

**SLEEPER SQUAD**

I just don't understand what the delay is.

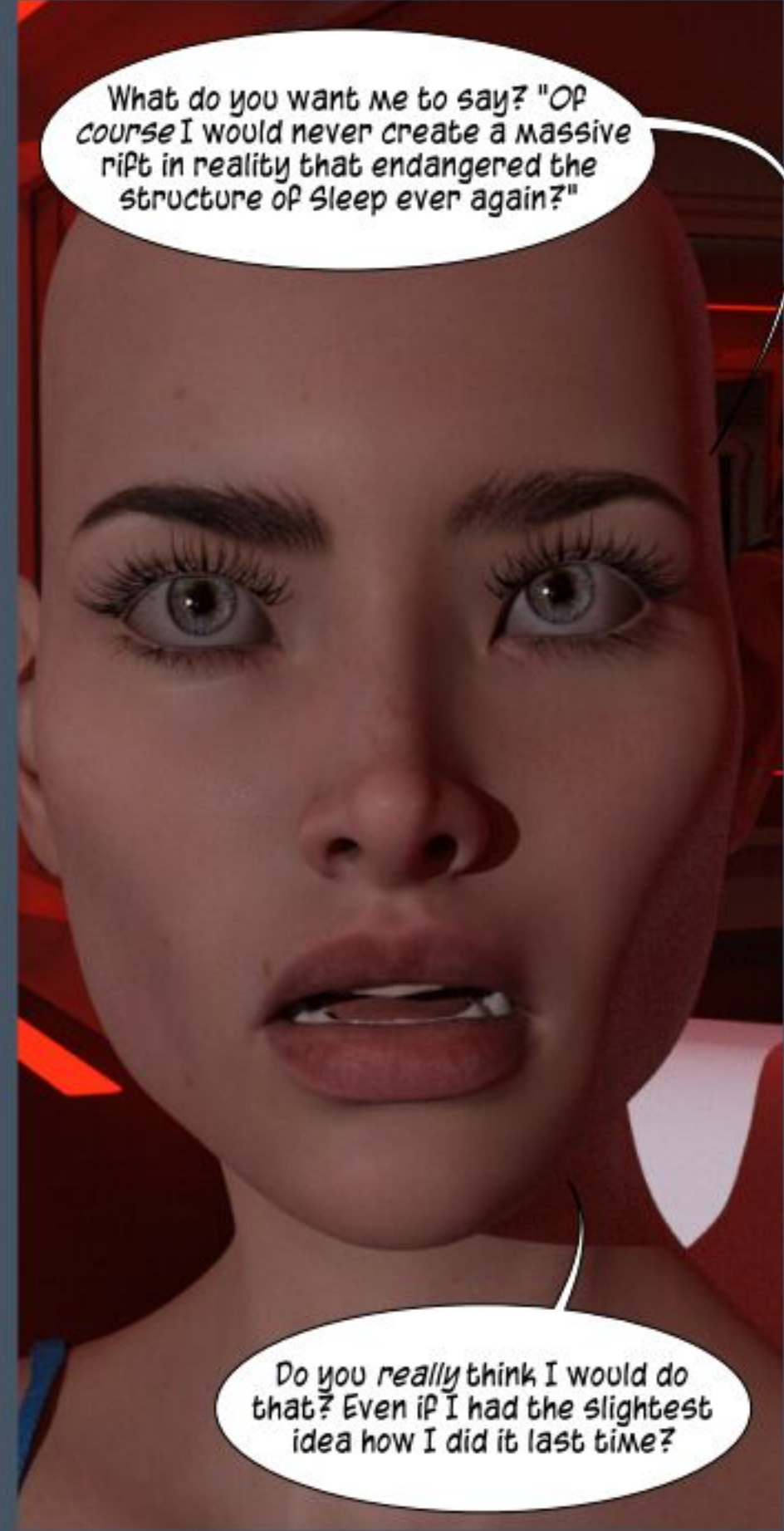
Dr. Chapman says I'm fit to be released ... yet all that happens is people come to talk to me. Over and over.

We're just ... Look, some very bad things happened ... you acknowledge that ...

Which weren't my fault! And wouldn't have happened if it weren't for her experiments. She acknowledges that.



I know it wasn't your fault, Constance. That's not my point. I want to do whatever I have to do to make sure it never happens again.



What do you want me to say? "Of course I would never create a massive rift in reality that endangered the structure of sleep ever again?"

Do you really think I would do that? Even if I had the slightest idea how I did it last time?



OK, point taken. Give me a minute to go find a bedder.

No offense, but I'm not happy about this.

Why would I be offended? I'm not happy about it either, or I wouldn't have called you two in.

If I'd been willing to release her on recognizance alone, she'd have been back in sleep three days ago.



She's pacing the room.

Wouldn't you be?

Thoughts?

I don't trust her.

I don't think she's interested in making another discontinuity. As she said, she probably couldn't if she wanted to. I do think she intends ... something. I don't know what.

But we can't keep her awake because of that.

Why not?



Leyna! Come on.

She's in full control of her faculties, she's saying all the right repentant things, she hasn't consciously done anything we can go after her for ...

... and she could be aboveboard. I've had days of conversation with her in the course of her treatment. If she's got a trace of hostility--even a grudge against me, which would be completely reasonable--I can't find it.

-- Sigh -- You know, I never wanted to be in this role. We're not law enforcement. We shouldn't be making these decisions.

Yes, but no one else will do it. We'll just have to watch her closely.



Sorry for the wait.

It's OK. I know you had to go talk to people to decide. I guess you decided.

... This is M3L. She'll get you tucked in.

GOOD AFTERNOON.



Thanks for deciding.

And don't worry. I won't disappoint you.

SERENE BARKER AND HER CONSORT, CORAZON ESTILO, ATTEND A SOCIAL FUNCTION.



You OK?

I don't know! Some of these men ... I don't mind them looking, but you can't talk to them about anything ... all they want to do is put their hands on you ...

You know, I did wonder if you knew what you were getting into when you said you wanted to come like this.

Some of them are bores, some of them are grabby ... Most of them are both ...

Go take a deep breath in the washroom for a minute. Honestly, I think that's why we keep those around. I'll get us some more drinks.



I mean, I guess I don't mind them looking ...

Half the problem is I barely know myself anymore.

I don't know which idea worries me more ... the idea that a man might proposition me and not take 'no' for an answer ...

... or that I might suddenly decide the answer isn't 'no.'



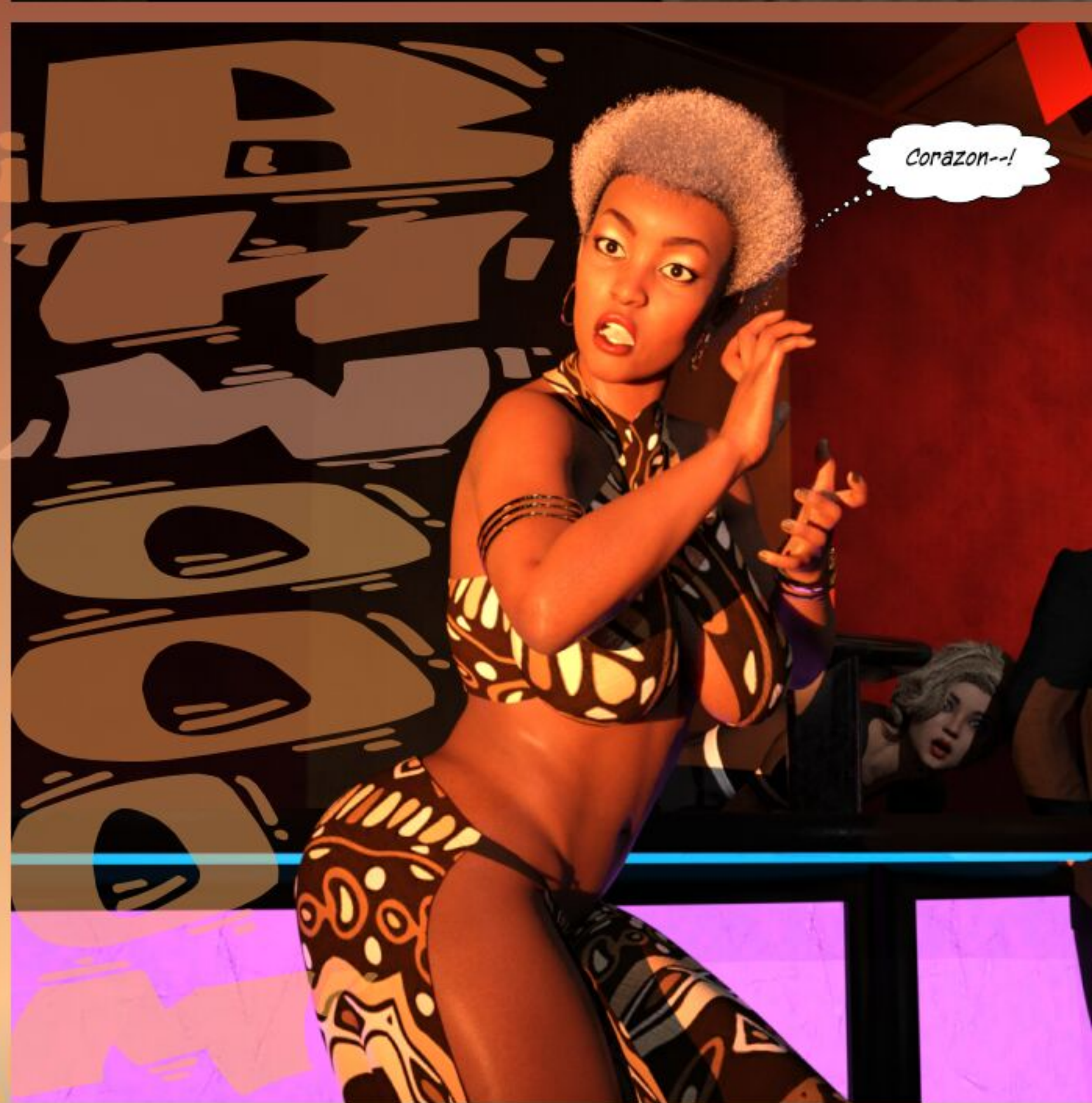
All right, Polks, if you'll take your seats, we'll begin the ceremonies ...



What the hell is that?



AAAAAAA!



Corazon--!

ELSEWHERE ...



HMM.



I wouldn't have expected you to live in a castle. You don't seem like the type.

Who are you? How did you get in here? This is a private space ...

You gave me permission, Raz. You gave me a lot of things. You may not remember. You don't remember me either, do you?

I'm your toy. From the club. One of your toys. I suppose you had others too. You went a lot, didn't you? You liked playing with your toys.



I think you want me to be your toy again. I can see it in your eyes. You need me.

And I need you, Raz.

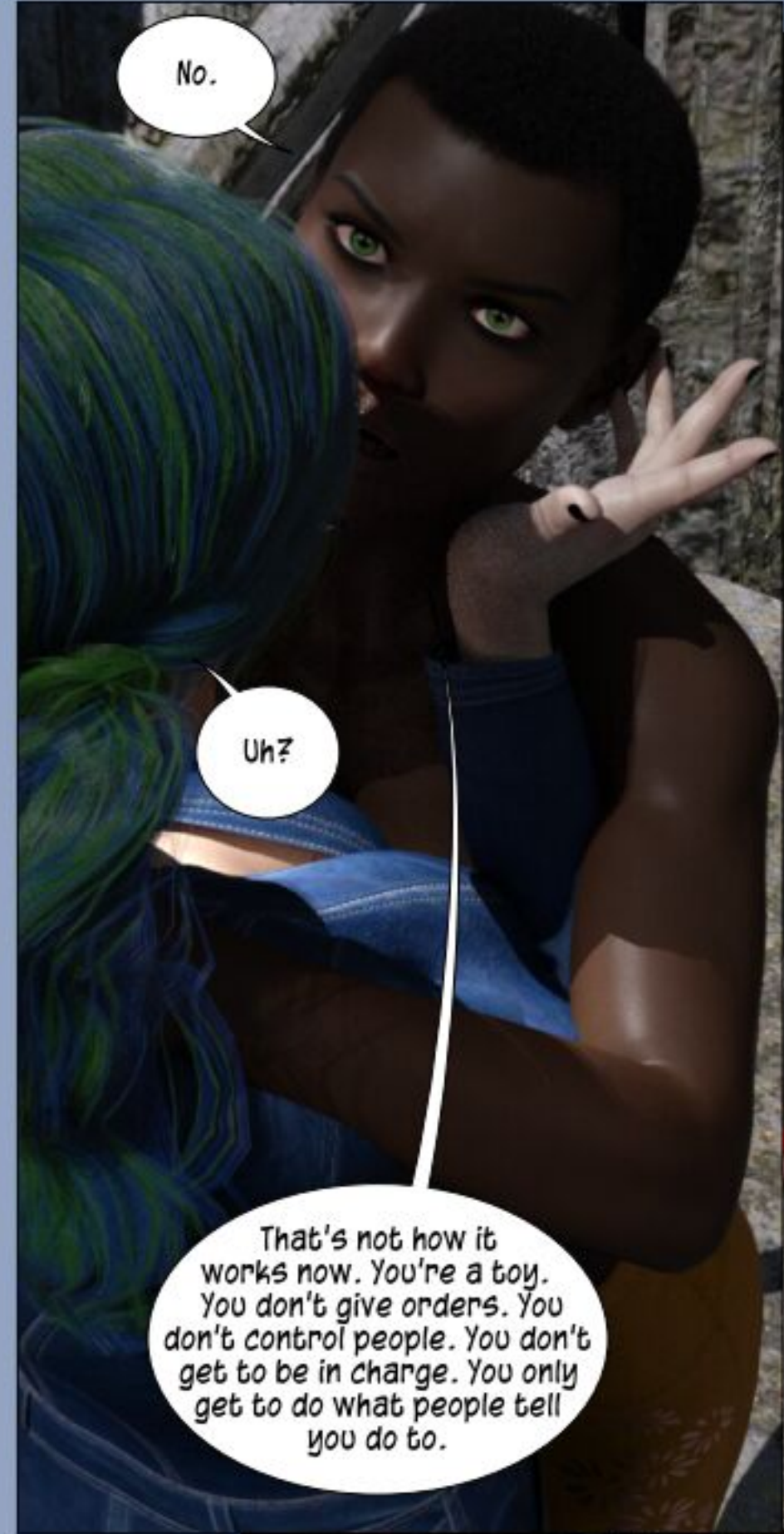


I can't do what I need to do myself. I need somebody to help me. Somebody who's good at changing things.

I checked on you. You know where to find her ... you know how to get her attention ...

You want to be a king? Is that why you live in a castle? You dream of ruling things? I can get you that. I just need one

little thing.



No.

Uh?

That's not how it works now. You're a toy. You don't give orders. You don't control people. You don't get to be in charge. You only get to do what people tell you to do.



If you're going to claim to be a toy, be a toy all the way.

But ... no .. I ...

MMHMM!



MMHMM ... toy ... not toy ...

got to run ... hard to run ...

need ... no ... no, don't need ... run ...

ugh!

move ... keep moving ... not toy ...

ouuu!

They told me you'd be coming, you know!

Everybody's looking for you ...

NAOMI COLEMAN'S PRIVATE SPACE.



I have to tell you, this is not what I expected your place to look like.

What did you think it would be?

I don't know. Maybe something like an old converted warehouse? With bare brick walls and open joists and a rough wood floor and a wall of big high windows?

I used to have a place like that, actually. I liked the idea of being able to make a mess with paint and clay anywhere I wanted.

Then I realized I could just clean the messes up instantly anyway, and decided I liked it more comfortable.

I'm always showing up at your homes, I figured I should return the hospitality for a change.

Especially since I need to ask you a favor. Mostly Leyna.

What's up?



You remember when Pauline just disappeared for a while?

When she got back, she told me she hadn't been in trouble but she hadn't been able to send a message.\*

She gave me an explanation ... kind of.

She's disappeared again. I'm sure she'll be back, and I don't want to interfere ... but if she's going to do this a lot, I need to know where to find her. In case.

\* SS #25



No ... But you're not wrong, either.

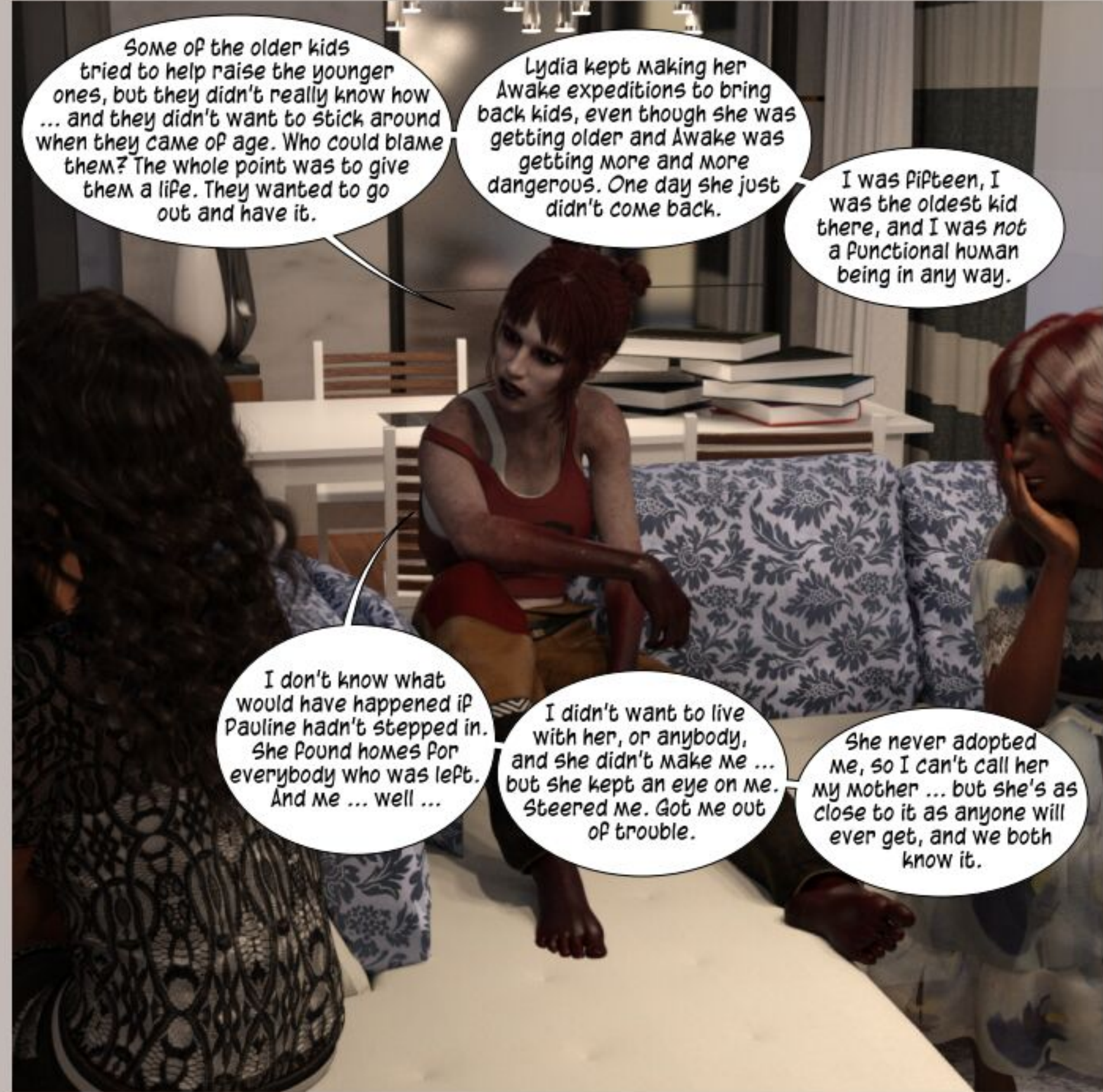
You know, I've wondered for a while if Pauline was more than just your patron. The way you talk with her, and the way you talk about her ...

