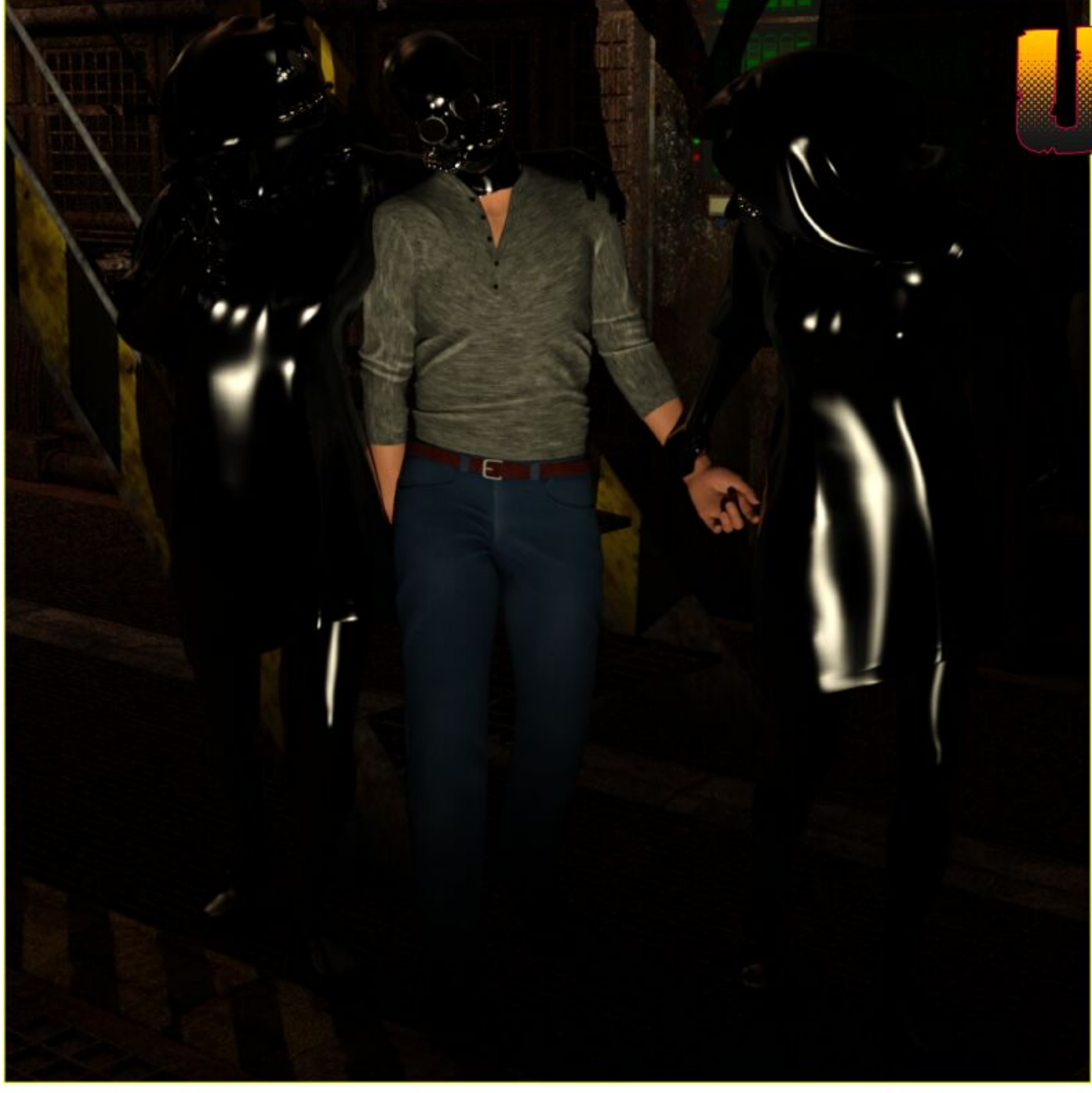
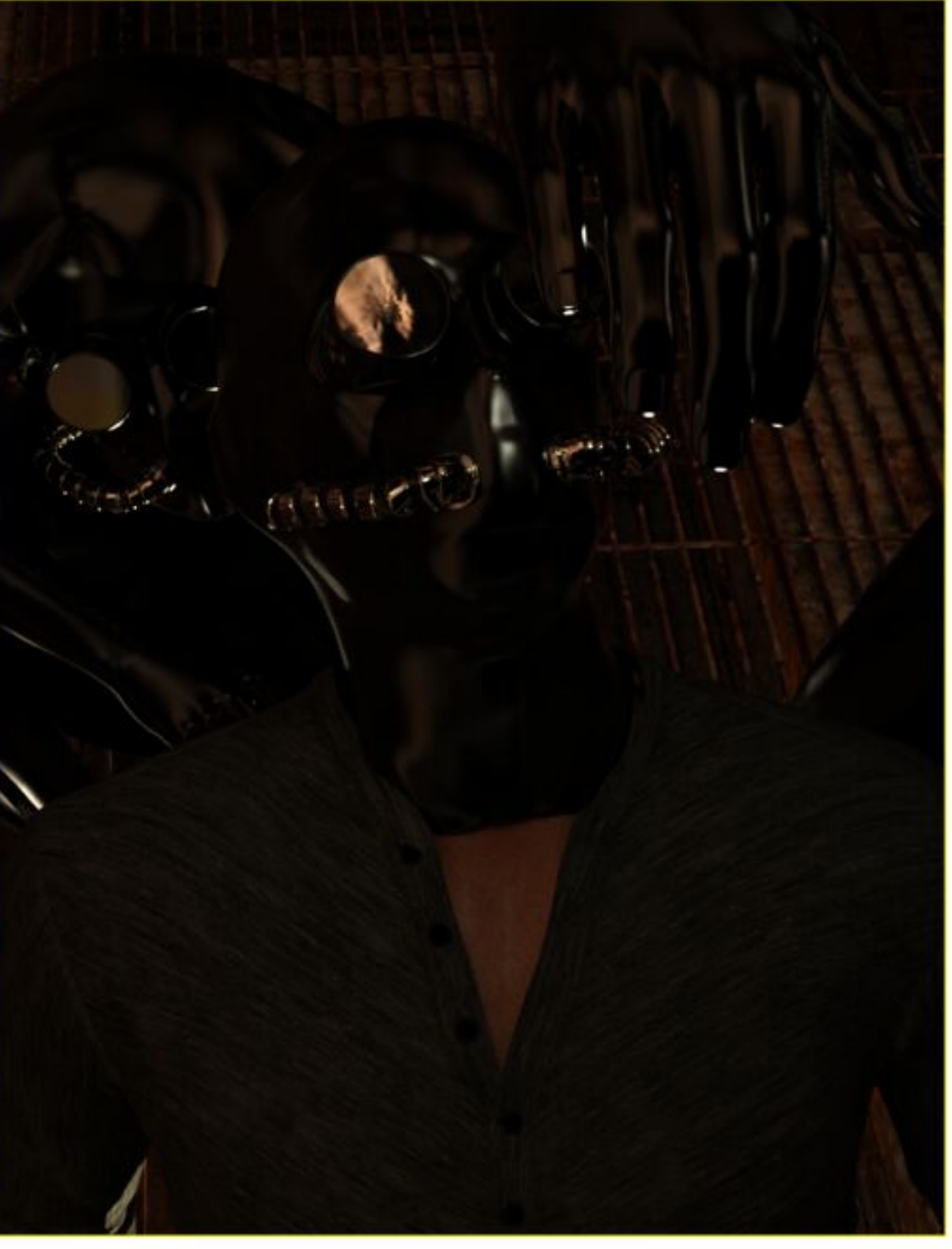


**Sometimes**  
a vacuum gets filled by whoever happens to be in a position to fill it.

It's likely that whoever dreamed up the auditorium or arena or whatever they called it never actually had a mental image of what was behind the scenes, how one reached the catwalks high overhead, or the maintenance areas and ducts and all the mysterious humming equipment that keeps a building running. They knew it had to be there, by implication, but didn't give any thought to what it looked like. In *Sleep* you don't always need to fill in those kinds of blanks. It all just works anyway.

So it was left to Gordon Dunn and his imagination to make it real, as he crept in to try to get a good view of the proceedings below. And since Gordon was a little bit of a romantic, in his mind it was rusty and dirty backstage, with pipes hissing steam and shaky railings. If you'd asked him, he probably would have said that it looked like that because that's just what it was supposed to look like.

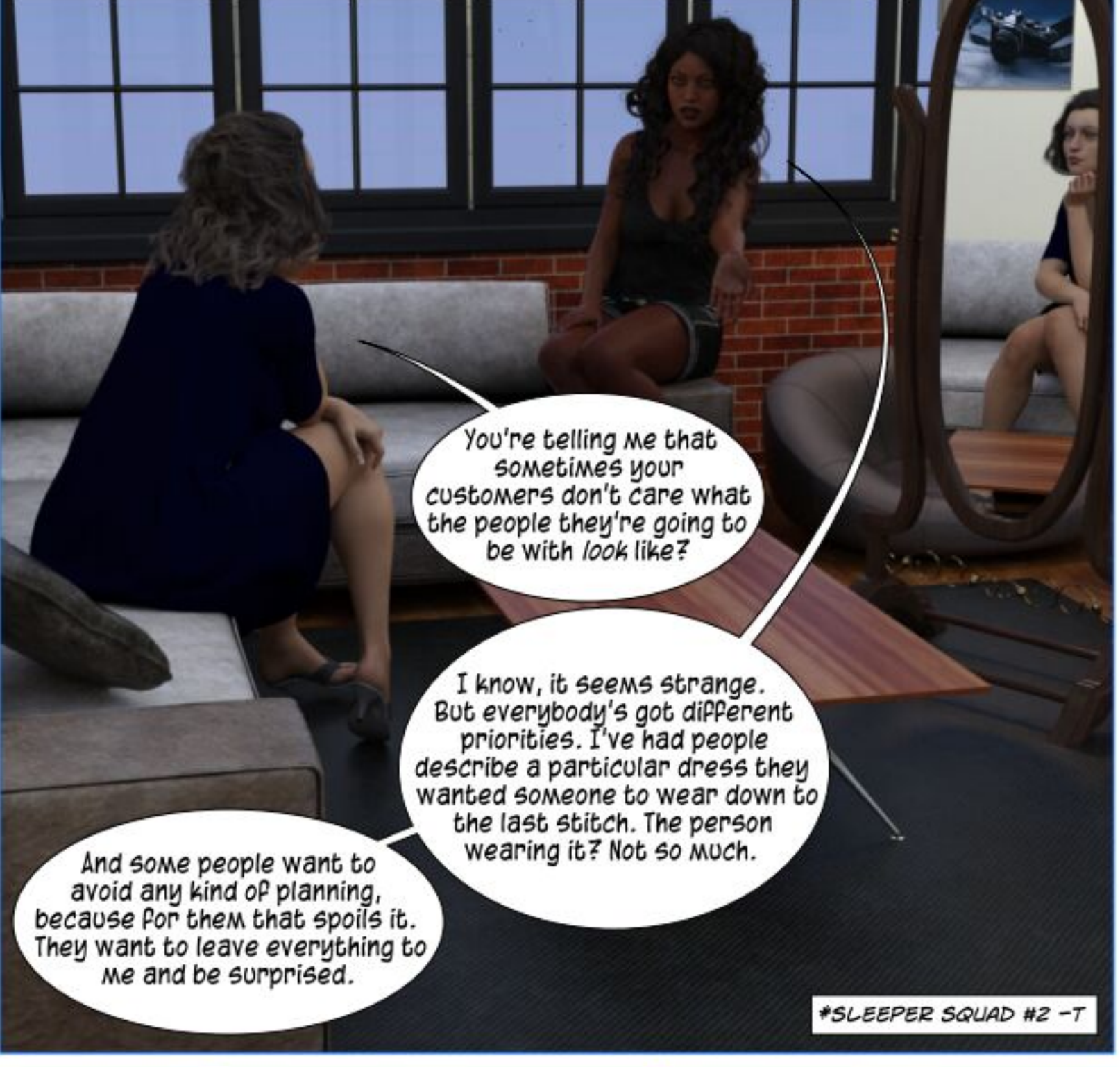
You'd have had to have asked him before he disappeared, though.



