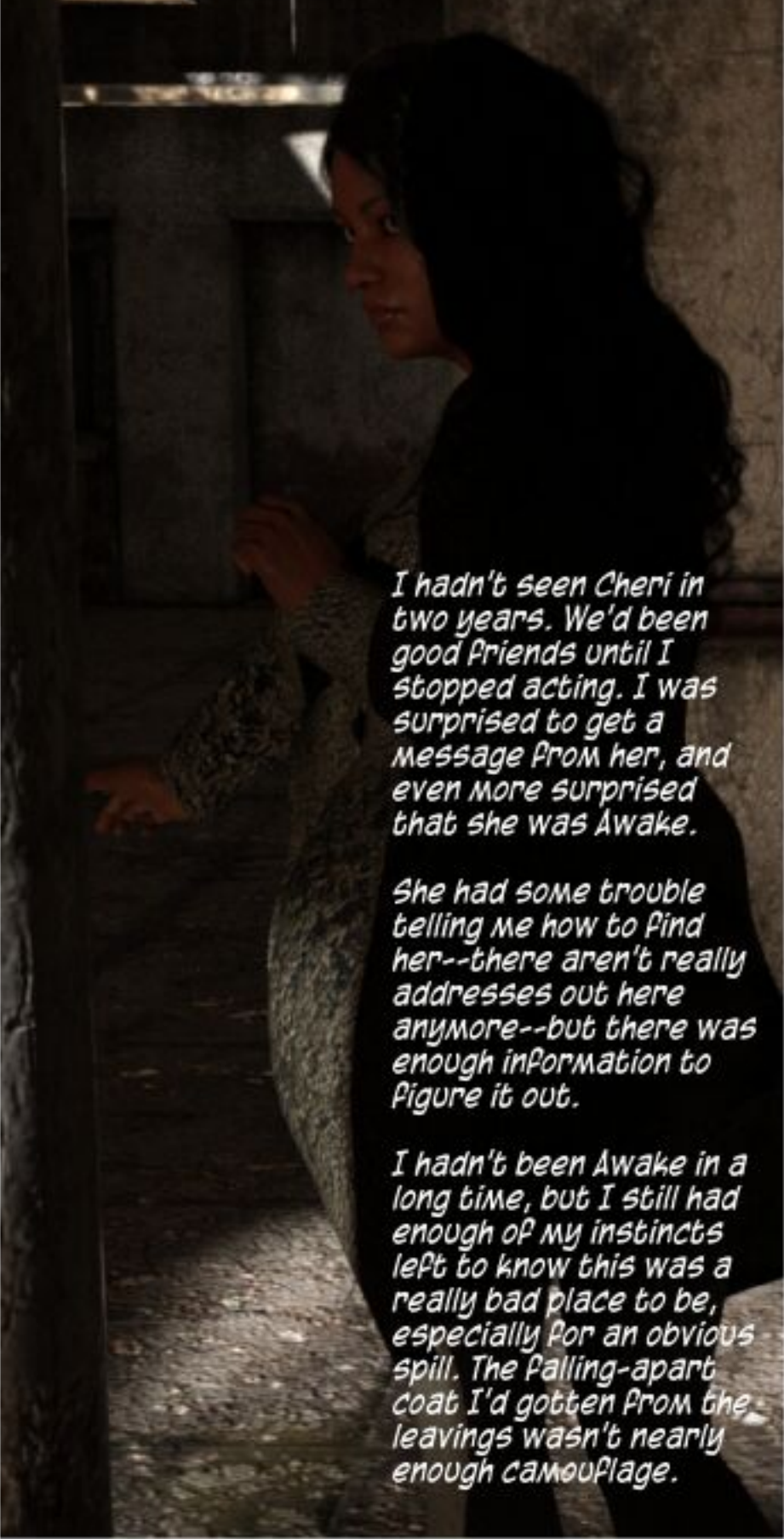


# SLEEPER SQUAD



So this is what "running for your life" feels like.  
I don't like it.  
I shouldn't be here.  
I shouldn't be Awake.  
And I definitely shouldn't have just seen my friend get murdered.

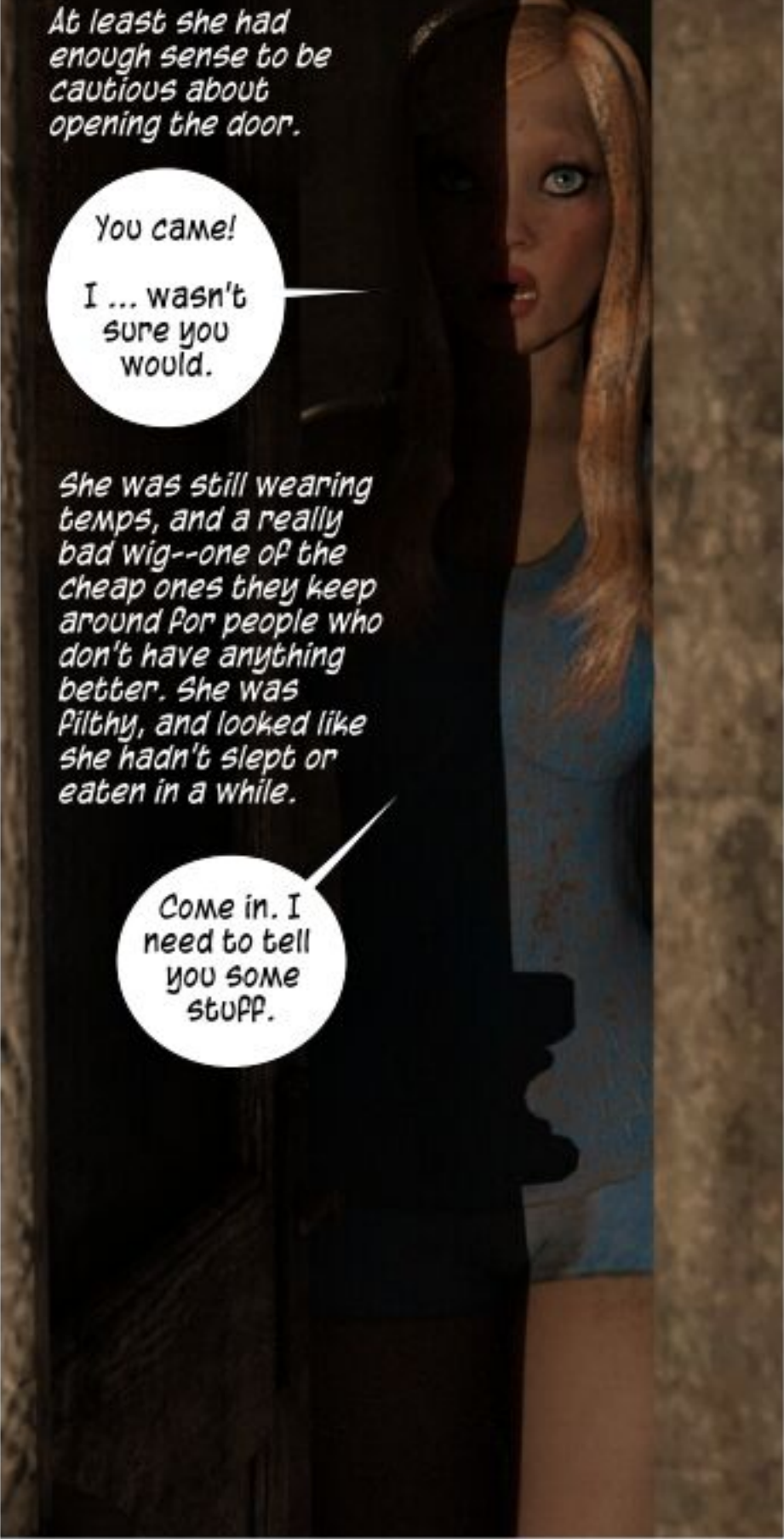
But maybe we'd better go back a bit.



I hadn't seen Cheri in two years. We'd been good friends until I stopped acting. I was surprised to get a message from her, and even more surprised that she was Awake.

She had some trouble telling me how to find her--there aren't really addresses out here anymore--but there was enough information to figure it out.

I hadn't been Awake in a long time, but I still had enough of my instincts left to know this was a really bad place to be, especially for an obvious spill. The falling-apart coat I'd gotten from the leavings wasn't nearly enough camouflage.

