



I don't intimidate. Just so you know.

THE BONISOVA ESTATE, HIGHPOINT. FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER THE END OF LAST ISSUE.



I wasn't going to try. I don't know where you got the idea I'd work that way.

You're telling me you just asked Delp sweetly to hand over his estate and his people?

Lord Delp and I made an arrangement of mutual benefit. There was no intimidation.

I wonder if he got what he thought he was getting out of the deal.

... It's moot now anyway. That Scholz creature has taken the whole place.

I'm going to take it back. But I have to rebuild first.



Well, you're not rebuilding with me. Or my people. Not interested.

You would gain considerably from it ...

And what would I lose? Seems to me you don't want allies, you want servants.

Besides, I've noticed all your people are women. I'm not interested in being a woman. Neither is anyone else here. I guarantee it.

And don't try using any weird powers. That kind of thing just bounces off me, and it makes me mad when somebody tries it.



So you're just going to turn us out, with nowhere else to take refuge ...

Oh, spare me. You're not some Peeble old woman. And there are other estates you could go to.

You picked me because I'm small and out of the way and you figure that makes this a good place to hide and take over.

Tell you what. You and your lieutenant can stay here while you regroup. But don't try anything with me or I will kick you out.

And leave my people alone. Recruit from somewhere else.



I suppose I'll have to take what I can get.

Try not to sound so delighted. Come on, I'll show you a spare suite you can use.

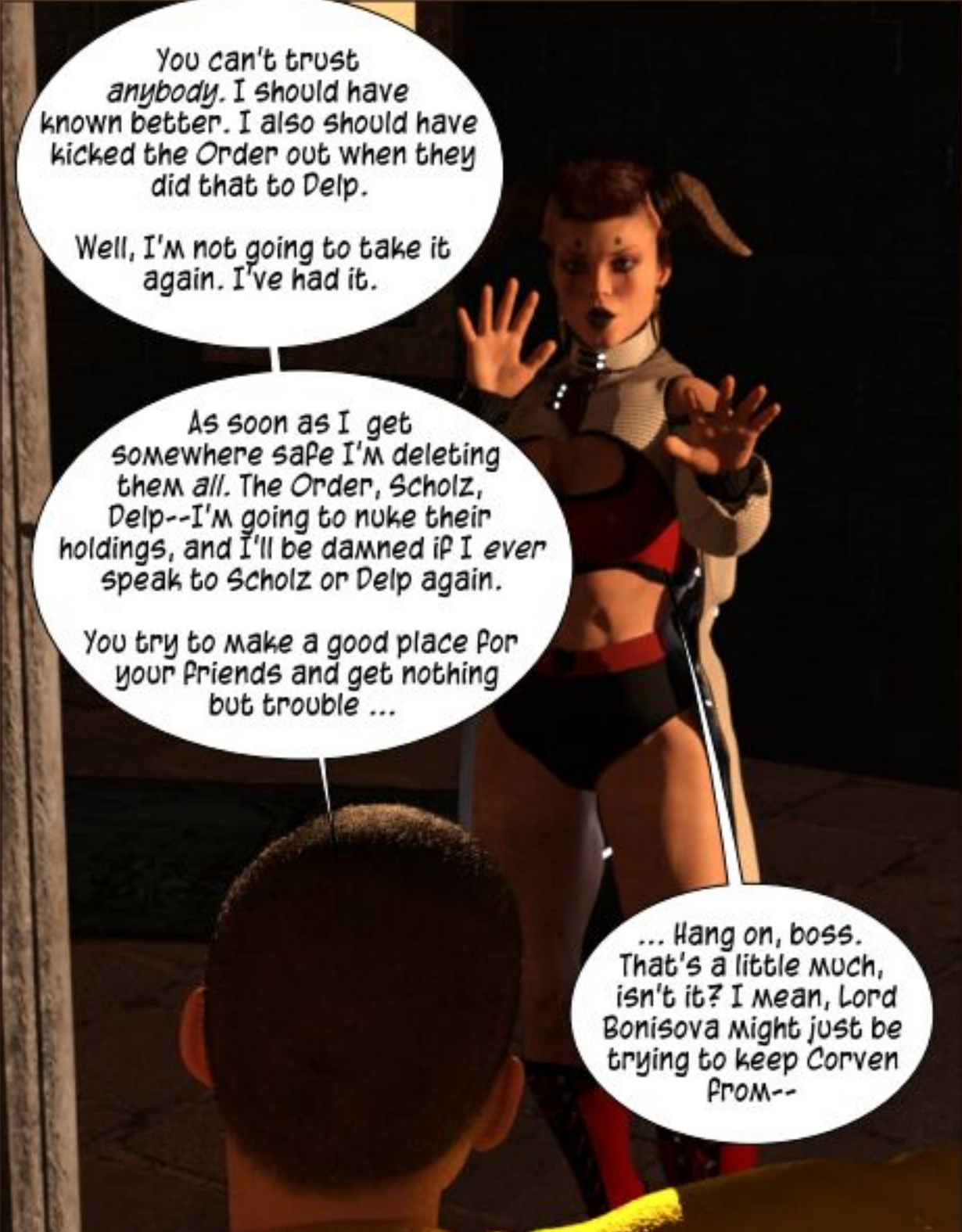


HANNE!!

YIII!

Damn, boss--

Alex sold me out! That son-of-a-bitch just gave Corven bed and breakfast! I've got to get out before she realizes I'm here!



You can't trust anybody. I should have known better. I also should have kicked the Order out when they did that to Delp.

Well, I'm not going to take it again. I've had it.

As soon as I get somewhere safe I'm deleting them all. The Order, Scholz, Delp--I'm going to nuke their holdings, and I'll be damned if I ever speak to Scholz or Delp again. You try to make a good place for your friends and get nothing but trouble ...

... Hang on, boss. That's a little much, isn't it? I mean, Lord Bonisova might just be trying to keep Corven from--



I didn't ask you!!

You're my fucking bodyguard, not my advisor.

And you've already fucked that up once. Don't disappoint me again.

Just get me somewhere safe, all right? Somewhere she won't find me. Somewhere the Scholz bitch won't find me. Somewhere none of them will find me.



... Sure, boss.

I can do that.



SERENITY, TEN DAYS LATER.  
A SMALL PRIVATE PARTY IN A SMALL PRIVATE ROOM AT A LARGE PRIVATE CLUB.

... so I told him "This is exactly why I don't like Men as customers, you know ..."

EW!  
What is that? Is it some kind of ... bug?

He's just going to change to being a woman so he can sneak back in.

If he behaves better like that, I don't have a problem with it.



It's a Pily.

Well, it needs to get off my drink.

Gotta be a simulation, right? Kaeleen, why have you put Pilies in here?

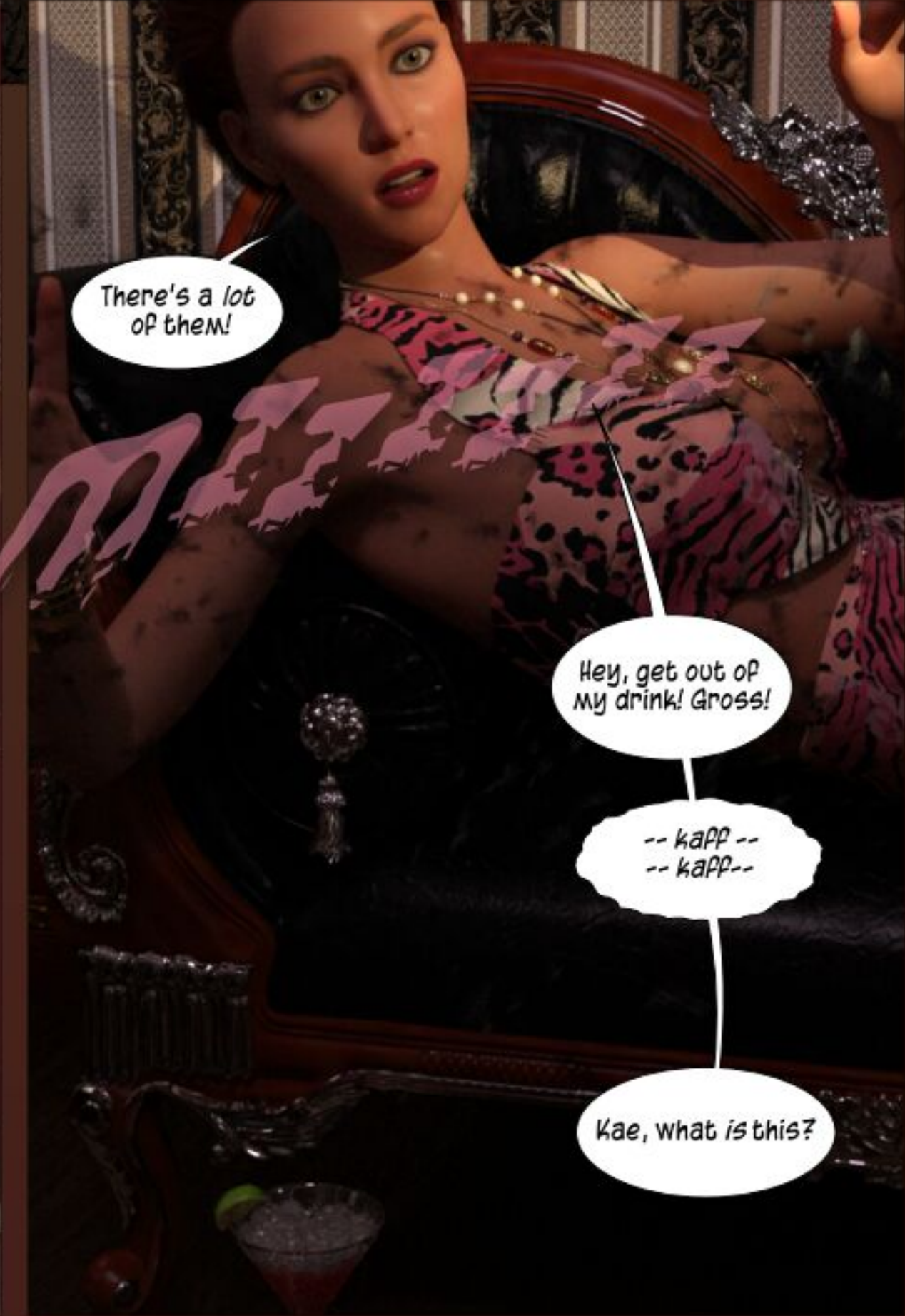


I didn't do that!

I don't--

--kapp--

I don't know how that got in here.



There's a lot of them!

Hey, get out of my drink! Gross!

-- kapp --  
-- kapp --

Kae, what is this?



I -- uh --

mzzzzzzz

Kae??



