

INCIDENT REPORT

Sequence # 10

Title:
Changes in Upper Management

Submitted by:
Trilby (Words and images)

Description of Incident:

So it turns out, actual detective work is pretty dull, especially the part where you do nothing but eavesdrop for hours in hope of overhearing something you actually want.

I was helping Leyna, despite my ongoing issues with Midnight, because I agreed getting the dirt on Clayton Barker was in the general good. But after a long day lurking, I was regretting that decision a little bit.



... he told Barker, "Who do you think you're fucking with? I don't rent from you, and I'm damned if I'm paying twice. If I go to Brendan with this, how hard do you think he'll kick your ass?"

And Barker said, "You don't want to do that. The last person who did that is having trouble making words of more than one syllable now. Have you met my partner?"

Thing is, Bill had heard rumors already ...



The story is this new partner of his is some kind of, I don't know, witch or something. She messes with people. I know, it sounds ridiculous. But Jimmy Grand rolled over and started paying Barker without a sound, and you know how much Jimmy hated his guts.

Well, the partner wasn't actually with Barker that afternoon. It was like, you know, a warning shot. Bill says he's probably going to have to pay. Or close up.

He's scared shitless.

So what happened with Bill?



... Anyway, that was all I got all day. I think people are scared to discuss it.

Definitely. Otherwise I'd be trying something a lot more direct than hunting gossip.

What did you think of your first time in the outfit, though?

You know, I figured it was going to be like being invisible. But no, they see you, they just ignore you completely. What are they seeing?

They're seeing you. But the suit sends a message that you're someone they don't need to pay any attention to. Unimportant.

Well, it's a neat trick.

WE FIRST SAW LEYNA WEAR ONE OF THESE "ALGORITHMIC" SUITS IN ISSUE #1. -T



Speaking of that ... I looked up while I was listening to that conversation, and I was being watched. I mean, she was watching all of it, but I felt like me especially.

But here's the thing: she saw me. I mean, she definitely noticed me. And what's more, when she realized I saw her, she was surprised. She ran off as soon as she caught on.

Pale skin? Red eyes? Wears a suit that looks kind of like ours?

Uh ... yes, now that you mention it. Friend of yours?

No. But I've seen her four times. I don't know if we're the only thing she's watching, but we're definitely on her list.

I think her suit may work the same way. Did you get a read with the goggles, or did she vanish too fast?

It said "Unknown."

Yeah, that's what I get too.

We'll just have to keep an eye out. Right now I'm more worried about Clayton ...



... because neither your resources nor mine have come up with a damned thing that's solid, and yet we have rumors all over the place that a malicious actor is helping him do dirty work.

If it's true, I don't need to tell you how dangerous that makes him.

I think we're going to need to recruit someone else inside the Family. I'm thinking Pauline.



You sure? Putting aside whether she has the same, ah, biases as some of the other Family members ... you realize that if we do that we'll be exposing our relationship to her.

I mean, I don't care, but it sure seemed like you did.

You know, Pauline has never forgotten when Prentiss tried to insist she couldn't take control of Ruth's shares just because Ruth had conceived her with another woman.

Ah, god, Prentiss. I'm so glad he assigned Josiah his shares and went off to growl at the sky or whatever he does now.

Anyway, I think Pauline's pretty good both with this Family's weirdnesses and its biases.

And we need somebody else, because it's looking like the only workable course of action is ...



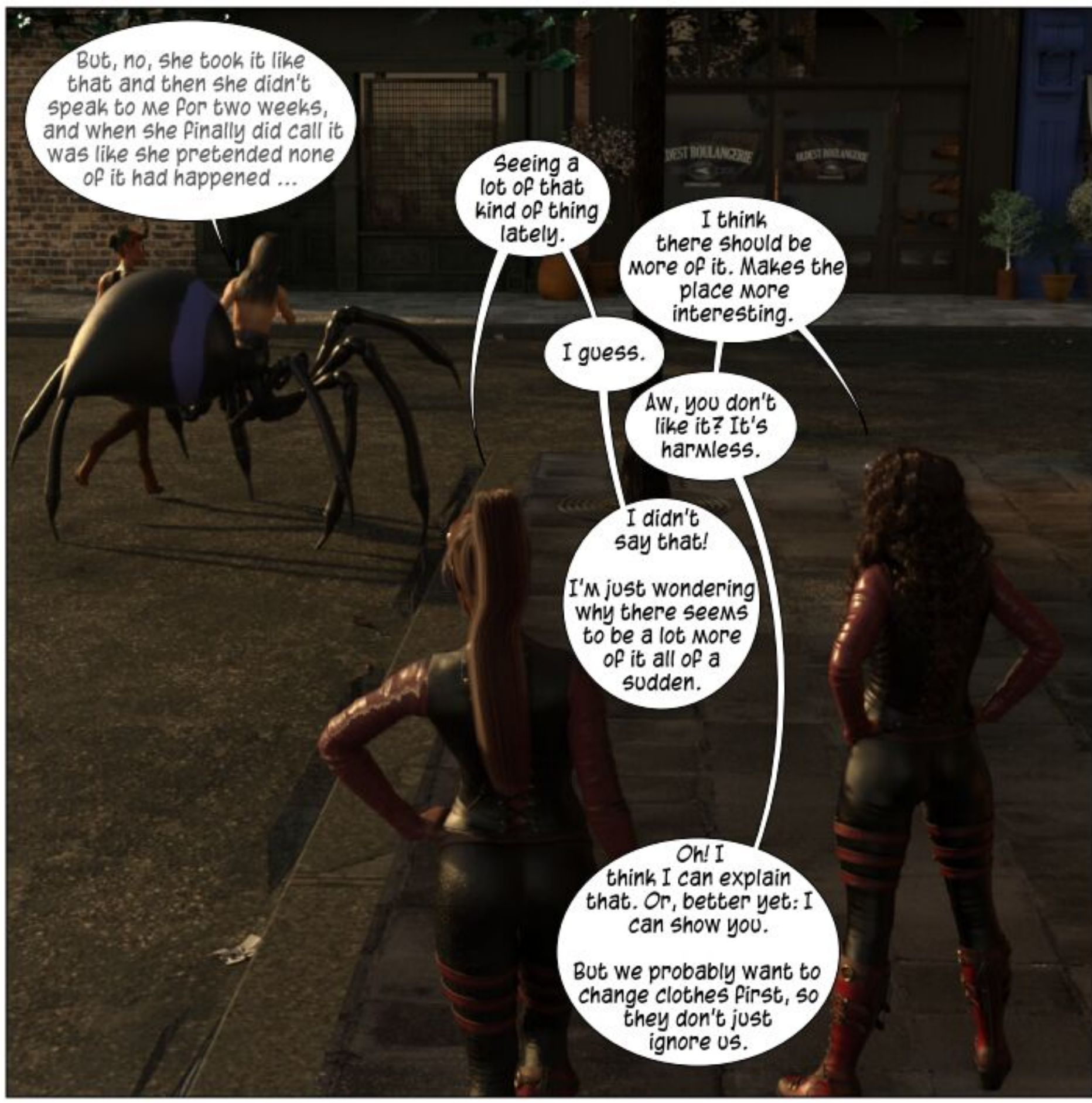
... confronting Clayton directly. Which would be unpleasant even if he didn't have help from this manipulator. Now it'll be dangerous.

But I can't see any other way to --

Huh.



... so she said, well, if you feel that way, then you don't have to show up at all, and I'm like, damn, no need to get all snobby about it, people have commitments sometimes, it happens, it's not a personal insult ...



But, no, she took it like that and then she didn't speak to me for two weeks, and when she finally did call it was like she pretended none of it had happened ...

Seeing a lot of that kind of thing lately.

I think there should be more of it. Makes the place more interesting.

I guess.

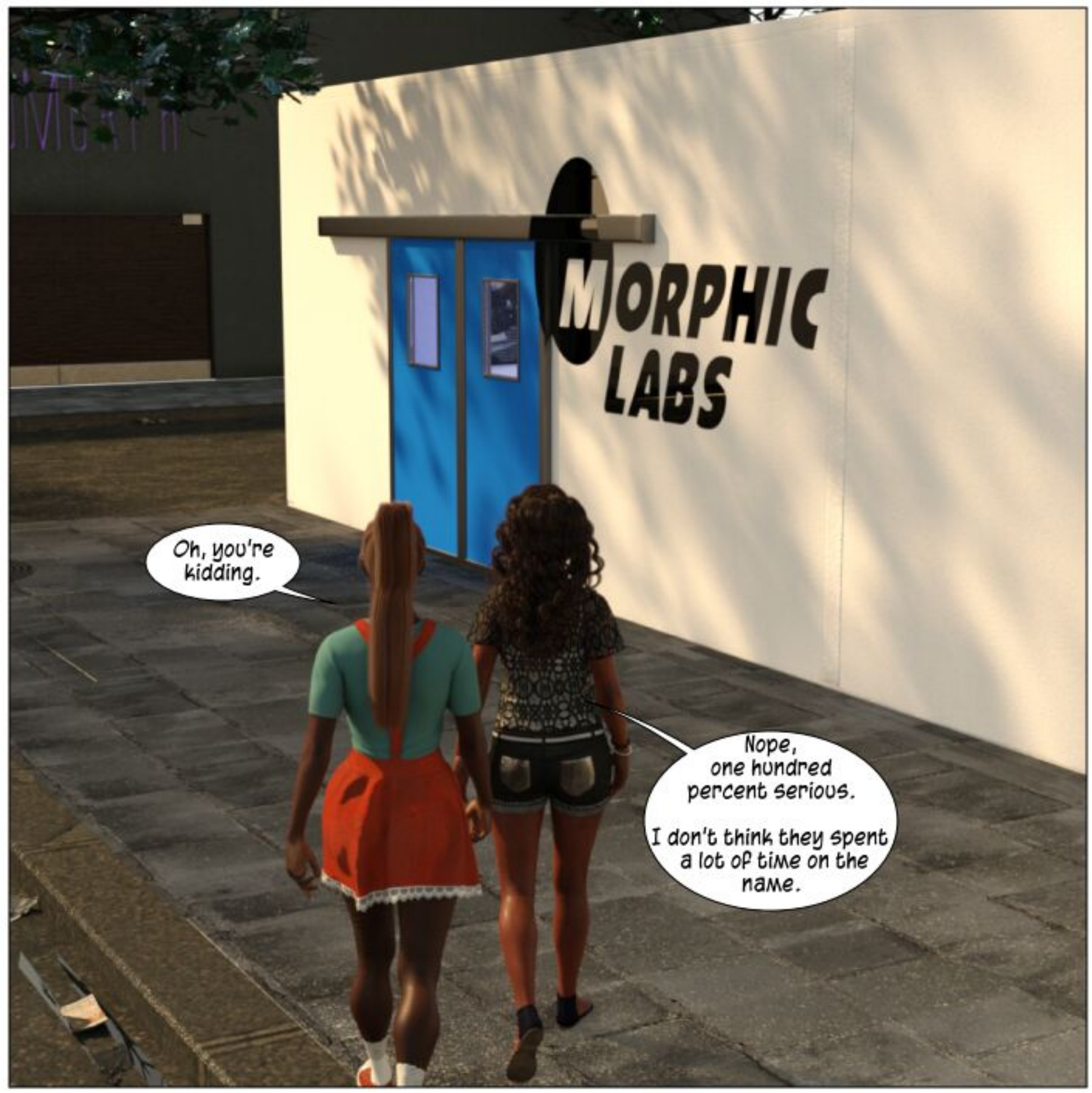
Aw, you don't like it? It's harmless.

