

Don't stand in the road, dipsticks!

yaan!



... a lot weirder.

I think I want one.



I didn't think this part through. I wasn't expecting a city. I was hoping there'd be, like, twenty of them.

Stand in the public square and shout "Hey, is anybody here an algorithmist?"

Wouldn't work. Apparently they all are.

But it's the games! You're supposed to have fun!

Love, if I don't fix this steam balance and half the town blows up, there won't be any games.



Hey! Big people!

You shouldn't be here!

I know, but it's important. We need some algorithmic help, badly.

Doesn't matter.

... What kind of algorithm help?



We're looking for someone who's expert on disassembly and reverse engineering for items that have been intuitively crafted.

We've got some nasty effects that we're trying to undo.

Ooh, that's tough. I've worked on that some myself. Have you tried an analysis subshell? That sometimes does it. But I don't have all the techniques. The person you really want for that is--

Threadbare ...

Oh! Oh, right. Uh ... we're not supposed to -- anyway, you won't get a chance to talk to her, because by the time we could find her, the Engineer's wardens will find you and throw you out. Did you come in from the Souk portal?

Yes.

Then they already know you're here. I'm surprised they haven't grabbed you already.



Oh, I know! You can be in the games!

I can sponsor you! You'll be my team!

How will that help?

It'll help her have a team because I can't participate. Won't help you at all.

Beeswax! That's not true. They won't grab them while they're actually in the events, and it'll give me time to find --

She's not allowed, even if you find her. You know that.

It's worth a try, though.



C'mon! This'll be great. But we have to hurry if we want to qualify!

I, ah -- I'm not sure this is the best idea ...

Do you have a better one? Let's go! I'll tell you about analysis subshells on the way.

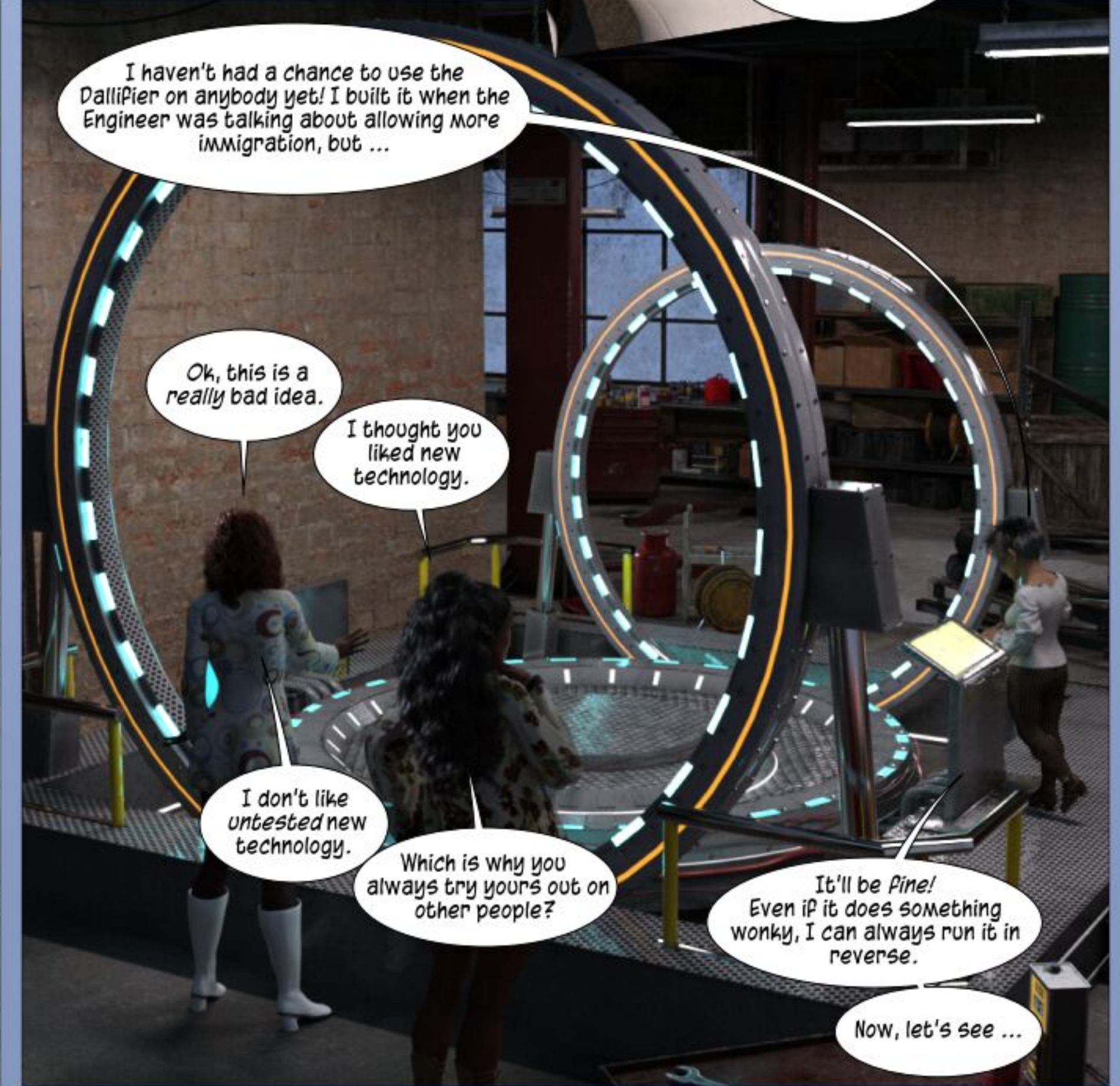
Uh, if we compete, everyone will be able to see we're not Dalliers ...

Oh, we're going to fix that!

I think I've just seen an immovable object meet an irresistible force.

You have no idea.

Anyway, they won't do anything worse than throw you out. Good luck.



I haven't had a chance to use the Dallier on anybody yet! I built it when the Engineer was talking about allowing more immigration, but ...

Ok, this is a really bad idea.

I thought you liked new technology.

I don't like untested new technology.

Which is why you always try yours out on other people?

It'll be fine! Even if it does something wonky, I can always run it in reverse.

Now, let's see ...



Uh ...

I'll go first, chicken.

Whee!



Oh, you both came out great!

And no extra arms or anything.

This Peels weird.

Now we have to hurry and get you changed!

... Changed?

Of course! You need a Plightsuit, and some safety gear ... goggles ... and a hat, you can't fly with your hair going all over the place like that!

Fly?

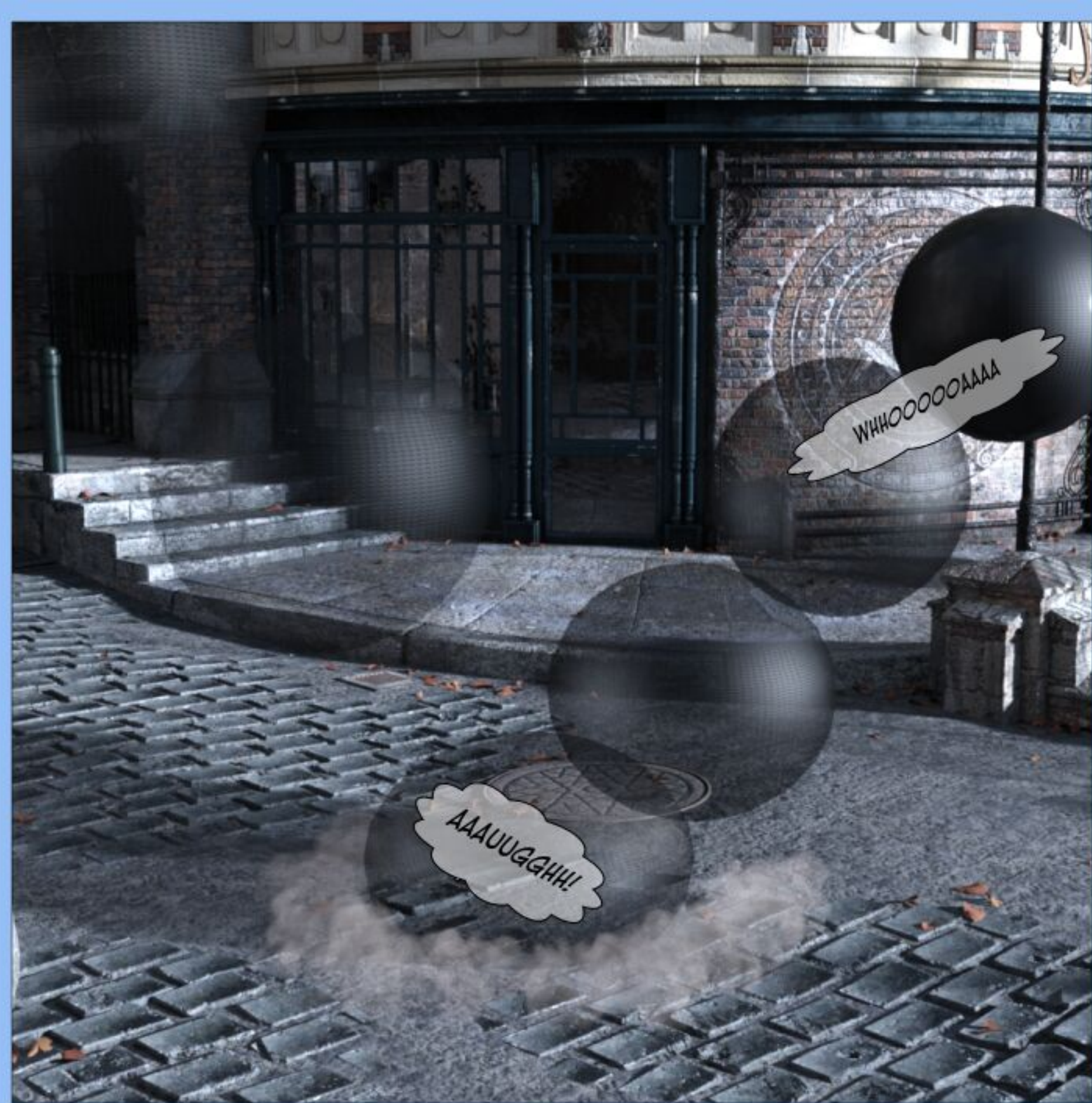








I can't see a thing, and somehow I think I'm better off that way.



AAAUGGGH!!



yike!!



Third place! That's really good, especially since you've never done this before ...

And you knocked out one of the red team!

By accident. I just wanted to push back a little. I didn't think she'd fall off ...

Uh, is that legal? Her teammate doesn't look happy with me.

It's legal, but it's kinda mean. Some teams won't ever make contact. Others do it all the time.

Come on, we've got to get you to the next event before they find you!



Don't Peel bad about the knock. They deserved it and everybody knows it. That's Stemrail's team and they're nasty. A lot of people think they cheat.

Cheat? What's the prize in all this?

Not a thing! We do it for fun. Like I said, they're just mean.

Your friend got knocked out too, I don't know if you saw. But don't worry. She'll be fine, and Beeswax is going to retrieve her.

Now we really do have to rush. There's setup to do again ...



You can't make me a Daller twice.

Hee! No. This event takes both of us, and I think it'd be better if I navigate, which means you've got to get patched.

Patched?

### INTERLUDE



Hello! Welcome to the Family Office.

I'm Ms. Pitt. But just call me Joanne.

What can I do for you today?



Well, uh ... We've reached a time where we ... that is, we were thinking about ...

Breathe, sweetie. You think she hasn't heard it before?

We want to have a baby.

And we weren't sure how long it takes to get a slot at the place they send you to, so we--

Oh! Hmm. It's so hard to get the word out to everyone ...

We're not using the birthing resort anymore. We've changed to using indirect insemination.



Like artificial insemination?

We don't like to call it that. It gives the wrong impression.

You have sex in the normal way. It's just that the conception is delayed a bit.

I'll be happy to explain, but you understand I do have to use very matter-of-fact language.

Please do.



Well, we set up his sleep bed to collect his semen.

You have sex as usual, and when he ejaculates, it's collected, temporarily stored at cold temperatures ...

... and brought to your bed, where it is ... inserted. You won't actually notice it happening. It could be anywhere from a few minutes later to a few hours, depending on a number of factors.

We monitor you to see if you've caught, and if not, we can just keep the collections going as long as we need to until you do.

So we can do this any time we want? No special arrangements?

There's a certain amount of lead time. We don't collect semen under any other circumstances, so someone has to go to his bed and set up the collection apparatus.



But the bedders respond very quickly to these requests, and as far as I know they're not especially busy right now ... I can put in a request immediately and it could be ready for you to begin trying to conceive tonight.

If that's convenient for you.

Oh, yes.

That's very convenient.





I think I've finally come to a stop, thank goodness.

But how do I get out? There's no way to open it ...

Oh, I hear somebody! They'll help me ...

-- heh -- Think we have time for a run or two before the race?

Crash ball?

Uh-huh.

Might!

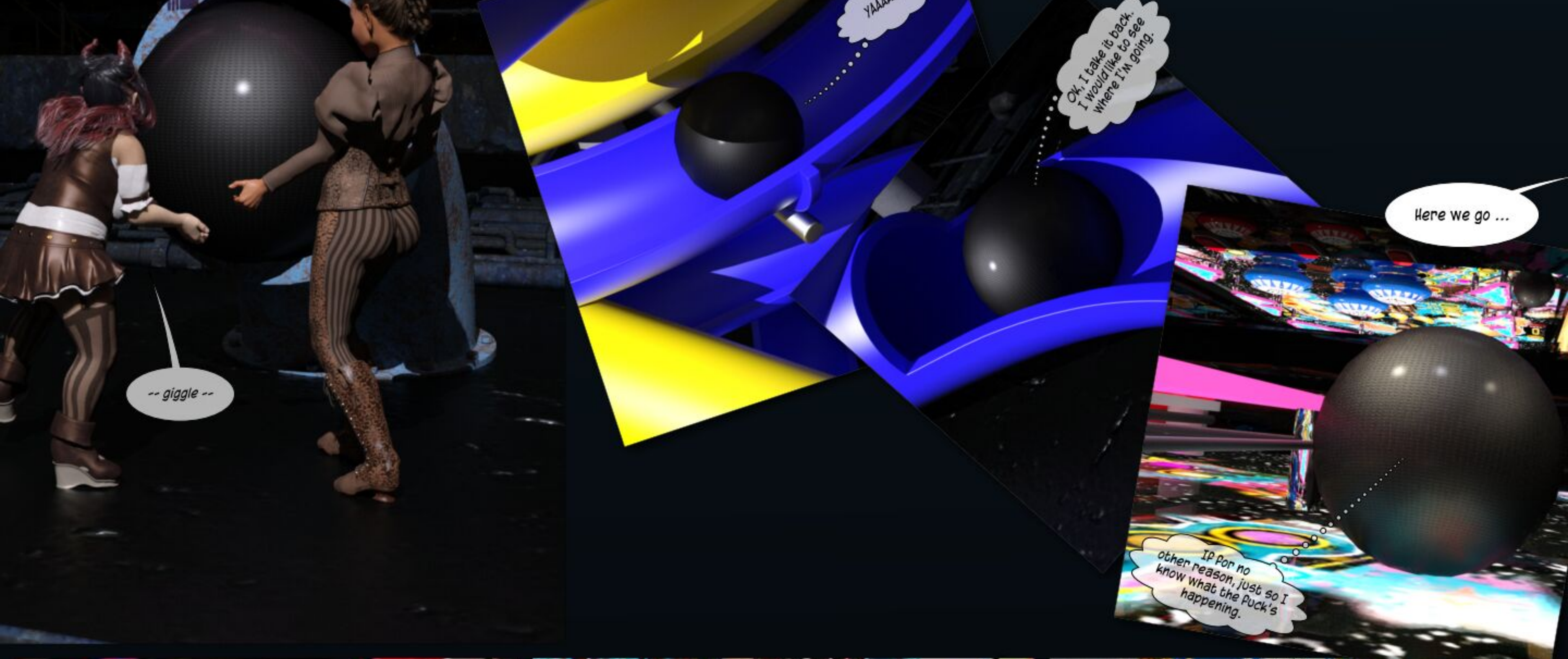
I don't like the sound of that.

