



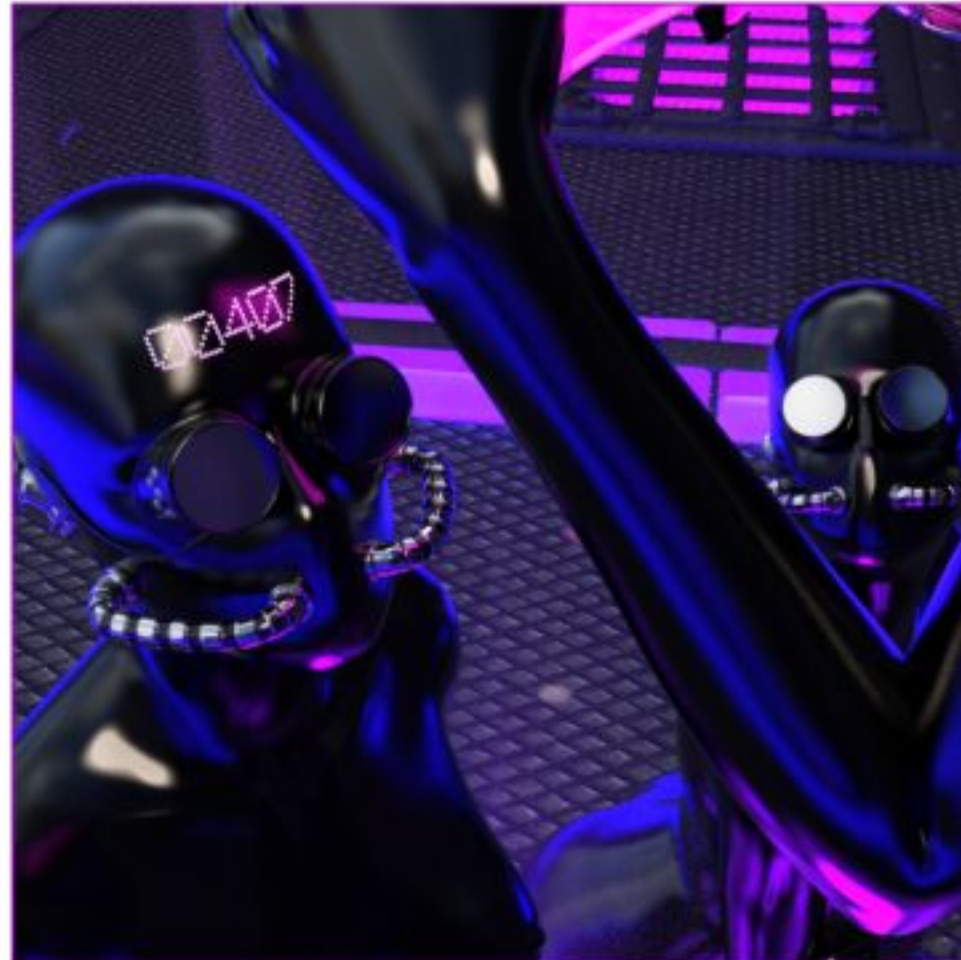
Here is what Clayton Barker remembers:

Someone put something over his head, dressed him in something. It all felt good. It made him want to do things.

He was in a room with another person who looked just like him. He might have known her? Before? They had a lot of sex. Maybe for days. It was good.

Then there were other rooms. Others like them. More sex. Time stopped progressing.

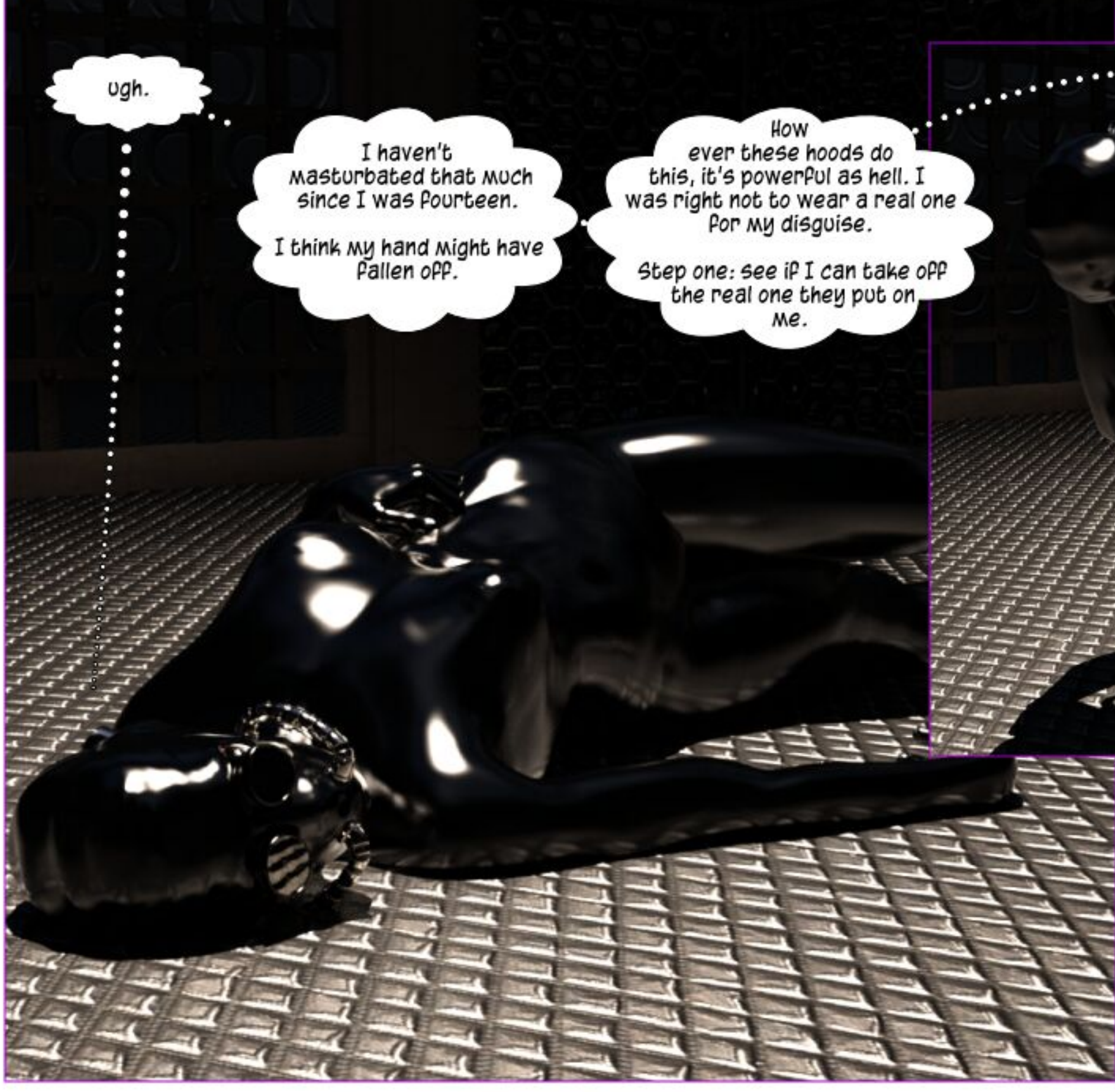
And everything else disappeared, gradually faded, until there was nothing but the rooms and the sex. Then the woman with the voice said "you're ready."



And then Clayton Barker didn't remember anything, because Clayton Barker didn't exist anymore.