# #3 UNSPOKEN

Words and images by Trilby

It had been nearly a month since the business with Dr. Chapman\*, and I hadn't had time to wonder about not hearing from Leyna. I was too busy.

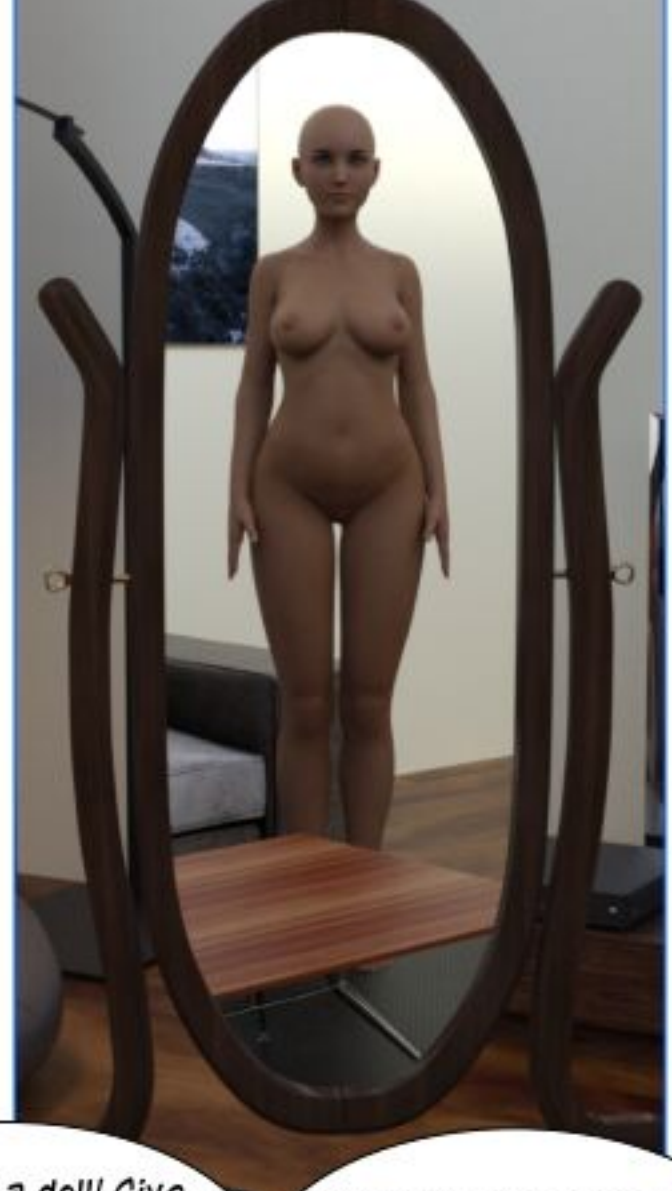


You're telling me that sometimes your customers don't care what the people they're going to be with look like?

I know, it seems strange. But everybody's got different priorities. I've had people describe a particular dress they wanted someone to wear down to the last stitch. The person wearing it? Not so much.

And some people want to avoid any kind of planning, because for them that spoils it. They want to leave everything to me and be surprised.

\*SLEEPER SQUAD #2 - T



Well, I'm not one of those customers. Either kind.

I guessed that. That's why I've dragged out the magic mirror over here, so we can see about figuring out what you have in mind.

This is an Aiko. She's sort of the default. We use her when the customer doesn't specify anything.

Really? And people like this?

Heh. I gather you don't.

She's like a doll! Give her some hips, at least, and make the breasts look more natural. Nobody is really shaped like that!

That's a little better. But more. And get her back to a real height. And does she have to have a pixie face?

Good. Bigger, though. I don't like skinny. I like something to hold and squeeze. And the face should be rounder.

Ah, now we have something.

... I notice you're showing me a white model.

Just playing the odds. Sorry, I didn't mean to offend. Would you like something else?

I'm not offended. I suppose most customers have a bias toward someone who looks like them. The thing is, I think that's ... a little boring.

But I also don't want to imply that I'd be picking something different for ... dubious reasons? And I realize it can be a minefield.

Well, it's a private scenario ...  
Actually, I have an idea.





Oh! That's definitely unusual ... I like it!  
Now she just needs hair. A lot of hair.

Perfect!



I'm sorry to be so demanding.

I wish more people were. The more specific you are, the better my chances of making you happy.

Well, I certainly wouldn't have been happy if I had ended up with that Aiko creature. I still can't believe that's the default.

What does the default for men look like?

There isn't one. They're less than a tenth of the scenarios, and our customers who want them usually will at least give us a hint or two.

... Fascinating.

I think I might put a few ... unusual ... touches into this scenario.



What an interesting woman.



She seems like she'd enjoy that ... now the question is, who do I use? I need someone who can kee--eee!



What the ...? How--



"Is Doreen still green"?  
... oh.  
I get it.

"Is Doreen still green?" was Leyna's way of telling me who was communicating with me. There were only three of us who'd know enough to ask and understand the question. No one else but the customer saw Doreen in costume\*, the customer never knew Doreen's real name ... and Doreen couldn't have pulled a trick like that with the mirror.

Well, good, so I knew it wasn't a trap or something ... but, damn it, "wake up" could only mean she needed me to wake up. I hated being Awake, and Leyna knew it.



GOOD AFTERNOON, MS. MARTINEZ. I'VE BEEN ASKED TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR BED LOCATION IS CHANGING.

I'VE PROVIDED A BAG FOR THE CONTENTS OF YOUR LOCKER. THERE'S A SLIP WITH THE NEW LOCATION INSIDE IT.

#SLEEPER SQUAD #2 -T



My new prep rooms were all the way on the other side of the sleep complex. Took me a long time to get there. It's a big complex.

Swank.

People who wanted classier prep rooms could pay higher bed fees for the privilege. Since to me a locker's a locker and when I'm in sleep I don't care, I never bothered.

I sure hoped whoever was moving me here without asking me wasn't also jacking up my fees for it.

GOOD AFTERNOON!



MY NAME IS SUB. PLEASE, CALL ME "SUE." SHALL I CALL YOU "MS. MARTINEZ," OR IS "RUBY" ACCEPTABLE?

Uh, "Ruby" is fine.

You're a little ... different from the usual bedders, aren't you?

NOT REALLY. BUT I LIKE TO INTERACT PERSONALLY.

IT HELPS THAT I HAVE A VERY LIMITED NUMBER OF SLEEPERS. IT'S DIFFICULT TO GET TO KNOW SOMEONE WHEN YOU SERVICE THREE HUNDRED BEDS.

How many do you have?

OCCUPIED? COUNTING YOU, ELEVEN.

Eleven? What is this place? I'm not sure I can afford it.

Another party? I don't understand. Is someone sponsoring my move here? Why?

THE DIFFERENCE IN FEES IS BEING MADE UP BY ANOTHER PARTY. YOUR RATES HAVE NOT INCREASED.

THIS IS YOUR LOCKER. LEAVE THE BAG ONCE YOU UNPACK, I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT. THE SHOWERS ARE BEHIND YOU AND THERE'S A ROBE ON THE BENCH. WHEN YOU'RE READY, COME TO THE BED.

THAT PARTY IS WAITING TO MEET WITH YOU AS SOON AS YOU GO BACK TO SLEEP. I IMAGINE ALL YOUR QUESTIONS WILL BE ANSWERED THEN.



This was already starting to feel like maybe it wasn't Leyna, so I was prepared for anything as I went back to sleep.

Or I thought I was prepared for anything. I wasn't.

Oh, it's so good to finally meet you. I've heard so much. I hope you don't mind if I use this appearance.

I don't mind, but I'd like to know who I'm dealing with. I guess you're Leyna's boss? The one she's almost mentioned two or three times before catching herself?

Leyna is always so careful. I appreciate it. I wish she were a little more careful about her own exposure. But we'll come to that.

Wait, let me make something for us to sit down on. No point in not being comfortable.

The beds I've moved you to have a couple of special features. One of those is access to this space. It's not in the usual instancing sequence.

In English, that means no one--absolutely no one but the two of us--knows where we are right now.

I have to be very careful. And from here on in, if you still want to be involved, so do you. Finding malicious actors as yourself is probably OK, but you may have to avoid being seen with Leyna. And you definitely cannot mention me. Not for my safety. For yours.

Where is Leyna? Is she in trouble? Is that why you've contacted me?

"Trouble" is relative. She's not in danger, if that's what you mean. But she will be if she reveals herself. She needs to stay out of sight for a while.

Which is a problem, because I have a task.

There's a group of people who call themselves the Euphorics, or sometimes the Unspoken. Other people have harsher names. "Drones" is probably the kindest. They're a cult, but be careful where you say that.

OK, but is that really our ... I mean, I know "manipulator" is kind of a loose concept in sleep anyway, but we chase the ones altering other people without permission, right? People making bad choices isn't our problem.

Absolutely right. If we went after people making poor decisions we'd die of exhaustion in a week.

"Manipulator" is Leyna's word. I prefer "malicious actor." Makes the distinction clearer. The question is whether all of the people who are joining the Euphorics are doing so voluntarily. I suspect not.

Why?

Several reasons, but here's the most recent one: I sent a man named Gordon Dunn to try to get a look at the major Euphoric gatherings. They have mass assemblies, a couple of times a week.

He didn't report back. He lists as in a private space. Very private. Too private for me to see into, which is saying something. Someone definitely doesn't want anyone knowing where he is.

Not necessarily. Dunn may be a lost cause. I want you to find out everything you can about the Euphorics. This will probably mean trying to join them. There is no other reliable information.

You want me to find Dunn?

OK, but if they really are doing it without asking, and I get sucked in, I might not be able to get back out. I got lucky twice so far\*, which means I'm pushing it.

\* IN EACH OF THE PRECEDING TWO ISSUES. -T

Yes. Another reason to move you to these beds. There are some precautions we can take. I've already arranged those. We'll be making sure we can get you out, even if you can't.

But you're on your own. You can ask around about the Euphorics, sure--you're supposed to be interested in joining--but you can't trust anyone but me, Sue, and Leyna. And Leyna's unavailable for a while and Sue doesn't sleep.

Still peel up to it?

... I'll give it a try.

Great! If you absolutely need to meet me, wake up and arrange it with Sue.

I'll be watching as closely as I can. Good luck!

... Huh.

You'd think a cult would want to attract new members, right? You'd expect them to post advertisements or something. "Join us and find enlightenment!"

This was not the way the Euphorics did business. I had to start by asking around, trying my best to sound like someone who was genuinely interested and not like a spy.

Fortunately, in my business I knew all kinds of unusual people who knew all kinds of even more unusual people. Lou, for example, the producer and booking agent I worked with most often. Lou knew every bit of weirdness going on in back corners of AA. "That's where all the best customers are."

