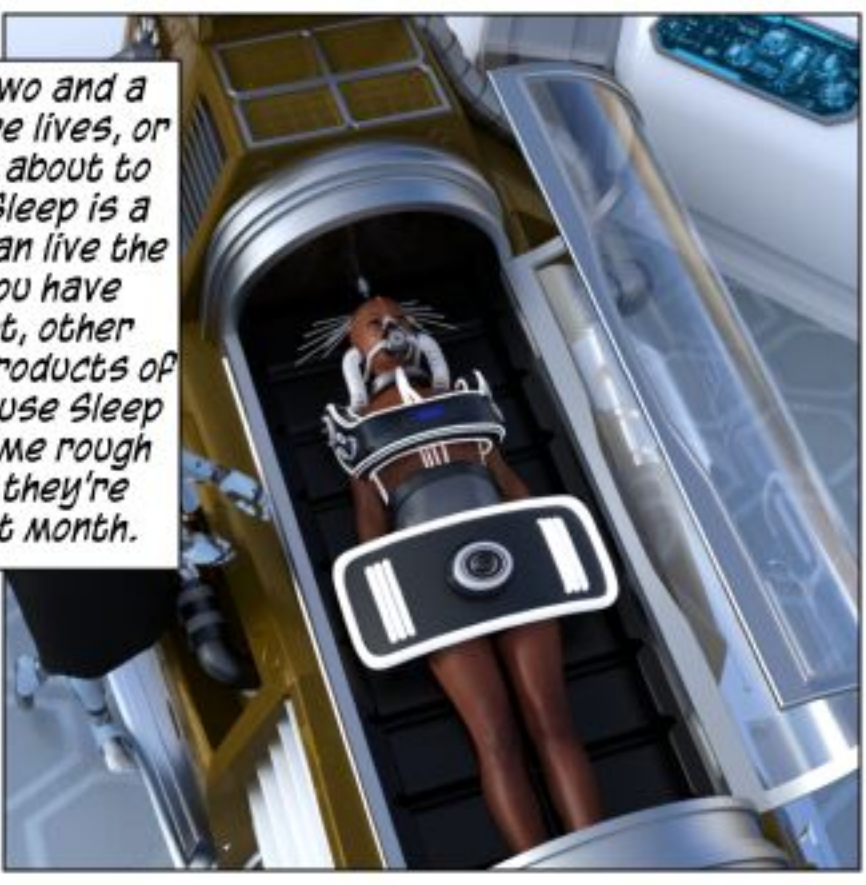


It's been a while, and who knows, you might have just wandered in from an alternate Earth, or you're a descendant of the Lifeship Antares crew finally making it back to check in on the home world (and you're probably thinking "what the hell...?")

Anyway, it seems like it's time to recap... If you've been along for the whole ride so far, you can skip this part, OK? You be the judge. There won't be an exam.

OUR STORY SO FAR

The majority of the people on two and a half continents spend their entire lives, or close to it, in Sleep. (Here's me, about to be tucked into my Sleep bed.) Sleep is a kind of dreamworld where you can live the life of your imagination... if you have enough imagination... and if not, other people will sell you some of the products of theirs. They'll be happy to, because Sleep isn't free, and everyone has some rough times where they wonder how they're going to pay their bed fees that month.



The only people who don't ever have to worry about their bed fees are the Barkers, who own the technology that makes Sleep possible... and own pretty much everything else, too. There are a few good Barkers, and there are a whole bunch that aren't. The crop of Barkers who run A4, the Sleep Facility (you might as well call it a city) where I live, are about fifty-fifty. I know, because I've had to deal with them. More than I'd like.



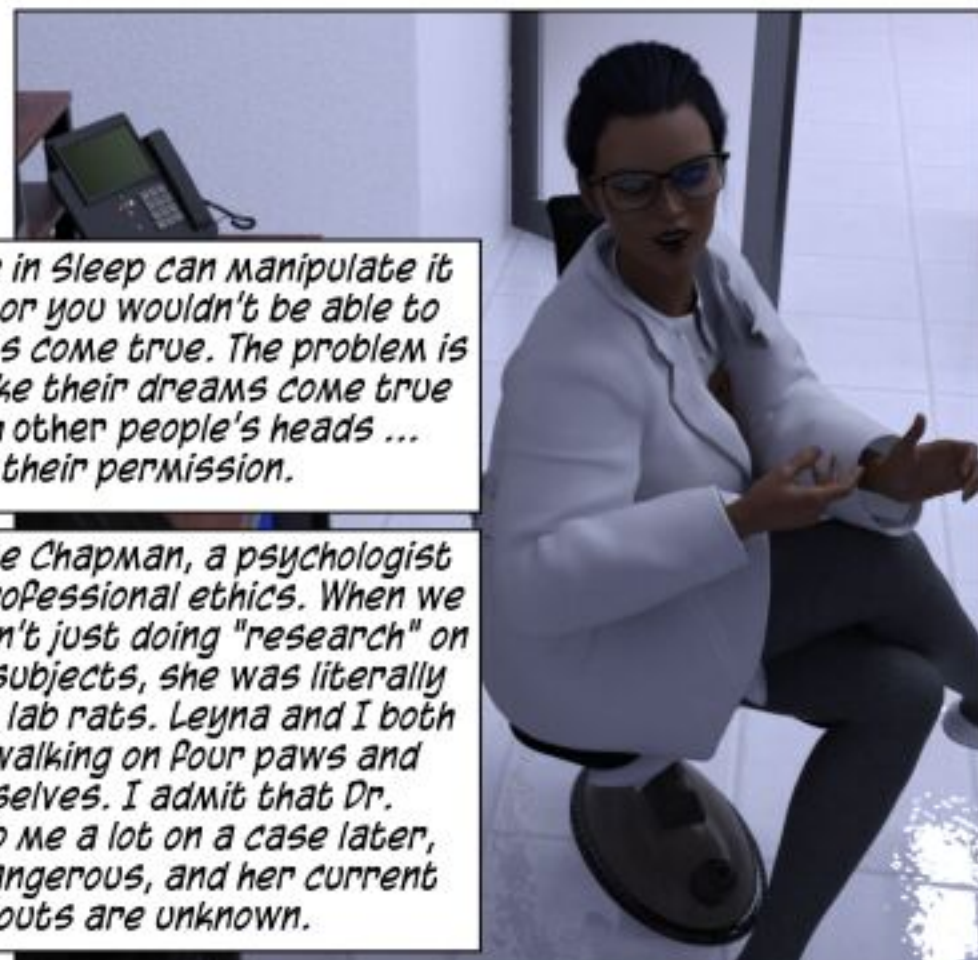
My name's Ruby Martinez, and I never intended to be going anywhere near Barkers if I could avoid it. I was an actor, until I realized I had a talent for directing and writing and switched to that. It pays better, and you have to have sex with unpleasant people a lot less often.

More than a year ago now, I was approached by a woman named Leyna, who wanted me to help her investigate--and, if necessary, subdue--what she called "manipulators."



I guess everyone in Sleep can manipulate it to some extent, or you wouldn't be able to make your dreams come true. The problem is the ones who make their dreams come true by messing with other people's heads... without their permission.

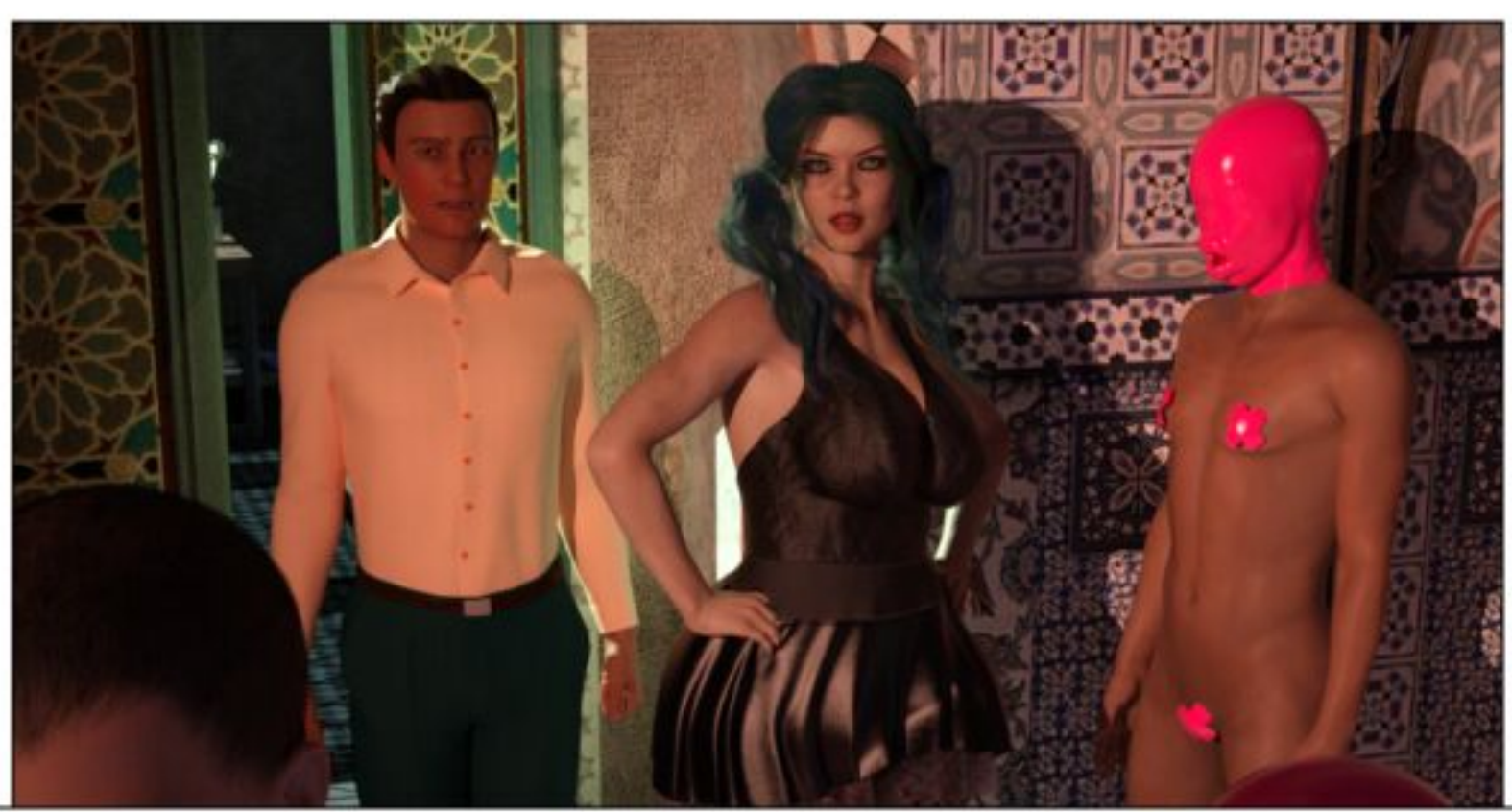
People like Dr. Zoe Chapman, a psychologist with very poor professional ethics. When we met her, she wasn't just doing "research" on non-consenting subjects, she was literally turning them into lab rats. Leyna and I both came close to walking on four paws and squeaking ourselves. I admit that Dr. Chapman did help me a lot on a case later, but she's still dangerous, and her current whereabouts are unknown.



We've also had to deal with Nathaniel Barker, a rogue member of that family. You can tell you're a real piece of work when they kick you out. Nathaniel would love it if everyone in A4 was walking around as a mindless drone. Misguided revenge? Sheer nihilism? We're not sure, but we've had to stop her twice.



But the one I think was the worst of the lot so far is "The Mesmerizing" Melinda, a hypnotist-turned-mind-controller with a really malicious streak. She likes to mess with people because she gets off on it. When last seen, she had teamed up with Clayton Barker, another one cast out of the family.



