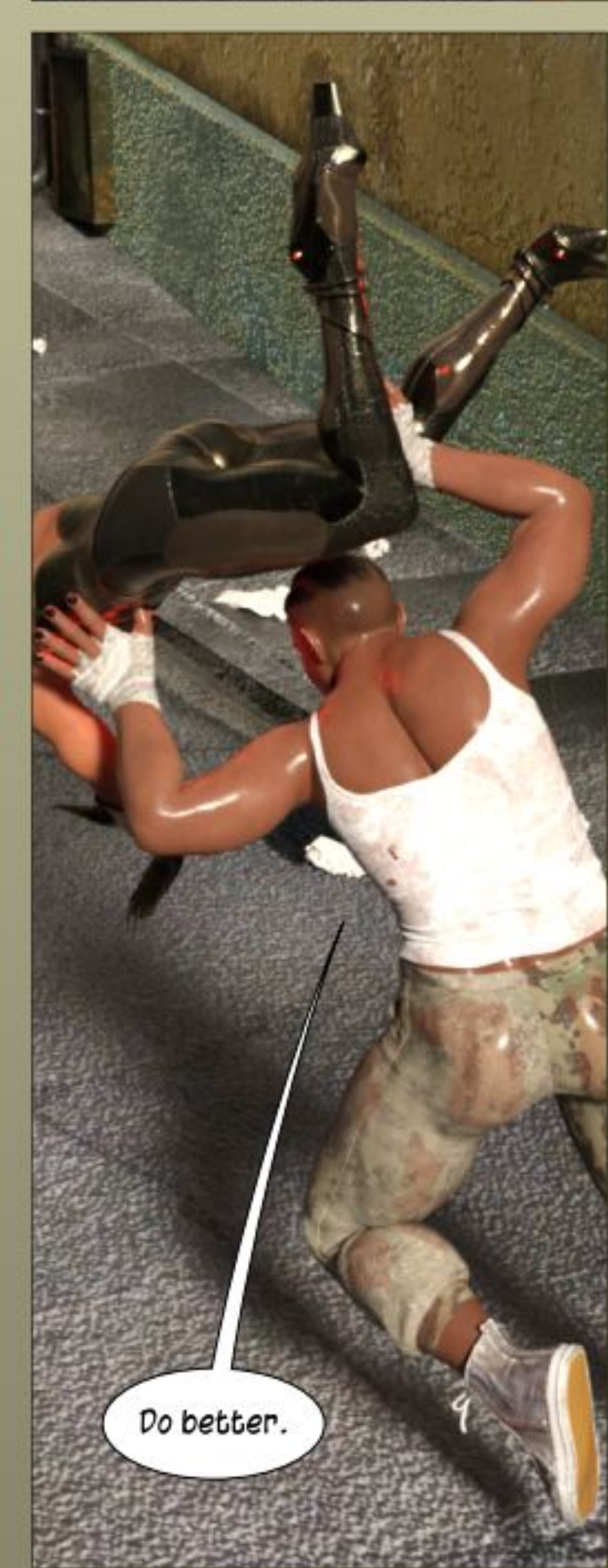
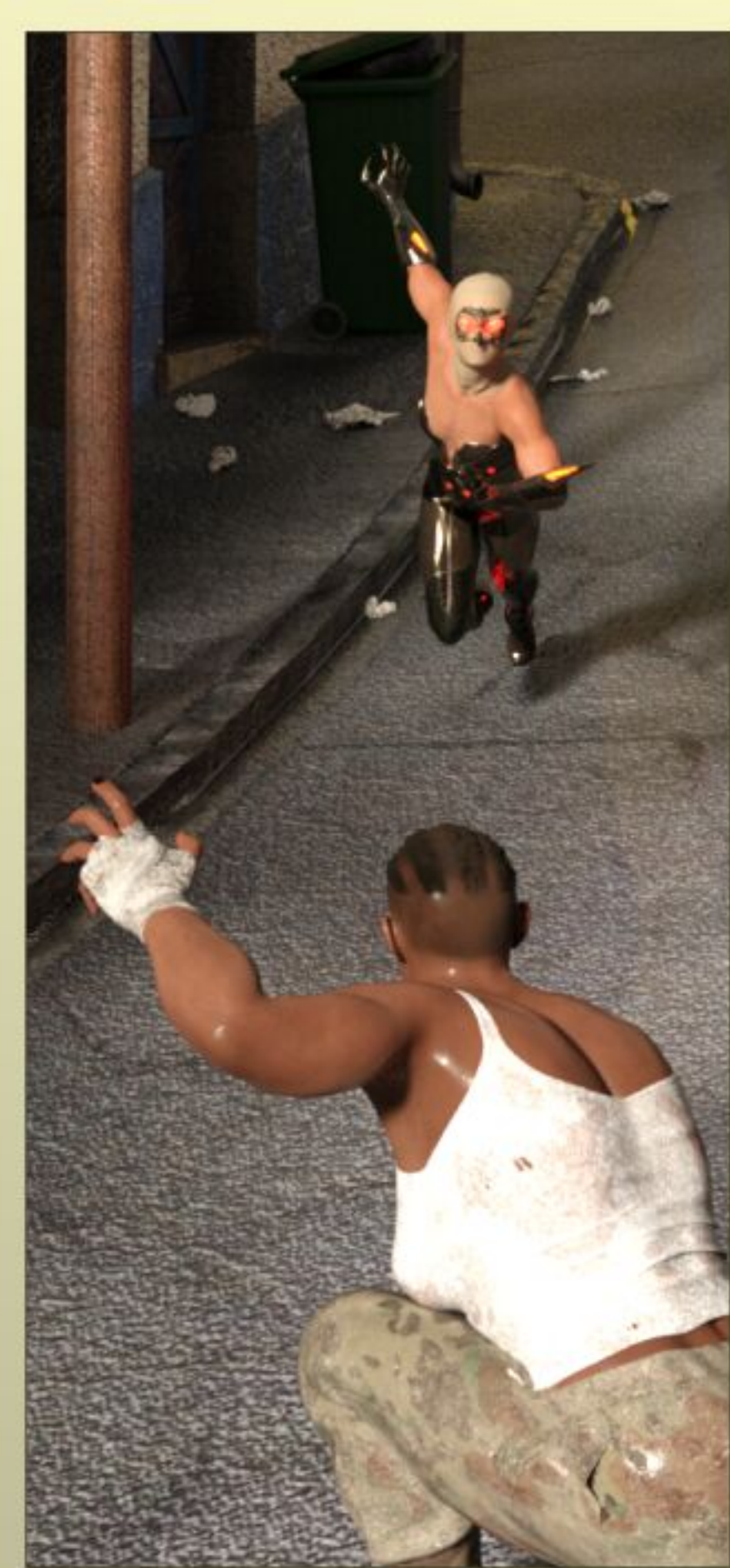
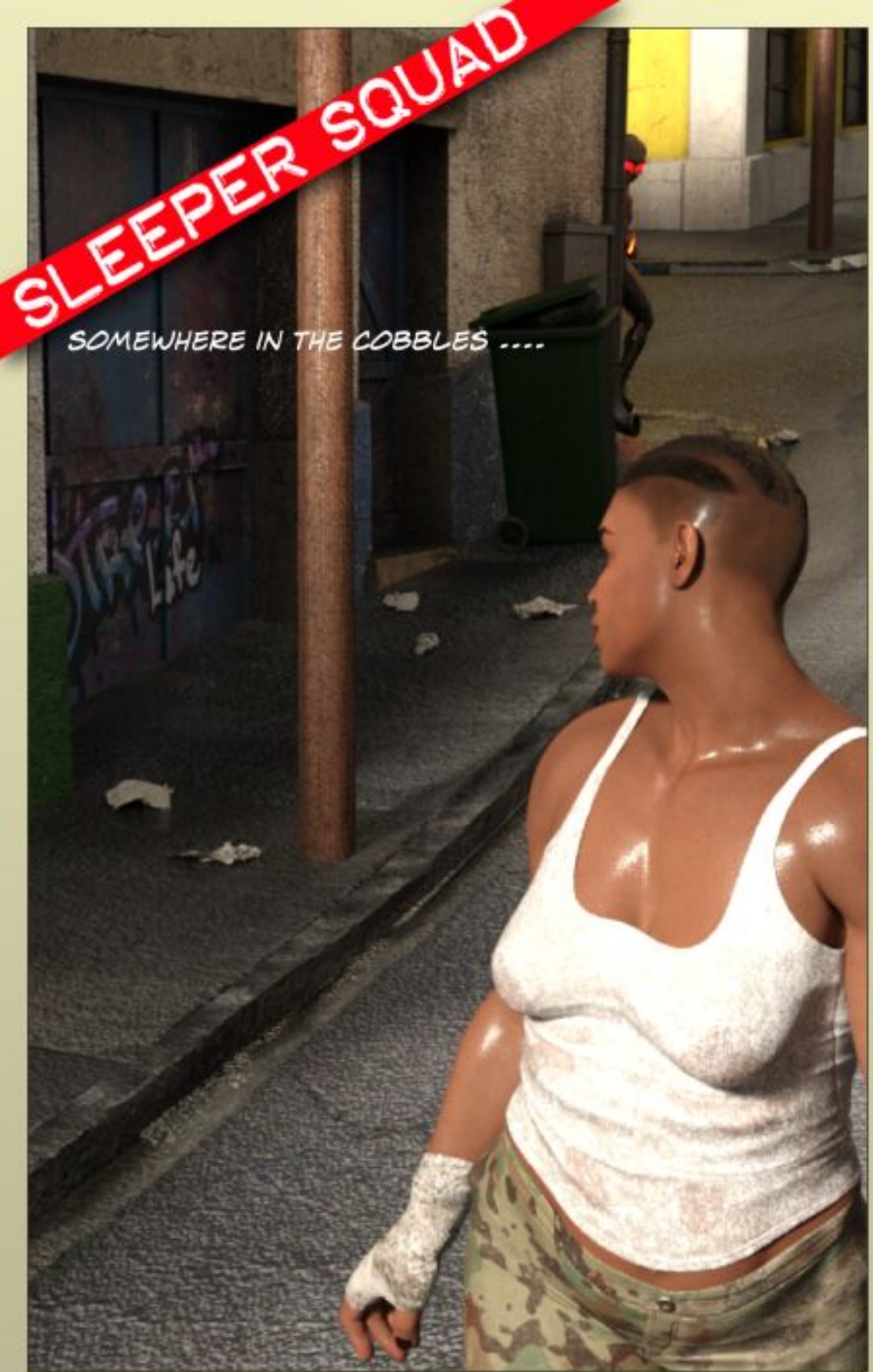


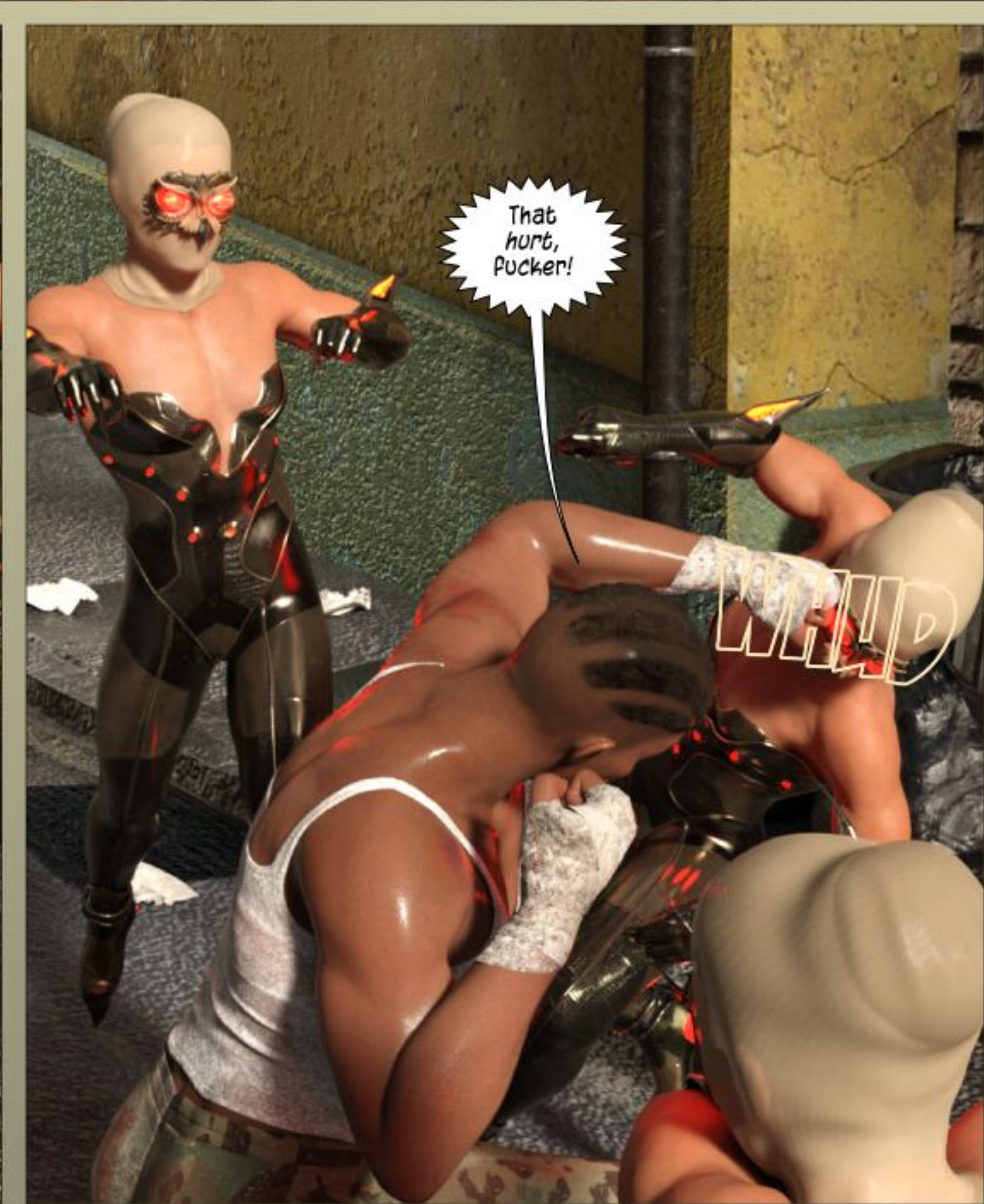
SOMEWHERE IN THE COBBLES



Do better.



OAWWW!!

