



But a sex club?

It is not a sex club.

It's a private club that has a lot of lovely people as members ...

... Who sometimes have sex.

Look, it really is a club, OK? Some people just come to talk and dance. Sometimes they get live music in.

It just happens to also check certs at the door and have a lot of little bedrooms upstairs.

OK, but even so. That doesn't really sound like what I--



Listen to your Uncle Burk, will ya? I'm trying to help you, here.

You're always telling me how horrible your social life is. This could be exactly what you need.

You're not old enough to be my uncle, Burk.



What do they do if you flunk the scan? Toss you out on your ear? Beat the shit out of you in a back alley?

Why are you like this?

If anybody gets beaten up, it'll be me, if you don't behave. So remember, you're my guest.

Don't be a bore, don't be a jerk, take no for an answer ... and don't ask about people's outside lives unless they volunteer it.



... I think I'm going to need something to drink.

Your first good idea of the night.



... Anyway, I think that's enough talking for now. I hope you're going to come upstairs with me. I'm going to be disappointed if you don't ...

I'd love to, but I did tell Gino I would ...

Oh, ah, don't worry about that, Lin, I mean--

No, no! Commitments are always important. Why don't both of you come up? That'll be fun.



Aw, and I was hoping to get a chance tonight ...

Plenty of nights, dear. Remind me next time you see me, and we'll make up for it.



So that's how it's done, huh? I'm not sure I'll be able to pull that off.

Oh, lord, no!

You're new, aren't you? I haven't seen you before. What's your name?

Kyle.

Hi, Kyle, I'm Selma.

Some of us are more direct than others, but no one else is like that.

She's a little special. Her name is ...

# BRENDA

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



She does what she likes. The rumor is she actually owns the club.

You get used to her pretty fast, if you stick around.

Speaking of that, has anyone offered you a warm and personal welcome yet?

Because if you don't already have a commitment ...



Oh ... Ah, honestly, I didn't expect to be asked! At least, not that fast ...

So is that a "no"?

... it's not a "no."



You're a little out of practice, aren't you?

That bad, huh?

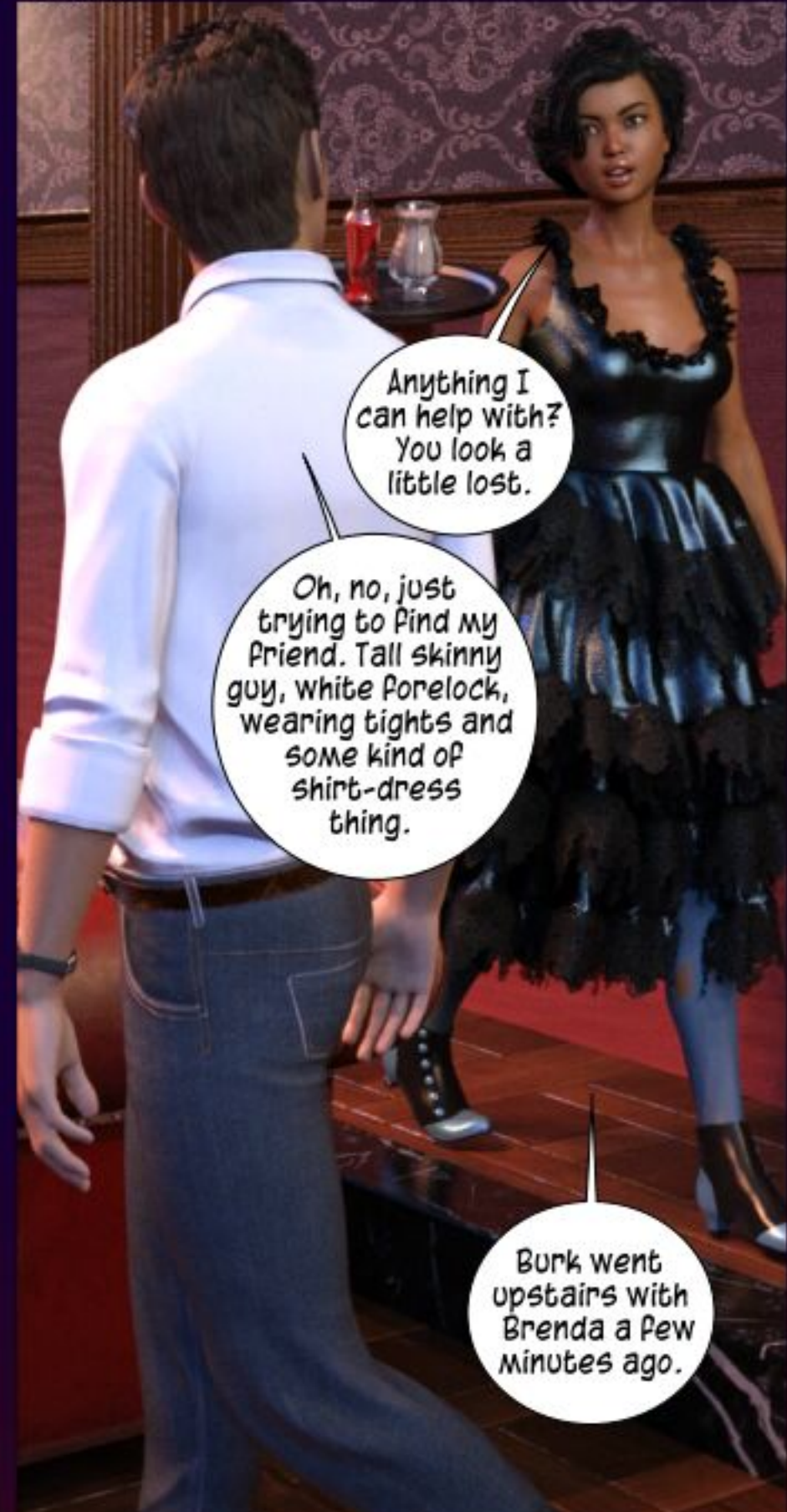
-- chuckle --  
No, not that bad.

But I can tell. Something about your approach ... Not nervous, exactly. Cautious. Extra cautious.



I, ah ... don't get too many opportunities.

Then you should definitely consider becoming a member.



LATER.

Anything I can help with? You look a little lost.

Oh, no, just trying to find my friend. Tall skinny guy, white forelock, wearing tights and some kind of shirt-dress thing.

Burk went upstairs with Brenda a few minutes ago.

EVEN LATER.



... and ever since then it's been the one drink we don't serve.

Hey, Kyle, I'm heading out. Thought I'd come check on you before I went.

Actually, I'm done for the night too.

Been nice talking to you, Jill.



So, what do you think? Did you enjoy yourself?

I suppose so ... I didn't really talk to a lot of people ... I think it's even more intimidating when the stakes are like this ...

See, you can't look at it that way. You don't aim at the sex, you aim at getting to know the people, and the sex just sort of happens.

Ah ... speaking of that ... I didn't think you ever went to bed with women.

Sorry, I know that's rude ...

I'm not offended. Mostly I don't. There are a couple of exceptions.

You saw me go up with Brenda, I guess? Brenda is definitely one of the exceptions.



A WEEK LATER, KYLE DECIDES TO JOIN.

Well, just so you know ... I checked around and nobody thought you were a jerk, so you're in if you want.

If you decide you want to keep going, just pay your yearly fee at the door the next time you go and that's that.

Thanks. I'll ... give it some thought.



... but they never actually said that was what they were going to do, so I think he had a point ... anyway, you're not really listening to a word I'm saying, are you?



Whoa!

What?

That's a serious power flicker ...

Oh, yeah. I hardly notice now. It does that at least a couple of times a night. The wiring in this building's got problems.

I was paying attention to you.

No, you weren't. You were staring at Brenda.



"I was listening to you, though.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I've ever seen anybody who was ... well, having as much fun as she seems to be.

"I don't think I've ever enjoyed anything like that."



Huh. Never?

Don't take this badly or anything, but ... you should work on that.

A FEW NIGHTS LATER.



Oh, she's definitely unusual. I mean, we all love her to death, but ...

You just have to accept it. She's like a Force of nature. For instance, she forgets who everybody is. It doesn't matter.

Talking about me behind my back?



Like she says, I'm very forgetful, but I'm pretty sure you're new here.

Ah ... that's right. My name's Kyle.

I'm Brenda, but I think you knew that.

You know, I don't feel like I've actually met someone until I have sex with them.



Do you want to undress me?



WHEEEEEEE!  
-- giggle --



I'm glad you enjoyed that ... especially since I'm probably not very good--

Oh, you shouldn't worry about that, dear.

If you want to get better, of course, just find someone who'll tell you what they like and listen to them.

But it doesn't matter as much as you think.

There are folks here who are a lot worse at it than you, and we always have a good time anyway.

SEVERAL VISITS LATER.



You know, I don't think you're trying to be rude, but what do you keep scanning the room for?

I, ah ... Was I?

He's looking for Brenda, of course. He's developing an obsession.



I'm not, Cali. I swear. I just ... I'm trying to figure her out.

That could take a long time.

Is it true that she actually owns the club?

Well, if she does, she doesn't run it. Charlene's the manager.

Charlene's the only person who'd know if that's true, and you probably don't want to ask her.