I didn't say that!

I'm just wondering why there seems to be a lot more of it all of a sudden.

Oh! I think I can explain that. Or, better yet: I can show you.

But we probably want to change clothes first, so they don't just ignore us.



Oh, you're kidding.

Nope, one hundred percent serious.

I don't think they spent a lot of time on the name.



Good afternoon! Welcome to Morphic Labs. Are you here for a consultation?

Uh ... no, we just--

My friend here is considering using your services and would like to know more about the process before she makes a decision.

Oh! Well, you have great timing. AZU is proceeding with a customer right now.

It's OK to watch? It seems ... private.

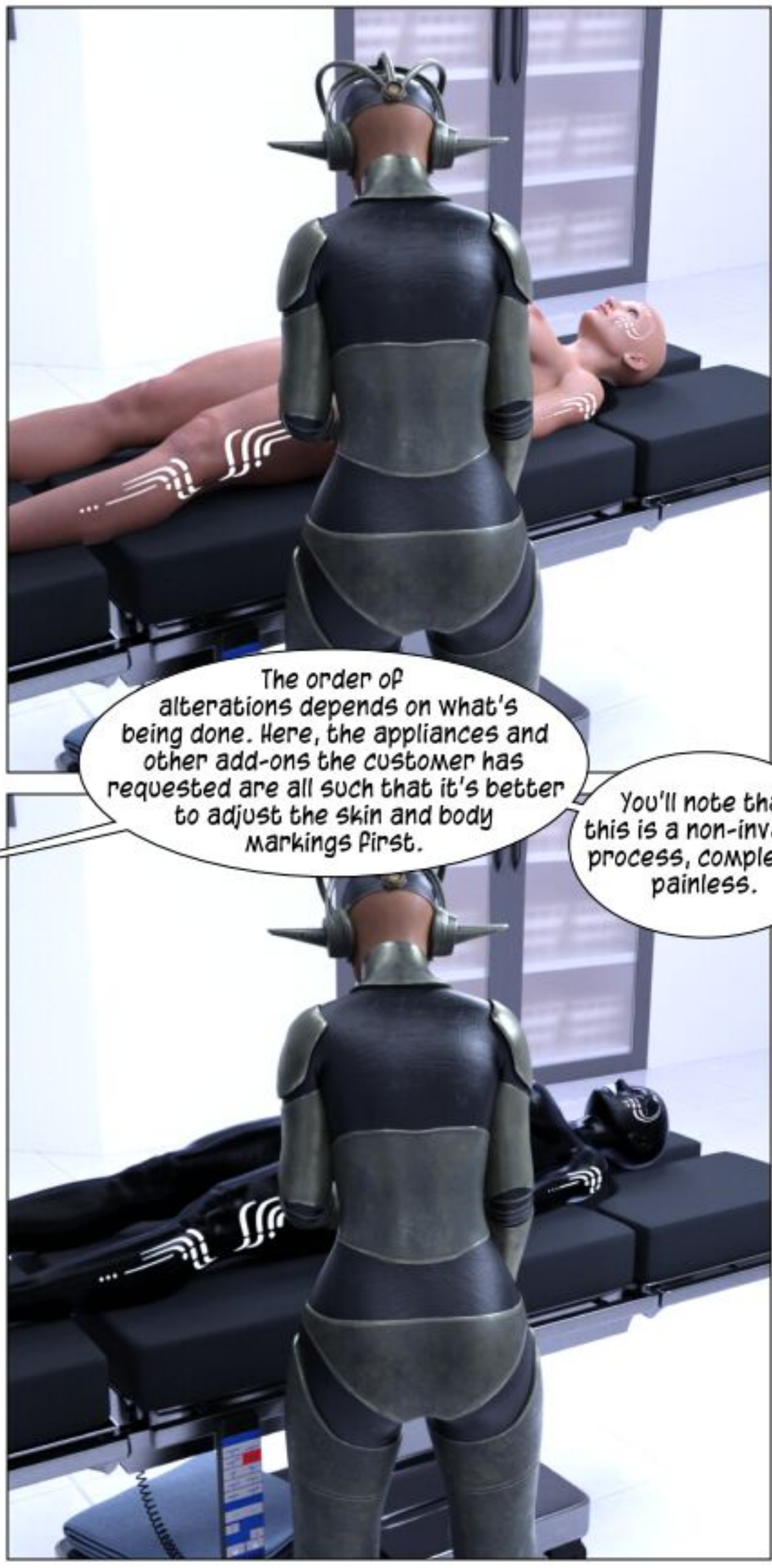
Absolutely! If the customer were concerned, AZU would have closed the curtains.



Some of our customers choose stock modifications; others want custom work. This one is custom work. She's already had a couple of consultations with AZU. Now they're ready to proceed.

The completed look is retained in the customer's shape memory so that the customer can switch to that appearance easily whenever she likes.

So, what do you think? Is there a new look we can provide for you today?



The order of alterations depends on what's being done. Here, the appliances and other add-ons the customer has requested are all such that it's better to adjust the skin and body markings first.

You'll note that this is a non-invasive process, completely painless.



Uh ... thank you, that was very informative. I'll ... let you know.

Meanwhile, in a club that used to be run by Bianca Zildan ... until she vanished ... *

But I know the Souk! I know all the dirt; who's dealing with whom, who's got grudges ...

You could use the help of somebody who knows that kind of thing.

Oh, Percy.

You know, getting your memory back after Zildan vanished did you no favors.

I don't want help. I don't need whatever information you think you can offer me. And I don't take on lieutenants.

Carlotta and Patrick came to me from what was left of Strunk's business* with the same idea.

I did find them positions in my organization, though, as you can see.

* SLEEPER SQUAD #6, WHICH YOU SHOULD ALSO SEE IF YOU DON'T KNOW HOW PERCY GOT IN THIS CONDITION. -T

* JOE STRUNK HAS ALSO VANISHED MYSTERIOUSLY. YES, ALSO SS #6. -T

I could offer you the same position, but you don't look interested in that.

... er ... no.

Just as well. Two dogs is enough. And I have something else in mind for you, anyway.

Look at my pendant, please.

Oh, see. So cooperative! They tell me Zildan's changes really improved you. Apparently you were a huge asshole before. Now you're nice and timid.

Her only mistake was not being good enough to have your new personality stick after she was gone.

I won't make that mistake.

That's right, keep looking. Focus on the pendant. It's so bright. You can't look at anything else.

We're going to empty that head for good and put something a lot more fun in there instead.

So you're not going to be getting a pair of antlers anytime soon?

Not even for shock value. How about beef Stir-Fry for dinner? I think I want something with meat.

Chef's choice. I'll eat anything.

So ... I don't think you've ever really explained Clayton's deal. Is he just an asshole? Or does he have a legitimate gripe against the other Barkers?

Oh, sure you want to know? This is deep Barker lore. I wouldn't know it myself if Midnight hadn't forced me to.

OK. First off, Clayton's the same generation as Hamilton, Ezekiel, Monica, and Nathaniel ... but he's a pair bit older than them. The problem starts with his grandfather ... Josiah's generation.

His maternal grandfather. I want to say "Jacob"? Hard to remember the names. He never married, but he fooled around with a lot of women, and from those liaisons he ended up with two daughters.

The Barkers theoretically can pass their shares to whomever they please. In practice, apparently, there is sometimes an unofficial veto.

Jacob wanted his shares split between his two daughters when he died, and Josiah and his brother Prentiss threw a fit. Said you can't inherit if you're illegitimate. They won. The daughters got some cash, but not the shares, which is where the recurring money is.

Ah. And so no shares passed to Clayton, and he resents that.

Yes, but he's also an asshole. He did inherit enough cash to make a legitimate stake somewhere, but he got into rotten stuff instead. He pretty much invented the protection racket in A4. Not something I'd want to be known for. And now he's apparently taking over the loansharking, with Strunk and the others gone.

What did happen to Jacob's shares?

I'm not sure. I'd have to ask Midnight. She retains an amazing amount of this stuff. More than I care to.

People don't use hotels in Sleep Por sleeping. They use them for functions--sometimes, very private functions. The little rooms in the so-called capsule hotels, for example, have only one purpose ... and in this one, a guest is getting impatient.

Twenty minutes late. I'll definitely be making a complaint.

Well, it's about time--

Wait, what?

Not what you were expecting, perhaps?

Is this a joke? I didn't order a freak--

Relax, honey. You're going to have the best time. You won't believe it.

Now, hold on--



I just want to give you a kiss first.



hmm de hmm da dee

Next morning.

