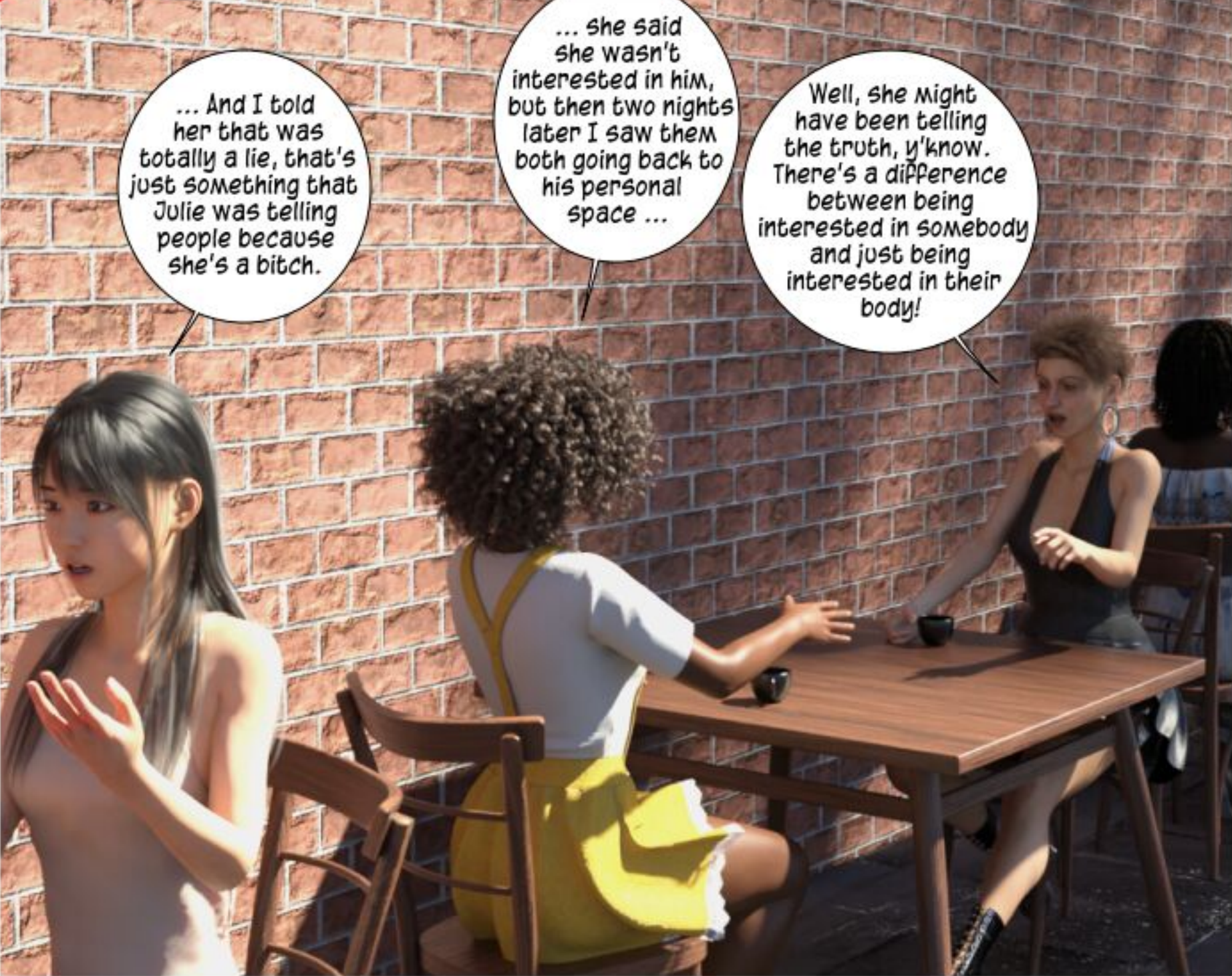


SLEEPER SQUAD

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN A4.
ACTUALLY, IT'S ALWAYS A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN A4, BECAUSE THERE'S NEVER ANY WEATHER OR TEMPERATURE VARIATION IN THE COMMON SPACES. IF YOU WANT IT COLD AND RAINY, YOU CAN DO THAT IN YOUR OWN SPACE.
A FINE DAY TO SIT OUTSIDE WITH COFFEE AND GOSSIP.



... And I told her that was totally a lie, that's just something that Julie was telling people because she's a bitch.

... she said she wasn't interested in him, but then two nights later I saw them both going back to his personal space ...

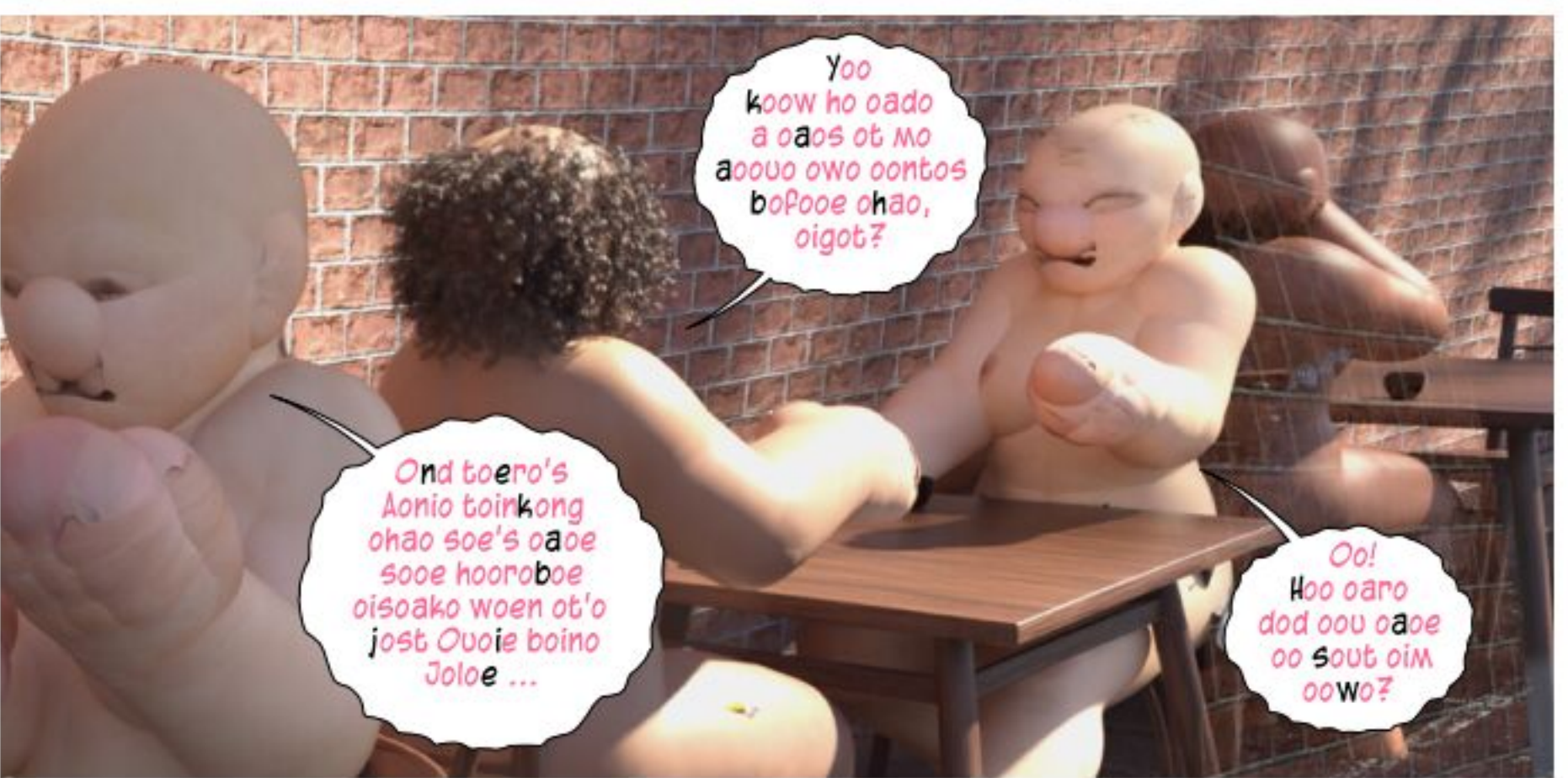
Well, she might have been telling the truth, y'know. There's a difference between being interested in somebody and just being interested in their body!



Heh. That's probably the only thing about him anybody would be interested in.

I mean, it didn't hurt me, but I don't want her thinking she can get away with that ...

Right? I mean, she's definitely something to look at ...



Yoo know ho oado a oas ot Mo aouuo owo oontos boPooe ohaa, oigot?

Ono toeno's Aonio toirkong ohaa soe's oase sooe hooroboe oisoako woen ot'o jost Ooie boino Jolo ...

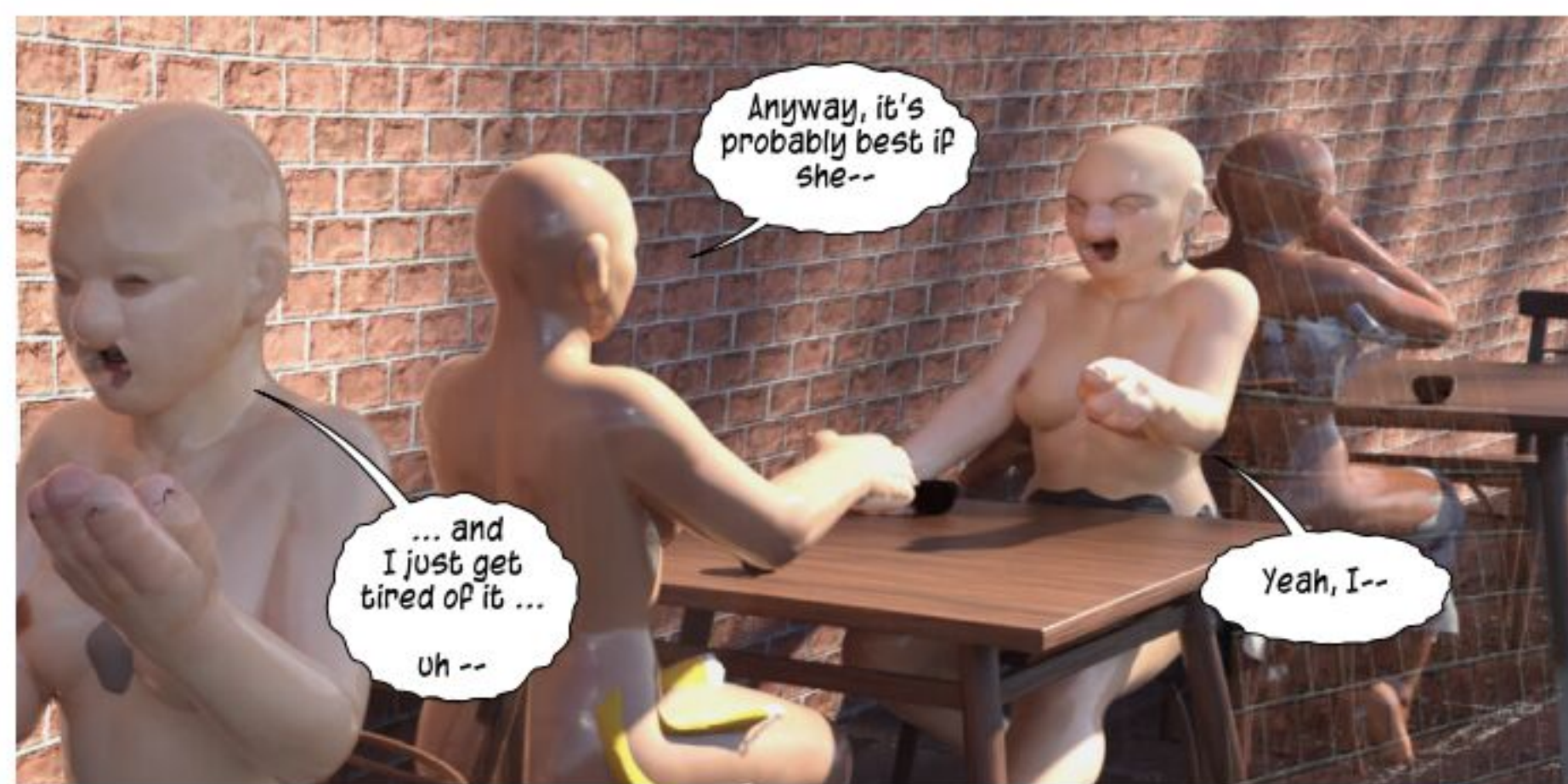
Oo! Hoo oaro dod oou oase oo soub oim ooWo?



