

Welcome To
Coldfront
 Pursuing the Potential of Progress

TOFFLER PROJECT Settlement #5

Welcome!
 My name's Helen Orris.
 Everybody calls me "Hello." I'm
 here to help you get set up. If
 you have any problems,
 come to me.

In a
 moment I'll
 show you
 around, but
 first-- I know
 by now you've
 been given a
 lot of
 information and
 it can be a
 little
 overwhelming.
 Does anyone
 have any
 questions?

Are you
 ... I mean,
 is that what
 we'll look
 like?

Not necessarily!
 There are several
 models of frame.
 I'm a type D. Also,
 the colors and
 surfaces vary.

When will we
 ... Uh ...

We call it
 "transferring." As
 soon as you like,
 more or less. It
 takes a while,
 but medical
 doesn't have a
 backlog right
 now.

Ms. Orris!
 I told you that
 the next time
 you greeted new
 arrivals, if I didn't
 get a chance to
 give them the
 facts ...

Ms. Parsons,
 this is an official
 function, guided by
 Toffler policy, and
 we're not obliged to
 humor the views of
 your group.

Ms. Barlowe's
 standing right
 back there--why
 don't you--

IS THERE A
 PROBLEM?

Aahh!

That was
 a little
 mean.
 But
 thank
 you.

NOT MY
 FAULT
 SHE'S
 SCARED
 TO DEATH
 OF ME.

Folks, this is
 Furst Deepstone,
 who runs Excavation.
 Our Facility is mostly
 underground, so that
 covers most new
 construction as well
 as mining.

Furst is a type M.
 Type M frames are, ah,
 not for everybody.

Can I help
 you with
 something,
 Furst?

NO, I'M
 HERE TO
 TALK TO
 WENDY.

For now you'll
 be staying in temporary
 quarters in Complex B
 ... Follow me ...

What's
 up?

WE
 FOUND A
 SMALL
 PROBLEM
 DOWN IN THE
 COMPLEX C
 DIG.

YOU
 SHOULD
 PROBABLY
 COME SEE IT
 IN PERSON.

YOU CAN TAKE THE MASK
 OFF FOR A BIT IF YOU LIKE. WE
 FINISHED THE INTAKE STRUCTURE
 LAST WEEK, SO THERE'S PLENTY OF
 FRESH AIR COMING DOWN THE
 VENT SHAFT.

The vent shaft?
 What kind of problem
 could you be having
 with the --

Oh.

That's a
 really long
 shaft.

ABOUT SIX HUNDRED METERS. BUT
 SHE WOULDN'T HAVE FALLEN THAT FAR.
 THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY IN FROM ANOTHER
 COMPLEX THAT WOULDN'T REQUIRE HER TO
 HAVE EXCAVATION ACCESS. THAT'S ABOUT
 TWO HUNDRED METERS UP.

Do we have
 an ID?

YES. THE TAG IS
 STILL FUNCTIONAL.
 HER NAME IS GIRA
 GESSIT.

SHE MAY BE
 RECOVERABLE. I ASSUME
 SYSTEMS CRASHED DUE TO
 THE SHOCK, BUT I DON'T THINK
 THE CHEST CAGE IS THAT BAD.
 UNLIKE HER LIMBS. I SEE THREE
 MAJOR BREAKS JUST FROM
 THE WAY THEY'RE
 ARRANGED.

So she
 wandered
 somewhere she
 wasn't supposed to
 be and fell in?

No way.

How'd you
 get here?

Furst called me.

That one way in is a cross shaft from
 Complex B. First you have to know how
 to get into the vent system, then
 bypass a grating, then walk down a
 long tunnel in the dark for no
 reason ...

A determined
 suicide.

There are easier
 ways. Walk into one of
 the matter reclaimers ...
 though I admit that'd be
 a much slower death.

BEAM DRILL TO
 THE CHEST CAGE.
 INSTANT, AND NOT
 LIKELY TO BE
 RECOVERABLE.

Ghouls.

OK,
 someone tried to
 kill her. May have
 succeeded.

Can the two of you get
 her to Zusy-Q? And please take
 back corridors. Don't carry her
 through the commons. We don't
 need the Puss.

DEATH AND DENIAL
 Words and Images by Trilby

YOU'VE ALREADY MET FURST DEEPSTONE AND MY ENGINEERING CHIEF, MENICA SCOTT. BETWEEN THEM THEY HANDLE THE PHYSICAL STRUCTURE OF THE PLACE. GLORIA BANTAM HANDLES MOST OF THE PEOPLE ISSUES. HELLO WORKS FOR HER. THEY ARE MY TWO TIERS OF DEFLECTION; VERY FEW COMPLAINTS OR PROBLEMS GET PAST BOTH HELLO AND GLORIA, THOUGH THE ONES THAT DO TEND TO BE REAL HEADACHES.

AMONG OTHER THINGS, GLORIA MANAGES THE EMPLOYMENT REGISTRY.



I'M WENDY BARLOWE. MY TITLE IS "OPERATIONS MANAGER," WHICH MEANS IN THEORY I RUN THIS PLACE. IN PRACTICE, I HAVE FOUR VERY GOOD DIVISION MANAGERS WHO HANDLE MOST THINGS, AND MANY OF THE PEOPLE HERE PROBABLY DON'T EVEN KNOW I EXIST. WHICH IS FINE WITH ME.



But I don't have anything current Por Gessit. Not since she transferred, and that was years ago.

She's a D, so probably sex worker.

That's a little reductionist, isn't it?



No, just playing the odds. Most D's who don't register a profession are sex workers.

And a lot of the ones who do. Sorry, Hello, I'm not picking on the D's, those are the facts. For what it's worth, an L who's not on here is probably a sex worker too.

Now, if she'd been an M and unregistered, I'd assume she was one of the Vigilance clan. I don't know how they support themselves. Especially Beth. She spends all her time agitating.



I wish we could get the sex workers to be better about registering. It's not that embarrassing.

Oh, I don't think they're embarrassed. Not with the culture here. I wouldn't be.

But so many people do it as a sideline or a one-off ... it takes a leap to admit that's your full-time job.



In this case, though, I wish she'd had a different job.

If she'd been a cook or something, I'd only have a couple of people to talk to. Now I have no idea who to ask about her, or even how to find out who.

BUT THAT WAS A PROBLEM FOR TOMORROW. I HAD A MUCH MORE PLEASANT COMMITMENT FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT.



Hey.

Perfect timing. I just finished my drink.



-- MMM --

You hungry?

We can always get something later.



Tread, if I wanted to find a sex worker, where would I look? Don't they usually form callout groups? How do you know where to call?

Looking for a change of pace, are you?



What? No! This is about something else--

Relax, love, I'm teasing. And I wouldn't get in a twist if you did, you know that.

First I'd go ask Mimi. A lot of them front at her place. And she knows things.

Might be better if you did change it up, Por a bit.

Why?



Rehearsals begin day after tomorrow.

Oh, already? I thought they were still trying to finish casting.

Filled the last one yesterday.

TREAD HAS A PERSONAL RULE: NO SEX WHILE DOING A SHOW. IN FACT, SHE DOESN'T REALLY DO ANYTHING ELSE DURING A THE RUN OF A SHOW EXCEPT EAT AND SLEEP, AND NOT MUCH OF THAT.

It's OK. Glad you reminded me or I'd have wondered where you were. Break a leg.

You'll come see it, won't you?

Of course. Opening night.



THERE WAS NO POINT IN TRYING TO FIND MIMI LANIER BEFORE HER CLUB OPENED FOR THE NIGHT. I HAD OTHER THINGS TO CHECK ON IN THE MEANTIME.

I wondered if you were going to come by.

I wanted to check on Gira Gessit. Were you able to ... ah ...

ZUSY-Q DOESN'T WORK FOR ME. LIKE ME, SHE IS A DIRECT HIRE BY THE TOFFLER PROJECT. WE GET ALONG, BUT I FIND HER A BIT TRICKY SOMETIMES.

HER MAIN RESPONSIBILITY IS TRANSFERS, BUT SHE FIGURED SHE MIGHT AS WELL HANDLE MEDICAL TOO. SHE DOESN'T LIKE BEING IDLE.

Save her? Yes.



It will be a while. I'm going to have to commission a completely new frame for her. She's lucky; the chest casing was very nearly breached.

When you find the human who did this, I'm going to expect some actual justice done.

You're assuming a human did it. Why?

Who else could have? You know perfectly well the behavior blocks prevent us from knowingly harming others. And from what Furst and Ms. Scott told me, this wasn't accidental.

Knowingly harming humans. The blocks don't apply to harming other robots, do they?

You're making this out to be an act of violence from a robot against another robot? It's never happened. Why would we do that?

I'm not making this out to be anything yet! I'm just keeping options open --

Hold on.



Hey, Cil ... They what? How long ago?

OK. I don't think I can really do anything, but I'll come have a look.

I have to go. Cil says someone burned down one of the fields.

Keep me informed on Gessit's status, would you?

Meanwhile, I'll do my best to provide actual justice.



CIL MENARD IS MY FOURTH DIVISION MANAGER. SHE RUNS AGRICULTURE. SHE IS VERY HANDS-ON. THE DAY I HIRED HER IS THE ONLY TIME I'VE EVER SEEN HER WHEN SHE WASN'T COVERED IN DIRT.

What a mess.

I've got the Pans trying to pull the smoke out, but it's taking a while.

What was the crop? Are we sure this was deliberately set?

Wheat. And, yes, it would have to be. The Pire wouldn't have jumped beds that quickly on its own. They must have set it in each one. Besides, I can smell what they used. Kerosene, I think.

Ms. Barlowe! This is an outrage!!



You never take any action against the Vigilants, even when things like this happen! Is that your plan, to do absolutely nothing and let them starve us out?

Ms. Parsons, you're not authorized to be in this area.

I DON'T BOTHER TRYING TO ANSWER CLAIRE PARSONS' RANTS WITH REASON ANYMORE. IT'S POINTLESS.

But she is? All your agriculture staff are robots. How does that make any sense? They don't eat! You're asking for them to sabotage us!



None of the humans want to do this work.

And you're leaping to a lot of other conclusions too, not that that's any shock.

By the way, how'd you even find out anything had happened in here? And why would you immediately assume sabotage?

Say! What if your group did this to make everyone think it was the Vigilants? Wouldn't that be interesting?



I hate her so much.

Clean where you stand ... Make sure everybody knows the truth ... can't get away with this forever ...

You know, it was only one field. Minor annoyance. I only asked you down because I wanted you to see it. If someone was really trying to starve the humans, they could have done a lot more damage.

Yes. If it was Vigilants, they either couldn't do more because of the behavior blocks, or they were just trying to send a little message.



