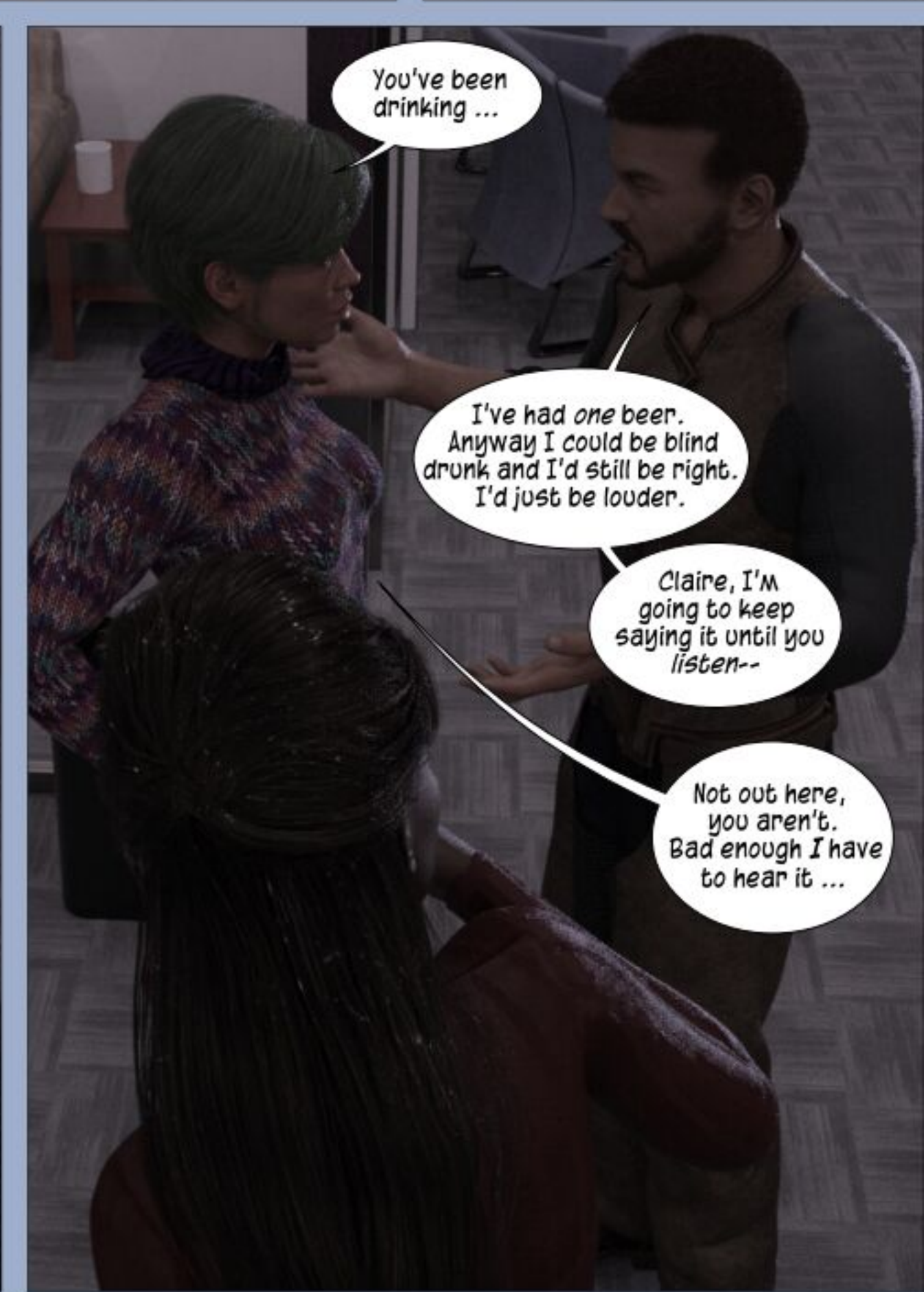
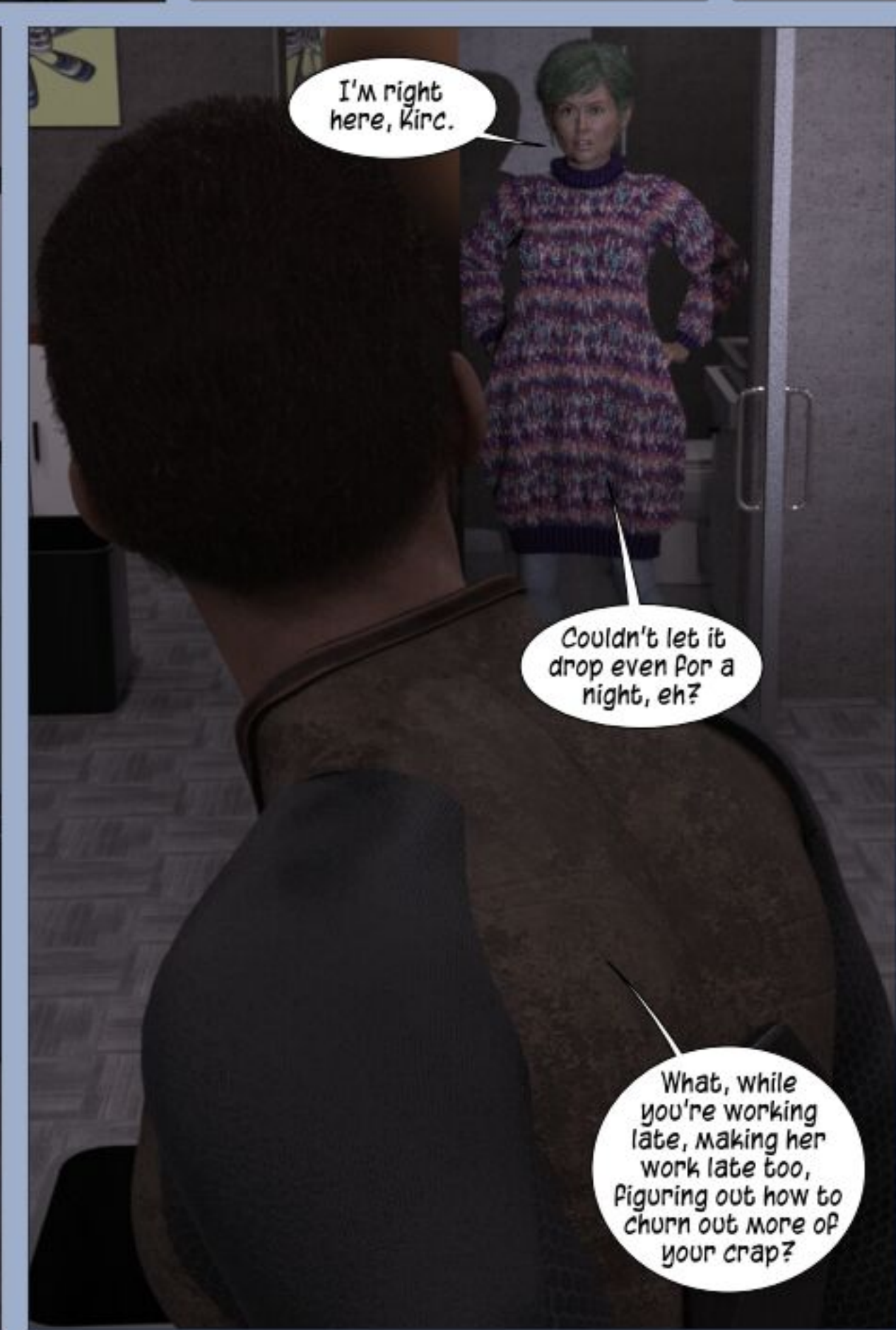
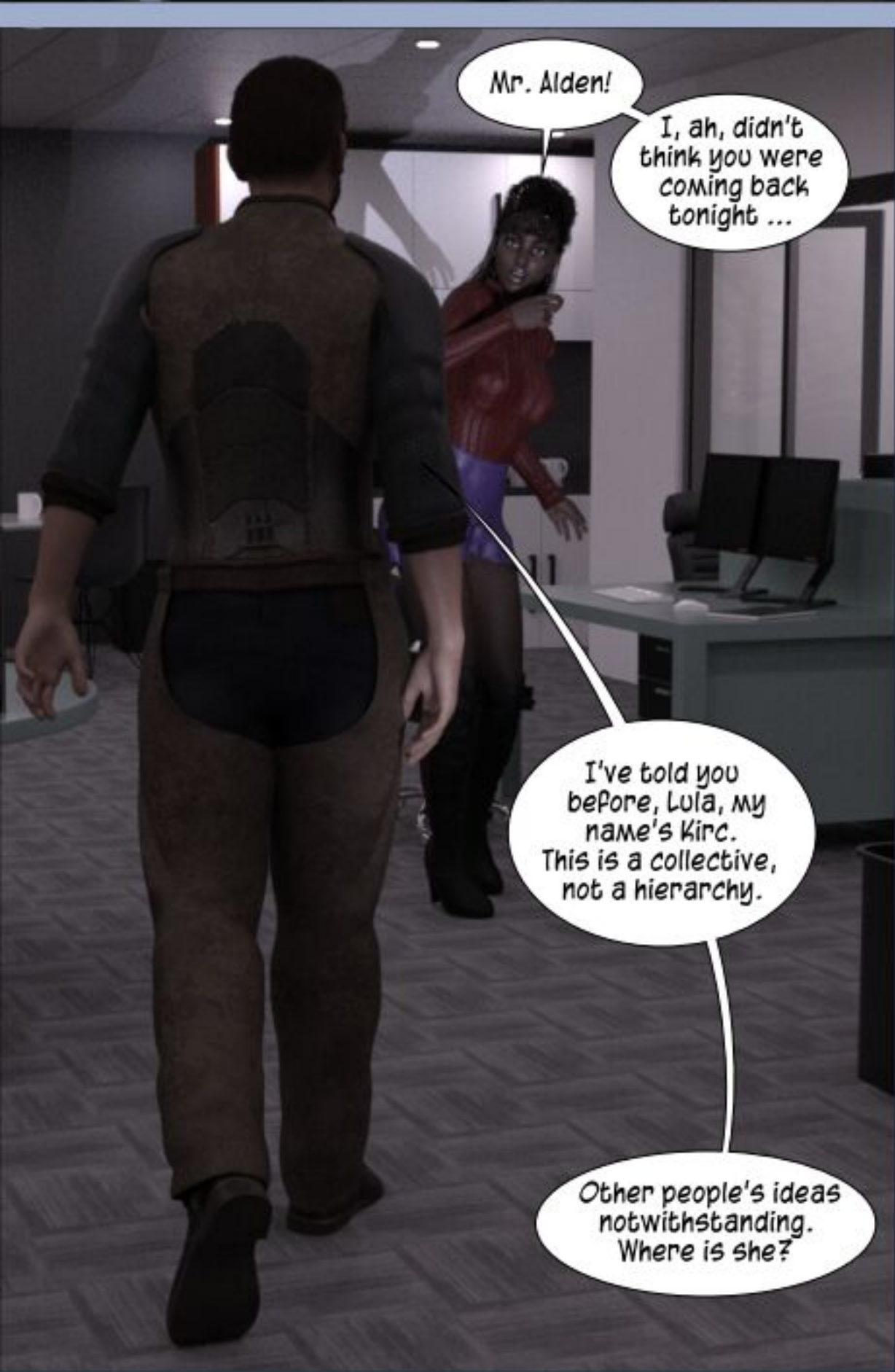