Wait, where are you taking me?

Get me out of this!

Hey, Flywheel, look!

# BALL RETURN



YAAAAA!

Ok, I take it back. I would like to see where I'm going.

Here we go ...

-- giggle --

If for no other reason, just so I know what the Puck's happening.



Yeow!



You're going to want a Flipper hold, coming in like that.

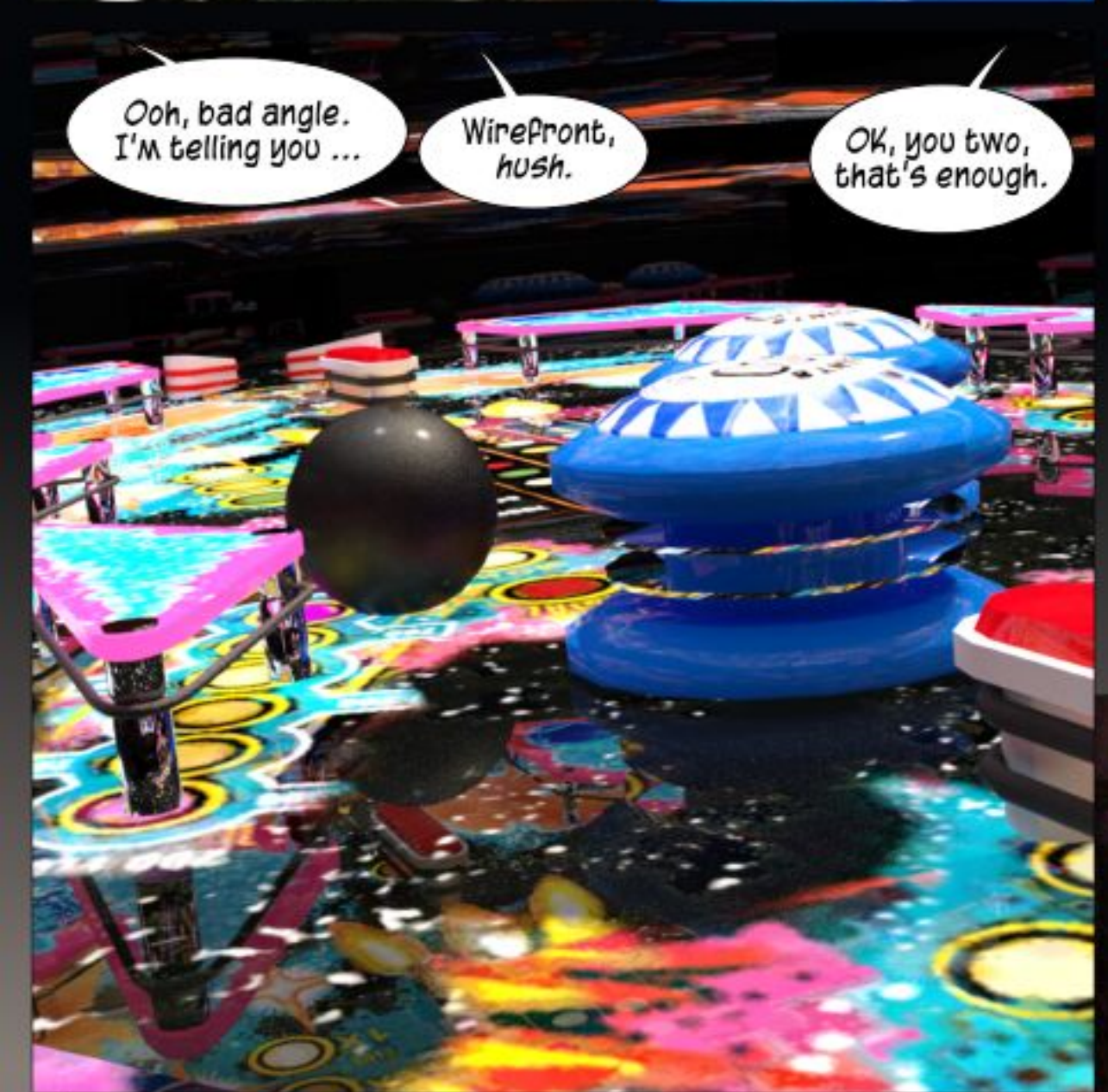
I can hear them, but I can't tell where ...



That wasn't a Flipper hold.

Let me play my way.

Whoooooaa



Ooh, bad angle. I'm telling you ...

Wirefront, hush.

OK, you two, that's enough.



Hey!

Let her drop.

Beeswax, you can't just come in and --



!!!



Have you got that in a jipp ...

You have no right! The rules are if we find her we get to play--

Flywheel was going to try to beat my score! Not that she could, but--

Hey!

I'm sorry, Wirefront, but she's needed elsewhere.

And weren't you two going to enter the ostrich race? You're going to be too late if you don't hurry ...



I'll get you some clothes.

Oh, poot!

OK, we're going ... but I want you to know we're really annoyed.



Thank you.

I thought you had a big problem to fix?

Done. Some dooPus had shut off a safety valve in sector three.

Come on. Your friend's running in the ostrich race. We can watch from our monitor point. I think nobody will be able to track you there.





Threadbare, uh ... reassure me a little?

Tested tech! We have a whole bunch of these and they've all been used hundreds of times. Never a problem.

I've been in this one myself I don't know how many times. Beeswax says she's a better navigator than I am, but I think she really just either doesn't like riding or doesn't like being patched.

I don't know why. It doesn't hurt or anything. It's a little intense, though.

Ready?



WhOOOOooooah!



Are you OK? How do you feel?

Oh, wait! Forgot. Let me get my headset.



So right now I'm talking and hearing on radio?

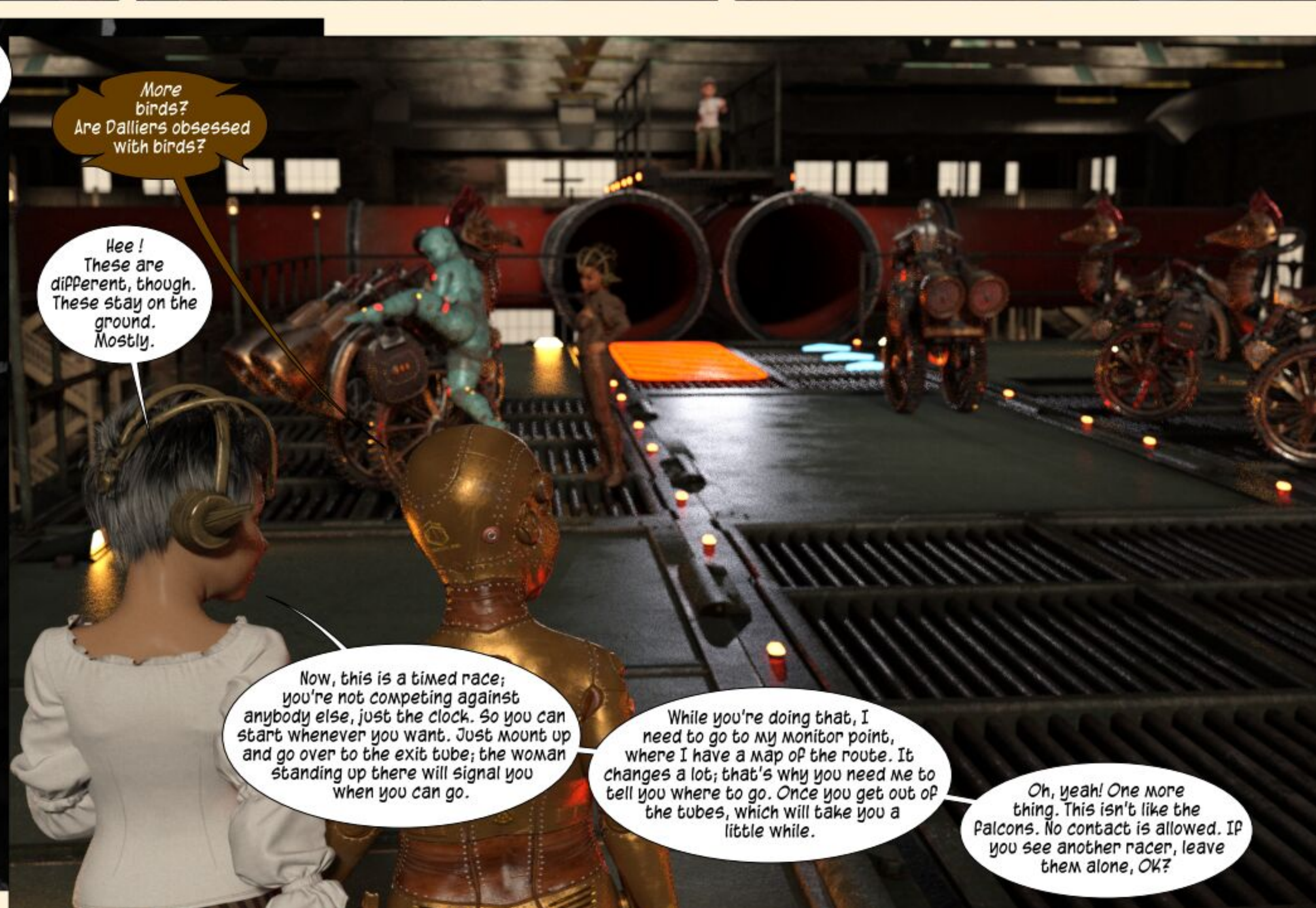
Yes! I'm the only one who can hear you or talk to you right now, and only with the headset on. It echoes anything I say aloud to your frequency.

Was that the only point of patching me? Wouldn't it be easier to just give me a headset too?

Well, this course can be a little rough. In that body you shouldn't get hurt. Also ...

It's more fun this way?

Ooh, you're catching on!



More birds? Are Dalliers obsessed with birds?

Hee! These are different, though. These stay on the ground. Mostly.

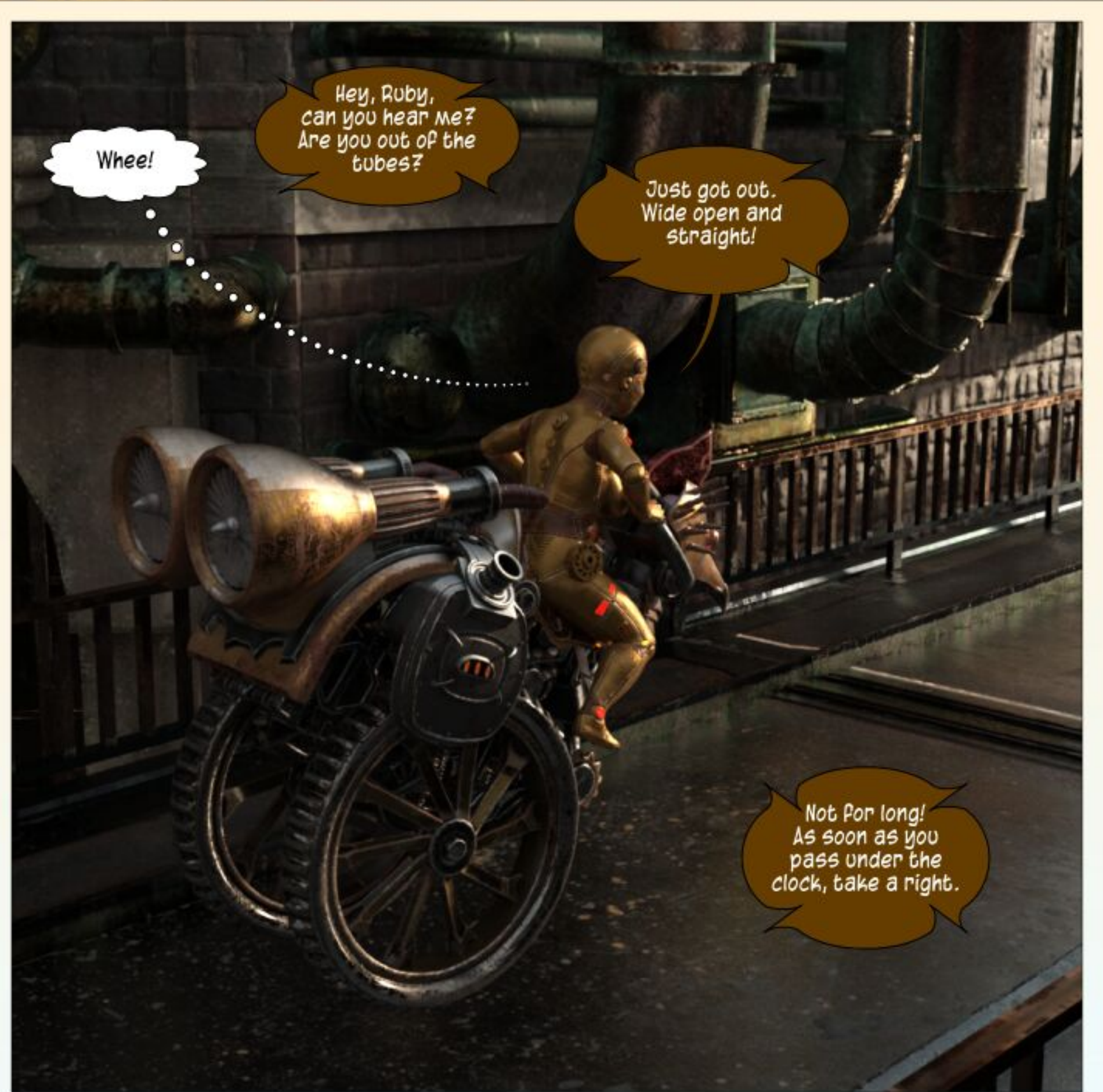
Now, this is a timed race; you're not competing against anybody else, just the clock. So you can start whenever you want. Just mount up and go over to the exit tube; the woman standing up there will signal you when you can go.

While you're doing that, I need to go to my monitor point, where I have a map of the route. It changes a lot; that's why you need me to tell you where to go. Once you get out of the tubes, which will take you a little while.

Oh, yeah! One more thing. This isn't like the Falcons. No contact is allowed. If you see another racer, leave them alone, OK?



And away we go ...



Whee!

Hey, Ruby, can you hear me? Are you out of the tubes?

Just got out. Wide open and straight!

Not for long! As soon as you pass under the clock, take a right.



Take a -- There's no place to turn right!

Use your hopper jets. This race doesn't always follow the roads.

Over the edge??

Yep! Quick, now.



Look out below!!

... oh, right, they can't hear me.

Nobody would be walking on the race route anyway. They know better, and the route's mostly closed off.

AAAAAAA!

