

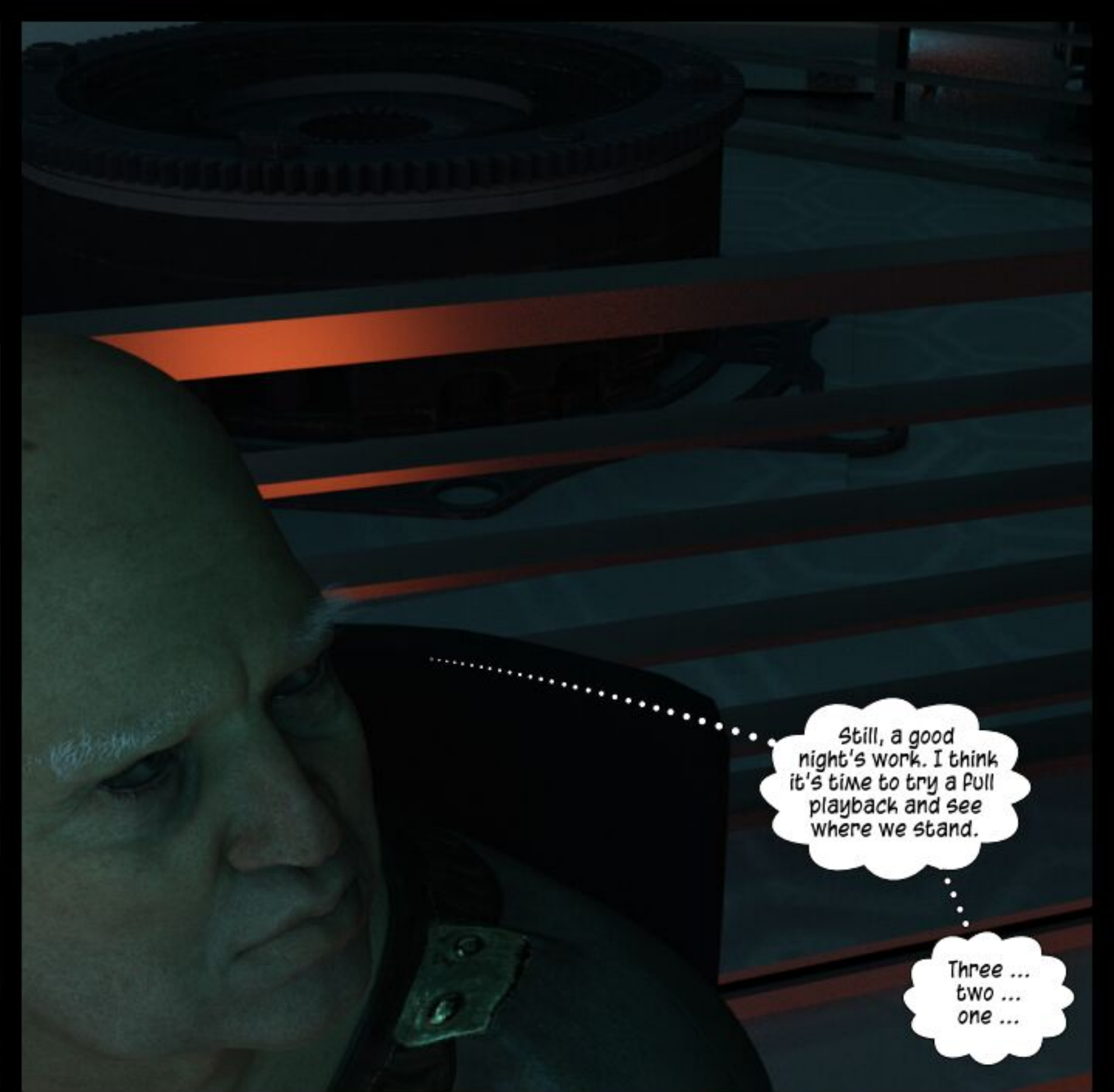
MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A **QUITCLAIM**

SOMETIMES MY STORIES START BEFORE I GET THERE. THIS ONE STARTS IN A SOUND STUDIO IN ASTRA.

THE MAN'S NAME IS POL BELLO. HE'S BEEN RECORDING MUSIC FOR OVER FORTY YEARS. HE HAS HAD ONLY ONE MAJOR CAREER SUCCESS, AND THAT ONE DOESN'T HAVE HIS NAME ANYWHERE ON IT.

IT'S TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, ASTRA TIME.

I remember when I said "no more late studio nights" and was dumb enough to think I meant it.



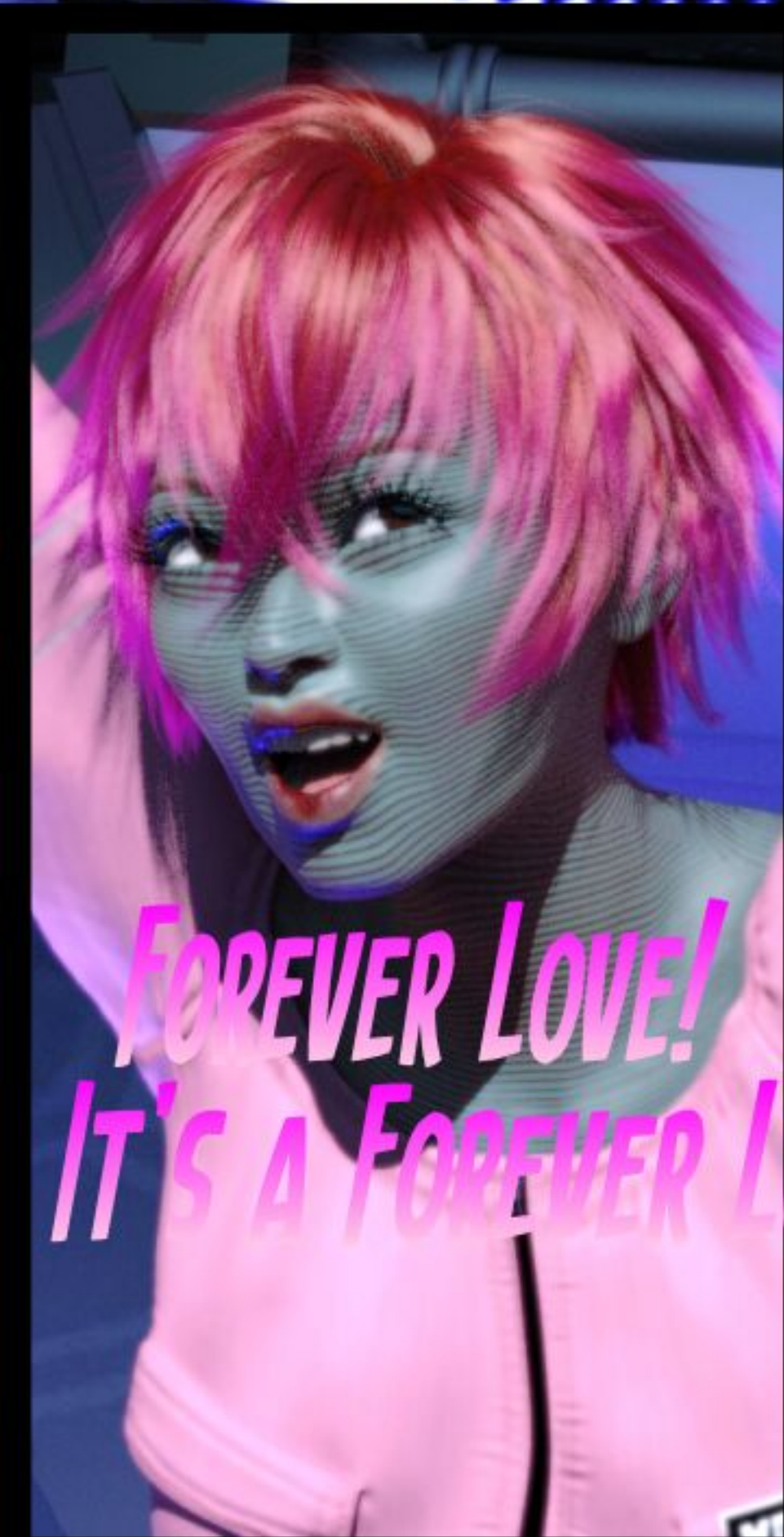
Still, a good night's work. I think it's time to try a Pull playback and see where we stand.

Three ... two ... one ...



... garbage. Complete garbage.

If I'd known this was what I was going end up doing ...



**FOREVER LOVE!
IT'S A FOREVER LOVE!**

Needs a little more bass at the drop.

Last time I tried to write her a real song. Black just about bit my head off ...

I don't know how many more years I can do this.



Eh?
What do you want?

Wait, what are you--

--hkkkkhh!--



THE LOST IDOL
WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

I DIDN'T KNOW MITCH STAPEWITH WELL ENOUGH TO CALL HIM A FRIEND, BUT WE'D WORKED TOGETHER A FEW YEARS BACK, AND I CONSIDERED HIM RELIABLE ENOUGH TO MAKE A TRIP TO ASTRA WHEN HE SENT THAT HE HAD A JOB FOR ME. EVEN THOUGH I DON'T LIKE ASTRA.

Mitch, I'm a quitclaim, not a paid escort.

Well, I sure wouldn't ask you to do it for free ... Randa, I'm not asking you to do anything but keep your eyes open.

Do better than that. I hate parties, and I especially hate parties full of the kind of people who'll be at this one. What would I be watching for? Spell it out. I don't work on half a briefing.

The thing is ... I don't know. I'm just ... I have a feeling. Maybe it's nothing. But I'd like someone else to be looking. Just in case.

I just want you to show up and watch for anything strange. We'll go together, I'll tell people you're with me, no one will ask questions. Wear some sparkly dress and smile and look like you belong there, and everyone will think you do.

The party will only last a couple of hours. I'll pay you in advance if you want. But I'm begging.

OK, Mitch. I'll do it.

But I'm not wearing a dress for you.

RANDA DISCUSSES HER DISLIKE OF ASTRA IN "THE ACID TEST." -T

Callout service, huh? We could have just taken a taxi. Style's wasted on me.

You know, this is a strange place for you to be. Last time I saw you, you were doing bodyguard work. Long way from there to the music industry ...

Depends on who you're guarding. I had Jet Black as a client and he decided he liked me.

I assume you know who he is.

Ah ... no.

Seriously? Glad you told me before we got there.

He's probably the most well-known producer in humanspace. He's the one who discovered Honeechan.

... Her, I've heard of.

It's not for you. These people judge on appearances. They like Flash. I don't care, myself, but I want their business. I have to act like a big name to be one.

Most of these people are kind of bizarre. Don't pine back when they say weird things. Just nod and move on.

I'm going to have to work the room, but I'll try to rescue you if you can't shake loose.

Which one's Jet Black?



"The big guy down there enjoying himself. I'll introduce you to him later when he's not so ... ah ... distracted."



This is going to be rough.

Shake loose? Mitch, I don't want to get close enough to need to.

I wouldn't even want to go to bed with any of this bunch.

Sure, most of them are as hot as money can make them, but I'd have to tape their mouths shut to keep them from trying to talk to me.



Excuse me ...

Do you know if Honeechan is going to be here tonight?

I ... ah ... Sorry, I have no idea.

She thinks Honeechan's a real person?



OK, Polks, if I can just get everybody's attention for a moment ...

I realize it may not feel like it, but this is a retirement party ... Before we all get too stonked on our substances of choice to appreciate it, we need to have Jet come up here where everyone can see him, and make him say a few embarrassing words ...

Jet, come on up--

Jet?

Where'd he disappear to?

EEEEEEEEEE!



He'd been in there a long time ... I just went to check on him ... you know, he's kind of old ... was ...

I'm afraid I don't know anything else, Lieutenant ...

... Uh, Lieutenant?

Well, he didn't die of old age. He was strangled. Did you see anybody coming out of the toilets as you went to check on him?

No! ... But, I mean, I wasn't really paying any attention ...

NO ONE ELSE HAD BEEN EITHER. THEY WERE ALL TOO FULL OF THEMSELVES TO NOTICE THE GUEST OF HONOR GETTING MURDERED.

ALL RIGHT, MAYBE THAT'S A LITTLE UNFAIR. AT A PARTY YOU DON'T SPEND YOUR TIME WATCHING THE DOOR TO THE TOILETS UNLESS YOU'RE VERY WEIRD.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, BLACK'S DEATH BROUGHT THE PARTY TO AN ABRUPT END.



You knew it was going to happen!

I didn't. I suspected.

OK, but if you'd warned Black, instead of just sitting on your suspicions, you might have been able to save his life.

Wouldn't have worked. If I've learned anything about Jet over the last couple of years, it's that you can't tell him a damned thing.

Couldn't. Couldn't tell him a damned thing ...

Anyway, this party was his last chance to have people pawning over him. I could have told him someone was waiting in here with a blast cannon and he'd still have come.

Why were you suspicious? What did you know?

And why didn't you tell me the truth?



Fourteen days ago-- wait--yeah, that's right. Fourteen. Early on the morning of the sixth--Pol Bello was killed in his studio.

