

SLEEPER SQUAD



Hang on!
There's a performance going on in there.

Oh! Sorry, I figured it was just a rehearsal. It's a strange time for an actual performance, isn't it?

Yes, but it happens. You're not really supposed to be in here even if it's a rehearsal, you know.

If you're going to wander into private scenario spaces, you need to be very careful about checking what's happening. And have the good grace to leave if there's sex going on. Or at least not let on that you saw.

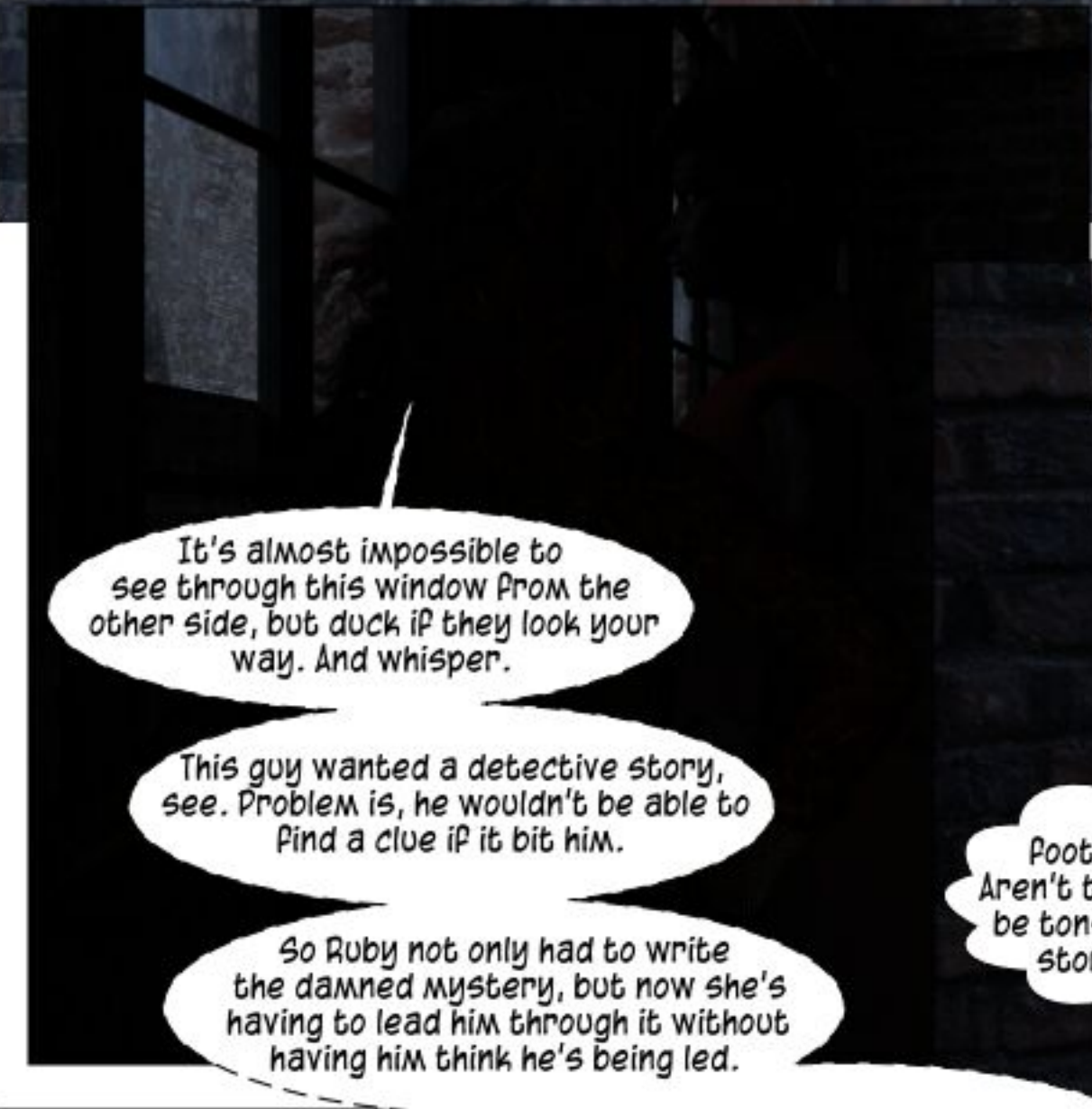
You must be Leyna. Ruby mentioned you did this from time to time. Anyway, there's no sex in this one, and she won't mind us looking as long as the customer doesn't see. Come on, there's a spot around the other side of the set.



I guess you're Lou? I didn't think you ever actually were on-set for these.

Not usually. This one's special. For one thing, we've had problems--two last-minute replacements--and I wanted to keep an eye on it.

But also, it's the kind of thing only Ruby could really pull off, and I like watching her do that.



It's almost impossible to see through this window from the other side, but duck if they look your way. And whisper.

This guy wanted a detective story, see. Problem is, he wouldn't be able to find a clue if it bit him.

So Ruby not only had to write the damned mystery, but now she's having to lead him through it without having him think he's being led.

But they've been at it for hours and I think she's started to give up on subtlety.



Not a footprint in sight. Aren't there supposed to be tons of footprints in stories like this?



Oh! Professor, I've found something very peculiar among these crates!

By Jove! This could only have been left here by that blackguard Rogers. He must have concealed it during the pursuit. Do you realize what this means, Miss Forsythe? We've solved the crime!



... Three hours I'll never get back, not to mention two weeks of prep. Good thing it paid well.

And that we were able to find emergency help. Thank you, Doreen.

You're very welcome. My bits of it were fun, anyway.

Leyna, you're staring.

Sorry. I'm having trouble getting used to seeing you looking like that.



This? This is nothing. I didn't even change my shape, just my skin color, and I only did that because the customer required it.

Doreen's the one who really had to suffer this time.

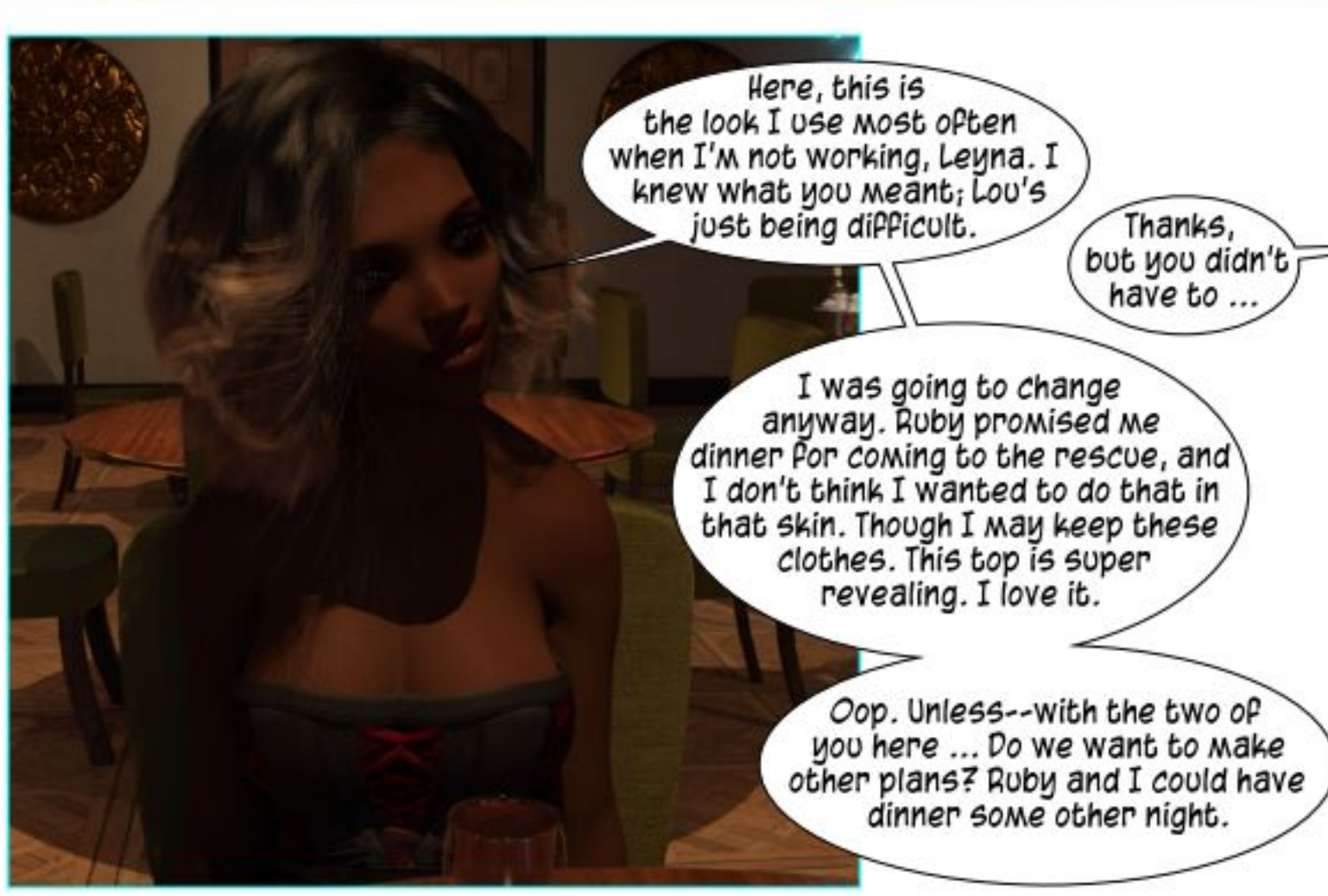
Been through worse. Besides, I'd never done this period before. I'll add it to my collection of "prostitutes throughout history" parts.

... I probably should have used more rouge and less eyeliner.

You know, I haven't seen what you actually look like yet.

"Actually look like" is a very strange phrase to use in sleep.

... Says the person none of us has ever seen without kitty purr.



Here, this is the look I use most often when I'm not working, Leyna. I knew what you meant; Lou's just being difficult.

Thanks, but you didn't have to ...

I was going to change anyway. Ruby promised me dinner for coming to the rescue, and I don't think I wanted to do that in that skin. Though I may keep these clothes. This top is super revealing. I love it.