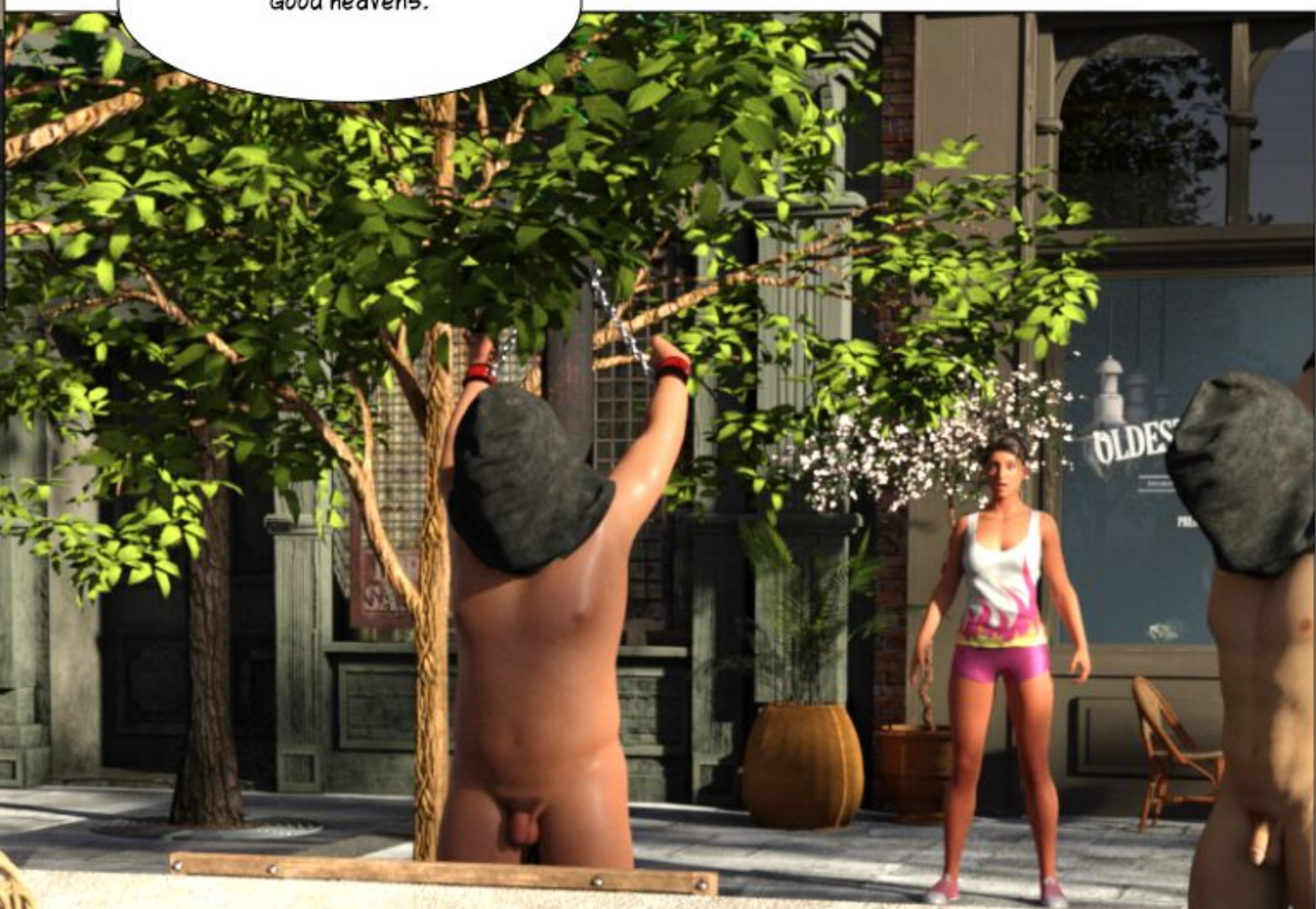


... Ruby tells me there's never all that much demand for that kind of thing in scenarios. Is that your experience also?

Depends on who's writing the scene. Ruby gets bored, so she tries to sell the customer on the more unusual stuff whenever she can. She's begun to have a reputation for it.

But left to their own devices, the customer often has very conservative tastes, yes. If Ruby were here she'd say "if they just want to go into a room and fuck, they don't need me to--"

Good heavens.

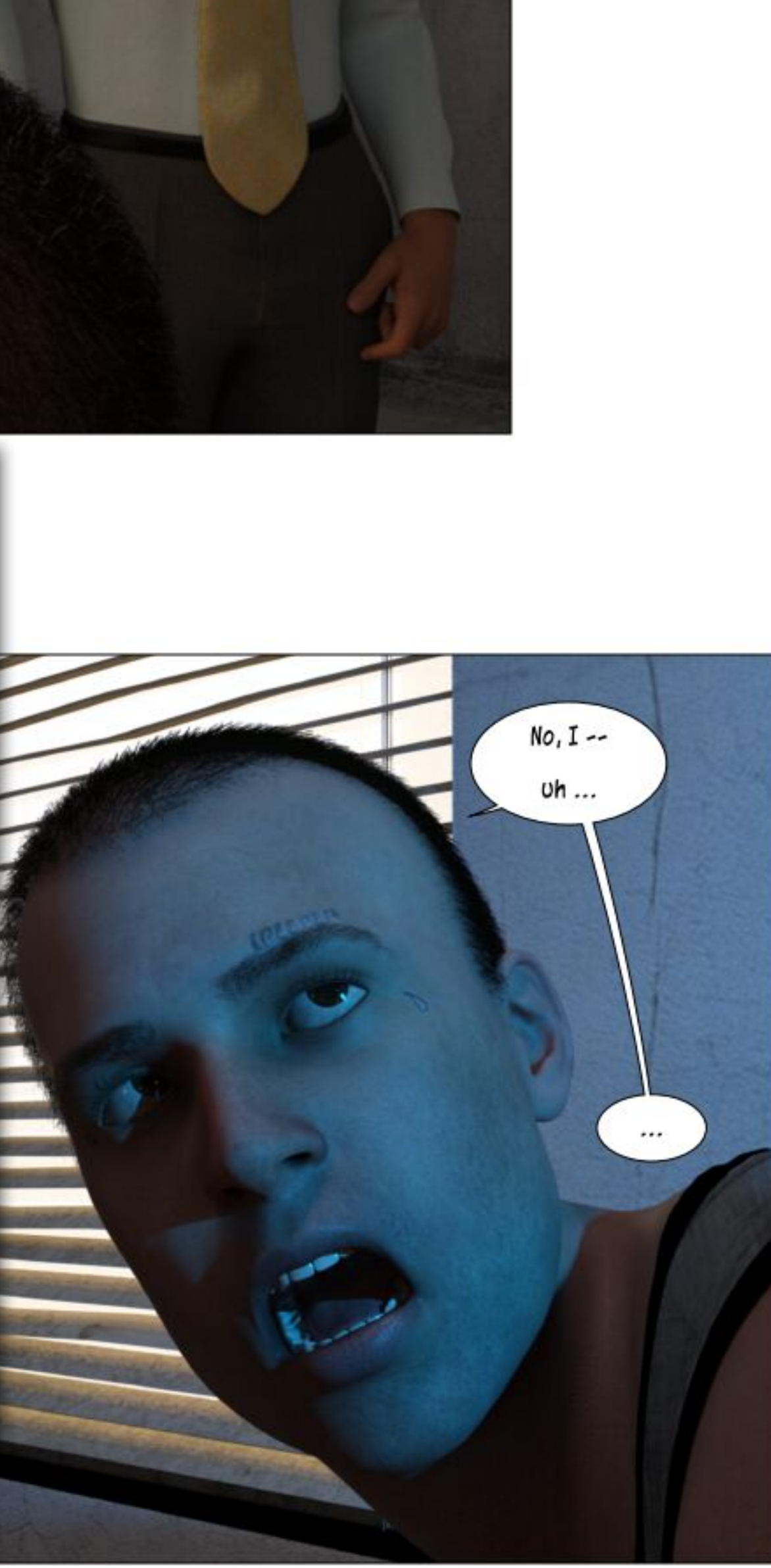
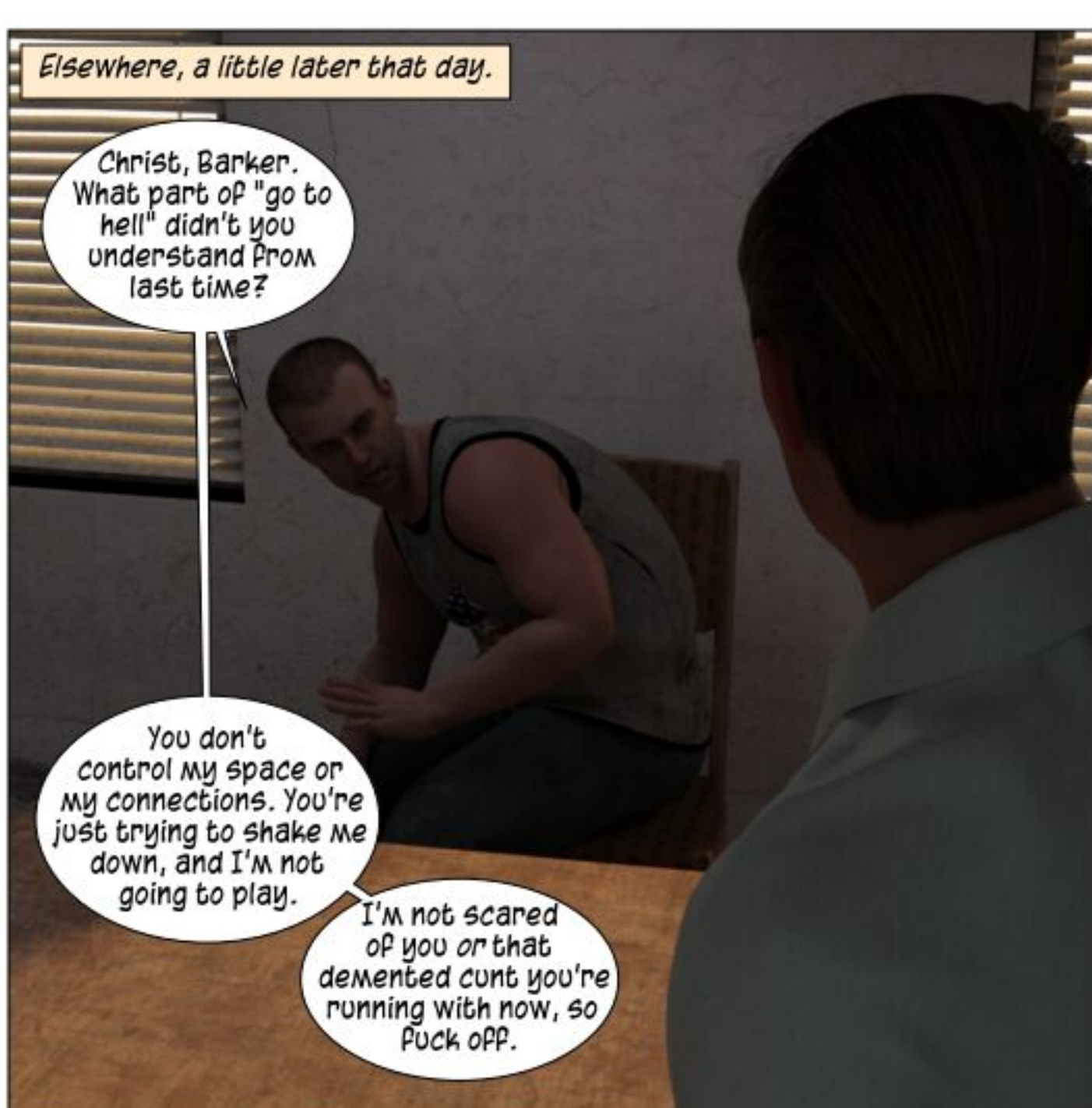


They deserve whatever you give them.