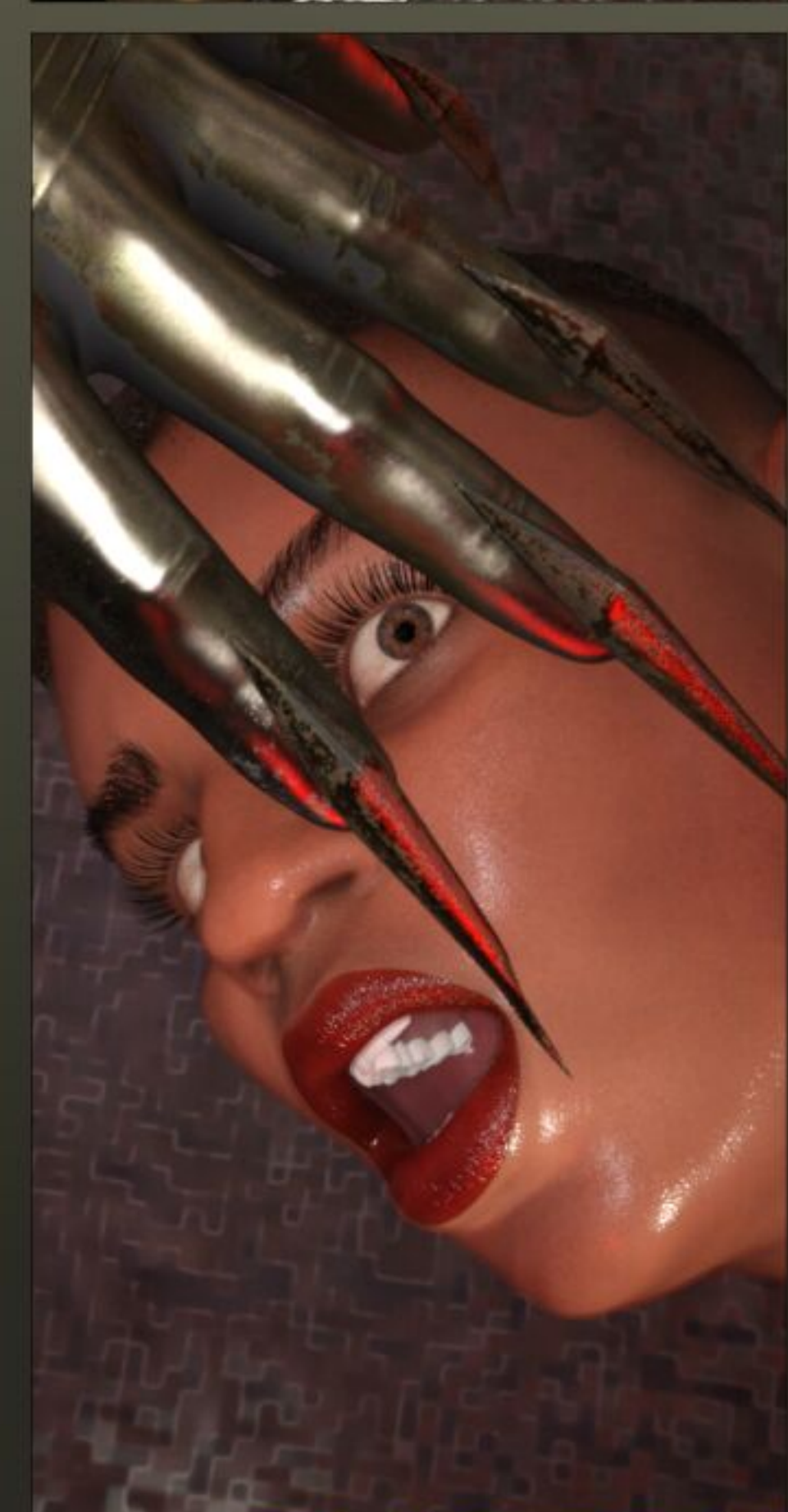
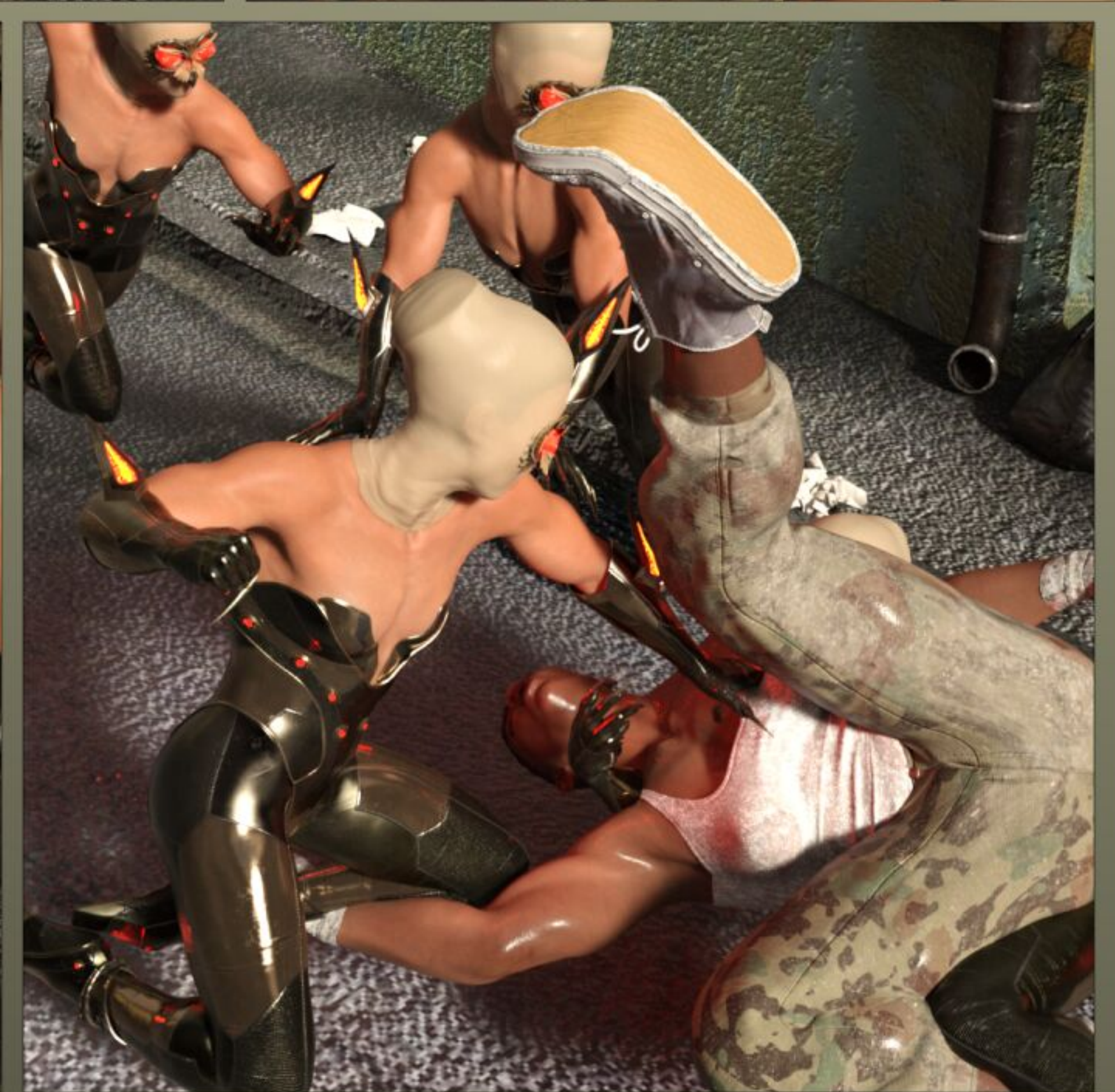


That hurt, Pucker!



FWUMP

hurghh



Good.

Bring her.

ATTACK OF THE 50 FT. WOMAN

Perfect.

Do I know you? You seem kind of familiar ...

No, I don't think we've met. My name's Millie.

Leyna is kind of the designated problem solver, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm not.

But half of A4 seems to know where I live, and Leyna prefers that nobody knows where she lives, which isn't fair, and I think she does it on purpose to involve me in things.

None of that's your fault, though. You didn't know. Come tell me a little about it, and if it sounds OK to me, I'll take you to Leyna.

Hmph. We're going to have to have a talk about that.

Leyna and I, I mean.

A SHORT WHILE LATER, IN THE OPS ROOM.

Leyna may not remember me, but I'm sure she remembers saving me from zombies in the weird place, and my deciding to join the balloon people.

OK. That sounds good.

I just wanted someplace where nothing else would try to hurt me or zombie me or whatever, and it seemed peaceful.

Hey, wait --

I wasn't sure whether I'd ever come out of it, but I guess you did what you went in there to do, because I did. I woke up as myself and wondered if the whole thing had been a dream.

#15

But I realized it had all really happened one day when I got attacked by those "anomaly" robots -- remember those? -- and I ballooned again. Caught me totally by surprise.

TooOoooh!

After that, I'd balloon every so often with no warning. And then I'd have real trouble getting back to normal.

It took me a long time to get to where I could control it.

#20

I'm ... swelling up ... this is really weird ...

The uncomfortable part doesn't last long, don't worry.

The secret turned out to be not fighting it. Once I admitted how much I liked it, it was easy.

Then I thought: Well, if I enjoy it, maybe other people would like it too?

#24

So I started teaching other people who seemed like they'd be into it. There are nine of us now. I haven't taught any more for a while. We don't actually come down much these days.

We ran into your flock up close a while back -- actually, you ran into us. I don't think any of you even noticed.

Oop! Heads up!

Whoa!

You just drift around? Do you have some kind of flight plan? I mean, do you have any idea where you're going?

And how do you manage to cross zones? That's ... that shouldn't be possible. You'd have to fly through interspace, and there's block permission problems ...

No, we don't steer. We just drift. And I don't know how it works ...

When we're up, we don't really ... we don't pay a lot of attention. It's hard to. Your mind drifts just as much as your body does. More. We didn't even know we were crossing zones until the first time one of us came down and didn't know where they were.

#40

Another thing I don't know how we do ... we can find each other. I mean, when we're floating. Or maybe we don't really find each other, but we always end up back together as a group somehow. It's really useful, actually!

That's what I need your help with. I came down to do some things for a week or so ... When I went back up, I couldn't find any of the others!

It took me a while, and I had to focus really hard ... but every time I tried, the same thing happened, so I figure I was doing it right and that's what it has to be.

There's a ship up there. Like, it looks like a ship but it's attached to a big balloon. Every time I try to find the others, I end up following that ship around.

I think that ship has got the others. Not only that, I think it's using them. I don't know how, but --

What do you mean, "using" them? Using them for what?

The ship can cross zones! Like you said, that shouldn't happen, right? But I know it does, because I can follow it across zones ...

I think the others are on that ship, and I don't think they want to be. I need to get them out of it! Or at least find out what's going on.

Well ... Don't take this the wrong way, but ... this doesn't really seem like something we can -- uh ...

What I mean is, it's not in our jurisdiction. So to speak.

If it's moving between zones it's not in anybody's jurisdiction, though, is it? That might be the whole point.

C'mon, Leyna, aren't you curious what that ship is doing up there? Bet you it's nothing good.

OK, but ... even if we do want to look into it, I'm not sure how.



Damnation!

I've never seen him anywhere but here, except when he goes wherever it is he goes at night.

Either he's got the wind up and he's hiding, or he's wandering the Cobble for some reason.

... All right. We're going back to the office. Maybe our guest can help us.



Turn on the lights.



hurhhh?

How are you feeling, Treece? That drug is quite powerful, I'm told.

Still have some brain left, I hope. I need to ask you a question. Don't worry, it's very simple.

Where is your boss?



don't ... don't know ...

Oh, come now. He depends on you. You do all his work for him.

don't know ... doesn't tell me shit ...



I suppose it's not a surprise he'd be paranoid.

-- sigh -- Very well. Thank you, Treece.

I'll look in on you again in a few days to see how much of you is left.



Come with me.

It's safe to leave her; she couldn't escape from a paper bag at this point.

We're going to need everyone for this.



... turn us into balloons?

You're serious.

Won't even make the top five of weird things I've been turned into.

You get into that kind of trouble a lot more than we do.

Believe it or not, it's the only answer that makes any sense.

We think this mystery airship must be using Millie's friends as its balloons. That's the only idea that comes even close to explaining why it can cross zones like they do. It's ... using their abilities.



Which should mean that if Millie sets some of us up as balloons the same way, and we rig up our own airship, we should be able to cross zones too ...

... and because we seem to drift together, if I just concentrate a little on finding them, they'll pull us to where they are.

OK, but why do you need other balloons for that besides her?

I don't think I can get big enough.

If that airship -- which Millie thinks is pretty large -- is using eight of them to stay aloft, we don't think we can safely run even a small ship with fewer than two balloons, and three would be better.

Millie's never carried anything before, so we're guessing, and we don't want to guess wrong.

Ruby's volunteered as second balloon. We need a third. I can't; I have to crew.



I'll do it. Sounds like fun.

You know, I've suspected you had a kink this way ever since that ...

Well, never mind.

I don't think I want to let you all fly off without some adult supervision.

Ooh, you heard her. She's claiming to be the adult. We got it on record.

Yeah, yeah, I know, asking for trouble. I'm serious, though.

Well, I never intended to be the only crew. I was planning on asking Jex to come and asking you to keep an eye on Serenity, but --

Can switch.



You're sure? If something comes up, you might be --

Been quiet. Think should be alright.

An't play so much, just me, but can try.

If goes bad side, tho, who to pull?

Ash and Maire would help out.

But they're hard to find, the way they wander all over the Cobble ... come to think of it, Jex, have you even met them?

Han't been Cobble none.

Huh. We should look into that sometime. You're not missing much.

I'd try to get Naomi. You know how to reach her. It might take her a while to respond, though.

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS WHAT GINA DIDN'T SAY, GO LOOK FOR AN INCIDENT THAT TOOK PLACE IN #29.



Good.

Bring them back to base and get them started. I'll be along after I talk to Dunn.



RAAAR!



I hate how they don't make any noise.

Guess Church doesn't like anybody to talk but himself.



Those claws aren't gonna do much, honey.

Got a thick skin.



Let's see how you do with mine.

WHOP



You're out of your mind.

Far from it, I assure you.

Think about it. The Boss isn't interested in business conditions in the Cobbles. He just wants his cut.

A coalition of ... concerned merchants ... could do much more to make this a better place to be than he's ever tried to do. Though admittedly he hasn't tried much.

And if it's a better place to be, then more people will want to be here ... which means more business for us, and more money.



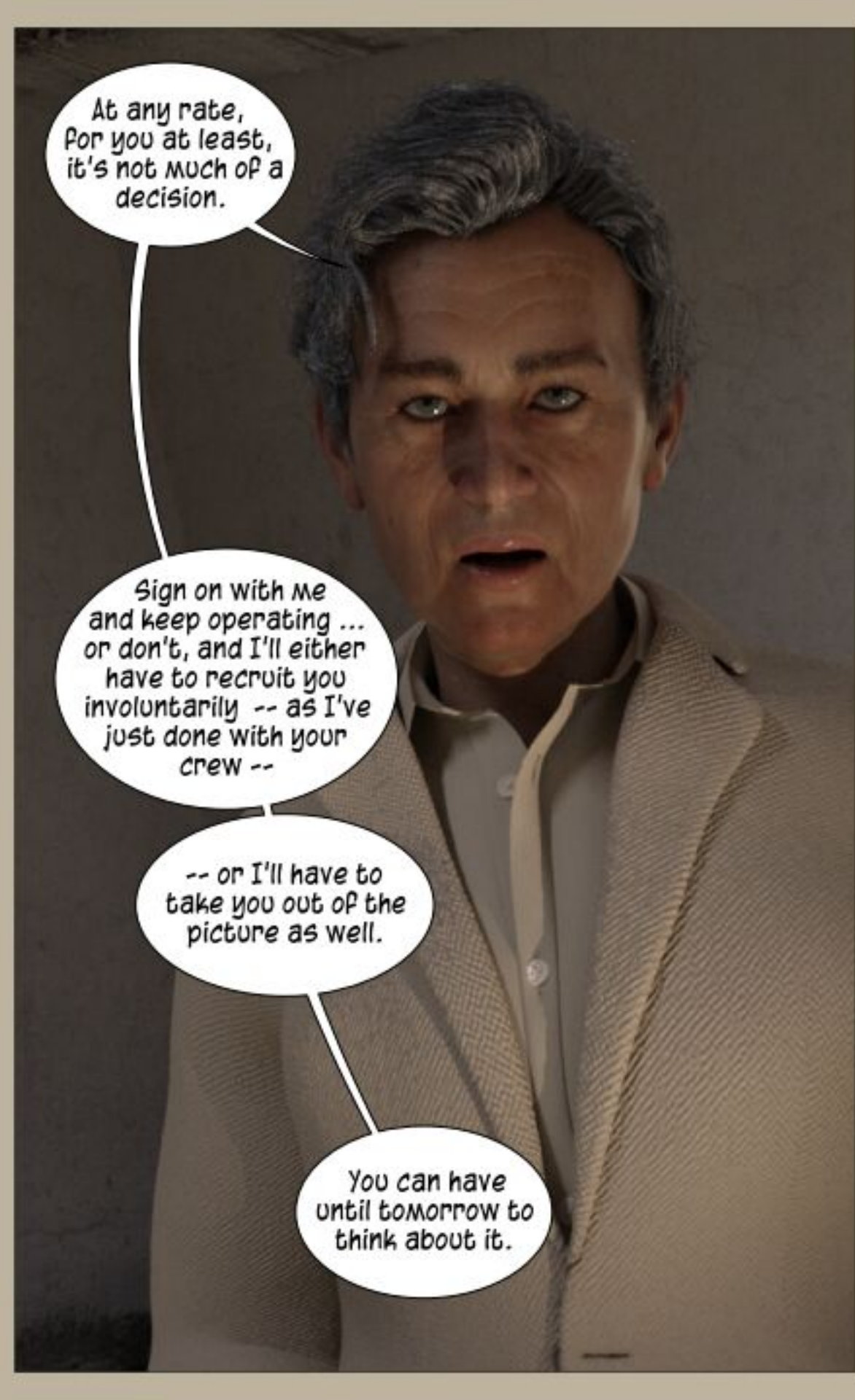
Yeah, right up to when he loses his shit and tosses us all out on our asses.

He can't throw us all out. Not if there are enough of us. He wouldn't have anything left to boss.

Besides, I'm planning to remove him from the picture entirely. I believe we need new management.

You think you can take down the Boss?

Why not? Honestly, he's kept his power only by reputation, hasn't he? Have you ever seen any enforcement from him other than Treece?