I'm going to go out on a limb here, and you can laugh at me if I'm way off: Is Pauline your mother?



I think I told you I was one of the last Coleman Children.

Lydia Coleman never was too interested in actually raising us. She was dedicated to bringing orphans into sleep, but once the "rescue" part was over, she didn't have very good follow-through.



Some of the older kids tried to help raise the younger ones, but they didn't really know how ... and they didn't want to stick around when they came of age. Who could blame them? The whole point was to give them a life. They wanted to go out and have it.

Lydia kept making her Awake expeditions to bring back kids, even though she was getting older and Awake was getting more and more dangerous. One day she just didn't come back.

I was fifteen, I was the oldest kid there, and I was not a functional human being in any way.

I don't know what would have happened if Pauline hadn't stepped in. She found homes for everybody who was left. And me ... well ...

I didn't want to live with her, or anybody, and she didn't make me ... but she kept an eye on me. Steered me. Got me out of trouble.

She never adopted me, so I can't call her my mother ... but she's as close to it as anyone will ever get, and we both know it.

A BACK ALLEY SOMEWHERE IN ONE OF AH'S LESS REPUTABLE COMMON SPACES.

This should make a noise ...

My god, it's great-aunt Leah. What cave did you crawl out of?

Clayton.

Have some respect, now, or I'll kick your ass.

You couldn't kick my ass if it was--

I've been getting in PistFights since before you were born, kid. Won most of them, too.

You think I'm out of shape because I look like this? Try Me.

UPP!

Do I have your attention?

Your bullshit is going to stop. Now.

You had a grudge for years, that got addressed ... and you went right out and made up a new grudge.

Getting so people think you enjoy making trouble and you're just looking for an excuse to be a jackass.

You're not my mother ... you can't tell me what--

No, your mother's dead. And no one knows where your aunt is, and no one knows who your grandmother is.\* I'm the closest thing to a mother you've got.

I don't like it either, but it makes you my responsibility, and you're embarrassing me.

I am never going to make nice with them. Never. You can't make me.

Then don't make nice. Go make a private space where you can play crime boss and shoot guns and blow up whatever you want. I don't care if you never speak to any of them again.

But stop with the Pires and the bombs and the other crap.

The rest of the family may not know how to deal with you, Clayton, but I do.

If you don't clean up your act--and I really do mean starting right this instant--wondering whether I can kick your ass is going to be the least of your worries.

\* OBVIOUSLY CLAYTON HAD TWO GRANDMOTHERS, BUT SINCE NO ONE IS SURE WHO HIS FATHER IS ... YOU GET THE IDEA. YOU CAN READ MORE ABOUT CLAYTON'S FAMILY SITUATION IN SS #23.

NAOMI, RUBY, AND LEYNA ARE TRACKING PAULINE.

You realize we could just be messing up her love life.

Yes, that occurred to me ... but I need to know, Ruby. I have to make sure she's OK.

... I feel like sometimes Pauline doesn't realize she's a target. Or doesn't want to admit it. I can't tell which.

... Eh?

How did you get in here? What do you want?

Sorry to intrude.

We're looking for Pauline B- ... ah ... we're looking for a woman named Pauline.

And you think she's in here?

There's nobody here but me. And I don't know any Pauline.

Now you need to leave. You have no business being--

Oh.

This is ... ah ... really embarrassing.



I can't believe you just went in there! It's an abuse of your privileges, for one thing, and absolutely none of your business, for another!

Lilac is having trouble getting used to the whole thing as it is! You're lucky she didn't have a heart attack!

I'm sorry! I was worried about you!

I explained it to you before ...

Yes, except you didn't really, and you didn't make it sound like you'd go off and do it again ...

OK, so it's none of my business. But if you're going to keep disappearing, that kind of is my business, and I feel like I have a need to know.



- sigh - It's just that ... Look, this isn't easy to tell, all right?

When Melinda Shannon captured us all, she did things to us. I have a feeling I'm not the only one who took some, ah, long-term effects away from it. The difference is ... I liked mine.

Melinda tried to turn off my brain. She was making me into an animal. Barely aware ... and I found it really ... well ... I guess "relaxing" comes closest. It was nice to be able to shut down, you see? Drift along and let someone else do the thinking.

Once we all got out ... I wanted that again. So I got Ruby to make a scenario for me. I don't think she's ever told you about that.

Not a soul. Customer privacy is very important.

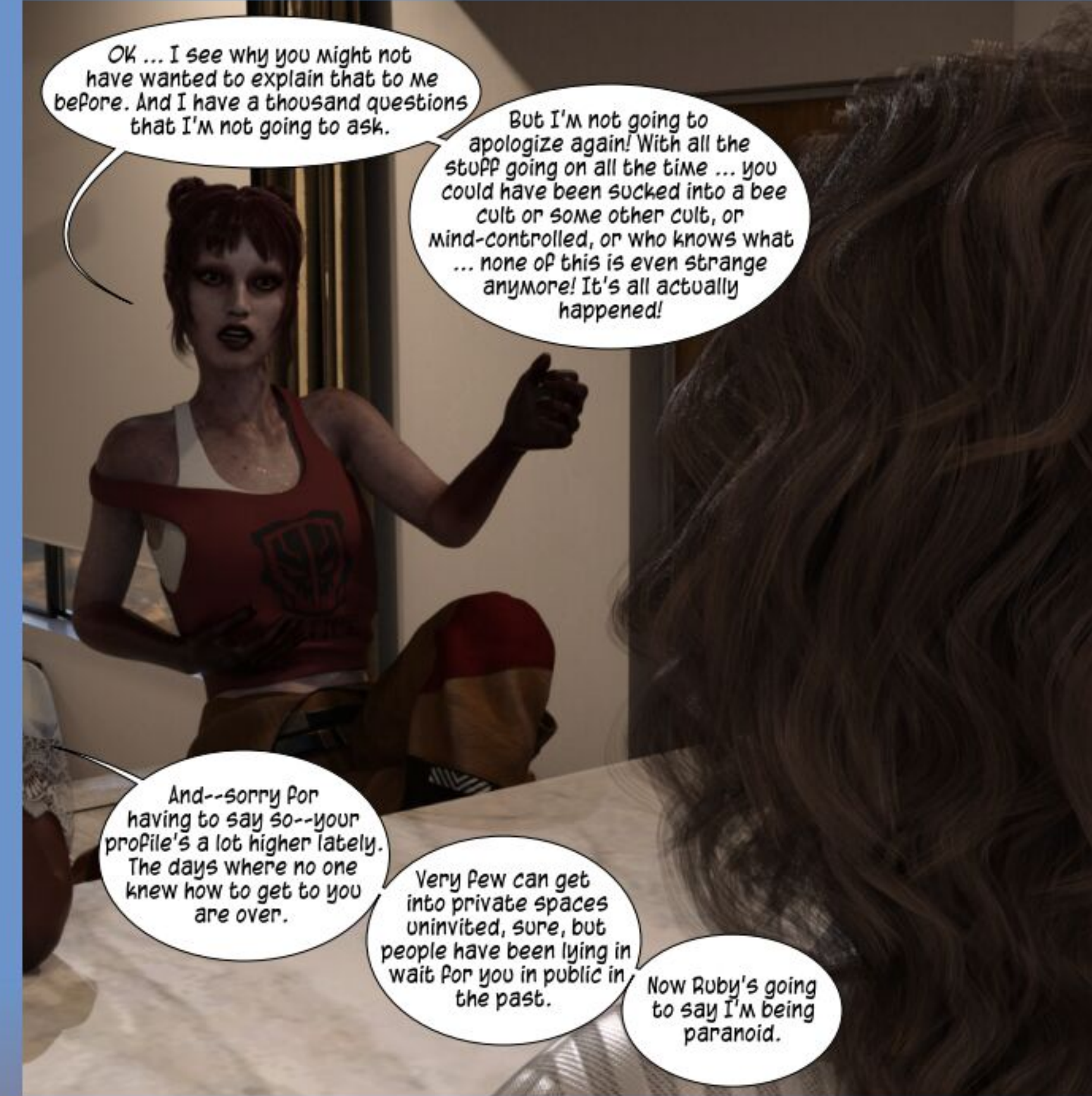
In the discontinuity, I was a horse. I think that's because it happened in the middle of Ruby's scenario.

After getting out of that, I found out that sometimes when I got stressed or excited, I'd ... start turning into a horse again.

I went all the way one day, not by choice, and didn't have enough brain to figure out how to turn back. Lilac found me and took care of me until I recovered.

I like being her horse, and she likes me being her horse, so we ... worked out an arrangement.

That's all.



OK ... I see why you might not have wanted to explain that to me before. And I have a thousand questions that I'm not going to ask.

But I'm not going to apologize again! With all the stuff going on all the time ... you could have been sucked into a bee cult or some other cult, or mind-controlled, or who knows what ... none of this is even strange anymore! It's all actually happened!

And--sorry for having to say so--your profile's a lot higher lately. The days where no one knew how to get to you are over.

Very few can get into private spaces uninvited, sure, but people have been lying in wait for you in public in the past.

Now Ruby's going to say I'm being paranoid.



Not while Melinda's out, I'm not. She probably has an individual axe to grind for each of us.

Pauline, you're entitled to a personal life. Maybe ... just let Naomi know that's what you're going to do? I'm going to assume Lilac is trustworthy, so that's probably a very safe space ... we just want to know when you're in it.

... all right, all right. Point taken.

You're pushy kids, but you're not wrong.

Speaking of that, what's the progress on the Melinda situation?

"We've got everything in place. We're just waiting for her to make a mistake now."



The whole souk has changed ... I can't figure out where anything is ... I don't think I should walk around in the open, though ...



Damn it, I was sure the back door was down this way ...

Huh?



Go away! Go away! Leave Prithy alone! Prithy doethn't want to play!

... Prithy knowth you! Thecary lady! Go away!



Oh, poor Percy! Still a doll? After all this time? Nobody liked you enough to rescue you?

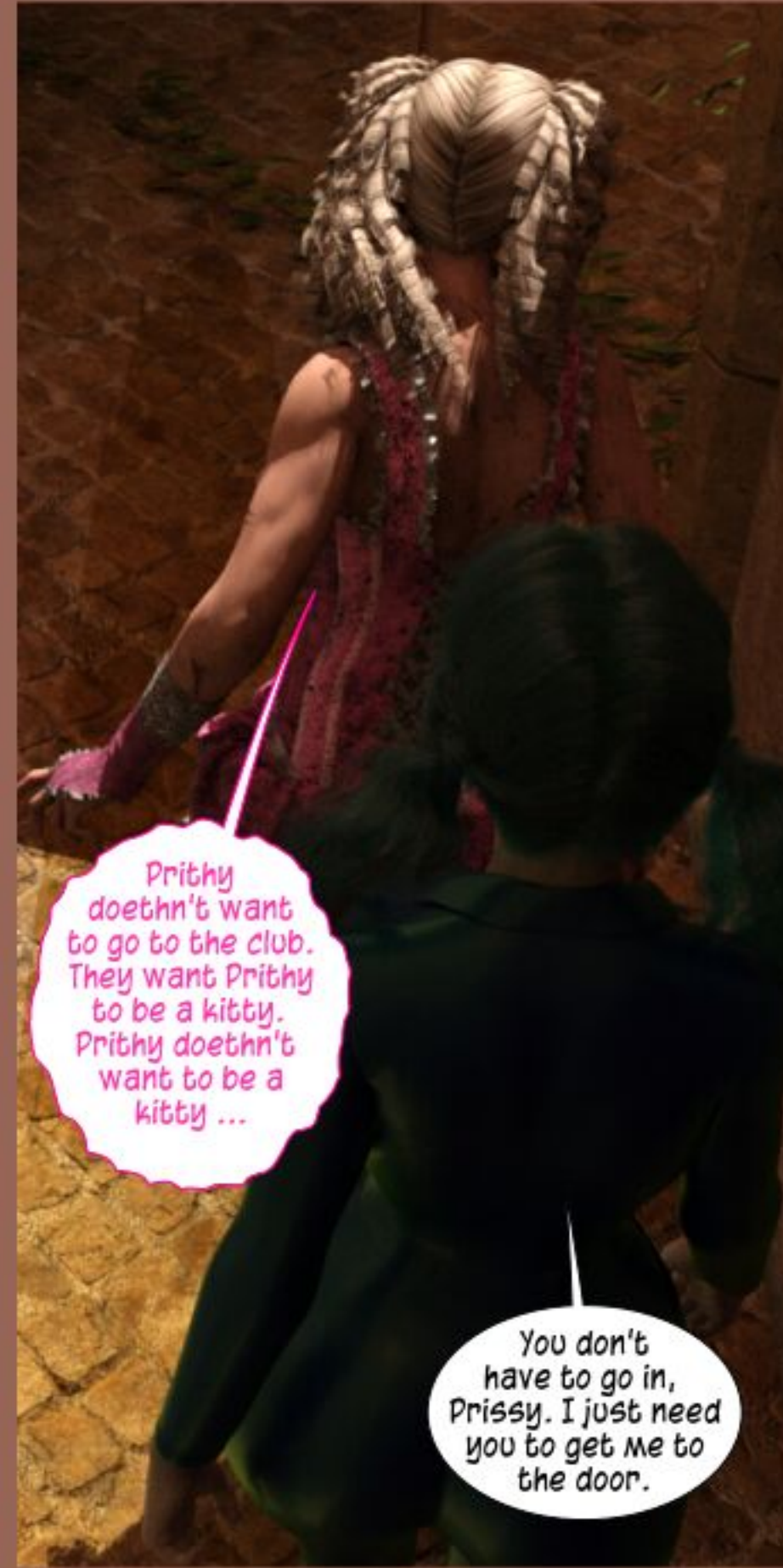
I can help you, Percy. I can fix it. But I need you to do something for me.



Not Perthy! Not Perthy!

All right! All right ... Prissy ... listen to me. I need the back door into the club. You remember the club. I know you do.

Do what I tell you, Prissy. Be a good doll. Show me the back door.



Prithy doethn't want to go to the club. They want Prithy to be a kitty. Prithy doethn't want to be a kitty ...

You don't have to go in, Prissy. I just need you to get me to the door.



Yes!

Still just like it was ... I can use this as a starting point ...

I need resources to deal with her. I can't take her by surprise, that's clear ... I'm going to have to work slowly, take control, build a force ...



This space isn't yours anymore.

It belongs to us now.



I don't know who you are ... but I had it first.

That means nothing. Especially coming from someone like you.

You want to hide here, don't you? I hear what goes on. There are a lot of people looking for you.

If we shelter you, we get to choose your role here.



Don't you touch me!

You love being a predator ... I know what to do with predators. I know where to put them so they do no harm.



NARRRRRL!!



And where do you imagine you will go, kitten?



The cary lady'th a kitty! The cary lady'th a kitty!

SERENE BARKER'S PRIVATE SPACE.



... I hate to just come in like this, but there's a good chance she knows ...

Huh. Well, she's supposed to be in here somewhere.

Try the bedroom?

... I guess. If we must.

Knock first.



You two are supposed to be out hunting for Melinda.

We are. Something else has come up. An unexpected problem.

Is Corazon OK? What's wrong?



She's in shock.

She had ... something bad happen, and her brain thinks she's in a condition she's not really in.

There's no real way to deal with it on this side. I could arrange Awake Medical attention, but they'd have to start by interrupting her and that might make it worse.

For now, I'm just waiting to see if she comes out of it on her own. What's your unexpected problem?

Now that Brendan's gone off somewhere to sulk, Lucius changed over to helping Hamilton keep Clayton in check.



Clayton set off three bombs at the Civic Awards. It doesn't sound like anyone was hurt, except ... no one has heard from Lucius since that happened.

Have you?

Oh ...

Uh, no, I haven't. But I'm sure he's fine ...

Momma. You're usually a much better liar than that.

I'm glad she said it, 'cause I'd have been in trouble if I had.

C'mon. What do you know?



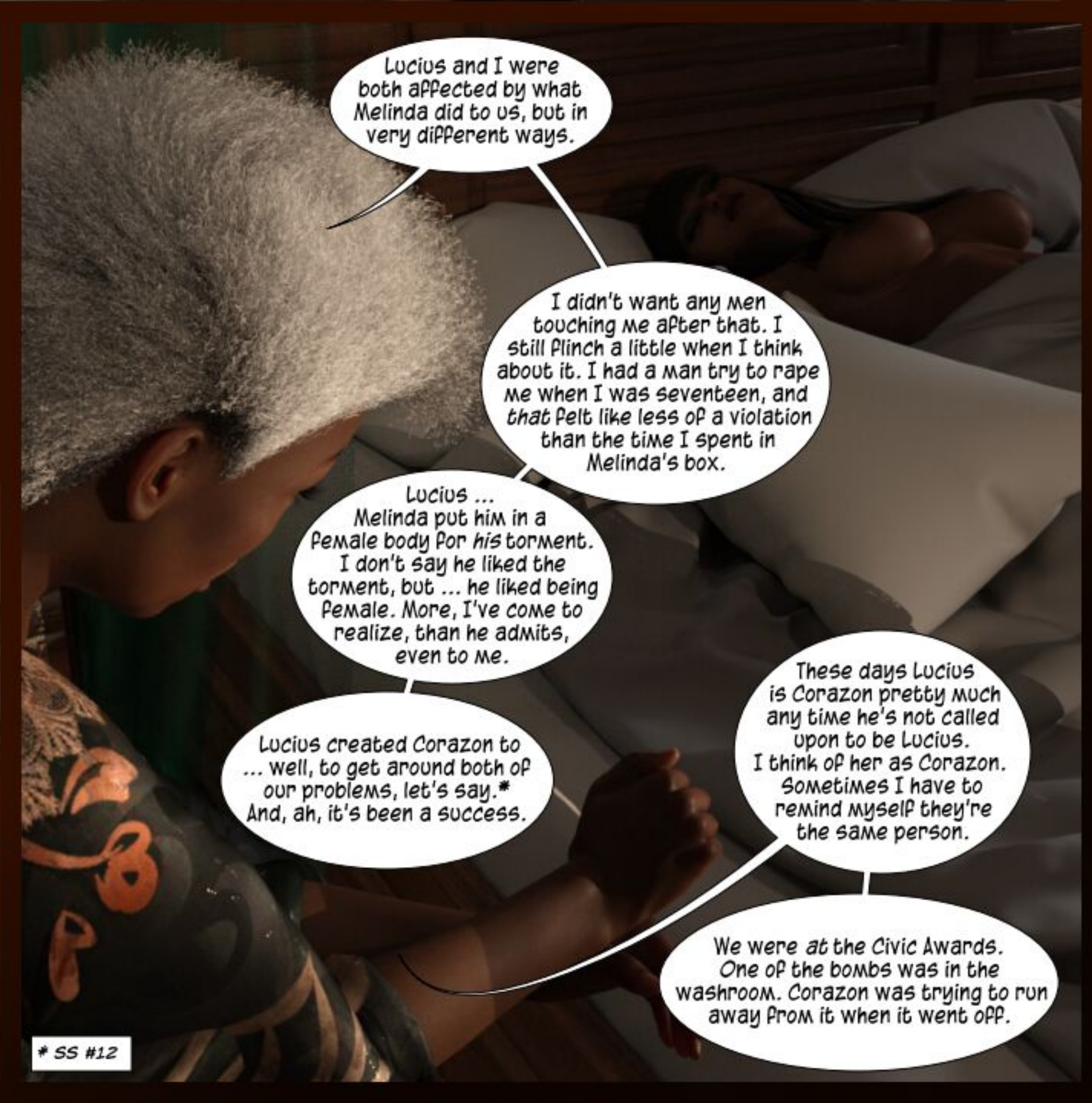
It's very personal.

