



To be completely Frank, I believe your company is overvalued, and has been since its first day of operation.

If you really were all that you say you are, you wouldn't need to be fishing for a buyer, would you?

Now, I'm prepared to start a business unit of my own in the same area, but it will be very costly--I'd be beginning from zero.

It'd be cheaper and easier to buy yours and rehabilitate it into something that actually is worth its reputation.

At any rate, I see no reason to reopen this discussion. My offer is not going to change.

SOMEONE ONCE SAID OF VANESSA SALKIND THAT, BAD AS IT WAS TO HAVE HER FROWNING AT YOU, HER NOT FROWNING AT YOU WAS WORSE. IT MEANT YOU WEREN'T SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH TO ANNOY HER.



So that's it?

Our choices are to take your offer--which is barely a third of our value and ousts all of our current leadership--or try to continue as we have and watch as you ramp up a competing business which is designed to wreck us?

And this is what you consider a Friendly negotiation?

You've heard the old saying about the carrot and the stick. I haven't ever had much use for the carrot.

In my experience, when you give someone a carrot, they just come back later asking for more carrots.

But if you use the stick, from then on they go out of their way to avoid being hit with it again.



Excuse me a moment.

Yes?

... she's here? I'll be out immediately.

I'm sorry, this is very important and I have to go attend to it. You have my offer. Feel free to respond any time within the next week.

I believe you know your way out.



So much for hoping she'd take pity on us.

If it's any consolation, I don't think any approach would have worked. You can't appeal to her better nature; she doesn't have one.

Maybe I should have made you offer her your body.

According to reports, she doesn't have sex either.

I can't imagine why not.



Dr. Steinholz. Thank you very much for coming ...

Don't try to make it nice. I want to see them, right now, or not another word. And they had better be all right.

And if you try to do anything to me, I'll make sure you regret it. I didn't come without defenses.

Honestly, there's no need to take that attitude. I'm not a sociopath.

Aren't you?



Seriously?

The body mass was roughly equivalent, they can't make trouble as easily, and if they somehow get out, no one will know to try to revert them. Likely they'd get taken to the zoo.

I don't even have a way of knowing it's really them ... they're not reacting to me at all ...

They can't see you well. The glass distorts much more from their side. Would you like me to show you their ID scans?

I wouldn't trust your system not to fake them.

I want them reverted and released. Now. I want to see them back to normal before I go any further.

Of course. I only did this because it was the only way I had of getting you here.



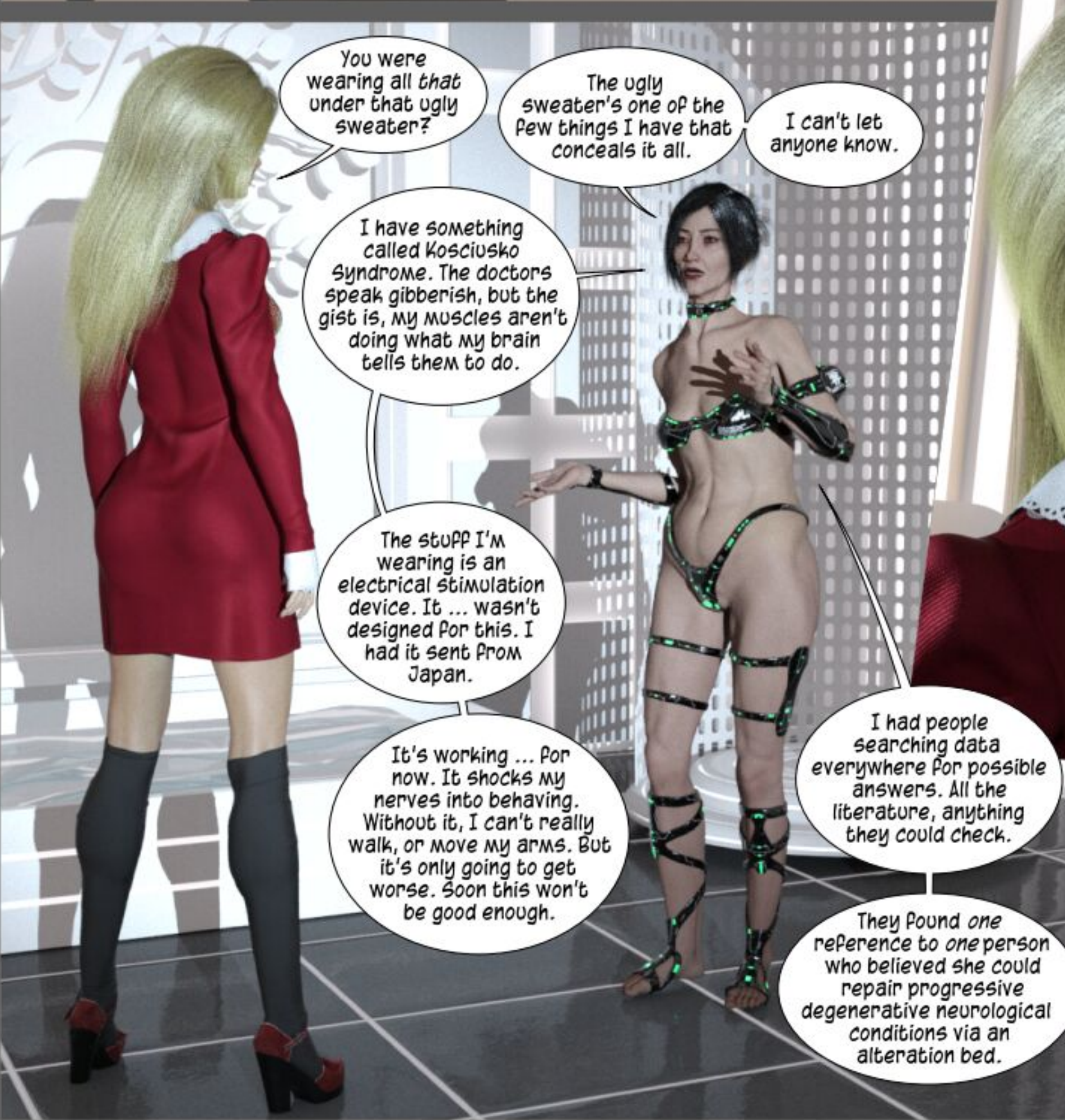
You don't have any ethics at all, do you?

Ethics are the one luxury I can rarely afford.

And you can hardly claim high ground. I heard what you did to those people from Morphic.

That was about survival.

So's this.



You were wearing all that under that ugly sweater?

The ugly sweater's one of the few things I have that conceals it all.

I can't let anyone know.

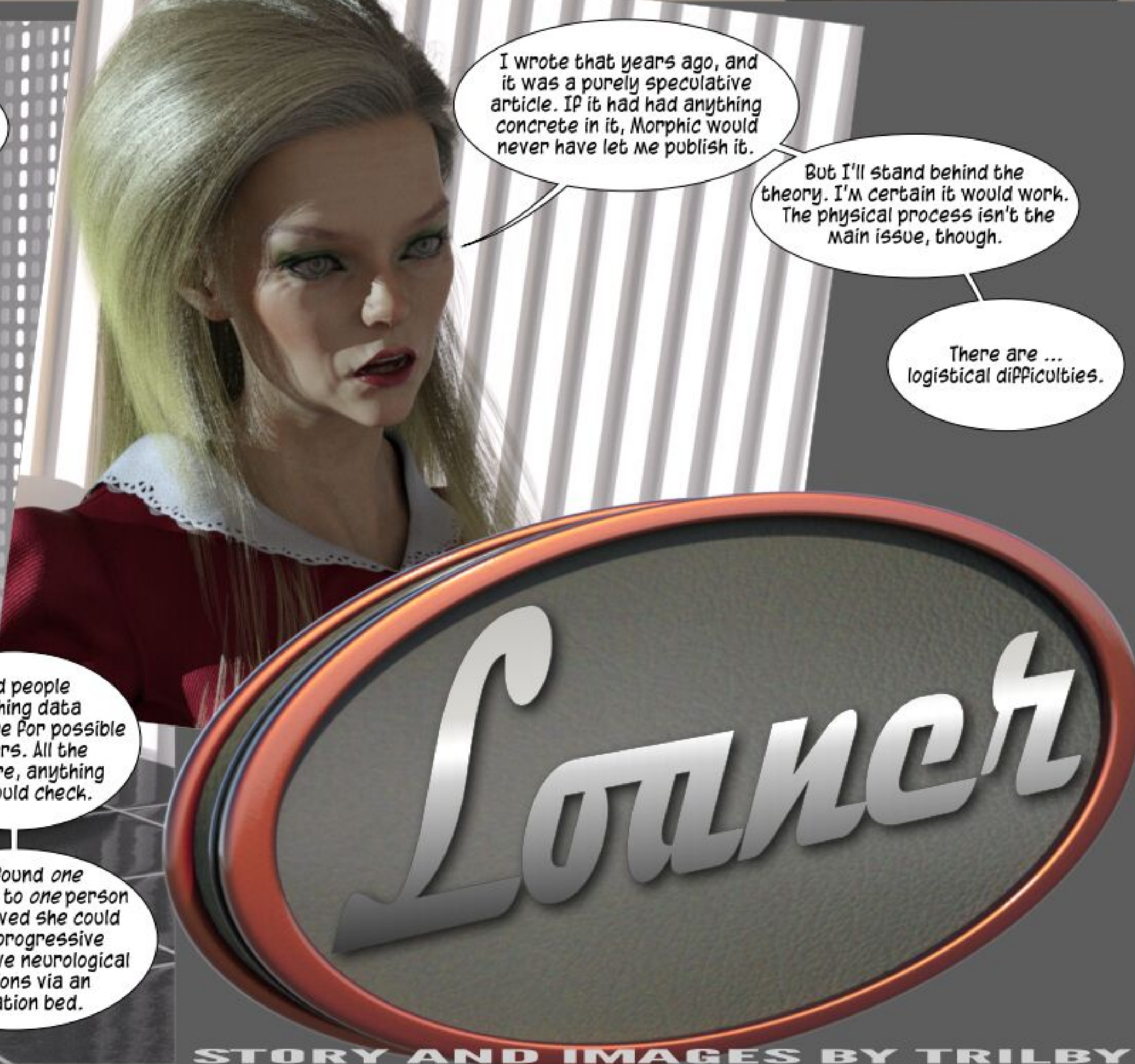
I have something called Kosciusko Syndrome. The doctors speak gibberish, but the gist is, my muscles aren't doing what my brain tells them to do.

The stuff I'm wearing is an electrical stimulation device. It ... wasn't designed for this. I had it sent from Japan.

It's working ... for now. It shocks my nerves into behaving. Without it, I can't really walk, or move my arms. But it's only going to get worse. Soon this won't be good enough.

I had people searching data everywhere for possible answers. All the literature, anything they could check.

They found one reference to one person who believed she could repair progressive degenerative neurological conditions via an alteration bed.



I wrote that years ago, and it was a purely speculative article. If it had had anything concrete in it, Morphic would never have let me publish it.

But I'll stand behind the theory. I'm certain it would work. The physical process isn't the main issue, though.

There are ... logistical difficulties.





That's not acceptable!

There is no one I can rely upon to run things competently for that long.

Well, it's not negotiable.

It can't be done quickly. That's the point. Not if the regrowth is to succeed. About six months.

And you have to stay soft the whole time. Do you know what that means? Your immune system is almost completely disabled. This procedure would make you especially vulnerable. You must be in a sterile isolation bed. There is no point in regenerating your nervous system if you're going to die of some cheap rhinovirus midway through.

No one you trust enough, you mean.

Isn't that what I said?

So you want a cure, but you don't want it badly enough to risk losing a little money while you're away?

It wouldn't be a little money. You don't understand the level we're talking about here. One or two bad decisions ... there could be nothing for me to come back to.

Actually, there's no point in any of this, because I haven't agreed to do it, and I'm not inclined to. And you know perfectly well nothing you can do will make me. If I can keep Morphic at bay for years, I can certainly handle you.

... I was told that the reason you fled Morphic was that you felt their tech wasn't being used to help people.

My tech. I invented almost all of it. They don't like people to hear that.

I see what you're trying to do. But there's some people who deserve help and some who don't.

And you have the gall to tweak me for ethics?

You're going to look me in the eye and tell me I deserve a death by inches as I become trapped in my own body? You'd condemn someone to--

Mother? There's someone at the main desk who--



Claude! I am with someone. And you know better than to speak like that in front of company! Now say it right.

Uh ... Mommy, there's a man at the desk who wants to see you.

I think he's real mad ...

Claude, I'm very disappointed in you. You barge in when I've got a guest, you forget your manners, you were sloppy with your makeup this morning--I can see razor shadow ...

Do you want me to tell Ellen you've been bad when she comes for your play date tonight?

No, Mommy.

Then start behaving properly.



That's Brad Halper at the desk, isn't it?

Yeth, Mommy.

He can go to hell. No, don't tell him that, stupid thing! Tell Melissa to tell him I'm not here.

Now apologize to Ms. Helga for interrupting us.

I'm very thorry, Mith Helga.



This is the kind of thing that makes me ask why I should help you.

Don't you dare judge me.

I knew when I married that Albert would insist on sticking his dick in me. What I didn't know was that he'd peel it was his prerogative to stick it into anything else he wanted to as well.