mzzzzzzz

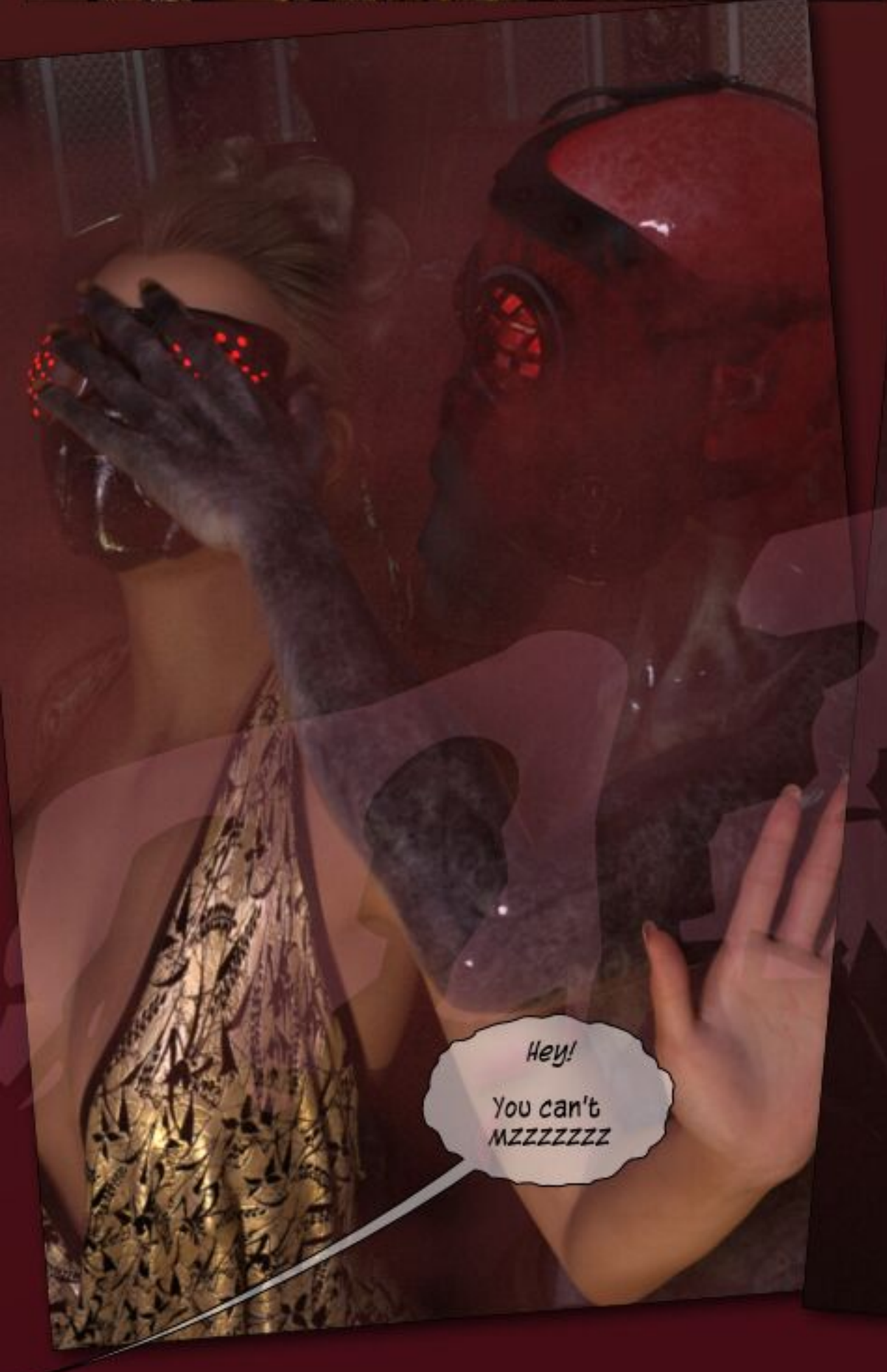
There's something --

-- kapp --

We need to get out of this room ...



Who the --kapp-- hell are you?



Hey!  
You can't mzzzzzzz



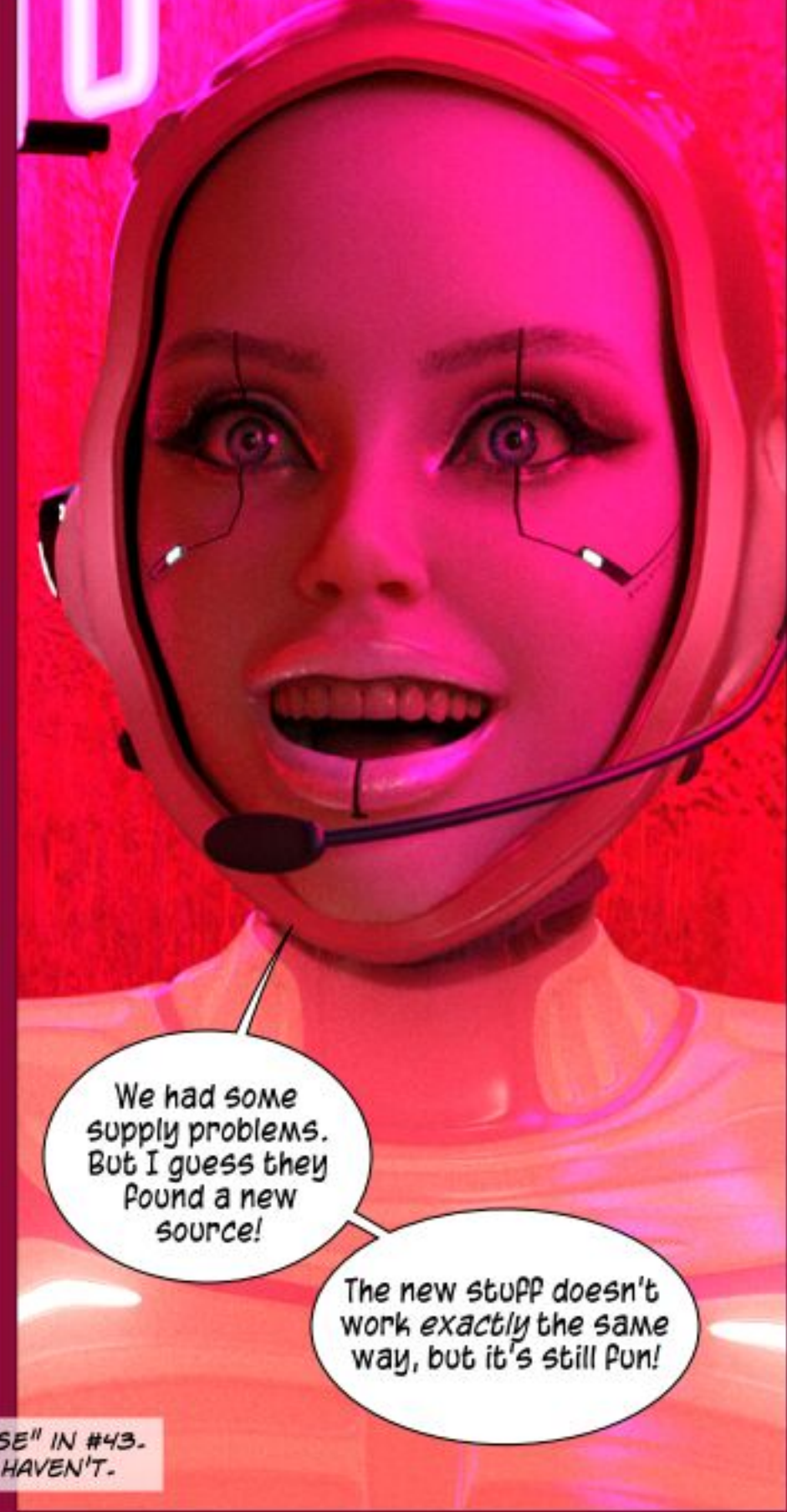


OMigod, you are open!  
Deanne said she thought you were and I figured she was just pulling my chain ...

Yes! Welcome.

It's our first night back, actually!

WE (AND MIKI, ON THE LEFT) FIRST VISITED THE "DOLLHOUSE" IN #43. MIKI'S BEEN BACK SEVERAL TIMES SINCE THEN, BUT WE HAVEN'T.



We had some supply problems. But I guess they found a new source!

The new stuff doesn't work exactly the same way, but it's still Fun!



I should warn you: right now it's lasting longer than the usual three hours for most people.

Wow. How much longer?

Well, everyone who's come in so far tonight is still affected. So if you don't have the rest of the night free ...

Oh, I'm so in.

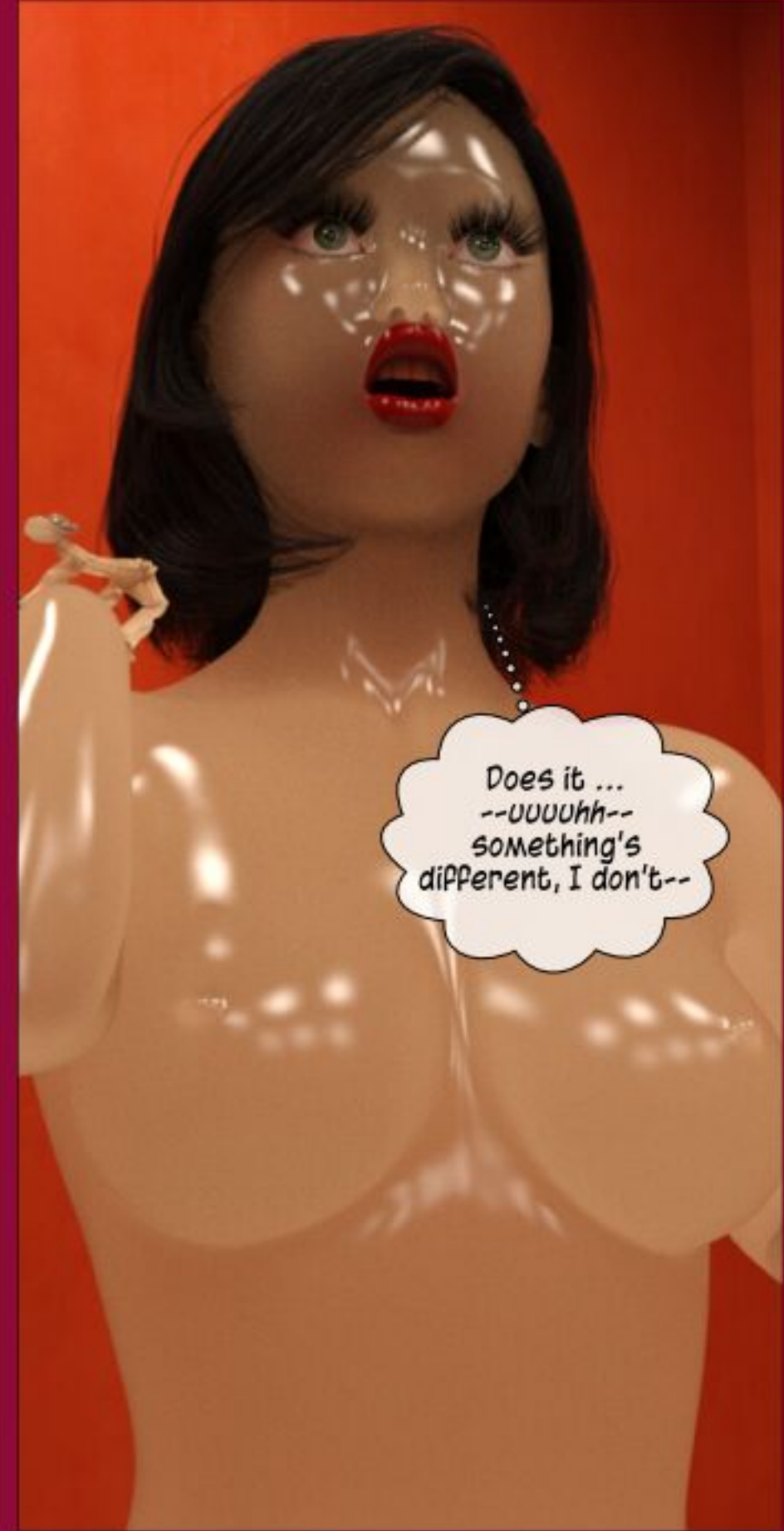


Down the hatch.

Wish I could have gotten IMMY to come ...



Whoa, this is even Paster than it used to be ...



Does it ... --UUUUhh-- something's different, I don't--



Whaaaa A A!



She's almost finished. Let's go ahead and start moving her to playroom A.



--OOP--  
I liked it better when they could walk there on their own ...

