

TRIBUTE COMSOTE

Words and images by Tribby

After days of trying, we'd finally collected some useful gossip: the woman who had reopened Bianca Zildan's club was the same person as Clayton Barker's new "partner."

A few hours of surveillance was enough to confirm that this partner was the missing Mesmerizing Melinda.



Why hadn't you tracked her here before this?

Can't track everybody all the time. We've been so busy getting dirt on Clayton I haven't kept an eye out for her.

We'd better get down before she sees us.

If we can do that without breaking our necks.

Even with the suits on?

Hmm?

Worried about being seen even with the suits on?

Oh. They only work when you could plausibly be someone the person doesn't know. Or at least doesn't care about. Public places, mostly, ideally crowded ones.

If you see someone on a roof where they aren't supposed to be, you might not care if they're a stranger, you still know they're not supposed to be there.

Same problem with that club, unfortunately. They have a doorman. They're too likely to have a good idea of everyone who's inside, so someone could say "Hey, who's that person I don't know?"

We'll have to think of another way, then.

Assuming we decide to take her on in the club at all. That might be a bad idea.

Give that some thought. I need to go talk to Midnight. Tell her what we've learned.

Elsewhere, Serene and Lucius Barker have just finished a lovely meal. But Serene is edgy.



I'm worried about being seen.

Why? You look great.

Not what I mean, you clown, and you know it.

I do. But this is why I suggested an early dinner. These streets are nearly empty and--

Well, this is unexpected. Does the rest of the family know how cozy you two are? I bet Josiah doesn't. He'd probably have an aneurysm.

Clayton, how about you just Puck right off and avoid the rush?

Lucius, this is a trap.

We need to get out of here before--



Before what?

This will be interesting. I've never tried to do two at once.

Later that night ...



Josiah Barker hates leaving his personal space. Whole months go by with him not seen anywhere else but the boardroom.

However, as difficult as his relationship with his son Brendan can be, when the latter asks him to come out for an emergency chat, he does.

That doesn't mean he has to be happy about it, though.

"Family members disappearing" ... probably they're all just hiding in their own spaces so they don't have to listen to Serene and Lucius' cries of doom ...

It continues to baffle me why Brendan voluntarily lives in this horrible part of the city ...

Josiah! Long time no see.

And I prefer to keep it that way. What are you doing here, Clayton? Surely Brendan doesn't want to warn you about missing family.

He doesn't have to. I'm the reason they're missing.

Well, part of the reason.

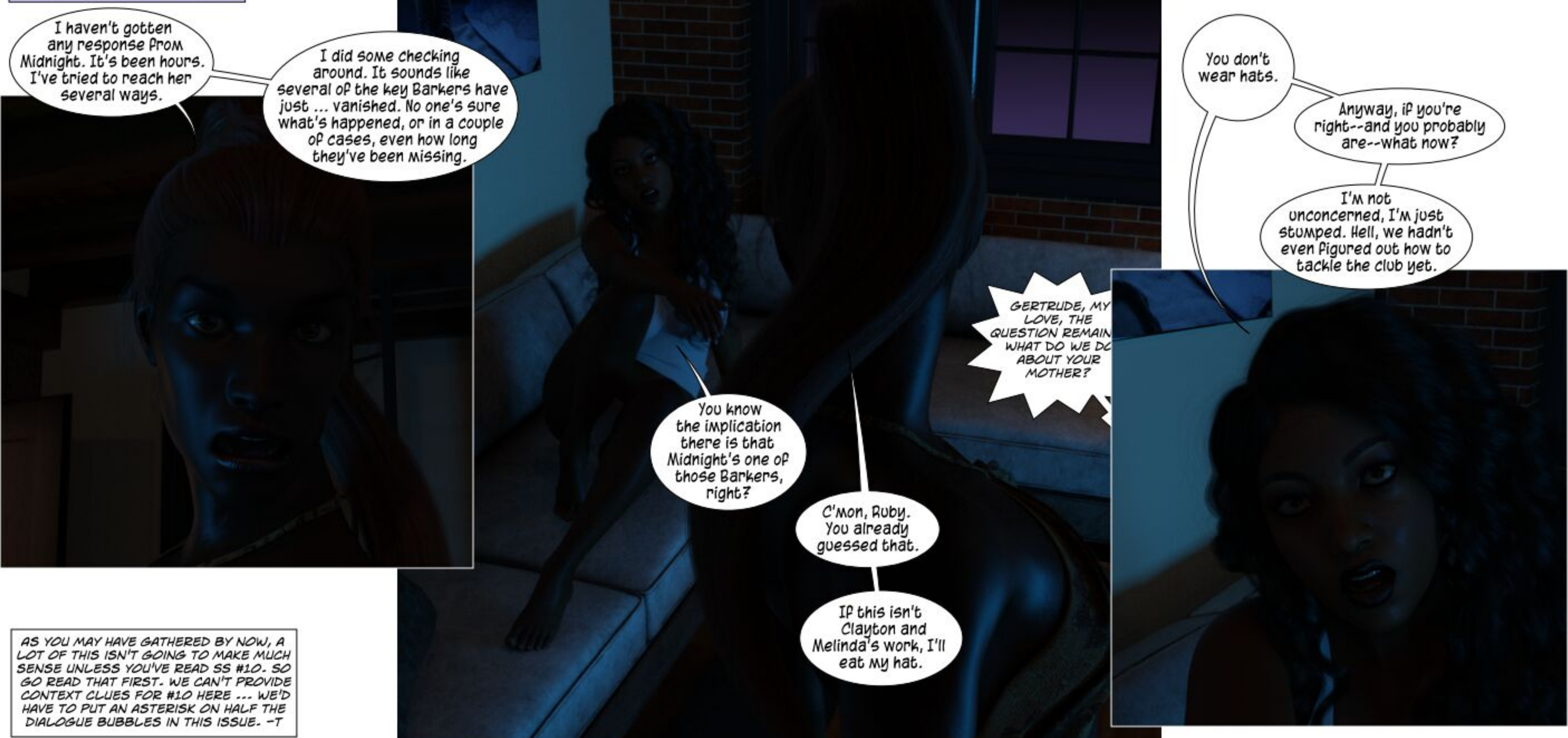
You-- What are you saying? Are you just admitting that you've done something to--

Simmer down, Josiah, doesn't do to get too upset at your age. You might have a stroke.

And don't worry about Brendan, not that you ever have. He's in good hands.

I have somebody I'd like you to meet. She's going to change your life.

Meanwhile, Leyna has come to Ruby's place unexpectedly.



I haven't gotten any response from Midnight. It's been hours. I've tried to reach her several ways.

I did some checking around. It sounds like several of the key Barkers have just ... vanished. No one's sure what's happened, or in a couple of cases, even how long they've been missing.

You don't wear hats.

Anyway, if you're right--and you probably are--what now?

I'm not unconcerned, I'm just stumped. Hell, we hadn't even figured out how to tackle the club yet.

GERTRUDE, MY LOVE, THE QUESTION REMAINS WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT YOUR MOTHER?

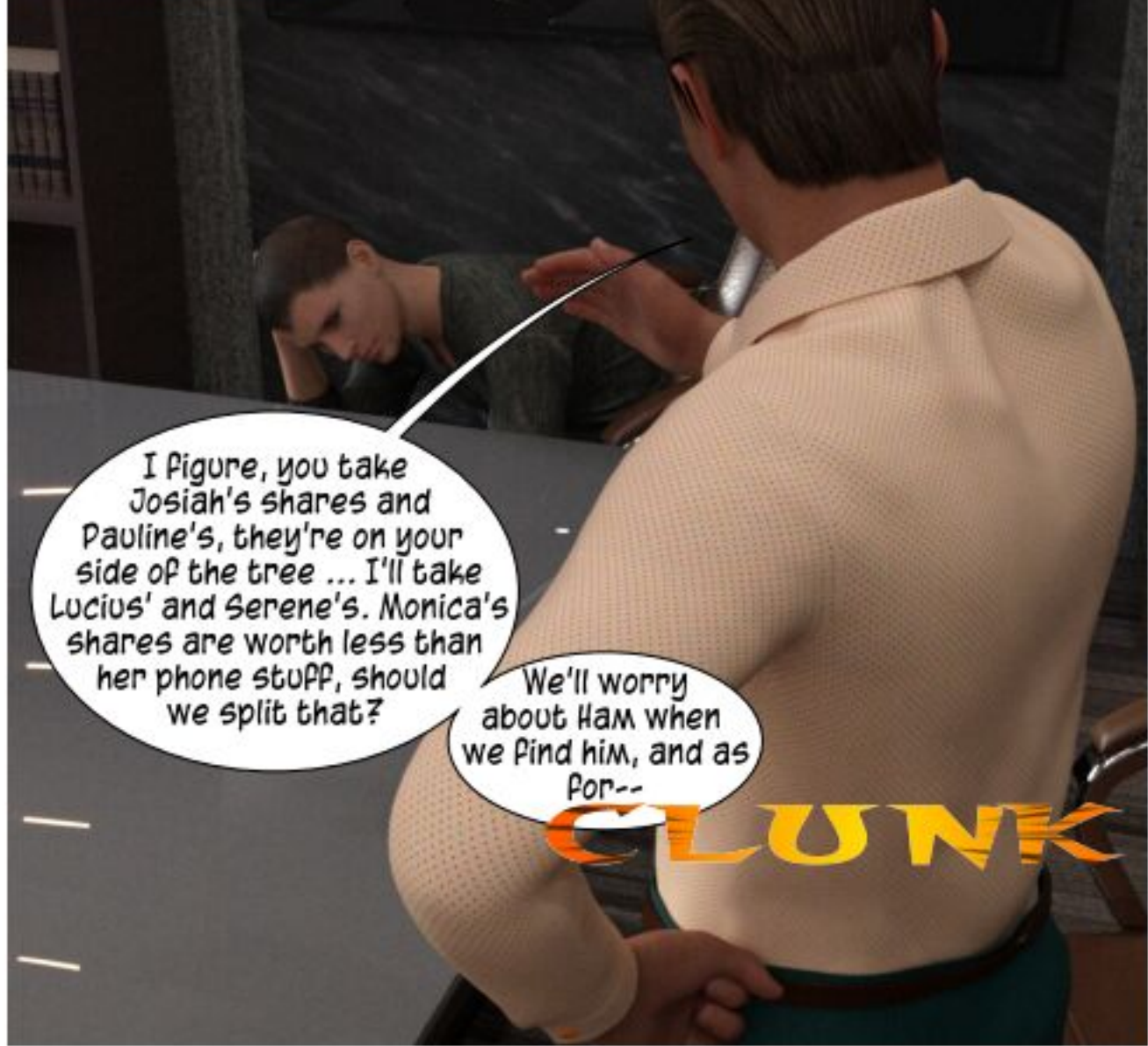
You know the implication there is that Midnight's one of those Barkers, right?

C'mon, Ruby. You already guessed that.

If this isn't Clayton and Melinda's work, I'll eat my hat.

AS YOU MAY HAVE GATHERED BY NOW, A LOT OF THIS ISN'T GOING TO MAKE MUCH SENSE UNLESS YOU'VE READ SS #10. SO GO READ THAT FIRST. WE CAN'T PROVIDE CONTEXT CLUES FOR #10 HERE ... WE'D HAVE TO PUT AN ASTERISK ON HALF THE DIALOGUE BUBBLES IN THIS ISSUE. -T

A Few days later.



I figure, you take Josiah's shares and Pauline's, they're on your side of the tree ... I'll take Lucius' and Serene's. Monica's shares are worth less than her phone stuff, should we split that?

We'll worry about HAM when we find him, and as for--



Come on out, Zeke, we heard you.

I was just--I came by to see if anyone was here. Why isn't anybody answering their phones? What's going on?



It's a coup, Zeke. Want in? We can give you a cut. Maybe you can take Monica's shares.



Uh ... OK, yeah. Sure.



Hey, I'm looking for a friend of mine. She used to live here.

Hilarious.

Lying around in your underwear, staring at the upholstery ... that's the kind of thing I do, not you. Have you slept?

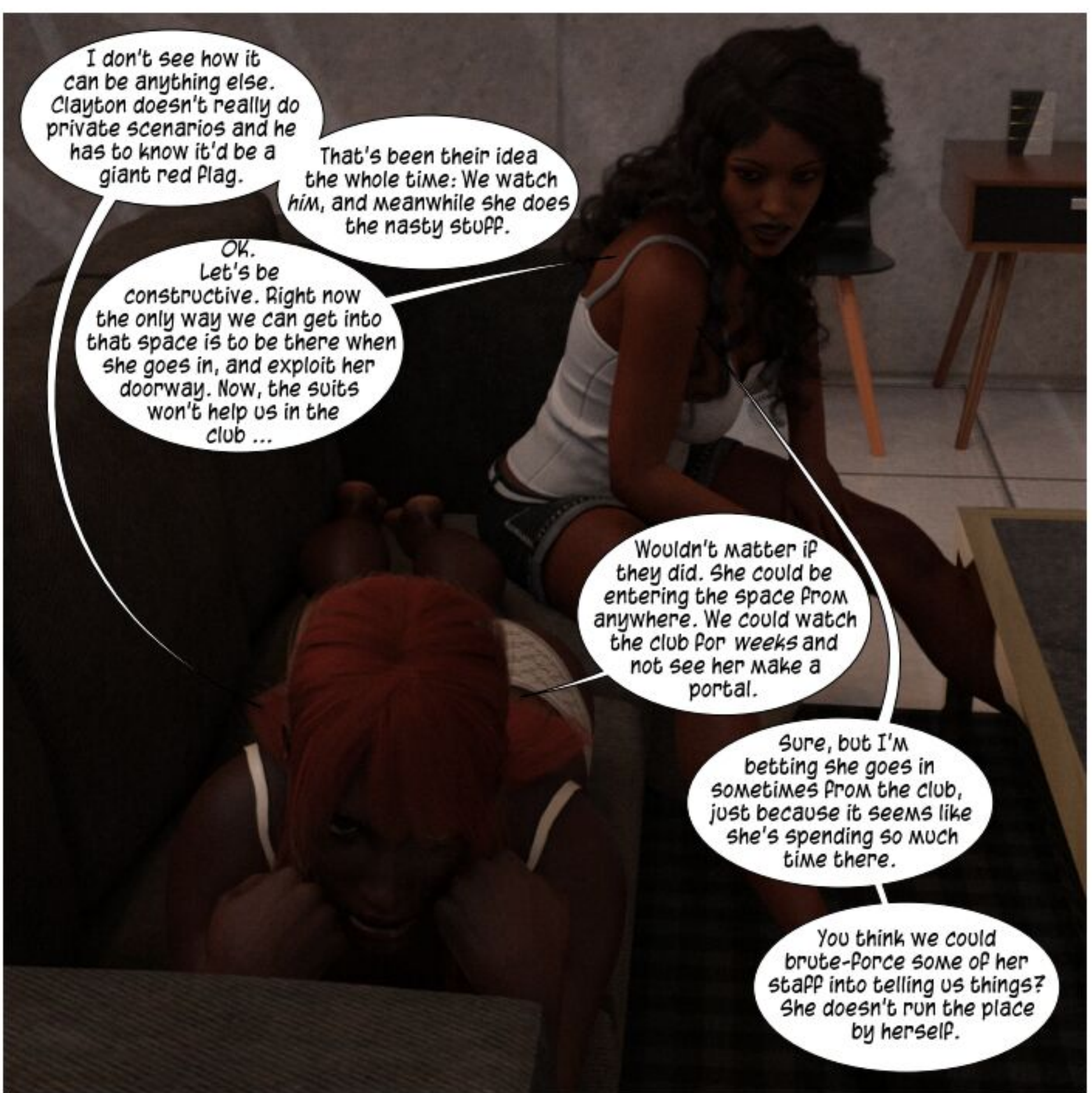
Lucius, Serene, Pauline, Monica and Josiah are all in a private space I can't trace without Midnight's access. No other information available. She could be wrecking their brains right now and I can't do anything.

Brendan and Ezekiel have been turned up in the same locations as Clayton several times, so they're either compromised or they're in on it.

It's a fucking takeover.

I didn't know you cared that much. Still, I wouldn't wish Melinda's fun and games on anybody.

You're assuming this private space is something she whipped up.