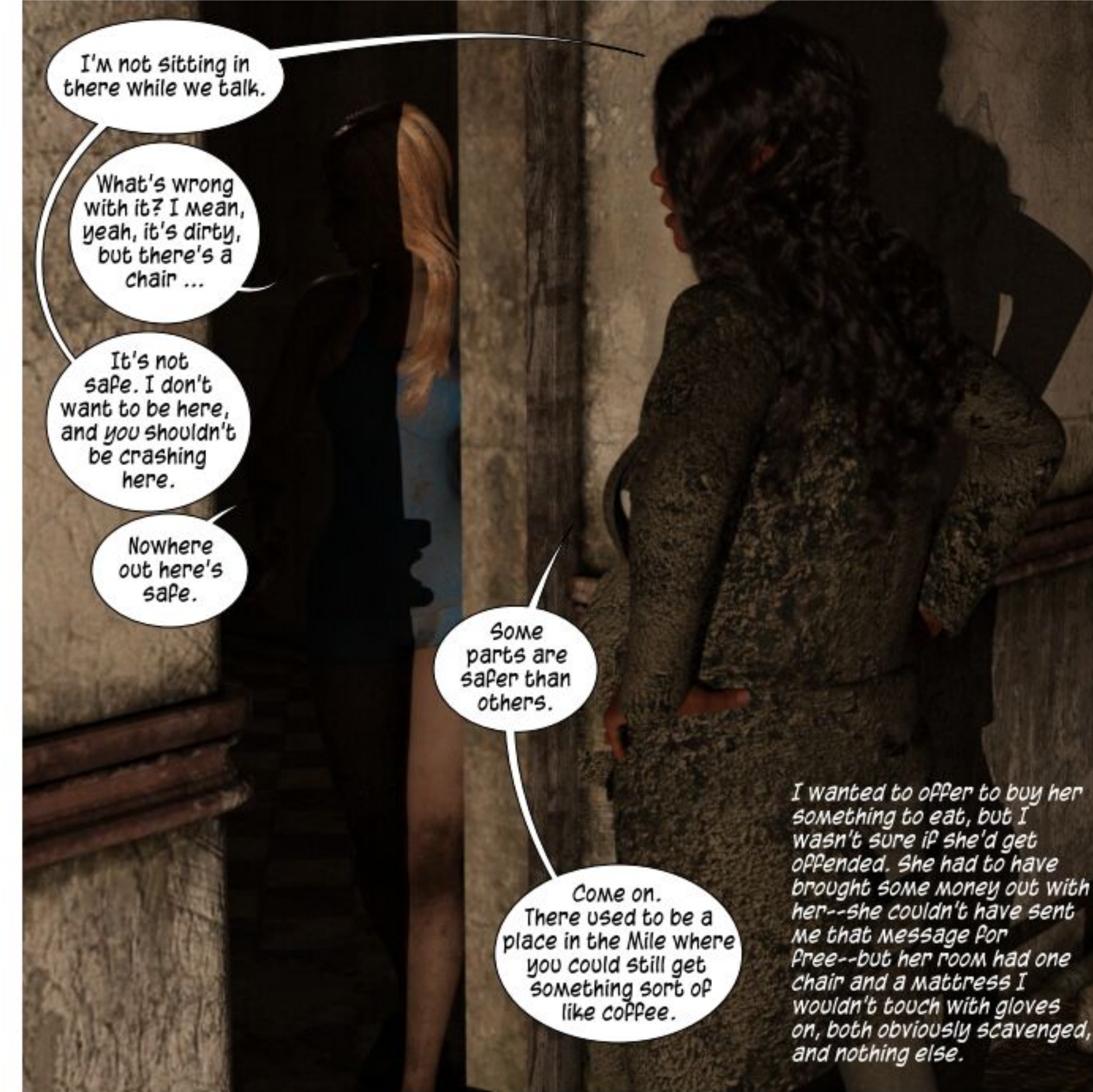


At least she had enough sense to be cautious about opening the door.

You came!  
I ... wasn't sure you would.

She was still wearing temps, and a really bad wig--one of the cheap ones they keep around for people who don't have anything better. She was filthy, and looked like she hadn't slept or eaten in a while.

Come in. I need to tell you some stuff.



I'm not sitting in there while we talk.

What's wrong with it? I mean, yeah, it's dirty, but there's a chair ...

It's not safe. I don't want to be here, and you shouldn't be crashing here.

Nowhere out here's safe.

Some parts are safer than others.

Come on. There used to be a place in the Mile where you could still get something sort of like coffee.

I wanted to offer to buy her something to eat, but I wasn't sure if she'd get offended. She had to have brought some money out with her--she couldn't have sent me that message for free--but her room had one chair and a mattress I wouldn't touch with gloves on, both obviously scavenged, and nothing else.



I had a regular gig, Ruby. It was a really good gig ... at least I thought it was.

She was doing something to my head! It was like ... I wasn't me anymore. I didn't have any control over it. Not just what I was doing. What I was thinking.

And she changed me! I mean, the way I looked. I didn't have a problem with it ... I thought ... but I didn't give her permission either. At least I don't think I did?

So what happened? I mean, you got out of it ...

One morning my head was real clear all of a sudden. Clearer than it had been in months. I don't know why. I realized what had been happening, what she'd been doing ...

I freaked. I went to my recall and woke myself up and left.



Ruby, if she could do that to me--who else can do it? Is she the only one?

I can't trust any of it now. I think about it and my skin crawls.

... OK, but ... Cheri, you're really not going to do well Awake. Sorry.



We need to get you out of those temps and that wig. You might as well be walking around with a sign on your back.

And you have to crash somewhere else. The Wide-Eyes will take you, but ...ugh. Most of the other safe places cost money. You really should go back to sleep.

I am never going back to sleep.



After we went back and Porth on that a little, I said I'd take her to a place that might shelter her. If it was still there. It'd been years.

Cheri ... why me? I mean, why tell me? What did you want me to do, exactly?

You in particular? You were the only person I could think of who might come out here and listen.

I just ... I wanted someone else to know about it. About what happened. In case--



-- oh, shit.

Knew you'd have to come out sooner or later.

Run, Ruby!  
Get out of here!



So, yeah, running for my life.

And I'd gotten myself into a corner. Really spill of me. I'd lost my instincts.

I fight well. I could kick his skinny ass--if not for that gun. Not out here, where you actually die.

Come on out. It'll be over real quick.

You make me come in there, it's gonna hurt--

--huh?

Hey!

It's OK, he's down.

Is he dead?

Unfortunately no. Did that woman tell you anything?

"That woman"? You mean, did my friend who just got killed tell me anything?

... sorry, yes, that's what I mean.

Who are you? Who's he? What is all this about?

It's a long story. Come with me. I can explain, but let's go somewhere safer.

I mean, hell, what was he doing out there? He was obviously a spill too--didn't even bother with a wig--he could have been just as bad as the other guy.

I couldn't stop thinking about it while I was cleaning up. Cheri was dead and she'd known someone was after her. That's why she'd wanted to tell somebody. Who wanted her dead? Why?

Um. No, I don't think so. Sorry. Thanks for saving my life, though.

I checked twice to make sure he wasn't following me as I ran back to the Sleep Facility.

I'M CLOSING UP NOW, MS. MARTINEZ. SLEEP WELL.

By the next day, though, I was already too distracted to think about it. I had a lot of work just then.

Look, I feel silly explaining this stuff, but who knows? Maybe you're one of the great-great-great-grandchildren of the Lifeship Arcturus crew and you finally made it back. Maybe you're an alien. Maybe you're from an alternate Earth that didn't go this way.

OK, so, welcome to Earth. We had a lot of problems, and about two hundred years ago, we solved a bunch of them for good.

We solved the food problem ...

We solved the energy problem ...

... and all of a sudden a lot of people had a lot of time on their hands, not having to run so hard just to survive anymore ... and they started to get really bored.

You know what people do when they're really bored?

Along came Erasmus Barker, who invented the Sleep technology. Now everybody could go off and live in their own dream world! Paradise for all!

... sorta.

Erasmus and his heirs weren't giving it away. So at first you had to be filthy rich to get into Sleep. Then the rich people realized they didn't have anybody to exploit.

Also, turns out a lot of people don't have much imagination, and weren't real good at making their own castles or whatever, and they were getting bored again.

THIS UNFINISHED PORTRAIT OF ERASMUS BARKER BY HIS SISTER BERYL IS THE ONLY RECORD WE HAVE OF HIS APPEARANCE. -T

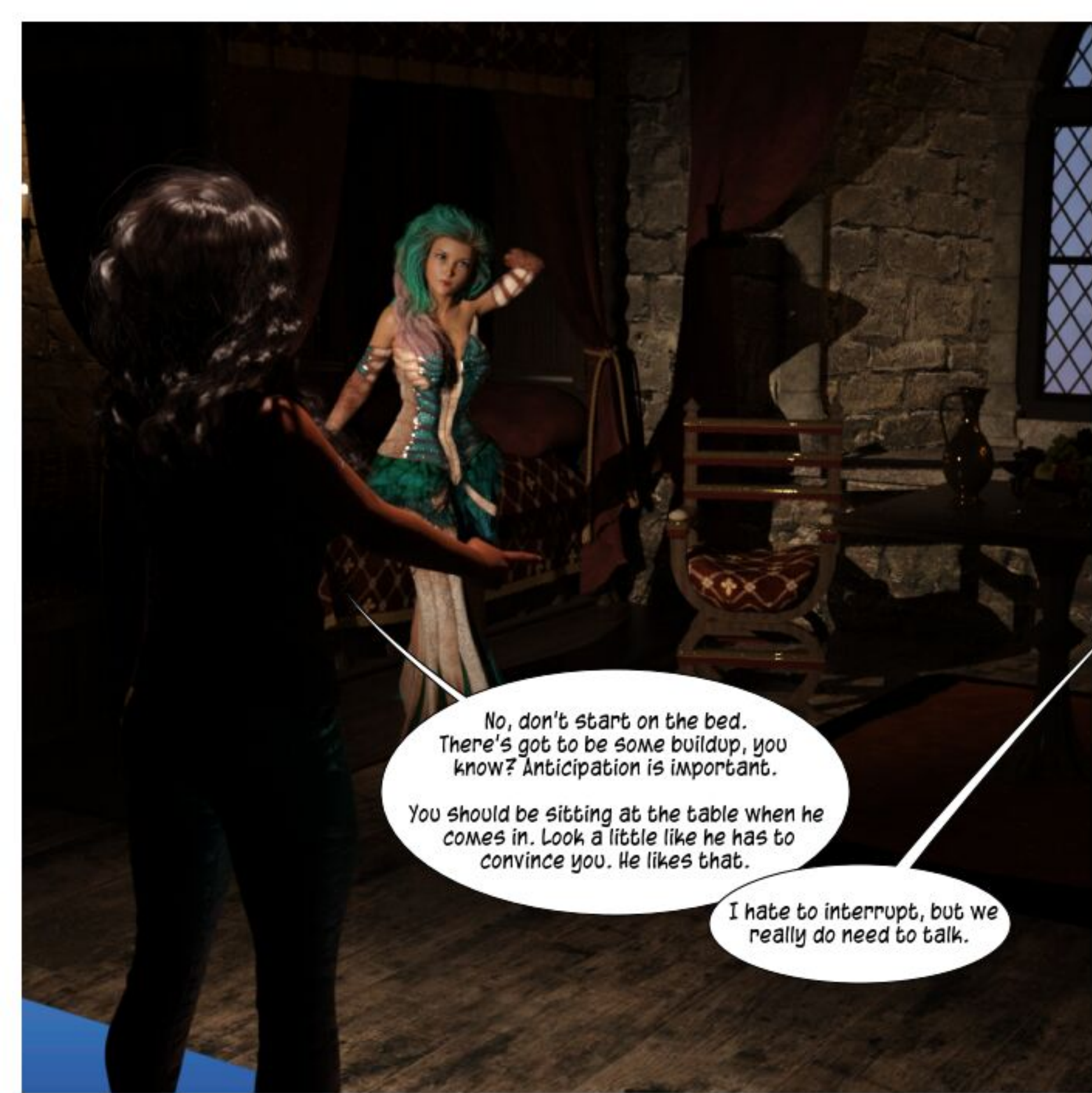
So now most people pay their bed fees in Sleep by working for other people, and most of that work is in entertainment.