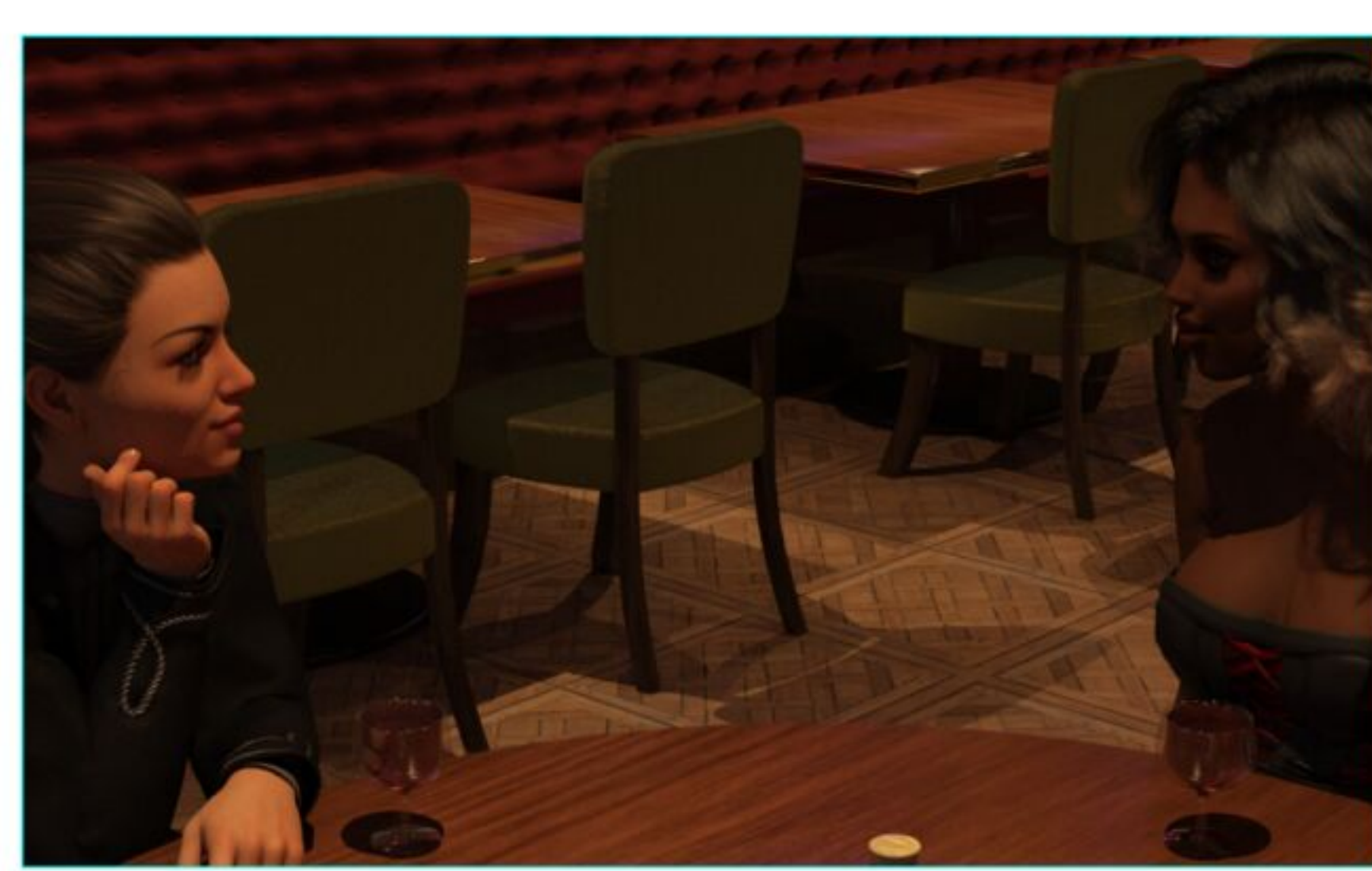
Oops. Unless--with the two of you here ... Do we want to make other plans? Ruby and I could have dinner some other night.



Actually, I was wondering if Leyna wanted to have dinner with me. We were in the middle of a conversation when the scenario ended.



Oh! Uh ... well ... yes, that'd be nice.



Let's give up dinner and spy on them instead.

Don't tempt me.

Do you want me to change too?

Nah. "Victorian governess" looks really hot on you.



Meanwhile, in a much less pleasant neighborhood on the other side of AA ...

OK, I'm here. What's this about? I told you ...



Thank you for coming, Trish.

I just wanted to discuss my offer again. I really do wish you'd reconsider. I know exclusivity seems very limiting, but it's also very lucrative.

You asked me to come out here for that? This is supposed to be my night off. You could have called me or left me a message. Like the last twenty times.

The answer is still no.

I suspected it might be. That brings me to the other reason I asked you to come.



I don't think you've met my business partner. She has something she wants to show you.

Hello there. I just want to get a good look at you. Is that all right?

Look me in the eyes--yes, like that, that's good. Now we can see each other clearly.



Oh, I see you've noticed my pendant. Isn't it pretty? It glows so nicely. I bet you can't take your eyes off it.

It's so shiny. It's filling your whole head. There's no room in your head for anything else. Just the shiny.

Empty and shiny.



How long do you think you'll need to get her oriented?

Always in such a hurry. You're not going to need those episodes for another week. I might play with this one a bit. I'm overdue for a new toy.

Suit yourself.



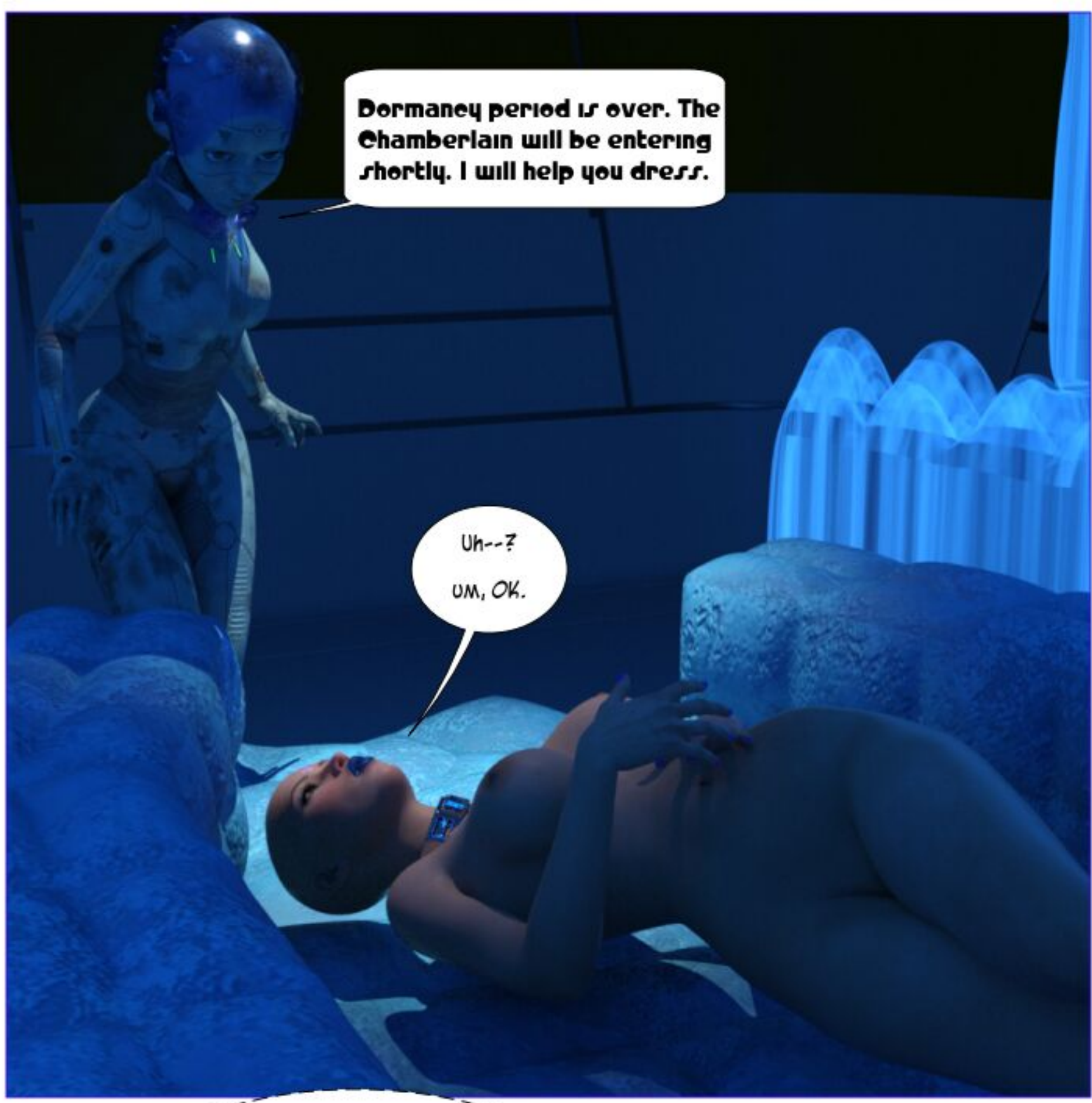
MMM ... this will be fun.

She's been dormant long enough, Cyla. Wake her and dress her. I will enter in a moment.

Yes, Mistress.



ooh ... What a weird dream ... Wait, where am I?



Dormancy period is over. The Chamberlain will be entering shortly. I will help you dress.

Uh--?

UM, OK.



This is "dressed"? A plastic hood?

It is the only apparel we are permitted to wear.

And you must always wear it when not in the dormancy chamber, or it will be considered a gesture of disrespect.

You may go, Cyla.



The immersive acting can be disorienting at first, but it gets great results. Just stay in character at all times. They're always recording and they hate editing out.

Immersive ... Did I sign on for this? I don't remember a-- Anyway I don't have a script!

That's all you need for now. Just play along.

The Krath nobility like human bed toys, they think you're status symbols. I'm the chamberlain for the household of one of the Krath princesses, so I find toys for her.

We Krath are subjugating humans. You managed to get yourself picked for internal service because you thought it would be a better life than a work crew.



Now it is my responsibility, as Chamberlain, to evaluate you. If you are found unfit to be brought to my princess, you will be sent back to the surface.

A test? Oh--

What do I have to do?

First, show proper address. You will call all Krath who are not of higher title "Mistress." I'll instruct you in noble and royal titles later. If you pass.

I--

... Yes, Mistress.



You did very well. A little more instruction, and you'll be ready to present to the princess.

Yes, Mistress. Thank you, Mistress.





So what do you think this is about?

I think Lou has gotten the idea that we can solve problems. They didn't hear it from me, but Lou has all kinds of sources and is very sharp. I trust them, though, so I'm not worried.

No, me neither, but that wasn't the question--I'm wondering what it's about.

By the way, don't think for a second I haven't noticed your appearance.

You and Midnight both keep telling me I need to try new looks. So I'm trying a new look.

Uh-huh. I know you go more dressy than I do, but that's a club outfit and you know it. And I've never seen you wear eye makeup or earrings.



It's about these actors just vanishing from the market! They didn't return calls, no one sees them. If it's some kind of exclusivity deal, it's a hell of an arrangement. And it's happening more and more. We're about to have a big casting problem!



I'd have thought there was no shortage of actors. I mean, isn't it practically the only way half of sleep has to make its bed fees?

Yes, but ... what happens is a lot of people say "Oh, I can go have sex with people for money, that's easy." They think that doesn't take acting. Most of them can't do the real parts. They end up working in clubs and callout places--strictly sex jobs, no acting.

And some of the people who can act get tired of dealing with the sex bits, and go off to do clean passives and other gigs where they don't have to fuck the customers.

And sometimes you find someone who can do both and they realize their talents are being wasted, and they go off to write or direct.

Hey!

Wasn't a complaint. As good as you were acting, you're more valuable doing what you're doing. Just pointing out it does happen. This business is a lot of fun but it does get tiresome. Too many of our customers are assholes.