I don't see how it can be anything else. Clayton doesn't really do private scenarios and he has to know it'd be a giant red flag.

That's been their idea the whole time: We watch him, and meanwhile she does the nasty stuff.

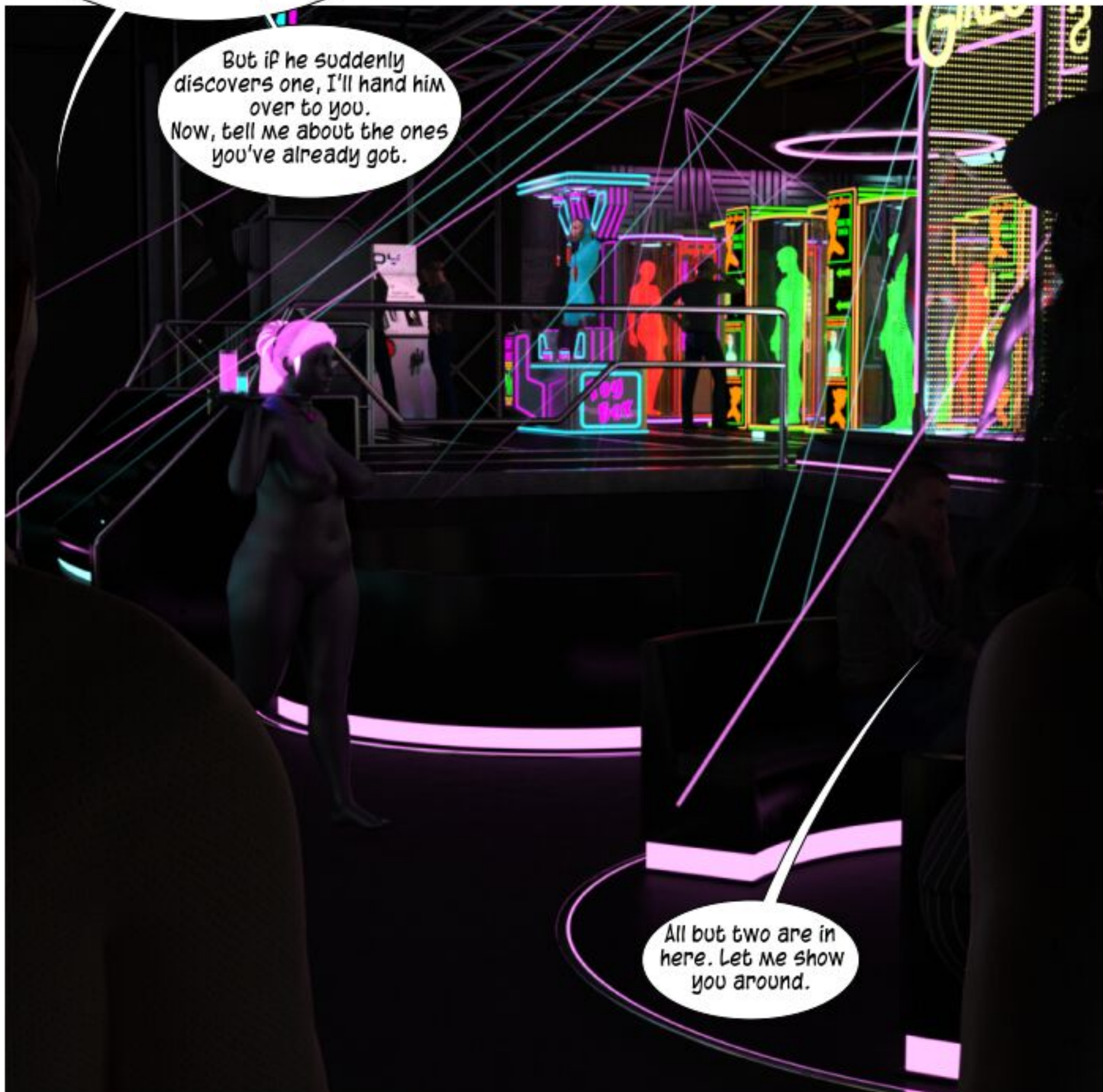
OK. Let's be constructive. Right now the only way we can get into that space is to be there when she goes in, and exploit her doorway. Now, the suits won't help us in the club ...

Wouldn't matter if they did. She could be entering the space from anywhere. We could watch the club for weeks and not see her make a portal.

Sure, but I'm betting she goes in sometimes from the club, just because it seems like she's spending so much time there.

You think we could brute-force some of her staff into telling us things? She doesn't run the place by herself.

... Zeke just goes along with what the most senior person in the room tells him to do. Even Brendan, who likes him, says he has no spine.



But if he suddenly discovers one, I'll hand him over to you. Now, tell me about the ones you've already got.

All but two are in here. Let me show you around.



This is definitely a ... I mean, you've got some really unusual physical stuff going on here ...

Most of it is Azu. She's got a genius for it. She's come up with some things I wouldn't have thought were possible.



So what is this? The arcade portion?

Most of these machines are for people to customize their consort for the back rooms. But the two here in the front are definitely games, yes.

In this one, the player can pick a variety of toys and manipulate them with those controls to do what they like to the person in the case.

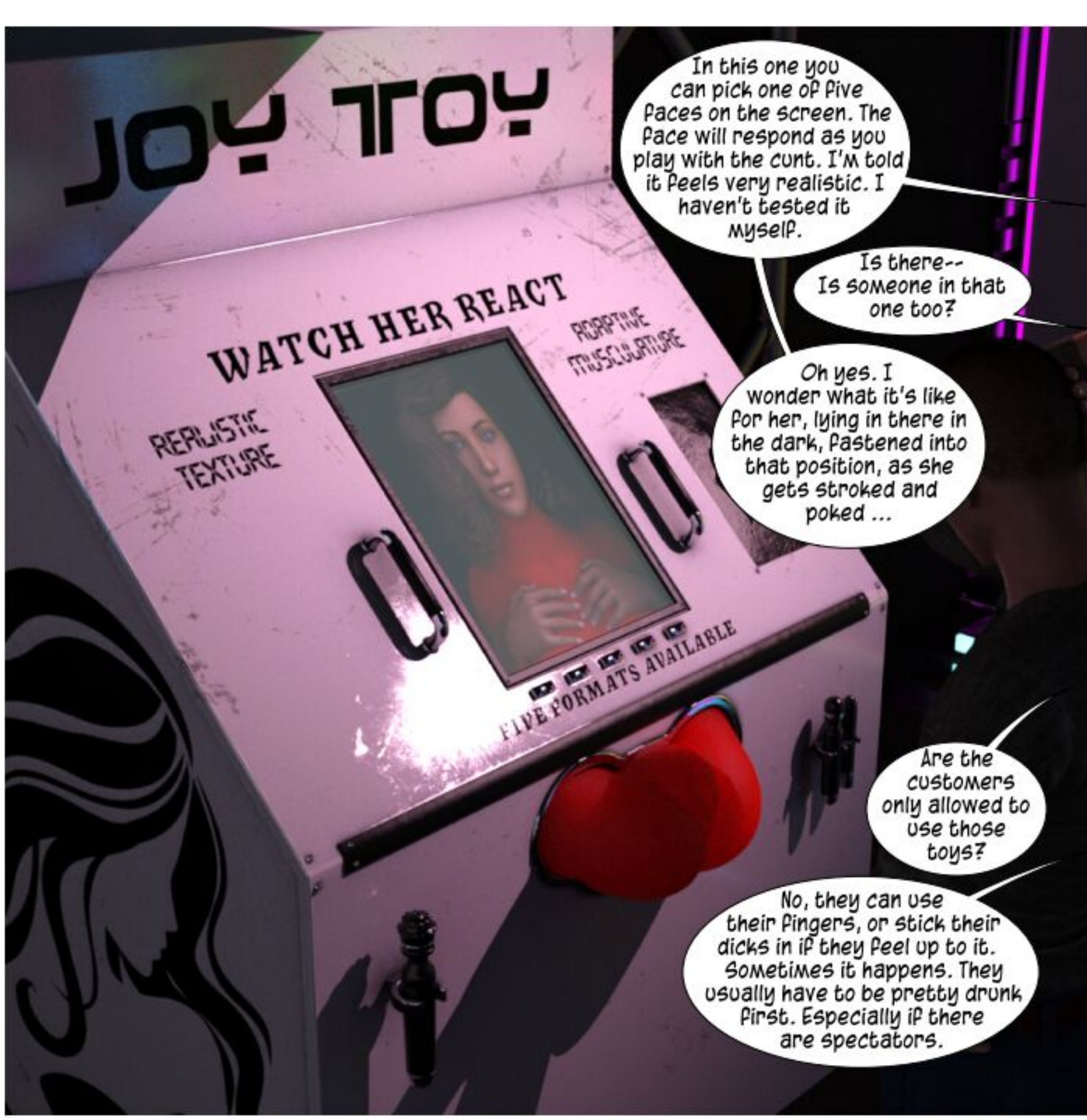
There isn't really a goal, much less a reward, but people seem to enjoy watching her reactions as they play with her.



Wait. You're saying that's not a silicone doll in there?

Shh! Not so loud with customers nearby. Yes, it's an actual person. But they think they're a toy. And the more often someone plays with them, the more that gets reinforced. Keeps me from having to worry about them breaking out of it.

Soon they won't remember they aren't just an object, or that they ever were anything else.



In this one you can pick one of five faces on the screen. The face will respond as you play with the cunt. I'm told it feels very realistic. I haven't tested it myself.

Is there-- Is someone in that one too?

Oh yes. I wonder what it's like for her, lying in there in the dark, pasted into that position, as she gets stroked and poked ...

Are the customers only allowed to use those toys?

No, they can use their fingers, or stick their dicks in if they feel up to it. Sometimes it happens. They usually have to be pretty drunk first. Especially if there are spectators.



Uh. Don't you think this is all ... a little much?

Why, Clayton! I wasn't expecting you to go squeamish, especially given the way you talked before we began.

"Don't erase them," you said, "until we know for sure we don't need their minds. Apart from that, do anything you want to them as long as no one finds them."

You dreamed of making them suffer. Don't you dare deny it.

If anything, my outcomes are kinder than yours. At least in my scenarios there's a good chance they're enjoying it. You'd have taken them to a back room and hit them over and over with a baseball bat.



And you've somehow got people trapped in these too?

Such a horrible way to put it. The customer can specify every aspect of their consort. Shape, appearance ... their dream lover steps out of the box, the two of them go into a back room, everyone has fun.

And then your living sex doll goes back into the box.

... So which of these are they?

Do you really need to know? I think it might be better if you don't.

Come on, Melinda, you can't do that to me. At least tell me what you did with Josiah.



I knew he'd be the one you'd ask about.

Does it get you excited, Clayton? The idea of Josiah as a sex toy, helpless, losing his identity? Do you want to jerk off to it, or maybe go call Lucy and Puck her silly while thinking about it?

Do you think that's what will finally get you to some kind of satisfaction in this ridiculous revenge of yours? Is that the idea?

I--what? No! I mean--

Look, forget I asked.



I just wanted you to think about the inside of your head a little.

Josiah didn't put up any resistance at all. It was a little surprising. He's gone completely over. I don't remember whether he's one of the customizables or I made him a dancer.

One of the others is in the Joy Toy, one of them is in the Toy Box machine, and one is in the back rooms being worked on. Not fit for public use yet.

And one is set aside for my personal entertainment. I think that's really all you need or care to know.



Our best bet to try to squeeze some information looked like it might be Sophia Lee, one of Melinda's hostesses.

Ms. Lee? We need to talk to you.



Are you customers? Wait, no, I'm not there right now, you can't be customers. Who are you? I don't know you. I can't talk to you. I only talk to customers.

Look, Ms. Lee, this is serious. Your boss is doing very bad things. You have to tell us what you know.

If you don't, my friend here is, uh, likely to get kind of rough. She's not as patient as I am.

I ... No, I-- uh ...



Welcome! What services may we offer you this evening? We have a wide selection of ... a wide selection of ...

Welcome! We have a wide selection of ...

Are you interested in our private rooms? What is your preference? Welcome! We have a wide selection. How are you this evening?



Welcome! How are you? Welcome! How are you? Welcome! How are you?

Shit, we broke her.

Melinda broke her. We just triggered it.

Hopefully if we leave her alone she'll reset or something.



I should have guessed that Melinda wasn't going to have any staff she hadn't put her hooks in.

But, damn it, that means we're not going to get anything out of any of them, and that was--

Oh.

What?

Oh.

Poydras Alley. Number one.



Huh.



#1 Poydras Alley wasn't too far away. I'm not sure what I was expecting when I knocked, but whatever it was, it wasn't what I got.

Oh my god, it's you!

I've been trying to figure out how to reach you for days!

Quick, come in before someone sees.

Uh ... have we met before?



I guess I'm not surprised you don't remember. Here, lemme take this junk off.

Gina Howard? Wow. That's a new look for you. I like the hair, though.

Thanks. I'm not sure I do. This is mostly for practicality. It was getting in the way when we jump.

This is Esperanza. She used to work for Percy Furlough.

Hi.

Sorry there's no furniture. We have to move a lot. You can sit on the bed if you want.

I think we can handle the floor for a while. It sounds like you two are on the run from something?

GINA AND ESPERANZA WERE BOTH INVOLVED IN THE EVENTS IN SLEEPER SQUAD #6, WHICH THIS CONVERSATION REFERS TO. -T



We had introductions all around and Gina explained:

When everything happened--you know--Ranza and I were both kind of at a loss. We hooked up and we thought maybe we'd go into business. Run a club of our own.

We were open for three days. Clayton Barker came in and demanded we pay him or he'd shut us down. We refused and ran. Clayton and that Melinda woman have been after us ever since. They think we're a threat. I wish they were right.

Melinda is the real problem. Clayton's just a nuisance by himself, but she can cause major damage. We believe she's got some people in a private space and is probably doing nasty things to them. But we can't get into that space to help them. The only way is to be around when she goes in, and use the door before she closes it.



Could this space connect to her club?

Not only "could," I think it's likely. Leyna isn't so sure. Why?

Melinda runs a secret club, inside the other one. We've started calling it the Back Club. She lets people into it, and she lets them out again when they're done. All sealed up.

Ooh. That does sound like what we're looking for.



We haven't figured out what the rules are for who gets an invite. High rollers? People she likes? Definitely not strangers, though. You can't just show up and ask to go into the back.

So if you're thinking about going in as a customer ...