Clayton, the closest A4's ever had to a crime lord, was definitely looking for revenge against the rest of his family. He managed to mostly get it, with Melinda's help; a lot of the key Barkers were trapped in nasty and humiliating situations, and it looked like the two of them were going to have all of A4 as a playground.



We had to take drastic measures to deal with them, including getting help from Nathaniel. When the dust cleared, Nathaniel was permanently exiled from Sleep, Melinda's damage was mostly undone but her whereabouts were unknown (damn it), and Clayton had suffered a complete mind wipe--Melinda's way of covering her tracks.

Clayton's lover Lucy didn't take that well. Melinda left a lot of holes in her memory, too. When we find Melinda there's going to be a hell of a reckoning.

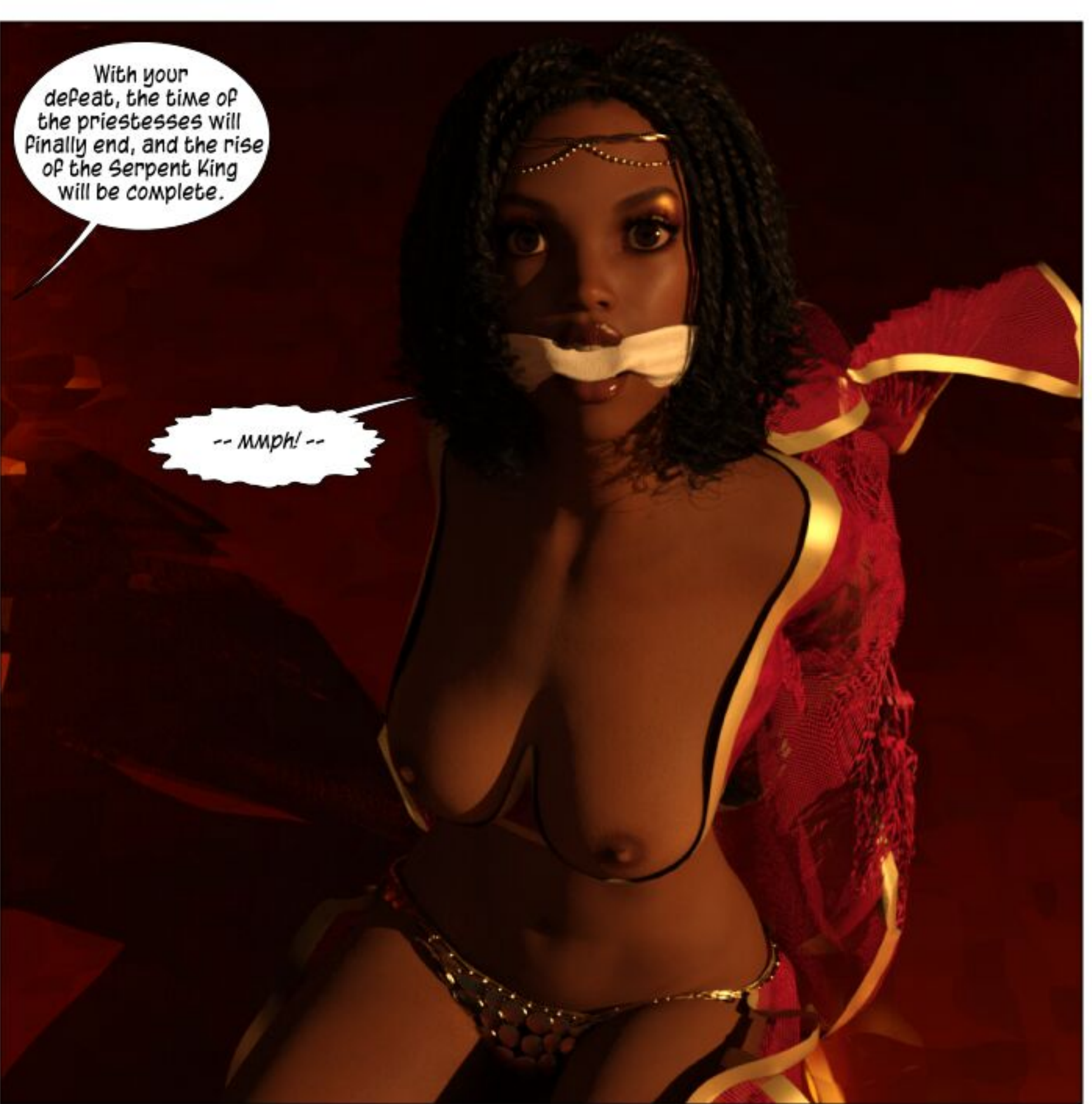


Oh, yes, and I also finally learned that Midnight, the mysterious woman Leyna and I do these tasks for, is Serene Barker (one of the good ones, I think, but then, she married in, so she doesn't have whatever's in their bad blood)... and that Leyna is her daughter. Both of these things are secret. Especially from the other Barkers.

All of that happened four months ago. Things have not yet fully recovered since then.



Finally, the last priestess of Isis kneels before me.



With your defeat, the time of the priestesses will finally end, and the rise of the Serpent King will be complete.

-- Mmph! --



Come, now, and demonstrate your submission. Please me, for your life's sake.

Yeah, yeah.



Dude, get your sweaty paw off my hair.

Serpent King sure ain't rising very much. Yunno, if you're gonna make me do this hands-free, you could at least try to hold a hard-on.

Don't know why you gave yourself that fat dick if you're not going to put anything into it.



FOR THOSE WHO ARE NEW HERE, THIS IS DOREEN DRAKE, RUBY'S FRIEND AND SOMETIMES LOVER. DOREEN IS AN ACTOR. SHE USUALLY LOVES HER JOB, BUT SHE'S NOT HAVING A GOOD WEEK.

Man, it takes a whole lot to sour me on a sub gig, but that clown ... He wasn't even into the sex, he just wanted someone to squirm for him. The "last priestess of Isis" should've bitten his dick off.

I've had it with these jobs I usually wouldn't touch. Work had better pick up again real soon or I'm gonna have to find a different career for a while. This shit is not worth it.



What the hell?

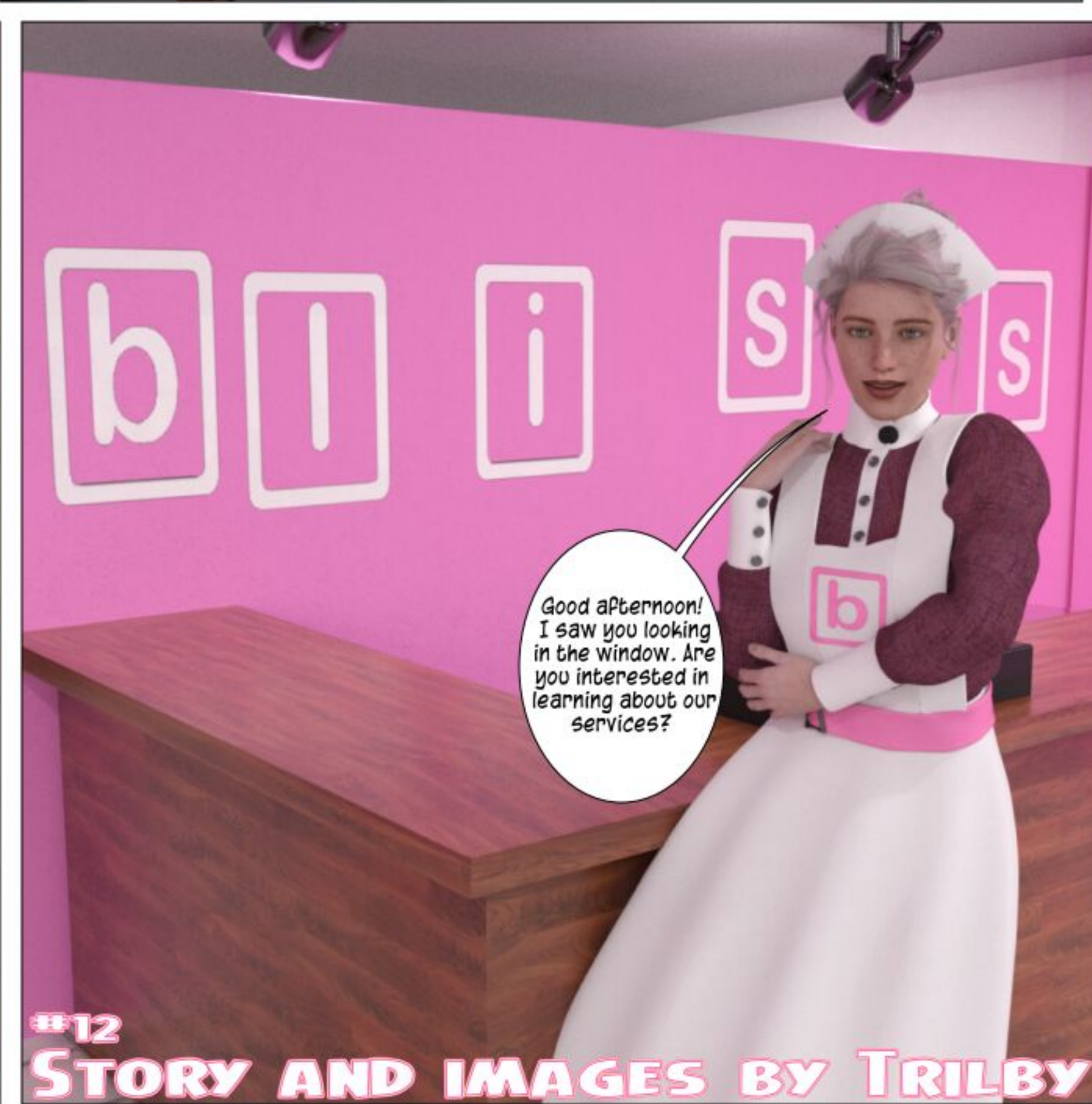
This store wasn't here last time I passed through this neighborhood.

Is it a boutique? 'Cause those are some real interesting fashion choices.



Girl looks way too pleased with herself. You got a vibrator tucked into that suit or something, honey?

OK, I have to go at least find out what they're selling.



Good afternoon! I saw you looking in the window. Are you interested in learning about our services?

RUBY DROPS IN ON LOU, WHO NOT ONLY OFTEN HAS WORK FOR HER, BUT USUALLY HAS ALL THE GOSSIP.



... No, it's everywhere. It's completely dismal. I've got people calling me begging for scraps, and the worst part is, I'm even running out of scraps. I don't understand it either. Did everybody just stop having sex?

I mean, sex isn't my thing, but that doesn't mean I have a good word to say for abstinence. For financial reasons if nothing else.

You know, I haven't wanted to ask you about that, it's none of my business ...

I don't mind talking about it to Friends. It's good to be in a relationship with someone again. It had been years. Leyna is still learning how to talk to people, but I'm enjoying the process. And I like to be with her physically too. I like the contact. I like intimacy. But the relentless pursuit of orgasm baffles me.

I assume you've talked to Leyna about this at some point?

