



(EVER NOTICE HOW WHENEVER WE SAY THAT, IT MEANS SOMETHING WEIRD IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN?)



You don't really believe it's love.
He comes to your house every day and you tell yourself it's love, but you know better.
You're a liar.

What??
Who are you? What is your problem?

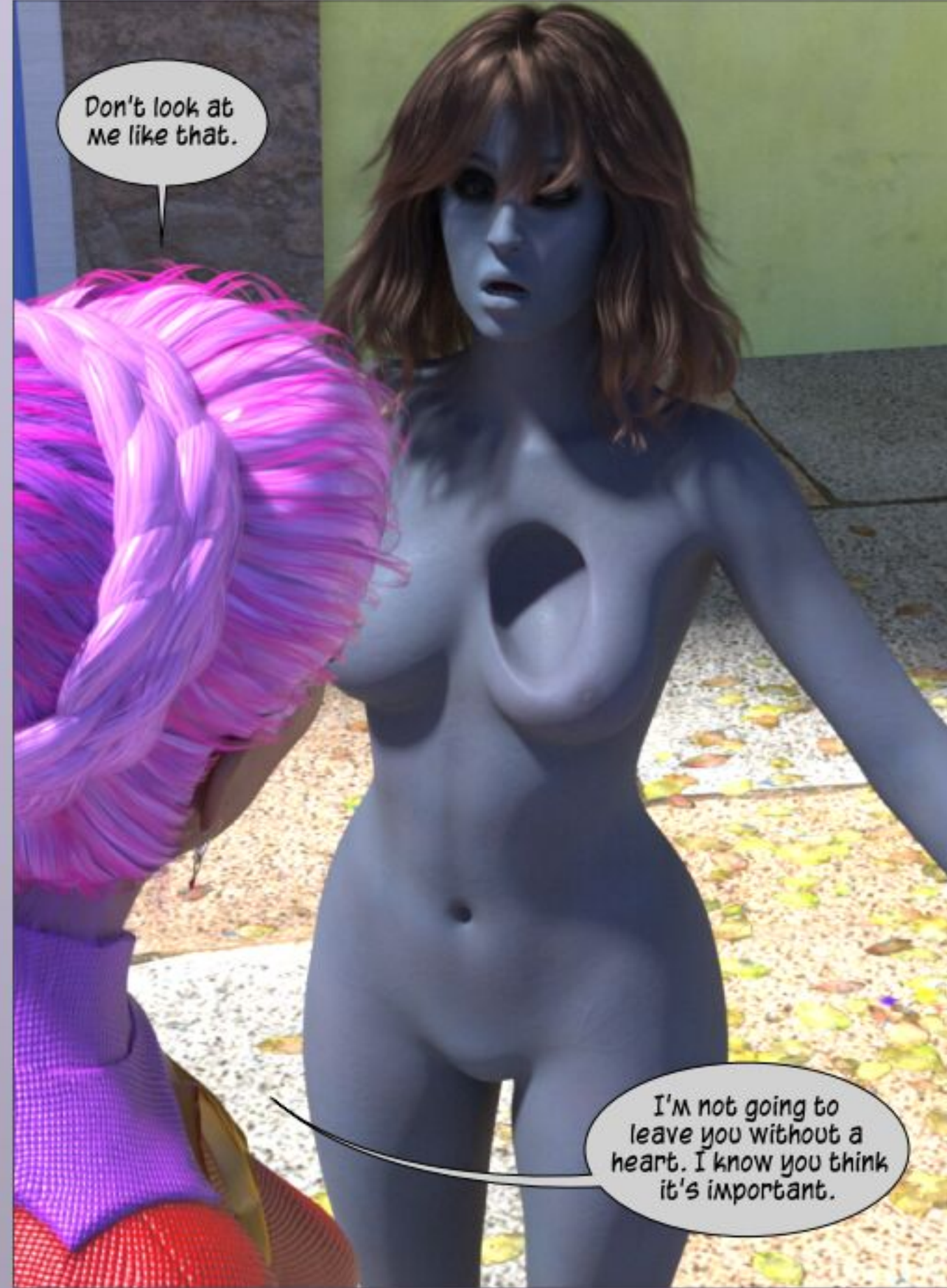


AAAAGHH!

You need different lies.



Only time your heart's ever burned for anything.



Don't look at me like that.

I'm not going to leave you without a heart. I know you think it's important.



This will help. Or, no, it won't really help, but it'll be better.



You can't learn -- none of you can -- so you might as well make more obvious mistakes.



That way maybe someone else will learn.

Go on. Find a better lie.



I'm finally here! Sorry, it took longer than I thought to --

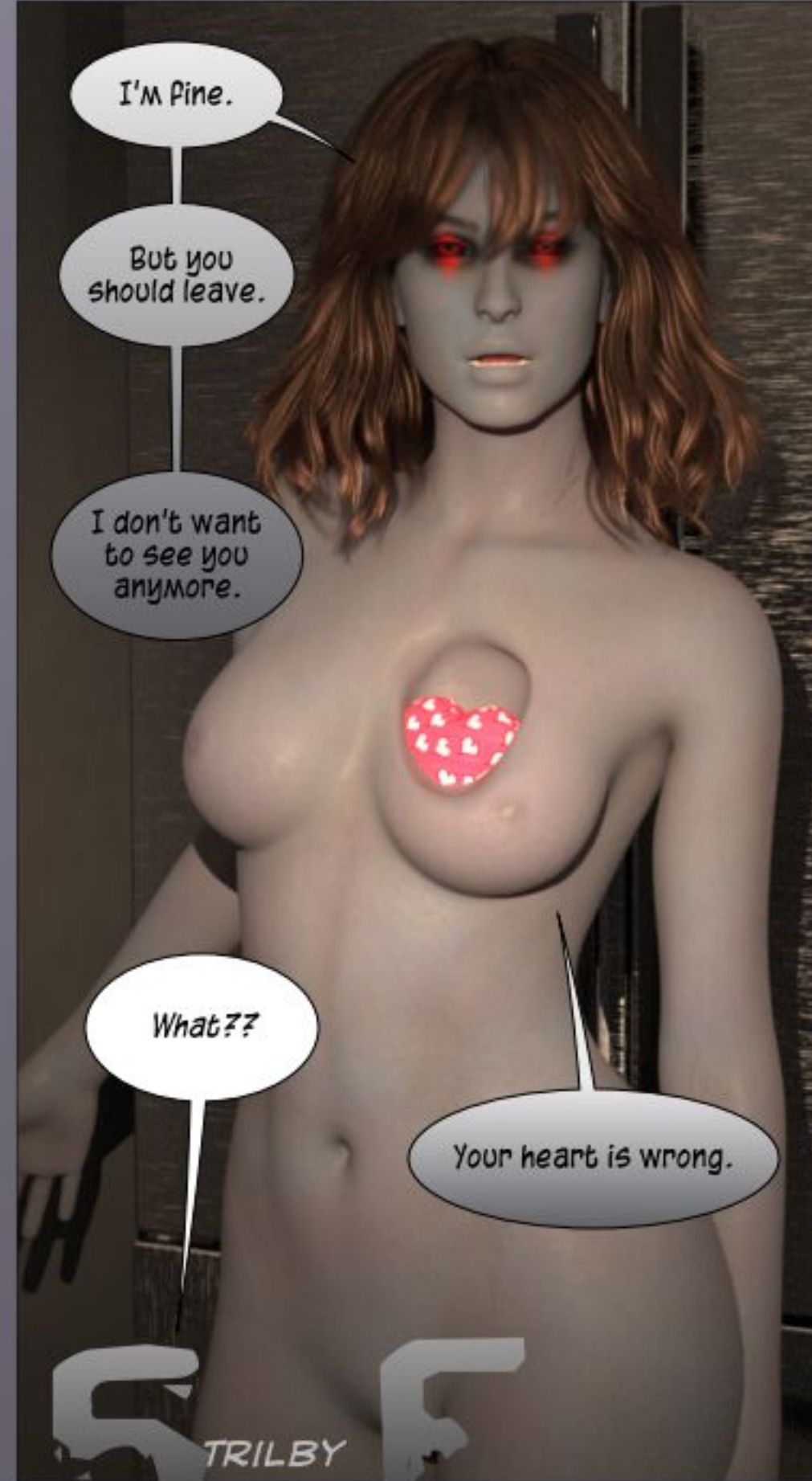
-- uh ... Are you OK?



I'm Pine. Why?

Well ... you're walking around naked, which --

-- and, uh, you're kind of ... gray.



I'm Pine.

But you should leave.

I don't want to see you anymore.

What??

Your heart is wrong.

THE YARDS.

ONE NICE THING ABOUT HORSES IN SLEEP IS THEY ARE SIMULATIONS (WELL, MOST OF THEM), SO DON'T GET TIRED. IT'S YOUR ENDURANCE, NOT THE HORSE'S, YOU NEED TO WORRY ABOUT.

BY PUSHING HERSELF POSSIBLY A LITTLE HARDER THAN WAS SENSIBLE, NAOMI HAS MANAGED TO REACH THE VIOLET LADY'S CASTLE IN FIVE DAYS.

SHE MAY HAVE COME AT A BAD TIME, THOUGH.

hmm.



Harder!!

We'll take the whole thing down if we have to, but we will get in there!



There you are! Do you know how hard it is to track all of you idiotic creatures down, when you're running all over the place in a panic like this?

You're so useless. Thank goodness I found this ... I suppose she was keeping it in case something like this ever happened ...



Hold still, would you?



Much more useful. And I think you're the last ones. I lose count of you, you know.

Now go keep those trolls out.



And you two are just standing around? Don't you know we're under attack?

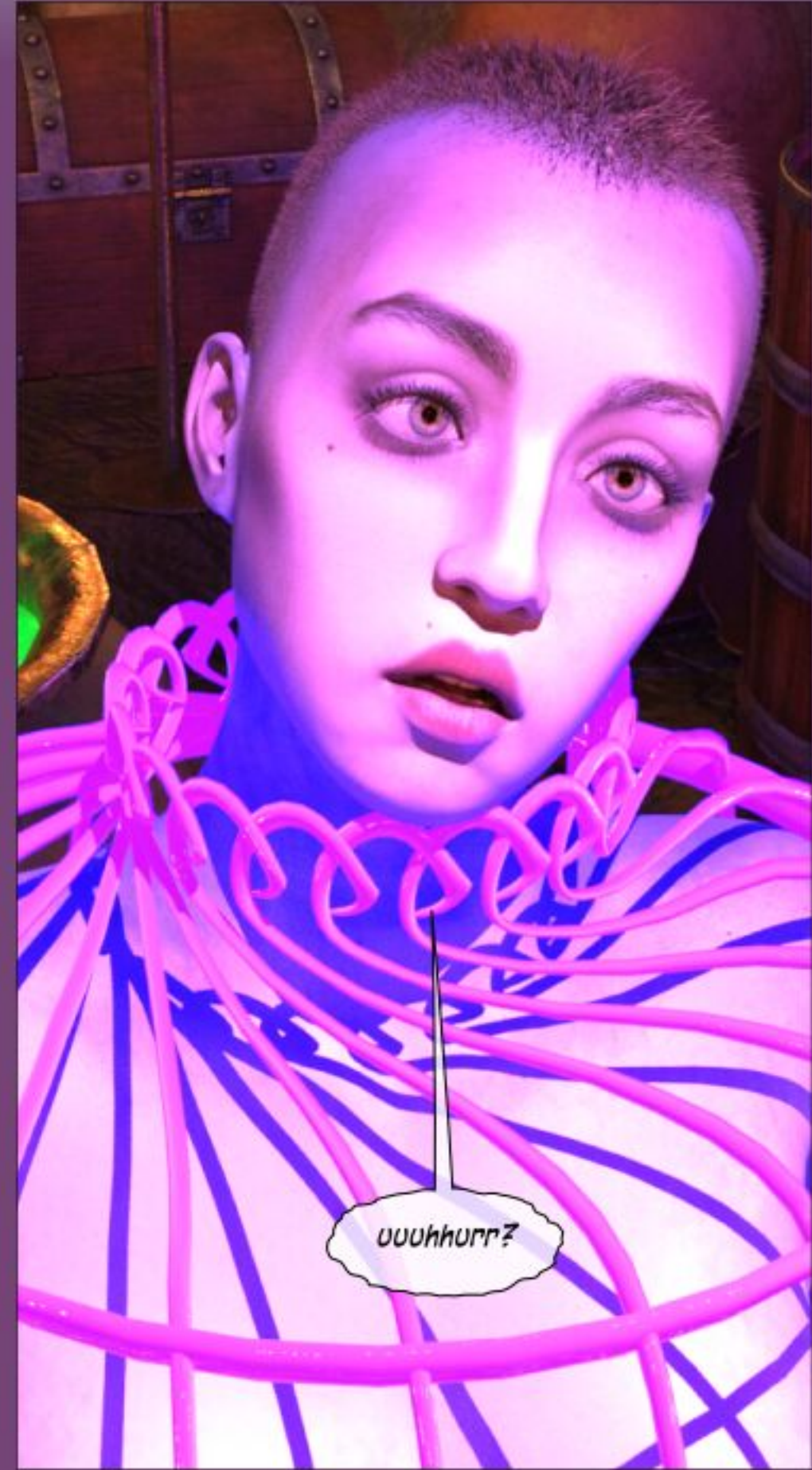
Go do something useful! Try to put out those fires! Or make sure the grimsins stay focused! Or divebomb those trolls. I don't know. Something.



We are so f*cked.



I can't waste any more time! You've got to help me! I don't know what's wrong with you, but you need to snap out of it!



uuuhurr?



AAAAH!!

If this is an act ... no, no, I don't think it's an act.

You're supposed to be one of the most powerful witches in the Yards! What is going on? What happened to you?



All right, back away. She and I are leaving right now.

Is that what you think?



Don't even.

rrruuhg!



Not doing it, huh? In real deep.

OK, come on. We'll get you out and then we'll work on that.

uruhh?

No, wait!

SKREEE!



KREEE!

SREEEK!

You know I can't --

-- oh no.

Did she breach? Is she in the inner keep?

KREEE!



Damn.

All right. Take her to the stainless tower. Quickly! And stand guard there!

Hey! Now, listen ...

No, you listen. You want her, you can have her -- after we get those trolls out of here. Honestly, if we can do that, I don't need her.

I'm not interested in your problems. The trolls can have this place for all I care.

You are interested, because if we overrun, they take her, and me, and you, and everybody.

And I'm out of tricks, so I hope you're as powerful as you look.

OFFICE OF THE DATA ARCHIVIST, SOMEWHERE IN SERENITY ...



... though maybe not for much longer.

Now that the Souk is stabilized, I may ask to move it there. Neutrality is very important to me.

that isn't neutral, though?

you'd just be changing from serene barker's control to leyna's ... and serille's ...

I don't think Serille would notice, much less care. And Leyna ... well, if I get to have a preference ...

HMM.

Speak of the devil.



What an unpleasant surprise.

Is she an unexpected visitor, or are you another person who's getting all chummy with this corrupt artifact and not telling me?

That's uncharacteristically rude of you.

Also, I can socialize with whomever I want. I don't need your permission.

And she's neither corrupt nor an artifact, for the record.



I'm trying to help people!

Oh, you are? Great. Tell me where Ruby is.

I don't know.



Bullshit.

From rude to downright offensive. What's eating you today?

I should have realized a long time ago. Of course you know where she is. You have all the data. But you don't want to tell me, for some reason I'm sure you think is justifiable, but I don't. I don't even care what it is. There's no justification.



I may have to rethink what I was just telling her about my preferences, if this is how you're going to behave. I don't think Serene would storm in here, demand capitulation, and call me a liar to boot.

She would if it were important enough to her. Why does nobody but me care about getting Ruby back?

Plenty of people do, and you know it. They just don't have the same priorities.

At any rate, we're not lying to you. Ruby is not Pindable ... as that entity. Which means she is either not in sleep, which I doubt, or she's very literally not herself right now. So deep in some other assumed identity that it pools the system. We've seen it before. You've seen it personally, with Nathaniel Barker.



So you're actually no help at all.

UnPair. And, again, rude.

I know something I can help with, or something you can help me with, I guess. Both.

there's a woman. her name is fane. she's stuck in the dark place.

Mhm. Did you put her there?

Leyna! Do not make me kick your ass.

she fell out while the souk was coming apart. tried to use a portal that was breaking. I didn't do any of that.

THIS HAPPENED IN #50.



i was going to get ruby to get her out ... but ruby isn't here and the woman has been stuck there for a long time ... i don't think it's good for her ...

she moves around, but i can find her ...

You want me to go into interspace. On your say-so.

If this were malicious, Leyna, don't you think there'd be easier ways?



She's a virus. Who knows how she thinks.

i am not a virus!

i had a virus.

-- sigh --

... I'll think about it.



she really doesn't want to leave ruby alone ... no matter how many hints you give her ...

I don't give "hints." I have no idea what you mean.

you're messing with me. your sense of humor is kind of tricky, but i'm getting there.

you just told her that ruby isn't ruby right now. that's a hint.

you didn't tell her you have a really good guess who ruby is.

Neither did you.

ELSEWHERE IN SERENITY ...



You think it's love, don't you?

YAAAAH!



hrrk

Well, it's not. And it's insulting.

HEY!!



I wasn't going to leave you out, don't worry.



Now, let's see.



GET AWAY FROM ME!

YOU MONSTER!!

There we go. Carry on.

BACK IN THE YARDS, THE BATTLE RAGES ... SLOWLY.
(NEITHER THE TROLLS NOR THE WAR GRIMLINS ARE FAST ON THEIR FEET.)



HRGH!



AUUHAAAA



All right, clear out! All of you!

WURUUH!



SOMETIMES HAVING READ WHAT CAME BEFORE DOESN'T HELP MUCH.

hrgk!

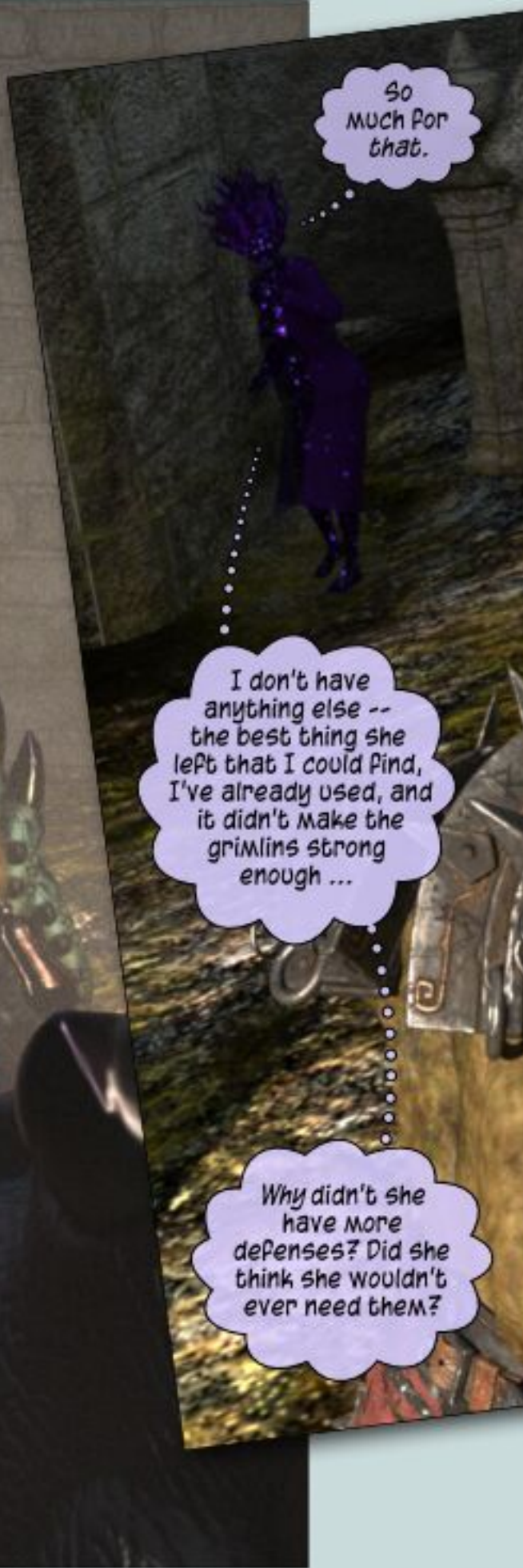
FOR EXAMPLE, WE SAW THIS CREATURE WITH THE NASTY SPIT IN #56, BUT WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHO OR WHAT SHE IS.



urgh ...



AAIEEGH!



So much Por that.

I don't have anything else -- the best thing she left that I could find, I've already used, and it didn't make the grimlins strong enough ...