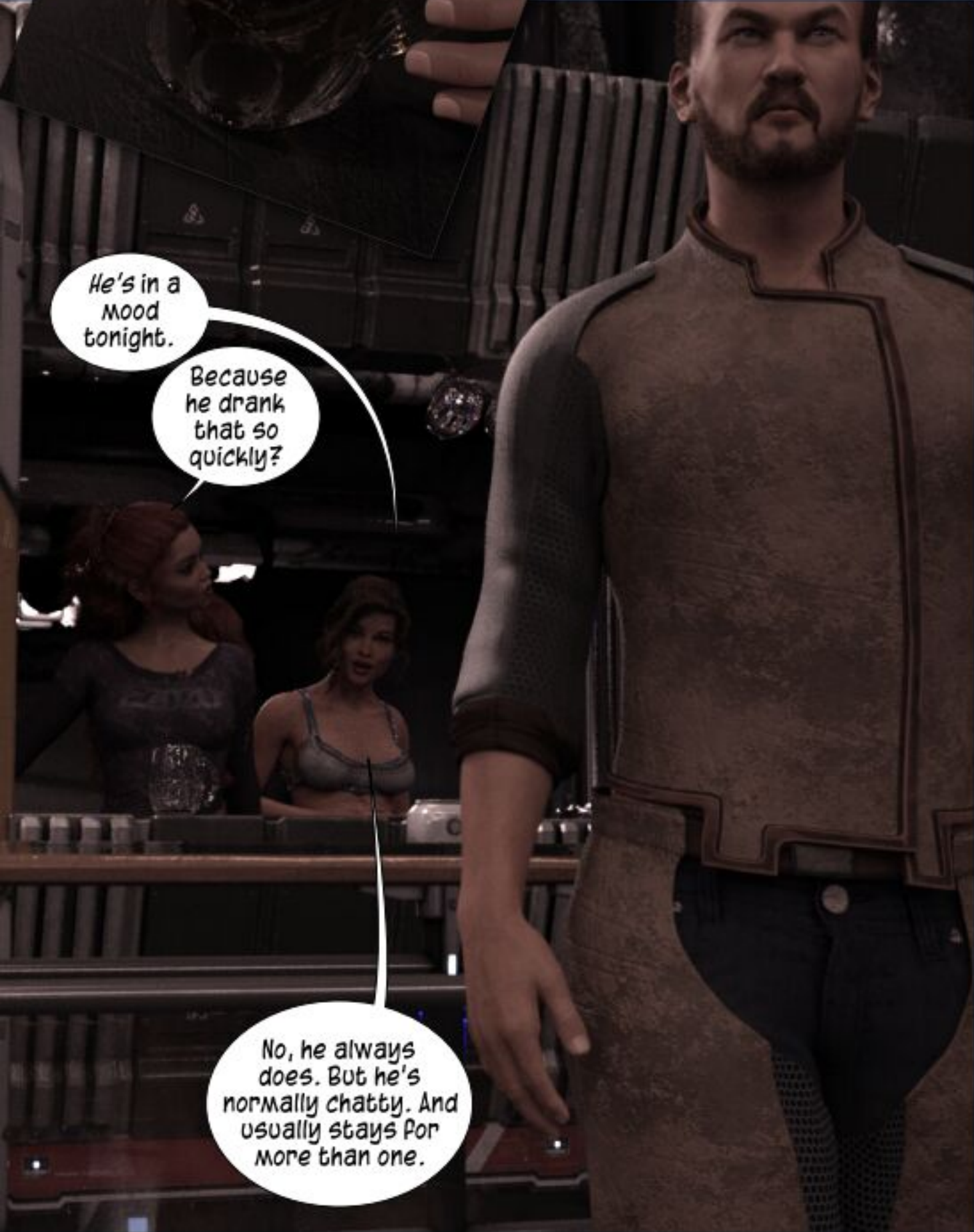
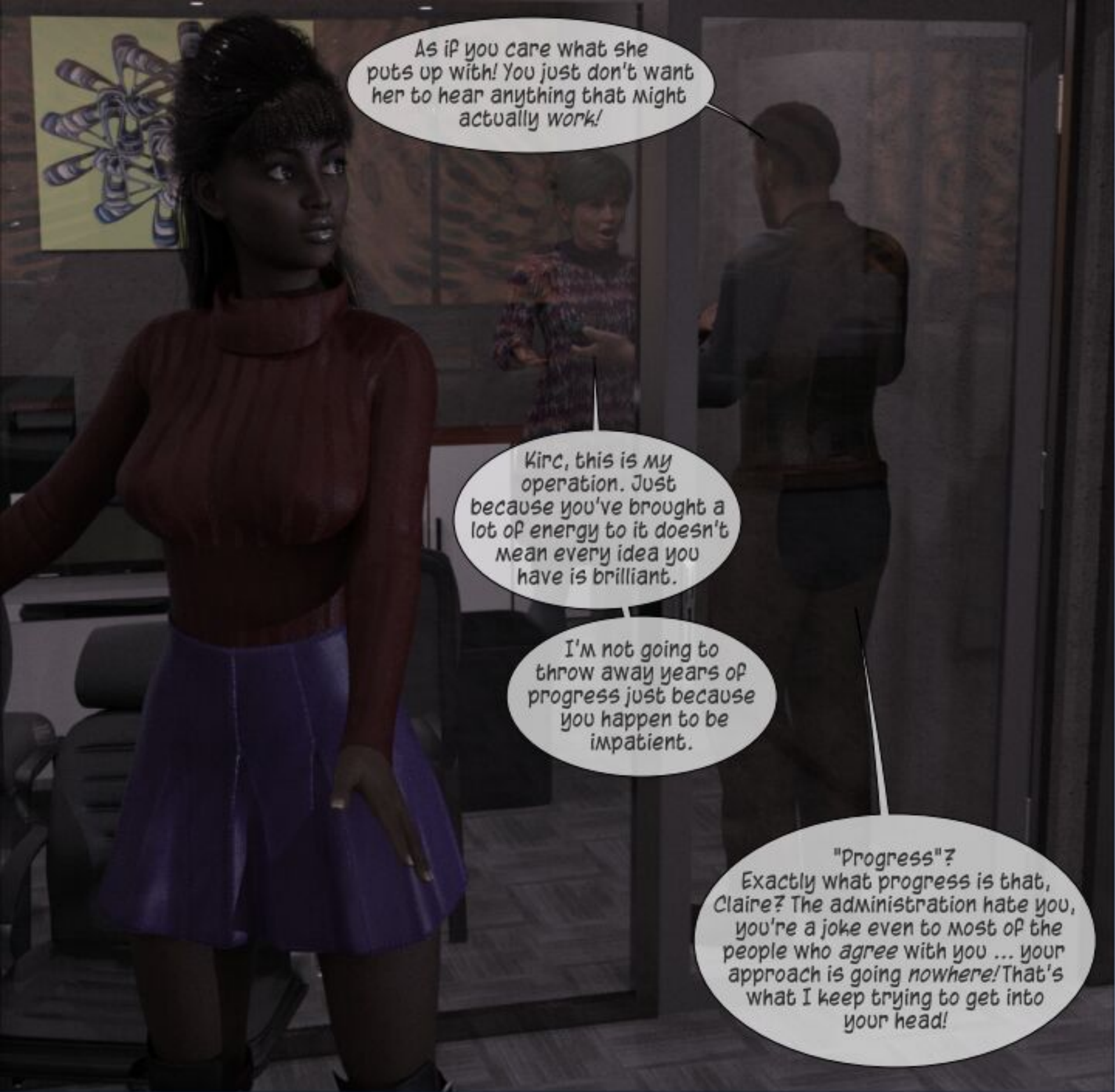


