





Wonder what I should put on this wall ... wonder if I should put anything on it ...

hm?

... oh.



Are you always going to show up in the middle of the night?

it's when you're here

you mostly only come home to sleep

and you don't sleep a lot

Sometimes I sleep for days. But not lately, I admit.

If you sneak in here one night while I'm in bed with someone, I'm going to expect you to turn around and sneak right back out.

And you don't need to point out I don't do a lot of that right now either.

... So. What's up?



the souk that's what you call it, isn't it?

it's broken the pieces came apart

Came apart? What happened?

i don't know

you tell me i need to prove ... i want to prove ...

i thought you would want to know



Well, I can't say I wanted to know.

But you were right to tell me, I guess.

I'll have to tell Leyna. ... in the morning.

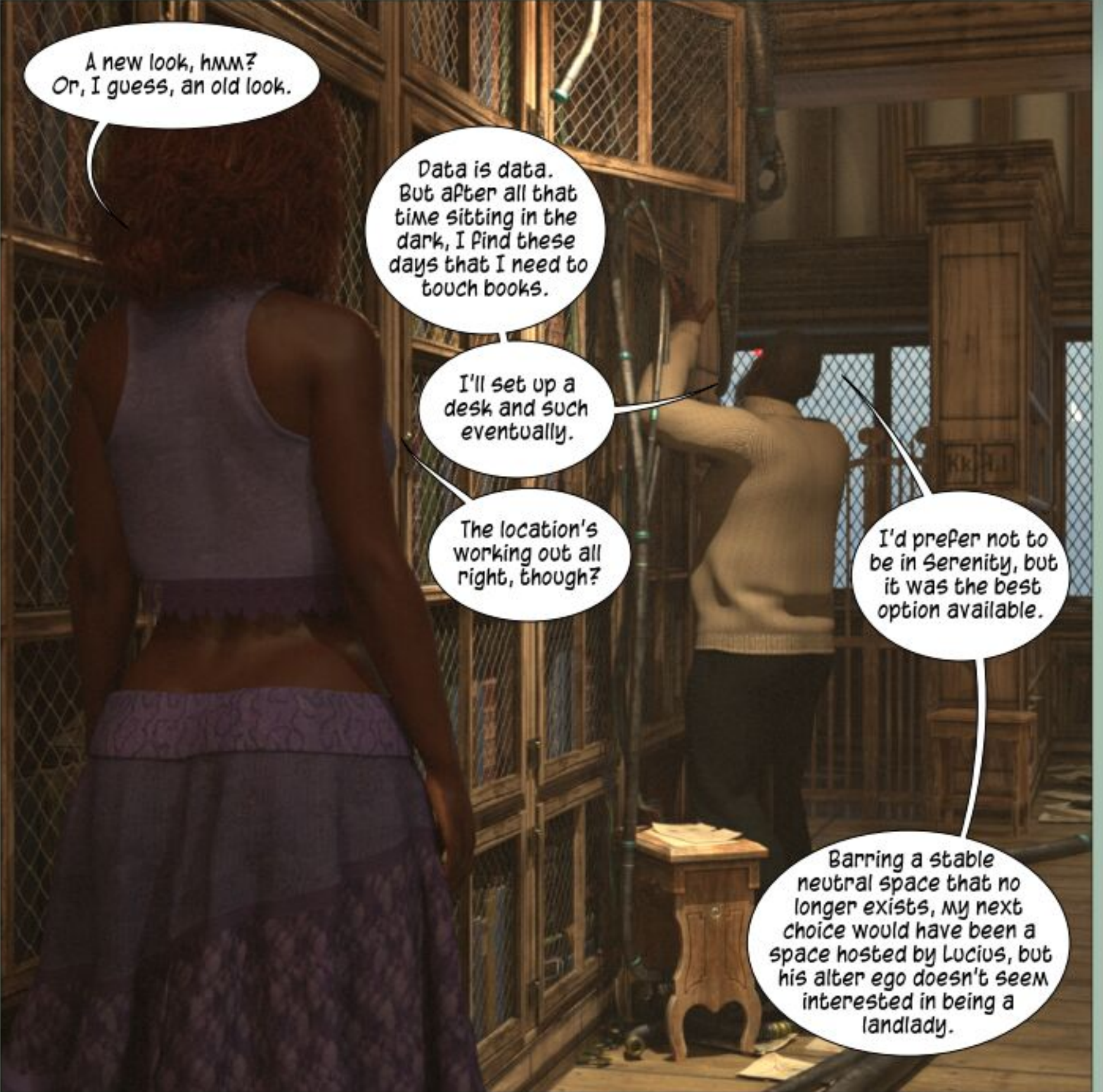


you don't care?

Oh, no, I care very much. If the Souk has come apart, someone's going to need to fix it.

But it's late and I'm tired, and right now I'm not happy with the idea that the someone might end up being me.

I realize I can't and shouldn't avoid my duty. But once in a while I'm OK with putting it off for a few hours.



A new look, hmm? Or, I guess, an old look.

Data is data. But after all that time sitting in the dark, I find these days that I need to touch books.

I'll set up a desk and such eventually.

The location's working out all right, though?

I'd prefer not to be in Serenity, but it was the best option available.

Barring a stable neutral space that no longer exists, my next choice would have been a space hosted by Lucius, but his alter ego doesn't seem interested in being a landlady.



Uh ...

I know. Officially you know nothing. Neither do I.

And I certainly wouldn't stand in the way of his happiness ... but I do miss Lucius.

He and Samuel created this position, as a fairly brilliant solution to a messy problem, and gave me the job.

They were the only ones who ever seemed to remember I existed ... and after Samuel died, Lucius was the only person who'd ever visit just to talk. To have a friendly conversation. Shoot the breeze.



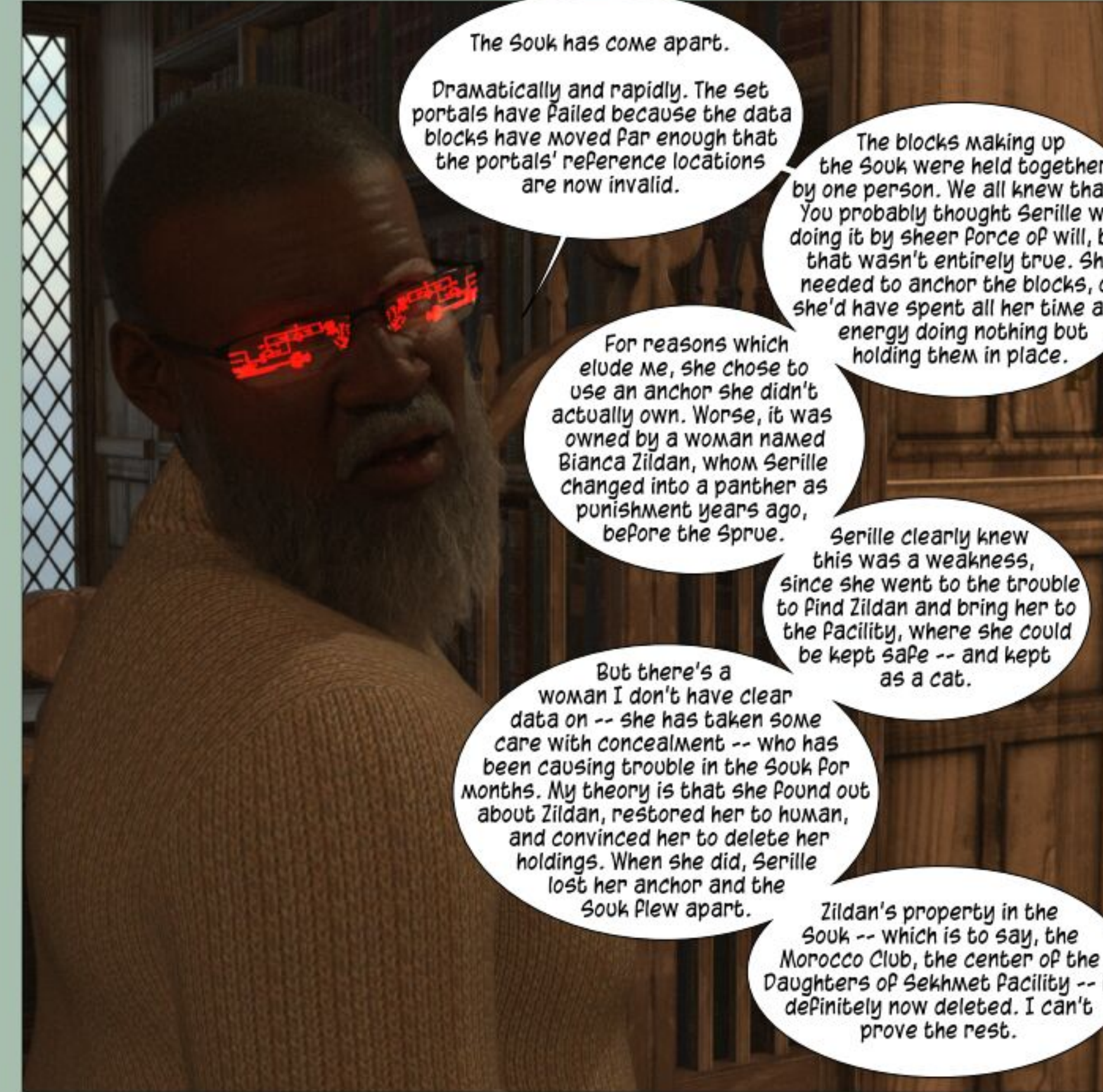
I think I'm being scolded.

Oh, not really. You've got a great deal on your plate at all times, and you're not my generation -- you've got better things to do than talk with an old man.

Nonetheless, you are here because you need something, aren't you?

Unfortunately, yes.

Every set portal to the Souk stopped working last night. All the ones I have reports about, anyway. Certainly all the ones in Serenity. The data, what little I can obtain, is giving very strange results. I wondered if you had anything.



The Souk has come apart. Dramatically and rapidly. The set portals have failed because the data blocks have moved far enough that the portals' reference locations are now invalid.

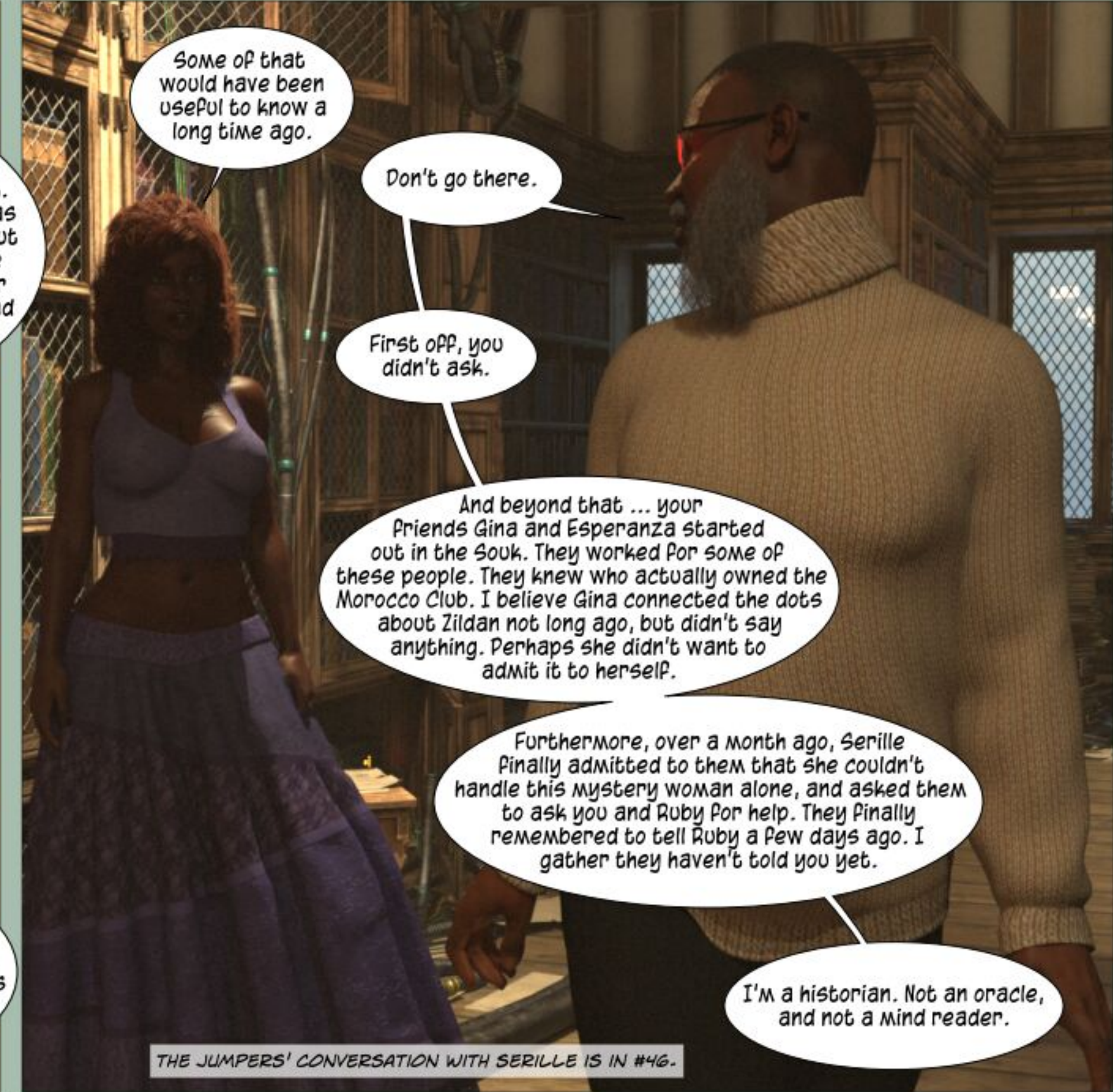
The blocks making up the Souk were held together by one person. We all knew that. You probably thought Serille was doing it by sheer force of will, but that wasn't entirely true. She needed to anchor the blocks, or she'd have spent all her time and energy doing nothing but holding them in place.

For reasons which elude me, she chose to use an anchor she didn't actually own. Worse, it was owned by a woman named Bianca Zildan, whom Serille changed into a panther as punishment years ago, before the Sprue.

Serille clearly knew this was a weakness, since she went to the trouble to find Zildan and bring her to the Facility, where she could be kept safe -- and kept as a cat.

But there's a woman I don't have clear data on -- she has taken some care with concealment -- who has been causing trouble in the Souk for months. My theory is that she found out about Zildan, restored her to human, and convinced her to delete her holdings. When she did, Serille lost her anchor and the Souk flew apart.

Zildan's property in the Souk -- which is to say, the Morocco Club, the center of the Daughters of Sekhmet Facility -- is definitely now deleted. I can't prove the rest.



Some of that would have been useful to know a long time ago.

Don't go there.

First off, you didn't ask.

And beyond that ... your Friends Gina and Esperanza started out in the Souk. They worked for some of these people. They knew who actually owned the Morocco Club. I believe Gina connected the dots about Zildan not long ago, but didn't say anything. Perhaps she didn't want to admit it to herself.

Furthermore, over a month ago, Serille finally admitted to them that she couldn't handle this mystery woman alone, and asked them to ask you and Ruby for help. They finally remembered to tell Ruby a few days ago. I gather they haven't told you yet.

I'm a historian. Not an oracle, and not a mind reader.



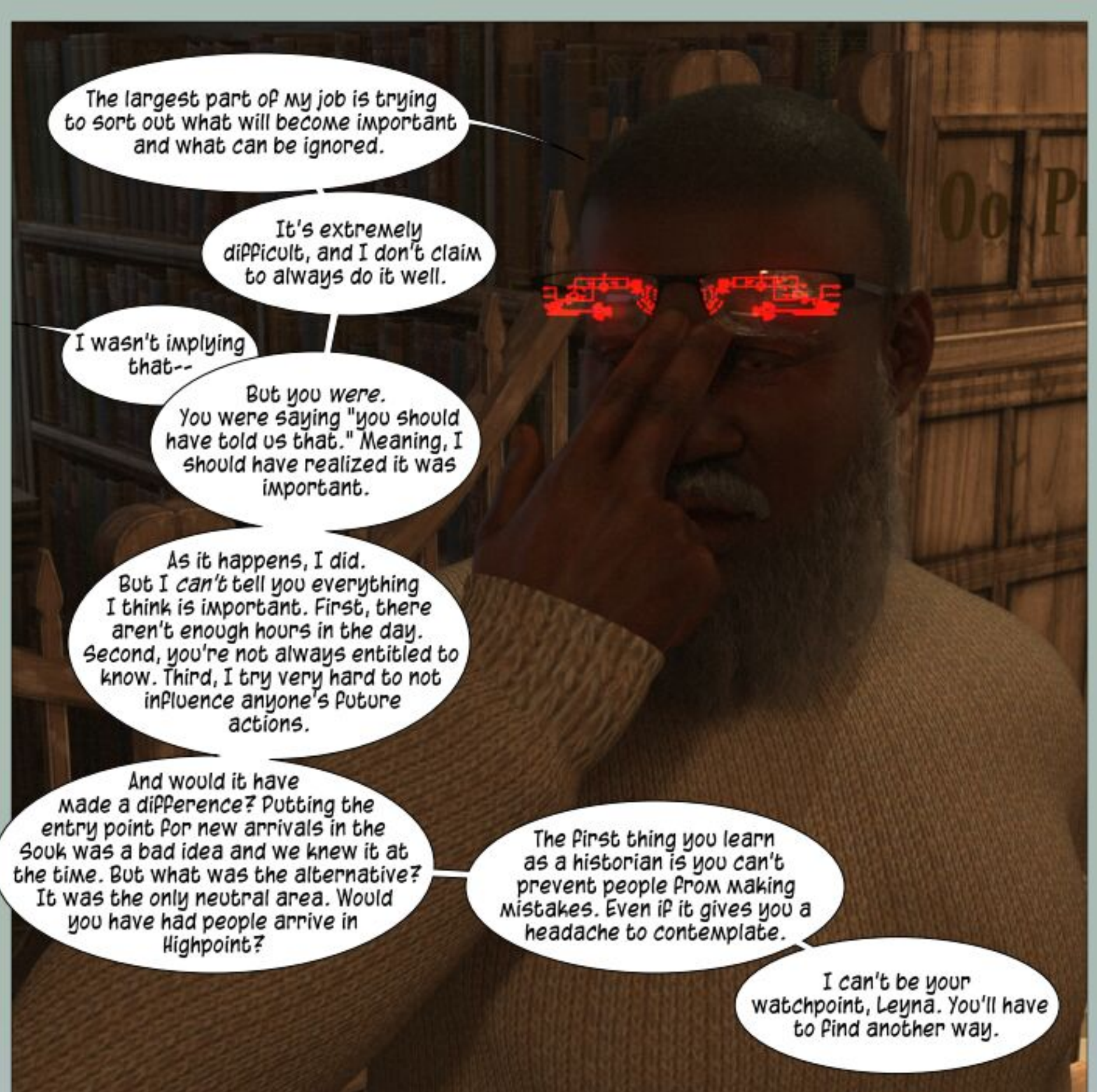
I'm not asking you to be.

But it just seems to me ...

I mean, I don't think you want this place to fall apart any more than I do. Do you?

If you're sitting on information you think is important ...

It doesn't work like that, Leyna, and you know better.



The largest part of my job is trying to sort out what will become important and what can be ignored.

It's extremely difficult, and I don't claim to always do it well.

I wasn't implying that--

But you were. You were saying "you should have told us that." Meaning, I should have realized it was important.

As it happens, I did. But I can't tell you everything I think is important. First, there aren't enough hours in the day. Second, you're not always entitled to know. Third, I try very hard to not influence anyone's future actions.

And would it have made a difference? Putting the entry point for new arrivals in the Souk was a bad idea and we knew it at the time. But what was the alternative? It was the only neutral area. Would you have had people arrive in Highpoint?

The first thing you learn as a historian is you can't prevent people from making mistakes. Even if it gives you a headache to contemplate.

I can't be your watchpoint, Leyna. You'll have to find another way.

THE OPS ROOM.



We've got a situation.

I've got one for you too.

What's yours?

You go first. Mine may take longer to explain.



The Souk came apart last night.

!!

No, she most definitely did not.

OK, so we've only got one situation ... how'd you find out? Did someone make it out of there?

The Sprue told me.

The Sprue?

Yeah. She's been manipulating. Visiting people. I've seen her, uh, three times now? Four?

Serene didn't tell you any of this? I told her about it when it started happening ...

IN, YOU GUESSED IT, #46.



I didn't tell you because we weren't speaking. But I thought it was important enough that I tried to make sure it got to you anyway. If you don't go talk to your mom, that's not my problem.

And if I thought the Sprue was trying to make trouble, I'd have made sure you knew about it. You're not the only person who cares about this place, you know.

Though I admit some days it's really hard to give a damn.

And you don't make it any easier when you're like this.



Hey! We got your message.

Found Jex, too. Sounded like you wanted her as well ...

... did we come in at a bad time?

You can't expect information to just come to you without you leaving this --

No, just calling Leyna out for being a pain in the ass.

Hey!

Uh ... so ... did you figure out why all the Souk portals died?



Probably because the Souk's in pieces.

In pieces? What does that mean?

It came apart.

The chunk that was holding it all together was owned by Bianca Zildan ... whom I'm told you two know ...

... and someone returned her to human and convinced her to delete it, and pow! No Souk.

"Returned her to human"? ... so that cat was her!

Yes, and I wish you'd told me about it ... just like I wish you'd told me that Serille asked for our help.

Sorry! We just never got a chance.



Look, I'm sorry to be a bitch about this. The thing is, I'm learning a lot of information this morning where, if I'd known it months back, we could have maybe avoided this mess.

And it's a big mess.

People used the Souk as a hub. There were more set portals to there than any other zone. The people who live there, if they don't have a saved location somewhere else, or can't cast portals to somewhere else, they're stuck there.

And because there were so many set portals to the Souk, not many people bothered to learn locations to cast portals into it.

And it's where new Sleepers get dropped on their first entry, so if we get any of those, they're stuck there too.

So if any of you want to say "why is this our problem?" say it now, so we can get the yelling and bleeding done with in a hurry. Because I'm not in the mood.



Actually ... I'd have thought you'd be the one going there. You're always saying you barely have enough resources just to deal with Serenity ...

And you're the one who was griping again just the other day about ending up being the cleanup crew for all of A4!

