



IT'S ANOTHER LOVELY DAY IN A4.

SLEEPER SQUAD

Anyway, I think we should try it. It's a strange crowd, but it'd be fun to be a bear.

(EVER NOTICE HOW EVERY TIME WE SAY THAT, IT MEANS SOMETHING WEIRD IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN?)

I figure she'll last about a day ...

That long?

Oh! That ... isn't what I thought you meant.

And she said "I have no idea who you're talking about," like she wasn't practically giving him a lap dance the night before ...

I just about exploded, right there in front of everybody.

And the thing is, she knew damned well that was exactly the way to push my button. That's why she did it ...

That was all I could take. I just decided, "To hell with it," and I told her ...

Grrrrr!!



You ... Uh ... Sorry, what?

Nasha, you OK?



I'm rrrwht? I said I wrp her "GrrrP!"

And she --yip-- becrrr the --bark-- can't rrrrP wrth a rrrr ...



Nshrrr, srrrrs wrng wrh yrr!

Yrr trrrP rrr 'n yrr --bark-- rrrs ...



WUFF!
rrr
GRRRR!

rrr?

arp!

-- whine --
Brrrr!
rrr

wup

rrr!



... uh.

OK, did that just happen to everybody, or ...

A SHORT WHILE BACK*, THE SERENE/PAULINE FACTION OF THE BARKERS DECIDED TO REMOVE ALL THE BED FEES AND RENTS. BECAUSE ANYONE WHO WANTED COULD SWITCH TO THEIR WAY OF DOING IT--AND WHO WOULDN'T SWITCH IF IT MEANT NOT PAYING FEES?--THIS IS RAPIDLY STRIPPING THE BRENDAN/CLAYTON FACTION OF REAL ESTATE THEY CONTROL.



THEY'RE NOT TAKING IT VERY WELL.

* SS #25



That's your ass, Muldaur!

I told you, I don't give a damn who controls your space, you're still going to deal with me whether you like it or--



Chock! You goddamned turncoat!

I'm going to rip you into very small pieces! Tommy! Bruno!

Sorry, Clayton, they're occupied.



Some clever Friends of mine lent me this gadget. Storage is so much easier when you put things in boxes.

They'll probably get their heads together enough in a few minutes to realize they can recall out. Or maybe not. You don't seem to pick very intelligent muscle.

I could put you in a box too, or you could recall now and save us both some time. I still have to go clean up your mess over there.

HAMILTON BARKER HAS GOTTEN A LOT MORE VICIOUS ABOUT CLAYTON SINCE CLAYTON SET FIRE TO HIS THEATRE DURING A PERFORMANCE.



YOU CAN'T DRINK ALL DAY... IF YOU DON'T START THE MORNING

We've got to throw more people at it. I didn't expect them to push back so hard. I knew Lucius could be tough, but Hamilton's a surprise. If we're going to keep claiming our cut, we're going to need--

Forget it.

It's over, Clayton. They've outsmarted us. Soon we're not going to control anything, and there's nothing we can do about it.



That's it, huh? The first little pushback you get, you just roll over and quit?

I should have known better! I never should have kidded myself we could work together.

None of you has ever in your lives had to fight for a damned thing! Not once.



What an absolute shitpile of a day ... Brendan can just suck my --

oh.

Cobermayer.

I sure as hell hope you have some good news.



As a matter of fact ... I think I do.



FIRST DAY ON THE SET OF RUBY AND TRISH'S NEW PASSIVE.

Gigi, you're on mark, but Jenny just told me she needs you a little to your right ...

Fran, hang back, we want you almost out of frame, behind the crowd.

Bonnie, Jake, stay out of frame but move to the rear, you come in behind Gigi, remember ...

Carly, we're still missing some of the extras. Can you round 'em up?

Roger!

Hey, Jenny? Don't forget to switch on Jake's headlights just before he comes in.

Are we ready?



Welcome! My name's Helen Orris. Everybody calls me "Hello." I'm here to help you get set up. If you have any problems, come to me.

In a moment I'll show you around, but first--I know by now you've been given a lot of information and it can be a little overwhelming. Does anyone have any questions?

Are you ... I mean, is that what we'll look like?

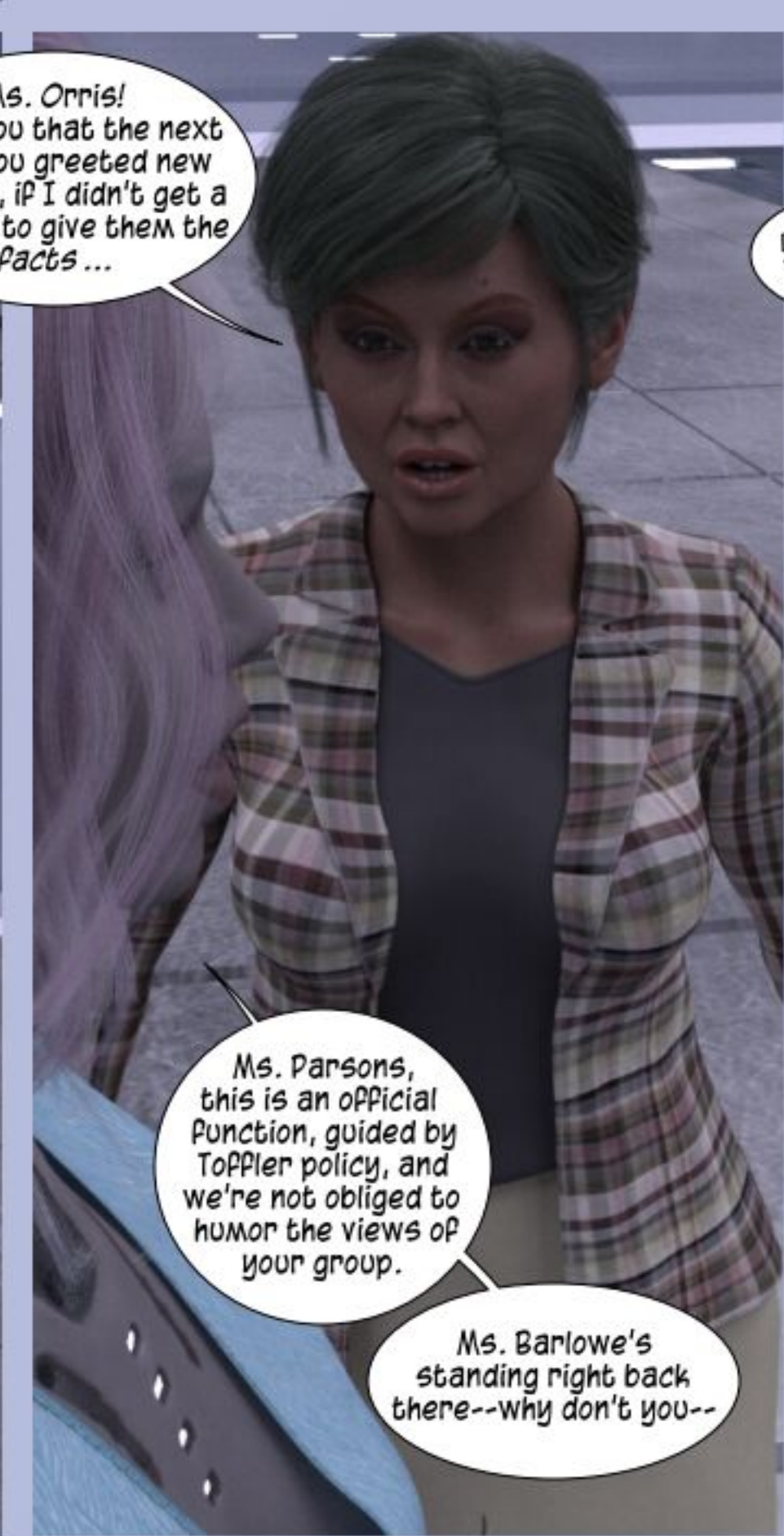


Not necessarily! There are several models of Prame. I'm a type D. Also, the colors and surfaces vary.

When will we ... Uh ...

We call it "transferring." As soon as you like, more or less. It takes a while, but medical doesn't have a backlog right now.

Ms. Orris! I told you that the next time you greeted new arrivals, if I didn't get a chance to give them the facts ...



Ms. Parsons, this is an official function, guided by TopPier policy, and we're not obliged to humor the views of your group.

Ms. Barlowe's standing right back there--why don't you--



IS THERE A PROBLEM?

Ahhh!



That was a little mean.

But thank you.

NOT MY FAULT SHE'S SCARED TO DEATH OF ME.

Folks, this is Furst Deepstone, who runs Excavation. Our Facility is mostly underground, so that covers most new construction as well as mining.

Furst is a type M. Type M Prames are, ah, not for everybody.

Can I help you with something, Furst?

NO, I'M HERE TO TALK TO WENDY.



For now you'll be staying in temporary quarters in Complex B ... Follow me ...

What's up?

WE FOUND A SMALL PROBLEM DOWN IN THE COMPLEX C DIG.

YOU SHOULD PROBABLY COME SEE IT IN PERSON.



OK, I'm declaring we got that in one!

Nice job, everybody!

Unless you saw something I missed?

You're the director. I'm not used to being able to do another take.

But it looked good to me.

Fran, Bonnie, change outfits, we're going to relight this set as the agriculture area and do that scene next.

Jake, stay dressed, OK? After that we're going to do Furst's other scene and get him out of the way.

I'm having real trouble getting used to this makeup. How about you?

Doesn't bother me ... but it's weird being this tall.

Watching you play against type is hilarious ...

Right? But it's fun to be a heinous bitch once in a while.

ELSEWHERE ...



I don't know ... it just doesn't feel right! Like it's ... you know, a cult or something.

A cult? Come on. How long have you known me? Would I go in for something like that?

Look, I'm not saying he doesn't think it's a cult. The guy's kind of sad, really. I think he doesn't have much self-esteem, or something.

So, yeah, you have to play along .. but it's not bad ... and it's a really nice place. And no rent! No more worrying about any of that. How many times have you had to do shit that was a lot worse to make your bed pees?

Come on, I'll show you around.



This is really nice ...

Told you! And it's huge, too. Plenty of space for everybody. As long as you keep him happy, you can do what you want the rest of the time. Swim, go to the beach, sunbathe all day, pool around ...

And no pressure. If you decide you can't deal, you can leave.

... OK.

I'll try it.



Amber, this is Mr. Hartwell, he handles ... anything that needs handling.

Sir, Amber's ready to join us.

Excellent! Welcome. I'm sure you'll enjoy it here.

Go get her changed while I make the arrangements.



Oh, yes, much better.

Come along. It's time for you to meet Ezekiel Barker.



Sir? You have a new subject. Her name is Amber.

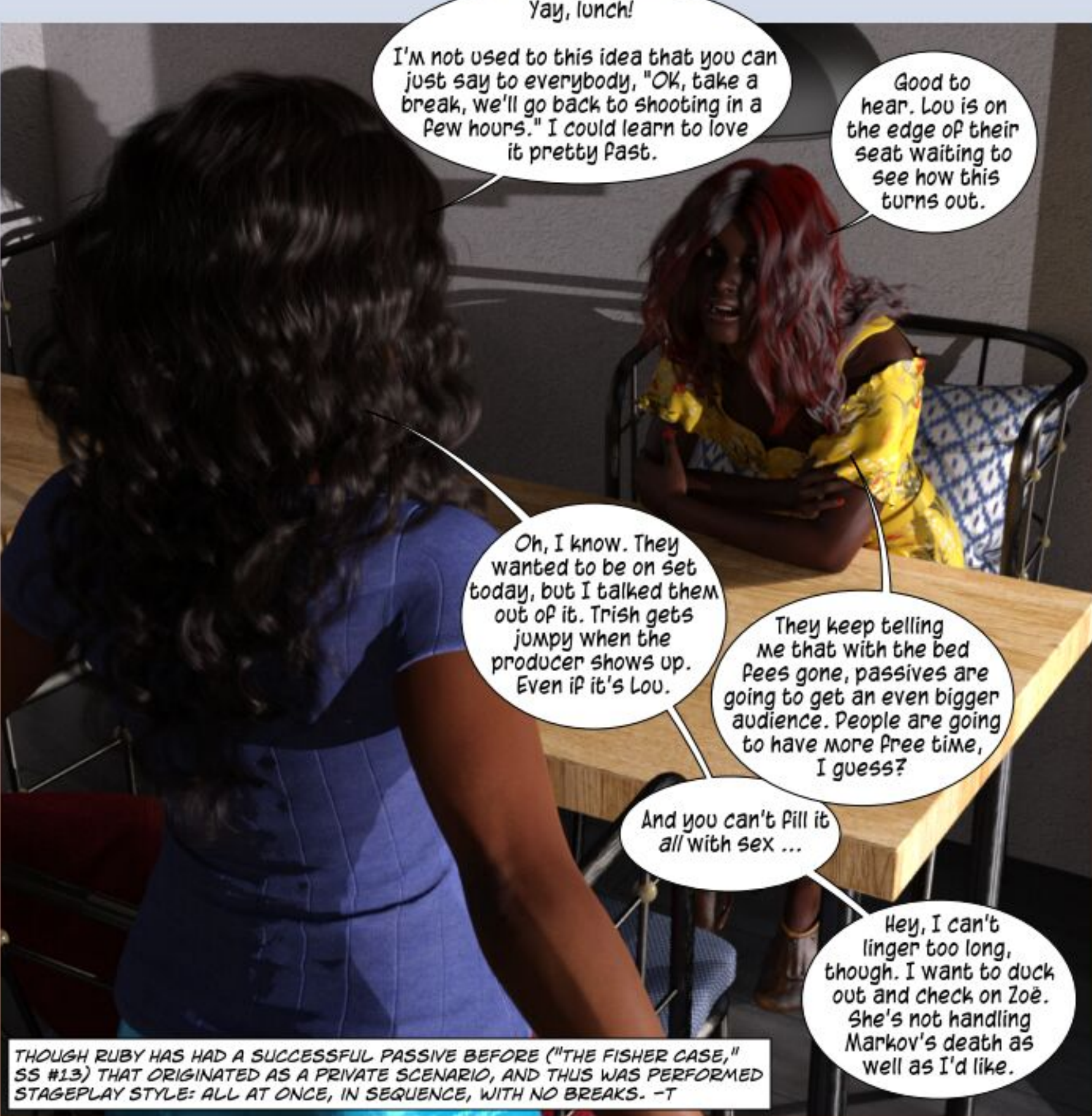
I assume you'll want to give her a trial run.



