

SLEEPER SQUAD

Listen, now, to a tale of the mysterious east ... a distant land of where the strange is commonplace and the mystical is real ...

... Nope. I just can't sustain that bullshit for long. This isn't some vaguely racist Arabian Nights storybook ride. This is a part of A4 called the Souk.

Whoever designed the Souk to look this way probably wanted it to be that kind of Fantasyland, but it didn't work out. There's a lot of very interesting stuff here, for sure. And also a whole lot that's really rotten.

As I've said before, a lot of people in Sleep lack imagination. So others, like me, supply it for them. Not just scenarios and sex; sometimes it's as basic as decor. Want an interesting piece of furniture or an ornate rug in your personal space? Someone will be happy to dream that up for you. For a modest price, of course.

A lot of these crafters spend their time in and around the Souk, for whatever reason. Problem is, imagination doesn't always pay very well. Even scenewriting, which has lots of demand, makes me less cash than directing does. Imagine trying to scrape together your bed fees by designing wallpaper.

So another group has infested the Souk. These people lack imagination in every range but one: they're really good at coming up with ways to exploit other people. And some of the crafters are easy targets.



Evening, Colin.



Tomorrow ends the second month you haven't made your fees.

I'll get them! I just made a sale! When I'm paid for that--

Tell it to Mr. Strunk. Either show up tomorrow night at his club with the two months in bed fees you owe him ... or show up prepared to work.

But show up, one way or another. Or I'm coming to find you.

I bet you'll look cute as one of his back room crew. Have you ever wondered what you'd look like with huge tits?

I might even need to take a photo of it.

The asshole's name is Bruno. Don't bother remembering his face. This is the last time you see him in this story.

In fact, as far as we can tell, this is the last time anyone saw him at all.

#6 GAZE of the Cat

words and images by trilby

... divided among three people: Joe Strunk, Percy Furlough, and Bianca Zildan. Each would love to have the whole racket to themselves.

But we're only interested in Zildan. Rumor is she might be convincing people to work for her in other ways besides loansharking.

Manipulator?

That's the question. But I can't get answers. No one will say a word. This meeting tonight is the first nibble I've had.



You the ones who want to talk about Miz Bianca? In here.



And here's the people you'll be talking with.

Lemme close the door first, boys, we don't want the street to see.



THUD

--erk--



Heard the noise.
Hate seeing anybody get attention from Bianca's goons. Don't know what you did to piss her off, but whatever it was, I like it.

We're investigating her. But no one will say anything. Her staff are all either very loyal or very scared.

Investigating, huh? Who are you working for?