Well, they're alive. And they don't look like anyone's used that carpet beater on them.

Are they conscious? They're not moving or making any noise. I guess we should try to unchain them.

Yes, I suppose so.





Getting Dennis under control is a big deal. With him in, most of the others who haven't cooperated will fall into line.

I think I'm going to go have a little celebration. How about you?

Oh... I, ah, have to go check on some things at the club. But I'll raise a glass to it later. Have Pun.



I wish he'd give more warning... At least I trained him to call first after that little incident.*

Annette? We have to clean up.

Annette?

Damn it, Annette, get your ass in here!

MMRRHH!

... oh, right.

* CLAYTON GOT AN UNEXPECTED GLIMPSE OF THE TRUTH ABOUT THIS HOUSEHOLD IN SS #8. -T



-- grunt! --

Well, I wouldn't have to put you in that when I leave if you'd quit misbehaving.

It amazes me that the big bad gangster has a mind as resistant as a bowl of pudding, and here's his kept bimbo who keeps fighting back.

I mean, I'm not complaining, it's Pun to discipline you, but you're a lot of work, you know?

But now we both need to get changed. Clayton's going to call any minute.



Now, hurry and tidy up. We don't want to look like slob.

Make sure there's ice in the bar. And open that cabernet so it can breathe; I'm going to need a couple of glasses to get through this.

-- grunt --

If you behave, I'll let you lick me later after he passes out.

BRRRT

Here we go.

Hey, sweetie! Yes, I'm here... I was just thinking about you, actually. ... OK, see you in a bit. --Mwah--



At dinner with April and Orchid, the topic turned to Morphic Labs.

It isn't the first time someone's tried to do it as a business. I very nearly tried it myself a couple of years ago. The problem is, there's not enough people who want it, and a lot of the people who do want it learn how to do it for themselves.

The only reason it might work for Azu is she also runs the club that most of her customers practically live in. In fact, it's right next door. The two businesses feed each other.

Are you talking about Xenomorph? I've never been there. I hear it's wild.

You should go sometime. But fair warning: you have to look the part to get in the door. They don't require a body morph, but you'll want something at least as striking.

How about you, Leyna? I take it you won't be checking it out anytime soon?



Yeah, yeah, go ahead, pick on me.

Look, I'm not really that big a grouch, even if this place sounds like it's completely not my thing. I wish I could figure out what's bothering me about it all.

Hmm. Maybe you should go.

Just once, to see what it's like. Get it out of your system, you know. Show yourself that it's actually harmless.



I feel a little bad. Leyna's going off to see Lou, we're heading off together... and April's walking away by herself.

Is she seeing anybody? I never got a glimpse of anything.

April's complicated. I think she gets off from what she does to people in the show, but she doesn't want anybody to know that.

There's a rumor that she was supporting herself as a dom before the circus. I've also heard she still moonlights sometimes.

Anyway, it doesn't seem like she wants any other kind of relationship. As far as I can tell.



Oh! I learned a new trick. Wanna see?

Sure!

Ta-da.

Nope, just for Pun. I thought I'd experiment a little, y'know?

I haven't tried it out with anybody else yet. I was thinking maybe you could give me some lessons.

Heh. Come over here and I'll see what I can do.

Mmm, not bad. Is that for a circus act, or--

The next day, Melinda is attending to routine matters at the club.



Prissy, I want you to take these two Mouths to the showers and wash them both. All over. The night crew only cleans their mouths between uses, and they're starting to get a little Punky everywhere else.

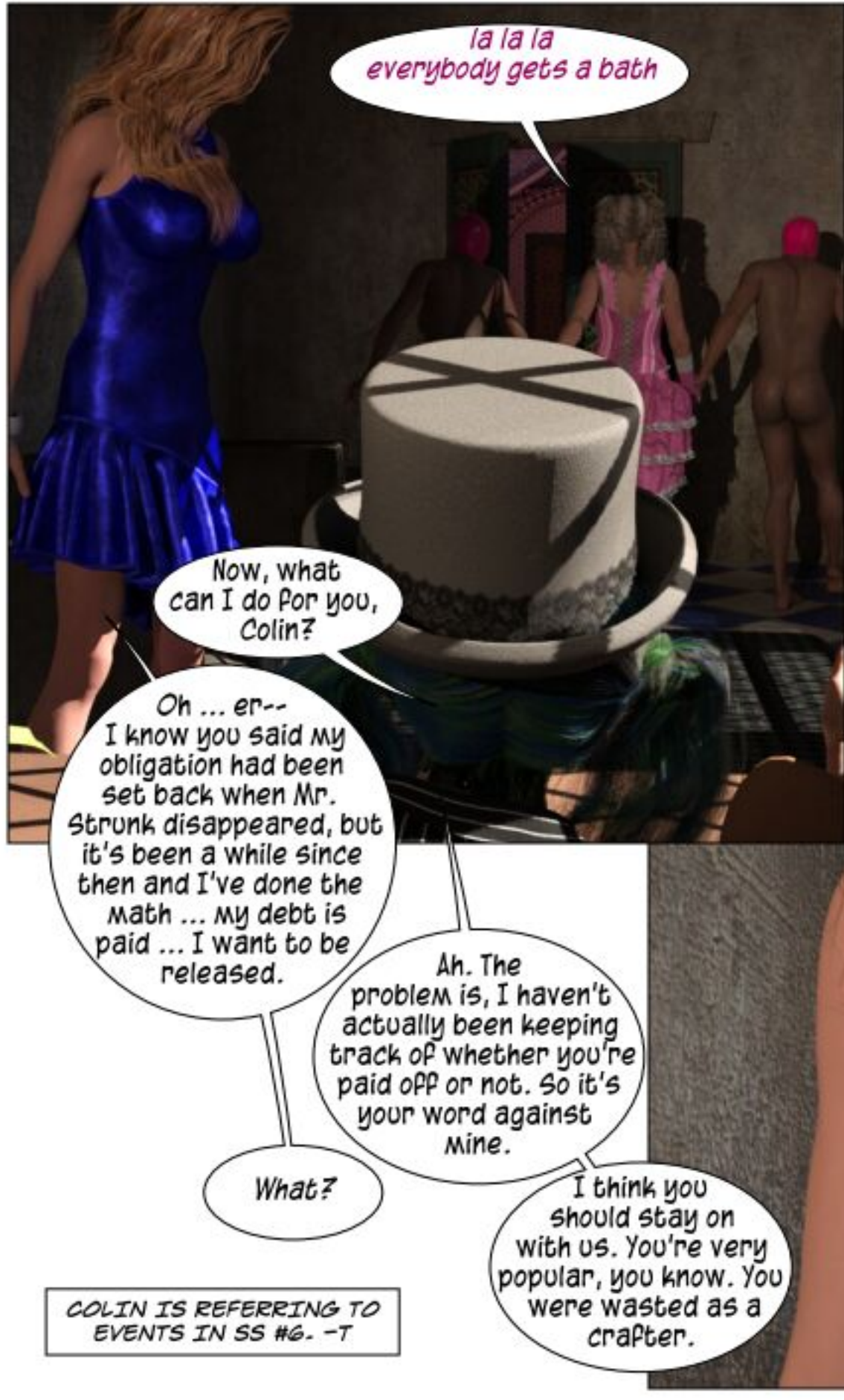
Yeth, Mith Melinda.



Then come back here and take Patrick and Carlotta and give them a bath too. Pat's been humping Carlotta a lot and they both smell like dog sex.

If you Finish all that before opening time, you can tell Dee that I said she can play with you under your skirt.

Oooh! --giggle-- Yeth, Mith Melinda.



la la la everybody gets a bath

Now, what can I do for you, Colin?

Oh ... er-- I know you said my obligation had been set back when Mr. Strunk disappeared, but it's been a while since then and I've done the math ... My debt is paid ... I want to be released.

Ah. The problem is, I haven't actually been keeping track of whether you're paid off or not. So it's your word against mine.

What?

I think you should stay on with us. You're very popular, you know. You were wasted as a crafter.

COLIN IS REFERRING TO EVENTS IN SS #6. -T



But I don't want to do this job! I only did this because--

I know. That's what makes you so much fun to keep around.

You see, Colin, some people don't push back at all. Percy, who just left? He made a lot of noise, but as soon as I told him what he was, he gave right in. Where's the fun in that?

And then there are people who resist so hard that I pretty much have to erase them and they end up Mouths or furniture. That's no fun for me either.

But someone whose mind won't quite give in but who doesn't resist enough to cause real trouble--that's the sweet spot. That's a rare find.



Everything you don't want to be? I'm going to make you more of that.

I want you to be dumber. Hornier. More exhibitionist. I want your tits bigger and your lips plumper and your eyes more vacant. I want the world to think there's not a single thing in your head but lust.

Only you and I will know the truth. You'll always have that little part of you in the back of your head hating every minute of it. And I'll always know that part is there and it'll make me hot every time I think about it.

--MMM--

Actually, I might need for you to crawl under the desk here and help me out--

Stop.



HMM. And who might you be?

You are an animal. We come to bring you to your Pate.

Oh.

No, I don't think so.

THESE TWO ARE ALSO FROM--YOU GUESSED IT--SS #6. -T



Patrick, Carlotta, look! Kitties! I bet you'd like to chase them around.

First, though, they need to learn what they are.

Look closely, kitties.



--MEOW?--

--MEOW!--

That's better.