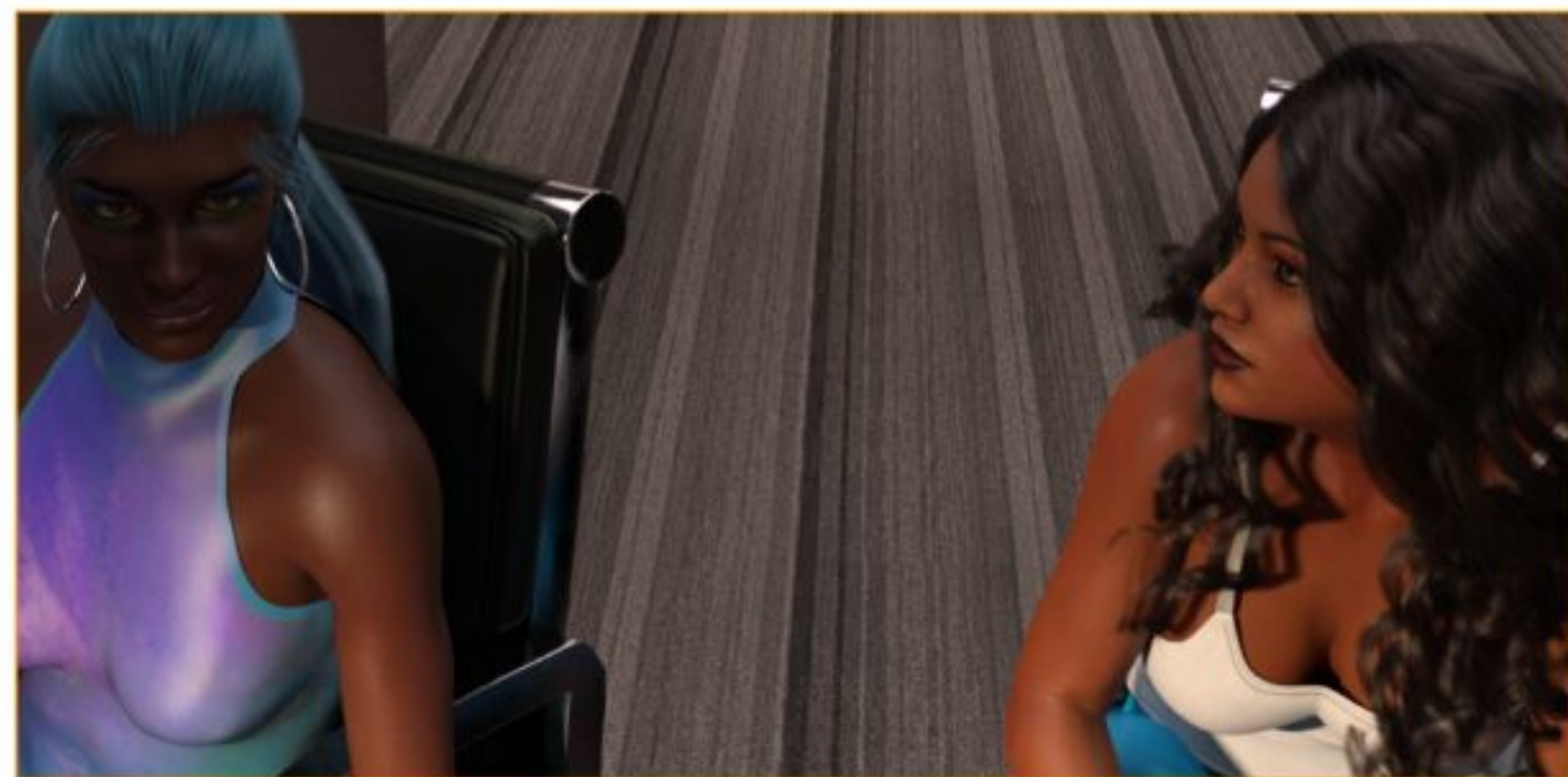


Look, something doesn't smell right. Trish Carter blew off a job two days ago. No show, no call. Now Trish is a lot of things, but even if she'd quit the business or taken an exclusive with someone else, she'd tell me. I refuse to believe otherwise.



That is strange ... I agree with you about Trish ... but the thing is, Lou, this isn't really what we--

We can take a look into it. See if we can find out anything.



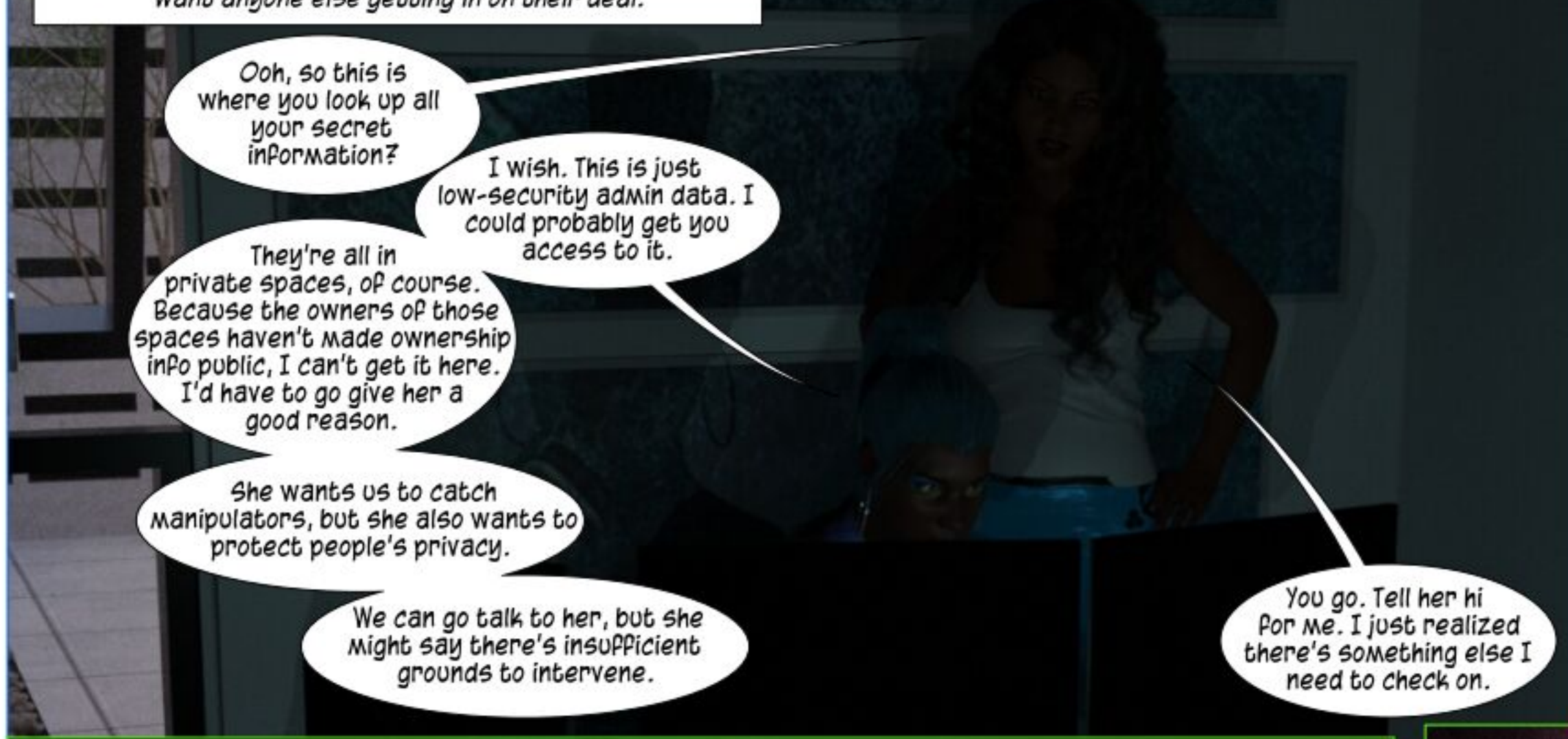
You like Lou.

Am I going to get teased if I confirm that?

No. Well, not much.

Good.

Asking around didn't get us much. We confirmed that some actors had definitely disappeared, but at the end, that's all we had--a list. The people who had vanished hadn't told anyone else what they were up to. Given how little cooperation we got from some of the actors we talked to, that was no surprise. Some of them probably had offers and weren't discussing it because they didn't want anyone else getting in on their deal.



Ooh, so this is where you look up all your secret information?

I wish. This is just low-security admin data. I could probably get you access to it.

They're all in private spaces, of course. Because the owners of those spaces haven't made ownership info public, I can't get it here. I'd have to go give her a good reason.

She wants us to catch manipulators, but she also wants to protect people's privacy.

We can go talk to her, but she might say there's insufficient grounds to intervene.

You go. Tell her hi for me. I just realized there's something else I need to check on.

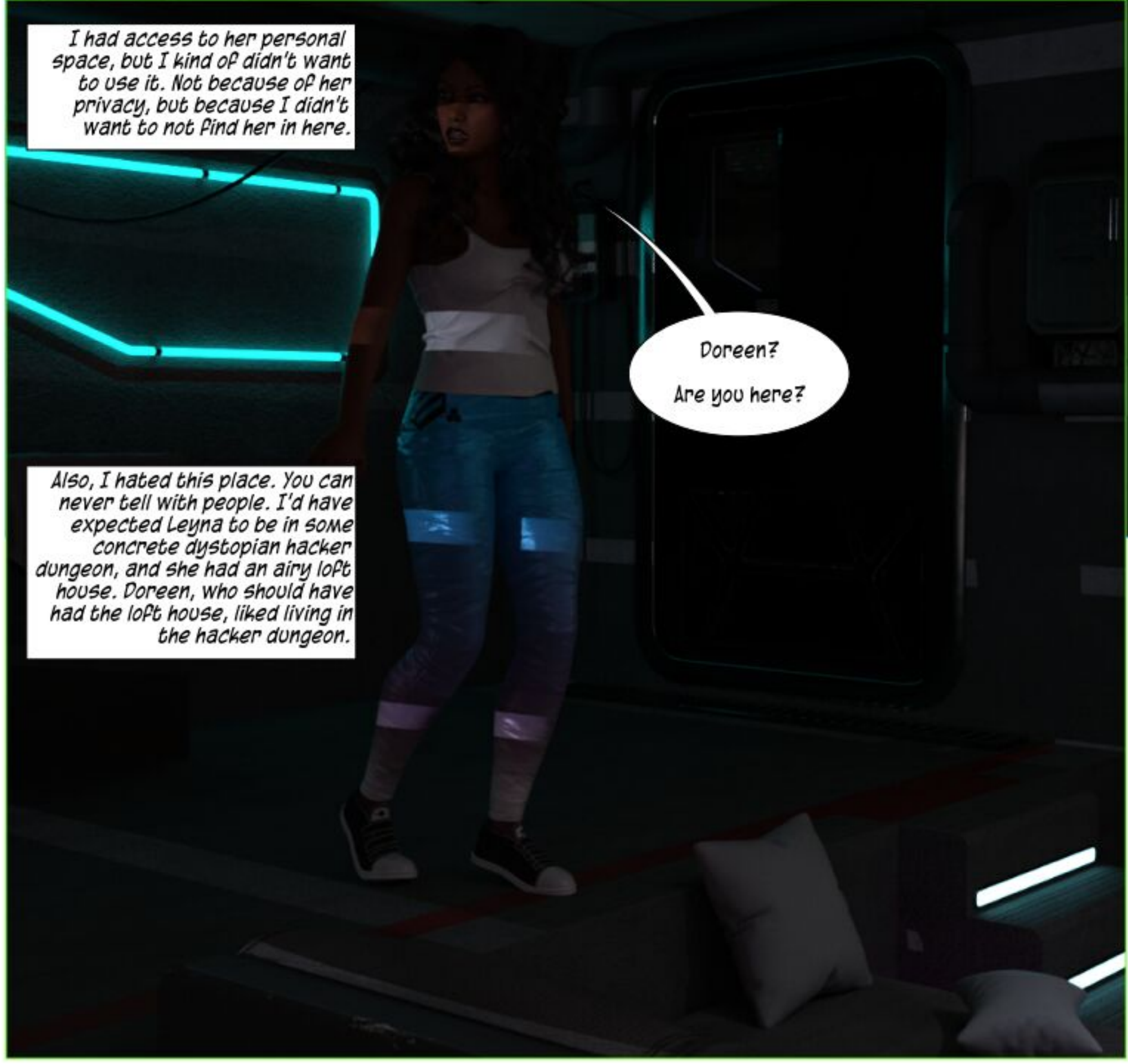


-BLIZZ-

C'mon, Doreen, answer the door. You didn't answer your phone.