I don't know if Claude would have taken after his father, because I've never given him a chance to.

If you keep treating him like that, one day he's going to snap, and you'll be lucky if you live through it.



No, he won't. He wants the money too much.

He knows he inherits, and he knows he won't get it if he murders me.

When Claude was sixteen and I had his sex changed, I discussed it with him first. I told him he could either go along with it or he could get disowned and make his way on his own. He went along with it.

When I told him how I was going to treat him, he went along with that as well. He hates it, of course. But he's being patient.

You changed his sex just to humiliate him?

No, I changed his sex to keep him out of trouble. No settlements, no paternity suits or hush money ... I don't know if you understand. When you're this rich, you don't have any friends. Everyone's looking for a piece of the cash.

Once I'm dead, he can have his dick back and get in as much trouble as he wants.

Maybe I'll have knocked enough of his father out of him by then that he won't get into any trouble. I wouldn't bet on it, though.



But this just goes back to what I was saying. I can't trust anybody. I need to manage my affairs in person.

Maybe so, but I can't change the science for you. And you can't be in two places at once--

--although--

Hmm. I have an idea.



Wait! What are you going to do?

It's premature to tell you. It may not work out. It may not be possible.

Give me a few days. I'll let you know, one way or another.



I don't know you.

Heiga Steinholz.

Steinholz--?

Prove it.

I've always wondered how you managed to keep brain tissue viable during dormant periods. There should be significant neuron decay.

... Come on in.



I thought you were older.

I am.

I hadn't been told you had an appliance arm.

It's fairly new. Makes some of the work a lot easier.

Come downstairs.



I also wasn't sure whether you were in some Morpheic gulag somewhere.

No one's sighted you for, what, five years now?

I was too visible when I first left them. I had no idea they'd react the way they did. I had to go seriously covert in a hurry, or I would have been in their gulag. Or dead.

They did eventually find me, even so, and I ... responded ... in a way they couldn't ignore.

They're leaving me alone now, but they won't admit it. They want to keep me thinking they're after me, so I won't take the tech somewhere else ... or take them to court.

But it's still safer to keep a very low profile.



Grab any chair. I can't sit down until I shower. There's no way to clean out the tissue vats without a mess.

A class six scanner! Not very many of these around. You know, with a couple of add-ons you can convert one of these into an alteration bed ...

I don't really have a need for one.

So why are we finally meeting? Not that it's not interesting.



I have something I need your help on.

But before I explain, let me tell you up front: There's at least one reason it's a horrible idea.



A FEW MINUTES LATER.

So she just wants a loaner?

I'm not a car rental agency.

Of course not, but you put people in proxies for short-term use ...

That's not actually my business model.



My customers don't know what they want.

Or they do, but don't want to admit it.

If they did, they'd just go get changed in one of your beds and have done.

They don't figure it out until they spend time in one of my proxies, and by that point they've gotten attached to that experience, and it turns into a permanent-rental kind of situation.

Still ... it'd be interesting to see if it could work.

The big problem would be maintaining enough of a neural connection for her to drive the proxy while still allowing your stuff to do the regen.

At the very least it'll need a completely new crib design.



What's the reason it's a horrible idea?

The client is Vanessa Salkind.

Ugh.

Exactly. And she can't be trusted.

Yet you want me to get entangled with her.

Not without appropriate precautions, no.



Right now she's playing nice because she knows I'm her only hope.

But the woman doesn't do gratitude and she has no sense of honor. As soon as we're finished, she'll start thinking about what we do and how she can make money from it. And she'll try to blackmail us into cooperating.

I'm beyond fear of exposure at this point, but it wouldn't make my life any simpler if the situation with Morpheic were to heat up again. And I'm sure you value your privacy for the same kinds of reasons.

If we do this, we have to do it in a way that ensures she's not a continual problem for us afterward.



So you are thinking of a permanent rental.

That's one possible approach. I can think of a few others.

Interested enough to keep discussing it?

Let me go take a shower first.



uuuuh ...  
aaaaaahh ...  
aaah ...  
oh ...  
oh ...

OOOHHHHHHHHH!!!



You really are the best sissy.

Are you all worked up now, little girl?

Do you need to?

Yeth, Mith Ellen ...

Do you want help?

... Yeth, Mith Ellen.



Ask.

Pleath?

You can do better than that.

May I, pleath, Mith Ellen?

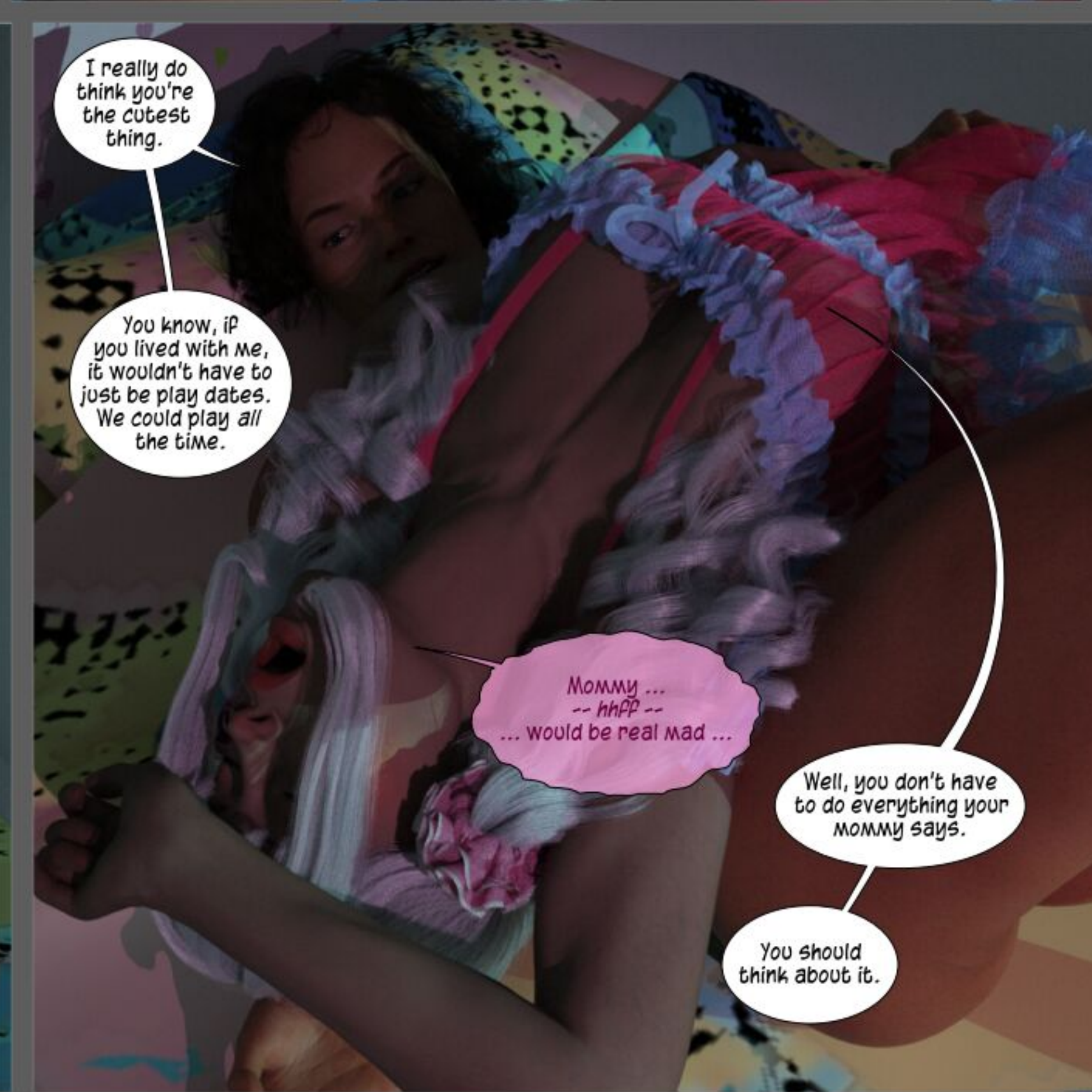
May you what?

May I --uuuuh-- may I pleath cum, Mith Ellen ...

Say "pretty please."

Pretty pleath Mith Ellen may I cum pleath I need to

OOOHHHHHHH!!!



I really do think you're the cutest thing.

You know, if you lived with me, it wouldn't have to just be play dates. We could play all the time.

Mommy ... -- hrrp -- ... would be real mad ...

Well, you don't have to do everything your MOMMY says.

You should think about it.

THREE DAYS LATER.



Ms. Salkind, this is Cecilia Wu.

I don't exist. I want to make that clear. You don't know me.

If you can work with that, then I think we've got a solution for you.



A QUICK TOUR.

The proxies are Pully realized human bodies. They pass medical scans. They can be given IDs and so Porth. They're alive in every sense except sentience.

Your timing is good; I happen to have several on hand right now, which is unusual.

Preexisting ones? When Dr. Steinholtz described this, I was expecting you'd make one that ... ah ... looked like me.

I could, but it takes me four months to grow a new proxy. You already have to wait several weeks while we build the special bed ...

I see your point.

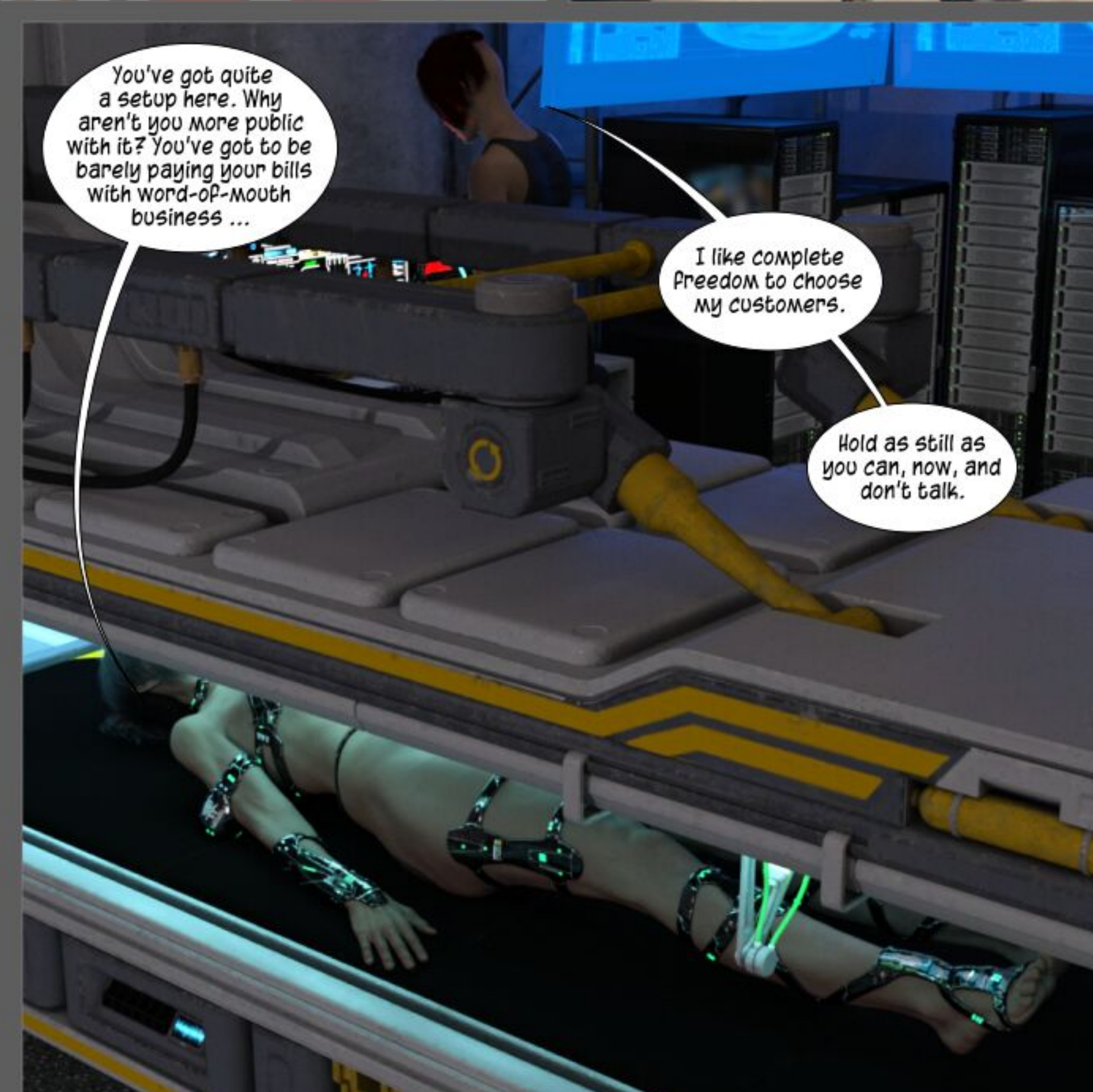
Come into the office. I want to do a scan.



Do I need to take all this opp? It's tricky, and you'll need to help me move ...

Hmm?

... No, it should be all right. They don't cover enough skin to interPere.



You've got quite a setup here. Why aren't you more public with it? You've got to be barely paying your bills with word-of-mouth business ...

I like complete freedom to choose my customers.

Hold as still as you can, now, and don't talk.



So how much is this going to cost me?

