

A MYSTERY WOMAN HAD SOMEHOW CREATED A DISCONTINUITY WITHIN A4, AN AREA WHERE ONLY HER RULES OF REALITY APPLIED ... UNFORTUNATELY FOR ALL THE OTHER PEOPLE WHO GOT TRAPPED IN THERE WITH HER, AND TRANSFORMED IN VARIOUS WAYS. RUBY WAS ONE OF THE PEOPLE STUCK IN THE DISCONTINUITY. LEYNA WENT IN TO TRY TO FIND HER AND REPAIR IT, AND EVENTUALLY, WITH HELP FROM FRIENDS AND UNUSUAL ALLIES, THEY MANAGED TO DO SO, BUT NOT BEFORE IT HAD SPREAD TO TAKE OVER A HUGE PORTION OF A4. WHEN THE DUST CLEARED, EVERYONE WAS BACK IN THEIR NORMAL FORMS, A4 WAS RESTORED TO WHAT IT HAD BEEN BEFORE THE RUPTURE, AND THE WOMAN WHO'D CREATED IT WAS FOUND COMATOSE, UNABLE TO ANSWER ANY OF THE MANY LINGERING QUESTIONS.

THAT WAS SIX WEEKS AGO. NO ONE HAS COMPLETELY RECOVERED.

TAKE PAULINE BARKER, FOR EXAMPLE. PAULINE WAS IN THE FORM OF A COW WHEN SHE GOT SWEEPED INTO THE DISCONTINUITY (IT'S A LONG STORY), AND SHE SPENT HER TIME IN THERE AS A HORSE. SHE'S ONE OF THE FEW WHO CAN CLAIM TO HAVE ENJOYED THE EXPERIENCE THOROUGHLY. IN HER CASE, THAT'S THE PROBLEM.



A human!
Trespassing in our forest!



Silly human!
Now what should we do with you, hmm?

Ooh!
-- giggle --
Let's change her!

No, please ...
It was a mistake ...



You must want to stay here with us!
We can take care of that!
We'll fix it so you can stay here, 'k?

-- giggle --

... NO ...



You'll be so much happier as a pony!

Cuter, too
-- giggle --

And you won't have to think about all those boring human things!

nnnnooo please ... I ... ah ...

aaaah!

no ... n ...

nnnnneigh!



Wheel!

Now you're just a dumb 'ol horse! But you can stay here forever, so it's OK, right?
-- giggle --
Give us a ride, horse!

Whinnieeaaagh!



-- gasp --

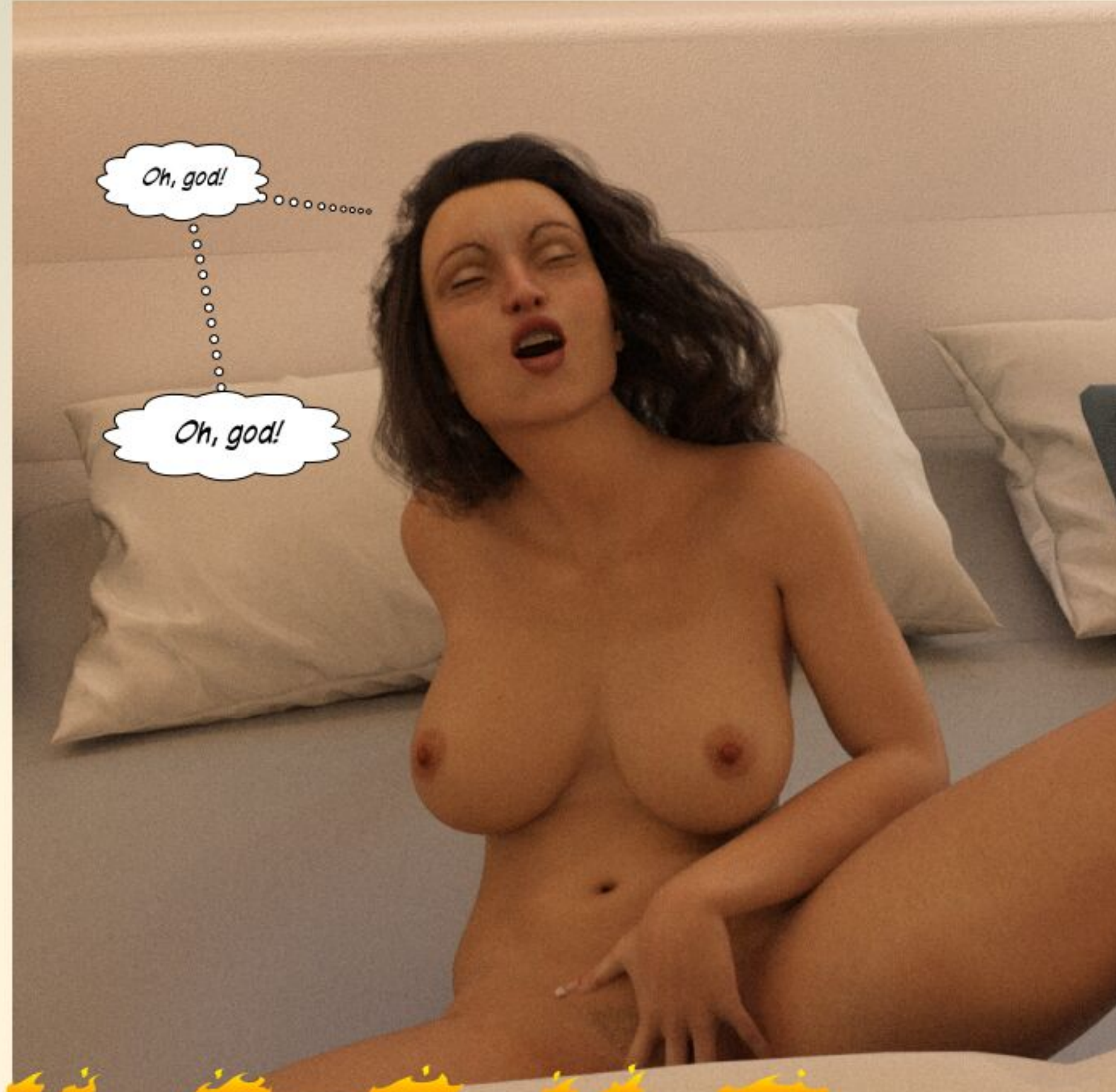
Oh, god.



Oh god

Oh god

Oh god



Oh, god!

Oh, god!

THE WOMAN RUBY AND LEYNA CALL "THE PHANTOM" WAS IN THE DISCONTINUITY TOO, AND THEY WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIX IT WITHOUT HER HELP.

UNLIKE PAULINE, HER PROBLEM ISN'T IN HER DREAMS.



No, no, no, no, no!



RUBY HASN'T BEEN ABLE TO SLOW DOWN ENOUGH SINCE THEN TO PAY ATTENTION TO AFTEREFFECTS.



* SLEEPER SQUAD #7 -T





Help! What's happening?

Make it stop!!

Lorie!
Calm down!

It, uh ... MUST be an effects squib that went off accidentally.

It'll go away by itself in a minute ...



See? All gone.

... Mostly. But the whiskers will fall out on their own.

I was turning into a mouse! Is this how you run a set?

... Look, I don't think we can go any further today. Why don't you go home and recover? We have one more rehearsal slot available ... Carly, I'm sorry, do you mind closing up?

Uh ... no problem.



Great. Just Pucking great.

Now I have to worry about this on top of everything.

And Carly knows perfectly well it wasn't a squib. She's going to want the truth as soon as she gets a chance ...

"The whiskers will fall out on their own?"

You could always pluck them ...



Damn it, if I'd had Doreen this wouldn't have happened ... but every time I call her she replies with a message three days later ...

She says she's super-busy, but I can't shake the feeling she's avoiding me.

BRRT BRRT

DOREEN IS WEARING A "BLISS" SUIT. SEE SS #12. -T

MEANWHILE ...



... the only real obstacle is Ruby Martinez. I don't think it's a good idea to proceed until we take care of her.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IF YOU'RE A REGULAR READER, YOU'VE SEEN ONE OF THESE PEOPLE BEFORE. BUT IT'S NOT SURPRISING YOU DON'T REMEMBER. ALL WILL BECOME CLEAR ... EVENTUALLY. -T



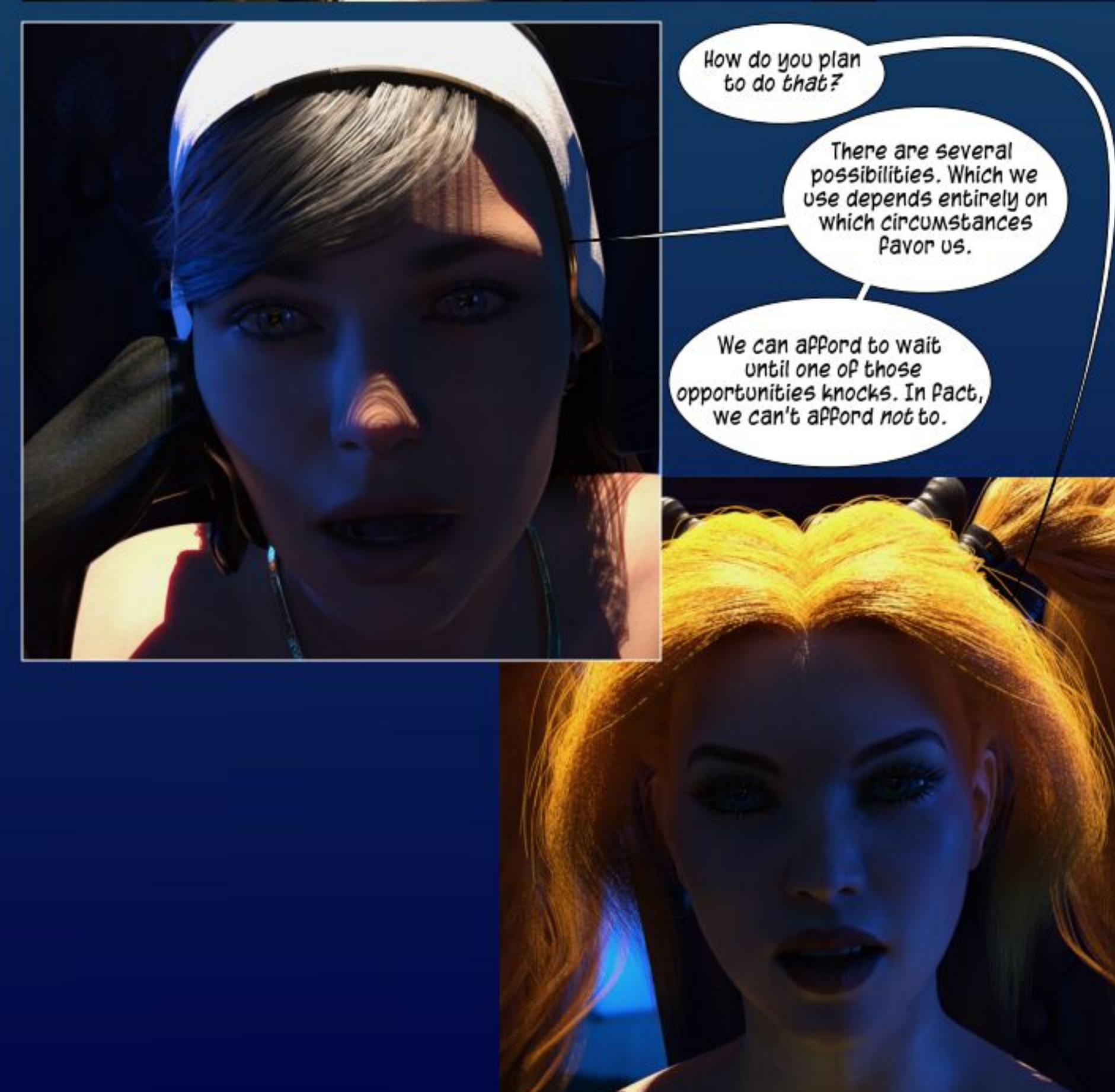
That might be a problem. She broke out of the Euphorics*, and that wasn't supposed to be possible. She had help, but the word is she's gotten even stronger since then.

Even if we can figure out a way to put her in a closed scenario, she might not stay in it for long.

We don't need long. Just a few days.

I agree, though. I think it is much more likely to succeed if she enters the scenario voluntarily.

* SS #3-4 -T



How do you plan to do that?

There are several possibilities. Which we use depends entirely on which circumstances favor us.

We can afford to wait until one of those opportunities knocks. In fact, we can't afford not to.



OK, so we wait. What about her friend? Do we need a plan for her too?

I don't think so. She apparently has none of the same abilities. She's a good, if unimaginative, investigator, but that's all. For her, we just need to stay below radar ... until it's no longer necessary, of course. Martinez is different. She'll practically smell us.

Besides, my information says that Leyna Otis is currently devoting all her attention to investigating some club in Shibuya. I don't know why, but I don't care as long as that keeps her busy.

IF YOU KNOW ENOUGH TO WONDER AT "LEYNA OTIS" THEN YOU ALSO KNOW ENOUGH TO GUESS WHY LEYNA'S VISIBLE RECORDS USE HER MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME. -T



"Investigating a club? Is there anything in there we should worry about?"
 "No, not as far as I can tell."

OK, Polks ... Brian's done great so far! He's reached the tenth and final question! Now he has to make a very big decision!

Go for it, Brian! You can do it!

No, he can't.

