

IF the phone didn't exist in Sleep, Mina Markov would have had to invent it.



#2

RAT RACE

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

I was rehearsing Doreen for a big scenario coming up. I didn't get to work with Doreen as often as I'd like, because she was in demand. She was very good at her job, and a pleasure to work with (unlike some others in the business).

Now, don't react as soon as he comes in. Your attention is on the tentacle monster. Give him time to notice that.

He's not really a visual person or you wouldn't be an Aiko right now, so if we want him to notice the effects we have to kind of lead him to them.

Ruby, do you ever get tired of this?

I mean, I peel sometimes like I'm doing the same things over and over.

Says the wood elf princess with her hands tied being menaced by a tentacle monster.

But, yeah, I get you. The Money's good but I wish people had a little more imagination.

I peel sometimes like I need to go do something completely different, just to change up.

- ahem -

Pretend you didn't hear that.

Doreen, this is Leyna, here to bring me trouble. Leyna, this is Doreen.

She's not usually green.

Hi!

The thing is, Doreen had been saying pretty much the same thing that had been on my mind for weeks. I guess that's why I went with Leyna to go find out what was up. Doreen was rehearsed enough and was ready to do her thing, so I was basically at liberty.

First, though, I had to straighten something out, and I did that as soon as we sat down in Leyna's personal space. Which was not what I expected ... but then, I'm not sure what I was expecting, exactly.

I think I might have Pucked up.

When I first saw you, we were Awake, and I assumed Prom what I could see that you were a he.

But seeing what I've seen since then ... sorry, what I mean is ... what pronouns do you want me to use?

"She."

Unless I'm actively playing a role that requires me to be male.

Which I try not to do.

And thank you for asking. I have more obvious forms than this, but I like this one.

Sorry I jumped to conclusions. Now, what's the story?

A woman named Mina Markov vanished yesterday. Checks on her show her in a private space I can't identify.

Mina Markov? As in "Mina Markov's Mind Meditations"?

The same. "A clear mind is a powerful mind."

I thought you could get into private spaces. You don't seem to have trouble wandering into my scenarios.

There's different kinds of "private." Yours have to be pretty open or your participants couldn't get in. Some I can enter, some I can get inPo about even if I can't go in ... and some are completely opaque to me.

OK, she wants an intimate weekend with someone without the world knowing. So?

She was talking to her assistant at the time. The call was cut off. How does that happen in Sleep? And he says she blew off her remaining appointments for the day, which she never does.

Thing is, there have been other disappearances in the same field. There's a lot of people doing this stuff. Some of them are probably scams, but there's a ton of money to be made. Markov just happens to be the most well-known one in A4.

You think there's a manipulator making these people disappear?

Maybe! Fact is, we had been wondering if Markov was a manipulator herself. There are rumors ...

OK, but assuming she was disappeared, it could have been anybody. She gives seminars to thousands of people at a time.

I'm pretty sure that's not true, though. Everything we've seen so far implies you need to get up close and personal to manipulate someone.

Like Julia Greene did.*

Right. And I don't think it could have been too long before the event.

So ... hmm. How many people did she see in person that day before she disappeared?

That's what I like about you, you're fast.

Usually I hear that in a very different context.

Six. She saw six people. It'll go faster if there's two of us interviewing.

... Also, you're better at stories than I am and I'm hoping you can come up with some good excuses for why we're asking questions.

Fortunately, even in Sleep, people will tell you anything if you say you're writing an article.



Oh, yeah, it works great! Best thing that ever happened to me. I wish I could get her more often, but I guess she's got a lot of other people to help too ...

Can you tell me more about what happens during one of these appointments?

Well ... we talk for a little while, you know, just normal stuff, how've you been ... and then we do the meditation exercises. Usually she says something and I have to repeat it back to her while I try to clear out my mind ...

Actually, by now I don't really need the exercises, I guess ... she just tells me to clear my mind and I do ...

What happens after that?

Oh, I don't ever remember much after that. But it's great! When I come back, my mind feels cleaner and stronger and I'm super-chill.

Like I said, I wish I could get her to come more often, but at least by now I can usually do it all by myself.

Would you be willing to show me?

Sure! Just have to get in the right mind ... and kinda let it ...

... Hello?

Are you OK?

Anybody home?



I think she's a Praud. Three visits, and they cost me a Portune. Not a damned thing happened.

We recited some bullshit over and over and she kept telling me to clear my mind. I was like, lady, if I could clear my mind just like that I wouldn't be paying you to come in here and show me how.

After the third time she said it was clear I was "never going to be a responsive subject," though she did say I shouldn't feel bad, her methods just didn't work on some people.

Wish she'd figured that out a little sooner, though. No refunds.



I mean, she's making money hand over fist, so it's either working on a lot of people and I'm just unlucky

or she's a really good con artist.

Anyway, she doesn't get any more of my cash.

Understandable.

If I'm honest, I didn't like her immediately. It was probably the glasses.

See, nobody needs glasses in Sleep. Vision doesn't even work that way here. So if you're wearing them, it's a costume choice; it's you trying to say something. Not that I have a problem with that; in my business I know all about costumes, including the ones we wear in our everyday lives. So I guess it's more that I had a problem with what this particular costume was trying to say.



... I'm gonna go out on a limb and assume you don't like Mina Markov very much.

Are you saying she's a Praud?

Oh, no, not a Praud. That's the problem.

For the people susceptible to her, her suggestions work exactly as intended. They leave the mind a blank slate. Temporarily. And as they do this more often, the slate stays blank longer.

They live happily ever after?

Do you know what happens to rats in experimental conditions where they're given everything they could possibly want?

Possibly! But they do so at the expense of severe mental deterioration. They forget how to think. With no pressing needs, no concerns to apply their minds to, their minds rot.*

I guess you're really talking about Sleep now.

Aren't you clever. Yes, and Mina Markov is accelerating the rot. She's encouraging people to stop thinking. When she says "a clear mind" what she really means is an empty head.

... Is something in here ... squeaking?

*DR. CHAPMAN'S CONCLUSIONS HERE ARE PROBABLY NOT SCIENTIFICALLY SOUND. SEE THE NOTES. -T



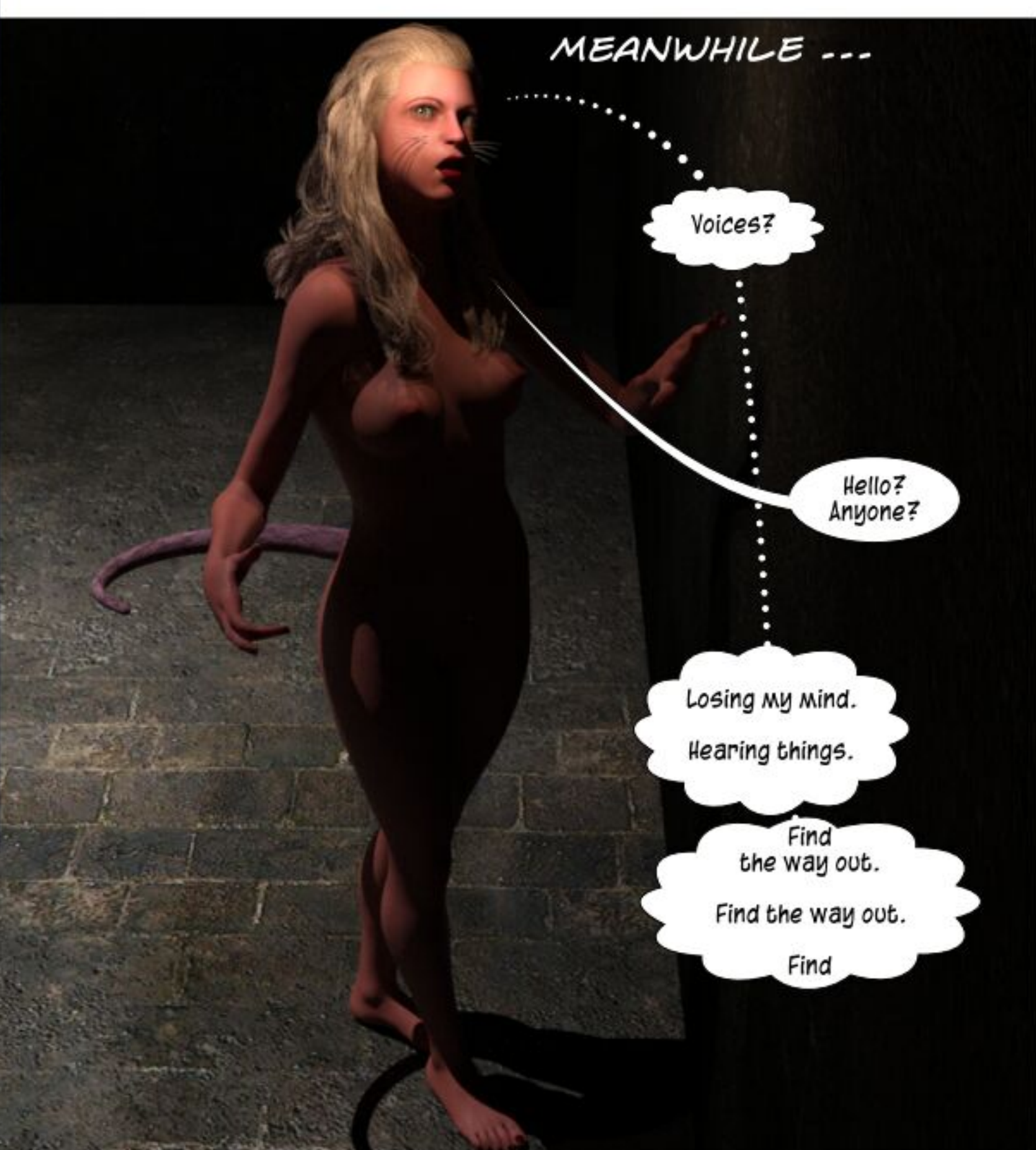
Oh!