All of us staff are protective about Brenda, but Charlene's on another level. If she thinks you're stalking Brenda she'll kick your ass out, so be careful.

A WEEK AFTER THAT, MORE OR LESS.



Hey!  
Brenda!

It ain't right to do what you do to me  
It ain't right so don't be untrue to me  
It ain't right, so baby, Parewell  
Mama, I'm talkin'--  
It ain't love that you handed out to me  
It ain't love so don't spare to shout to me  
It ain't love, so baby, Parewell



... Oh, hello, dear.  
Did you need something?

Huh.  
... You don't actually  
remember me at all,  
do you?



I have the  
worst memory  
in the world.

Especially for  
names and faces.  
You shouldn't take  
it personally.

If we've  
played together  
before, I'm sure I  
enjoyed it.  
I always do!

But if you  
like, we could  
try again and  
make sure ...

Heh.

"IT AIN'T RIGHT," BY BOB ROTHBERG AND JOSEPH MEYER, LYRICS AS PERFORMED BY STUFF SMITH AND HIS ONYX CLUB BOYS, 1936



Oop!  
Another of  
these.

Almost a  
brownout, that  
time. They really  
should fix this.



You don't have  
any say in that,  
do you--

--Brenda?

You there?  
Hello?



... Oh!

Sorry!  
Just spaced  
out for a  
second.

... Come on,  
let's go play.

THREE NIGHTS AFTER THAT.



... No, I just wanted to  
ask her a question.

I saw her going  
upstairs a few  
minutes ago.

Oh ... well, I  
don't want to  
disturb that.  
It'll keep.

No, no--she was  
going upstairs alone.  
Usually that means she's  
going to sleep. You might  
be able to catch her  
before she does.



Thanks, Jill!  
If she doesn't answer my  
knock, I won't push my luck.

Good plan.  
If she is  
asleep, you  
won't wake her  
by knocking  
anyway.



Brenda, are you--

Knock  
Knock



Oops!

Not locked.  
Barely even shut.



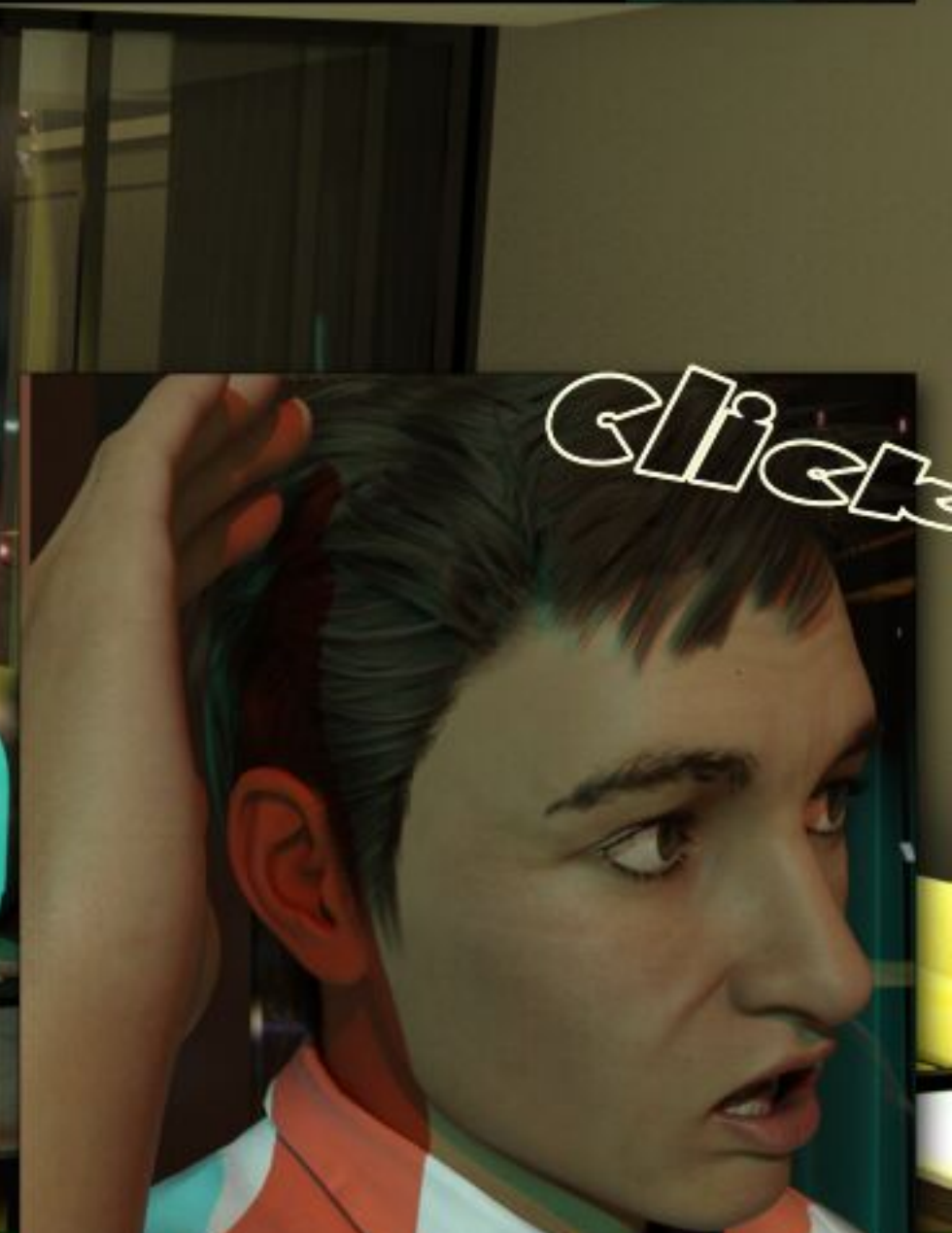
Ah ... hello?  
Brenda?

Sorry to disturb  
you, but I--



Nobody home.

I guess Jill  
could have been  
wrong about  
where she was  
going ...



Click



That's not Brenda ...

Wait, what is that back there? A secret room?



... And she's leaving.

Was she watching? Did she see me come in? No, she'd have asked me what I was doing here ...



Gotta be a latch or something on this side ...

... There.

I am surely going to regret this ...

... but I can't walk out of here without knowing.



What on earth?

In that tube thing ... is that ...?



Brenda!!

Is she asleep? I think she's just asleep. I hope she's just asleep. Why is she in that?

I don't want to open it if I don't know what's going on ... what if it's something ... medical?



What's this?

"Connecting:  
- Make sure you are completely clean  
- Wear no clothing, jewelry or any other items in the pod  
- Set the connect cycle Por 'automatic'  
- You then have three minutes to enter the pod"

"Disconnecting:  
- Make sure Brenda is completely clean everywhere. Do not leave on any makeup.  
- Make sure Brenda is not wearing any clothing, jewelry, etc.  
- Please re-hang dresses, store jewelry and shoes properly, and put undergarments in the hamper.  
Clean up after yourself!  
- Set the disconnect cycle Por 'automatic'  
- You then have three minutes to position Brenda in her pod"



I don't believe it.

OK, I do believe it ... but I'm not sure I should.

So they take turns at being Brenda, is that it? How many of them do? Does everybody on staPP know? Have Jill and Cali been laughing behind my back?



No, Kyle. No way. That would be approximately the dumbest thing you ever did.

You'd get caught, you'd get kicked out of the club ...

I should get out of here before someone finds me, and pretend I never saw any of this.



-- sigh --  
So much Por trying to talk sense into myself.

I have to know, though.  
I have to know what it's like ...

