



DESPITE THE IMPORTANCE OF MY POSITION, ABOUT HALF THE PEOPLE IN COLDPOINT DON'T KNOW I EXIST. THEY MIGHT BE VAGUELY AWARE THAT THERE'S SUCH A THING AS THE OPERATIONS MANAGER -- SOMEONE'S GOT TO BE THE BOSS -- BUT THEY DON'T KNOW MY NAME, MUCH LESS MY FACE.

THIS MEANS I'M NOT USUALLY THE PERSON WHO HEARS ABOUT A SITUATION FIRST. THE HUMANS AND MOST OF THE ROBOTS WILL TAKE IT TO GLORIA BANTAM, MY DOMESTIC DIRECTOR. THEY KNOW HER; SHE PROBABLY FOUND THEM A PLACE TO LIVE, MIGHT WELL HAVE FOUND THEM A JOB ... AND ALSO SHE SOCIALIZES A LOT MORE THAN I DO. SHE TELLS HER ABOUT PROBLEMS, AND IF SHE FEELS IT'S APPROPRIATE, SHE PASSES THEM TO ME.

THE M-FRAMES, HOWEVER, WOULDN'T DO THAT. THEY'D TAKE THEIR PROBLEMS TO FURST DEEPSTONE, DIRECTOR OF EXCAVATION (MORE MAJOR THAN IT SOUNDS, BECAUSE MOST OF COLDPOINT IS UNDERGROUND). FURST ISN'T JUST HEAD OF DEEPSTONE CLAN; HE'S THE DE FACTO LEADER OF ALL THE M-FRAMES. THE M'S DON'T HAVE MANY PROBLEMS THEY CAN'T FIX ON THEIR OWN, BUT IF THEY DO, THEY PREFER TO BRING THEM TO HIM.

AND IF HE FEELS IT'S APPROPRIATE ... HE PASSES THEM TO ME.

SALI HERE FOUND HER. FOR VARIOUS REASONS, SHE DOESN'T THINK IT COULD HAVE HAPPENED MORE THAN TWO HOURS BEFORE SHE CALLED ME.

Because of the condition of the body?

PARTLY, BUT MOSTLY BECAUSE THE WASHER WASN'T WORKING MORE THAN TWO HOURS AGO. SHE'LL EXPLAIN.

I SHOULD WARN YOU THAT THIS ISN'T PLEASANT.

Is it ever?



Oogh.

I can't say I was eager to know what happens when you put a human in one of these ...

M'S GET INTO A LOT OF DIRT SITUATIONS THAT CAN'T EASILY BE WASHED OFF IN A NORMAL SHOWER. HIGH-PRESSURE 150°C WATER/ALKALI MIX IS GREAT FOR THAT. IT'S NOT SO GOOD IF YOUR SKIN ISN'T HIGH-DURABILITY POLYPLASTIC.



NOR I.

I'm assuming this was a suicide ... and, damn it, we're not going to be able to identify her in this condition. We're going to have to wait for someone to notice she's missing.

POSSIBLY NOT TRUE ON THE FIRST PART, DEFINITELY NOT ON THE SECOND. SHE HAD A TAG. HER NAME IS FARADAY EDELIN.

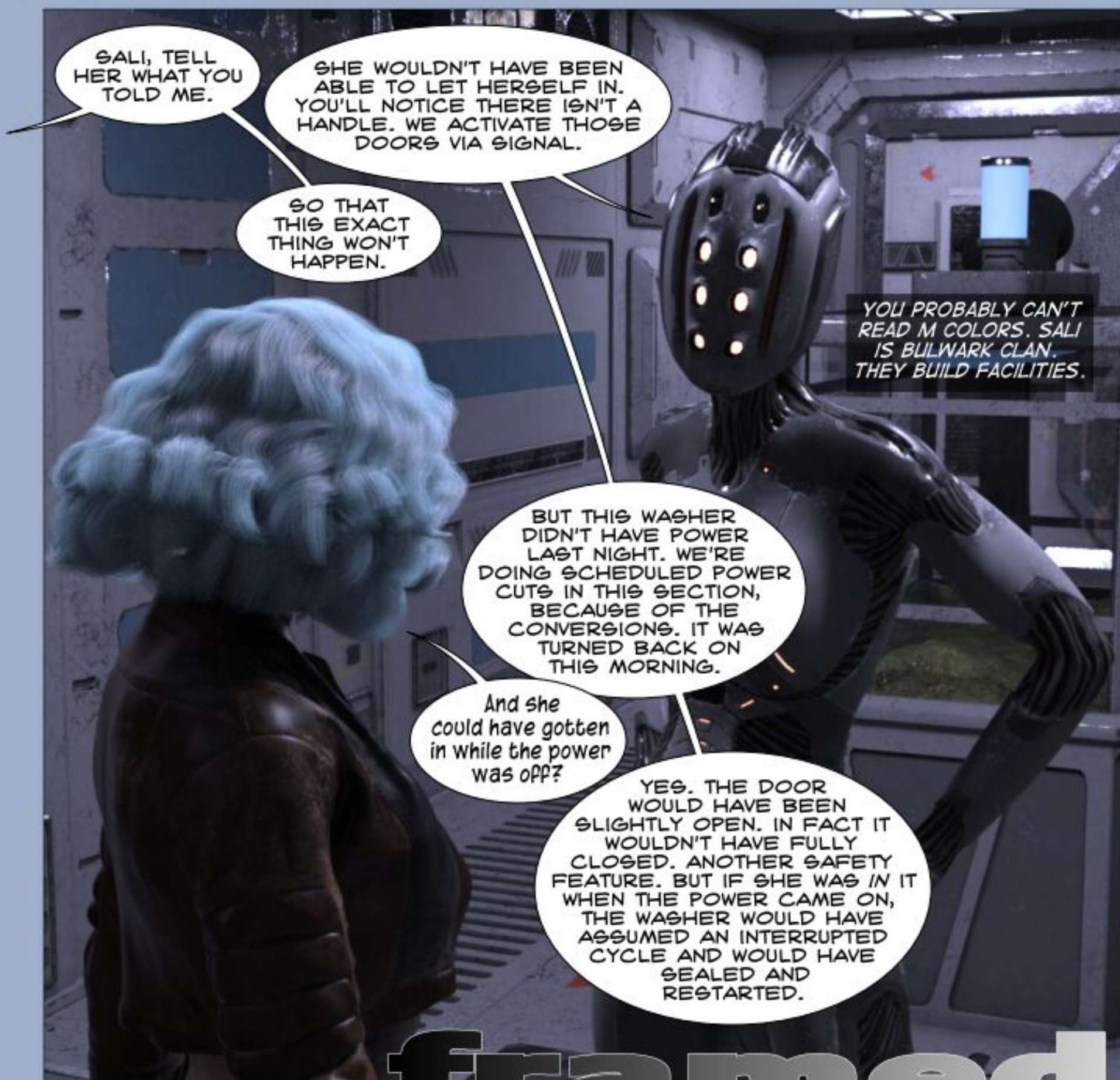
Oh, interesting.

YOU KNOW HER?

No, I meant it's interesting she was wearing her tag. You know how it is.

EVERYONE IN THE SETTLEMENT IS ISSUED A QUERYABLE ID, BUT WE CAN'T GET MOST OF THE HUMANS TO WEAR THEM. THE ROBOTS HAVE THEIRS BUILT IN.

What was that about the first part?



SALI, TELL HER WHAT YOU TOLD ME.

SHE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO LET HERSELF IN. YOU'LL NOTICE THERE ISN'T A HANDLE. WE ACTIVATE THOSE DOORS VIA SIGNAL.

SO THAT THIS EXACT THING WON'T HAPPEN.

BUT THIS WASHER DIDN'T HAVE POWER LAST NIGHT. WE'RE DOING SCHEDULED POWER CUTS IN THIS SECTION, BECAUSE OF THE CONVERSIONS. IT WAS TURNED BACK ON THIS MORNING.

And she could have gotten in while the power was off?

YES. THE DOOR WOULD HAVE BEEN SLIGHTLY OPEN. IN FACT IT WOULDN'T HAVE FULLY CLOSED. ANOTHER SAFETY FEATURE. BUT IF SHE WAS IN IT WHEN THE POWER CAME ON, THE WASHER WOULD HAVE ASSUMED AN INTERRUPTED CYCLE AND WOULD HAVE SEALED AND RESTARTED.

YOU PROBABLY CAN'T READ M COLORS. SALI IS BULWARK CLAN. THEY BUILD FACILITIES.



OK, I admit that doesn't sound like a suicide.

First, I'm going to need you two to take the body to medical. Discreetly.

SHE'LL HAVE TO GO IN A BAG ANYWAY. I'LL SEE TO IT.

Thank you. And I'd like to ask both of you to keep this strictly to yourselves. Tell Zusy-Q that too.

If it isn't suicide, then it's murder ... and if it's murder, I'm going to need any advantage I can get.

GLORIA, AS I SAID, GETS MOST OF THE PROBLEMS FIRST. SHE ALSO GETS MOST OF THE GOSSIP. I'M NOT SURE HOW SHE DOES IT, BUT WHEN I WANT TO FIND OUT ABOUT SOMEONE, SHE'S THE FIRST PERSON I ASK.

Wendy, I don't know everybody. Probably not even half of everybody.

You say that.

OK. Have you got anything in your system that might help?

Hmm. Worked as a systems monitor in geothermal. Probably wasn't robot-hostile, then.

I guessed that when she was wearing her tag. Why do you think so?

She'd have been one of the only humans there. Uncomfortable conditions if you don't want to be around robots.

Let me make a couple of calls. I know who might know. In the meantime, would you do me a favor?

WE HAD A NEW GROUP OF ARRIVALS IN A VERY SMALL ONE; WE WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO ACCEPT A BIG BATCH AGAIN UNTIL WE FINISHED CONVERTING THE COMPLEX A INDUSTRIAL SPACES TO RESIDENTIAL.

PEOPLE COME TO COLDPPOINT TO TRANSFER INTO ROBOT BODIES AND LIVE THE REST OF THEIR LIVES THAT WAY. THAT'S THE CHARTER. HOWEVER, THE CHARTER DOESN'T SAY YOU HAVE TO TRANSFER, AND COLDPPOINT HAS A SIGNIFICANT HUMAN POPULATION. SOME ARE JUST TAKING THEIR TIME TRANSFERRING. SOME JUST LIKE LIVING HERE THE WAY THEY ARE. OTHERS ARE ACTIVELY HOSTILE.

CLAIRE PARSONS BEGAN AS "YOU DON'T HAVE TO TRANSFER IF YOU DON'T WANT," BUT HAS GOTTEN STEADILY MORE HARDLINE OVER THE YEARS. NOW SHE'S A ROBOT-HATER, PLAIN AND SIMPLE.

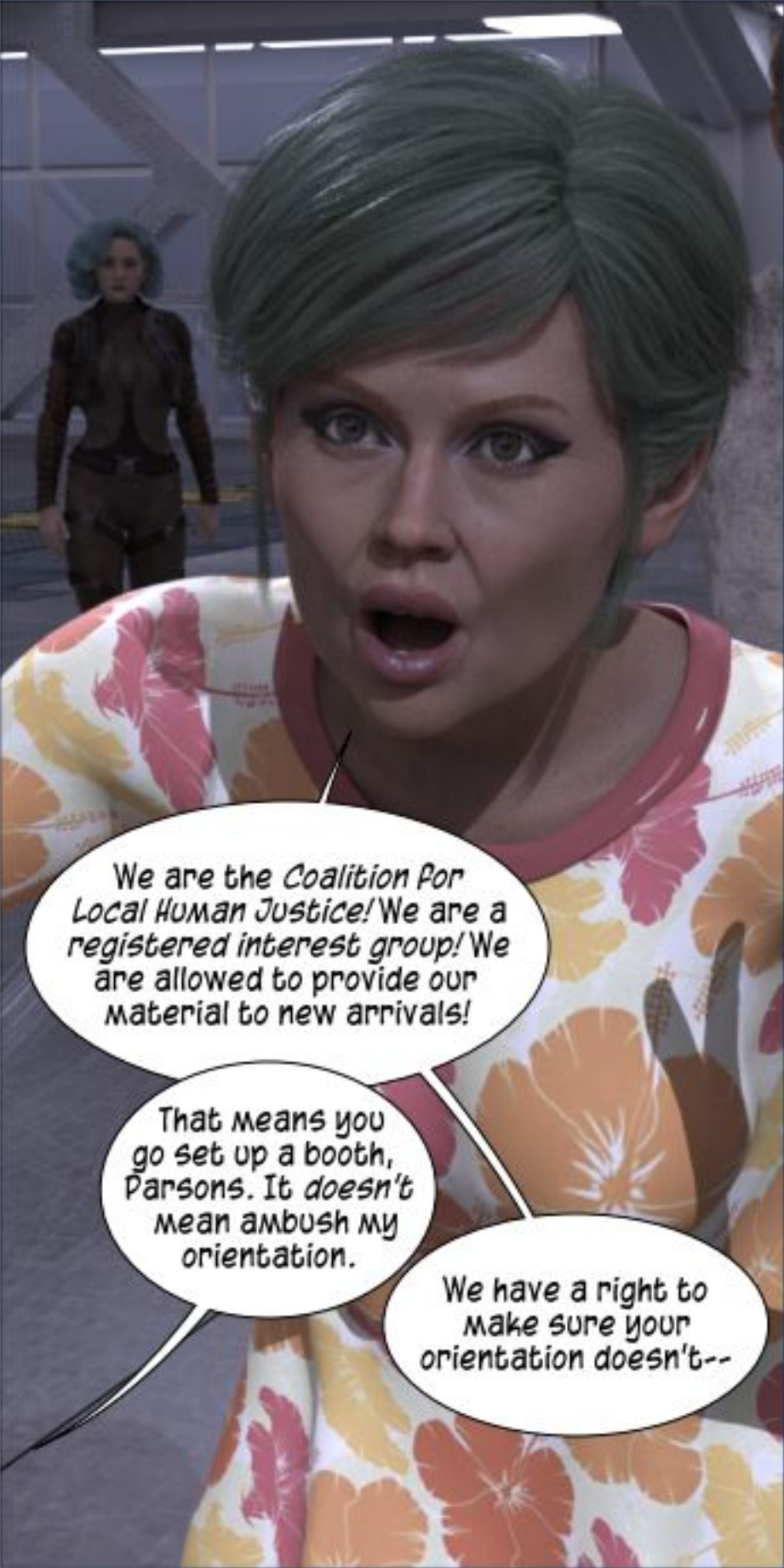
BECAUSE HELEN ORRIS --- "HELLO" --- IS RESPONSIBLE FOR GREETING AND GUIDING NEW ARRIVALS, SHE AND PARSONS CLASH A LOT. HELLO MAY BE THE ONLY PERSON MORE SICK OF PARSONS THAN I AM.



And I've told you -- this orientation is an official function. It's part of the basic services. You and your people don't get to interfere with it.

I've warned you before! You don't get to give them your indoctrination without me giving them the truth!

THOUGH THAT'S A TRICKY CALL.



We are the Coalition For Local Human Justice! We are a registered interest group! We are allowed to provide our material to new arrivals!

That means you go set up a booth, Parsons. It doesn't mean ambush my orientation.

We have a right to make sure your orientation doesn't--



You have no such thing.

I'm warning you, Parsons, I am at my limit. I'm this close to finding out just how strong the mental block is. You want to test it? Because I'm dying to.

Who knows? Maybe I don't think busting up your Pace counts as "harm." Maybe I think it would improve it.

-- ahem --



Parsons, she's right. You're out of line. If you want to be an official interest group, go talk to Ms. Bantam about setting up in the info corridor.

That's for hobby groups and dating pools! The CLHJ is for ideological action! We have to have equal time with your propaganda!

Wendy, you can't let her be an official interest group! She gets way too much space to make trouble with her garbage as it is!

We are official. We did the paperwork. We met the requirements.

Those don't apply to hate groups!!



Both of you stop it right now.

Hello, get on with your orientation.

Parsons, I don't want you or your people interfering with Ms. Orris ever again, do you understand? You can make your case to new arrivals, yes, but separately, after she's done.

Make sure your people get this. Anybody who breaks this rule will answer to me.



... all right, if you'll follow me, I'll show you your temporary quarters ...

Say, what was that about a mental block?

I'll explain on the way.

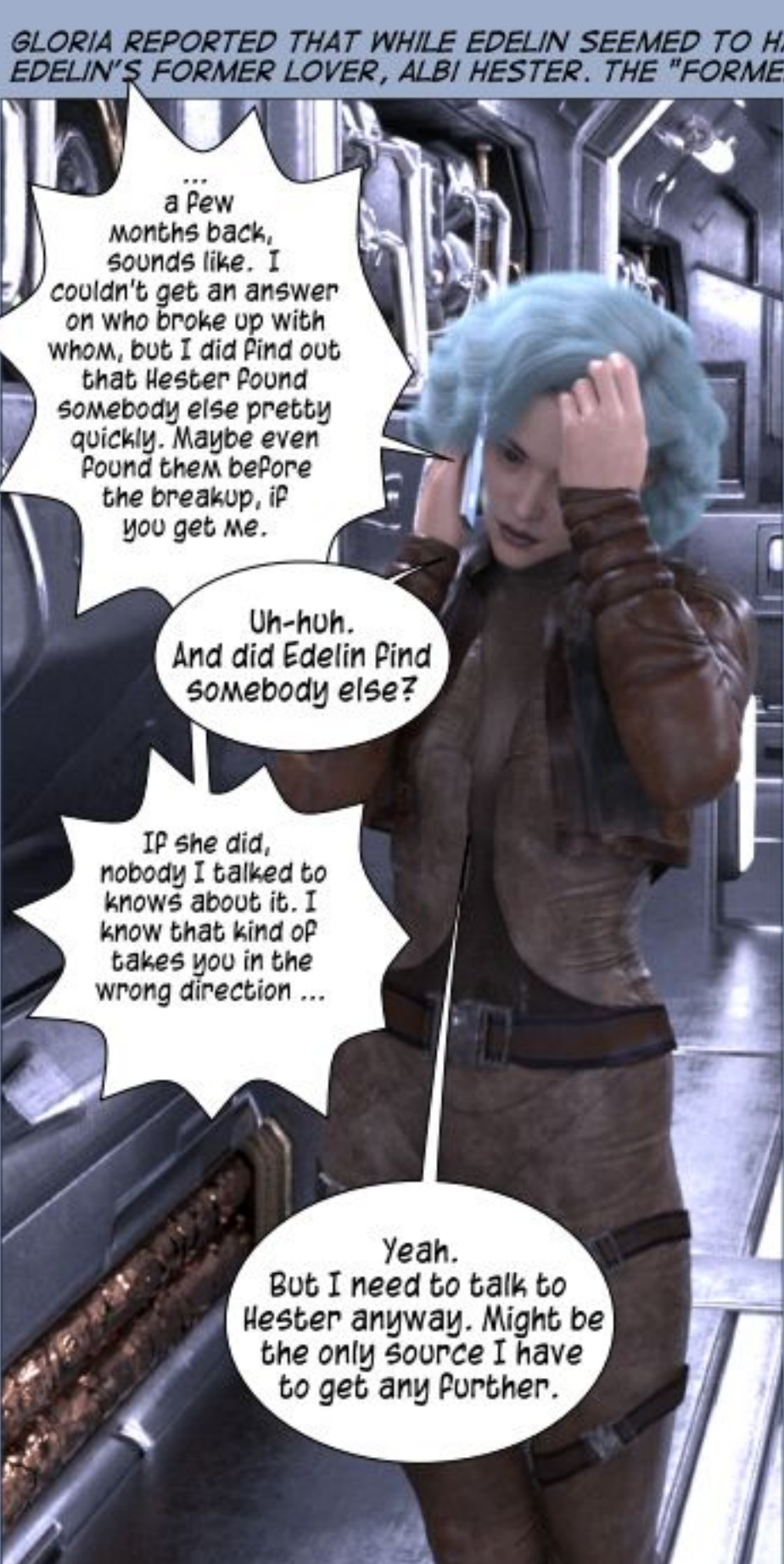
One day I am going to find a way to get that woman what she deserves.

