

SLEEPER SQUAD

SOMEWHERE IN THE LESS CHARMING PARTS OF SERENITY ...



HIGH ANXIETY

AFTER SEVERAL FALSE STARTS, RUBY HAS FINALLY FINISHED REMODELING HER PERSONAL SPACE. HOWEVER, THERE'S STILL A LOT OF PAINTING AND DECORATING TO BE DONE.



hmm ...

An't get why do this way tho. Han't just make it any you want?

That's a very Leyna question, you know.

So?

And han't should be mean, Ruby.



Sometimes it's good to do things the hard way. It makes you think about the process.

And the time and energy means you take it seriously. Like right now, when I'm trying to decide if I don't like this color enough to justify undoing the half hour I spent putting it on.

Besides, I like painting. It's relaxing. I need things that relax me. Especially right now.



Of course! I just need some time. I'm still pretty pissed off.

And if that's her, you're going to see a fight, because she should know better right now.

Ever gon talk Leyna gain?



I don't know you. And that probably means you're here to bring me a problem. And you're not welcome.

Like hell you don't. Just let me get this mask off.



Honor Delp! My goodness.

You're even more not welcome.

Jex?

I ... didn't know you'd be here ...

Look, you know I wouldn't come here unless I really didn't have any choice.

I need help, and there's nowhere else I can get it.



No way.

But it's my father! You'd try to save your father ...

Uh ... OK, sorry about that ... but I think the point still ...

I don't like to talk trash to people about their parents, but since you went there ... Tommy Delp is a jackass and a gripter. Maybe you don't know his past. Wouldn't surprise me if he hadn't told you.

I hate him, he hates me, and anyway it would take a lot more than his ass to get me to go anywhere near Highpoint's bullshit again.



This isn't just Highpoint politics! The Order is dangerous! They've kept to themselves before this, but that seems to be over, and I don't think they'll stop with the Delp estate.

You want them coming into Serenity? One of them tried to chase me here today, you know.

So why'd you let them in in the first place?



#30

I didn't want to! I objected to it from the beginning. But we couldn't keep out that Scholz bitch with just the resources we had, so Daddy went to the Order and their Mother Corven lent us an acolyte. One acolyte.



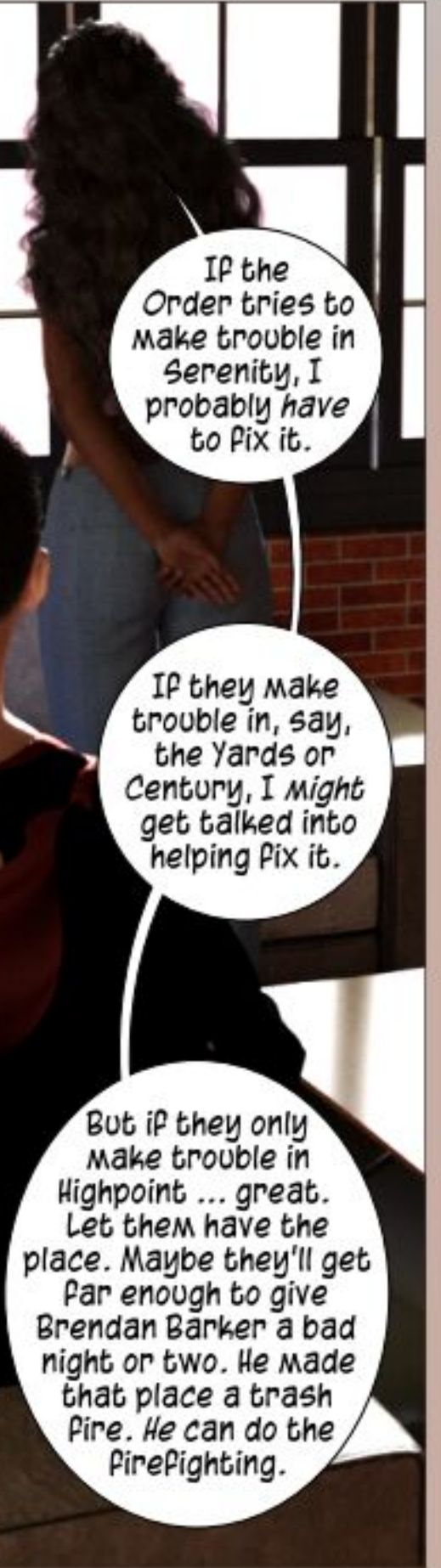
Jex, you were there when Daddy introduced her. You said she didn't look like she was up to any good. Remember?

But she did what she came to do! She improved our defenses, she made the shadows nastier ... Scholz couldn't get in anymore ...

Then she said it was time to pay the price for the service.

And all of a sudden the Order had completely moved in, and they're running the whole estate, and all kinds of horrible things have happened, and Daddy ... well ...

#38



If the Order tries to make trouble in Serenity, I probably have to fix it.

If they make trouble in, say, the Yards or Century, I might get talked into helping fix it.

But if they only make trouble in Highpoint ... great. Let them have the place. Maybe they'll get far enough to give Brendan Barker a bad night or two. He made that place a trash fire. He can do the fire fighting.



I guess I probably shouldn't even ask if you'd help ...

What, you mean after you used a mind-control potion on her?

An't your pull, Ruby.

Honor ... an't think you're skel all time. Some good. But yeah, han't trust you none. Tacked me with that stuPP.

Made your old dore a monster. Prob make me monster too, got tired of me.



I had to use that on you! I had no way of knowing I could trust you!

And since you were there to distract me so she could spy, I was right!

And then you stabbed me!

Cause you asked me to kill her!

... Look, I know I made mistakes. But I really did think ... I thought maybe it would be ...

I don't know. With you it was different. I mean it.



Ruby ... kind Peel like should ...

Prob bad idea, know ...

I'm not your mother, Jex.

And I've done dumber things for weirder reasons. Can't cast stones.

Honor, if I don't hear from her in a couple of weeks I'm going to assume the worst, and I'm going to come kick every ass I can reach, starting with yours.

ALL OF THE EVENTS BEING DISCUSSED IN THESE TWO PANELS HAPPENED IN #30.



We're going to have to wade a little. You sure you don't want boots?

Been in worse.

Why han't just port in?

I can't. The Order's got some way of keeping people from casting portals in or out. Set portals work, but there aren't any on the estate. Daddy didn't want them.

They've also got defenses up everywhere between our estate and Scholz'. But the Scholzzen wouldn't try to attack from this side--they'd have to go all the way around the estate--and I think everybody but me forgot these tunnels were even here.



Ruby said you were big witch. All kinds pull.

Why han't just tack all self? Why get help?



She said that? Huh.

I can do all kinds of things but they take setup. I can make something in advance, like a potion ... or I need to do a formal procedure. Takes time. Concentration.

We won't get that with Corven, which is why I need you to help distract her or knock her out long enough for me to work something.



Gettin hazzed Polk all use me for bait.

Got be some else here help ...

I didn't say "bait." I said "distraction." If you have a way to take her before she can do anything, great.

Nobody. The Maids are all initiates now, and the shadows all got converted.

Some of the nobles didn't cooperate, but ...

Lord Pulter hasn't been seen--I think Holly the acolyte claimed him. The Sterlings tried to rebel and vanished too. They're probably tied up somewhere, repenting. Lady Barigault went over big and now she keeps Lord Barigault on a short leash. Literally.



What bout one hot for your dad?

Lady Darrow! I'm amazed you remember.

HMM. She's still at liberty ... and it could work ... that might motivate her ...

She's not very reliable though.

Need some else. Gon be slide just two.

... OK. Let's talk to her.



The initiates can't see you, but they can hear you. They'll probably ignore you anyway, but try not to make any noise.

The acolytes might as well not have their eyes covered. Those we have to avoid completely.



Why, Honor!

Just barging in here like you never learned manners ... I'm not dressed!

I'm sorry, Lady Darrow, but it's important. We need you to help rescue Daddy.



Rescue him? From what? Me?

I haven't laid eyes on the man in weeks ... every time I look for him I can't find him ... I even went to his rooms and knocked on his door. He didn't answer.

He's avoiding me.

He's being held captive, Lady Darrow.

Captive? By those horrible Order people?

We think so. We need you to come with us and help us get him out.

Very well. Come back in forty minutes.



Lady Darrow, we need to do it now! We're running out of time!

Honor Delp, I am not going to let your Pather see me with my hair slept in, no makeup, wearing a nightgown ... I don't care if it's a crisis!

-- sigh -- At least let me get my hair up and put something on. I'll hurry.



How do we play this? You get her attention, I try to take her out?

Other way. You pull, I push, Lady goes in.



eh?

Come quick!

The initiates are revolting!



My mistake. They're not revolting, you just don't let them shower often enough.

WHONK

uhhk



Lord Delp?

Forgive the intrusion, Milord, but we're--

--gasp--
Lord Delp???



Oh, dear!

Lady Darrow, isn't it? Very unexpectedly. Well, if you're going to give a rude surprise, you should get one in return.

uuuh?

I'm afraid Lord Delp has changed considerably, as you can see.
Do you still want her like this? I'm sure she'd be willing to play. She usually is.



Daddy?

You monster!

How could you do this--

Oh, and Honor as well? I didn't think you would come back. Who's your friend?



You're jumping to the wrong conclusion. I didn't do this. She did it to herself. I offered her a risky possibility and she took it. It didn't work out.

uuuh?

Perhaps we'll discuss the details later, but for now, you have other places to be.

You know, it's very interesting, Honor ... now that she's like this, I can see the family resemblance much more clearly.



BACK IN SERENITY ...



Damn it, I'm busy!



Jeanne?

I haven't seen you since before the Sprue! No one was sure where you were ...

I like to keep a low profile.

Redecorating? I have to tell you, I'm not sure the plum works here.

Yeah, neither am I.

You changed your hair! I like it.

JEANNE LAVAL (BARKER). JOSIAH'S MOTHER, NOT THAT SHE LOOKS IT IN THIS FORM. WE'VE SEEN HER A COUPLE OF TIMES SINCE THE SPRUE, BUT RUBY HASN'T.



Jeanne, you know I'm happy to see you, but I also suspect you're bringing me trouble ...

... and I've got to warn you, I am not peeling the troubleshooting business right now. Very much not.

Hmm. That's not like you. Wearing you down, I suppose. There's so much bad behavior.

Uh ... something like that.



This isn't the usual level of mischief, or I wouldn't waste your time.

After years of keeping to themselves--and not making trouble--the Order of Vision has woken up and is starting to show signs of activity outside their enclave.

They're very dangerous. If they're actually becoming active again, it's a problem for all of us.



Order of Vision? Please tell me this isn't the same group as the weird nuns who have a little Pothold in Highpoint.

I'm afraid so. What do you know about them?

I sort of peel like I should make you go first.

I don't know a lot. Some of them have abilities we've never seen anywhere else, but I haven't been able to find out more.

And apparently they've recently taken over the Delp estate because Tommy Delp was stupid enough to invite them in for protection.

How do you know about them?



I've been keeping close track of them for a long time.

Mmm. Because of your keen sense of danger? That you didn't apply on your hive project and we nearly all became Penny's bees?*

Oh, you are in a bad space right now. Is everything else in your life going all right? You and Leyna aren't fighting, are you?

Um ... I apologize. That was out of line.