Why didn't she have more defenses? Did she think she wouldn't ever need them?



You! Carry me to the stairless tower. Now!

Hm.

... OH, WAIT, THERE SHE IS.



Hey! Bat!

Don't you fly away, now, or I'll be pissed.

More creatures who want to be monsters but also want to be cute.

You can't be a monster and cute.



There. Now you're a monster.

HRGHK!

I have a job Por you.





Damn it, what does it take?
I know you're in there!
You're the pale lady of Graytower!

You've got to come back
to yourself! She's going to
overrun us --



AAAAA!

Pale lady, huh?
I've heard some
interesting rumors.

And I suppose
you think she's
going to --

-- wait a minute.

Something
here doesn't
smell right.



wauuugh!

Ah!
I knew I smelled
goblin.

Now, how long has
this been going on? And
what did you do with the
real violet lady?

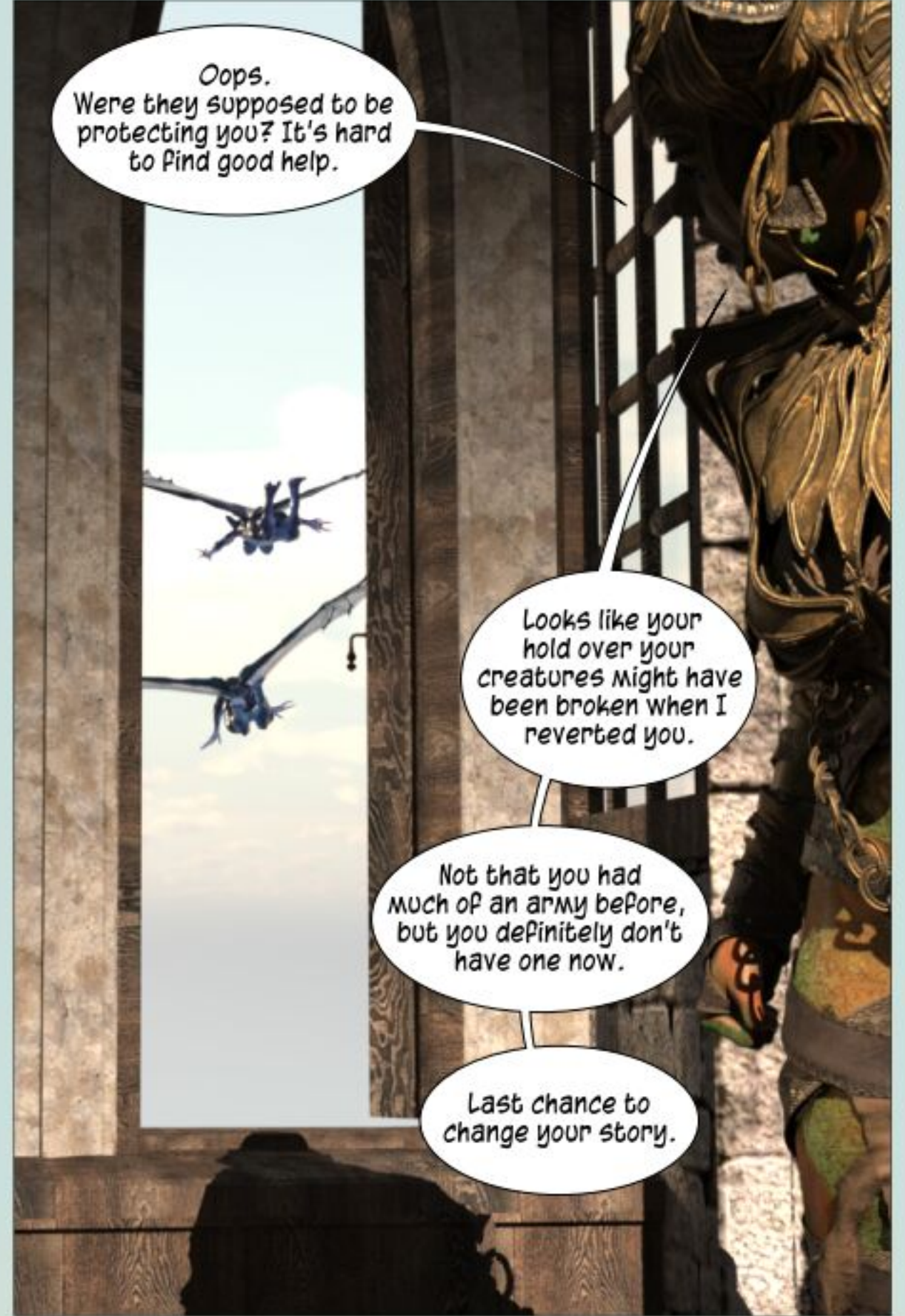


I -- I've
always been
the violet lady! I
just -- it was
better to look
human --

You should be very
careful what you choose
to claim. You see, the real
violet lady is not going to
enjoy what I plan to do
with her.

Are you sure you
want to stick to that
story?

I ...
um --



Oops.
Were they supposed to be
protecting you? It's hard
to find good help.

Looks like your
hold over your
creatures might have
been broken when I
reverted you.

Not that you had
much of an army before,
but you definitely don't
have one now.

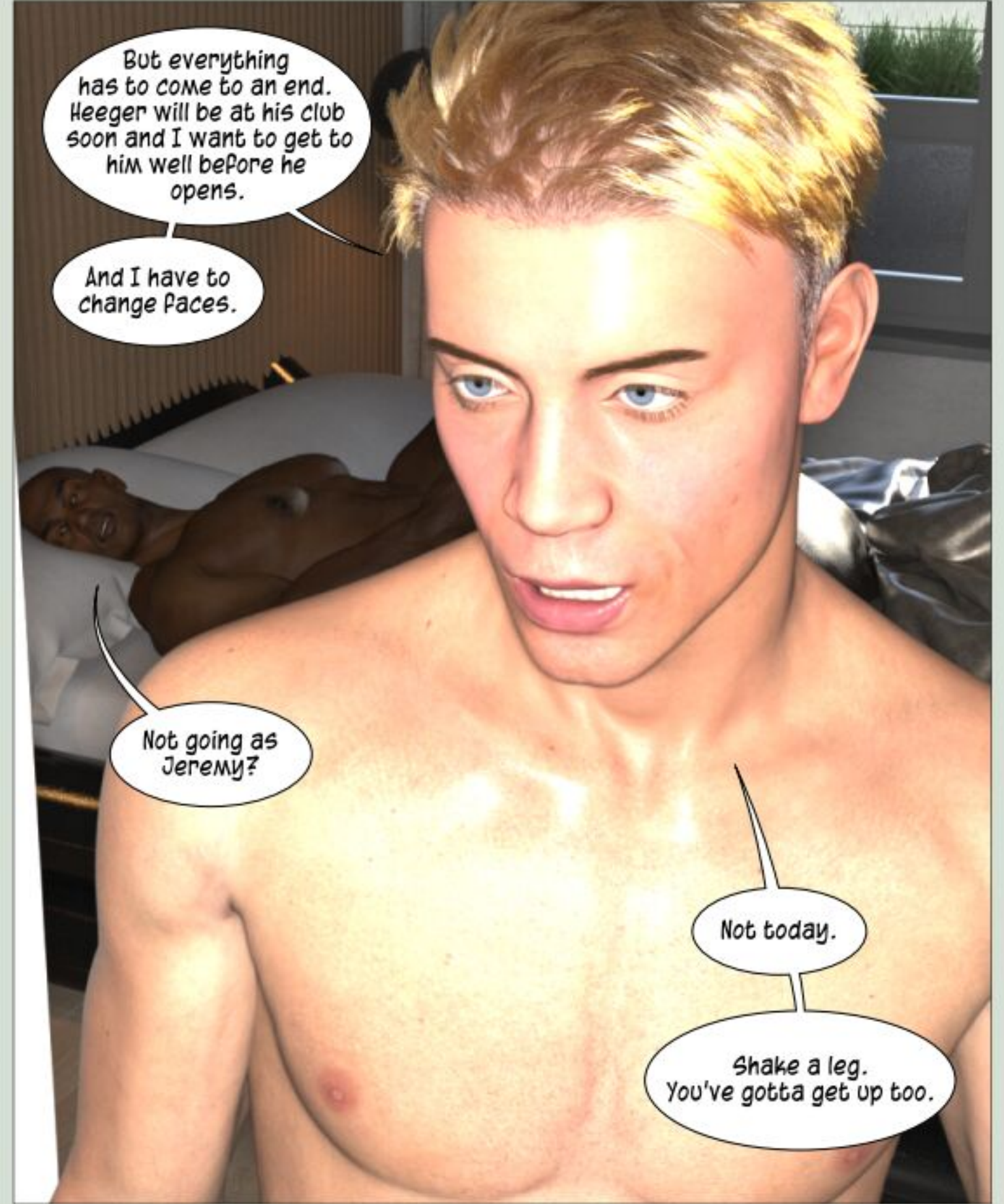
Last chance to
change your story.

SOMEWHERE IN THE COBBLES.



There is
nothing in the
world better
than sleeping
late.

Really, really,
really late.



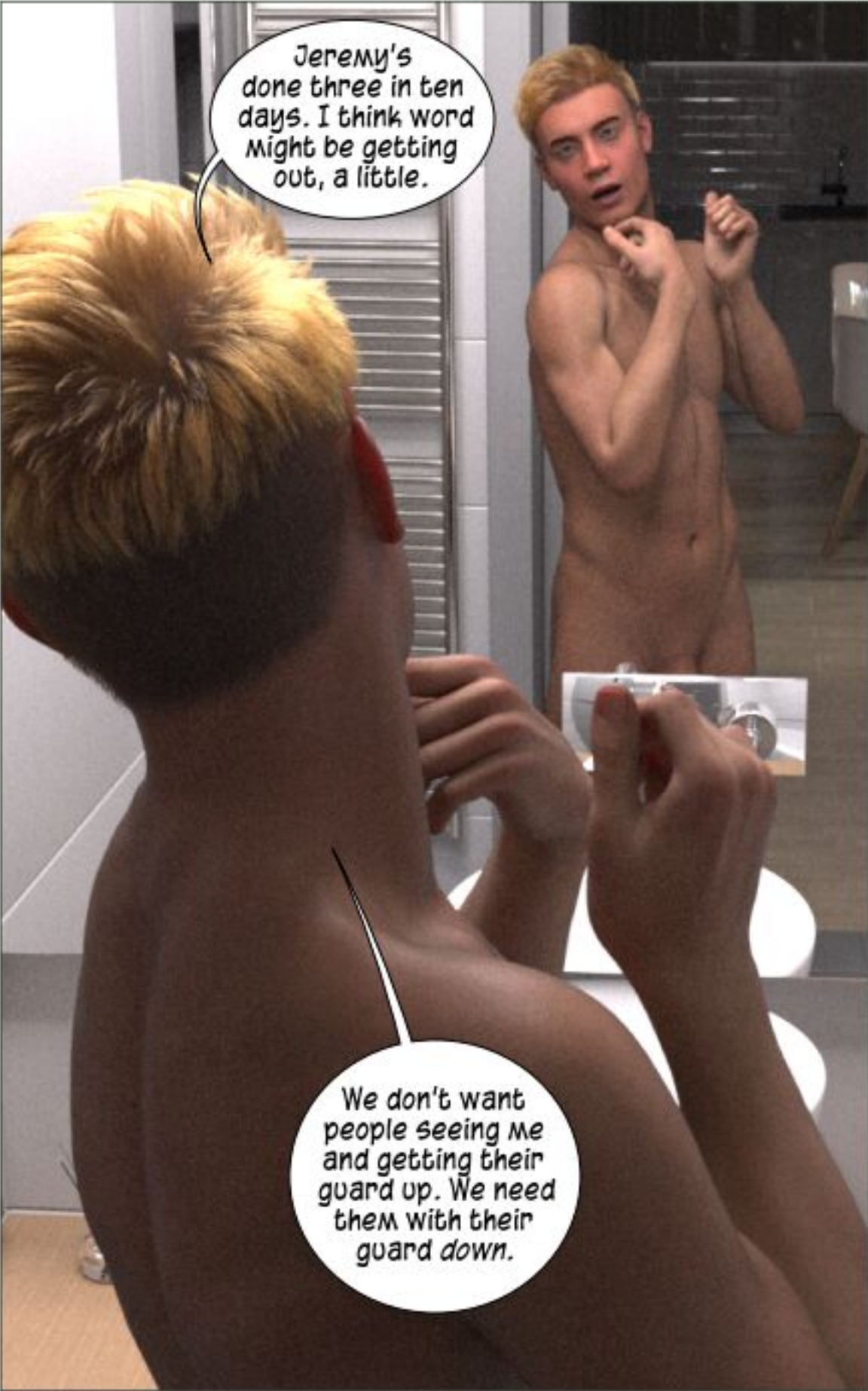
But everything
has to come to an end.
Heeger will be at his club
soon and I want to get to
him well before he
opens.

And I have to
change faces.

Not going as
Jeremy?

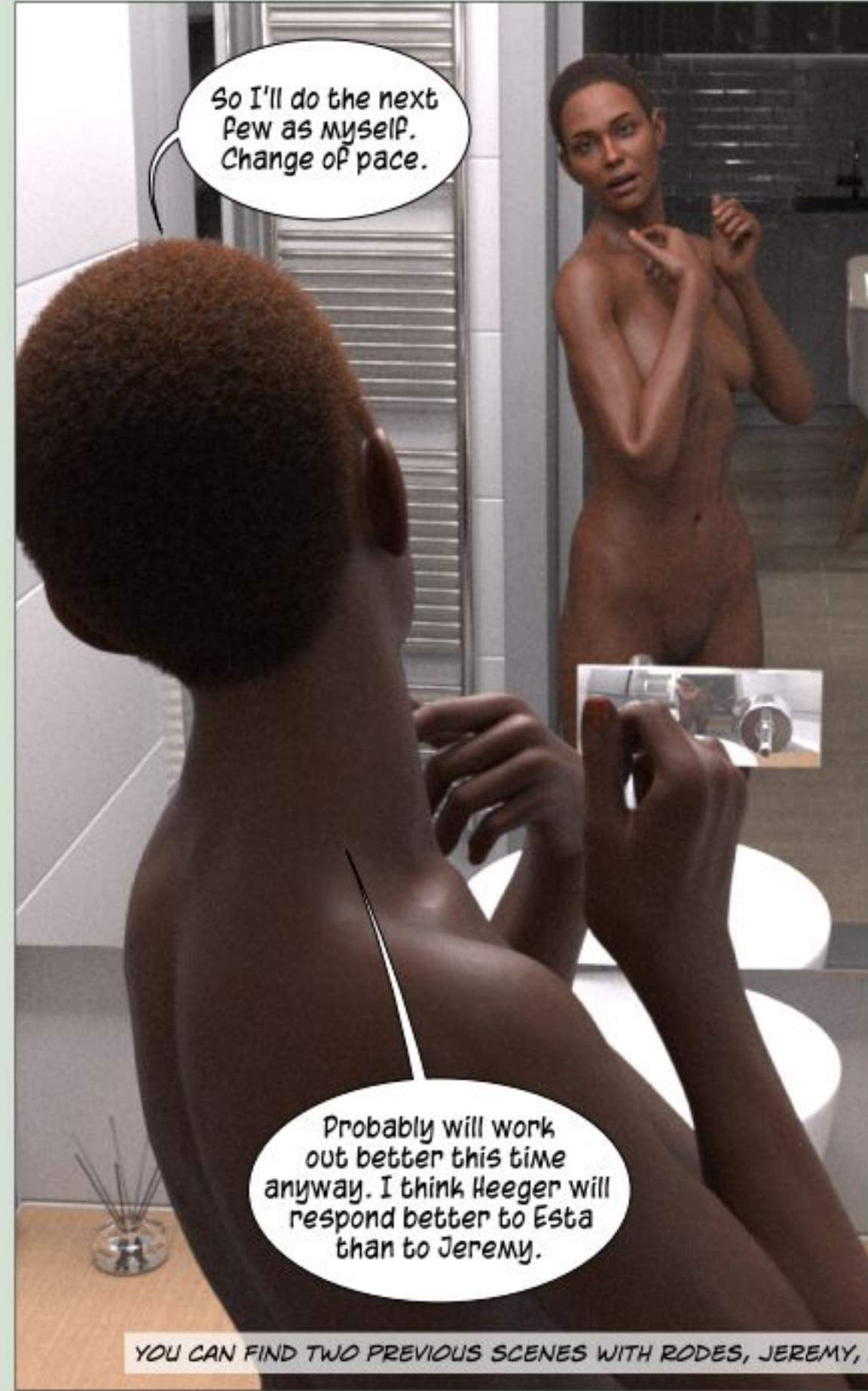
Not today.

Shake a leg.
You've gotta get up too.



Jeremy's
done three in ten
days. I think word
might be getting
out, a little.

We don't want
people seeing me
and getting their
guard up. We need
them with their
guard down.



So I'll do the next
Pew as myself.
Change of pace.

Probably will work
out better this time
anyway. I think Heeger will
respond better to Esta
than to Jeremy.



He won't know
what hit him.

Unless it's you
hitting him, but maybe
we can avoid that.

C'mon,
Rodes, move
your ass!

Want some
coffee?

YOU CAN FIND TWO PREVIOUS SCENES WITH RODES, JEREMY, AND ESTA IN #55, THOUGH THEY MAY NOT TELL YOU MUCH MORE THAN THIS ONE DOES.



Lorena!
Wait!!

I know something's wrong with you!

Let me help you!



Eh?

Ooh!



I think we should go Puck.

Definitely.



LORENA!

... you don't even know her!

Oh, for pity's sake. It's not like it's a big deal, you know.



Huh?

Any lie's just as good as any other. Why should you care? Why do you care?



Uurgh



Now you don't have to chase her anymore.

You're not her type.

BACK IN THE YARDS, WHERE EVERYONE HAS BEEN BROUGHT DOWN FROM THE TOWER ...



GONNA MAKE HER TROLL?

I was thinking taugharn. I like making the little ones into something so big. Throws their assumptions out of whack. Not going to make her anything for a bit yet, though. She may still have information I want.

Just keep an eye on her. I'll deal with her after I work on getting something useful from the pale idiot over here.

You'll never get that! I've been trying for days!

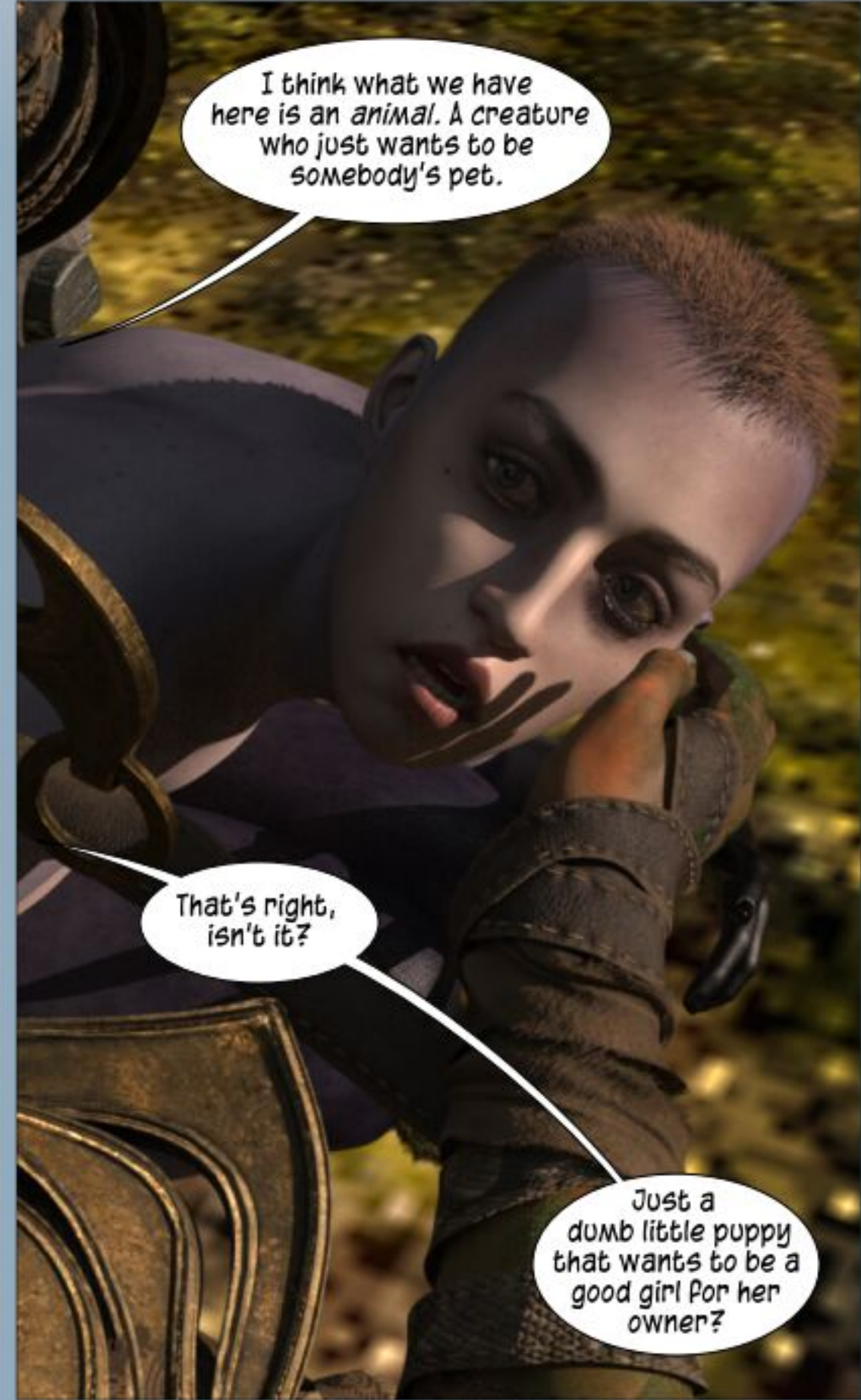


Mmm, but you're obviously incompetent.