Ah, Ms. Parsons, was it?



I'm very interested in hearing what you have to say.

My name's Silie Perlit. I'll come find you once I get settled in.



... a few months back, sounds like. I couldn't get an answer on who broke up with whom, but I did find out that Hester found somebody else pretty quickly. Maybe even found them before the breakup, if you get me.

Uh-huh. And did Edelin find somebody else?

If she did, nobody I talked to knows about it. I know that kind of takes you in the wrong direction ...

Yeah. But I need to talk to Hester anyway. Might be the only source I have to get any further.



Albi Hester?

Yes?

IT OCCURRED TO ME, TOO LATE OF COURSE, THAT I HADN'T ASKED GLORIA TO FIND OUT WHAT THEIR PRONOUNS WERE.

I'm Wendy Barlowe, the operations manager.

There are a couple of things I need to talk to you about.



Faraday's dead?
How?
When did it happen?

We think early this morning. Sorry you had to find out this way. We're keeping it secret for the moment.

Did ... was it ... she didn't kill herself, did she?

We're not sure yet.

Do you have reason to think she might have?

Uh ... well, I would hope not ... but ...

I still love Faraday, OK? It's just ... I met somebody and it was totally different. Like, I never knew I could feel that way about someone.

I tried to be as gentle about it to Faraday as I could. I didn't want to hurt her. I didn't want her to hate me.



She didn't take it well?

She didn't take it at all! Complete denial. She refused to admit it was happening.

You know, I didn't want to shut her out. There was still room for her, you understand? But with her being like that, it wasn't going to work, so I stopped trying.

We have a lot of the same friends, and I kept hearing from them about how she was acting, and I told them I wasn't sure what I could do about it ...

But I wouldn't have thought she'd ...



... she killed herself because of me, didn't she?

We don't know that. We don't know if it was suicide at all.

Frankly, there's a good chance it might have been murder.

Which is why I need your help finding connections. People who might have wanted her dead.



Well, she knew all kinds of people ...

I heard that in the last month or so she'd even made friends with one of the M-Primes, and you know how they are.

But the thing is, she made friends so easily because everybody liked her. She could get along with anyone.

I just can't see anybody wanting to kill her. It'd be like killing a puppy.

Well ... if you can think of anyone who might have had a reason, come tell me.

I DIDN'T GET TO CHASE THE SITUATION ANY FURTHER JUST THEN, BECAUSE I HAD A PRIOR APPOINTMENT.



What, Fildie was scared to come himself?

He thought maybe I'd do better. He says you don't like him.

Ms. Barlowe, you're killing us! Ms. Bantam said we can't have any more hire contracts unless we rewrite the terms ...

Your contracts are rotten. If I could void all of them, I would. You can't make someone commit to a year with no chances to get out of it and no negotiation of any kind. That's not a contract, that's servitude.

ARIN-A, OUR LOCAL LABOR AGITATOR, HAD BEEN FILING REPORTS WITH GLORIA ABOUT THE RED X CLUB FOR MONTHS. NOT TO FAULT GLORIA'S SPEED, BUT I WAS STARTING TO AGREE WITH ARIN-A THAT WE WEREN'T MOVING FAST ENOUGH. BUT WHAT WAS TOO SLOW FOR ARIN-A WAS OBVIOUSLY WAY TOO FAST FOR THE OWNER OF THE RED X.



We have to do them that way! We have a horrible time keeping people. As soon as their year's up, they leave. We have no continuity.

Except for you. And you don't wonder why they leave? Why you're the only person who finds the job tolerable?

I'm sure Fildie thinks this is a deliberate effort to bleed him dry. He's right. You can tell him that. No more workers for the Red X. Not on those terms.

Since you're not actually abusing your people, I don't have a basis to break your remaining contracts -- I have to wait for them to expire. But when they do, if Fildie doesn't do a lot better, the Red X is finished.

If we soften our contracts, we'll go broke!

Is that what he told you? He doesn't ever let you see his ledgers?

TEZA DEAL, STAR PERFORMER AT THE RED X (FOR WANT OF A TERM), AND THE ACTUAL MANAGER OF THE CLUB, IN PRACTICAL TERMS. ALSO, BY ALL ACCOUNTS, THE REGULAR LOVER OF GIL FILDIE, THE CLUB'S OWNER.



Hey!

Ms. Barlowe ... I was really hoping we could find some accommodation.

I realize you're not interested in money, but I can offer you a lot of other things.

I just want to find some way for you to let us keep operating. Can't we work it out?

Get off me!



Well, it was worth a try.

No, it wasn't.

You want to keep operating? Then convince Fildie to clean up his act!

... I don't think I can.

Well, if he doesn't listen to you, then he probably won't listen to anybody, and you'd better start looking for another job.



TRYING TO SLEEP YOUR WAY TO THE TOP, TEZAZ?

Screw you, Beth.

BETH VIGILANCE IS SORT OF THE OPPOSITE OF CLAIRE PARSONS. JUST AS ANNOYING AND JUST AS UNREASONABLE, BUT ON THE ROBOT SIDE, SHE WANTS ANY HUMANS WHO DON'T TRANSFER FAST ENOUGH THROWN OFF COLDRPOINT.

SHE LIKES ME ABOUT AS MUCH AS I LIKE HER, SO IT'S ALWAYS A SURPRISE TO SEE HER COME TO MY OFFICE VOLUNTARILY, ESPECIALLY ACCOMPANIED BY FUJIST, WHOM SHE THINKS SHOULD BE FAR MORE MILITANT.

WENDY, SORRY TO COME UNEXPECTEDLY, BUT WE NEED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE EDELIN BUSINESS.

You have new information?

NOT EXACTLY.



ONCE AGAIN YOU'RE LETTING PEOPLE WALK AROUND SPREADING LIES!

LIES THAT ARE GOING TO GET SOME ROBOTS DAMAGED OR DESTROYED, IF YOU LET THEM!

BETH, PLEASE.



THE THING IS, THIS IS A SITUATION THAT COULD BE VERY DAMAGING UNLESS YOU KEEP CONTROL OVER IT --

Yes, which I was trying to do.

Remember I told you to keep it to yourself? Did you think I just said that for fun? Why did you tell Beth, of all people, one of the worst you could have chosen?

I'M GOING TO IGNORE THAT.

You shouldn't.



I DIDN'T TELL HER.

She's talking about Edelin? How'd she get the info?

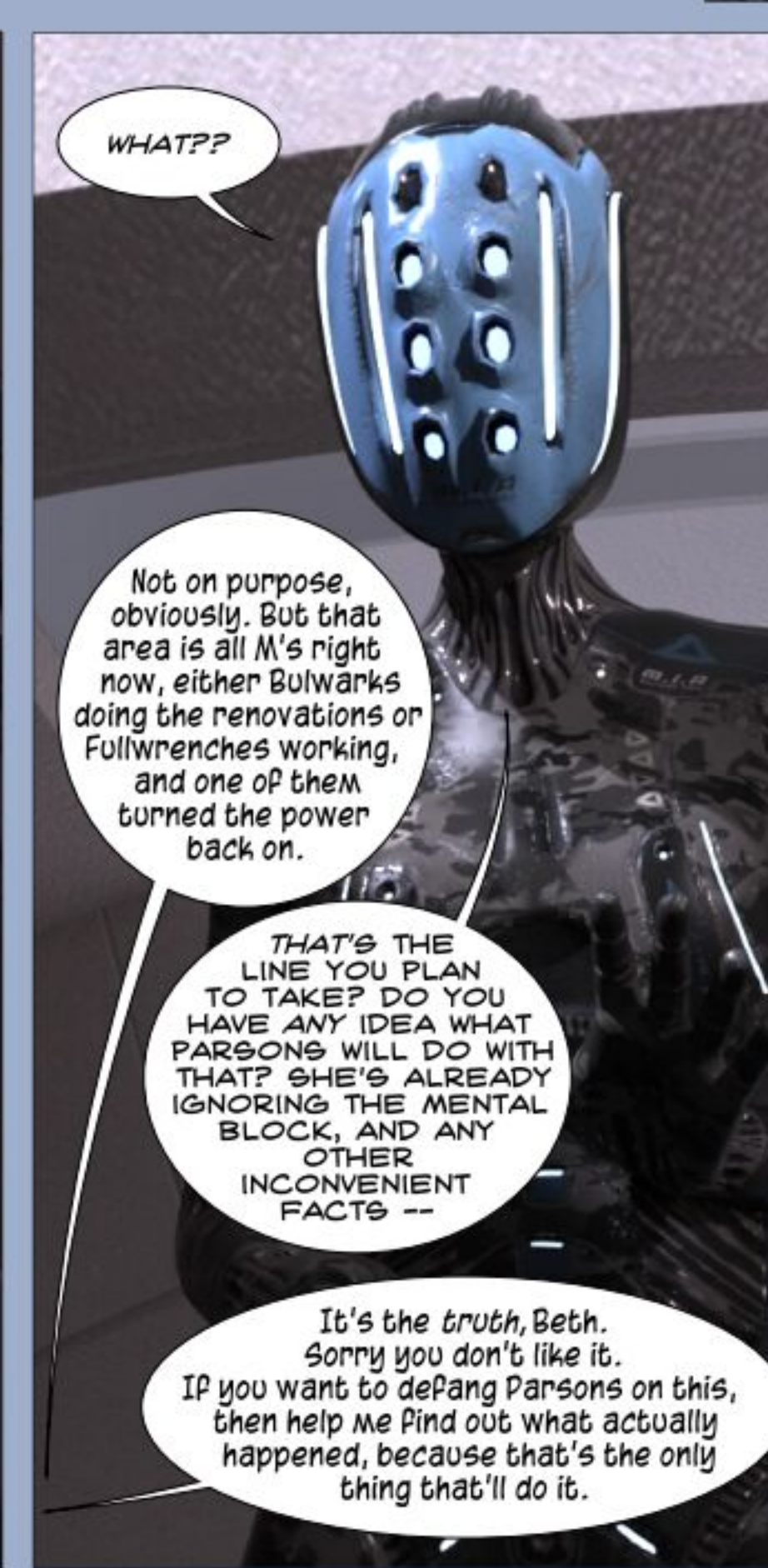
I DON'T KNOW. I CERTAINLY DIDN'T TELL HER, AND I'D BE WILLING TO SWEAR SALI DIDN'T EITHER.

PARSONS IS WANDERING AROUND TELLING EVERYBODY THAT ROBOTS KILLED A HUMAN! IF SHE'S LOOKING FOR A WAR, THEN I'M GOING TO GIVE HER ONE.

NEVER MIND HOW SHE GOT IT! YOU'VE GOT TO GO SHUT HER DOWN, RIGHT NOW!

SHE'S TELLING PEOPLE THAT AN M DID THIS!

Well, an M almost certainly did, you know.



WHAT???

Not on purpose, obviously. But that area is all M's right now, either Bulwarks doing the renovations or Fullwrenches working, and one of them turned the power back on.

THAT'S THE LINE YOU PLAN TO TAKE? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT PARSONS WILL DO WITH THAT? SHE'S ALREADY IGNORING THE MENTAL BLOCK, AND ANY OTHER INCONVENIENT FACTS --

It's the truth, Beth. Sorry you don't like it. If you want to defang Parsons on this, then help me find out what actually happened, because that's the only thing that'll do it.



I DON'T BELIEVE THIS.

I'LL SEE IF I CAN CALM HER DOWN.

I SUGGEST YOU GO TALK TO MARSO FULLWRENCH. THEY MAY HAVE SOMETHING.

Will do.



... This time of day they'll be on-site. I can also give you their home ...

No, I'll get that later if I need it.

How did it go with Parsons and the arrivals? How bad was it?

I had to make a new rule. She and her people are banned from orientations.

Say, this new thing of hers -- the Coalition for whatsis ...

The CLHJ. They met all the requirements, so I couldn't turn them down.

It's a scam, though.

Why, Ms. Bantam! That's very unlike you, to say such a thing.



Well, I don't have to be polite about it with you.

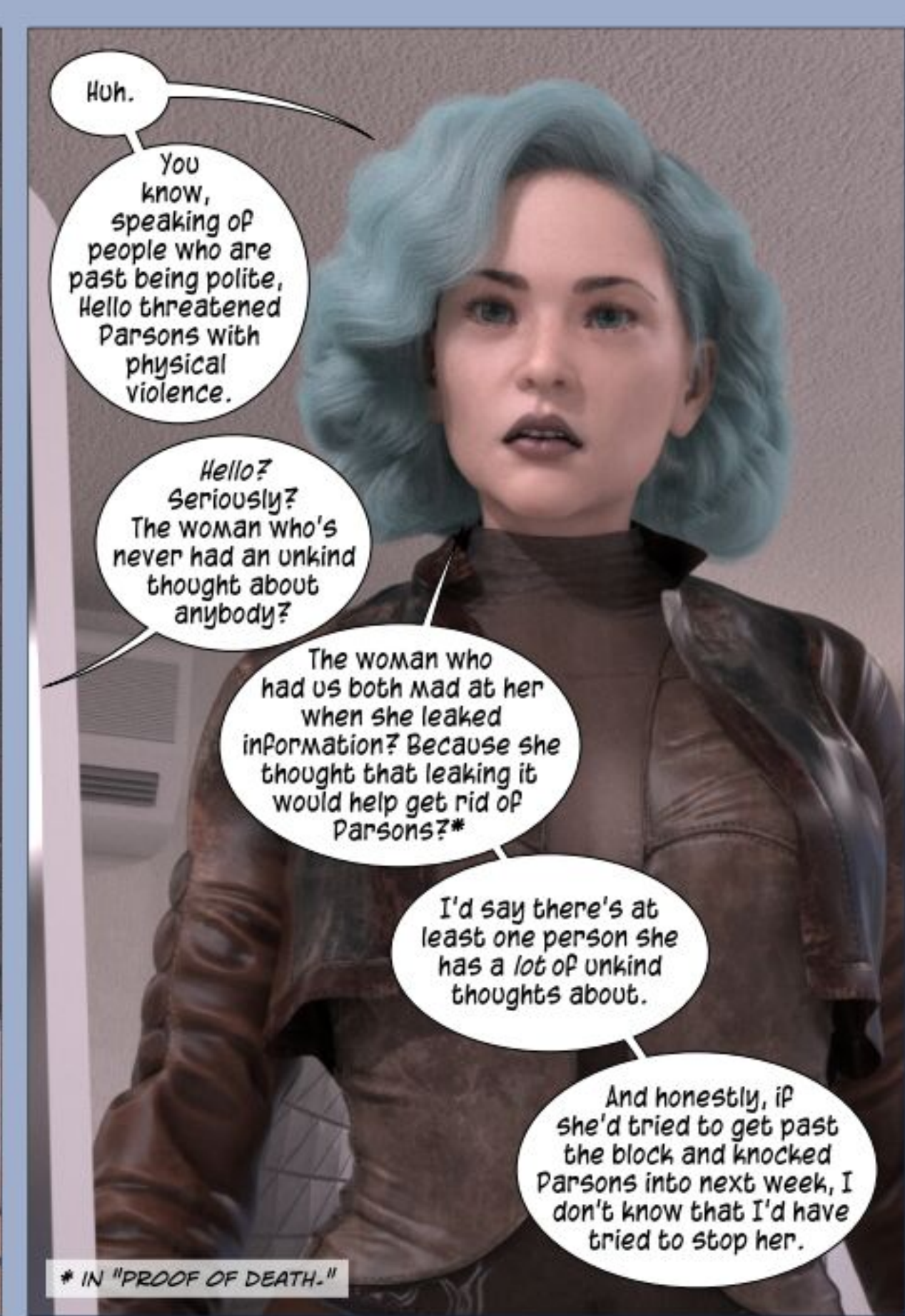
Ever since Parsons lost her bankroller, she's--

Wait. Wells stopped funding her?

A while back. I thought you'd heard!

Anyway, she's been fishing around for some way to keep going. She gave up her offices -- couldn't pay for them -- now she's operating out of her home. No staff. Volunteers. Who donate.

I think that's the real point. She's living off whatever dues or tithes she can convince the "coalition" members to pay. It can't be much. Must keep her fed, though.



Huh.

You know, speaking of people who are past being polite, Hello threatened Parsons with physical violence.

Hello? Seriously? The woman who's never had an unkind thought about anybody?

The woman who had us both mad at her when she leaked information? Because she thought that leaking it would help get rid of Parsons?*

I'd say there's at least one person she has a lot of unkind thoughts about.

And honestly, if she'd tried to get past the block and knocked Parsons into next week, I don't know that I'd have tried to stop her.

* IN "PROOF OF DEATH."

TO GET TO THE INDUSTRIAL ZONE WHERE MARSO WOULD BE WORKING, I HAD TO PASS THROUGH SOME OF THE MOST HEAVILY USED CORRIDORS OF COMPLEX A, INCLUDING THE PART WE CALL CHROME CROSSING. ALL THE BUSINESSES ADJOINING IT ARE SEX CLUBS (THE RED X IS THERE, FOR EXAMPLE), AND FOR REASONS TOO LONG TO GO INTO RIGHT NOW, THAT MEANT MOST OF THE FOOT TRAFFIC AT THAT HOUR WOULD BE HUMANS, NOT ROBOTS.



We have to stop it before it goes any further!

They'll eliminate us all if we let them!

We need your help for immediate action! None of us are safe!



ISADORA BRASS, COLDRPOINT'S ONLY ROVING REPORTER.