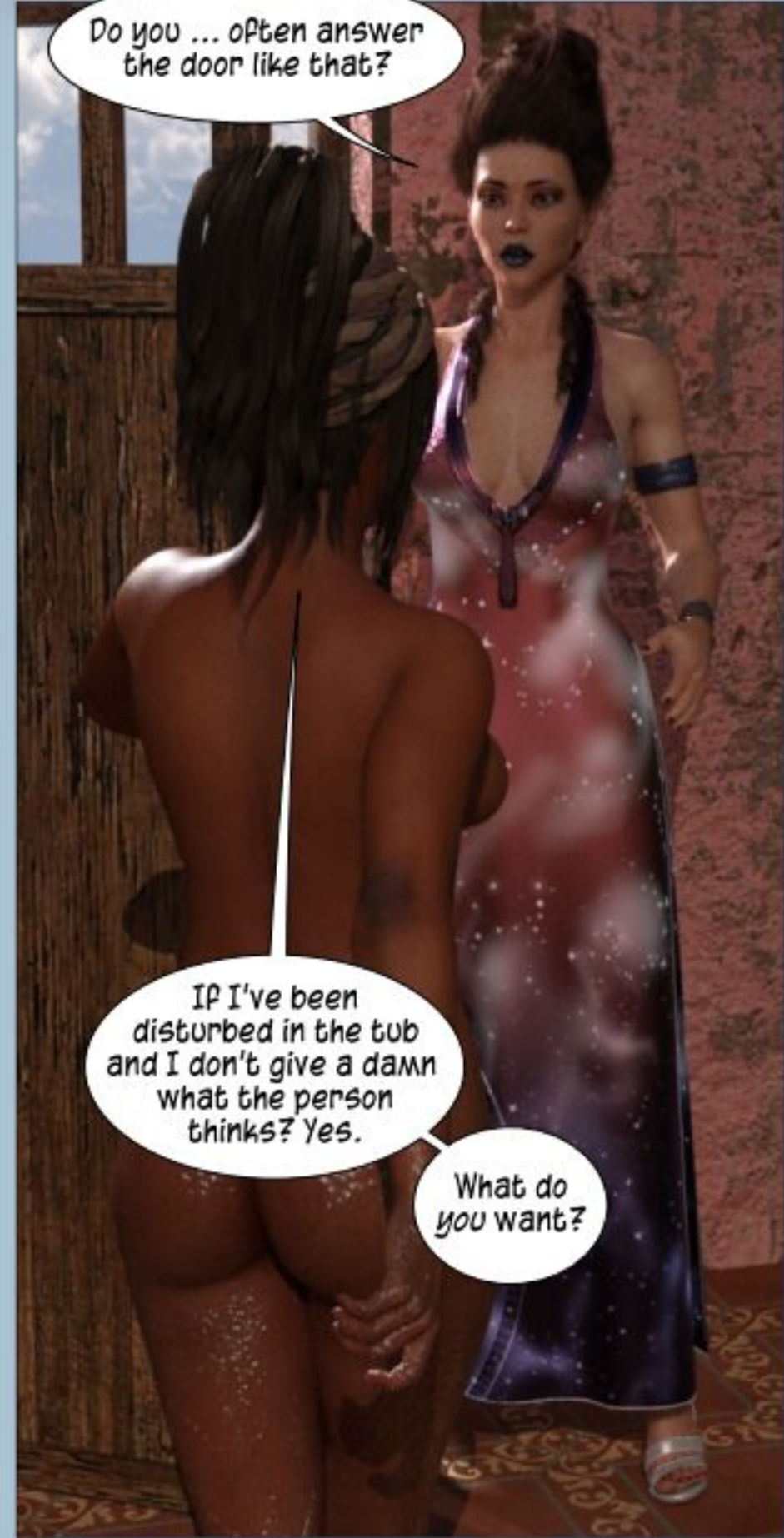
Right?

Stop wriggling, silly thing!



RUBY'S PERSONAL SPACE, SERENITY.

urgh.



Do you ... often answer the door like that?

If I've been disturbed in the tub and I don't give a damn what the person thinks? Yes.

What do you want?



I want to put my Pather back together.

I need your help.



You should have stuck with the short hair. It looked good on you.

... that's what Violet keeps telling me.

I'll probably change it. I just haven't decided what to do with it yet.

Like everything else in my life right now.



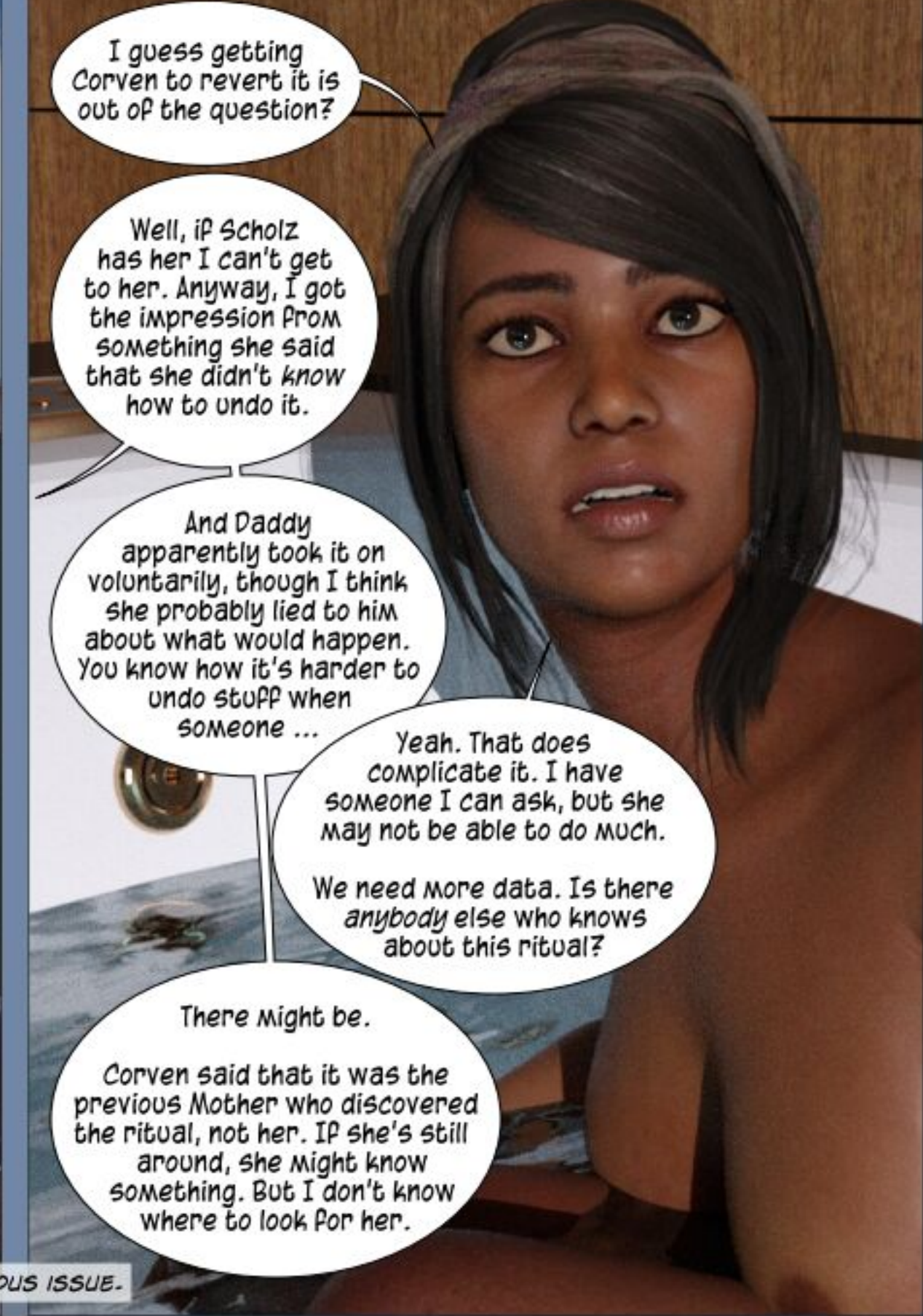
I don't know what I'm going to do about the estate. I'm not sure I care as much as I thought I did.

Whatever I do, I'm not asking you for help with it.

But I don't know what to do about Daddy.

I know you don't like him, but he's my father, and I can't leave him like this. But I don't know where to start.

You know how to fix a lot of things, and you know other people who fix things. I just want you to point the way.



I guess getting Corven to revert it is out of the question?

Well, if Scholz has her I can't get to her. Anyway, I got the impression from something she said that she didn't know how to undo it.

And Daddy apparently took it on voluntarily, though I think she probably lied to him about what would happen. You know how it's harder to undo stuff when someone ...

Yeah. That does complicate it. I have someone I can ask, but she may not be able to do much.

We need more data. Is there anybody else who knows about this ritual?

There might be.

Corven said that it was the previous Mother who discovered the ritual, not her. If she's still around, she might know something. But I don't know where to look for her.

THIS CONVERSATION IS NOT GOING TO MAKE MUCH SENSE UNLESS YOU'VE READ THE PREVIOUS ISSUE.



**THE COBBLES.**

Cort, yer a right bastard!

I could manage all right with your stuff not doing the same thing. But they're not coming out of it! Not a one of the dolls from last night is back to themselves!

And I'm thinking you knew when you sold it to me!



You didn't say anything about it wearing off.

What's your problem? Now you've got permanent staff for your other customers, the ones who really pay your bills.

Honestly, such a specialized effect--you're lucky I was able to get you anything that even came close. Shame Hayah never shared his formulas ...



Wouldn't surprise me if your boss took Hayah out!

You can go tell that gobshite I'm done with him.

And I'll be telling Polks what kind of service you give.



Now, hold on there ...

He did warn me you were likely to react this way.

Obviously we can't have you walking around talking trash like that.

My customer service department is ready to assist you.



**DING**

Now, lads, there's no need to--

AAAAOOWW!



Take them!

What the fuck???



**WAAAA**



**WAAAA**

Get away from me!

Do you know who work for ...



Good.

Get them all out. Then we'll burn the stock.

er?



Mr. Heatter, you may want to close down for a while.

He's not going to take this well, and he'll be looking for people to blame.

Lovely.



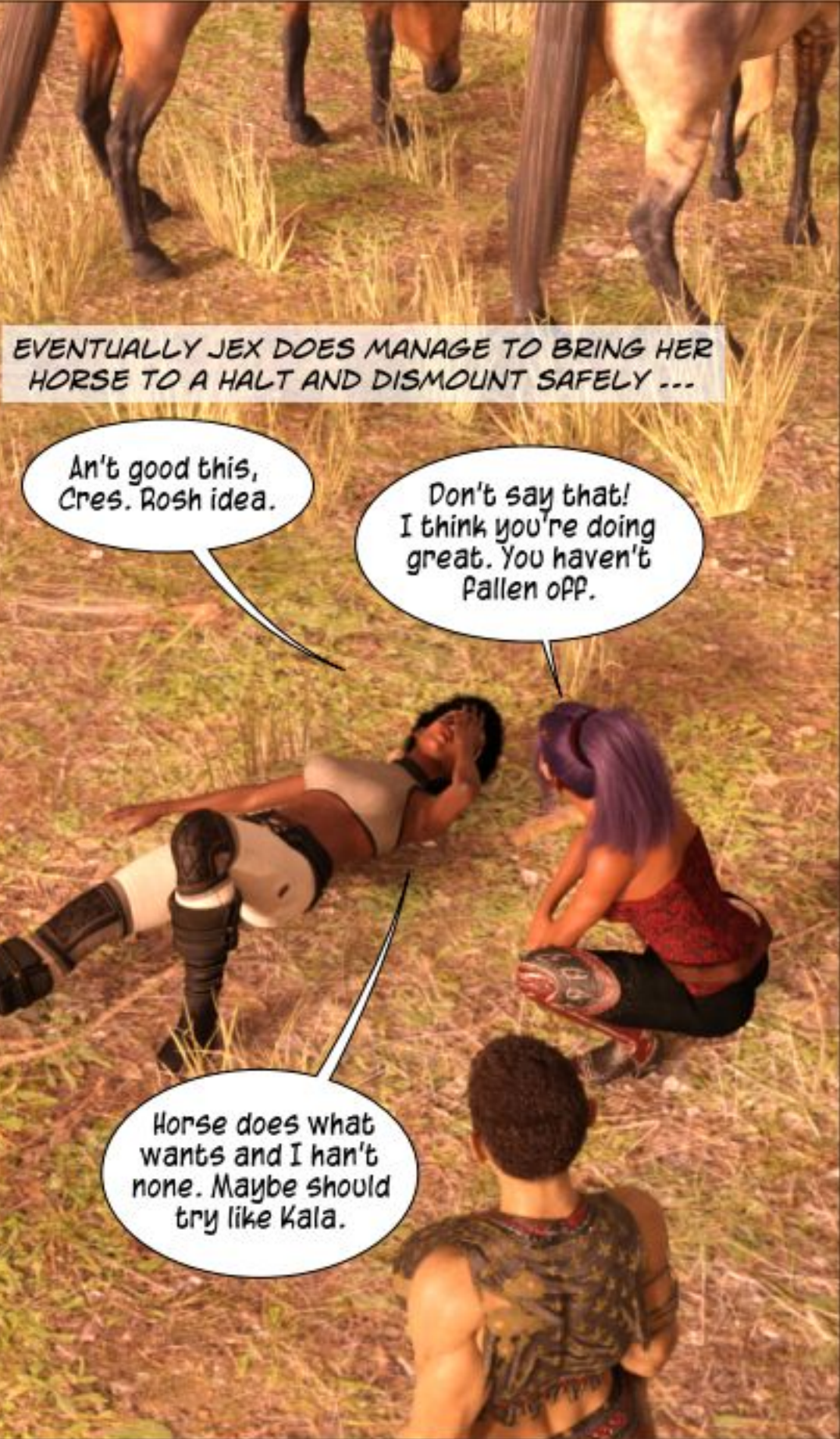
Whoaaaaa!!



Han't stop!

Push on the front of her neck, like I showed you!

Tryin'!



EVENTUALLY JEX DOES MANAGE TO BRING HER HORSE TO A HALT AND DISMOUNT SAFELY ...