It looks like she'll be satisfactory.

A good job of recruitment, that.

... Thank you, sir.



Yay, lunch!

I'm not used to this idea that you can just say to everybody, "OK, take a break, we'll go back to shooting in a few hours." I could learn to love it pretty fast.

Good to hear. Lou is on the edge of their seat waiting to see how this turns out.

Oh, I know. They wanted to be on set today, but I talked them out of it. Trish gets jumpy when the producer shows up. Even if it's Lou.

They keep telling me that with the bed pees gone, passives are going to get an even bigger audience. People are going to have more free time, I guess?

And you can't fill it all with sex ...

Hey, I can't linger too long, though. I want to duck out and check on Zoe. She's not handling Markov's death as well as I'd like.

THOUGH RUBY HAS HAD A SUCCESSFUL PASSIVE BEFORE ("THE FISHER CASE," SS #13) THAT ORIGINATED AS A PRIVATE SCENARIO, AND THIS WAS PERFORMED STAGEPLAY STYLE: ALL AT ONCE, IN SEQUENCE, WITH NO BREAKS. -T



"Zoe."*

Are you going to get mad if I want to talk about that?

I don't think so ... what do you mean?

Well, you were never on a first-name basis with her before, but you haven't called her anything else since the two of you came back from your ... uh ... experience.

I had wondered before that if the two of you had been intimate. After you came back, I switched to wondering how often and for how long.

I mean, had you already been pooling around with her before you dumped Doreen and Orchid?

* DR. CHAPMAN, TO YOU. -T



Well, now, hold on. I don't think it's fair to say I "dumped" Doreen. Doreen didn't want to be my friend if I was going to stop her from being a supervillain, and the peeling was mutual.

Zoe and I have been through some ... really strange experiences together. The only reason I haven't told you more about them is I'm not sure I have words to explain them.

You get thrown together in weird situations where maybe you don't even know what's real, sometimes you end up having sex. It's like being in combat. You have to let it out some way.

And especially after Markov's thing* ... we've been through some shit, it's what I'm saying.

You and I have been through some shit together too, you know. We'd probably be lovers, at least occasionally, if you were into that. You don't happen to be. That's not a criticism.

I'm sorry you don't like her.

* LAST ISSUE.



It's not that I don't like her.

I don't trust her. I don't think she has any ethics.

She does, though I admit they're not the same as most people's.

She's a lot more cynical than I am ... but I think I like that. She keeps me honest.

And I-- Look, I don't think I can explain exactly why I don't think she'll pull anything again. But I do believe she won't. I believe it pretty strongly.

And if I turn out to be wrong, you can point and laugh.



I'll tell you a secret. It's ... I'm not proud of it.

I told Orchid I was done with her because I couldn't trust her not to do dumb things ... and that was true ... but I realized later it wasn't the whole truth.

I couldn't really talk to Orchid. The sex was great, but there was nothing else there.

Zoe has depths. I can have a conversation with her. ... She could be a friend.

I'm a little short on those these days.



Well, I'll try to give her benefit of doubt, but I hope you'll forgive me if it--

-- if it --

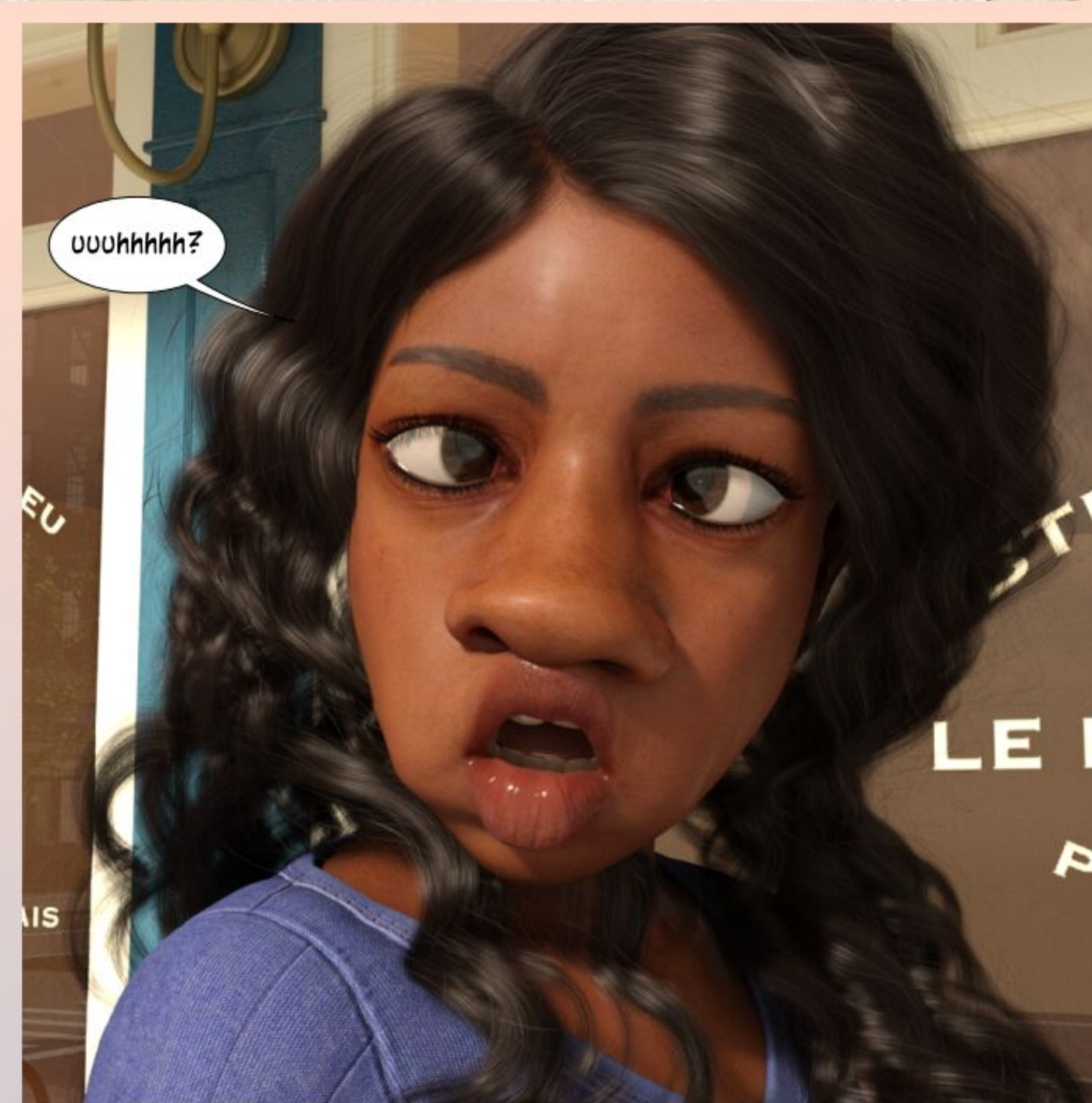
-- uhh?



Leyna??

Uhh ... I -- hurrhhhh

What's wrong? Are you --



uuuhhhhh?



hurr ...

duuhh?

uhmmmm!

urrhhh ...



OK, what the hell was that?

If you don't know, I sure don't.

Some kind of wave effect ... but from where? And how?



I wondered if you were going to come by.

I wanted to check on Gira Gessit. Were you able to ... ah ...

Save her? Yes.



It will be a while. I'm going to have to commission a completely new frame for her. She's lucky; the chest casing was very nearly breached.

Who else could have? You know perfectly well the behavior blocks prevent us from knowingly harming others. And from what Furst and Ms. Scott told me, this wasn't accidental.

You're making this out to be an act of violence from a robot against another robot? It's never happened. Why would we do that?



When you find the human who did this, I'm going to expect some actual justice done.

You're assuming a human did it. Why?

I'm not making this out to be anything yet! I'm just keeping options open --

BREEEEET
Hold on.



Hey, Cil ... They what? How long ago?

OK. I don't think I can really do anything, but I'll come have a look.

I have to go. Cil says someone burned down one of the fields.

Keep me informed of Gessit's status, would you?

Meanwhile, I'll do my best to provide actual justice.



Keep walking away ... and ... cut.

Good. Third time's the charm.

Still too talky. I wish I could lose about half of it.

Yeah, but we need it. It's the only place we can explain an important ground rule. I never had to do the first episode of anything before, but I'm told that's a common problem--getting in all the setup.

You OK with the take, Zusana? You don't look happy. I thought your reading was fine, after we got past the fumbles.



Should I be giving my boss attitude like that? I mean, I get they don't see eye-to-eye, but she runs the whole place, doesn't she?

Wouldn't I at least be a little more polite about it?

Oh, Wendy's not your boss. The two of you are both direct hires by the Toppler project. If anything you're equivalent level. You're the second most vital person in the settlement. Maybe the most.

We need you to be able to push back. You're her ethical check. All the other people she trusts have a different relationship with her.



I guess we should find a way to make that clearer ...

Yeah. Even more talky, but it'll work.

We already know Fran will have some voiceover at the beginning of the scene. We could add it to that.

OK, let's do the other scene in here. Fran, you need to be back in your leathers, no jacket. Where's Bonnie? She's going to sub for Gira's voice over speaker ...

THE NOT-SO-SECRET CLUB (IT HAS NEVER HAD A FORMAL NAME). CLAYTON BARKER HASN'T SET FOOT INSIDE IT SINCE ITS PREVIOUS FORM, WHEN IT WAS LOCATED IN A HIDDEN BACK AREA OF THE MOROCCO CLUB. A LOT OF WATER HAS FLOWED UNDER THE BRIDGE SINCE THEN.



I'm pretty sure she's in the back.
Big door at the far end of the toy room.

Thanks.



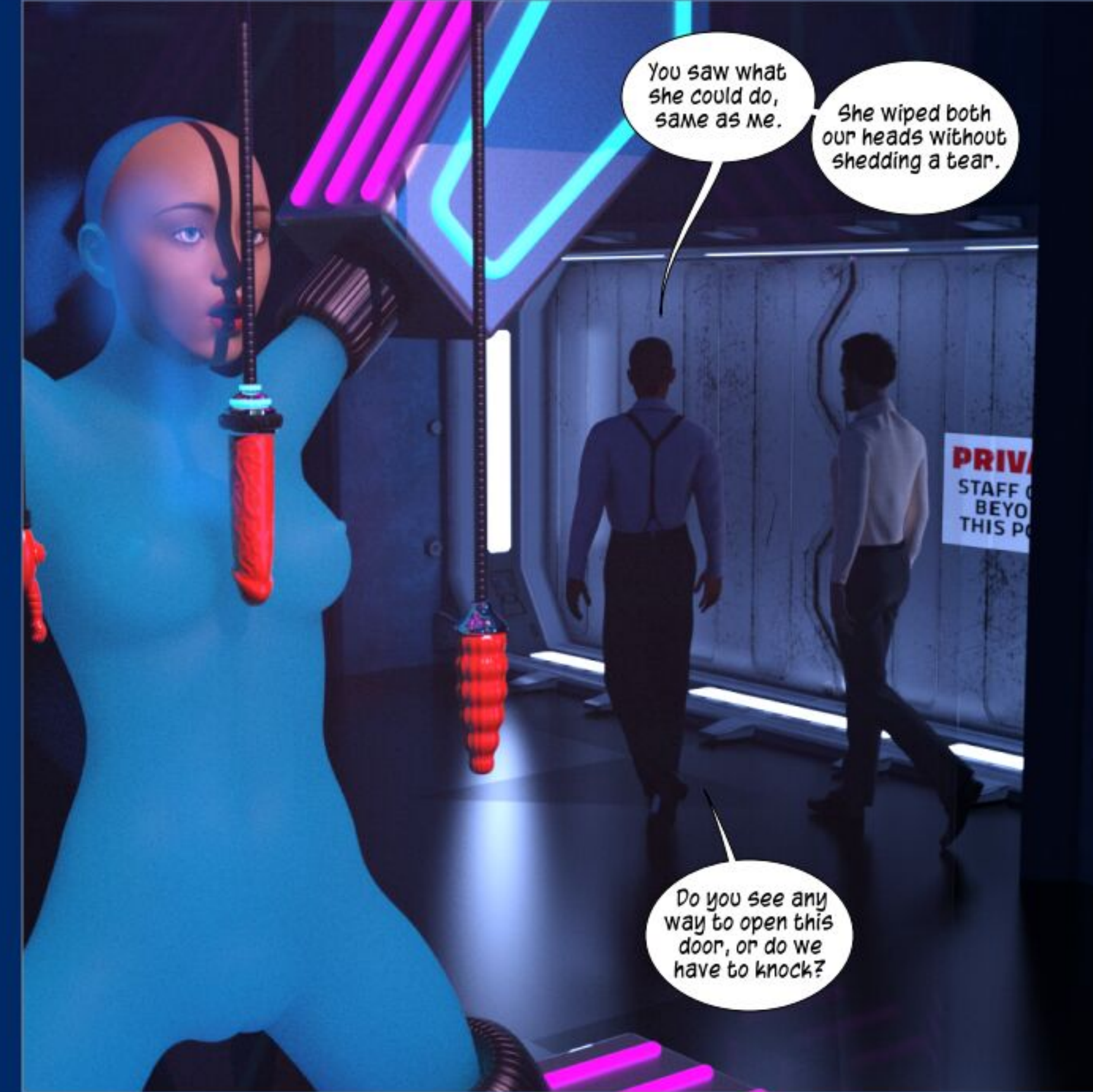
Oh, yeah, I recognize these.

Wonder who she's got in 'em now.

Sorry?

You're serious.

All these toys have real people in them. She'd do something to them, make them like dolls. Gave me the creeps, to be honest, but I let her do that kind of thing her way.



You saw what she could do, same as me. She wiped both our heads without shedding a tear.

Do you see any way to open this door, or do we have to knock?



This place is either a lot bigger than her last one, or she didn't let me see most of it.

Melinda always liked big sets.

I think there's someone moving around back there.

I'm going to need you to leave. Right now.

Huh?

This area's not open to the public. Didn't you see the sign?

Hello, Alicia.



Cobermayer? I thought you were supposed to be dead or something.

Get out of here.

No chance.

We're looking for Melinda Shannon, and my friend here thinks you must know where she is.

Nobody's seen Melinda for a long time. She vanished. Hadn't you heard?

And you just breezed in and took over her business.