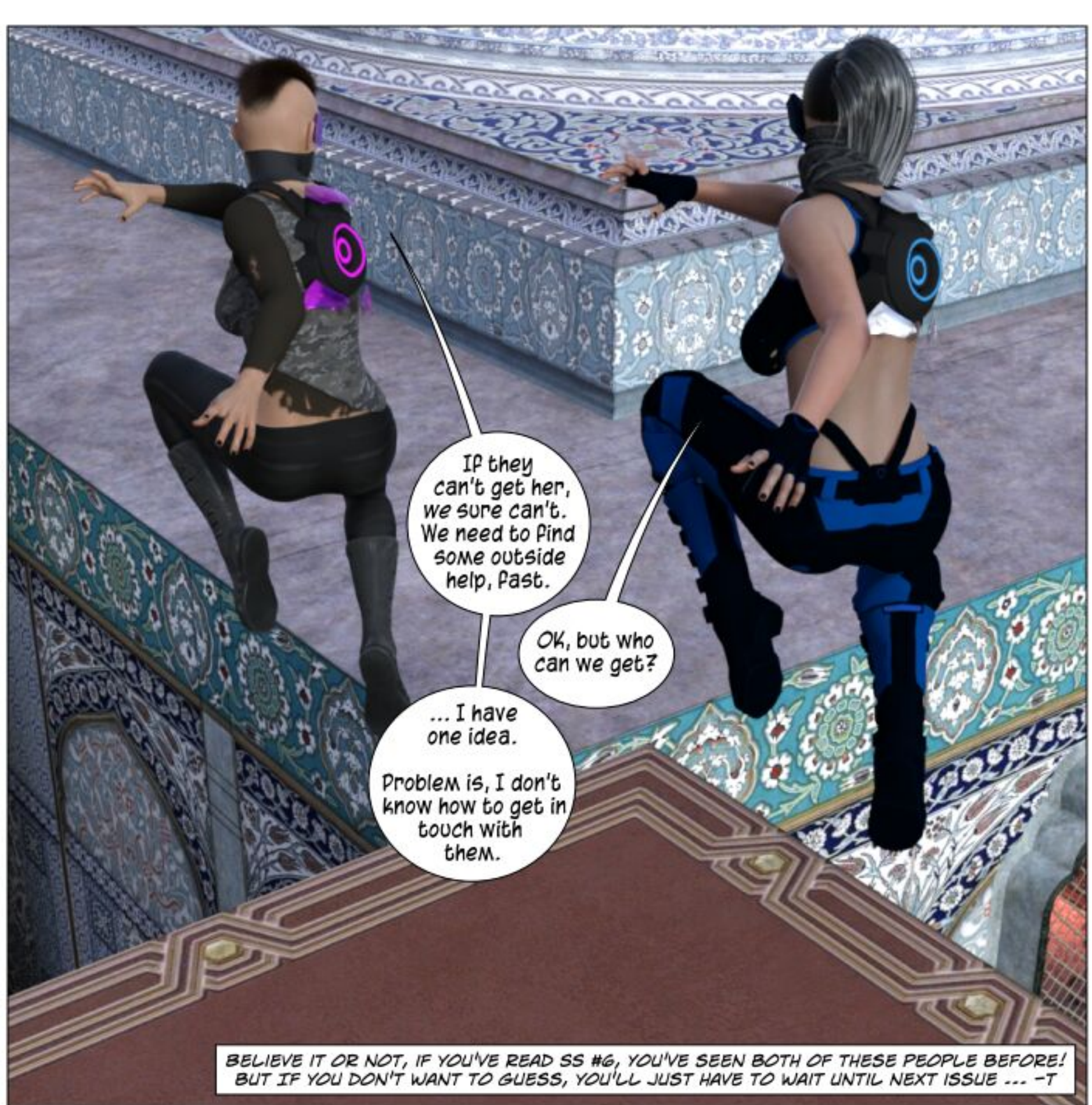
Maybe once we work on it a while you'll look like kitties without the masks, too.



Fuck! She got them.

So much for that. Damn it, I really had hoped they'd be able to resist her.

We better jump before she sees us up here.



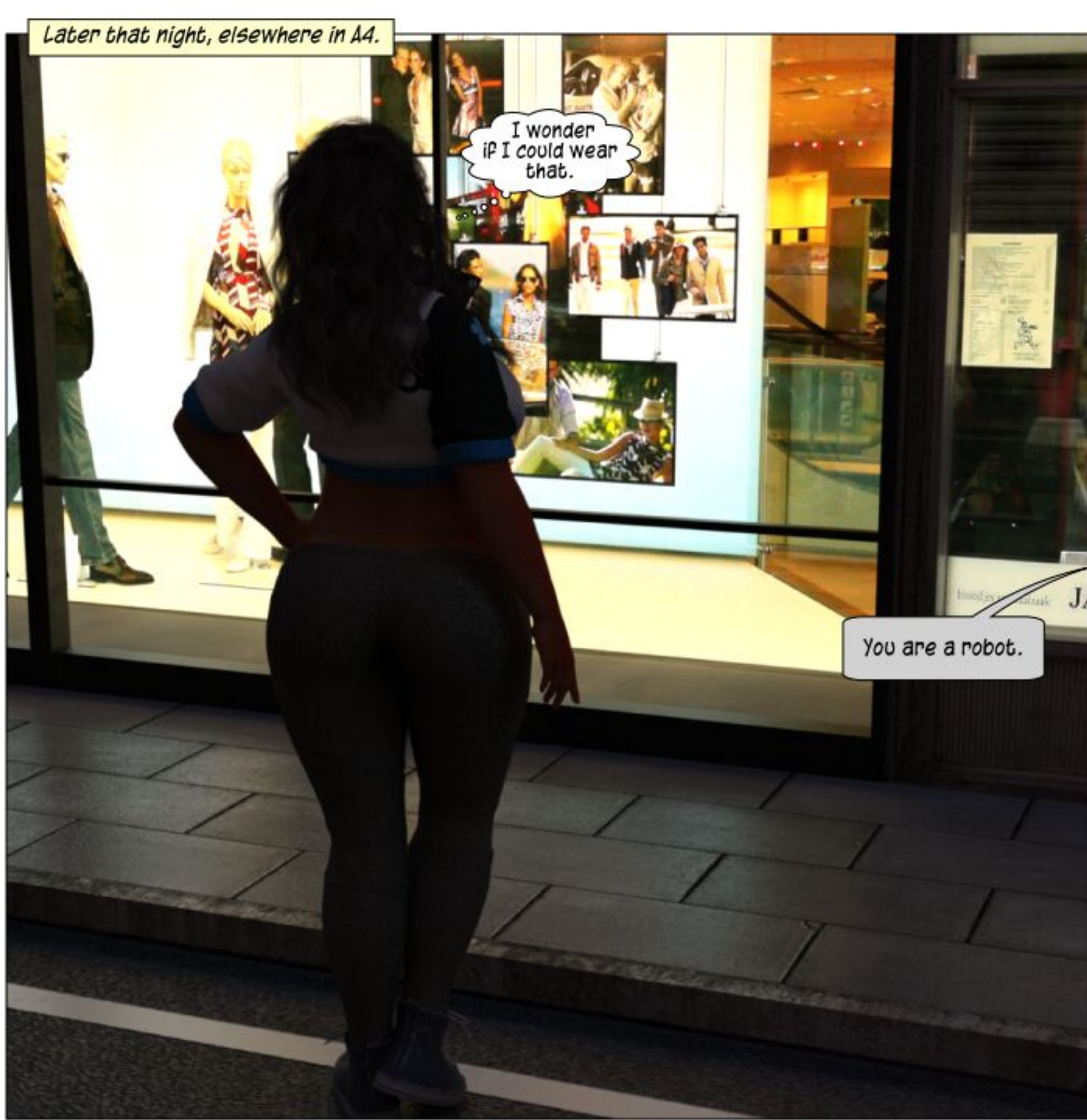
If they can't get her, we sure can't. We need to find some outside help, Past.

OK, but who can we get?

... I have one idea.

Problem is, I don't know how to get in touch with them.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IF YOU'VE READ SS #6, YOU'VE SEEN BOTH OF THESE PEOPLE BEFORE! BUT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO GUESS, YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL NEXT ISSUE ... -T



Later that night, elsewhere in A4.

I wonder if I could wear that.

You are a robot.



... What?

A robot. From the Czech robot, "Porced labor."

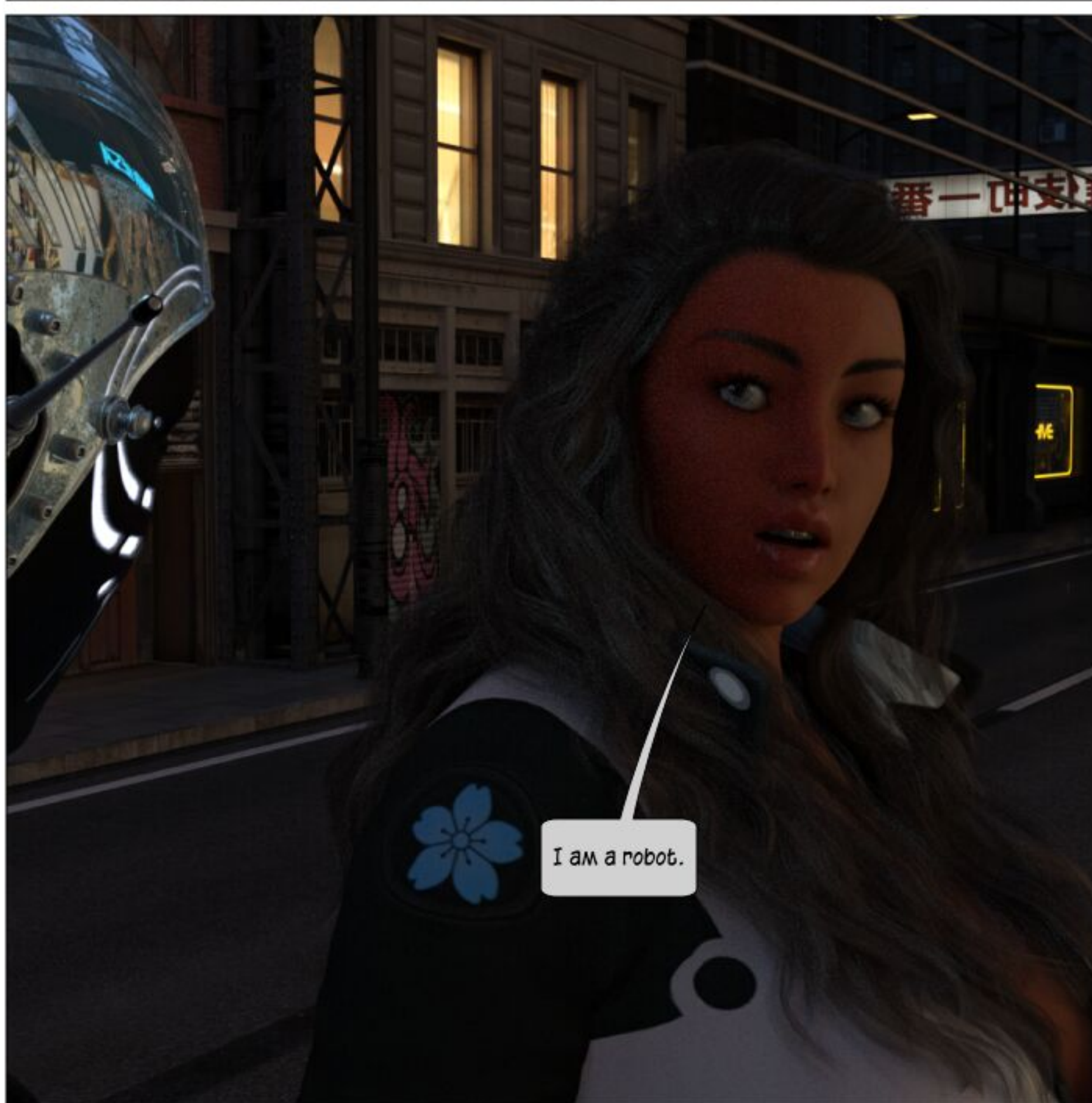
You have sex to make the money to pay your bed fees so you can have the free time to have more sex.