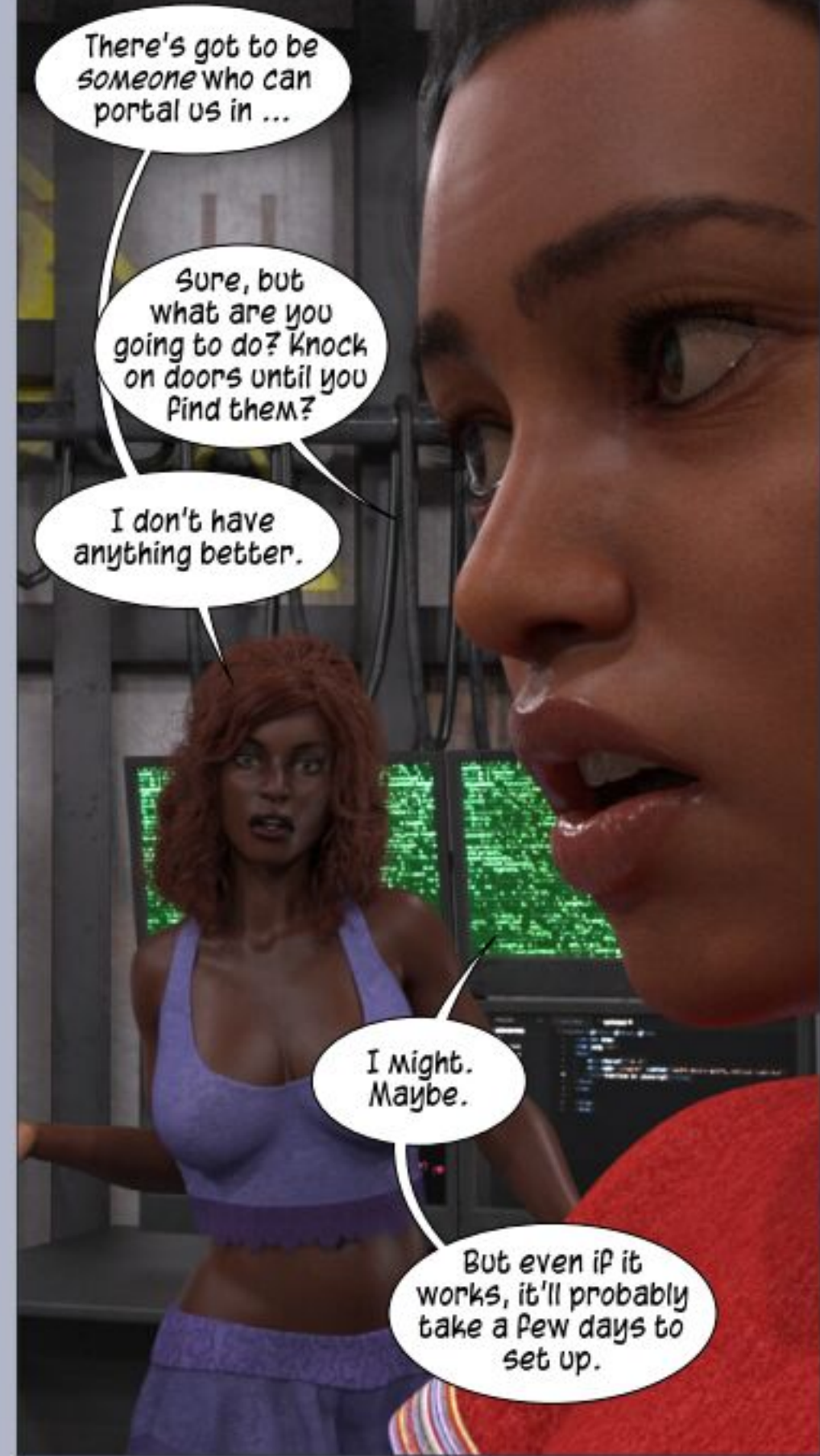
This is different. It's a major problem, and nobody else is going to be in a position to do anything about it --

I'm agreeing with you, Leyna.

Oh.

... Yeah. I guess you are.

Sorry.



CENTURY (WHICH HAS THE TALLEST BUILDINGS IN A4).



FOR MORE ABOUT MILLIE AND THE BALLOONERS, SEE #48.





... so I thought I'd come see if you were in, and say hi. Been a while --

Huh. Well, that's not what I was expecting. Remodeling?

Not exactly.

This is just to have a look at it and see if I like it. I'll revert to my old place later today.

I'm Peeling like I need to change something, even though I know perfectly well this isn't it.

Uh-oh. That sounds like the itchies.

... Everything going OK?



I don't think you'd have asked that if you thought it was.

Honestly, the question right now is what's going right.

You haven't met Molly yet ...

Don't even know who that is.

HM. I was thinking Leyna might have told you.

Leyna and I aren't always communicating very well right now.



Molly's a Coleman too. She came to me looking for information on other Coleman children for a project. We got reacquainted. I hadn't seen her since we were teenagers.

We've ... been spending a lot of time together since then.

How did I not notice they didn't bother to put a railing there?

Well, that's good, though, isn't it?

I mean, you'd think ...

I don't know, Ruby. After a while alone, you get so you kind of make it into a strength, you know? Like, "I don't need any of that."

Then you find out maybe that wasn't really a strength.



And this wall doesn't do anything except make this corner unusable ...

Anyway, it's not just that. Things are getting pretty messy here, and I'm going to be up to my neck in it whether I want to be or not.

Monica Barker has practically ordered me to put together a team to deal with the problems.

You don't have to do what she wants ...

I know, but I also don't want to let Century Fall apart.

Molly doesn't have any powers. She's already been put in danger a couple of times just by hanging around me. I don't want to get her deeper into that.



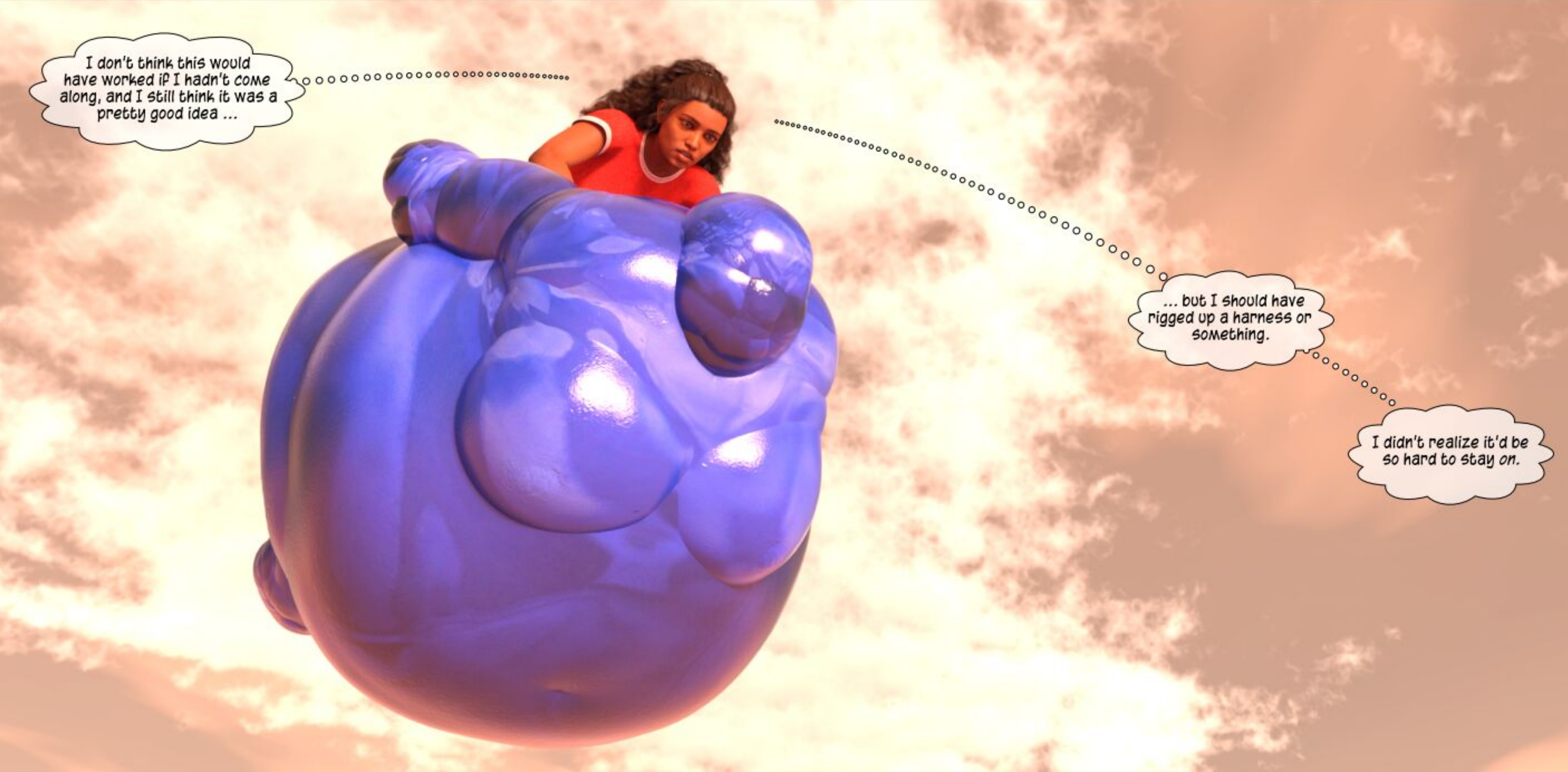
Incidentally, I might have to ask you for help.

I'm trying to get a team together as fast as I can, but it's slow going. No one wants the job.

I have a nasty Peeling something's going to blow up bad real soon. If it does, I may be trying to get help anywhere I can.

You know I'll come a-runnin'. Anytime you need.

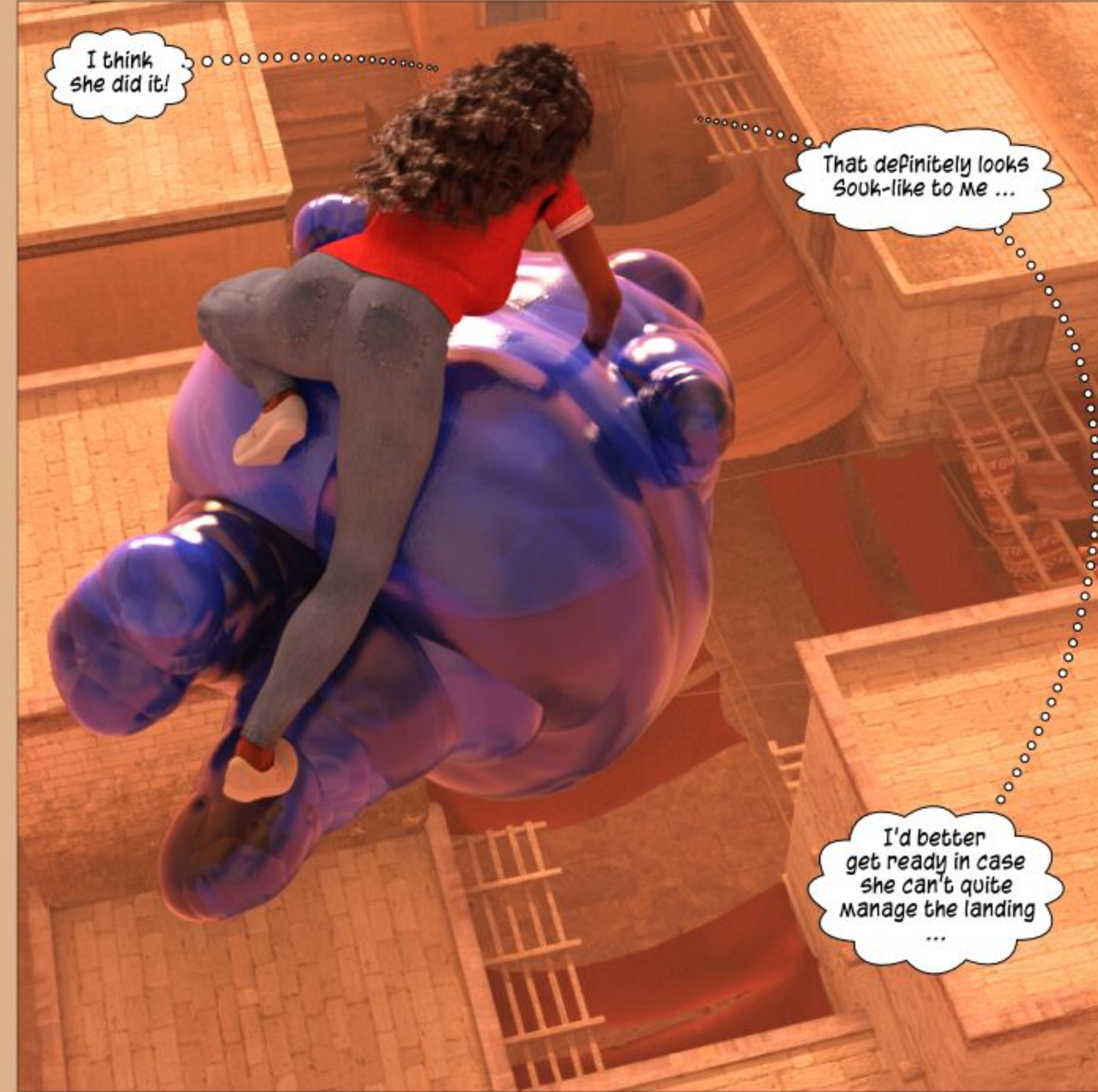
RUBY REJOINS ESPERANZA, WHO HAS LEARNED HER LESSONS WITH EASE, AND THUS ...



I don't think this would have worked if I hadn't come along, and I still think it was a pretty good idea ...

... but I should have rigged up a harness or something.

I didn't realize it'd be so hard to stay on.



I think she did it!

That definitely looks Souk-like to me ...

I'd better get ready in case she can't quite manage the landing ...



Well, what do you know.

Right? You did a great job.

Hey, I know where this is. You and Gina lived here for a while, right? We came to find you here.\*

Poydras Alley. I don't know if I'd call it living. Hiding is more like it.

Well, it must have meant something to you, if you knew it well enough to Pocus on it ...

... Yeah, I guess so. This is where Gina and I got serious about each other.

It's still a dump, though.



Ruby, I gotta ask ...

I mean, Gina spent years in the Souk too, and probably had a lot more locations she could focus on than I did ...

I spent most of my time in the back rooms of Percy's club, which doesn't exist anymore.

Anyway, what I mean is --

Gina would hate being a balloon. You enjoy it.



... I was afraid that was what you'd say.

Oh, don't be embarrassed!

C'mon, you were in the business for years. You know there's much weirder stuff out there.

Yeah, but none of it was ever my kink before. I just liked to get beaten sometimes, like a normal person.



Heh.

I don't have normal friends. They're boring.

I think the first thing I need to do is save a preset here. You probably want to do that too. I can leave a message for Leyna while I'm recalled ... then we can arrange to portal them in --



Stop her!

Get away!

Whoa!



Hey!

AAAAA!

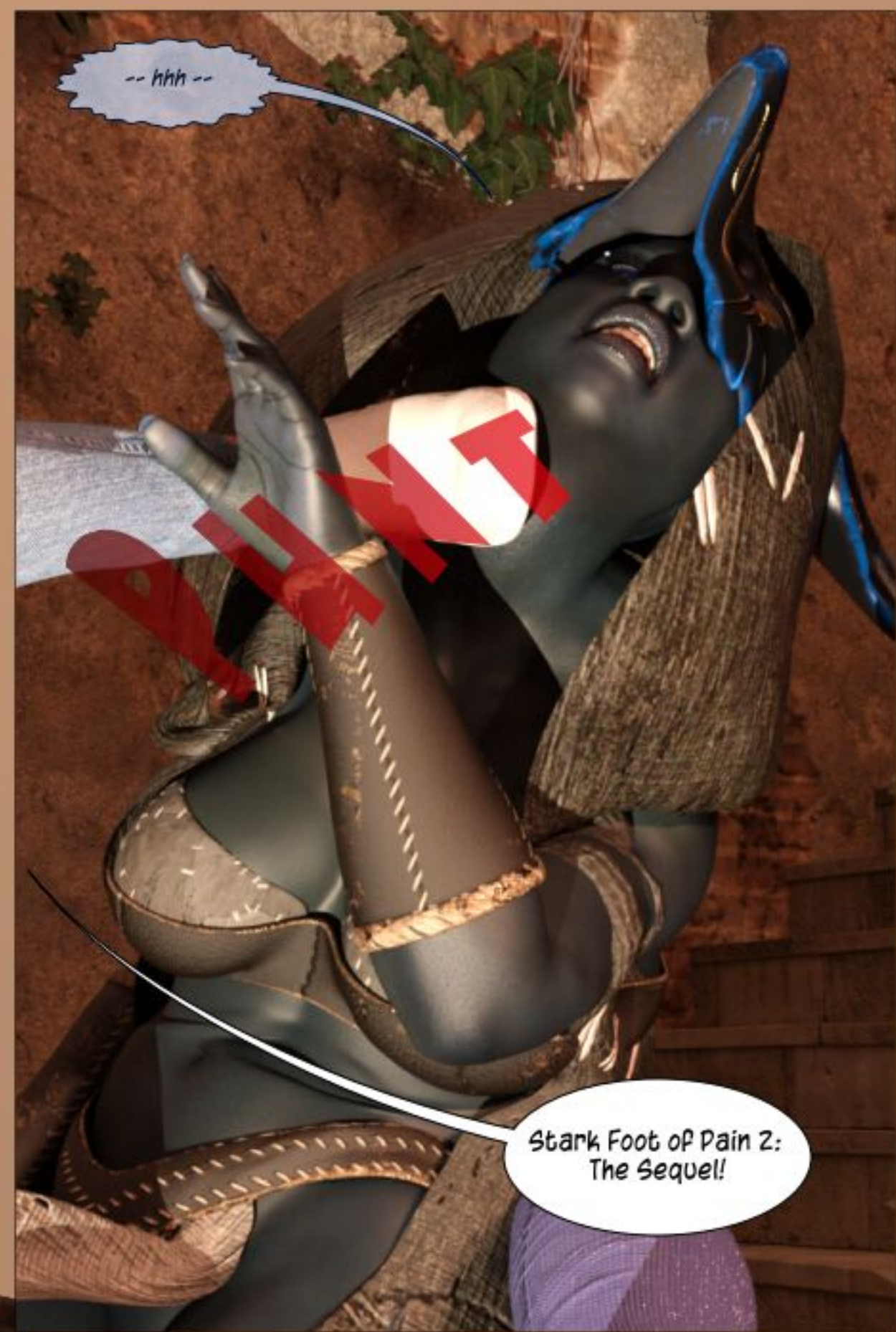
You bitches again.

You know, you're getting really good with your footwork.



You'll suffer for that!

The Souk belongs to us now and --



-- hhh --

Stark Foot of Pain 2: The Sequel!



Now, what are you? Evil version of the kitties? Do they know you're stealing their look?

They -- I --

the new wave



No --!

Too many! Too many!!

Huh?



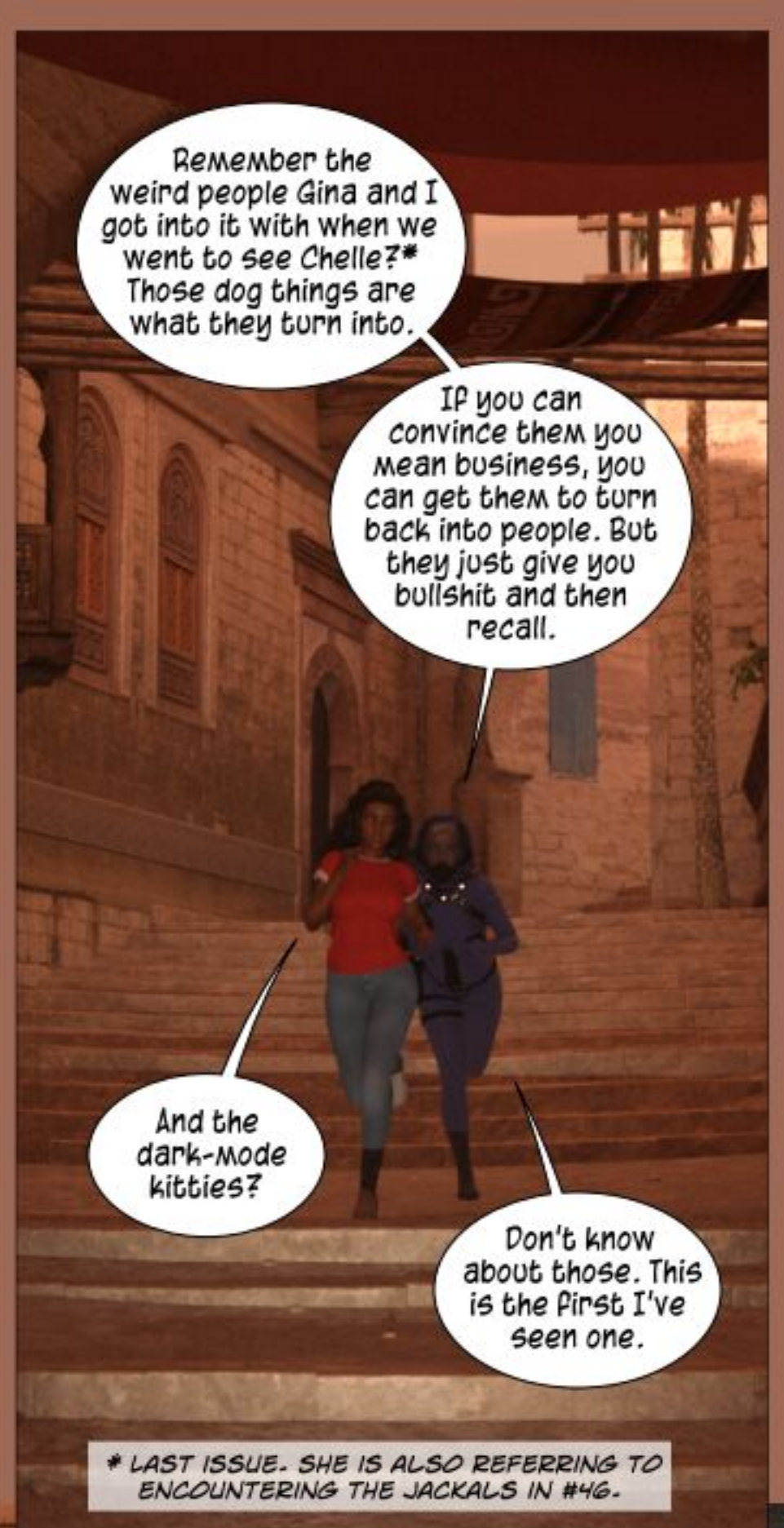
Hey, I wasn't done hitting you yet!