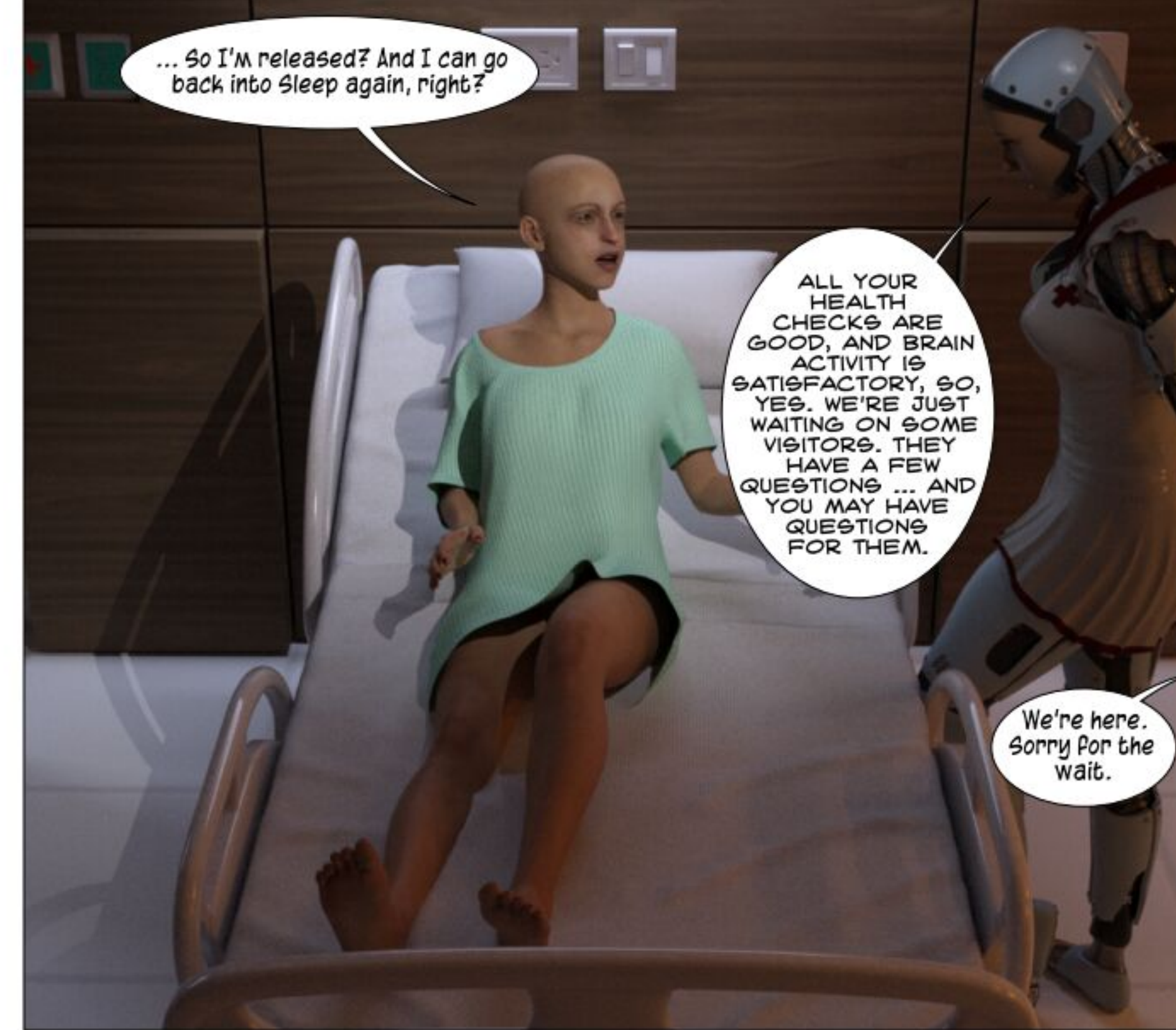
Yes, we--

BZZZZT
Speak of the devil. Hang on a second, Lou.



"Hey ... are you available right now? We've been asked to go see to something real quick."
"Bad? 'See to something' sounds kinda grim."
"No, no ... just something we need to go see."
"Sure, I'm free ... where do I meet you?"
"Uh ... Awake. I'll be in the prep rooms. Sorry."
"You could have told me that first, you sneak. ... OK, give me a few minutes, I'll be there."

A HOSPITAL WARD IN THE AWAKE PARTS OF THE SLEEP COMPLEX. THIS IS WHERE SERENE BARKER HAS ARRANGED TO KEEP PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN LEFT CATATONIC DUE TO MALICIOUS ACTION BY MANIPULATORS, GIVING THEM BRAIN THERAPY IN HOPES THEY WILL RECOVER. SO FAR, ONLY ONE HAS.



... So I'm released? And I can go back into sleep again, right?

ALL YOUR HEALTH CHECKS ARE GOOD, AND BRAIN ACTIVITY IS SATISFACTORY, SO, YES. WE'RE JUST WAITING ON SOME VISITORS. THEY HAVE A FEW QUESTIONS ... AND YOU MAY HAVE QUESTIONS FOR THEM.

We're here. Sorry for the wait.



Hello, Ms. Markov.

Do I know you? You know me ... I feel like I recognize you from somewhere.

We've met, but I'm not surprised if-- What do you remember? Do you know what happened to you?

No, not really ... I was an ... animal? I remember running on four feet? And everything was really big.

Your mind was altered so you thought you were a rat. It's taken a long time for your brain to realize you aren't.

* ISSUE #2 - T



I thought I was a--? Who did this? Did they do this to me on purpose?



Well, we-- We, ah, don't actually know who did it. We found you in that condition. But if we learn more, we'll let you know.



CAREFULLY, NOW. YOUR LEGS ARE STILL NOT AT THEIR FULL STRENGTH. WE WILL ADD MUSCLE STIMULUS WHILE YOU ARE IN BED.

Now why did you tell her that?

You didn't notice the look in her eyes? We're going to have enough trouble dealing with Chapman without having someone else on vendetta for her.

LUCIUS BARKER'S PERSONAL SPACE. LUCIUS AND SERENE (SERENE IS THE WIDOW OF LUCIUS' COUSIN SAMUEL) HAVE BEEN DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP ... THAT THEY DON'T WANT THE OTHER BARKERS KNOWING ABOUT.



I shouldn't need to tell you it's OK if you don't want to. We're too old for that bullshit.

But it's been a few months, and I'd like to know if that's the new permanent thing.

Lucius, I ... I don't know if it is. I just know that I ...

Forgive me for asking: Does it have to do with ... you know, what Melinda did?



... I think so. But I don't like to believe that.

I think about sex and all of a sudden my brain is full of men doing things ... things I don't want them to do ... things I don't want to enjoy ... I don't want her to win, I don't want to let her in my head like that, but--

Why doesn't it get to you? From what you told me, yours was just as bad as mine. But if it bothers you, you've been hiding it really well.

I think ... I don't want to say I found it positive, because it sure wasn't. But I think I sort of took it as an education, if that makes any sense. I learned things.

Or I'm just a little too much of a "that which does not kill me makes me stronger" kind of person. I don't know.

I just want to know if there's anything I can do to help.



Doreen? Hello?

I called, but you didn't answer.

You'd better not be sitting here moping in the dark--

Whoa!



What the hell is all this? Hey, Doreen, wake up--

Oh, shit--

No, Doreen, it's just me! It's me! It's OK!



I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you like that.

Ruby? What are you doing here?

Well, you sounded so low in your message I thought I should check on you ...

Oh, yeah. I forgot I left that ...

Doreen, what is all this stuPP?

OK, well ... I was kinda low, like you said, and on my way back from a horrible gig I passed by this place called Bliss. They rent this equipment, and I decided to try it out. It ... well, it makes you blissful, I guess.

You don't have to use the head part, but if you do, then you can't see or hear anything on the outside ...

Hang on, let me take the rest of this stuPP opp.



You know, you could have just asked me to come Pool around.

It's not like that, though! It's not ... I mean, it feels good ... really good ... but it's not sexual, you know? It's not the same thing. I don't know how to describe it.

I definitely needed it, though.

Yeah, I know what you mean. Work is scarce, everything feels rotten ... to be honest, I was also coming to see if you wanted to play. Improve both our moods.

But I understand if you're not interested.

Now, when did I say that?

ELSEWHERE:



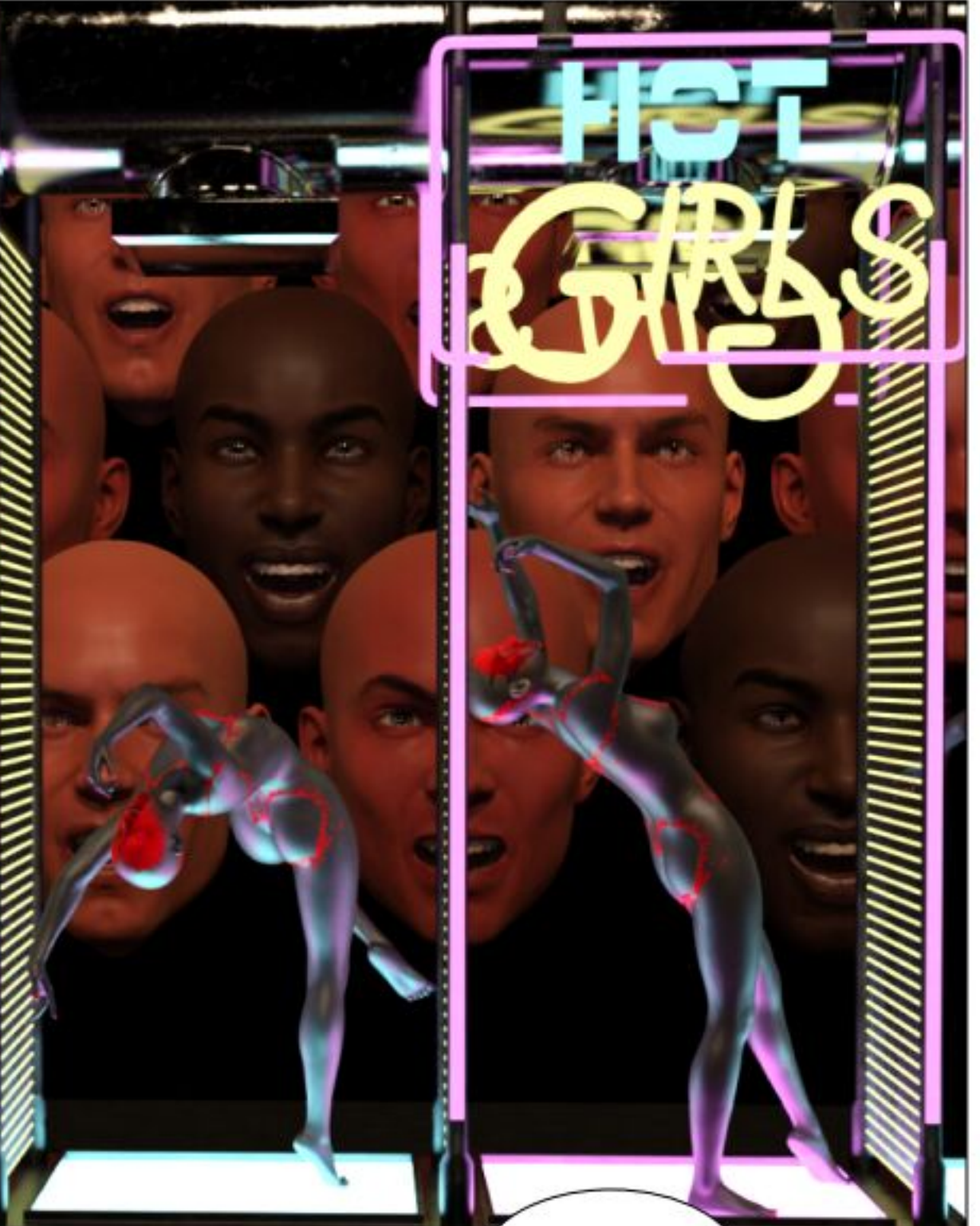
Dance.

Dance.