An't good this, Cres. Rosh idea.

Don't say that! I think you're doing great. You haven't fallen off.

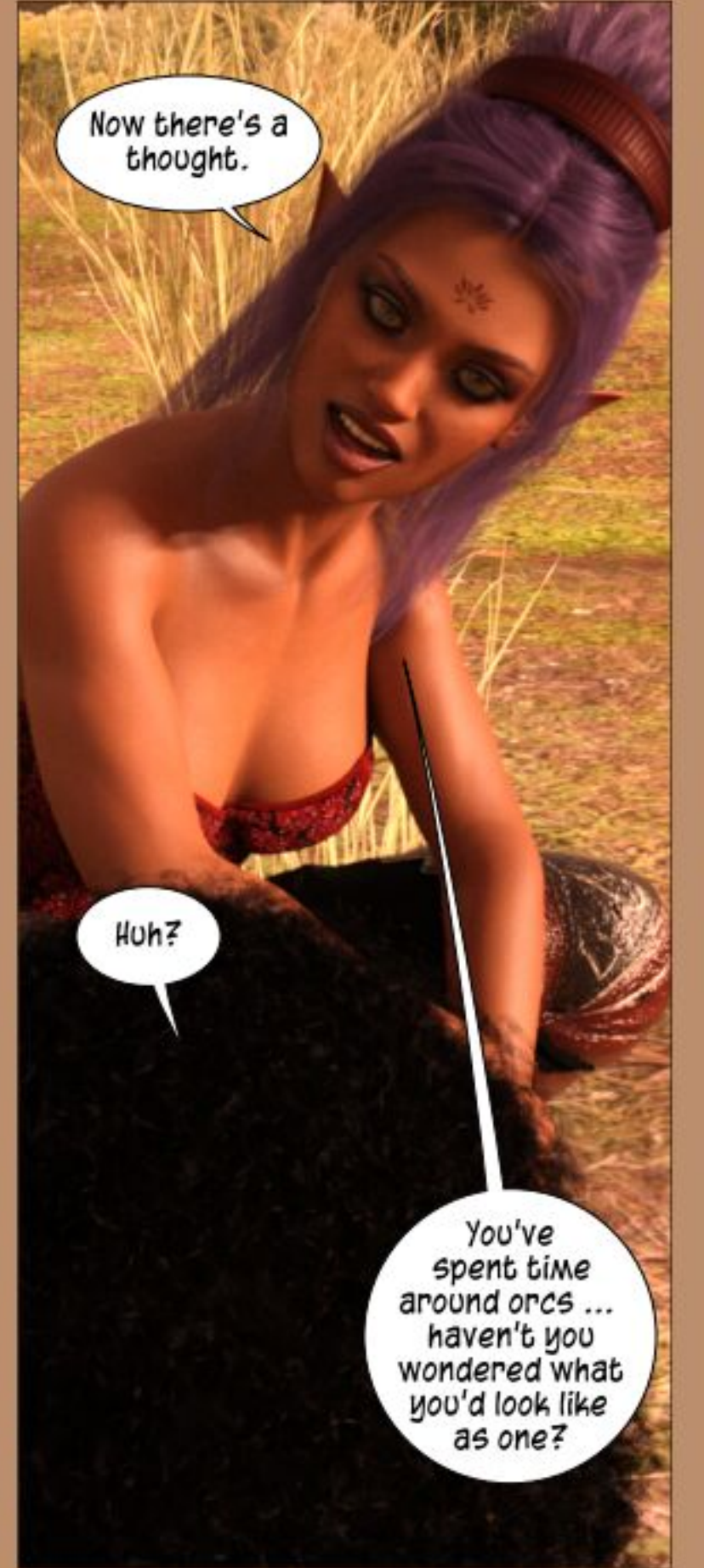
Horse does what wants and I han't none. Maybe should try like Kala.



What, you mean riding a varg?

From what I hear they're a lot harder. Easier to fall off, and you have to be real careful of your legs because they're so close to the ground.

Also you'd have to be an orc. They don't let anybody else ride them.



Now there's a thought.

Huh?

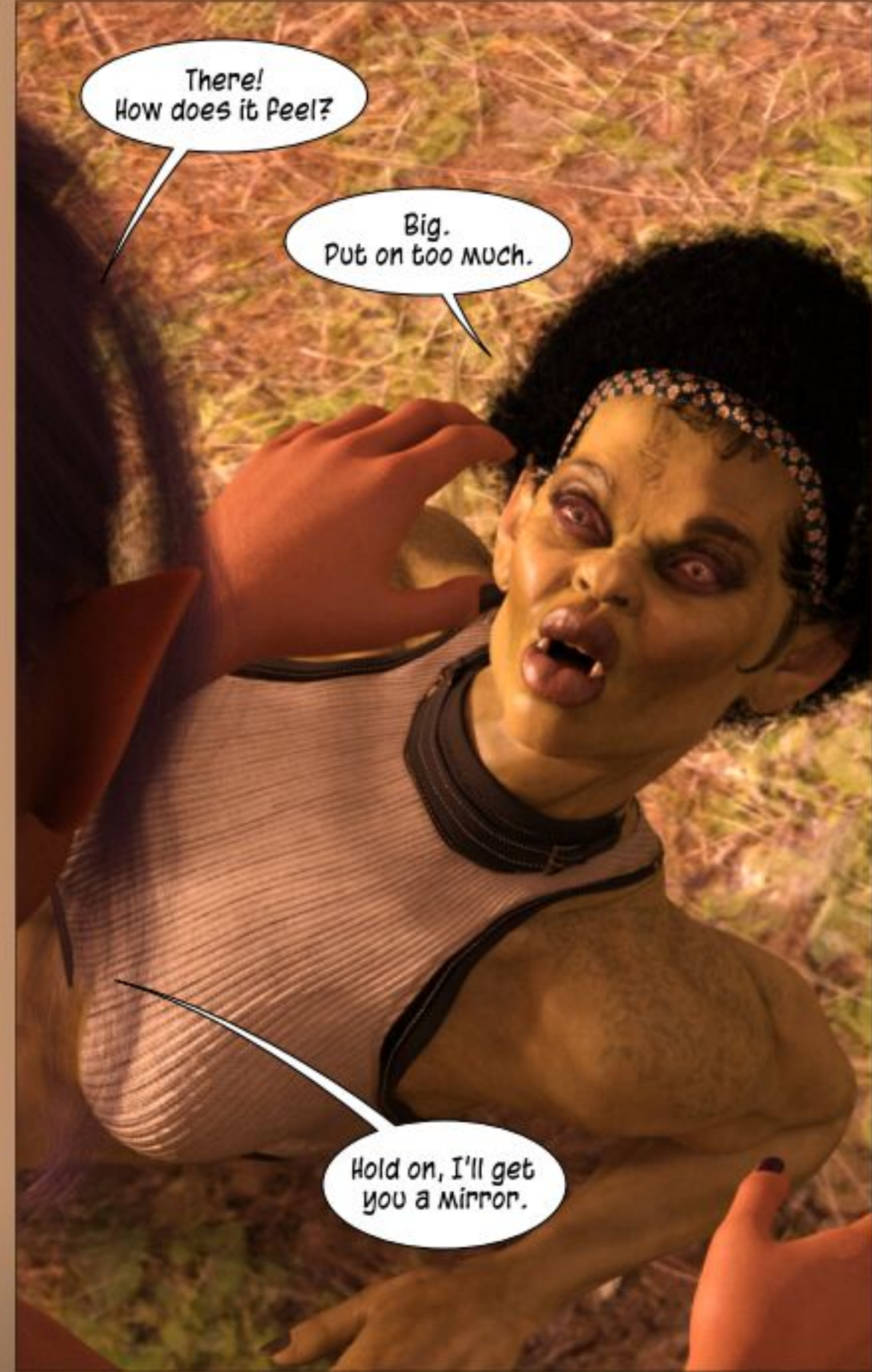
You've spent time around orcs ... haven't you wondered what you'd look like as one?



An't like be any but me.

I know, but just for a minute, OK?

I'll change you right back. I'm just really curious to see how you come out.



There! How does it feel?

Big. Put on too much.

Hold on, I'll get you a mirror.



Tacked pants too ...

Well, it wouldn't have looked right if I hadn't given you the "orc ass." --giggle--

Kala, what do you think?



Hot ... but I like her better the normal way.

Besides, she's wearing too many clothes to be an orc.

That's easily fixed.

We'd better make camp first. Sun's setting.



MMMh ... Kala, you're a genius.

hmm?

For coming up with this. I didn't realize how much I needed it. You wouldn't think you'd need a vacation in the Yards ...

Depends what need vacation from.

It was a better idea than just hanging around the village. Some of the clan weren't happy about you. No offense.

None taken. I'm just glad you're OK with it.

I like everybody until they give me a reason not to.

So which way do we want to ride tomorrow?



We can figure that out in the morning.



Kind of out of the way ... are you sure this place is all right? Lot of weird stuff going on right now ...

I've been three times. It's out of the way so there won't be any weird stuff.



"Loft." Just that? Is this one of those really snooty places? You know I don't like those. We could go to the Cobbles ...

You want to avoid weird stuff by going to the Cobbles?

I don't think it's snooty. I mean, it has a dress code, but I've never gotten so much as a sideways look ...



Shouldn't there be someone at the door?

... I think so. There always has been.

Maybe they've changed their policy.



I don't know ... something just doesn't feel right here ...



YAAAAAAHHH!!



Let go!! -- kapp --

What do you kapp think you're .... kapp ... let me go ...

let me go ... let MM.MZZZZ



MMZZZZ



MMZZZZ

MMZZZZ

RUBY'S PERSONAL SPACE, WHICH SHE HAS BEEN REMODELING.

I think .... I'm finally finished?

I mean, I haven't decided whether I'm putting anything in this big space ... and I need some new art for the walls, I hate looking at them bare ...

But all the big stuff's done, and I'll think about the rest tomorrow. Snack and bed now.

Huh?

... Hello?

Oh.

You know, I wondered if you'd get tired of sitting down there pouting in the dark.

You can't frighten me, and if you're trying to make me regret what I did, forget it. I made the right choice.

So you might as well just get the Puck out of my house.

NO NO E WHY

No?

Then what do you want?

HELP

IT IS BASICALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON HERE WITHOUT YOUR AT LEAST HAVING READ ISSUE #42.

BACK AT THE "LOFT" CLUB ...

MZZZZ

MZZZZ

MZZZZ

Going well so far.

By tomorrow we'll have enough in stage two to go out in the streets. Then it'll get interesting.

And to think I had no idea where to start until you threw me out of here the other night.

You'd resent that if you had anything besides buzzing in your head.

Maybe there's a part of your mind that's still aware enough to resent it. Hard to say.

That will end with stage three, though.

MZZZZ

CENTURY, THE NEXT MORNING.  
NAOMI HAS ASKED LEYNA TO  
COME CONSULT ON A PROBLEM.



Sorry about the climb. I put her up here because I was hoping she wouldn't have it together enough to find a way down.

I wasn't sure how long it'd take you to get my message, and I didn't want her running off.

I've climbed worse.

--grunt--  
Not sure I have.



She's awake.

gabaging

Careful, now. She doesn't look it, but she's dangerous.



mama?



No, I'm not your mama.

mama?

We want to help you. Can you try to think ...

hee hee hee

mama?

