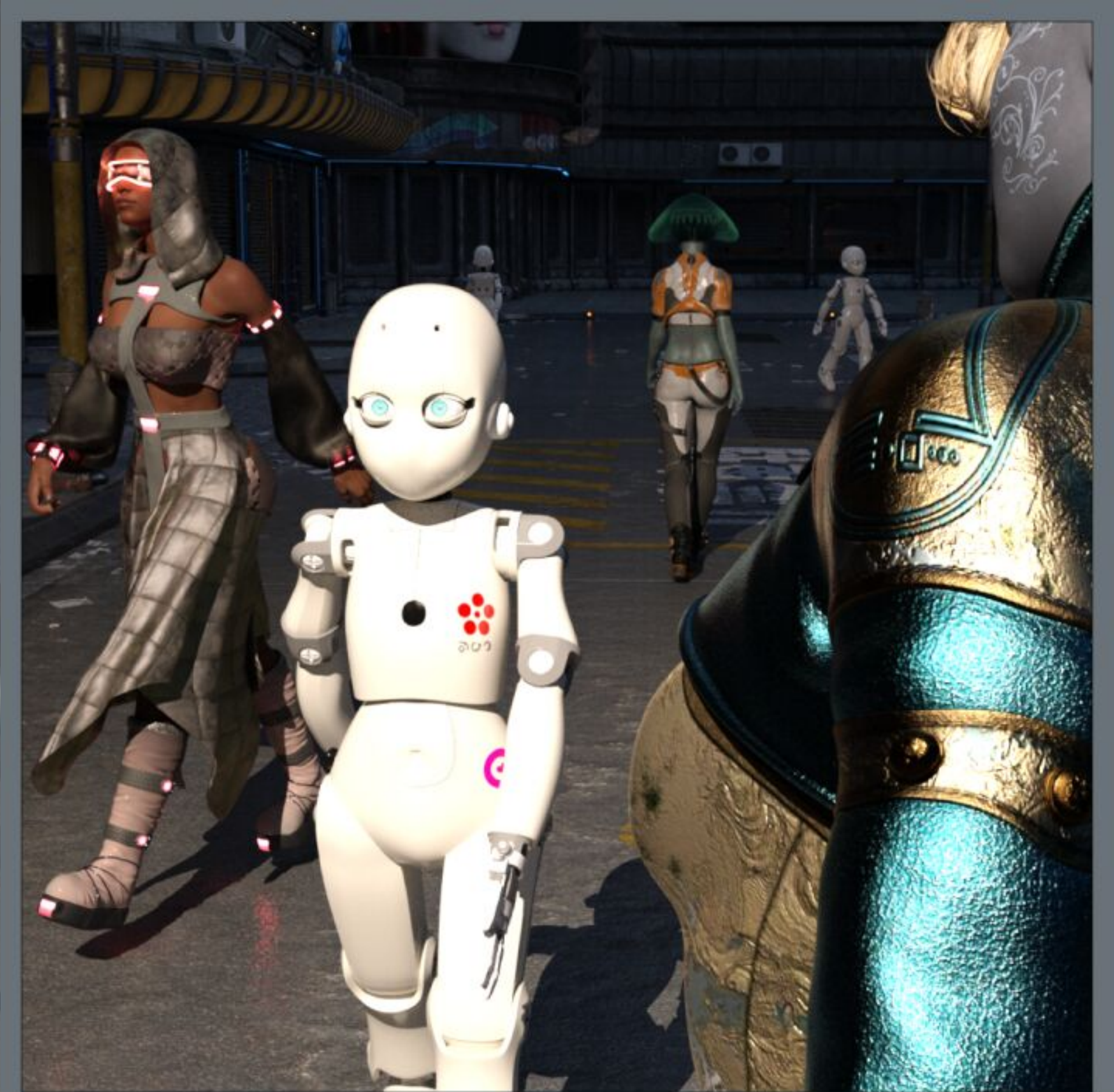


SLEEPER SQUAD

CENTURY.



S P A R E P A R T S

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



... it's just radio! Ancient tech. So ancient it didn't even occur to me, until I saw them using it for all kinds of things in Spindrop.

Oh, you know what? Threadbare even said that was how she was talking to me, after she patched me. I didn't make the connection.

OK, so that solves how the babybots and brainbots were talking to each other. Kind of. How does it cross data blocks?

I think only if they have a physical connection. It's a signal. A broadcast medium.

Anyway, one loose end crossed off the list.

Speaking of that, do you have any leftovers from that Cobble's business I should know about?

SPINDROP: #47
BABYBOTS: #46
BRAINBOTS: #43



None for us. They'll be a while recovering, I guess, but that's not our problem. And since Clayton won't make it his problem, either, it's probably mostly Treece's. I feel bad for her.

Though I guess she did know what she was getting into.

Against us? No. Actually, I'm on his good list at least for a little while, especially since I'm keeping his identity secret for him.

Do we have to worry about Clayton holding any grudges?

Yeah, about that ... Church really didn't know who he was?

Church knew what "the Boss" looked like, had met him ... but didn't know who he really was. Almost nobody does. There are some people who knew Clayton from before the Sprue, and he hasn't changed his looks ... but those people mostly haven't seen the Boss, so they don't connect the dots.

That reminds me. Clayton can't fix his problem patients, and he's hoping we can. I've got a list. I didn't make him any promises.

OK. We'll bring them up at the meeting.

We'd probably better get going.



I wasn't sure if you'd want to come.

Got keep flag. Case you say 'hey Jex, got pull' and han't catch crux.

We wouldn't blindside you. If we needed you to help deal with them, I'd make sure you had the facts.

But since we probably will need you, you might as well stay up to speed. I don't think some of this is going to go very well.

Hey! Some positivity, please?



Ah!

Where's the special guest star?

Should be along any minute now.

Who's this?

This is Josie Zhao, my new apprentice.

Josie, these are Leyna Otis, Jex Haley, and Ruby Martinez.

EVEN NOW, LEYNA DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY LET PEOPLE KNOW SHE IS A BARKER.



They don't bite. In most circumstances.

... Good to know.

Jex is a comparatively recent arrival to sleep.

Why don't you two go on ahead to Holding #1? She might be willing to answer a few of your questions.



You didn't tell me you were taking an apprentice.

Got want ask?

Well, there's a hypothesis about people who've come to sleep as adults ...

I hadn't had a chance to.

I put my name back in the list of active instructors at the college a while ago. First time in years.

She's what came out of that. I haven't had any other takers. But she's good. Very capable.

I might get more. Interest is up. If I do, I'll have to decide if one is all I can handle.

Interest is up? I'm a little surprised.



You're thinking of the college in terms of "learn something better to pay your bed fees." Most people do.

That's what just about killed studying psychology. Even though the Barkers subsidize education, no one saw a path to a better job in that subject matter.

Nobody wanted to pay for psychological help, though they'd pay for self-empowerment grippers and that kind of garbage.

Do they want to pay for it now?

No, not really. But with the bed fees gone, people are realizing that there's no penalty anymore for taking the time to learn things just because they want to.

But Josie's not just broadening her mind. She wants to practice psychology. And, honestly, we need her. I need her. I'm tired of being A4's sole mental health practitioner, especially as it becomes clear how poorly everyone here is doing in that direction.

Huh. I wish I could argue with that.



Oh, good, this is the right place.

Hello, Backwren! Thank you for coming.



So line them up for me. How many cases?

Chad Cantwell.

And I have three who didn't recover from the Sprue interrupt, but that's probably a different situation.

The Ply dude and his jar of Plies. Not sure how many. They're hard to count at that size.

And Naomi has a room full of babybots in Century. Algo gear we can't remove. About thirty.

Five coma victims and I don't know how many sexdolls we can't recover in the Cobble, all from algo drugs, because if Church had antidotes he didn't tell anyone.

And Church's street fighters with the claws. More than twenty. Weird combination of algo gear and old-school brainwash.

The, uh, bananas. Four of them. And I suppose we should think of letting the banana lady out of her can at some point.

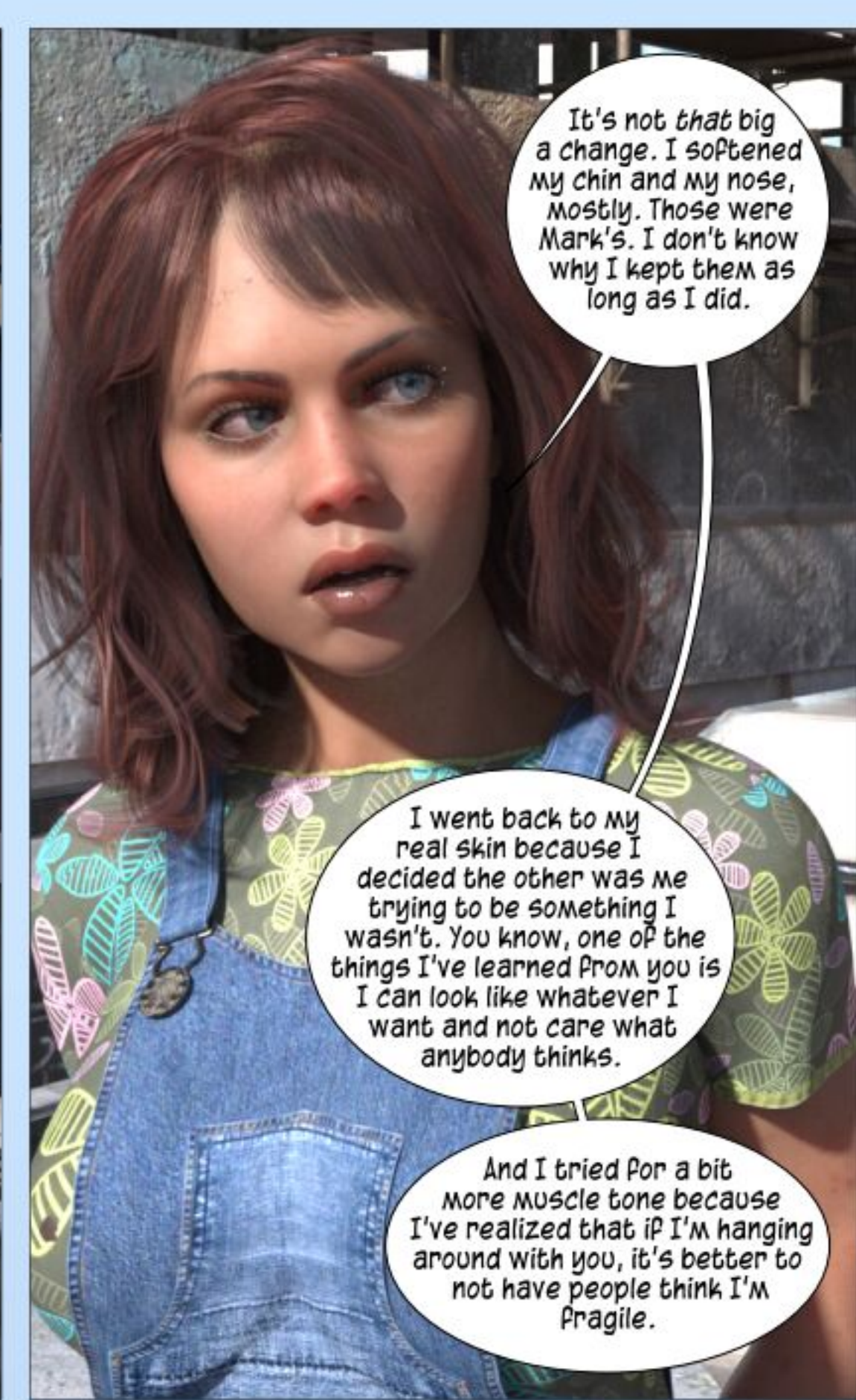


So you Polks are the cleanup crew for all of A4 now?

Welcome to my life.

Seems like it, doesn't it?

But we're not asking you to help fix all of them. What we're hoping to get from you is techniques -- methods we can use to fix them.







aaaaaaa

Not if you miss, huh?
Now, dropping you onto your big metal ass -- that's going to hurt.



Sorry if I gave you some bruises.
I needed to knock you out of it, and I didn't have time to modulate.
I'll live. Thanks, Nina.
Are we going to have to chase it now?
I can't actually damage it much, just blow it around.
We should, yeah -- it's making those little orange bots -- but ...

let us seek greener pastures.

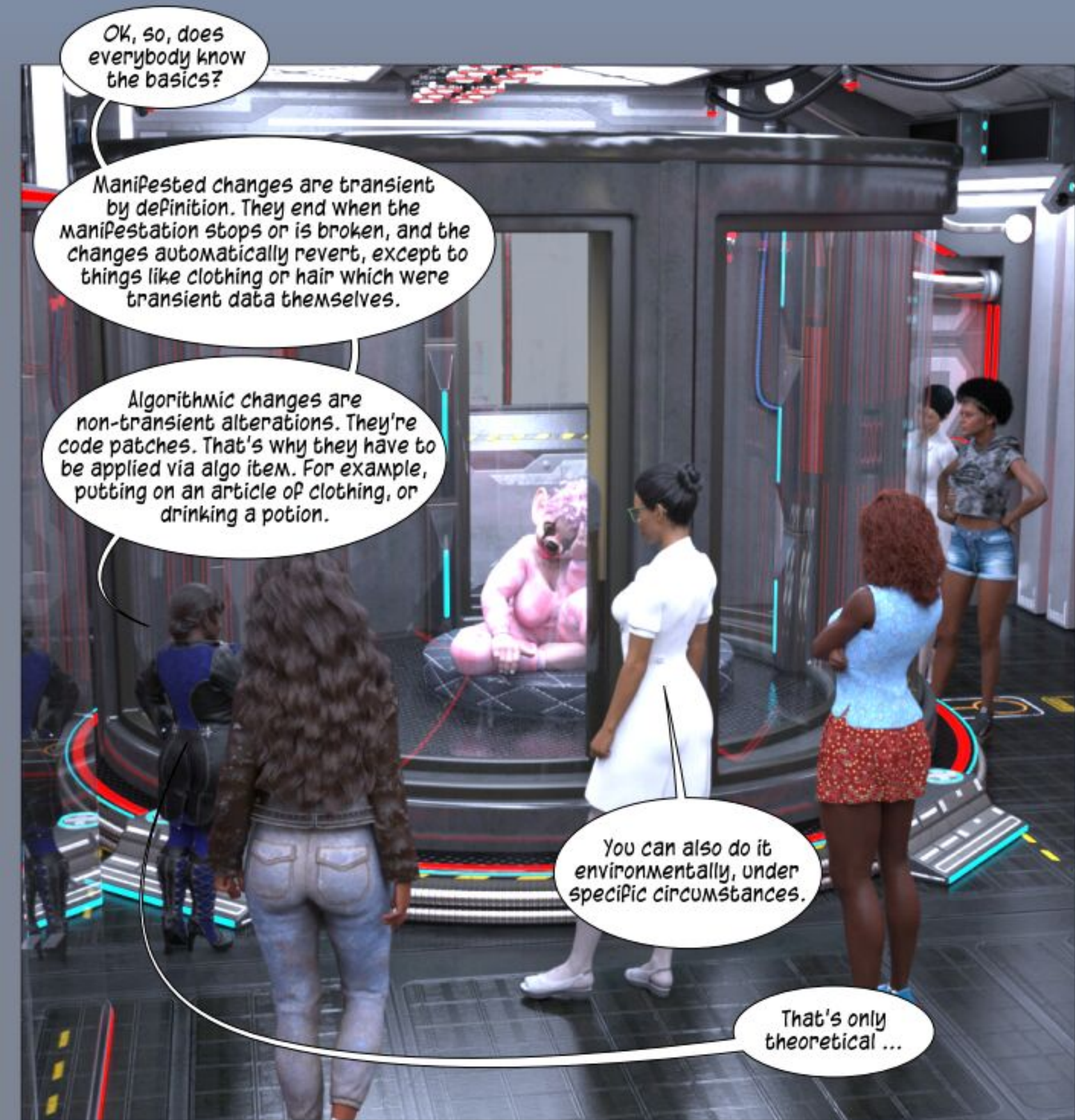
WE MET NINA COLEMAN, AKA "THE SYLPH," IN #43.