#4 WUNSPOKEN part two

Words and images by Trilby

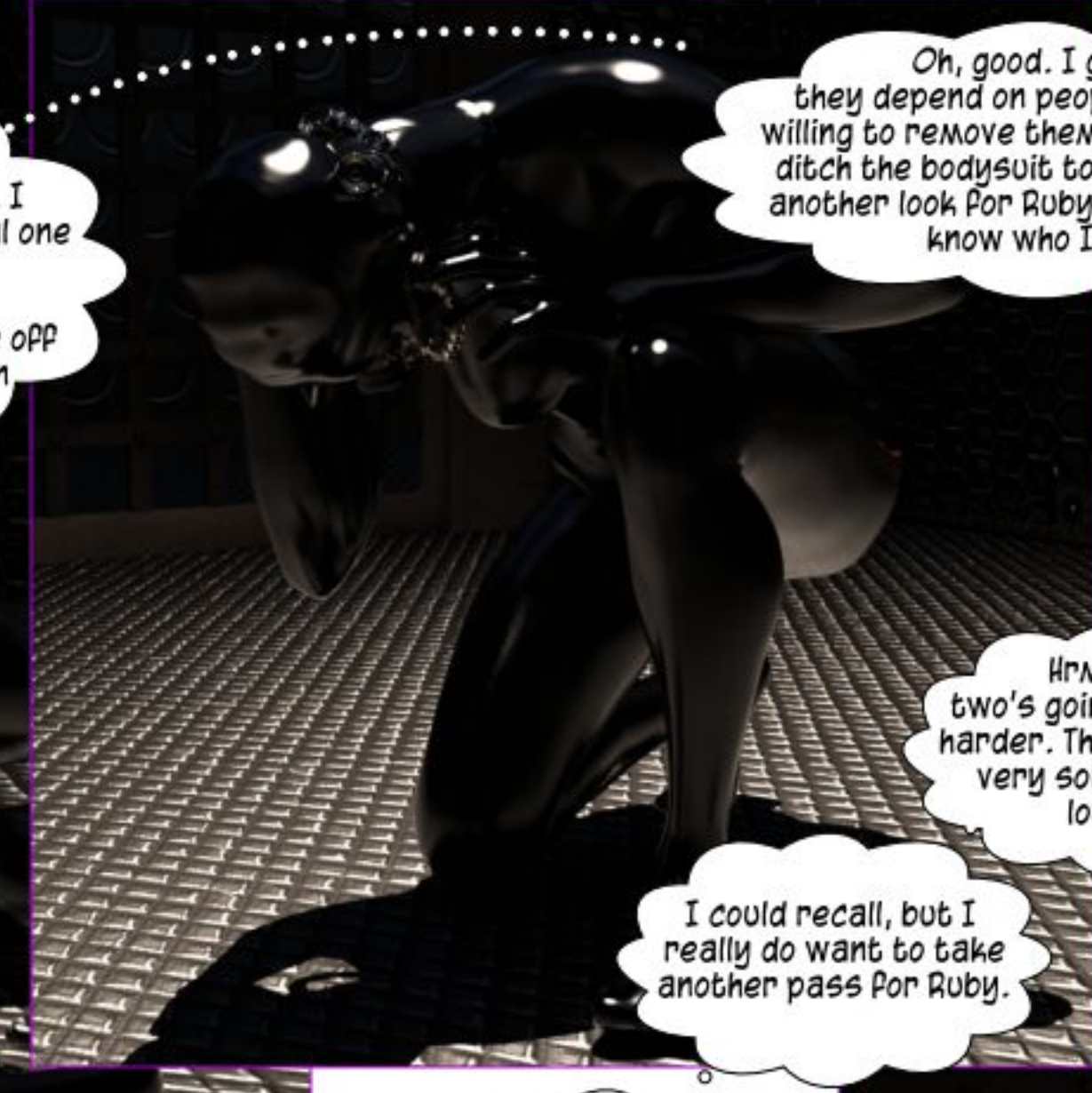


ugh.

I haven't masturbated that much since I was fourteen. I think my hand might have fallen off.

How ever these hoods do this, it's powerful as hell. I was right not to wear a real one for my disguise.

Step one: see if I can take off the real one they put on me.



Oh, good. I guess they depend on people not being willing to remove them ... I'm going to ditch the bodysuit too. If I go have another look for Ruby, I want her to know who I am.

Hrm. Step two's going to be a lot harder. These gates are very solid and very locked.

I could recall, but I really do want to take another pass for Ruby.

If I were her, maybe I could just disbelieve and walk through this wall. But I still don't know how she managed

Gonna have to do it the old-fashioned way: Hide in a dark corner, wait for someone to come check on me, then jump them.

* SLEEPER SQUAD #2 -T



An emergency meeting of some of the more prominent Barker Family members in A4.

... Four that we know of. And the truly disturbing thing is, they're not off in some private retreat. They don't exist anymore. Their identities are missing. That shouldn't be possible.

All their assets have been transferred to these Euphoric people. Fine, if one of you is that Polish, that's your problem. But the identity vanishing ...



Seems to me like you have that a bit backward, Josiah. Some of us would love to vanish completely for a while. But if we get rid of our money ... that's serious.

Have you considered the possibility that they might not have gotten entangled with the Euphorics voluntarily? Didn't Clayton disappear without any warning?

Yes, Pauline, that did occur to me. Though anything's possible with Clayton. I'd like everybody to check on any others you can; see if they've been approached by these people. Monica, when did you last see your brother? He'd probably sign up with a cult.



You know, Josiah, if you'd bother to get her pronouns right, she might speak to you once in a while.

I haven't seen Nathaniel in months. I suppose I can go check.



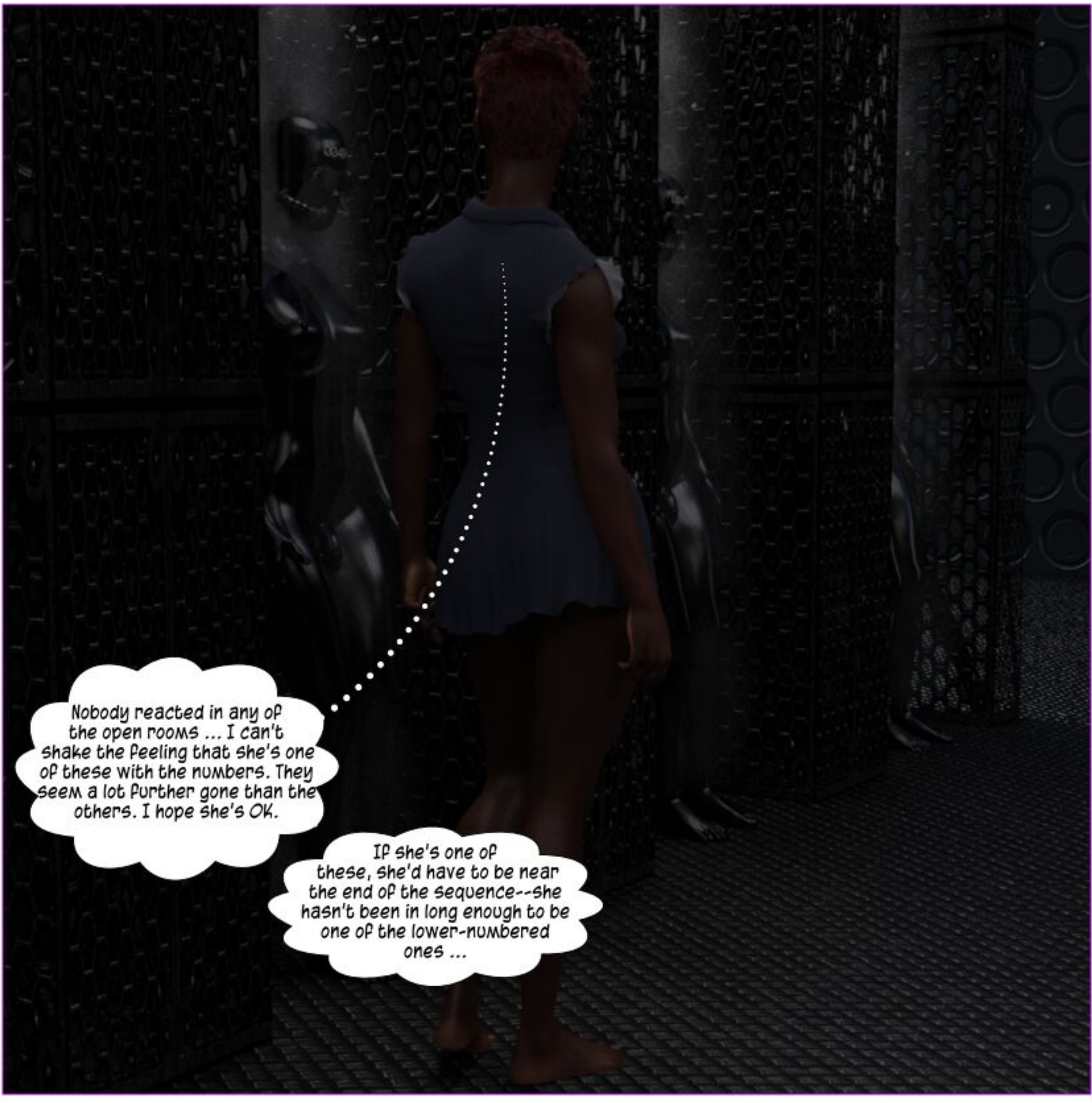
Thank you. Lucius, I'd like you to investigate these Euphorics, if you don't mind. We can shut them down, but we need a firm basis. We don't want to seem capricious.