I'm very good at communicating with stupid things.

Besides, I think you were taking the wrong approach. You were trying to wake her brain back up. I don't see why that's necessary.

I don't think she wants to wake up.



I think what we have here is an animal. A creature who just wants to be somebody's pet.

That's right, isn't it?

Just a dumb little puppy that wants to be a good girl for her owner?



Here's my problem, puppy: I can't explain to those bug things that they just joined my army until they stop fighting.

They're too involved in it to listen to me. We need to make them all stop.

Can you help me with that?



Oh.

... all right, I suppose that works.



You see, little goblin? I knew she was a good girl.

And powerful, too ... I might need her help to get them --



WAAURGH!!!



I am really really angry.

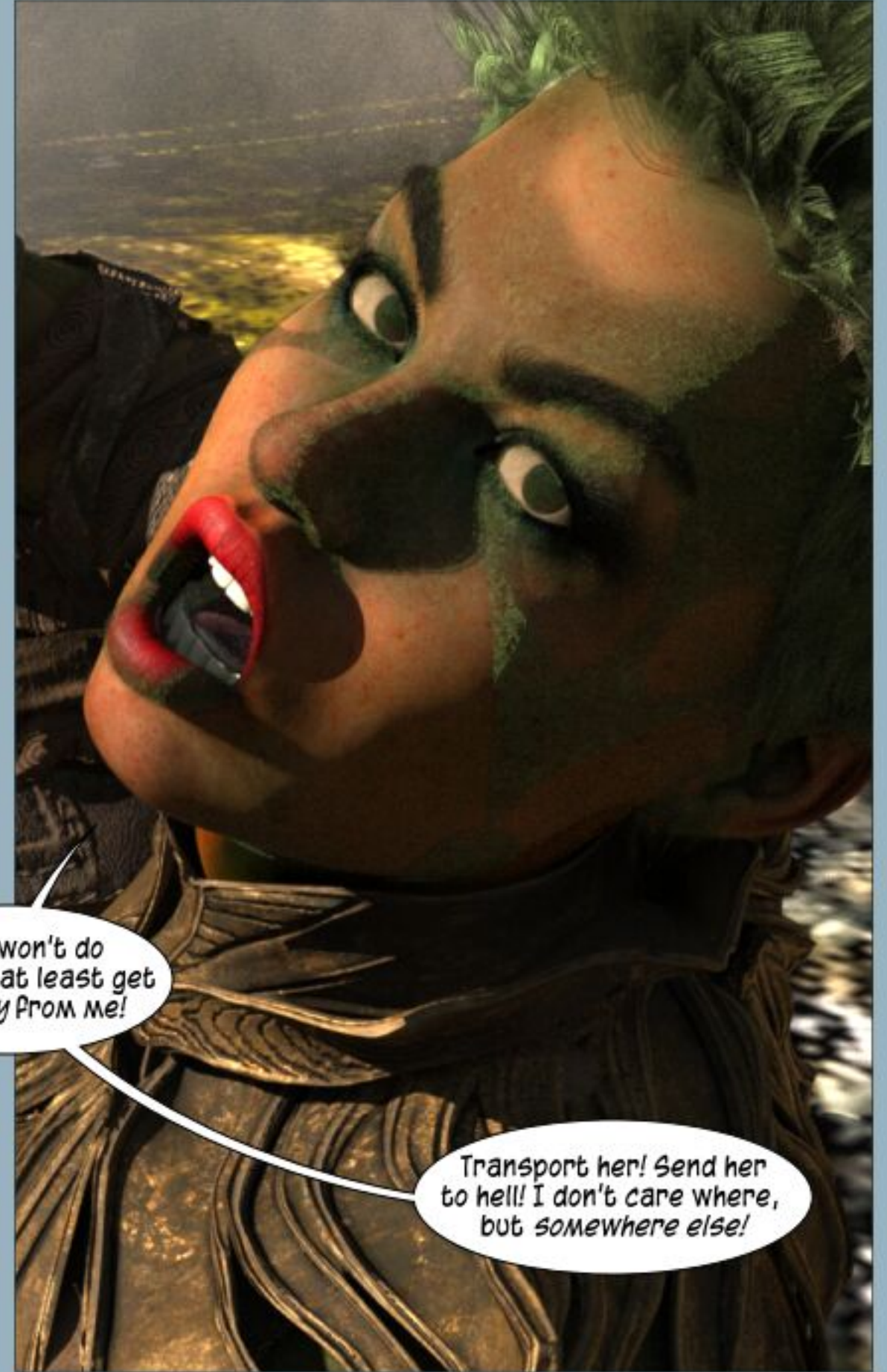
urh



And everything hurts from your trolls pounding on me, and you have three seconds to give me a really good reason not to broil you.

Turn her into something! Something harmless!

What's wrong with you? Don't you want to be a good girl?



If you won't do that, then at least get her away from me!

Transport her! Send her to hell! I don't care where, but somewhere else!



whoa



... I'm going to have to remember you're too dumb to be anything but liberal.



TWO DAYS LATER

KIRA WESTMINE IS A POPULAR ACTRESS IN A4. SHE'S BEEN INVOLVED IN OUR PECULIAR ADVENTURES, BUT AT THE TIME, SHE LOOKED LIKE SOMEBODY ELSE. LONG STORY. WE SEEM TO HAVE CAUGHT HER IN AN INTIMATE MOMENT.



ohuuuh ... Kira ... I knew you'd be good ...

I knew you'd want it ... knew you'd want it like this ... I knew ...

... don't know where they come from but --

-- oh, shit.

-- unhhhh -- ... knew you'd want me ...



They get the weirdest ideas ...



No!

Not again!!

OH, WAIT, WE'RE MISTAKEN. IGNORE WHAT WE SAID TWO PANELS AGO.

THE "LONG STORY" IS #36.



Oh ... he hasn't even noticed. His eyes are shut. -- Whew --

Not a doll ... got to get back before he does ... not a doll ...



Better ... no! Shit!!

He doesn't want to see me, he wants Kira. OK, I got this ...



oog ... there.

And just in time.

Uhhhhhhh

THIS ISN'T KIRA WESTMINE, THIS IS EELI. SHE'S A SEX WORKER WHOSE SPECIALTY IS BEING A "DUPER" -- THAT IS, TAKING ON THE APPEARANCE OF SOMEONE ELSE. EELI SPENT QUITE A WHILE HAVING BEEN INVOLUNTARILY CHANGED INTO A SEX DOLL AND HAS ONLY RECENTLY RECOVERED. APPARENTLY THAT RECOVERY WASN'T AS COMPLETE AS SHE'D LIKE.



I hope you enjoyed it!

Oh, yeah, I did. For sure.

I'll be back again soon.

Don't bet on it.

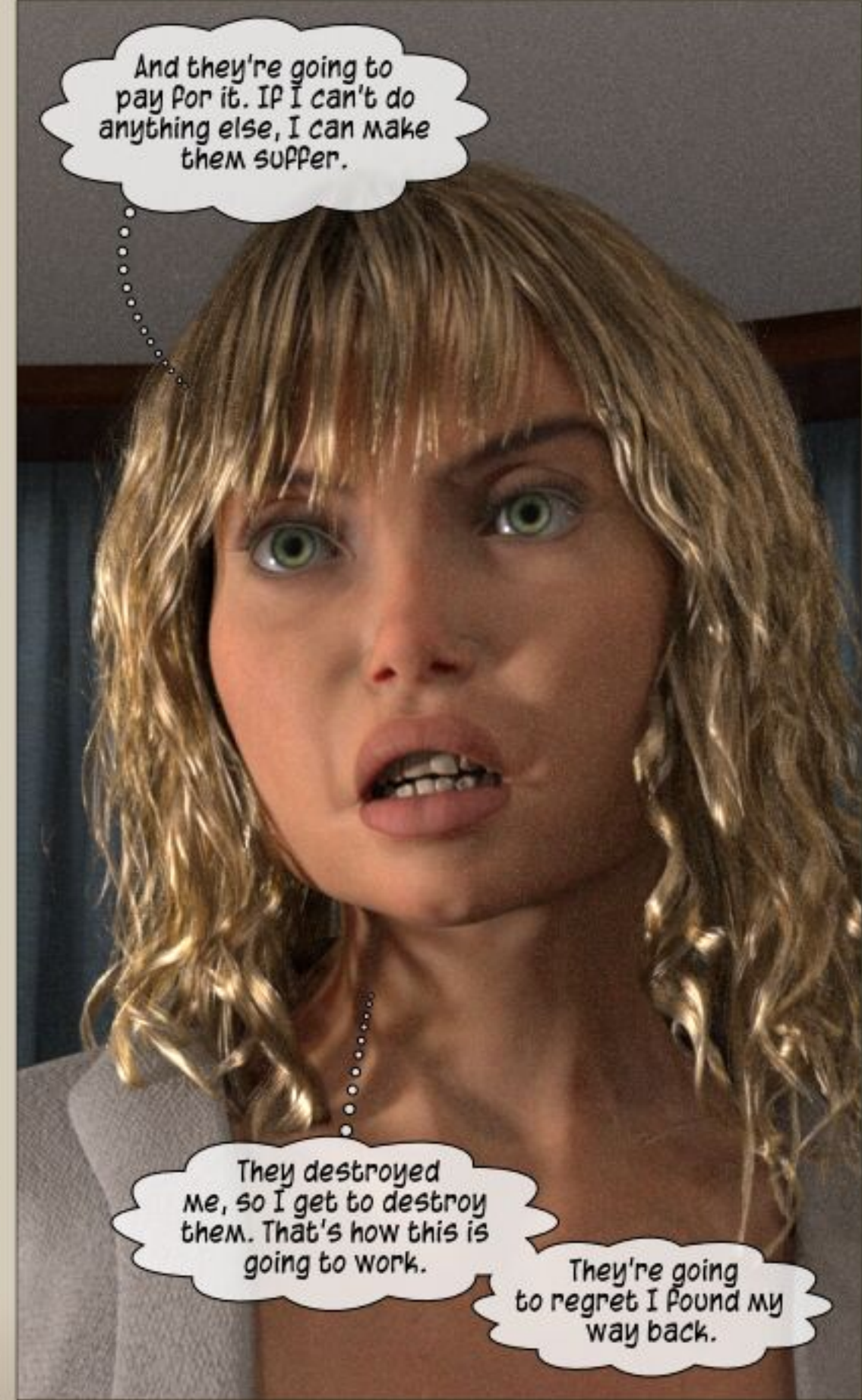


I have to face it: I'm ruined.

Three customers, and it's happened all three times. Something's happened to my brain and I don't know how to stop it.

It's OK most of the time, but as soon as I have sex ... I can't do this for a living now. I can't keep having near misses like that.

I could go back to the doctor, but what's she going to do? I don't think she can fix it. I'm destroyed.



And they're going to pay for it. If I can't do anything else, I can make them suffer.

They destroyed me, so I get to destroy them. That's how this is going to work.

They're going to regret I found my way back.

SERENITY.



Kade??

What happened to you?

Nothing. I'm Pine.

You're gray. And what's with your chest?

And you don't usually walk around nude ...

I'm allowed to look any way I like. What do you want?

You didn't show up! Remember? We were supposed to have lunch?

I wasn't interested.



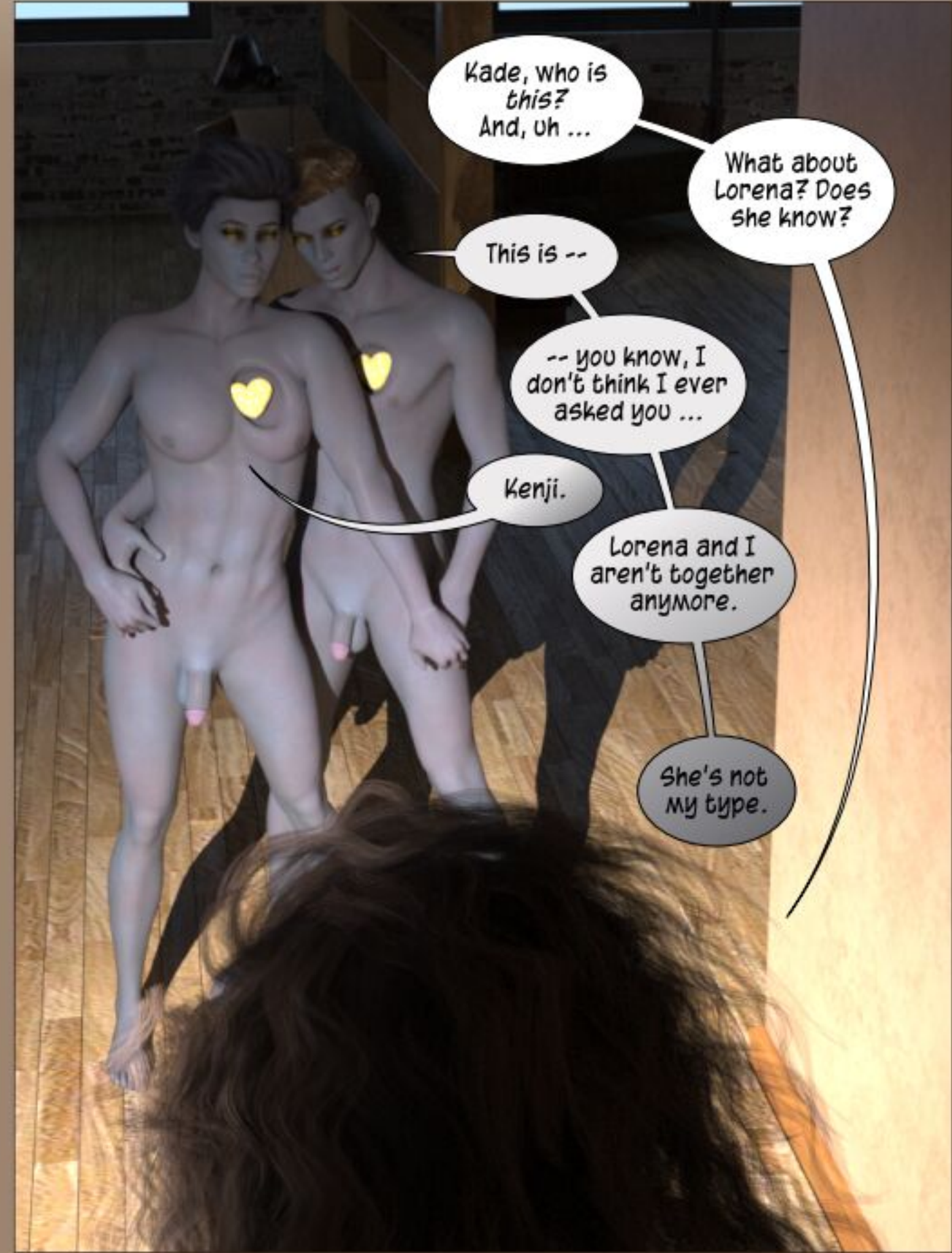
Oh, well, thanks a lot!

That's super-rude ...

I just didn't want to. Don't make a big deal about it.

You could have at least sent me a message.

What's got into you, anyway? You're being weird.



Kade, who is this? And, uh ...

What about Lorena? Does she know?

This is --

-- you know, I don't think I ever asked you ...

Kenji.

Lorena and I aren't together anymore.

She's not my type.



... and even putting all the rest of it aside, Kade's never been interested in anything with a penis!

Well, people do change sometimes ...

Sure, and if it was just that maybe I'd believe it. But he's been joined at the hip to Lorena for ages. To dump her, and start acting weird, and change up ... and then there's the way he looks ...



That's the part I'm wondering about. I've seen a couple of people who look like what you're describing, the last few days.

I figured it was some new thing ... they were all poso types, and you know how they are, they'll chase whatever they think the flavor of the week is ...

But maybe it's something else?

Is it the kind of something else we'd ... uh ... look into?

Ranza would probably be the one to answer that.



What do you think, Ranza?

I mean, I can see Kade joining whatever the latest thing is, he's like that, but ...

The other stuff -- especially dumping Lorena -- they were really serious, y'know? I just don't think he'd do that unless ... well, unless it wasn't under his control.



The trouble is, we can't prove that.

And we can only really justify handling problems we see out in the common areas. We can't go police what's happening in people's private spaces. And shouldn't.

You know, maybe it's a cult. Maybe it's a cult that doesn't always follow the rules, like the Euphorics.

We can't do anything about them except stop them from forcibly recruiting in the streets. Same here.

If we see somebody involuntarily transforming someone, then we can intervene, but not until we do. So keep your eyes open.



And speaking of that, who's coming out with me?

I guess Helane's in, because she's already started to dress. Mai?

Yeah, I was just about to get my suit.

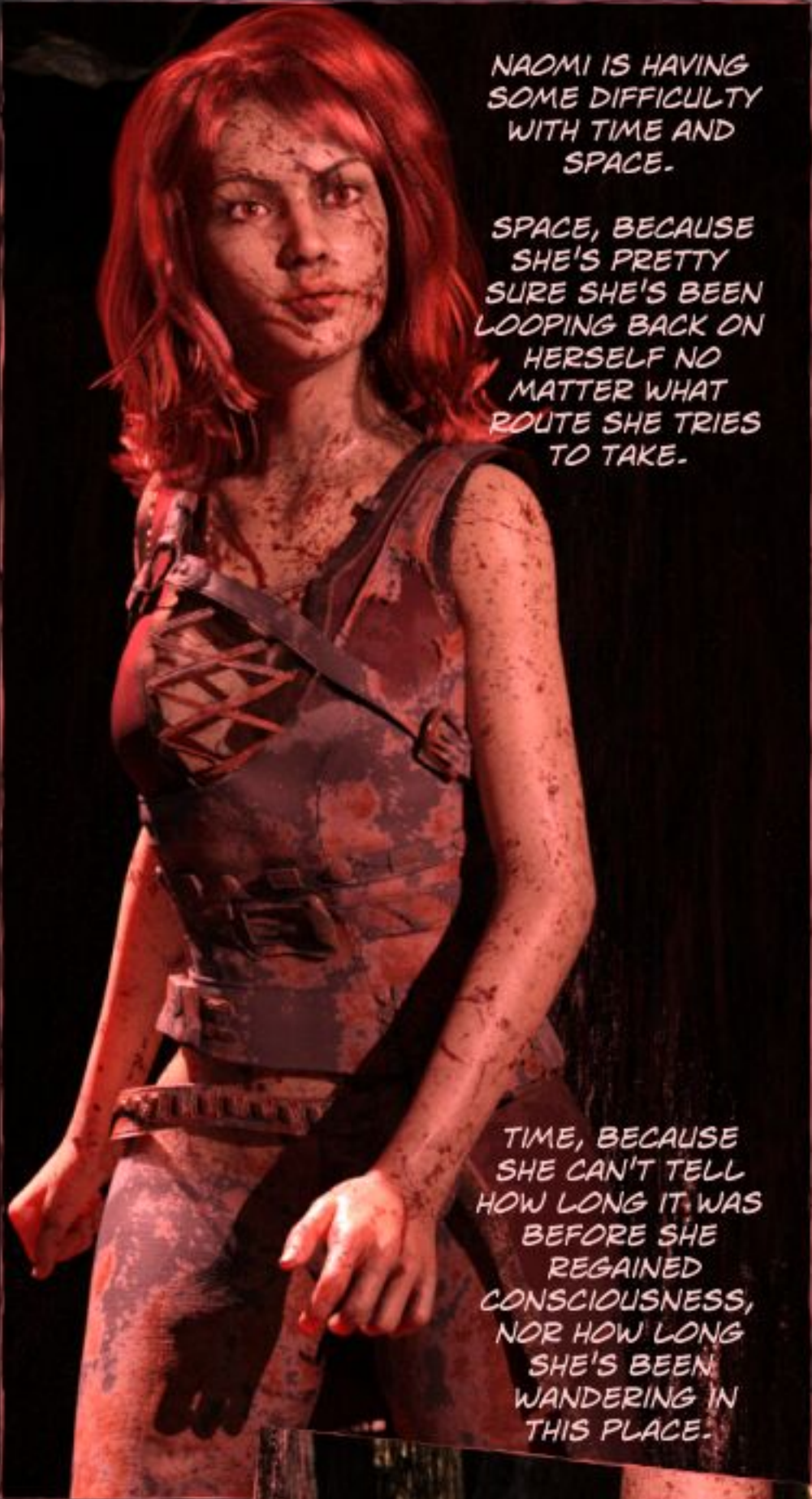
Pell, do you want to come on this run?