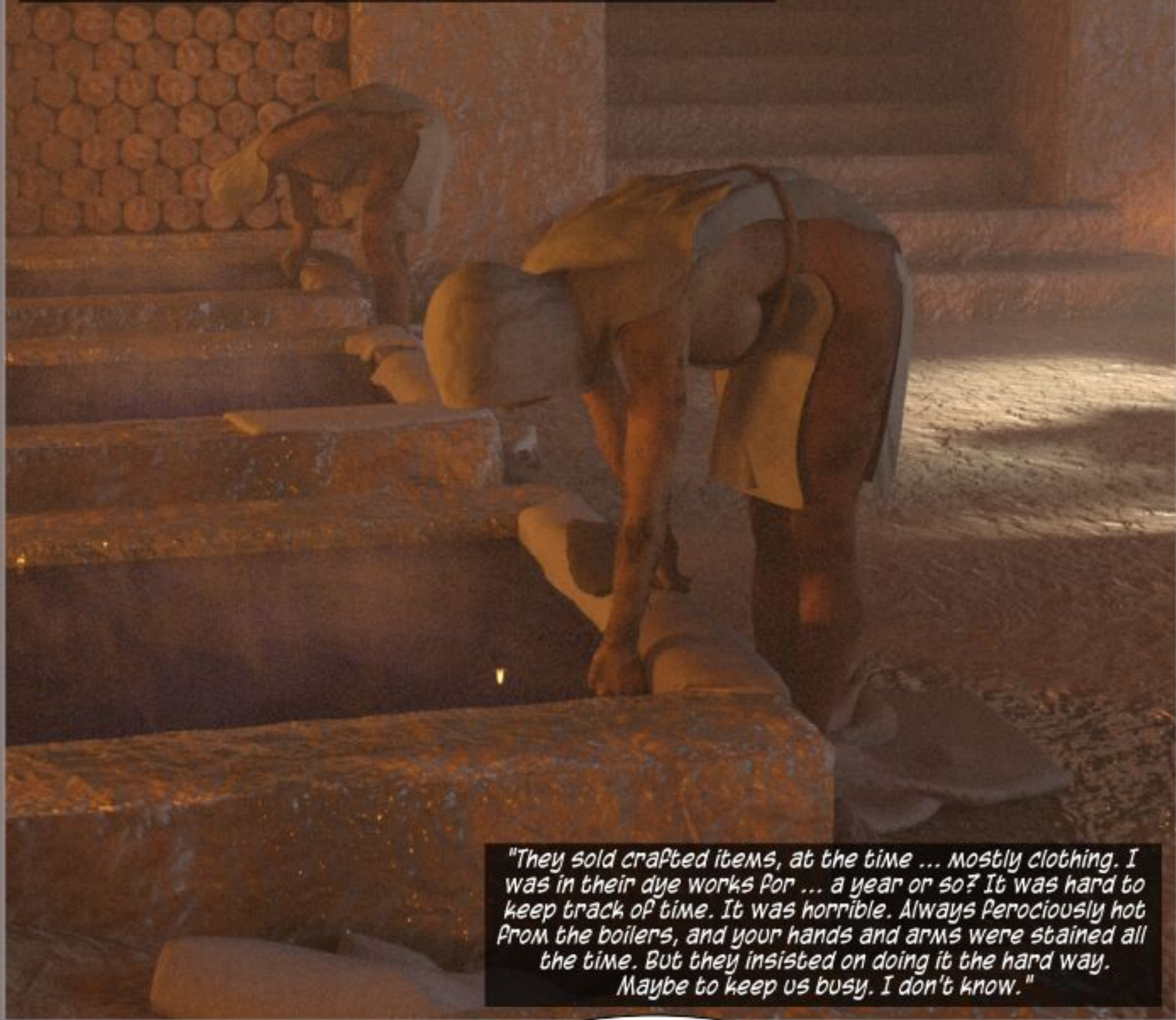
I've been keeping track of them ever since I realized what they really were. Which was also when I left the Order.

... Oh, this should be good.

"When you join the Order, you start as an initiate. You spend a lot of time meditating and doing 'mental exercises' that they say are going to get you in the right state of mind to advance and acquire the special abilities the acolytes have."



"What they don't tell you is that very few initiates ever advance. I'm sure they'd say it's because most just aren't suitable, but the truth is, they weren't exempt from bed fees, and they needed the initiates to earn enough to support themselves and the acolytes. The initiates were there mostly as captive labor."



"They sold crafted items, at the time ... Mostly clothing. I was in their dye works for ... a year or so? It was hard to keep track of time. It was horrible. Always Perociously hot from the boilers, and your hands and arms were stained all the time. But they insisted on doing it the hard way. Maybe to keep us busy. I don't know."



"They also rented out the initiates to make money a different way. You know I don't have an issue with sex work, but I don't think this really counted as consent ..."



"And I suppose it goes without saying ... at least in retrospect ... the initiates had to serve the acolytes any way the acolytes saw fit."

Lovely place, huh?
Yes, and very hard to get out of. I wouldn't call it mind control in any direct way ...



... but there was a lot of ... you know ... repetition of messages. Sensory deprivation. Even the acolytes always have their eyes covered. They claim it enhances their other senses.
Maybe for the acolytes it does, but the initiates are literally kept in the dark.
When I did get out, I didn't think there was anything I could do. Brendan wouldn't have shut them down--my grandson is a jackass. So I just tried to warn people off. Keep them from joining.
Then the bed fees ended. Brendan let them stay on in what became Highpoint and I guess they felt they had enough initiates. They stopped recruiting and kept to themselves.
Until now.
Until now.
Jeanne ... I have to ask. Why did you get involved with this cult in the first place?



I thought they were working toward the same things I was.
What, telepathy?
It's never been just about telepathy, Ruby. It's about getting everyone to be better to one another. Social awareness. Learning to act as part of a group. Unity.
The kinds of troubleshooting you're exhausted with ... I'd like to make A4 into a place where there's none of that, because everyone has a sense of ...
... Well, anyway, whatever I'm trying for, they weren't it. They do have abilities, but they're not interested in community. Or at least not any community outside themselves.



A friend of mine--you haven't met her yet--is probably up to her ass in this right now.
Honor Delp came to try to get our help this morning. She wants to rescue her father from the Order.
So that's where she was going ...
... Why isn't my portal working?
Are you trying to portal to somewhere inside the Delp estate?
The Order has somehow got the ability to prevent casting portals into or out of into a space. They've had it set up in their own compound since the Sprue.
If they've taken over the Delp space, setting it up there would be one of the first things they'd do.



Then we'll have to get there the hard way.
You don't want to even change clothes or anything?
I'll change on the way.
You've convinced me that Jex is in over her head, and I want to get there before something really bad happens to her.



HIGHPOINT.
MMGHRH!
MMGH GRHEH!!
Oh, do calm down.
We'll be done in just a moment. See? We've arrived.
This is Lord Delp's study. Fascinating man, Lord Delp. Shame about him prying his brain like that. I've learned so much from his notes.



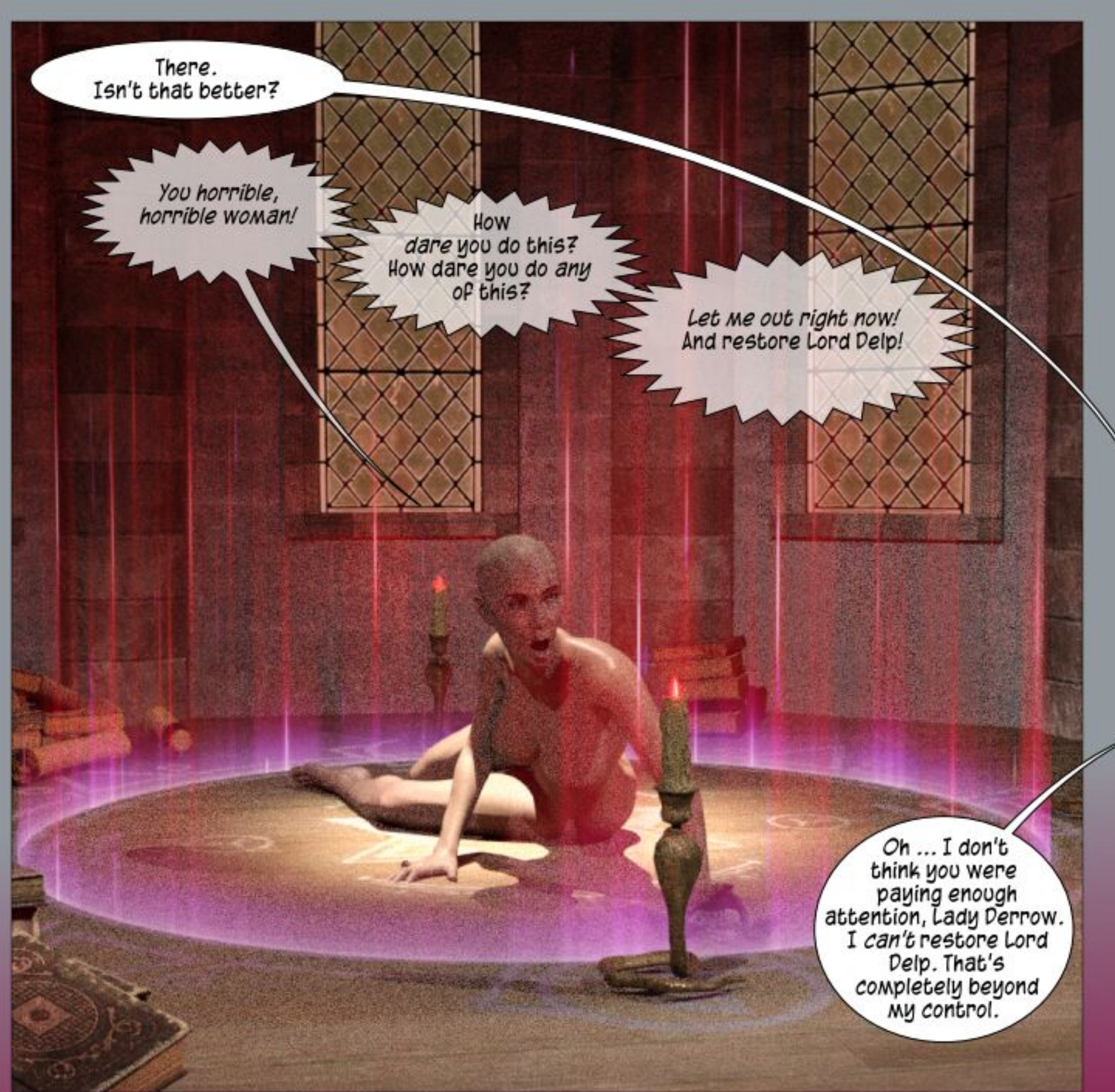
I don't imagine you've ever been in here, have you? I doubt Lord Delp would have let you anywhere near.
Oh, you don't recognize the Sterlings? I suppose it is a bit difficult. I'm still deciding what to do with them.
For the moment, I've told them that whichever of them makes the other climax first can have their feet back.
hrp!
Of course, neither of them has the equipment down there anymore. They could lick those empty spaces for a century and get nothing. Must be frustrating, don't you think?
hrp!



HHRRGHMMMM!

All right, all right. Be patient.

I just need to set up a few things and then I'll let you out of that icebox.



There. Isn't that better?

You horrible, horrible woman!

How dare you do this? How dare you do any of this?

Let me out right now! And restore Lord Delp!

Oh ... I don't think you were paying enough attention, Lady Darrow. I can't restore Lord Delp. That's completely beyond my control.



Wait, what are you doing?

Stop this at once!

Stop! You have no right to -- ooohooo!

I did consider giving her to you in exchange for your cooperation. She needs constant attention, and you'd get what you want. Or what you say you want.

