

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN A4. OF COURSE, MOST DAYS IN A4 ARE BEAUTIFUL.



... I think she's lying, because Sylvie says she never said anything to her about it ... anyway, one of them is lying ... and I trust Sylvie a lot more ...

Hello? Are you still there?

I'm listening ... but check this lady out.



la la la la la la la la

Uh ... hey there ... are you OK?

Don't the flowers sound pretty? They sing in colors!

They're happy for the clouds!



Okaaaay. Somebody found the good drugs, I guess.

Look, there's another one!

All the lights in the sky ... clouds laughing ... listen!

It's a great day to be a cloud!



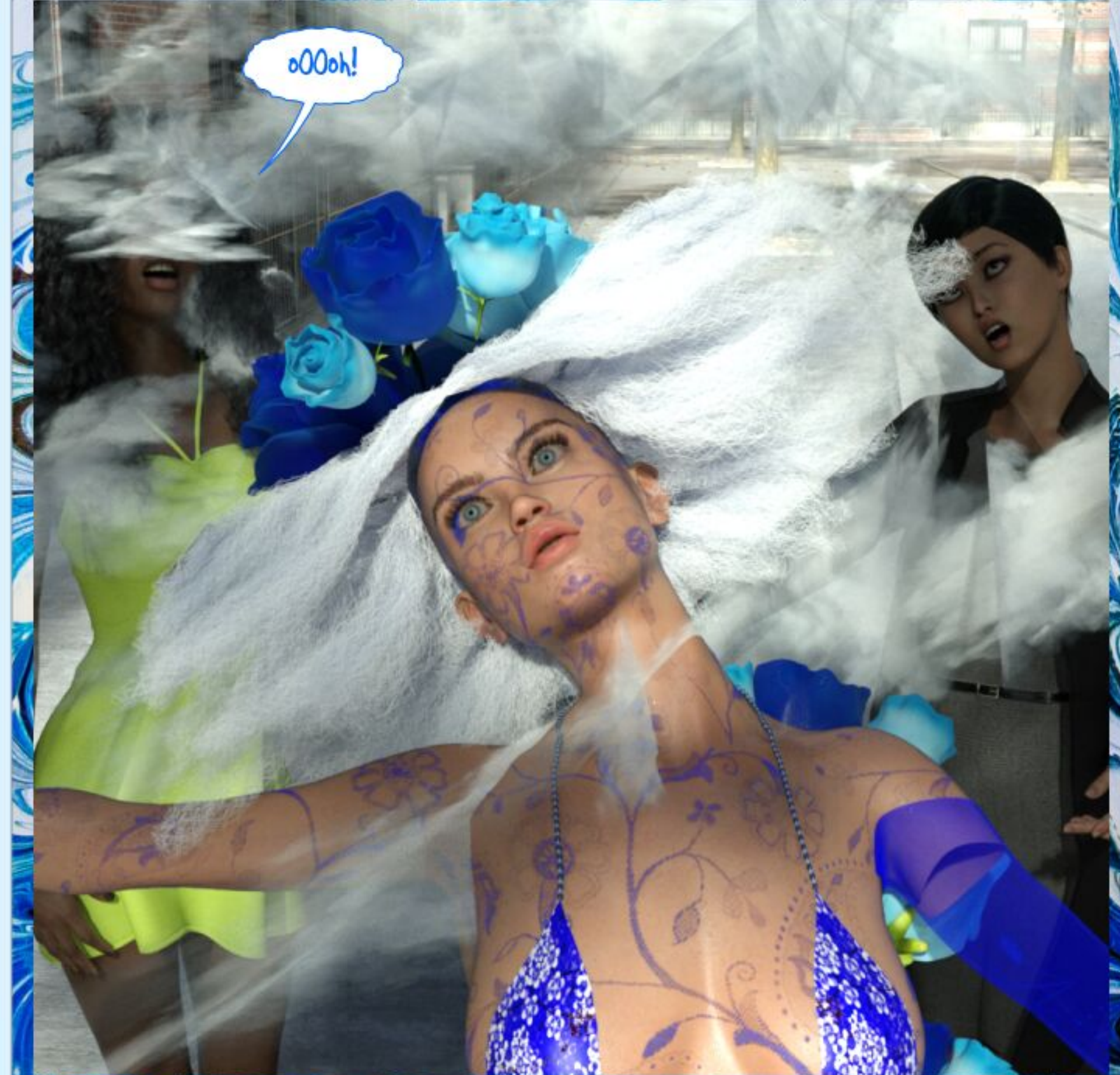
Where do I get some of whatever they're on?

I don't know, but if it turns out to be from whatever this is coming our way, I'm not going to be surprised.



Ma'am? Miss? Excuse Me? Hello?

Do you know anything about what's going --



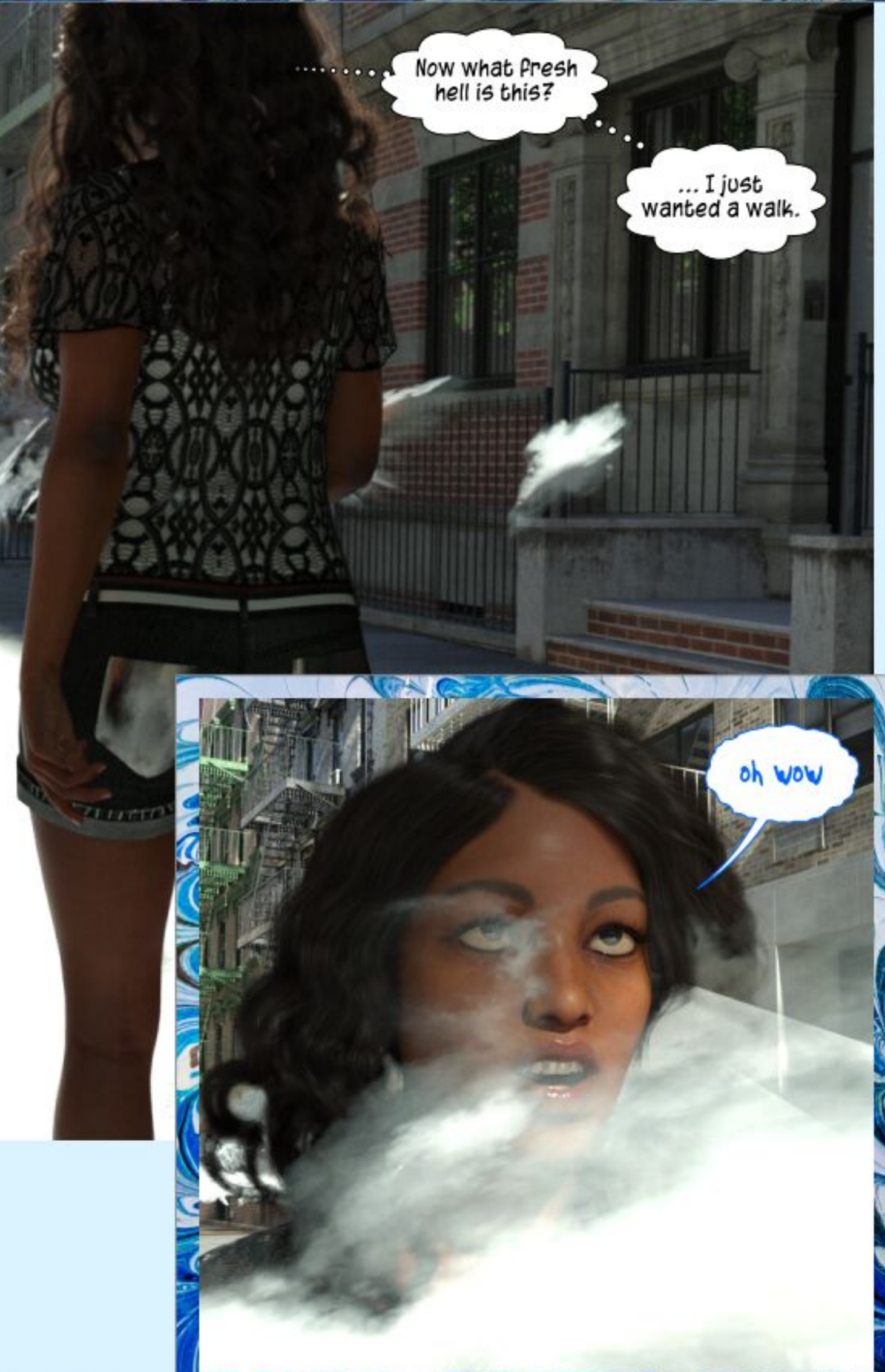
ooooh!



Whee!



Excuse Me! You, with the flowers! You look like the cause of --



Now what Presh hell is this?

... I just wanted a walk.



oh wow

splinter grows

#24

words and images by trilly

SERENE BARKER'S PERSONAL SPACE.



Sorry to get you out so early.

It's all right.

Where's Ruby?

We're not joined at the hip. Was I supposed to give her a message?

No, I sent messages to both of you.

The lack of phones does have some disadvantages. The phone's harder to miss.

I thought that was what you hated about them.

It is.

Anyway ... we have to do something about Monica.

Word's reached me that Brendan wants to try for a vote to declare her mentally incompetent.



Does he think that'd automatically give him her shares, or something?

No, he knows better than that. But it would definitely release them, and then there'd be a big fight over what to do with them.

Of course, right now he'd have trouble getting a quorum to the table, on his side as well as on ours. I'd be willing to bet he and Clayton and Ezekiel haven't spoken since the board meeting. And we've got some communication gaps too.

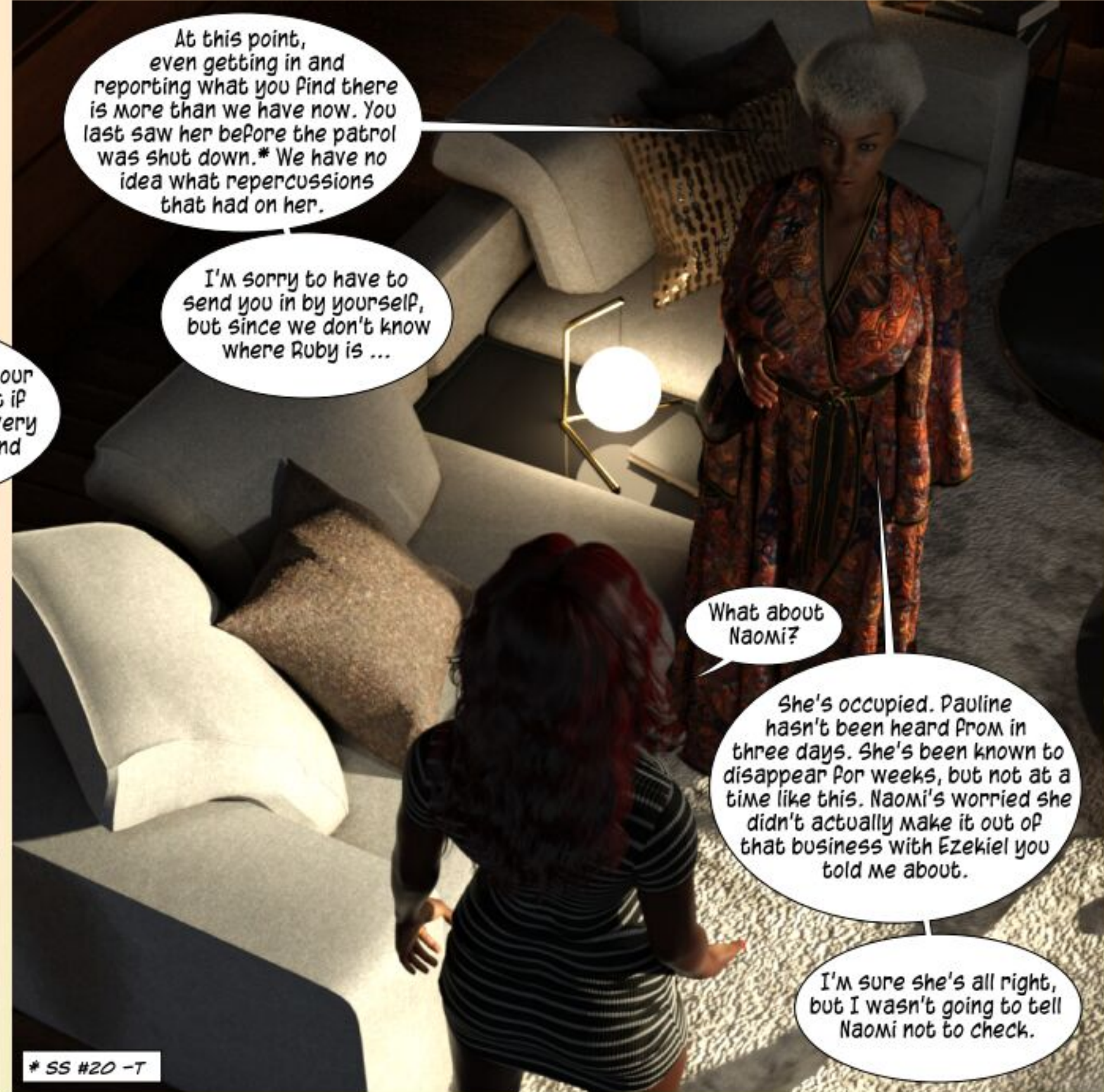
Then why the urgency?



The thing is, as long as Monica is either unwilling or unable to talk to us, the case to declare her unfit looks pretty strong. Even I have to admit I have my doubts, unless she can show up and establish she's in good mental health.

... Well, adequate mental health.

I can get in. I mean, the access is doable, if we abuse your permissions horribly. But what if that's all I can do? She wasn't very lucid when we last saw her. And I'm no psychologist.



At this point, even getting in and reporting what you find there is more than we have now. You last saw her before the patrol was shut down. We have no idea what repercussions that had on her.

I'm sorry to have to send you in by yourself, but since we don't know where Ruby is ...

What about Naomi?

She's occupied. Pauline hasn't been heard from in three days. She's been known to disappear for weeks, but not at a time like this. Naomi's worried she didn't actually make it out of that business with Ezekiel you told me about.

I'm sure she's all right, but I wasn't going to tell Naomi not to check.

* SS #20 -T



Brought you some food.

I know you're just a simulation, but Rita's horse always needed to eat.

Realism, I suppose.

Anyway, it's all a simulation when you think about it.



Got some of -- oop -- this, too. In case you need a snack.

Had to remember where the manifests for all this were. This barn hasn't been used in years and years.

Still can't figure out who you belong to. I've asked just about everybody in Shadyside. Nobody's had a horse go missing.

I know you weren't cheap, so I figure somebody's going to come looking sooner or later. Meanwhile, might as well get some use out of the barn and the pasture again.



You're such a pretty horse. I'm sure someone misses you a lot.

Could use some cleaning up, though. A good currying and a brushing, and you've got tangles in your mane that need getting out.

Later I'll see if I can dig out some of the old supplies. Got manifests for all of it somewhere. Rita had all kinds of kit.



I'll bring you more food tonight.

Plenty of room to run around if you get bored.



LEYNA ENTERS MONICA BARKER'S PERSONAL SPACE ... OR WHAT'S LEFT OF IT.

And I thought this place was weird last time.

The "apartment" is completely gone now. She hasn't bothered to recreate it ... nothing but this maze of data ...

There she is! Hey! Monica! Wait!

I mean, I'm not a psychologist, but that seems like a bad sign to me.



A maze, and it's missing some pieces. Glad there was something to land on. Whole lot of nothing below that.

What's this? Some kind of image? What am I looking at?

Whoooooo!

