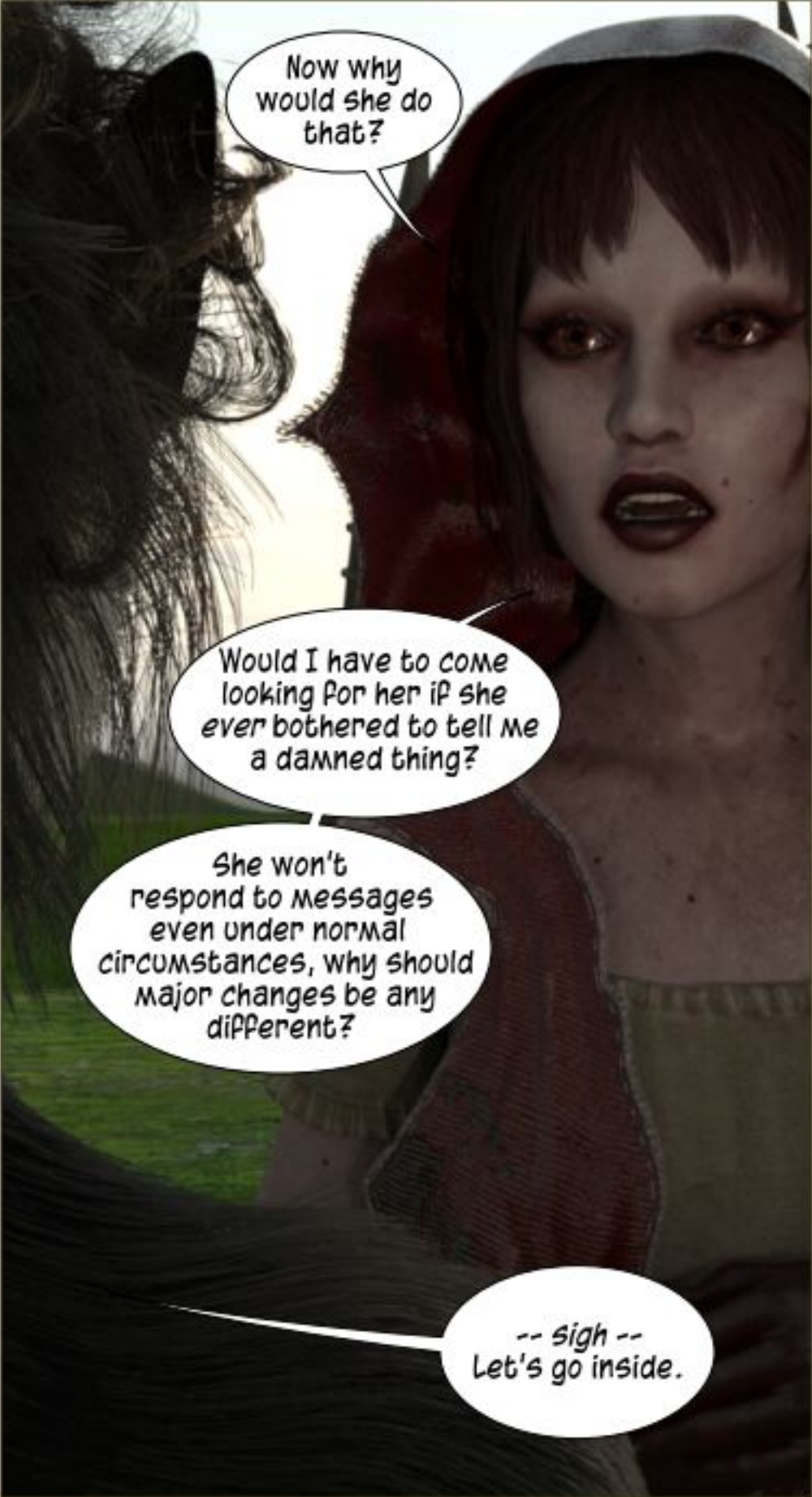
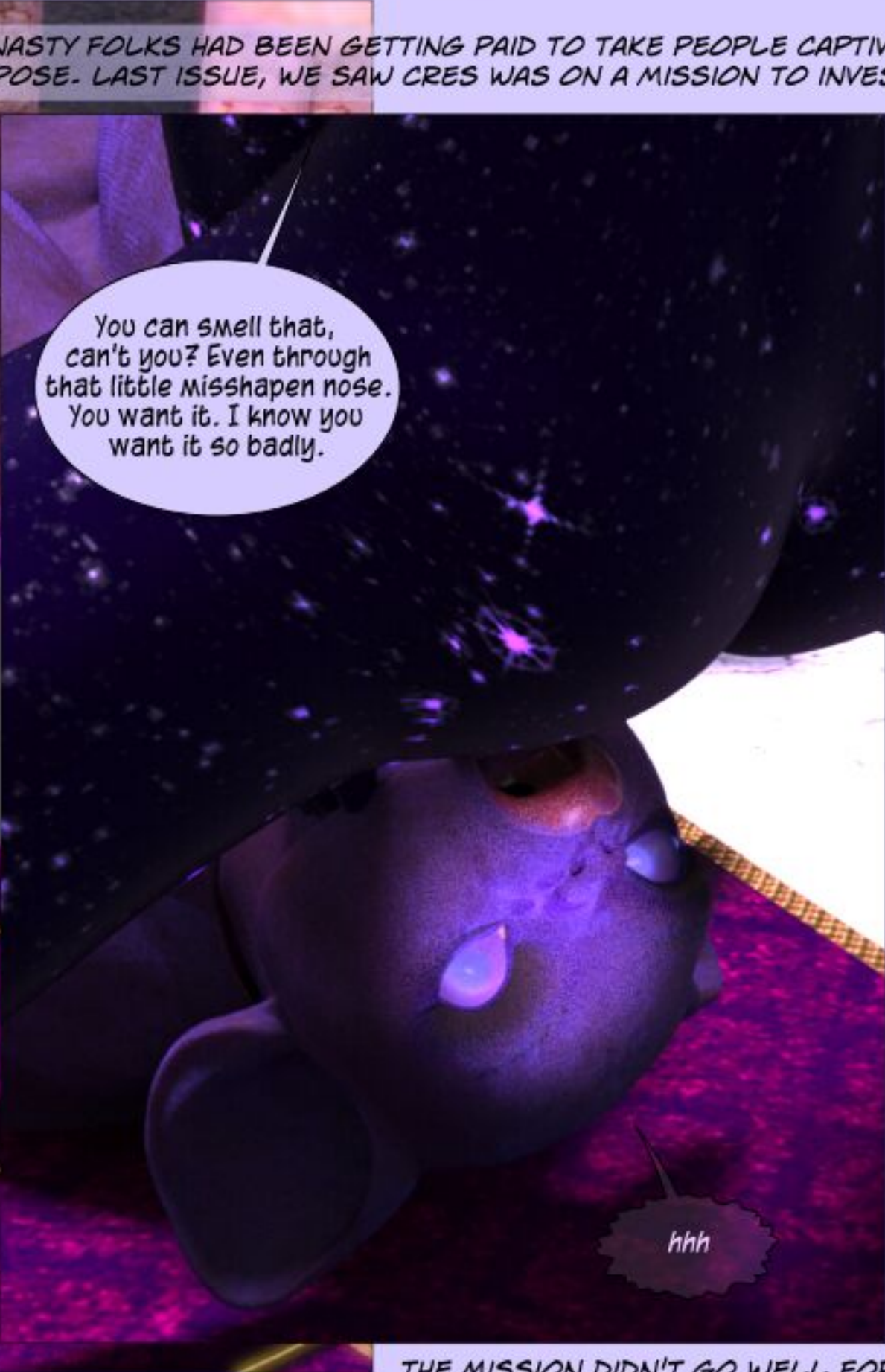


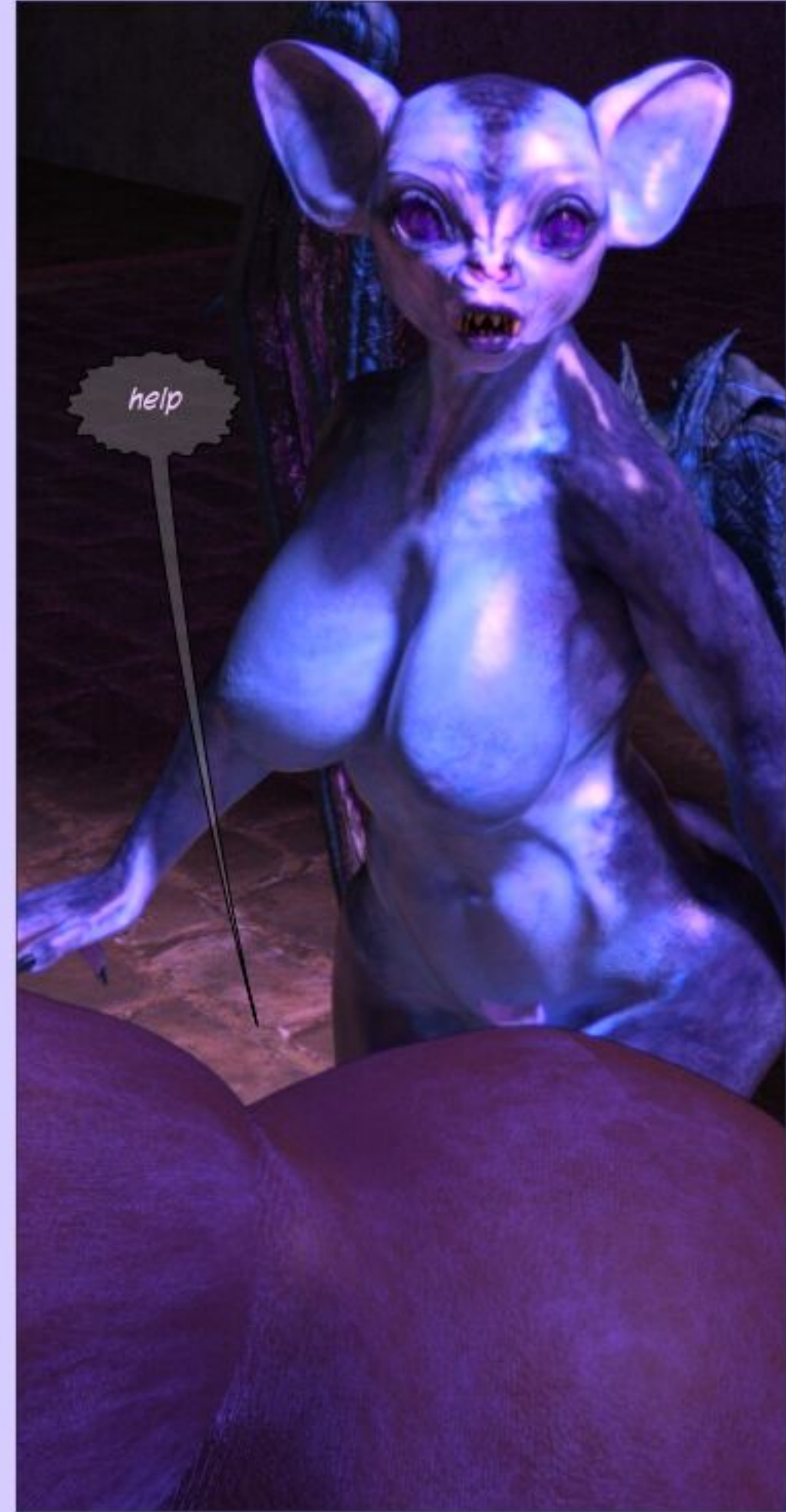


THE CAMPSITE OF THE ROVERS, A PERIPATETIC BAND OF ADVENTURERS.

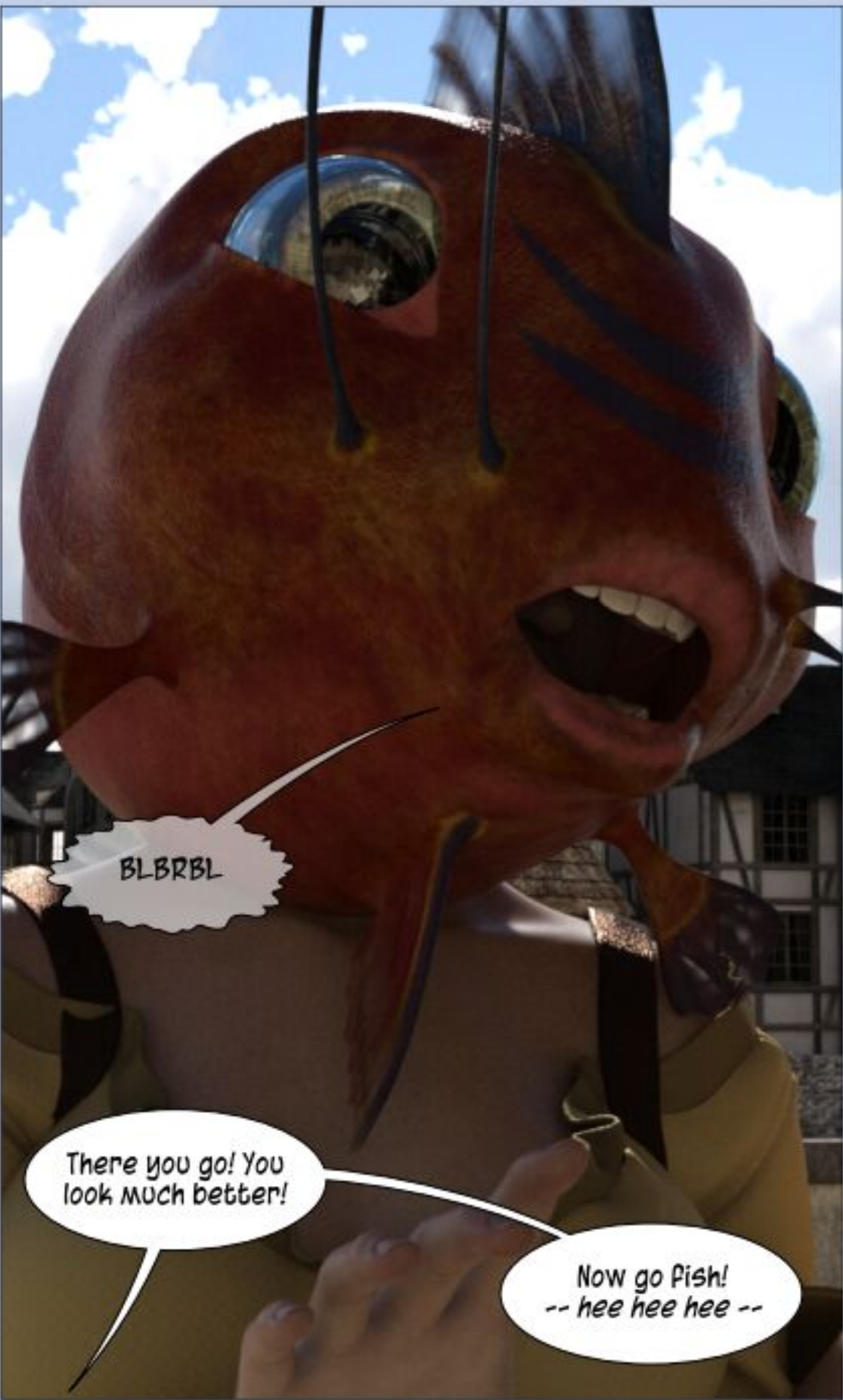




THE MISSION DIDN'T GO WELL FOR CRES.

