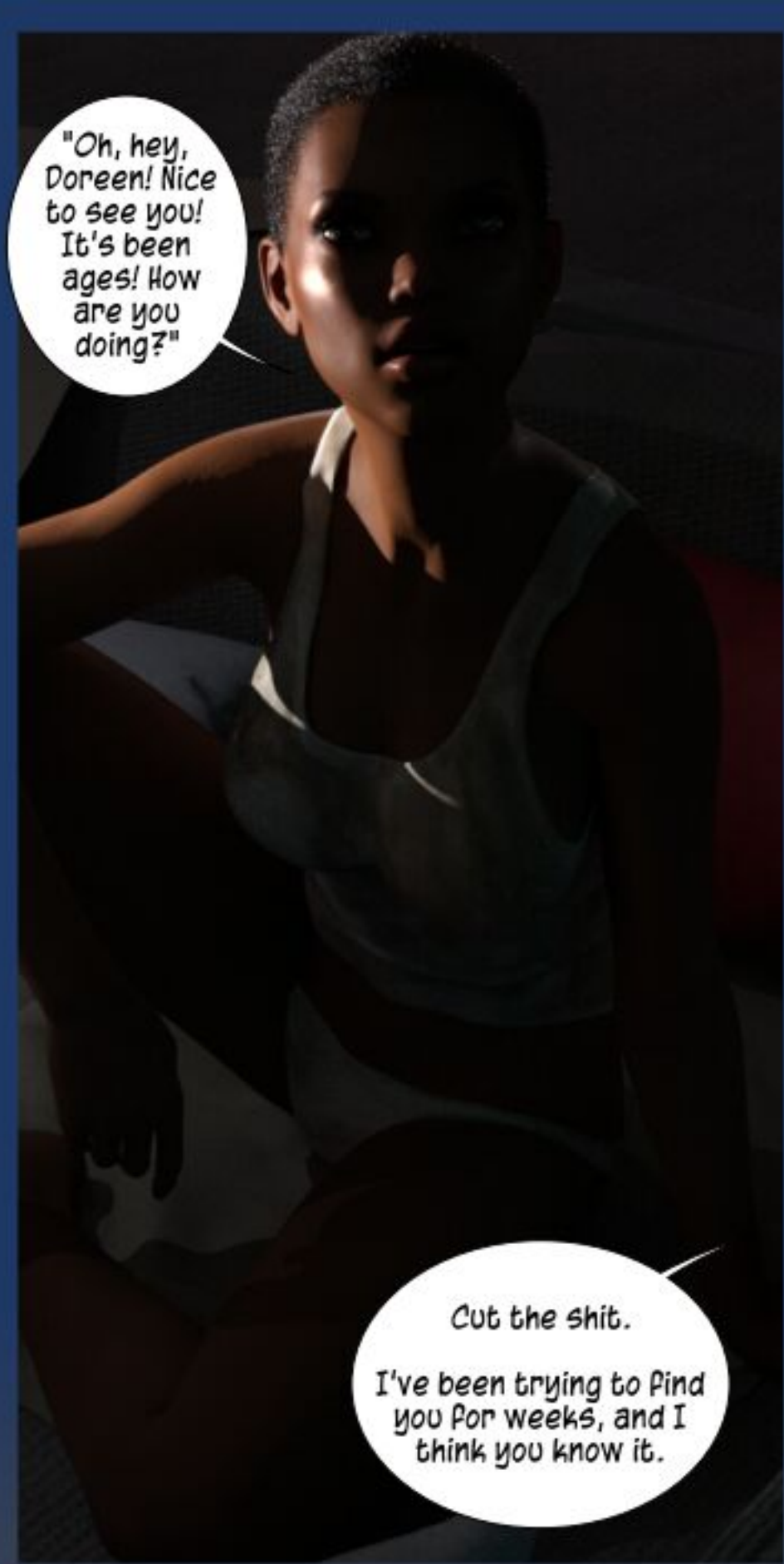SLEEPER SQUAD

Doreen.

We have to talk.

"Oh, hey, Doreen! Nice to see you! It's been ages! How are you doing?"

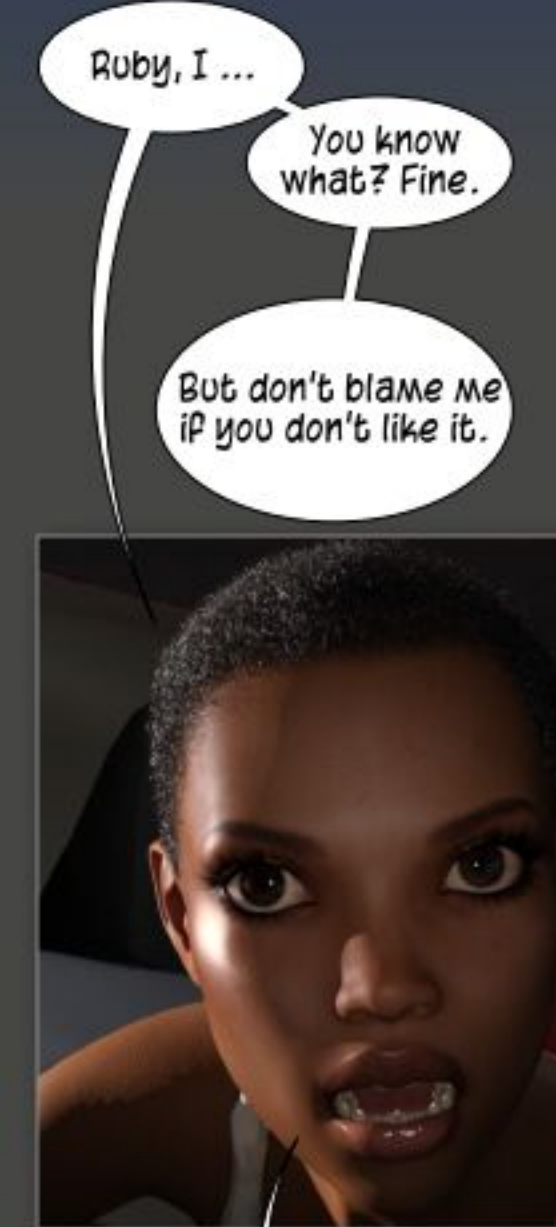Cut the shit. I've been trying to find you for weeks, and I think you know it.

Once we didn't have the patrol or the bees to think about, we could finally spend a little time tracking down this woman who keeps turning people into mindless gray things.

The few times we managed to get a read on her, it didn't help because she didn't register as an identity. But then we started timing her appearances against other events.

Specifically, every so often Doreen disappears for a while, then reappears, and guess who we always find operating in exactly that gap?

So: what the fuck?

I don't want to have to push, but I am going to need some answers.
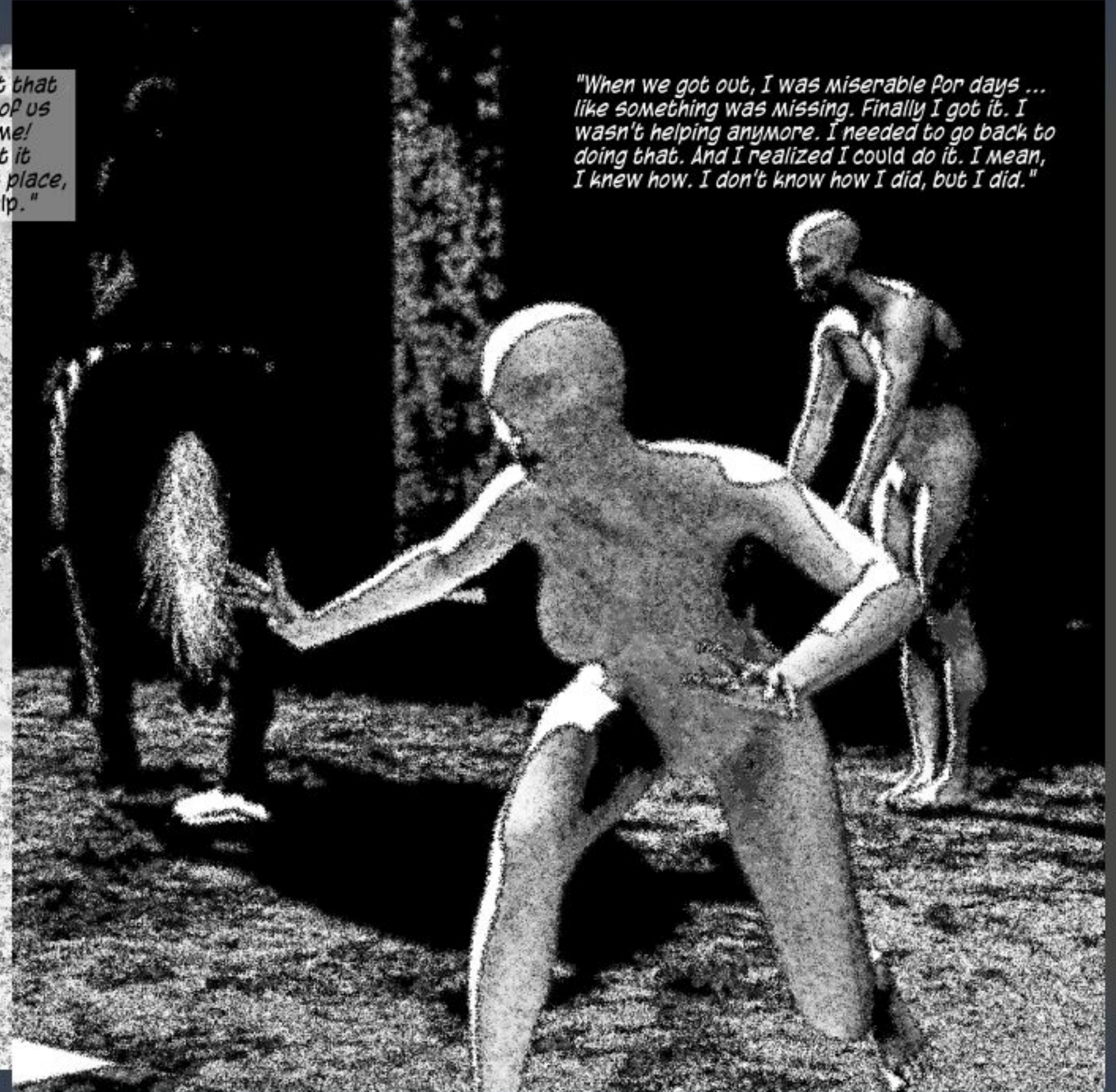
Ruby, I ...

You know what? Fine.

But don't blame me if you don't like it.

"I'd already been thinking a lot about that kind of thing, and I realized ... most of us want to be mindless. It wasn't just me! She was doing it a different way, but it was the same idea. And then, in that place, all of a sudden I had the ability to help."

"When we got out, I was miserable for days ... like something was missing. Finally I got it. I wasn't helping anymore. I needed to go back to doing that. And I realized I could do it. I mean, I knew how. I don't know how I did, but I did."

It started when we were all in that place. When we got pulled in, we were doing your scenario.* Remember? The woman who wanted to be an animal?

#SS #14 -T

Doreen, that's -- That's just --

I knew you wouldn't like it.

It's not whether I like it, it's that it's wrong! Most people don't want to be mindless! Maybe you do, but ...

Ruby. Most of us finish work -- work we shouldn't even have to be doing, sometimes -- and we go get wasted, or try to get enough sex to get a good haze on, if our jobs don't make us hate sex ...

As soon as we don't have to do any of the stuff we want to forget, we go off and try to forget it for a while. Over and over.

Doreen, what happened to you? You weren't like this once. What changed?

I hate to say it, but ... if you really believe all that, then ... you need help.

No, I don't! There's nothing wrong with me, Ruby. You just don't see it, because you're one of the ones who doesn't have to play the same way. You have power. You get to make your own world if you don't like the one the rest of us have to deal with.

And I haven't changed; I'm the same person I was when you met me. I've just caught on, is all. I watched what I was doing. I figured out what I was looking for.

What about Bliss? I thought that was giving you the escape you needed ...

You fucked up Bliss for me. You and Leyna. You made them put in those limits. A few minutes a day is no good. I'm looking for something permanent.

I don't know why you couldn't just let people stay in Bliss long-term. Oh, wait, I do know ... because then we couldn't pay, huh? Gotta keep us in debt.

That's not true and it's not fair. I don't like the system any more than --

Then why the fuck do you support it? Why do you help them, Ruby??

Look, I'm just trying to help deal with people who are trying to make Sleep miserable for others.

And right now, no matter what weird ideas you might have, that includes you. I'm sorry.

Stop changing people, Doreen. I am asking you. As a friend.

That's a threat, huh?