-- giggle -- Right?



Now, remember, these questions get tougher each time, and this is the big one. If you get it right, you win, but if you get it wrong, you get the maximum penalty.

But, hey, you've aced them so far. What do you think? Want to go for it?

Uh ... sure.



OK, Brian, here's the final question.

Name the creature that is the only remaining member of the family Ornithorhynchidae.

Well, that's ...

... Uh ...

... Oh, shit.



Oh, I'm sorry!

That's incorrect, and you know what that means!



Let's all give Brian a big round of applause!

Remember, Polks, part of the penalty is that Brian works for the house for the rest of the night! If you'd like to play with him, there's a nominal charge ... and it's first-come-first-served, so get in early!

Come on, we should get over to the rooms.

When Burt lost, there was a line.



Oh, this is going to be fun!

Did you hear that after Tyler lost, his girlfriend decided he was better at sex like that? Now she wants him to find a way to go into bimbo mode every night.

All right, Polks, who's going to be our next contestant?

GINA AND ESPERANZA -- "THE JUMPERS" -- DIDN'T GET CAUGHT IN THE DISCONTINUITY. INSTEAD, THEY HELPED MIDNIGHT TRY TO PREVENT OTHERS FROM BEING SUCKED INTO ITS SPREAD. THIS ENDORSEMENT FROM MIDNIGHT MADE IT OFFICIAL ... THEY'RE NOT JUST HELPING LEYNA OUT ANYMORE, THEY'RE MEMBERS OF THE TEAM.



Anything?

Nope.

There are all kinds of games -- intelligence tests, tests of skill, two-person competitions, dance contests, you name it -- and the penalties for losing can really be something. But it's not involuntary. The people who play know what they're getting into.

We think some of them even lose on purpose.



Damn.

Sorry! But that's what we saw. I think this new person, the one we can't identify --

Alicia.

Oh?

That's all I have, the one name. Ruby identified her. Maybe I can send you in with goggles and see what they say.

Seems like Melinda had a special grudge against her. Captured her twice that we know of, maybe more, did who knows what to her.

I figured Melinda had taken Alicia's identity, once we saw through the Annette one ... but if the club's gone aboveboard, maybe not ...



She's definitely not trying to keep it a secret anymore. She's relaxed the door checks too. I bet you could get in now without anyone catching on.

Do you think there's still something bad going on in there we just didn't catch a whiff of?

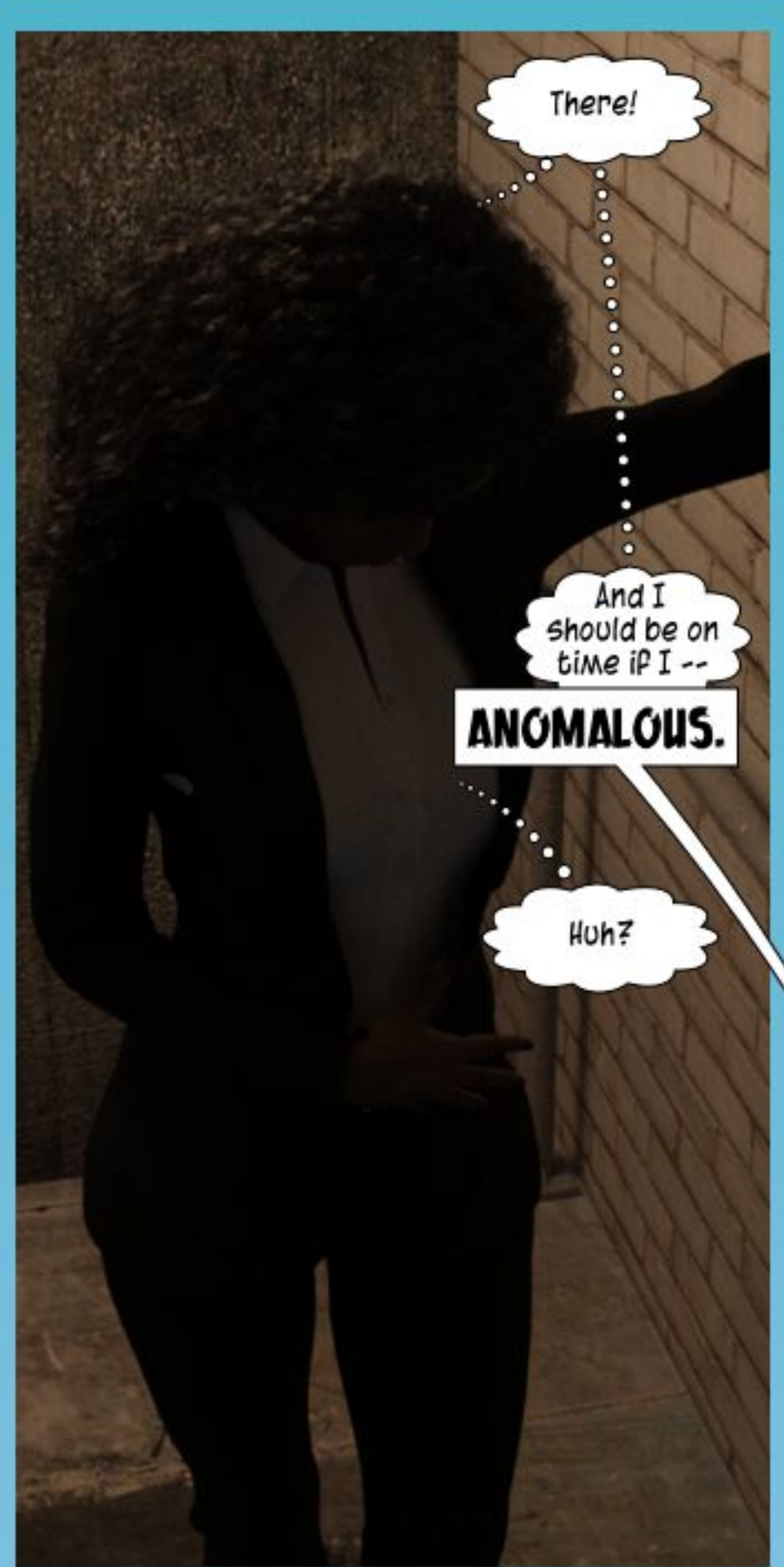
No, I think you're probably right; Alicia is running the show her way.

But that sends us back to start. What happened to Melinda?

oh gosh oh gosh
I can't believe I completely forgot about the council meeting --



Even if I jump home and back it's still a ten minute walk to the meeting. I'm going to have to change clothes here.
I don't see anybody around, it should be OK ...



There!

And I should be on time if I --

ANOMALOUS.

Huh?



... an' the car goes over the hill and gets away from the bad guys. Vroom!

DINA MERRIWETHER: A PERFECTLY NORMAL GENIUS ALGORITHMIST WHO JUST HAPPENS TO PREFER NOT TO BE A GROWN-UP IF SHE CAN POSSIBLY AVOID IT.

Dina? It's almost time for dinner. And after that, I think you could use a bath.



May I talk to Adult Dina for a moment, please?

Well ... if we have to ...

Oh. It's been a week, hasn't it? I lost track.



That's right, and I need to know what you've decided.

It's not really my decision. You've been great this past week.

The question is whether you still want the job, now that you've tried it out.

I won't be offended if you say no. I know I can be a handPul.

Oh, no, I definitely want it. I admit I was a little taken back at first, but now that I understand ...

And frankly, I've cared for *MUCH* more troublesome children. Including my own three, back in the day.



Yaaaay!
I have a new MOMMY!

-- chuckle --
I'm happy to be here too, sweetie. But now it's time for dinner.



Hey, stranger!

Yeah, yeah.

I didn't ask to be this Prantic, believe me.

Well, in the interests of limited time, you see the wine is already poured.

Good thinking. Though it's not that bad. I can probably manage an hour before I have to head to my next gig.

Ruby ...

Don't take this badly, but ...

... you look kind of wrung out. Are you pushing yourself too hard? I mean, you can turn down a job or two ...

-- Sigh --

Yeah, I've thought about it. But it's not really that.

Truth is, I think I've been taking on all this work to avoid ... other things.



Leyna, have you ever heard of the centipede's dilemma?

Somebody asked the centipede "How the hell do you walk with all those legs?" And as soon as the centipede stopped to think about it, he tripped over his own feet and couldn't walk anymore.

I knew I had manipulation abilities, but I was doing a pretty good job not thinking about them. Then Chapman confronted me with them*, and that ruined it.

I lost my control on a set yesterday, and I started to turn my main actor into a mouse. I reversed it as soon as I realized what was happening, but that's not the point.

I can't be having to think about that all the time, constantly worrying about what mayhem my brain might be doing. I have enough things to worry about.

But what happened yesterday told me I have to think about it, all the time, whether I want to or not.

* LAST ISSUE -T



Well, I don't think it's that bad. I mean, yes, you'll always have to give it a little bit of Pocus -- but that's just self-control. Like not losing your temper.

You're not evil. You're not Melinda. You're not even Dr. Chapman.

You sure about that?

Did I tell you that she wanted me to use my abilities more? She thinks I should try to manipulate A4 into being a better place. I told her I'd never be able to be sure I was doing the right thing.

Hmm. Maybe she has a point.

... That's the most startling thing I have ever heard you say.

I'm serious. We chase so many people trying to manipulate for the wrong reasons. Why not offset that a little?

Anyway, you never get a guarantee. You just have to do what Peels right. If we waited until it was ironclad, nobody'd ever accomplish anything.



Huh.

OK, I'll take that into consideration.

Meanwhile ... what else is going on? I haven't actually seen you in weeks. I like the new look. Daring!

Oh, well, I get bored, you know.

Let's see ... I told you that Melinda's club looks like a dead end for now. We're still trying to figure that out.

The Barkers are being so quiet that I'm worried an explosion is coming, but there's nothing we can do for that.

Did I tell you about Serille?

The woman in the Souk who sells simulations of big cats?

Sold. She's moved on. Specifically, she's moved into Bianca's former club, that was then Melinda's club for a while. It seems OK, but Gina and Esperanza hear all kinds of weird rumors in the Souk, so we're keeping an eye on it.

OUR INTRODUCTION TO SERILLE, AS WELL AS BIANCA ZILDAN'S DISAPPEARANCE, WAS IN SS #6. -T

"What kind of rumors are we talking about?"

"Well, it's not clear. No two stories agree. But everyone agrees she's running a strange operation."



... and then he said, "I'm sorry, I've never seen this man in my life!"

Ha!

... Hey, it's getting pretty late. How would you like to go back to my place for a nightcap?

Oh, I'm sorry, I can't.

I have an appointment.



"An appointment." At this hour?

Right.

You know, you could have just told me you weren't interested at the beginning.

I could have saved the price of your drinks.



You sat down and insisted on talking to me.

Though I do appreciate the drinks.

And I really do have an appointment.

Right here.

And I think they're getting impatient to close up so I can keep it.



Uh.

I think maybe I'll be going now.

Good plan.



Are you ready?

... I'm a little nervous.

There's no need to be.



Wait until we all enter, then come in when you Peel ready.





Welcome.



Let's see, what else?

There's another new club in Shibuya ... actually, I'm not sure you can call it a club. It's called "Hive." No "the." Just "Hive." Not ominous at all ...

Oh, I've heard about them! They're a meditation space or something like that. Rumor is they're trying to teach people to develop telepathy.

Well, hell, you know more about it than I do. Where are you getting your info?

"From Orchid, believe it or not. She's very interested. Last time I talked to her she said she was planning to check it out."



Now, in this room, we have individual meditation. The Pocus balls help induce a state of mental detachment. We think that's a prerequisite, so to speak.

But even those who've moved to the next phase sometimes spend time in here. It's very relaxing. Good for losing the stresses of the day.

And they just ... stare at these balls?

That's all there is to it! Would you like to try it?



You mean, right now?

Why not? Assuming you don't have somewhere else you need to be ... We have some spots free, as you can see.

Let me show you the lockers. You'll want to take off your shoes, and most people remove their outer clothing. It's more comfortable to sit for a long time that way.



Jeanne?

... You said we were waiting for an opportunity ... well, an unexpected one may just have knocked.



Hmph. Barely touched their food.

Anyway, it doesn't sound like they're trying to make people into zombies or turn them into monsters, so what's a little fraud? They won't run very long.

You figure they're frauds?



C'mon. All this time since sleep was invented and no one's ever cracked telepathy, it's ...

ANOMALOUS.

aaaigh!

Shan!



Door Shan. That's, what, the third time one of them has zapped her? She's going to be pissed when she gets back in.

What did she even do to attract it?