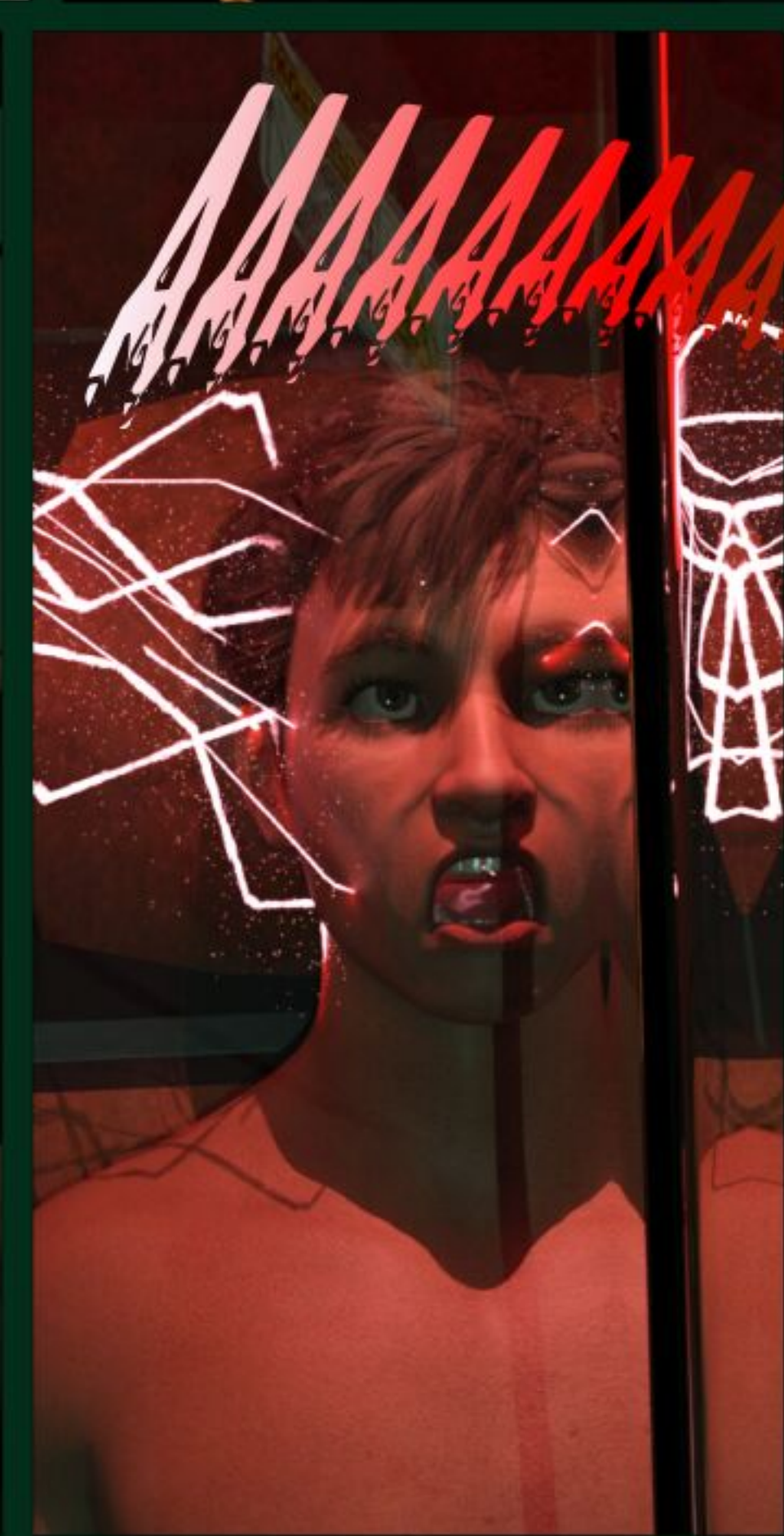


Opp! OK. Automatic cycle. Right.

Hope it closes the doors too, because I sure can't reach them now ...



God, Brenda, I'm an idiot ... I hope this is OK ...





Aaaagh!

OK, that's really disturbing, seeing yourself from the outside like that ...

Oh, I sound different! ... I mean, of course I do. I don't know what I was --



All right. You've done it, it's real, now get back in the tube and call it a night.

But it doesn't really count as a test drive, does it?

I mean, I can't say I really experienced it just standing here in this room ...



I did not think I would ever again use what I learned in high school drama club.

And if Burk were here he would be laughing himself silly.



OK. Just going to go downstairs and socialize a little. That's all. Just to see what it's like.

Then you're coming straight back up here and getting out of this.



Brenda!

Hey, Brenda!

Brenda! Thought you were done for the night ...



I don't know who I was kidding, thinking I was going to bed early ...

Right? You might have missed something!



Yes. She could have missed me.

Brenda, honey, last time I saw you you gave me a rain check. I want to collect.

--oof!--



Huh. Is that true, everybody? Confirm or deny? 'Cause I don't remember--

--MMMMH!--

Looks like it doesn't matter whether we confirm or deny ...



Oh.

My.

God.

First we're gonna let those amazing titties out, then I'm finally gonna see what you taste like.

Uh ... OK!

So much for just having a little conversation.



QUITE A WHILE LATER ...

I hate to get up ... I'd love to wake up next to you, but I've pushed my luck too far already.

Thanks, Laverne. I've never had an experience like that before.

But now I need to clean up and get out of here while I can.

KYLE TOLD HIMSELF THAT BEING BRENDA WAS A ONE-TIME EXPERIMENT, BUT LESS THAN A DAY AFTERWARD, HE REALIZED THAT WAS GOING TO END UP BEING A LIE.

OVER THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, HE BECAME SOMETHING OF AN EXPERT ON THE COMINGS AND GOINGS OF CLUB STAFF. WITH CAREFUL WATCHING, IT WAS POSSIBLE TO FIGURE OUT WHEN BRENDA WAS "AVAILABLE."



Now, Alexander, I think you're just trying to be provocative and you don't really mean it.

I'm very serious, Ms. Brenda. I think you make these choices. I Peel maybe a little, what you say, oppressed.

I see you go to bed with all these pretty men ... never like me. I know I am not pretty. I have a Pace would stop a clock. Been through a lot.

My point. You would do well perhaps to go to bed with a man who has been through a lot. He knows things.

Ooh, boy ...



Hey, now ...

It's all right, Elijah. Alexander doesn't mean it personally, he's just trying to give me a challenge.

And I Peel like Brenda would take him up on it, so I'm going to have to charge on in ...



Your Pace really wouldn't stop a clock, you know.

You're very handsome.

Maybe in an ugly way. But thank you for saying so.

I don't think people should underrate themselves. I mean, there's all kinds of--



Ms. Brenda? Are you all right?



... I'm Pine. Sorry. Spaced out for a moment.

It's those power Pickers! They break Brenda for a second or two ...

That was bizarre. Felt like I wasn't anywhere at all.



What am I doing? I have no idea how to do this ...

mmm, but what is that going to Peel like inside me ...?

You want that? I give you that.



Aaaahh!!

Oh, yes! Yes!!

This isn't hard at all! ... I mean ... it's hard ... nice and hard ... ooh ...

A FEW NIGHTS LATER.



If I had any sense at all I would not be doing this again.

I have no idea why nobody's caught on yet.



I didn't think anybody was going to run Brenda tonight.

Me neither.

But I saw Jo a while ago and she's not on shift tonight, so maybe she came in to run her just for fun.



Hello there! Those are some awfully shiny pants.

They're supposed to be. Can you remember my name?

Let's see ... Bart. No! ... Burk. Is that right? Burk?

Are the shiny pants supposed to help me remember you?

Well, it worked, didn't it?



I have to do something to get you to notice me. You're too much in demand.

Oh, it's not that bad! Mostly all you need to do is ask!

Am I going to go to bed with Burk?  
Am I really going to go to bed with Burk?

... I think I am.



You've got the best room in the building, I think. None of the other ones have any kind of view.

I have a better view than that right now.

Let's get you out of those ridiculous pants.



ohhhh ... Oh, that's ... Uhhhhh ...!

-- giggle --

I will never tell him.

Never never never.

TWO NIGHTS LATER.



Hey there! My memory's horrible, but I'm pretty sure I haven't seen you before. Are you new?

I just noticed you sitting over here in this room by yourself! ... if you want to be left alone, I'll go--



I've been here a couple of times, but you haven't seen me. Honestly, I'm not sure I belong in this place. It's ...

It can definitely get a little loud. Sometimes I want quiet too.

It's not so much that ... everybody wants sex. I mean, they talk, but they're just talking until they can figure out who they'll go upstairs with.

Well, that's kind of the point here, isn't it? You're not interested in sex?

I am! Sometimes. But sometimes I just want to talk. It's hard to find a conversation, you know? I just ... I want to socialize.

You're not going to improve your chances sitting in here, though. Pardon me for saying.

What's your name?



I know. But I go into a room with a lot of people and I can't make myself stay in it very long ...

My name's Nor. Eleanora, but no one ever calls me that.



Hello, Nor. I'm Brenda.

I'd love to sit and talk with you a while.

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, A PATTERN BEGINS TO EMERGE WHENEVER KYLE MANAGES TO BE BRENDA.



It's strange. Some nights she does what she usually does, and then other nights she finds Nor and they just spend the evening talking.

I think it's cute. They like each other a lot. I wonder if they've figured that out yet?



Are you OK? You've got a really strange expression.

Brenda, I ... want to go upstairs with you.

Oh!

Well, we can certainly do that.





Thank you for being patient with me.

You're not like the rest of them, you know.

Oh, I don't think you should say that.