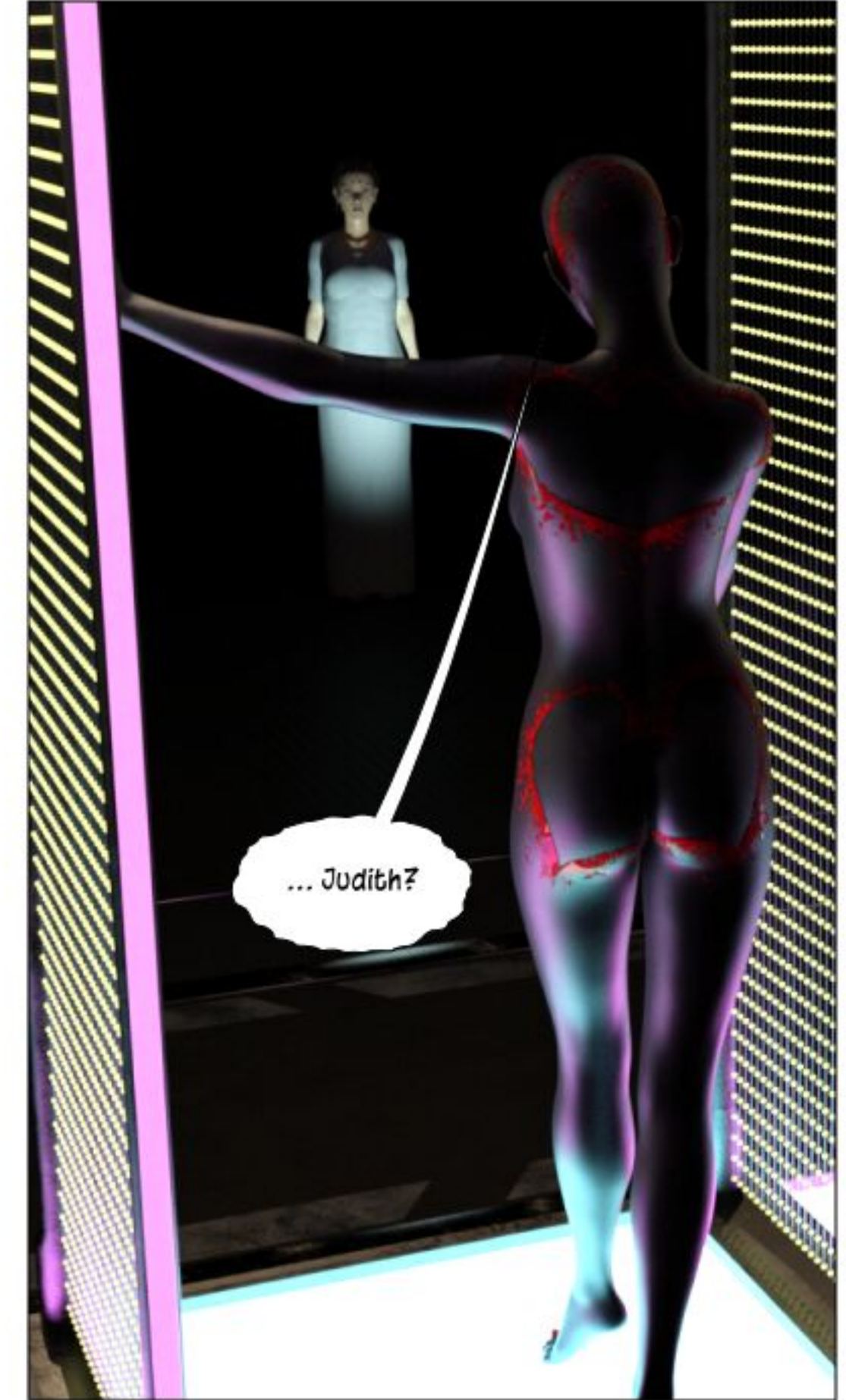
Dance.

Dance.

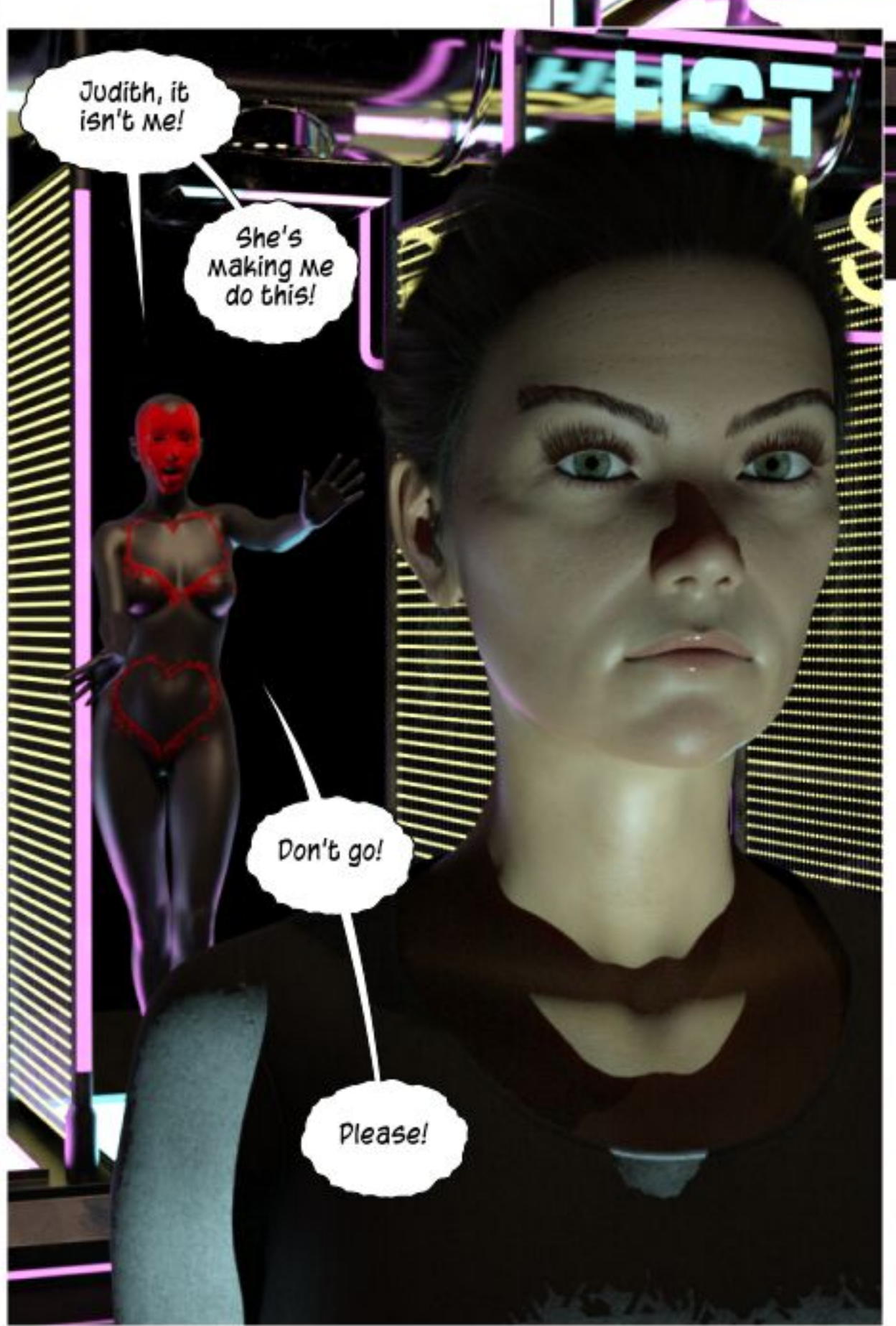
Dance!



Josiah?



... Judith?



Judith, it isn't me!

She's making me do this!

Don't go!

Please!



Don't leave me here --

-- hhh --

agh.

Ah, goddamn.

JOSIAH BARKER IS NOW HAVING THIS PARTICULAR NIGHTMARE AS OFTEN AS TWICE A WEEK.

IT DOES NOT BECOME MORE BEARABLE WITH REPETITION.

A WEEK OR SO LATER.



So it's ready?

Uh-huh! All done. I tested it and everything.

I made it pink, is that OK? I like pink.



It's kind of huge, isn't it?

Well, there's a minimum ratio of manipulation size to algorithmic complexity, and with the limited working area--

Dina, honey, you know I can't understand it when you babble.

-- giggle -- Sorry, Mommy! This is as little as I can make it for what we want it to do.

Is it OK? Did I do good?

Hmm? Oh, yes, you did very good.

Yaay! Will you read me a story?

... Of course, sweetie. Would you like to sit in my lap in the rocking chair?



Girl, what is going on with you today?

... hmm? What do you mean? ...

The last time I was around someone who had that Pace, it turned out her girlfriend was eating her out under the table --

-- wait.

You're not wearing that Bliss shit ... You are, aren't you? Under your clothes!



... maybe?

I'm not zoning out! I heard everything you said!

It's just ... It makes everything ... better. I'm less stressed when I'm wearing it, and everything ... I don't know ... Peels nicer?

It must be pretty damned good, because this sounds to me like the kind of thing you could get hooked on real easy, and I know you have more sense than that.

I'm not! I swear!

Look, it doesn't interfere with anything else I'm doing, so I don't see why I can't just wear the stuff all the time, OK?



Hey, Leyna?

Remember that Bliss stuff I mentioned? I think we need to take a look at it.

... No, I can't right this minute. I have a potential customer coming over, and you know how thin work's been.

But we could go later today.



Ms. Hill, I'm always thrilled to get repeat business, and I don't want to get in the way of that ... But you're not really giving me enough information.

I realize many of these scenarios can be ... embarrassing to discuss. But I can't arrange one unless I know what to arrange. Don't worry; I keep everything absolutely confidential.

Please, call me Pauline.

It has nothing at all to do with trusting you, and I don't want you to think that.

It's just ... not easy to talk about.

RUBY DOES NOT KNOW THAT "PAULINE HILL" IS PAULINE BARKER. BUT WE DO! -T



Have you ever had customers who wanted ... I don't know how to put this ... to revert, I suppose? Put the brain in a simpler place for a while?

Sometimes. How reverted are we talking?

... Animal.

PAULINE DESCRIBES WHAT SHE HAS IN MIND.

Some of that, I'm going to need some outside help with.

The good news is I know people who can do it. The bad news is it'll take a while to arrange.

Your choices are to do it without that part, which we can do Fairly Past ... or try to get that part of it, and it might take a few weeks.



"I'm willing to wait. I don't think it'll be the same experience without that. I mean, if I could put my head in that place on my own, I would have already."

"OK. I'll start working on the setup. I'll let you know as soon as I have more information."

Ms. Barker.



Please, as I've said before: Pauline.

What did you learn?

I've found out who's providing the funds.

But at this point, I think you can probably accomplish more than I can.



... and of course, all our merchandise has been extensively tested for quality and safety.

Would you like to try out a set? We have demonstration booths ...

Oh. No, I don't think we're ... ah, ready for that just yet. We'd like to have a look around and discuss it with each other, is that all right?

Of course! Come talk to one of the staff if you need anything.



Definitely algorithmic items.

Yeah, I figured. Like our surveillance suits.

More so. The suits broadcast an effect to everyone but the wearer. It's actually more difficult to make an item which affects the wearer.

Really? But Azu's stuff ... and the helmet Dr. Chapman made ... and April seems to know how ...

That's a skewed sample set. We happen to come into contact with an unusual number of people with the ability. For some reason.

Heh.

So another person with that same talent is behind this somewhere?

Would have to be, and that bears looking--

Hmm.

Turn around. This may be interesting.



Ma'am, I'm sorry, but you can't just walk in to see Ms. Cantor! And since you don't have an appointment ...

I tried to make an appointment. She didn't want to see me. But she's going to see me. This is important, and I guarantee she's going to want to hear it.

Now you can either let me pass, or I can start making a lot of noise right here--



What's the problem, Linda?

... Oh.

Ms. Cox, isn't it? I told you when you called--



You mean when you blew me off?

I'm not letting this drop, Ms. Cantor. Your products are addictive! And I'm sure you know it, and you're not doing a damned thing about it.



Now, there's no reason to discuss this out here. Someone might think you were telling the truth.

What? I am telling the truth, you--

Ssh. Not another word. I insist. If you really want to talk about this, we need to go to my office.