Not all of the entertainment has sex in it--I've watched a couple of passives that were completely clean! Just most of it. And private scenarios are almost always about the customer getting off.

I used to be one of the actors in these scenarios. But I found out I could create them instead, and that I was pretty good at it. So now I'm a writer/director.

OK, which of you is going to climb on his lap? We need to figure that out ahead of time.

It's a weird system. I think everybody admits that.



No, don't start on the bed. There's got to be some buildup, you know? Anticipation is important.

You should be sitting at the table when he comes in. Look a little like he has to convince you. He likes that.

I hate to interrupt, but we really do need to talk.



How did you get in here? This is a private space.

Actually, no, don't answer that. I don't want to know. Go ahead, talk. But hurry. This scenario is for tonight.

Not here. It's too easy to monitor, and I don't have a good secure space right now.

I could come find you in your prep room.

I haven't been awake in four years and you want me out there for a second time in two days?

-- sigh --

Look, let me finish with the Emerald Princess first. I'll meet you in an hour.



So this is about the woman that Cheri was working for? The one she thought was messing with her head?

She was right.

Some people--we don't know how many--have figured out how to break the rules. They alter things in sleep they shouldn't be able to control. Other people's scenarios, other people's minds--they suck people into their scenarios, and if you stay in them, you start to peel like theirs are yours. You can get stuck.

Her name is Julia Greene. The asshole with the gun is named Cole. He's working for her. He's trying to kill anyone who knows about what she can do, I think. Which means you're in danger.



Oh, great! So I have to look around every corner for him now? Why didn't you just kill him?

I'm not a murderer! Anyway, it wouldn't matter. If it wasn't him there'd be somebody else.

Greene seems determined to keep it a secret. Which means she doesn't know there are other people who can do it too.

The only way to get her off your back is to get proof she's manipulating sleep, and then remove her ability to do it.

Why does that sound like you're trying to recruit me?

I ...

Look, I'm the only person on this in all of A4. I could really use some help.

His name--actually I was beginning to wonder if I was using the right pronoun--was Leyna. I'm not saying I agreed to help him just because I was really curious about him, but that contributed, for sure.



I'd never been in this particular hole-in-the-wall club before, which is saying a lot.

I don't know why, in a world where you can make your club look like anything you want, you decide to make it dark and grubby. Probably for the same reason I do more scenarios in crumbling stone castles than five-star hotel suites. People are weird.



Hello.

Oh hi. Snuck up on me.

Interesting outfit.



It's algorithmic. It keeps people from noticing me.

That's why you ignored me until I said hello. You saw me but your brain said it wasn't important.

Good trick. Do you always wear that when you go out?

Right now, yes. I couldn't change my appearance or you wouldn't know me, and there are people looking for me I don't want finding me.



But it's OK if people are looking for me, huh?

Cole hasn't come back into sleep, and he and Greene won't communicate via message. So Greene doesn't know who you are yet.

But you're still using me as bait. Admit it. You want me to go stick my neck into trouble. Why don't you change appearance and go in yourself?

This needs backup. If you go in and get in trouble, I can get you out of it. If I go in and get stuck, you can't. Same as if I tried to do this alone.



... All right, Pine. So why are we here?

The dancer. Her name's Orchid. She's one of the only two who've managed to get loose from Greene's influence.

Yeah, and the other's dead.

Are we sure she got completely free, like Cheri? What if she's still under Greene's influence? That could be kind of important.

Very. And I don't know. That's part of the problem. I haven't figured out a way to approach her that she'll listen to, but that doesn't give us away.

Great.

HMM.



... OK, I think I have an idea.

I'll need to change first. This is the wrong look for it.



So I just figured, if Cheri wasn't yanking my chain, then you'd know how I can, like, get in on this.

I want a gig with somebody classy for a change, y'know? I'm tired of busting my ass for greasy old men in back rooms.



You don't want that gig. Trust me.

Oh, well, if you want to keep it to yourself, I get it ... Just hoped maybe there was room for one more ...

You don't get it. Take a good look at me. This doesn't come off. I can't get rid of it. You want to be like this?

I can't remember a lot of things ... can't remember my recall ... doing well to remember my name, some days ...

There were no good approaches from there, unless I decided I could trust her.

I decided I was going to have to.

OK, look. I'm sorry I wasn't honest. I'm trying to get proof that Greene's messing with people without their consent, so she can be stopped.

I'm the proof.

Yes, but we still need to get to her. We need to catch her at it. And she hides in that hotel almost all the time.

She gives parties. There's one tonight. She doesn't check who crashes. Just wear something flashy and pretend you're one of that crowd.

Thank you.

Don't thank me. I don't think you should go. You may not make it back out.

Greene operated the Hotel Martinique. "Hotels" in Sleep are really just places for people to do things they don't want to do in a private space for some reason. Usually that means it's people who want to have sex without going to someone else's personal space to do it. Most "hotels" don't bother to be swank--they're places where you rent a bed, no illusions about it. The Martinique did bother ... so it got a lot of the upscale sex-party business.



First impression, I wouldn't have called this one a sex party ... but it looked like it could turn into one if you gave it another couple of hours.



Just now occurs to me Leyna never did tell me what Greene looked like.

Still, it's her party, surely she won't be hard to spot--



I don't know you. Are you a gate-crasher? How exciting!

Uh-oh.

Well, you're welcome to stay, but there's a condition. You have to dance with me.



You want to dance with me, don't you?

I think you do.