Ooooo
ooo ooooooo
Oo ooo ooooo
oooo

Ooo oo ooo
ooooo ooo oooo
Ooooo oo ooooooo

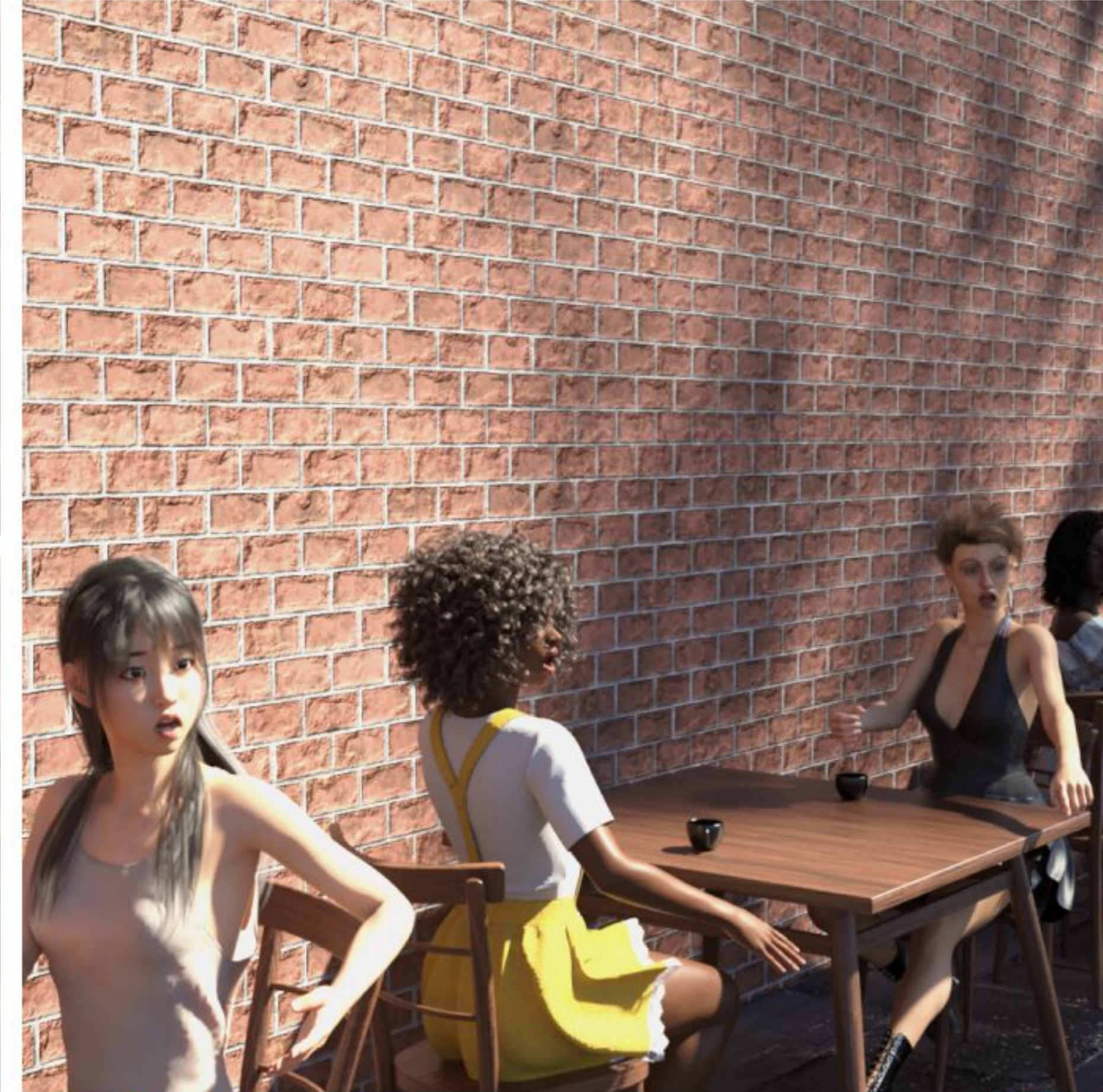
Oooo
ooo oo
ooooooo ooo



Anyway, it's probably best if she--

... and I just get tired of it ...
uh--

Yeah, I--



SLEEPLESS PART ONE

RIPPLE

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

EFFECTS #14

RUBY STOPS BY MORPHIC LABS, WHERE SHE HAS ASKED AZU TO CREATE A SPECIAL "ALGORITHMIC APPLIANCE"--AN ITEM OF CLOTHING THAT HAS ALTERING EFFECTS ON THE WEARER (AND SOMETIMES THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND THE WEARER) WHEN WORN.

I have to tell you, I have some misgivings. If it wasn't you, I'm not sure I would have done it.

I mean, your explanation was valid ... but I'm not sure I'd have believed it coming from anyone else.



Yeah, I'm having some trouble with it myself. I don't like turning down a client, and it's not even close to the weirdest thing I've done ... but maybe I should have said no.

Still, I feel like I'm committed now.

It's very important that you remember to take it off her when you're done. There's no cutoff trigger for the effect.

Got it. Thank you, Azu. Don't forget to bill me!



No danger of that. Believe it or not, this was four days' work.

Hey, any progress on Pinding Melinda?

No. Leyna's been working on it with our friends. I've been unable to help much the last few weeks. But if they've had a breakthrough, I haven't heard about it.



Well, keep me in the loop. If there's anything I can do or make that will help bring her down--

I mean, I don't want to sound overly vicious, but ...

No, I understand.

Actually--if it's not too personal--I notice that you haven't worn your robot outfit since all that happened. Bad associations?

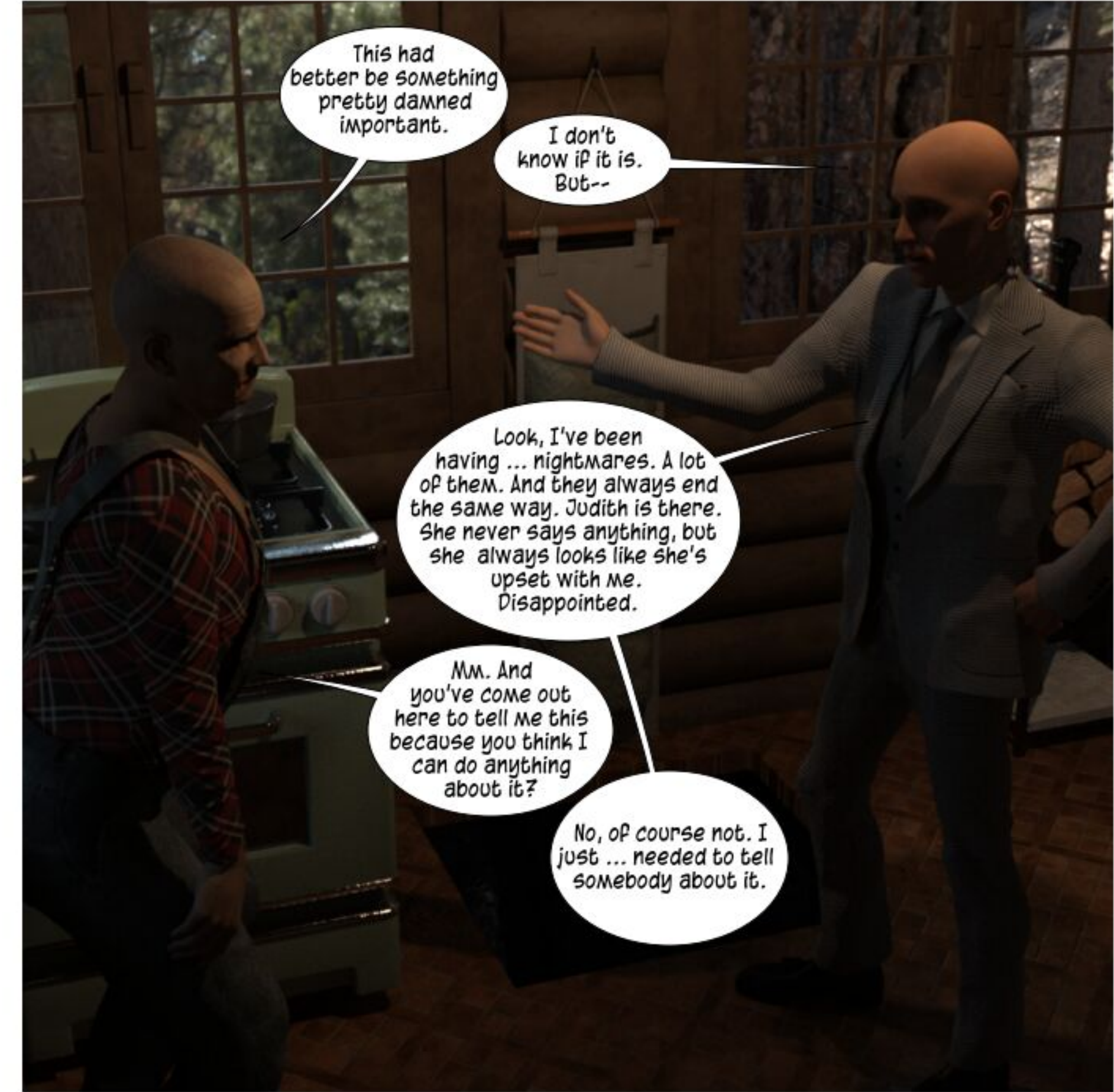
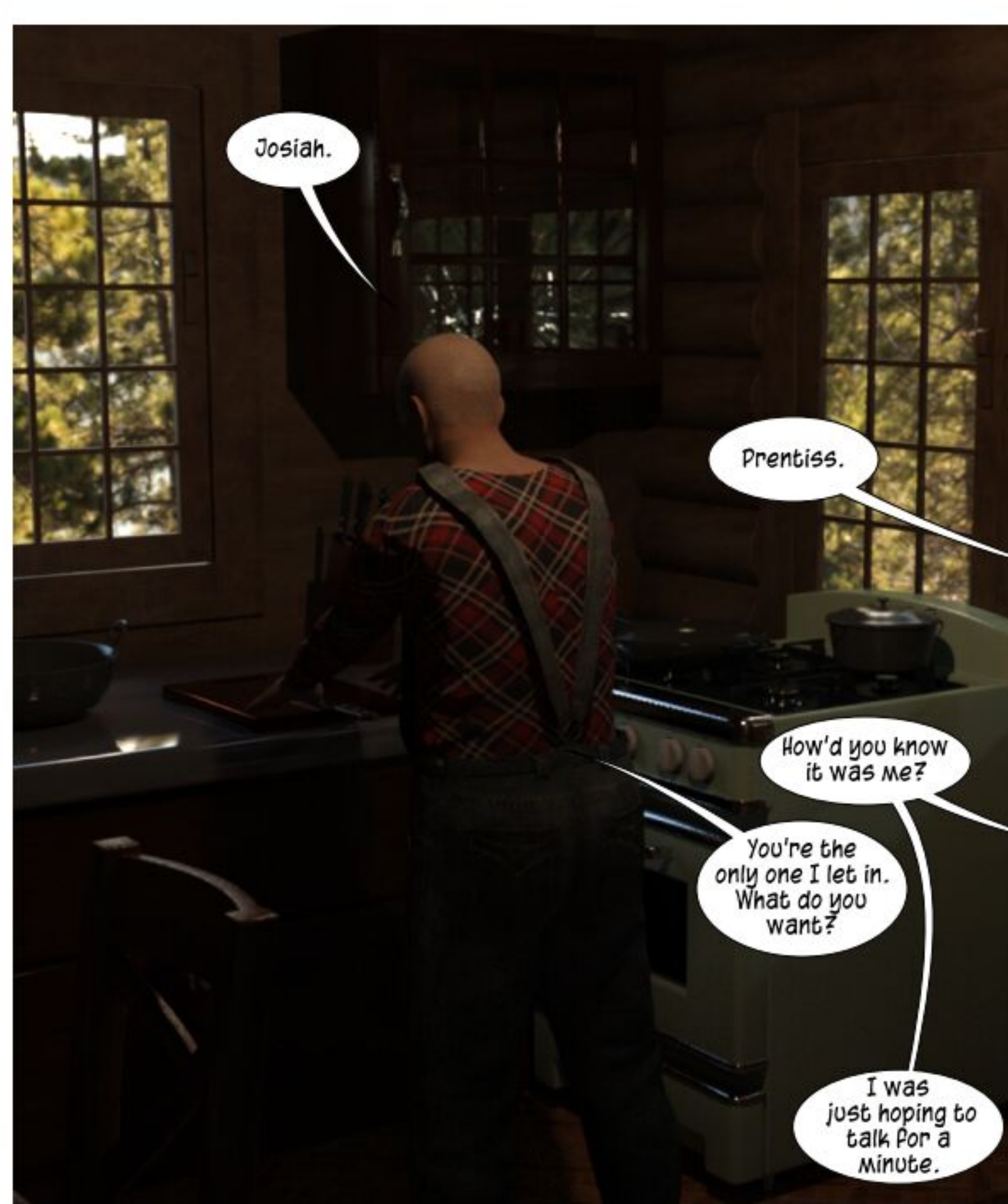
Yeah. I can't bring myself to do it.

