

IN A TINY CORNER BAR, RUBY AND TRISH DISCUSS THE PASSIVE THEY'VE AGREED TO DO AS A JOINT PROJECT.



I still like the detective idea, but I think it needs a wrinkle.

I don't think I can do aliens again yet ... after the Krath passive, people will say that's all I know how to do ... but we need something to weird it up, y'know?



What do you think about robots?

It'll throw people off guard, which I like, and there seems to be a lot of interest in robot sex ...

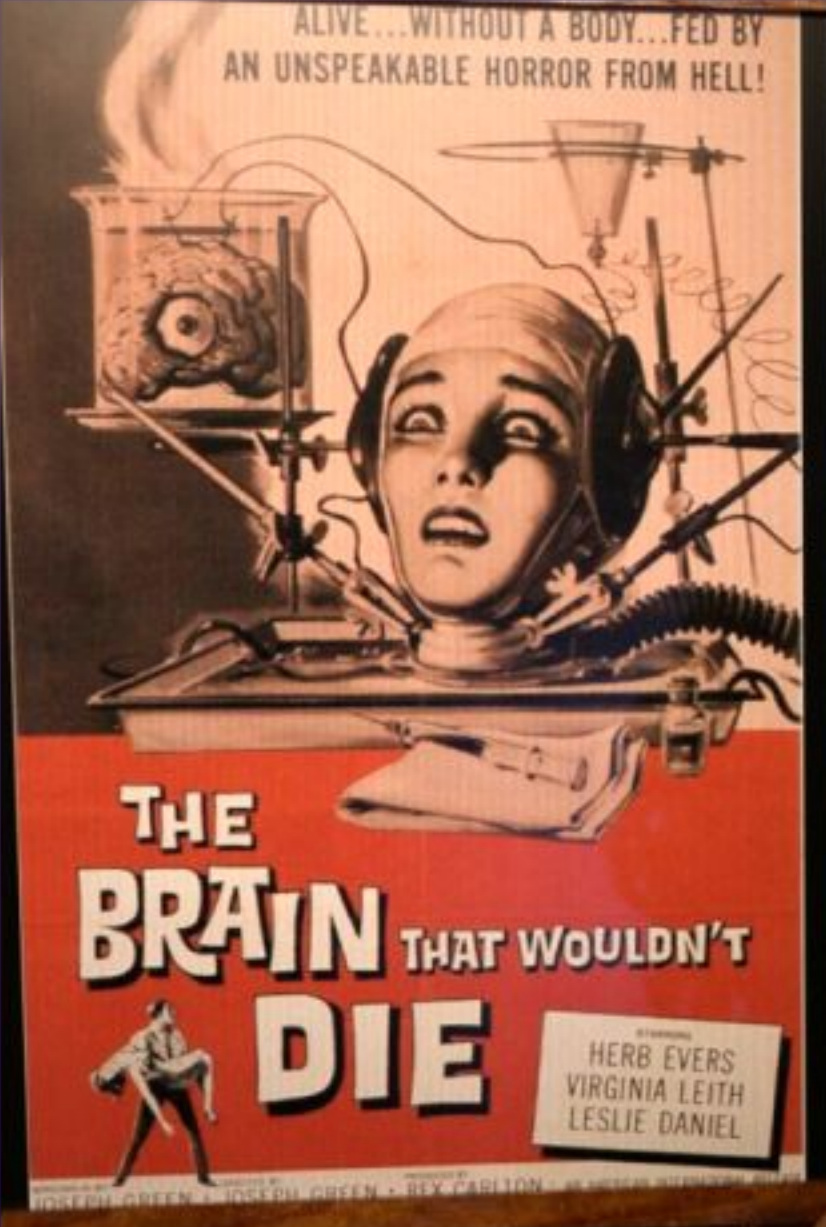
Of course, the costuming might be a little --

OWWWW!!

Did you just hit me with a dart???

You know, if you can't throw well enough to even hit the wall, you probably shouldn't --

shouldn't -- uhhh



Trish? Are you OK?

Oh, yeah ... I'm fine ... I just ...

I just ...

I just Peel really weird all of a sudden ...

I ... **ahhhhh!!!**

Trish!!



-- hhhh --

Ow!
Hey!
Why are you throwing darts at us?



AAA!

-- hhhh --



-- hhhh --

-- hhhh --

-- hhhh --

-- hhhh --





Hold her down, pets!

Keep her still so I can change her. She'll be one of you soon.

Hmm ...

Maybe I should let you play with her a little first?



That would almost sound like fun if I were in the mood.

And if they weren't so ... pointy.

And I don't think giving in is the right choice in this particular little scene ...



Sorry, Trish.

raaaa

AWAY

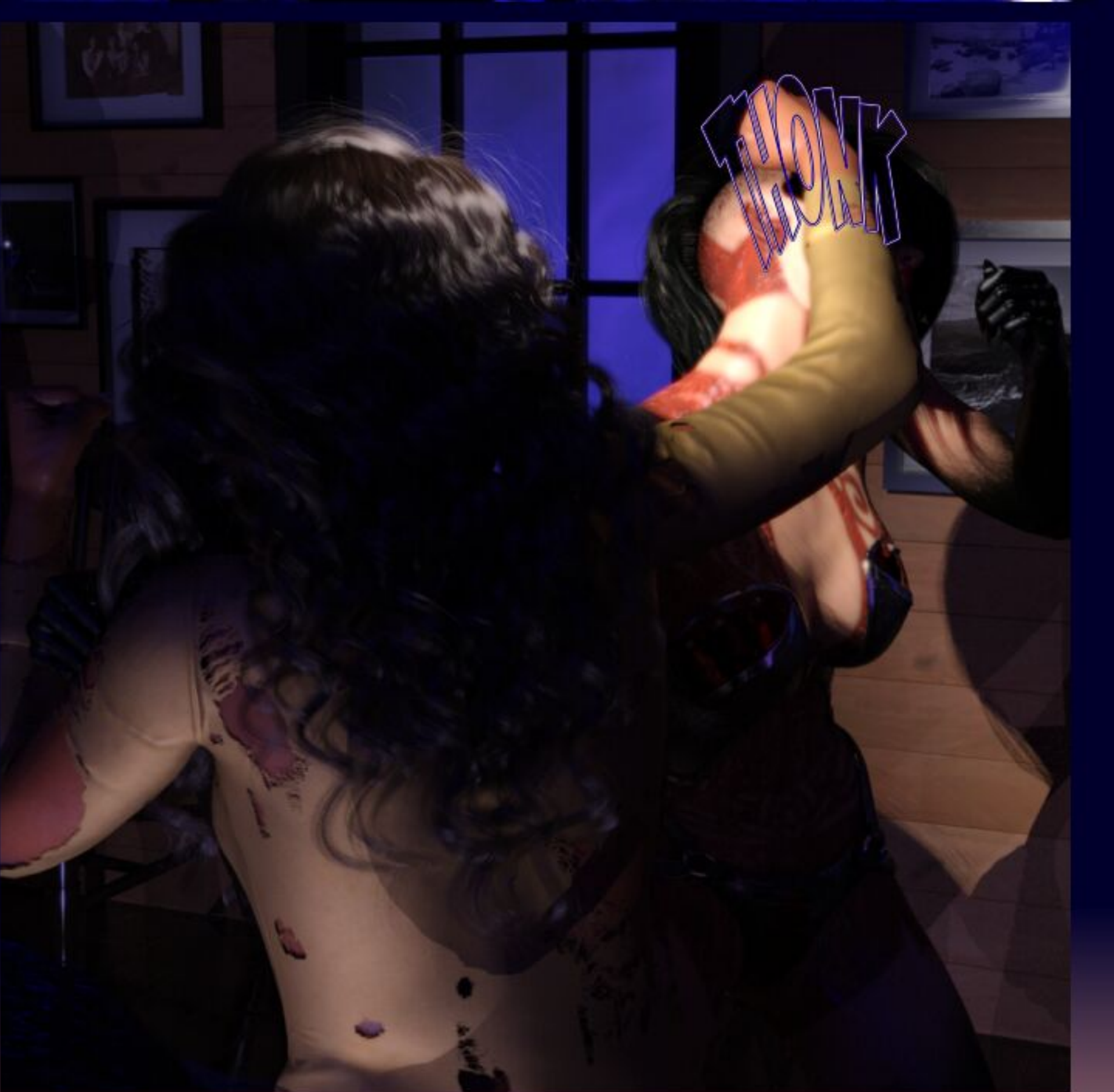


Always easier when it's obvious who's directing ...

Keep back!

Pets! Depend me!

urr!



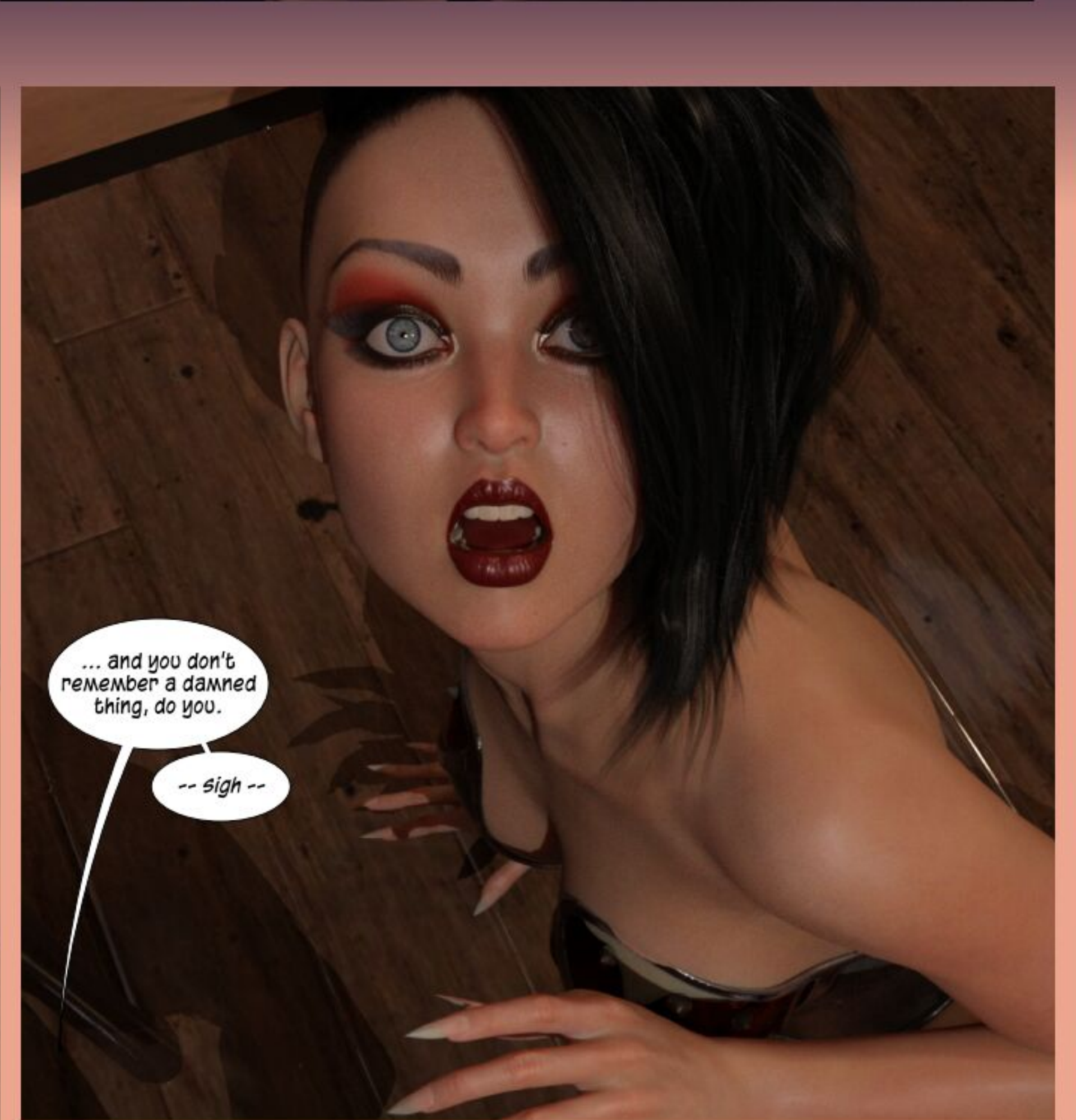
THUNK



Now ...