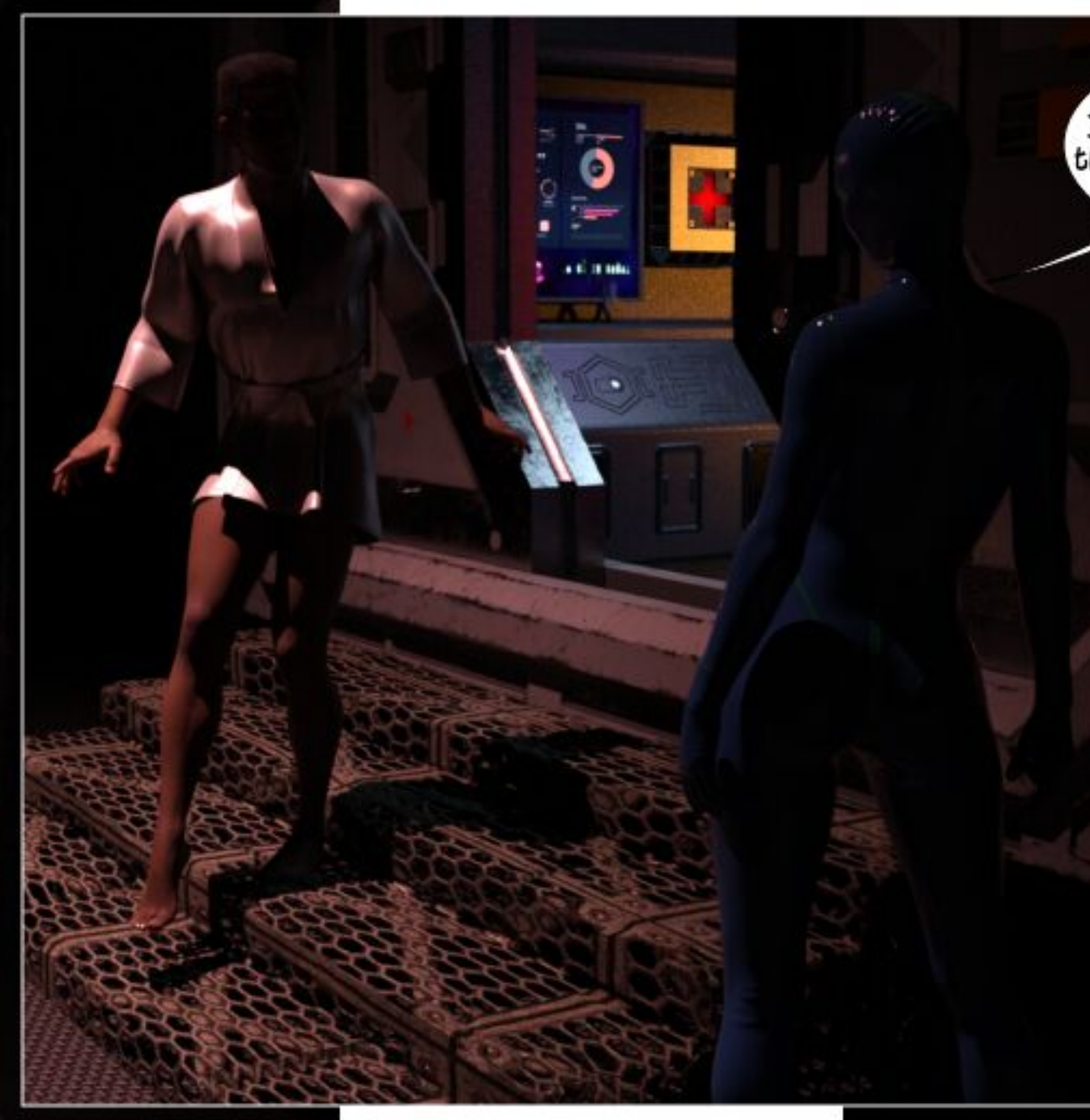
It's even worse than that. Suppose she opens it and we're there. We can't just run in, disguised or not. She sees two strangers running for her portal, she slams it shut. The end.

But I have an idea. Are you two interested in helping? It could get a little dangerous.

Definitely.

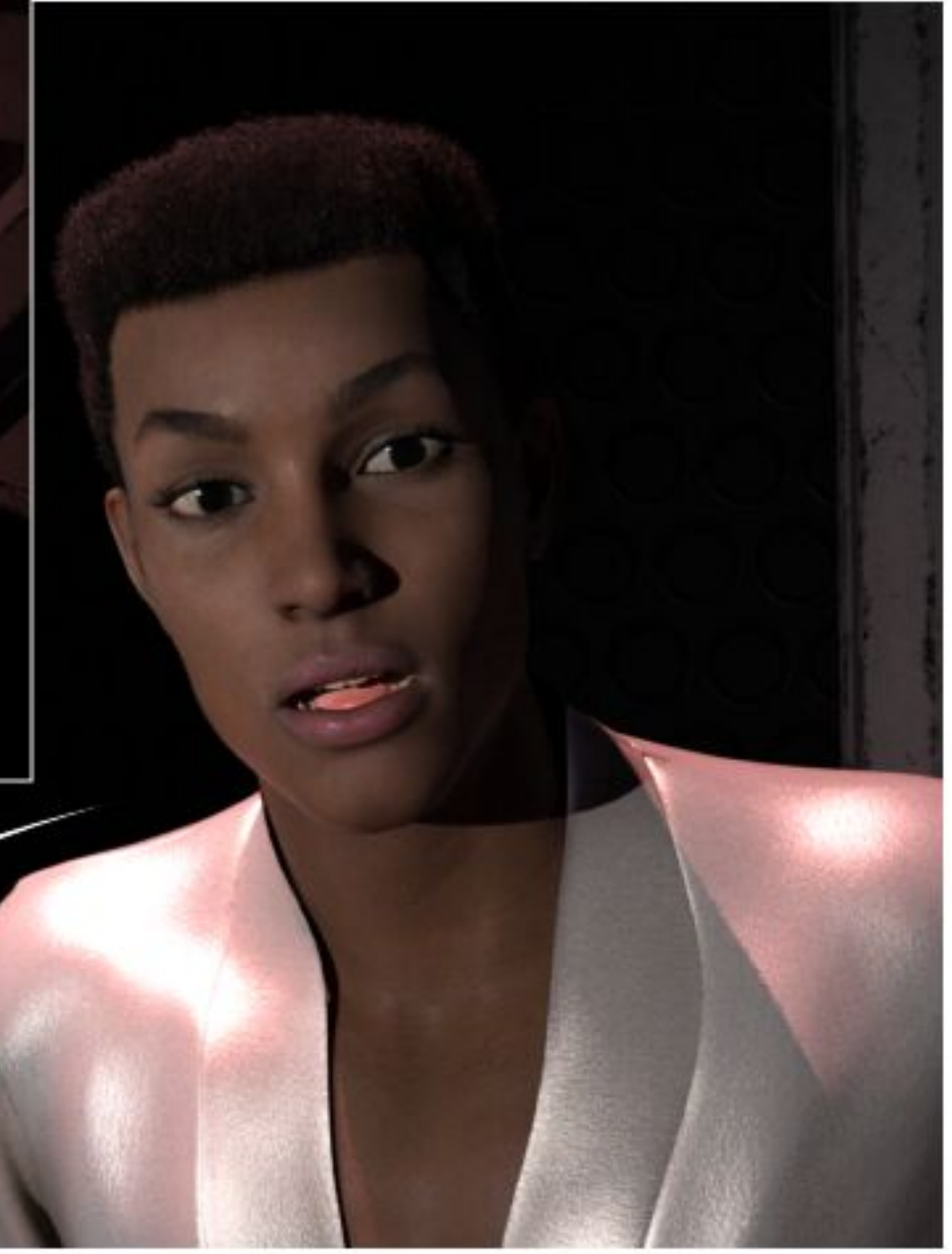
Yeah, whatever it takes to get her ass.

A couple of nights later. A customer has just finished up in one of Melinda's special private rooms.



Mr. Sharpe. I'm pleased to see you like the dolls so much. This is the fourth night this week.

I'm always interested in improving customer service. Tell me, what do you like about them?



Um. I guess it's because they don't really ... I mean, they just do the sex. They don't want to talk or anything. And they're not real people, so I don't have to feel guilty about it ...



So you really do just want a doll.

Would you like to know a secret, Mr. Sharpe? They are real people.



They are?

Oh, yes. And I have an opening. I think you should try it from the other side.

But I don't want to--

Now, now. I refuse to take "no" for an answer. Look at me.

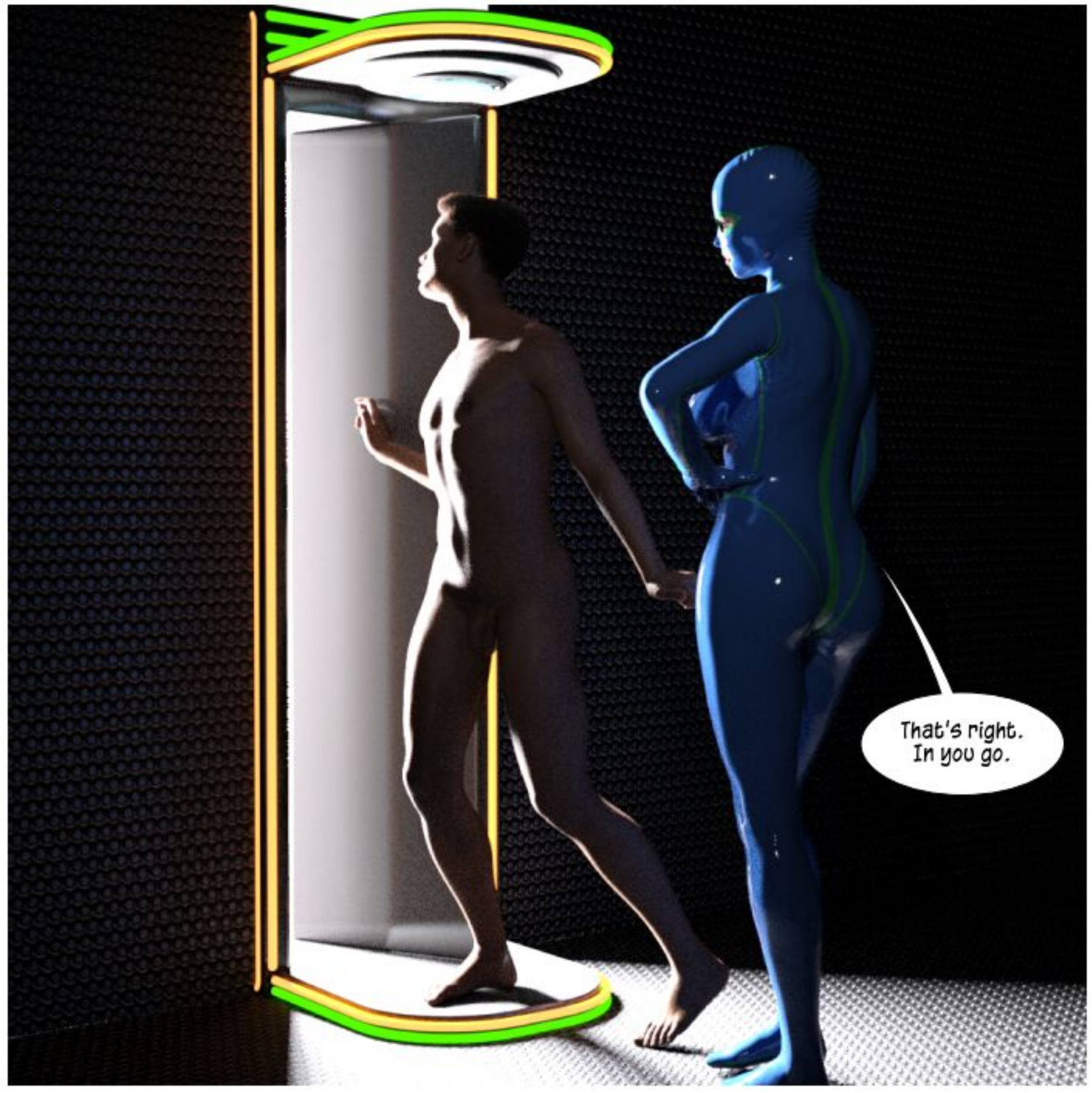
That's right. Just go along with it and everything will be fine.



Now come with me. I'll show you what to do.



Here we are. Now let's get you out of that robe, and then you just open that door there.



That's right. In you go.



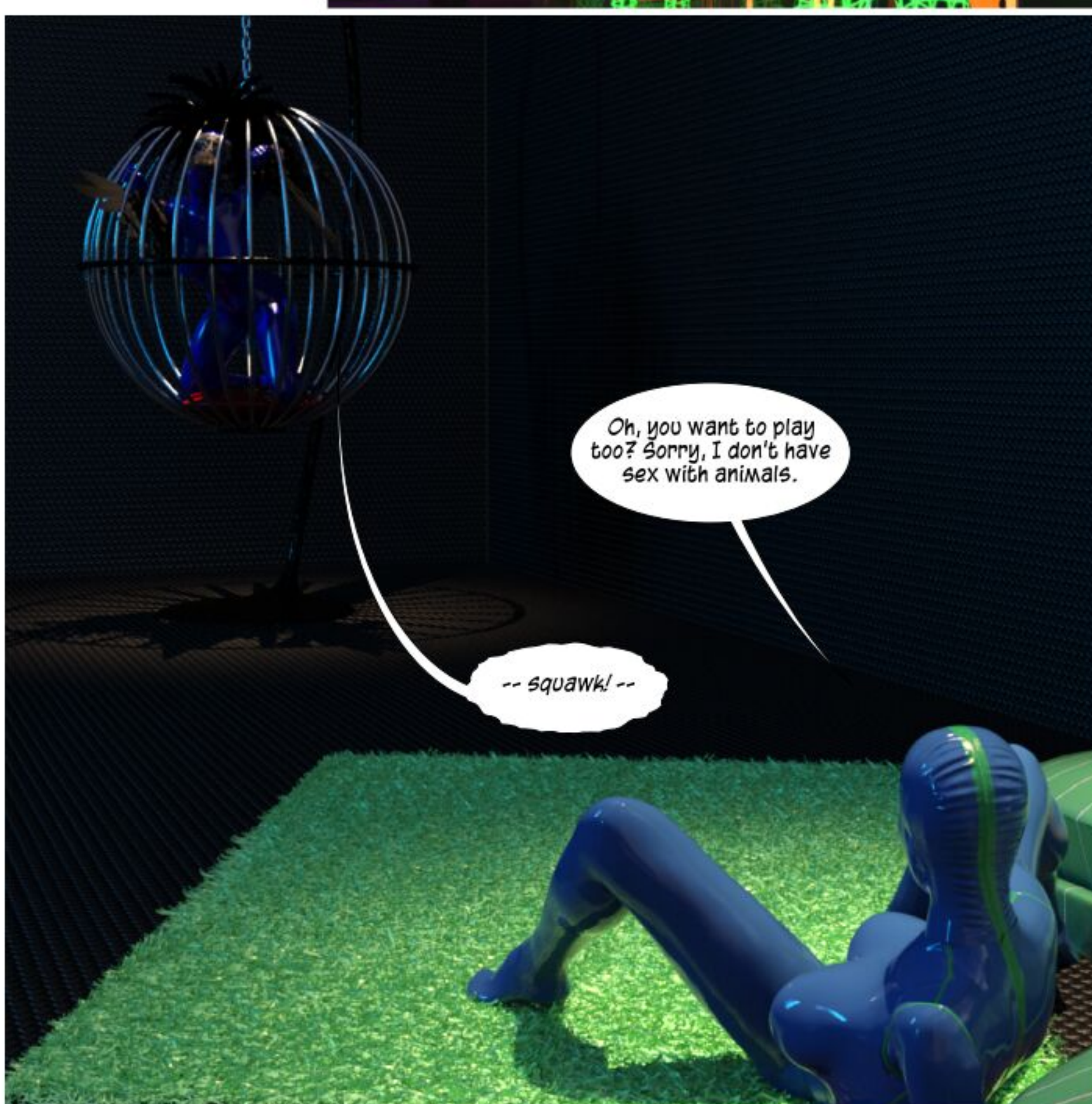
And you'll stand in there until someone makes you into their toy ... MMM ... and you'll Puck them and go back in the box and be nothing again ... aaah! ... Over and over ...



Oh, yes, MMM, oh, stupid Pucking doll --

AAAAAH!

-- squawk! --



Oh, you want to play too? Sorry, I don't have sex with animals.

-- squawk! --



I know, you don't think you're an animal. There's a part of your head that thinks you're a person. That part will be wrong Forever.