You know what they say: As long as you have your health ...

It might not be that bad.

We'll need you to pay the cost of the new bed--that's Presh overhead--but, under the circumstances, I'm prepared to waive the cost for use of the proxy.

We think three weeks to build and test the bed. In the meantime you should work on setting up the identity for the proxy. I suggest you suddenly hire an executive assistant.



Ms. Salkind?

Is ... Uh ... is something wrong?



Your play date tonight is cancelled, Ellen.

You're out of the rotation. Permanently.

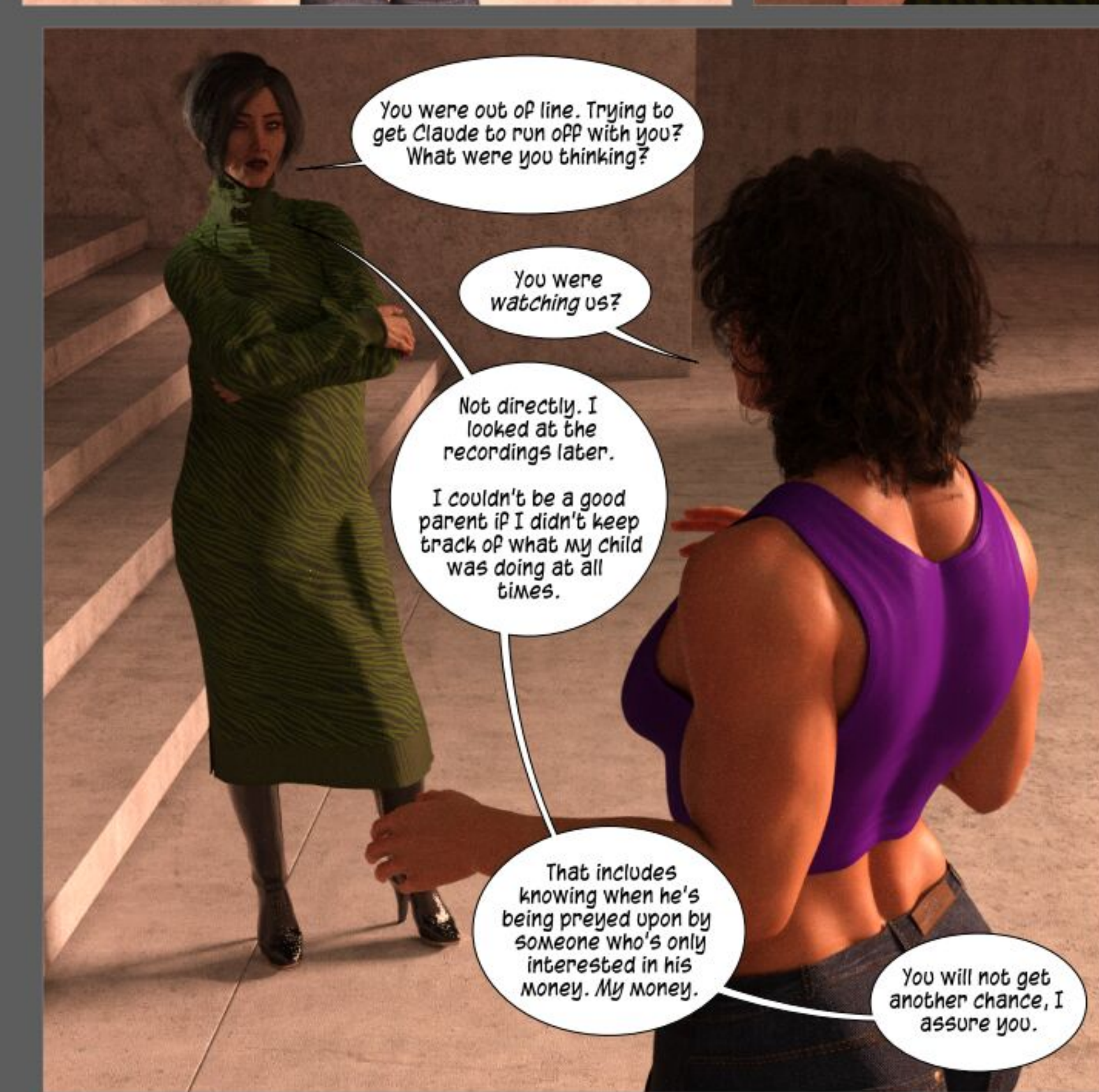
I don't want to see you here again.



You're firing me?

Why? What did I do?

I think you know.



You were out of line. Trying to get Claude to run off with you? What were you thinking?

You were watching us?

Not directly. I looked at the recordings later.

I couldn't be a good parent if I didn't keep track of what my child was doing at all times.

That includes knowing when he's being preyed upon by someone who's only interested in his money. My money.

You will not get another chance, I assure you.



You bitch! Where do you get off second-guessing me? Telling me what I'm interested in? You don't have any idea! Maybe I actually love him, did you ever consider that?

You know, you've pucked up his head so badly that if he ever gets off his leash, he's going to end up with the first woman who's halfway nice to him. You think I'm trouble, wait till you see what's out there. He could do a lot worse than me.

He could do a lot better too.

If Claude ends up in a relationship with someone while I'm alive--and that is hardly a given--it will be someone I choose. Someone who satisfies my standards. Not Claude's.

Now get out. And don't try to see him. If you're caught on this property I'll have you arrested.

SIXTEEN DAYS LATER.



You never did tell me how you keep the brain from deteriorating when they're dormant.

So the proxies dream?

... I never thought of it that way.

Oh ... there's a routine that runs, it fires off neurons semi-randomly, so they all get exercise.

Speaking of deterioration, I'm still not confident in this seat.

Well, you didn't like my usual crib design.

It's not that I didn't like it, it's just you had to half-freeze them to avoid atrophy if they were going to be in there long-term, and that kills signal efficiency.

Atrophy's always a problem. This seat might be the best thing I've come up with, though. I'm thinking of using this as my approach from here on.

If the muscle stimulation works.



How's the signal?

Readings are good.

This is the part I'm not confident in. I'm used to physical connections.

Got to get you an alteration tank to try out. All vibes.

I think that may be why I've avoided them.

Still, again, if this works, I'm keeping it. My customers hate the neural suits.



It'll work.

So we're basically finished! What do you usually do for a test cycle? Put Misty in?

Can't use Misty, she's a proxy.

You're kidding.

She hasn't been out of that proxy in years.

There's another person you haven't met. Name's Birdie. I can usually talk her into testing.

I was thinking you might do it.

Oh ... yes, I don't see why not.

Not today, though. We still have to haul the bed over to the main area and hook it into the system.



So ... do you think the proxy effect is going to be enough?

... Normally, I'd say yes.

But a woman who can wear a full-body electrical sex toy all day and not show any reaction ... I'm not sure about her sexual response.

Heh. I thought I had better not ask her whether she knew what that was intended for.

Still, we also know her nervous system isn't what it's supposed to be right now. That makes a difference.

Yes ... and the proxy connection won't have that issue. She'll be feeling some things for the first time in a long while.

But, honestly ... I can't be sure.



Well, we knew we were likely going to end up doing stage two no matter what.

And she's given us exactly the hook we need.

Oh?

This morning. I'm going to need to get on it right away.

I can do the test run ... but after that, I'm going to be impossible to see in person for quite a while.

Are you all right with getting her into the proxy and oriented and so on without me here?

Sure. She's not even close to being the worst customer I've ever had.

TWO DAYS LATER.



Hey, Doc! Back to yourself again.

I'm relieved. I was a little worried you were going to stay with that other look.

Not a chance. I prefer looking like myself whenever possible.

Also, every day I spent connecting that appearance with the name "Helga Steinholz" weakened both my own secrecy and the identity I usually use it for.

It turned out to be the right thing to do, though; my instinct not to show Salkind my own face was sound.

Hello, Jer. Thank you for coming.

I apologized to Flux for getting her caught in this mess, but I haven't had a chance to apologize to you.

Oh, it wasn't so bad. Being a cat was kind of fun.

And we got back at them by making as much noise as we could during sex. How were they going to stop us?

Still, it shouldn't have happened. Flux knows she takes some risks by being associated with my work, but I don't consider it acceptable to use her that way ... and you're a complete bystander, so that's even worse.

It's intolerable, and I don't intend to let it pass.



Which brings me to why I wanted to see both of you.

How would the two of you feel about an extended research trip overseas? I have a colleague in Munich who will extend credentials.

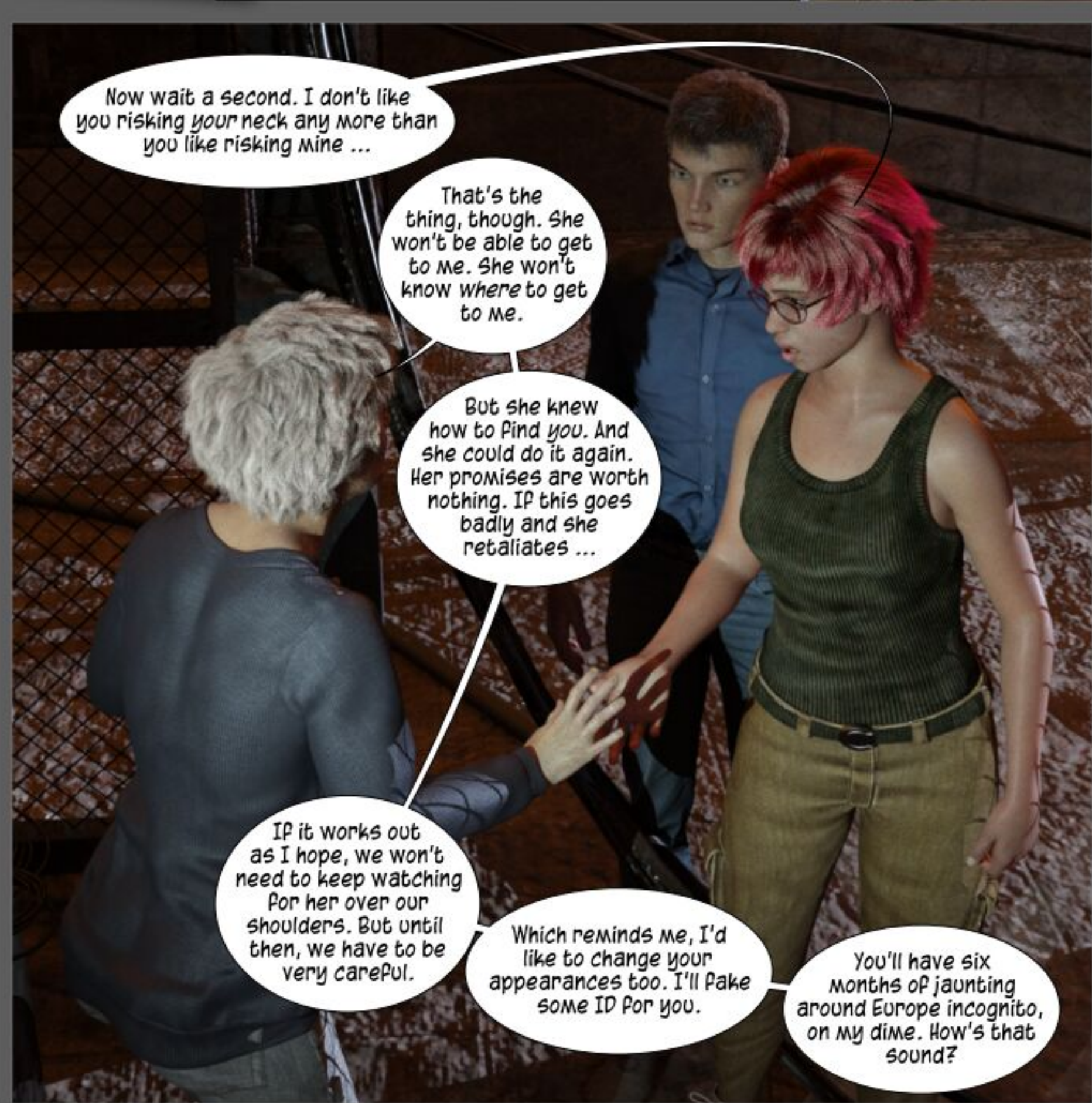
Jer, I realize it wouldn't work out well with your job, but Flux tells me you were on the verge--

Yeah. I'd have given notice soon anyway. As it turns out, I didn't have to. I couldn't come up with a good reason why I went missing for a week. I sure wasn't going to try to tell them I was busy being a puma.

Oh. Well, I apologize for that too, though it doesn't sound like condolences are necessary.

OK, but, Doc, what's this really about? I know you. Why do you want us cleared out?

Because of Salkind. I'm going to be ... engaged ... for an extended period taking care of that matter. I'm going to close up the lab, and I won't be available, so it's better if you two aren't vulnerable.



Now wait a second. I don't like you risking your neck any more than you like risking mine ...

That's the thing, though. She won't be able to get to me. She won't know where to get to me.

But she knew how to find you. And she could do it again. Her promises are worth nothing. If this goes badly and she retaliates ...

If it works out as I hope, we won't need to keep watching for her over our shoulders. But until then, we have to be very careful.

Which reminds me, I'd like to change your appearances too. I'll take some ID for you.

You'll have six months of jaunting around Europe incognito, on my dime. How's that sound?