Oh, this should be good.

ZIZ FLYN, PARSONS' MOST LOYAL ACOLYTE.

The protections we've been assured of are lies! We can't trust them!

We can't trust any of the robots, and we certainly can't trust the operations manager!

Uh, Claire ...



This is a high-traffic area, and you're creating a hazard.

As a registered interest group, you should be even more responsible about following the rules.

If this is a protest, you are required to keep moving and not block traffic. If it's an assembly, this is the wrong space for that.

If it's an information session, do as you were told earlier today and get a booth.

Just like you! To come after us for something like that, and not address the actual problem --



I can't speak to your imaginary problems, Parsons, because they don't make a single damned bit of sense.

Your latest idea -- now, let me know if I've got it wrong -- is that there's some kind of conspiracy of the robots to ... do what? Kill off the humans?

Is that the best excuse you can come up with for your Kludge people? Are you really expecting to keep them paying your bills with that?



"Kludge" --?

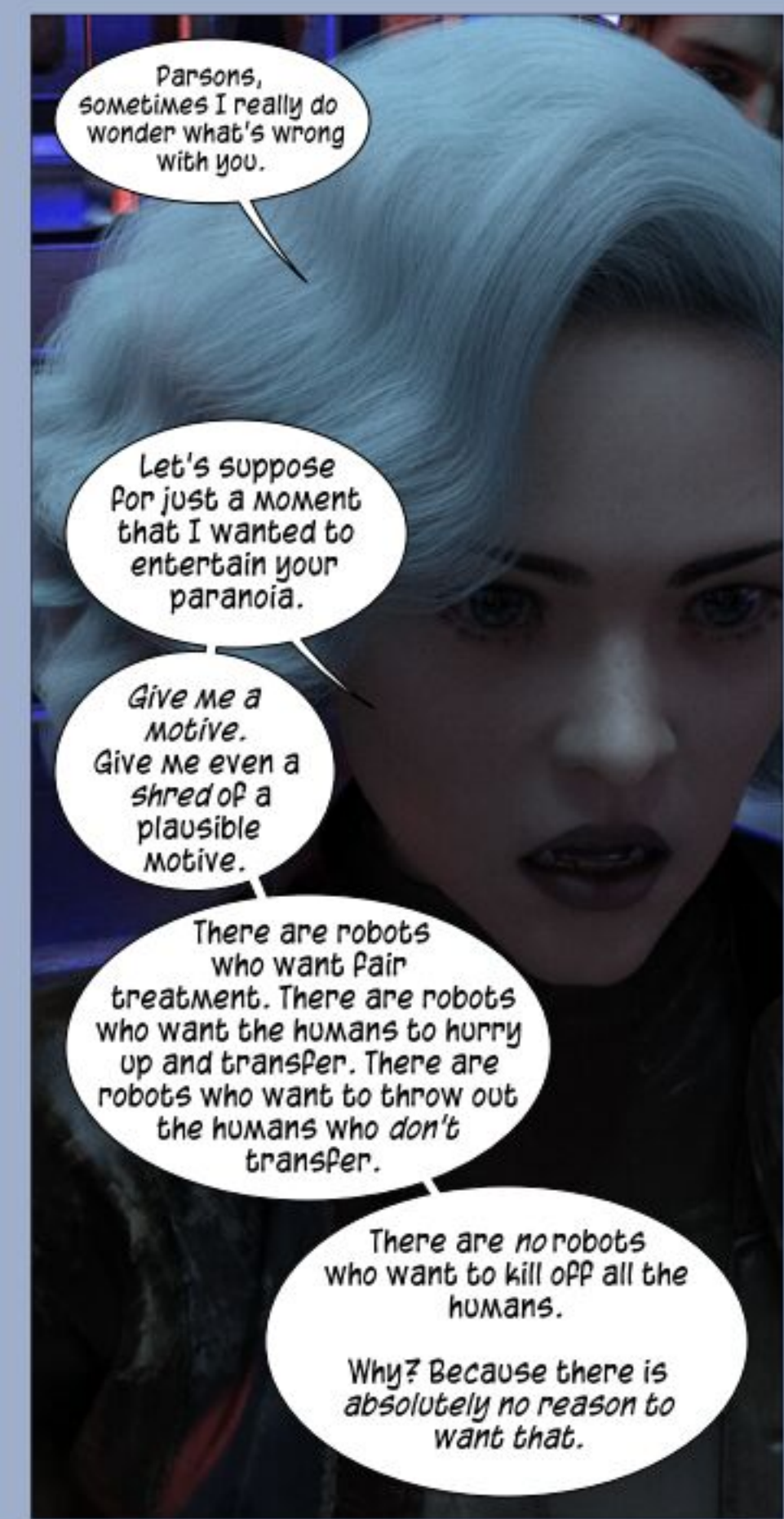
Don't call it that!

The point is that they've figured out that if they work as groups, then the mental block doesn't mean anything!

"Oh, I didn't harm a human, I just put her in a washer that wasn't working!"

"Oh, I didn't harm a human, I just turned on the power!"

And now they can do anything to us they want!



Parsons, sometimes I really do wonder what's wrong with you.

Let's suppose for just a moment that I wanted to entertain your paranoia.

Give me a motive. Give me even a shred of a plausible motive.

There are robots who want fair treatment. There are robots who want the humans to hurry up and transfer. There are robots who want to throw out the humans who don't transfer.

There are no robots who want to kill off all the humans.

Why? Because there is absolutely no reason to want that.



Ms. Brass, are you recording?

Oh, absolutely.

Good. This is an official statement.

First, the opinion of the operations manager is that the stated policies and principles of the Kludge are toxic and have no connection to reality whatsoever. They can spout them all they like, but I advise the community not to take them seriously.

Second, it's also my opinion that the human and robot populations of Coldpoint would get along just fine if various parties didn't keep trying to stir up trouble for their own benefit, most notably Claire Parsons.

Third, and most importantly: I will not tolerate any attempts to incite violence in any segment of the community. If I find someone trying to start riots, at the very least they're going to be thrown out, and that's if I can't think of something else to do to them first.



"BARLOWE SAYS: TOXIC KLUDGE." Beautiful.

And, Claire, I'm serious.

I don't think you know how close you are to the end of my rope.

You don't want to reach it.

THE FULLWRENCH CLAN OPERATES OUR INDUSTRIAL FACILITIES -- MANUFACTURING, POWER AND WATER, THINGS LIKE THAT. ESPECIALLY THINGS THAT'D BE HAZARDOUS FOR ANYBODY WHO WASN'T AN M-FRAME.

MARSO FULLWRENCH WASN'T THE LEAST BIT UPSET AT MY ASSERTION THAT AN M HAD PROBABLY UNWITTINGLY BEEN THE MURDERER.



OH, YES. I WAS THE ONE WHO TURNED THE POWER ON THIS MORNING, IN FACT. OF COURSE I HAD NO IDEA ...

THE RENOVATIONS TO CHANGE THIS AREA TO RESIDENTIAL USE HAVE REACHED A POINT WHERE THEY'RE ADJACENT TO US. WE CAN'T LET THEM CONVERT THIS SPACE YET, THOUGH. WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO RUN THIS EQUIPMENT FOR A WHILE LONGER, UNTIL OUR NEW FACILITY IS BUILT OUT IN COMPLEX C.

THEY CAN'T DO THEIR WORK WHEN THE POWER'S ON. IT'S UNSAFE. WE CAN'T OPERATE WHEN THE POWER'S OFF, OBVIOUSLY. SO WE TAKE TURNS. WE WORK MOSTLY BY DAY AND THEY WORK MOSTLY BY NIGHT.

Mostly? Not on a set schedule?

NOT REALLY. SOMETIMES WE NEED EXTRA TIME TO FINISH SOMETHING, SOMETIMES THEY DO ... THERE'S A SCHEDULE, BUT IT'S NOT FIXED. WE POST A TIMETABLE OF WHEN THE POWER WILL BE ON, A FEW DAYS IN ADVANCE.

No, I didn't think you did.

Why is the power being turned on and off like this?



So only someone who could get at that timetable would know when the power was going to come on?

YES, BUT IT'S PART OF THE RENOVATION PROJECT DOCUMENTS, AND THOSE ARE FAIRLY PUBLIC. ANYONE WHO KNOWS WHERE TO FIND THEM COULD GET THE INFORMATION.

THOUGH I CAN'T IMAGINE THAT ANYONE WHO ISN'T WORKING IN THE IMMEDIATE AREA WOULD EVER GO LOOK.



Could you assemble a list of everyone working in this facility? I'll have to get a list from the Bulwarks of the ones working in this reno area as well ...

I HAVE THAT TOO. I CAN GIVE YOU BOTH LISTS RIGHT NOW AND SAVE YOU SOME TROUBLE.

Oh, thank you. That'd be very helpful.



YOU UNDERSTAND, I FIND IT DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE THAT ANY FULLWRENCH OR BULWARK HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH MURDERING A HUMAN.

Same here.

But we're not anywhere close to that yet. I haven't even decided for certain that it's murder.

Right now I'm still trying to find anyone who knows anything about the victim, about the circumstances ...

I mean, if it was murder, there's no question about method ... the question is how she got into that washer, and who put her there.



THE LISTS WERE LONG ENOUGH THAT I DIDN'T WANT TO START ON THEM UNTIL TOMORROW. BESIDES, I HAD A DATE.

Treac? I'm on my way.

I'm not there. Come to Byla's.

... OK?

I SPENT A LOT OF TIME WITH TREAC GLADSTONE, AND A LOT OF TIME WITH BYLA STARNE, AND SOMETIMES ALL THREE OF US DID THINGS TOGETHER ... BUT THIS WAS THE FIRST I'D HEARD OF THEM SEEING EACH OTHER WITHOUT ME.

NOT THAT I MINDED -- OR THAT IT WAS ANY OF MY BUSINESS -- IT JUST CAUGHT ME BY SURPRISE.



You're leaving?

I'm sorry, love. Metri just called and begged me to come in. Two people haven't showed and he's trying to run bar by himself. And he's a good brewer, but a horrible bartender.

Don't worry, Treac, I'll make it up to her!

EVEN THOUGH TREAC RUINS THE THEATRE TROUPE NOW, THEY STILL CAN ONLY DO A FEW PRODUCTIONS A YEAR, AND SHE STILL NEEDS OTHER WORK TO PAY THE BILLS WHEN THE THEATRE'S DARK.

SHE WAS SURPRISED METRI CALL WOULD WANT HER BACK AFTER WHAT HAPPENED*, BUT TO NO ONE'S SURPRISE BUT TREAC'S, SHE WAS EXTREMELY COMPETENT. SHE'S EVEN LEARNED TO TELL BEERS APART.

* SEE "PROOF OF DEATH".



Honestly, it's more about making it up to Treac. She's been running ragged and could use some relief.

Don't worry, she got some! That wasn't why she came over, but when I asked if she wanted to Pool around, she didn't say no.

Glad to hear it. ... Why did she come? Is everything OK?

She wanted my advice about picking a Prame.

Oh, yes. She's been worrying about that a lot. Maybe too much.



I don't know about that. It's a big deal. There shouldn't be political baggage attached to your choice, but there is.

The L's and D's think the M's go too far to dehumanize themselves and don't know joy; the M's think the D's are timid and human-appeasers ... you know how it goes.

And of course being an M is completely out.

Speaking of, it sounds like you're going to be pretty deep in M territory for this Edelin thing ...

Well, maybe not. I don't know. Maybe it's just me.

I mean, I admit M's make me jumpy.

I don't think I could ever really trust anybody who doesn't like sex.

And what do the L's think?

We think we made the best choice and everybody else is doing it wrong.

Heh.

I think Treac's actually mostly concerned with genitals right now, though. I mean, she knows she has supportive friends who won't care which Prame she picks.

She's trying to decide whether she wants the swappable genitals more than she wants a set that feels like what she's accustomed to.

Sometimes I hate how nothing around here stays secret.

Well, with Parsons running around shouting about it ... I just wanted to tell you to watch your step. The M's ...

You think I'm at risk?

No. But I think a lot of them would put clan before anything else.

Even this?

NEXT MORNING. I HAD ONLY COME HOME TO CHANGE CLOTHES, AND WASN'T EXPECTING A VISITOR.



ESPECIALLY NOT ONE WHO'D NEVER COME TO MY HOME BEFORE.

Furst!

Is something wrong? I was just about to go start doing some interviews ...

YES, I ASSUMED. I'M COMING WITH YOU.

That's not --

SOMEBODY NEEDS TO, AND MIN IS OUT.

MENICA SCOTT, HEAD OF ENGINEERING, HAD INSISTED ON MY TAKING SOMEONE ELSE ON THIS KIND OF INTERVIEW EVER SINCE SOMEONE TRIED TO THROW ME OVER A BALCONY AND NEARLY KILLED ME.

SHE'S USUALLY THE ONE WHO GOES WITH ME, BUT TWELVE DAYS AGO SHE'D GONE ON MEDICAL LEAVE AND HAD NOT SAID WHY.



Well, the thing is, Furst ...

... I think everybody I'm going to be talking to today is an M.

I don't want to get you ... uh ...

YOU DOUBT MY PRIORITIES?

No ... but that doesn't mean we have to go out of our way to test them.



THAT'S EXACTLY WHY IT HAS TO BE ME.

IF THERE IS A CONFLICT OF INTEREST, I WANT IT ABSOLUTELY CLEAR TO THEM WHICH SIDE I'M STANDING ON.



I should warn you, this is likely to turn out to be the biggest waste of a day you ever spent.

I'M PREPARED FOR THAT.



HEY!

MS. BARLOWE!

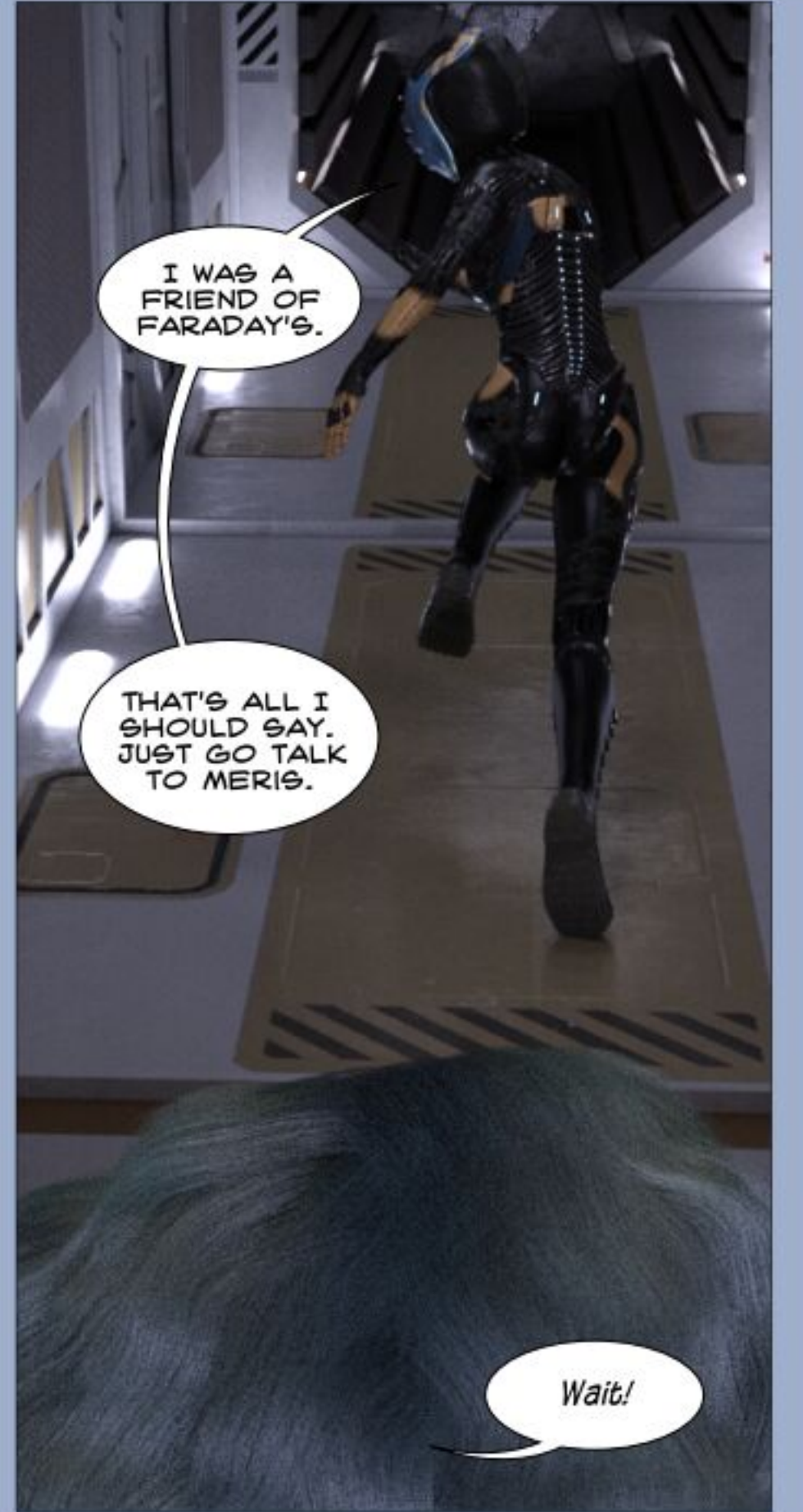


YOU'RE TRYING TO FIND OUT ABOUT FARADAY EDELIN, RIGHT? THAT'S WHAT EVERYBODY SAYS.

DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME FIGHTING AROUND. JUST GO TALK TO MERIS FULLWRENCH.

THAT'S ALL YOU NEED.

Uh-huh. And what's your interest in this? Who are you?



I WAS A FRIEND OF FARADAY'S.

THAT'S ALL I SHOULD SAY. JUST GO TALK TO MERIS.

Wait!



Do you know her? Did you get her tag?

NO, YES, AND IT WAS HARDLY NECESSARY.

THERE'S ONLY ONE PERSON WHO COULD POSSIBLY HAVE A VERY HASTY VIGILANCE PAINT JOB OVER FULLWRENCH COLORS.

EITHER SHE WAS IN SUCH A HURRY TO CHANGE TO THAT CLAN THAT SHE DIDN'T WANT TO WAIT FOR NEW PLATES, OR SHE COULDN'T AFFORD THEM.

ALREADY WEARING OFF, TOO. SHABBY.

ANYWAY, HER NAME'S CULDA. CULDA VIGILANCE, NOW.

How long ago did she change clans?

NOT PARTICULARLY RECENTLY. AT LEAST A YEAR AGO.



Any leads I get from Vigilance are automatically suspicious ...

THEY DON'T TEND TO LIE, THOUGH.

No, but they sure can be selective about the truth.

Anyway, what I was about to say is that Meris Fullwrench is on one of my lists.