I have two types of test subjects. These tend to be more pleasant and better-behaved than the human ones, frankly.

But harder to have a conversation with.

Heh.

Thank you, Dr. Chapman. This interview has been very informative.



MEANWHILE ...

Voices?

Hello? Anyone?

Losing my mind. Hearing things.

Find the way out. Find the way out.

Find



Then it occurred to me ... all animals in sleep are simulations anyway, right? So they're useless to her for research.

I agree she's the likely candidate ... Even if Markov is a manipulator herself.

If she is, her hit rate isn't very good. Anyway, I don't think she's hiding. Talking to Chapman, I'm sure she's got Markov locked away somewhere.

So what now?

Now we get into Chapman's lab when she's not there and see if we find anything.

Later tonight, maybe.

-BZZZT-



Hello? Wait, calm down, Lou, you're talking too fast ...

Opp. OK, no problem, we can work around it. I'll go take care of it right now.



No spy work for me tonight. Booking agent says the customer just dumped our scenario.

Apparently he's learned some things about himself since he booked this job months ago.

Now he wants to be the one who gets rescued from the tentacle monster.



What's with the cold feet? It's just a role swap. You've pulled off stuff way more impromptu than this.

I just don't think it works. I come in and rescue him, there's no buildup there, and I don't have a way to make some.

I see what you mean. It needs an antagonist.

... OK, I'll help out. I should have enough time to get into costume.

Oh, you're the best! I'll switch back to Aiko.

Eh, don't bother. He wants to change the whole thing at the last minute, he can take you as is. Aikos are boring.



Night Queen! Your hour has come! The mortal is beloved to me and I shall not let you sacrifice him to your horrors!

You are foolish to try to stop me, Princess. I have claimed him, and I do not relinquish my claims easily.



Then we must settle this matter in combat.

Indeed. Lay down your sword, coward, and we shall fight body-to-body, in the way of our ancestors.

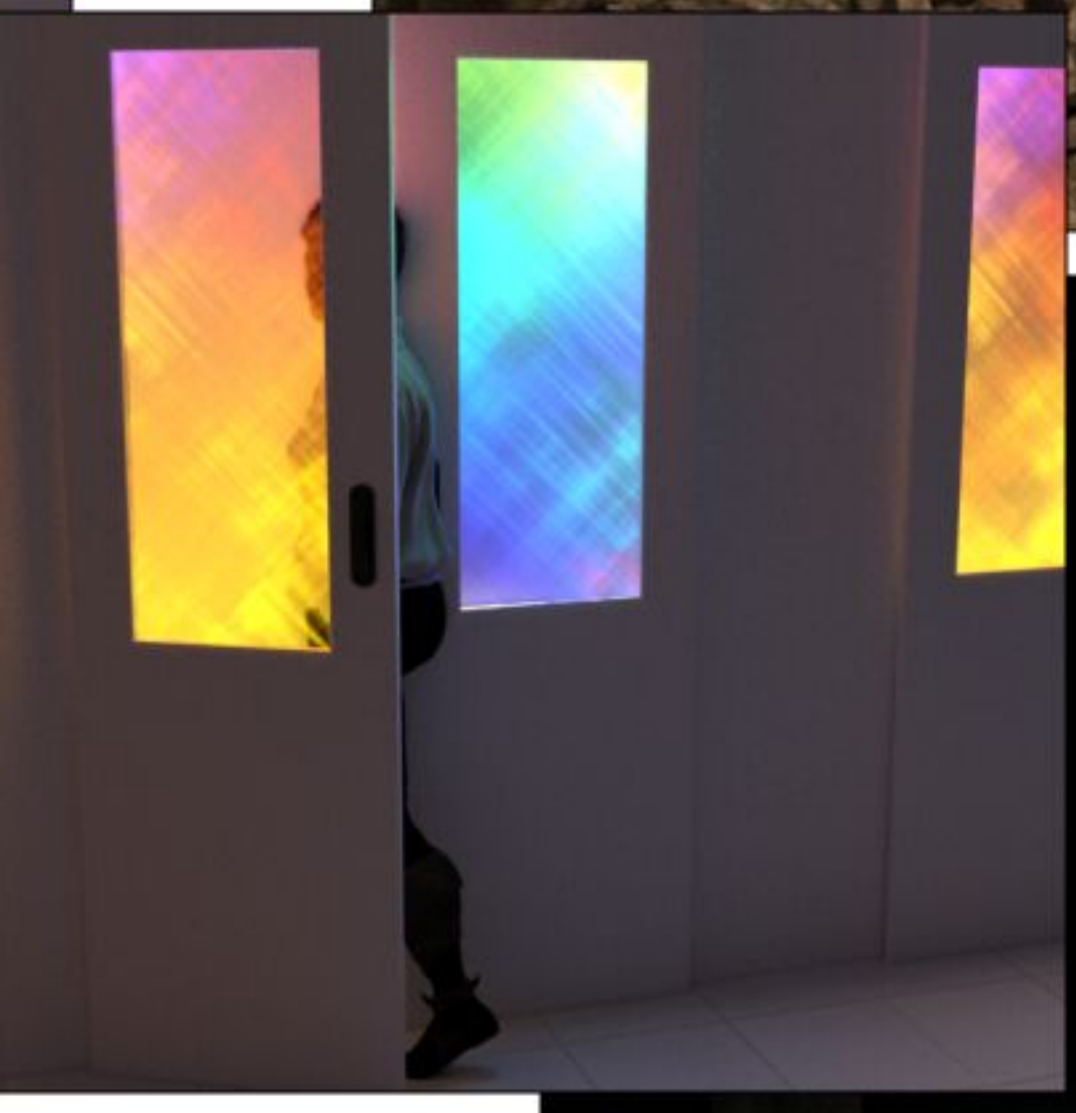


- hrngh! -

MEANWHILE ---

Three computers and nothing interesting on any of them.

Hmm. These doors are very strange.



Definitely not good. I hope there's a way out of --



Hey, wait! You! Come back!



- hrr -
Find the way out
Find the way out
I ... who ...
Find the way out



... Oh, hell.

Oh, hell.



C'mon, stand up. Give me your hand. It's OK. We'll find the way out. I promise.

The thing about jobs like these is that they're for the customer. Whether you get off isn't important. A lot of times, that means you're really wound up after the job's over.

'Course, if there's two of you all worked up, and you're on close personal terms already, the solution to that is obvious.

Nothing.

... MMM ...
Wh'ime is it? ...

After eleven. Let's go shower and then we can go get something to eat.



Doreen went off to rehearse for her next job--this is why I hardly ever got to see her--and I spent the next couple of hours worrying.

If Leyna got herself into trouble, she was capable of getting herself out of it, right?

But if she was in trouble, and couldn't get out of it, then I needed to do something--and I wasn't sure what. I didn't have the tools she did. I couldn't just go dig out data and find out who was where.

Yeah. Sorry. We stopped in the middle of something yesterday and I sort of expected her to get in touch with me today.

Ha! No, it's not like that. I don't know if Leyna is even into sex. Anyway, it's business. At least, I think it's business.



Whatever you keep checking for on that phone, it must be pretty good, because you're ignoring me completely, and I am fascinating.

It's your hot friend, right? The one who came to the set yesterday?

"Stopped in the middle of something?" Please tell me you did not break off a night of passion just to come help me out.



There has to be a way out of this. There has to be.
Find the way out
We can't stop looking.



- skk -
run in circles. circles.
no more run with you.
Find the way out
Find the way out



SKITTER

No, wait! Don't run away!
... Damn it.

I finally couldn't stand it anymore and went to either confront Chapman or search her lab. Whichever. Or both.



Lot of machines that look like they're good at taking apart people's brains, but nothing else suspicious ... yet.

Well, well.

May we abandon the pretense now? You're looking for some missing people.



Since you've as good as admitted you have them ... yes. Why don't you just let them out? It'll be a lot simpler.



It's never simple. You're not simple either, so don't pretend to be.

Behind the right-hand set of doors back there is a test. If you pass the test, I'll let them go.

I confess, I am fascinated to see how you'll do on it.

Or I could just kick your ass and save a lot of time and effort.



... MMM ... yes, you probably could ... but I'm the only person who knows where they are, how to get to them, and if you incapacitate me I can't tell you. And you can't force me. If you want them, the only way to get them is to take my test.

- sigh -
Fine.



Oop! Was not expecting the nudity. And what is this thing I'm wearing? It's already getting a little too personal down there.



Whoa.

There! Much easier to see now.

