Why would I do that? Hal was a jerk sometimes, but ...  
No, I don't think you did it. I think there had to be someone else there.  
What do you know about the woman he was getting real friendly with at the club that night?

HAL BERG, DRUG DEALER, WAS FOUND COMATOSE IN HIS PERSONAL SPACE BY HIS LOVER LULA, THE MORNING AFTER THEY WENT BACK TO HIS PLACE FOR THE NIGHT AS USUAL. BERG'S CASE IS THE MOST MYSTERIOUS ONE, SINCE ABSOLUTELY NO ONE BUT HIM HAD ACCESS TO THAT SPACE--EVEN LULA HAD TO GET HIM TO LET HER IN--AND LULA SWEARS SHE DIDN'T DO IT AND THAT NO ONE ELSE WAS THERE THAT NIGHT.



He what?  
You didn't know.  
Look, we were in that club every night. Hal just about lived there. That was work time, for him. I get tired of just sitting at the table watching him, so I go off and play.  
He came and found me when he'd sold all his stuff for the night, and we went back to his place. Same as usual.



Several people have said whoever she was, she was all over him. In his lap, groping him, kissing him, all that.  
I've got to ask: how out of it were you?  
Uh.  
Sometimes I drink more than I should.  
Especially when I'm bored.  
I was really bored that night.  
I ... kind of don't remember getting back to his place.



So you got to his place, and passed out. Maybe you had sex first.  
Did you crash hard enough that he could have let somebody else in after you were out cold and you wouldn't have known?  
You mean did he Puck somebody else while I was face down on the sofa?  
That'd be a real dick move, wouldn't it? Hal wouldn't--  
Aw, shit, who am I kidding. Like I said: he was a jerk sometimes.  
So he might have.  
... yeah.  
And I'd have slept through an avalanche.



... so I figured it was finally safe to start seeing people again, and now I can't seem to find anybody who's interested.

It's not just you. I don't know what's up with everybody right now--



Hoop-de-doop! Call out the troop! Banana Pish and banana soup!

--huh?



Banana here! Banana there! We're all bananas everywhere!

No false moves, now, Chiquitas! I'm the Patest banana in town!



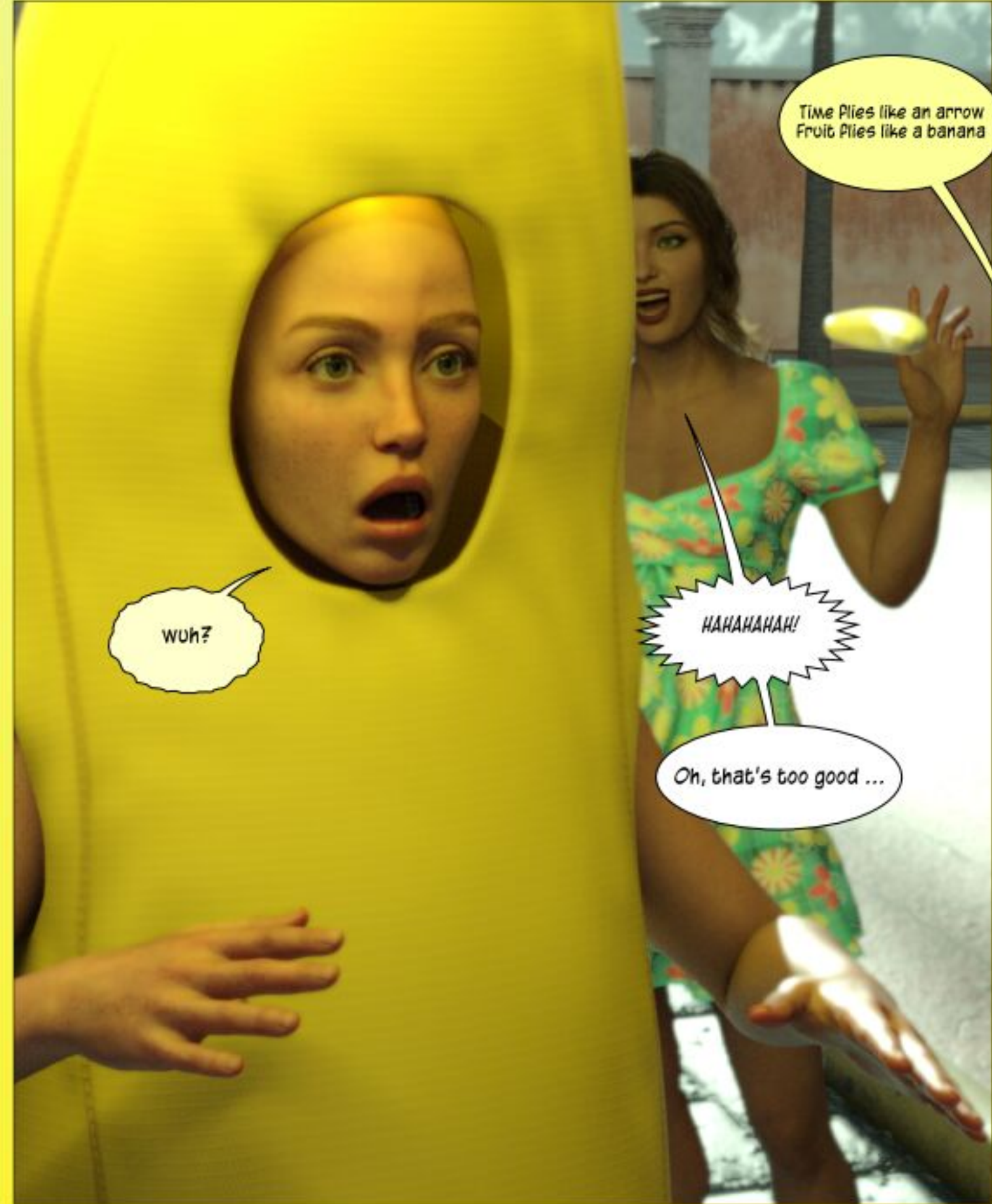
Look, lady, I don't know what your deal is, but you obviously need help--

Uh, that might not be a good idea



--Mmpgh!

Direct hit, matey! Straight down the piehole! Arrr!



woh?

HAHAHAHA!

Oh, that's too good ...

Time Pies like an arrow  
Fruit Pies like a banana



In the jungle, the mighty jungle, banana trees tonight ...

mgimpr!

Hey! Don't you just walk away!



Ooh! You're ripe already!

Here, have another on me!

glimp!!

Actually, it's on you!

A moment on the lips, banana on the hips!



Hooray! You're a banana!

Now split! hee hee hee

MEANWHILE, NEARBY.

So gon do some else?

Well, we haven't decided.

We like doing this ... but we didn't figure on doing it forever, y'know?

What kind pull you want? IP han't do this.

We were going to start our own house. You know, sex work.

But we've gone a little sour on that ... and also the market's swamped right now ... we'd have to bring something new to it and we're not sure what ...

What is going on down there?

I hear somebody yelling about ... bananas?

Anna banana bo banna  
Fee Pi Po Panna

... Gina, put your helmet on.

Any chance we can talk through this?

We don't want your peaches  
They are full of stones  
We like bananas  
Because they have no bones

Forget it, 'Ranza. This one's completely nuts.

Nuts?  
Never!!

I'll have you know I am completely and totally BANANAS!!

'K then.

Allez-oop!

Whoa!

You miss one hundred percent of the shots you take!

Gon play hard way then.

You said it, not me!

yyyagh!

Now there's a trick with a peel!

See ya later, banana haters!



You OK, Jex?

ughh ... yeah. Hazzin skel ...

Never did like bananas.

What is all this?



I'm guessing the new tropical look is because of the woman with the unusual headdress running down the street?

She's Past. We can't hit her. With guns or Pistols.

Well, we can try to surround her ... with four of us, we should be able to ...



Need to be careful, though, Leyna.

This one's manipulating stuff right and left. You and Jex might want to get suits first--



Bananas! It's just ridiculous! --hahahahaha-- I should have thought of that!

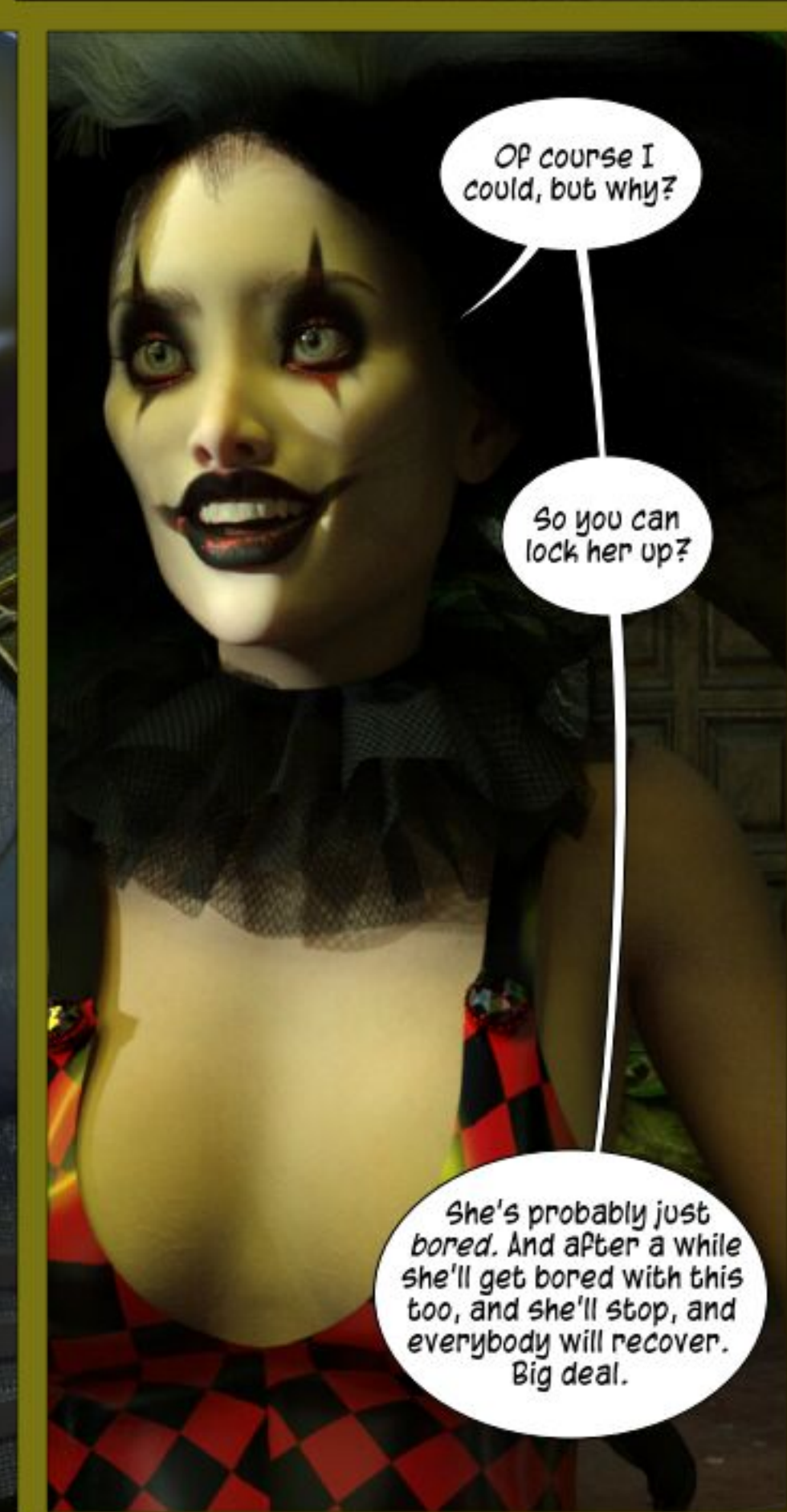
Not one of your little monsters, then.

CONSTANCE FORBES. SHE IS A CONUNDRUM.

See, that's your problem. "Monsters?" Really?

No, I had nothing to do with this. And she's got your noses pretty broken, huh? Where's your witch? Can't get it done without a manipulator, tsK ...

I suppose you could do better.



Of course I could, but why?

So you can lock her up?

She's probably just bored. And after a while she'll get bored with this too, and she'll stop, and everybody will recover. Big deal.



Unless they don't.

It's algorithmic, it may not wear off, and we may not have a way to reverse it. They could be stuck. As bananas.

You think I care about that?



No, I know better.

I figured out a long time back that you don't care about anything.

C'mon, Polks, let's go see if we can get her cornered.

Wait!



You know, one of these days you're going to get the boring world you think you're after, and then you're going to wonder why you made those choices.

I'll take care of her for you ... if it's what you really want.

But I'm going to want a one-time waiver.

Huh?



Dispensation.

No one is ever going to say I break my promises.

To you or anybody else.

CONUNDRUM HAS PROMISED NOT TO MAKE MISCHIEF VIA DIRECT MANIPULATION. (SO INSTEAD SHE MAKES IT INDIRECTLY, BY PERSUADING OTHERS TO MAKE TROUBLE.)



Hey, Banana-rama!

Can it!

WON

She's all yours.