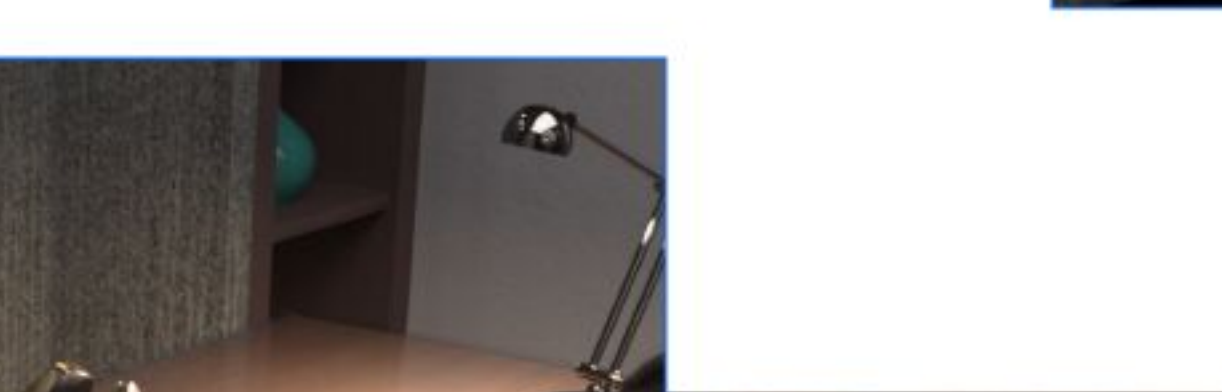
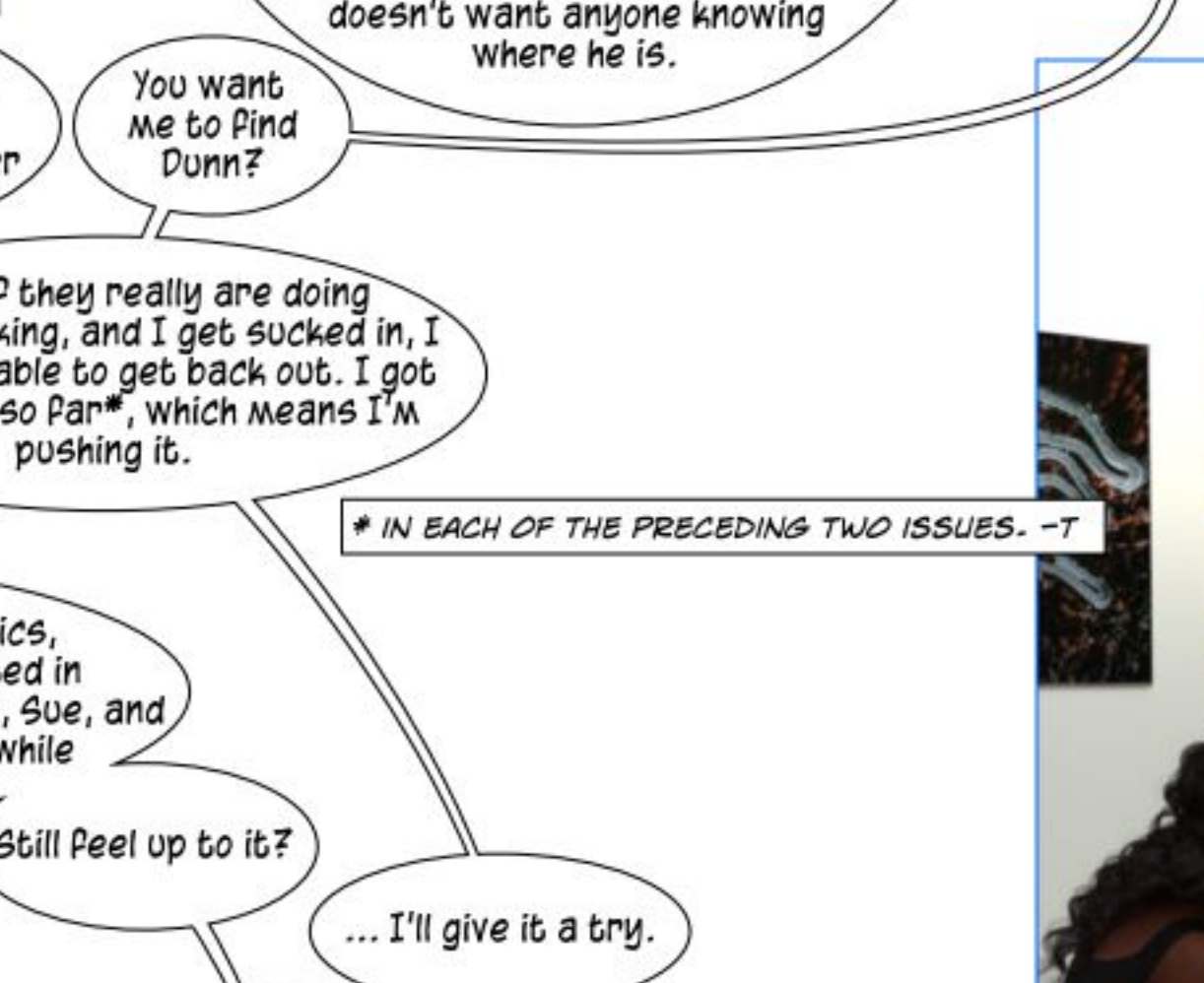
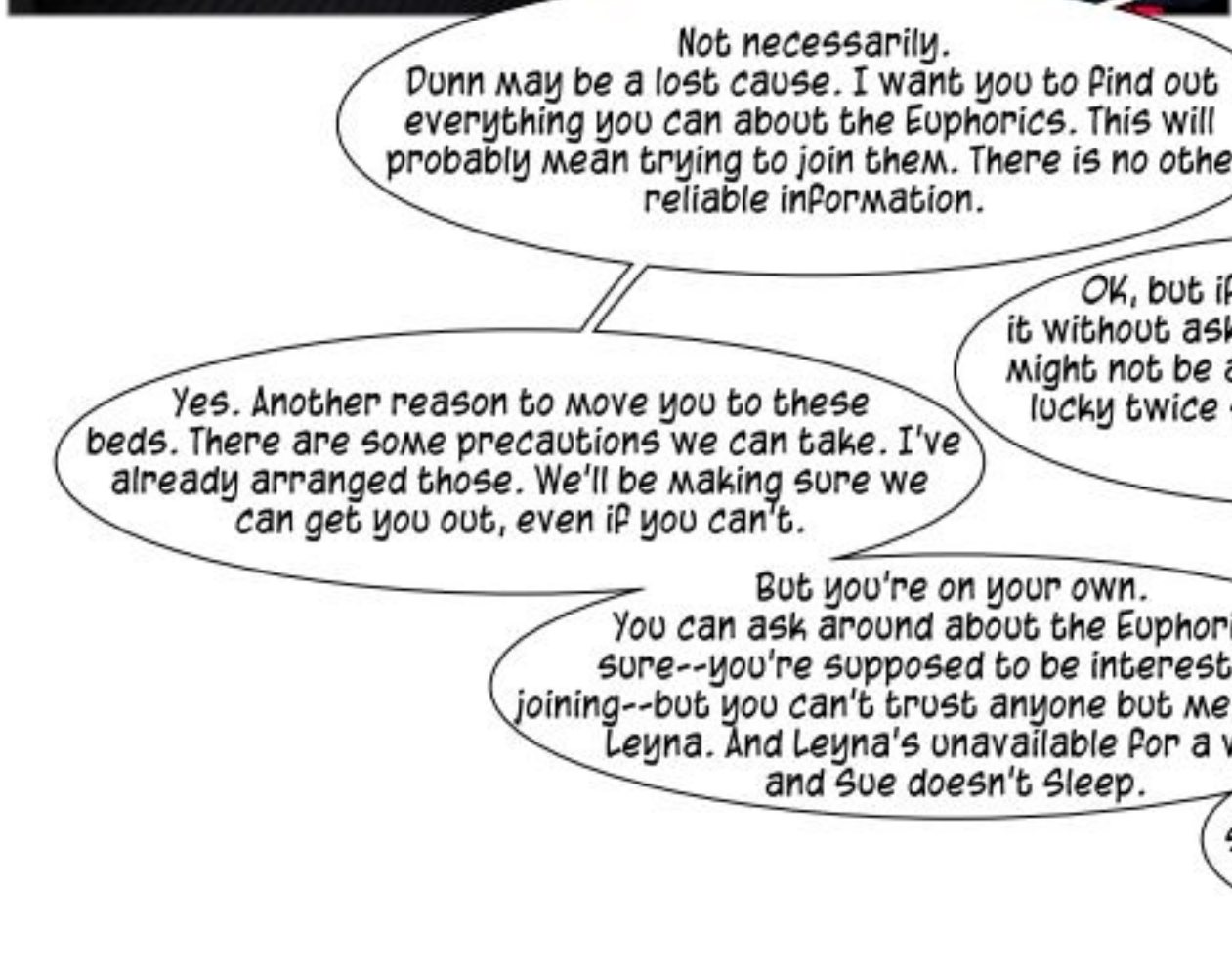
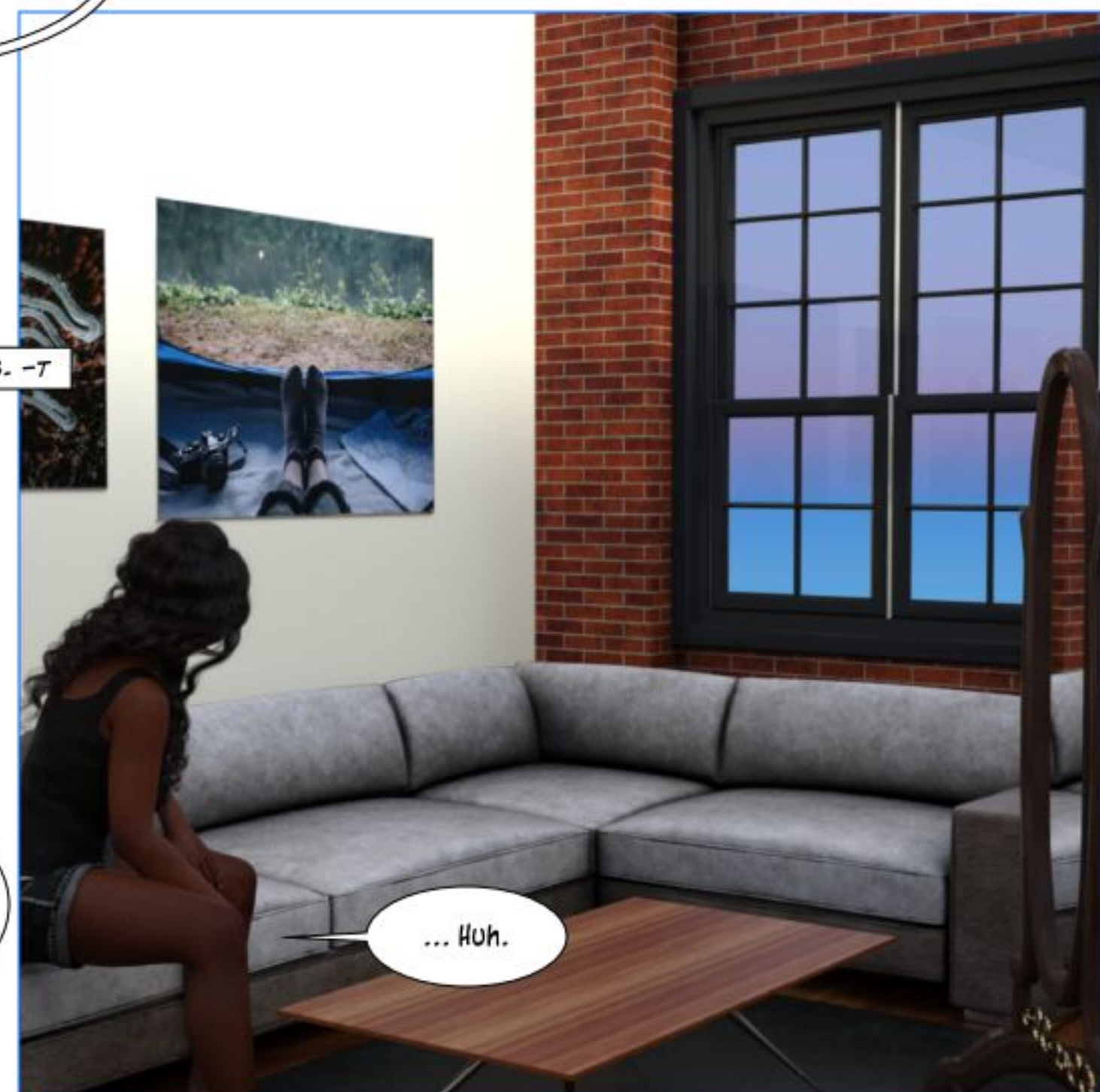
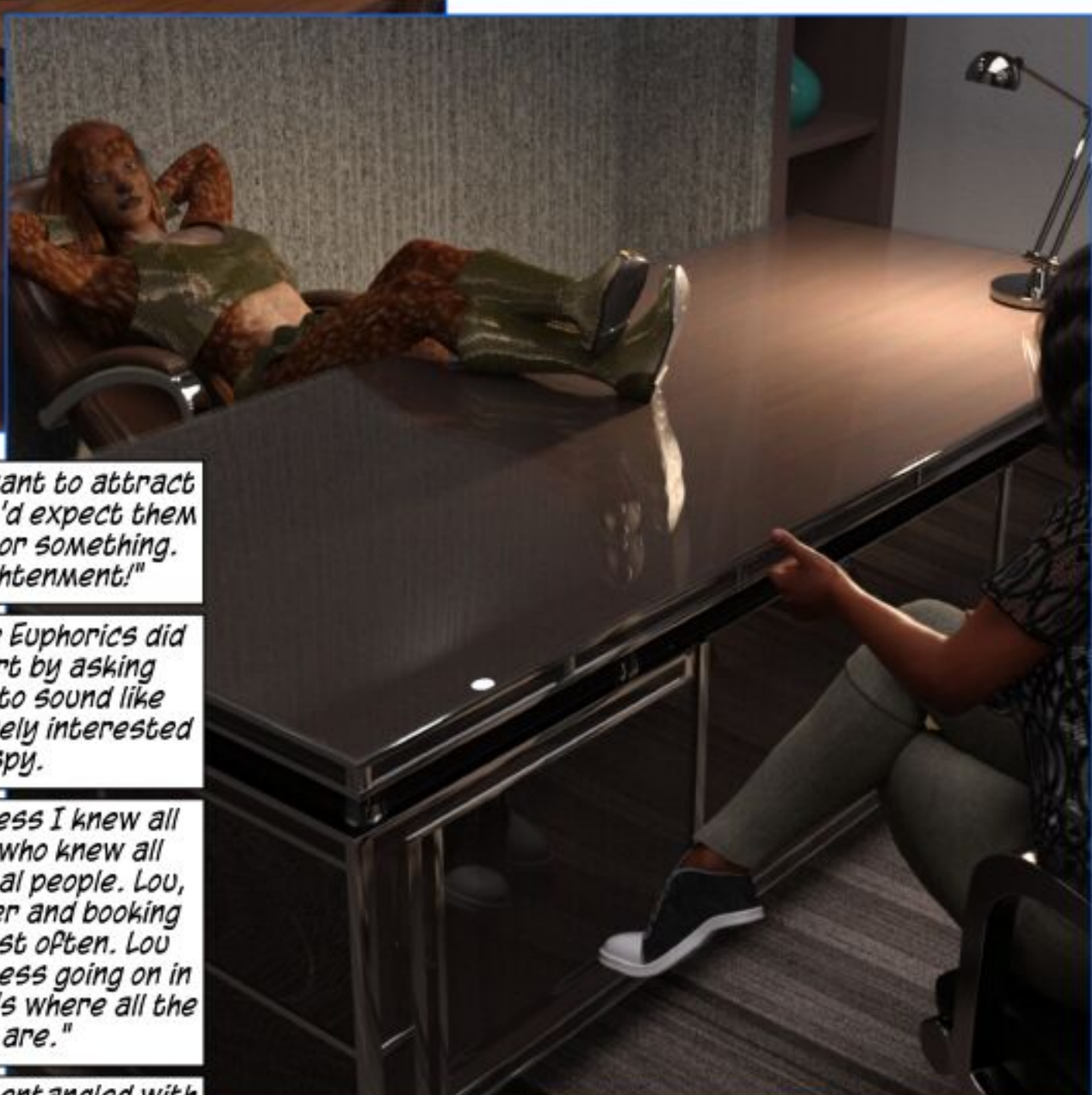
Lou thought that getting entangled with the Euphorics was a big mistake. Lou was probably right. But they did know who to ask.