Actually ... I have information that they're already being investigated.

By whom?

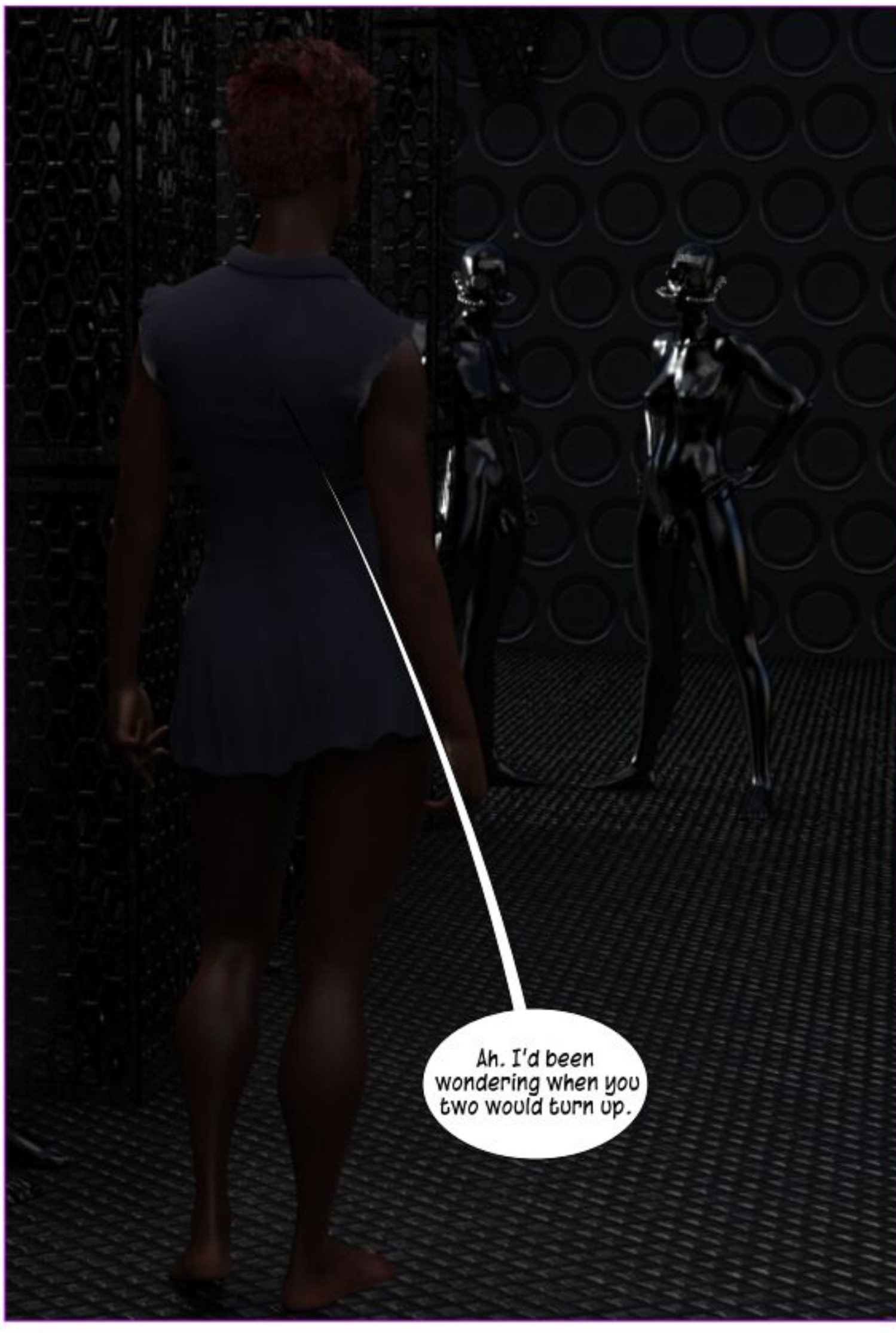
Unclear. Concerned citizens, maybe. I'll know more once I speak with them. I hate to do work that's already been done.

Please yourself. But work quickly. I don't want to see any more of our family disappear to these people.