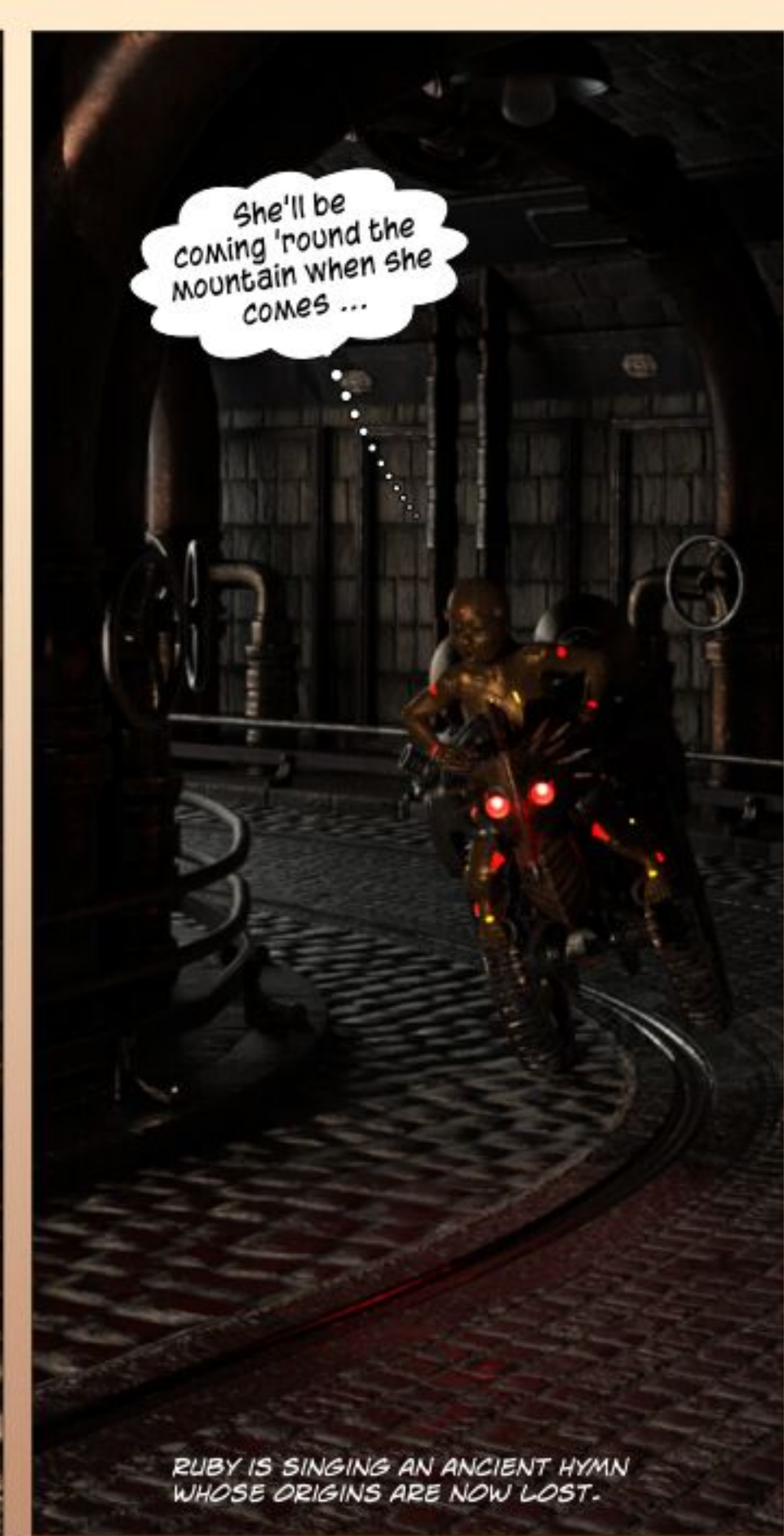




I survived!

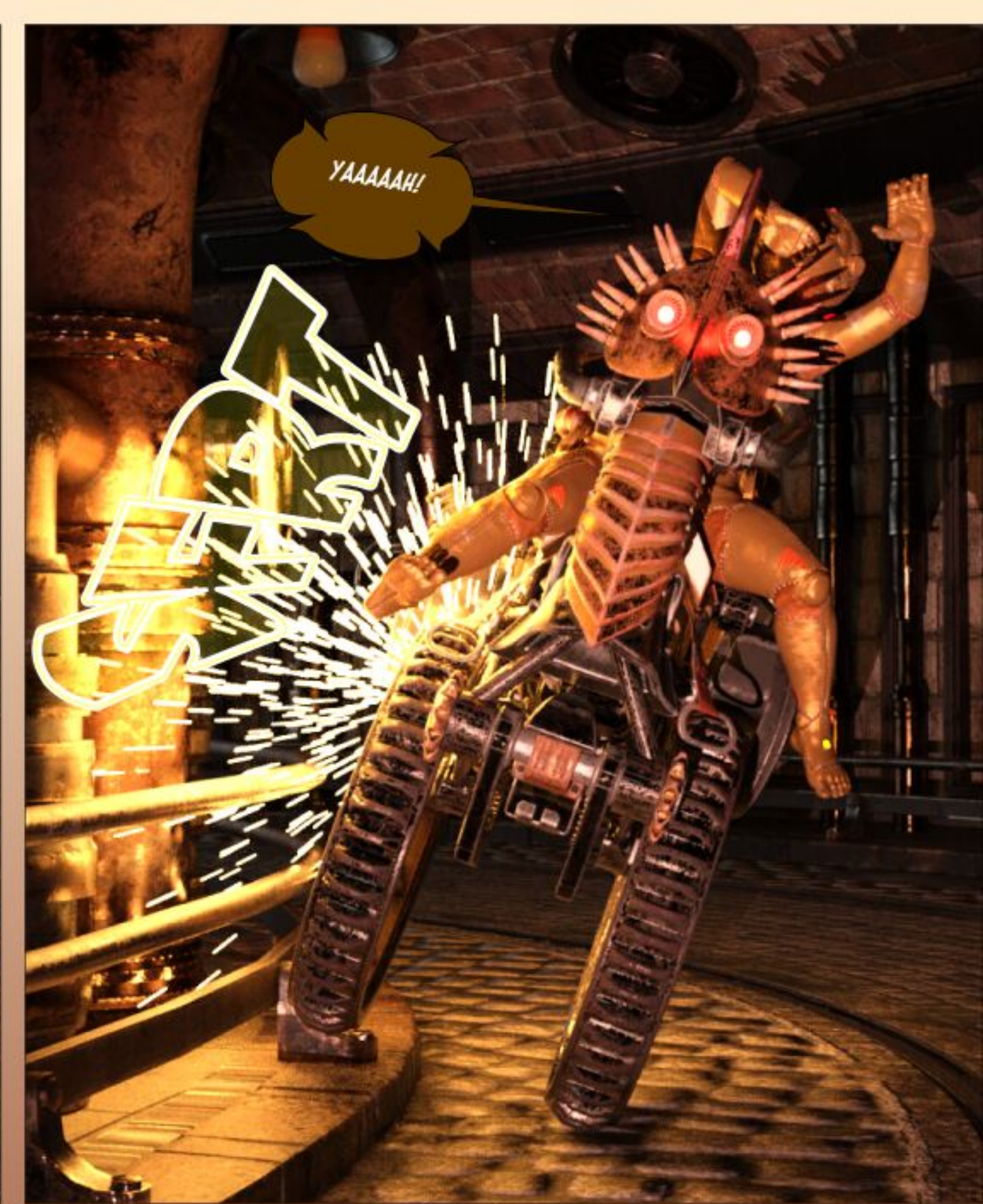
'Course you did. You're making good time too.

They're not running the streetcar on this line because of the race, so all you have to worry about in the tunnels is the corners. Full speed ahead!



She'll be coming 'round the mountain when she comes ...

RUBY IS SINGING AN ANCIENT HYMN WHOSE ORIGINS ARE NOW LOST.



YAAAAAH!



Ruby! Ruby, are you OK? What happened?

I'm all right, but I think I'm out of the race. My ostrich had a breakdown. Smoke's coming out.

Oh, boy. All right, I'll come down to get you. Too bad.

I'm going to try to move out of the tunnel. I'm worried someone's going to come through and hit me.



Huh?

Oh, wait ... I can't talk to her ... Unless I can lose this ...



I'd have thought this was an algorithmic apply, but maybe not? It doesn't Peel any different Prom any other changes, I think I can still "peel it off" ...

Yeah! And I think I got the Daller Porm back OK too ...



Hey!!

What are you doing?

Are you trying to interfere with the race?



No! I'm the one trying to keep somebody from interfering with it.

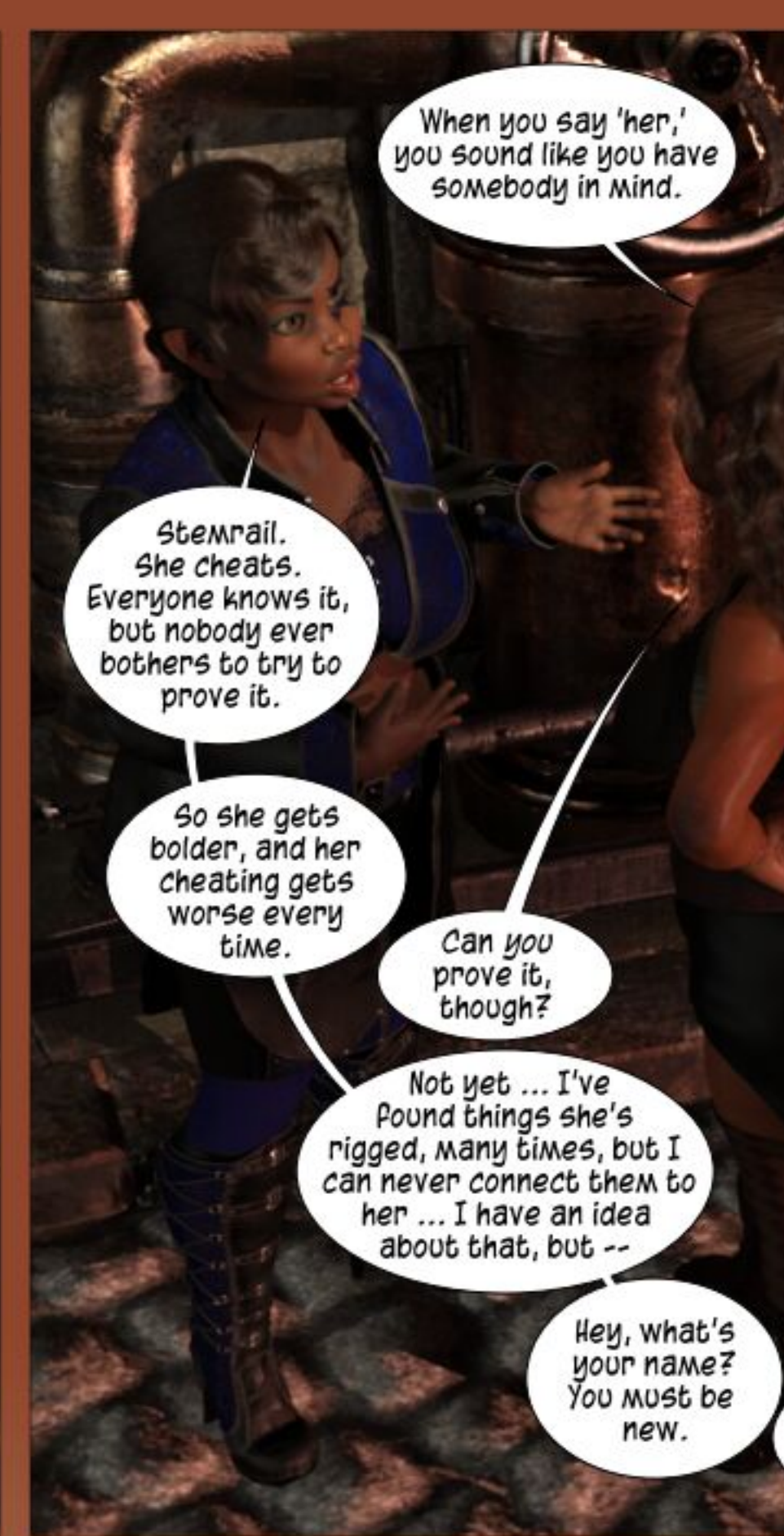
I'm pretty sure she's been in here. I'm sure she got to the Falcons too, but I didn't have a way to check.

So my ostrich that just blew up around the corner could have been sabotaged?

Blew up around the-- what?!

You didn't hear it?

I was distracted. Damn her!



When you say 'her,' you sound like you have somebody in mind.

Stemrail. She cheats. Everyone knows it, but nobody ever bothers to try to prove it.

So she gets bolder, and her cheating gets worse every time.

Can you prove it, though?

Not yet ... I've found things she's rigged, many times, but I can never connect them to her ... I have an idea about that, but --

Hey, what's your name? You must be new.

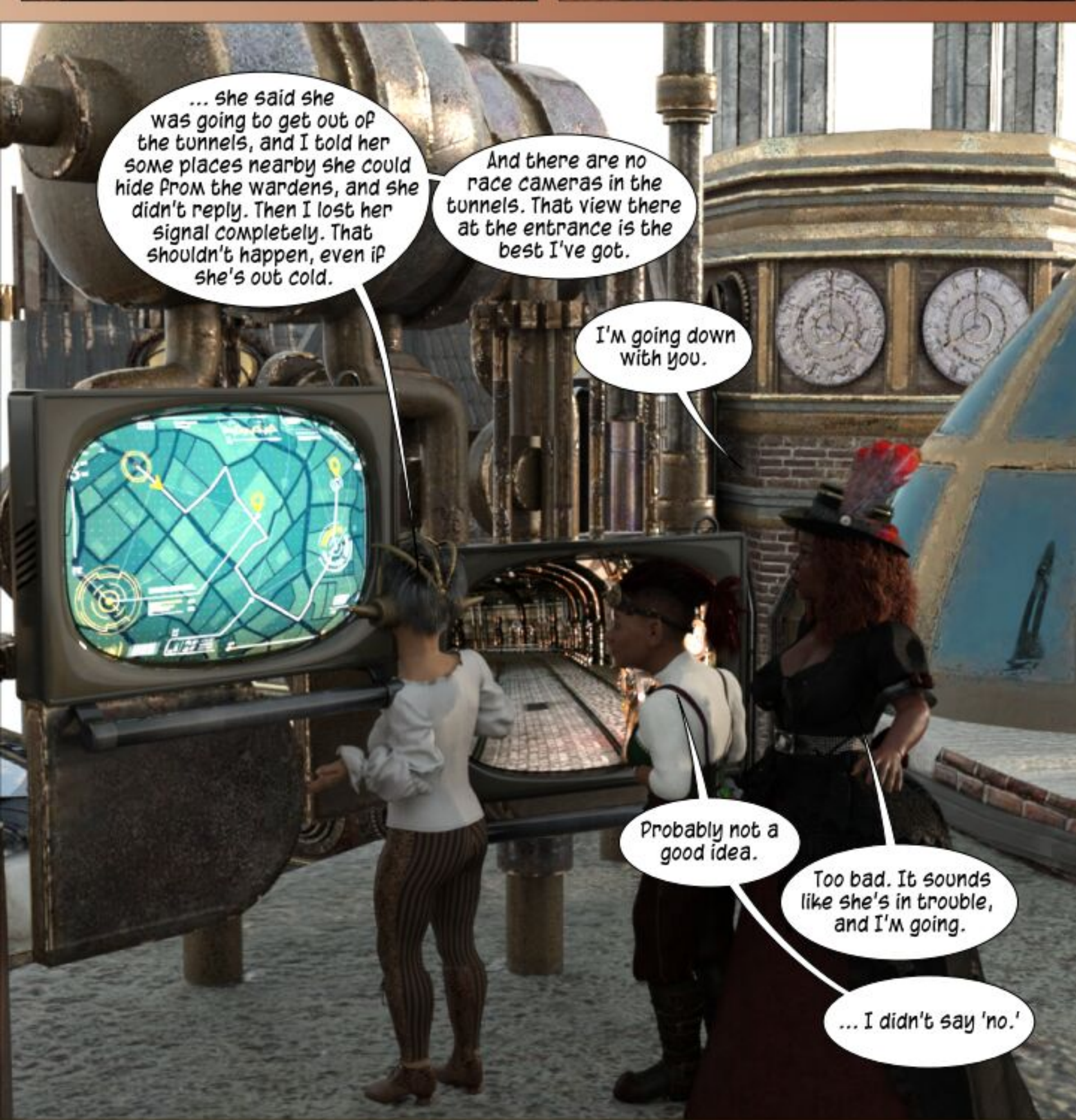
Ruby.



Ruby, huh? OK.

I'm Backwrench.

Listen, if you're interested, come with me and I'll show you something.



... she said she was going to get out of the tunnels, and I told her some places nearby she could hide from the wardens, and she didn't reply. Then I lost her signal completely. That shouldn't happen, even if she's out cold.

And there are no race cameras in the tunnels. That view there at the entrance is the best I've got.

I'm going down with you.

Probably not a good idea.

Too bad. It sounds like she's in trouble, and I'm going.

... I didn't say 'no.'



You know, the ostriches are built to take a lot of abuse. And checked before the race.

You're thinking sabotage?

I definitely am. I'd like to have looked at it to see if I could find anything, but I guess the race crew has already gotten here.

They wouldn't want to leave an obstruction like that for long. Especially at a corner.

Anyway, this is the right spot.



Ruby, where are you?

It was sabotage. Look!

