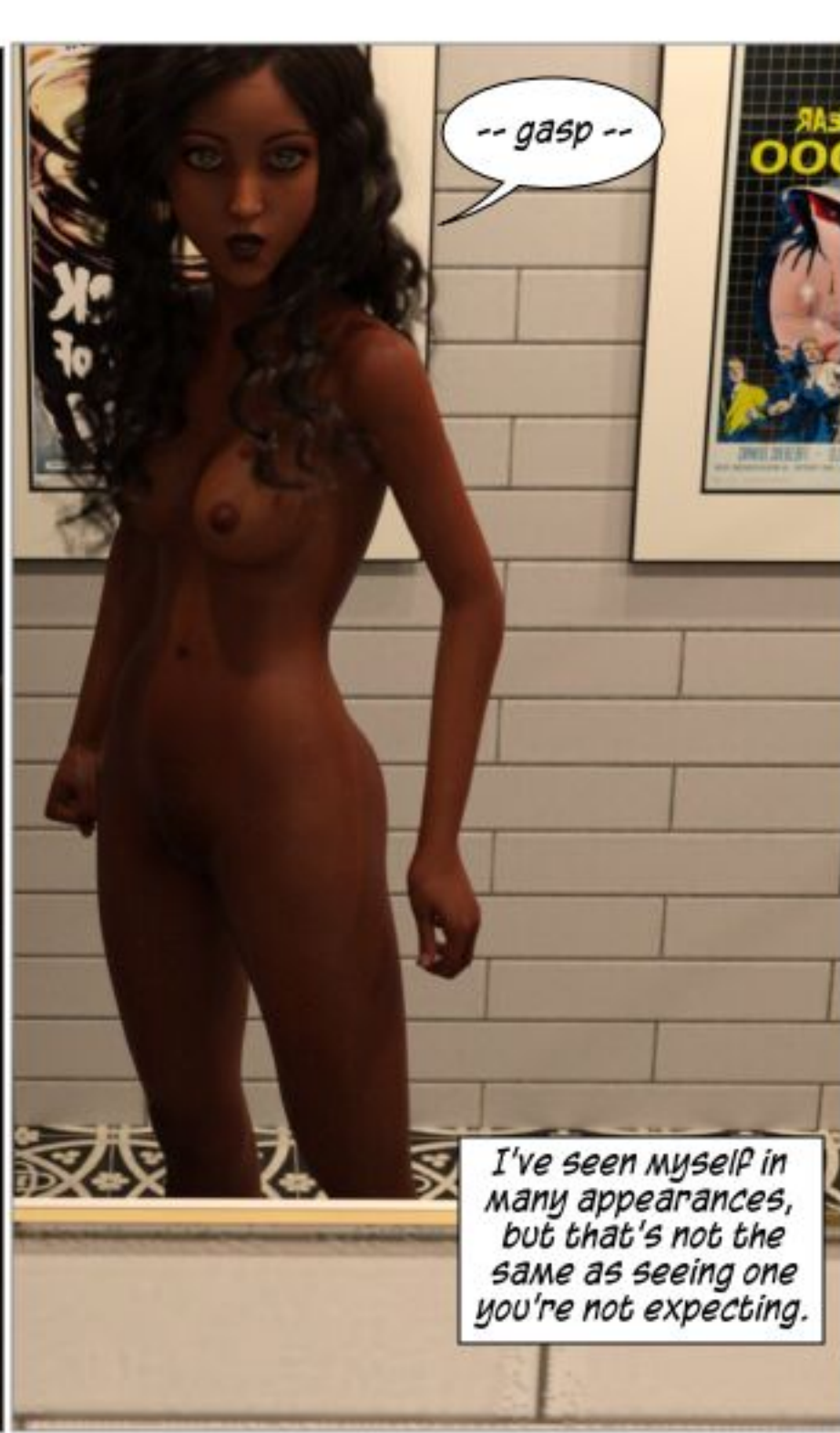


I've lived my whole life in sleep, but I do know what a toilet is. I've even been Awake long enough, once, to feel the need to use one.

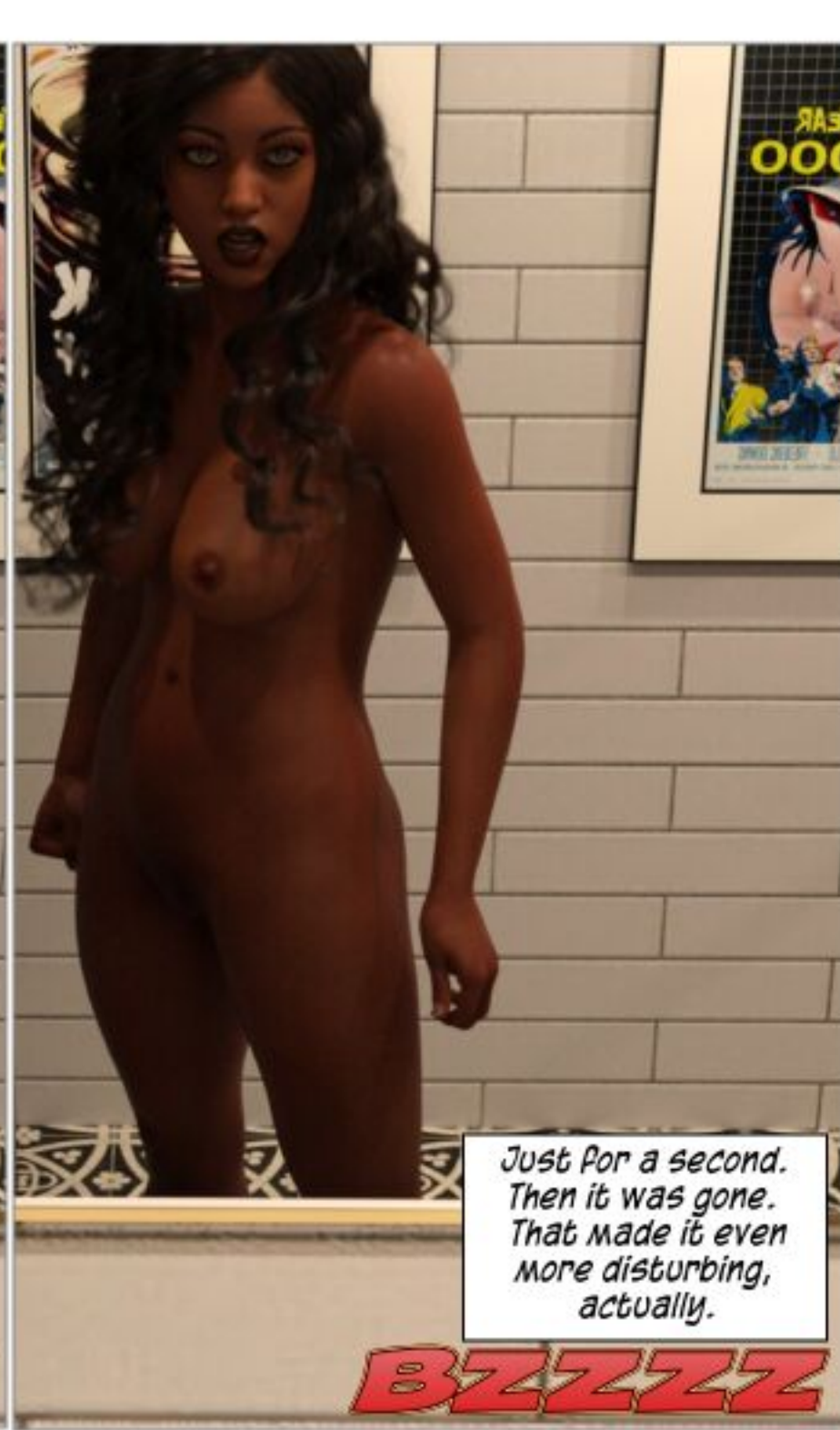
(I Preaked out. I thought something was wrong with me.)

So I don't wake up needing to pee. But I do, almost always, go straight into the bathroom to take a shower.



-- gasp --

I've seen myself in many appearances, but that's not the same as seeing one you're not expecting.



Just for a second. Then it was gone. That made it even more disturbing, actually.



--What?--

Oh, shit. Sorry, Doreen. I just got a shock.

No, I'm OK. Tell you about it when I get there. Give me twenty minutes.

BZZZZZ



Hey, Ruby! Over here!

I changed my hair. What do you think?

Ruby?

...

... OK, I get it. It's a joke. You decided to meet me as an Aiko. As a joke.

What are you talking about?

AIKOS HAVE BEEN MENTIONED SEVERAL TIMES, BUT THE BEST EXPLANATION IS NEAR THE BEGINNING OF SLEEPER SQUAD #3, IF YOU'RE CONFUSED. -T



BZZZZZ

Hang on a sec, it's Lou.

!!!