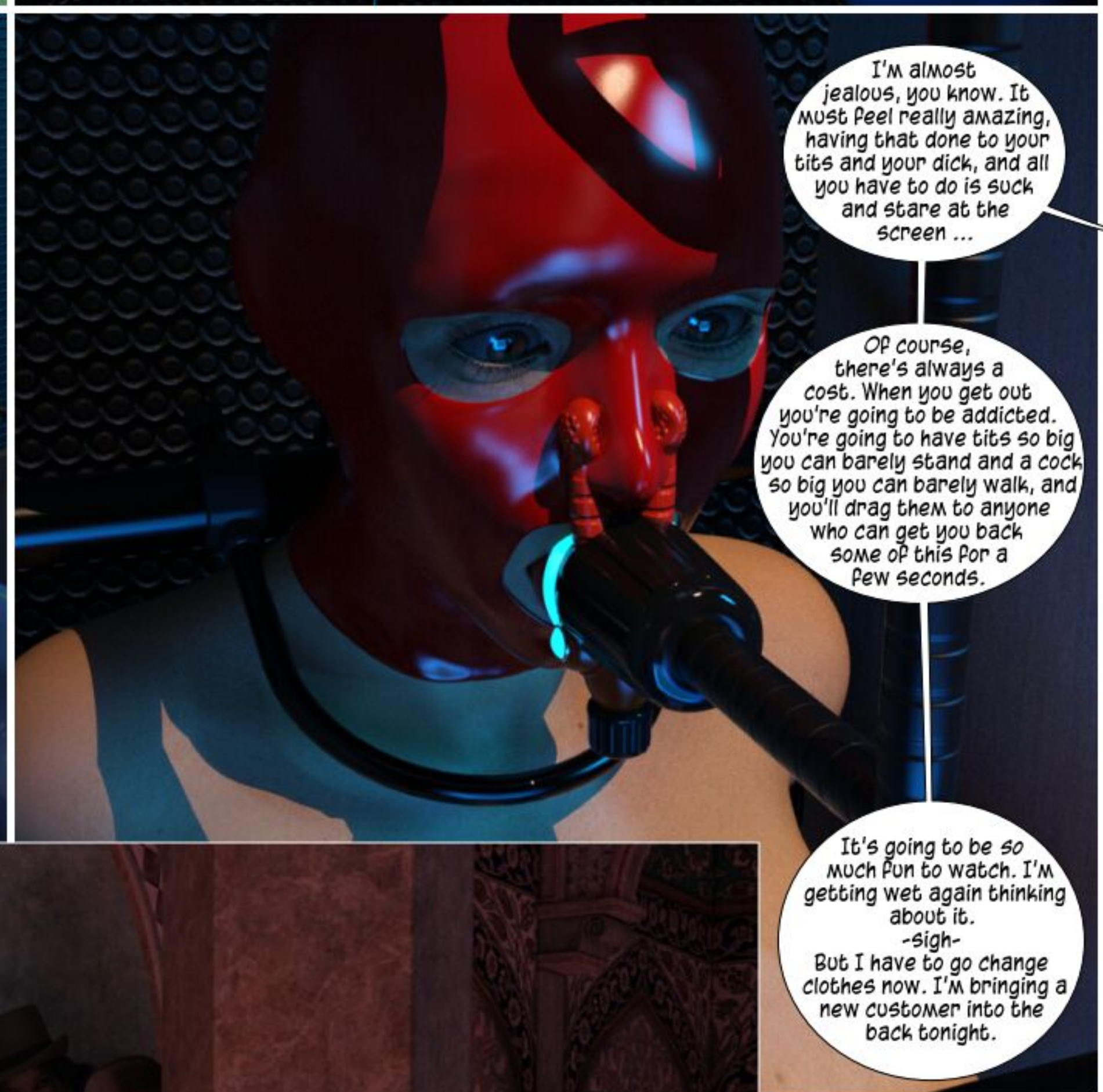
"Why can't I talk?"
"Why can't I recall?"
"Why can't I move my arms right?"
"Why am I in a cage?"

And then you'll think, "Oh no, I'm a bird!" and a little part of you will despair. Again and again ... MMM ... damn, I don't have time for another round ...



And how's my other one tonight? I see the screen still has your undivided attention.

And sucking like crazy. That's a good girl!



I'm almost jealous, you know. It must feel really amazing, having that done to your tits and your dick, and all you have to do is suck and stare at the screen ...

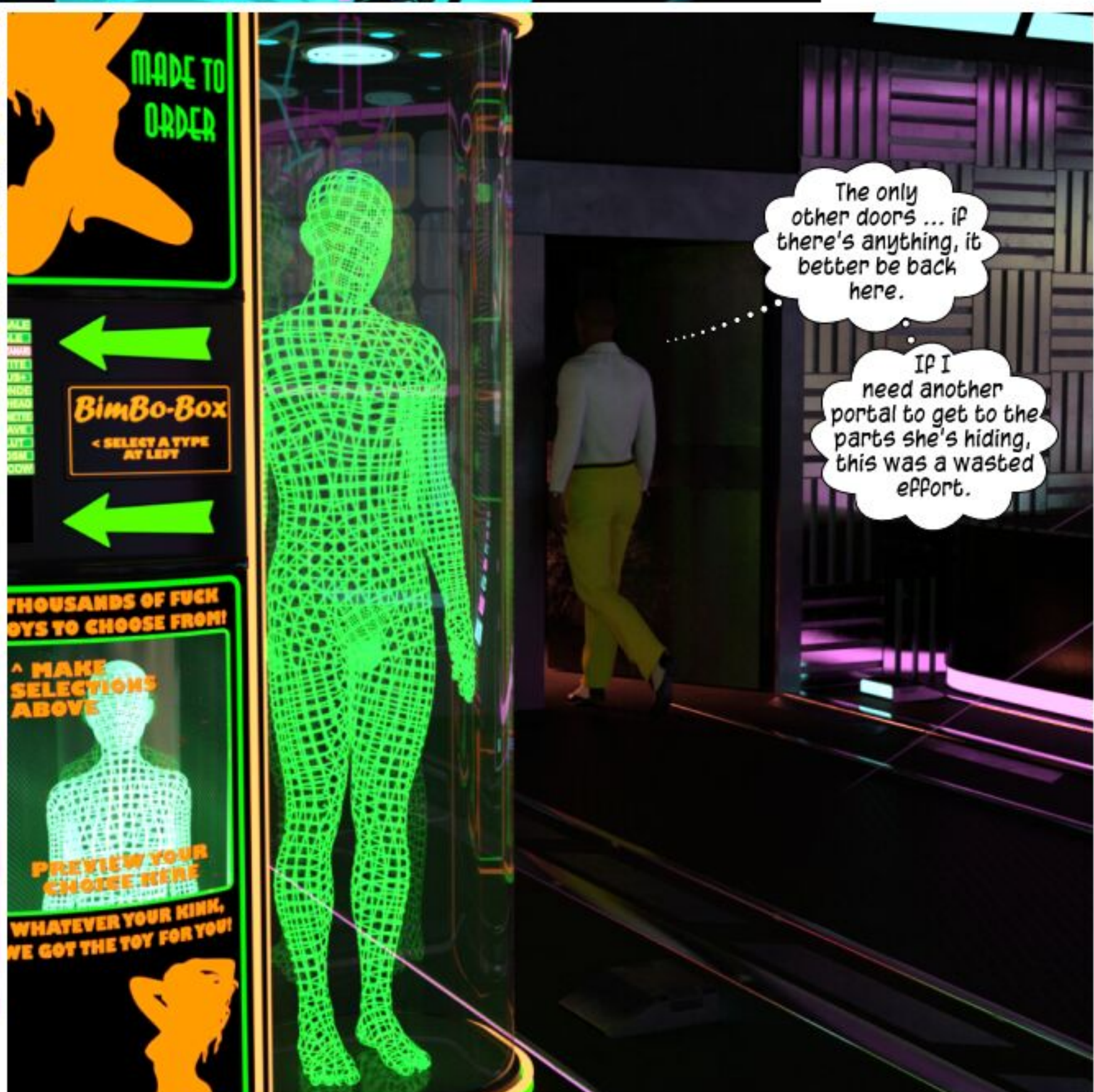
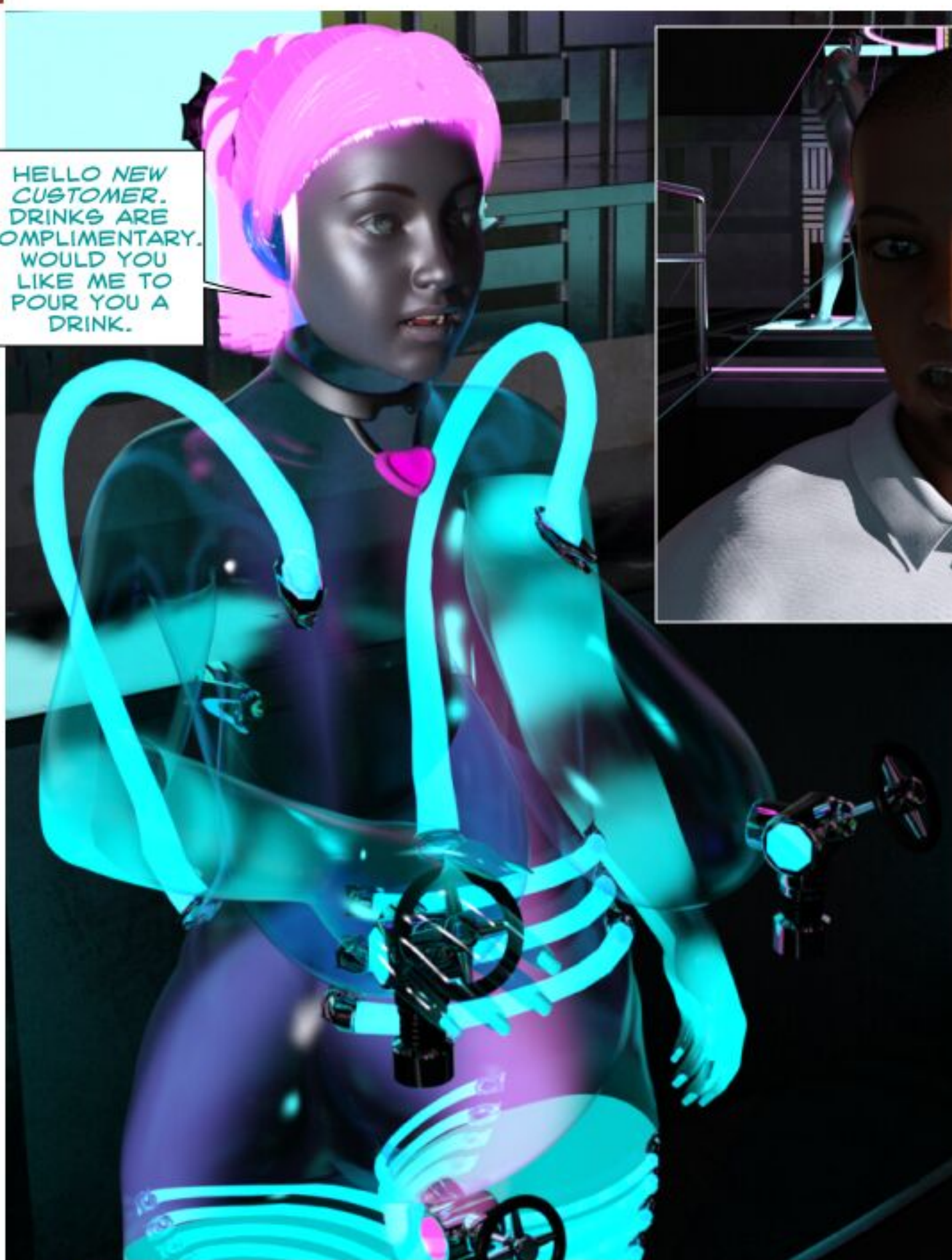
Of course, there's always a cost. When you get out you're going to be addicted. You're going to have tits so big you can barely stand and a cock so big you can barely walk, and you'll drag them to anyone who can get you back some of this for a few seconds.

It's going to be so much fun to watch. I'm getting wet again thinking about it.
-sigh-
But I have to go change clothes now. I'm bringing a new customer into the back tonight.

Not too long after that ...



I think you'll really enjoy our special facilities. Just give me a moment to open the door. It's restricted access, you know. We only let preferred customers back here.

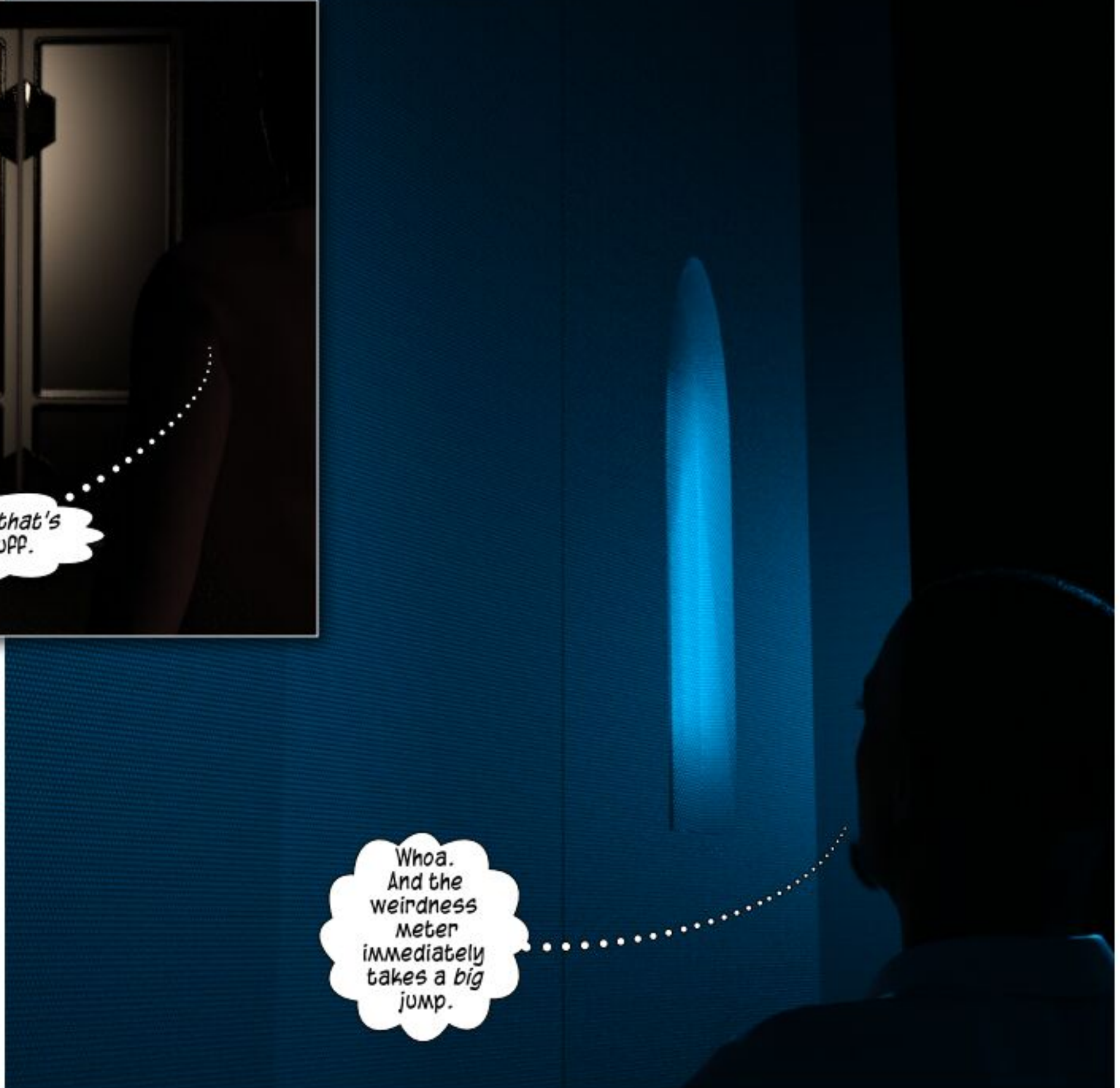




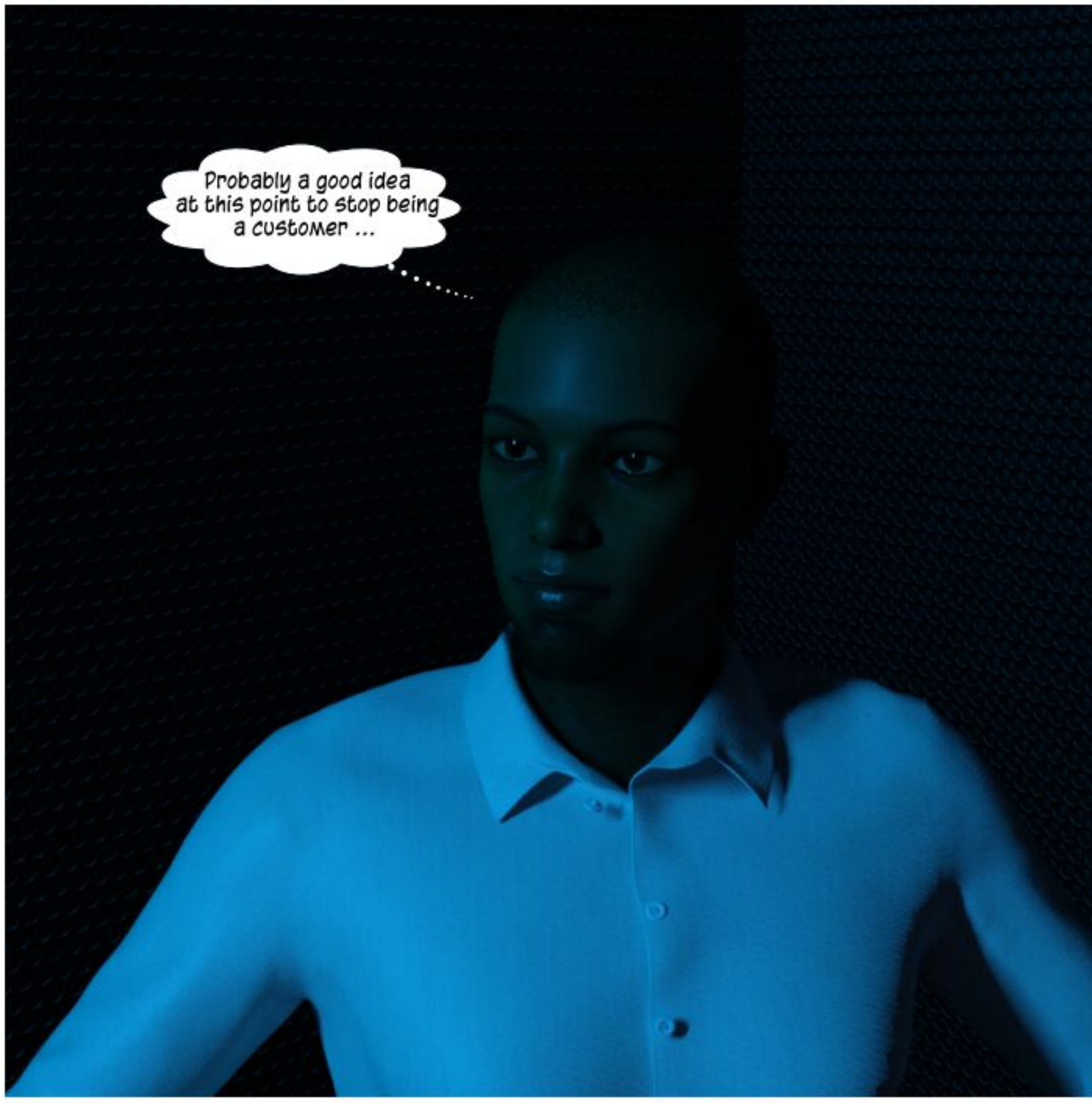
Twisty little maze of sex rooms, all alike ... C'mon, there's got to be something better than that back here ...