I'd had that look for too long anyway. I need something new, but I'm still trying to figure out what.



SLEEPER SQUADS #5 AND #11, RESPECTIVELY. MELINDA'S VERSION OF EVENTS IS A BIT WARPED ... JUST LIKE MELINDA. -T

MEANWHILE, ELSEWHERE ...



RUBY HAS HER FINAL PRE-SCENARIO CONSULTATION WITH HER CLIENT, PAULINE "HILL."



I apologize for going over it again, but it's necessary. Informed consent is very important, and once the scenario progresses past a point, you won't be in a position to give it. Or stop the scenario, unless you recall. So I need to be absolutely sure you want to proceed.

I suppose I'm putting a lot of trust in you, aren't I? Does that make you nervous?

Me? No. I know there won't be any actual harm done. But if it makes you nervous, then we should get that in the open.

I understand. Well, perhaps it should, but it doesn't. Actually, all I feel is eagerness. I wonder if that's wrong of me.



At any rate, you continue to have my full consent. Don't worry about that.

... Is it too late to make a request, though? I think it's probably pretty small ...

What is it?

The other person ... may I specify what she's, ah, wearing?

Is that ridiculous?

No. Sometimes it's very important. What would you like?

A full skintight bodysuit. Hood, hands, feet, all of it. Eye and mouth holes, and a zipper at the crotch.

... Latex. Bright blue.



Oh!

... Yes. Of course.

Anything you want.



... That's a picture of Pauline Barker.

Why do you ask?

Ah, damn.

Because she's my client.

She's not calling herself "Barker" around me, of course. I would never have guessed, if she hadn't made a very specific request today.

I've told you about the scenario I found Pauline in, in Melinda's lair*. I think ...

I think she's trying to reproduce it. No, that's not right. I think she's trying to take it past that. Way past that. As far as she can take it.

* SS #11 - T



Is that ... healthy? I mean, should you stop it, now that you know?

It should be okay. People don't pay for this kind of thing to torture themselves, unless they think it's cathartic. And she commented today that she was eager. That doesn't sound like catharsis.

I think she found a kink, and now she's trying to figure out the extents of it.

A kink? For that?

Sure. You know, people get hot from some really horrible things sometimes. Things that no one would want to go near unless it was a safe situation. A fantasy. Get it? It doesn't mean she liked what Melinda did. It means she realizes she would have liked it, if it had been a game instead.

And now she wants to try out the game.



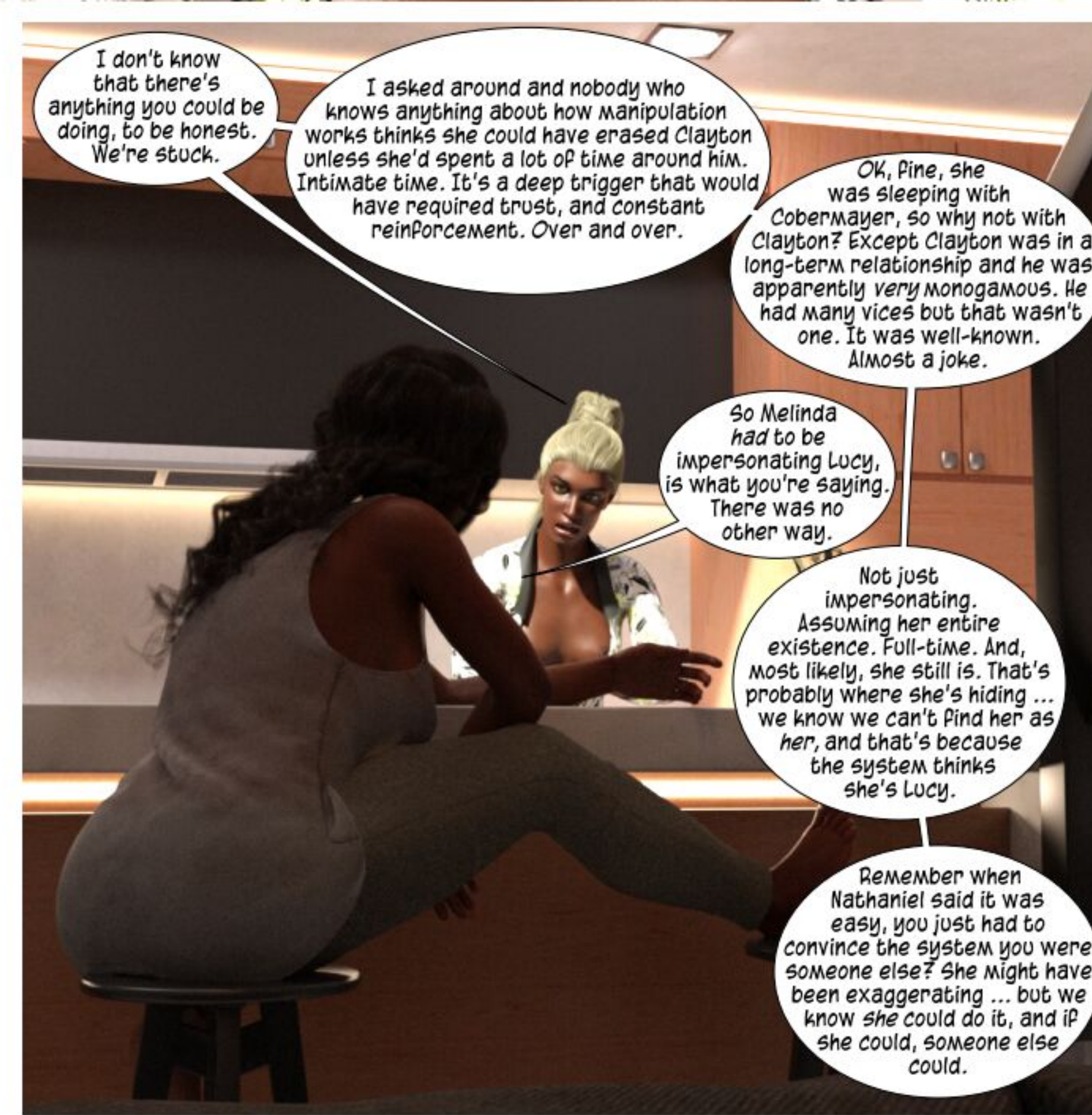
I do feel guilty about not being able to tell her I know who she is. It feels unfair.

But Midnight is still insisting that we try to keep Barkers from knowing our faces more than they do already.

Anyway, thank you for the confirmation.

How's the Melinda hunt going? Azu was asking about it.

I'm sorry I haven't been more available to help.



I don't know that there's anything you could be doing, to be honest. We're stuck.

I asked around and nobody who knows anything about how manipulation works thinks she could have erased Clayton unless she'd spent a lot of time around him. Intimate time. It's a deep trigger that would have required trust, and constant reinforcement. Over and over.

OK, fine, she was sleeping with Cobermayer, so why not with Clayton? Except Clayton was in a long-term relationship and he was apparently very monogamous. He had many vices but that wasn't one. It was well-known. Almost a joke.

So Melinda had to be impersonating Lucy, is what you're saying. There was no other way.

Not just impersonating. Assuming her entire existence. Full-time. And, most likely, she still is. That's probably where she's hiding ... we know we can't find her as her, and that's because the system thinks she's Lucy.

Remember when Nathaniel said it was easy, you just had to convince the system you were someone else? She might have been exaggerating ... but we know she could do it, and if she could, someone else could.



So go haul in Lucy, then.

Well, we don't have any proof. We can't put her in an isolation hood or whatever just because of a theory.

Didn't the Jumpers* say she'd started up her secret club again? Track her, wait for her to go there. Then you have evidence.

Right! And that's the problem. We've been tracking her.