And so, a couple of days later, I found myself standing in the doorway of a big room that looked a lot like a dance studio, being greeted by a woman wearing black latex.

So you're interested in what we have to offer?

Come on in. We have a session starting in a few minutes. Several others are already here.

My name is Penny. I'm pleased to meet you.





It wasn't anything particularly suspicious. A little unusual, but I'd seen much stranger things happen in private rooms. We all took off our clothes--the forest backdrop outside the window was probably meant to make it feel more private--got onto the big soft circular pads or seats in the room (also covered in latex, but very comfortable to sit on), and Penny led us through some meditations.

The focus seemed to be to get us into a state of calm arousal and explore our bodies. It was clear Penny wanted us to play with ourselves, but feel comfortable about doing it. It worked. I never need much encouragement, but I looked around discretely and it seemed like everyone else was playing along as well. Those who climaxed first were asked to offer silent encouragement to those who hadn't yet. Once everybody came--and everybody did--the session ended.



These sessions happened daily, or almost daily. I attended three where it went exactly the same; fun, but not really useful. The fourth time, we had some people who were very clearly nervous about the whole thing--having trouble getting into it. Penny called me up front to give a demonstration.



I was an actor for years--I know you know what "actor" mostly means in sleep--so I don't really have any shame about sexual performance. If my brain says "Oh, it's an acting gig," then any embarrassment just shuts off. So this didn't bother me at all, and I gave a good climax, I think, even though I hadn't performed for a crowd in a long time.

So far this was about teaching people how to find their pussies, and that wasn't even very noteworthy, much less cultish. But I thought that if Penny had picked me, that might have meant she thought I was worth further attention. So I wasn't completely surprised at the end of the session, as we were all going to dress, when Penny put an arm around me.



You seem like you're a little advanced for this, hmmm?

There's a session tonight where we'll do something more interesting.

Don't tell any of these about it. They're not ready for it yet.

The session that night got a lot more interesting right off the bat.



We have some new people tonight, so I'll explain.

This is a euphoria mask. It can feel a little strange at first, and I know it looks intimidating, but it won't hurt you. In fact, you're going to find it very enjoyable.

Once everyone has their mask on, we'll begin tonight's session.

Oh... you won't be able to speak while the mask is on, so if you have any questions, please ask now.

Either no one had questions, or they were afraid to ask them.

Whatever it was built into the back of the neck of the masks made them unbalanced and a little difficult to put on. Several of us had to use the mirrors along one wall.

It took me a minute or two to realize that in addition to not being able to speak, I couldn't hear anything. Along with the tunnel vision from the goggles, it was very disorienting, and I might have panicked...



... except the thing at the base of the neck was pumping air through the mask, and the air was... there was something... it wasn't just calming, it was making me really...

That wasn't actually possible. It shouldn't work that way. It had to have all been in my mind; this mask was not really feeding me some kind of horny gas. But if it was all in my mind, then I was doing a hell of a job fooling myself.



I was still adjusting to how I felt, and I'm sure everyone else was too, when our surprise visitors came in.

They were hermaphrodites. OK, look, I've seen everything, and sometimes someone does get the clever idea to have a cock and pussy at the same time, because they think it'll be more fun or something. I've even had a customer request it. It doesn't happen much, though, because in sleep you can change your equipment any time you want, and it's a lot easier and less distracting to use one tool at a time.

If any of us were intimidated by the latex creatures, it didn't take us long to get over it.



I wonder what the session would have looked like to a bystander. Room full of people fucking like crazy, yet making absolutely no sound. Like a very strange ballet without music.

It went on for a long time.



I didn't have much spare attention for anyone else, but I was pleased to see that Penny wouldn't ask us to do anything she wouldn't do herself.





I woke up when Penny took my mask off. Everyone else (except Penny) looked just as groggy and disoriented as I was. We'd all apparently collapsed wherever in the room we happened to be when we finally ran out of juice. The latex creatures were long gone.

Once I got dressed and left, I realized it was not only the next morning, but it was so late in the morning that I'd missed a rehearsal. I never do that.

I'm so sorry, Trish. We can try again as soon as you're available ... Yes, absolutely, I can do it right now. Meet me there?



I realized that if I was seriously going to follow up on the Euphorics, I needed to clean me to finish off all my pending bookings, or get them into a condition where they could finish without me. I told Lou and the other people I worked with regularly that I was taking a little sabbatical. (Lou gave me a suspicious eyebrow, but didn't ask.)

I didn't go anywhere near Penny or the sessions for ten days, which is how long it took me to finish off all my pending bookings, or get them into a condition where they could finish without me. I told Lou and the other people I worked with regularly that I was taking a little sabbatical. (Lou gave me a suspicious eyebrow, but didn't ask.)

When I returned to the mask sessions--they happened two or three nights a week--Penny asked me some careful questions which were obviously intended to find out whether I'd gotten cold feet. I told her that I was thinking about giving the sessions a serious commitment and had been clearing up my other responsibilities. It was even almost the truth!



She must have liked that answer. The session after that one, in the morning as everyone was pulling themselves back together, she signaled me to wait until everyone else had gone to get cleaned up and dressed.

Interested in adding something that'll make this even more fun?

Of course I was.



Once again I was asked not to tell anyone at a lower level of progress that this one existed. This happened one night a week, and it seemed to be pretty exclusive--there were only six of us in the room, including Penny.

I could tell all of them had been doing this for a while because, like me, they had just stopped bothering to manifest hair when they came to sessions. The mask would temporarily remove it anyway. Gets in the way.

You two are new, so here's how it works: Tonight we don't just wear the masks. I'm going to give you a bodysuit to put on. It'll change you ... but you'll like it.