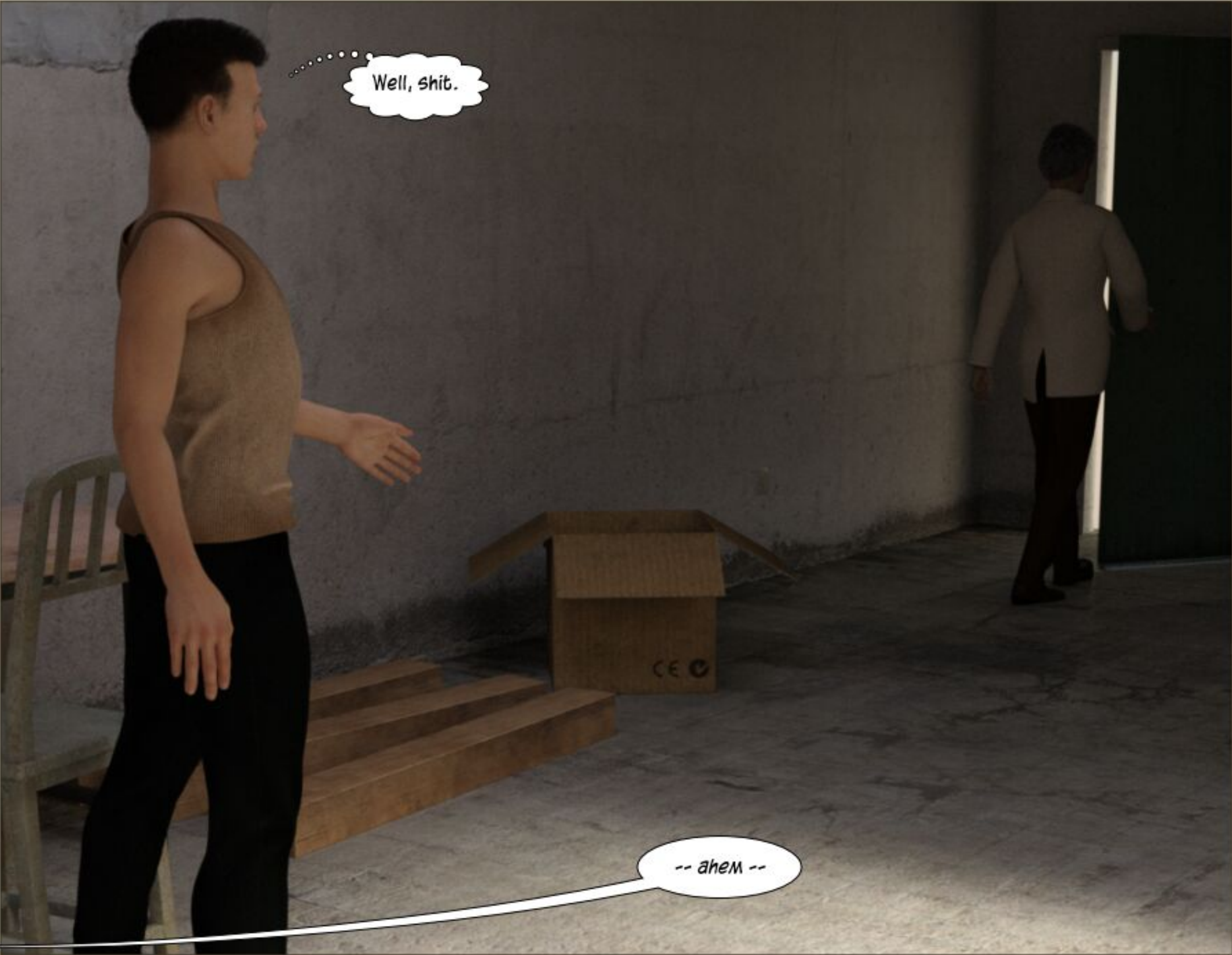


At any rate, for you at least, it's not much of a decision.

Sign on with me and keep operating ... or don't, and I'll either have to recruit you involuntarily -- as I've just done with your crew --

-- or I'll have to take you out of the picture as well.

You can have until tomorrow to think about it.



Well, shit.

-- ahem --



I'd like to make a counteroffer.



I can do it without you needing to do anything. Just go along with it. It's only hard if people panic and try to resist.

I'll be good. Should I be wearing something different?

Appreciate your helping us rig ... I'm not sure how tricky this is going to be.

An't none. Y'k to fly it?

Probably shouldn't be wearing anything. The expansion will blow out your clothes until they rip, and that can be uncomfortable.

I hope so. I mean, I know how it all works ...

And we've got these fancy life vests if it doesn't.



Of course, if it embarrasses you, you can leave them on --

If anybody in this bunch hasn't already seen me nude, it was by sheer luck.

You want to start now?

If they're ready to net you ...

We're good. Do your thing.

OK, lemme strip.

Urgh! Is it supposed to peel ... uh ...

Yeah. Right at first it peels like you've got bad gas.

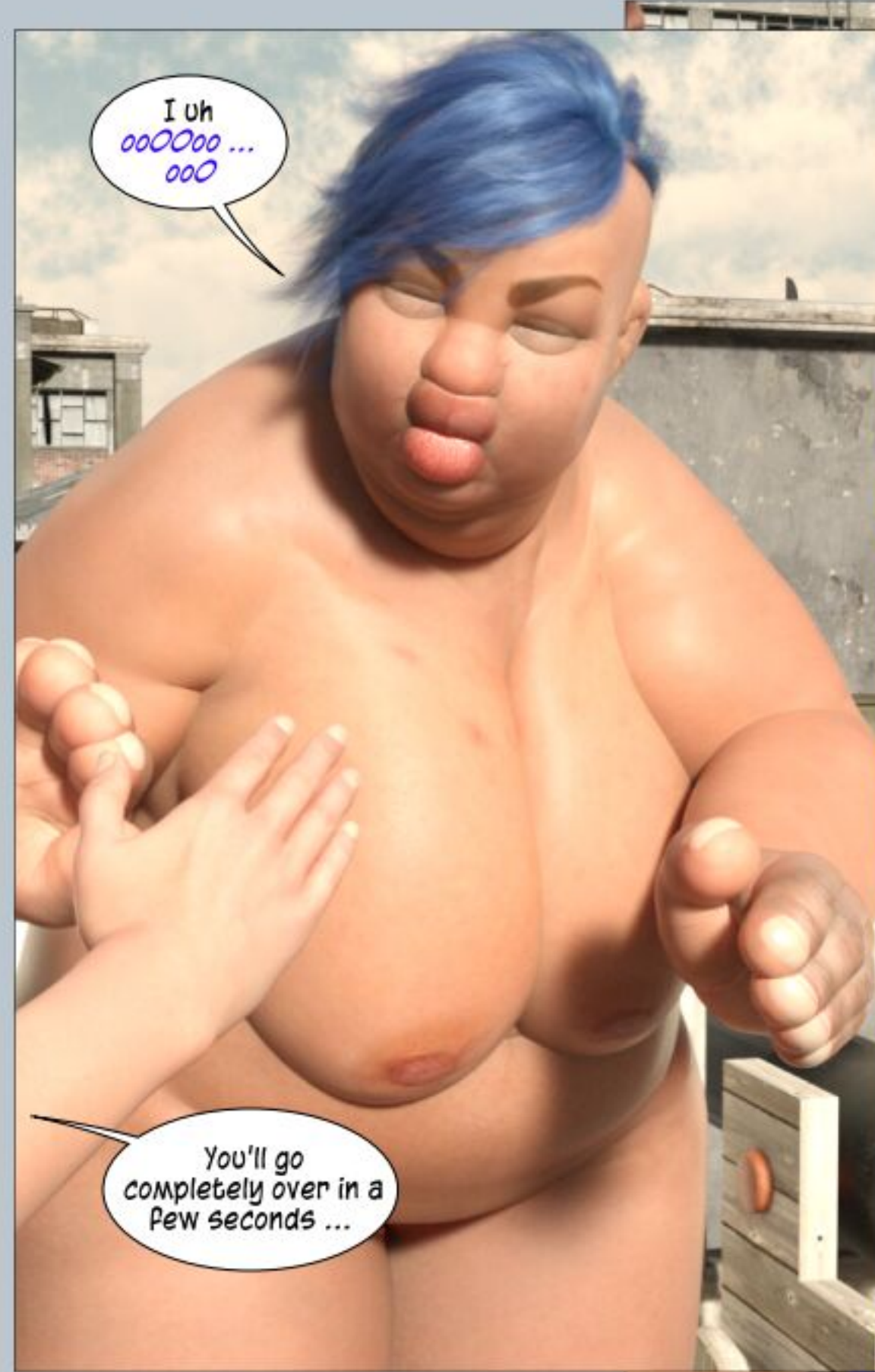
It'll get a lot better in a second.



ooh ... yeah, i see what you mean ...

Trust me, it's great.

But I'm also peeling kinda lightheaded



I uh oooooo ... ooo

You'll go completely over in a few seconds ...



ooooooo!

Get the net!

She's already starting to lift.



I can get her a lot bigger, and I think we'll need to ... but we'd better get her into the envelope first.

oooo?

Rigging's ready. We just need to pull her over there.



Perfect!

If you say so.

I sure hope she's enjoying it.

Your turn, Ruby.

Ready, I guess.



Whoa!

Careful!

We're lifting! ... and tilting. Should have done the middle one last ...

I needed to be at the front, remember? Don't worry. I can get up fast. Get the rig ready. Once I'm up, the ship will level off ...

But Jex needs to be able to --

Can recall. Han't puss.



I guess we're off, then.

INTERLUDE

THE BONISOVA ESTATE, HIGHPOINT, WHERE BOTH HOLLY AND HANNE ARE STAYING AS GUESTS ... THOUGH FOR VERY DIFFERENT REASONS.



It's amazing how different you look without the horns.

And the boots. When I first saw you, I wasn't sure whether you'd actually given yourself hooves.

I considered it.

But the shoes are really comfortable once you get used to it, believe it or not ... and they're a lot easier to take off.

Might not matter, now. I may not have a reason to go back to that look.



Oh?

Well ... it was mostly to intimidate people. Helps when you're being a bodyguard, y'know?

But Brendan didn't even tell me where he was going to hide, and he didn't say when he'd be back ... I might not have a job anymore.

Which might be OK. I might be ready for something else.

Hey, are you going to come in or what?



I, uh ... I don't think I can go in without getting the hood wet.

I'm not supposed to let anyone but other acolytes see my face ...

Well, no, but --

Corven's out again; she's barely been here for days. And Bonisova's men won't come near this wing. I think they're scared of women.

I want to see your eyes for a change.



OK, but don't tell Mother Corven.

Cross my heart.



Oh, this is nice.

Yeah, the sun's been warming it all day. Shame it's not deep enough to swim in.

... You know, it seems like you're kind of at loose ends too.

What do you mean?

Well ... From what you say about Corven's mission, I think there's a good chance she's not going to get what she wants.

I mean, I'm not sure she can put the Order back together after what happened ... which leaves you adrift ...



What do -- mmmh!

I can't just abandon her, though. She's really like a mother -- well, not so much now, but once --

I mean, the Order is all I have.

That's not true.

You have options.



I didn't realize this was going to be so ... boring.

Well, she said we'd drift to them. She didn't say it'd be fast.



How do we know she was right about that, though? What if she can't home in on them and we just drift forever?

We've got engines ... can't we use them?

To do what? If I turn them on, then we'll be heading in whatever way I steer ... instead of whatever way she wants to drift.

Those are only there for emergencies.



I agree this isn't the most exciting thing ... I'd hoped that crossing zones would be interesting, but not so much.

We changed zones? How can you tell? I thought you said you couldn't get location data up here ...

Right. But we passed through interspace, so we must have.

We passed through interspace?

You didn't notice the ten minutes where it got really dark?

That must have been while I had dozed off.



There! I mean ... ship ahoy!

Is that as big as I think it is from here?

A lot bigger than us, for sure.

Hang onto something. I'm going to start the engines and we might lurch a little.



No activity on deck at all?

... No, wait. One person.

And they've seen us. Be ready, I don't know what they're going to do.



Oh, hell!

Gina, use the cannons!



Aaagh!

Leyna, we're tilting!

I know!

They're going for the balloons! I can't get out of the way fast enough!

You have to! The cannon's not doing shit!



Gina, jump!

We're going down and we need to get clear!

But the --

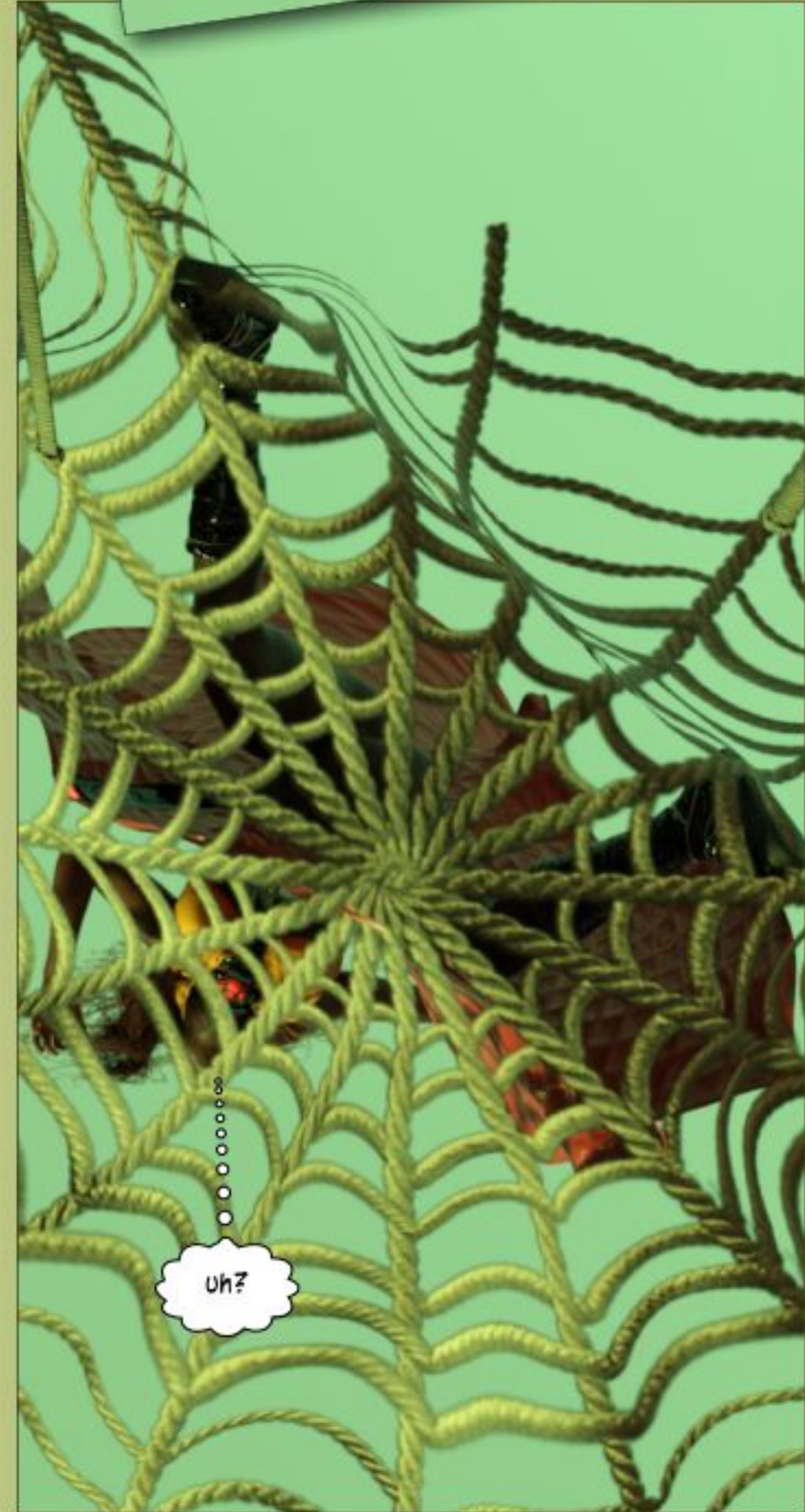
The vests work! I've used them before!

Quick! Before we completely--

LEYNA'S LIFEVESTS GOT THEIR FIELD TRIAL IN #40.



grr.



uh?



We don't normally accept drop-in visitors.

But we'll give the two of you a tour anyway.



MEANWHILE ---

Mmh?

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA



I gotcha.

Ruby??



That didn't go too well, huh? Ship's gone ... Leyna and Gina are on board the other ship and probably captive ... you and I got knocked out of balloon mode ... and Millie floated off without even noticing.

Ruby ... how are you doing this?

... That's a long story. I'll have to tell you later.



Right now I have to focus on getting us both down to wherever it is we are.

Hmm ... Looks like the Cobbles.

Oh, great.

There are worse places.

ESPERANZA HAS TO WAIT ... BUT YOU CAN READ RUBY'S EXPLANATION ABOUT IT TO LEYNA, IN #40.



Suiting up, huh?

I feel safer with it on.