Lucy has not left her personal space since Clayton got erased. Not once. Not so much as a foot across the threshold.

So either the theory is wrong, or she's found some new trick which shouldn't be possible.

And that's where we are. Hey, you want to stay for dinner? I'm making chowder.

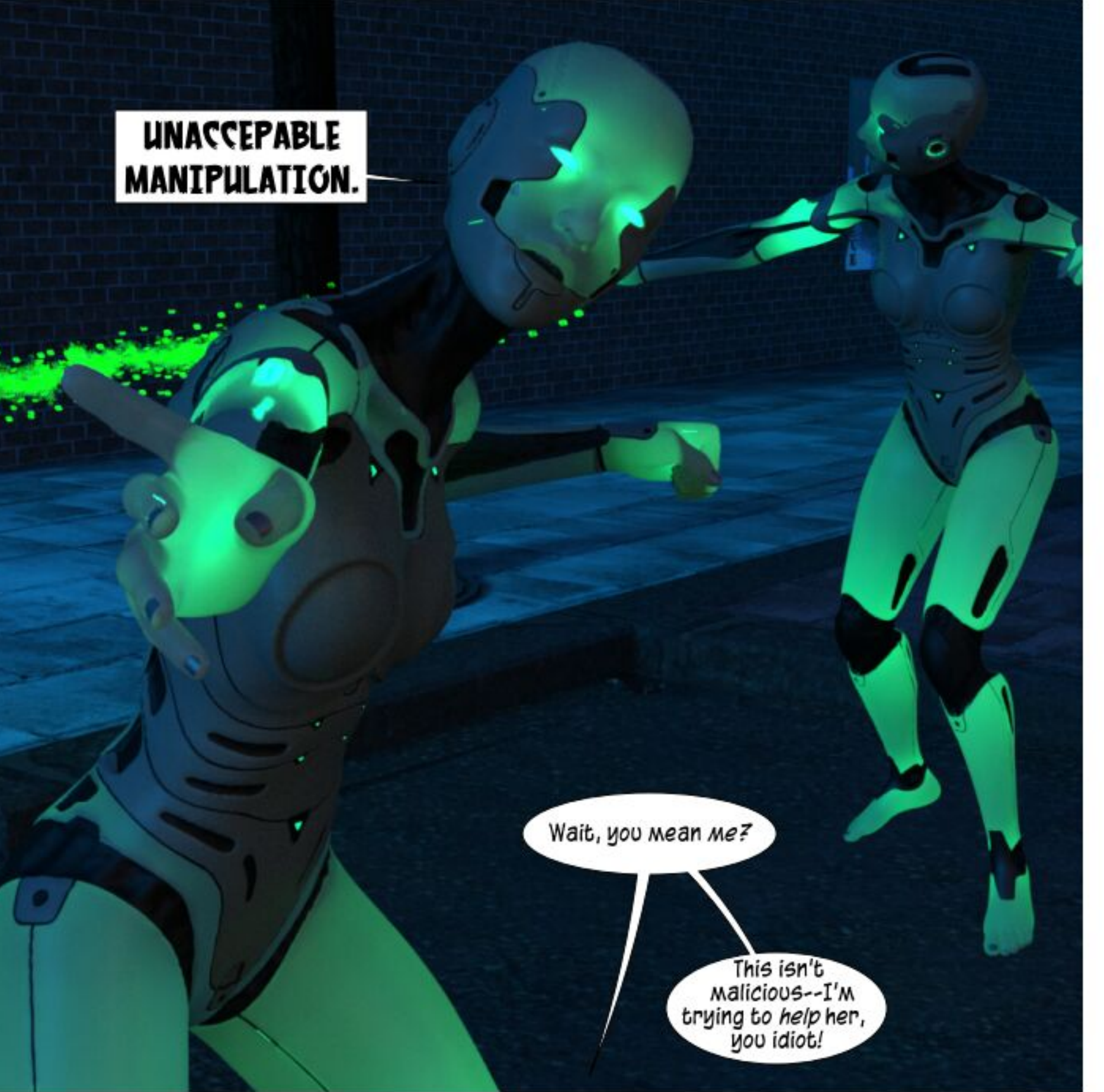
Yum! ... But I can't. I have a date with Doreen. Part business. I hope it's only part business.

* RUBY MEANS GINA AND ESPERANZA, WHOM YOU JUST SAW ON THE PREVIOUS PAGE. -T



DINNER AT THE REGULAR PLACE. DOREEN WAS RECRUITED FOR PAULINE'S SCENARIO WEEKS AGO, BUT HAD NOT YET BEEN TOLD ANY OF THE DETAILS.





A FEW DAYS LATER. RUBY, LEYNA, AND THE JUMPERS HAVE ASSEMBLED TO COMPARE NOTES.



... definitely on the increase. Ranza and I are now encountering at least one event a day, and that's just the ones where we happen to be nearby.

I sort of feel like we have to change priorities ... of course, I'm not sure what we can do. We don't even know what these events are.

That's not completely true.



I was able to get permission to access some of the deeper records. That's a privacy breach, but this is starting to look like something that demands investigation, as you say. Point is, this part's confidential.

But the records don't tell us who or what the initial vector is. Sure, we can see who was in the area just before it started to happen, but we don't know which of them--if any--was the catalyst.

I'm trying to go through the events looking for common threads. It's slow work--there's a lot of data to sift.

What happens is something passes through the area of effect, and the alterations happen in a spreading but weakening wave after the whatever-it-is passes through. Like a boat leaving a trail of ripples.

The good news is, the data alterations are brief and self-correcting. Maybe not pleasant to experience, but they seem to pass quickly and leave no lasting effects.

Or at least they'd pass quickly without effect if those damned robots or whatever they are didn't show up ...



Are the two related? I mean, the robot things never appeared before these ripples started happening, right?

Robots that can appear anywhere, smell anomalies, and zap people into recalling--that sounds like something that takes real juice to make. Some big shot's behind that for sure.



Not recalling. Only you can do your recall. No one else, no matter how powerful. This was an interrupt. Woke me all the way up.

But, yeah, that just makes your point even stronger. Barkers have to authorize interrupts, and these whatsits are doing something that crosses their property lines ... that's like pulling teeth.

Problem is, we've asked all our usual sources who know what's going on in high places. Nobody will admit to knowing anything about the Anomaly Patrol.

So even if they are connected, that just means we have one mystery instead of two.



THE MEETING BREAKS UP WITHOUT A SATISFACTORY PLAN.

Good luck at your thing tonight. Please don't murder Lou.

Ha! I wouldn't do that to you. Though I won't say I wasn't tempted when they insisted we attend ...

I mean, I see Lou's point ... when you have an unexpected success, you don't hide under a rock.

But I have a suspicion they're going to try to push me into doing more passives now that this one's done well*. That's not really what I want to do, at least not regularly.

*APPARENTLY "THE FISHER CASE," SEEN LAST ISSUE, WAS A HIT! --T



Oh, by the way ... I had a thought after we talked the other day.

Melinda replaced Lucy, right? What happened to the original Lucy? I mean, we know Lucy existed long before that.

Hmm. I guess she hid the original Lucy somewhere ... somewhere we still haven't found.

Right ... but is that allowed? I mean, wouldn't having two people with the same identity confuse the system?

I was wondering if maybe she had to come up with some other identity to drop the real Lucy into. Somehow.



LATER THAT NIGHT ...

Lou, the deal was you would do all the talking and I would just smile and look cute.

I'm about to hit my quota on inane banter for the night.

Not my fault if they want to talk to you instead of me.

They know me already. You're the novelty of the moment.

Come on. Over there's the person I really brought you here to meet.

Serene Barker, Ruby Martinez. Serene, I don't think I've met your friend?



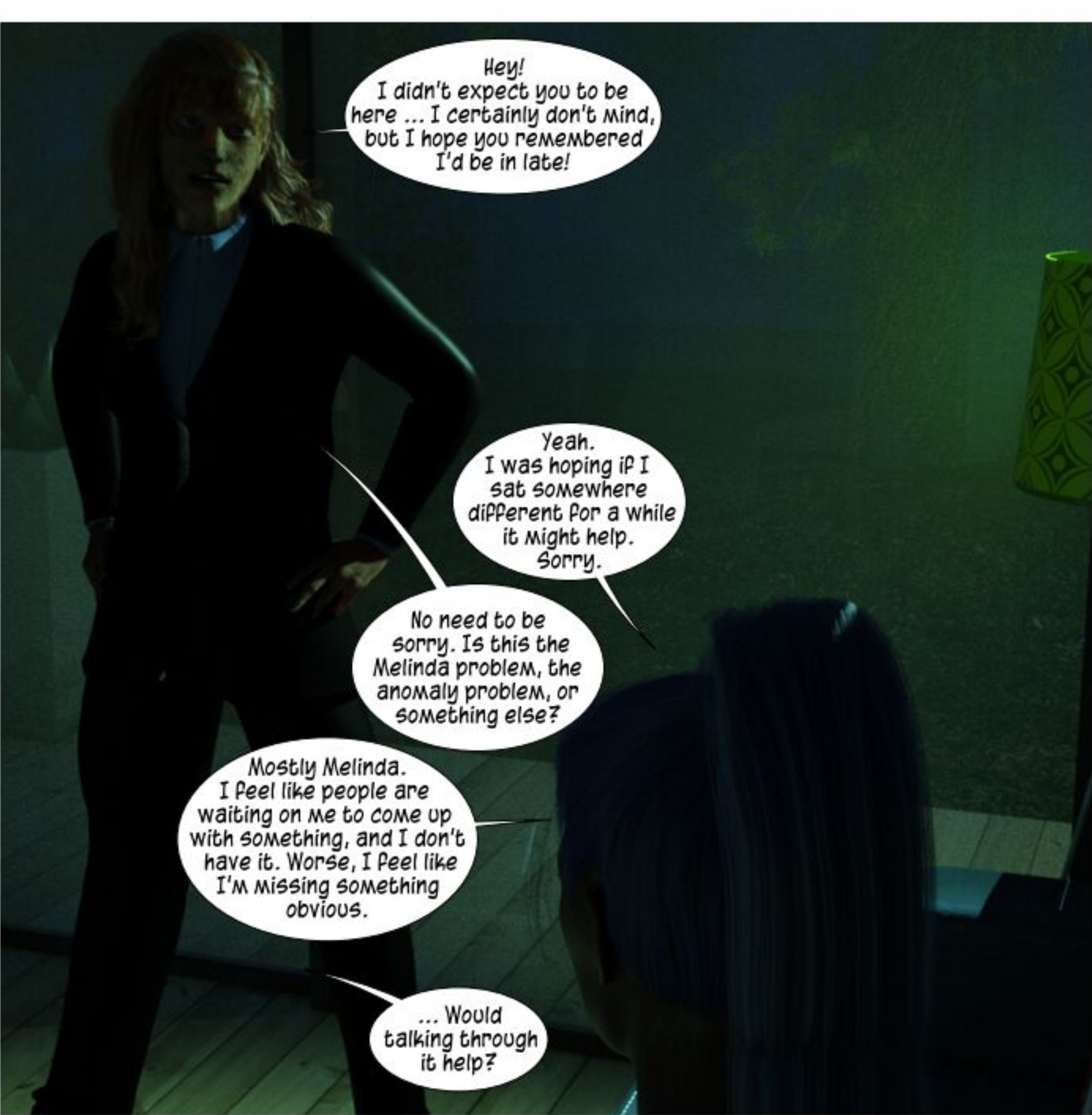
No, I don't believe you have. Corazon Estilero, Lou Laurence.