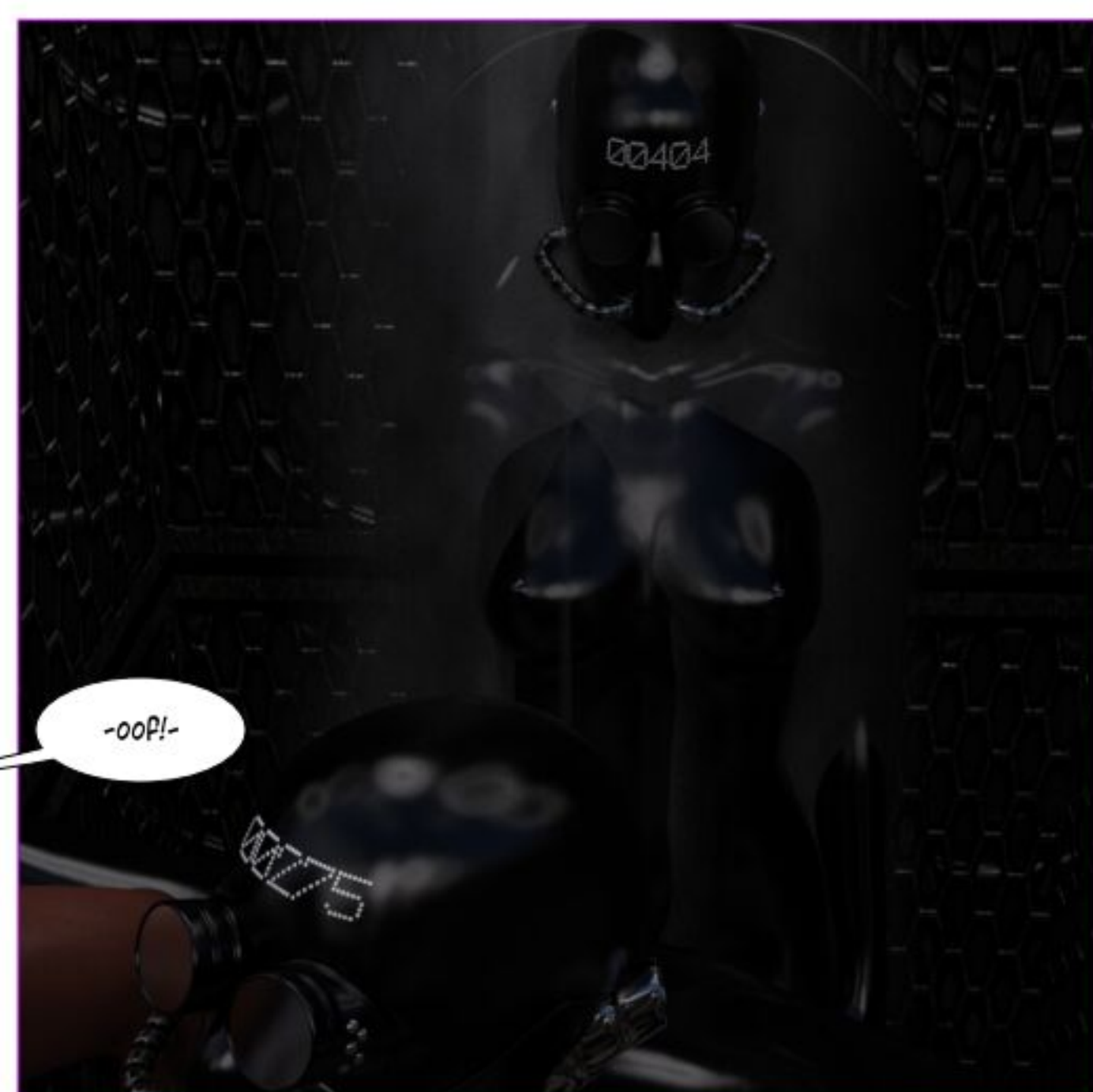


Nobody reacted in any of the open rooms ... I can't shake the feeling that she's one of these with the numbers. They seem a lot further gone than the others. I hope she's OK.

If she's one of these, she'd have to be near the end of the sequence--she hasn't been in long enough to be one of the lower-numbered ones ...



Ah. I'd been wondering when you two would turn up.



ONE FIGHT LATER ...



It's got to be her. But she can't hear me. And her hood doesn't come off.

OK. I'll call for an interrupt. For both of us. And that should fix her. I hope.



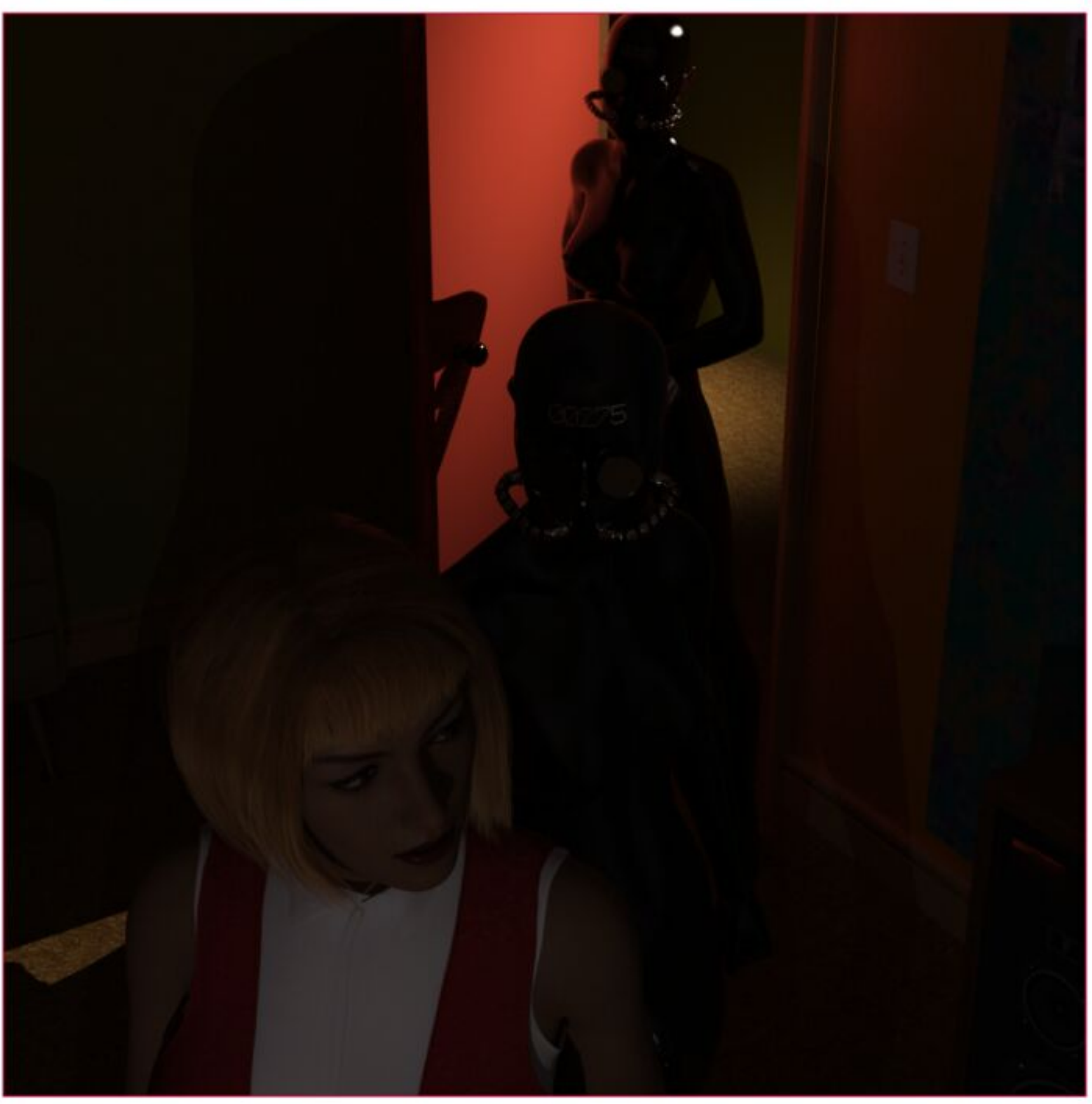
Nat? Hello?

This isn't right ... Feels like even Nat hasn't been in here in ages ...