PROOF OF DEATH

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY





As if you care what she puts up with! You just don't want her to hear anything that might actually work!

Kirc, this is my operation. Just because you've brought a lot of energy to it doesn't mean every idea you have is brilliant.

I'm not going to throw away years of progress just because you happen to be impatient.

"Progress"? Exactly what progress is that, Claire? The administration hate you, you're a joke even to most of the people who agree with you ... your approach is going nowhere! That's what I keep trying to get into your head!



Kirc, how many times have we discussed this? We cannot advocate that. If we take any physical steps against the robot population ... you think we're unpopular now ...

You can't worry about that! The humans will come around. Once one or two of the robots are deactivated ...

"Killed," Kirc. You think once we murder a few robots, the human population will suddenly decide that was the right approach? May I remind you that thirty percent of the humans agree with us, at most?

Do you have any idea how much Barlowe would love to throw the two of us off the planet? You want to give her a reason?

Kirc, one day we'll get the robots out of here. But we have to convince more of the humans first. It isn't negotiable. That's what I keep trying to get into your head.

And I'm getting really tired of arguing with you about it. Maybe you should form your own operation, if you

AS OPERATIONS MANAGER--THAT IS, THE WOMAN AT THE TOP--IT'S ARGUABLY PART OF MY JOB TO BE DISTURBED BY CALLS AT ALL HOURS. IN PRACTICE, THOUGH, I HAVE FOUR EXTREMELY COMPETENT DIVISION MANAGERS AND VERY LITTLE GETS PAST THEM TO ME. ON THE OTHER HAND, WHEN IT DOES, THAT'S USUALLY A SIGN IT'S SOMETHING SERIOUS.



--huh?--

... Gloria? What's wrong?

GLORIA BANTAM, DOMESTIC MANAGER, PERSONNEL AND ALL ASPECTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE. USUALLY THE FIRST PERSON TO HEAR ABOUT A PROBLEM, UNLESS HER DEPUTY HELEN "HELLO" ORRIS GETS TO IT BEFORE SHE DOES.

AT LEAST I DIDN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT WAKING UP TREAC. I'D GONE TO HER PLACE TO WAIT FOR HER TO COME HOME, BECAUSE I KNEW SHE'D NEED TO CRASH HARD ALMOST AS SOON AS SHE DID. AS IT WAS, SHE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE THE ENERGY TO FOOL AROUND.

POOR TREAC. SHE'D RATHER BE ACTING THAN TENDING BAR, BUT THERE'S ONLY ONE THEATRICAL TROUPE IN COLDFPOINT AND THEY CAN'T AFFORD TO RUN PRODUCTIONS CONSTANTLY.

One of my people found a body, Wendy. Human. In an access corridor in complex A.

We, ah ... He thinks, and from what he says I agree ... it wasn't a natural death.



What did you do with it?

Good. I guess I'll go see what she has to say.

Gloria ... better keep this to ourselves for now. Except I suppose we need to tell next of kin ... or have you done that already?

He and another of my guys brought it to Zusy-Q.

Can't. I haven't got a clue who it is. The guys didn't recognize him, and I haven't seen the body myself.



I'd tell you how I much don't care for unexpected corpses at this hour, but I suppose we can take it as read.

Would expected corpses be any better?

ZUSY-Q DOESN'T WORK FOR ME. LIKE ME, SHE'S A DIRECT HIRE BY THE TOFFLER PROJECT. HER JOB IS DOING TRANSFERS. BUT SHE RUINS MEDICAL JUST TO HAVE SOMETHING ELSE TO DO WITH HER TIME, AND ALSO SO SHE CAN HAVE SOMETHING TO GRUMP ABOUT.

Uh, I know the light in here makes it hard to tell, and I admit I haven't seen many dead people, but ... is he a ... strange color?

Very much. Blue is never a good look on humans.

He has severe methemoglobinemia. His blood was unable to properly carry oxygen. Samples confirm it.



So I suppose if he'd had an existing condition ...

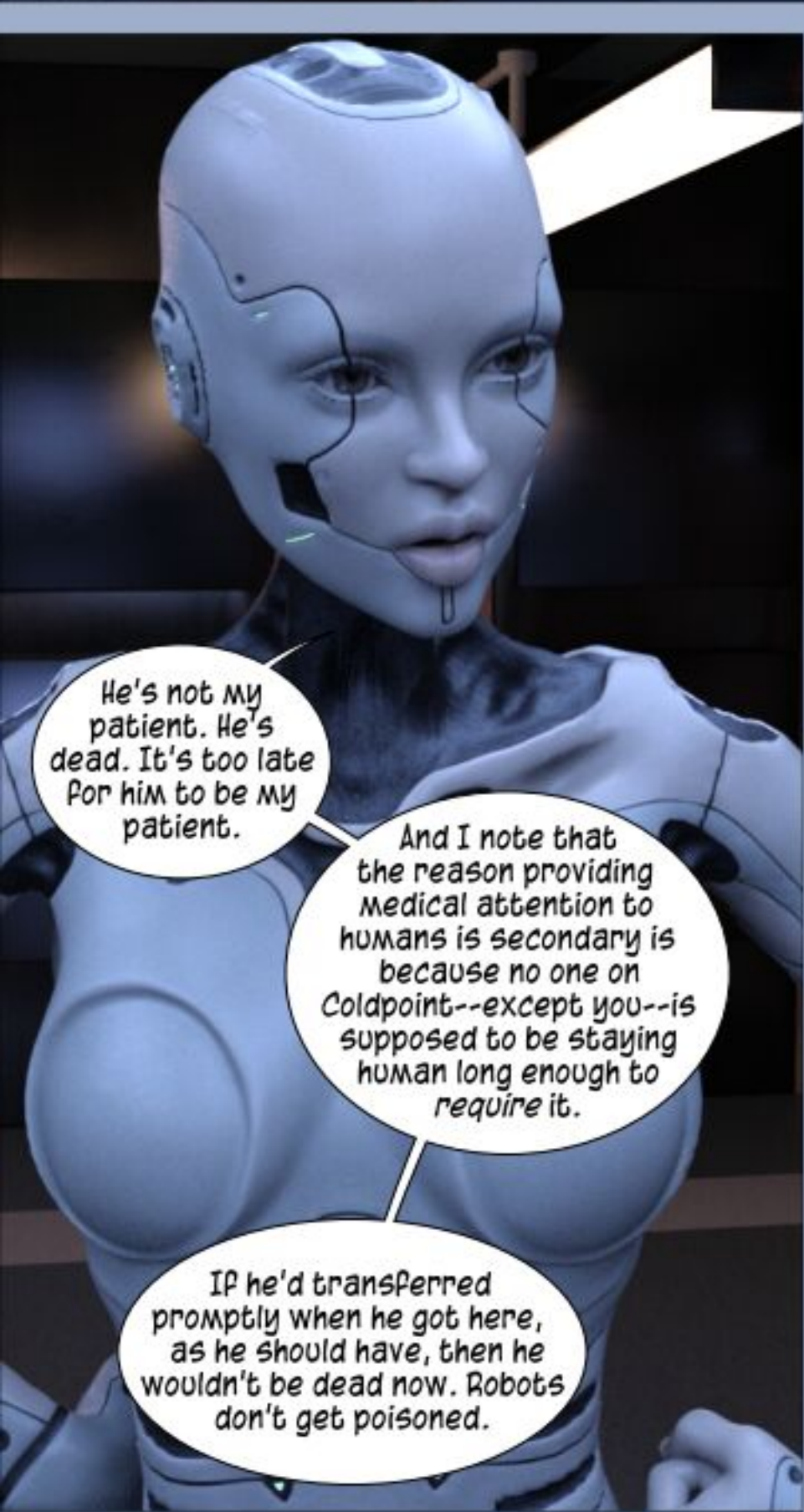
Well, it was either unexpected or he was stupid, or he'd have come to us. I think he was poisoned.

Cyanide?

Strangely, cyanide doesn't make you cyanotic. With cyanide his hemoglobin would be oversaturated and he'd be very red. Less so post-mortem, of course, but you'd be able to tell. No, this'd be some kind of nitrite.

It wouldn't necessarily be instant. He could have had an hour, maybe more, without noticing anything but a little dizziness and fatigue--until the crash. By which time he should already have been in here getting oxygen and methylene blue.

You know, I feel like you're a lot more respectful of your robot patients.



He's not my patient. He's dead. It's too late for him to be my patient.

And I note that the reason providing medical attention to humans is secondary is because no one on Coldpoint--except you--is supposed to be staying human long enough to require it.

If he'd transferred promptly when he got here, as he should have, then he wouldn't be dead now. Robots don't get poisoned.



Unfortunately, that was never going to happen with him.

This is Kirc Alden. He got here a couple of months ago, and immediately got involved in Claire Parsons' operation, to the extent that rumor is he's now second in charge.

Well, was.

He was a lot more militant than she is. He wanted to actually drive robots off Coldpoint, or worse. Or so I'm told.

In that case, I see even less reason why I should be reverent.



I didn't say you had to be reverent.

I suppose I'm going to need to figure out who killed this asshole.

Please tell me as soon as it becomes acceptable to put the body into matter reclaim. We have limited cold storage.

I'll do that. In the meantime, do me a favor and keep this to yourself.

AS IT TURNED OUT, NONE OF THE SECRECY MATTERED A BIT. WHEN I WENT TO MY DESK THE NEXT MORNING, THERE WAS A COMMOTION OUTSIDE MY OFFICE, INCLUDING A PERSON I WAS SURPRISED TO SEE, AND ANOTHER WHOSE PRESENCE USUALLY MEANT MY DAY WAS GOING TO GO POORLY.



... WON'T ADMIT IT EVEN WHEN IT'S RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU ...

... spreading rumors just to cover your own asses ...

You're not going to intimidate us!



Ms. Barlowe! Any remarks on the fact that Kirc Alden was found dead last night under suspicious circumstances?

ISADORA BRASS. NOT ONE OF THE TWO PEOPLE I JUST ALLUDED TO. SHE'S USUALLY PRETTY TOLERABLE, BUT I WASN'T IN THE MOOD.

Not at this time. And I would like to strongly caution the press against speculation without facts.

When I have a statement to make, I'll let you know.

BETH VIGILANCE, THE M-FRAME ON MY LEFT. BETH IS CLAIRE PARSONS' OPPOSITE--MILITANT ABOUT HUMANS WHO DON'T TRANSFER, WANTS TO FORCE THEM TO TRANSFER OR EJECT THEM FROM COLDPOINT. YOU'D THINK JUST BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE PARSONS I GET ALONG WITH BETH. YOU'D BE WRONG.

ZIZ FLYN ON MY RIGHT, ONE OF PARSONS' GROUND OPS, THE KIND SHE SENDS OUT TO PROTEST AND DO DIRTY WORK. I DIDN'T THINK ENOUGH OF FLYN TO BOTHER TO DISLIKE HER.



I don't know what you two are shouting about, and I don't care, so don't tell me.

Stop squabbling outside my office. I'd say not to squabble anywhere, but that's beyond hope.

Beth, I've told you before that shining your headlights in people's faces does not help your arguments. Turn them off.

But she's saying that--

SO YOU'RE NOT EVEN PRETENDING TO HEAR US--

I don't care. I am investigating Kirc Alden's death. If I need information from you, I will come ask you for it. That is all.