All right. You got me away from those customers. Happy? But you're still not going to get me to--



MMMHH!

Mhrr Mhrr Mhrr



There, now, isn't that much better? Nice and calm. And quiet. And cooperative.

Mommy! That was s'posed to be for people who needed more help!

That was a mean thing to do!



I know, honey, but she was trying to be mean to us.

If she did what she was going to do, then we wouldn't be able to make people happy with your toys anymore, and you wouldn't like that, would you?

I'm not going to do anything bad to her. I'm going to put her someplace where she can be happy all the time and not worry about anything. OK?

Um ... OK. I guess.

That's my girl. Let me change her clothes and put her to bed, and then I'll come back and make dinner. You can have nuggets tonight.

Yay!



A FEW DAYS LATER. DOREEN HAS JUST FINISHED ANOTHER EXTREMELY UNPLEASANT JOB.

I wish I could wear the Bliss rig while I was on a gig ... that might make some of these assholes tolerable ...

Nah, probably not.



Ms ... Drake? Did I get it right?

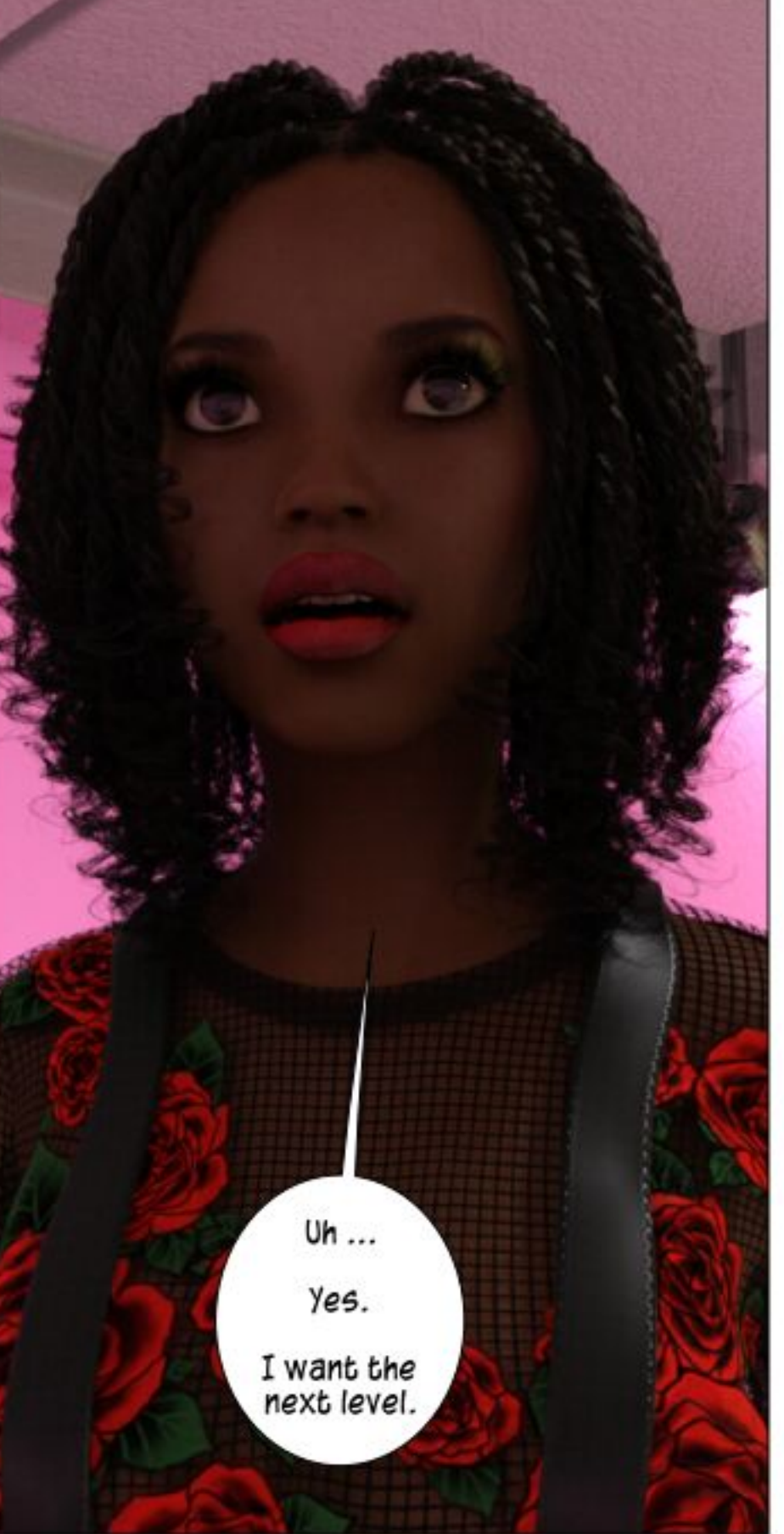
Good to see you again. No trouble with the equipment, I hope?

No, no trouble with that.

When I was first here, you also showed me a different set ... you said it was ... I forget how you put it ...



Oh! That sounds like you're ready to move to the intermediate level?



Uh ... Yes. I want the next level.



PAULINE PAYS A VISIT ON MONICA BARKER.

Goodness, what is all this? have you walled yourself in?

You insisted you had to talk to me. OK. Talk.

Well, can I come in?

No. You can see me just fine. Say what you have to say.

... All right.

I've learned that you're the person who provided the space and the financial backing for the Bliss store.

I assume you're aware that--



You came here for that? You know the rules. Unless it's a real problem, we stay out of each others' business.

But you did fund them, right?

Yeah, I did. I get a cut, but mostly I did it because we all need what they provide. We should probably all be using their stuPP all the time. Might make this place a lot better.

So you're OK with helping provide an addictive service that's made a lot of people unable to function--

Pauline, I don't know what your grudge is, but that's bullshit. I don't know where you get that. Sure, there are a few people who take it a little too far. We set up a facility for them to help them out. I paid for it. I pay their bed fees too, while they're in treatment.



Monica, if you're serious, then someone isn't being honest with you.

I'm not going to bother giving you the facts. You'd just say I'm lying.

You're not going to get the real numbers out of that Cantor woman, so I guess you'll have to investigate yourself, like I did.

Go find out how many people are in that "treatment" facility. Go find out if any of them ever get released from it.

You're being scammed. Cantor's not just collecting rent from her customers, she's collecting it from you. If you're paying the bills of everyone in that facility, what incentive does she have to keep people out of it?

Look into it fast. I'm not going to let it stand much longer.

And in case I'm not being clear, my dear, that's a threat.



ELSEWHERE ...

So, any news?

Nothing good. We're picking up a lot of talk that Melinda's secret club has reopened ... somewhere. We haven't found out where yet.

But so much for the hope she'd lie low and do nothing for a while.

THESE TWO, GINA AND ESPERANZA, WERE FIRST SEEN IN ISSUE #6 AND WERE VERY HELPFUL AT FINDING MELINDA'S SECRETS IN ISSUE #11. -T



Yeah. Unfortunately.

OK, keep it up. I'll keep digging from my end. I'll check back in a few days.

... You're both still all right with this, yes? I don't want to ask you to do something you don't want--

Nah, we're good. It's not exciting, but it's nice to work for somebody we can trust for a change.

Don't forget the club.

Oh, right! We think you should know ... Bianca's club has a new "owner" now. Apparently.

Did you ever meet Serille? Ran a shop in the Souk selling large-animal simulations ... among other things.*

*ISSUE #6. -T

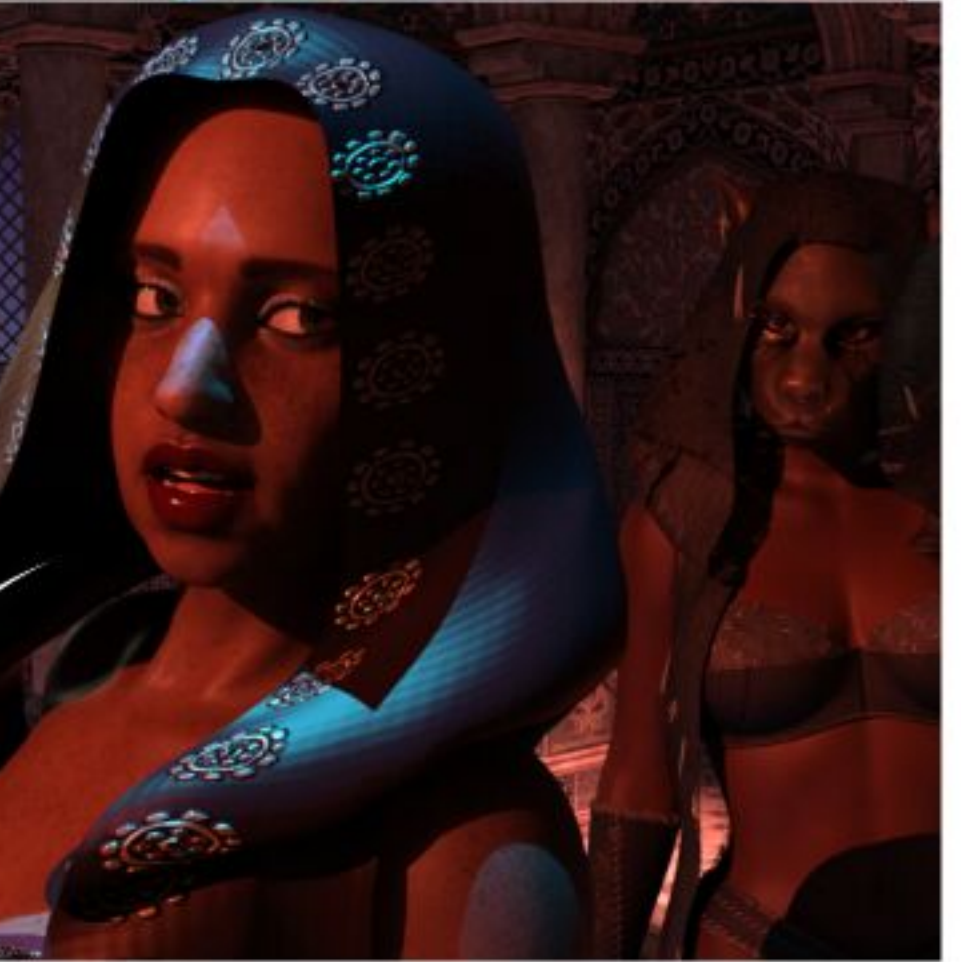


"She vanished for a while when Melinda was at high tide, but now she's back."

-- sigh --

So many messes left behind to clean up. And I don't just mean the condition of this floor.

Still, if we don't claim this space, someone else will surely come along and make it worse yet again.



I think this will suit us nicely.



They couldn't have hidden this place deeper in the ass-end of Shibuya if they'd tried.

If I didn't trust the people at Bliss, I'd wonder what I was being led into.



Yes?