Let's have some answers. Who are you? Why did you do this? Did someone ask you to do it, or make you do it? Who? And ...

OK, do I even want to know what just happened?



... and you don't remember a damned thing, do you.

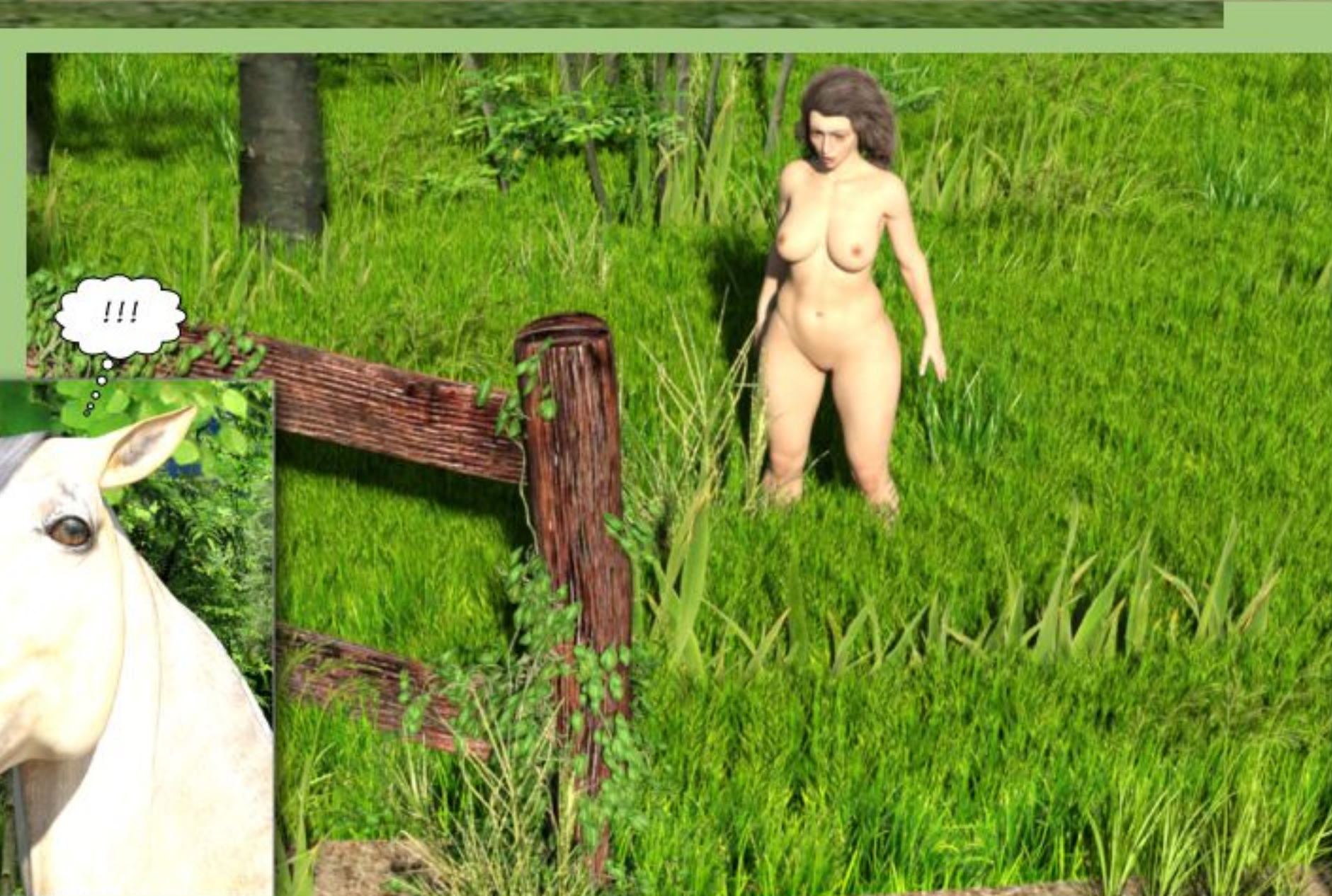
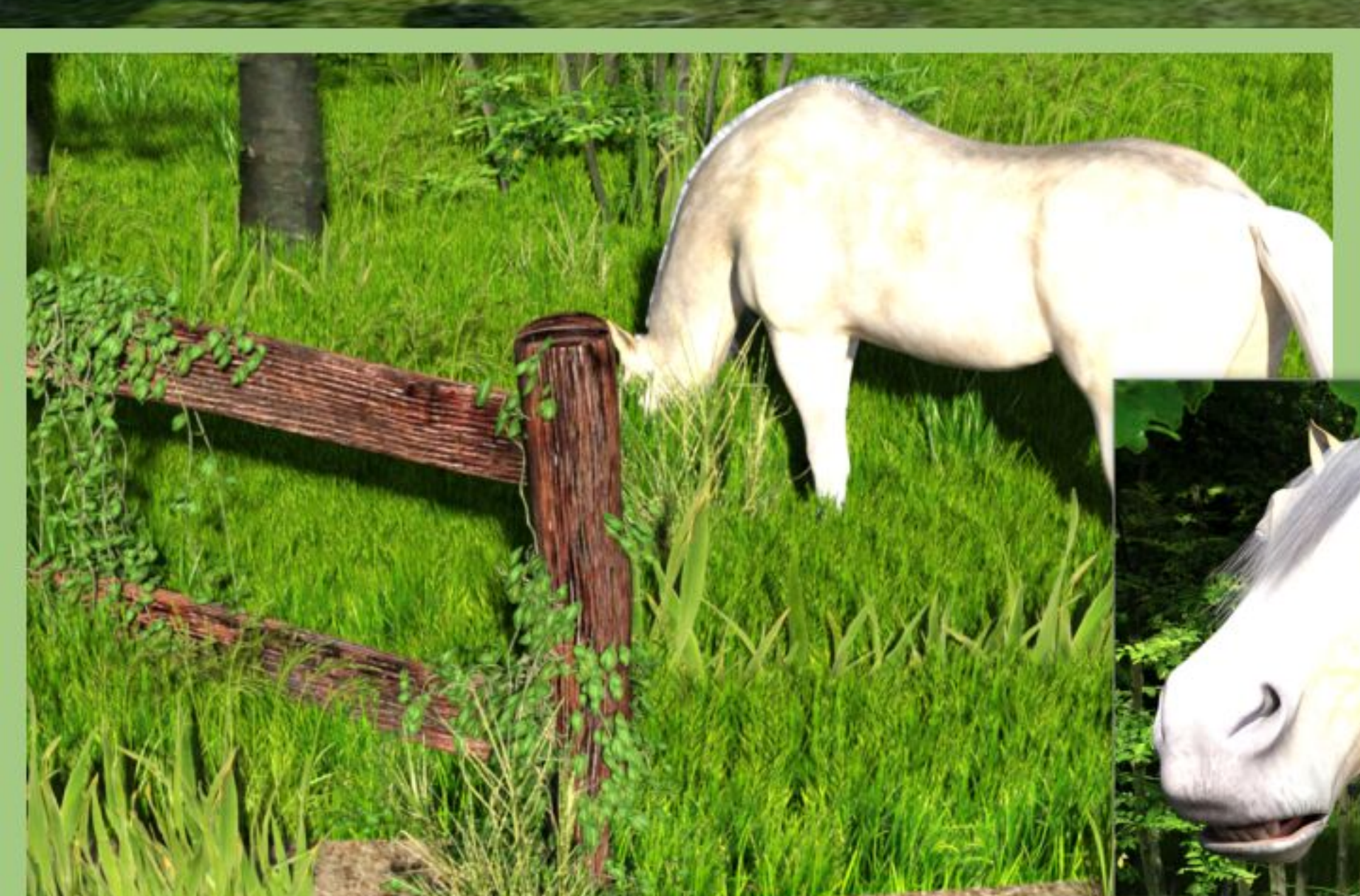
-- Sigh --



Ooh, that was nice!

Did you have fun too? I hope so.

Take a little while to cool down, then I'll get you some dinner.



!!!



You know, I probably shouldn't, but part of me hopes nobody claims you. I've really ...

I guess I've needed something. It's been a long time since Rita ... I don't know ...

It sounds so stupid ... talking to a horse because you're ... what, lonely? Bored? Not even a real horse!

But I've really liked this ... I know that much ...



Er ... hello.

Aaa!

Who are you? Where'd you come from?

... I'm ...

... well, I'm the horse.

You're ...

You've been a person all this time? And you didn't let on? Is this some kind of perversion?

It's not like that! I didn't have any control over it. I didn't change into a horse on purpose, and I didn't know how to change back ... I still don't ...



I told you things! Things I wouldn't have ...

I think you need to leave now.

I'm leaving. I'm sorry.

But ... thank you. For taking care of me. I appreciate it.

I guess my mind doesn't work exactly the same way when I'm a horse, so it's all a little hazy, but I know I did enjoy it.

For what it's worth.



So another Barker gets to know what I look like? What happened to "incognito unless absolutely necessary?"

Lucius is OK. Don't worry.

Maybe so, but somebody should have asked me first.

RUBY DOESN'T KNOW THAT LUCIUS ALREADY KNOWS WHAT SHE LOOKS LIKE, BECAUSE LUCIUS HAS MET HER WHILE IN "GORAZON" GUISE. OF COURSE, RUBY HAS NO IDEA GORAZON IS LUCIUS. LUCIUS AND SERENE ARE KEEPING THAT ENTIRELY TO THEMSELVES ... SO FAR. -T



Ruby, you haven't met Lucius before. I'm going to let him do the talking ... He's the one who's been dealing most directly with the problem we have right now.



The problem is that Brendan and Clayton are running a campaign of intimidation and physical violence, even in places they don't have any control over. They don't care about the rules, and they're causing a lot of fear and pain.

I hate to say it, but we need to fight them on their terms. We need to get out and approach people one-by-one, to counter what they're doing. This is going to take a lot of ...

No.



Sorry?

No, I am not going to help you. You can stop right there.

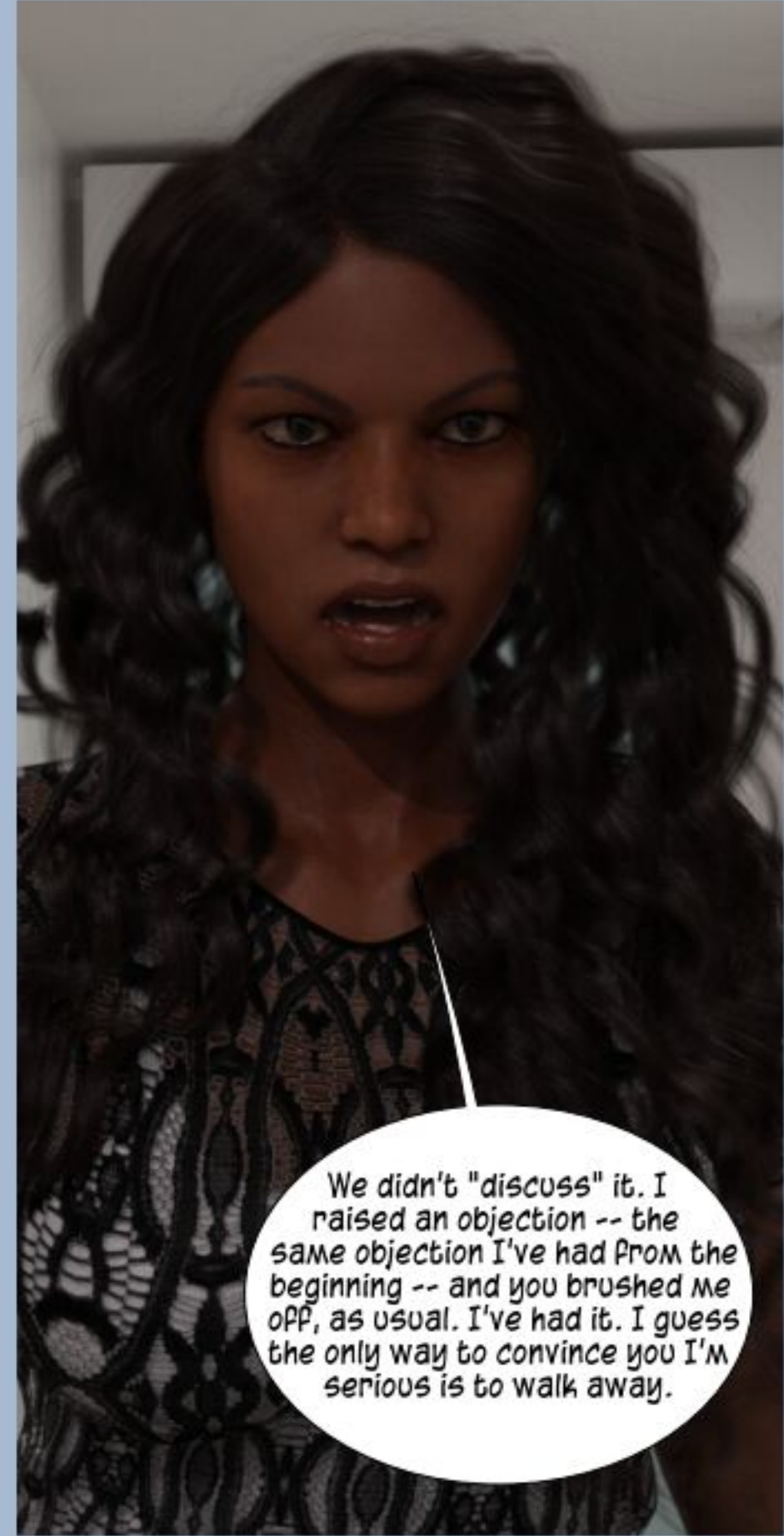
I am not your Pinkerton. I'm not here to service the money. I signed on to help deal with actual threats. Threats to all of A4. Not things Barkers find inconvenient.