IT WAS A LITTLE EARLY FOR MIMI'S CLUB. THE MUSIC HADN'T STARTED YET, AND THE ONLY CUSTOMERS WERE A COUPLE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE QUIET AND DARKNESS IN A BACK CORNER.



Like to have some fun?

Not tonight, thanks ... but could you tell me where I can find Mimi?

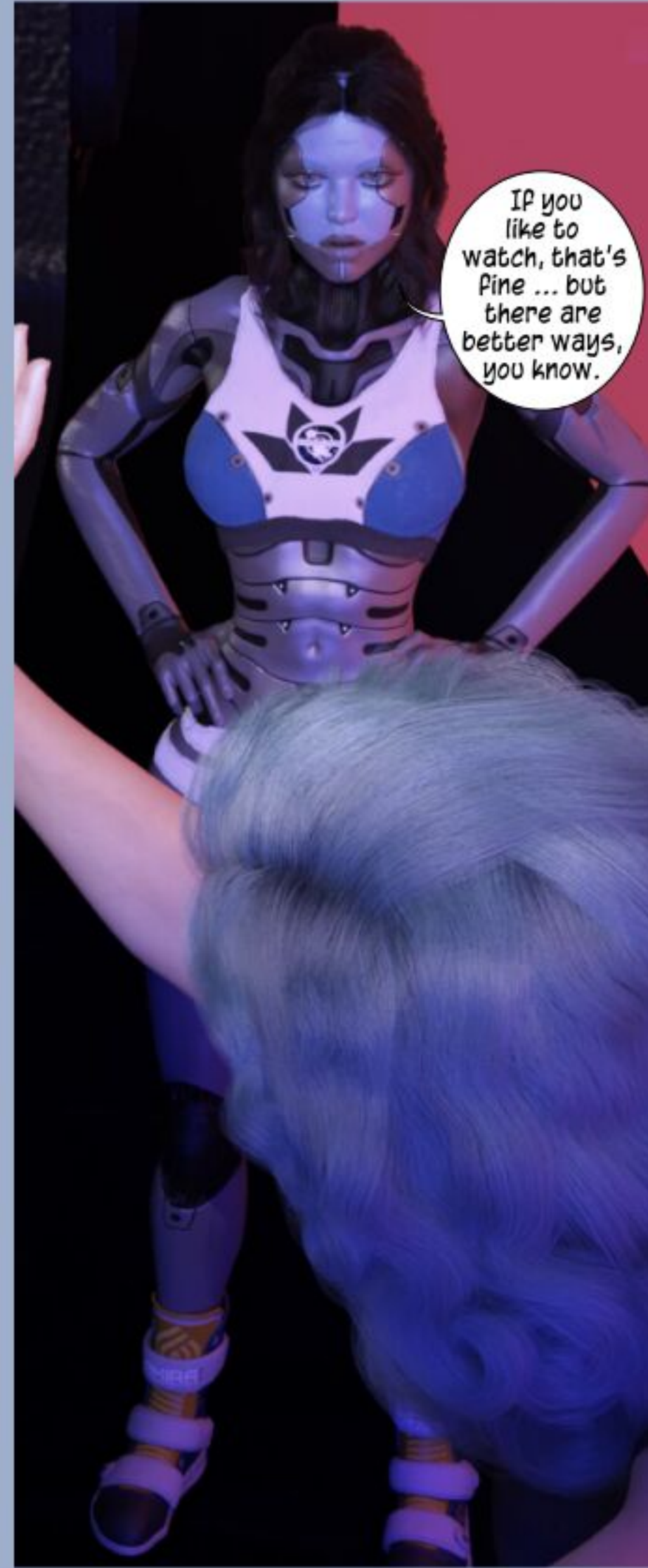
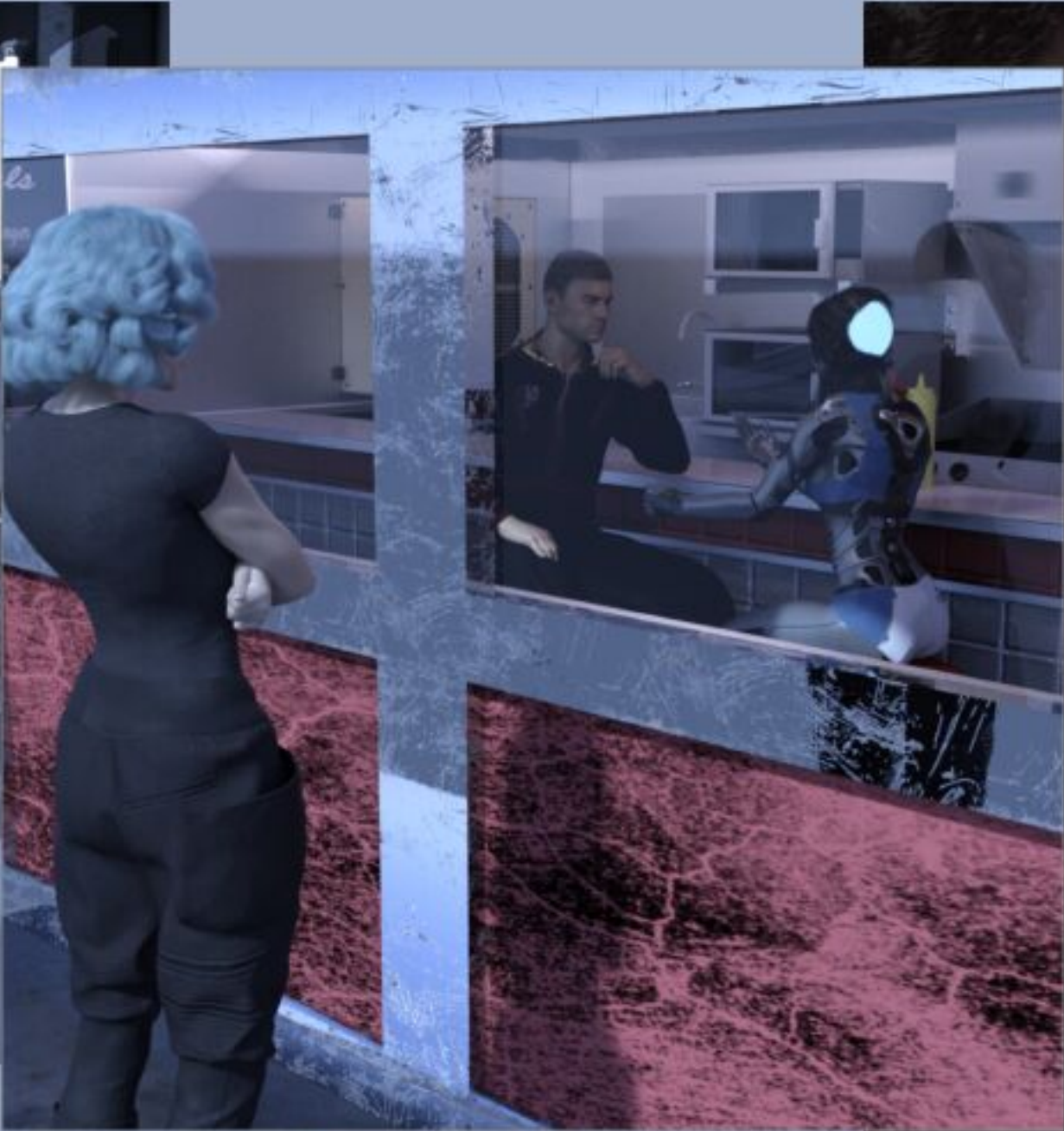
Up the back stairs.



Been a while, Mimi.

What are you doing -- I mean, to what do I owe the pleasure?

I'm looking for information on a woman named Gira Gessit. Type D. Sex worker.





Byla, my name's Wendy Barlowe. I'm the --

I know who you are. Still shouldn't be spying on them.

Well, I only followed them because of you.

Me?

When I asked Mimi about Gira Gessit, the first thing she did was run downstairs to warn you. What did she tell you?

... We shouldn't talk here. They might hear us, and I don't want to disturb them.

Come on.



This is your place?

I realize it's not as swank as the operations manager's ...

Actually, my rooms aren't much bigger. And all I meant was I was expecting we'd go get coffee or something.

They get upset when we robots sit in places like that and don't buy anything. I don't know where Gira is. She blew off a callout last night. No word.

She's, ah, probably not going to be available to work for a while.

What's happened to her? Are you holding her? On what basis?

The callouts all happen through you? So you know her customers. I need information on them.

... Which kind of appliance do you like?

Appliance?



You don't know? I figured in your position you'd --

We L's aren't like the D's. They have fixed genitals. Ours are swappable. Which kind do you prefer?

I --

Maybe we're not having the same conversation. I'm not here to have sex. I just want contacts for Gessit. I need to talk to them.



I'm not going to tell you any of that. Our client list is very private.

And you're not going to tell me anything about Gira, obviously.

So you can either go ahead and leave now, or we can fuck.

I think it'd be interesting to have sex with the operations manager. You know, you're kind of not like a real person. A myth.

Maybe once we know each other more closely we'll decide to tell each other things.



I haven't ever had sex with a robot.

Really? That's unusual, you know.

It always struck me as cold. I don't mean physically, I know you heatsink through your skin. Emotionally.

Why would any robot be interested in sex with a human? The M's are always saying how what they do together is better ...

M's are snobs about some things. And defensive. I've done direct conjunction. It's pun, but it's not really the same thing at all.