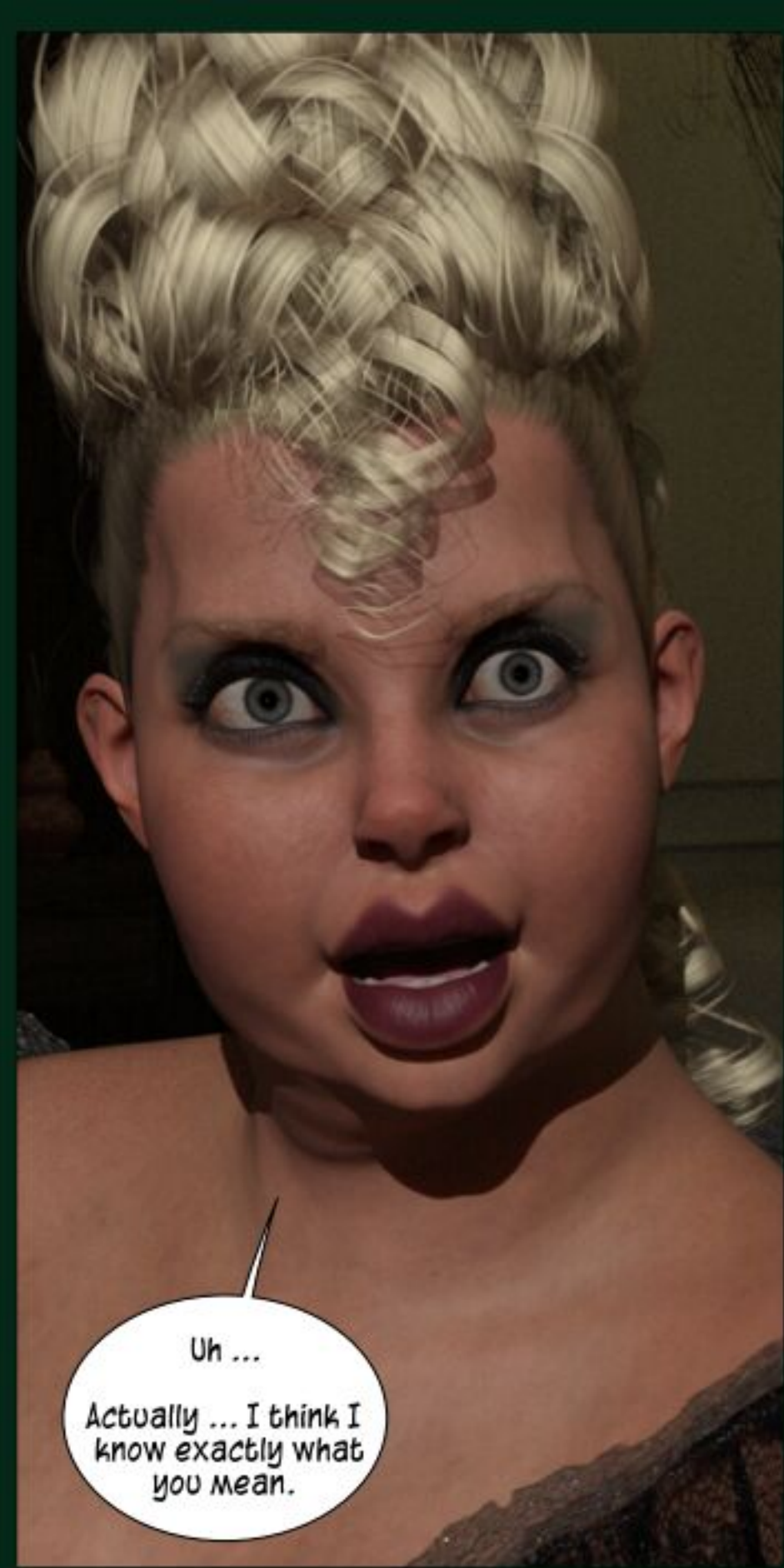
Most of them are very sweet, once you get to know them.



I didn't mean to imply they weren't.

But it's like ... I think most people don't see me. Not just here. Everywhere. Even when they talk to me, they don't really see who I am.

I guess that probably doesn't make a lot of sense.



Uh ...  
Actually ... I think I know exactly what you mean.



You're not ... if we ... uh, it's not going to change the way we talk, is it?

What a thing to be worried about!

Of course it won't change that. If we never have sex again ... if we have sex a thousand times ...

I mean, I have so many other people I want to talk to too ... but I will always want to talk to you.



MMMMH!  
aaaaahhhh!  
ohhhhhh!

TWO NIGHTS LATER, ON KYLE'S NEXT VISIT.



I'm very concerned about the power drops. You know they might--

Yes, yes ... you've told me fifty times. What the hell do you expect me to do? It's not us. Our wiring's fine.

I call the city to complain about it every week. They keep telling me they're looking into it, which is --

Shit, there he is. Going upstairs by himself. I gotta go deal with this.



Unless you'd like to deal with him.

It's not my job, Charlene.

And besides, I'm not sure you're making the right decision.

Well, if I'm the one that has to do it, then I get to say whether it's the right decision.



Hold it right there, son.



Did you think you were gonna keep doing this forever?

Out you go. You're banned. I don't want to see you anywhere in the club ever again.

But ... Nor won't ...

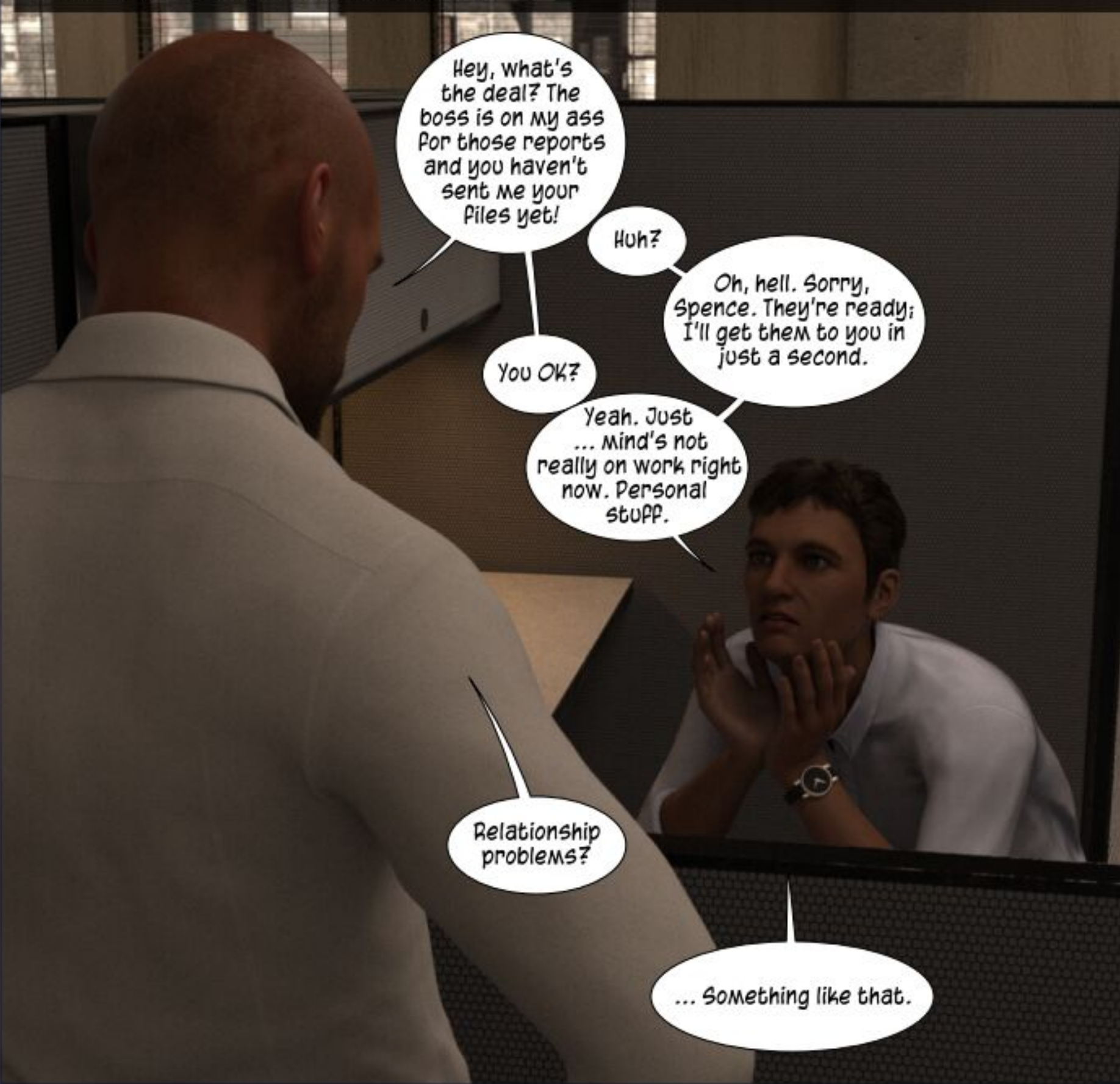
There's no "but." Do you know how many rules you broke? We have arrangements here, and they don't include just letting anybody do that who gets an idea in their head.

Now, I grant you did a good job--nobody could tell, not even me for a long time--but you know you did wrong, and now you have to pay the bill.

Out.



THE NEXT FEW DAYS GO BY FOR KYLE ...



Hey, what's the deal? The boss is on my ass for those reports and you haven't sent me your files yet!

Huh?

Oh, hell. Sorry, Spence. They're ready; I'll get them to you in just a second.

You OK?

Yeah. Just ... Mind's not really on work right now. Personal stuff.

Relationship problems?

... Something like that.

SLOWLY ...



-- sigh --

AND NOT HAPPILY ...