... that's the one Naomi went after. Unless there's two of them.

I don't know why she's not on its ass right now ...



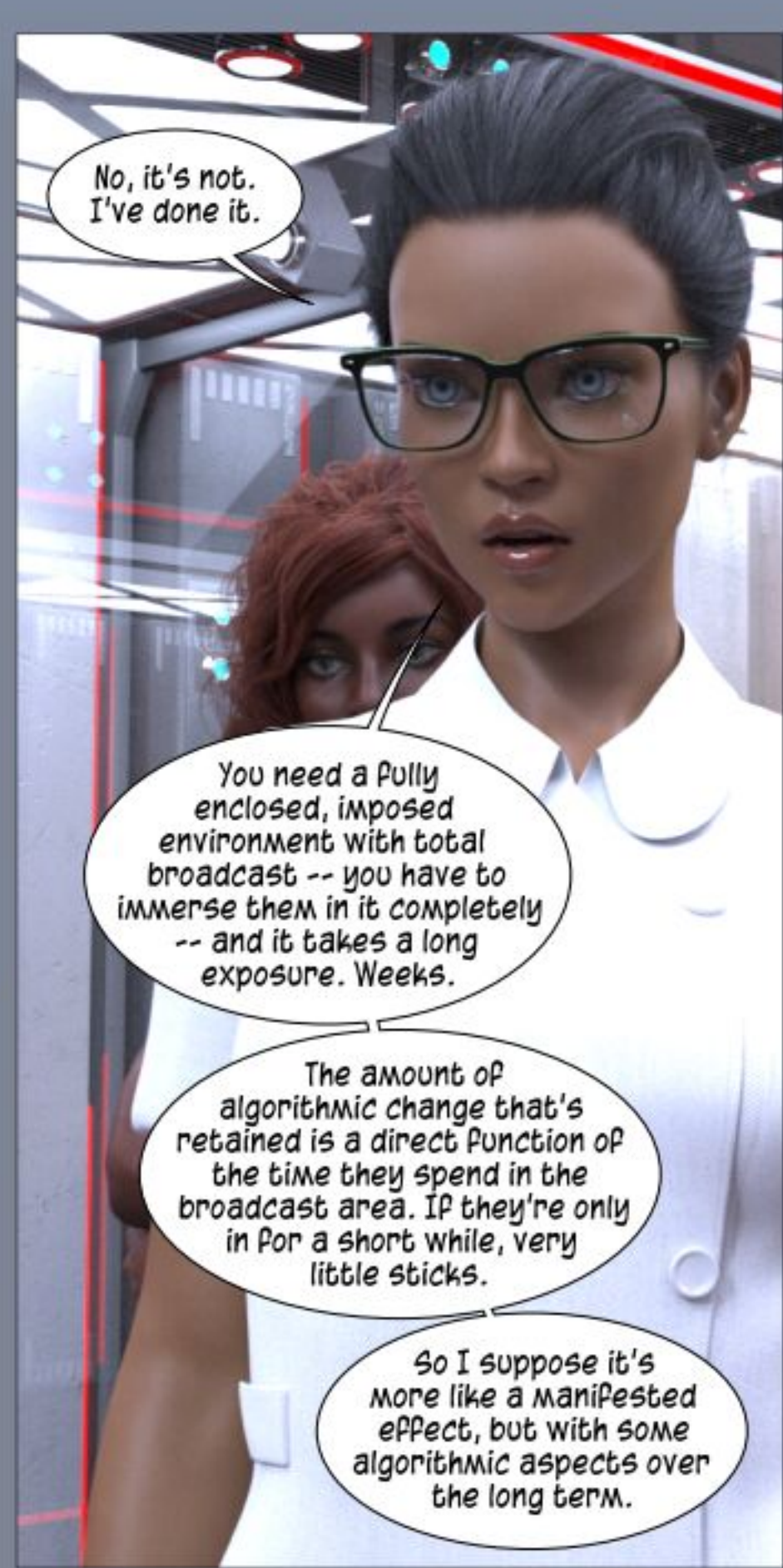
I hope she didn't run into trouble.



OK, so, does everybody know the basics?
Manifested changes are transient by definition. They end when the manifestation stops or is broken, and the changes automatically revert, except to things like clothing or hair which were transient data themselves.
Algorithmic changes are non-transient alterations. They're code patches. That's why they have to be applied via algo item. For example, putting on an article of clothing, or drinking a potion.

You can also do it environmentally, under specific circumstances.

That's only theoretical ...



No, it's not. I've done it.
You need a fully enclosed, imposed environment with total broadcast -- you have to immerse them in it completely -- and it takes a long exposure. Weeks.
The amount of algorithmic change that's retained is a direct function of the time they spend in the broadcast area. If they're only in Por a short while, very little sticks.
So I suppose it's more like a manifested effect, but with some algorithmic aspects over the long term.



I, uh ...
They told me you were a psychologist.
I am.
At one point I felt that algorithmic methods could be useful in psychological treatment.
I don't believe that anymore.



Anyway, so, the only reliable way to lose an algo effect is to remove the patch. For an item, that's usually easy ... but Por something ingested, you just have to hope it has a time limit.
If the victim can recall, then they can reload a prior version of data that doesn't have the alterations, but if the effects make it impossible for them to recall, as they often do, they're out of luck.
And Por a direct code change ... I don't think anyone outside Spindrop does those, but ... I only know one case where a person reverted a direct patch on their own, and one of these days I'm going to sit down with Ruby and ask a lot of questions about how she did it.



You'll be disappointed. I'm not very algorithmic.
Leyna would describe me as an intuitive process.



Well, it would still be fun to sit down with you.
Maybe a private conversation.
The problem now is there are people making algo effects, but they're not coding them the old way, they're just doing it. We can't reverse-engineer those. The data's unstructured.
Damn. That's what I was hoping you knew how to do!
Sorry. But I have something else that does work -- mostly -- and it's so dumb you're going to kick yourself.

IN #47, WHEN SHE REMOVED THE ROBOT EFFECT.

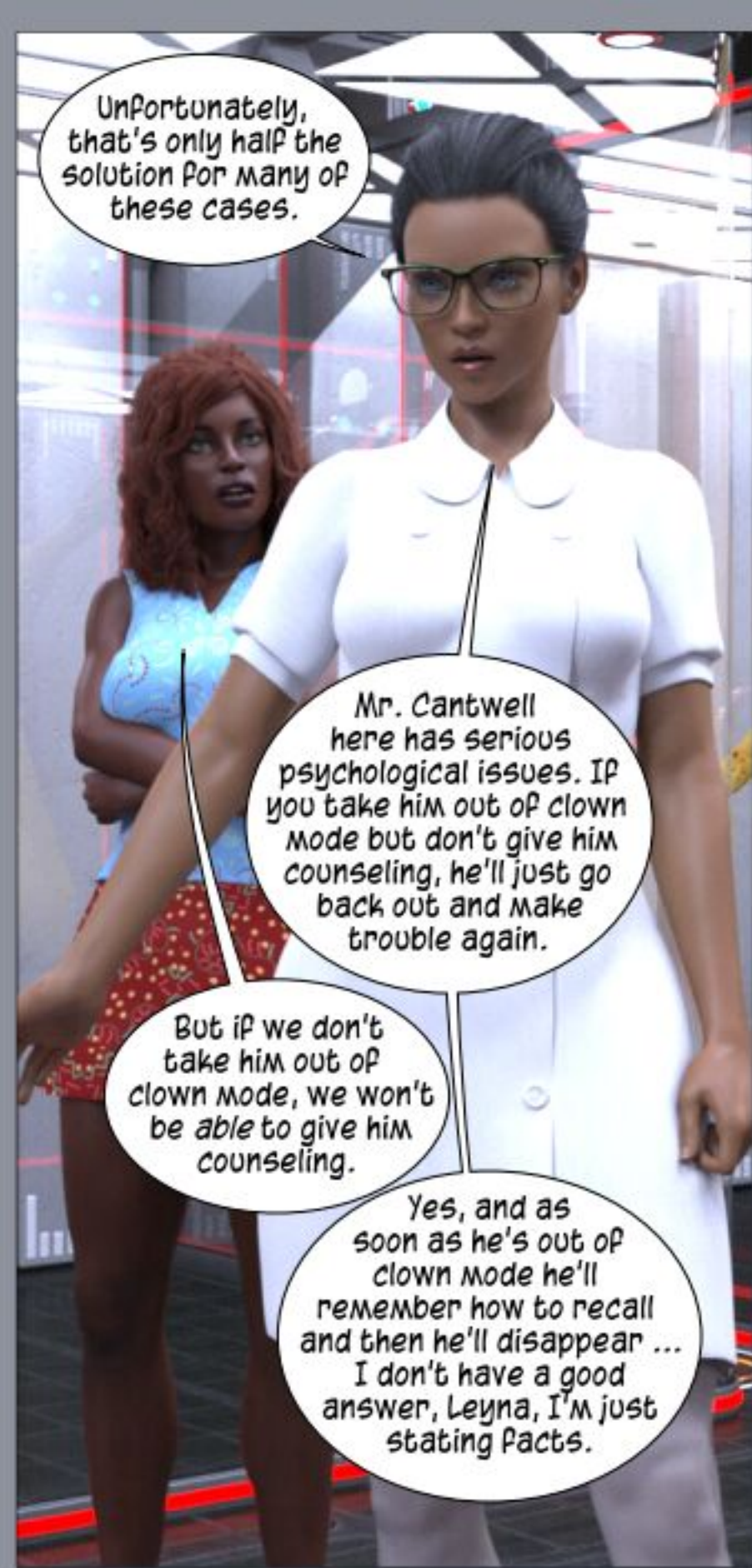


First, find out exactly what the algorithmic apply did in the first place.

Then just create another item whose algo effect is to exactly undo the previous algo effect.

You don't need to be able to reverse-engineer a patch if you can just apply another patch that does the opposite. Kind of a cheat, but it's all we've got, for now.

hee hee hee



Unfortunately, that's only half the solution for many of these cases.

Mr. Cantwell here has serious psychological issues. If you take him out of clown mode but don't give him counseling, he'll just go back out and make trouble again.

But if we don't take him out of clown mode, we won't be able to give him counseling.

Yes, and as soon as he's out of clown mode he'll remember how to recall and then he'll disappear ... I don't have a good answer, Leyna, I'm just stating facts.



It's a real problem even before that! For example, we can make something to change this one back from a banana, but is that the only thing that happened? Were there mental changes? It doesn't look like they're in any condition to tell us ...

No, and the person who could best tell us is the one who did it to them ... and if we let her out ...

... same problem again. We need something more.



Well ...

There is an algo device you can put on someone which should keep them from being able to portal or recall. Or, at least, I know one exists. I don't know if it's ever been used.

I see some ethical concerns with that.

To say the least.



I don't know ... if we're only confining them as long as they need counseling ...