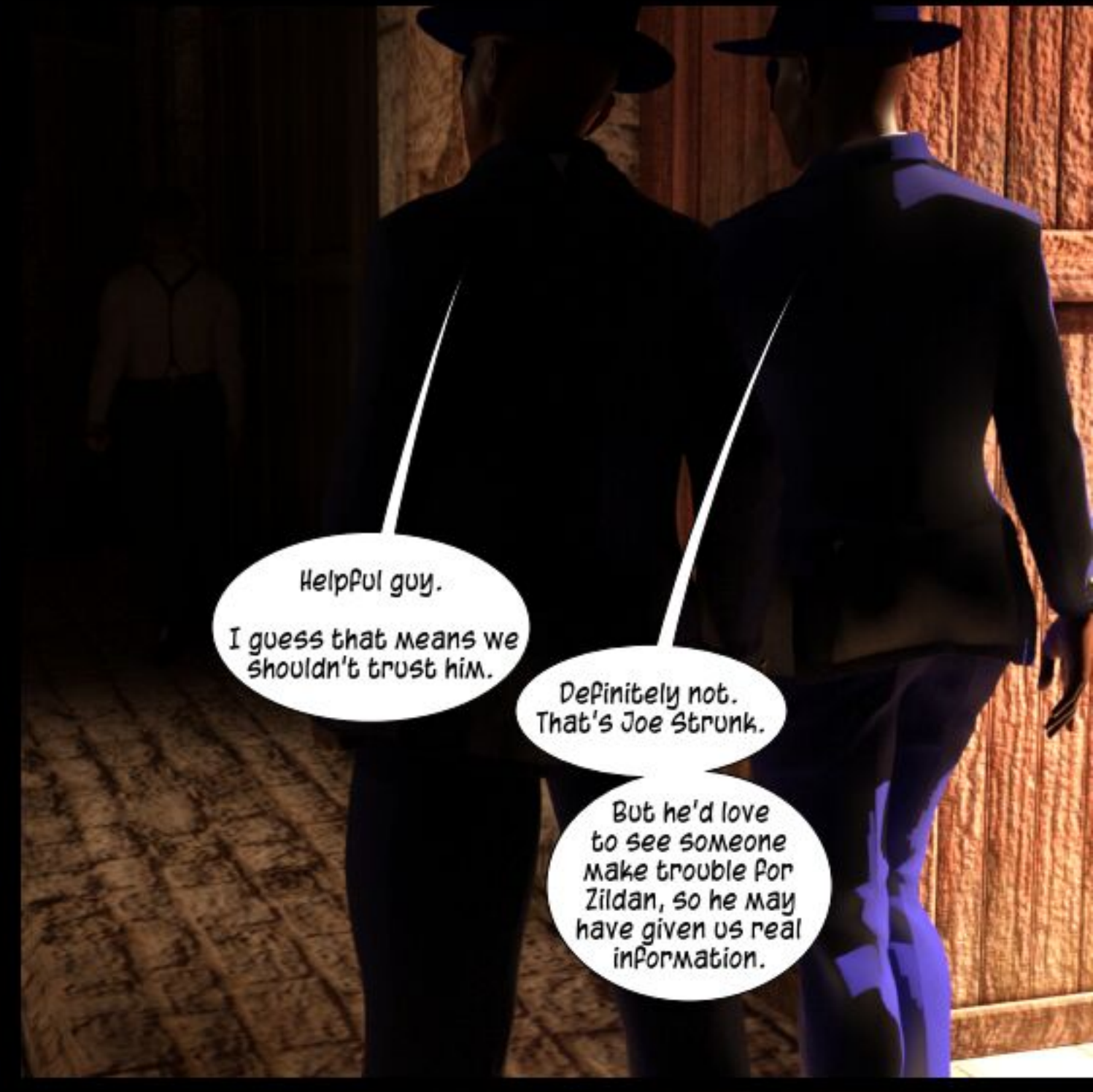
I'm ... not at liberty to say.



You've got the wrong end of the stick. You want dirt on Bianca, go talk to Percy. He's got a spy in her organization.

But you didn't hear that from me.

Nice suits, by the way.



Helpful guy.
I guess that means we shouldn't trust him.

Definitely not. That's Joe Strunk.

But he'd love to see someone make trouble for Zildan, so he may have given us real information.



Pro tip: Always go for the balls first.

Yeah, yeah.

Where'd you learn to fight, anyway?

Oh, when you start out, you get a lot of customers who won't take "go to hell" for an answer.

You never did any acting, did you?

Nope.



This was another conversation that didn't go well.



... hell, do you know what she'd do to me if she even knew I was talking to you?

I don't know anything. And whatever Percy told you was a lie. He lies a lot.

Sure. And Joe Strunk lies a lot too. But it's funny that they agree on this.

... Joe said ...?

Look, I have somewhere I have to be.

I'll think about it.

And don't you dare follow me, or you can go get pucked.



Much later that night ...



Joe?

... MPM?

Why'd you tell those two clowns in the suits about me?

HM? Oh. Go ahead and talk to them. They're trying to bust Bianca.

If they don't, and they expose me, you know I'm screwed.

Got your back if that happens. Figure it's worth a try. You want to be rid of Bianca as much as I do.

I guess. Percy'll just find something worse for me to do. He's never going to let me out from under that debt.



Don't worry about Percy. He crossed a line when he went after Bruno.

Starting tomorrow, he's going to be busy watching over his shoulder for me.

The next day.



You know, if she doesn't come through, we could be wandering around here forever.

I mean, I enjoy looking at all the merchandise here but--

--Whoa!



Sorry to have taken you by surprise. My simulations are very good, though, aren't they?

My name is Serille. These are my wares.

Though I hesitate at the plural. I only have one other just now; they are individually designed, and take a long time to make.