She's just messing with us--

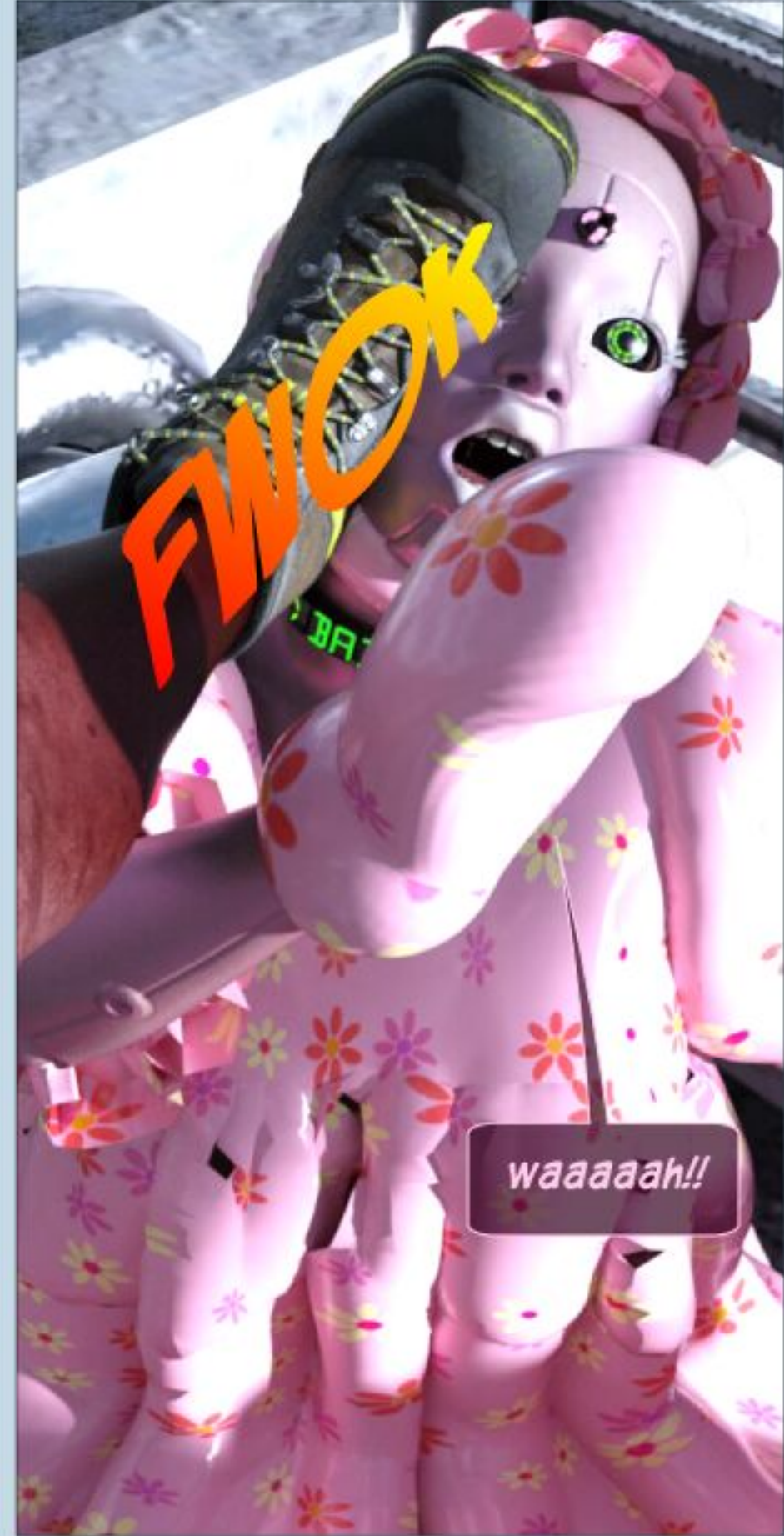
Leyna, move!!



Damn it!

eeee!

Yeow!

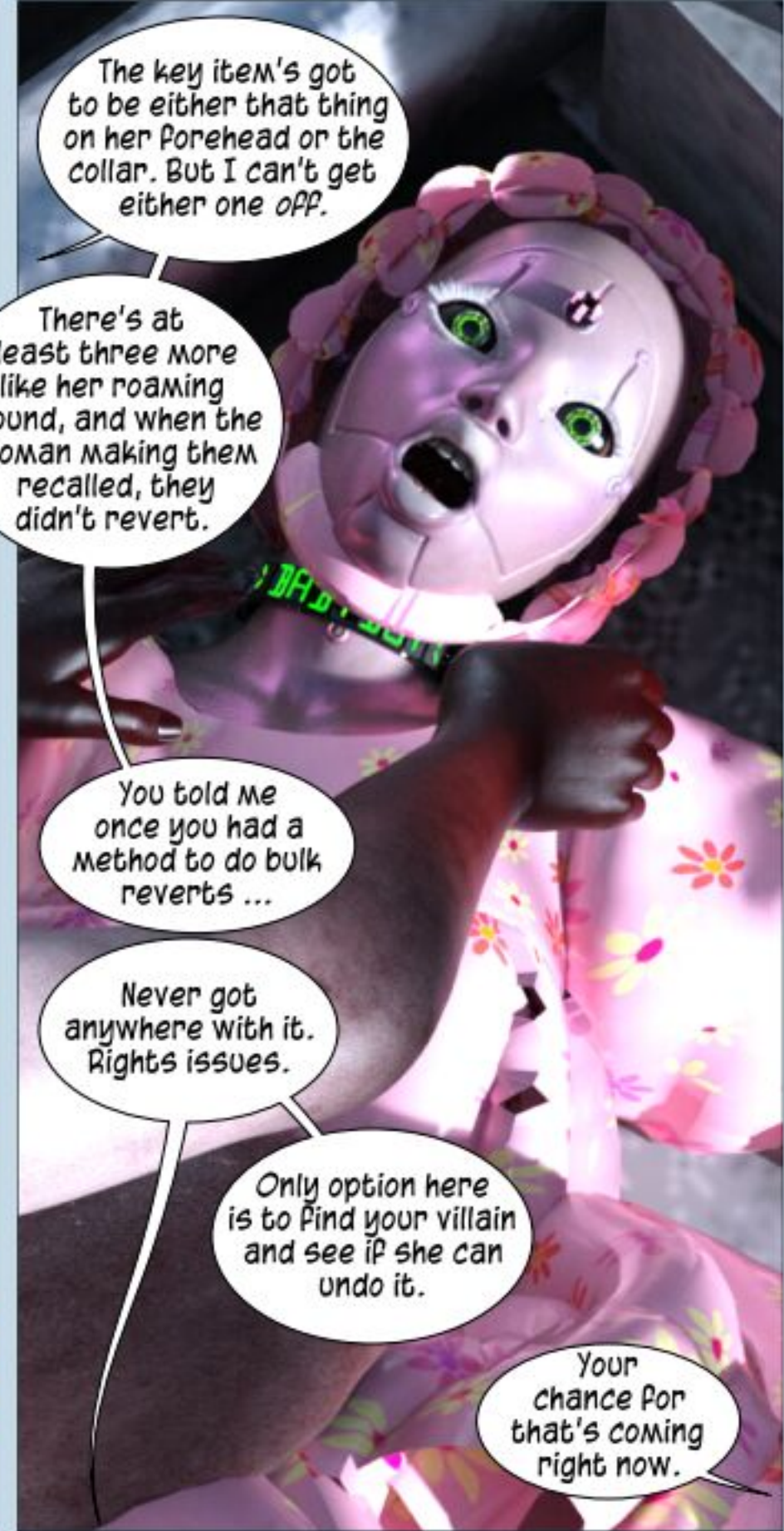


waaaaah!!



Is she out?

I think so. Her eyes stayed open last time too.



The key item's got to be either that thing on her forehead or the collar. But I can't get either one off.

There's at least three more like her roaming around, and when the woman making them recalled, they didn't revert.

You told me once you had a method to do bulk reverts ...

Never got anywhere with it. Rights issues.

Only option here is to find your villain and see if she can undo it.

Your chance for that's coming right now.



She's back, and it looks like she's locked onto a fresh target.



This time I'll get her before she can recall.

You two better stay up here. Watch out that one doesn't wake up and zap you.

# SALAMANDER

THE HUMAN INFERNO



Sometimes not having superpowers in Century is hard to take.

Go see Azu, then. She'll set you up with some.

I've thought about it. But most of the time I think it's better to not have to be a superhero ... if you know what I mean.

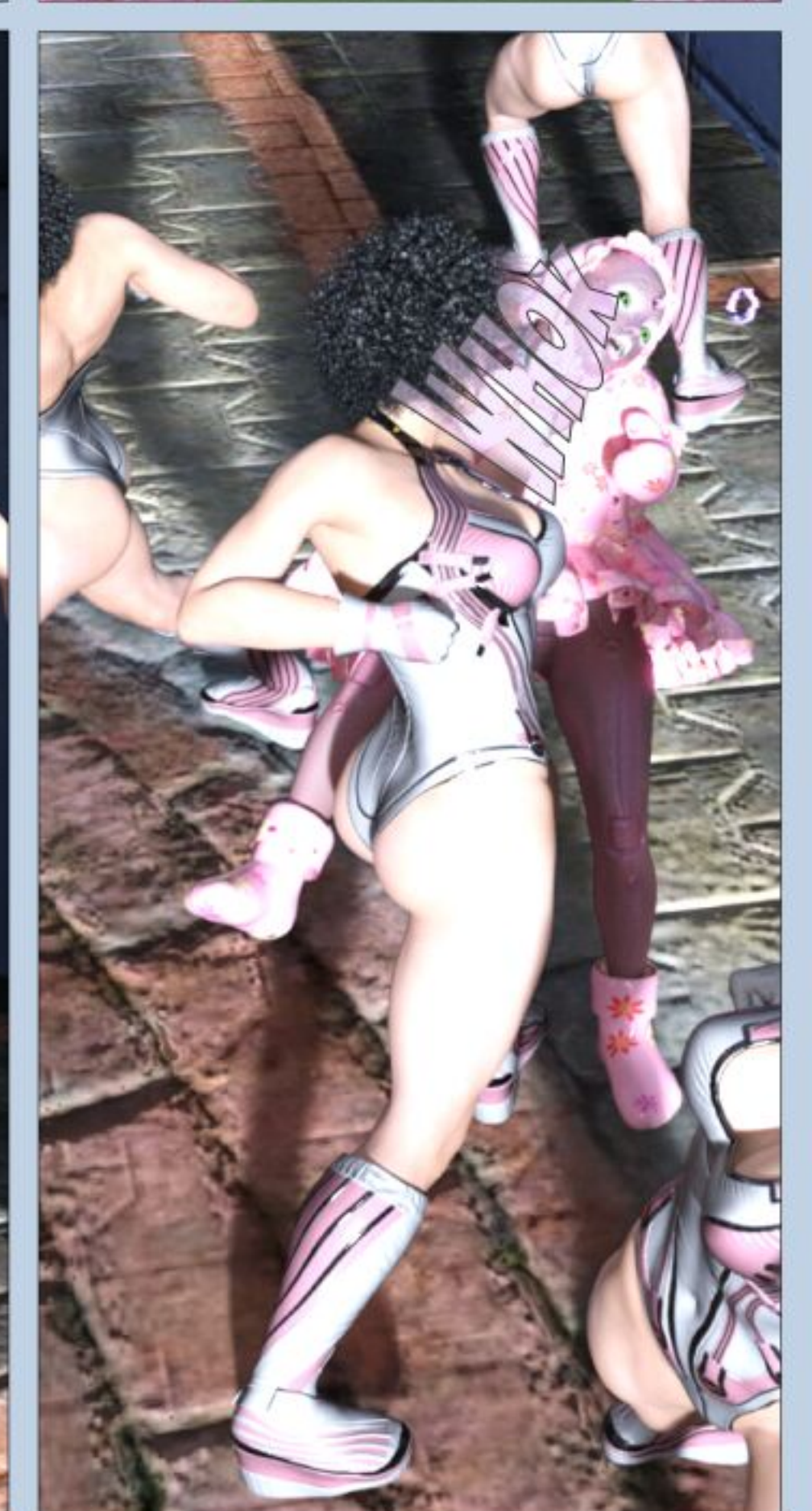
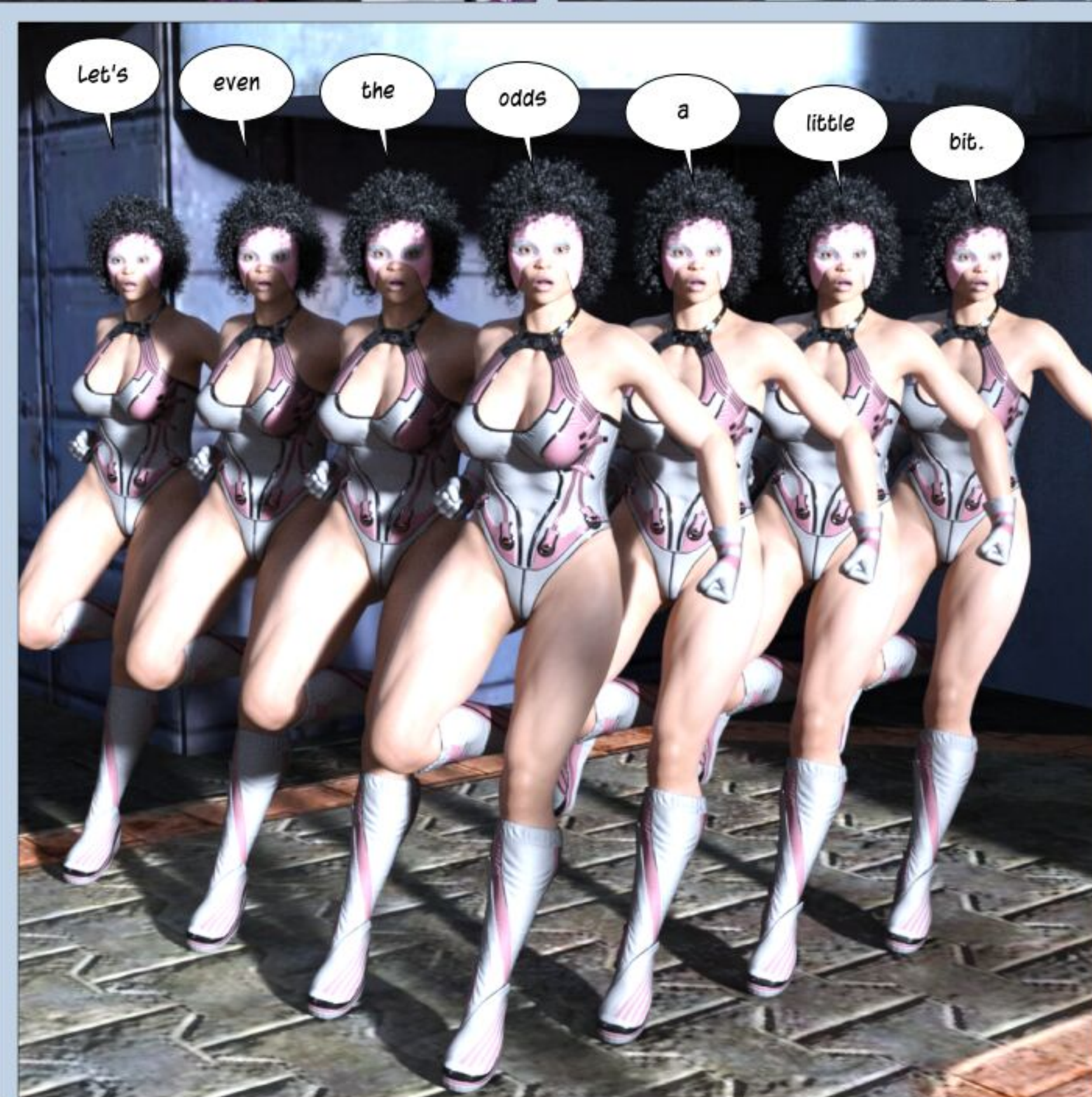
... I know exactly what you mean.