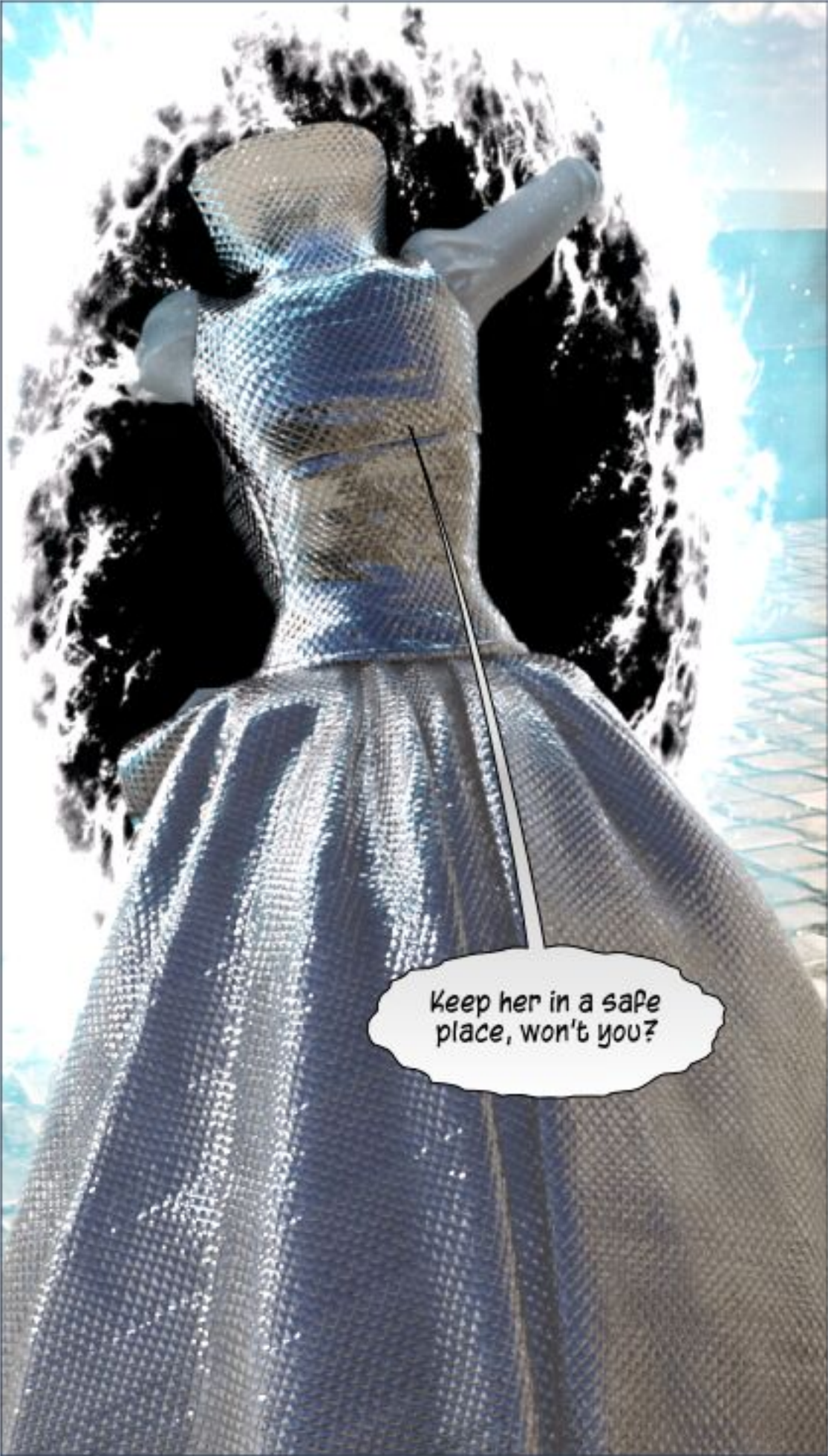
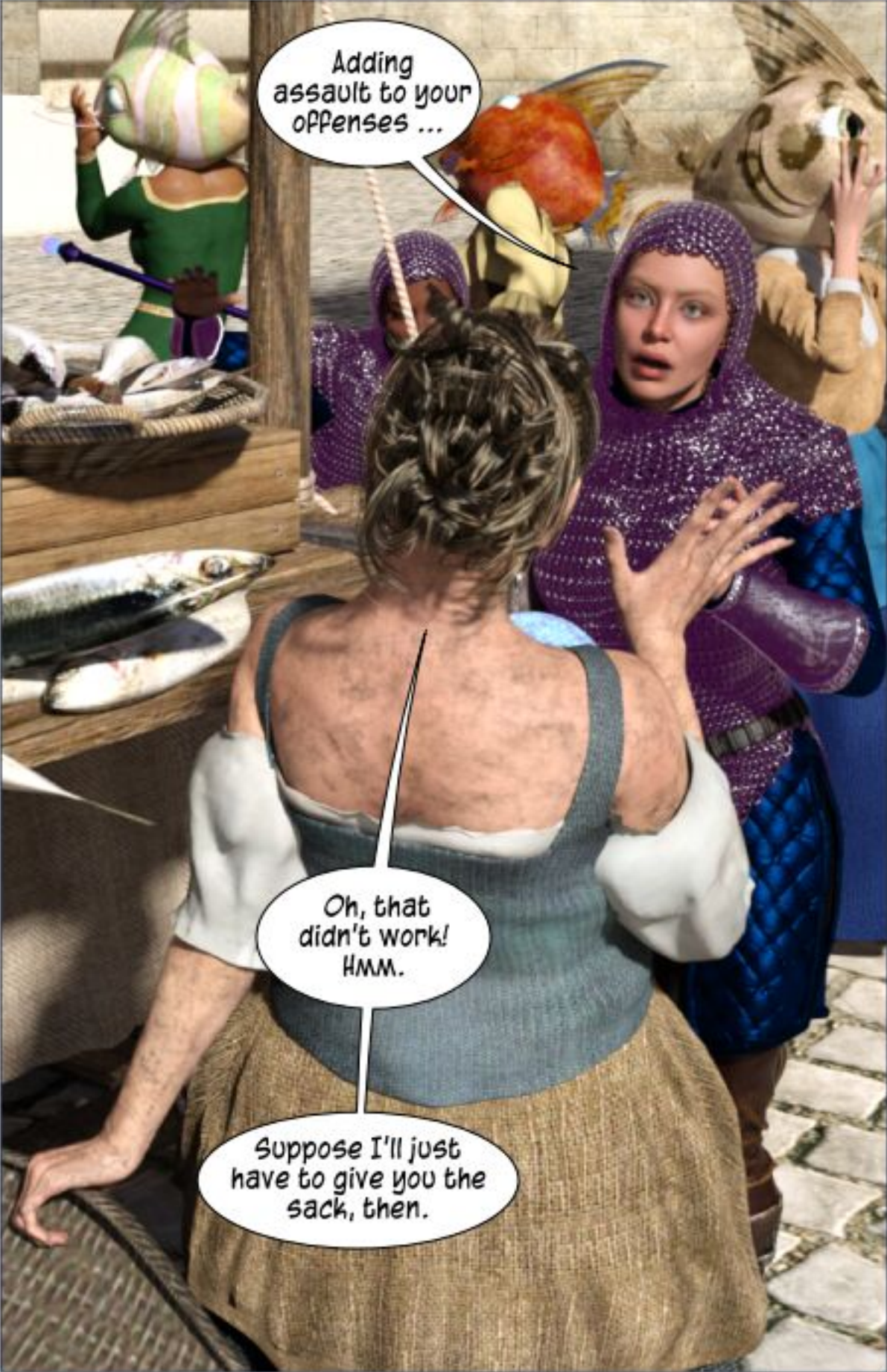


MEANWHILE, MUCH FURTHER SOUTH, A VERY SMALL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE IS MAKING ITS WAY ACROSS THE HOT SWAMP.





AN ANCIENT FISHWIVES' HYMN, REPUTEDLY FROM THE WHOLLY ORDER OF BARNES.



HIGHPOINT, WHERE HONOR AND VIOLET ARE ON A DIPLOMATIC MISSION ...





... a goldfish?

It seemed right. She was making people into fish ...

Sure, but you didn't just leave her in the street?

The City Watch took care of her. They tried to stop her first. She wasn't scared of them.

I bet they're starting to get scared of you, though.

So did I do good? Can I go back now?



Sounds like you're drifting back already.

I know. You can't do anything without me.

--sigh-- You know, you're much more fun to talk to when you're ...

Pleeeeeease?

All right. Let it all out.

Can't go all the way without --



Uhuurrrr

Wow. You were really in a hurry, huh?

Drooled your brains out in half a second.

I think I know what that means ...



Uhhhuuh ... what I thought ...

You are the randiest little thing ... I ... uh ... -- ooooo --

... let's move to the bed and do this properly ...

slurp



What are you waiting for?

-- whine --

Silly puppy, you can get up here and you know it.

... You can't understand a word I'm saying.

Here, girl! Here! Come on!

hrP!!



oooooh! Good girl!

Good puppy!

-- MMh -- that's right ...



DR. CHAPMAN'S FACILITY IN THE A4 SLEEP COMPLEX.

Wow! How long have you had all this?

Technically, I don't "have" it. They let me use it.



You're taller!

I mean, I guess I knew you would be, but --

Yeah, I wasn't born a Dallier. I don't think anybody was.

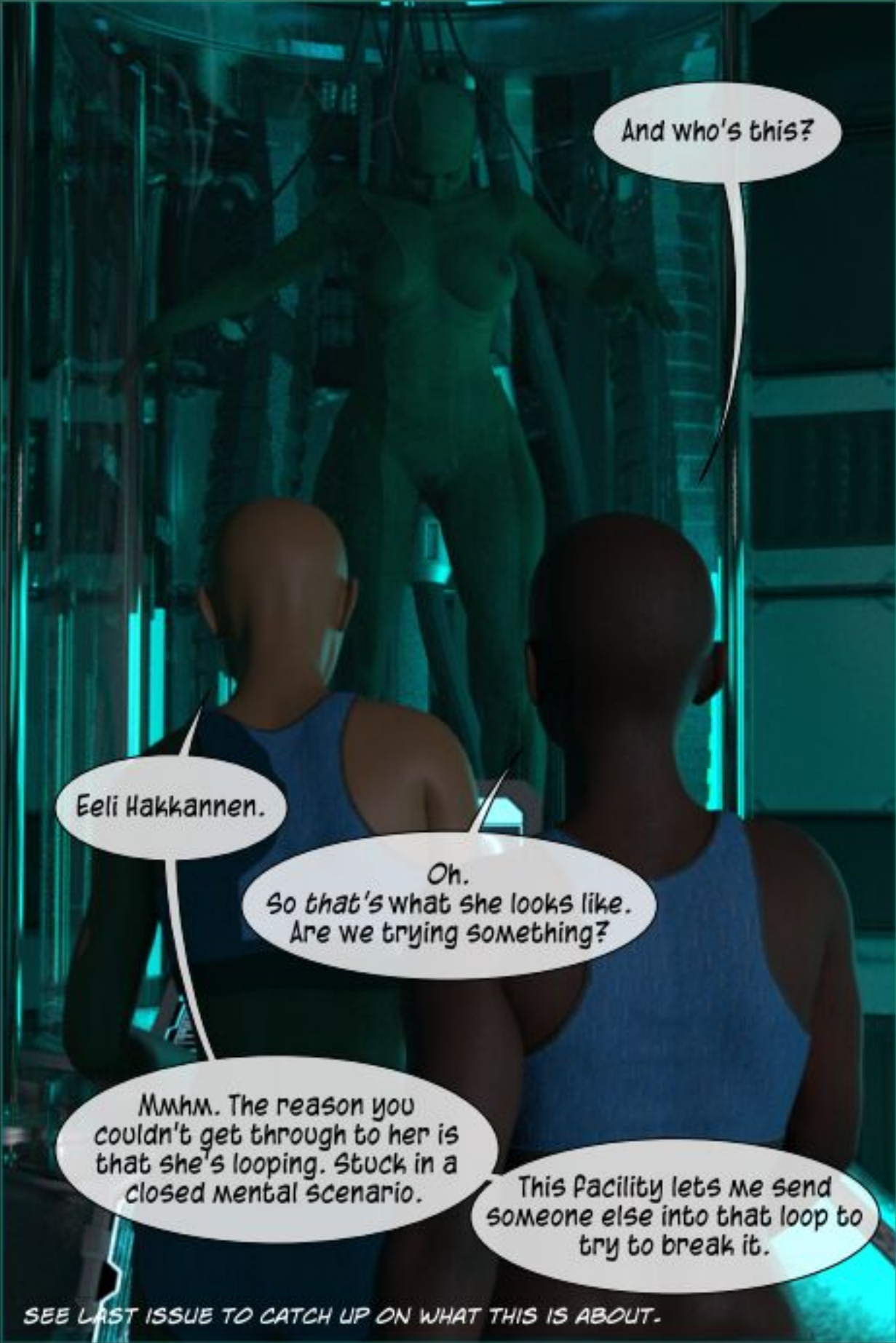
Have you ever been Awake before?

No. You?

No. It's weird. Especially not having hair.

You get used to it.

Ruby wears a wig out here, but I never saw much point.



And who's this?

Eeli Hakkannen.

Oh. So that's what she looks like. Are we trying something?

Mmmm. The reason you couldn't get through to her is that she's looping. Stuck in a closed mental scenario.

This facility lets me send someone else into that loop to try to break it.

SEE LAST ISSUE TO CATCH UP ON WHAT THIS IS ABOUT.



You mean into her mind?

Indirectly. Her loop is manifest -- she's actually experiencing it, somewhere in sleep that we can't otherwise get to. A very private personal space.

From here, I can send someone else into that space.

Well, I hope you don't mean me. I'm not qualified.

You'd be surprised. It doesn't necessarily require psychological training. That's not the skill set.

But, no, I'm sending Josie. I thought it might be good for you to be here. As moral support.



Is it dangerous?

I sure hope not.

No. If she stays in too long or I get other indicators it's not going well, I can pull her out without risk.

But loops like this are traumatic, almost by definition. They can be -- usually are -- a very intense and unpleasant experience.



Tell me again what I'm looking for?

I don't know. I have no idea what's going on in there.

But the structure of the loop usually becomes apparent pretty quickly.

Then you have to find a way to do something the loop doesn't expect you to do. Refuse to play by the rules. Break the pattern.

... Good luck.



OK, this is ...

... I can't even tell what this is.



Hello?
Is anyone in here?



Hey!

Let me --

-- no, wait, don't let me go, we got way off the ground real fast --



Now I can't even see the ground. Can't really see anything ...

... what is that?

Oh, no, don't you put me in those!



AAAAH!

I don't want any of this! I'm just trying to find somebody! What are you doing?



Come back here! Let me out of this!



Some kind of demented factory? Conveyor belts and carriers and mechanical arms and ...

... oh, boy.



I'm sure I'm not going to like wherever I'm going ... but I can't get loose.

And if I did get loose, I can't even tell how far I'd fall.



Oh, now, wait ...

... you don't have to do that ... please ...

AAAAA!



I ...

oh my god.