Oh yeah, that's the stuff.



Whoa. And the weirdness meter immediately takes a big jump.

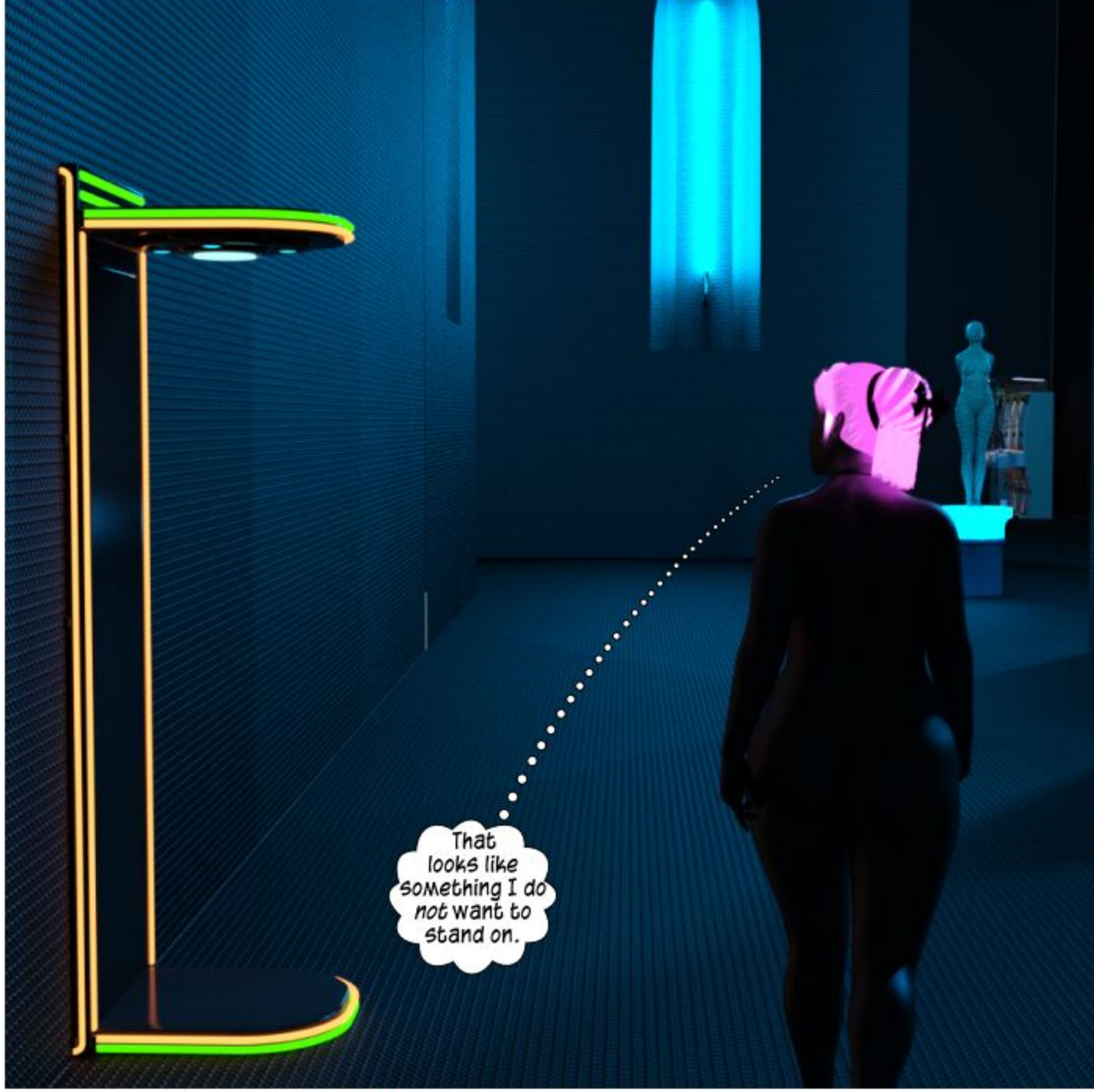


Probably a good idea at this point to stop being a customer ...

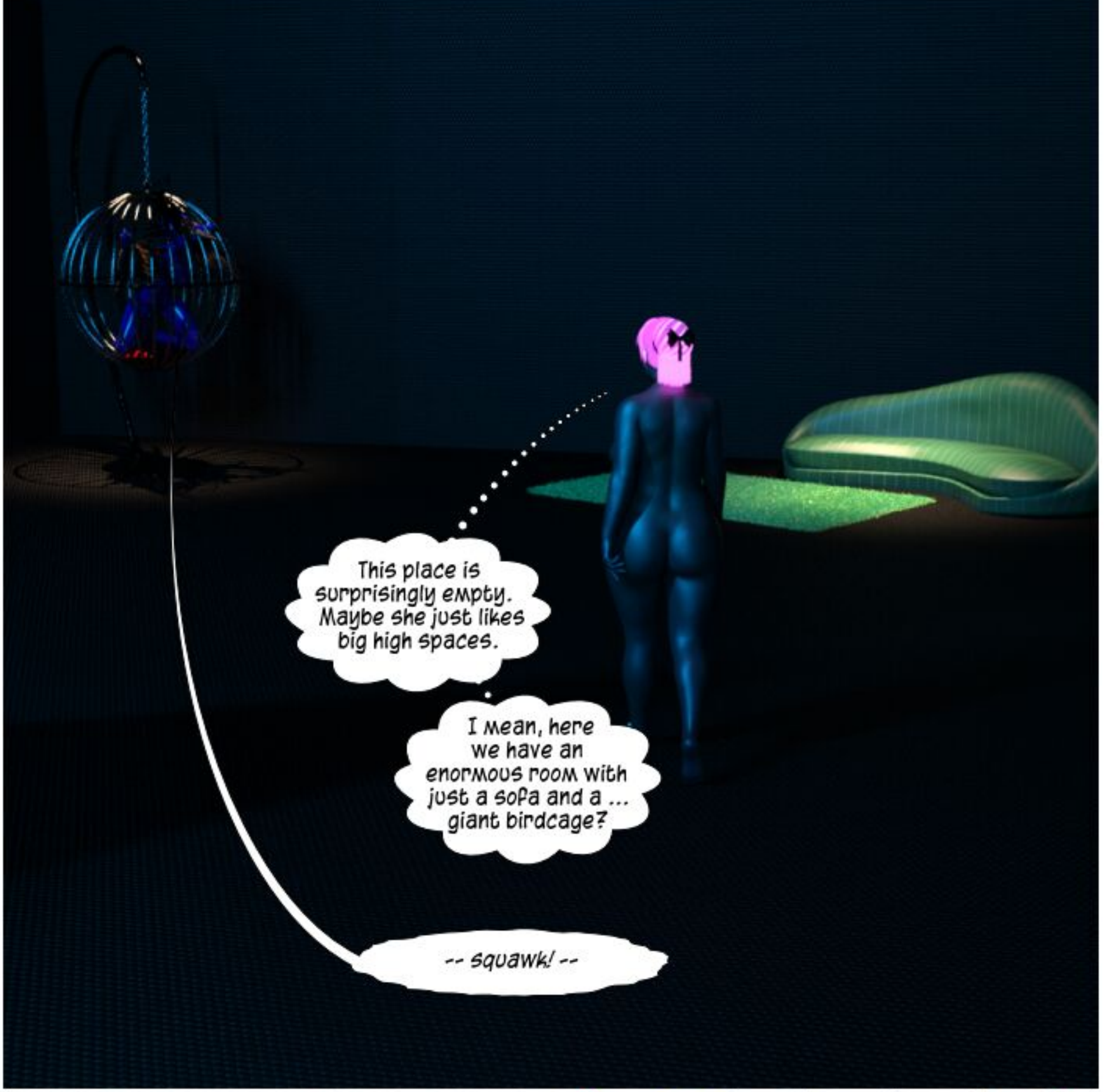


Waitress-bot is now online. Hello new customer. All drinks are complimentary.

I'm glad I stopped to get a good look at the waitress. The bartender Porm would have been kind of unpleasant to walk around in.



That looks like something I do not want to stand on.



This place is surprisingly empty. Maybe she just likes big high spaces.

I mean, here we have an enormous room with just a sofa and a ... giant birdcage?

-- squawk! --



Now, you look exactly like the kind of setup she'd reserve for someone important.

Let's see what the goggles have to say about you ...

... Monica Barker?

-- squawk! --

Can you understand me?

-- squawk! --

... I can't tell if that's a yes or what.

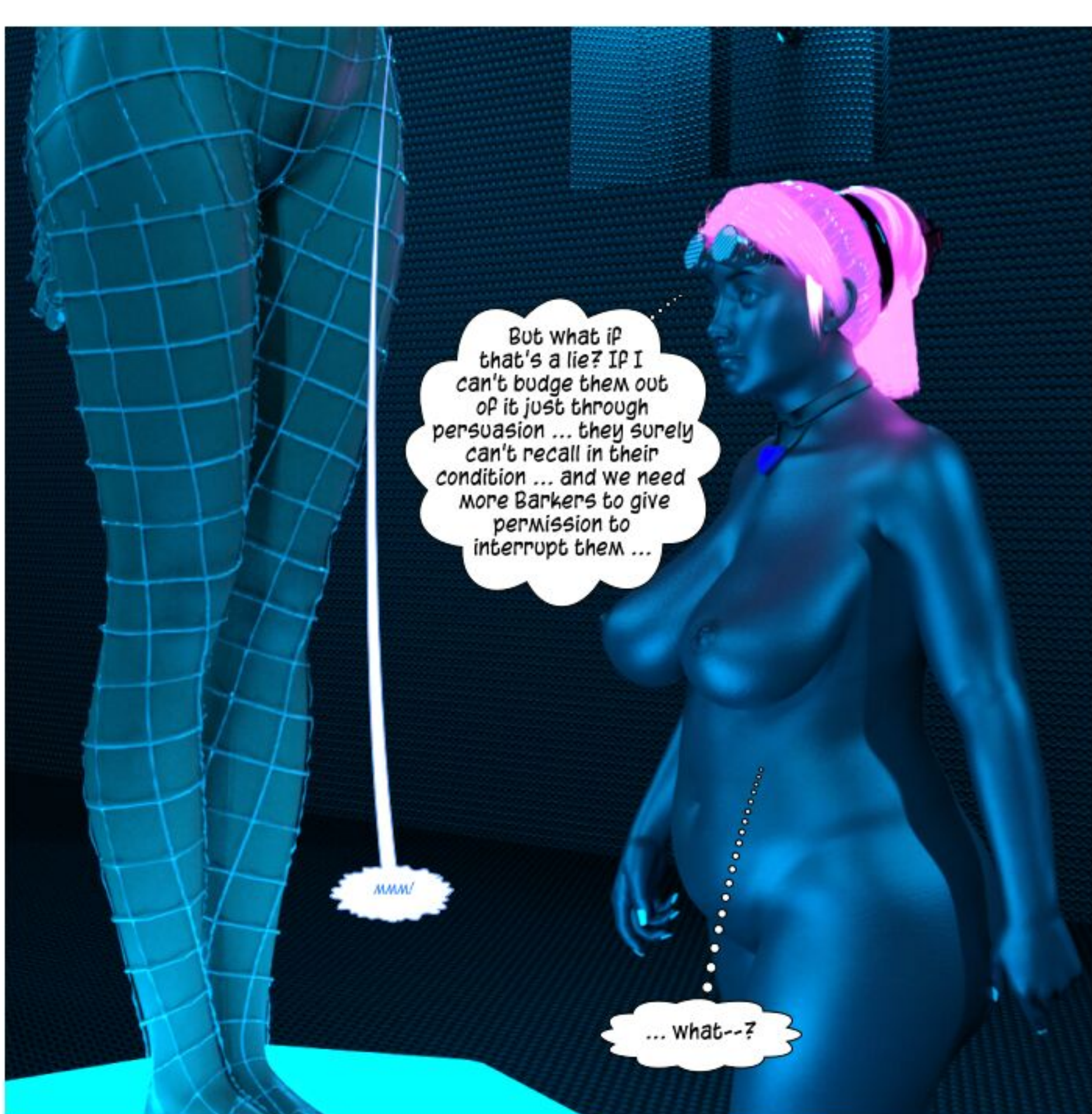


C'mon, Monica, you're not a bird! Snap out of it!

-- squawk! --

Hmm. I can't see how this cage opens.