No, but if you don't stop, it will be. Doreen ... I don't want to have to take you down by force.
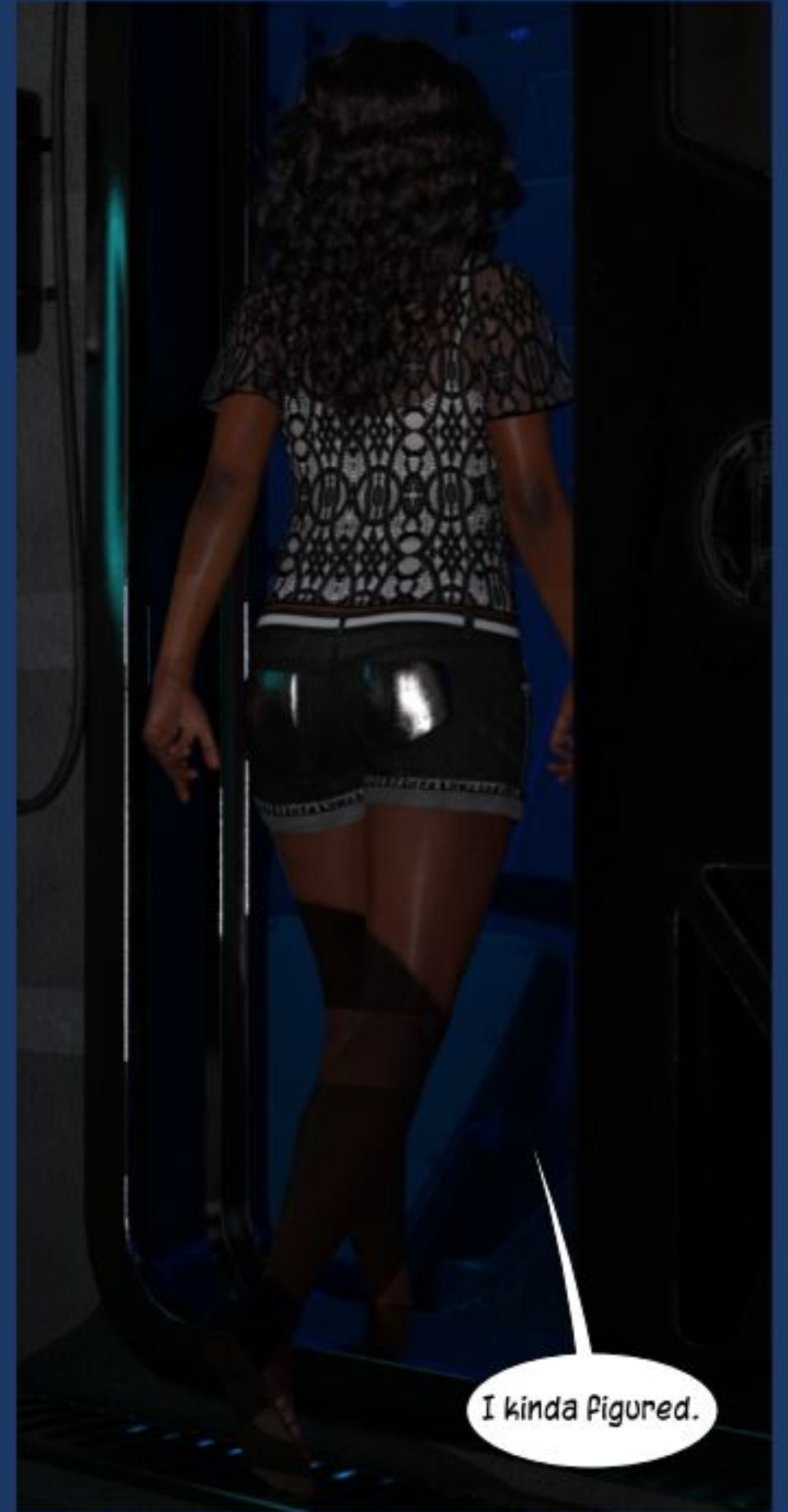
Yeah, and you could.

OK, I'll stop.

... Don't come back here again.

I don't want to see you anymore.

I kinda figured.

#23 DIVESTING

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

LATER, AFTER THE SCENARIO HAS CONCLUDED THE WAY THEY ALWAYS DO ...

... But did you have to kick me so hard?

Yes! You were about to mess up the whole thing!

So how was he?

Same as most customers: not very good at it, but made up for it with enthusiasm.

Definitely going to be glad to get out of this makeup.

Oh, this is nothing. You should have seen the one she did last year.

You've worked with me for years, Raz! You know how this goes. You know that keeping the mood is the most important part.

I had to get you out, fast, before the customer could realize that wasn't part of the script. What were you thinking?

I don't know!!

Ruby, I know you're not going to believe me, but I swear it's true ... it was ... I wasn't doing that. It wasn't me!

It was like someone was controlling me. Like ... like someone ordered me to do it. And I couldn't tell them no!

Hmm.

Do you have any idea who that could have been?

Huh?

-- sigh --

All right, go on. No harm, no foul.

Thanks, Ruby.

But, Raz, do me a favor. Try to think about where you might have gotten a suggestion like that. Who might have given it to you. Try hard to remember.

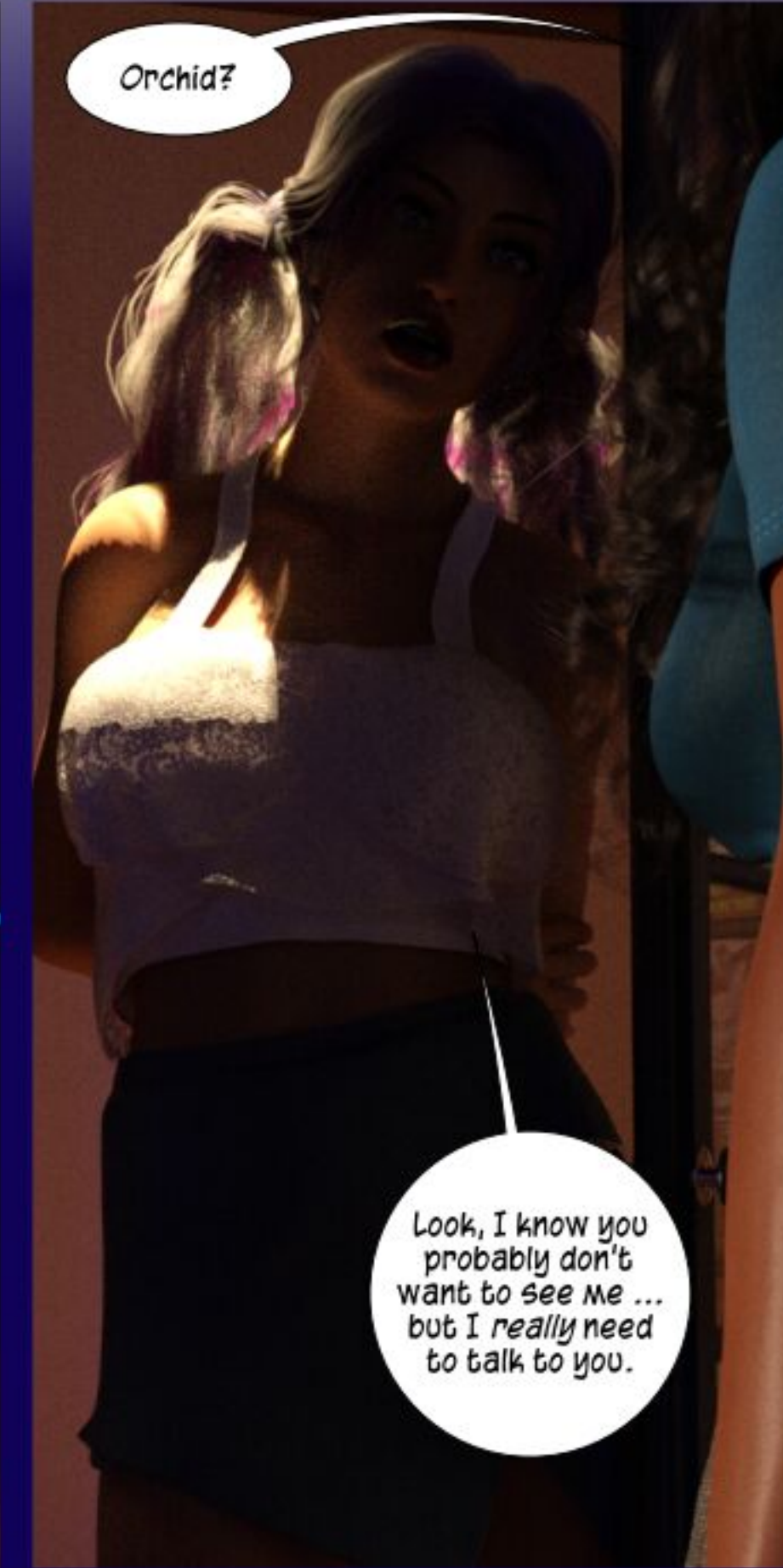I'm probably going to ask you about it again.

Carly, how would you feel about teching a passive for a while?

Might be OK ... if you told me what the hell's going on.

Someone's trying to get me. This is the second time they've messed with a scenario.

Remember the weird thing that happened with the alien-experiment one?#

I know an obvious suspect, but no one knows where she is. And it's not really her style. Might take me a while to figure this out.

At least with passives when something goes nuts you can say 'cut' and do it over.

And Trish Carter has been after me to collaborate for months.

SS #21 –T

RUBY RETURNS TO HER PERSONAL SPACE.

I wonder, if I slept for three days, if anything would be better when I woke up.

BZZZZZT

Now what?

Orchid?

Look, I know you probably don't want to see me ... but I really need to talk to you.

This isn't a good time. I'm really tired, Orchid. I've been trying to salvage my career and it's not going well.

You've gotta be tired too. I didn't know April had started the circus again ...

Huh?

Your hair. You only wear it that way for the act.

Oh. Yeah, it's been running for two weeks. It's picking back up, but not fast.

Ruby, I just ... I'm sorry. I'm sorry about all of it. I'm sorry I was stupid. I'm sorry any of it happened.

I don't think I can be any sorrier than I already am, but I can try. Can you tell me what I need to do to make it right? Because I don't know what that is.

It's not about being sorry. I know you're sorry. That's not the problem.

Orchid, you brought me that focus crystal, and I know you didn't know what it would actually do, but you still brought it. Because someone told you it was a good idea. Someone you trusted, and shouldn't have. Someone you apparently trusted more than me.

I just wanted to help!

Sure, but did you actually talk to me about it?

And then, when I tried to tell you that what you were getting into was a really bad idea, you didn't trust my judgement. You blew me off completely. Again, you trusted people who you didn't even know very well instead.

You don't trust me, Orchid. And that means I can't trust you.

But ... I didn't do any of that on purpose! I didn't know!!

I realize that ... but do you understand that doesn't matter?

It should matter.

I never thought you were malicious, Orchid. That didn't cross my mind.

Look, I still want to be friends. I want to go out for drinks and hear about how everything is going.

But I can't be more than that. I can't do it.

And right now I'm tired and cross and sad and I need you to leave.

I'm sorry.

RUBY IS REFERRING TO EVENTS IN SS #17 AND #20. –T

Panel 1

Cora?

Hi! I'm Mina. Nice to meet you. Thanks so much for waiting.

Now, what problems can I help you with?

Uh ... to tell you the truth, I'm not even sure I should be here. You're a therapist, right? But I don't need --

I mean, there's nothing wrong. There's nothing to fix. I just --

Narration

REGULAR READERS MAY REMEMBER MINA MARKOV.

MINA WAS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A LIFE COUNSELOR AND A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER. "A CLEAR MIND IS A POWERFUL MIND" WAS HER SLOGAN. SHE GAVE PRESENTATIONS TO LARGE AUDIENCES, AND PRIVATE CONSULTATIONS TO INDIVIDUALS, AND DESPITE A NUMBER OF RUMORS ABOUT FRAUD AND EVEN LESS SAVORY THINGS, MADE A LOT OF MONEY.

THAT WAS BEFORE DR. CHAPMAN, WHO FELT MARKOV WAS EXPLOITING PEOPLE AND LEADING THEM INTO MENTAL DECLINE, TURNED HER INTO A LAB RAT.*

MINA DIDN'T SPEND LONG AS A RAT, BUT IT WAS JUST A LITTLE TOO MUCH TIME. WHEN SHE WAS FORCIBLY INTERRUPTED (BROUGHT AWAKE) BY RUBY AND LEYNA IN AN ATTEMPT TO SNAP HER OUT OF IT, SHE WAS STILL CATATONIC. IT TOOK HER MANY MONTHS, ON HER OWN, INSIDE HER HEAD, TO REALIZE SHE WAS A PERSON AGAIN.

THESE DAYS MINA HAS A MUCH MORE SUBDUED STYLE. SHE DOESN'T GIVE PRESENTATIONS ANYMORE, AND SHE DOESN'T MAKE HOUSE CALLS. IN FACT, SHE'S SELDOM SEEN IN PUBLIC. HER CUSTOMERS COME TO HER. BUT THE NATURE OF THE BUSINESS IS BASICALLY THE SAME ...

* IN SS #2 -T

Panel 2

STRESS
The Nation's #1 Killer
Medically Proven Stress Contributes to:
Heart Disease · Insomnia
Strokes · Fatigue
High Blood Pressure · Sex Problems
Colitis · Skin Diseases
Irritability · Allergies
Rheumatism · Overeating
Migraines · Depression · Asthma

You just feel like things could be better. Like something is missing. Or isn't doing what it should.