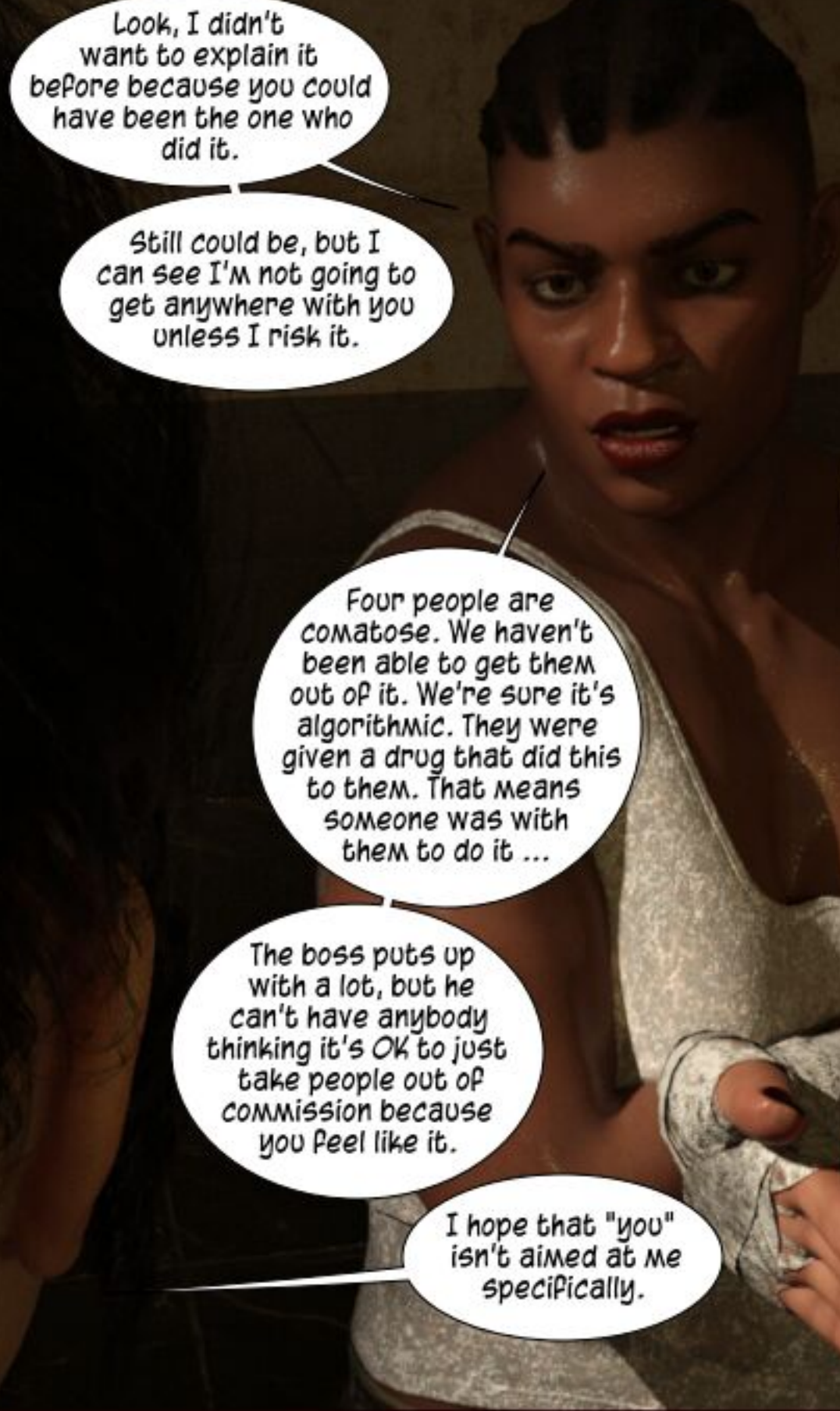
MS. LEE'S ESTABLISHMENT, THE COBBLES.



It takes a special kind of nerve to come in here and ask me for something when I've already said no once.

What makes you think the answer's going to be different this time?

Because I'm not asking the same thing.



Look, I didn't want to explain it before because you could have been the one who did it.

Still could be, but I can see I'm not going to get anywhere with you unless I risk it.

Four people are comatose. We haven't been able to get them out of it. We're sure it's algorithmic. They were given a drug that did this to them. That means someone was with them to do it ...

The boss puts up with a lot, but he can't have anybody thinking it's OK to just take people out of commission because you Peel like it.

I hope that "you" isn't aimed at me specifically.



I don't know. Maybe.

Now, wait ...

We haven't found any of the women who were with the victims. Yet. But there are several people who saw Hal Berg getting really close and personal with a woman in the club he uses as a sales front.

One of the street crew confirmed to Ash and Maire that this woman went back to Berg's personal space with him that night. And when they wanted to know more, she told them to ask you.\*

She wouldn't have done that unless she'd known the woman was one of your people.

\* #40, WHICH IS ALSO WHEN TREECE GOT TOLD NO BY MS. LEE.



Ronna. It was an unusual job. Berg wanted her to meet him in the club and follow him home. Some mischief there.

Probably trying to avoid someone else. That does happen. We don't ask.

But, look, mischief or not ... I just don't believe Ronna would dose him with anything. I know my staff, and they know the rules ... and they all take the job seriously, or they don't stay employed with me.

If she did something like that and it got out, it could ruin our reputation. No one takes someone home for sex if they're worried they're not going to wake up the next morning.

It's got to have been someone or something else.



I want to talk to her anyway.

Yes, I'd imagine you do.

-- sigh --

Well, she's not in the house today.

Come back tomorrow. She'll be here. Before it gets busy, if you don't mind.

SIX DAYS AFTER THE PLUNGE.



LEYNA HAS TO GO AWAKE TO VISIT DR. CHAPMAN'S FACILITY IN THE SLEEP COMPLEX.

I didn't realize you were out here right now.

I've got some patients for you. We had an incident with people getting turned into, uh, bananas--

They'll have to wait in line.

... That bad, huh?



The Sprue interrupted everyone trapped in interspace. Thousands of people. A percentage of them didn't handle it well. I have nearly a hundred patients.

A few of them aren't going to recover, I don't think. There are limits to what I can do. We may eventually have to make ... decisions about them.

I'm sorry. I didn't realize.



This is not what I do, Leyna.

It's not my career. I do it out of a sense of obligation, and because you have no one else who can.

And it's not getting any easier. We keep getting more patients from whatever villain-of-the-week is turning people into bananas or ice cream or robots or who knows what.

These algorithmic items, in particular, defy psychological treatment. I've warned you about that. I've got a very limited set of tools for those.

I'd also like to remind you, while I'm on the subject, that Chad Cantwell is still sitting in one of my observation rooms staring at the walls and giggling incoherently.\* What became of your mission to go investigate a possible solution?

\* #35.



Yeah, I know.

So many things keep happening all the time.

Maybe now that the Sprue's dealt with ...

Are your bananas also algorithmic?

Not sure. Probably.

We might not be able to get a clear answer from the woman responsible, either. She's ...

... well, anyway, I agree with you that the interrupted ones should be the priority.

I wish I knew where to find you some help.



She seems very nervous about this, so please be gentle.

I'm not going to bite her.



Ronna, this is Treece.

I know.

As I said, she needs to ask you about the job Por Hal Berg a while back.

Is something wrong? You look like you're--



I didn't do it on purpose, OK?

I don't know what happened! I don't remember anything!

Please don't fire me!



Uh ...

... I think we might not be talking about the same things.

What are you talking about?

Just tell us the truth, Ronna.

I blew the job! I never showed up for it.

Or I guess I didn't.



You're not sure?

No! Like I said, I don't remember anything.

From, I don't know, maybe noon that day? Until I woke up the next morning. In a room at the Serenade. And I don't know how I got there.

I wasn't on anything, Ms. Lee, you know I don't do any of that when I'm working ... I don't know what happened!



Do we believe her?

She's worked for me for years and her conduct has been spotless. I'm annoyed she didn't tell me sooner ... but, yes, I believe her.

Until proven otherwise.

Then someone seriously messed with her, and she's probably the only one who can give us a clue who.

Yes. Give me a few days. I'll work with her and see if I can get her to remember anything.

THE BARKER BOARDROOM, SERENITY.



You know, Zeke, I don't mind meeting you here ... but you could have just come to my personal space.

I know ... but it doesn't seem right. No business at home, is what Josiah always said ...

Well, Josiah also kept his home so private that not even his children and grandchildren could get to it.

And I think he's softened a little on that. I just discussed some business with him the other day at his daughter's.

Are you all right? It's always a bit worrisome when someone looks tired in sleep.



I'm fine. ... a lot of things have happened, is all.

So what I wanted to talk to you about ...

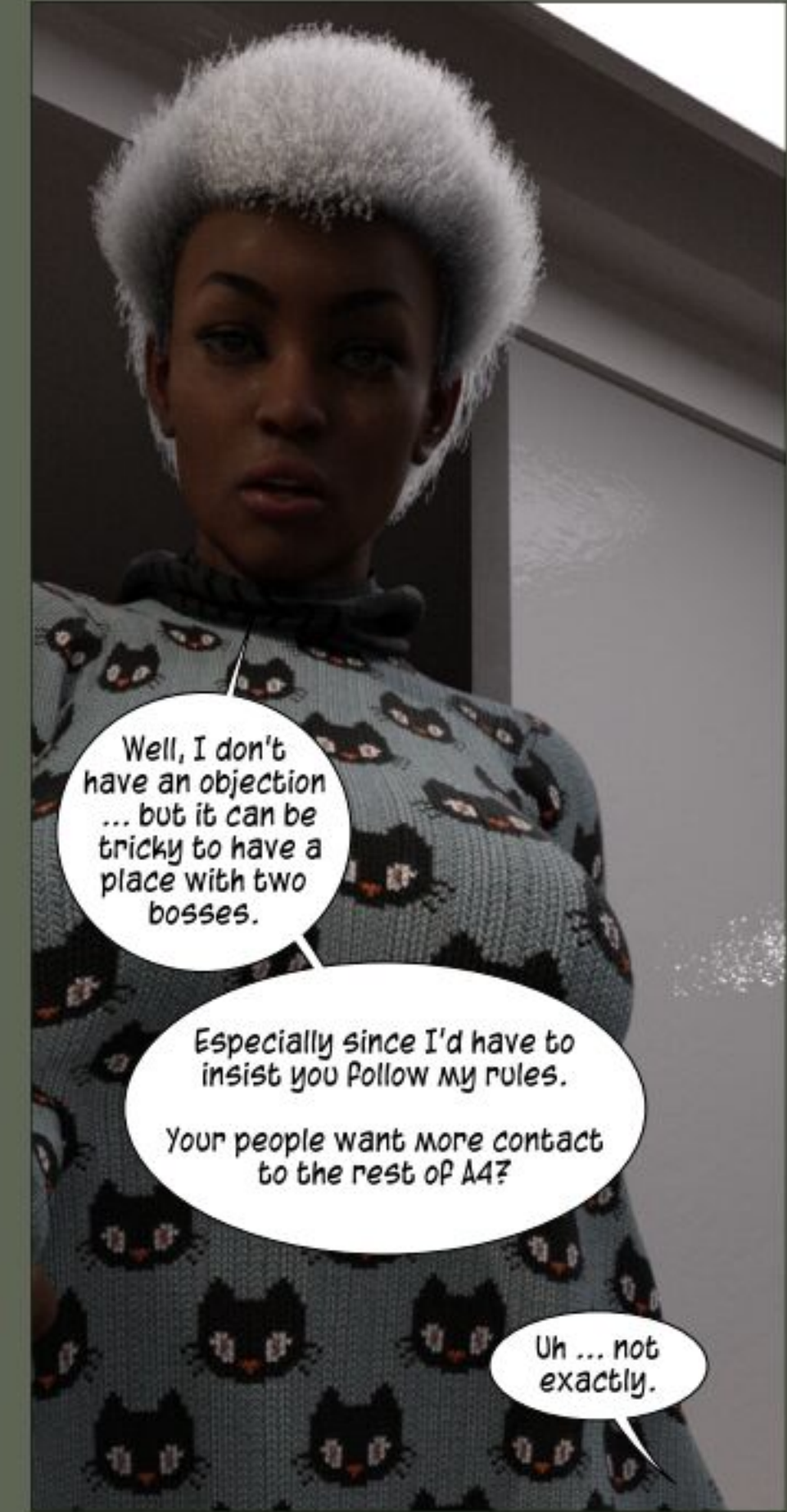
... When we were all here, you asked who wanted the blocks reunified.\*

Brendan, Clayton, and Pauline didn't, and Monica was on the Pence. You didn't say anything. You weren't in favor?

Well ... I want to keep running Shadyside. Everybody there likes it the way it is, and I need to keep it that way.

I know it's kind of boring, and I know some people think it's kind of weird, but it's what we want, y'know?

But I think it would be good if we could join Serenity too.