Lou is responsible for most of Serene Entertainment's biggest successes, Corazon.

And Ms. Martinez has just added another to the list. I hope you're planning more in the future!

Ah ... well, I'll do my best.

Oh, I am dying to hear what Leyna knows about this.



Hey! I didn't expect you to be here ... I certainly don't mind, but I hope you remembered I'd be in late!

Yeah. I was hoping if I sat somewhere different for a while it might help. Sorry.

No need to be sorry. Is this the Melinda problem, the anomaly problem, or something else?

Mostly Melinda. I feel like people are waiting on me to come up with something, and I don't have it. Worse, I feel like I'm missing something obvious.

... Would talking through it help?



LEYNA RECAPS THE MELINDA SITUATION.

... And I just don't see how we proceed from here. If she's not Lucy, and she's not herself, she could be anybody. She could be anywhere.

Ruby had this idea that she might have needed another identity to put the real Lucy in, in order to replace her. It's an interesting idea but I don't think it helps much.

You know, I think part of the problem is you've just got too many plates in the air right now. Between this and the anomalies and the robot things, you're having trouble focusing on anything.

Let's try to isolate one part of it and see what we can figure out. ... Actually, let's consider Ruby's idea for a second, because something just occurred to me.



Melinda comes along. Clayton's already got a steady lover, and she needs to replace that lover so she can get into Clayton's head.

She can't put Lucy in some oubliette somewhere; she hasn't got a pied-a-terre again yet. She's rebuilding at that point, after Cobermayer. So she has to temporarily make Lucy be someone else.

Who would she pick? It'd be an identity that wouldn't raise eyebrows if she were around them all the time. Someone she could keep a constant eye on. She'd have to; otherwise she'd worry they might break out.

Oh. Oh! Lucy has a maid. Her name is Annette.

OK! So Melinda drops Lucy into "Annette" so she can become Lucy.

Then the bust happens. Melinda has to hide. But she doesn't want to stay Lucy; she knows Lucy will be watched like a hawk ...



... So she switches! Lucy becomes Lucy again, Melinda becomes Annette, and she cuts big holes in Lucy's memory so Lucy doesn't remember being Annette --

You are a genius!

-- MMMH! --

... I do what I can.



WITH RUBY AS BACKUP, LEYNA PAYS LUCY A VISIT THE NEXT DAY.

I don't think I should talk to you ... aren't you with the people who erased Clayton?

We're trying to find the person who erased Clayton. So we can punish her.

Oh! Well, that's good ... I like that ... What did you say you wanted?

Actually, we were hoping to talk to your maid.

My ...? Oh, wait, I remember ... But she's not here anymore. I guess she quit? Maybe? She left right after ... after ...

You know, it's funny, I don't even remember hiring her ... but I must have ... there's a lot of things I have trouble remembering ...

You know, I think we need to get her some help.

I was just thinking the same thing. There were an awful lot of empty bottles.

So "Annette" punted as soon as no one was looking, huh? Does that put us back to start?

No. I take it as confirmation. We know what we're looking for now, and Midnight's told me "to hell with privacy, find her," as far as access policy goes. Shouldn't take long.



TWO DAYS LATER:

Hey, Leyna, what's up?

No, you're not ... I'm just doing a final walkthrough of the set.

You did?

... That was faster than I expected. You've got definite data?

Oh, that's funny. That's a block down the street from this scenario space ... I mean, I know connection locations probably don't have anything to do with where they really are ...

So what's the next step? Try to raid the place?

... oh.

Leyna, I can't do it tonight. I absolutely can't. Tonight is Pauline's scenario. This is months of planning.

Well, that's your decision. With Gina and Esperanza it should be OK. Just ... stay safe, all right? If I get done with Pauline and I find out you got trapped in something, I'm gonna come interrupt you with my bare hands.

Yup. Good luck to you too. Wish them luck as well.

'Bye.

NIGHT FALLS IN ONE OF THE SEEDIER PARTS OF SHIBUYA ...



Ooh! I'll catch up, OK? All of a sudden I'm starved.

You're gonna eat that? Well, don't die. See you there.

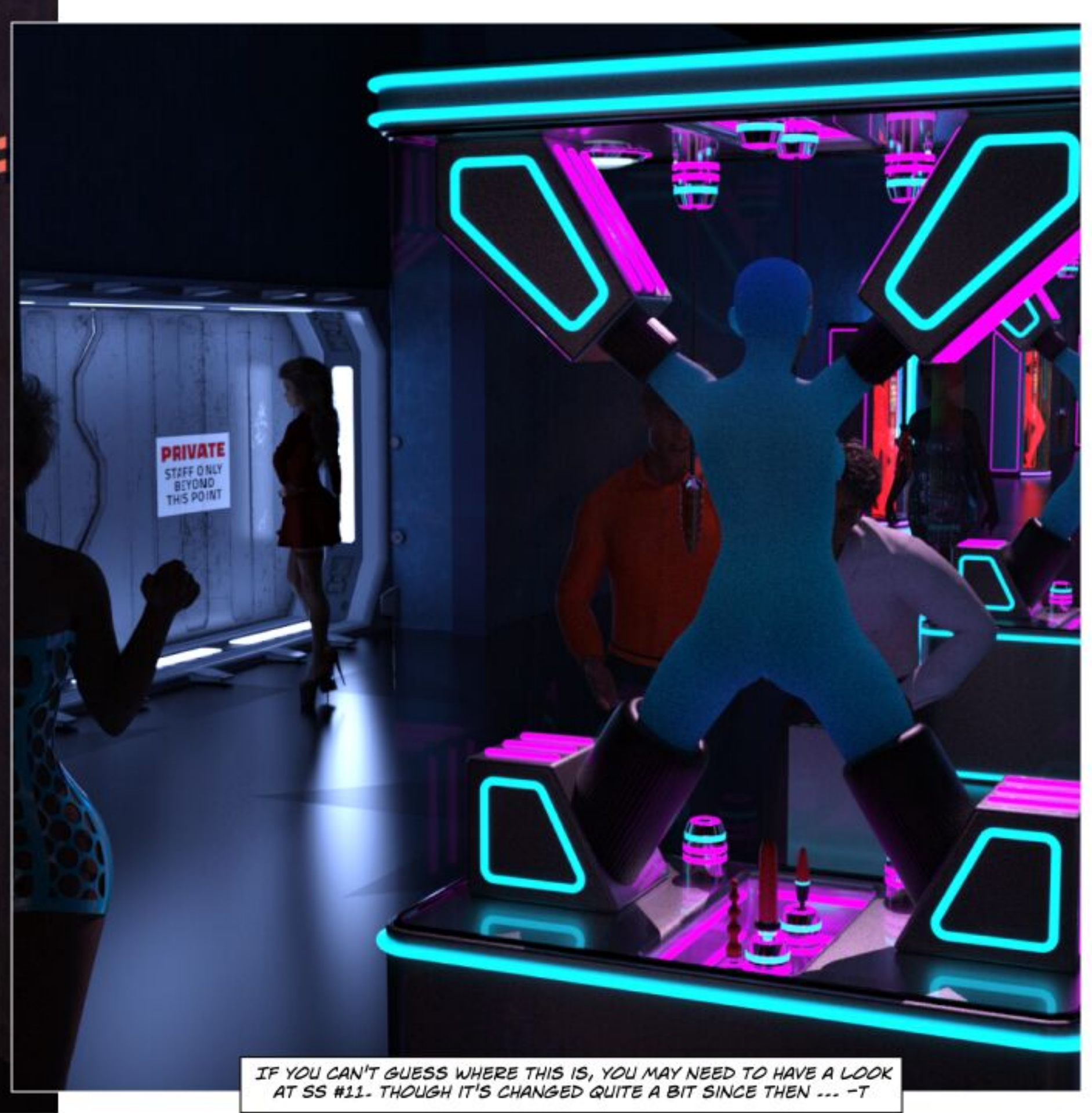


-- NOM --

THUD



Good evening, Ma'am. Welcome back.



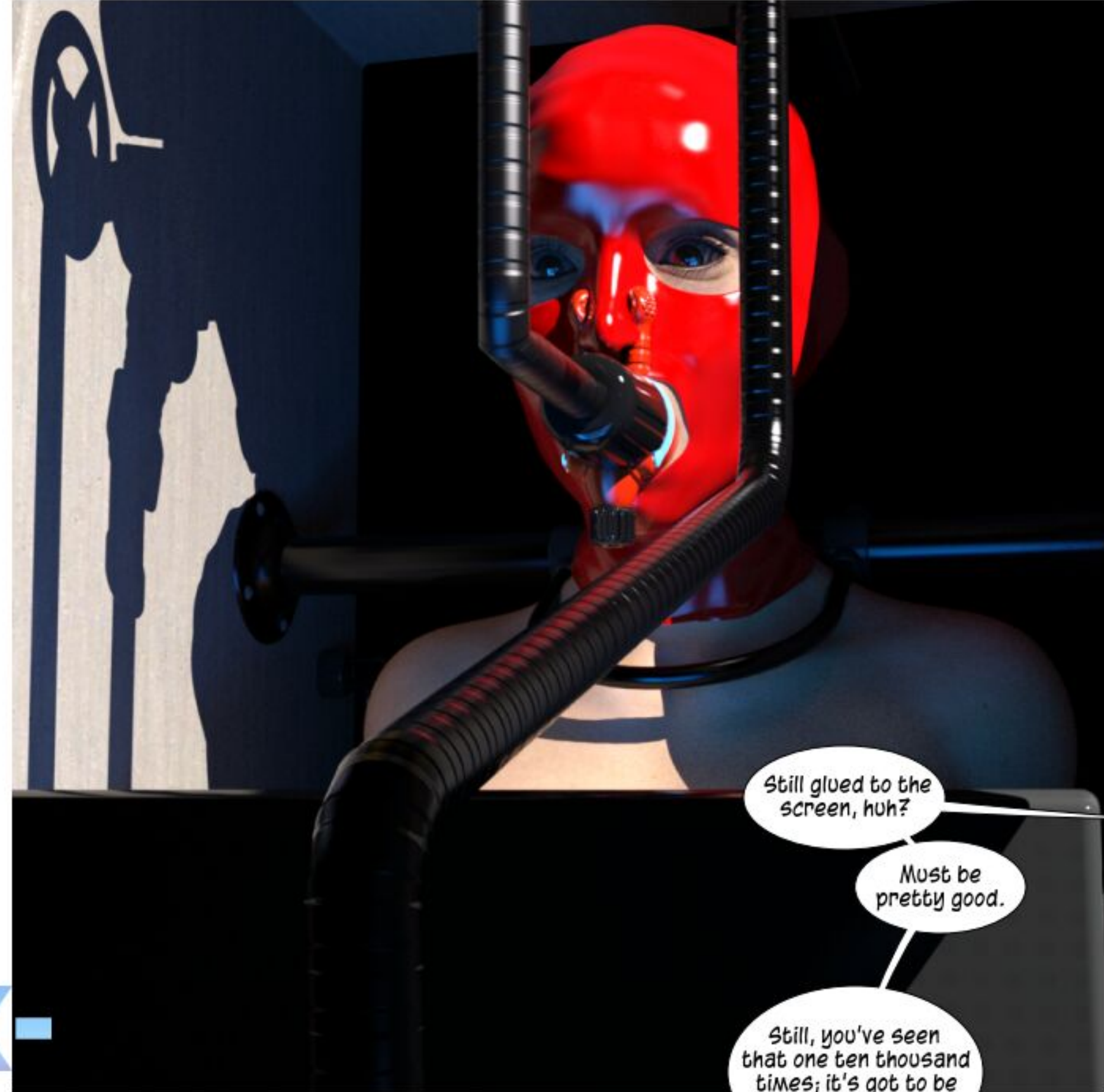
IF YOU CAN'T GUESS WHERE THIS IS, YOU MAY NEED TO HAVE A LOOK AT SS #11. THOUGH IT'S CHANGED QUITE A BIT SINCE THEN ... -T



OK, Polks, here we go!