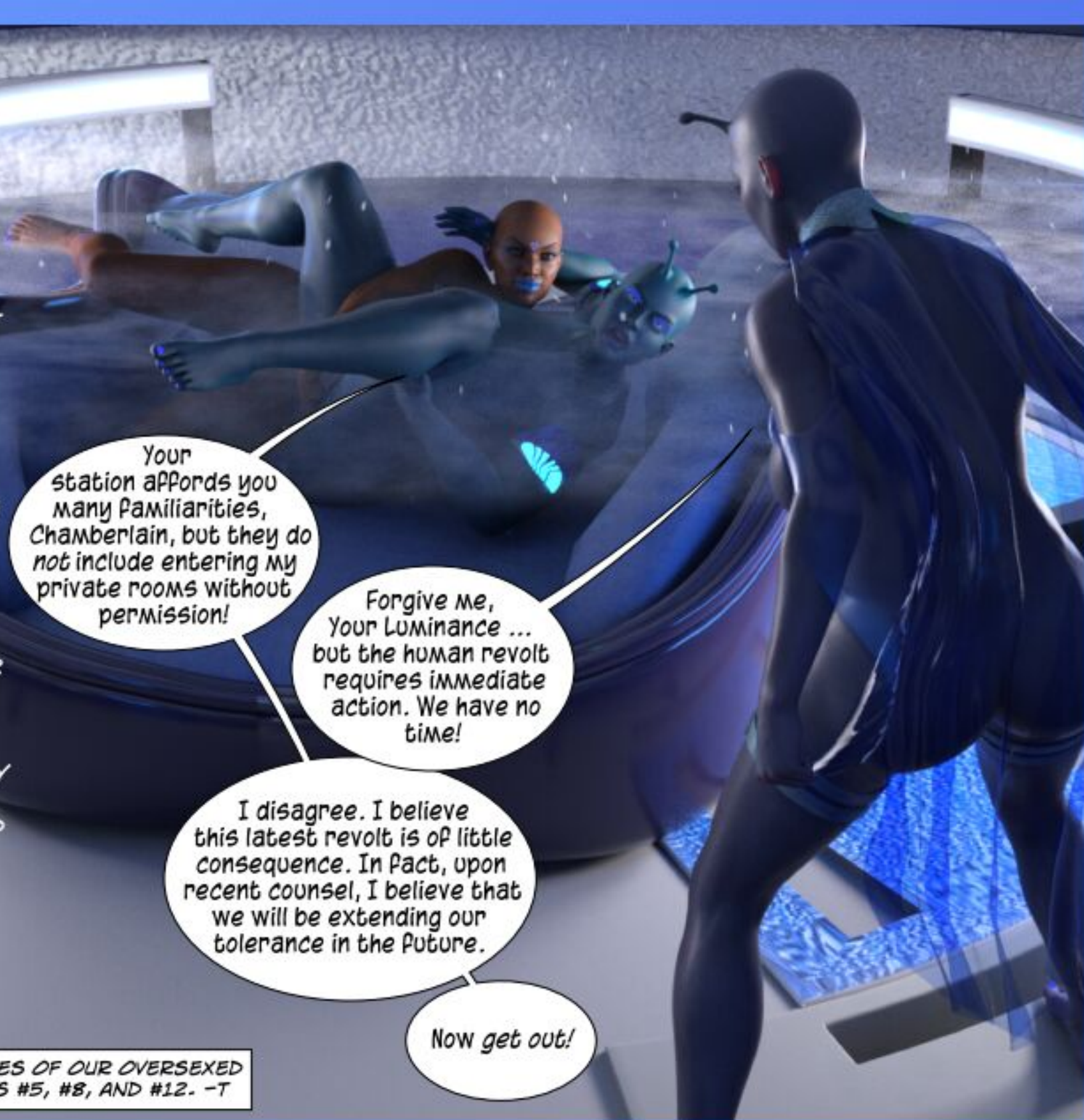
She was probably clearing the table by deinstanting the dishes. They're getting really bad -- any change made in a public space and they show up.

You know, sooner or later we're going to be asked to look into this.

Yeah. But not today. I have to run. Can't miss the thrilling conclusion to the alien occupation!

AFTER MELINDA WAS NO LONGER USING IT FOR HER OWN UNSCRUPULOUS ENDS RUBY'S FRIEND TRISH CARTER ASSUMED THE DIRECTING AND WRITING DUTIES ON "DARK BLUE SKIES," THE LONG-RUNNING PASSIVE SERIAL ABOUT AN ALIEN OCCUPATION OF EARTH.

TRISH DID TWO SUCCESSFUL SERIES, THEN SHE AND THE PRODUCER AGREED ITS POPULARITY WAS DWINDLING AND THAT THERE SHOULD BE ONLY ONE MORE. TRISH ASKED RUBY FOR HELP WRITING THE FINAL FEW EPISODES, TO ENSURE THAT THE SERIES HAD A SUITABLY OVER-THE-TOP ENDING. SHE ALSO HAD RUBY RETURN TO THE ROLE OF THE KRATH PRINCESS' CHAMBERLAIN, WHO IS CONFRONTING HER BOSS AS WE JOIN THE LAST EPISODE ...



Your station affords you many familiarities, Chamberlain, but they do not include entering my private rooms without permission!

Forgive me, Your Luminance ... but the human revolt requires immediate action. We have no time!

I disagree. I believe this latest revolt is of little consequence. In fact, upon recent counsel, I believe that we will be extending our tolerance in the future.

Now get out!



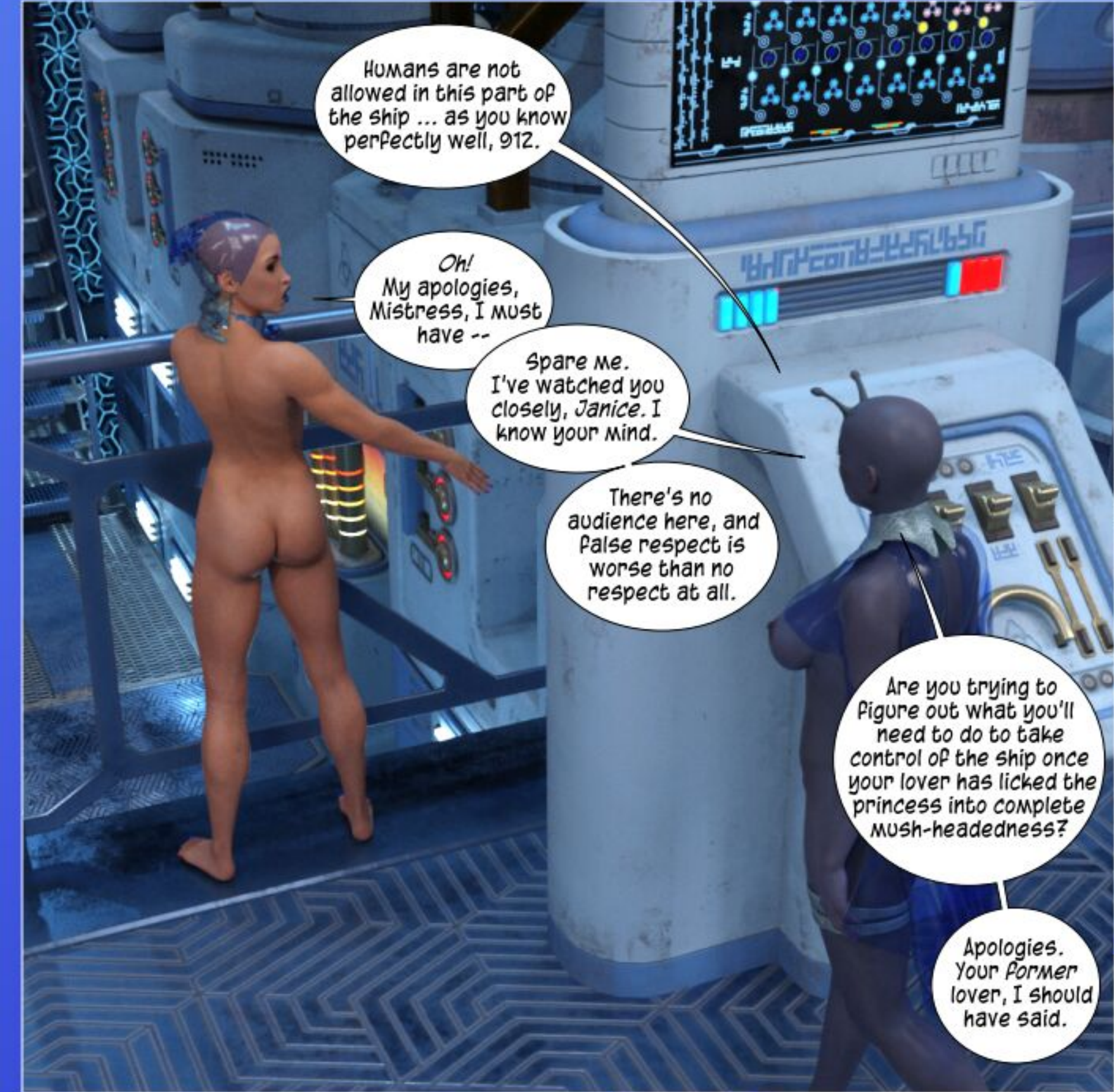
Now the mood's broken ... how do we get it back? Why don't you do that thing you do with your tongue?

Oh! As Your Luminance wishes!

No question as to the source of this recent counsel ...

Next her beloved human will be "counseling" her to surrender and withdraw.

FOR PREVIOUS APPEARANCES OF OUR OVERSEXED BLUE ALIENS, SEE ISSUES #5, #8, AND #12. -T



Humans are not allowed in this part of the ship ... as you know perfectly well, 912.

Oh! My apologies, Mistress, I must have --

Spare me. I've watched you closely, Janice. I know your mind.

There's no audience here, and false respect is worse than no respect at all.

Are you trying to figure out what you'll need to do to take control of the ship once your lover has licked the princess into complete mush-headedness?

Apologies. Your former lover, I should have said.



That's -- That's not true!

You have an analytical mind. You're not the type to remain unaware of the facts -- or deny them once you find them.

913 -- Corinne -- may well have begun her dalliance with the princess as strategy. But now it's genuine.

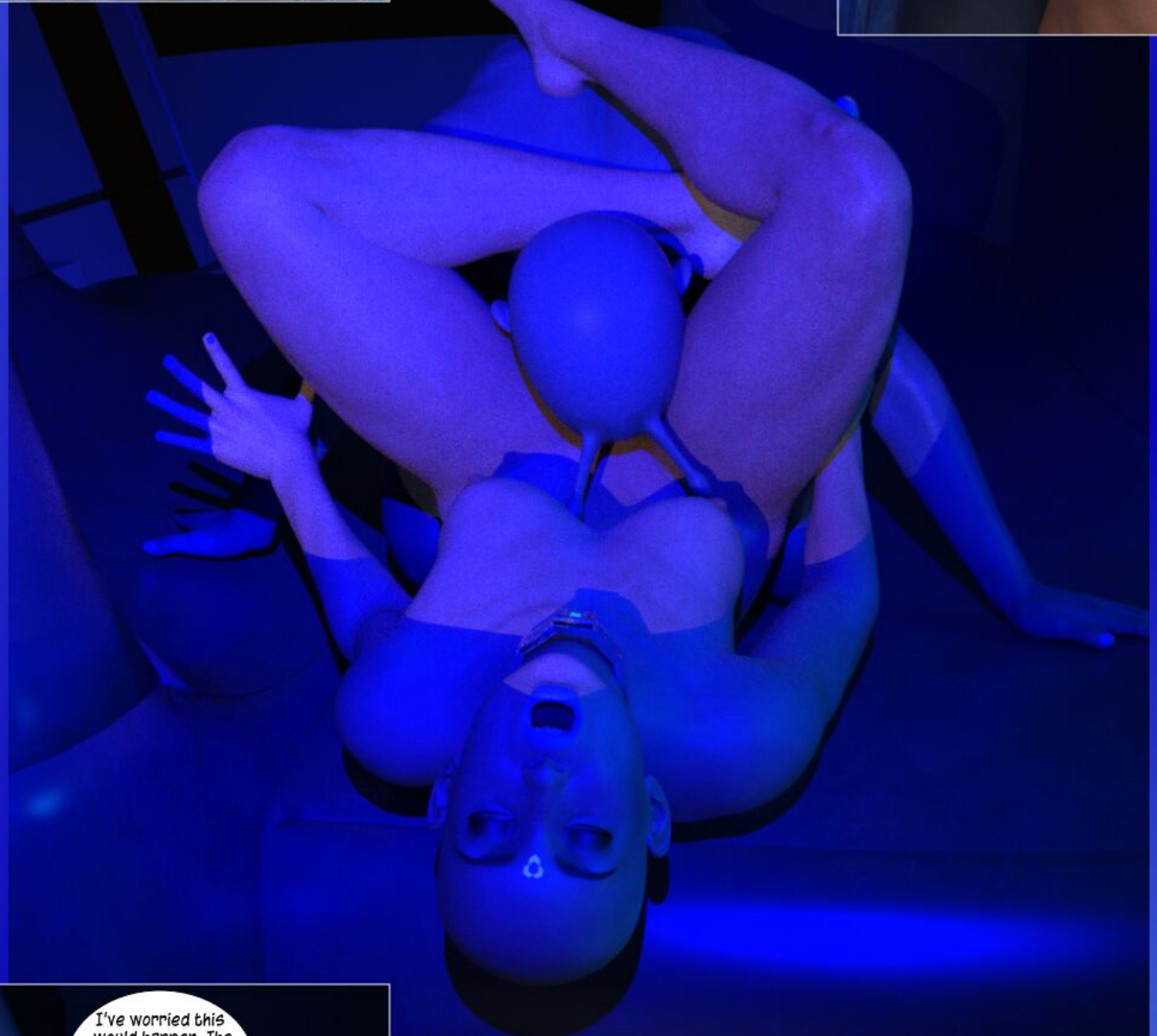
-- Sigh -- What's your point?



I think it's a pity Corinne has such poor judgment, that's all. I know the princess better than anyone on this ship, and, between us, there's very little to her.

You are much more interesting.

oh.



... All right, you have my attention.



I've worried this would happen. The collars prevent you from harming us. They don't do a thing about seduction.