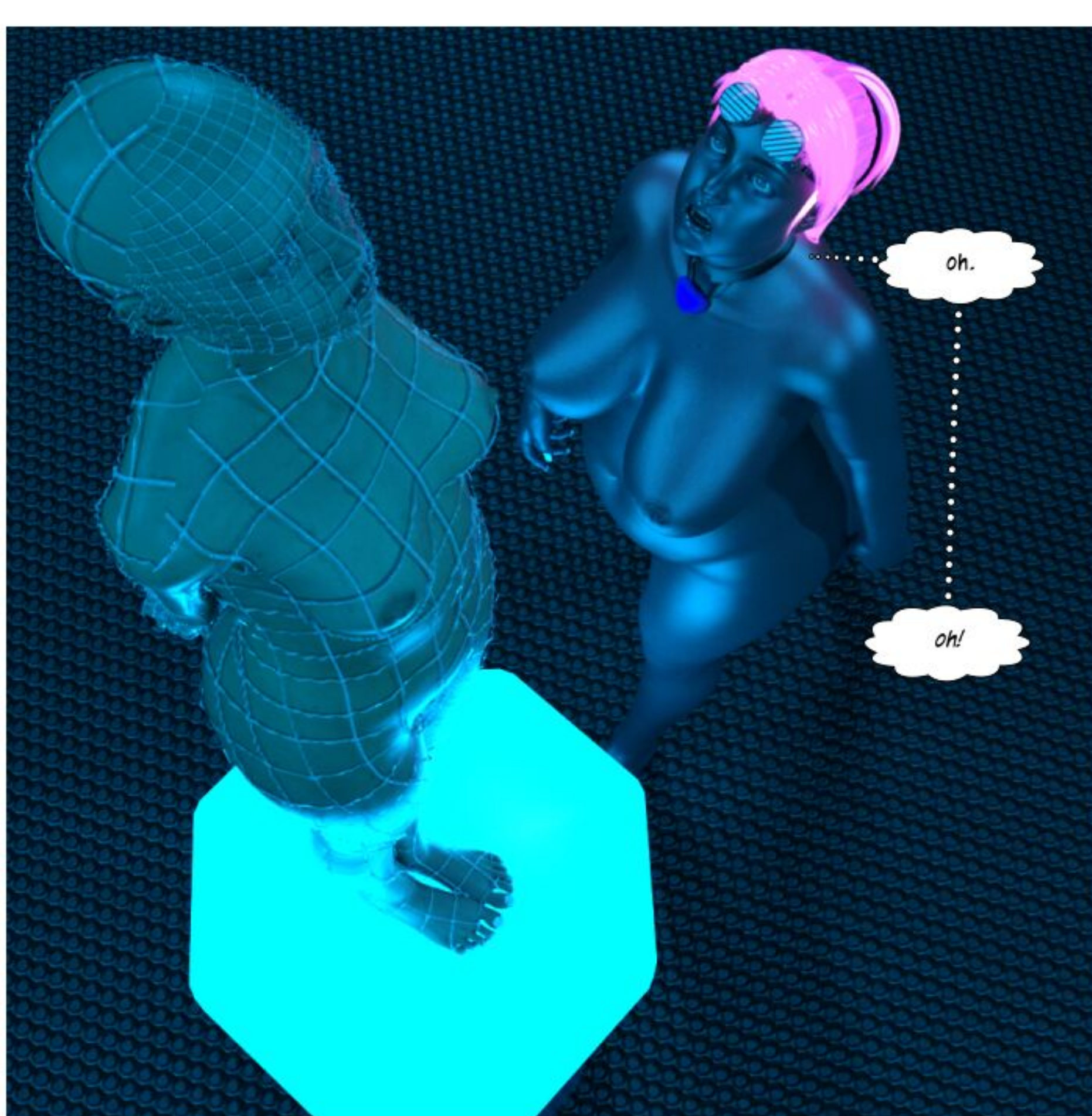
-sigh- OK. Don't give up hope. I'll figure out some way to help you.



But what if that's a lie? If I can't budge them out of it just through persuasion ... they surely can't recall in their condition ... and we need more Barkers to give permission to interrupt them ...

MANN!

... What--?



oh.

oh!



I thought you were a statue!

Hang on, let me try to get this shit off ... what is this? Magic chicken wire?



A short de-wiring later ...

She put me where I could watch everybody coming and going, but I couldn't move ...

I know you from somewhere, though.

Oh! I've got it! You were Sky Skater, weren't you? In the superhero series? I helped you get out.*

I didn't look like this at the time.

* SS #5 -T



That was you? But you're the reason I'm here! She tracked me down, and she said it was my fault for letting you get out, and that I needed to be punished ...

I think she's got a pretty big grudge against you.



Great. Personal vendetta on top of everything else. Well, I broke out of everything she threw at me before, I can do it again.

Yeah, but she's got help this time. Some woman who can change people's bodies in all kinds of horrible ways. She's over there in the lab right now. She never leaves. Lucky for us she doesn't pay a lot of attention when she's working.

Hmm. Well, let me see if I can take her by surprise, then.

I'll come with you.

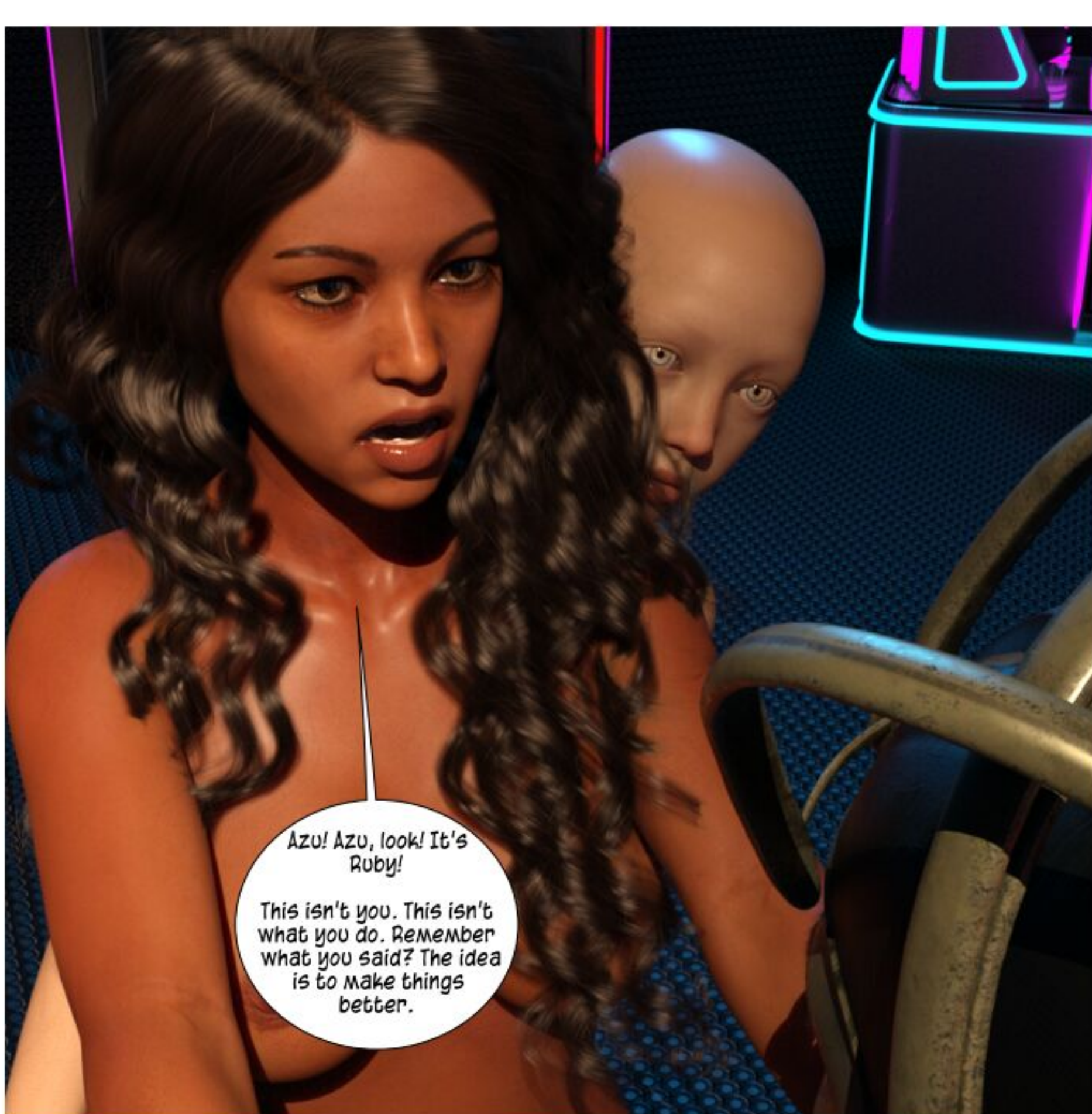


Oh, hell.

... AZU?

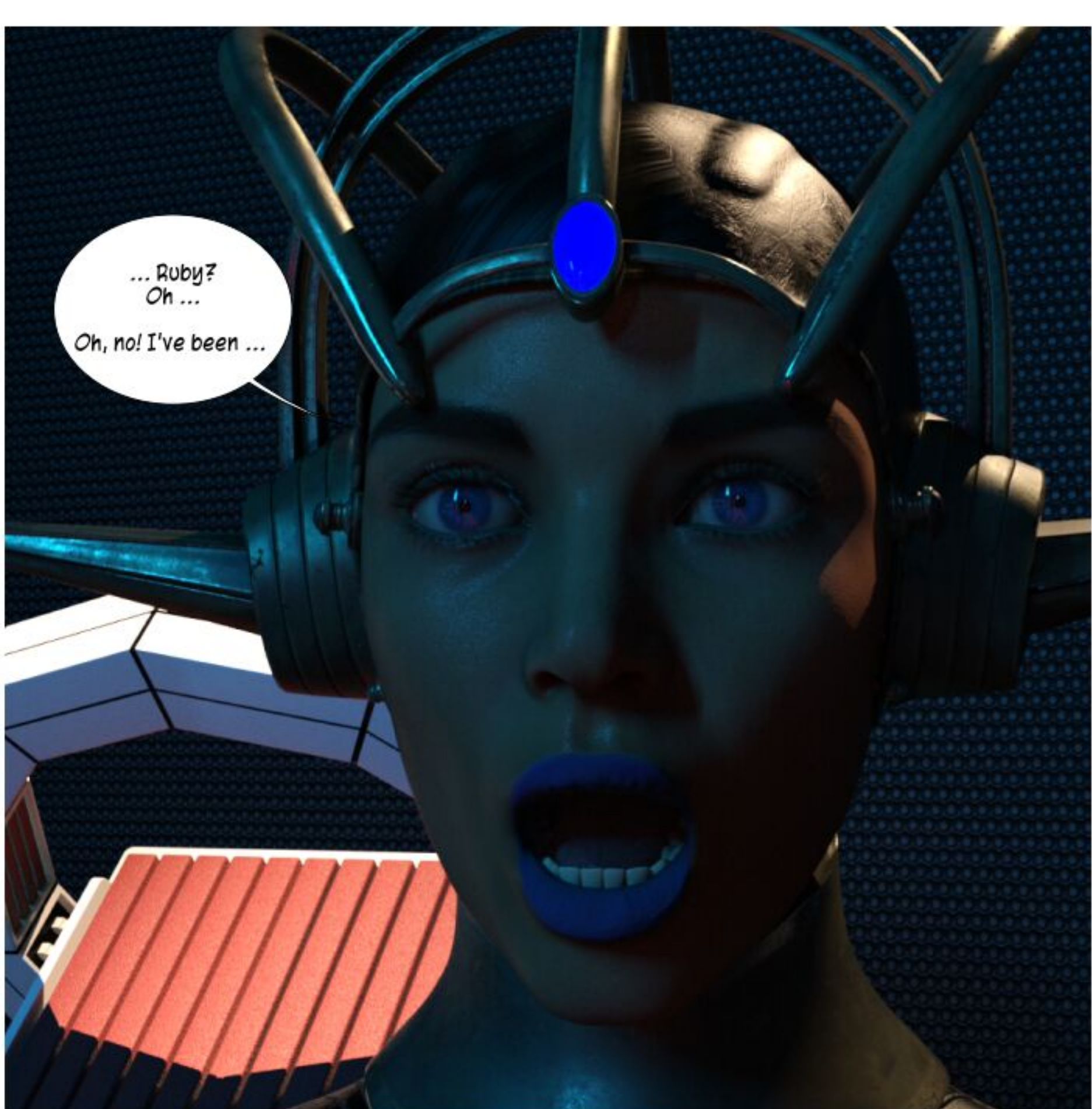


SERVICE UNIT. I SEE YOU HAVE BROUGHT ME A SUBJECT FOR ALTERATION.

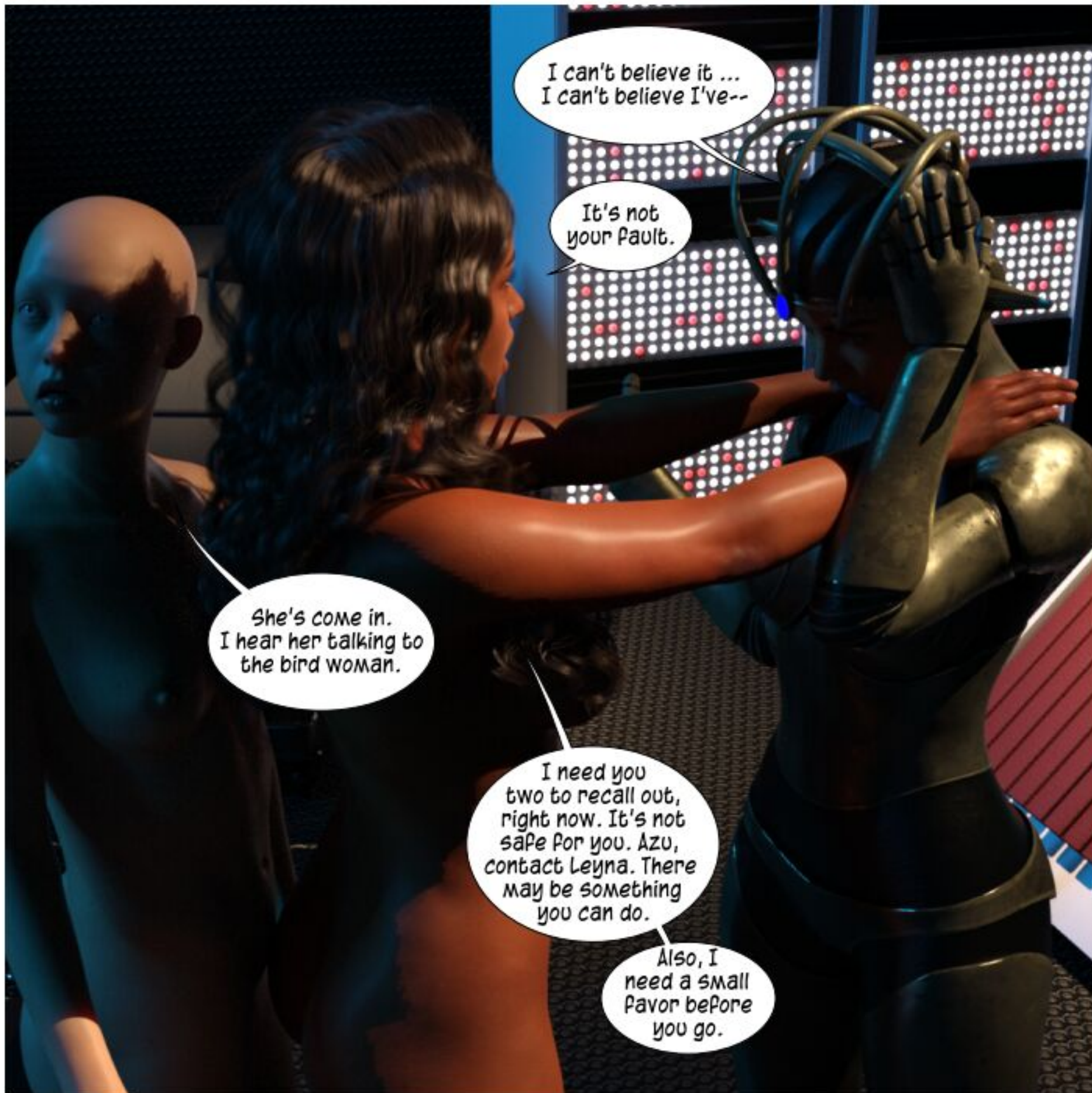


Azu! Azu, look! It's Ruby!

This isn't you. This isn't what you do. Remember what you said? The idea is to make things better.



... Ruby?
Oh ...
Oh, no! I've been ...



I can't believe it ...
I can't believe I've--

It's not your fault.

She's come in. I hear her talking to the bird woman.