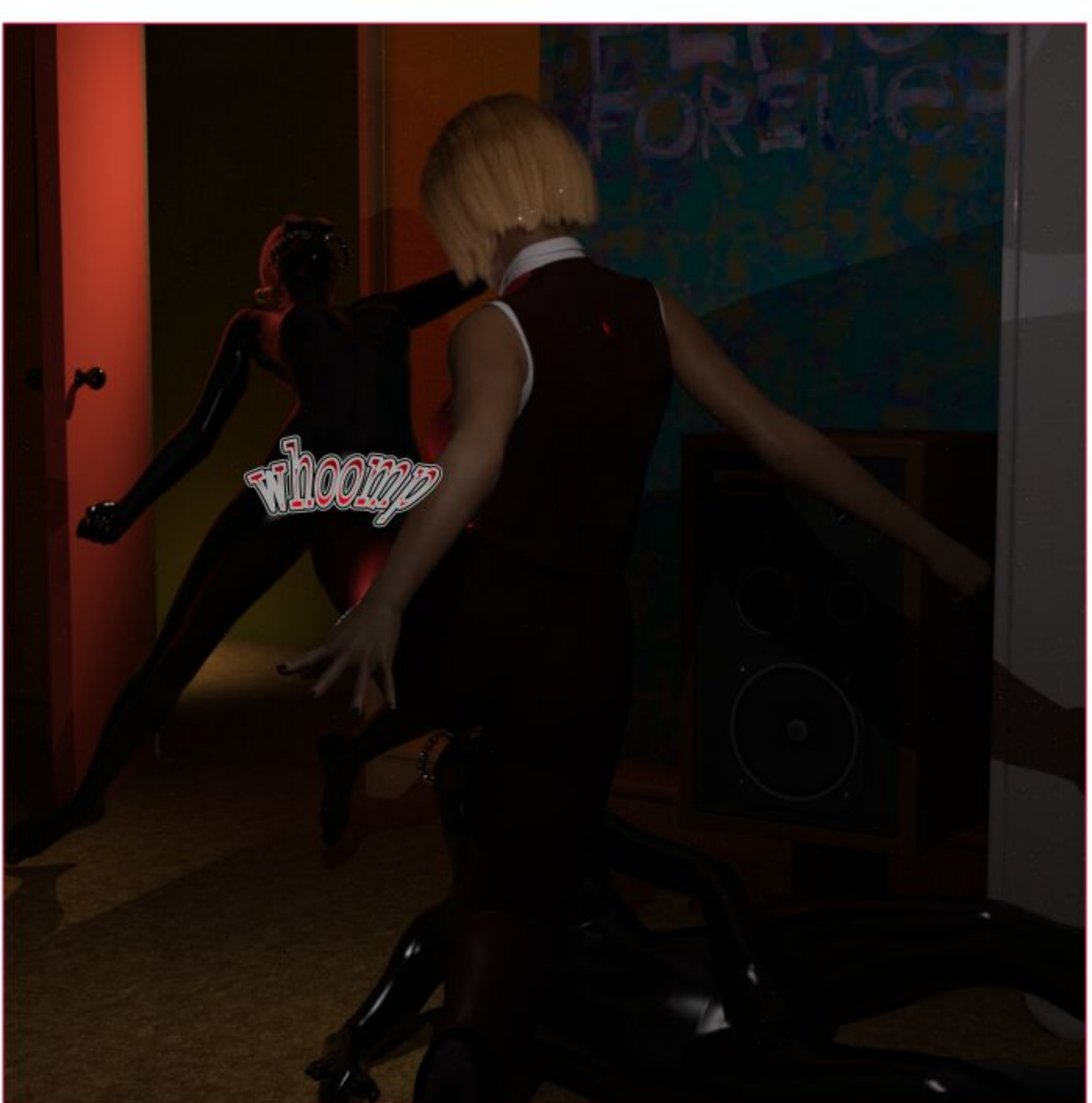


... 'Course, it doesn't help that Nat hasn't changed this room since she was on that retro kick when she was sixteen ...

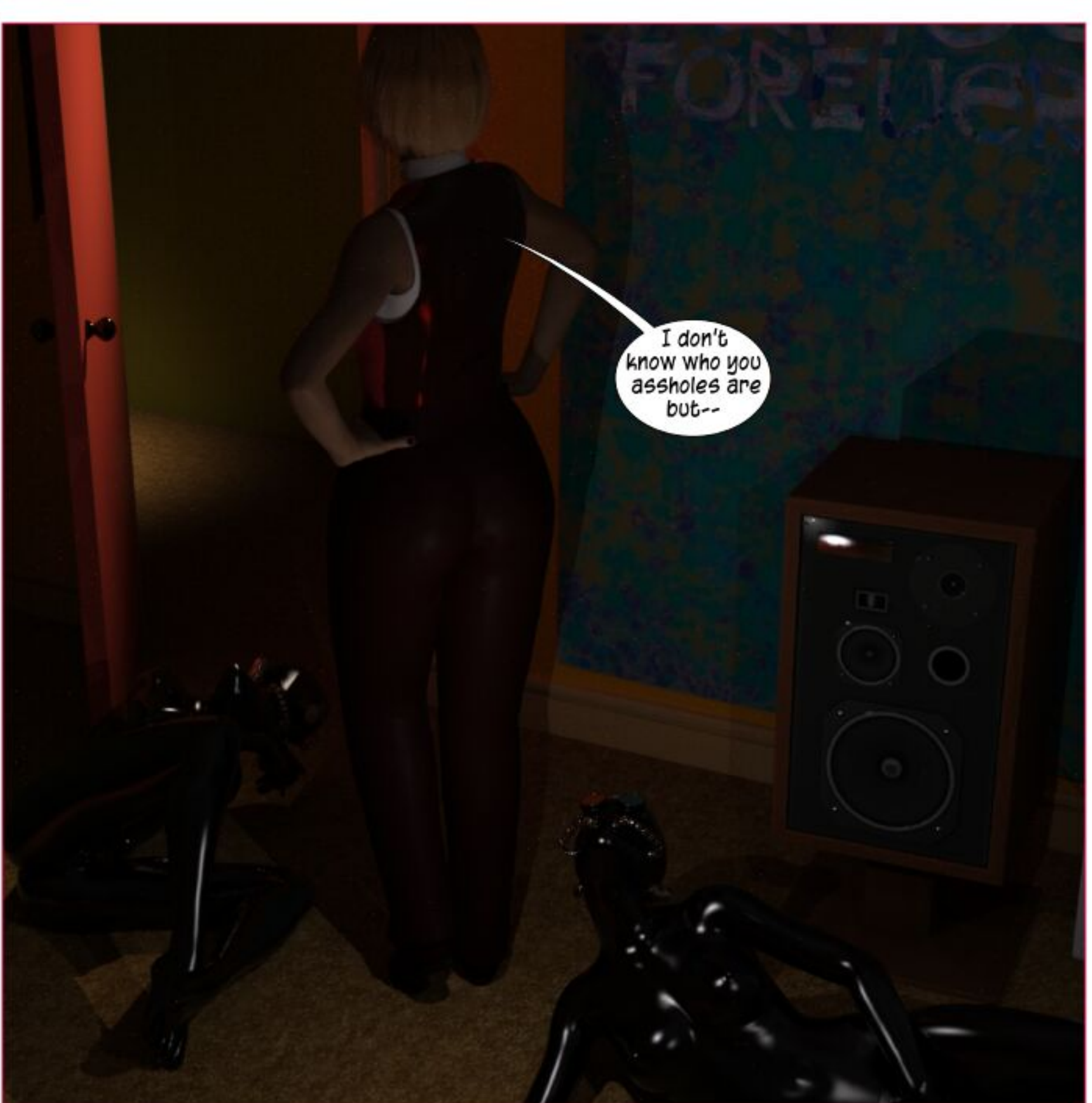
Room's like a MUSEUM OF everything that was bad about the 1970's ...
... which I assume was most of it.