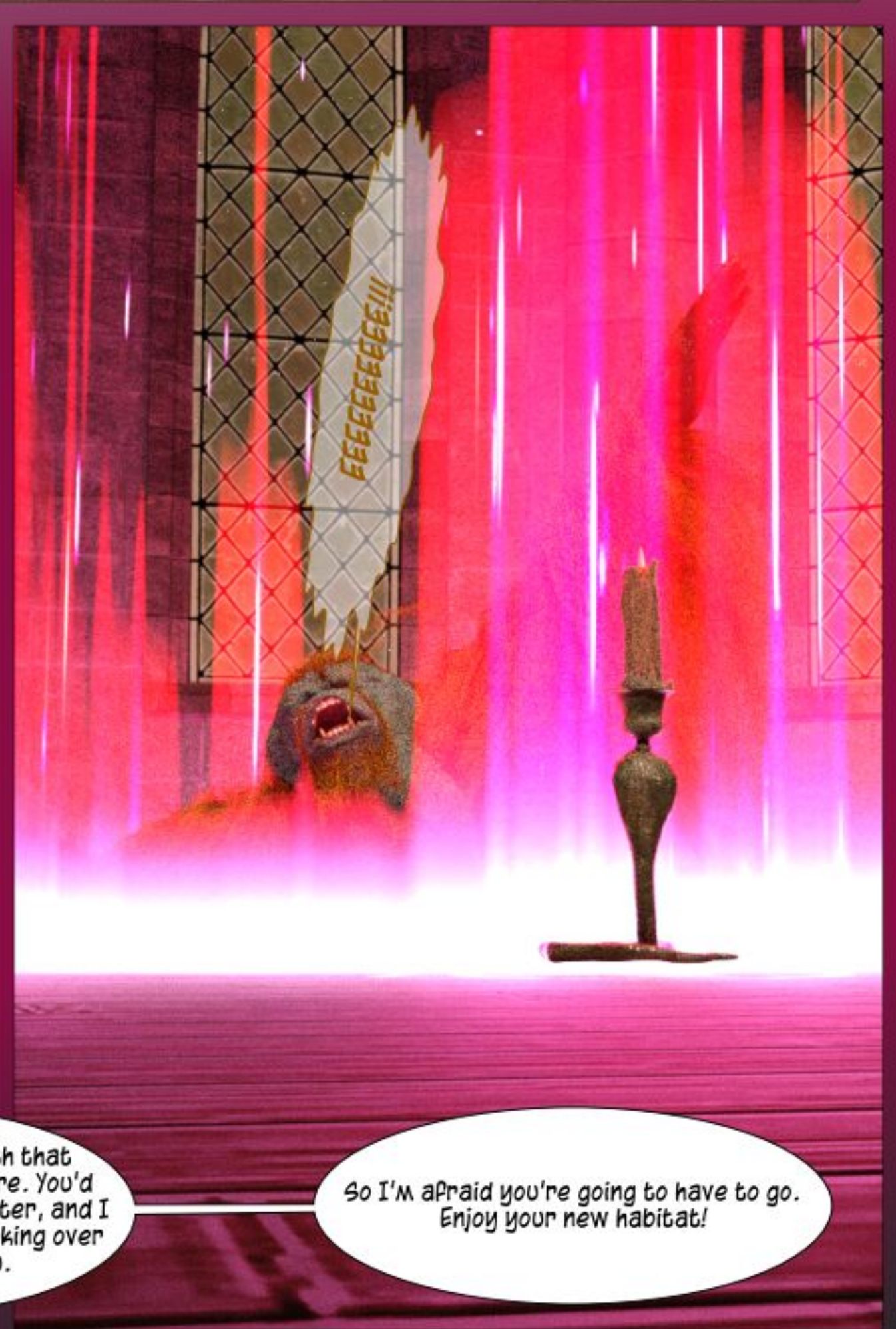


OOOK! EEEEE! OOOEEK!

HOOOO! KEEEEEE!

And there we have the problem. I don't think you actually love Lord Delp or even have any attraction. You just want to marry him for his estate. For the power.

I can't have someone with that kind of ambition around here. You'd try to cross me sooner or later, and I don't care to always be looking over my shoulder for you.



So I'm afraid you're going to have to go. Enjoy your new habitat!



You know, I really didn't expect you to come back, especially after you managed to lose the acolyte I sent to follow you.

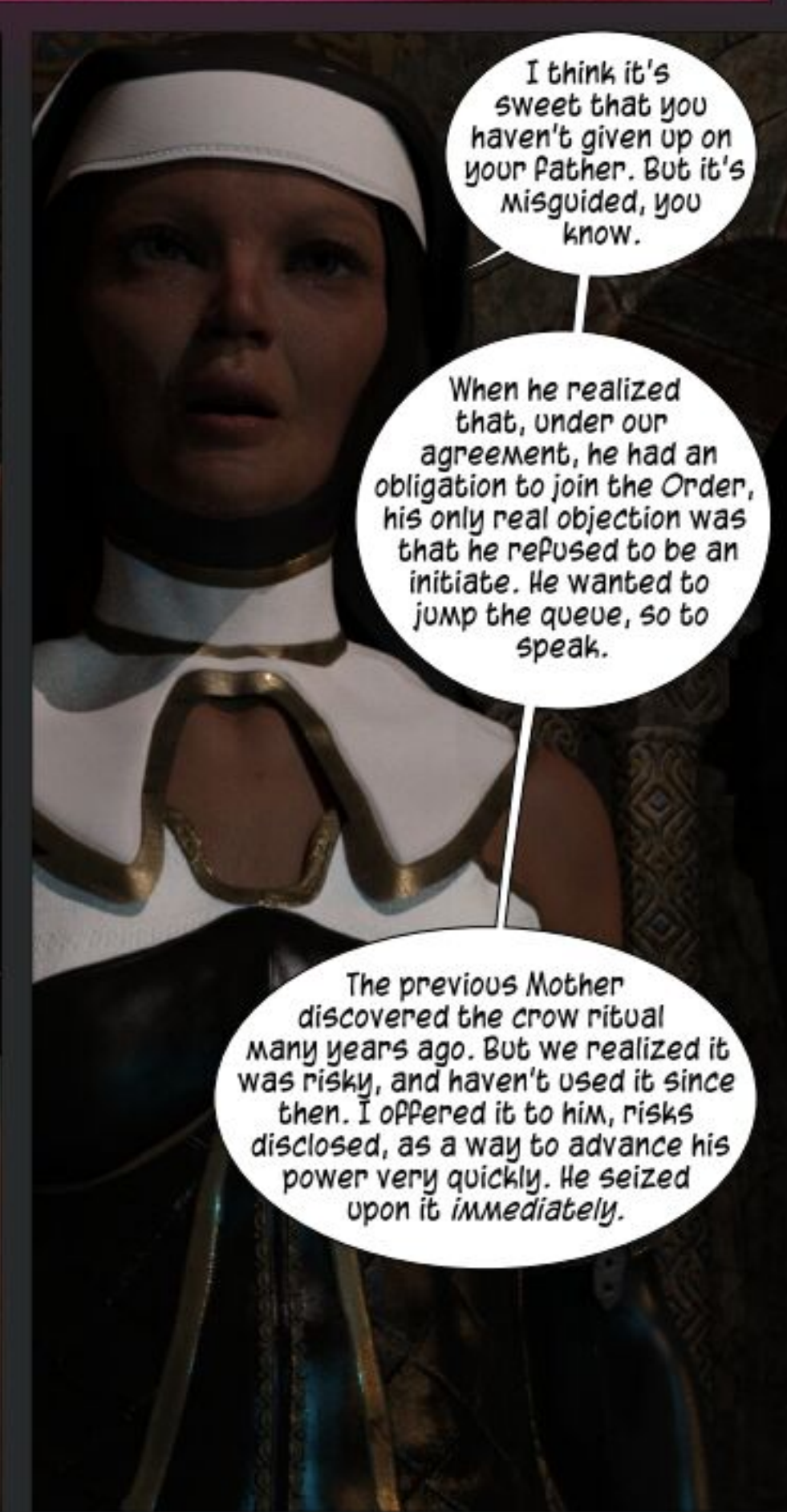


And you could certainly recall out of that. Is it possible you want to be here?

I'm prepared to offer you opportunities ...

Why don't you pucker yourself with that candle over there. I'll watch.

I'm not leaving without my friend and my father.



I think it's sweet that you haven't given up on your father. But it's misguided, you know.

When he realized that, under our agreement, he had an obligation to join the Order, his only real objection was that he refused to be an initiate. He wanted to jump the queue, so to speak.

The previous Mother discovered the crow ritual many years ago. But we realized it was risky, and haven't used it since then. I offered it to him, risks disclosed, as a way to advance his power very quickly. He seized upon it immediately.



He had no idea that you were going to force him to join the Order!

I was there, remember? All you asked at the time was that he "respect the Order" once we held off Scholz ...

And what better way to respect the Order?

Don't pretend to be naive, Honor. It doesn't suit you.

You knew there would be conditions. You probably tried as hard as you could to warn him off.

That's not the point! You can't spring something like that on him and then say it was his fault for trying to make the best of it!



You probably told him on purpose.

Shush.

You are missing the point.

The point is that your father is--was--a very ambitious man who would pursue any avenue he thought would get him more power. And you are your father's daughter in every way.

I like ambition, but it has a tendency to clash with my own. With someone like you or your father, I either need to be absolutely sure that I can trust them, or they have to be broken of their ambitions completely.

I don't have a strong preference which.



I'm going to give you one more brief chance to recall out.

If you do, I expect never to see you again.

If you stay, or if you come back, you will join the Order.

And we'll see which approach I have to take with you.



There you are!

EPPn skels put me in box ...

'clear? say some ...



Han't talk like that? K.

Get out of this, sePP, Pix face later. Skels all over.

Han't make Por shit but gettin pretty good breaking ...



Honor, got hau! Han't time Por that ...



... oh.

Aright.



Maybe she ran in here?

Look!

Stop them!



No, don't!!



I had several locations set up in that portal! All of them places that are difficult to reach any other way. And I don't remember which one I used last!

You've not only wrecked the portal, but now we have no way of knowing where they went!

NOT TOO LONG AFTER THAT ...



Hard to tell if your don't-notice-me suits work on them ...

They only really work when there's a crowd anyway. They're more like notice-somebody-else-instead suits.

I just figured they couldn't hurt.

Where do you think the head nasty would be keeping herself? I don't know how anybody finds anybody in these big stone piles ...



My word! A prodigal returns to the Pold.

Don't kid yourself. I tolerated you as long as you were keeping quiet and not recruiting any more victims.

But now you're out of line. Even if some of these people probably deserve you.



You never did understand. It was obvious early on that you weren't ever going to.