Oh! Am I ... uh ... ready?

Not quite ... but you're definitely ready for on-the-job training. With four of us, we'll be able to keep you out of trouble.

I'll go get dressed!

SOMEWHERE IN THE YARDS?



NAOMI IS HAVING SOME DIFFICULTY WITH TIME AND SPACE.

SPACE, BECAUSE SHE'S PRETTY SURE SHE'S BEEN LOOPING BACK ON HERSELF NO MATTER WHAT ROUTE SHE TRIES TO TAKE.

TIME, BECAUSE SHE CAN'T TELL HOW LONG IT WAS BEFORE SHE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, NOR HOW LONG SHE'S BEEN WANDERING IN THIS PLACE.



Yes, yes, eyes everywhere. I get it.

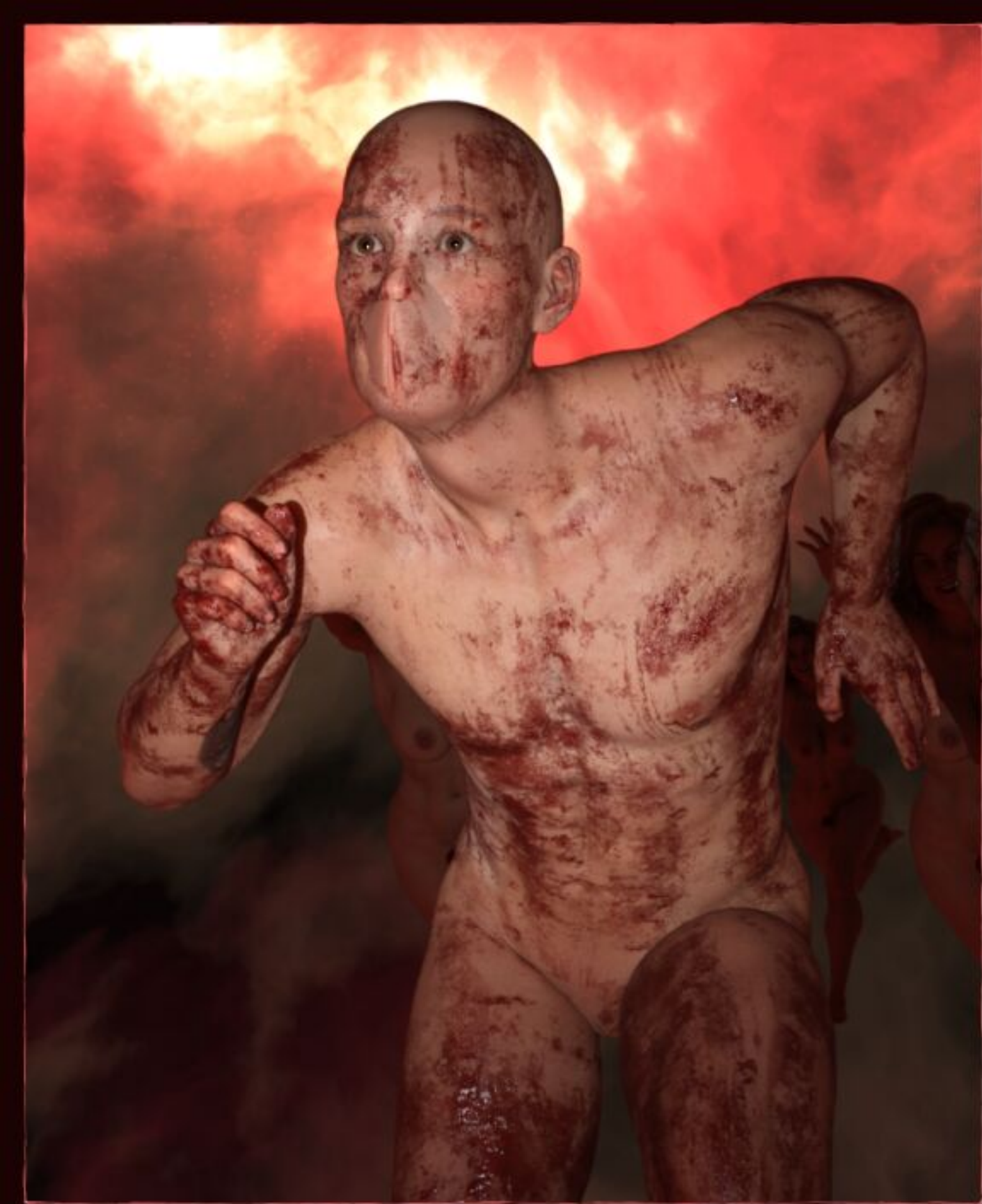
If you see me, why don't you come find me and show me a way out?

What's that up there?



Platform of some kind? Can't tell what it's for, but it looks like a place where something happens ...





Don't run, Donny!
Don't you want to play with us?

hrrgh!



You sure did want to play with me once ... even when I told you no ...

What's different now?

And you've got those cute new pussies, too! Don't you want to try them out?

-- hff --
-- hff --

Ngh!!



Awh, come on ...

I jutht want to give yh a little kith ...



hghhrrrr!!

Yh're no fun!



Copt! Careful there!

hrrruuk!



Oh, poor Donny!
Too tired to run and fell on his face!

Well, there's a place for you to hide up ahead ...

Just a little further ... you can do it ...





You're going to have to pick one! Either crawl up that hole or let them play with you!

You decide which one scares you more! -- giggle --

Donny, come back!

MNRH!

... What in hell?



What? Who are you? How did you get in here?

She's going to wreck the scene! Somebody get her!



No, not all of you!

Donny's running opp! Somebody's got to go after him too!



You can't get out that way anyhow!

rrgh!

You need to get out of here right -- ugh!

You need to get out of my face.



I guess you want to get burned, then.



HAHAHAH!



I do the burning.

Look, I don't want to fight, but I'm in a really shitty mood.

You want me to clear out? Great. Show me the way and I'm --



rrrk





OK, Sharl, I'm down.
... Gonna need your help now.



sprue. call me sprue.
I'm not sharl anymore. i think. i don't feel like i am.
... I'm sorry. Sprue it is.
fane's right over there but you can't see her yet. follow me.
do you really need all that stuff?



I really do. This is anchoring me to existing data. It's like I'm carrying a little bubble with me.
A little piece of the Souk. That I can pull back to when I need to.
ruby didn't use that when she was here ...
Ruby is special. No one's sure how she does some of the things she does.
Most of us, when we get in this space, our brains can't handle it and we end up creating a loop just so we'll have some environment to perceive. And then we get stuck in that.

THIS IS THE SECOND TIME LEYNA HAS USED A CONTINUITY SUIT. THE OTHER IS IN #14-16.



is that what's happening to her?
... I'd say so. Looks like she's running from something.
can you break her out of it?
No. The data bubble on the suit keeps me from being able to go into her loop. A shield goes both ways.
I probably couldn't break it anyway. I was thinking I'd try physically carrying her out.



she might not let you ...
Yeah. She might kick me in the face. But let me get a hold of her and then we'll see --



-- huh.
Do you know what just happened?
i think ... when you touched her. It was enough to break her out. maybe?
but i don't see her anywhere. i mean anywhere.
she's not in the data now.

A DAY LATER.



SERENITY.
The job's kinda not very interesting, isn't it?
If you have to do an intervention it gets real interesting.
But, yeah. Gina told me when I started that it was mostly going to be standing on rooftops doing nothing.
I think that's why they want us to do it in teams, so we'll have somebody to talk to.



Helene, look!
I see it. Let's go down.



You need to undo that right now! And stop doing what you're doing!
On whose say-so?
Huh?
We have Serene Barker's authority. Check on it if you like -- after you clean up your mess.



You think I care how big you are?

You just keep growing and I'll keep making a bigger --



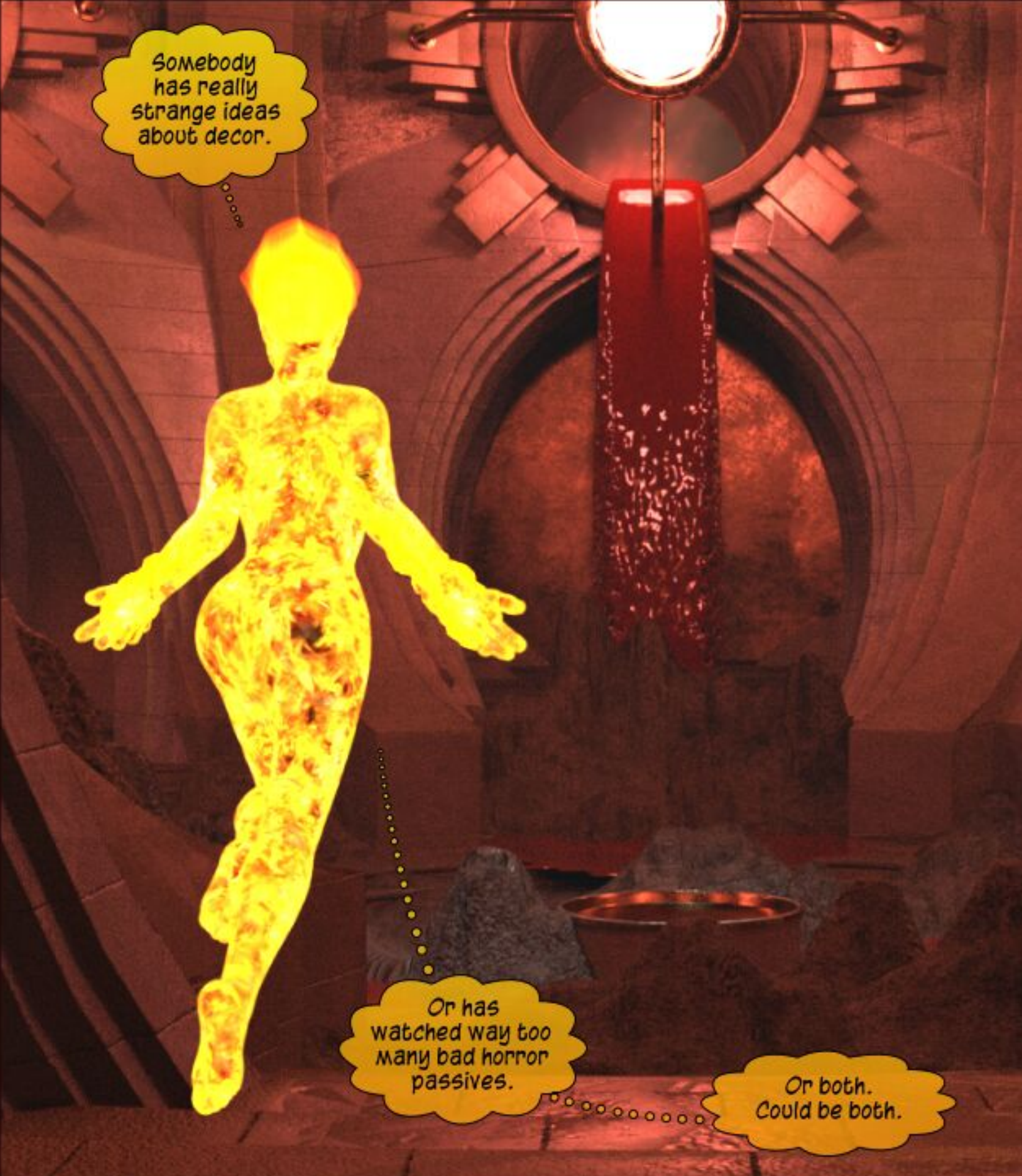
hrrgh!



... OK. Right. Fine.



Didn't really want a fight anyway.



Somebody has really strange ideas about decor.

Or has watched way too many bad horror passives.

Or both. Could be both.



I mean, all these pools of fake blood everywhere ... a blood waterfall ...

What is the point? Intimidation? Do they just like it that way?

I only just burned off all those blood splashes and how I'm going to have to do it again ...



And so you end up in the place they were taking you anyway.

I had Drina check on you. She said you were very smart and very subtle.

You're not being either smart or subtle right now, though.

For example, it didn't occur to you that Fire might not be very effective in this place?



You had other tools once. Back when you were a spy for your mother.

You could disguise yourself. You could sneak around. You could do other things besides just try to burn and smash through any problem.

When did you lose that? What happened to you?



I was never a spy. And she's not my mother.

... And I'm not interested in your criticism, or anything else you have to say!

I'm only interested in getting out of this place!

Oh, well, that's simple. Look up.



Technically, that's usually the way in. Most people have to find a different way out.

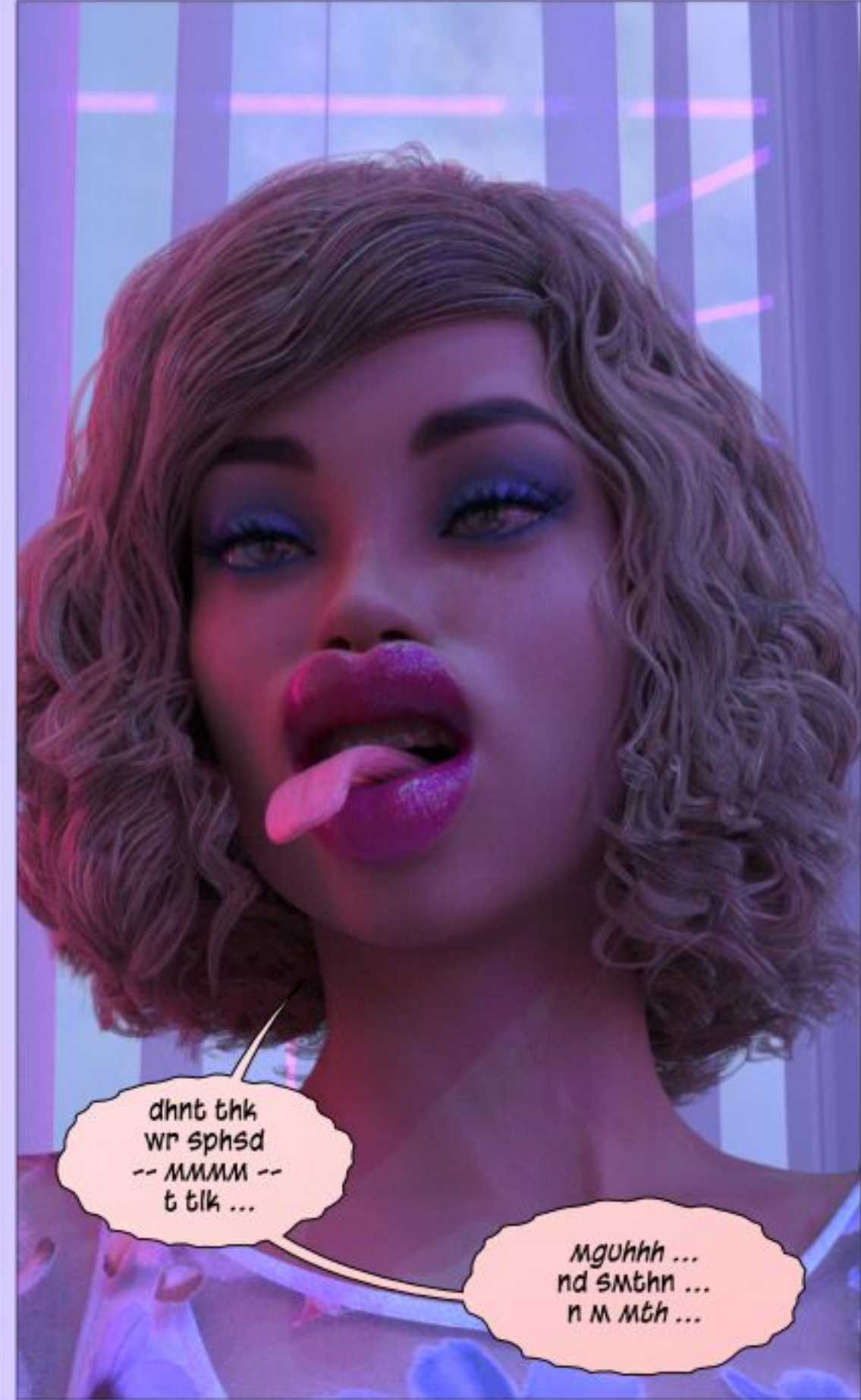
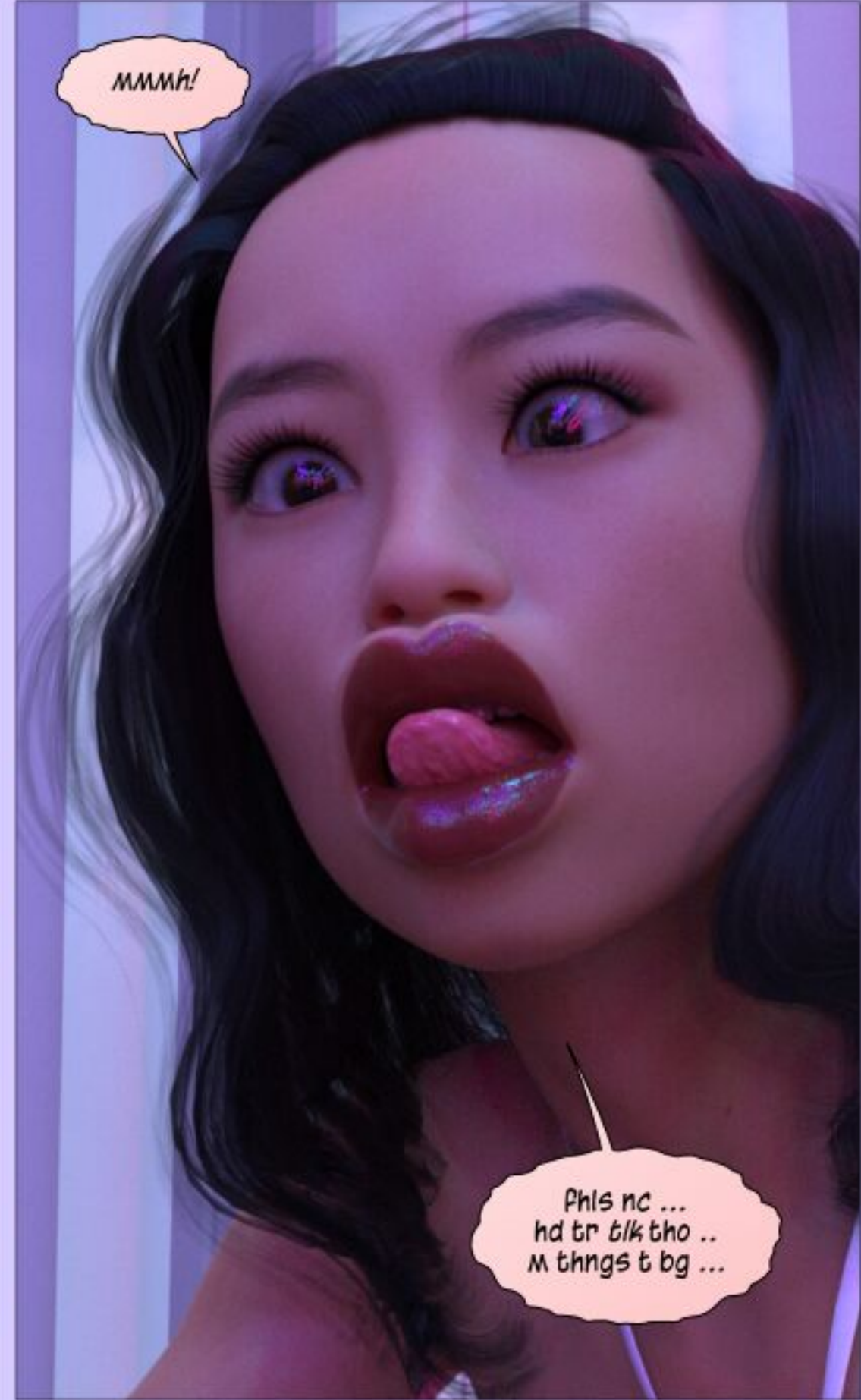
But you can just fly out, because you're so special.