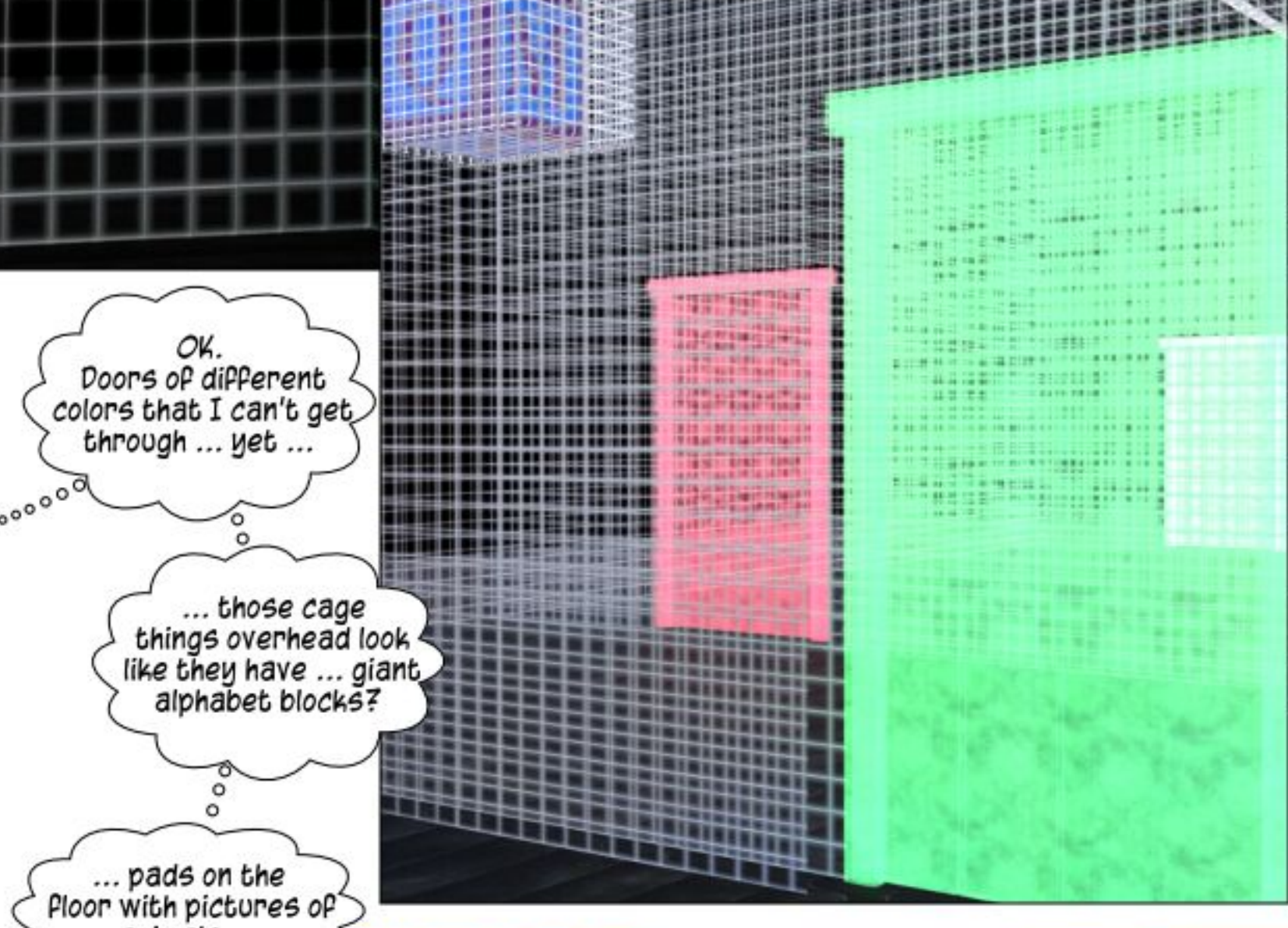
Your test is to get out the white door at the far end.

You'll be rewarded for progress.

Like a good lab rat? What, is there a kibble dispenser?

Oh, no, we can do better than that.

I'll be watching. I'll leave the lights on to help you out.



OK. Doors of different colors that I can't get through ... yet ...

... those cage things overhead look like they have ... giant alphabet blocks?

... pads on the floor with pictures of animals ...



... and three consoles with some kind of quiz or puzzle on them, it looks like.

Well, at least I can get to the first of those, and it's obvious what it wants me to do.

Oh, and it's easy, too. Done! -- whoa! --

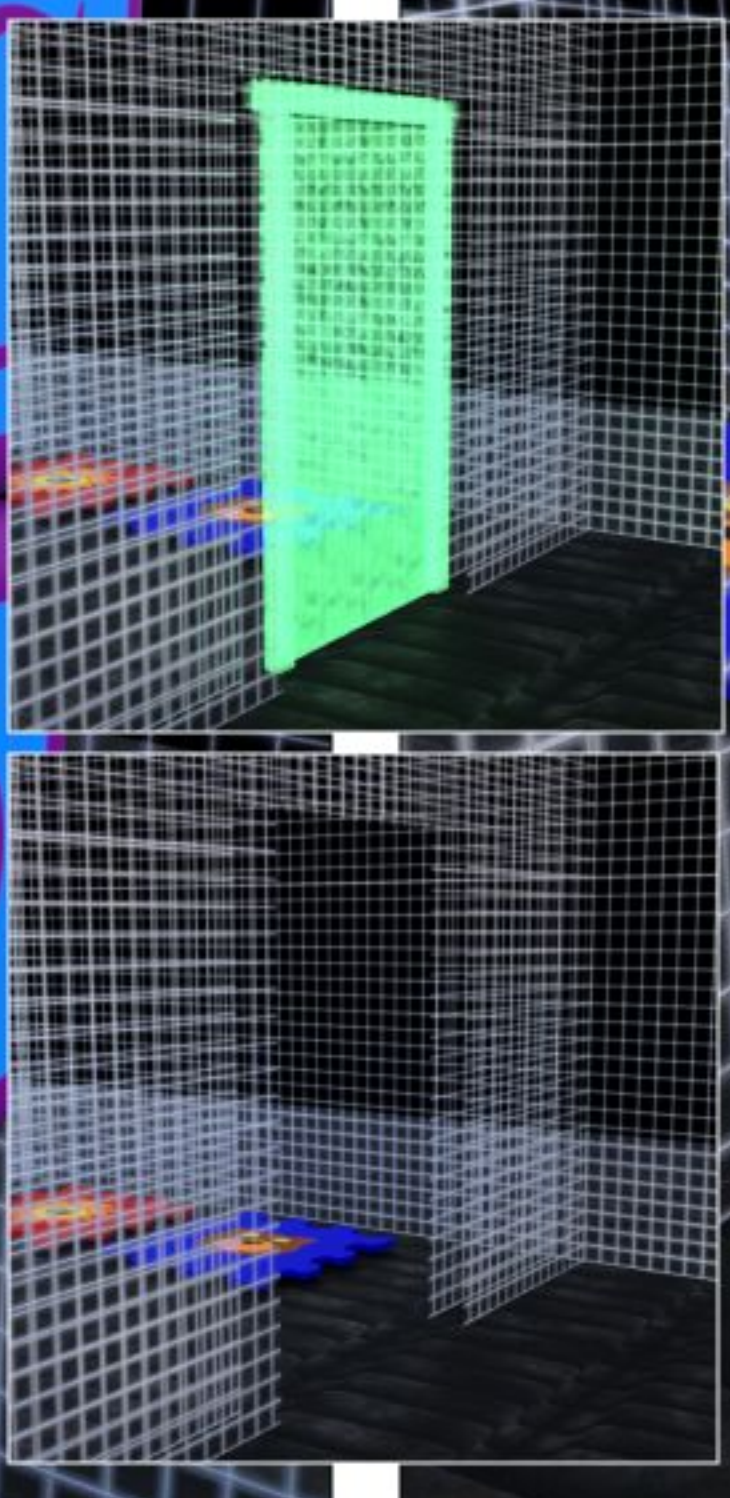
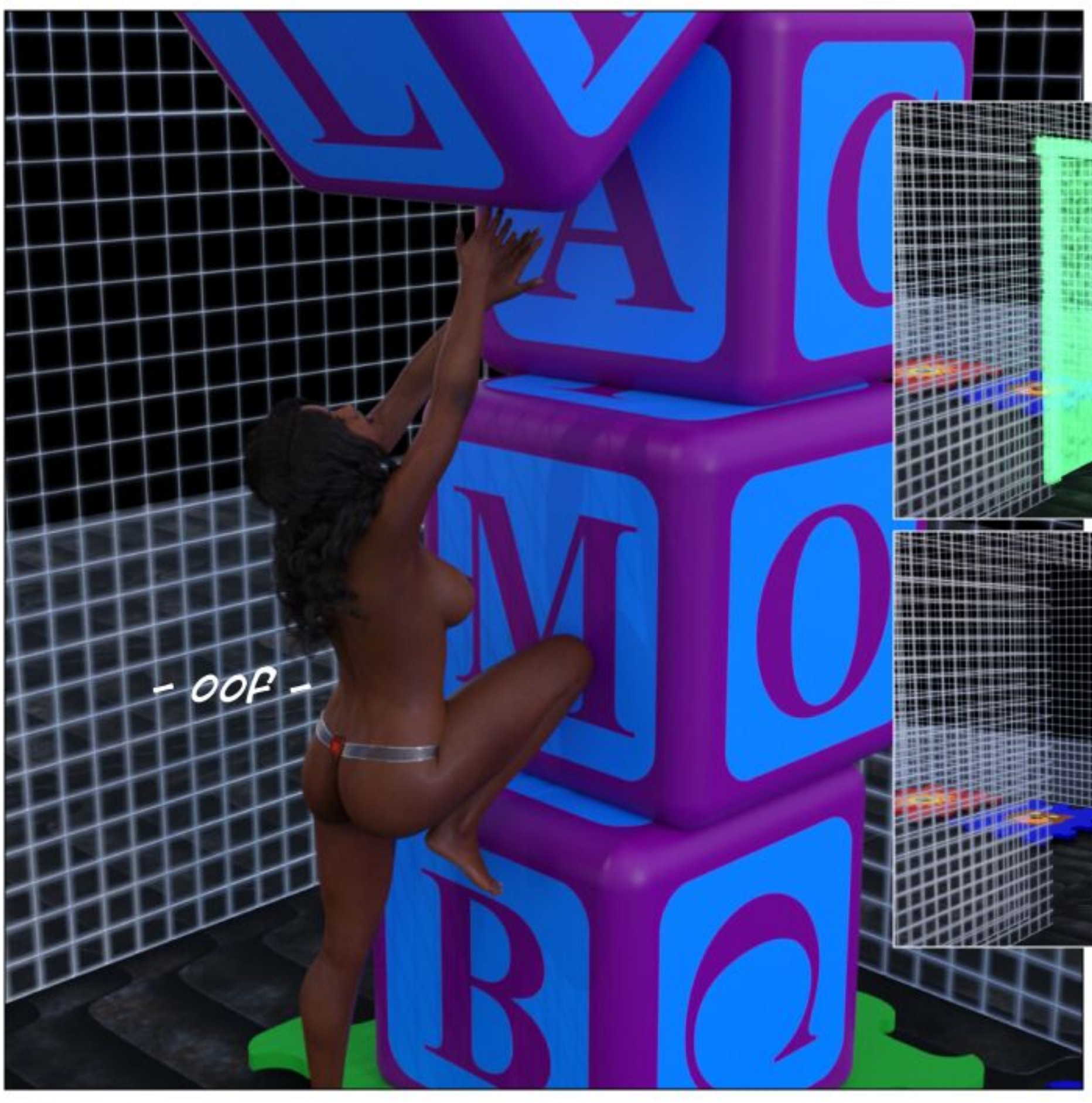


Whew! They're just Poam. Thought that was going to be lethal for a second.