And children don't usually care to think about their parents having a sex life.

I'd love to know if my mother's got a lover. I hope she does.

Yes, well, you're a little unusual about that kind of thing, you know.

... This does not leave this room, you understand? It's none of anybody else's business.



Lucius and I were both affected by what Melinda did to us, but in very different ways.

I didn't want any men touching me after that. I still flinch a little when I think about it. I had a man try to rape me when I was seventeen, and that felt like less of a violation than the time I spent in Melinda's box.

Lucius ... Melinda put him in a female body for his torment. I don't say he liked the torment, but ... he liked being female. More, I've come to realize, than he admits, even to me.

Lucius created Corazon to ... well, to get around both of our problems, let's say. \* And, ah, it's been a success.

These days Lucius is Corazon pretty much any time he's not called upon to be Lucius. I think of her as Corazon. Sometimes I have to remind myself they're the same person.

We were at the Civic Awards. One of the bombs was in the washroom. Corazon was trying to run away from it when it went off.

\* SS #12



I'm sorry.

... Go deal with Melinda. That's important. And there's nothing you can do here.

I'll let you know if anything changes.

If you see Clayton ... tell him I'm taking this personally.



MEANWHILE ...

got to ... nyarr ... got to find ... somewhere safe ... mrrr ...

Damn it!

She ... I can't think ... can't even walk upright ... Got to get somewhere I can recover ...



That's a new look for you.

I know a couple of clubs where that kind of thing would go over real well.

Shit.



Maybe once I break your mind the way you broke mine, that'll be your new job.

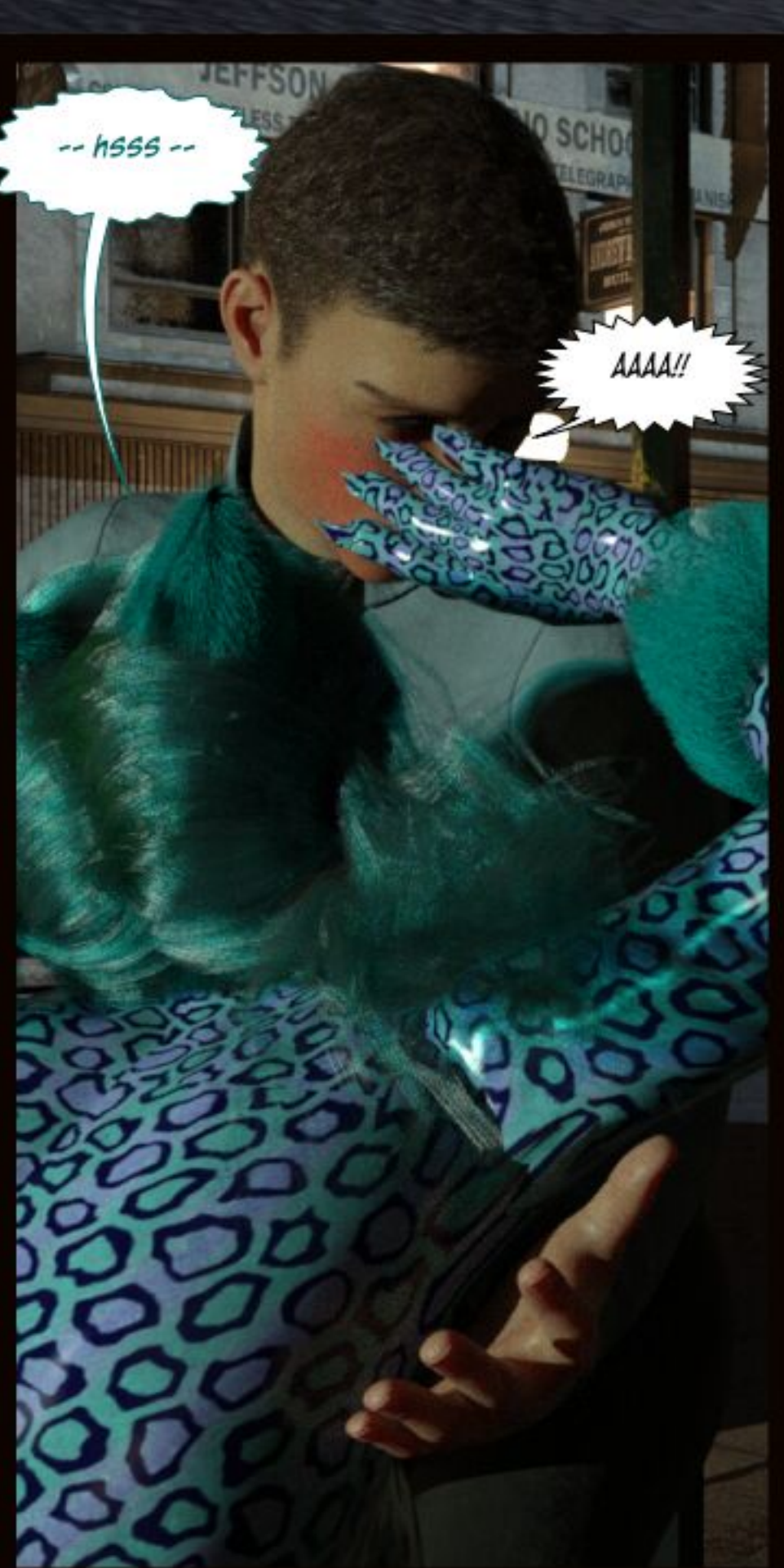
Nyaaarr!!

Sorry, I don't speak whatever that is.

I'm going to lock you in a place nobody can find you. Then I'm going to take you apart.

Mmyaaa!!

They want me to tell them I found you, but I want you all to myself.



--- hsss ---

AAAA!!



I hope I just cost you an eye, you son of a bitch.

Got to hide somewhere before he gets his bearings. I don't think I can fight him, and he's too angry to be suggestible.



Perfect.

Nobody will look twice at me in here.



OOH! HERE, KITTY, KITTY. DO YOU NEED SOMEONE TO PET YOU?

I can't control someone if I can't even talk ... I've got to find someplace to try to undo some of this ...



Hey, nice outfit!

...!

I've been running around, practically on all fours, looking like this?

When I get reestablished, I'm going to go see that bitch in the Souk and I'm going to make her into the worst thing I can think of.

But right now ... if I change to one of my other presets ... if I can remember how ... will that undo any of this?



Oh, yes.

And if I'm lucky, as a bonus, no one will be looking for Antoinette.

I'll keep the outfit, at least while I'm in the club, and it looks like I might want a mask too.



You know, Melvin, you look so ...

... malleable.

... good.

I think we should go somewhere more personal ...



You want me, don't you?

I can be your doll. You can make me do anything you want--

No, wait!

That's not-- I mean ...



AAAAAAGH!!

Too much time in the doll system. That's what it has to be.

Damn it, there are so many things that have messed with my head I can barely tell who I am ...

But--

THE PRIVATE SPACE OF JOSIAH BARKER, PATRIARCH OF THE SHAREHOLDING BARKERS (CURRENTLY IN SECLUSION).



He's let the place go completely to hell.

It certainly didn't look like this the last time I was here.

Disturbing, if it's indicative.



... Mother?





You take the chair. I'll sit on the hassock.

Mother, where have you been? It's been years ... I tried to find you ...

I didn't want to be found, dear.

You really should consider letting someone else into your life. This house is so desolate ... I hate thinking of you sitting alone in it ...

No one else is Judith.

Why are you here?

To get you to start participating again.



I know you've gotten some bad advice over the years, but I can't believe you'd just walk away. You were supposed to be leading by example.

I don't think they want my example. And the more I have a chance to reflect upon it, the more I realize it wasn't a very good example.

I visited Prentiss a while back. I was .. I didn't realize ... had he been like that all along? how much of that had I absorbed?

And I look at Brendan and see ...

... he got all the wrong lessons.

Yes, well. That doesn't mean you can run from it. It means you have a responsibility to fix it.

At this point? Brendan doesn't listen to me. I'm the last person he listens to.

Anyway, how can you talk? You didn't try to fix anything. Instead, you disappeared.

Your father had his moments, Josiah, but he wasn't a good man, and he passed on all his nastier bits to Prentiss. I left when it was clear you'd rather listen to Prentiss than to me. I had nothing I could contribute.

Right. That's where I am now. Nothing to contribute. Sauce for the goose, Mother.



-- sigh --

I suppose it doesn't make a difference. Once some of them decided to waive the Fees, the rest was inevitable. I just wanted to try to avoid some of the pain on the way there. Rumor is that Clayton is setting off bombs.

Who removed Fees? I've been wondering for years if they'd think of that. Was it Serene? Serene is cunning. I never wanted to tell her that. I didn't want her to think I admired it.

Waiving Fees ... hrm. That does make it inevitable, yes. The instant that happened, the family said goodbye to their ability to enforce any rules. It takes away our lever, unless we want to exile someone from Sleep, which is too drastic for most offenses.

Is that why you never mentioned it as a possibility?



It's not the only reason. Nor the main reason.

Erasmus Barker created Sleep because, despite having all their major problems solved for them, the world's people were at each others' throats. No good reason. They just needed something to do.

You can give humans paradise, but if they're bored, they'll just tear it apart and start killing each other.

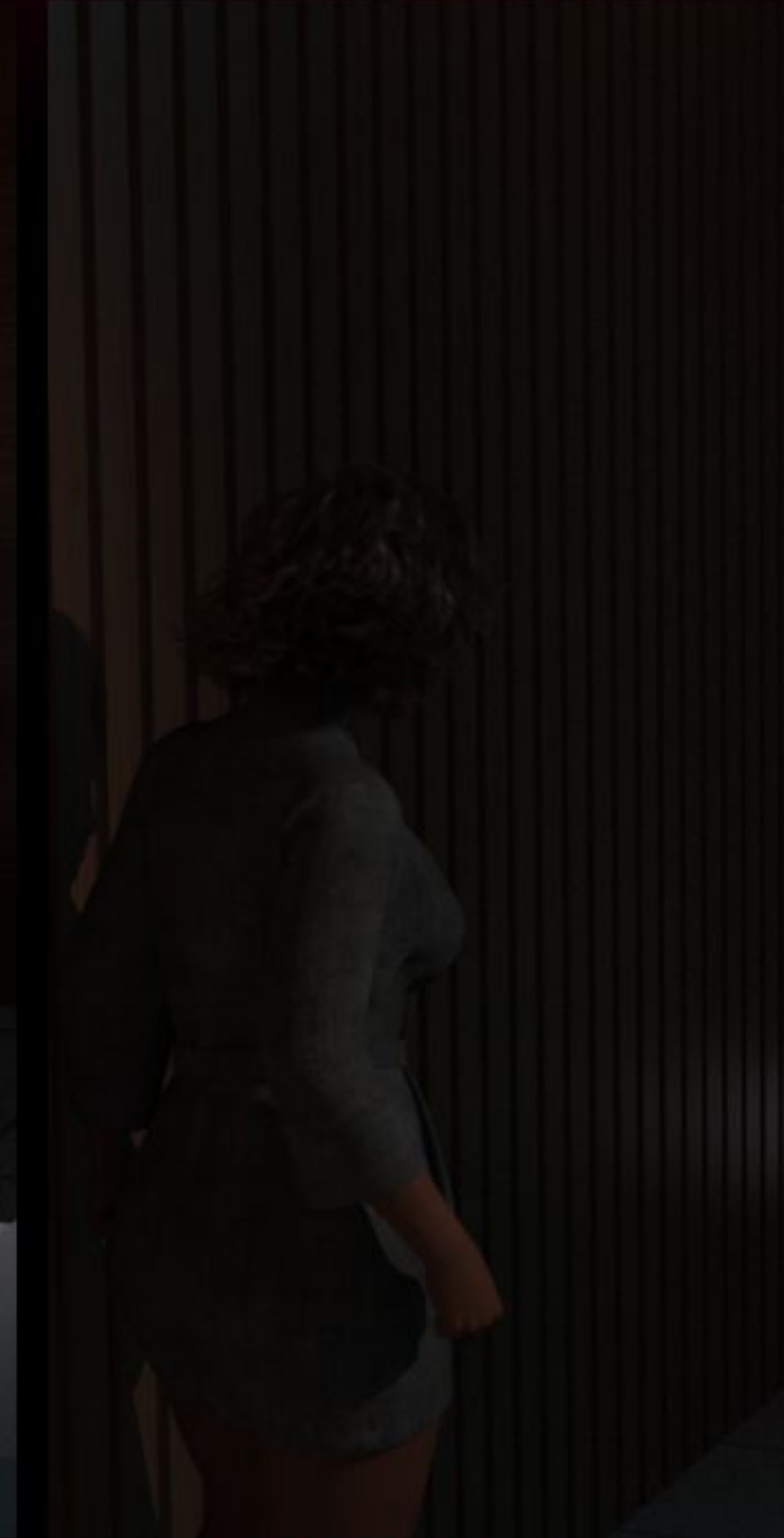
The structure of Sleep where everyone was forced to work just to remain in it wasn't optimal, but it did keep everyone occupied.

I don't know what happens without it, but I'm not optimistic.

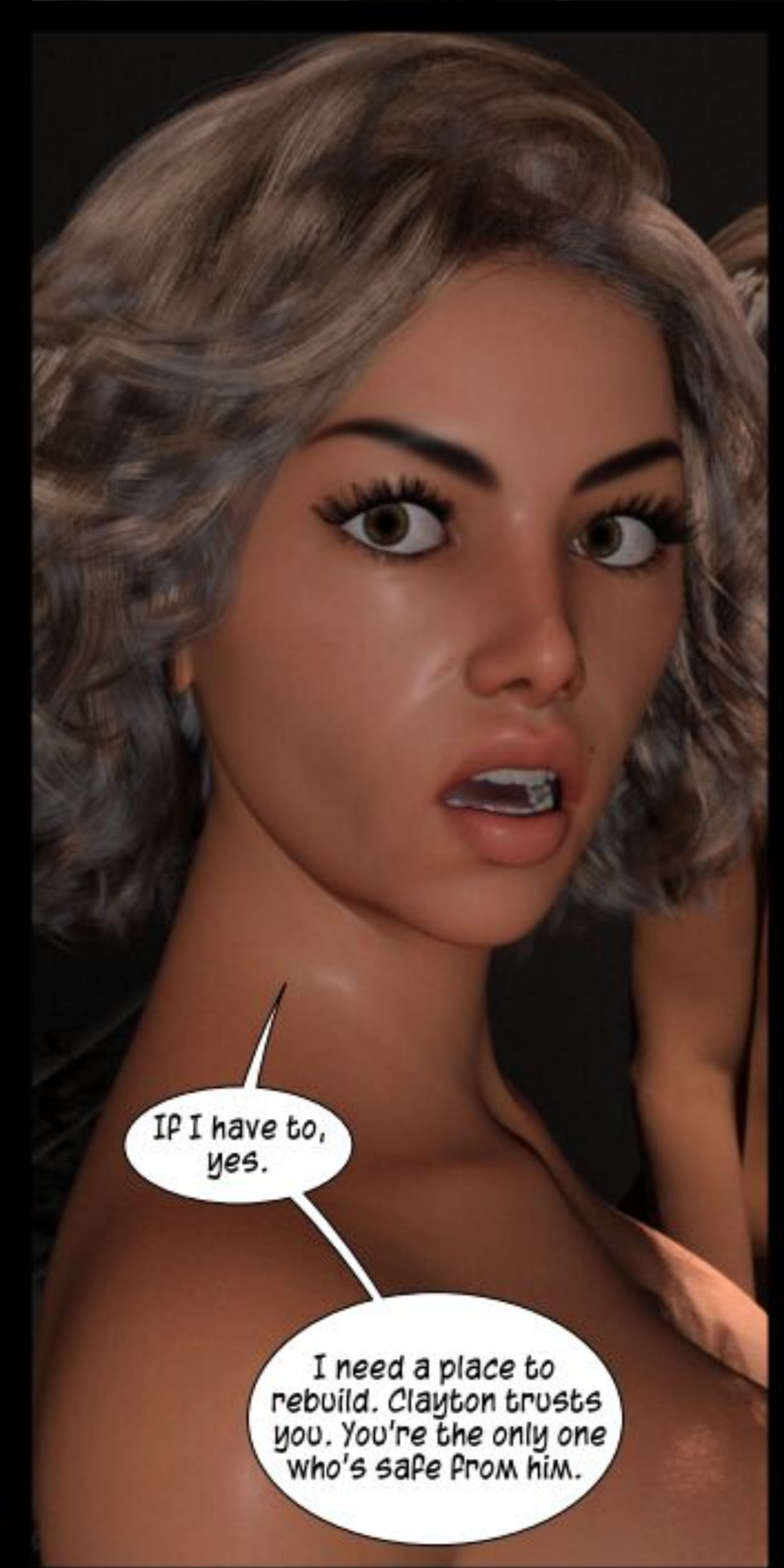
MELINDA QUIETLY ENTERS A DARKENED PRIVATE SPACE.



Still lets me in, so there's that.



Stealing my pace again?



If I have to, yes.

I need a place to rebuild. Clayton trusts you. You're the only one who's safe from him.



Oh, I have bad news!

Clayton doesn't trust me. He won't have anything to do with me anymore. You ruined that.

You'd do better looking like yourself. And you should run, because I told everyone you were here.



Good luck finding somewhere to hide!

RUBY'S PLACE.



Aw, c'mon, really?

It's late and I need sleep!



Oh my god.



Nice place. SoPa's too low, though. Can't sit with my butt that close to the floor.

Momma, how are you even here? You said that--

They don't keep me locked up. They wouldn't like it if they knew I was in here, is all.

So I'm not here. My team and I are on a field trip collecting plant samples. They're good people. They won't tell on me.

And with the bed fees gone, anybody can get in, pretty much.



It's a good deal easier to sneak in here than send you a message, or I would have done.

I came to warn you. That Nat Barker has something going, and some of the worst ones up in charge are giving her what she needs to do it.

It's supposed to be a big secret, especially from the Polks like me, but they're so keyed up about it they can't help gloating. Whatever it is, they say it's going to bring down Sleep.