That hole shouldn't be there. That's a gun. Can't tell what it fired. It could have been just a little chunk of metal, if it was aimed right ...

Ooh, and if someone did find that in the engine they might just assume it was road debris that got kicked up into a very unlucky place ...

Sneaky!









Oh My goodness!

Well, there are certainly *easier* and more approved ways of entering ...

But you're here, that's what matters! And there's no queue right now, so it doesn't matter how you came in.

Let's get you set up! No time to waste!

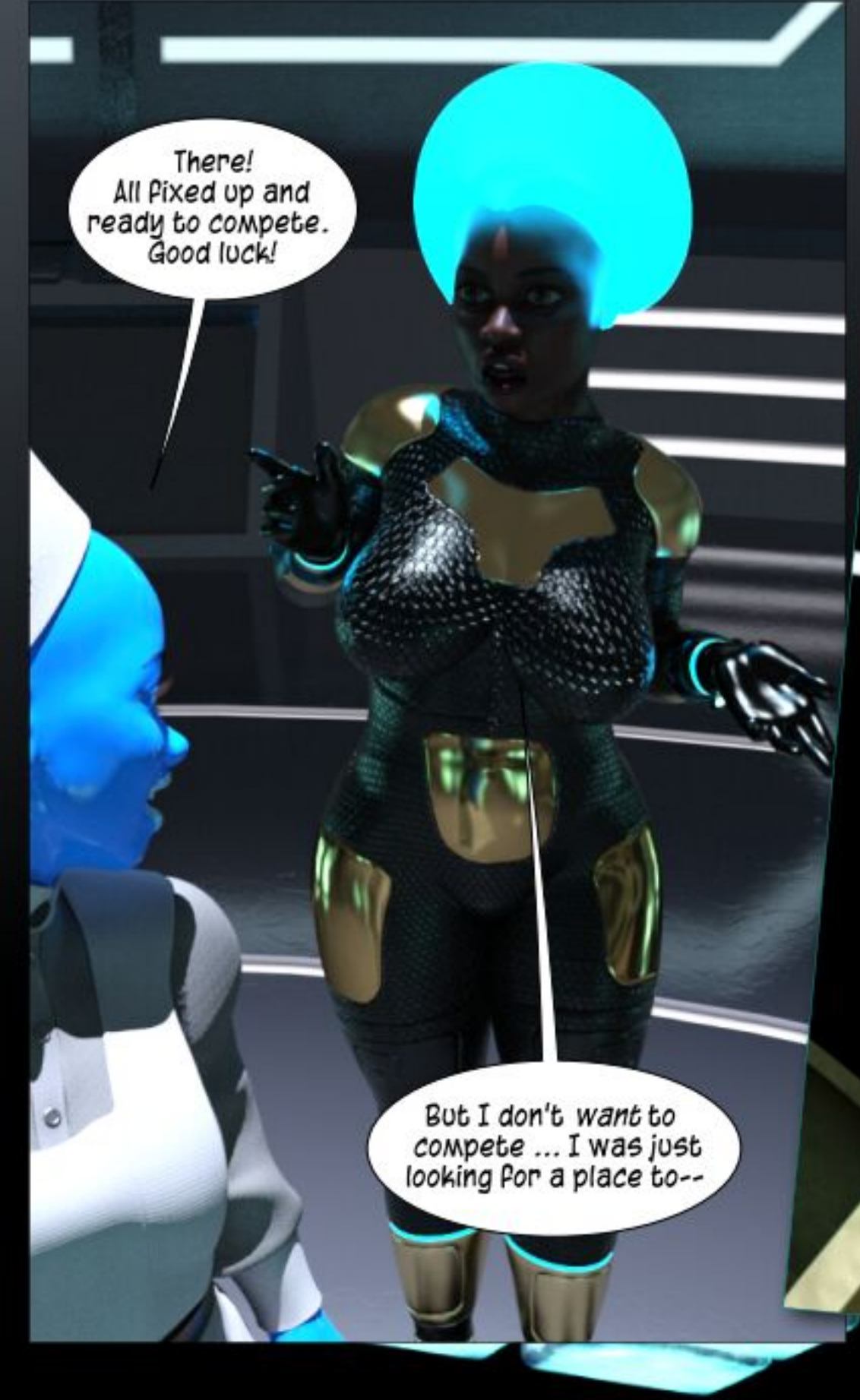
whuuuh ...?

We'll need to take all this off, of course. Can't put on the suit over this! And can't run the cubes without a suit! No indeed!

And that hair has simply got to go.

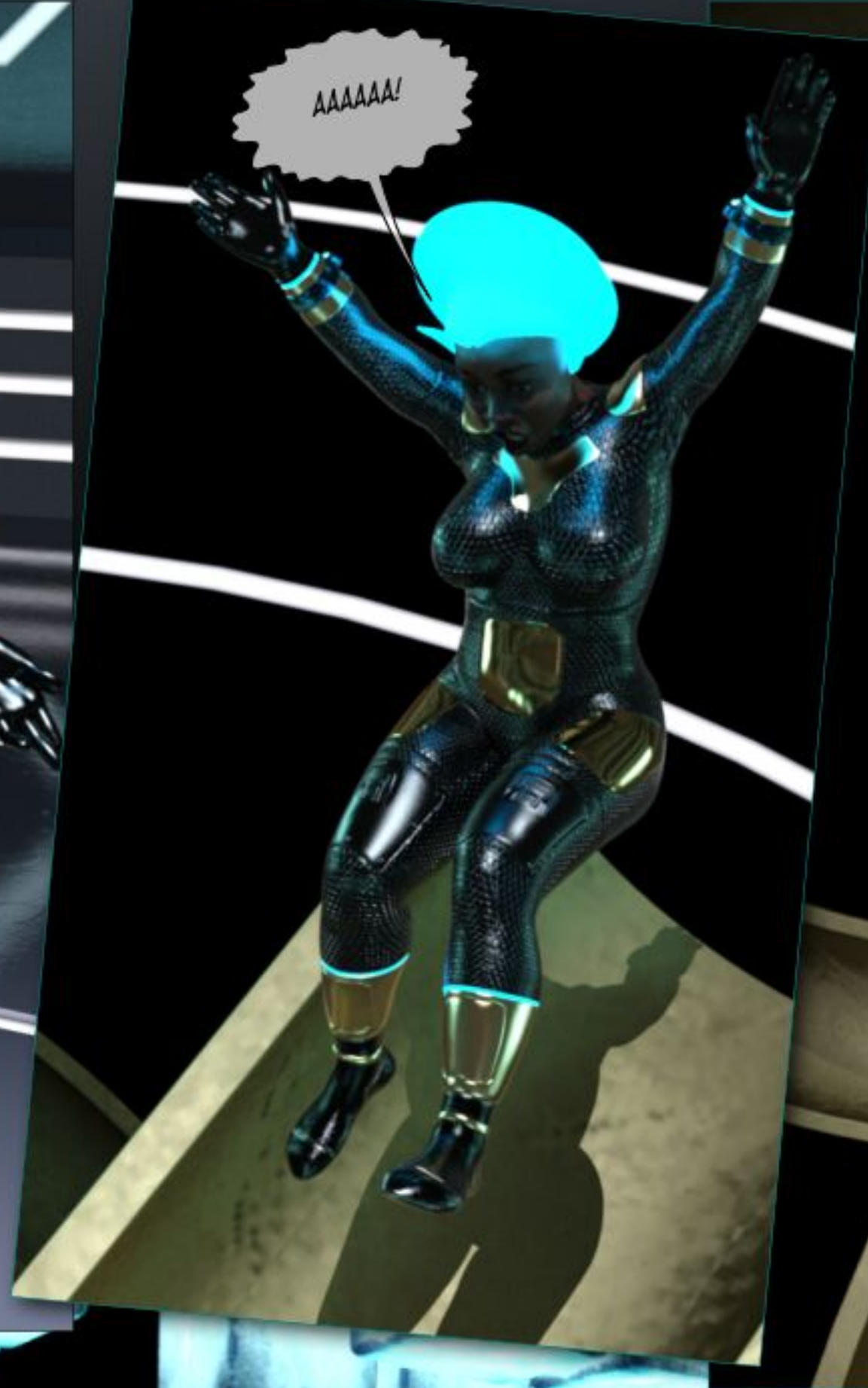
Hey, wait!

urgh



There! All fixed up and ready to compete. Good luck!

But I don't want to compete ... I was just looking for a place to--



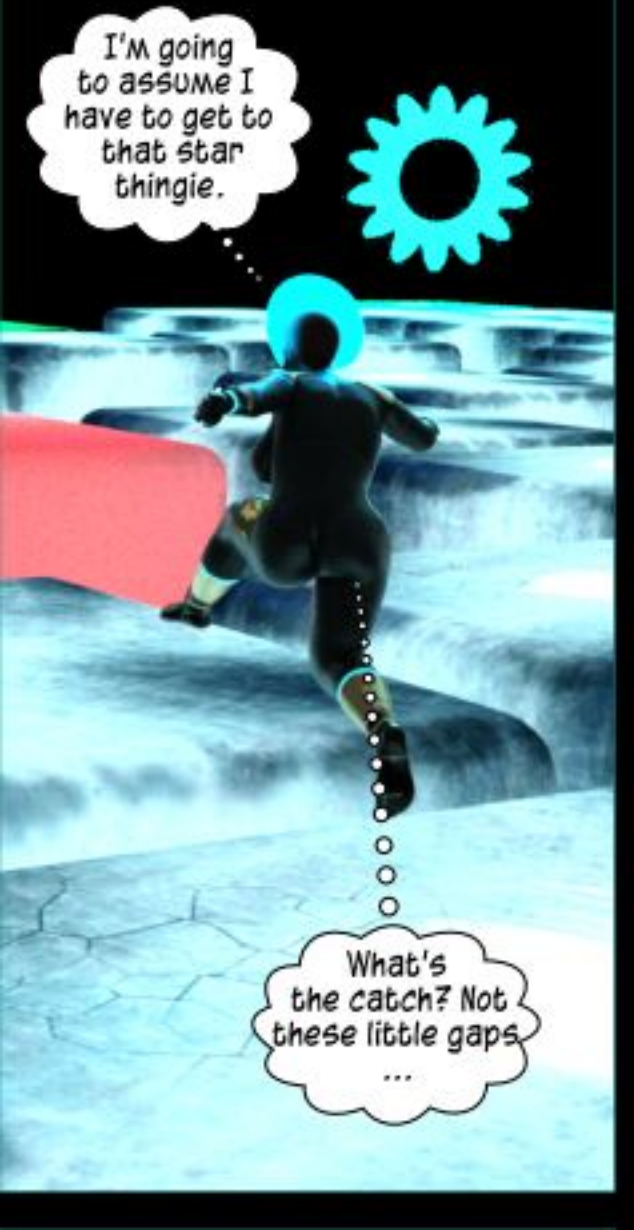
AAAAAA!



Why don't these things ever happen to Ruby??



oooookay ...



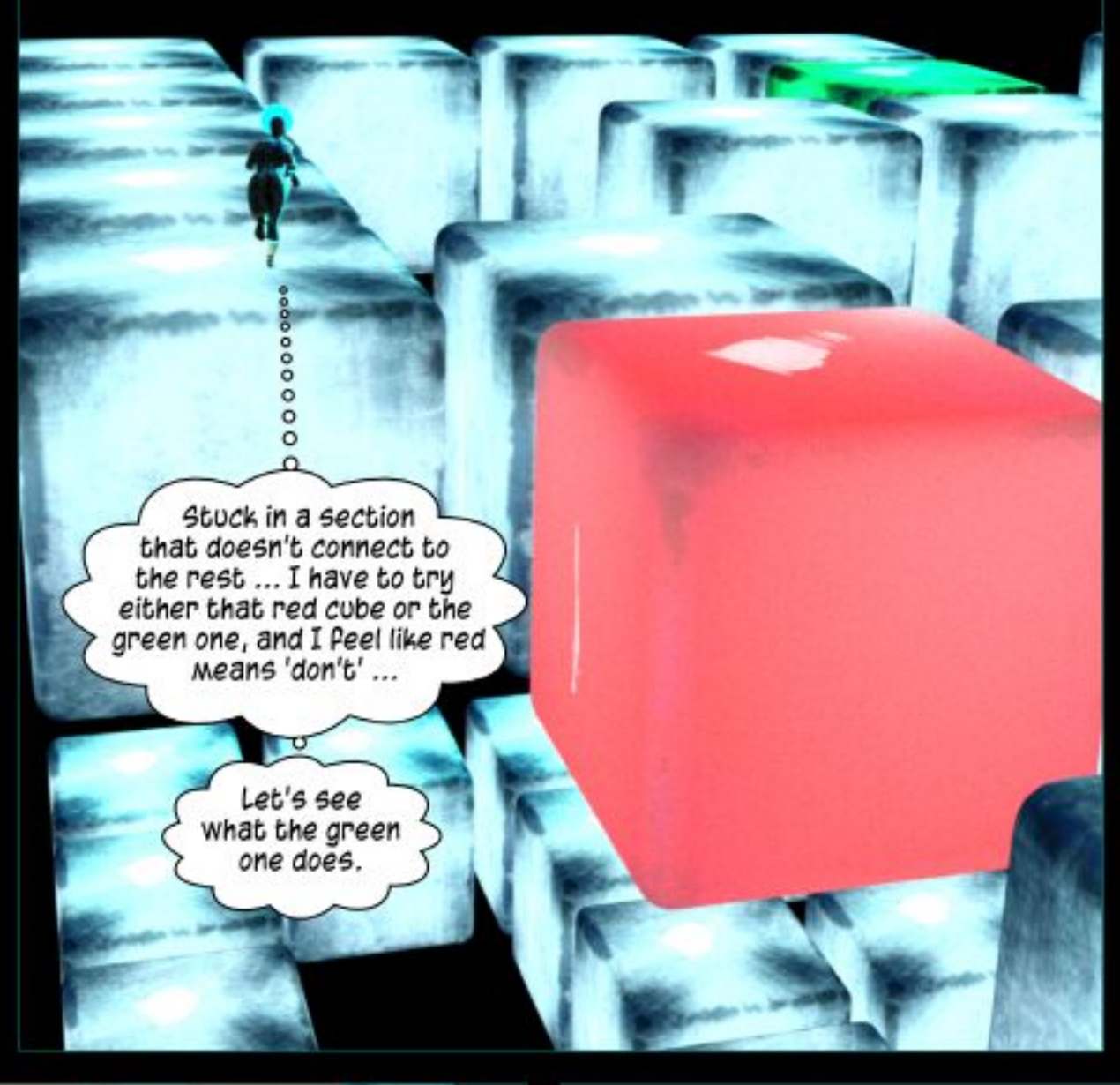
I'm going to assume I have to get to that star thingie.

What's the catch? Not these little gaps ...



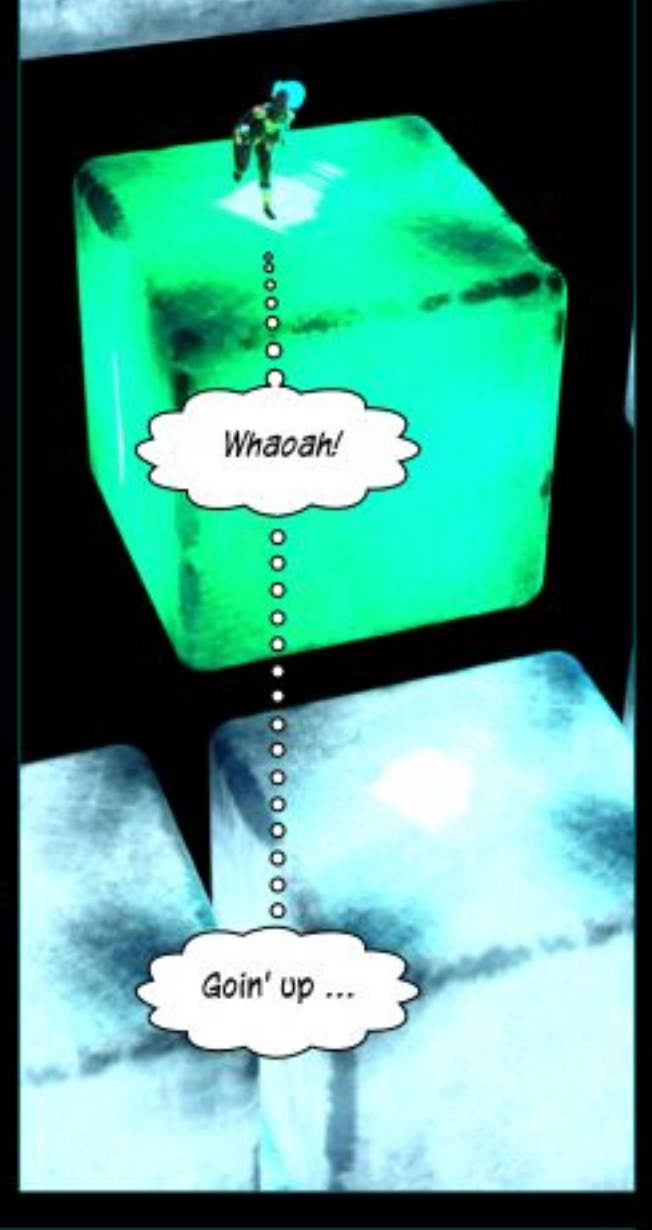
oop! They disappear when you step off them?