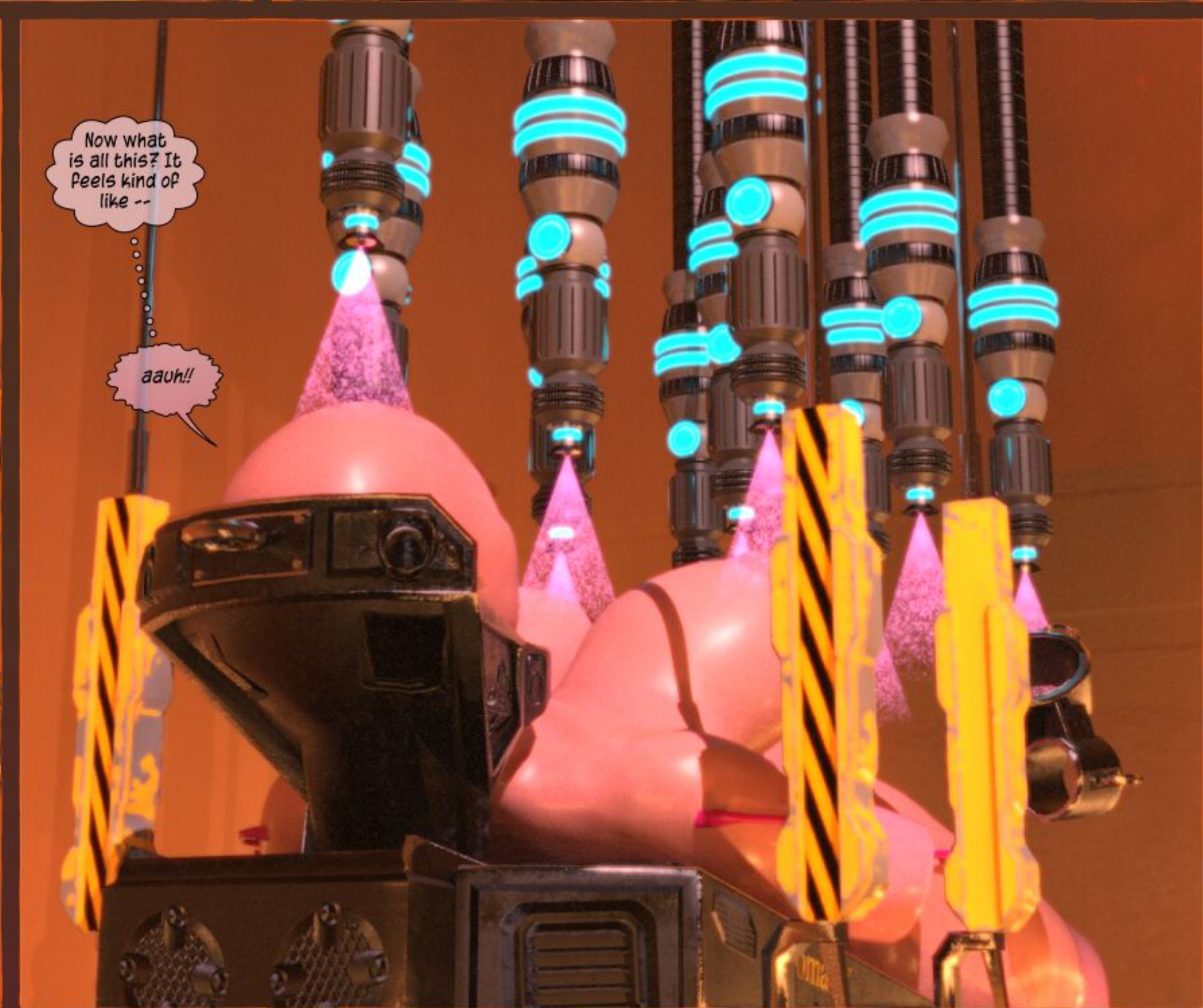
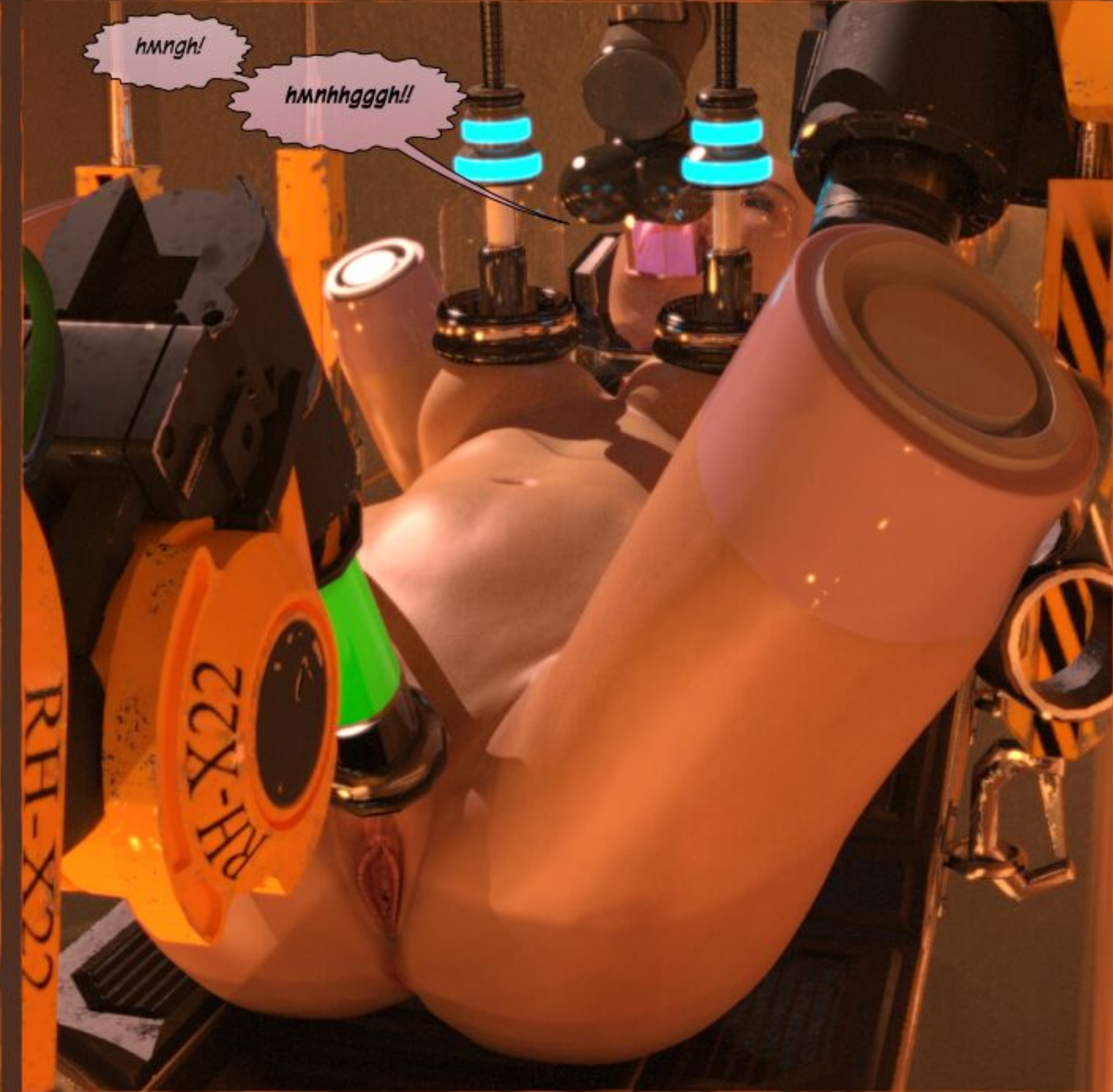
Eeli.

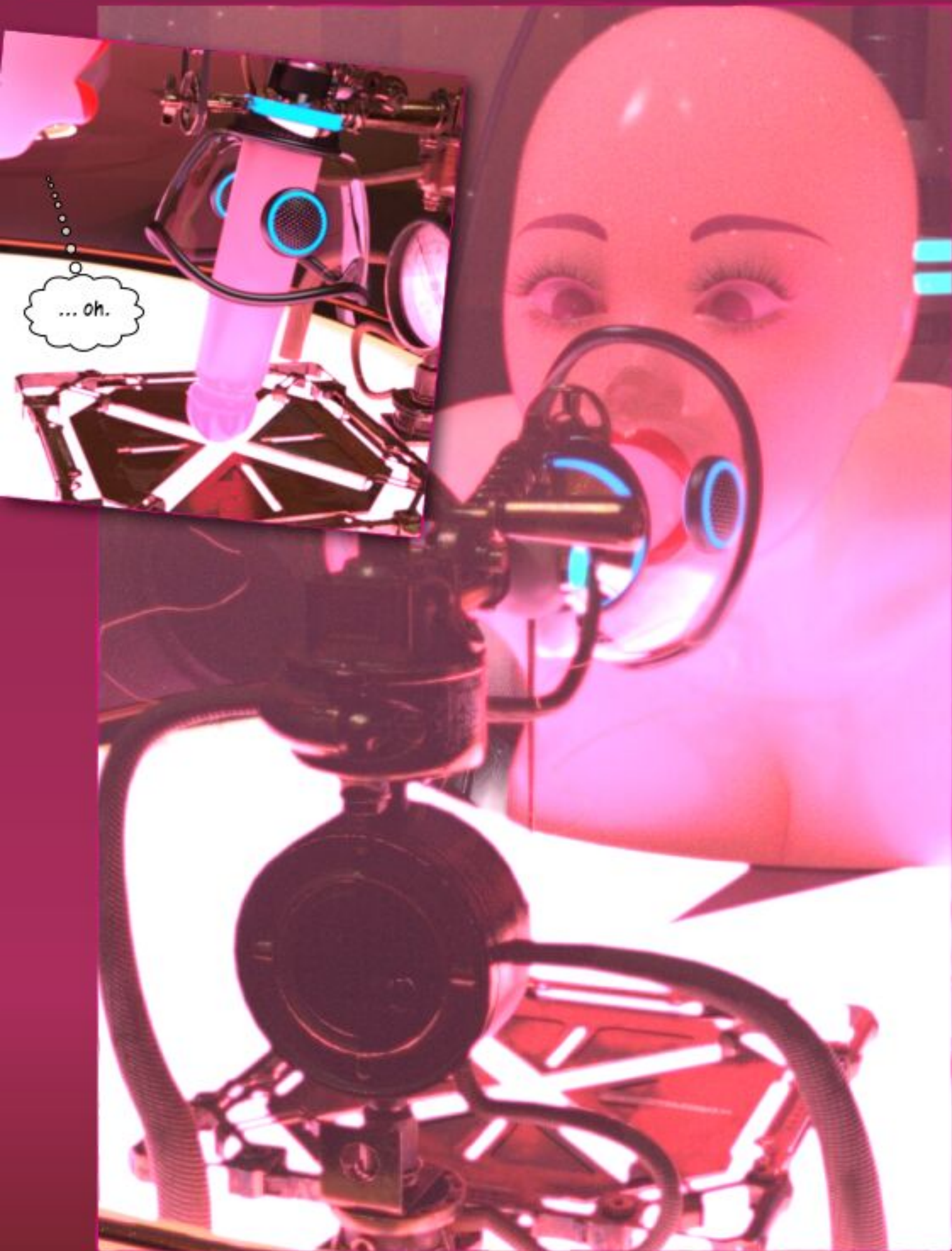
It's making me like Eeli.



No, no, no!

I'm trying to find Eeli! I don't want to be her!







OK, but I don't believe for a second I'm really out.

Maybe the thing to do is not let the claw grab me here ... it's probably coming right now ...



Damn it!



And I have to get reminded of my failed attempts?

Why are you both just sitting there? Why didn't you resist??



hph.

Let's try it again.



I'm sure I can do it this time ... just have to find the right moment ...



... do it this time ... there's got to be a way ...



... this time find way ...

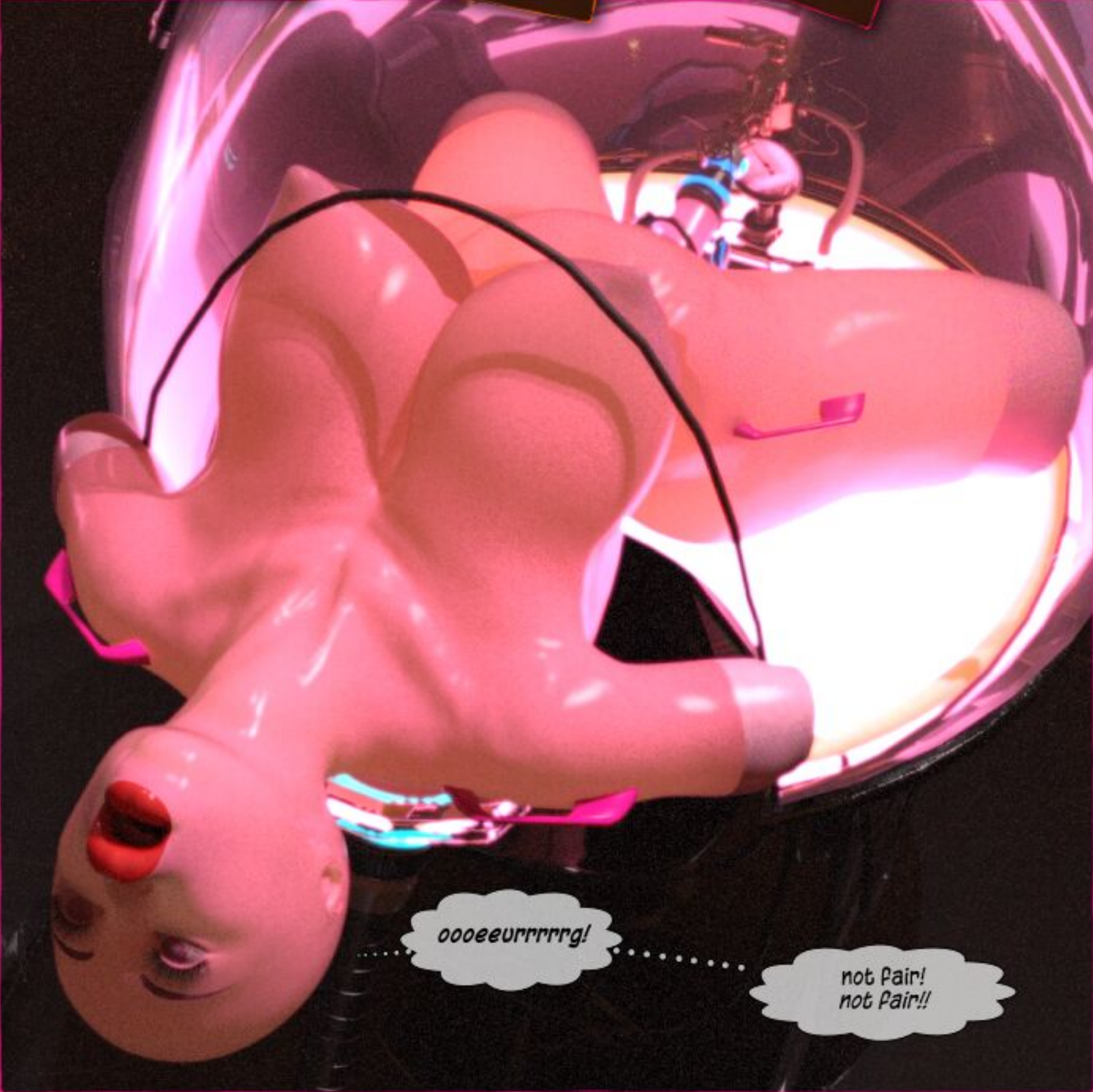


loops making head bad ...

dumb ... like doll ... just be doll ...

no! no. can't be doll ...

beat it before ... beat it every time ... seen all it has ...



ooooeurrrrrg!

not Pair! not Pair!!



sneaky dumb loop waited till ...

mmhhh ... I ... oooo ... can't ...



... llop

hngnn

puck me

bueng

aw llll

ghhhh

use me



Josie!

Josie!!

Josie!!!

C'mon, break out of it!

You are not a sex doll!



Bkwrncch?

Yeah, it's me.

When she realized you were stuck, she was gonna pull you out, but I asked what'd happen if I went in too.

Turns out the loop was so busy looping you it didn't even notice me.

Let's get you out of this.

Brk t?



Yeah, I think we did.

Look, the whole thing's fading out. It's coming apart.

Wouldn't be surprised if any second now --



-- we got kicked.



So it worked? She's out of the loop?

Yes, and it looks like in her case that was most of the problem.

Great! So we can start post-trauma rehab now and she'll --

You're not doing post-anything until you get some rest.

But she might--

No, she won't. Because I'm not even going to have her moved back to a bed for at least another twelve hours. She needs rest too.

Go home. And make sure you get some real sleep. Backwrench, would you take her to bed?

Uh.



Come on. It'll be OK.

But I --

Look, you know she's right. You just went through a lot.

Well, uh ...

... would you do me a favor and meet me in Medical when we get back?



DR. CHAPMAN'S MEDICAL FACILITY, SERENITY.

You OK?

Do you need to talk about it?



Not exactly.

I mean, yeah, there's some stuff to process.

I'm pissed off that I couldn't break out by myself ...

And I'm worried, or I feel guilty, or maybe both, that the reason I couldn't break out by myself was that I enjoyed the scenario too much.

Probably both.



Huh.

But "not exactly"?

"Not exactly" because none of that is my actual problem right now.

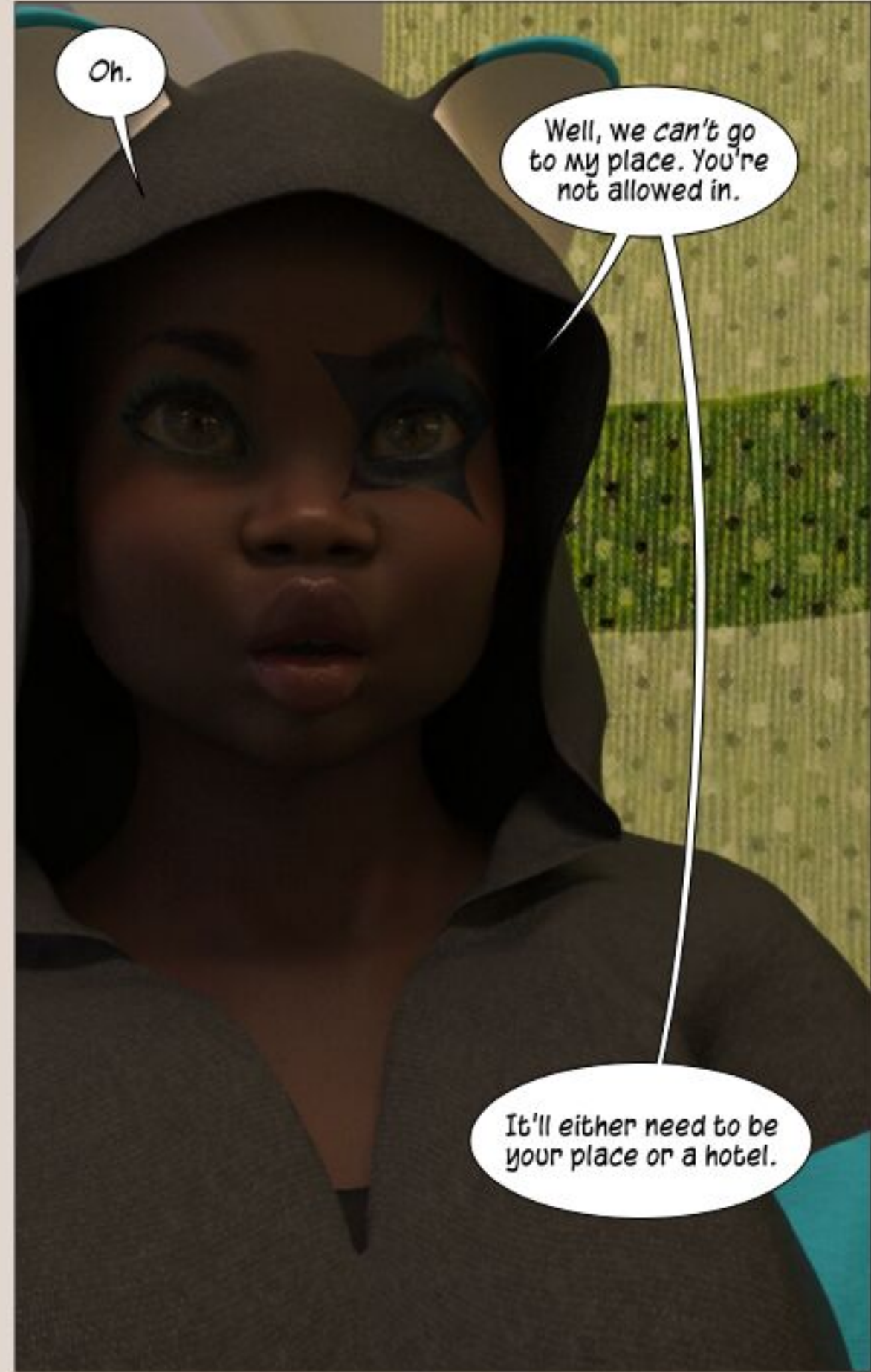


I ... need to have sex with somebody.