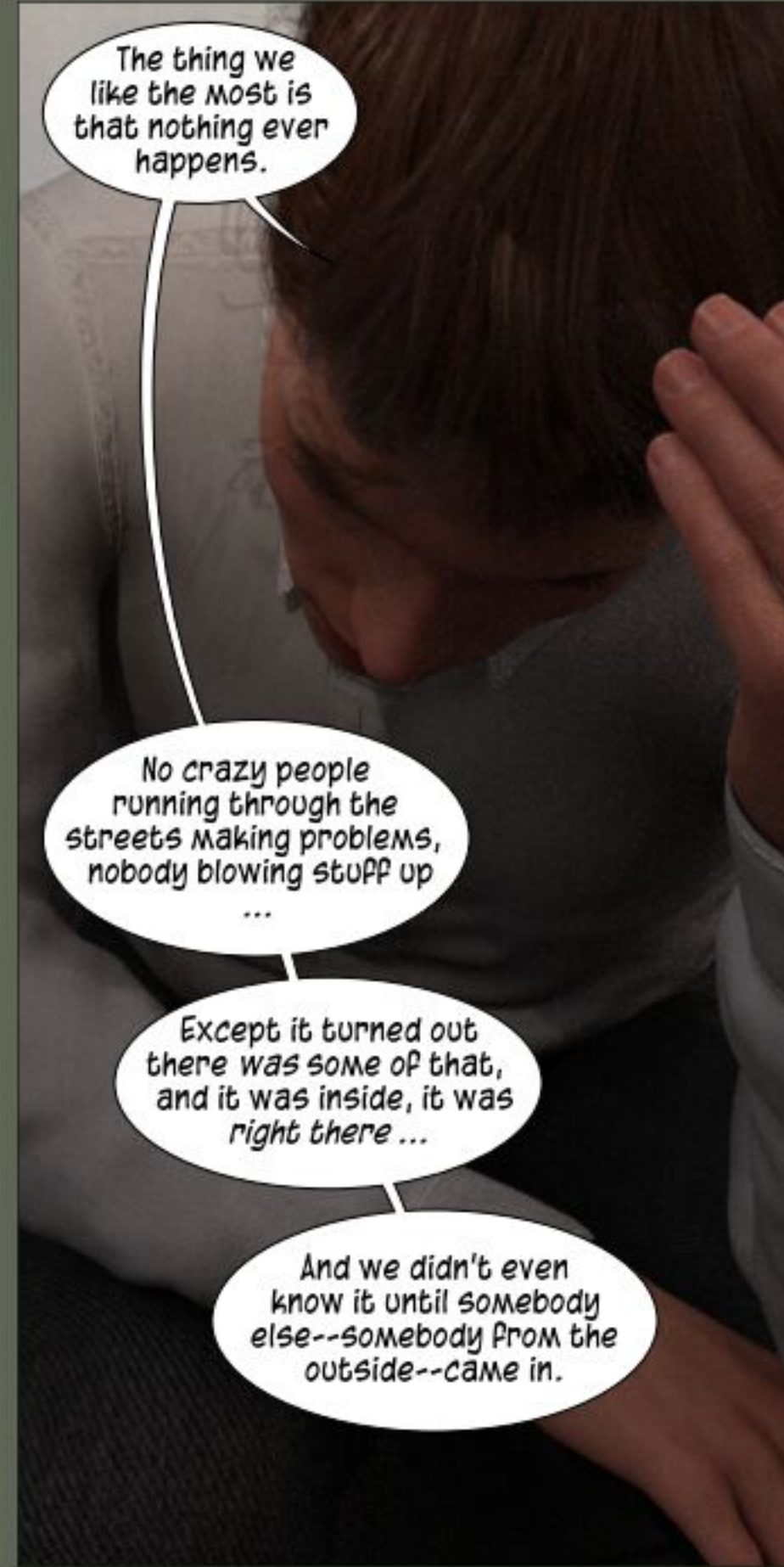


Well, I don't have an objection ... but it can be tricky to have a place with two bosses.

Especially since I'd have to insist you follow my rules.

Your people want more contact to the rest of A4?

Uh ... not exactly.



The thing we like the most is that nothing ever happens.

No crazy people running through the streets making problems, nobody blowing stuff up ...

Except it turned out there was some of that, and it was inside, it was right there ...

And we didn't even know it until somebody else--somebody from the outside--came in.



I'm not asking for protection. I'm just thinking that if we'd been less isolated, maybe we could have spotted that a lot sooner.

I like the people there. I want to be able to give them what they want ...

I get it. Believe me.

And honestly? I'm happy to hear you say things like that. I guarantee Brendan wouldn't.

You can certainly rejoin Serenity if you think it's the best way to go.

It does mean that we'll want to monitor your blocks, the same as we do ours.

Yeah, that's what I was hoping.



Oh, good. I wasn't sure when you'd see my message.

Ronna's remembered something.



The last thing I remember doing was talking to Eeli outside the Comet Room.

I think we talked for a few minutes? And then ... nothing else. Until I woke up the next day.

Tell her the other part.

Oh ... uh, I'm pretty sure Eeli knew I had the job with Berg coming up. A bunch of us had the night off a couple of days before, and we got together ... We talk about customers sometimes when it's just us and we know we'll keep it to ourselves ... Sometimes we like to trade stories, you know?

You're going somewhere with this I'm not getting.

Eeli is a duper. Best one around.



I don't know that one.

Duper? Heh. Need to spend more time around our business, I guess.

She can change herself to look like some other person. From an image, or from looking at the person themselves, if she's given a while to study them.

It's a specialty job. "I want someone who looks like that woman from those passives." Or, sometimes, "I want someone who looks like my ex-lover." Never really understood it myself, but we try to give the customers what they want.



Eeli works for you?

Oh, no. She's freelance. She could work for me, if she were willing to join up and let me teach her how we do things, but I never got the idea she was interested.

If I've collected from her, I don't remember it.

So your idea is that Eeli knew about the Berg job, kayoed Ronna somehow, and pretended to be Ronna that night?

Huh. Lotta questions there, but it's worth a look for sure. Any idea where I can find her?

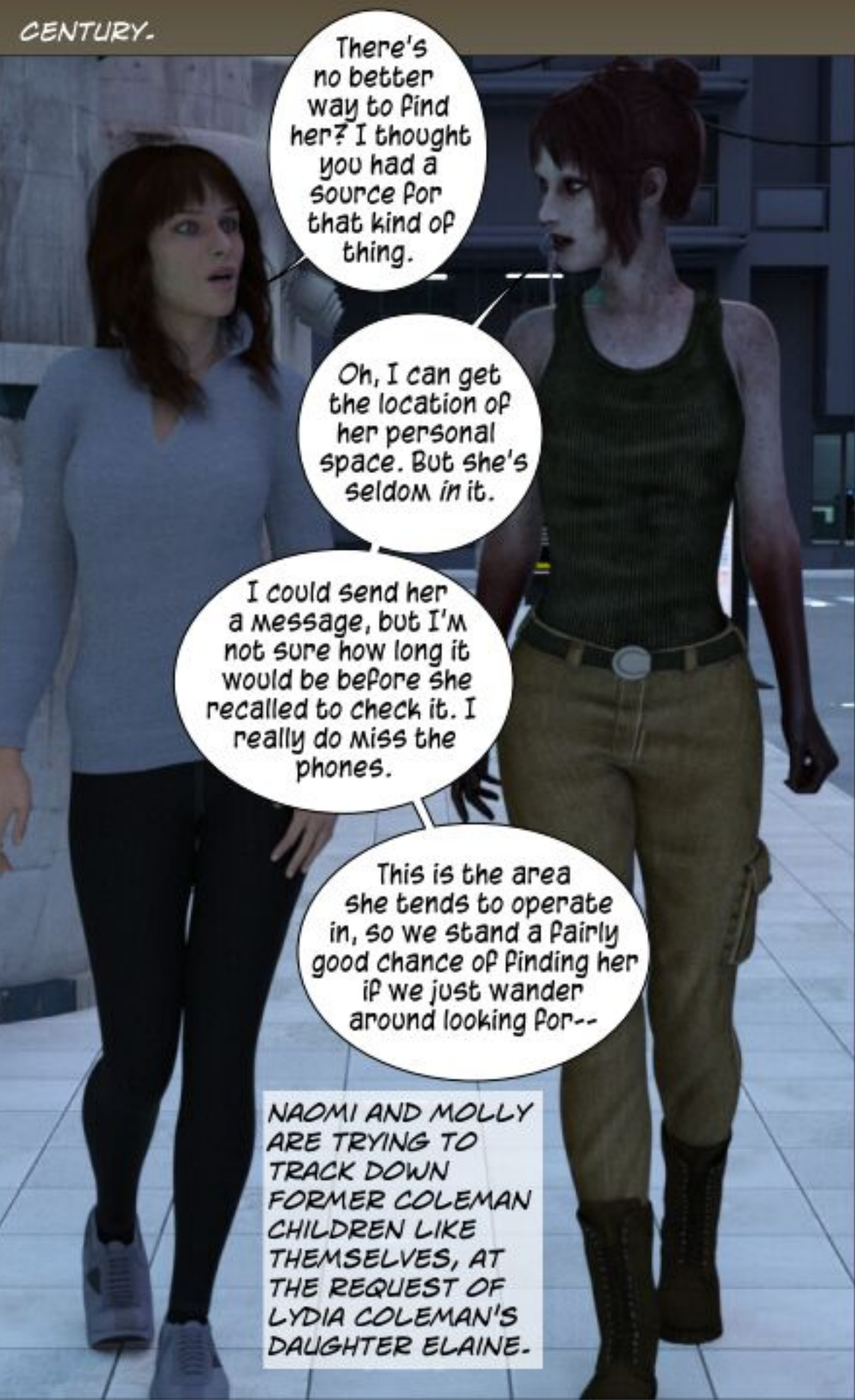
If she's not on a job she's probably in the Comet Room. That's where she finds most of her work.

Else she's in her personal space. I'm not sure where that is, but ask Fran at the Comet Room, she knows.



Treece? Please keep me informed.

This feels increasingly like someone was trying to make my house look bad, and if they were, I'm going to take it personally.



There's no better way to find her? I thought you had a source for that kind of thing.

Oh, I can get the location of her personal space. But she's seldom in it.

I could send her a message, but I'm not sure how long it would be before she recalled to check it. I really do miss the phones.

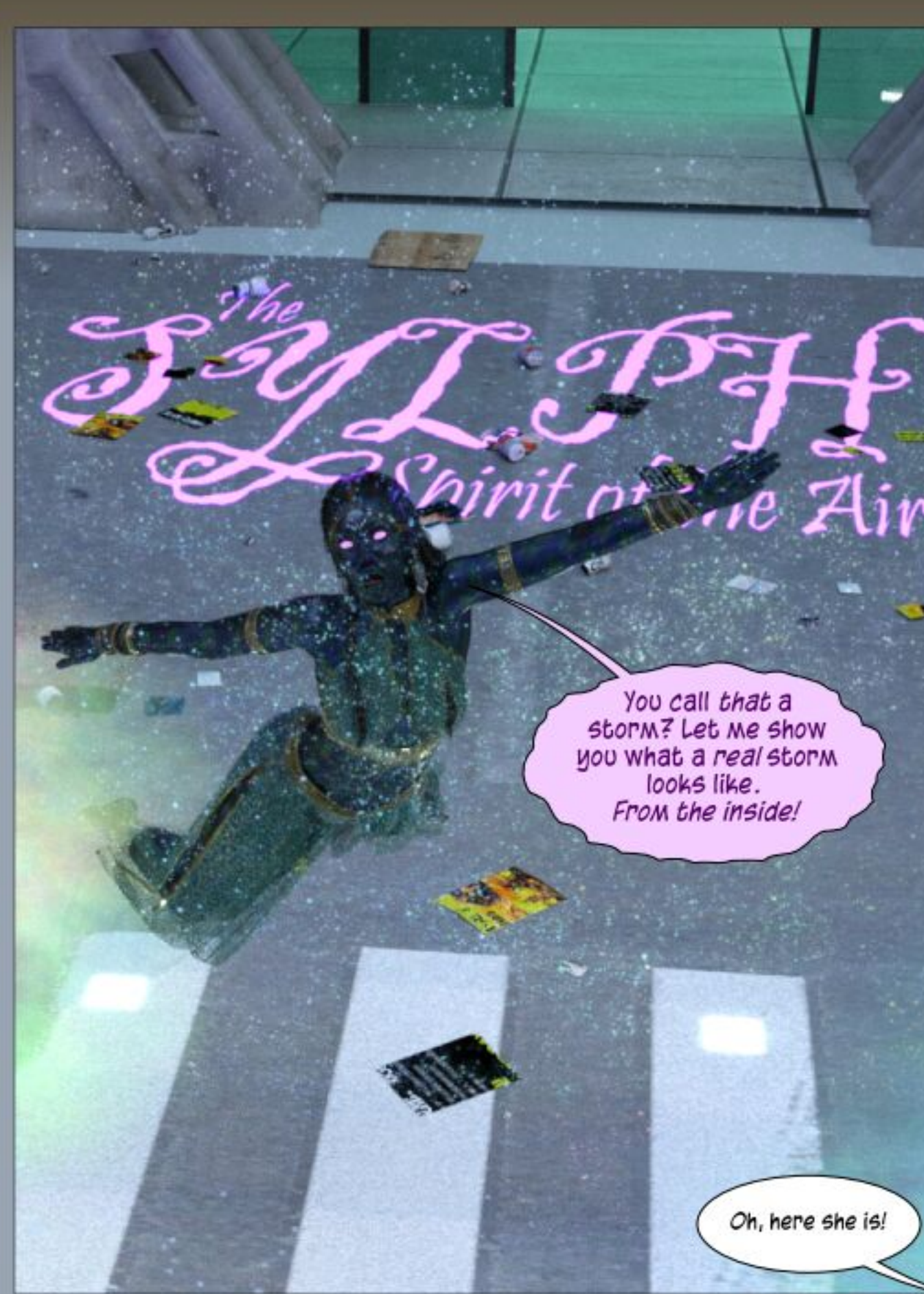
This is the area she tends to operate in, so we stand a fairly good chance of finding her if we just wander around looking for--

NAOMI AND MOLLY ARE TRYING TO TRACK DOWN FORMER COLEMAN CHILDREN LIKE THEMSELVES, AT THE REQUEST OF LYDIA COLEMAN'S DAUGHTER ELAINE.