Tell me, how often do you feel stressed? Anxious? Do you find yourself feeling upset for no particular reason?

Yes. ... A lot.

Right. That's your mind reacting to unfulfilled potential. It's saying "This is sleep, I could be anything I wanted here, but something keeps holding me back ..."

Panel 3

And you can do something about that?

You can do something about that. All I can do is show your mind how to do it.

There are a number of ways, but I find that hypnosis is usually the easiest. Have you ever been hypnotized?

Panel 4

This is, uh, a little ...

Relax. I'm not going to make you cluck like a chicken or anything. In fact, I can't make you do anything you don't want to do.

It's just that there's a part of your mind we need to reach, and you've got walls built around it. Hypnosis is the fastest way past those walls.

Are you comfortable? Is the chair adjusted all right?

OK. Relax as completely as you can. Close your eyes if you like. I want you to concentrate on my voice, and only on my voice. Nothing else is here. Just my voice.

Panel 5

OUT IN THE AWAKE WORLD, DR. CHAPMAN IS WORKING TO RECOVER VARIOUS PEOPLE IN A STATE OF COMA SIMILAR TO MINA'S ... INCLUDING SOME SHE PUT IN THAT CONDITION.

You can't sneak up on me, you know.

I wasn't trying to.

Full house, huh? All six tubes.

Panel 6

Those are the remaining Euphorics. Remember I said I had a breakthrough? I'm expecting to have them all recovered within the next week or two.

Then I suppose I'll start on the rats.

Assuming you still want them to recover.

Panel 7

Don't want to clean up your own mess?

You know better than that. I made a promise.

But what I can't seem to get you to believe is --

... Look, they're not good people. It's like with Clayton Barker: I understand why you want them repaired, but you also have to acknowledge that it might be better for everyone else if they stayed comatose.

I'm not saying I don't agree, but I feel like that's not the point. Clayton is trouble, sure, but he didn't deserve that, and I don't think your rats did either.

You didn't meet any of them before they were rats.

Panel 1

I got your report on the outcome of the bees and the patrollers. Read it with great interest.

Thank you for setting me on the right track.

If you knew the network was that powerful, I'm surprised you didn't try to use it yourself.

Didn't have the ability. You needed a network engineer, you'll notice.

And anyway, I'm interested in changing bad actors, same as you. Not altering the place wholesale.

I admit I have faults, but megalomania is not one. I am not Nathaniel Barker.

You didn't come Awake just to compare notes. What's on your mind?

Panel 2

I left something out of that report.

Penny said we always need leaders because most people can't function without them. She said we need gods and queens to survive.

Penny had deranged ideas, and she probably was a megalomaniac. I shouldn't give her the brain time. But I can't seem to get that line out of my head.

That's because the back of your mind knows she was right.

Not the answer I wanted to hear.

Panel 3

You don't confide in me to get the answers you want. You confide in me to check your math.

It's not true of everyone, of course. It never has applied to me much, because I barely play within the system at all; I'm an observer ...

And it doesn't apply to you because you're a god who happens to be in denial.

How's your personal life? Not going especially well right now?

Now why would you ask that?

I'm a psychologist.

Have you ever had sex Awake?

Panel 4

Uh ... no. Have you?

Not yet.

They tell me it's just like in Sleep, but stickier.

Panel 6

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP

Oh, hell.

I'm here, CLO. What's wrong?

CLAYTON BARKER IS FULLY CONSCIOUS AND DEMANDING HE BE ALLOWED TO RETURN TO SLEEP.

I don't want him to see me or know my identity. I'm sure Ruby feels the same way. Can you lead him through reentry without us?

ALREADY IN PROGRESS. I ASSUMED YOU WANTED TO BE NOTIFIED.

Yes. Thanks.

Panel 7

Leaving so soon?

Reluctantly.

If Clayton's going back to Sleep, I need to warn some people there's a storm coming.

... Thank you, Zoe. I needed that.

Panel 1 — caption: A MEETING OF THE SHAREHOLDING BARKERS, TWO DAYS LATER (ABSENT MONICA). JOSIAH IS IN A VERY BAD MOOD. HE'S PRACTICALLY SHOUTING.

... going to make you take me seriously if it's the last thing I do!

I told you I didn't want your vigilantes operating. I warned you. Repeatedly. We even took a vote!

And now we have no phone system! Because, apparently, you told them it was fine to just take it down without consulting the rest of us!

And you two are the ones who accuse me of acting unilaterally!

Panel 2:

As I told you before, we would have consulted with you, if you hadn't decided to disappear. The phones were already out by then, and you didn't respond to messages.

And if you had, and I'd said no, you'd have done it anyway.

Once we realized it was the only thing that was going to stop the problem ... probably, yes.

Josiah, there's wanting consensus and then there's plain stubbornness. You've refused to consider fixing things before, even when they badly needed fixing.

Your laissez-faire bit is getting old.

Did you want the bees and patrollers to keep terrorizing people?

SERENE BARKER.

Panel 3:

If the alternative was the phones permanently being disabled ... yes! People could just avoid going into public spaces, at least until we found a better answer.

Sure, it was annoying, but no real damage was being done. But you didn't want to wait! You just sent in your strike team to burn their way through the problem!

BRENDAN BARKER.

EZEKIEL BARKER, NOT SAYING MUCH, AS USUAL.

Panel 4:

Rumor has it that if not for that "strike team" finding you, you'd still be wandering Shibuya mindlessly as a gray doll.

That ... uh ... that's not the point!

And the bees and patrollers were definitely doing "real damage." Businesses were closing. A cult was forming under our noses.

It just wasn't anything that affected you personally, so you didn't give a damn.

PAULINE BARKER.

Panel 5:

Pauline! He's right, that's not the point. This is about usurping our authority. If we have these people at large doing these sorts of things, then our customers won't come to us with problems.

And why would they do that anyway? You -- we -- never fix anything! There's a general perception that all the Barkers actually do here is take everyone's money.

A perception that isn't wrong, I might add.

LUCIUS BARKER.

Panel 6:

Two of those "vigilantes" solved the murder of someone who was important to me.*

There were no other resources I could have turned to for that. We don't have any detectives.

HAMILTON BARKER.

Those same two resorted to drastic emergency means to keep Clayton and Melinda Shannon from having complete control of the place.* I know you haven't forgotten that. You couldn't do anything about it; she and Clayton had you all subdued and trapped.

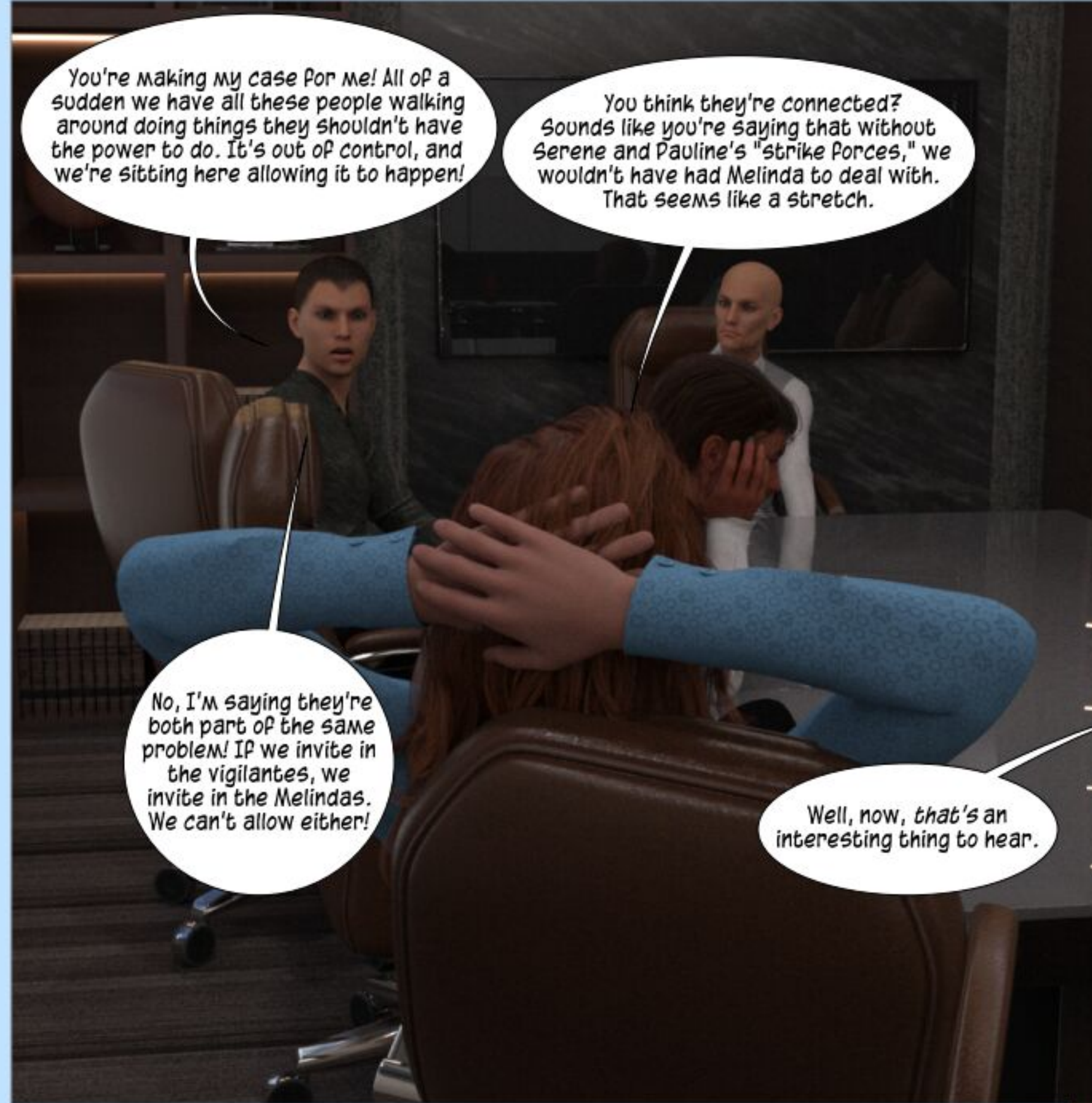So you've completely gone over, Ham? Maybe you should sit on the other side.

I always wondered how you managed to avoid being taken ...

You know, Brendan, I believe in being polite to my family, but I have limits.

They missed me because I had the good sense to hide from them. And I don't like your insinuation.

* SS #9 AND #11, RESPECTIVELY. HAMILTON IS BEING OBLIQUE ABOUT THE LATTER BECAUSE HE DOES NOT CARE TO REVEAL SOME OF WHAT HAPPENED ON THAT ADVENTURE. –T

Panel 7:

You're making my case for me! All of a sudden we have all these people walking around doing things they shouldn't have the power to do. It's out of control, and we're sitting here allowing it to happen!

You think they're connected? Sounds like you're saying that without Serene and Pauline's "strike forces," we wouldn't have had Melinda to deal with. That seems like a stretch.

No, I'm saying they're both part of the same problem! If we invite in the vigilantes, we invite in the Melindas. We can't allow either!

Well, now, that's an interesting thing to hear.

Panel 8:

Because what I remember is when I said, "Hey, join up with us and get a good seat at the table," you said, "Sure."*

Clayton??

Aren't you supposed to be in a coma?

I woke up, genius.

You and Zeke were both happy to "invite her in" when you thought it meant you could get control of the place.

So was I. I'll own it.

* SS #10 –T

Panel 1

Hey! I only went along with it because you two didn't give me a --

Shut up, Zeke.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to slam you, Brendan. I think you and I agree a lot about the way things should be. But you can't take the high road. You'd use anything you could get. So would I.

I'm just more honest about it.

You've got a lot of nerve coming in here trying to sound like we should listen to anything you say --

So trying to imply I was in with Melinda, that was projection, huh, Brendan? Nice.

Panel 2

Oh, you're squeaky-clean, huh? If you saints over here want to make everything better for everybody, why didn't you start at home? Why'd you let Josiah and Prentiss screw me over, just like they screwed my mother over?

You agree with the guy at the end of the table with the stick up his ass that I don't deserve my shares just because I'm a bastard?

No, Clayton. I think you don't deserve shares because you're the *other* kind of bastard.

Even if you'd had those shares all your life, you'd still be a complete asshole.

Panel 3

I don't have to take that from you!

Hey, Pauline, if that's what you think of Clayton, what do you really think of me?

I don't think you want to know, Brendan.

That's a hell of a way to treat your cousin.

I am not a jerk!

Shut up, Zeke.

Well, if my family wasn't full of jerks, I wouldn't have to. You think you get a pass just because you're related?

You sold me out as soon as you got a chance!

Panel 4

Just because you don't think we should be allowed to appreciate what we have ... you want us to just pretend that all of what we've built doesn't get us anything?

We're not making Sleep "hell" for anybody!

Oh, you don't think so?

I didn't ask you, Serene.

Too damned bad, Brendan.

People out there already think we take too much in bed fees and rents, and with someone like Clayton going around running a protection racket on top of it ...