I don't think playing with myself is going to do it.

It's not just about horny. It's about getting past that scenario. Or I think it's just going to keep running around in little sweaty circles in my head.

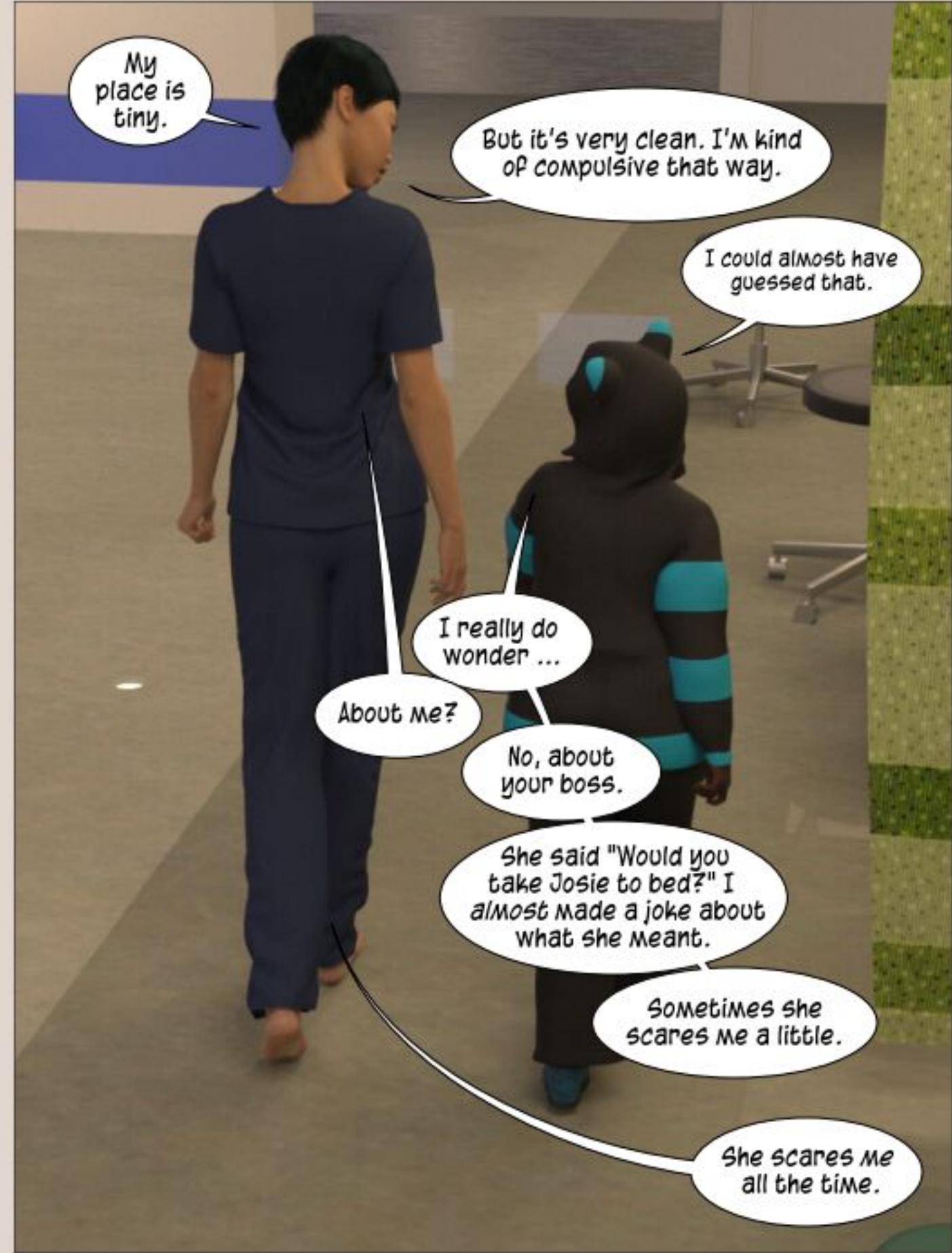
But it's been a long time since I was with somebody and I don't have --



Oh.

Well, we can't go to my place. You're not allowed in.

It'll either need to be your place or a hotel.



My place is tiny.

But it's very clean. I'm kind of compulsive that way.

I could almost have guessed that.

I really do wonder ...

About me?

No, about your boss.

She said "Would you take Josie to bed?" I almost made a joke about what she meant.

Sometimes she scares me a little.

She scares me all the time.

BACK TO THE YARDS, WHERE OUR EXPEDITION IS ...

... coming out of the swamp. Finally.

How can you tell? I mean, I see some sand, but ...

The palm trees are what you look for. They like their heads hot and their feet wet. They can't grow in the water -- that's too wet -- but they can't grow far from it either. So they stay on the edges.

Past that, it gets nasty. Nothing tries to live in the desert except the scorpions. Even the snakes don't go very deep in.

But we are?

Nope! We follow the edge north. It'll get rockier, and there's a canyon.

And that's where our troubles will really begin.

Might start sooner than that. There's something watching us over there.

I think it's a mudback.

Oh, no, wait -- that doesn't look like --

They're degenerating even further. That's bad.

Couple more days and she'll just be a gator.

Look out!

YAAAA!

Thanks, Crel.

That's why we keep her around.

Yeah, yeah.

I didn't think it'd move that fast ... the others didn't ...

SHHLLL

Huh?

There was only one of them?

SSHHLL...

Are you ... trying to say my name?

HHHH

Oh, no ... T'lau?

Be careful, Chelle. I don't think there's much of her left.

Wait! Don't run!

It'll be OK! Hold on! We'll fix it!

I'm surprised she managed that much. You two must have been close?

She guided me to the Gaja.

She was worried she'd change. She thought she might have been the last one left.

We've got to fix this.

Well, if we can take down the cobra queen, that should undo all her work.

... I guess.

You're skeptical?

T'lau went to Piertown to consult a seer.

The seer told her this mess would only be solved "when the swamp turns blue."

T'lau didn't know what that meant, and neither do I, but it doesn't sound like it has much to do with the cobra queen.

But I don't figure going after her can possibly hurt.

Let's keep moving, huh?



No lookouts?

Don't like it.

A long canyon. How far in do we go?

About halfway. Then there's a path that branches off.

How did you even find this in the first place?

Followed some of her snakes. We've been on her for a long time now.



You know, coming in this way, we're asking to be spotted.

The problem is, we've never found any other way in.



I don't like this, and not just because it was in my vision.

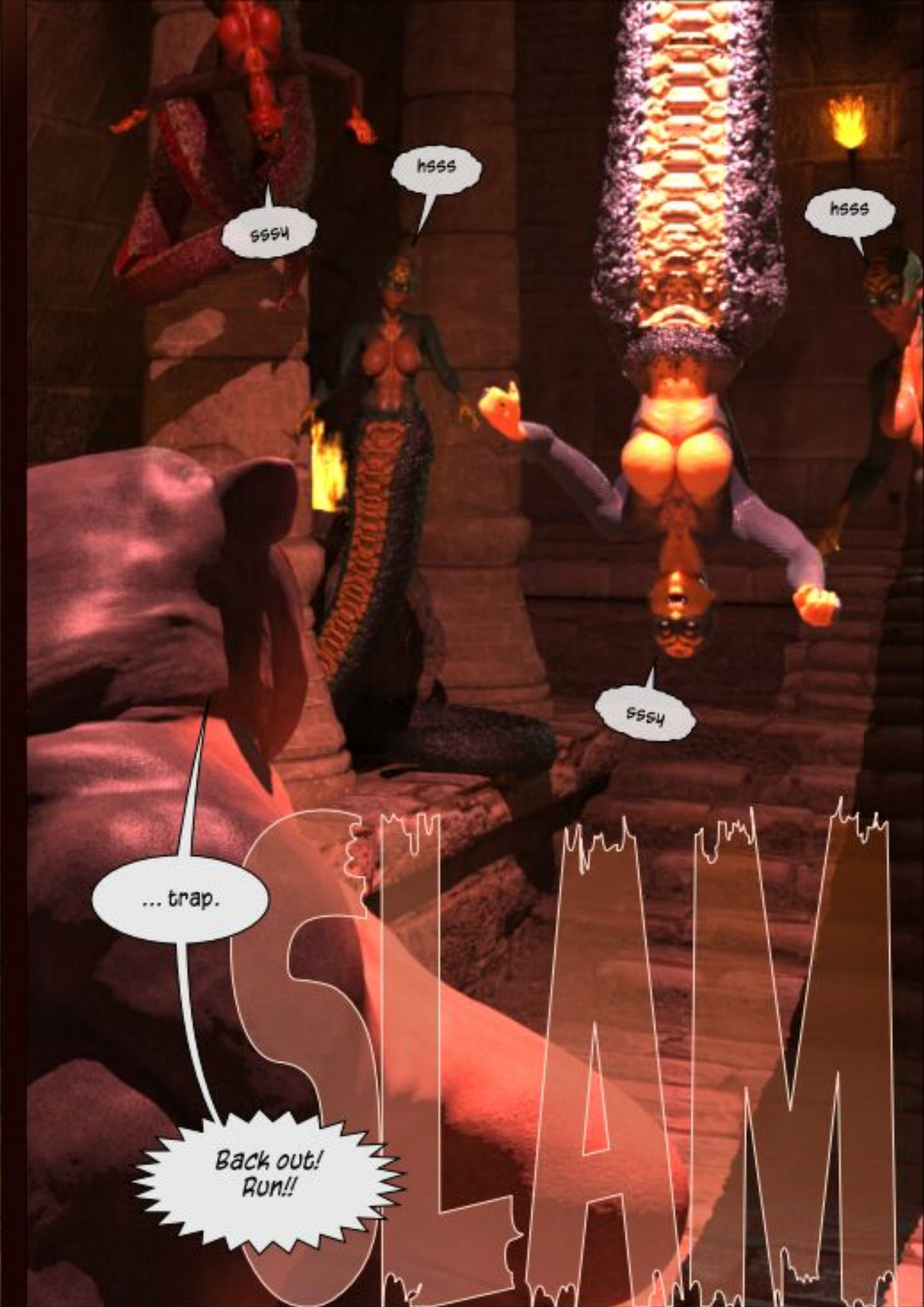
I can't shake the feeling it isn't going to go well.

CHELLE'S VISION CAN BE SEEN IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE.



Still nobody ...

Yeah, this is either an amazing opportunity or it's a trap.



hsss

hsss

hsss

... trap.

Back out! Run!!

SLAM



We're cut off!

It won't open!

Shit.



Hey!!

Don't touch me!

hgh

That's it, Chel, knock 'em into next week!

Tabe, behind you!

There's too many -- dagh!

Tabe!

Chel, we have to -- yllll!



Well, well. What have we here?



I'd say I was amazed by your stupidity, but I've come to expect it after all these months.

You three really don't know when to quit, do you? I'll be so happy to finally deal with you.

And I have just the thing in mind.



OK, the left fork leads outside, I know that ...

... so I'll try the right one.

There's got to be another way around to where they are.



A pool?

I mean, it's a very nice pool, but.



That's right. Bring them over this way ...

Carefully now. The cages are set up over here ...



Excellent!
A place for
everything and
everything in its
place.

All right, let's
leave them alone
to settle in.



Oh, that's not good.

No, no ...
ssh ...!



Ah, there
you are.

They told
me a human had
gotten involved
with those
clowns.

You should
pick sides more
carefully.

I'll get them
out of this.

I doubt that.
And if you try to,
my wisp here will
do something
horrible to you.

I won't make
you a snake.
That'd peel like a
reward. But I do
have more cages
to use up.



Or we could
avoid all that.

I have certain needs. And I
don't like trying to have sex with the
snakes. Too much squirming and
wriggling, and I'm not built for it. I
like someone with legs.



Of course I'll need
to take certain
precautions, but I
guarantee it'll be better
than what I'd have to do
to you otherwise.

Uh ...
Well, since you put
it that way ...

THE PREVOST ESTATE, HIGHPOINT. (NO, WE HAVEN'T BEEN HERE BEFORE.)



Cold Peet,
Shaylen? Now? I
thought we were
past that.

Well, I ...
you hadn't told me
all of it before ...
you're asking a lot,
you know ...

It's not me,
and it's not
asking. Lord
Prevost demands it.

But yes, it's a lot.
And it must be voluntary. Lord
Prevost doesn't want anyone in
his household who isn't.

You can
certainly just walk
away right now.



But they're still
looking for you in the
Cobbles, aren't they?

You came to us
asking for safe haven.
A place to hide.

Lord Prevost is
benevolent and is
prepared to offer you
sanctuary ... but the
condition is your
submission.

This is not negotiable.



I, uh ...
This is ...

Oh, don't fret.
It'll be over before
you know it.

You're in exactly
the right spot.
Perfect.



But --

Don't move, now.



WUAAAAH!



UUUUH?



eehooouh



hUUUUU!



There! Now you're suitable to join the household. And much improved, I must say.

uuuh?

Oh, don't worry. The disorientation passes quickly.

Now let's get you cleaned up and into the proper attire.



You'll find, with a little training, that serving Lord Prevost is actually very --

Hmm.

We're not receiving visitors. How'd you even get in?

The gate let me in. Lord Prevost *did* say I had a standing invitation to visit at any time.

Yes, I can imagine why.

Now, now. We *all* know he has a type. And you shouldn't cast stones from your glass house, dear. That's a magnificent bosom you have there.

At any rate, this is estate business and he'll want to see me.



You'd better hope you're right about that, because you'll almost certainly be interrupting him in the middle of --

-- I have to tend to our new arrival. Go back down those steps and take the rear corridor on my left.

If he throws you out on your ass, don't blame me.