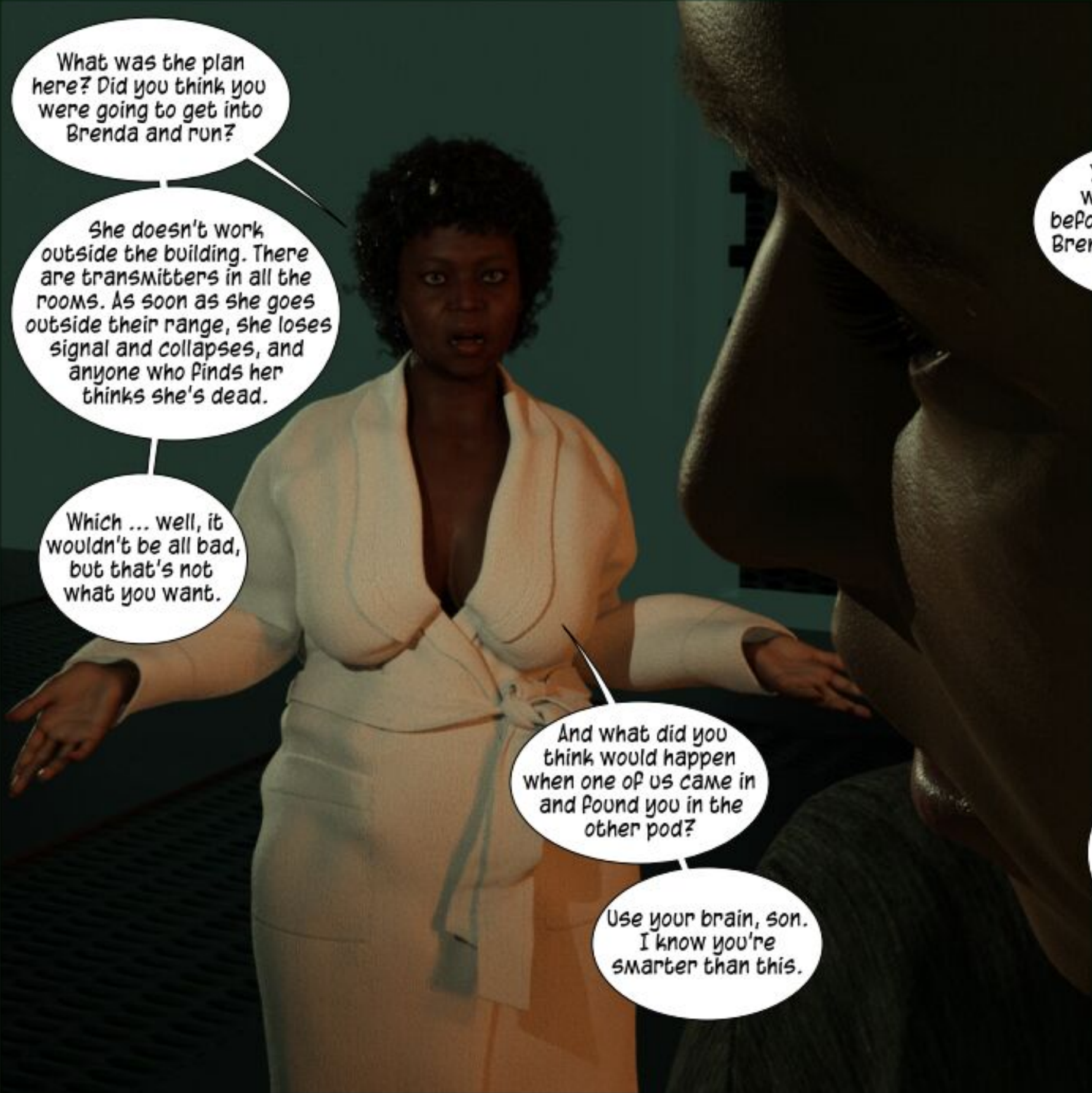
Nor's going to think Brenda lied to her ... no one else will treat her the same way and she won't know why ...

I've got to do something ...

THE VERY SMALL HOURS OF THE MORNING. THE CLUB IS JUST CLOSING FOR THE NIGHT.



-- ahem --



What was the plan here? Did you think you were going to get into Brenda and run?

She doesn't work outside the building. There are transmitters in all the rooms. As soon as she goes outside their range, she loses signal and collapses, and anyone who finds her thinks she's dead.

Which ... well, it wouldn't be all bad, but that's not what you want.

And what did you think would happen when one of us came in and found you in the other pod?

Use your brain, son. I know you're smarter than this.



I ... I was desperate, I guess.

You don't know what it was like before. People talk to Brenda. They like her. They --

Look, there's a woman who thinks Brenda's the best thing that ever happened to her. She comes just to talk to Brenda. She wouldn't talk to me in a million years.

... what did you mean, "it wouldn't be all bad?"



"I guess you probably do have a need to know. But don't spread it around, hear?"

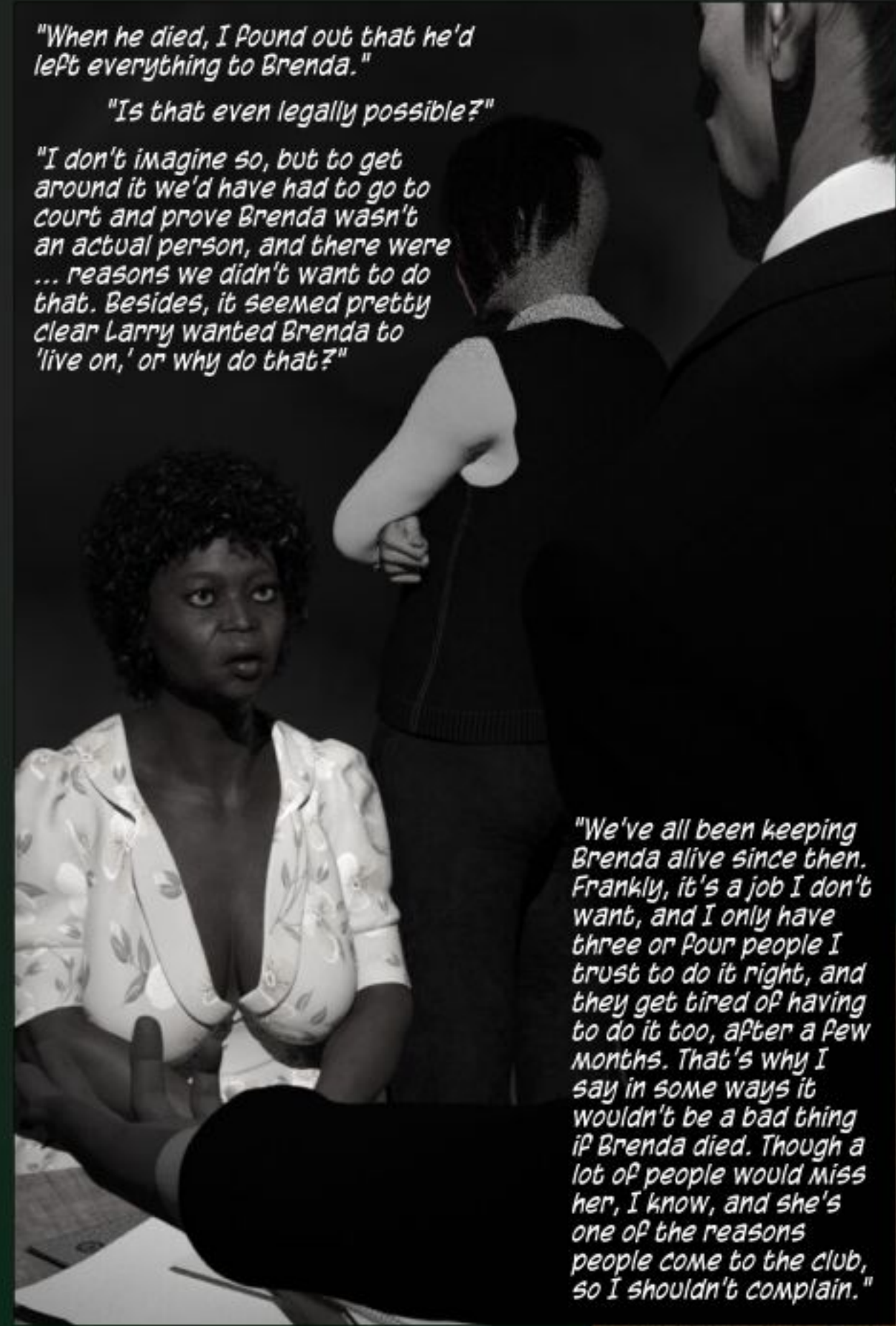
"This club, and a lot of other things, used to be owned by a man named Lawrence Hardcastle. He's no longer with us.

"I've run the club from the beginning, which means I used to work for him. He wasn't bad, as old rich men go. I'd even call him a friend."



"Brenda was designed for Larry. For his personal use only, you understand. I guess he didn't want to be himself, at least not for some things. Honestly, sometimes I think he set up the club just so Brenda would have a place to play."

"As I say, Larry was basically a good guy, but he did do one thing that I've never figured out. I don't know whether he thought it was a good joke or what, but it made my life a lot more complicated."



"When he died, I found out that he'd left everything to Brenda."

"Is that even legally possible?"

"I don't imagine so, but to get around it we'd have had to go to court and prove Brenda wasn't an actual person, and there were ... reasons we didn't want to do that. Besides, it seemed pretty clear Larry wanted Brenda to 'live on,' or why do that?"

"We've all been keeping Brenda alive since then. Frankly, it's a job I don't want, and I only have three or four people I trust to do it right, and they get tired of having to do it too, after a few months. That's why I say in some ways it wouldn't be a bad thing if Brenda died. Though a lot of people would miss her, I know, and she's one of the reasons people come to the club, so I shouldn't complain."