Do I spell something? I don't have the right letters for BEAR, and not even enough blocks for SHEEP ...

Oh, wait, it's not SHEEP ...



Green pad opens green door, got it. There's two blue pads and two blue doors. Does one of them open each?

Worry about that in a bit. I can get to the second console now, so let's see what blocks it drops on my head.

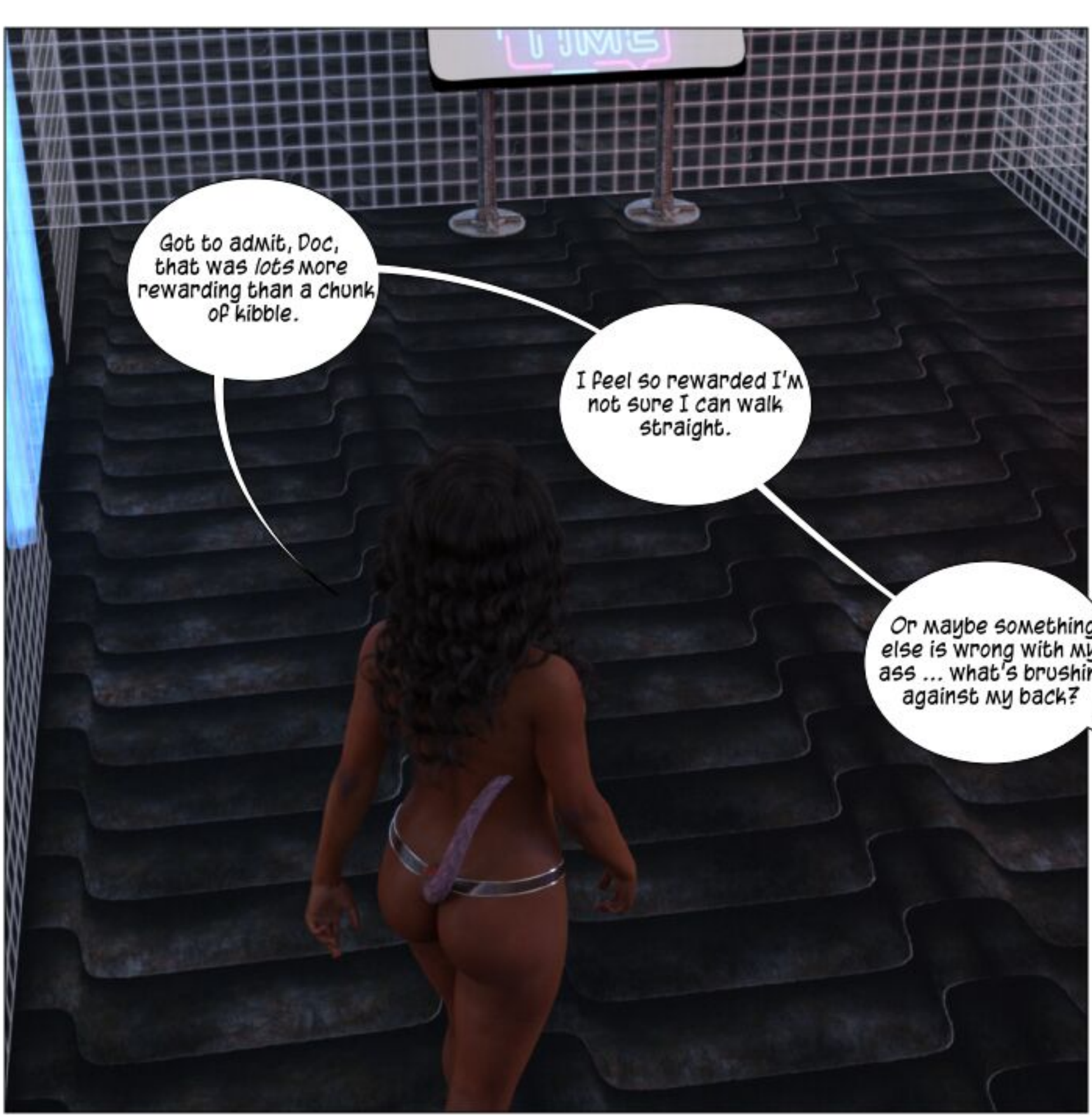


OH! - gasp - what the ...

OH!! oh, god!

OOHHHHH!

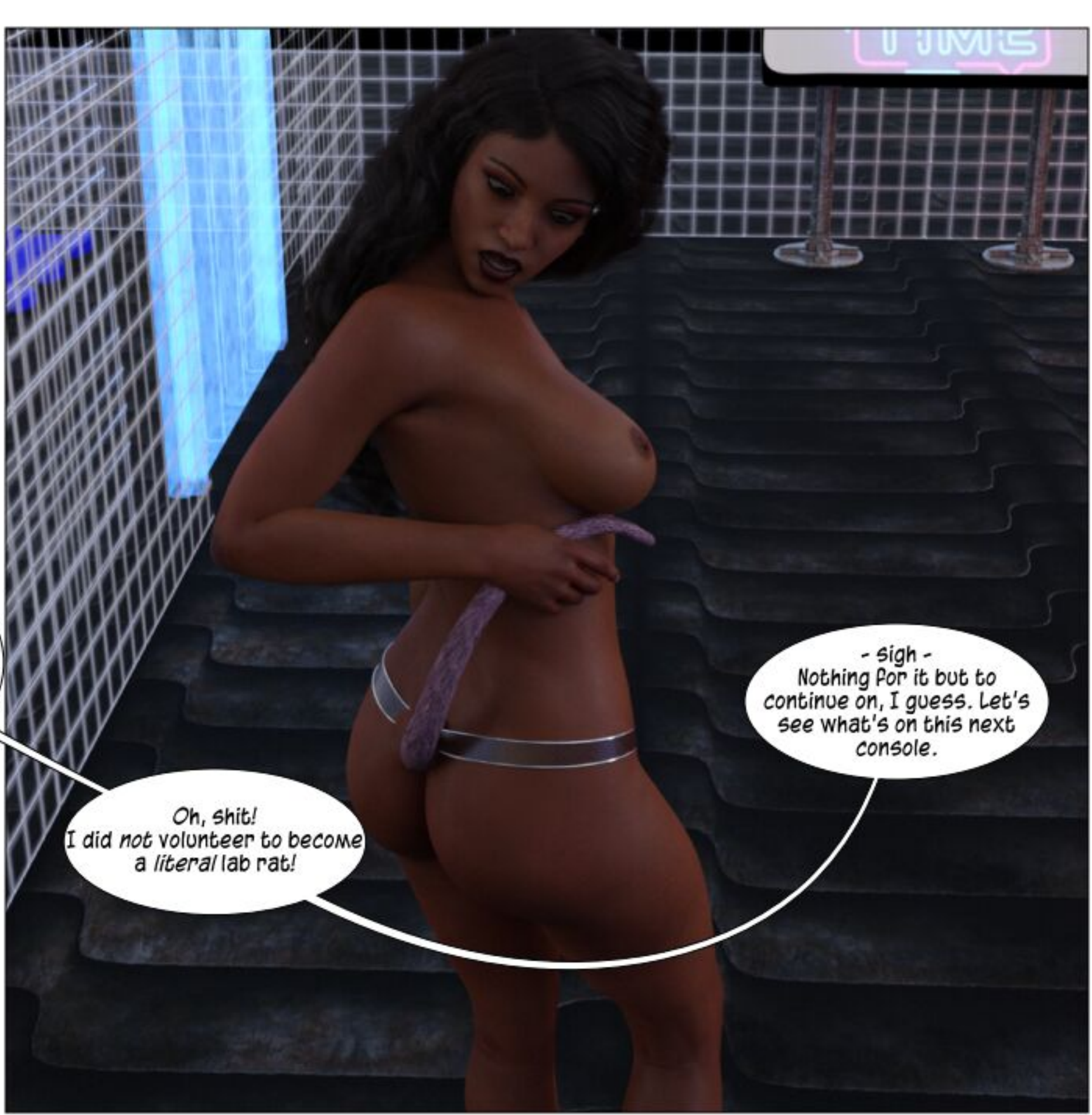




Got to admit, Doc, that was *lots* more rewarding than a chunk of kibble.