YII!



Do we see where the stampede's going?

I kinda think we have to.



Remember the weird people Gina and I got into it with when we went to see Chelle? Those dog things are what they turn into.

If you can convince them you mean business, you can get them to turn back into people. But they just give you bullshit and then recall.

And the dark-mode kitties?

Don't know about those. This is the first I've seen one.

\* LAST ISSUE. SHE IS ALSO REFERRING TO ENCOUNTERING THE JACKALS IN #46.

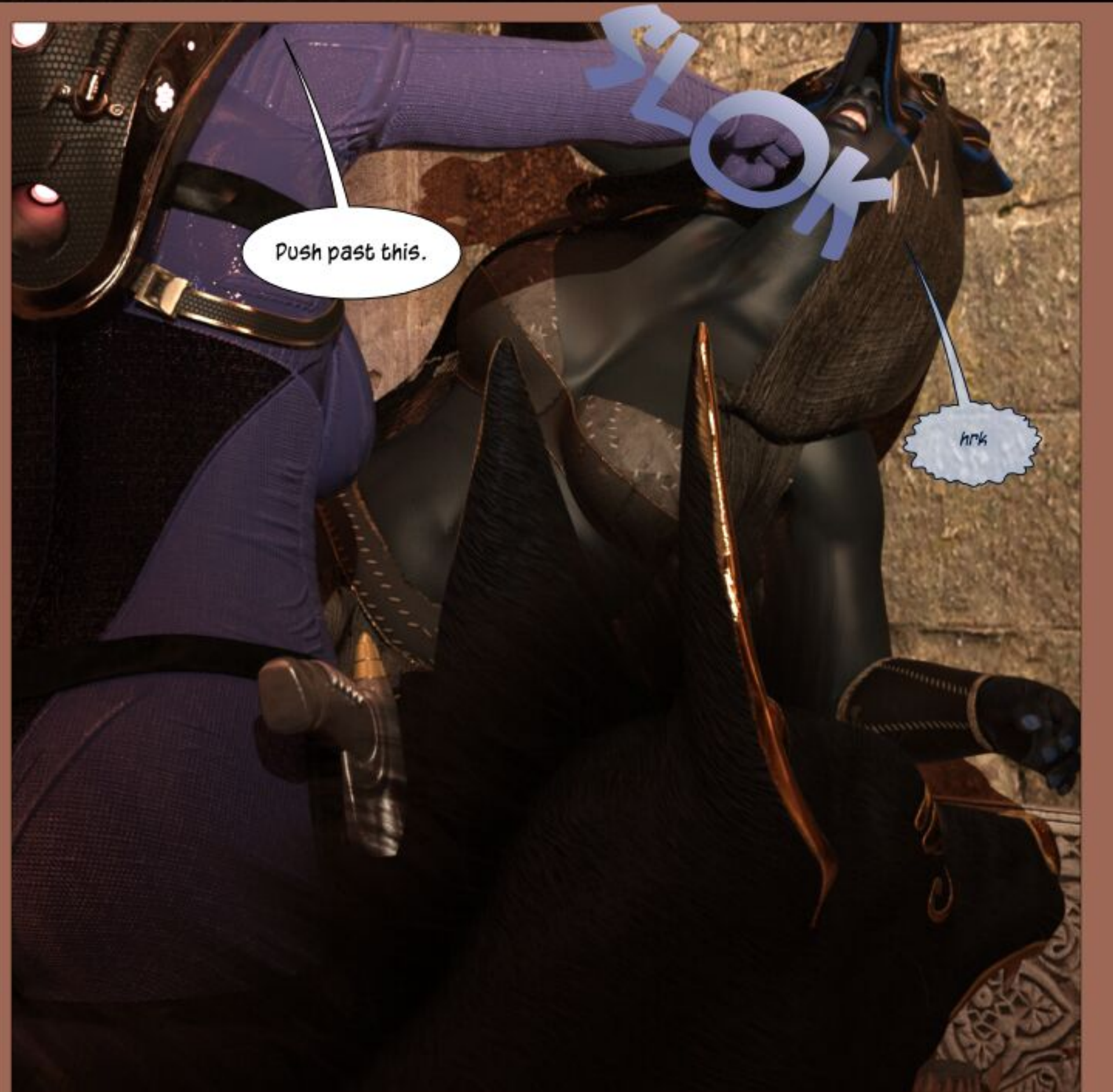


Get in there! Take down the gate!



No!!

Don't let them intimidate you! You're stronger than they are! Push past --



Push past this.

hrk



Out. Damn. I was hoping to have to hit her a couple more times.

I've never seen you this ready to do violence before.

I think I don't like them very much.



And the others all disappeared wherever they were going ...

Doesn't seem like they have each other's backs much, huh?

They're all trying to get into an alley or a courtyard or something. Cul-de-sac. I got a look at it. Some people on the other side of a gate.

We can get into it from another direction, I think, but we'll probably need to go over a wall.



Get through that gate!  
Ignore the tigers!

We've got to close it, Sabah!

I'm trying!!

EEEEEE!!



I've got to make reinforcements. You'll need to hold them off.

I'm not a street cat!  
I can't fight!

I can help you out.

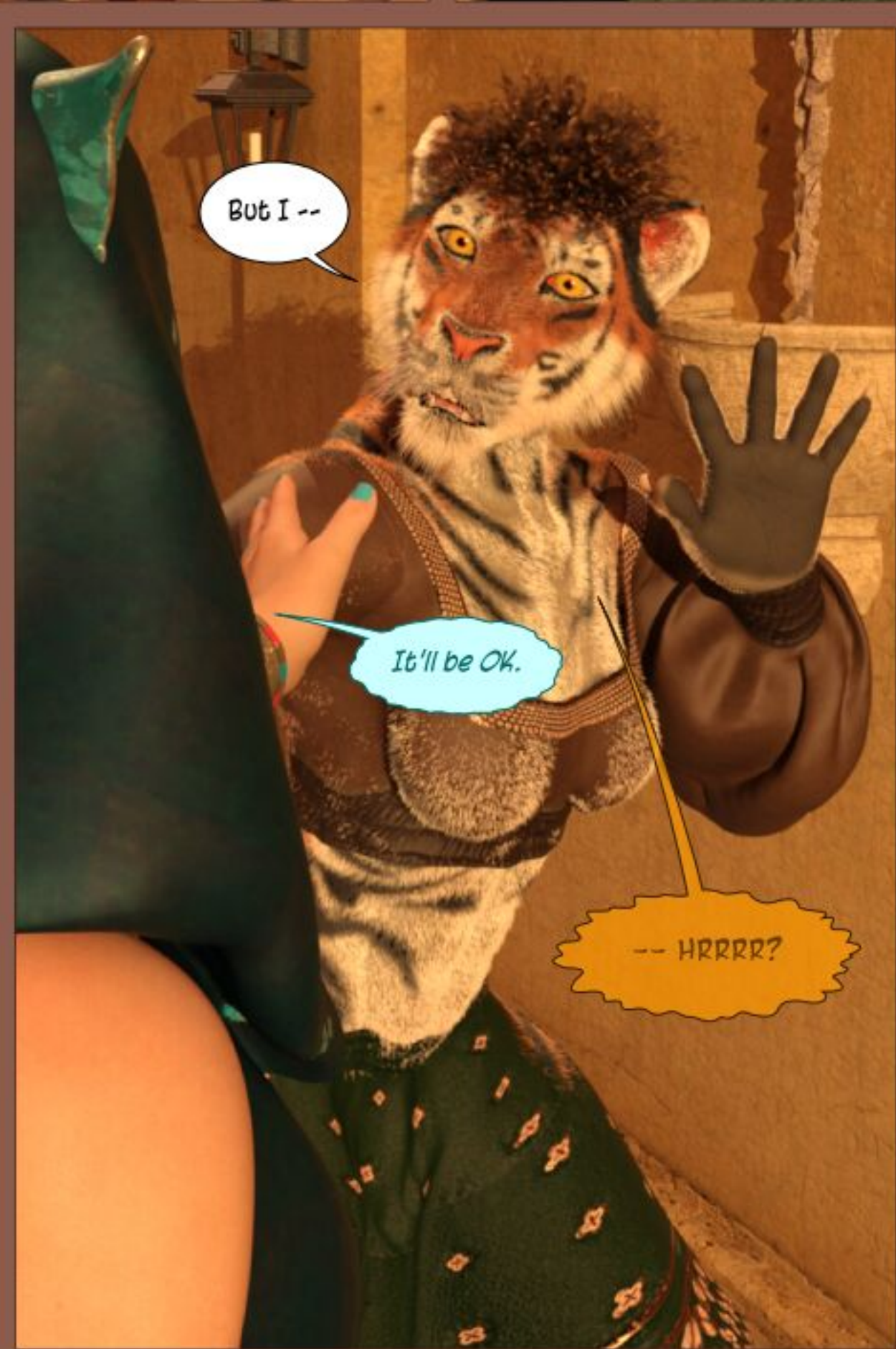
Oooooo!



You just volunteered.

Huh?

Get back, you!!



But I --

It'll be OK.

-- HRRRR?



Go get 'em, tiger.



That was a rude thing to do ...

I have to work with what I've got. I'll change her back afterward.

You want to clear them out instead? Happy for the help ...

Oh, well, if it'll make you happy.

'Ranza, see if you can zap the Dark Kitty, hmm?



Kick 'em right at the bottom of the ribcage. See? Knocks the wind out.

Oh ...

AAAGH!!

Oooooo!

Great shot!



Cowardly dogs.

No, they just prefer to wander around aimlessly making trouble. They only do something coordinated if one of the corrupted is there to order them to.

I'd have taken her out, but all my stuff is very short range. I couldn't reach her. Which she knew.



I was expecting you to use some of your secret powers.

There wasn't any reason to.

... Do I know you?

Your reputation precedes you.

I didn't ask "Do you know me." I asked if I know you.

This is Serille's second-in-command. Watches the streets. I don't know her name.

Emily.  
My name is Emily.

And you have met me. Just not with the mask on.

You were looking for Slip Shear one night. I gave you directions.





Bina!

Looks like it. She's been gone a long time.

So you meant it when you said she was corrupted.

Serille did say the kitties had been going missing.

Can you do anything, Ruby?



I can peel off the physical changes, but that won't do much. This doesn't feel like that kind of thing. She'll need mental help to shake off whatever's been done to her, I think.

She's coming to. What do we do with her?

Leave her here.

Emily, no!

Sabah, we can't help her right now! And we need to get those gates closed and sealed.

If you leave her out here, she'll probably just come back for another attack as soon as she recovers enough.

Which is why we need to get the shelter sealed!

I have to protect these people. That's first priority.

Whurrh...

Anyway, if I bring her in, she'll just try to do damage in there. I don't have a place to hold her.



... Most of the street cats had already been taken. I think maybe one or two left, plus me. Might just be me, now.

Sabah and I were out on an errand when the club vanished. Most of the inside cats would have been working in the club or asleep.

When it did, the jackals all went into high gear. Like they were waiting for a signal. They're capturing everybody they can find.

What do they do with the people they capture?

We don't know. We were going to try to track where they take them, but I decided it was more important to try to save the ones they hadn't gotten yet.

I figure we might have a chance, because I don't think there's too many of them in this Fragment. I've only seen two or three of the corrupted. It's harder to count the jackals.



The bigger problem is we can't find Serille.

She was in the club when it was deleted. I guess she recalled after that ... then she'd surely have come back to some set point in the Souk, but I don't know where.

I'm pretty sure she's not in this Fragment at all, though.

We'll have to look for her in the others. If we can figure out a way to get to the others.

I need a safe spot to bring in the rest of the team.



A WHILE LATER.

We should have plenty of space for everybody, but we don't have enough beds.

I can make some. We probably want some curtains, too. For privacy.

You know, now that we've got some reference points, we can portal everyone out ...

I'm not ready to turn my back on the Souk. If anyone wants to go, they can. But I bet they won't. This is our home.

Trying to fix it would be a better thing to do than trying to evacuate.

I hope Chelle is OK. I don't see her here.

She could be in one of the other pieces ...

So made 'Ranza balloon gain?

Hey, you guessed! Nice. Don't tell, OK? She's embarrassed.



Follow that corridor over there. We're not far from the edge of the hole. That's why we're here. Most of the entrances don't exist anymore. Easy to depend.

Be very careful. It's dark in there.

Please try to find Serille ... and if you do, bring her back here. We need her.



Just sepp all sudden, huh?

Careful! Yeah, that's how it does.

So are you going to tell me what you and Ruby actually did?

... Maybe later.



An't see none out.

Me neither. There's nothing anywhere near.

So if anybody was thinking of making some wiseass remark about me pulling the blocks back together ...

I was considering it.

Leyna, any tricks up your sleeve?



Same problem. I was hoping we'd be able to bridge between blocks, but ...

See some.

You mean, like an actual bridge?

That's what it'd look like, yes. Sometimes data relationships are physically literal.

The archivist wasn't kidding, though -- this must have acted almost like an explosion. The blocks all zoomed away in different directions. Fast.

I don't even have a way to find them that doesn't take--

Oyo!!

Huh! You're right. Way out there.



Gettin bigger?

No. It's moving.

... Past.

Very Past. Straight at us.



Move!!



That was a little too convenient.

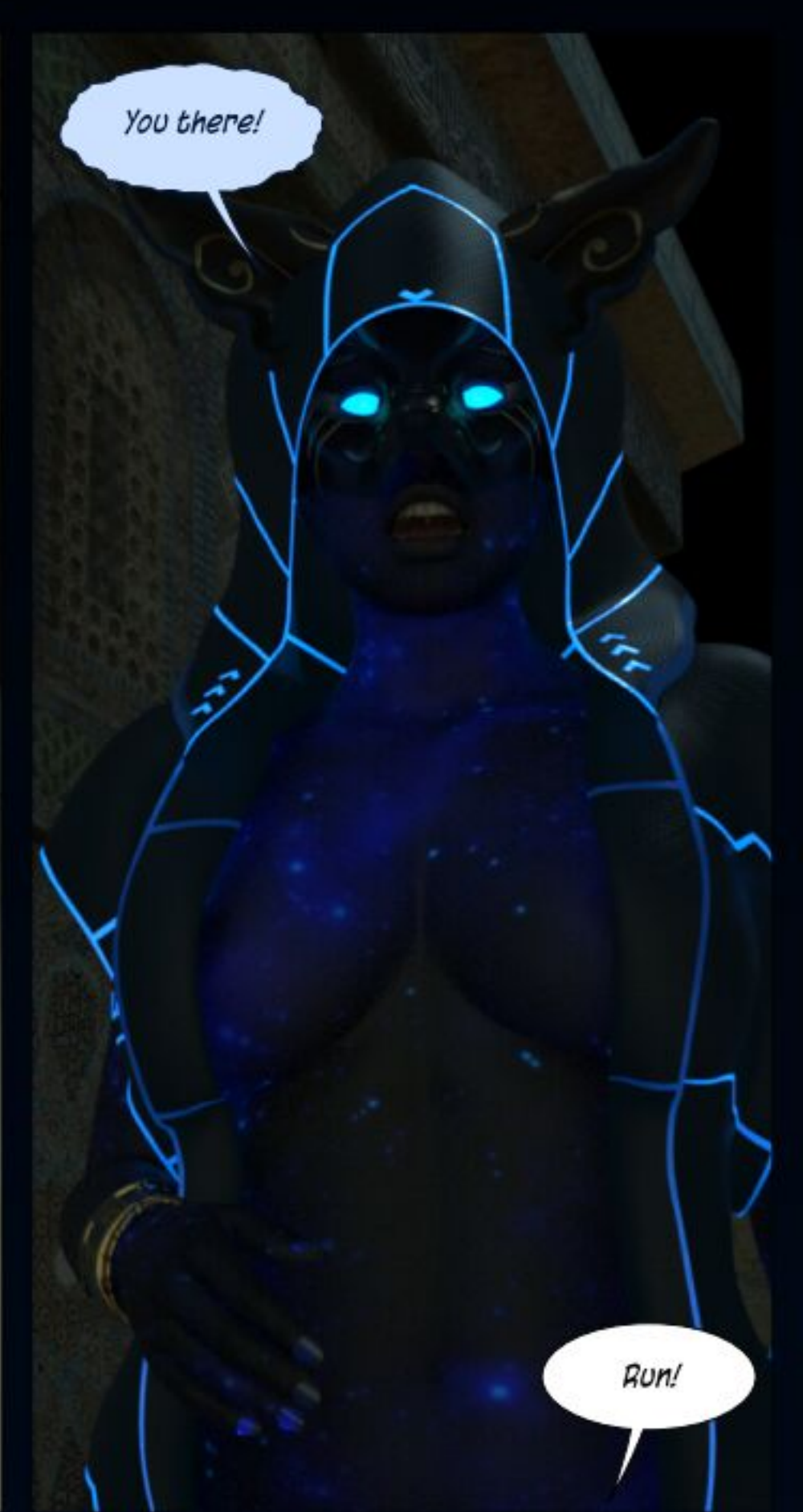
Yes. This block was moved by someone. To us. On purpose.

Putting aside what that says about their power level, the question is whether they're trying to fix things or ...



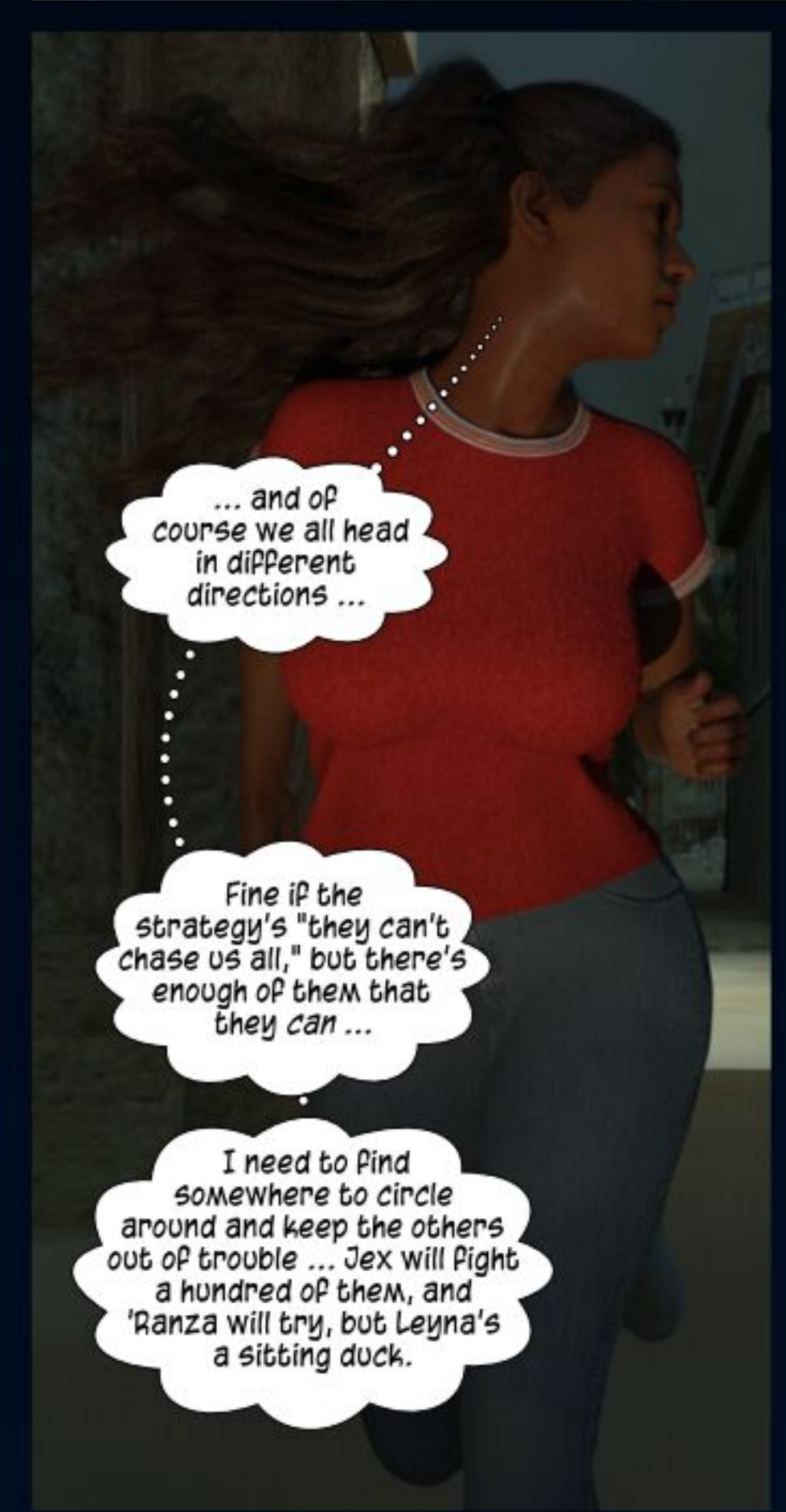
... they've taken control of this block and are looking to branch out.

Shit.



You there!

Run!



... and of course we all head in different directions ...

Fine if the strategy's "they can't chase us all," but there's enough of them that they can ...

I need to find somewhere to circle around and keep the others out of trouble ... Jex will fight a hundred of them, and Ranza will try, but Leyna's a sitting duck.



Damn it, let us in!

We're desperate!

There's probably nobody in there.

Everybody with any sense got out already ...



I told you you wouldn't be able to run Forever.

Now we settle up.



HYAAAAA!

urk



Don't you start.



Kicked her so hard she changed back to a person. Handy, I guess.

Oh, hey, Chelle! It's Chelle, right?

Are you two OK? These clowns are definitely--



-- MWWH! --



... Uh ... you're welcome.

There's a safe place I can take you.

Actually, we need to get back there in a hurry if we want it to stay safe ...

I hope we can find the others on the way.



Ah, there we go.

Wow.



Ruby!

And you Pound Chelle and Kari!

Gina, we've got to finish up here and get back to the sanctuary. Right now.

These jerks are headed straight for it. Emily doesn't know that dead end isn't a dead end anymore. She won't be watching that side.



Where's Leyna?

I don't know. We'll have to come back for her.

Ruby!

Listen. Jex can fight, I can fight, you two are getting better at it every day ... she's the only one of us who refuses to learn to take care of herself, and I can't always stop to save her ass.

We'll come back for her.

I'm glad she Pound you. We were worried.

She's really something, isn't she?

Ruby? Yeah, she's something. It's just that some days I'm not sure what.



Speaking of fighting, why weren't you using your disruptors?

... Oh ... Uh ... good question.