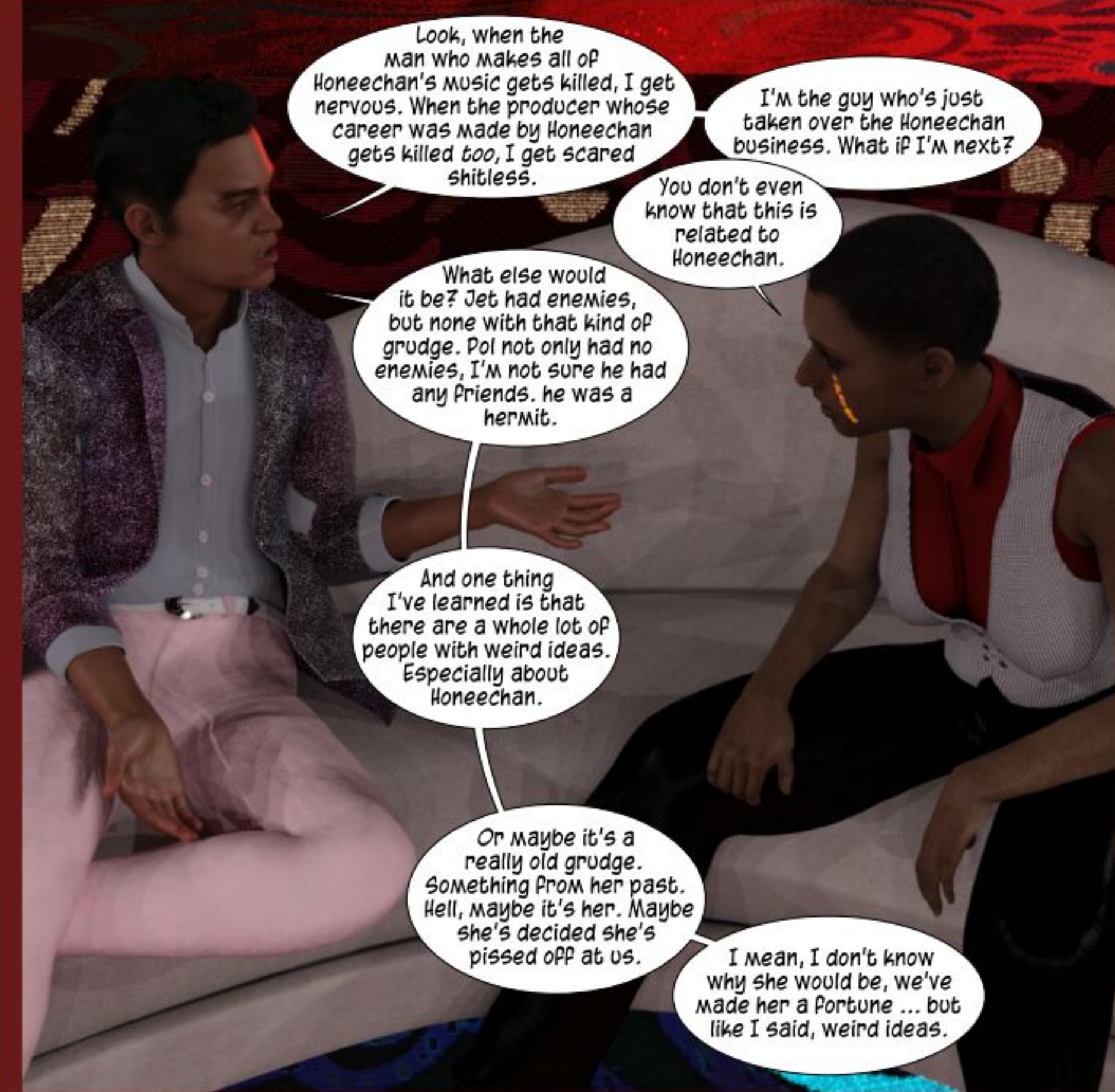
Pol worked exclusively on Honeechan. That's all he did, and he was the only one who did it. He hasn't done any other work in Party years.

Not too many people could get into his studio, or would know he'd be in there at that hour. I got really nervous. I couldn't tell you why--no, I mean it!--but that's when I sent that packet out to Pind you.

You're sure he was murdered? Sounds like he couldn't have been that young ...

Not that old. Not as old as Jet. Jet was around eighty, though it was hard to tell. You know they can hide so much of that these days. Pol was probably in his sixties.

Anyway, Pol was strangled. There were finger bruises on his neck.



Look, when the man who makes all of Honeechan's music gets killed, I get nervous. When the producer whose career was made by Honeechan gets killed too, I get scared shitless.

I'm the guy who's just taken over the Honeechan business. What if I'm next?

You don't even know that this is related to Honeechan.

What else would it be? Jet had enemies, but none with that kind of grudge. Pol not only had no enemies, I'm not sure he had any friends. He was a hermit.

And one thing I've learned is that there are a whole lot of people with weird ideas. Especially about Honeechan.

Or maybe it's a really old grudge. Something from her past. Hell, maybe it's her. Maybe she's decided she's pissed off at us.

I mean, I don't know why she would be, we've made her a fortune ... but like I said, weird ideas.



That's the second time tonight someone's talked about her like she's real.

It's a little disturbing.

She is real. Or was. The virtual one is based on her appearance and uses her voice samples. She gets royalties as if it's actually her singing, even though she hasn't been in a studio herself in ages.

That's a secret, by the way. Jet wanted to keep everyone guessing.



Sounds like you should talk to her, then.

Love to. Except I don't know where she is. I don't even know if she's alive. Jet knew, and probably Pol too--he'd have worked with the real one, back at the beginning--but neither of them ever told me.

"Mitch, just so I'm clear: Are you asking me to Pind Honeechan for you?"

"I'm asking you to keep me alive, Randa. You decide what that means."

"Well, you're not giving me nearly enough to work with. I can't Pind her with no leads."

"I have one. She had an agent, back in the day. He must know where she is, because he gets her royalties and passes them along. And he's here in Astra."



I can't believe we got tickets! Do you know how fast the last Honeechan show here sold out?



Tor Halvig?

Yeah?

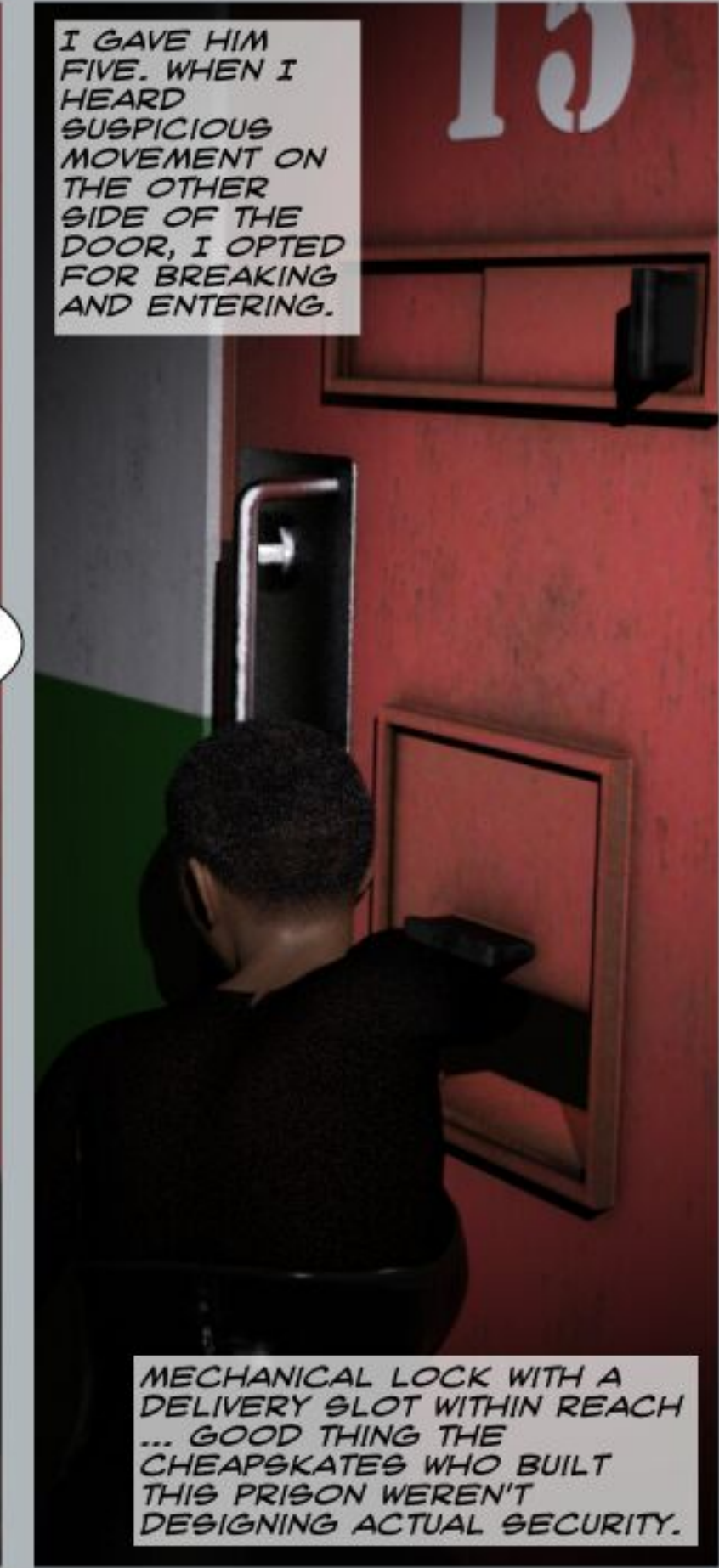
I understand you represent Honeechan. I'd like to talk to you.

WHATEVER HALVIG'S CUT OF THE HONEECHAN MONEY WAS, HE WASN'T LIVING EXTRAVAGANTLY ON IT. I TRACKED HIM TO SOME GRUBBY CAPSULE APARTMENTS--THE KIND THAT'S ONE ROOM AND THE BED HAS TO FOLD UP TO THE WALL JUST SO YOU HAVE A PLACE TO SIT.

She's not open to contract.

... It's not about that. May I come in?

Uh ... give me a minute.



I GAVE HIM FIVE. WHEN I HEARD SUSPICIOUS MOVEMENT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR, I OPTED FOR BREAKING AND ENTERING.

MECHANICAL LOCK WITH A DELIVERY SLOT WITHIN REACH ... GOOD THING THE CHEAPSKATES WHO BUILT THIS PRISON WEREN'T DESIGNING ACTUAL SECURITY.



Hey!

THEY DID, HOWEVER, BUILD IN A BACK DOOR.



Damn it, Halvig, wait!!

HE WAS SCARED BAD. WHO DID HE THINK I WAS?



HE GOT WAY AHEAD OF ME WHEN HE WENT OVER THE WALL. I WAS TOO FAR BEHIND WHEN HE RAN INTO THE ALLEY. WHEN I GOT THERE, A WOMAN WAS RUNNING OUT THE FAR END.

Hey, you! Stop!!



OF COURSE SHE DIDN'T.

AND I COULDN'T CHASE HER BECAUSE I NEEDED TO CHECK ON HALVIG'S CONDITION. IT WAS PERMANENT. STRANGLER.

I WENT BACK TO MY HOTEL. I DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO DO.



FINDING LOST PEOPLE ISN'T VERY DIFFERENT FROM FINDING LOST SHIPS, AND I'VE DONE BOTH. BUT YOU ALWAYS NEED SOMEWHERE TO START. I DIDN'T HAVE THAT. I HAD THREE DEATHS, A MYSTERY WOMAN, AND MAYBE NO CONNECTION BETWEEN THEM, EXCEPT MITCH'S FEARS.

I DIDN'T WANT TO GO BACK TO HIM AND TELL HIM, "I CAN'T DO ANYTHING ELSE, YOU'RE OWN YOUR OWN, HAVE YOU CONSIDERED HIRING A BODYGUARD?" BUT I DIDN'T SEE ANY WAY TO PROCEED.



I don't know how they do it where you're Prom, but here on Astra, when you find a dead body, you're supposed to report it.



I know you. You're the prov who was on scene at Black's death.

And you're the Ped jakaz who thinks she can do my job.

It's 'Lieutenant Reta Caller.' Call me a 'prov' again and I'll drag your ass.

Proving my point.



Go ahead. Arrest me just for being on the scene of two deaths. I will laugh all the way out of the arraignment.