OK, that makes it a lot more complicated.



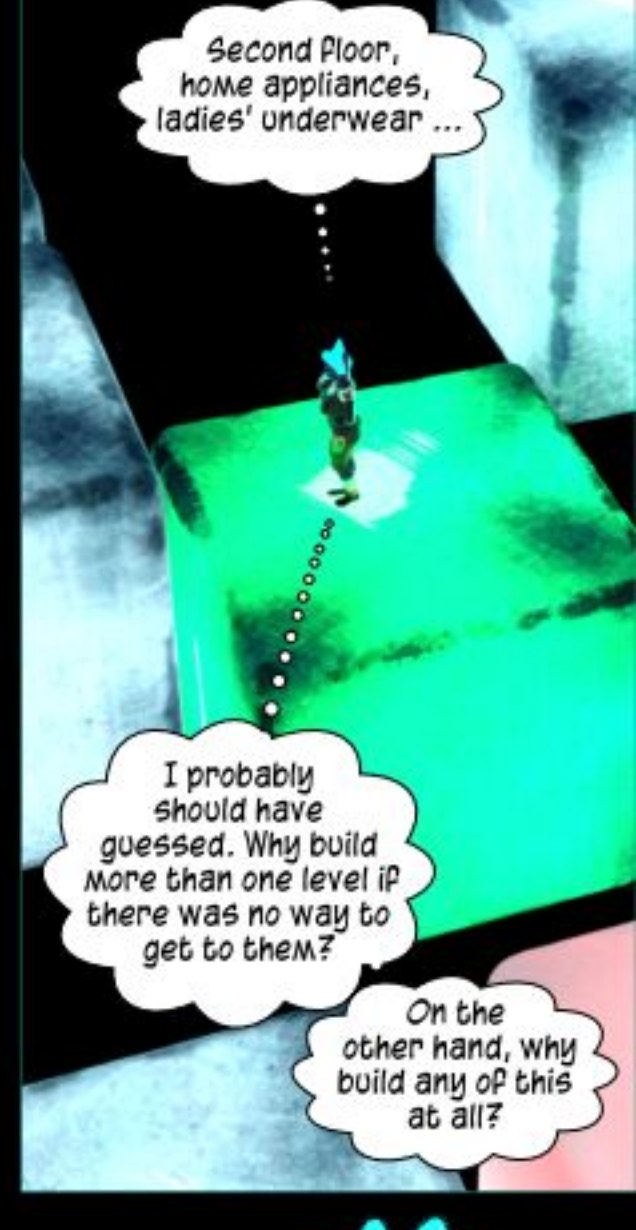
Stuck in a section that doesn't connect to the rest ... I have to try either that red cube or the green one, and I feel like red means 'don't' ...

Let's see what the green one does.



Whooah!

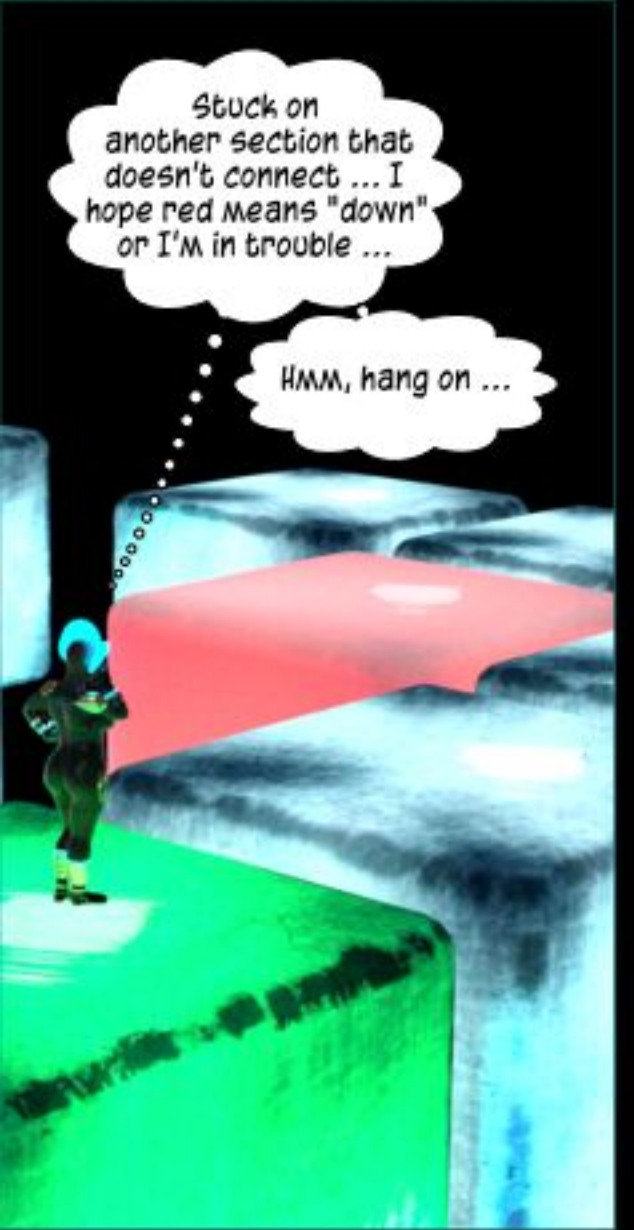
Goin' up ...



Second floor, home appliances, ladies' underwear ...

I probably should have guessed. Why build more than one level if there was no way to get to them?

On the other hand, why build any of this at all?



Stuck on another section that doesn't connect ... I hope red means "down" or I'm in trouble ...

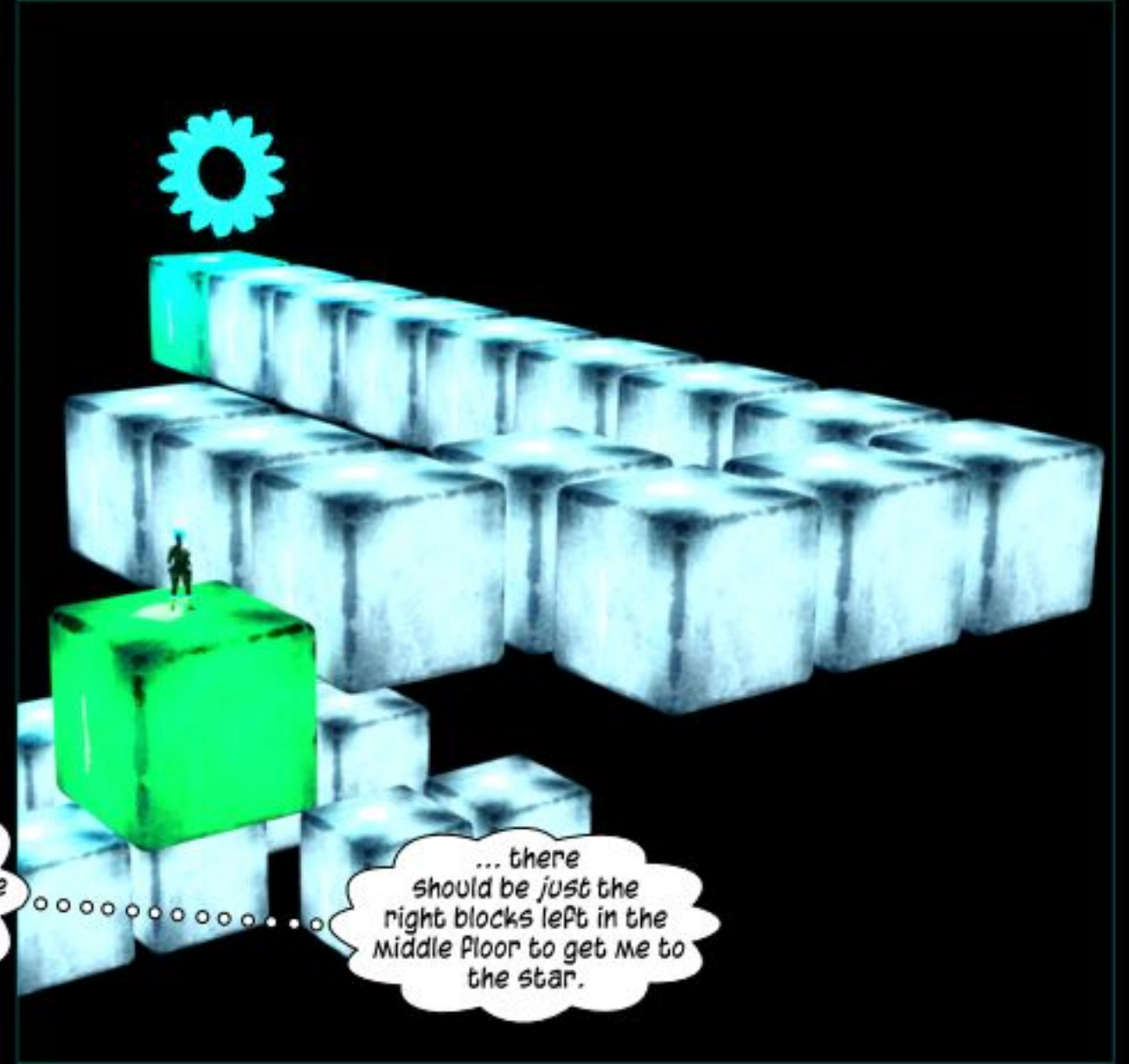
Hmm, hang on ...



Oh, yeah! I've got it!

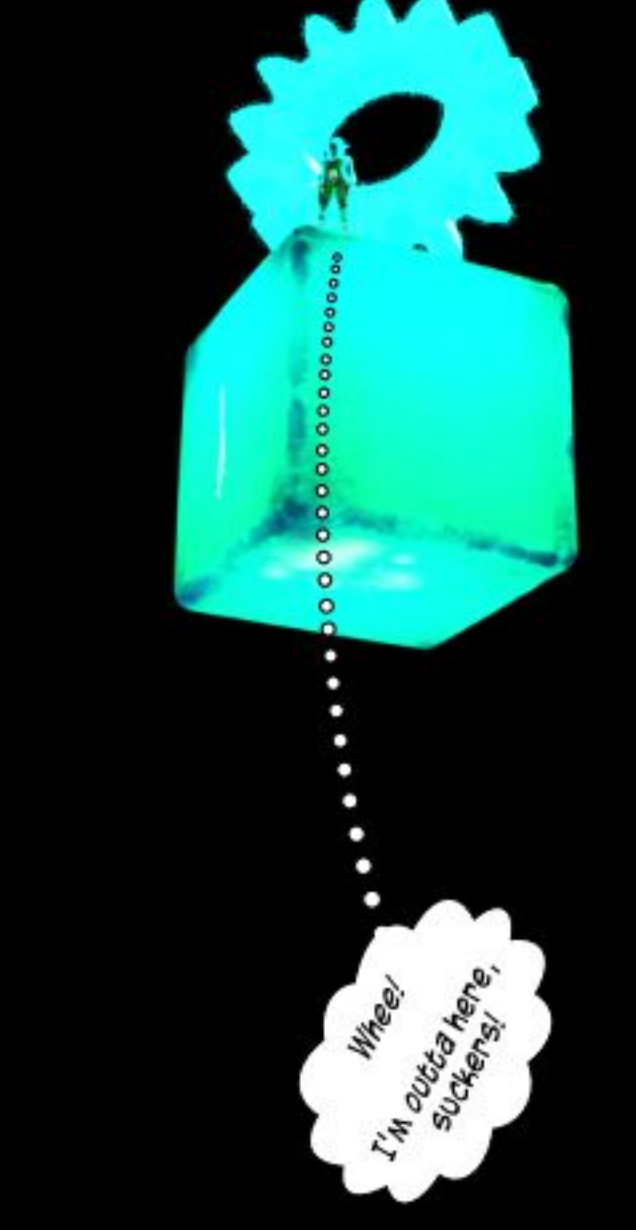
I can see the whole thing from here. Ride each 'elevator' once ... loop through the upper floor twice and the lower floor twice ...

I can do that without ever crossing my path ... and when I ride that last elevator from the bottom floor ...



...

... there should be just the right blocks left in the middle floor to get me to the star.



Wheee! I'm outta here, Buckle up!





Leyna!  
You're brilliant!

Nobody's ever run the cubes that fast! A lot of people don't finish at all! That was amazing!

But also very visible.

Yeah, we need to get you out of here right now before the--



oh.

Come with us, please.

### INTERLUDE

#### THE COBBLES.



Treece, I resent this.

I'm required to tolerate your extortion, as the cost of doing business in the Cobbles, but that doesn't entitle you to come in here and interrogate me.

Answer the Pucking questions, Church, or you're going to find out just how much I'm entitled to do.

-- sigh --  
If it will get you out of here.

Matty Lendlaw runs a third-rate nightclub; Hal Berg sits in the Palisade every night selling drugs; Junker Smith is Ethel's worthless son ... and Jonah Ulster ... well ... heaven alone knows what he is, these days.

The only one of those I've ever seen in person is Ulster. I have no idea who Marc Hayah and Eeli Hakkannen are.



So you had no idea that Junker was an algo drug chemist? That Hayah was too? That Lendlaw was selling algo drugs out of his club as a sideline? That Ulster was trying to move into selling them? None of that?

Not a clue.

And you also didn't know that five of them have been Pound comatose and Hakkannen has ... uh ... well, might as well be.

Hmm. Sounds serious. But no, I hadn't heard.

TREECE BEGAN INVESTIGATING THE FIRST FOUR COMA VICTIMS IN #39, CONTINUING IN #40, #43, AND #45. HAYAH AND EELI, ADDITIONAL VICTIMS, WERE FOUND IN #43.



That was what I figured you'd say, but I wanted to hear you say it.