I'm entitled to a cut, Lucius. You can call it whatever you want.

Panel 5

We have an *obligation*! Our goal should be to make Sleep better for everybody in it! Not "Make Sleep great for Barkers and hell for everybody else!"

Give me a reason why I should care. Seriously. You think I'm an asshole? Fine. But *we* are in charge, and they --

Panel 6

And there it is. Out in the open. You think they're just here to be exploited --

People do *leave* Sleep sometimes, you know, Brendan --

SILENCE!!!

Panel 7

Clayton. I am giving you your five percent. Effective right now.

Josiah, no!

Uh ... well, it's about time.

They're my shares, Pauline. I'll do as I like with them.

I doubt it will make you any less of an asshole, Clayton, but it *will* prevent you from using that old grievance as an excuse for it in the future.

Panel 8

Brendan, I am giving you an additional twenty percent. Also effective immediately.

... Thank you?

It's your inheritance. Try to use it wisely.

Panel 9

Josiah, does this mean ... you aren't retiring, are you?

Not yet, Pauline. And try to sound less delighted at the prospect.

Panel 10

I'm taking a leave of absence from board affairs. The fifteen percent of shares I retain are taking a leave of absence with me.

If you all manage to act like you're members of the same family again, perhaps I'll come back. Until then, you're on your own.

I hope you work it out.

THREE DAYS AFTER THAT, A VERY DIFFERENT KIND OF MEETING TAKES PLACE IN PAULINE'S PERSONAL SPACE.

We thought it was past time we all formally met one another.

Especially since we've figured out that the three of you have been working together for a while now and not letting on.

Well, it hasn't been an actual arrangement ... we just seem to often be chasing the same things ...

Even so. Let's make it actual. I'm Pauline Barker.

I'm Naomi Coleman.

Is that Coleman as in --

Yes. I was one of the last ones.

Huh.

I'm Ruby Martinez.

If Pauline isn't going to let on that she was my customer, then I'm sure not going to blow her cover.

I wish Momma had dropped a hint what she had or hadn't told Pauline.

Leyna Otis.

Even that could give it away if she's paying attention ... oh, well, it seems like we've decided to trust her.

And I'm Serene Barker.

I wish this could be a more pleasant social occasion, but as usual, we've got problems.

LEYNA USES HER MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME TO AVOID REVEALING THAT SHE IS SERENE'S CHILD AND SECRETLY A BARKER.

Yes. How much have you told them about the situation?

Josiah stalked off, leaving the rest of the shareholding Barkers at each others' throats?

Oh, it's worse than that. Before he flounced, he gave away exactly the wrong amounts of shares to the wrong people.

So now we have one group -- Serene, myself, Lucius, and Hamilton -- with forty percent of the shares ...

... and another -- Brendan, Clayton, and Ezekiel -- who also have forty percent of the shares.

So we have a tie. Mind you, Brendan and Clayton's arrangement may not last more than a week or so, if they don't kill each other sooner. But while they're united they can do all kinds of damage.

And Ezekiel will do whatever those two tell him to do.

What about Monica? Whose side is she on?

Nobody's, at the moment. After the patrollers were shut down, Monica's personal space detached from its access point. She's presumably in it, but no one can get to her, she doesn't respond to messages, and she hasn't shown any signs of coming out.

She may not even be in her right mind. Sooner or later we'll have to figure out how to get someone in there to try to help her, but for now, we assume she isn't participating in any votes, just like Josiah.

So we have deadlock, and we'll have to deal with whatever nasty things Brendan and Clayton decide to do. It's hard to get rumors these days, but a message I got this morning tells me they've already started to make trouble.

OK, but hang on a second. You know I'm not here to help you with politics --

I'm aware, Ruby. But this isn't just a boardroom feud, even though Brendan would probably say it is.

One of these groups is actually going to do harm. You're all right with preventing harm, aren't you?

Excuse my saying so, but that division of shares ... just doesn't make sense to me, no matter how I try to slice up the pie.

Yeah, me neither. I'd like to know how that came about.

You'll be sorrrrrrry!

Well, that's mostly about Pauline's side of the tree, so she can probably tell it better.

Oh! Sure, but you can't really understand how that got to be such a mess without also getting a whole lot of family history.
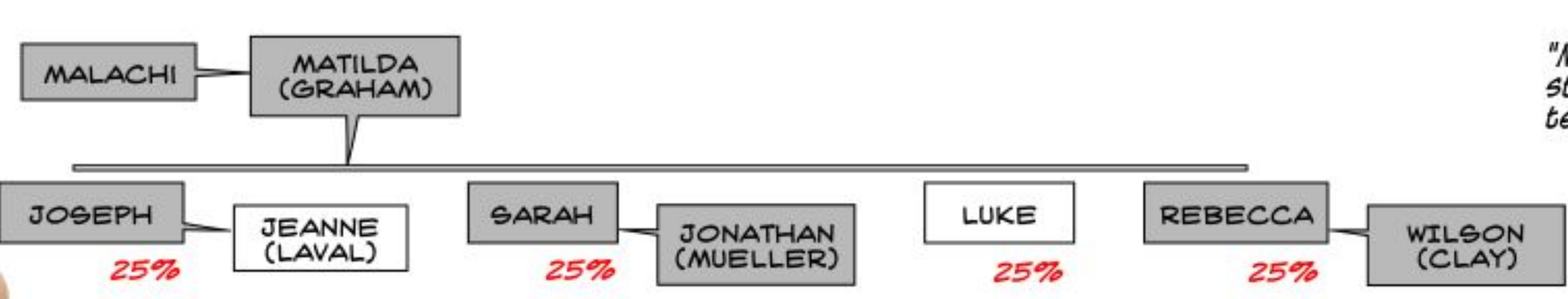
That's fine. Give me the whole deal.

... You will be sorry. All right, make sure you're sitting comfortably.

GRAY BOX = DECEASED

The history of the Family in A4 is only on its Fifth generation. I'm told the ones in A1 and A2 are really boggling. Ours, you can actually memorize the whole thing. Not that you should.

MALACHI — MATILDA (GRAHAM)

JOSEPH — JEANNE (LAVAL) 25% — SARAH — JONATHAN (MUELLER) 25% — LUKE 25% — REBECCA — WILSON (CLAY) 25%

"Malachi and Matilda both died of old age. Hardy stock, but then, even outside Sleep, Barkers tend to live a long time if they don't get PNAC."

"Wait, what's PNAC?"

"Serene hasn't told you? Well, no reason why she should have. We don't like to talk about it. Barkers have a genetic tendency to progressive neuroacanthocytosis. Your body makes weird-shaped red blood cells that don't do their job. Gradually it makes more and more of them, and then you die. If you have it, you usually know by the time you're twenty, and you're usually dead before you're fifty. That's why Erasmus Barker died at forty-three."

Malachi and Matilda Barker started A4, and immediately got busy on making a dynasty. They had four children. Malachi was a real hard-ass, I'm told, but he played fair: he divided the A4 shares evenly, 25% to each child.

Luke is gay and didn't have any children. I don't know where he is these days, some private space somewhere, same as Jeanne. Barkers have long generations -- about thirty years, give or take -- so they're over a hundred and twenty years old by now.

You'd think being homosexual might incline him to be less racist, but when Rebecca wanted to marry a Black man, he and Joseph were the two who threw a fit, along with Matilda. Sarah supported Rebecca, and Malachi didn't give a damn, which is probably why Rebecca got to keep her shares.

I've told them most of that part.

Ah, OK. Well, Naomi hasn't heard it. You want to tell it?

You go ahead. I want to hear how you put it.
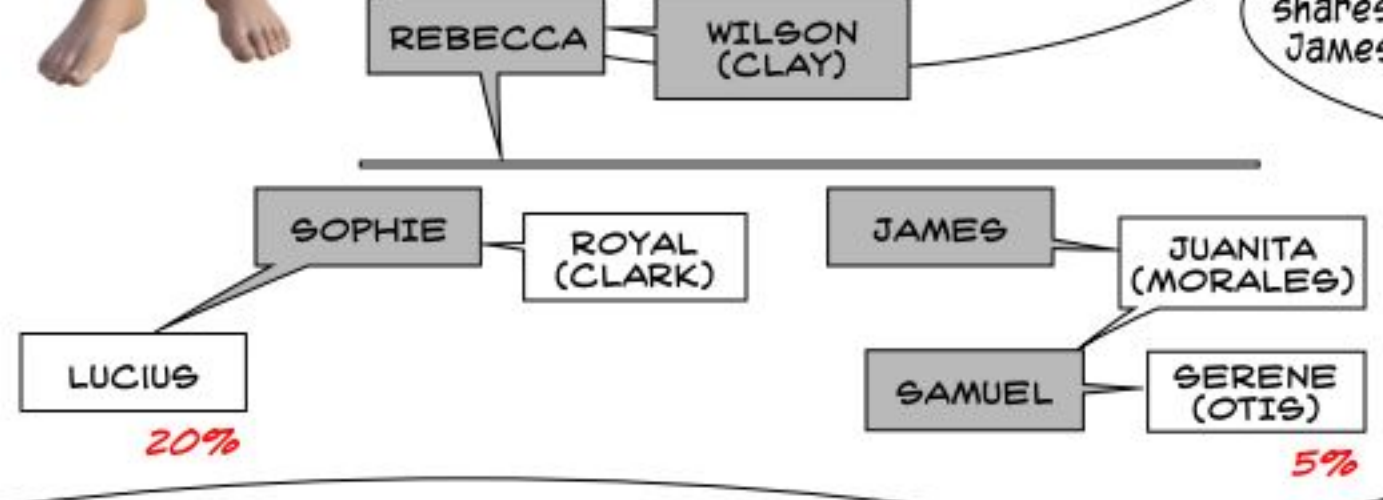
YOU CAN FIND SERENE'S VERSION OF THIS PART IN SS #11.

All right ... well, let's see. Rebecca had two children, Sophie and James. She didn't approve of James' wife, and that's probably why she didn't divide her shares evenly; she gave four-fifths of them to Sophie.

REBECCA — WILSON (CLAY)

Beyond that, nothing much happened to those shares. Sophie's 20% descended to Lucius, and James' 5% came to Serene after Samuel died.

Serene, do you ever see Juanita?

Sometimes. She's not very lucid. Once she asked me where Samuel was. She remembered a minute later, and we were both too sad to talk.

SOPHIE — ROYAL (CLARK) — JAMES — JUANITA (MORALES)
LUCIUS 20% — SAMUEL — SERENE (OTIS) 5%

REMEMBER, WHEN YOU MARRY A BARKER, YOU TAKE THE BARKER NAME, WHETHER YOU ARE A HUSBAND OR WIFE. IT'S THE ULTIMATE IN MARRYING UP.

Believe it or not, despite the rest of the Family treating them like dirt, that's the low-drama wing. Sarah's branch is where the real mess happens.

SARAH — JONATHAN (MUELLER)

Leah and Rhea were identical twins who were nothing alike. It was clear from early on that Rhea was definitely having kids and Leah (Mom used to joke about how she got the lesbian gene, too) was definitely not. Also, Rhea had PNAC and, somehow, Leah didn't. Rhea didn't tell Jeremy she had it, which was a mean thing to do. When she died, Jeremy was crushed -- and left with two fairly young children.

LEAH — RHEA — JEREMY (SCOTT) — JACOB — ???

Leah helped raise them. In fact, if she hadn't been gay, people would have talked about her and Jeremy; they practically lived together.

When Sarah realized Rhea was the one who'd be having kids, she split her shares unevenly: 5% to Leah, 15% to Rhea, 5% to Jacob. She died too soon to see what became of Rhea. Leah gave her shares to Jeremy, so that he'd have 20% to split evenly between the children.

MATTHEW — PATRICIA (HART) — JUDITH — PETER (SPRUILL)
EZEKIEL 10% — NATHANIEL — MONICA 5%

Nothing to tell about one side of that. Matthew is a bland guy who married a bland woman and had a bland kid, and he and his wife retired fairly early to go be bland together, leaving Ezekiel his 10%.

Meanwhile, Judith married a real monster. None of us know where Peter is now, and none of us want to. Judith died under suspicious circumstances, and we never did figure out whether Peter did it. The only good thing he ever did was not fight over the shares. When Judith died, he left, and Nathaniel and Monica split the 10%.

But Josiah didn't think Nathaniel was fit to have shares, right?

Well, she probably wasn't. That was a less controversial decision than what he and Prentiss pulled with Jacob, which happened before that. We all pretty much agreed on Nathaniel. But, yes, Nathaniel's 5% went to Josiah to hold "in trust." Remember that phrase.