QUICKSAND THE QUAGMIRE QUEEN

This time I've got you! My sandstorm is going to blow you away, meddler!



The Spirit of the Air

You call that a storm? Let me show you what a real storm looks like. From the inside!

Oh, here she is!



You're pulling yourself, windbag!

Get a mirror, dustbrain!

-- ahem -- Could I get a cease-fire, please?



Shelley, I need you to haul off. Sorry.

But we were just getting to the good part!

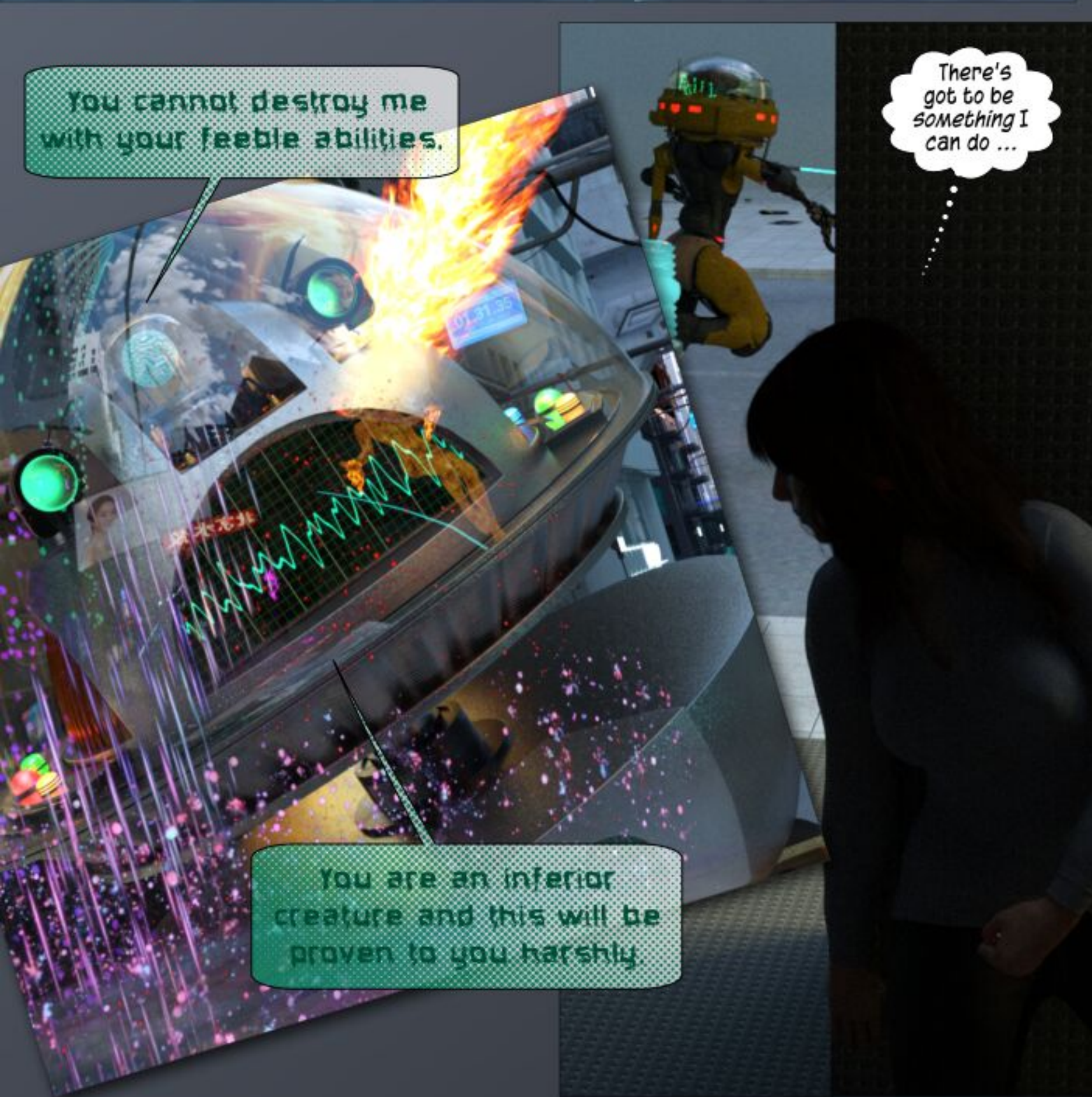
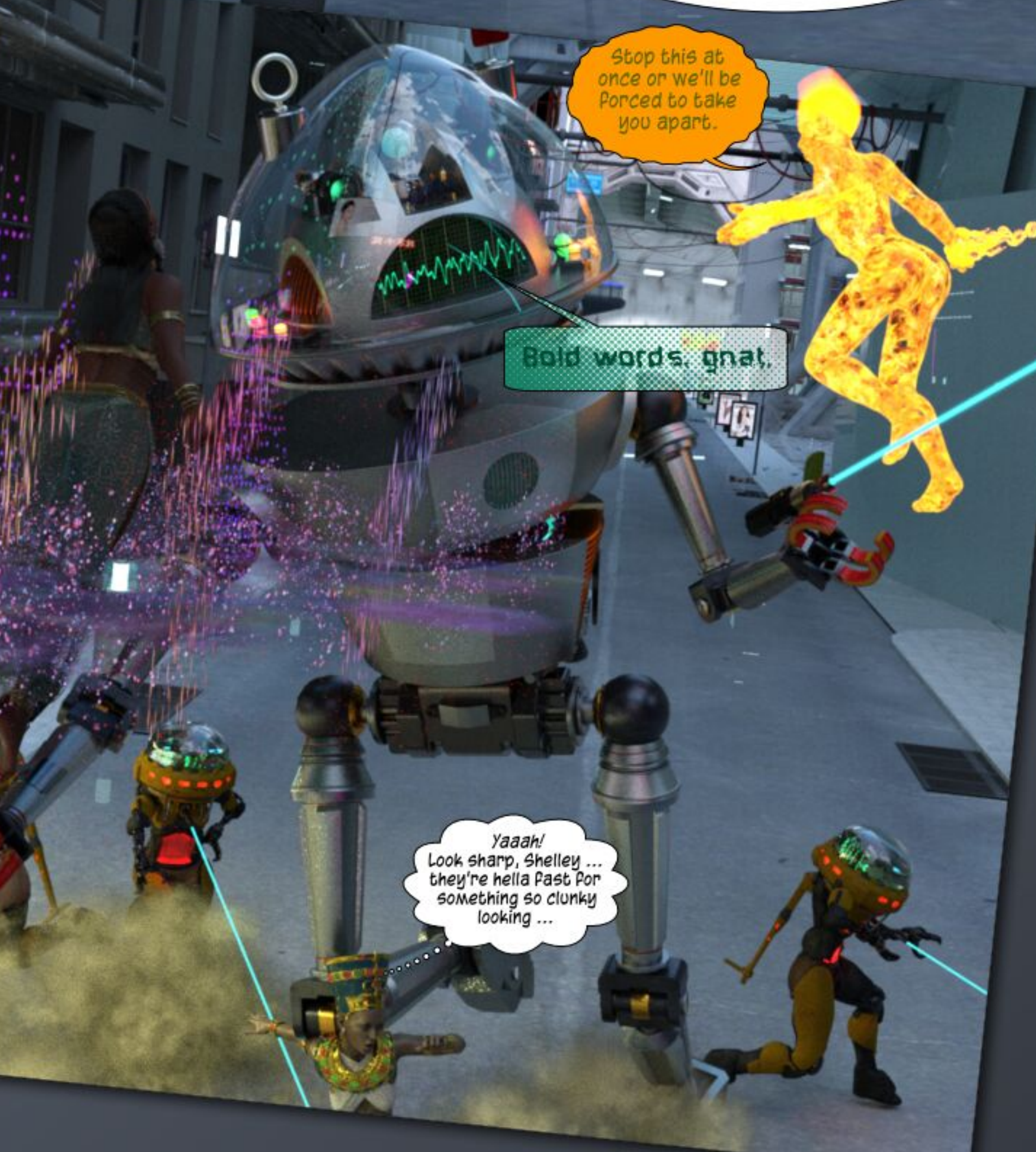
I know, but we need to talk to Nina privately for a bit. I saw Half-Moon a couple of blocks over. Go play with her.

Me? I don't even know you! I mean, by reputation, but ...

Actually, you do. Let's go sit down.



A FEW MINUTES OF EXPLANATION LATER.  
(IF YOU COULD USE AN EXPLANATION TOO, SEE #39.)





... closed.  
Best timing ever, or worst.

On the one hand, she can't follow me through it; on the other hand she may not need to.

Be a real laugh if I just voluntarily took myself the same place they're kidnapping the others to ...



Yep. A real laugh. Ha ha ha.

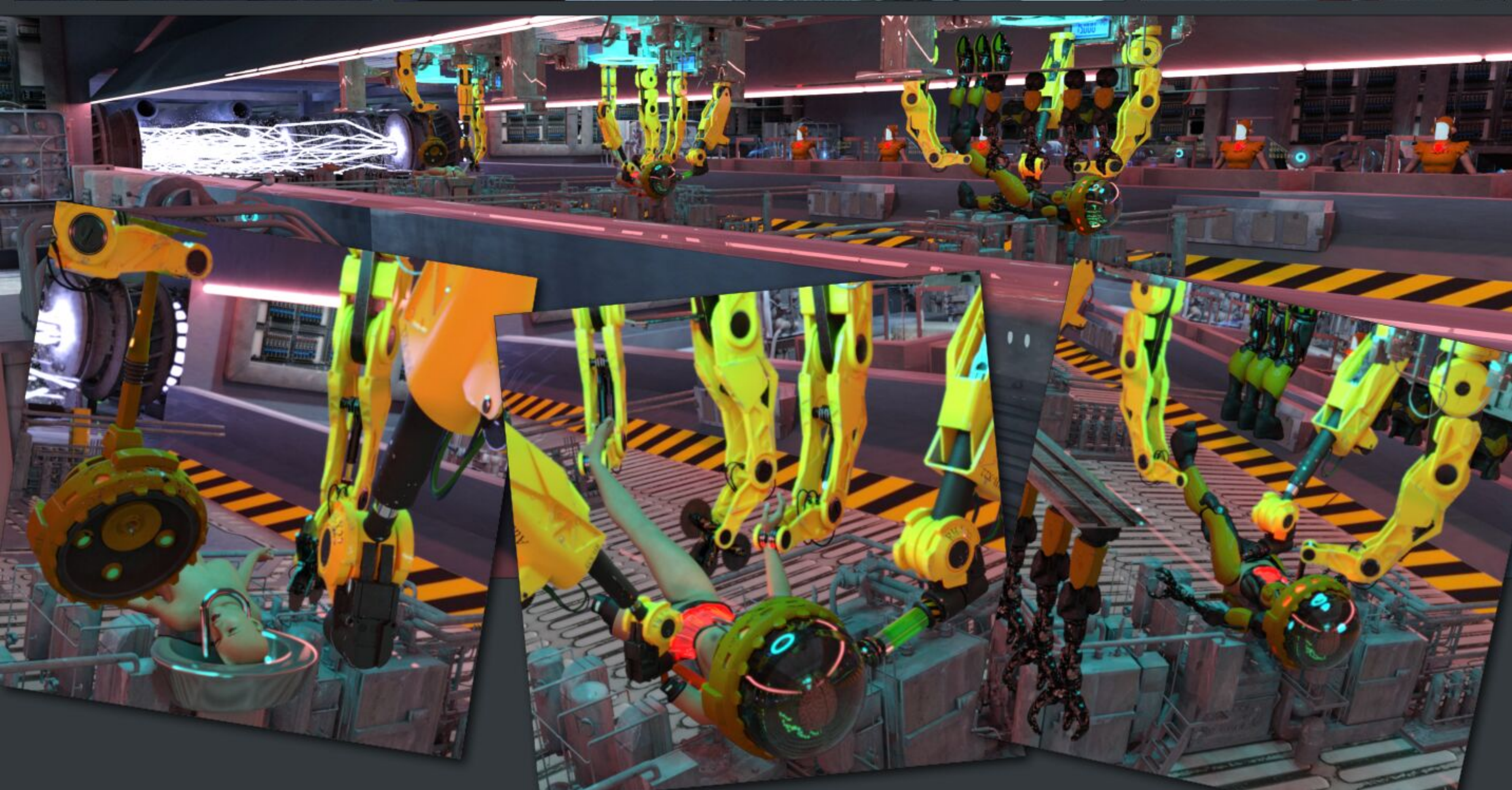
New recruits  
Presh off the line.  
Portalling out to join the fight.

If that's the pace, then we're in real trouble. I wonder if I can find a way to throw some sand in the machine ...



Lucky they're not paying me any attention.

What's all this over here?



Oh, boy.

Well, at least I didn't portal into that.

OK, definitely got to try to shut this horror show down. But how? And where?



Oop! This one is paying attention.

I need to get out of its sight, fast.