Like I said before: You did a good job being Brenda. I don't know how, but you seem to understand who she is.

But you also see why I can't let you run her unless I trust you a lot more than I do right now. She owns the club! I can't give the keys to somebody who might abuse that.

Now, if you were to come work here ... and I mean really work here, give up whatever you're doing now and all that ... then that'd do a lot for my trust. An awful lot.

You want to be Brenda pretty bad. Put something on the line for it.

Take as long as you need to think about it. Brenda's not going anywhere.

TWO NIGHTS LATER.

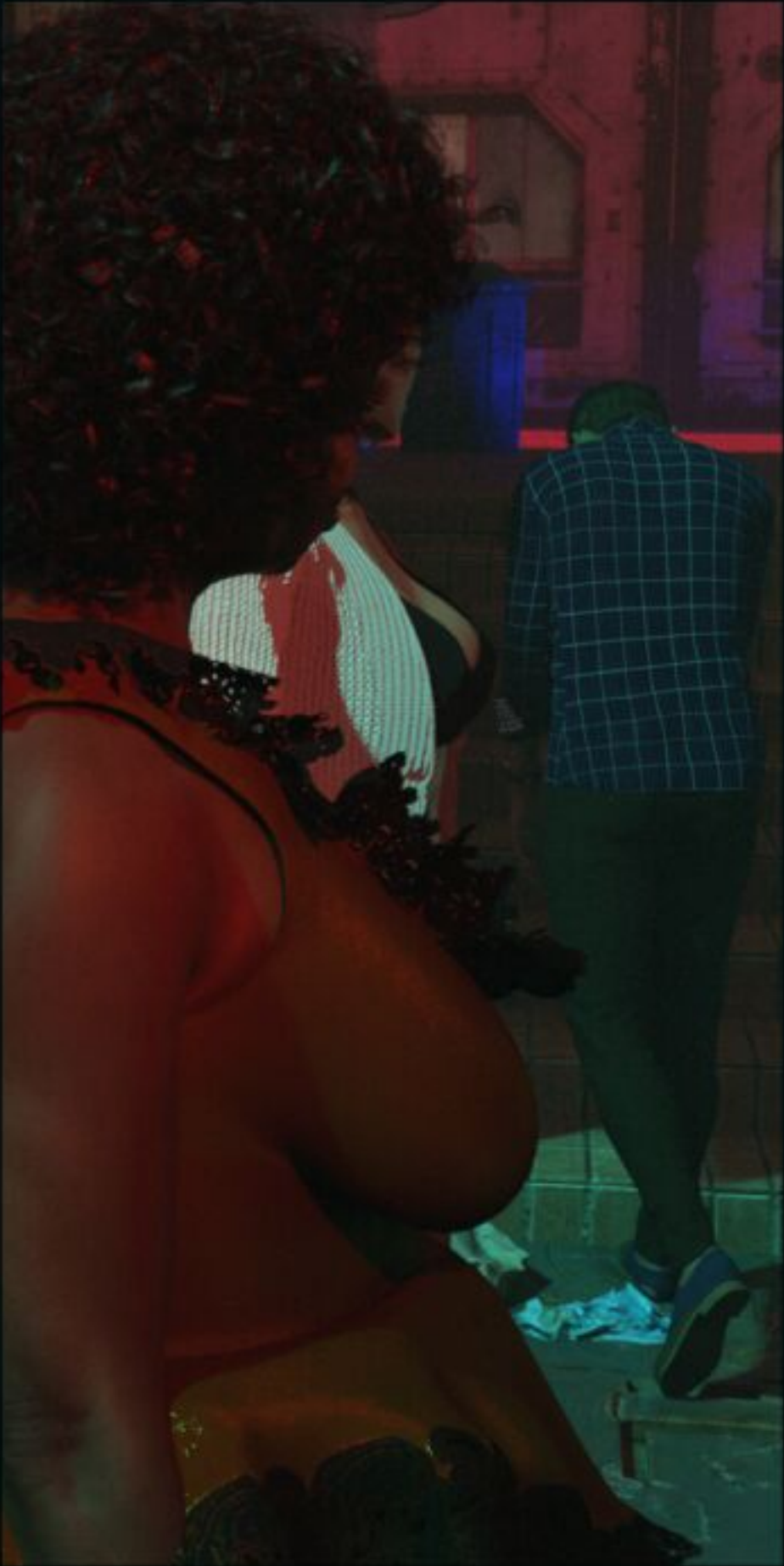
I sure hope I'm making the right decision ... I just--  
what??



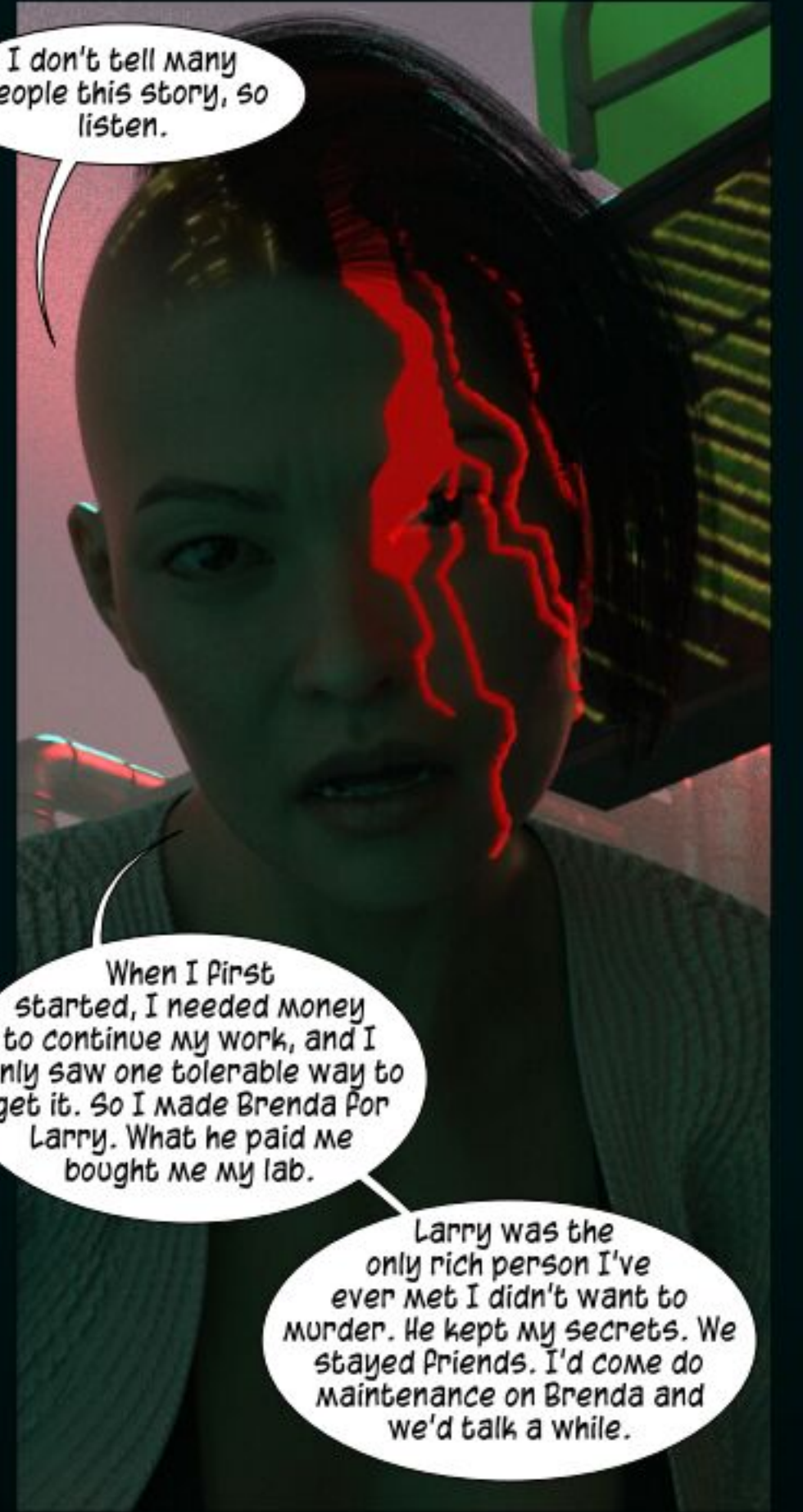
What happened?  
What do you think happened?  
There was another of those power drops and something caught Fire. Like I've been saying it would for two years now.  
Cecilia, that's not helpful ...  
Is everyone OK? Is it under control?



It's under control. The Fireships almost have it put out already.  
And everyone's Pine ... except ...  
The Pine started in Brenda's room.  
There's nothing left in there.  
... no ...