Jex went in punching, like she does, and I guess we just followed her lead ...

I Peel a little dumb now.

Nah. Whatever works.



Stop right there!

You're through causing us problems.

Aw, did we hurt your Peeling?

You won't think it's as Punny when we take you down.



You idiots couldn't take down a wet paper bag.

Why don't you just haul oPP and save us both some trouble?

Uh, Ruby ...



Wha--



urk!

Surprise!

oog



OK, Ms. Second Sight, who is it?

I don't have second sight, Kari.

Disguised, yes. I don't know them, though.

That's because you haven't met Leyna yet.



I thought I'd have a better chance of making it back to you if I blended in.

Listen, we've got to get back to Emily. She doesn't know they can get at her from that side now.

Just give me a second to put on clothes.



Sometimes I think they clash the way they do because they understand each other.

We may be walking into a fight ...

I think we can sneak up, though.

Only sometimes?



Oh, thank goodness, Emily figured it out ...

Fewer than I expected. Maybe some of them are still out looking for us. Good.

But that barrier effect isn't very strong. I can tell from here. I could blow through it in a second. Only reason they haven't is they're using their Pistols, and if someone --



What is this? Surely this many of you can take down one gate ...

Any idea who that is?

None.

Ah, I see. Someone thinks she's clever.

Get out of the way so I can deal with it.

Fire.



What?



Your interference is -- urgh!

... pointless.



You don't think that Peeble magic will stop me for more than an instant?

No more than the puny barrier on this gate will, once I deal with your --



Then let's try the physical approach.

-- hnk --



I suppose you think that was a triumph.

Well, you are the one lying on the ground.



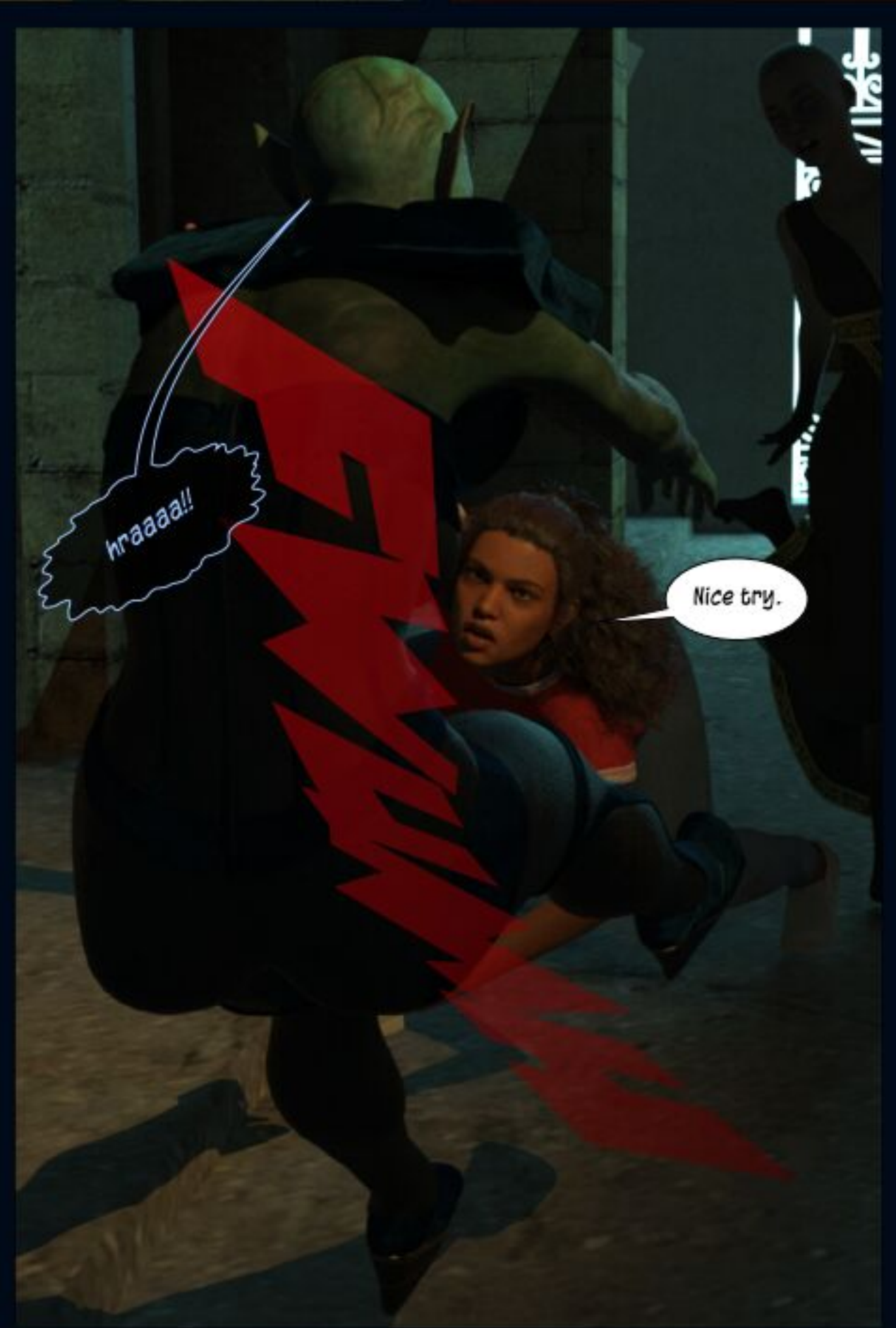
Wooaaa!

Crouched. Crouched on the ground.



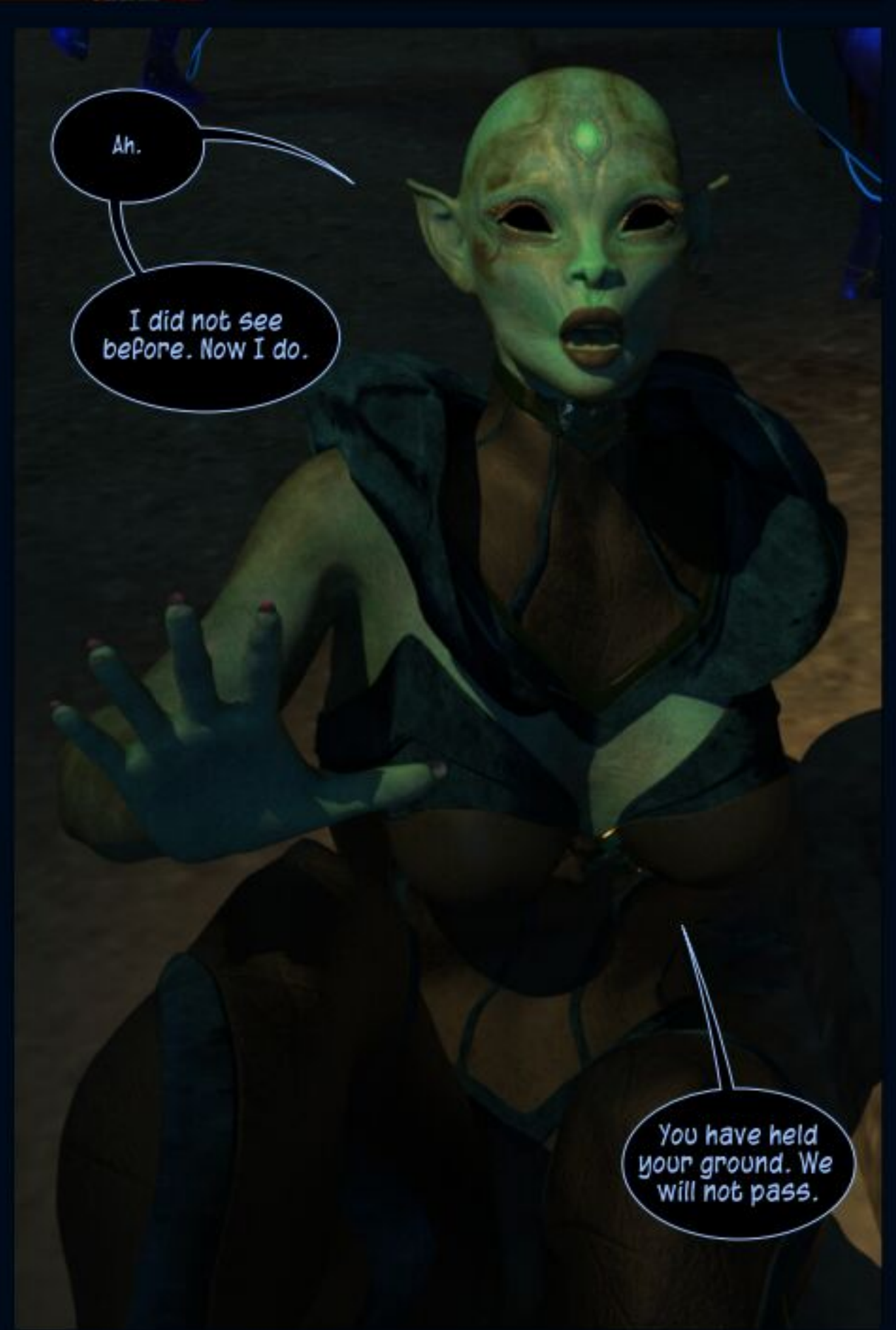
You're strong ... I can use you ... once you ... hgh --

uhrrrr



hrrrrrr!

Nice try.



Ah.

I did not see before. Now I do.

You have held your ground. We will not pass.



Fall back!

We have things to attend to elsewhere.



... Did we just win?

I don't think so.

That felt more like a stay of execution.

Yeah, she's not anywhere near done.

Someone get Emily to come open that gate. We need to have a serious talk with her.

A WHILE LATER.



You know, if we're going to hold here, we could use a bunch of those guns.

That's a good idea. I'll ask Leyna to manifest some.

... So this is the woman the archivist says has been making trouble here for a while?

Sounds like it, Prom, your description. She's the one who makes the jackals, and steals our people. She also does other things. Nothing good.

Do you know who she is? He said he couldn't find out ...

No idea. We don't even have a name.

But I'm sure Serille knows.

Why?



A while back, the two of them confronted each other in the street, and the woman called Serille a word I don't know. Serille didn't take it well.

Leyna, you and that man came up right after that. You were looking for the portal to Shadyside, remember? You also might remember that Serille was kind of --

She just about bit my head off, yes.

Serille's been on edge more or less since then. Jumpy. I'm sure they knew each other. I know the woman definitely knew who Serille was.

I think it's personal. I think this woman's got some kind of grudge against Serille and that's why she's been making so much trouble here. And I think Serille knows it.

But I haven't been able to get Serille to tell me anything. She won't talk about it.

You know, if it's like that, there's a good chance this woman's got Serille captive somewhere. I know that's hard to imagine ...

No, I think you're right. So that means that you have two reasons to find this woman and stop her.



An't like.

Yeah, the blue light's not working for me.

And it's too empty. She can't have made everybody into jackals ...

I'd expect more if she had. They'd be patrolling the streets. Everyone else is hiding in their private spaces.

If they're lucky.

If she's not making everybody into jackals or guards, what is she doing with the ones they catch?



Hey, look!

Yep. Leyna, I think you're about to get a chance to find out.



You stand before my judgement ...

Judgement? Why do I need judgement? I didn't do anything! I was at the party and Lorin was telling me about all these crazy people going all over the place and taking people and the next thing I know they rushed in, and really wrecked the mood by the way, and now I'm here and you're telling me you think I need judgement? Who are you, anyway? What is your malfunction?

You don't have any right to just come around

You talk too much.

Bring in the next.



Turn loose, bitches!

You fuckers gonna bleed! Fucking tools!

You got her? How unexpectedly competent.

Nimeh, you've been wasting a lot of our time and energy.



Only waste here is you! We're not having it! There's gonna be payback! We don't want you Pascists in the Souk!

Even if you take me out, there's --



Hush.



So much antagonism. So much defiance.

urmh

You need to spend a while doing anything anybody tells you to do.

It will improve you.



And here's the person to do it.

Look at her. So compliant there's nothing there. Just going where the jackals lead her.

What do you suppose she'll ask you to do once I awaken her nerve? It'll be interesting, I think.



HRAAAA!!!

Got news, skel!

hmk



ugh!

Tack eppn Pace opp!

aaa!



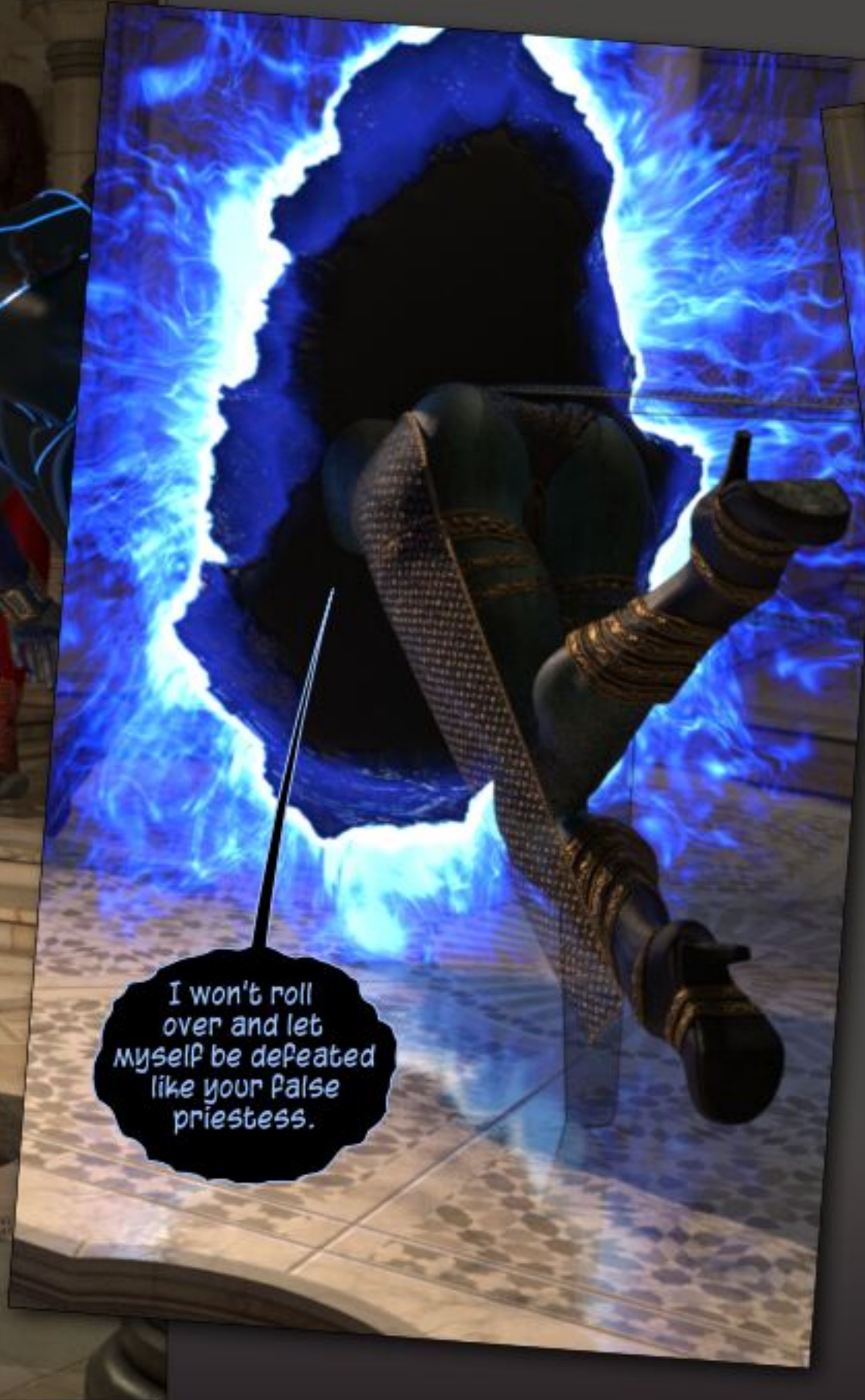
Watch out, Jex!

urg

You think it's that easy?

hhh

WOAHH!



I won't roll over and let myself be defeated like your Paise priestess.



Oh, no, you don't!

RUBY!!

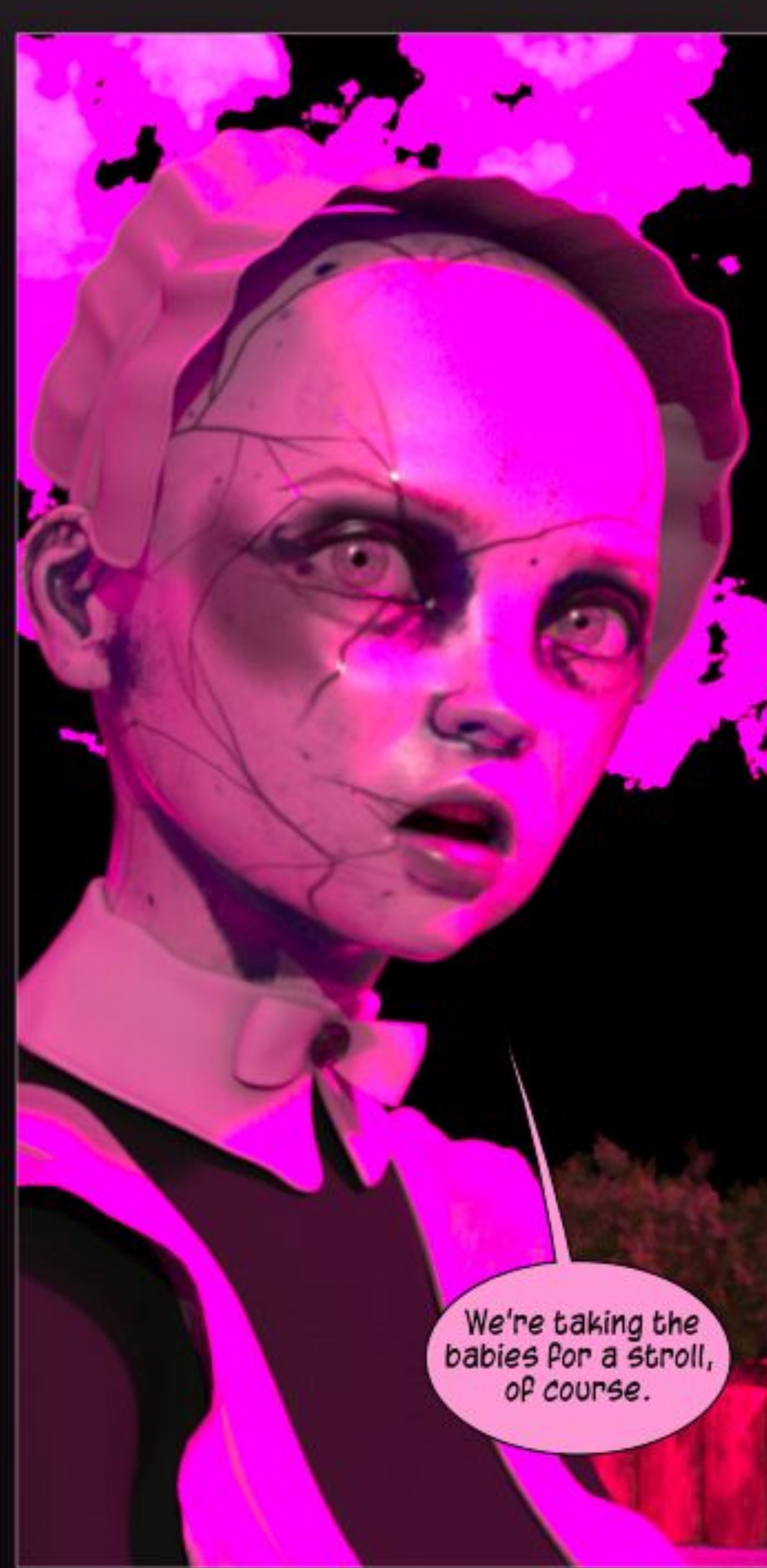


Wuh?

Where did she go?  
Where did I go?



Um, hi?  
What's going on here?

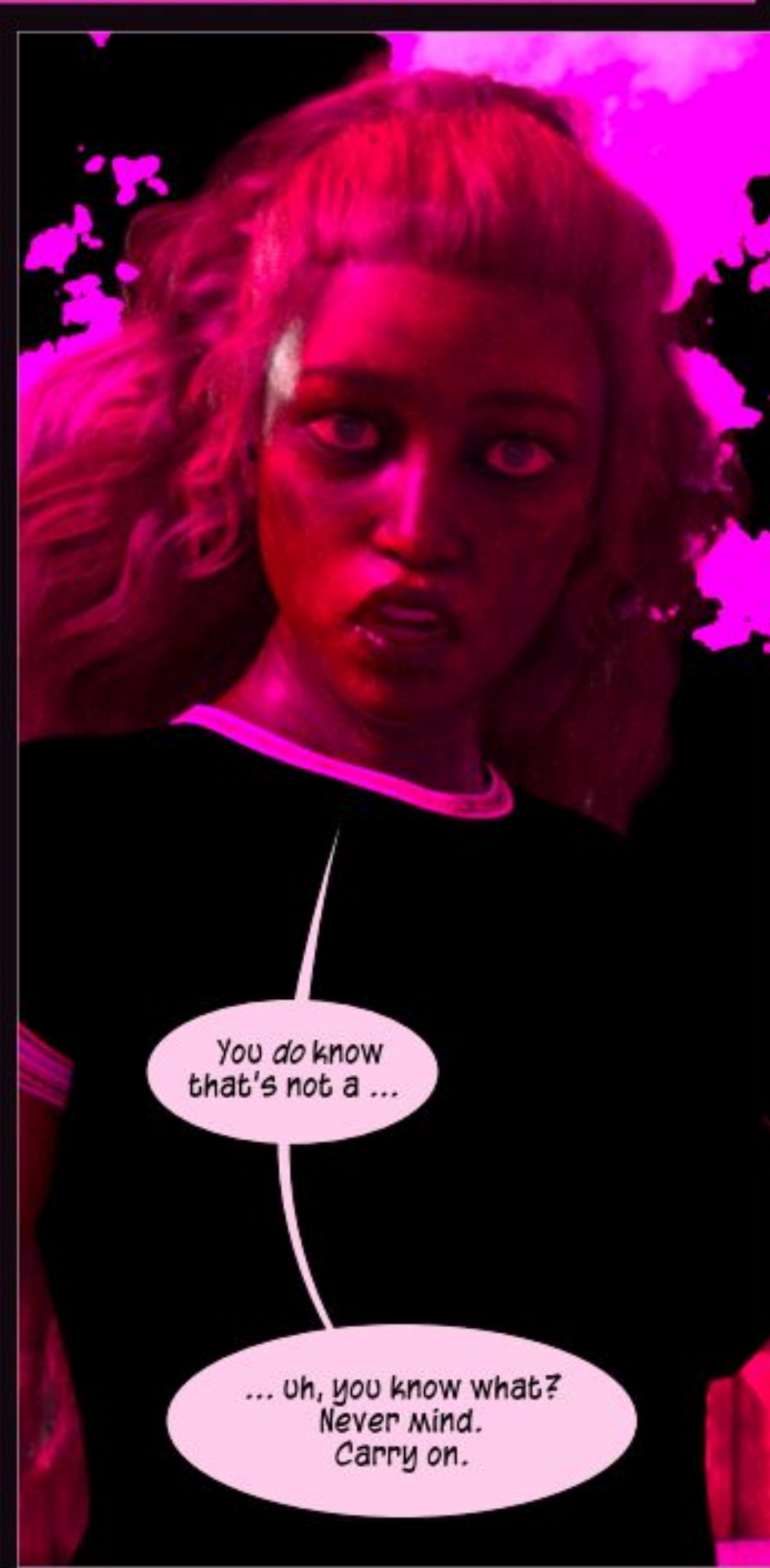


We're taking the babies for a stroll, of course.