TWO DAYS LATER.



Mommy! I don't need a babysitter!

Nonsense. You're too young to be trusted alone for an hour, let alone for months.

You need to be looked after at all times.

Mother, I'm twenty-four years old.

I know you like to forget that--or you like to pretend you forget that--but I'm an adult. I can take care of myself.



Talk to me like that again, little girl, and I will wash your mouth with soap.

As far as I'm concerned, the only thing your being twenty-four means is that you get into bigger and more difficult kinds of trouble.

And your little friend Ellen made it clear I can't trust any of that lot to watch over you, either.

Now: you will have a governess while I'm away, and you will cooperate with her. No, more than that: you're going to be an angel. A perfect princess. If I get a bad report from her, you'll regret it in ways you can't imagine. Do you understand?

-- Sigh --  
Yeth, Mommy.



Claude, this is your new governess, Ms. Elsa.

Claude is a bit shy.

Hello, Claude.

... Hello, Mith Eitha.



Now, in addition to being closely supervised, you'll find that Claude needs to be kept entertained. When she's bored she gets petulant. She does have regular duties during the day, but the rest of the time, you have to watch out.

Don't worry. I have plenty of diversions in mind.

THE NEXT DAY.



Dr. Steinholz isn't here?

There wasn't any need. She's never done the intake. This is My Facility.

Don't worry, though; she'll be monitoring your progress closely.

We shouldn't waste time. There's a lot of prep to do.

I'm going to need you to completely empty your bladder and bowels. Then you'll want an antiseptic shower.

I'm afraid we're also going to have to get rid of your hair.



I must look absolutely ridiculous.

No one will see.

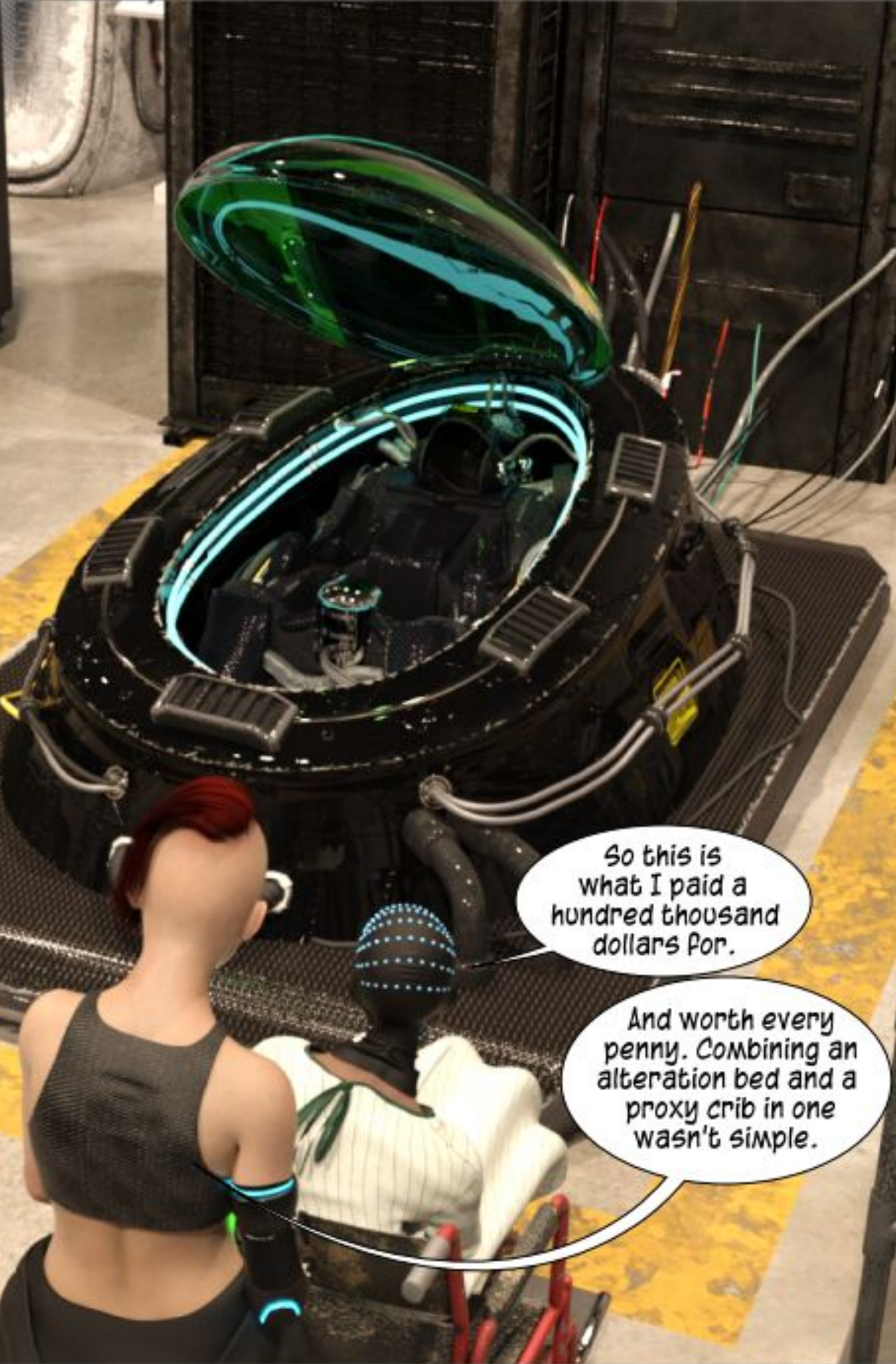
It'd be even worse if it was the full suit.

We had to go a different way for you than for my usual customers. The suit would interfere with the alterations.

To drive the proxy, the bed needs to capture nerve signals from your body and your brain. For the body, we can get by with transmission pickup instead of contact pads, but not for the brain. Especially since your body is making deteriorated impulses, so brain signal's even more important for you.

Which is why you shaved my head?

Yes. I didn't want to risk bad contact. We'll turn off hair growth while you're in there with the alteration functions, and regrow it from scratch when you're done.



So this is what I paid a hundred thousand dollars for.

And worth every penny. Combining an alteration bed and a proxy crib in one wasn't simple.



When you enter the proxy, you'll be immersed in a thick liquid. Don't panic. It only takes a few seconds for the tank to drain.



This is ... ah ... going to take some getting used to ...

Watch your step. The bottom's curved and your balance is probably off.



Do you make all your ... proxies ... with bodies like this?

Like what?

... My mother would have described this as a 'baby-making body.'

You were tempted to say something worse.

Anatomy isn't destiny.

And it's the format my usual kind of customers prefer.

Who are your usual kind of customers?

Men.

Come over here, I've got some hair for you.



You can go pretty much anywhere in the city, but don't leave it. If you go out of range, the whole thing's blown.

If you start to feel dizzy, that's your inner ear telling you the signal's failing. Get out of wherever you are, quickly.

Let's see. I've warned you about that, I've told you about the hair situation ... I think that's all you need. You're on your own for the next six months.

I recommend you spend the rest of the afternoon buying some clothes.

I was just thinking about that.

THE NEXT DAY.



Uh ... good morning, Ms. Pembroke.

I'm--  
I know who you are, Claude.



You're her useless sissy son. Aren't you supposed to be talking like you're five?

Well, never mind that. She says you're supposed to help me out, tell me what I need to know, and so on.

Just remember, she put me in charge of this place ... and as far as I'm concerned, that means I'm in charge of you too.

Now, show me where the office is. We've got a lot to get done today.

THE END OF THE AFTERNOON.



Seems to me like we've covered everything major ...

I think so.

And just in time, too ... Mr. Brent should be coming in any minute ...

Yes. Do you want me to stay?

Good lord, no! What would he think? Go on, get out of here before he sees you.



Mr. Brent?  
I'm Lisa Pembroke.

Yes, the girl warned me I was getting an "executive assistant."

It's not like that, I assure you. Her absence was urgent and affects the entire operation. All her business is going through me for the moment.

And I also assure you I'm quite competent.

Um. That's as may be, but it still stings a bit.



And I don't like doing business with strangers. Of course, if we were to get to know each other ...

How would you feel about my buying you dinner?



I ... uh ... Mr. Brent, I don't think that'd be appropriate, do you?

I don't see why not. Business associates have dinner together all the time.

It might be inappropriate if I were seen as trying to influence her assistant ... but you're in charge right now, yes?

Slime!

Blackmail, or very near it. And I know what he thinks this will lead to.

But ...

No one would ever have tried this with me in my normal appearance. It's not just that they're all scared of me ... they don't think I'm attractive.

There's something to be said for having that tool ... and it's not like he isn't attractive ...

No, I can't do it. ... Can I?

... All right, Mr. Brent. I accept.



But I'm *only* having dinner with you. You understand? This does not lead anywhere.

Absolutely.



Claude? Is something wrong, dear?

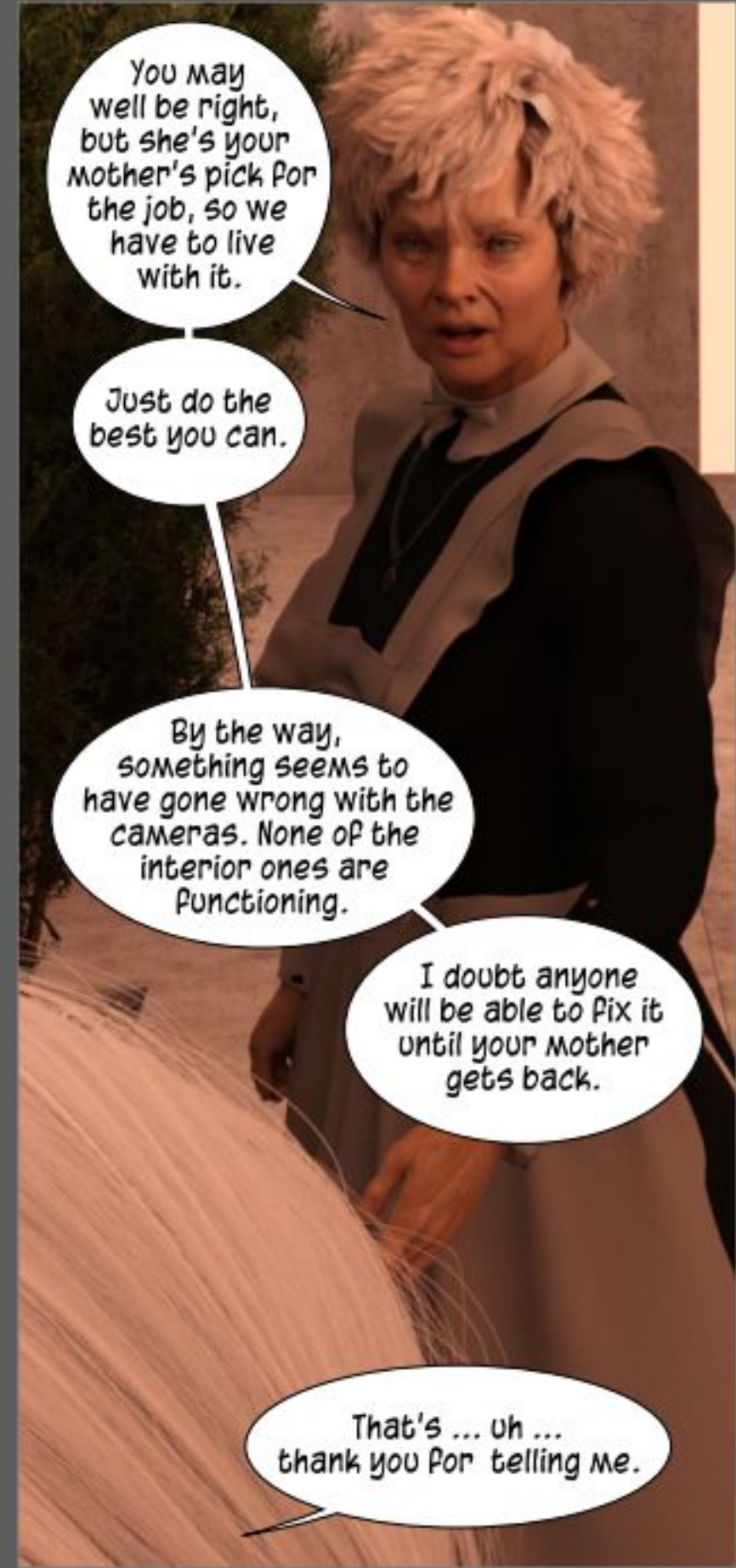
Oh!

I'm sorry, Mith Eltha ...

You don't have to talk like that around me, Claude. I'm not going to tell your mother.

... Oh ... thank you.

I'm just not sure about Ms. Pembroke. I don't know if she knows what she's doing ...



You may well be right, but she's your mother's pick for the job, so we have to live with it.

Just do the best you can.

By the way, something seems to have gone wrong with the cameras. None of the interior ones are functioning.

I doubt anyone will be able to fix it until your mother gets back.

That's ... uh ... thank you for telling me.



I assumed you'd want to know.

I don't like being watched either.





I can't get over how this all feels.

Nothing hurts! Everything works the way it's supposed to!

Food tastes better now. There shouldn't be any reason for that! And alcohol ... well, OK, I might be a little drunk, but I can't remember the last time I even bothered to try--

Wait, I think he just said something important.