If I let you.

And at the moment, I'm not inclined to.



TWO DAYS LATER.





Ladies! Ladies!!

You can't do that down here! You need to get a room upstairs, or --

MMMhg

hmmhh



Oh, let them have Pun.

There's nobody else in here to get offended and there's not likely to be for a while yet.

They can have special exemption from the manager.

... Yes, ma'am.



Unless this person objects.

But I don't think you're a customer.

Leyna Barker, isn't it?

Uh ... that's right.



I'm Chimay.

I'm the manager. I'll be happy to tell you anything you need to know.

I appreciate that, Chimay ... but I also know you're not the owner. Even though that's apparently a secret. You run the front of the house, but I need to talk to the man in the back.

Word is he's usually around at this time of day.

He is. Come on, I'll take you back there.



Just out of curiosity, what were they drinking?

Selma served them ... but from the looks of it, it was Old Oral. Very popular.

Second most popular variety for the ones who drink here as a setup for sex. We have two kinds of customers. The other kind drink as a party game.

What's most popular?

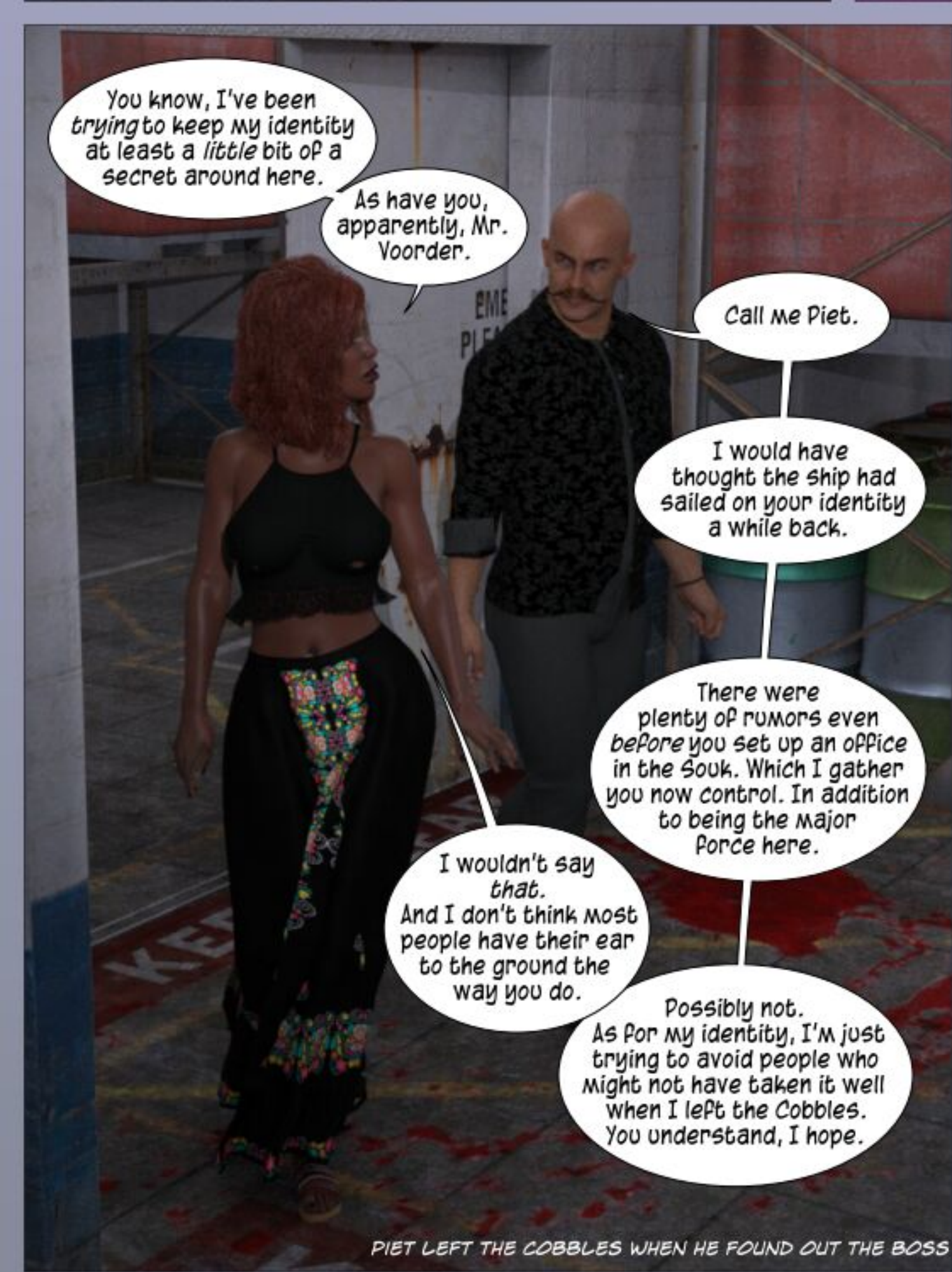
Among the Poreplay customers? Bimbo Bourbon.

Which, to me, is no different from just being drunk, but to each their own.

... I probably shouldn't have asked.

By the way, I don't usually get recognized on sight. Have we met before?

No, no. He told me what you look like.



You know, I've been trying to keep my identity at least a little bit of a secret around here.

As have you, apparently, Mr. Voorder.

Call me Piet.

I would have thought the ship had sailed on your identity a while back.

There were plenty of rumors even before you set up an office in the Souk. Which I gather you now control. In addition to being the major force here.

I wouldn't say that. And I don't think most people have their ear to the ground the way you do.

Possibly not. As for my identity, I'm just trying to avoid people who might not have taken it well when I left the Cobbles. You understand, I hope.



I told Chimay about you because I suspected you'd show up sooner or later.

Serenity doesn't have constant shakedowns like the Cobbles, which is nice ... but in return, you have to let the people in charge inquire into your affairs as they please.

I'm not yet convinced that's a good exchange to have made, to be honest.



Well, unlike the Cobbles, we do occasionally care about the public good here.

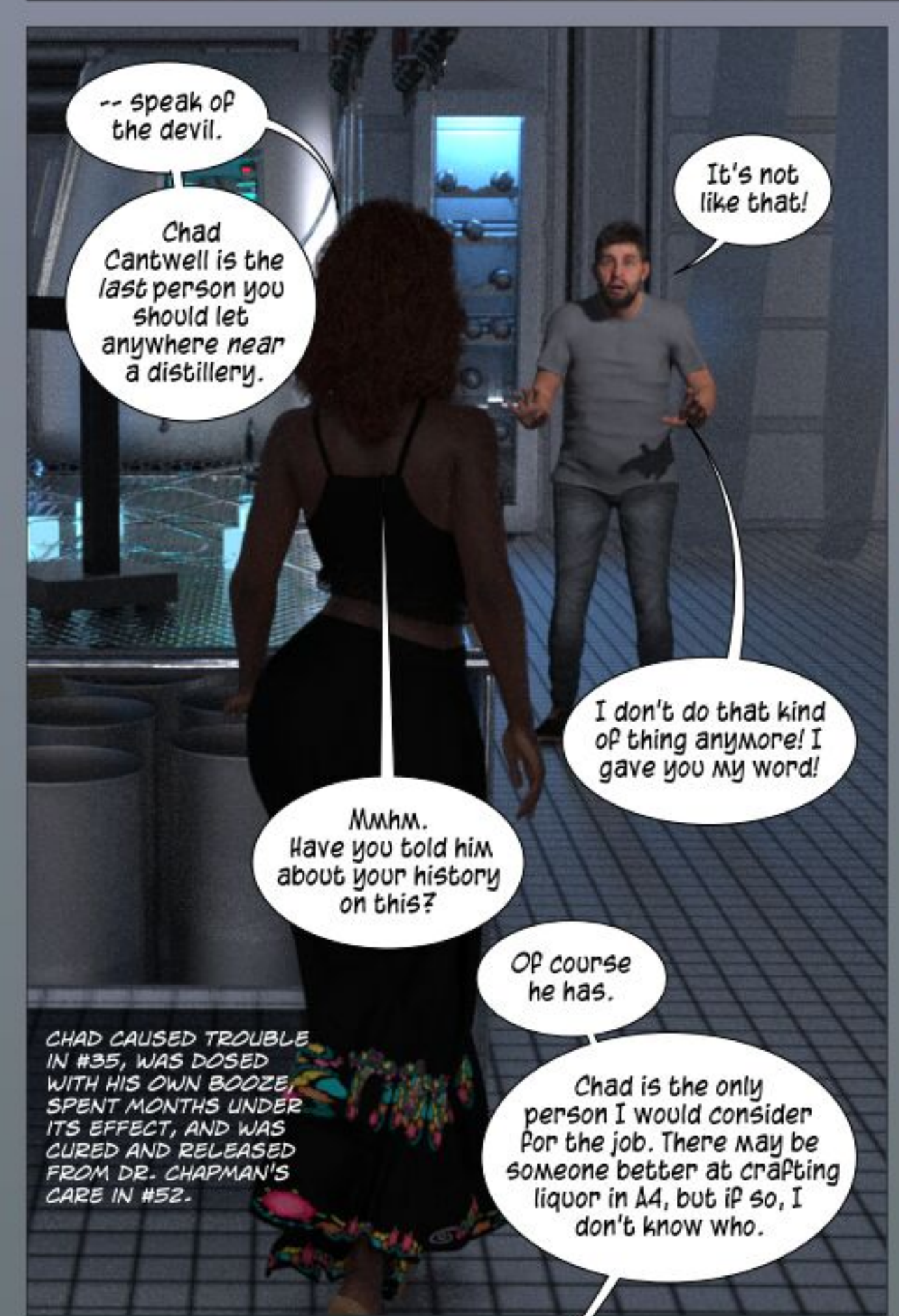
There have been a lot of issues with algorithmic drugs, including some where we're still working to repair the damage ...

Yes, but how much of that was Jonathan Church deliberately wreaking havoc?

... No matter. As it happens, I agree with you. That's why we're doing algohol. It's much more predictable.

Most people know what it takes to get them drunk and how long it lasts. No wondering when -- or if -- it's going to wear off. And the effect doesn't last nearly as long, so it's less daunting.

We've encountered some that didn't wear off, though --



-- speak of the devil.

Chad Cantwell is the last person you should let anywhere near a distillery.

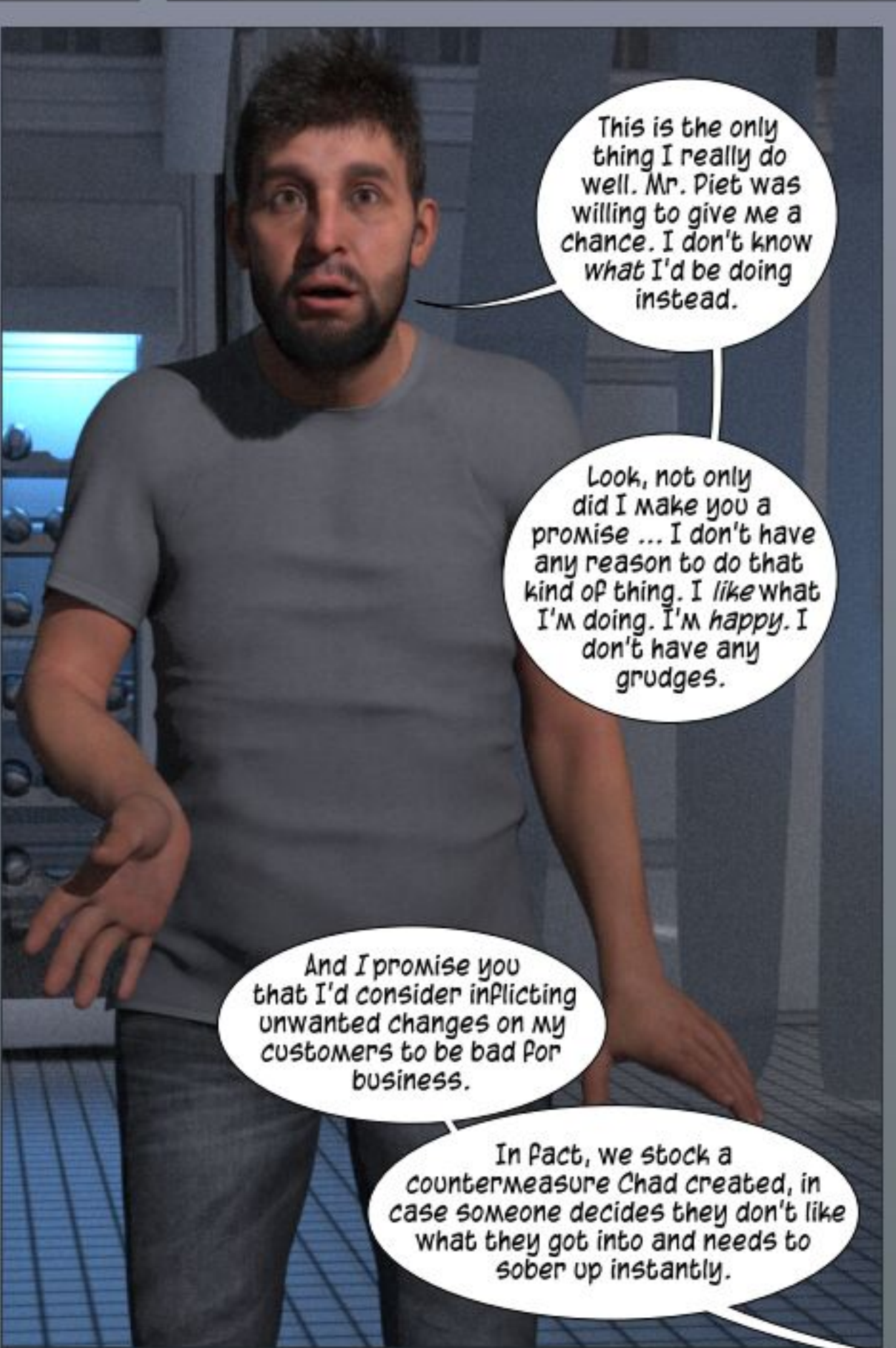
It's not like that!

I don't do that kind of thing anymore! I gave you my word!

Mhm. Have you told him about your history on this?

Of course he has.

Chad is the only person I would consider for the job. There may be someone better at crafting liquor in A4, but if so, I don't know who.

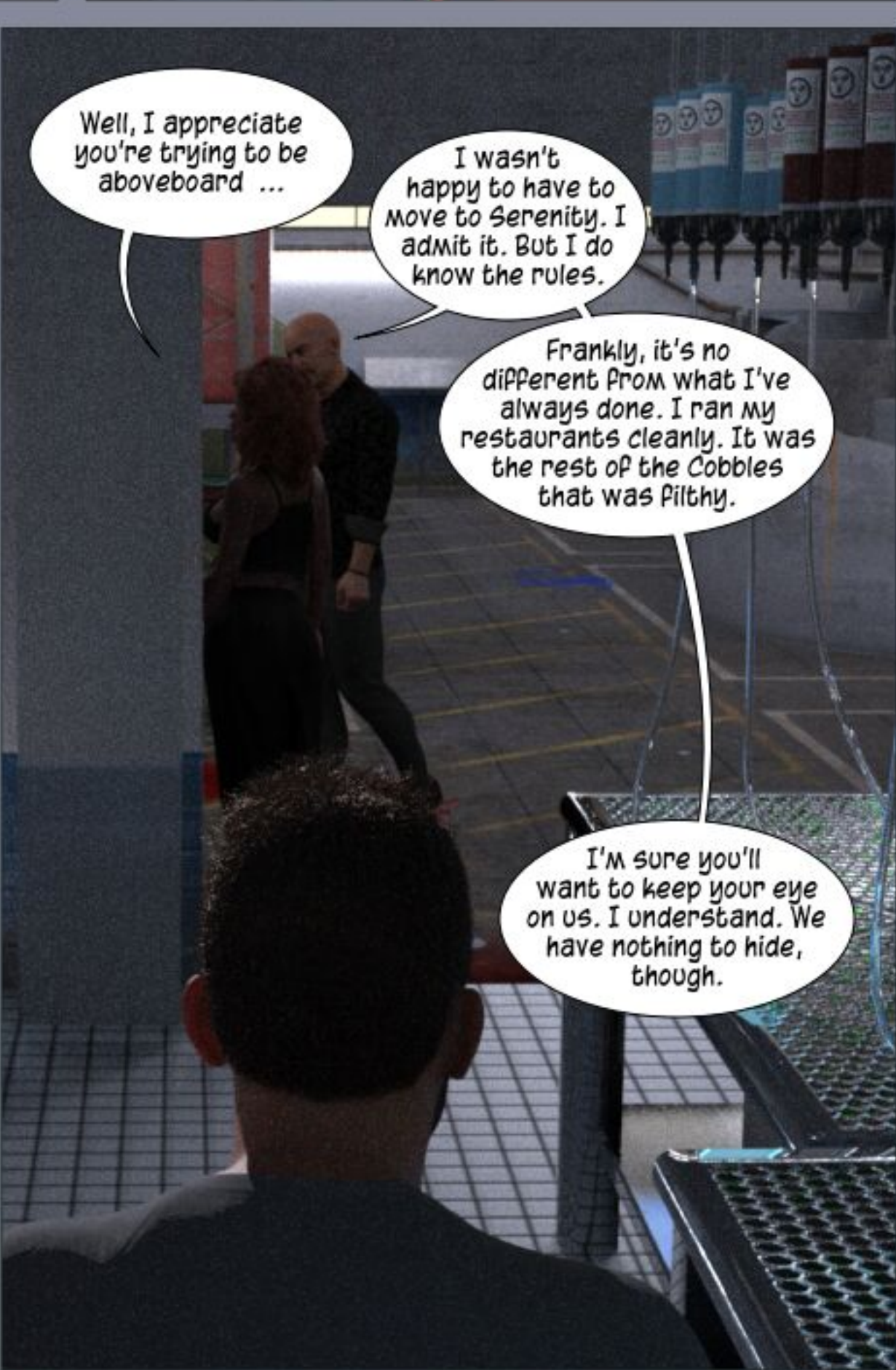


This is the only thing I really do well. Mr. Piet was willing to give me a chance. I don't know what I'd be doing instead.

Look, not only did I make you a promise ... I don't have any reason to do that kind of thing. I like what I'm doing. I'm happy. I don't have any grudges.

And I promise you that I'd consider inflicting unwanted changes on my customers to be bad for business.

In fact, we stock a countermeasure Chad created, in case someone decides they don't like what they got into and needs to sober up instantly.



Well, I appreciate you're trying to be aboveboard ...

I wasn't happy to have to move to Serenity. I admit it. But I do know the rules.

Frankly, it's no different from what I've always done. I ran my restaurants cleanly. It was the rest of the Cobbles that was filthy.