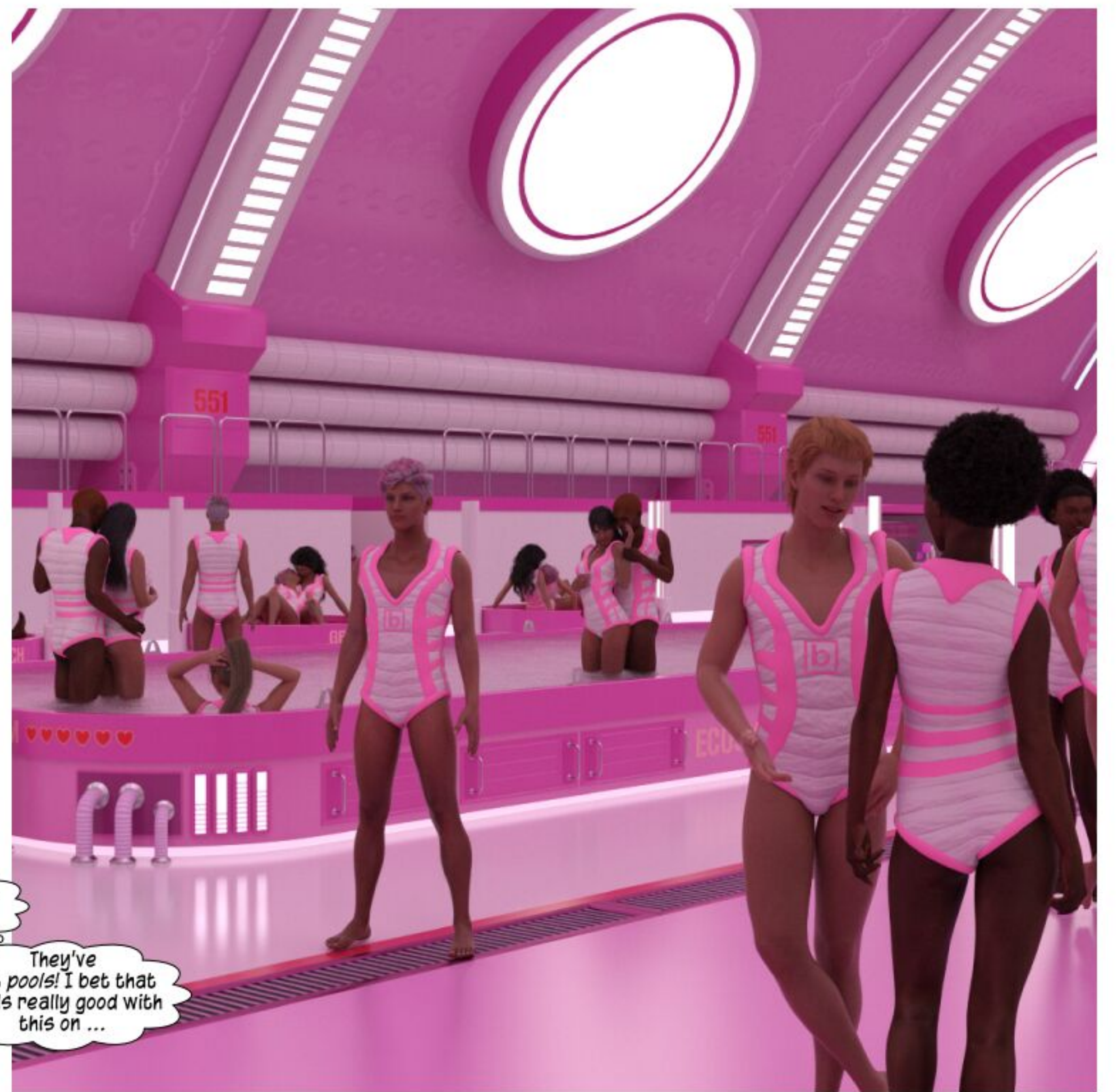
Uh ... there's supposed to be a club here? I was told--

We have a dress code.



Oh, OK. Good. Sorry about that.

Check your other clothes and your shoes in the coatroom on the way in.



Oh, wow, this is huge!

They've got pools! I bet that Peels really good with this on ...



MMM, that looks like a lot of Pun too ... I like this place already.



Hi! I think you're new. I haven't seen you before.

Mm-hm, first time. This place is great! The water Peels amazing!

Right? I spend most of my time in the pools, unless somebody wants to play ...

Are you here a lot?

Most nights. A lot of people here come most nights. Everybody's nice. You'll like it.

... What are those booth things with the frosted glass?

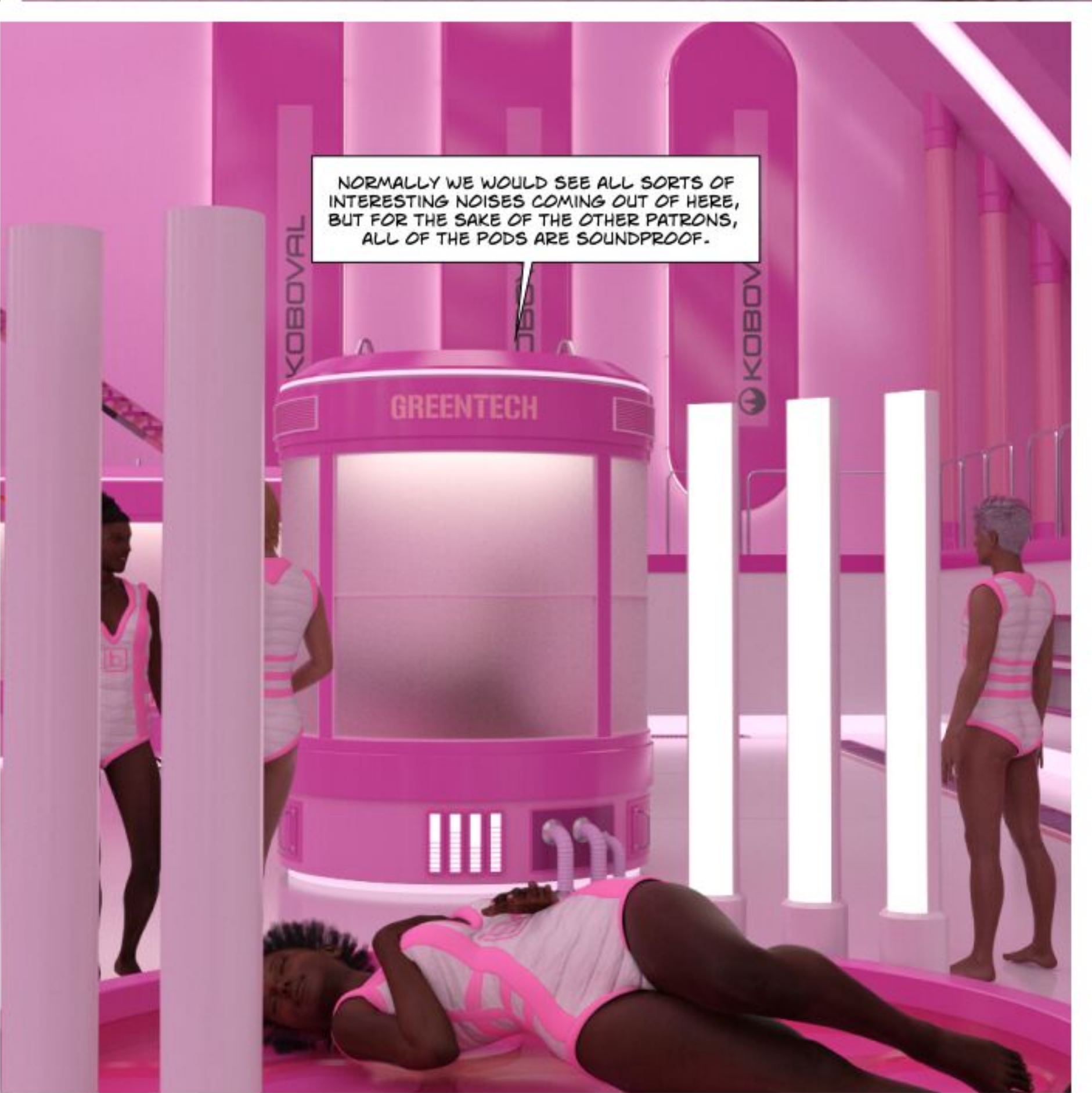


-- giggle --
You know, you're really cute.

-- MMMM! --
...
-- MMMM --

... want me to show you what the pods are for?

AND SO ...



NORMALLY WE WOULD SEE ALL SORTS OF INTERESTING NOISES COMING OUT OF HERE, BUT FOR THE SAKE OF THE OTHER PATRONS, ALL OF THE PODS ARE SOUNDPROOF.



Goodness, what is all this? Have you walled yourself in?



What are you afraid of, hiding in here?

Can't you tell your friends from your enemies?

Well? Are you going to say anything?



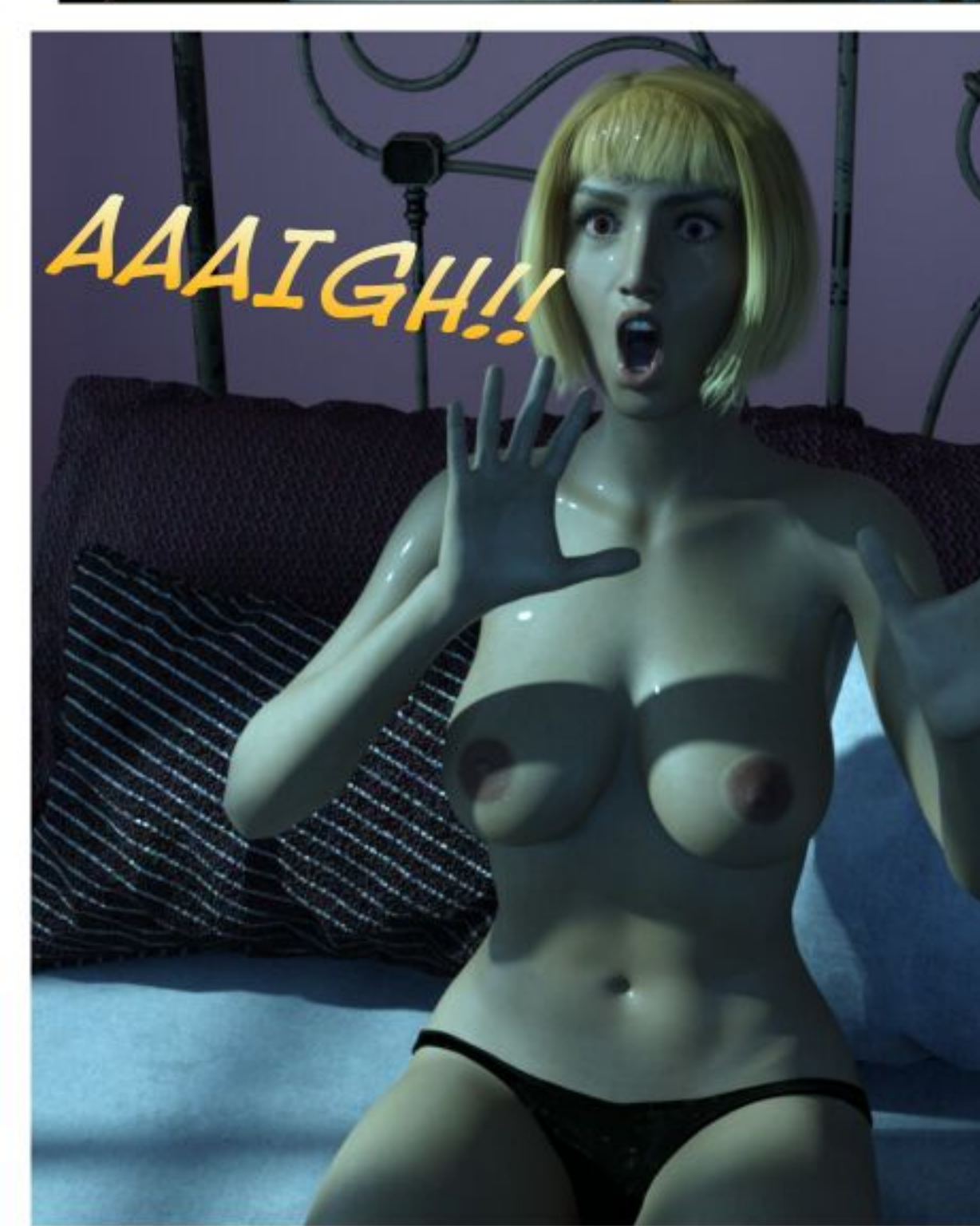
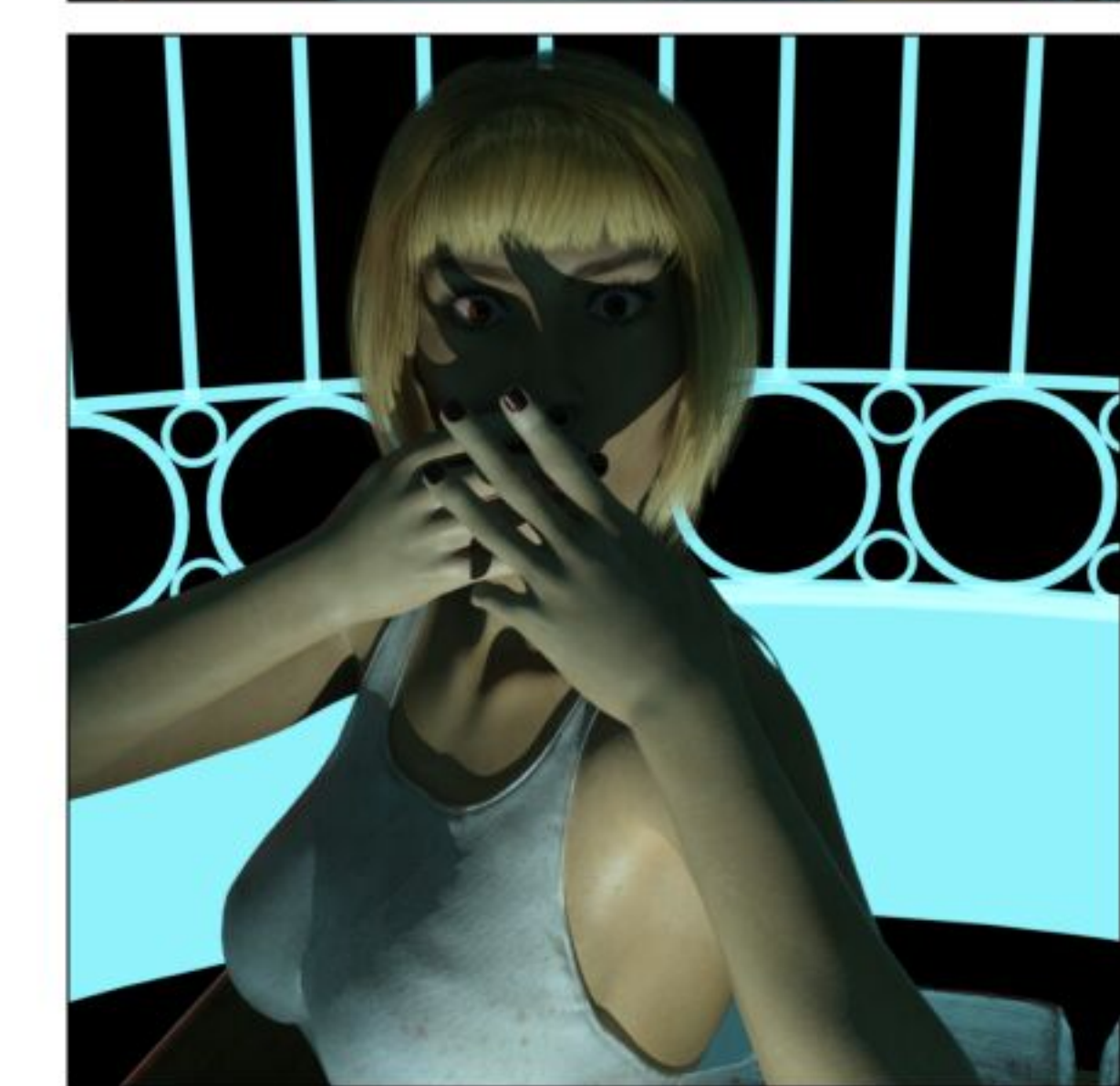
SQUAWK!!!