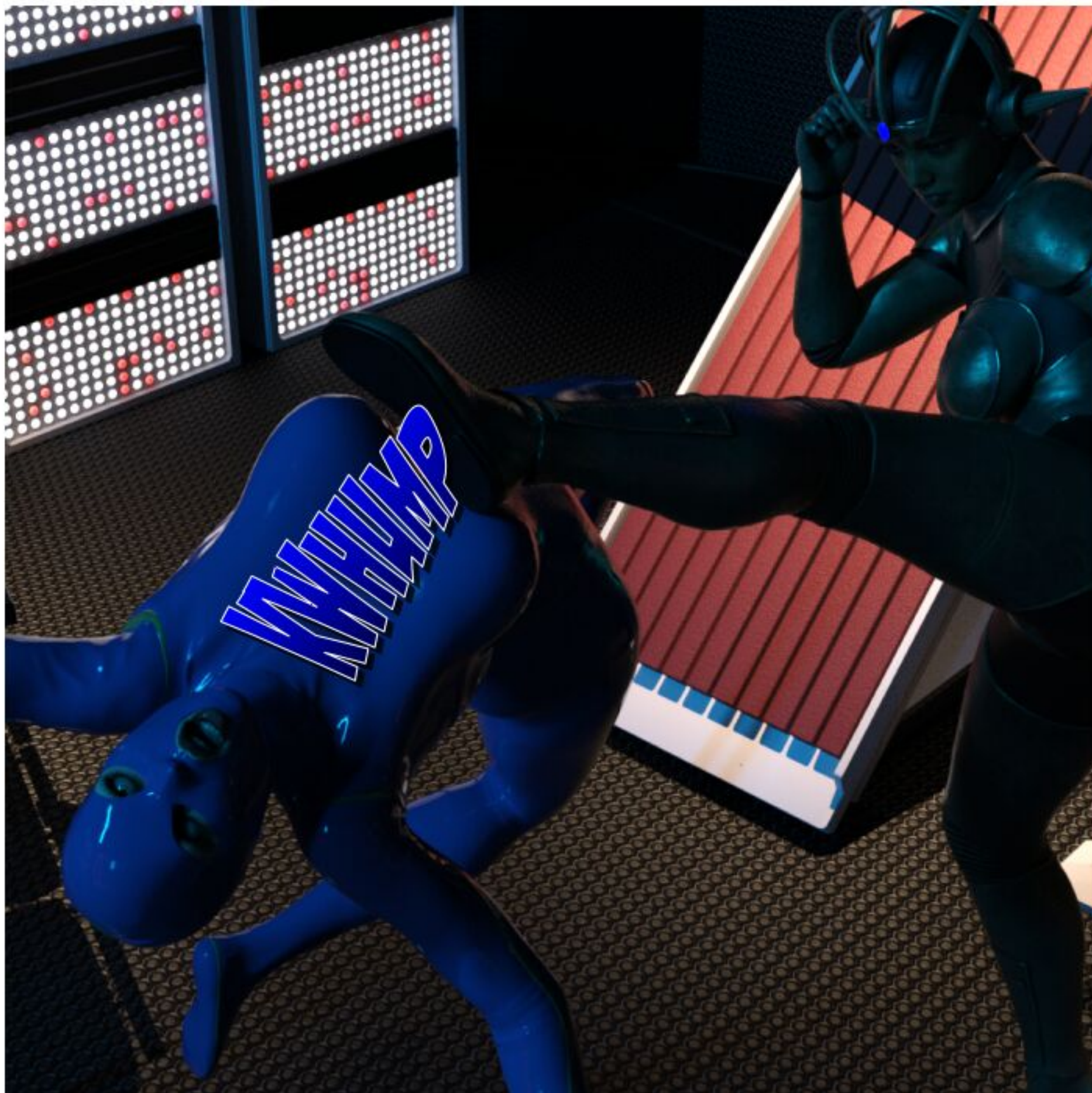
I need you two to recall out, right now. It's not safe for you. Azu, contact Leyna. There may be something you can do.

Also, I need a small favor before you go.



Azu. I think there's been an unwanted visitor back here. Have you seen anything?

Hello? What are you so absorbed in?



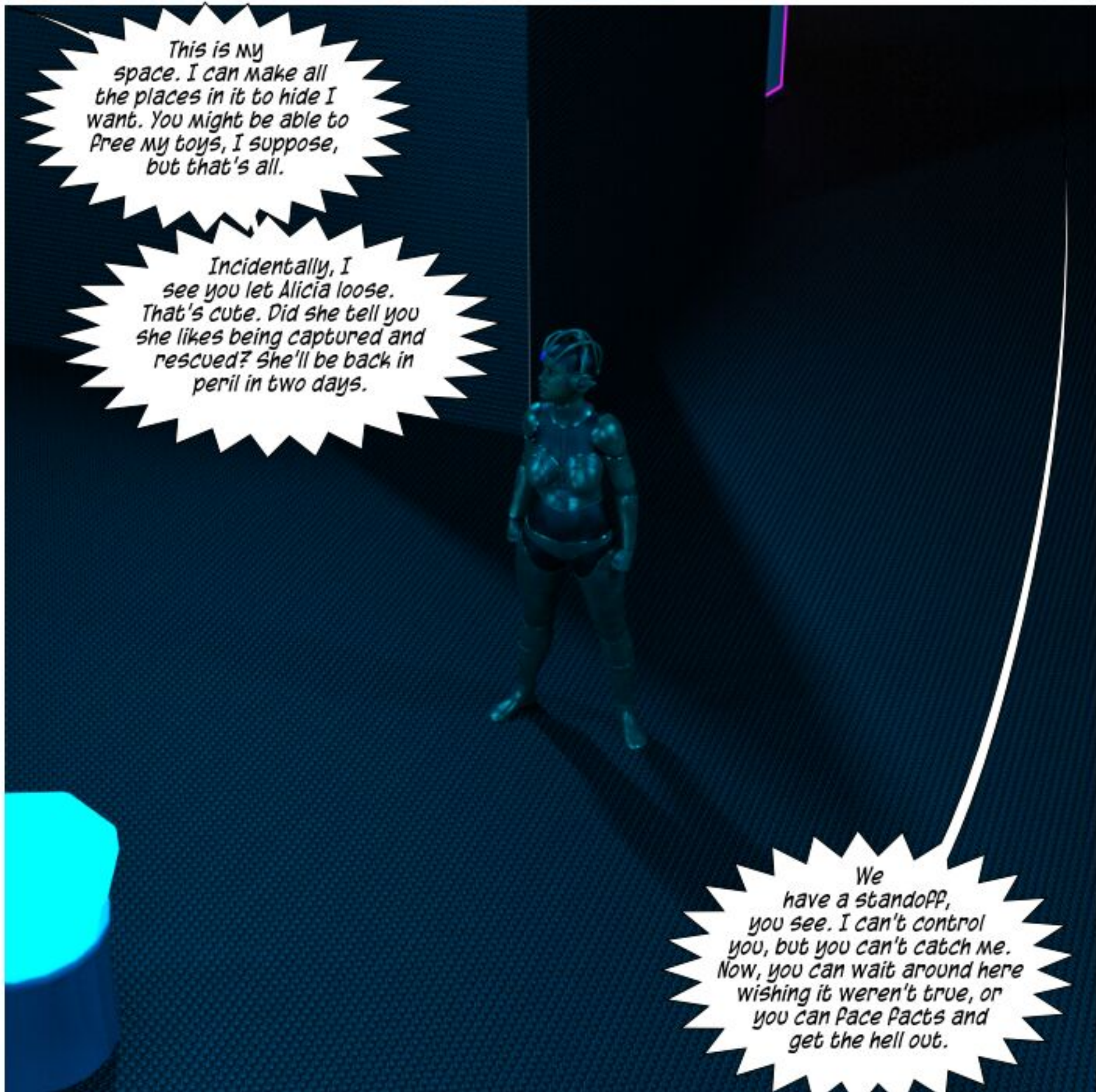
-häh-
You know, I knew you'd show up sooner or later.

Get up. I need to hit you a couple dozen more times.



Now, that would be stupid of me. Especially when I can just outwait you.

Hey!



This is MY space. I can make all the places in it to hide I want. You might be able to free my boys, I suppose, but that's all.

Incidentally, I see you let Alicia loose. That's cute. Did she tell you she likes being captured and rescued? she'll be back in peril in two days.

We have a standoff, you see. I can't control you, but you can't catch me. Now, you can wait around here wishing it weren't true, or you can Pace Facts and get the hell out.



... and she was right. So I recalled.

Even if we manage to go in there again with more than just me, we need something to use on her when we get her.

Azu, what did you think of the looping hood I described?*

* USED TO IMPRISON NATHANIEL BARKER IN SS #7 -T



Well ... your Dr. Chapman must be really skilled. There's no way you can get her help?

No. She's ... not a reliable resource.

I might be able to do it ... if I worked on it for weeks. But we may not have weeks.

Most of Melinda's victims aren't people Clayton wants out of the way. Mostly she does it because that's her kink. She likes to do things to people and imagine what's happening in their minds.

She won't stop, and with Clayton consolidating this much power, she won't have a reason to.



I might have another way. But I need a little more time to work on it.

Azu, please be careful. She knows where you are and she needed your abilities. She may try to grab you again.

Don't worry. Half the regulars at Xenomorph are watching my back. We have plans in place.

You be careful, too.



I know what to do. I just didn't want to talk about it with Azu there.

Cautious. You're really worried she's going to get taken again?

Well, with this it's better to be safe, I think. We can interrupt Melinda. Pull her out of sleep. Then maybe lock her out of it for good.

Won't fix all the damage she's done, but it'll stop her from doing more.



You have access to interrupt her?

Nope. And a pull lockout is almost unprecedented. I'd need a lot of Barkers to consent to that.

Then how--?



There's a physical console deep in the Sleep Facility. Anyone sitting at it has root access. Can do basically anything.

I assume you don't just walk up and use it, then.

Definitely not. First you have to convince the Monitor system that there's a severe emergency. I think we have a basis for that. Then you need three Barkers to open the door. The idea is you'd need some family consensus to use it.

Shareholding Barkers?

No. Any Barkers by blood. Well, specifically, Barkers by DNA.



So we go find some of the Barkers who don't play--

No. Yes, there are several in A4, but they tend to be reclusive. I don't know how to reach them.

Do we have enough uncaptured Barkers we know how to find? You obviously think Hamilton is one, or we wouldn't be here.

Well, he shows up as in the theatre ...

He could be compromised.

I don't think so. I think they must just not have been able to get him.

Wow! You know what? I think I know why.



Hey, Hamilton. I think there's some stuff we need to talk about.



We moved to a more discreet corner of the theatre first.

I know it seems like it's in very poor taste. But I think of it as a tribute. Like, giving her a chance to play the role after all.

I also didn't have much of a choice. There were only ever two people who knew the part well enough: her and me. When her second replacement fell through, it was this or not open.

So I put my AD in charge and I've been Honey for weeks. The rest of the cast don't know. Very few people are aware she's dead.

Worked out lucky for you.

No kidding. When Clayton and that woman showed up I had a bad peeling and I didn't say anything. That was a good call.

Well, we're not going to blow your cover. But we need a favor.

HONEY'S UNFORTUNATE DEMISE IS THE SUBJECT OF SLEEPER SQUAD #9. -T



We need you as one of the IDs to get to the root console. It's probably the only way we can deal with the Clayton and Melinda situation.

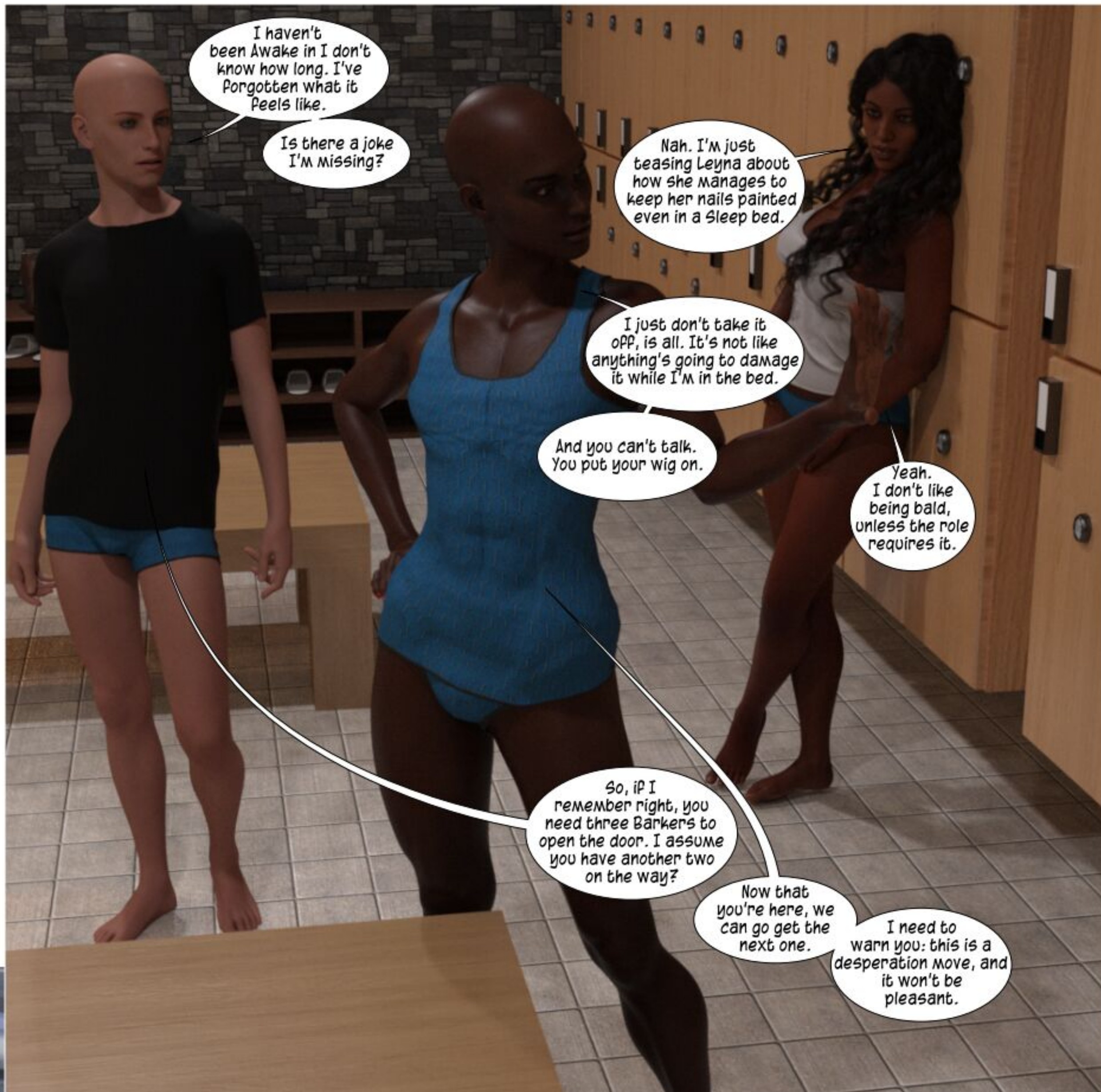
The-- Is it real? I was never sure whether it was just a story.

No, it's real. Trust me. I know where it is.



Wow. OK. Sure, I'll help. But ... you'll need to wait until after tonight's show. Given what I'm doing to keep it going, I hate missing performances.

Several hours and one private strategy session later, the three of us assembled in the prep rooms. Apparently Hamilton used the same Facility we did ... which was not very surprising, given that it was clearly meant for VIPs.



I haven't been Awake in I don't know how long. I've forgotten what it feels like.

Is there a joke I'm missing?

Nah. I'm just teasing Leyna about how she manages to keep her nails painted even in a sleep bed.

I just don't take it off, is all. It's not like anything's going to damage it while I'm in the bed.

And you can't talk. You put your wig on.

Yeah. I don't like being bald, unless the role requires it.

So, if I remember right, you need three Barkers to open the door. I assume you have another two on the way?

Now that you're here, we can go get the next one.

I need to warn you: this is a desperation move, and it won't be pleasant.

Not far away:



... all right, but why am I Awake? What happened?

MY APOLOGIES. AN INTERRUPT WAS REQUESTED.

An interrupt? I didn't even know you could do that. Who requested it?



Hello, Nathaniel.



Oh, god. Well, at least give me something to put on, would you?



I don't see why I should help, especially after what you did to me. What makes you think I care if Clayton and this Melinda woman overrun the place? You can't possibly think I like it the way it is ...

Because you hate competition?

Not Punny.

Wasn't trying to be. You and Melinda both want the same thing, even if it's for different reasons. You can't both win. I assume you don't want to be her thrall ...

Hmm. ... No, not good enough.



If you want my help, I want your promise. You're not going to put me back in one of your loops. In fact, you're not going to try to imprison me in any way. I am not going back into that place again.



OK. You have my word.



Sure.



Now, hold on--

We don't have any choice.

... All right. Fine.



Leyna led us deep into the Sleep Facilities.

You do know where you're going?

Absolutely.

We still need a third Barker.