CYBORG ARMY: #39.  
COG ARMY: #40.





With her help it looks like it's under control, right? I'm a lousy fighter ...

Where did the head troublemaker go?



HYAAAAAH!



Does this belong to you?

I'd hesitate to claim her.

Hold that pose. I want to take off her toys before she comes to.



Thanks for the save, by the way, mysterious stranger.

I'm sure she was about to zap me.

urgh



Get off me, you lump!

... My gear! Give me back my gear!

Maybe you can have it back, if you undo all of your mess.



Undo it?

Why would I have a way to undo it?

I've finally found a way you can't interfere with ... I'm not undoing anything.

I'll be back, and I'll be making more. And this time you can't stop me!



Recalled?

Of course.

She said she couldn't undo it, anyway.

Do you have a place we can store the babies? I doubt they're together enough to recall.

Yes, but it'll be a chore. There's a lot of them. And Dupli-Kate ran off as soon as they were all down.

That seems to be what she does.

LEYNA ENCOUNTERED DUPLI-KATE IN #40.



Maybe we can get some more help from ...?

Oh! ... I haven't picked a name yet. That's why I don't have a title card.

My real name's Fabian. I've heard about you. You're OK.

Sure, I'll help you haul 'em. Where are we going?

LATER.



So we pile them in here, and we can't stop her from making more, and all we can do is pick them up when we find them and pile them higher?

I don't like it.

Don't blame you. I'm not thrilled either. But I don't have anything better.

I'll try to reverse-engineer this gear, but I'm not a pro, and if it's intuitively built I'm not sure anyone can.

The babybot effect is only half of it. She had a way to signal them all to gather and attack. How? There's no network. That shouldn't be possible.



You know ... the brainbots<sup>SM</sup> had some kind of private comms channel too. Molly was tuned into it for a bit. It didn't occur to me then, but you're right.

They also had guns which could shoot portals at people to teleport them away ... I meant to tell you about those.

# 43



All kinds of new tech right and left we have no idea how to deal with ...

It's this rise in intuitive construction. You don't have to be an algorithmist to make a manifestable object that does X. You just have to be able to conceive of an object that does X clearly and completely enough.

It's always been the case, but now too many people are catching on to the possibilities. We're just lucky that not many people can manage the "clearly and completely enough" part.

We need defenses against this kind of thing, and we need them yesterday. But I don't know how to get them.

TWO DAYS LATER.

THE SOILEAU ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.

... the only reason we let you in at all is I was curious what you could possibly have to say.

Everyone in Highpoint knows you're not to be trusted. We all saw what you did to Delp, you know.

And we have no desire to be subsumed into your cult.

Delp entered into that arrangement voluntarily. I didn't overstep, no matter what anyone else may believe.

But it was a bad approach, for reasons now obvious. I've realized that I was combining two different goals which I should have kept separate.

Yes, it's important to me to grow the Order, but that can't take priority now.

The important thing--for you, for me, for all of us--is that a major battle is coming, and we urgently need to unite.

And whose battle would that be?

We're not taking on Brendan. I admit he's not the most pleasant person in the world, but he gave us this estate and mostly leaves us alone. We have no quarrel with him.

I'm not talking about Brendan. I don't have a quarrel with him either. Though there's someone I believe does.

Lady Scholz now controls all of her estate, all of Delp's estate--the two largest by population in Highpoint--and almost the entire membership of the Order. They're all her footsoldiers now.

I patently underestimated her. I won't make that mistake again. She is not going to stop. She wants all of it. All of Highpoint. Including, eventually, going after Brendan.

Oh, he'll intervene eventually, but he's far too laissez-faire. He should have stopped her months ago. By the time he wakes up, you'll be overrun too.

Our only hope is to fight her ourselves.

THE YARDS.

Huh.

Hey, pretty girl. Where's your driver? How long have they left you like this?

But they went into those trees over there.

... did I say 'trees?' My mistake.

Those do not belong here.

Bad.

What's wrong?

Seen Pore. You too.

I have?



... oh, you're right.

JEX AND CRES ARE REFERRING TO EVENTS IN #37, WHEN THEY FIRST MET.



Be alert for the creature who did this, Kala. If it's the same one, she's got a red cap.

... she'll also be the only one moving.

Do you think they taste good?

hm.

Kala!

--snerk--

Well, how do you feel about MUSHROOMS?

Love 'em.



AAAAAAAAAAH!!

Can't move!

Muh arms! M'arms'r gone!

Muh tee! Wh happn muh teeP?

S'OK! S'OK! Han't slide.

You need to recall! That'll put you back to normal!



You broke her out? Nice!

Break's easy. Make stupp's hard.

Think can do this one? All way gone ...

Ooh, yeah, that'll be trickier ... maybe if we both work on her at the same time though ...

grghph



--kapp-- little help?



Skell!

I THINK

Sorry, Kala! Forgot to warn you about the spores ...

urgh



Han't say none for self?

Jex, I'm not sure she can speak.



Should fix her ... just gon make trouble more else.

I don't think there's anything to "Pix," is there? I assumed she took this form on purpose ...

Huh! All right, maybe not.

Let's try--



--gasp--

aaughh

aaughh

aaughh



Gone.

Lost her shit.

I think that was shock.

I wonder how long she'd been stuck like that. And who did it to her.

LATER, AFTER REVERTING THE OTHER VICTIMS ...



Should we do anything about the Unexpected Mushroom Forest?

Nah.

Let people wonder.



You've really been building up the skills ...

You can spot transformations and revert them ... that's pretty impressive for such a short time.

Ruby's trying to train you to do the same kind of thing she does, isn't she?

Mhm.

An't sure want that, tho.

What are your other ideas?

She's going to settle down and join the Bear-Friend clan.



Kidding! ... I don't think you'd like staying in one place.

Har't know what.

Prob right bout that tho.

Still got too much to see. Want go all.

"All" is a lot. You could spend your life just trying to cover the Yards.



With a lover in every village.

Hey!

... well, maybe.



I understand, though. I didn't think I was a wanderer type, and maybe I'm really not ... but every time I stand still I start to wonder what I'm good for. Better to keep moving, I think.

Sounds to me like you just need a purpose.

Probably. Is that your secret? You know your purpose?

Don't have one.

Orcs don't think about things like that. We drink and Puck and Fight and yell and laugh and break stuff. That's all the purpose we need.

I can see where that might not work for everybody, though.

I just want you two wanderers to remember to come visit me sometimes.

SERENITY.



We're sorry to call on you at your home ...

It was the only place we knew how to find. To find you.

That's all right ... but ... do I know you?

I don't think we've met ... but you're familiar for some --



Oh, wait!

Now I see. You looked different in her memories.\*

Yes, those were very old. From before Prola and I came to Sleep.

I had given up hope of ever seeing her again ... then, when I did, it was not in good circumstances, we could say ... and now ...



And now she's haunting you, or trying to?

Ah. She has visited you?

Just once. Three days ago.

Come sit down.



... it wasn't really an introduction, was it? My name is Estrel Wybova. This is my elder daughter Prola. My younger daughter, Charlotta ... you have met.

Charlotta?

No one ever called her that, not even me.

Since ... what happened in that place ... Sharl has visited me three times, and Prola four.

Never for more than a few moments. She seems to come in and watch me. Once I notice her watching, she vanishes.

Prola says the same, except ... on the last visit, it was a bit different.

She tried to talk to me.

Only a couple of words, and I couldn't really understand them.



She said a word to me, and I understood it clearly:

"Help."

I don't think she's trying to haunt us. I think she's trying to find her way back to being a person again.

And as long as she can't do damage anymore, I'm inclined to let her. I believe in repentance, and besides, it's got to be horrible down there in the dark.

But it doesn't matter. I can't help her. I don't have any way to help her.

If she's going to claw her way back, she's going to have to do it by herself.



What is with this Pog?

I'm not sure it --kaff-- is Pog.

It didn't look like this last time I was here.



Maybe we should go somewhere else instead.

Hang on.

There's somebody on the ground over here ... I can't tell if they're--



MZZZZ

MZZZZ

nn--

nh--

hhhhh--

MZZZZ



What are--

Bugs??

Get away! Get away!!

Laverne! This is too much. We need to leave. Now!

Laverne?



Laverne!!











It's early yet ... want to do a pass?

I guess we should. Let's find somewhere to change.



I finally get to find out what you two look like without those suits!

CONSTANCE FORBES, A CONUNDRUM.

Voyeur.

What do you want? Besides making our lives difficult.



Now don't be like that. I'm here to be helpful.

You're getting ready to make the rounds and do your do-gooder bit, right?

Well, I've got a hot tip for you. Something really nasty going on. And, no, I had nothing to do with it.



There you go. Good luck. Don't say I never did you none.

You're not coming down?

Oh, no. That's the way it works: the people who want to be heroes get to take all the risks.