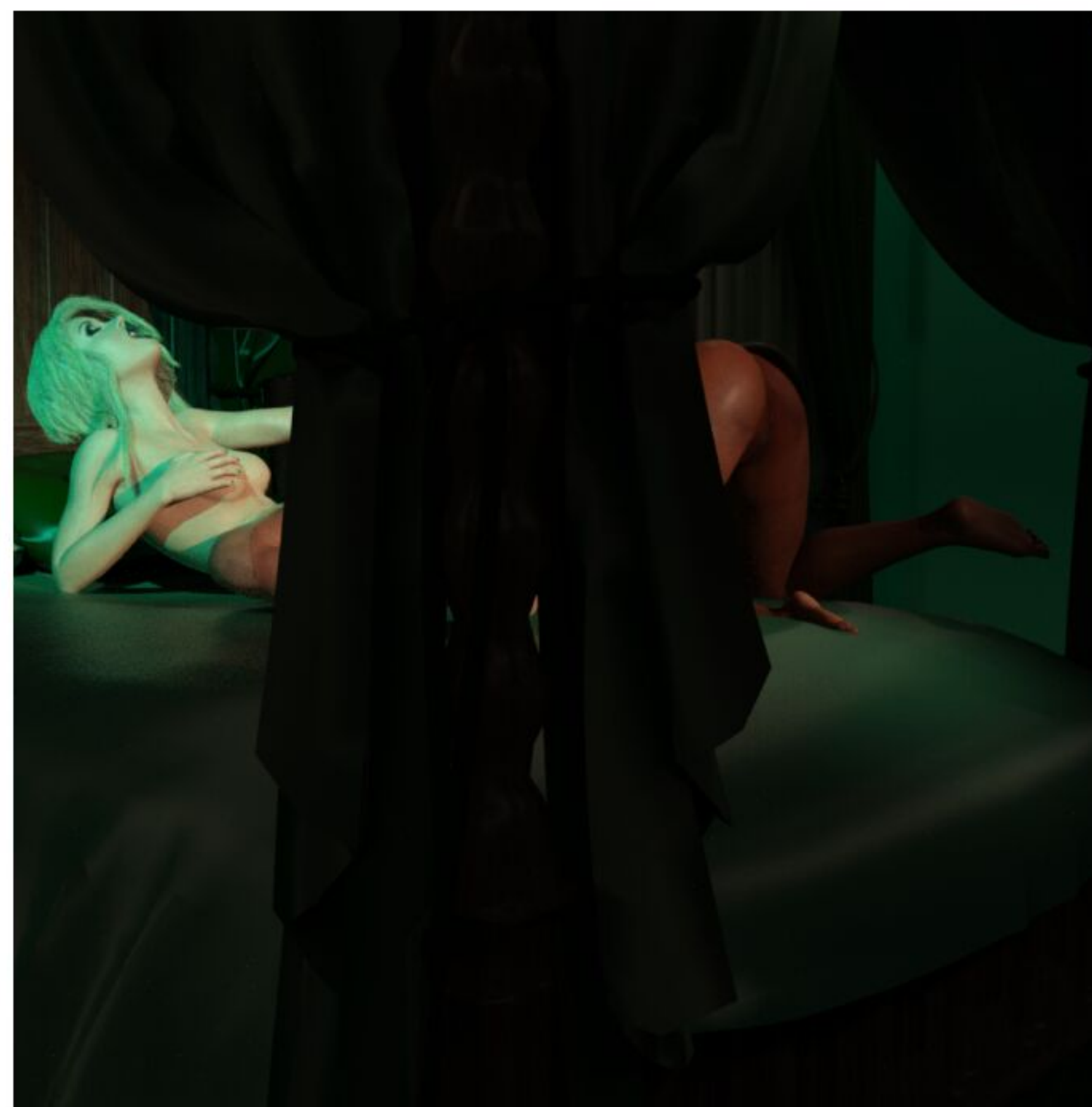
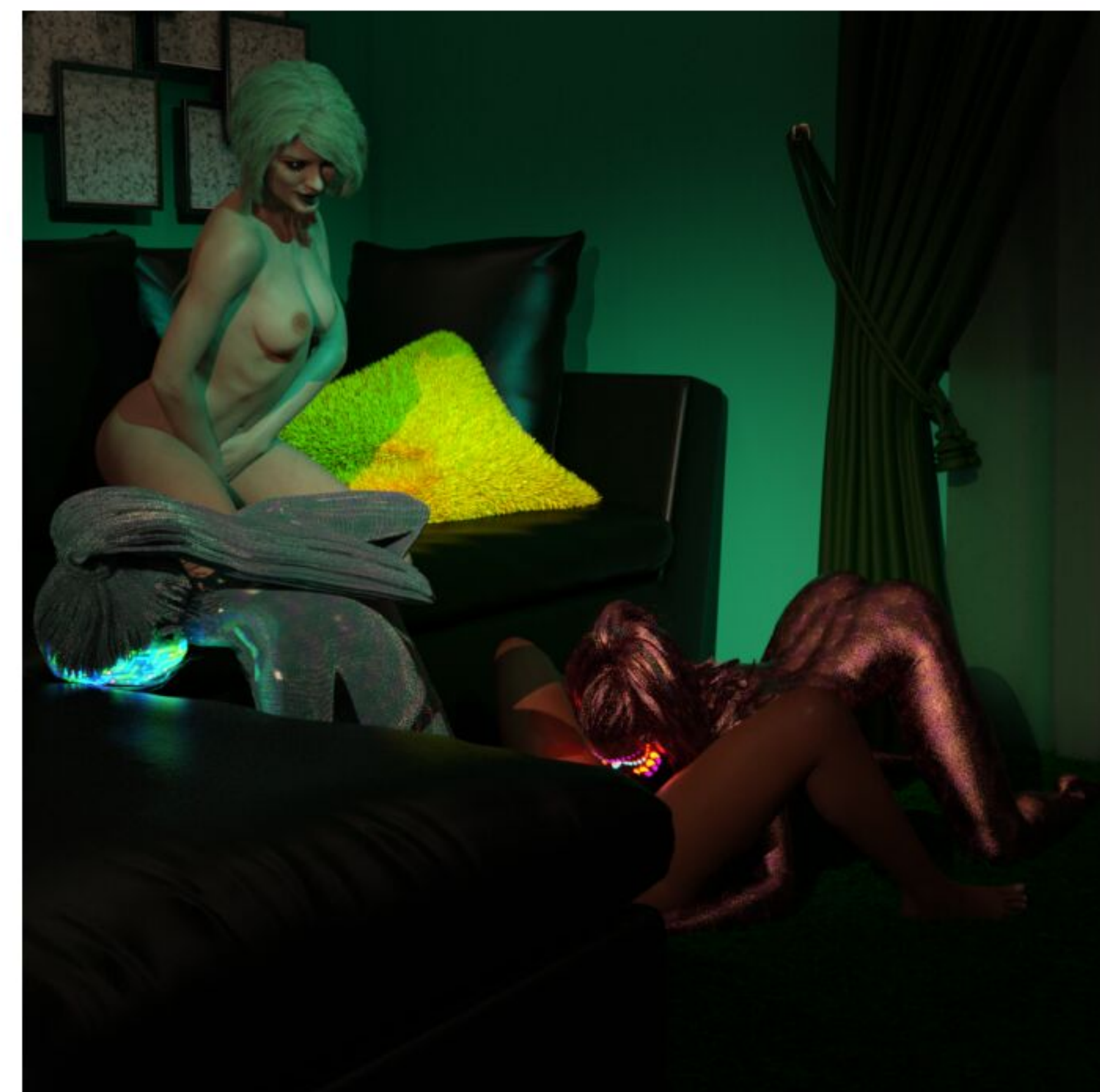
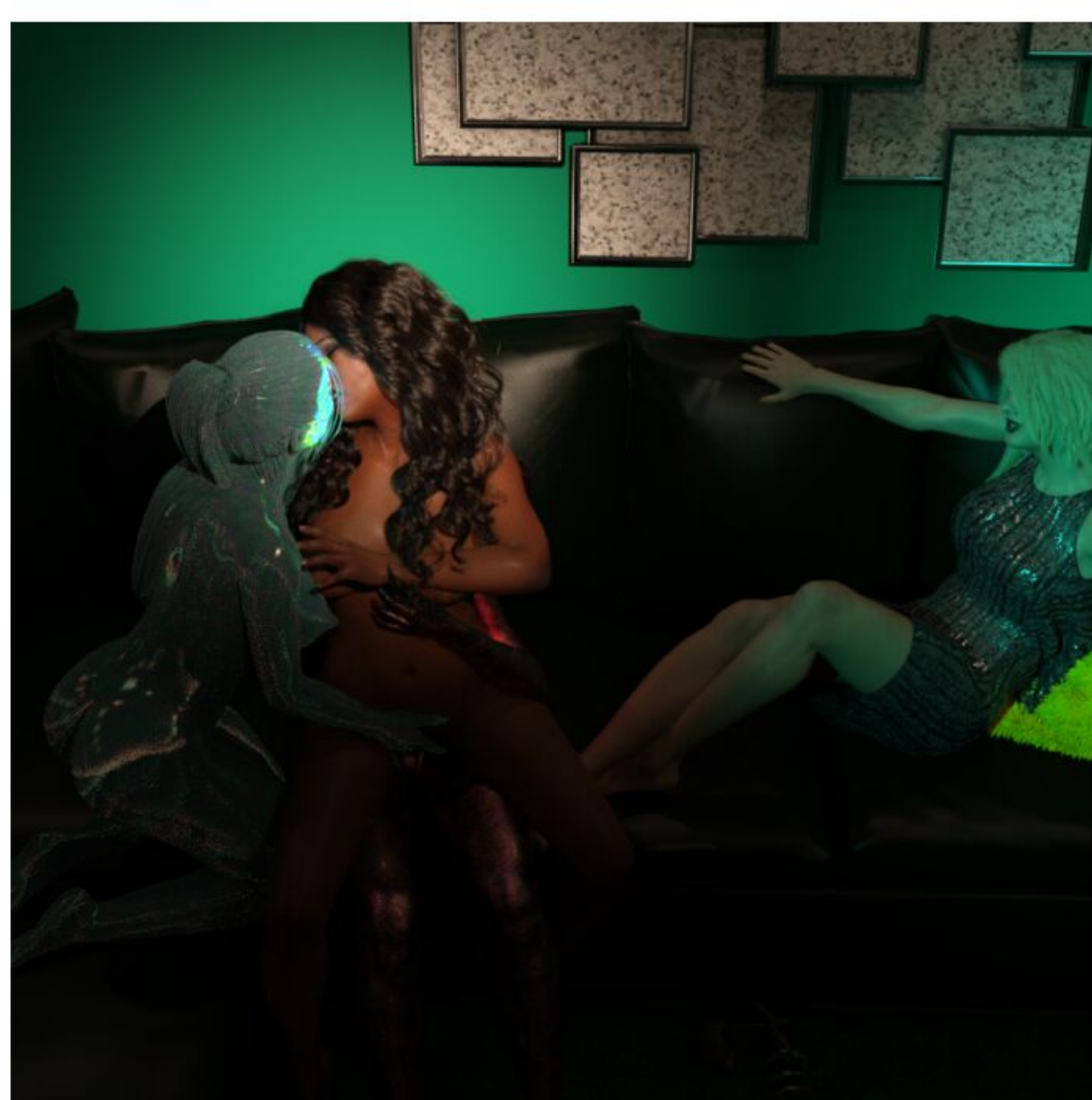
I ...  
... Uh ...



See, I knew you did.



Everything that happened after that is kind of blurry in my head.