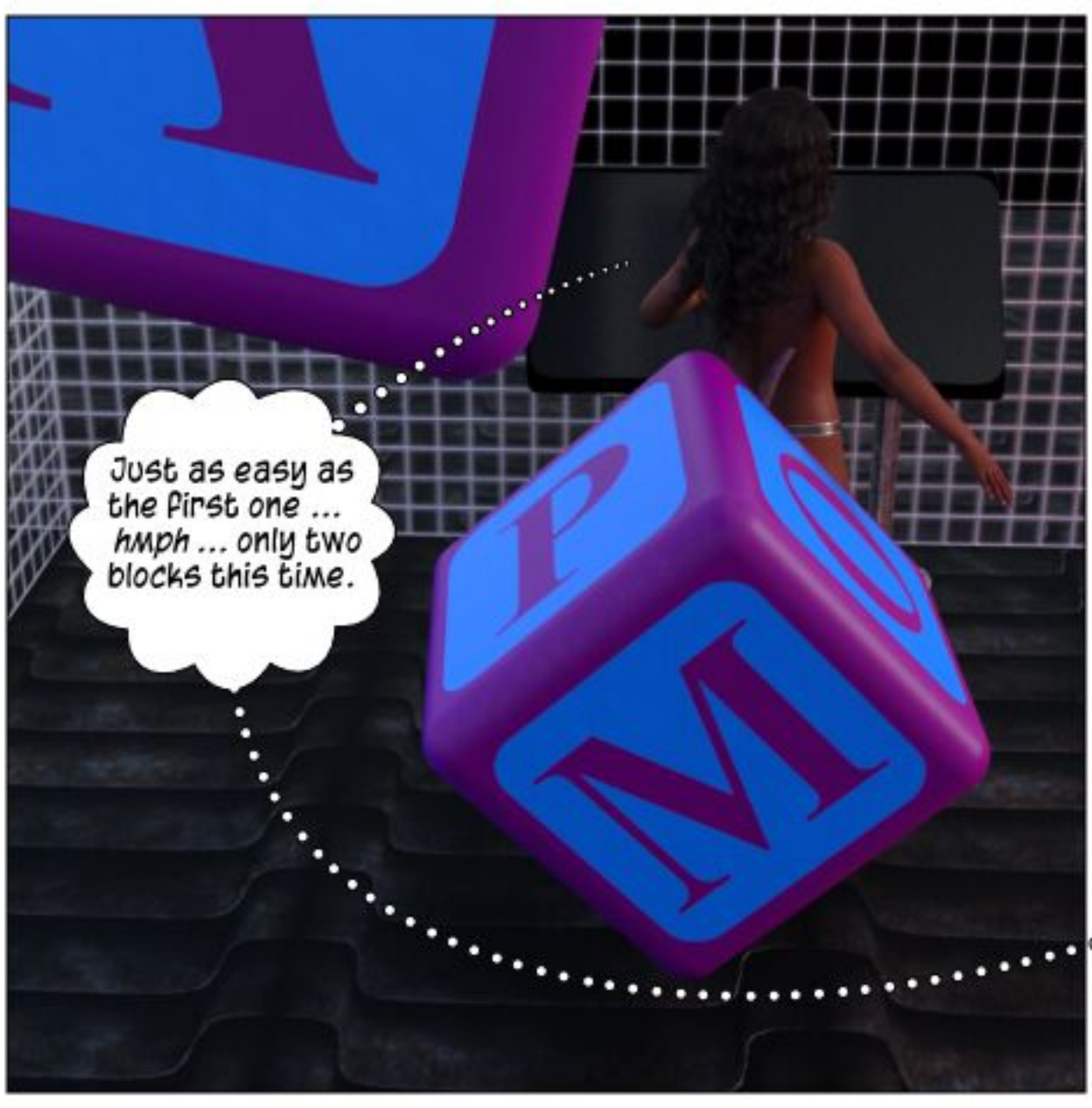
I feel so rewarded I'm not sure I can walk straight.

Or maybe something else is wrong with my ass ... what's brushing against my back?



Oh, shit! I did *not* volunteer to become a *literal* lab rat!

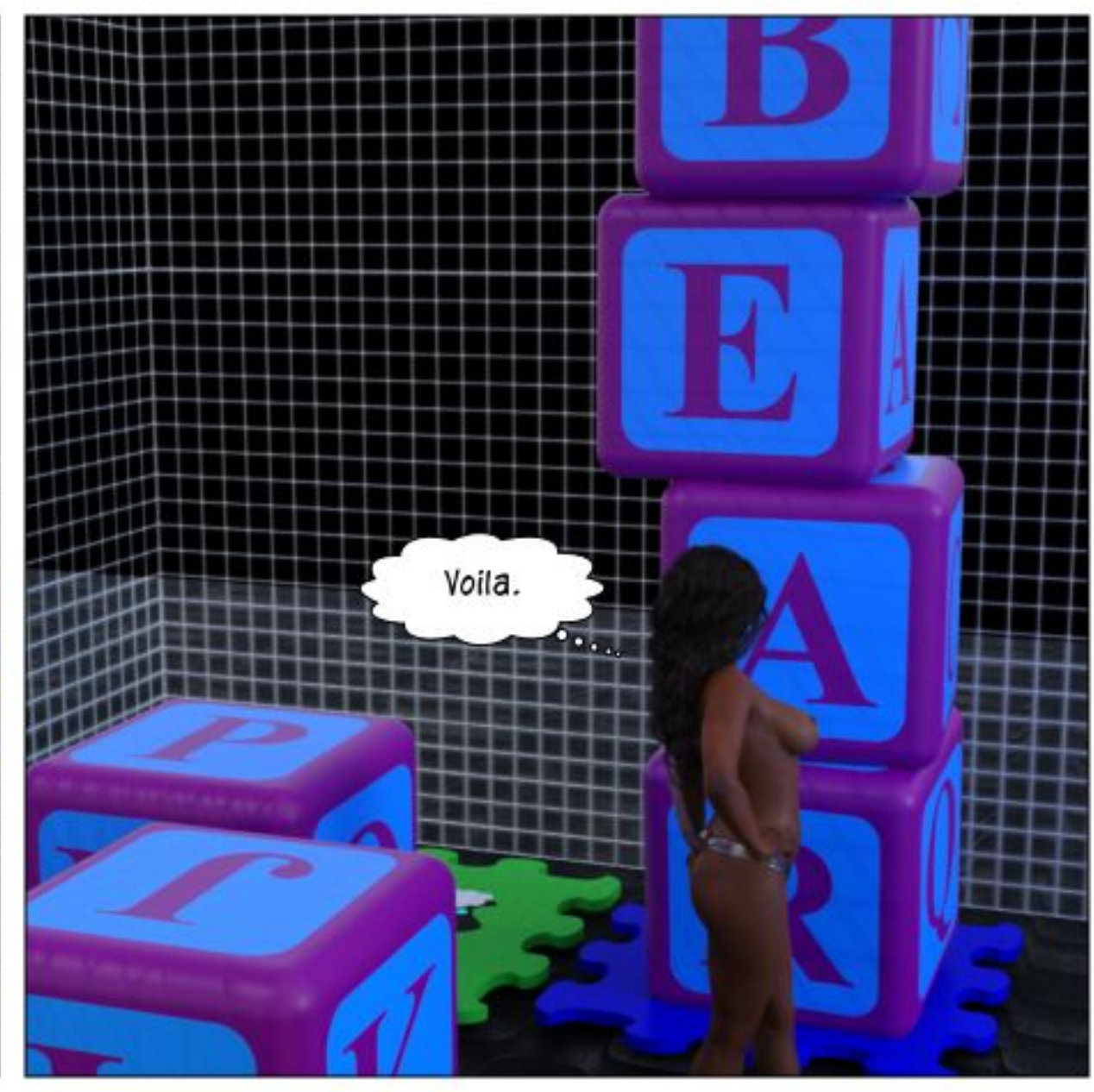
- sigh - Nothing for it but to continue on, I guess. Let's see what's on this next console.



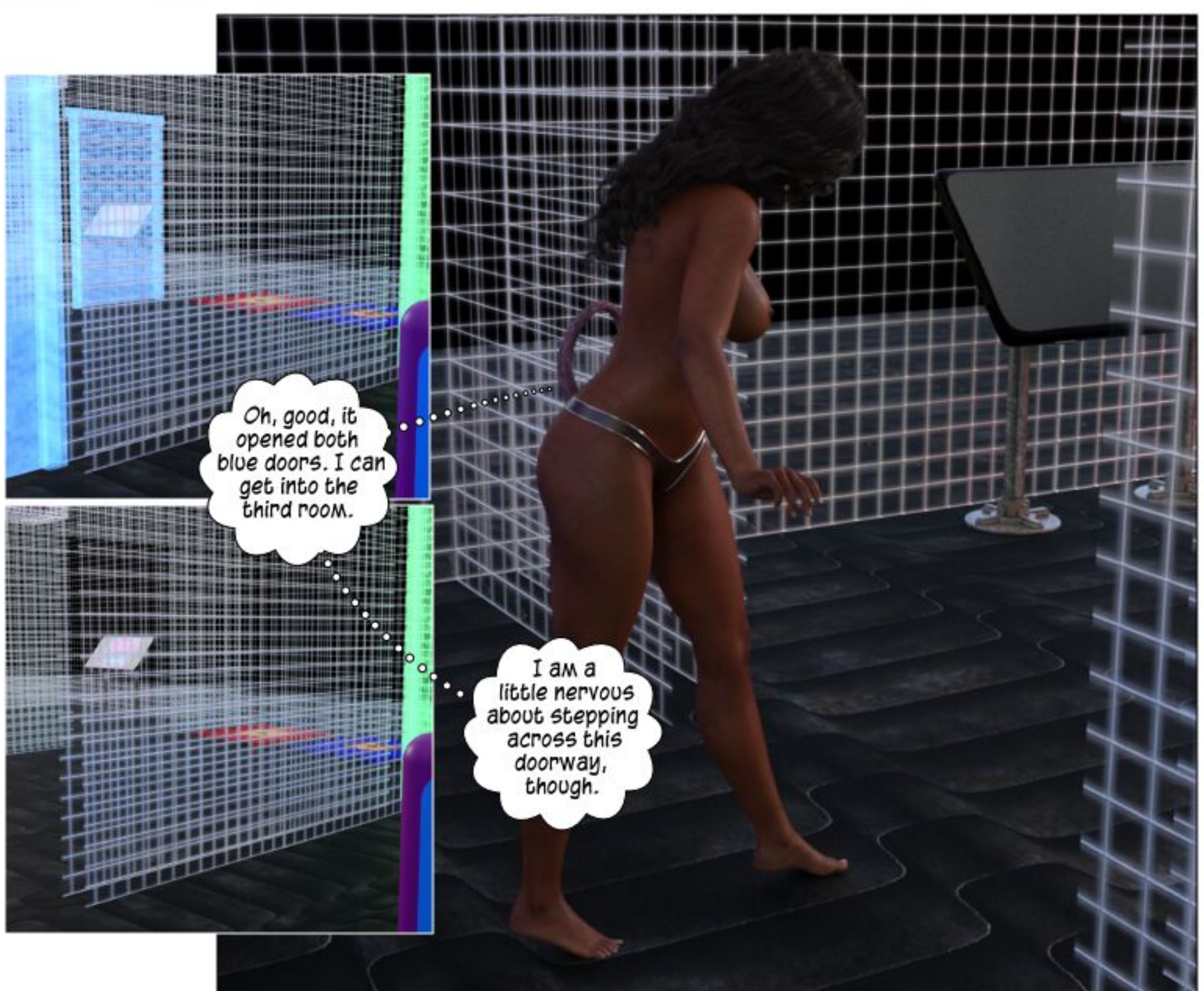
Just as easy as the first one ... *hmph* ... only two blocks this time.