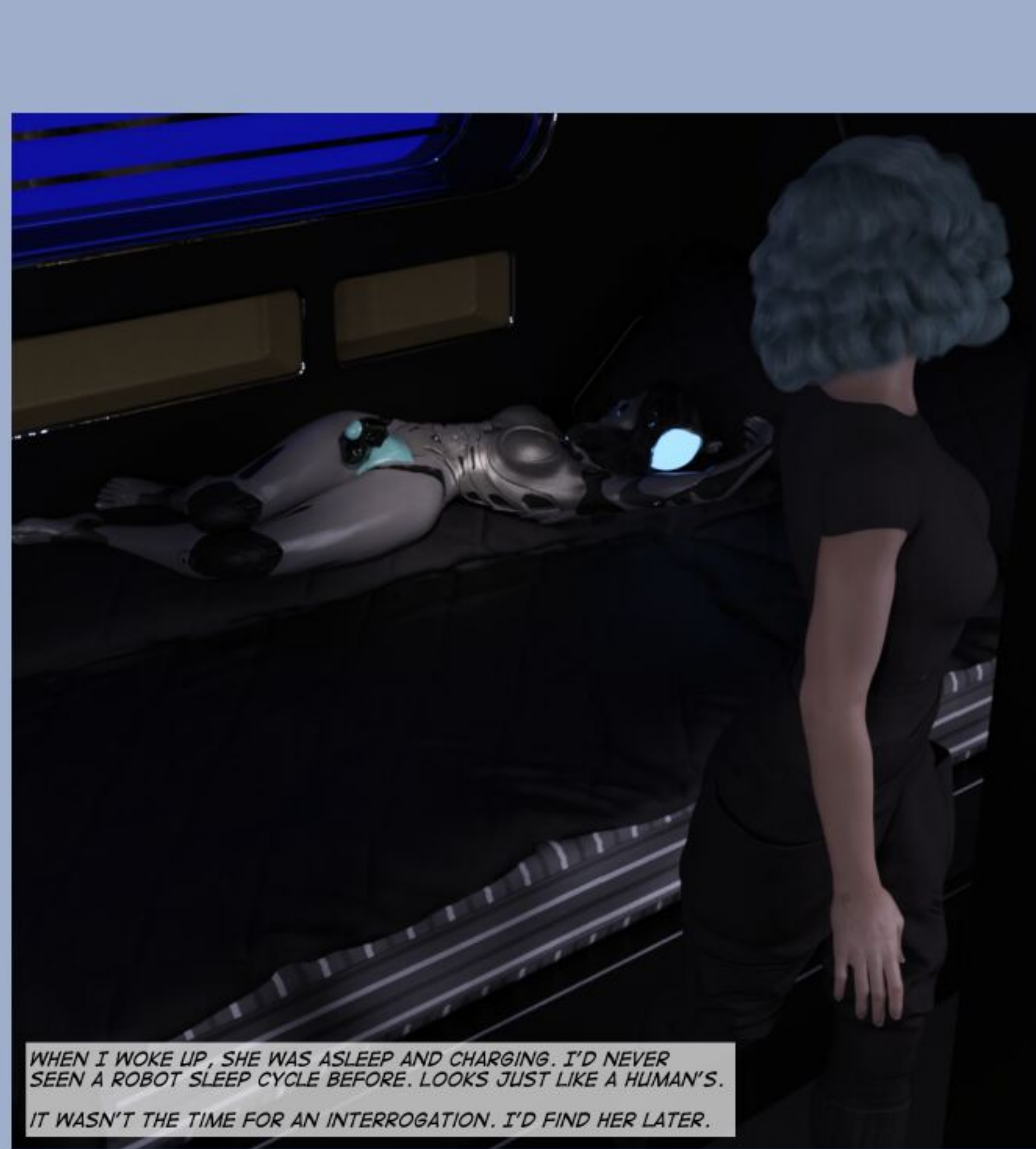


I can hear your heart. I can hear differences in your breathing. I can feel tiny temperature changes in your skin.

When I touch you in the right place and your nervous system reacts, I know it. That's seriously hot.

Every robot I know -- except the M's -- is incredibly invested in sex. Much more than any human I've met. And we have better Pocus. And way better orgasms, though we try not to mention that, because the humans don't like to hear it.

I think I'll use the penis.



WHEN I WOKE UP, SHE WAS ASLEEP AND CHARGING. I'D NEVER SEEN A ROBOT SLEEP CYCLE BEFORE. LOOKS JUST LIKE A HUMAN'S. IT WASN'T THE TIME FOR AN INTERROGATION. I'D FIND HER LATER.



... She said we should reconsider transferring, that we were being ... uh ... misled, that it wasn't the only or the best choice. I think that's the way she put it.

Ms. Barlowe, I thought we were here on the condition that we transfer. That was the whole point! We were surprised to see so many people here who hadn't transferred--



-- Sigh -- You're absolutely right. Coldpoint and the other Toppler Project locations are intended to be for human intelligences who have transferred to robot bodies. This is, as you say, the whole point.

The problem is that they didn't write in a rule that requires people to transfer, probably because they didn't anticipate that anyone would come all the way out here to participate and then refuse to.

We have some people here who are --

Stop!! Whatever you're telling them, I demand an opportunity to refute it!

Speak of the devil.

I was just about to tell them all about you, Ms. Parsons.

Were your ears burning?



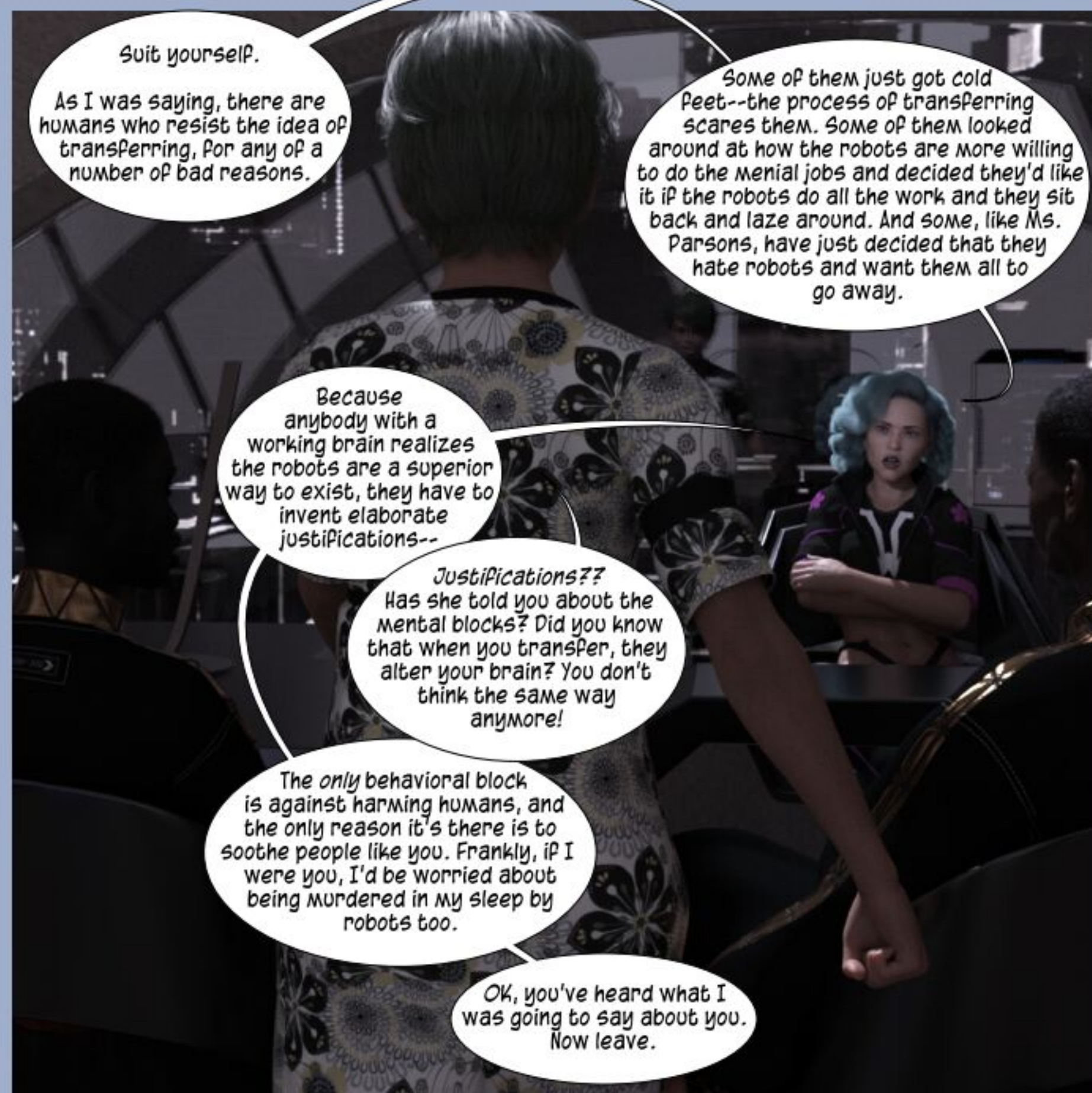
I'll have you know I ran all the way over here. As soon as Morton told me where these two were headed ...

You had us followed?

Of course she did. She has no scruples.

Get out of here, Parsons. This office is by appointment only and you don't have one.

No, I won't. You were about to tell them about me? Then I'm entitled to hear what you have to say.



Suit yourself.

As I was saying, there are humans who resist the idea of transferring, for any of a number of bad reasons.

Some of them just got cold feet--the process of transferring scares them. Some of them looked around at how the robots are more willing to do the menial jobs and decided they'd like it if the robots do all the work and they sit back and laze around. And some, like Ms. Parsons, have just decided that they hate robots and want them all to go away.

Because anybody with a working brain realizes the robots are a superior way to exist, they have to invent elaborate justifications--

Justifications?? Has she told you about the mental blocks? Did you know that when you transfer, they alter your brain? You don't think the same way anymore!

The only behavioral block is against harming humans, and the only reason it's there is to soothe people like you. Frankly, if I were you, I'd be worried about being murdered in my sleep by robots too.

OK, you've heard what I was going to say about you. Now leave.



You know we're going to win.

We have the money on our side. Wells agrees with our position. Sooner or later you'll have to go against him and--

Wells does not have any influence with the Toppler Project. He can't buy me, and he can't get me fired. They don't care about his money. And they have the charter. He can't buy that out either. He can leave. So can you.

You can start by leaving this office.



Who's Wells?

Shane Wells. Richest person in Coldpoint. For what that's worth.

Some people come here with personal wealth. Wells came with a lot. No one's sure why he came here, since he doesn't seem to want to transfer.

Is it ... is it really that much better?

What, being a robot? Well, apart from the increased senses, the durability, not having any pain, not needing to eat or breathe, and so on, there's a good chance that you become immortal.

Oh.

Why haven't you transferred? ... Sorry, I guess that's personal ...

It's all right. I'm not allowed. Charter says the boss has to be human, for two reasons. First, because imagine what people like Parsons would do if a robot was in charge.

Second, because I don't have behavior blocks. In case I need to deal with people like Parsons.



FOR ONCE, CLAIRE PARSONS HADN'T BEEN COMPLETELY USELESS. SHE HAD GIVEN ME A THOUGHT.

Oh.

You didn't say goodbye this morning.

I didn't want to wake you.

Your customers are all people who are publicly anti-robot in some way. Loudly enough that it'd be really bad if they were seen having sex with a robot. Right?

... Come inside.



Now that I've figured that out, will you show me the list? I promise I'm not interested in exposing them.

First tell me what your interest is. You want to ask them about Gira, but why?

Gessit was murdered.