-BLIZZ-

Damn it.



I had access to her personal space, but I kind of didn't want to use it. Not because of her privacy, but because I didn't want to not find her in here.

Doreen?
Are you here?

Also, I hated this place. You can never tell with people. I'd have expected Leyna to be in some concrete dystopian hacker dungeon, and she had an airy loft house. Doreen, who should have had the loft house, liked living in the hacker dungeon.



--What--?
AAAA!

Shit, Ruby!

Don't scare me like that!



Scare you like that? I thought you'd joined the disappeared.

Joined the what now?

Somebody's making actors vanish. It might be a legitimate job, but if it is, they're locked up tight somewhere.

You haven't been getting suspicious offers from anybody lately, have you?

Well, yeah, actually, but--

Hell. Hang on, that's Leyna. It might be important.

BZZZZT



Not only got the ownership, she let me look at the money. Whatever they're doing, he's paying them. Guy named Ben Cobermayer.

Cobermayer?

Now, see, if you knew already, why'd you ask?

Leyna, you need to come to Doreen's. Right now. The three of us need to talk.



Nobody who can get better gigs works for Cobermayer, Leyna. Nobody. He treats people like shit and his scripts are the most horrible setups-for-bad-porn you ever saw.

Yet he's got five very successful passives. I checked. Actors may hate him but viewers don't.

Only because they've never worked with him. Ask Doreen. She swore never to do it again.

OK, but since he's paying them, and all the paperwork is legit, it'd be really hard to prove they weren't just doing very long-term, very private acting jobs. "Actors hate him" isn't proof. Maybe he threw so much money at them they took the job anyway.

Right. So we have to actually catch him trying to take someone in against their will. Because I am positive he's doing that. Trish wouldn't have worked with him for all the money in A4.

Uh-oh. I think I see why I'm in this conversation now.

Cobermayer's been pestering you for weeks, you said. He even asked you to come to his office to talk.

Just so you know, I charge extra to play "bait."

That's not exactly what I have in mind.



OK, Cobermayer. This had better be the most interesting thing you've ever said, or I may have to kick your ass.

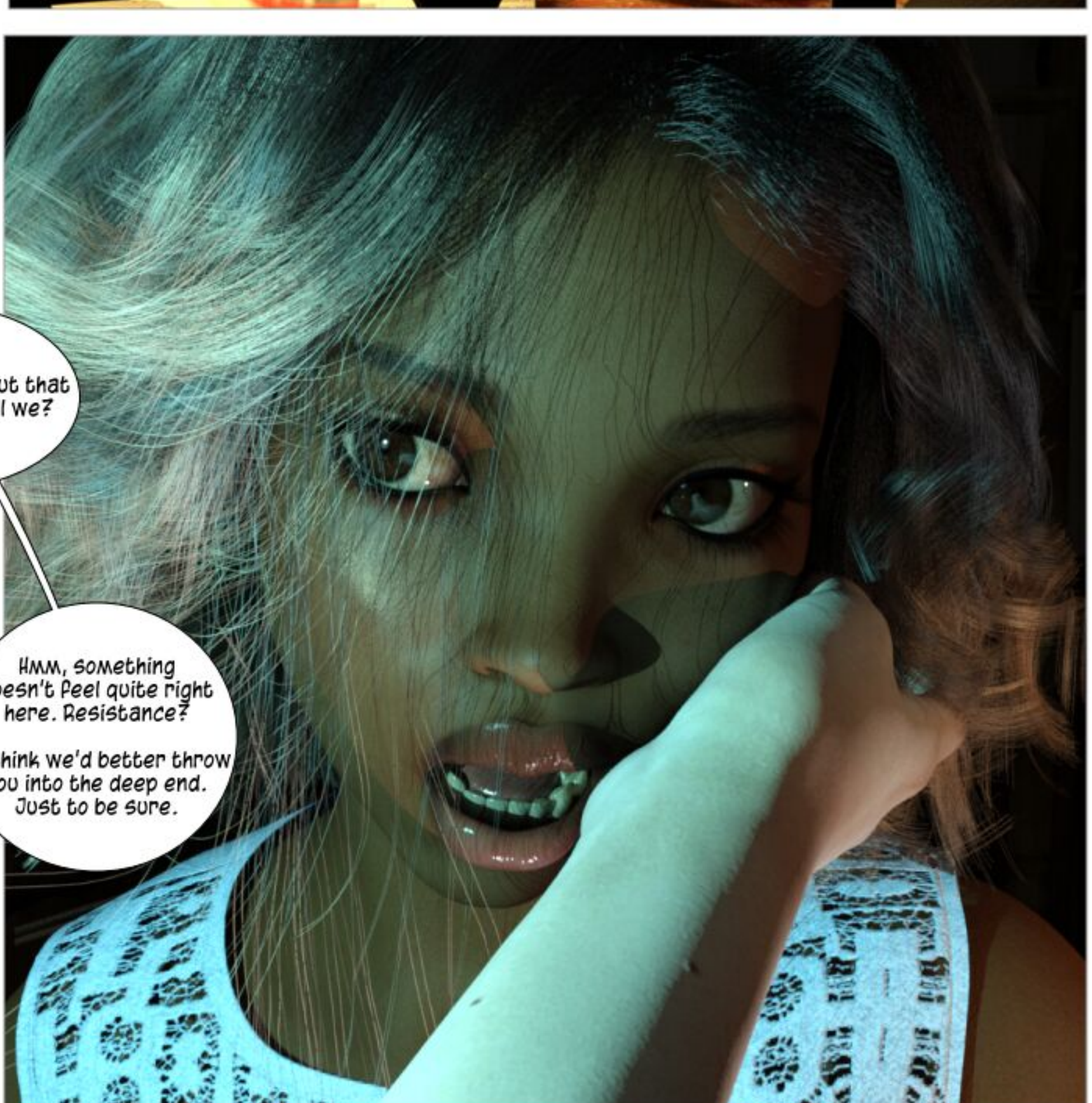


Don't worry, it'll be fascinating. I didn't have a business partner the last time you worked with me.



You must be Doreen. I've heard so much about you.

Let's just empty out that pretty head, shall we?



Hmm, something doesn't feel quite right here. Resistance?

I think we'd better throw you into the deep end. Just to be sure.



Fox, you've got to get up! They're coming back!



Uugh ...

What happened?

She got hit by one of their stings. Knocked her halfway down the street.



Look, there's not enough time for the script. You're just going to have to roll with it.

We're fighting the Queen Bee. She turns people into her minions, like those soldier bees coming down the street at us.

Just remember to stay in character, OK? They can fix any other major mistakes in editing.

Uh ... OK, but ...

C'mon, sit up, you're all right. Just had the wind knocked out of you.



Sky, you have to take on Queen Bee, you're the only one who can get up there.

Roger that.

I'll try to get a shot at her, but I have to get to higher ground first. Fox, that leaves you to deal with the ones down here.

Um. Right. OK.

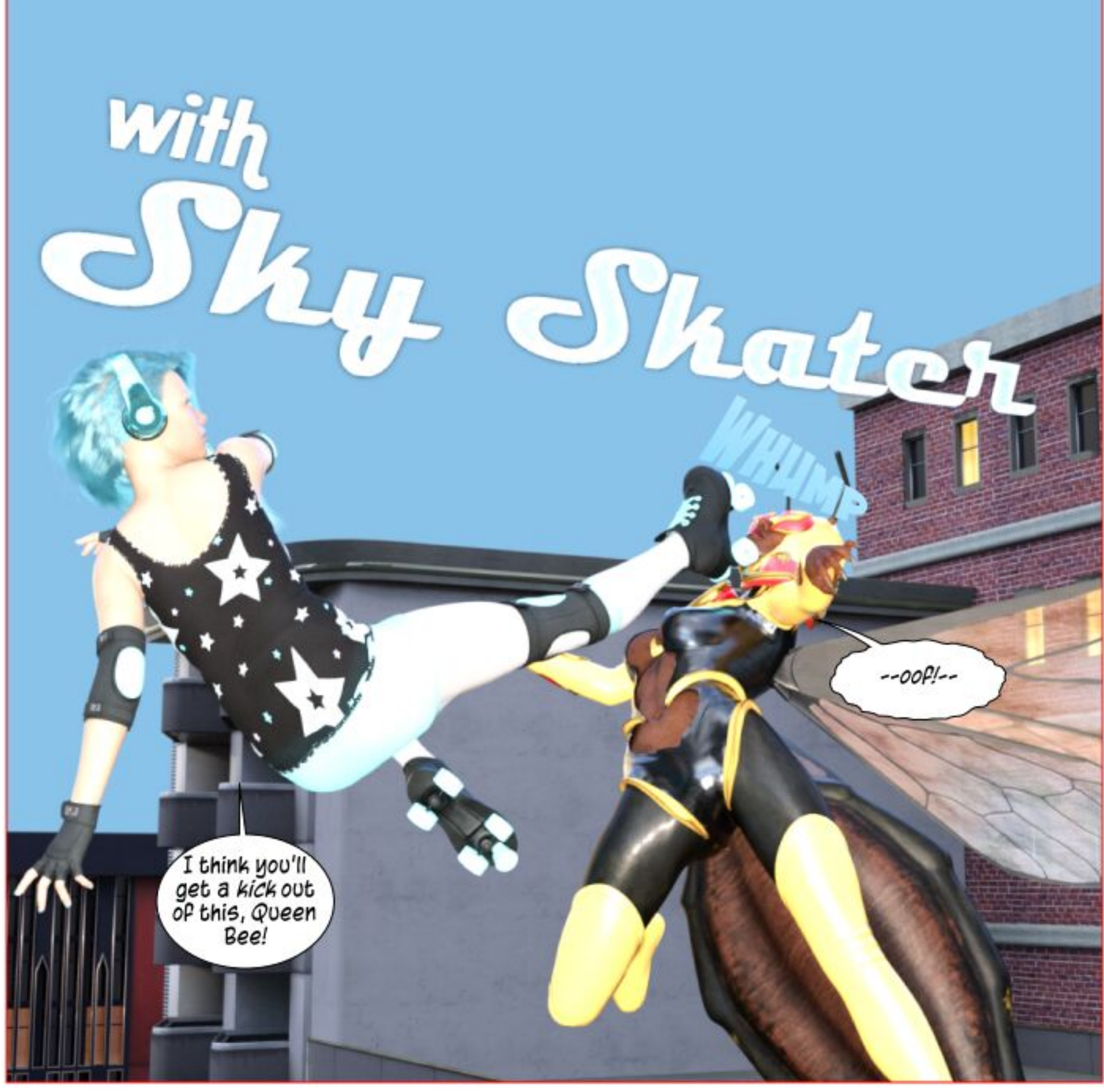
You'll be fine. Just don't get hit by their stings again.