Sex--money--sex. Repeat. You are a windup toy for your masters.

No, that's not true--

You don't even know what I do, I'm not ...

I ... uh ...



I am a robot.



Ruby has dozed off watching old passives again.

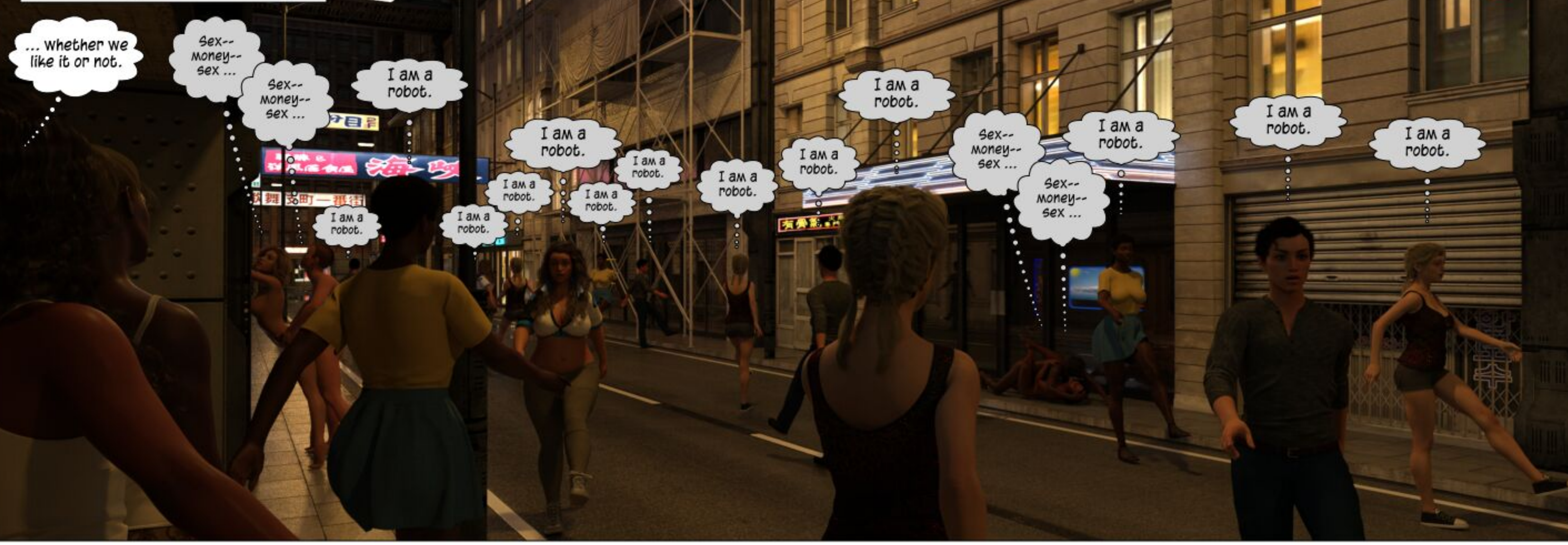
MORRIS, YOU KNOW WE CAN NEVER REALIZE OUR LOVE AS LONG AS I AM AFFLICTED BY THIS HORRIBLE CURSE!

... BUT, ASATHA ... WHAT IF I REALLY LIKE FROGS A WHOLE LOT?

BRRRT

--uh?

"Ruby, hi, it's April. A friend of mine just told me about something happening in Shibuya and I think you and Leyna may want to go have a look."
"... What kind of thing?"
"People acting weird. Like they're being controlled, maybe?"
"Oh. Yeah, I guess that's our thing."



... Whether we like it or not.

Sex--money--sex ...

Sex--money--sex ...

I am a robot.

I am a robot.

I am a robot.

I am a robot.

I am a robot.

Sex--money--sex ...

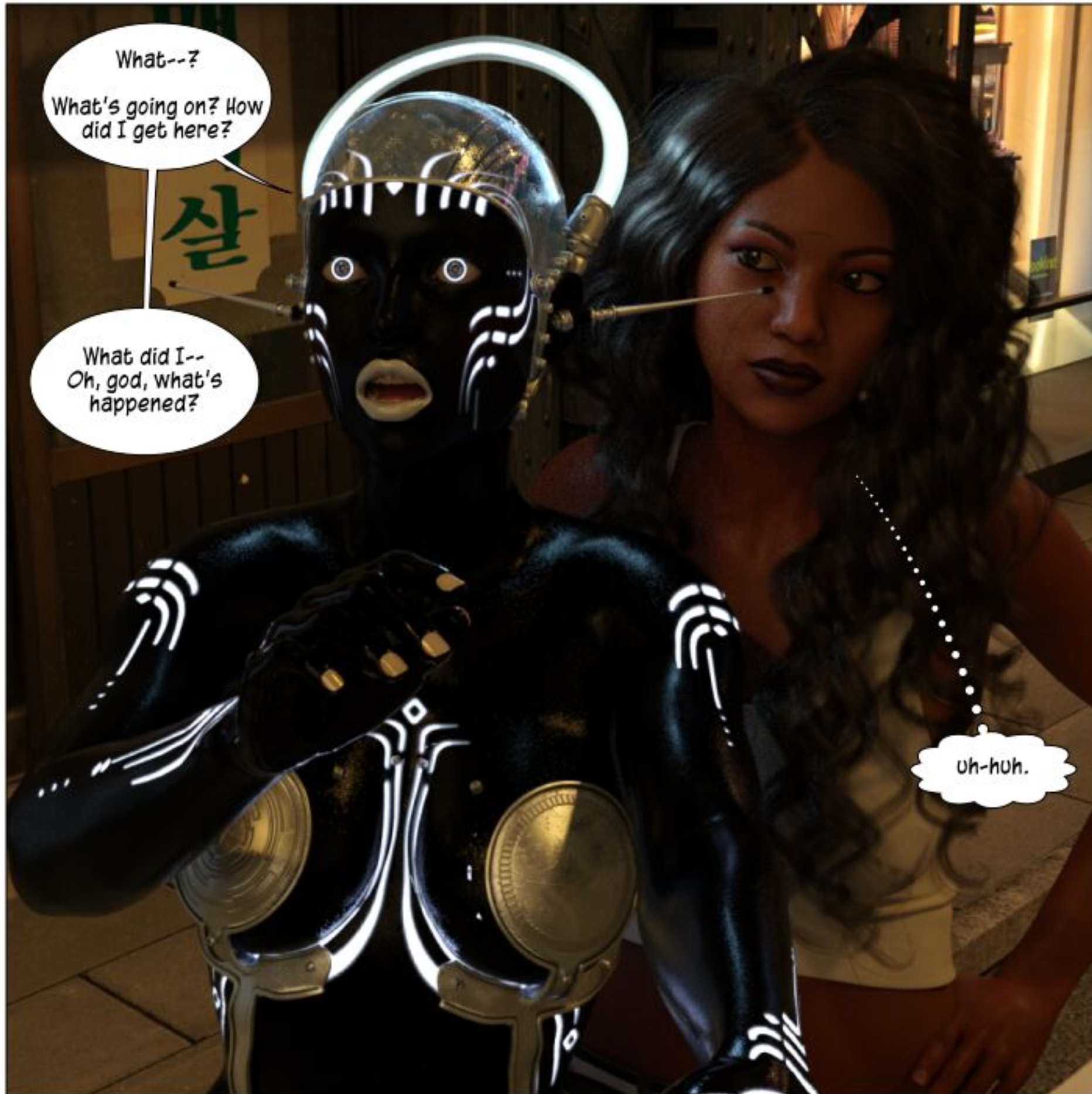
I am a robot.

Sex--money--sex ...

I am a robot.

I am a robot.

I am a robot.



Meanwhile, Melinda and Clayton have invited a guest to come speak with them at the club.