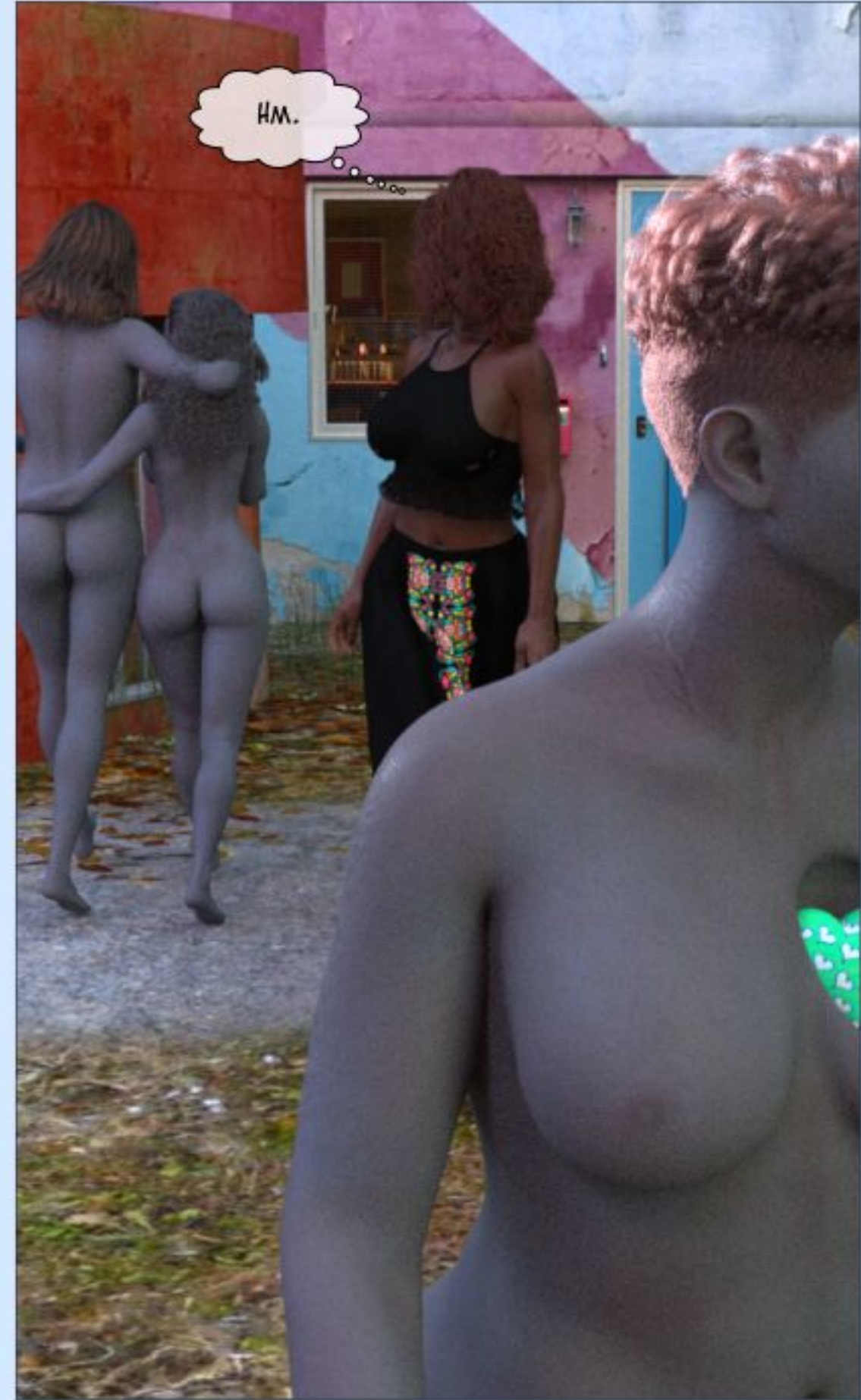
I'm sure you'll want to keep your eye on us. I understand. We have nothing to hide, though.

CHAD CAUSED TROUBLE IN #35, WAS DOSED WITH HIS OWN BOOZE, SPENT MONTHS UNDER ITS EFFECT, AND WAS CURED AND RELEASED FROM DR. CHAPMAN'S CARE IN #52.



The thing is, I don't have any choice but to trust him, unless he actually does something --

-- eh?



HM.



Hi, Leyna!

Hello, Pell. I knew I'd find at least one of you somewhere around here.

So these are your gray people? There are a lot more of them than I was expecting.

That's because she's been busy. The woman making them, I mean. We think she's gotten nearly everybody who lives in the area.

Which may also mean she lives in the area.



Possibly, but the only time any of us has seen her, we didn't have a chance to get an ID ... we've been watching for her to show her face again, and she clearly has been out, because she's been making more of these, but --

Hey, we may have a problem.



You're wrong!

It's not me that's wrong ...

You are! Your heart is wrong, and you know it.

We don't want you around here!



You're just as wrong as he is!

Yeah, well, so are you!



Oh yeah?

ugh!



You had this coming!

hrrk

YAAAAH!

Oh no you don't!

Hey, hey! Let's not, OK?

Clear out!

OWWW!



You stay out of this!

Whoa! Now, hold on ...



I'll show you who's wrong!

I -- urgh -- I don't think they're gonna talk down.

AAAH!

Do we shoot them?

I hate to, but I think so ...



Why are you interPering? Can't you see they're wrong? You should be helping us!

Who's "us"? And what makes them so wrong?

Can't you see? They're the wrong color!

Wrong color? You're all the same -- wait.

Do you mean this stupid little badge or whatever it is? Is that what this is all about?



No, don't!

Now, you're all going to stop this, or --

Maybe you shouldn't have them, then.

... hello?



Wait, they stop when you take those out?

Is it OK to do it to all of them, you think?

I think so. He's not dead or hurt, he's just not moving ...

What happens if you put it back in?

I don't think we want to try that just yet.

I need to put on a suit if I'm going to help them ...

... but it looks like they've got it under control.

The fighting, anyway. No sign of the real problem.



What are you doing??

Do you know how much work you people are ruining?

Days of effort, and you're just trashing all my progress!

You consider this progress?

Tearing up people's love lives so they can fight over what color toy heart they're wearing?

They don't have love lives! No one has a love life. People just say that because they think it sounds better than what they do have. It's a lie! It's always a lie!

We're never going to get anywhere until everybody figures that out, that nobody ever loves anybody else because love doesn't exist and pretending it does is breaking our heads.

Of course they're fighting over something petty and stupid. That's the point. If you make it stupid and obvious enough then all of a sudden people can see how stupid it is. They won't notice their lies any other way.

That's ... uh ... that's an interesting viewpoint ...



You don't understand!!

hk

But I can make you understand. I can fix your heart --



-- urk!

HYAAAAAAA!



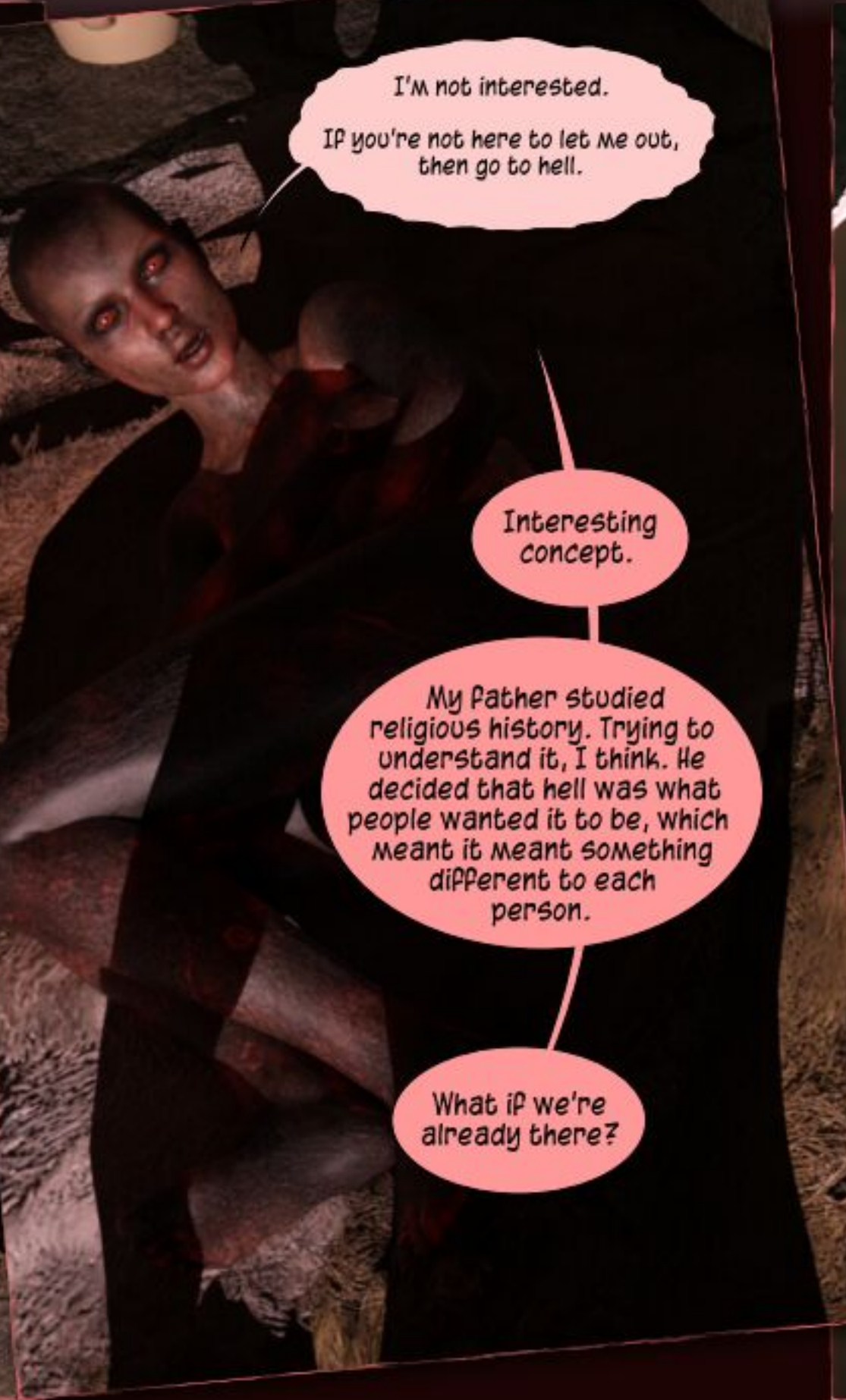
None of you! None of you understand. None of you are going to stop me! I'm never going to stop --



... That wasn't as satisfying as I thought it would be.

It never is.

BACK TO THE YARDS, PRESUMABLY.



I'm not interested. If you're not here to let me out, then go to hell.

Interesting concept.

My father studied religious history. Trying to understand it, I think. He decided that hell was what people wanted it to be, which meant it meant something different to each person.

What if we're already there?



My name is Drina.

I'm here to find out what your hell looks like.



Drina? She mentioned you. Said you told her about me.

So you're her spy?

Spy? No, no.

I'm a researcher. I find information.

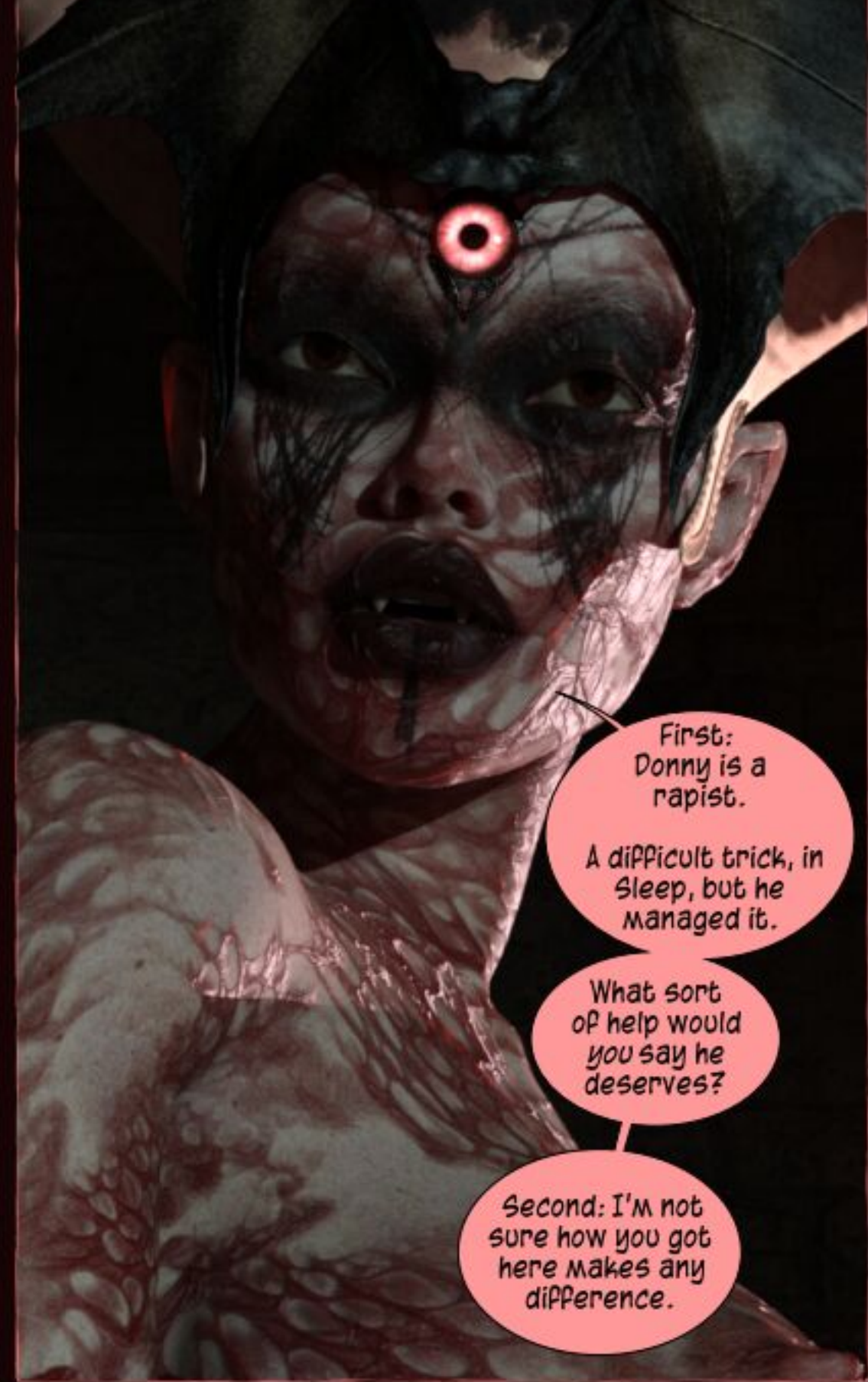
When people are brought here to be helped, we can't help them unless we know everything about them.



"Helped." Now there's an interesting concept.

I saw what you were doing to that man. That was a very strange kind of "help."

And I'm not one of those people, anyway. I came here by accident.



First: Donny is a rapist. A difficult trick, in sleep, but he managed it.

What sort of help would you say he deserves?

Second: I'm not sure how you got here makes any difference.



It makes a difference because I'm not one of the people you "help"! I don't need your help and don't want it!

You're saying -- MMH -- there's nothing about you that needs repair? Nothing wrong at all? That's a very bold claim ...

That's not the point! Even if there is, I didn't choose your help!

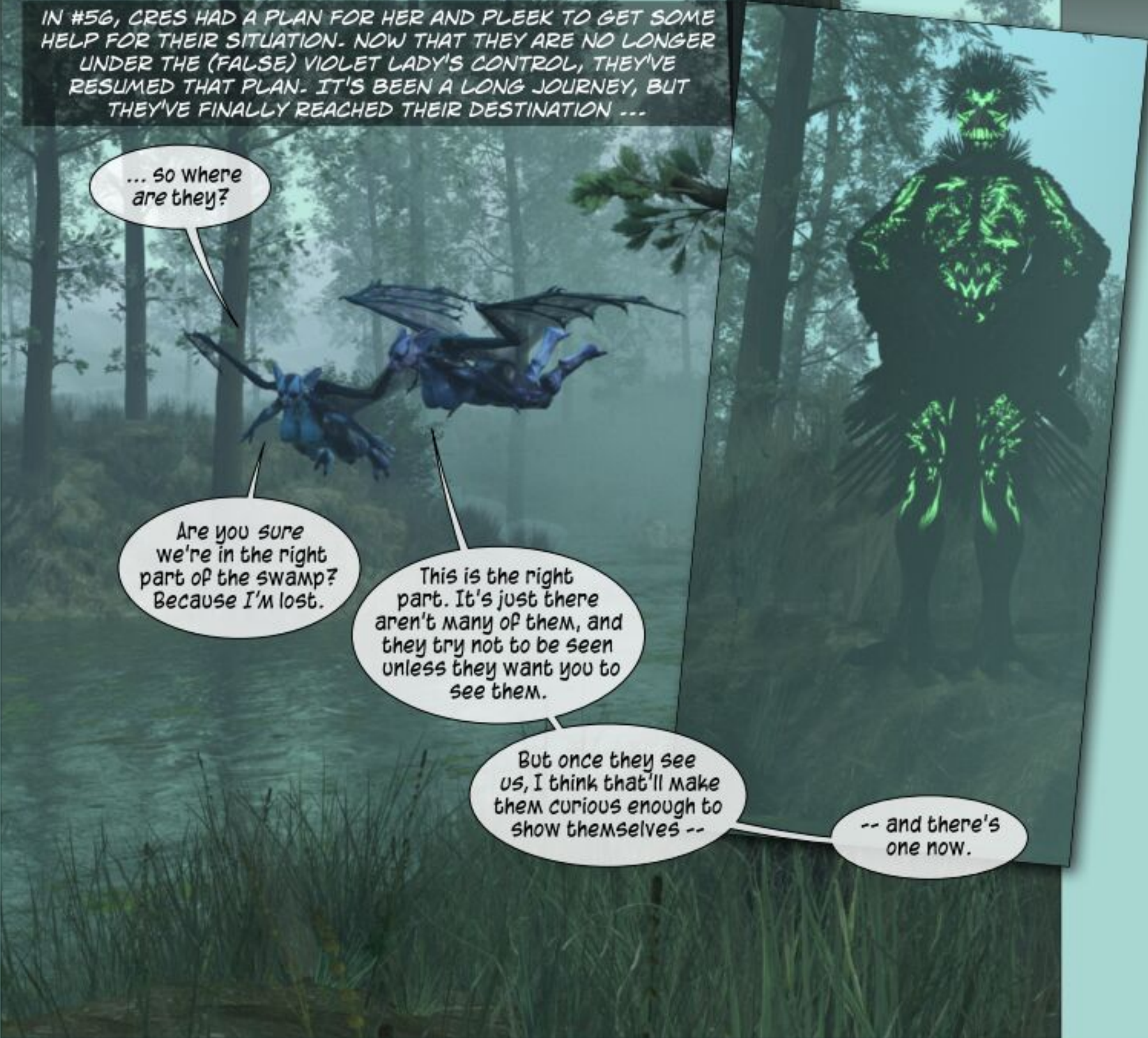


Very little that happens in this place is about choice.

Just as I'm not giving you a choice right now.

You would do well to learn that. Quickly.

IN A VERY DIFFERENT PART OF THE YARDS



IN #56, CRES HAD A PLAN FOR HER AND PLEEK TO GET SOME HELP FOR THEIR SITUATION. NOW THAT THEY ARE NO LONGER UNDER THE (FALSE) VIOLET LADY'S CONTROL, THEY'VE RESUMED THAT PLAN. IT'S BEEN A LONG JOURNEY, BUT THEY'VE FINALLY REACHED THEIR DESTINATION ...

... so where are they?

Are you sure we're in the right part of the swamp? Because I'm lost.

This is the right part. It's just there aren't many of them, and they try not to be seen unless they want you to see them.

But once they see us, I think that'll make them curious enough to show themselves --

-- and there's one now.



Well, you don't seem hostile, anyway.

SKREE! EEERK!!

EEE!

I think we'd better go see Keridwen.

THE BATS, AS YOU MAY RECALL, CAN ONLY SPEAK IF THERE ARE NO NON-BATS PRESENT.



h'm.

I can't tell what you want without removing those effects on you.

I think removing the effects may be what they want.

EEE!!

Ah.

Well, that shouldn't be difficult.



It will take a while to set up, though.

When did you last eat? Do you need to rest? Eilonwe, see what they need while I go prepare.

SOME TIME LATER.

Try not to move, now ...

Shouldn't take long, it's yielding well ...

... Oh.

HMM.

Interesting.

Pleek! You're ... uh ... you didn't go all the way back to human?

wow, I barely remember looking like this ...

No, I was always this way.

Well, for a long time, anyway.

This is her prior form from before the enchantment. I undid it fully. No leftovers.

I was a bat before the violet lady. Just a different bat.

I like being a bat.

Cres ...

Oh, you remembered!

We try never to forget anyone. And some of your activities since then are known to us.

Come inside. There are things we need to talk about.

CRES ENCOUNTERED THE EGRETS IN #37.

During the ritual, I was given unexpected information.

Prophetic-type information, you mean? I've heard the rumors ...

We don't call it prophecy. And most of the rumors about us are untrue.

Sometimes the air is turbulent. Sometimes the Plight is calm. Sometimes the destination can be seen from far away.

To defeat the green lady, you will approach from behind, as others push forward.

But to succeed, first you must repair Paur: Raz, Rani, Peri, and the russet lady.

That is what I have seen.

Well, uh ... I never dispute ... that kind of information ...

... but I'm not sure it's for me? Maybe your vision got sent to the wrong address?

I don't know any of those names ... I think I've heard of the russet lady ... a rumor about someone living up in the north forest? But that's all I've got.