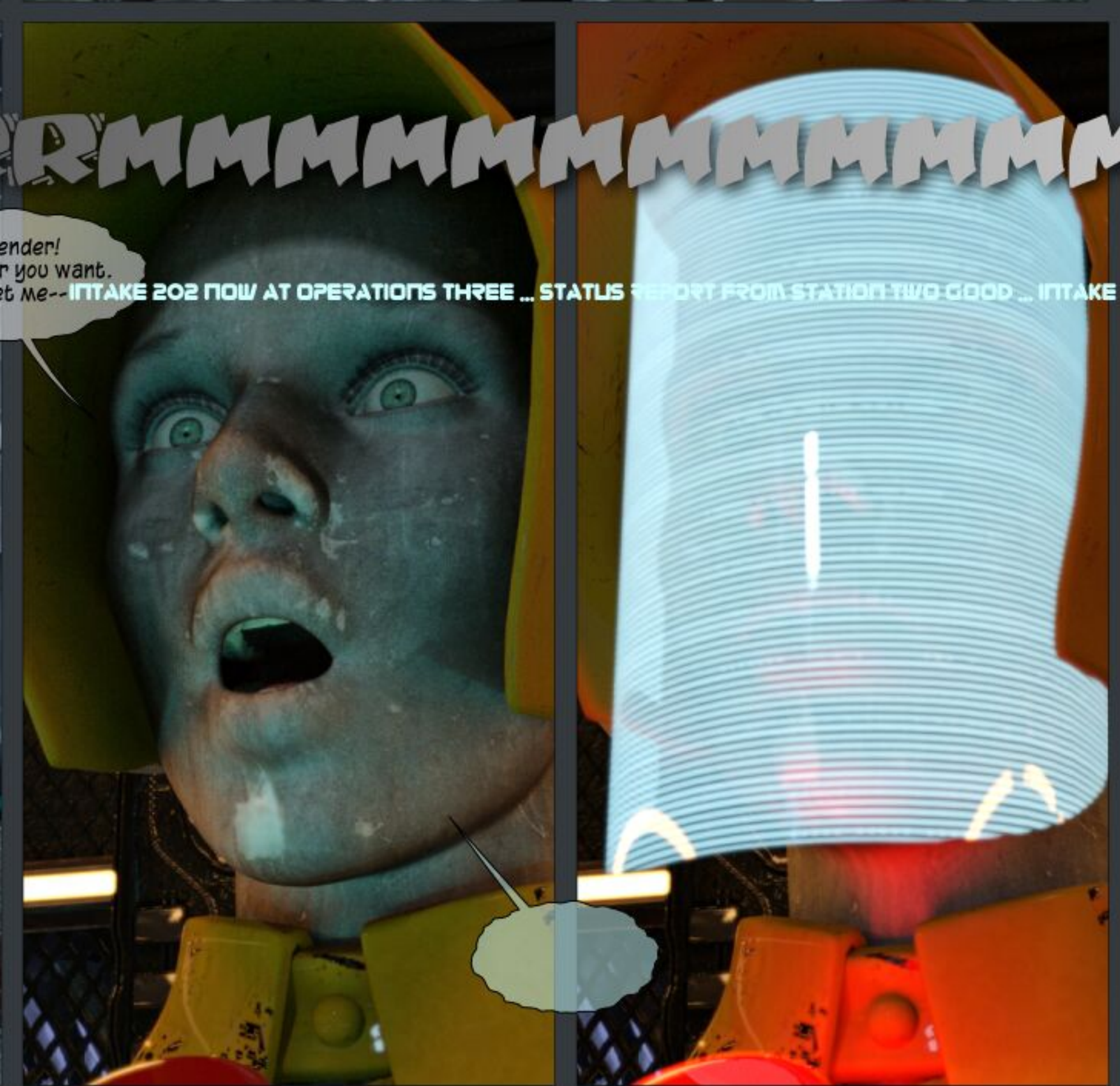
What's this? Wiring closet?

Best I've got ... hope this isn't a mistake ...

Mistake.

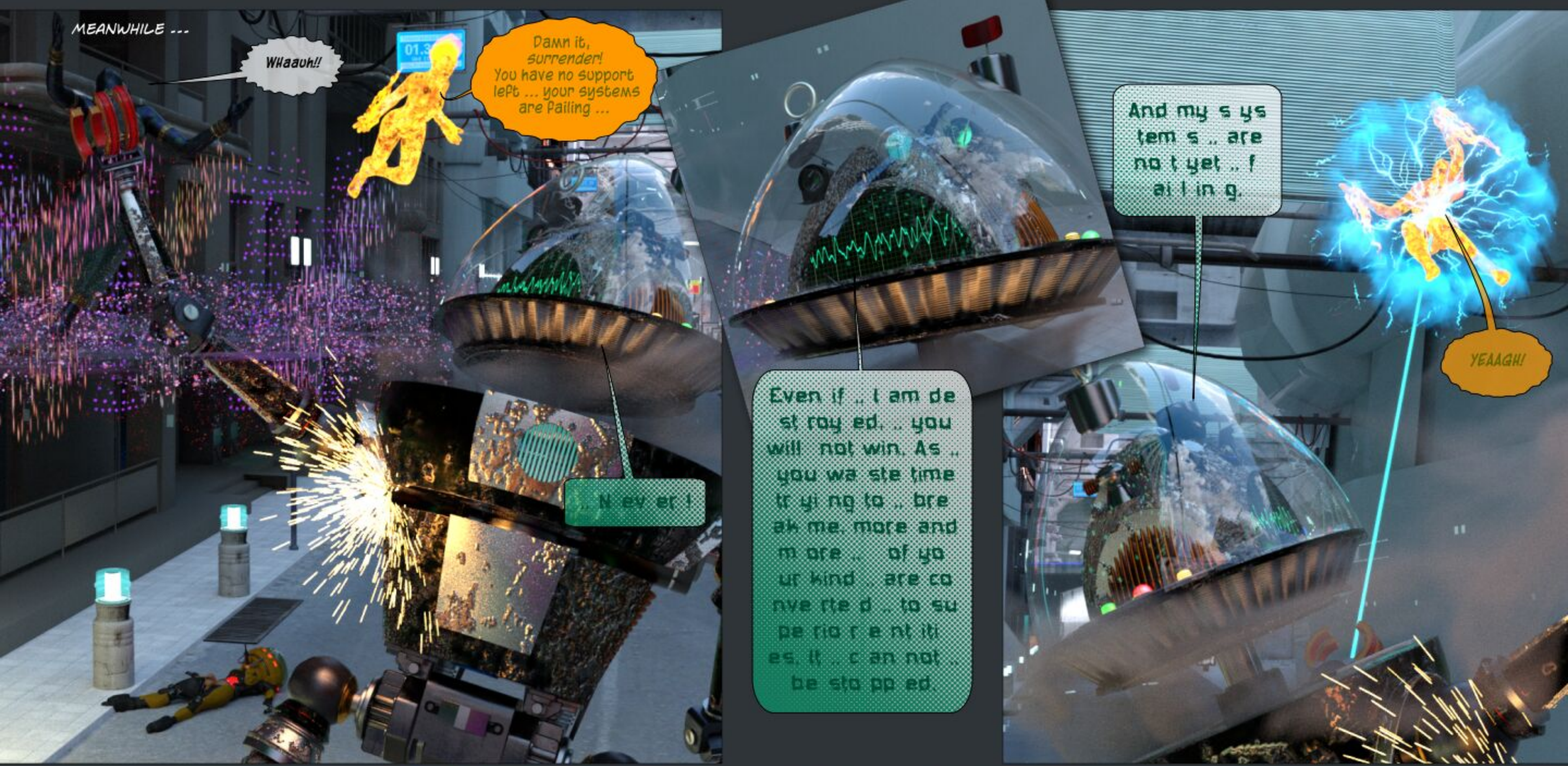


Hey! Robot lady! Anybody! Let me out of here!



I surrender! Do whatever you want. Just get me--

... STATUS REPORT FROM STATION TWO GOOD ... MISTAKE 202 NOW AT OPERATIONS THREE ...



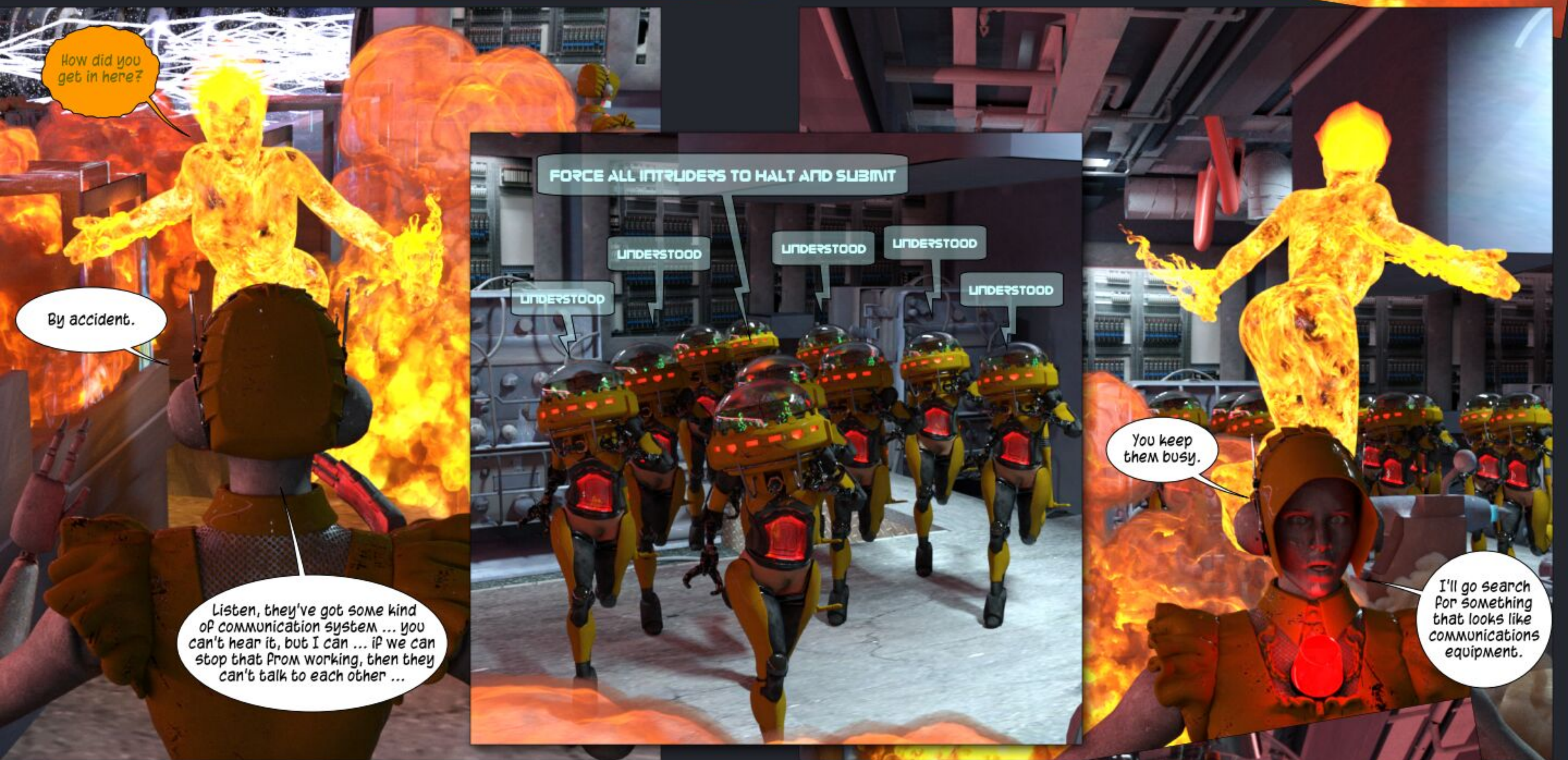


I am now officially very pissed off.

Naomi, it's me!

Please don't melt me!

Molly?



How did you get in here?

By accident.

Listen, they've got some kind of communication system ... you can't hear it, but I can ... if we can stop that from working, then they can't talk to each other ...

FORCE ALL INTRUDERS TO HALT AND SUBMIT

UNDERSTOOD

UNDERSTOOD

UNDERSTOOD

UNDERSTOOD

UNDERSTOOD

You keep them busy.

I'll go search for something that looks like communications equipment.