Now everybody clear out.

Except you, Morton. I want a word.



What's your interest in this? I know Parsons fired you a while back. I was surprised to see you lurking.

She didn't fire me. I quit. It was amicable.

Mostly.

Working for Claire can be ... exhausting. When Lula Benjamine came along, I was thrilled to let her replace me.

But Lula didn't show up this morning, and Claire really needed some help today.



Anyway, I'm not here to start a fight. And I didn't tell Ziz and Tam to show up.

I just came to warn you about ... what did you say to Brass? Speculation without facts. Wouldn't want you jumping to any conclusions.



What conclusions would I be jumping to?

I'm sure Ms. Headlights here will spell them all out for you.

GO PISS IN A RECLAIM, MORTON.



I'M CURIOUS. WHAT LIES DID HE TELL YOU THAT YOU'LL USE TO KEEP FROM TAKING ANY ACTION THIS TIME?

I don't even know what it is I'm supposed to be taking action on. Does this have something to do with Kirc Alden's death?

YOU DON'T-- NO, I THINK YOU'RE SERIOUS.

YOU AREN'T AWARE THAT PARSONS PLACED ONE OF HER PEOPLE IN AGRICULTURE SPECIFICALLY TO MAKE TROUBLE?

Parsons got her into Agriculture because she was paranoid about only robots working with the human food supply and she wanted a monitor. Or, all right, a spy. But it was harmless. What's that got to do with--

HER JOB INCLUDES TAKING CARE OF THE AGRICULTURAL CHEMICAL SUPPLIES, THE ONLY SOURCE OF THE SUBSTANCE THAT POISONED ALDEN. CONNECT THE DOTS.

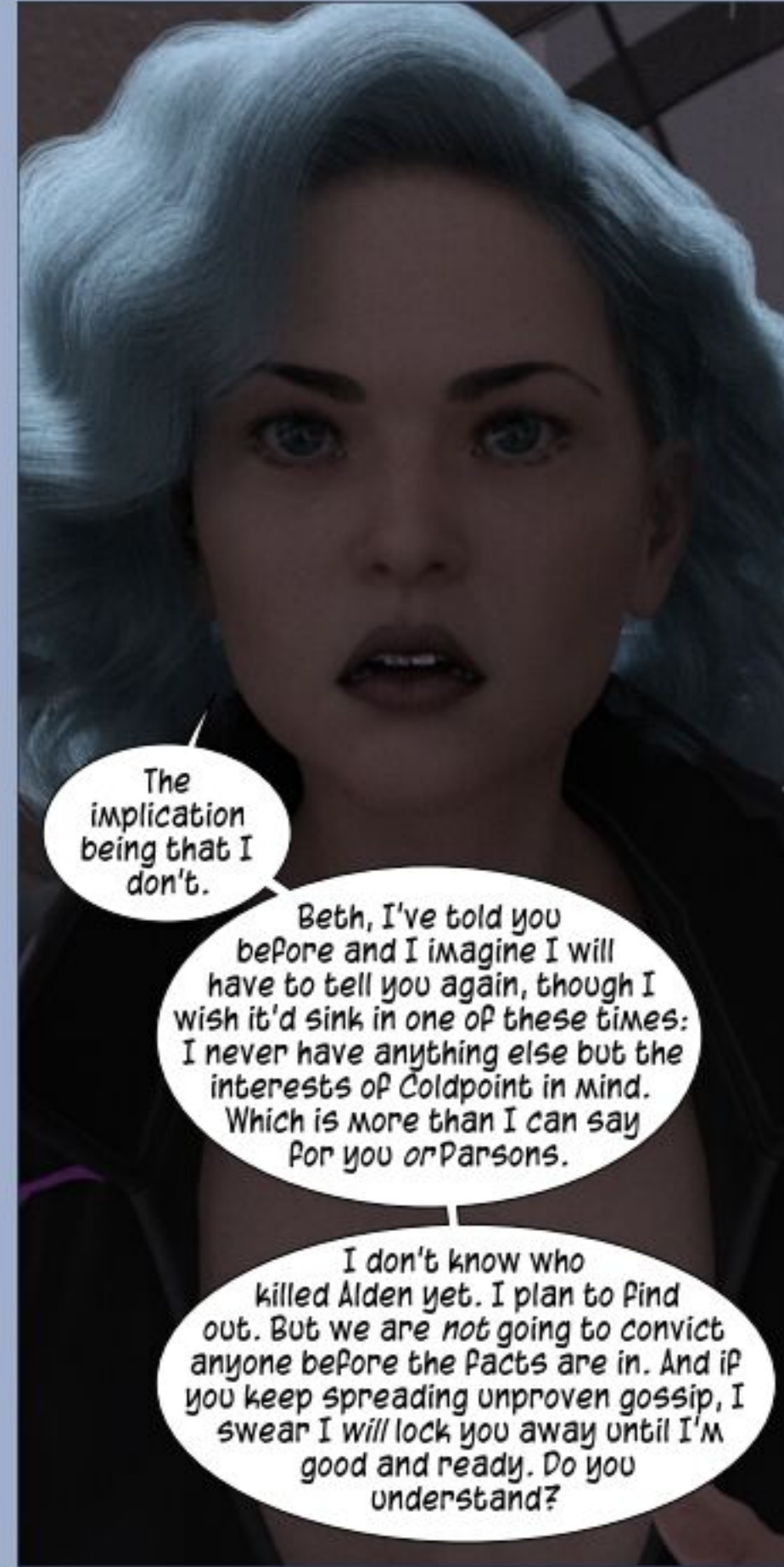
... You know, you're suspiciously well-informed about all this, Beth.



DON'T START WITH THAT. YOU KNOW PERFECTLY WELL I KEEP CLOSE WATCH ON ALL PARSONS' LITTLE TRICKS. SOMEONE HAS TO. YOU CERTAINLY WON'T.

That's not what I meant. The circumstances of Alden's death haven't been disclosed. Who told you?

... SOMEONE WHO HAS THE INTERESTS OF COLDPOINT IN MIND.



The implication being that I don't.

Beth, I've told you before and I imagine I will have to tell you again, though I wish it'd sink in one of these times. I never have anything else but the interests of Coldpoint in mind. Which is more than I can say for you or Parsons.

I don't know who killed Alden yet. I plan to find out. But we are not going to convict anyone before the facts are in. And if you keep spreading unproven gossip, I swear I will lock you away until I'm good and ready. Do you understand?



Honestly, I'm a little surprised you're not cheering. Word is Alden was much worse than Parsons.

DON'T KID YOURSELF. THEY BOTH WANT THE SAME THING.

HE JUST WANTED IT TO HAPPEN A LOT FASTER.



I don't have time to look through manifests right now, but that sounds plausible. Actually, I don't know why Agriculture would want to have it on hand either, but it's even less likely for anyone else. I certainly don't keep any in Medical.

I'll ask Cii. Mostly right now I just want to know how--



Hm. This is supposed to be a private lab.

I told them to come. Sorry. I wanted all of you in the same place for a moment.

Beth Vigilance not only knew about Kirc Alden's death, she knew the death was suspicious and she had some idea of what he'd died of.

Since the behavior block makes it unlikely she knew because she killed him, I have to assume one of you gave out information I asked you not to give out.

Even if I were inclined to do that, I haven't been in contact with anyone to tell. I haven't left Medical in days.

I haven't said a word ... and the two who Pound and moved the body would follow my instructions, I'm pretty sure ... I mean, there's nobody else who knew ...



Unless ... but surely ...

Hello?



I told Beth. Yes.

I knew you were going to try to cover it up. You wouldn't want there to be any kind of disturbance.

I know why you feel that way--I mean, I want to keep the peace too--but this is probably our best chance to get Parsons out of Coldpoint! We can't let it pass by!



We don't even know Parsons had anything to do with it!

I realize that! I just wanted to make sure it didn't get dropped. So we'll actually investigate. So we can prove she did it.

I wonder sometimes if there's something about the D Frames that encourages sloppy thinking.

I'd offer to give you a continuity check, but I have to go interview a new transfer. Please don't touch anything while I'm gone.



Hello ... I'm ...

... I don't even know how to start.

What hurts the most is we've worked together for years. I am really offended by your assumptions.

I'd love to walk away from this, you understand? We're all better with Alden dead. But I have to follow through, and you should know better than to think I wouldn't.

... Are you pining me?

If anyone pines you it'll be Gloria. Anyway, I don't want you gone, and I don't think she does either.

But I'm not happy, and I expect you to never pull something like this again.

I'LL CLAIM HELLO'S BEHAVIOR AS THE EXCUSE FOR MY FEROCIOUSLY BAD MOOD WHEN I WENT TO PARSONS' HEADQUARTERS. IT DIDN'T HELP THAT THE ONLY PERSON THERE WAS



Morton!

Yiii!

Where is she? I need to talk to her now.



She's at home. She's ... not having a good morning.

I can imagine. Beth Vigilance will be marching in the halls calling for her head any moment now. If she isn't already.

But you knew that. It's what you were trying to warn me about.

I know better than to try to get an opinion from you, but I'd like to know what you know about her movements last night.

Ah ... not much. Like I told you, I'm not really involved anymore.

Claire was probably here until late. Even before I quit, she'd taken to only going home to sleep. She was getting pretty ... uh ... well, obsessed. And she didn't trust Alden enough to let him handle anything by himself.

But I wasn't here, so that's just a guess.



The person you want is Lula. The two of them were joined at the hip.

By choice?

-- Sigh --

Claire demands a lot from her assistants. That's why I quit. I couldn't tell if Lula was more into it than I was, or if she just hadn't run out of energy yet.

Anyway, the problem right now is that no one knows where Lula is. I'm trying to deal with this mess, and meanwhile she's not answering my calls.