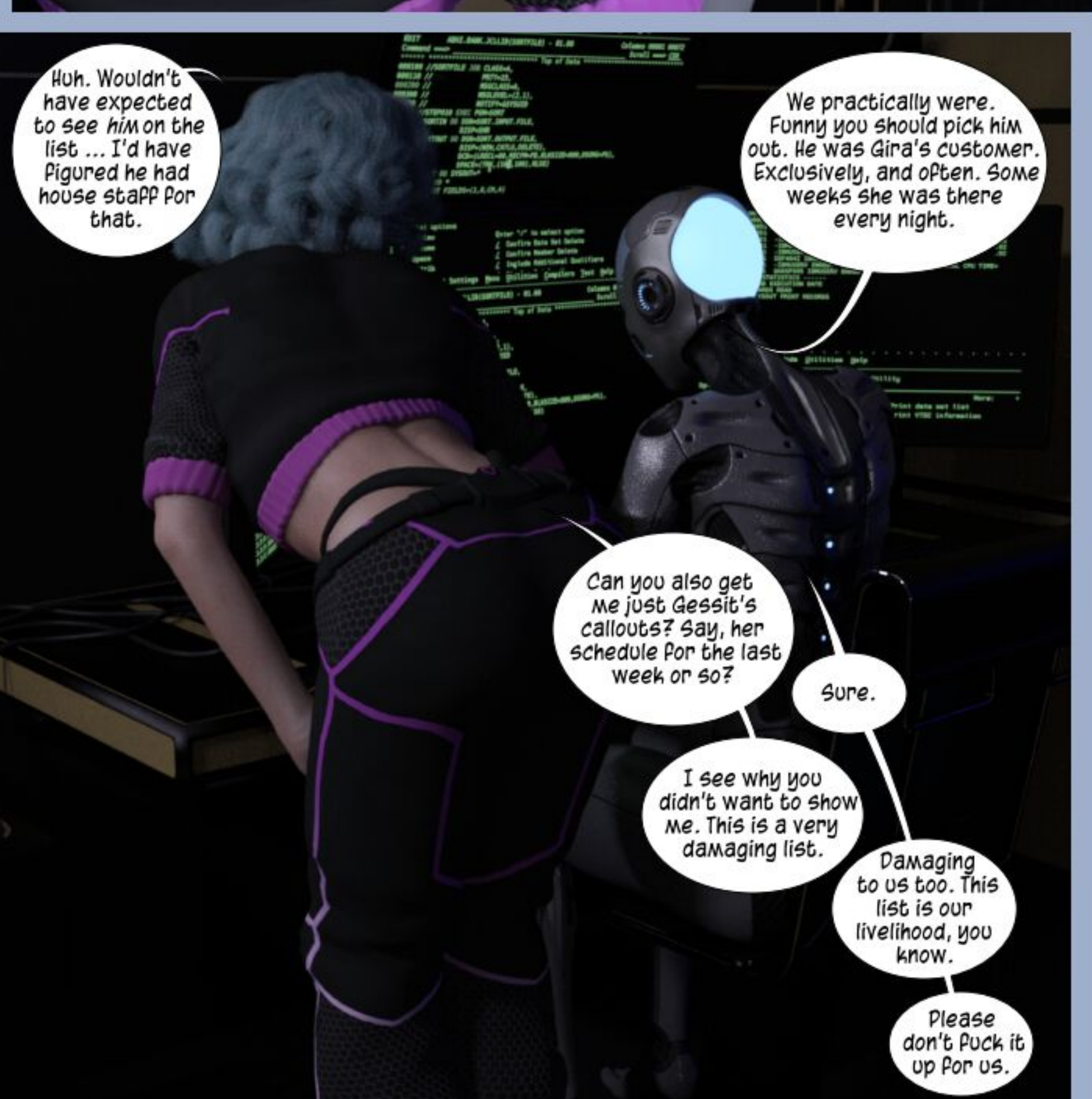
What??

She'll recover. Her chest case was intact. But she needs a completely new frame.

Someone pushed her down an airshaft.

I figure there are two groups of suspects: her friends and co-workers, and her customers. The customers seem more likely to me, especially now that I know they had something to hide.

I'll pull the list up on a screen.



Huh. Wouldn't have expected to see him on the list ... I'd have figured he had house staff for that.

We practically were. Funny you should pick him out. He was Gira's customer. Exclusively, and often. Some weeks she was there every night.

Can you also get me just Gessit's callouts? Say, her schedule for the last week or so?

Sure.

I see why you didn't want to show me. This is a very damaging list.

Damaging to us too. This list is our livelihood, you know.

Please don't pick it up for us.



I haven't even begun to work on Gessit's new frame yet ...

I figured. But I'd like to see her event log. You can access that, can't you?

Yes. Right this minute?

It's pretty important. I think.



Wow, that's a lot.

When you're making multiple entries every microsecond ... how far back to keep a log is a constant topic of debate among us robots. You don't want to lose something important, but the logs eat space fast ... what exactly are you looking for?

I need to know the exact time she crashed.

Oh, that's simple. There's a time gap between the crash and when I restarted her for integrity tests ... see? That's the last stamp before the gap.



Roger Perone?

Yeah?

My name's Wendy Barlowe. I'm the operations manager.

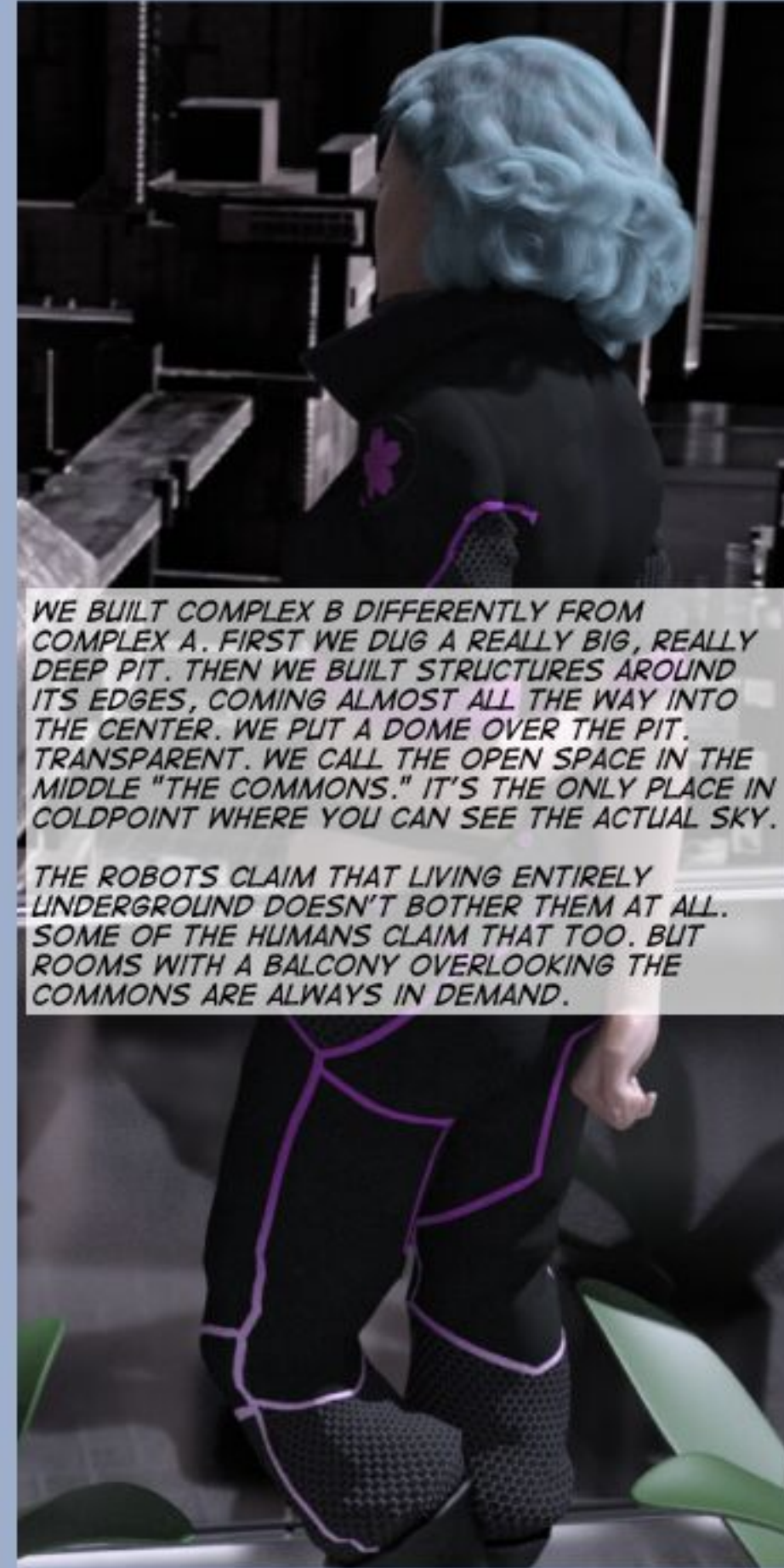
I need to ask you a few questions. Strictly in confidence.

I'm trying to find out about a woman named Gira Gessit.



Gimme a second to put some real clothes on, OK?

Of course.



WE BUILT COMPLEX B DIFFERENTLY FROM COMPLEX A. FIRST WE DUG A REALLY BIG, REALLY DEEP PIT. THEN WE BUILT STRUCTURES AROUND ITS EDGES, COMING ALMOST ALL THE WAY INTO THE CENTER. WE PUT A DOME OVER THE PIT. TRANSPARENT. WE CALL THE OPEN SPACE IN THE MIDDLE "THE COMMONS." IT'S THE ONLY PLACE IN COLDFPOINT WHERE YOU CAN SEE THE ACTUAL SKY.

THE ROBOTS CLAIM THAT LIVING ENTIRELY UNDERGROUND DOESN'T BOTHER THEM AT ALL. SOME OF THE HUMANS CLAIM THAT TOO. BUT ROOMS WITH A BALCONY OVERLOOKING THE COMMONS ARE ALWAYS IN DEMAND.



Aaaaa!



-- oof --

oh god oh god



-- hph --



Min?

I'm in crossvent ... uh ... looks like one-oh-four. Can you come get me out?

No, I'm completely serious.

Also, do me a favor. Stop by the special locker and bring a couple of CSI's.

Yeah, I know. I'll fill you in, I promise.



Let's try this again.



Get this fucking thing off!

Sorry. I'm never very sympathetic to people who try to kill me.

Now, tell me why you killed Gira Gessit. Did you two have a fight? were you worried about her keeping your secret? Or was it something else?

Fuck off! Why do you even care about the robot whore? That's the problem--you'll bust your ass for the goddamned robots but you don't do a fucking thing for the humans!



You can't keep me here! There's no way this is legal! Sooner or later they're going to miss me and then they're going to come after your ass. And I hope they take this fucking place apart!

Get the other hood. I'm already tired of hearing his voice.