I'm sorry, what was that?

I said it just seems like a shame.

What does?

We've had a nice dinner; some great conversation; a couple of drinks ... it seems a shame to let the evening end now.

Mr. Brent, you made me a promise!

That I knew you'd break.

I did, and I'll keep it ... but it feels like a missed opportunity, don't you think?



Maybe ... but I have a professional reputation to consider!

No, you don't. Nobody knows who you are. Anyway, in some of the circles where we do business, this is the kind of thing that improves your reputation.

I doubt that.

No. There is no way I am going to bed with you. Forget it.



OHH!  
OHH!  
OHH!  
OHH!

OHH!

THREE DAYS LATER.



... and we got the contract renewal from Mr. Brent this morning, so we don't have to think about that for another two years ...

So it did work ... I mean, he probably would have renewed anyway, but that doesn't matter ...

God, that felt so good ... I don't know what's going on ... I never expected to actually enjoy sex ...

Certainly never did with Albert, or any of the ones before him ... did I just happen to get someone who was really good? Or is it this body?

Feel like the only way to find out is to try again with somebody else and see what happens ...

... Are you even listening?

Sorry. What was that last part again?



I said, the rep from Synergistic Systems will be here in a minute.

They're sending someone really junior, and I think it's a little insulting.

We want it badly, so we'll end up making a deal anyway, but I feel like we should make them sweat a little. Show them they can't take us for granted.

Oh ... Yes. I think that's sound.

You had better get out of sight now.



Claude has been paying more attention than I thought, all these years. He knows the business very well. Much better than I expected.

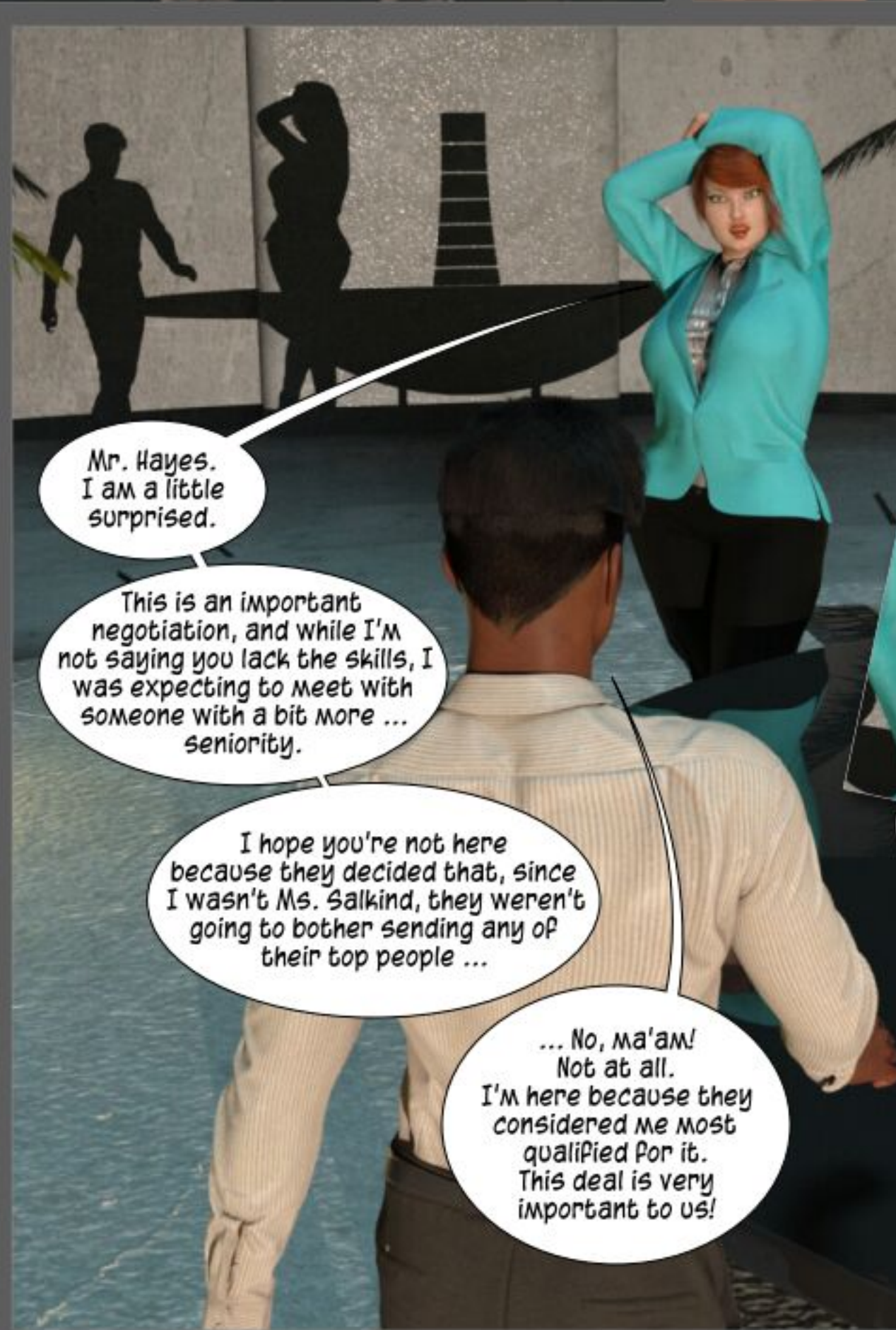
I'm going to have to be very careful about him when I get back to being me. He might want to try to take over ... before I'm even close to ready to let him.



Ms. Pembroke?

I'm Siv Hayes, Prom Synergistic.

Oh my god.



Mr. Hayes. I am a little surprised.

This is an important negotiation, and while I'm not saying you lack the skills, I was expecting to meet with someone with a bit more ... seniority.

I hope you're not here because they decided that, since I wasn't Ms. Salkind, they weren't going to bother sending any of their top people ...

... No, ma'am! Not at all. I'm here because they considered me most qualified for it. This deal is very important to us!



I'm glad to hear it, but I still feel a little doubtful.

It would certainly help if I knew you better. I hate doing business with strangers.

Maybe we should get to know each other. On a personal level. On an intimate personal level.



You're ... uh ...

You're asking to ...

... I'm not sure that's a good idea ...

Well, if you're not really invested in this deal, that's all right, I understand ...



Mmm. This is going to be fun.

He clearly doesn't have the slightest clue he's hot. How is that possible?



I think you should know ... I ... uh ... haven't had a lot of experience ...

I'm sure you'll figure it out.



OOOOHHHHHHHHH!!

THREE MONTHS LATER.



... We nearly missed the deadline on that development contract. And we've got all kinds of paperwork piling up ... and you completely blew off that meeting with Joe Tombaugh yesterday!

You do the paperwork. You're better at it anyway.

I'm seeing Tombaugh tonight. He'll be fine.

If he's really upset, I'll suck his dick, and he'll forget we even had a meeting scheduled. -- giggle --



And this is how you run a business?

Going to bed with every man who comes through the door? You know, we have a reputation. It took years to build. And you're destroying it!



Yeah, I know all about that reputation. Nobody wanted to go near this company because they were scared to death. Your mother busted so many balls it's amazing there were any testicles left in the Fortune 500.

When your mother gets back, she'll fire me, and she can go back to busting balls again ... but until then, we're gonna have a few months where people actually like working with us.

I haven't destroyed anything. We haven't lost a single deal. In fact, we've gotten a couple we probably wouldn't have had.



I know what your real problem is, you know. You're jealous.

Your mother gave you this hot little body and won't let you do a damned thing with it.

Get away from me--!

I get to go out and have fun and you have to stay here and the only release you get is playing with your hand, or when one of the women she pays has pity on you.

Well, it sucks to be you, but too bad.



Now listen good. Tomorrow afternoon I'm going off to that conference. I'm going to be away for three nights, and while I'm gone, you do nothing. Nothing, you hear me? Don't meet with anybody, don't start anything, no business decisions of any kind.

You're competent, I admit that, but you are not in charge, and don't you forget it.

If I come back and find you've disobeyed, I will give your mother such a bad report that you'll be lucky if you ever leave these grounds before you die of old age.

AS IS IS THE CASE AT MANY CONFERENCES, NO MATTER WHAT'S ON THE AGENDA, THE REAL ACTION IS IN THE HOTEL BAR.







You know, while Ms. Pembroke's away, if you wanted to, you could wear boy clothes for a bit.

I certainly don't care one way or another.

Oh ... no, it's OK.



You're sure?

Uh ... don't tell my mother or Ms. Pembroke, they'd probably find something nasty to do about it, but ... I like the clothes.

Boy clothes are kind of boring. I see all these business guys come in and they all dress the same.

Besides, I couldn't put on boy clothes even if I wanted to. I don't have any.



Forgive my asking, but ... You prefer being female, don't you? Or am I reading that completely wrong?

... I think so? It's kind of hard to say. I barely remember being a boy. But I don't hate being a girl.

Being a girl's the good part. The bad part's getting picked on and called names and having to talk like I'm five and all that.

Ms. Pembroke's just as bad as mother.

Ms. Pembroke's probably doing it because she's been instructed to. And your mother ... well ... I think she's genuinely trying to do what she thinks is good for you ...

She's not, though, Ms. Elsa. She's really not.



She hates me. She does it because she thinks it's fun.

She never wanted a kid. She's told me so. Lots of times.

One time I found out something about a man she was going to do business with. Really bad. Like, as soon as I found out, I knew she didn't want to deal with him.

I told her, and she called off the deal, and you know what she said to me after that?

"Maybe having you wasn't a complete mistake after all."

I don't know how much longer I can go, Ms. Elsa. She's not going to turn me loose until she dies. And she's going to come back from whatever she's having done and she's gonna be all rejuvenated and live who knows how long ...

I feel that there has to be some way out, though, dear.

We just have to find the right approach.

THE NEXT NIGHT ...



... so they give private parties, see? Usually there's two or three every night of the conference. For networking, some, but mostly just to blow off steam.

A lot of these guys are real tightly wound. Here they can cut loose where nobody will know.

And sex is part of that.

Yes, but there's a shortage of women at these things. Not nearly enough of them up at that level of the business world, and the ones that are have to stay pretty tightly wound too ... they have to prove all the time that they can be just as hardass as the men, or they don't get taken seriously ...

... yes, I've noticed.

So the men love it when we crash their parties and offer to pool around. Captive audience! And they never cause trouble about it, because they want to keep it quiet too--



There you are! What were you thinking? All the others have been here for an hour! Some of them have already done a round and come back!

No, no, don't tell me. I don't want to hear it. Just get in there and try to make up for lost time. I have to hurry back now. And don't dawdle out here!



Oh my gosh!

What was that about?

Oh, that's too punny ...

OK, look, some of these parties, like I said, there's a woman shortage ... so they hire out.

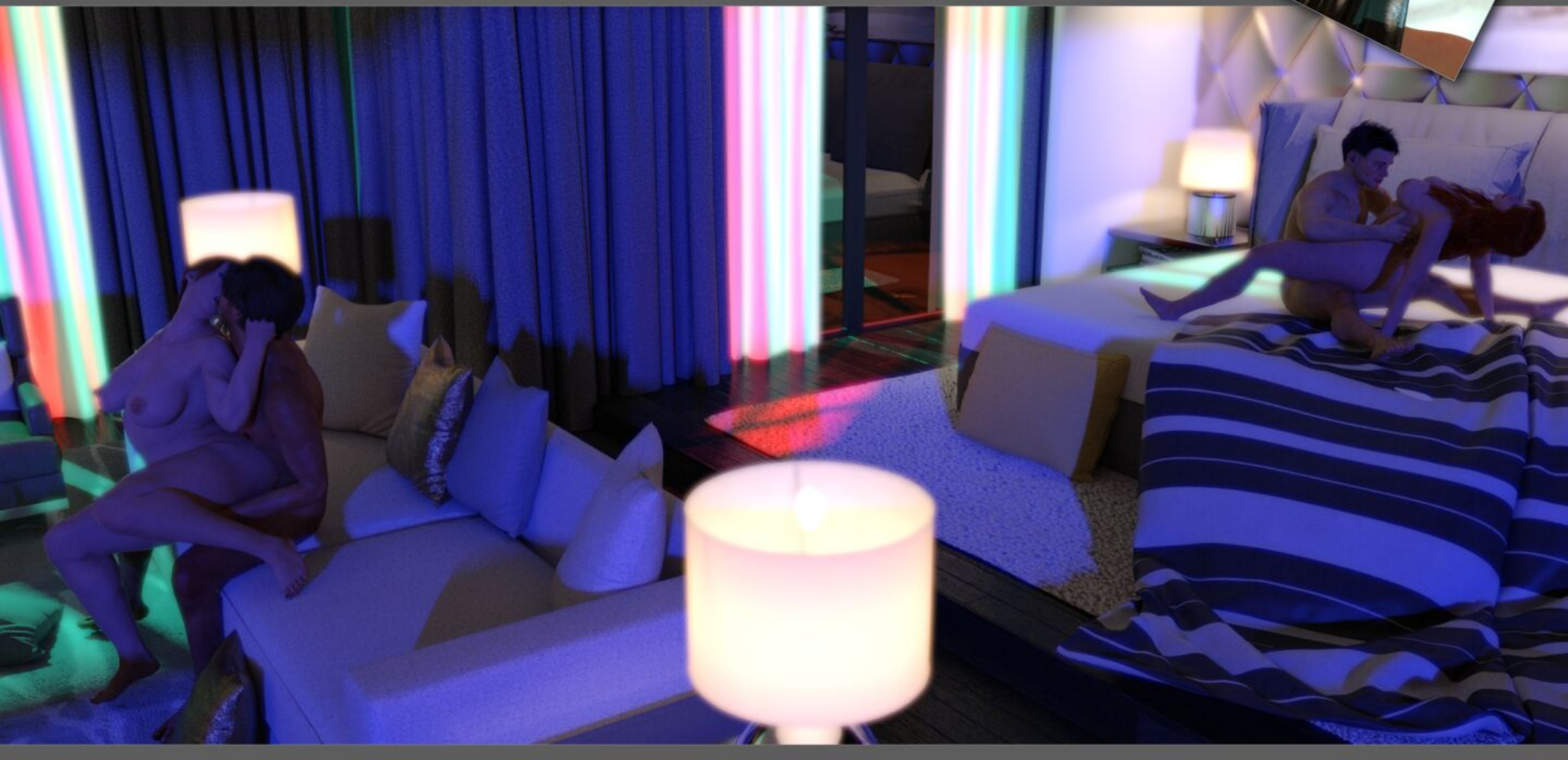
She thinks we're supposed to be working the party!