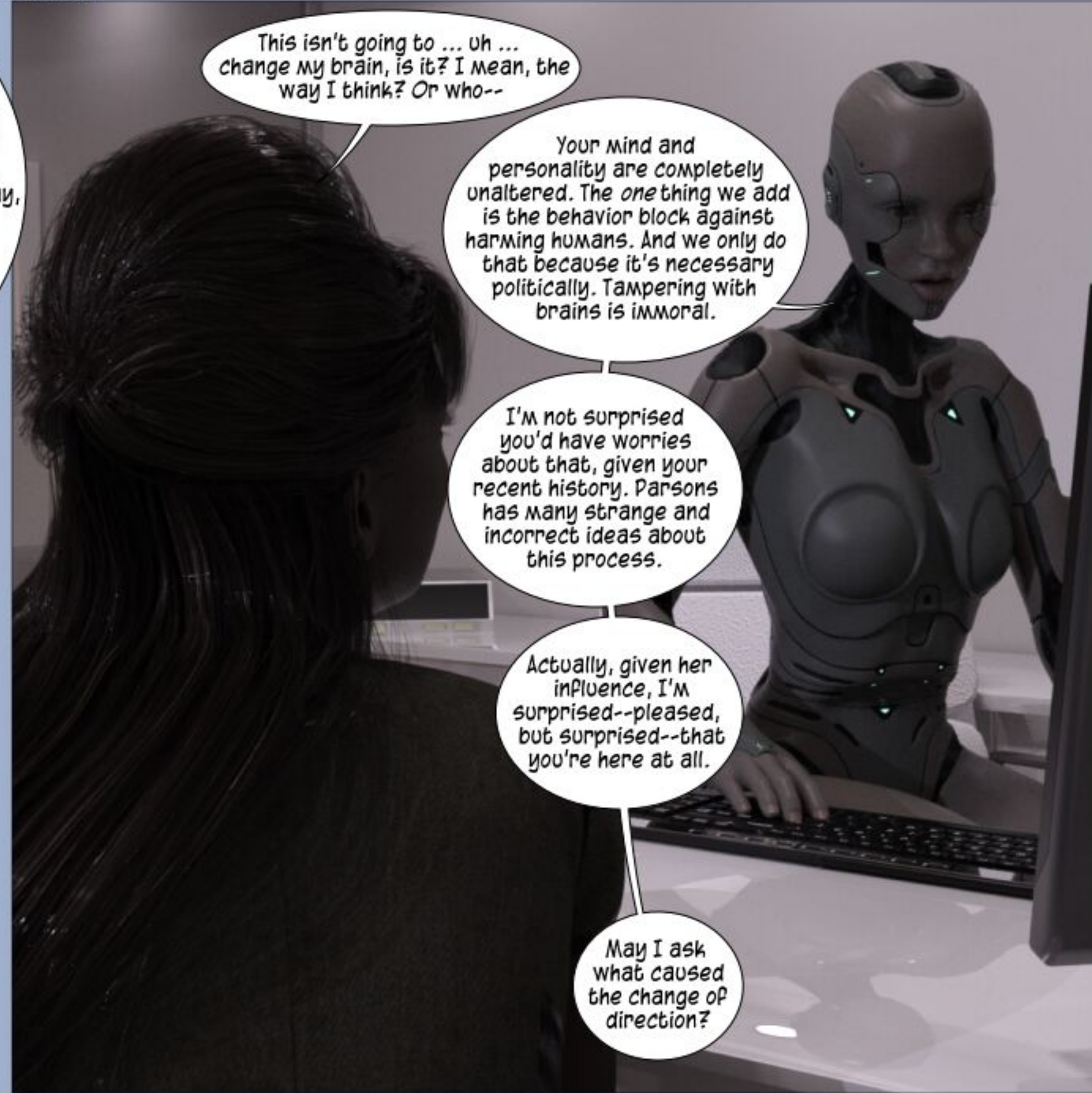
"She picked the worst possible time to decide to vanish, y'know?"



The first step, of course, is deciding which type of Frame you'd like. I don't want to rush that decision ... but if you make it today, we can proceed immediately to the surgical stage. I have no queue at the moment.

You have Frames ready?

No, they're custom-built. I have chest cases; when I relocate you to one, there'll be a period of several days while you grow the neural connections. You'll effectively be unconscious for that. During that time, I construct your Frame.



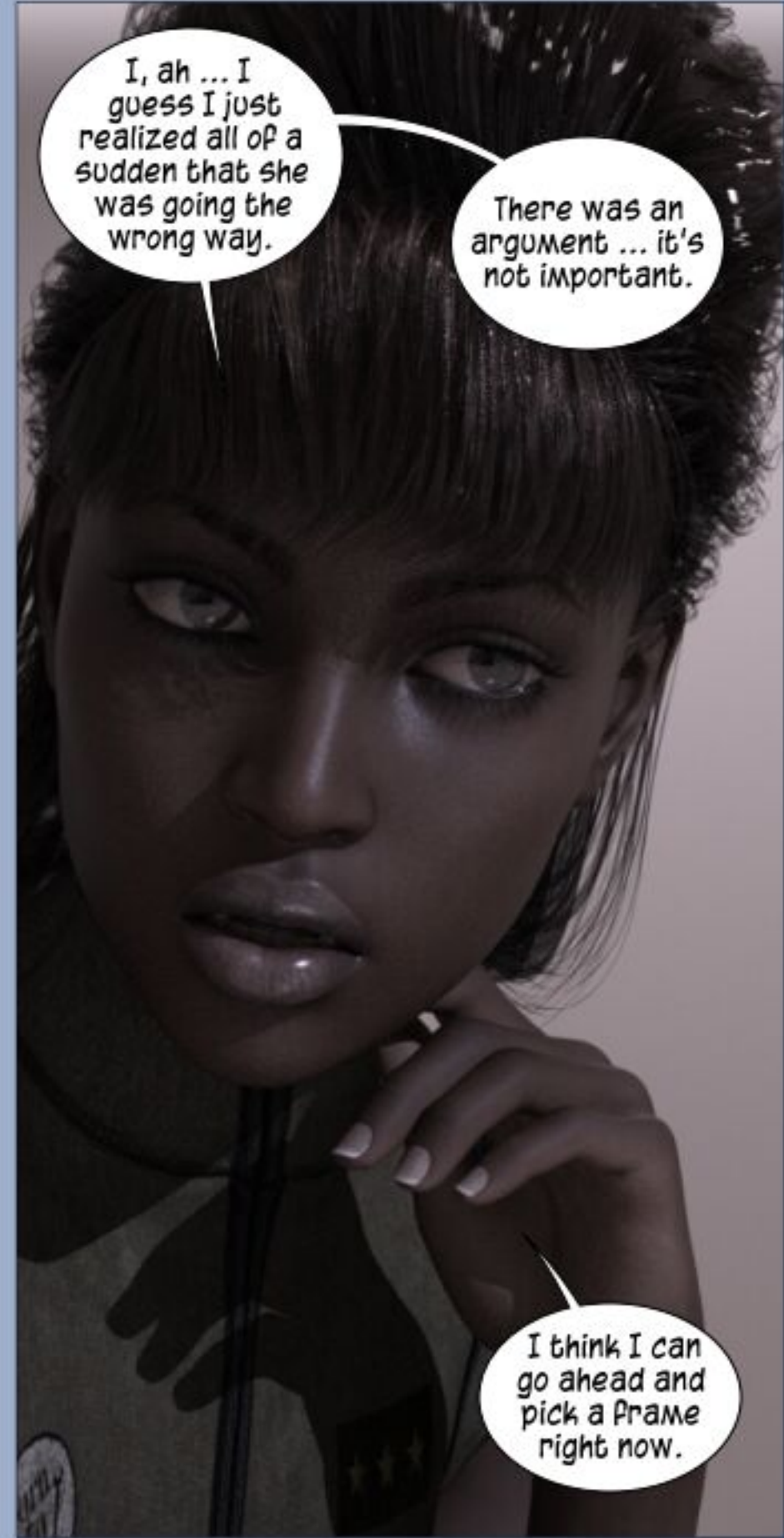
This isn't going to ... uh ... change my brain, is it? I mean, the way I think? Or who--

Your mind and personality are completely unaltered. The one thing we add is the behavior block against harming humans. And we only do that because it's necessary politically. Tampering with brains is immoral.

I'm not surprised you'd have worries about that, given your recent history. Parsons has many strange and incorrect ideas about this process.

Actually, given her influence, I'm surprised--pleased, but surprised--that you're here at all.

May I ask what caused the change of direction?



I, ah ... I guess I just realized all of a sudden that she was going the wrong way.

There was an argument ... it's not important.

I think I can go ahead and pick a Frame right now.

I HAD NO IDEA WHERE PARSONS LIVED. I HAD NEVER NEEDED TO FIND HER BEFORE; USUALLY THE PROBLEM ISN'T FINDING HER, IT'S GETTING HER TO GO AWAY.

I WASN'T ABOUT TO ASK MORTON. I'D ASK GLORIA FOR IT. LATER.

I WASN'T IN THE MOOD TO DEAL WITH HER, BUT THEN, I NEVER WAS. PARSONS GIVES ME A HEADACHE.

Jin Seria?

Yes?

We haven't met. I'm Wendy Barlowe. Operations manager.

Oh! Uh ... what can I do for you?

I understand that among your duties here in Agriculture, you run the chemicals storage. Fertilizers and so forth. Some of those are pretty nasty, right? Toxic?

To humans? Definitely. That's one reason we keep it secured.

And you have ... ah, I'm not sure exactly what, but it'd be a nitrite compound?

Nitrites? Not nitrates? No reason to ... oh, except for the blue salt. Is that what you mean?

Blue salt? That sounds promising.

It's not really blue. We dye it so you can't confuse it with anything else. Plants don't like it any more than humans do ... except one.

Fallowbean'll make you sick if you eat it, so it figures. But Fallowbean loves the stuff. Put them together and you can refresh a whole bed in a few weeks. Fixes the nitrogen like crazy. Then you pull up the Fallowbean for seed and toss the bagasse into matter reclaim.

... uh, why do you ask?

I think you must be the only person in Coldpoint who hasn't heard about Kirc Alden's death.

I heard he was dead. I don't know what that's got to do with blue salt.

Medical says he died of nitrite poisoning. Well, died of the side effects of nitrite poisoning, I guess.

It doesn't sound like there's any other source of something like that but Agriculture's chem storage.

Ah ... it's common knowledge that Claire Parsons got you this position because she was scared the robots would mess with the food supply, and she wanted a human here to ... keep watch.