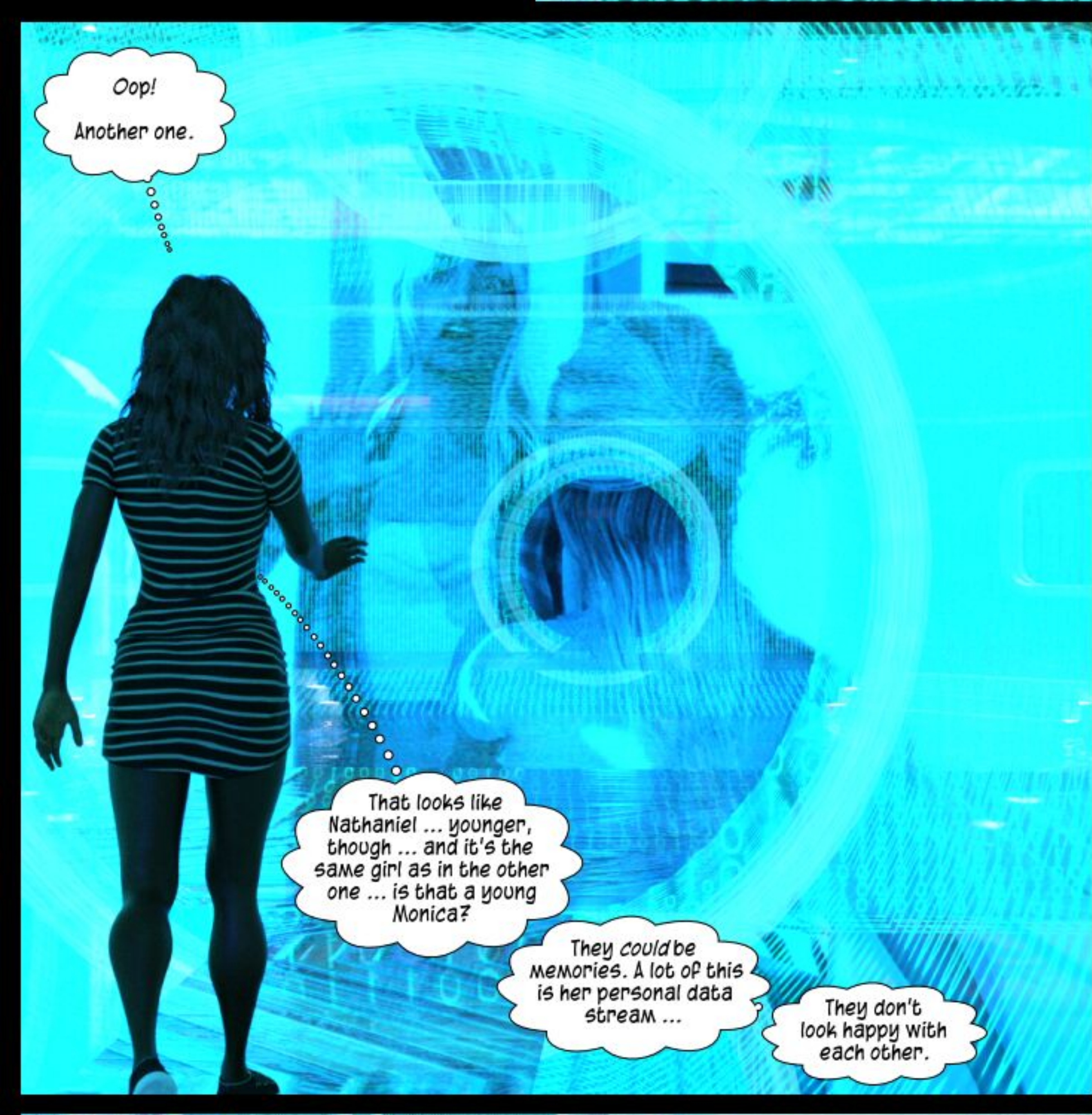


Girl reacting to ... somebody getting hurt? Falling? Whatever it is, doesn't look good.



There she is, down there.

She can move around this place a lot more easily than I can ... I'll never catch her, I've got to get close enough to get her attention ...

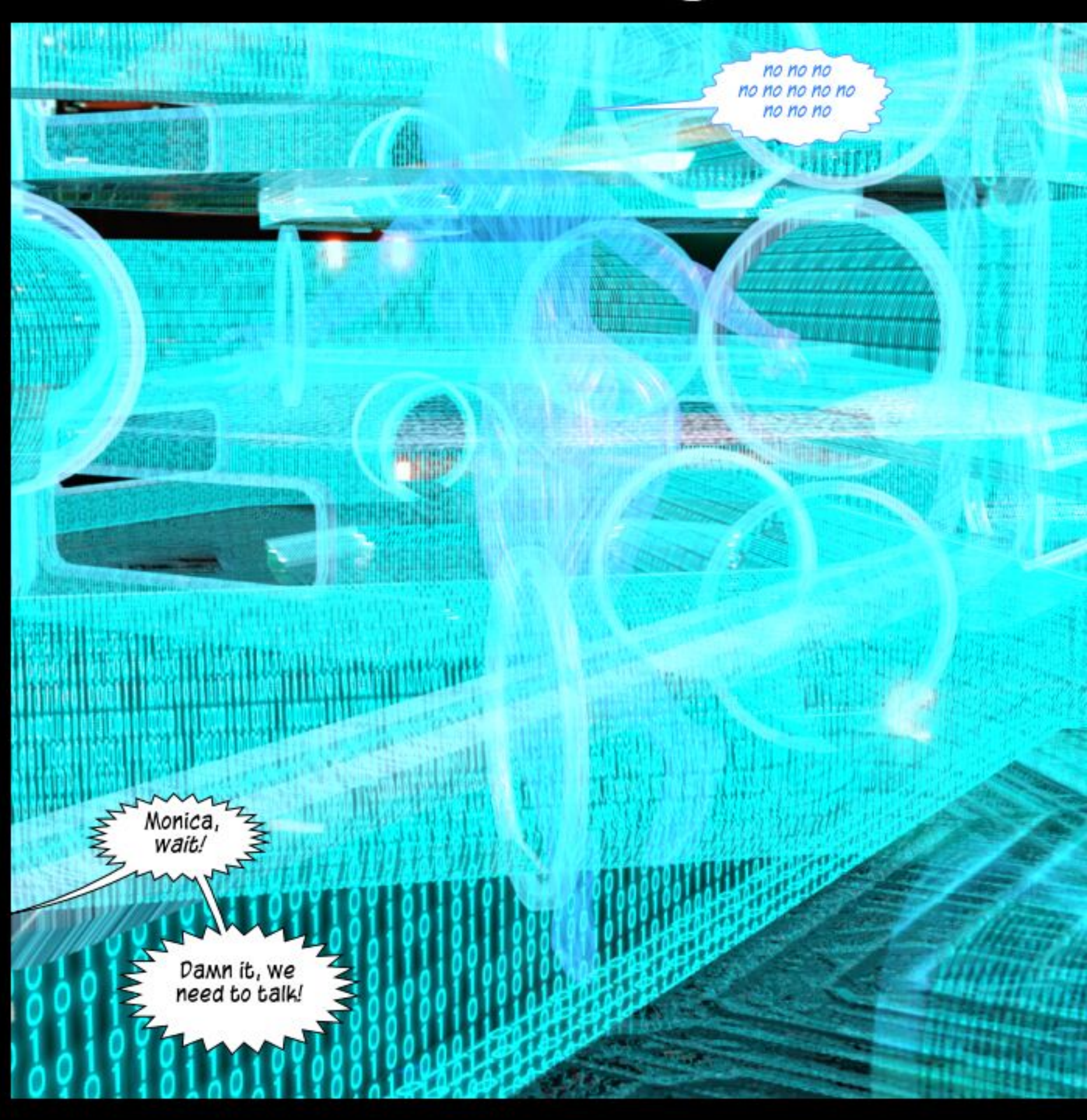


Oop! Another one.

That looks like Nathaniel ... younger, though ... and it's the same girl as in the other one ... is that a young Monica?

They could be memories. A lot of this is her personal data stream ...

They don't look happy with each other.



no no no no no no no no no no

Monica, wait!

Damn it, we need to talk!



Monica, please!

A man hitting a woman ... she looks like she's trying to fend him off ...

I don't recognize either of them.



Never again! Never again! You hear me? Never again!

Get out! Get out!

Monica ... it's important ...

Get out!!





WHEN RUBY RECALLS TO CHECK MESSAGES AND SEND WORD TO SERENE, SHE FINDS A REQUEST FROM GINA AND ESPERANZA.



I'm learning to look for you two in high places first. What's up? Leyna's not available; Serene says she's looking into something else.

That's OK, we just wanted you. You're good at ... ah ... dispelling things.

Another? Must be the day for it. What am I dispelling?

Have a look.



Huh! Back-alley royalty.

Why is it always something so ... banal?

What do you mean?



I mean every time we see people getting their wildest desires, the desires are always so fucking boring. Really basic shit. Someone who wants to have their ass kissed by everybody. Or wants to wander around in some incoherent pleasure cloud.

Even someone like Melinda ... she has a lot more imagination in what she does to people than in what she actually wants.

Well, what would you wish for, if you were going to go get your wildest desires?



Action and excitement. Fewer stupid people. A decent love life. Hell, I don't know.

Come on, I guess we should deal with this clown. I don't think I'll have much trouble resisting, but you two might want to keep your distance until I get some sense into him.



Finally I am accorded the respect due me ... I shall rule benevolently and well ...

And my subjects all love me ... isn't that so?



Oh, yes, your worship! Your rule is glorious for all!



OK, your kingliness, that's enough.

Your game just became a reign-out.

How dare you! This disrespect to the royal person will not be tolerated!

On your knees!



OWWWW!!!



You can't -- I can be anything I want!

I've heard that one already once today. Get volunteers to be your subjects. Or go be king in your personal space.

Do I need to slap you again?

N-no!



In that case, I suggest you recall in a hurry.

Your "subjects" don't seem happy with you.



Not only two of these in the same day, but they said the same thing.

Melinda?

I guess, but it doesn't feel like her. It feels like something else, but I still haven't figured out what.

But it's the timing that I'm wondering about. Whatever it is, why two events in the same day? Or are we only just now noticing?

I feel so used.

Right? but at least you wear it well. Want to come to my personal space?

We don't even know each other ...

We were just kneeling in a filthy street together in tunics with no underwear. That counts as an introduction, doesn't it?

... lead on.



Are you two willing to help me with a little research?

I think we need to wander around and see if there's any other weird stuff going on that we're missing.

I have this odd feeling that there is.



On behalf of Serene, eh? Never did really get to know Serene ... didn't see that part of the family much ... but I hear good things. Don't know if I can tell you much, though.

Any information at all would be helpful, Mr. Barker.

Call me Jeremy. I go by Jeremy Scott again now. I didn't peel right hanging onto the Barker name. I'm not really connected to the family anymore. Rhea's dead, my daughter's dead, and Leah and I ... well.

I'm sorry. I realize I'm asking about painful events ...

No, no. "Painful" was a long time ago. I'll tell you what I can, if it helps. Take a seat.

You say you think Monica may still not be recovered from Judith's death. I'd believe that. She saw it, you know.

I didn't know. I don't know much about it at all. What did Judith die of?

JEREMY AND RHEA ARE JUDITH AND MATTHEW'S PARENTS. RHEA DIED WHEN HER CHILDREN WERE FAIRLY YOUNG. RHEA'S TWIN SISTER LEAH HELPED JEREMY RAISE THEM, AS JEREMY WILL NOTE THREE PANELS FROM NOW.



Well, medically, her heart stopped. Why is the question. They said it was a sudden shock. But no one's really sure.

Monica said she -- I mean Judith -- opened the door to Peter's office, and screamed and fell. That was it. She was dead by the time Monica ran up the stairs to her, and the body vanished a second or two later.

Monica had never seen anyone actually die in sleep, and didn't know their sleep presence would disappear, so it was twice as upsetting. Poor kid.

I've never seen anyone actually die in sleep either.

Mr. Scott, I have to ask ... there's talk that Judith's death was ... suspicious.



Of course it was suspicious.

Judith wasn't fragile, and she was in perfectly good health. Well ... under the circumstances.

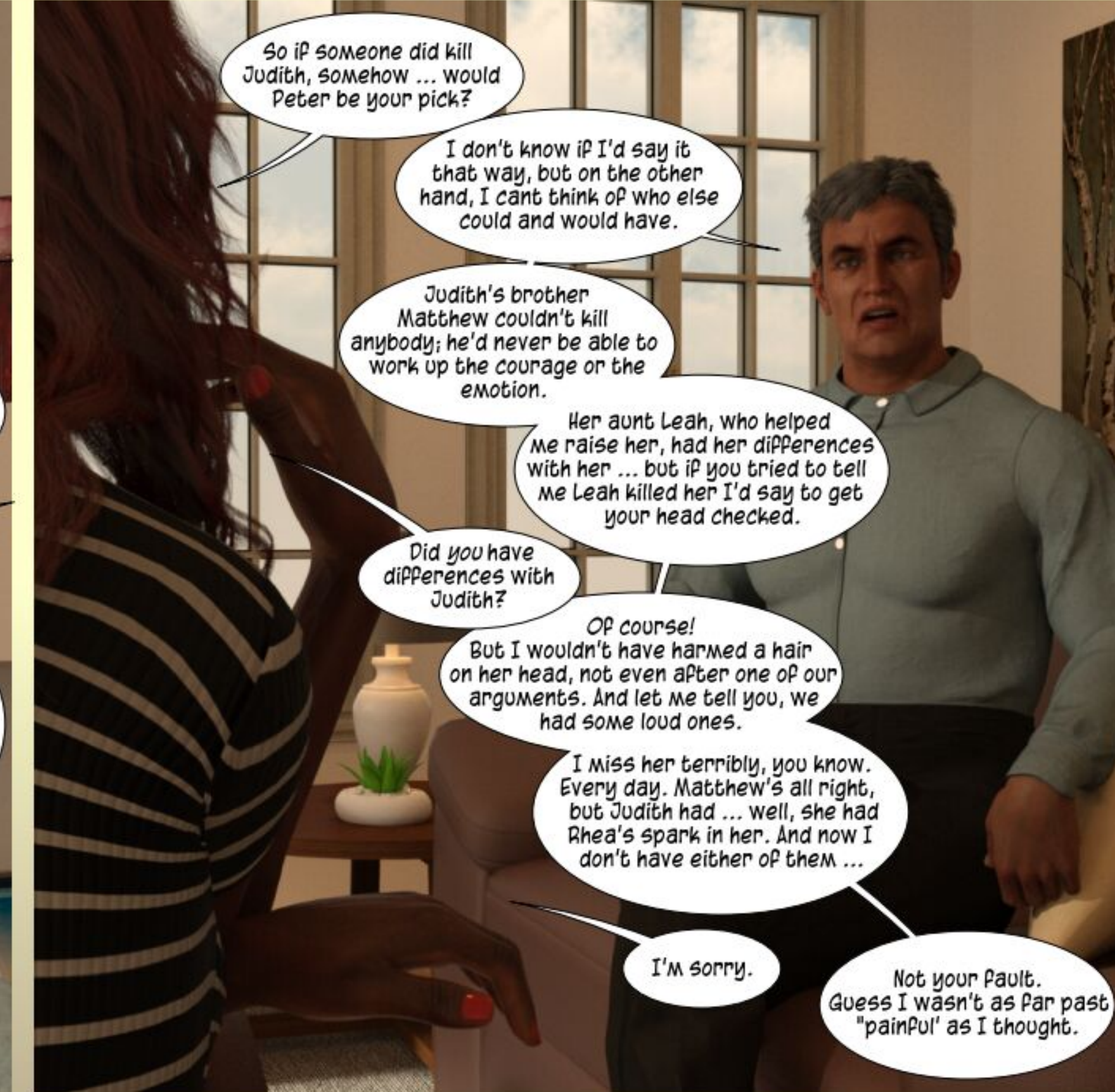
What does that mean?