Um.

Then, afterward, we'll feed them and put them to bed for a nap.



You do know that's not a ...

... Uh, you know what? Never mind. Carry on.



Later we'll probably have a tea party.

You could join us, but you'll already be doing something else by then.



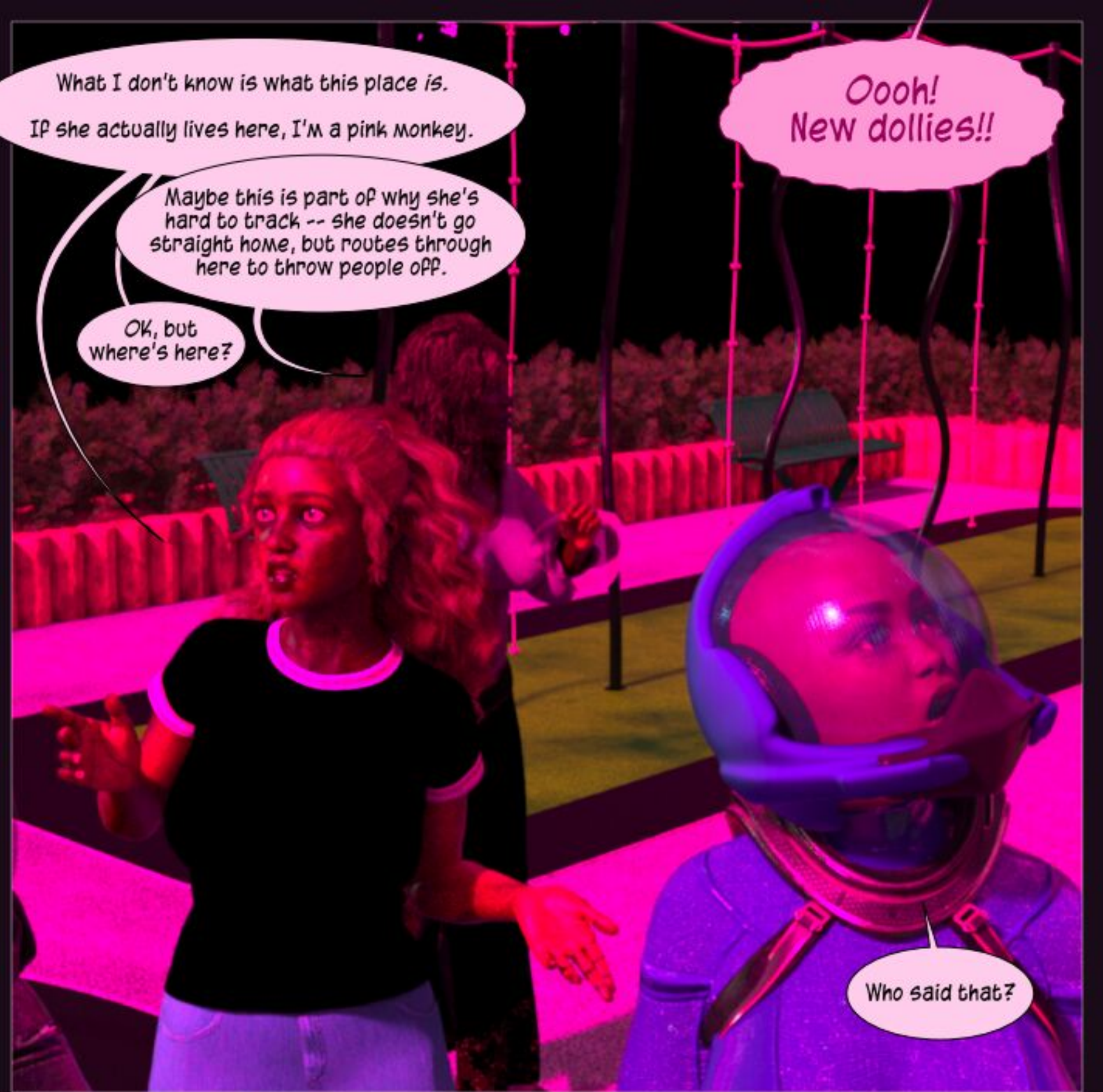
I was just about ready to kill you when you jumped into that portal without backup.

It was our only chance to catch her!

I'm just glad you figured out to go back to Emily's hideout and wait to see if I'd open a portal.

If we have to be here too long, my eyes will start to bleed.

Same.



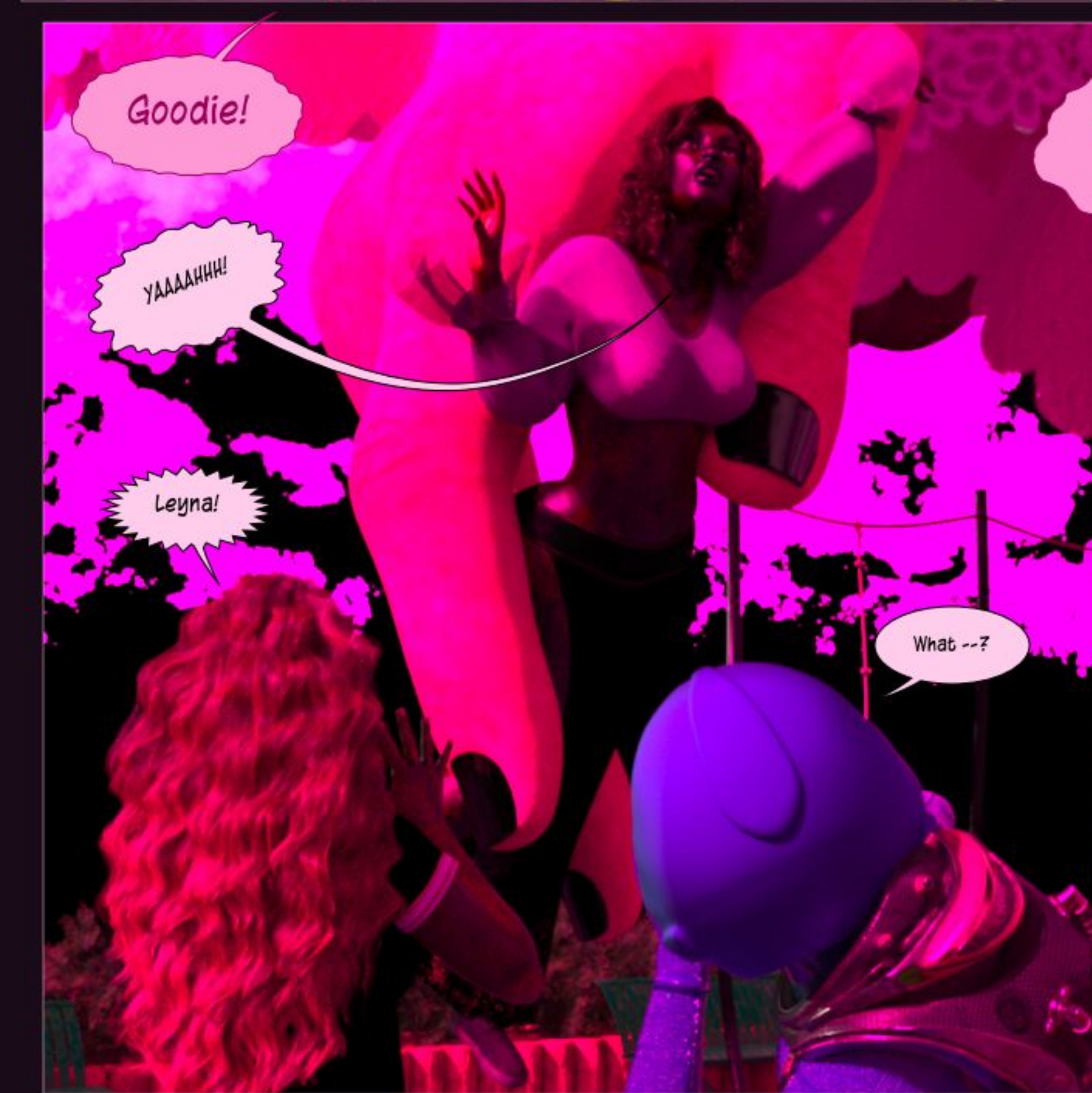
What I don't know is what this place is. If she actually lives here, I'm a pink monkey.

Maybe this is part of why she's hard to track -- she doesn't go straight home, but routes through here to throw people off.

OK, but where's here?

Oooh! New dollies!!

Who said that?



Goodie!

YAAAAHHH!

Leyna!

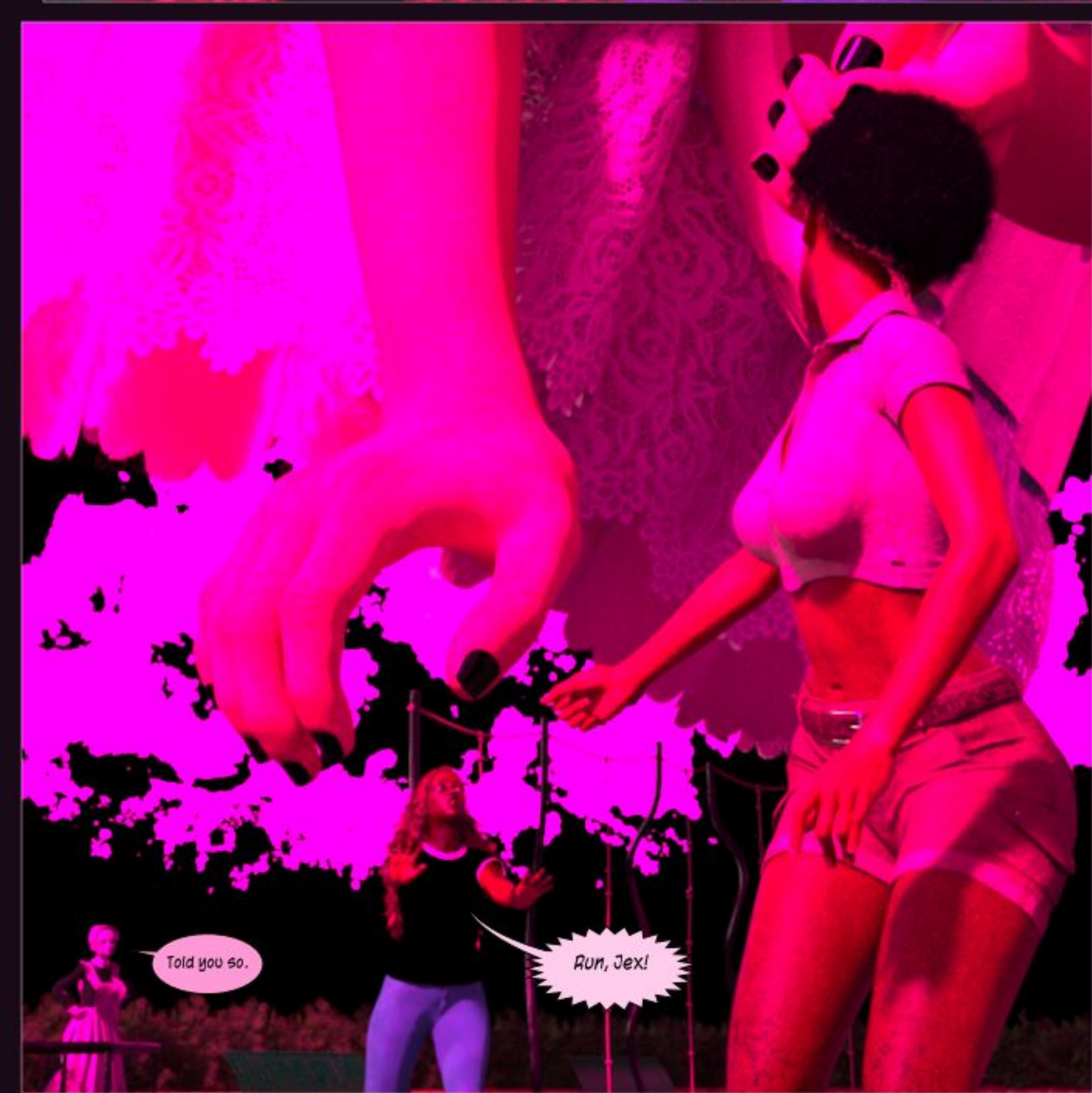
What --?



Oh, a thpace dolly! Don't like those. Have to change your clothes!

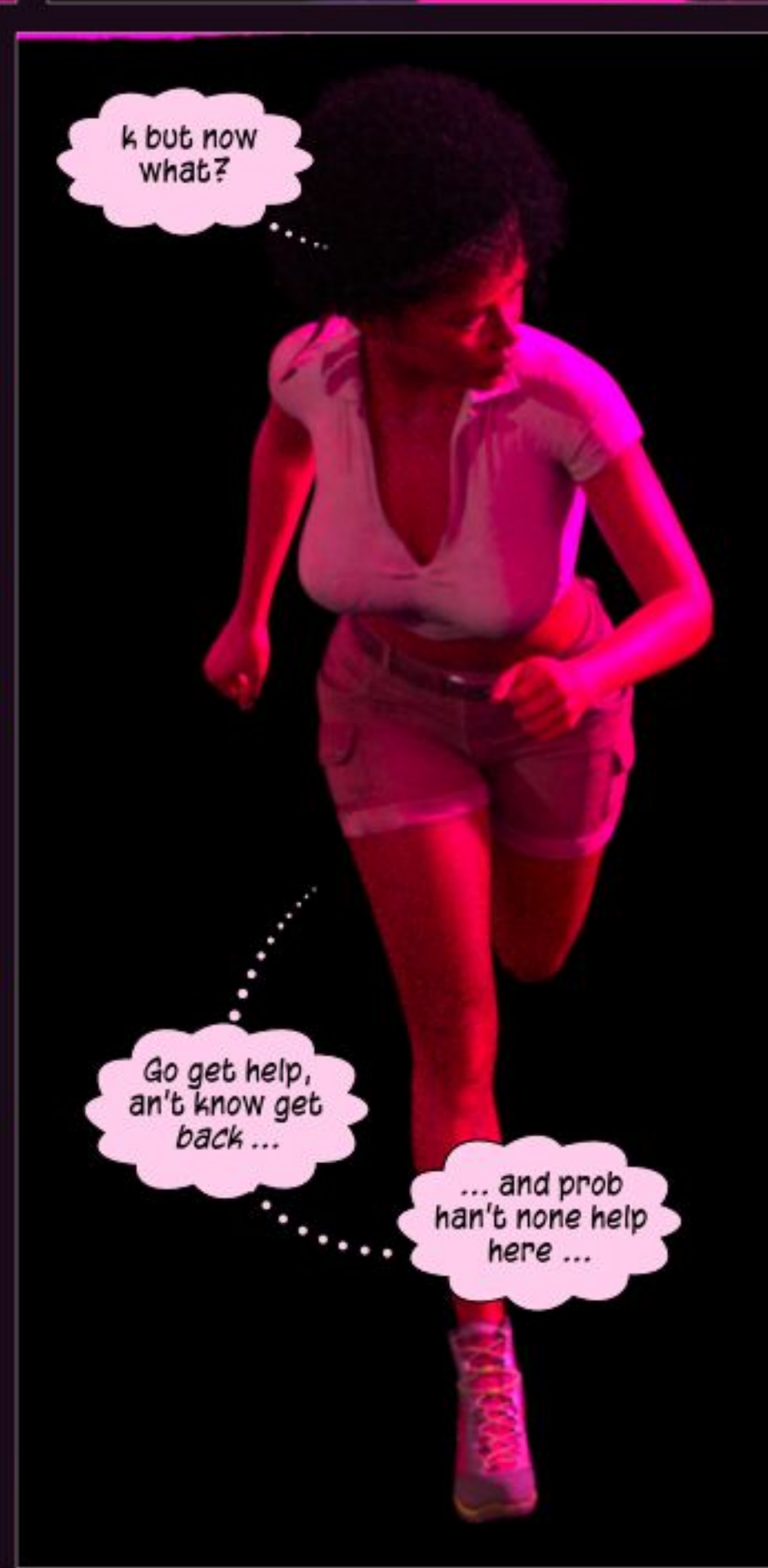
HEY!!

Move!



Told you so.

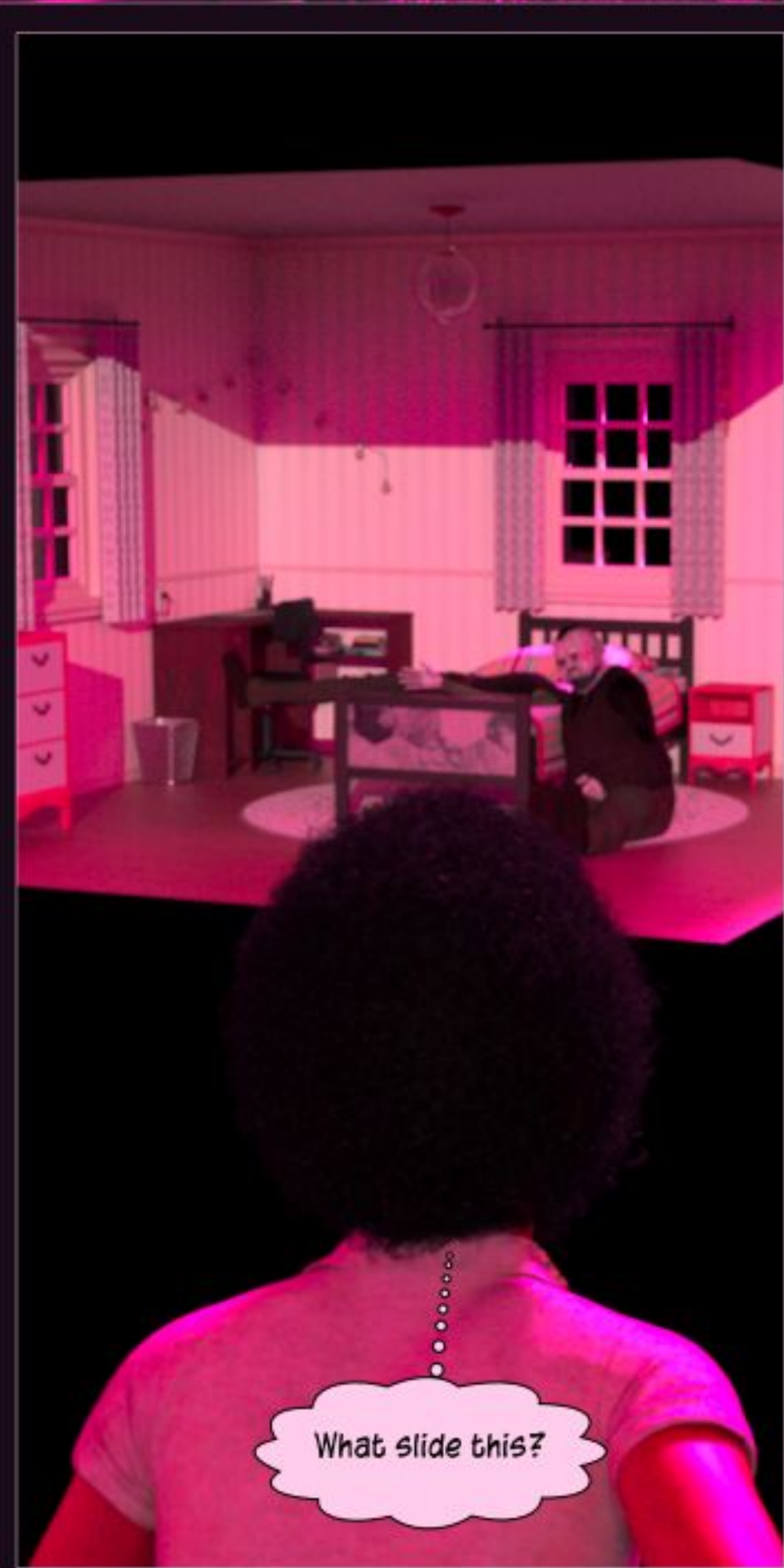
Run, Jex!



k but now what?

Go get help, an't know get back ...

... and prob han't none help here ...



What slide this?



Just sit do none?

You got a problem with that?

She's not playing with us. She doesn't play with us because we're not cute.

So we can't do anything.



An't dolls ... han't got do like ...

Looked in a mirror lately, Sweetcheeks?



Everybody here's a doll.

When she plays with you, you're whatever she wants you to be. When she doesn't play with you, you're nothing.

You'll get so that's normal.

Uh-uh. An't havin.

Kick her ass.