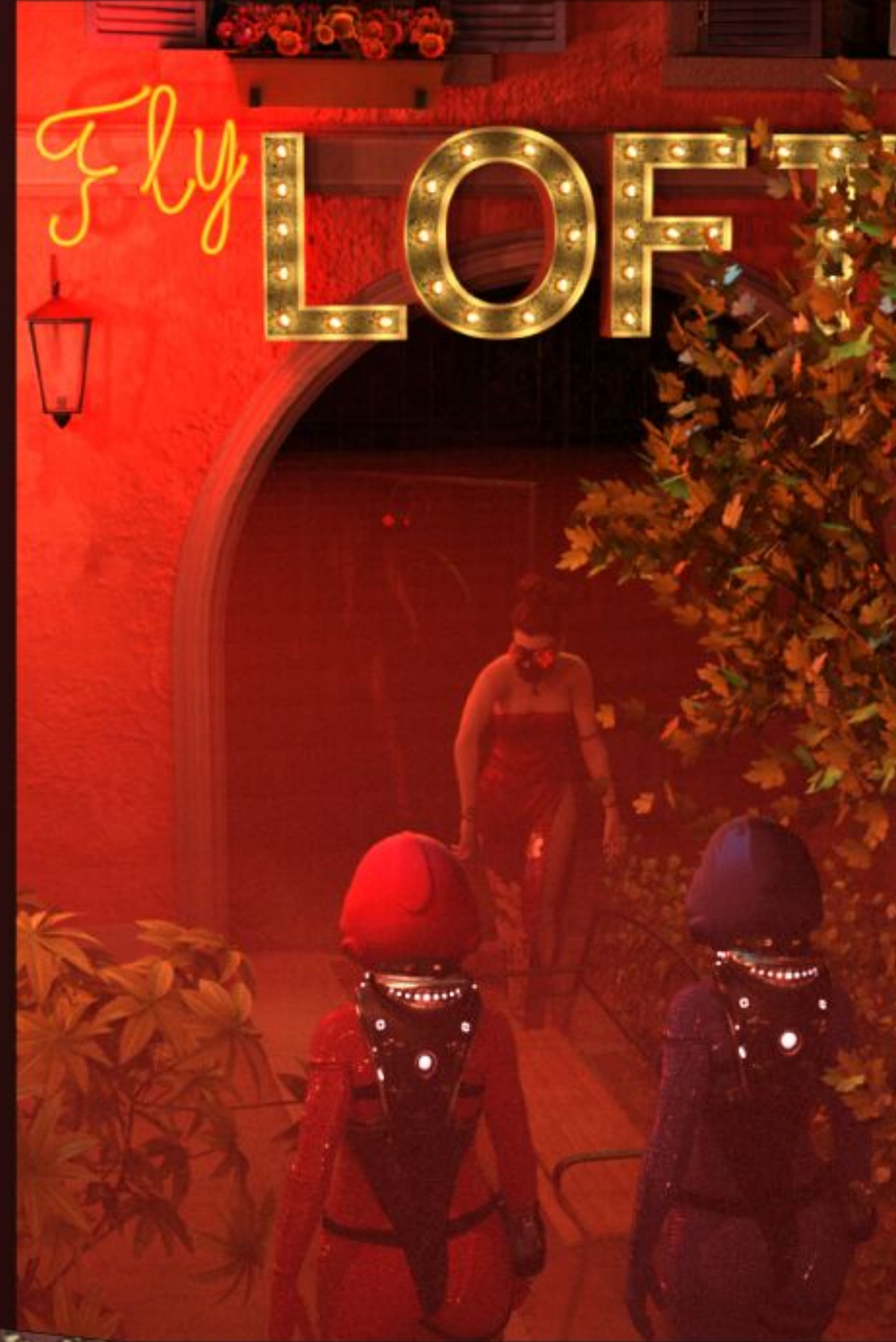
I'd keep those helmets on. I don't know what that red smoke is, but I don't think you'll like it.



Huh.

Yeah.

MZZZZ



This might be a mistake.

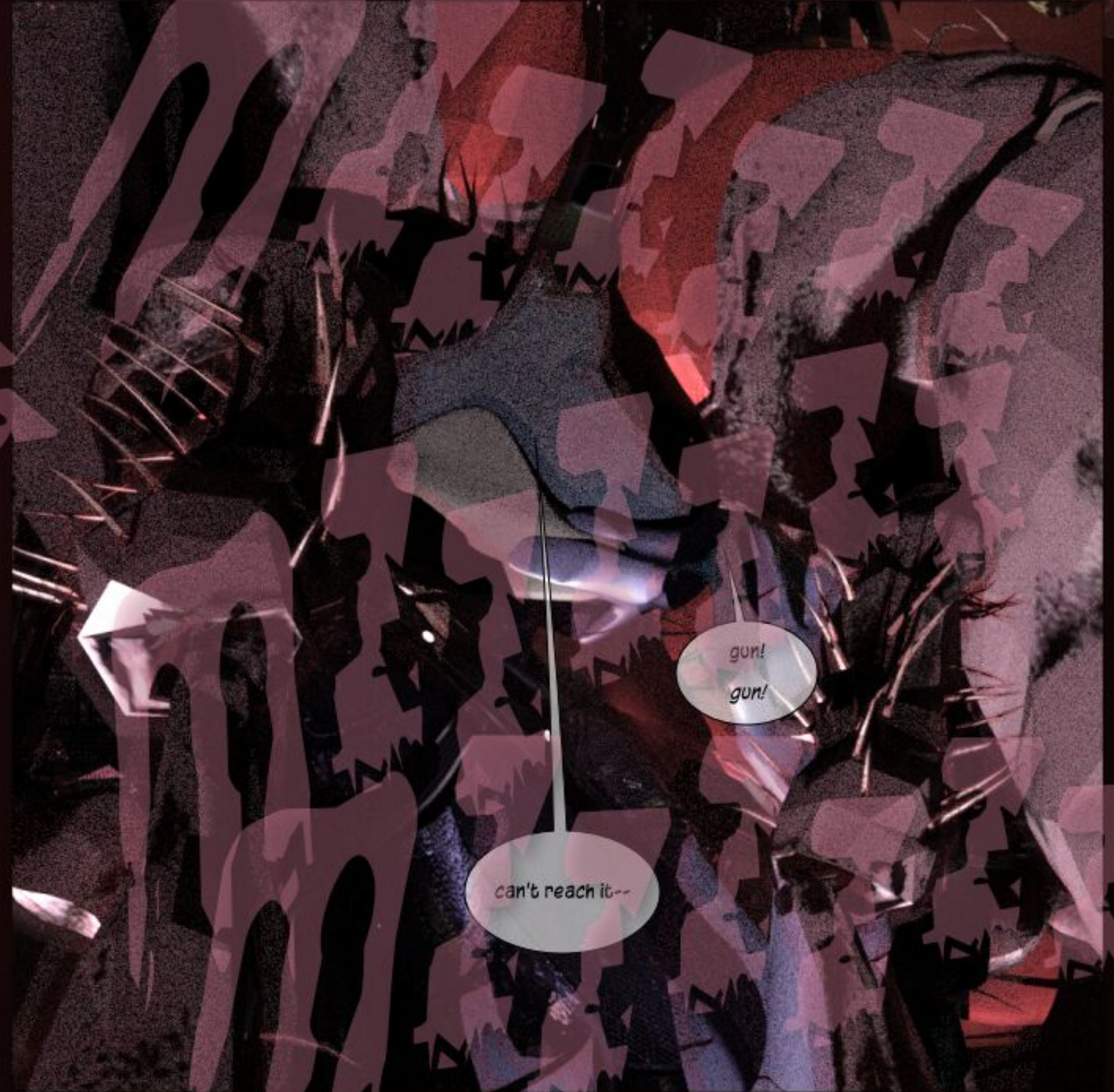
Maybe, but this is clearly where the problem's coming from.

We just need to find the-- AAAAAAA!!



Gina, there's a lot--

Just push through them ... we've got to get to whatever's--



gun! gun!

can't reach it--

LAFFER!

??

Oh. Hello, Drip.

What's up? You can't need another batch already ...

Another batch, My ass.

You sold me bad stock! What are you trying to do, ruin me?

Now just a minute. You know I can't let accusations like that slide by. You could ruin me.

Unless you can prove it was a bad batch--

Oh, I can prove it.

Pearly! Bring her over!!

What, you keep that around to service the customers?

This is a customer, asshole.

The drug's so they can have sex like animals. Like animals. Not as animals, Laffer.

She wasn't supposed to go more than about half wolf, at most.

Just a little fur and some reduced impulse control is all ...

WHINING

Interesting.

Not to mention it was supposed to wear off fourteen hours ago.

But you know I don't give refunds, so what's your point?

Did you come find me just to complain?

No. I brought the customer to you so she could complain.

She's pretty upset with you.

YAAAA!

RRRRRRRRRR

Hey, Laffer!

I never want to see you or your boss again, understand?

You know, Church is doing half our job for us, with these bad drugs.

I thought he was smarter than that.

He may not have a choice at the moment.

The three best algo drug makers in the Cobbles have all vanished.

My thinking is, Church tried to strongarm them to sell exclusively through him, and they all told him to go to hell.

And then all three left the Cobbles?

"Left," well ... that bears some investigation.

But whatever happened, they're not available now, and Church is having to use second-tier people.

We're going to need to keep an eye on Drip. Church might not take what just happened well.

OK. I'll make sure someone's watching.

Church really is a petty little man, isn't he?

No ... he just thinks he can always get what he wants.

He's in for a nasty surprise.

SERENE AND CORAZON'S (AND DOLORES') PERSONAL SPACE.



I have to tell you, I'm still not sure about this.

You'll be fine. You've taken her places before and it's always gone all right ...

That's not what I mean. I'm not worried about that.

It just feels like this is the first step to ...

... Well ... to taking her away from you.

Jolee ... we are old ladies. Whether we look it or not.

We took in Lor because it was the right thing to do. But even at the time, we wondered if it was only a temporary arrangement.

Lor knows it too. I mean, we love her and she loves us, but she's always acted like she's staying with her grandmothers ... just waiting for her real parents to come back.

She's got it all figured out, unlike the rest of us. And she's decided what she wants.

OK ... that makes me feel a little better.

Ready to bounce, kidlet?

Yeah!

Now, who's that?



Ruby!

Hello, everybody. Hi, Lor. Going on a trip?

Lor's going to be staying at my place for a couple of days.

Oh! Well, that sounds like a pretty big deal. I hope you have fun!

Wuby!

She's really hitting the ground running, huh? Good for her.

Lor went over completely to thinking of her as mama by the second visit. It's taking a little longer for Jolee to think of herself as mama. But she loves our brat, so.

The first shipment has been sent and received.

And, honestly, I think she wants the stability. I mean, she wanted to have a child ... just wasn't expecting to get one that'd been ... Past-Forwarded a bit.

Hey, I'm glad you stopped by. I was going to send you a message today.

Oh, great! No problems?

None that anyone saw fit to tell me about. We'll do the next in a couple of weeks.



I came to bring you up to date about ... hmm ... actually ... you haven't been seeing any ghosts lately, have you?

Ghosts? I should hope not! We've got enough problems as is.

Very true. Well, Shari--the Sprue--has gotten into the ghost business. She's been paying little visits to key people. Me among them.

Hostile?

No. I think she's trying to find her way back. Put her head back together.

I don't think she can possibly do any damage. I just thought you should know.



You mean you thought Leyna should know.

Are you ever going to speak to my daughter again?

Of course.

But, Serene, I need you to understand why I'm so pissed off at her. This isn't just me being random, you know.

I have a legitimate grudge.



Ruby ... sooner or later you're going to have to accept that you're vital. The normal rules don't apply.

But that's the thing: I don't accept it.

I didn't ask to be vital. I didn't volunteer. I wasn't even given a chance to say no!

What would you have done if I hadn't come along? Would you be having this argument with someone else right now?

I don't accept it, and I'm not going to drop it, because I'm not the one in the wrong.

ELSEWHERE IN SERENITY ...



I don't think I ever gave it that kind of thought.

It was just always what I wanted to do ... I wanted to understand ...

People told me there was no point to it, not in sleep, but I never really did believe them.



And I was right, too, wasn't I?

Look at all the neurotic behaviors. I mean, look at Century. There's a lifetime's worth of things to unravel there.

I just want a chance to do some of that. I think it'll be exciting. I admit it. Maybe that's my own neurosis.



I don't know that it'll be as exciting as you think.

A lot of the procedural work is sheer tedium. Repeating the same stimulus again and again until something sticks.

And some cases are the opposite of rewarding, because you can work on them for months and still not get any closer to a resolution.

But I appreciate your energy, and I can certainly use the help.

Let's begin on a trial basis, and after a month or so, we can see where we stand. How's that sound?



Uh, may I help you?

Susanne, right?

Sorry to catch you off guard. I didn't have a way to send a message ... I thought Josiah had told me how to reach him, but apparently not ...

We've never met. I'm Leyna Barker.



Leyna! Josiah's told me a little about you.

I was expecting you to look more like Samuel ...

I did at one point, or so people tell me.

I changed my appearance during the Sprue.



Dad, you've got visitors ...

Leyna! This is unexpected.

Yes, I'm sorry about that.

But don't worry--it's not bad news.



Josiah, this is Linda Quinn. You don't know her. Except, we think, you do.

I know that doesn't make much sense. I'll let her explain.

Ah ... privately. Susanne, can I maybe get you to show me around your house?



--Sigh--



Why so glum, chum?

Boringness of your boring world finally getting to you?



Speaking of boredom, are you so bad off you've got nothing better to do than taunt me?

Ooh, you are in a mood. What's really wrong?

Where's your witch? Did she finally give up on you? Is that the problem?

Anyway, I was here first. Just minding my business. But since you're bored ...



Somebody took over the "Loft" club in the terraces.