Eh, I suppose there's no reason you shouldn't know. Peter -- sorry, did I explain who Peter is?

Judith's husband, right?

That's right. He was a real piece of work. Shouted at her and beat her. I think pretty regularly. She tried to cover it up, but everyone knew. He'd do it right in front of the kids, and they'd tell us when we saw them.

I'd have liked to have wrong his neck. But Judith ... well, you can't control your children's bad decisions.



So if someone did kill Judith, somehow ... would Peter be your pick?

I don't know if I'd say it that way, but on the other hand, I can't think of who else could and would have.

Judith's brother Matthew couldn't kill anybody; he'd never be able to work up the courage or the emotion.

Her aunt Leah, who helped me raise her, had her differences with her ... but if you tried to tell me Leah killed her I'd say to get your head checked.

Did you have differences with Judith?

Of course! But I wouldn't have harmed a hair on her head, not even after one of our arguments. And let me tell you, we had some loud ones.

I miss her terribly, you know. Every day. Matthew's all right, but Judith had ... well, she had Rhea's spark in her. And now I don't have either of them ...

I'm sorry.

Not your fault. Guess I wasn't as far past "painful" as I thought.

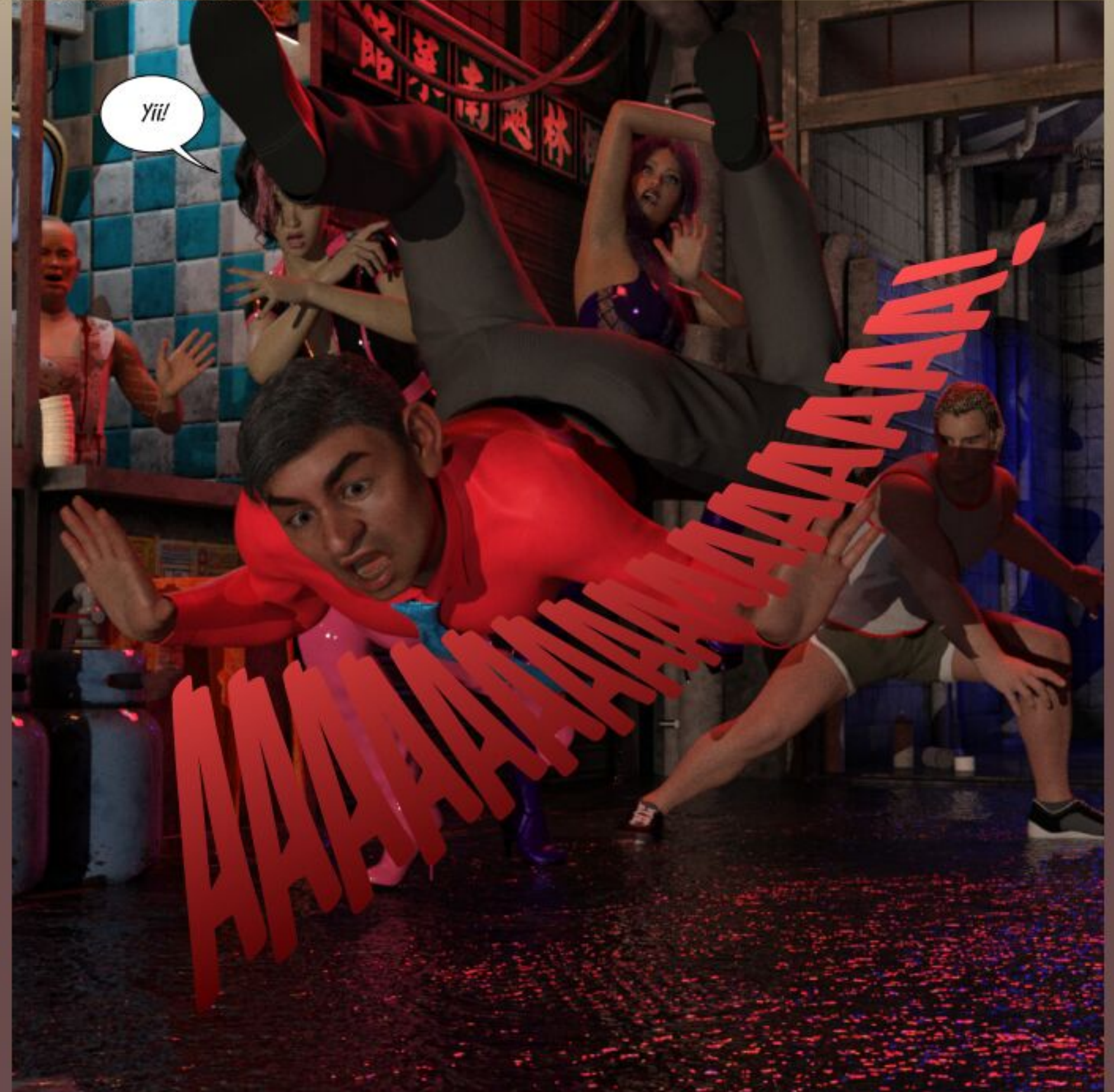
IN A BACK ALLEY IN THE "SHIBUYA" DISTRICT, TWO WOMEN HEAD IN TO PREPARE FOR THE UPCOMING EVENING'S WORK.



Hi, Mr. Yan!

Lina, you want something to eat?

No, love. I hate working on a full stomach.



Yii!



I told you I wasn't giving any more chances, Pinter. Now you're done. Out of business.

... Fuck off, Barker. You don't control my space.

It's cute that you think that makes any difference anymore.



What the Puck are you two staring at? You work for me now. Get out of my sight before you piss me off.

I'm getting real pucking tired of people thinking they can push back. I'm running A4 now, and I'm going to beat that into everybody's head one way or another.

Hey, Brendan, do you ever get tired of being wrong about everything?



For the record, Polks: Brendan does not control all of A4, he does not control this property, and he has no right to mess with it.

He does, however, urgently need a punch in the face.

Lucius, this is none of your business.

I'm making it my business. Isn't that what you do?

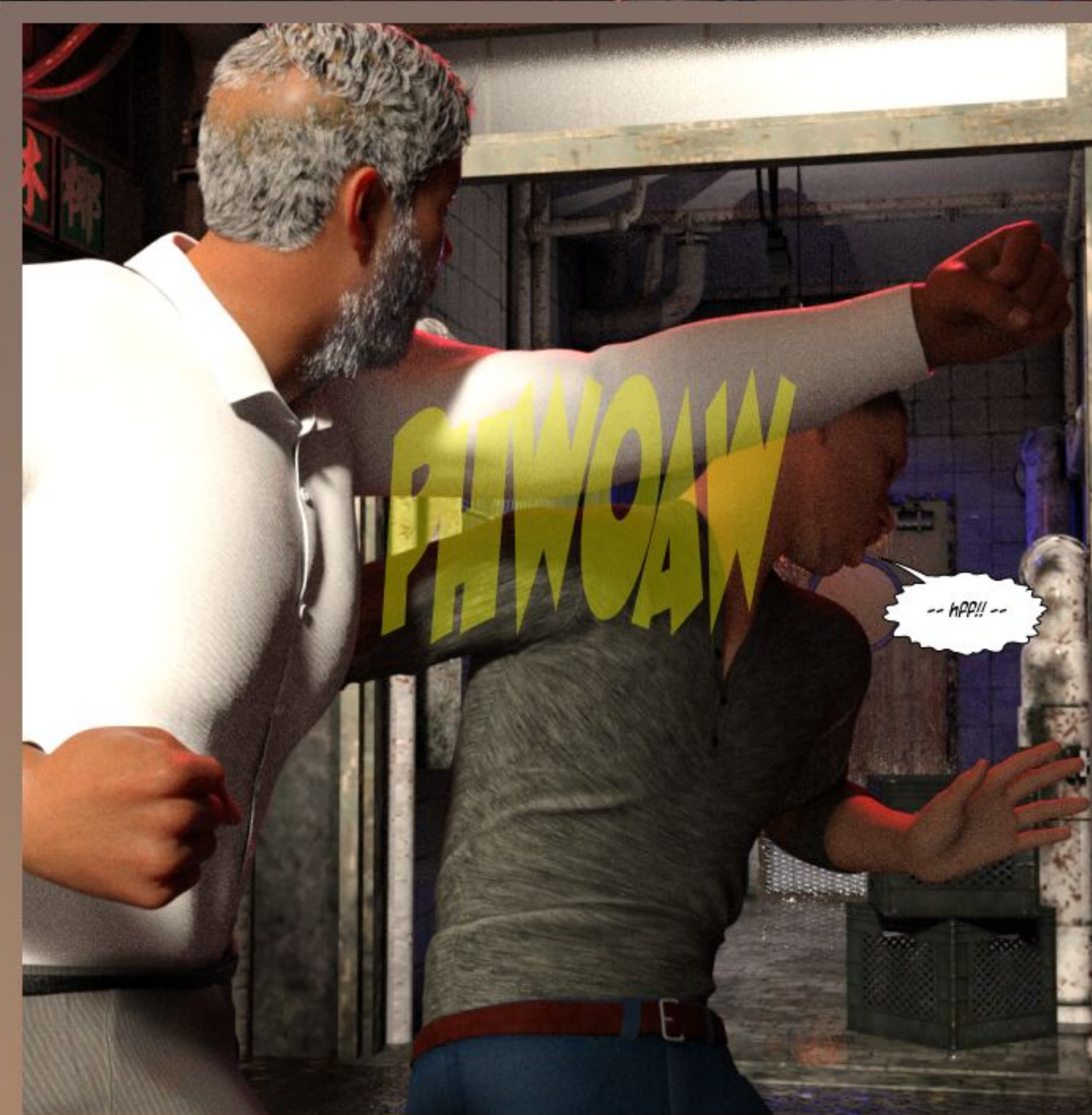


Hey! Careful of the glass!

-- OOP --

Lucius ... you're not in the best shape, you know. I don't want to hurt you ...

Brendan ...



-- HPP!! --



... either you think way too much of yourself, or you underestimate me, or both. Probably both.

Extort your own properties if you must; I can't stop you. But if you mess with any of the ones you don't control again, I will stop you.

urgh

I'll bring as many people as it takes, as often as it takes. Do you understand?



Hey, pretty girl! I brought you some dinner. Also got the grooming tools.

And look what else I found the Manifest Por.

You seem pretty good-tempered. Want to try Por a ride before you eat?



I haven't been on a horse since Rita left, but I remember how. I don't think you're going to be trouble; you don't have a problem with being saddled, that's Por sure.

A little exercise, and a rubdown and a brushing, and dinner. How's that sound?





OK, ready? Everybody else is aloft.

Millie ... this isn't going to ... hurt, is it?



It's a little uncomfortable at the beginning. Like you've got, y'know, bad gas or something.

But after that, it feels great.

O-OK. I'm ready.



Uhhh! I see what you mean ...

Yeah. It's all right, it passes quick.



I'm ... I'm swelling up ... this is really weird ...

I didn't expect to be able to Peel it so much ...

-- giggle -- Just wait.



Millie! I'm gonna bust my shirt!

Probably! Better take it off while you can.



Oh! This is ... this is really ... ah ... Oooh!



OoOO I'm oOoo ...

Almost there ...



OoOooOo!!

Yay!

I'll be right behind you.



OoOooOo!!



I don't think that's the same kind of thing we were looking for, do you?

No. Bizarre, yes, but not related.

Those floating people were in the discontinuity too. I think this is someone's carryover. There seems to have been a lot of that.

Might be a problem for us one day, but not today.

Looks like a lot of Pun, though.



Peter Spruill?

Don't know him.

Go away.

Yeah? What about Peter Barker? You know him?



Not so loud!

Who are you? How'd you find me? What the fuck do you want?

You only leave your personal space to come here to drink every evening.

I'm trying to get the facts on Judith Barker's death.

Oh, you can definitely Puck off, then.

Suit yourself. It's just that I've been talking to other people who all seem to think you killed her, so I figured you might like to tell me your version.



Little late for that.

You've been talking to Barkers, right? So they've already told you how big an asshole I am. How about you go with that and leave me alone? I'm trying to drink.

I can think you're an asshole and still want to hear your side. And I don't always believe what Barkers say.

Aren't you special.

No. No point in it, and I don't peel like talking.

No harm in it either, though. Like you say, it's pretty late. Surely it's OK to clear the air now ...



Oh, you wanna clear the air?

You married?

Uh ... no.

Well, don't marry a fucking Barker. They don't just think they run the place, they think they run all the people in it.

Judith never quit giving me hell, not from day one. I don't know what she wanted, but whatever it was, she made it clear I wasn't it.

Doesn't excuse hitting her.

Hey, you can go Puck off right now. You want to hear this or not?

Of course, but you have to admit it's hard to get past ... and in front of the kids ...

The kids! The fucking kids. Monica already just like her mother, queen of everything, and Nathaniel ... a fucking Preak!

Fucking disappointments, both of them ... Whole Family's not worth a damn ...



You know, people don't get to choose what they're born as, but they do get to decide for themselves later.

You gave up on your own child because she decided to be something you didn't like? You abused her and you call her names? Are you proud of that?

You're lucky she didn't decide to cut your fucking throat in your sleep some night! Because I sure as hell might have.



I, ah ... OK.

But there are plenty of other things ... I'd still think Nat was a Preak even without ... that.

Anyway, Yeah, I was rough, all right? But I wouldn't have killed Judith, no matter what anybody thinks.

And they know I didn't, no matter what they tell you. At least Jeremy does.

What do you mean?

I was with Jeremy while it was happening.



I got a message from him asking to see me.

It was as I was going home for the evening, so I thought, OK, I'll run by and see what the fuck he wants.

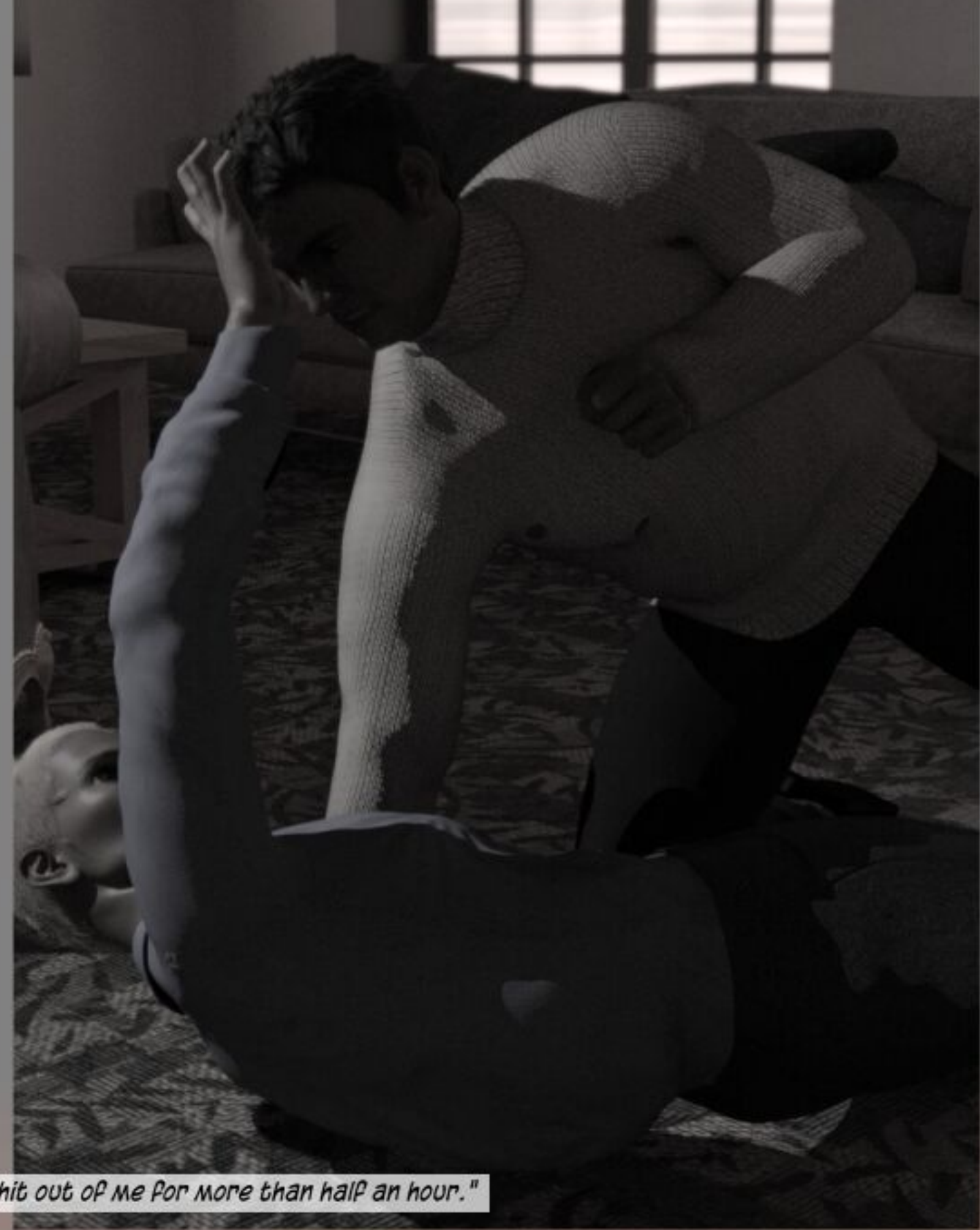
It could have been something worth hearing. Until then, I'd thought Jeremy was kind of on my side. I mean, he married a Barker woman too ...