But if I have the letters right ... let me bring these two back into the first room ...



Voila.

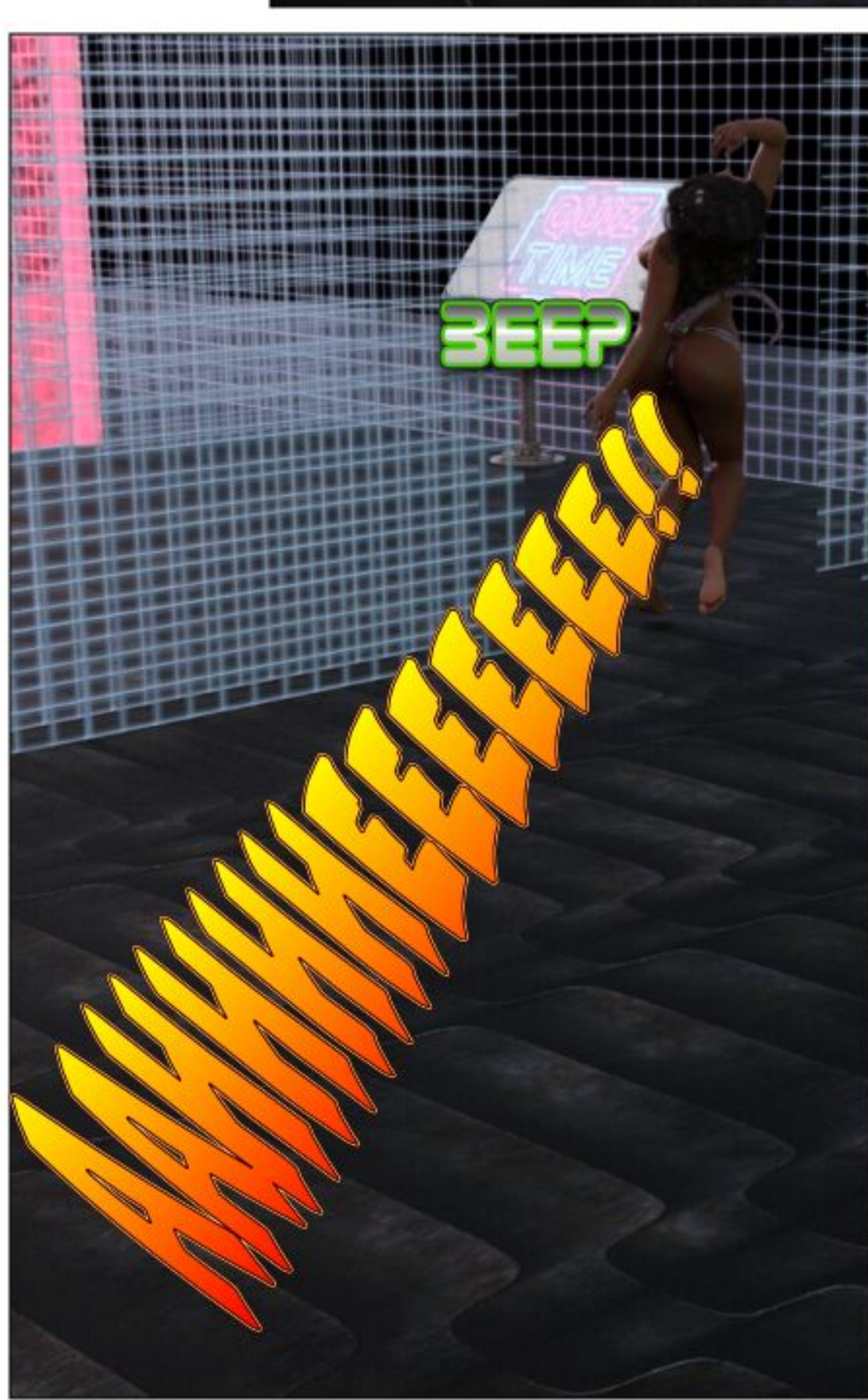


Oh, good, it opened both blue doors. I can get into the third room.

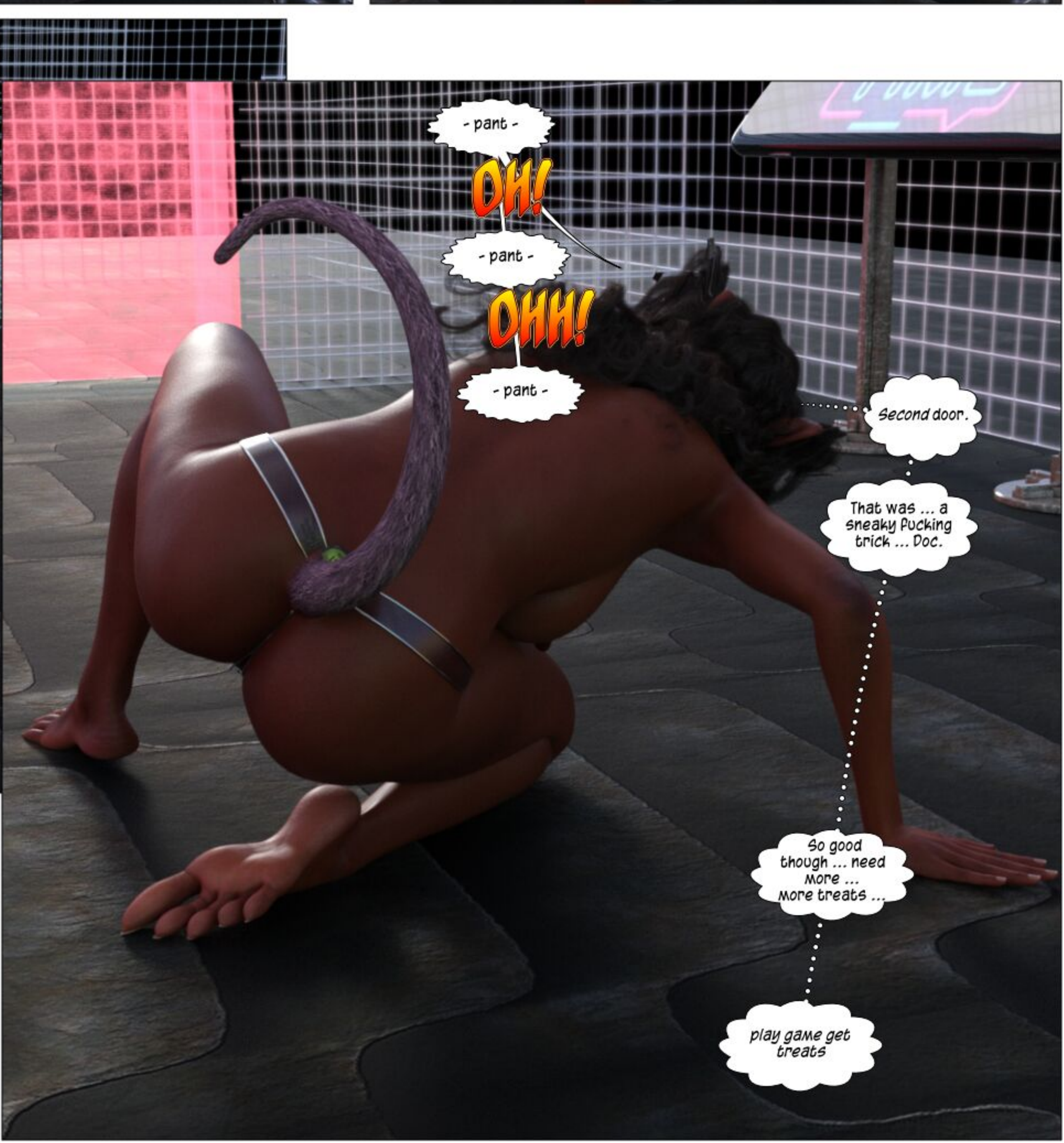
I am a little nervous about stepping across this doorway, though.