Would you like to see him?



I don't think he likes being in that cage.

Do you get a lot of people wanting to buy big cats? They're kind of, uh, elaborate ... Por decor.

And yet there is much demand. This is the first time in months I've had two available at once.



Are they ... I mean, cats like this aren't really meant to be pets.

And I pride myself on making them accurate. Yes.

I explain to buyers that there must be land to wander, prey to hunt ... and a very strong, very high fence.

But apparently having a tiger in your back yard is a status symbol.

I sell to them, and try not to give it more thought.



Come on! Quick!

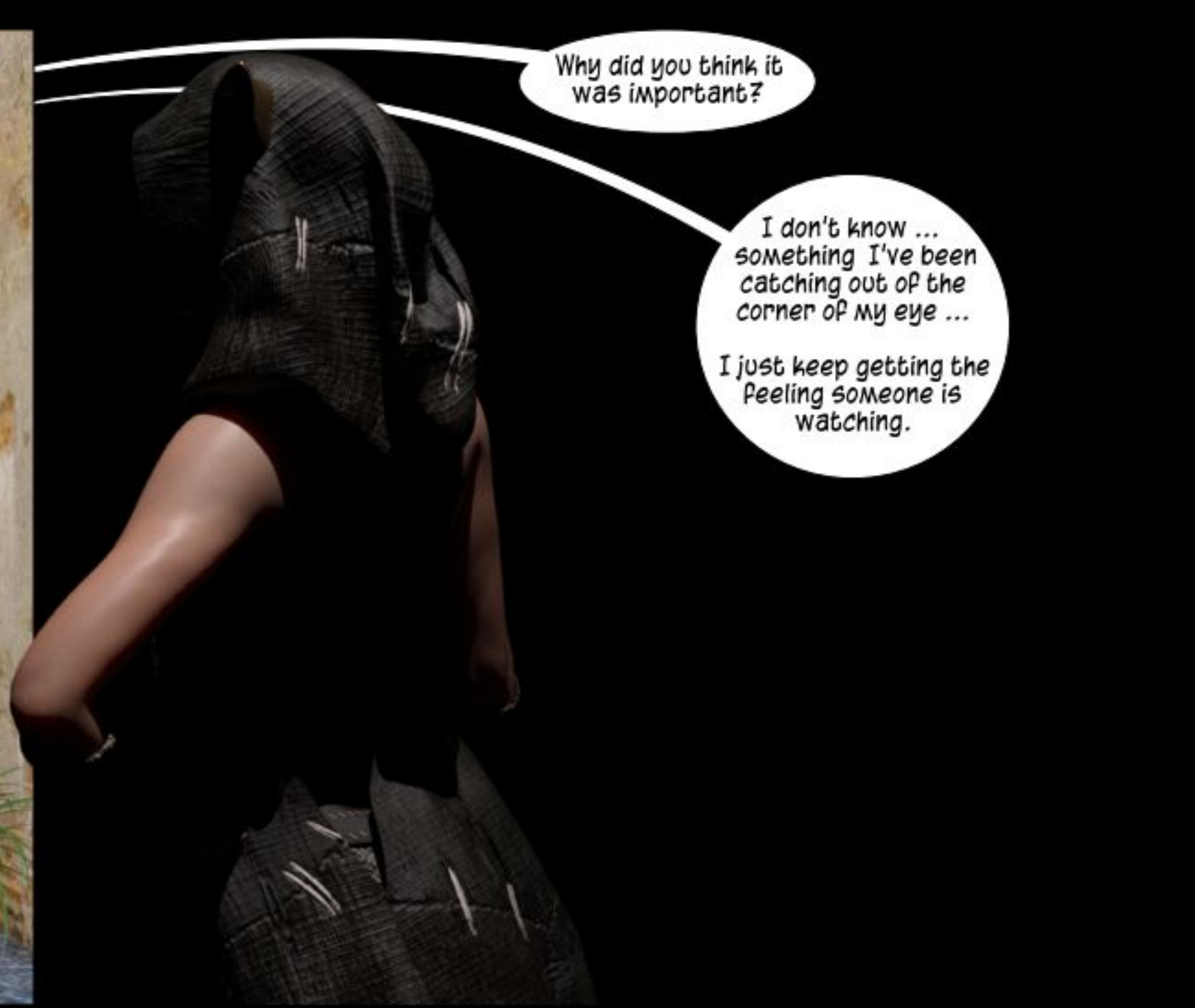
--what?