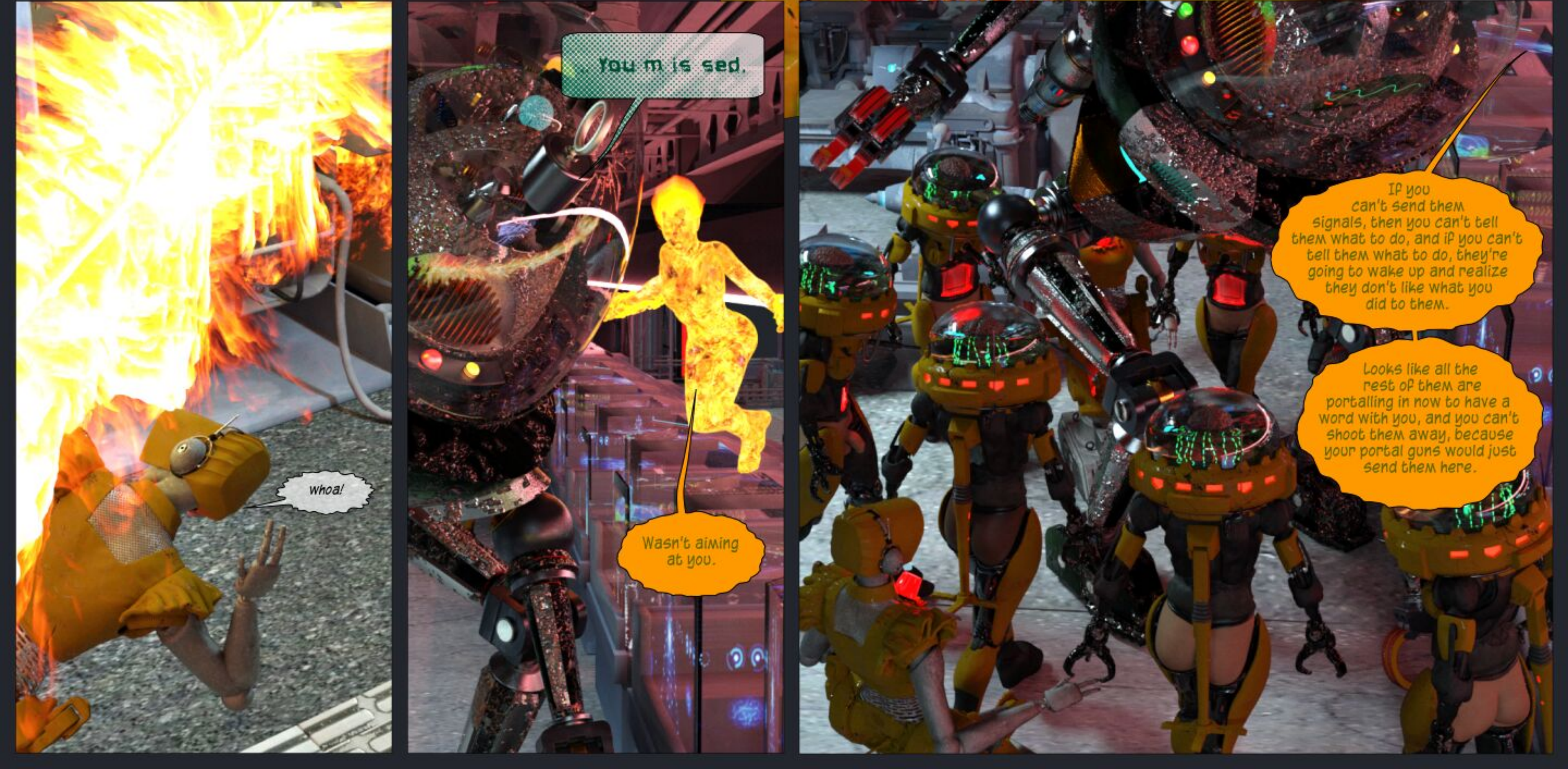
If this isn't it, I don't know what is.

Now what do I do? Is Robo-Molly strong enough to tear them open with bare hands...

GET AWAY FROM THAT!

You are being repaired unit ... You will have to be SCRAPPED!

Molly, duck!!



You missed.

Whoa!

Wasn't aiming at you.

If you can't send them signals, then you can't tell them what to do, and if you can't tell them what to do, they're going to wake up and realize they don't like what you did to them.

Looks like all the rest of them are portalling in now to have a word with you, and you can't shoot them away, because your portal guns would just send them here.



MONICA BARKER. SHE OWNS CENTURY.

... and then she recalled.  
Of course.

Left behind a huge mess ... the ones she converted couldn't hear except on their special channel. If Molly hadn't been able to talk on it, we wouldn't have been able to tell them to recall to fix themselves.

I guess we could have held up a sign.

And I'm sure she's going to just regroup and try again ...

Probably.

I'm very concerned about the amount of serious trouble coming from the robotic sector lately.



I'm glad to hear it, because I was starting to wonder if you cared.

Dealing with the robotics is becoming a full-time task, and I didn't sign on to police Century full-time even under normal conditions.

Though I'm not sure we see eye-to-eye on that.

Yes, your friend Ruby read me chapter and verse about it a few days back. I had no idea. You need to tell me these things.

... Well, put that aside for the moment.

The point is, even if I was willing to do this full-time, there's more than I can do. One way or another, you need more people.



So get more people. Put together a team.

There's tons of talent here. Your friend, for example.

I don't have any abilities. And I'm not a fearless person. I'm over here because I don't know how she can sit that close to the edge of this roof.

First off, isn't it your responsibility to recruit a team?

Second, give their attitudes even among the ones who aren't making trouble in the streets, wouldn't it make everybody's life better if you just threw the robotics out of Century?



... I can't do that. I've considered it a few times, but I can't.

I made them a promise. I said they could live here and be what they wanted to be. I don't feel like I can renege on that.

I'm perfectly willing to throw more people at the problem ... but it would be better if you chose them. You know more about who we can depend upon.

Hrm.  
Well, let me see what I can come up with.

SERENE BARKER AND CORAZON ESTILO'S PERSONAL SPACE, SERENITY. JOLEE MADISON IS VISITING, AT THEIR REQUEST.



She'll nap for a while now, I think.

Completely tired herself out.

Tired me out too!

I didn't realize little kids could be so ... exhausting. I don't know how you two do it.

Well, she was especially energetic today. She's been wanting to see you for days.

That's ... what we wanted to talk to you about.



For the past few days, ever since you first saw her, Lor has been a mess.

Fussing all the time, refusing to do things, throwing tantrums ... and she's normally a shockingly well-behaved child.

All we can get out of her about it is that she keeps asking for you.

Me? But she doesn't even-- I mean, I'm a total stranger to her!



Maybe not as total as all that.

Serene has a theory.

I wasn't able to figure it out until you and Ruby found out which bed the Sprue entity was in. Then I could confirm what I should have suspected sooner.

We told you that we took on Lor because she was the child of an unresponsive mother. At the time I assumed the mother was lost in interspace. I suppose that wasn't far wrong.

Dolores is the Sprue's child--the baby she conceived after swapping for you in the birthing resort.

Oh, wow.  
But what's that got to do with me?

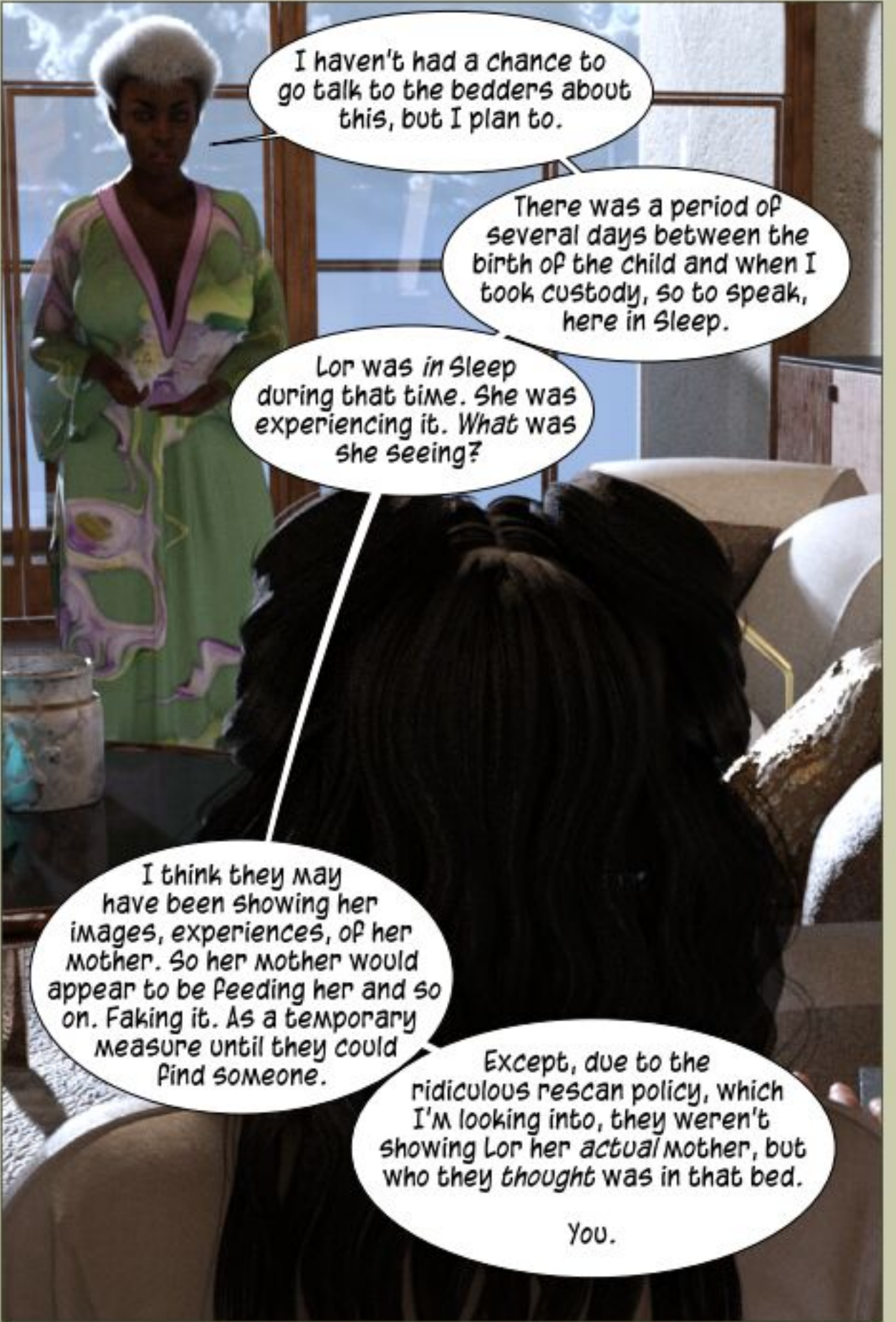


I don't know how to put this gracefully, so I won't.

I think she thinks you're her mother.

WHAT??

She'd never seen me! How's that even possible?



I haven't had a chance to go talk to the bedders about this, but I plan to.

There was a period of several days between the birth of the child and when I took custody, so to speak, here in sleep.

Lor was in sleep during that time. She was experiencing it. What was she seeing?

I think they may have been showing her images, experiences, of her mother. So her mother would appear to be feeding her and so on. Faking it. As a temporary measure until they could find someone.

Except, due to the ridiculous rescan policy, which I'm looking into, they weren't showing Lor her actual mother, but who they thought was in that bed.

You.



But --  
What do we do now?

I'm not her mother, and I'm not prepared to be a mother ... I mean, yeah, I was going to try again to have a baby, but that's a baby ...

I don't know how to raise a child Lor's age!

I don't think any of us ever really do, honestly.

Well, I sympathize. But we have to figure out something.

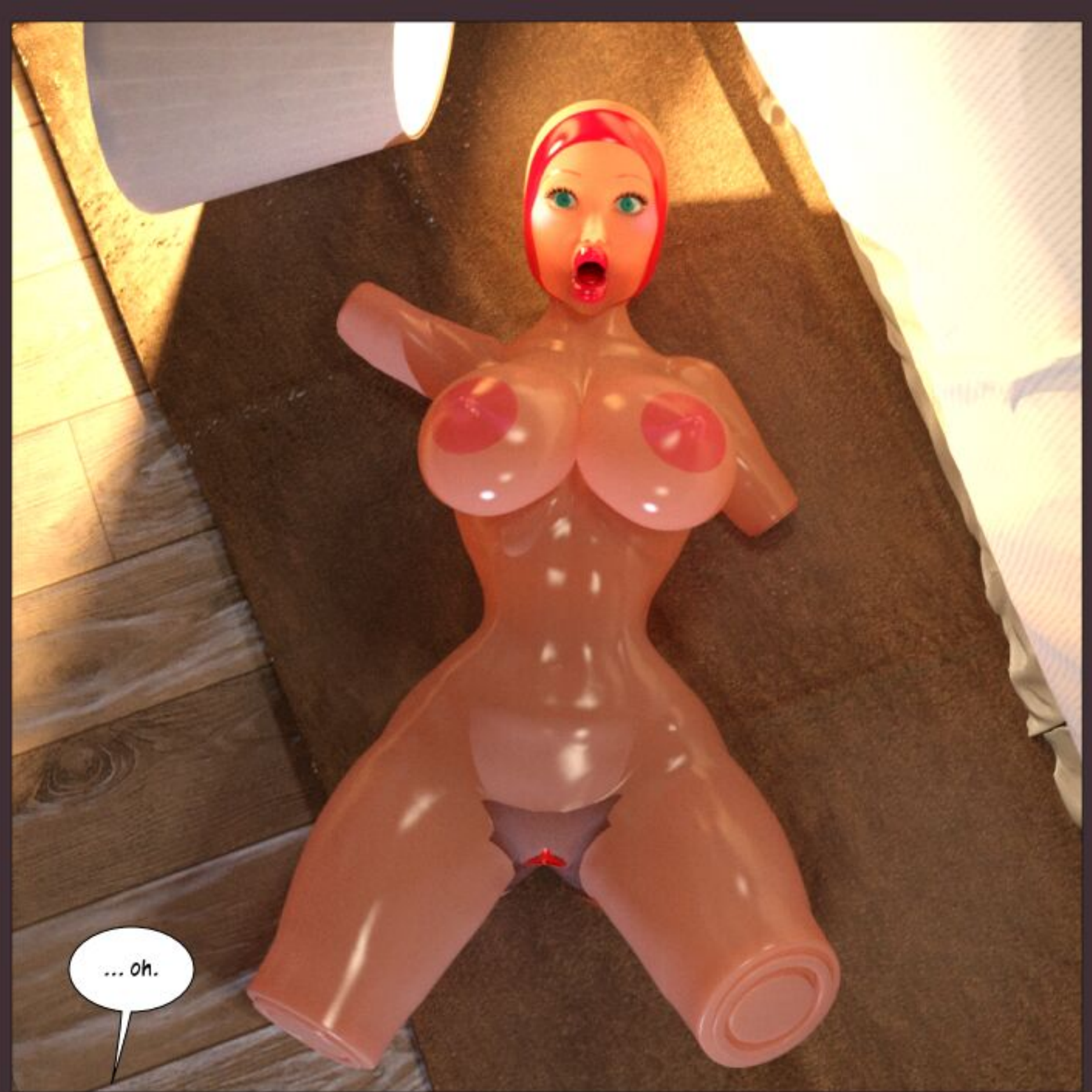
For Lor's sake. Because the situation right now is not sustainable.