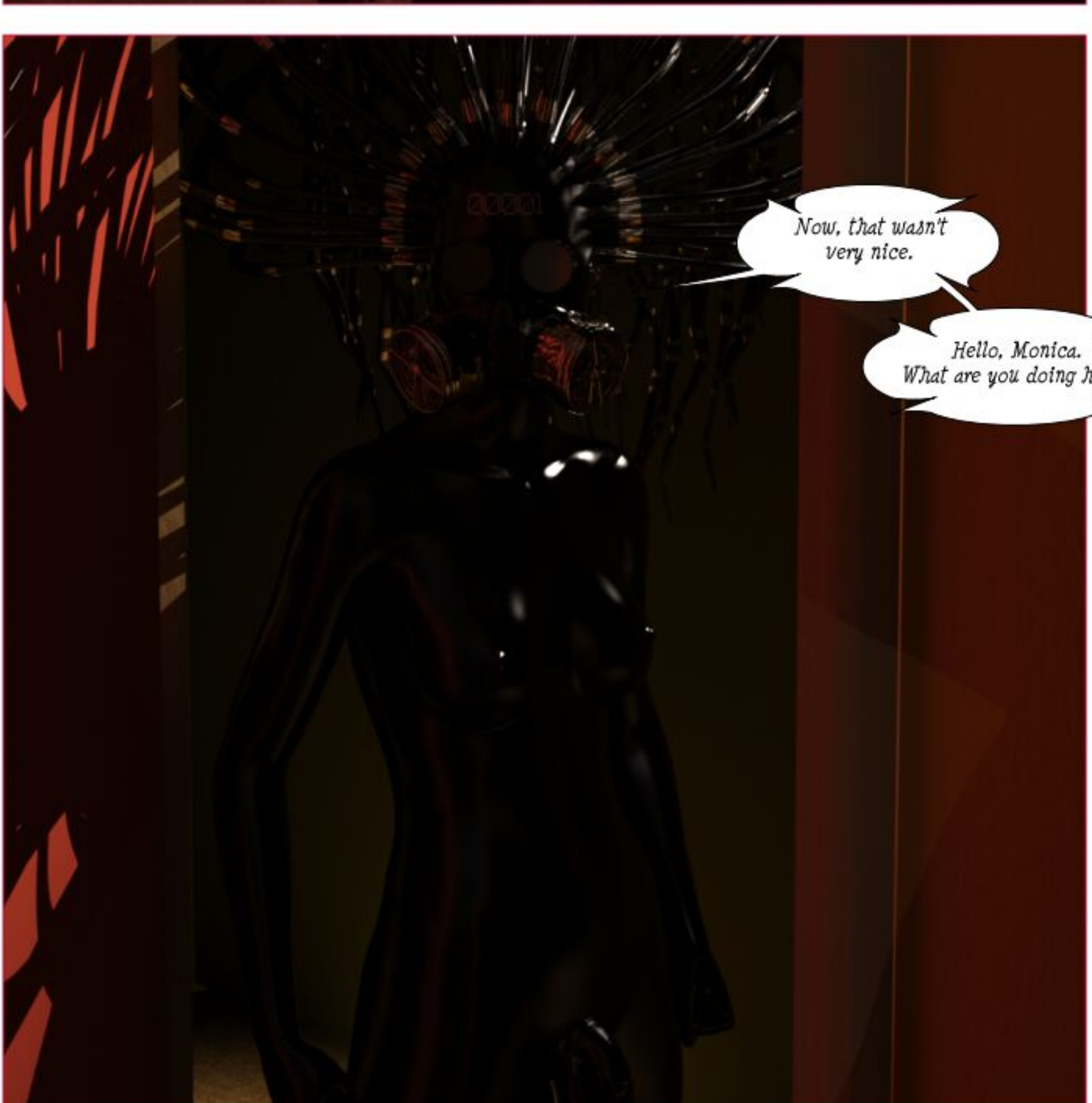
thud



whoomp



I don't know who you assholes are but--



Now, that wasn't very nice.

Hello, Monica. What are you doing here?



... Nathaniel?

Midnight summoned us for a meeting a couple of days after we escaped the compound. I think she wanted us both to have a little breather first.



I have new information.
But before we get into that, how are you doing? Are you fully recovered?
I owe you an apology. I didn't realize it was possible to lose yourself that hard in there ... at least, not until it was too late.

I'm all right. I had a little trouble talking, and I was dazed at first, but mostly it seems to have all come back as soon as I woke up.

I have a question about that. I understand that you can't force a recall, because even if you know their recall method, they have to do it themselves.

But these interrupts--you can pull someone completely out of sleep without needing their cooperation. Why can't we do that to Pix Dr. Chapman's poor lab rats?*

Permission. I can do an interrupt for you two because I completely control the beds you're in. To do it for other beds I'd need to get cooperation from whoever controls that bed.

Which is not likely to happen.

OK, so here's the news: I know why the cult leader is doing all this, and now that Monica Barker has vanished, I'm pretty sure I even know who they are.

#SLEEPER SQUAD #2 -T



It's a Barker, isn't it?

I believe so. How'd you get there? Was that a hunch, or do you know something I don't?

Hunch, once I realized this was someone with bigger ideas than just getting their own personal jollies. This is a takeover. That's Barker territory.

Well, they don't have a monopoly on it, but yes. Ruby noted that the money motive didn't work if they were assuming bed fees. That's true for most people in Sleep--but if those small fry are just bonuses and the real goal is to get some big fish ... Five Barkers have been eaten by the cult. Four of them have signed all their assets over. Apparently they haven't taken Monica that far yet.

OK, so we have a motive, and we know the method, and we may even know who's doing it. Now what do we do about it?

Well, that's the problem. I was hoping maybe if the three of us put our heads together ...

The nasty bit is whoever's running this has some way of destroying or muting personal identity. The people consumed by the cult are consumed. They don't have an existence except for whatever identity the cult assigns them. That's not supposed to be possible.

The numbers.
When they gave me a number, my old identity stopped existing. It was like I wasn't that person anymore. Did they try to eat my assets? I didn't check.

Yes, you consented to it, according to the records. Not that they got anything, thanks to your foresight. I'm assuming you didn't consent?

Honestly, I don't even recall being asked.

... I have a solution.
But given what Midnight told me a minute ago, I'm not sure it's doable.
And even if it is, the three of us will have to be really careful how we do it.

Less than a day later, there was another Barker emergency meeting. A smaller group, this time.



... I don't know that it'll work completely, but it'll stop the problem for the moment, and we'll be in an excellent position to prevent it from happening again.

But it does require a level of cooperation which ... excuse my saying so ... we don't usually muster among ourselves.



True. But you'll have our cooperation this time. Some situations call for special exceptions. I think we have general agreement this is one of those.

You understand that we can't initiate this without a near Pocus, though? Someone will have to go in there.

Oh, yes, I know. The people who had been investigating this matter will provide that.

I'd like to know more about these people.

So would I. But, in this matter and for the moment, I trust them. Beyond that, we'll see what happens in the future.

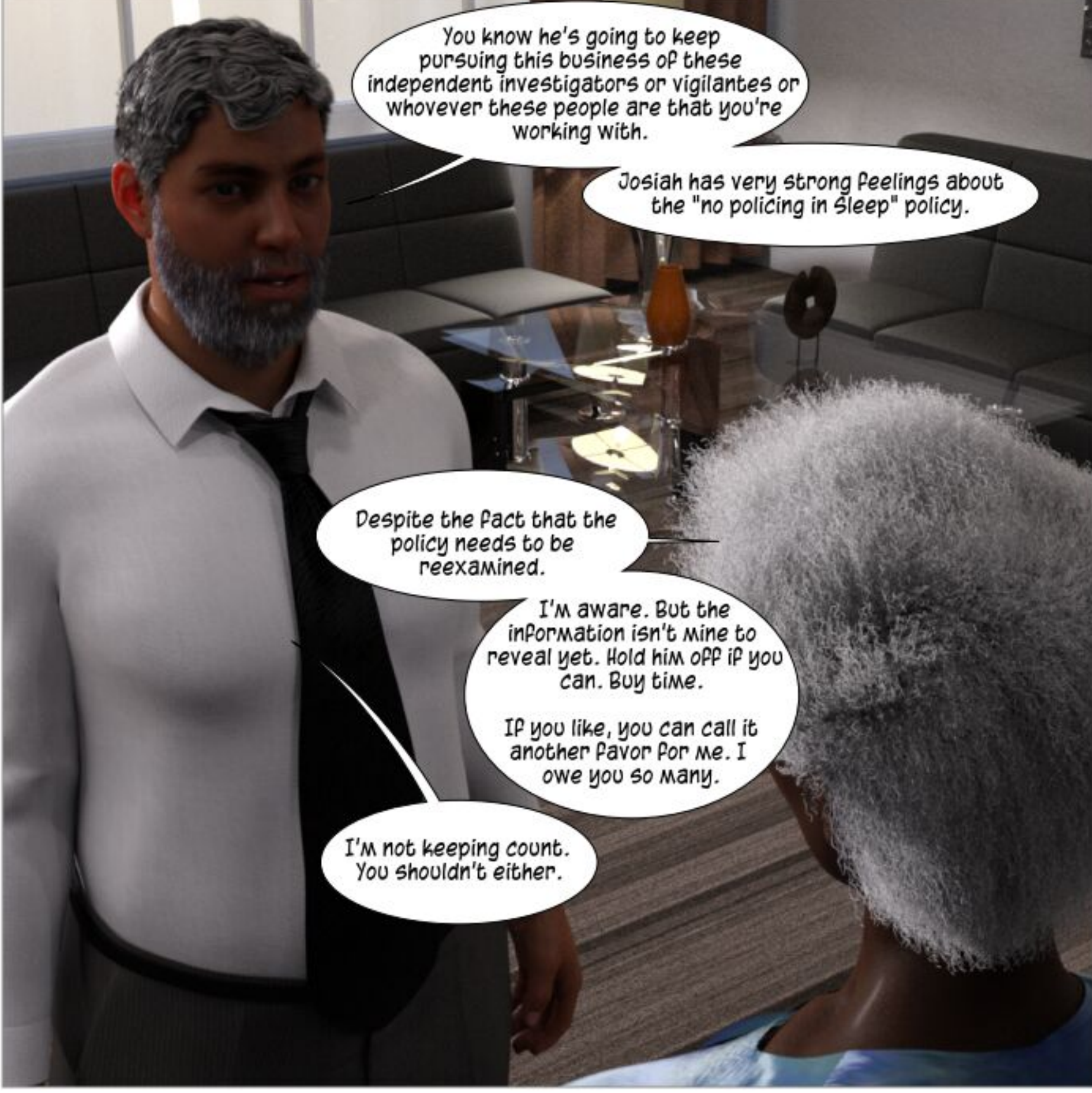


Thank you, Lucius.