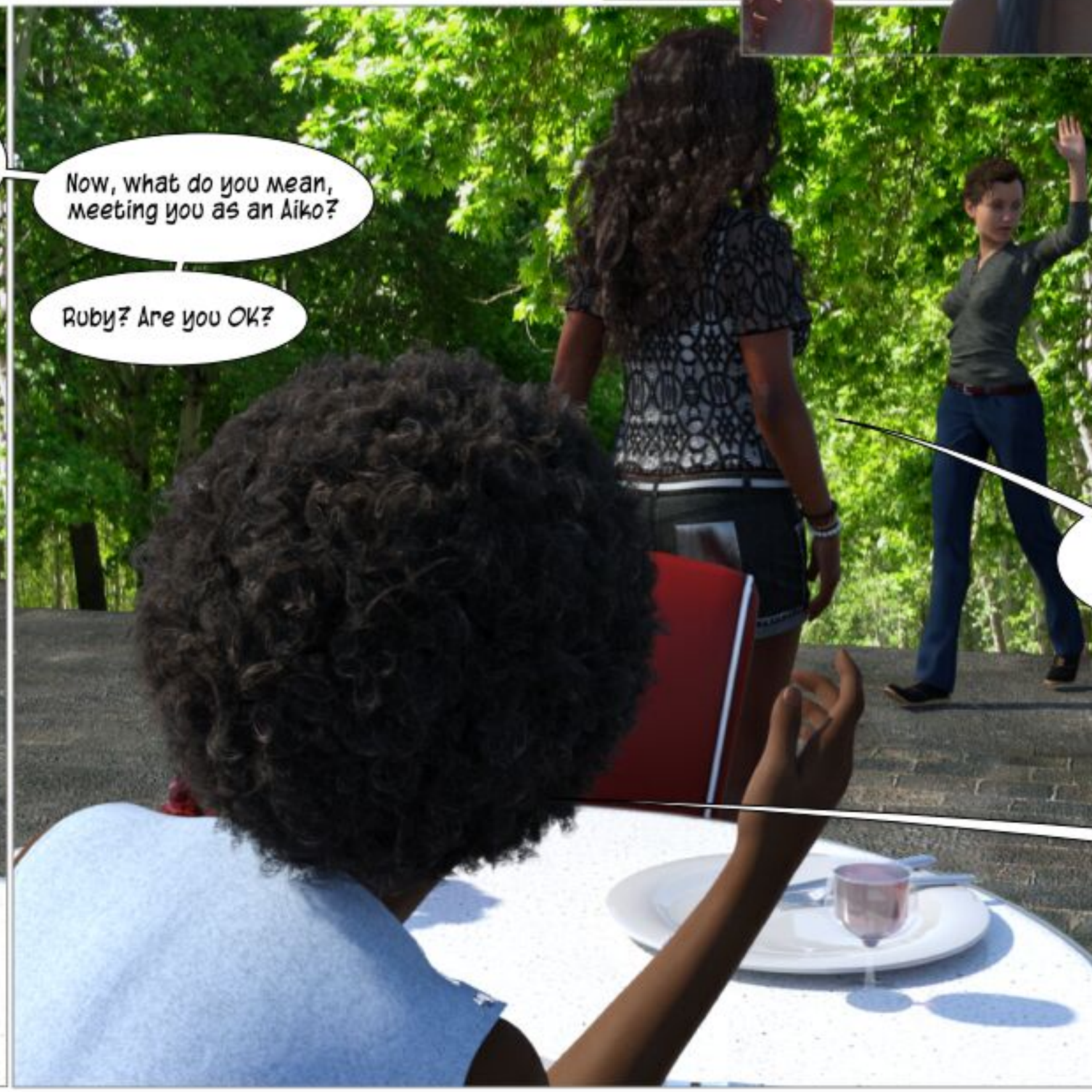


Hello? ...

... Damn it, these calls keep getting cut off. Has this been happening to you a lot too?

Now, what do you mean, meeting you as an Aiko?

Ruby? Are you OK?



... No.

I think I need to cancel on lunch, Doreen.

Wait! Can I do anything?

Sorry. I'll see you later.



Leyna?

Sorry to just come over. You didn't answer the phone.

I really need your help--

Oh, hi, Ruby.



Every time somebody calls, the phone eats it.

My robe is too big.

What are you doing here?



I--

... OK, I was going to get your help, but you've answered my question.

Can you remember how to do your recall?

Um. I'm not sure. Why?

I ... there's something really weird happening, Ruby ...

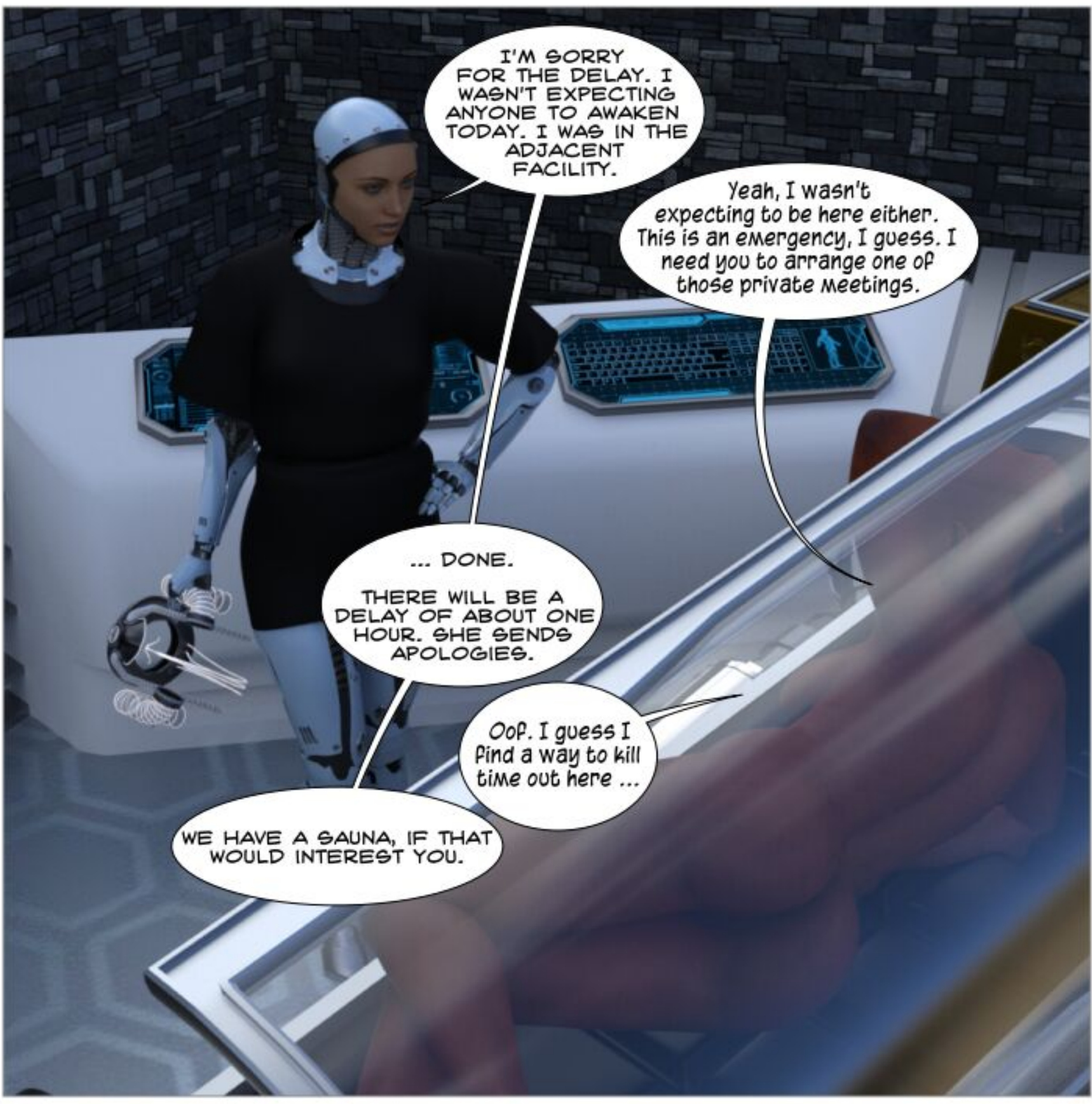
No kidding.

Recall if you can. It might help.

I have to go talk to Midnight, right away.

Do I know her?

... Oh, boy.



I'M SORRY FOR THE DELAY. I WASN'T EXPECTING ANYONE TO AWAKEN TODAY. I WAS IN THE ADJACENT FACILITY.

Yeah, I wasn't expecting to be here either. This is an emergency, I guess. I need you to arrange one of those private meetings.

... DONE. THERE WILL BE A DELAY OF ABOUT ONE HOUR. SHE SENDS APOLOGIES.

Oop. I guess I find a way to kill time out here ...

WE HAVE A SAUNA, IF THAT WOULD INTEREST YOU.



PARDON MY REMOVING MY GARMENT. IT GETS DAMP.

You're supposed to be nude in a sauna anyway, right?

Why did you have to go into the next facility? I assumed bedders weren't allowed to leave their posts, or something like that.

YES, THOUGH IN PRACTICE, AS LONG AS WE MAINTAIN REASONABLE RESPONSE TIME IT'S TOLERATED. THERE IS VERY LITTLE TO DO HERE.

3V3 AND L12 ARE NEAR ENOUGH THAT THE THREE OF US CAN PAY SOCIAL VISITS TO ONE ANOTHER.

Oh! Well, I'm glad to hear you have company out here.

WE DON'T ACTUALLY DO A LOT OF TALKING. THESE BODIES HAVE A COMPLETE RANGE OF SEXUAL RESPONSE.

If you don't mind my asking, what kinds of things do you talk about?

Wait, are you saying I interrupted your sex life? Now I feel guilty.

DON'T. THIS IS MY JOB. ALSO, THE THREE OF US HAVE AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES. MISSING ONE WON'T HURT.

The better part of an hour and one refreshing cold shower later, I met with Midnight in ...



A laundry room?

I like to keep you on your toes. Besides, this reflects my mood accurately.

I gather you're here about the chaos. Where's Leyna?

I'm relieved you're confirming it's actual chaos, and not me losing my mind.

Leyna's fallen into the chaos. You probably need to do an interrupt. She wasn't sure she could remember her recall.

Do you have any idea who's doing this?

None, nor how it's being done, which is the more important question. Manipulation on this scale isn't just "impossible without very high access." It's supposed to be impossible, period. Someone has figured out a new trick.

I don't suppose there's anyone else you can tap for help on this? I'm out of my depth with the systems stuff. I do better with people.

Exactly the opposite of Leyna. I'll see if I can get her functional again. But I don't think you can wait for that. This is already spreading dangerously.