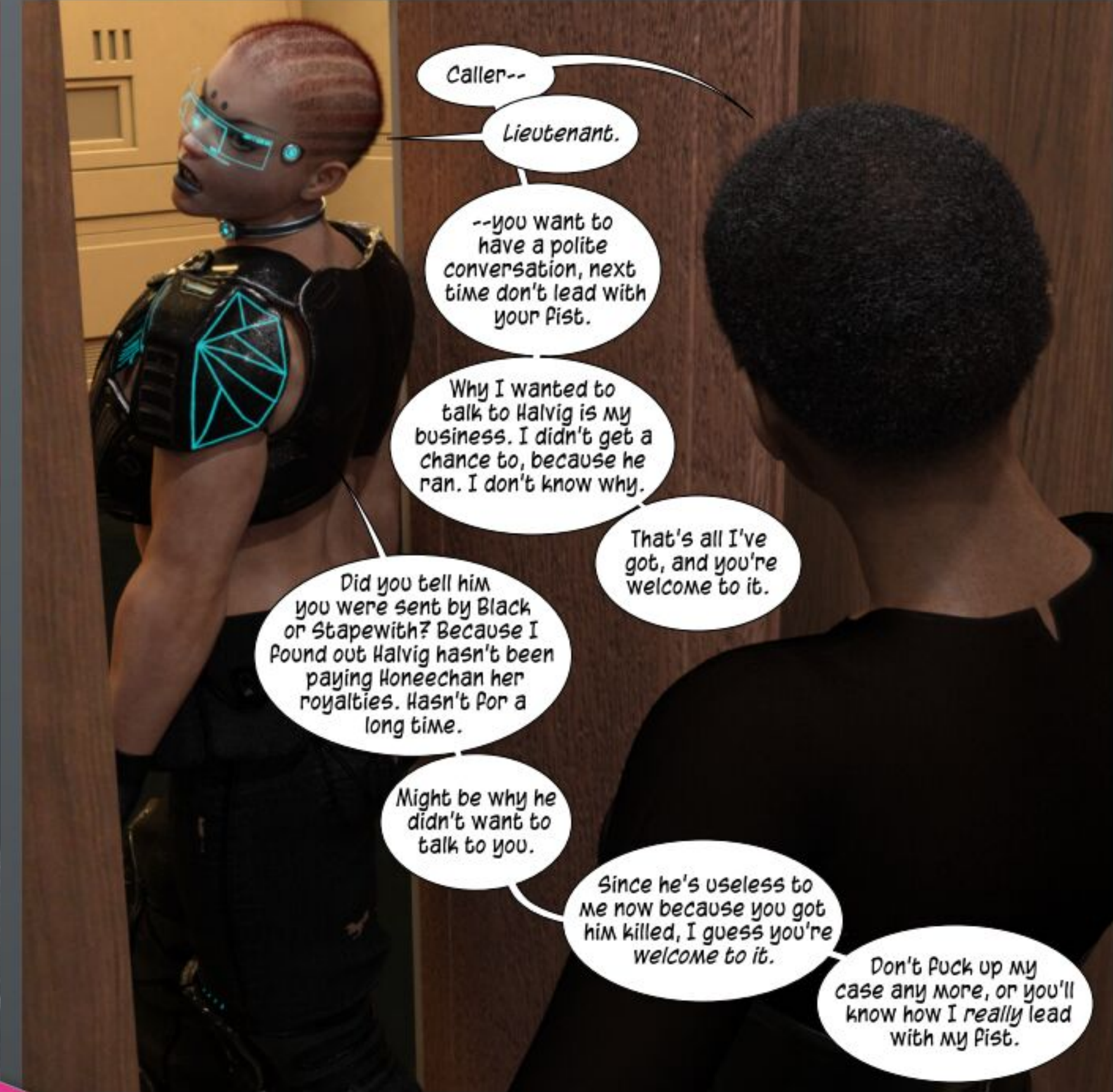
Then maybe I'll sue you.

... Did you have something you wanted to ask me?



Why are you Ped types always like this? Did I say anything about an arrest?

I just wanted to ask why you went to see Halvig. I was coming to talk to him, next thing I know I'm chasing after both of you, and then he's dead.



Caller-- Lieutenant.

--you want to have a polite conversation, next time don't lead with your Pist.

Why I wanted to talk to Halvig is my business. I didn't get a chance to, because he ran. I don't know why.

Did you tell him you were sent by Black or Stapewith? Because I found out Halvig hasn't been paying Honeechan her royalties. Hasn't for a long time.

Might be why he didn't want to talk to you.

That's all I've got, and you're welcome to it.

Since he's useless to me now because you got him killed, I guess you're welcome to it.

Don't Puck up my case any more, or you'll know how I really lead with my Pist.

IF CALLER HADN'T COME TO MY ROOM TO PUSH ME AROUND, I PROBABLY WOULD HAVE GONE BACK TO MITCH AND ADMITTED DEFEAT. BUT THAT LINE ABOUT MY FUCKING UP HER CASE REALLY GOT TO ME. I DIDN'T GET HALVIG KILLED.

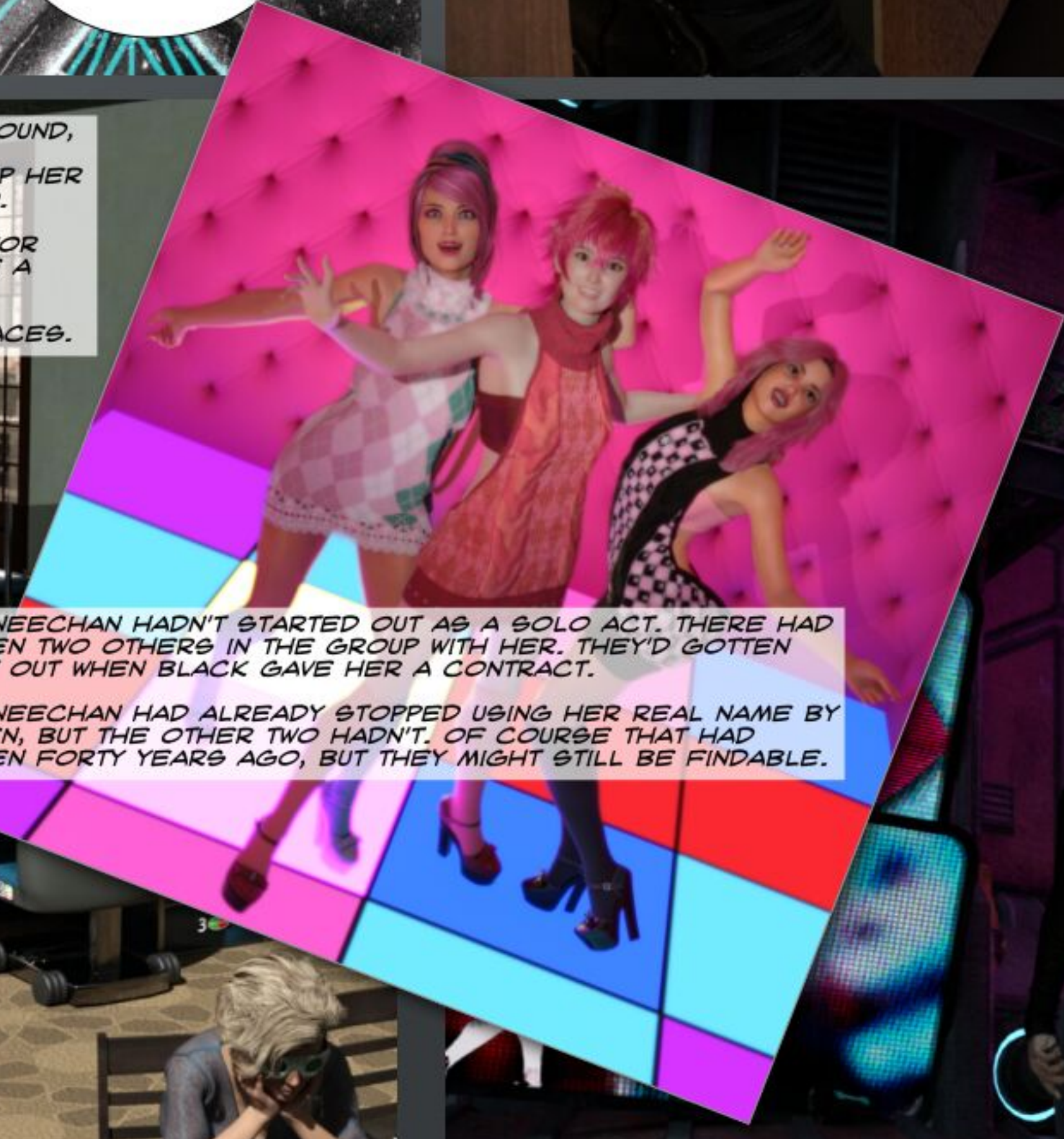
IT MADE ME DETERMINED TO KEEP GOING. SO I DUG FOR INFORMATION. ANYTHING THAT MIGHT POSSIBLY GIVE ME A ROCK TO LOOK UNDER.

I FOUND ONE. ON A HONEECHAN FAN SITE, OF ALL PLACES.



HONEECHAN HADN'T STARTED OUT AS A SOLO ACT. THERE HAD BEEN TWO OTHERS IN THE GROUP WITH HER. THEY'D GOTTEN CUT OUT WHEN BLACK GAVE HER A CONTRACT.

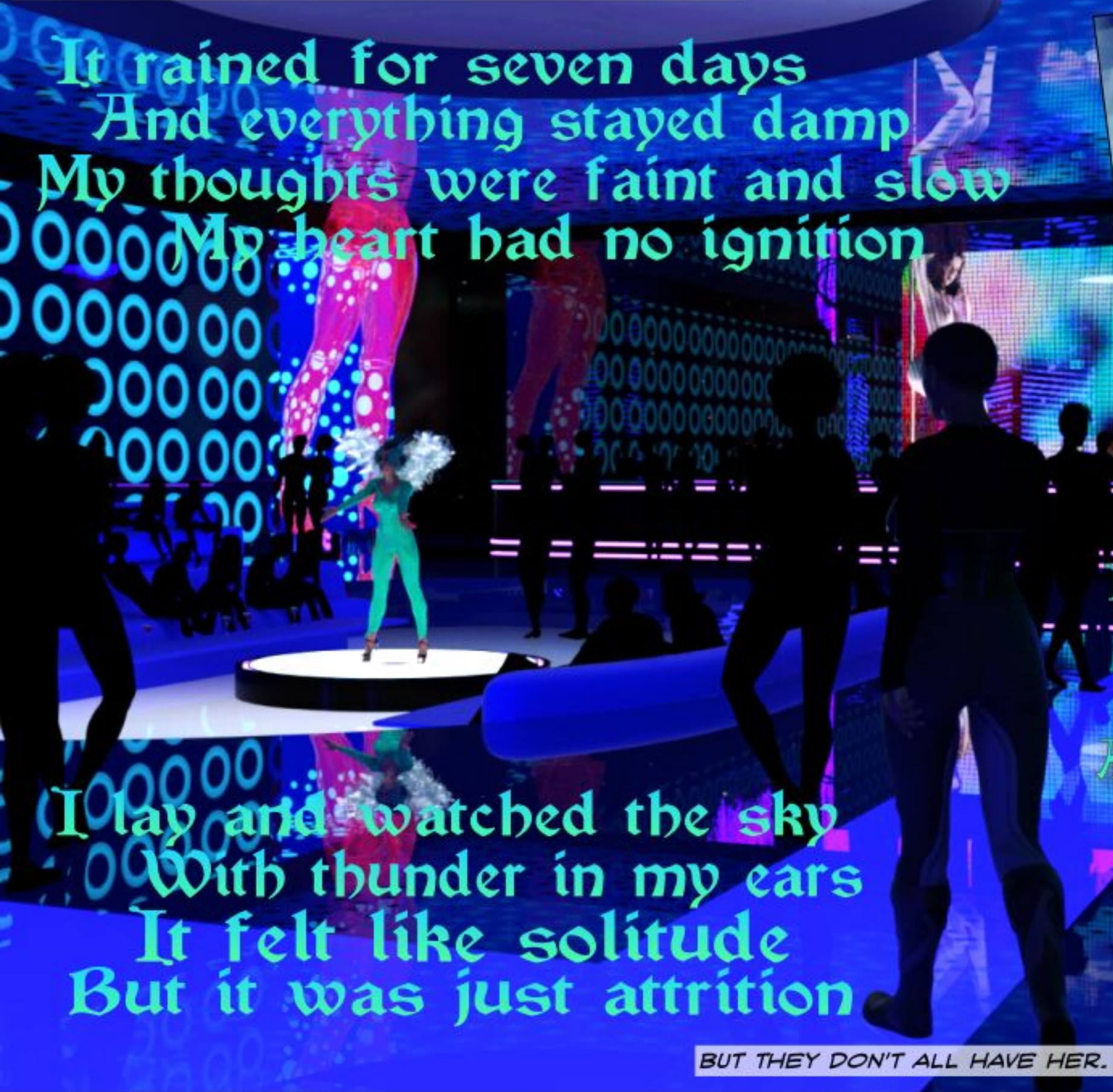
HONEECHAN HAD ALREADY STOPPED USING HER REAL NAME BY THEN, BUT THE OTHER TWO HADN'T. OF COURSE THAT HAD BEEN FORTY YEARS AGO, BUT THEY MIGHT STILL BE FINDABLE.



I COULDN'T PICK UP THE SLIGHTEST TRACE OF MODA MORIN, BUT RAIN SLEET--WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN HER ACTUAL NAME--WAS THE FEATURED ACT, AND EVENTUALLY THE OWNER, OF A CLUB HERE IN ASTRA, AND HAD BEEN FOR DECADES.



THESE CLUBS ALL LOOK ALIKE TO ME AFTER A WHILE.



It rained for seven days
And everything stayed damp
My thoughts were faint and slow
My heart had no ignition
I lay and watched the sky
With thunder in my ears
It felt like solitude
But it was just attrition

BUT THEY DON'T ALL HAVE HER.