I thought this was just going to be an excuse to Past-Forward to a sex scene ...



Oh, well. Here we go.



with Sky Skater

--OOP!--

I think you'll get a kick out of this, Queen Bee!



and LAIRRAVE

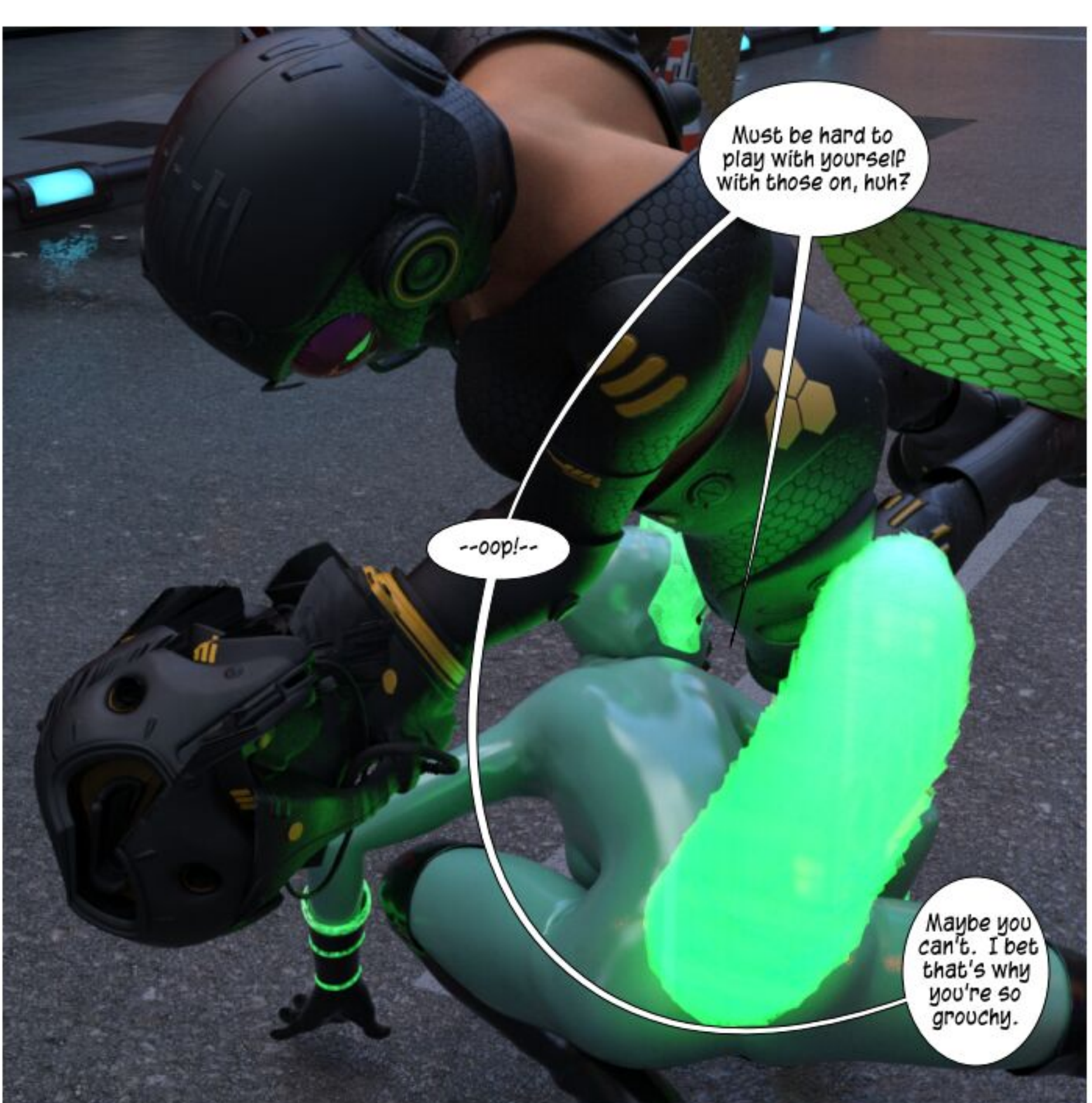
See if you can get me a clean shot at her front, Sky! Her backside's too well armored for my darts!



Whoa!

I felt that pass me! Guess that's the "sting" she warned me about.

Well, that explains those things on their hands, anyway.



Must be hard to play with yourself with those on, huh?

--ooh!--

Maybe you can't. I bet that's why you're so grouchy.



Am I supposed to do this with just my hands and Peet? Where's my gun or my Plying roller skates?

I can't-- yikes!

OK, she really should have told me I could do that.

Can I do it again?



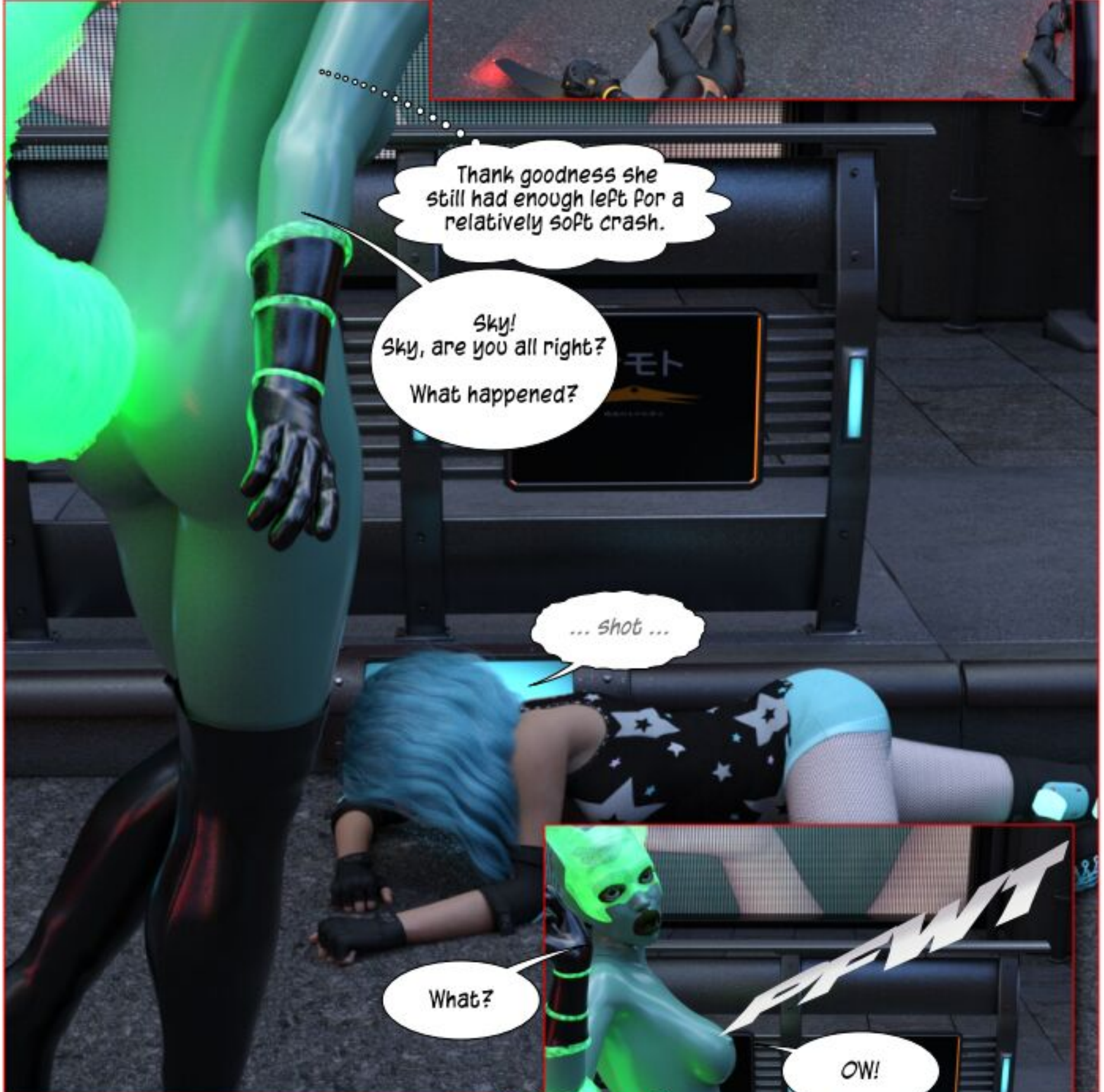
Oh, well, now, that makes everything MUCH easier.

Almost too easy, now ...

--What?



Oh, god, she's falling! I don't think I can catch her ...



Thank goodness she still had enough left for a relatively soft crash.

Sky! Sky, are you all right? What happened?

... shot ...

What?

OW!



Sorry, Foxy! Your friend here got down with the buzz.

She really should have watched her back. Now she can watch mine.



Something just ... hit me? uugh ...

Trickshot ... no ... Tranquilizer dart. Can't ... keep ...

Some amount of unconsciousness later ...

Fox, wake up!
They're watching us ...

... uuhn?

Oh, hey,
you're awake!
Time for some
Pun!

I don't understand you super Polks.
What's your problem? I just want to be
loved! My drones here love me. My soldiers
love me. My workers love me. Even your
Friend with the big gun loves me now.

But you two don't love me.
We're gonna work on that, though.

Now, I got a problem.
Skate lady there is immune to
my buzz--are those headphones
glued on, or what?

And Foxy, you recover so fast
that it's no good. I'd have to buzz
you again every ten minutes.

But I have another idea.
You'll like it! It's gonna be a lot of Pun!

... water? ...

It's going to take a lot
more than just getting us
wet to stop us, Queen Bee!
As soon as I --

... uh ...

... what is that smell?

Smells kinda like ...

... Fox, I Peel really weird ...

Fox, I'm burning ... I
need to touch you ... I
need you to touch me ...

Sky, I ...
--gasp--
No, Sky! This is because
of whatever she
sprayed on us!

Bees are all about
communicating with scent, you
know. What you've got there is one of
the most bona fide, high-test batches of
pheromone I've ever brewed up. Quality
stuppp! Only the best for you two!
Guess what it communicates?

I Peel like my
whole body's on fire! I
just want to rub against her
and--
No!
Not with that Piend watching
it all, anyway.

--Whoa!--

Sky ... ooh! ... you've
got to ... fight it!

... MMM ... don't
want to fight it--



Some unspecified amount of post-coital sleep later ...



... MMM ...
That was nice ... but now it's time to get the hell out of here. Before it starts over.