This worries me enough that I'm risking direct involvement, though not from the same direction as you. Whatever this is, it required high-level access. That only comes from a limited number of places. I'll work from that approach.

You try to find them on the ground, as it were.

Oh, but I'm already out of ideas and I haven't started. If you can't figure out how this new trick is done, then I sure can't.

I need someone with ...

Oh. Wait.

Um. I have what's probably a horrible thought. I'm going to need you to break some access rules.



There are unused private spaces all over sleep. I have some myself. Sets for scenarios I may use again, for example.

Space is almost infinite--you have to use an awful lot before it drives up your bed fees. So people leave things lying around.

The designed-to-be-decrepit greenhouse Midnight directed me to had surely been a set. Hopefully it had been for something clean, because it didn't look like a comfortable place to have sex.

It wasn't what I was expecting. Also, it was empty. But ...

There's something about this inner door ...



Ah, that's more like it.



Oh, my.

You must have really pulled some strings to get in here. You should be careful. Favors like that always carry a high cost.

Since you're not here to drag me off, what do you want?

How do you know I'm not?

You'd have brought your tall friend with you. Unless she's lurking in the shadows somewhere. No? Well, then.



Come in here where there's somewhere to sit.

Mind your head and feet. The rooms are mismatched.



Nice background.

I need to have something to stare at.

Bring the chair over from the desk if you don't want to sit on the bed.

People all over A4 are turning into Aikos. Do you know what those are?

Of course. It's amusing that's the default. I don't imagine they have much personality.

It's affecting their memories. They're forgetting they aren't really Aikos. A4 is about to be fucked.

Manipulation without consent is supposed to need some in-person interaction. Or so I'm told.



Oh, so you're interested in "how," not "why." You might be pursuing the wrong question.

"How" comes first. Then I'll think about "why." This isn't supposed to be possible.

It's not only possible, it's simple. You're just not thinking it through. All you need is a way to send messages directly to people's heads. You don't have to be in the same room for that.

There's a system in Sleep that already has that ability. And because of what it is, most people listen to anything it tells them.



And the phones have been acting strange for days ... those cut-off calls ...

But that would take--

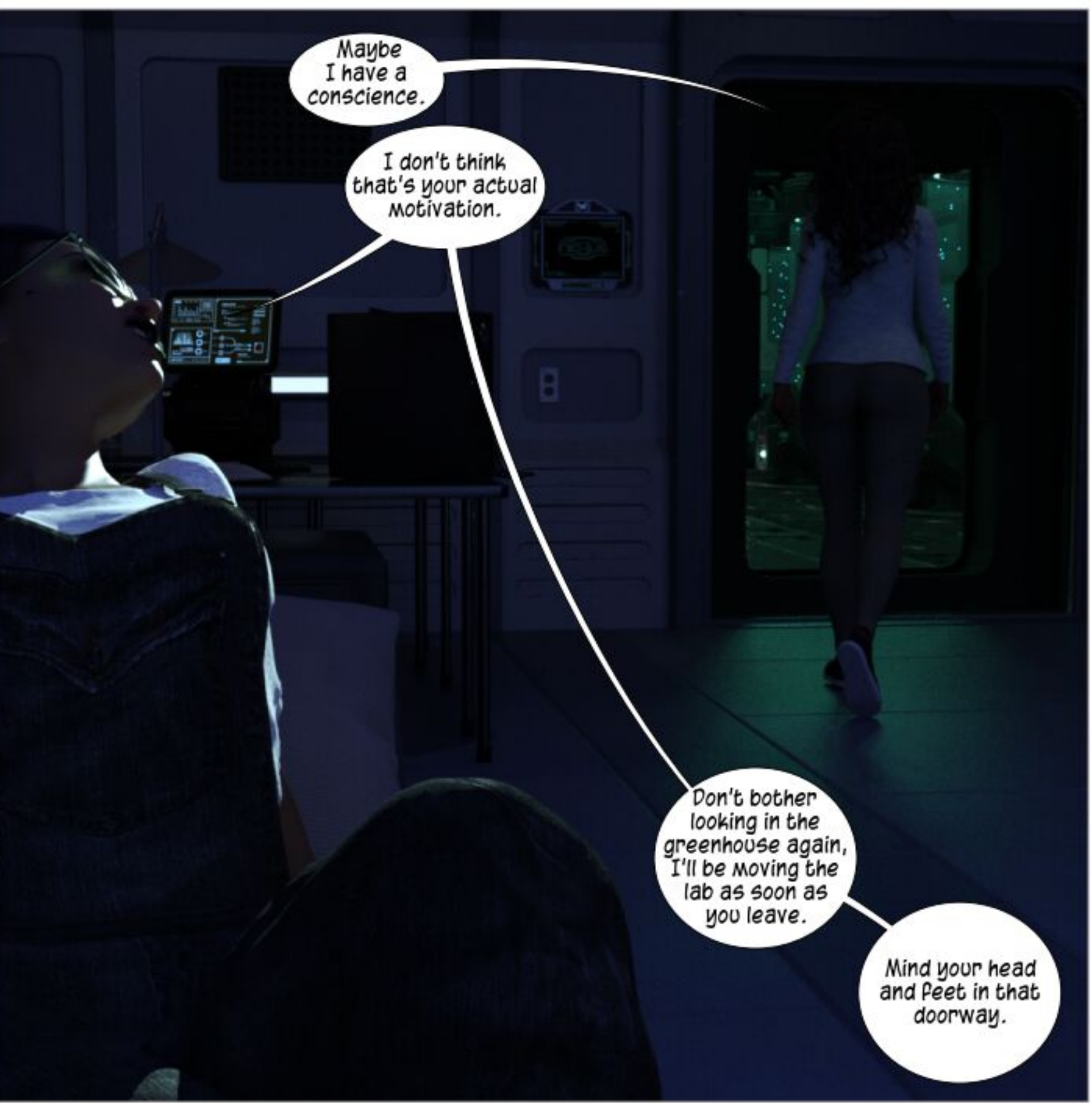
--Mischief at a very high level. Yes. That's why I say "why" is the more important question.

... Look, I know this isn't ... I need some help. I don't guess you'd want to declare a truce long enough to help me fix this?

You know, I'm curious what makes you feel this is your responsibility to fix. Has someone in a high position handed you this task? Is this your job? Why don't they fix it themselves, with the better resources they have?

You're too smart to let yourself be manipulated like this.

Anyway, it's certainly not my problem. I don't care if all of A4 is Aikos. I've already told you, wandering around with no purpose and no brain is what Sleep is steering everyone toward anyway.



Maybe I have a conscience.

I don't think that's your actual motivation.

Don't bother looking in the greenhouse again, I'll be moving the lab as soon as you leave.

Mind your head and feet in that doorway.



I didn't waste any time. I recalled straight from there, then went Awake, and asked Sue to set up a meeting with Midnight ASAP.

Midnight was available immediately, so clearly I wasn't the only one feeling a sense of urgency.

The laundry room didn't last long.

Too depressing. Even for my mood. Three of the big Barkers aren't responding. I hope you have something.

It's the phones. These phone calls that are getting cut off are actually sending messages to the victims. I've had a bunch of cut-off calls myself. I'm not sure how I'm intact.

I knew my dislike of the telephone would work in my favor one day.

You shake things off fast. It's one reason why you're the only one who can continue this.

No Leyna?

I pulled her out of Sleep. She thanked me, went back in again--and I've heard nothing else. If these phone messages are reinforcing whatever this is, though ...

Right. All she'd need to do is answer a couple more of the bad calls, and she'd revert, I bet. And they look like real calls, too. I think they happen when someone's actually trying to reach you.

They think you're not answering, and meanwhile you get brainwashed. Sneaky as hell.

And not something just anyone has the reach, much less the ability, to do. You're going to have to go find Monica Barker.

Why her in particular?

Because she controls the phone system. She and Nathaniel originated it. Nathaniel was cut out, because she was ... well, you've seen what she gets up to.*

* RUBY HAS NOT YET MET MONICA BARKER, BUT YOU HAVE, IF YOU'VE READ SLEEPER SQUAD #3/4. MONICA'S SISTER NATHANIEL WAS REVEALED AS THE VILLAIN IN THOSE ISSUES. HER WHEREABOUTS ARE CURRENTLY UNKNOWN. -T

Approach Monica with care. I wouldn't have listed her among the bad ones, but she's prickly, and there's a wild streak in that part of the family tree.

Meanwhile ...

Josiah Barker, the senior Barker in A4 in several senses of the word, also doesn't care much for the phone. But he likes it better than having to go someplace in person.

Can't get a call through ... have to come all the way to this miserable place ... why he likes it here I don't know ... I'm going to give him a piece of my mind ...



MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE.



THE SYSTEM HAS FAILED US. WE ARE PUPPETS OF THE POWERFUL, BUT THERE IS A GLITCH IN THE SYSTEM, THE PUPPETS WILL FIGHT BACK.

That sounds like a threat.
I'm not intimidated by a hologram with a manifesto.



OF COURSE NOT.

WHAT ABOUT AN ARMY THOUGH?

GET HIM!



I have a theory that you can tell things about a person by which common space they choose to hook their personal space to. Of course, some people don't hook to a common space at all. And some like to move around. Those choices give me information too.

A lot of the commons are just variations on "urban streets," but the "shibuya" area ... well, put it this way: historically, most of the people in A4 are not from an Asian culture. And these streets are a mishmash of Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean... In other words, completely Pake. As Pake as the souk.

I was a little surprised Monica Barker would locate here. But I was definitely getting warmer. Everyone I saw on the streets was an Aiko, and, worse, they'd all completely standardized--same clothes, same hair, same blank faces. It was unnerving.



Also, the address I'd been given had two Aikos who were clearly standing guard. I paused to consider my approach.

I hope you're not considering a physical assault. There's a better way.



... What?

Where'd you come from? And I thought it wasn't your problem?