And the nobility are hedonistic. They have come to love sex with humans far too much. Not that it's not fun, you understand.

But if the humans succeed in rebelling, the next thing will be other Krath households arriving to do what we could not. There will be blood then.

And if I convince the princess to change her approach, that, too, will mean bloodshed. If it isn't safe to try to subjugate you humans, then you must be killed, you see?

I have another solution. But I will need -- not just your help. Your cooperation. Your alliance.



SOME TIME LATER.

Have you made progress?

I'm done! I didn't have to do anything with the technology, just find a way to broadcast it. We can go through the collars. It'll overload them, though. They'll probably vaporize. But they'll last long enough for it to work.

Kres ... it looks like you've had this ability a long time. Why haven't you used it?

The nobles would never approve. They feel it would dilute the bloodlines.

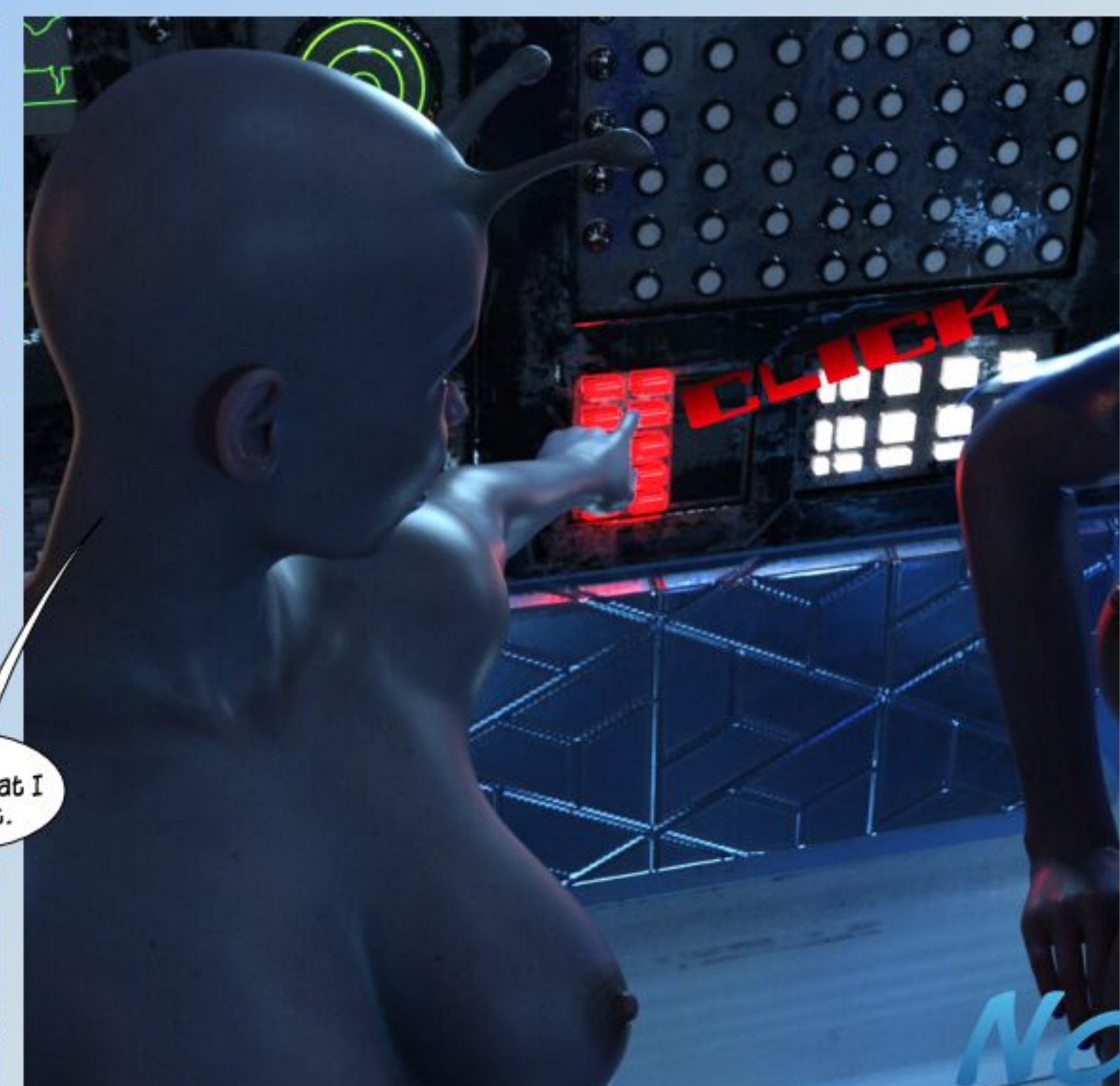
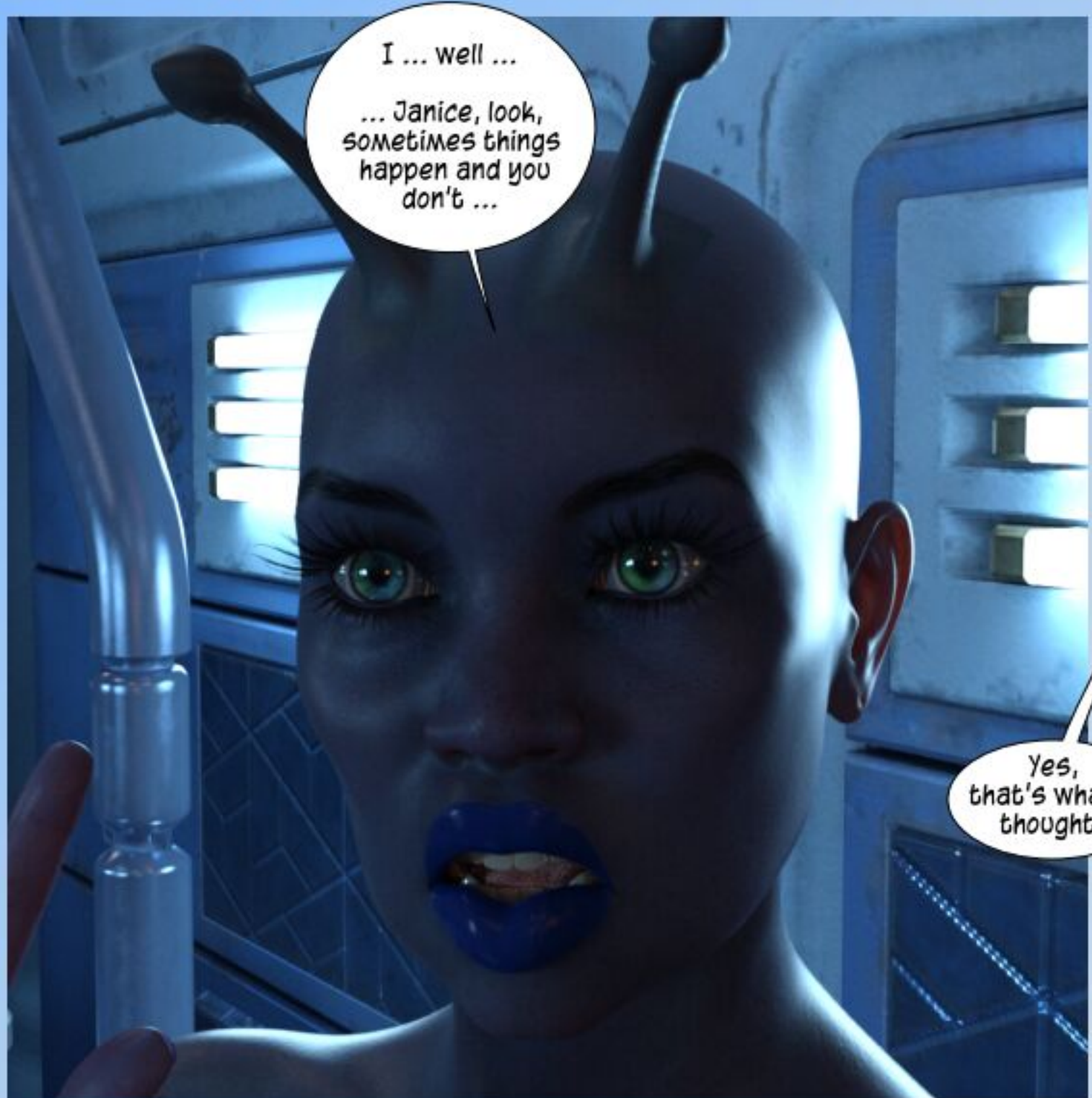
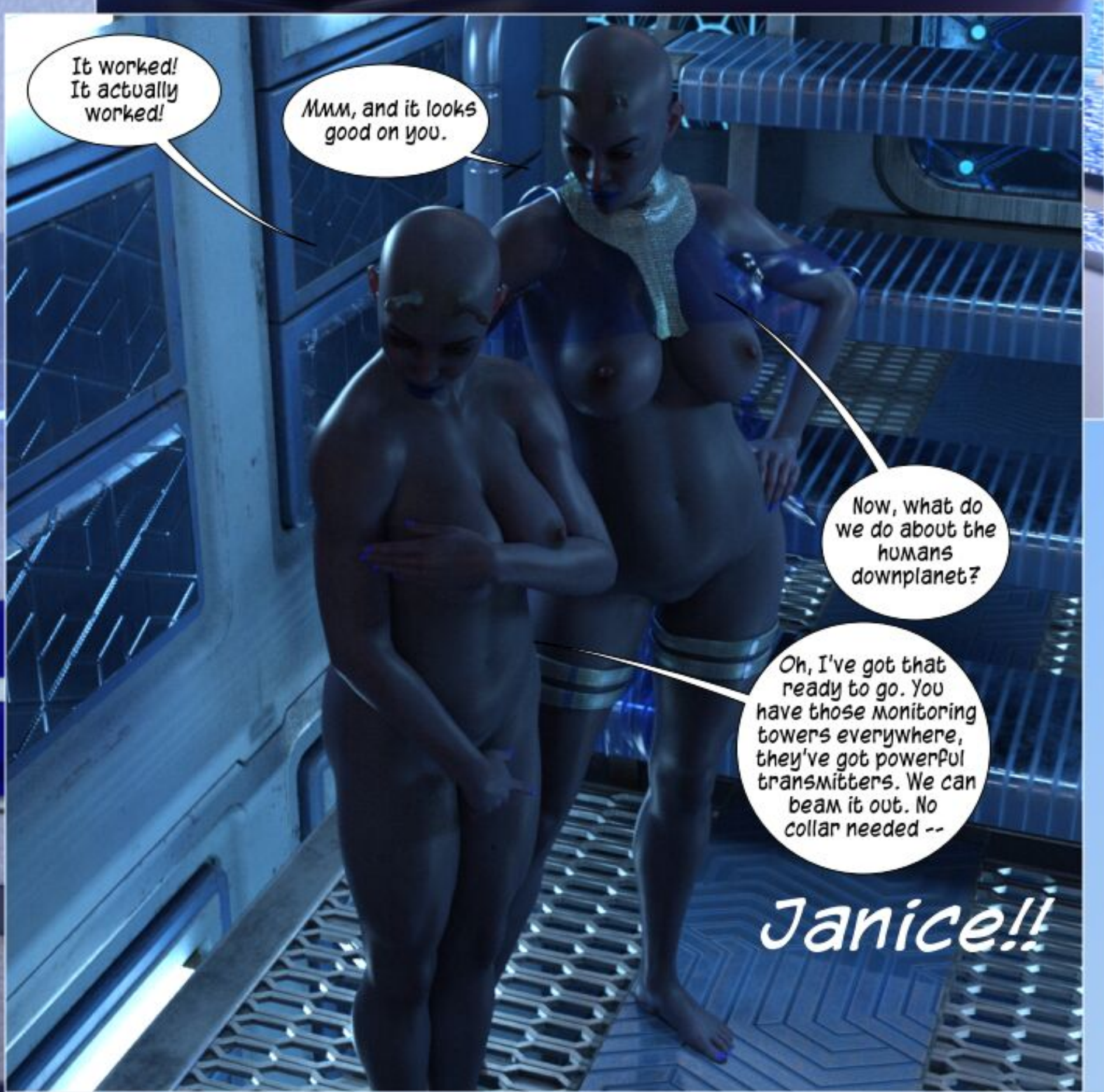
This is why I would not trust a Krath to do what you've done.

Well, their approval is about to be irrelevant. When would you like to test it?