You're seven Rings away
And you're not coming back
I burned up all your clothes
And your holo collection
I masturbate each night
And when I scream your name
A swarm of gamma rays
Zooms off in your direction



We never understand
Some choices that we make
Our minds are all opaque
In consequential ways
I ought to wish you well
But I don't think I can
The moment that you left
It rained for seven days

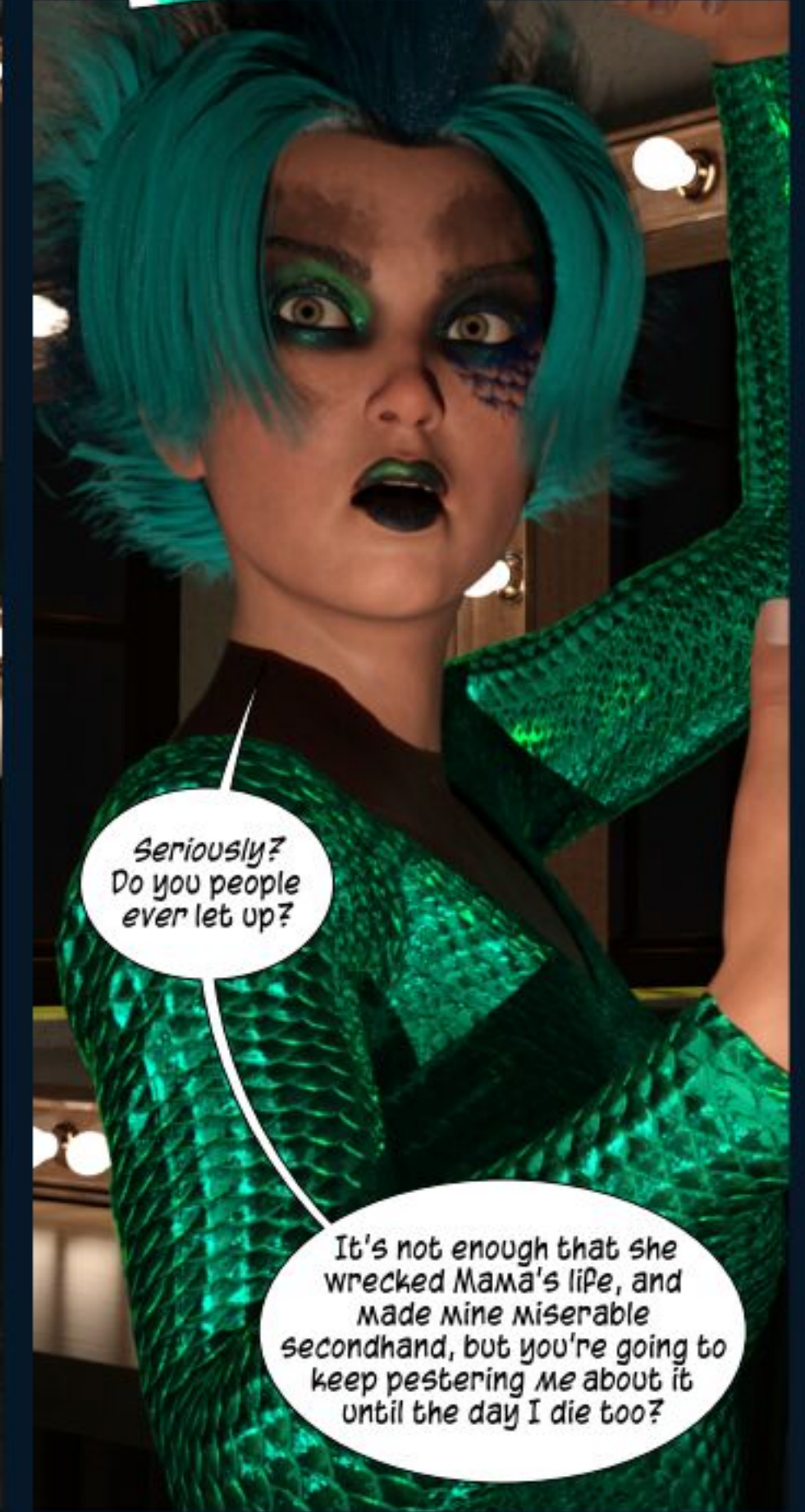


Excuse me ... It says out there you're Juli Sleet. I'm looking for Rain Sleet. I assume you're related?

If you're a bill collector, you're about fifteen years too late.

Mama set it up so you couldn't take this place when she died. So you can go space yourself.

Uh ... no. I'm trying to get some information about Honeechan. The actual Honeechan.



Seriously? Do you people ever let up?

It's not enough that she wrecked Mama's life, and made mine miserable secondhand, but you're going to keep pestering me about it until the day I die too?



I don't know about anybody else who's been pestering you.

Three people have been murdered. The killings may have something to do with Honeechan. Something in her past. I'm not sure, but I'm looking into it anyway.

The problem is, her past seems to have been sort of ... erased. And the only three people who knew anything are the dead ones.



Good for me I don't know anything, then, huh?

I really don't. Mama never talked about any of that, except sometimes when she was screaming drunk.

You know when Honeechan got that contract, she didn't just cut Mama and Moda out? She never spoke to them again. It was like everything from before that stopped existing.

But I can tell you this: I think you're looking in the wrong place.

If someone's been killing people in Astra and it's about Honeechan, then it's probably one of her Fans. Some of them are way over the edge. Bet Olear, for example. She's deranged.

Bet Olear?

She fronts an anarchist Honeechan tribute band. There are a lot of rumors about what they do offstage.



You know, there was that woman ...

I'd be interested in talking to Olear. Any idea where I can find her?



They're performing tomorrow night ... but I'm not sure I could tell you how to get to it. Their venues are hard to find on purpose.

Tell you what. I'm not singing tomorrow. Why not meet me here and I'll take you?

Can't promise you'll get to talk to her, but it's the only place you're likely to get a chance.



Not a very likely place for a concert ...

I warned you!

The government doesn't like them. The city manager has tried to break up their shows a couple of times.



We're coming in near the end, so we won't have to listen to it for very long.

Though, honestly, they've improved a lot since the last time I heard them.





Juli?

Vendyk wants to see you.

Vendyk doesn't know me and I don't know him. Try again.

He wants to see you. Come on.

And what if I don't want to?

We pick you up and carry you there.

I PROBABLY COULD HAVE KICKED THEIR ASSES—THE BIG STURDY-LOOKING ONES ALWAYS MOVE LIKE THEIR FEET ARE STUCK TO THE FLOOR, BUT I DECIDED TO PLAY ALONG, AS LONG AS THEY WERE KEEPING IT POLITE.

I DIDN'T KNOW RON VENDYK, BUT I KNEW OF HIM. ONE OF ABTRA'S MORE ECCENTRIC PLUTOCRATS, WHICH IS SAYING A LOT. VENDYK DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING ON ME THAT I KNEW OF, SO I WAS CURIOUS TO SEE WHAT HE WANTED.



Good morning! Welcome aboard. We'll depart as soon as you take your seat.

The beep boys aren't coming?

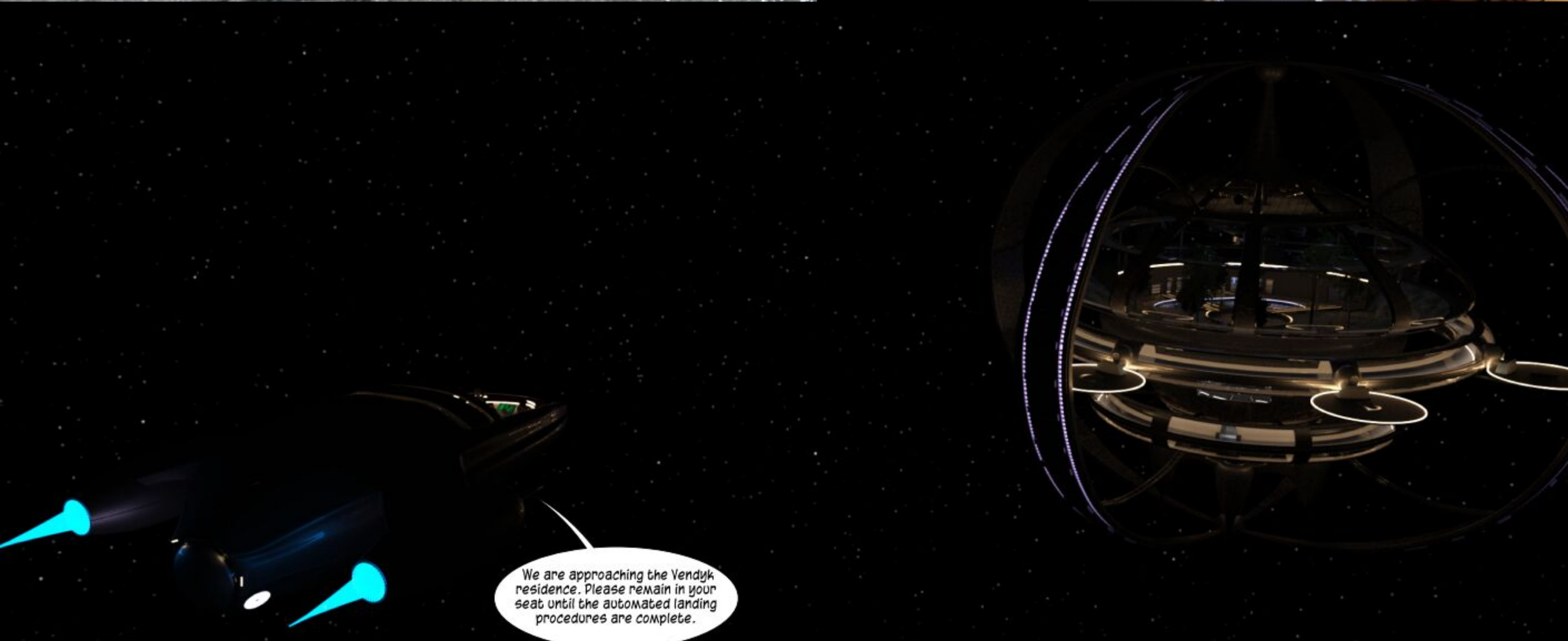
They only visit the residence when they have a reason to.

And one of them gets spacesick.

What's stopping me from slugging you and taking control of the ship?

It's an automated course, so if you're going to do that, better do it before I press the button.

I'm going to dim the cabin lights now. Please remain in your seat for your own safety.



We are approaching the Vendyk residence. Please remain in your seat until the automated landing procedures are complete.



Your visitor is here, sir.

Thank you, Purl. Please remain on hand.



Ms. Guerrero. ... Ah, please Porgive the archaic mode of address. I've never liked this business of just using last names.

I apologize for asking you up here on short notice. I won't keep you long.

You see, I don't leave this station by choice, yet I needed urgently to speak with you.

I wouldn't say you "asked." But I'm here, so speak.



Yes, well. I'll be brief: It's come to my attention that you're trying to find Honeechan. The actual Honeechan.

I must ask that you desist immediately.



Now, why would you even care about that? Are you protecting her from something?

Not at all. I simply don't wish the mystery to be resolved. Part of the reason Honeechan has endured as a success for forty years is that she is literally the subject of myth.

It would lessen my joy in her music if that myth were penetrated.

You know, I don't like when people try to tell me what to do, and I especially don't like it when they think they can tell me what to do because they have money or power or a penis.

What happens if I tell you "tough luck, I'm staying on this"?

Then I'm afraid I shall have to ask Purl to emphasize my request.



And after that?

-- retch --

Compound it, woman, I just had that floor cleaned this morning.

Mabel!



Right away, sir.



WAKING UP FROM A STUN SHOT IS ALWAYS HORRIBLE--LIKE THE WORST FULL-BODY HANGOVER YOU EVER HAD. IT'S EVEN WORSE IF YOU'RE DOING IT IN A PILE OF GARBAGE.

urgh

-- ahem --



Is it time to start trusting each other yet?



How'd you find me?

Got a tip that Vendyk's roughs had tossed a body in the trash. Glad you weren't dead after all.

Even if I'm a Ped? By the way, I've been out of the Navy for years.

I hate Vendyk a lot more than any Peds. He lives up there so we can't run him in, you know.

Look, let's have a truce on that. I won't call you a Ped if you don't call me a prov.

Deal.

So who do you like for Bello and Black's deaths?

Well, I would have said Halvig. That's the reason I was so pissed he ran off and got killed. My idea was that one of them found out, or was about to find out, about his keeping Honeechan's royalties, and he killed them because of that.

But then I went through his records. He wasn't embezzling. He was holding that money. He didn't send it because he had no idea where to send it to. So if they did accuse him, he had a good answer.

Wow. So even he didn't know where she was.

Anyway, he's out for sure, because he's dead. You can't convince me that was a different killer.



Maybe. The woman who I saw leaving the scene is named Bet Olear.

Olear? Aw, crap.

I take it she's got a record.

No! That's the thing. Never been brought in. But the government would love us to find an excuse to. They've given us grief about it a couple of times.

I'm told she's capable of violence. I tried to talk to her but she sent some of her fans after me.

I'm glad she recognized me, though, or I wouldn't have connected her to the woman in the alley. She likes to wear makeup that hides her appearance.

Yeah, they all do that.

What I don't have for her is a motive. If there's a reason she'd want to kill any of them, I haven't found it.

Hmm. Let me do a little digging.

Got anybody else?



Well, I have to throw Vendyk into the hat after that visit ... but he doesn't want to wreck the Honeechan business, he wants to keep it going. Unless he's doing a very hostile takeover ...

Y'know, keeping on this after he warned you off might not be smart. Vendyk's trouble.

Yeah, I know. I'm probably too stubborn for my own good. Anyway, he didn't kill me, and he could have--I was up at his station, out cold. Space the body, can't prove a thing. So I think that means something.

Doesn't mean he won't do it next time.



Might not matter. I'm out of leads again. Can't keep investigating if I don't know what to investigate.