Peter. Glad you could come by. I have something important to tell you.



PHIAHUD

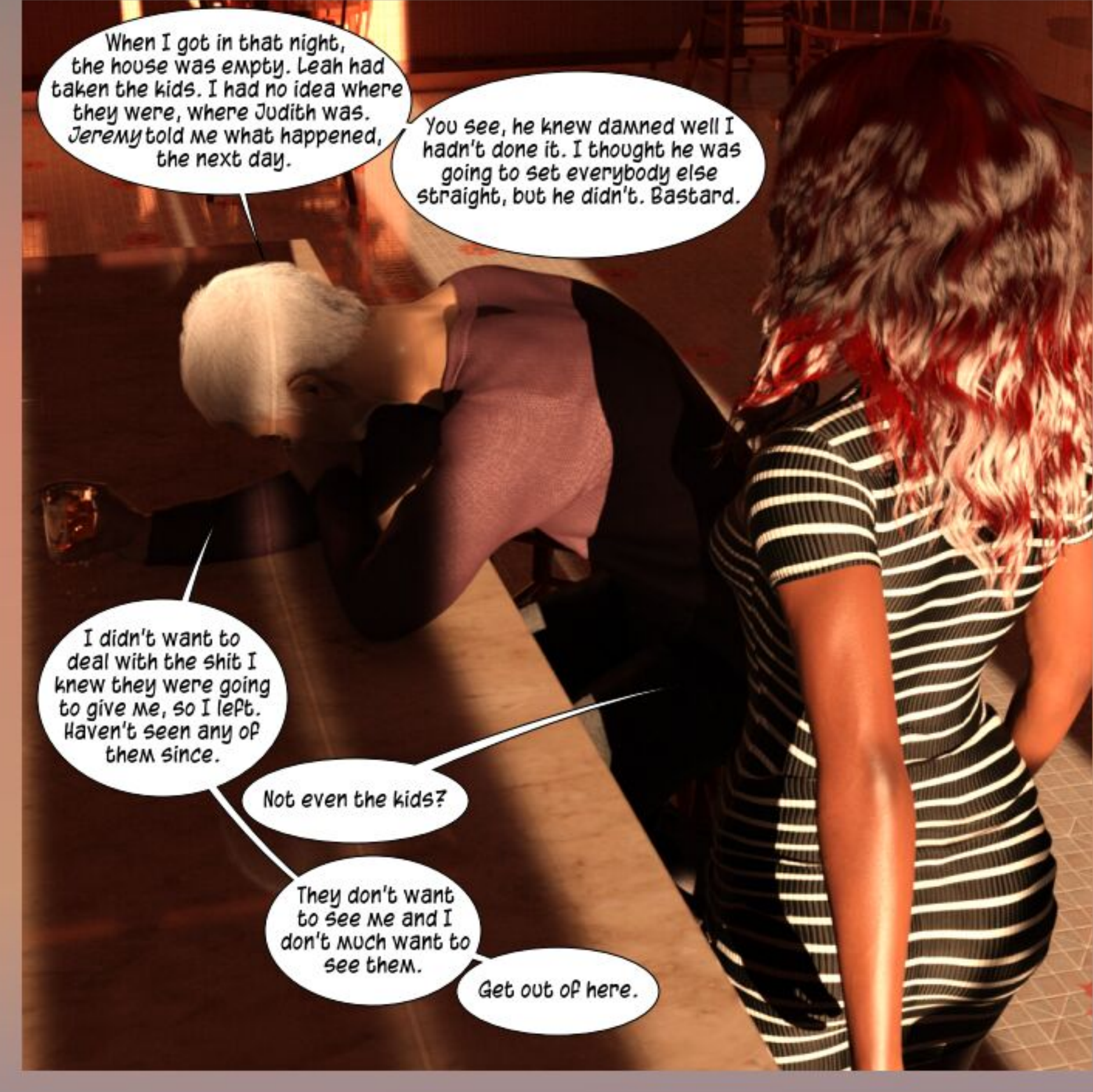


"And then he beat the shit out of me for more than half an hour."



Now, make sure you get this part:

If you lay a finger on my daughter or my grandchildren again, I'm going to give you a beating that'll make this one Peel like a light massage.



When I got in that night, the house was empty. Leah had taken the kids. I had no idea where they were, where Judith was. Jeremy told me what happened, the next day.

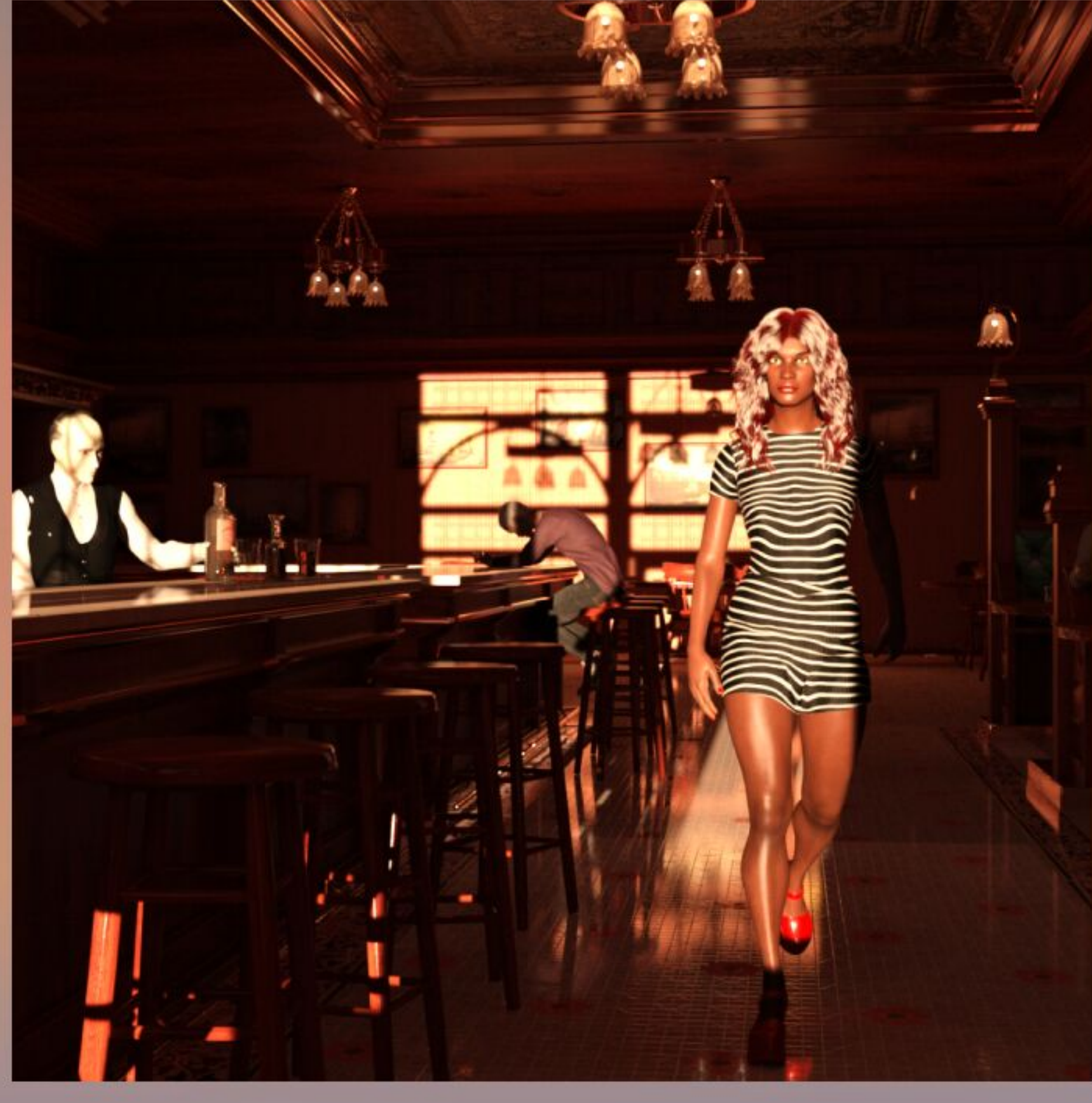
You see, he knew damned well I hadn't done it. I thought he was going to set everybody else straight, but he didn't. Bastard.

I didn't want to deal with the shit I knew they were going to give me, so I left. Haven't seen any of them since.

Not even the kids?

They don't want to see me and I don't much want to see them.

Get out of here.



I guess we might as well --

Huh.

Have either of you seen this place before?

No, and I was down here just a couple of days ago.



Bree! Not working at Xenomorph anymore?

Oh, hey, uh -- Ruby, right?

No, I quit. Me and a couple of others are starting this place now. We think it'll --

Just a second. Customer.

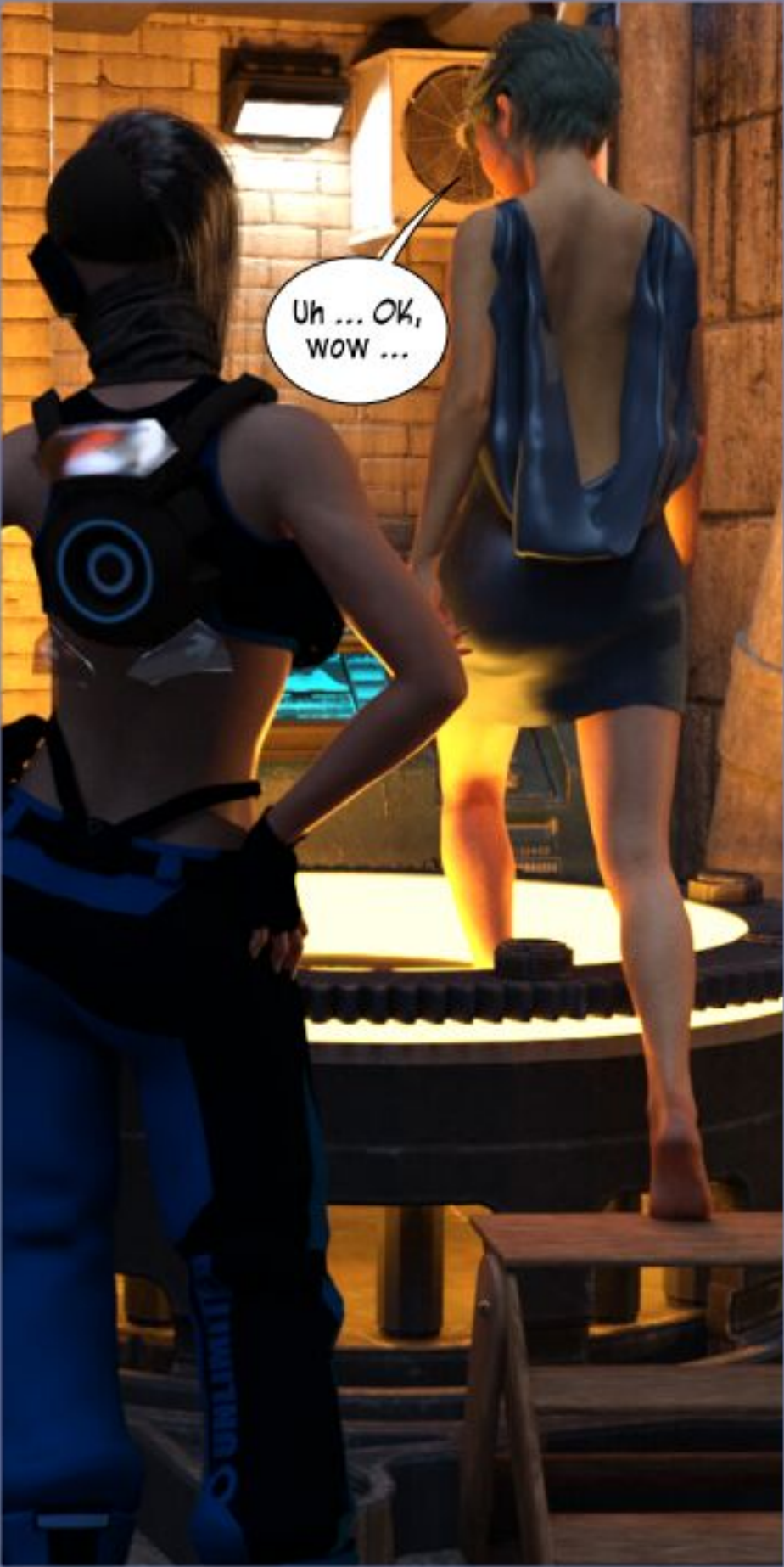


Is there a cover?