-CLICK-



Still glued to the screen, huh?

Must be pretty good.

Still, you've seen that one ten thousand times; it's got to be getting old.



I think enough of your brain is mush by now. Let's get you out of that box.



-- UUUUH! --

Careful!

You've been in there a long time, your legs aren't going to like this.

Also--heh--you're a lot more top-heavy than you used to be.



Don't try to talk, sweetie, your brain's not built for it now.

Though it's fun to listen to you make those noises. It's almost like you think you can communicate.

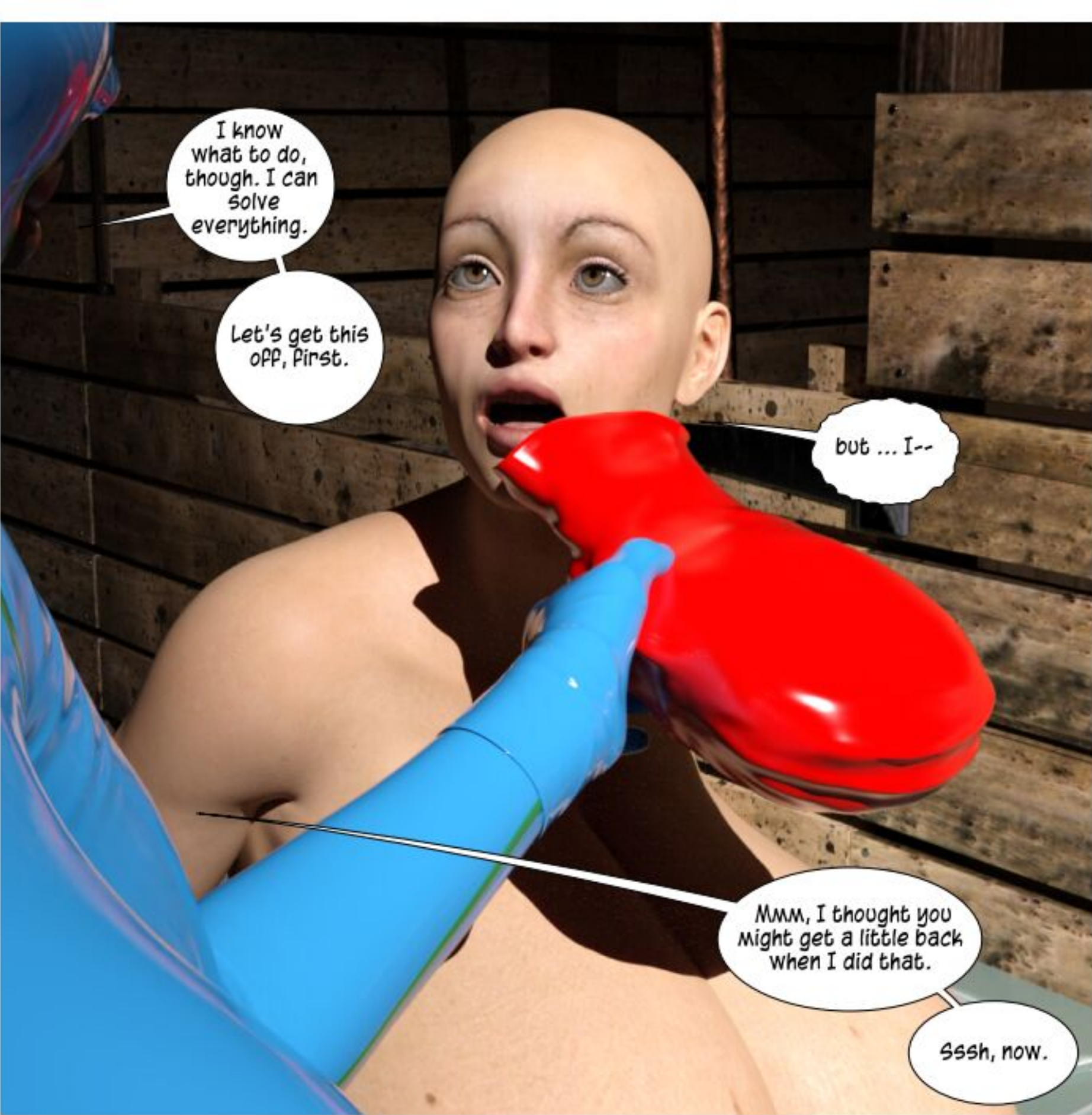
-- UH? --



God, those tits! I'm not surprised you're having trouble standing. Do you like when I touch them? I bet you do.

You know, you can't go back now. If anyone saw you, they'd say "what is that?" You probably don't even remember who you were anyway. Poor little dummy.

Does it feel good, having all that empty in your head?



I know what to do, though. I can solve everything.

Let's get this opp, first.

but ... I--

Mmm, I thought you might get a little back when I did that.

Sssh, now.



I have a new mask for you. A better mask.

...better ...?

Hold still.



... but ... I don't want



Aw. Who's a pretty cow, huh?

See? No more problem. Nice and simple. Nothing in your head but food, sex, and "my tits are Pull, Milk Me."



-- snort --

In you go, girl!

Hope you like it; this is where you live now.

I bet you can't even understand what I'm saying anymore, you stupid thing.

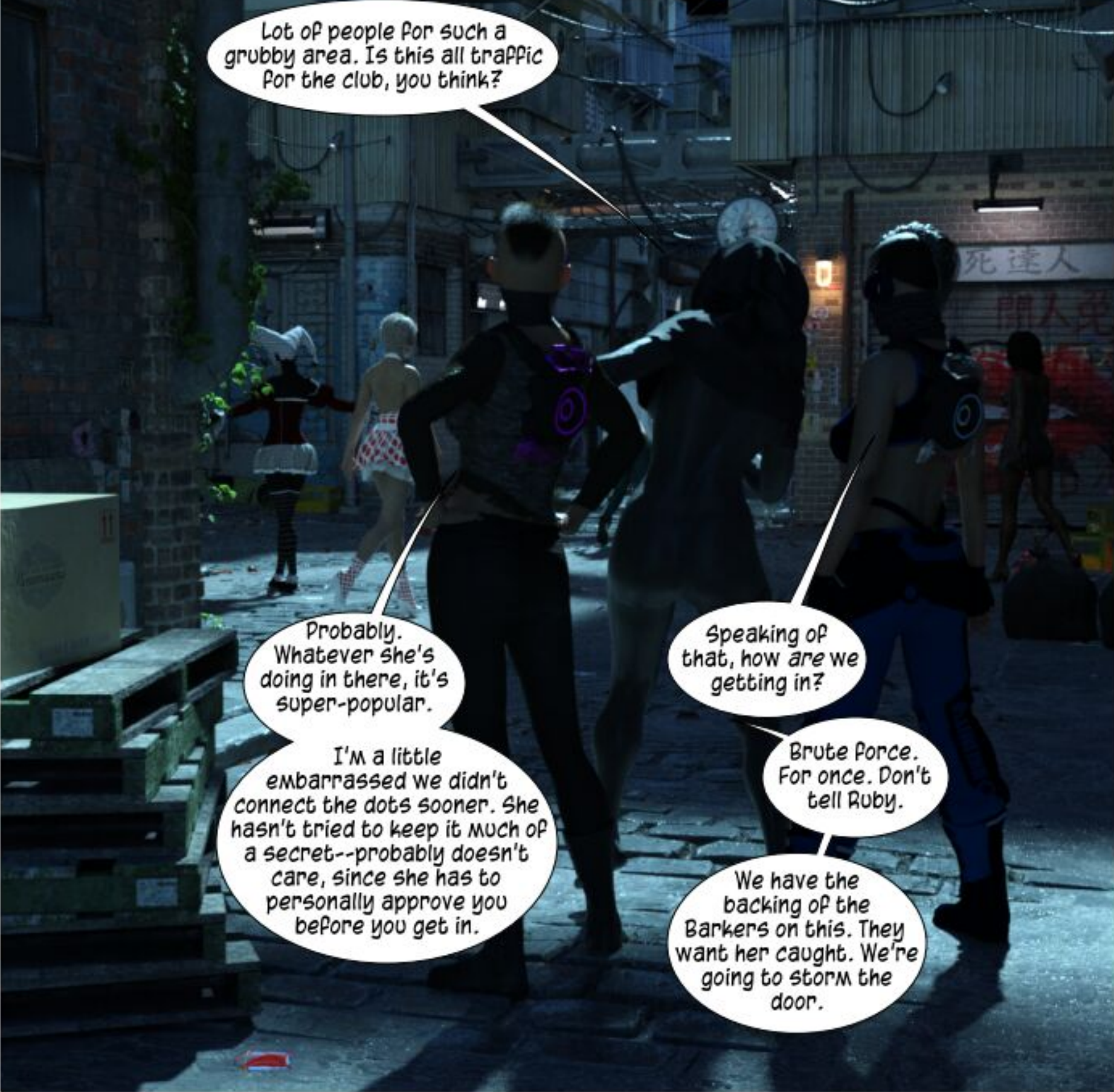


I have one more surprise for you!

I don't have a bull--at least, not yet--but I'm looking forward to using this on you. More than you can imagine.

Now, be a good cow and wait there while I go get the veterinary lube.

HA HA HA HA HA!



Lot of people for such a grubby area. Is this all traffic for the club, you think?

Probably. Whatever she's doing in there, it's super-popular.

I'm a little embarrassed we didn't connect the dots sooner. She hasn't tried to keep it much of a secret--probably doesn't care, since she has to personally approve you before you get in.

Speaking of that, how are we getting in?

Brute Force. For once. Don't tell Ruby.

We have the backing of the Barkers on this. They want her caught. We're going to storm the door.



ykkkkh!

aghk!

rhkkhh!

Ripple! Back away, quick!



Where the hell did that come from? The source must have been right in front of us and we--

Huh. Are they getting Paster on the draw or is it just my imagination?

ykkk!



aghk!

krhh!

... That's new.

Do we follow them?

Yeah. I think so.



Let me go!

Oh, hush.



It's no good pretending. You love this. You want to be captured so your friend can come rescue you.