Nothing on the agenda but a shower. Thanks for not saying anything. I needed to change out of these clothes before I got hauled off to a space station and then thrown in the trash.

Ha! I've seen worse. Smelled worse.

Look, don't leave Astra just yet. I may turn up something. Give me a day or two.

Didn't you just warn me not to keep going?

Yeah, well ... I'm stubborn too.

I WOULDN'T HAVE LEFT ASTRA IMMEDIATELY ANYWAY. I HAD A LITTLE UNFINISHED BUSINESS.



I'm on in twenty and I haven't even done my hair, this better be impo--

oh.

... uh, hi.



You told Vendyk I was looking for Honeechan.

You cleared out yesterday morning before I woke up. So you wouldn't be there when his assholes came. You knew what was going to happen.

Why? What's your connection to Vendyk?



There isn't any!

Well, I mean, OK, there is, but not like that. And I wish there wasn't.

A few years ago, Vendyk figured out that anybody who's looking for Honeechan ends up asking me about it sooner or later.

He asked me to let him know any time somebody did.

And you went along with it.

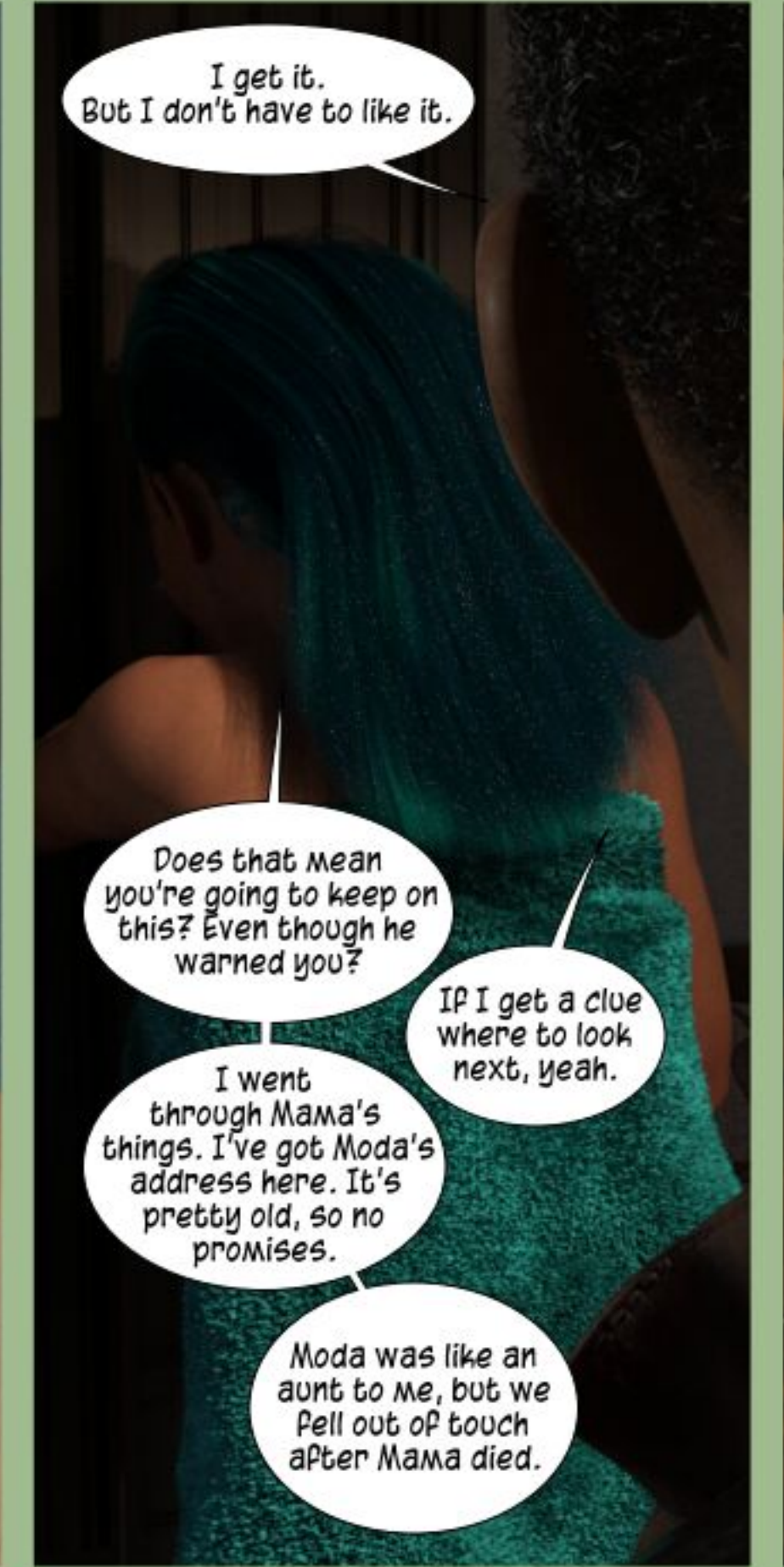
Man says jump, everybody asks how high.



I have to live here, you know! I don't get to just hop on my ship and fly off like you!

Vendyk's one of those people you try real hard not to piss off.

Randa, this club's all I've got, and he could destroy it if he wanted to. Just like that. One call to the right people.



I get it. But I don't have to like it.

Does that mean you're going to keep on this? Even though he warned you?

IF I get a clue where to look next, yeah.

I went through Mama's things. I've got Moda's address here. It's pretty old, so no promises.

Moda was like an aunt to me, but we fell out of touch after Mama died.



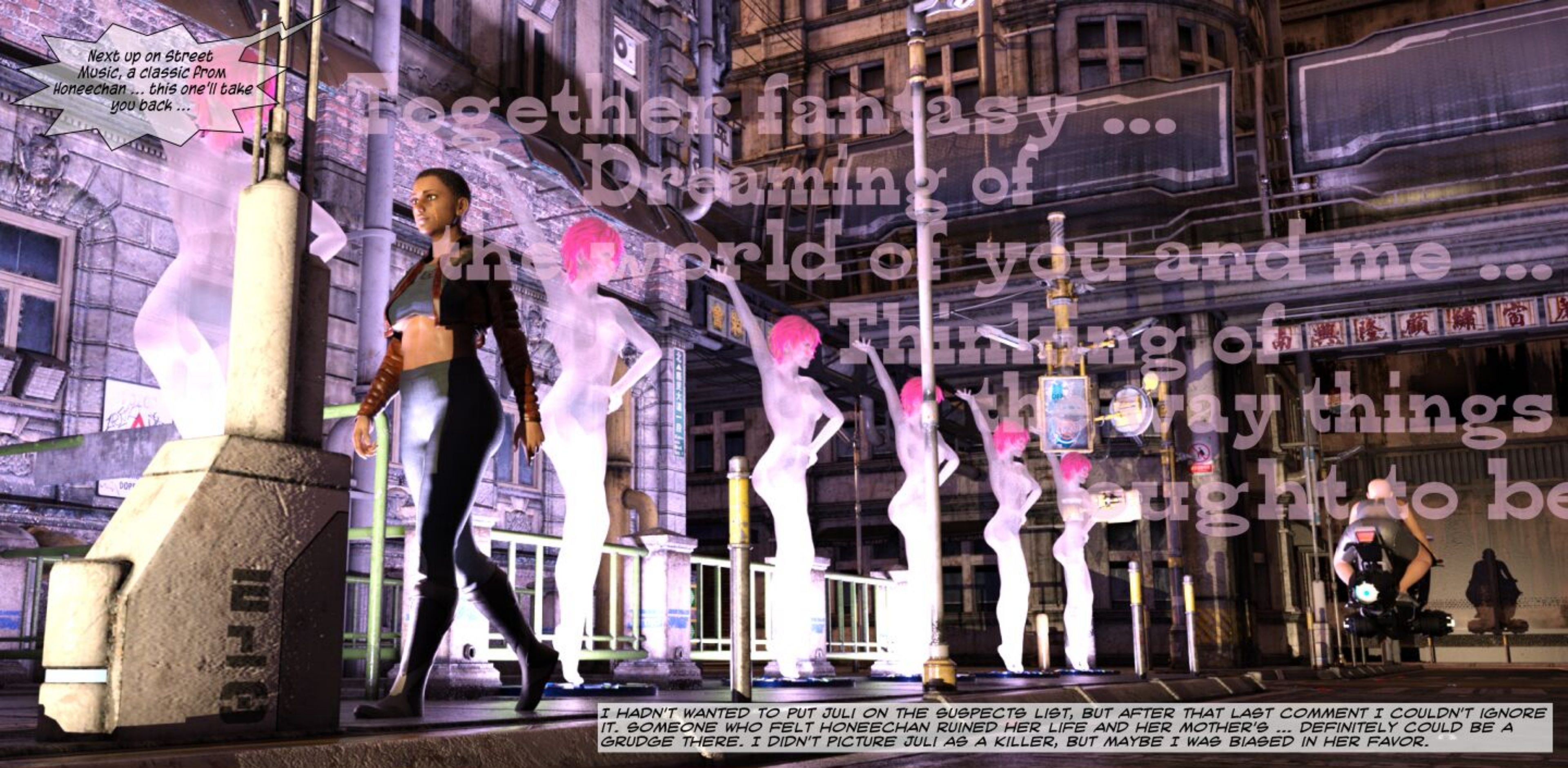
You're a very interesting person, you know that?

You should see me again sometime. If you survive.



But if you do find Honeechan ... I don't want to know anything about it.

She ruined a lot of things around here. I'd love it if I never heard her name again.



Next up on Street Music, a classic Prom Honeechan ... this one'll take you back ...

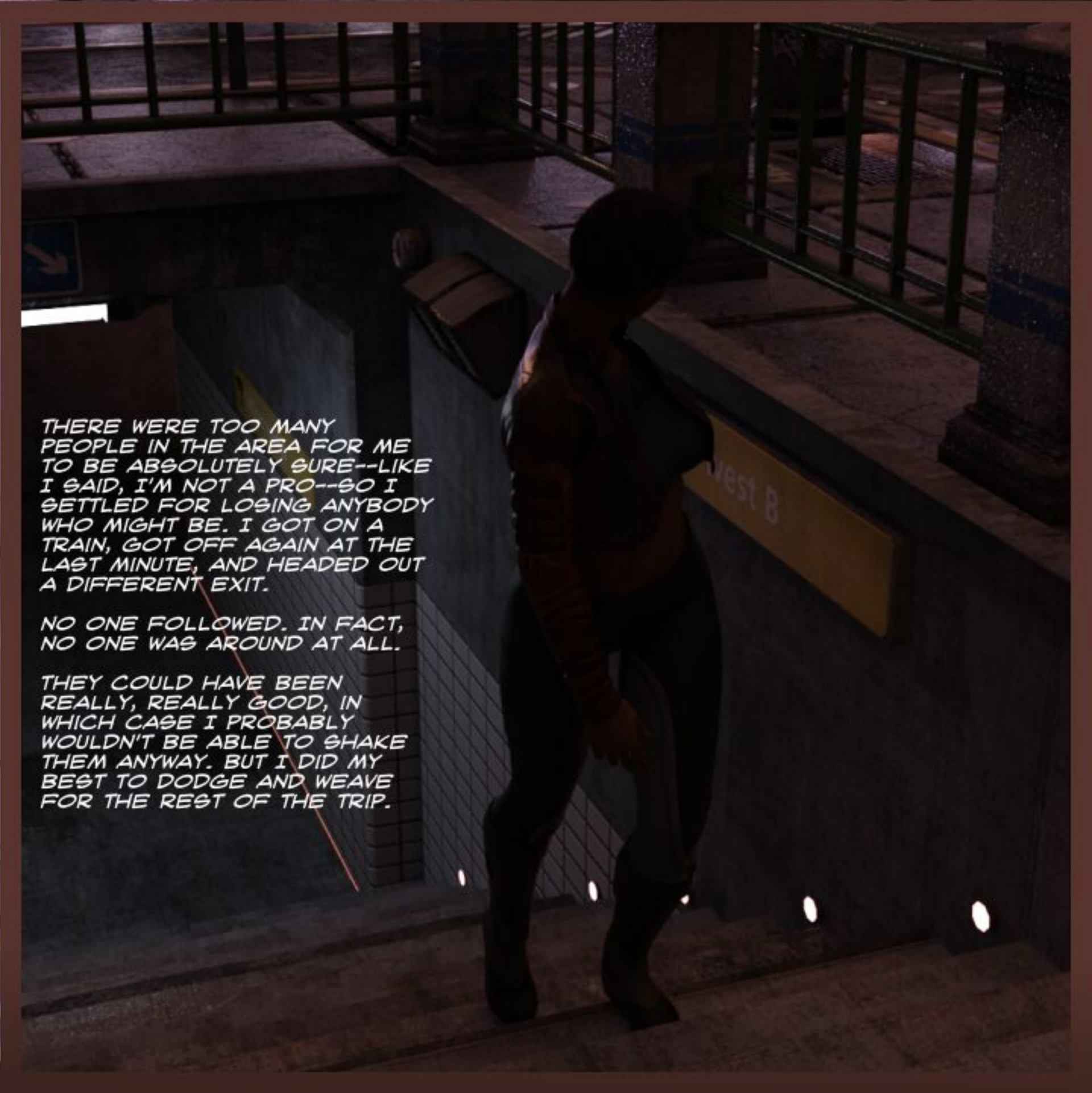
Together fantasy ...
 Dreaming of
 the world of you and me ...
 Thinking of
 the way things
 ought to be

I HADN'T WANTED TO PUT JULI ON THE SUSPECTS LIST, BUT AFTER THAT LAST COMMENT I COULDN'T IGNORE IT. SOMEONE WHO FELT HONEECHAN RUINED HER LIFE AND HER MOTHER'S ... DEFINITELY COULD BE A GRUDGE THERE. I DIDN'T PICTURE JULI AS A KILLER, BUT MAYBE I WAS BIASED IN HER FAVOR.