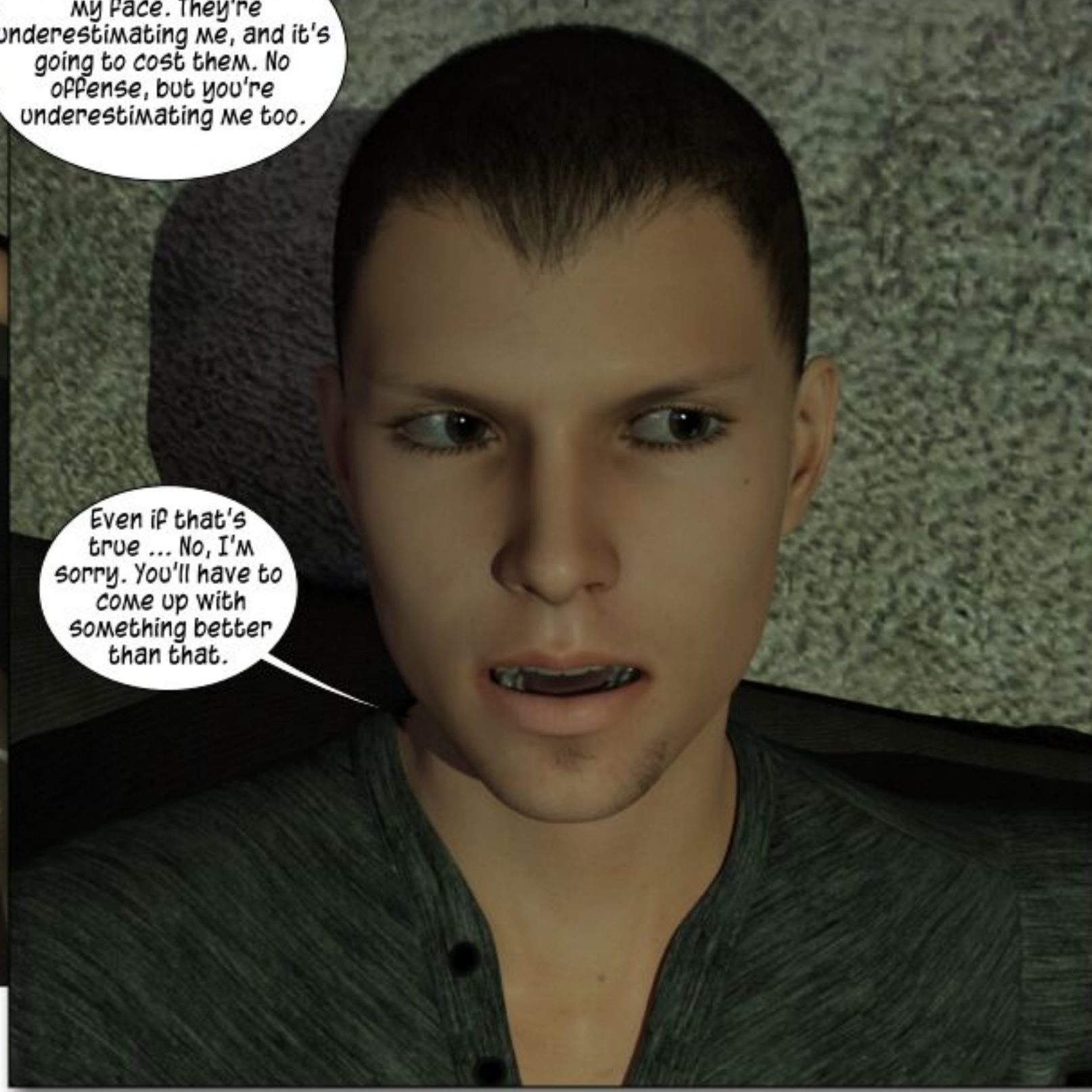


... I'm serious, Brendan. We're on the move here. The situation is going to change whether Josiah and the others like it or not. It's a question of which side you want to land on.

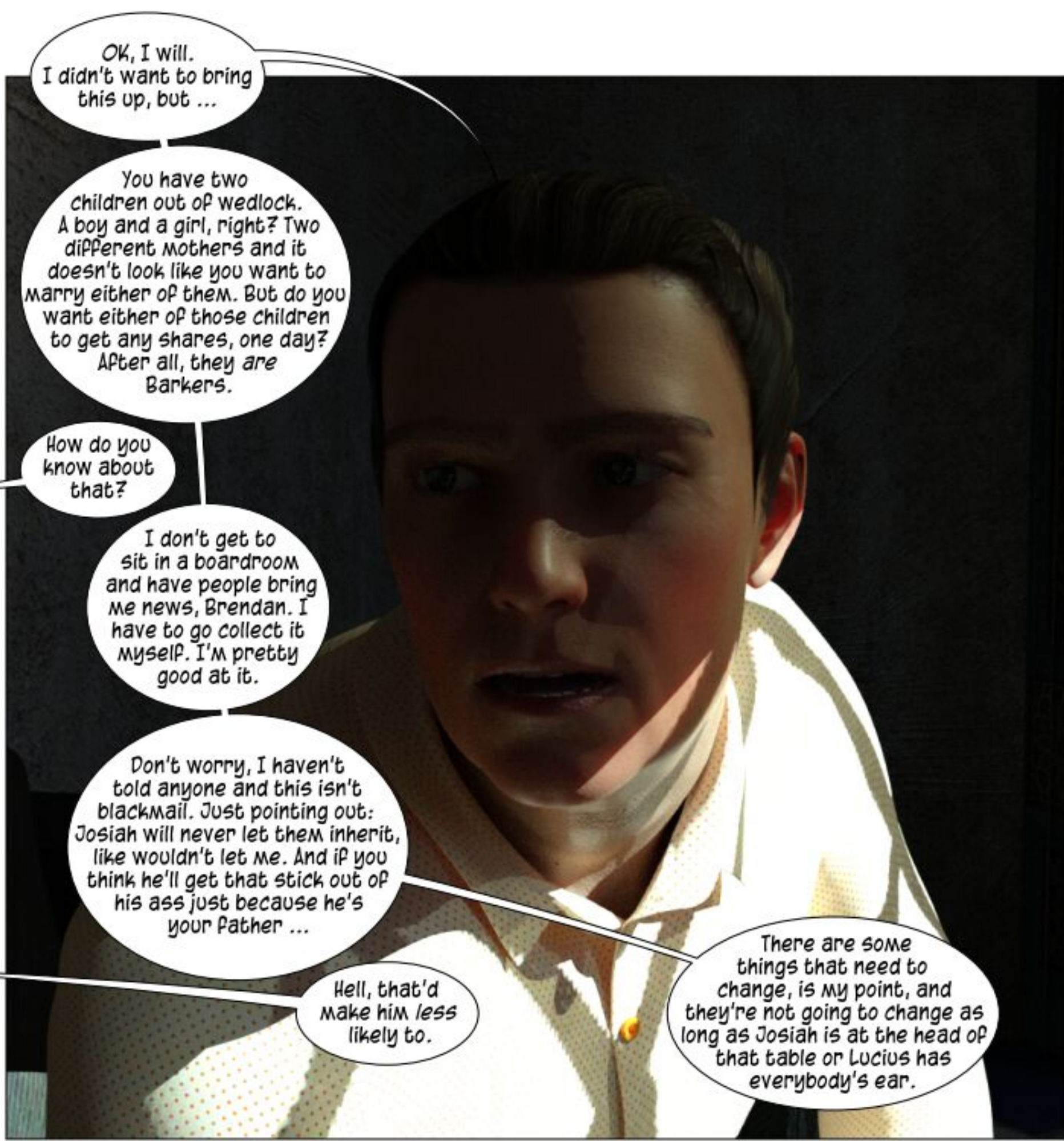
Clayton, you don't get it. Do you have any idea just how much you're not welcome in the Family? Do you realize how big a risk I'm taking even showing up here?

They're not going to let you do a takeover under their noses, so why should I throw in with you when it just means they'll have some other reason to be mad at me when you fall on your face?

I'm not going to fall on my face. They're underestimating me, and it's going to cost them. No offense, but you're underestimating me too.



Even if that's true ... No, I'm sorry. You'll have to come up with something better than that.



OK, I will. I didn't want to bring this up, but ...

You have two children out of wedlock. A boy and a girl, right? Two different mothers and it doesn't look like you want to marry either of them. But do you want either of those children to get any shares, one day? After all, they are Barkers.

How do you know about that?

I don't get to sit in a boardroom and have people bring me news, Brendan. I have to go collect it myself. I'm pretty good at it.

Don't worry, I haven't told anyone and this isn't blackmail. Just pointing out: Josiah will never let them inherit, like wouldn't let me. And if you think he'll get that stick out of his ass just because he's your father ...

Hell, that'd make him less likely to.

There are some things that need to change, is my point, and they're not going to change as long as Josiah is at the head of that table or Lucius has everybody's ear.



... All right.

You try your coup. I'll do what I can from my side. If you succeed, then we can cooperate.

But I can't back you openly, you understand that. Until you succeed, we have no deal, and I know nothing about any of this.

Of course.



Mr. Barker, can I interest you in some of our services, on the house? To round off your evening?

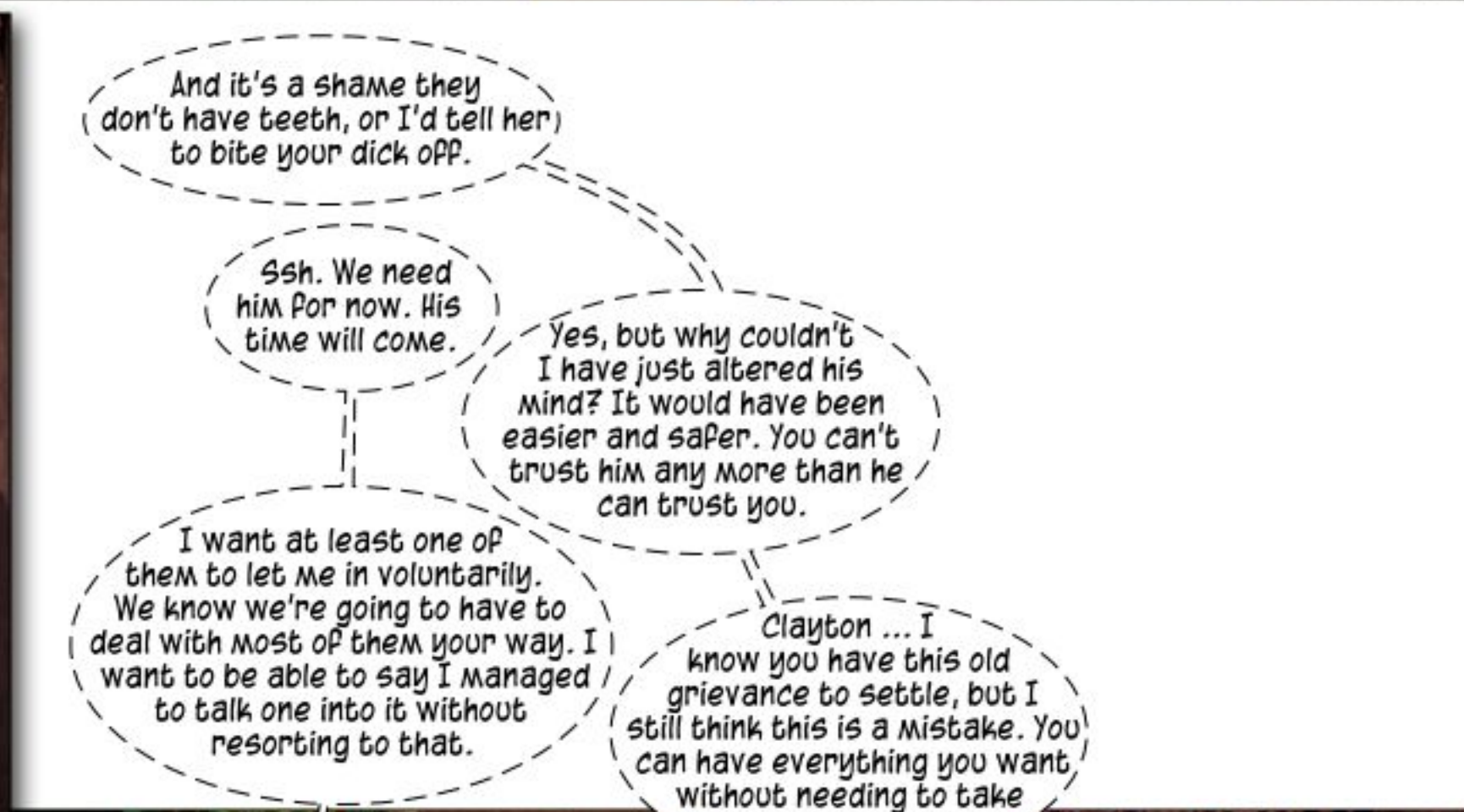
Would you like to try a Mouth, perhaps? I have some right here. They're very popular lately.