What was that?

I'm sorry, I don't speak animal.

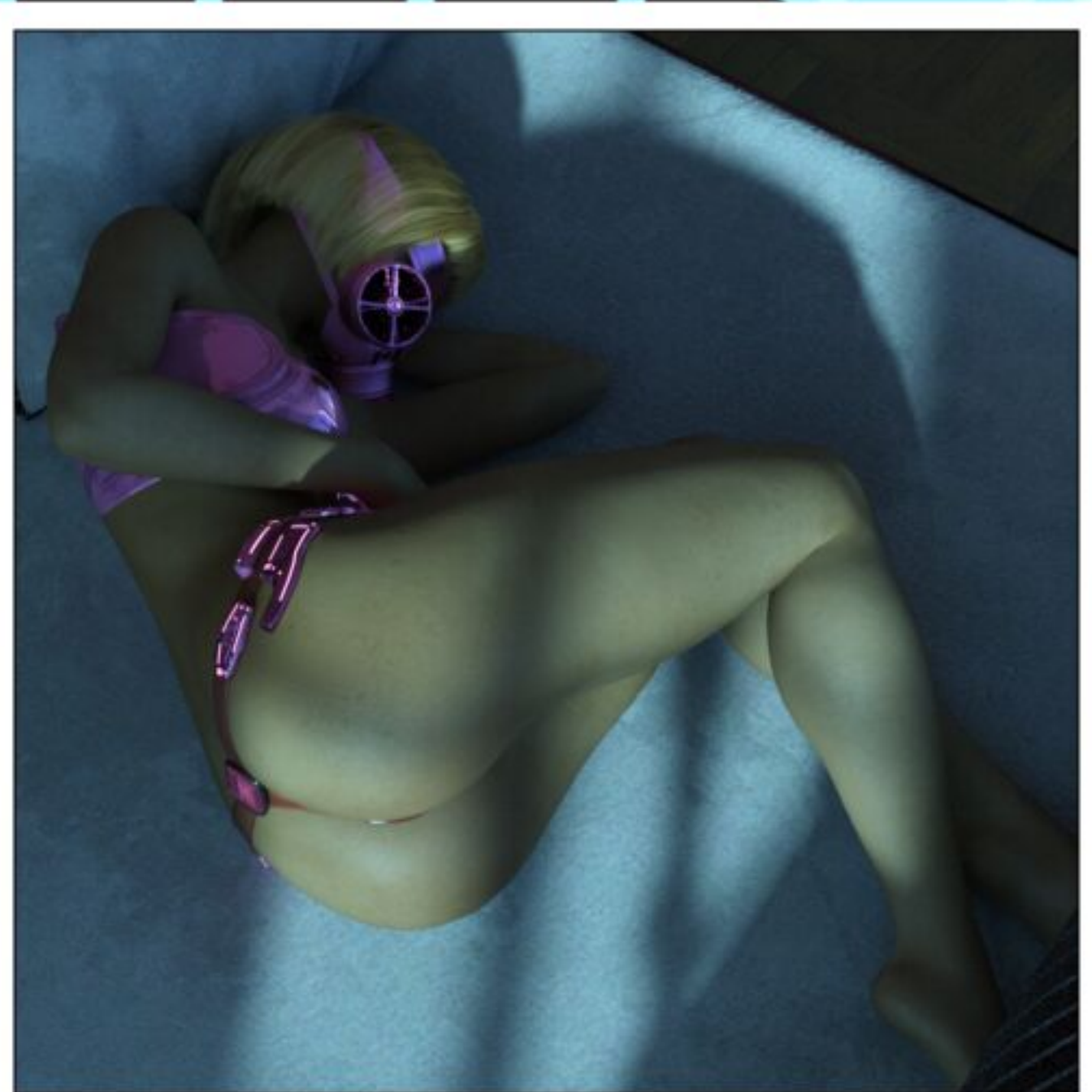
SQUAWK!
SQUAWK!!!



AAAIGH!!!

damn it damn it damn it damn it

Addictive, huh? ... I don't care.



Doreen. Doreen.

... hmm? Watchin' the passive.

Name one thing that's happened in it in the last half hour.

OK, Pine. But I'm really enjoying just being here with you. Isn't that good enough?

I need this, Ruby. There's no work! Everything else in my life is miserable! ... except you.



You know, it could be that nobody's got any work because there are so many Bliss zombies now, and they're not having sex.



But-- that's not how it works! Trust me on this. Bliss is really arousing! You take off the suit, and usually the first thing you want to do is go fuck something.

And what if people aren't taking off the suits?

Doreen, we saw a woman named Leslie Cox confront the owner of Bliss. She claimed Bliss was addictive.

Addictive-- ... Did she have any proof?

We don't know. She went into the office with Cantor and nobody's seen her since then. We've been trying to find her for days.



Oh. Oh, shit.

THESE DAYS SERENE WOULD PREFER TO HIDE IN HER PERSONAL SPACE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, BUT SHE DOES HAVE SOME SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS FROM TIME TO TIME.

If I have to listen to one more man talk for fifteen minutes without saying anything ...

Oh! You're Serene Barker, aren't you?

Uh ... I am, but I don't think we've met.

No, we haven't. My name is Corazon.



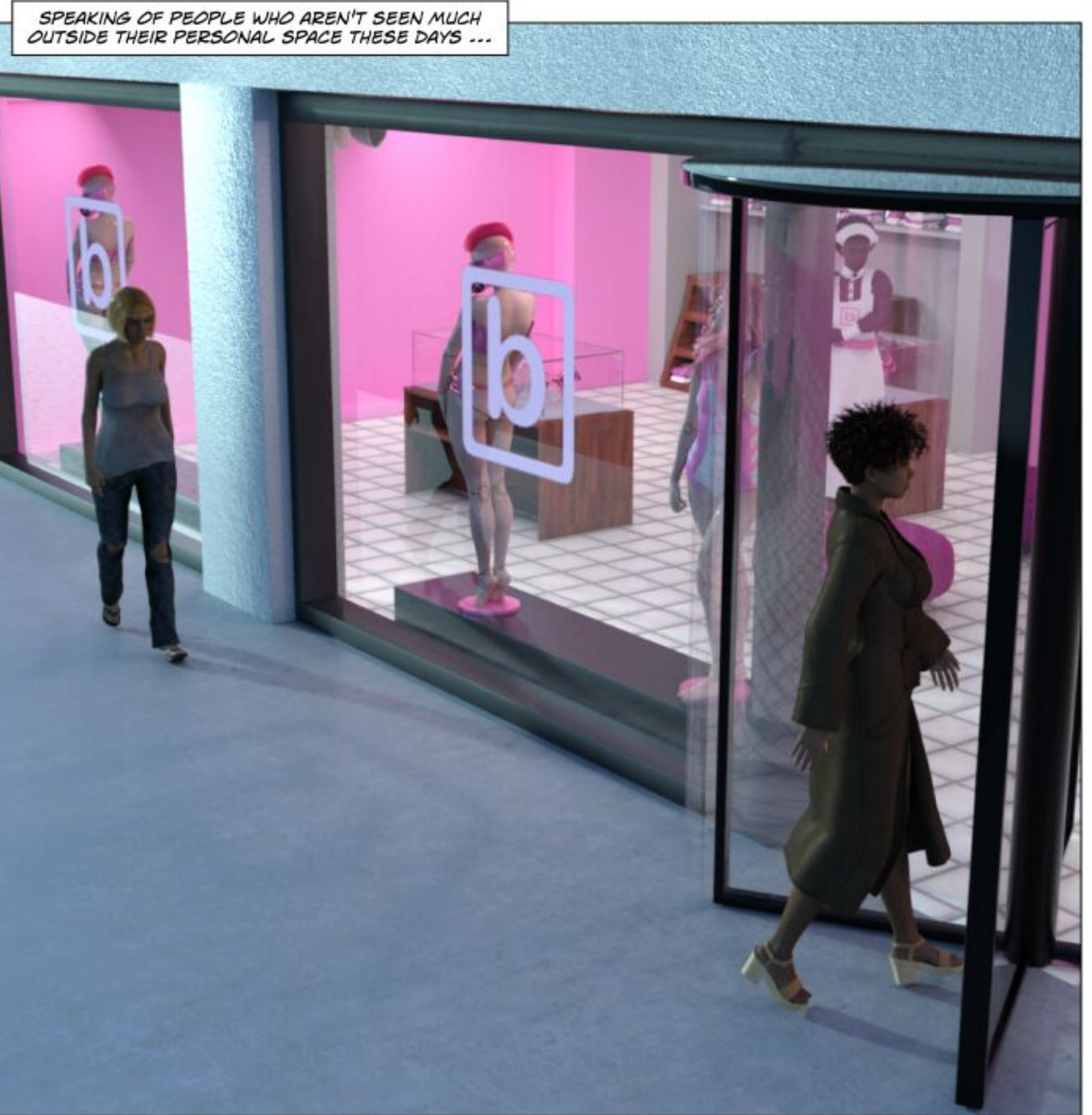
Lucius said that if I ever got the opportunity to meet you, I should take it.