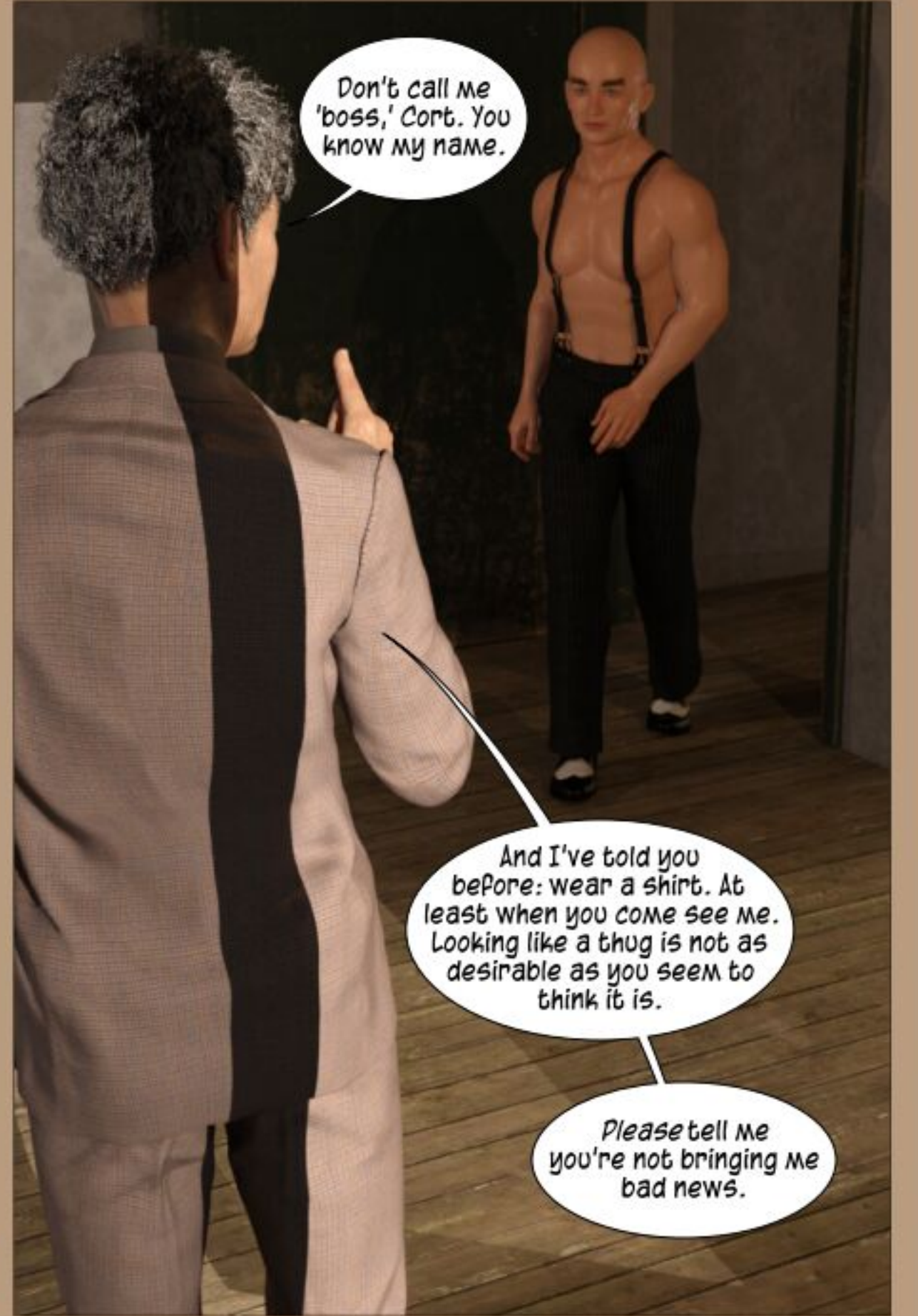
Y'know, Church, I thought you were supposed to be a real operator.

Can't be much of one if you don't know any of the talk on the street.

The others kept to themselves, but everybody in the Cobbles knows about Berg and Matty going missing, and what happened to Eeli. Everybody but you.



Boss?



Don't call me 'boss', Cort. You know my name.

And I've told you before: wear a shirt. At least when you come see me. Looking like a thug is not as desirable as you seem to think it is.

Please tell me you're not bringing me bad news.



Well, shit, boss -- uh, Mr. Church -- I don't know what -- should I just go?

... oh, get it over with.

They found the new place.

I knew they would. I can't get good people, not after the last crew got wrecked so bad. These clowns can't keep their mouths shut.

I guess they're sorry about that now, because they got pretty messed up by those big plastic-looking ladies ... We still don't know where they came from ...

LAST ISSUE, WE SAW THE FIRST TIME THE 'PLASTIC-LOOKING LADIES,' AKA THE BRUTE SQUAD, GOT IN CORT'S FACE. IT'S APPARENTLY HAPPENED AGAIN SINCE THEN.



Jonah Ulster created them. As enforcers. Everyone assumed they stopped when Ulster's scheme died, but apparently not.

I'm much more concerned with this mystery woman directing them. She seems to be everywhere. I doubt we could have hidden the new warehouse for long even if your punks were discreet.

And now with Treece getting involved ...

Treece? Oh, shit. You know we can't do a thing to her ...

Not strictly true. But it'll be difficult. And if we do that, we might as well ...

FOR THE ORIGINS OF THE BRUTE SQUAD AND 'ULSTER'S SCHEME,' SEE #36.

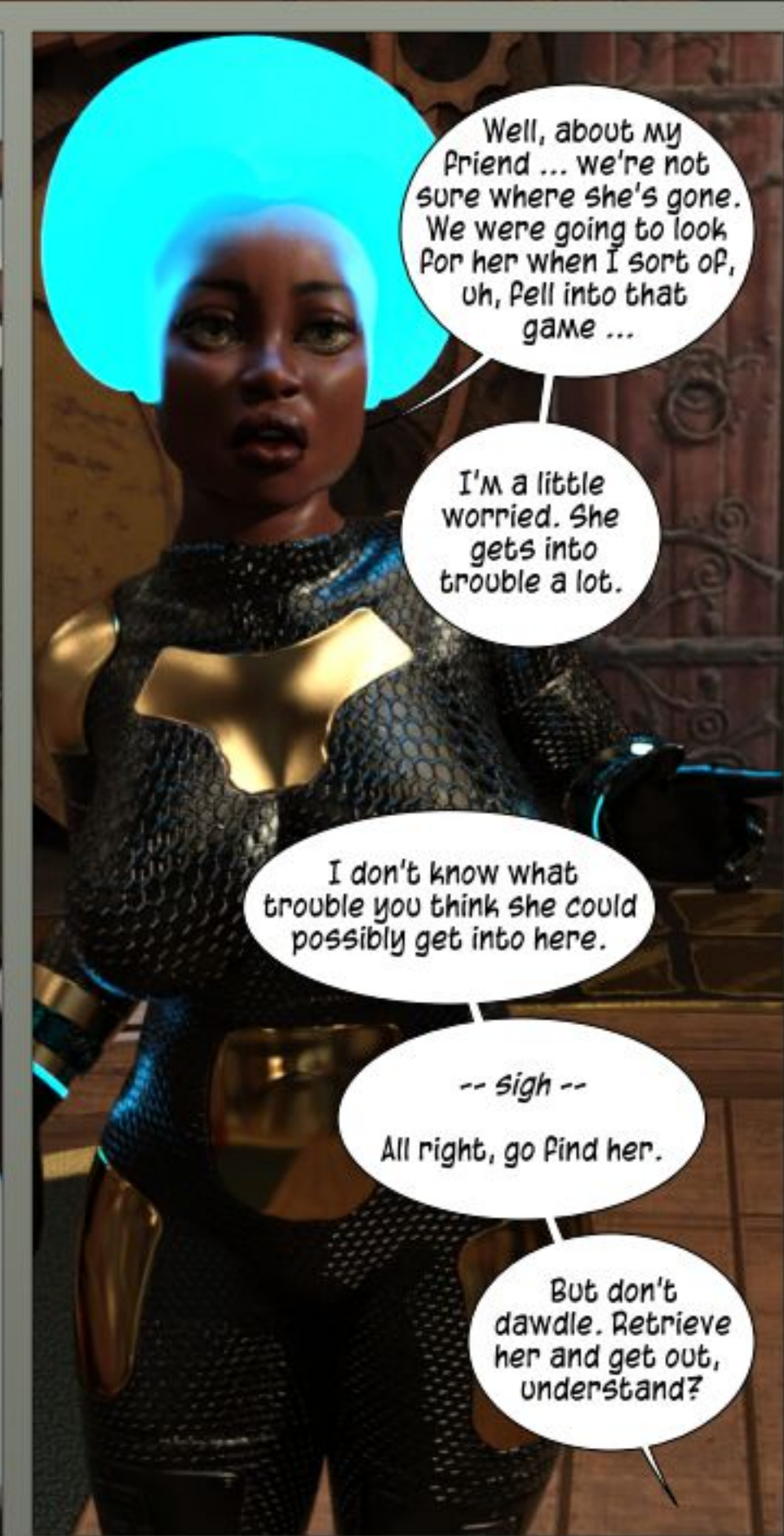
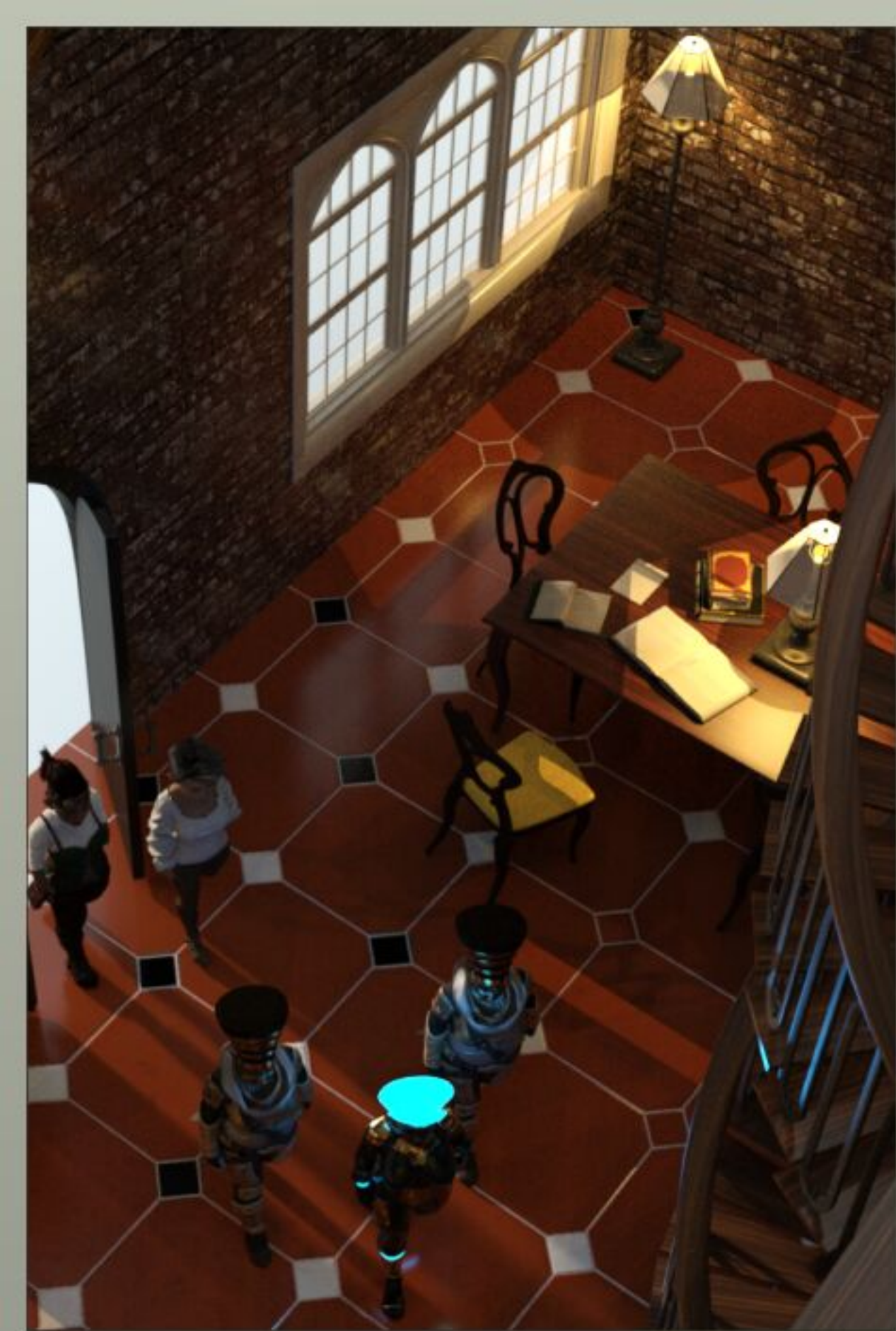


Yes. That's what we'll have to do.

The only way out of the position we're caught in is up.

We're going to have to escalate.





I know, but it's important!

We've got a massive problem with intuitive algorithmics! They make effects we can't undo and people get stuck!

Spindrop's the only place I know of that even might have a solution ...

Then why aren't you looking for it? Why are you pooling around in the games?

Why didn't you come directly to me? I run this place.

We didn't know you existed! Nobody outside Spindrop knows anything about it. All we have are rumors.

And that's how I intend to keep it.

I want you and your friend to leave. Immediately.

You can recall, or you can go back to the Souk portal ... but if I catch you going anywhere but straight back to that, I'm going to be upset.

Well, about my friend ... we're not sure where she's gone. We were going to look for her when I sort of, uh, fell into that game ...

I'm a little worried. She gets into trouble a lot.

I don't know what trouble you think she could possibly get into here.

-- Sigh --

All right, go find her.

But don't dawdle. Retrieve her and get out, understand?

A lot of Dalliers are interested in the challenges of making simulations that are capable of more than just the most rudimentary behaviors. They're trying to approach programmed intelligence.

So one of the events in the games is the automata arena here. You have to make simulations which are good at tactics and fighting. It's hard!

Stemrail's automata have never lost.

So she's a really good algorithmist ...

She's not that good. I don't think anyone's that good. This is not yet a solved problem.

OK, she's paking it. Dressing up Dalliers as these things and sending them in ...

No, there's a check. A simulation can't get into the arena without being ID'd to make sure it's actually a simulation.

I'm sure she's cheating, but I can't figure out how.

I want to get into her lab. There's a good chance I can find proof of whatever she's up to in the arena. This isn't like her snipers and booby traps and other mischief. Whatever she's doing here would take a lot of preparation. Infrastructure.

But I don't want to go in there without backup, and I can't find anybody who seems to care ... at least, not enough to go in with me.

Ah.

I guess we're sneaking in the back way or something?

Underneath. Her aboveground entrances have defenses.

What makes you think this way won't have them?

I don't think she remembers this is down here.

And if I'm wrong and something bad happens, you'll shake it off and get us out.

Now, wait ...

I know who you are, Ruby. Looking like a Dallier didn't disguise you much. And you gave your real name!

I know about some of the things you've done. What you can do.

You shouldn't believe everything you hear.

Sure. Except you've already broken an effect today you shouldn't have been able to break, because you were riding that ostrich, which means you had to have been patched.

OK, but even so ...

I don't like the way I always get roped into fixing things, somehow, no matter where I go.

That's the penalty of having a conscience.

Especially when no one else will admit anything needs fixing.





How do you go down ladders so fast in those shoes?

This is it!

And she's not here. Good.

Backwrench ... I don't know much about machines, but ... are any of these going to be enough proof that she's cheating?

UM ... no. I was hoping, but ... I'm going to have to catch her in the act, I think.

Well, I don't think I have enough time to wait around for that to --

-- huh?

# NOT



I'm glad you had a locator. I don't think mine would have worked.

No. You'd never get access.

I also appreciate your helping me. I know you didn't want me here ...

I never said that. I said you were going to get thrown out.

Between us, I'm not sure I agree with policy. I don't see the harm in the occasional visitor. But I don't make the rules.

# BING BING

Ugh.

Uh-oh. What?

It looks like Ruby is somewhere in Stemrail's home.

You heard WireFront talking about the person who's always cheating? That's Stemrail.

Oh.

So either Ruby was trying to find out who messed with her and it led her here, or ...

... or Stemrail waylaid her and brought her here and is up to who knows what. Either way, it's trouble.

Figures.



Anyway, that's it up there.

Do we just knock on the door and hope she lets us in?

It may not matter.



I'm not admitting visitors at this time. Go away.

This is a recording.

Yep.

Do you know anyone who can force access?

Let's try the back way first.



That passage leading down, over there.

It connects to her basement. That door may be easier to get past.

Anything we should be watching out for?

With Stemrail anything's possible.

True, but I don't see anything--

Look out!



What is it?

Threadbare! Don't stare, move!



urk!