LORETTA — LEANNE — ???
CLAYTON 5%

Jacob had two out-of-wedlock children. He never revealed who the mother was, or whether both children came from the same mother. He wanted to pass his shares to them, though, and he was prepared to prove they were Barkers by blood, but it didn't matter.
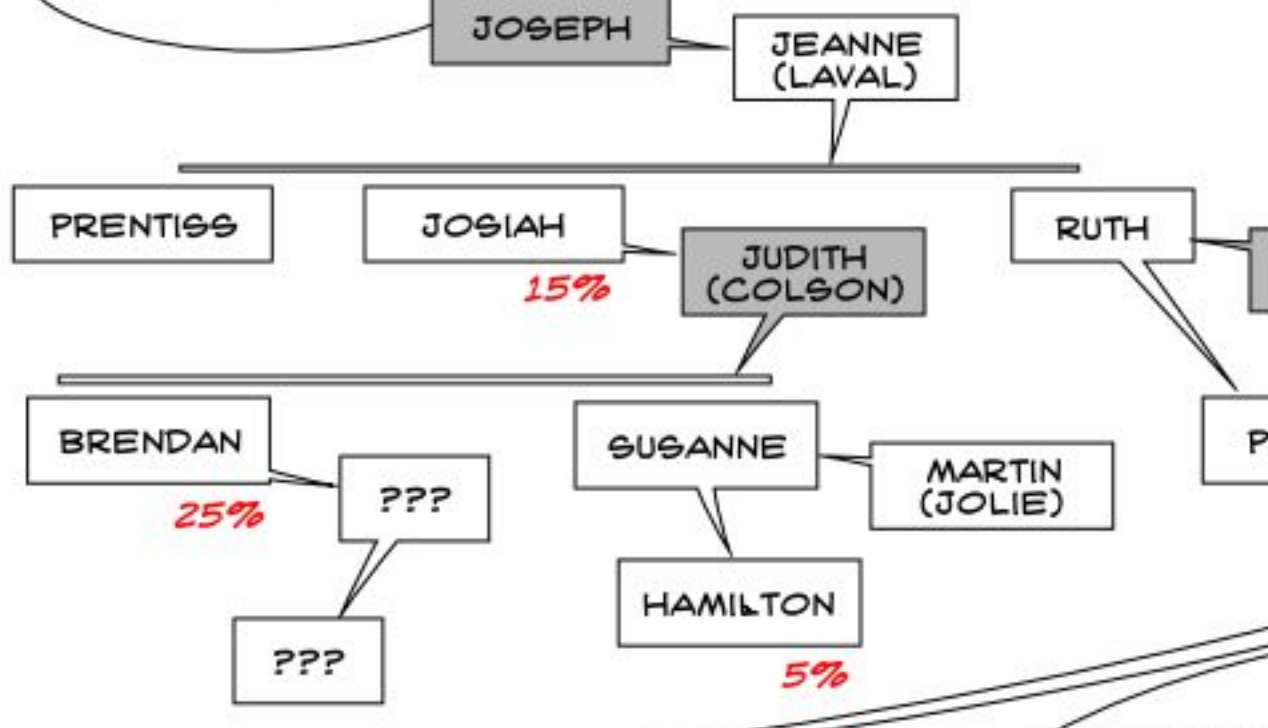
Josiah, Luke, and Prentiss threw a fit. Joseph probably would have too, but by then he was dead. They said there were family values to think of; Jacob insisted he could leave his shares to whoever he damned well pleased. He was right, but somehow they won. When Jacob died, Josiah took his shares to hold "in trust" -- until what, he did not say.

So when Clayton came along, any shares he might have gotten weren't there anymore. By the way, Leanne, following her father's lead, never married and never said who Clayton's father was, so Clayton is the bastard of a bastard. But as I said the other day, being illegitimate isn't the reason I think he shouldn't have shares. He falls under the Nathaniel rule, as far as I'm concerned -- can't be trusted with them.

Still awake?

OK, time to do my branch. The mean branch.

JOSEPH — JEANNE (LAVAL)
PRENTISS — JOSIAH — JUDITH (COLSON) — RUTH — RACHEL (STONE)
JOSIAH 15%
BRENDAN — ??? — SUSANNE — MARTIN (JOLIE) — PAULINE
BRENDAN 25% — HAMILTON 5% — PAULINE 10%
???

First, you need to know that somewhere in there, probably because he thought Joseph was the only one of his siblings mean enough, Luke gave his whole 25% to Joseph. So when it came time to think inheritance, Joseph had 50% of the shares in A4 to play with.

Grandpa was sexist as well as racist; either that, or he just didn't take to Ruth because Ruth wasn't a jerk like her brothers. He gave Prentiss and Josiah 20% each, and Ruth 10%.

When Ruth and Rachel had me, they already knew there was going to be trouble, because Prentiss just about had a heart attack when they got married. He didn't consider the marriage legitimate, he sure wasn't going to consider me legitimate. But Ruth is the only one who's ever been able to win a fight with either of them by herself. When Rachel died suddenly, Ruth made sure she'd scared Josiah enough not to mess with my 10% -- Prentiss had retired by then to go shout at clouds -- and then went off to her farm. I visit her sometimes, but I think she doesn't really want company.

Judith, Josiah's wife, was a good person, better than he deserved, and he knew it. He got a lot worse after she died -- too soon -- and Prentiss whispering nasty in his ear didn't help. Prentiss hates everybody, as far as I can tell, and wants everybody else to hate everybody too. Also, Ruth always said that Prentiss was pissed that Judith married Josiah instead of him, but she couldn't prove it.
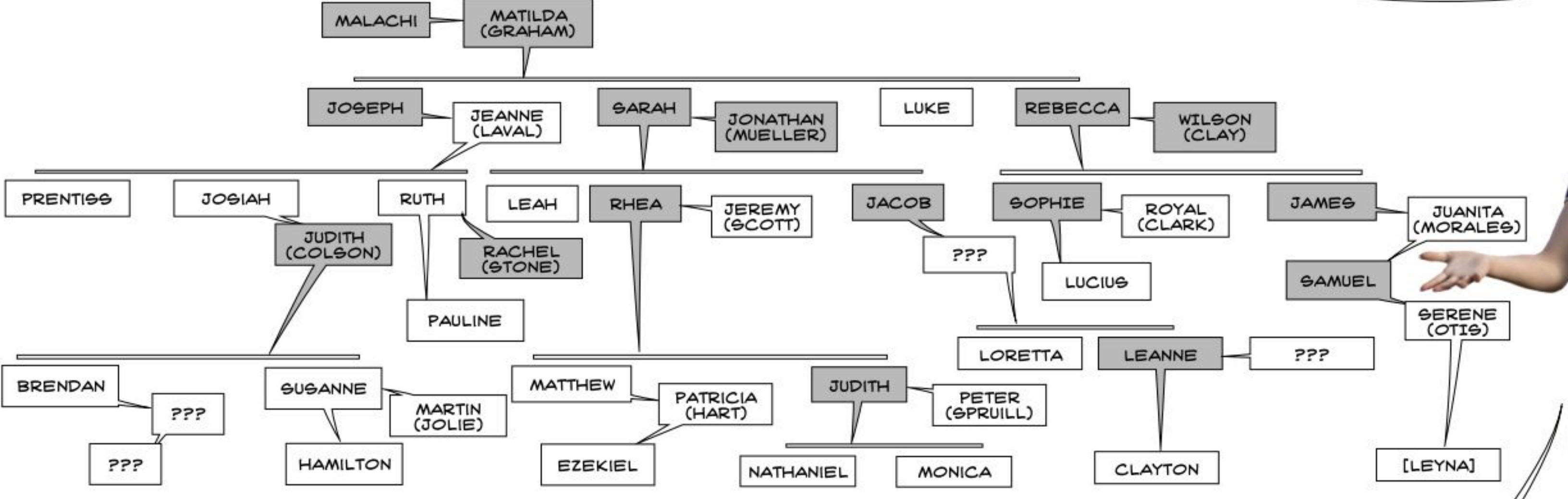
OK, now watch the cards closely, because here's where the swindle happens. When Josiah's kids got old enough, Josiah suddenly decided the thing to do with the shares he was keeping "in trust" was give it to them. You'll recall he was holding Jacob's 5% and then later Nathaniel's. He gave one of those to Brendan and the other to Susanne -- and somehow managed to make it stick, probably because by then everyone knew the rightful holders of those shares were pretty unfit.

Until Josiah's surprise three days ago, Brendan always insisted that was the only kind thing his dad had ever done for him.

Anyway, Susanne and Martin are good people, and Ham's a good guy even if he's a little full of himself, so no one is upset about that 5%, but Brendan got all his father's bad points and few of his good ones. And now ...!

Remember, even without the "in trust" shares, Josiah had 40%, because of course Prentiss gave him all of his 20% when he retired. So even after doling out 25% the other day, Josiah still has 15% left. And now Brendan is the largest single shareholder.

Brendan has tried very hard to conceal it, but he has a kid. Possibly two. No idea who the mother is, but he knows that if they're illegitimate, the fight will be a lot easier with Josiah out of the picture. But Brendan's also in denial. He's about sixty years old, same generation as me, Lucius, and Serene -- but we don't walk around looking like we're less than half our age. He does.

MALACHI — MATILDA (GRAHAM)
JOSEPH — JEANNE (LAVAL) — SARAH — JONATHAN (MUELLER) — LUKE — REBECCA — WILSON (CLAY)
PRENTISS — JOSIAH — RUTH — LEAH — RHEA — JEREMY (SCOTT) — JACOB — SOPHIE — ROYAL (CLARK) — JAMES — JUANITA (MORALES)
JUDITH (COLSON) — RACHEL (STONE) — ??? — LUCIUS — SAMUEL — SERENE (OTIS)
PAULINE — LORETTA — LEANNE — ???
BRENDAN — ??? — SUSANNE — MARTIN (JOLIE) — MATTHEW — PATRICIA (HART) — JUDITH — PETER (SPRUILL) — CLAYTON — [LEYNA]
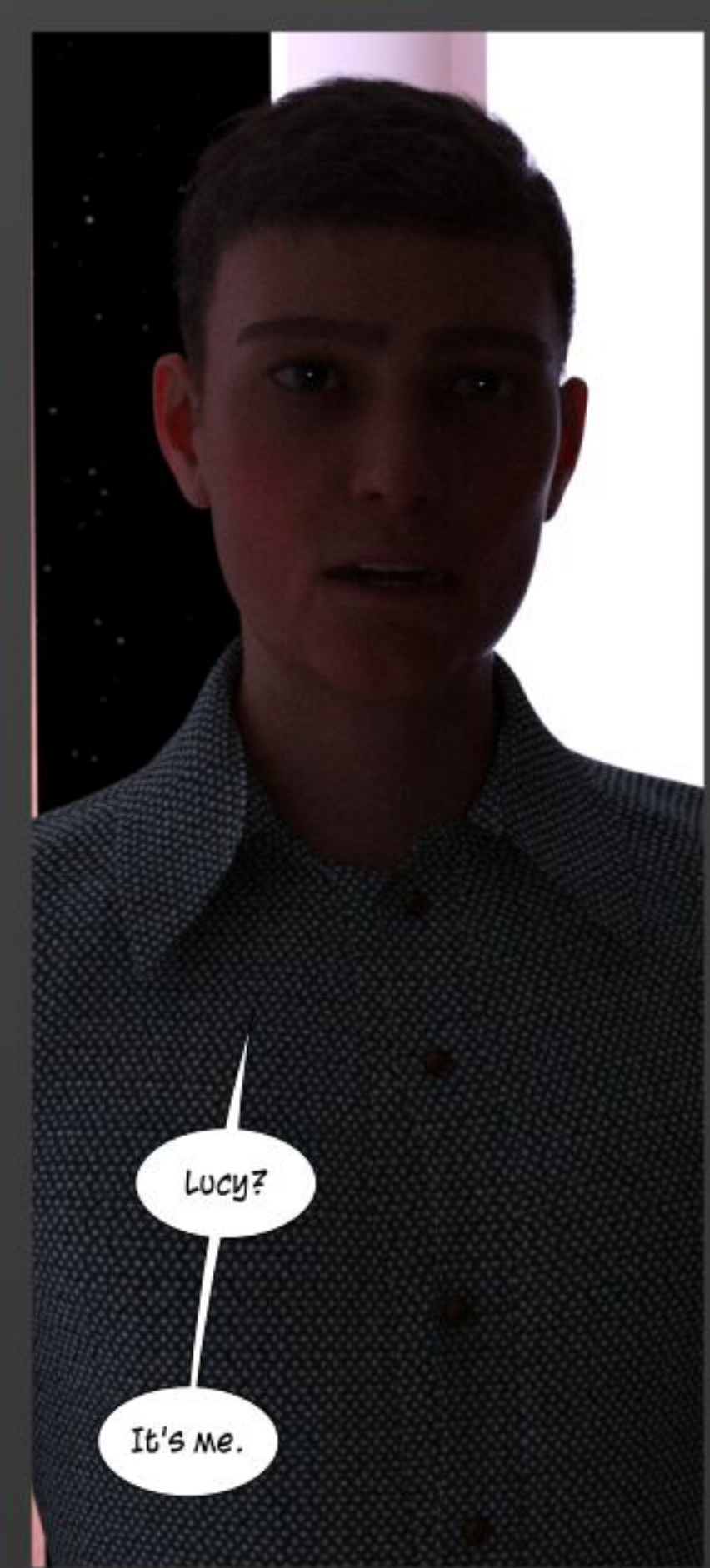??? — HAMILTON — EZEKIEL — NATHANIEL — MONICA

And there you have it! I hope you didn't suffer too much.