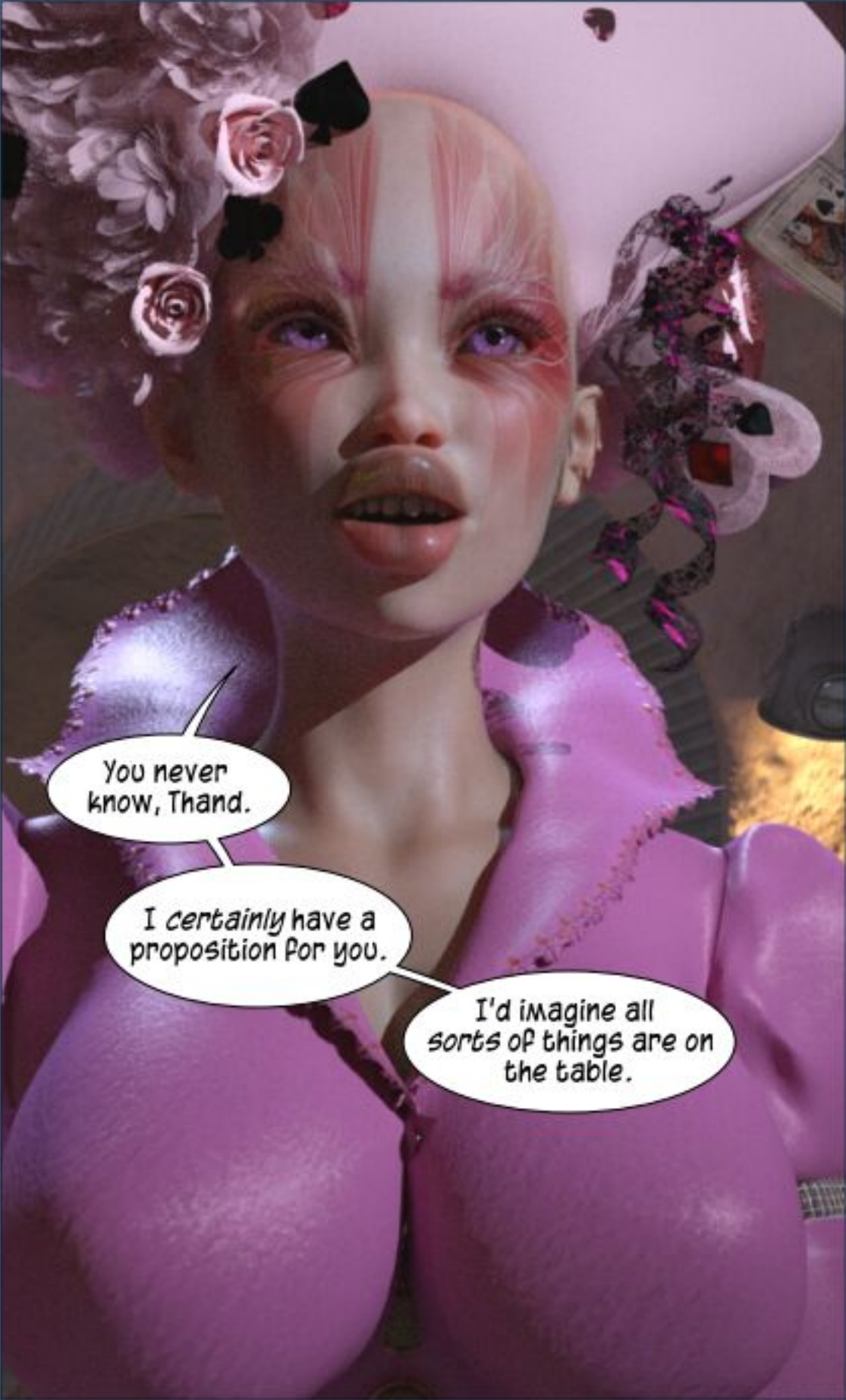
Good evening, Lord Prevost.



... Lady Isidore!

This is extremely unexpected.

Unless you've come for a spot in the rotation ...



You never know, Thand.

I certainly have a proposition for you.

I'd imagine all sorts of things are on the table.



Now, why don't you send your little broodmares out of the room so we can have a private discussion, hmm?

Hmph.

Lord Prevost?



May I present your newest subject?

She's prepared for you to initiate her into the household.

... She'll have to wait, Drusilla. Take her out, and take the others with you as well.

I have business to discuss with Lady Isidore.



Oona, I know what you're here for. Forget it. I don't like either of the factions, and they can't breach me. I wall off, they send each other to hell, don't care which of them wins, the end.

I think you might be mistaken about some of that.

It doesn't matter what you think. There's no incentive for me to get involved.

Unless you're offering to join my household. That might be an inducement.



You know I'm not prepared to go that far. I have an estate to tend.

But, short of that, as I said ... a lot is on the table.

I know you must get bored with these little pretties who don't know how to do anything but lie still and squeal.

I can offer you more interesting and entertaining experiences.



It's not enough, Oona.

You know perfectly well what I demand.

If you want my help, I'll give you my help. But there will be sacrifices.

And they'll have to come from you. Not any of the others in your coalition. Is it worth that to you? Because my terms are not subject to change.

THREE WEEKS LATER

GRAYTOWER, THE YARDS.

Sweet, I'm sorry, but you're going to need to come back. Hallwell's on her way.

Wrp??

We knew we were going to have to deal with her sooner or later. C'mon, hurry. She's almost here and we need to get you dressed.

WITCH!

I demand that you explain yourself!

There's no need to be rude, Baroness. Do I charge into your house calling you names?

Well, I --

-- I don't actually know what to call you.

Some people have taken to calling me the pale lady. That'll do. I suppose "pale witch" would work too.

I don't know what you're upset about. I haven't intervened unless it was a situation your City Watch couldn't handle themselves.

I haven't stepped on your feet at all.

That's not the point! We don't need another mystery person with unknown motives running around Graytower doing mischief!

Nonsense. My motives are very plain. They're the same as yours. I don't mind Pun and games, but it's clear that this city, and a great deal of the Yards, needs some supervision.

Sure, you say that, but how do we really --

Because if I were malicious, you'd know it already.

-- Mglph!

That looks cute on you. Would you like to keep it?

You and your troops have a lot of anti-magic ability, but you can't actually cast much. You don't have much power. I do.

I'm going to run this place, and I'm going to make it better. You can help me ... or I can turn you into something that won't interfere with me.

But I'd much prefer your help.

I ...

... am at your service.

Milady.

Excellent.

I think we'll work very well together.

SOMEWHERE IN THE DEPTHS OF THE VIOLET LADY'S CASTLE ...

Why can't I shake it?

Weeks and weeks, and all I've managed to do is get my brain back.

Can't revert my form ... can't really talk --

-- eh?

KKKEEEE?

hah wnh ths ...

nd hong bk ...

What's the point? I don't know if she could understand me even if I could speak clearly ...

Uh?

Then again, I could be wrong ...

Huh. An arcane lab ... but it doesn't look like the violet lady's been using it lately ... I wonder if I can figure any of it out ...

In there?

Does she think it'll fix me?

Well, it can't make anything much worse ...



This is some kind of fixed apparatus ... I can feel it charging ... I must have activated it by stepping in --



Wuuurh!



That was not on my list of possible outcomes.



Oh, you turned out so cute!

You can talk?

To you, yes.

Come on, we can't stand around. She doesn't know I can get in here, and she won't like it if she finds out.

We can talk somewhere else.



Thanks for that ... though it wasn't exactly what I was hoping for ...

Well, I know, but I don't know how to change you back to whatever you used to be.

I figured you'd rather be a bat. You were sad. Don't blame you. It's got to be pretty rotten to be a grmlin if you have a brain.

Never saw a grmlin get their head back before. I didn't know that could happen.



Usually I can break all the way out of something, but this seems to be sticking for some reason.

But you're right, this is much better. Thank you again.

What's your name? I'm Cres.

Pleek.

IN THE COBRA QUEEN'S SANCTUM ...



Uuuuuh ...

Mmmh



You know, I never would have guessed it'd be just as much fun to make you come.

Urrh

You rest up. I'm going to have a swim and see to some chores.

Later it'll be my turn.



It's so good to finally have everything exactly the way it should be.

With the swamp devolved, our border is safe ... the Gaja will never do anything about it ... My subjects and I are free to relax and enjoy life ...

... and to think, after all these years, the secret was just to capture one little wisp ...



And speaking of that, I'd better give you your dose for today ...



I almost feel bad for her sometimes ... never saw someone who needed someone else to talk to so badly ...

'Course it doesn't help that she doesn't trust anybody ... she wouldn't be talking now, except she thinks I'm pried to the eyeballs on her venom ...

She still hasn't figured out I've built up a tolerance. I need to make sure she doesn't.

Now let's see if I can get close enough to find out what this is all about ...



-- ungh --

Wish you were big enough to just bite ... wouldn't have to do this the hard way ...



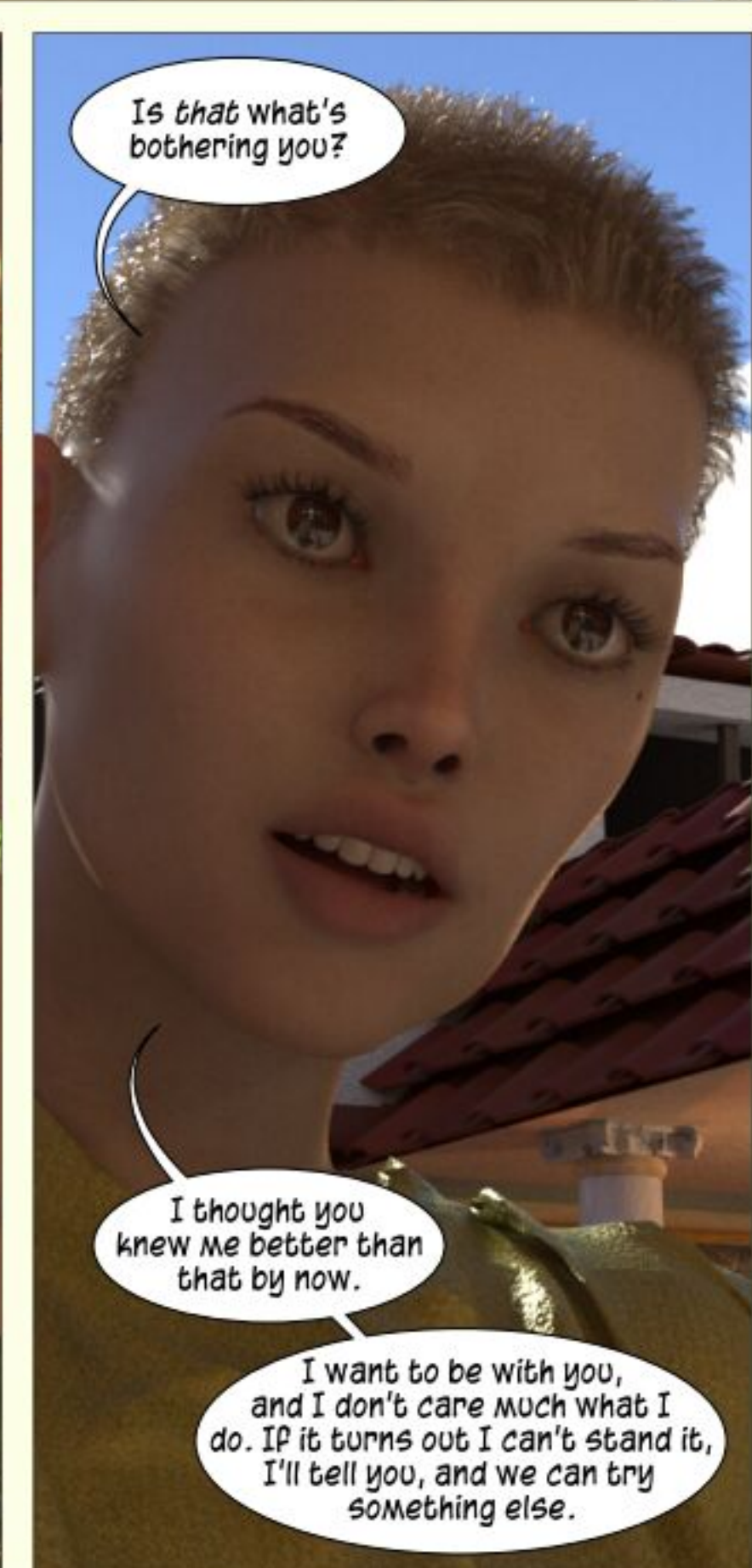
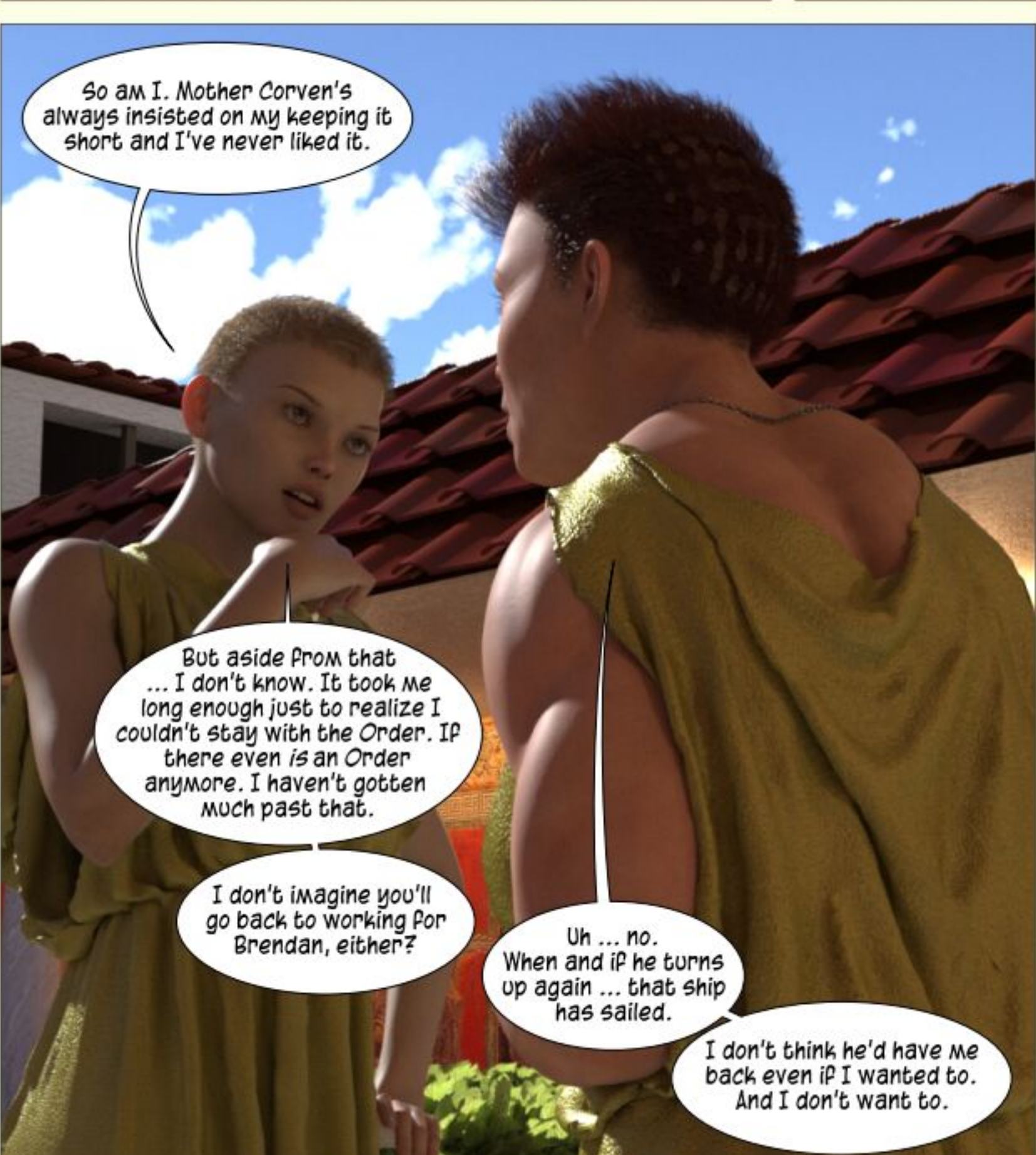
OK, little bug, time for your shot --

Missstress?

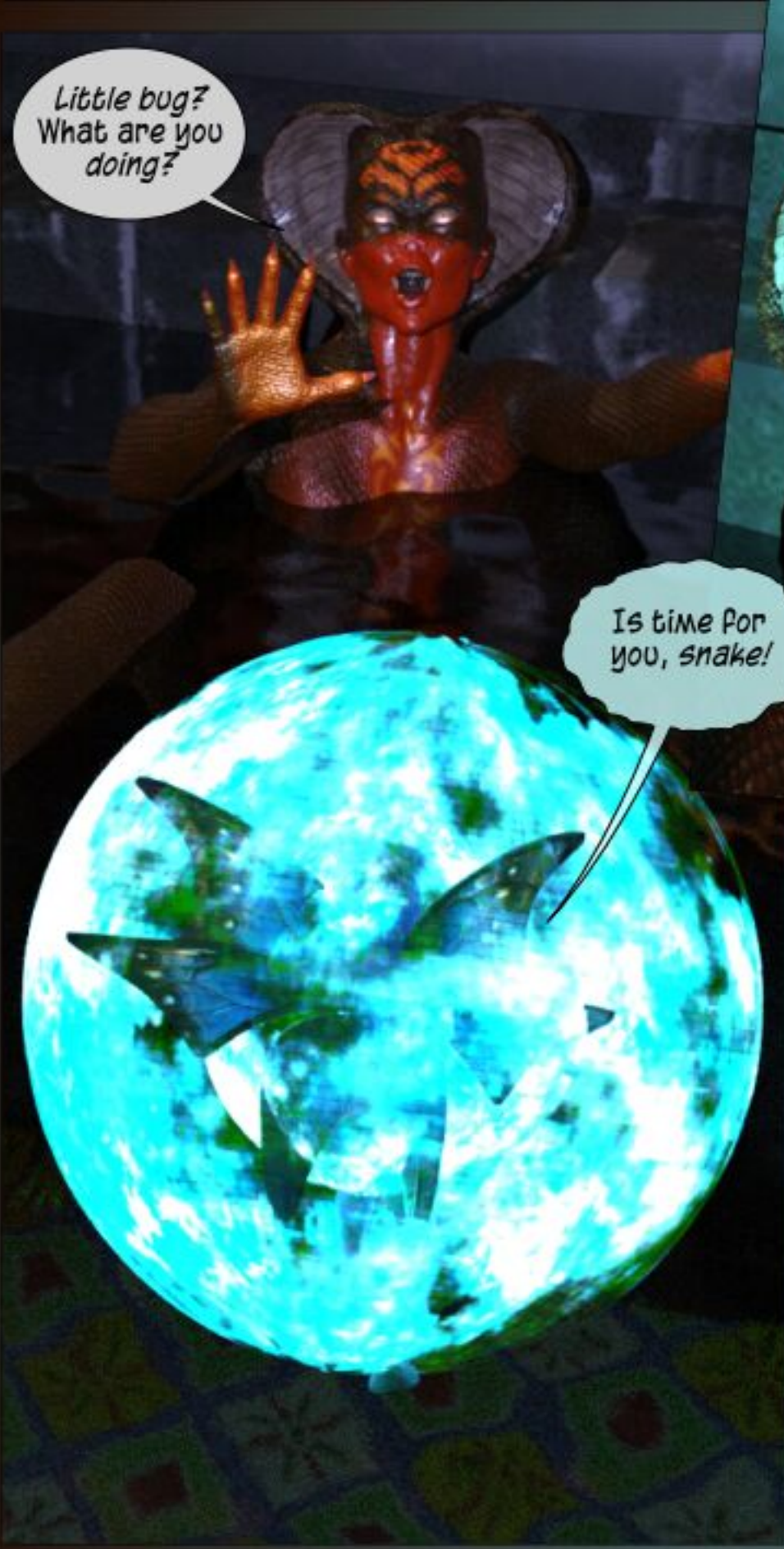
Damn it, Pliss, what?