But I remember, later, just as I was falling asleep, she said:



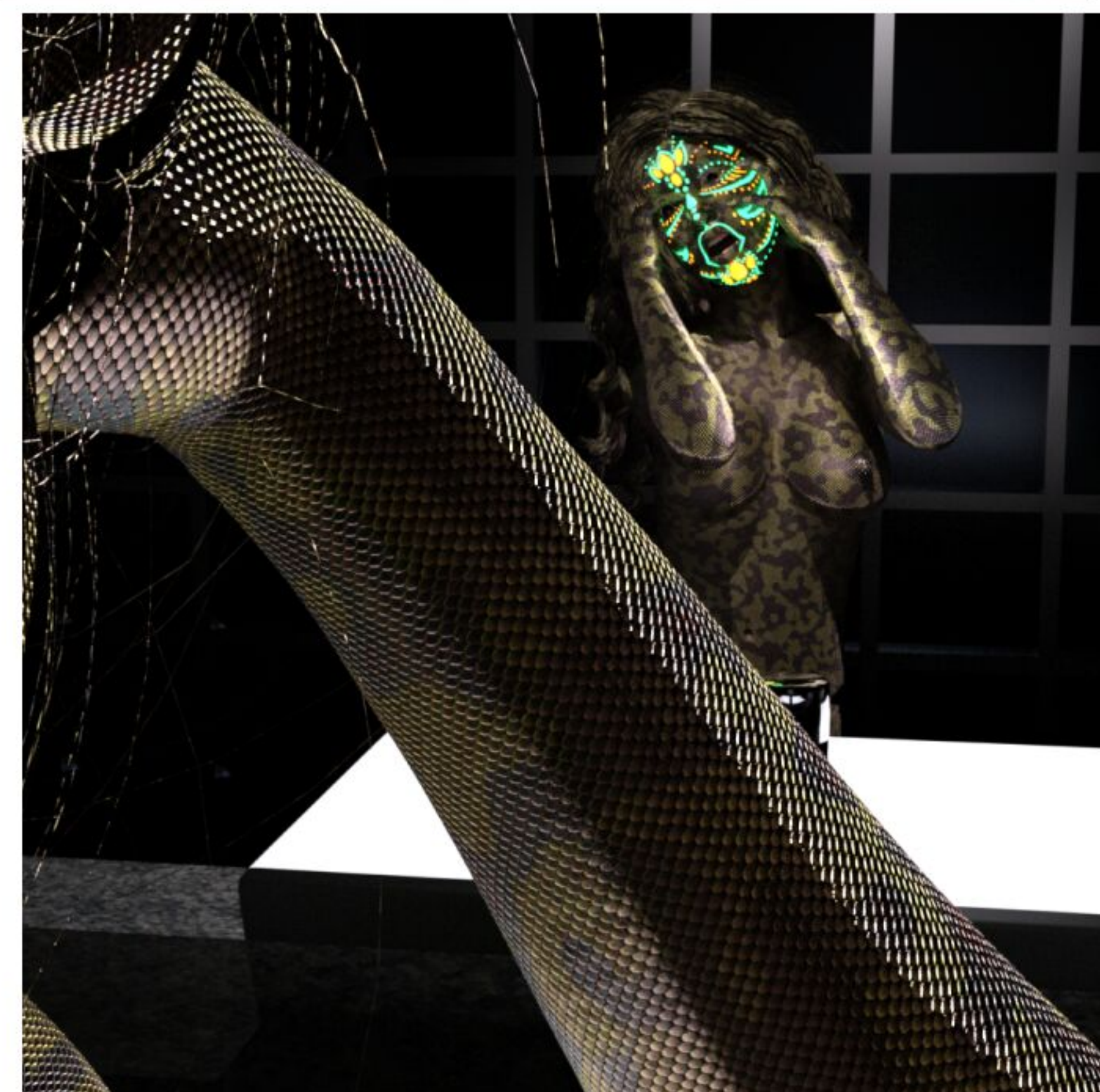
You're a good dancer.  
Now I'll make you perfect.



I don't know how much later it was when I woke up. Might have been morning by then. She liked really heavy curtains that didn't let in daylight, and I didn't open them to check.

I felt ... dirty. I don't mean from what I'd been doing, that didn't bother me. I mean I felt like I needed a shower. Itchy, except not exactly.

I didn't catch on until I got into the bathroom.



It shocked me right out of whatever she'd done to my head.

As I was getting myself back together, I heard her moving around in the bedroom.

If she saw me she'd probably just mess me up again, and I wasn't in condition to try to fight it. So I recalled.



And by the way, you were supposed to rescue me.

I was working on it! I didn't expect you to fall in so fast. She had you less than ten minutes after you crashed the party!

Yeah, she caught me off guard too. I didn't even get to try to resist it.

I'm a little pissed off at myself for not doing better, honestly.

Don't be. You broke out on your own! That's impressive. I was still trying to figure out the best way to do it, and you did it yourself.

Anyway, you wanted proof ... you've sure as hell got it now.

Yes. I'm sorry you had to go through that to get it.

Oh ... Well, actually, it wasn't horrible. I mean, it was kind of fun. But I wouldn't want to do it forever, y'know?

Wouldn't have been forever even if I pucked up. She's not paying the bed fees for the people she messes with. Eventually they get thrown out of sleep for nonpayment and they recover.

You hope.

... yeah.



So I'm done now, right? You go put her in jail or kick her out of sleep or whatever.

I wish. Now comes the hard part. A4 doesn't have anything like a jail, I can't get her thrown out easily for anything but nonpayment, and I'm not going to kill her even if it were possible.

Wait, so this was all a waste of time? You don't have anything you can actually do?

I could probably do something, if I knew what to do.

We want to put her someplace where she can't cause any more harm, including to herself. That'd be the humane thing. But I'm not sure how to do that.

What did you do last time you caught a manipulator?

Ah, well, see ...



This is the first one? You know, there's a lot of stuff you didn't bother to tell me.

OK, I have an idea. But ... Seems like you can do all kinds of things, like break into private spaces and spy on people ... can you find out somebody's recall?

Nobody but the person themselves can use their recall.

I don't want to use it. I want to find out what it is. So I can tell them what it is, so they can use it. Orchid can't remember her recall.

Orchid? Can we trust her?

I think so. Anyway, we need her. And she needs her recall. Can you get it?

Maybe. Recall method is very secret personal data. If I make a case, then my--that is, I think I can learn it if I have a really good reason to get it.

What do you have in mind?



Oh no.

I warned you. I did.

At least you got out.

Actually ... I can get rid of this any time I want.

I'm leaving it on because I think it's going to be useful. I have a plan to deal with her. And I need your help.

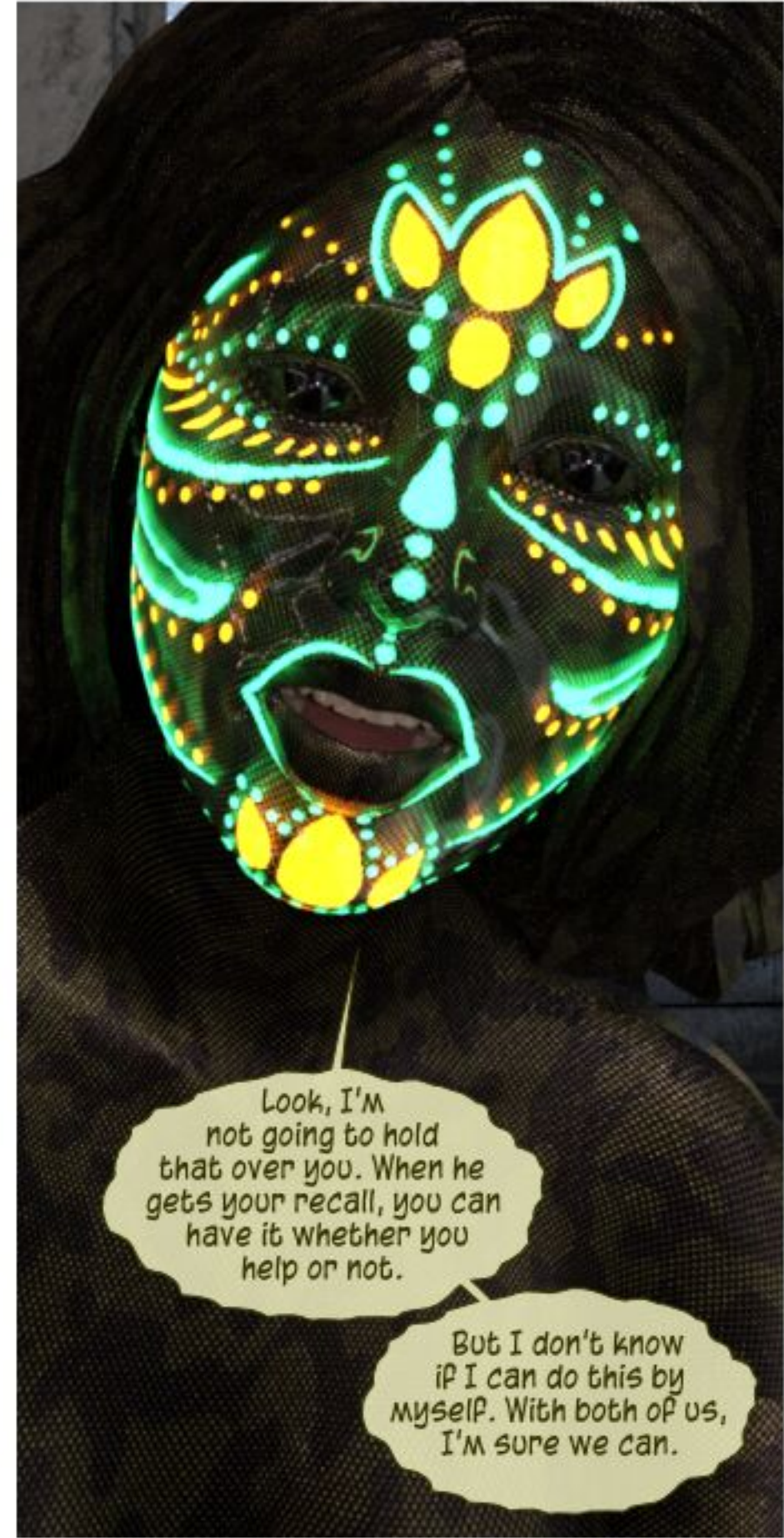


I'm not going back in there again.

I barely got out last time.

It's not going to be like that. There's someone who's going to be watching. If it goes sour, he'll pull us both out.

He's trying to find out your recall. I know you haven't been able to alter your appearance on your own, but once you have that again, you can load a preset. It'll also help clear your mind.



Look, I'm not going to hold that over you. When he gets your recall, you can have it whether you help or not.

But I don't know if I can do this by myself. With both of us, I'm sure we can.



Ruby ... I'm worried.