Except she's not going to this time. I'm going to bury your mind so deep she'll never find you. She'll walk right past you and won't know it.

But you'll know.

I really love that part.



You're horrible! And you're wrong. OK, I'm a sub, I never said I wasn't. But I don't like this! And you don't get to tell yourself I do!



You know what she said, last time?

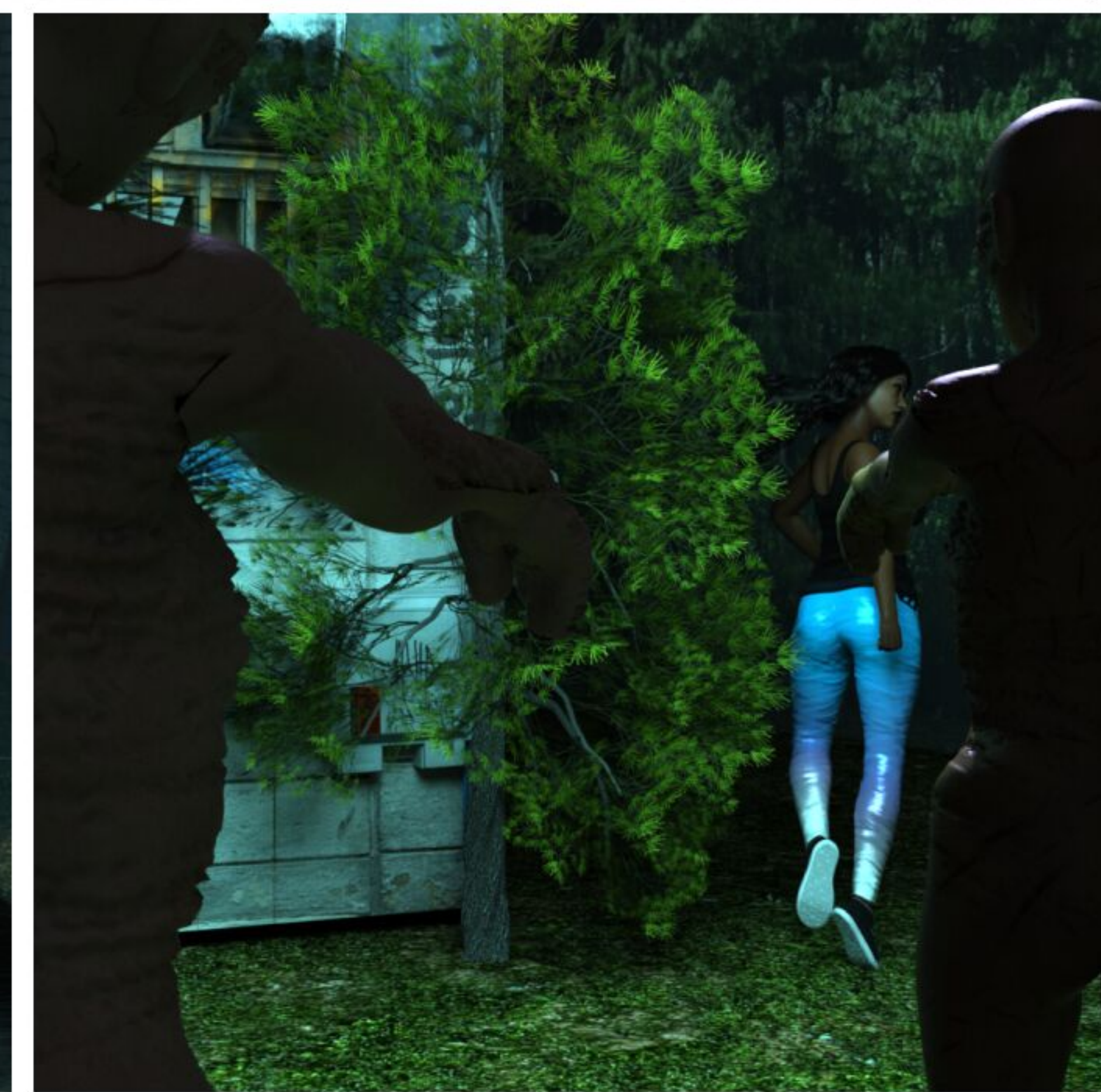
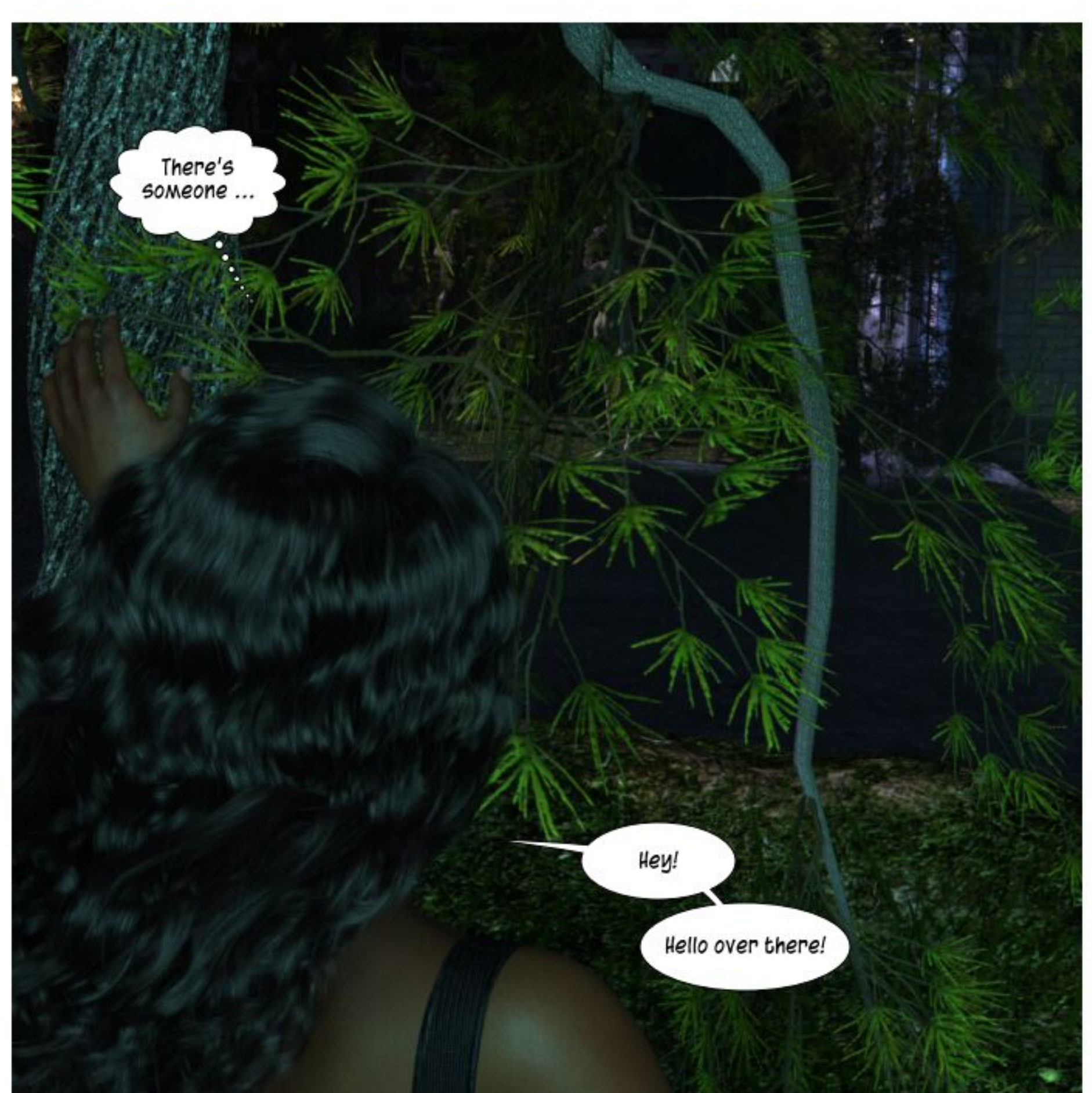
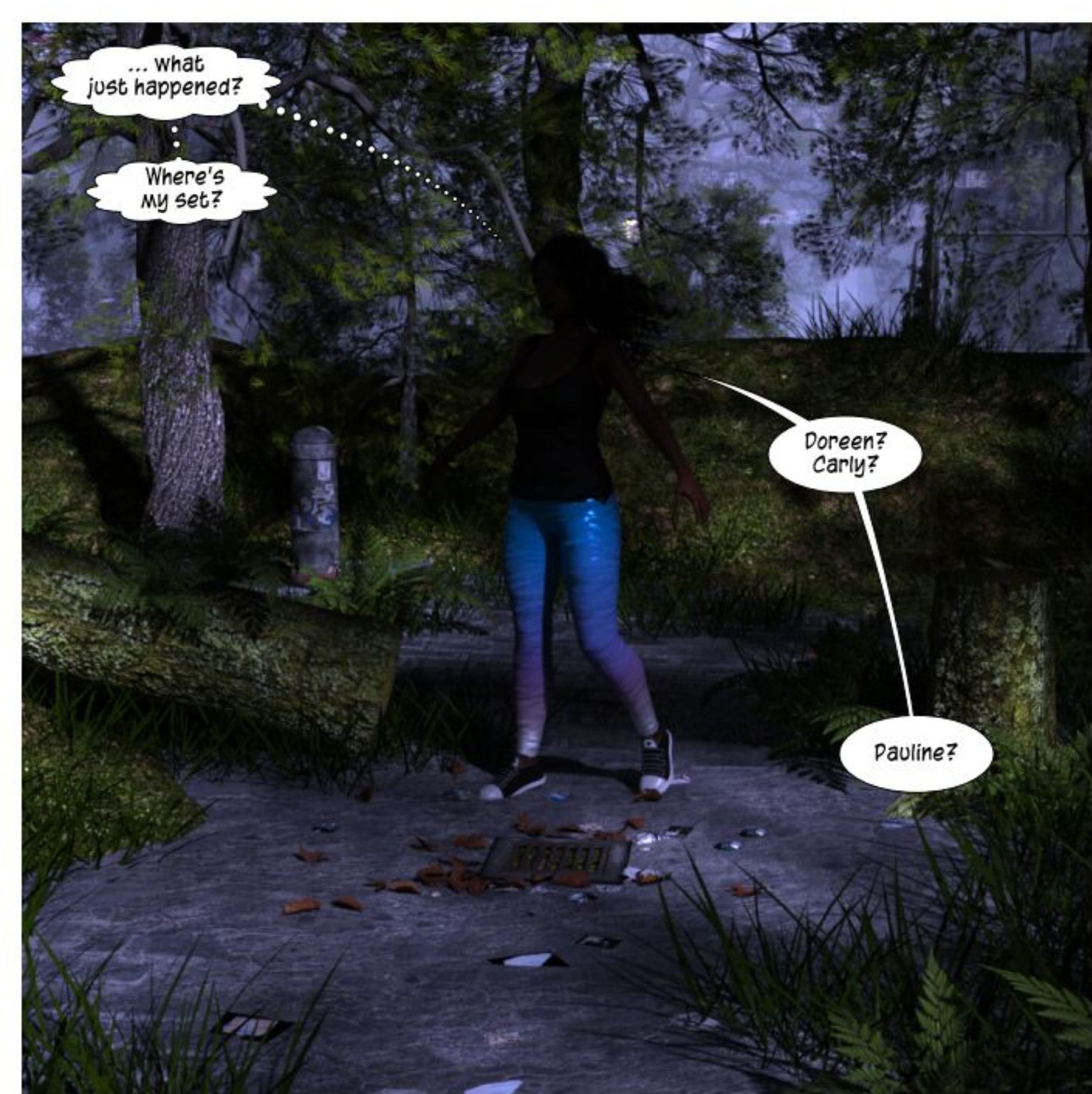
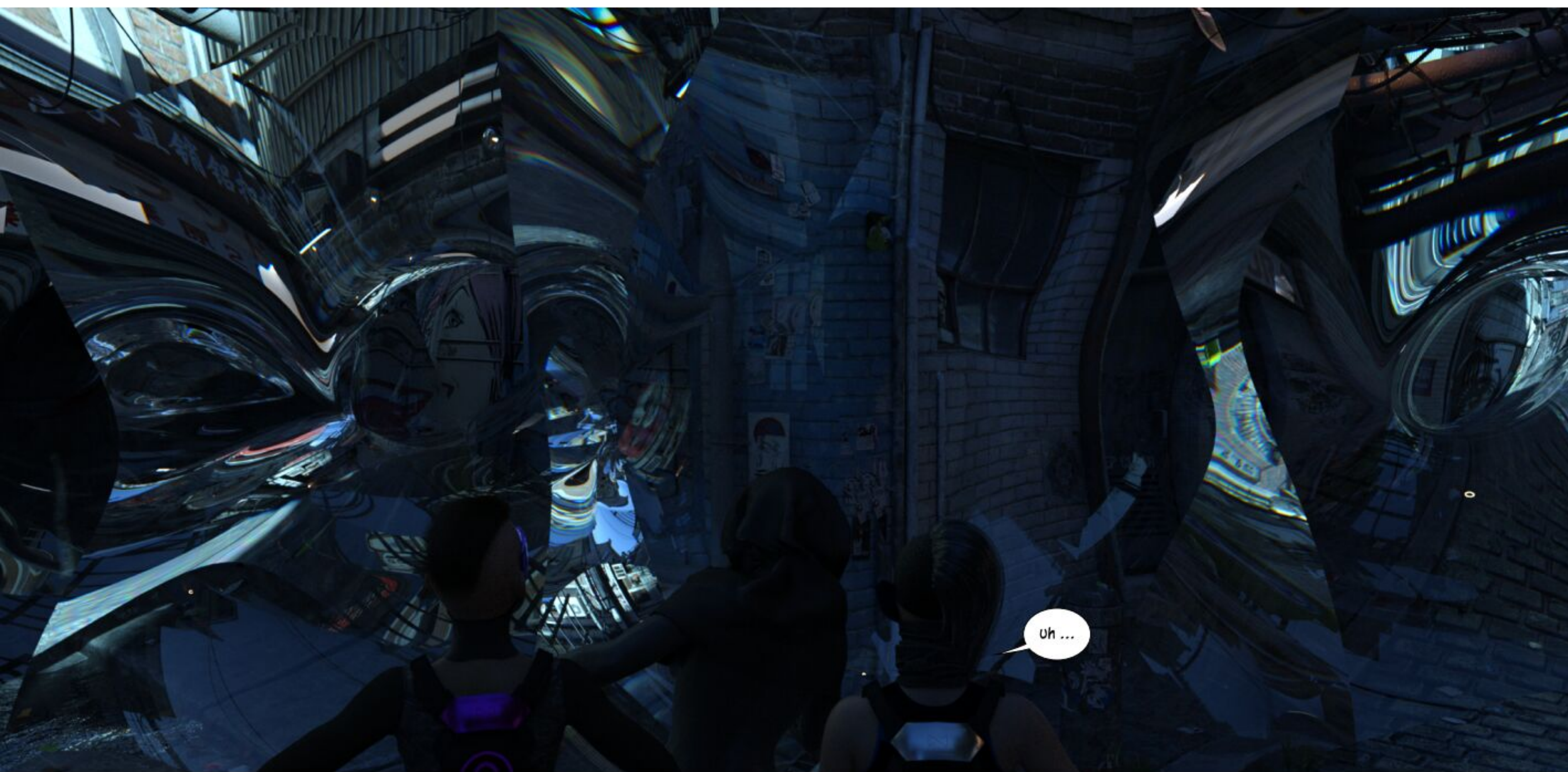
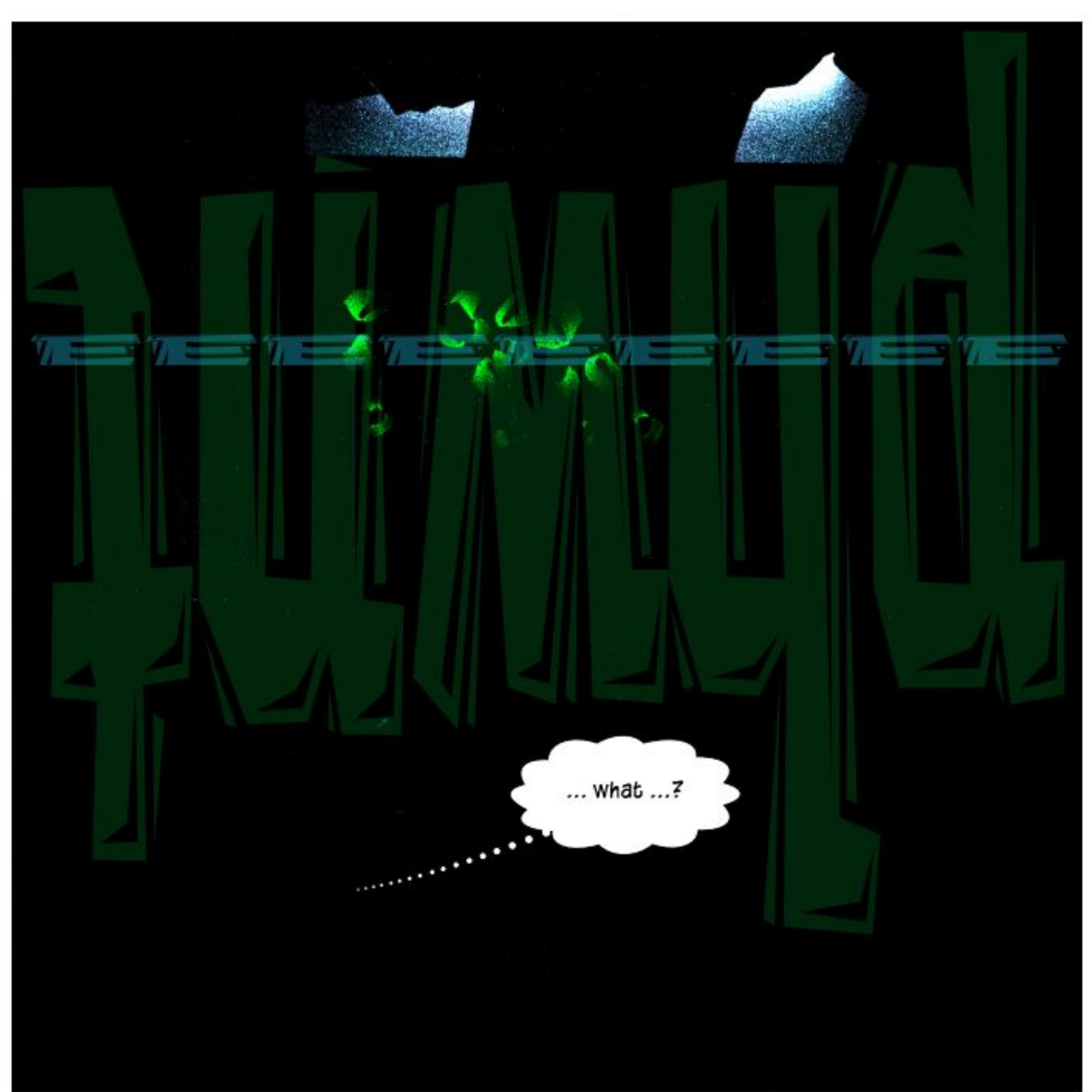
She said nothing you do is real! She said I don't have to believe any of it.