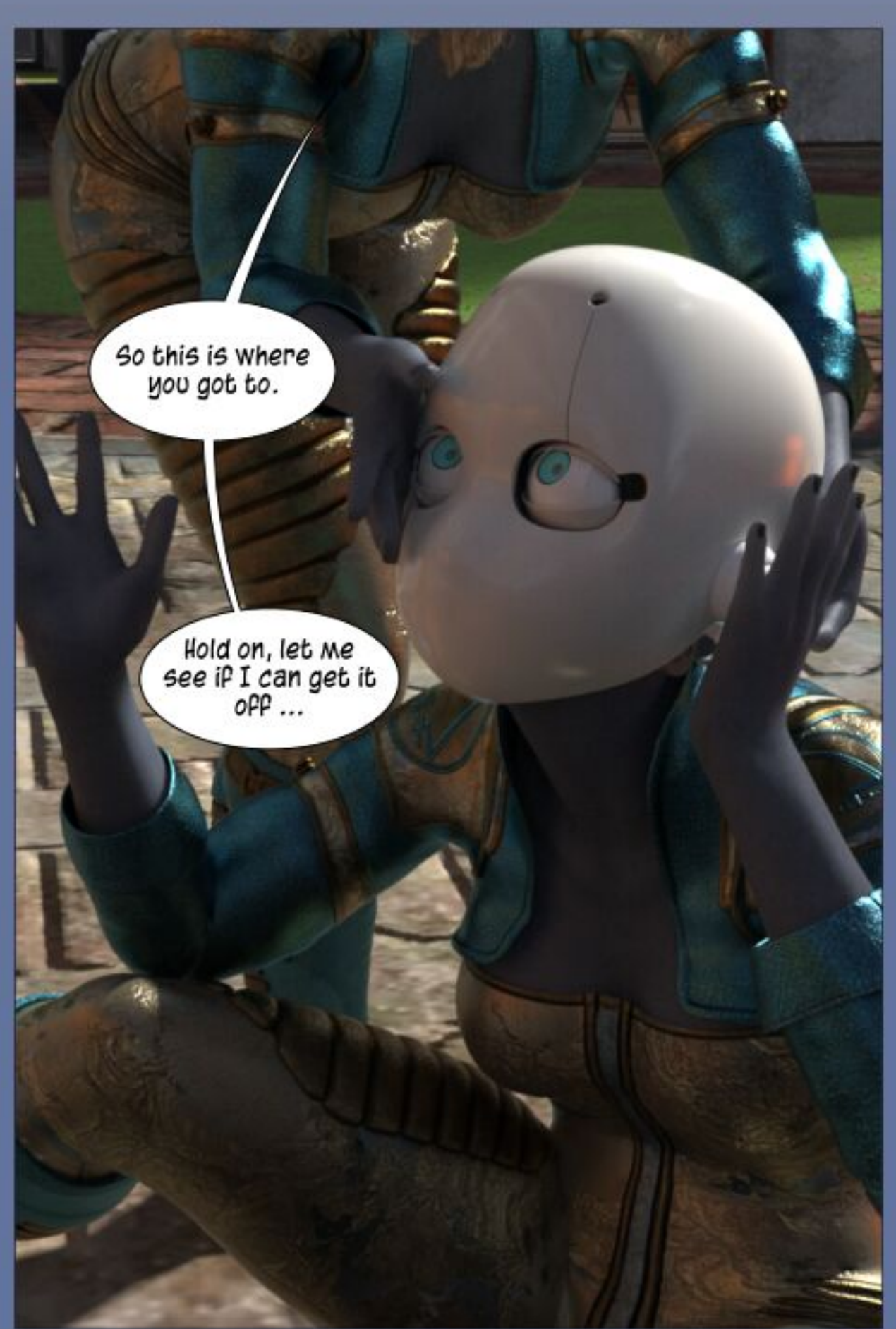
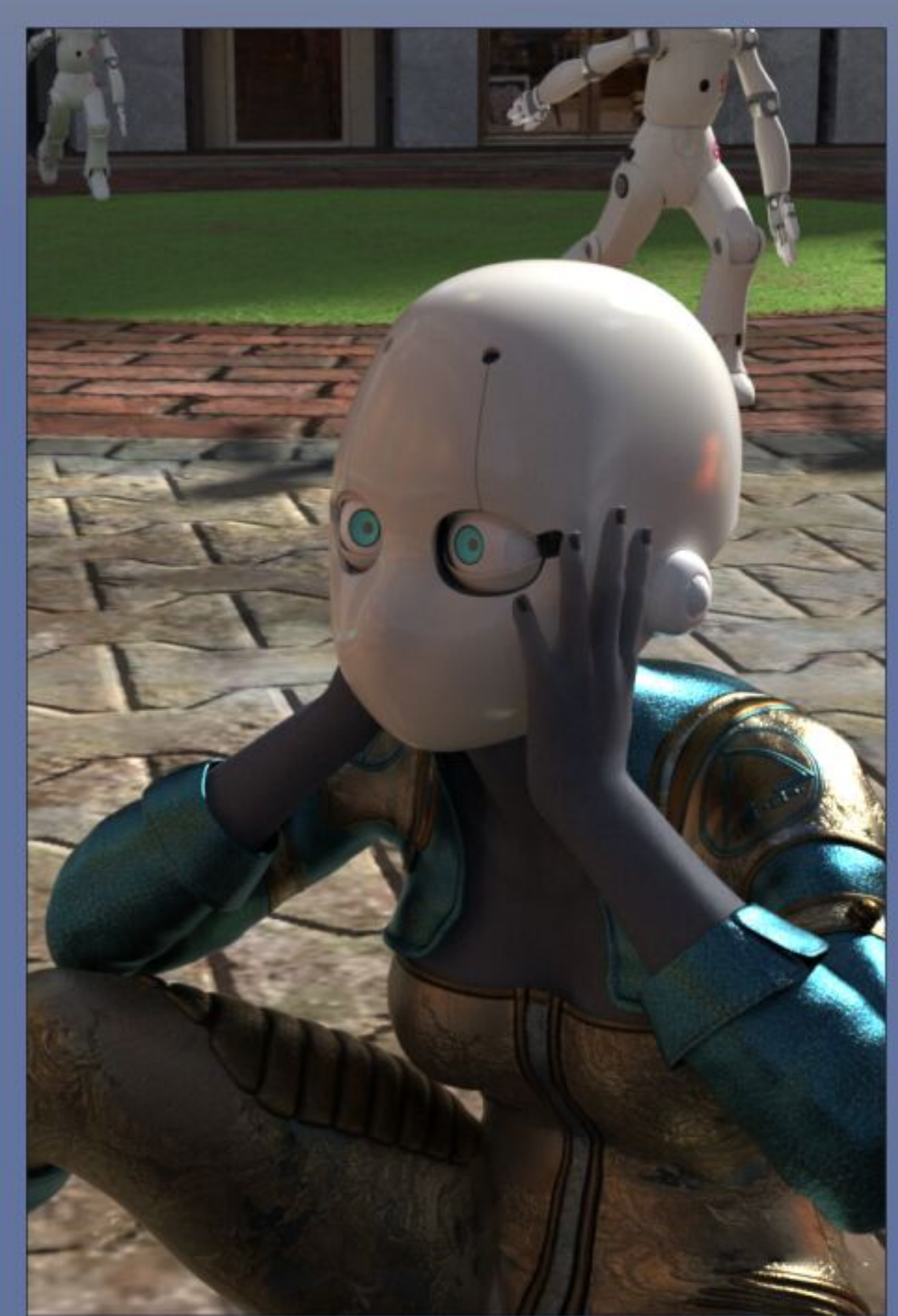
You're not the one who'll be trying to provide therapy to a patient who's resentful about being trapped.

Who decides who deserves that? This is a first step to incarceration. You do see that, I hope?

But it's so we can help them! I don't see a problem here.

-- sigh -- I'm going to remind you later that you said that.

... I'll need to go back to Spindrop and talk to the Engineer.



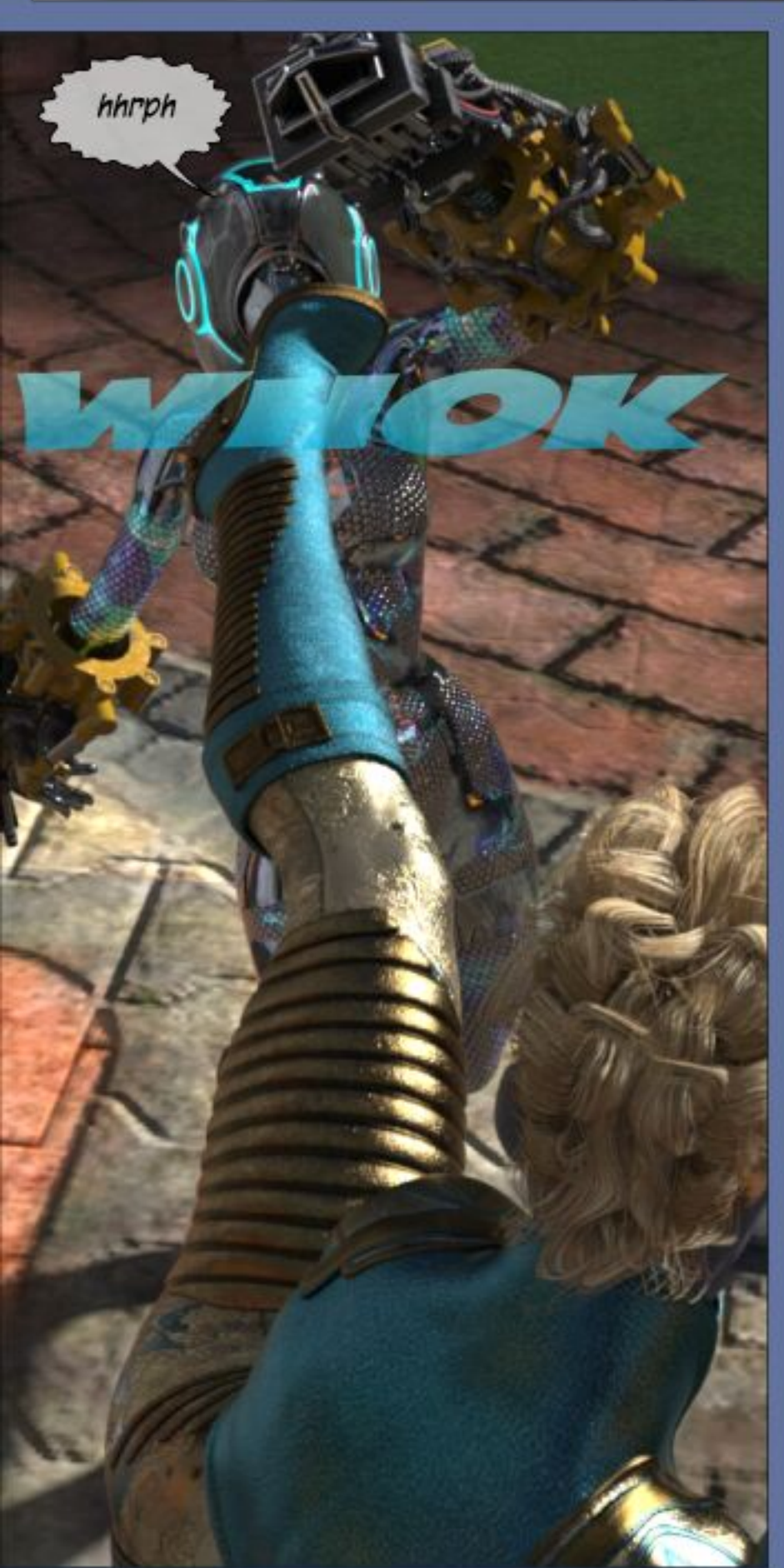
So this is where you got to.

Hold on, let me see if I can get it off ...

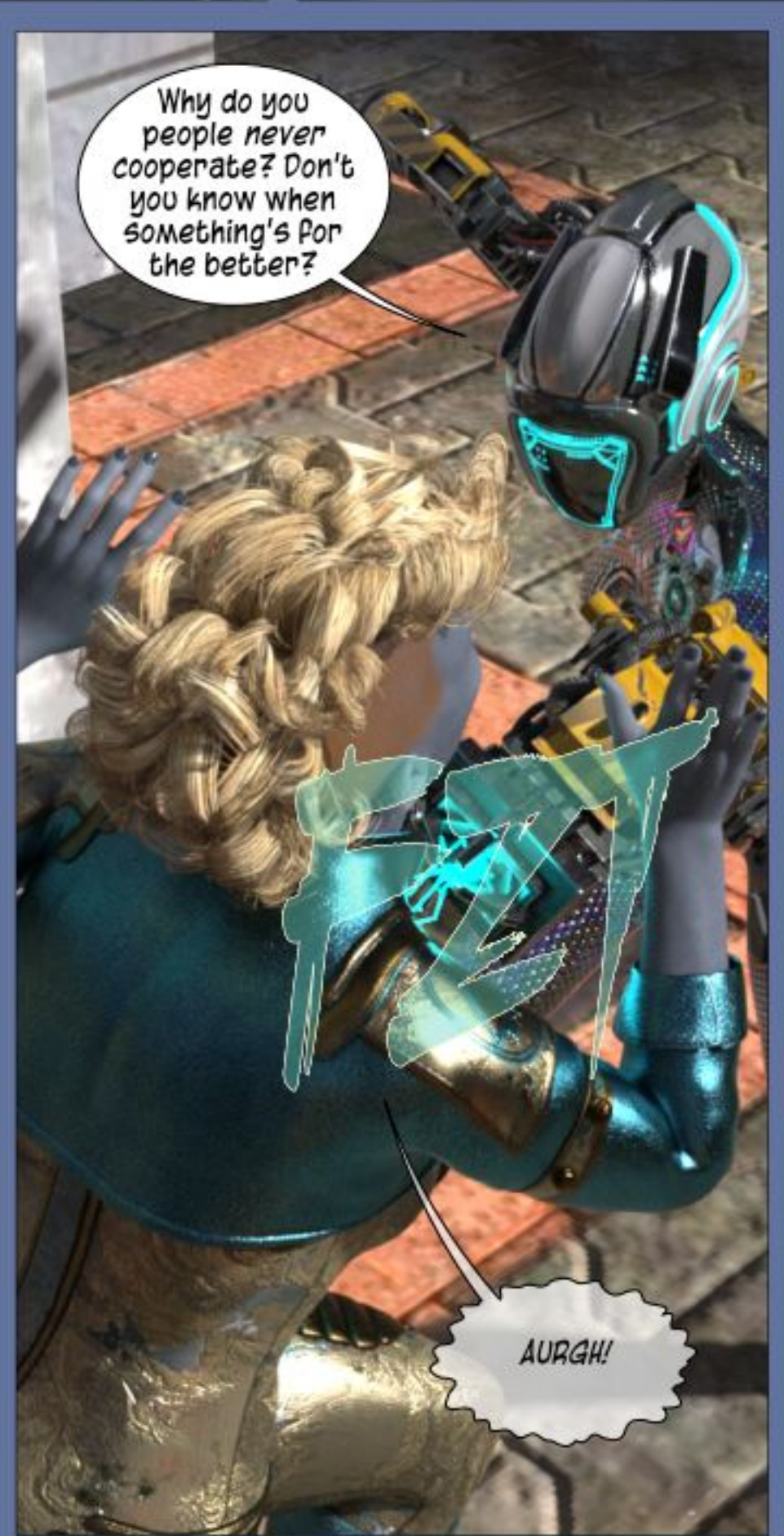


Two of you?

Well, you'll still get to be twins ...



hhrph



Why do you people never cooperate? Don't you know when something's for the better?

AURGH!



That's enough!

Another? How many of you are there?

Get off!



Don't guess there's --

No. She'd hide and snipe us.

And we can't run in these shoes.

What about B?

Keep away from me!

Changed. We'll have to figure out how to get them loose.

We need a bigger hitter.

urgh!

Hang on, Salamander!



ROCKET KICK, BABY!



You OK?

... Will be.

Might need to mend a couple of bones.



What happened?

Fire doesn't bother them at all.

... Did they kick me so hard I'm seeing double, or are there two of you?

It's a long story.

Hey, this one's changed back!



How'd you manage it?

Kicked her into a wall and her helmet thing came off.

Oh, good. That means we can recover the others. Of course there's not much point, until we get the person who's making them ...

... and she wasn't even the one I was after! We still need to go deal with the big bot first. -- sigh --



Fabian -- it's Fabian, right?

Yeah. I still don't have a title card. I'm having trouble picking a name ...

Fabian, what can you do? I mean your hero abilities. Just so I know, for strategy?

Oh! Uh ... I can kick things really hard. Punch, too, but not as hard, or I might break my hands. Need better gloves.

And I can fly ... for short bursts. Enough to get up to high places. Not enough to hover.

WE MET FABIAN IN #46.

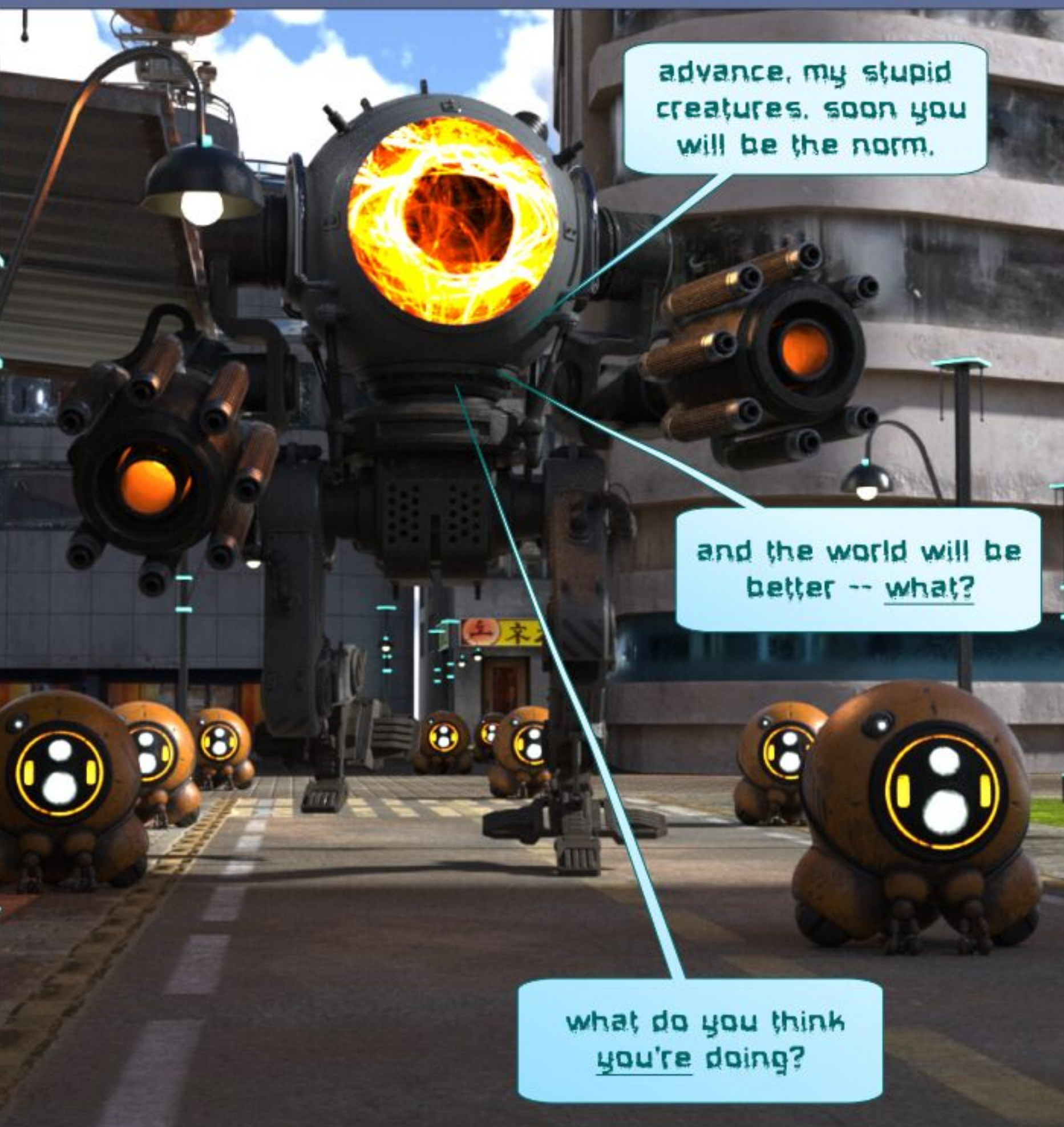


The two of us might not be enough, not if we get both of them at the same time. We really could use another --

Oh, hey.