Threadbare!



tik  
tik  
tik  
tik  
tik  
tik  
tik  
tik  
tik  
tik

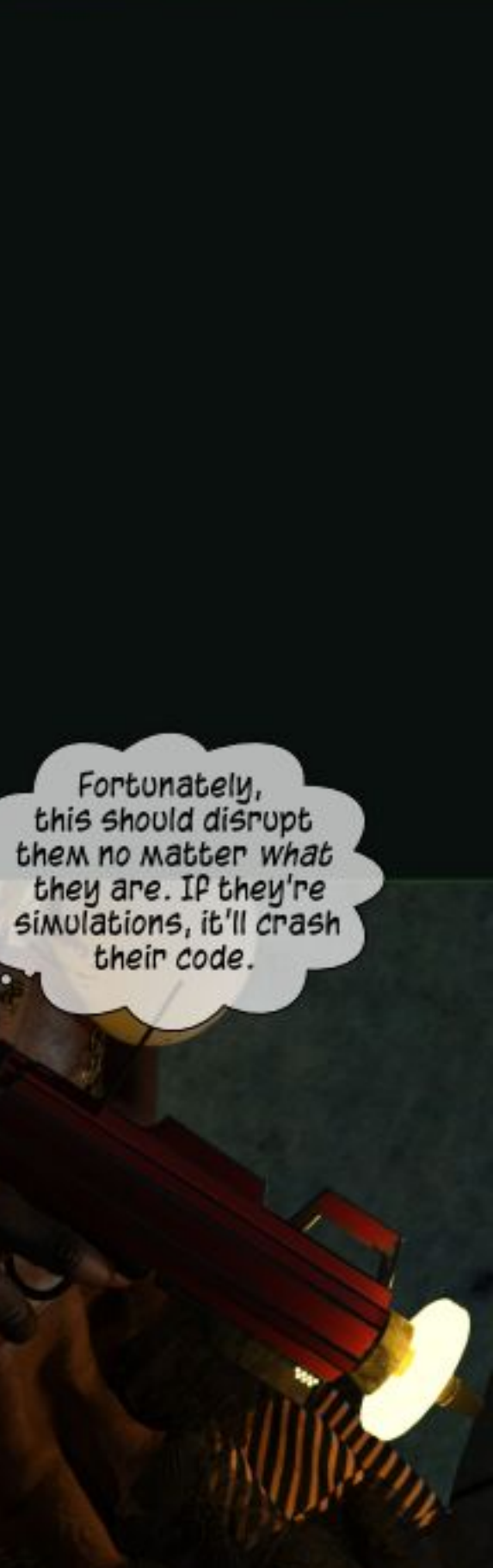
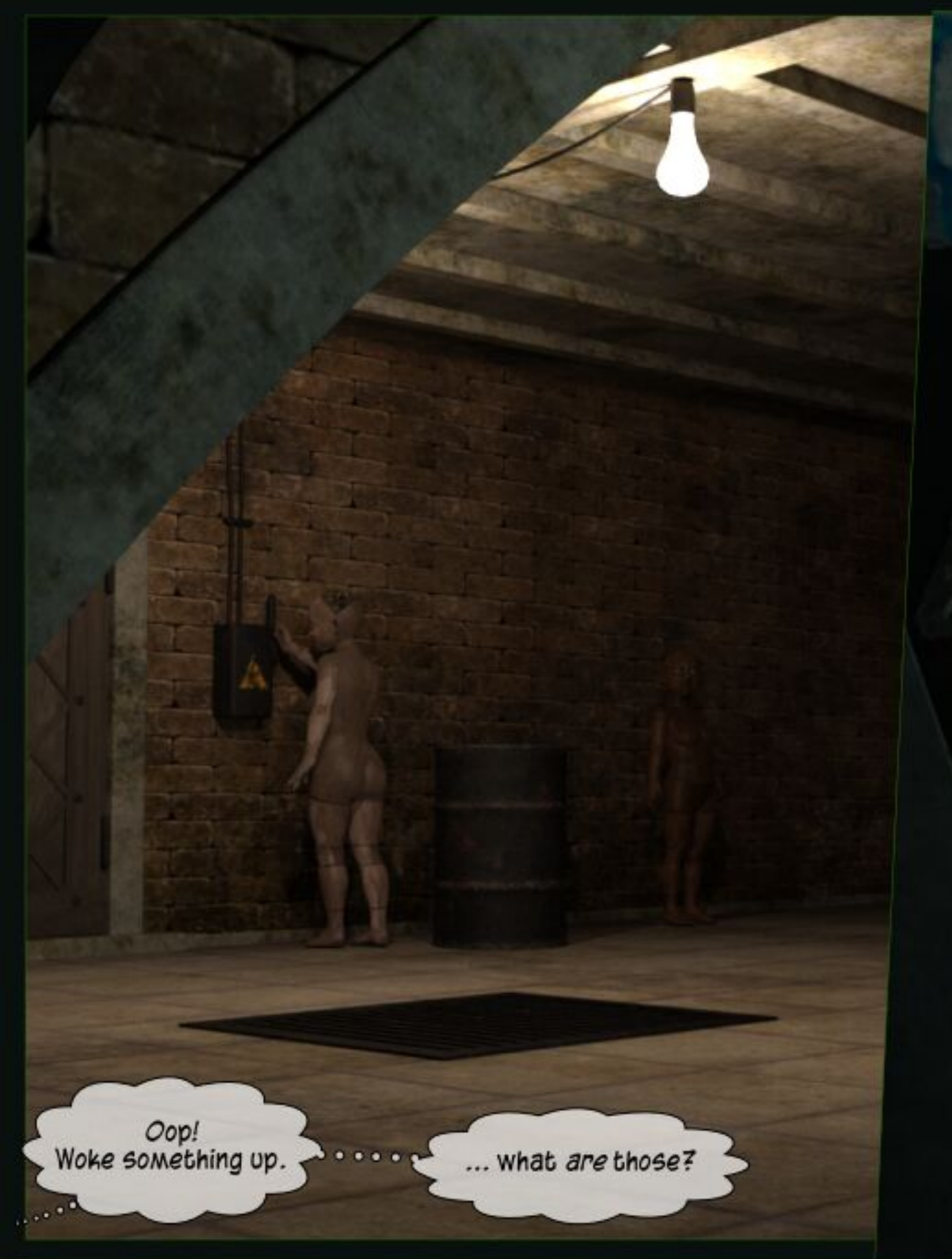
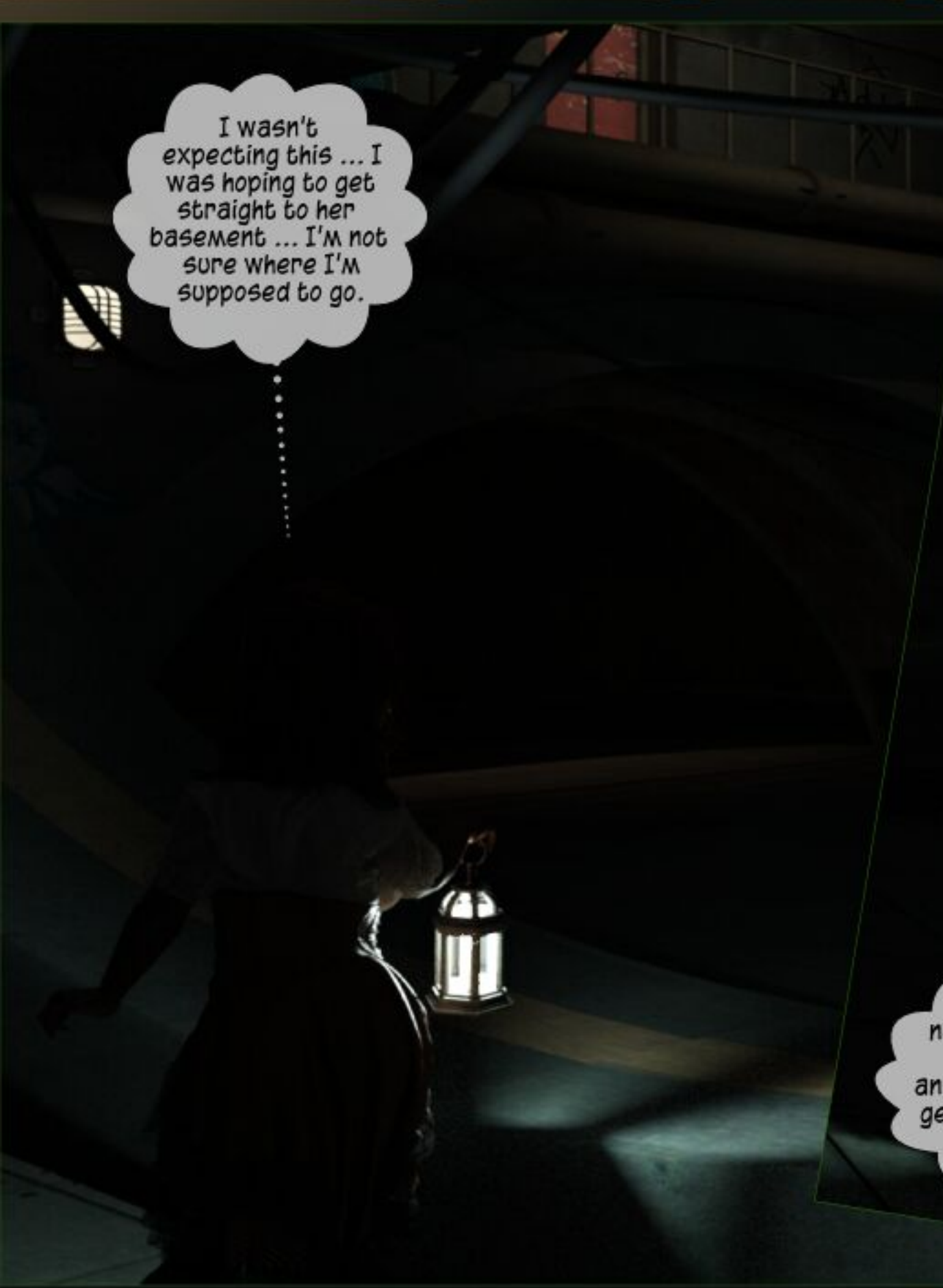


Beeswax!

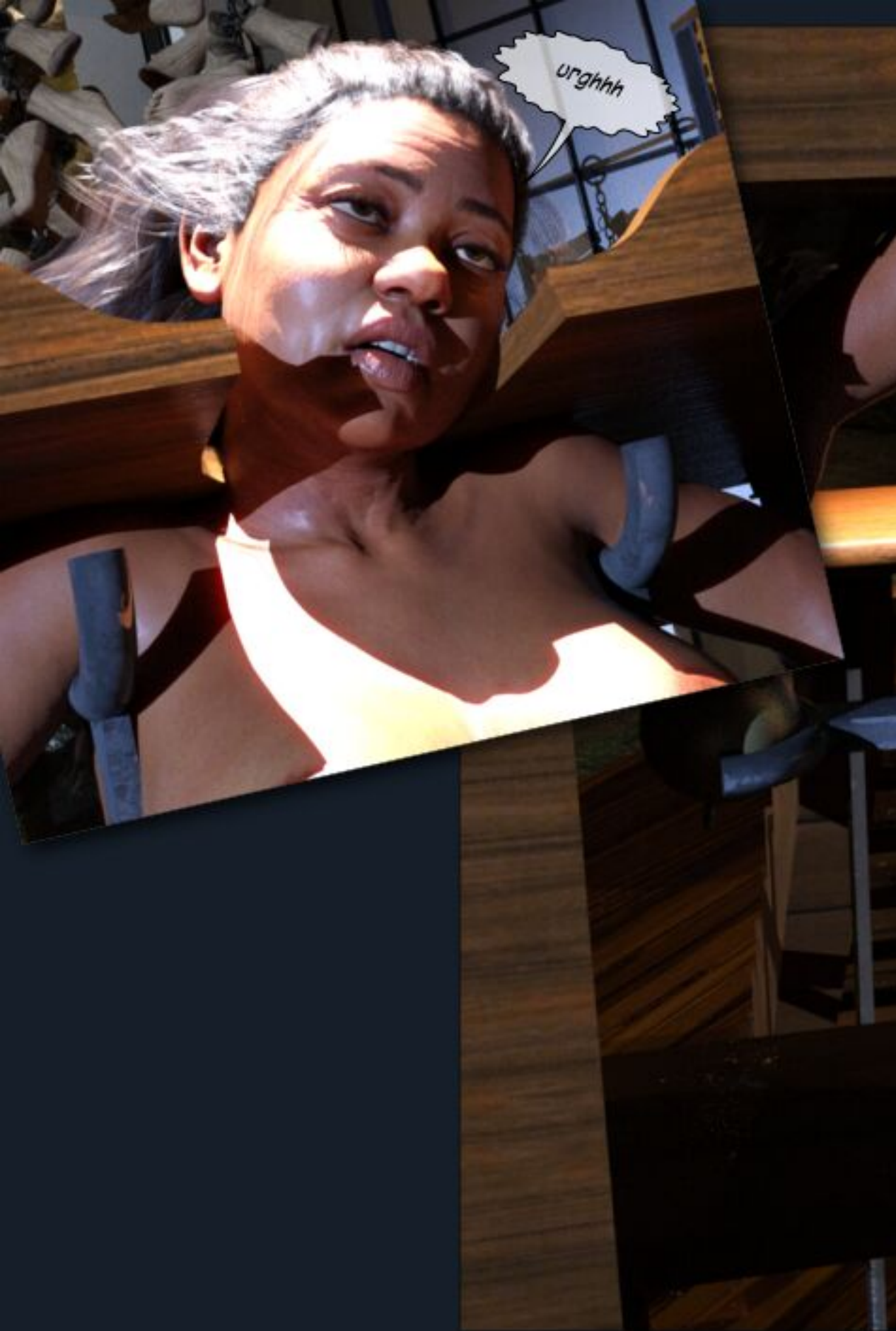
Over here! Get under cover!

Beeswax?









urghhh



... oh.



Psst! Backwrench! They're not paying attention.

Come help me get out of this?



duhrrr?

You're not going to get any help from her. Nobody's good for anything when they're in the stupidizer.



I guess you're Stemrail.

But I don't know who you are.

What did she tell you, to get you to come with her? Did you know she's been wanting to break in here for months now, but was too scared to come alone?

Cautious and scared aren't the same thing.

No, but either way, she knew it would end badly, and dragged you in anyway.

That's how desperate she is to find out what I'm doing. And for what? No one cares. Everyone knows that except her.



They might care if they knew you were making Dalliers into these things.

How do you pool the arena into thinking they're simulations?

It's a good trick, isn't it?

Don't worry, I'm going to show you.



So you just like to cheat? I mean, there's absolutely nothing at stake ...

That's the problem. Why don't they make it worth competing? Offer a damned prize! Let the winner run Spindrop for a day, or something!

It's so boring. Figuring out new ways to cheat is the only way to get any excitement out of it.

Look at all this hair! This is all going to have to go, I'm afraid.

Now hang on--



hhhhrrrrghh!

I used to make real automata. You can see all the parts around. But they weren't smart enough. And I'm much more of a bulder than an algorithmist.

The problem is, Pooling the detection does have a few mental side effects. Seems that to make you pass as a simulation, you have to mostly act like one. But you'll still be useful, don't worry!

Let's get started. This will take a while.

huuuurr



There. I don't know how you can walk around with that much hair.

Doesn't it get in the way of everything? Doesn't your head get hot?

Anyway. Now we can really get started.

Let's see ... where did I put my torch ...?



This is going to feel a bit strange.



INTERLUDE  
CENTURY.

JEX IS PAYING A VISIT TO HER AUNT RO.

So you've got a thing now with an elf and an orc? And that woman in Highpoint, whatever she is?

Han't any goin that last one, think. Other two for sure.

An't gone lookin. Just happened.

That's usually the way it goes. It's not like Awake, where it's hard to find a safe space to fool around at all ...

Oh yeah, got one Awake too. Wants me come back out. Hooked up when went out with Ruby to find Barker skel.\*

You're gonna have to come fill me in a lot more often. I'm missing out on some good stories, I can tell.

What I want to hear about is orc sex. I wouldn't have guessed you like it rough.

\* #41. JEX HASN'T SEEN AUNT RO SINCE #40.

Aunt Ro!!

What? I always like to talk about sex. Course, I don't have any shame, but most people here are like that. Sex is everybody's thing, just about.

Seems like.

That a complaint?