You were always scared to death of her, Alicia. So I think you must be really sure she's not coming back, if you're operating this openly here.

Which means you know what happened to her.



Or it just means I'm not scared of her anymore.

You have three seconds to leave. Or you'll wish you had.

Do you know who I am? Nobody threatens me!

Clayton, wait, she's, ah--





Drag these two out the back door.

Don't let them into the club again.

Yes, ma'am.



EARLY-MORNING STRATEGY MEETING BEFORE THE DAY'S SHOOTING.



I'm thinking we try to get through the last of the Material without Byla in it today, if we can. The more of that we put away before working on Treece's scenes, the better.

You think Treece is going to be difficult?



No, not difficult ... but she's the second most inexperienced member of the cast, after Gigi ... and Gigi barely has a part, while Treece has to carry a couple of big scenes.

Sex scenes, you mean.

It's no joke ... no matter what else we put in it, for some people, the sex is going to be the only reason they watch it. That's just how it is.

And I don't think Treece has ever done that on camera.



I can help talk her through that, if it's not stepping on your directorial toes.

I have a lot of experience dealing with people who've had cold feet that way--

Huh.

Another one of these?

Another one of--?

Ruby, why are you a robot?

Good thing you don't have a mirror.



Check it out. It's a wave effect. Everybody's a robot.

I swear, Ruby, I don't know how weird shit finds you so often ...

Well, I'm pretty sure it's not focused on me, for once. There've been a couple of others, the last few days. Leyna's collecting reports.



... All done.

Like it never happened.

What's causing this? Is someone doing it on purpose?

No clue.

Did you notice we both turned to robots from the passive? Nobody else in here did. They each had their own forms.

So the effect may have been external, but the shapes we took came from inside our heads.



You don't seem too concerned ... isn't it part of your job, to look into weirdness like that?

Don't know if I'd call it a job. It seems to just find me, like you said.

We don't have enough information to follow up on it--or even figure out where to look--and so far it's strange but harmless. Until we can get more, there's no point getting too worked up.

Right now we've got a passive to make. And we should probably get to the set. Grab your coffee.



Been a while, Mimi.

What are you doing --
I mean, to what do I owe the pleasure?

I'm looking for information on a woman named Gira Gessit. Type D. Sex worker.



And you think I'd know something about that?

Come on, Mimi. Word is that half the trade does its meetups downstairs. Besides, you know all the gossip in Coldpoint.

I wouldn't say that. There's a lot of Polks here who wouldn't tell me the news if their lives depended on it.

You know, normally I don't give out information for nothing.



I'll trade you my goodwill.
I'm sure you want to stay on the right side of the woman who could shut down your business.

Since you put it like that ...

Give me a moment, though. I need to go check on the floor. I'll be right back.



And that's my two minutes done with.

Thanks, Ruby, it was fun.

Aw, Kori, don't be like that. I wanted you for this role because I needed someone I knew could do it right.

Come on. This is practically a stock character. You could have gotten anybody else who was willing to put on twenty years and sixty pounds.

Not that I don't appreciate it. I always like working with you. I just was hoping there was a little more meat to it.

Mimi gets more to do later. I promise.

I sure hope so.



Let's see ... We'll finish shooting this episode in another two days ... then a few days to edit ... that's a little more than a week for the whole process. Then we take it to Lou to figure out how many episodes to go ahead and make ...

So if things happen as fast as they could, and Trish wants to keep shooting without a break, that's about a month before I have to come up with more material than the three episodes I've already written.



Huh?

My finely honed sense of danger says that weirdness is upon me yet again.

You won't get away from me this time!

You're going to perform in my circus ... forever!



You know, I realize I'm getting way too used to this kind of thing, but I feel like you're saying that without a whole lot of conviction.



I'm--?

No! I--

... oh, god.



Why is this happening again?*

It's you! It's you, isn't it? I need to get away--

Hang on! It's not me doing it, and it's not really you, either.

It's beyond your control, and I'm not mad at you ... but we do need to talk.

* THIS IS THE WOMAN WHO TRIED TO TURN RUBY INTO A MINDLESS JESTER IN SS #25. -T



I think it must have been sex. Like, when I was having sex. I can hear her voice ... and we're both not wearing anything ... we're lying down ...

But that's all I'm sure about.

Well, you're also sure it's a woman. You said "her."

Oh, yeah, definitely a her. But every time I try to remember her face ... it just slips away.

I'm not surprised. She obviously gave you some suggestions to block all that out. She doesn't want us finding her.



But -- I mean, am I going to be doing this forever?

I sure hope not, don't you? But I think you won't. The suggestion's getting weaker; that's why it didn't hold up this time. Of course, if you meet up with her again and she refreshes it ...

Keep trying to remember where and how she did this to you, if for no other reason than so you can avoid it!

We have a good idea who's doing this. We're just having some trouble finding her. When we do, we are going to shut her down hard. Believe me.

Meantime ... eh. If we end up doing this dance again, I think I can probably break us both out of it. No worries.

A FEW HOURS LATER. OUT IN THE AWAKE WORLD, MISCHIEF OF SOME KIND SEEMS TO BE TAKING PLACE.



This is how we're getting into the Facility?

We're not going into the Facility. We'd set off alarms left and right. What we need will come to us right here.

So what do we do?

You know, it'd help if I had some idea how this is going to work.

We seem to have some time to kill.

We wait.

Stay close to the wall. The carriers will take up most of the tunnel.

NATHANIEL BARKER ... AND SHARL, THE WOMAN NAT HAS RECRUITED FOR HER PLAN, WHATEVER THAT MAY BE.

"You want to hear a story? All right.

"When Sleep began, they realized they had a problem. For Sleepers to have babies, you have to get two of them physically together in the same Awake space. Well, you don't, but nobody wanted automated collection and insemination, even though it would have been simple to do.

"So they made 'birthing resorts.' These were Awake areas attached to the Sleep Facility, where two people could take a vacation together and spend it trying to make a baby."



"They immediately found they had a brand-new problem. People's appearance Awake wasn't always the same as it was in Sleep, especially with longevity so high ...

"Also, after a while in Sleep you lose your toilet training, so they had to either back on a couple of weeks to relearn that, or try to have sex while in diapers ..."



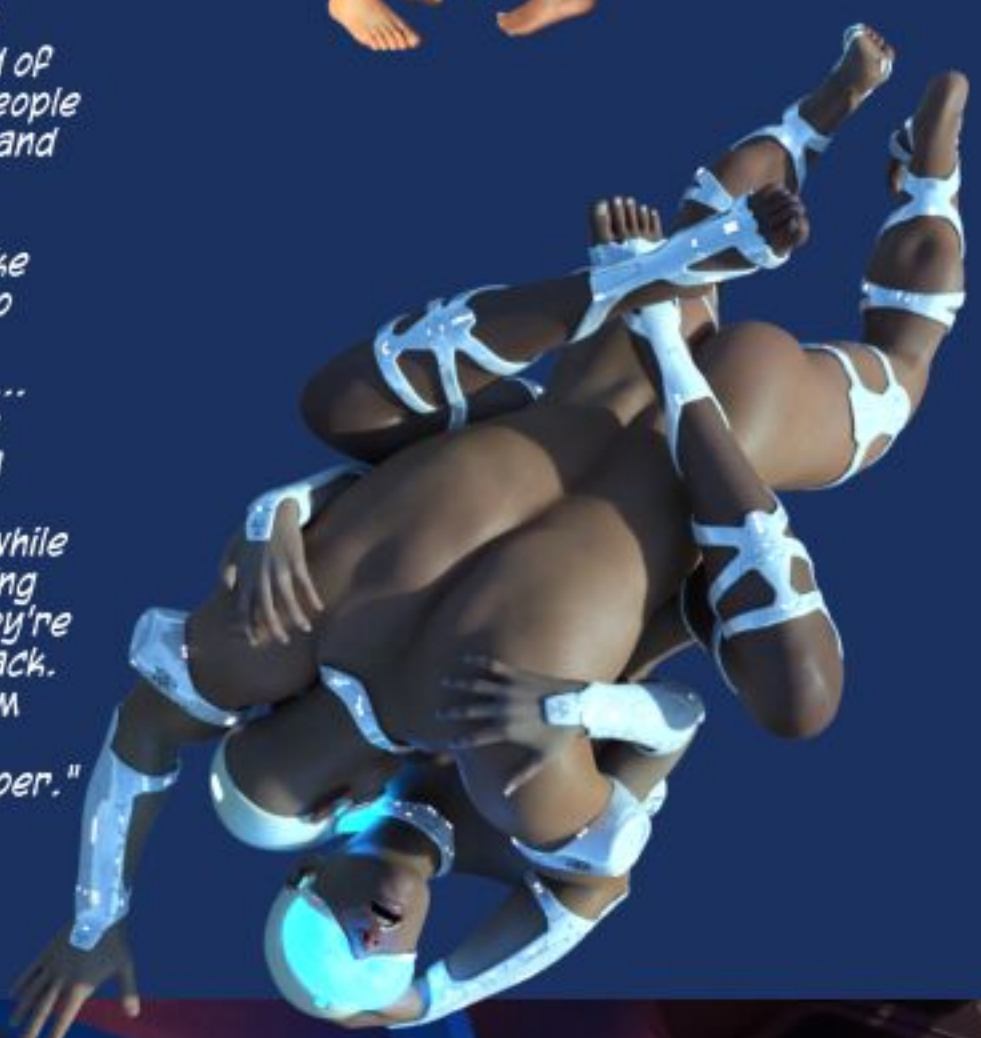
"In A4 they used the existing birthing resort as the new Facility. Waste not, want not. The birthing resort was designed so you could walk around in actual outdoors and such, so it's not underground like the rest of the Facility. That makes it a weak point. They've never bothered to do anything about that."

"OK, but weak point or not, aren't they going to notice when we switch out? I mean, Sleepers are monitored--surely they can tell when one of them changes to a different person with a different shape?"

"You'd be surprised. The system doesn't care very much about your physical appearance, just your vitals. People have to request a physical rescan just to find out what they look like. You'll be getting extra scans because they're very careful about prenatal care, but none of them will look at what you actually look like. You just need to be healthy. And Fertile."

"Their answer was to develop a special kind of Sleep bed that two people could be in together, and ... you get the idea.

"But they couldn't take people OUT of Sleep to move them to the temporary sex beds ... that'd spoil the whole point. So they made a carrier system that transports people--while asleep!--to the birthing Facility, and when they're done, carries them back. The bedders tuck them back in and it's all seamless to the sleeper."



One's coming. It'll either be her or him.

Be ready to move past it's her. I can only interrupt the carrier for so long before it sets off alerts.



It's her! Quick!



What are you going to do with her?

None of your concern. Hurry.

I just want to know if you're going to kill her.

No.

Get in! I still have to connect you and seal it back up.



OK, stay a reasonable distance back--you don't want her to notice you, remember. When she takes the corner, you can close in a little Paster.

Next you follow her to the diner where she consults with the customer. We shot that already, so we're skipping to the other corridor set.

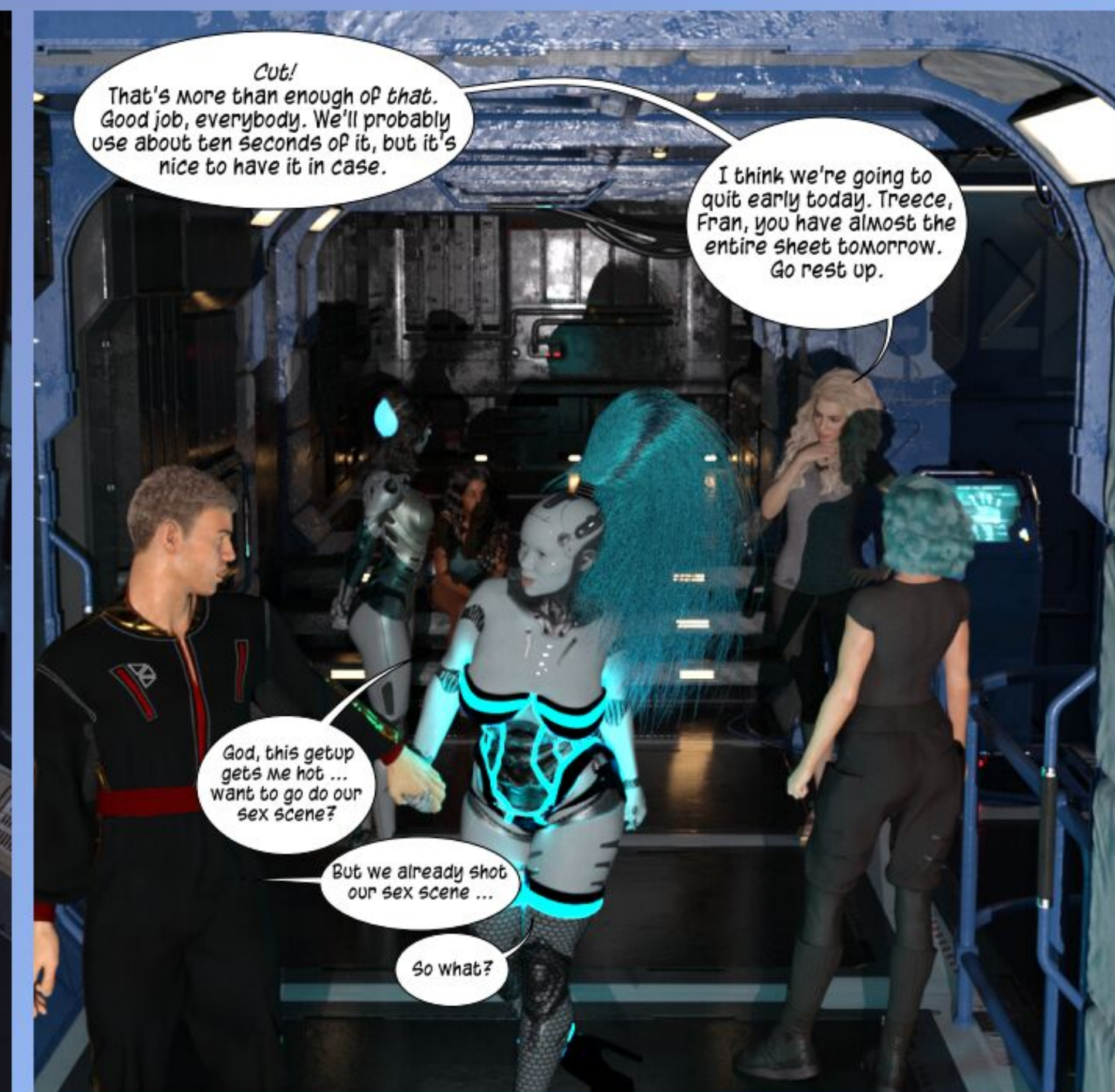


Keep back ... the camera's going to move past you so we can close in on him keeping his rendezvous with her ...