Eeli?

Hello?



... Oh.



Not sure if you deserved this.

And of course you can't tell me anything to help figure that out ...

I think I better take you somewhere else. Just in case.



Stop squirming, would you? I'm trying to help you.

INTERLUDE.

SOMEWHERE IN THE SKIES OVER A4. WHICH ZONE IS UNCLEAR, BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT THAT IT'S A GOOD DAY TO BE A LOONER.



OF COURSE, EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY TO BE A LOONER. EXCEPT ...



There!

What are you waiting for? Fire! Fire!

Calm down, old man. We're not in range yet.

May only get one shot. When we net one, the rest will scatter.

I don't think they're smart enough to scatter.



Got one! Try for another, quick!

Working on it ...



More! Can we get any more?

Well, since someone's not at the helm, probably not.

They're changing course. Get up there and follow them, and I might be able to get another couple before they zone out.

WHAT NASTINESS IS THIS? PATIENCE! MORE WILL BE REVEALED ... IN DUE TIME.



That's Eeli?

Unless somebody else got turned into a doll and left at her place.

Ronna! You have a customer in five minutes! You need to be out in Reception!



So your thinking is, someone paid Eeli to impersonate Ronna and drug Hal Berg, and afterward, that same someone did this to her so she couldn't tell anybody who that someone was.

Those don't all have to be the same someone ... but, yeah, that's where I am.



Treece, this would be unacceptable even if it wasn't also trying to incriminate my people and my house.

As it is, it's infuriating. I know I don't need to encourage you to see it through, but let me expand on what I said earlier today:

This has now become my problem too. Any help I can give you to get to the bottom of it, just ask.

There is one thing you can do.

I didn't want to leave Eeli there, in case someone decided that wasn't good enough. They were pretty vicious; there'd been a fight. Things were knocked over.

Can you keep her safe until we figure out a way to fix her?



Yes, I can do that.

Although I won't promise not to offer her to customers in the interim.

Part of me feels like she owes that in amends.

NAOMI'S PERSONAL SPACE, CENTURY.

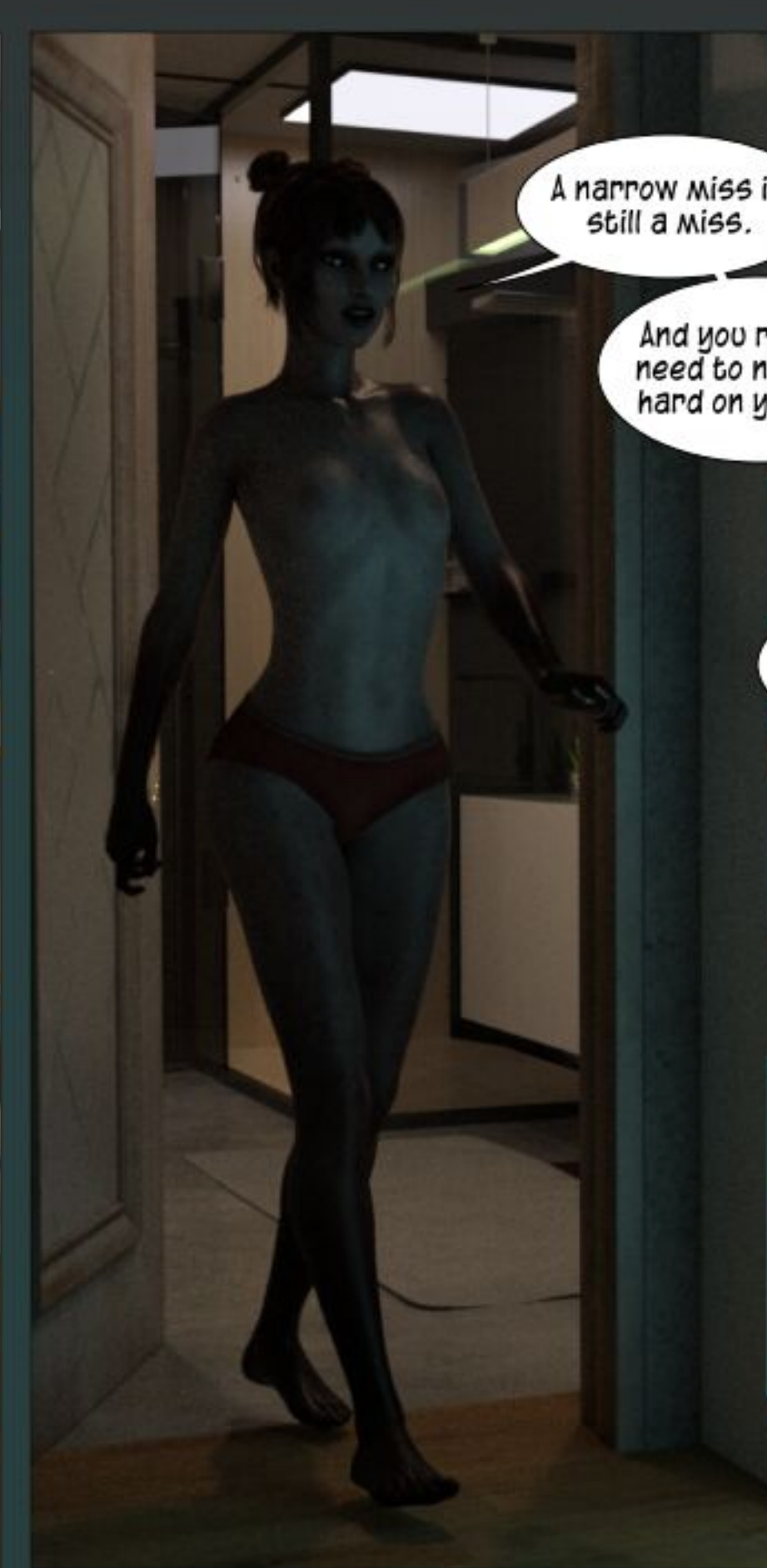


... and you did halt the line long enough for me to come to. Even if you'd done nothing else, that'd still be important.

I guess ... but I shouldn't have been in there in the first place, and I shouldn't have let them take over my head as easily as they did.

I only snapped out of it because I saw you ... and it's a good thing you're so recognizable with that skin ... otherwise I might not have caught on, and you'd be a robot now.

Along with half the people in Century.



A narrow miss is still a miss.

And you really do need to not be so hard on yourself.

... Maybe you're right.

Uh ... I guess I'd better be getting home ... Should I come by tomorrow, or do you want some time off from the Coleman hunt?



Don't go home.

You -- MMM -- you never did tell me why you decided to look like that ...

Was it just to stand out?

Not really. I wasn't interested in standing out. I'm still not.

I didn't feel like I was doing a very good job of being a human, so I decided I shouldn't look like one.

... Do you think you've gotten better since then? At being a human?

Sometimes.





I really appreciate your seeing me ...

Happy to, Ms. Quinn--

Call me Quinda. Everybody does.

-- but I am curious how you managed to find me. Were you recommended to me by someone?

Kind of. There were a whole bunch of people who were, uh, stuck? In nowhere? And they all woke up at the same time?

My friend Sammy didn't wake up right. He said you helped him get his head back together.



Samuel Chang mostly put his head back together on his own. He was fortunate. Most of the people who didn't recover well from the interrupt still haven't recovered. I'm doing what I can.

I take it you were a ghost as well?

Ghost?

Sorry. A term a friend of mine used. Trapped in a loop while in interspace. Reenacting the same scenario over and over.

I guess so. It wasn't exactly like that for me ...

So what can I do for you? Is the experience causing you problems now? Are you trying to get past it?

No. I want to get back to it.



I'm sorry?

What I did while I was a ... ghost ... wasn't with some other ghost, or with things from inside my head.

It was with a real person, and I want to find him.

You're sure? About it being a real person, I mean.



He wasn't anybody I knew. Nobody from my past or my memories or whatever.

And it didn't feel like I was playing back scenes from my brain. It was real.

Even if I wasn't myself. That was the other thing, I wasn't me. I was someone else. He knew who I was. It meant something to him.

I know that probably doesn't make any sense.



I've dealt with things that made much less sense.

And it's plausible. It would mean he was controlling the scenario ...

But, Quinda, even if we can reconnect you with him, do you think it's a good idea? Even if it wasn't ephemeral for you, it may have been for him. He may not want to go back there.

He was very sad, Dr. Chapman. Lonely, I think.

But he wasn't sad when I was with him.

I don't know. I'd just like to see if I can keep him from being sad again.

HM. Well, it may be moot. We may not be able to find him.

Start by telling me everything you can remember. We need all the clues we can get.



... I didn't pursue it for a long time because I wasn't sure it wasn't just a rumor.

But then we got the independent block check, to work around the Sprue, and that confirmed it.

Spindrop is real. Some of its data is obscured--for example, I can't figure out who owns it--but it's there.

But I don't know how to get to it.

Yes, and in this case it's deliberate. The people who live there don't want any visitors, apparently. They must have portals, but they're a--

What on earth?



Pardon me, ma'am ...

Would you like to try one of our relaxation beds? A refreshing and blissful experience, absolutely free.

Pink Euphorics?

Uh-huh. Saw em while back.\*

Ruby can't tell you?

\* #35, AND NO, WE STILL HAVEN'T GIVEN NEWER READERS--OR JEX!--THE FULL BRIEFING ON THEM. NEXT TIME. WE PROMISE.



And there go the other kind.

Must be the day for it.

Huh!

What?

Last time, heard pink and black can't like other none.



Do we walk in and smash up your operations?

Your ridiculous ideas have to be eliminated.

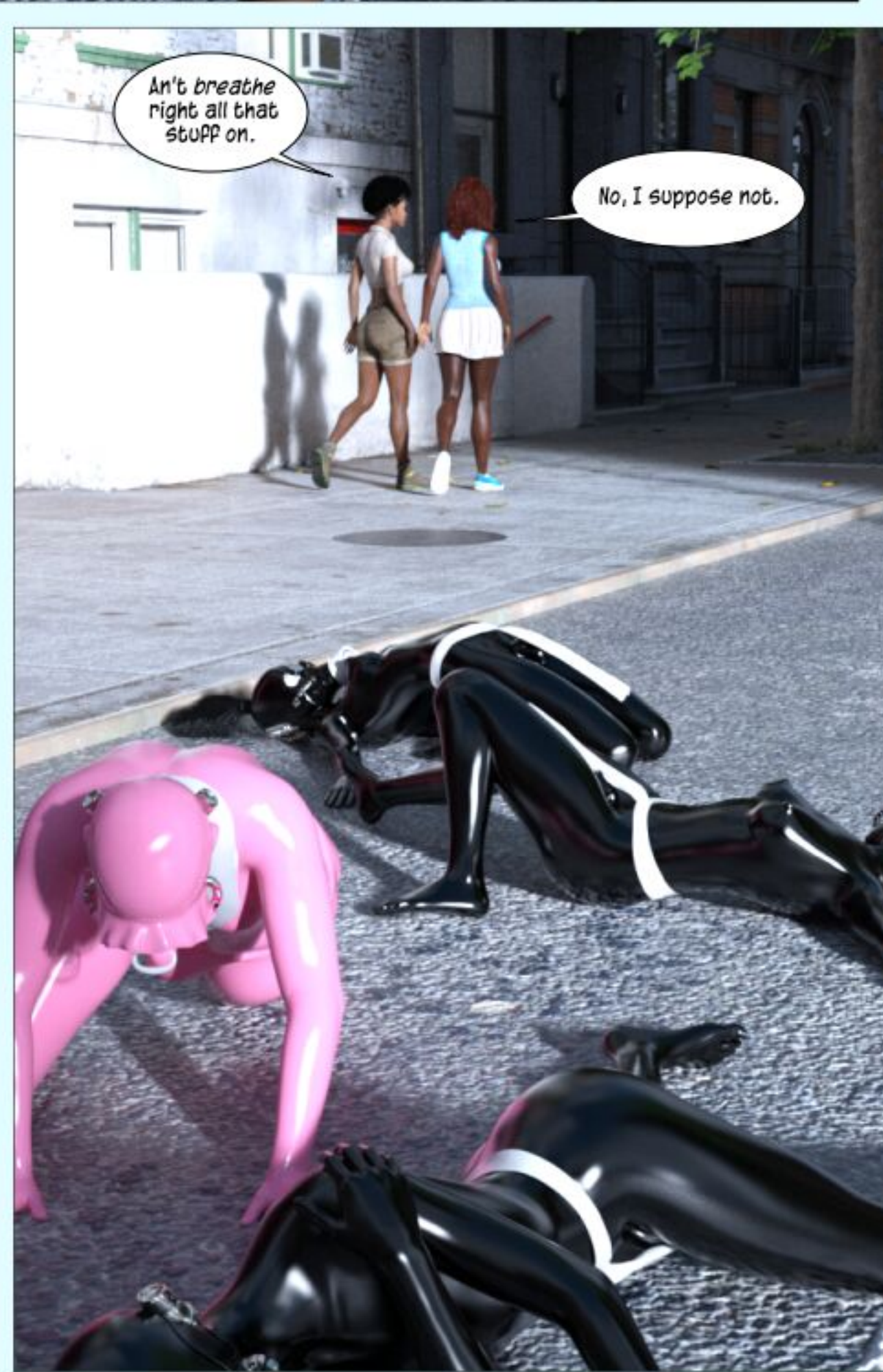
And you couldn't smash our operations if you tried.