You don't think getting a shakedown from Clayton counts to people as a threat?



Ruby, we discussed this! This is about preventing harm ...

*MOST RECENTLY, TWO ISSUES AGO. -T



We didn't "discuss" it. I raised an objection -- the same objection I've had from the beginning -- and you brushed me off, as usual. I've had it. I guess the only way to convince you I'm serious is to walk away.



I've already got people asking me why I help you, why I'm supporting you, how can I live with myself, and I'm tired of not having a good answer for them.

That's what most of the people in A4 think of you. I know you think you're the good guys and the others are the bad guys, but to everybody else, there are no good Barkers. Because you're all Barkers.

So you fight off Clayton and Brendan's nasties. So what? So that everybody can go back to the system designed to keep them in debt to you forever, the system where they have to bust their ass constantly just to stay here?

Your way isn't all that much better than their way. You're just more polite about it.

Serene, Leyna ... you know I like you personally, and I'm happy to help you with the next manipulator or mind-controller or whatever.

But that's as far as I go.

You know how to reach me.



So much for that supposedly reliable resource.

That's uncalled-for.

Well, what do you want? Serene kept telling me how much we were going to need her help, and now --

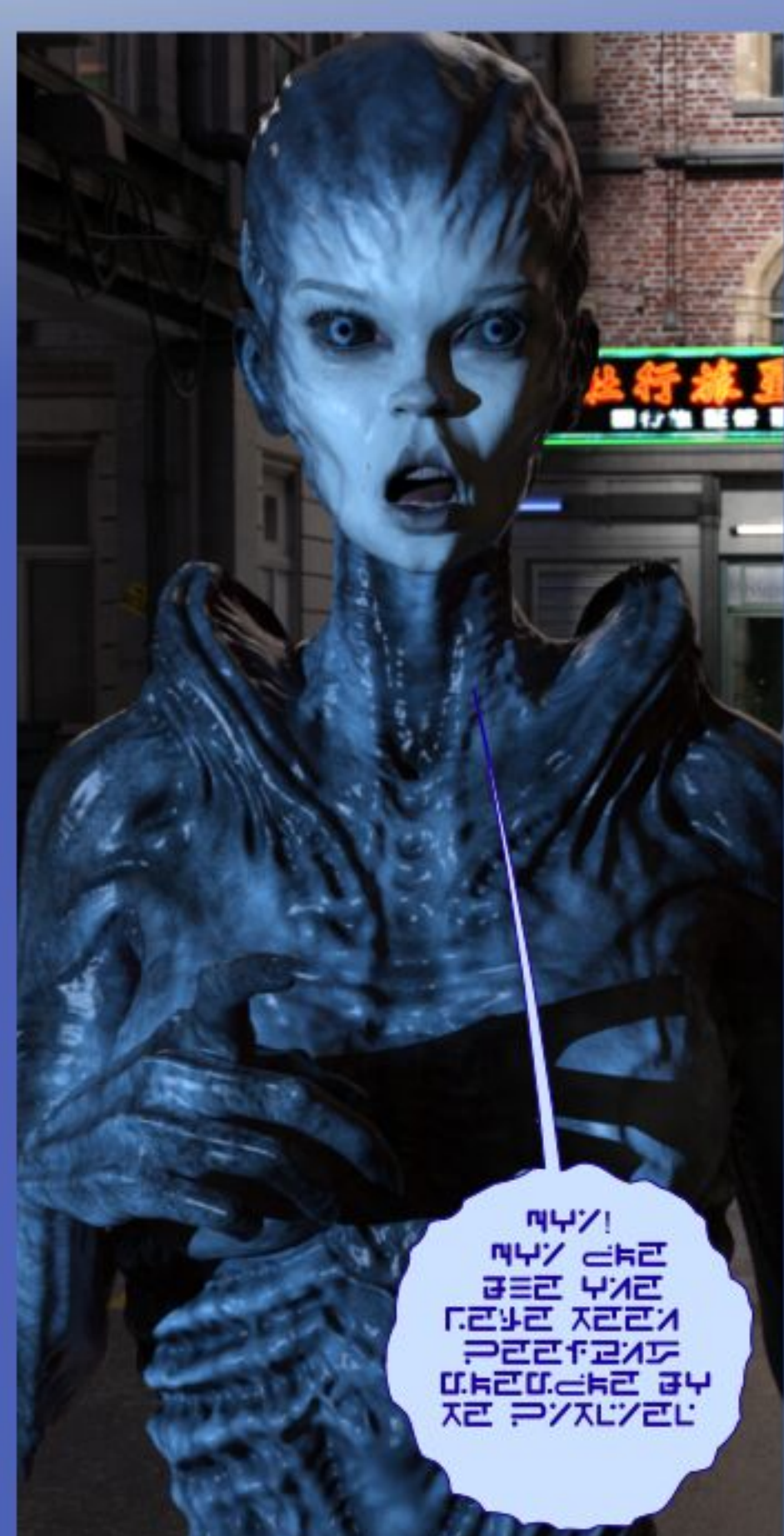
... she has a point, Lucius.

Serene...?



grrr Barker bullshit razzm Prazzm

Wait, what?

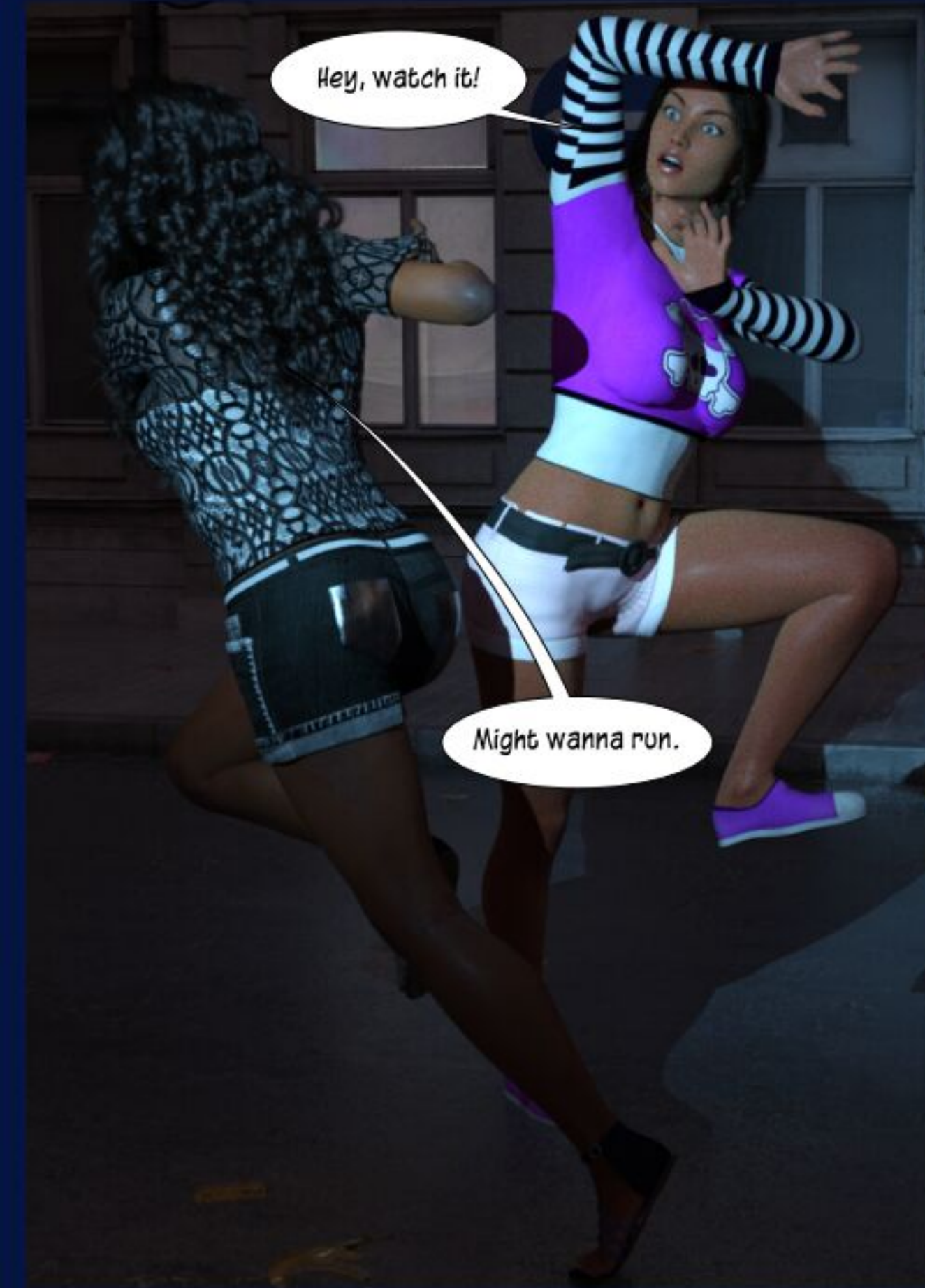


Wait, what?



I wonder what the exact moment was when I lost control of my life.

무엇이든 저에게 물어주세요!