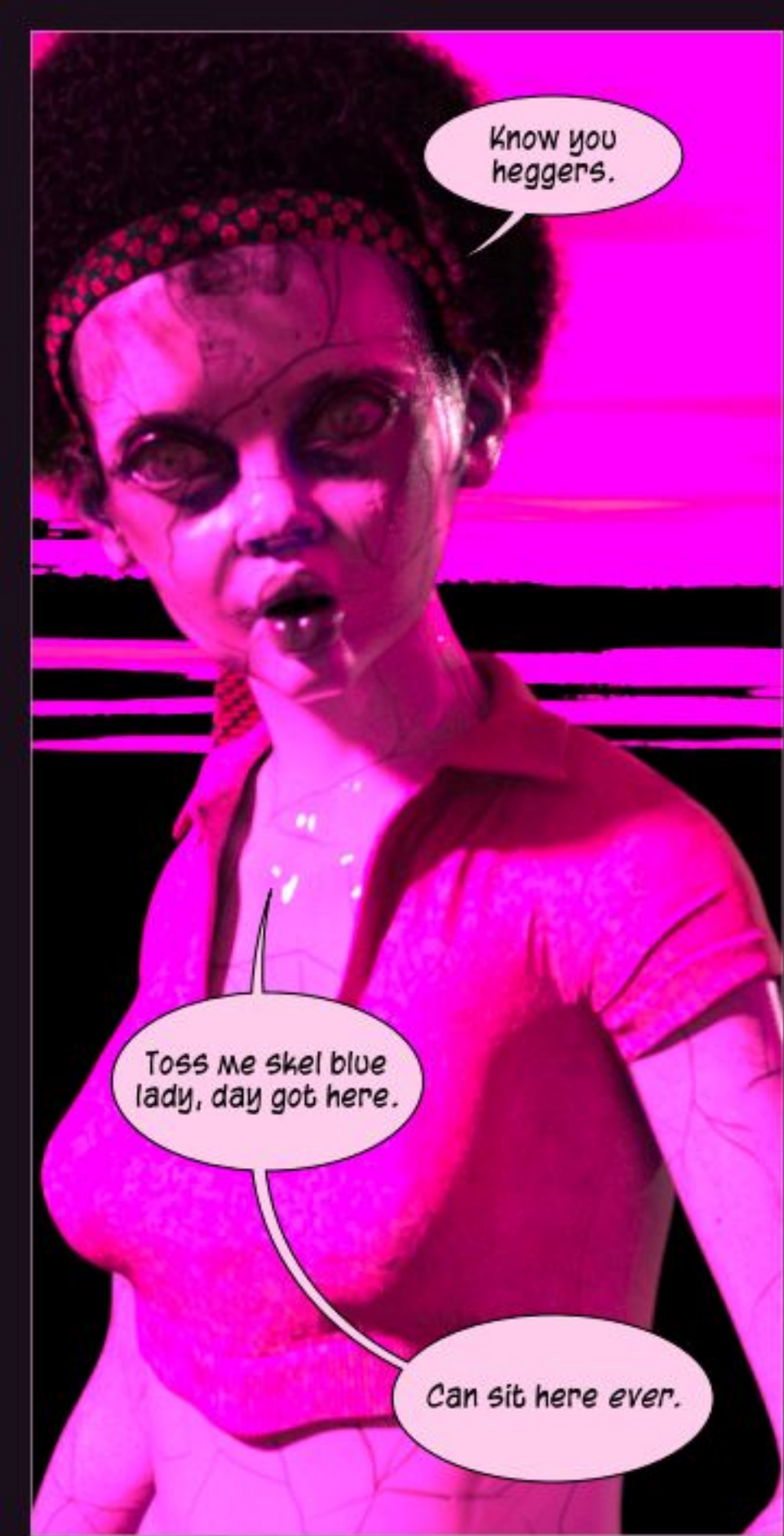


And how do you expect to do that?

She's got total control of this place. Not to mention she's, you know, a giant. You don't stand a chance.

... but, ah, if you do manage to ... come back and help us out, would you?





Know you heggers.

Toss me skel blue lady, day got here.

Can sit here ever.



"Toss me skel blue lady?"

She was one of the ones we roped for Scholz, Jook. Remember? The one who'd just come to sleep?

The one I said was a bad idea to grab?

Ah, shit.



Rosh.



Uh ... goin on, Leyna?



I'm making dinner!

The girls need a nutritious hot meal before they go to the dance.



... k.

Gon go up, see what.



Don't you two look pretty!

We look ridiculous, Mother!

These are little girl dresses! We look like little girls!

Now don't be silly. You can't be little girls. You're old enough to go to the dance, aren't you?

But, you know, we really should do something about your hair. It's just not right for the dress ...



There! Much better.

Motherrrr!

... Ruby?

Huh?



Oh!

... hmm.

You know, I was kind of enjoying that.



But I guess we have to --

Hey!

You're mething up the game! IF you want to play, play right!

YAAAAH!

Move, Jex!

Come on! This way.



I know what we have to do.

It's really just a question of scale. It will all become a lot cleaner once we're a lot bigger.



Isn't that right, Prissy?



How did you even get here, Prissy? What is this place? Did you make it?

Dog lady! Dog lady brought Prithy here! Gave Prithy dolls to play with!

HMM. And she still comes through here?

Uh-huh! But never thtays. Doethn't even talk to Prithy.

Good. Prithy doethn't like dog lady.



We don't like her either. We need to find her so we can keep her from making more trouble. Can you help?

And then we can help you get out of here.

No!!



Prithy doethn't want to leave! Prithy likes it here!

No one bothers Prithy here!

But, Prissy ... I think your dolls don't really want to be dolls ... you can't just keep --

-- Sigh --

Tell you what, let's figure that out some other time. Can you show us where the dog lady goes?



There.

Huh. You've never tried to go through it yourself?

Prithy doethn't like dog lady! Why would Prithy want to go thee dog lady?

... Good point.



We are going to need to take our friends with us.

Aw!

AS USUAL, PRISSY WOULD TAKE MORE SPACE THAN WE HAVE TO EXPLAIN. BUT YOU CAN SEE THE "DOG LADY" CAPTURE HER IN #39. NOW WE KNOW WHERE SHE WENT.

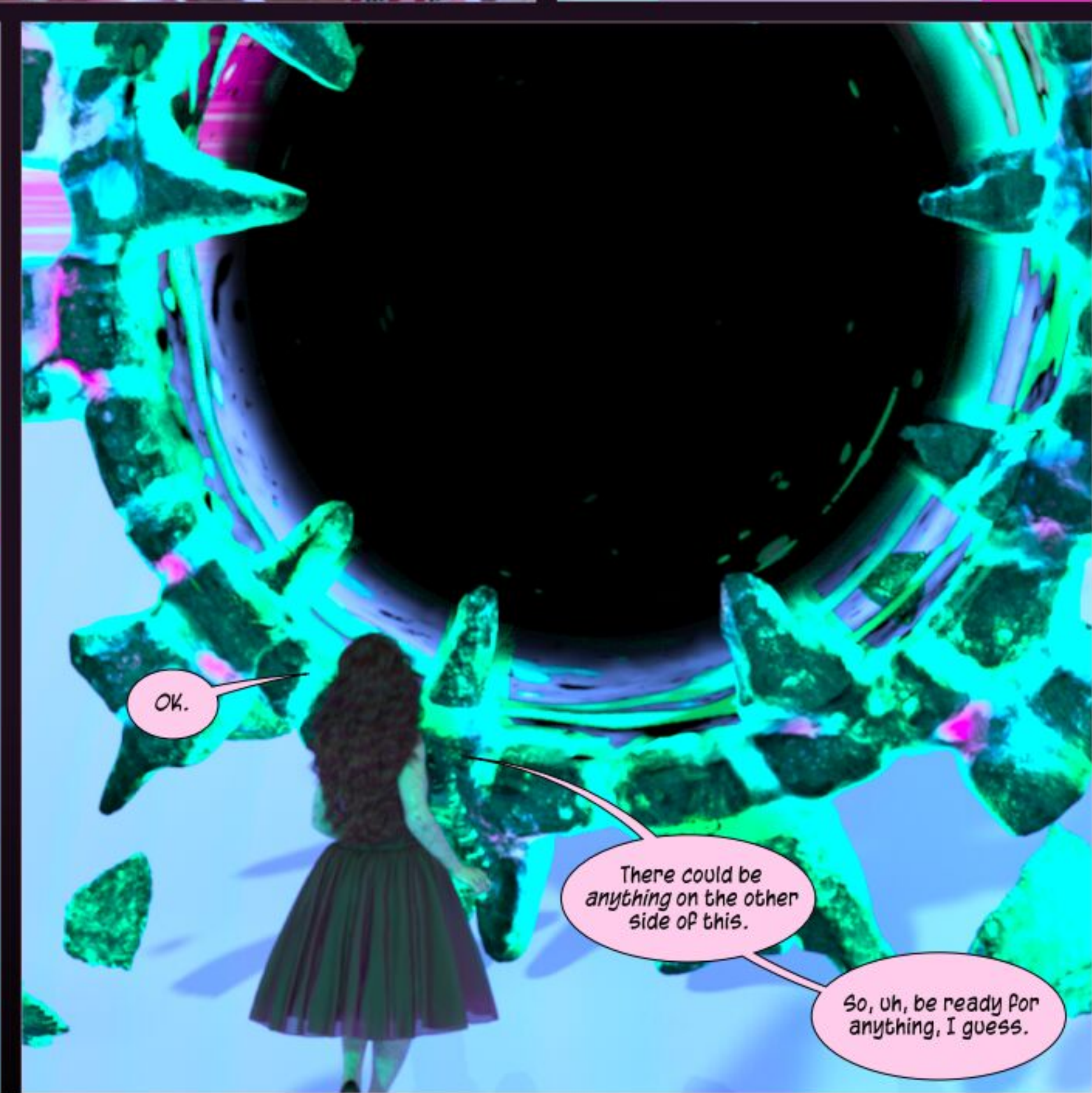


... But why would she want to keep Prissy on ice? Prissy isn't important to anything ...

I don't know, and I'm not going to think about it right now. I have to focus on whether I can work this weird-ass portal.

Can we change back, please? I Peel dumb.

Ruby thinks because it's an area effect it'll just reapply. Might as well wait until we get out. And maybe once we're out it'll go away by itself.



OK.

There could be anything on the other side of this.

So, uh, be ready for anything, I guess.



OK, this is actually more or less what I was expecting.



If you want to change back, now's the time.

I can help you out, if you need it.

Personally, I'm going to put on some clothes I can fight in.



Do you ever wonder how you ended up in a situation?

Ssh.



Dog lady too full self.

Maybe ... but I'm not sure these are statues of her.

Haven't had much interest in ancient myths, but I've had some customers who were really into this shit. Tombs and mummies and such.

There's a god in those old stories who's supposed to have a jackal head. Give me an hour or two and I might even remember his name.



Lady statues tho.

I don't know. Maybe there's a female version.



More to the point, there's no other exit from this room.

Unless there's one under the water.

Maybe this never was anything. Maybe while we were playing dolls, she portaled back to the Souk.

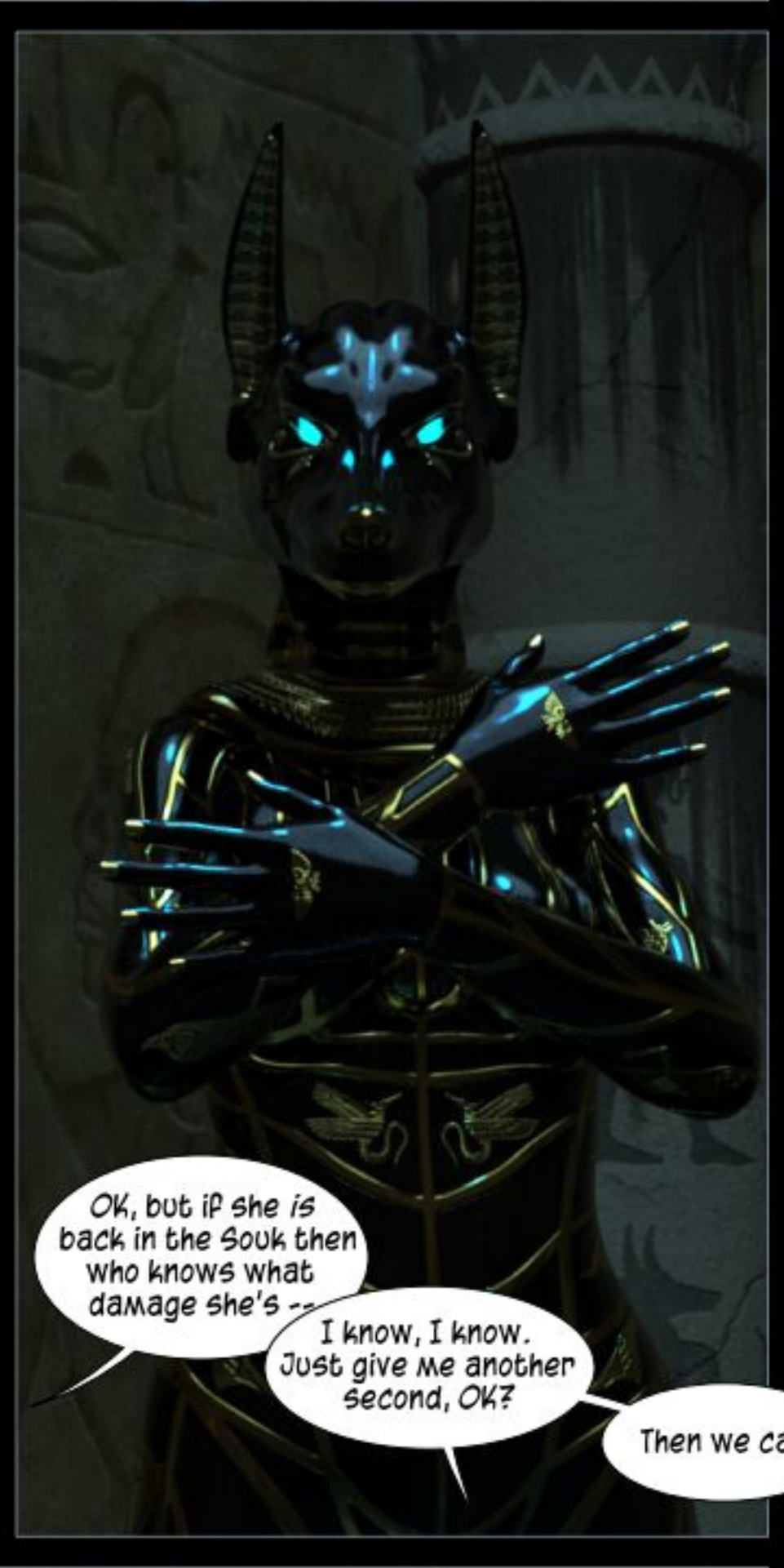
... I don't think so.



You just talking from your gut?

Some. But there's something about this room I haven't figured out yet ...

... and a couple of other things that don't Peel right. I'm not sure.



OK, but if she is back in the Souk then who knows what damage she's --

I know, I know. Just give me another second, OK?

Then we can



oh shit.

-- oops.

YAAAHH!

Whoa!



RUBY!!

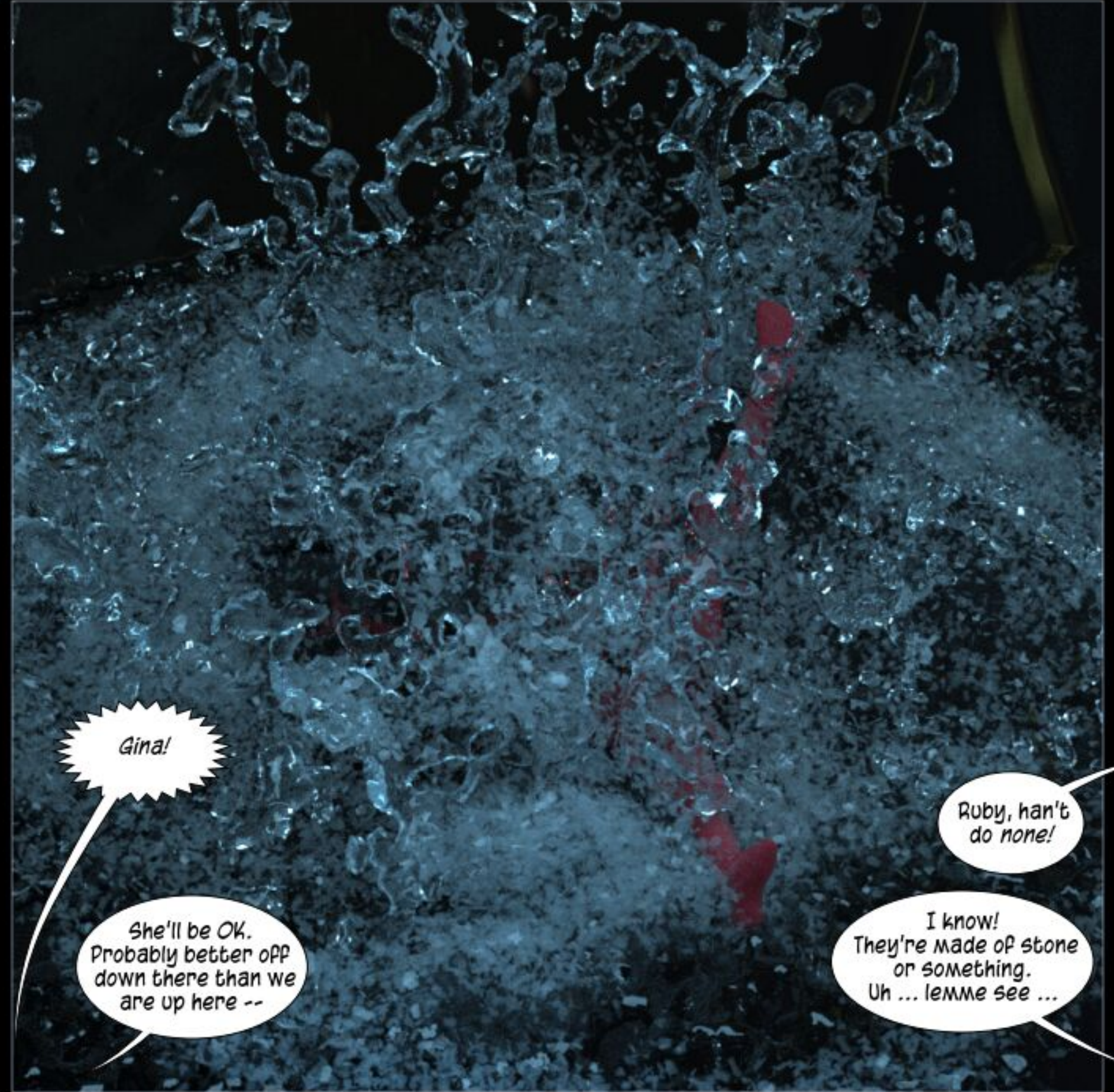
I can't fight all four, Leyna!

Hey, back oPP!



WhPP!

**FWONK**



Gina!

She'll be OK. Probably better oPP down there than we are up here --

Ruby, han't do none!

I know! They're made of stone or something. Uh ... lemme see ...



There! That's got your ass.

Hey, you two gonna try shooting them, or what?

Aw, fuck!



Well, it'll make Gina Peel better to know you forgot too --

--whaaaa?!



It's working, but they get right back up again!

Yours are starting to recover too, Ruby ...

... Ruby?



Where'd she -- YIIII!



grhgh!

Gina??

You know, Leyna, your protective suits don't always protect real well ...

I never said they were perfect!



I hadn't figured her for a "water" person.

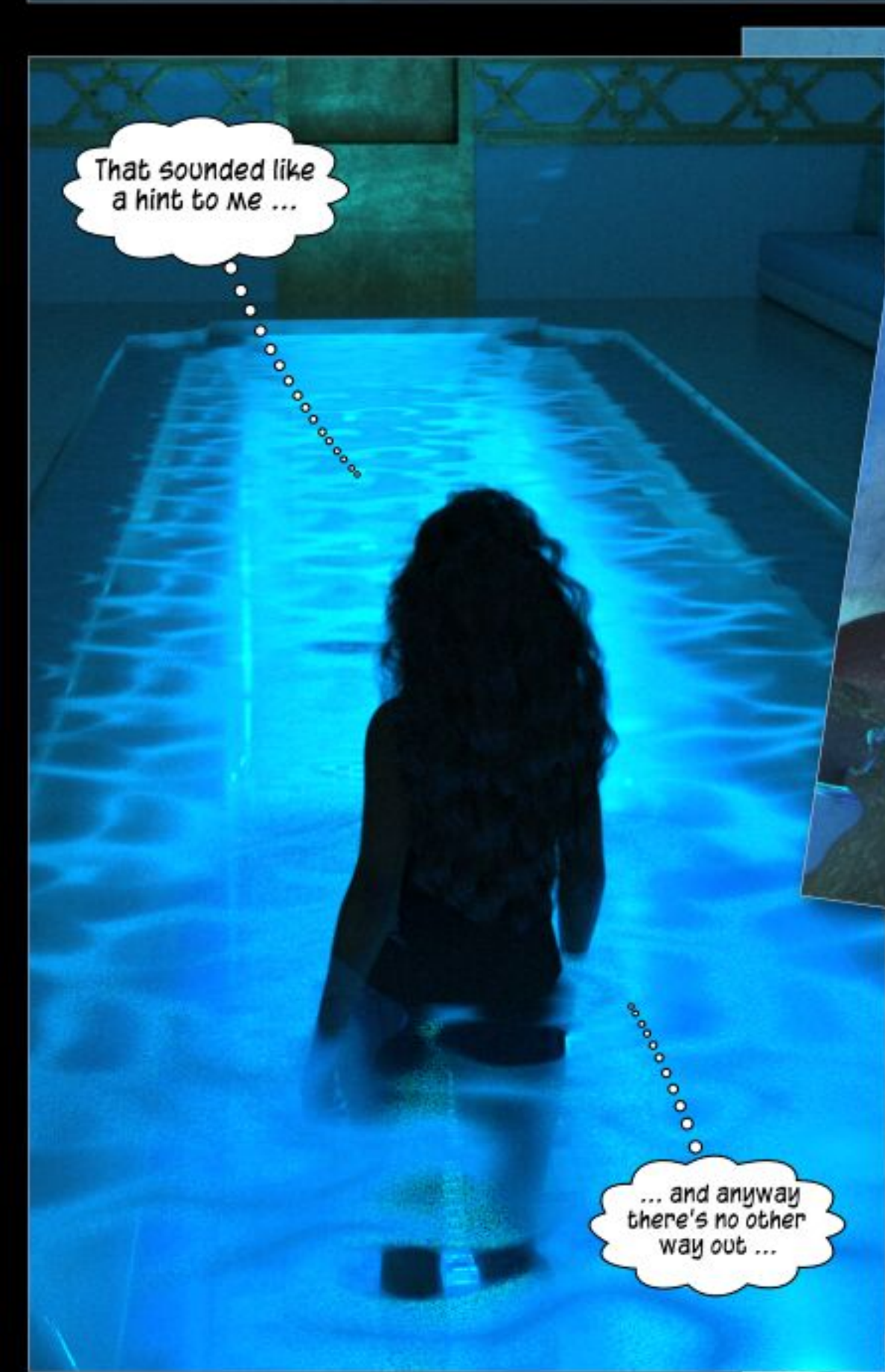


The color choices didn't make it obvious?