In other circumstances that would have been a really fun gig ... maybe that's part of the scheme ... if it's interesting, you're less likely to notice you're stuck in it.

... MMM ...
gotta escape ...
before she destroys ...
... minds ...



Sorry, I'm not playing another round. In a second I'm punting on this scenario. All the way out. You should too.

But ... there's a contract! IP you blow off a commitment, and word gets out--

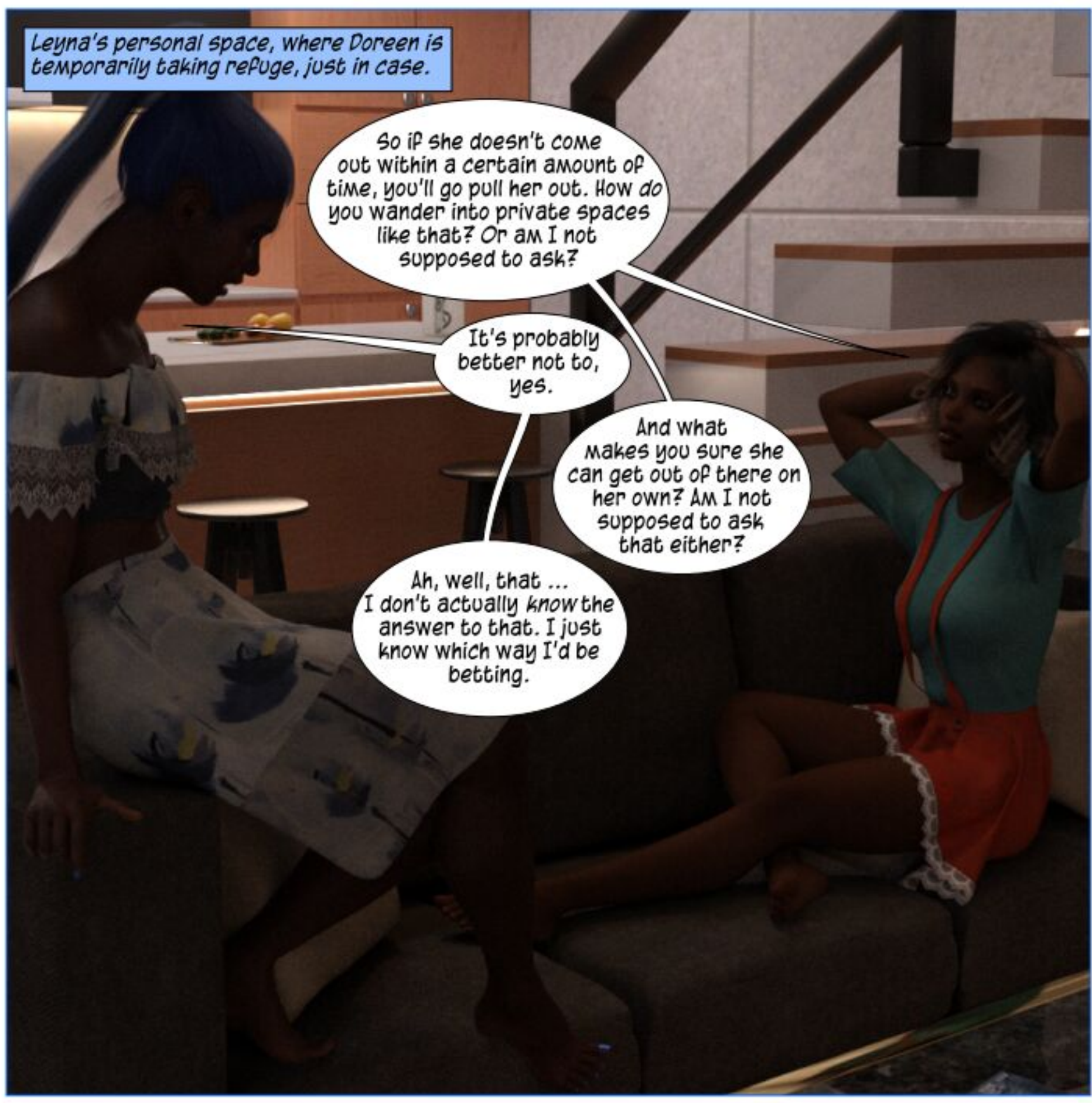
I will bet you anything you never actually agreed to a contract. They may have made you think you did, but you didn't.

I'll also bet you anything no one actually knows where you are right now. People might even be looking for you.

Do you remember your recall?

Yeah, of course, but--

Use it. I'm using mine.



Leyna's personal space, where Doreen is temporarily taking refuge, just in case.

So if she doesn't come out within a certain amount of time, you'll go pull her out. How do you wander into private spaces like that? Or am I not supposed to ask?

It's probably better not to, yes.

And what makes you sure she can get out of there on her own? Am I not supposed to ask that either?

Ah, well, that ... I don't actually know the answer to that. I just know which way I'd be betting.



Hey, kids!
Did I miss anything?



Sooner than expected.

Yeah, I saw everything I needed to see.

Did you destroy my reputation?

Nothing you couldn't live up to. Besides, I was masked the whole time. You can always deny it was you.

Hang on, I'll change. I came straight here after recalling.



I wish I could do that that past.

Just a lot of practice.

OK, so this mystery woman is definitely the one we want. Cobermayer's scripts have improved enough that I'm sure he's not writing them. She's writing, directing, participating ...

... kidnapping ...

Yeah, all of it. Cobermayer's incompetent; she's not. I don't know how to confront her yet, but I bet we can pressure Cobermayer. If we scare the shit out of him, maybe he'll help.

Sounds worth a try. When do you want to go talk to him?

Well, there's no time like the present, right?



On the other side of A4 ...

--She not only got out, she took one of the others out with her somehow. I knew something Pelt wrong about her.

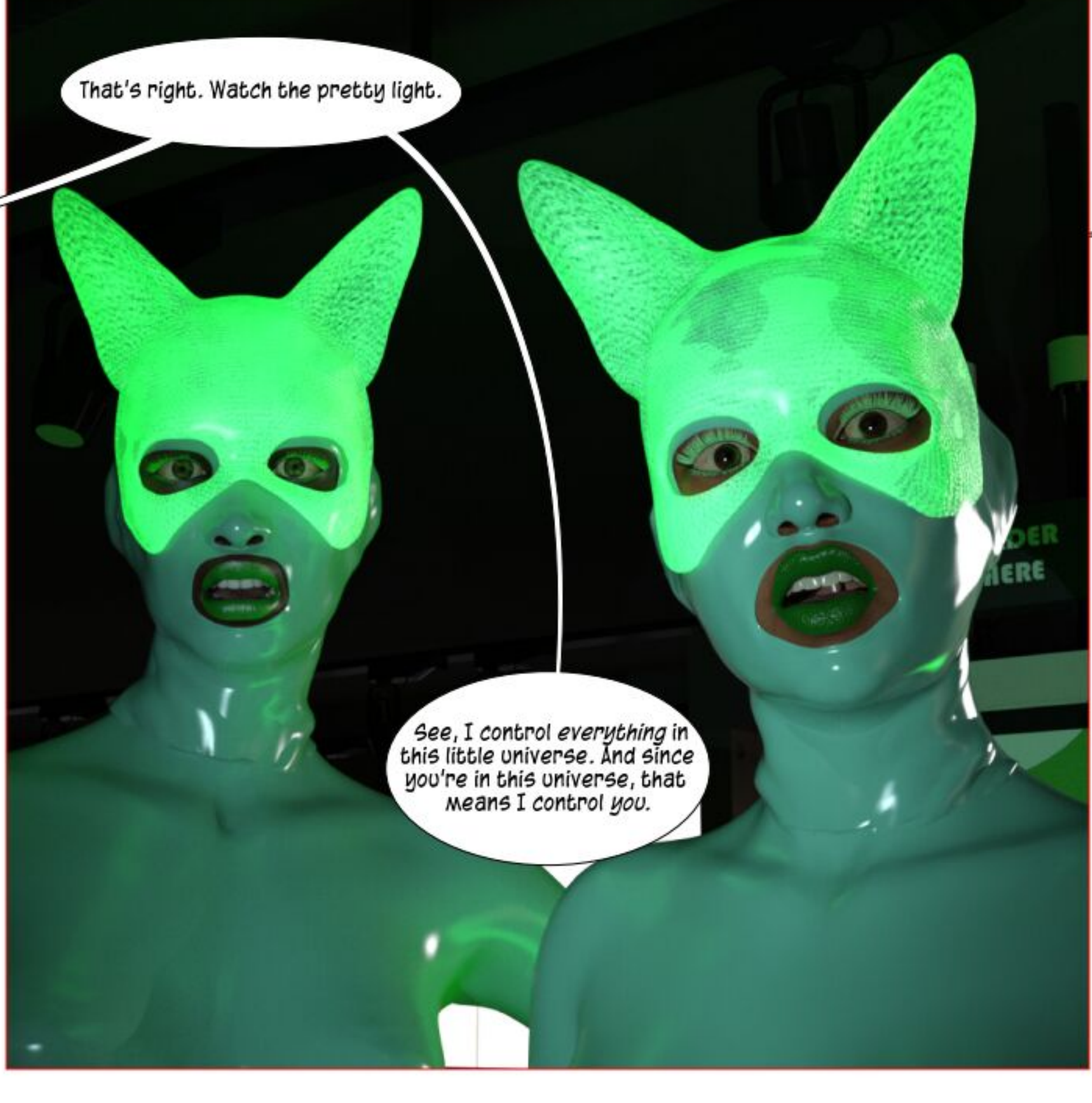
OK, but closing down? We've got a sure option on another passive! Views are skyrocketing! We're a major success and you want to end it because we got one person with a little more--