Ah, you know I'm happy to do anything for you, Serene. Anyway, it's a good idea. What I don't understand is why you didn't just propose it yourself.

Come on. There are at least three reasons why Josiah won't listen to anything I have to say. As it is, he resents that my holdings entitle me to be present at these meetings at all.

If this was going to happen--and it needs to happen--then someone else was going to have to propose it.



You know he's going to keep pursuing this business of these independent investigators or vigilantes or whoever these people are that you're working with.

Josiah has very strong feelings about the "no policing in Sleep" policy.

Despite the fact that the policy needs to be reexamined.

I'm aware. But the information isn't mine to reveal yet. Hold him off if you can. Buy time.

If you like, you can call it another favor for me. I owe you so many.

I'm not keeping count. You shouldn't either.



You're giggling.

I'm in character. Also, this is Punny as hell.

Ooh! We're in some kind of Preaky cult place! I don't think we're supposed to be here! I sure hope nobody finds us!

Are you grouchier than usual?

Anybody who sees us will be too distracted by the disguise to realize that we're disguised.

Trust Me! It's a distraction. Besides, you look totally hot in it.

Cut it out. They'll find us soon enough.

-sigh- It's the outfit. It makes me uncomfortable. I know we had to be disguised, and I like your imagination, but why this in particular?

That doesn't make any sense.



-gasp- These people in weird hoods have found us! They look mean! Omigosh, what are we going to do?

Ham it up, apparently.

They can't hear us anyway.

--giggle-- Can't hood us if you can't catch us!



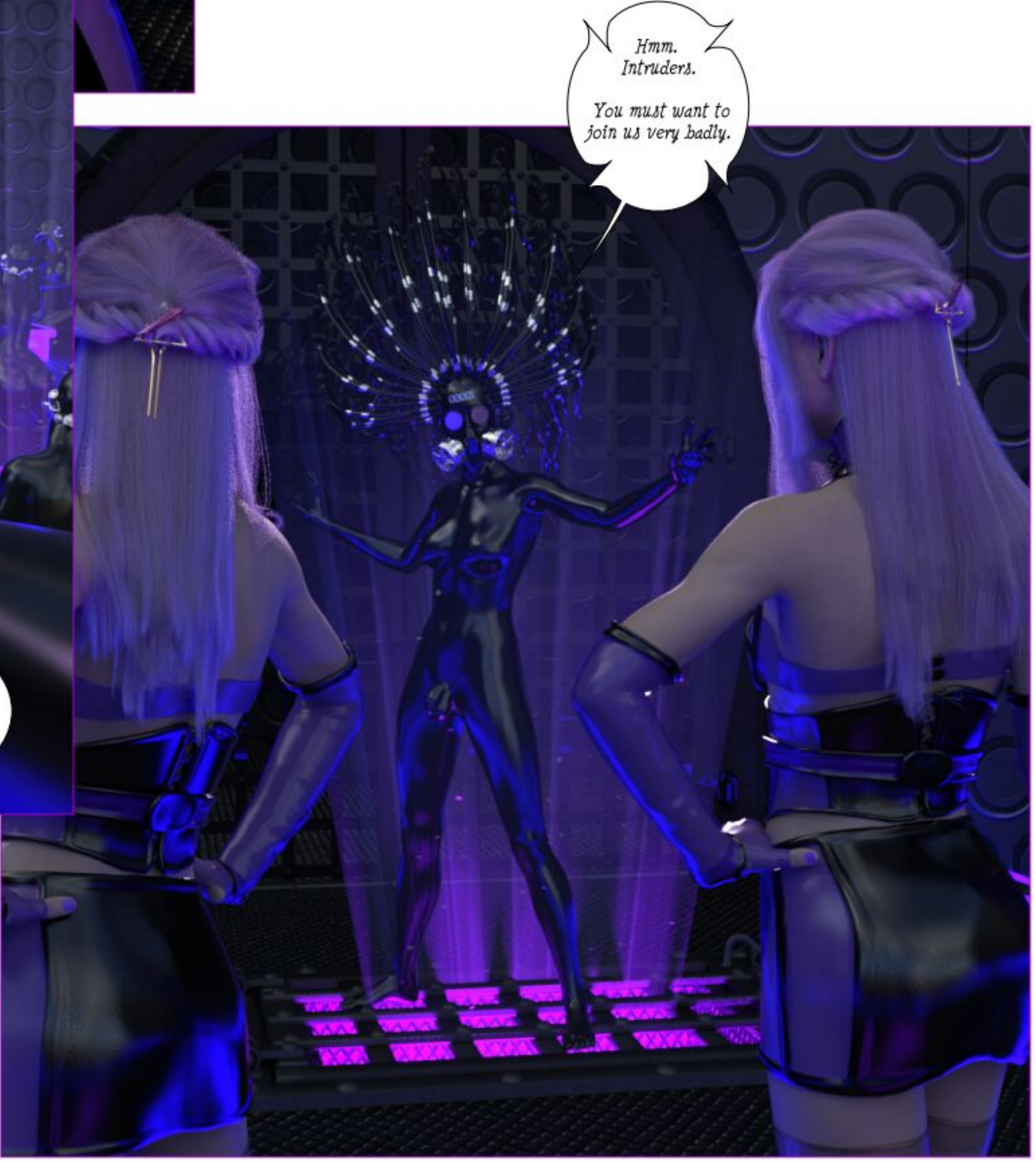
'Bye!



Oh no! We've run right into some kind of big gathering! Or maybe it's a dance party.

I think it's a rave. Check out those lights.

Ooh, yeah. The one up on the platform's got great hair.