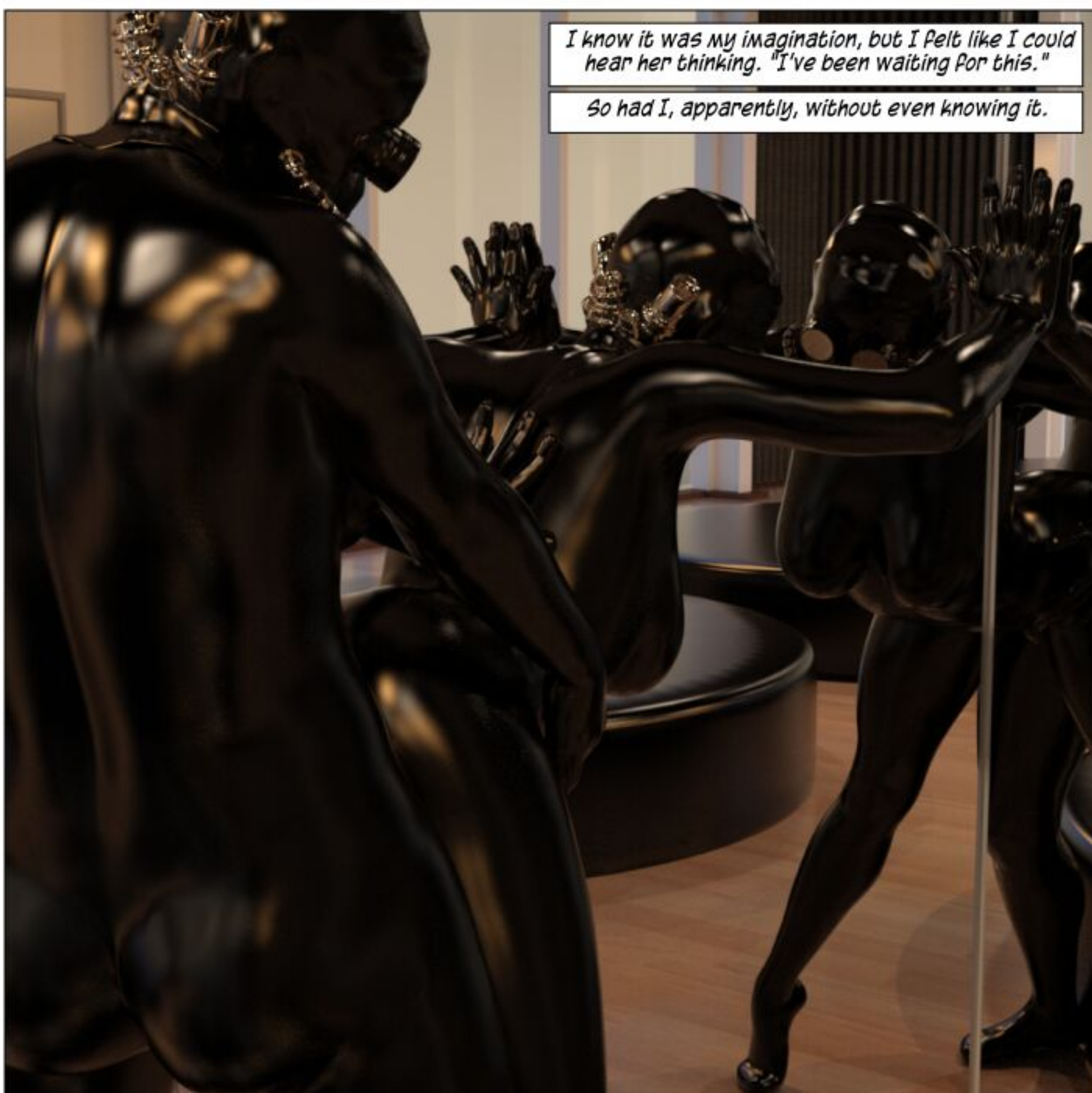


As I said, I'd been a hermaphrodite before, a couple of times. I'd had a penis I don't know how many times. Often enough to lose count. And yet, the sensation of "oh, wait, all of a sudden I have something down there I didn't have a minute ago" never gets less ... well, startling.

The suit felt fantastic. It made me feel like I was being touched all over my body in a way that made me want to be touched all over my body even more. I wanted to just rub up against things, slide over them. I could easily have just gone into a corner and spent the night playing alone.



Penny had other ideas. As soon as we'd both suited up, she went straight for me. I felt her arms around me, and the caress made me want to squirm against her.



I know it was my imagination, but I felt like I could hear her thinking. "I've been waiting for this." So had I, apparently, without even knowing it.

When we were recovering the next morning, I was stopped at the door of the changing room. I realized, a little embarrassed, that one of the other people I'd spent the whole night pooling around with was someone I knew.

My friendship with Kori had deteriorated a little once I moved to directing, as it had with a couple of others ... but unlike some of them, I still worked with Kori once in a while. Granted, it had been months, but I still should have noticed it was her.



Hey, it's been a while. Want to go get something to eat?

The way she said it was light, cheerful, old friends reconnecting. Her eyes said something completely different.





I didn't notice you either. We were both too busy thinking about the sex. Ruby, what are you doing? You need to stop going there. Right now.

I'm sorry I didn't realize it was you at the beginning--

Why? Seems like you go pretty often ...

I go when I can't stand staying after any longer. And then, after I do, I cuss at myself for going.

Ruby, she has her eyes on you. I've seen it happen before; I know when someone's on her short list. If you keep going, she's going to push you to go to the next level. Bet on it.

And if I do? Then what happens?



Then you disappear! From here on, they'll try to get you to move into their lair or whatever it is. Ruby, people don't come out of there! They wear the suit full-time and they don't talk and ... well, you must have Pucked one of them by now, you've seen what they're like. It's a one-way trip.

These people are bad news! Rumor is that anybody who tries to get in their way just ... vanishes. Nobody knows what happens to them. The person at the top, the speaker, nobody knows what they're up to, what they're trying to do here. If I could, I'd stay far away. I'm just ... I like the sex too much, OK?

I couldn't tell her the truth. I wanted to, badly, but I couldn't trust her. For all I knew she was in so deep that she'd turn around and spill it all to Penny.



You're overreacting a little, aren't you? It seems like they just want to have a lot of hot sex. I don't have a problem with that.

I did not like playing dumb, especially when I saw how angry and disappointed it made her. She was trying to save my ass, and I really did appreciate it, and I couldn't tell her.

Breakfast didn't end cheerfully.



Thing is, she's probably right. I'm about to get in too deep. But I don't want to quit now. She said that when they take in someone full-time, they get the person to sign over all assets. But then they assume the person's bed fees. So it's not about money. What's the angle? What are the cult leaders trying to do?



I want to transfer everything I have temporarily to you. I trust you to hold it for me. That way if they make me sign away all I have, I won't have it to sign away.

But that's not enough. I need an emergency exit.

I agree. Manifest your phone. I'm going to put a number in it. ... There.

"Midnight"?

I've decided that's the name we're going to use when I look like this. I hope you don't mind if I keep using this. I like it.

You don't even have to leave a message. Just call it. Any call, any signal there, I'll consider that to be pressing the panic button.

And if I can't remember how to manifest my phone?

I have a few precautions in place for that as well. Don't worry. I will not abandon you to these people.



Oh, good, you got my message. Come in.



You've been spreading a lot of bad stories, Kori.

I don't blame you. I know the real problem. You're frightened of advancement.

We're going to help you.



No, I--  
-mph-







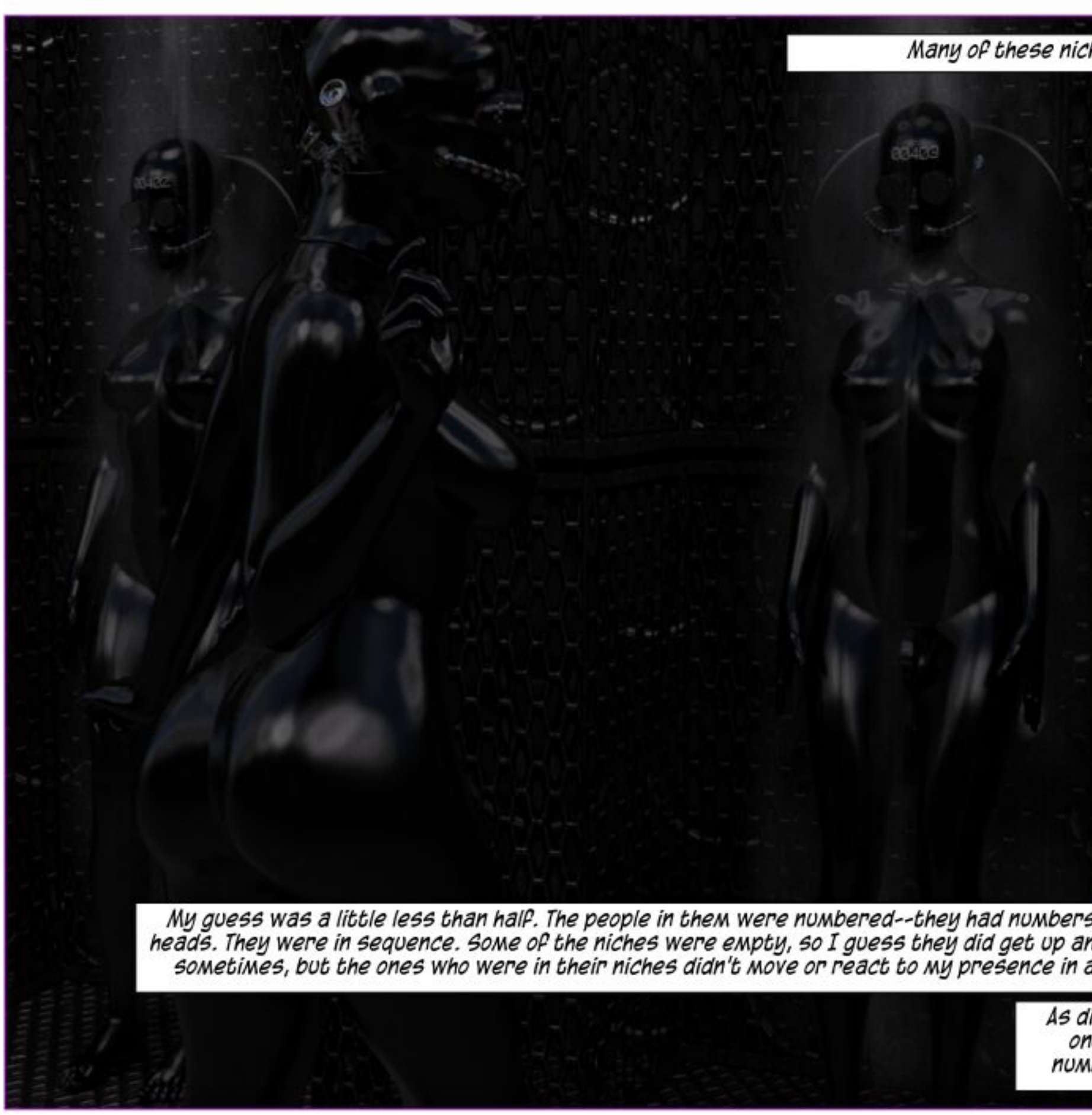
As Kori predicted, two nights later I was told "don't bother with the sessions, you've moved past that. Here, have access to our compound. Just make sure you're fully suited whenever you're in there, and you can come and go as you like." Unspoken: and Puck as much as you want.

There was nothing sinister about it. It was "Oh, we see you really like this. Great! Let's get you unrestricted access. Enjoy!"