You can follow a little more closely here because they aren't paying attention to anything but each other ...

Good! Let them go through the door, then give it three beats and go through after them.



Cut! That's more than enough of that. Good job, everybody. We'll probably use about ten seconds of it, but it's nice to have it in case.

I think we're going to quit early today. Treece, Fran, you have almost the entire sheet tomorrow. Go rest up.

God, this setup gets me hot ... want to go do our sex scene?

But we already shot our sex scene ...

So what?



You know, I do welcome an evening out, but I can't help suspecting you might not have asked just because you want my company.

Well ... If I say I'm a little worried about you, are you going to take it badly?

You looked really tired when I came out to check on you the other day. You're obviously throwing yourself into fixing Forbes* with everything you've got, which is fine, but I don't want it to strip you raw, especially since you're not really recovered from Markov yet.

*CONSTANCE FORBES, WHO CAUSED THE DISCONTINUITY IN ISSUES #14-16. DR. CHAPMAN'S FINAL "COMA PATIENT" TO BE HELPED, AND POSSIBLY HER MOST DANGEROUS. -T



Forbes is my fault too! I messed up with Markov, y'know. I don't want to mess up again.

'k, but if you go so hard you get all messed up too, that's real bad ...

Ruby, you look like a little kid!

You do too! -- giggle --

And you're talking weird ... and ...



ooahh! Phbbrt

hee! argb! Pft!



... Well, that was certainly something.

Another of those wave effects. There've been a bunch of them the last few days. They never last long.

You've been spending most of your time Awake, you've missed the other ones.

No idea where they're originating?

Not yet. I've been too busy to investigate.

Has to be a network phenomenon. Nothing else has that kind of reach.

OK, but the network is still completely down ...

... wait.

Huh. Want to come meet a couple of interesting people?



I told you! Even with the stabilizer in, that sequence was going to degrade just like all the rest ...

I know, I know ... but we had to try it. That was just about my last idea ...

-- ahem --



Ruby!

Hey! It's good to see you. Who's your friend?

Uh ... there's nothing wrong, is there?

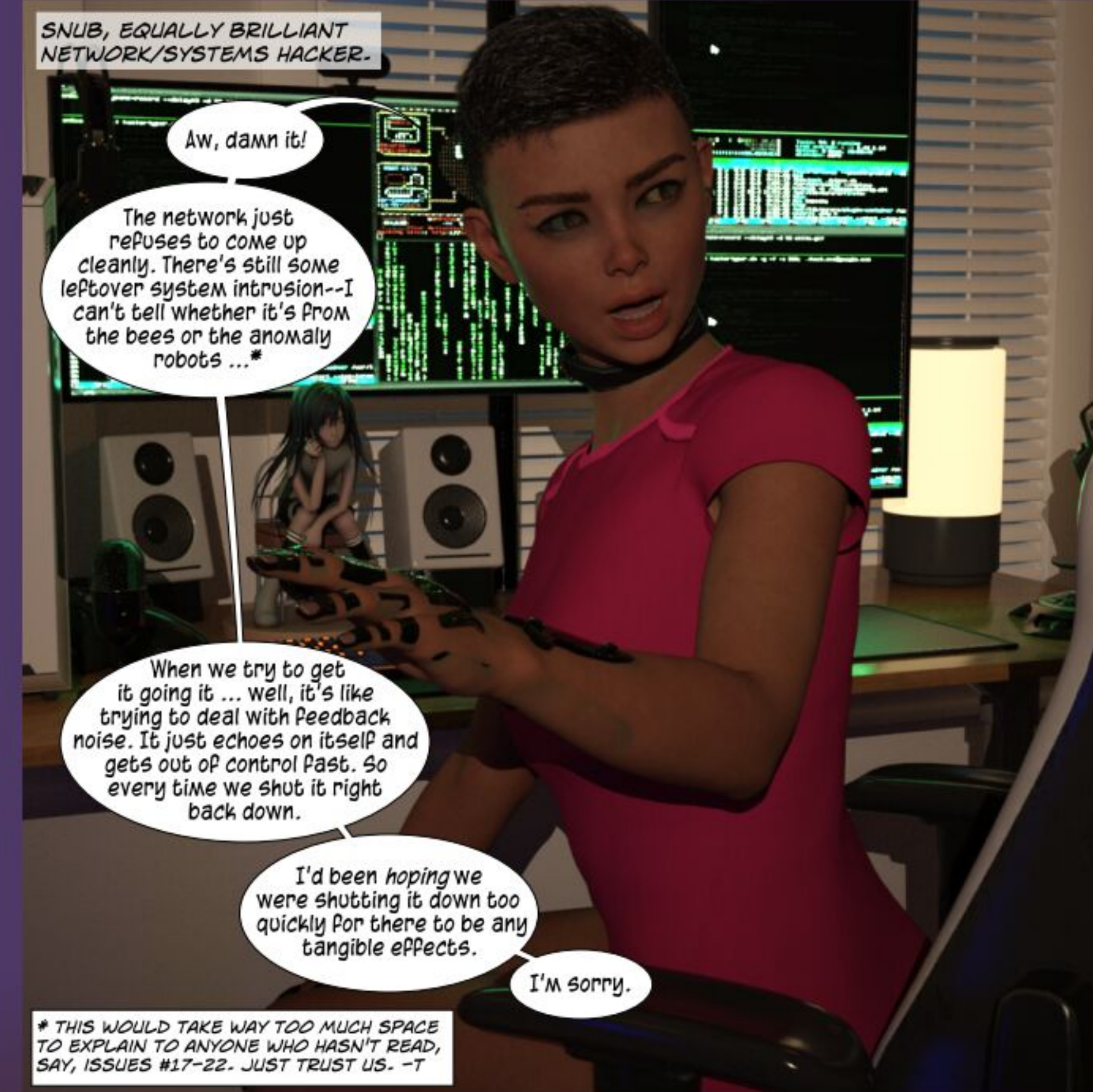
This is Dr. Chapman.

As for whether something's wrong, you tell me.

I take it from what I just heard that you're trying to get the network back up again?

I think whatever you're doing might be causing spillover effects. Weirdness. People turning into robots or babies or dogs for a few seconds.

DINA, AN EXTREMELY BRILLIANT ALGORITHMIC-MANIFESTATION HACKER. SHE ALSO MOONLIGHTS AS A TODDLER.



SNUB, EQUALLY BRILLIANT NETWORK/SYSTEMS HACKER.

Aw, damn it!

The network just refuses to come up cleanly. There's still some leftover system intrusion--I can't tell whether it's from the bees or the anomaly robots ...*

When we try to get it going it ... well, it's like trying to deal with feedback noise. It just echoes on itself and gets out of control fast. So every time we shut it right back down.

I'd been hoping we were shutting it down too quickly for there to be any tangible effects.

I'm sorry.

* THIS WOULD TAKE WAY TOO MUCH SPACE TO EXPLAIN TO ANYONE WHO HASN'T READ, SAY, ISSUES #17-22. JUST TRUST US. -T



No need to apologize ... but maybe we should set up some kind of warning system for when you're making attempts? "Ahoj, brace for weirdness" or something?

Might be moot. Like I said to Dina, that was my last idea. We can't even get a clean restart, and we haven't figured out how to make the system safe from abuse if we do get it up.

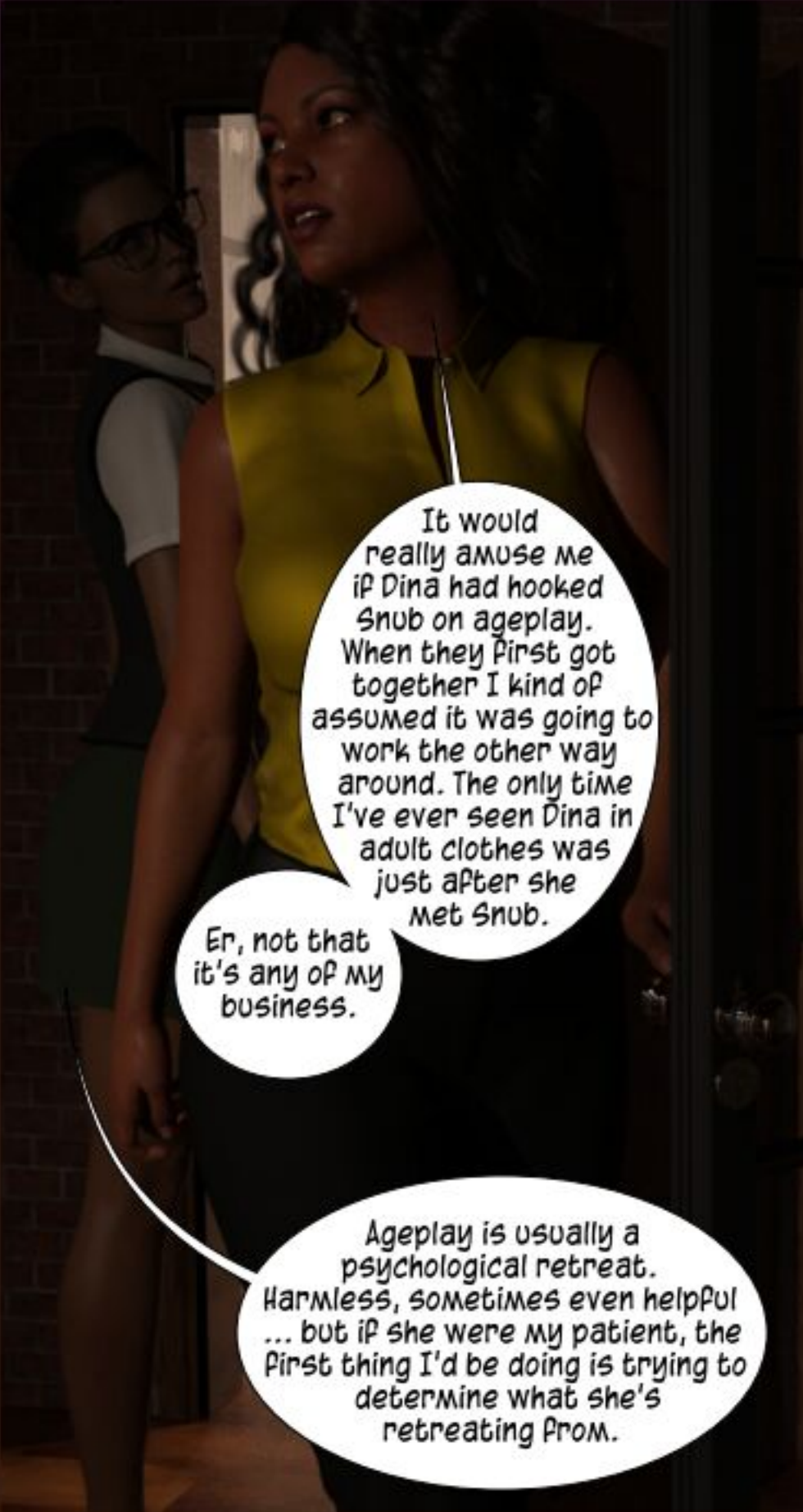
HMM. You know, the Archivist told us that some of the other A's, faced with the same problem, eventually just gave up and stopped having phones.

Anyway, keep us informed of what you're doing. And don't feel bad if it turns out it can't be done.

By the way, that's a new look for you, isn't it?

Oh ... ah ... The onesies are really comfortable for sitting at a keyboard all day ...

-- giggle --



Er, not that it's any of my business.

It would really amuse me if Dina had hooked Snub on ageplay. When they first got together I kind of assumed it was going to work the other way around. The only time I've ever seen Dina in adult clothes was just after she met Snub.

Ageplay is usually a psychological retreat. Harmless, sometimes even helpful ... but if she were my patient, the first thing I'd be doing is trying to determine what she's retreating from.



I figured she was just retreating from having to be a grown-up. Some days I can't say I blame her--

We're closed, damn it!



Raz?

Ruby, I'm sorry! I didn't have any other way to reach you ... I didn't want to wait for you to get a message ...

I figured it out! I know who was messing with my head. Well, I don't know who, but I know where it happened ...



Remember your friend showed me an image and asked me if I knew her? I said she was familiar but I couldn't remember where?*

She used to run a club I go to sometimes. Kind of a scary lady. She doesn't run it anymore, I don't think. I haven't seen her there in a while.

This club's got some kinda weird things. They have these booths where you can customize ... uh, well, a person. And the person comes out of the booth and you go to another room and have sex with them.

OK, so ... I do that. Every couple of weeks. I don't have much of a personal life right now, see?

Tonight I went to do that, and as I was going to the room with the woman, I ...

It was like everything fit together all at once. That was where I got the suggestions--in one of those rooms. From one of the people from the booths. Maybe more than one of them, I don't know.

Huh. What did you do?

I left! You think I was gonna pool around with her, knowing that?

* AFTER THE SECOND TIME RAZ TRIED TO AMBUSH RUBY IN A SCENARIO. -T



Well, I think you did the right thing.

And, honestly, I wouldn't go back there until we can get this sorted out.

We already knew that club had something to do with this, but since Melinda hadn't been seen in it for ages, it was kind of a dead end.

Sounds like we need to go look at the dead end again.



COINCIDENTALLY, AT MORE OR LESS THE SAME TIME ...

HMM?

**KNOCK
KNOCK
KNOCK**

Lucy?

Don't throw me out! I didn't know who else to go to. I don't know where your friend lives, and there's no phones, and ...

Relax! I'm not going to throw you out. What's wrong?



... I just ... I was so determined, after what Clayton did* ... I wanted to find her first. I wanted to be the one to kick her ass. she's wrecked everything I ever had ...