THE BONISOVA ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.



BACK TO THE YARDS, WHERE CHELLE AND THE COBRA QUEEN ARE HAVING A POSTCOITAL NAP ...





Interesting For you! Horrible For everybody else. You disrupt people's lives! There are all kinds of people in the swamp who can't do what they're supposed to be --

-- Urk!!

You're going to be her now. I think. Yes.



But why?

Because it was Pun! Weren't you even listening?

She's got a whole lot of snake people! With them, we can go make trouble in all kinds of places!

We can mess with the elephants! I don't like them anyway, they're snotty. We can go up into the jungle! There are some people up there who really need to be messed with.

But the snakes only listen to her! So one of us needs to be her. And it's not going to be me. I don't want to look like that. Eww.

So you're going to be her and I'm going to be me and we're going to have a lot more Pun!



And you're going to play with me because if you don't I can make you into something that's a lot worse.

And if you run away I'm going to be real mean to your friends.

OK, I'm gonna be little again now. It's boring being like this.

THE STONE ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.



Have you met Stone before?

Um ... Met, yes, just barely. Once. You?

I've been here a few times. It's ... interesting.



Hey!

I asked you to take us to Lord Stone! You're just leaving us here? Where is he?

Someone hasn't done this before.



Indeed.

As someone who nominally runs a religious order, Corven, I'm surprised you don't appreciate the virtues of silent meditation.

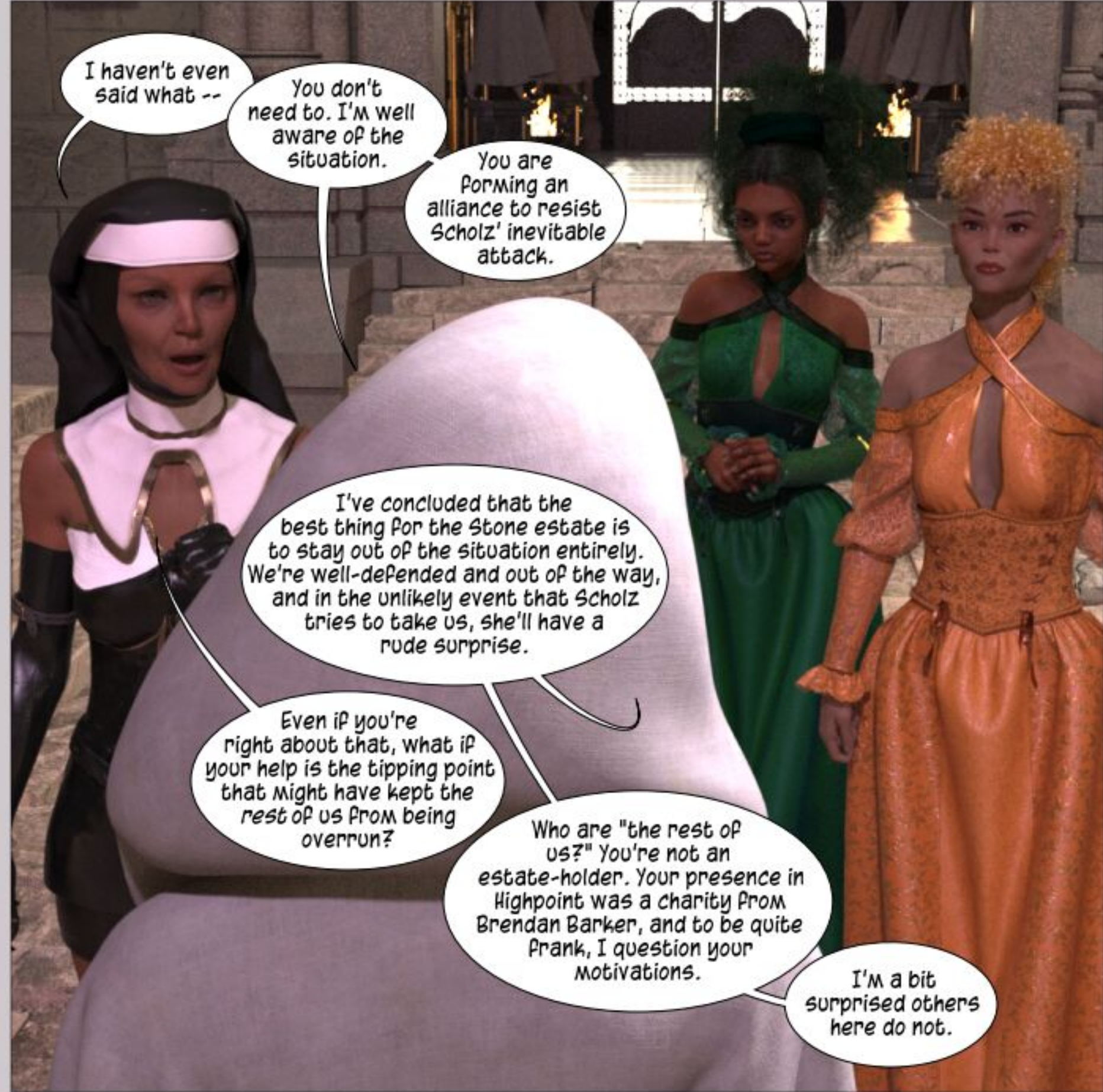


Lady Michener, Lady Soileau, how nice to see you both again.

I suppose I don't need to introduce myself, then.

No.

And I can save you even more words: We can't help you.



I haven't even said what --

You don't need to. I'm well aware of the situation.

You are forming an alliance to resist Scholz' inevitable attack.

I've concluded that the best thing for the Stone estate is to stay out of the situation entirely. We're well-defended and out of the way, and in the unlikely event that Scholz tries to take us, she'll have a rude surprise.

Even if you're right about that, what if your help is the tipping point that might have kept the rest of us from being overrun?

Who are "the rest of us?" You're not an estate-holder. Your presence in Highpoint was a charity from Brendan Barker, and to be quite frank, I question your motivations.

I'm a bit surprised others here do not.



Sonja, Louise -- do Peel Free to pay a social call sometime. I enjoy seeing you.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I must return to my meditations.

BACK IN THE YARDS ...



... and it wasn't always like this, that's the thing.

We liked being her bats. We took care of the castle and helped her out, and she treated us well ...

... changed.

Changed in what way?



Well, she's gotten really nasty.

I mean, she always transformed people, but there used to be something different in it, I think.

Now it seems like she only does it to *gSKREEEE*



What are you all doing just sitting around?

Someone is supposed to be keeping watch in the south tower! The grimplins have gotten into the koi pond again! Go herd them out!

EEEE!

BREEEK!



So we can't talk when she's around?

Her, or anybody else who's not a bat. Even grimplins.

Huh. OK. I figured that when I was a grimplin I just couldn't understand you ...

The Punny thing is, I don't think she remembers we can talk. She treats us like we're barely intelligent.

I'll go herd. Poor things just want to play in the water.

Yes, but they step on the fish a lot.



But that's the kind of thing I mean. She's forgotten who we are, she's forgotten how to do some of the things she used to do ... her personality's changed completely ...

Something happened to her, something major, but we can't figure out what.

She's a different person now.

One none of us likes very much.

But you stay?

Well ... we don't know how to change back ...

... but mostly I think we're all hoping we'll wake up one day and she'll be back to who she was before and this'll be a good place again. Y'know?

SOMEWHERE IN SERENITY.



You don't have to be nervous, you know.

It'll be Pun! We're just going to have Pun! There's no pressure ...

No, it's not that ... I just ... don't do this very often.

I'm probably not very good at it.

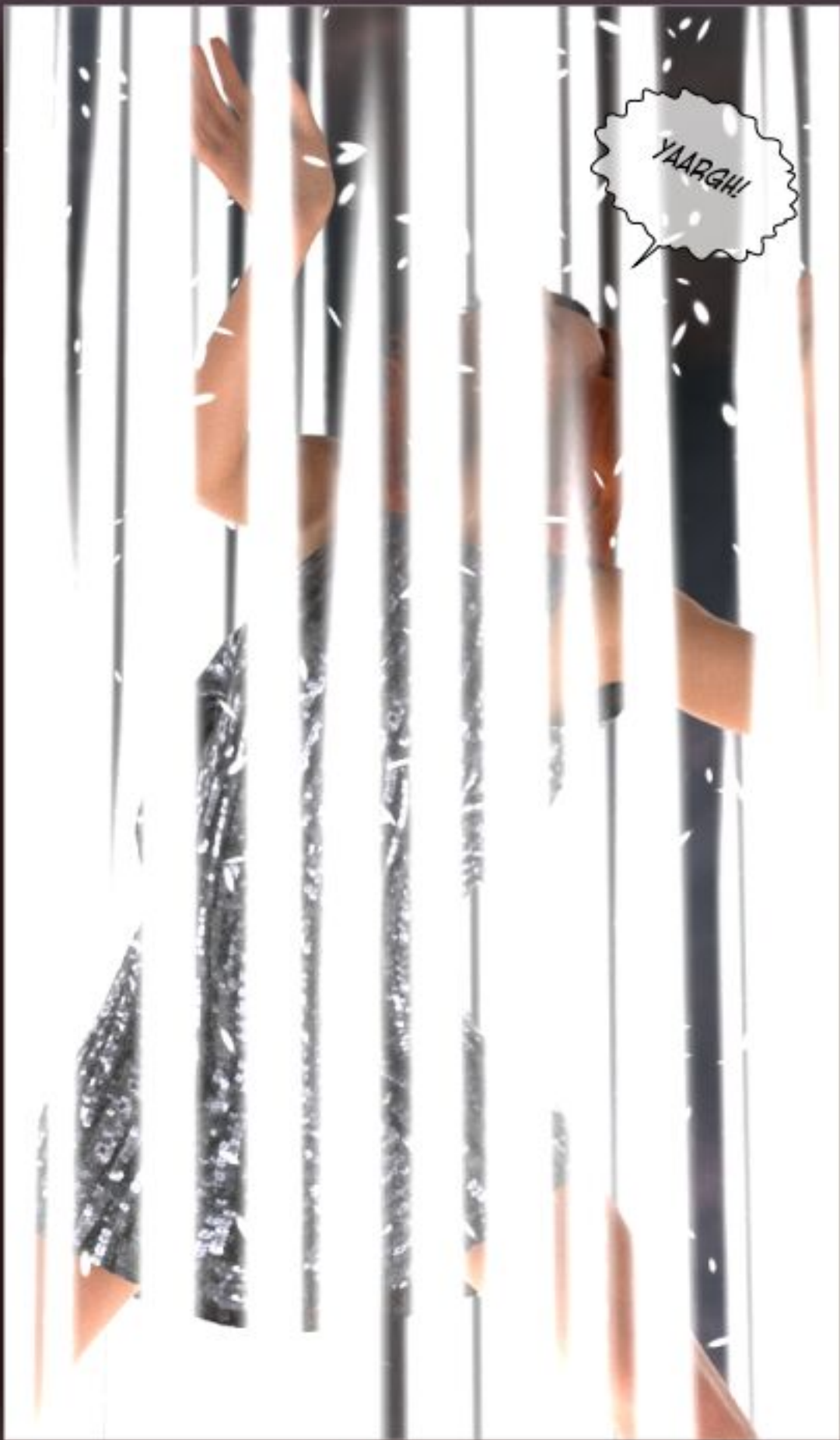


Even if you aren't, so what? That's a good sign. It means you know you can learn.

Usually the trouble is people who think they're great at it and they're not. You can't teach them a thing.

Ooh, you got one of the big rooms?

Yeah, I, uh ... had a special setup.



YAAARGH!



... wuh?

wuzz happn?

Sorry about that! Your head should clear up in a second.

I didn't think I could get you to just walk into the box.



box ...?

Hey, what is this?

I thought we were going to have Pun!