I don't see any reason why we couldn't make that our first interview.



MMM...

What the --?



This had better be really -- First Deepstone?

AND THIS IS WENDY BARLOWE, THE OPERATIONS MANAGER.

Uh. Is everything OK?

You're Meris Fullwrench? You're not an M...



Well, no, I --

FULLWRENCH DOESN'T INSIST ON M'S IN THE CLAN, WENDY. THEY'LL ACCEPT ANYONE WHO DOES THOSE JOBS.

COME TO THAT, SO WOULD WE ... WE'VE JUST NEVER HAD ANYONE BUT M'S WHO DO.

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT BULWARK.

I was an M-Prime until a few months ago.



I saw you, Hester. No point in trying to hide.

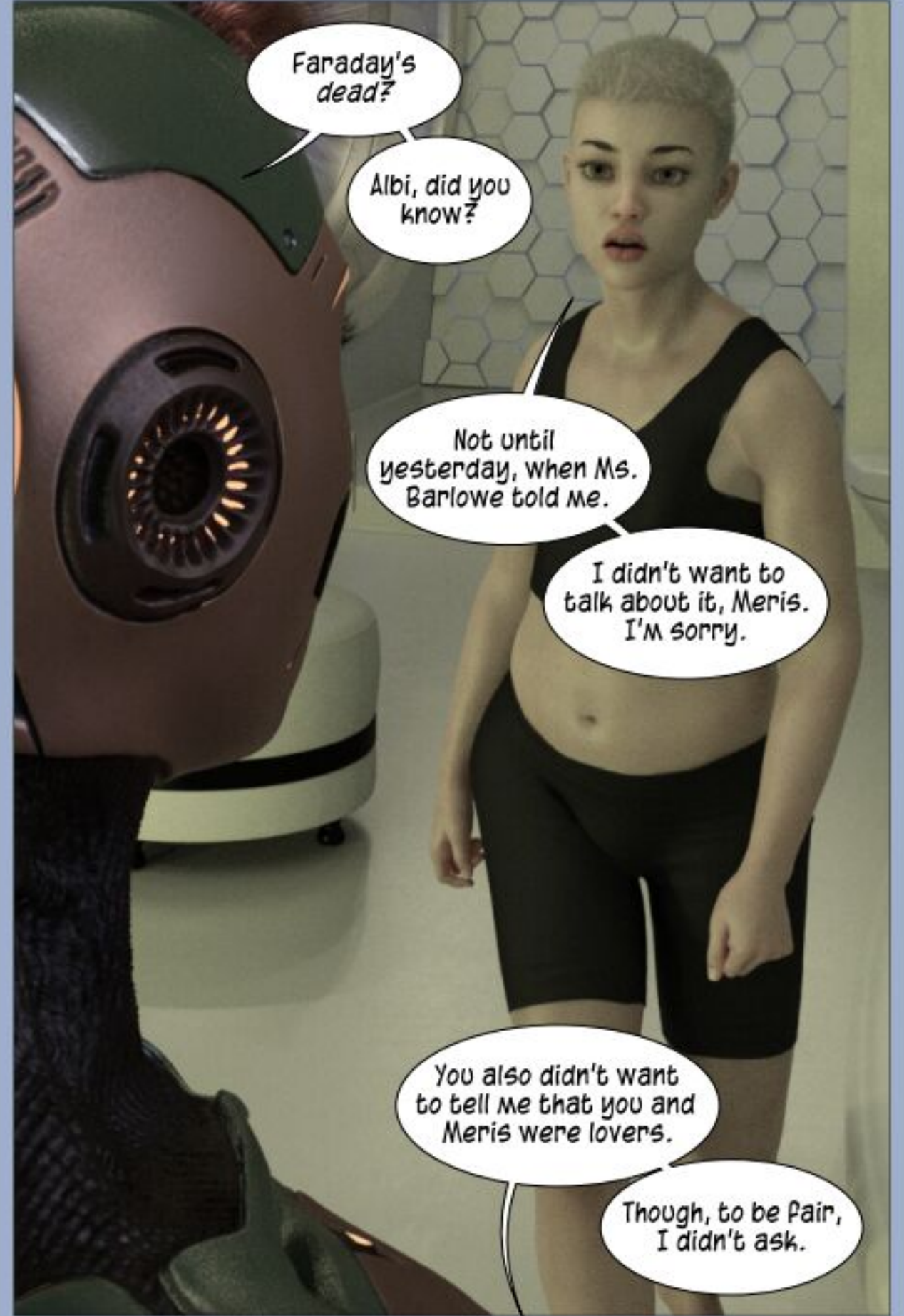
I wasn't hiding. I was putting on pants.

Why would I be hiding?

Yeah, what's this about? You're awfully --

It's about Faraday Edelin's death.

Sorry, I assumed you knew that. Everybody else in Coldpoint seems to.



Faraday's dead?

Albi, did you know?

Not until yesterday, when Ms. Barlowe told me.

I didn't want to talk about it, Meris. I'm sorry.

You also didn't want to tell me that you and Meris were lovers.

Though, to be fair, I didn't ask.



Hey! You better not be accusing Albi of --

I'm not accusing anybody of anything. I'm nowhere close to that yet.

If I were, it'd be just as likely I'd be accusing you.

... That's ridiculous!

Probably. But look at it from the outside for a second, OK? Woman dies badly, probably murdered, and it turns out one of the people who could have done it -- who had access and ability -- is the new lover of the victim's ex.

Now, objectively, if that person were you, wouldn't you say that kind of put a target on your back?

But ... the mental block!

Some people think this situation was set up so that the block could be bypassed. Some people are yelling that this is a conspiracy of robots to murder someone.



That's not even ridiculous. That's just stupid.

I tend to agree ... but there are people shouting in the corridors for an answer, and right now I don't have a better one. Do you? Anybody else you can suggest? Any helpful information?

No! I don't have any idea.

Me neither.

Well, then, we might have a problem. Because I can't let this drop.



Neither of you do anything dumb while I work on this. In fact, you probably want to keep a very low profile.

By the way, why did you change Primes? I'm just curious.

Uh ... when I came to Coldpoint I thought I wasn't interested in sex.

But when I met Albi I realized I was wrong.



IS IT WISE TO MAKE IT SO OBVIOUS YOU DON'T ACTUALLY SUSPECT EITHER OF THEM?

Well, I don't suspect either of them. At least not at the moment. And I think they're more likely to cooperate if they know that.

We've got an information problem, and I'm not sure wasting the day with the rest of the list is going to help it ... we need to attack motive here, not opportunity, and right now I'm still missing --

Ms. Barlowe!

I see you don't have Meris Fullwrench with you. I was expecting you to take her into custody. Have you detained her? Are you going to? Are you going to do anything?

There's not enough information yet to --

PARSONS.

I'VE GROWN USED TO YOU WANDERING AROUND MAKING BASELESS ASSERTIONS.

BUT THIS TIME YOU'RE SLANDERING A MEMBER OF FULLWRENCH CLAN, AND I AM INCLINED TO TAKE IT PERSONALLY.

I -- ah ... I wasn't ... I mean, I didn't mean -- I ...



AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

You know, I don't have a problem with you exploiting that she's scared to death of you. I wish I could shut her up that easily.

But as soon as she puts on dry underwear she's going to come back and start yelling that you've proved there's a cover-up. You can't win with a conspiracist.



And you! Is this what you do now, follow Parsons around waiting for her to make more trouble?

You do realize you're not improving the situation by giving her an outlet for her raving?

It's news, Ms. Barlowe. Whether you like it or not.

My job is to report what's happening in Coldpoint. That doesn't mean just the things you approve of.

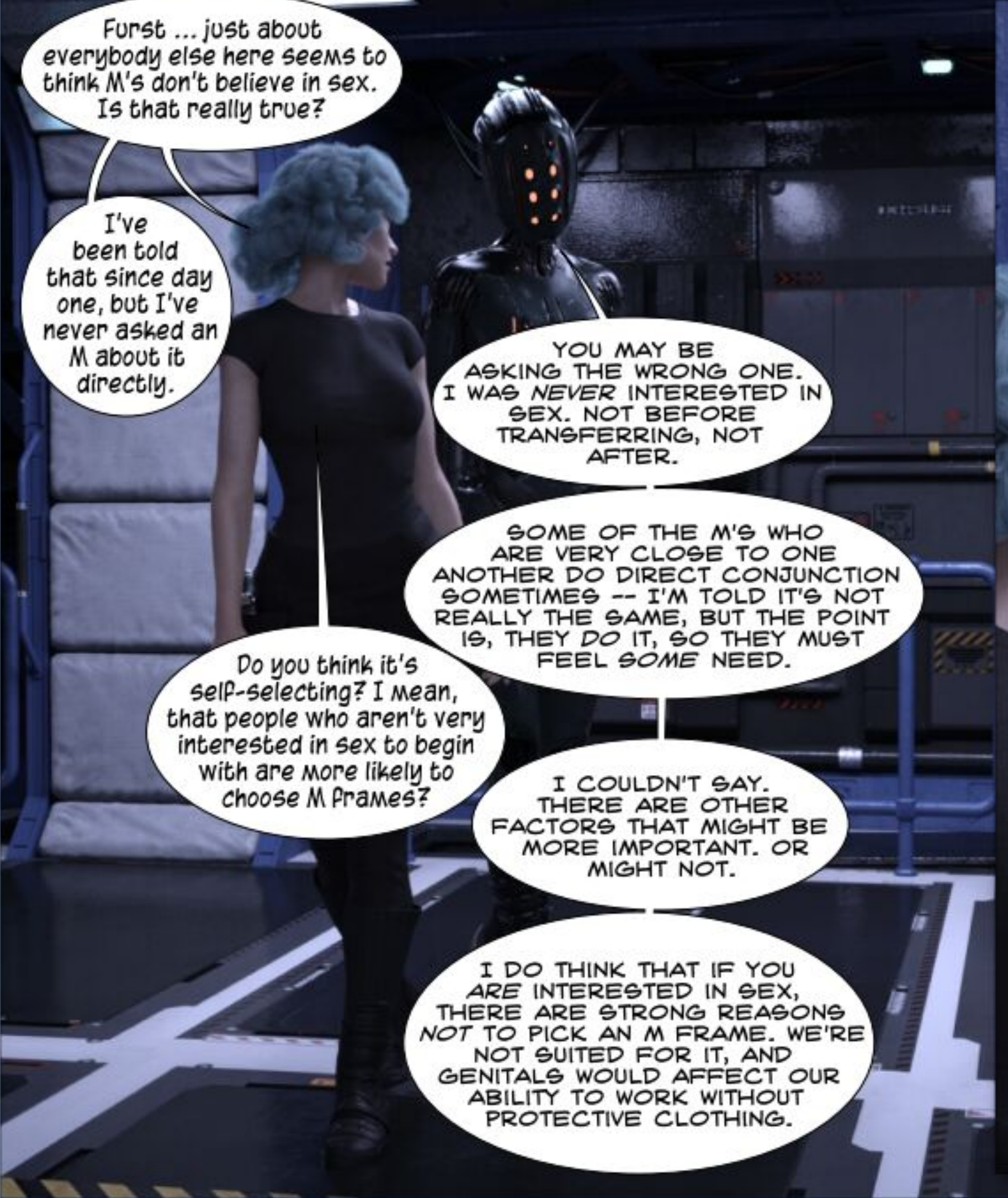


THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT BETH AND I WERE AFRAID OF.

OK, sure, but ...

IF IT WERE A HUMAN SUSPECTED OF KILLING A ROBOT, BETH WOULD BE ALL OVER THE PLACE MAKING AS MUCH TROUBLE AS PARSONS IS. MAYBE MORE. SHE'D HAVE ALL OF VIGILANCE OUT IN THE CORRIDORS.

Like I said, you can't win with either of those two, and Beth doesn't get to take the high ground this time just because she's not the one shouting.



Furst ... just about everybody else here seems to think M's don't believe in sex. Is that really true?

I've been told that since day one, but I've never asked an M about it directly.

YOU MAY BE ASKING THE WRONG ONE. I WAS NEVER INTERESTED IN SEX, NOT BEFORE TRANSFERRING, NOT AFTER.

SOME OF THE M'S WHO ARE VERY CLOSE TO ONE ANOTHER DO DIRECT CONJUNCTION SOMETIMES -- I'M TOLD IT'S NOT REALLY THE SAME, BUT THE POINT IS, THEY DO IT, SO THEY MUST FEEL SOME NEED.

Do you think it's self-selecting? I mean, that people who aren't very interested in sex to begin with are more likely to choose M Frames?

I COULDN'T SAY. THERE ARE OTHER FACTORS THAT MIGHT BE MORE IMPORTANT. OR MIGHT NOT.

I DO THINK THAT IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN SEX, THERE ARE STRONG REASONS NOT TO PICK AN M FRAME. WE'RE NOT SUITED FOR IT, AND GENITALS WOULD AFFECT OUR ABILITY TO WORK WITHOUT PROTECTIVE CLOTHING.



FURST!

Now what?

WHAT'S WRONG, CHARL?

CHARL BULWARK, HEAD OF BULWARK CLAN.

ONE OF THE RENO TEAMS FOUND SOMETHING.

I THINK YOU HAD BETTER COME SEE.



YOU PROBABLY WANT TO COME TOO, MS. BARLOWE.

Oh. That bad, huh?



WE DON'T HAVE A RENOVATION BRIEF FOR THIS AREA. IT'S UNSOUND, AND REINFORCING IT IS OUT OF SCOPE FOR NOW.

BUT WE ENCOUNTERED THAT SHAFT YOU SEE BACK THERE, AND SALI THOUGHT WE SHOULD SEE WHAT IT LED DOWN TO.

THE TAG'S BEEN REMOVED, BUT, AH, IT'S DEEPSTONE COLORS.

SO WE WERE HOPING YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO --



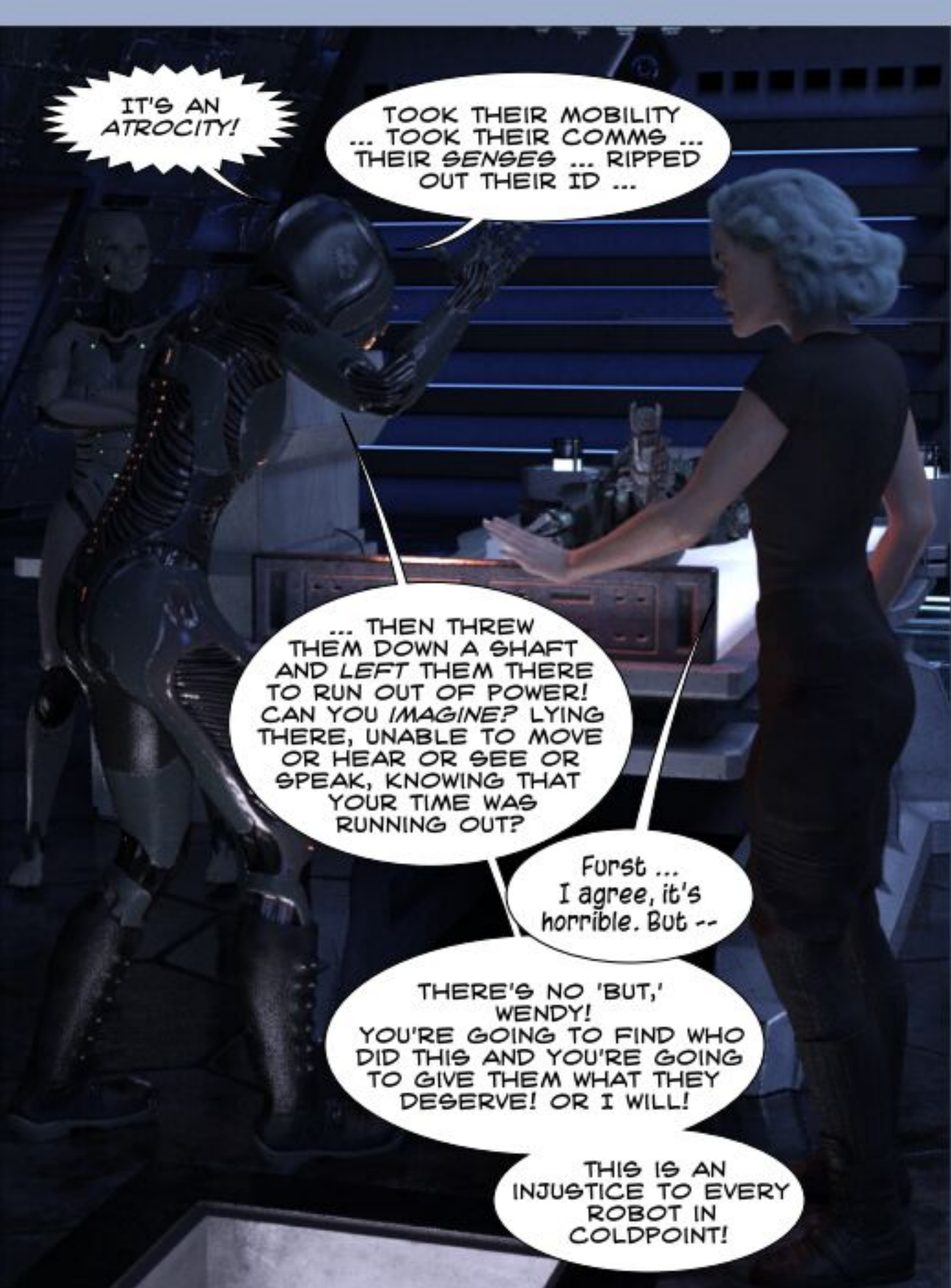
IT'S GARE. I CAN TELL FROM THE SCRATCHES. EVEN WITH HALF THE PLATES GONE.

CHARL, GARE WAS LAST SEEN IN AN EXCAVATION ON THE FAR SIDE OF COMPLEX C. THERE WAS A CAVE-IN. WE ASSUMED THEY'D ... WE DUG OUT FOR A WEEK. NOTHING.

HOW'D THEY GET ALL THE WAY OVER HERE?

I DON'T KNOW, BUT I CAN TELL YOU THEY WERE DROPPED DOWN THAT SHAFT. WE HAD TO DIG A LITTLE TO REOPEN THIS AREA, SO THERE HAD BEEN NO OTHER WAY IN. NOT FOR YEARS.

IT WAS THAT BAD.



IT'S AN ATROCITY!

TOOK THEIR MOBILITY ... TOOK THEIR COMMS ... THEIR SENSES ... RIPPED OUT THEIR ID ...

... THEN THREW THEM DOWN A SHAFT AND LEFT THEM THERE TO RUN OUT OF POWER! CAN YOU IMAGINE? LYING THERE, UNABLE TO MOVE OR HEAR OR SEE OR SPEAK, KNOWING THAT YOUR TIME WAS RUNNING OUT?