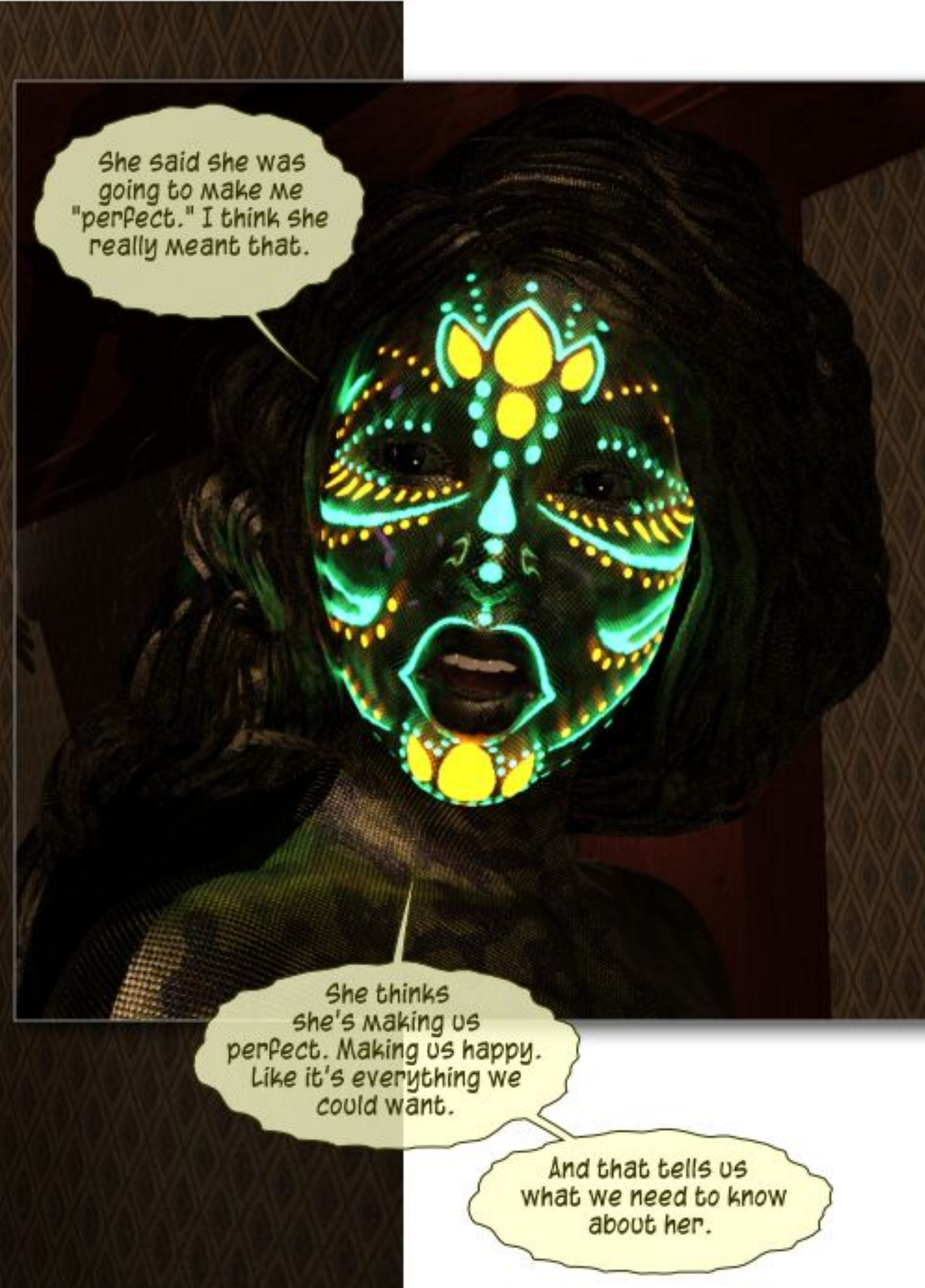
I just don't think this is going to work. I mean ...

You've got to be more positive. This depends on how persuasive we can be. We need to both hit her as hard as we can, and we have to at least sound like we're absolutely sure of ourselves.

We have the upper hand because she'll think we're still under her control. We take that opening and push.

But how do you know there's even an opening?