You didn't see the person walking through the back, behind the curtains? Had on a cloak and some kind of mask.

I was too busy watching the woman and the cat. I think they both wanted to eat me.

It was an exit. Daylight. They must have gone this way--
-- damn.

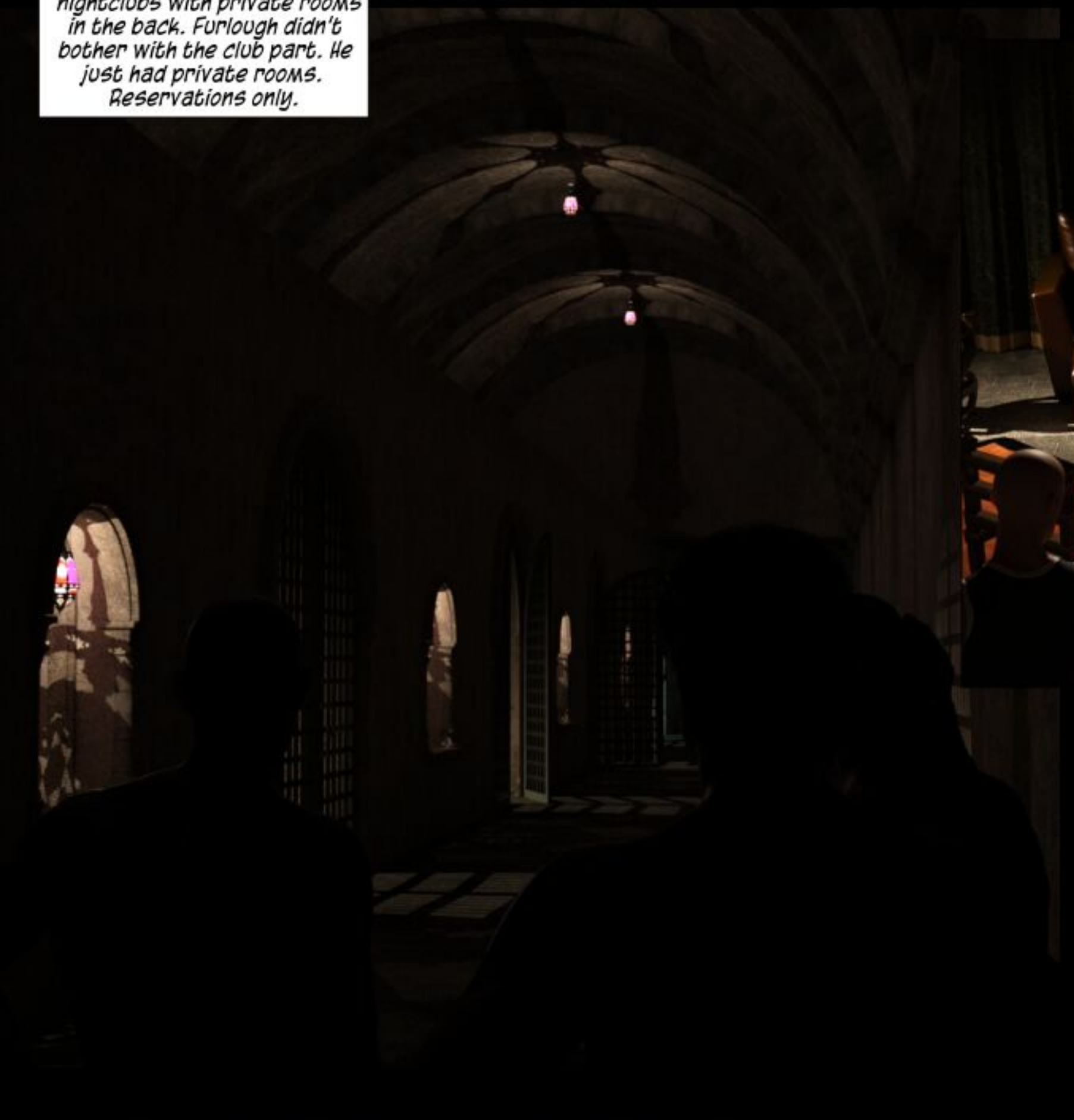
That night.
Strunk and Zildan had nightclubs with private rooms in the back. Furlough didn't bother with the club part. He just had private rooms. Reservations only.