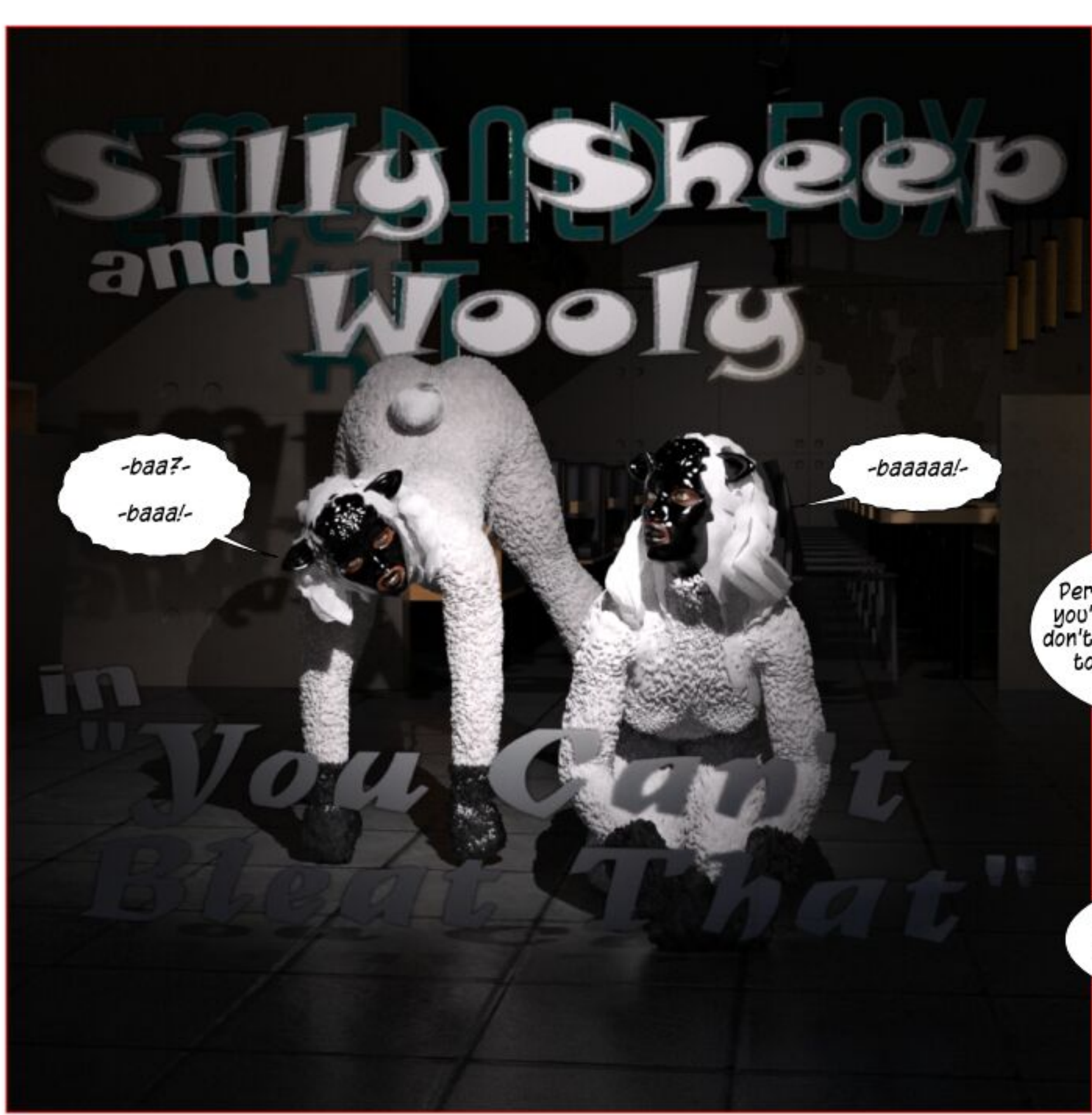
It's not your neck at risk. I've known all along that sooner or later we'd be having this conversation.



I'm sorry.

It's time to drain the pool, Ben.





-baa?-
-baaa!-

-baaaaa!-

Silly Sheep
and
Wooly
in
"You Can't
Blame That"



-baaa!-

AAAAAHHHHHHH

PerFect! You can't realize you're stuck in here if you don't even have enough brain to know you're human!

You're in no condition to chase me, and by the time the scenario deteriorates, I'll be long gone.



Maybe I'll make you a nice paddock before I --

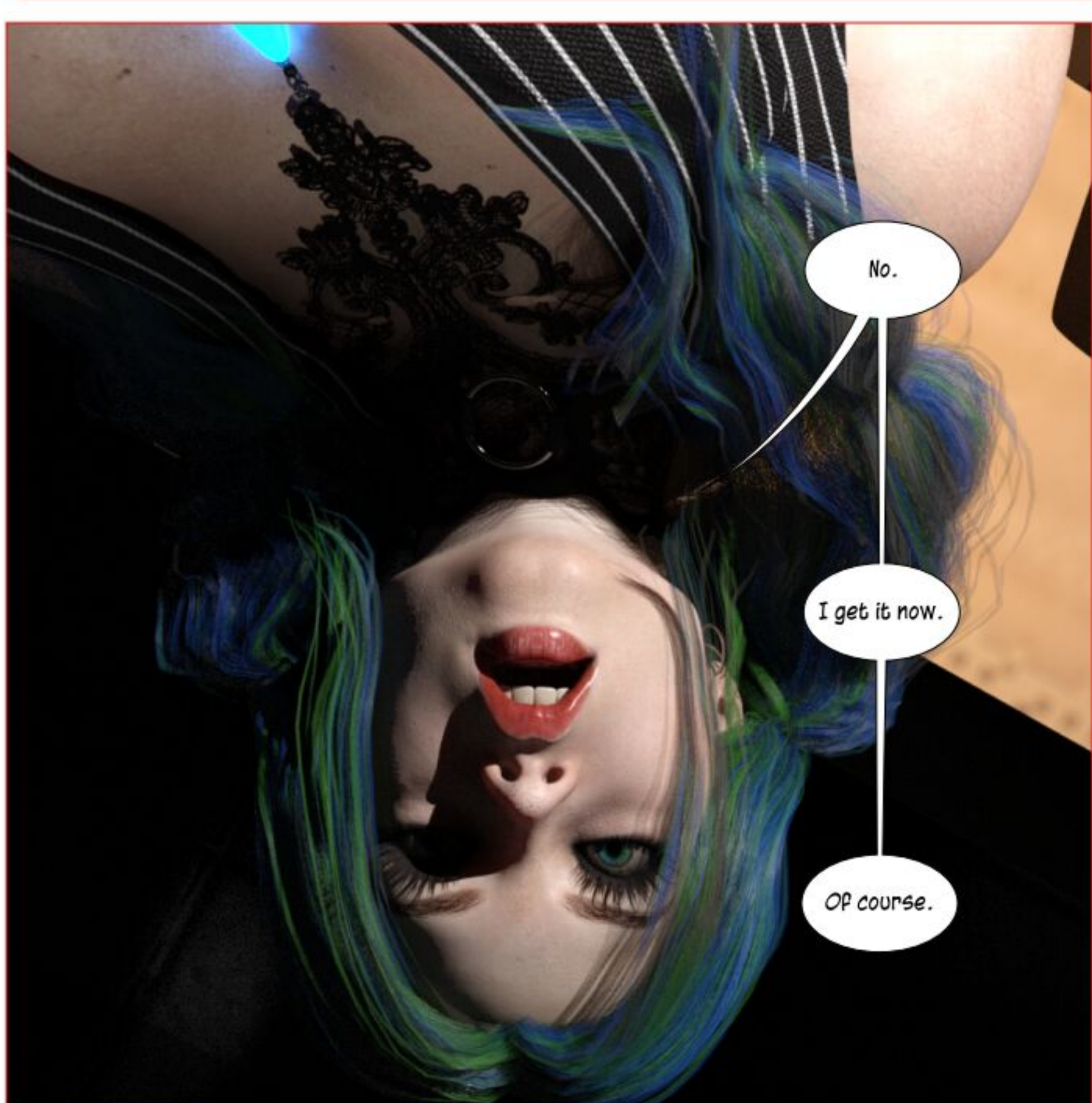
--aaigh!--

AAAAAHHHHHHH



Sorry, I don't herd well.

How--? So Fast!
I'll-- I'll do it again! I will!
I can do this as many times as you--



No.

I get it now.

Of course.



No point in it--
I have to--

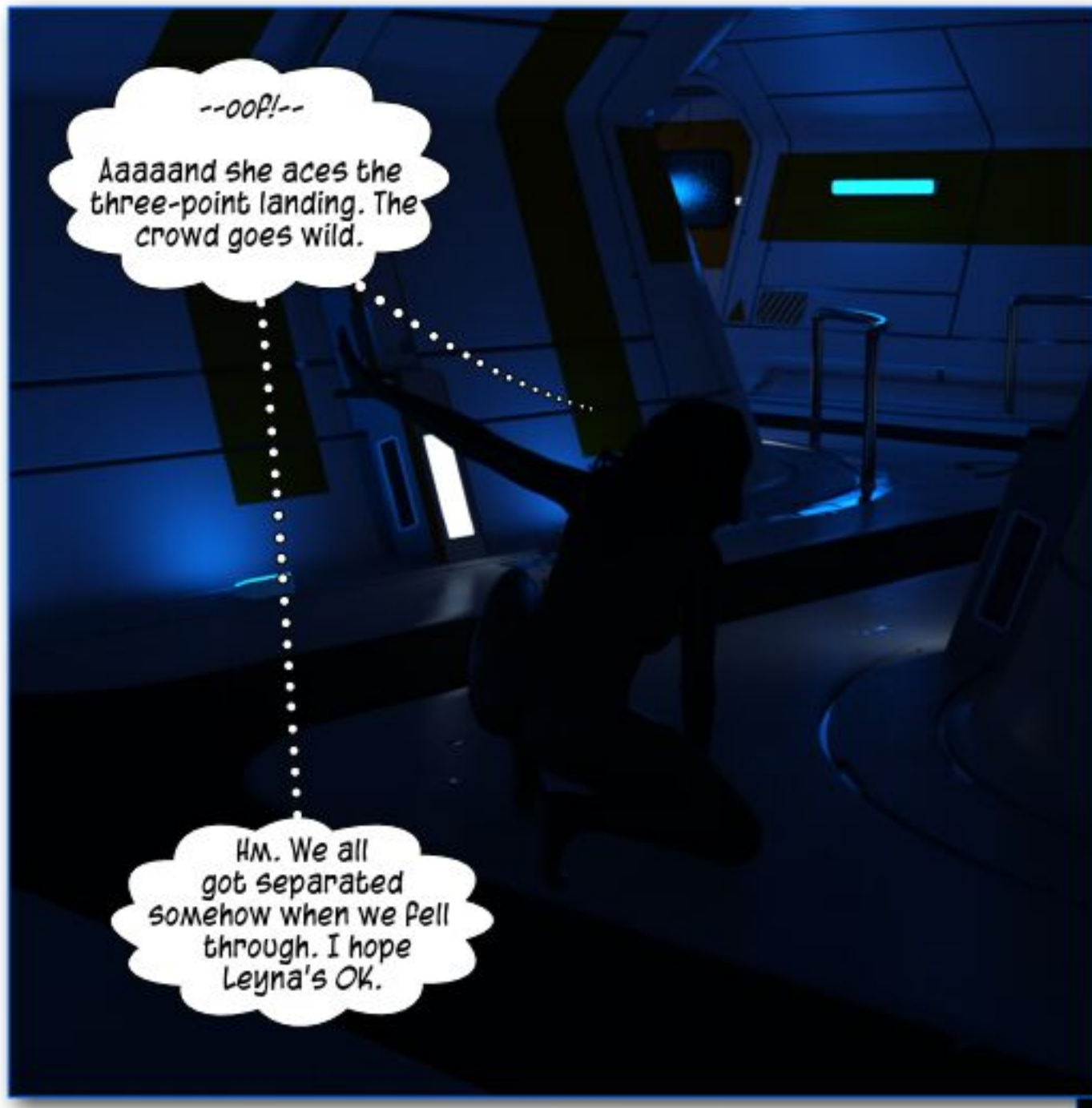
--oof!--



Let go of me!
You're supposed to be a dumb sheep!
I have to get out!
I need to--



Portal!
Look out!