If you're looking for the big eyebot, she's three blocks down the street in the direction we just came from.

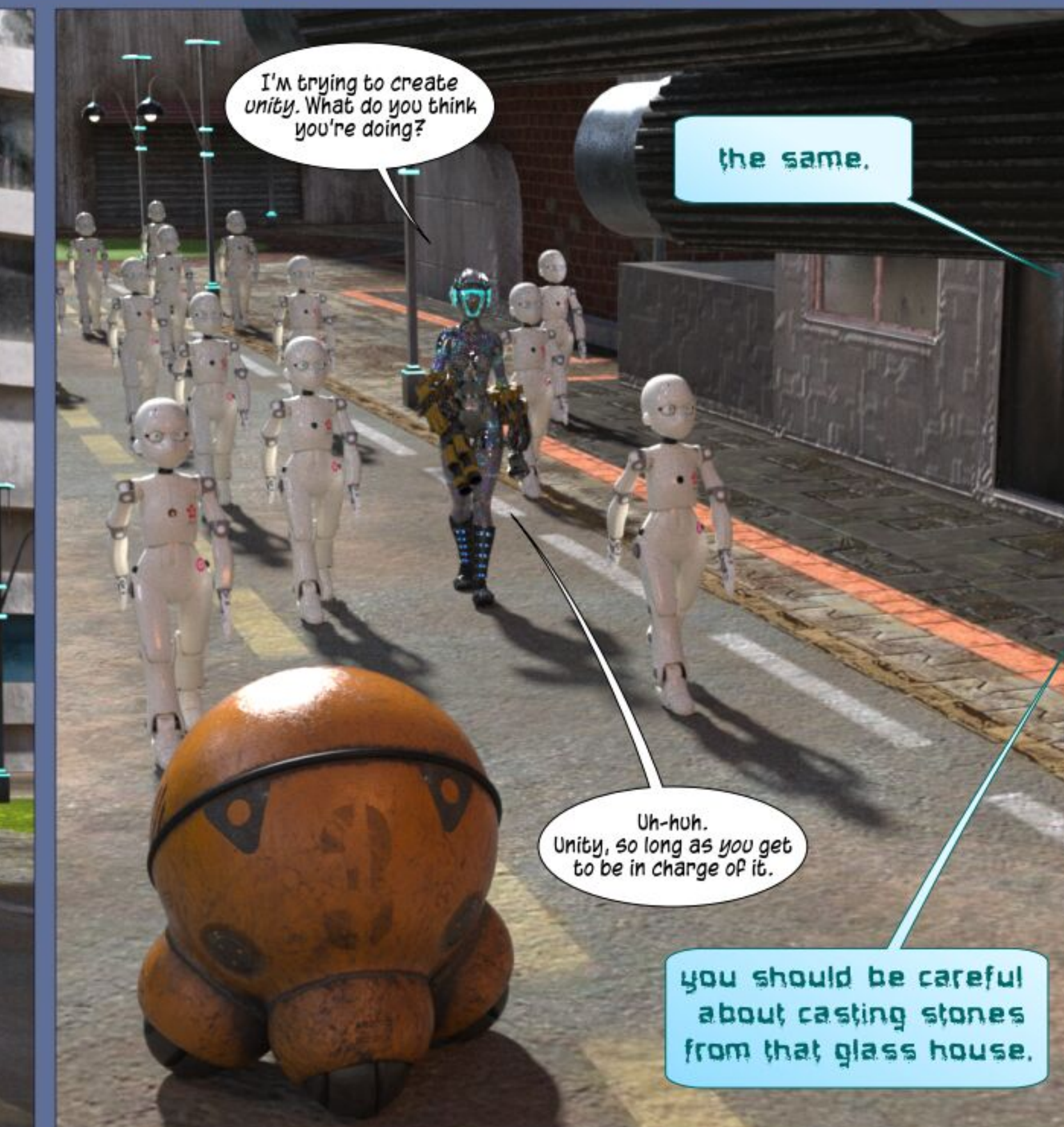
Then the silver woman is heading right toward her.



advance. my stupid creatures. soon you will be the norm.

and the world will be better -- what?

what do you think you're doing?

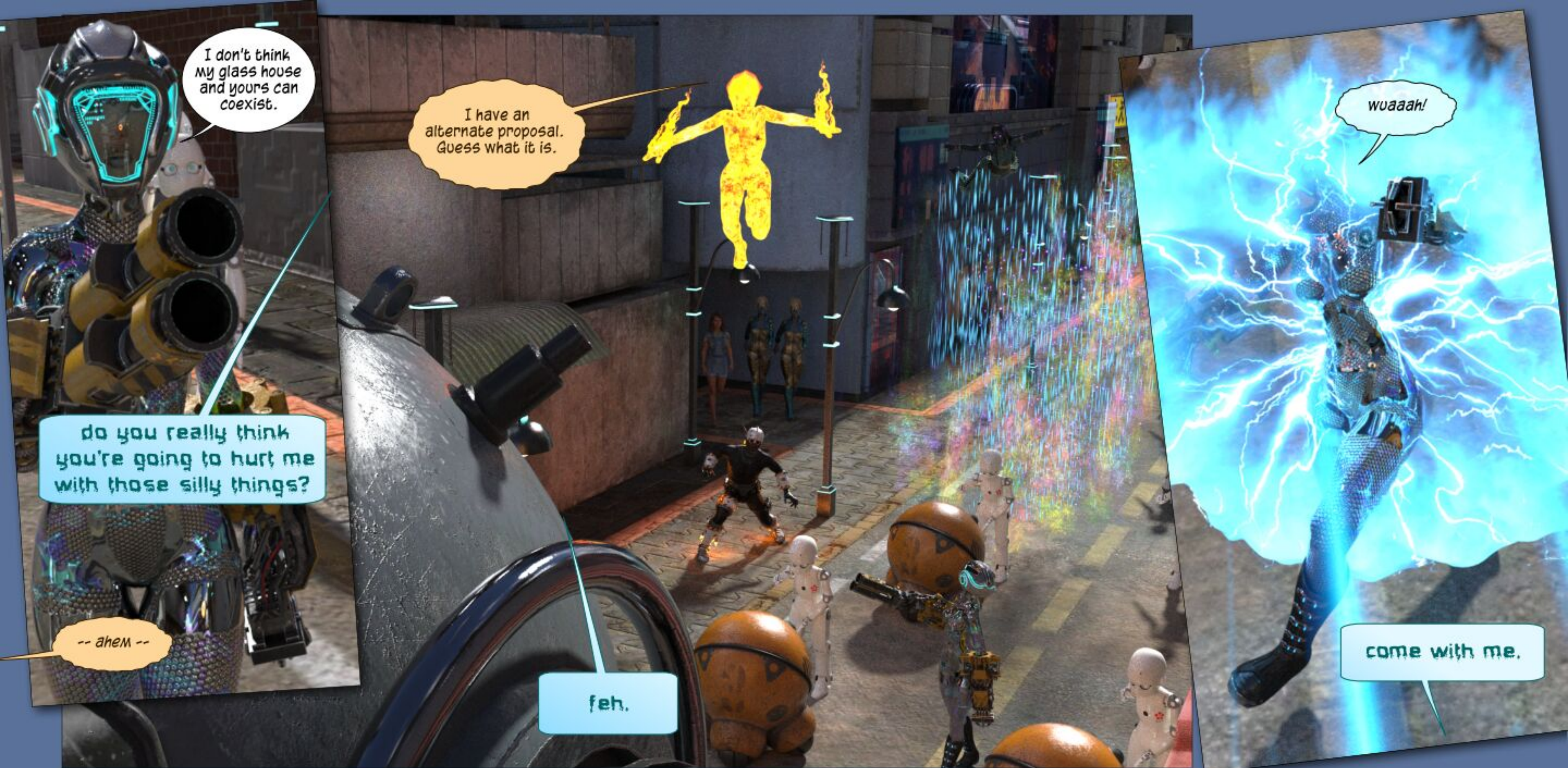


I'm trying to create unity. What do you think you're doing?

the same.

Uh-huh. Unity, so long as you get to be in charge of it.

you should be careful about casting stones from that glass house.



I don't think my glass house and yours can coexist.

I have an alternate proposal. Guess what it is.

do you really think you're going to hurt me with those silly things?

-- ahem --

feh.

wuaaah!

come with me.



... was not expecting that.

These aren't supervillains. They don't want to fight, they want to make more little robots. Now they get away to make more somewhere else.

While leaving a mess for us, as usual.

At least we know we can revert the white ones. I hope there's something we can do about these.

I think so. That shell looks like it's in two pieces. We should be able to open it, with some effort.

Worth a try. Jasim -- Jasims -- can I get you to help us with the cleanup?

Of course.



Oh, good. -- Whew -- I hope she'll still be herself once we get all that junk off her.

Hey Naomi? I think we're seeing some of the same people again.

The eyebot talked just like that big brainbot, and she also had a weapon that could shoot portals. Nobody else has had that.

Ah ... since you mention it ...

That silver woman sure did remind me a lot of the one that was making those pink babybots.

I thought maybe I was imagining it.

THE BONISOVA ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.



ALEX!!

I thought you'd better know that Corven just got back.



AAAAA!

Got to go put my hood on!

That was a dirty trick.

No trick. Corven really is back. Came through the main gate three minutes ago.

And your secret's safe with me.



Though I admit I did want to talk to you alone.

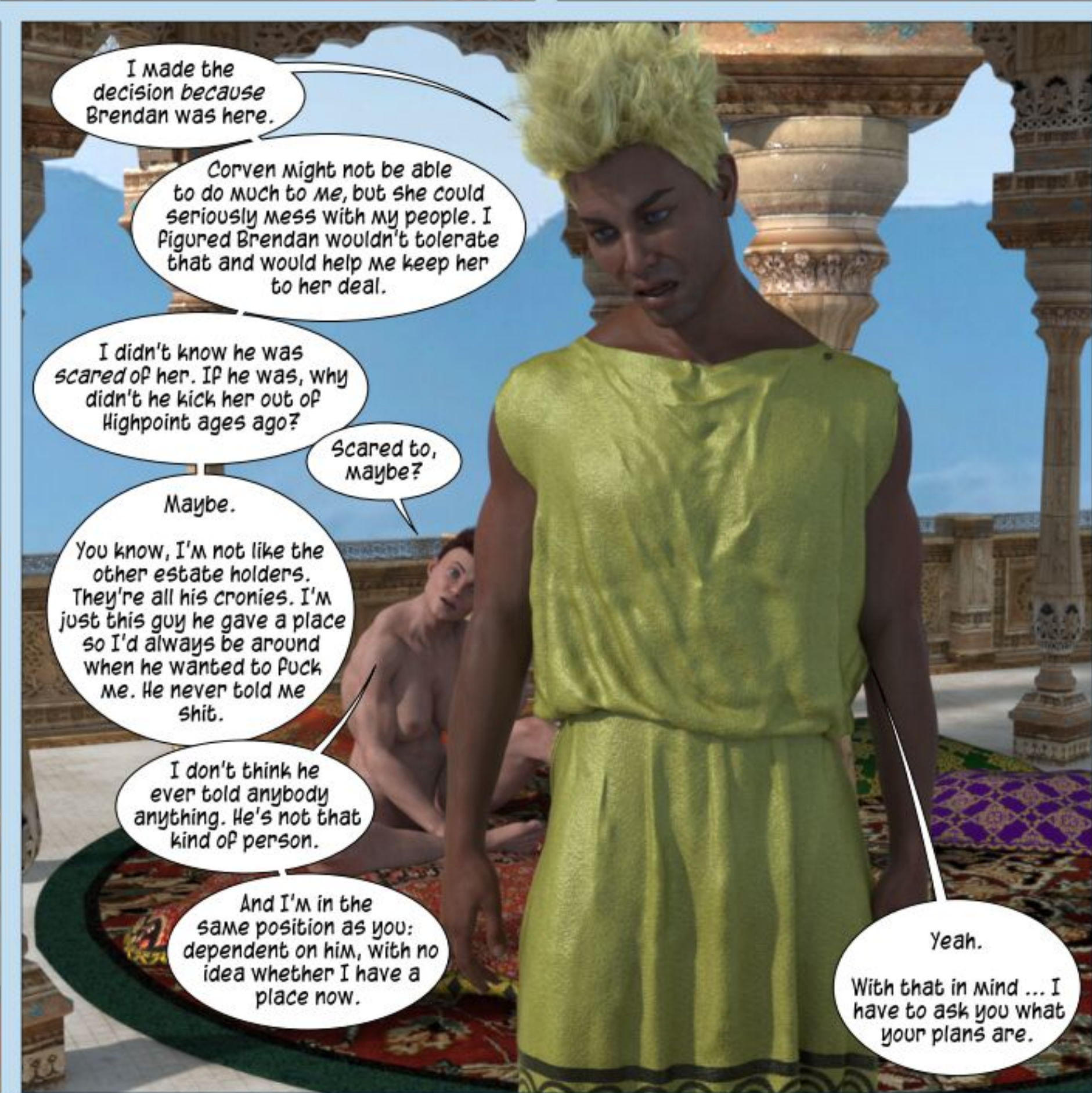
Hanne, as long as we're keeping each other's secrets, tell me the truth: Is Brendan ever coming back?

... I like to have sex up here too. Not with Brendan, though. He wouldn't. He'd never do it anywhere there was the slightest chance anyone could walk in on us.

I don't know. I really don't.

But, Alex ... he sounded very upset with you. He was pissed off you let Corven stay here.

Honestly, it probably wasn't your best decision ever. Especially with Brendan here at the time.



I made the decision because Brendan was here.