I decided to pursue a different theory.

And Monica Barker controls the phones, so you'd start here, because you're not stupid.

Good to know. What's the better way?



"They're blanks. They think they're--what would you call them? stand-ins. Extras. They've been told they're playing guards. We just have to convince them to switch to a new role."



That shouldn't have worked. Maybe for you, but not me. I told her that her new gig was to walk around the streets trying to remember and use her recall.

One of these days you're going to be forced to examine the data you are refusing to contemplate.

Incidentally, I told mine she was a chicken.

That explains her posture as she left.

Also the clucking.



There are conclusions to be drawn from a person adopting symbology of a culture not their own--

Ssh. I hear someone moving in that room over there, behind the screen.



Oh! I didn't hear you come in. Who are you? What do you want?

Ms. Barker? We need to talk to you about the phones.

Of course you do. But not to me.

You need to talk to the person responsible.

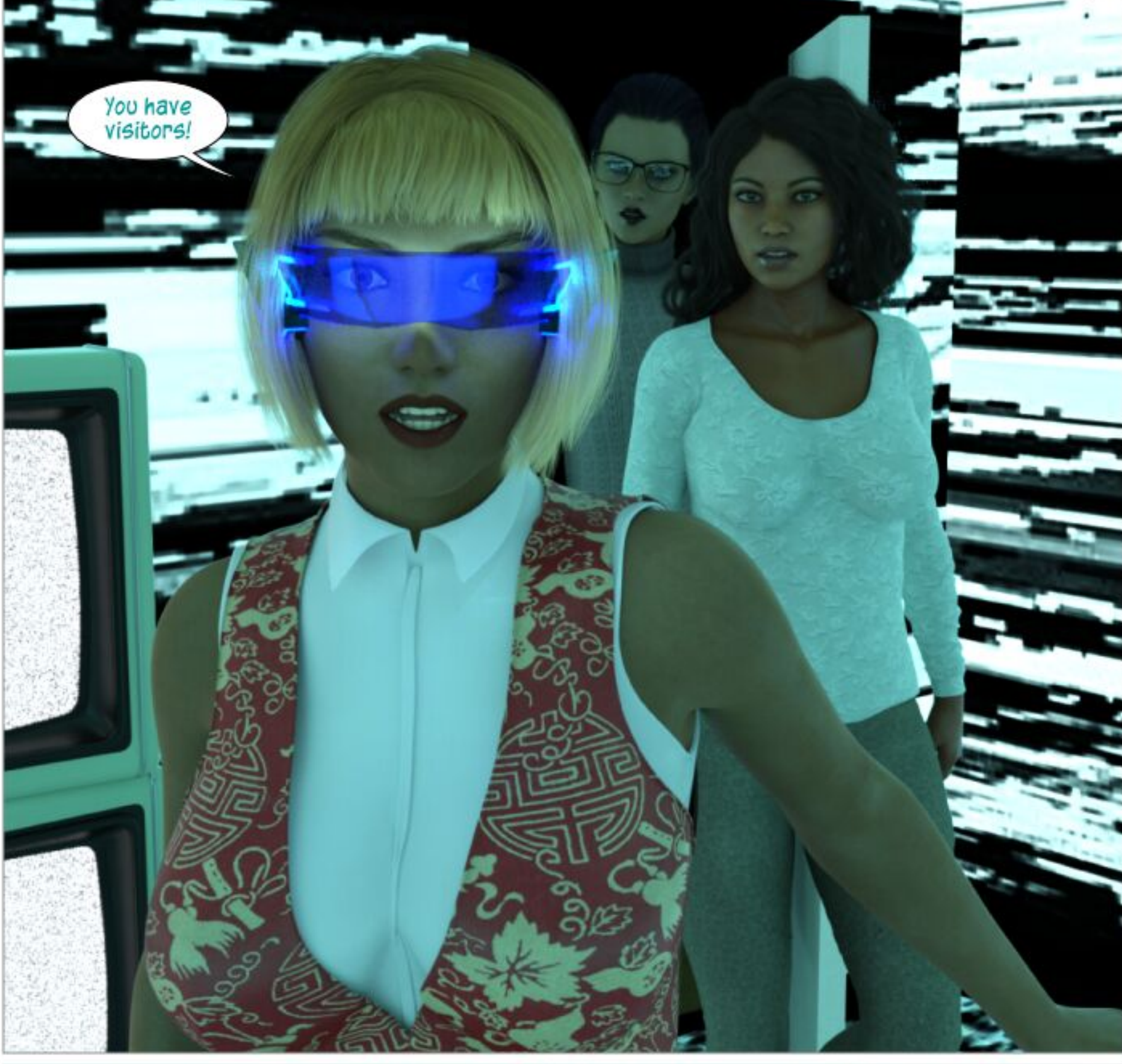
Follow me.

Well, this seems completely not suspicious.

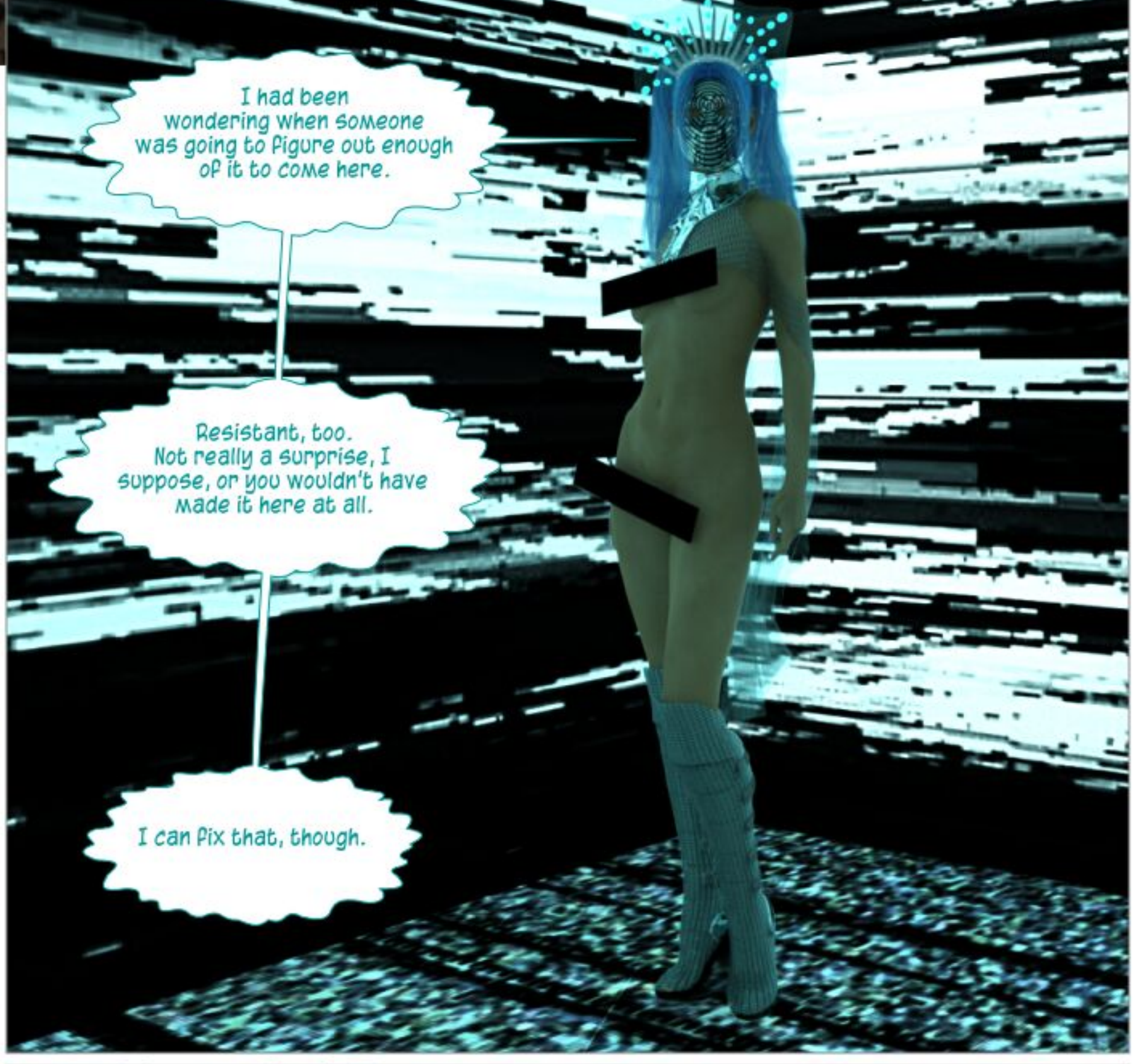
What gave it away?

But I see we're following her, nonetheless.

If it really is someone else, this is likely our only chance to find out who.



You have visitors!



I had been wondering when someone was going to figure out enough of it to come here.

Resistant, too. Not really a surprise, I suppose, or you wouldn't have made it here at all.

I can fix that, though.



How do you think she keeps those bars on? Glue? Hidden nipple clamps?

I could write several psychology papers on that outfit.



Make your jokes. The lights and the mask have a purpose.