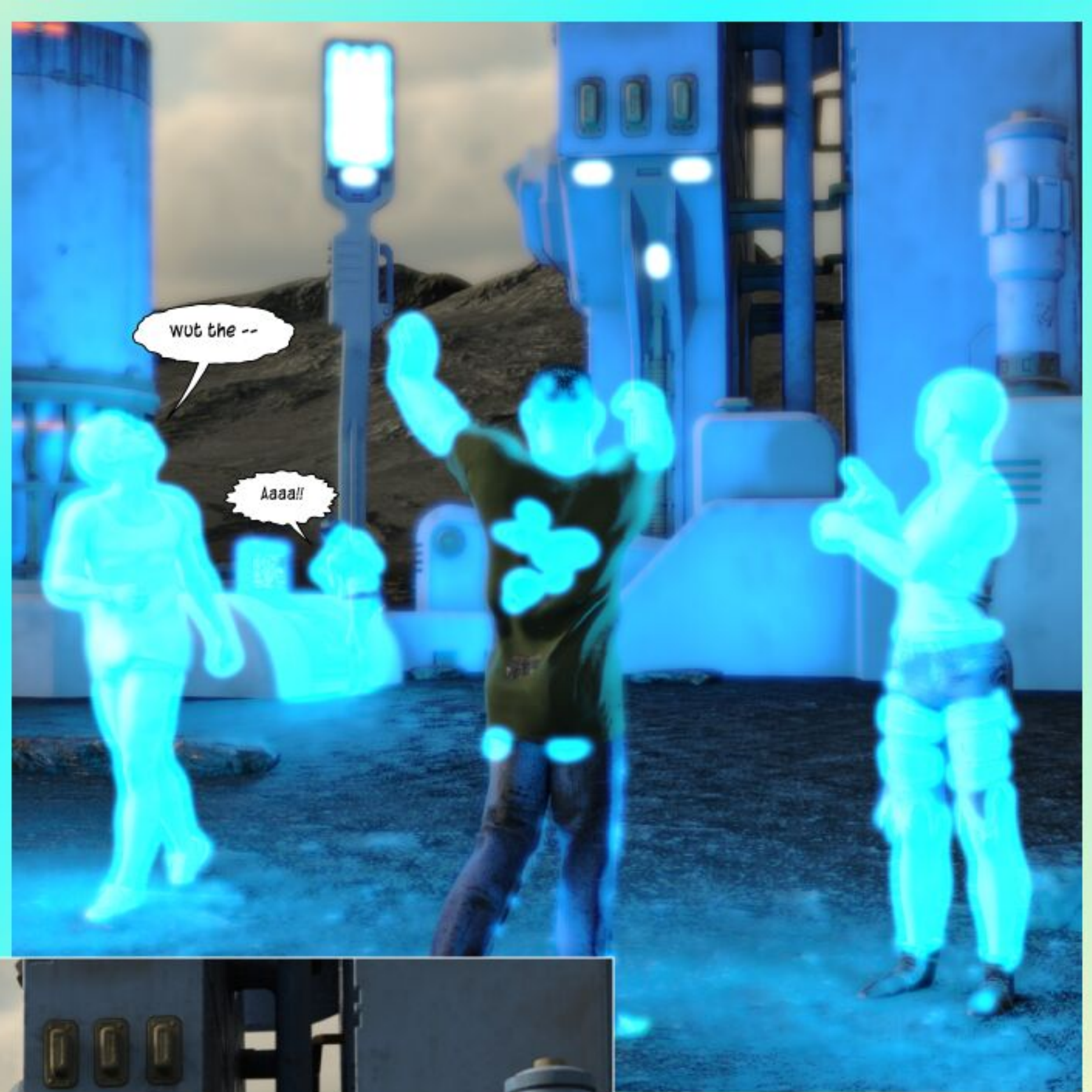
Why not right now?

Heh. OK, here goes ...





Hey ...
Are the Monitor
towers doing
something
weird?



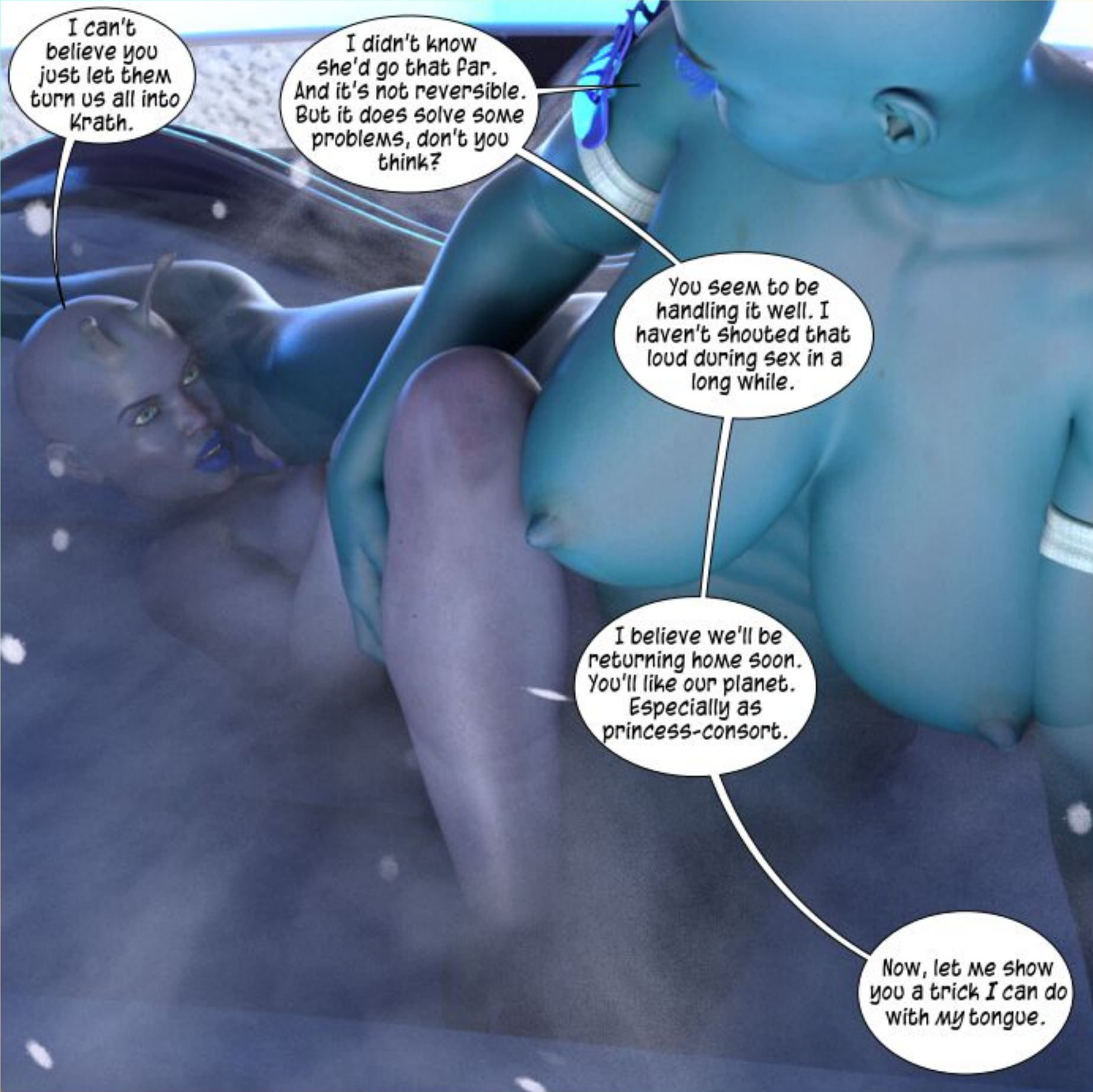
wut the --

Aaaa!!



Holy shit.

LATER, AFTER THE CHAOS AND SHOUTING ...



I can't
believe you
just let them
turn us all into
Krath.

I didn't know
she'd go that far.
And it's not reversible.
But it does solve some
problems, don't you
think?

You seem to be
handling it well. I
haven't shouted that
loud during sex in a
long while.

I believe we'll be
returning home soon.
You'll like our planet.
Especially as
princess-consort.

Now, let me show
you a trick I can do
with my tongue.



Never had sex in a
dormancy chamber before ...
anybody could have walked by
and looked in the window ...
strangely exciting ...

You know, we're Krath
now, but we don't act like
Krath. Aren't you worried
about what happens when
those human instincts get
into your bloodlines?

Counting on it.

We're stagnant.
We need that fresh
influence.

I think we're going
to end up being
something better. Though
it might be a struggle,
for a while.

Speaking of change,
I'm vacating my position as
chamberlain. Want to help
me teach them?

Oh, absolutely!



... And that's a wrap, folks!

Once and for all.
You've all been great.

Wrap party
starts in twenty
minutes at the Martinique!
Stay in costume if you're
peeling exhibitionist, we'll
see who notices.

Ruby, I hope
you're coming. We
couldn't have done
this without you.

I'll come at least long
enough for a toast or two.



Oh, hey, Ruby!

... Sure!
I'll be there in a jiff.

No, of course I don't mind, don't be silly! I just finished what I was doing anyway, and I'd love to see you.

LATER ...

Thanks for coming over. I know it was kind of out of the blue ...

Psht! I told you, don't be silly. If I'd had a problem, I'd have said so. I think you should call me more often! It's been a while.

Ruby ... are you OK? You seem, I don't know, really down. Even after what we just did ...

... No, I'm ... I'm OK, really. I just have ... I'm dealing with some things where I don't know which way to jump. Like, there's parts of my brain arguing with each other about what to do. It's exhausting.

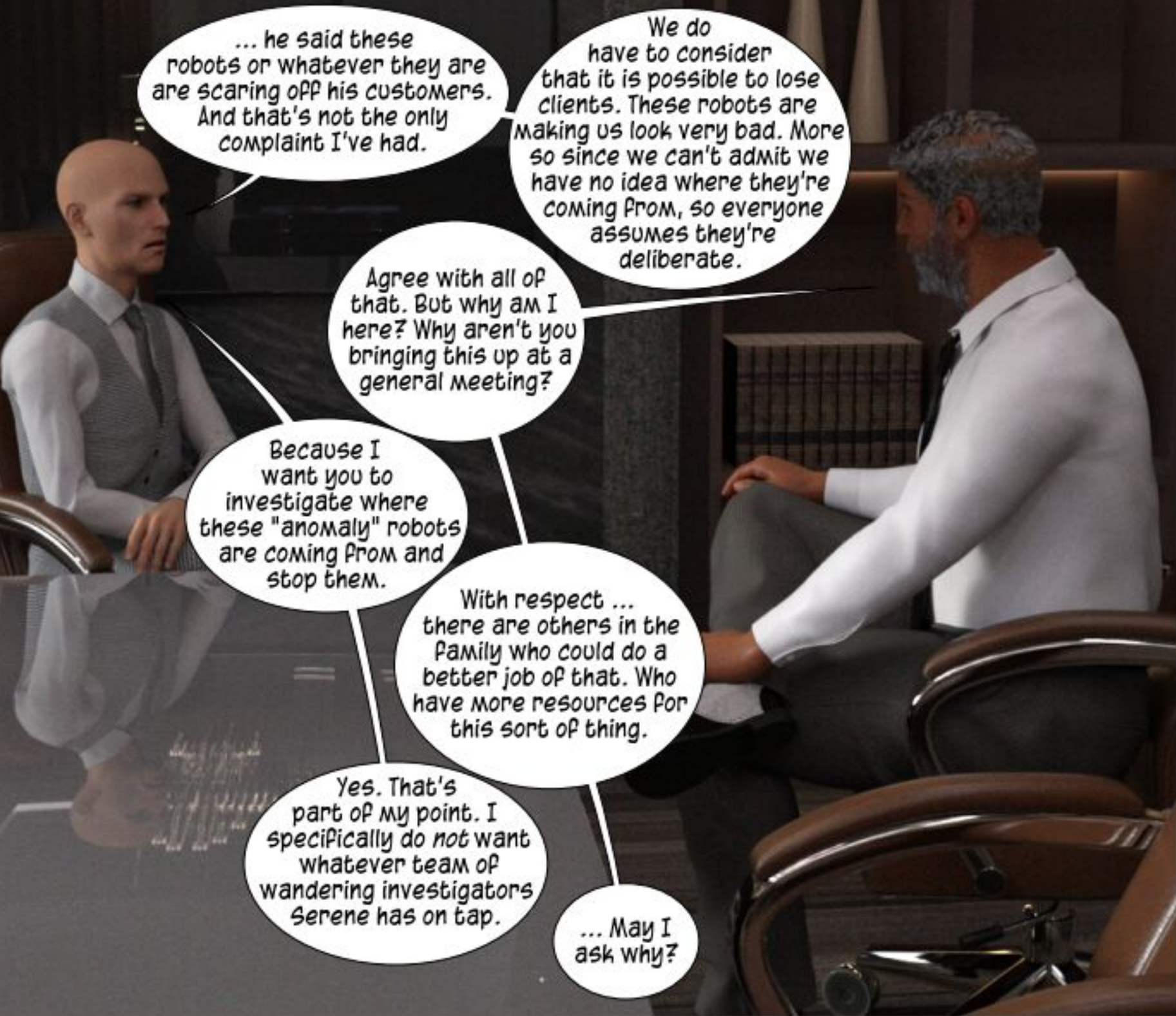
And there's been so much work, I've barely had time to stand still, and that's exhausting too.

Well, tell me if there's something I can do to help, won't you? Even if you just need someone to talk to ...

You're helping just by being here.

NONE OF THE BARKERS EXCEPT PAULINE WERE CAUGHT IN THE DISCONTINUITY, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THEY DIDN'T NOTICE.

JOSIAH HAS ASKED LUCIUS TO COME TO THE BOARDROOM FOR A LATE-NIGHT PRIVATE MEETING.



... he said these robots or whatever they are are scaring off his customers. And that's not the only complaint I've had.

We do have to consider that it is possible to lose clients. These robots are making us look very bad. More so since we can't admit we have no idea where they're coming from, so everyone assumes they're deliberate.