You may have to hold him down.

Check.



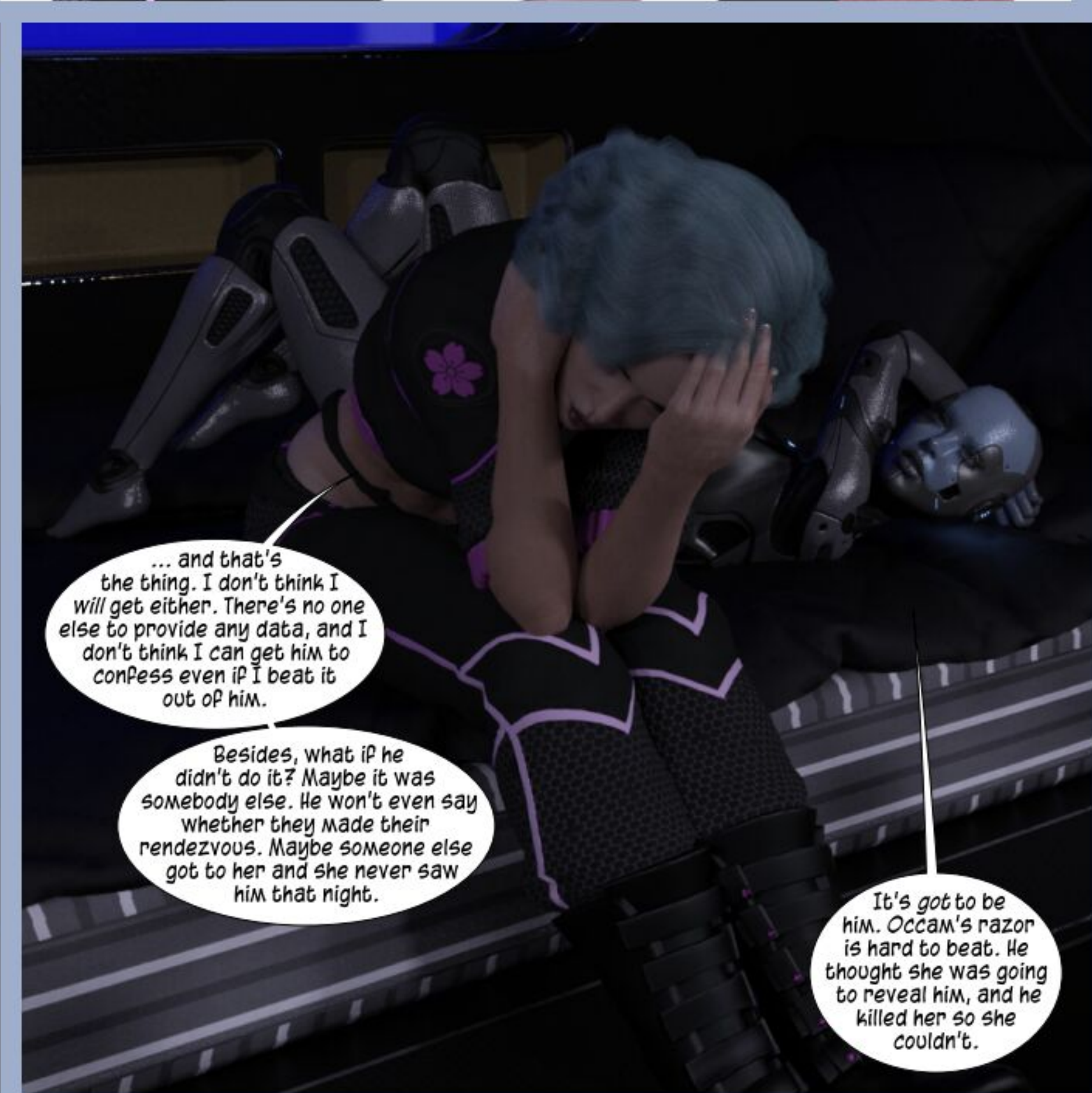
So now we just have to figure out what to do with him?

No, we're not there. All we have is that he was Gessit's customer at the time she crashed, and that he hates robots, and tried to kill me. None of that is proof he killed her, though.

I make the law, but we have to think about how it looks. IP Parsons thinks we did this on insufficient grounds ... especially since he's probably one of hers ...

We need corroboration, or a confession.

OK, but what happens if you can't get either?



... and that's the thing. I don't think I will get either. There's no one else to provide any data, and I don't think I can get him to confess even if I beat it out of him.

Besides, what if he didn't do it? Maybe it was somebody else. He won't even say whether they made their rendezvous. Maybe someone else got to her and she never saw him that night.

It's got to be him. Occam's razor is hard to beat. He thought she was going to reveal him, and he killed her so she couldn't.



Would she have?

Have what?

Would Gessit have exposed him, do you think?

I'd like to say no ... but, honestly, I'm not sure. I liked Gira, but she was weird about money. I could see her being tempted to blackmail somebody. Hard to imagine her doing it to a client, though.

Take off your boots.

We don't have to --

I know that.



Owww!!!

You bitch! That really hurt!

That was nothing. When we trained on these guns, they told us about what happens if we shoot someone in the balls with them. It takes you about a day before you can move again. It takes a week to stop pissing yourself.

Let's try it.

No!

She was going to tell people what we did, OK? She was going to expose me. She was going to ruin my life!

And you think that justified murdering her?



Fuck you!

You just don't get it! They're robots. They decided to stop being human. They don't get to be treated like humans anymore. It's their own damned --

AAAUGH!

That's plenty from you.

Min, keep your gun on him while I get the hood.

I was going to let you use a toilet, but now I think you can just sit here in your own piss.



Sorry I couldn't answer when you called. What's up?

I've had to activate Gessit again for synchronization checks, and I thought you might want to use the opportunity to speak to her.

I warn you that she'll be a bit disoriented, and it's normal to lose memory around a crash, so she likely won't remember anything about the event.



Hello, Gira.

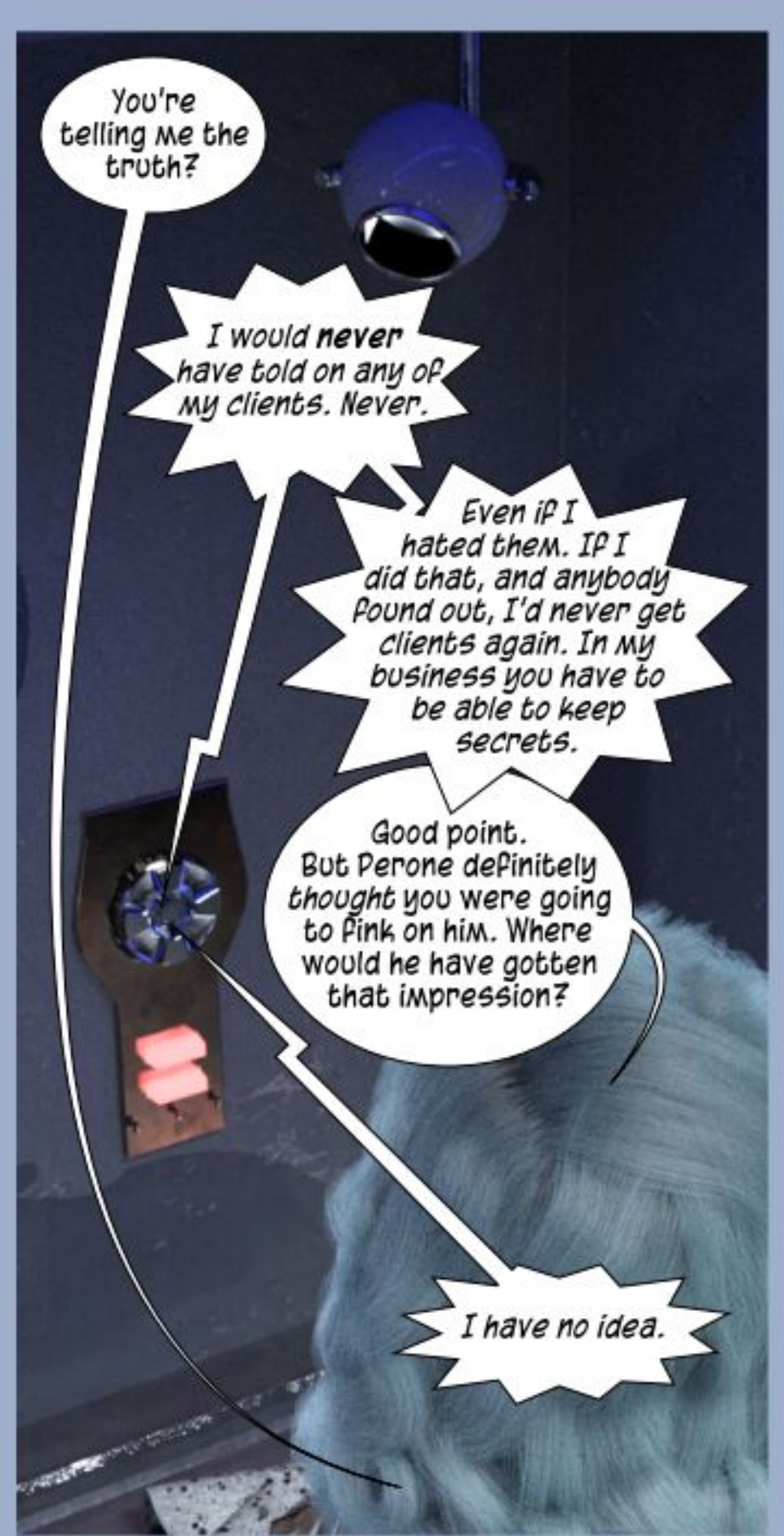
Hello, Dr. Quincy. Who is this other person? I don't know her.

I'm Wendy Barlowe, Gira. The operations manager. Do you know how you got here?

Dr. Quincy says I fell a long way and somebody pushed me. But I don't remember any of that.

We think it was one of your customers. Roger Perone. He says you were going to reveal that he was a client and ruin him.

What?? No!



You're telling me the truth?

I would never have told on any of my clients. Never.

Even if I hated them. If I did that, and anybody found out, I'd never get clients again. In my business you have to be able to keep secrets.

Good point. But Perone definitely thought you were going to go on him. Where would he have gotten that impression?

I have no idea.