One day we see
 that we need
 something

I'M NOT VERY GOOD AT THE STREET STUFF--I TRAINED AS A SOLDIER, NOT A SPY--BUT I DID LEARN REAL FAST TO WATCH MY SIX, AND MIDWAY THROUGH THAT Musing, I GOT THE DEFINITE IMPRESSION I WAS BEING FOLLOWED.

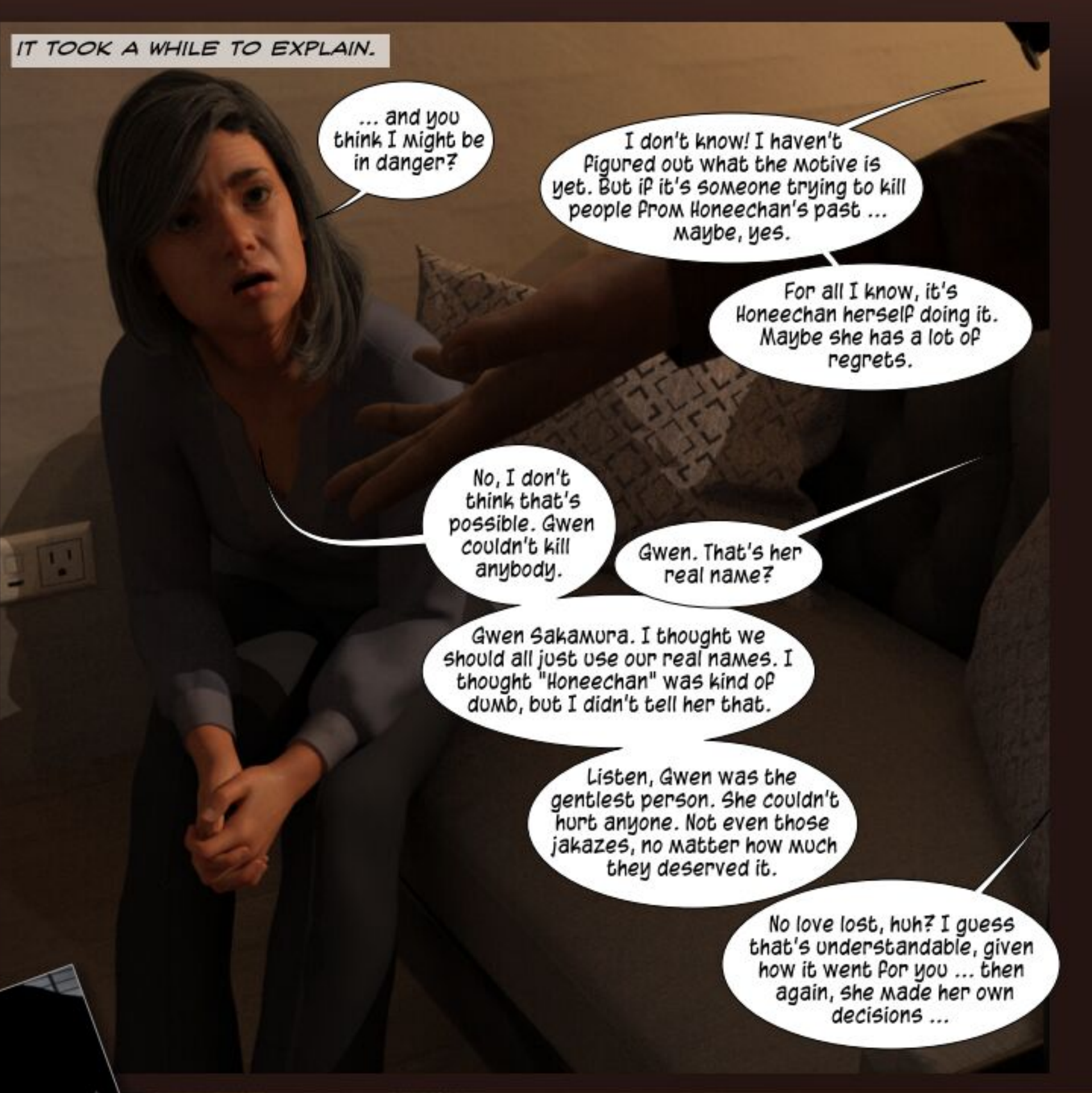


THERE WERE TOO MANY PEOPLE IN THE AREA FOR ME TO BE ABSOLUTELY SURE--LIKE I SAID, I'M NOT A PRO--SO I SETTLED FOR LOSING ANYBODY WHO MIGHT BE. I GOT ON A TRAIN, GOT OFF AGAIN AT THE LAST MINUTE, AND HEADED OUT A DIFFERENT EXIT.
 NO ONE FOLLOWED, IN FACT, NO ONE WAS AROUND AT ALL.
 THEY COULD HAVE BEEN REALLY REALLY GOOD, IN WHICH CASE I PROBABLY WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SHAKE THEM ANYWAY, BUT I DID MY BEST TO DODGE AND WEAVE FOR THE REST OF THE TRIP.



Moda Morin?
 Yes?

My name's Randa Guerrero. I really need to talk to you.



IT TOOK A WHILE TO EXPLAIN.

... and you think I might be in danger?
 I don't know! I haven't figured out what the motive is yet. But if it's someone trying to kill people Prom Honeechan's past ... maybe, yes.
 For all I know, it's Honeechan herself doing it. Maybe she has a lot of regrets.
 No, I don't think that's possible. Gwen couldn't kill anybody.
 Gwen. That's her real name?
 Gwen sakamura. I thought we should all just use our real names. I thought "Honeechan" was kind of dumb, but I didn't tell her that.
 Listen, Gwen was the gentlest person. She couldn't hurt anyone. Not even those jakazes, no matter how much they deserved it.
 No love lost, huh? I guess that's understandable, given how it went for you ... then again, she made her own decisions ...



But did she really?



She believed everything that agent of hers told her. I don't think she'd have signed the contract without him telling her it was a good idea ... and because he thought it was a good idea, I'm not sure she really looked at what it said.



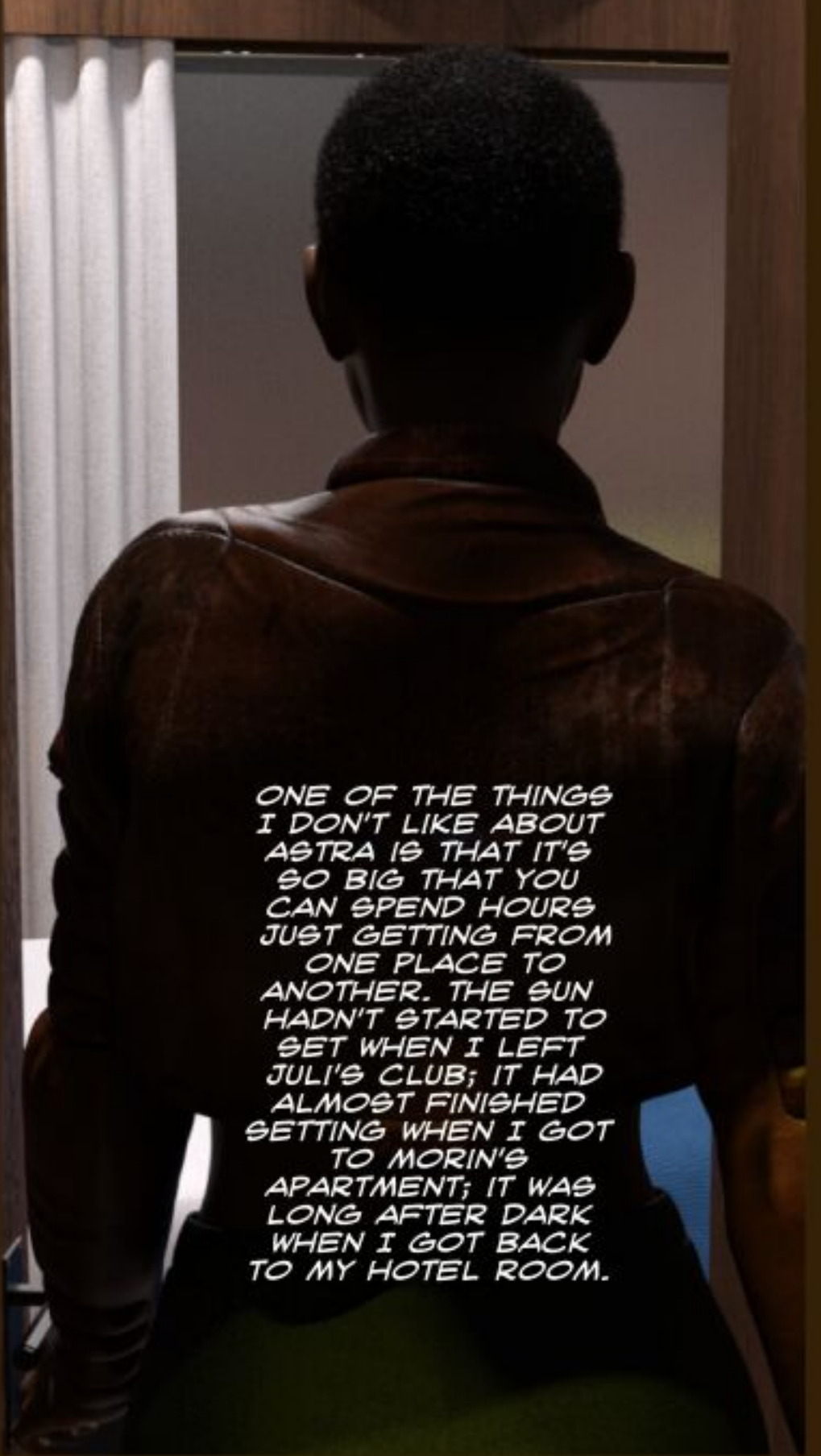
I thought Gwen and I had something. I thought we were going to stay together no matter what happened to the group ... Rain told me once she'd assumed Gwen and I would go off and do our thing after a couple of years, so it wasn't just me that thought so ...
 I guess Gwen didn't think so. Or she decided that whatever I was to her, Honeechan was more important.

The next thing Rain and I knew, we were completely cut out, and Gwen just ... vanished. I don't know what they were telling her, but she listened to it.

Regrets? You know, I'd love to believe she has some, but ...

I sort of hope she doesn't have regrets. I hope she really likes what she got.

I mean, it better have been worth it for her, y'know?



ONE OF THE THINGS I DON'T LIKE ABOUT ASTRA IS THAT IT'S SO BIG THAT YOU CAN SPEND HOURS JUST GETTING FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER. THE SUN HADN'T STARTED TO SET WHEN I LEFT JULI'S CLUB; IT HAD ALMOST FINISHED SETTING WHEN I GOT TO MORIN'S APARTMENT; IT WAS LONG AFTER DARK WHEN I GOT BACK TO MY HOTEL ROOM.



YAAAAARRRR!!



The police are looking for me now! First you come after me at the show, and then you put them on my ass!

You want trouble? I'll show you what real trouble is!



uaaaah!



Not a chance, Clea.

MMMMHH...

hm.

So it's like that, is it?



Make me. -- Uhh --

Go on, Pheb. Make me!



ooooohh!!

I'LL SAY THIS FOR ASTRA, IT'S FULL OF UNUSUAL AND INTERESTING PEOPLE.





I HADN'T EXPECTED HER TO STILL BE THERE IN THE MORNING. WITH HER MAKEUP OFF I REALIZED SHE WAS YOUNGER THAN I'D THOUGHT. NOT YOUNG ENOUGH TO MAKE ME FEEL GUILTY, THOUGH.

You're going to go look for her, aren't you?
I don't know who you mean.
Yes, you do. Honeechan. The real Honeechan. You were talking to Juli Sleet, and you wanted to talk to Halvig, but he got killed first. And that jakaz Vendyk warned you off, so he thinks you are too.
Eyes and ears everywhere, huh? What's it to you if I am?
I want in.

... You're kidding.



I've been trying to find her for years. She's ... important to me, OK? A lot of my life has been about her. I want to meet her.
None of the people who know anything will ever tell me anything ... Sleet told me to space off a long time back ... Vendyk warned me and I had to stop looking ... you aren't scared of him. Maybe you're crazy.
But I think you're going to find her, and I want to be there.



That's a horrible idea.
You think I'd bring someone to her who might be trying to kill her?
I mean, yes, I was willing to have sex with you, but I knew you weren't actually trying to kill me.
What if you're on vendetta? What if you finally lost it because these people wouldn't tell you anything and you're murdering them one by one? What if you've decided you actually need to kill the real Honeechan because she's avoided you for so long?



That's ... that's ... agh! It's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.
You don't really believe any of that.
No, not really.
But you were seen fleeing from the scene of Halvig's murder, and while it's not much, it's more than the police have on anybody else ... which makes you suspect number one.
But even if you weren't, consider this: Honeechan has been hiding for years. She doesn't want to be found.
I have to find her, much as I'd prefer to just leave her alone, because I think some people's lives are at risk.
But you ... you're probably exactly the kind of person she's avoiding.
Sorry.