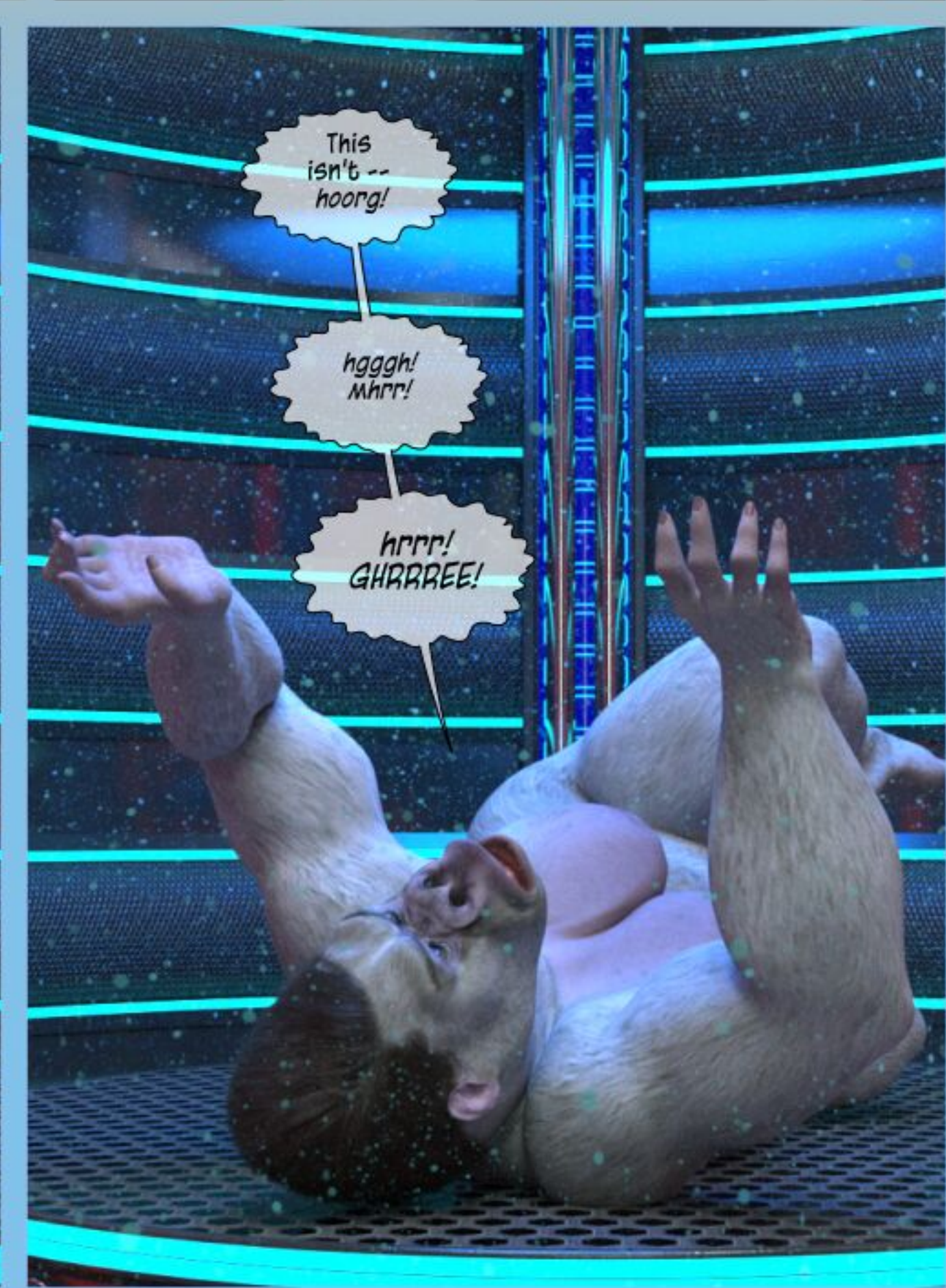
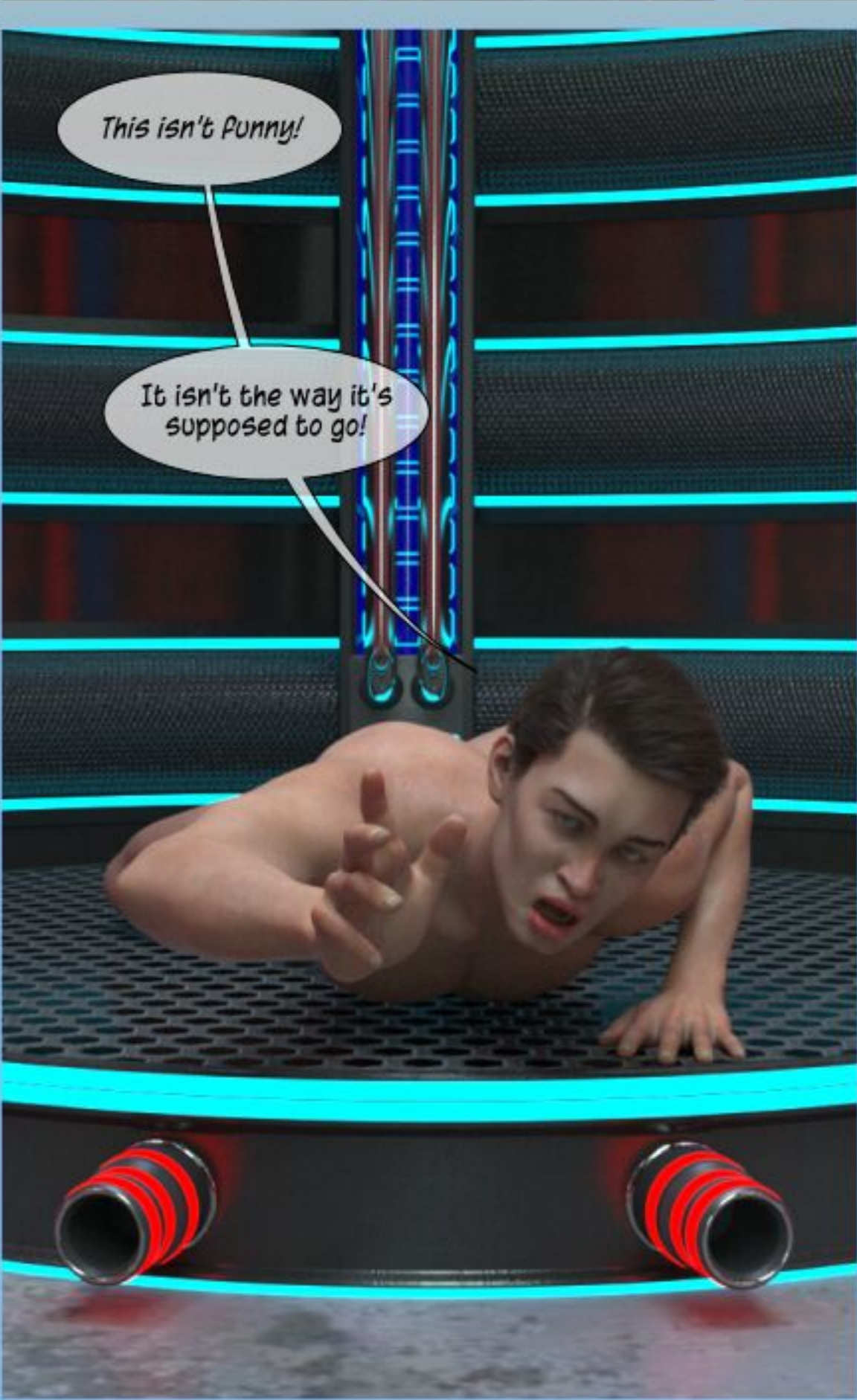
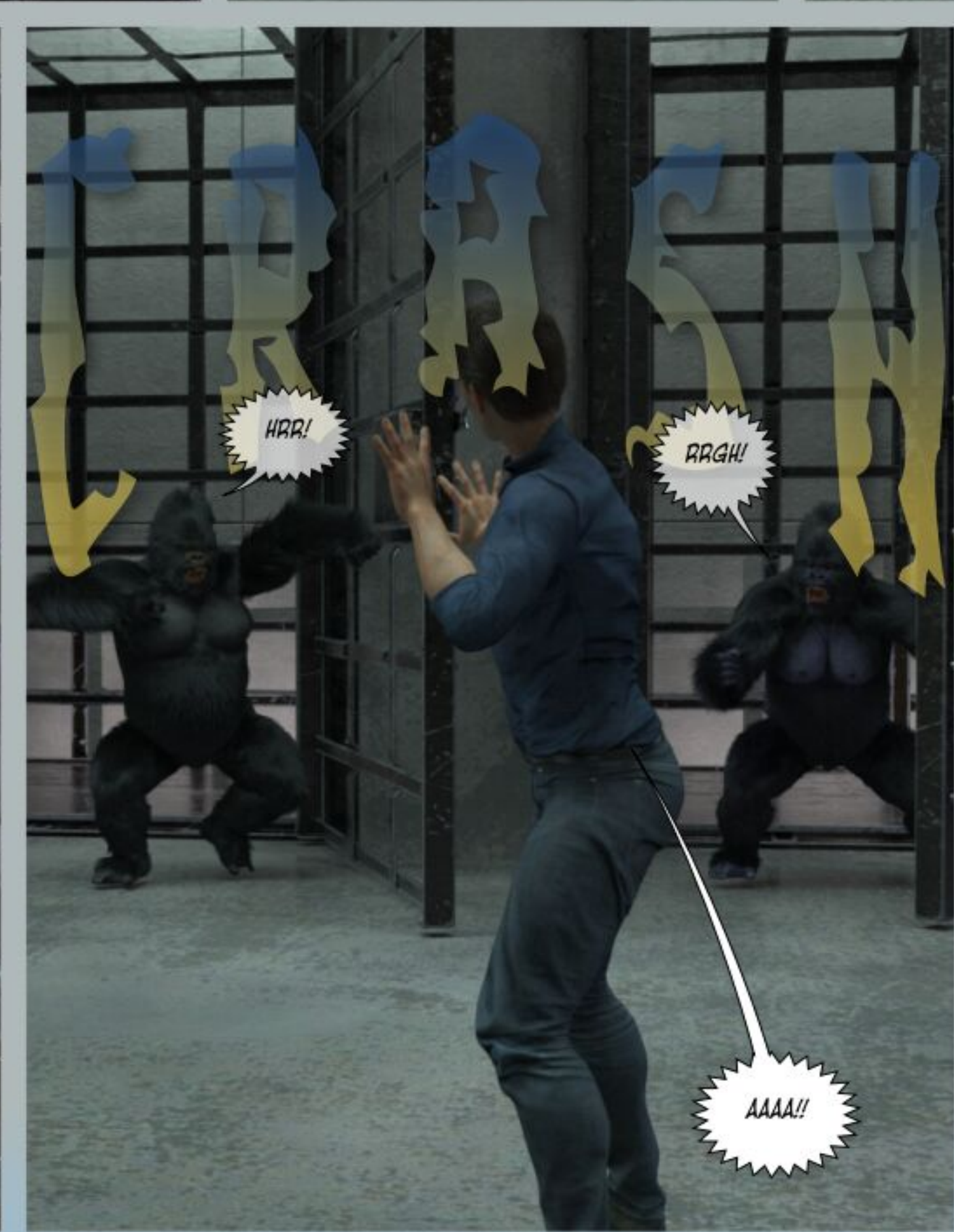
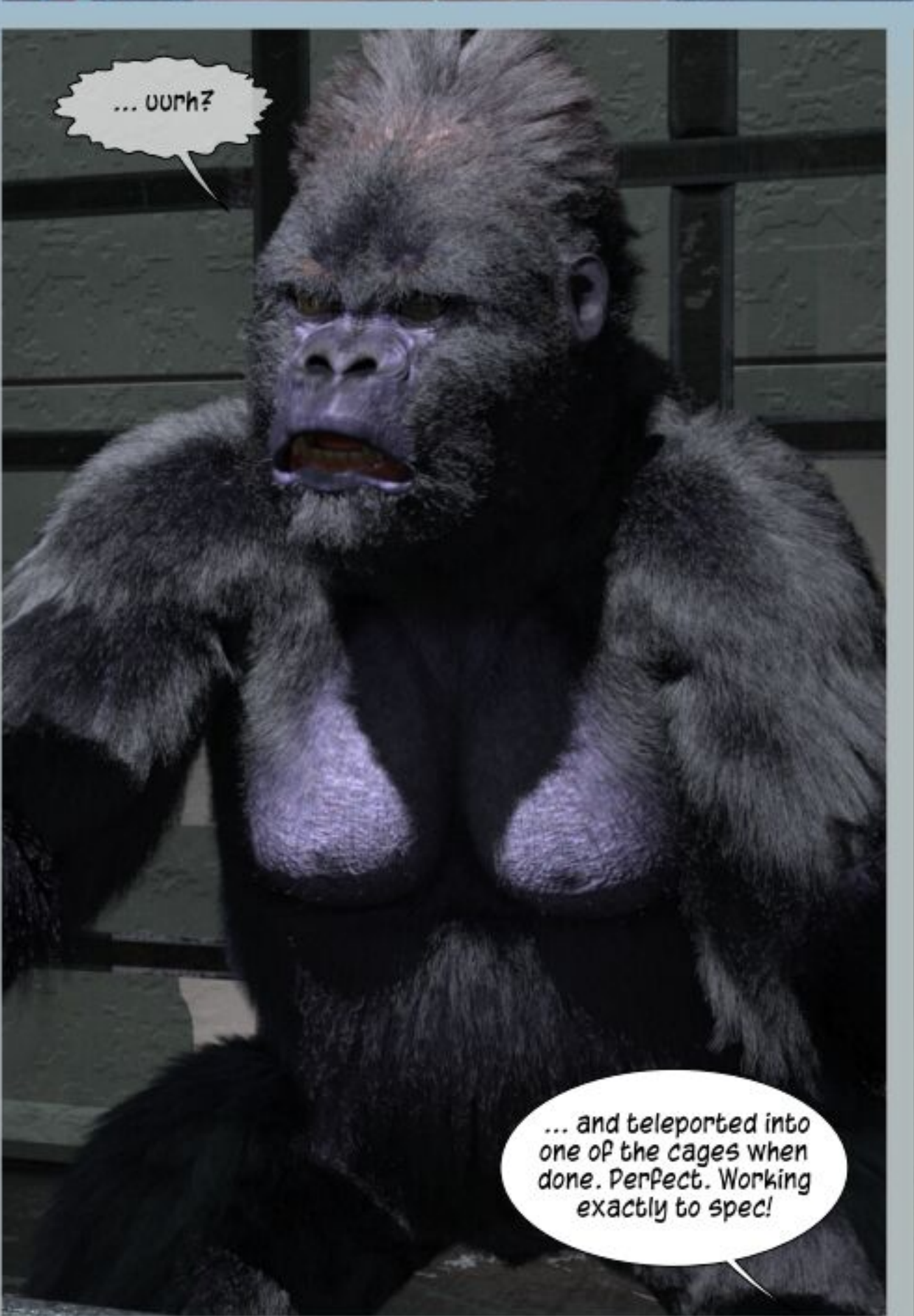
I'm going to have Pun. I don't know about you.

I told you I had a special setup. That's some really interesting technology you're standing in.



Hey!!

Sorry. That's going to start itself in a second and I think it'd be better if I was over here.





THREE WEEKS LATER

THE YARDS.

You're not happy.

No. I'm not.

It's not because of you. You're great, I like being with you, you've been trying so hard to make me feel better ...

But this isn't where I should be.

I mean, I don't guess anybody else cares. It's not like it's my job or anything. No one said, "Hey, Cries, you should --"

But I care. I feel like I have a responsibility. So I need to get out of here and find a way to get back to myself and --

I'll go with you.

... what?

It's not good here anymore.

I like being a bat, but not like this.

You know we have to follow her direct orders? Sooner or later she's going to give me one I really don't want to follow.

It's time to leave.

I know some people who can help, but they'll take a while to get to.

Uh ... when would you want to go?

Any time you like. Today. Now.

It's a beautiful morning for flying.

MEANWHILE, IN GRAYTOWER ...

What have you brought me, Baroness?

Trouble, of course.

Sorry to bring him in like this, but there was no other way.

Every time we try to do anything, he recalls. Then he's back the next day making trouble again. This time Frey slugged him.

Well, he'll need to be conscious. I'll want to speak to him.

Let me change over to the cage. That will keep him here.

... Dare I ask why you have that arrangement?

That's a long story I may tell you someday. Tell me about him.

He curses sex workers. Sews their mouths shut ... and, ah, other parts.

Minor, and easily reversed, but he's very persistent. We can undo his mischief, but we don't have a way to make him stop.

Every guild of comfort in the city is asking us to deal with him. Yesterday he burst in on someone when she was with a customer.

And I'll never stop! This city is a cesspit of sin because of all the harlots you allow to roam the streets!

Peddling their cunts on every corner! Inflaming the lusts of honest men!

And some honest women, one would assume.

Attitudes like yours either come because you like to repress, or because you are repressed.

Which is it in your case, I wonder?

When you speak of inflaming lusts, whose lusts in particular are you concerned with?

Spare me your justifications, you -- ooerg!

It doesn't really matter. This should be effective either way.

Oh, come on. Doesn't that feel good? Letting it grow so big, bursting out like that?

You're clearly a small-minded man, so all I'm doing is letting the rest of you be as small as it should be.

It will improve your focus.

Find someone who will put him to frequent use.

It'll be a much more constructive punishment that way.

... I'll see what I can do.

SOMEWHERE IN THE HILL COUNTRY.



Come on, Thru!

Gella ...
-- hpp --

We lost them.
They're way behind us.

That's not it,
hamhead!

Those trolls are headed
straight for this village.
We have to warn them.

Don't hear any
yelling ... I guess
that's good ... Means
they have no idea
what's coming their
way though ...



... or, OK,
strike that.



gurb!



hrgh

We've got
to get her out
of that --

Wait!!



Good. Make
another circle to see if
there's anybody you
missed.

You goblins, I
think, annoy me
more than any of
the others.

You want to be
monsters ...
but not really.

You sort of want to
be orcs, but you won't go
the distance, because you
also want to be cute.

The one inside's
done, so if there aren't
any more, that leaves this
one here and the one you
just spat on.

And keep your eye out
for the main force. They
should be pretty close.



You can't be a
monster and cute.

nglrrh!

Oh, I'm sorry.
Let me wipe off
your face.

I'm going to help you
out. You're going to be a real
monster now. You're going to be a
troll, and serve me. How does
that sound?

Are you kidding?
I don't want to be a troll!
Trolls are ugly and dumb!

Well, that's true.

But if you don't want to be a troll, I'll
have to change you into something
even uglier and dumber.