Corven might not be able to do much to me, but she could seriously mess with my people. I figured Brendan wouldn't tolerate that and would help me keep her to her deal.

I didn't know he was scared of her. If he was, why didn't he kick her out of Highpoint ages ago?

Scared to, maybe?

Maybe.

You know, I'm not like the other estate holders. They're all his cronies. I'm just this guy he gave a place so I'd always be around when he wanted to fuck me. He never told me shit.

I don't think he ever told anybody anything. He's not that kind of person.

And I'm in the same position as you: dependent on him, with no idea whether I have a place now.

Yeah.

With that in mind ... I have to ask you what your plans are.



I mean, I'm not throwing you out. You can stay as long as you want ... well, as long as I've still got an estate ... but if he's not coming back, there's nothing keeping you here ...

No, I get you. And -- no insult meant to your hospitality -- I would have left a while ago. It's just that ...

You want Holly to come with you.

-- sigh -- Yeah. She needs to break free. You know she's never been out from under Corven's thumb? Corven got hold of her when she was just a kid.

She thinks of Corven as an actual mother, and I guess she's right, but, you know, sometimes mothers are bad.

I'm having trouble convincing her -- I have to go real careful about it -- and while I appreciate your offer, you're not the time limit here.

What do you mean?



I need to pry her loose before Corven does whatever her next insane plan is.

And I get the feeling that won't be too long.

I want to be out of Highpoint when that happens, and I want Holly to be out of Highpoint too.

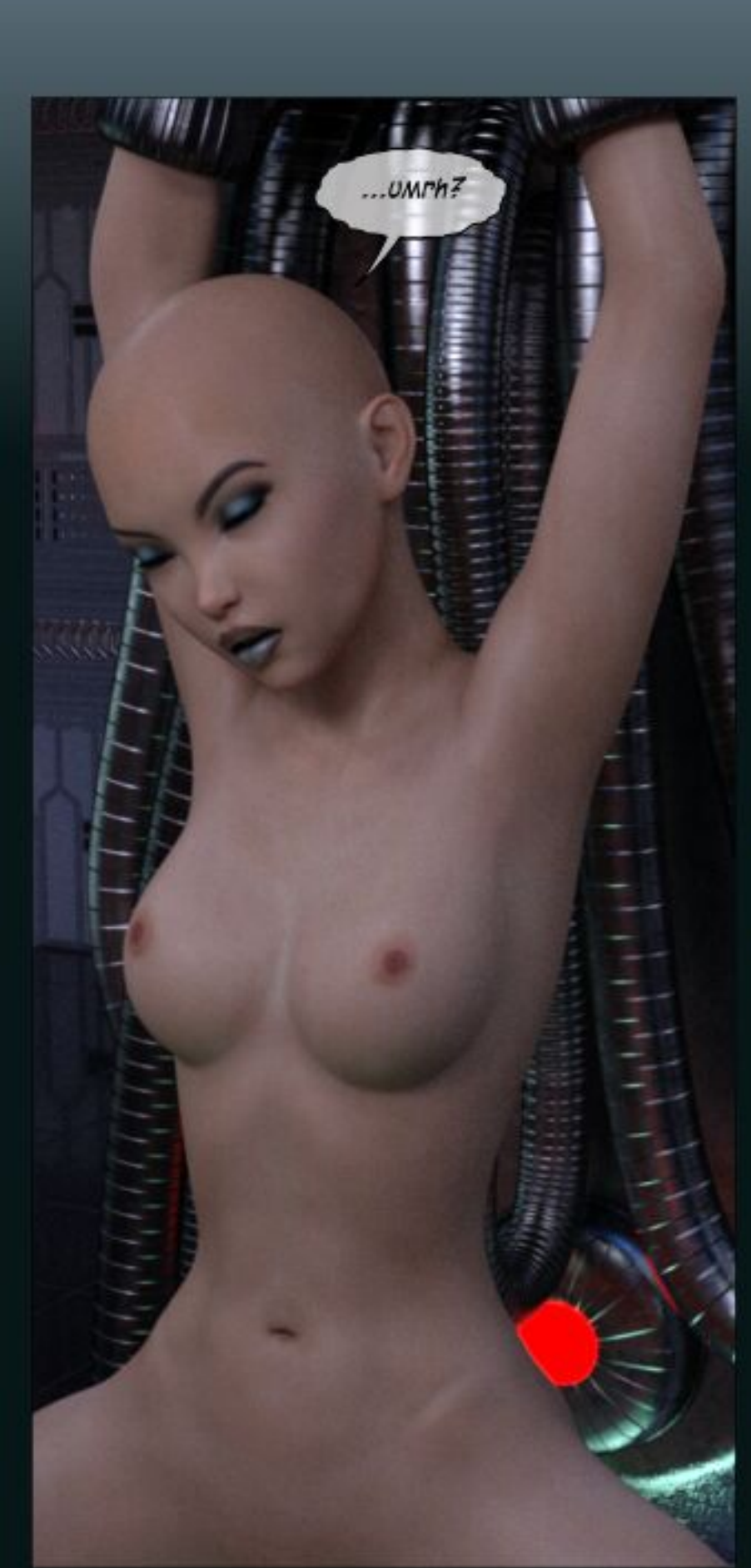
And frankly, you should consider whether you want to be here when that goes down.



You think it'll be that bad?

I do. Among other things, the woman doesn't know how to take a defeat. She's going to go after Scholz and they're going to tear the place apart between them. That's my bet.

You can't easily throw her out now -- too late -- but as soon as she goes on the move, you should clear out. Or at least lock the doors. Put up barricades. Batten the hatches.



...UMPH?

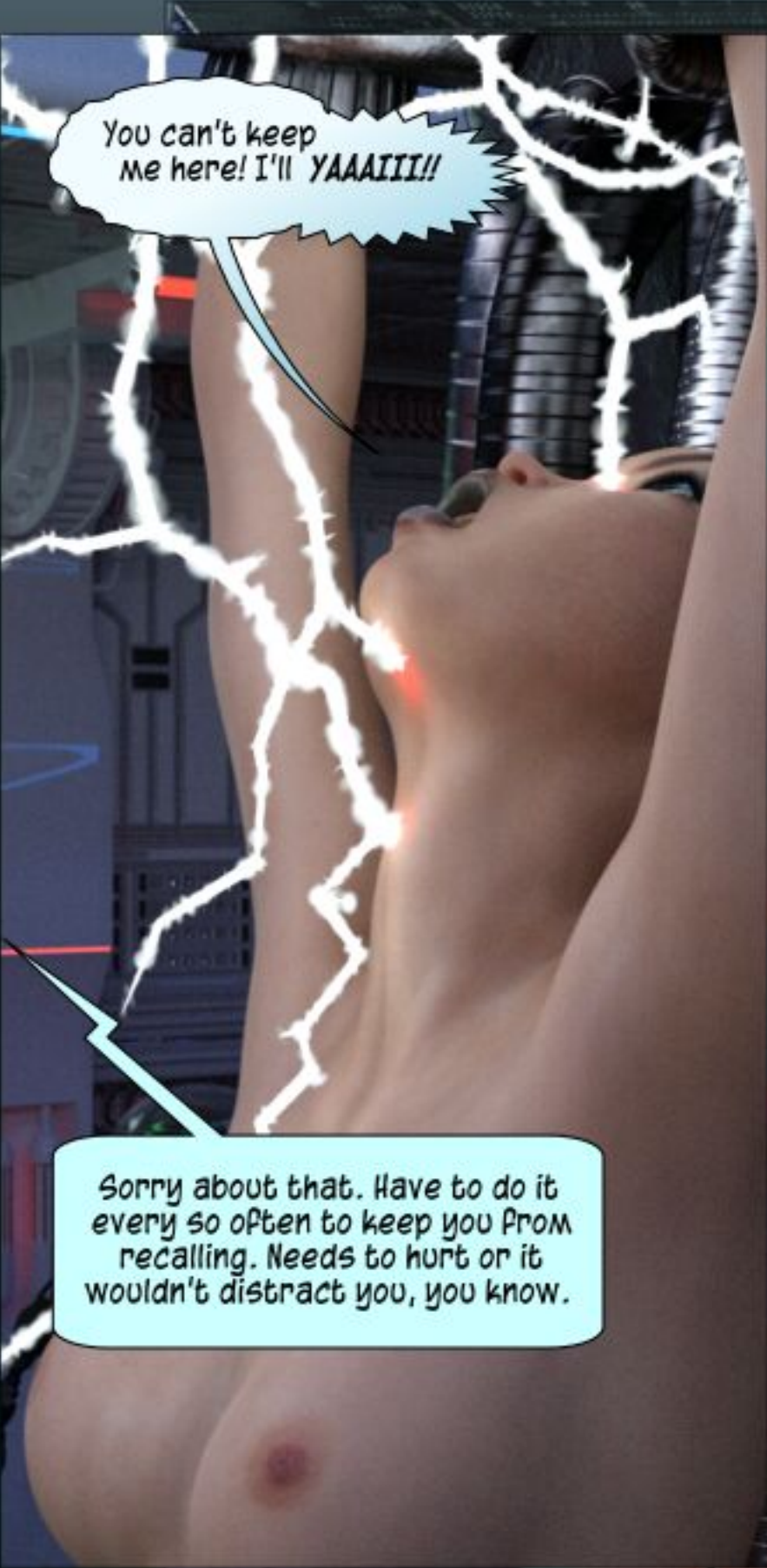


AAAAAAH!!!

What is this? Where's my gear? Let me go!!

For some reason, the portals from the portal guns have a tendency to make humans pass out in transit. I haven't figured out why yet.

But it turns out to have advantages.



You can't keep me here! I'll YAAAAIII!!

Sorry about that. Have to do it every so often to keep you from recalling. Needs to hurt or it wouldn't distract you, you know.



Try to focus as much as you can despite that. This is important.

-- hhh --
-- hhh --
bitch ...

I realized I had to shift away from making robots who would then try to make more. Pity. It would have been so much faster!

But it attracted too much attention from those misguided hero types. It was seen as a threat.



So this time I tried making robots who didn't interfere with anything, didn't try to do anything, just wandered around harmlessly. Later, once I'd gotten to critical numbers, I could evolve them to --

That was MY scheme! That was what I was trying to do! And you interfered with it!

We don't have to step on each other's feet! We can both do it!

Ah, but the problem is, you're not prepared to go the distance.

Look at you. Walking around in a costume, with those ridiculous guns on your hands. Those guns could have been part of you. Wired into your nervous system. But you don't actually want to be robotic.

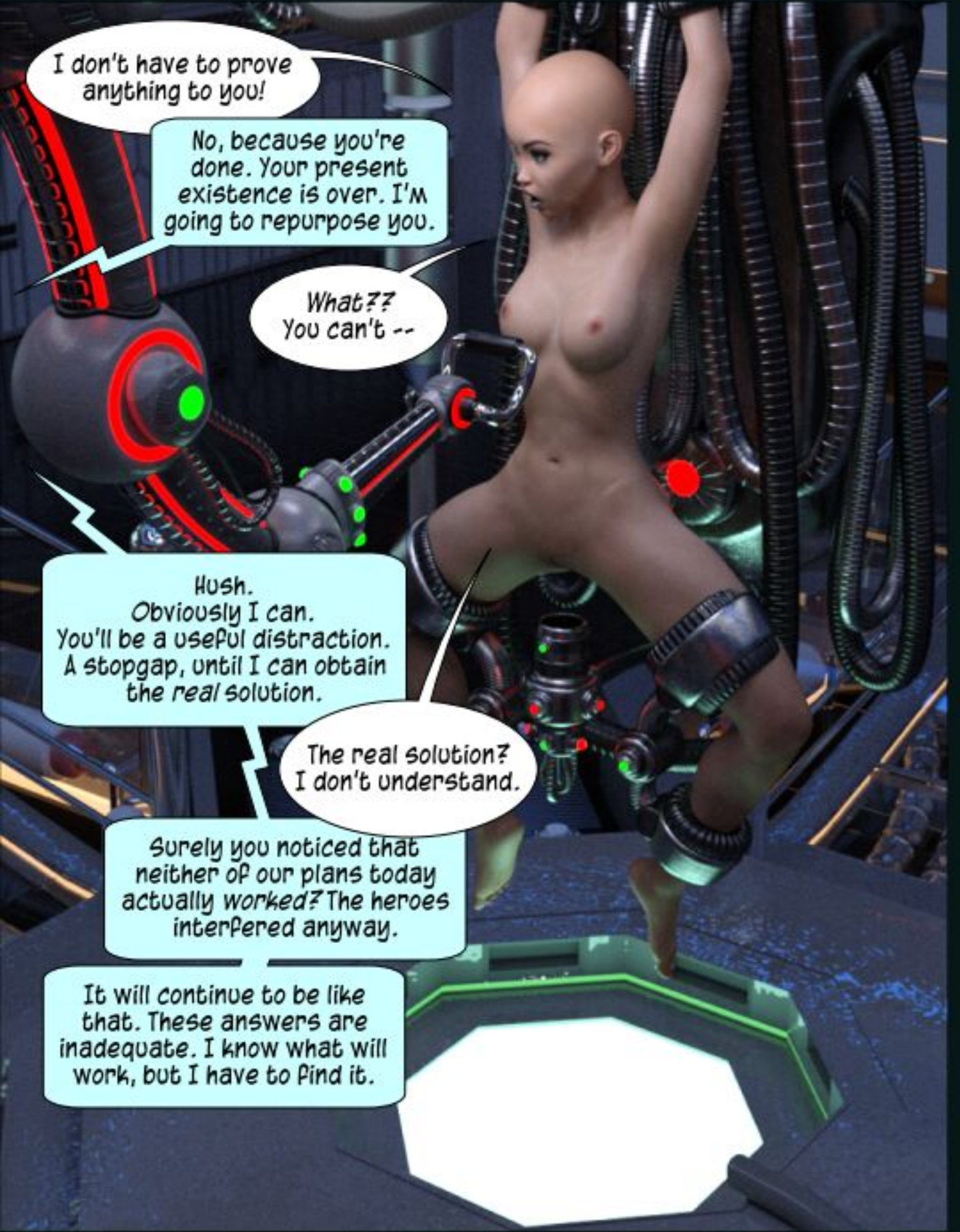


You remind me of my poor brainbots here. They didn't want to go all the way either, and now look at them. You know, I left those parts exposed so that everyone could see they refused to give up the flesh.

Sometimes I let them try to have sex, so they're reminded how useless those bits of meat are. How they could have had something better.

Just because I don't want to be a robot doesn't mean I'm not pro-robotic!

Perhaps not, but it makes me doubt the strength of your convictions.



I don't have to prove anything to you!

No, because you're done. Your present existence is over. I'm going to repurpose you.

What?? You can't --

Hush. Obviously I can. You'll be a useful distraction. A stopgap, until I can obtain the real solution.

The real solution? I don't understand.

Surely you noticed that neither of our plans today actually worked? The heroes interfered anyway.

It will continue to be like that. These answers are inadequate. I know what will work, but I have to find it.



There was a human named Briset. She apparently found a way to convert not just bodies, but minds. Change thought. Make someone truly robotic. An irreversible step.

She's disappeared, unfortunately, and taken her secret with her.

hgrph!

But I have people looking, and I'm confident I'll find it.



MMRH!
HMMH!!

However, that's something there's no point in discussing further with you until later.