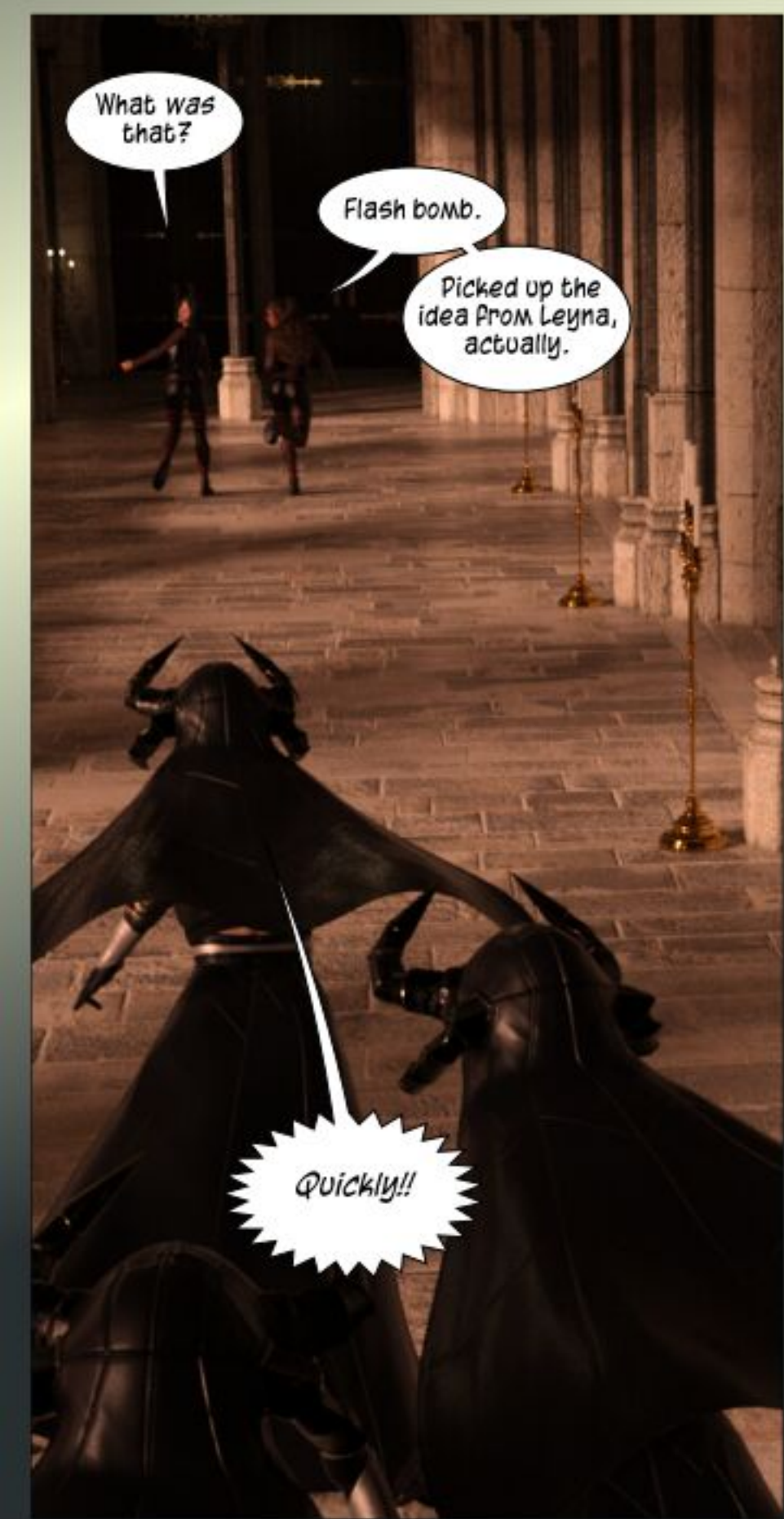
That's why you never advanced, you know. It was clear your mind could never encompass our mission.

That, and your inflated opinion of yourself. Like now. What do you think you're going to do? Do you imagine you can overpower me? You never had an ounce of ability.

Besides, you've picked a very bad day Por it.

Because there are already people here trying to shut you down?

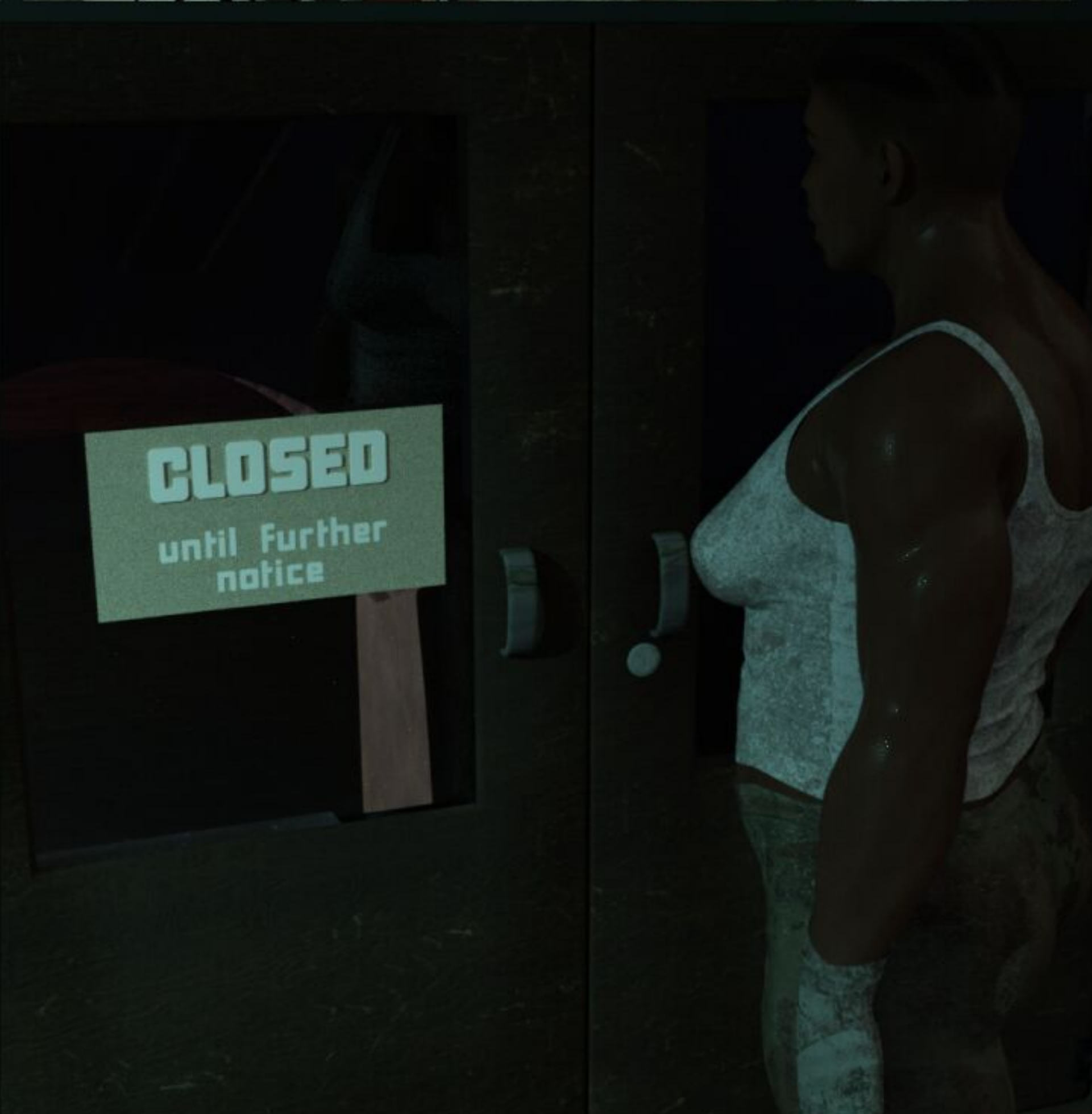
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE'VE SEEN THE INCONSPICUOSITY SUITS, MOSTLY BECAUSE THERE HAVEN'T BEEN ANY SITUATIONS LATELY WHERE THEY'D DO ANY GOOD.



INTERLUDE.
THE COBBLES.

TREECE HAS BEEN PREOCCUPIED WITH THE INVESTIGATION OF THE COMA VICTIMS (SEE #39 AND #43), BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN SHE CAN NEGLECT HER DUTIES AS THE BOSS' ENFORCER AND COLLECTOR. "THE BOSS ALWAYS GETS HIS CUT."





SOMEWHERE?
WE'RE NOT SURE OURSELVES.



Rosh.

Know would get here?

Oh, yeah, han't say none ...



Ohhhhh.

Big slide. Bad.

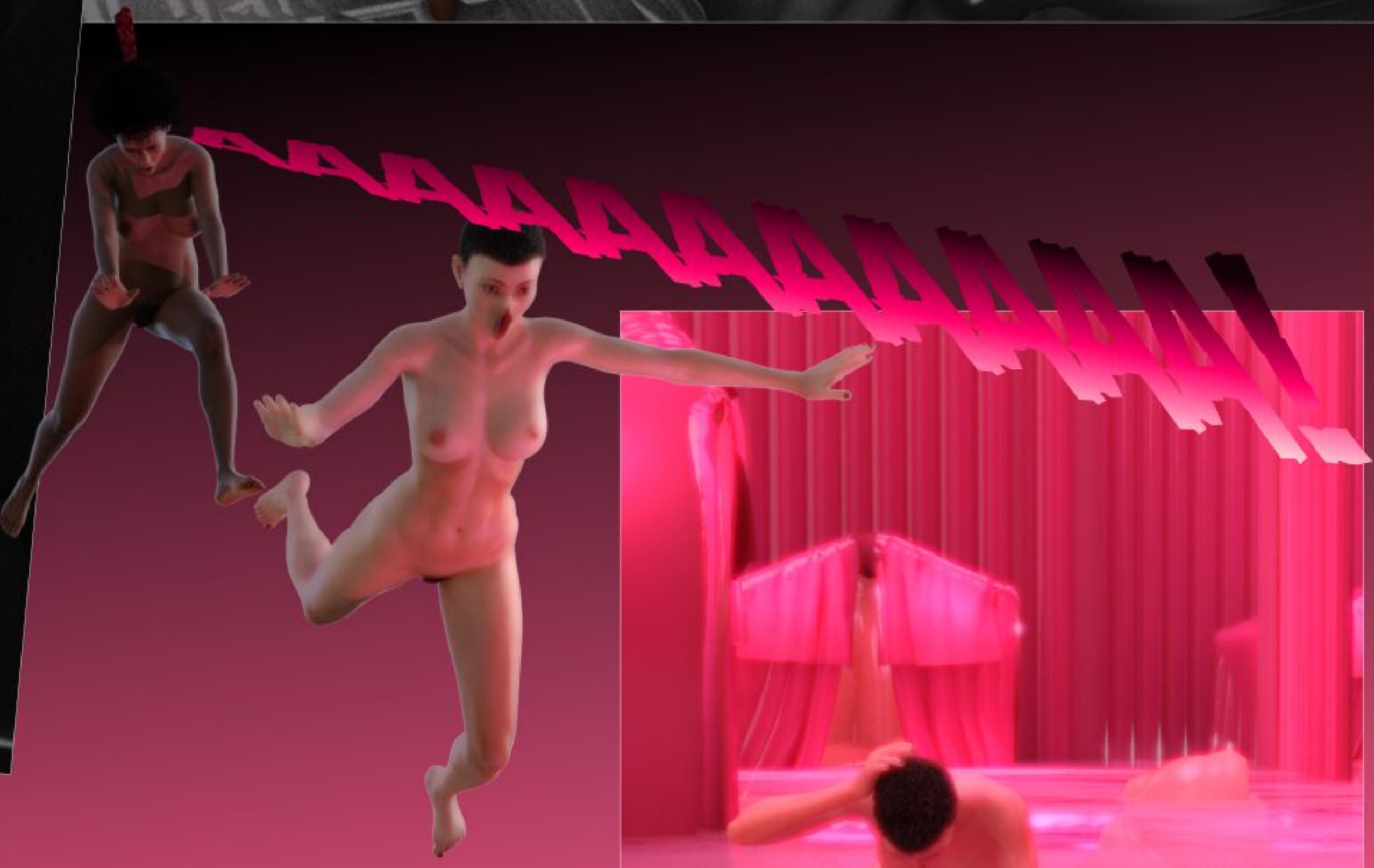


Got be some way out ...



Han't chase? Night bad ...

Some an't want go, then--



Han't none round. Can prob sit here while ...

Rest, Pix Pace ... save eyes ... so pink here han't see shit ...



Han't Pix? HM.

Ruby prob can .. if we can get to her ... got Pind way out tho ...

Han't got portal any good, huh?

... Rest first.



urgh

k what rosh now?