OK, so there's someone tied up in this I haven't found yet. Someone was telling Perone stories ... someone who knew a lot about Gessit ... but --

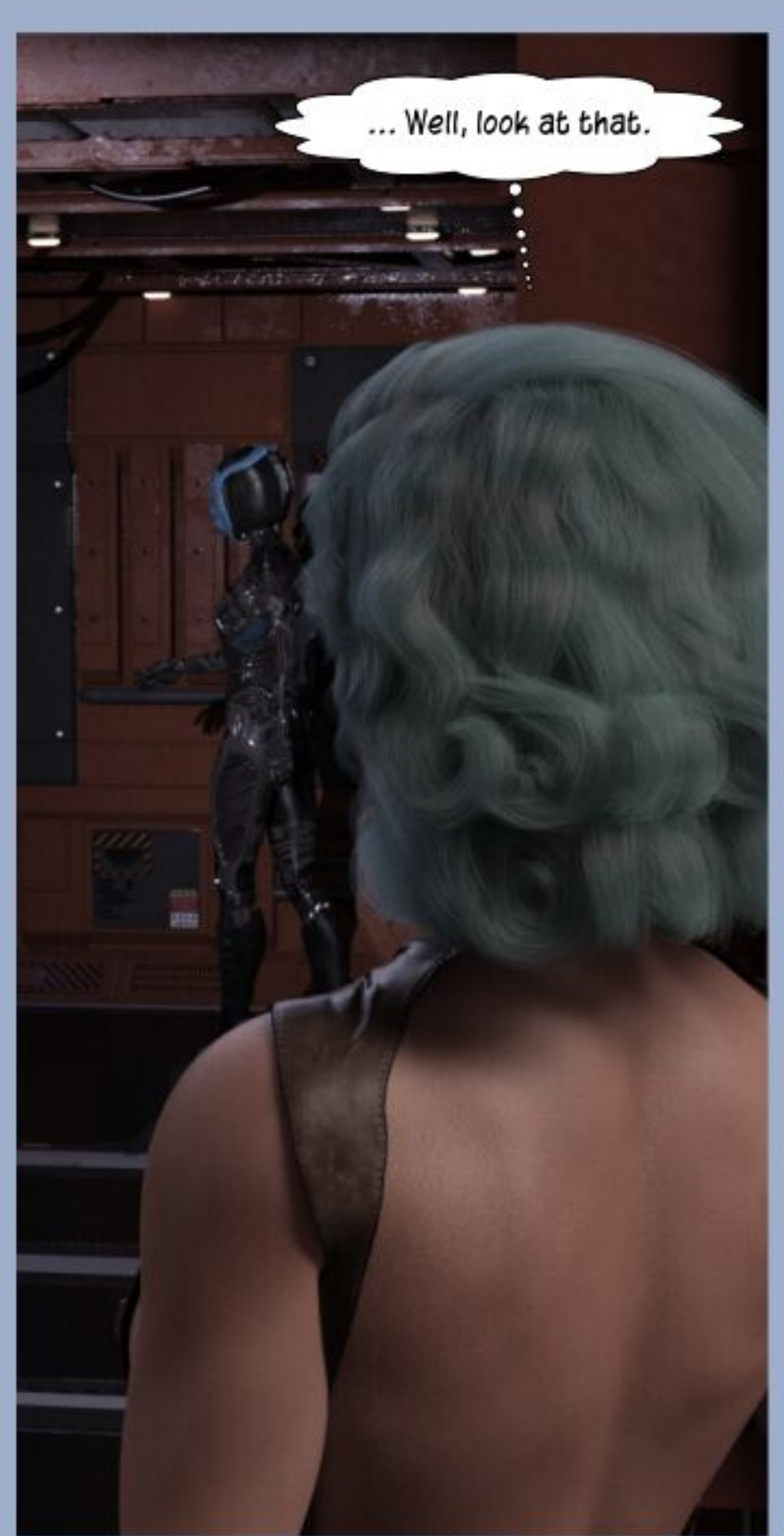
Is someone following me?



HMM.

I was hearing the same Pootsteps for a while ... but maybe that doesn't mean anything ...

On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt to loop around and see what happens. If there is someone following me, I might be able to get a glimpse.



... Well, look at that.



WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT?



You don't scare me, you know, Beth.

And shining your headlights in my eyes just gives me a headache. Turn them off.

I was being followed by a type M wearing Vigilance colors. Let's talk about that.

... IF I TURN THEM OFF YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE. THIS ROOM DOESN'T HAVE POWER.

I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU THINK I SHOULD TELL YOU ANYTHING. IT'S NOT LIKE YOU EVER DO A DAMNED THING FOR US.

You know, it's punny. Parsons is constantly yelling that I don't do enough for the humans and you're always saying I don't do enough for the robots.

MAYBE THAT MEANS YOU'RE DOING A LOUSY JOB.

Or maybe it means you both have unreasonable demands.

Somebody burned down a field of wheat. You'll notice I'm not following up on that. But if you want trouble, I can make it.



-- SIGH --

I WAS APPROACHED BY A SEX WORKER. A D YOU KNOW THE D'S USUALLY WON'T TALK TO US, AND VICE VERSA.

Yeah. You think they're collaborators, and they think you've abandoned your humanity.

HMPH.

SHE SAID SHE HAD A PLAN TO NEUTRALIZE PARSONS, IF WE WERE WILLING TO PUBLICIZE WHAT SHE PROVIDED. THERE WAS NO RISK FOR US, SO I SAID YES.

THEN SOMEONE ELSE TOLD ME YOU WERE INVESTIGATING HER CALLOUT GROUP, SO I NEEDED TO KNOW IF WE WERE BEING HANDED A TRAP.



I need to know her name.

SO YOU CAN SHUT HER DOWN? BECAUSE YOU ALWAYS LET PARSONS GET AWAY WITH HER SHIT?

I know you're not going to believe this, but Parsons pisses me off even more than she does you. What you don't get is that if I throw her off Coldpoint or shut her down some other way, I prove her point for her.

Anyway, I don't think you approve of murder, do you?

I NEVER SAID I WANTED TO MURDER PARSONS ...

Not Parsons. A type D sex worker named Gira Gessit. Someone tried to kill her and almost managed it.

That's what I'm investigating.

WAS THE MURDER ATTEMPT BY A HUMAN, OR ANOTHER ROBOT?

OH, I THINK IT'S POSSIBLE. OF COURSE AN M WOULD NEVER HARM ANOTHER M, BUT THERE ARE SOME D'S I WOULDN'T MIND DEACTIVATING. IN THEORY, OF COURSE.

Interesting you go there. I'd been trying to figure out whether it was even possible for one robot to try to kill another.

She's right--you M's are snobs.

WHO SAID THAT?

Never mind. Give me the name.

IF I DO, ARE YOU GOING TO TRY TO STOP WHAT SHE'S DOING?

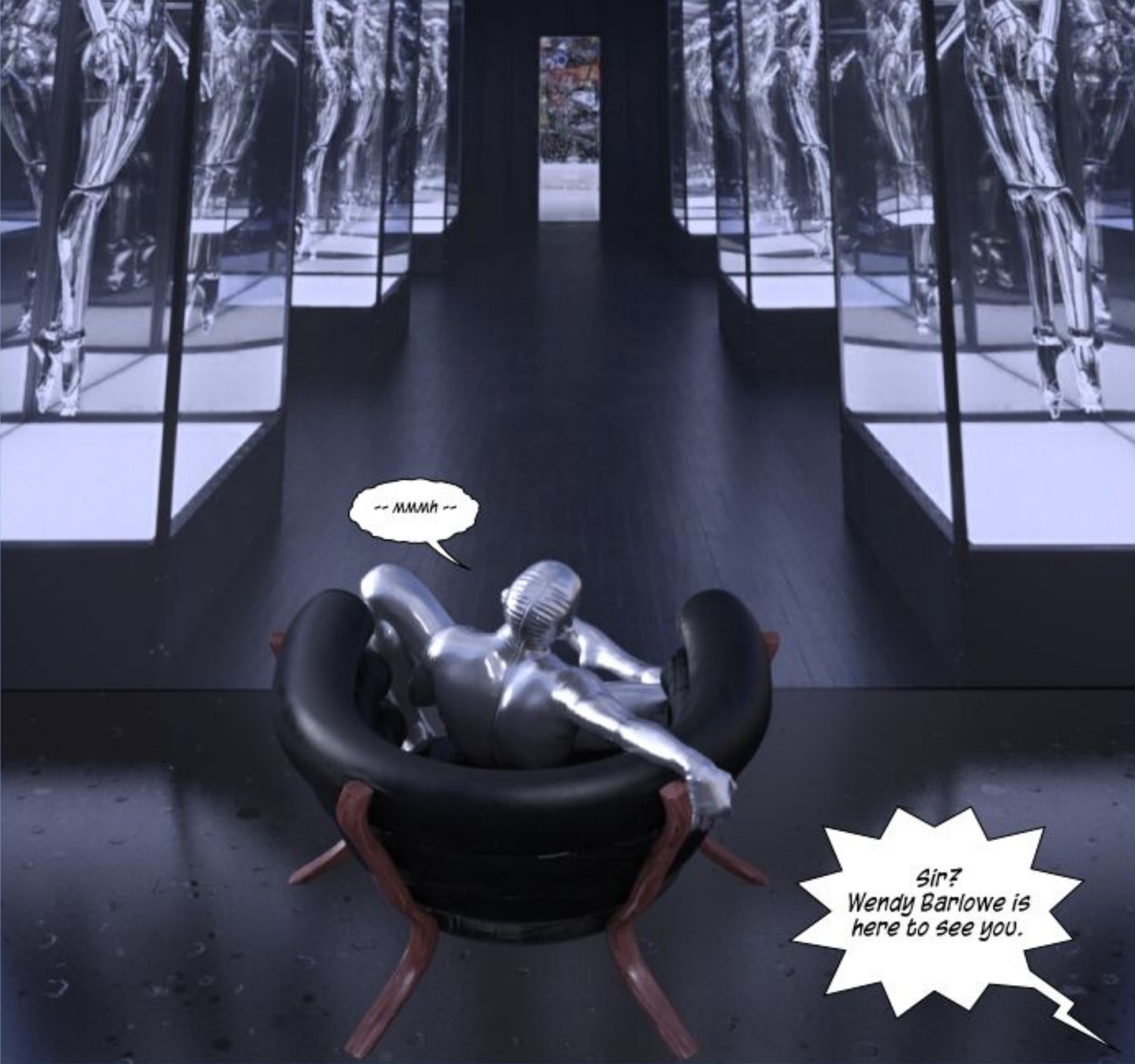


If I have to.

Look, I would love to see Parsons shut down. But there are higher priorities. I will not have a murder attempt go unpunished on my watch.

And if you don't agree, then you're not the person I thought you were.

I HAD EVERYTHING I NEEDED. I JUST HAD TO CONFIRM ONE SMALL PIECE OF IT. THAT MEANT A POSSIBLY DIFFICULT INTERVIEW.



-- Mmmh --

Sir?
Wendy Barlowe is here to see you.