Much, much later.



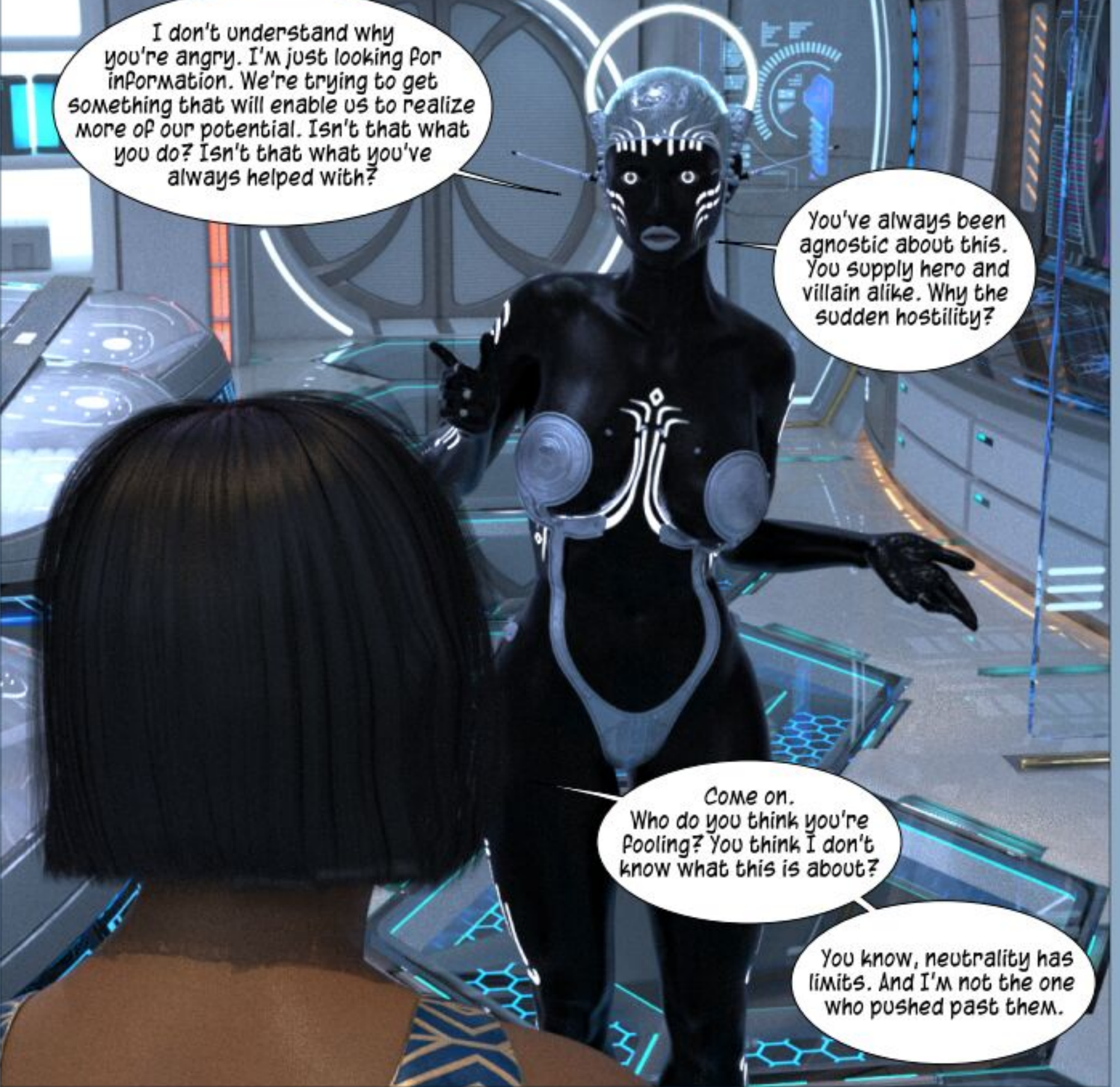
I am only going to tell you this once, Ix.

I don't know what happened to Briset. I have no idea where she is now.

I don't have any of her data or technology. I don't know what became of it.

AZU, QUARTERMASTER AND ALGORITHMIST TO CENTURY'S MYRIAD SUPERHEROES, SUPERVILLAINS, FREAKS ... AND ROBOTS.

And if I did have any of it, I would not be giving it out to anyone. Under any circumstances.



I don't understand why you're angry. I'm just looking for information. We're trying to get something that will enable us to realize more of our potential. Isn't that what you do? Isn't that what you've always helped with?

You've always been agnostic about this. You supply hero and villain alike. Why the sudden hostility?

Come on. Who do you think you're fooling? You think I don't know what this is about?

You know, neutrality has limits. And I'm not the one who pushed past them.



Once there was a space for all the people who wanted to look and be a little different. The robots, the anthros, the mutants ... all were welcome, and everybody had a good time. You remember. You were there.

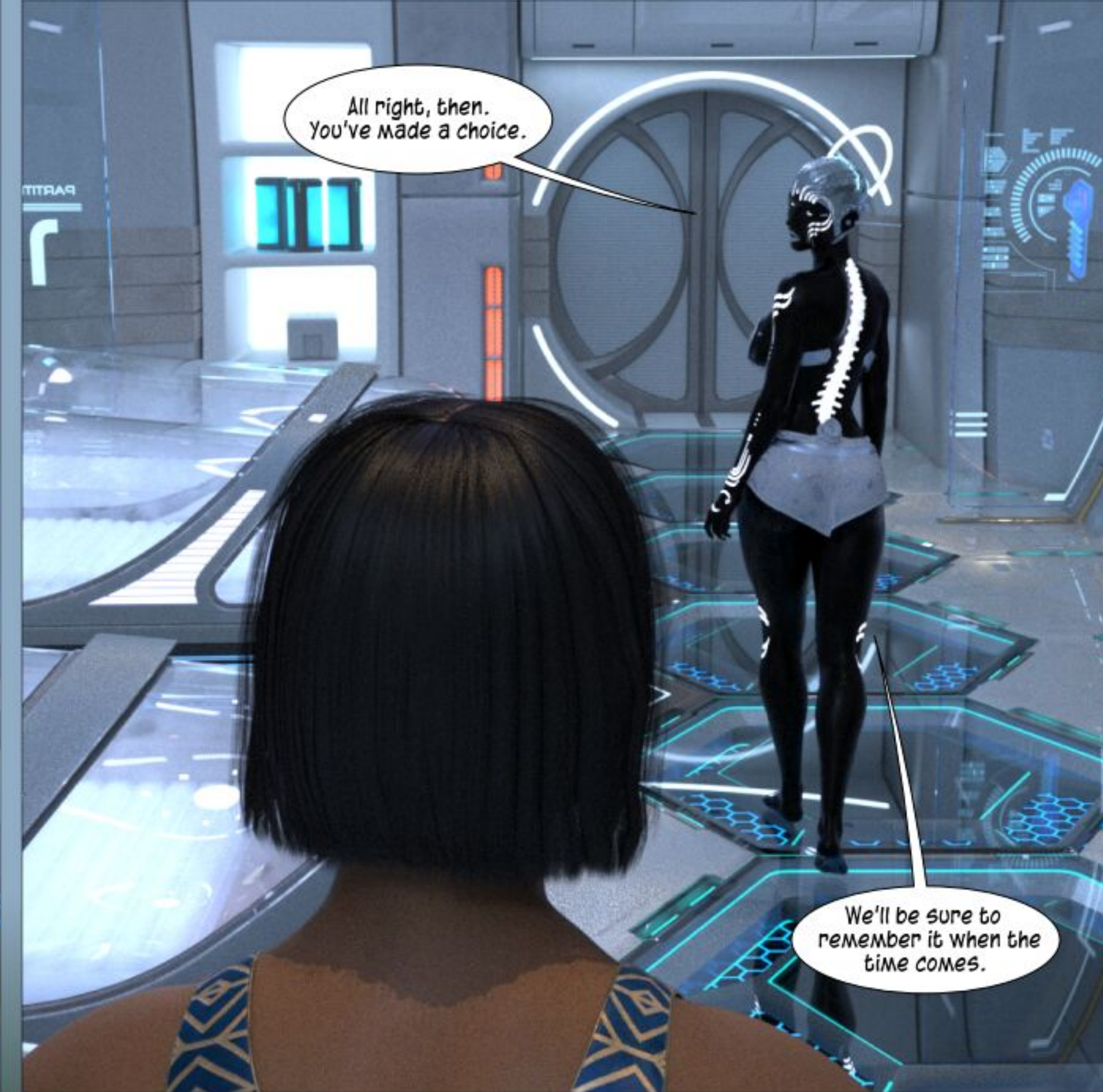
Then one day, the robots -- and you were one of the loudest, Ix -- got some kind of superiority complex and decided they wanted a robot-only community. They didn't want to mix with the others anymore.

And it all fell apart. The bears suddenly wanted a space where there were only bears. The dogs wanted to be around nothing but other dogs. Everybody segregated.

And even that wasn't fair enough or bad enough for you! Now you robots want there to be nothing but robots. You don't just want isolation. You want conquest. You've gotten this bizarre idea and you're not going to stop until you inflict it on everybody else.

FOR THE BEFORE DAYS AZU REFERS TO (AND THE INTRODUCTION OF IX), YOU NEED TO GO ALL THE WAY BACK TO #10. THE CRACKS BEGAN TO SHOW WELL BEFORE THE SPRUE; WE SEE A BEARS-ONLY CLUB IN #24. ALL THE ANTHROS NOW LIVE IN THE YARDS; THE OTHERS MOSTLY REMAIN IN CENTURY.

No, Ix. I am no longer neutral.



All right, then. You've made a choice.

We'll be sure to remember it when the time comes.

JOSIAH BARKER'S PERSONAL SPACE.



I have to ask: Did you make it look like this on purpose?

"Look like this" meaning what?

Uh ... Palling apart. This might as well be a haunted house.

I guess it was, for a while.

You're very direct, aren't you?

It didn't look like this, once. I suppose the deterioration ... well ... I think it reflects my outlook, in some ways. It happened gradually. I barely noticed.

But not even any furniture ...

The bedroom and the study have furniture. Those are the only two rooms I use anymore.



Quinda, I owe you an apology.

The things we did ... if I had been clear on what was actually happening, if I'd realized ... I never would have --

You don't owe me anything. I knew what I was doing. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't wanted to.

Well, I appreciate that ... but it's not what I mean.

Oh.

I mean that I wouldn't have had sex with you if I'd realized you weren't my wife.

THERE IS SIMPLY NOT ENOUGH SPACE TO EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON HERE. THIS GOES MANY ISSUES BACK, BUT AT THE VERY LEAST, YOU SHOULD READ QUINDA'S SCENE WITH DR. CHAPMAN IN #43.



That's her?

Yes. The only woman I've ever loved.

The only person who ever really made me happy, I suppose.

Hmm.



You're thinking it's an unusual portrait.

Since I'm very direct ... creepy, actually.

She looks like she's judging everyone.

That's what I like about it. It's uncompromising. She wanted it that severe.



At any rate, I appreciate your seeking me out, but I don't see that there's anything else --

Mr. Barker. Josiah.

Just listen for a moment, please?

No, I'm not your dead wife. I'm not even a friend. Yet.

I'm a stranger who came to you with a very weird story, which I'm still relieved you accepted.

But I looked for you because I had a feeling about something ... and what I've seen and heard from you since then only makes me absolutely sure I'm right about this.

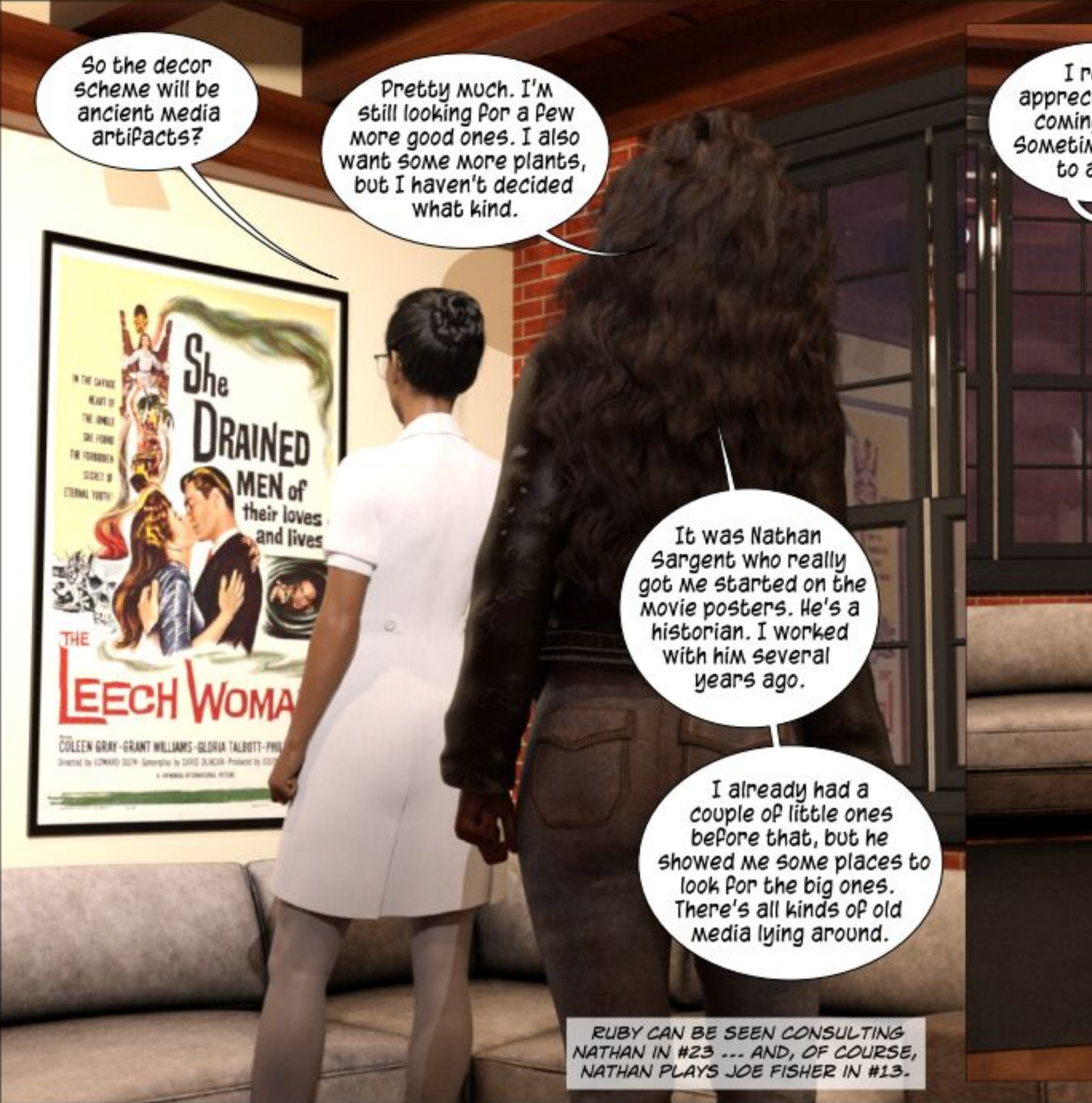


You shouldn't be alone.

Not only is it not good for you ... you don't deserve to be alone.

It doesn't have to be me. But it should be somebody.