Especially in this zone.

You bounce back from things a lot faster than I do.



Move it, Lee!

Trying!

Well, we may not be here more than a few minutes.

We need to regroup and figure out how to get back to Gina and Leyna.

I'm just not sure where to regroup to.

Should we have stayed up there and tried to board?

Couldn't. They were already too far away. I'd never have caught up.



Lee! Shit!

AAGH!!

We should probably just go back to -- HEY!

Leave him, Ade! We're almost clear--

Watch it, asshole!



Whoaaa!!

Hey!!

Whoa now!

You don't want to do that ...



FUM

See?



Stop!

Hey, leave him alone --



Think so, do you?

Wah!



POW

You and your friends need to do something about those violent tendencies.



Hey, come back!

... right over the edge.

Don't bother chasing her.



ASH AND MAIRE, UNOFFICIAL GUARDIANS OF THE COBBLES DOWNTRODDEN.

There's dozens of them. Swarming the place. Too many to clean out, and they run off as soon as they're losing.

Wouldn't matter if you got her. They don't talk and don't cooperate.

They've got some kind of drug on their claws. They scratch you and you're useless for hours.

Yeah, mine just slipped loose and hauled.

Any idea who's behind it?

We think it's probably Church.



There were a bunch of people put in a coma. Treece was trying to solve it. She decided a few days back that it was all Church -- getting rid of anybody who wouldn't go along with him trying to corner the algo drug business.

We think this is Church taking it up a notch. Or five. He's going for everything.

We can't find Treece. We've been looking for her since this morning.

... all right. Let's go.

Huh?

We're going to fix this shit. I'm going to want your help.



Ruby!

We can't! We've got to get back to that ship before--

We don't even know how to get back to it.

Either they're Pine and they'll leave on their own, or they're in something that won't get any worse if we take a while. I mean, I don't think so.

I'm more worried about Treece right now. She doesn't usually get in over her head.

This seems a lot more urgent.

TREECE'S COMA INVESTIGATION STARTS IN #39 AND HAS CONTINUED IN SEVERAL ISSUES SINCE THEN.



There! We need to grab one. And not get scratched. Ranza, you go in front, they can't get through your suit ...

But --

They may not talk, but they can hear. And they don't seem to recall -- they run instead. I guarantee you I can convince one of them to take us to their leader.

Might have to carry them there after I'm done with them though.

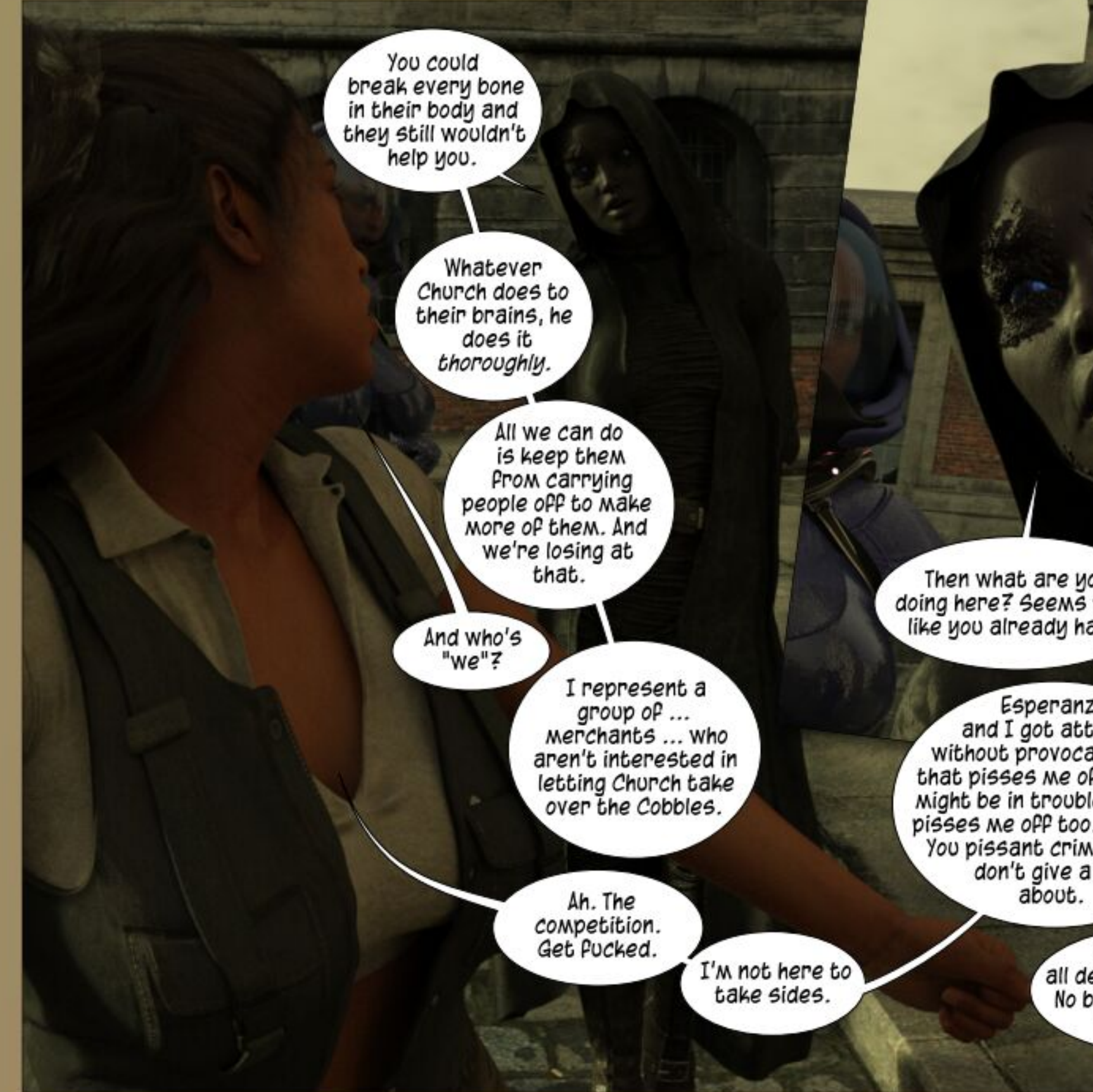


Huh.

Now who's that? And where'd they come from?

We've got to stop them before they mess us up! Or at least grab one from them --

What's the point?



You could break every bone in their body and they still wouldn't help you.

Whatever Church does to their brains, he does it thoroughly.

All we can do is keep them from carrying people off to make more of them. And we're losing at that.

And who's "we"?

I represent a group of ... Merchants ... who aren't interested in letting Church take over the Cobbles.

Ah. The competition. Get Pucked.

I'm not here to take sides.

Then what are you doing here? Seems to me like you already have.

Esperanza and I got attacked without provocation and that pisses me off. Treece might be in trouble and that pisses me off too. That's it. You pissant crimelords, I don't give a shit about.

Fight until you all destroy each other. No big loss. You're all the same.



We're not, though.

We're trying to keep the Cobbles the way it is. Church is trying to make it something you'll like even less than you do now.

That's saying a lot.

And if you're pissed off at these things attacking you, then you need to help us get Church, because that's the only way to stop them.

Can't corner him yourself, huh?



He's very careful. The only way we've come up with to trap him is to beat him to what he's searching for.

Which is what?

The Boss.

We figure Church knows that no matter what he does, he still has to worry about the Boss shutting him down. Unless he gets to the Boss first.

We also think Church can't find him. Building an army's just a bonus for him; what they're really doing is combing the Cobbles looking for the Boss. We're pretty sure.



I bet I know where to find Cl-- the Boss.

That sounds like there's about to be a catch.

Only catch is none of you can come with me. I'll have to get him by myself.

You all figure out how you're going to set it up once I do.



Oh, no.

You can't just --

I'm an intruder. Completely unauthorized. You had nothing to do with it.

I can tie you to a chair to make the point, if you think that'll help.

Daria?

Were you just talking to --

Oh.



I'm going to have to move, damn you.

I haven't told anybody where you live, Clayton. I'm not interested in exposing you. I don't want to have anything to do with you. I'm only here because I have to be.

Church is overrunning the Cobbles with this army of weird-ass women with claws. They're converting more. He's trying to take over the whole place.

I know that.

He's looking for you.

I know that too. Why do you think I'm here?

In a couple of days, after it all shakes out, I'll find him and we'll have a talk.

And you think that's as far as it goes?



I don't get in the way of business. As long as I get my cut, I don't care if Church takes over. That's the Free Market in action.

Not a very Free Market.

Anyway, you're not going to get your cut. He wants your job.

Yeah, well, he's not getting that. If he thinks so, he's got a surprise coming. I'll have Treece break him into pieces.

Treece is missing, Clayton. We think he got her first. Step one.

... what?

He's got more people every second, and they've all had their minds messed with ... they'll do anything he tells them to do.



You're not walking away from this. If you think so, you're deluded.

Which I'd believe, but ...

Had their minds messed with?

Big time. We need to deal with him.

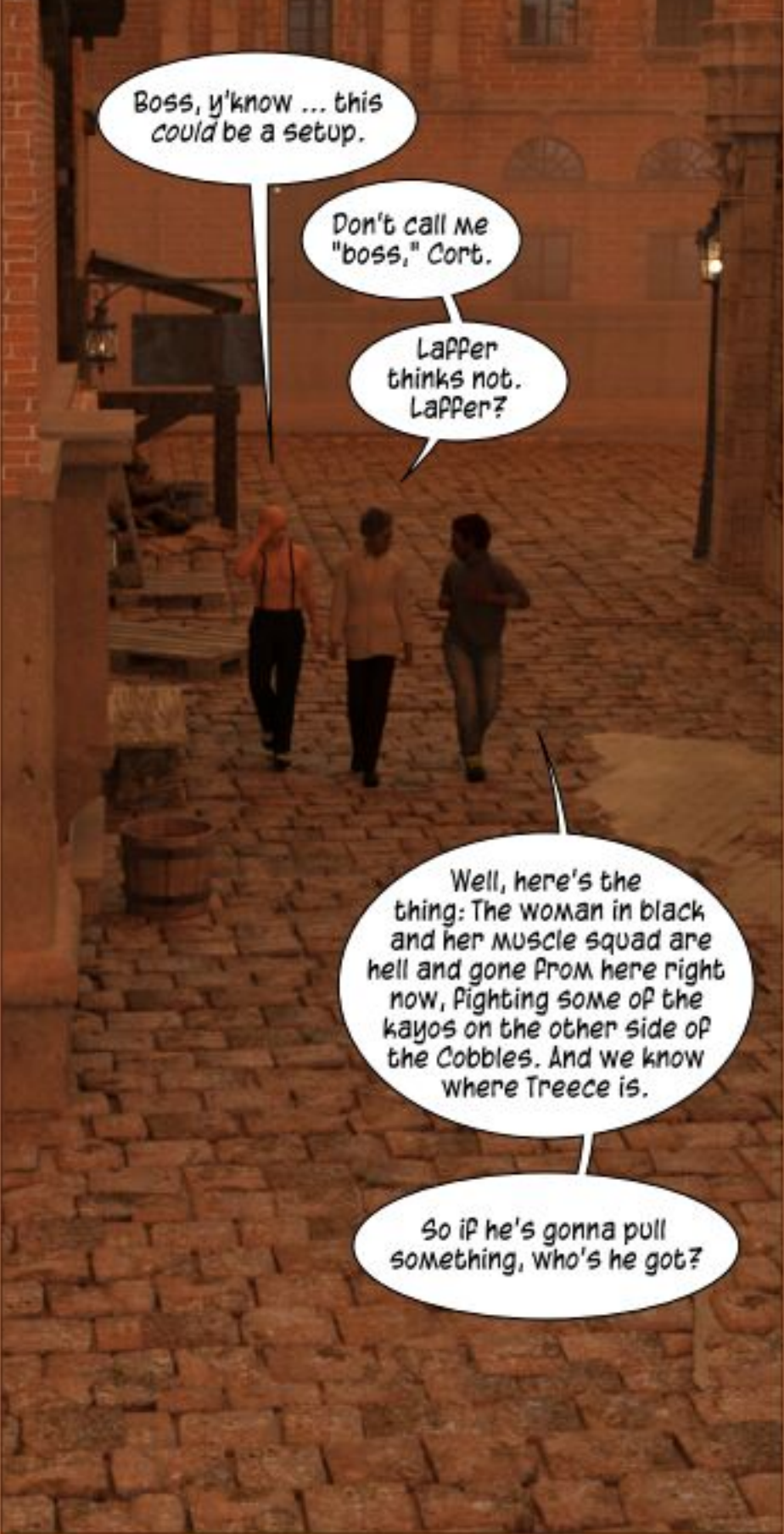
Why do you care? You don't like me or the Cobbles ...

Maybe I think there are worse things than you.

Take advantage of that while you can.

RUBY LEARNED THAT "THE BOSS" WAS CLAYTON BARKER, AND FOUND OUT WHERE HE LIVES, IN #40.

MIND CONTROL IS THE ONE THING CLAYTON DOESN'T TOLERATE. RUBY KNOWS THIS, BUT CAN'T TELL HIM SHE KNOWS, BECAUSE SHE WAS TOLD IN CONFIDENCE BY TREECE.



Boss, y'know ... this could be a setup.

Don't call me "boss," Cort.

Lapper thinks not. Lapper?

Well, here's the thing: The woman in black and her muscle squad are hell and gone from here right now, fighting some of the kayos on the other side of the Cobbles. And we know where Treece is.

So if he's gonna pull something, who's he got?



Church, what exactly do you think you're doing?

Making the Cobbles a better place. Unfortunately, I think you stand in the way of that.

Good of you to arrange this meeting. I was having trouble locating you.

I'll try not to make this too rough.



I won't.

Ah, shit.



Hm. I should have realized.

Clever, to keep us from ever seeing more than one at a time.

However, I have reinforcements too.



ATTACK!



OK, here we go.

Spread out, and try not to hit any friendlies.



Oh, no, you don't.



Now I've got you, you chickenshit.



Huh. Where'd he go?

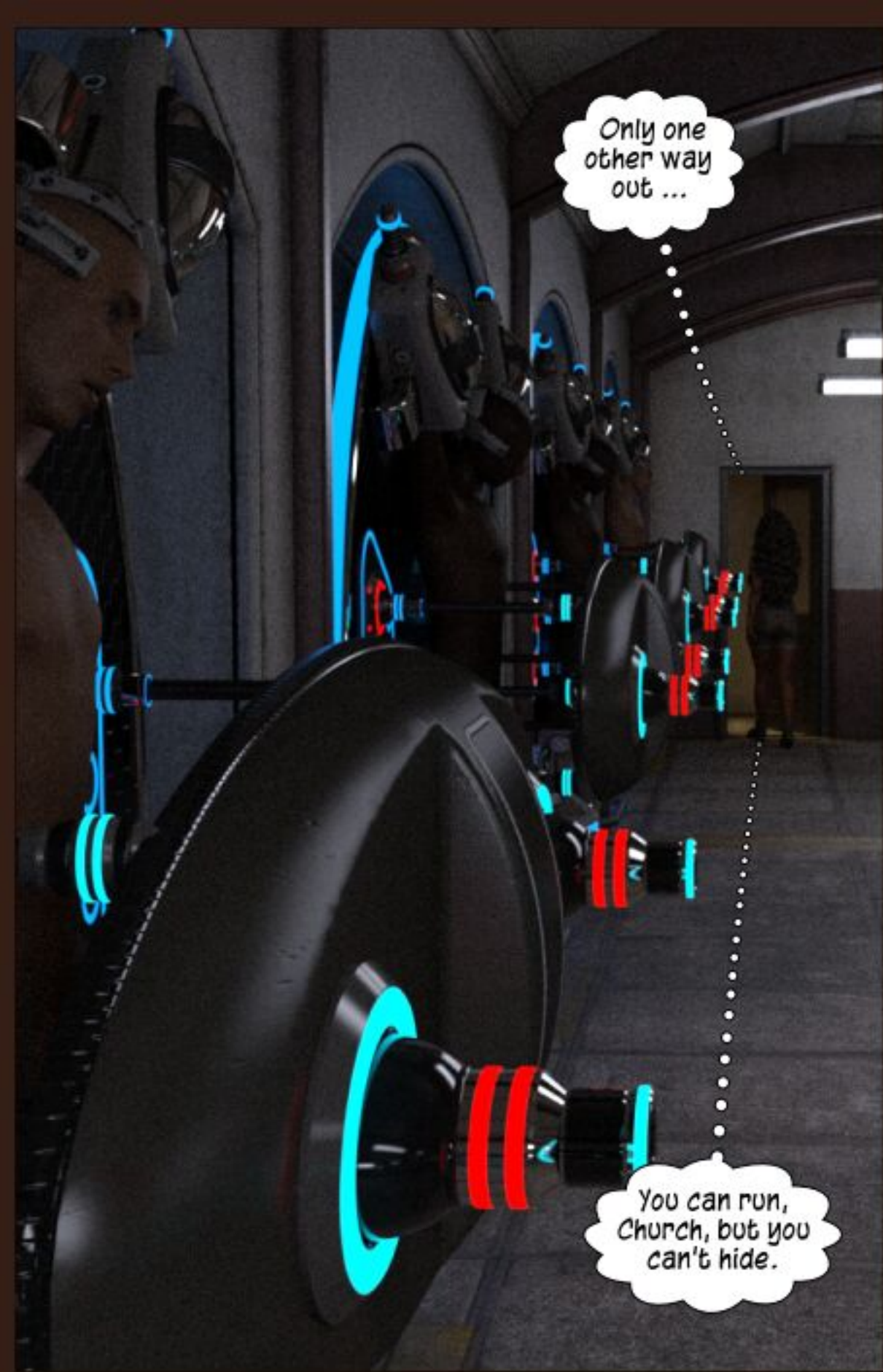
This must be where he converts people ... I need to get them out of this, but I need to catch him first ...