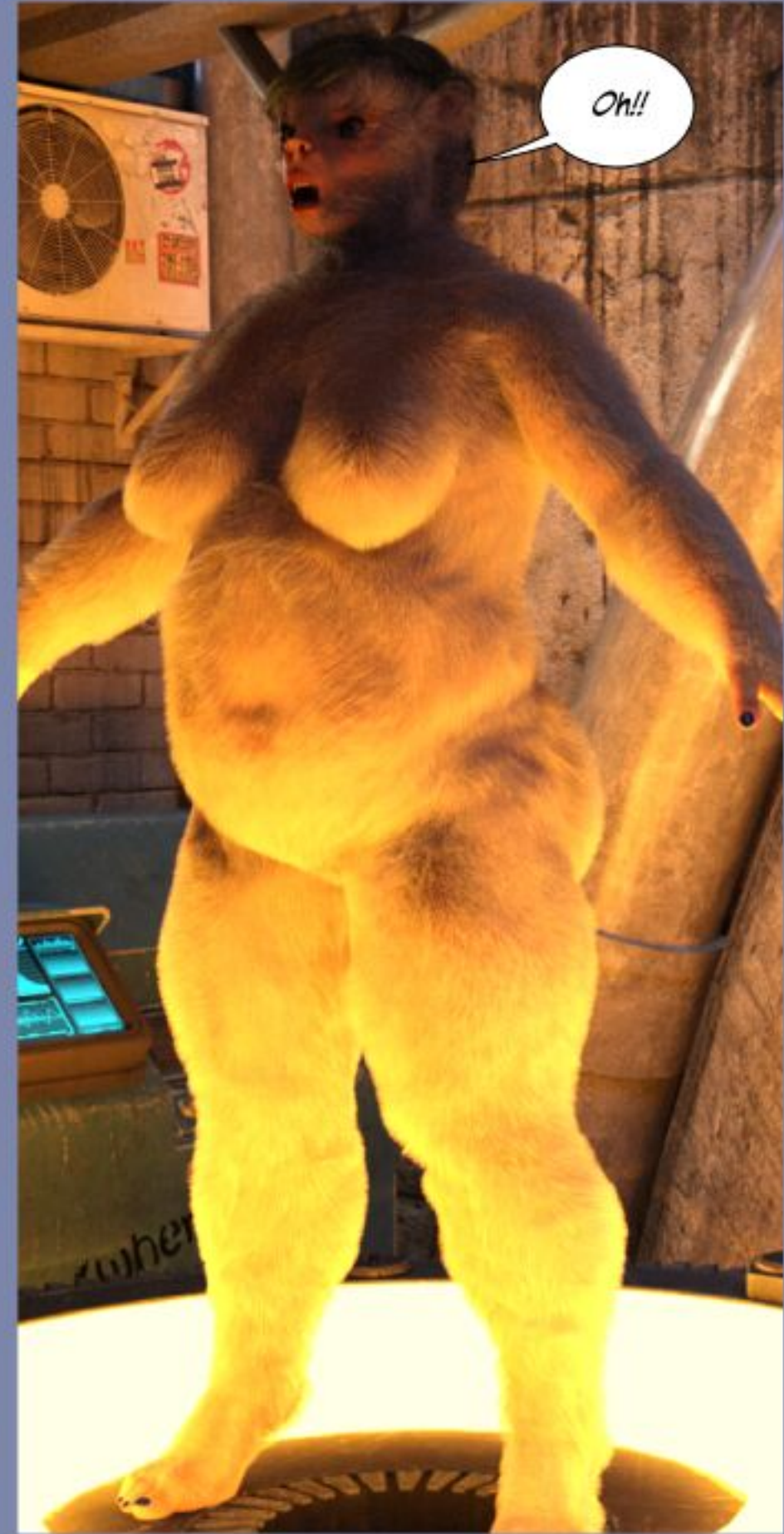
No, no cover, but you have to be a bear.

You can change over there. I'll turn it on for you.

You'll lose the clothes anyway, but I'd take those shoes off now. For the steps.



Uh ... OK, wow ...



Oh!!



Arrrr! This is going to be Fun!

Enjoy!

I can't believe I live in a world where that counts as "Nope, nothing to see here."

Yeah.

I'm sorry to have wasted your afternoon. I still think there's something important I'm missing, but wandering around looking for it was a dumb idea.

Aw, it's OK. It was interesting. We'll keep an eye out for other weirdness.



I'm telling you, Rodney, I didn't kill him! I can't believe you think I'd do something like that!

No one else knew he'd be there but you! You've been lying to me from the --



AAAAIEEE!

Yeow!!



What the hell!?

Moirra! House lights, now!

Everybody please leave the theater in a calm and orderly fashion!



Ham, do something!

This isn't internal! I may have to reset the whole theater. Help get the audience out!

Oh, my! They told me this show was a hot ticket, but I didn't know it was so liberal!



You!

You son-of-a-bitch! You did this!

Easy there, champ. You're a lover, not a fighter, remember?

EEE!

You had it coming after you got in my face this --



-- OOF! --

What the Puck is wrong with you, Clayton? You got your shares, you got your acknowledgement ... you're not doing it out of greed like Brendan ... what is your problem?



You think Josiah throwing me that bone makes up for everything?

You think all these years of being treated like I was dirt just goes away because he decided, "here, I'm giving you back what was yours to begin with?"

PHWAM

-- uhhhh! --

I'm not going to stop until I cram his Pake charity down his throat. He's going to suffer. You're all going to suffer.

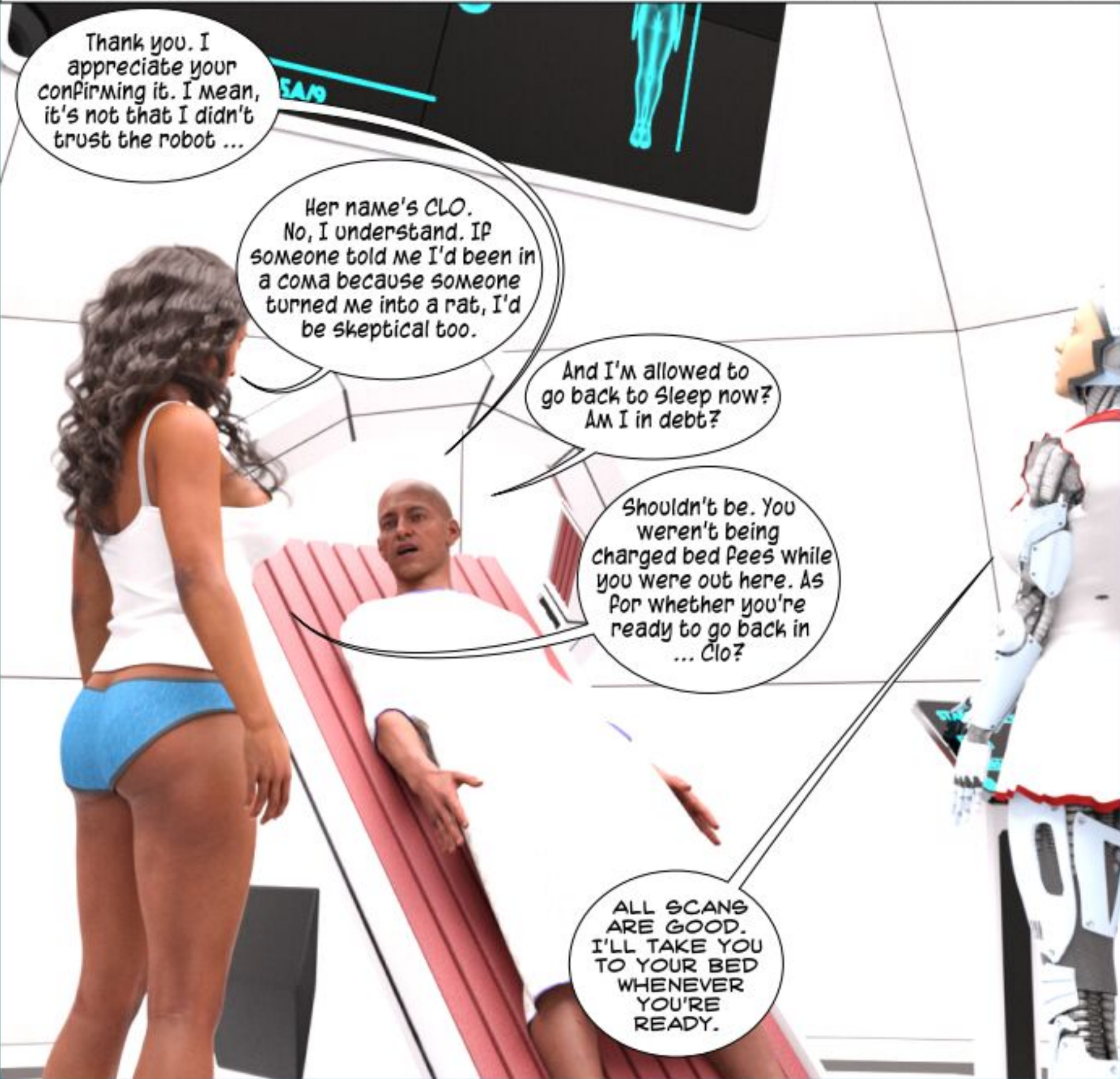


I figure about twenty years. Twenty years of you all getting back what you gave out. By then we'll be just about even. Maybe.

I'm better than all of you, and I'm going to hear all of you admit it, sooner or later, even if I have to break you all to do it.

huh?

You'd better get that fire out before someone gets hurt.



Thank you. I appreciate your confirming it. I mean, it's not that I didn't trust the robot ...

Her name's CLO. No, I understand. If someone told me I'd been in a coma because someone turned me into a rat, I'd be skeptical too.

And I'm allowed to go back to sleep now? Am I in debt?

Shouldn't be. You weren't being charged bed fees while you were out here. As for whether you're ready to go back in ... Clo?

ALL SCANS ARE GOOD. I'LL TAKE YOU TO YOUR BED WHENEVER YOU'RE READY.



Thanks. That one would definitely have recognized me. We clashed personally.

Yeah? What was his deal?

Same as all of them ... "I have this great new philosophy" ... or therapeutic technique ... or life advice ... and he went around merrily rotting people's minds with it.

Ignorance is not actually bliss, you know.

I agree, though I have a friend -- ah, an ex-friend -- who'd argue the point.

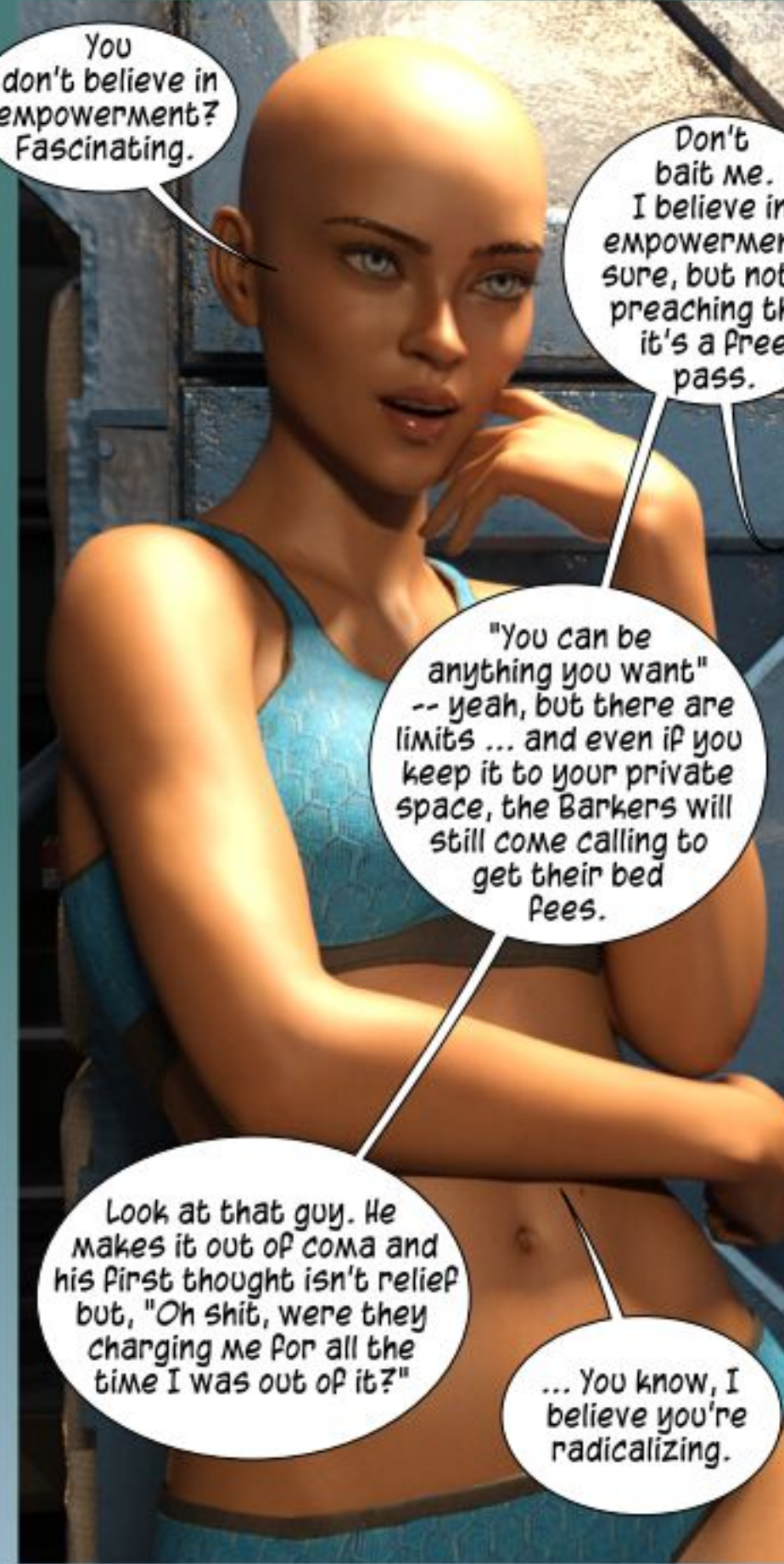
DR. CHAPMAN, WHO IS CURRENTLY TRYING TO RECOVER THE "LAB RATS" FROM COMA, IS THE PERSON WHO TURNED THEM ALL INTO RATS TO BEGIN WITH.



Wait a second.

That's it! That's what was hitting me so familiar.

It's got to be Mina Markov. It's not quite the same material she used before, but "you can be anything you want" is definitely in line with her inspirational empowerment crap.



You don't believe in empowerment? Fascinating.

Don't bait me. I believe in empowerment, sure, but not in preaching that it's a free pass.

"You can be anything you want" -- yeah, but there are limits ... and even if you keep it to your private space, the Barkers will still come calling to get their bed fees.

Look at that guy. He makes it out of coma and his first thought isn't relief but, "Oh shit, were they changing me for all the time I was out of it?"

... You know, I believe you're radicalizing.



Anyway, here's the thing: When we let Markov go back to sleep, we requested she follow a couple of rules. One of them was that she had to keep a registry of her patients. Well, customers.

Now, what could possibly have inspired you to do something like that?

I interviewed some of her patients the first time around. * One of them zoned out completely, right in front of me, just from recounting what she taught him.

So she's not harmless. Even if she doesn't do it on purpose.

Also, there's this woman who keeps telling me Markov deserved what she got. She's cynical, but her judgement is usually very good.

Come help me check on the list.

* WAY BACK IN SS #2-T



You actually found Peter?

Yes, and you lied to me! You knew he was with you at the time of the death, but you wanted me to think he did it.