Oh, thank goodness. I don't think I could handle another orgasm like that so soon.



AAAAAAAAAAAAA!



- pant -

OH!

- pant -

OHH!

- pant -

Second door.

That was ... a sneaky Pucking trick ... Doc.

So good though ... need more ... more treats ...

play game get treats



God ... I can't even get My eyes to Pocus right ... head Peels strange ... I hope this one's just as easy as the other two.



Yup, a cinch. These new blocks aren't very helpfUl though ...

C'Mon, think. There's got to be a way to Make this work.

play game get treats

... got it.



I have enough spare blocks to Make BEAR in the Middle room ...

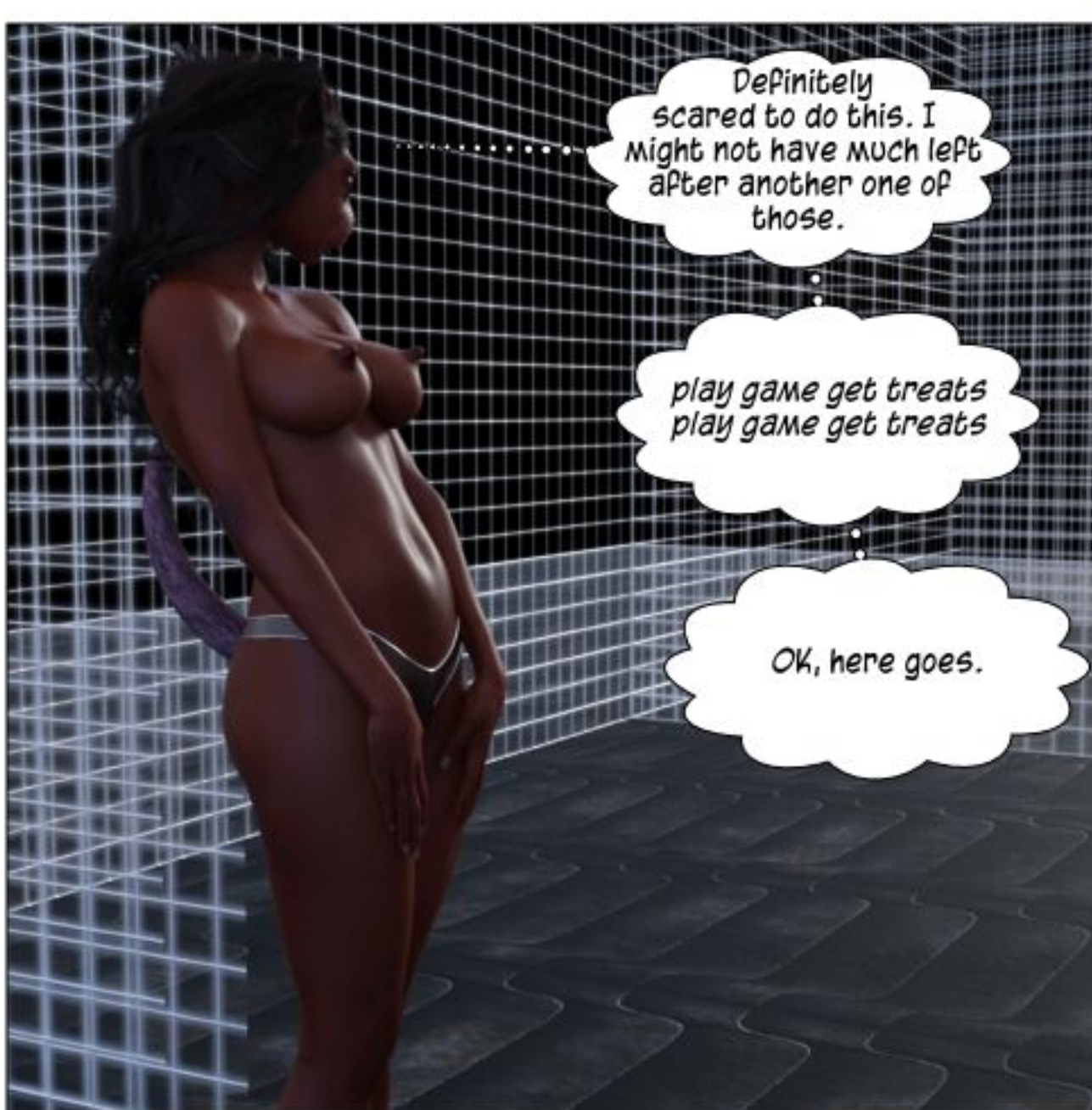
That'll keep the blue doors open ... Yes!



I can take apart the other BEAR and Move all My spare blocks into the Middle room ...



Ta-da!
I am a rat genius. Give Me My treat.



Definitely scared to do this. I might not have Much left after another one of those.

play game get treats
play game get treats

OK, here goes.



!!!!



- hrrr -
don't want to be rat
Pinish game to not be rat
play game get treats

**Congratulations!
The door is open! Just step out of the cage to get your last reward!**

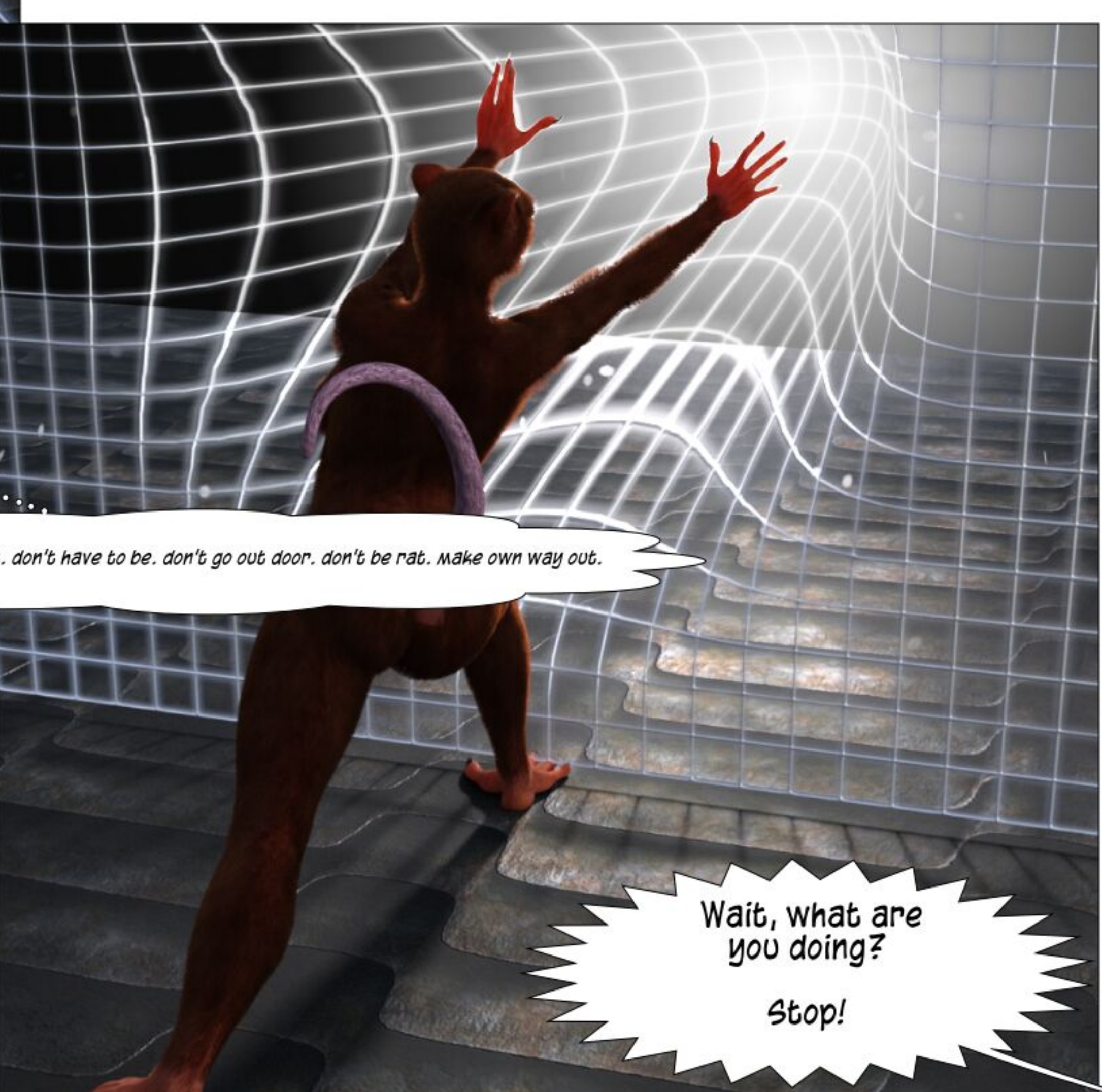


play game play game almost out play game

wait. no.

big woman is lying.
lying.
go out door, pretty sure be rat.
all the way rat.
be good rat
no. don't want to be

don't have to be rat. don't have to be. don't go out door. don't be rat. Make own way out.



**Wait, what are you doing?
Stop!**



No! Where did she go? It's impossible!

- ahem -



THUD



Sorry, not gonna be a rat today. Anyway, I know where you're keeping them. I figured it out once you shrank me into that cage.

Leyna? Is that you? It's really hard to see down into here, she's got some kind of concealment over it.

Hold real still. I'm going to pick you up and I don't want to hurt you.



aaaand ... ooP!

OK, probably should have seen that coming.

You all right?



Thank you. I'm a lot better now.

But we need to get someone else out of there.

Yeah, Markov's in there too, isn't she? Let me see if I can find her.



- krr -

Oh! There she is. I didn't expect ... she's gotten a lot, uh, smaller.