I figured their costumes were an algo apply, but this looks like he's trying to do old-fashioned mental conditioning.

No, he can't be ... that'd take weeks, months. Ash said he's making them a lot faster than that.

Maybe it's a little of both?



Only one other way out ...

You can run, Church, but you can't hide.



Now what the hell's this?



Oh, shit!

Hang on, Treece!



Hold still!

Iv straight into your neck ... that asshole ...

urgh

... Ruby?

Yeah, Treece, it's me. I think you'll be OK ... but we need to get you somewhere you can let this shit wear off.

INTERLUDE

SERENITY, EARLIER THAT DAY, WHERE A FASHION SHOW IS TAKING PLACE IN THE PUBLIC GARDENS ...



... Lula is wearing "Fiesta" by Anna Benjamin. The bodice and skirt are embroidered black silk, with black taffeta underskirts ...



Say "quack"!

huh?



I'm going, Carmen, don't pitch a fit.

Lee! You're up next! You should be in the wings right now!

Kat, you're after her -- if you're ready, stop blocking traffic back here. We're tripping over each other as it is.

And Carol! You're not dressed yet? Come on!



Say "duckface"!

Wuh?



Go on, Kat. Stop distracting Carol Prom Finishing.

Honestly, you lot ...

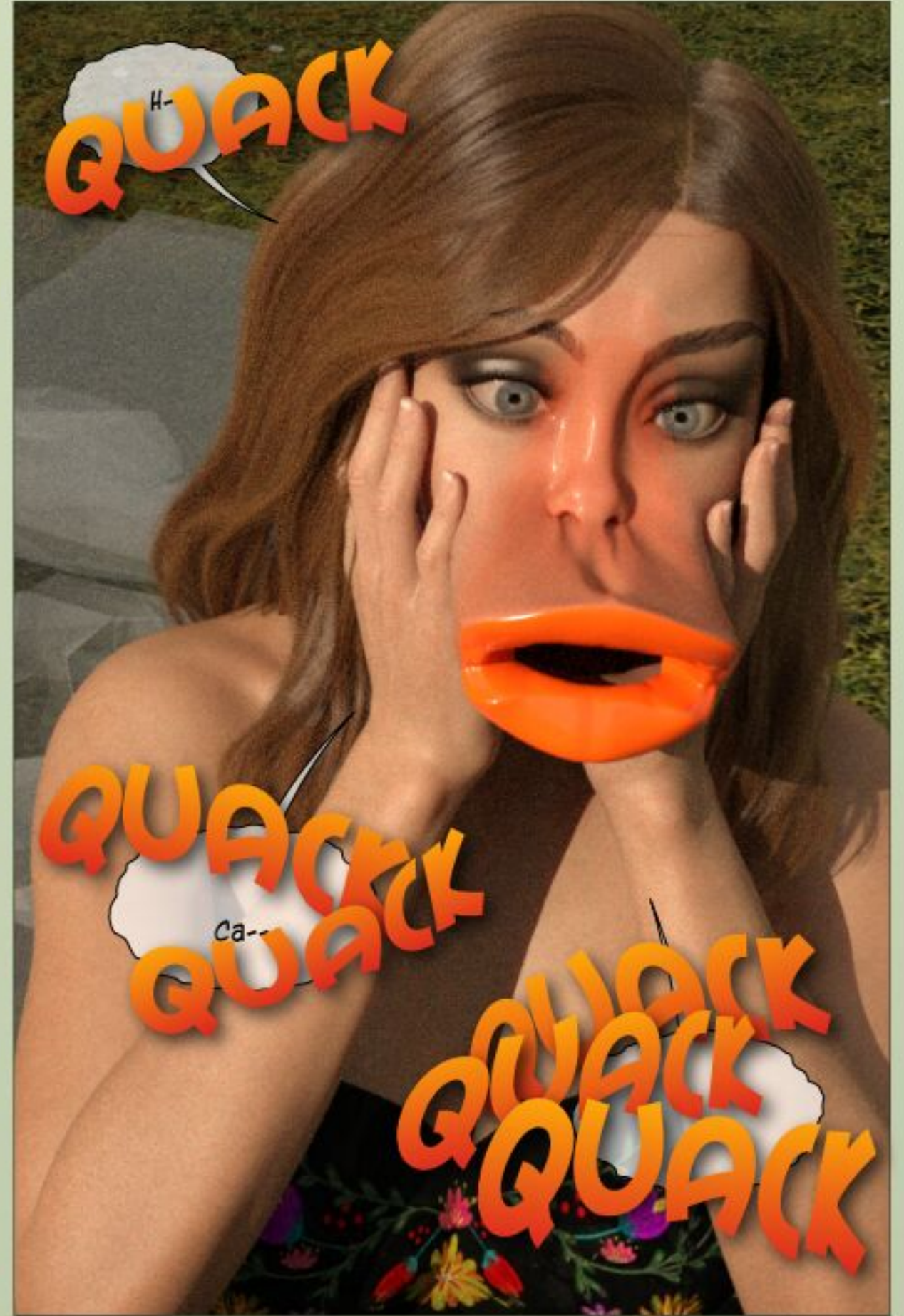
And where's Lula got to? She needs to put on her next outfit!



Lula!
What are you doing?

That's a very expensive dress, and you're sitting in dirt! What's come over--

-- gasp --



H
QUACK

Ca--
QUACK QUACK

QUACK QUACK



... Next, Lee is wearing "Hollywood" by FJ. This classic-cut satin cocktail dress is -- what on earth??

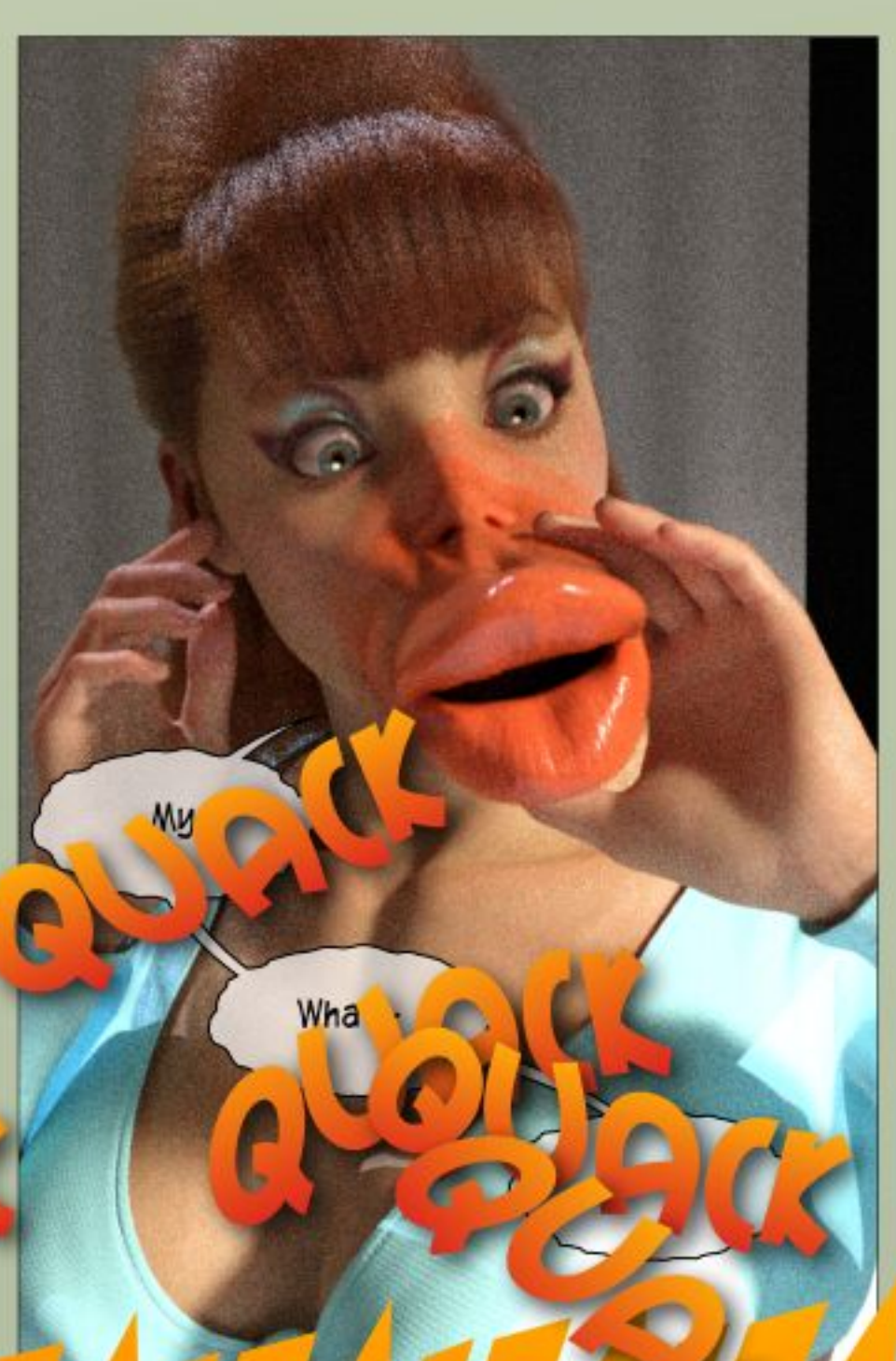
HAAA



Wh --
Whath goin on?

Whyth evbody laughn?

I
QUACK



My
QUACK

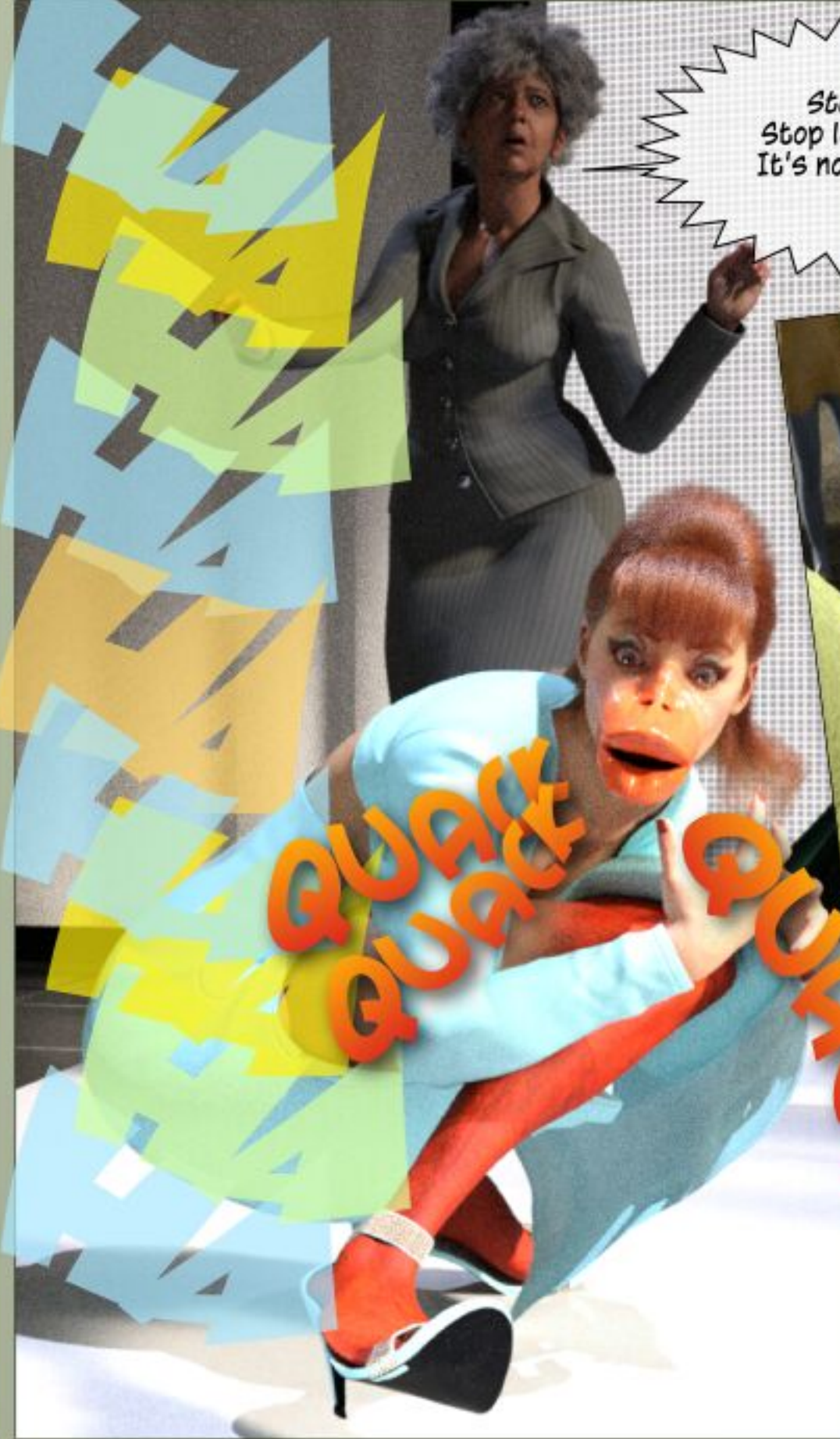
Wha
QUACK QUACK



What is going on out here?

Say "dummy"!

Huh?



Stop it!
Stop laughing!
It's not funny!

QUACK QUACK QUACK



Say "annoying"!

eh?



zzz



QUACK QUACK QUACK



Hm.



And now, Polks, we've got a small change to the program ... let's have some applause for Ditzzy, Dopey, Dappy, and Dippy, our flock of Fashionable Feathered Friends ...

Our ducklings are modelling the exciting new "downy" look, which comes in one color, and they're accessorizing with bills and webbed feet, to complete the ensemble ...

They're not the most coordinated waterPowl, but then, they're new at this ... they just hatched a few minutes ago.

Think Pound where slide.



Oyo! Skell!

Huh?