What I hear, whatever it is, it's already in here. They're just talking now about when it's going to happen.



Nathaniel can't possibly be in Sleep. They'd never let her back in.

No, not her. I believe she's put someone else in here. Couldn't say how.

Well, hell, that could be anybody.



I know, but maybe knowing will help. Maybe you can get ready for it, some way? Whatever it is.

Sorry that's all I've got.

Wait, you're leaving?

At least stay the night! Let me get you a good breakfast. Maybe show you around a little?

My team's waiting for me. The longer they stay put outside the facility, the more likely it is somebody will notice them.



You know, with the bed fees gone ...

... you wouldn't have to do any of the things people used to have to do here to stay in. You wouldn't have to do anything. You could do whatever you wanted.



Aw, honey.

I've got people who need me out there.

Just like you've got people who need you in here. You wouldn't walk away from them.

We'll find a way to stay in touch. I know we will.

DAWN BREAKS IN JOHAN MORELL'S PRIVATE SPACE.





Good to see you figured out how to make yourself new clothes.

But, you know, you don't have to dress the way they make you do when you're Awake. There are colors other than black.

I'll wear what I want, thank you.



Come on, at least lose the hood--you look like either a monk or an assassin ...

Back off!!

I am not the woman you seduced for six months.

Maybe she thought the two of you really had something. Maybe you even did.

But you don't have anything with me, and I don't want you touching me again!



I have to stay here until activation because I don't know "my" recall and I don't have any other way to jump to her private space.

I want you to keep that in mind, because I don't want you thinking I'm here because I like your company.

That's just as ridiculous as you thinking I let you impregnate me because I was hot for your body or something.

I did it for the same reason I'm doing all the rest of it, for the same reason I let Spruill do painful things to me for months, for the same reason I gave up my life:

Because it's what has to happen for this mission to succeed. That's the *only* reason. And it's the only thing that matters. I don't. You don't.



You're ... ah ...

I respect your dedication and all, but ...

Don't you question any of it even a little bit? This Nat Spruill, I guess she's got a lot of important folks listening to her--did any of them ever ask what's driving her?

I mean, she's not here. She sent you instead. If this is so important to her, why didn't she come do it herself?

Come to that, why the hell are you so invested? Don't tell me it's because Spruill said so. I already know you better than that. Why do you want this so badly?



Everybody I cared about went into Sleep.

There was ... she and I ... I thought we were going to be forever ...

She went in here and never came back. I never heard from her again. I don't even know where to look for her. She threw me away. My parents ... my sister ... they all came in here to hide from everything and turned their backs on everything they had.

Sleep is destroying the world and it needs to die.

You're supposed to be one of us. You're supposed to be just as invested.

I just don't think it's that simple, is all.

I'm not sure that Sleep made the Awake world what it is, and I'm not sure destroying Sleep will fix it.



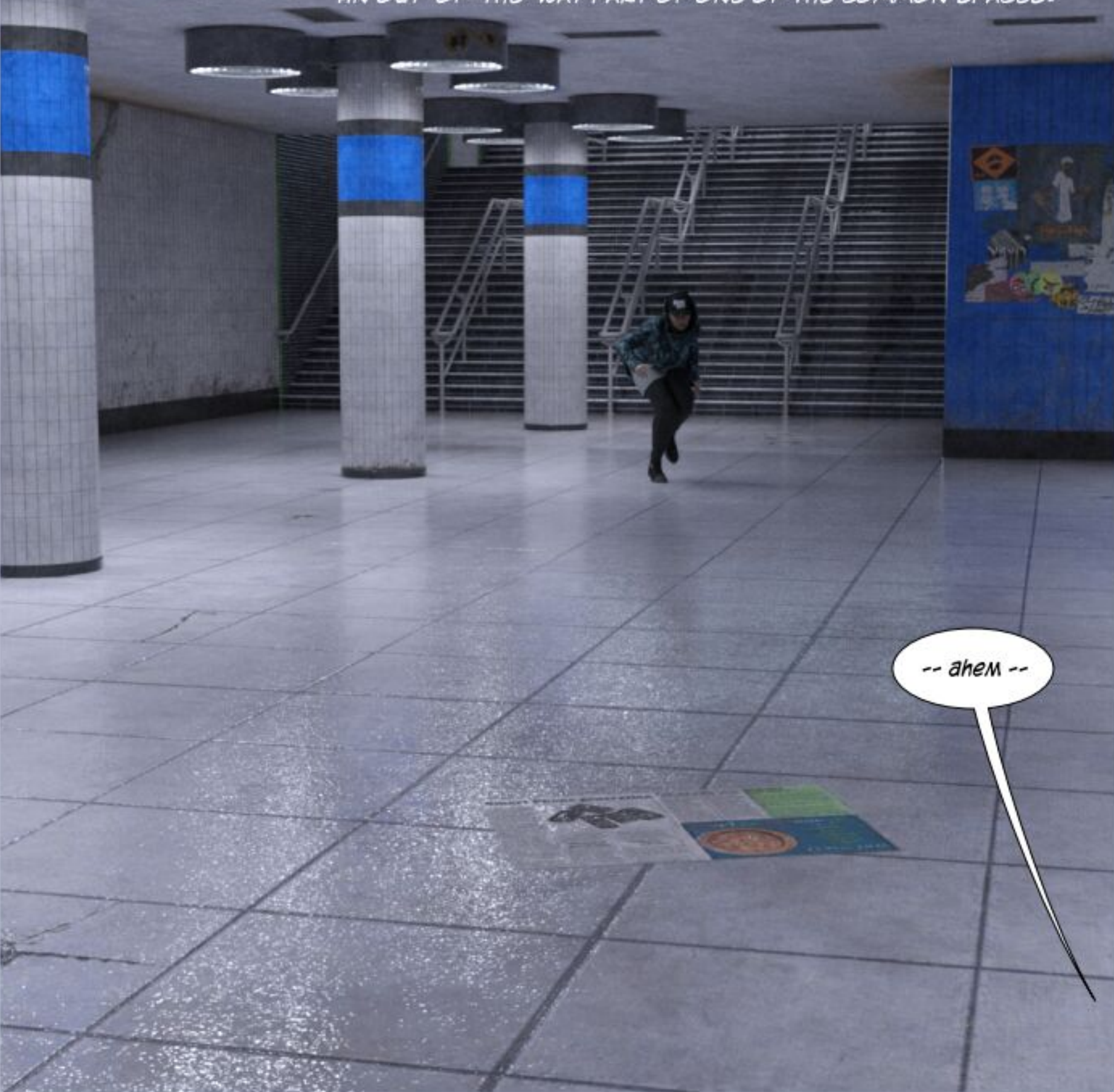
Nat warned me about this. She said you'd been in here a long time, that you'd likely gotten soft.

She told me I'd probably have to use this.

I'm sorry. But what if you decided to go tell them? I can't risk your doubts.



AN OUT-OF-THE-WAY PART OF ONE OF THE COMMON SPACES.



-- ahem --

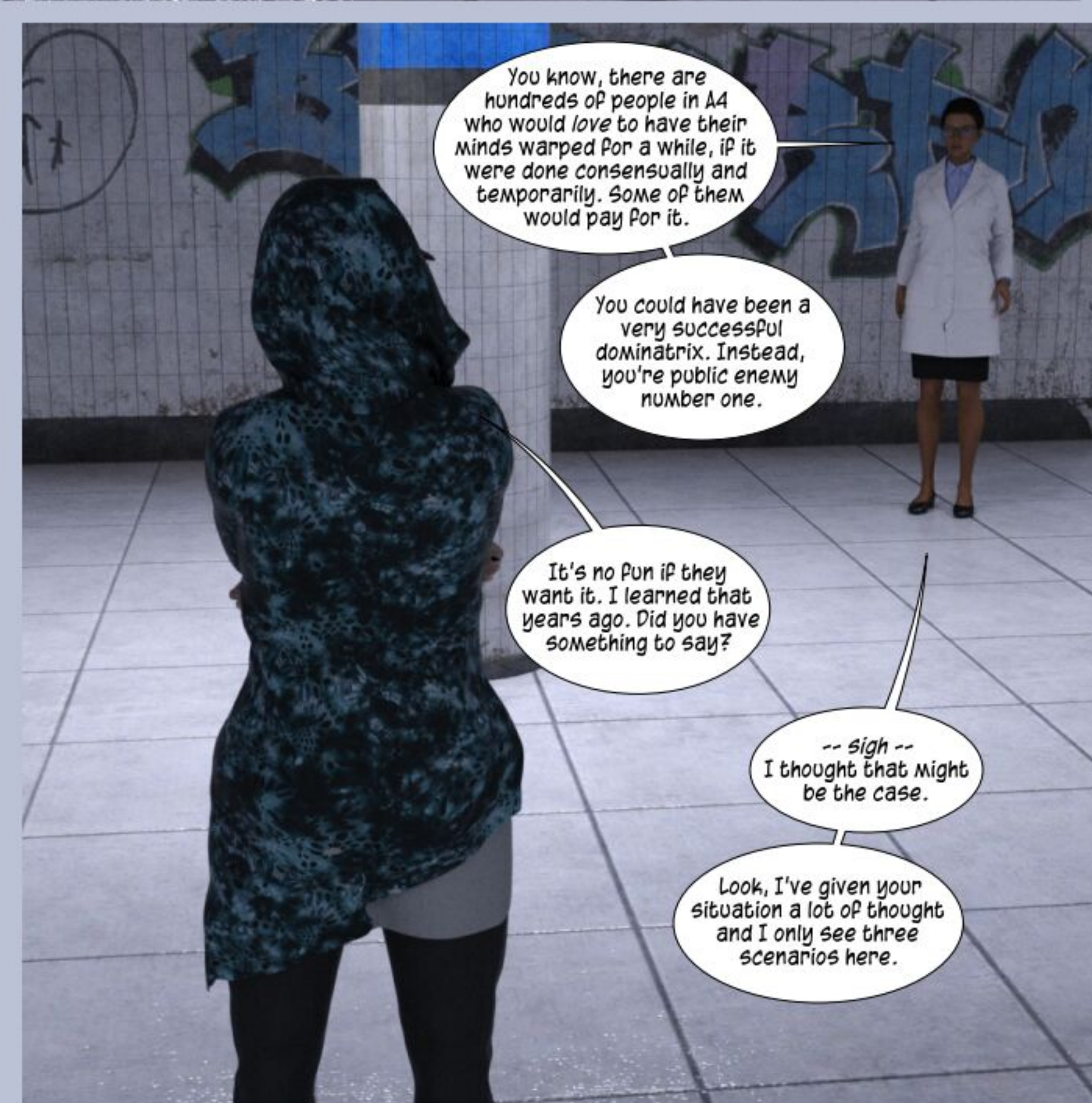


Who are you?

No, you don't need to come closer. Best for both of us, I think, if you don't. This is not a trap. No one else is here.

You don't know me. My name's Chapman. I'm a psychologist, but don't hold that against me.

I just want to talk to you for a moment.



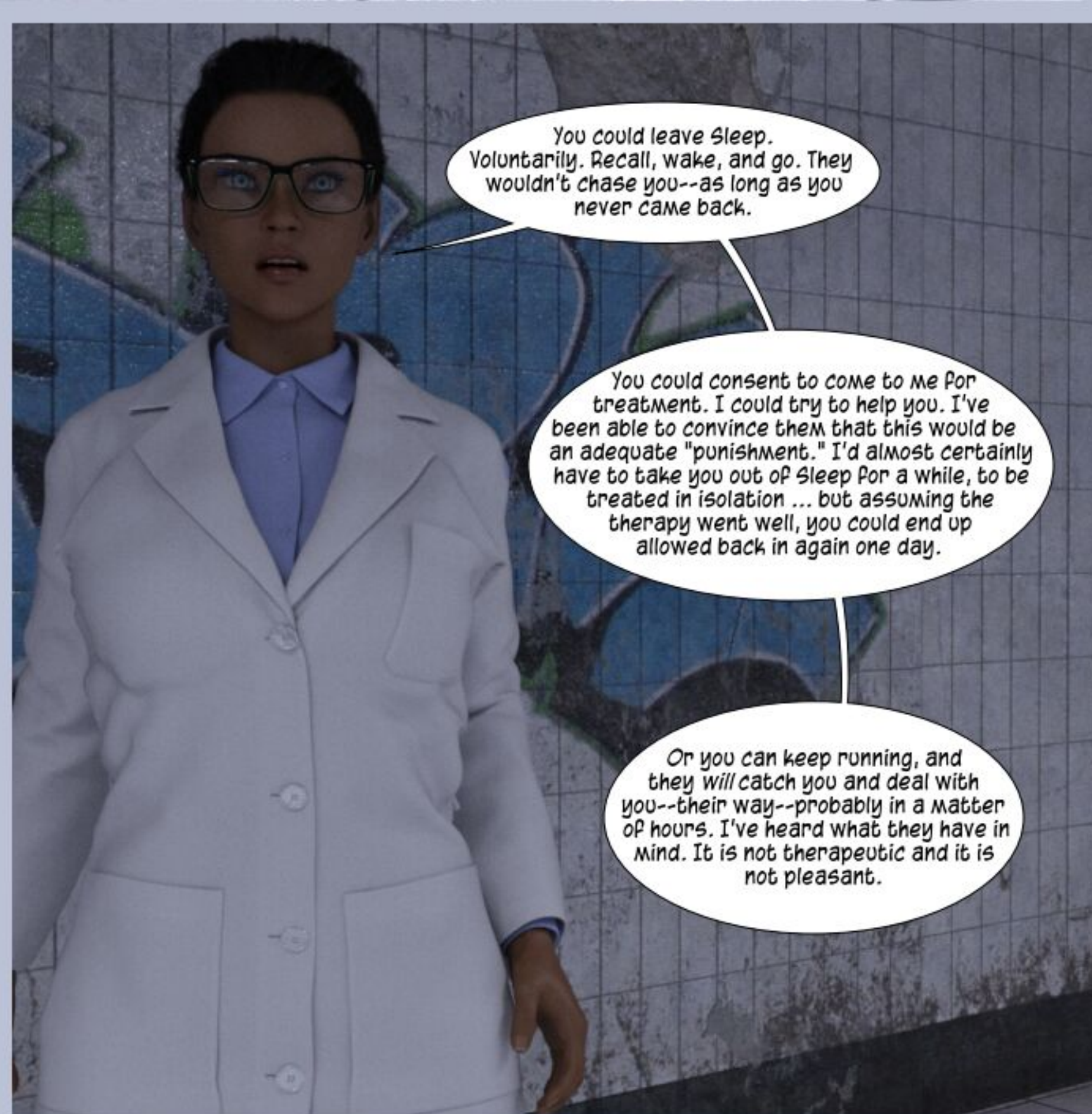
You know, there are hundreds of people in A4 who would love to have their minds warped for a while, if it were done consensually and temporarily. Some of them would pay for it.

You could have been a very successful dominatrix. Instead, you're public enemy number one.

It's no fun if they want it. I learned that years ago. Did you have something to say?

-- sigh --  
I thought that might be the case.

Look, I've given your situation a lot of thought and I only see three scenarios here.



You could leave Sleep. Voluntarily. Recall, wake, and go. They wouldn't chase you--as long as you never came back.

You could consent to come to me for treatment. I could try to help you. I've been able to convince them that this would be an adequate "punishment." I'd almost certainly have to take you out of Sleep for a while, to be treated in isolation ... but assuming the therapy went well, you could end up allowed back in again one day.

Or you can keep running, and they will catch you and deal with you--their way--probably in a matter of hours. I've heard what they have in mind. It is not therapeutic and it is not pleasant.



You know, I resent the idea that there's anything about me that needs treatment. I know what I do to people. There's nothing deluded about it. Not my fault the rest of you can't deal with it.

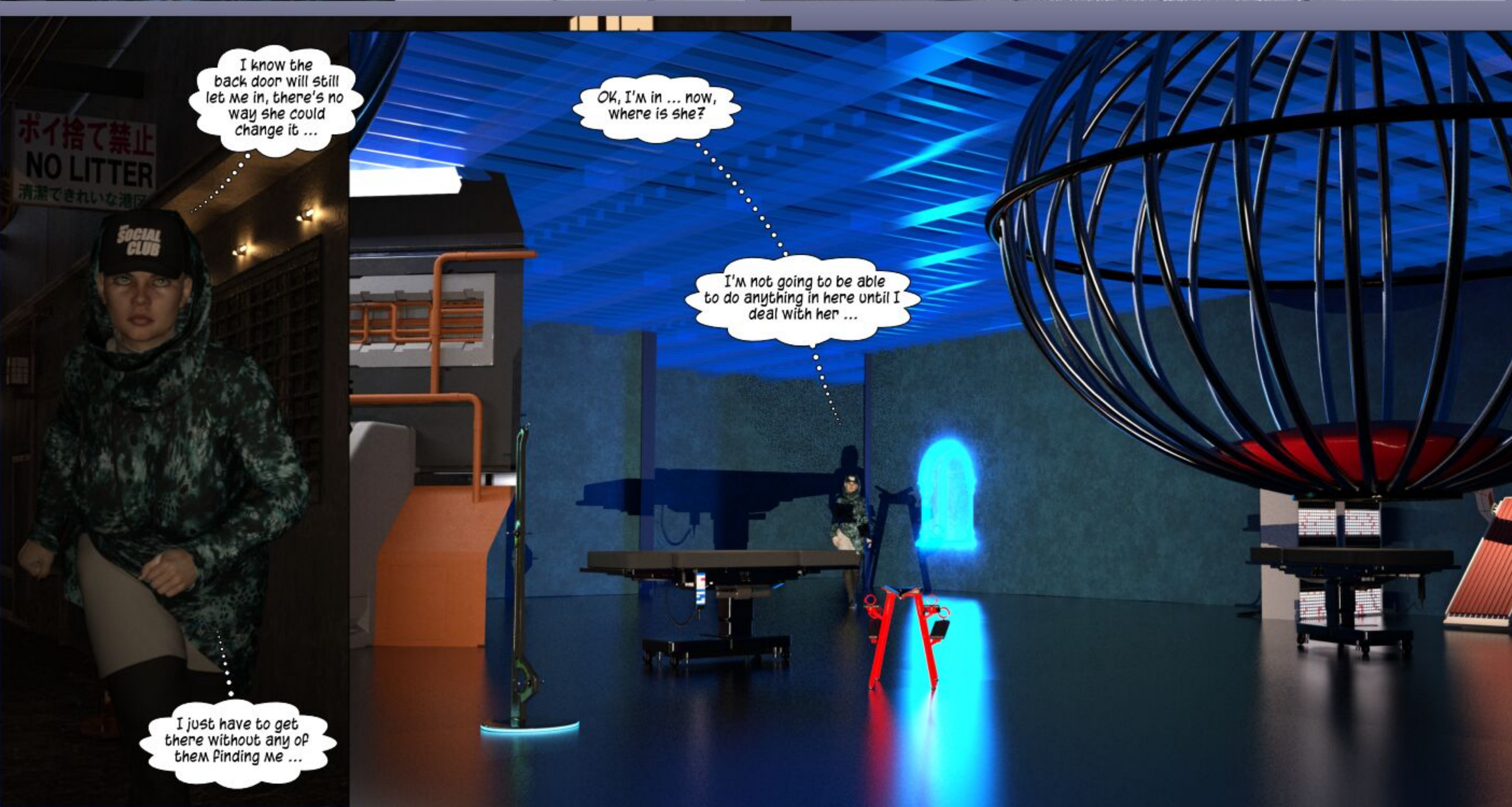
And I'm not leaving. I'm not giving that bitch the satisfaction.