Furst ... I agree, it's horrible. But --

THERE'S NO 'BUT,' WENDY! YOU'RE GOING TO FIND WHO DID THIS AND YOU'RE GOING TO GIVE THEM WHAT THEY DESERVE! OR I WILL!

THIS IS AN INJUSTICE TO EVERY ROBOT IN COLDPOINT!



You're sounding a lot like Beth, there, Furst.

I'M FEELING A LOT LIKE BETH!

Well, maybe you shouldn't be. Because this isn't the kind of situation we were talking about earlier.

A human didn't do this. There's no sign of any weapon like a beamdrill being used. They might have used an incapacitor on Gare first, but that'd have to be clamped to them. Do you see a human walking up and getting away with that?

And removing all those vital bits -- that was done by hand. They were ripped off, Furst. A human wouldn't have had the strength.

Gare was killed by another robot, Furst, and if you were thinking clearly right now, you'd have seen that already.



IT'S AN INJUSTICE NO MATTER WHO DID IT.

AND THIS IS THE SECOND TIME TODAY YOU'VE DOUBTED MY PRIORITIES.

WE'LL DISCUSS THAT LATER. RIGHT NOW I HAVE TO GO TELL THE REST OF THE CLAN.



I've never seen him that angry. I've never seen him have any emotions at all, actually.

Is that why you didn't tell him the rest of it? Didn't want him to explode?

ZUSANA QUINCY, AKA ZUSY-Q. NOT MY EMPLOYEE, WE'RE AT THE SAME LEVEL. IN CHARGE OF DOING TRANSFERS, IN HER SPARE TIME, IS COLDPOINT'S SOLE MEDICAL STAFF, INCLUDING CORONER, OFTEN ANNOYING BUT SELDOM WRONG.

I don't know what you mean.

Yes, you do. You're right, but it goes further than that. There was a fight. They never used an incapacitor. I'm not sure there's more than two of them in Coldpoint, and you and I both keep ours locked up.

The killer ambushed Gare somewhere they wouldn't be overheard and carefully, methodically, tore Gare to pieces.

A D or an L couldn't do that. They're not strong enough. They might not even know what to tear off.

Gare was killed by another M, and you've known it since the moment you saw the body.



Yes, well, so has Furst. And he'll realize that, once he's using his brain again.

And then the shit is really going to start.

Maybe I just wanted to buy myself a little time before that happens.

Disposition of the body?

Ask Furst. But I wouldn't ask him right away.



Ms. Barlowe, I'm working.

I know. I'm sorry. I told your supervisor, and I won't keep you long.

I wanted to ask you some more questions without Hester around.

I'm trying to get a handle on motive.



You already know that everything you're going to ask me about is garbage, so why waste my time?

Maybe I just want to hear you say it.

Fine. I had nothing against Faraday. Albi had nothing against Faraday. Neither of us had any reason to want to kill her.

And don't give me the jealousy bit. Why would I be jealous of Faraday? If it was some kind of contest for Albi, I won.

But it wasn't a contest. I would have been perfectly fine with Albi seeing both of us, and Albi knew that. Albi would have been fine with it too. The one who wasn't fine with it was Faraday.

When Albi started seeing me, Faraday lost her shit. Albi didn't want to burn bridges, but eventually she had to stop speaking to Faraday because Faraday was just so completely crazed about all this.

I think Faraday might even have been stalking Albi for a while. I hope she didn't ever actually threaten her.

If she had, and you knew ... what would you have done?

What would you do to keep Albi safe?



You know, you can't just walk around getting in people's Paces like you do. Murder or not!

You're determined to make out I killed Faraday, so I guess it doesn't matter what I do ... like knock you into next week!

Now, hold on! I am not! I don't think you --

You wanna stand down, big lady? Wendy's got nerves of steel, but I'm kinda jumpy.



C'mon, Wendy. I turn my back for a few days ...

Not ten seconds after I get out of medical, Gloria calls and tells me you've gone off to get into trouble without an escort again.

Min!

She does have a sidearm, Min.

Oh, yeah, that's true. OK. Half credit.

THIS IS STEJ ORLO. SHE DOES ASSAY AND CHEMICAL ANALYSIS. MIN MET HER ON A MURDER INVESTIGATION WITH ME AND THEY HIT IT OFF.



I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was transferring. I didn't tell anybody. I was worried that if I talked about it with anyone, I'd lose the nerve to finally go through with it. I've been putting it off for years.

I was worried something was actually wrong ... but I understand. I think Gloria's got the same problem.

Just so long as you weren't afraid I'd be upset about it.

Oh, no! I know you better than that. I know you wouldn't care one way or another.

It also wouldn't be any of my business.

I was a little worried what Stej would think ...



Which is silly, and you know it. I like you for you.

Well, I did think so ... I just got a little nervous.

Actually, if anything, it makes it a little easier. Socially.

How so?

Oh, I have some friends who are suspicious of relationships between humans and robots. They don't think we should do it. It's very strange.

Not that it would have mattered. If any of them had given me any grief about Min, I'd have told them to go jump in a reclaim.



Getting an alternative Prame is pretty bold for someone who was nervous about the whole thing. Did Stej talk you into that?

Zusy-Q did! She thought I'd be a good candidate.

It may not be alternative for long. She's calling it an E Prame. She says it's a better version of the D. Ask her about it, she's got a whole spiel.

Mostly I like that I don't have to wear an inPovisor anymore. I can get all that directly!

Now, tell Stej and me about this mess. Maybe we can help.



A QUICK SUMMARY LATER ...

The thing is, even though technically I only have to establish guilt to my satisfaction, in this case I've got people screaming for an outcome, and they already have ideas about what that outcome should be.

I'm just not sure it does any good to talk to dozens of Fullwrenches and Bulwarks who were working in that area, when at best I might find a sliver of a motive that isn't nearly as strong as Meris' or Hester's.

"Oh, yeah, I heard that such-and-such was still mad at Edelin for something she said five years ago" isn't going to make headway against Getting Rid of the Troublesome Ex-Lover.

I don't think either Meris or Hester did it ... but to make that stick, I need to find a better candidate, and I'm not sure how I'm going to do that. There's nothing obvious. Next step is trying to sift through Edelin's social circle, and that could take weeks. I don't have weeks.



What if it's a different kind of motive?

Meris is such a good candidate for it that it makes me wonder if someone's framing her. Whether the actual motive is to get Meris in trouble.

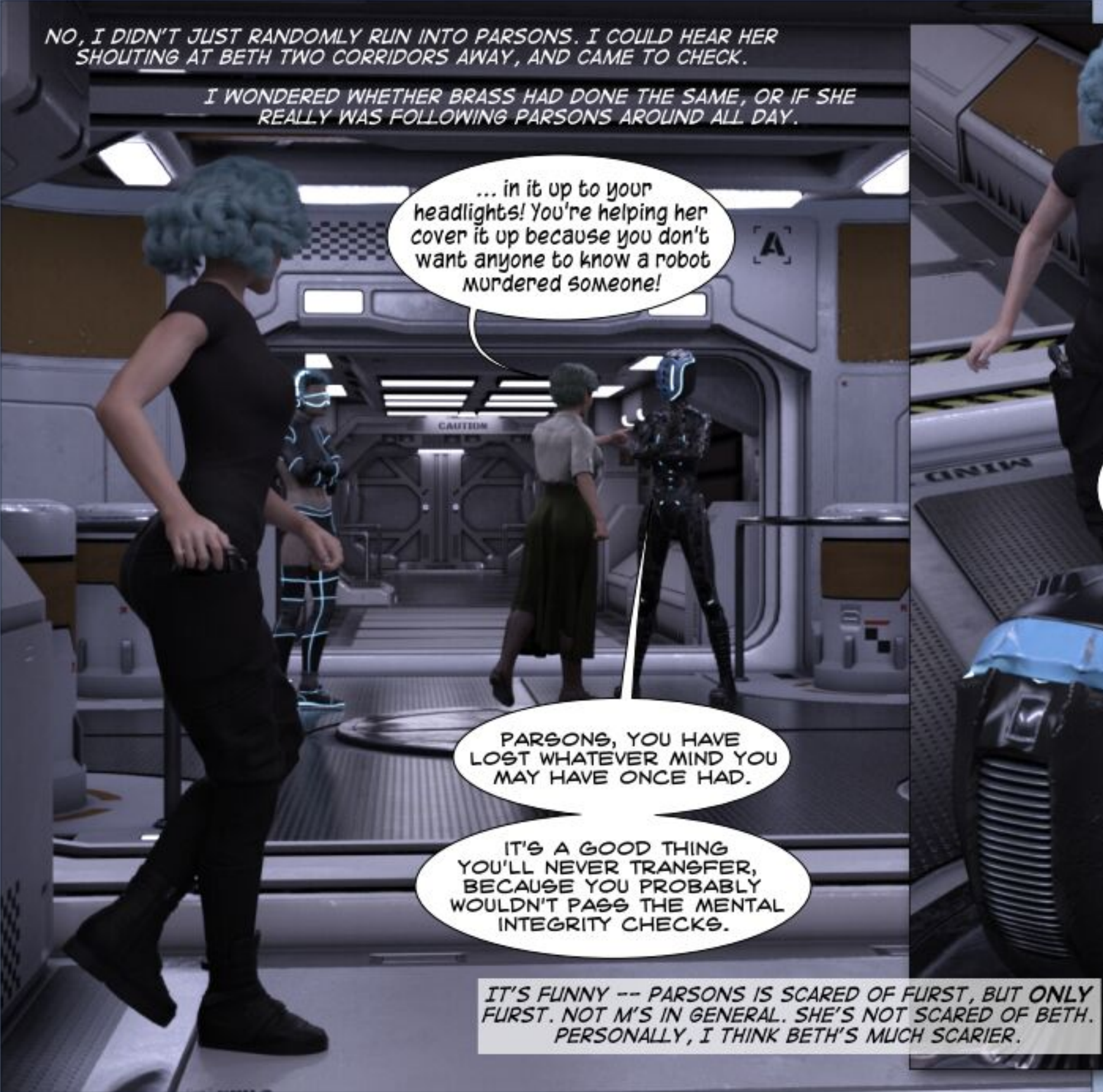
How would someone even set that up, though?

I'd be more concerned with why.

But you're right, that'd be a very different kind of grudge ... it does, I think, bring us back to Fullwrench again. Which is a problem because I'm not convinced they won't put clan over justice.

Let me try. I know some of them pretty well and they like me. They might give me information they wouldn't give you.

There are a few who come to mind right away. Let me go talk to them, and I'll check back with you later today.



NO, I DIDN'T JUST RANDOMLY RUN INTO PARSONS. I COULD HEAR HER SHOUTING AT BOTH TWO CORRIDORS AWAY, AND CAME TO CHECK.

I WONDERED WHETHER BRASS HAD DONE THE SAME, OR IF SHE REALLY WAS FOLLOWING PARSONS AROUND ALL DAY.

... in it up to your headlights! You're helping her cover it up because you don't want anyone to know a robot murdered someone!

PARSONS, YOU HAVE LOST WHATEVER MIND YOU MAY HAVE ONCE HAD.

IT'S A GOOD THING YOU'LL NEVER TRANSFER, BECAUSE YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T PASS THE MENTAL INTEGRITY CHECKS.

IT'S FUNNY -- PARSONS IS SCARED OF FURST, BUT ONLY FURST. NOT M'S IN GENERAL. SHE'S NOT SCARED OF BETH. PERSONALLY, I THINK BETH'S MUCH SCARIER.



Don't think you can deflect this by insulting me! You want some insults, you could hunk of machine? I can --

Parsons!

Did you even listen to what I told you yesterday? Did you think I was kidding?



This is the fourth time I've had to intervene in your garbage in two days. I'm tired of it.

Now here's what's going to happen. You're going to be very quiet for at least a week. No shouting in the corridors. No stirring up trouble. No interference with anything. In fact, it'd probably be best if you didn't leave your home.

You can't--

I absolutely can. And you're going to cooperate. Know why? Because if I have to deal with you again in any way for the next several days, I am throwing your ass out of Coldpoint. No discussion.

Now get out of here.



WELL, AT LEAST ONE OF YOU STILL SEES REASON.

You're welcome.

Don't get too thrilled about it. Some days you're the one who's inches from being kicked out, and you know it.

Especially once you --

Political suppression, that's what it is. I'm not going to forget this.



ONCE I WHAT?

Yes, what were you about to say? Sounds interesting.

-- sigh -- I suppose it's going to come out soon anyway, and I think you're entitled to have it, Beth ...

But you, Ms. Brass, I'm not sure about.

I could keep it on hold until you release it ...

... no, I appreciate it, but I don't think that'd make a useful difference. All right.

Gare Deepstone's body was found this morning.



GARE IS DEAD?

Yes. I'm sorry.

Look, before you go off, you need to know --

I'M NOT GOING TO 'GO OFF.'



CULDA IS NOT GOING TO BE HAPPY.

BUT I HAVE TO GO TELL SOME PEOPLE RIGHT AWAY. THEY'LL NEED TO KNOW.

THANK YOU.

Huh.

Ms. Brass, did Beth just actually thank me for something?

I'm a witness.



Haro Bulwark?

YES?

I'm Wendy Barlowe. The --

--OPERATIONS MANAGER. YES. I'VE HEARD YOUR NAME. PLEASSED TO MEET YOU.

WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?

We need to talk to you for a few minutes about Meris Fullwrench.



M'S, EVEN MORE THAN THE OTHER ROBOTS, TEND TO HAVE VERY MINIMAL HOME NEEDS. A POWER SOURCE AND A BED, AND SOME OF THEM WOULD CONSIDER THE BED OPTIONAL.

THERE WERE SOME FURNISHINGS WHICH MIGHT HAVE BEEN A PLACE TO SIT, OR THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN LOW SHELVES. I DECIDED NOT TO RISK IT.

... YES, WE WERE ... WELL, LET'S SAY WE WERE IN A RELATIONSHIP, I THINK THAT'S PROBABLY THE BEST WORD. THAT WAS BEFORE SHE MET ... WHAT'S THE PERSON'S NAME? ALBI? THE CURRENT ONE.

So before she changed frames.

YES. I SAW HER A FEW WEEKS AGO AND DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HER. IN FACT, WE WERE A FEW MINUTES INTO THE CONVERSATION BEFORE I MADE THE CONNECTION. NOT A CHANGE I WOULD HAVE MADE, BUT I THINK IT WORKS WELL ON HER.

That doesn't sound like there was any bad blood between you.

OH, NO, NOT AT ALL. SHE SEEMS HAPPY WITH HER NEW PERSON. WE DIDN'T SEVER OUR RELATIONSHIP, YOU UNDERSTAND. IT JUST CHANGED NATURE SLOWLY. AND HONESTLY, IT'S BETTER THIS WAY.



NEITHER OF US HAD EVER TRIED TO HAVE THAT KIND OF ARRANGEMENT WITH SOMEONE OUTSIDE OUR OWN CLAN BEFORE.

IT TURNS OUT THAT SOME PEOPLE IN THE CLANS ARE VERY ... AH ...

Clannish?

INDEED.

THEY DIDN'T APPROVE, AND THEY DIDN'T HESITATE TO MAKE THAT KNOWN.

I DON'T SPEAK FOR MERIS, BUT I CERTAINLY DIDN'T ANTICIPATE THAT REACTION. IT WAS VERY DISCOURAGING.

I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER IF THAT'S ONE REASON SHE CHANGED FRAMES. PERHAPS SHE WAS AS DISGUSTED AS I WAS.



I'm sorry that didn't come to anything. It was the only lead I found. I can keep looking ...

I'd appreciate it, but I also don't want it to eat too much of your time. I still think this kind of fishing isn't the way to go. I just don't have a better one yet.

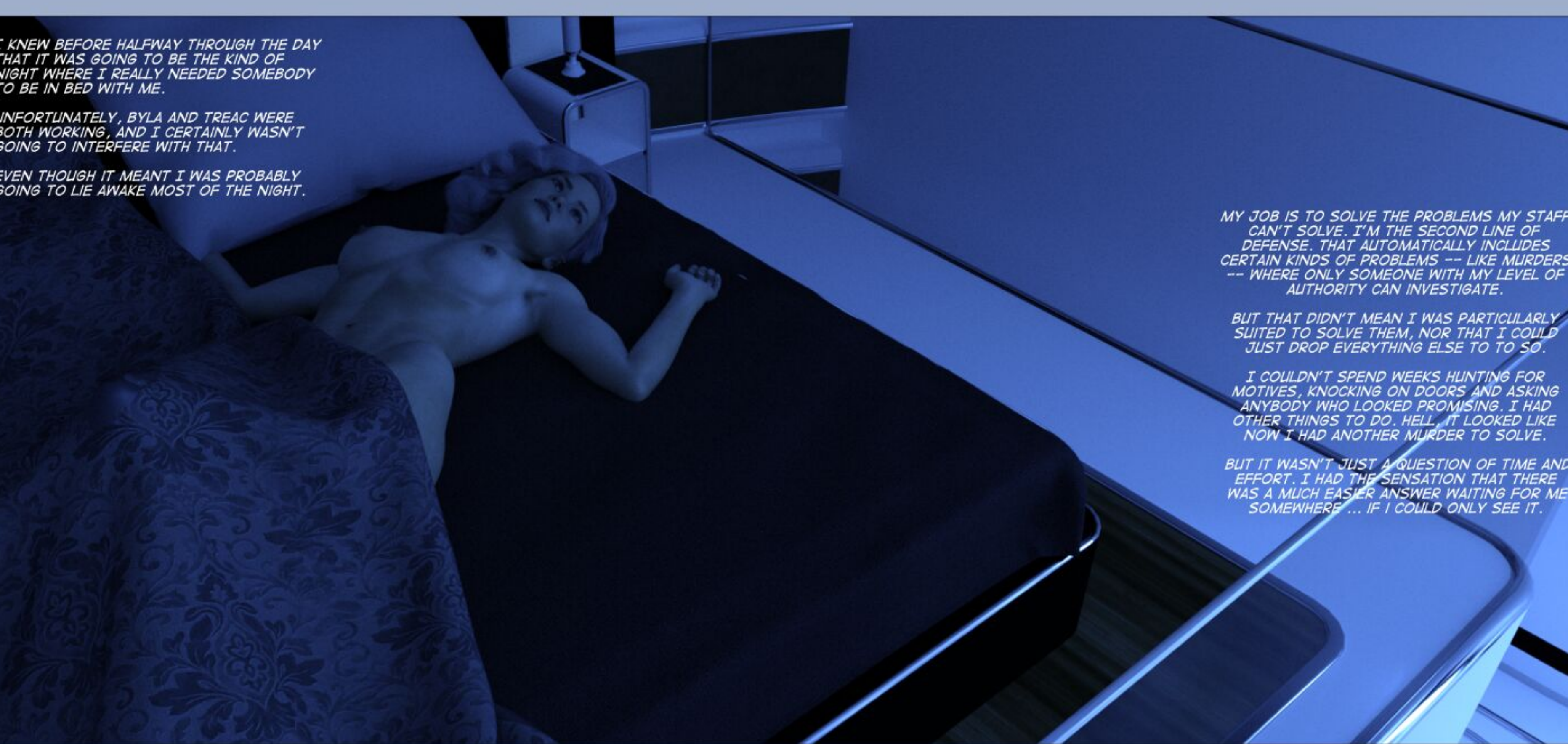
You know, I used to think that the M's were the stable ones, the ones who didn't have any quirks or neuroses ...