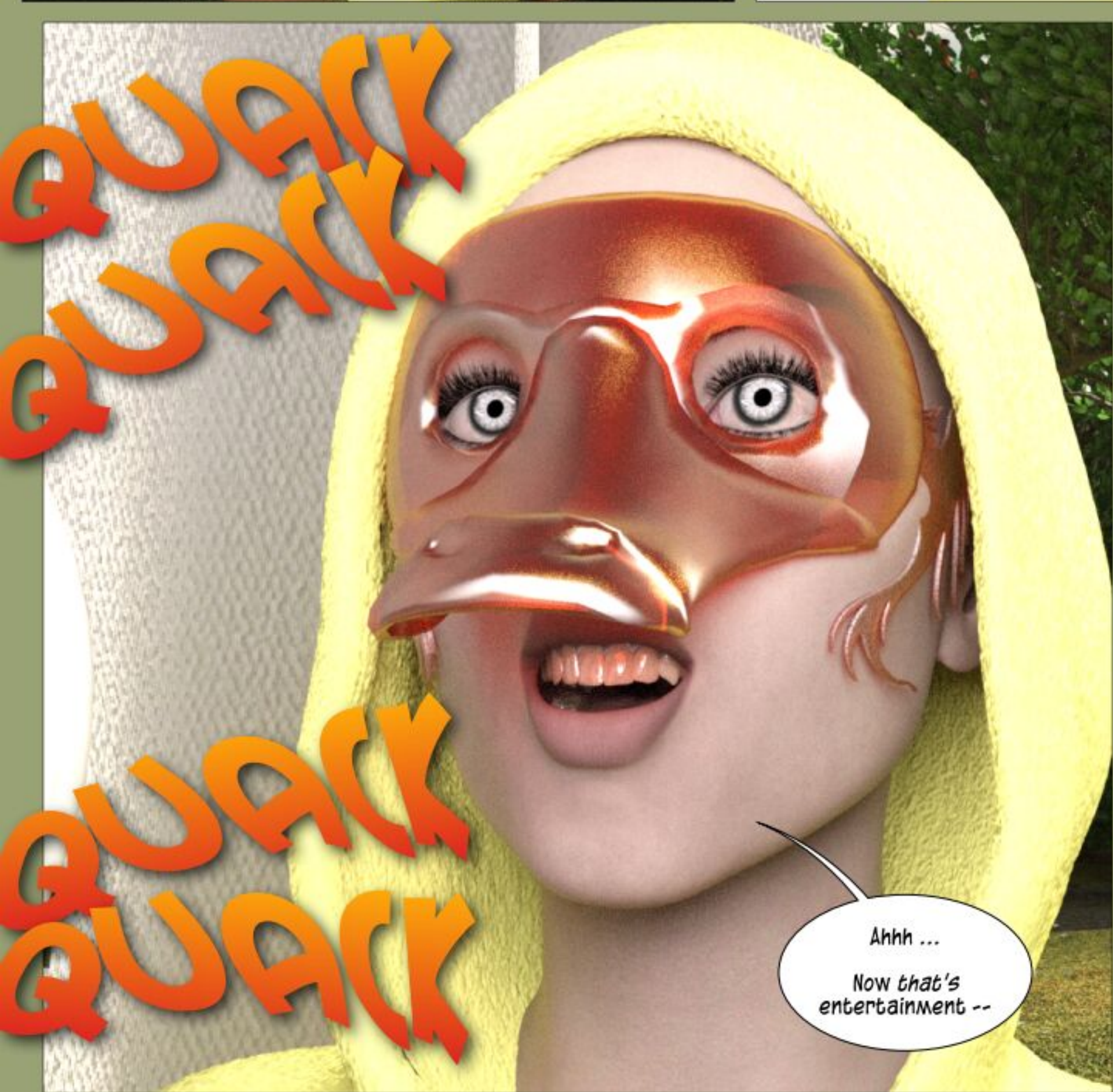


Say "meddler."



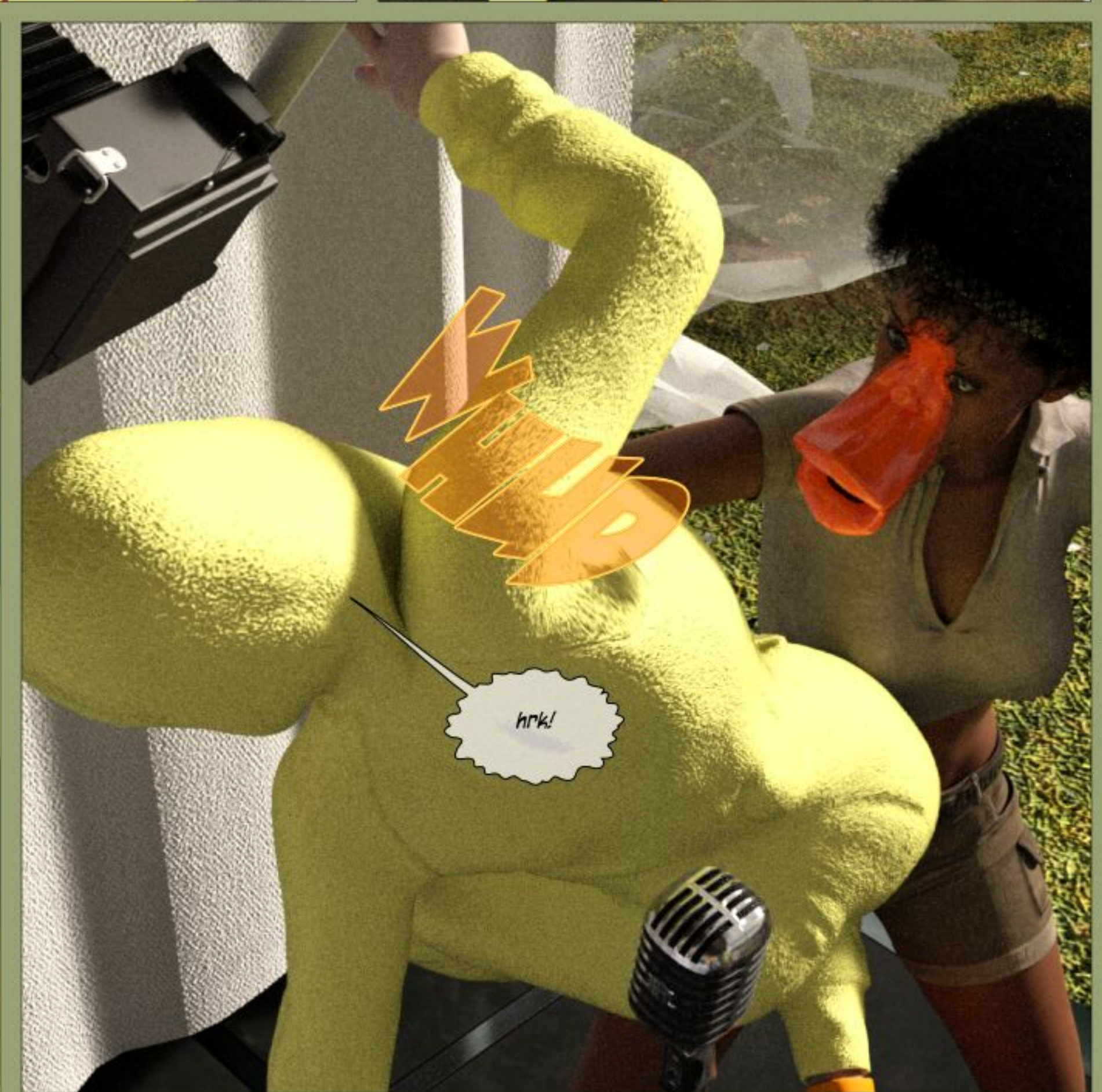
Everybody wants to get into the act.

All right, maybe we can try for a bit more precision ... let's see if we can get our ducks in a row.



QUACK QUACK QUACK QUACK

Ahhh ... Now that's entertainment --



hrk!



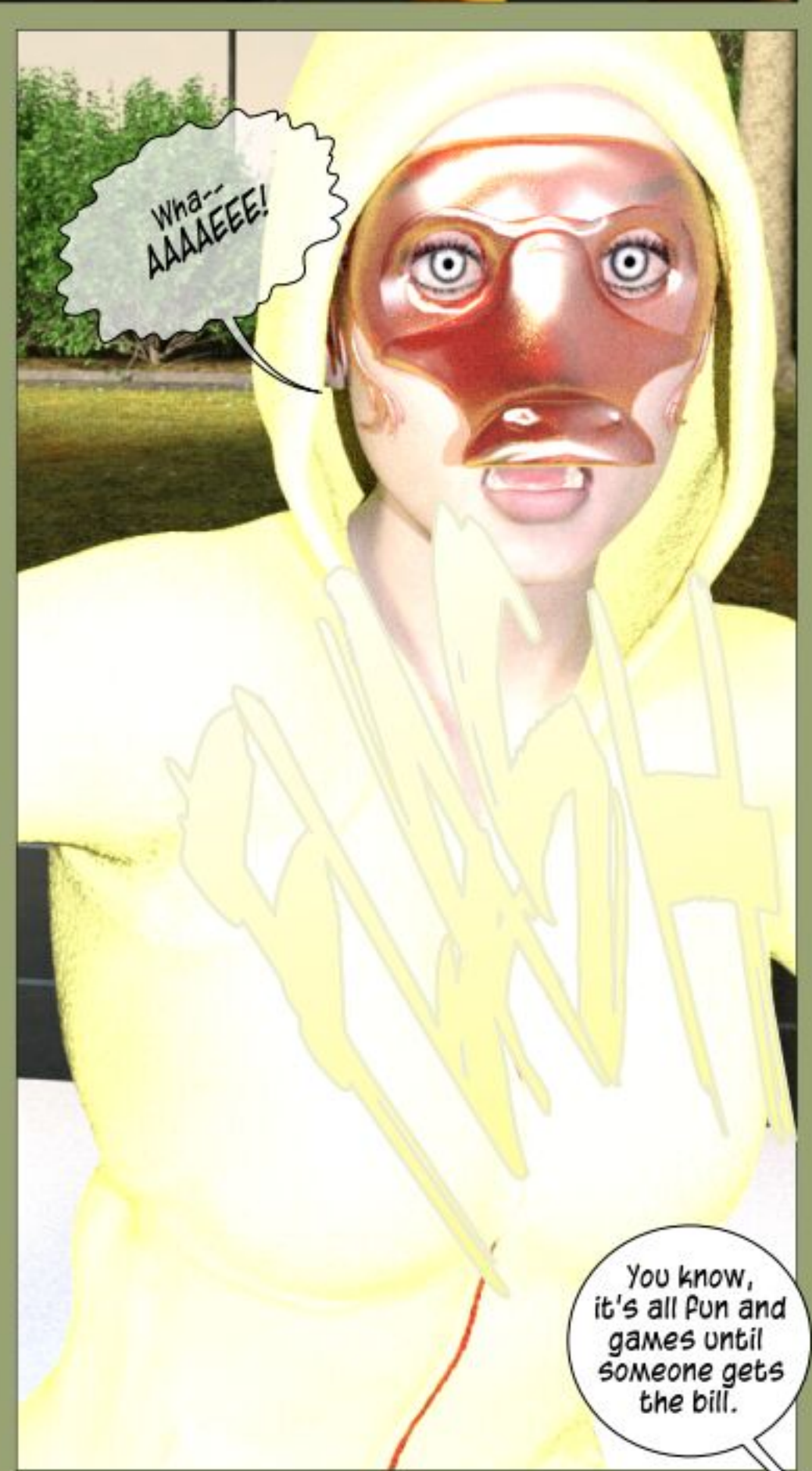
No! You're not doing it right!

You're supposed to be a dumb, dazed duck!



You just haven't given it a try!

Wait a few minutes! By the time your Peathers come in, I'm sure you'll have embraced the duck iFestyle!



Wha-- AAAAEEEE!

You know, it's all fun and games until someone gets the bill.



Whad' --
QUACK

y--
QUACK

QUACK

We haven't met. My name's Midnight. I handle troublemakers.

Jex, I should be able to fix you in just a second ...

Fix self.



That's some Past recovery! Keep that up and I think you're going to be Pastier than Ruby!

That's good, we really need that in the team --

An't on team. Might none on team ever.

Doin For Friends. Han't work for you.

Knew you were out, Might han't said yes.

Have you got something against me?

No ... just should Pix slide self more. Your lock.

How gon Pix rest?



Well, I think it's transmitted and not an algo apply, thank goodness. So we just have to stop what's maintaining the effect.

Tack out skel? Make recall?

I don't think it's her. Her camera worked even on her, and the effects are still going even though she's caught up in them ...

Let's delete the camera and see --

JEX DOES NOT YET KNOW THAT MIDNIGHT IS SERENE BARKER. SHE THINKS LEYNA AND THE JUMPERS WORK FOR MIDNIGHT, KEEPING ORDER. (IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW MIDNIGHT WAS SERENE, YOU DO NOW!)



There! All Fixed. Nothing left but some mild embarrassment.

Fixed skel too. Hauled.

Yes ... but that's all right. Getting rid of her without damage was more important than actually getting her.

Gon do gain, next chance.

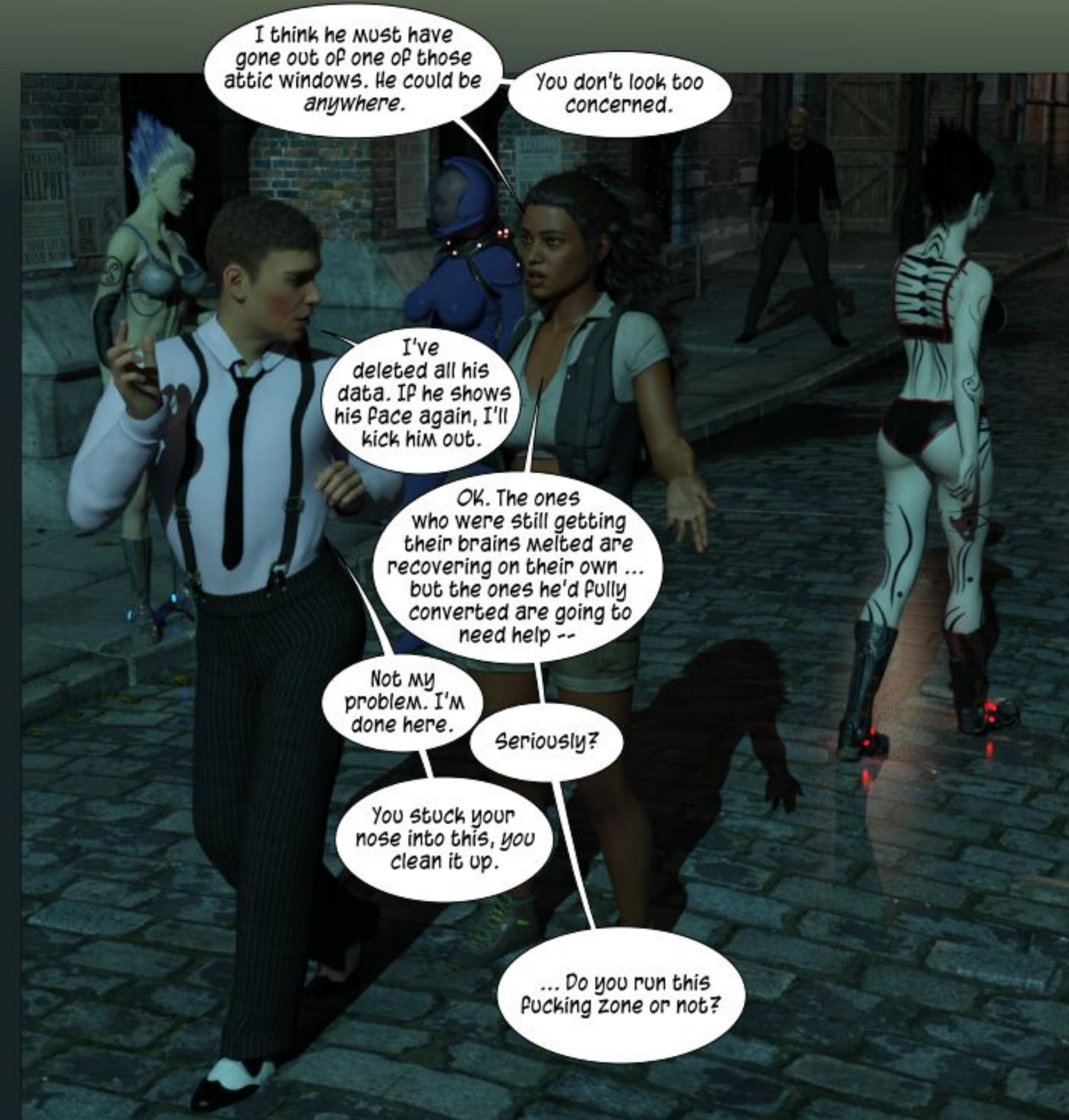
Probably ... which is why we need a Pull team at all times. Too many like her. It takes constant vigilance.



Should get Polk want job, then, stead got now.

Leyna does cause wants to ... every else only does cause Leyna asks. Han't good way.

B'sin.



I think he must have gone out of one of those attic windows. He could be anywhere.

You don't look too concerned.

I've deleted all his data. If he shows his face again, I'll kick him out.

OK. The ones who were still getting their brains melted are recovering on their own ... but the ones he'd fully converted are going to need help --

Not my problem. I'm done here.

Seriously?

You stuck your nose into this, you clean it up.

... Do you run this Pucking Zone or not?



All right, look.

I ... appreciate your help. OK?

I still don't think you belong here, but this time I'm glad you were.

But I don't know what to do about them. If you still feel like helping, maybe ask your team of geniuses if they can do anything. That goes for his other victims as well.

If not, they're going to stay like that, because I've got nothing.

And tell Treece to come check with me as soon as she gets herself back together.



I don't believe it.

He's getting soft-hearted.

No. He's scared.

He didn't think a situation would ever get out of hand like that, and he's not happy he didn't catch on until it was almost too late.

He's also realized he has one line of defense, and while she's damned good, she's not invulnerable.



Where is Treece, anyway?

I don't know where she lives and she was in no condition to tell me. I took her to Ms. Lee's.

I'll come back later to check on her and help you clean up ... but we have to go deal with something else first.

Yeah, Ranza was explaining that. I think you two should go talk to Lo-Rez. He's an --

Lo-Rez? I had to threaten to beat the shit out of him once.*

Want to do it again?