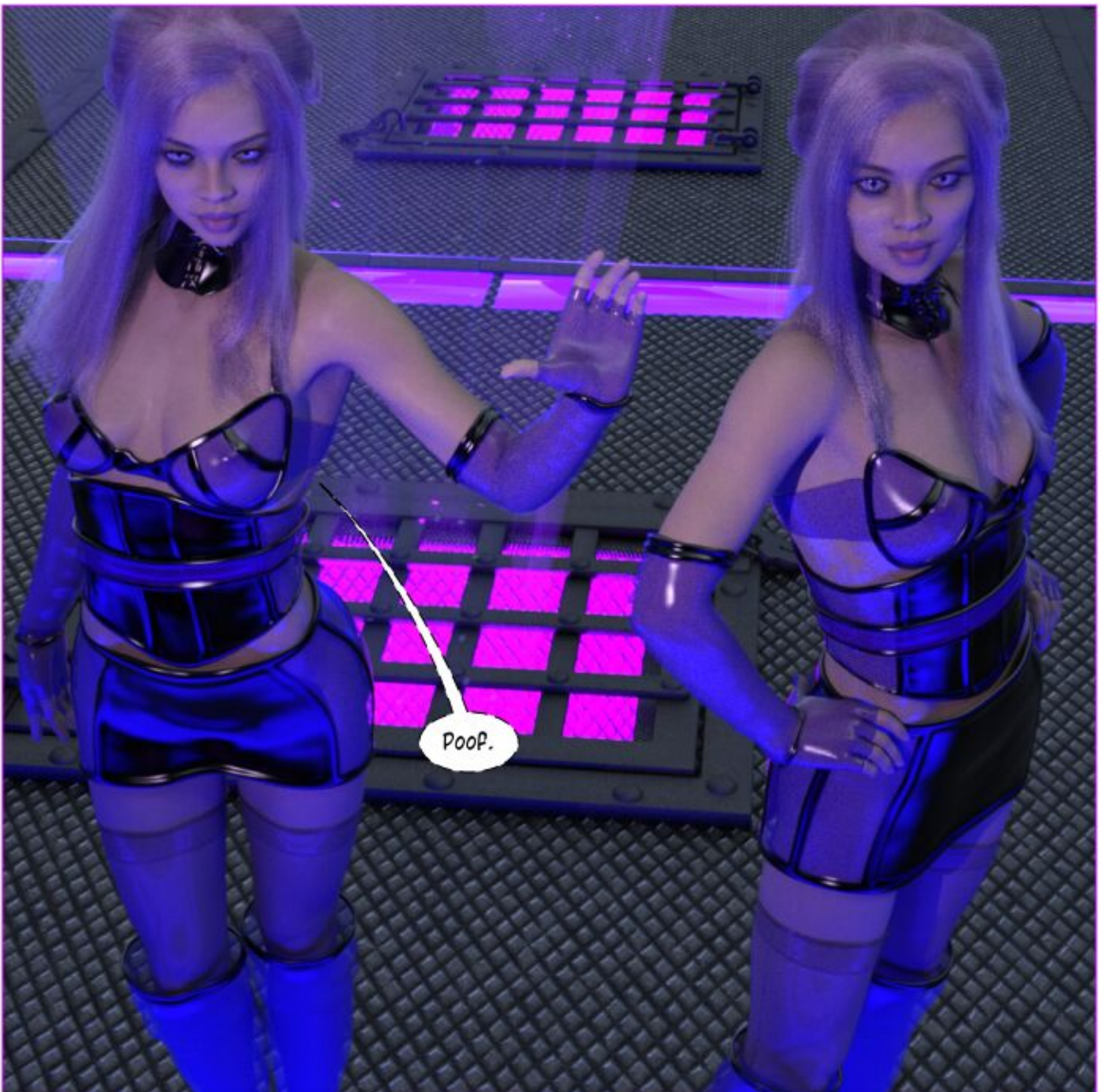


Hmm. Intruders. You must want to join us very badly.

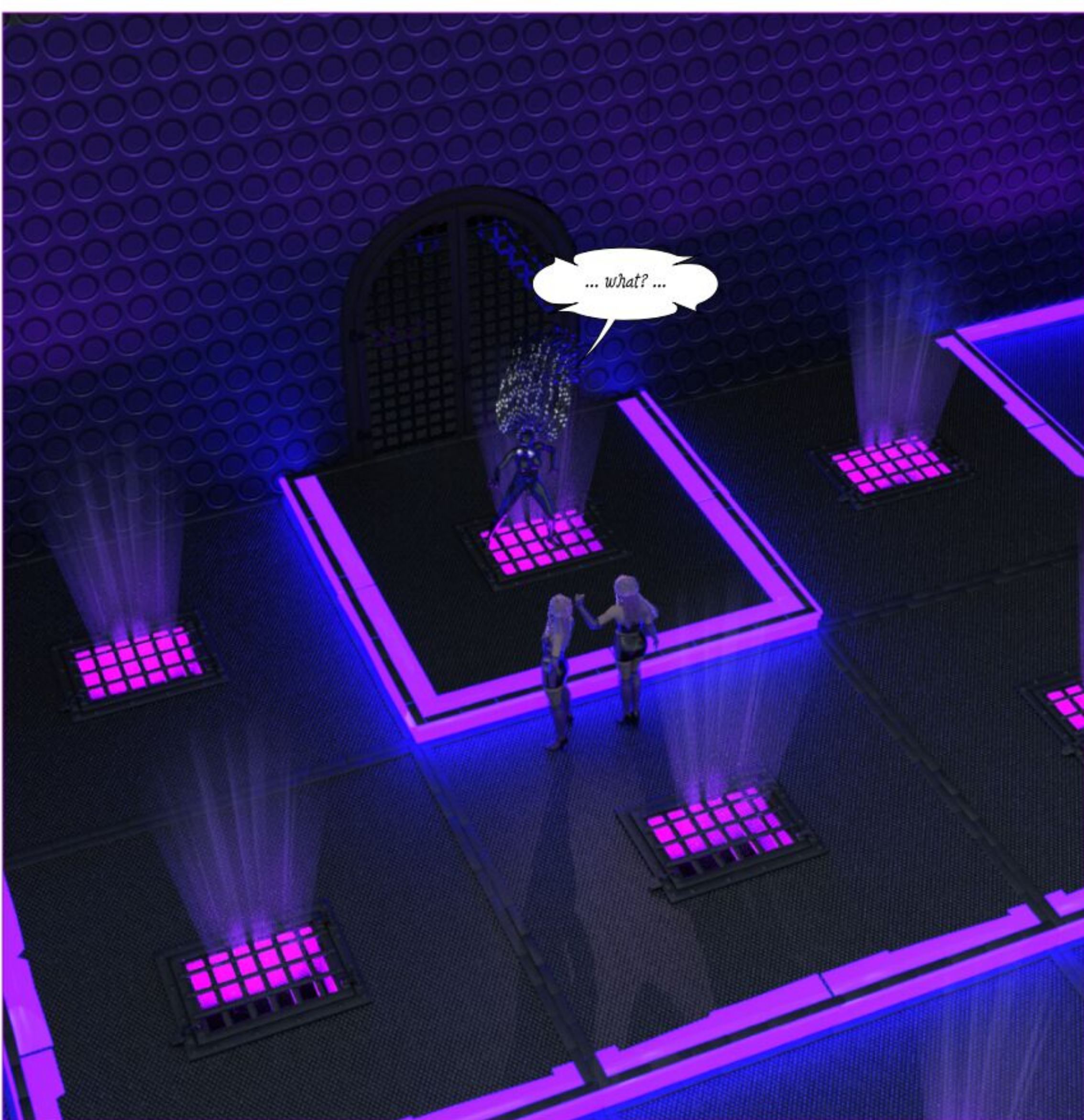


That wasn't really what we had in mind.

OK, we're here!



Poop.



... what? ...



No! You've ruined everything! Do you know how long--

You can't-- I have to--



A few days later? A few weeks later? I don't know. Later.

I'm still impressed your friend was able to get them all to agree to it. Doing an interrupt on everybody in that space wearing one of those hoods ... that was nearly five hundred people. How many Barkers had to buy in?

Not as many as you might think. Only a few of them are directly involved in managing beds. But, still, enough. If there hadn't been Barkers affected by it they probably never would have.

They fight like crazy, but they protect their own. Mostly.

Unfortunately, no one's figured out this identity cloak that Nathaniel is using. So when she disappeared, she really disappeared. She doesn't exist. And all her spaces were deleted, as you noticed.

Yeah. I'd never been standing in a space while it was being deleted before. Interesting experience.

So all we can do is wait until Nathaniel decides to make more trouble in some other identity?

Yes, but don't lose sleep over it. She's got a long list of people mad at her. Clayton's claiming the family's using this as an excuse to try to strip his assets; Monica Peels betrayed; Josiah doesn't like Barkers trying to do dirty to other Barkers, unless he's the one doing it.

If she does reappear, we may be too far down the queue to even get our licks in.

Follow Leyna's example. She's so unconcerned she's barely keeping awake.

Someone told me a short time back that if I was on the beach I should enjoy the sun.

So hush.



WATCH THIS SPACE FOR ANOTHER EXCITING ADVENTURE OF the SLEEPER SQUAD