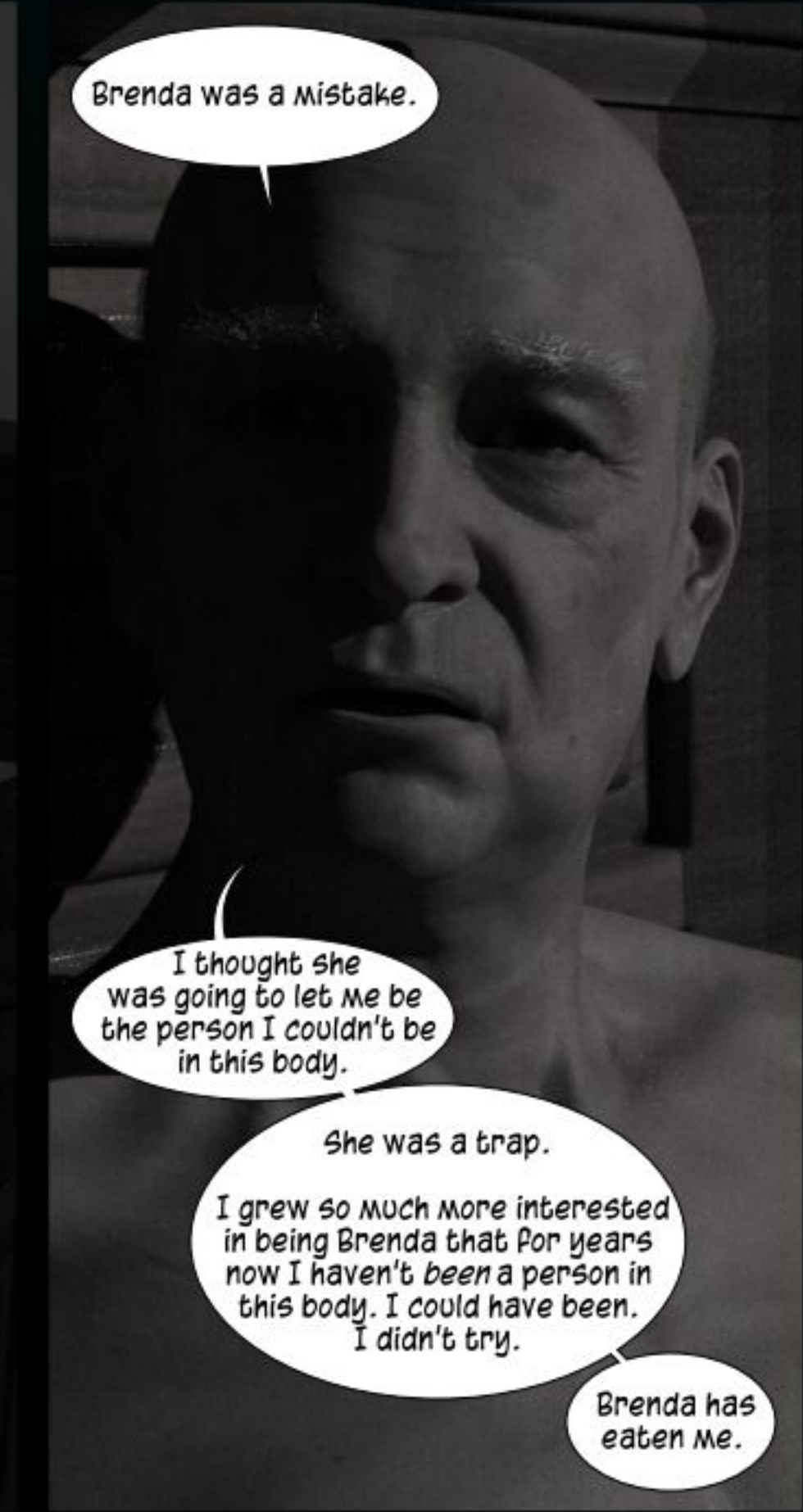
... She wasn't real, you know.  
Real enough. What do you know about it, anyway?  
About Brenda? I know everything. I made her.  
She was the first proxy I made that was actually meant to be used. First production model, you might say.  
I've made a lot of improvements since then ... they're not zone-confined anymore, things like that ... but the first one's always special.  
So why aren't you wrecked too?  
Because I know she wasn't a person. And you don't.



I don't tell many people this story, so listen.  
When I first started, I needed money to continue my work, and I only saw one tolerable way to get it. So I made Brenda for Larry. What he paid me bought me my lab.  
Larry was the only rich person I've ever met I didn't want to murder. He kept my secrets. We stayed friends. I'd come do maintenance on Brenda and we'd talk a while.



"The last time I saw him, he hadn't been Brenda in months. He hadn't wanted to give it up, I think, but he was having trouble leaving his bed."  
"He didn't tell me that, incidentally. He just got where he couldn't hide it any longer."  
You've looked better, Larry.  
That's unusually restrained for you, Cecilia. You don't need to be polite around me all of a sudden just because I happen to be dying.  
I've made peace with the dying part. The physical. There are some mental regrets I wish I could come to terms with as easily.  
Hm. Such as?  
"He wasn't the kind to have the usual boring I-should-have-done-more-for-the-world-or-been-a-better-person remorse, so I was curious what was eating him."



Brenda was a mistake.  
I thought she was going to let me be the person I couldn't be in this body.  
She was a trap.  
I grew so much more interested in being Brenda that for years now I haven't been a person in this body. I could have been. I didn't try.  
Brenda has eaten me.



If you feel that way ... why have you set up your will the way you have?  
Because I want her to continue. Even though she's destroyed me. That was hardly her fault. She deserves to live.  
And I know you'll keep to it, not just because you don't want your projects exposed ... but because you think so too.



Of course, you didn't hear any of that.

As far as you're concerned, I don't exist, nothing like the proxies exists either, and Brenda was the eccentric rich woman who lived above the club who died tragically. I'd stick to that story if I were you.

And you think that wraps it all up.

You think I can just slap myself a couple of times and go back to being a person who might as well not exist. As if nothing's happened.

No, I don't think that.

But I get impatient with people needing to be steered, especially when they're being stupid. It's not a good use of my time.

What had you decided about Charlene's offer?



... I was going to tell her no.

And you were prepared to be miserable about it. Why do you assume that it was the wrong choice? Wouldn't you have also been miserable if you'd made the other choice? Is being miserable required?

Go think, would you?



Uh ... what happens to the club, now that--?

I inherit. I've known that for years. Since long before Larry died. It'll be fine. I have no intention of interfering with it, or Charlene.

Thanks for being concerned.

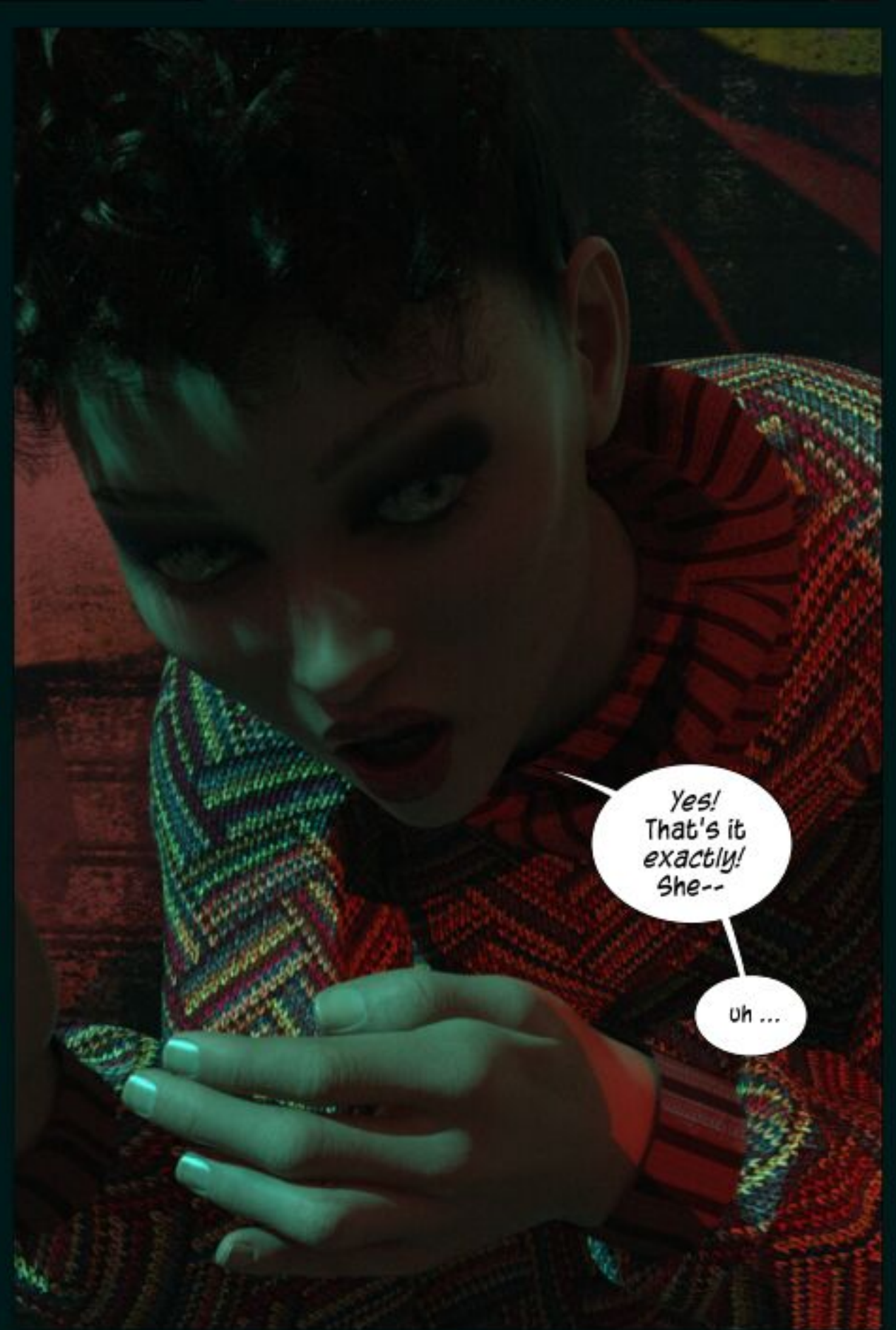


I'm sorry.