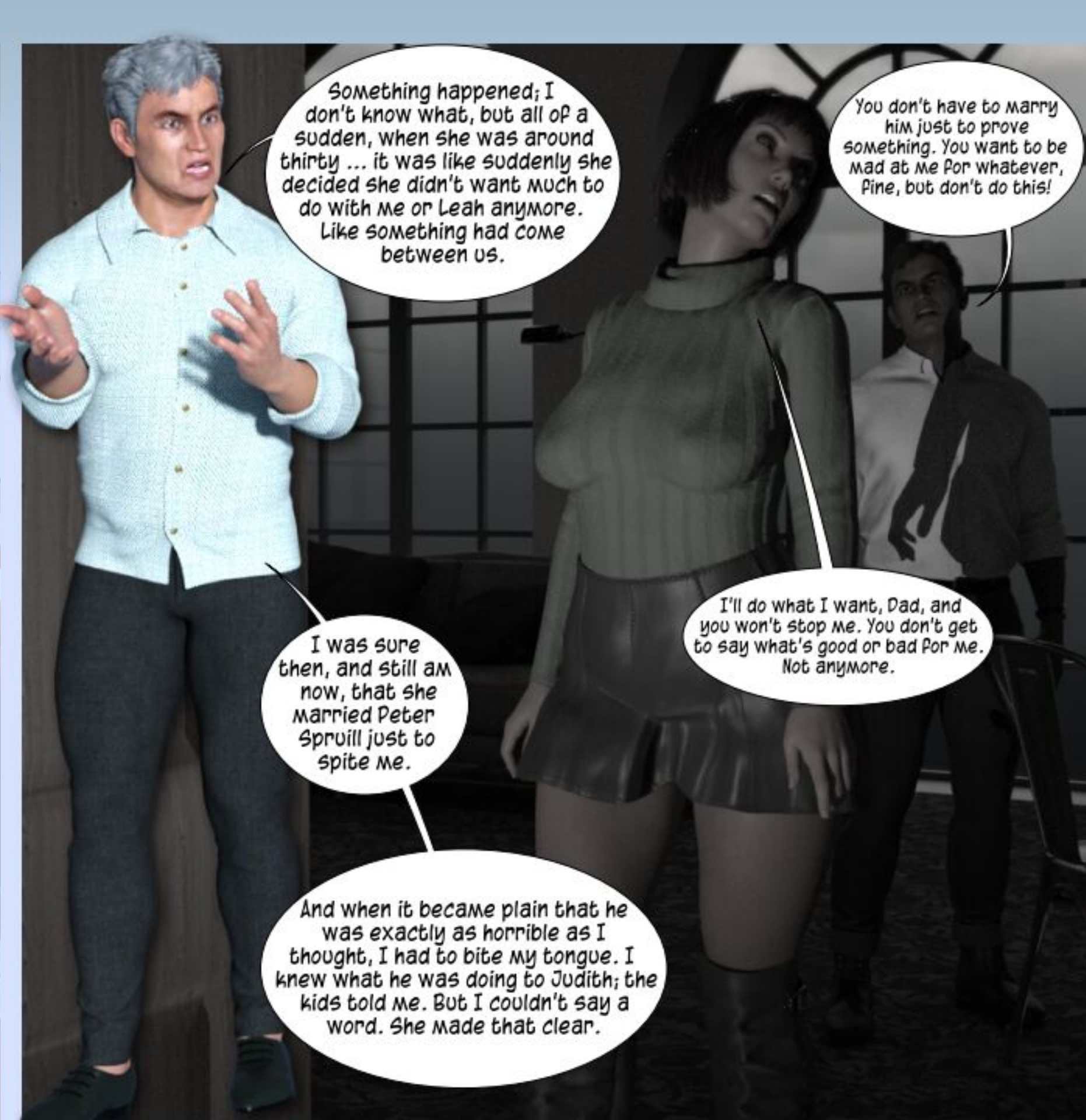
I never said that. I said I couldn't imagine that anyone else could and would have done it.

Look, I don't know how much you know about the history ... Rhea didn't tell me she had that disease Barkers get.

PNAC. Yeah, I was told.

She knew before we were married ... she knew she wouldn't live to see her children grow up ... it was a horrible thing to do to all of us.

But I forgave her ... I loved her so much ... I'm not sure Judith ever did, though. When Rhea died, I think something in her never really recovered.



Something happened; I don't know what, but all of a sudden, when she was around thirty ... it was like suddenly she decided she didn't want much to do with me or Leah anymore. Like something had come between us.

You don't have to marry him just to prove something. You want to be mad at me for whatever, fine, but don't do this!

I was sure then, and still am now, that she married Peter Spruill just to spite me.

I'll do what I want, Dad, and you won't stop me. You don't get to say what's good or bad for me. Not anymore.

And when it became plain that he was exactly as horrible as I thought, I had to bite my tongue. I knew what he was doing to Judith; the kids told me. But I couldn't say a word. She made that clear.



It was Nathaniel that pushed me past my limit. If Judith wanted to sit there and take it, I had to let her ... but when Nat started showing up with a black eye or a swollen lip ...

You know, even at that age, Nat knew perfectly well how to change appearance. He -- excuse me -- she could have concealed it all from me. She didn't. She wanted me to know.

She wanted me to do something about it.



Well, I'm certainly not going to blame you for tossing him around the room. It sounds like he more than earned it.

But I'm trying to figure out a mystery, and this information leaves me nowhere, you see? If Peter couldn't have done it, and we agree it wasn't a natural death, who did it?

Hell, I don't know.

Maybe it was a natural death. People do sometimes just have heart attacks. Even in sleep. The beds can only rescue you from so much, right?

Leah always thought Nathaniel did it. But I don't know how. I mean, he -- excuse me, she -- was there that night, in the house ... but how was it possible?

For that matter, even if Peter had done it, it's not clear how. Not if Monica's story of what she saw is true, and Monica was always a bad liar.

I'm sorry I muddied the waters, but even so, I just don't think anyone's going to ever have a definite answer.



Twice in two days I've wasted somebody else's time. I'm sorry.

At least she hasn't had very many customers since coming back to sleep.

Two she's not finished with yet, so presumably haven't lost their minds yet ... two I already dealt with ... three in their private spaces we can't get to, who aren't our problem anyway unless they come out ...

... and one out here that your secret spyware can't seem to locate.

It's Leyna's spyware, really. Anyway, it *did* locate him. I think he's just on the move.

It's all right. I needed a change of pace. You know, when I finish the rats there'll only be two left in the --

Hmm.

I only had this description secondhand from you -- do those outfits look familiar?



Oh, no.



Hello! Would you like to learn about the Euphoric lifestyle?

Wait ... Dr. Chapman? It is Dr. Chapman, isn't it? I didn't recognize you with the glasses.

Or with hair. Which one are you? I can't tell in that, Charles?

... Yes, that's right.



No, no, it's not like that! We just prefer to spend our personal time in this lifestyle ... it's very pleasant, you know. Euphoric, in fact.

We all spend a considerable portion of our time out of garb --

-- because Nathaniel Barker isn't paying for everything this time, and you have to go work to make your bed fees.

Er ... yes.

THE ORIGINAL EUPHORICS WERE IN SS #3-4. CHAPMAN IS REFERRING TO THE FACT THAT SHE'S JUST RECENTLY FINISHED RECOVERING SEVERAL WHO HAD BEEN EUPHORICS TOO LONG, LOST THEIR IDENTITIES, AND LANDED IN THE COMA WARD WHEN THE CULT WAS BROKEN UP.



The thing is, I don't feel like we can intervene unless there's malice.

The others probably can't speak while they're in the suits, so if they were being manipulated, we might not know ... but I don't think they'd be out on the streets being blatant about it.

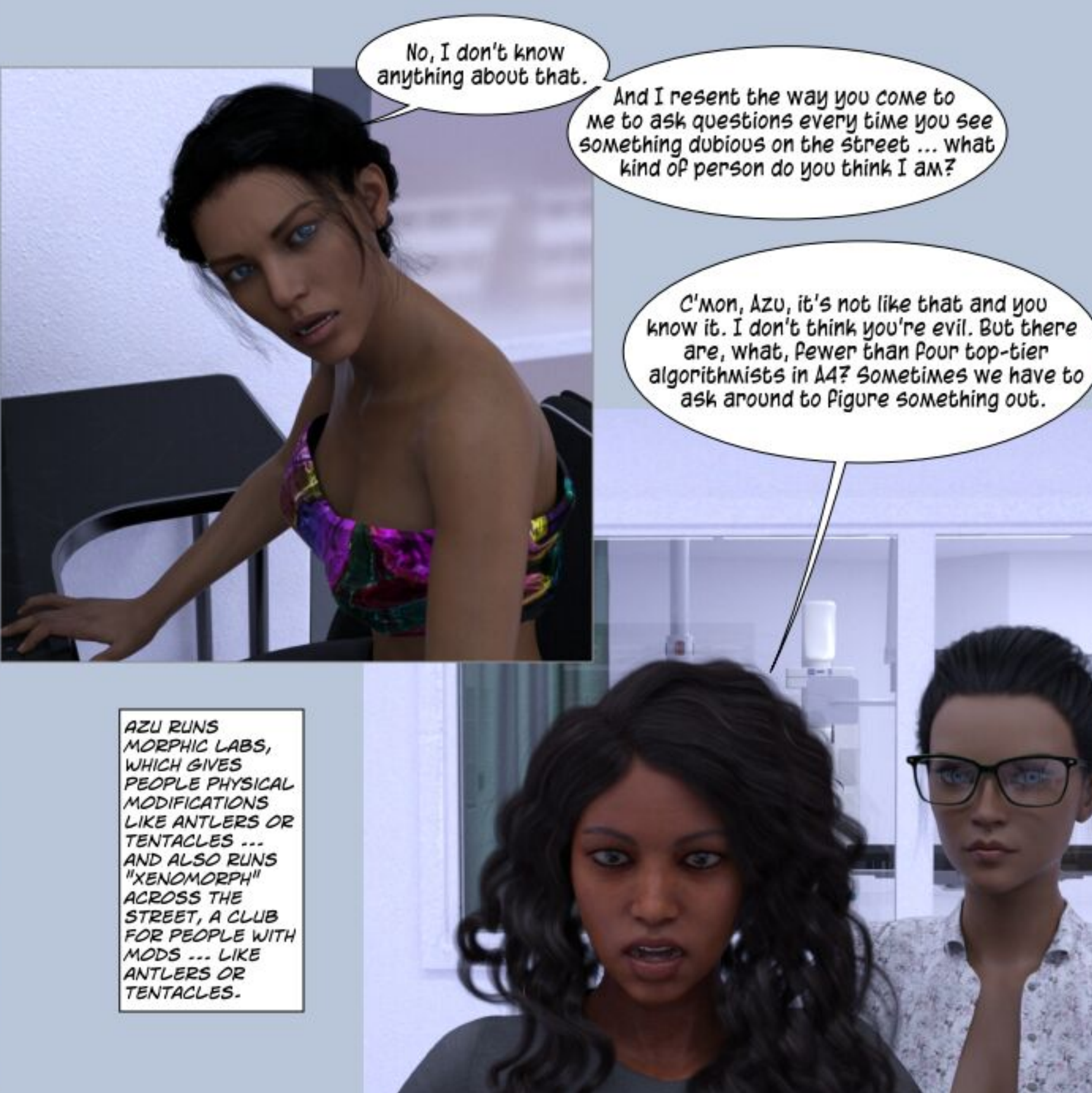
I can't stop stupid if it's voluntary.

I agree in theory.

Heh.

Well, I understand why it pisses you off.

... Hmm. Let's take a detour. There's someone I'd like to ask about this, and I think you'd like to meet her.

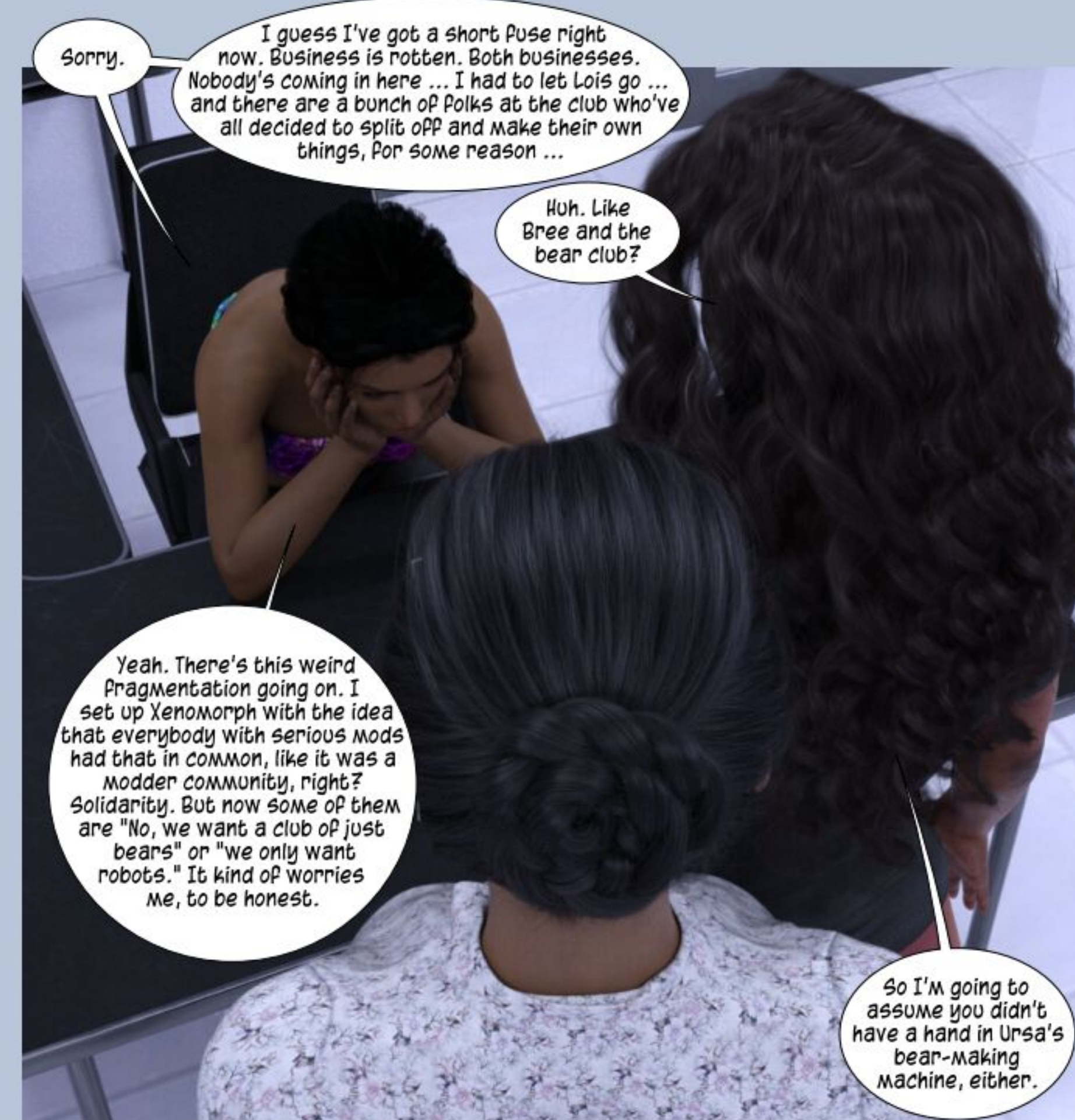


No, I don't know anything about that.

And I resent the way you come to me to ask questions every time you see something dubious on the street ... what kind of person do you think I am?

C'mon, Azu, it's not like that and you know it. I don't think you're evil. But there are, what, Pever than four top-tier algorithmists in A4? Sometimes we have to ask around to figure something out.

AZU RUNS MORPHIC LABS, WHICH GIVES PEOPLE PHYSICAL MODIFICATIONS LIKE ANTLERS OR TENTACLES ... AND ALSO RUNS "XENOMORPH" ACROSS THE STREET, A CLUB FOR PEOPLE WITH MODS ... LIKE ANTLERS OR TENTACLES.



Sorry.

I guess I've got a short fuse right now. Business is rotten. Both businesses. Nobody's coming in here ... I had to let Lois go ... and there are a bunch of Polks at the club who've all decided to split off and make their own things, for some reason ...

Huh. Like Bree and the bear club?

Yeah. There's this weird Pragmatism going on. I set up Xenomorph with the idea that everybody with serious mods had that in common, like it was a modder community, right? Solidarity. But now some of them are "No, we want a club of just bears." or "we only want robots." It kind of worries me, to be honest.

So I'm going to assume you didn't have a hand in Urusa's bear-making machine, either.



No, and here's the other thing ... you know it wouldn't necessarily need an algorithmist, right?

Huh! No, I guess it wouldn't. You'd just need to be strong enough at visualization. The new Euphorics could have somebody who remembered the suits vividly and exactly enough to just manifest new ones that had the same effect.