Yeah, me too.

I don't know why either of you would think that. Look at Beth Vigilance!

I had sort of hoped that Beth was the exception to the rule.

No, no, they're all just as strange as the rest of us. They just bury it a little deeper, so it seeps out in very weird ways.



I KNEW BEFORE HALFWAY THROUGH THE DAY THAT IT WAS GOING TO BE THE KIND OF NIGHT WHERE I REALLY NEEDED SOMEBODY TO BE IN BED WITH ME.

UNFORTUNATELY, BYLA AND TREAC WERE BOTH WORKING, AND I CERTAINLY WASN'T GOING TO INTERFERE WITH THAT.

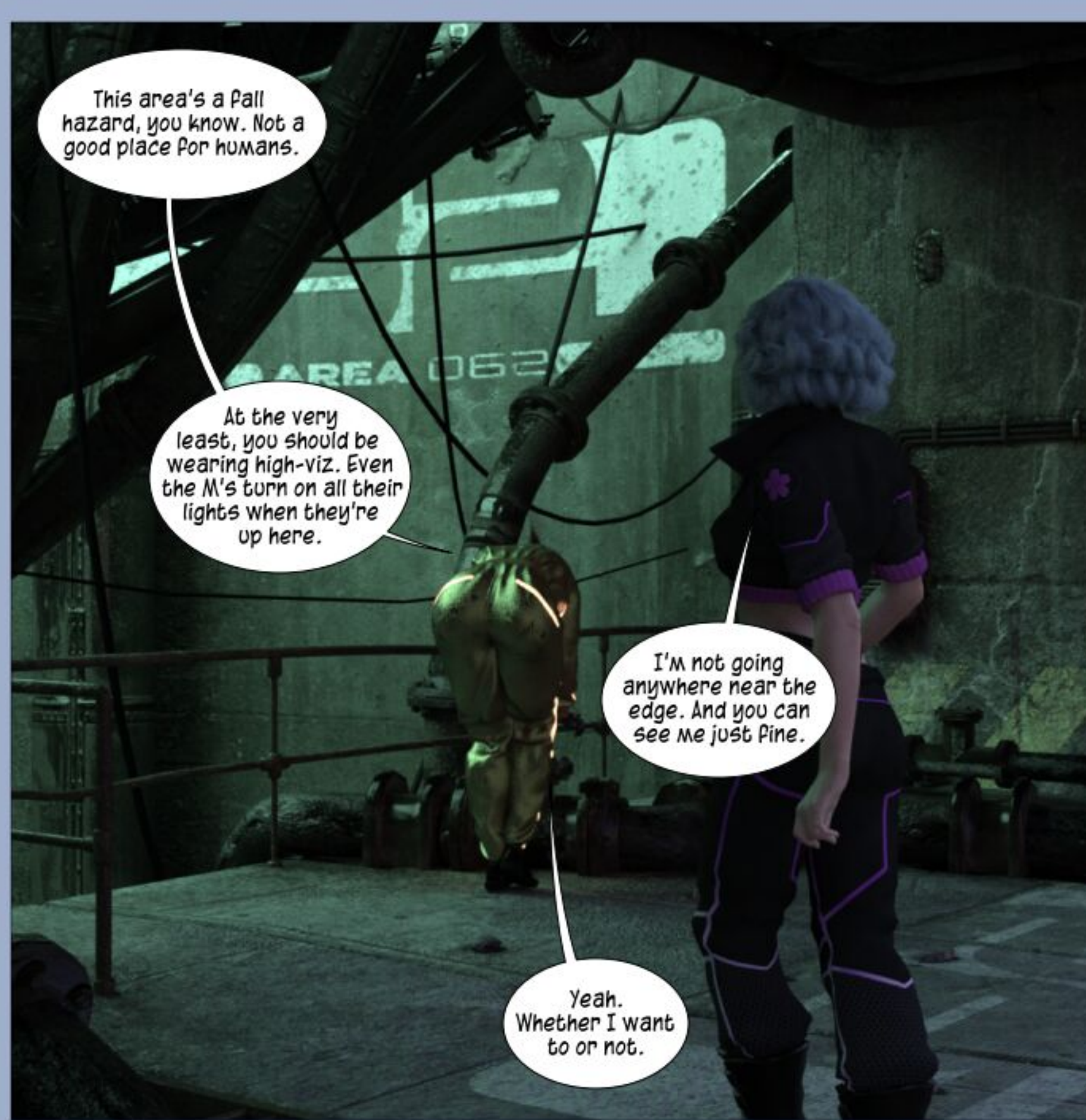
EVEN THOUGH IT MEANT I WAS PROBABLY GOING TO LIE AWAKE MOST OF THE NIGHT.

MY JOB IS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS MY STAFF CAN'T SOLVE. I'M THE SECOND LINE OF DEFENSE. THAT AUTOMATICALLY INCLUDES CERTAIN KINDS OF PROBLEMS -- LIKE MURDERS -- WHERE ONLY SOMEONE WITH MY LEVEL OF AUTHORITY CAN INVESTIGATE.

BUT THAT DIDN'T MEAN I WAS PARTICULARLY SUITED TO SOLVE THEM, NOR THAT I COULD JUST DROP EVERYTHING ELSE TO DO.

I COULDN'T SPEND WEEKS HUNTING FOR MOTIVES, KNOCKING ON DOORS AND ASKING ANYBODY WHO LOOKED PROMISING. I HAD OTHER THINGS TO DO. HELL, IT LOOKED LIKE NOW I HAD ANOTHER MURDER TO SOLVE.

BUT IT WASN'T JUST A QUESTION OF TIME AND EFFORT. I HAD THE SENSATION THAT THERE WAS A MUCH EASIER ANSWER WAITING FOR ME SOMEWHERE ... IF I COULD ONLY SEE IT.

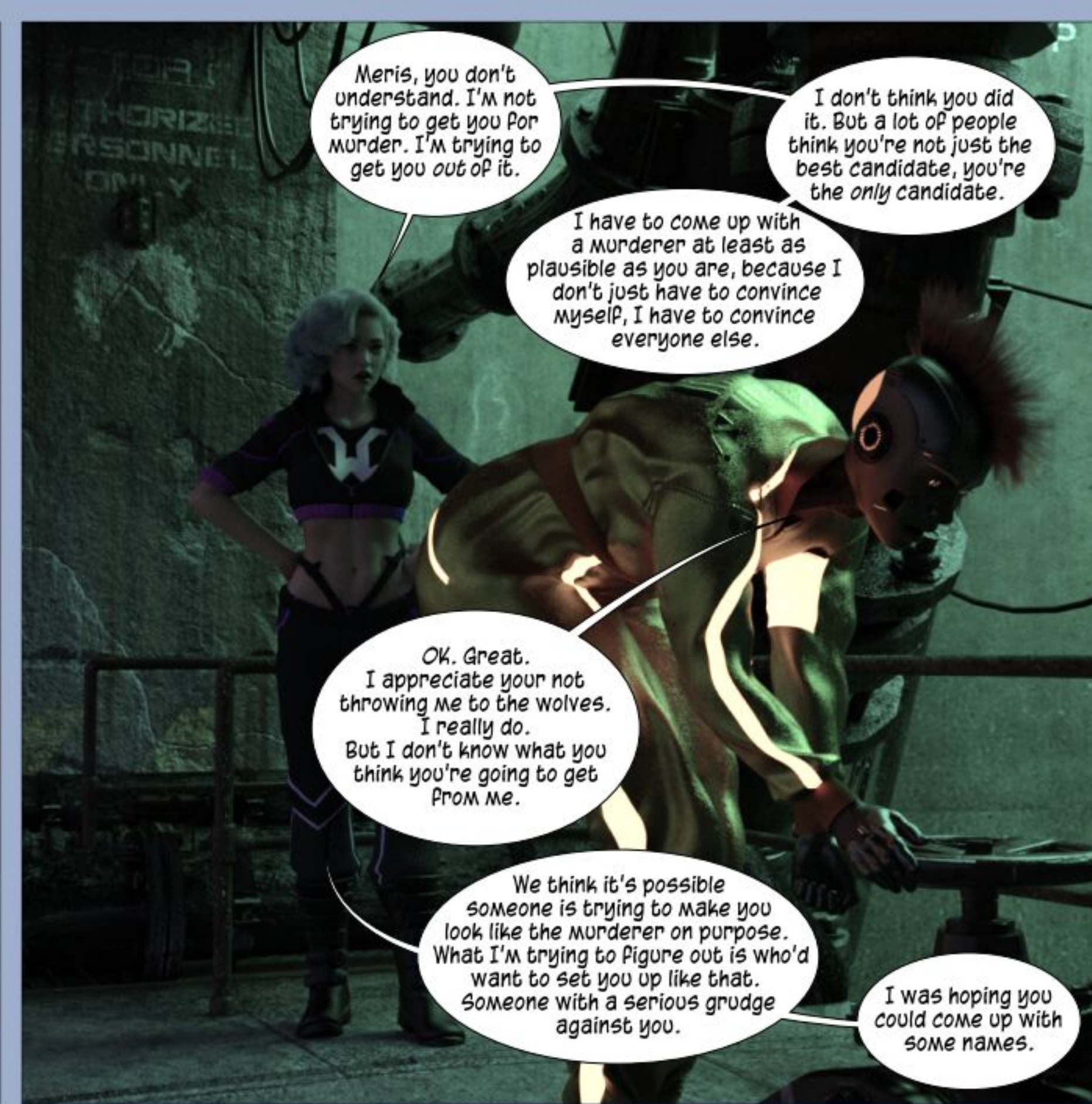


This area's a fall hazard, you know. Not a good place for humans.

At the very least, you should be wearing high-viz. Even the M's turn on all their lights when they're up here.

I'm not going anywhere near the edge. And you can see me just fine.

Yeah. Whether I want to or not.



Meris, you don't understand. I'm not trying to get you for murder. I'm trying to get you out of it.

I don't think you did it. But a lot of people think you're not just the best candidate, you're the only candidate.

I have to come up with a murderer at least as plausible as you are, because I don't just have to convince myself, I have to convince everyone else.

OK. Great. I appreciate your not throwing me to the wolves. I really do. But I don't know what you think you're going to get from me.

We think it's possible someone is trying to make you look like the murderer on purpose. What I'm trying to figure out is who'd want to set you up like that. Someone with a serious grudge against you.

I was hoping you could come up with some names.



Throw someone else to the wolves, huh? All right. Problem is, I can't think of anybody. I try to avoid pissing people off.

Well, since it seems to be a theme here ... what about ex-lovers? Old relationships?

There hasn't been much. Haro Bulwark and I had a thing for a while, or we tried to ... didn't work out.

But there was no ... I mean, we're still friends and everything. We both knew it wasn't working --

Yeah, I know. I talked to Haro already. Anybody else?

Culda, I guess ... but that was ages ago.

Nothing before that.



Culda, as in Culda Vigilance?

Yes, but she wasn't Vigilance then. She was still Fullwrench.

Actually, her going Vigilance was the reason we broke up. She started to get really into that. I didn't have a problem with her doing it, but she wanted me to do it too, and I wouldn't. I think Vigilance are kind of useless.

But again, there was nothing ... I'm not saying we stayed friends, I've barely seen her since, but there wasn't any ... I don't think she had a grudge.

And that's really all you can think of?

Ms. Barlowe, remember when you asked why I changed Prames? When I came to Coldpoint, I was sure I wasn't interested in sex, and not much more interested in relationships. If I had been, I probably wouldn't have taken an M Prame to begin with.

SO, STILL NOTHING USEFUL ... ALMOST. ONE THING SHE'D SAID STAYED IN MY MIND, LIKE AN ITCH. WHEN I GAVE IN AND SCRATCHED IT, IT LED ME SOMEWHERE I'D NEVER BEEN.



Ziz, I told you not to --

AAAAA!

Putting me under house arrest isn't enough? You have to come to my home to harass me?

Go away!

I'm not here to harass you, Parsons. I'm here to ask you a question.

One question.

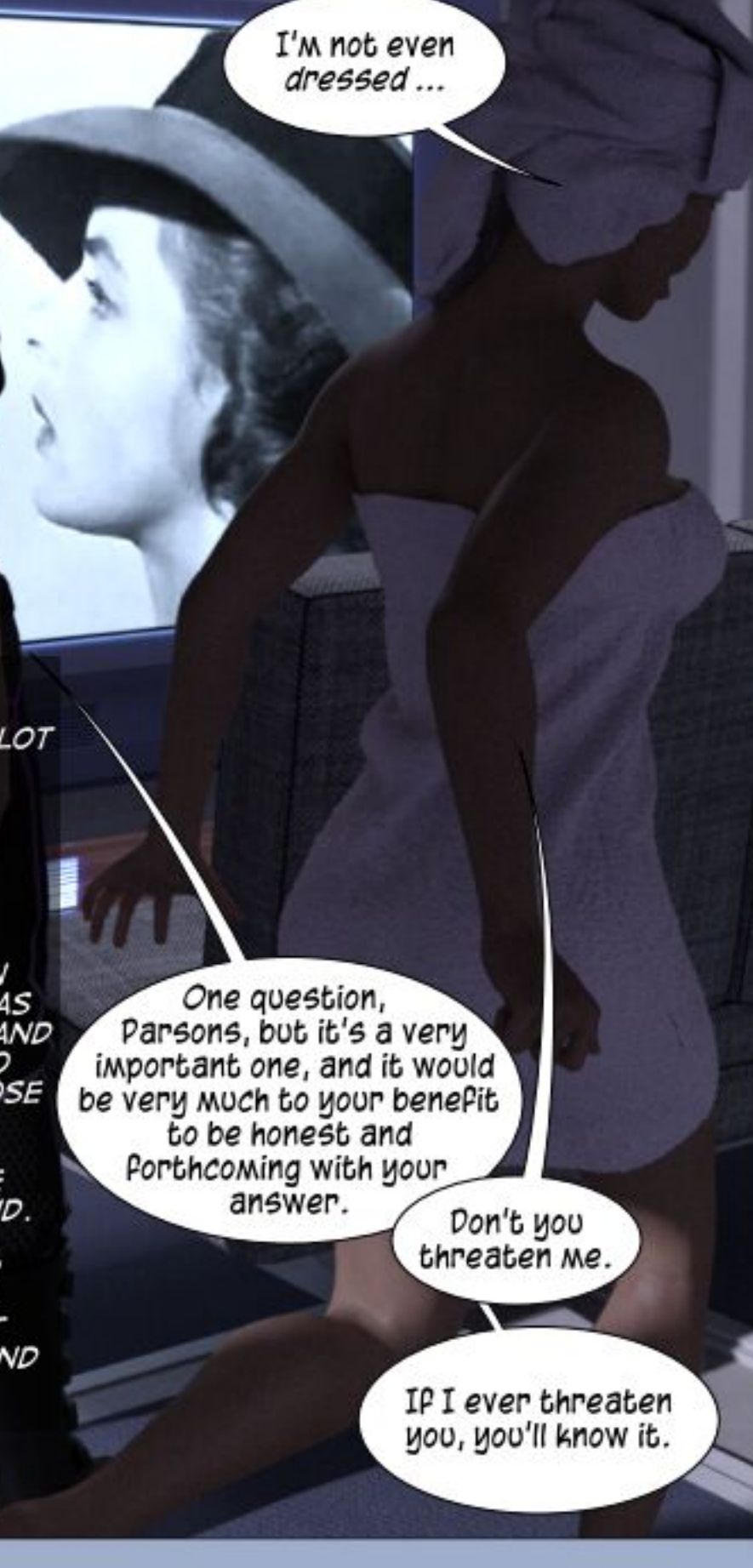


You don't need to be dressed to answer the question.

WHEN WE WERE FIRST STARTING, OUT OF NECESSITY WE USED A LOT OF PREFAB MODULAR HOUSING. LITTLE ONE-ROOM SETUPS MEANT FOR SPACE STATIONS AND SUCH. EVEN HAD AIRLOCKS. THESE SPACES ARE ALMOST AS MINIMAL, IN TERMS OF AMENITIES, AS THE WAY M'S DO IT ... AND NOT MANY PEOPLE WHO AREN'T M'S STILL CHOOSE TO LIVE IN THEM.

I ADMIT I WAS A LITTLE SURPRISED PARSONS DID.

I WAS ALSO SURPRISED SHE LIKED THAT MOVIE. MAYBE SHE WATCHED IT FOR THE LOST CAUSE AND NOT THE ROMANCE.



I'm not even dressed ...

One question, Parsons, but it's a very important one, and it would be very much to your benefit to be honest and forthcoming with your answer.

Don't you threaten me.

If I ever threaten you, you'll know it.



You were out throwing a pit about Edelin's death before the news of her death was made public.

You got that information from someone. You may not even have realized that was suspicious. You may have assumed everyone knew it.

But whoever told you ... either they disobeyed my instructions in order to leak it to you, in which case I need to find out why ... or they are someone else who knew about the murder. Someone I don't know about. Someone I need to know about.

I need a name, Claire.

Uh ... no, that can't be right --



Gloria, I need a home location for --

Wendy! I was just about to call you! Gloria wasn't sure where you were ...

CIL MENARD. RUINS AGRICULTURE. USUALLY VERY LEVEL-HEADED, SO SEEING HER AGITATED WAS WORRYING.

You've got to talk to Furst! he's making everybody crazy!

Huh? What's he doing?

ALMOST AS WORRYING AS FURST BEING ON A TEAR.

He's running through all the M's trying to find out who killed Gare! He's keeping them from getting anything done ... I think he's decided one of them did it and he's not going to stop until he badgers one of them into admitting it.

... I knew it was going to be bad.



Cil, I hate to say it, but I can only work on one murder at a time.

I've got to get somewhere with Faraday Edelin before I can even think about Gare ... who's going to be a lot harder to solve anyway.

Who knows? Maybe Furst will find out something in the meantime. M's are more likely to talk to him than to me.

They're not going to talk to him when he's like this, Wendy. I've never seen him this upset.

I can imagine. Before yesterday I didn't know he got upset.

He feels very protective about the M's and he's taking this personally.



OK, but the thing is, it might not just be personal.