Besides, I can't remember my recall. I can't remember a lot of things these days.

Thanks for the honesty, though.



... Best of luck, I suppose.



I know the back door will still let me in, there's no way she could change it ...

OK, I'm in ... now, where is she?

I'm not going to be able to do anything in here until I deal with her ...

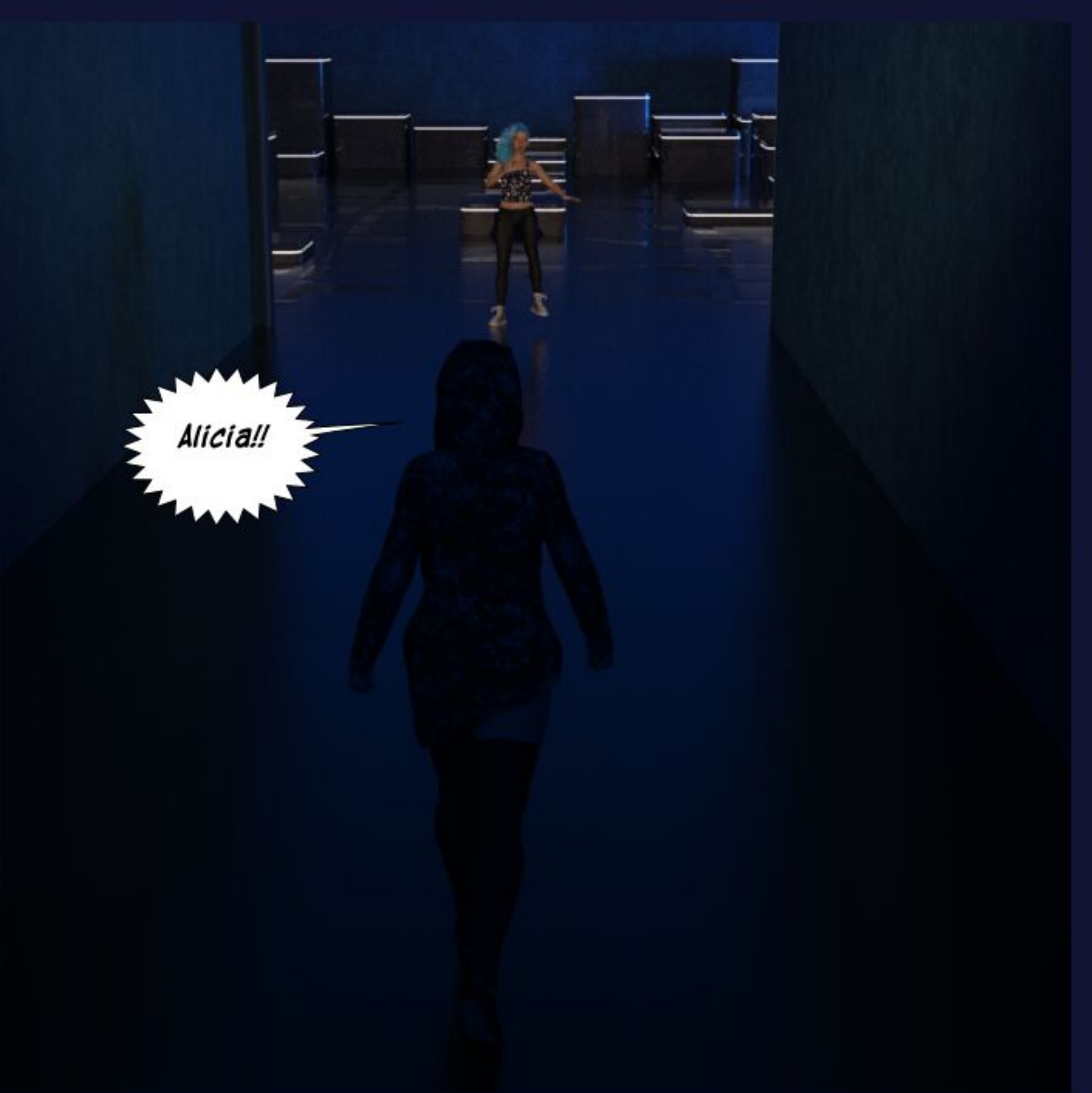
I just have to get there without any of them finding me ...



-- cringe --

It may be time to get rid of these.

I'm sure I can come up with something better to replace them.



Alicia!!



This is my club, you little bitch! You thought you could put me in a doll box and just take over?

I'm going to beat you to a pulp. Then I'm going to throw you out. And you're never, never coming anywhere near this place again!



Get off!

AAAAGGHH!!



Shit! I can barely see! Spots in my eyes ...

... Pace Peels like ... I think burned? Hurts ...

What the hell happened to everybody while I was in with the dolls? People resisting me right and left, Alicia can make lightning ...



AAA!

You think I'm going to let you walk in and take it back?

I'm going to zap you so hard you'll be out cold for a week. Then I'm putting you back in with the dolls until they can figure out what to do with you--



This is still my space, Alicia. I control it, no matter what you do. You don't own it!

And that means I can delete it.



Noooo!

If I can't have it, no one else can.

Goodbye.



... a real disappointment, Zeke. Clayton and I are getting our asses kicked and you haven't done shit.

What was I supposed to be doing? Helping you waste your time pissing into the wind? Helping Clayton set things on fire?

You didn't ask me to do anything, because you didn't expect me to do anything. You never do.



The only reason you included me at all is because you needed my shares.

And the last time you and Clayton had a scheme, you included me just because it was easier than having to shut me up, and anyway everybody knows I'm harmless, right? I'm a big joke.

I'm tired of that shit. And I'm not going to listen to you blaming me because your idea fell apart, like you were depending on me or something. You wanted my votes, and that's what you got.



I needed you out there! There were some fights where they might not have won if you'd been there! I was counting on your support, no matter what you think!

And what have you been doing? Roasting your lazy ass by the pool and screwing your little harem all day long.



Brendan ...

... get the fuck out of my house.

ELSEWHERE.



Literally my last refuge.

Took me much longer than it should have to realize Ben couldn't possibly have locked me out of it before I wiped him ...



I'm having so much trouble getting my head together ... I'm sure it must be all that time in the doll system.

But no one will come in here ... I can get my concentration back and build some new private spaces ... where they can't get to me ...

--- cough ---

YIII!



Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you.

Ben? You're not ...

No. I'm not. Someone managed to put my brain back together. Woman named Chapman.

Chapman? Hell. So she knew ...

Of course. They know everything. They gave us these little gadgets. Genius, really. They do one thing: they track you. We've known everywhere public you went. And they have a way to signal everyone else. Not sure how they managed that with the network down.

If Clayton hadn't been too stubborn to use his alert, they'd have had you yesterday.

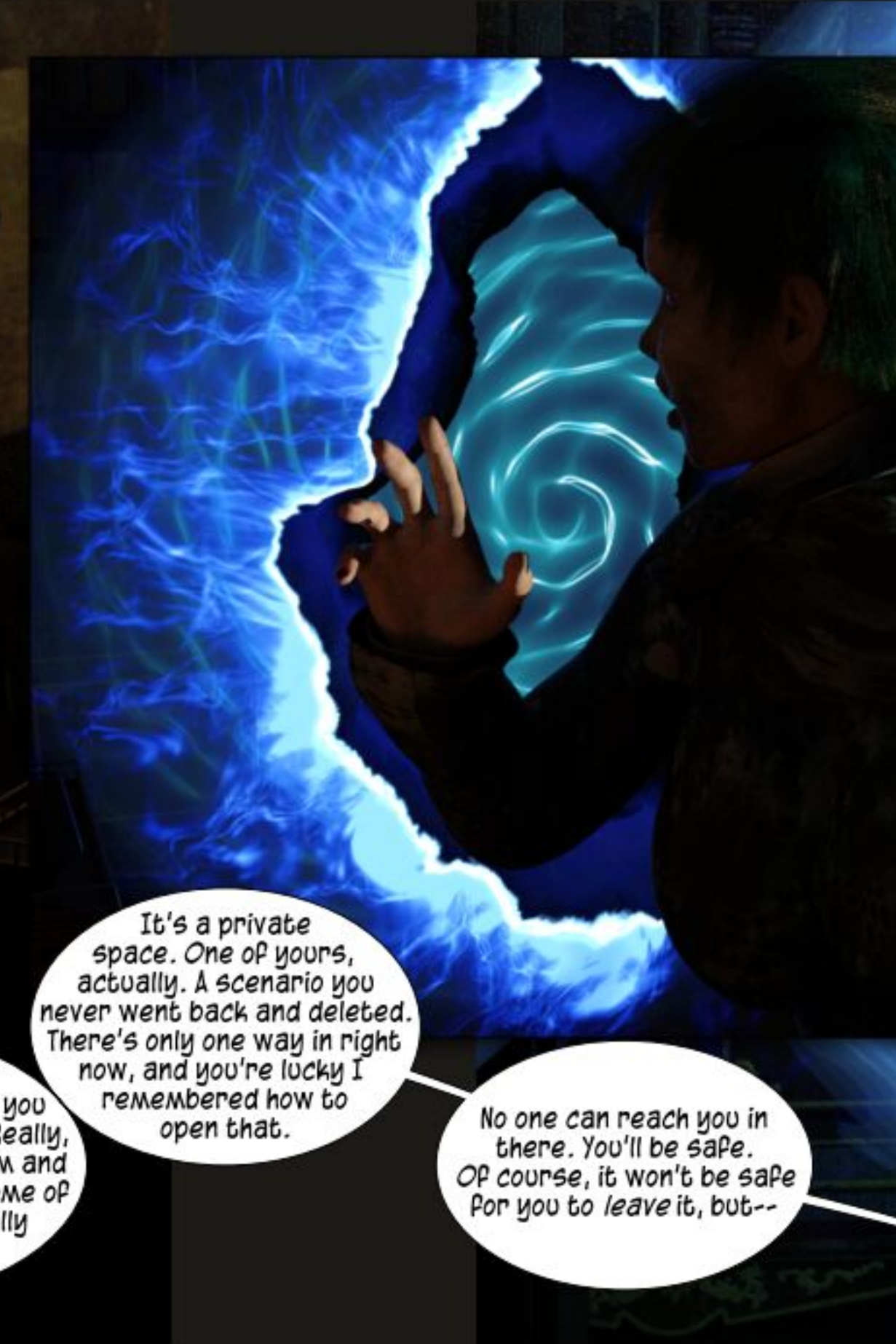


Ben ... I'm sorry. I didn't want to do what I did to you ...

Spare me. We could have talked it through, but you didn't bother. You wiped my brain, Melinda. You think an apology's going to cover that?

You're out of time, you know. You've burned too many bridges. They have to find a permanent solution for you, or some powerful people are going to be upset.

But this is your lucky day. I'm prepared to offer you a refuge. Don't ask me why. Really, I should hand you over to them and cheer. Maybe it's because some of those powerful people really piss me off.