I don't know of any green lady, and if there's a war on, I haven't heard about it.

Wait, was the green lady the woman who was invading with the trolls?

I didn't like her.

Your instincts are good, then.

And, Cres, you know her from some time back. When last we crossed paths. She was the woman causing us all so much trouble.

Oh, her.

Ruby looped her!

Mental loops aren't escape-proof.

She must have begun mustering that army of trolls almost as soon as she broke out. No remorse, that one.

They're moving southward. You would be better able to judge than us how far they've gotten.

Right. Because you never leave the swamp. Not even to warn people about big trouble.

We aren't strong anywhere but here ... and there are very few of us ...

And there's only one of me. Why is it my problem?

Because you're the only one who is willing to claim it.

You can't do half a job. If you're the keeper of the peace, you have to do it completely.

If you're not prepared to do that, then it would be better for you to hide away somewhere and claim none of it is your concern.

Like you do?

That was my intended point, yes.

HMM.

OK then.

But I don't know how much longer I can go being the only person in the Yards who gives a damn.

We sympathize. Perhaps you should be assembling an army.

TWO DAYS LATER.

DR. CHAPMAN'S FACILITY, SERENITY.

... We noticed her outPit was an algorithmic apply. I assumed it was some kind of protective effect. We stripped her ... and found out it was a disguise effect, and that she was a man.

I was startled, but Dr. Chapman ... very much wasn't. Later, she said that she'd more or less guessed it in advance!

Huh! Did you ask her how she'd gotten there?

I did, and she wouldn't tell me. I think she was embarrassed. She said something about how it was bad form for her to jump to conclusions.

Anyway, his name's Jacob Grist, and that's pretty much all we have.

Backwrench! I'm surprised ... I don't think there's going to be any algorithmic engineering on this one ...

Ah ... no. I've been ... um ... I'll explain later.

Hey! I --

-- Uh, can they hear us?

No.

OK. Whew. I know him! He was a regular at ... uh, one of the places I worked. Not sure which.

Was he trouble? Do you remember?

No! I mean, no, he wasn't trouble. I'm sure about that part. None of us ever had a complaint. And I don't remember him being horrible or anything during the sessions, or even wanting to do anything very wild.

I'm not going to be able to do anything with him. I don't have a lever.

He believes there's no such thing as love, or even any kind of emotional attachment. He thinks all relationships are transactional.

Well, aren't they?

... Don't troll me, Leyna.

Yes, of course there is room for discussion about whether exchange of emotional support is transactional, but we're not talking about that here.

He's working from a fundamentally sociopathic position. Because he has never cared about another person, he assumes no one else has either, and so everyone is lying.

I can't fix that. The only thing that would knock him out of it would be to find someone he actually cares about for the first time in his life, and I can't make that happen.

I suppose that means we can't just let him loose on promise of good conduct.

You wouldn't get one anyway. He's completely remorseless. He's said several times he's just going to keep going as soon as we have to let him go.

... I know what you're thinking.

There was always going to have to be a first.

Let's put him aside for a bit and think about his victims.

They haven't reverted. If we leave their "hearts" in they go back to their corrupted behavior right away. If we take them out, they freeze. Many of them are standing around frozen right now.

We were talking about that and I'm pretty sure I have a stupid answer that will work. How many do I need? I mean, how many victims are there?

We've got thirty frozen ... there might be a lot more. But fixing the frozen ones would be a big start. Then we can deal with others as we find them.

Thirty plus a lot of spares. OK. I need a real facility for that, and some time. Can you keep them all out of trouble while I go to Spindrop for a day or so?

BACK TO WHEREVER THE HELL THIS IS.

NAOMI!

HELP!!

Molly!

Hold on! I'm coming!

ugh

NO, YOU'RE NOT.

WE HAVE OTHER PLANS FOR YOU.

AAUGH!!!

... NAOMI?

SHE'S NOT GOING TO HELP YOU.



SHE'S UNDER MY CONTROL. LIKE SHE WAS MEANT TO BE.

THAT'S WHAT SHE REALLY WANTS, YOU KNOW. TO SERVE ME. MINDLESSLY. NO MATTER WHAT SHE SAYS.

IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHO THIS IS, YOU NEED TO READ #53-54.



NoooooMmmMgh!!

I'M GOING TO LET HER WATCH WHILE I MAKE YOU INTO A BRAINLESS ROBOT.

THEN I'LL CONVERT HER TOO.

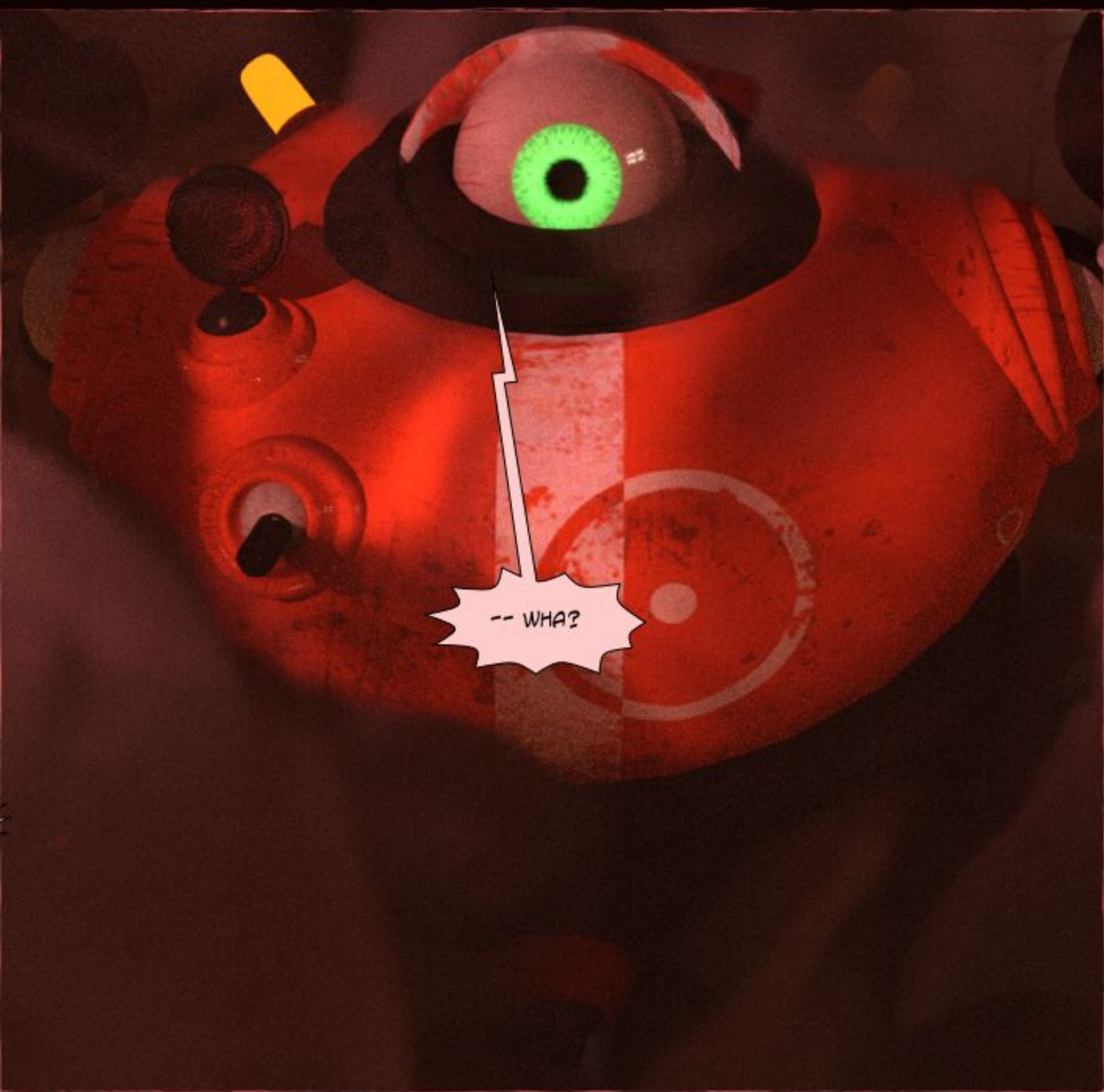
AND THE WHOLE TIME SHE'LL KNOW THERE'S NOT A THING SHE CAN DO ABOUT ANY OF IT.



GRH!

YAAAAAARRRRRRH!!

Burn, you bitch --



-- WHA?



BUT --!

NO ... I'M NOT ...

You can't get out of it that way, idiot.



You keep trying that path and you never learn --



-- hrgk!!

THAT'S ENOUGH!!



You all think you're doing something useful, don't you? You think this is therapy. You think this is repair.

BULLSHIT!

You're torturers, is what you are. You're grinning little sadists who like ripping people's brains open.

If she's convinced you any differently, she's lying to you.



You think I can't burn through this? Well, maybe I can't.

But I sure might try. And I sure would be justified in prying every one of you little horrors until there's not enough left of you to scream!

Now, hold on --



I don't think you'd really do that.

And I wouldn't let you if you tried.

Come with me.



I do realize you're here by accident, you know. I've known that since you got here.

But, whether you believe it or not, we Pix people. We repair them. And just because you're not our usual fare doesn't mean you don't need repairing.

Do you get off on those kinds of decisions? Who said you could make that choice for me? I don't think I need --



Hush, now. Listen to me.

You think you're going to find a way to make it safe. To make yourself feel safe from it ever happening again.

That's not possible. There is no wall you can build high enough. There is no armor strong enough. The answer isn't there. You will never be safe.

You can't get safety, but you can get security. Security isn't the same thing. Safety is knowing nothing can harm you. Security is knowing you have someone to help you out of it when it does.

You're trying to solve the wrong problem.



You're so full of --

I said, hush.

I'm not going to put you in a torment again. You learn nothing there. You've proved that.

You're going to be one of us now, for a while.

I've marked you as the lowest echelon. You'll serve the tormentors and enforcers. See to their needs.



You'll find it humiliating. But I think that will do you good.

Wander. Serve. Learn.

IN YET ANOTHER PART OF THE YARDS ...



Fix them.



Won't! More Pun like this! Take all Pun, don't like -- hghgh! --

ssh.

It'll still be Pun. Just like the others.

Fix them.



WE SAW THIS HIPPO VILLAGE GET CHANGED INTO ACTUAL HIPPOS IN #53.



Tabé?

What's -- uh -- what happened? There was a --

-- Tabé?



Everything is altered now.



I -- I don't understand --

What does that ...

UUUUUHHHM



Blue?

What's -- what are you ...

UUHHHH?

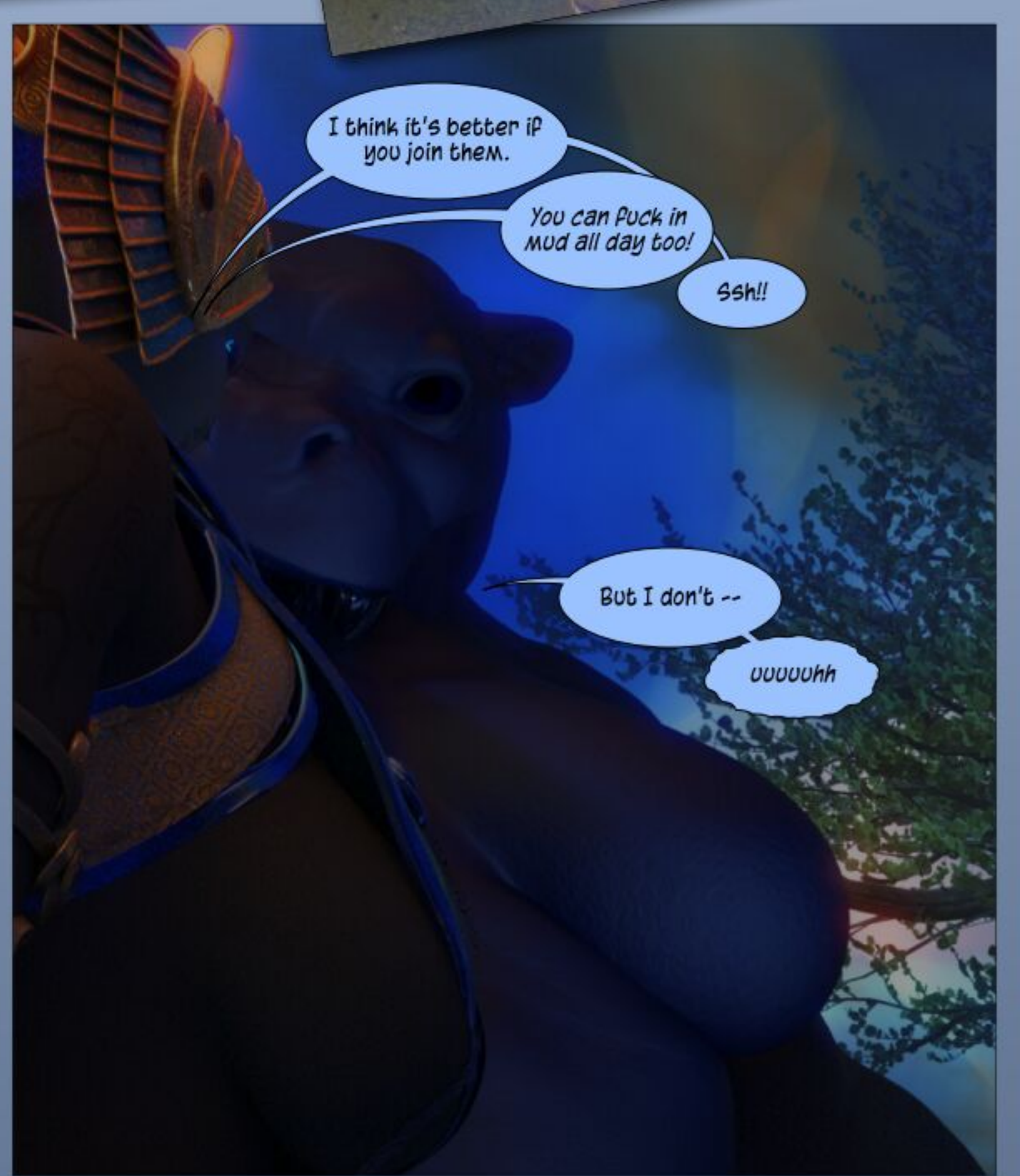


Could stayed hippos still humped in mud ...

Ssh.

It's more fun this way, when they know what they're doing.

But --



I think it's better if you join them.

You can Puck in mud all day too!

Ssh!!

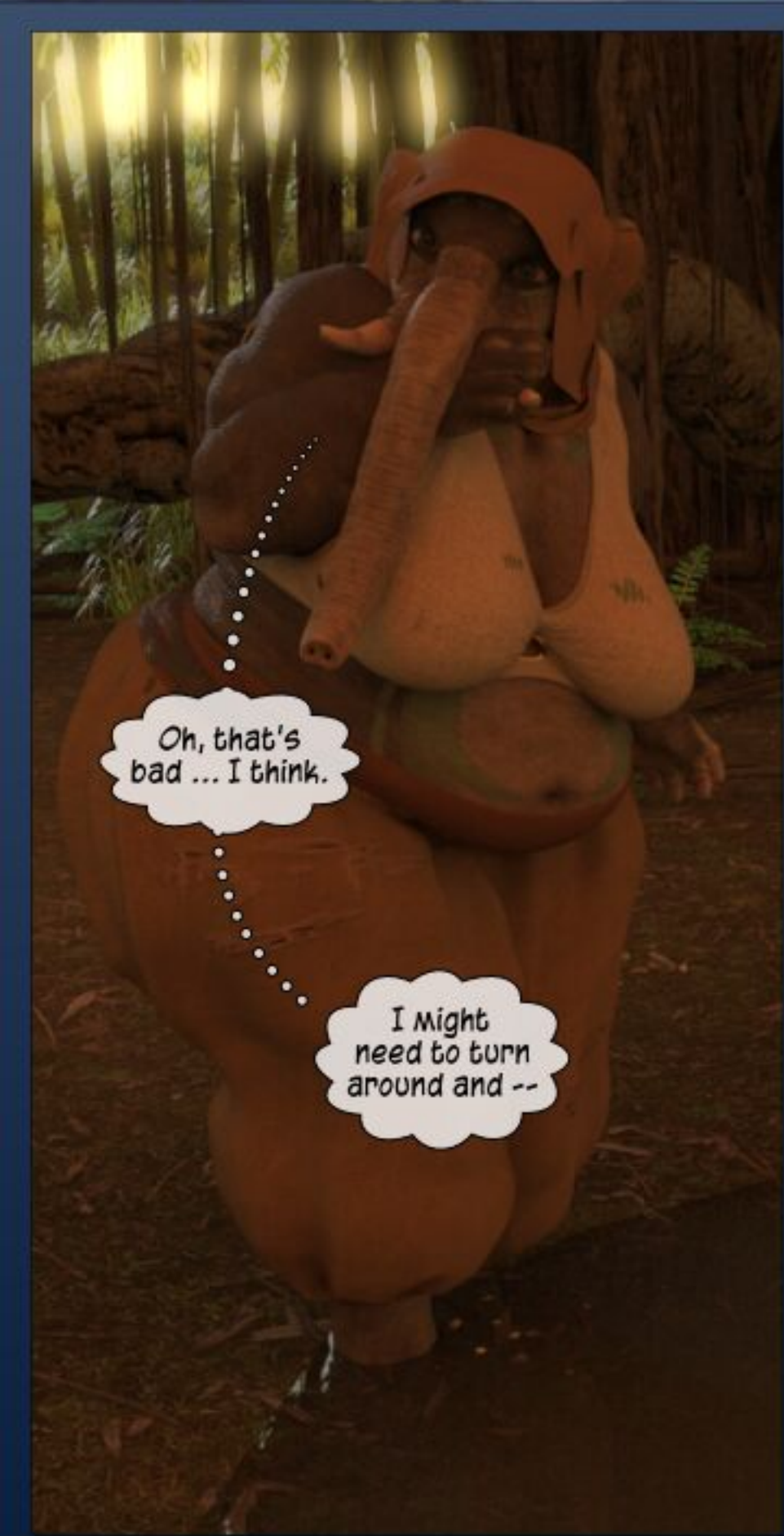
But I don't --

UUUUUH



Still say could just be hippos ...

Ssh.



Oh, that's bad ... I think.

I might need to turn around and --



Why, Heji!

Nasty elepn't come out of cave! Must like you special!

Ssh!

Is that true, Heji? Are you out here looking for me?

Chelle? Is that you?

Well, I ... none of you came back and ...

UUUHHR?



It's all right. We were heading to the Gaja lands anyway.

You can come with us and help us out.

A DAY LATER.



SERENITY.

Right where we left them ... surprised no one messed with them ...

I think everybody is kind of trained by now just to leave the weirdness alone.