I hate to have to ask, but: Have you given any of that blue salt to anyone who ... well, who wasn't going to use it on Fallowbeans?

Wait. Common knowledge? People are saying that about me?

I got this job because I'm qualified to do it! Yes, Claire recommended me for it, but she never--

No, I absolutely have not released any blue salt to anybody unauthorized!

I'm reassured to hear it.

I'm sorry. But I did need to know.

She's very good at what she does. I wouldn't keep her on if she wasn't, and Parsons can be damned.

CIL MENARD MANAGES AGRICULTURE. I WOULD TRUST HER WITH MY LIFE. SINCE SHE KEEPS ME FED, I KIND OF DO.

I know you wouldn't. But her competence and her loyalties don't have to be related.

That said ... I don't think she poisoned Alden, and I also think she's telling the truth about not letting any of it out of storage ...

So either someone managed to steal some of it, or there's another source of nitrites on Coldpoint we haven't found.

Maybe not either.

Metri Call is allowed to get blue salt from us. Jin knows that, but she might have forgotten; she only knows because I told her about it.

What does Call want with it?

It's a preservative. That used to be its main industrial purpose. Meats. Curing hams, things like that. He uses it in his beer. It's not toxic in small amounts.

I checked carefully before I let him have any. He's very conscientious. Actually, I'm not sure he's needed more since the initial supply I gave him.

I don't think Call is misusing it, but I also think it would probably be easier to steal a little from him than from our chemical storage.

... just the beer. None of the hard stuff. Anything eight percent or less. I don't want to re-ferment my beer, see ... ruins the flavor. And it wasn't lasting as long as I needed it to.

It was available, and it doesn't change the taste, not in the amounts I use. I don't think any customers have ever noticed.

Never have had any problems ... except ...

Except?

Well, I don't think it has anything to do with this, but I had a bad keg last night. First time.

Pris brought me some and said it looked strange. I had a little. Tasted strange too. We pulled the keg. Don't want to take chances.

We didn't serve it to anybody; the keg'd just been tapped and Pris noticed on first pour.

HM! Is that keg still around?

Sure. Hate to throw it out, y'know, but I haven't figured out what to do with it yet ...

I'd like to get a sample of it, if you don't mind.

MENICA SCOTT, MY HEAD OF ENGINEERING. KEEPS THE PLACE FROM FALLING APART. KNOWS HOW TO DO ALL KINDS OF THINGS ...

... but chemical analysis is not one of them.

Furst has someone he uses for assay, testing soil composition and things like that.

Can I get you to arrange it?

Sure. I've been wanting to meet her anyway. Word is she's ... unusual.

Beer, huh? Guess I shouldn't drink any of it.

I wouldn't recommend it.

Gloria. What's up?

... Hell. I'd like to say I'm surprised, but ... look, just try to keep the lid on as well as you can. I'm working on it ...

... hey, while I've got you, would you please give me Claire Parsons' home location? ... yes ... unfortunately. Thanks.

Min, I hate to ask, but can you get that analysis done *Past*? Tell them I need it and I'll claim priority.

Gloria says the whole Vigilance clan is out in the commons stirring up trouble over this.

I don't think I have much time to figure it out.

Claire, she didn't leave any notes! I don't know what you expect me to do. I'm not telepathic!

I'm not asking you to be. I just want you to find the damned things! They've got to be somewhere--

Claire!!

I thought you recommended me to Cil because you respected my skills. I thought you were looking out for me!

Now I find out you've just been using me, and people are saying things about me--

I'm done with you. You, and your group. I'm sticking to my job, which I like ... if you want a spy, you're going to have to find somebody else.

But ... Jin, wait ...

I don't want to hear it.

I don't want to hear anything else from you ever.

Lovely.

What did I do to deserve this wretched day?

Ah ... it's not about to improve.

Oh. Of course. Perfect.

When I look for you here, you're at home. When I look for you at home, you're here. Makes me think you're trying to avoid me. Given the circumstances, that's not what you want.

What difference does it make? You've made up your mind already.

Actually, at the moment, I'd be inclined to say you didn't do it. Though I'm still gathering information.

Don't take this as an endorsement, but even if you and Alden were fighting nonstop, I don't picture you killing him. Unless he threatened you physically. I could see you retaliating for your safety. Did he?

No ... he never did anything like ... that ... Last night he came back here, we argued some more and he left. He never touched me.

Uh ... thank you?

Don't thank me yet. Beth Vigilance is out drumming up a mob.

A lot of people want your head, and the only way I'm going to keep them from getting it is to offer them a different one.

We need some other suspects. Seria didn't do it. Beth couldn't have done it, nor any other robots. If Benjamin did it, I need a motive. Did they fight? Did he try anything with her?

If they had, she'd have told me. I'm sure of it.

Then maybe it's not even related. Something from Alden's personal life. Was he in a relationship?

... he might have been? I think he made a comment once ...

You don't know.

Claire doesn't concern herself with the lives of her underlings.

Morton! That's not--

Come on, Claire. We worked together every day for years and you have no idea whether I have a lover, or a family, or anything like that. You've never asked.

She really doesn't know, Ms. Barlowe. And I can't tell you, because I haven't been around here in a while.

I bet Lula would know--I got the impression she didn't miss much--but ...

... but we still have no idea where she is. Right.



There, you see the color of the precipitate? We knew before we got to this test that it had to be one or the other of those. Now we know which.

Neat! And that's really all there is to it?

Learning how to do the tests is easy, and even if you can't remember, you can always look them up.

The analysis part is deciding what tests to do in what order. Like a logic problem. Especially if you have a limited sample size ... or limited time.

Speaking of which ...

Hey, Wendy! This is Stej Orlo.



Pleased to meet you. Thanks for the rush job.

Likewise, Ms. Barlowe. And it was a pleasure. First hasn't brought me anything interesting in a while.

She's just finished. It was fascinating.

What you have here is a mixture of ethanol and water, with minor amounts of numerous esters ... beer, in short ...

... plus a significant amount of sodium nitrite in solution. And traces of a vegetable-based blue dye.



How significant an amount?

About fifteen percent of the sample.

Would that ... could that be lethal? Say, that percentage in a glass of beer?

Hard to say. It would depend on what else the person had eaten recently, their body mass, how fast they drank it ...

But given what Ms. Scott's told me, Occam's razor seems to imply it not only could have been lethal, but was.

... Yeah.

-- sigh --

Wouldn't you taste that much of it in the beer? How would it taste, anyway?

Salty. Bet he chugged it.



All right, and if we assume all that ... how long would he have had? Assuming he didn't keel over right away, which ...

... which he obviously didn't.

I'm not a forensic pathologist, Ms. Barlowe, and I can't offer you the sort of proof you're after.

Again, Occam's razor suggests he did indeed have time to return to Parsons, have an argument, and leave. But you'll need more evidence--that I can't provide.

If you'd like a suggestion, I'd say the next step is to find out who served him that beer.



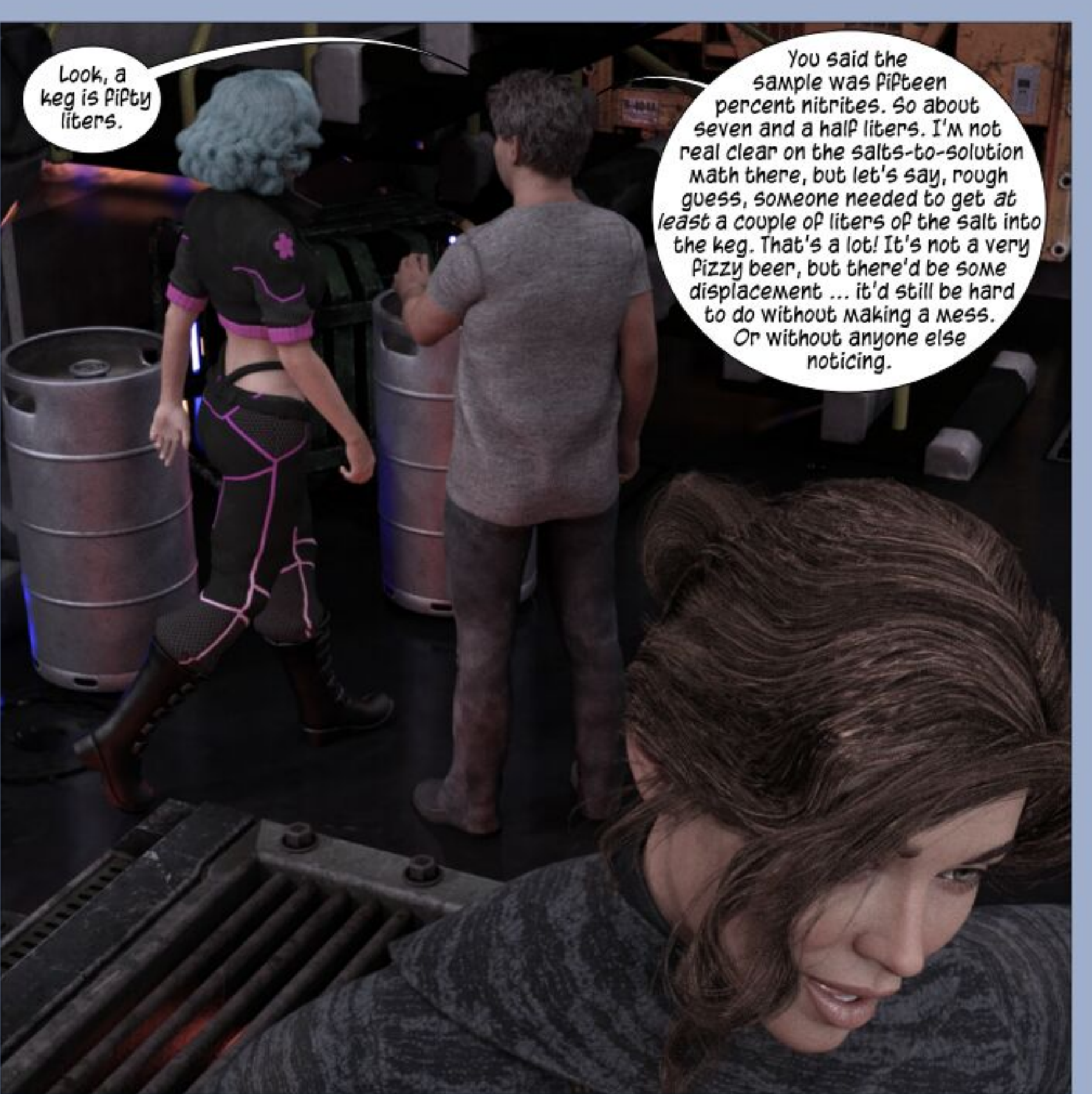
... You don't believe me? You saw me take the sample ...