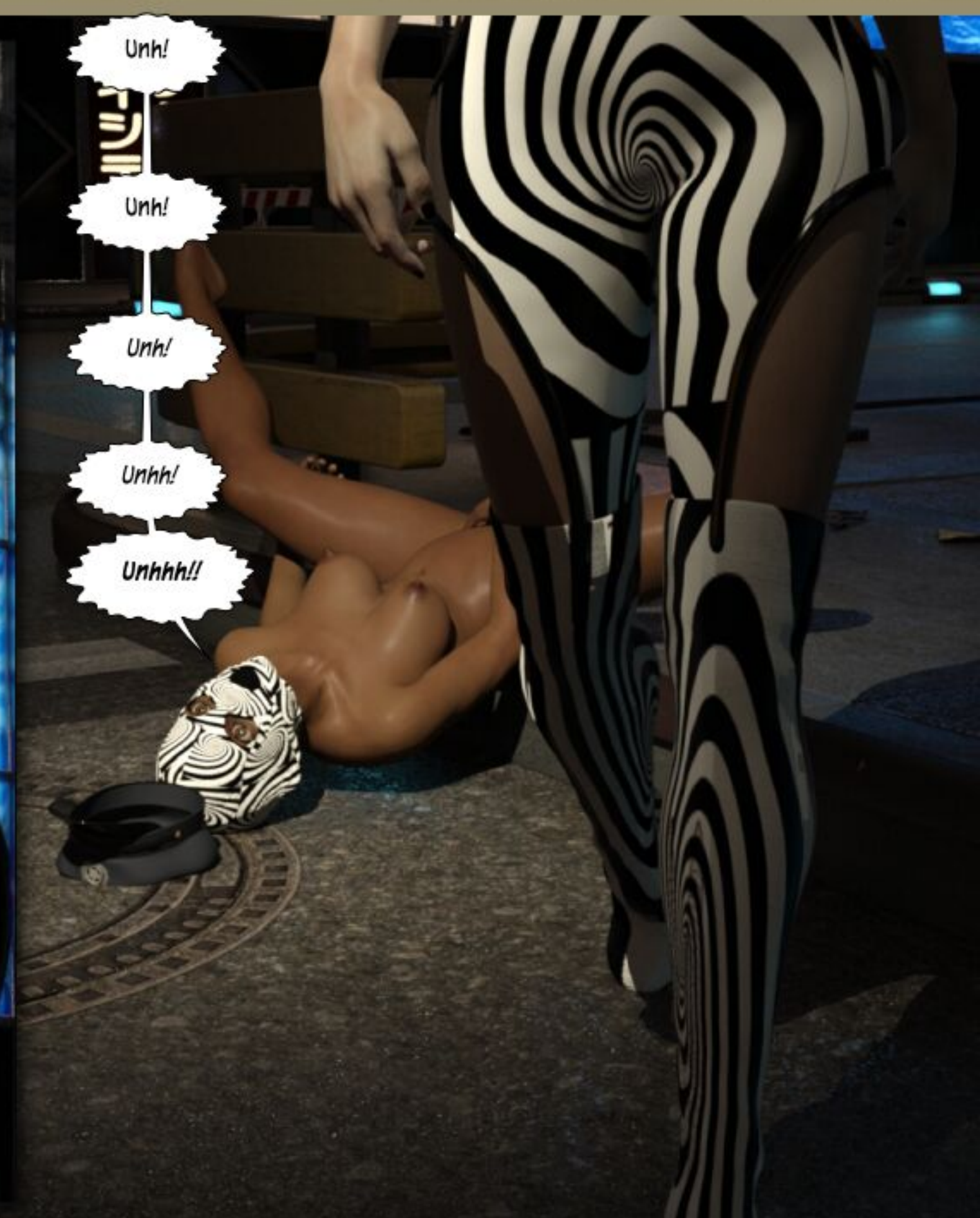
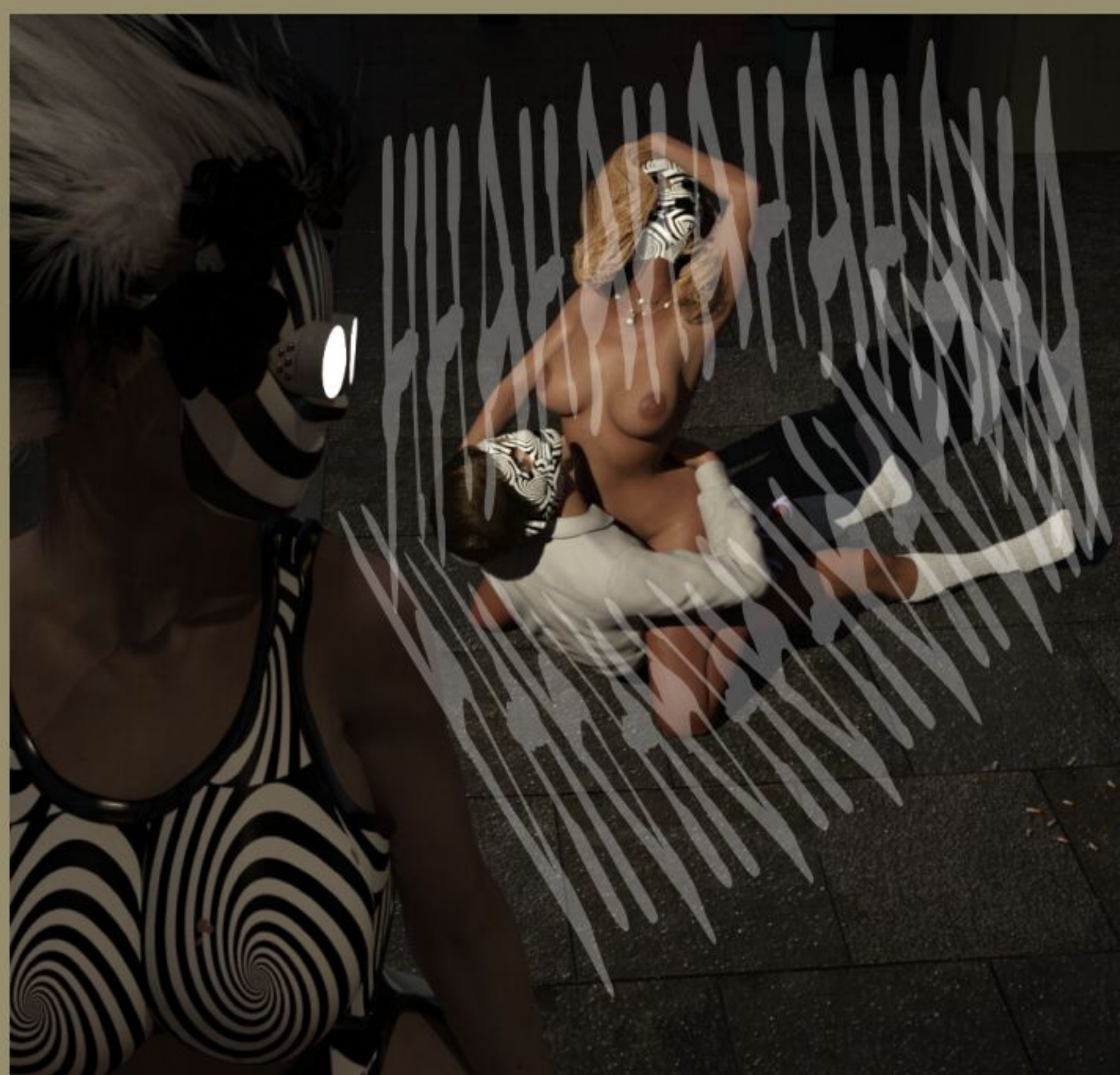
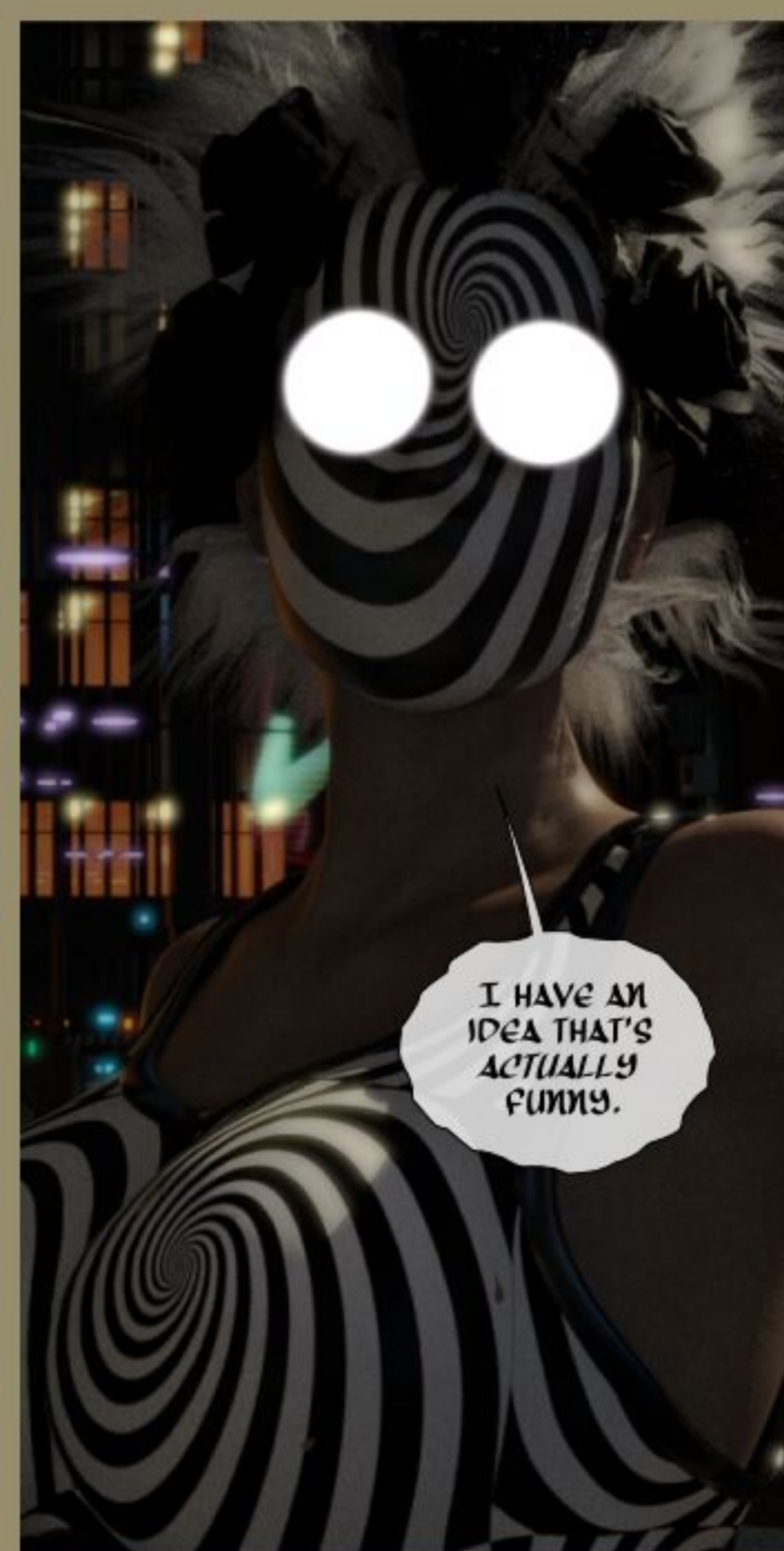
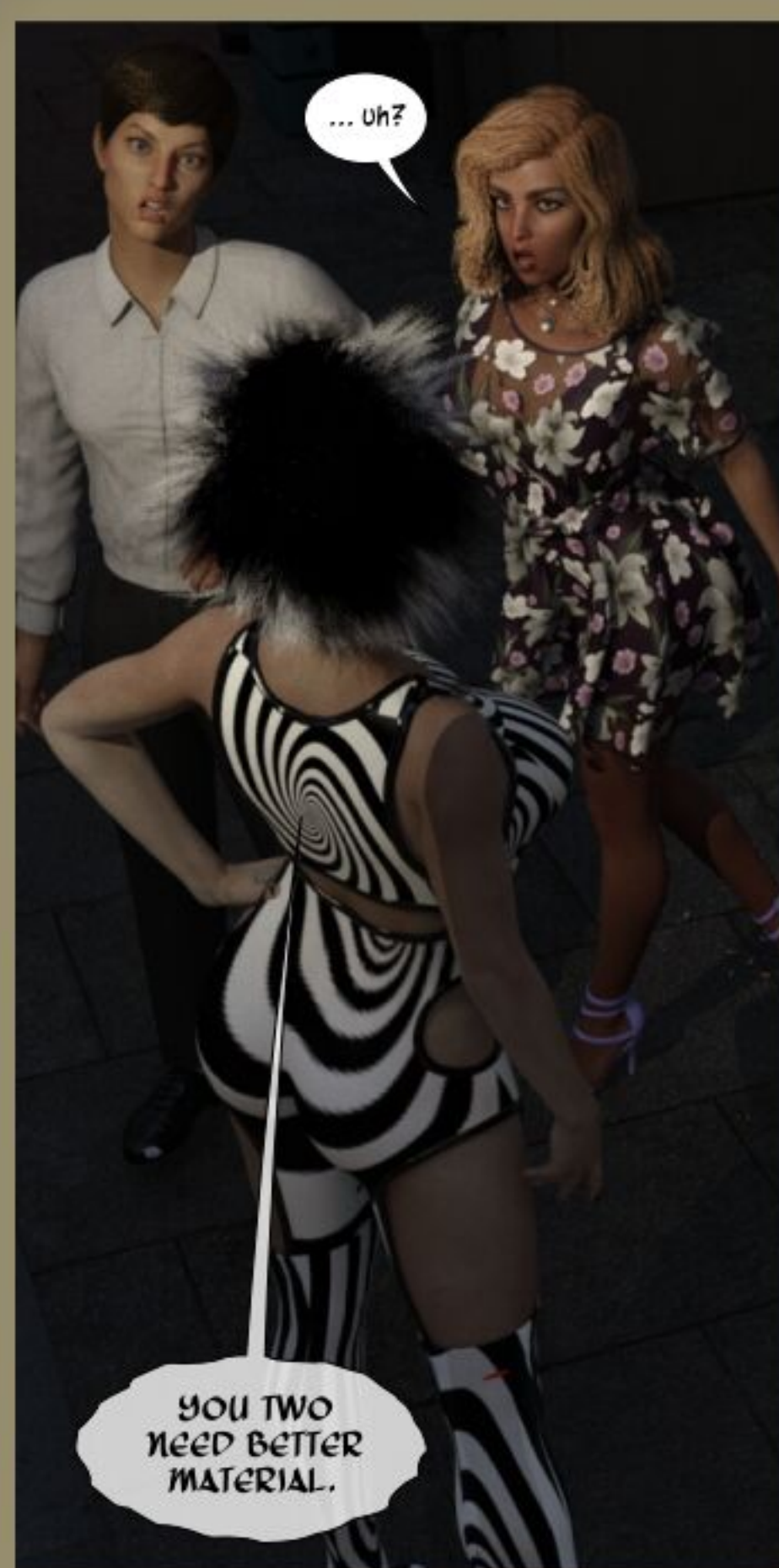
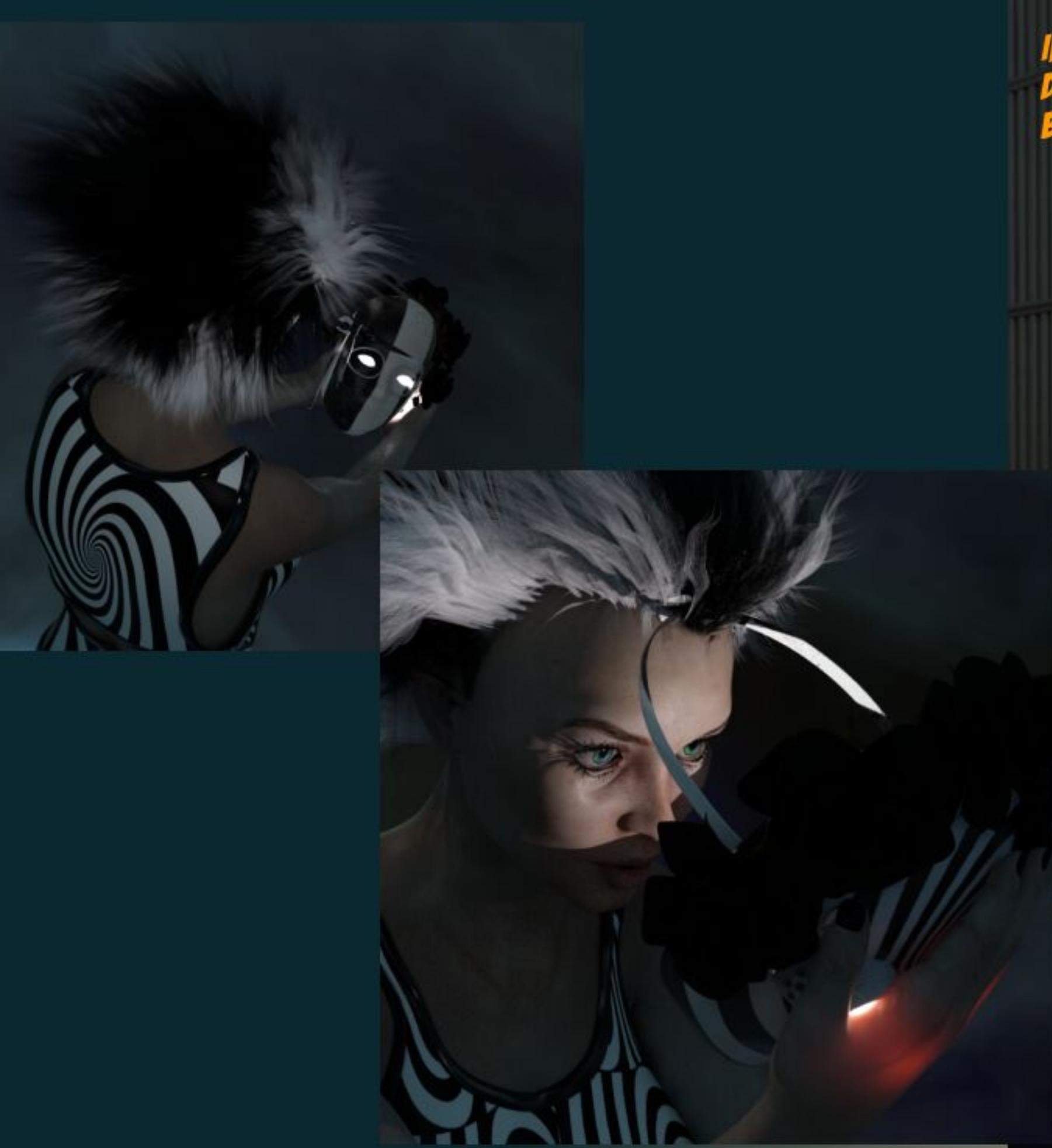
It's a private space. One of yours, actually. A scenario you never went back and deleted. There's only one way in right now, and you're lucky I remembered how to open that.

No one can reach you in there. You'll be safe. Of course, it won't be safe for you to leave it, but--



Uh-huh. I thought you would.

IN THIS ISSUE:  
DUSK COMES EARLY TONIGHT TO CENTRAL CITY, FOR A DARKNESS HAS DESCENDED UPON IT!  
BEWARE, CITIZENS, THE STARTLING SCHEMES OF ...



**BUT ALL IS NOT LOST!  
FOR TWO INTREPID HEROES HAVE HAPPENED UPON THE SCENE OF THE SHENANIGANS ...**



Wow. Spellbinder's work, you think?

Has to be. Look at their Paces. Besides, no one else has that twisted sense of humor.



You can spot her better. Do some recon, while I try to snap these people out of it.

Roger.

Unh!  
Unh!  
Unh!  
Unh!  
Unh!



My third eye tells me she's just up ahead ...



Hey!! Stop where you are!



bri  
bbri  
bril  
buh  
bri

All right, First you're going to undo whatever you did to her, and then you're going to come with me quietly.



Hey! I mean it! Don't Make Me use my mental force on you--



MENTAL FORCE? THAT SOUNDS PROMISING.



LET'S SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU USE IT FOR SOMETHING LESS BORING.

SOON AFTER ...



Nightwave?

Did you find her? What happened?

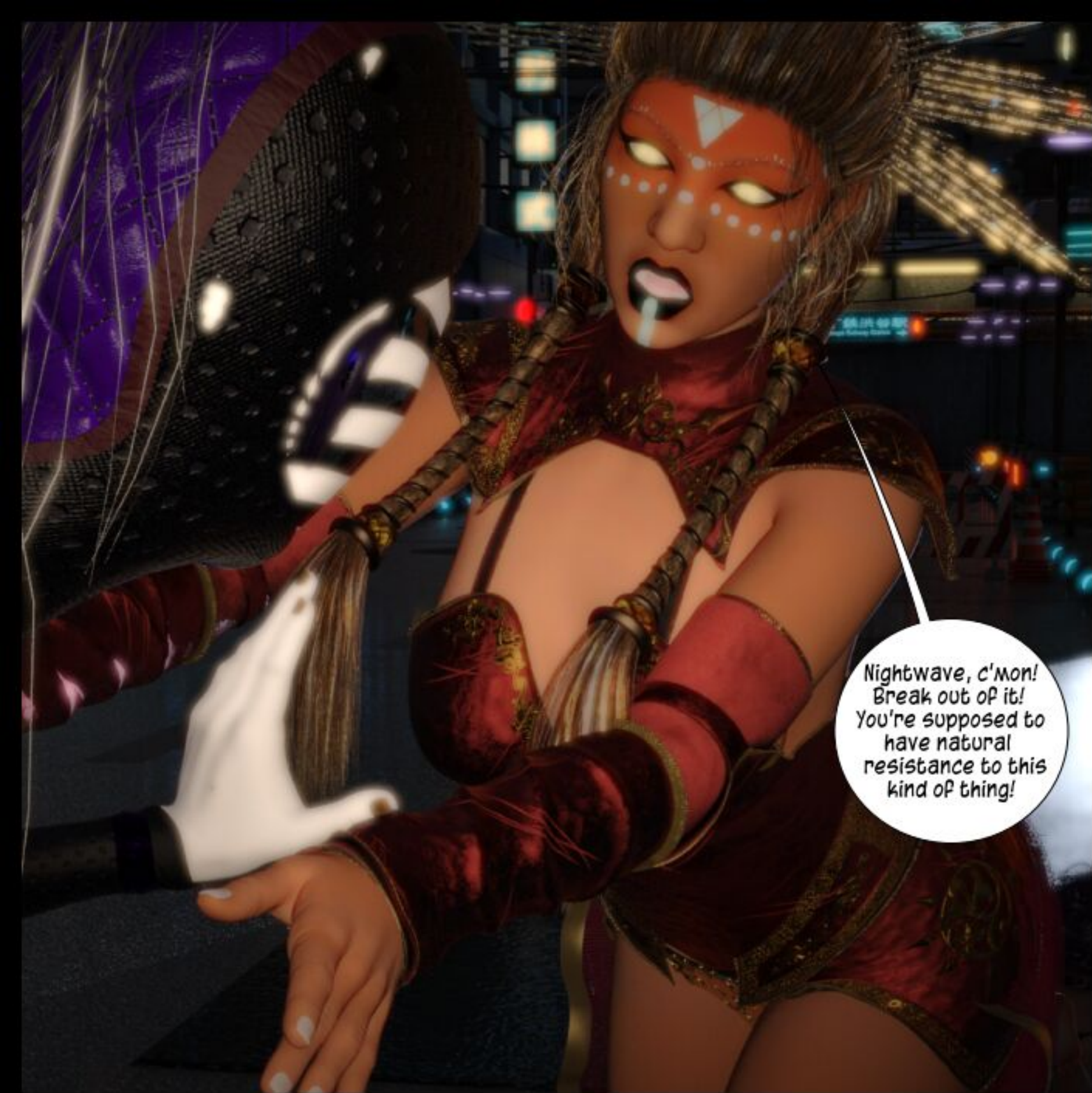
Nightwave, what are you doing?



less boring ...  
I'm helping ...  
helping ...  
be less boring ...

help you be less boring too ...





SOME TIME LATER ...



No, no, it's not an investigation! We just want to be able to assure our viewers that it's safe.

But Ms. Hou, if I give your viewers those assurances, I'm conceding something baseless.

Why would anyone Peel there are concerns about safety here in the first place? What rumors would I be dignifying?

Have there been complaints?



Not at all ... and that's sort of the problem. The people who get your service apparently all love it so much that they become permanent customers.

Ah. So I'm accused of providing something people like.

I haven't accused you of anything ...

Ms. Hou, I really do think the best way to show how harmless our relaxation sessions are is to let you experience one. On the house.

Oh, no, I don't think that's a good--

I insist.

...

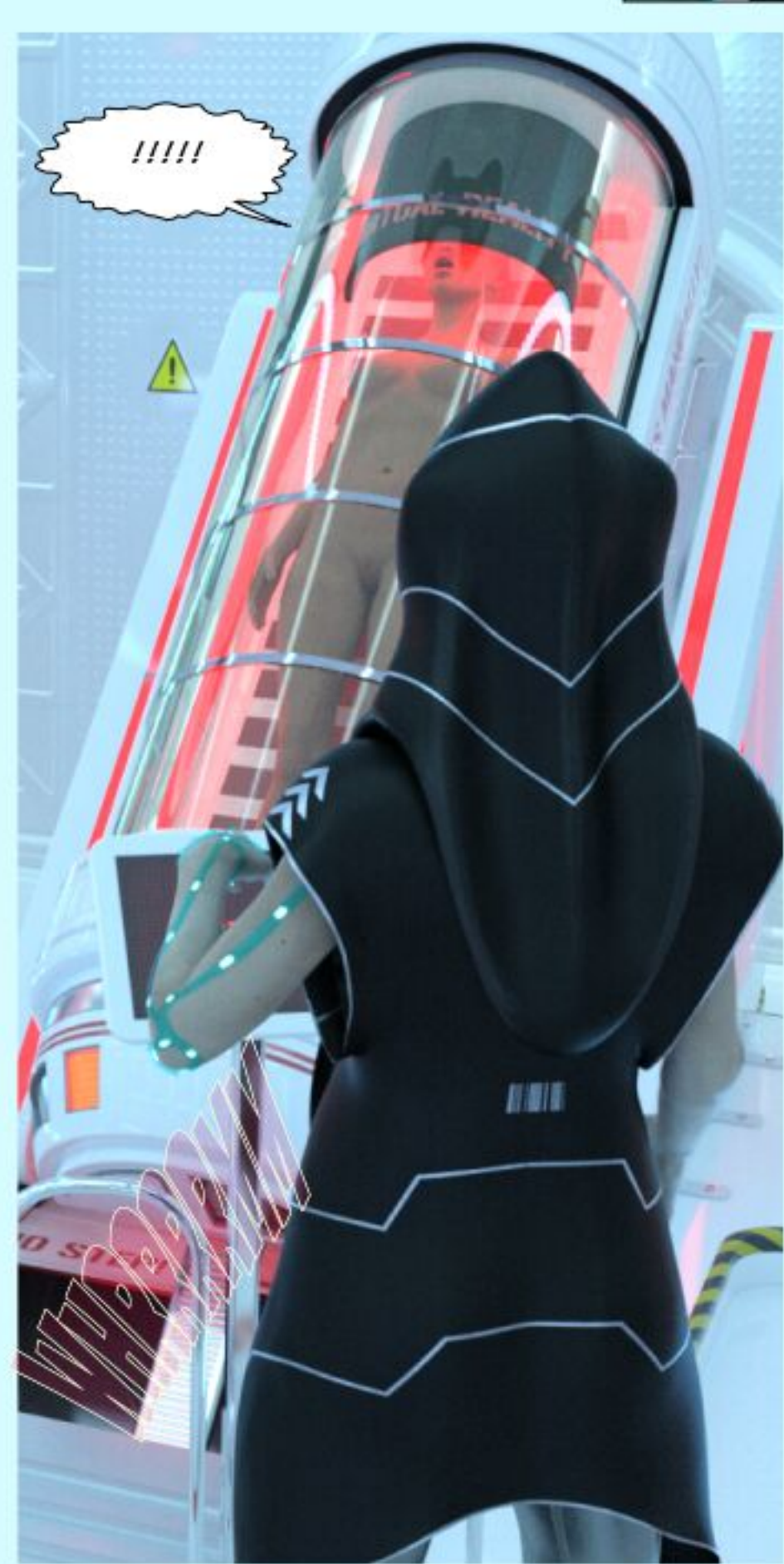


No ... This is ... I don't ...