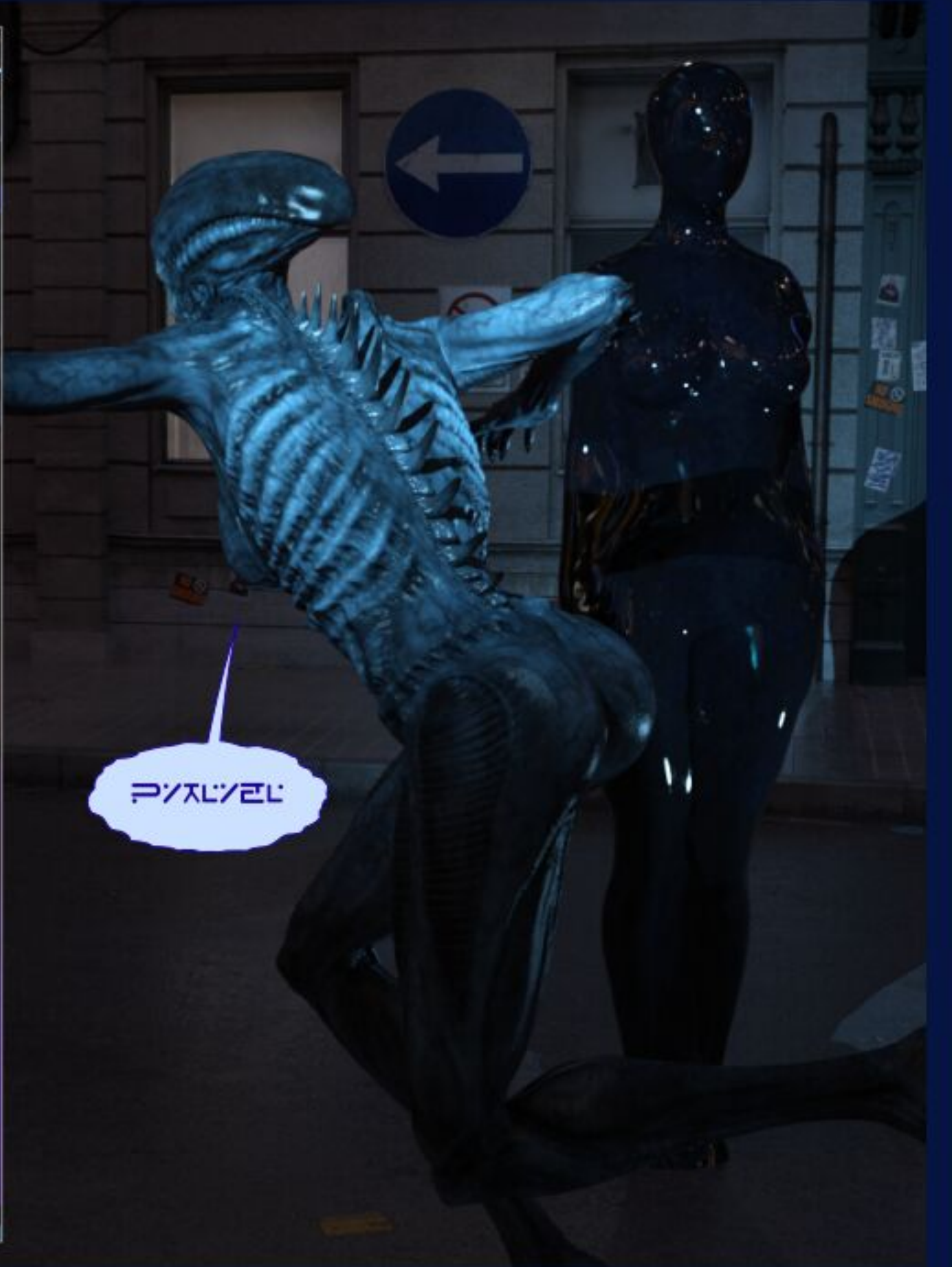
Hey, watch it!

Might wanna run.



SPUNK

aaahgrblbg



PYXLVZL



Ruby.

AAAAA!



Sorry! Didn't mean to startle you.

What is all this? Is it yours?

No, it's not mine ... I think it may be aimed at me, though ...



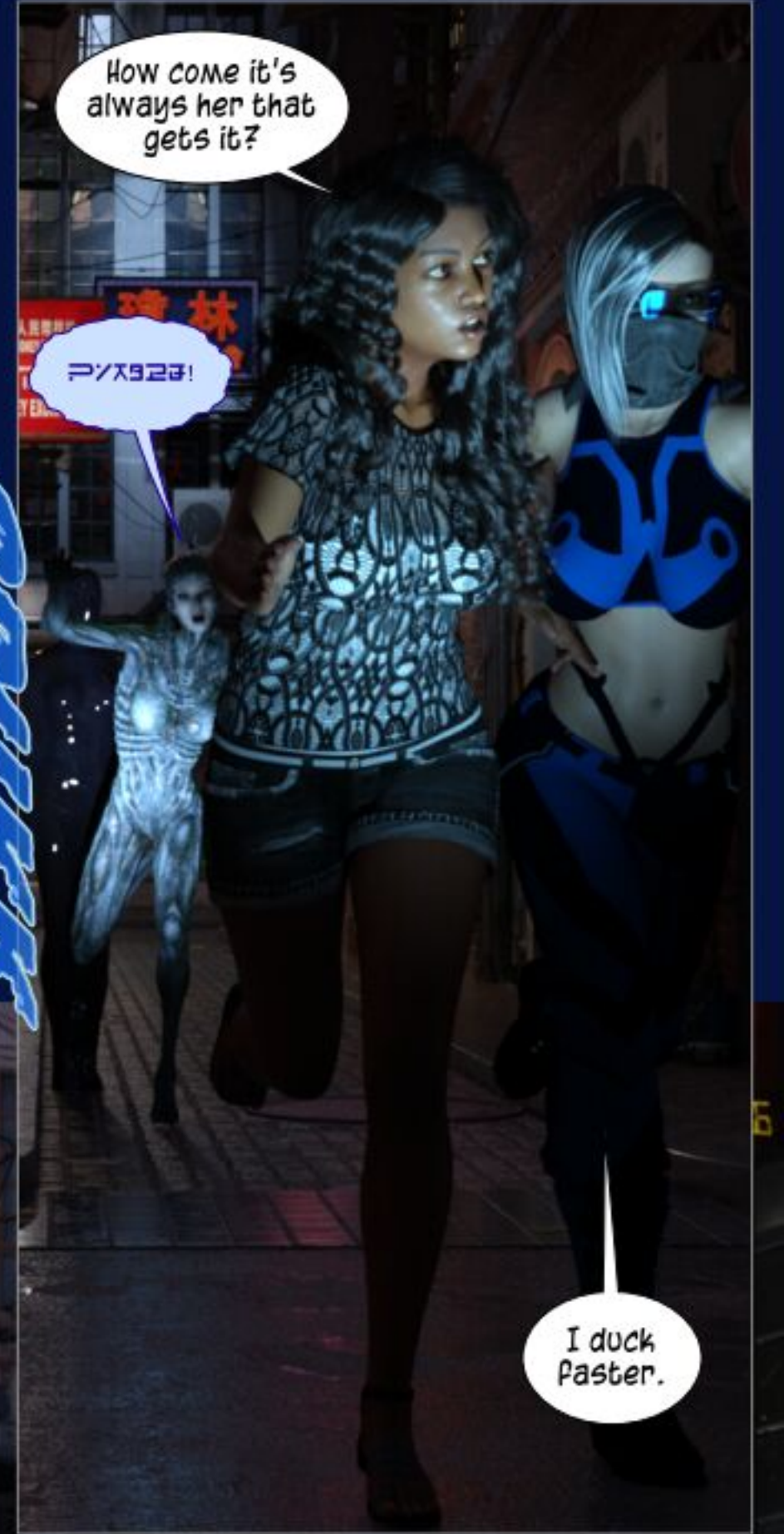
I can probably shut it down, if we can figure out who's actually the person causing it.

And if we can avoid getting coated in alien spit until we do.



"Alien spit"?

Gina, look out!



How come it's always her that gets it?

PYXZB!

I duck Paster.



They're making new ones. This could get out of control real fast.

aghi

SPUNK

무엇이든 저에게 물어주세요!

Don't worry. I just located the culprit.



How do you know?

He's the only one they're not trying to convert.

Also, I've seen him before.

If we can make it around the block we can come up behind him.



Hey, Matt.



Twice is two times too many, Matt. Why are you doing this?

I'm not! I mean ... She's making me do it!

Who is "she"?

I ... I'm not sure. I can't remember!

Well, you had better try hard to remember so you can avoid her. Because if I find you making trouble like this one more time, I'm going to start breaking things. Body parts. On you. Get me?



You think he's telling the truth?

It matches the pattern. These people are being controlled, just as much as the people they suck into their scenes. No, more.

The thing is, Matt's got no imagination. The first time, he tried to control me by hijacking a scenario I'd written for him. This time, he used the creatures from that same scenario. He couldn't come up with anything on his own, see?

So here's this dude with no imagination and no ability, and yet he's making a full-scale manifestation, that changes bystanders, the environment ... how is that possible? That worries me.

Unless ... he can do it because whoever controlled him told him he could do it. Which is even scarier.

Come on, let's go check on Gina.

* SS #21 -T



You are here! Where have you been?

I did reply to your messages as soon as I could ...

You've been missing for days! No one knew where you were! You can't just disappear like that!



I didn't do it on purpose, I promise. I was ... somewhere I couldn't send a message.

You were in trouble.

No ... no, I wouldn't say that. But it was unexpected, and, ah, I couldn't come back easily ...

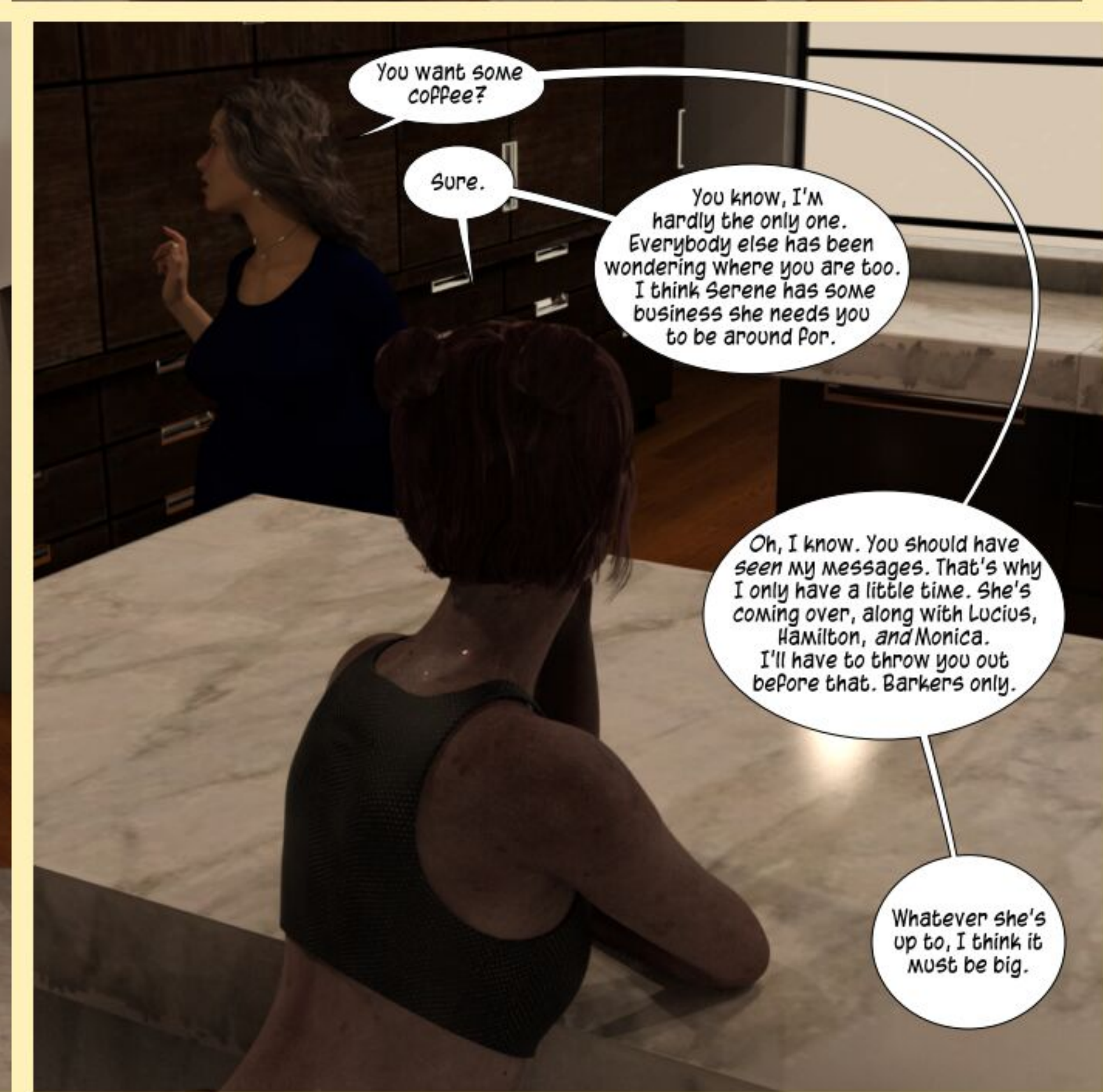
That's not good enough, is it ... no, I can see it isn't.



I was getting really worried!

I'm sorry, dear. You know I'd never want to do that.

Look, I've got a little time. I'll try to explain. But ... please don't tell anyone else, all right?