Oh, I don't know, that's not really ... I like to be able to look someone in the eye when I'm in bed with them.

It does take a certain mindset. For example, if you imagine that they're an enemy of yours who's in that condition involuntarily.

Hmm. Actually, when you put it that way ...

Excellent! Pick one. I'll have someone show you to a room.



And it's a shame they don't have teeth, or I'd tell her to bite your dick off.

Ssh. We need him for now. His time will come.

Yes, but why couldn't I have just altered his mind? It would have been easier and safer. You can't trust him any more than he can trust you.

I want at least one of them to let me in voluntarily. We know we're going to have to deal with most of them your way. I want to be able to say I managed to talk one into it without resorting to that.

Clayton ... I know you have this old grievance to settle, but I still think this is a mistake. You can have everything you want without needing to take on the Barkers.



That's the thing; it's not about taking on the Barkers, it's about being allowed to be a Barker.

They've been trying to deny who I am since I was born.

-- sigh --



The next night.

If you're wondering whether I'm OK with this, the answer is no.

... You're an extrovert, you don't understand.

I am not an extrovert.

Aw. All I did was change your skin and hair a little! And you look great!

I'm uncomfortable with being noticed, I guess. This feels like I'm screaming for people to look at me.



Don't worry. They'll be too busy looking at your hair to notice the rest of you.

Not Punny.



It's dark and loud in here.

It's a club. Have you never been in a club?

Not since I learned I don't like them.

--sigh-- Why don't we go get a drink?



What'll it be?

Leyna, you want a glass of wine?

Bourbon. On the rocks.

... OK. Same for me, please.



First time here?

That obvious, huh?

Actually ... I'm looking for someone. We met last night, but I didn't get her inPo. Black glossy robot with white markings.

Most people have that look for a while until they get used to it.

Oh, that's Ix. She's around here somewhere. Hey, Nadine, have you seen Ix?



Friends of hers?

... We'd like to be.

HMM. Well, you look OK. She's back there in the corner.

Not only was Ix back there, but so was the woman from the front desk at Morphic Labs ... and a woman with a cobra hood. Three birds with one stone.



Hello, Ix.

Uh ... hi. Do I know you?

Sure. We met last night. You wanted me to be a robot and I said I wasn't in the mood.

Oh, shit--

Before you do something stupid ... We're not here to bust you. I know you were paking last night. You're a horrible actor.

We just want to talk about what happened.

--ahem--



I sure hope you're not causing my customers any grief, or Bree and Thea are going to toss you both out on your asses.

Oh, Por ...
You know, if you hadn't been so defensive about this to begin with, we wouldn't have needed to come talk to your customers.
We're not here to make trouble. We're just trying to figure out what's going on. We already know these public stunts are volunteer jobs, despite Ix's little act last night. So what's the deal? Art? Political demonstration? Vigilante squad?



Maybe all of the above? Are you working for Barkers? I don't want to talk to you if you are.

Sometimes we do. But even when we do, we don't tell them everything. Usually the Barkers are the ones we're trying to keep in line.

Huh. Crusaders.

Weren't you picking on us about glass houses a few days ago?

... OK, Pair.

We're not doing any harm. Most of the people here just want to look unusual. A few want to do more than that. I try to help, give them some useful tools. But I don't let them actually cause damage. The idea is to make things better.

To be honest, the only part we really care about is whether you're manipulating people against their wills. If it's always consensual, then we don't have a gripe.

You need to be careful. No one's crying for the jackasses cobra lady here caught, but Ix and those bystanders pushed the limits.

It's bad tactics anyway. Manipulating people makes them so angry and upset it undermines whatever your message was.

... unless they're into that kind of thing.



And that's really it? You just wanted to make sure we weren't messing with people's heads?

That's it. We'll finish our drinks and then we're out of here.

Maybe I'll come back some time for Pun. I like your club.

It was nice to have an outcome that didn't involve us having to figure out how to restrain or catch a diabolical mastermind, y'know?

Several hours later, very late in the evening (or very early in the morning) ...



Go home, Trini. I'll close up.

OK, Azu. See you tomorrow.



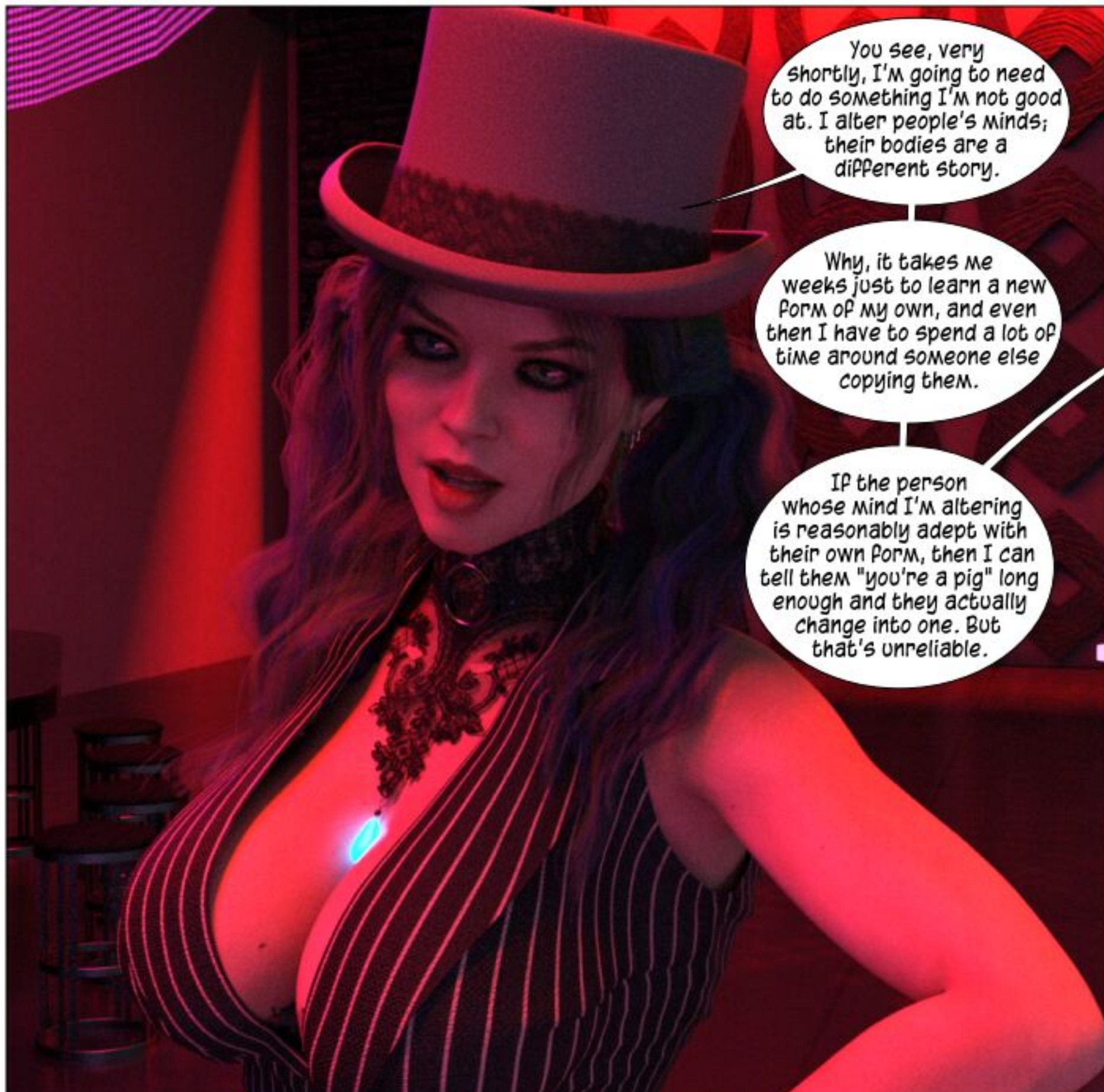
One nice thing about running a club in Sleep, there's no cleanup. You just reset it all and turn out the lights ...

May I help you? We're closed.

I just need to speak to you for a few minutes.

We're closed, and I'm very tired. Is this something that can wait until tomorrow? I'll be available in Morpich Labs across the street all day--

No, it's urgent.



You see, very shortly, I'm going to need to do something I'm not good at. I alter people's minds; their bodies are a different story.

Why, it takes me weeks just to learn a new form of my own, and even then I have to spend a lot of time around someone else copying them.

If the person whose mind I'm altering is reasonably adept with their own form, then I can tell them "you're a pig" long enough and they actually change into one. But that's unreliable.



I need someone highly skilled with physical changes. Someone who can do them without needing a cooperative or adept subject. And the word is, you're that someone.

Of course, I don't intend to give you a choice in the matter.

SEEMS LIKE WE'RE HEADING TOWARD SOMETHING REALLY BAD HAPPENING, DOESN'T IT? THE COLLISION COMES IN SLEEPER SQUAD #11 ... AND IT'S GOING TO BE SOMETHING YOU WON'T WANT TO MISS. STAY TUNED!