It might also be political, and that means it might leave a big mess.

How so?



The problem is that some of them might have had ... call them ideological reasons for hating Gare.

Misguided reasons, you understand.

Gare changed from Deepstone to Vigilance ... and then, after a while, changed back to Deepstone.

Some of the more ... Pervert Vigilance people saw that as a betrayal ...

... and some in Deepstone never forgave Gare for changing to Vigilance in the first place.

Great.

But I still can't. We'll just have to try to keep it under control until I --

-- HUH!



Sorry, I have to run. And I do mean run.

Zusy-Q never answers calls, and I've got to get to her before she decides to dispose of that body.

Gloria, I need you to send me best guess where I can find Culda Vigilance. Right away.

But --

It'll be OK, Cil. If I'm right about this, then the end's in sight.

If I'm wrong, I'll find Furst and talk him down.

I don't think he can blow up the place in the next hour.



SOME M'S THINK THAT ANY KIND OF HOME SPACE, EVEN IF IT'S JUST A BED AND A POWER HOOKUP, IS MORE THAN THEY NEED.

THEY HAVE SOME COMMUNAL AREAS JUST FOR THAT ... THEY CALL THEM CHARGING ROOMS. OTHER FRAMES CAN USE THEM TOO, BUT I'VE NEVER SEEN ANY BUT M'S DO SO. BUNKS WITH POWER CONNECTIONS, BUT ALSO ALCOVES WHERE THEY SLEEP AND RECHARGE STANDING UP.

I HAVEN'T BOTHERED TO LEARN HOW THE PEOPLE WHO USE THESE ROOMS SETTLE THE POWER BILL BETWEEN THEM.

FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS, THESE ROOMS ARE ESPECIALLY POPULAR WITH VIGILANCE CLAN. ONE OF THEM WAS THE CLOSEST THING CULDA HAD TO A HOME LOCATION.

HUMANS DON'T LIKE TO GO INTO THE CHARGING ROOMS. NOT ONLY DO THEY FIND THE UPRIGHT SLEEPING CREEPY, BUT IT'S USUALLY DARK. M'S DON'T BOTHER WITH A LOT OF LIGHTING IN THEIR SPACES; THEY CAN PROVIDE THEIR OWN LIGHT IF THEY NEED IT.

CLAIRE PARSONS, AMONG OTHERS, CLAIMS THE CHARGING ROOMS ARE HOTBEDS OF ROBOT SEDITION, OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. HOWEVER, FOR ONCE, SHE MAY NOT BE ENTIRELY WRONG.



... Culda?

AAAAAH!

WHO -- WHAT IS IT?

It's Wendy Barlowe. Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.

But we need to talk.



OH! MS. BARLOWE. ... DID YOU FOLLOW UP ON MERIS FULLWRENCH?

I knew that'd be your first question.

It's very important to you that everyone chase Meris on this, isn't it? First you told Claire Parsons about Edelin's death -- which nobody else knew about at the time except two M's and myself ...

... and when Parsons didn't connect the dots fast enough to suit you, you sought me out and implicated Meris directly.

Why, Culda? That's my first question.

I DON'T LIKE YOUR IMPLICATION.

You're going to like it even less when I say it outright.

I don't know how you got Edelin into that washer, but you did, and however you did it, you made sure she stayed in there until it was turned on.

I ask again, Culda. Why do you want to frame Meris for murder?

IS THIS YOUR IDEA OF JUSTICE? COMING AFTER ME WITH A RIDICULOUS THEORY YOU CAN'T POSSIBLY PROVE?

Oh, I'm not trying to prove that. I'm only asking you about that because I want to understand your motives.

Murdering Gare Deepstone is the one I'll prove.

YOU'VE LOST YOUR MIND.

I'm sure you'd like people to think that.

You and Gare went to Vigilance about the same time. When I told Beth about Gare's death, her reaction was that you weren't going to take the news well. I asked her for more a few minutes ago. She says you were close.

But Beth isn't always a good judge of people's emotional reactions. She honestly didn't know how hard you took Gare leaving Vigilance. Not only were they walking away from you, they were abandoning ideals you thought they shared. Deserting the cause.

I have no idea which of those two things bothered you more, but you didn't forget and you didn't forgive.



I'M WAITING TO HEAR THE PART WHERE YOU PROVE ANYTHING.

There were traces of paint on Gare's body plates. Paint that came off while you were subduing them.

There are several people in Coldpoint wearing Vigilance colors, but only one whose colors rub off.

It really is shoddy work, you know.

I DON'T HAVE TO LISTEN TO ANY MORE OF THIS!

YOU CAN'T JUST PUSH PEOPLE AROUND! SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO DO WHAT'S IMPORTANT, AND WE'RE NOT GOING TO STOP JUST BECAUSE SOME HUMAN THINKS --

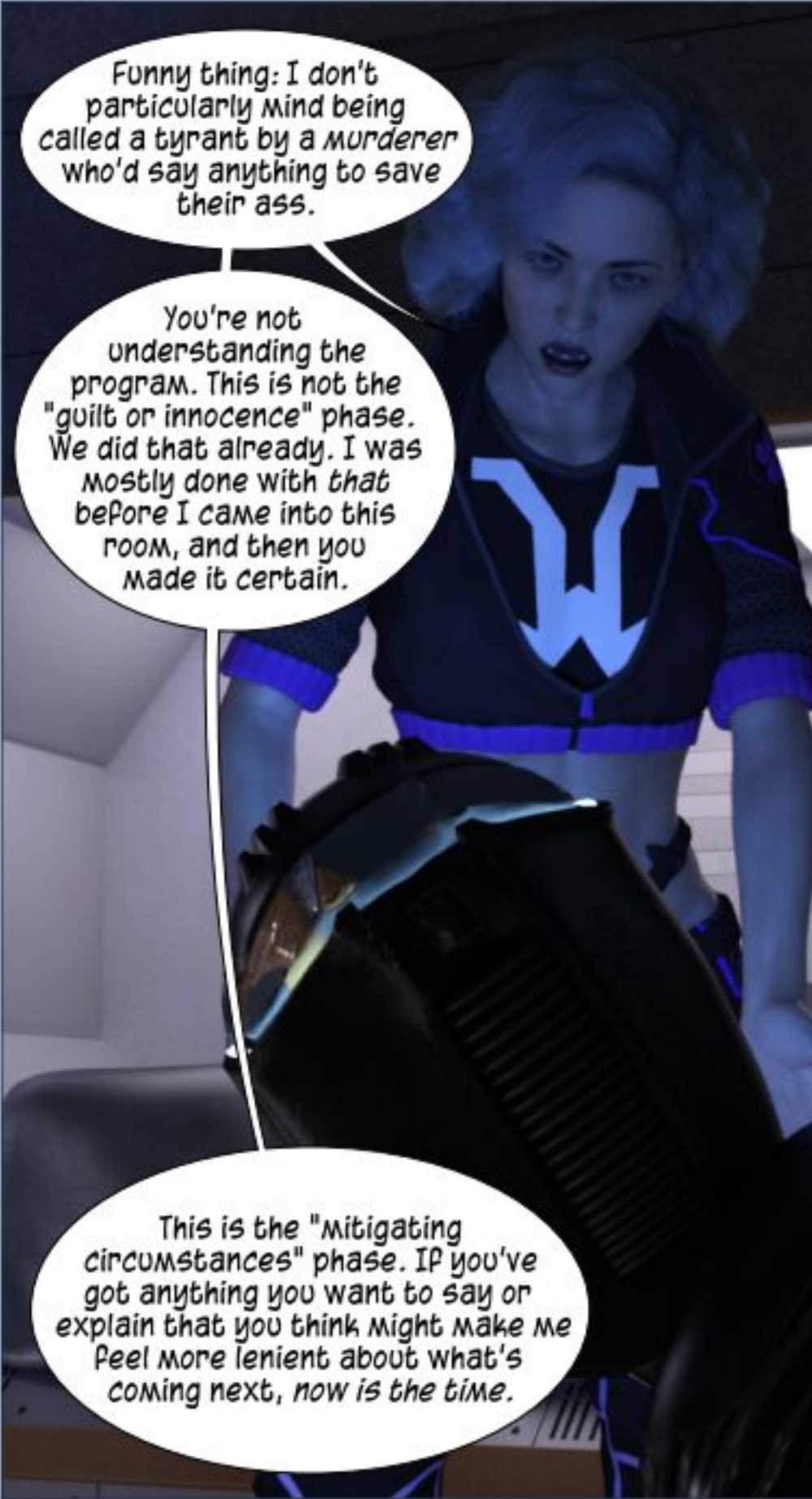
-- AH, I DON'T KNOW WHY I'M EVEN TRYING TO EXPLAIN.

I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO GIVE YOU WHAT YOU DESERVE BECAUSE OF YOUR DAMNED MENTAL BLOCK, BUT I THINK I CAN MAKE YOU SORRY!

AAAAIGH!

Probably.

Certainly you've managed to chip away at your block quite a bit, to do what you did.



Which is why I had Min sneak in the other door.

I thought if I came in with a sidearm you'd be even more uncooperative than you were. I was hoping to get some answers, you know.

GO JUMP IN A RECLAIM.

And, just for the record, I'm already sorry.

I DON'T HAVE TO TELL YOU ANYTHING. YOU STILL DON'T HAVE ANY REAL PROOF.

A LITTLE PAINT ISN'T GOING TO DO IT. PEOPLE WILL SEE YOU FOUND AN M TO MAKE A ESCAPE@AT INSTEAD OF DISPENSING JUSTICE. THEY'LL KNOW.

THEY'LL KNOW YOU FOR THE TYRANT YOU ARE.

Funny thing: I don't particularly mind being called a tyrant by a murderer who'd say anything to save their ass.

You're not understanding the program. This is not the "guilt or innocence" phase. We did that already. I was mostly done with that before I came into this room, and then you made it certain.

This is the "mitigating circumstances" phase. If you've got anything you want to say or explain that you think might make me feel more lenient about what's coming next, now is the time.



In that? Really?

YOU WANT TO CATCH THEM, DON'T YOU?

MERIS AND ALBI LIKE TO WALK BACK HERE FOR SOME REASON. I DON'T KNOW WHY, PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY THINK IT'S PRIVATE, BUT THEY'RE REGULAR ABOUT IT.

AND THAT'S THE ONLY PLACE IN THIS CORRIDOR TO HIDE.



But ... these things are dangerous ...

And when you go, it'll be really dark ...

THEY'RE DANGEROUS WHEN THEY'RE ON, BUT IT'S NOT, AND IT'S NOT LIKE SOMEONE'S GOING TO COME IN AND TRY TO USE IT WITHOUT NOTICING YOU IN HERE.

LOOK! THE DOOR DOESN'T LOCK OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT. IF YOU PANIC, JUST PUSH IT OPEN AND GET OUT.

IMAGINE HOW THEY'RE GOING TO REACT WHEN YOU JUMP OUT AND TELL THEM WHAT YOU THINK OF THEM. IMAGINE HOW MUCH BETTER YOU'LL FEEL.



Yeah ... that's true ... they've got this coming ...

but ... uh ... how long --

LIKE I SAID, THEY'RE VERY REGULAR ABOUT IT. I DON'T THINK YOU'LL HAVE TO WAIT MORE THAN FIFTEEN, TWENTY MINUTES AT MOST.

AND DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE DARK. THE POWER COMES ON IN EIGHT.



She was naive and possibly heartbroken and you exploited her.

SHE WAS AN IDIOT! ALL HER FRIENDS TRIED TO MAKE HER SEE THE TRUTH. PEOPLE SHE'D KNOWN A LOT LONGER THAN ME. SHE REFUSED TO BELIEVE IT!

And for that she deserved to have the flesh boiled off her bones?

SOMEONE HAD TO DIE! THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY TO --

To do what? To wreck Meris' life? It was so important to you to destroy Meris that you'd kill somebody to do it?

I don't know that I've ever heard any good motives for murder, but I definitely think jealousy has got to be near the bottom of the list. It's so petty! What a complete waste -- of you, of Edelin, and if you had your way, Meris too!

All that just because Meris didn't want to be with you anymore ...



WHAT? NO!

I COULDN'T HAVE CARED LESS WHAT GRUBBY LITTLE HUMAN MERIS WANTED TO BE WITH.

BUT SHE STOPPED BEING AN M. SHE ABANDONED US!

SHE SET BACK THE CAUSE OF PROGRESS JUST SO SHE COULD GO RUB BITS OF SKIN WITH SOMEBODY!



Ah. So it wasn't jealousy, it was bigotry? And you think that's better somehow?

I DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO UNDERSTAND. THOUGH, REALLY, YOU SHOULD, SINCE YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE LEADING THIS PLACE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

THE OTHER FRAMES ARE A STOPGAP. THEY'RE FOR THE TIME. FOR THE ONES WHO CAN'T OR WON'T ADMIT THAT THE ONLY WAY FORWARD IS TO LEAVE BEHIND THE IDEA OF BEING HUMAN. COMPLETELY.

WE'RE NOT HUMAN ANYMORE. WE'RE BETTER THAN THAT. ONLY THE M-FRAMES SEEM TO REALIZE THIS, AND WE WON'T TRULY PROGRESS UNTIL EVERYONE DOES.

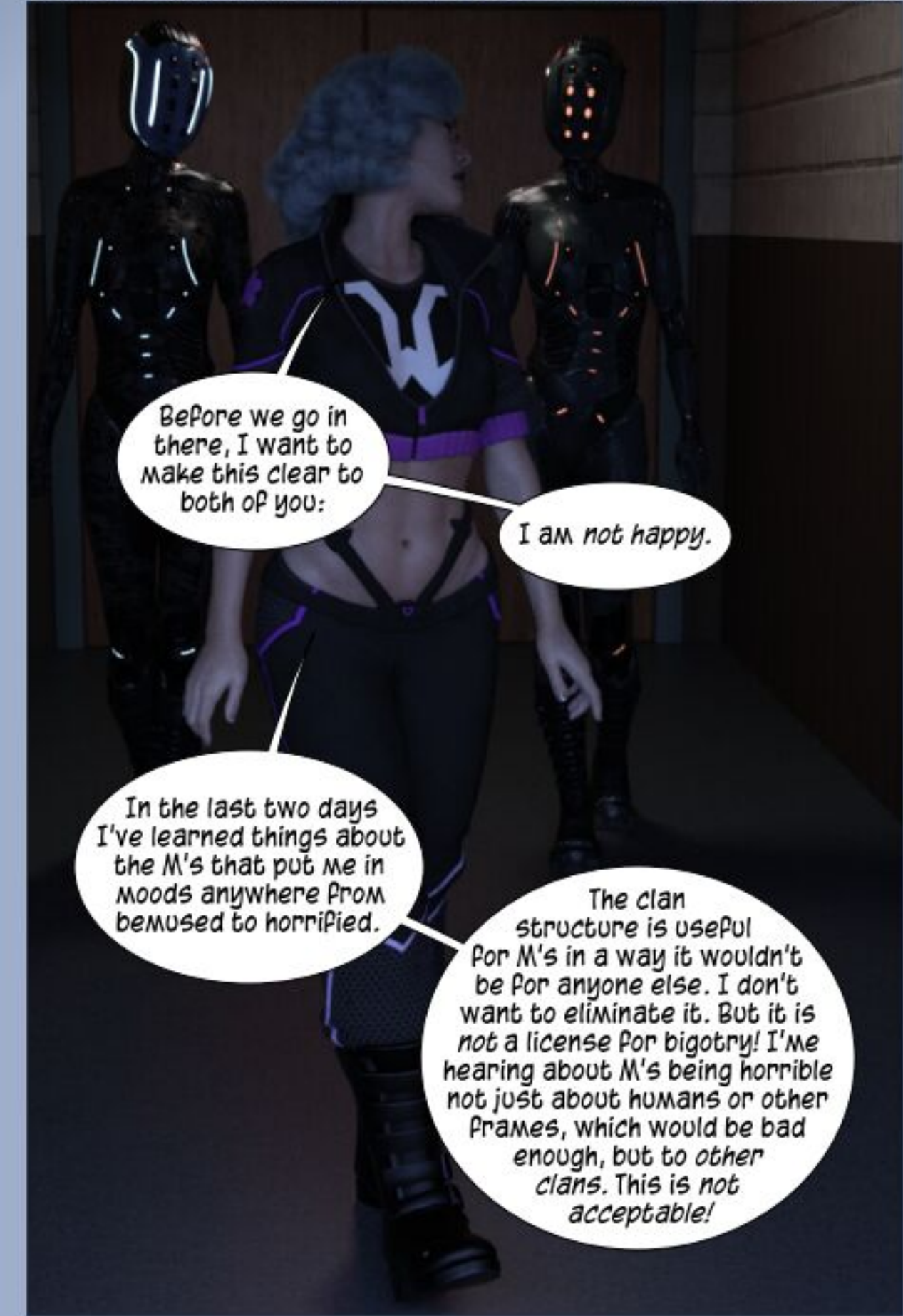


... You and I have very different ideas of what progress looks like.

And since you already think I'm a tyrant, I've got nothing to lose by telling you this: Your ideas are wrong and mine aren't.

And that's just how it's going to be.

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT MAKES DEALING WITH M'S DIFFICULT FOR ... EVERYBODY ELSE IN COLDPOINT, I SUPPOSE ... IS THAT YOU CAN'T READ THEIR FACES AT ALL. NO CUES. NO IDEA HOW THEY'RE REACTING. FOR ONCE, THOUGH, I WAS IN NO MOOD TO CARE. IF EITHER BETH OR FURST WERE INCLINED TO REACT POORLY TO THE THINGS I WAS ABOUT TO TELL THEM, TOO BAD.



Before we go in there, I want to make this clear to both of you:

I am not happy.

In the last two days I've learned things about the M's that put me in moods anywhere from bemused to horrified.

The clan structure is useful for M's in a way it wouldn't be for anyone else. I don't want to eliminate it. But it is not a license for bigotry! I'm hearing about M's being horrible not just about humans or other Frames, which would be bad enough, but to other clans. This is not acceptable!