No, I thought it was very interesting!

Hmm. I'm not sure if I should be flattered, or worried for your mental health.

Lucy?

It's me.

... Clayton ...?

It is you! I'm not dreaming.

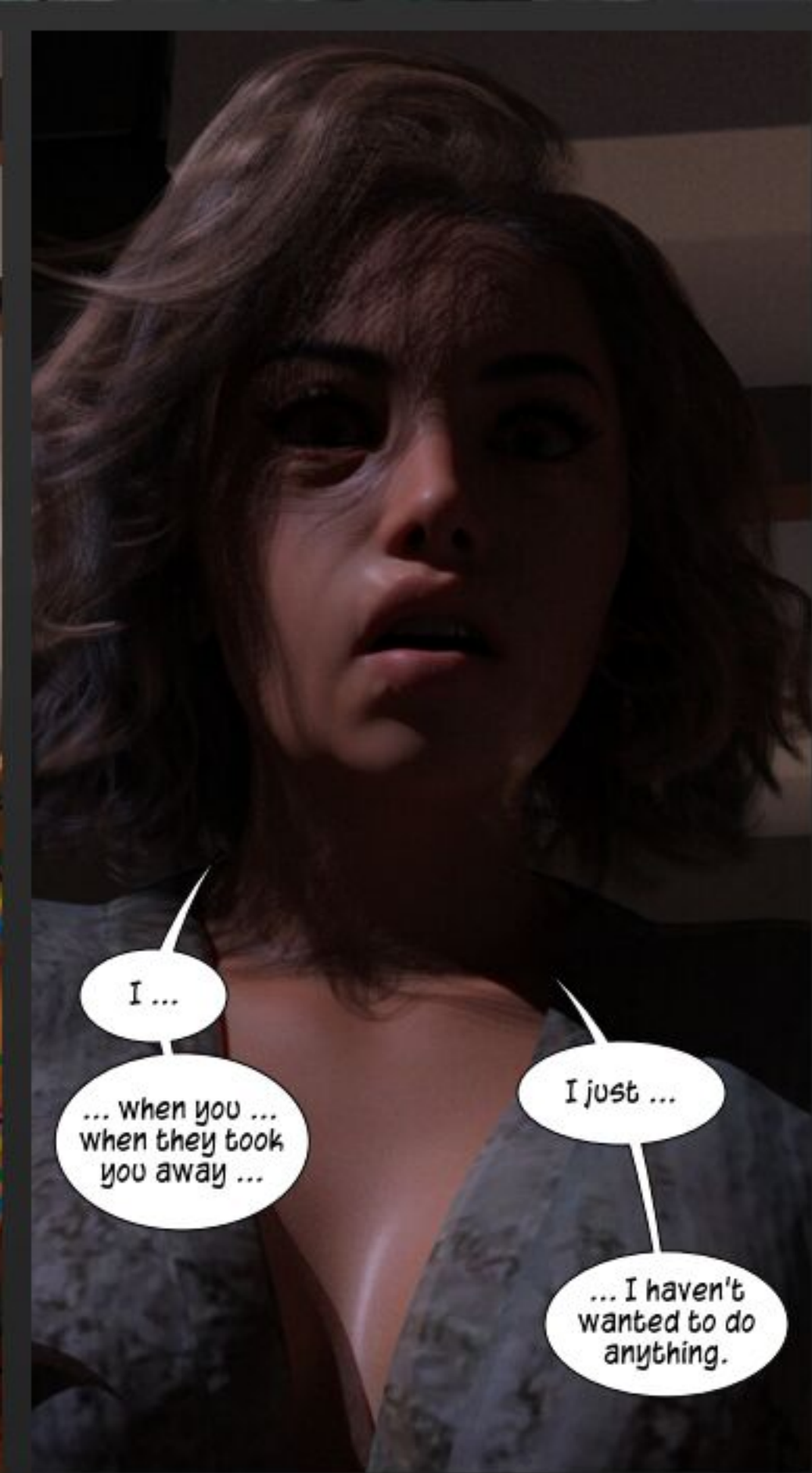It's really you! You're OK!

I've missed you so much!

My god, Lucy! What happened to you?

You're *filthy!* And you smell like a whiskey bottle.

And look at this place! What have you been doing?

I ...
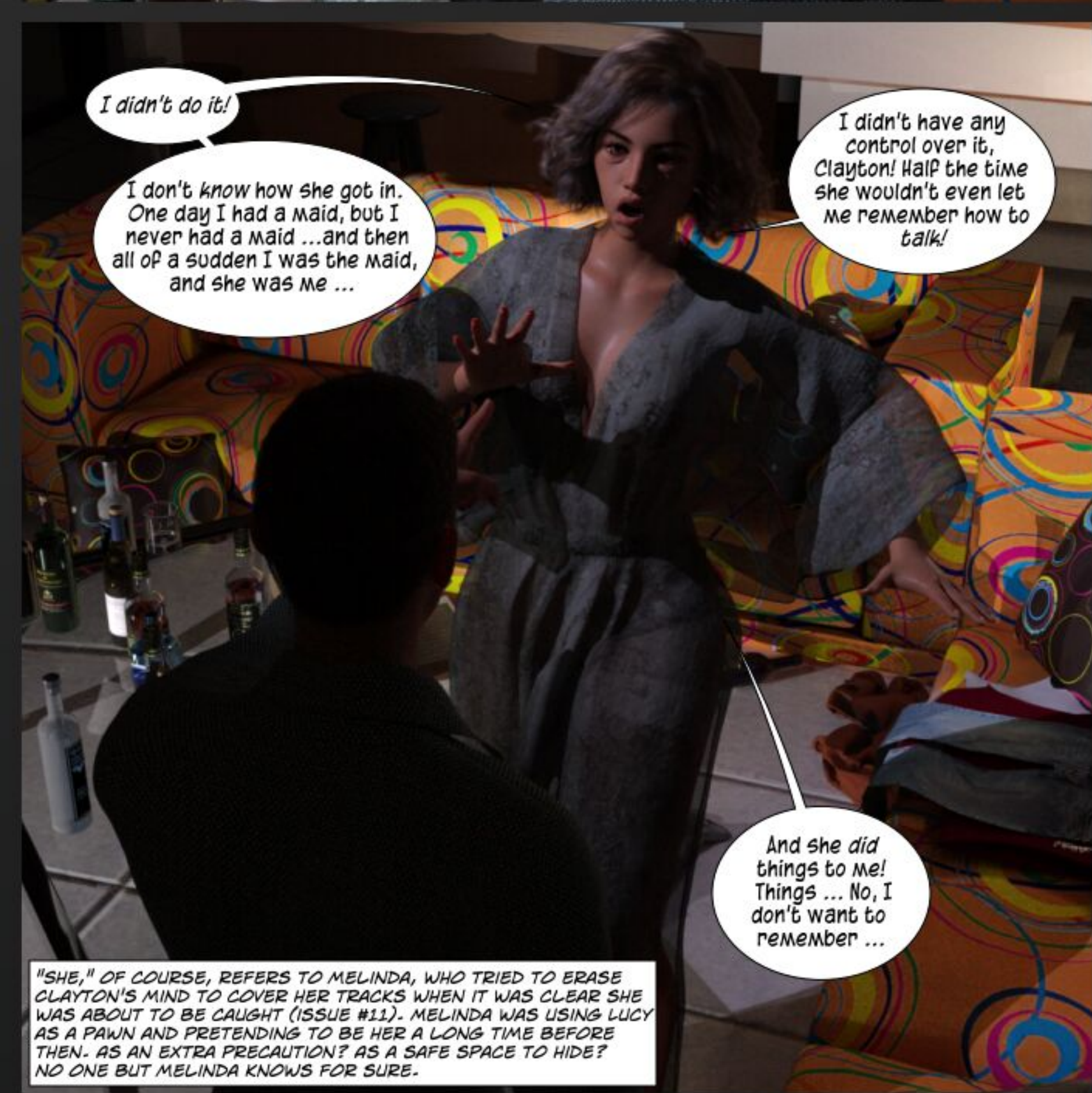
... when you ... when they took you away ...

I just ...

... I haven't wanted to do anything.

Lucy.

This was a safe house. We never gave anyone access, never told anyone where it was.

How did she get in, Lucy? How did she find me to ambush me here?

I didn't do it!

I don't know how she got in. One day I had a maid, but I never had a maid ...and then all of a sudden I was the maid, and she was me ...

I didn't have any control over it, Clayton! Half the time she wouldn't even let me remember how to talk!

And she did things to me! Things ... No, I don't want to remember ...
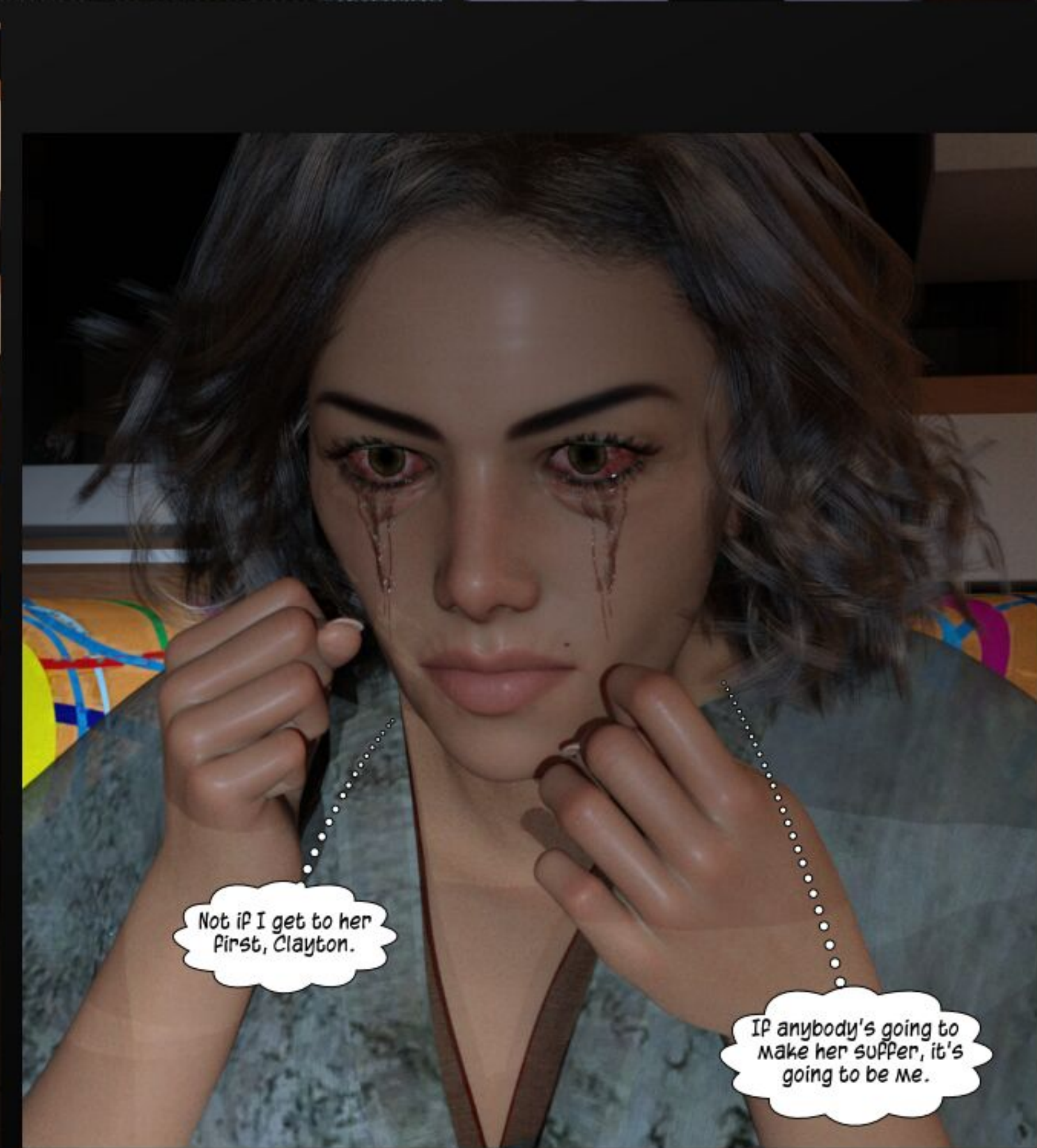
Maybe I believe you.

You'd better hope I do.

Because I'm going to find that bitch, and I'm going to find a way to kill her.

Don't go!!

But first I'm going to make her wish I'd kill her faster.

"She," of course, refers to Melinda, who tried to erase Clayton's mind to cover her tracks when it was clear she was about to be caught (issue #11). Melinda was using Lucy as a pawn and pretending to be her a long time before then. As an extra precaution? As a safe space to hide? No one but Melinda knows for sure.

Not if I get to her first, Clayton.

If anybody's going to make her suffer, it's going to be me.

Panel 1

I'm calling it, people: we're done. No reshoots. This episode's a wrap.

Oh, thank god.

RIGHT? AND ALL YOU HAVE TO WEAR IS THE SPACE LEOTARD.