No! S'good. Cusk's best part so far.

"Cusk." People still saying that?

You know where that comes from? You weren't born yet.

Barkers were taking some kind of Awake survey. Seeing how many of us were left, most likely.

One of the questions asked about Consensual Sexual Contact, and somebody decided CSC was gonna be 'cusk' after that.

Don't know why they didn't just ask "how much you getting it on?" Guess it didn't sound stuppy enough.

You ever get tired of it?

Of what?

Cusk. Sex.

Not really. If I did, I wouldn't be doing what I do.

Some days I'm "Oh, I don't think I want to screw anybody today, I think I'll stay home."

Nice thing about them getting rid of the bed pees is if I have a day like that, I can stay home.

Why do you ask?

Just tryin figure shit out.

An't think could do what you do ...

Ruby and Leyna want me fix stupp all time like they do ... Cus thinks should just run around Yards gettin in slide ...

An't know what.

Well, last time we talked, you weren't even sure if you wanted to stay in Sleep. Decided on that, I guess?

Yeah. Han't for sure, till went Awake. Realized was wondering how long till got back in.

Well, that's not nothing. That's one big decision made. Who says you have to rush the next one? Hell, who says you have to decide at all? Some Polks here never do.

Like to be better at knowin own head.

Wouldn't we all?

I think it'll be like the other -- you won't know until you do, and when you do, it'll be obvious all of a sudden.

That might be a family thing. I do it. Your mother did it too. I wouldn't worry about it.

You know, people are going to notice I'm missing.

You? The nuisance of Spindrop?

No one has noticed any of the others are missing, and some of them were people other people actually liked.

If anyone notices you're gone, they'll probably cheer.

Now, your friend's another matter, especially since I have no idea who she is.

I'll have to alter her appearance a little more. Or keep her well hidden.

I hope you feel guilty about getting her into this. And all because you don't understand that Spindrop doesn't want or need somebody walking around trying to police us.

The things you do prove Spindrop does need it! You shouldn't be allowed to--

MMMPH!

There. Very stylish, and now no one will recognize you even if they do come looking.

CLUNK

Hey! Don't just stand there!

Didn't you hear that noise? Someone's lurking in here who doesn't belong! Go find them and deal with them!

Mmhrg! Mmhrg!

You had something to say?

I told you somebody would come!

I don't believe for an instant that's someone looking for you. Or for me. That's someone who's wandered in downstairs.

All they're looking for is trouble.

You could be wrong.

Don't expect to see the two you just sent again, by the way. They've been disrupted, like the two downstairs.

Wonder what they're going to tell the Engineer once they recover enough?

Now: what have you done with Ruby?





Ruby?  
She's--  
mmghph!

Forgive her.  
She's not in her  
right mind.

I don't believe I  
know any 'Ruby.' Of  
course, I don't get out  
very much. Unusual  
name for a Dallier ...

Why don't you take that  
mask off her? I'm very  
curious to hear what she  
was about to say.

Or would you  
rather I just go ahead  
and shoot you?



That's not  
very polite.

I'm not  
peeling  
polite.

I don't think  
any of those  
people asked to be  
made into those things  
and I'm not going to  
stand here and watch  
you make another. I  
wasn't born  
yesterday.

Did you do that to  
Ruby? Is she somewhere  
here? Let's go search  
the house.



You've got a  
lot of nerve.

But I'll go  
along with it, if it'll  
help settle your  
strange ideas. You  
won't find anything,  
you know.

Just give me a  
moment ...



Really,  
bitch?



I'll say this:  
when you come  
looking for me, it  
always seems to  
set me off to  
recover  
Paster.

Me, I'd have  
shot her first and  
talked later,  
though.



And you, Ms.  
Ruby-Will-Get-Us-Out-Of-Trouble  
...

If she'd  
converted you first,  
I wouldn't have been in  
a position to break out  
when Leyna arrived, and  
chances are good we'd all  
three have gears for  
brains right now and  
we'd be really  
pucked.

You got very lucky.



Did I hear you  
say the others  
reverted to people  
when you disrupted  
them?

Yes.

Good. Then  
we don't have  
any cleanup.

Let's recall  
and get out of this  
pucking place.  
They're not going  
to help us.

Ah ...  
Threadbare and  
Beeswax got  
transformed while  
helping me get in. We  
may need to go  
revert them.



And there's her.

Nope.  
I am declaring her  
to be 100%  
Backwrench's  
problem.

Backwrench,  
what would you like  
to do with her?

Oh!  
Uh ... hmm.

Let's just put the  
Stupidizer on her for now.  
I guess the Engineer's  
going to have to decide  
beyond that.



uhhrrrr?

Can she  
break out?

I don't think so.  
When I was in it, I  
couldn't focus at all.

-- ahem --



Would you  
come with us,  
please?

You as well,  
Backwrench.

At least let me put on  
some clothes first.





You don't want to change?

Why bother?

Maybe it'll shock her.

Maybe it'll piss her off.

Even better.



So this is where all the dumb decisions come from, huh?

Hauled us in for one last "Puck you" before you throw us out?

Oh, boy.

Ruby!!

C'mon, Backwrench. None of this would have happened if not for her bad policy. And if you're not allowed to say that, that's even worse.

I can say it. She's not my dictator. Besides, she's going to toss me out on my ass in about thirty seconds anyway.

-- Sigh --  
Backwrench, would you mind waiting outside? But don't go away.



I'm about as far from being a dictator as it's possible to be. You just happen to be on the wrong side of the one policy I enforce.

And you or anyone else can say anything critical of me you please, but I don't like you trying to sour one of my most valued citizens on me.

Oh, is she a valued citizen? You might tell her that sometime, because she thinks she's a social outcast.

You know, the only thing worse than constantly being asked to fix things whether you like it or not ...

... is trying your best to fix things and being told that nobody wants that and they hate you for trying.



You think you don't have any troublemakers. You figure that's the kind of thing other zones have and you're better than that and as long as you keep to yourself you'll--

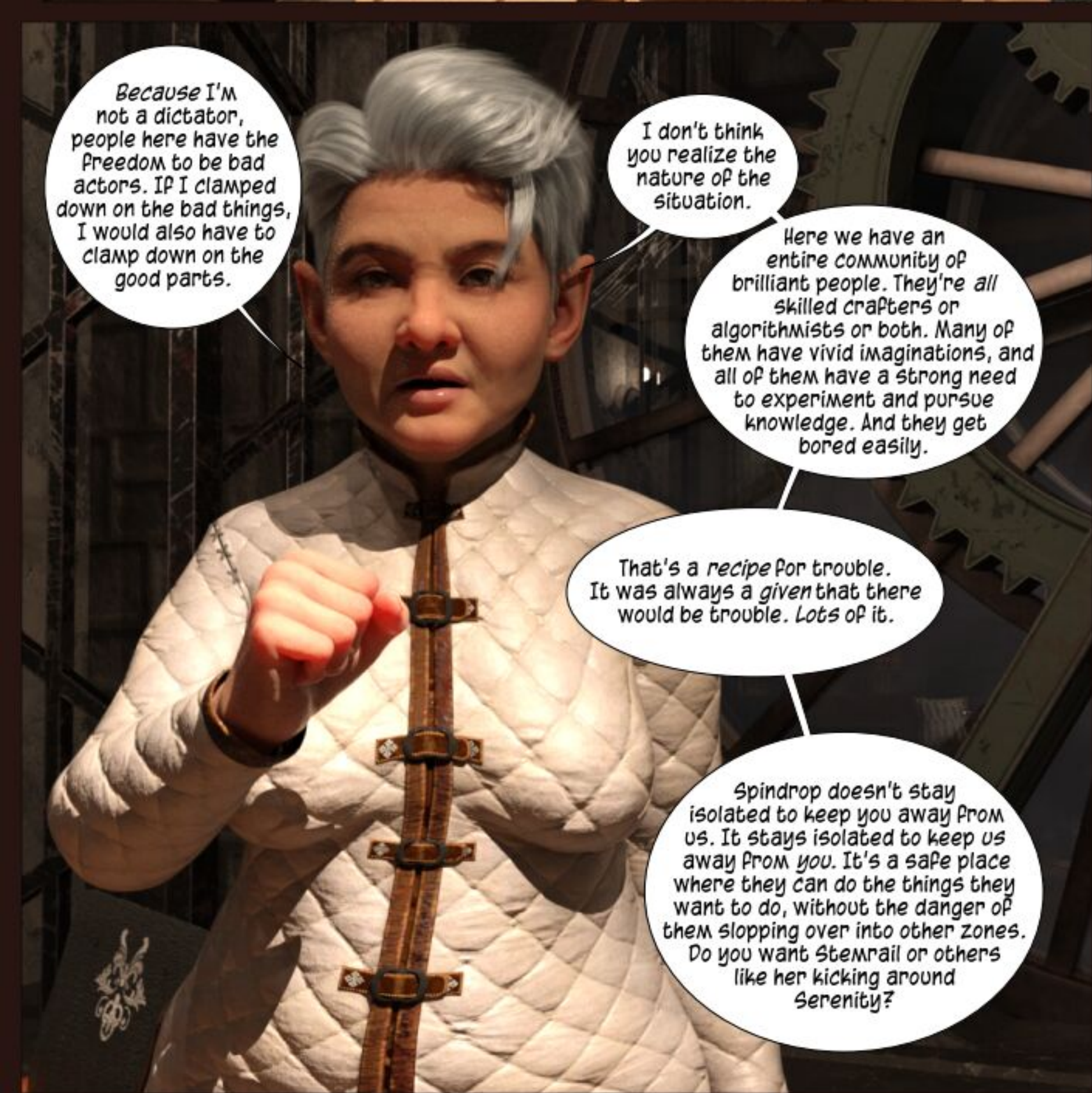
Don't tell me what I think.

I'm perfectly aware that there are bad actors in Spindrop. In fact, the culture here encourages people to test limits in that way. But the problems are usually self-correcting.

The situation with Stemrail, for example, didn't have much longer to go. Everyone was reaching the limits of their tolerance. Soon they would have taken action.

And found how many victims in her basement by the time they did? You think "wait until it goes critical" is a solution?

A better one than keeping everyone on a short leash all the time? Yes.



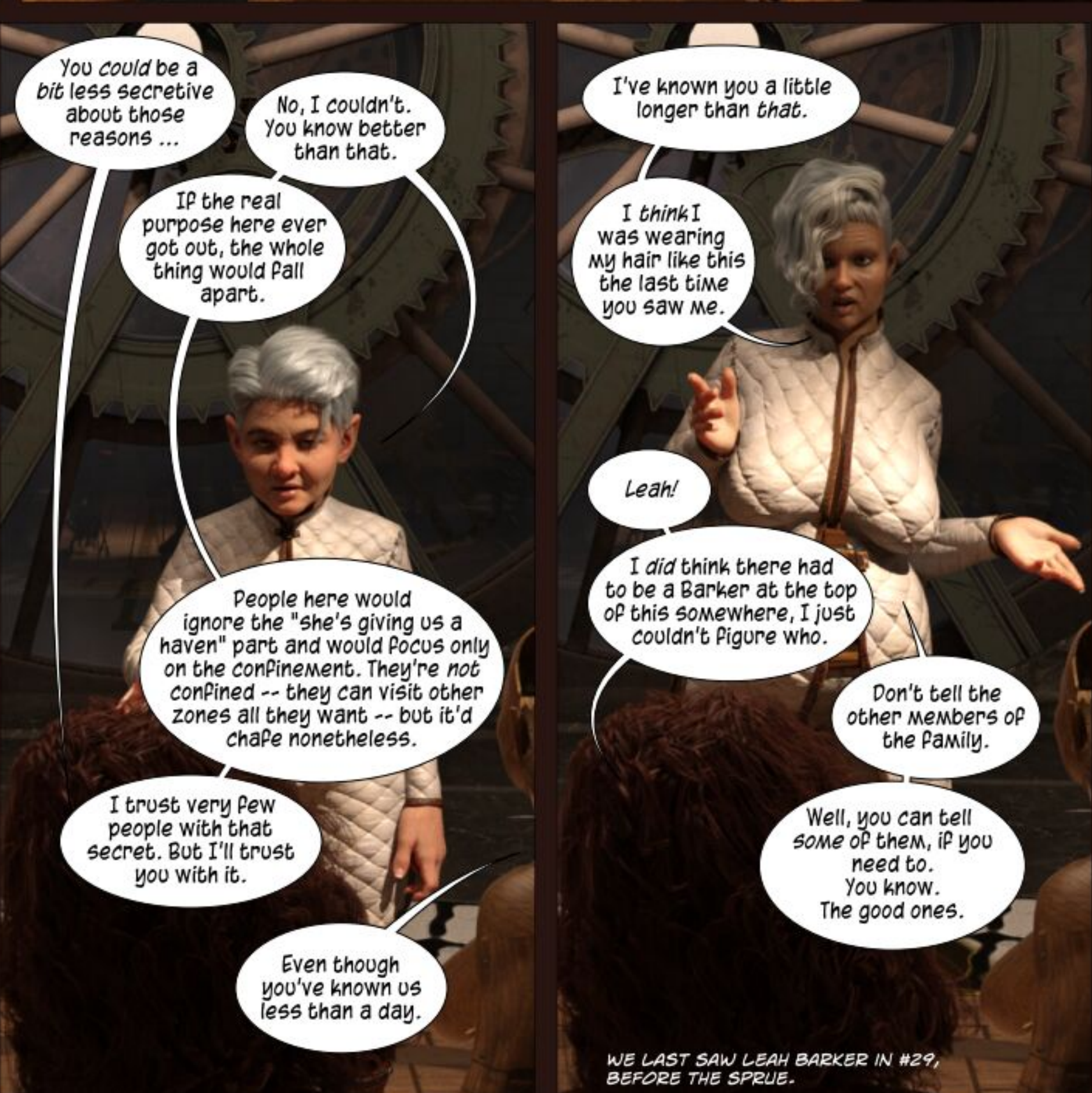
Because I'm not a dictator, people here have the freedom to be bad actors. If I clamped down on the bad things, I would also have to clamp down on the good parts.

I don't think you realize the nature of the situation.

Here we have an entire community of brilliant people. They're all skilled crafters or algorithmists or both. Many of them have vivid imaginations, and all of them have a strong need to experiment and pursue knowledge. And they get bored easily.

That's a recipe for trouble. It was always a given that there would be trouble. Lots of it.

Spindrop doesn't stay isolated to keep you away from us. It stays isolated to keep us away from you. It's a safe place where they can do the things they want to do, without the danger of them slopping over into other zones. Do you want Stemrail or others like her kicking around Serenity?



You could be a bit less secretive about those reasons ...

No, I couldn't. You know better than that.

If the real purpose here ever got out, the whole thing would fall apart.

People here would ignore the "she's giving us a haven" part and would focus only on the confinement. They're not confined -- they can visit other zones all they want -- but it'd change nonetheless.

I trust very few people with that secret. But I'll trust you with it.

Even though you've known us less than a day.

I've known you a little longer than that.

I think I was wearing my hair like this the last time you saw me.

Leah!

I did think there had to be a Barker at the top of this somewhere, I just couldn't figure who.

Don't tell the other members of the family.

Well, you can tell some of them, if you need to. You know. The good ones.

WE LAST SAW LEAH BARKER IN #29, BEFORE THE SPRUE.



What are you going to do about Stemrail?

You feel a need for some punishment?

Maybe I just take it personally when someone tries to pry my brain.

Isolate her for a while, I suppose. That might help remind her she's part of a society.

Ah, Leah ...

The thing is, while I understand your reasons now ... you do have knowledge and abilities no one else has, and some of that is in everyone's interest to share.

We don't have a force of Dalliers to take matters into their own hands when someone steps out of control. And sometimes our bad actors leave messes we can't fix. It's becoming a real problem.

I agree. That's why I'd already decided to loan you the services of my best forensic disassembler.

One moment.



Here she is.

Huh?

Well, that's convenient.

Don't get your hopes too high. Some of the things you describe, we don't have well-established solutions for. We have some techniques to try. They might not work.

But she'll do the best she can to help.

We can't ask for more than that.

Thank you.

NEXT: MOVING PARTS