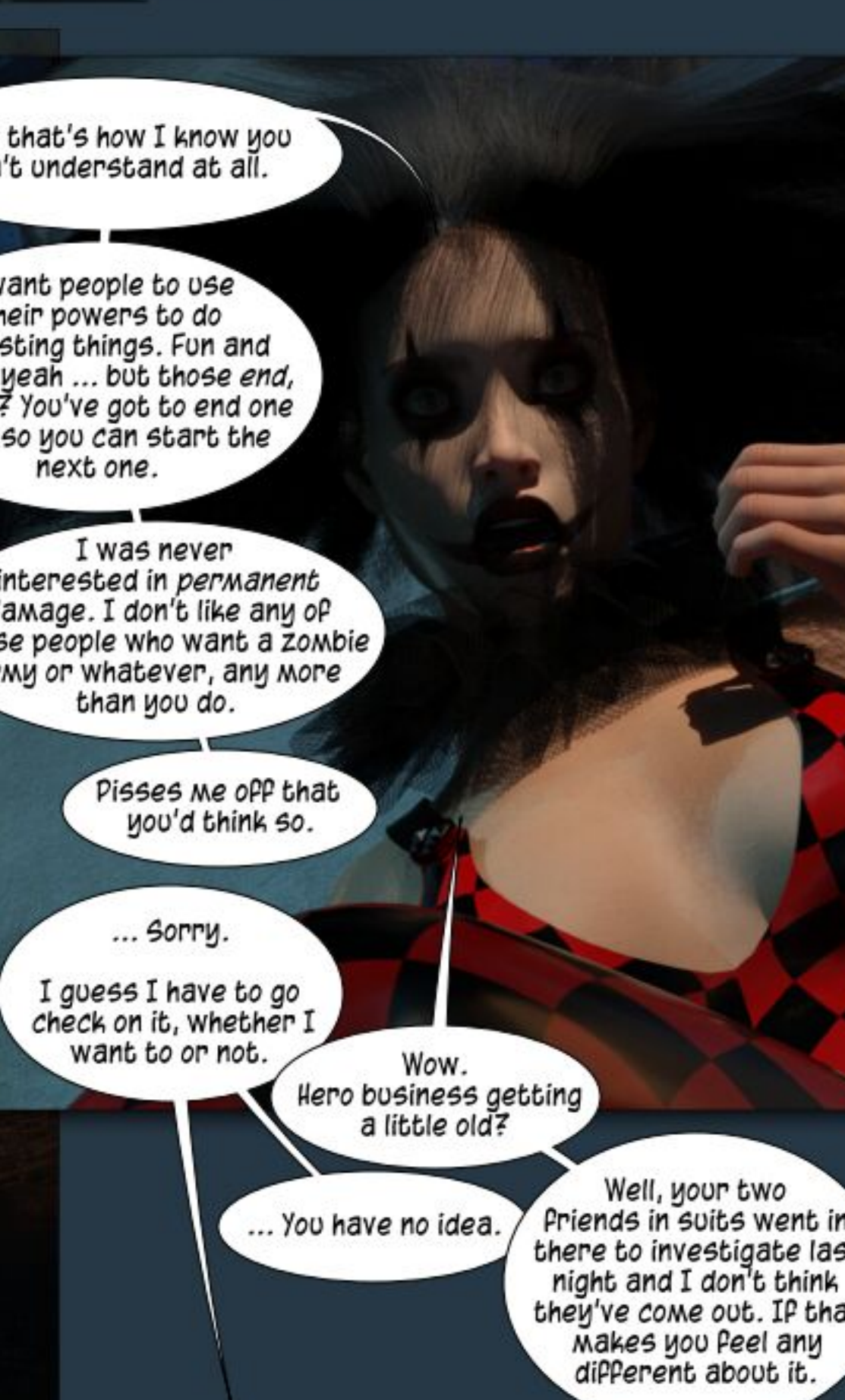
They're using it to do interesting things you won't like a bit.

What they're doing is spreading. All up that street, and now to other streets nearby.

Nobody who goes into the area comes back out as themselves.

Actually, they don't come back out.

And why are you telling me? Why aren't you over there enjoying the fun?



See, that's how I know you don't understand at all.

I want people to use their powers to do interesting things. Fun and games, yeah ... but those end, y'know? You've got to end one game so you can start the next one.

I was never interested in permanent damage. I don't like any of these people who want a zombie army or whatever, any more than you do.

Pisses me off that you'd think so.

... Sorry.

I guess I have to go check on it, whether I want to or not.

Wow. Hero business getting a little old?

... You have no idea.

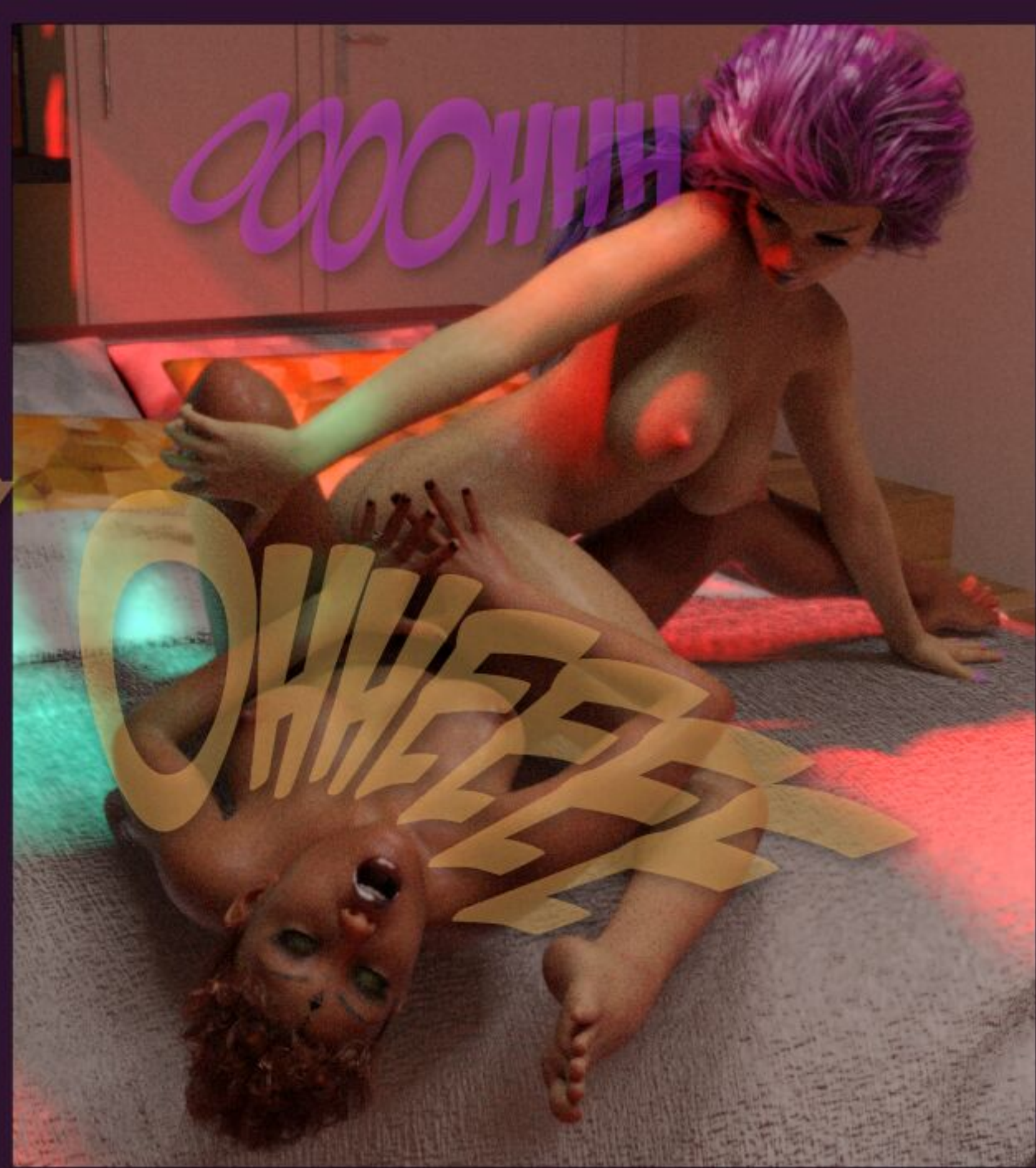
Well, your two friends in suits went in there to investigate last night and I don't think they've come out. If that makes you feel any different about it.

WHILE LEYNA'S CHANGING INTO PROTECTIVE GEAR AND CONVINCING CONUNDRUM TO COME ALONG, LET'S GO TO CENTURY FOR A MOMENT.

REGULAR READERS MAY RECALL THAT ORCHID SIGNED ON FOR WHATEVER STRANGE PROJECT JEANNE LAVAL IS UP TO NOW, IN #38.

IN #43, JEANNE ANNOUNCED THAT SHE'D FOUND ORCHID A PARTNER FOR THE PROJECT, MADELINE. ORCHID AND MADELINE IMMEDIATELY RESOLVED TO GET TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER AS WELL AS POSSIBLE.

LET'S SEE HOW THAT'S GOING ...



SEEMS LIKE IT'S GOING PRETTY WELL.

AND NOW BACK TO OUR DENOUEMENT.





Wow.  
Watch out!  
That's one of the kind that catches people.

MZZZ  
MZ--

Does she look like she's ... in pain?



It's got to be the headgear doing the changes. Let's see if we can get it off her.

ngh  
nnnn

hhhh--

I don't know, I think she might be --



AAAH!

-- too far gone.



Now she's just wandering around.

Should we have tried to get her back to human?

The way my luck's been going on these things, I'm betting we couldn't have.

Maybe if we can disrupt whoever's at the top of this--

There's a lot of that smoke in here. Watch out.



... I don't like what they've done with the place.

No?  
I thought you were into red and black.



Ah. More.

Righteous little shits.

All these ugly insects deserve what they get, but you deserve something special.

I was trying to figure that out for these two. I thought about setting them up as enforcers. Sending them out to hunt down the rest of your kind.



MZZZ

MZZZ

I think turning them into flies would be a waste of material.

But I haven't had a chance to work out the gear, so you'll just have to get swarmed.



--kapp--  
It's not working?

It is!

They're shrugging it off--



I really don't --kapp-- know how or why I let you get me into this.



And you made me break my promise.

I'm sure there's an exception for self-defense.

Uh ... what did you actually do?



They're still Flies. They're just Fly-sized now.

Let's get them all into one place.

What-- What did you do? WHAT DID YOU DO??

You--! I'm going to make you wish you'd never--



You belong in there too.

AAAAAAAHH!!



They're a lot more obnoxious when they're small enough to actually Fly.

Was noticing that.

Get away! shoot! leave me alone!

Aaaaaa!



Not sticking around for the cleanup?

Help!

You know better.

Your Friends are OK. Your villain's all wrapped up for you. What else do you want?

Like they say in your business: My work here is done.



And it's not my business, so you're really lucky I was even here in the first place.

Yeah. What is your business?

If you ever figure that out, let me know.

NEXT DAY.

IT'S ALL OVER BUT THE SHOUTING.



NO!!!

I refuse. I've warned you several times, and instead of listening to me, you just pile up more and more ...



I'm not doing it on purpose.

I know that, Leyna, but it hardly matters.

We already had Cantwell and the bananas ...

Now you tell me there's a roomful of robots in Century ...

... and then you hand me a bottle full of people who have been turned into flies?

PEOPLE CHAPMAN IS UNABLE TO HELP. CANTWELL: #35. BANANAS: #43.



Who are, by the way, going to be made far more difficult to treat by their size, not that I have any good method for treating them at all.

Not to mention the difficulty of getting the villain out of there so he can be dealt with, and hoping we can find a way to subdue him before he manages to recall.

I am not the cleanup crew, Leyna. You can't just keep handing me all the problems you can't solve and expect me to come up with a way to fix them.

It's not fair to me and it's extremely frustrating. Especially since you keep refusing to pursue something which might bring us a better solution.

Now wait ... I haven't--

Putting aside my time and effort, hasn't it occurred to you what a situation we're making for ourselves without adequate tools? Surely you realize that if this jackass had put masks on Gina and Esperanza, they'd be in the bottle now too and you'd be wondering whether they'd ever be human again?

Do you like living on the edge like this? Do they?



No. This is an ultimatum. If you want any more help from me, you need to do this thing.

Two things.

First, go patch things up with Ruby. Right now, I don't care what it takes. You two are making life worse for everyone around you.

And second ...

Find a way to Spindrop.

NEXT: THE MINOR SPIN, THE MAJOR DROP