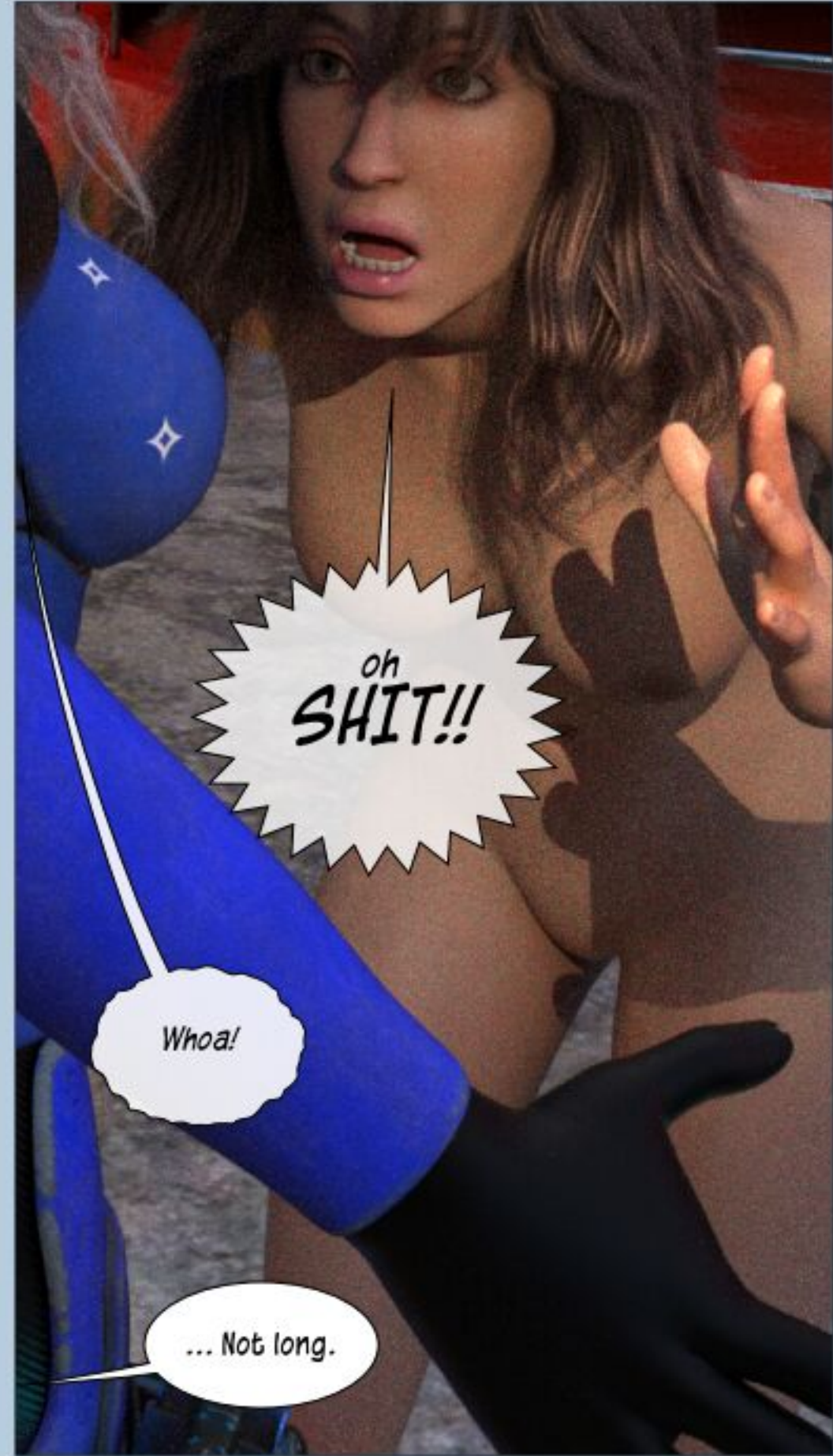
Here, grab some hearts and let's get started.



Ok ... hope you're right about these things ...

Well, the Failure Mode's not horrible ... if they don't work, just don't work, is all. But I'm pretty sure they will.

How long do you think they'll need to start working?



Oh SHIT!!

Whoa!

... Not long.



OK, but how? You didn't know what to make the clockwork hearts do ...

Oh, Kade, I'm so sorry!!

Yeah, me too.

Turns out sometimes you don't have to be exact.

You do if they've really lost themselves ... like, if they've been turned into bananas ... but these Polks still knew who they were and everything ... they just had their appearance and behavior messed with.

They were aware enough that we could just have an algo effect that said "OK, you're back to yourself now," and let them fill in what that means for themselves.



Let's never leave the house again.

... Not a bad idea.



Most of this silliness is mental. A lot of the time in sleep, you actually are what you think you are.

I always figured I was a little nuts for believing that, but then I started hanging around Dr. Chapman, and she thinks so too.

OK, but if they're not completely back to their normal selves, we'll never know ...

We might not know that anyway. People change on their own all the time.

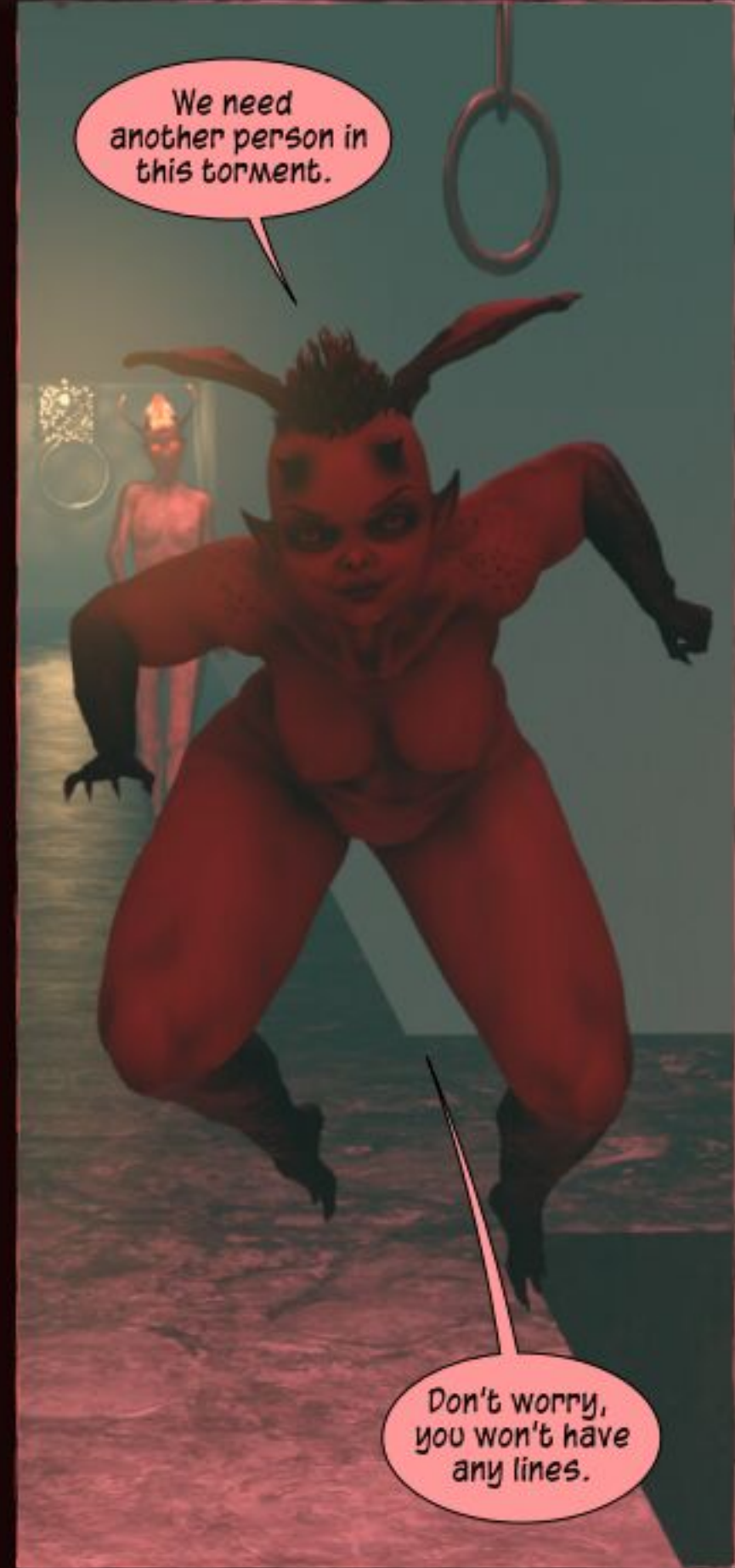
It's not a perfect answer ... but it's better than having them fighting over stupid things, or standing around frozen in the street.

VERY MUCH NOT SERENITY.



Hey! Hothead!

Come with me. Got a job for you.



We need another person in this torment.

Don't worry, you won't have any lines.



Ma'am, I must caution you ... Human Resources is not happy about the prior incidents --

HR can lick my ass. What do I have lawyers for, anyway?

Still, it would be better if you abstained from, er ... if you complied with standards. At least for a while. Until they calm down.

Well, I'll try, but I don't feel any obligation to --



Get out of here.

-- sigh -- Yes, Ma'am.

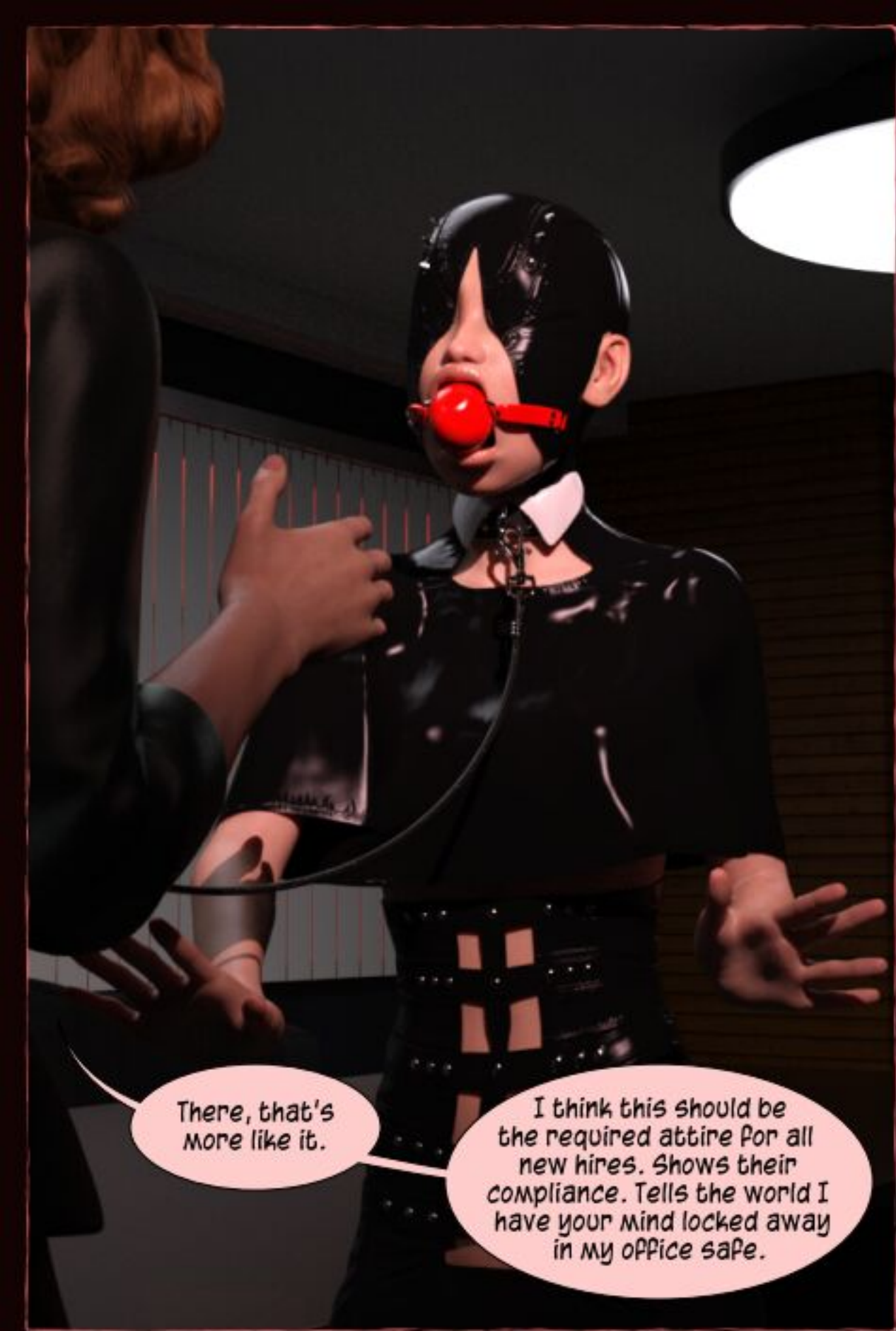


Honestly, I don't know how they expect me to control myself when they keep sending me adorable stupid things like you.

Look at that Pace! Not a thought in that cute little head. You think you want to climb the ladder, but you don't have the slightest idea why.

You think you'd do anything for a position, don't you? Well, I have a position I don't think you'd be willing to take.

But we're not going to let that matter.



There, that's more like it.

I think this should be the required attire for all new hires. Shows their compliance. Tells the world I have your mind locked away in my office safe.



Get on the table.

No one outside can hear you under that, but I can. And I want to hear you squeak like a little mouse.



Go on, now. -- hrgh --

Squeak for me!

Squeak!!



That enough of a squeak for you, bitch?

I don't want to hear any pucking squeaks from you. I want to hear you scream!

You can burn until there's nothing left but your bones!



And you! That was a rotten trick. Tossing me in here to be her victim because you knew I'd explode ...

aaaae

please

aaurn

I know you tormentors get off on your horrible shit, but there's got to be a floor.

I think I'm going to pry your ass too.

She was going to have to burn anyway! You were the right person for --

No, she's correct.



We have standards, and you crossed a line.

That sort of thing leads people to think what she just said -- that we're malicious, sadistic, that we enjoy what we do.

It obscures our morality. And we are nothing without that.

But --



This hothead's never going to learn anything anyway! She's just going to keep flaming out! She might as well be useful about it --

I said you are in the wrong!

And now you are going to have to be retaught!



Drag her to the grub pit. She can stay in there for a while and reflect on herself.

I'll deal with her later.

Yes, ma'am.



Take that one back to holding and give her a little time to reset.

In a day or two we'll run it again and see if she makes the same bad choices as usual.



You come with me.

What, you're not going to silence me again?

Not unless you need to be silenced.



You really are a challenge, you know. Or maybe you don't know.

Torments won't work on you ... you won't self-repair ... you frustrate my staff so much that one of my best people breaks discipline ...

I'm going to have to take your case on personally.

I've told you before: I don't need your "repairs." They don't work because there's nothing to repair.

Mhm. I'm almost sure you really believe that.



You have tremendous power and ability and you do your best to pretend that you don't.

You're scared of being any kind of dominant force because you believe you'll inevitably do harm with it, and you don't trust your own restraint or judgment.

But you're also scared of going submissive and getting away from it that way, because you worry you'll like it too much, and maybe end up like your mother -- who you don't like to admit is your mother.

You've got a relationship that could provide you emotional support, but you're so scared you'll fuck it up that you almost fucked it up by avoidance, and also you don't think you're capable of having one.

You spent years denying that you were even a human being, really ... and yet you refuse to admit that you might have a tiny barrelful of damage from your childhood.



And yet you insist there's nothing to fix.

Even if all that is true -- and I don't agree with half of it -- I didn't ask you to fix any of it. I didn't give you permission to mess with who I am.

Does anything you've seen here so far make you think I need permission?

Also, I can't change who you are. Nobody can. I can try to change the way you approach who you are.

And I'm going to do it even though you won't ask for it.



But you'll burn that woman because she was controlling people ...

Eden controls people maliciously. She makes them do things they don't want and would not have consented to.

Yeah? So even if I accept you have no malice -- and I don't, by the way -- you think I want what you're doing, no matter how many times I tell you I don't? Convenient.

My dear, you are tragically unaware. You want to be handled so badly that even my dumbest tormentor can see it. If you weren't so fixated on whatever it is you think it's so important for you to go do, you'd be licking my feet by now.



But we'll get there.

mnhhh

You belong to me now.

You've belonged to me since you got here, but now I'm making you admit it.

And you're going to keep belonging to me for a while. Until I say so. Until I think you're ready.



I'm going to show you who you really are.

And you're going to enjoy the hell out of it.

THE SOUK.

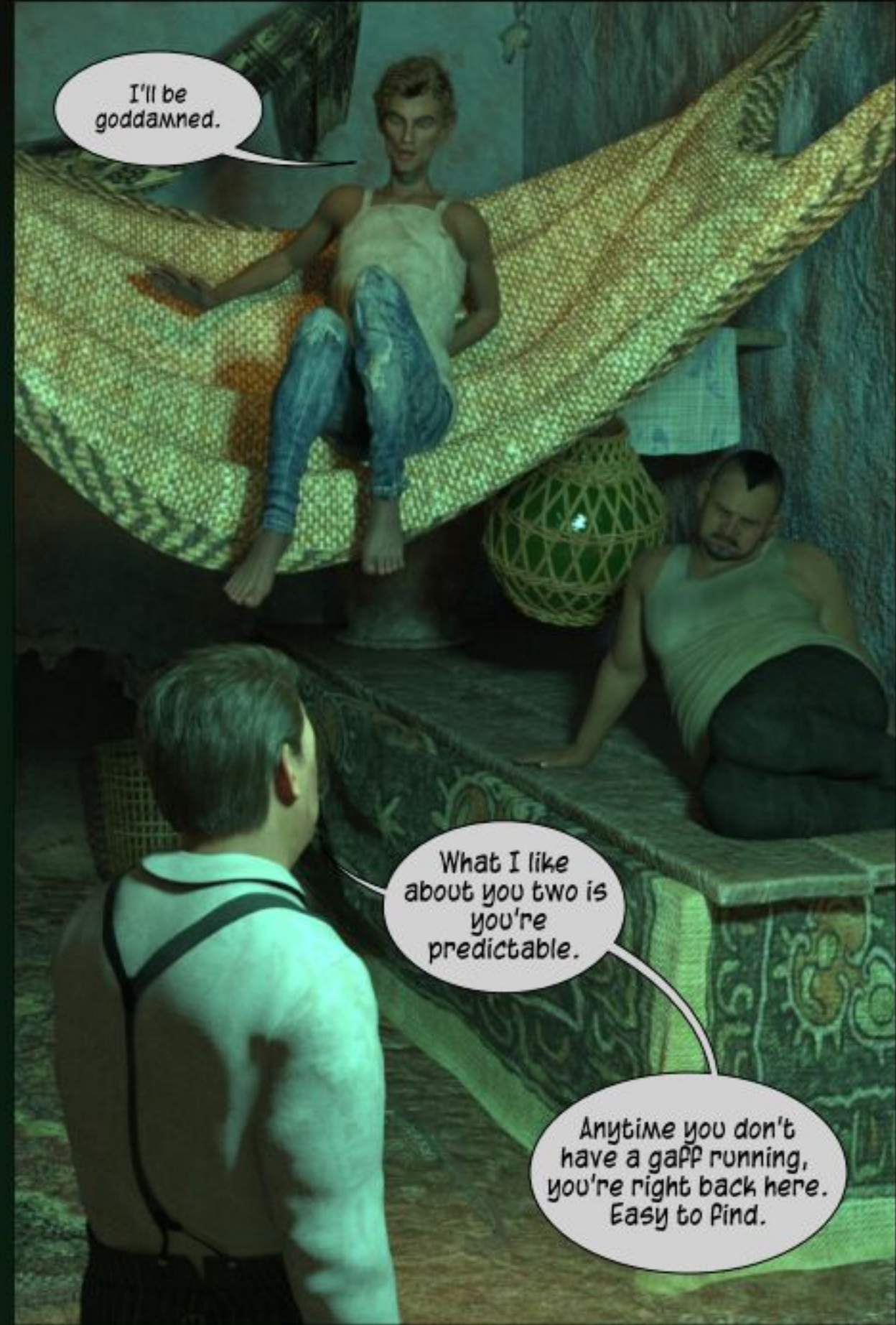


DON'T KNOW WHO THIS IS? UNSURPRISING. HE HASN'T BEEN SEEN SINCE ISSUE #6. HIS NAME IS JOE STRUNK.



Just rolled over and let the Pucking cats take the whole place ...

... can't depend on anybody to fight for territory anymore ...



I'll be goddamned.

What I like about you two is you're predictable.

Anytime you don't have a gap running, you're right back here. Easy to find.



Yeah, well, you might be surprised.

A lot of weird shit's happened. We only got back to the Souk not long ago.

But you missed all that, didn't you? You vanished a long time before the weirdness started.

Where've you been?



Out.

Out of commission.

Not by choice.

So, what? You coming back to make a fresh play?

Gotta tell you, the Souk's not like it used to be ...

Yeah, I noticed.

I don't know. Maybe.

That's not what I'm after right now, though.



I'm looking for Gina Howard.

Do either of you have any idea where she's gone?



I am not interested in anything you have to say.

Well, you should be.



This is about your future.

Your immediate future.

I don't like being the only person who decides what happens to you, but apparently I am ... and what you say to me now makes a lot of difference.

Yeah, I know what you want to hear. I'm not stupid.

And I'm not going to say it.



If you had any justice at all you'd respect that, that I'm not going to lie to you.

You want me to be repentant and all that, but there is nothing to repent. I'm not wrong, and I'm not doing anything wrong.

I'm trying to help people. I'm trying to force them to figure out how fucking meaningless their lives are.

So they can be just as miserable as you are?

No, so they can get to the good parts! So they can lose all that crap and get on with their lives!

I'm not miserable and I never have been, and you've got a lot of gall assuming I am!

I'm not wrong and I'm not going to stop! Sooner or later you'll have to let me out of here, and then I'm going to go twice as hard just to make up for your bullshit!



WAAAAHH!

I'm sorry to hear that.



-- sigh --

... there was always going to have to be a first.



hrgh



Can't get rid of me that easily, bitch. I can recall anytime ...

... what kind of weird-ass place is this, anyway?

Huh?



Ooh! A customer!

Have you been bad? Do you need to be punished??

Well, this is your lucky day!

Oh, no, wait, that's not right --

This is my lucky day! My mistake.

NEXT: WITCH WARS