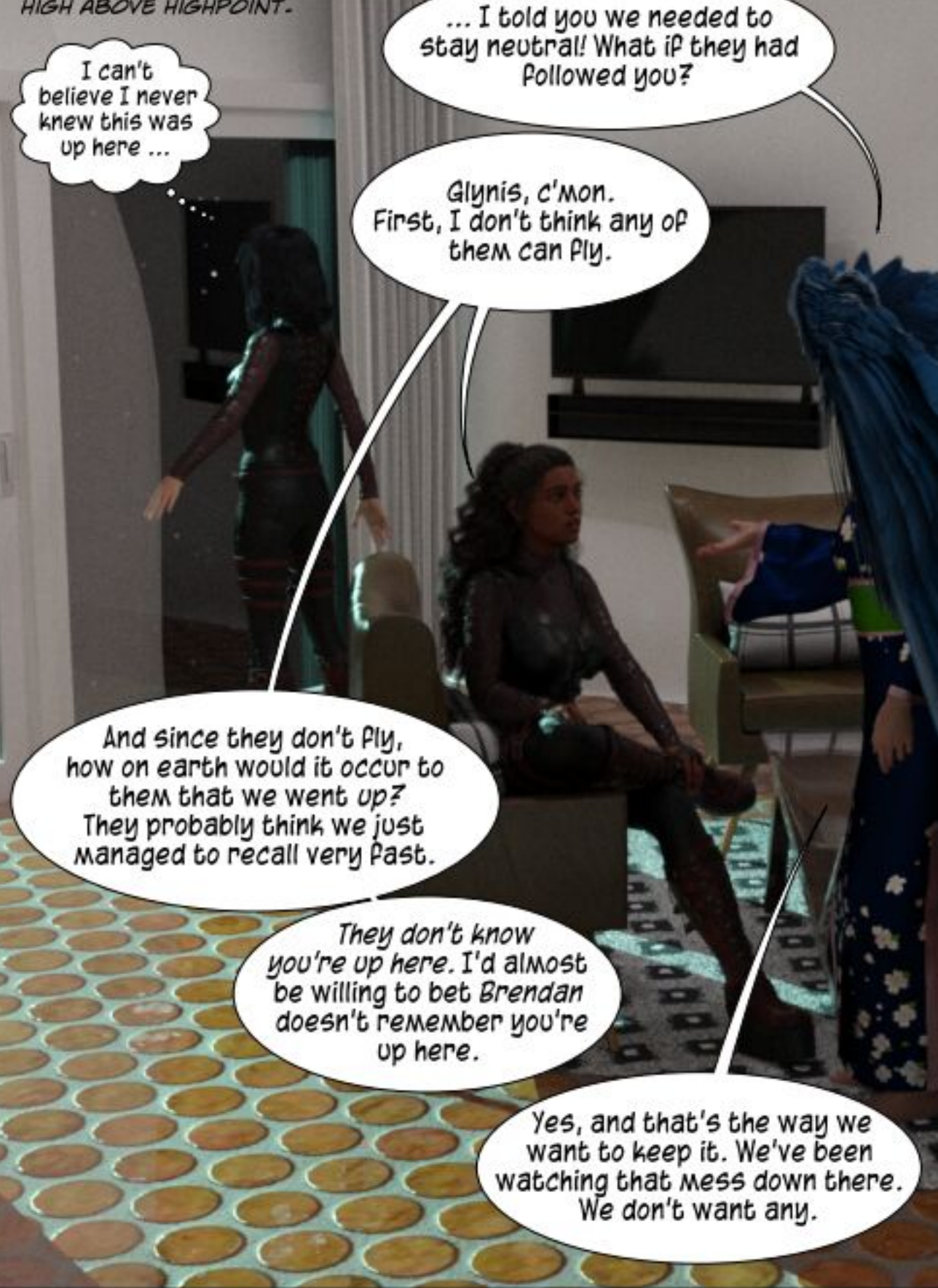


How's Peel? Does do like other one?

Want try out?



THE AERIE.
HIGH ABOVE HIGHPOINT.



I can't believe I never knew this was up here ...

... I told you we needed to stay neutral! What if they had followed you?

Glynis, c'mon. First, I don't think any of them can fly.

And since they don't fly, how on earth would it occur to them that we went up? They probably think we just managed to recall very fast.

They don't know you're up here. I'd almost be willing to bet Brendan doesn't remember you're up here.

Yes, and that's the way we want to keep it. We've been watching that mess down there. We don't want any.

You know, the mess might find you whether you want it or not.

If you've been watching the situation on the ground, you know at least two of these factions are serious bad news for all of Highpoint.

I don't think either Arianna or the Order is going to stop until they have the whole place. And that includes taking on Brendan. It'll include you if they figure it out.

You may have to do more to protect yourselves than just rely on being overlooked.

But what, Ruby?

There are only twenty of us here.

We have no defenses other than being hard to reach; we have no weapons, unless we drop rocks on them.

How do we fight?

I mean, you're right. Every day I check on them, I get more worried.

Speaking of that, there's something I need to show you. Important information.

But I can't show you tonight. Too dark.



Why don't you both stay the night? I have an extra room. I'll make some dinner.

I can show you in the morning.

Does your friend know the rule?

You mean the "don't set foot outside the house without wings unless you want to fall to your death" rule?

I think she figured it out when she saw you don't have any railings on your porch.



Well, the upstairs room has a little balcony and that does have a railing, but be careful.

It's only got one bed ... I'll need to set up another ... unless you're going to share that one ...

We ... aren't that kind of friends.

Oh! In that case ... will she be offended if you share my bed?

I still have trouble figuring out how ground people work sometimes.



I mean, if you want to! Sorry! I didn't mean to--

It's OK. There's a lot to be said for directness.

DOWN BELOW, ON THE DELP ESTATE ...



Mhr?

You poor, pathetic creatures.

Have you repented? Was it enough? Are you prepared to be servants of purity and light?

I suspect you aren't, honestly.

I've glimpsed your black hearts, and they aren't easily reformed. I seriously doubt you repent anything at all.

Or ever have.

But I also imagine you don't want to be stuck like this any longer, and I have a way for you to be useful. So I'm not counting on your repentance, but if you don't want to lie there licking each other's crotches for the rest of your lives, I do count on your cooperation.

I'm going to give you back some of your freedom of movement. Enough for you to crawl to that circle over there. If you do, I assume that means you've decided to help out.

If not ... well ... I suppose I can find someone else.



Good.

Take care not to knock over the candles, now.

Mhr!

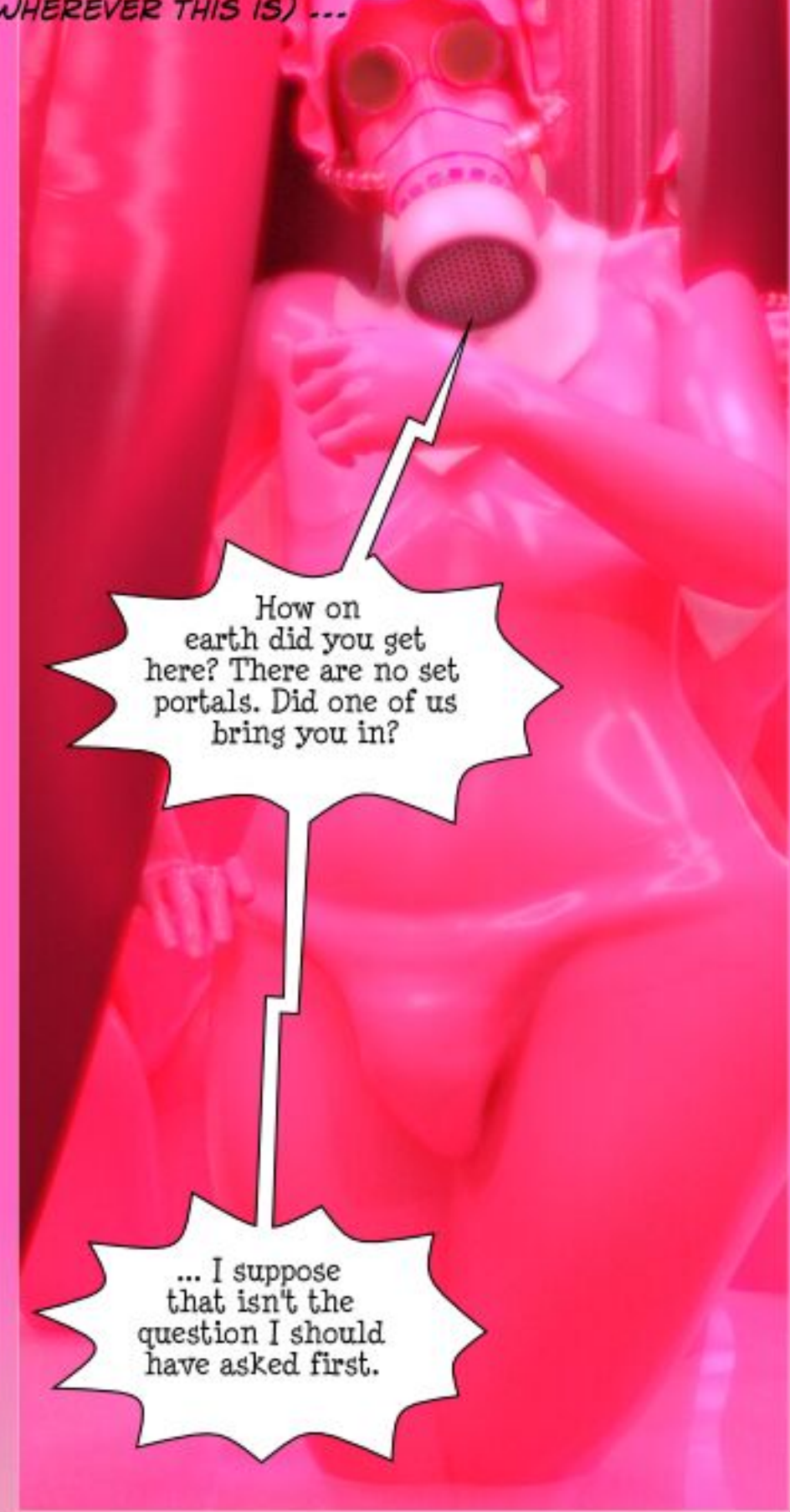


Honor is going to try to retrieve her father again. She's a stubborn child.

I want to have something special waiting for her. I seem to recall you two don't get along with her at all, so you might even enjoy this.

I'm afraid it's going to hurt a bit, though.

UWAAAGH!!



hmm.

How on earth did you get here? There are no set portals. Did one of us bring you in?

... I suppose that isn't the question I should have asked first.

I would love to know why that person has a portal to the hards. We don't trust the hards, and we don't trust anyone who has dealings with them. It's all we can do to keep them from invading our space at all times.

If you find out more, please tell us. Meanwhile, I suggest you recall, if you can. Hopefully that will also take care of your friend's ... problem.

Unless, of course, you want to join us ... but I'm assuming you don't.

INTERLUDE. DR. CHAPMAN'S OFFICE, SERENITY.



Thanks for coming.

Sorry about the message out of the blue ... I don't have a portal to your ops room, and I felt it'd be wrong just to show up at your house.

No, it's perfectly all right.

Besides, I haven't been here before. Interesting to see the place. How are the sleep studies going?

Intermittently. I had to put them on hold for a while to deal with all those interrupt patients. I'm just now resuming again.

When did you last see Ruby?

Uh ... nine ... no, ten days ago.

But I think I need more information.

Did she tell you she was going to vanish into the Yards for two weeks?

The Yards, no ... and she didn't give a timeframe. She said she was going to disappear for a while and I shouldn't worry.

Then I got a message that she was back ... and I haven't been able to find her since then. She's either not at home or not answering her door.

That's my fault. She's not avoiding me, she's avoiding me. Jex and I went to the Yards to fetch her. She didn't take it well.

Leyna!

I don't want to be a scold, but I feel like you should have known better.



I didn't feel like I had a choice! We need Ruby around. She's the only person who can do the things she does. We can't keep this place together without her.

Listen to what you just said. You don't see why she might resent that a bit?

Of course! But, again, what choice do I have? What choice does she have?

-- Sigh -- I want Ruby to be happy. I don't think she is, not lately, and I don't know what to do about it. I don't know if I can do anything about it.