You want some coffee?

Sure.

You know, I'm hardly the only one. Everybody else has been wondering where you are too. I think Serene has some business she needs you to be around for.

Oh, I know. You should have seen my messages. That's why I only have a little time. She's coming over, along with Lucius, Hamilton, and Monica. I'll have to throw you out before that. Barkers only.

Whatever she's up to, I think it must be big.



You're serious?

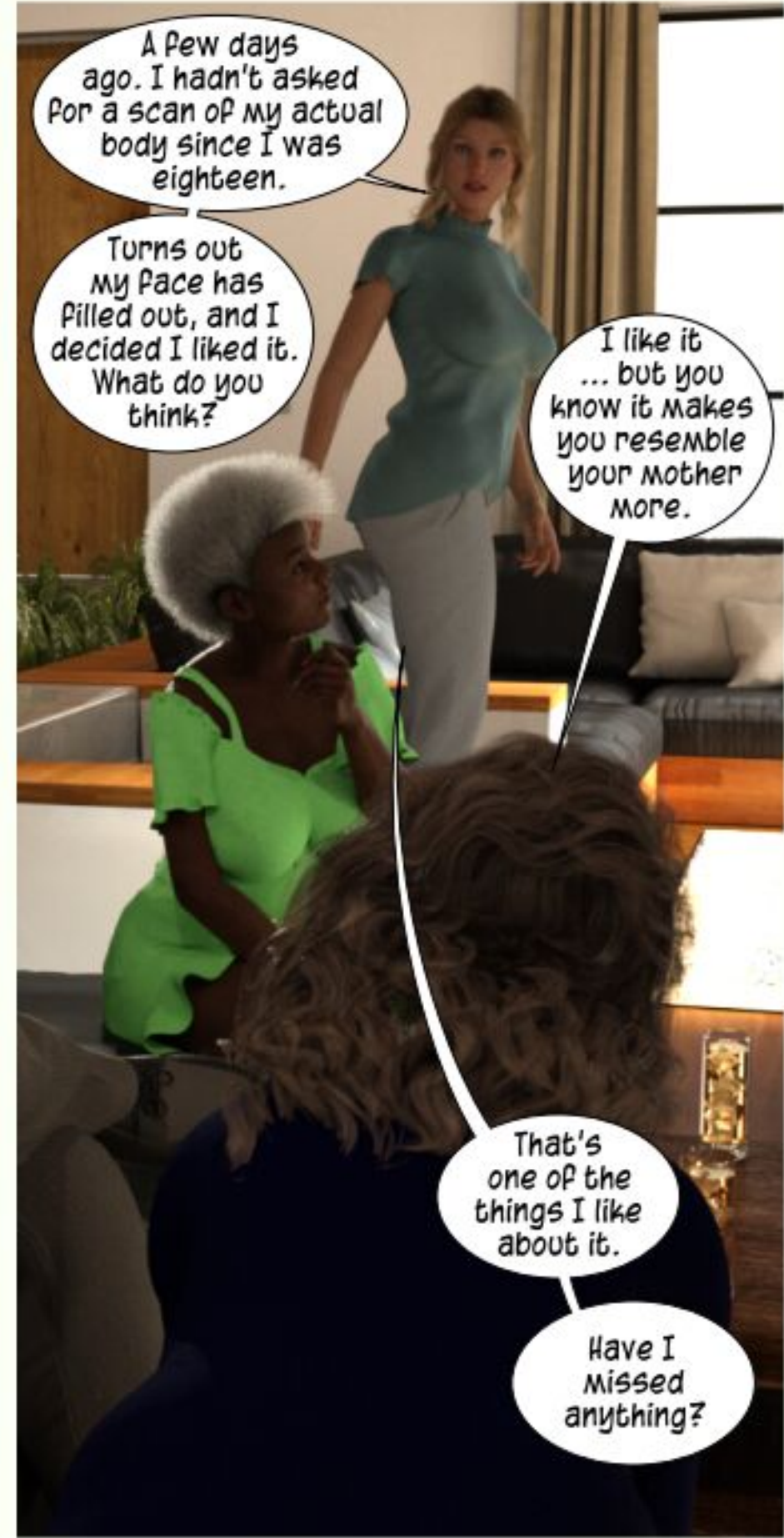
I am. I've given it a lot of thought, and it just keeps --



Hello, everybody! Sorry I'm late.

Monica??

When did you change your look?



A few days ago. I hadn't asked for a scan of my actual body since I was eighteen.

Turns out my face has filled out, and I decided I liked it. What do you think?

I like it ... but you know it makes you resemble your mother more.

That's one of the things I like about it.

Have I missed anything?



Only Serene proposing that we completely end bed fees and data rents.

Wow, that's ... uh ... Isn't that a little ... extreme?



More than a little. Completely.

But somebody pointed out that we don't actually offer much of a difference from Brendan and Clayton's methods. The public just sees it as being perpetually beholden to us, either way.

And, honestly, I've been thinking about this for months now. There are so many problems with sleep that end up coming back to the damned bed fees ...

OK, but you're asking the Barkers to give up everything ...

I'm not, though.



Look, what are you doing with the money? Not one of us has left sleep in who knows how long, and what do we do with it in here? Buy entertainment ... You have enough cash on hand to buy anything in here you want for the rest of your life.

And as for investments and costs ... what happens if we need another server stack or another five hundred beds? I'll tell you what happens: We put in an order at our automated construction facility for another five hundred beds.

They contact our automated bioplastics farms or our automated resource warehouses for the materials, and maybe contact our automated excavation team to hollow out more land below Chicago ... maybe contact our robotics facilities to make another couple of bedders ...

... and the infrastructure expands without any of us actually paying for any of it, because money is totally irrelevant to us, and has been for a long time.

We don't have to pay; we already own all of it. Every damned bit.

And if we had to deal with one of the other facilities, we'd still have so much money from our non-sleep operations that it wouldn't be a problem unless we expanded relentlessly for a long, long time.

We're not giving up our holdings. We're not giving up ownership. We're not really even giving up any power. We're just recognizing that we are no longer dependent on that constant stream of rent.



OK, but Brendan will see you in hell before he agrees with that point of view. He doesn't believe there is such a thing as enough.



Funny thing: Once upon a time, your shares weren't just a percentage of all holdings. They actually mapped to sleep beds. If you had 5%, there were 5% of the beds designated as being explicitly under your control.

Years before you were born, there were some administrative reasons to break that connection. Mostly having to do with the way sleep properties chained to common areas.

Point is, nowadays, who controls beds has absolutely nothing to do with your shares. You still get your percentage, but you could get it without administering any actual beds.

Which means we could go to people and say "Hey, if we can change your bed to our control, you won't have to pay fees anymore." And this can be done on consent of the sleeper alone.

... Huh. Does Brendan know that?

If he doesn't, he will soon.



Well, you didn't have to throw in Brendan having apoplexy to sweeten the pot; I was already sold.

I'm just saying ... this isn't going to end our little civil war. It might make it worse.

For a while, yes. They'll fight us tooth and nail.

But it'll end it eventually through attrition. Everybody will want to come to us. Who wants to pay for something if they don't have to?

And I think it's the only thing that will end the fight. Even if it'll be rough getting there.

THE AWAKE "COMA WARD," WHERE DR. CHAPMAN IS ATTEMPTING TO REPAIR A DWINDLING NUMBER OF CATATONIC PATIENTS.



Anybody home?

Looks abandoned in here ...



No active patients right now.

No wig today?

So you're lying here in the dark?

Too tired to deal with it. Don't change the subject.

What's wrong?

I released Ben Cobermayer yesterday.* That means there's only one patient left. Constance Forbes.

Which one's that?

The one who didn't respond well to my sleep-deprivation experiment? Who somehow caused the discontinuity that nearly consumed A4 and still has lingering effects?*** Constance Forbes?

Oh. You know, you never did tell us her real name. Sorry.

She's the only one of the lot I Peel a personal obligation to help, and she's also the one I worry the most about restoring.

Hmm. You Peel guilty about her, don't you?

... Yes. I maintain those experiments served an important purpose. I'd like to resume them. But not if I can't guarantee that something like that wouldn't happen. It wasn't supposed to happen. There were supposed to be safeguards!

* COBERMAYER GOT ERASED BY MELINDA, WHO WAS TRYING TO COVER HER TRACKS, BACK IN ISSUE #5. -T
** ISSUES 14-16 ... AND BEYOND. -T



Well, for what it's worth, I think the worry is more justified than the guilt. You didn't know she'd explode.

Yeah, we do have an obligation to try to fix her ... but be careful. Bring me in if you need to, or any other safeguards. Put CLO on high alert.

Thanks.

Usually it's me doing the psychological consulting ...

If you want to consult, you could tell me that I'm justified in telling the Barkers that I'm not helping them. Fight their civil war.

Though I know you wouldn't just tell me what I want to hear.

Of course not. But here it wouldn't matter, since it sounds like you've made the decision firmly.

However -- for what it's worth -- I do think that's the right choice for you. The role was already beginning to chafe you, and it's not who you are.



Thank you.

Would you like, sometime, maybe, to do something together that's not psychological help, coma patients, manipulators, diabolical masterminds, or any of that crap?

You know, have dinner? Cup of coffee? Pleasant chat?



I'm glad you replied to my message.

I wasn't entirely sure you were still speaking to me.

I'll always speak to you, Leyna.

Though if this turns out to be a pitch for me to come back into the fold, I am going to be annoyed.



No ... but I have news which may affect that.

Serene's group have decided to do away with bed fees and data rents. Completely. And anyone who wants to move their bed over to their control can stay in Sleep for Free.

You're kidding!

Wow.

That changes everything, doesn't it?



Listen ... Serene hasn't come right out and said so, but I think what you told her the other day is a major cause of this. After you left, she said you had a point. She didn't say much else at the time.

Huh! I may owe her an apology.



I don't know about that ... but we really could use your help. This is going to make Brendan and Clayton have fits.

Would you be willing to do ground work if it's for something that's demonstrably --

What's going on over there?

... oh, no.



It's just some kind of performance.

Yeah. Sorry. I'm a little jumpy.

Don't be shy, everyone! Gather round! Jingle and Twinkle's virtuoso demonstrations are just a small sample of the show to come! And it's absolutely free of charge!



In fact, I see we're ready, so if you'll all be seated, we can begin!

I promise you entertainment the likes of which you have never seen!



This could be a mistake.

Sure could. But if there is something going on, this is the only way to know.



For our first act, we will need a volunteer from the audience.

You, there! In the middle of the front row!

Me? Oh, I don't think I want to --



Nonsense! You are the perfect choice. I won't take no for an answer.

Come along, now.



How do you know I'm a good choice? You don't know anything about me ...

My nose tells me. Heh. It's very large, you see.

Would you like to try it on?

Look, I don't think I --



Quiet.

Mmph!

Help her out, you two.



There!

Now she looks like she's ready. For something, anyway.

How about a round of applause for her, for bravery?



And into the cabinet of wonders you go!

Mph!!



Are you prepared to witness the Miraculous and stupendous transformation that is taking place inside this cabinet even as I speak?

Hold onto your seats ...



Voila!!

HOORAY!!