* IN #33. IT WORKED.



I don't know why I have to explain this again: I don't give out information for free.

I'm trying to run a business here, y'know?

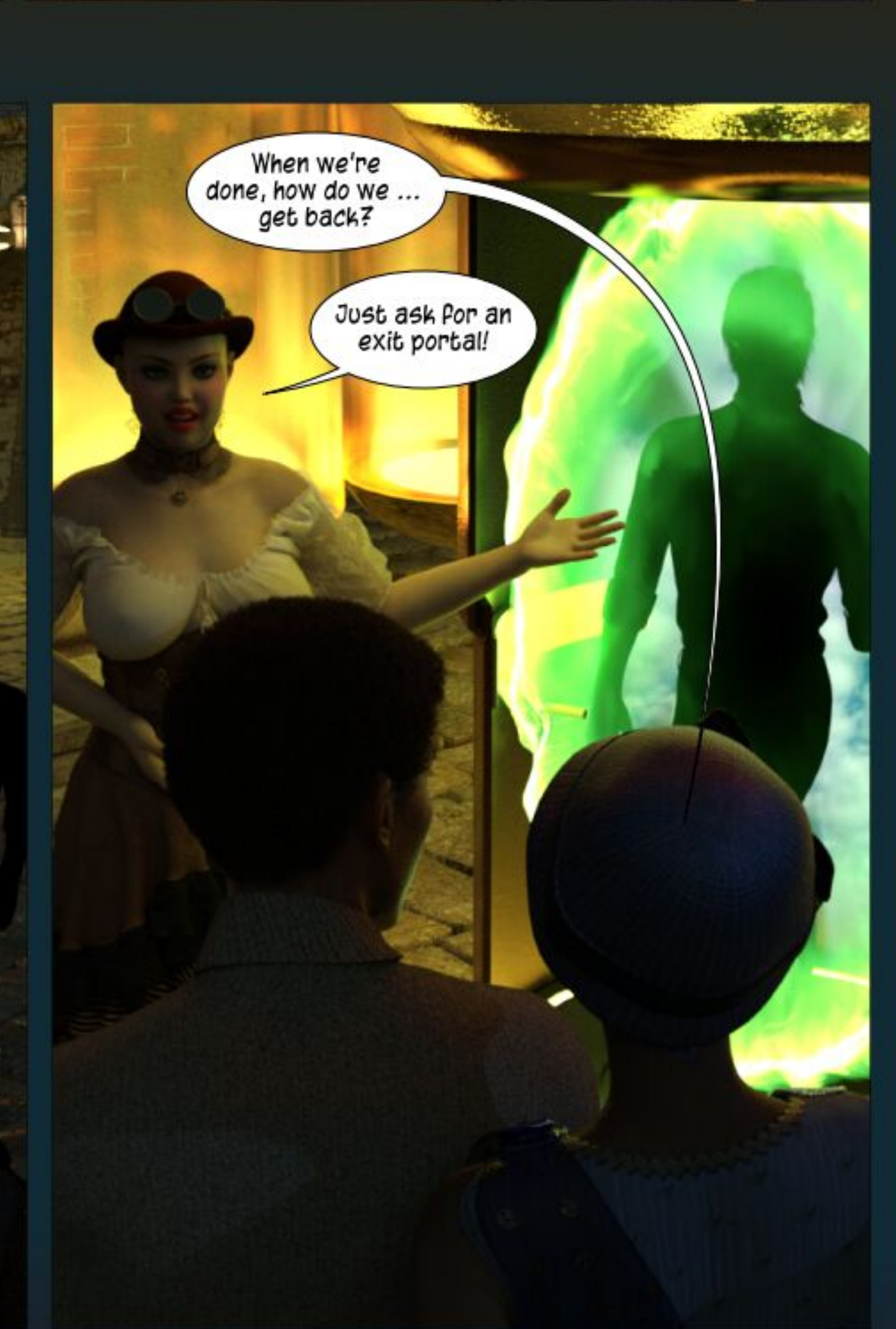
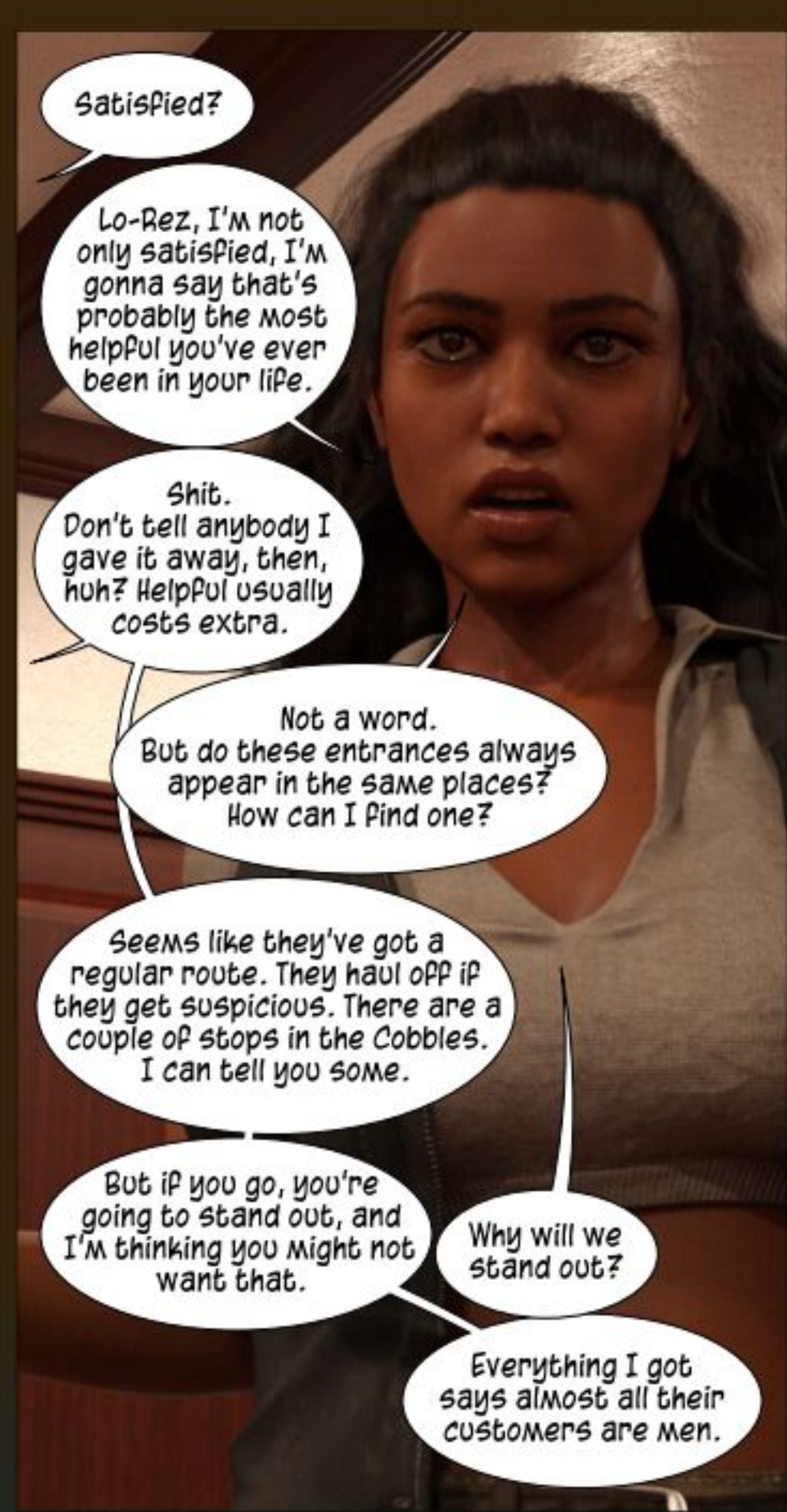
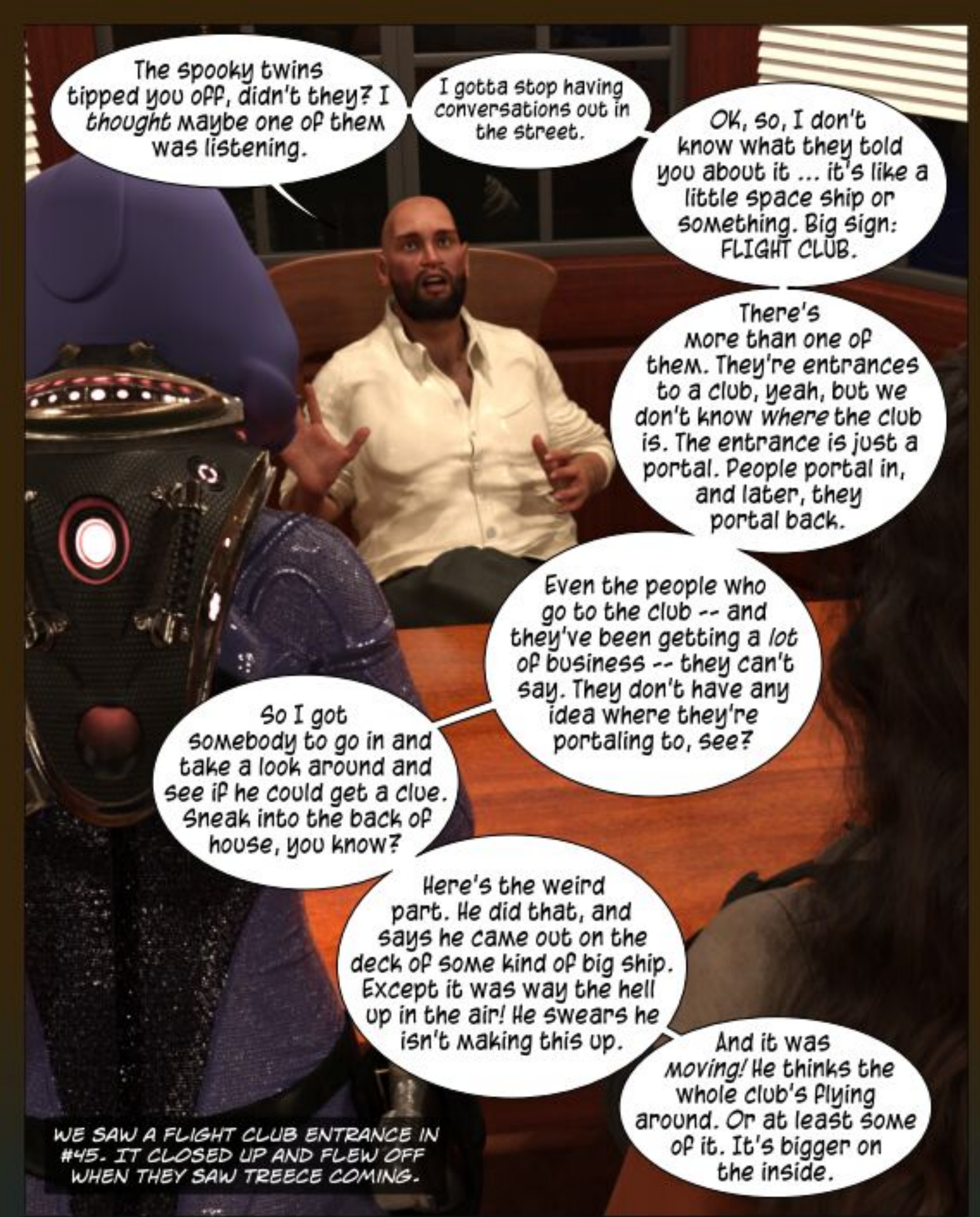
And I've had a really rotten day and I'm not in the mood, so you can just--



You've had a rotten day, asshole??

See, the thing is, my friend tells me she didn't actually get to beat the shit out of you last time you met, and since you're obviously a person who badly needs it, she regrets that missed opportunity ...

All right, all right! Sheesh.





Tell me about those new customers.

They're a couple. I sent them up with Nia. They looked fine to me. Is anything wrong?

I can't read an ID for either of them, which could mean several things ... and the hat one is wearing is an algorithmic item. I think it's some kind of shield.

I'd better keep an eye on them. Let me know if they do anything unusual.

Yes, ma'am.



Nice room.

She's just standing there ...



I'm waiting for you to tell me what you'd like to do.

Well, at least show some enthusiasm.



Oh! ...

Mmm ... uhh ...
Oh, that's ... definitely enthusiasm ...



It's got to be the collar. It's the one thing they're all wearing. Leave it on her and order her to help? Or take it off and hope she'll still help?

You ...
-- uhhh! --
... right now?

She might be more likely to help if we don't make her do something she didn't really want to do ...

-- ohhh! --
uhh ...
Pine.



AAAAAAA!



I'm going to kill him!!

Keep your voice down, or you won't get a chance to.

Look, we're going to wreck this place, I promise ... but we need to find two friends of ours first. They'd be new -- just got here today. Can you help us?



Hey! Stop!!

Oh, shit, Philomena!

How bad?

Spy, enforcer, chief bitch.

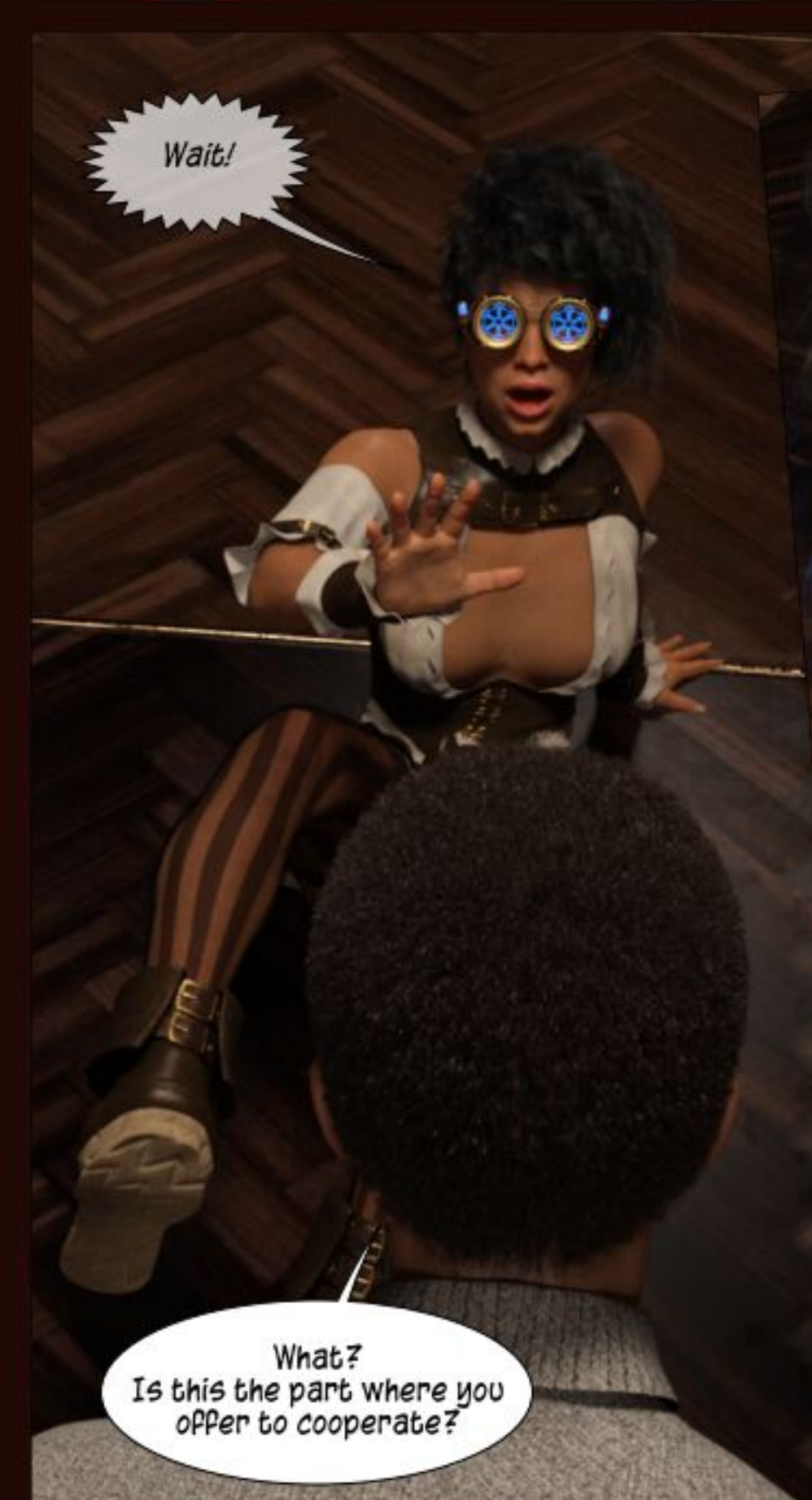
I'll deal with her. You two go start taking collars off people. And look for Gina and Leyna.