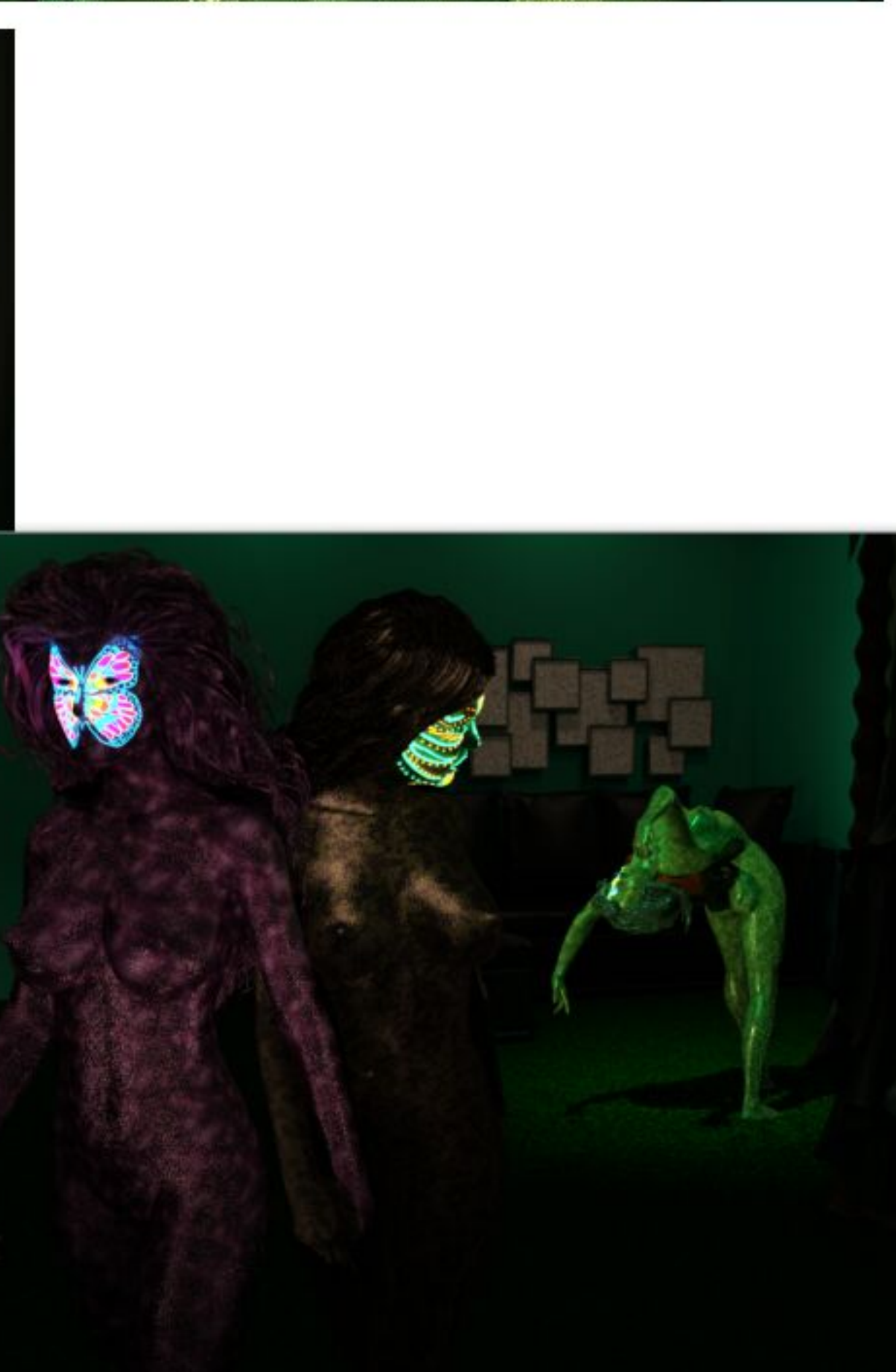
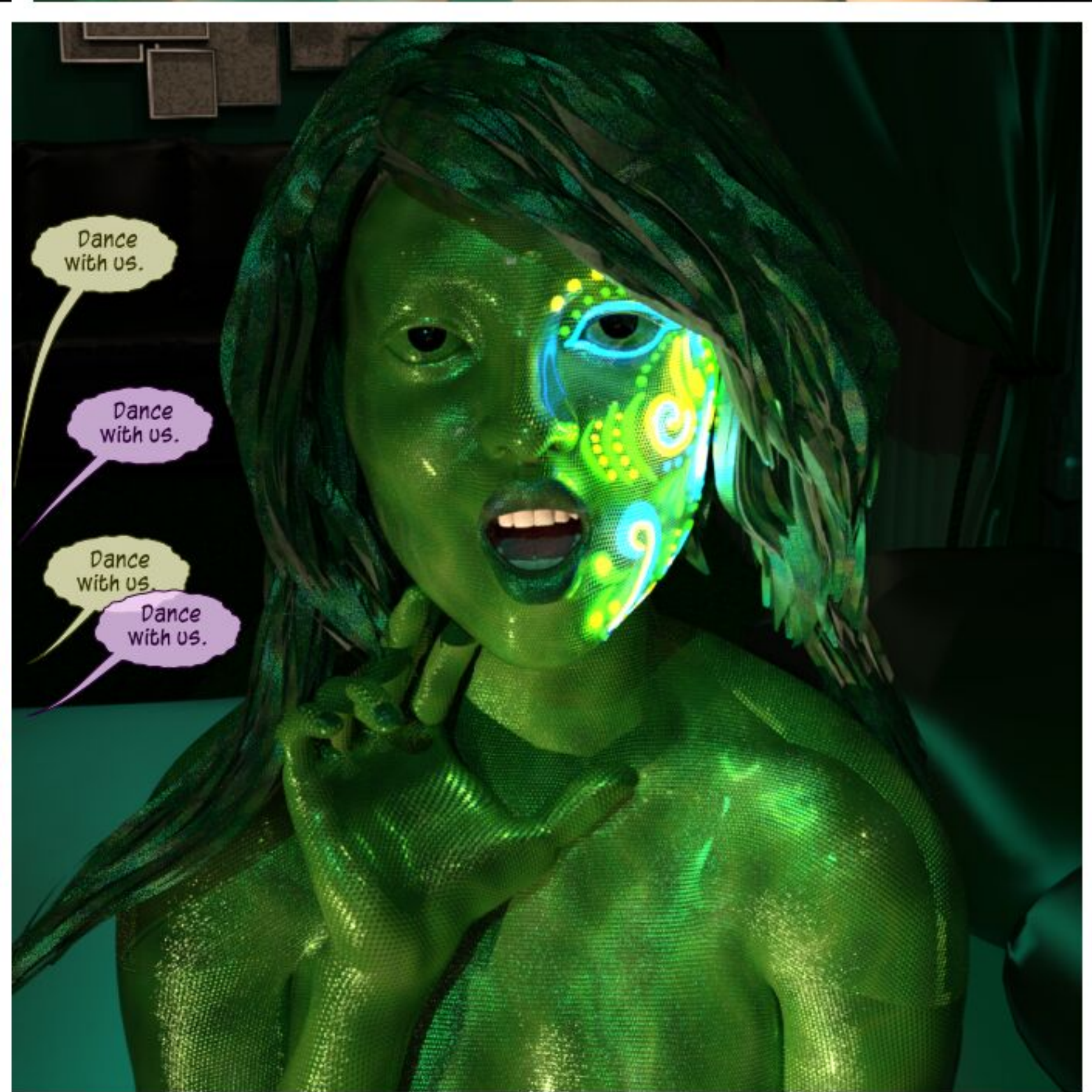
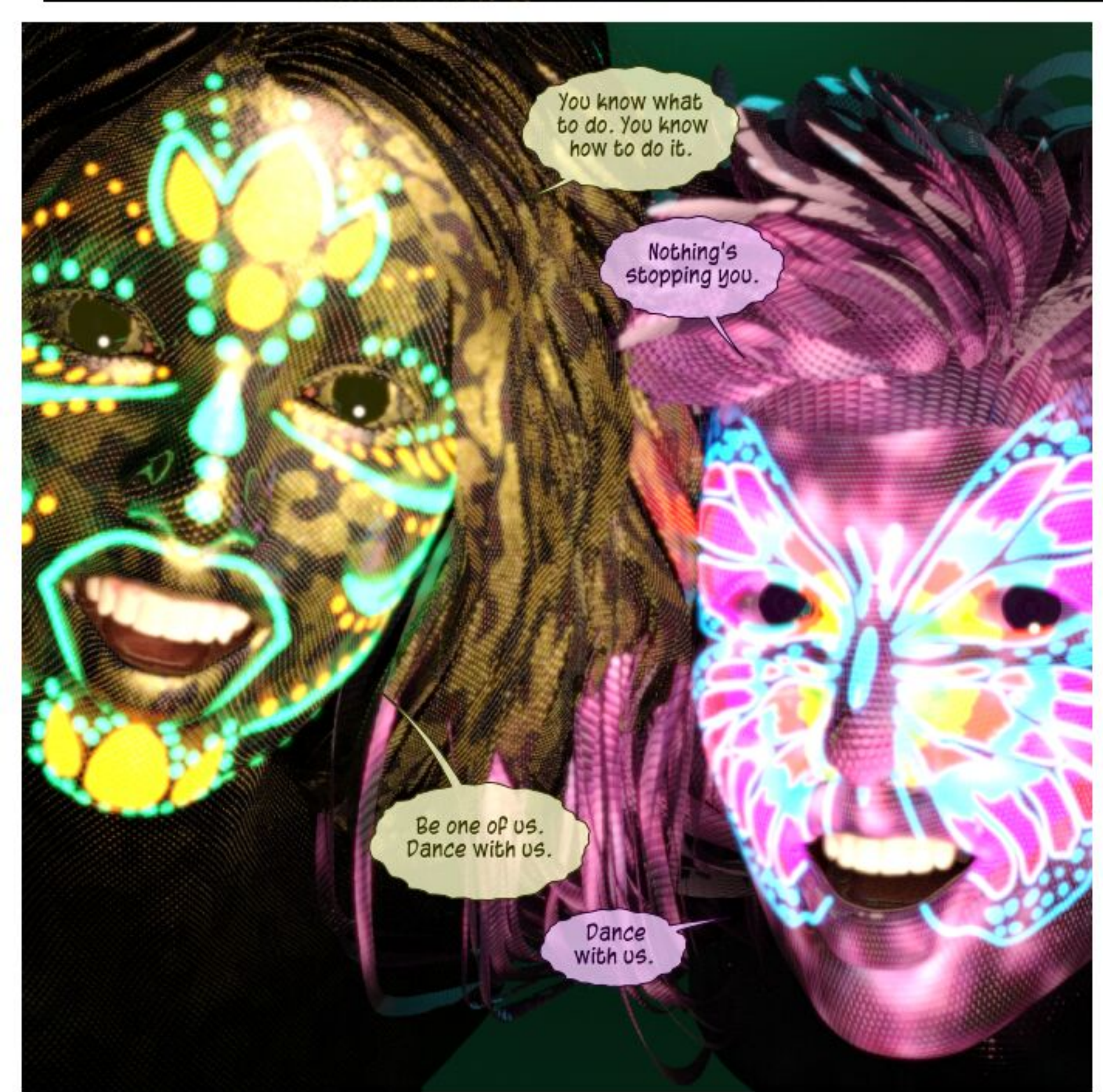
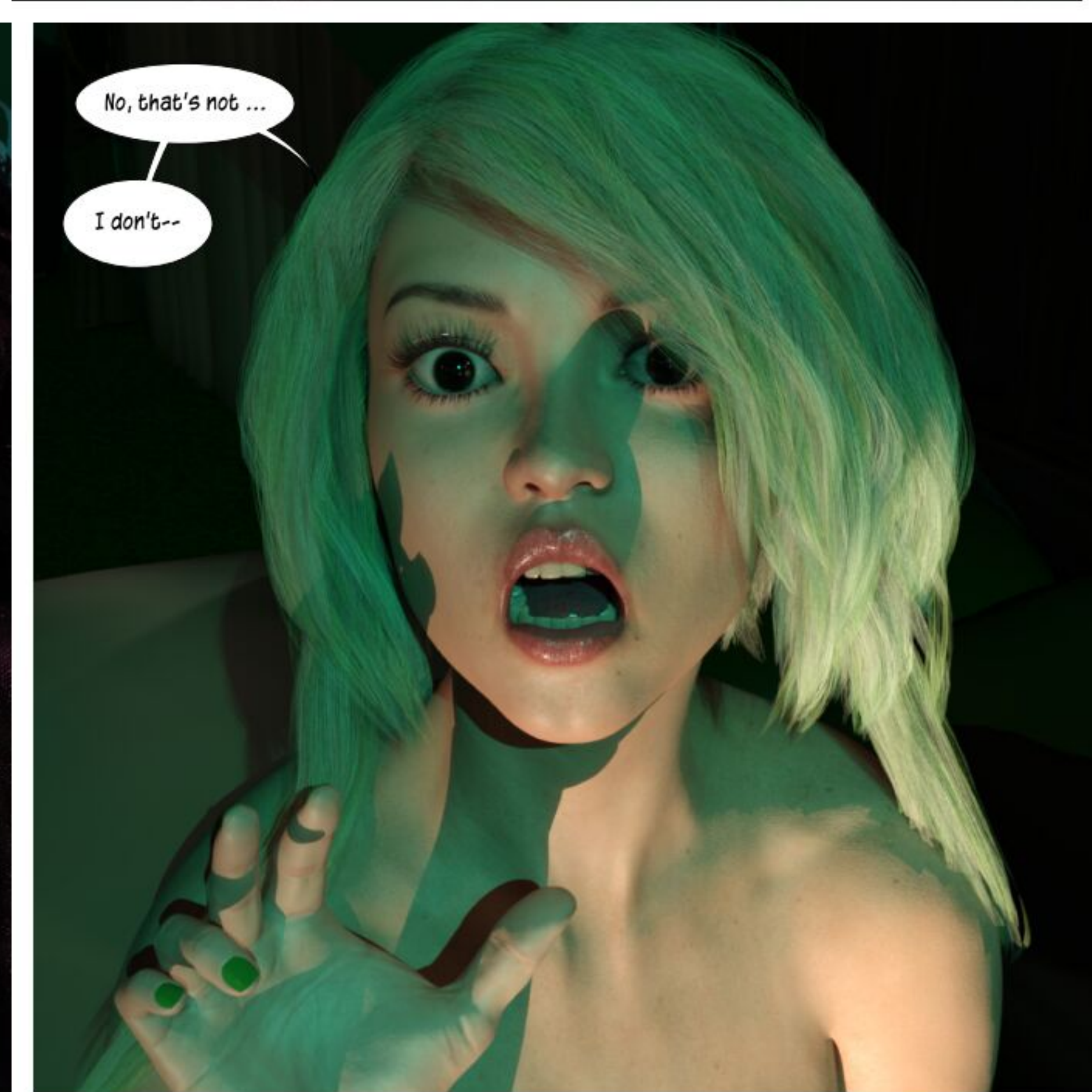
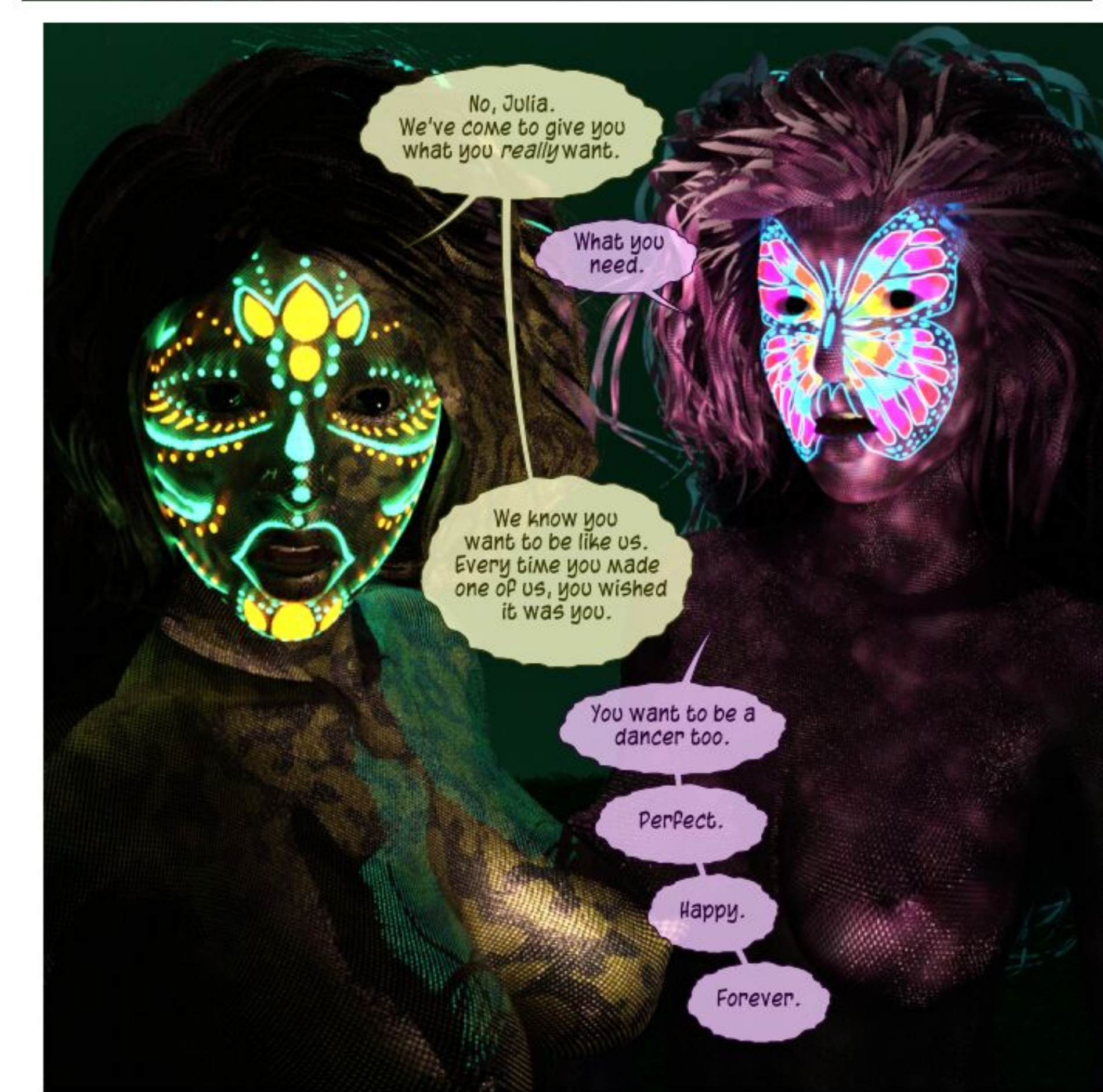
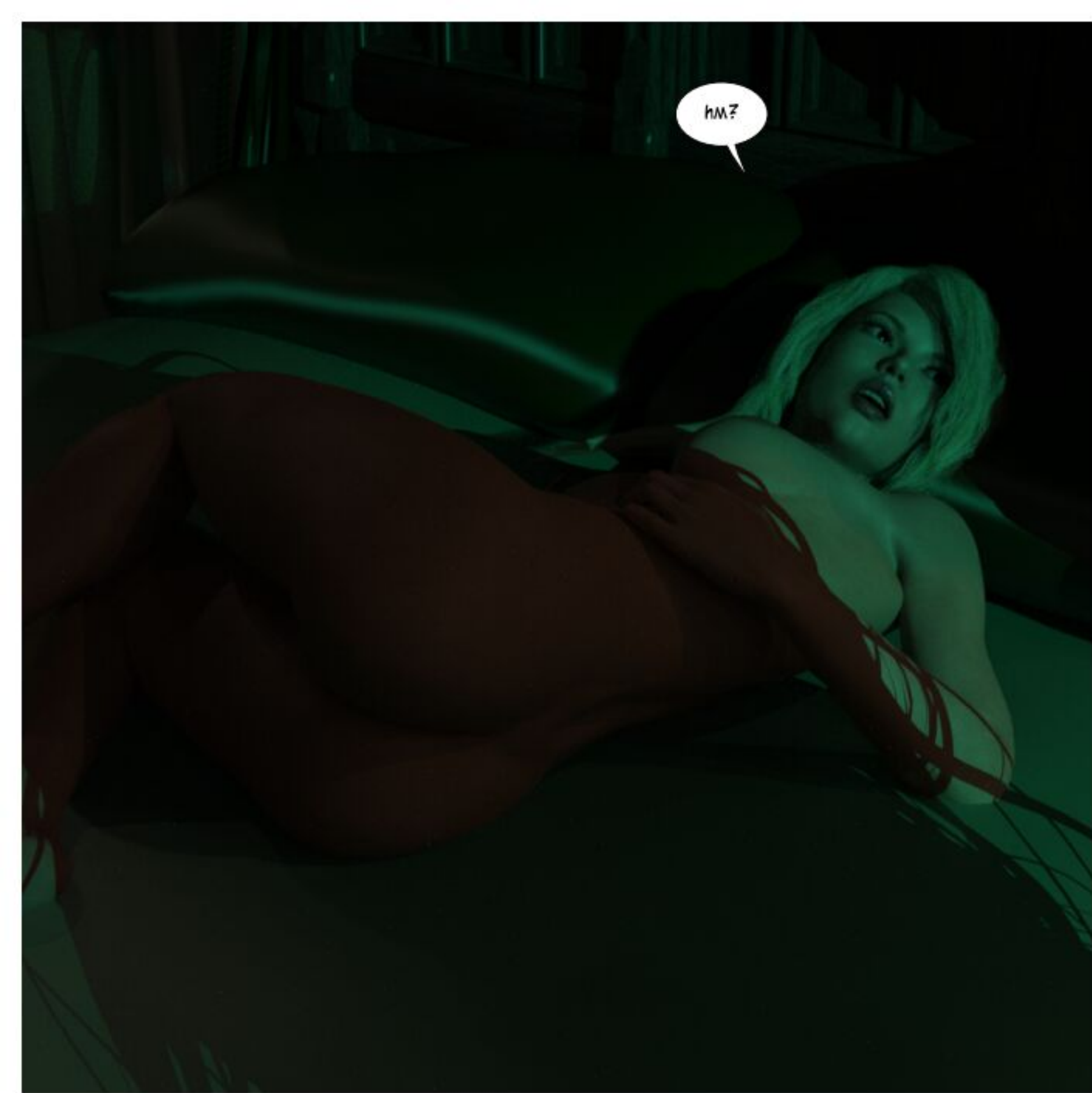
A couple of reasons. Partly something she said.