Why did you think it was important?

I don't know ... something I've been catching out of the corner of my eye ...

I just keep getting the feeling someone is watching.



What the hell is going on out here?



How many did you get?

Seven, not counting 'Ranza. A bunch of them recalled.

All seven are OK with us taking over their debt. Guess they didn't like working for Percy much.

Can't blame them. ... Did you put her in that?

No, sir. Brought her like we found her.

Heh. OK, Pat, take a hike. Good job. I want to talk to her alone.

Esperanza! Surprised you didn't recall.

Yeah, yeah. I'd beat the shit out of you but I know you like that kind of thing.

I have a message for you to bring back. Tell Percy this is what he gets for going after my people.

And you can tell him that I'm not even close to done--

I wanted to stick around to tell you to go fuck yourself, you son of a bitch! Where do you get off pulling this crap? When Percy gets his hands on you--



--huh?



Though Gina had told us everything she knew, it wasn't enough. Zildan may very well have been a manipulator, but all we had was rumors, and we didn't have any other levers to pull.

Two days later, we were on the verge of calling this one a wash and giving up.



You Pinks! I knew I shouldn't have trusted you. What did you do with Joe?

... I have no idea what you're talking about. Is Joe missing?

You know damned well he is! No one's seen him since two nights ago!

Ms. Howard--

Gina.

We don't do that. We don't disappear people. It's not our style.



Damn it, I'm going to find him! I'll strangle them both if I have to--

You win the bet about those two.

I knew when we first talked to her and she did that double-take.

I'm astonished. About them, I mean.

Somebody for everyone. Besides, there are MUCH more obnoxious people than Joe Strunk.

I'm offering double-or-nothing on whether Bianca or Percy nuked Joe.

No bet. I'd just flip a coin, anyway.

That night.



You're too pink to wear red, Percy.

Oh, do fuck off, Bianca. I allow you in here out of courtesy, but it's clear you have no idea what that is.

So what did you do to Joe? I'm curious.

I didn't do a thing to Joe, and you know it.

Actually, I do. Just wanted to see what you'd say.

'Ranza was there. She said it was two women in masks. Didn't sound like your style. Nor mine.

But everyone thinks either I did it or you did.

Yes, I know.

I want you to focus on my face, Percy. That's right. Look straight into my eyes.