Damn it, Melody, I said I didn't want to be disturbed!

I know, sir. I'm sorry. But it's the operations manager. Don't you think it's probably a bad idea to refuse to see her?

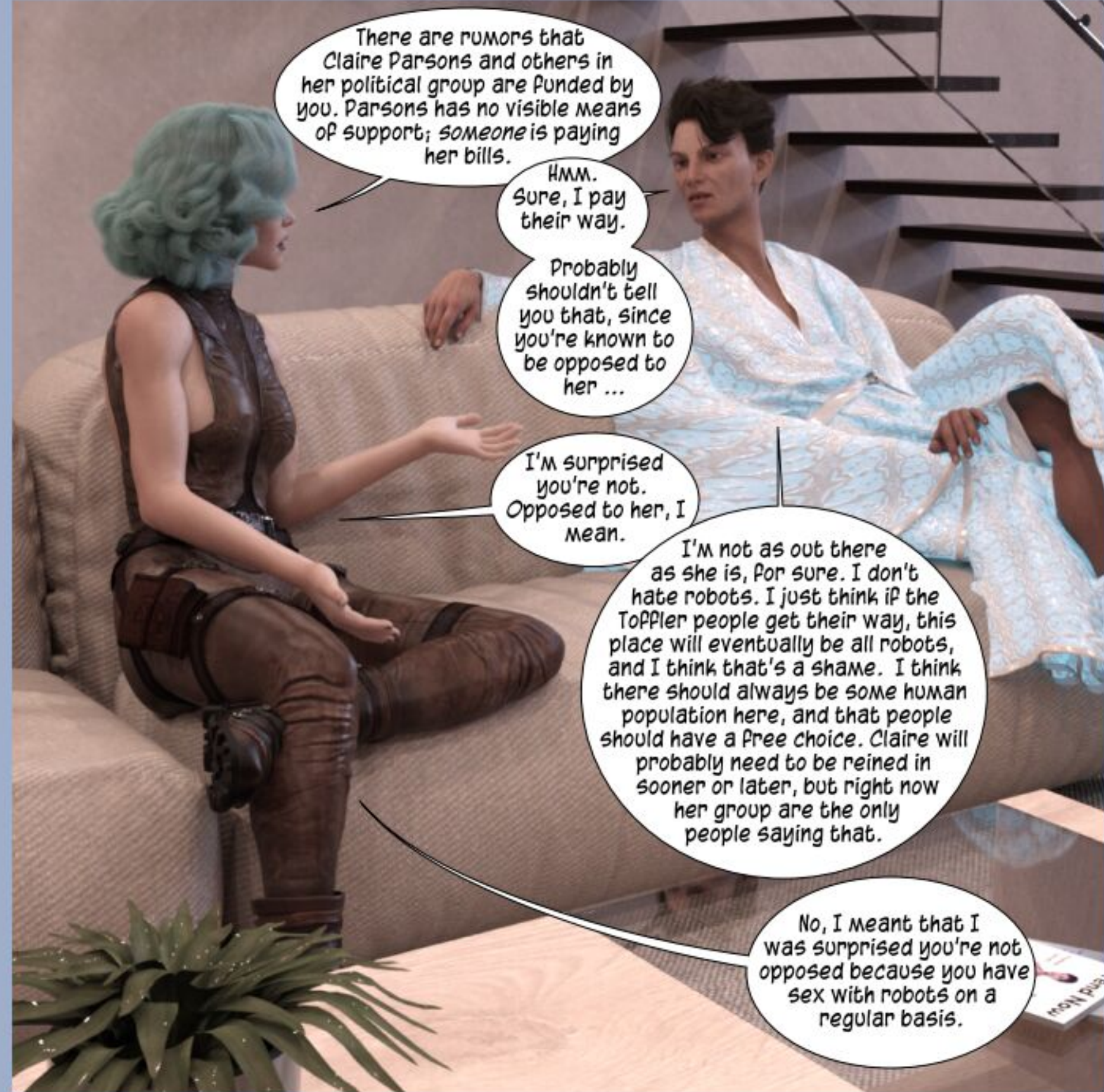
... Oh, Pine.
Give me a few minutes to change clothes.



Ms. Barlowe? I don't think we've ever actually met. Shane Wells. Excuse my attire; I wasn't expecting you.

Sorry about that, Mr. Wells. Normally I'd have made an appointment, but this was urgent.

I won't keep you long. I just need to confirm some information.



There are rumors that Claire Parsons and others in her political group are funded by you. Parsons has no visible means of support; someone is paying her bills.

Hmm. Sure, I pay their way.

Probably shouldn't tell you that, since you're known to be opposed to her ...

I'm surprised you're not opposed to her, I mean.

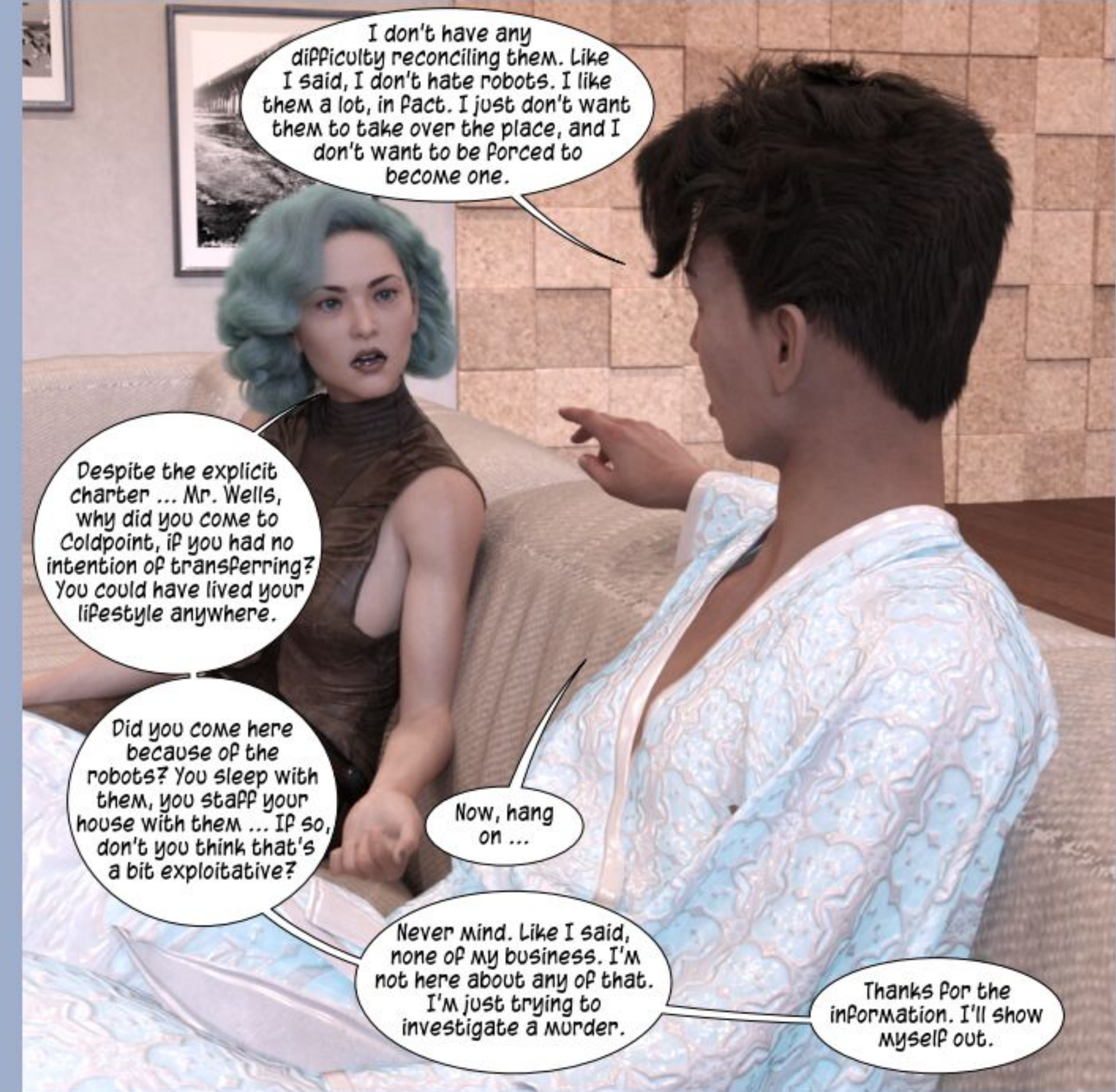
I'm not as out there as she is, for sure. I don't hate robots. I just think if the Toppier people get their way, this place will eventually be all robots, and I think that's a shame. I think there should always be some human population here, and that people should have a free choice. Claire will probably need to be reined in sooner or later, but right now her group are the only people saying that.

No, I meant that I was surprised you're not opposed because you have sex with robots on a regular basis.



That's slanderous! And you couldn't prove it even if were true ...

I don't intend to try to prove it. Your private life is your business. I was just pointing out that it feels a touch hypocritical to both support Parsons' phobias and be intimate with robots. Hard to reconcile the two, you know?



I don't have any difficulty reconciling them. Like I said, I don't hate robots. I like them a lot, in fact. I just don't want them to take over the place, and I don't want to be forced to become one.

Despite the explicit charter ... Mr. Wells, why did you come to Coldpoint, if you had no intention of transferring? You could have lived your lifestyle anywhere.

Did you come here because of the robots? You sleep with them, you staff your house with them ... If so, don't you think that's a bit exploitative?

Now, hang on ...

Never mind. Like I said, none of my business. I'm not here about any of that. I'm just trying to investigate a murder.

Thanks for the information. I'll show myself out.



Wait! Who got murdered?

A woman named Gira Gessit.

Gira?? So that's why she hasn't --
Damn it, she was a friend!

Then you'll be happy to know she'll recover. She needs a completely new frame.

If you resume your relationship with her, you might want to rethink the secrecy. People might think you have a guilty conscience.



Hala Tybalt?

I'm not working tonight. Go find somebody else.

I'm not here for that. I need to talk to you.

Don't want any. Fuck off.

I'm Wendy Barlowe. The operations manager? You know, the woman who runs the place?

-- Sigh --
Fine.



Make it fast. I'm in the middle of a movie.

Fast, huh? OK.

Roger Perone pushed Gira Gessit down an airshaft because he thought she was going to expose him. He thought that because you told him so. You wanted Gessit dead because she was in the way of you exposing Shane Wells. You figured if you could get the truth out about Wells, he'd stop backing Claire Parsons and her little brigade.

That fast enough for you?



The Puck?

I don't care who you are, you've got to be out of your Pucking mind to come in here and throw some shit like that at me --

Beth Vigilance says you approached her. And Byla Starne says you were the only one in the callout group who gave a damn about that kind of politics.