Because you don't do them where anyone can see you! You're scared what would happen if people actually knew!

They're for the initiated only, is all. We don't just take anybody in off the street like you do.

-- sigh --



INTERLUDE.  
THE SOUK.



EMILY HAS PUT ON EXTRA PATROLS AS A RESPONSE TO INCREASED ACTIVITY BY THE MYSTERIOUS JACKAL WOMAN. BUT THIS HAS DONE LITTLE TO RELIEVE HER ANXIETY. ESPECIALLY AT NIGHT.



LEYNA AND LOU'S PERSONAL SPACE, SERENITY.



... It's getting frustrating. Demand is way up and yet we're not seeing any new actors ...

I don't know what's causing it, and neither does anybody else I've asked. Not even any good guesses.

I'm thinking of starting a campaign. "Hey, you like to watch passives all day? Then do your part to help make them!"



Say, am I keeping you awake?

Oh! ... Damn. I'm sorry. It's not you. Lost in my own head.

Rough day?

Not especially ... we had to deal with the Euphorics, which was annoying ...

Actually ... I think that's the problem. I was more annoyed about *having* to deal with it than about the actual event.

IP that makes any sense.



A few days ago, Ruby accused me of not wanting to get my hands dirty. She said I wanted to just stay in the ops room and make everyone else go out and do the work.

Well, that's true, though.

Oh, thanks a lot.

My dear, it absolutely is true and you know it. What's more, your choices here are sound, and you know that too. You are not cut out for field duty. It's not where your strengths are.

I told Ruby that. She didn't like it.

The key part here isn't whether the assessment is true, it's why it bothers you as much as it does.



You don't like it when Ruby is upset with you. Obviously. I mean, of course you don't.

But this is one of those cases where you need to stick to your guns. It's not as if you're putting in less of an effort than she is. I know how much time you spend in that ops room. Too much. Ruby knows it too.

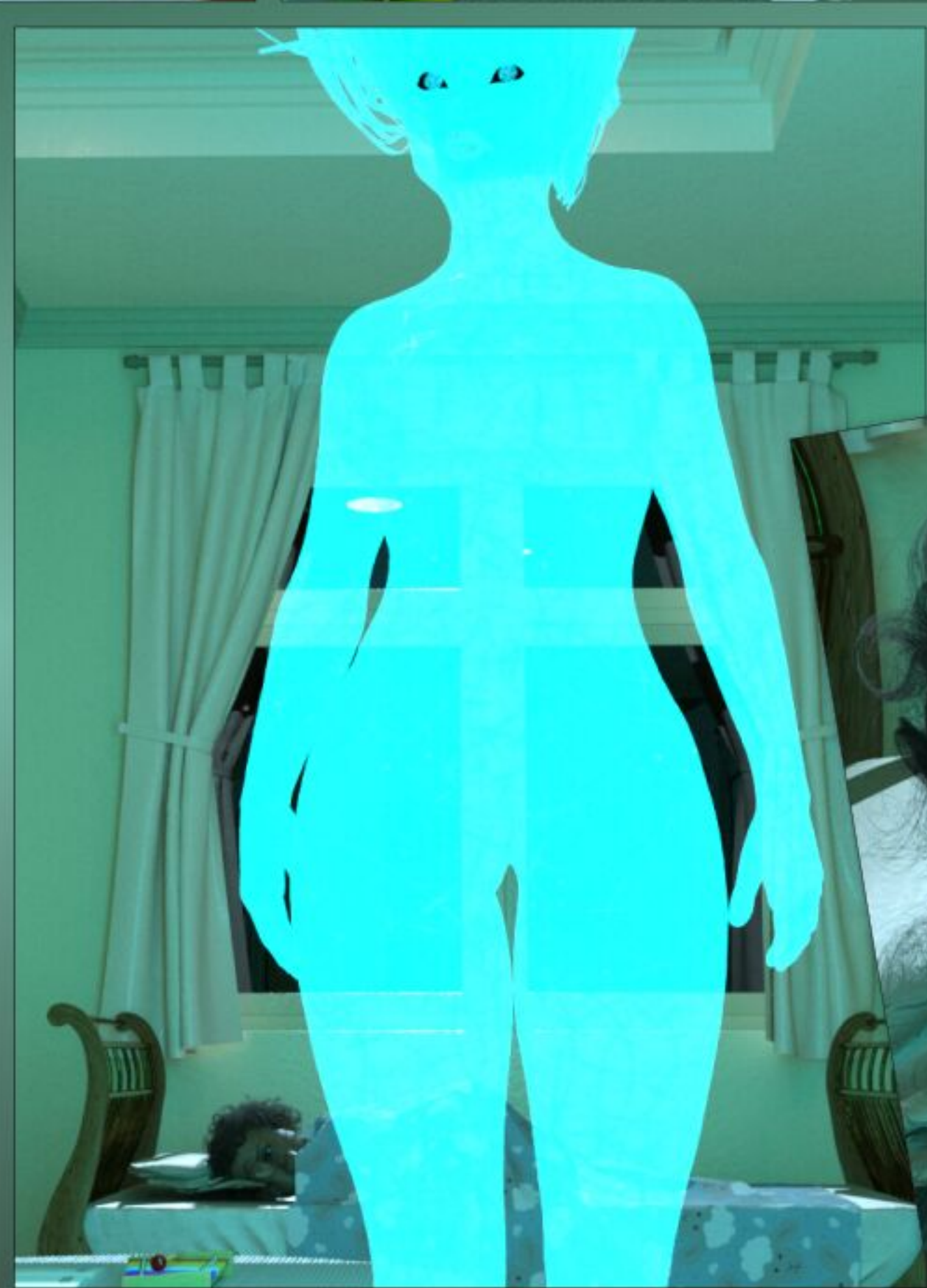
The real reason Ruby is prickly about this is because she doesn't want troubleshooting to become her entire life, and she's waiting for you or someone else to come up with something so it doesn't have to.

Now, what you do to solve that problem, I have no idea.

MEANWHILE, ELSEWHERE IN SERENITY ...



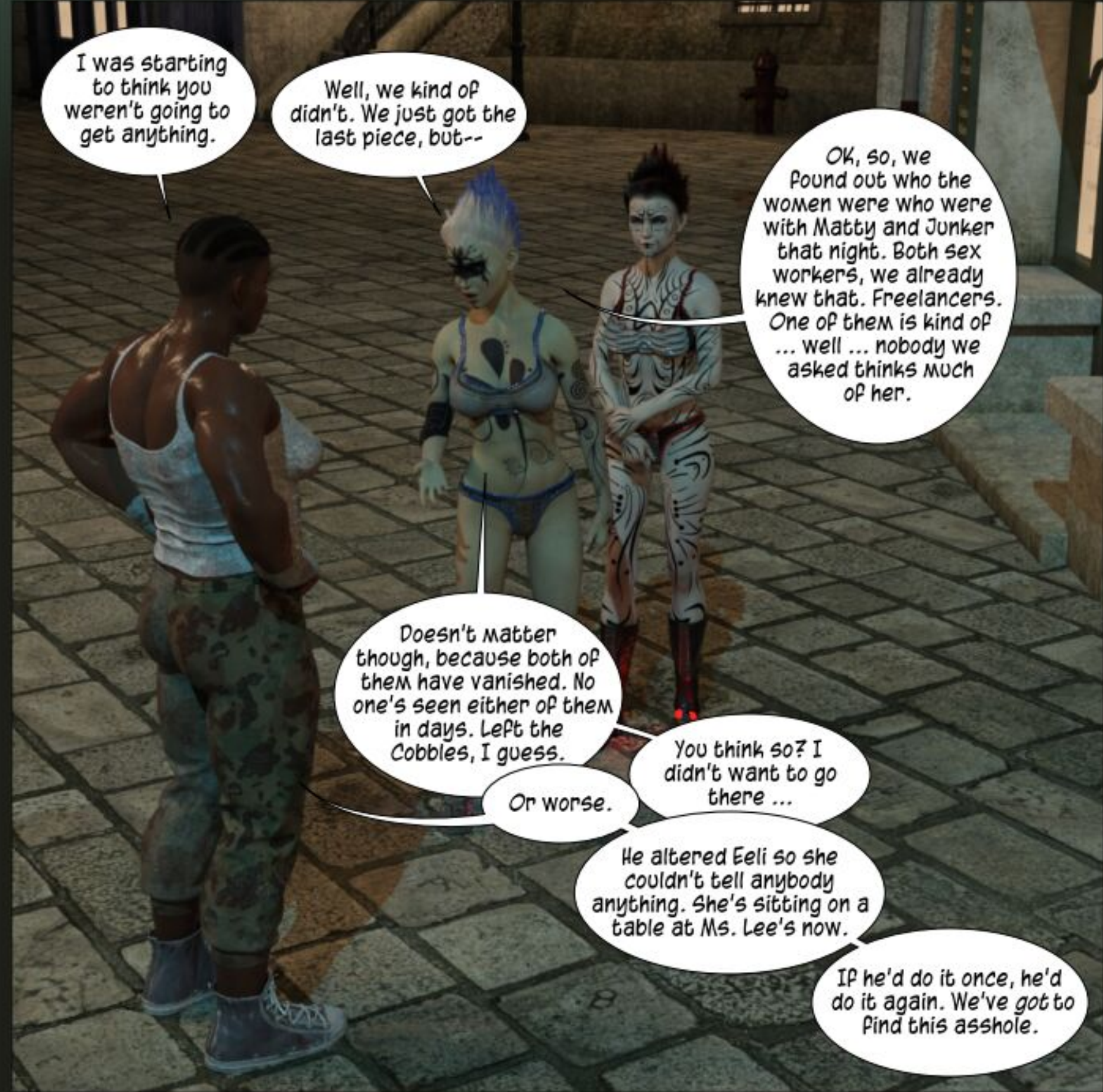
DOLORES ONLY SWITCHED TO A BIG GIRL BED A FEW MONTHS AGO. SHE IS STILL VERY PROUD ABOUT IT.



AND ONCE AGAIN WE RETURN TO THE COBBLES.



Hey! Treece!



I was starting to think you weren't going to get anything.

Well, we kind of didn't. We just got the last piece, but--

OK, so, we found out who the women were who were with Matty and Junker that night. Both sex workers, we already knew that. Freelancers. One of them is kind of ... well ... nobody we asked thinks much of her.

Doesn't matter though, because both of them have vanished. No one's seen either of them in days. Left the Cobbles, I guess.

You think so? I didn't want to go there ...

Or worse.

He altered Eeli so she couldn't tell anybody anything. She's sitting on a table at Ms. Lee's now.

If he'd do it once, he'd do it again. We've got to find this asshole.



Yeah, about that ...

Look, we've been glad to help ... common good and all that ... but you know we're not Friends of the boss. And he tolerates a lot of things we don't like.

If ... when ... we do find this asshole, we want to know you're actually going to do something about him.



Don't worry.

The boss asked me to solve this, remember? As far as I'm concerned, that means "Do whatever you have to."

And even if he hadn't ... I don't care. Even if this jerk wasn't crossing any of the boss' lines, he's crossed a couple of mine.

I've got one thing left to chase. Join me?

... Sure.



He turned Eeli into a sex doll?

Mhmm. And since everything else he's done has been via algo drugs, I figure that's what he used.

The only person in the Cobbles making anything like that is Hayah, who supplies it to Steve Heatter's club.

I've been looking for Hayah for two days with no luck. But Heatter says he's supposed to be here making a fresh batch tonight.

Hayah? You in here?



... Yep.

You, uh, don't sound too surprised.

I'm not. I'd been wondering if I was going to find him in time.

Asshole's in a hurry to clean up his tracks. He didn't even bother using a sex worker for this one.

How do you know?

Hayah's got clothes on.



So now we have nothing left?

Nothing we can chase down.

But this confirms it: I know what this is all about. I know why everything happened, what the asshole is up to. There's just two things I don't have yet.

Who he is, and how to prove it.

FOURTEEN DAYS AFTER THE PLUNGE.



THE OPS ROOM.

We've got to get you to where you can cast your own portals.

I mean, I don't mind coming out to pick you up, but it means sending a message to arrange it, and that takes a while ... and finding you is hard, especially right now ...

I can't believe you're still sleeping rough after all this time!

Still an't figured where set up.

And like sleep outside, less rain. Han't rain much here.



Hey, don't pick on her choices!

Besides, she's easy to find sleeping rough. We know the places she goes. It's the rest of the time we can't find her.

So this is a general assembly? What, is there some new disaster we haven't seen yet?



No, no disaster.

Uh ...

... It's time to bring Ruby back.



She han't gon like none.

I know. And I'd let her stay out as long as she wants--as long as she has to--if I could.

But we need her, Jex. You know that.

She's had two weeks. Like it or not, that's all the vacation we can give her.



Now: Who's going to go find her?

NEXT: THE HIGH SEAS