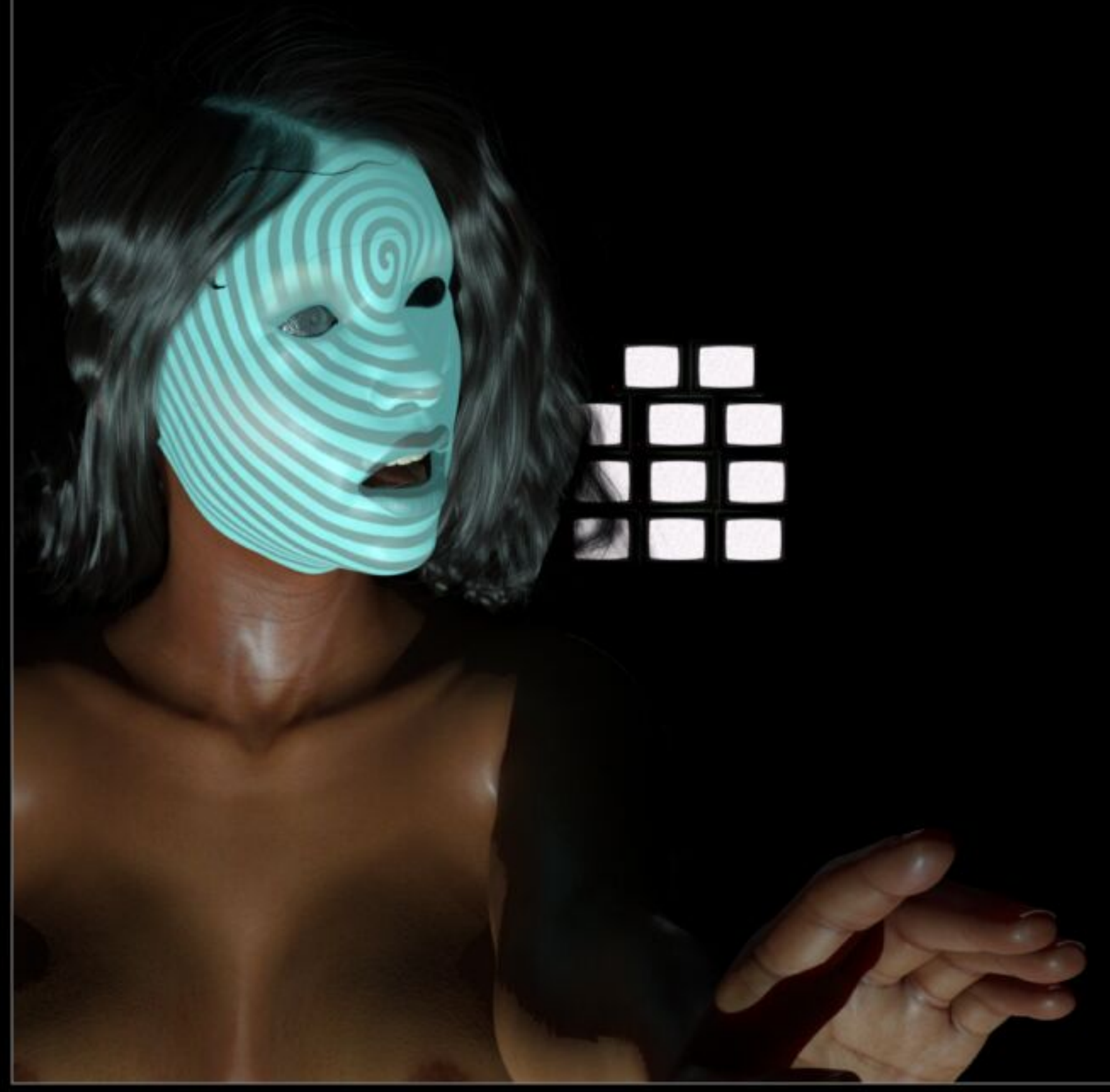
No one can be around me without being affected by them.

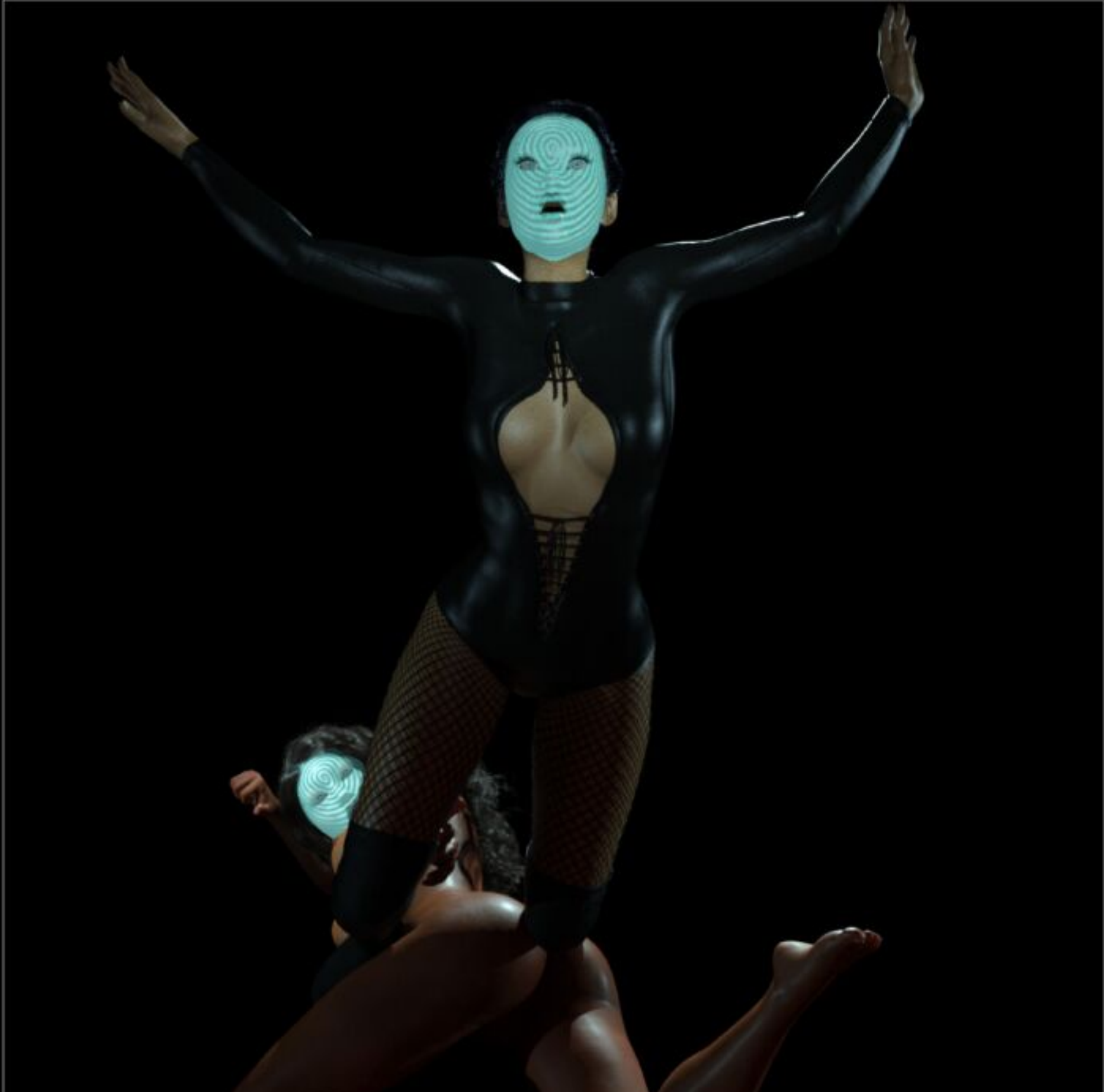


You see? It's too late already.



And now you won't bother me again.







That was unexpected.

That's why I did it.

Seems like that's usually the Pastest way out: break the script.

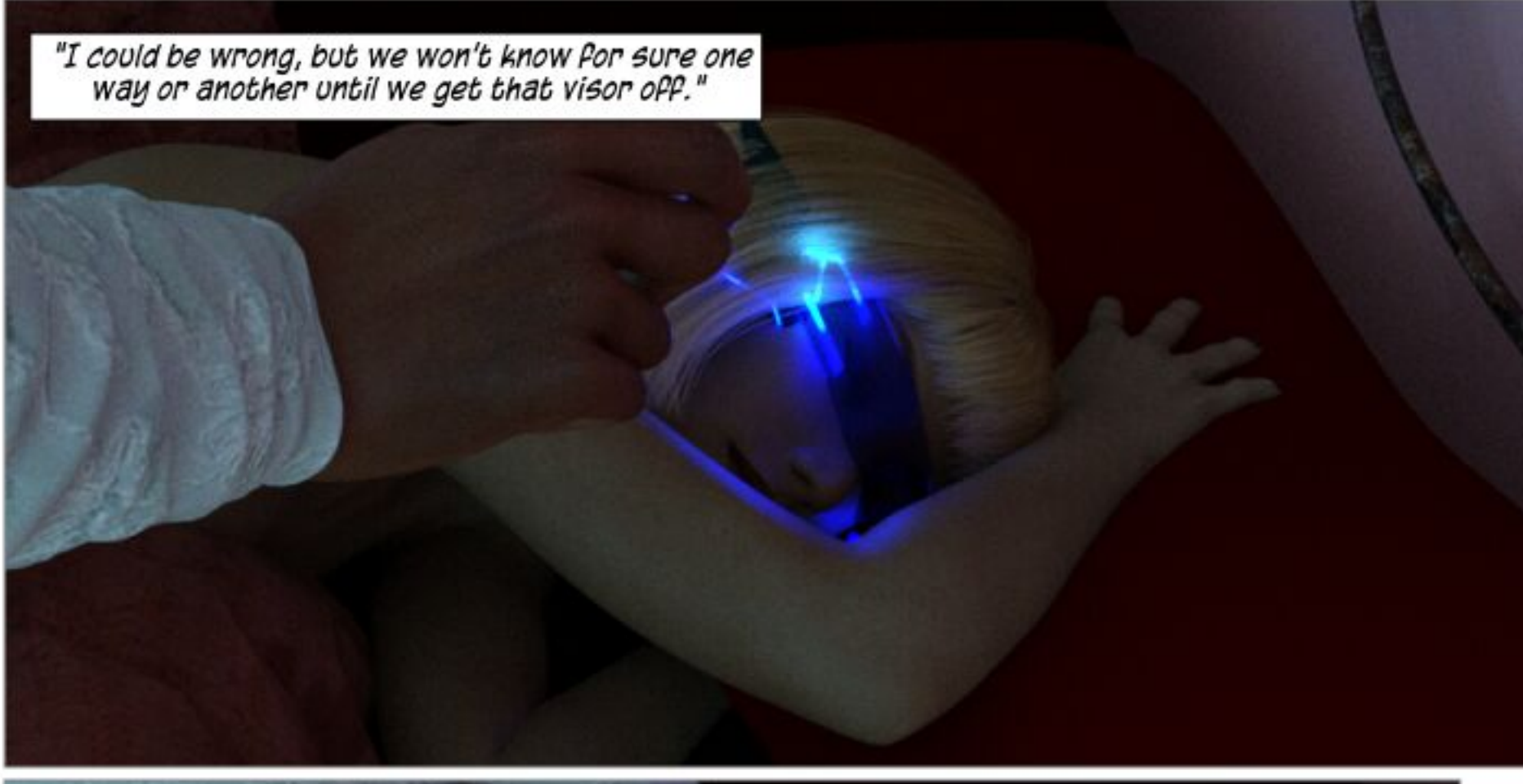
Are you going to claim that's the only reason you did it?