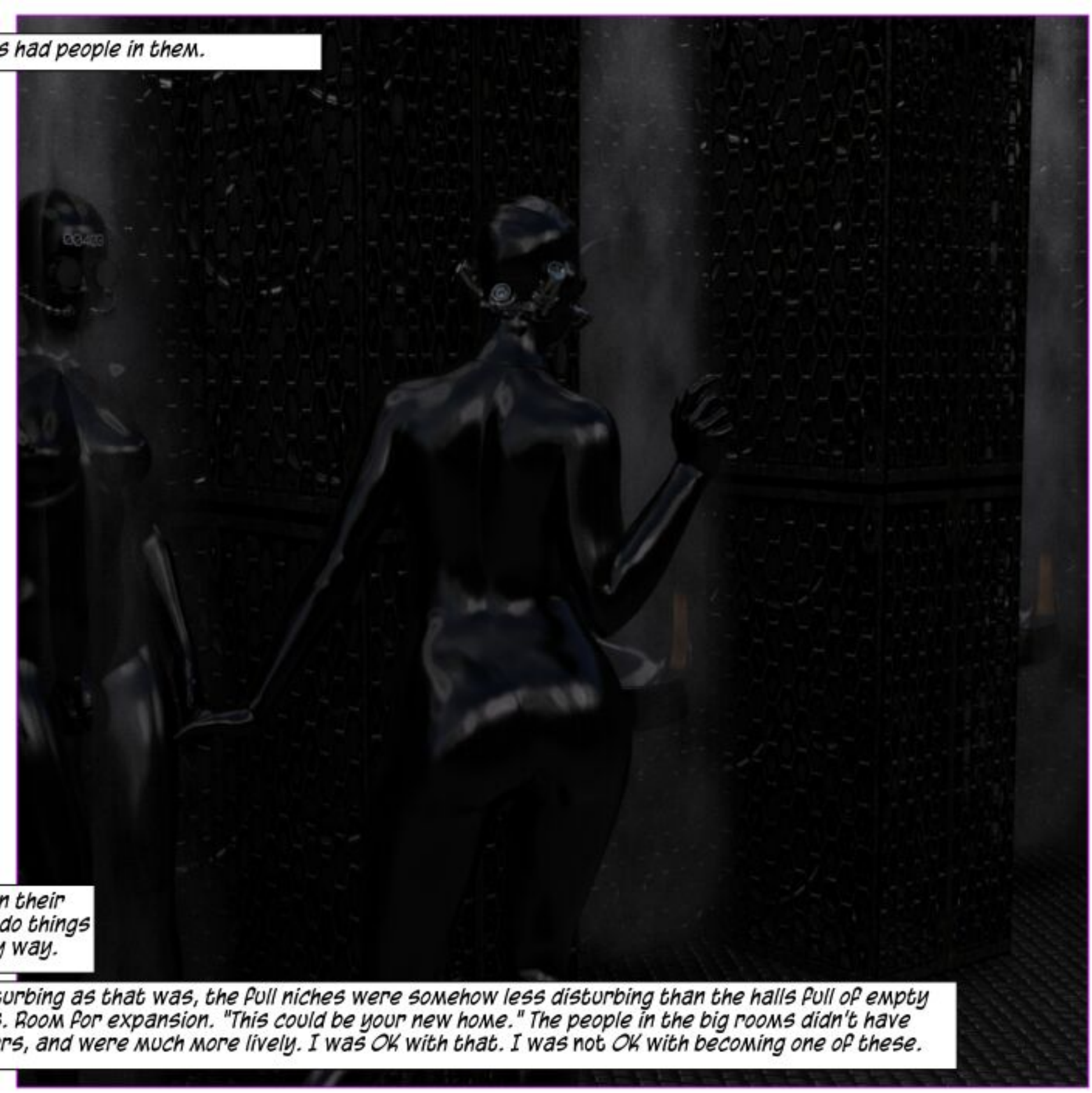
The compound was a strange place. Most of it was big rooms with stepped floors and alcoves for people to have sex in. There were probably fifty or sixty people living in these rooms full-time. I say "living in them," but I never saw anyone else in them doing anything but having sex or sleeping. Of course, it wasn't like we could have casual conversation.

The only light in these rooms was along the edges of the steps ... but it was actually easier to see in them than outside; the mask had some kind of weird night vision that, in combination with these lights, outlined everything in an ultraviolet glow.

The weirdest part, though, was the long corridors--I lost count of how many--with narrow niches along both walls. Each one had sort of a shallow seat, with a protruding object that--well, I wasn't sure what its actual purpose was supposed to be, but I was definitely sure you couldn't sit on the seat without that item going up your ass.

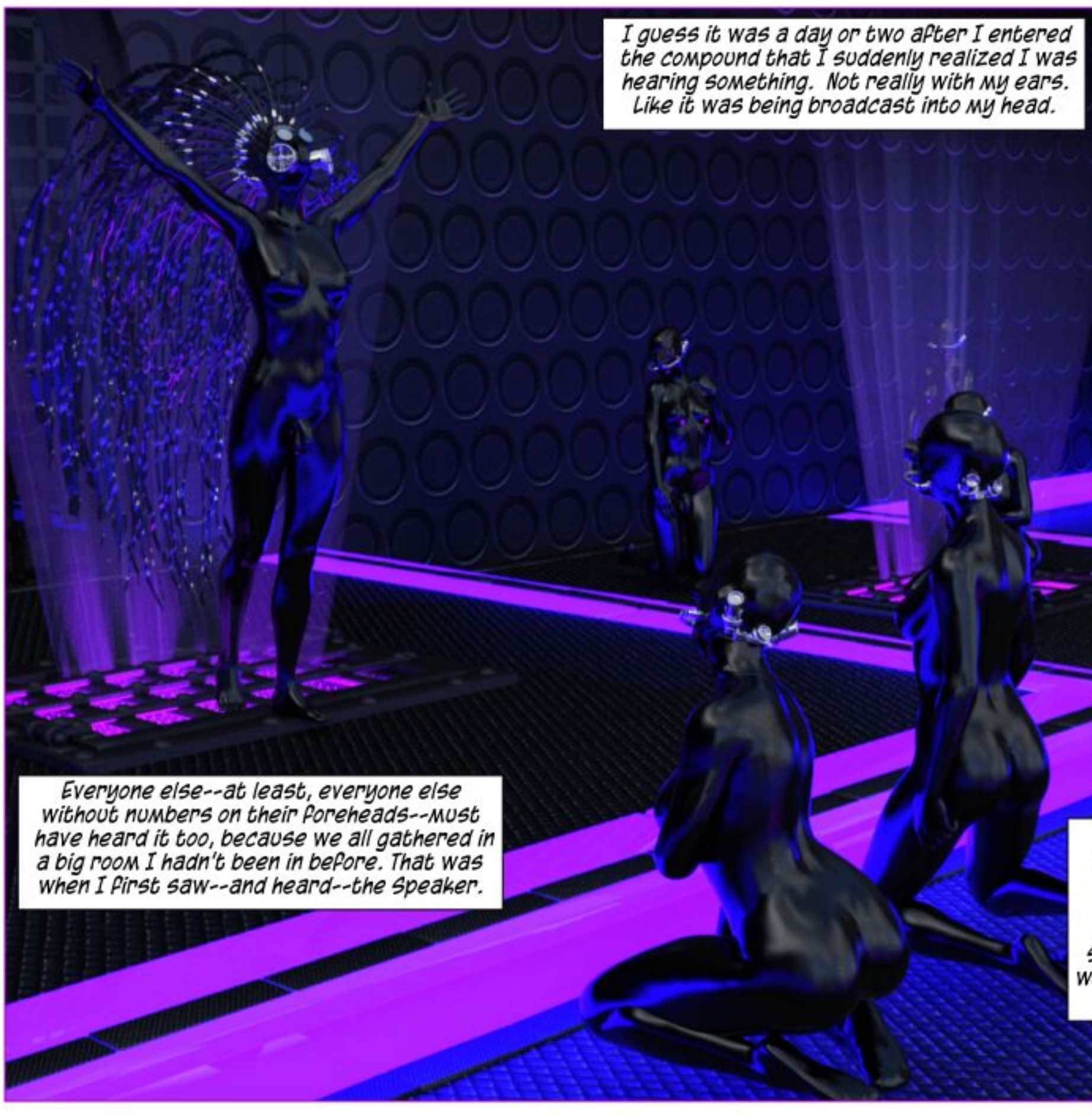


Many of these niches had people in them.



My guess was a little less than half. The people in them were numbered--they had numbers on their heads. They were in sequence. Some of the niches were empty, so I guess they did get up and do things sometimes, but the ones who were in their niches didn't move or react to my presence in any way.

As disturbing as that was, the full niches were somehow less disturbing than the halls full of empty ones. Room for expansion. "This could be your new home." The people in the big rooms didn't have numbers, and were much more lively. I was OK with that. I was not OK with becoming one of these.



I guess it was a day or two after I entered the compound that I suddenly realized I was hearing something. Not really with my ears. Like it was being broadcast into my head.

Everyone else--at least, everyone else without numbers on their foreheads--must have heard it too, because we all gathered in a big room I hadn't been in before. That was when I first saw--and heard--the Speaker.



Her voice filled our heads. She sang of bliss, of freedom. No fears, no wants, no worries. She told us we had chosen well. She told us to stay on this path and we would find it more rewarding than we could dream.

That path, she said, began by losing things. All the things we no longer needed. All the things holding us down. We were to toss them away.



Well, that wasn't hard to do, in that place. It was so easy to lose things there.

Memory.  
Identity.  
Time.



But I didn't--

What--?





Sue was efficient. She had removed the bed appliances before I could get my brain to remember how to speak.

What just happened?

I WAS INSTRUCTED TO PERFORM AN INTERRUPT IF YOUR STATUS SHOWED THAT YOU REMAINED LONGER THAN A SPECIFIED TIME IN A PARTICULAR PRIVATE SPACE.

Emergency extraction, huh? Midnight should have told me. How long was I in that private space?

TIME IN SLEEP IS SUBJECTIVE. I COULDN'T SAY. TEN DAYS, FROM MY PERSPECTIVE.



I really wish she'd told me she'd set that up. Now you're just going to have to put me right back in again. As it is, it'll look like I left the compound, and when I go back in, it might make people suspicious, especially since nobody saw me leave.

PARDON MY ASKING, BUT IS THAT WISE? YOU DO CONFIRM THAT YOU LOST YOUR TIME SENSE COMPLETELY WHILE YOU WERE THERE, YES? WON'T THAT JUST HAPPEN AGAIN?

Maybe ... but I can't get at this any other way. I don't know. At least set your interval longer, or something. Tell Midnight that Kori was right; there's someone running the whole thing called the Speaker. I don't know what she's trying to do. Yet.

I ADMIRE YOUR DETERMINATION, BUT I FEEL THIS IS ILL-ADVISED.

- sigh -  
Yeah, it probably is.

The Barker Family may control nearly all the wealth and power in the world, but the pie isn't evenly divided. Clayton Barker only gets a tiny share of Sleep Fees by inheritance, so he's spent most of the last twenty years figuring out other ways to claw his way to the top. Most of them are pretty unsavory. This also means that Clayton works pretty hard for his money. His hours are erratic and long. It's hell on his love life.