I'm serious! Stop or I'll shoot--



If you're gonna shoot, shoot, don't talk.

hwp



Wait!

What?
Is this the part where you offer to cooperate?



No.

This is the part where I use my emergency backup plan.



Come with me.

I'll deal with the others in a while ... but the old man's been neglecting me lately, and I need some Pun.



MMMM!

That's right, pose for me.

I don't understand the Men of A4 sometimes. So many of our customers are just ...

I know they know they could give themselves a body somebody'd actually want to Puck. They just don't. I don't know why not.

I think I want to oil you up. That'll be even better.

I know you just can't wait to put that in me ...



Wuh?

Ahhhh! No!

You know, the problem with a line-of-sight effect is that it only works as long as you maintain line of sight.



Don't kick me again!

That really hurt!

I'm not going to lay a hand on you.

Gonna show you a trick, though.

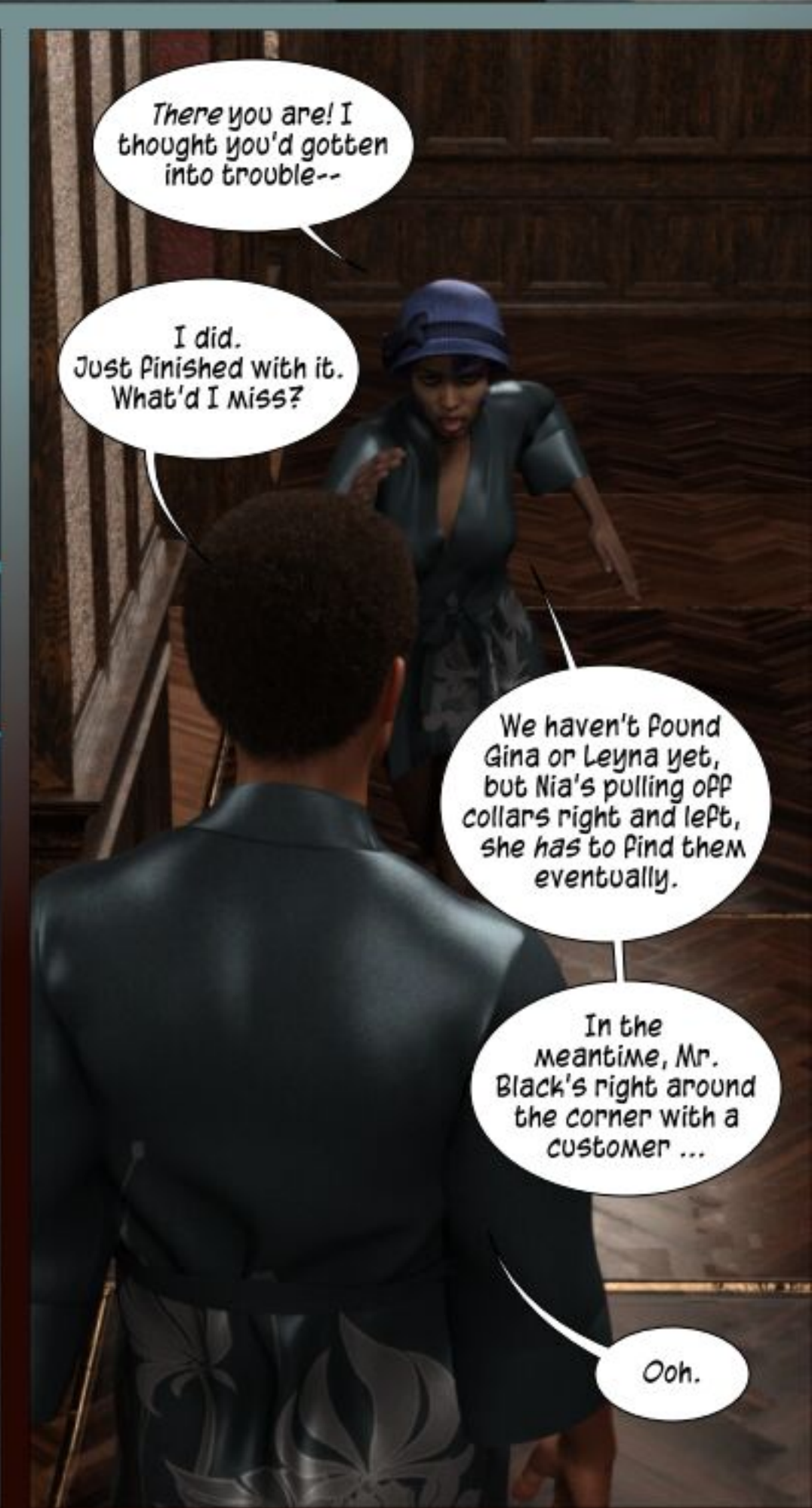


I just want you out of my way while I take this place apart. This business is being shut down. Including Mr. Black.

If you're smart, you'll recall out of here. If you're even smarter, you won't try to come back. This just became a place you don't want to be.

Mmrhph!

That was fun, though, thanks. I don't get to do that very often.



There you are! I thought you'd gotten into trouble--

I did. Just finished with it. What'd I miss?

We haven't found Gina or Leyna yet, but Nia's pulling off collars right and left, she has to find them eventually.

In the meantime, Mr. Black's right around the corner with a customer ...

Ooh.



I believe I've been able finally meet your special request. I'm sorry it's taken as long as it has.

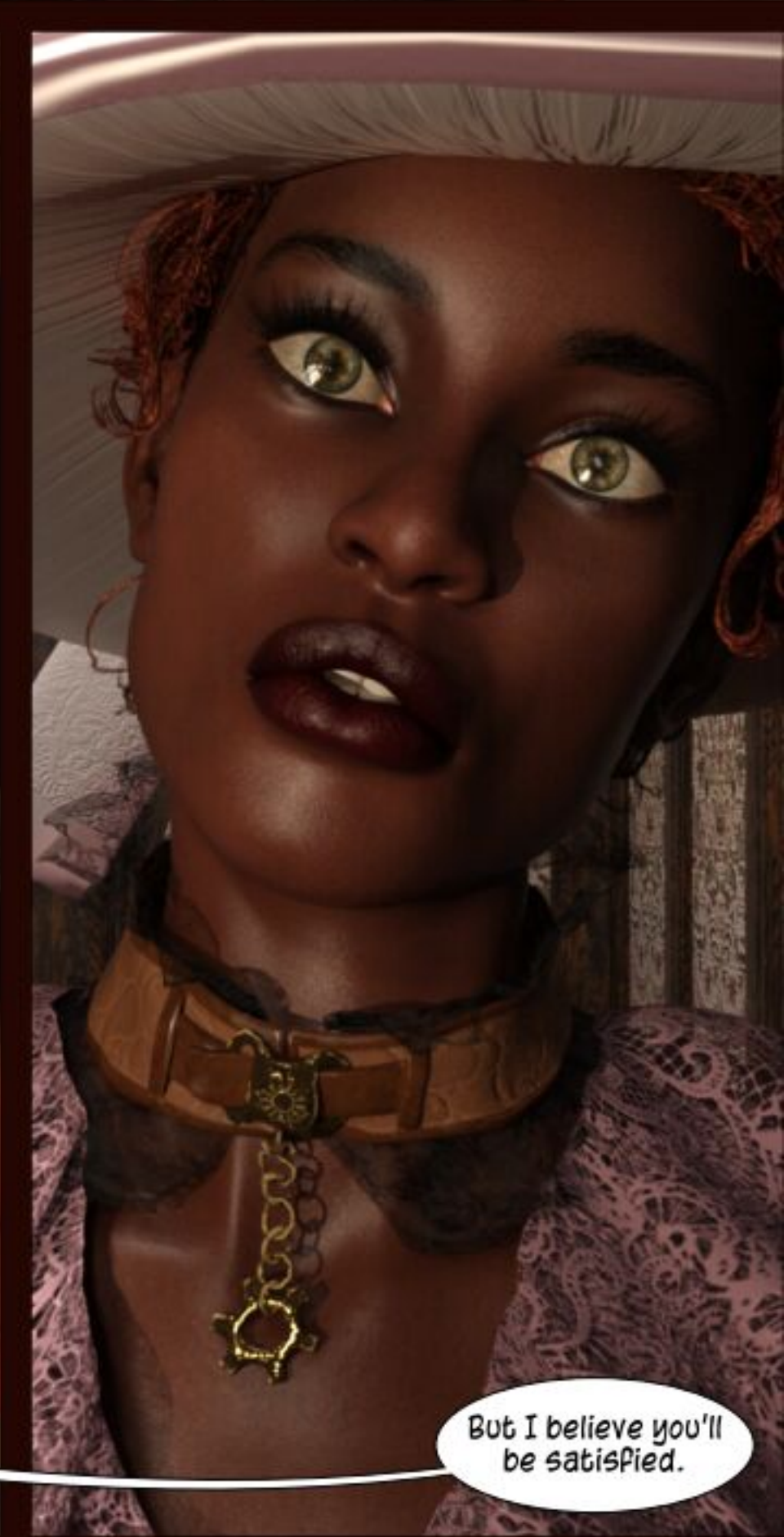
You must understand that even our new staff are rarely shy or inexperienced. The job attracts a particular type.

But I have a new arrival, only joined us today, whom I believe fits the bill perfectly.



Oh, yes, very nice.

Now, she is extremely new at this, so I'm going to ask you to tread lightly.



But I believe you'll be satisfied.



Let me know if there are any problems, of course --

YAAAA!

HYAAAAA

Hold on, Leyna, I'm coming!

Hey!

Hey yourself. Touch her and I'll knock your ass into next week.

Get out. We're closed.



Who are you?

Are you a customer? What do you think you're doing?

Philomena!!

She's not available.

She and I talked. I told her I was shutting this whole Pucking place down. I'd guess she's gone by now.

Get away from me, you maniac!



Asshole!

shitbag!

I'm going to tear your dick off!

You're going to supper!

You Pucked up my life!

Oh, well, since you asked so nicely.

You'll still have to deal with them, though.



Back off, you jackals!!

Jackals? You promised me a management job!

You told me it was a rare business opportunity!



Get away! Get away!

You can't touch me! I made sure of that! You don't have any jurisdiction up here! Nobody does! I don't have a location!

Come on, Black, there's nowhere for you to go!

Cuts both ways, doesn't it? You're not anywhere, so nobody has any right to stop me from shutting your ass down!

You think it's that easy?

Yeow! Shit!

Black, you idiot! You're going to hit your own ship!



Who are you?

It's Ruby and Ranza. We had to come in disguise. Glad you found us!

Oh, shit! Thurmer!

You know who he is?

Not until you knocked his goggles off. Rick Thurmer. Ran a house in the Cobbles.* Just as shifty. Same tricks. Got thrown out of the Cobbles for it too, I heard.

* #33.

Hey!!

Oh, he did hit the ship.

It's spreading inside!

OK. Gina, Leyna, get everybody out. All the portals they can open, recall, whatever, but get them out.

Millie, Ranza -- we've got to cut all the ballooners free. Fast.

Where are you going?

There's a top canopy. I gotta get rid of it or cutting them loose or the envelopes won't be enough.

YIII!

Ruby!!

I'm OK! Don't worry about me!

Canopy's off! Are they loose?

Millie's cutting the last one!

We just lost an engine!

I guessed that!

You two get clear! Millie, recall if you can't balloon fast enough!

... aaaand Thurmer's gone. OP course.

I'll get you sooner or later, asshole.

But now it's time to be somewhere else.

With the balloons gone, this ship is going to go down fast!

INTERLUDE

THE YARDS.



A very attractive residence, don't you think, Rhi?

Oh, most definitely, Tri.



hmm?

Well, it's not one of mine. They're all in for the night ...



Where are you, silly creature?

Are you lost?



MMWhmp!

Good evening. My name is Tri. That's Rhi over there.

Our beloved Filthy suggested that we come find you.

Rhi, why don't you have Filthy stand up, so she can see her.



MMWh!

Filthy needs a companion, you see. Someone who's at her level, so to speak.

We think you will do nicely, isn't that right, Rhi?

Absolutely, Tri.



MS. LEE'S ESTABLISHMENT, THE COBBLES.

Why, Mr. Church! At this hour?

It's nearly dawn! Far too late to make any arrangements for tonight ...

I'm not here for that.



I need a favor.

For various reasons, I don't have a safe place to stay right now.

I was hoping I could impose upon your hospitality. For a few days. Just until I figure out what to do next.

I've been searching for other options. You're my last resort.



Well, I'm not a resort. Nor a hotel.

But you've been a good customer for years. I'm sure we can work something out.

You look like you've had a really bad night. Sit down. I'll pour you a drink. That'll steady you a bit.



Feel any better now?

Yes, I ... uh ...

Would you like another?

Uuuhh ...



You know, you're not supposed to be here at this hour either.

Sorry, I wanted to come check on Treece, but I had a mess to clean up first, and it took a while.

Y'know ... if you want to be the one to keep him on ice, that's great ...

... but a lot of other people want a crack at him right now. What I mean is, there's no reason he should be your problem. You should probably just hand him to Clayton.

Yet, somehow, I don't get the feeling that's what you plan to do.

Hm.

Let's sit down. There are some things I think you should probably be told.



Thing is, I know you can keep secrets.

Darla told me you were very careful when you visited Clayton's home today, and you haven't told anyone where he lives, or that she showed you. I appreciate that. So does she.

While you may not like the way the Cobbles is run, he's not really a horror. He's not a good man, and he doesn't know how to be, but as we've seen today, it could be a lot worse.

You're protecting him, aren't you? You were OK with Church until he went after Clayton directly.

Well, I'm also protecting the Cobbles, in a way. I might have had to interfere with Church if he got any further in his plans. But my interference would have been along the lines of getting Clayton to do something. If Clayton is unable ...

But, yes. I like Clayton. Despite everything. I don't want anything bad to happen to him.

I have to ask why. I mean, you are definitely seeing something in him I'm not.



Do you remember Lucy?

Clayton's lover? Sure. I guess they were together for years? But when Melinda got into their heads, it wrecked their relationship ... I have some of this only from Leyna, but she thinks they couldn't trust each other anymore.

We were worried about her after that ... she wasn't dealing with it well. She helped us get Melinda, and it seemed like that steadied her, but we never did get to check on her again. We lost track of her in the Sprue.

What's she got to do with anything?

She's me.

THE FULL SET OF LUCY APPEARANCES WOULD TAKE TOO MUCH SPACE TO LIST HERE. SHE WAS LAST SEEN IN #28.



And you are the only other person in the world who knows that, so don't tell a soul. Especially not Clayton.

After Melinda I had to figure out what to do. I couldn't just let myself drift, I'd seen where that ended up. So I landed here. I didn't come here just to keep watch on Clayton, but it's a nice benefit.

This is what I actually look like, more or less. "Lucy" was always a fake. It was me trying to be what I thought certain people wanted. I don't do that anymore.

But I think Clayton did actually love Lucy, to the extent he was capable of loving anybody ...

... and I actually loved him. To the extent that anyone can.

And if somebody comes for him, they have a fight with me.

That includes you.



Huh.

Well, you've definitely made the case that you should be the one to get this asshole.

But now that you've got him, what are you going to do with him?

Oh, I'll do what I told him I'd do -- I'll give him a safe place to hide. Indefinitely.

Of course, to really hide him, he'll need to change his appearance. And as I said, I don't run a hotel. He'll have to earn his keep.

We'll work something out.

PIET AND PAOLO'S PERSONAL SPACE, A LITTLE EARLIER THAT NIGHT (BUT STILL QUITE LATE).



Of all the people, at all the times ...

Yeah, yeah, I know, but I really need your help.



I've got nowhere else to go. Nowhere safe ...

I don't want to know, Fil.

I'm serious. My life is better not knowing what kind of trouble you've gotten into this time, who you've pissed off, who you're running from.

I mean, it's always gonna be somebody, right?

C'mon, Paolo, I'm begging!



You and I are the only family each other has! We've got to help each other out when we're in trouble! I'd do it for you, you know that!

I don't get into the same kind of trouble you do.

-- sigh --
OK, look, you've got a point.

The problem is, you picked a really bad time.



Piet found out today the Boss is Clayton Barker.

A while back, before the Sprue, Clayton was making a power grab and Piet refused to play, so Clayton came along with some muscle and tried to beat the shit out of both of us.

Piet's had an axe for him ever since. He gets pissed off if you even mention Clayton. Now it turns out we've been living under Clayton's roof for years. And paying him a cut!

I've never seen him this mad. I don't know what he's going to decide to do.

I don't even know if we're going to be living in the Cobbles tomorrow.

NEXT: SPARE PARTS