Those Pucking rats!

Neither one of them wanted to name you. But they also didn't want to be complicit in an attempted murder. You crossed a line, #ala.

You don't get to judge me, bitch! I'll break you into little pieces!

No, you won't.

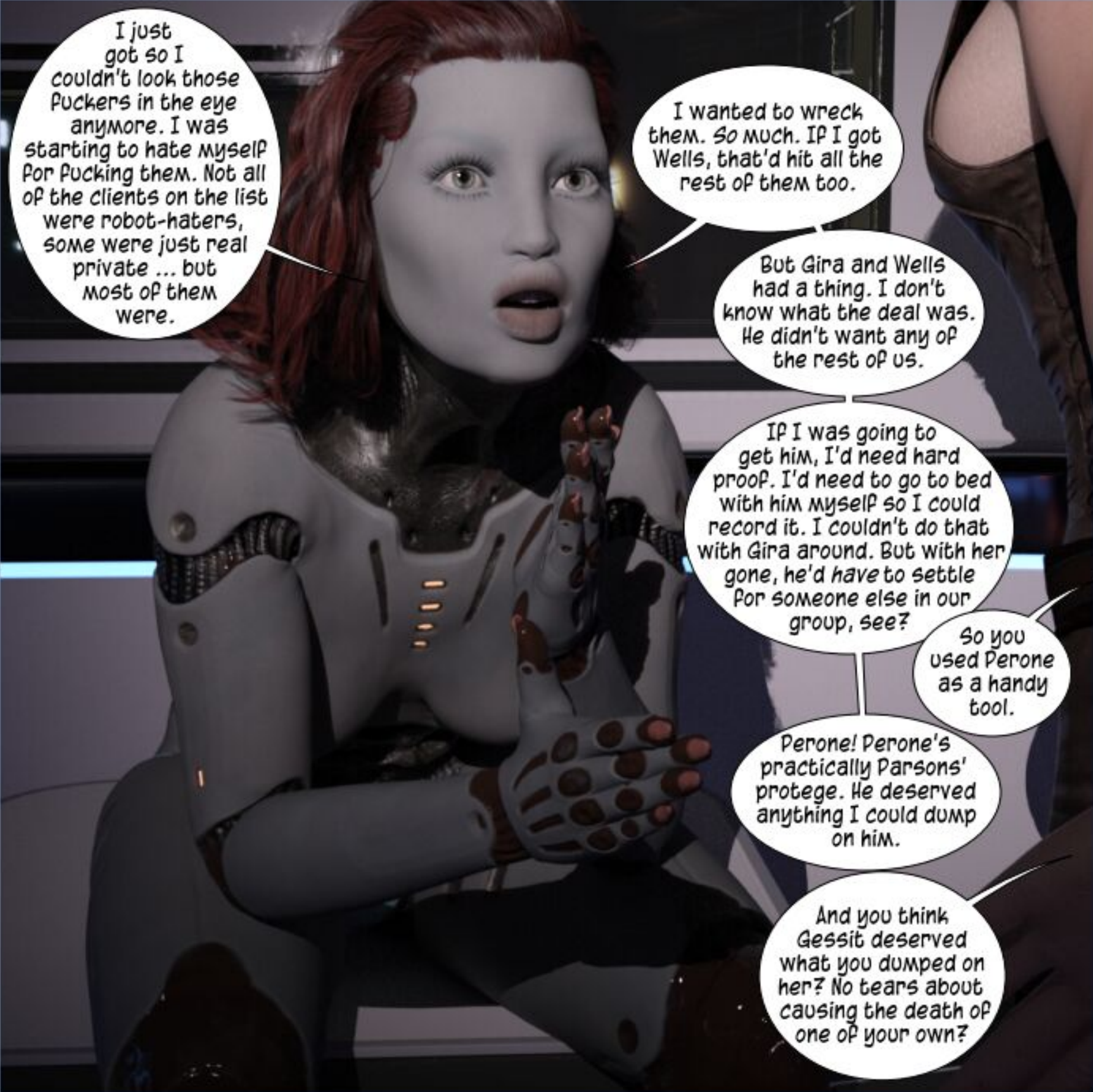
You can't prove a Pucking thing, anyway--

I don't have to prove anything. All that matters is whether I'm sure. I could have you tossed into a matter reclaim without even needing a reason. But I like to be able to sleep at night.



shit.

I'd like to hear your version of it. I don't say it'll change my opinion, but it'd be good to know.



I just got so I couldn't look those Puckers in the eye anymore. I was starting to hate myself for Pucking them. Not all of the clients on the list were robot-haters, some were just real private ... but most of them were.

I wanted to wreck them. so much. IP I got Wells, that'd hit all the rest of them too.

But Gira and Wells had a thing. I don't know what the deal was. He didn't want any of the rest of us.

IP I was going to get him, I'd need hard proof. I'd need to go to bed with him myself so I could record it. I couldn't do that with Gira around. But with her gone, he'd have to settle for someone else in our group, see?

So you used Perone as a handy tool.

Perone! Perone's practically Parsons' protege. He deserved anything I could dump on him.

And you think Gessit deserved what you dumped on her? No tears about causing the death of one of your own?



AAARGH!!

Why did I Pucking bother? I knew you wouldn't understand.

Gira liked Wells. She would have protected him. She would have protected that asshole!

I really am going to kill you, bitch!

-- hkkk --
no ... you're ... not ...



... no, I'm not.

Fucking blocks.

Fine. Do whatever you're gonna do.



What am I going to do?

Heads on pikes.

I don't think you're serious.

Zusy-Q, I hate to ask, but ... can Tybalt's behavior be ... altered? So she doesn't do something like this again?



Would you talk like that about altering the behavior of a human?

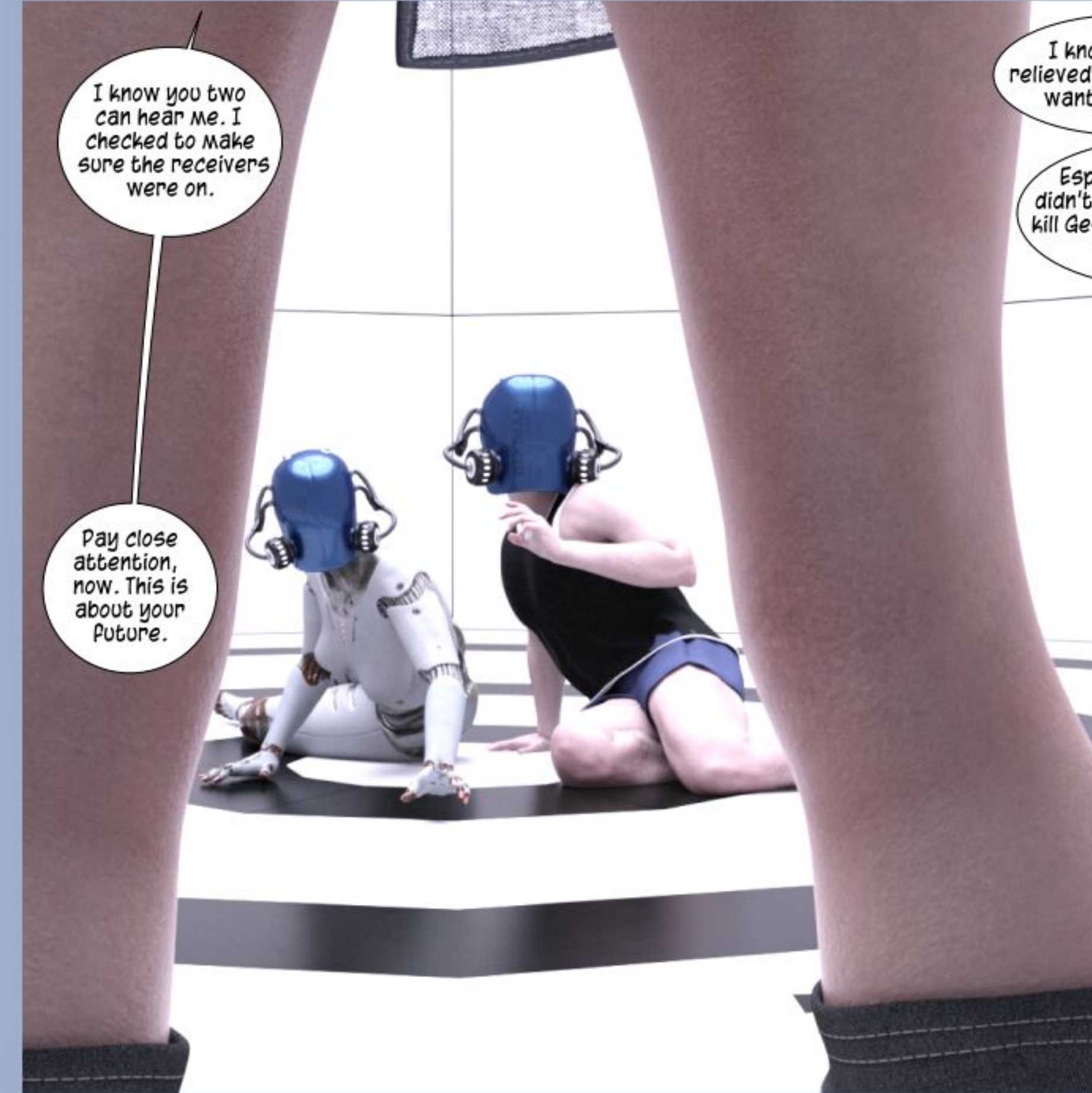
I might. IP I were desperate enough. I'm aware it's ... ethically dubious.

That's putting it mildly.

Even IP I were willing to do something that repugnant, I don't think it would have much of a chance of succeeding. The existing behavior block only works because it's got very definite boundary conditions. "Something like this" is very vague. No political activism? No conspiracy?

More likely it'd cause mental damage. I assume you're not willing to compromise your ethics that Par. IP you're going to lobotomize her, just go ahead and throw her into a matter reclaim and save time.

Don't think I haven't considered it. I don't have a single answer I like.



I know you two can hear me. I checked to make sure the receivers were on.

Pay close attention, now. This is about your future.

I know you'll be relieved to hear I don't want to kill you.

Especially since you didn't actually manage to kill Gessit or do any other real damage.

But I also can't just let you back among the population like nothing happened.

Even IP I trusted you to never misbehave again--and I don't--this place is a political fire hazard these days, with Claire Parsons plugging her bullshit at one end and Beth Vigilance trying to start a revolution at the other, and I don't need people wandering around lighting matches.

We don't have anything like an actual prison, and I hope we never do, and I can't keep you in this room forever.

So. What do you two think I should do with you?