He said I would find you interesting.

I'd like to look into that.



... Well, I certainly wouldn't want to stand in the way of your investigation.



SPEAKING OF PEOPLE WHO AREN'T SEEN MUCH OUTSIDE THEIR PERSONAL SPACE THESE DAYS ...



It's a real problem! I don't want to do anything, I can't focus on anything ... you have to help me!

Don't worry! We have a solution for that.



Ms. Cantor, the owner, can help you out. I'll take you to talk to her.



Wait! I'm sorry, you can't go back there--

I paid for this whole goddamned place.

I can go wherever I want.

Move.



There. Isn't that comfy? Now let's get you into bed.

... ok ...

Don't worry about a thing. Your fees will be taken care of. Now you can just lie back and be blissful full time. Problem solved.



That's your solution? You get people addicted to Bliss and then you put them in here? On my dime, no less. Was this the idea from the beginning?

Monica? Heavens, you look horrible. Haven't you been sleeping? Didn't I give you something to help with that?

Right. You'd like it if I got hooked too, then I wouldn't ask questions. Don't change the subject.



I'm closing down your business right MMgW!

I have *always* thought you were too tightly wound, Monica.

Now, let's get you out of those filthy clothes and into something nicer ... and, I think, something to keep bad little girls from taking their paci out. Yes.

After you've had a few months to calm down, maybe we'll talk about the business again.



There! All better.



MOMMY!

You used a paci on the Barker lady, didn't you?

That was bad! You did a bad thing!!



Now, listen to me, little girl.

Do you remember how hard it was for you to find a good MOMMY?

... Uh-huh ...

If you stop being a good girl then I won't be your MOMMY anymore. Do you want that?

... N-no ...

Well, then. Are you going to behave yourself?

... Yes ...

Yes, what?

... yes, MOMMY.

A FEW NIGHTS LATER, RUBY AND LEYNA HAVE REACHED THE POINT OF DIRECT ACTION.



You sure about this? You know I have better resistance ...

You're always the one who has to walk into the lion's den. I should have to take a turn.

Besides, I'm better at burglary than you are.

Hopefully there won't be anything to resist. We know Cox is still in there somewhere. I don't plan to do anything else but get her out. Assuming she's not in there voluntarily.

OK, but I'm only giving you an hour. After that I'm coming in. This place gives me bad vibes.



If Ruby's ideas are right, there's somewhere back here where a lot of people are being kept ... I guess I'll know it when I see it ...

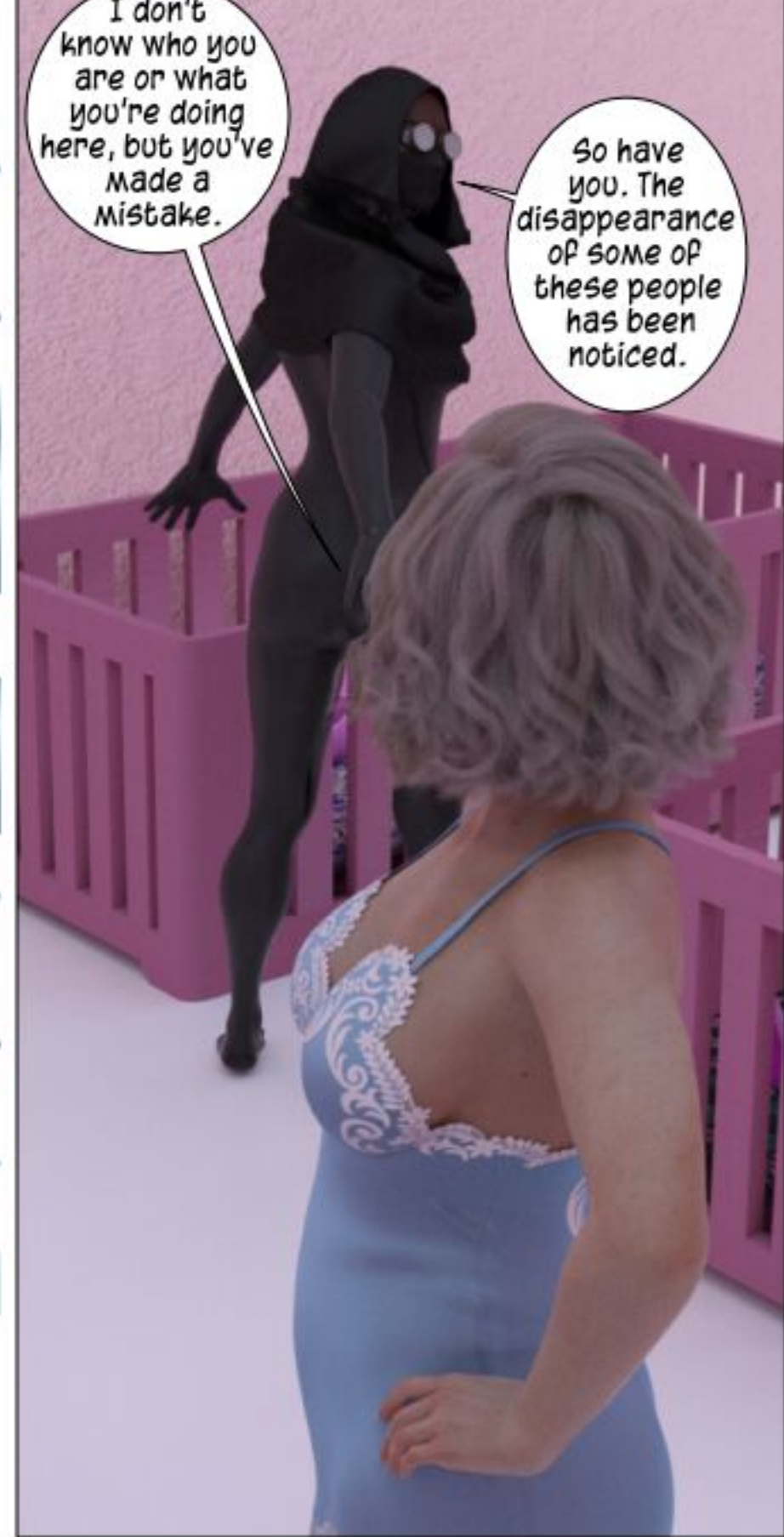


... oh.



That doesn't look very voluntary. ... she's awake.

Ms. Cox?
Don't worry, I'm friendly. Hang on, I'm going to get you out.



I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but you've made a mistake.

So have you. The disappearance of some of these people has been noticed.



Does it seem like I care?

-- aagh! --



AN HOUR HAS ELAPSED, AND RUBY RIDES TO THE RESCUE.

Is this a medical lab or a nursery?



Well, that explains why all the toys are so big ... sized to match.



Out cold. I knew I should have gone in instead.

She looks really cute in that, though.

Is she all right?

Well, well. Who are you, anyway?

An ally. Today, at least. I've been investigating Bliss too.

She's fine. But you and I have a problem. Turn around slowly.



This is the second time I've been woken up tonight and I'm not pleased.

You look like you're hard to fight, but I can still shoot you before you get close enough.

Go stand over beside your friend. Move carefully, now.



Now, before I get you both fitted out like your friend in the crib: What's up with all this? Three of you in one night. What led you here? Who are you working for?

Why do you want to know? You think you're going to find them and stash them in here too?

Surely you realize that's not going to work forever. Well, you've already attracted a lot of attention. I saw Monica Barker in that crib behind me. You think no one's going to notice her going missing?

I don't care! I'll pacify as many people as it takes. I'll put all of A4 in here if I have to! This is the best thing that's ever happened in my life, and I don't plan to let anybody stop it without a--



Huh?

Dina? What are you doing?

TWELVE DAYS LATER, AND THE MESS HAS MOSTLY BEEN CLEANED UP, THOUGH OBVIOUSLY THERE WILL BE LINGERING EFFECTS FOR QUITE A FEW.



I guess you deserve an explanation.

I've always preferred being little. Adulthood stresses me out. I work better when I'm little, think better, I'm calmer, happier ...

It took me a long time to find Bel. And she was perfect! She was a great MOMMY. And she seemed to really like it. You know, it's hard to ask someone to be in a full-time relationship with no sex.

I don't know what changed her. It must have had to do with Bliss. Before that, I made OK money doing algorithmic crafting, but it was always one-off projects.

I don't know whether it was the money Bliss was making that did it, or if she decided she liked the idea of being everybody's MOMMY ...

Anyway, I hope you don't think I'm super weird.



Of course not.

I've seen much weirder. Done it sometimes too.

We gave your proposal to Monica Barker to review, along with a couple of other people whose oversight would probably come into play sooner or later.

Everyone thinks it's fine. With time limits and other abuse constraints on the Bliss equipment, plus careful monitoring and counselling where necessary, there's no reason the business can't still operate.

You'll be watched like a hawk, of course, but big deal.



Oh, that's great! I really do think Bliss is useful and good ... as long as we can keep people from overdosing on it.

By the way, I was kind of expecting Ms. Barker to be here today.

She's ... not doing very well, and prefers to stay in her personal space. She did tell us to give you her regrets.

And the other woman, the one who was working with you?

She has a habit of disappearing.

What about Ms. Cantor? Do you need someone else to take care of her?

Oh ... no, I feel like she's my personal responsibility, if you see what I mean.



"Don't worry. She's fine, and I'll make sure she stays that way. Though I admit, it feels strange to be the MOMMY now."



-- MMM --
Sex on the second date. I haven't done that since I was seventeen.

'Course, it helps that I figured out who you are.

... Lucius.



Aw, hell.
And I practiced, too!
What did I do wrong?

You did pretty well. It was little things. Verbal, mostly. You still talk like you.

You were going to tell me, right?



Of course I was. Though I probably would have waited until the morning.

I imagine you have questions. OK. It's two different things, really.

Remember when I said I'd pound Melinda's little games educational? Well, this is ... I guess you could say this is what I got educated about.

They say nineteen out of twenty men in sleep eventually become women. I never tried it, never even thought about it. And then Melinda's thing happened. And it was so ... different.

I mean, it wasn't a pleasant experience, but it made me realize there was something I was missing. That I needed to look into. You see?

But the other thing is, after what you told me, it sounded to me like that was mostly a reaction to men having their way with you.

I figured, well, maybe if it's not a man, maybe she won't have the bad reaction. Maybe that can still be enjoyable ...

I'm sorry. I know it was a sneaky thing to do. But if I'd told you in advance --



Don't apologize. It worked, didn't it?

My question is, is this a one-shot deal? Is Corazon going to be appearing regularly?

Uh. Honestly, I haven't figured that out yet.

But if it's OK with you ... I suspect the answer is 'yes.'

AND ON THAT INTRIGUING NOTE, WE CONCLUDE. AS EVER, WATCH THIS SPACE FOR FURTHER ADVENTURES OF THE SLEEPER SQUAD!