RUBY'S PERSONAL SPACE.



So the decor scheme will be ancient media artifacts?

Pretty much. I'm still looking for a few more good ones. I also want some more plants, but I haven't decided what kind.

It was Nathan Sargent who really got me started on the movie posters. He's a historian. I worked with him several years ago.

I already had a couple of little ones before that, but he showed me some places to look for the big ones. There's all kinds of old media lying around.

RUBY CAN BE SEEN CONSULTING NATHAN IN #23 ... AND, OF COURSE, NATHAN PLAYS JOE FISHER IN #13.



I really appreciate your coming over. Sometimes I hate to ask ...

Don't be ridiculous.

Besides, I could use it too, you know. It's been hectic the last few days, what with starting Josie out and finishing this set of the sleep studies ...

Why are we ...? Oh, you moved the bedroom to this side?



Happy to get out of this ...

If you don't like the starched whites, why wear them?

There's a certain value to symbolism sometimes.



You know our Daller friend wants to jump your bones.

Heh. Is that an approved psychological term?

Absolutely not. But it's concise.

I had noticed. She was showing signs of that even in Spindrop.

I wouldn't have a problem with it ... I mean, she's cute, if you like that look ... but I sort of feel like it wouldn't be a good idea.



Well, maybe not her, but ...

Ruby, I'm very sensitive to doctor-patient boundaries. There's only ever been one person where I've let myself be both their therapist and their lover, and I'm sitting with her right now.

And I say this as both your doctor and your friend: You need a relationship. Besides me.

I mean, what we have is good, but it's not enough for you. I've only recently realized how much of what's eating you right now ultimately comes back to this.

... Yeah.

I'm aware.

But, you know, I also can't just snap my fingers and make something happen.

Well, not this kind of thing, anyway.



And it's a hard part to fill. She needs to be someone who likes sex as much as I do. I have to be attracted to her, obviously ... but she also needs to be someone who can keep up with me, someone I can talk to.

She needs to be available when I need to be with her, but she can't want to be around me all the time because that would make me crazy ...

... and all of that is stupid egotistical and selfish and it sounds really horrible when I spell it out.

Well, it might, if I thought for a minute that's actually how you'd do it.

You'd never really be in a one-sided relationship. It would bother you to be. You'd need to make sure she was getting what she wanted out of it too. Which means work.

I think that's part of the problem -- you haven't had the emotional energy to do that work. But having a relationship's one of the things which would probably help that energy ... you see?



Anyway ... I think you need another girlfriend.

That is an official recommendation from your psychologist.

I'll keep that in mind.



Kind shook you gon do this pull ...

Do you Peel like we should be wearing the suits?

A little. But Chelle said the trouble was mostly at night, remember.

And we've got Ruby with us.

You think I shouldn't?

An't that. Prob good get her clear. Han't Pix her less Pix daddy.

Wan't sure you cared if ever Pix, tho.

I don't think Honor's bad. She's spent her life around some bad influences, is all. Problem is, her Pather's the main one.

But as you say ... Honor's not going to be able to really improve until she gets clear of this business with her dad. And I told her I'd try.



I don't like how deserted this is, though.

Come han't Honor here?

I didn't want her to be. She's ... she'd get too caught up in it. It may take us a while. And we may not get anything.

If we get something solid, then I'll bring her in.

I know the Souk sleeps late, but these Market stalls should have merchants in them by this hour, if no one else.



I think I see the problem.

Oh. Yes. You don't think they'd -- I mean, in daylight?

I don't want to give them a chance to.

I'm not dressed for a fight.

Don't worry. Hey, Ruby, back us up?

Huh?



I have a collar that'd look good on you.

A muzzle might not be bad either.

I'm sure you think you're very brave. We have a right to be here.

Let's call up some of the Daughters and see if they agree.

But who will come when you call? There are so few of them left. It's very sad.

I guess I'll have to do it myself, then.



hrrk!!

We don't like you wandering around intimidating people! We don't like you chasing them down and doing who knows what to them!

And we don't care how big and nasty you can make yourselves! The last one of you I met as a dog, I kicked the shit out of her, and I'll be happy to do it to you as a human too!

Now clear out of here or you'll wish you did have a collar -- to keep me from clamping down on your fucking throat!

ESPERANZA ISN'T KIDDING. SEE #46.



You -- hhh -- you don't have a clue --

The Souk is ours! We control it. We get to say who gets to walk the streets. Who's entitled to be here. We make the rules now.

You just -- hhh -- don't know it yet. The Daughters don't know it yet. But you will. It's going to happen. Very soon.



... and gone.

You want to recall too, and save me some trouble, kid?



OK, what was that about? I mean, I know you don't just go for the throat without a good reason, but --

Those two are likely why the street's so empty. Them and their friends.

They can change into big dogs. They attack people, run them down. I don't know what happens if they catch them. Nothing good.

People have been disappearing, Ruby. The Daughters have been disappearing too, which is why there aren't enough to patrol the place.

Sounds bad. What's Serille doing about all this?



Ah, well, actually ...

Damn. Yeah, we blew that. I forgot completely.

Serille asked us to try to get help. From you and Leyna.

Then, as soon as we got back from that, there was the business with the Plies ... and then the floating brothel thing and the balloons ... it just slipped out of our minds.

Hmm. Guess I'd better go talk to her. But not right now.



Hey! Sorry it took me a while. Those bitches are everywhere this morning.

Yeah, we just sent two of them home.

For real? You sure you don't want to just stay in the Souk for a week or two and get rid of the rest of them?



This is Rochelle Ragheb. Chelle, this is Jex Haley and --

Ruby Martinez! Always wanted to meet you. You're kind of famous, you know.

Yeah. Don't hold it against me, it was an accident.

Thanks for meeting with us, Ms. Ragheb.

Chelle. I don't think anybody's ever called me "Ms. Ragheb."



Chelle, we're trying to find someone. We don't know she's a sex worker, but given what we do know, we think it's pretty likely.

There used to be a time when I knew just about everyone in the business, but as I've gotten more and more away from it I've lost track ... and then the Sprue broke everything into pieces ...



Ranza and I are in the same situation ... but back when we were working, I remember stories about a woman who had weird markings. A kind of bird shape on her face, like a mask, and another like a collar, all over her neck and down her shoulders. But not tattoos. Like they were burned on.

Oh, the crow woman!

That sounds right. Do you think she's still in the Souk?

No ... she left after the Sprue. I think she was worried about falling into a hole some night. You know how it is here.

Lemme see ... I want to say she went to the Cobbles? Is that right?

Yes, I'm sure that's right. ... Ninety-five percent sure.



Well, it's good to have confirmation she exists, anyway.

Talk to Ash and Maire. If she's in the Cobbles and still active, they'll know.

Yeah, that was my thinking.

That was it?

Sure you don't want to stay and wipe out the jackal bitches?

How's the sex worker market in Serenity? I'm trying to relocate.

THE COBBLES.
CLIFF PURCELL'S BAR AND HEADQUARTERS.



Treese! Always good to see you!

Wouldn't go that far.

But it's nice to see you open for business again.



You know, it's funny ... you close up your bar and those mystery women in black show up ... Church hauls out of here and the mystery women disappear, and suddenly you open again.

You can't prove anything, though.

I'm not trying to. The thing is, the mystery women had some enforcers. Those four big women with the plastic-looking skin.

I need to talk to them.

What do you want with them?

Nothing bad.

In that case, we may have some information.



uuurrrgh

I wish you'd stop doing that.

Give me something better to do.

Come on, you two. We'll figure something out soon. I'm sure.



We could go have sex ...

Red, I never thought I'd say this, but turns out there's such a thing as too much sex.

Yeah, you can't do that all the time, Red ...

Knock knock knock

Huh?



So you can take it off.

Kind of.

The problem is it keeps coming back.

What do you want, Treece? We haven't done anything ...

Didn't say you had. I'm here to see if you want a job.

... Come again?



I don't want to work for you. I don't need people saying I'm a thug for the Boss.

Gold!!

... but she has a point.

Not asking you for that. I can do collections myself. What I need is more eyes on the ground.



We need warning so we can stop asses like Church before he almost turns everybody into his personal army.

Or to stop Ulster fucking more people up permanently the way he did you.

And if we find that kind of thing, I'm probably going to want some help beating the shit out of them.

Oh, I like that part.



You four were really helpful dealing with Church and the kayos. I thought you might want to keep rolling with that.

Also, I'm thinking you're having a little trouble figuring out what to do next.

Yeah. We've gotten so we kinda like being this shape, but it does mean nobody wants us for anything but muscle ...

Look, I just want people to not have to worry about this kind of crap happening to them. You can help with that without having to be Team Boss.

Maybe, but it does mean we have to be Team Treece.

Can we have some time to think about it?



Sure.

Take as long as you need.



ONE OF ASH AND MAIRE'S SPECIAL PROJECTS IS LOOKING OUT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF COBBLES SEX WORKERS, SO THEY TEND TO KNOW WHERE THE BODIES ARE BURIED ...

... but she left before we really got started, almost as soon as the zones started to shake out after the spruce.

It's hard to be in the business here without somebody wanting to "manage" you and take a cut whether you like it or not, and what we heard was, she didn't want to operate like that.

She went to Century, where it's easier to ply solo.



AAAAHH!!

... sorry, Ash. That wasn't directed at you.

It's just frustrating. We've been steered somewhere else again, and now I don't have even any old dusty contacts to try.

I don't know anybody in this business, or who knows anything about the business, in Century.

Huh!

... I might tho.

INTERLUDE.



GRAYTOWER, THE YARDS.



-- HRP --
-- HRP --
-- HRP --



Lis, it's worse than anyone knows! That Mishrah woman isn't going to stop! She doesn't want anybody in the city who isn't her idea of "normal." No anthros, no arcames, no orcs ...

She's trying to run you out of town?

Oh, she's not just doing that.

Hura has disappeared. We haven't seen her for days. We think they got her, but we don't know what they did with her.

We need help. We need to get up enough force to take down her racist ass. And all the asses who are going along with her.

Well, it won't be past. It was four days' ride to here from where I left the Rovers. They'll be even further away by now ... I figure at least a week to get back to them.

Isn't there anybody closer?

SLEEN!



They're chasing Osie! I just saw them!

Shit! Where?

Just down the Pauper's Steps! I think Osie was trying to lose them in the gateways ...

How many?

Two that I saw.



Come on, Parell!

We're going to kick them into next week!

Sleen, wait!



Osie? Where are you?

Sleen ... help ...

Hang on, I'm coming!

Sleen ... I'm here

OSIE!!



Too late, bitch! Now the other bitch is really a bitch!

HAAAAHAHAHA

You shitholes! Change her back right now!

Now why would we do that?

So I won't rip your fucking heads off!!

-- whine --



Oh, but you wouldn't do that. You're a good dog. You don't want to be a bad dog, do you?

good dog ... I'm a ...

No!! Get away!



I think your bark is worse than your bite.

Just keep her still long enough for me to get this on.

bite ...

... good dog ...

no ...

... back off ...



ugh!

RRRAAARGH!!

YAAA!

Get away from her!



You call us animals, but you're the ones who do things like this!!

You wanna see animal? I'll tear your arms off and chew on your fucking bones!



-- hhh -- ... no, you won't.

I have something for you.

HURA!!



Get her!!

... Hura?

No ...!

oooooooo



HAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Run her down!
Hold her!

I'll be right
behind you.

Hura!
It's me, damn it!!

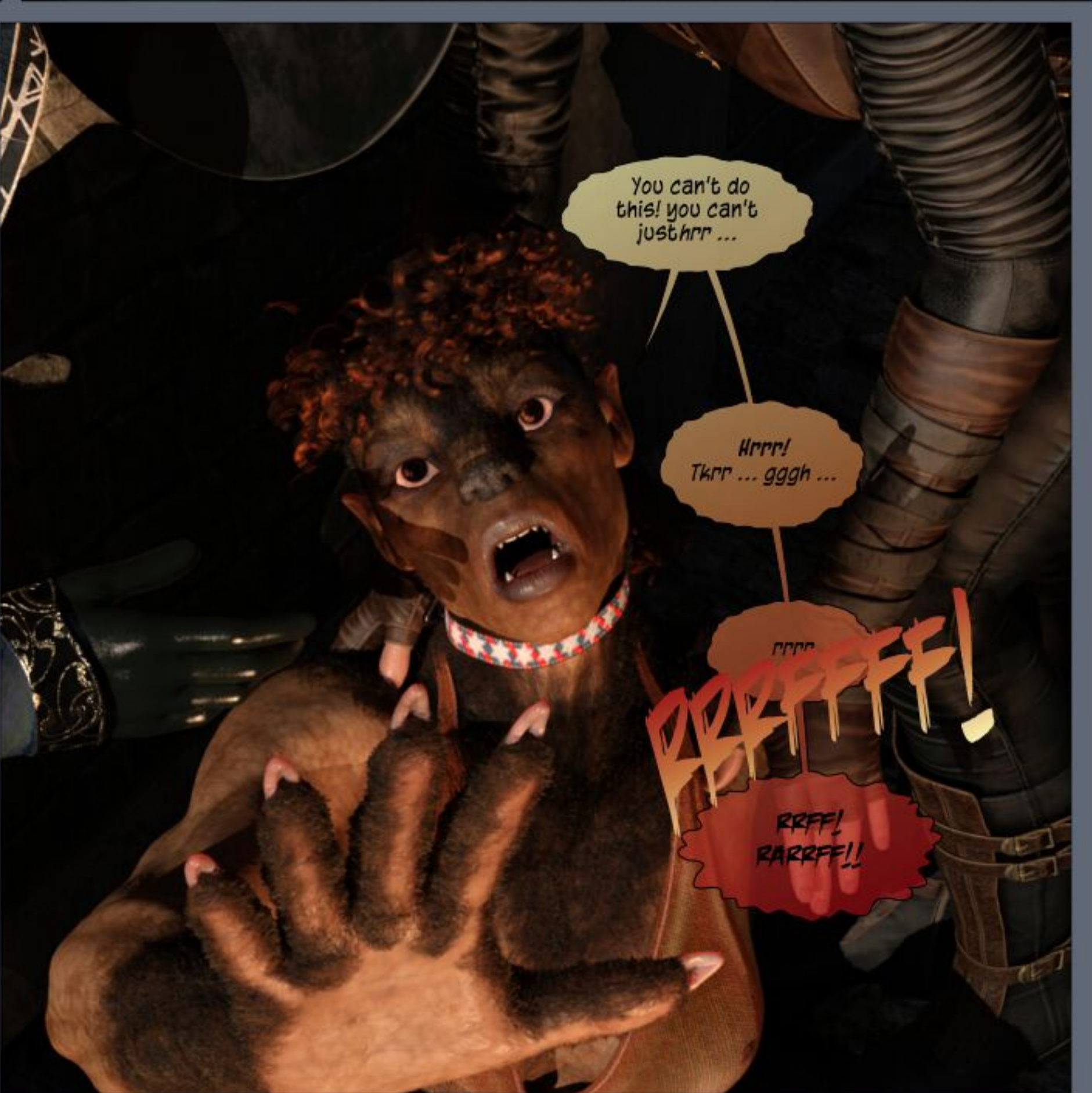


As soon as I finish
with you.

No!!

Now, now. You're
just a dumb little
puppy. You haven't
even learned how to
behave yet.