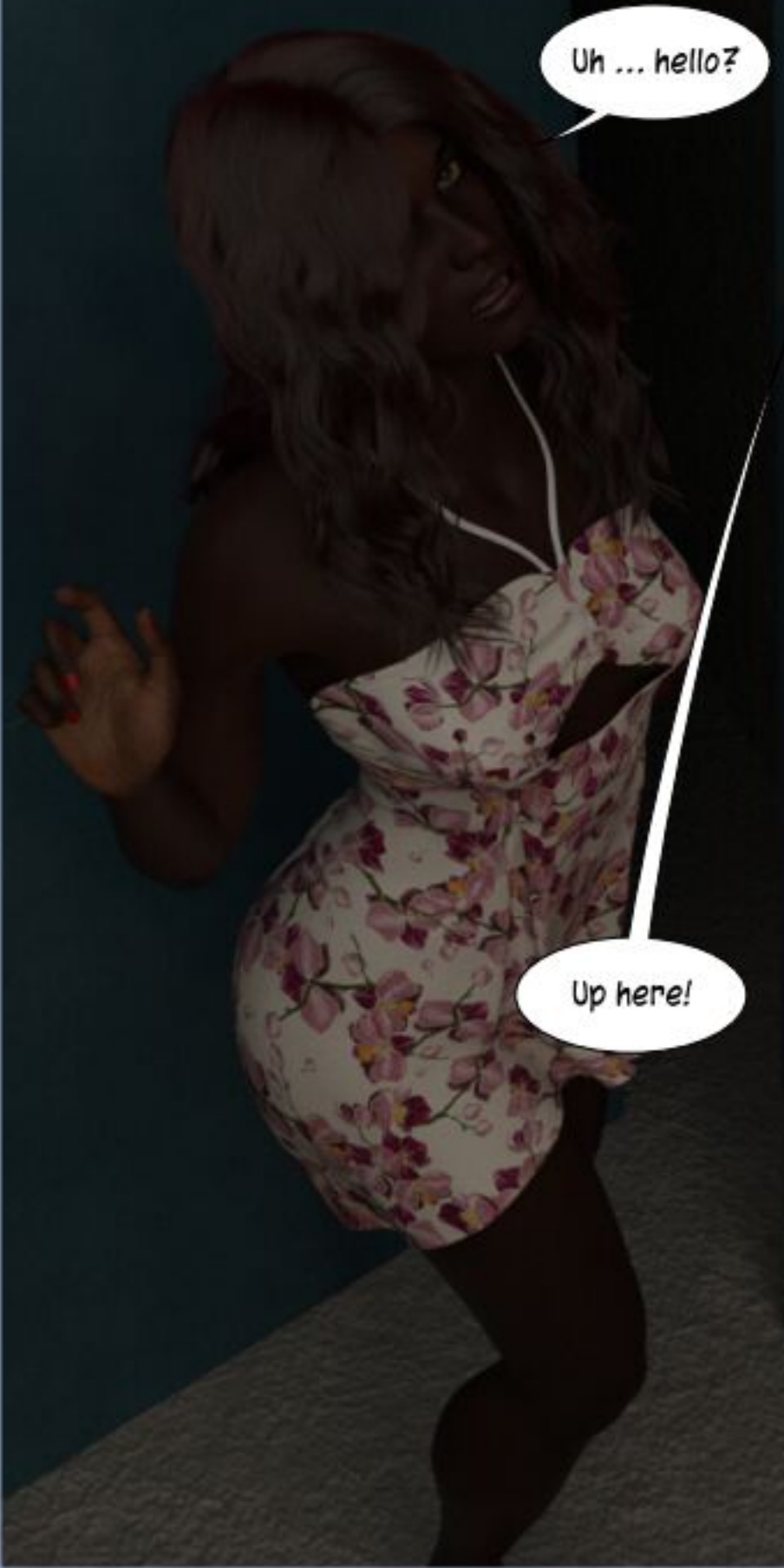
But, hell, manifestation at that level is just as rare as top-tier algorithmists. If not rarer.

Well, that's what I'm getting at.

I wonder if it isn't getting less rare.

Either people are discovering their imaginations, or they're getting better at using what they have.

Or something.



Uh ... hello?

Up here!



I thought we might sit outside. I'm Leah Barker.

Leyna Otis. I was surprised to get your message ...

Jeremy sent word you were asking around and I wanted to see you for myself.

From Serene, eh? Why does Serene want to dig up these particular bones?

Monica. She's a mess. We're trying to help her, and we think solving this might be important somehow.



"Solving" it? What's to solve? Nathaniel killed Judith. This isn't a mystery passive.

You sound really certain of that. Why?

Because, if Monica is telling the truth about what happened -- and Monica is a lousy liar -- then Judith died without anyone laying a finger on her. And the only person who could have set that up, at least in that house, was Nathaniel. He --

I'm sorry.

You have to understand, in my head Nat's still that clever little boy. It's hard to change the way I think of him. Her.

I taught her, you know. At least at the beginning. She went beyond me very quickly.

Nat was fourteen when Judith died. By then, she knew more than enough to do what she'd have needed to do.

And what would that be, exactly?



I don't know what you know about networks.

Some.

All right. Well, it's possible to create a broadcast spot. A loudspeaker, but with no speaker. Rigged in a fixed location, possibly with a trigger to set it off. Say, opening a door. And no one would know it was there; there'd be nothing to see, unless you were doing a very specific kind of scan and knew what to look for.

OK, but Judith wasn't killed by a loud noise ...

It wouldn't have to be that kind of noise. You could broadcast other things. Pain. Ecstasy. Fear.

You think Nathaniel made a trap to scare Judith to death.

More than that, I think he -- sorry -- I think she might have been one of the only people who could. Even at fourteen.



I feel like there's something there that doesn't work, though ...

What's that?

I'm not sure yet. Something bothers me about it, is all.

What bothers me, to this day, is that I'd have been willing to swear Judith was the only person in the world Nat really cared about.

I could see Nat killing Peter, easily. I could see a lot of people killing Peter. Jeremy wanted to.

Yes. Jeremy beat Peter up the night of Judith's death. In fact, while it was happening, best guess. Has he told you that?

Oh, yes. Even now, Jeremy never keeps secrets from me.



"Even now" -- it seems like the two of you have had a falling-out of some kind? Is it the same thing that came between Judith and the two of you? Jeremy mentioned it, but said he didn't know why.



Jeremy is a good person, but he sometimes doesn't think things through if he suspects he won't like the answer.

-- sigh --

Judith caught Jeremy and I having an intimate moment.

She thought it was horribly disrespectful to Rhea's memory. I wonder if she'd have felt the same if she'd caught Jeremy with someone who wasn't me. The man wasn't obliged to hang it up just because his wife died.

And in our case, it was even more ridiculous, because Rhea and I had that relationship with Jeremy long before Judith was born. Long before Rhea and Jeremy married, in fact. He married her because he couldn't marry both of us, and because I wasn't going to have children.

Jeremy and I never had a "falling-out." Once the kids were grown, I just decided it was time to move on. I'd never been interested in any men other than Jeremy, and I wanted to go see about some relationships with women. He understood. It wasn't bitter. We're good friends.



Rhea knew I would be there for him, and the kids. That's why she didn't tell him she had PNA. She knew they were in good hands, and she didn't want it to be a cloud over the limited amount of time they had.

Though, honestly, I'm not sure that was the right decision. Jeremy was more hurt by that than he'll ever admit.

Sometimes I wonder if the Barkers will ever realize they probably shouldn't keep as many secrets from one another as they do.

You're not really in a position to complain about that. Is Leyna your real first name? Why has Serene kept you a secret all these years?



I don't know what you mean --

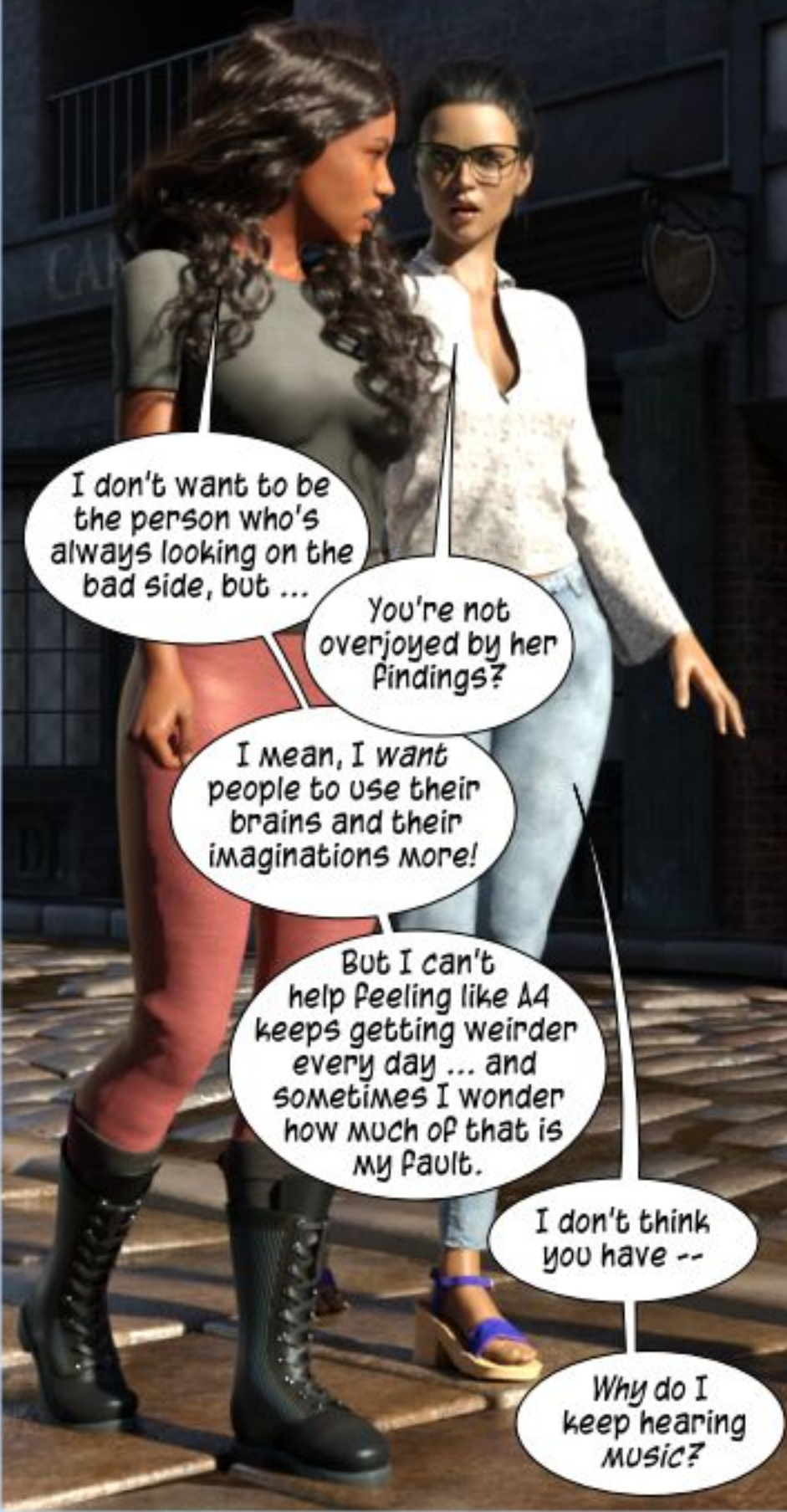
Don't give me that. I knew as soon as I saw you. You look exactly like what I'd expect Samuel and Serene's child to look like.

Serene wouldn't send anyone to look into this but a Barker. This is family business. And who besides a Barker would care about helping Monica?

Mind you, my great-niece needs all the help she can get. I don't think she ever really was the same after her mother's death ... and that happened when she was twelve.

I'm just pointing out that you can't complain about keeping secrets. We always have our reasons.

Yours is safe with me, by the by.



I don't want to be the person who's always looking on the bad side, but ...

You're not overjoyed by her findings?

I mean, I want people to use their brains and their imaginations more!

But I can't help feeling like AA keeps getting weirder every day ... and sometimes I wonder how much of that is my fault.

I don't think you have --

Why do I keep hearing music?



Onward, all! Forward March! One, Two! One, two!



We just Pound your man.

Uh-huh.



Hey! Excuse me ... You, with the wooden hair!

That music ...



I have to march ... march ... the music ...

Oh, no, you don't!

Come back here!



Thanks.

Ruby, that was an area manipulation! That wasn't just mental suggestion ... these people are physically altered.

Yeah, I know. The other two had some physical effects too. Not as obvious as this, but the first one yesterday was a lot stronger. Pulled me in for, I don't know, a couple of hours. I barely noticed this one.

Now you're wondering: If this is Markov's work, is she just really good at spotting people who have manipulation ability, or is she setting off the ability in them even though they never had it before?

... Something like that, yes.

And how it meshes with what Azu told us.



-- sigh --

I guess I'd better go catch up with the drum major and knock some sense into him.

I have a better idea.



Monica?



Get out! Didn't you listen last time? Get out and leave me alone!



Monica ... I know the truth about your mother's death. Don't you want to know?

No ... I don't want to think about that. It hurts ... I don't want to hurt ...

That's why we have to think about it. So it won't hurt anymore.

No ... I don't ...



NO!!

Peter ... the children are watching ...!

Do I look like I give a shit? Let them see. They need to know how fucking useless you are.

They're useless too. You're all worthless. I don't know why the fuck I'm still here.



"He said we were useless, but he was the one who didn't do anything. He insisted on having an "office" in the house. All he ever did was hide in there and watch passives.

"We liked it when he did, though. That meant he wasn't trying to hit us or yell at us. We never went in there, except ... except when ..."



Peter?

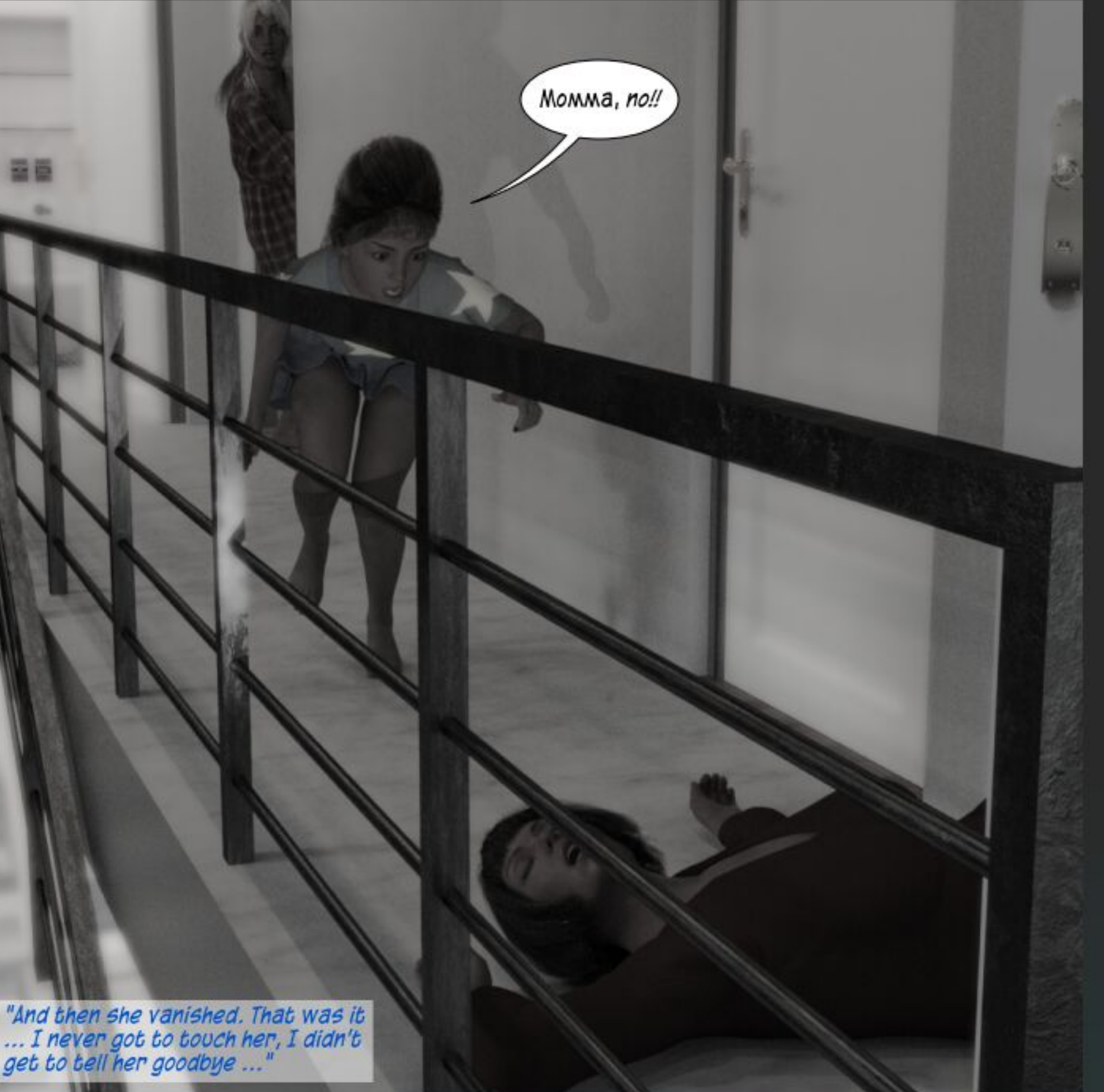
Peter!