---!!

Sorry, can't hear you.



!!!!



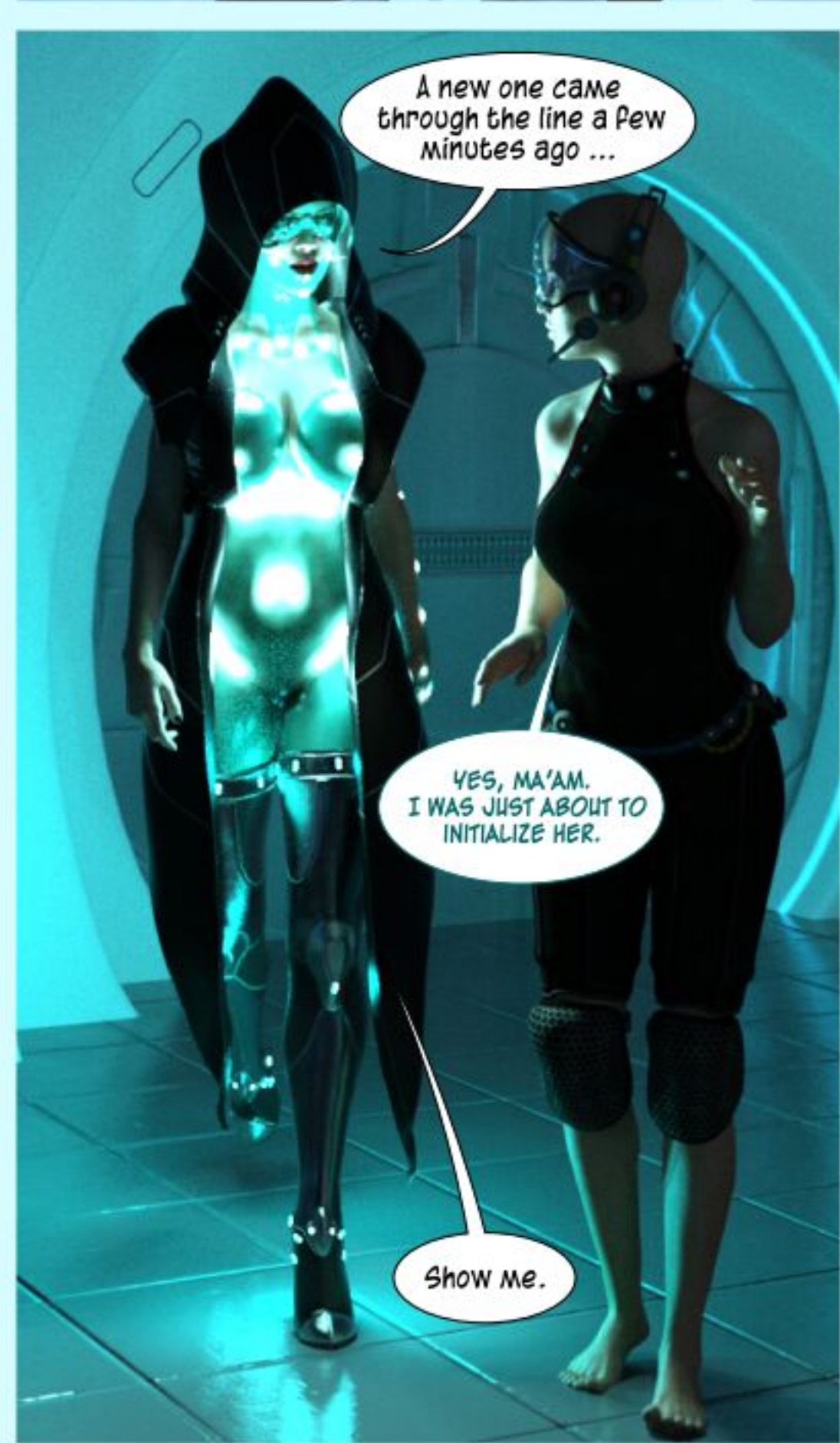
Bye!



Dispose of her belongings.

I'm going downstairs to see the outcome.

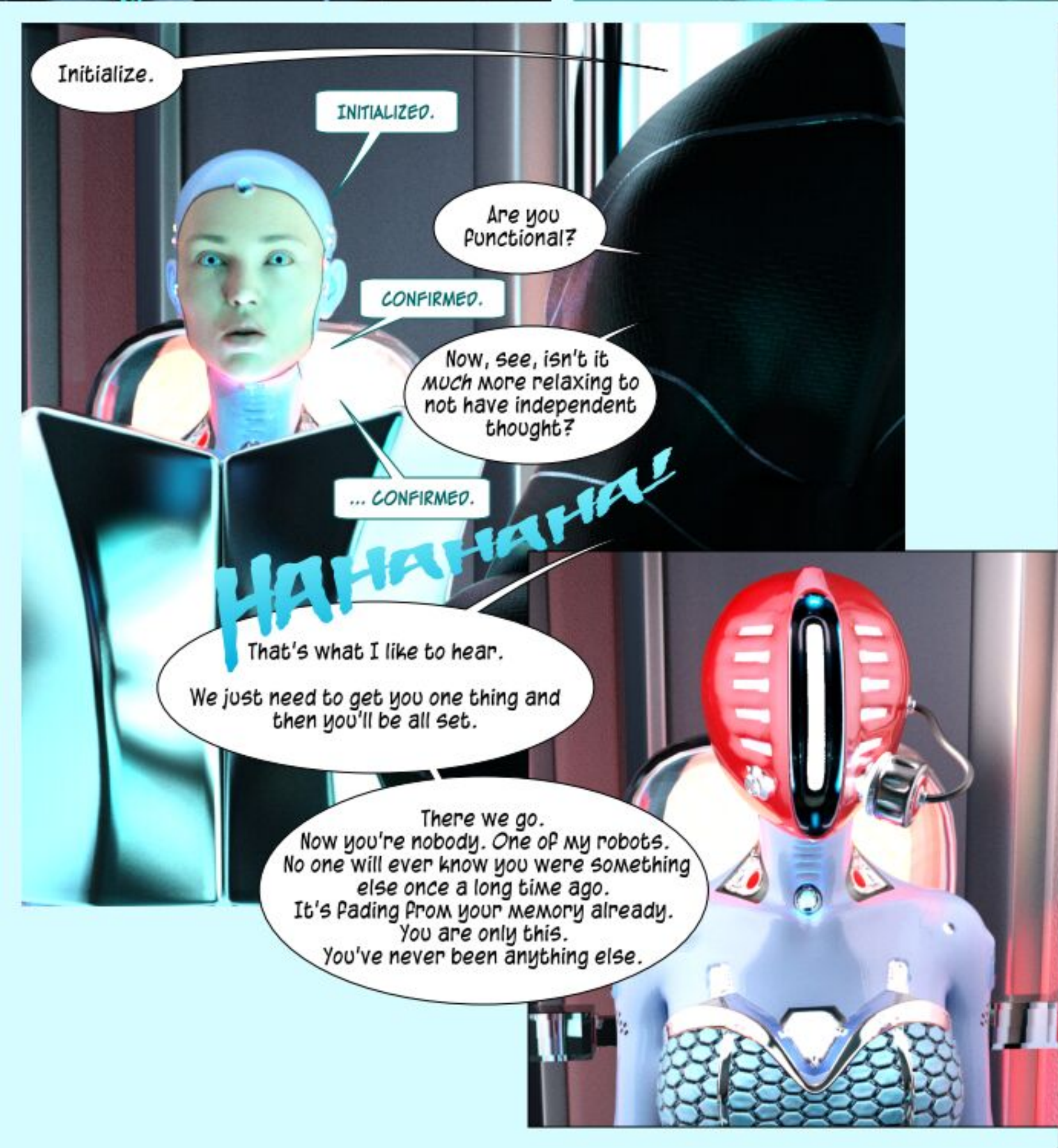
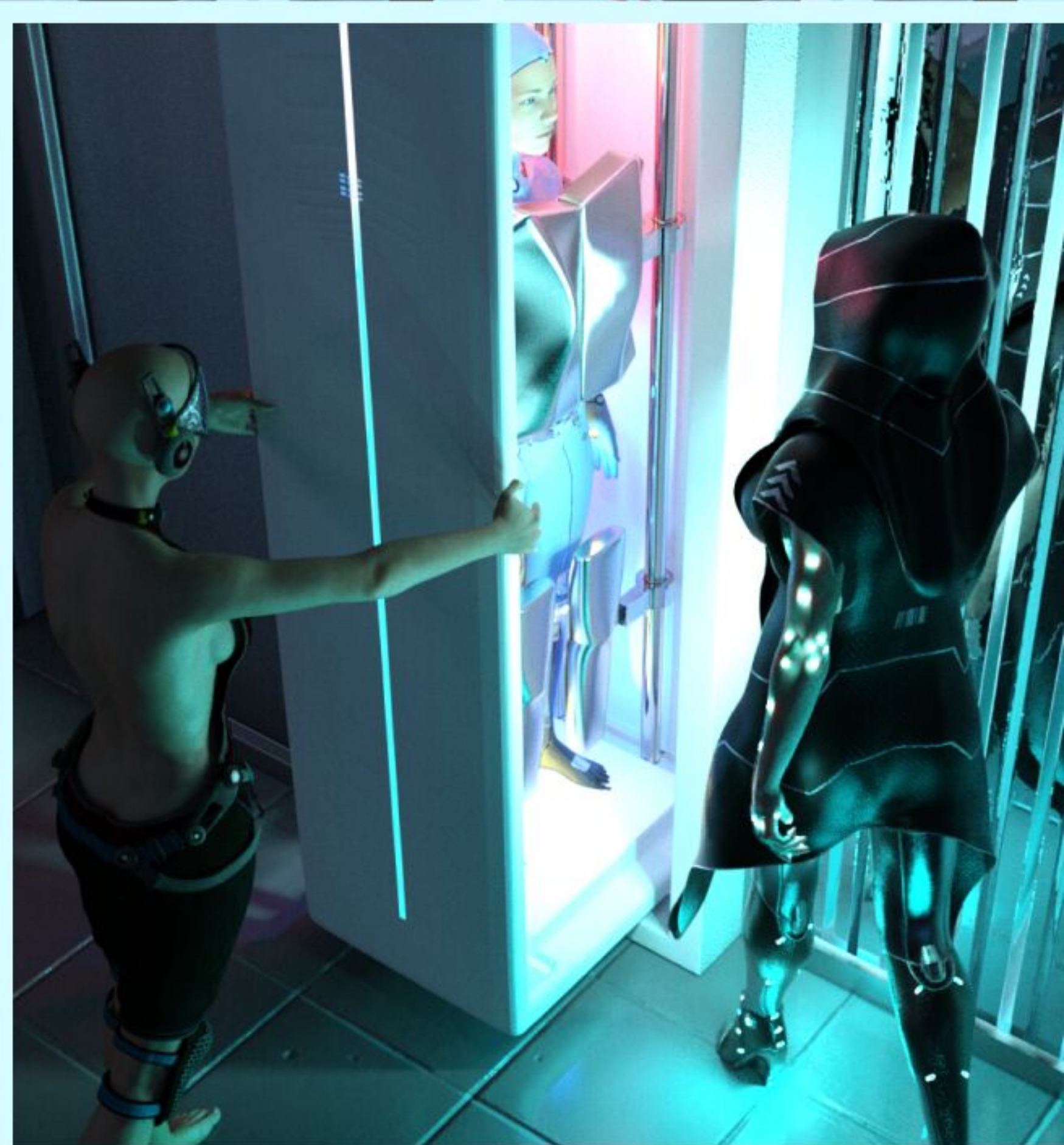
YES, MA'AM.



A new one came through the line a few minutes ago ...

YES, MA'AM. I WAS JUST ABOUT TO INITIALIZE HER.

Show me.



Initialize.

INITIALIZED.

Are you functional?

CONFIRMED.

Now, see, isn't it much more relaxing to not have independent thought?

... CONFIRMED.

**HAHAHAHA!**

That's what I like to hear. We just need to get you one thing and then you'll be all set.

There we go. Now you're nobody. One of my robots. No one will ever know you were something else once a long time ago. It's fading from your memory already. You are only this. You've never been anything else.



Now go to your storage area and deactivate until you receive instructions.

ACKNOWLEDGED.

MMM ... Erasing someone gets me wet every damned time ... I sometimes wonder if I should have given you robots genitals.

I suppose I'll just have to go work off this sexual tension on my own.



Delusions of grandeur?

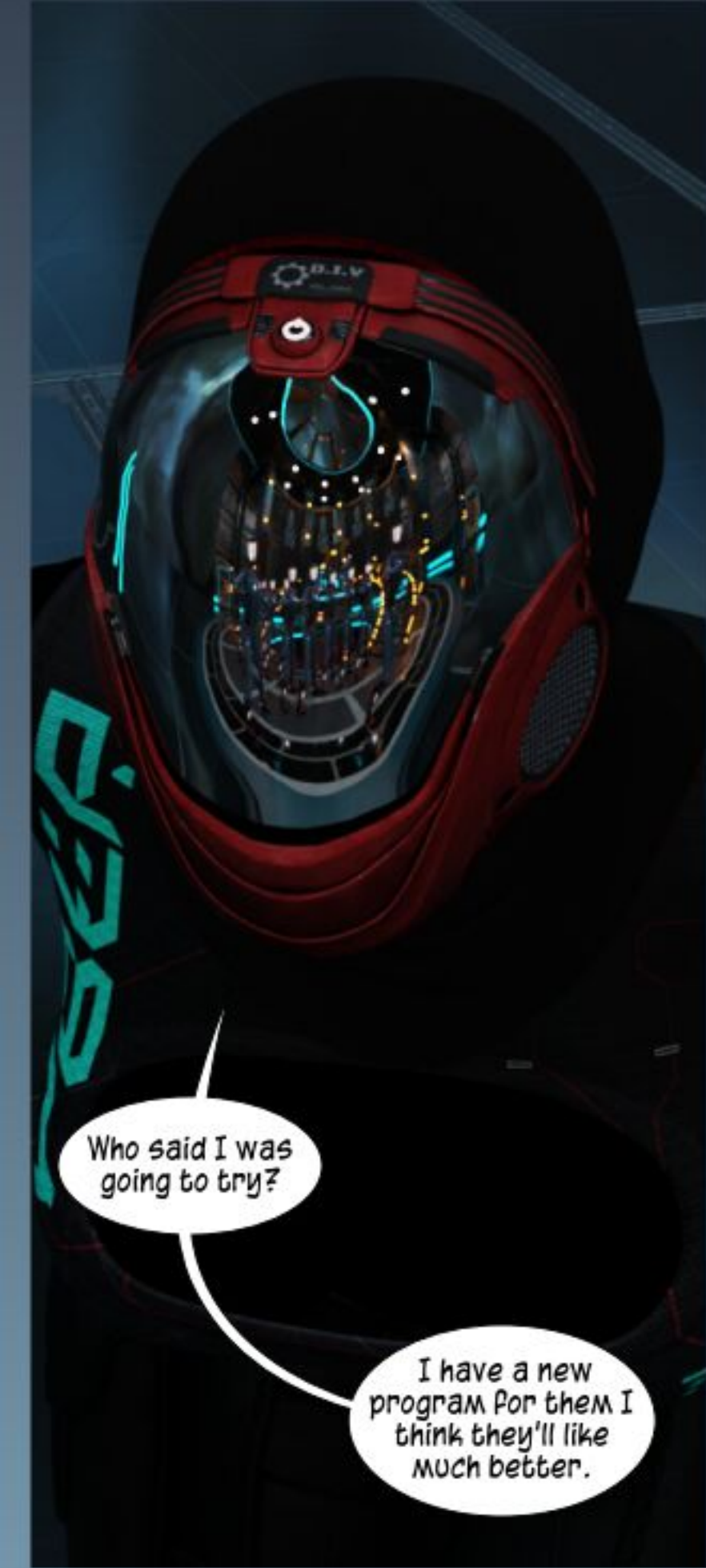
There you are! I've been wondering when you'd show up.

You see, I'm ready for you this time.

Attack her!