Water is very important. It brings change.

And that's what you like? You wander around changing things for no reason?

There is always a reason.



That sounded like a hint to me ...

... and anyway there's no other way out ...



You see? You've already begun to change. You have started down your road.



I'm not here to go down any road. I'm here to stop you from causing more damage.

I haven't caused any damage. Upheaval, yes, but the Souk will be a better place for it.

Better because you'll be queen?

Hey, do you have a name, or do you want me to just keep calling you rude ones?



I am Input.

Huh. Hadn't figured you for an algorithmist either.

Don't act stupid. I know you're not. The god whose name you couldn't recall is Anubis.

The Greeks were the ones who did that, because they were ignorant. The actual name is *inpwt*, which has been said as *Input* and *Anpu* and so on. *inpwt* is the Female Form.



So you think you're the Female version of Anubis?

I am Input also. They're the same. Sometimes I'm one Form, sometimes the other.

Balance is the most important thing.

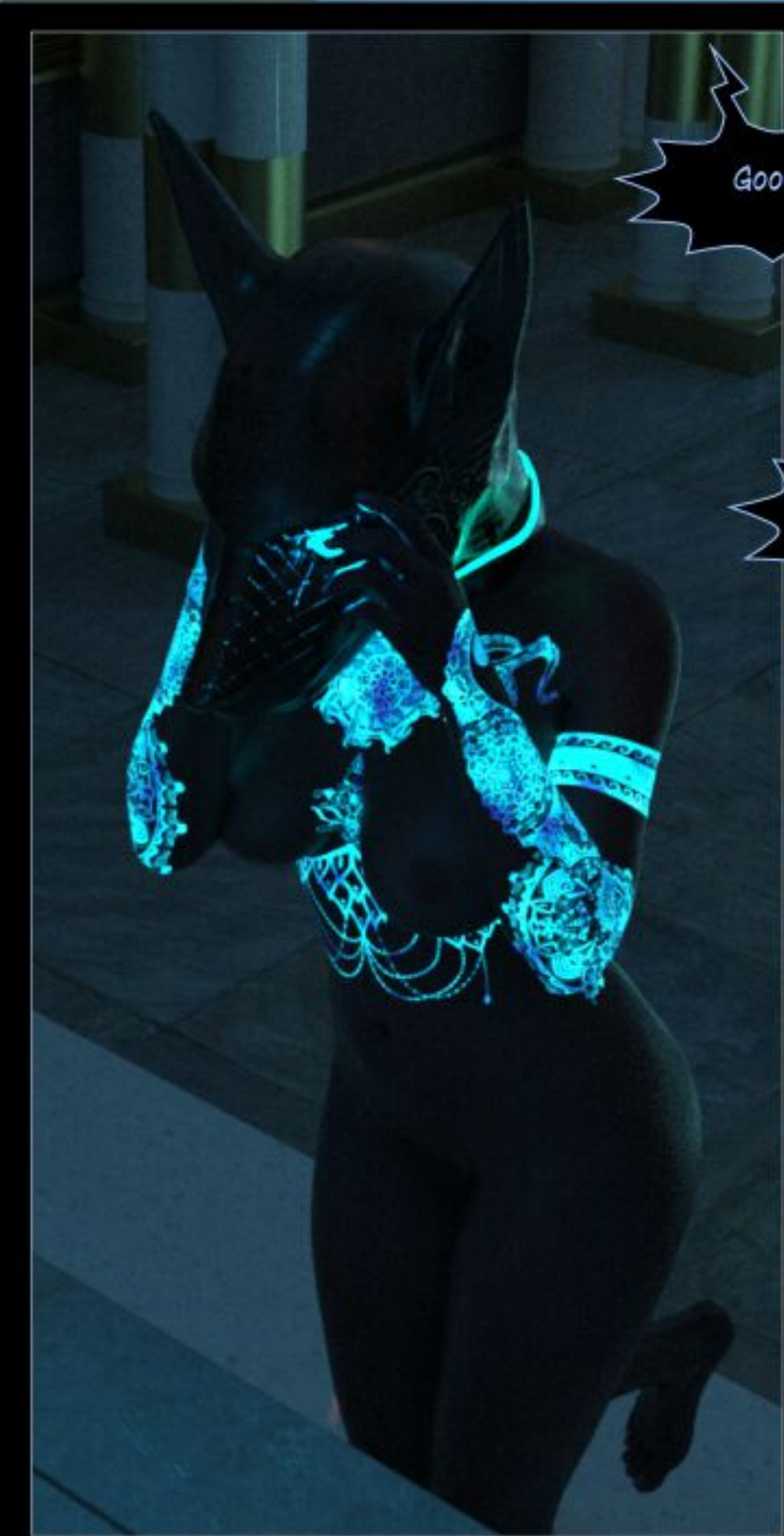
I think both your Forms might be a little bit deranged.



You say things like that only because you don't yet understand. Put the helm on, and I will show you the rest of the way.

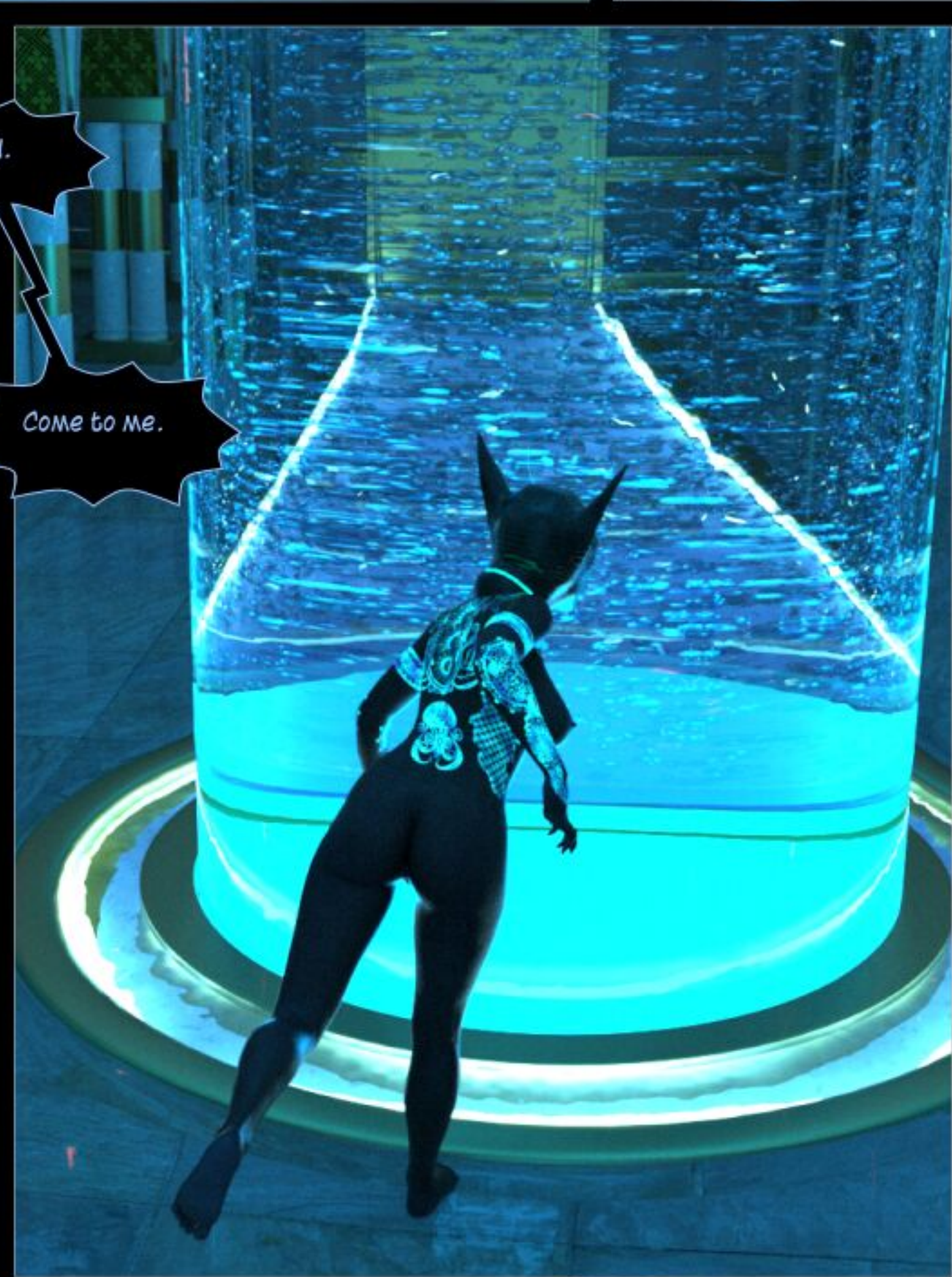
No ... that's ... that's a very bad ... idea ...

Put the helm on. You know you want this. Accept it.



Good.

Come to me.



I knew you would. There's a part of you, at the back of your head, that knows what you need.

What you crave.

Balance.



Everything must have consequences. Compensations.

If you talk too much, you should spend some time saying nothing. If you're good, you should be bad for a while. If you don't believe in sex, you should have to take a few days fucking anything that stands still long enough.

That false priestess doesn't believe in consequences. She believes everyone should just be allowed to run wild. But I expect that from a cat.

hwhph! Mghph!

I haven't decided what to do with her yet. I'm not sure what most needs balance there. I suppose since she thinks she's significant, she needs to be nothing for a while.

Perhaps I'll keep her in a sarcophagus until she forgets who she is.



Mghm!!



But don't concern yourself with her.

You and I have better things to contemplate.

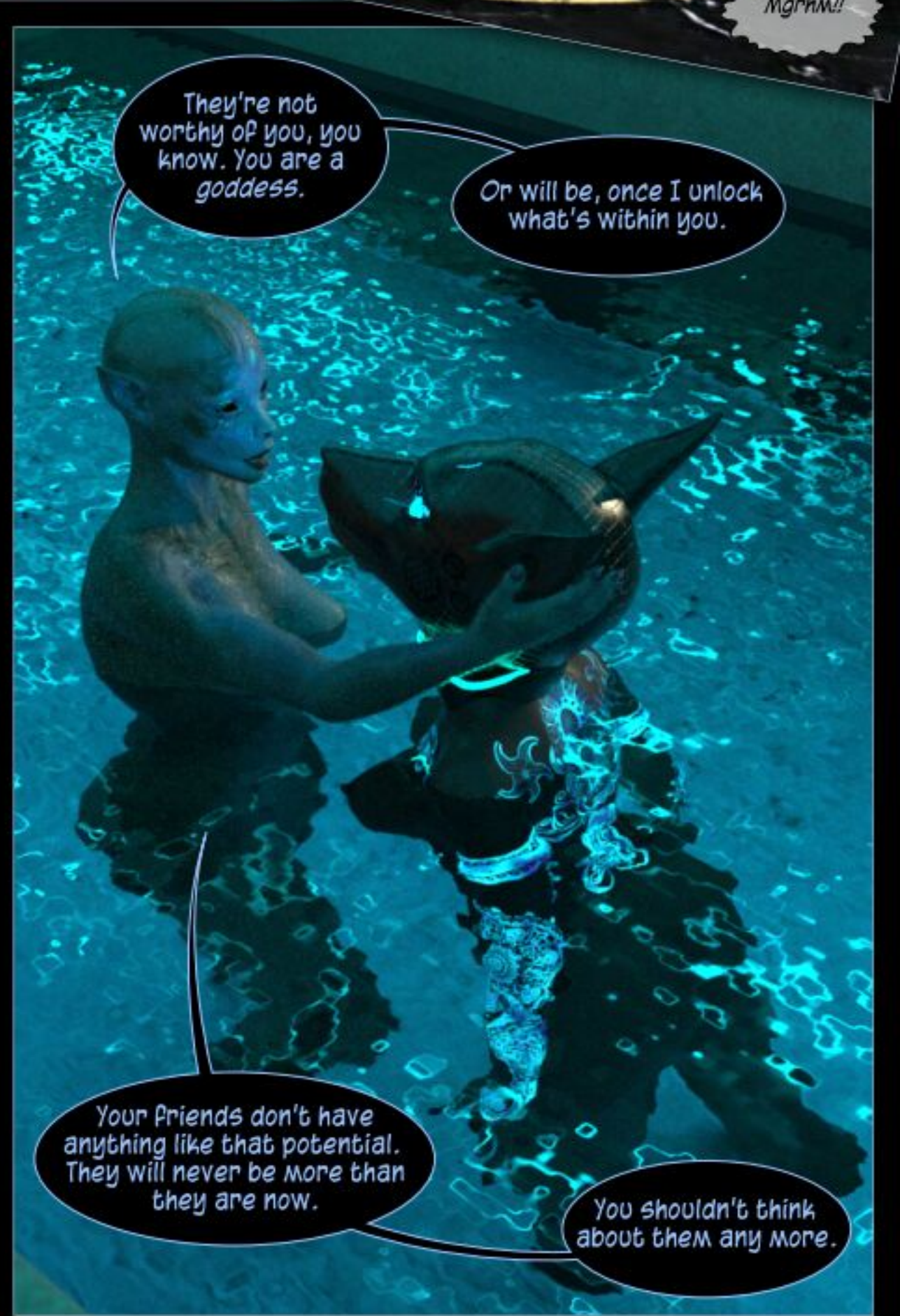
hwhhph



When I realized what you were, it took me a moment to believe it.

You have such power. I've never encountered someone with that kind of power, besides myself.

It's so exciting! I'm so glad you followed me here. I hoped you would. I needed to get you away from all those others.



They're not worthy of you, you know. You are a goddess.

Or will be, once I unlock what's within you.

Your friends don't have anything like that potential. They will never be more than they are now.

You shouldn't think about them any more.

"I'll make sure they find some use."



I told you we should have run for it!

Now not only are the stairs gone, the water's rising! If that reaches us we'll end up like Gina and Jex!

I didn't want to leave them! We might not find our way back! And Ruby ...

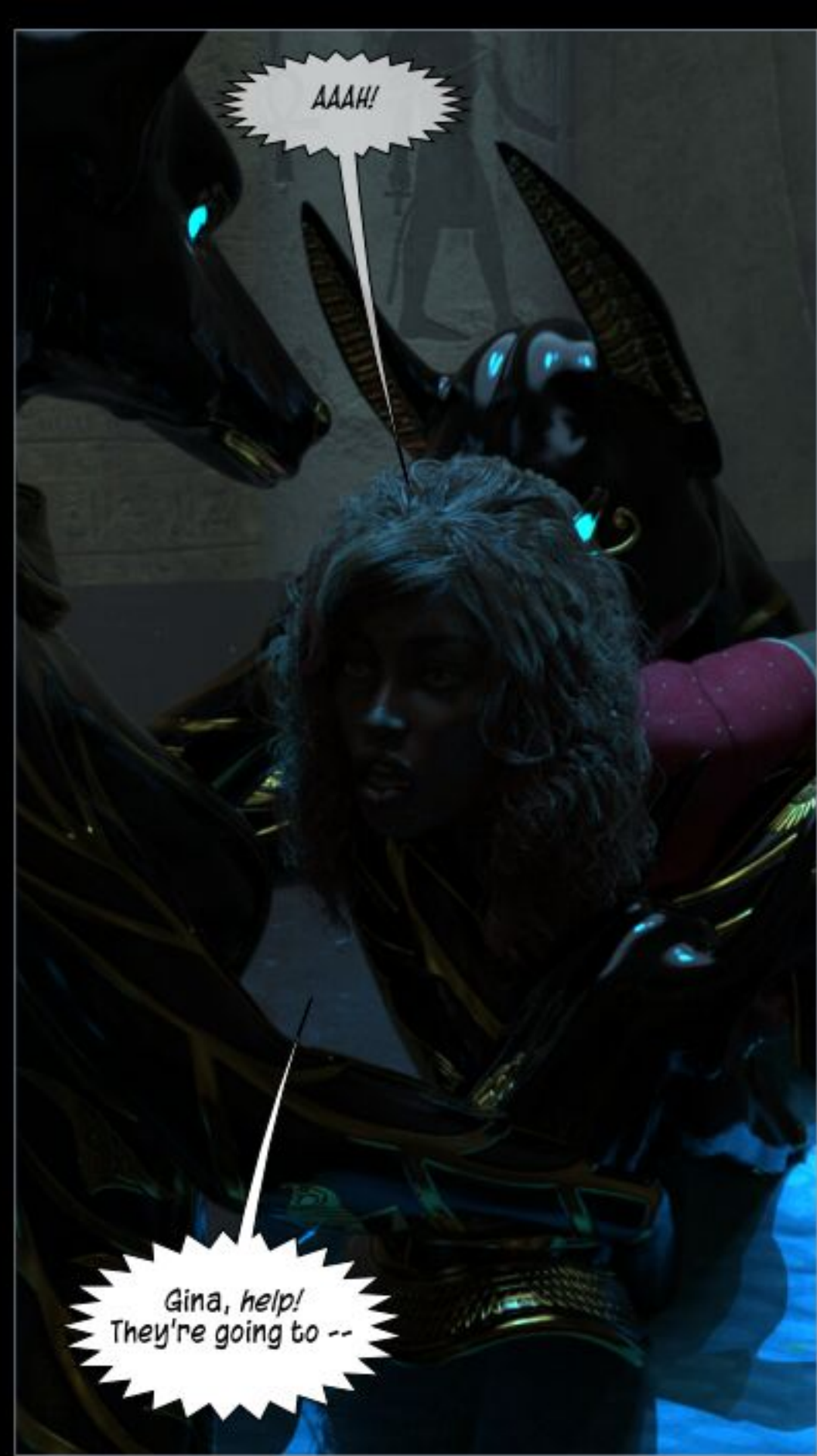
Well, in a second we're all going to be here a long time.

Do you think we can get up onto the big statue?



I can.

Can you focus long enough to manifest yourself a jump pack?



AAAH!

Gina, help! They're going to --



--!

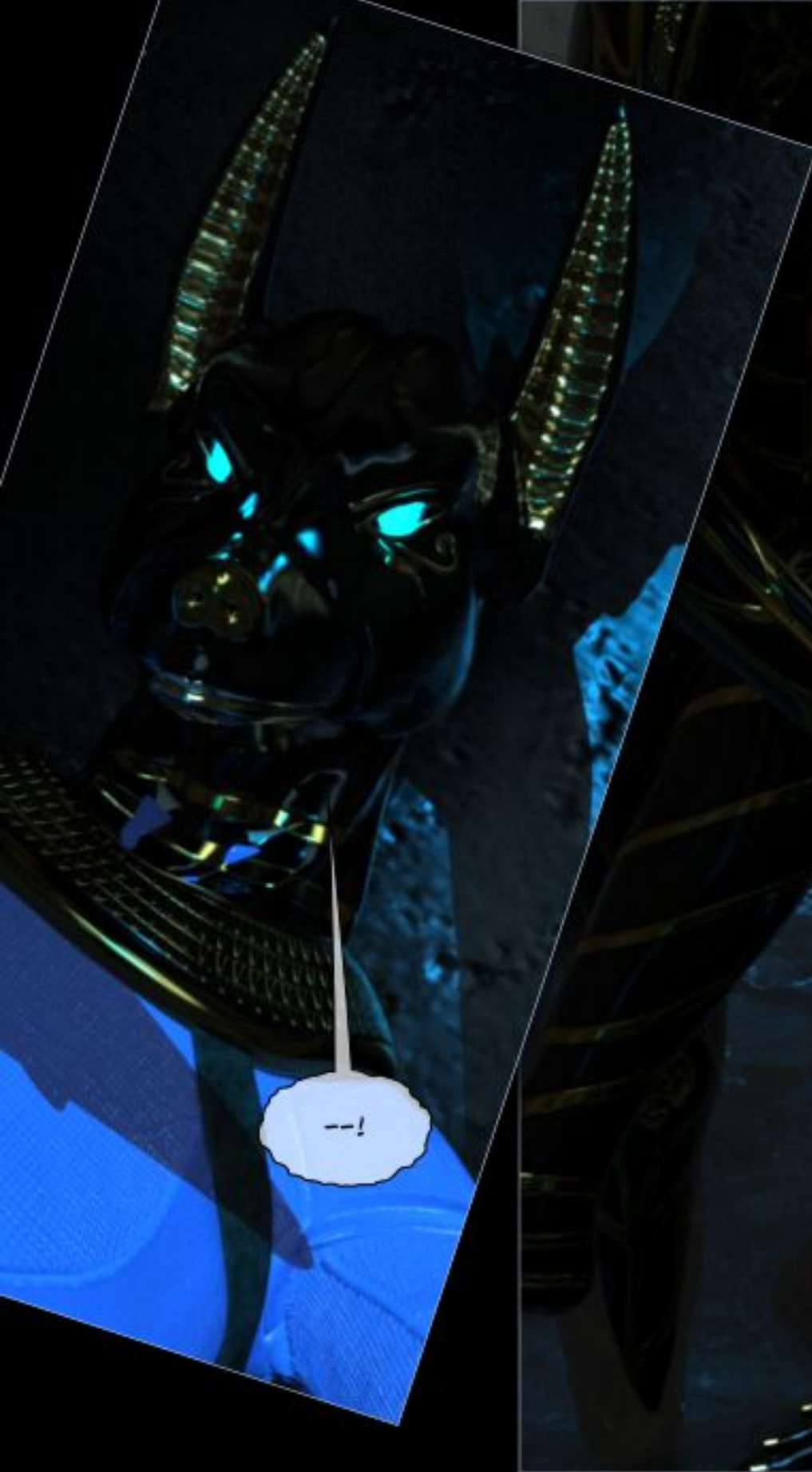


Oh, not good.