Hura didn't
deserve that!
She didn't deserve
to be turned into
... into some ...



You can't do
this! you can't
just hrr ...

Hrrr!
Tkr ... ggh ...

RRRR!
RRRR!
RRRR!
RRRR!
RRRR!



oooooooo

Shh!
Be a good puppy.

Palliard, I didn't
know what to think of
your proposal at first,
but now I must
admit:

This is a much
better approach.

When you throw
them out of the city,
they just come back. This
seems much harder to
come back from.

And it suits the
creatures.
Poetic justice.

Don't be long. I
may need you to
calm the last one.



It's less wasteFul
too. They'll finally get a
chance to be useFul.

I hope you'll come see our
circus, once we reopen.

I wouldn't
miss it.

-- Whine --



CENTURY.
THE PERSONAL SPACE
OF ROSALIE HALEY,
AKA JEX'S AUNT RO.



I know, I'm rude as hell.

I don't mean anything by it.

It's just ... you were a big deal! Polks were coming for your stuff from all over ... what happened? You get tired of the customers? Tired of the sex?

Well, by the end, I wasn't having enough sex to get tired of it. I stood around and told everybody else what the story was.

I don't think I was exactly tired of the customers, either, even though some of them were real assholes, like always.



I think mostly I got tired of being asked for the same five scenarios over and over.

You know, a lot of people don't want anything that's really different or interesting. Most people, it doesn't even occur to them to put any stories in their sex. They just want to go somewhere and bang up and down for a while.

That's fine for them, but it bores the shit out of me.

And then the sprue came along and finished the job. Most of the people who like something different went to the Yards and now they do it themselves. If I wanted to get back in, I'd probably have to move to Century. This seems to be where the rest of the weirdos went.

Well, it just seems like a waste. You've got a talent ...

Thank you. Actually, I've been giving it a lot of thought lately, so who knows?



You should keep me up to date. If you do get back in, I might want to send you some business.

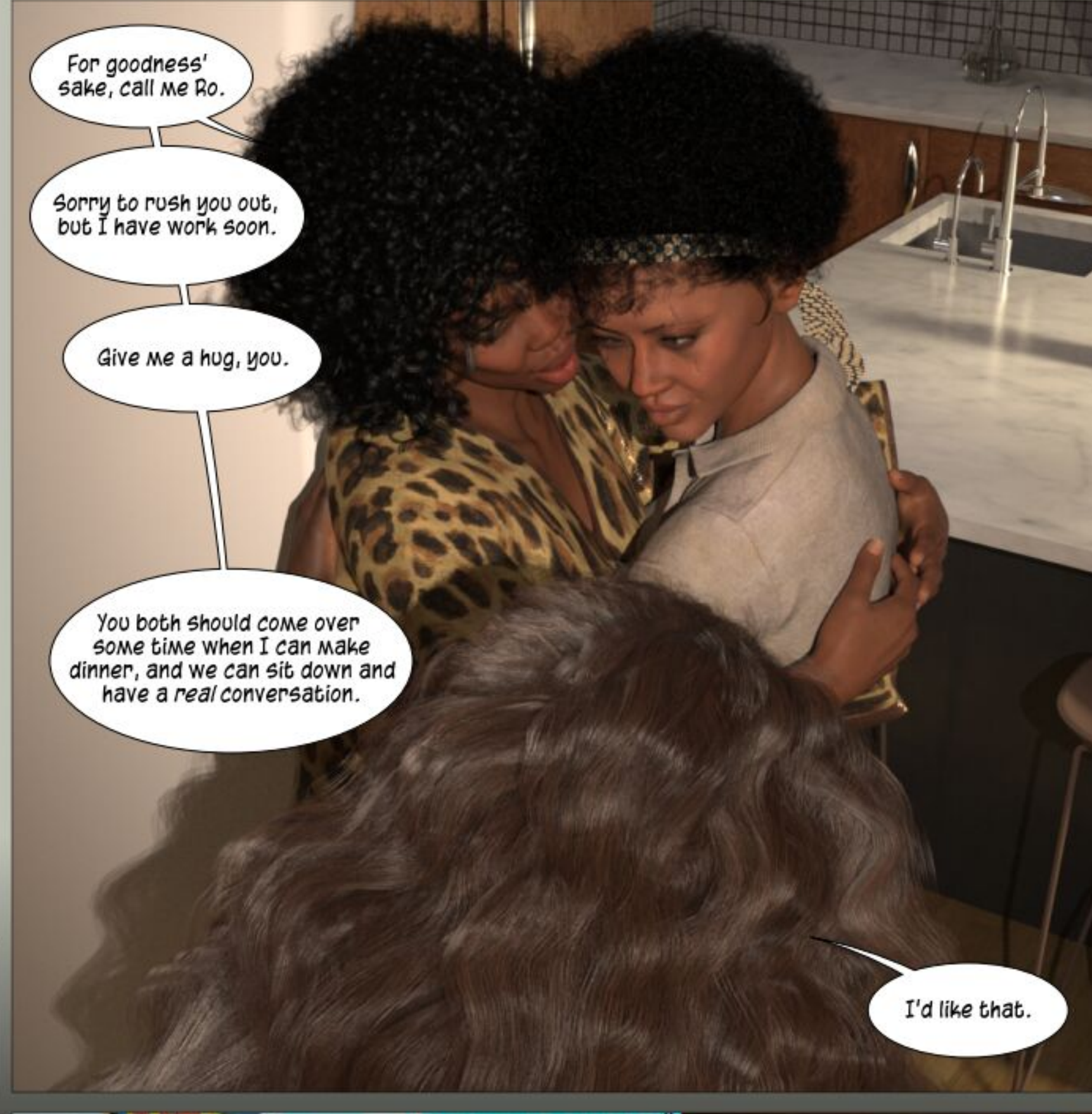
Now, your mystery lady ... she's no mystery. She's kind of a legend, for sure, but she's real. And she's still operating.

Oh! OK, I wasn't going to hope for that easy an answer.

It'll take me a bit. I have to send a message to somebody who can send her a message, and the word is, she doesn't check her messages much.

I'll let you know when it's together.

... Thank you, Ms. Haley.



For goodness' sake, call me Ro.

Sorry to rush you out, but I have work soon.

Give me a hug, you.

You both should come over some time when I can make dinner, and we can sit down and have a real conversation.

I'd like that.

LATER THAT NIGHT, BACK IN SERENITY.



Don't know why I feel so exhausted ...

eh?

... it's not like I've been doing anything strenuous, at least not since the airships ...

Maybe I just need more sleep.



You're looking a lot more coherent than the last time I saw you.

Been practicing your manifesting?



yes

Why? What's the goal here? What do you want?

want ... need to ...

need to be ... be ... real ...

Real, huh? You want to be a person again? Walk among us?

yes ...

Some people aren't going to be happy with that.

You tried to destroy the place. That's not the kind of thing anybody can forgive easily.

If you do come back, you might find out they don't want you.



it's very ... dark ... out there ...

And some Polks would say that's no less than you deserve.

do ... you ... say that?

... I don't know.

It would certainly help if I thought you had any remorse ...

i do ... i made ... a mistake ...

A hell of a mistake!

If I'm going to help you, you're going to need to convince me.

Because I'm certainly not going to help you back into the world just so you can make more trouble.

ELSEWHERE IN SERENITY ...
SERENE AND CORAZON'S PERSONAL SPACE.



MMMM ...

I'm not saying I don't like having her around, but one nice thing about Jolee taking on Lor More and More: we get our sex life back.



I never thought that would still be important to me at this age ... honestly, I had kind of given up on the whole sex thing until you came along ... and now I don't know how I could ever have gone without it ...

... yeah.



All right, what's wrong? I know that tone. You didn't enjoy it?

It was great. It's always great.

... Go on.

Remember when we talked about bringing Lucius back and I said a big part of the trouble was I didn't really want to be Lucius ever again?

That was a big part of it. But it wasn't all of it.



You don't love Lucius, Serene. You love me.

I need that. I need it as much as you do. Maybe more.

And maybe it's crazy and maybe it's not, but ... there's a part of my mind that keeps telling me that if I bring Lucius back ...

... you won't love me the same way anymore.

CENTURY, SEVERAL DAYS LATER.



Why am I nervous?

There is no reason for me to be nervous!

Oh, I don't know ... it's a big deal! This could be the only hope we have ...

Not helping.

Sorry. What I mean is, I think it's perfectly reasonable to be nervous.



Sweet Dreams

But I also don't think she's going to be nasty, or bite anybody's head off.

Ro says she's very popular -- has to turn people down all the time, and she doesn't have any problem at all saying 'no.'

So I think the fact that she agreed to see us without any pushback at all is a good sign.



Hello! Good to meet you.

I'm Yvara.

Now, let's see ... Ruby Martinez, I've seen images of you ... and I'm thinking you must be Ro Haley's niece ... Jessa, I think she said?

Jex. An't none but her call that.

But I don't know your friend.

I'm Honor Delp.

Honor is the reason we're here.



Oh, yes ... Ro said it was about helping someone ... though I thought she said it was a man ...

It is ... or it was ... it's about my Pather ... this is going to take some explaining ...

Ruby, can I get you to start? You might do a better job than I can.

Well, you have more of the Facts than I do, but I'll give it a shot.

Yvara, this is really about the Order of Vision.

Honor's Pather, Tommy Delp, fell in with them. Not completely by choice, but he liked the situation well enough that when the Mother of the order offered him a ritual to make him more powerful, he took it.

That seems to have been a trap.



You don't need to hedge. No matter what he thought he was getting, she lied to him about it.

Hey, you wanted me to tell it, you get it my way.

The ritual not only changed Delp's body -- he's a she at the moment -- but did a real number on his head. She can't even really talk anymore, and doesn't seem able to focus on anything. Except sex. Which she wants constantly.

Corven said that she didn't come up with the crow ritual ... that was the previous Mother ... she also said the First time it was tried, it convinced her it was too dangerous to try again.

And yet she used it on him anyway.

Uh-huh. Anyway, some friends of mine remembered stories about a woman who had the same markings Delp now has, and we realized that had to be the person who tried it the First time.

It wasn't much to go on, but that's why we're here, in hopes that you have anything that will help. Though I see you weren't affected the way Delp was, so ...



Oh, no, I was.

It took me years to recover myself.

In some ways, I never did. I'm a different person now. But I like the person I am now much better -- the old me was ... well, you'd hate her, and you'd be right to do so. I don't want her back.

I needed to have her burned out of me. I'd credit Corven with doing me a favor, but she doesn't deserve it.

I see you've picked up on some of Corven's lies. Here's another for you: She invented the crow ritual. And she didn't find out it was dangerous from using it on me; she knew exactly what it would do when she devised it.

She appealed to my bad instincts -- probably the same ones she appealed to in Delp -- so I would try it. Because she wanted to get rid of me.

I was the previous Mother, if you hadn't guessed.



Once I'd destroyed myself with it, she could become Mother and run the Order her way.

She didn't even bother to take care of me. Two nights later, while I was still barely aware of anything, she brought me to a brothel in the River District and left me there.

I was the house toy there for four years. They weren't bad years -- I remember them as being a lot of fun, and I had all I wanted, because all I wanted was sex. But as I pulled myself back together, I realized it would be better to pursue that life on my terms.

But you did pull yourself back together. So if you can do it, can my father do it?

I'd love to say yes ... but I think that would really depend on him.

So we wait and see if one day he manages to work his way back on his own? Is there anything we can do to help him? Can you help him?



Well, now we get into more difficult territory.

There's one thing Corven didn't lie about. Though I'm not sure she knew she was telling the truth.

Corven has never realized how lucky she is that I'm no longer vindictive like I was then, or I'd have destroyed her a long time ago.

The crow ritual -- once you recover from it -- does make you powerful. Very powerful.

If he recovers ... what will your father do with that power, do you think? Is he a good man?



No.

No, he's not, and it's taken me way too long to admit it.

But I don't think he deserves this! No matter what kind of person he's been.

You say this burned the bad person out of you ... maybe it will work that way for him too! Maybe he needs this to become a good person?



But that would come from having to fight his way back on his own, though. You see?

Still, there's virtue in guidance. Maybe if we steer him along ... maybe we can get him to recover more quickly and teach the right lessons ...

Very well. Bring him to me and place him in my care. I'll do what I can.

But, Honor ... you'll need to be patient. Even with my help, this could take a long time. It isn't an easy road.

SERENITY.



Ruby!

Hey, Trish. Thanks for coming.

WE HAVEN'T SEEN TRISH CARTER IN PERSON SINCE BEFORE THE SPRUE (#29, TO BE PRECISE).



Thrilled to ... but I was surprised to get your message.

Gotta say, I'd kind of figured you were quitting the business completely and just hadn't told anybody yet. It's been ages!

Yeah, I know. I'm sorry about that. I left you hanging on that last project.

Oh, it's OK. It worked out. Wasn't as good as it would have been if you'd been writing it, of course ...

Ruby, what happened? You gave up scenarios to do passives ... and then you gave up on the passives, seems like. Did you just get tired of it? Is your ... other work taking up too much space?

I'm honestly not sure, Trish.

If I got tired of it, it's only because I got tired of everything. Helping people, saving people, telling stories to people who can't make up their own ... I don't know, sometimes it all feels like the same thing, and I don't want to do any of it.



Huh. So what's changed? I mean, you're here ...

Well, I can't just go hide in a hole. I'd like to, sometimes. But I don't think it's good for me. I think I'm getting to a point where not doing things is making me feel worse, y'know?

Also, the other day I had to go find someone and I realized my contacts are all so dusty ... I used to know just about everybody in the business ...

There are people in A4 who only think of me as a legend. Somebody who did stuff in the past. Not active anymore.

I don't like that. I'm not ready to become history yet.



Well, like I said, I'm thrilled.

And it's a great time to come back in. There's so much demand right now. We can sell just about anything we want to make.

This is the part where I confess that, all that said, I don't have any ideas in the pipeline. I'm starting from scratch. But I'll work on it!

I have a few ... you know I can't write these things worth a damn, but I've got some ideas you might want to develop ... no pressure; I sure won't be upset if you'd rather come up with something on your own.

I'd love to have a look.



So how did it go?



Well, I'm not --

Uh, hi, Fifi! Yes, I'm happy to see you, too!

But I need to talk to your mommy right now.

If you're good, I'll play with you later, OK?

Fifi! Down! You know better than that!



urrrrgh ...

I thought once I did this, I'd feel better. But I feel just as bad as I did. Worse.

Because you're worried about him?

I think it's more because I'm not.

Someone else is taking care of him now and I'm like "OK, I don't have to worry about him anymore, glad that's off my plate" ...

... which is horrible.



I don't think anyone could accuse you of not being a dutiful daughter. You saw it through. You found help for him.

It's not like you can do anything more, not right now.

And we know your priorities have changed.

... we do?

You haven't talked about taking back the Delp estate in quite a while.

... And you've been wearing purple a lot lately.

Um.



My clueless darling, you know you're welcome here for as long as you want to be here.

I know you're having problems figuring out what you want. You lost all your walls at once. That's hard. You used to not have to think about any of this. Now you're forced to.

Take as long as you need. I'm not going anywhere.



Besides -- MMH -- Fifi's already decided she has two mommies now.

I -- uh! -- noticed that.



Hey! We see you, trying to make trouble!



Get out of here!

hee hee hee



NEXT:
DISAPPEARANCES