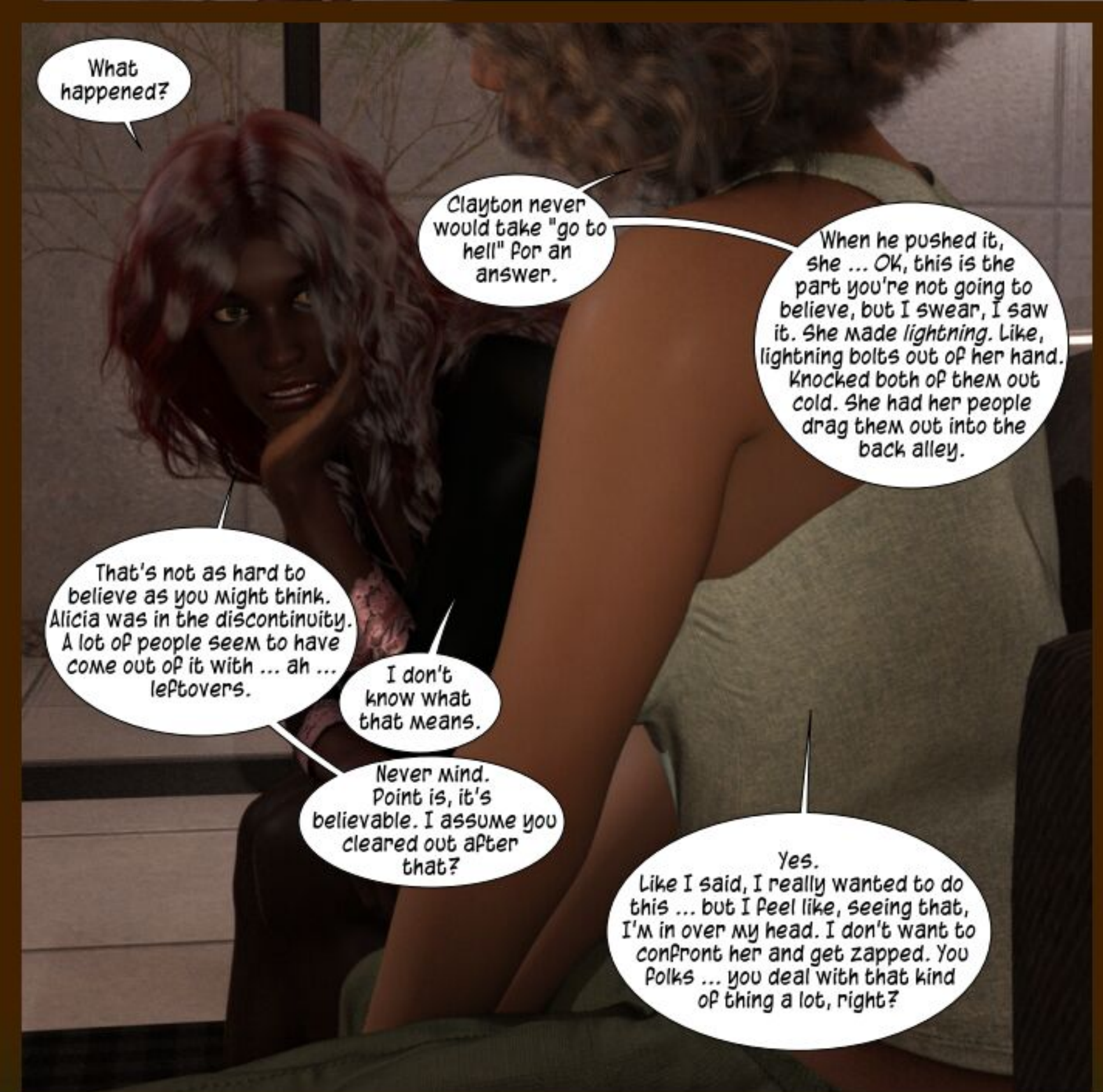
I got as far as the club. Melinda used to run it. I guess you know that. The woman who runs it now--Alicia is her name--she said she didn't know anything about Melinda and didn't want to.

I didn't believe her.

So I started hiding in the club. Watching her. Waiting to see if she did anything. I've been doing that for ... uh ... I'm not sure how long ...

Two nights ago, Clayton and some guy I don't know came in to talk to her. They thought the same as I did. She knew something she wasn't telling.

* ENDED THEIR LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP WITHOUT WARNING, AS SOON AS HE RECOVERED FROM THE BRAINDEAD CONDITION MELINDA PUT HIM IN. MELINDA IMPERSONATED LUCY, AND CLAYTON NO LONGER TRUSTS HER. -T



What happened?

Clayton never would take "go to hell" for an answer.

When he pushed it, she ... OK, this is the part you're not going to believe, but I swear, I saw it. She made lightning. Like, lightning bolts out of her hand. Knocked both of them out cold. She had her people drag them out into the back alley.

That's not as hard to believe as you might think. Alicia was in the discontinuity. A lot of people seem to have come out of it with ... ah ... leftovers.

I don't know what that means.

Never mind. Point is, it's believable. I assume you cleared out after that?

Yes. Like I said, I really wanted to do this ... but I feel like, seeing that, I'm in over my head. I don't want to confront her and get zapped. You folks ... you deal with that kind of thing a lot, right?



Unfortunately, yes.

You will follow up, right? I mean, you'll go find out what she knows, and ...

Of course we will ... ah, on one condition.

Get some sleep, and I mean some real sleep. And don't think about this for a while. Let us look at it.

I ...

You're wrong out, and covering it with eyeliner isn't working. If you're looking that tired in sleep, your actual body must be ready to collapse.

I have a spare bedroom, if you need a place to crash.

No ... No, I'll go home.

Uh ... thank you. For giving a damn.



Here you are.

I thought maybe we were going to meet downstairs?

That sky is fake. Fake stars.

I guess that's good, since there's no curtains around the tub.

We don't have bathtubs.

There's nobody else in the entire hotel. I looked.



Uh ... I think what they do is, every couple gets, sort of like their own personal copy of the hotel ...

We're not a couple.

I don't like this body. She wears makeup. And she puts on clothes like this to go have sex with a stranger.

I don't know how to change it. I don't even know how to change my clothes.

We're not strangers. I've been seeing you for months.



She didn't warn me. She didn't tell me how weird this would be, being a different person ...

What's your name? What's my name?

I'm Johan. Johan Morell.

And your name is Jolee Madison. "Oh, we match!" she said.

I don't know her recall. You'll have to do without.

I guess you'll want to fuck now.



It might be easier if you had at least a little enthusiasm.

Did you love her?

No, actually, don't answer that.

Listen, ah ...

I don't know if it's changed since I was awake, but at the time, a lot of people avoided having sex because of the ... uh ... policies of the leadership ...



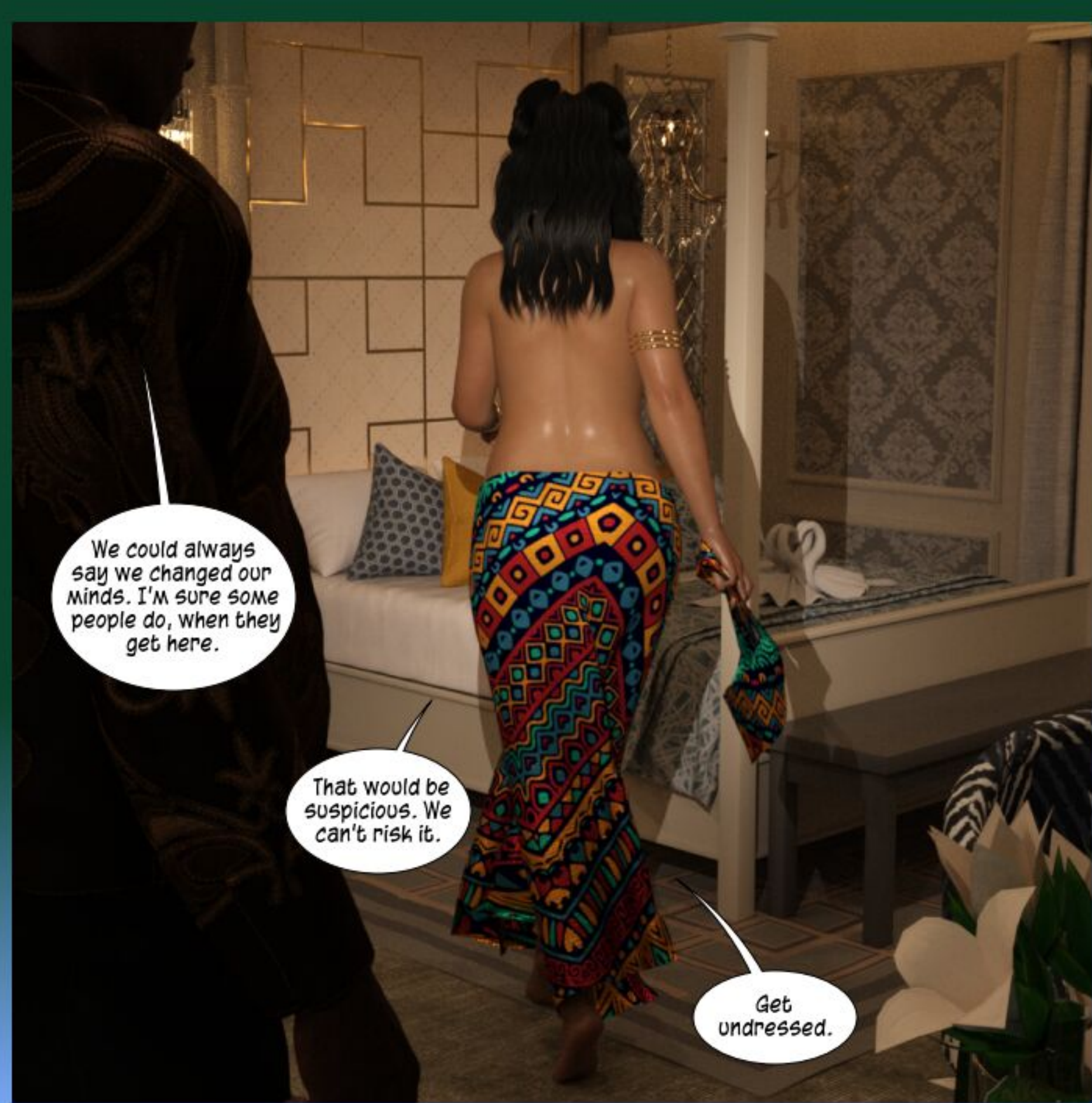
Yes. They want us to have babies. Lots of babies.

But you can't make babies when you're bleeding. A lot of red-bedding goes on. They know, the old Men, but they can't stop it.

You want to know if I've had sex with a man before. Yes. A couple of times.

It wasn't as good as--

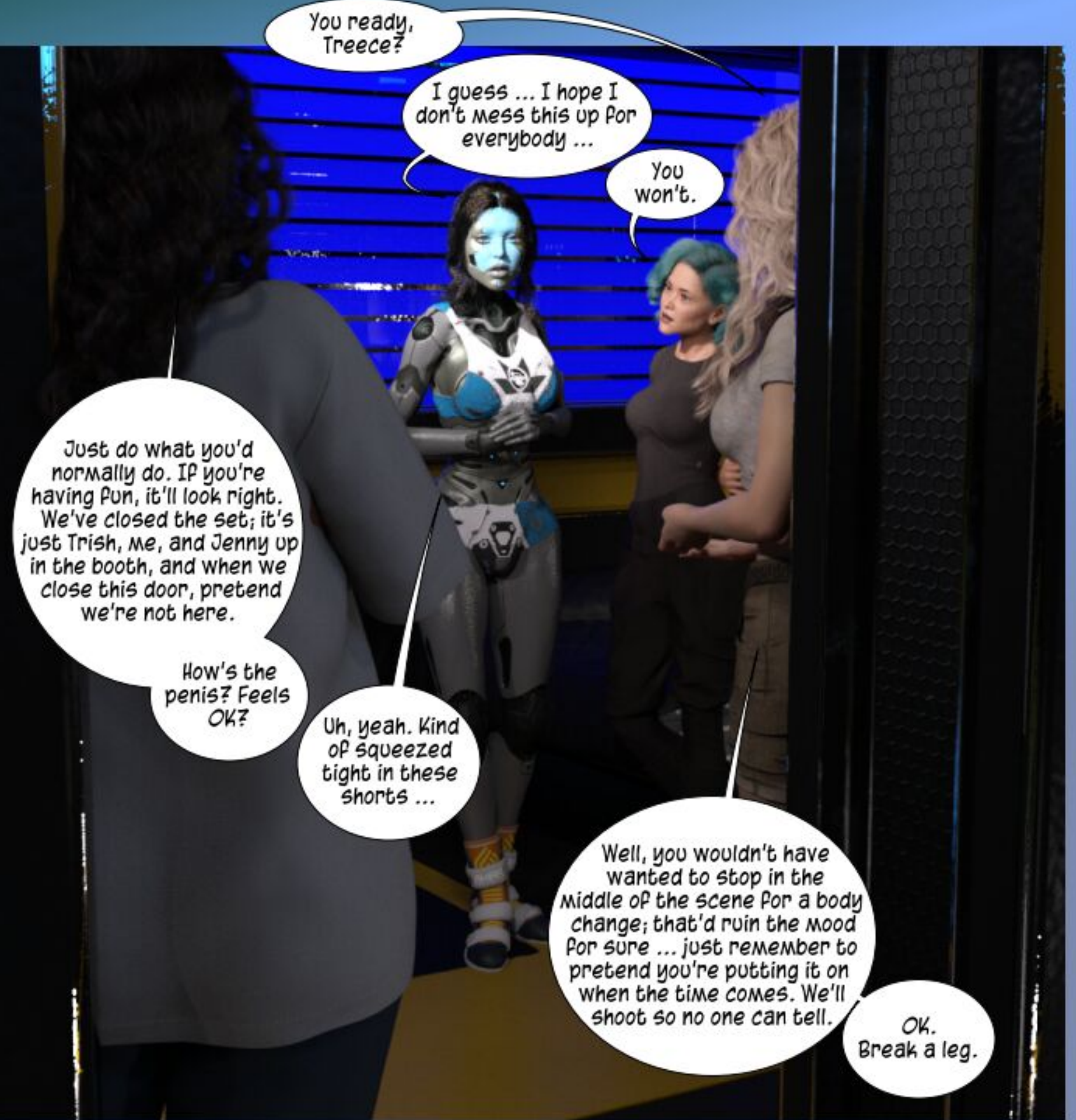
--never mind.



We could always say we changed our minds. I'm sure some people do, when they get here.

That would be suspicious. We can't risk it.

Get undressed.



You ready, Treece?

I guess ... I hope I don't mess this up for everybody ...