Lose the damned dust effects, would you, Jenny? We're all choking down here. And kill the fire.

Make sure everyone's off the towers, then go ahead and start striking the set.

Panel 2

LIKE RUBY, TRISH CARTER STARTED AS AN ACTOR. SHE MOVED INTO WRITING AND DIRECTING ALMOST BY ACCIDENT, BUT HAS DONE WELL AT IT. UNLIKE RUBY, WHO HAS UNTIL NOW PREFERRED TO STICK WITH PRIVATE SCENARIOS, TRISH WORKS ON PASSIVES LIKE THIS ONE.

So how's the gig? That looked like a fun scene.

Eh.

That good, huh?

Oh, it's all right. But I'm not writing, just directing, and the scripts don't do anything for me. And everybody else has been on this project for years -- Syd and Kim can do their parts in their sleep -- so there's not a lot for me to actually do. I tell them to start, I watch, I tell them to stop.

Leave the appliances, Syd, we'll delete them with the set.

Thanks, Trish.

We have one more episode to do in this series. If they do another, and they ask me to direct, I think I'll say no.

I think it's really the hood that does me in.

I'm sure you and I can come up with something more interesting!

Yeah, I was dying under that mask, I can only imagine how it is for you.

Panel 3

Honestly, this series kind of ... bothers me. People love it, I know, but ... it's so violent, and in a really random way, too.

I mean, Wheeler and Sharpe are heroes ... the people they shoot deserve it ... but they shoot a lot of people, and they enjoy it.

I wonder sometimes if that means something bad, that the show's so popular. Like, if people are getting out some nasty urges that way.

That's why I was thinking maybe a detective series. "The Fisher Case" did great, and you can tell the heroes from the villains in something like that.

"THE FISHER CASE" = SS #13!

Panel 4

Of course, we'd also need to figure out how to cram a lot of sex into the plots.

Naturally.

Panel 5

ELSEWHERE ...

No more bullshit from anybody, you hear?

You take that list and explain to everybody on it that there's a new arrangement. Explain hard.

Sure, boss.

Truck, you do what Weasel tells you. But be careful. We want to scare them, not break them.

And if either of you see Sessa, you tell him he'd better have a damned good reason for not doing the job.

BRENDAN BARKER DOESN'T ACTUALLY CONTROL MUCH OF THE REAL ESTATE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD CALLED THE "SOUK." BUT THAT'S NOT STOPPING HIM FROM TRYING TO SQUEEZE MORE MONEY OUT OF IT.

Panel 6

What are you supposed to be, the genie of the lamp? And what the fuck are you smiling at?

Maybe I know something funny.

Yeah? Like what?

There's someone behind you.

Panel 7

-- urk! --

Panel 8

mmmph!!

Hello, Mr. Barker. Did you know you have pretty eyes?

Someone wants to talk to you. Come with us.

Ah!

Good of you to drop in.

-- oof! --

mmmphmm!

Oh, don't fuss. They'll take it out when you leave.

It's just that no one here is the least bit interested in anything you have to say.

The Souk belongs to us now. We've spent a lot of time and trouble clearing the extorters and bullies out of it. We don't need someone else coming in and starting that nonsense.

I'm already tired of having to deal with your lackeys. You won't see the first one you sent again. You won't see these again either.

uuhh?

-- giggle --

The ladies seem to think the big one might be fun to play with, so I'll let them have him for a while. He might even be redeemable. I don't think he's actually that bad when he's not working for people like you.

But this other one ... he's beyond hope. He's not fit to be human.

Boss! Make these crazy women let me out!

What are you ... no, don't! ... I'll do whatever you want! ... I'll

AAAAAARRRRRR!

Oh, a lioness! We haven't had one of those in a while. Usually we get leopards.

Sorry about the sex change, sweet, but boy cats make too much trouble.

I think she's unhappy with you. Don't worry, she'll forget you soon.

Now, we're not going to turn you into a cat, though it would do you good.

But if you interfere in the Souk again ... if you try to extort people or cause the least bit of trouble here ...

RRRAAARRR!

mmph!!

... you'll be on all fours before you know what hit you. This is a promise.

Get him out of here.

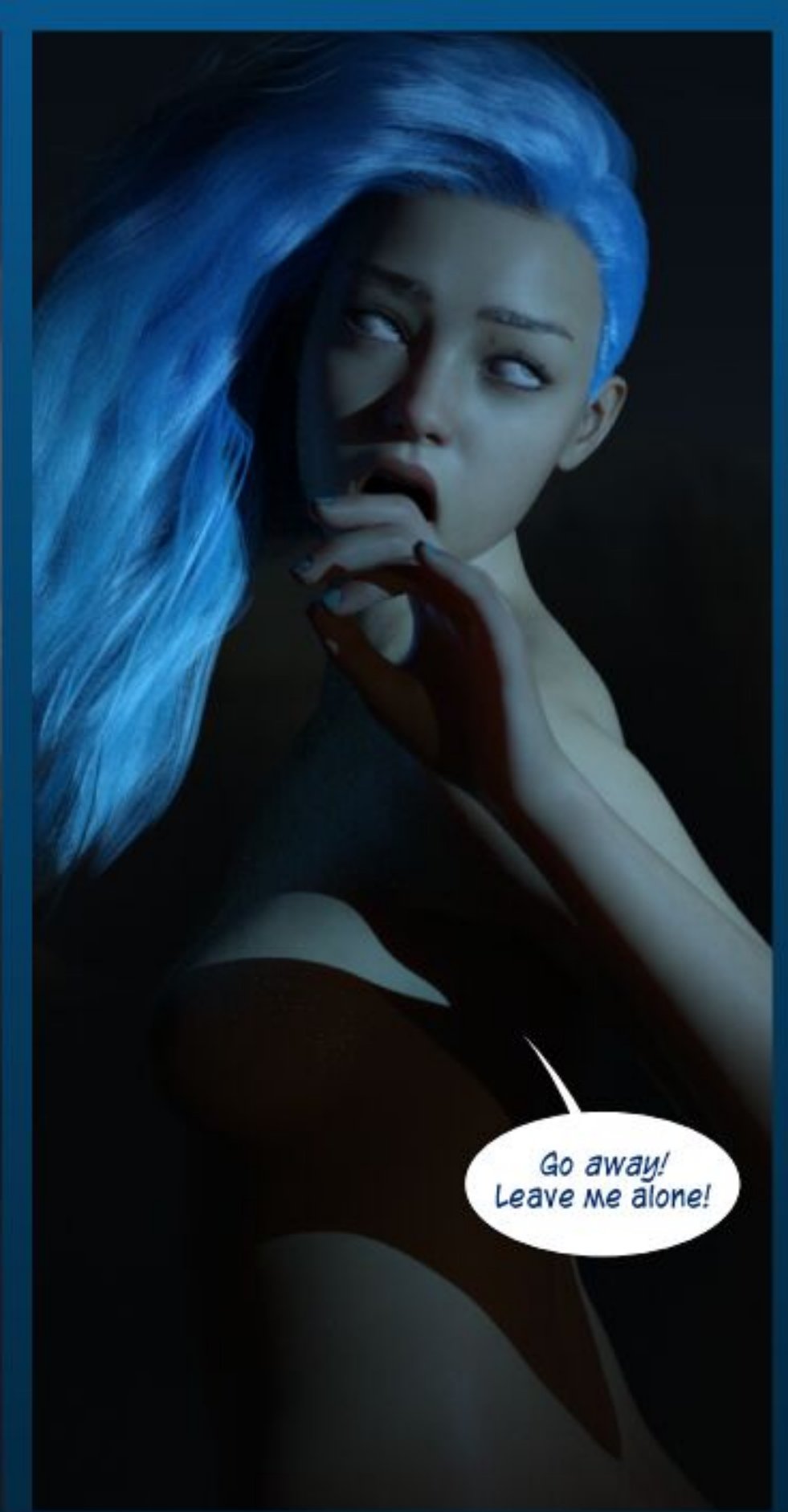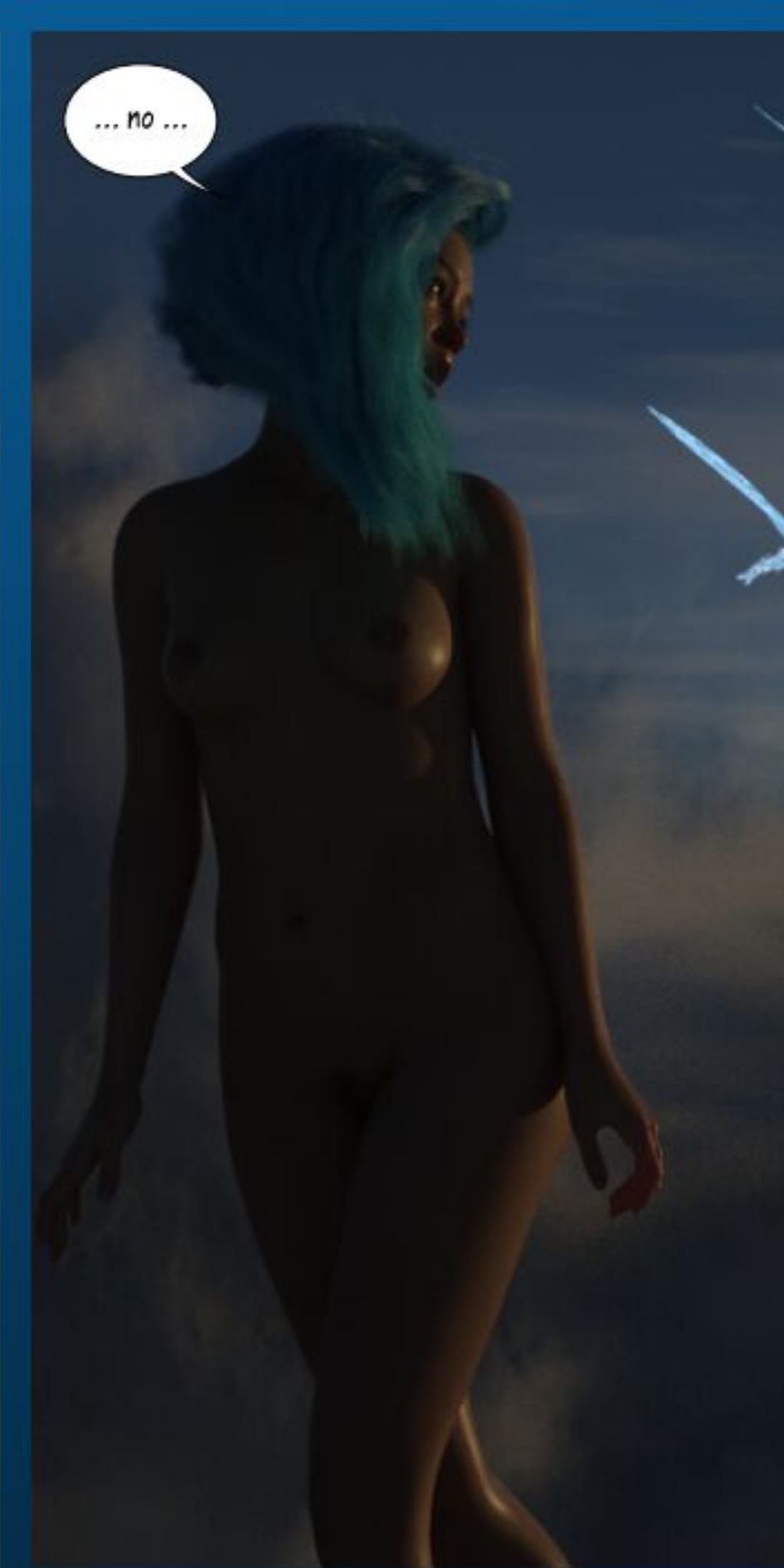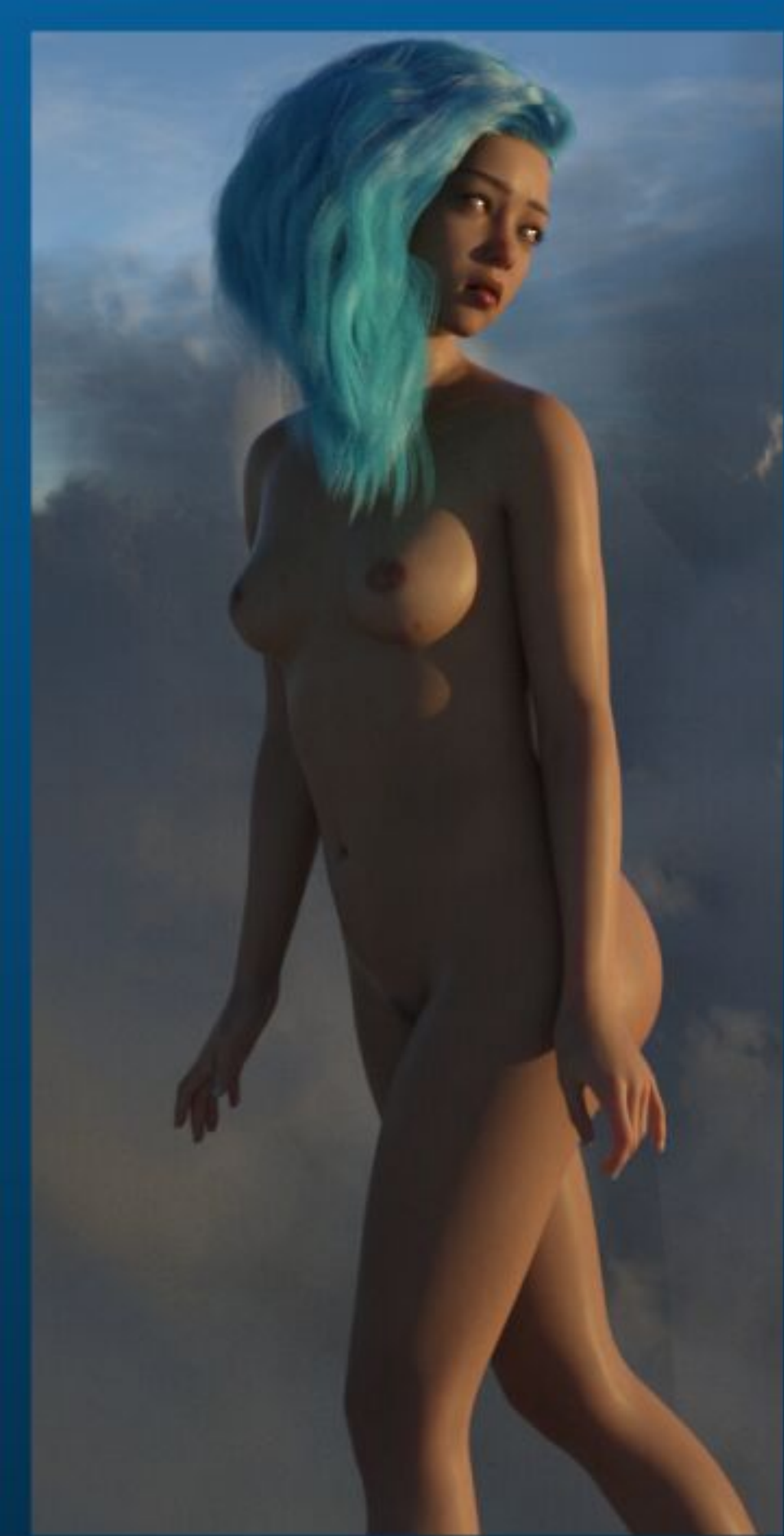See? I told you we weren't wasting our time doing regular checks here even after Melinda vanished.