What do you think? You probably understand her better than anybody else here ...

If I ever completely understand Ruby, I'll write a thesis about it.

But right now I suspect she's just got the same thing everybody else has.

What do you mean?

I've been ... renewing some professional contacts. There aren't a lot of psychologists in A4, but there are a few.

Everyone I've spoken to confirms this observationally: A4 is suffering some kind of malaise. People seem to have given up pursuing creative activities. All kinds. Even their hobbies. They're not putting much zeal into their work either, the ones who work.

Basically, a lot of people don't seem to want to do anything. They want to coast through ... sit on their couch and watch passives ... take algo drugs, or drink, or whatever ...

You know, Lou said a while back that the demand for new passives was way up, but they were having trouble finding people to write them and act in them.

Right. And Ruby's given up on writing and acting, even if she won't admit it.

No one knows what's causing this, why it started, or what to do about it.

What Ruby needs is some other pursuits besides saving the world. Once she has those again, she probably won't resent being called upon to save the world as much. But I can't force her to go find those pursuits. Nor can you.



She also needs ...

Actually, I shouldn't go there. I don't have any basis for it. And it's not something we can help her with anyway.

I wanted to talk to you about something else besides Ruby. I have ... I suppose she's a patient. I can't think what else to call her.

During the Sprue, she was a "ghost" -- one of the people in interspace trying to hang onto whatever little islands of reality they could find.

The island she found was someone else's property ... apparently real ... and not eaten by the Sprue for whatever reason. She and several other ghosts clung to it. For a long time. Years, perhaps. She ended up having an intimate relationship, such as it was, with the lone non-ghostly occupant of the space.

I assume he's the person who owned the space. She describes the space as containing nothing but a large house in poor repair. She describes him as an older man, bald, thin ... whom she thinks was under the impression she was someone else.

I've been hoping to ask Ruby about it, but maybe you can help too.

I know it's not a lot to go on, but does that description ring any bells?

...!

It doesn't just ring bells.

I'm not only almost a hundred percent sure I know where she was and who he was ...

... I'd be willing to bet I know who he thought she was.

HIGHPOINT - THE THALLIUM ESTATE.



Glad recall Fixed Pace ...
Yes. But it really worries me that I couldn't dispel it myself.
I knew she was powerful, but ... We're going to need help.
Which I realize you told me from the beginning.
Thank you for sticking around, by the way.



Hey!
State your business.
The estate is not open to visitors at this time.



We need to speak to Lady Thallium.
Her ladyship is also not open to visitors at this time.
It's important.
I don't care if she's in bed with somebody right now or what. I'll take responsibility.
... You certainly will.



I should pine you for this, seev.
But you'd be too damned hard to replace.
Sorry, milady.
They're not hostile and they're very insistent.



It's my fault, Lady Thallium. I wouldn't take 'no' for an answer.
Honor Delp. My, my! The short hair looks cute on you. Who's your friend?
Her name's Jex ... and we need to talk to you about the Order.
-- sigh -- Fine. Seev, would you grab my kimono, please?
Unless you two want to join me in here ...



... The thing is, as you know perfectly well, House Thallium's survival depends on staying out of the other houses' fights. Especially these days.
But this isn't just our fight! Now that they've got our estate, you know they won't stop there ...
Yes, and remind me to give your father the thanks he deserves for bringing that to pass. Honor, what was he thinking?
... He was desperate.
Because of Scholz? Well, so am I. Frankly, she's much higher on my personal list. She'll have overrun me long before the Order gets around to it.

WITH THE ORDER'S SUCCESSFUL DEFENSES OF THE DELP ESTATE, LADY SCHOLZ HAS TAKEN TO RAIDING OTHER ESTATES ... INCLUDING THALLIUM, WHICH CAN ILL AFFORD IT. THIS WAS DISCUSSED BOTH TIMES WE PREVIOUSLY SAW LADY THALLIUM, IN #37 AND #39.



But that does lead me to wonder--
Down, FiFi!
Mommy's busy.
Look, give me a little while to dress and get my head together.
Seev, show them to the Sakura room and get them some tea. And make sure FiFi has been fed before you put her in her run.

A WHILE LATER.



I'm not saying it's your fault, but my issue is, you've given me a second problem, when I already didn't have a good solution for the first one.
And solving one doesn't affect the other at all, unfortunately. If I deal with the Order, Scholz can still wipe me out. If I deal with Scholz, the Order can still wipe me out.
Now, if as a condition for helping you with the Order, you agreed to come give me all the assistance you can against Scholz ...
I will absolutely agree to that.



But I feel in honesty I need to warn you first.
I thought I was going to be able to deal with Mother Corven by myself, or with a friend or two. I was wrong. We need real support.
You're my best hope here ... but if it turns out that what you can provide still isn't enough, then I don't want to hand you the risk. I know you don't have many people.



Well! As it happens ...
Since I haven't been able to get help against Scholz from someone like you. So, you see, I have the exact opposite problem!
They're good, but I've been worried they won't be enough without help from someone like you. So, you see, I have the exact opposite problem!
Seev, let's show them what we've got.



I hope I didn't annoy you by, uh, my choices last night.

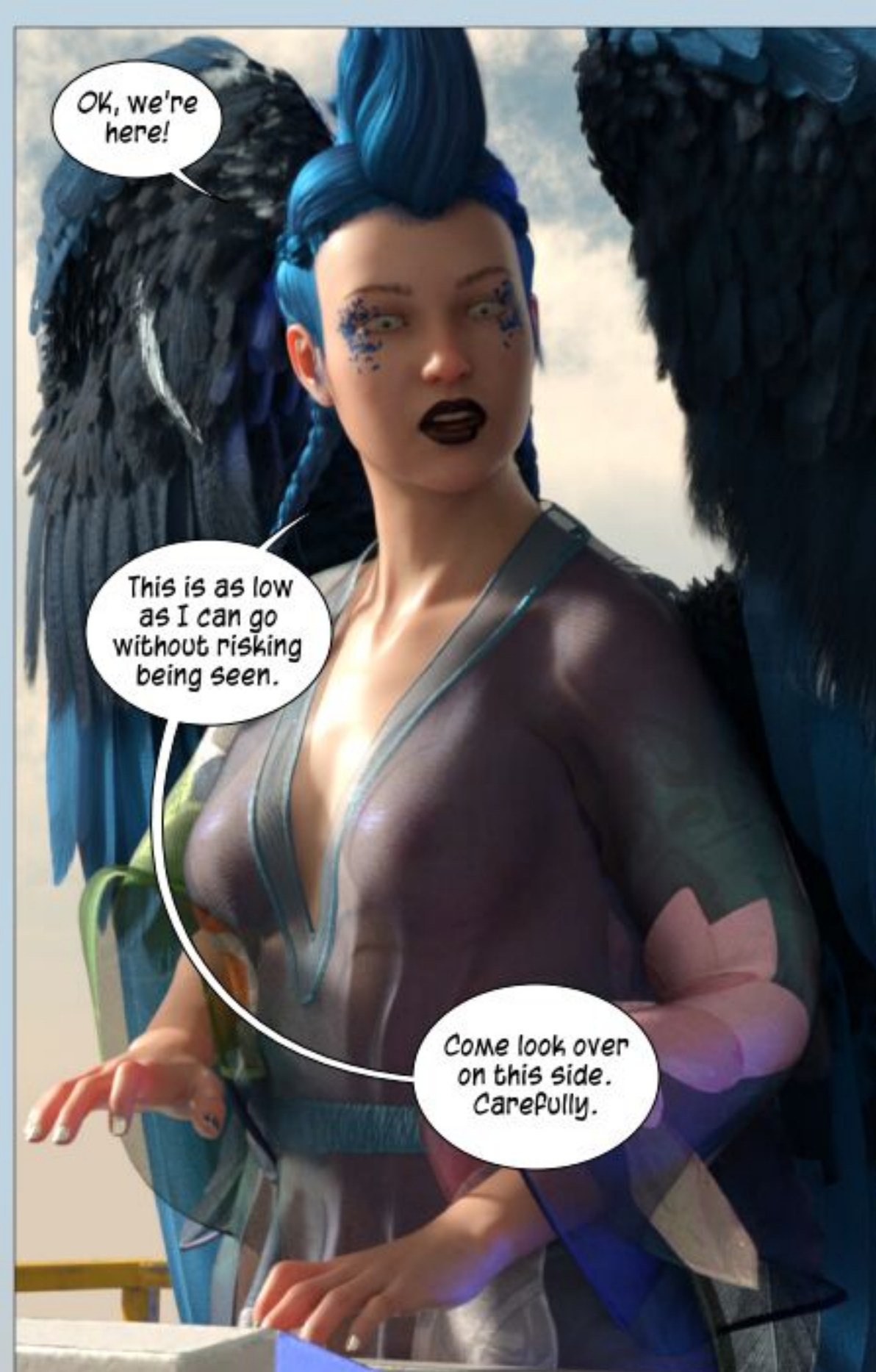
Not at all! I hope you had fun. ... a little jealous, maybe. I miss that ease sometimes.

... your love life isn't what you'd like it to be either?

I'm over a hundred, Ruby. Other people my age ... probably don't go around looking like this ... and that's one reason they don't.

It does affect things. You try to tell yourself it won't, but your outlook isn't the same as someone who's actually thirty.

It makes it difficult. And I'm mentor to a lot of people, and I won't sleep with people I'm in that kind of relationship with, and that makes it difficult too.



OK, we're here!

This is as low as I can go without risking being seen.

Come look over on this side. Carefully.



... That's bad.

I was sure you'd agree.

We're going to have to drop. Jeanne, are you OK with a drop?