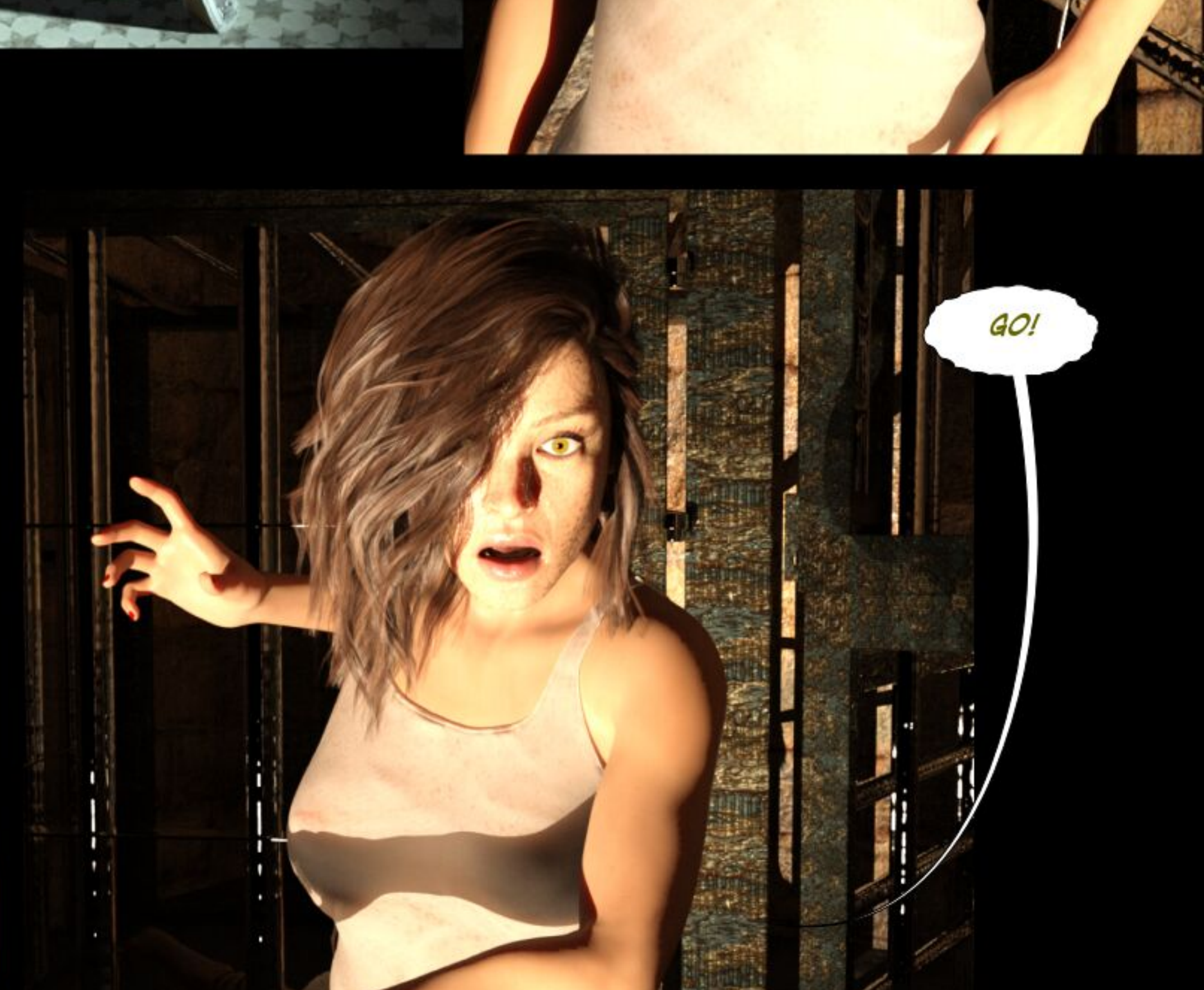
Good.

You know, I always avoided dealing with either of you because everyone would assume I'd done it. But if someone else is muddying the waters ...





Meanwhile ...



Two nights later. Or maybe three? I forget.



Hey, nice to see you again. All better after that crowbar to the Face, I hope?

We're going to talk to your boss. No need to get up.



-sigh- Fine.



FUMPH



Uh-uh. Not this time.



PHWID

Suit yourself.



You two.

BOBBY!
CHUCK!

Sorry, they can't come to the phone right now.



Damn it, I've got to find better guards.

What do you want?



Just wondered if you had any comment on the convenient disappearance of your competition. Nice to have the whole thing to yourself, huh?



Is that all?
I didn't do it. And even if I did do it you wouldn't be able to prove it. If there's even anything to prove.
Maybe they're just on a bender somewhere. Maybe they'll turn up in a few days and you'll look really stupid.
I don't care who you're working for, and I'm not scared of you. So get the hell out of my office and stop wasting my time.



We figured you'd say something like that.
... We'll be in touch.

Wait, that's really it? You barge in here just to poke me and then you leave?

Weirdos.

No, they're just patient.

-- What ...?



They are patient. They want you to know they are watching. They'll keep watching until you make a mistake. Then they'll deal with you.

I am not that patient, though.

Who are you? How did you--

I have many names. You will not need any of them.



A couple of days later. I don't know why we were making one last pass through the Souk.

I mean, Zildan's disappeared now too, so even if we stuck to our original goal ...

No, I agree. There's nothing else we can do.

You sound angry.



Not really.
A little frustrated, maybe.

I suppose I *should* be concerned about their disappearances, but they were horrible people and frankly everyone is better off if they never come back.

Still, it's annoying that we'll probably never know what actually happened to them.