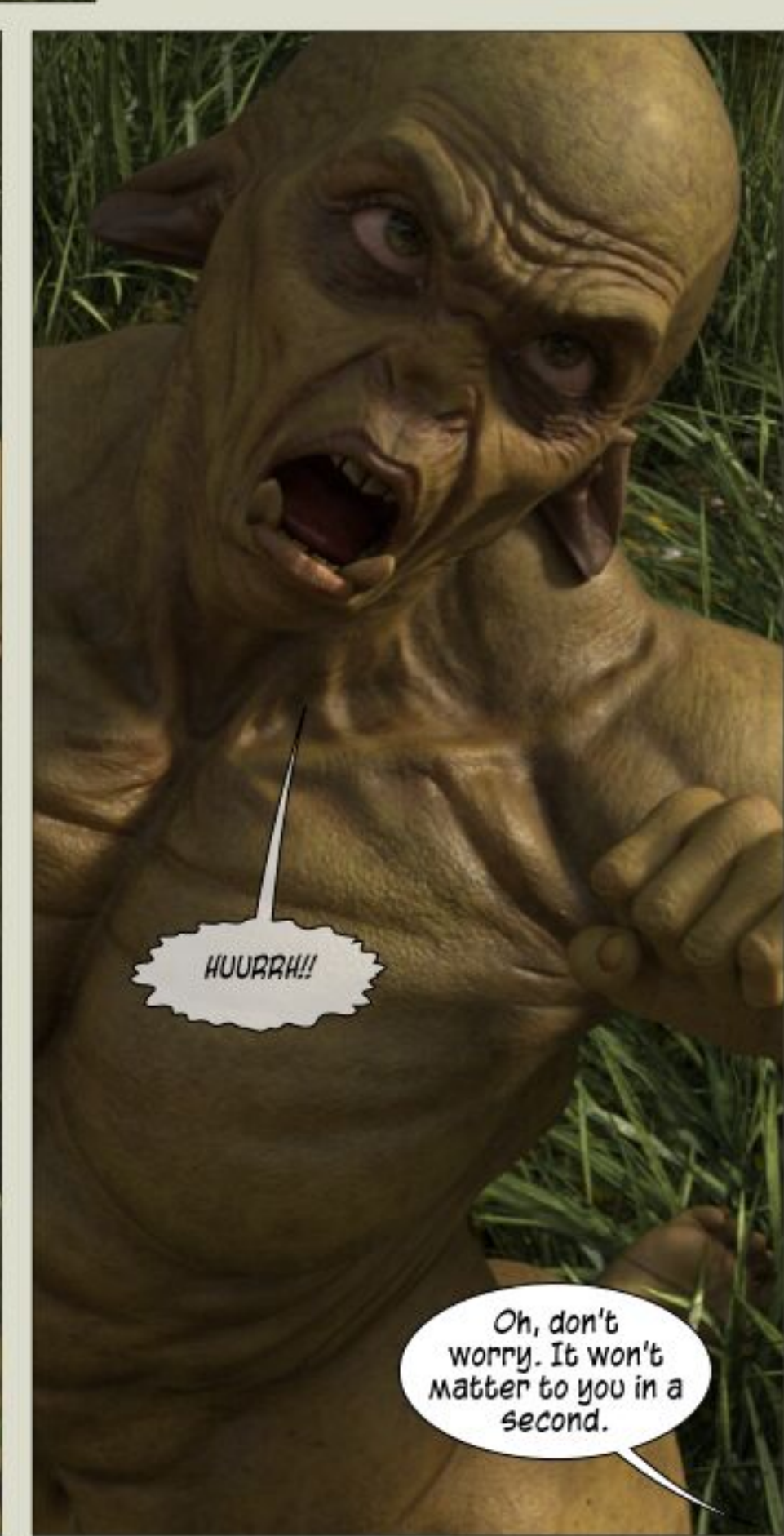
But --
I ... uh ...

That sounds
like a "yes."



... wuuuh!

See, you've made it all
the way up to 'orc' already.
Why do you goblins like to be
tiny, anyway? Isn't it
better to be enormous?



HUURAH!!

Oh, don't
worry. It won't
matter to you in a
second.



HUUURUH?

There we go.
Stand up and wait
over there with the
other recruits. We'll
get you outpitted
shortly.



OK, bad.

See why I didn't want to rush in?

We can't save them. We need to turn around and sneak out of here and try to find some help.



Shit.



... didn't know flying was going to be this fast.

I figured six days to get there on foot, so maybe four on horseback ... but we could almost do it in three!

Just so long as you know where you're going.

Hey, what's happening down there?



Crosswinds clan, huh? I think I've already gotten some of you. Not sure.

STAY DOWN!

Hard to tell once they're trolls. And they probably don't remember.

You're a monster!

Yes, I am. I'm a real monster. Not like you Prouds.

Soon the monsters are going to own the yards. And I'm going to own the monsters.

And just think -- I'm giving you an opportunity to get in on it. Isn't that nice of me?

We're not joining your army!



Oh, yes, you are.

If you've got any sense at all, you'll serve me as a troll. That's the good way. You'll get a better life out of it than you think.



But if you don't want that, I'll make you into something worse, and you'll serve me anyway.

A taugharn, maybe, like this fellow here. We can use a few more of those. Of course, they're not smart enough to do anything but move heavy things and Puck, but if that's what you're into ...



OK. Fine.

But we're going to get out of this one day! And then you're going to pay for it!

I very much doubt either of those things.



OK, everyone, into formation!

We march south!

We've got to go back.



What? No, we don't!

They're going to be headed straight for the castle! We have to warn her!

Pleek, I don't care if the trolls get her!

Neither do I! But what about the other bats? What about the grimlins? If she can't put up defenses of some kind ... do they deserve this?

-- Sigh -- All right.



HM.

... Well, I don't think it'll make any real difference.

FAR SOUTH OF THE PREVIOUS SCENE,
IN THE DESERT ...



Thiss iss
ssuch a wasste
of time.



Orderss are
orderss. And they
ssaid there were
ssightingsss.

There iss
nothing out here
and you know it.

Even sso ...
do you want to go
back to Pliss and
ssay --

-- huh.



What?

Thought I ssaw
ssomething. Out of the
corner of My eye. But
it'ss gone now.

We've been
out here too long.
You're sseeing
thingsss.



-- What??

yuahh!

hrrh!



We can't bring
them in. Not
without a cart.

No.
We'll have to leave
them here.

But we should get
back and tell her right
away. She'll want to know.
She's been wondering
when they'd try to
spread north.

THE VIOLET LADY'S CASTLE.



Oh, now, what have
you brought me?

It had
better be
something
interesting.



You're going to have to
speak for yourself, you know.
They don't.



My name is
Stura, milady.

I'm housemaid to a
woman in Graytower they call
the pale lady. I guess you've
heard of her.

I've heard
nothing. My only
news of the world
comes from visitors.
And I usually don't let
them keep their voices
long enough to tell
me any of it.

Well, this is
someone you should
know about. She's very
powerful and probably
a danger to you.

But I have
information you could
use to avoid that.



Hmm, so ...
this is a negotiation?
What do you want?

You're
holding someone
who's very
important to me. I
want to buy her
release.

I see.

Bats!
Clear out.

You, approach me.

And kneel.



My second favorite
position for a human. The
only better one would be if
you lifted your head a little
and put your face
between my legs.

We may come to
that yet. We'll see.

I hope you
realize don't have
much bargaining
power. You could
leave, of course.
Or try to.

Here's what we'll
do: You'll tell me
what you know.

Then I'll decide
whether it's good
enough to buy you
anything.



BACK TO THE YARDS ...



IN THE COBRA QUEEN'S TEMPLE
(OR PALACE, OR WHATEVER IT IS).

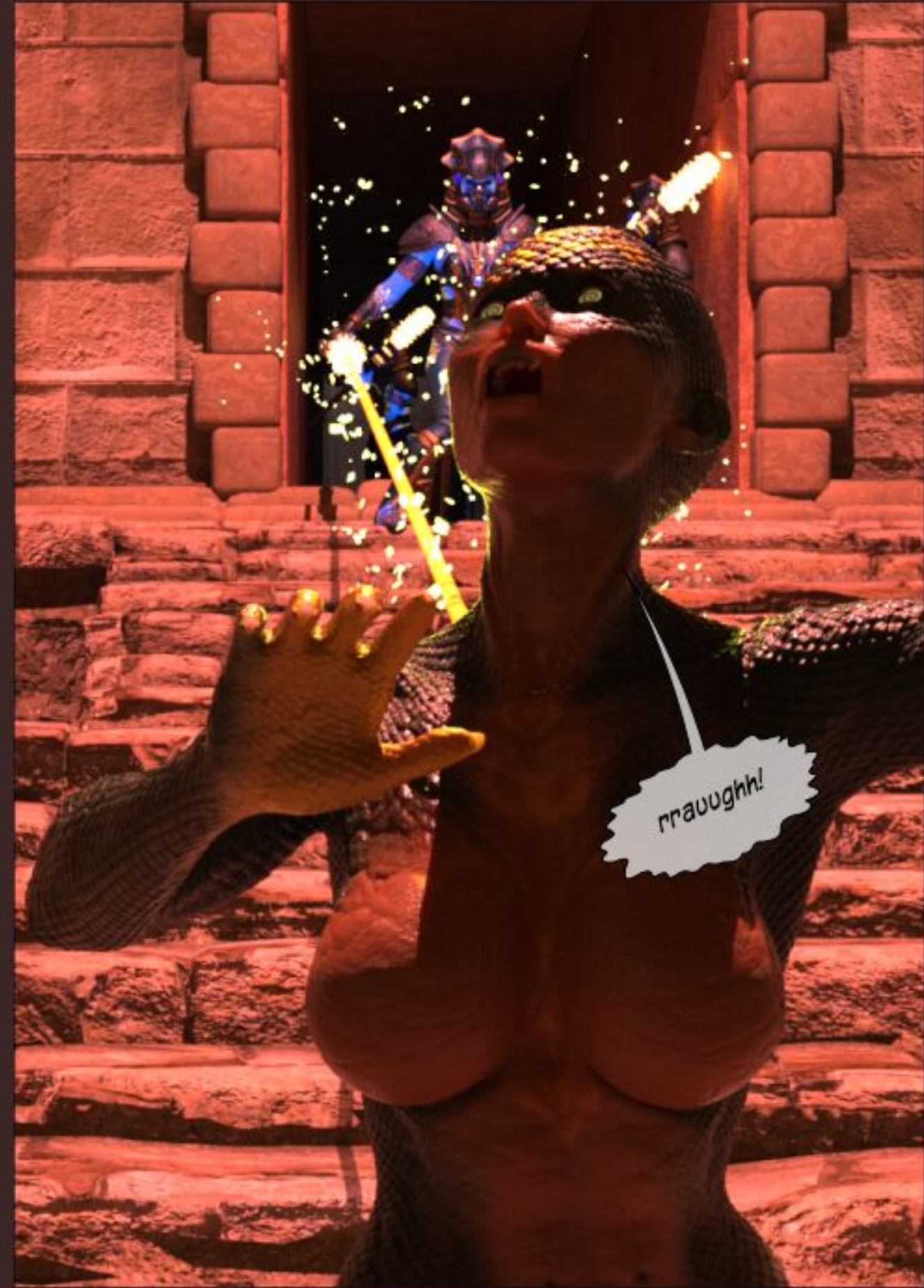


Look, it'ss what ssshe
wants. Are you going to
argue with her?

No!
But where are we going
to get the people? We've
run out of places to
recruit ...

Pliss!!

We're
being
attacked!
ssome people I
don't --



mraughh!



YOW!

Everyone get
to the inner
court! Barricade
yourselves!

I have to go
tell the
Mistress!



Pliss, what --?

We're being invaded!

By ssome blue
people. I've never sseen
them before. They're
sshooting us down right
and left!

You're going to
have to --



-- AAUGHH!



You know this is gonna
have to be you. I can't do
anything but bite them.

Uh-huh.



Hope you like
puppies!
hee hee hee



Huh?
Didn't work??



They're under
protection stronger than
anything you can do.

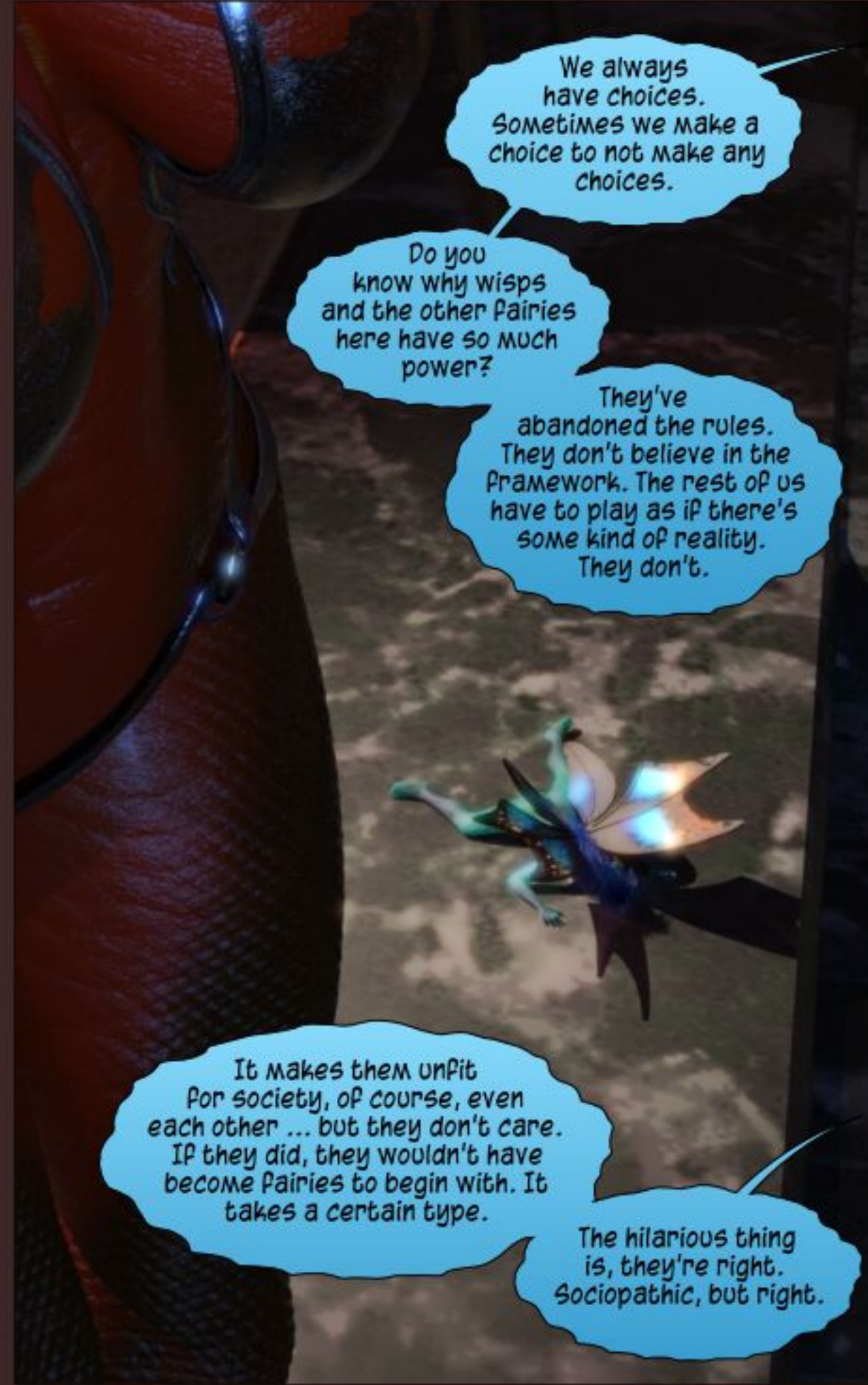
WUAAAAH!



Hm.
You're not the cobra.
You're just pretending
to be. Why?

... I wasn't
given a choice.

The wisp is holding my
friends hostage as animals.



We always
have choices.
Sometimes we make a
choice to not make any
choices.

Do you
know why wisps
and the other Pairies
here have so much
power?

They've
abandoned the rules.
They don't believe in the
Framework. The rest of us
have to play as if there's
some kind of reality.
They don't.

It makes them unFit
for society, of course, even
each other ... but they don't care.
If they did, they wouldn't have
become Pairies to begin with. It
takes a certain type.

The hilarious thing
is, they're right.
Sociopathic, but right.



I want to see
what you really
look like.



HHMM.

Look, all I wanted to do was learn to control my weird dreams ...

... and I got turned into a Gaja and then tossed into a situation that wasn't mine, and then I was under the cobra queen's thumb, and I got changed *again*, and then I was under the wisp's thumb ...

I'm tired of it. I'm tired of being pushed around and used --

But are you really?

Again, we make choices. Going where the tide throws you is always a choice.



You follow reason, but you have no direction.

She has a direction, but no reason.

In other words, she's deranged and you're aimless.

... er ...



I have an idea.



It has to fall apart, you know. It has to all fall apart.

Everyone has to admit that none of it means anything. It needs to crumble. All of it.

Your problem is you don't have a purpose. I'm going to give you one.



It won't be *your* purpose, but I think you'll like it.

Besides, you don't *actually* hate being pushed around, or you'd fight back once in a while.



And now you'll have the power to free your friends, so you can stop using them as an --

Ah, there she is!



hss

I'll just take her with me. It'll be for the best.



I'll be keeping an eye on you.

Have fun. Don't disappoint me.

AND BACK IN HIGHPOINT ...



... it's not just the waiting, it's the lack of information.

Even if we're right about what's stopping Corven, we have no idea why Scholz hasn't moved, and our best source doesn't --

Lady Thallium! Lady Thallium!!



Why, speak of the devil. Jilly? Are you all right?

I'm sorry I'm not in uniform, milady. I couldn't stop to. I had to run here ...

I can't go back now! It's too late ... I think they saw me getting away ...

Jilly, take a deep breath. It's all right. What's happened?



Lady Scholz is attacking! All her people are on the move.

Lady Thallium, they're headed this way!!

NEXT: **HIGHS and LOWS**