No. It was fun, too. But don't get ideas.

Look, this person has got to be Nathaniel, Monica's sister. It's pretty much the same stuff she pulled last time.*

I don't think Monica is actually cooperating with Nathaniel. They're like us: not really friends.

* SLEEPER SQUAD #3/4 -T



"I could be wrong, but we won't know for sure one way or another until we get that visor off."



AAGH!

Who-- what-- No!

What are you doing? Don't--

Oh. Oh, god.



You were sheltering her?

Not exactly, I just didn't go looking. I figured as long as she stayed quiet, didn't do anything--

And then she showed up one day and slapped that thing onto my head.

You have to undo the phone effects.

I can't.

Look, Nat's a genius in her way. I'm not sure I would have been able to do what she did even if she had told me what she was doing.

But it doesn't matter. The effects don't persist. She has to keep reinforcing them, or they fade. In a few days everything will be back to normal.

And I can lock her out from sending more, but ... that's not the whole solution.

I have a really good guess. I mean, really good.

No, it isn't. We have to stop her. Do you know where she is?

And can we trust you? I mean, I know you're not happy with her, but she is your sister.

If you knew about us, you wouldn't-- --sigh-- It's a long story.

Look, I'm giving you all I have. I'm not leaving here, and I'm not letting Nat near me. I won't help you get her, but I'm also not getting in your way.



Are you still in? Not bored yet?

Do I look like the kind of person who leaves before the last act?

Good, because I need something. I know you know how to make loop scenarios.

I've only done it once and that one was special.*

You want Nathaniel stuck in a loop.

No, I want Nathaniel to never make people into zombies, cultists, or Aikos ever again.

But looping is probably the best I'll get.

Yet you objected to my lab rats.

They didn't deserve to be turned into rats!

That's arguable.

* TO JULIA GREENE, IN SS #1 -T



You could just turn her over to the Barkers, you know. They won't be pleased with her.

And one of them would retrieve her the next time they thought she'd be useful for a power grab.

In this case, your motivations are a lot closer to mine than the Barkers.

I'm touched.

What are we going to do about her loop field? There's no point to any of this if we land back in her limbo every time we approach.

I have an idea about that. You'll be thrilled to know it requires me to trust you.

Oh, I am touched. Also intrigued.

I need a little time to work on this. When shall we two meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or-- Let's say midnight.



The meeting is called to order.

I'll go around the table.

Josiah seems to not be present at the moment, so I'll vote on his behalf as proxy.

Ezekiel isn't Ezekiel anymore and is thus ineligible to vote.

But don't Peel bad; in your case, becoming an Aiko has probably made you more intelligent.

Monica has already assigned me her vote by proxy.

Hamilton has also vacated his identity and is ineligible.

But you always did want to be an actor, Ham. I'm sure we can find some good roles for you.

Brendan has vacated his identity as well.

I bet you'd love being an Aiko, though, if you were aware enough to realize it.

Shame your dad can't see you now, eh?

Pauline seems to be hiding, as is Serene. I'll find the two of them later.

At any rate, if they're not here, they can't vote.

And Lucius.

I'm sorry. But I couldn't really leave you out, could I?

So. Apparently I'm the only one here who can make any decisions at this time.

What a refreshing change of pace.

I think the first order of business is transfer of assets--

Before you do that, I have an agenda item.



You claim you're the glitch in the system.

Well, I'm the ghost in the machine. And I'm here to haunt you.

It was a good scheme, Nathaniel. Congratulations. But now it's time to stop.

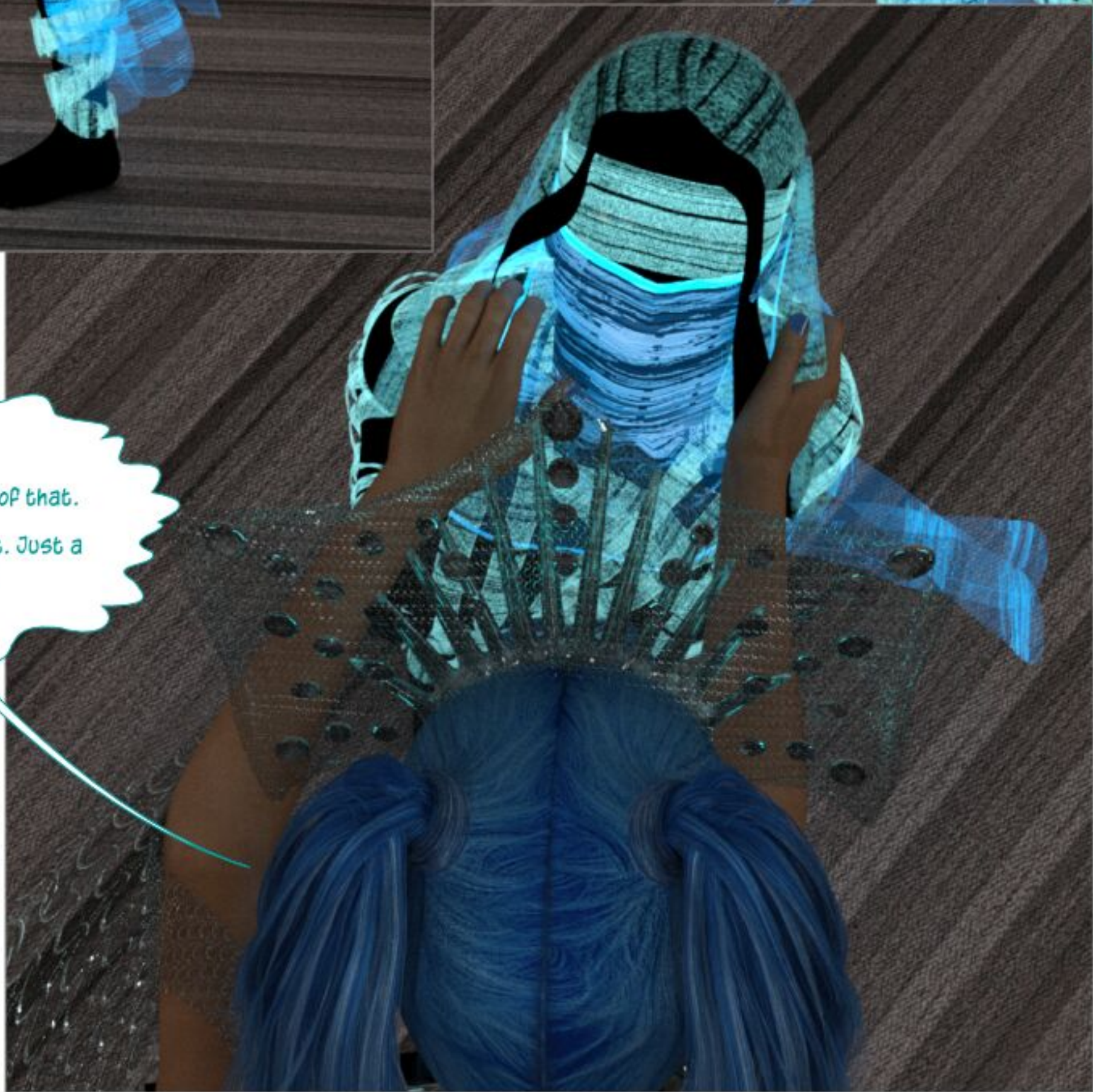


Stop? When I've finally succeeded? When I can give them what they deserve at last?