So are we still crashing?

Are you kidding? We've absolutely got to crash it now.



Oh, wow.



THREE DAYS LATER.



You lied to me.

When?

When you said anatomy wasn't destiny.



The other night I had sex with two total strangers.

Ever since I got into this body my libido's been off the charts. I've been doing things I really shouldn't be doing ... the only reason I haven't damaged my reputation and my company horribly is that it's not me doing them.

I was never like this. Never. I didn't have a sex drive like this even when I was a teenager. It's this body. It's this damned proxy.



I know it probably comforts you to think that ... but, no, it isn't. Or very little, anyway.

Yes, you came to us in relatively poor physical condition, and there is certainly some effect of having a body that's pain-free, robust, in excellent health, so on.

But I promise, it's almost entirely what you brought in with you. I didn't alter your thinking. And you just answered your own question a second ago.

You get to tell yourself that it's not you in this body. That you're not accountable for anything you do while you're in it. You don't have the weight of being Vanessa Salkind right now.

That's got to be pretty liberating, don't you think? Allows you to let out some things. Maybe some things that have been trying to surface for a long time.

Well, whatever it is, I can't keep it up. In a couple more months, rate I'm going, I'll probably be pucking people on my desk. We have to end it.



If we abort now, with your nervous regeneration incomplete, everything we've done so far will be for nothing.

Not to mention you'll have completely wasted the cost of that bed.

You need to go the distance. Now, the way I see it, you have two choices.

If you're actually bothered by your behavior, you can stop. It's your brain. Just stop. It's not like quitting a drug habit. There's no addiction here.

Or ... you can not stop, in which case you should just admit that this is what you want and you're doing it because you like it.

A LITTLE OVER TWO MONTHS LATER.



BRENDA'S NOTIONS & SUNDRIES

YOUR PACKAGES ARE READY FOR SHIPPING AT OUR NEW LOCATION. PLEASE LET US KNOW WHEN YOU WANT TO ARRANGE DELIVERY.



Claude?

I just got word. It's time to start.

Are you ready?



Start ... you mean now?

Well, later tonight, but yes. No point in waiting, don't you think?

Unless you need more time ...

Uh ... no, I'm ready.

... well, as ready as I'm going to get.



ELSA MUELLER

BEGINNING DELIVERY PREPARATION TONIGHT.

Ms. Elsa, can you cut hair?

Depends. I'm no stylist, but I can do the basics. You want to cut your hair?

I feel like it might be better to look ... a little bit more mature ... for this.

Let me start some of the other arrangements we'll need, and then I'll see what I can do.

A FEW HOURS LATER.



This is what you call a "business meeting"?



Claude!!

I told you not to disturb me!



Yeah, well, too bad.

Lisa, my mother isn't where you said she was going to be. I checked with the clinic. They have no record of admitting her, and they've never been contacted about her.

There's also no record of her hiring you. She told me she was going away, but didn't say where, and told me she was hiring an executive assistant, but didn't say who. I got a text from her with your name the night before you arrived. Or, at least, it was from her phone.

Lt. Brion here would like to ask you some questions.



WHAT???

Of course she hired me! What else would I be doing here? Claude, I don't know what you're trying to do, but--

I don't think we should discuss this here.

Put some clothes on, and come with me, please.



... But you can't possibly believe I did something to Ms. Salkind! Look where that's coming from! Claude is not reliable!

He sounded pretty together to me. Am I supposed to think he's unreliable because he wears dresses? I gather he's had a sex change, so that's not even odd. I'm probably using the wrong pronouns.

Anyway, Ms. Salkind is definitely not where she's supposed to be, and you were the only one who ever stated she was supposed to be there.

I needn't tell you she's a very important person in this city ... and if something has happened to her, her son is her sole heir and a very important person too. I'm not going to sweep his concerns under the rug.



So you're arresting me?

Not at this time.

But I expect you to make yourself available for further questioning. And stay away from the Salkind property. He's made it clear he doesn't want you on it.

And don't leave the city.

I couldn't if I wanted to.



When I get out of this, I'm going to murder Claude.

No, no, I can't do that ... he's trying to look out for me, in his way.

I should have given more attention to the paper trail ... but there wasn't a lot of time ... and I never thought anyone would bother to check up on it, least of all Claude ...



CECILIA!!

Let me in, damn you! I know you're in there!



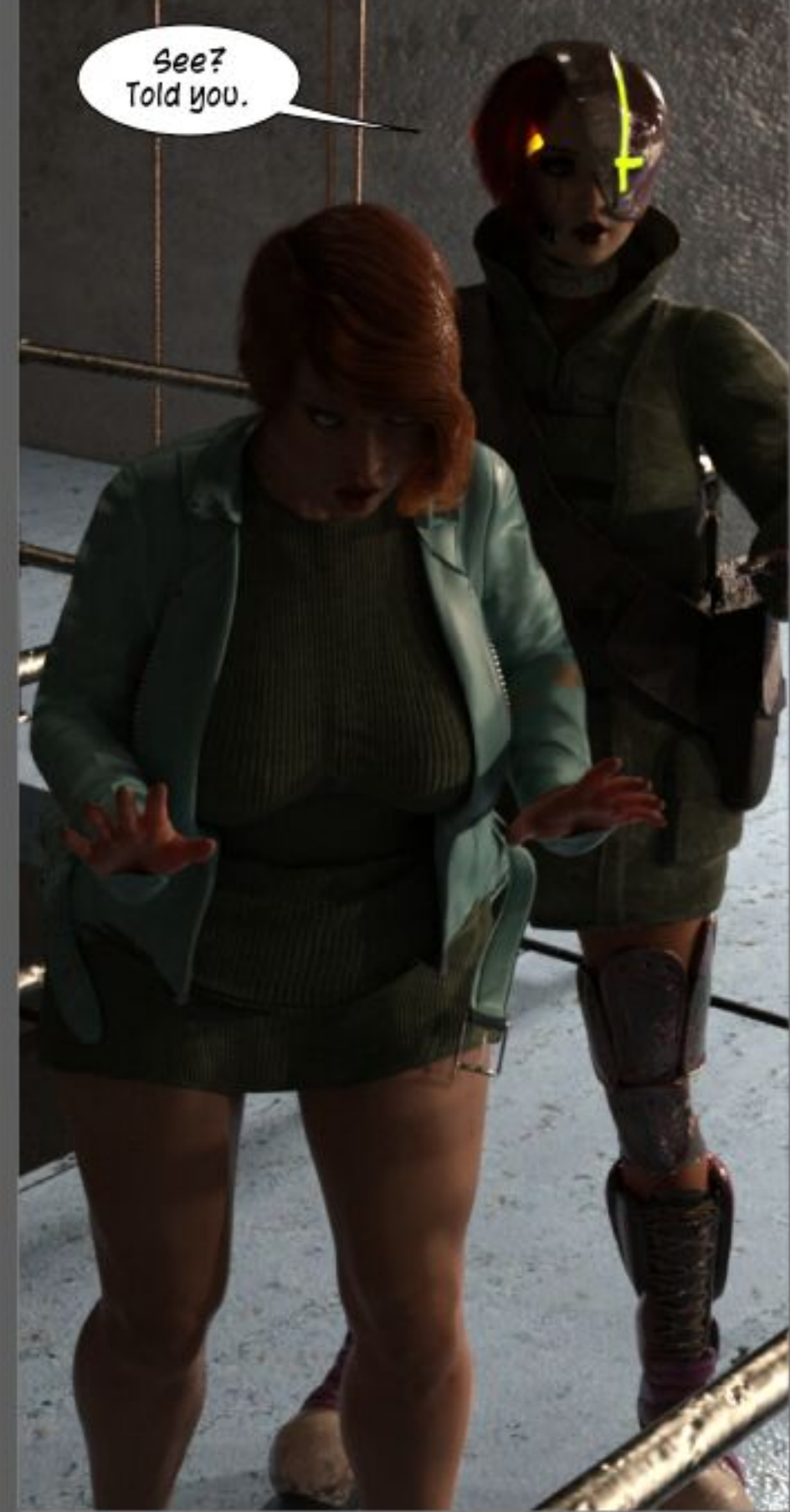
You sure there's somebody in there?

Power to this scan's been cut from the inside. They didn't want anyone to use this door again.

Can you get in?

I'll have to drill the frame. It'll cost you more.

And if somebody comes along, I'm gone in a hurry, get me?



See?  
Told you.



What were you expecting to be here?

THE NEXT MORNING.



Again already?

You know, when you told the desk where you'd be staying, I assumed it'd be someplace a little better than this.

I can't afford it, now that Claude's basically fired me.

Why don't you go bother HIM? He's probably the one you want anyway. Probably dumped his mother in the river so he could finally inherit.

We're unable to locate Mr. Salkind at the moment.

I went to talk to him this morning. The woman who looks after him says he was there when she went to sleep last night. He never leaves the estate.

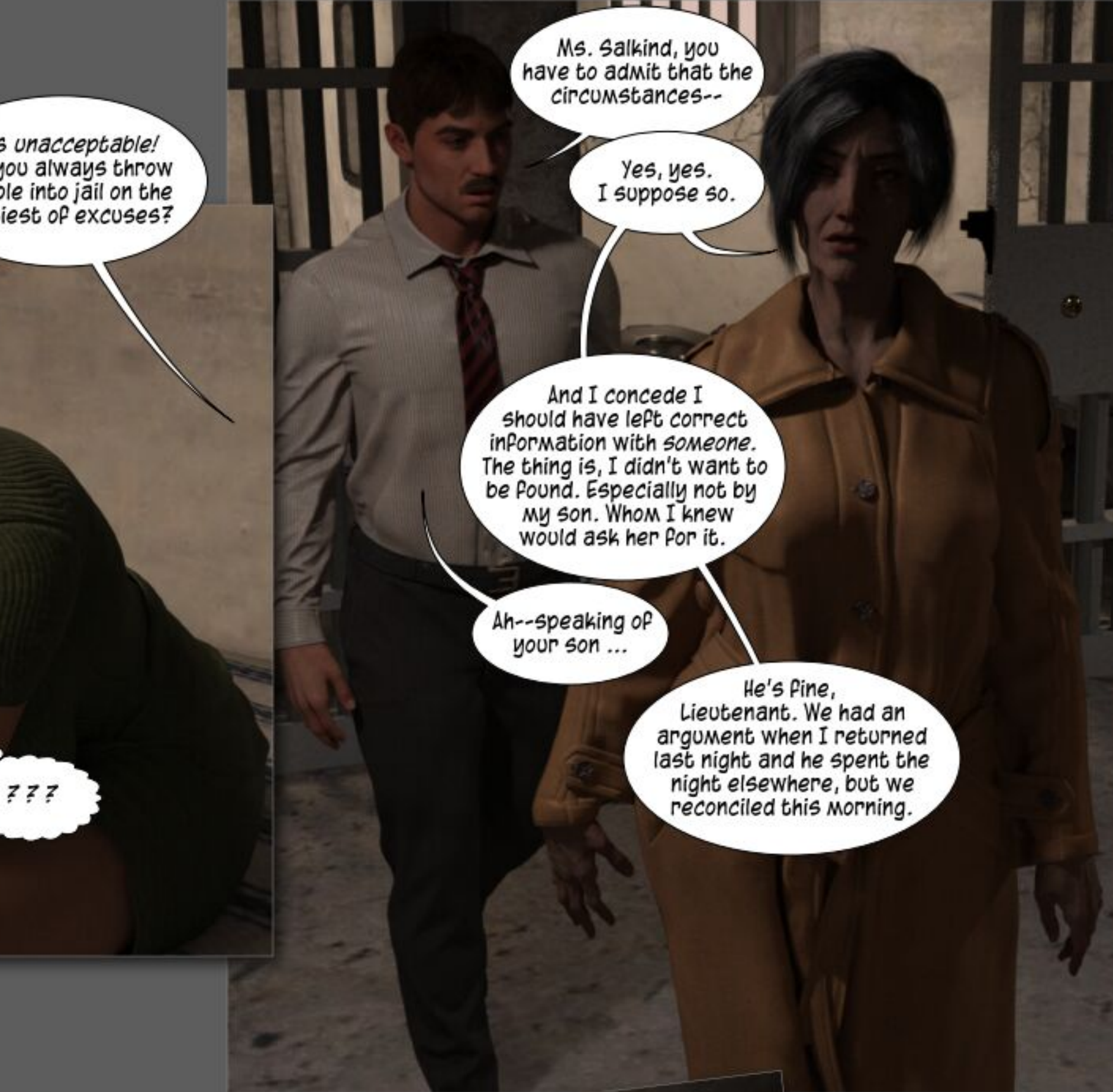
Would you come with me, please?