And that means I can--



YEEARRRGH!

Aaaa!
-- hkk --





I sure hope they can't run very fast, or they've got short attention spans or --

aaaaa!!



-- Whew --

I don't know what's down there, but I'm pretty sure that's not the way I want to find out.



Damn it, I'm a director, not an action hero.



i doN'T like it I thought IT would be DIFFerent



it's too DARK why is it ALWAYS dark it nEEDs to not BE dark

uh ...



THERE now it has COLOR it's ALL shiny doN'T you think IT's shiny do YOU like it



YOU don't LIKE it i can tELL you DON't you don't LIKE anyTHING you won't even PLAY right I think you doN't LIKE to play

Uh, hang on ... I didn't say I didn't--



you should LEARN how to pLAY bye-bye!

What? Hey!

AAAAAAA!



... do I have to watch my language or anything? I mean, is this a kiss-ass situation?

Definitely not. Either one.

Don't worry. She's hard to win an argument with, but other than that--



Hello!

Ms. Howard, Ms. Castillo, nice to finally meet you. I'm Midnight.

Sorry to drag you here, but we have a mess.

And a whole lot of unknowns.



What we think is that when the anomaly patrol--our first unknown--located and tried to interrupt the source of the ripple effects--our second unknown--it caused ... well, our third unknown.

You see how sure of our ground we are, eh? Best we can tell is that a complete data discontinuity was created. A total breach. No connective services in there--no phone, monitoring and integrity tools don't work, etc. We have no idea what's going on inside it.

What we do know for certain is that the discontinuity is spreading. It's now nearly twice as big as it was when you witnessed it being formed twelve hours ago.

This is alarming, to say the least.



Is there some way to keep it from spreading?

Externally? We're trying to figure that out. We may not be able to figure it out fast enough.

Those damned robots took what was a minor annoyance and turned it into a potential major catastrophe.

But we think the discontinuity is an active effect. Whatever was making the ripples is generating it, and the theory is, if we stop whatever that is, at best we fix the whole thing, and at worst we stop the spread.

But whatever that is, it's inside the bad zone, right? So ...

Yes. So we have to send someone in there.

How? And, uh, who?



Me.

We have a setup for a continuity chain. Like ... a ForceField around me that hopefully can maintain data integrity. Attached to a lifeline. A connection to the area outside the zone.



But we don't have any idea what's in there, right? Could be a big void. Could be random garbage.

You sure you want to go into that?

I don't see as there's a choice.

Among all the other reasons, I'm sure Ruby is in there. Her phone doesn't respond at all, and she was in a location with a connection point nearby.

There is probably at least one other ... uh, important person ... stuck in there, but you'll have to take my word for it.

We should go in with you.

No. I need you out here, to help me deal with the effects of the spread. We've got a quarantine to run, and I need people I can trust.

And, also ... I need you as plan B if Leyna ... doesn't come out.



Are you sure about this?

Absolutely not.

Heh.



But then, I seldom am.

Wish me luck.