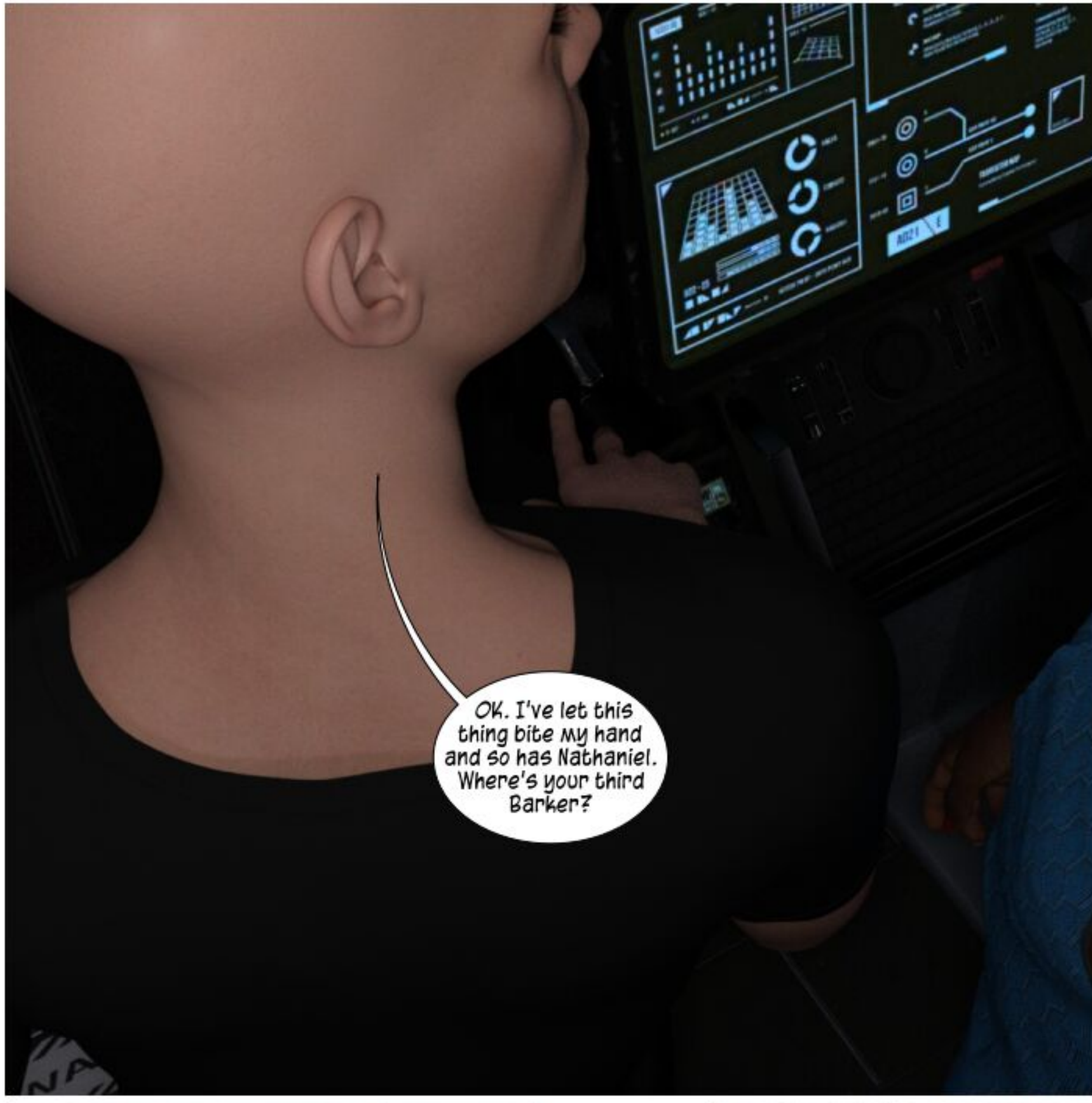
They'll turn up.



OK, this is it.

This? I was expecting, I don't know, an enormous door five inches thick. Like a bank vault, or something.

To be honest, so was I.



OK. I've let this thing bite my hand and so has Nathaniel. Where's your third Barker?



BEEP click



Look, it'd be better if I explained later, OK?



Secret Barker and you know your way around the systems. Fascinating. Whose bastard are you? Did they train you?

... There's a problem. I can't find Melinda.

Can't see her location?

No, I mean she doesn't exist. I can't find her identity. She's concealed somehow.

Oh, that's not terribly hard to do. You just have to be someone else strongly enough to convince the system.

Well, we can't interrupt her if we can't figure out who she is.

All right. How about we interrupt all the captured Barkers?

Must we? Let's at least leave Josiah where he is.

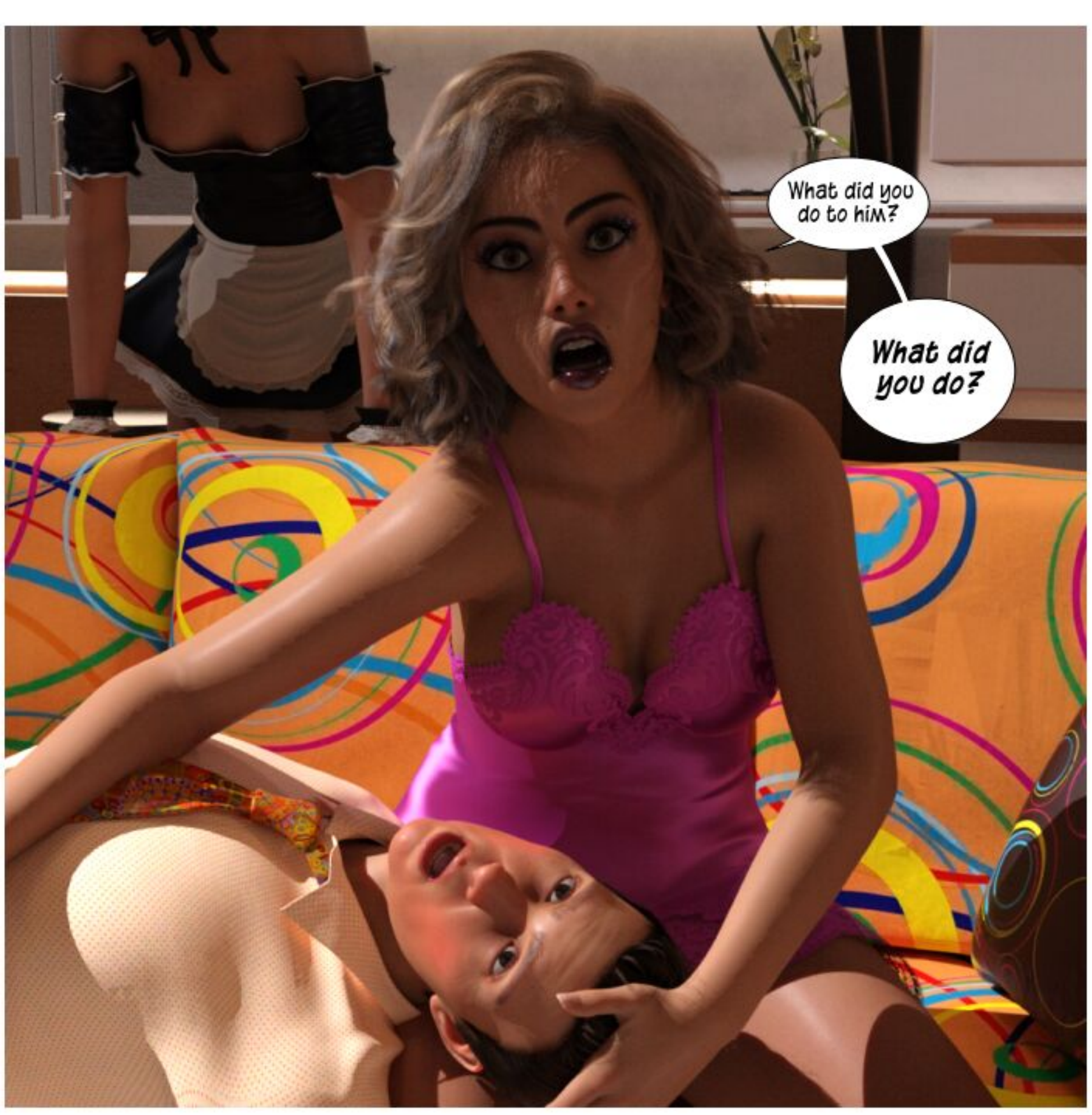
Oh, cut it out, Nathaniel.

He hates you too, you know. You're not straight enough or boring enough for him.

OK, I've interrupted them. They'll be coming Awake now, and with any luck they'll have shaken off all Melinda's effects.

Which means hell is about to break loose.

Yes, and we'd better get back in a hurry to help with that.





... He'd been completely erased, just like Cobermayer*. No idea whether he'll recover. He's been moved to the usual Facility.

Lucy's got huge gaps in her memories, going back months. I guess Melinda had been tampering with them both.

She'll be a while recovering. Her Maid is taking care of her.

And which Barker told you all of this?

You know what? She's right: You're impatient.

You're going to find out in about thirty seconds, you know.

* SS #5 -7



Hello! Why don't we go sit on the balcony? I never did replace my sofa in here, and it's nice out.



I have to warn you, you're about to be exposed to Barker genealogy. It's inevitable.

I've learned that. I think I can bear up.

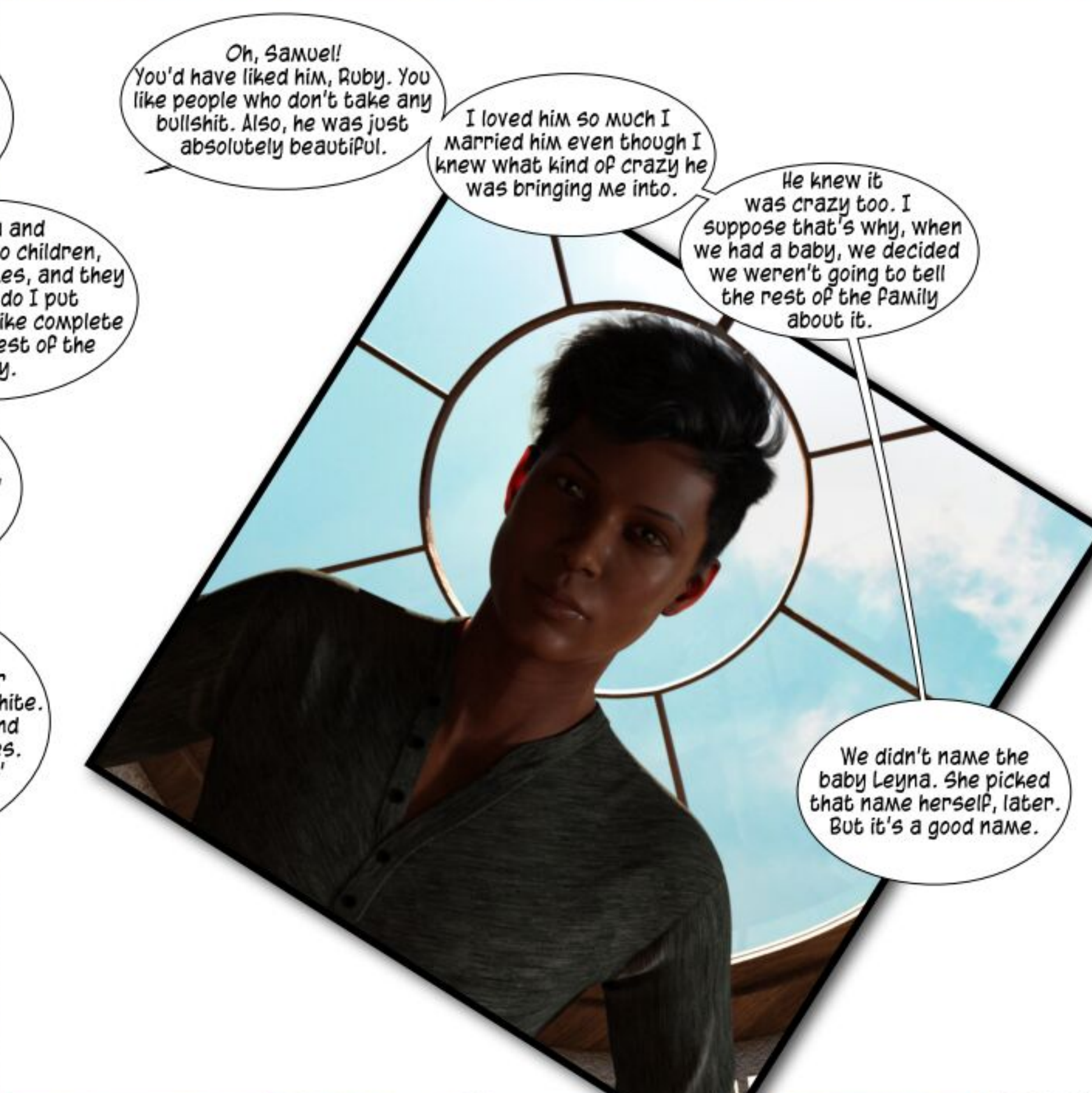
Well, we'll only do a little bit of the tree. Specifically, we start with Rebecca Barker. Two generations above me. She married a man named Wilson Clay--who became Wilson Barker, because you always take the Barker name, no matter what--and that's where the trouble began.

You see, among the Barkers, "traditionalist" means "whites only," and Wilson was very much not.

Rebecca and Wilson had two children, Sophie and James, and they were--how do I put this--treated like complete shit by the rest of the Family.

Not stripped of their shares, though, which I guess is saying something, given some of the other events I think you've already heard about.

I don't know if it was preference or a thumb in the eye to their racist relatives, but neither Sophie nor James married Lily-White. Sophie married Royal Clark, and James married Juanita Morales. Sophie and Royal were Lucius' parents. James and Juanita had Samuel.



Oh, Samuel! You'd have liked him, Ruby. You like people who don't take any bullshit. Also, he was just absolutely beautiful.

I loved him so much I married him even though I knew what kind of crazy he was bringing me into.

He knew it was crazy too. I suppose that's why, when we had a baby, we decided we weren't going to tell the rest of the Family about it.

We didn't name the baby Leyna. She picked that name herself, later. But it's a good name.



I guess you've raised Leyna to be pretty dubious about the Barkers, like you ... which is good, but I also sort of feel like you can't have it both ways.

Well, I don't have many shares. Just enough that they can't ignore me. Lucius got most of what was in our branch of the tree. He's trying to keep them honest. So am I.

I think there are ways to change them from the inside. They're just not very fast ways.

Also, sooner or later you're going to have to pass the torch. What happens then?

That's Leyna's decision.



Don't remind me. I don't want any of that. Never did. Probably never will.

So you don't believe in change from the inside?

I don't think that's possible with the Barkers, to tell you the truth.

And I say she's too fatalistic. But we've been having this discussion for years. and we'll probably have it for years more. I don't intend to kick the bucket for a while yet.



Are you still going to be Midnight when we're working?

I don't see why not. I like being Midnight. And Leyna's managed to keep from slipping and calling me "momma" around you for months, so I think she's about got it mastered.

Besides, we still need to keep this whole thing secret, even if your Pace is getting known to more Barkers. You're going to have to be careful about that, by the way. Hamilton's one of the nice ones, but he's not completely trustworthy. Neither is Monica.

Yeah, it was sort of unavoidable.

You know, sooner or later we're going to end up having to bust a Barker the rest of the Family doesn't hate. Then we'll have a huge mess.



We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, we have other things to think about. Nobody is crying for Clayton--well, except Lucy, poor thing--but Melinda is still out there. We can't miss her a third time.

Mmm, and who knows what Dr. Chapman is up to. At least Nathaniel is out of the picture--until she finds a way to make trouble from outside.

It was the best available option.

Oh, I agree. I'm just saying.

But put all that aside for a little while. I want you both to take a break. Go have fun. See your friends. Rest up.

You're not going to hear it from the rest of the Family, but: You did good. You saved everybody's butts. Again. I think that calls for a little vacation at the very least.

Don't worry; I bet you won't have enough time to get bored.

AND THAT'S WHERE WE LEAVE IT FOR NOW. BUT KEEP WATCHING THIS SPACE FOR MORE ADVENTURES OF THE SLEEPER SQUAD!