-- sigh --

It's unacceptable! Do you always throw people into jail on the flimsiest of excuses?

???



Ms. Salkind, you have to admit that the circumstances--

Yes, yes. I suppose so.

And I concede I should have left correct information with someone. The thing is, I didn't want to be found. Especially not by my son. Whom I knew would ask her for it.

Ah--speaking of your son ...

He's fine, Lieutenant. We had an argument when I returned last night and he spent the night elsewhere, but we reconciled this morning.



Come along, Ms. Pembroke.

The lieutenant overreacted a bit. You're free to go.



Now, I should make this clear: I wasn't going to let you sit in jail, but your employment with me is over.

It wasn't intended to be permanent, and I discovered when I got back that you've been spending money that wasn't yours to spend.

But I--  
But you--

I won't attempt to prosecute you with embezzlement, since I feel my instructions could have been more clear.

I've arranged to have your belongings packed. They'll be sent to whatever address you like. And I'll pay you for your final month in Pull. But I don't want you setting foot on the estate ever again.



... Who are you??

I'm Vanessa Salkind.  
Who else would I be?





TWO DAYS LATER.

What am I going to do?

What the hell am I going to do?



OK. OK. Plan of attack.

I'm not going to be able to convince anybody that those two bitches stole my identity while I look like this.

They've done a good job of making sure nobody takes Lisa Pembroke seriously. But if I'm back in my own body again ...

Then I can say to the police, "That one's an impostor," and they'll listen, especially when I can prove it. Whoever's pretending to be me, they can't know as much about me as I do.

Cecilia said if I break the connection, I'll come awake in my own body. All I have to do is go out of range.



I think this is the best way.

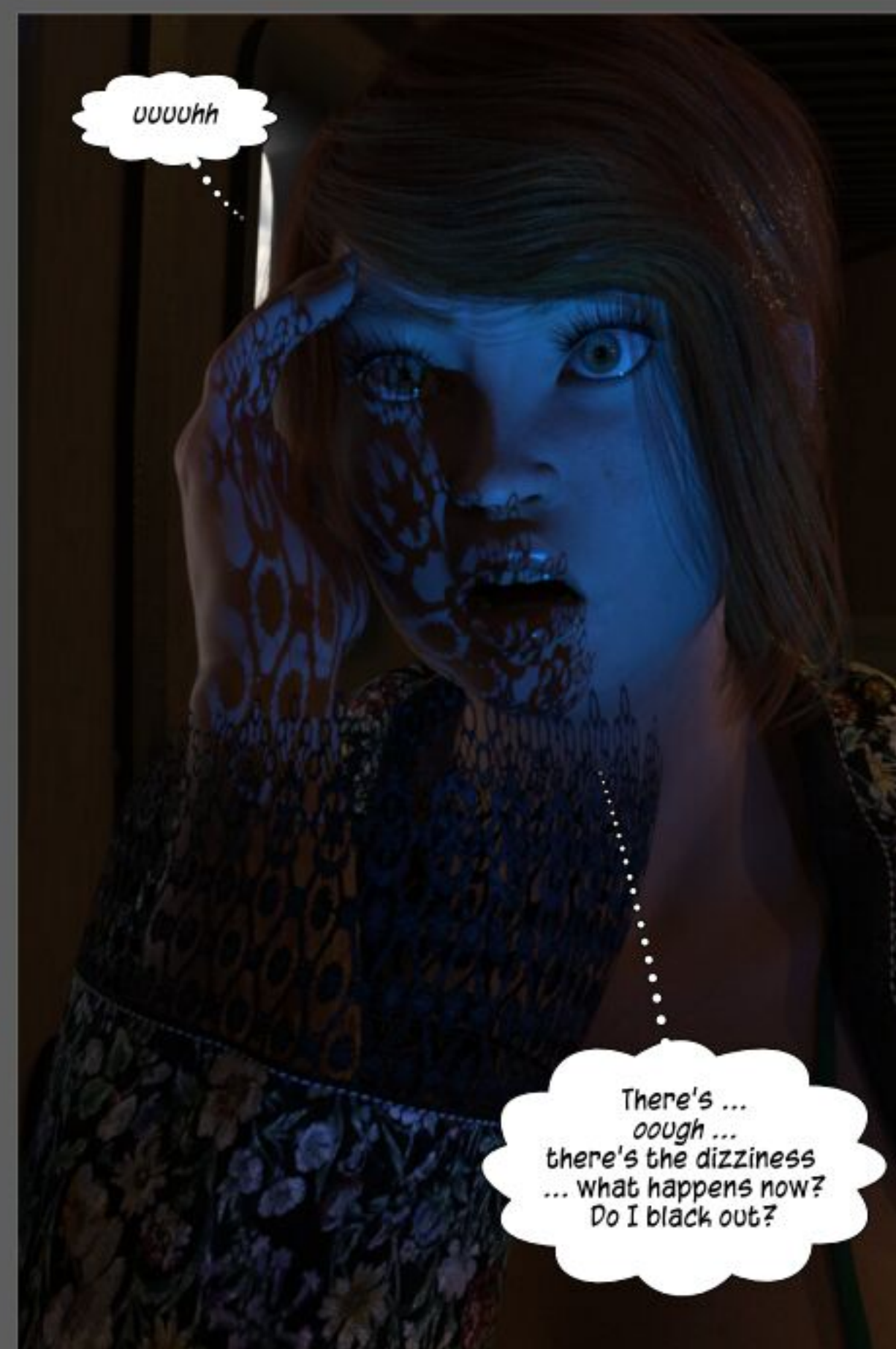
If I tried to drive out of the city, I'd crash the car.

On foot, there's too much of a chance I'd pass out but not get far enough to actually break the connection.



We're almost out of the city already?

This is going to happen real fast ... I hope I'm not making a big mistake ...

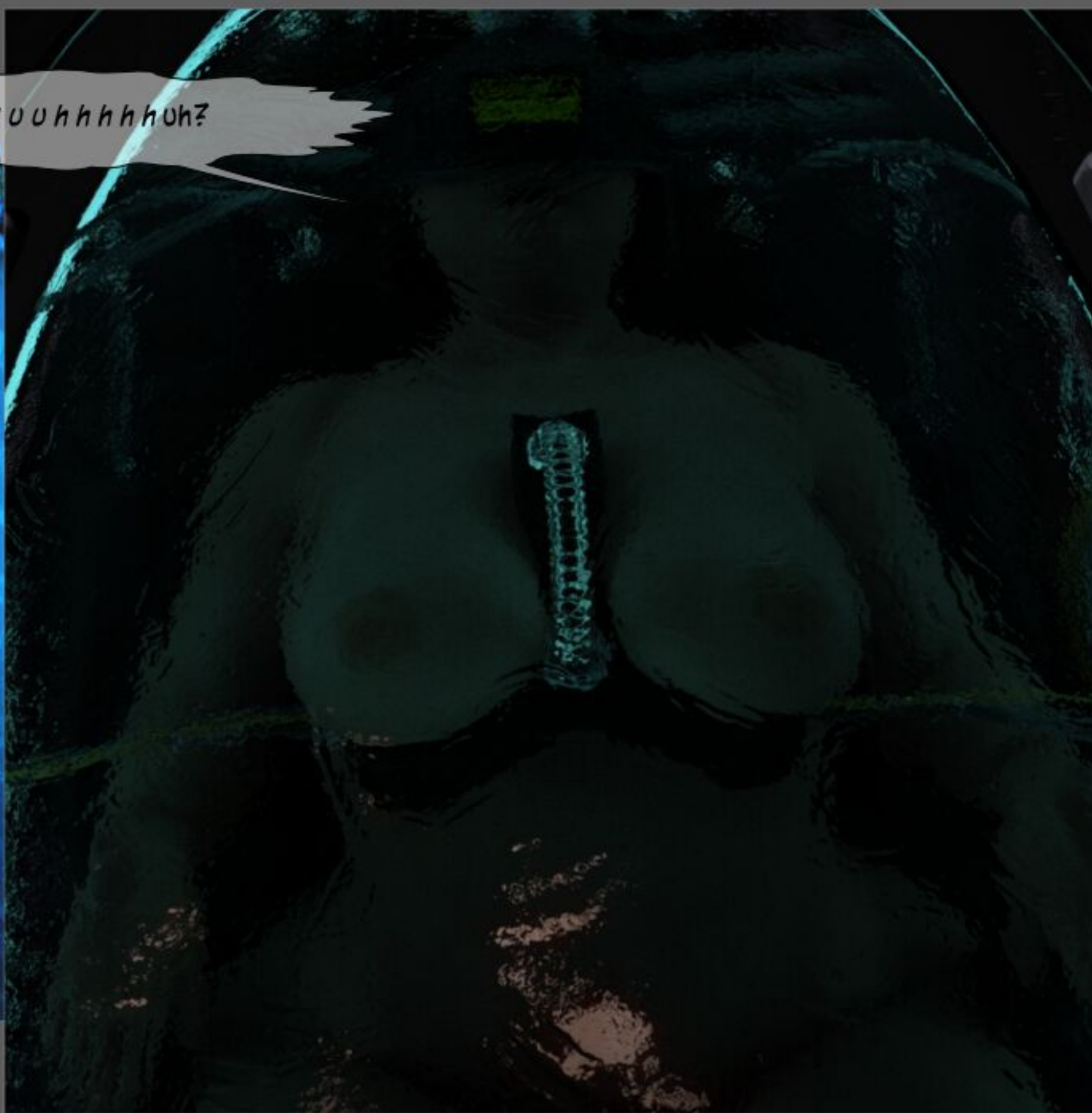


uuuhh

There's ... ough ... there's the dizziness ... what happens now? Do I black out?



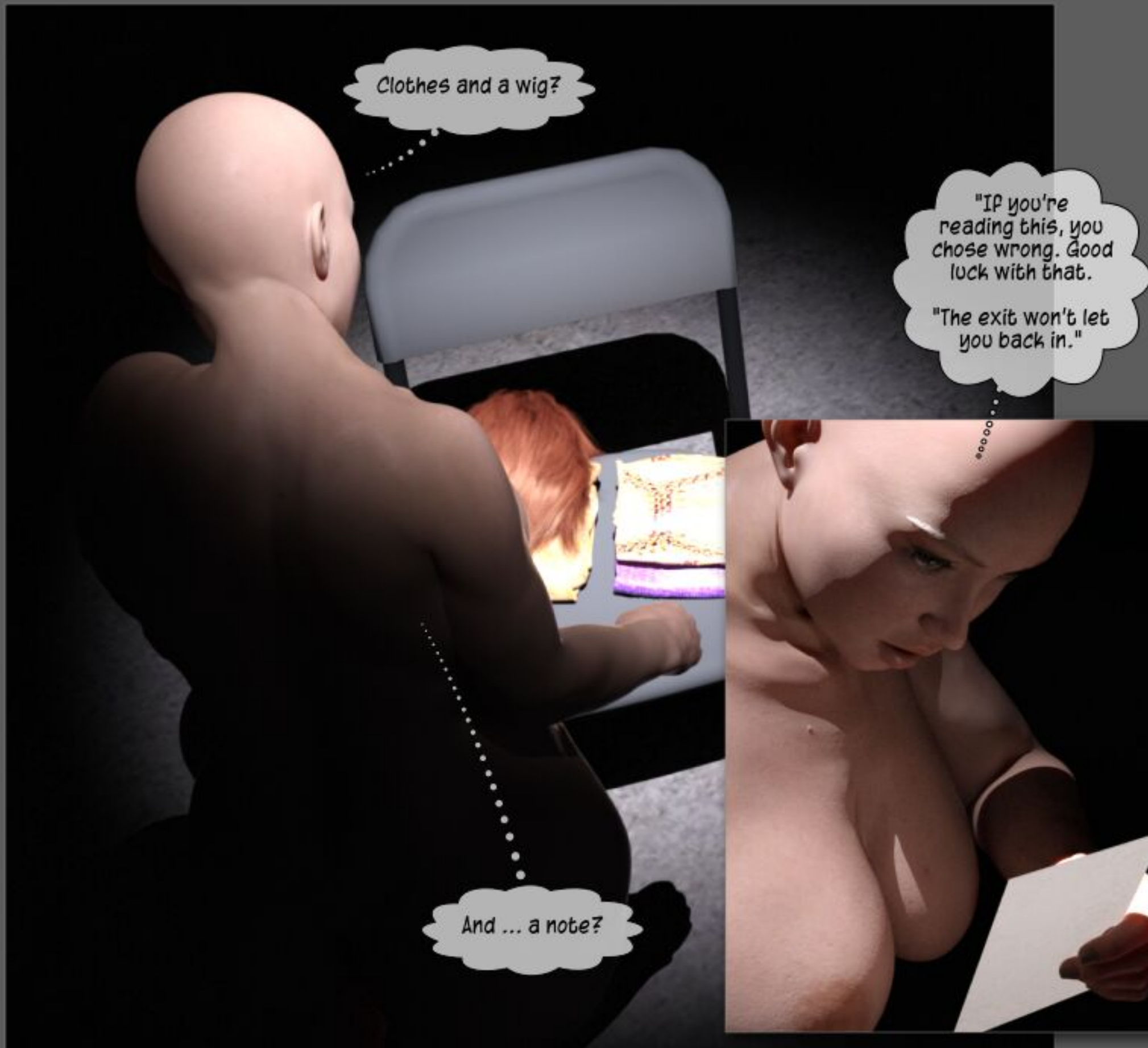
oaaauuhhhhhuh?