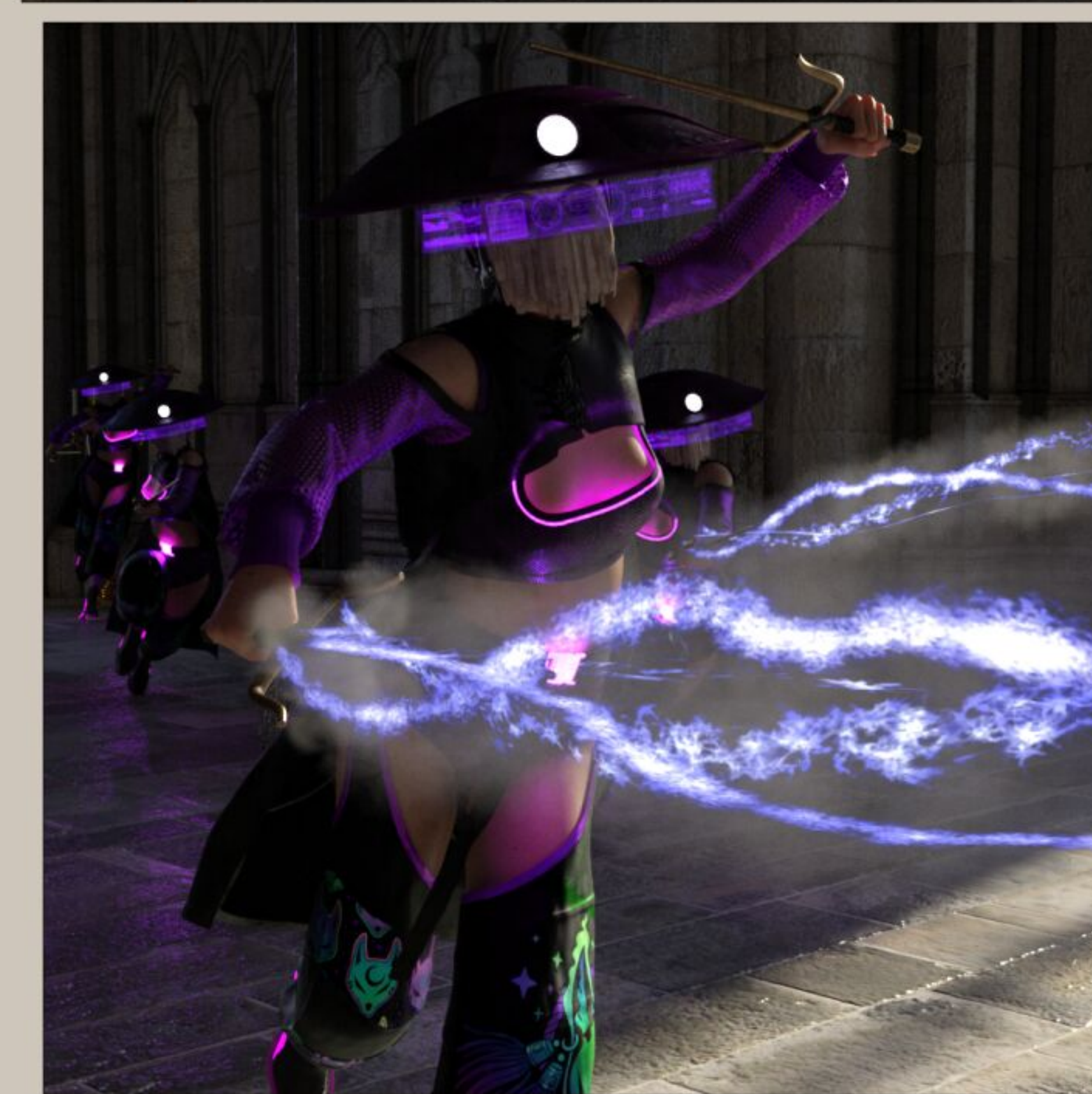
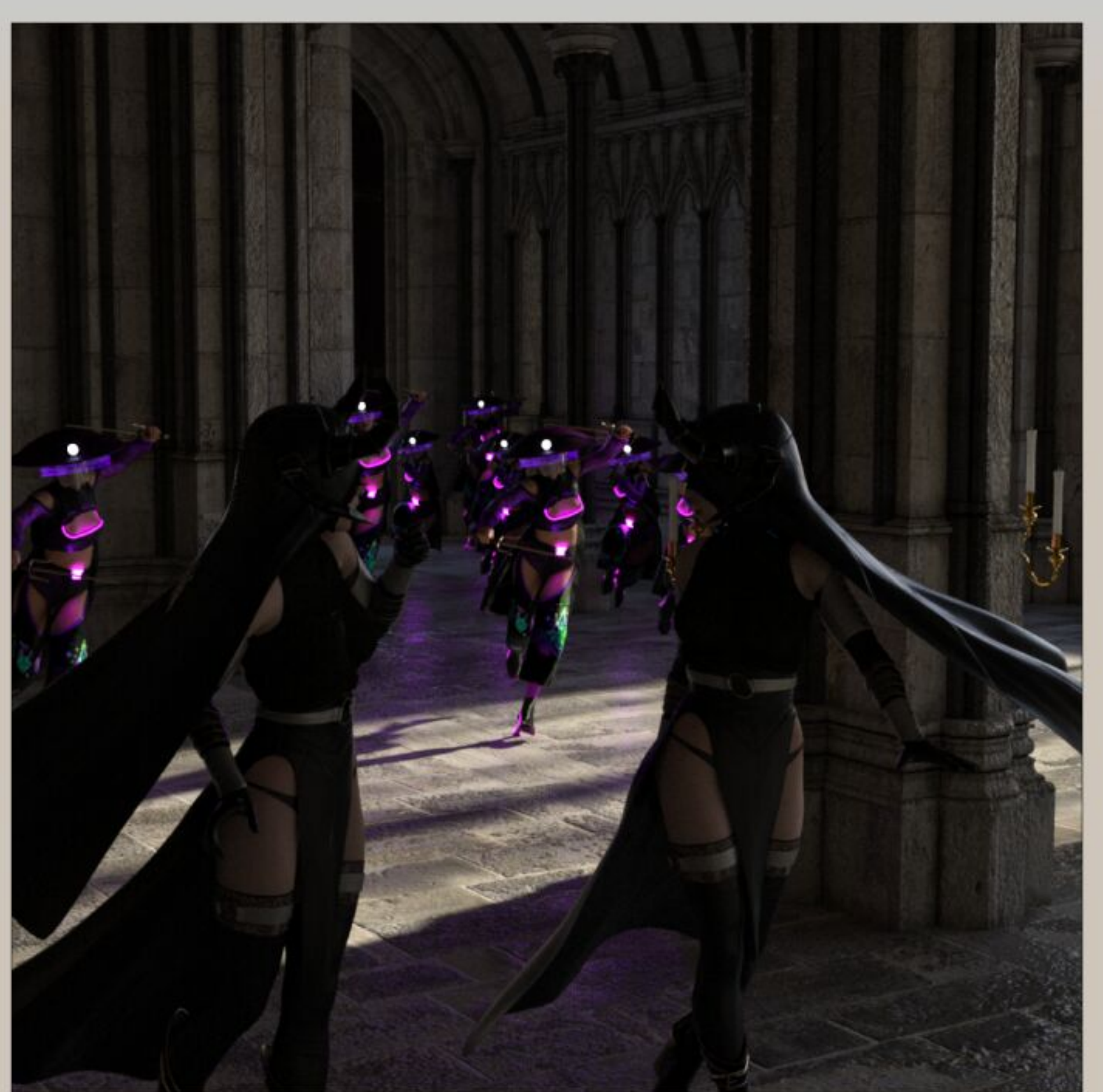
If you can keep me alive.

That's not a problem. The problem's figuring out the right place to do it.

It looks like we may not have long.



THE DELP ESTATE.



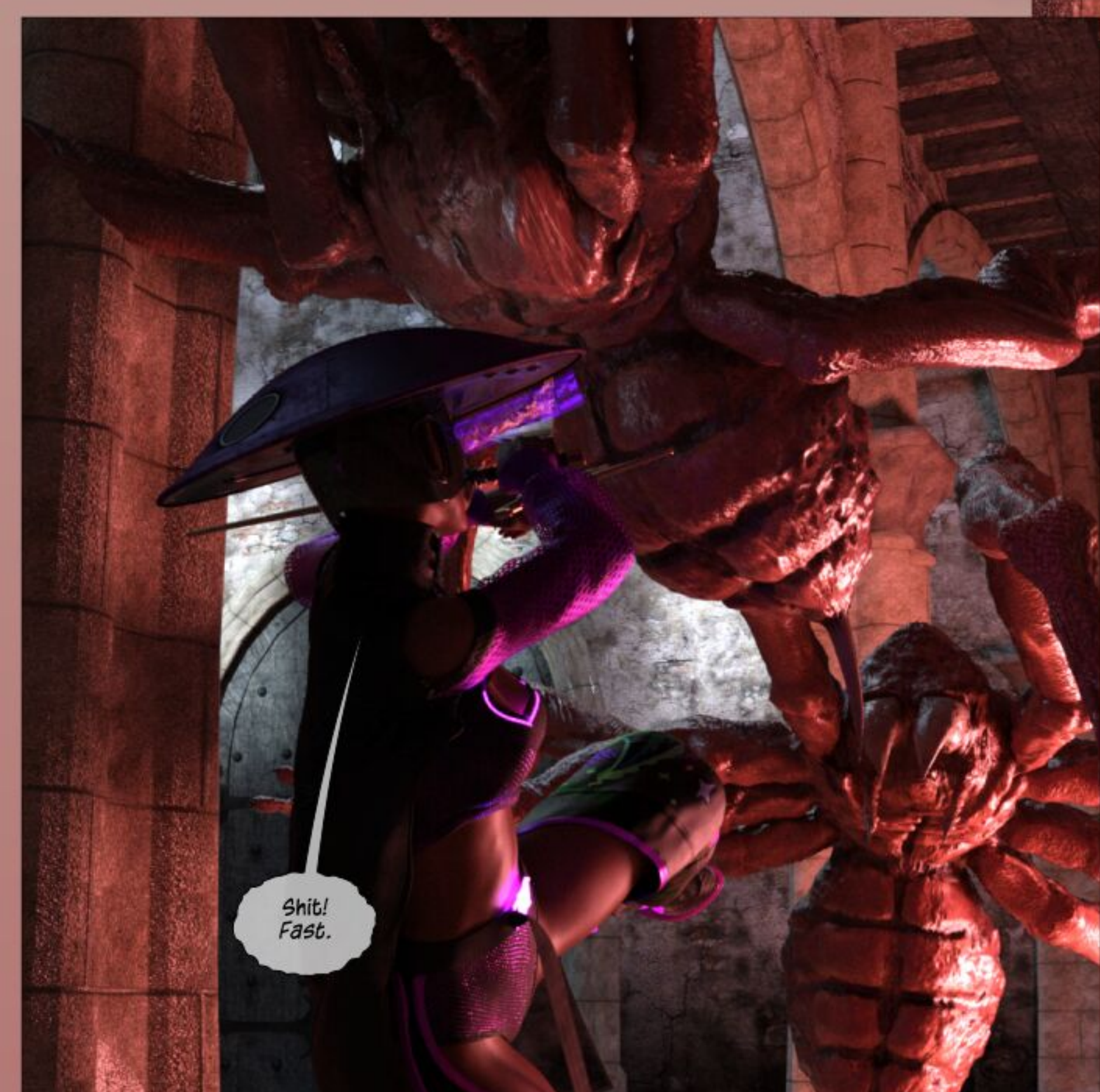
going a lot better than I expected ...

yah but they can't figure yet bout--



--shadows.

Oh, hell.





K who they real?

You're assuming they're transformed?

Jex is right. Too complex for a simulation.

Let's see what we got ...



Lady Sterling??

Oh, I bet she enjoyed that. She's wanted to bite my face off for years.



What we gon do keep from make more slide?

Nothing. We're leaving. We need to get out as fast as we can. That's why we came to find you.

What? Why? What's going on?



FWHOMPK
FWHOMPK
FWHOMPK

YAAAAA!



For Scholz!!

No quarter! We take them all!



Emy! Scholz is raiding in Porce!

Too many to fight! Get your people out the way I brought you in, quick!

Roger!



But what about you?

Yeah, what about you? You're going the wrong way!



I am not leaving without my father.

If you need to go, go. I'll do it by myself.



Han't look me. She gon slide, she gon slide.

Prob should help her tho. What we came for.