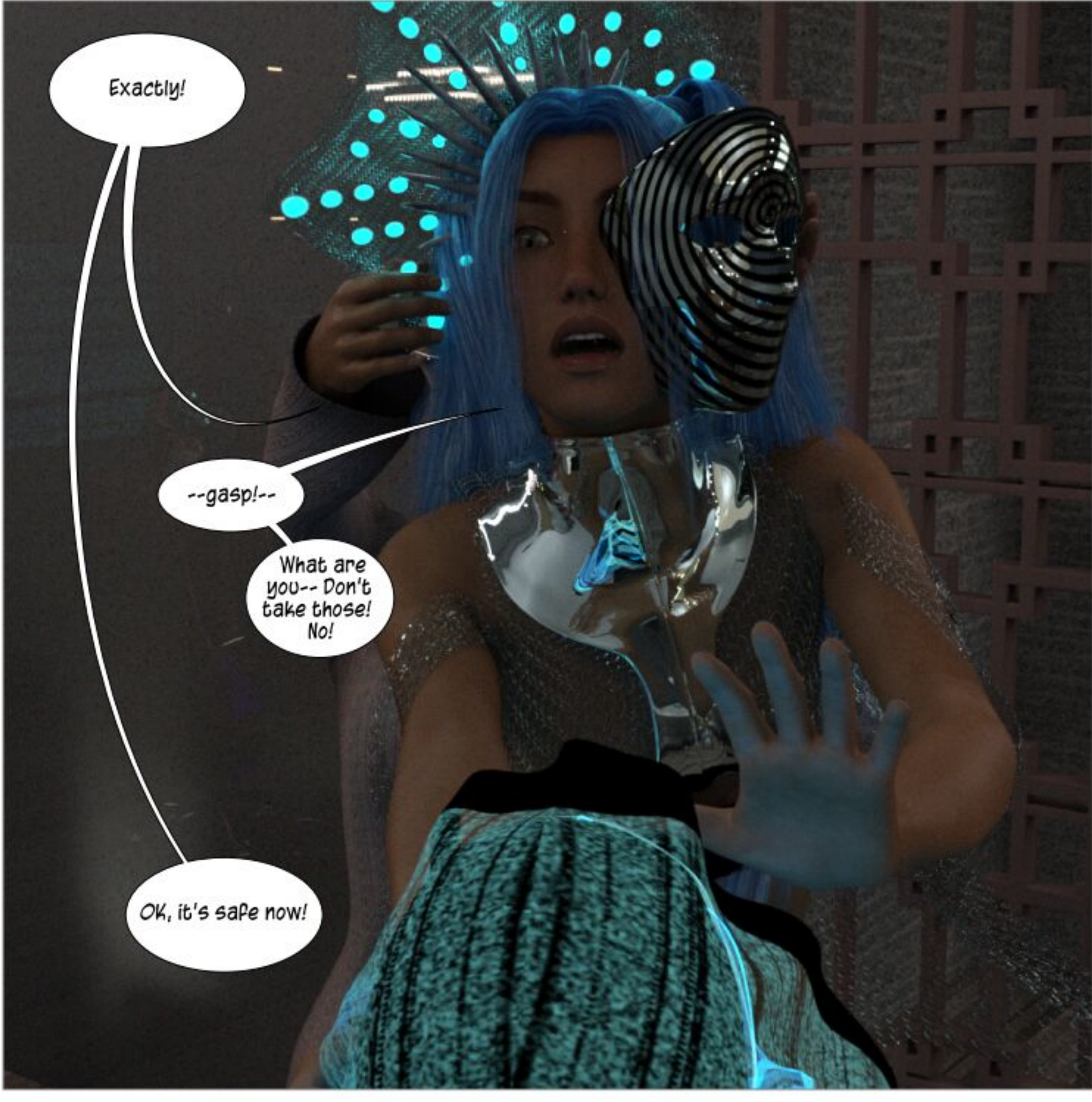
I won't. And you're not going to stop me. All you need to do is look at me--

Looking at ya now, Nat. I'd tell you what I see, but you'd probably be offended.

You're not even facing my direction, you're--



Blindfolded!
Clever. But we can easily get rid of that. You see, you're not really a threat. Just a momentary distraction.



Exactly!

--gasp!--

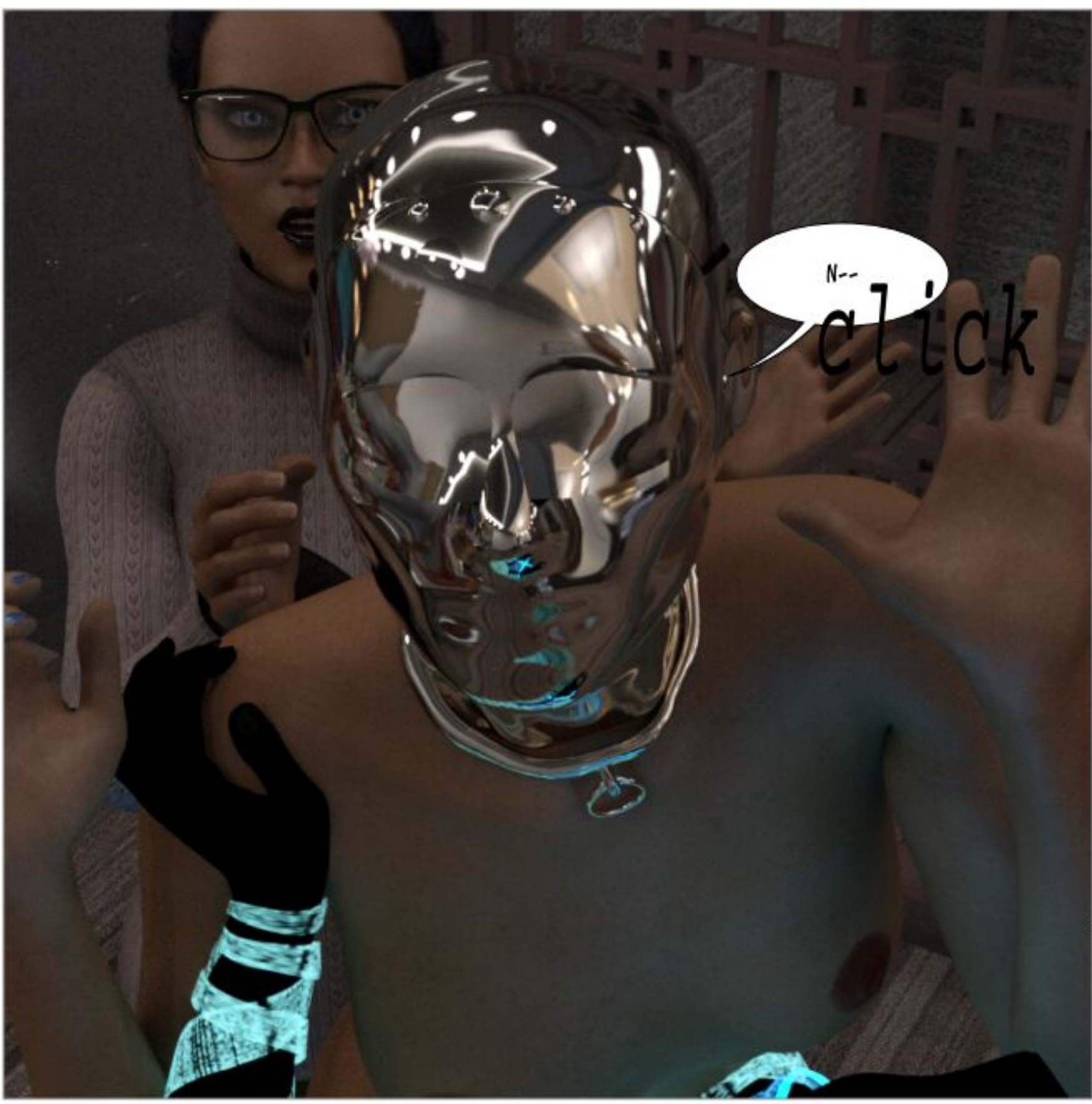
What are you-- Don't take those! No!

OK, it's safe now!



Noooo!

I've got her! Quick!



N--
click



The sensory deprivation will make the loop harder to break. And the lock will make it hard for someone else to remove.

You'd probably be able to get out of it.

Shame her things disappeared. I would have liked to have studied that headdress and mask.

I bet.

... urgh ...

Josiah's coming out of it. We need to vanish.

Thorough. For a moment I was worried you'd made a second one to put on me.



-oof-
I should have brought a wheelbarrow or something.

I find it very interesting that you didn't want Josiah Barker to see you, even in a fairly thorough disguise.

Speaking of which, could you remove that shadow effect? It's disturbing not to be able to see your facial features.

Oh, yeah. Sorry. It just seemed like a good precaution to take. Not being seen, I mean.

But a precaution against what?

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: sooner or later you will have to ask yourself several questions you're obviously avoiding.

I hope you'll have done that by the next time we meet. I look forward to seeing the results.



And with that, she vanished. Recalled. Gone.