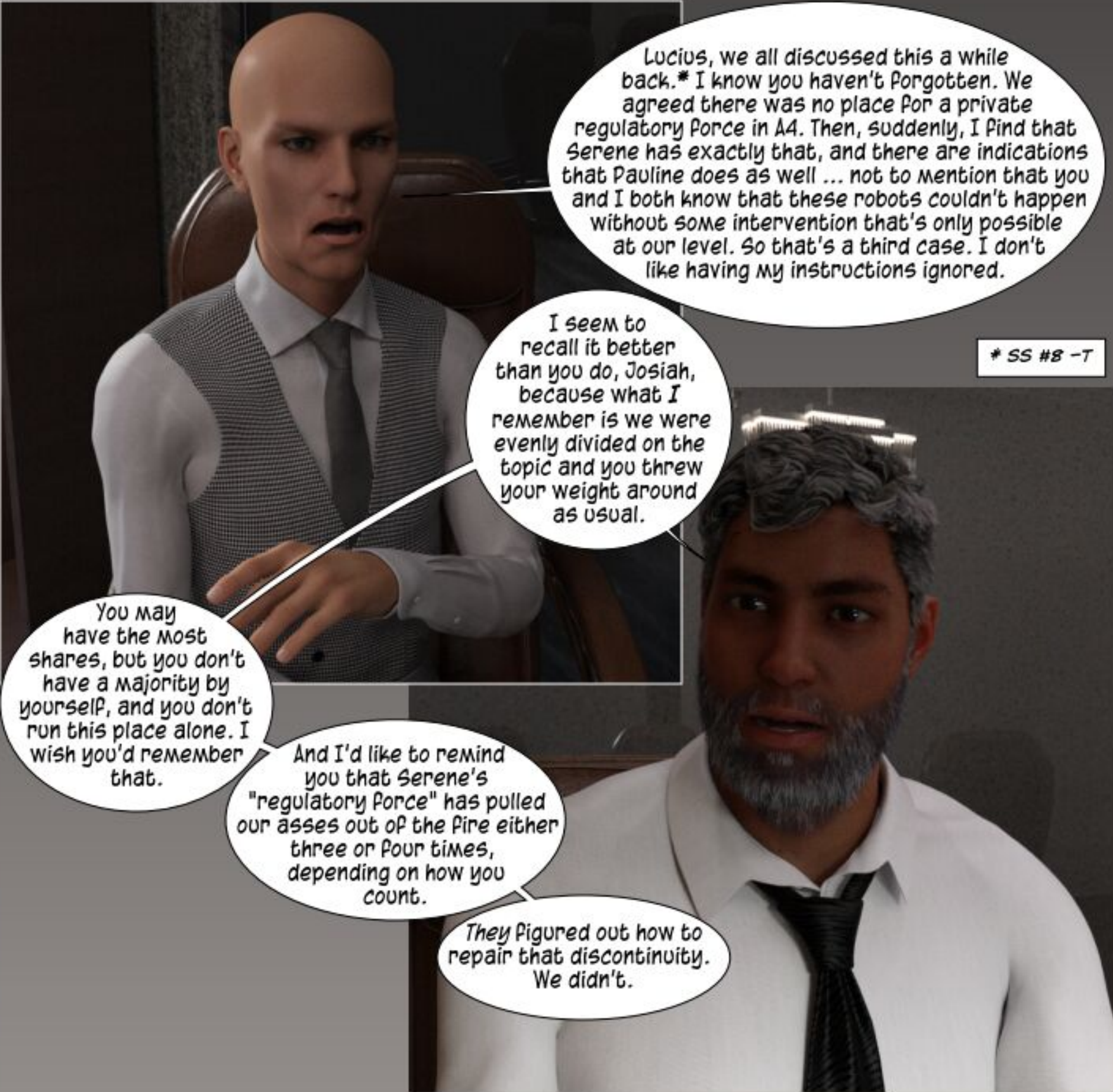
Agree with all of that. But why am I here? Why aren't you bringing this up at a general meeting?

Because I want you to investigate where these "anomaly" robots are coming from and stop them.

With respect ... there are others in the Family who could do a better job of that. Who have more resources for this sort of thing.

Yes. That's part of my point. I specifically do not want whatever team of wandering investigators Serene has on tap.

... May I ask why?



Lucius, we all discussed this a while back. I know you haven't forgotten. We agreed there was no place for a private regulatory force in A4. Then, suddenly, I find that Serene has exactly that, and there are indications that Pauline does as well ... not to mention that you and I both know that these robots couldn't happen without some intervention that's only possible at our level. So that's a third case. I don't like having my instructions ignored.

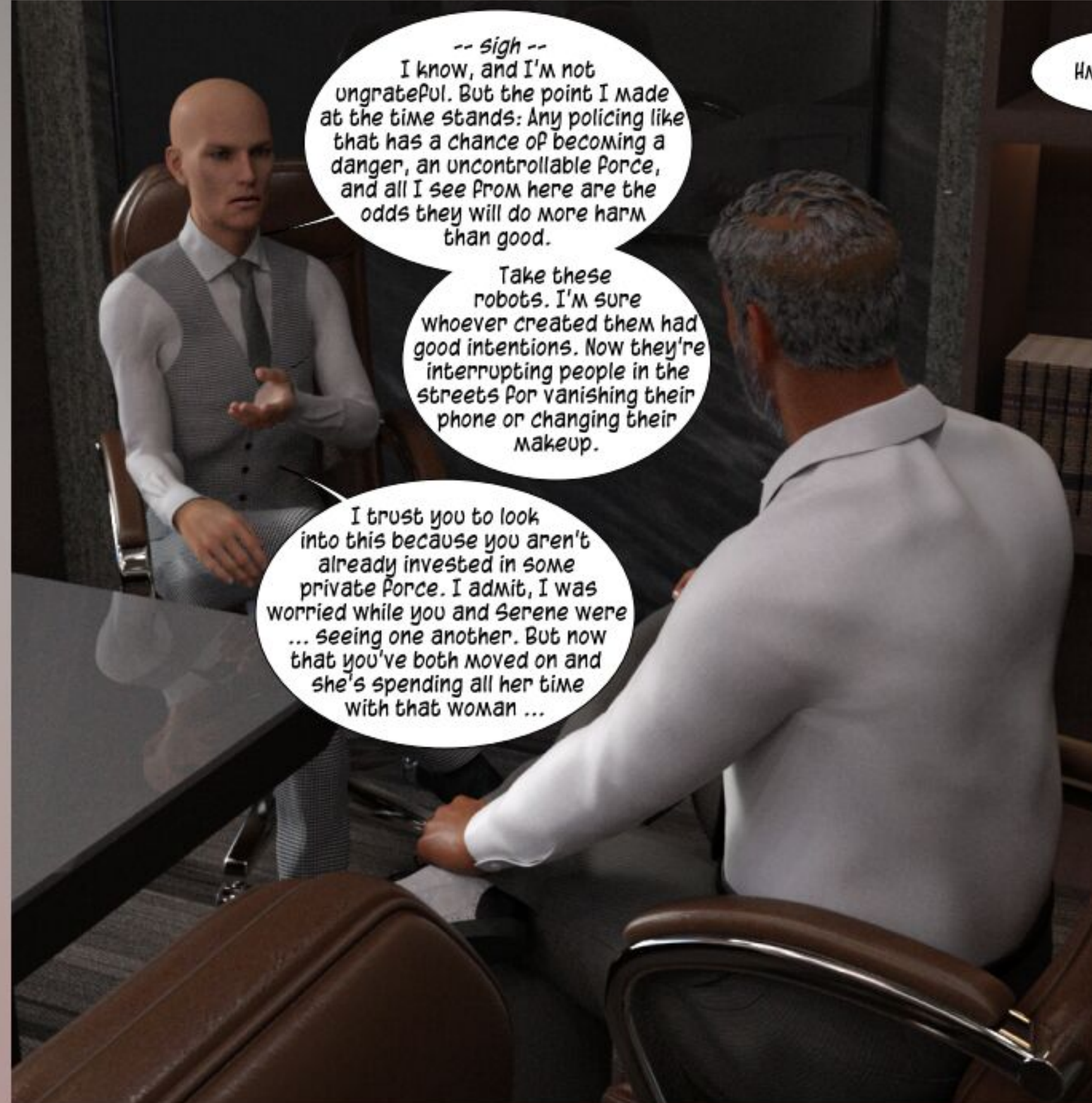
I seem to recall it better than you do, Josiah, because what I remember is we were evenly divided on the topic and you threw your weight around as usual.

You may have the most shares, but you don't have a majority by yourself, and you don't run this place alone. I wish you'd remember that.

And I'd like to remind you that Serene's "regulatory force" has pulled our asses out of the fire either three or four times, depending on how you count.

They figured out how to repair that discontinuity. We didn't.

SS #8 - T



-- sigh --
I know, and I'm not ungrateful. But the point I made at the time stands: Any policing like that has a chance of becoming a danger, an uncontrollable force, and all I see from here are the odds they will do more harm than good.

Take these robots. I'm sure whoever created them had good intentions. Now they're interrupting people in the streets for vanishing their phone or changing their makeup.

I trust you to look into this because you aren't already invested in some private force. I admit, I was worried while you and Serene were ... seeing one another. But now that you've both moved on and she's spending all her time with that woman ...

Hm, en, well ...

You know, Josiah, I resent the implication, first, that you think Serene and I are somehow no longer friends, and second, that you'd be able to trust me more if we weren't.

Also, doesn't it strike you as a bit hypocritical that you're terrified of private investigators, yet you apparently have a team of spies checking on the personal lives of everyone else in the Family?

That's not the same--

Yeah. It's not the same because it's for your benefit. That's your real worry, that someone's going to do something that isn't.

I'll investigate if you want. But I'm not making you any promises about methods. If I think the best way to get to the bottom of this is to use Serene's people, then by god I'm going to use them.

And if you don't like those terms, you can do your own damned investigating.

LUCIUS' REACTION TO JOSIAH'S REMARK IS BECAUSE HE IS "THAT WOMAN." IT'S A LONG STORY. SEE SS #12. -T

THE NEXT AFTERNOON...



... Trish is already fishing around for another directing project. She's decided she likes directing much more than acting. She also writes, but what she really wants is for me to write stuff for her. She wasn't very subtle about asking.

I don't know. I said I didn't want to do passives because I like the hands-on stuff, I like to actually meet my customers ... but I'm so burned out on scenarios right now ... maybe I could do something with her just as a change--

BRUZZ

-- Who on earth is that?



Hello.

Uh, hi.

... This is a surprise.

I know.

Can we all talk?



You know, I don't want to be the paranoid in the room, but I'm not sure that we should trust you.

I'm not asking you to.

But it's obvious we're working to the same ends a lot of the time. I think it wouldn't hurt to be able to ... synchronize.

Mm-hm. Who do you work for?

I'd rather not say. What about you?

... I'd rather not say.

Heh. OK, point taken.

Is there something specific you want to ask us about?

FOR THE RECORD, NEWCOMERS, "THE PHANTOM" APPEARS TO BE WORKING FOR PAULINE BARKER IN THE SAME WAY OUR HEROES WORK FOR SERENE BARKER, ALIAS MIDNIGHT. -T



I'd like to know if either of you have experienced any ... aPterePfects from the discontinuity. Or have heard about anyone else having any.

What kind of aPterePfects? Were you there?



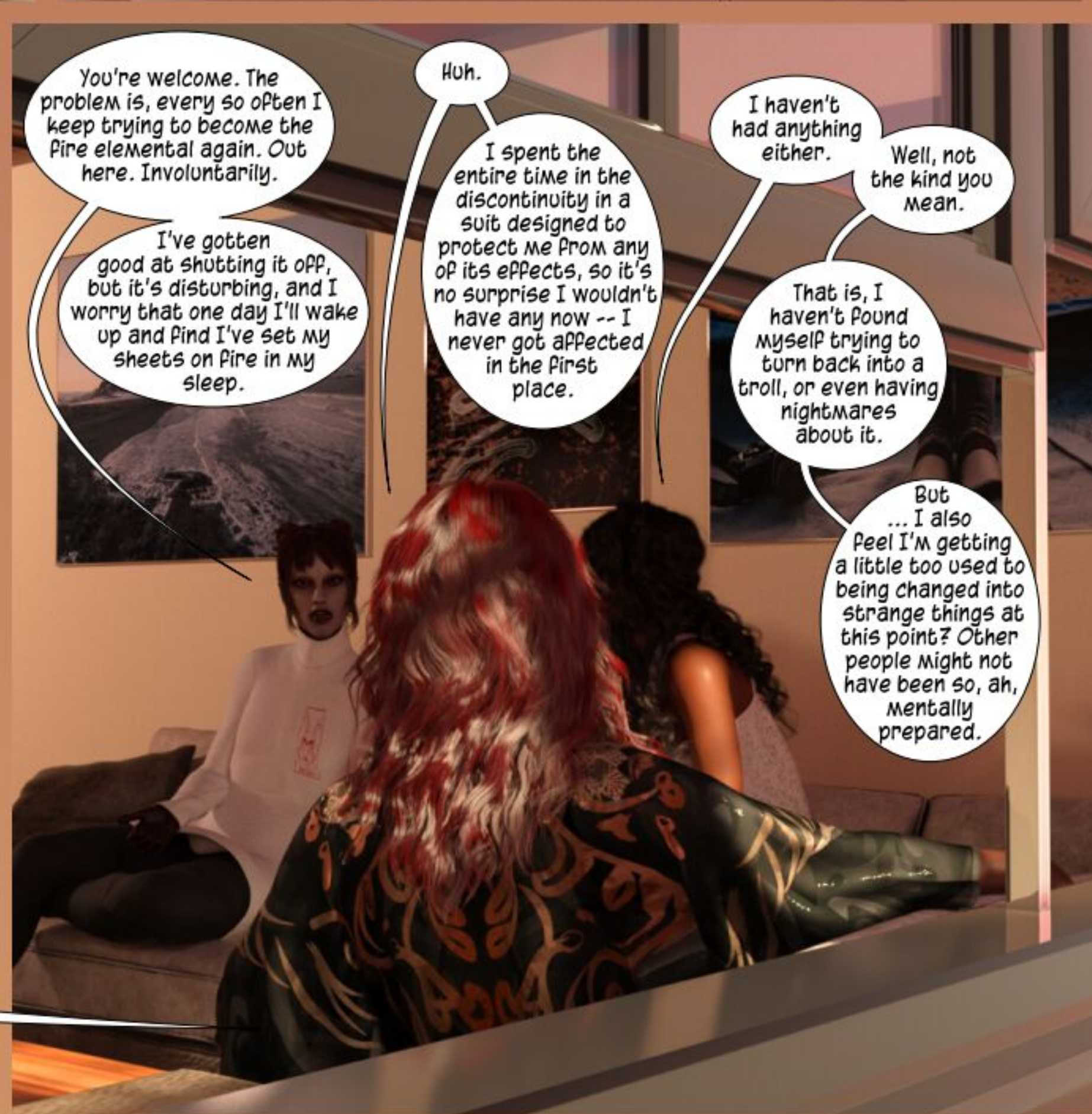
Yes, I was in there.