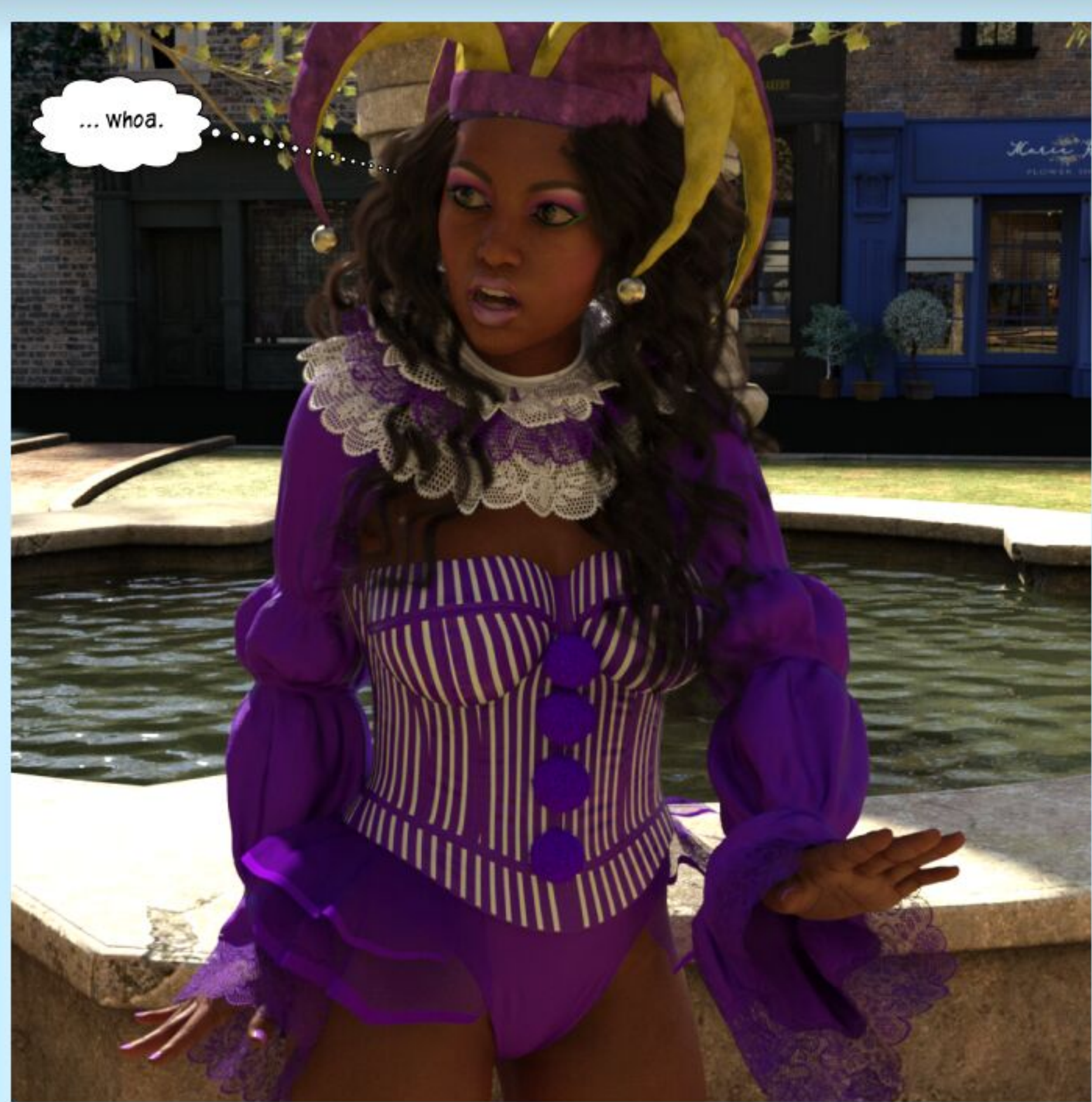


HOORAY!!



Now she's just one of my bubbleheaded little assistants! And that's all she'll ever be from now on. Isn't that hilarious?

Let's put a nose on her and make it official. Jingle! Twinkle! Bring me a --



... Whoa.



Did you break me out?

Wow, that's a really strange Peeling ... usually it's me doing the breaking ...

Yes. I started to think this wasn't going well.

I got off the bench just before the effect there became too strong, and then I got her to stop what she was doing using your method.

My method? What do you mean?



I hit her really hard.

Oh. Yeah, that's usually a good method.

I don't know her. At least not in this appearance. Do you?

No.

Hmm, she's coming to.

Let me get my goggles and try to get an ID on her real Past in case she --



-- recalls.

Damn.

If it's consistent, she wouldn't remember doing it or have any answers anyway.



I didn't know the one in the bar either. That's what really puts me on edge. It could be anybody, anywhere.

"The one in the bar"? How many of these have there been?



Well ... Matt, my customer, tried to ambush me in his scenario. You remember, I told you about that when it happened.

And Raz tried something in a different scenario*, I may have told you about that, and then there was nothing for a while ... but there's been three in the last few days now. I don't know why.

This one, Matt trying a second time, and a woman in a bar I was in with Trish.

More of Mina Markov's patients?

I don't think so. Hers make trouble at random. All of these seem to be targeting me. Just me. They drag other people into the setup to try to trap me and ... I don't know what they're ultimately trying for.

But I know I don't want it, whatever it is.

So, Melinda, then.

Now, see, I didn't want you to think I was going there too Past.



No, it makes sense. Melinda's got a big axe to grind with you, but she also seems to be scared of you.

So she's found a way to mess with you via proxy.

-- sigh --

I almost wish you'd disagreed with me.

If it is her, then finding her and putting her out of business is the only way to make these stop. That could be a while. I'm not sure how many more of them I can take.

I can try to keep an eye on you at all times ...

Thanks, but that won't work. Not only is it unfair to you, but there's things you really can't shadow me on.

For example, I have one last private scenario to do tomorrow. Old regular customer; I didn't want to turn him down.

I like him, but I am not looking forward to this.

ELSEWHERE.



Leah, you didn't tell me you were bringing someone --

oh.

Oh, my goodness.

... Do you have any idea how long it's been?



Of course I do, dear.

But, you know, I told you there was a good chance you wouldn't ever see me again.

I also told you when you got older you'd understand why.

And here you are. Older, and hiding on a farm you never leave.



RUTH BARKER. JOSIAH'S SISTER, PAULINE'S MOTHER, BRENDAN'S AUNT, HAMILTON'S GREAT-AUNT. LAST SEEN IN ISSUE #14.

JEANNE LAVAL. LAST SEEN IN ISSUE #22, GOING OFF TO REGROUP AFTER HER "HIVE" EXPERIMENT ENDED BADLY.

LEAH BARKER. GREAT-AUNT TO MONICA, NATHANIEL, EZEKIEL, AND CLAYTON. LAST SEEN IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE.

It's really not fair. You look the same as you did when you left. I look older than you do!

You know perfectly well you don't have to look like that if you don't want.

Half the time these days I go around looking the way I did in my twenties.

But if I'd come here like that, you wouldn't have recognized me.

It just feels wrong to me somehow. I don't want to be like Brendan, with people making fun of him for it behind his back.

I consider it a test. If people aren't interested in me the way I actually look, then they're not actually interested in me, is my thinking.

So. What's so important that you've come out of retreat after all these years?



I realize you may not be watching Family business closely, but there's a schism. Josiah transferred exactly the wrong amounts of shares before stalking off to hide.

Now Brendan, Clayton, and Ezekiel have the same percent of shares as Pauline, Hamilton, Lucius, and Serene. Monica is abstaining. Brendan's group are trying to extort everything they can. Pauline's group is trying to stop them.

Clayton got his shares back? And how do you know all this?

I have sources. Point is, this isn't just squabbling as usual. I think this is going to tear A4 apart if it isn't resolved.

Fighting in the streets isn't a good look for anyone, least of all the people who are supposed to be running the place.

What exactly do you expect us to do about it? We're retired. We don't have any influence over any of them.

Not in shares, no. But they may listen to their family. Maybe we can talk sense into them.



Ha! Clayton is probably less likely to listen to his family than anyone.

I've only ever spoken with him twice, you know. And neither time was a real conversation. If it had been, I'd have told him that I thought he had a legitimate grievance. But I've never gotten a chance.

Zeke just wants to know that somebody loves him. He's very insecure. Him I could probably reach. But Clayton -- I'm not sure anyone can talk sense to him.

And I feel the same way about Brendan. He never listened to his own father, much less his aunt or uncle. Why would he start now?

All right, but it can't hurt to try, don't you see? Maybe anybody else we can get as well.



Oh, I am way behind ...

Sure are. He's on the Bridge of Doom.

Yeah, I know. I can't find Mordith ... Judy doesn't usually flake ... Look, set the rest of the palace as soon as I get inside. I'll change to Rosamund in there. That needs to be ready for him. Then go find Judy and make sure she has her shit together. She doesn't have long.

For once, his tendency to want long action sequences before the sex works in our favor.

Check.

Nice work, harpies. Very hot. I think he almost wanted to stop the scene there and let you "defeat" him.

Thanks, Ruby.



My princess!

I have come to your aid at last ... there were many attempting to prevent me from reaching you ...



My princess?

... Rosamund?



Rosamund, it's me! Richard!

Rosamund, why do you not speak? What has she done to you?



... Richard ...?

Richard! Oh, my love! I'm so glad you've come!



She keeps me ensorcelled most of the time ... I think ... the hours slow for me nearly to a cease ...

Richard, she intends to keep me as her puppet forever, so she may rule in secret!

Fear not. I intend to end her misrule. Come, let us make haste to show her my blade.

Richard, I -- you don't --

I cannot make haste anywhere. I cannot even descend these steps without assistance. I stand here and stare out at the clouds all day.

... Remove my outer robes. Then you will understand.



What manner of mischief is this?

She ... seeks to hinder my movements. And twist my mind.

Richard, you cannot comprehend the depth of her evil. She straps me to my bed each night.

She whispers to me in the dark. And ... touches me.

You ... you must cut these garments from me, my love.



I apologize for the affront to my princess' modesty.

Pish, my love. If we are honest, I find it preferable to wearing ... that.

Upon my oath, when I find that monster I shall have her head!

You cannot destroy her in that fashion, love. It has been tried many times. She cannot be killed by fire or sword, or any other act of man.

But there may be a way nonetheless.



Locked in a case in her chambers is a jeweled coronet. It is said that this is the source of her invulnerability. That she has stored part of her essence within it.

If you were to engage her in combat while wearing it yourself, I think its protection would work against her ... penetrate her defenses.

She does not know I know where she hides it.

Lead the way.



A wall of cages? This creature has unnatural desires.

You have no idea.



Vain, as well. ... What is that sound?

You chests you see there, with the air holes.

Do not open them.

Look behind the mirrors.



Aha!

Not even locked. Overconfidence will be the death of her.



She comes!



So, Princess, your "protector" managed to reach you after all.

When will you understand that I have a better and more interesting destiny planned for you than standing loyally at the side of this dim-witted oaf like a tamed pup?

Mock me while you may, Mordith. Your life is about to close ... I will ...



Richard!

I have a very bad feeling ...

AAAAAHH!!

Aaagh! What is ... happening?

Oh, dear.

How unfortunate.



It seems someone must have switched that coronet for an entirely different one.

I knew you had discovered where I hid it. You're not really very good at stealth.



Now she's finally found a role suited to her limited capacities. She'll be far more useful as a mindless bed toy than she ever was as Sir Richard.



Yep. O.P.P script. Way, way O.P.P script. Poor Richard.

I'm gonna kill Judy for this ...

... Actually, that might work. If I defeat Mordith, then I might be able to salvage the scenario ...

Richard will be upset he didn't get to defeat her, but he'll still get to have hot victory sex with the princess, so ...



The invulnerability wasn't real, just a plot coupon for Richard ... if I "kill" her it'll be disruptive enough ...

... Uh ... this sword is really heavy ...

Now, don't be like that. You know you're too weak and submissive to take me.



You needn't peel left out. I have one for you too.

NOOO!!



EEEEEE!!

This one works a little differently from Sir Richard's.

I really did want to convert you slowly. Voluntarily. It would have been much more entertaining.

But I've always had this ready as an alternate plan.



That's much better. Now you will never try to pretend you have a mind of your own, ever again.

Of course, since you're not Rosamund anymore, someone will have to be Rosamund, won't they?



Now I am Princess Rosamund, ruler and heiress to the kingdom.

And you ... you are a creature with no name, whom no one else even knows exists.

How delightPul.



ELSEWHERE.

There you are.

You didn't have to wait.

I wanted to.

I've been -- MMM -- keeping myself warmed up thinking about you.

REGULAR READERS HAVE MET SERILLE AND HER MAJORDOMO EMILY -- EMILY'S THE ONE ON THE BED -- BUT YOU HAVEN'T SEEN SERILLE IN A WHILE, AND THE LAST TIME YOU SAW EMILY, SHE HAD A CAT MASK ON, AS SHE SO OFTEN DOES THESE DAYS.



Two of the back room kitties wanted to have some group play. They are eager to devote themselves to their priestess.

I told them it was a lovely idea, but it should wait until a time when you weren't too tired to appreciate it.

... You have the strangest expression, and I can't even tell whether you're happy or upset.