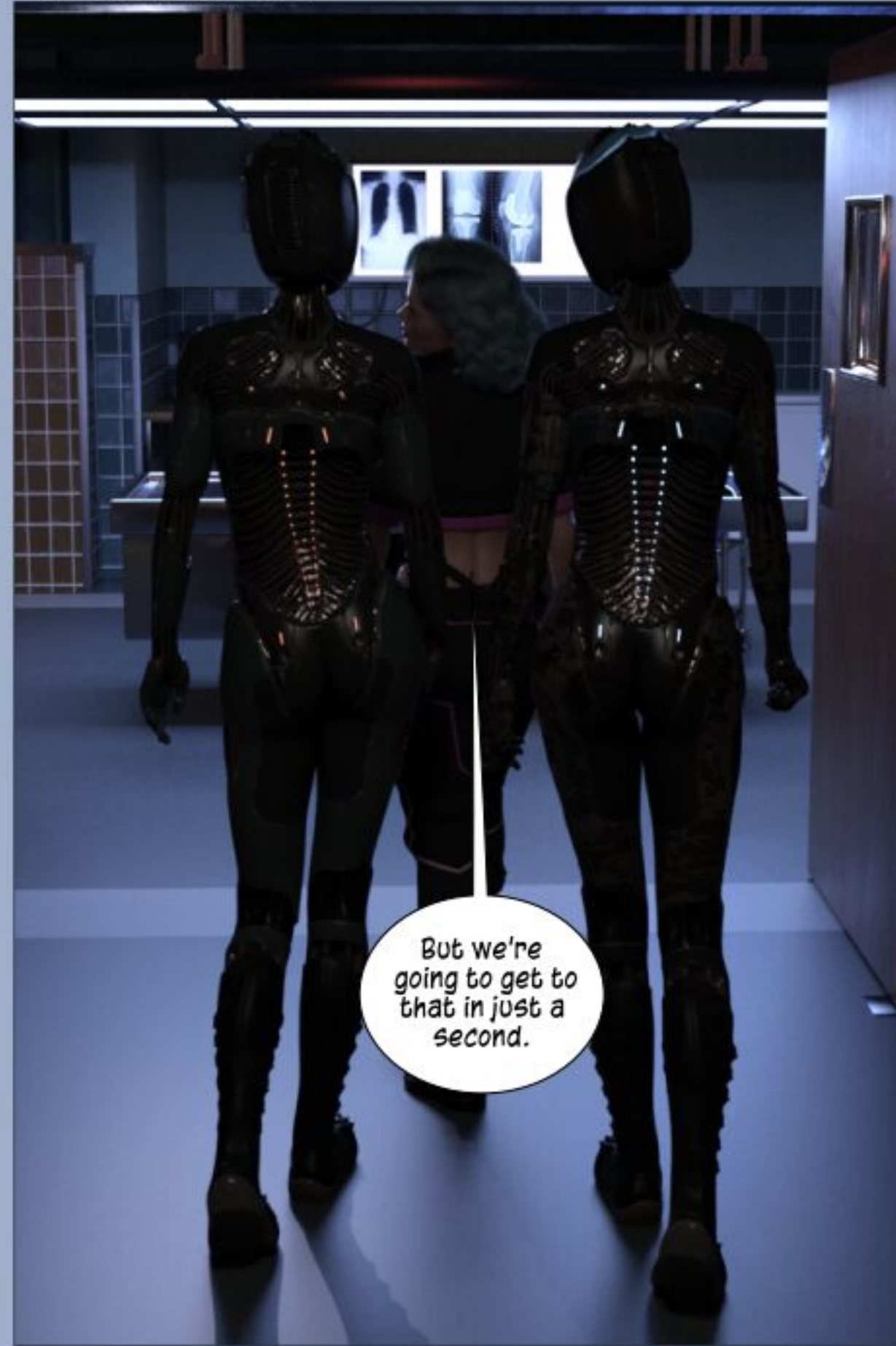


Furst, if you're going to be the leader of the M's, however unofficially, then you have a responsibility to not tolerate this, and discourage it wherever you find it.

That just became policy. Two seconds ago. If you don't want to do that, then the M's need a different leader and I need a different director of excavation. But I don't think it'll come to that, do you?

Beth, I need you to become aware that your actions have consequences and -- I think -- they're often consequences you don't actually want.

Because I don't think you're a monster, see.

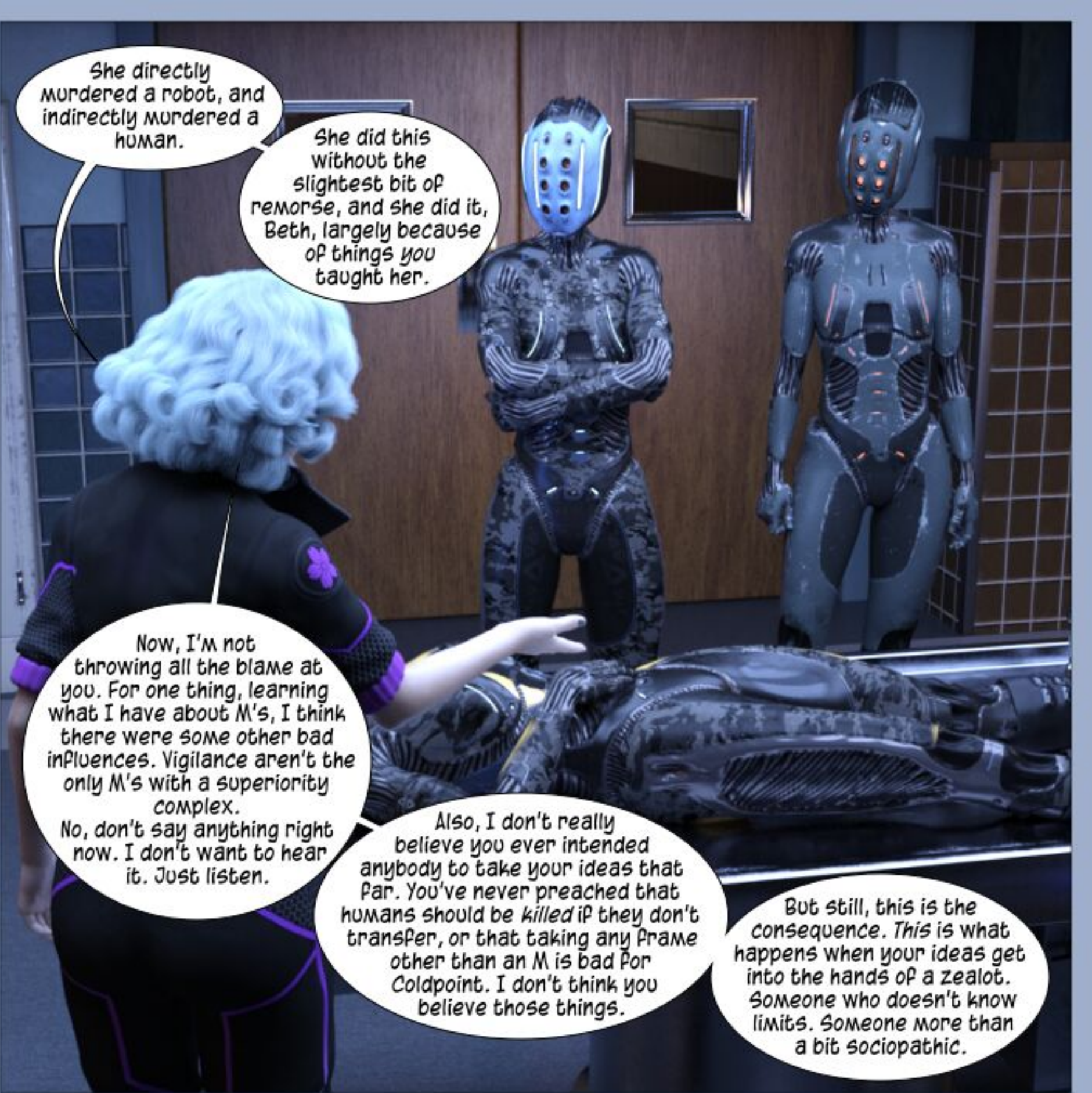


But we're going to get to that in just a second.



SHE'S NOT ---?

No. She's not. She can hear and see us. But her mobility and comms circuits have been cut, and they're going to stay cut until we reach some kind of decision. Or maybe longer.



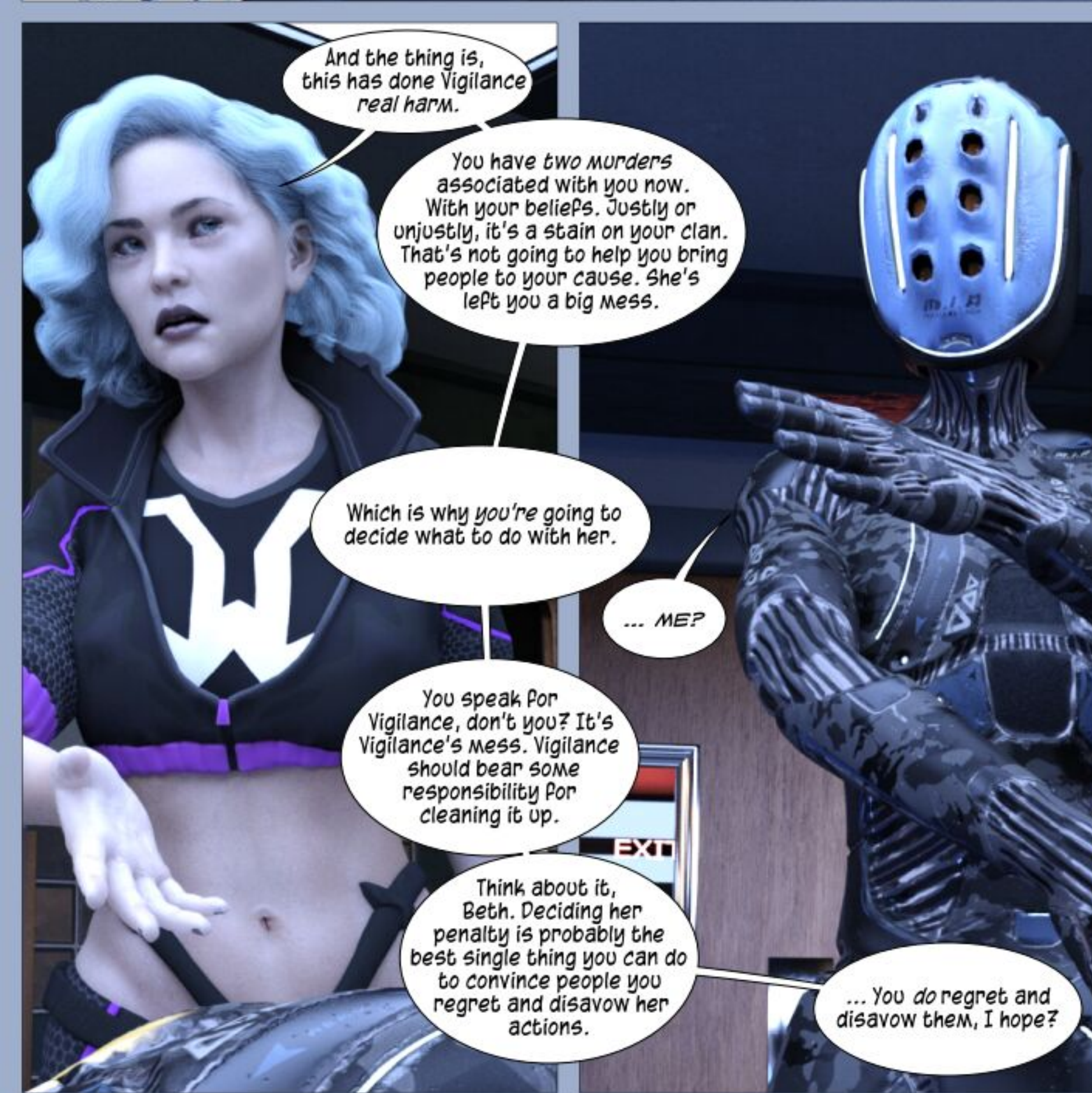
She directly murdered a robot, and indirectly murdered a human.

She did this without the slightest bit of remorse, and she did it, Beth, largely because of things you taught her.

Now, I'm not throwing all the blame at you. For one thing, learning what I have about M's, I think there were some other bad influences. Vigilance aren't the only M's with a superiority complex. No, don't say anything right now. I don't want to hear it. Just listen.

Also, I don't really believe you ever intended anybody to take your ideas that Par. You've never preached that humans should be killed if they don't transfer, or that taking any frame other than an M is bad for Coldpoint. I don't think you believe those things.

But still, this is the consequence. This is what happens when your ideas get into the hands of a zealot. Someone who doesn't know limits. Someone more than a bit sociopathic.



And the thing is, this has done Vigilance real harm.

You have two murders associated with you now. With your beliefs. Justly or unjustly, it's a stain on your clan. That's not going to help you bring people to your cause. She's left you a big mess.

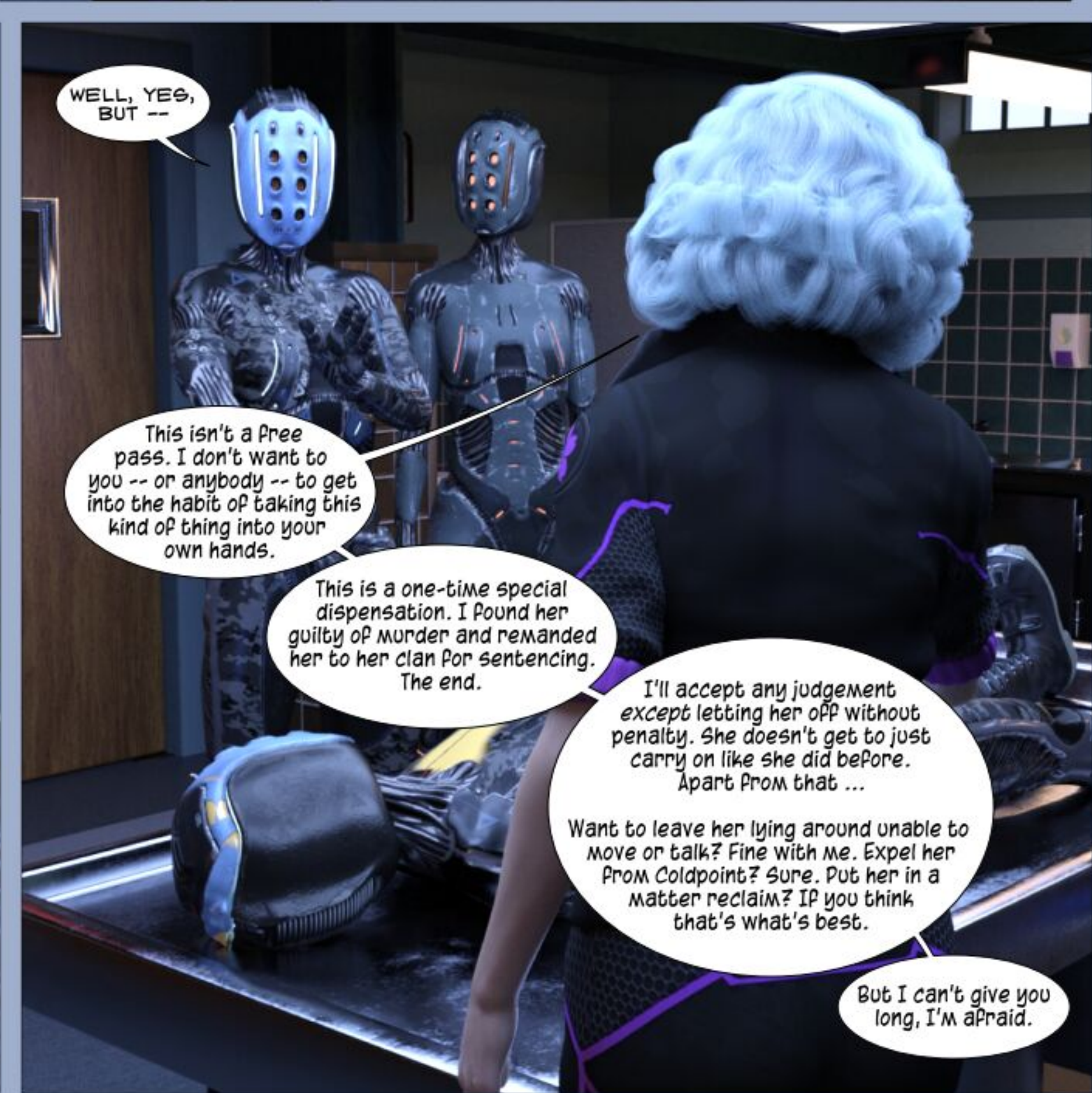
Which is why you're going to decide what to do with her.

... ME?

You speak for Vigilance, don't you? It's Vigilance's mess. Vigilance should bear some responsibility for cleaning it up.

Think about it, Beth. Deciding her penalty is probably the best single thing you can do to convince people you regret and disavow her actions.

... You do regret and disavow them, I hope?



WELL, YES, BUT --

This isn't a free pass. I don't want to you -- or anybody -- to get into the habit of taking this kind of thing into your own hands.

This is a one-time special dispensation. I found her guilty of murder and remanded her to her clan for sentencing. The end.

I'll accept any judgement except letting her off with no penalty. She doesn't get to just carry on like she did before. Apart from that ...

Want to leave her lying around unable to move or talk? Fine with me. Expel her from Coldpoint? Sure. Put her in a matter reclaim? If you think that's what's best.

But I can't give you long, I'm afraid.

THE NEXT DAY, I WITNESSED CULDA VIGILANCE BEING LOADED INTO A MATTER RECLAIM.

I DIDN'T NEED TO BE THERE --- I TRUSTED FURST, AND EVEN BETH, ENOUGH TO HANDLE THIS --- BUT BETH INSISTED I BE PRESENT. I THINK SHE WANTED MY IMPLIED ENDORSEMENT OF HER DECISION. YOU KNOW, SO I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SAY LATER I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT SHE'D CHOSEN. WHICH I WOULDN'T HAVE DONE, BUT IF IT MADE HER FEEL BETTER FOR ME TO BE THERE, FINE. I HAD STARTED TO REALIZE THAT BETH, LIKE FURST, HAD EMOTIONS SHE DIDN'T ALWAYS LIKE TO ADMIT TO.



CULDA HAD NO LAST WORDS, BECAUSE WE NEVER RECONNECTED HER COMMS CIRCUITS.

AND THERE WERE NO REMAINS, BECAUSE THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT OF A MATTER RECLAIM. WASTE NOT, WANT NOT.



AND THEN I WENT HOME AND SAT TREMBLING AND NEARLY CRYING FOR THREE HOURS.



I heard about Cuida and thought you might need some company.

... I can't do this anymore. I'm no good at it.

What are you talking about? You're brilliant at running this place.

That's not it. Running the place ... that's what I was hired for. I can do that.

I guess I can even solve crimes, if you give me enough time.

But being justice ... punishing people ... deciding who lives and dies ... I didn't sign on for that. And it hurts.

Of course it hurts. I'd be worried if it didn't.

It hurts because you care about the people you're judging. Even the nasty ones. It hurts because you want to be sure you're doing the right thing.

If you find yourself becoming callous ... saying "I don't care about these people" ... then we can talk about whether you can't or shouldn't do this anymore. But until then, you're doing just fine.

And I, for one, am prepared to demonstrate my absolute confidence in your leadership.

MMM!

end