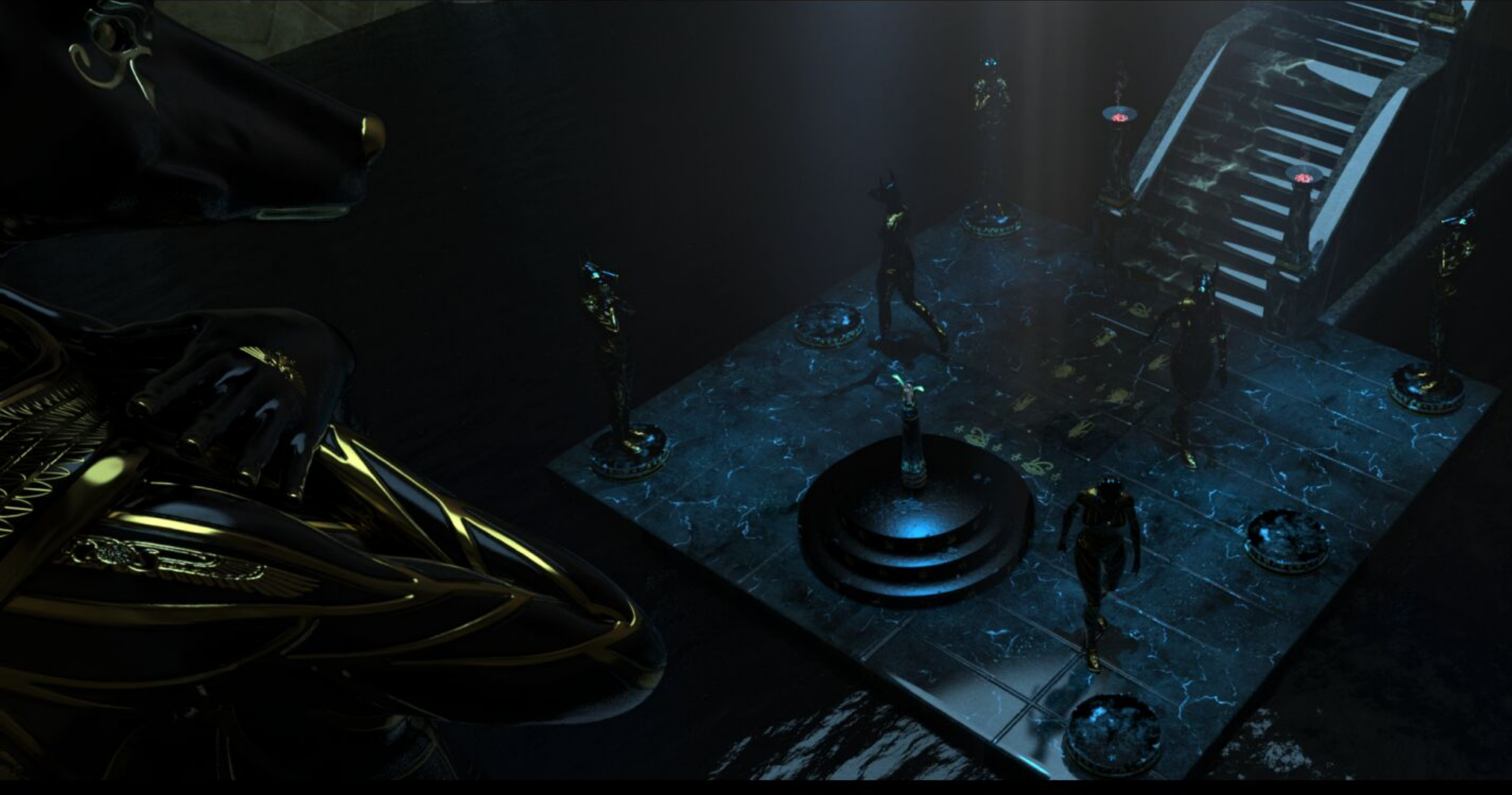


WHUAAA!!

Oh, no! Don't even try it --



--!





My silent companion. Don't worry, you won't need the helm much longer.

Even though it's such an exciting look for you ...

You have so much resistance. I needed the helm to help break that down. Help you accept.

But you're ready. I can tell.



We will share so many secrets, you and I.



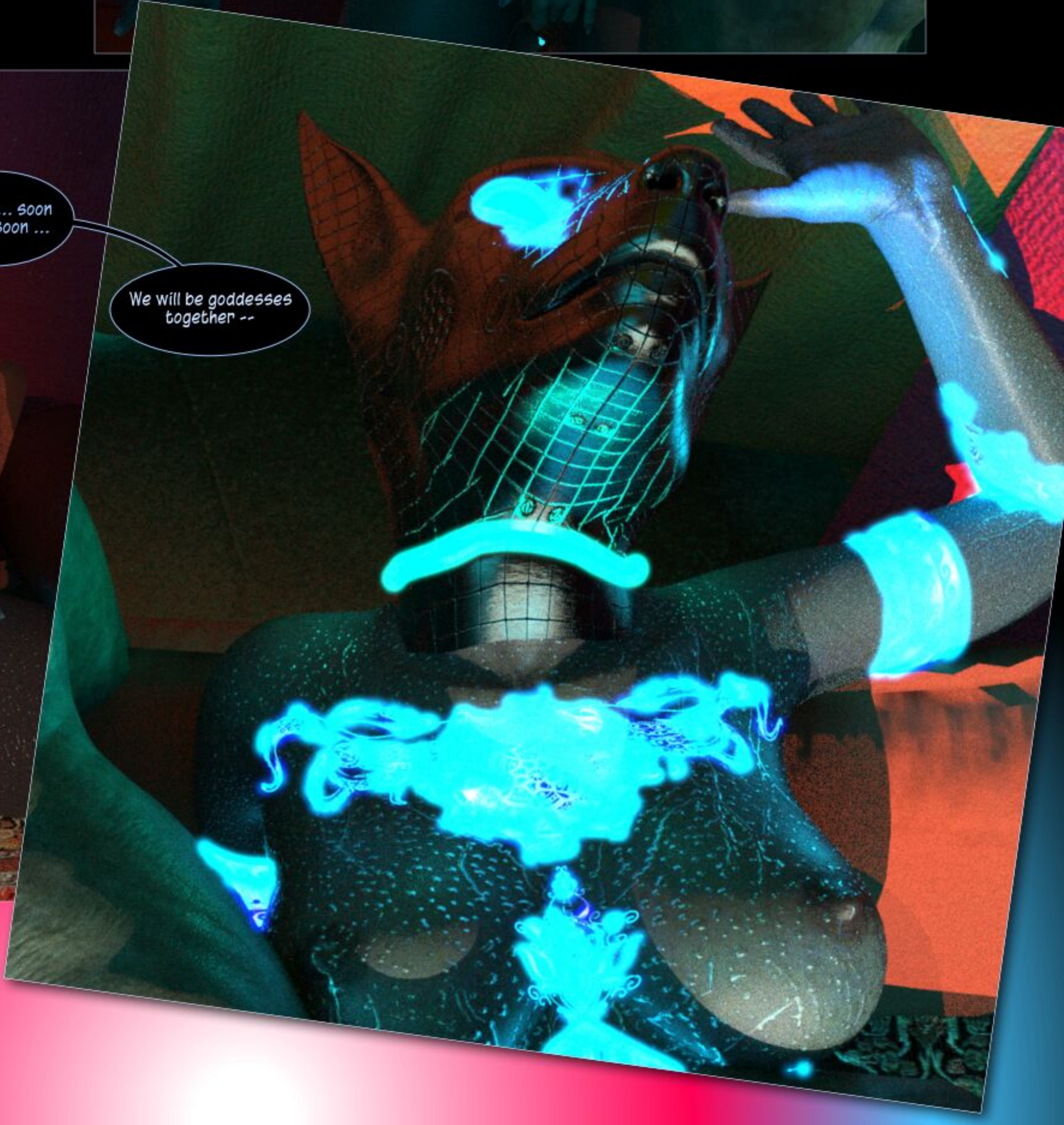
But even now, it will take more than a passing touch to open you. You're too strong for that. So strong.

I know how to awaken what's within you, though.



MMMMH ... soon now ... soon ...

We will be goddesses together --



Uh?



Leyna! ... it is you, isn't it?

Unclear. Try again later.

What happened? How did you get here?

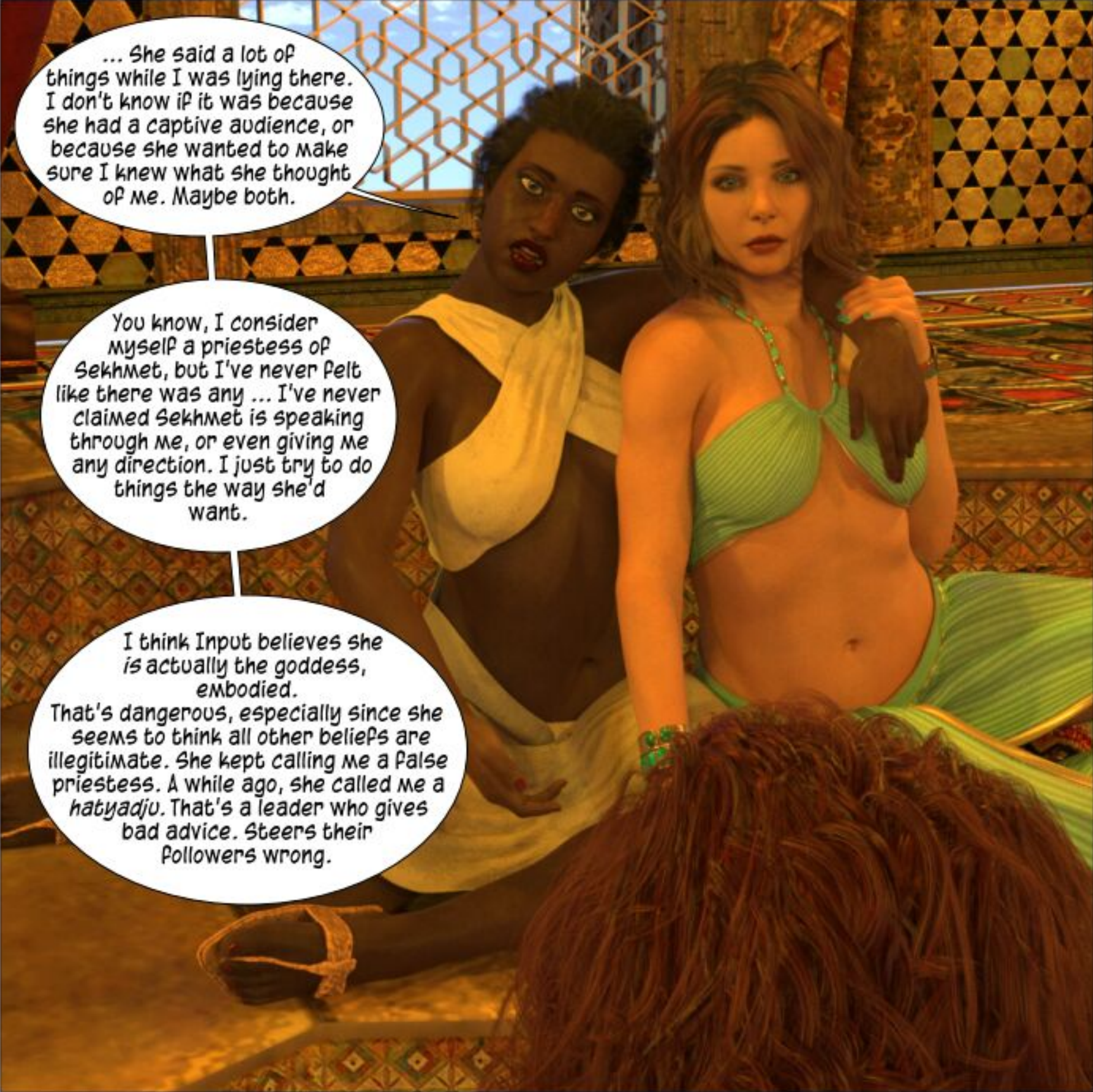
I wish I knew.

Did everybody else get back too?

Looks like it. Who's that way over there? Ruby?



Serille!



... She said a lot of things while I was lying there. I don't know if it was because she had a captive audience, or because she wanted to make sure I knew what she thought of me. Maybe both.

You know, I consider myself a priestess of Sekhmet, but I've never felt like there was any ... I've never claimed Sekhmet is speaking through me, or even giving me any direction. I just try to do things the way she'd want.

I think Input believes she is actually the goddess, embodied. That's dangerous, especially since she seems to think all other beliefs are illegitimate. She kept calling me a false priestess. A while ago, she called me a hatyaadju. That's a leader who gives bad advice. Steers their followers wrong.



Well, you don't have to talk me into thinking she's dangerous. I had gotten there already.

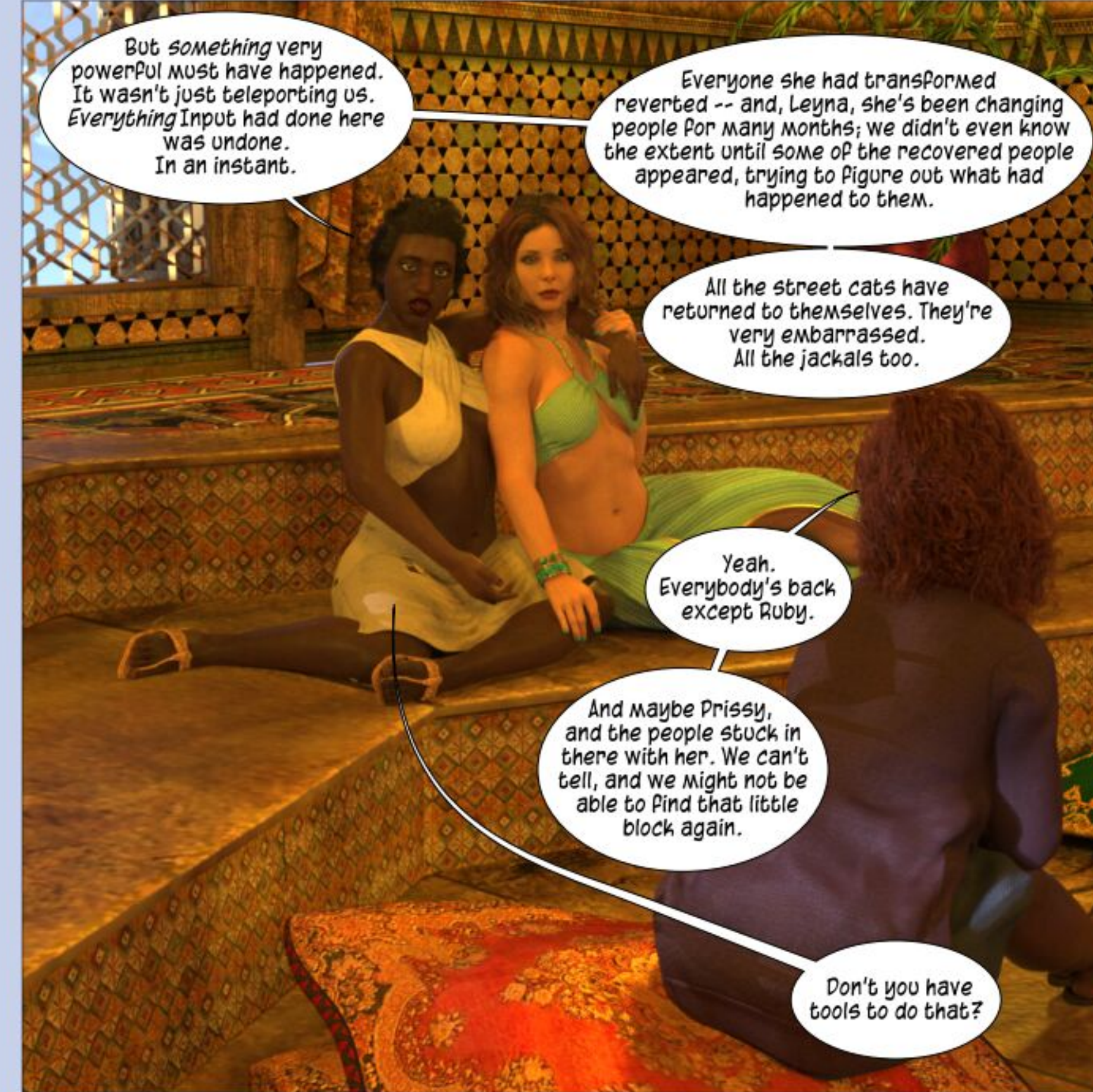
The question is what happened to her. Do you think she Pound Ruby? Or that Ruby Pound her?

I don't know. I couldn't see anything, only hear.

There was definitely somebody. They came into the room and Input spoke to them for a while. Not hostile; I got the impression that they were being ... recruited.

Whoever it was, they didn't make a sound. Then the two of them left the room together. A while after that, I must have lost consciousness, before waking up in the Souk -- but I can't tell how long.

Yes. The rest of us all have holes in our timekeeping too. There's a chunk none of us really remembers.



But something very powerful must have happened. It wasn't just teleporting us. Everything Input had done here was undone. In an instant.

Everyone she had transformed reverted -- and, Leyna, she's been changing people for many months; we didn't even know the extent until some of the recovered people appeared, trying to figure out what had happened to them.

All the street cats have returned to themselves. They're very embarrassed. All the jackals too.

Yeah. Everybody's back except Ruby.

And maybe Prissy, and the people stuck in there with her. We can't tell, and we might not be able to find that little block again.

Don't you have tools to do that?



Yes, but it's not past and it's not simple. There are a lot of permission problems. A deep block scan -- which is what I'd need, to look for people -- is an invasion of privacy.

And there are many ways to conceal or camouflage information. Make things look like what they're not. More ways than I knew, honestly, and I'm supposed to be pretty good at this.

If Input doesn't want to be Pound, I may not be able to find her. If she doesn't want Ruby to be Pound ...

... or if Ruby doesn't want to be Pound ...



... anyway, that's mine to deal with, not yours.

I didn't come today to talk about that. I came to see how the cleanup was going ... and ...

... well, to make sure you were still OK with doing what you've been doing.



You mean, after making a mess of everything?

Maybe I am a hatyaadju. I certainly have been giving bad counsel. To myself not least.

I should have taken the problem more seriously. I should have realized she was more than a nuisance, much sooner than I did.

I should have confided more in people. Especially the ones I'm very close to.

There's not much cleanup to do, but there's a great deal of rebuilding. I don't just mean the Sekhmet complex. I must earn back everyone's trust.

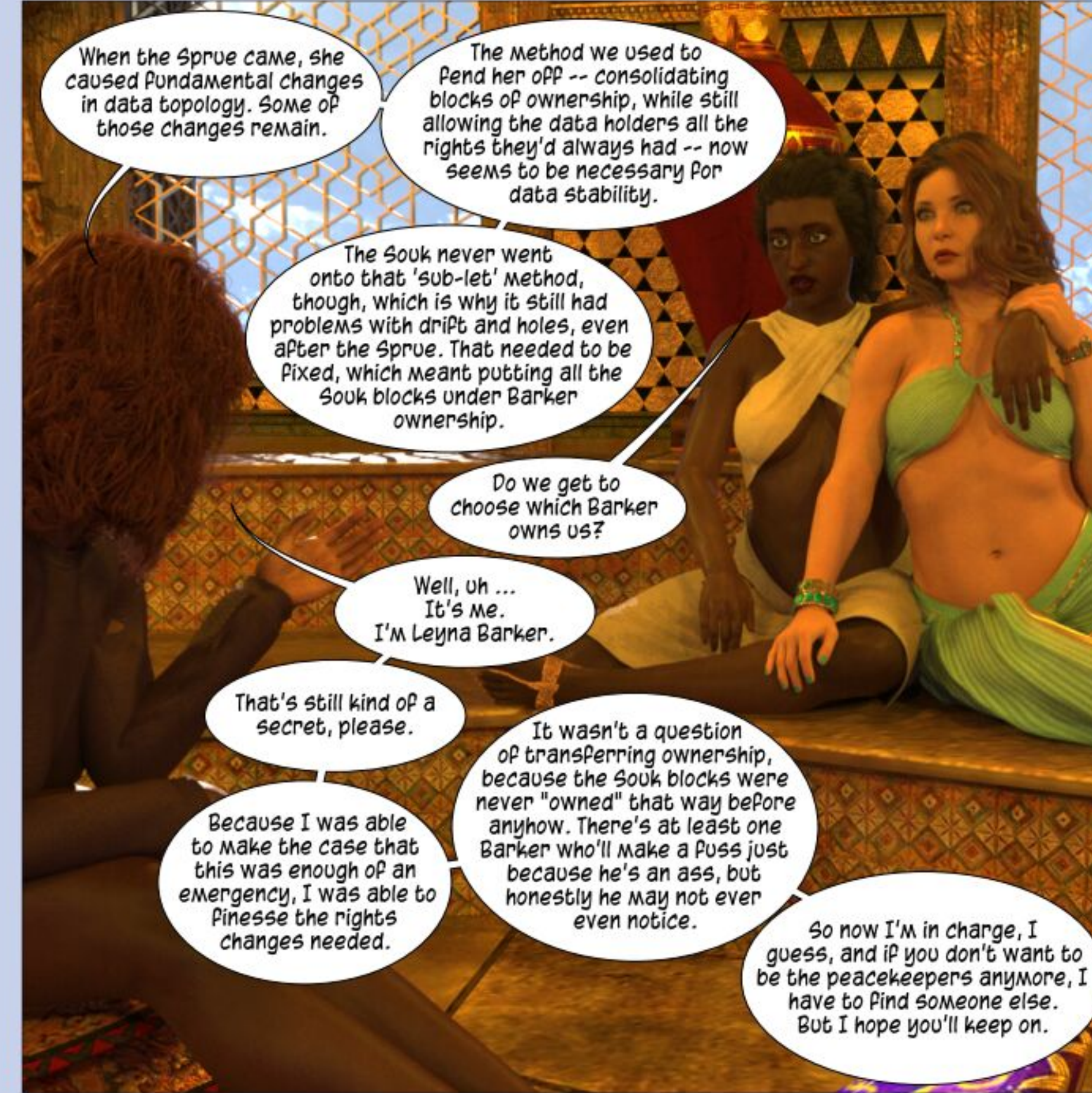
And we need to change some things. I need to prepare my people better. Train them better. To be ready when something like this happens again.



But that does sound like you want to keep doing it.

Good.

Let me explain why I'm asking.



When the Sprue came, she caused fundamental changes in data topology. Some of those changes remain.

The method we used to find her off -- consolidating blocks of ownership, while still allowing the data holders all the rights they'd always had -- now seems to be necessary for data stability.

The Souk never went onto that 'sub-let' method, though, which is why it still had problems with drift and holes, even after the Sprue. That needed to be fixed, which meant putting all the Souk blocks under Barker ownership.

Do we get to choose which Barker owns us?

Well, uh ... It's me. I'm Leyna Barker.

That's still kind of a secret, please.

Because I was able to make the case that this was enough of an emergency, I was able to finesse the rights changes needed.

It wasn't a question of transferring ownership, because the Souk blocks were never "owned" that way before anyhow. There's at least one Barker who'll make a Puss just because he's an ass, but honestly he may not even notice.

So now I'm in charge, I guess, and if you don't want to be the peacekeepers anymore, I have to find someone else. But I hope you'll keep on.



I ... well. Yes. I would like to keep doing it. I'd like to have another chance. To do better.

Thank you.

NEXT: ROVING THROUGH THE YARDS