Were you the scarecrow, the tin man, or the cowardly lion?

You like old passives. I know. I watched "The Fisher Case."

I was the Pine elemental.

Oh! Well, I'm glad to get a chance to thank you. We couldn't have fixed it without you.



You're welcome. The problem is, every so often I keep trying to become the Pine elemental again. Out here. Involuntarily.

I've gotten good at shutting it off, but it's disturbing, and I worry that one day I'll wake up and find I've set my sheets on fire in my sleep.

Huh.

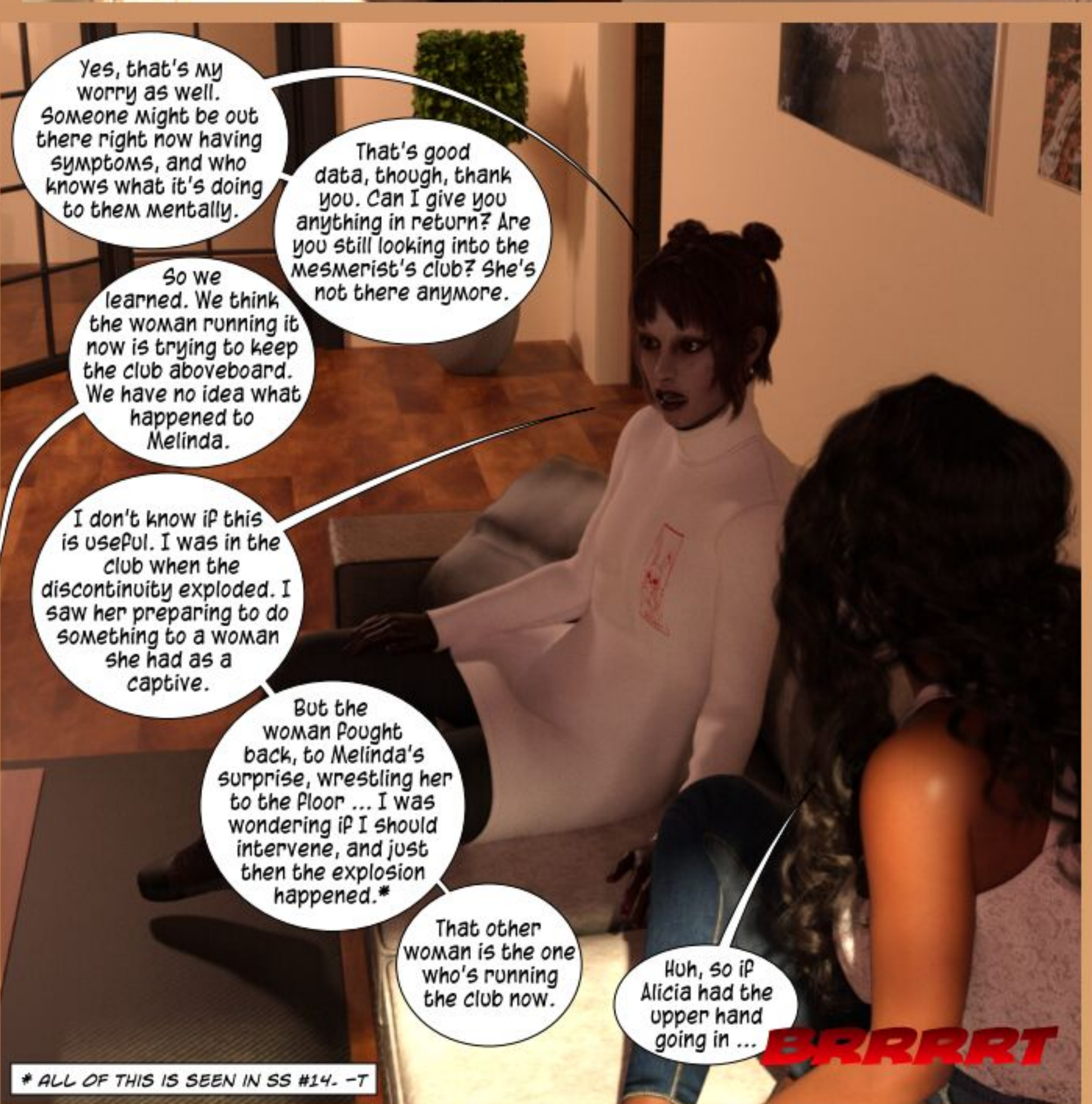
I spent the entire time in the discontinuity in a suit designed to protect me from any of its effects, so it's no surprise I wouldn't have any now -- I never got affected in the first place.

I haven't had anything either.

Well, not the kind you mean.

That is, I haven't found myself trying to turn back into a troll, or even having nightmares about it.

But ... I also feel I'm getting a little too used to being changed into strange things at this point? Other people might not have been so, ah, mentally prepared.



Yes, that's my worry as well. Someone might be out there right now having symptoms, and who knows what it's doing to them mentally.

That's good data, though, thank you. Can I give you anything in return? Are you still looking into the mesmerist's club? She's not there anymore.

So we learned. We think the woman running it now is trying to keep the club aboveboard. We have no idea what happened to Melinda.

I don't know if this is useful. I was in the club when the discontinuity exploded. I saw her preparing to do something to a woman she had as a captive.

But the woman fought back, to Melinda's surprise, wrestling her to the floor ... I was wondering if I should intervene, and just then the explosion happened.*

That other woman is the one who's running the club now.

Huh, so if Alicia had the upper hand going in ...

* ALL OF THIS IS SEEN IN SS #14. -T



Exactly. It might have affected their condition while in the discontinuity ... and maybe even after leaving it.

Hello?
Oh, hey ...

Well, I guess I can, sure ... wait, do you mean right now?

OK, OK. I'll come. Give me a few minutes.



That was Dr. Chapman.

She has ... one of her, ah, patients ... that apparently only I can help with, and apparently it has to be right this instant.

Feel free to stick around and keep talking.

And, hey -- If I don't check in again by tomorrow, send out a search party, OK?



Now, you want to talk about people I don't trust ...



Orchid?

It's time to come out.



I think I actually got something that time! I mean, I'm pretty sure ...

You're doing extremely well. Most don't progress this fast.

But you don't sound very excited about it. Are you still worried about your friend?

Some, yeah. I just wish I could do something to help her ...

... Come with me. I think I have something in the office that might do the trick.



Ooh!

Don't stare at it unless you intend to use it.

And you don't need it. You're not complicated.

This is a Pocus crystal. Meditating with it -- if you can get her to try it -- may help her sort her mind out.

I don't mean that negatively. I mean you're perfectly clear on what goes on inside your head. It sounds like your friend isn't.



SOMEWHERE IN THE MASSIVE A4 SLEEP FACILITY ...

Wow, fancy experimental-style Sleep beds. You get to work in a room with giant tubes again!

It does seem to be my lot in life. CLO made this available to me. Your patron has clout.

All those people in the ward and you had to start with Clayton.

I suspected you'd say something like that.



MELINDA HID FROM OUR HEROES FOR A WHILE BY ASSUMING THE IDENTITY OF CLAYTON BARKER'S LOVER LUCY, WHEN SHE WASN'T WORKING WITH CLAYTON AS HERSELF. WHEN THIS WAS UNCOVERED, MELINDA ERASED CLAYTON'S MIND TO COVER HER TRACKS.

AS PENANCE FOR HER ROLE IN THE CREATION OF THE DISCONTINUITY, DR. CHAPMAN, SOMETIME ALLY AND SOMETIME ENEMY, IS WORKING TO TRY TO REPAIR THE MINDS OF THE VARIOUS PEOPLE IN THE AWAKE "COMA WARD" WHO HAVE BEEN LEFT INCAPACITATED BY VARIOUS NASTY MANIPULATIONS -- INCLUDING, IN SOME CASES, HER OWN.

There are two reasons.

First, Melinda didn't do as thorough a job with the block on him as she did with the one on Cobernayer. There's activity going on in Barker's head. He's trying to come back.

He's actually the most likely prospect in the ward right now.

Second, if I can revive him, I think he'll be useful to you. He spent a lot of time around Melinda, after all.

More likely he'll just go make more trouble.

You would prefer to leave him like this?

-- sigh --

No, but it's very tempting.



If I'd known this was what you were planning, I wouldn't have bothered to put on my wig.

I should have warned you.

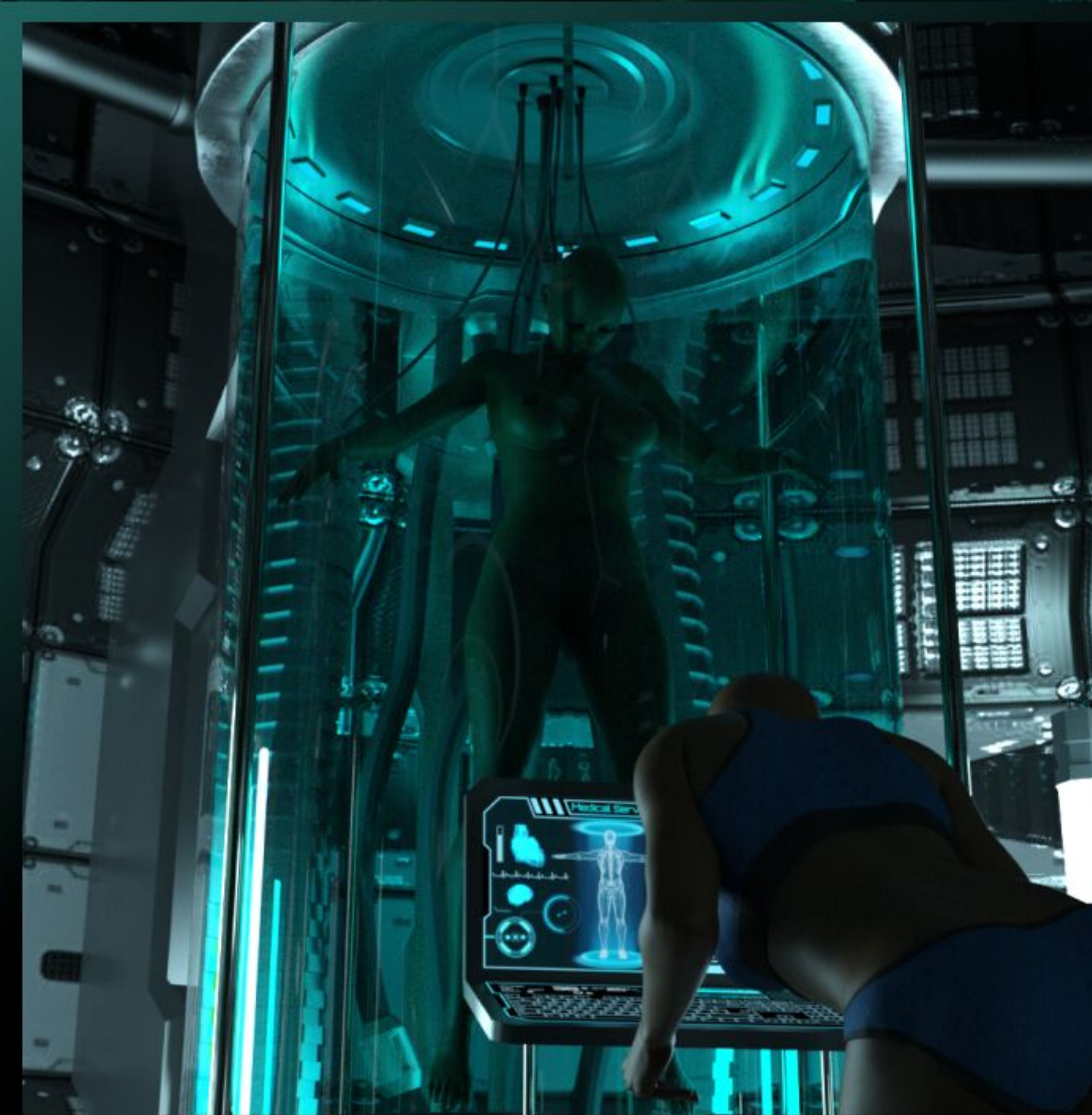
Yes, you should have. You didn't, because you figured I'd say no if you told me in advance.