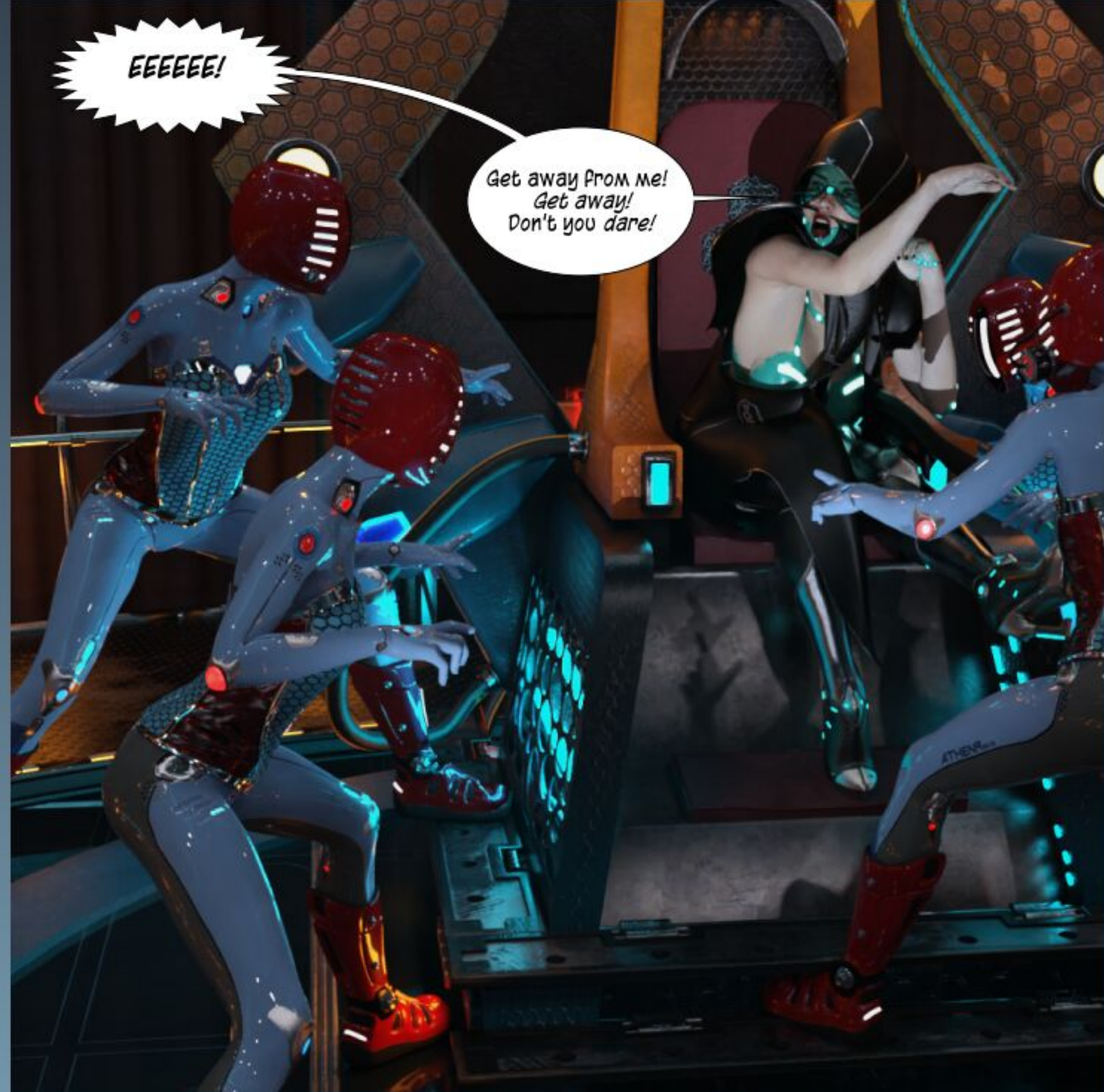


There are hundreds of them. Even with that sword, you can't possibly get through them all.



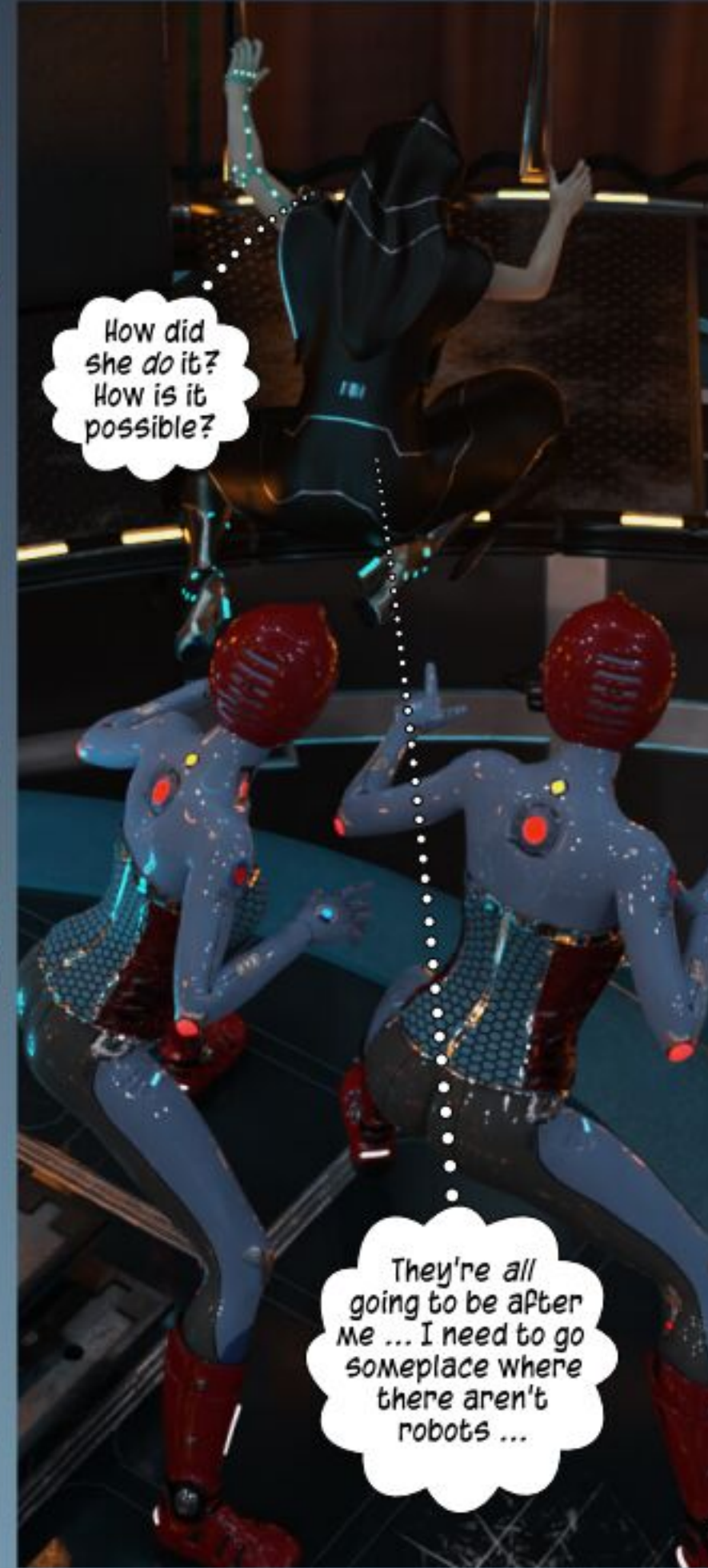
Who said I was going to try?

I have a new program for them I think they'll like much better.



EEEEEE!

Get away from me! Get away! Don't you dare!



How did she do it? How is it possible?

They're all going to be after me ... I need to go somewhere where there aren't robots ...



She's after me! They're all after me!

Help me fight them off!



What are you doing? Stop!! Have you lost your minds?

Oh, I've arrived just in time! I guess it's hard to get loyalty by force, huh?

Make them stop! Make them stop!!



AAAAAAAAAAAAA!



Only one way to get out of this ... have to Pocus ...



Don't just stand there and gawk! She'll be coming after me! We have to depend ourselves!



Look at you. Not a thought in your heads. If you're going to be dumb as dirt, you might as well be trolls.



At least that way you might be worth something in a fight.

UHRRR?



Depend the castle! Don't let anyone in! And if they do get in ... tear them apart!

RRRRR!!



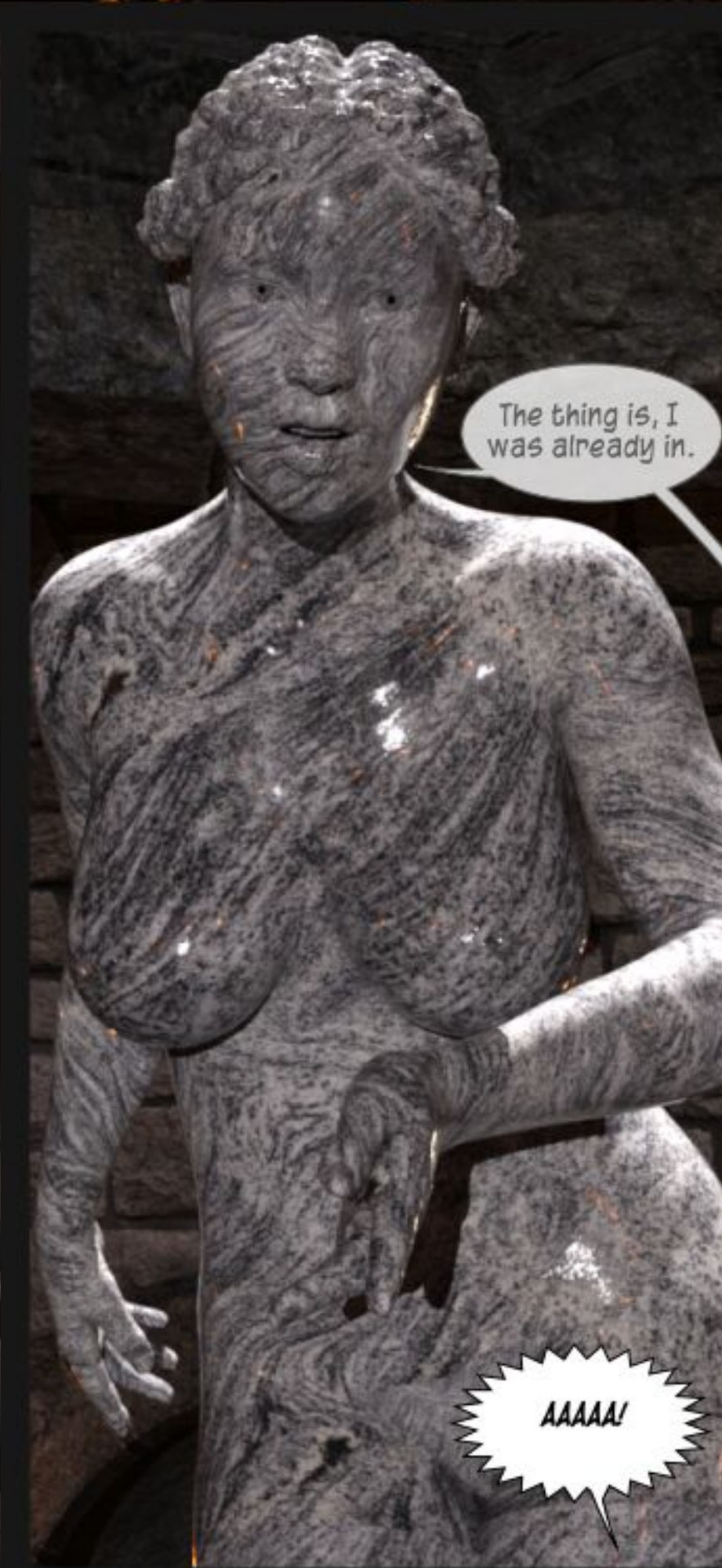
Only five people to make into trolls ... and all of them were out in the grounds ... of course I'd end up in a castle that's deserted ...

Lots of good places in here to hide, though.



It may be enough. The castle's gates are barred and there's no other entrance.

Between that and the trolls, it will be very hard for her to get in here.



The thing is, I was already in.

AAAAA!



No! Stop! STOP!!

If you want to hide in here, that's fine. No one will ever find you when you're a statue like the rest.



I can't move!

I only have one chance ...

Right under me, and I'll fall through it ...



Professor, are you sure this is a good idea? The hieroglyphics on the door said--

"Trespassers will be dismembered." Yes. Aren't you interested in the possibility of a great archaeological discovery?

Sure, but my student health insurance doesn't cover dismemberment.



Let's see ... This is about a woman ... of high birth ...

Ooh. Apparently she was not a very nice person.

Is this her tomb?



Professor!

I think I've found the main burial chamber!

... Professor?



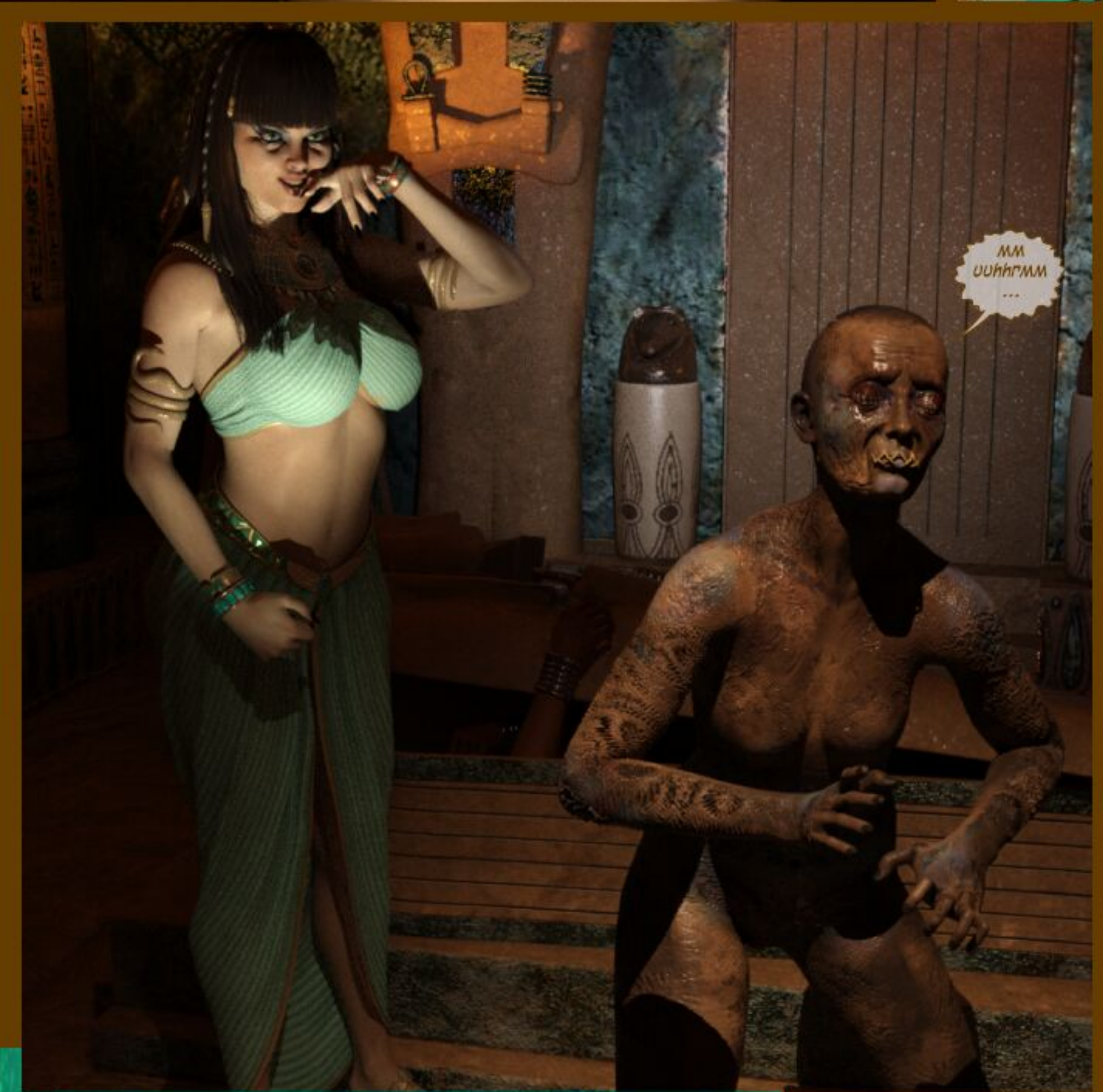
EEEEEEEEEEEEE!



EEEEEEEEEEEEE!



MMMMMMMMM!



MM UHHMM



THAT WASN'T A VERY NICE THING TO DO.



AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!



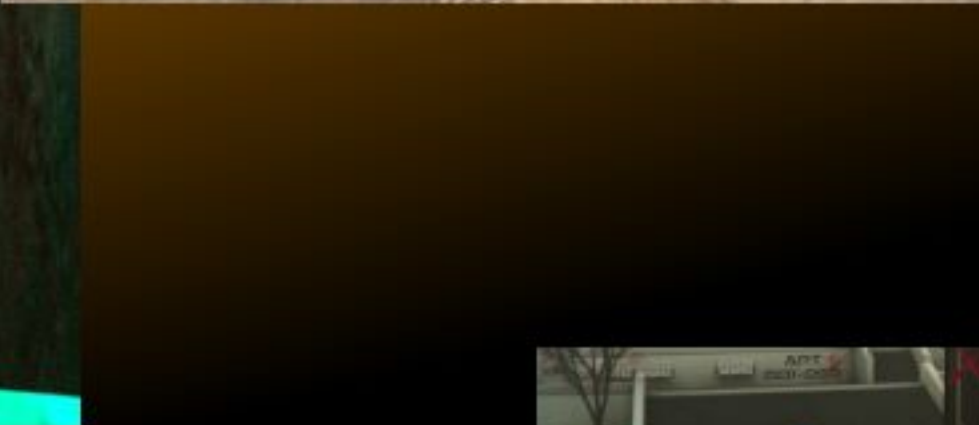
She's not going to get me ... I'll get away ... she won't find me ...



She's not going to get me this time ... I can still get away ...



... never get me ...



not going to get me ... she's never going to ...



She's not going to get me ... I can get away as many times as I need to ...



Am I the only one who's really curious what's going on in there?

We'd have to put you in there with her to find out. It shouldn't be too big a risk, as long as you don't get too caught up in it to recall ...

... No, probably a bad idea.



I'm surprised. You're not the type to take vindictive pleasure.

It's not that at all! I just don't have any idea what her personal hell looks like. Not even a good guess.

That's assuming it's even working.

It's working. I don't know what's actually happening, but I got medical to give me data on her brain activity. It's consistent with repeated cycles of ... things she finds very upsetting.



So she really is making this for herself? How is that possible? Does she realize she is?

She really is. Cobermayer wasn't lying to her: the space she's in is one of her leftover passive scenarios. And since it's hers, we can only alter it in very limited ways.

But we only needed to do one thing to it. One trap. Ironically, seeing how it's hers, it was a mental suggestion.

It got applied when she ported in. The rest is all her.

What happens if she recalls?

If she remembers how ... Well, if she wakes all the way up, she can choose to leave sleep. We can't stop her, and we wouldn't want to.

But if she reenters, she's going to mentally be so stuck on that loop that she'll probably just end up right back in it as soon as she tries to go to sleep again.

"Probably." No longer one of my favorite words.



Well, she told Zoë she'd forgotten how to recall. We'll see.

The thing is, Melinda is actually a pretty brilliant visualizer, with a lot of imagination. Don't forget, those hit passives Cobermayer put out were her work.

She doesn't seem to be able to use that ability to manifest out in the common spaces, which is why she started making trouble via proxies who could. But inside one of her own spaces ... anything goes.

There's no way we could possibly have come up with any kind of punishment scenario as effective as one she dreamed up herself.

As for whether she realizes she's in her own loop ... I have no idea. And I'm not sure if it'd be better or worse if she did.



What are you going to do with the ... ah ...

It stays in here. This is one of my staging spaces. I can get in and so can Leyna, but nobody else. For extra security.

Do you want access too? Just in case?

... no, I don't think so.



We'll need to tell a couple of Barkers, so they know this is over with. Leyna and I will tell Serene ... when she's a little less distracted. Would you mind letting Pauline know?

Not at all.



"In fact, I think I'll go drop by there right now."

Oh! Sorry, I didn't realize you had company ...

Naomi, you may not remember my mother, Ruth. It's been years since you've seen her.

Mother, you remember Naomi Coleman.

Mother was just telling me some important information. Mother, there's no reason Naomi can't hear it, is there?



At this point, I wouldn't object to shouting it in the street.

Several of us older Barkers have had enough of this intramural fighting. Not to mention the collateral damage.

We're intervening.

This is going to come to an end, no matter what we have to do to end it.

NEXT: VOLUNTEERS OF A CLOWN PLUS: ONLY THE END OF THE WORLD, NO BIG DEAL