You won't.

Just do what you'd normally do. If you're having Fun, it'll look right. We've closed the set; it's just Trish, me, and Jenny up in the booth, and when we close this door, pretend we're not here.

How's the penis? Feels OK?

Uh, yeah. Kind of squeezed tight in these shorts ...

Well, you wouldn't have wanted to stop in the middle of the scene for a body change; that'd ruin the mood for sure ... just remember to pretend you're putting it on when the time comes. We'll shoot so no one can tell.

OK. Break a leg.



This is your place?

I realize it's not as swank as the operations manager's ...

Actually, my rooms aren't much bigger. And all I meant was I was expecting we'd go get coffee or something.

They get upset when we robots sit in places like that and don't buy anything. I don't know where Gira is. She blew off a callout last night.

No word.

She's, ah, probably not going to be available to work for a while.

What's happened to her? Are you holding her? On what basis?

The callouts all happen through you? So you know her customers. I need information on them.

... Which kind of appliance do you like?

Appliance?



You don't know? I figured in your position you'd--

We L's aren't like the D's. They have fixed genitals. Ours are swappable. Which kind do you prefer?

I--

Maybe we're not having the same conversation. I'm not here to have sex. I just want contacts for Gessit. I need to talk to them.

I'm not going to tell you that. Our client list is very private.

And you're not going to tell me anything about Gira, obviously.

So you can either go ahead and leave now, or we can Puck.

I think it'd be interesting to have sex with the operations manager. You know, you're kind of not like a real person. A myth.

Maybe once we know each other more closely we'll decide to tell each other things.



I haven't ever had sex with a robot.

Really? That's unusual, you know.

It always struck me as cold. I don't mean physically, I know you heatsink through your skin. Emotionally.

Why would any robot be interested in sex with a human? The M's are always saying how what they do together is better ...

M's are snobs about some things. And defensive. I've done direct conjunction. It's Fun, but it's not really the same thing at all.

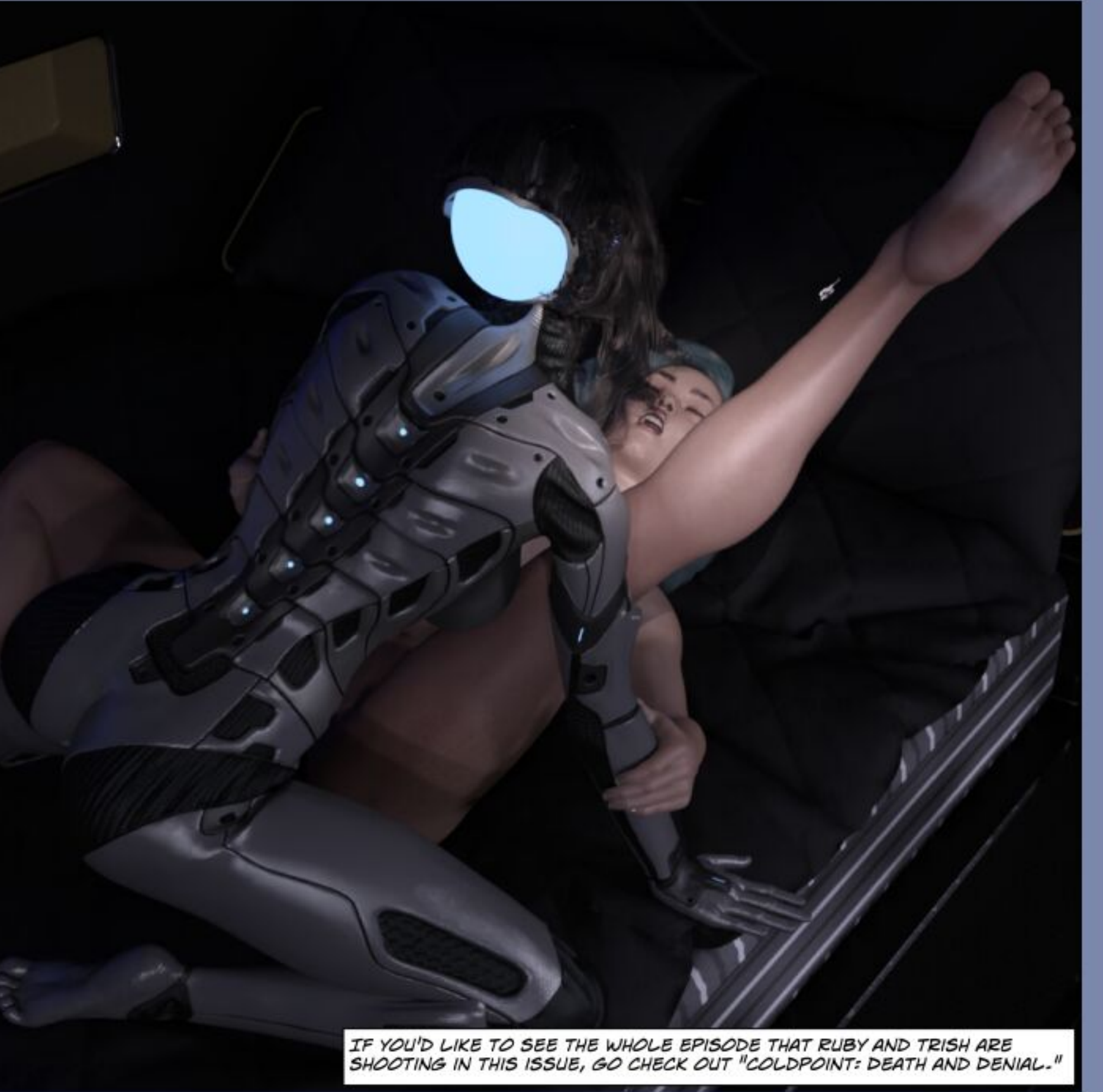


I can hear your heart. I can hear differences in your breathing. I can feel tiny temperature changes in your skin.

When I touch you in the right place and your nervous system reacts, I know it. That's seriously hot.

Every robot I know--except the M's--is incredibly invested in sex. Much more than any human I've met. And we have better Pocus. And way better orgasms, though we try not to mention that, because the humans don't like to hear it.

I think I'll use the penis.



IF YOU'D LIKE TO SEE THE WHOLE EPISODE THAT RUBY AND TRISH ARE SHOOTING IN THIS ISSUE, GO CHECK OUT "COLDPOINT: DEATH AND DENIAL."



Raz says real people come out of these booths. You tell them what you want, and poof! Instant lover.

I feel like we should have given this place a much closer look. A whole lot of people come here! They knew about this. But nobody wants to talk about it.

Embarrassed, I guess. You're asking me? I'm the one who doesn't understand sexual urges.

Heh. I understand the urge--I can see the appeal of being able to make a sex partner who looks exactly the way you want.

But if I did it, I wouldn't bother being embarrassed about it.



Hey, Alicia. We need to have a talk.

And if you're considering zapping us, I should warn you, we've come prepared.

Yeah, we are *not* in the mood.



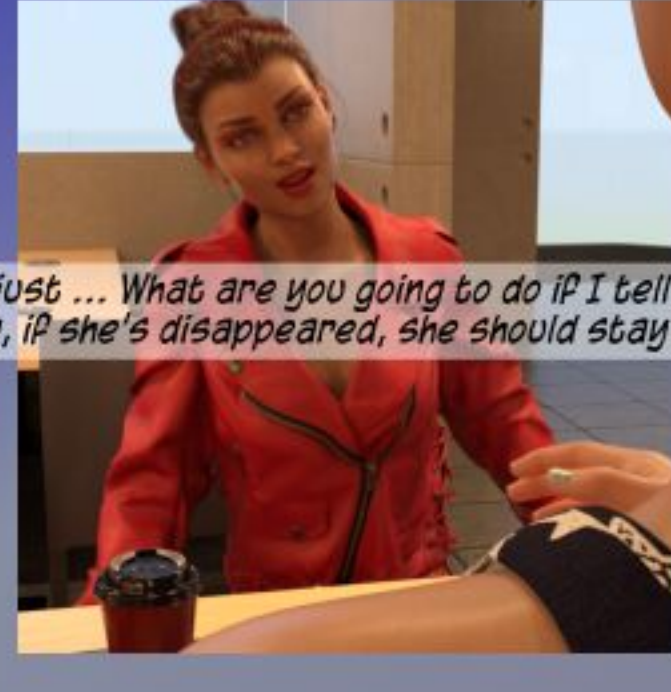
I've told everybody a thousand times!

I don't know where Melinda is, I don't want to know where she is, and I don't know why people want to find her so badly!

We didn't even say it was about Melinda.

Come on, Alicia. I've saved you from her twice. You know how I feel about her. Surely you don't think I'm going to hold it against you if it turns out you disappeared her?

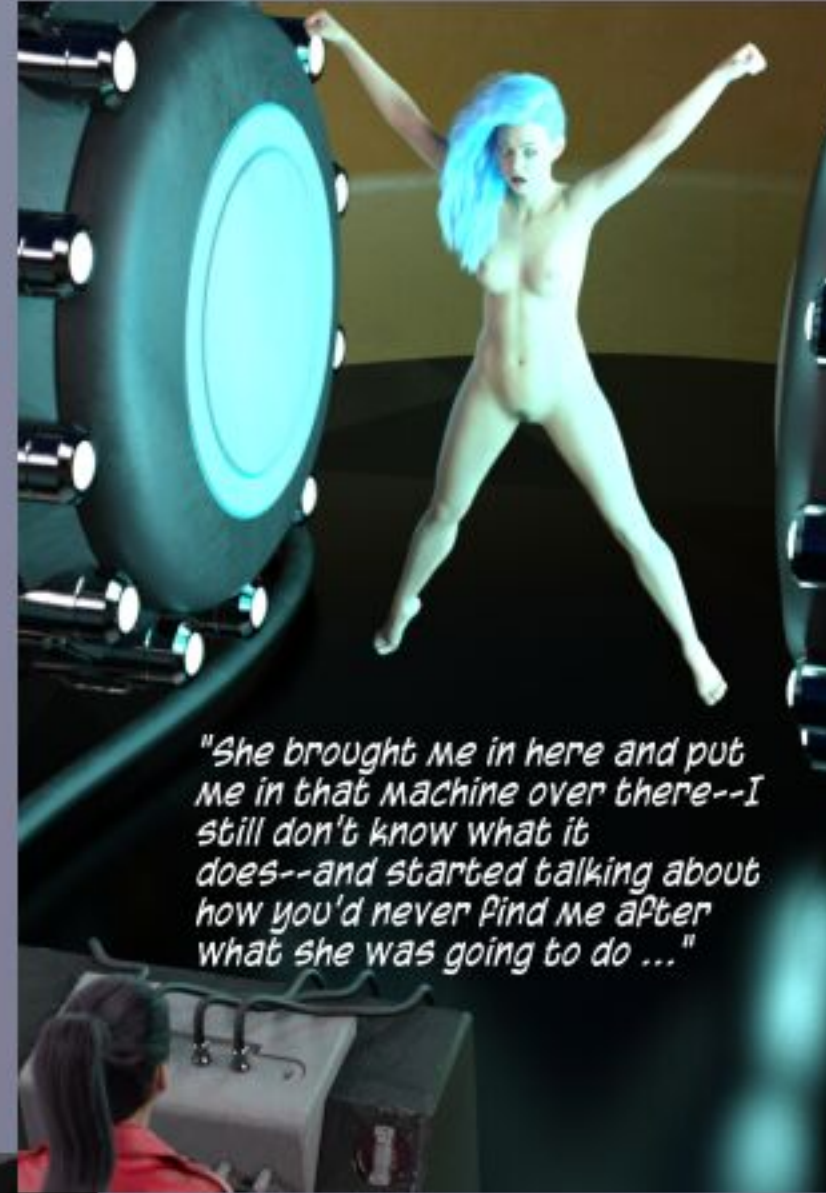
But the more we look, the more it seems like she never left this club. And we really do need to know.



"It's just ... What are you going to do if I tell you? Because, really, if she's disappeared, she should stay that way."



"She came after me a third time. She didn't look like herself, so she was able to catch me off guard."



"She brought me in here and put me in that machine over there--I still don't know what it does--and started talking about how you'd never find me after what she was going to do ..."



"And I thought about how you said none of this was real and I just got madder and madder, and all of a sudden, before I knew it, I'd broken out of it."



"I went at her hard."

"She said I liked being captured, I liked being controlled ... Well, maybe sometimes I do, but not by her. Never again."