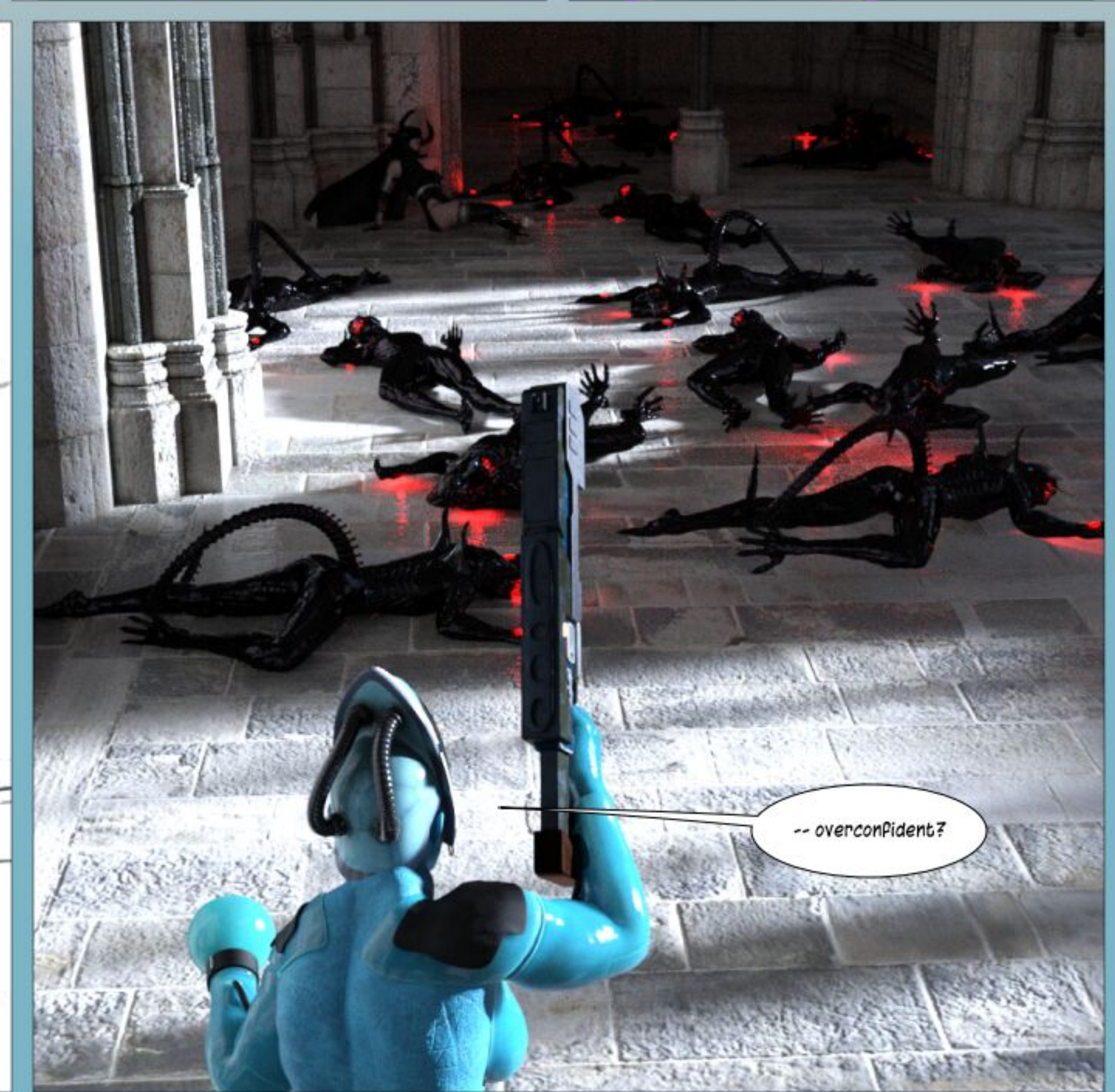
... You know, she doesn't deserve you.

OK, Pine.



Stay alert!

We've encountered no resistance so far, but we shouldn't get--



-- overconfident?



But, Mother, we can--

No, we cannot!

There are too few of you left. I've taken down the portal barrier. I want you to do one sweep of the immediate area to see if there's anyone to save.

The immediate area, Holly. Don't go far and don't take long. We have to get out of here before--



AAAA!



They're upon us! We have to run!

Mother, wait! Don't just race off until you can see--



Why, Jeanne Laval!

Now wait--

Oh, don't even try it.

Skell!

I've wanted to do that for so long.

I know you can see me under that and you know I'm ready for you.

Get out of here before I turn you into a bug.

Get!



Wait, they can see under that?

Yeah, I guess you didn't get far enough up the ladder for them to tell you.

Probably why you didn't. They knew you wouldn't buy in.

I realized when that first flash bomb dazed the acolytes for more than a second. If their eyes were really covered, it'd barely have affected them.

None of that extrasensory stuff they want you to think they have. I think they're mostly bullshit. All the really powerful stuff I've seen has been Corven here. She's dangerous. I'm thinking the rest of them don't do anything I can't do.

And the proof is, that acolyte hauled instead of trying anything.



Mightn't should let her haul tho ...

That was on purpose. I want her to try to take a few Scholzen down on her way out.

They came in and got absolutely no resistance. I want them confused about who or what cleared their way.

K. Why?

Because, from those colors, you had help from Lady Thallium, and I want to try to keep that from backfiring on her. Lady Scholz is a vindictive bitch.

Wonder how far that acolyte's going to get?

Better to wonder how far we're going to get.



We're not going to fight our way out. While I was getting the flash bomb together I heard Corven say she'd taken down the portal blocker.

Come on, Honor. It's time to get your Pather out of here.

ONE MORE INTERLUDE.



CENTURY.

ooooooh ...



ohhhh! oohhhh!



Shari!

I know it's you.

Wait!



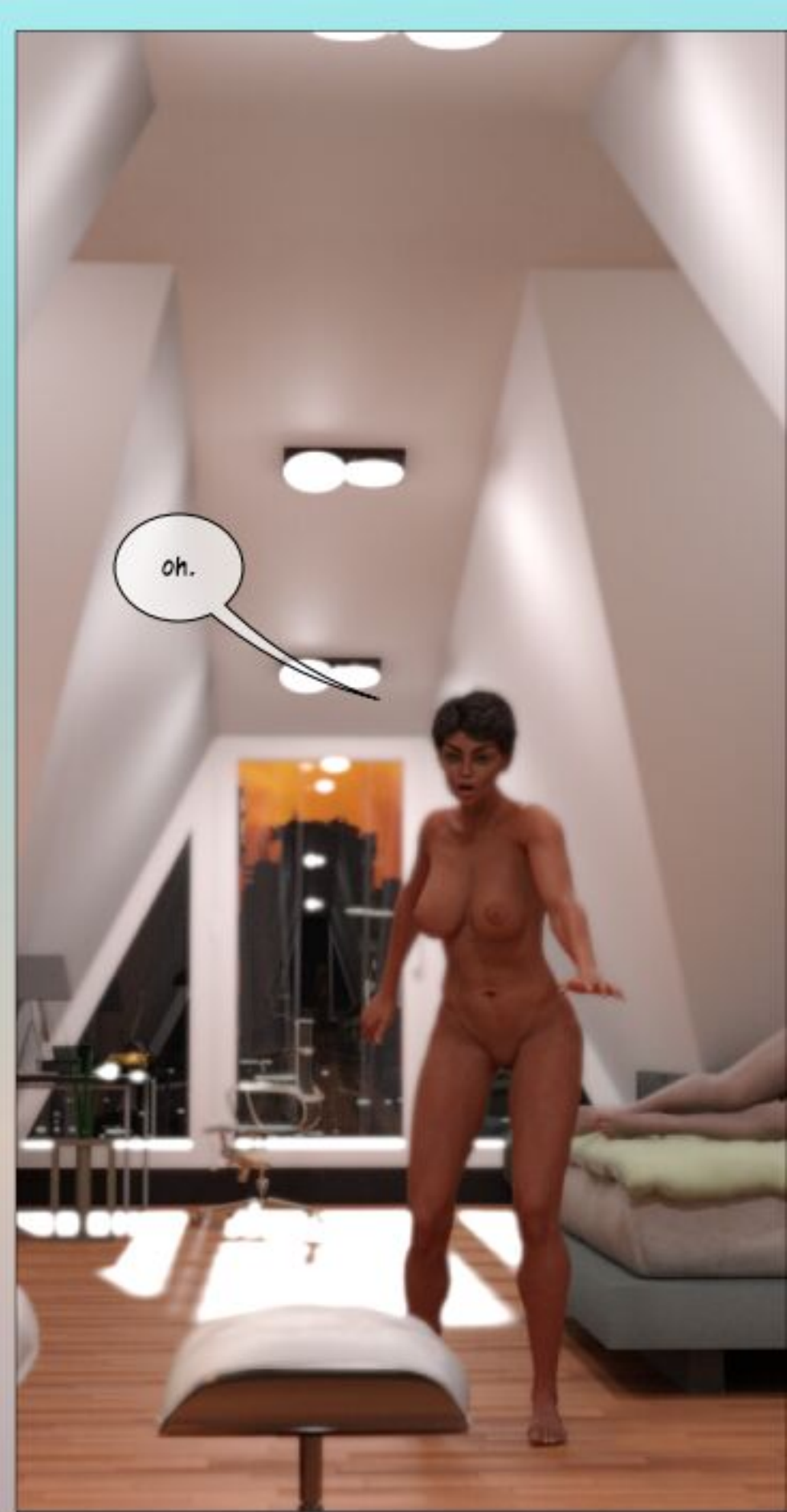
What do you think you're going to get, playing ghost like this? Watching Me?

Do you think you're going to Make Me Feel guilty or something? Regret?

Well, too bad. I don't regret any of the choices I made. Do you?



YES



oh.

THE THALLIUM ESTATE.



... but it's in your interest to help!

You were already saying you needed to find a way to keep Scholz off your back ... without having the Delp holdings as a buffer between you it's going to be even harder ...

Honor, even if I agreed, I don't think it would be possible.



We don't have the people, I'm honestly amazed you did as well as you did with what I was able to give you.

And thank you for bringing them all back, by the way.

It sounds like Scholz has been rebuilding numbers for a while now ... and she's re-equipped them ... there are a lot of them and they're powerful and now we don't even have Delphine Forces to count on ...

My best choice before was to lay low and tend my defenses, and it's even more so now. Maybe she'll decide she's satisfied.



You mean, now that she's eaten my estate? Maybe she won't want dessert? Is that the idea here?

Do you honestly think she's going to stop anywhere short of taking over the whole place? You can't believe that. You're not stupid.

And you know, I can't do much to help you when she does invade if I don't have any people left to help with!



That doesn't release you from your promise, Honor. You're more valuable than all your people anyway.

Oh, don't you worry, Violet. I keep my word. If she invades, I'll be here, doing everything I can to save your timid ass.

But until then I'm going to do anything I can to try to get the estate back.

Which apparently means finding help somewhere else.



I suppose there'd be absolutely no point in asking for your assistance ...

Nope.

I've never had occasion to tell you my position, but I've certainly told Lady Thallium. Ask her.

Short version: You can all get f*cked.

I came here for Jex, and only for Jex. If your mess spills over into the other zones, I may have to clean it up, but what happens in Highpoint can rot in Highpoint.



Jex? I could use your help. More than ever.

I wasn't lying to you, you know. I really do think we had something special. That you're something special.



Believe you.

But wan't. Bad here, Honor. All slide, all time. Bad place.

Should pack in and haul. Start some else. Better.

B'sin.

SERENITY, RIGHT BACK WHERE THIS STORY BEGAN.



I'm still worried about the Order, though. Like you said to your Friend: I think they're not going to want to stop any more than your Lady Scholz is.

She's not mine. I don't want her.

Look, there was, what, one acolyte left conscious? Two?

Even if Corven managed to get out, she's going to be a long time regrouping. And if she didn't, I think Arianna will keep her busy.



So you don't even want to go make a pass through covertly and find out?

Jeanne. I consider you a Friend, unlike Honor or Thallium. But my answer to you is exactly the same as I gave them.

I went in there for Jex only. Every time I have to set Poot in Highpoint a part of me dies.

If the Order makes a mess somewhere outside Highpoint, find me, I'll be all-hands-on-deck. Until then ... Forget it.



... I just don't understand.

Been through a lot.

Do what she does, wearin her down. Gettin so hates every. Han't want do none more, or any else maybe.



Makes me think an't want go that way.

HIGHPOINT.
THE BONISOVA ESTATE, SEVERAL HOURS LATER.



Don't know why he bothers ... Most boring shift in the whole place ...

Right? We don't even get visitors, except for you-know-who. Who'd care enough to invade?

I think he does it just to keep us--

Is that the gate bell?

Shit.

Hang on, I'll go take a look.



Hey, you down there!

The estate's closed right now. No visitors.

We need to see Lord Bonisova.

He's not receiving anyone.

We're coming up to the gate.

-- sigh --



Look, I wasn't kidding. You're wasting your time.

Lord Bonisova is sequestered right now, and he isn't seeing anybody.



He'll see us.

NEXT= RAGS AND BONES (AND FLIES)