Almost ecstatic, actually. Have you heard that some of the Barkers are rescinding bed fees and rents? Completely?

Oh, is that what that conversation I heard part of was about ... interesting!

It's more than interesting. It eliminates the one real worry I had about using this place.

I don't follow.



The Morocco Club actually belongs to a woman named Bianca Zildan.

Zildan is still in sleep but ... is not in a mental state to actively control the property. She left it in a maintainable condition. Someone else could occupy the space and, though they couldn't change everything, they could alter enough to keep it usable. And it wouldn't be traced to them, because they didn't really own it.

Before I could claim it, though, another woman named Melinda Shannon had the same idea. She's gone now too. I don't know where she is. I have safeguards in place if she ever tries to come back.

The thing is ... the one way the space could get deleted is if Zildan -- who is still paying for it -- gets thrown out of sleep because she ran out of money for bed fees. And since she isn't charging anymore, that was a real worry.

But I checked today ... this space is controlled by one of the Barkers who isn't charging anymore. So there's that worry done with!

Make a little room, would you?



What if -- MMM! hi there -- what if Zildan comes back and throws us all out?

Unlikely. She's a pantheress. Beautiful. Solid black fur, sleek. One of the best ones I've done, I think. She's living in a wildlife preserve.

... oh.

And she's been there quite a while. If she were going to break free, I think it would have happened by now.



We may have to hurry the schedule.

I warned you at the beginning that probably wasn't possible.

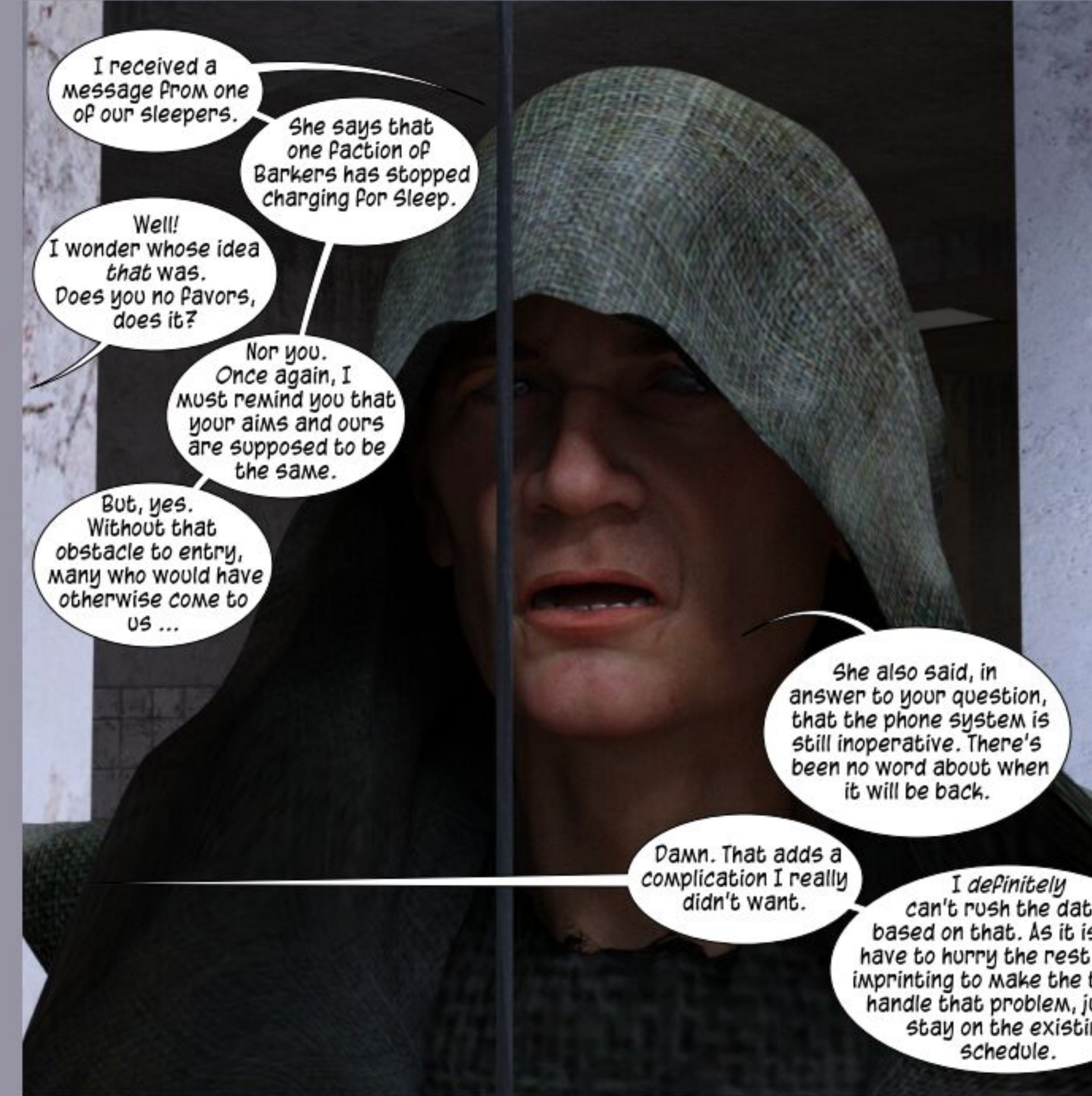
Do you want to risk frying her brain?



Is she even in there?

Don't get too close. If you interfere with the Field, it could fry both of you.

Why the sudden need for speed?



I received a message from one of our sleepers.

She says that one faction of Barkers has stopped charging for sleep.

Well! I wonder whose idea that was. Does it favor, does it?

Nor you. Once again, I must remind you that your aims and ours are supposed to be the same.

But, yes. Without that obstacle to entry, many who would have otherwise come to us ...

She also said, in answer to your question, that the phone system is still inoperative. There's been no word about when it will be back.

Damn. That adds a complication I really didn't want.

I definitely can't rush the date, based on that. As it is, I'll have to hurry the rest of the imprinting to make the time to handle that problem, just to stay on the existing schedule.



Look, I'll see what I can do without taking risks. But if she isn't usable, then we have no operation, and we'll have wasted weeks.

What about the person for the rendezvous?

That's our other sleeper. He's said he's finished the preliminaries and is ready for the date we've given him.

If we can't make it earlier, at least don't make it any later.



How much of that got through the haze?

Some. He's worried that more people will go into sleep because they don't have to pay?

Yes. Exposing his hypocrisy once again, as usual.

How do you figure that?

Striver's key idea, like the other zealots here, is that being with the Wide-Eyes is a superior way to live. That if people would just wake up -- metaphorically and physically -- they'd realize this.

If that's true, why is he so scared of destitute awake people fleeing to sleep as soon as they don't have to come up with the buy-in? If this place is so much better than sleep, why worry?

No, he knows sleep is better ... but if he admits that, even for a second, the whole thing falls apart.



Don't get dressed yet. I thought I saw a little bleeding at one of the insertions. I want to check it. Damned crude tools.

I wonder how many people in this complex are even aware that sleep never actually shut off the ability to send messages to awake people, or vice versa.

I also wonder about his agents inside sleep. How do they feel? Can they be trusted? They've been in sleep for a long time and surely by now they've seen enough that their commitment to the Wide-Eyes way is ... well, I'd say it's somewhat shaky, at least.



Talking this way makes me wonder if you can be trusted.

I mean, if you believe sleep is so superior to life out here, then why work to destroy it?



I'm the only person in this whole damned place you can trust.

You and I are the only two people who aren't acting on principle. We're not following some ridiculous ideology. We don't actually care if sleep is better or whether the Wide-Eyes are right.

We're both doing it because we want the same thing.

Revenge.



Doesn't look like I'm interrupting a scene ... actually, it looks deserted ...

Uh ... hello? Anyone here?

MMMMM!!



MMMMM!!



Back off! I'm not interested.

Now get away from her!



What were those things?

Well, they used to be actors.

Thank you. I mean, it was kinda fun at first but --

Hold still, I should have you untied in a second.

Who are you, anyway? How'd you get in here? Not that I'm complaining.

I'm Leyna. Friend of Ruby's. You're Carly, right? Her tech?

I'm thinking something went wrong with the scenario?

Yeah. How'd you guess?

It's been days. No one's seen her. Even Ruby doesn't have sex for that long.



When the scenario started to go south, the set got sealed off. I couldn't get in or take it down. Ruby must have locked me out.

So she's in there?

Yeah. With the customer, and Judy, who's playing Nordith.

Let me see if I can get in.



Just walk through the wall? That's handy.

When it works.



She's just been hiding in here letting those things eat her out for days? I'm gonna kill her.

I, uh, don't think it's voluntary ... especially since that one's not her.



Hi.

EEEEEE!!

What are you doing here? How did you --

Never mind that. It's time for you to stop this.



How dare you! I am -- ah -- I am Princess Rosamund, ruler of this kingdom!

And you will become my next toy for your --



Shit.

Carly, I'm so sorry.

Can you get Richard out of here and try to help him recover? I need to have a hard talk with --

That really hurt!



Raz???

What are you even doing here? I didn't cast you for this. Where's Judy?

I snuck in and got her to let me sub ...

Ruby, I didn't do it! I didn't have any control over it! It was like last time! I don't know what's going on ... really! I'm not making this up!



I must have seen her again ... but I'm not ... I can't remember where ...

Well, at least now it's "her." That's more than you managed last time.*

Is this her, maybe?

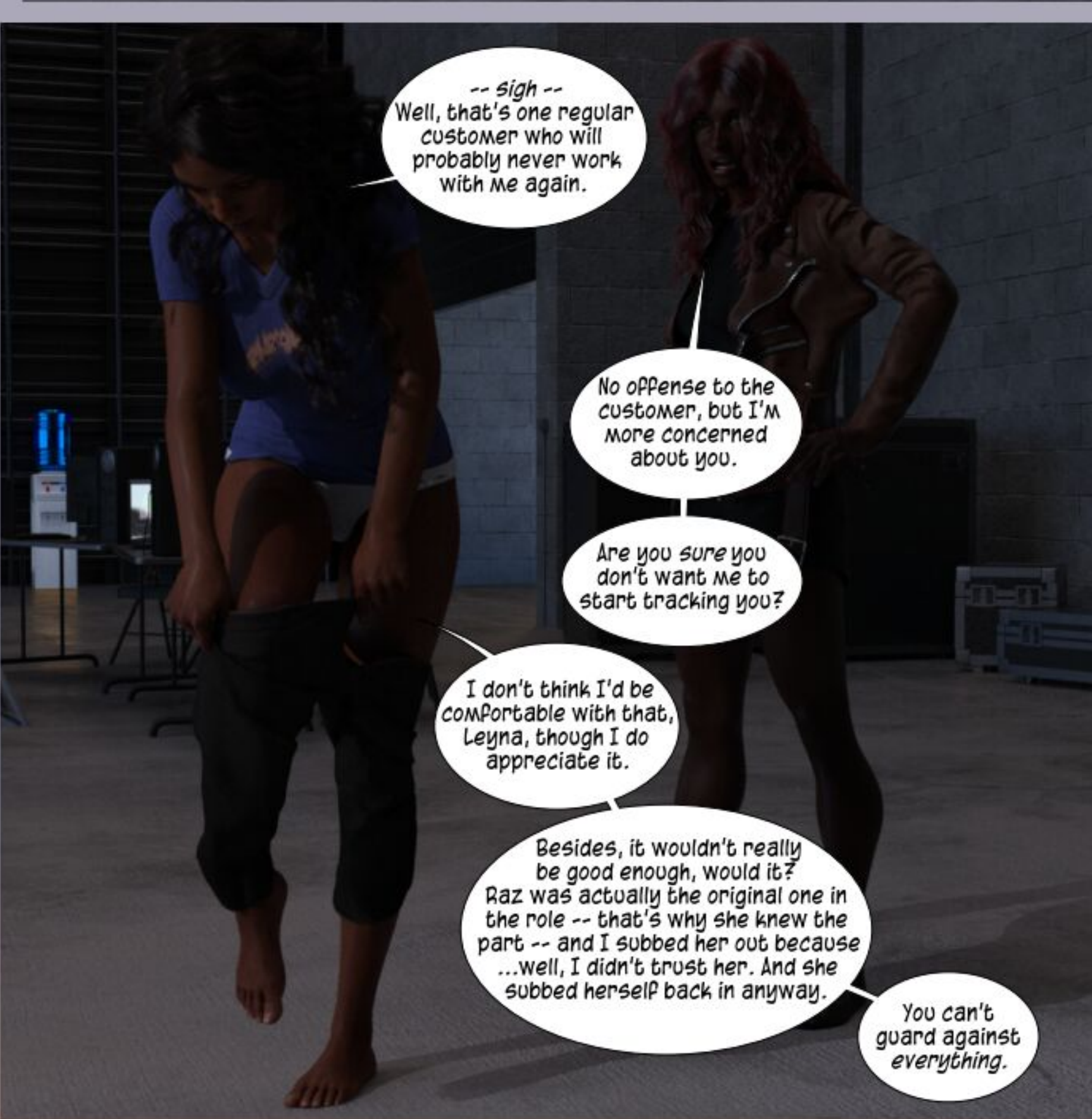
* SS #23, AS ALREADY NOTED. THERE WILL NOT BE A QUIZ. -T



Uh ... I really can't remember ... but ... I'm sure I've seen her before, somewhere ... Not recently, though, I don't think.