I tell you what. If I find her, I'll tell her. I'll let her know she has a devoted fan who is probably not dangerous. And if she'll allow you to meet her, we'll set it up.
But I have two conditions.
First, don't try to follow me or interfere in this.
Second, please don't break into my hotel room again.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO FIND SOMEONE IF ALL YOU HAVE IS THEIR NAME AND WHAT THEY LOOKED LIKE FORTY YEARS AGO? WELL, IF THEY COULD BE ANYWHERE IN THE GALAXY, THE ANSWER MAY BE 'FOREVER,' UNLESS YOU GET A LUCKY BREAK. BUT IF YOU HAVE A STRONG SUSPICION THEY NEVER ACTUALLY LEFT ABSTRA, AND YOU KNOW PEOPLE WITH GOOD DATA CONNECTIONS TO ASK, THE ANSWER IS 'EIGHT HOURS.'



ABSTRA IS STACKED ON TOP OF ITSELF. IN GENERAL, THE HIGHER UP THE STACK YOU LIVE, THE RICHER YOU ARE. SAKAMURA HAD TO HAVE MONEY, UNLESS SHE WAS REALLY GOOD AT BLOWING THROUGH IT ... YET SHE LIVED AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STACK, IN THE CANAL DISTRICT.



Gwen Sakamura.
I don't know you. What do you want?
My name's Randa Guerrero. I need to talk to you.
I don't talk to anybody. I only talk to people I know, and I don't know anybody anymore.
Go away.



I wish I could.
I'd like to just leave you alone and let you stay vanished.
But three people have been killed, and it has something to do with you.
No ... that's not quite right. It has something to do with Honeechan. Not you.



But you're the only person who knows anything about Honeechan who's still alive.



I was twenty years old. I didn't know a thing. I knew I didn't know anything, though. That's why I got an agent, so he'd know the things I didn't know.

I depended on his judgement. I trusted him. And ... I don't think my trust was misplaced, exactly. I don't think Tor was trying to cheat me, or act against what he thought was my interest.

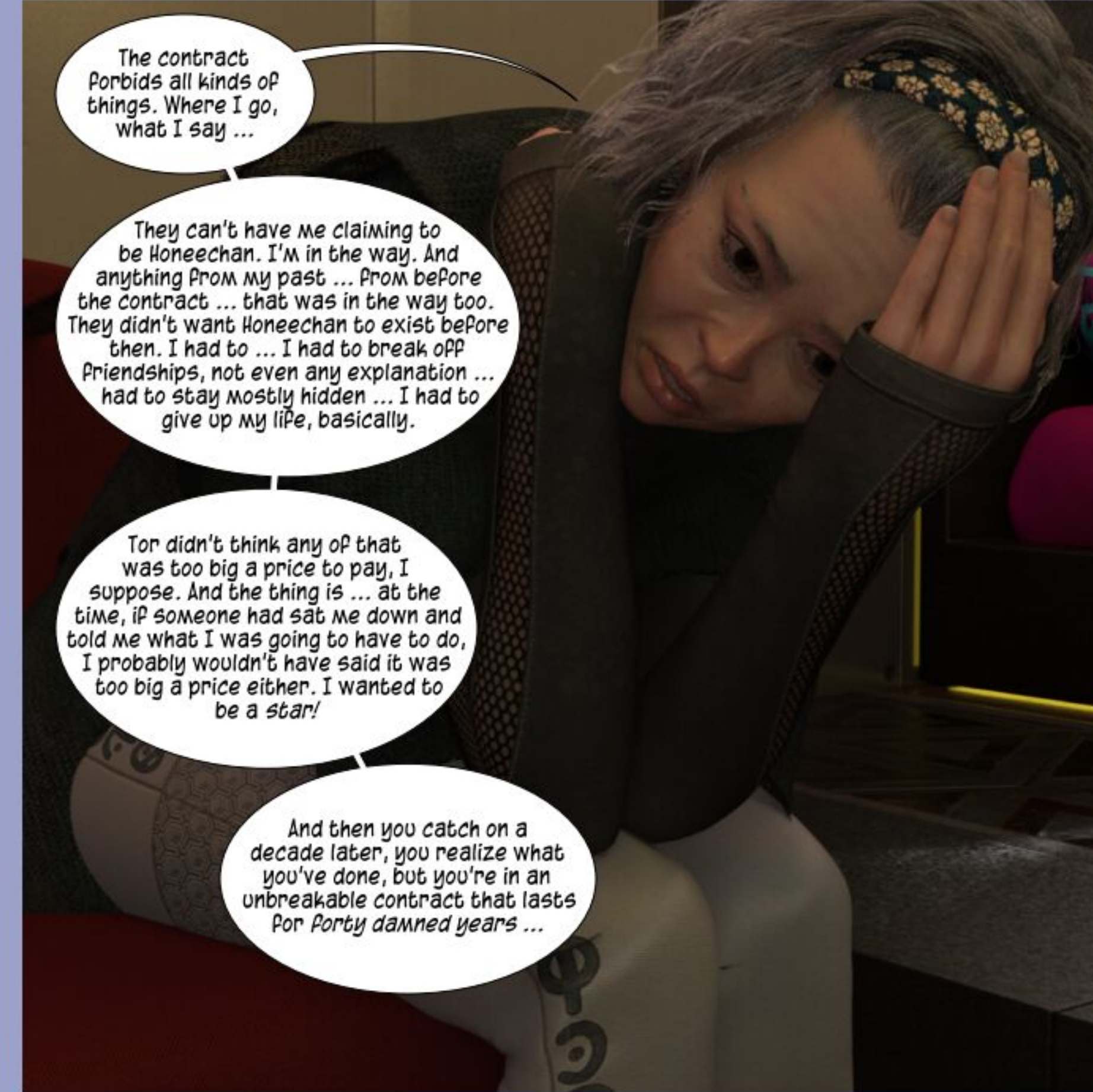


I didn't read the contract very closely, and I didn't understand a lot of what it said anyway. But I knew he did, and I knew he wouldn't let me sign anything that was a bad deal. That's the problem: he thought it was a good deal. And in its way, it was.

A forty-year contract! No loopholes! I'd do a few days of voice samples for them, let them take scans of my body, and then they'd make me a guaranteed idol and I wouldn't even have to do anything!

I didn't realize that it wouldn't be me! That I wouldn't be performing. That they were going to create this other person out of nothing and call her me, and she was going to be the idol, and I'd never sing in public again.

Wait ... the contract forbids you from performing?



The contract forbids all kinds of things. Where I go, what I say ...

They can't have me claiming to be Honeechan. I'm in the way. And anything from my past ... from before the contract ... that was in the way too. They didn't want Honeechan to exist before then. I had to ... I had to break off friendships, not even any explanation ... had to stay mostly hidden ... I had to give up my life, basically.

Tor didn't think any of that was too big a price to pay, I suppose. And the thing is ... at the time, if someone had sat me down and told me what I was going to have to do, I probably wouldn't have said it was too big a price either. I wanted to be a star!

And then you catch on a decade later, you realize what you've done, but you're in an unbreakable contract that lasts for forty damned years ...



You know, I feel like you could fight that. There's no way some of that can be enforceable.

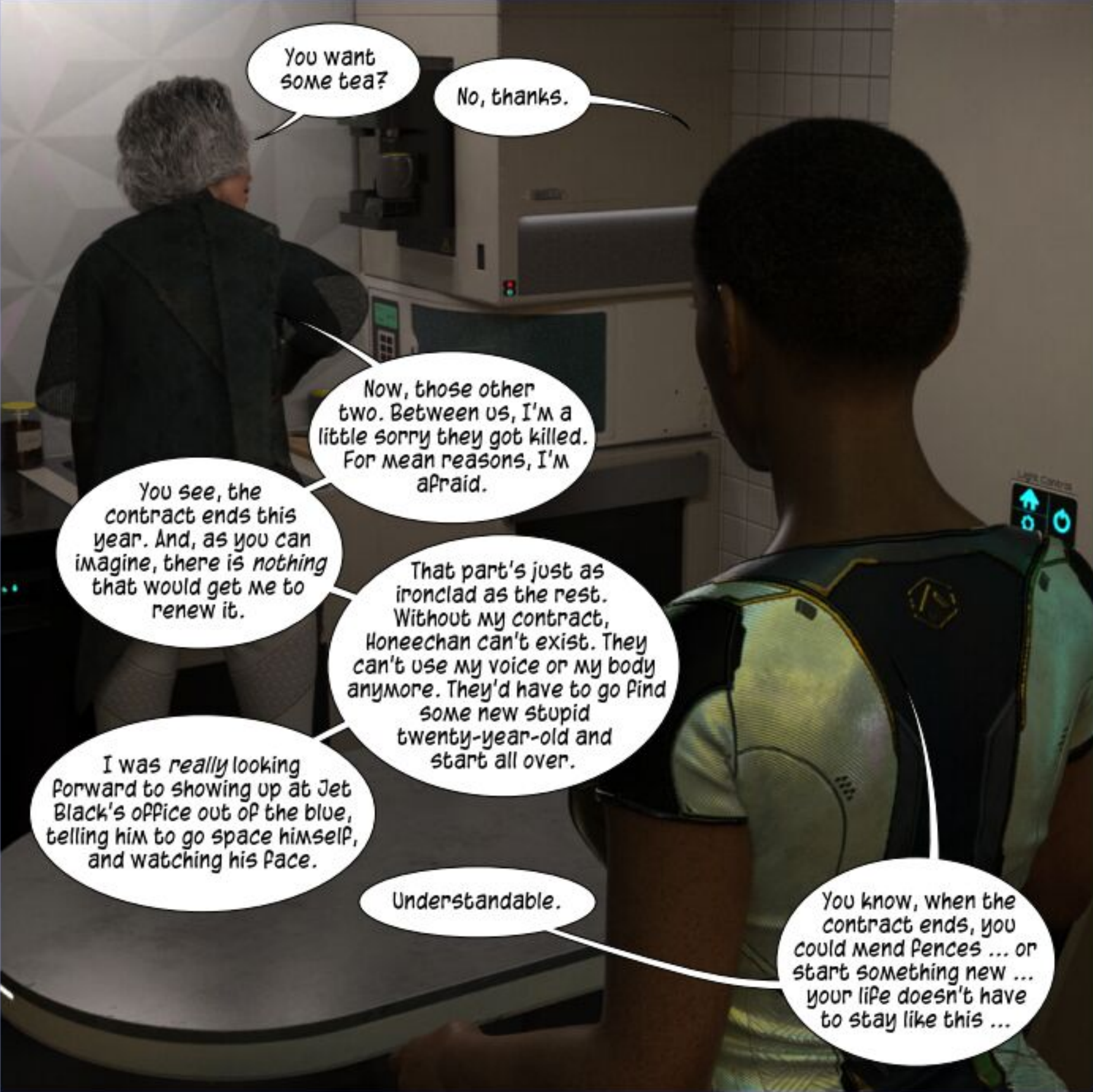
Well, I did agree to it. And I took their money. For twenty-five years I took their damned money. Then I couldn't bring myself to do it anymore.

That's when you really went into hiding. And Halvig didn't know where to send your royalties.

You know he was holding them for you?

You see? He never did me wrong. He was a good person. He didn't deserve ... I just ... strangled in the street ...

I don't want to think about that.



You want some tea?

No, thanks.

Now, those other two. Between us, I'm a little sorry they got killed. For mean reasons, I'm afraid.

You see, the contract ends this year. And, as you can imagine, there is nothing that would get me to renew it.

That part's just as ironclad as the rest. Without my contract, Honeechan can't exist. They can't use my voice or my body anymore. They'd have to go find some new stupid twenty-year-old and start all over.

I was really looking forward to showing up at Jet Black's office out of the blue, telling him to go space himself, and watching his face.

Understandable.

You know, when the contract ends, you could mend fences ... or start something new ... your life doesn't have to stay like this ...



Well ... I can't sing the way I used to.

And I don't think any of my old friends would forgive me.