Lucy? I'm sorry I'm so late--

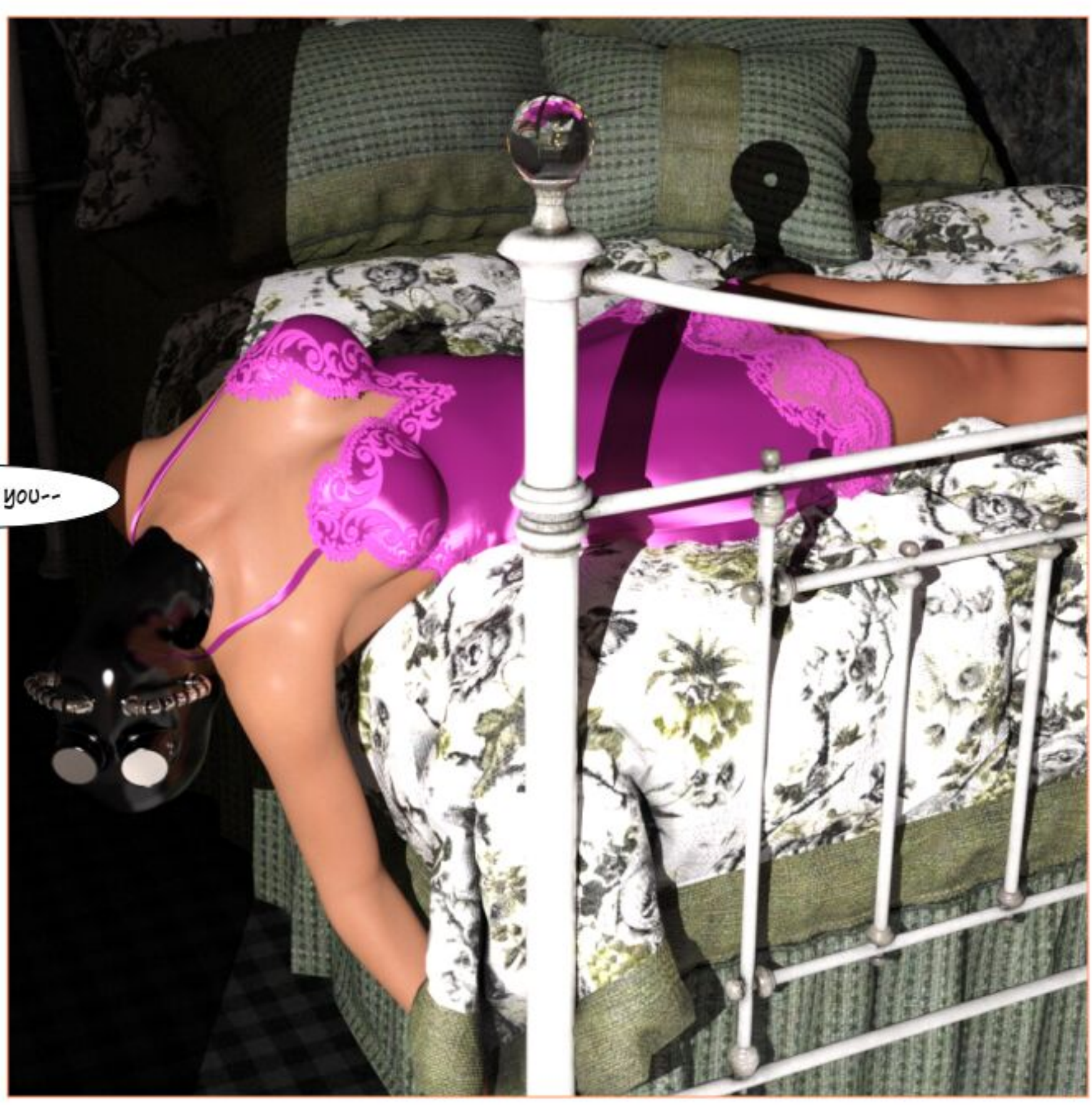
Lucy? Are you here?

Maybe she's waiting for me upstairs.

Maybe she's wearing that new negligee ...

Lucy? Are you--

--!!



Who the hell are--



### A FEW DAYS LATER ...

That's a new look for you.

You don't like it? Ruby came up with it. Not for me, but I stole it. She calls me "Midnight" when I look like this. You might remember that for when she's around.

Glad you two are getting along. Is that why you sent her into something she wasn't ready for?

Such a grouch. Look, it's a beach! Don't you want to lie here and enjoy the sun? Let's put you in something more appropriate.

Hilarious. I'm serious. You sent her in there alone. People don't come out of there!

I note, my dear, that I wouldn't have had to send her alone if you hadn't been careless. For the second time.

We got incredibly lucky with Cole--were you expecting to get lucky twice? Speaking of that, have you told Ruby the truth about Cole yet? You know the longer you wait, the worse it's going to be.

Don't change the subject. You threw her in there, and then when she came out you threw her back--

I did no such thing. I warned her at the beginning and gave her a chance to refuse, no penalty. When Sue pulled her out, she dived back in on her own. Sue told her explicitly she had misgivings.

... I don't get it.

Sweetie, this is what I mean when I say you're a good assessor but a bad interpreter. You got her wrong from the beginning, and your instincts were sound. You just didn't bother to follow through with what your assessment meant. You don't really do people very well.

-sigh-  
Data is easier.

You understood that she was intelligent, resourceful, creative, stubborn and bored. Now think about what that implies for her follow-through.

Does she strike you as someone who walks away from a challenge?







OK, Fine, but I'm not sure I like you exploiting that. How long has she been in there? The second time, I mean.

More than a week, Awake time. I admit, I was trying to decide whether to do another interrupt. But it will definitely blow her if we do that a second time. If she's onto something, I don't want to interfere.

Well, that's what I came to tell you. Clayton's vanished. Along with his lover. No one knows where they went. Pohler doesn't do squat if he doesn't get paid, so he's stopped looking for me.

I might send you in to go have a look, if it weren't too hot for you right now.

How interesting! And, I must say, very convenient.

So convenient I was wondering if you had anything to do with it.

Now, now. I'm not saying I wouldn't have been willing to disappear Clayton if it was safe and I had the means, but it wasn't and I didn't. I have no idea what happened to him.

... I want to go look for Ruby.

Well, now that Pohler's off your ass, I can't say no. But be careful. Don't use that appearance anywhere there are witnesses. You're already pushing your luck. I know you hate using other forms, but you're going to have to get used to it.

### MEANWHILE ...

I had to keep exploring. If I stood still, someone would come along and rub against me or squeeze my ass and then hours would vanish.

Besides, I knew there was something I had to be missing. It took me a while, but I found it. Or at least part of it.

In a section of the compound I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to be in, there was a long row of rooms. Unlike all the other rooms here, these were closed. With sturdy-looking lattice doors. Which were all locked.

Some of them had people in them.

The people were fully suited, doing what Unspoken do--the ones alone in their cells were masturbating; one cell had two people in it and they were too busy humping to notice me outside the doors.

But why lock them in? Why were they there? These people had to be here involuntarily. Maybe they were being kept in here until it wasn't involuntary anymore.

I needed to tell Midnight.

That's when I discovered bad things had happened.

I couldn't remember how to manifest my phone. I couldn't remember how to recall. I tried. They were gone. As I dug through my head, I realized there were a lot of things I couldn't remember for some reason.

And then I discovered I couldn't take off the hood.

It wasn't a hood anymore. The suit wasn't a suit. It was me. It was part of me.

I'd had a vague feeling for days like I was changing, reshaping, and I hadn't stopped to give it much thought. I'd been very dumb.

I had to get out of the compound. That was the only way, now. I had to physically leave it. Then I could fix all this.



Oh, shit.

They took me to the Speaker.

You can't return now. You have come too far.

Your mind is still busy. Untidy. You are still carrying things you should have cast aside.

No!

Empty your mind. Empty it.

No ...

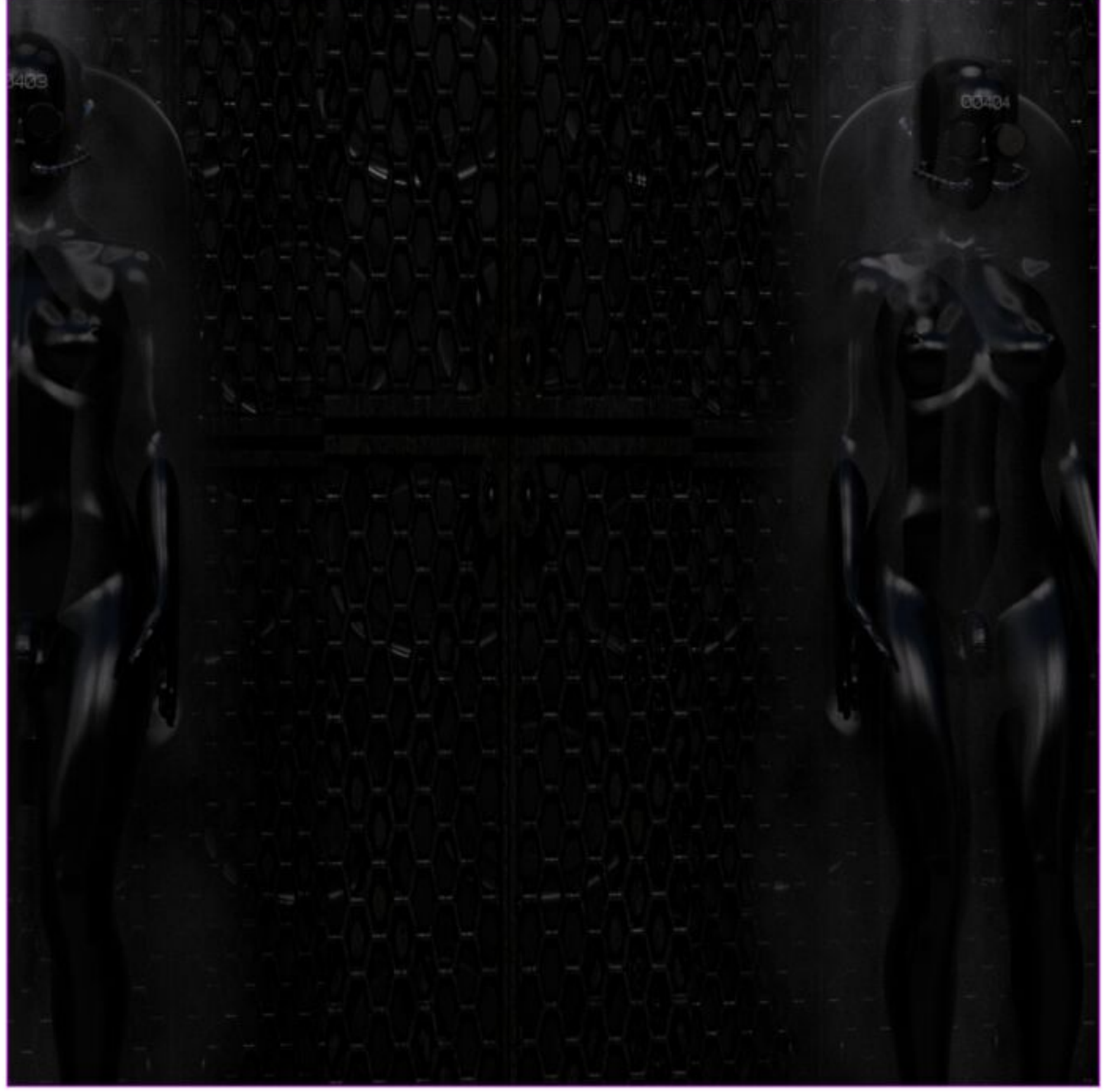
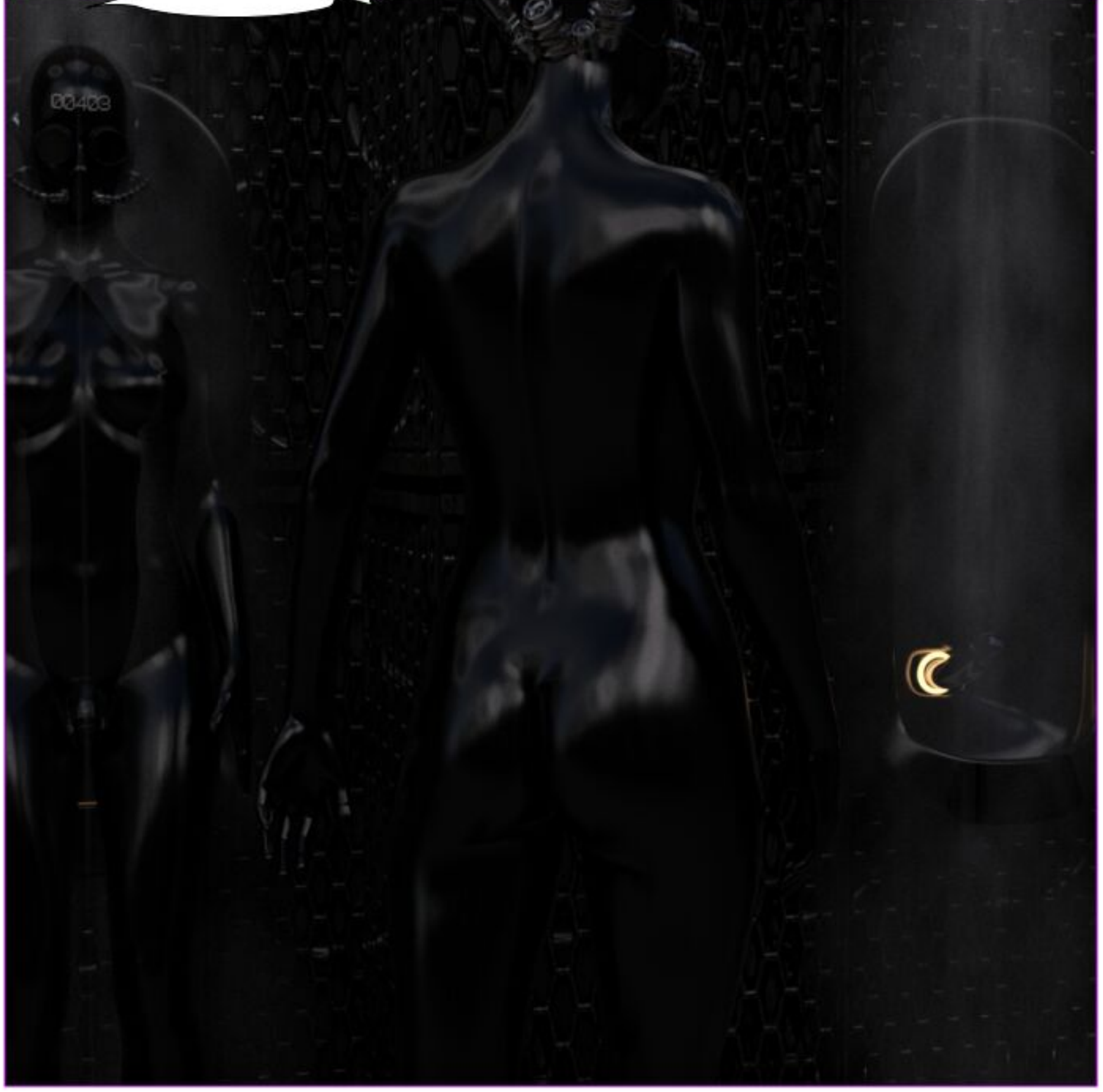
That's right. Cast it all out. Find bliss.