--sigh--

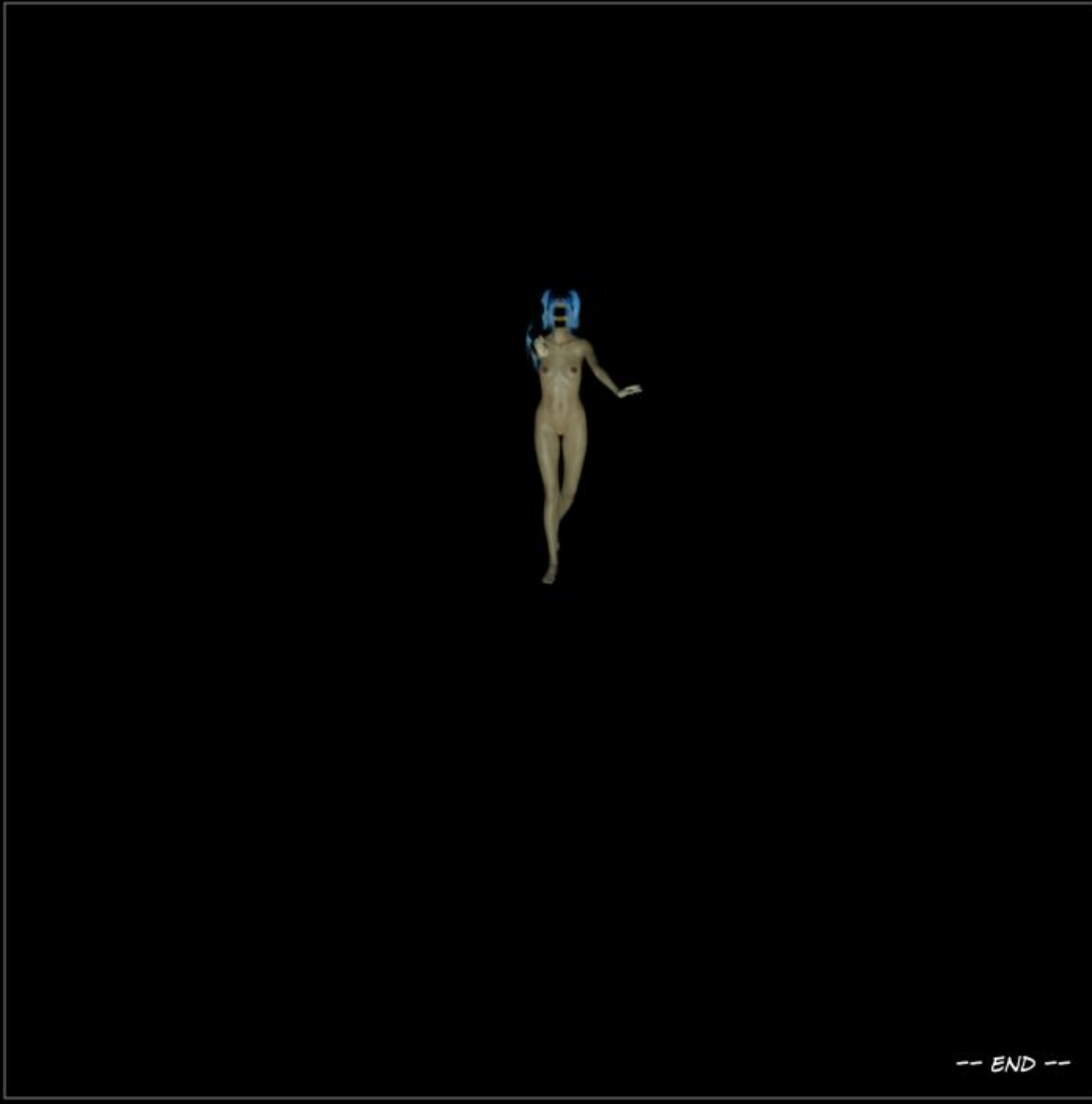
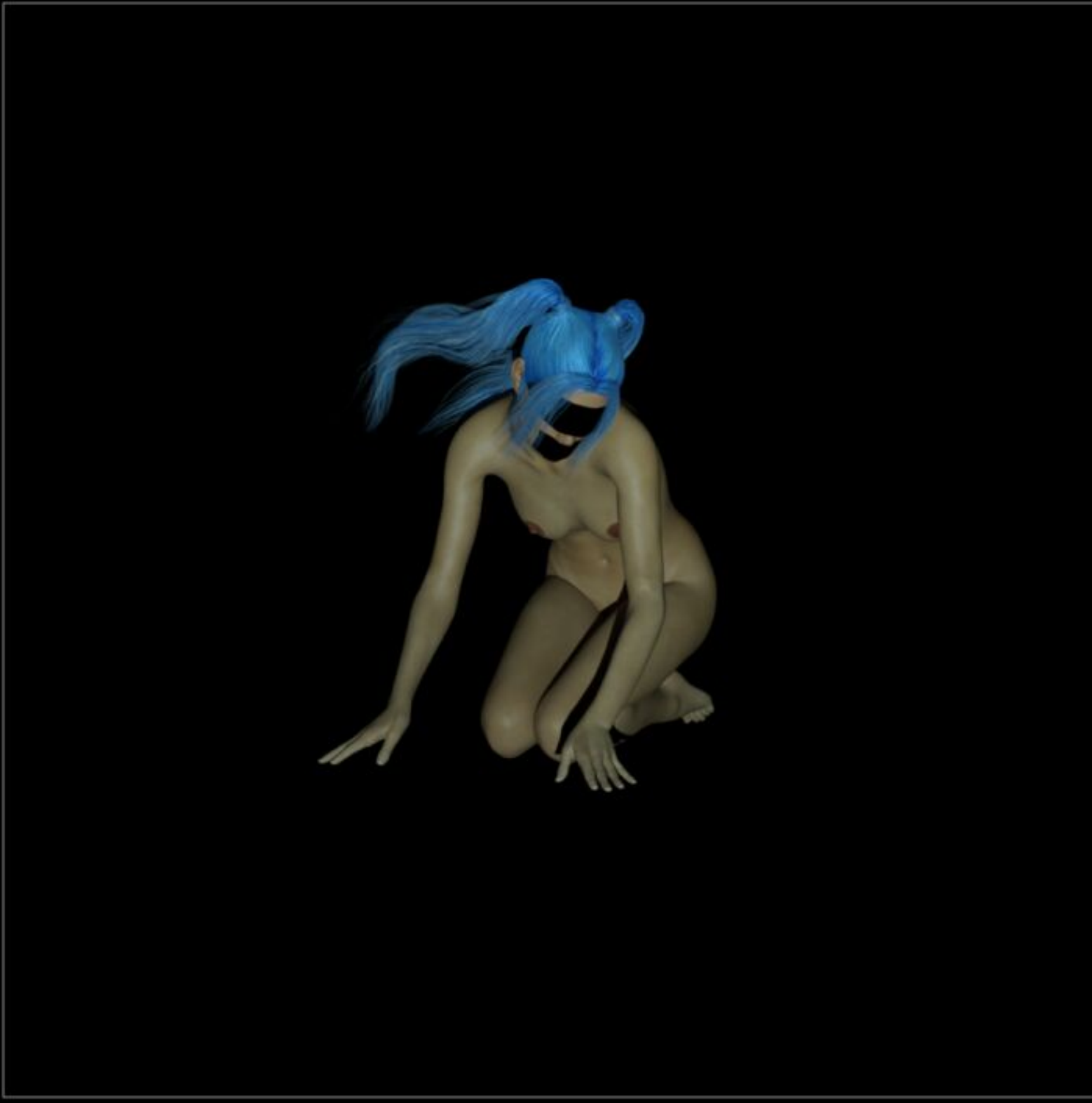
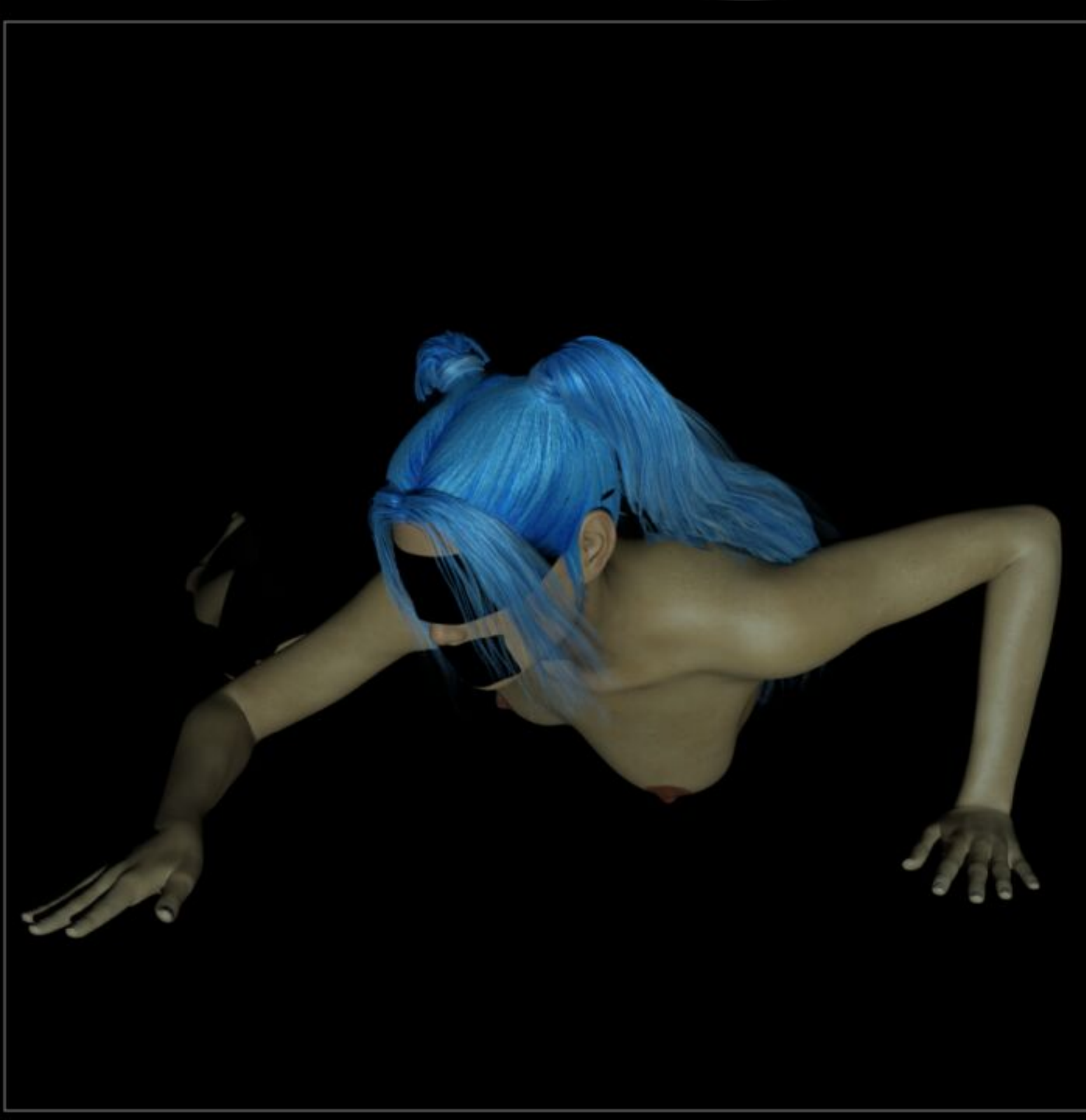
Well, one problem solved, another postponed, I guess.

We're going to have to figure out where to put you, you know.

... I wonder what's going on in your mind right now.

Loop of perpetual orgy to keep you distracted? Loop of endless horrors? Torture chamber?

Or maybe you're just wandering around lost in nothingness.



-- END --