She can't be gone.

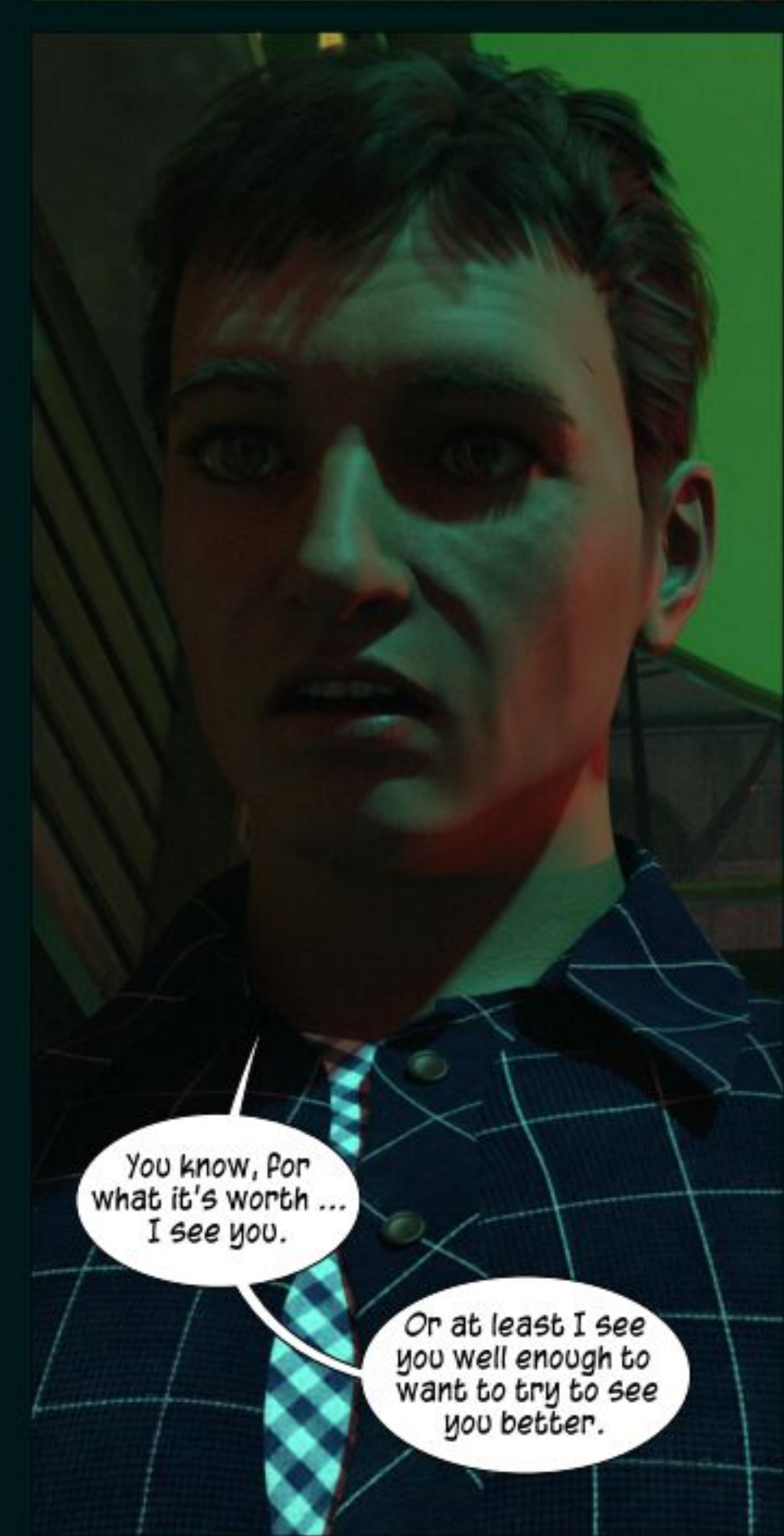
She was ... There wasn't anybody else like her.

I know. Sometimes I felt like she was the only person who ever really saw me.



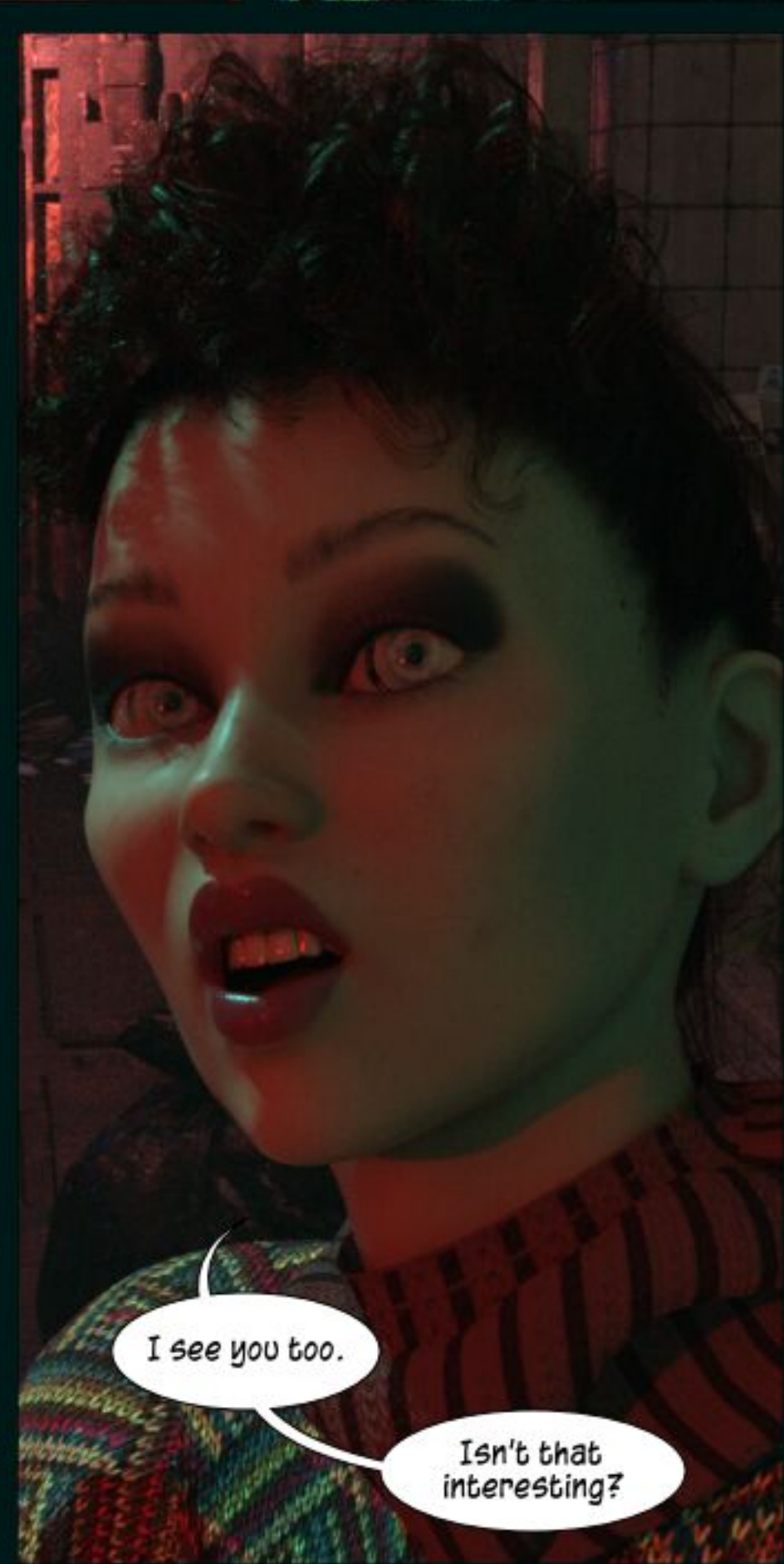
Yes! That's it exactly! She--

uh ...



You know, for what it's worth ... I see you.

Or at least I see you well enough to want to try to see you better.



I see you too.

Isn't that interesting?



Would you like to maybe get some coffee?

That'd be nice.



You knew all along he wasn't one of your customers.

I didn't. He could have gone either way.

I didn't know for certain until he told me he'd decided to turn down your offer.

He could relapse. If he ever turns up at the club and you think he has, send him to me.

Right. You'll just build him another Brenda.

No. I've got plenty of proxies to put him in, but whoever I put him in, it won't be Brenda.



There will never be another Brenda.

END