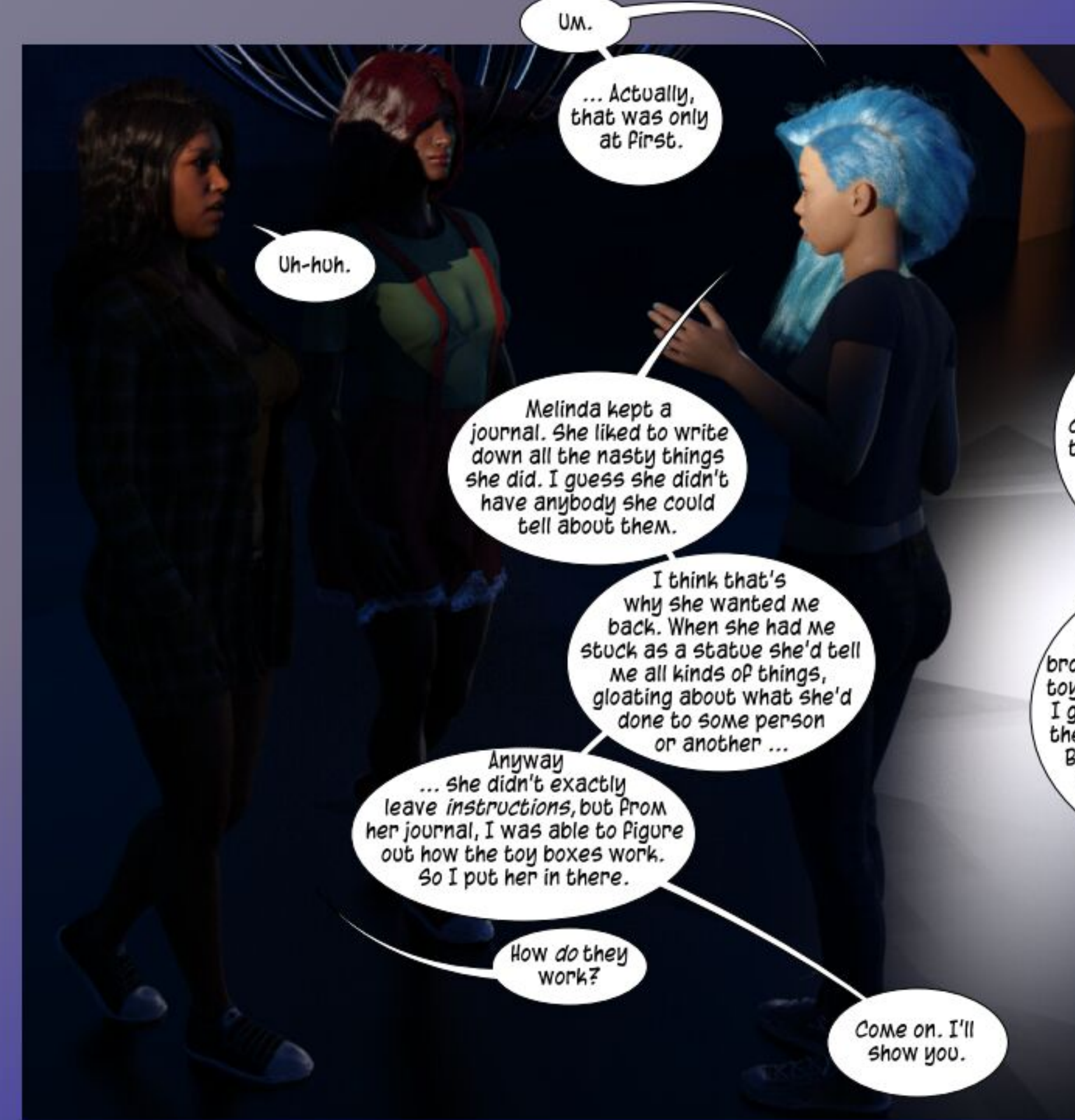
"I had my hand around her throat, I remember that, but I don't remember what I was going to do, because that's when everything exploded and went really weird, and then we were all in that strange place for a while ..."

ALL OF THE ACTION ALICIA IS DESCRIBING HAPPENED IN ISSUE #14. --T



"When we came back out, I found her lying on the ground. She was alive ... awake, her eyes were open ... but she wasn't moving or reacting to anything, it was like she didn't even realize I was there ..."

"And that's when you decided you'd just hide her in a box or something, right?!"



Um.

... Actually, that was only at first.

Uh-huh.

Melinda kept a journal. She liked to write down all the nasty things she did. I guess she didn't have anybody she could tell about them.

I think that's why she wanted me back. When she had me stuck as a statue she'd tell me all kinds of things, gloating about what she'd done to some person or another ...

Anyway ... she didn't exactly leave instructions, but from her journal, I was able to figure out how the toy boxes work. So I put her in there.

How do they work?

Come on. I'll show you.



When somebody goes through this gate, it ... puts their brains in toy mode, I guess. There's a special space they stand around in until someone uses one of the toy boxes.

They get pulled into the box and change to what the customer wants. When they're done, they walk back in here and go through the gate again.

None of Melinda's toys wanted to be there, of course. I broke them all out of it. But the toy boxes are really popular. So I got volunteers. I mean, I pay them! They don't do it for free. But they do it because they want to. Some people think it's fun to be a toy for a while.

I guess whatever toy mode does to their heads worked on Melinda even though she was ... uh ... not there. Mentally, I mean. She's been operating as a toy ever since I put her in here.

Great. Let's pull her out.

What?? Now, see, that's exactly why I didn't want to tell you! Why would you want to do that? Leave her there!



She's not harmless in there, Alicia. If she were, I'd agree with you, no question.

We think she's been messing with the minds of her customers. I guess she's shaken off some of the "toy mode." Or she's doing it subconsciously.

She's been giving them suggestions to come find me and take control of me. I've had to deal with three of them so far ... twice each, in fact. Who knows how many more there are?

If we don't do something about her, I could be looking over my shoulder the rest of my life. And we can't stop her from causing trouble without pulling her out of where she is now.

Oh.

... OK, I see your point.



Great. So we go in and yank her ass out ...

Not through there!

You go in there, it'll put you in toy mode too. You can go out through that gate but not in.

We have to go in the hard way. Come on.

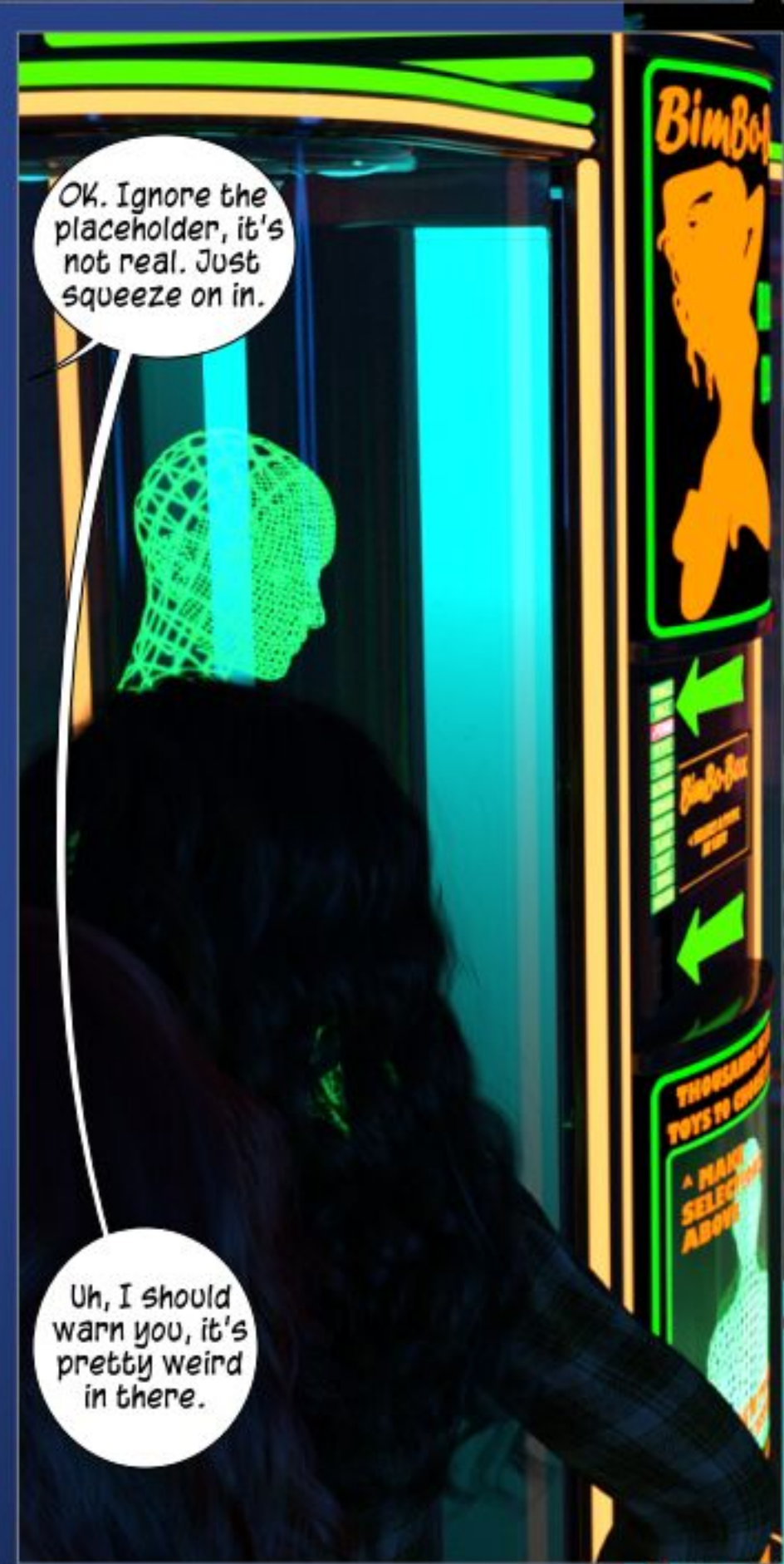


You have to get the glass open ... then there's another door inside they use when they teleport into the box. It's a pain in the ass, but I have to do this any time I break someone out.

That is a pain. What did Melinda do when she let someone out?

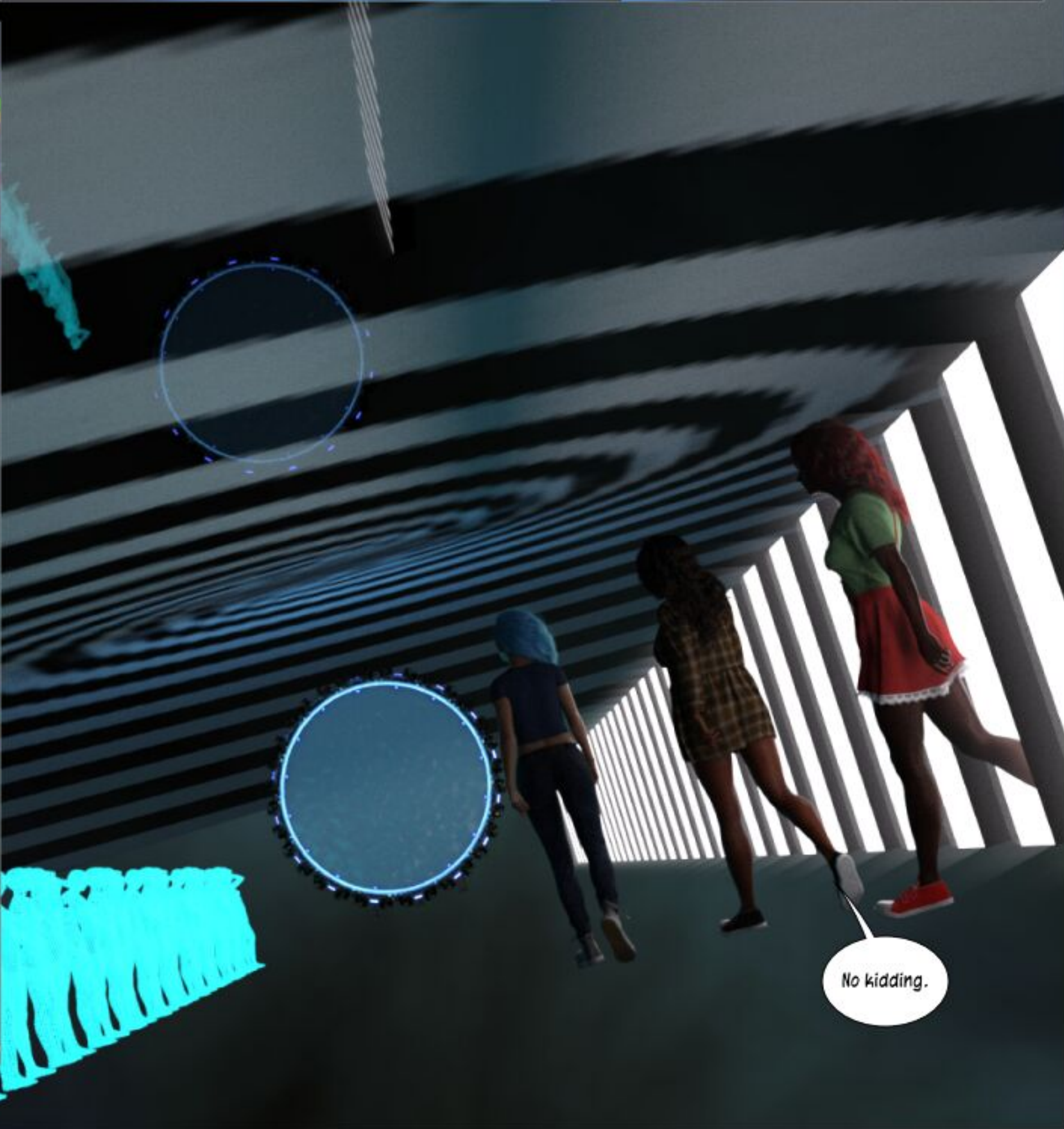
I bet she never did.

Oh. Right.



OK. Ignore the placeholder, it's not real. Just squeeze on in.

Uh, I should warn you, it's pretty weird in there.



No kidding.



How can you tell them apart?

They have numbers, believe it or not.

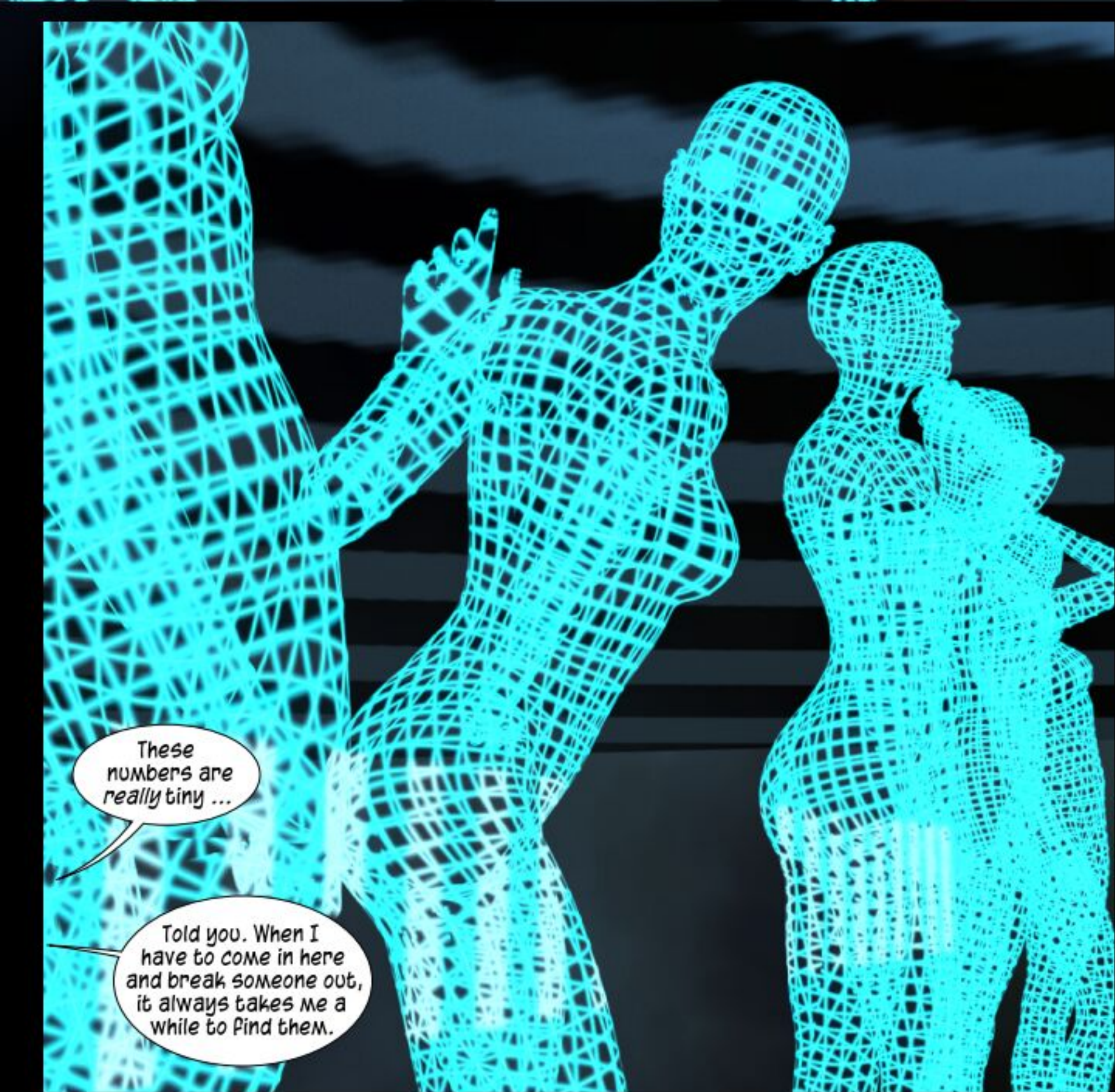
The woman who made all this--you remember her--what was her name?