They're watching us again.

I know.

I believe they're harmless.

No, more than that ... useful. If the people they work with stay informed, hopefully they won't oppose us.

But if they do, we'll be ready.

I stand corrected. Big time.

Reel in the window Mike. We need to go find Leyna and tell her about this.

... no ...

Go away!
Leave me alone!

aaahhh!
leave me alone!

You can't have me!
You won't ever again!

Aaaargggh!!

I told you!

... I told you ...

ALICIA WAS ONE OF MELINDA'S FAVORITE VICTIMS. SHE WAS FIGHTING OFF MELINDA'S LATEST ABUSE WHEN THE TWO OF THEM GOT PULLED INTO THE DISCONTINUITY TOGETHER.
ONCE THE DISCONTINUITY WAS DISPELLED, MELINDA HAD VANISHED, AND FROM THEN ON LIFE SEEMED TO IMPROVE A GREAT DEAL FOR ALICIA.
BUT IT ALSO SEEMS SHE'S NOT IMMUNE TO SOME OF THE SAME LINGERING EFFECTS OF THE DISCONTINUITY WE'VE SEEN IN OTHERS -- INCLUDING SOME THAT GO BEYOND JUST BAD DREAMS.

We're not even
close to open yet.

I'm looking for a woman
named Melinda Shannon. I'm
sure you know who she is.
She used to run this club.

She's disappeared. No
one knows where she is.
I was hoping maybe
you'd have some ideas.

I know. I told the
woman who opened the
door that I needed to
talk to you privately.

Nope.

Just like that.

So -- pardon my
asking -- you just took
over the business
without having any
idea where the owner
was or when she
might return?

It seemed like
nobody wanted
the club to close.
Someone had to
take over.

If she ever
reappears, and
wants it again,
I'll give it back.

Honestly?
Melinda was a
horrible person.
I don't know why
so many of you
people are
looking for her.

Personally, I
hope she
never
reappears.

Anyway, I can't help
you. I don't know where
she is, and I don't want
to find out.

Panel 1:

Well, it sounds like an interesting idea.

I hope you're not asking me to be in it, though. I barely survived with my dignity the first time. I don't think I'd want to push my luck.

Don't undersell yourself! You did a great job.

Panel 2:

NATHAN SARGENT IS A HISTORIAN. HE WAS ONE OF RUBY'S PRIVATE SCENARIO CUSTOMERS A WHILE AGO. THE SCENARIO TURNED OUT SO WELL THAT RUBY GOT HIS PERMISSION TO MAKE IT INTO A PASSIVE.* RUBY HAS KEPT IN TOUCH WITH HIM.

But what I'd like is to be able to hire you sometimes as an advisor. If we do a period series, it doesn't have to be completely historically accurate -- most folks won't notice or care -- but we'd like to avoid any blatant mistakes.

Well, I can certainly do that. Though ... if you'll excuse my sticking my neck in ... you might want to rethink whether you want to do a period detective series at all.

Detective, sure, but maybe invent your own milieu.

*"THE FISHER CASE," ALREADY MENTIONED A FEW PAGES BACK. –T

Panel 3:

Why?

As much as I love some of the stories, it turns out that the whole detective thing in fiction has often been used in the service of ... well ...

The people that really started the whole private detective business were the Pinkertons, who operated for over two hundred years. But they were nasty people. They began mostly as strikebreakers. Thugs. Gathering information on labor organizers to discredit them.

Even later, "detectives" weren't mostly solving the mystery of the missing heiress or the murder of the bride. They were private security, house detectives for hotels or shops ... or were tracking bail jumpers or getting the dirt for messy divorce cases. None of this is noble stuff.

Panel 4:

I was very disillusioned when I learned all this. I had these glorious ideas, and it turns out that the myth of the private investigator was mostly invented to dress the image of people doing a lot of things I don't care for.

I have this idea that the private detective is someone who helps people, and it bothers me to think of them operating strictly in service of the money. Still does, to this day.

... yeah.

That bothers me too.

Panel 5:

SHADYSIDE IS A NEIGHBORHOOD FOR PEOPLE WHO REALLY JUST WANT QUIET AND WHAT THEY CONSIDER NORMALITY. MOST OF THEM ARE PRETTY BORING. THE MOST IMAGINATIVE THING THEY EVER DO IS MAKE THEIR HOUSES BIGGER ON THE INSIDE.

IT'S EZEKIEL BARKER'S FAVORITE PART OF A4.

What is this, a parade?

Did you get permission for this? I didn't give any.

Panel 6:

I'm campaigning for social change.

Now, you may have heard that the Barker leadership is kind of a mess right now.

I've given it a lot of thought, and I've concluded that the only way to avoid chaos is if someone is chosen as undisputed leader of the Barkers.

I believe I'm the right man for the job. May I have your support?

Panel 7:

You must be kidding. I think you all stink.

I wouldn't support a Barker if my life depended -- Hey! Back off!

Get this thing off of --

-- uhhoooaaa?

At least take one of our lovely souvenir hats.

Panel 8:

This is going very well.

Yes, sir, but we still shouldn't stay in one place for too long.

I think Zeke is the perfect choice for undisputed control of A4.

Yes, and he's so handsome, too.

Ezekiel!!

What do you think you're doing?

Maybe I just got tired of putting up with everybody's shit.

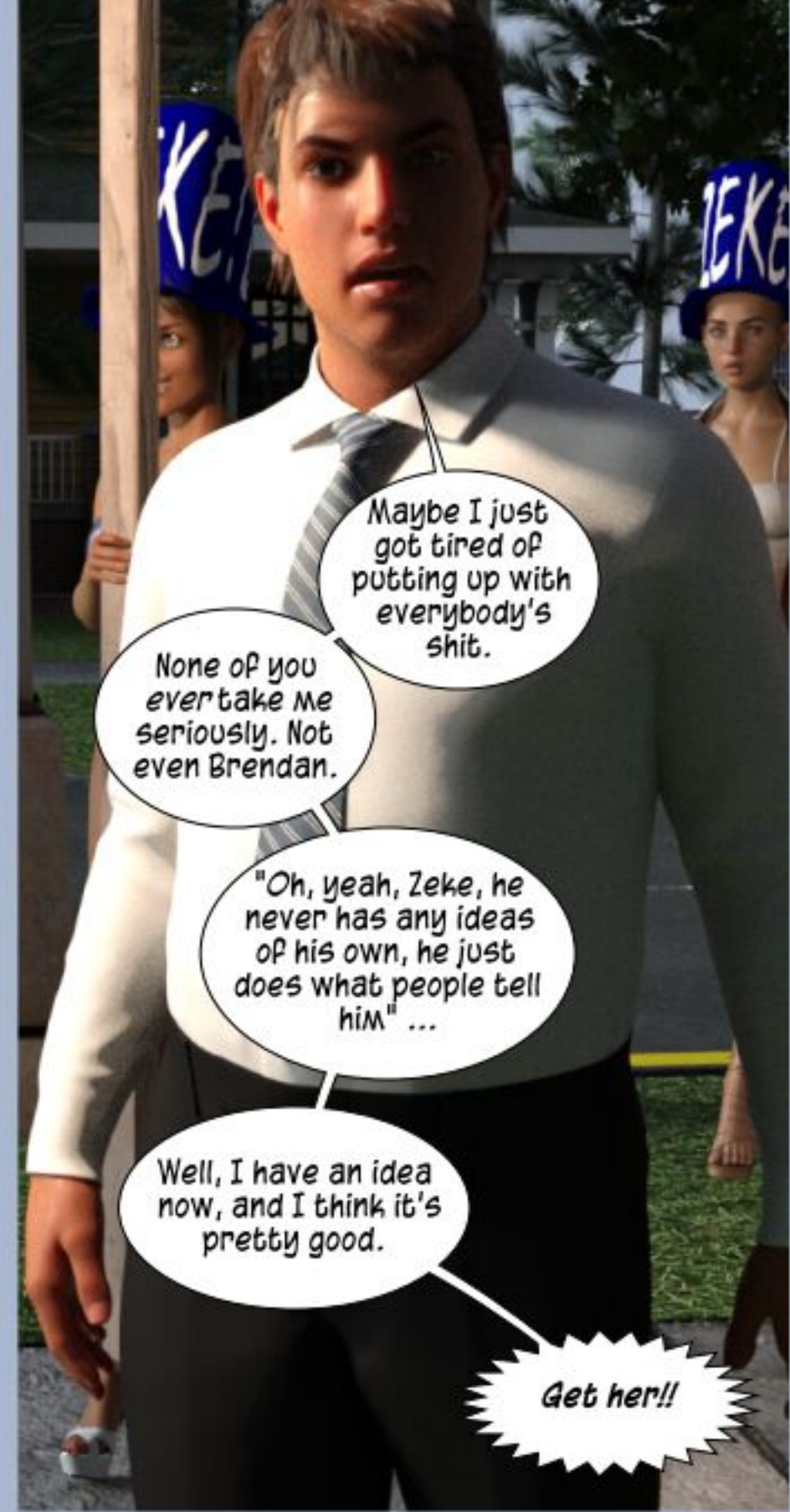None of you ever take me seriously. Not even Brendan.

"Oh, yeah, Zeke, he never has any ideas of his own, he just does what people tell him" ...

Walking around telling everyone we're unstable ... controlling people openly ... have you lost your mind?

Well, I have an idea now, and I think it's pretty good.

Get her!!

Hell.

That's all we need, initiative from Zeke.

They really are doing what he tells them. Where did he get those hats?

If they get one of them onto me, I'm screwed.

I need to recall ... why can't I focus?

Deep breaths, Pauline, deep breaths ...

It's not just my heart racing. I feel really strange ...

Oh.

Oh, no.

No, no, no!

This is not a good time!

What on earth is all this?

No idea. The message from Pauline just said she'd had a complaint about something on one of her properties and she thought she might want help.

There's something wrong about those hats.

They look OK to me. I mean, they're ugly ...

I've got to remember to make you a pair of these goggles.

They're algorithmic. The hats, I mean; obviously the goggles are.

Looks like there's just enough people that the suits are working -- no one's noticed us. Let's see if we can sneak up and take some hats off.

Hey, hold still for a second.

whuh?

What's going on? What happened to their hats?

It, ah, may be time to run, sir.

AAAAAAAA!

You fink!

C'mere! I want to give you your sign back!

ZEKE!

That was easy.

Yes. Ezekiel doesn't seem to be very good at dastardly schemes.

But where's Pauline?

She probably recalled. I'll send her a message when I leave.

I keep telling her not to put herself at risk in these situations. All kinds of things can happen.

NEXT ISSUE: MINA MARKOV MAKES MAYHEM!

MALICIOUSLY? MAYBE!