No, I do. That beer looked wrong, smelled wrong ... probably tasted wrong too, but I didn't want to try it.

I believe the beer had that stuff in it. I just don't see how it had that stuff in it.

I hate to say it, but what if one of your employees isn't as reliable as you think?

No, no ... I mean, yeah, that's an issue, but that's not what I'm talking about.



Look, a keg is fifty liters.

You said the sample was fifteen percent nitrites. So about seven and a half liters. I'm not real clear on the salts-to-solution math there, but let's say, rough guess, someone needed to get at least a couple of liters of the salt into the keg. That's a lot! It's not a very fizzy beer, but there'd be some displacement ... it'd still be hard to do without making a mess. Or without anyone else noticing.



More to the point, I don't have that much of the salt. Never have.

Menard gave me about a liter of it when I started using it. I'm still working through that. I only use fifteen milliliters per keg. I just looked at that this morning; I've got as much of it left as I should have, judging by eye.

So this absolutely couldn't have happened by accident.

No way. Someone had to have gotten a big supply of the stuff, brought it in, and gone to a lot of trouble to get it into the keg.

Also, I promise you the beer wasn't like that when it came out of the fermentation vat. I'd have been able to smell it if it was when I decanted. I got three kegs from that batch. The other two are fine.



I mean, I agree, someone here had to have messed with the beer. But I've got questions about who, how, when ... and why. Big time on the why.

Not to mention: Nobody ever got served the beer! Pris swears she pulled the keg as soon as she saw what was coming out of it. They all would. They'd be able to tell it was bad a mile away.

I agree, none of it makes any sense at all. I wish it did, though, because I need to figure this out in a hurry.

Sorry I can't shed any light.

Hey, do you need me to still hang onto the bad keg? I haven't figured out what to do with it ...

Send it to Agriculture. It's got enough blue salt in it that they can probably use it as is.

I wonder if Pallowbeans like beer.

I DIDN'T PURSUE THE BEER SITUATION BEYOND THAT CONVERSATION BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO PURSUE. EVEN IF CALL WAS LYING, OR WAS WRONG ABOUT ONE OF HIS PEOPLE ... HE HAD ASKED THE RIGHT QUESTION: WHY? WHY ALTER THE BEER AT ALL?

IF IT WAS JUST TO POISON ALDEN, THAT TESTED THE BOUNDS OF MY CREDULITY. THERE ARE MANY EASIER WAYS TO KILL SOMEONE, EVEN ON COLDFPOINT.

ON THE OTHER HAND, ALDEN HAD BEEN POISONED ... AND SAYING, "NO, HE MUST HAVE BEEN POISONED WITH THE EXACT SAME SUBSTANCE SOME OTHER WAY ENTIRELY, AND THE BEER HAVING IT WAS JUST A COINCIDENCE" STRETCHED CREDENCE EVEN FURTHER.

INSTEAD, AS MUCH TO DISTRACT MYSELF AS ANYTHING ELSE, I WENT LOOKING FOR BETH VIGILANCE, TO WARN HER TO STOP MAKING TROUBLE. I LOOKED FOR A LONG TIME, CHECKING ALL HER HIDING PLACES I KNEW ABOUT. I DIDN'T FIND HER.

MEANWHILE ...



Hey, Cil ... no, I was just getting home ... what's wrong?

Explosion? ... oh, no ...

I'm on my way.



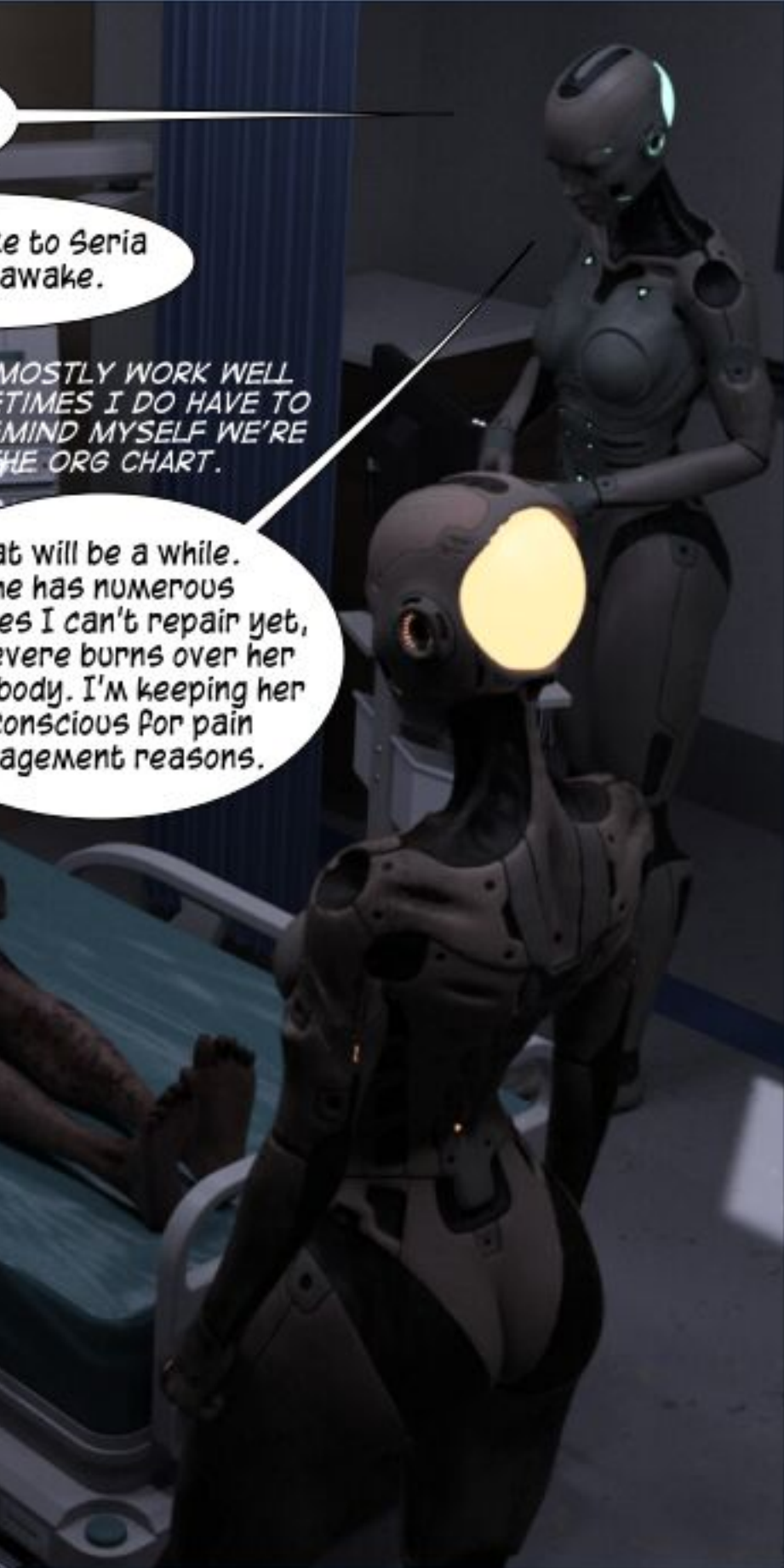
One of you help me with this canopy.

The burns are the most critical issue, and she needs to be in a sterile enclosure until I can get them sealed, or they'll get infected.

Once I get the skin sealant on, and I determine how much debridement is necessary, then I can contemplate repairing the bones.

That's if I bother to fix any of it at all.

What do you mean?



Cil, I'm so sorry ...

She's not the one who needs your apology.

... I'll apologize to Seria once she's awake.

AS I'VE SAID BEFORE, I MOSTLY WORK WELL WITH ZUSY-Q, BUT SOMETIMES I DO HAVE TO BITE MY TONGUE AND REMIND MYSELF WE'RE AT THE SAME LEVEL OF THE ORG CHART.

That will be a while. She has numerous fractures I can't repair yet, and severe burns over her entire body. I'm keeping her unconscious for pain management reasons.



I can't bring this body back to full capacity. She's not going to be "healthy" again.

She'll never move with ease and without pain again, there'll be considerable skin scarring ...

Her brain is completely intact. I'm contemplating a transfer.

An involuntary transfer.

I'm not disagreeing with that. But if word gets out that you transferred someone without their consent ...

I don't give a damn what Parsons thinks.

I know you don't. Look, I'm not going to get in the way of a medical decision. But is there any penalty for getting her conscious long enough to get her consent? She'll probably give it. Then Parsons can't yell about it.

She'll still find a reason. --Sigh-- I'll consider it.



Wendy, I don't think the explosion could have been an accident. We know the fertilizer curing process emits methane. That's why we use small sheds with capture Pans.

Even if she'd forgotten to turn on the Pan before going in--which she wouldn't--it still wouldn't spontaneously combust. There'd need to be a spark. Which she'd also be extremely careful about. She was very conscientious.

Earlier today, Jin told me, she went to Parsons and severed ties. Do you think this could have been retaliation?

Maybe. I still feel like none of this is Parsons' style ... I was wondering if there was something else. Something about the blue salt. But I'm not there yet.

Yes. I wasn't aware of all that, but I admit I had pretty much leaped straight to sabotage. Call me paranoid.

Zusy-Q not only thinks it was deliberate, she thinks it was connected to Alden's murder. That's what the "apology" crack was about. She thinks I got her blown up.



You realize there's a strong chance that Zusy-Q will just proceed with the transfer, and, if asked, say she woke Jin up long enough to get her consent.