Damn it, Peter, are you coming down for dinner or not?



AAAAIII!!

Момма!



Момма, но!!

"And then she vanished. That was it ... I never got to touch her, I didn't get to tell her goodbye ..."



What did you do, Nat?

Monica ... I ... it wasn't

What did you do???



I couldn't prove that Nat killed her. I didn't know what to believe ... I thought Nat loved Momma ... I started peeling like nothing was safe anymore, I couldn't trust anybody ...

Monica ... yes, Nat killed Judith ... but I don't think she intended to.

You yourself said no one went into Peter's office unless they had to. Jeremy said something similar. Why would Nat set a trap to kill your mother on that door?

I didn't stop speaking to Nat, but it wasn't ever the same after that. And less than a year later she went off on her own and I barely saw her from then on.

Nat was trying to kill Peter. Judith opening the door was an accident. What should have happened is Peter would have come home, gone into his office and gotten zapped. But Jeremy decided that was the night to sidetrack Peter and beat the hell out of him. It was all the worst kind of coincidence.



Oh. Oh!

That makes so much sense!

Why didn't any of us figure that out years ago?

I think maybe you were just too close to it to see it.

Also, ah, your family doesn't seem to be really good at communicating with each other.



I mean, it doesn't make everything go away ... and Nat still controlled me twice, like I was just some pawn ...

Those are when I really started to get shook ... and then that Melinda person came along and ... I just wanted to make sure that no one ever did that to me again.

But mostly it was Nat. I didn't want Nat anywhere near me anymore. I still don't.

I guess ... with everything that's happened ... nobody's had a chance to tell you.

I'd have thought one of the family would have, but, like I said: not great communicators.

Nathaniel isn't in sleep anymore. She's been banned.



"You don't ever have to worry about her again."

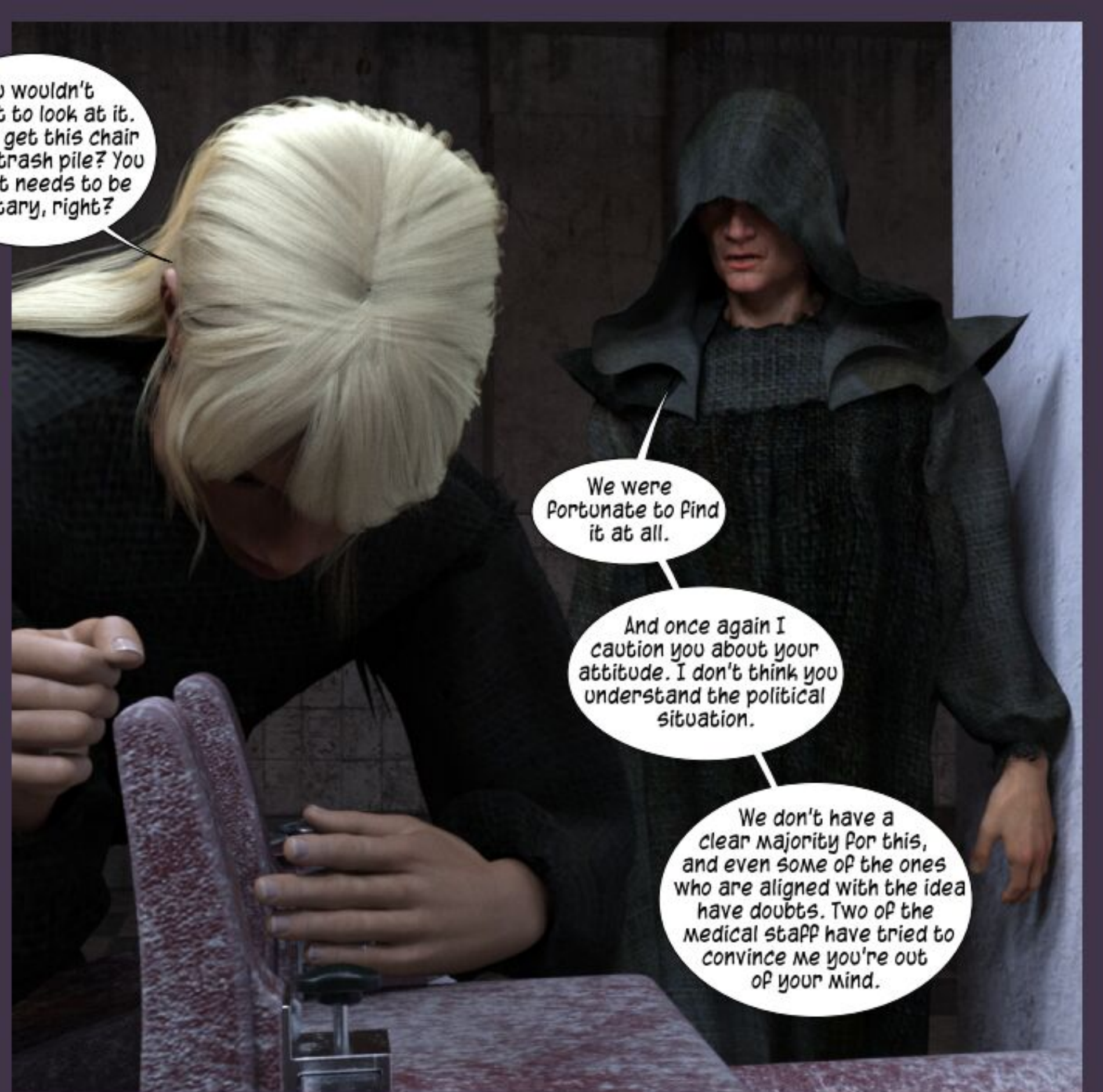
Is everything ready?

That depends on your definitions.

Not an answer that inspires confidence.

I must remind you that we're putting a great deal of faith in your plan. Over several people's objections.

And this equipment took a great deal of time and effort to obtain.



You wouldn't know it to look at it. Did you get this chair from a trash pile? You know it needs to be sanitary, right?

We were fortunate to find it at all.

And once again I caution you about your attitude. I don't think you understand the political situation.

We don't have a clear majority for this, and even some of the ones who are aligned with the idea have doubts. Two of the medical staff have tried to convince me you're out of your mind.



I'm a lot of things, but not that. It will work, as long as the people we've discussed are still willing to assist me.

And the equipment is ... good enough.

All I'm waiting on now is for you to find me a volunteer.

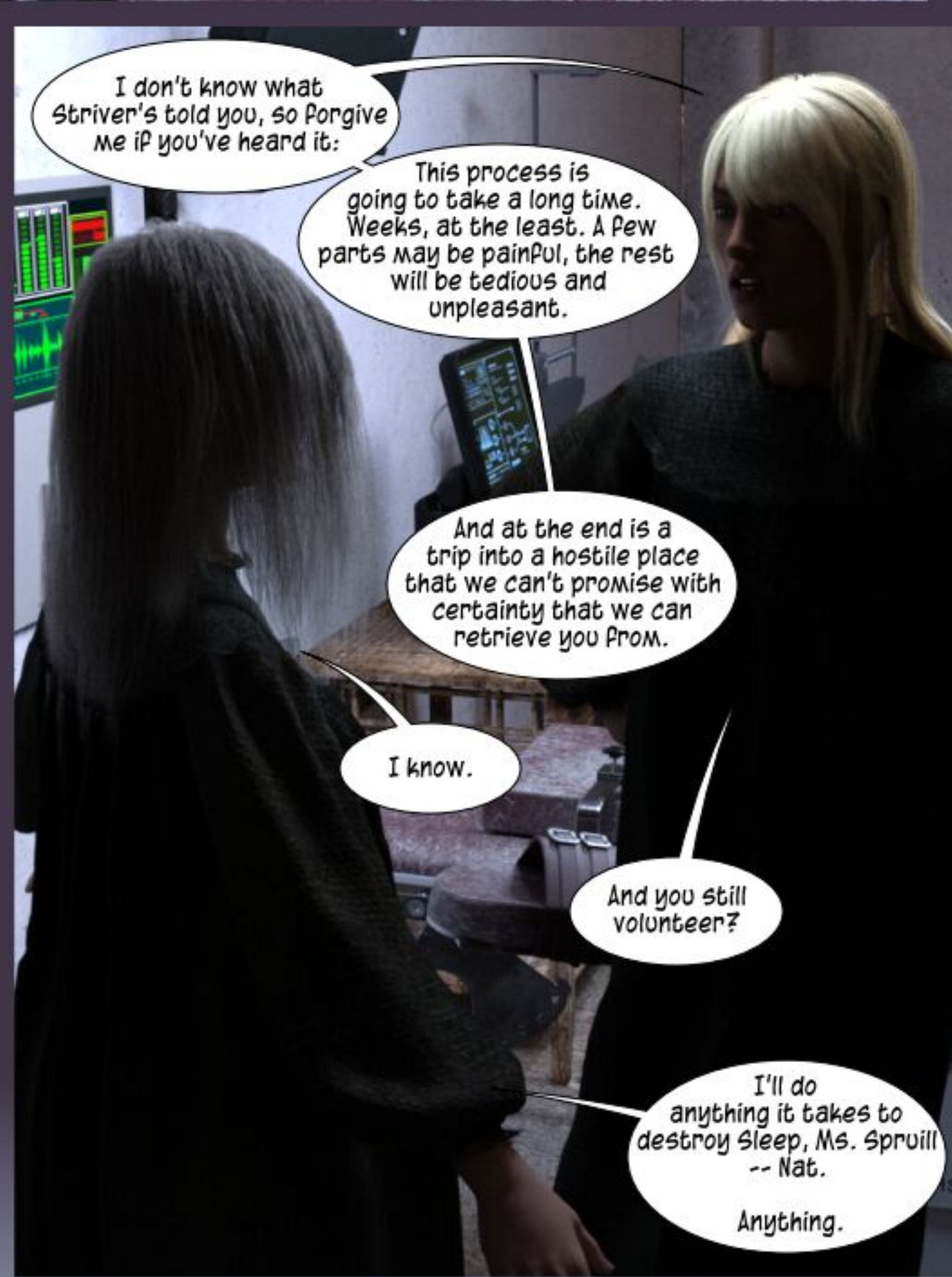


That's actually why I'm here. This is Sharl.

Sharl, this is Nat Spruill.

Ms. Spruill.

Just call me Nat.



I don't know what Striver's told you, so Porgive me if you've heard it:

This process is going to take a long time. Weeks, at the least. A few parts may be painful, the rest will be tedious and unpleasant.

And at the end is a trip into a hostile place that we can't promise with certainty that we can retrieve you from.

I know.

And you still volunteer?

I'll do anything it takes to destroy sleep, Ms. Spruill -- Nat. Anything.



And you think he's one of my patients?

Mm-hm. Frederic Wood.

Oh!

Something just make sense?

One, two! One, two!

Frederic wanted to "lead people into something." That's how he put it.

Huh. Wonder if he realized this was what he was going to get.

Anyway ... I fixed the other two yesterday. This time, I think you should clean up your own mess.

Go set him straight.



But ... given what you've told me ... what if I get pulled into the effect?

Then I'll come pull you back out.

But I don't think you will be.

You're his Mentor.



Frederic!

Frederic, stop!

This isn't how it's supposed to be!



march ... march ... march ...

Frederic!!



... Ms. Markov?

What on earth is going on?

And why am I wearing this uniform?

???



You can come out now! Everybody's gone.



Markov was surprised, remorseful, and apologetic.

I mean, I'm sure she's a good liar, but I really think she had no idea this would happen.

If you're trying to change my opinion of her, forget it.

So, still no guilt about turning her into a rat?

Neither of us believes much in guilt. And I thought I'd convinced you that what she was doing to people -- last time, at least -- was actually and deliberately bad.

No, I buy that part, but I'm still not sure that the rat thing wasn't too severe a punishment.

Hmm. We should work this out, because I do wonder what you're going to do when you eventually find Melinda Shannon.

You may recall my misgivings when you had me make that isolation hood for Nathaniel Barker. Then you exiled her from sleep, and made her even more dangerous.

* SS #7 - T



I recognize that you're reluctant to pass judgement on people, though you're not as reluctant to be the enforcer in the first place ...

You really think we made Nathaniel worse?

I'd be very surprised if Nathaniel wasn't plotting some kind of catastrophic revenge right this instant. What resources she can find awake to do it is another question.

I agree turning Markov and the others into rats wasn't pleasant, but it removed any possibility of their making further trouble ... I admit I didn't think it would do the sort of long-term mental damage it did ...

But I refuse to feel much remorse even about that, because I contend -- and will continue to -- that they deserved everything they got.

So, no. I don't feel one damned bit of guilt about Mina Markov.



TWO DAYS LATER.

I didn't intend for the patrol to get out of hand the way it did. I just wanted to try to do something to protect everyone from people like Melinda. I didn't tell any of you because I knew Josiah would throw a fit.

I'm sorry I made such a mess.

I'm just glad you're back among us again. And not only because we need you in this internal fight.

About that ...

Look, I'm not sympathetic to Brendan, OK? I never liked him anyway. And I've made it clear to him that I'm not out of my mind, my shares are not vacated, and he doesn't have my support.

But ... I don't think I can participate in the battle. Not right now. Not yet.



You know, I looked in the mirror this morning and realized that I picked this hairstyle because it's the way Momma wore hers. I've been wearing my hair like this since I was fifteen and that never occurred to me.

I feel like something's been taken off me ... like a rock holding me down ... but now that the rock is gone, I'm realizing I have no idea what was underneath it.

I don't know if that makes any sense.

No, I understand.

I'm not going to vanish again. I want you to keep me up to date on what happens. If you really need me, I'll participate.

But ... I need some time. To figure things out.



So all of that gained us nothing.

Ah, c'mon, Serene. At least she's communicating again, and she's on our side. That's something.

Twenty-some years of refusing to deal with grief surely creates a whole lot of mental constipation.

-- Sigh --

Not sure it matters anyway. We wouldn't be able to get a quorum if we did want to vote on anything. And Clayton and Brendan know it. They've stopped even pretending to care about the rules.



On the other hand, maybe that's our hint that it's time to play by new rules.

I mean, let's think shady for a second. No holds barred. What can we do to mess with those two? Something they'll actually notice.

Funny you should say that. I had an idea a couple of days ago, but it's ...

Well, put it this way. We can't even think about it until Pauline comes back from wherever she's hiding.

So it's big, huh?

Oh, yeah. It's big.

NEXT: MULTIFARIOUS MISCHIEF (MAYBE MELINDA?) ALSO: SERENE'S SURPRISING SHAKEUP SCHEME!