I think I'm going to be sick.

Something ... something's wrong ... this doesn't feel right ...

Where am I? Is this her new lab? Where are all the other beds?



Clothes and a wig?

And ... a note?

"If you're reading this, you chose wrong. Good luck with that."

"The exit won't let you back in."



I have a really bad Peeling ... I have to get to a --  
oooergh

Got to go slowly ... Peel like I'm going to Fall over. Am I supposed to be this dizzy? What did she do to me?



AAAAAAA!

TWO NIGHTS LATER.



You know, when you're in a crib that long it does leave you in bad condition for a while afterward. Especially if you've broken contact the rough way.

You probably shouldn't be drinking like that.



YOU!

Now just stay right there while I go find the police.

By the time you come back with them we'll be gone.

And then you will never, never see us again.

This is your one chance. Are you going to blow it?



My one chance at what? You think I'm going to trust you with anything? I won't make that mistake twice.

For once in my life, I trusted somebody, because I had to, and what do they do? They steal my identity and destroy my existence!

Yes, it's unfortunate.

We might even Peel guilty about it, if you hadn't been such an utterly horrible person.



That's your reason? You consider that a justification for taking my life from me and handing it all over to some impostor?

Oh, it's not "some impostor."

That's Claude.



Claude???

He really is much more capable than you ever gave him credit for.

And a very good person, despite everything you've put him through.

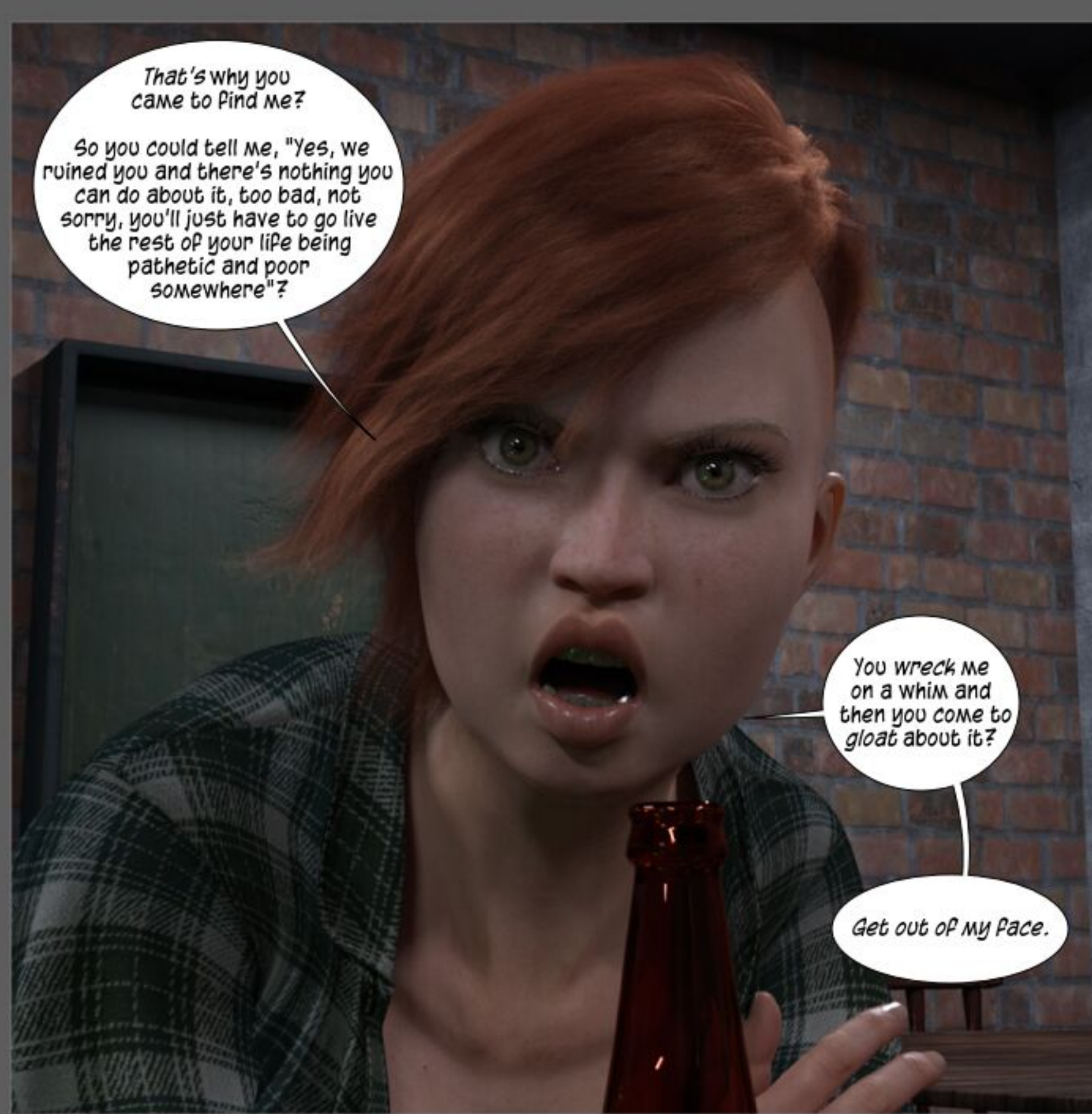
It'll be interesting to see what your empire is like when it's being run by someone who actually has a heart.



Don't try to interfere with him, either. He's keeping an eye out for any trouble you might try to make.

He doesn't want to speak to you; he doesn't want to see you.

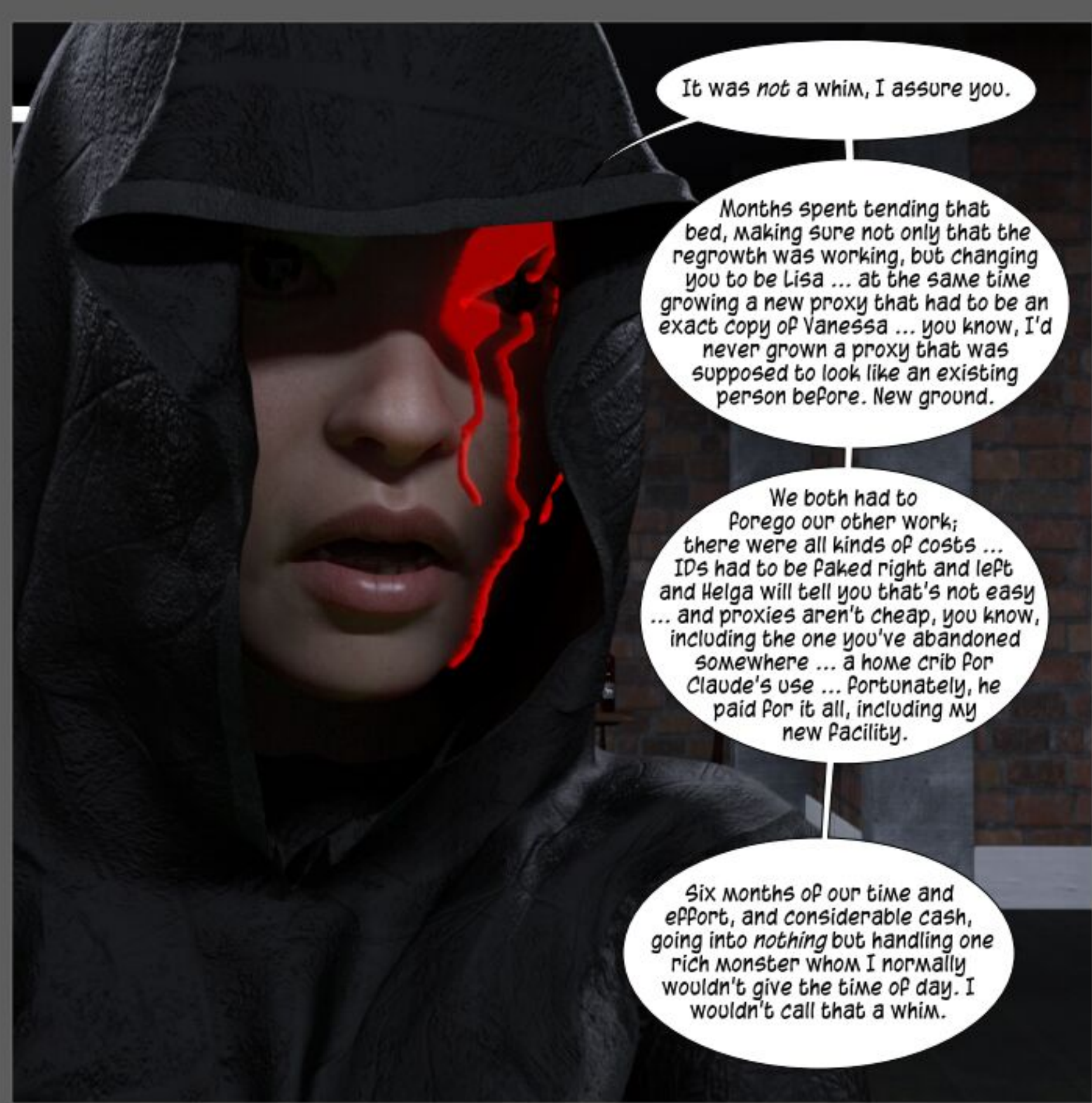
And if you try to tell anyone any of this, you know there's no way they're going to believe you.



That's why you came to find me?  
So you could tell me, "Yes, we ruined you and there's nothing you can do about it, too bad, not sorry, you'll just have to go live the rest of your life being pathetic and poor somewhere"?

You wreck me on a whim and then you come to gloat about it?

Get out of my face.



It was not a whim, I assure you.

Months spent tending that bed, making sure not only that the regrowth was working, but changing you to be Lisa ... at the same time growing a new proxy that had to be an exact copy of Vanessa ... you know, I'd never grown a proxy that was supposed to look like an existing person before. New ground.

We both had to forego our other work; there were all kinds of costs ... IDs had to be faked right and left and Helga will tell you that's not easy ... and proxies aren't cheap, you know, including the one you've abandoned somewhere ... a home crib for Claude's use ... Fortunately, he paid for it all, including my new facility.

Six months of our time and effort, and considerable cash, going into nothing but handling one rich monster whom I normally wouldn't give the time of day. I wouldn't call that a whim.



Oh, and that makes it better? "No, it wasn't on a whim, we went to a lot of effort to destroy you!"

And you did come to gloat, and I don't have to sit here and listen.

We came to make you an offer.

You know, for most people like you, we wouldn't have needed the difficult part. They'd have found being in the proxy so much fun they just wouldn't have looked back.

All of the rest of it was because we were fairly sure you liked power more than joy.

Don't you dare lecture me--

Even so, I almost thought you'd changed. I honestly wasn't sure whether you'd try to break out, or just stay in the proxy and start a new life.

Well, you're going to be starting a new life one way or another. That was what we wanted to make absolutely sure of: that you would never be Vanessa ever again.

Now, given that, would you like to have a new life that you'll enjoy? Or are you only interested in being miserable now?



I have a friend who runs a very high-end companion service. She pays decently and treats people well.

I am not becoming a prostitute.

I'm not sure that's a fair description, but whatever.

It just seems to me ... you've learned you like sex, after spending your entire adult life trying to shut that out for some reason.

And we know you like business. I thought you might like an opportunity to combine them.

This way, you can still screw people, but they'll enjoy it.

NINE MONTHS LATER.



I've done most things, but I haven't done one of these business gigs before.

Me neither. I think this bunch doesn't usually want my color.

They're pretty harmless. Surely you've had suits as customers?

Sure! Lots. But that's in private. I get jumpy when they're in packs like this. I mean, they all think they have something to prove to each other, right?



Oh, they're definitely concerned about status. And they're scared of death of looking vulnerable, or nervous, or anything else, really. One of them apologized to me once because he made noise when he came.

But they're all right. Even if they're assholes, they'll behave while they're here. Reputation.

And most of them are so desperate to be cared for that you can get anything if you're sweet to them.



Is something wrong?

Hmm?

Oh. No, no. Just saw someone I think I knew, once.



The evening doesn't have to end with that lovely dinner, you know.

Why, Vanessa!

Inappropriate behavior toward a business associate. Scandalous.

Not at all. I waited until the negotiations were finished. Now, if I'd propositioned you before, that might have been bad.

But the contract's signed and we're both going to come out very well from it, and I don't see a problem with celebrating a bit, do you?

Your place, or my hotel?

... I have a really good bed.

End