She said she was going to make me "perfect." I think she really meant that.

She thinks she's making us perfect. Making us happy. Like it's everything we could want.

And that tells us what we need to know about her.



The three of us got together a couple of weeks later. Leyna proposed the lobby of the Hotel Martinique. I hadn't realized until then that she--by now I was pretty sure it was 'she'--had a sense of humor.



So how are you doing? Back to normal?



More or less. I mean, I'm not exactly the same. I don't think my eyes used to be purple. But I like it.

Whatever I am now, I'm OK with it. To get back to what I was before, I'd have to forget everything that happened, right? And I don't think that'd be a good idea, even if I could.



You're probably wondering about Greene. I know Ruby is.

She's still in the hotel. She hasn't really run it in years, she has people for that. I've made sure they'll take care of her.

We didn't tell them it's her. Safer not to. She apparently wasn't a very nice boss.

The other dancers have all recovered. Mostly they don't remember anything. I don't know why you two took away more, but I bet it connects to how you managed to break out on your own.

I imagined Julia Greene wandering through a series of private rooms and parties, dancing and fucking, oblivious to everything else.



Part of my mind said that was a horrible thing to inflict on someone. Another part thought it was a much better ending than she deserved.



So now we really are done.

If you like.

"If you like"? What does that mean?

Well ... I was wondering if you'd like to help me on a regular basis. There are more like Greene lurking around A4.



Are you kidding? Look, I already have a job. A job I like, that doesn't involve me risking my life, or my mind.

Remember, the only reason I helped you at all was because someone was trying to kill me.



And you did an amazing job under difficult circumstances.

You haven't noticed, but you're very good at this. You took everything in stride. You shook off her control and got out by yourself. You came up with a brilliant idea for dealing with her, and made it happen. All I did was stand watch and look up information.

... I ... ah ... Well, thank you. But I can't afford it.



I do get paid for this, you know. We'd definitely compensate you for time spent working on this stuff. You wouldn't have to give up your other job.

Anyway, I checked; you could walk into your agencies after being away for months and they'd fall over themselves to hand you work. You're very much in demand.

Kind of a waste of your skills, if you ask me, but I'm supposed to be buttering you up right now.

You're not doing a very good job.

Yeah, I know.

I'll think about it, OK?

... You're going to take that as a yes, aren't you?

Probably!

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