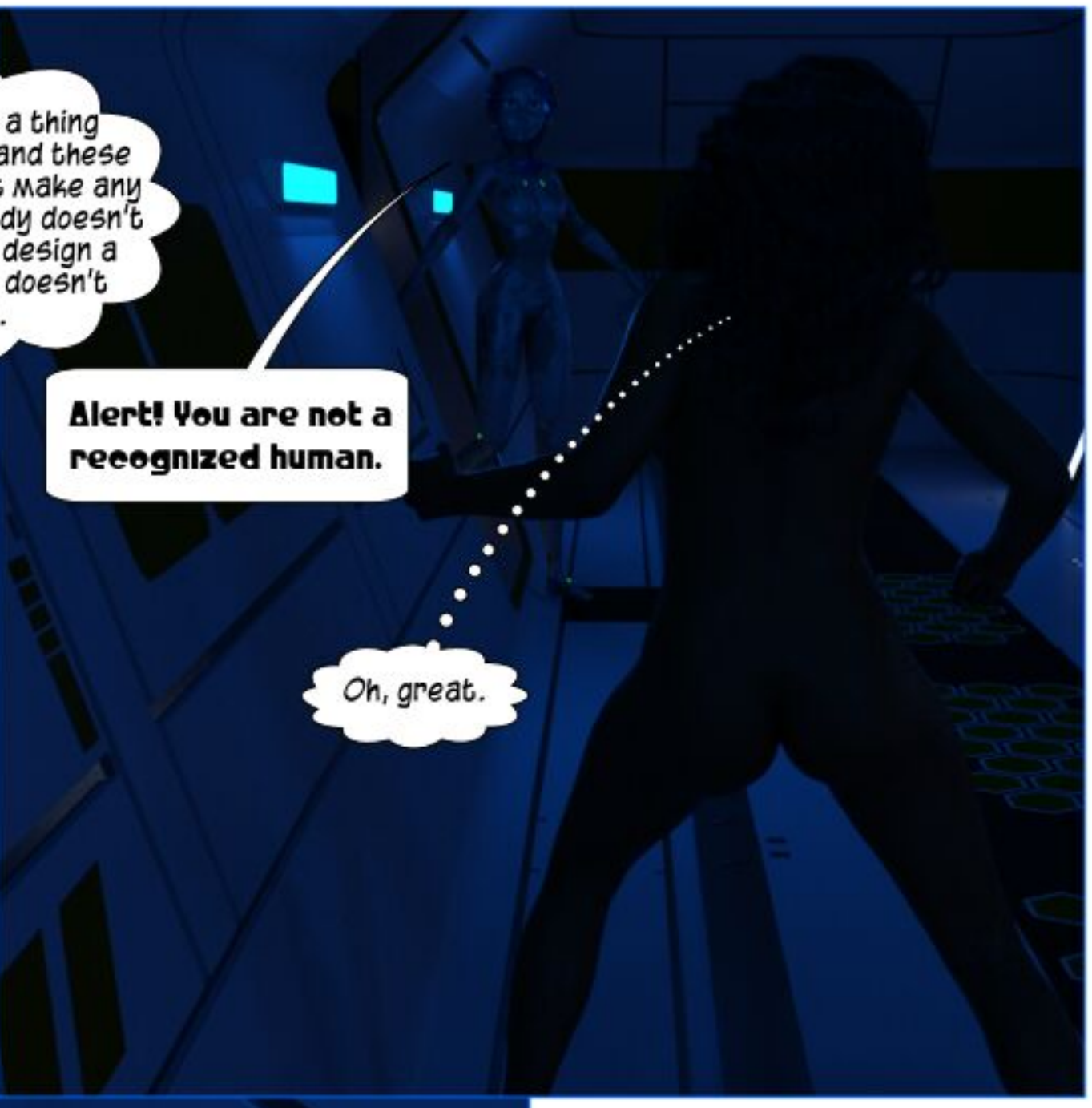


--oof!--
Aaaaand she aces the three-point landing. The crowd goes wild.

Hm. We all got separated somehow when we fell through. I hope Leyna's OK.



Can barely see a thing in this place and these corridors don't make any sense. Somebody doesn't know how to design a set. Or just doesn't care.



Alert! You are not a recognized human.

Oh, great.



Pretty sure I don't want her catching me ... good thing she can't run very fast.

'Course, I have no idea where I'm running to.



This corridor is different. That means this is probably the one that leads to the alien breeding chamber or something.

Oop!
Well, I was close, anyway.



Your Luminance, this is the human infiltrator I was warning you about! We must--

I will be the judge of what we must, chamberlain. She looks like she would be very interesting between my legs.



Human, one of your kind is threatening my person. Stand up and defend me.

... MMM ... yes, Your Luminance ...



Oh, hi, Trish. You know this gig's not real, right? They're messing with you.

Your Business, I'm not interested in your person. All I want is your chamberlain.

... Ruby?



Insolence! A threat to my chamberlain is a threat to me!
Cyla! Subdue the intruder!

Ver, Your Luminance.



Whoa! Faster than I expected. And she almost knocked me off the platform. I think I'd better change strategy.



Hopefully this one can't run any faster than the other one could ...



-Yikes!-

Uh, I guess you're all named Cyla?



Maybe we can come to an arrangement, I just--

Huh.

Being inside a scenario while it was being deleted never got less startling, but the "huh" was because the Cylas disappeared. That meant they hadn't been actors, or they'd be standing next to me, confused.

You didn't see simulations being used very often for anything more complicated than animals. They're not capable of playing real parts. Guess Cylas don't have to do much.



I recalled and headed to the person I figured had answers.

OK, so what happened?

When we got separated, I realized all I could do in there was wander around and get into trouble. I'm not as good at shaking off effects as you are.

So I recalled and went back to Cobermayer's office. The private scenario spaces were his. I was going to talk to him and make him shut them down. Which is what I would have done to begin with if you hadn't insisted on chasing her in.

Sorry. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Oh, I wouldn't have put it past you to catch her. You have different techniques than I do.

And it might not have mattered... When I got back to the office, I got a nasty surprise.

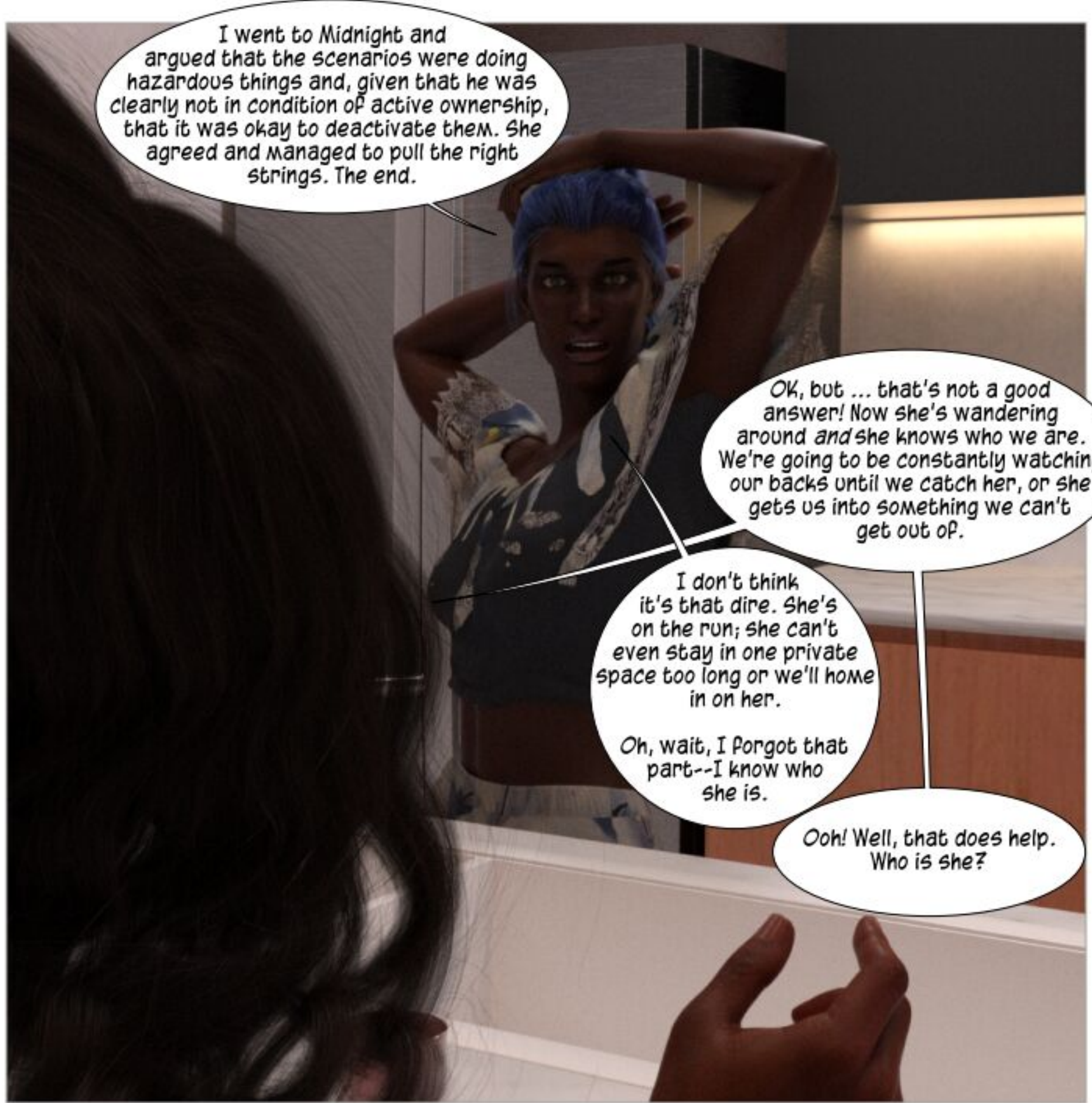


"There was nothing left of Cobermayer. It was like he'd been erased. I couldn't get any response from him at all. I don't think there's a mind in there now."

"Her doing? Covering her tracks?"

"Yeah, that's what I think. We'll have to add him to the lab rats and the people who didn't come out of the cult intact*. We're gathering quite a collection."

*SLEEPER SQUADS #2 AND #3/4, RESPECTIVELY. -T



I went to Midnight and argued that the scenarios were doing hazardous things and, given that he was clearly not in condition of active ownership, that it was okay to deactivate them. She agreed and managed to pull the right strings. The end.

OK, but ... that's not a good answer! Now she's wandering around and she knows who we are. We're going to be constantly watching our backs until we catch her, or she gets us into something we can't get out of.

I don't think it's that dire. She's on the run; she can't even stay in one private space too long or we'll home in on her.

Oh, wait, I forgot that part--I know who she is.

Ooh! Well, that does help. Who is she?



The Mesmerizing

MEGANDA

"She used her real name in the empty restaurant. And something about what she was wearing rang bells in my head. She used to do a hypnotist act. Apparently, it was a very good one."

"I guess it would be."



"Anyway, it's just a matter of time."

Damn it ... Only a couple of days and I'm already running out of places to go ... Am I going to have to leave sleep? I don't think I can last long out there.

You know, you strike me as a person who could use a little help.



Who are you?

Clayton Barker.

I've been on the lookout for someone with your abilities.

I don't know what you're running from, but I guarantee I can protect you.

Assuming, of course, you're willing to work with me on a couple of little things.

WHAT A SHOCKING DEVELOPMENT! HOW WILL THIS END FOR OUR HEROES? WATCH THIS SPACE FOR FUTURE ADVENTURES OF THE SLEEPER SQUAD