What exactly is it you want me to do?

Clayton is in a loop. A closed scenario. You're good at breaking those. I recall you telling me that the fastest way out was to do something the script doesn't expect.

I'm throwing you into his loop. I want you to try to break it.

* SS #7 -7







Is something wrong, darling? You seem unhappy.

I don't know. I just ... doesn't this feel wrong to you?

Wrong? What could be wrong? You come home every night to a woman who adores you, and you make passionate love to her, and the next day you get to do it all over again! It's everything you've ever wanted!

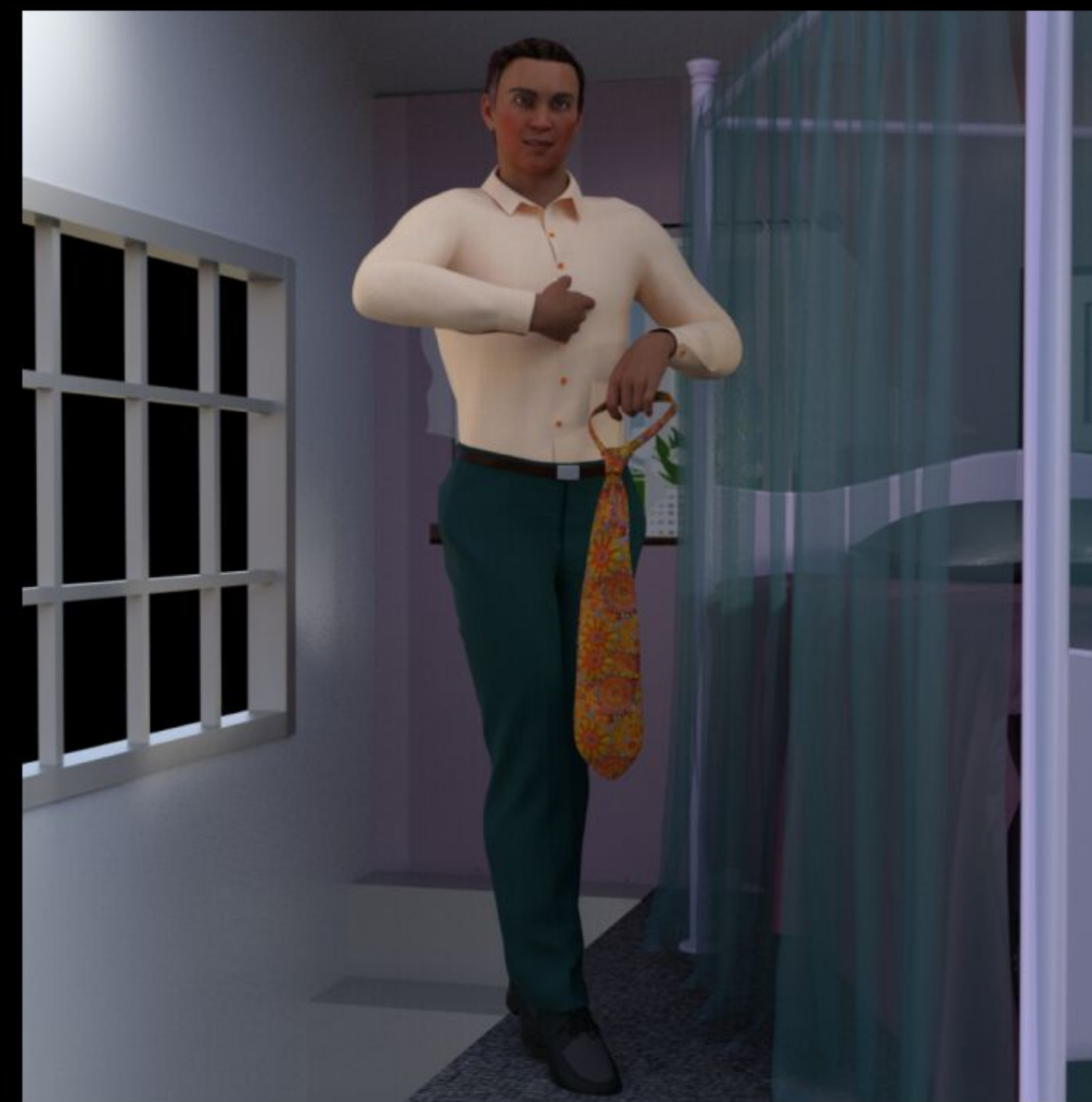
That's the loop, then ... they have sex and it resets ...

HMM ... well, I know how to break it, but I'm not gonna be too thrilled about it.



I know what will make you feel better!

Now, you go upstairs and get in bed and don't think any more of those horrible thoughts, while I go change into something more interesting.



Hey, hot stuff.

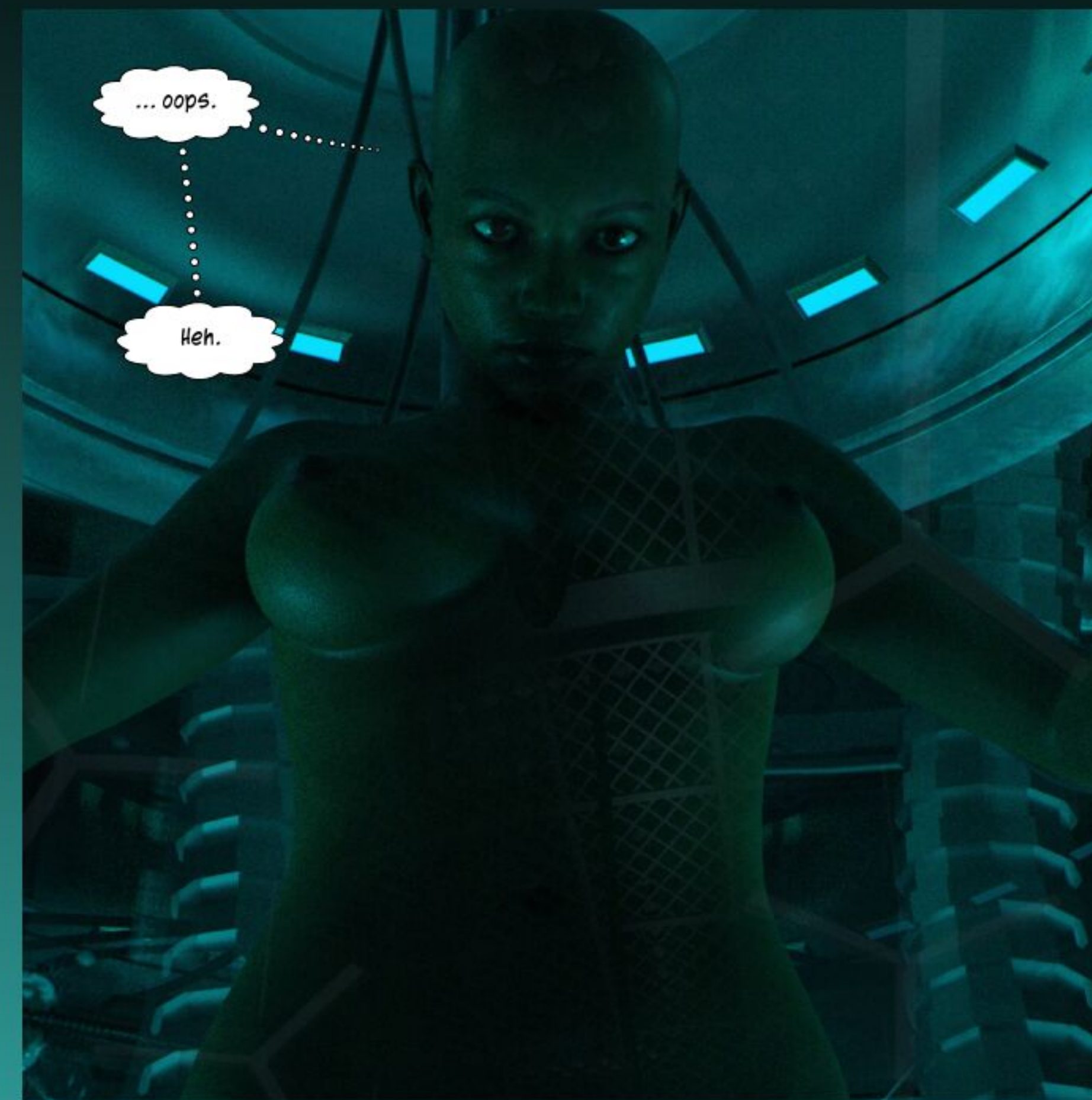
I've got something here that's a whole lot better than what she's got.



Here I come ...
-- giggle --
... ready or not ...



Clayton!!



... oops.

Heh.



Did I accomplish anything?

Definitely. He's out of the loop.

Still a long way to go for recovery, of course, but I wouldn't have been able to proceed without that.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

Do you ... need to know what happened?

No.

LATER THAT NIGHT.



HMM?

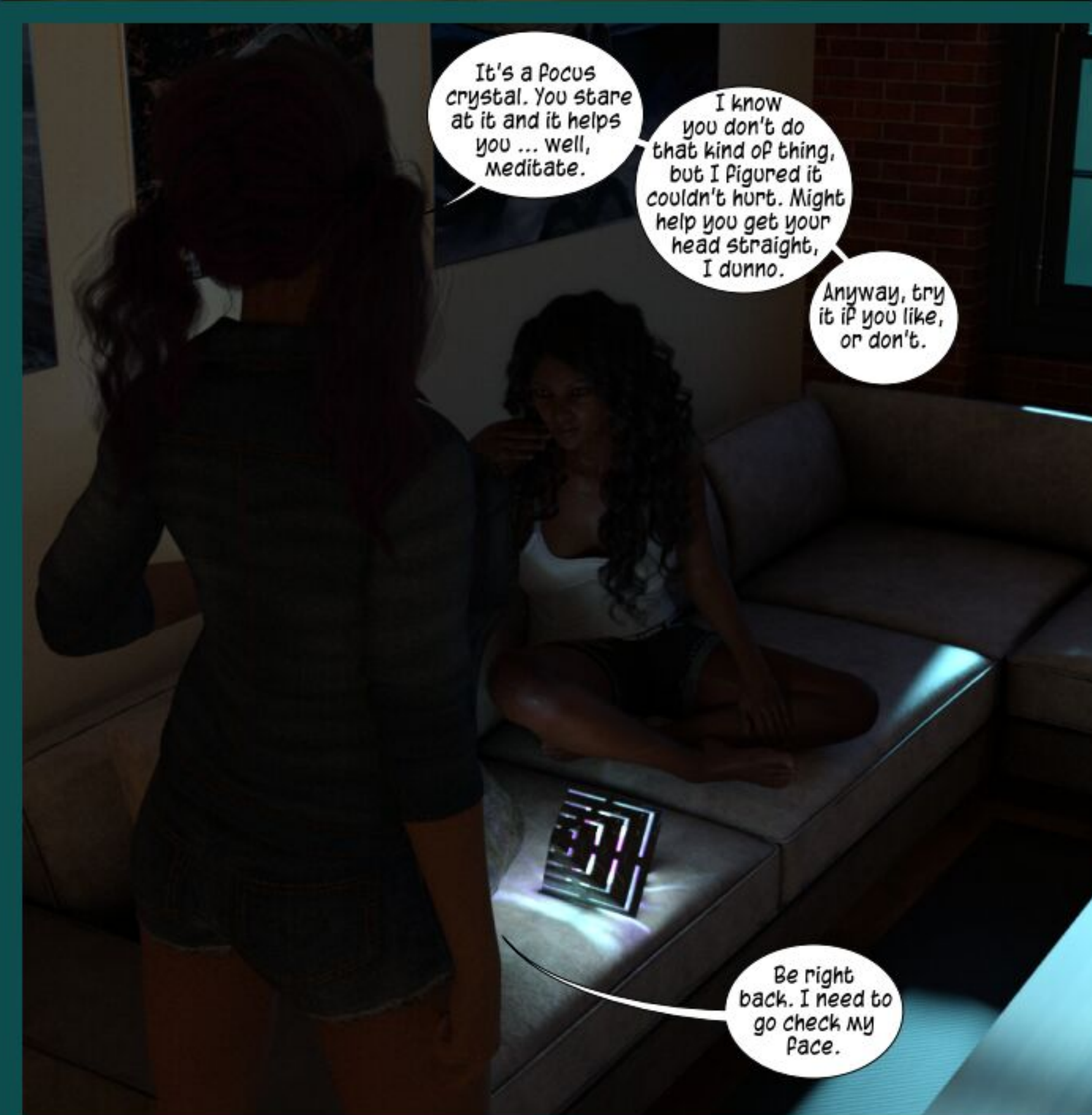


Hi.

I know it's late, but I thought maybe you could use some company.

I probably could.

What's that you've got there?



It's a Focus crystal. You stare at it and it helps you ... well, meditate.

I know you don't do that kind of thing, but I figured it couldn't hurt. Might help you get your head straight, I dunno.

Anyway, try it if you like, or don't.

Be right back. I need to go check my face.



"Focus crystal" ... I can't hold it against her, I know she's only doing it because she's concerned, it's sweet ...

Honestly, though, she falls for even more shit than Doreen does ...

Like staring at a glowy rock is going to help me with any ...

... any ...

...



Sometimes after a show I have this weird feeling like I haven't taken my stage makeup off completely ...

I know it's silly, it doesn't work that way, but it always drives me nuts until I go check ...



Ruby?

NEXT: INTO THE RUBYVERSE!