Azu.

Her. She built it to do that. I don't think Melinda would have cared.

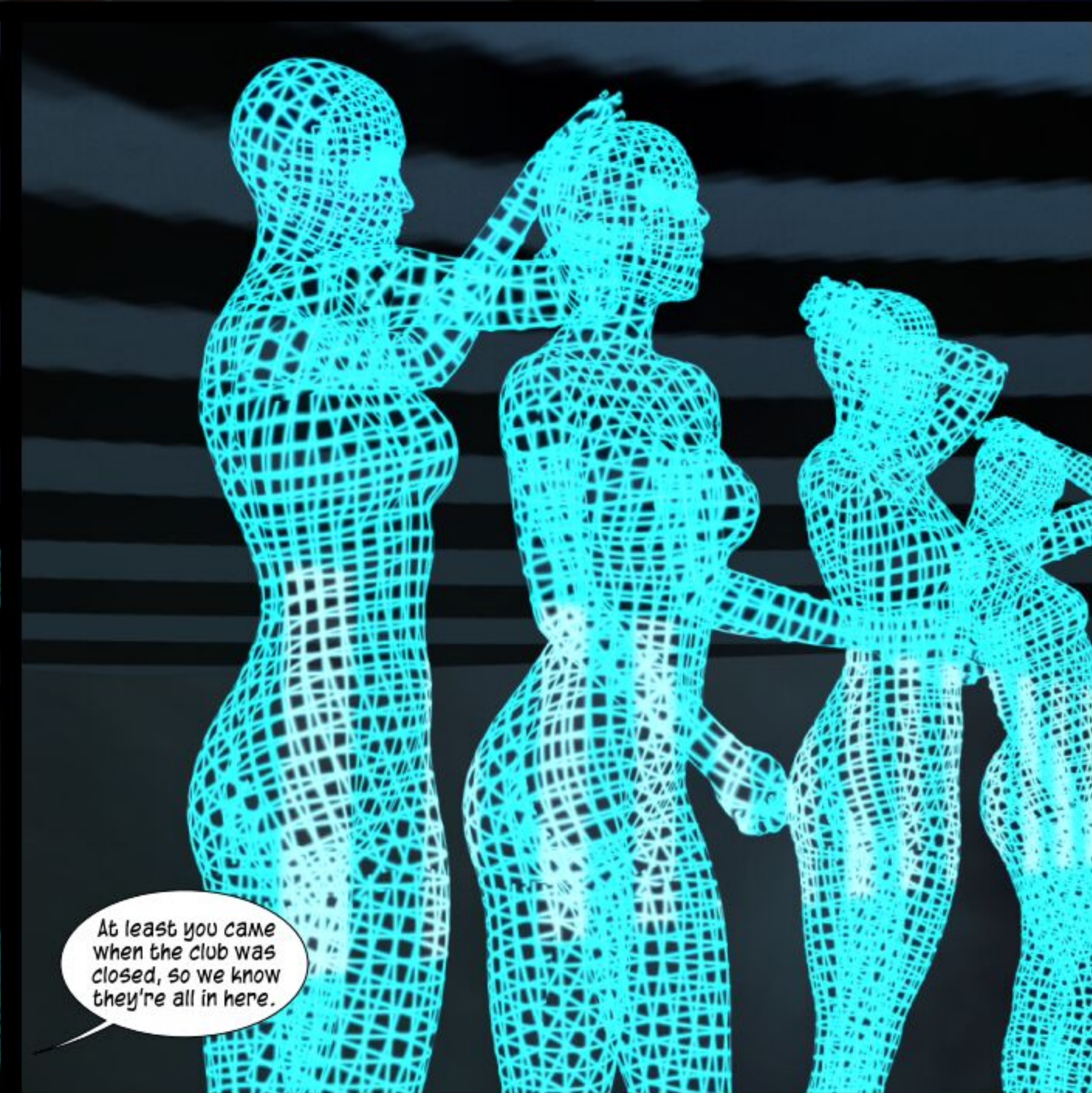
The numbers are real small and they're on the backs of their necks.

Melinda is #83.

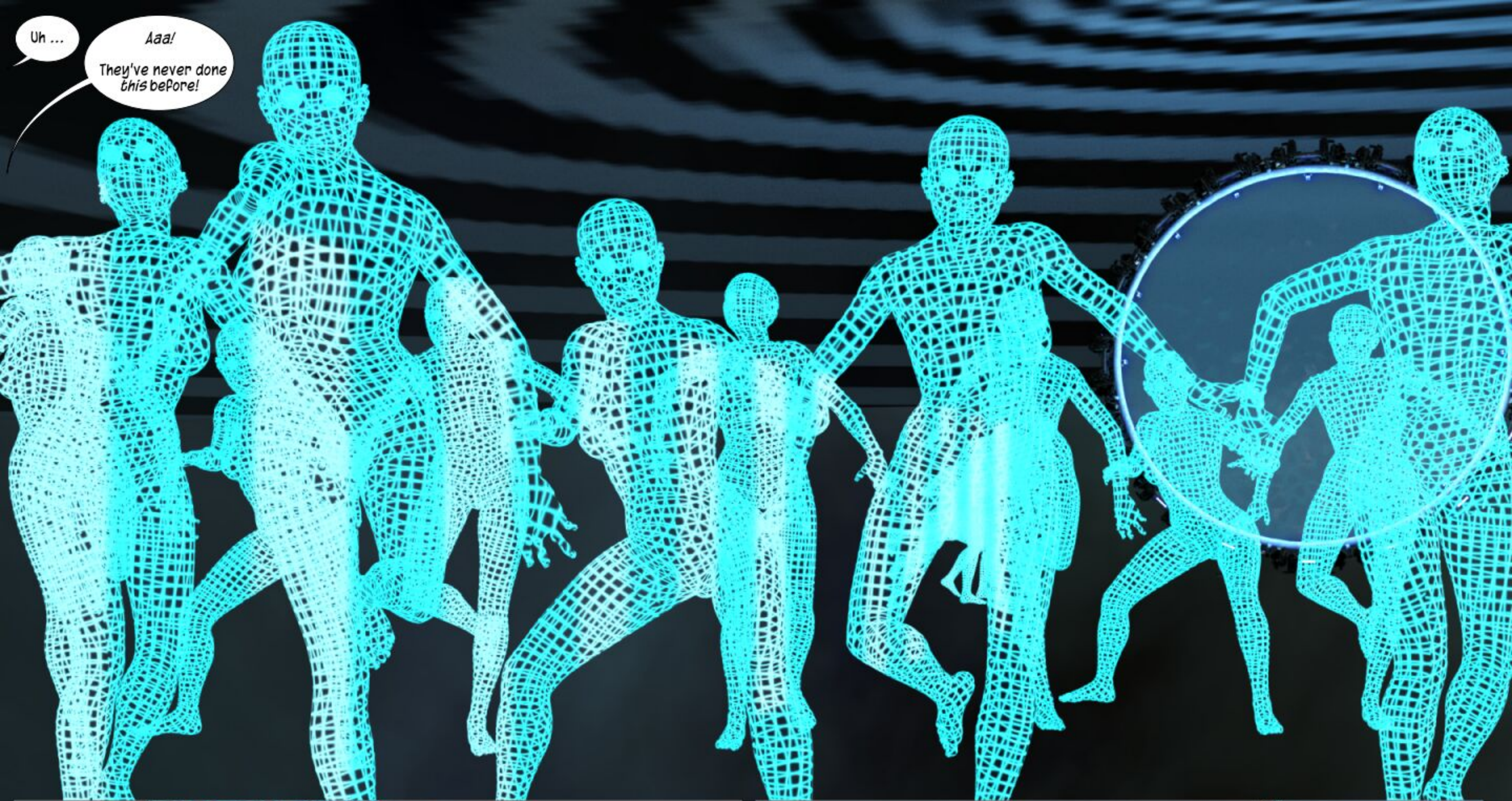


These numbers are really tiny ...

Told you. When I have to come in here and break someone out, it always takes me a while to find them.



At least you came when the club was closed, so we know they're all in here.



Uh ...
Aaa!
They've never done this before!



Help!
What do we do?

Fight 'em!

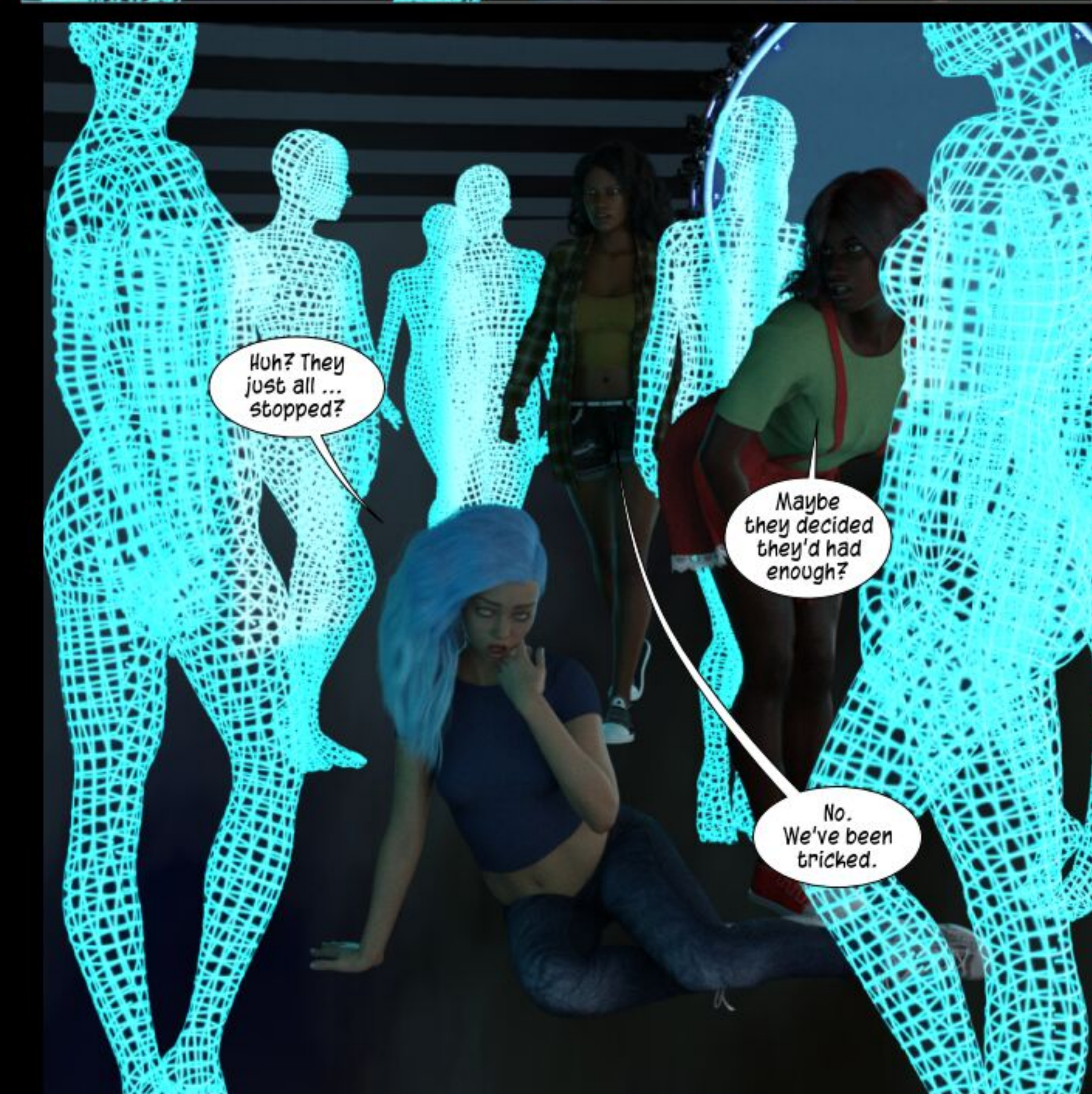
-- hrk --
Easy for you to say ...



Hey!
... Can they go out the big gate on their own?

Not until I break them out.

Shit.



Huh? They just all ... stopped?

Maybe they decided they'd had enough?

No. We've been tricked.



Melinda had already broken out of toy mode on her own. Or mostly had.

She wasn't trapped in here; she was hiding.

Nice and safe, and she could amuse herself by warping her customers and sending them after me.

She must have figured out how to influence the other toys. When we came in looking for her, she activated them as a distraction so she could run for the gate.

I saw her go. She's out.



Oh no!

Yeah. Right back to square one. Damn it!

Not necessarily.

We have more resources available now, and we're better prepared.

Plus, I have an idea. It'll take a little while to put together.



"I don't think it's going to work out very well for her this time."

NEXT: YOUR MOTHER'S CALLING ...