Her name's Melinda. She messes with people's minds. And she doesn't like Ruby.

If you see her, or if you remember where you saw her, you come tell us right away.



-- Sigh -- Well, that's one regular customer who will probably never work with me again.

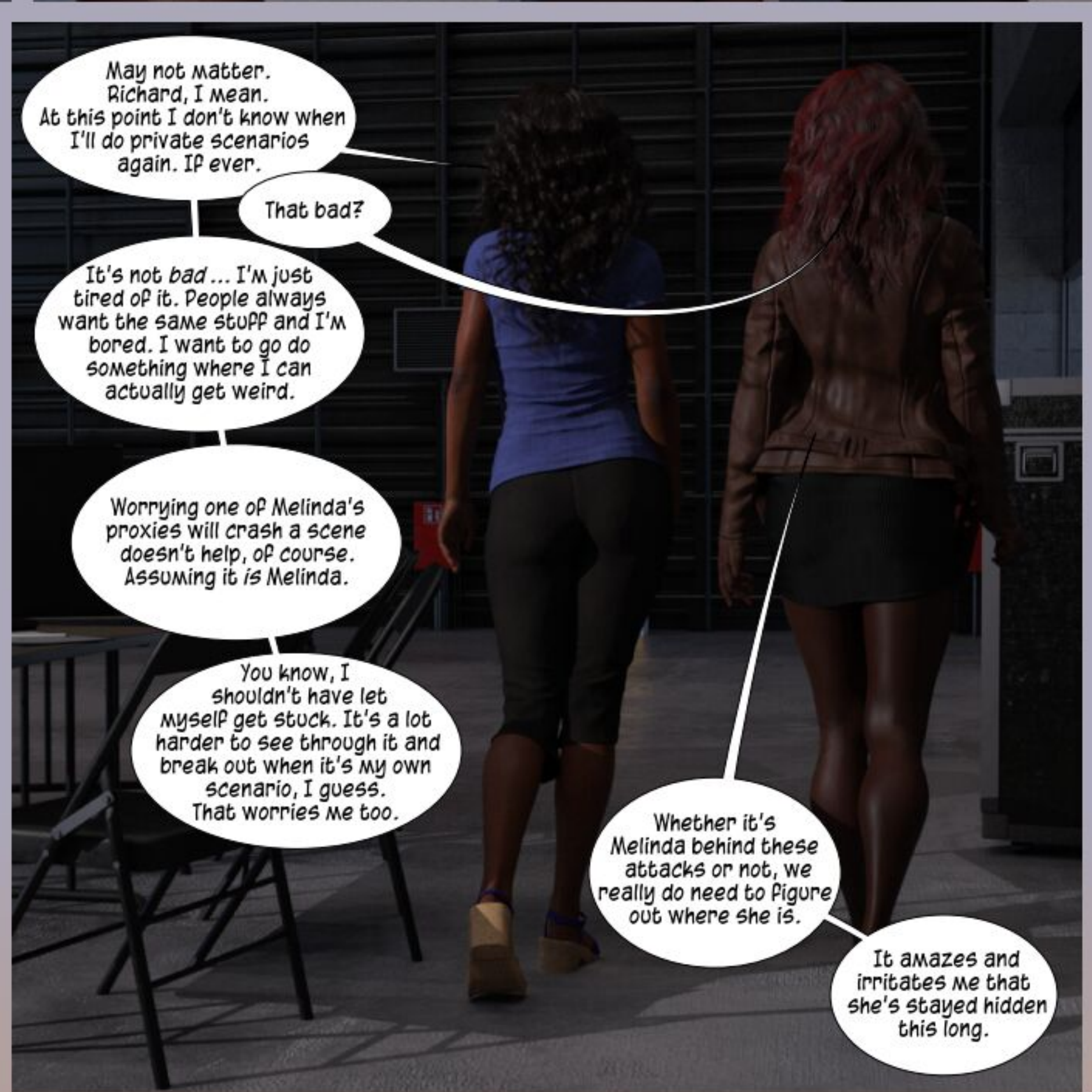
No offense to the customer, but I'm more concerned about you.

Are you sure you don't want me to start tracking you?

I don't think I'd be comfortable with that, Leyna, though I do appreciate it.

Besides, it wouldn't really be good enough, would it? Raz was actually the original one in the role -- that's why she knew the part -- and I subbed her out because ... well, I didn't trust her. And she subbed herself back in anyway.

You can't guard against everything.



May not matter. Richard, I mean. At this point I don't know when I'll do private scenarios again. If ever.

That bad?

It's not bad ... I'm just tired of it. People always want the same stuff and I'm bored. I want to go do something where I can actually get weird.

Worrying one of Melinda's proxies will crash a scene doesn't help, of course. Assuming it is Melinda.

You know, I shouldn't have let myself get stuck. It's a lot harder to see through it and break out when it's my own scenario, I guess. That worries me too.

Whether it's Melinda behind these attacks or not, we really do need to figure out where she is.

It amazes and irritates me that she's stayed hidden this long.

"Especially since there have got to be quite a few other people looking for her at this point."



You're hard to find, Mr. Barker.

I'm in the middle of changing offices.

Do I know you?

Not personally. My name's Ben Cobermayer.

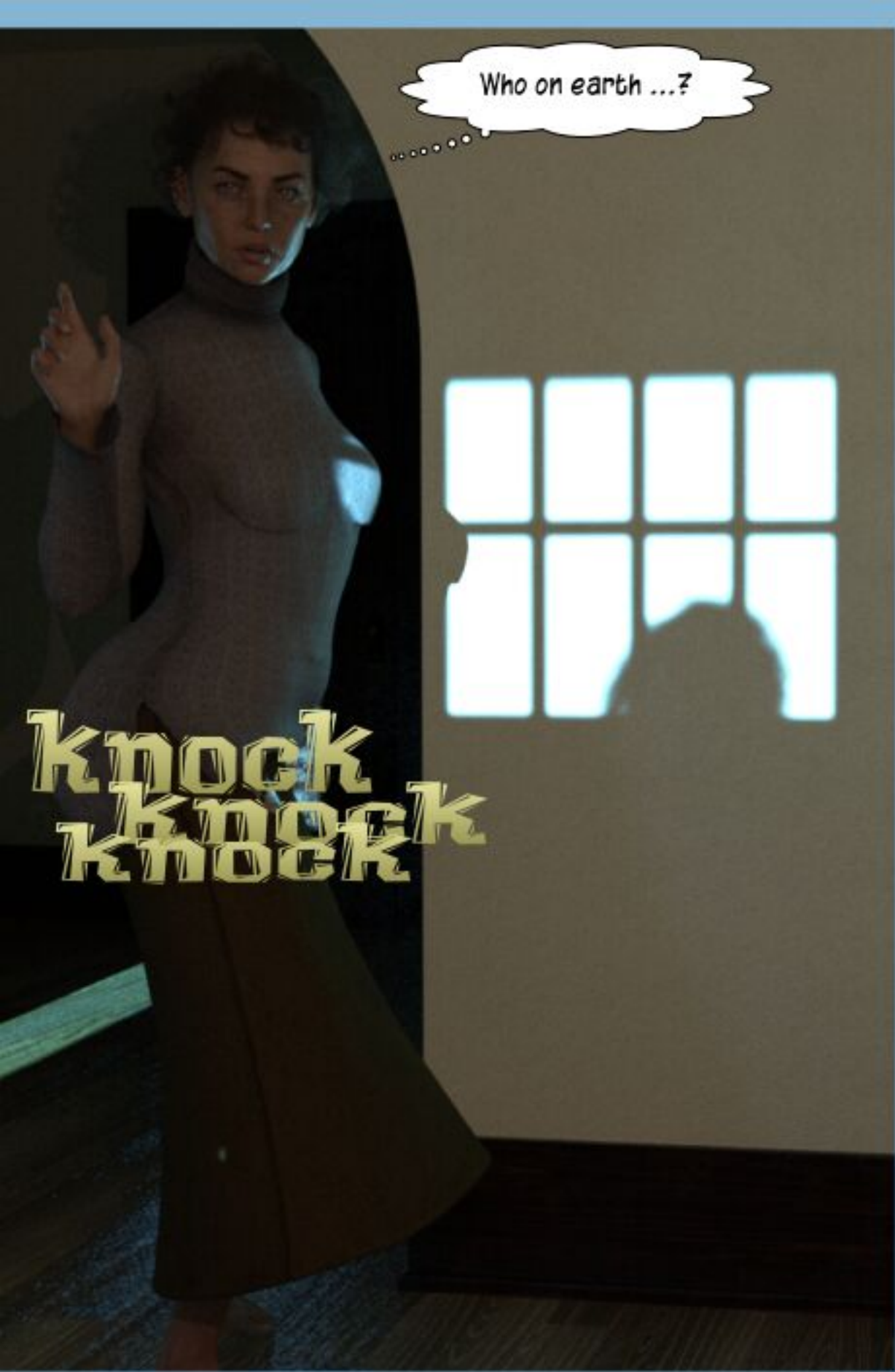
Cobermayer ... Oh, yeah! Produced passives, right? Until you disappeared.



I didn't "disappear." I was taken out. Banjaxed. A woman Pucked with my head. When I recovered, I was broke, someone else had my properties, my business was gone ...

Her name's Melinda Shannon. Word is you have a couple of things to settle with her too.

I want in.



Who on earth ...?



Oh.



... and I guess it's just a permanent side effect. It seems to happen when I get stressed, but every time before that it was just a partial attack and I was able to stop it. This time I went all the way, before I could even react, really.

I've been trying to learn to control it, but I'm a little scared to practice, because I'm worried I'll figure out how to turn myself into a horse voluntarily before I figure out how to turn myself back.



Well, I appreciate the explanation ... I overreacted the other day. I shouldn't have just thrown you out like that ... it was a shock, is all.

No, I understood why.

But ... I'm not making myself understood very well right now. I'm sorry.

You see, I don't think I'd have this lingering thing at all if I ... well, if I hadn't enjoyed being a horse as much as I did.



I need somewhere to work on this sometimes. Somewhere safe. With someone I can trust.

You know, they say you can tell a lot about someone by how they treat animals.

... What I'm saying is, I really liked being your horse ... and sometimes -- when I can, when you can -- if you're willing ...

... I'd like to be your horse again.



ELSEWHERE ...

... I admit, it did prejudice me at first ... I mean, there's no reason for it, really. Why do you wear them?

At first it was as a distraction. The men in my field were so taken aback by the glasses that they never got around to objectifying me.

But I find them ... reassuring, sometimes. They're like armor. I feel a little more protected from people with them on. I know, it's ridiculous. No one said psychologists weren't allowed to have neuroses!



You'd think with the ratio of female to male presentation in A4 what it is, we'd have a lot less of that.

I expect it in my business -- after all, objectification is kind of what I do -- but it makes me sad to hear it's no better in the sciences.

Sad, but not really surprised.

Heh.



AAA! What ...?

-- kapp --

-- kapp --
-- kapp --



NEXT: THEY TRIED TO MAKE ME GO TO REHAB ...