n--

Good.

...

Now go where you belong.







Leyna follows the trail of information to the training center and keeps it under observation for several days while deciding on her approach.

At least it's not hard to spy on them ... they're so engrossed in the sex they might not notice if I walked in there and fired a cannon.

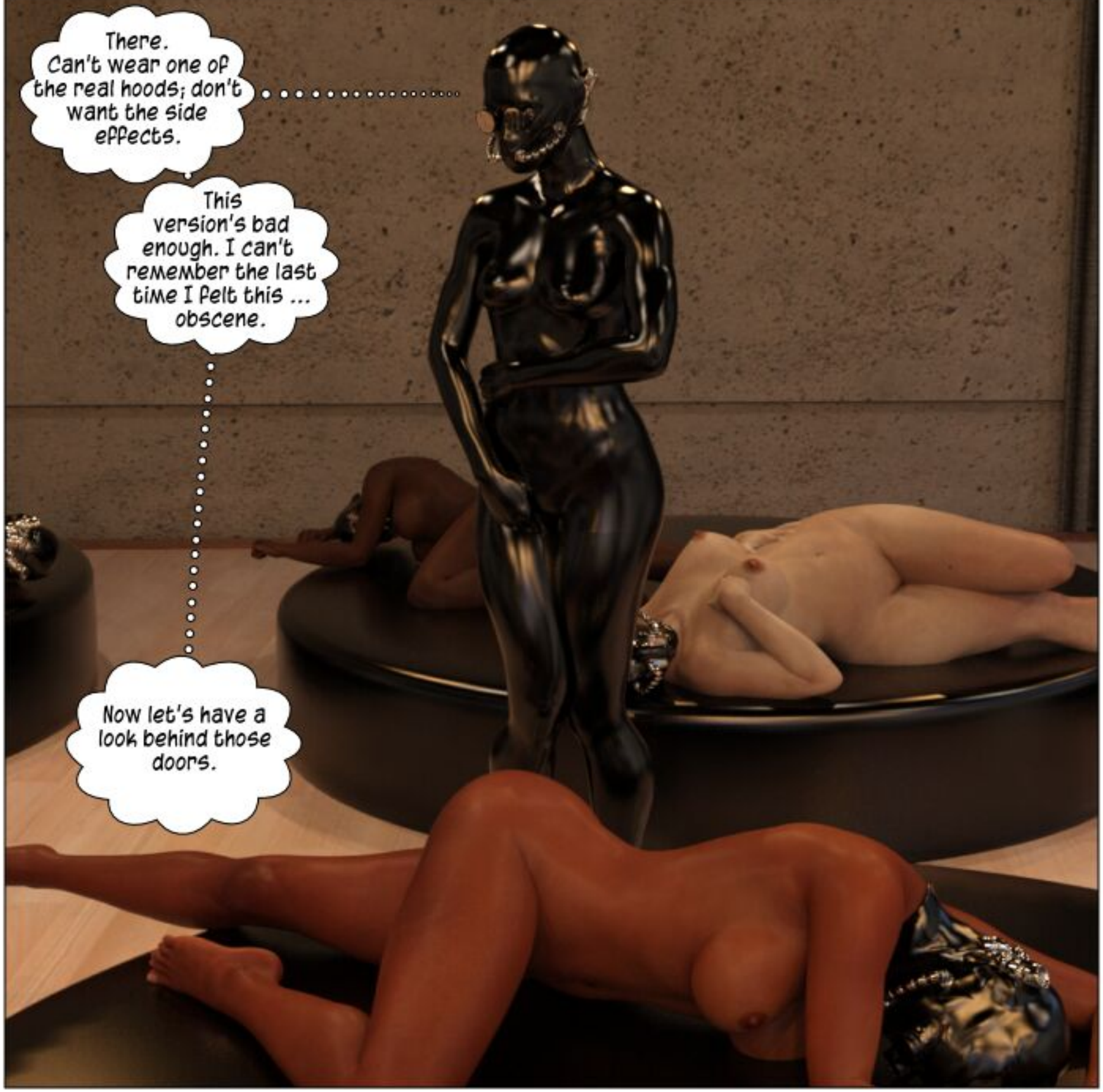
I want to get out those back doors, the ones the people in the black suits disappear into at the end of the night.



Later, after the other participants are all sleeping it off:

I don't think the algorithmic suit's going to work. Not in a place where everyone looks exactly the same and everyone knows who's supposed to be there.

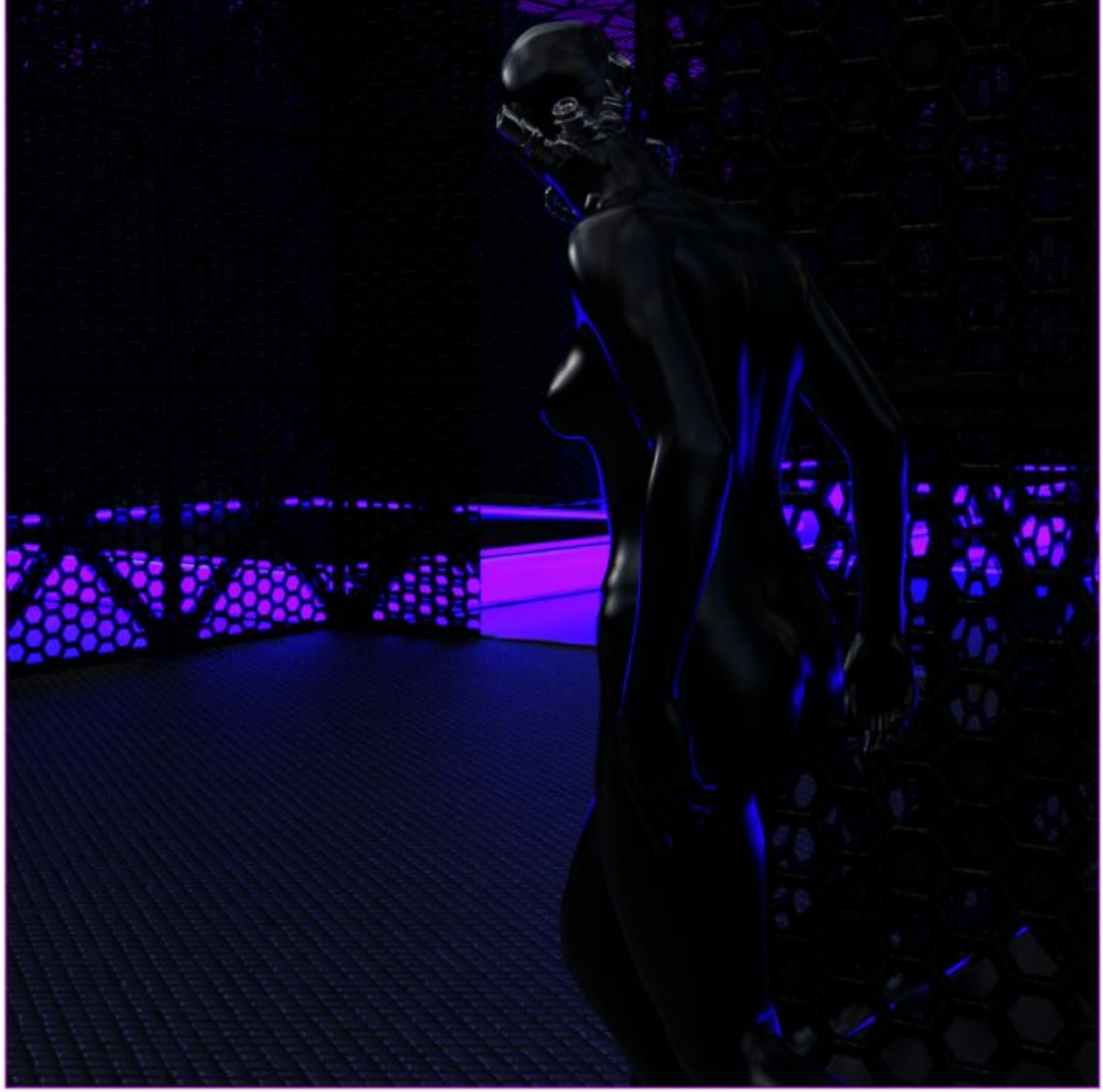
But I've seen them closely enough now that I think I can try for a disguise.



There. Can't wear one of the real hoods; don't want the side effects.

This version's bad enough. I can't remember the last time I felt this ... obscene.

Now let's have a look behind those doors.



Damn, how big is this place?

This is hopeless. I can't tell anyone from anyone, and Ruby can't tell I'm me--if she's aware enough to even notice. I could wander in here for weeks accomplishing nothing.

I need to go discuss this. Figure out a better way.



Besides, I need to get out of here before someone realizes I'm a fake.

**IS LEYNA IN MORTAL PERIL?**

**WILL SHE FIGURE OUT HOW TO RESCUE RUBY?**

All will be revealed in the next exciting issue of **SLEEPER SQUAD**