Let me see if I can manage to grab her.



I was hoping she'd change back too. I don't guess she can recall out of this?

I think she's too far gone. We may have to wait for her to be thrown out for nonpayment.

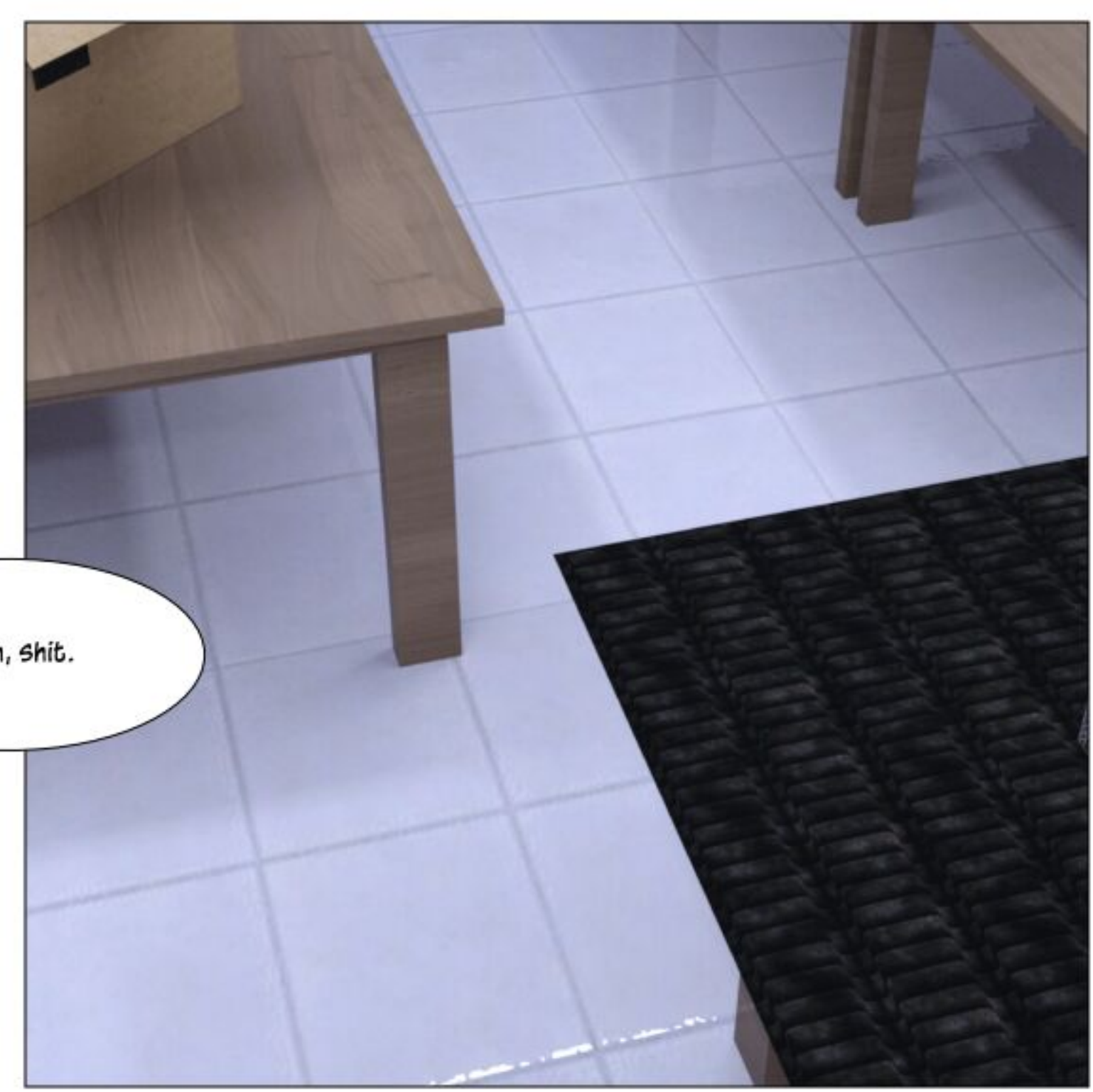
That could take a while. And what about the ones over there in the cages? I bet you dinner they're not simulations.

No bet. I don't know, I guess we put them someplace safe and wait ... I can ask about it, but I'm not sure there's much we can do.

... and we also have to figure out what to do with ...

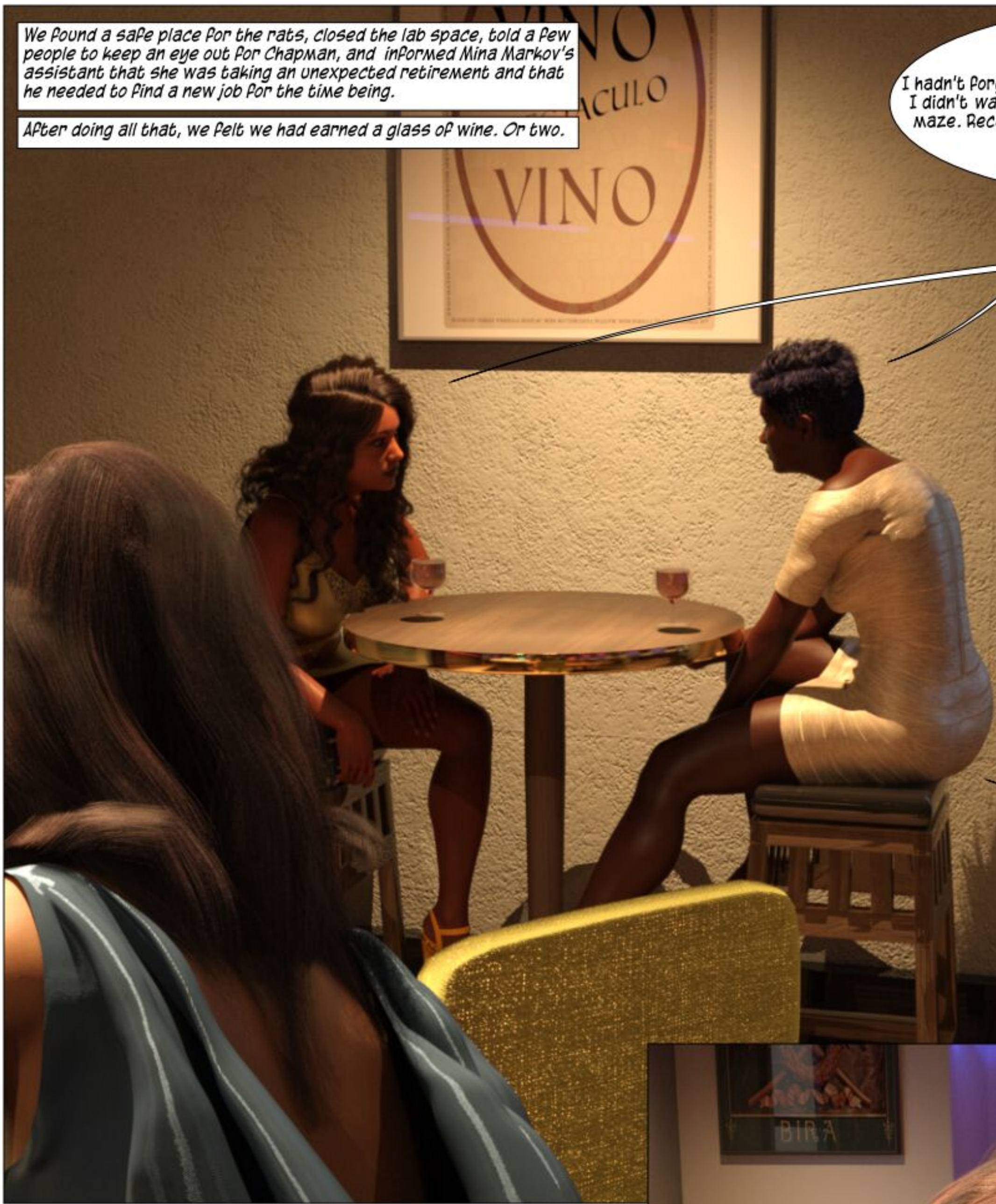
... Dr. Chapman ...

... Oh, shit.



We found a safe place for the rats, closed the lab space, told a few people to keep an eye out for Chapman, and informed Mina Markov's assistant that she was taking an unexpected retirement and that he needed to find a new job for the time being.

After doing all that, we felt we had earned a glass of wine. Or two.



I hadn't forgotten how to recall, that was the strange thing. I didn't want to. All I could focus on was trying to solve the maze. Recalling away from it would have felt like giving up.

Yeah, I had the same problem. My brain was telling me that solving the puzzle was the most important thing in the world.

How did you break out of it?

You know, I'm not sure. All of a sudden I just realized it was rigged, that it was trying to steer me to something I didn't want. And I got so mad--mad at her for doing that, mad at her for lying--that I just sort of ... did it. It was like pushing at a wall. Except I knew if I pushed hard enough I could break it.

Huh.

I don't know. Everything here is an illusion, right? It felt like ... like suddenly remembering that. Like when I do scenarios. I know where the set stops. I know I can step off it any time I want. I can change the script if I need to.

Except that's not completely true, because if I could change this one, we'd have Chapman. Damn it, I can't believe I just let her walk right out of the room!

You were distracted by rescuing me, so I'm not complaining. Anyway, you did a great job; don't kick yourself.

Don't worry about Chapman. We'll find her.



Goodness, no, definitely don't worry about that.

You're the most interesting thing that's ever happened in this place, and I'm going to really enjoy studying you.

Just field observation for now. I'm not ready yet. I have to regroup, find a new space, put some experiments together.

But trust me, my dear, when the time is right ...

... I'll find you.

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