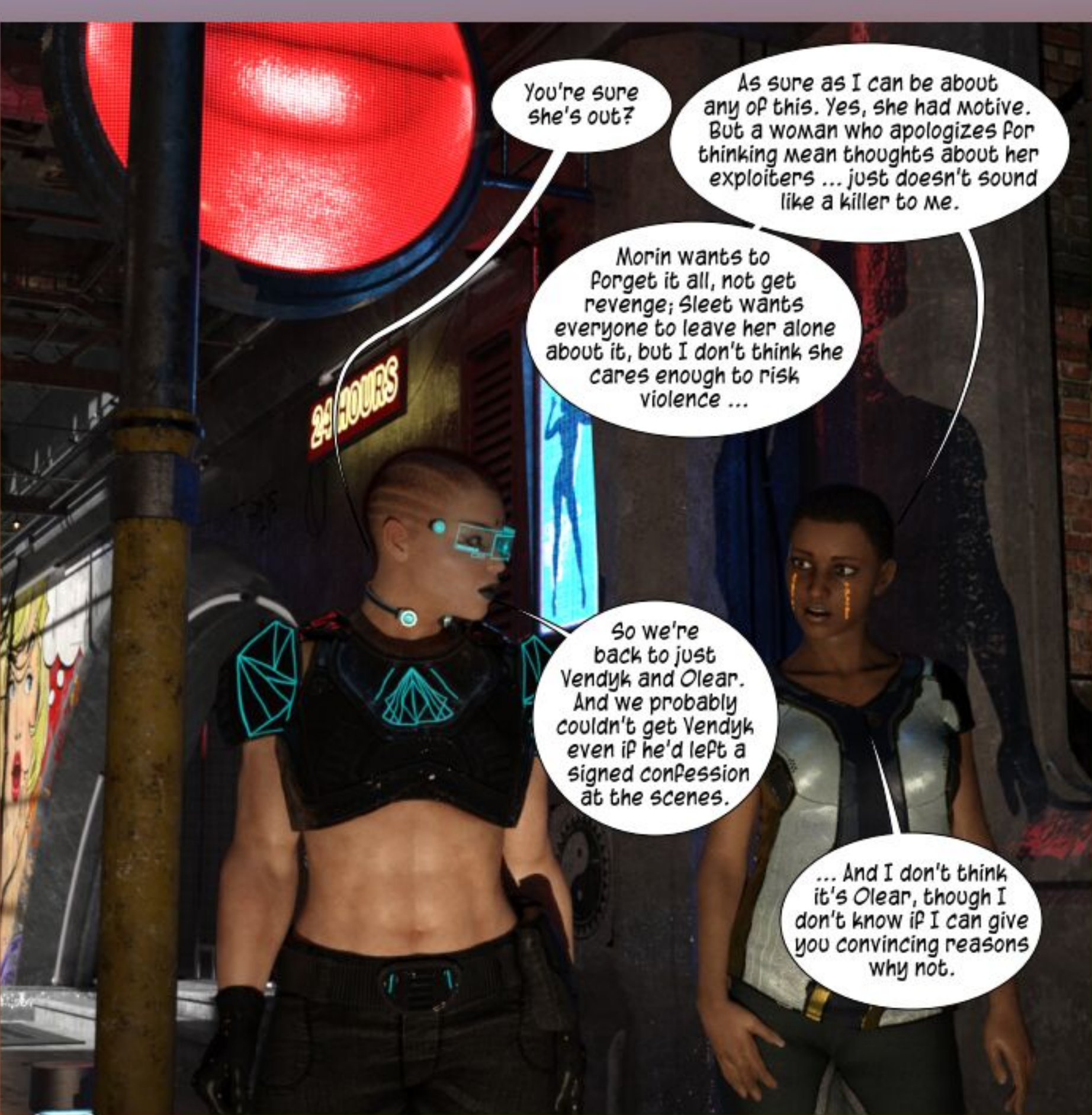
I appreciate the thought, though.

You know the worst thing about all of this?

I can't stand to look at her. Honeechan. I hate walking past the signs, the street songs ...

It's not just that I get older and she doesn't.

I look at her and I see the twenty-year-old who did a really stupid thing. Like she's frozen at the moment of stupid. To remind me.



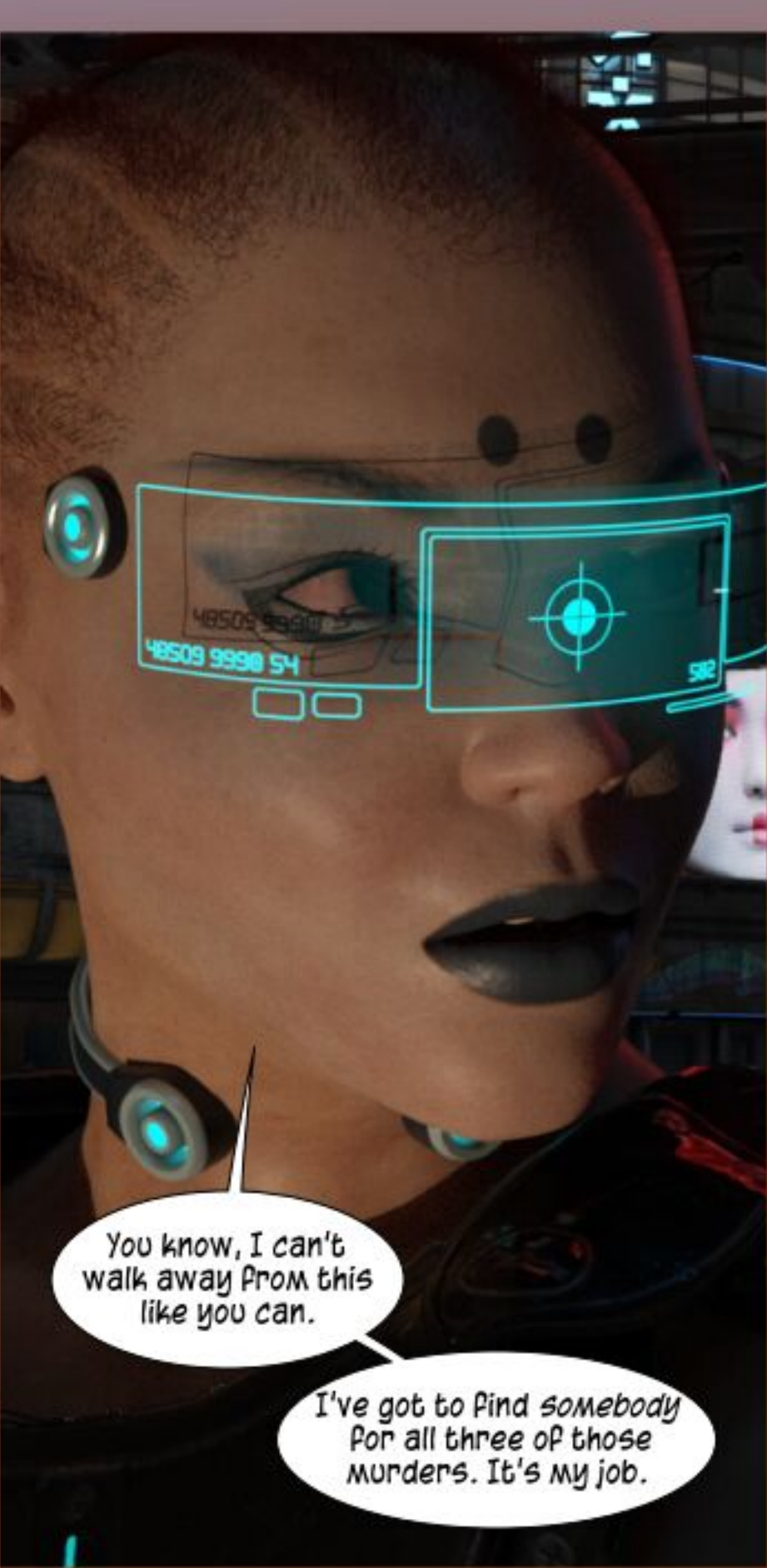
You're sure she's out?

As sure as I can be about any of this. Yes, she had motive. But a woman who apologizes for thinking mean thoughts about her exploiters ... just doesn't sound like a killer to me.

Morin wants to forget it all, not get revenge; Sleet wants everyone to leave her alone about it, but I don't think she cares enough to risk violence ...

So we're back to just Vendyk and Olear. And we probably couldn't get Vendyk even if he'd left a signed confession at the scenes.

... And I don't think it's Olear, though I don't know if I can give you convincing reasons why not.



You know, I can't walk away from this like you can.

I've got to find somebody for all three of those murders. It's my job.



Then you'll be glad to hear I'm ninety-five percent sure I know who did it.

But I need to connect the dots. Ninety-five percent isn't good enough.

What kind of access to financials do you have?



AAA!

... Randa.

Don't sneak up on people like that!

I said hello, Mitch. I guess you didn't hear me.

Everything OK?

Oh, sure ... just business ups and downs, you know ...

But maybe you've got better news?

As a matter of Pact, yes.

I've found out who killed Bello and Black.

And Tor Halvig.

Oh! Well, that's great. Good work.

Any progress on finding Honeechan?



It's interesting that's your priority.

Remember what I said about not being honest with me?

Mitch, I've been having a look at the money. The Honeechan arrangements are very strange.

As not just composer, but essentially performer, Pol Bello got forty percent of all Honeechan revenue. Jet Black also got forty percent, of which he fed five percent back into the operation of the business. The other thirty-five percent he kept for himself.

The remaining twenty percent went to the real Honeechan as per usage of her voice and likeness, of which her agent Halvig took a cut.

Is that accurate? Presumably you know these numbers better than I do.



The thing is, those arrangements were made very difficult to change.

Not only did Bello have it written in the contract that he was the only person allowed to compose and create new Honeechan songs, but his cut of existing royalties would continue even after his death.

However, he has no estate--no spouse, no heirs--so now that he's dead his cut goes to the company, which inherits his music rights.

As for Black, he made it explicit that the thirty-five percent he was pocketing continued to go into his pocket even after his sale--or, really, transfer, I can't find that you paid anything for it--of the business.

That arrangement was to continue until his death.



Wait, are you trying to imply that I--

Don't even start.

Once I learned a little about what was in that weird contract, I knew I needed to know the rest of it.

And once I knew the rest of it, it couldn't possibly have been anybody else but you.

You took over the business and you weren't happy with just having five percent of that money.

The only way to get at the rest of it was to kill the others off.

Halvig confused me, because you didn't really need to kill him, and you killed him too soon. You thought he'd given me information on where to find Honeechan, and he hadn't.



Because it's very important to you that I find Honeechan.

Did you realize before you took over that the contract was about to expire?

If she doesn't re-sign, the whole thing evaporates, no more money at all, and you killed three people for nothing.

Not that your killing them would be justified in any case.

Mitch ... even putting aside the Pact that you lied to me and used me, that you wasted my time and made me an accomplice ...

... do you have any idea how it feels to find out that all this was just about greed?



You don't understand!

Jet made a big deal of how he was giving me an opportunity. Handing me this business for free just because "I was like a son to him" and "he wanted it to outlive him."

But that's not what he wanted at all. He didn't give a damn. What he wanted was someone to keep the last bits of the business running so he could keep living on that money until he died. He lied to me start to finish.

I got in and found out that not only was there barely enough cash to operate, but that he hadn't done any scouting in years. No prospects. No other acts in the pipeline. He'd stopped doing anything else but rolling in the Honeechan money.

And then I found out that even that was going to end this year ... he didn't tell me! He could have told me where to find Honeechan and he didn't tell me that either. He planned for the business to not last much longer. He knew Bello was tired and thinking about retiring. He set me up to fail!

Look, I agree that Black was a shitheel ... but that doesn't excuse murdering him--



AARRGGGHH!!



They all deserved to die and you know it!

This was my Future! It was supposed to be my way out of having to do shit guard jobs the rest of my life. And now what have I got?

What the hell, what's one more? No one will miss you, you know.

--hkk--
You get all that, Caller?

Loud and clear.



Good.

iiiiiiiii



Nice toss.

Thanks.

He used to be a better fighter. Guess the music producer life's made him soft.

Hey, Mitch? I'm handing you over to the lieutenant now, but before I go, there's something you should know.

I found Honeechan. And she'd already decided a long time ago that there was nothing in the galaxy that'd get her to re-sign.

So you'd have been Pucked anyway.

urgh



See you around, Caller.

If you need inPo from me for the trial or whatever, you know how to reach me. Might not be Past.

I'm thinking of being somewhere a long way from Astra for a while.

SOMETIMES MY STORIES START BEFORE I GET THERE, AND SOMETIMES THEY DON'T END UNTIL A WHILE AFTER I LEAVE.

MITCH HAD KILLED HALVIG BECAUSE HALVIG FIGURED OUT WHO'D KILLED BLACK AND BELLO. WE KNOW THIS BECAUSE MITCH TOLD CALLER, HAVING NO REASON LEFT TO HOLD ANY OF IT BACK. HALVIG HAD SENT MITCH A MESSAGE: CONFESS OR I'LL DO IT FOR YOU. THAT WAS WHY HALVIG RAN WHEN I TRIED TO SEE HIM--HE THOUGHT MITCH HAD SENT ME TO ELIMINATE HIM.

I TOLD SAKAMURA HOW IT HAD COME OUT. SHE DESERVED TO KNOW. I DIDN'T TELL JULI. SHE'D ASKED ME NOT TO.

I ALSO CONVINCED SAKAMURA TO CLAIM HER REMAINING ROYALTIES. SHE WAS ENTITLED TO THEM, AND IF THEY WERE THE LAST OF THE HONEECHAN MONEY, SHE MIGHT AS WELL MAKE GOOD USE OF THEM.

I DID TELL SAKAMURA ABOUT CLEAR. I HAVE NO IDEA WHETHER THEY EVER MET.

I DIDN'T LEARN THE VERY LAST PART OF THE STORY UNTIL A MESSAGE FROM SAKAMURA CAUGHT UP WITH ME MORE THAN SIX MONTHS LATER.



... Hello, Moda.

...!

Gwen?



Moda ...

... I'm so sorry.

I got into something without thinking it through, and then I couldn't get out of it.

I hurt you. I hurt a lot of people. I didn't mean to, but that's no excuse.

I don't expect you to Porgive me. I'm not asking you to.

I just wanted to tell you in person: I really am sorry. For everything.



Gwen, wait.

Gwen!

Don't you dare disappear on me again!



Honestly? I have no idea whether I can Porgive you.

For one thing, I don't know yet for sure what I'm Porgiving you for.

But I do know I sure can't Porgive you if you don't give me a chance to.

Now, come in and sit down. It sounds like we've got a lot to talk about.

END