She knows Jin would give it. Jin's too practical not to read the writing on the wall. And if she's no longer aligned with Parsons ...

I don't mind that. As long as it's plausible. But I've got to make Zusy-Q understand that I walk in a minefield, even if she doesn't.

It does mean we're not likely to find out anything from Seria in a timely way.

Zusy-Q will want to get her into a chest case as soon as she can ... then it'll be days, unless we can talk to her while she's jarred ...

I don't have days, I don't think.



bing
bing
bing

Now what?



Hi.

Hi.

Did I pick a bad time? You don't look pleased.

I MET BYLA STARNE A FEW MONTHS BACK. WE TOOK TO ONE ANOTHER. EVER SINCE THEN, SHE HAD BEEN SHOWING UP AT MY DOOR EVERY SO OFTEN. NEVER WITH ADVANCE WARNING, BUT NEVER UNWELCOME.

IT WASN'T EXACTLY A RELATIONSHIP, BUT I DON'T HAVE A BETTER WORD FOR WHATEVER IT WAS.

It's not you. I'm not having the best day.

Actually, this is a great time.

* IN "DEATH AND DENIAL" - T



--MMMM--

You are having a bad day.

Want to tell me about it?

... Not really.

I mean, I'd rather not talk.



A WHILE LATER, SHE WAS ASLEEP--I STILL WASN'T CLEAR ON WHEN ROBOTS DECIDE TO SLEEP--AND I HAD ALMOST DRIFTED OFF.



... hmm?

bing
bing
bing



I killed him, Wendy! I killed him!

Treac?

What's wrong? What are you talking about?

The fellow who died! The one everyone's on about ... all through my shift tonight ... they said there was something in the beer ...

Wendy, I served him that beer!



I don't drink beer! How would I know if it looked or smelled odd? And he drank it so fast ... Pris was there and she didn't have time to notice ...

She pulled the keg just after that, but I didn't find out why until tonight ... she says nobody got served any but she's protecting me ...

I killed him! I ...



... oh, bloody hell.

It's OK, Treac.

I'll leave.

Please don't.



And now I've ... I'm sorry ...

I'm telling you, it's all right.

You're not the murderer. Whoever put the stuff in the keg is the murderer. You were used. If it hadn't been you pouring the beer it would have been someone else convenient.

That's the person we're--

Hell.

This is not a good time. ... What?

Seriously?

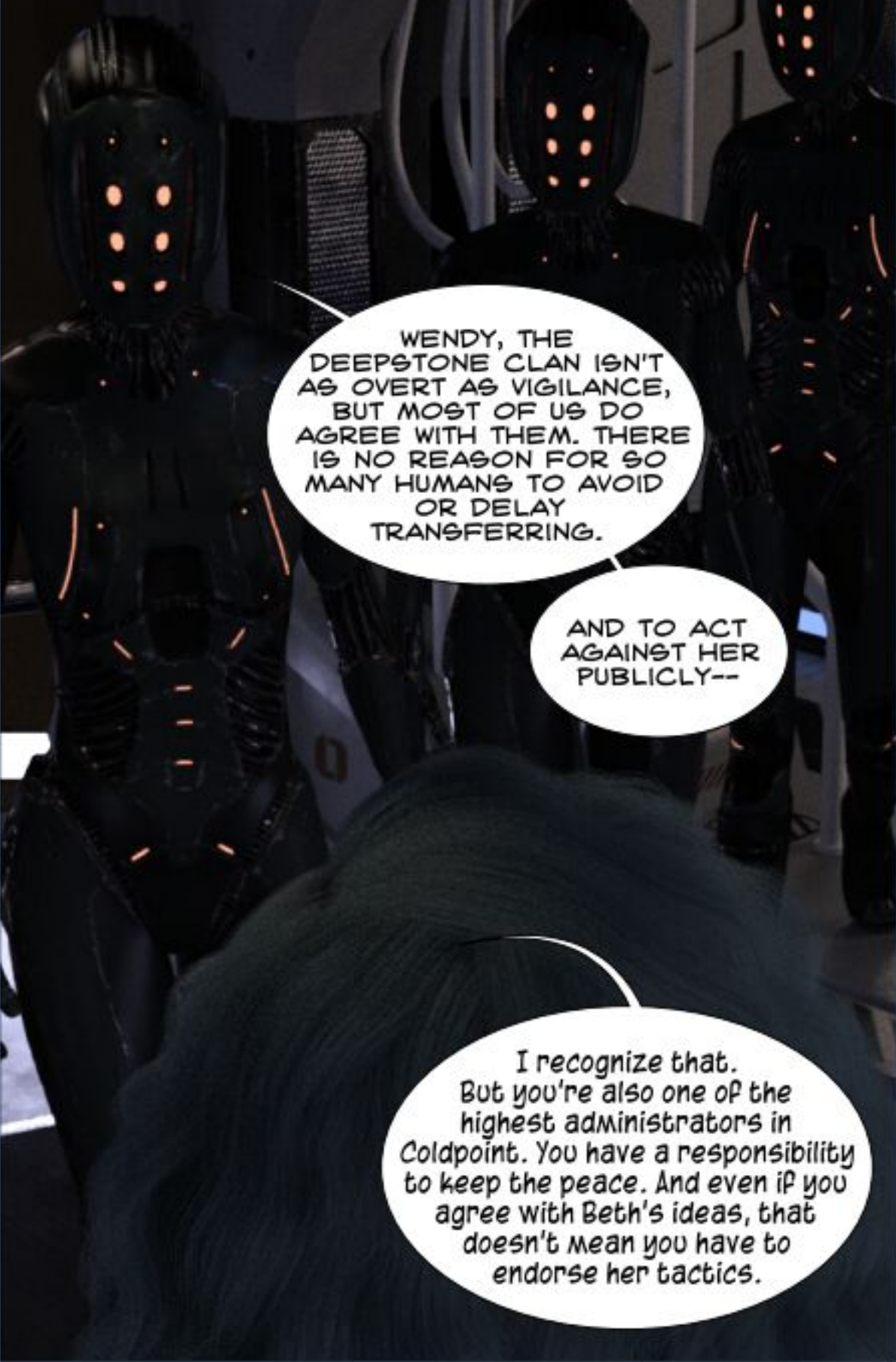
All right. Let me get some support and I'll be there as soon as I can.



Thank you for coming out at this hour.

I'M NOT COMFORTABLE WITH IT.

FURST DEEPSTONE AND TWO OF HIS CLAN. YOU SAW FURST BACK IN ORLO'S LAB, BUT HE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY THEN. HE OFTEN DOESN'T.
FURST RUNS EXCAVATION. SINCE COLDPOINT IS ALMOST ENTIRELY UNDERGROUND, THAT'S A MUCH MORE IMPORTANT POSITION THAN IT SOUNDS.



WENDY, THE DEEPSTONE CLAN ISN'T AS OVERT AS VIGILANCE, BUT MOST OF US DO AGREE WITH THEM. THERE IS NO REASON FOR SO MANY HUMANS TO AVOID OR DELAY TRANSFERRING.

AND TO ACT AGAINST HER PUBLICLY--

I recognize that. But you're also one of the highest administrators in Coldpoint. You have a responsibility to keep the peace. And even if you agree with Beth's ideas, that doesn't mean you have to endorse her tactics.



HRM. WELL, SHE PROBABLY ALREADY CONSIDERS ME A COLLABORATOR ANYWAY.

AELI, RED, YOU CAN OPT OUT IF YOU LIKE.

NO, I'M GOOD.

SAME.



Get away from me! You have no right to harass me like this!

SHUT UP, PARSONS. I CAN'T STAND HEARING YOUR VOICE.

YOU'RE COMING WITH US. I'M GOING TO GET YOU OFF COLDPOINT, EVEN IF BARLOWE IS TOO MUCH OF A COWARD TO DO IT--

-- ahem --



YOU! I DON'T WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU EITHER. IF YOU'D DO YOUR JOB, I WOULDN'T HAVE TO DO IT FOR YOU.

I am doing my job, Beth. I'm trying to find a murderer. But there's no evidence Parsons is it, and a lot of indicators she isn't--

YOU THINK THAT MAKES ANY DIFFERENCE? YOU THINK I CARE?

COLDPOINT IS FOR ROBOTS. THAT'S WHAT IT WAS CHARTERED FOR. YOU KNOW THAT. SHE WANTS TO DESTROY THAT. WHY DO YOU PROTECT HER? DON'T YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO UPHOLD THE CHARTER?

I WANT HER GONE. I DON'T CARE WHAT IT TAKES. YOU HAVE AN EXCUSE AND YOU WON'T USE IT!



I'm sorry to hear that.

Min, Furst-- make sure the others don't try anything.

AAAUGH!

Until now, Beth, I'd assumed I could reason with you.

But if you've decided Pacts aren't important, then I guess we'll have to work on a different basis from now on.



Don't you move either, Parsons. This gun hurts humans too.

I hate using it, and I resent that I've had to. So both of you listen for once, because I'm in a very bad mood.

I did not write the damned charter. If I did, I would have made transferring mandatory. See, I agree with you, Beth! The intention was clearly to make Coldpoint for robots. But that is not what they wrote. And I have to enforce what's written.

So neither of you has a basis, as far as I'm concerned. Do you understand? Unless the charter is changed, you are both equally a pain in my ass.

And if you two don't stop provoking public discord, I swear I'll throw both of you off Coldpoint, and lose two problems at once.

BY THE TIME I GOT HOME, EVERY MUSCLE BYLA HAD MANAGED TO LOOSEN UP A COUPLE OF HOURS EARLIER WAS NOW TWICE AS TENSE AS IT HAD BEEN.



Z5XXXXZ

IT'S A PERFECTLY COMFORTABLE CHAIR.



--complete standstill! Who knows if I'll get a chance to talk to Seria before Zusy-Q transfers her .. and I can't find Lula Benjimine ...

I may have scared Beth and Parsons enough to get them to behave for a while, but if I don't figure this out in a hurry--and I don't have enough--!

Wait, I didn't know you were looking for Lula Benjimine. Zusy-Q didn't have anything?



How's Zusy-Q come into that?

Benjimine's in the process of transferring. Zusy-Q updated her status yesterday.

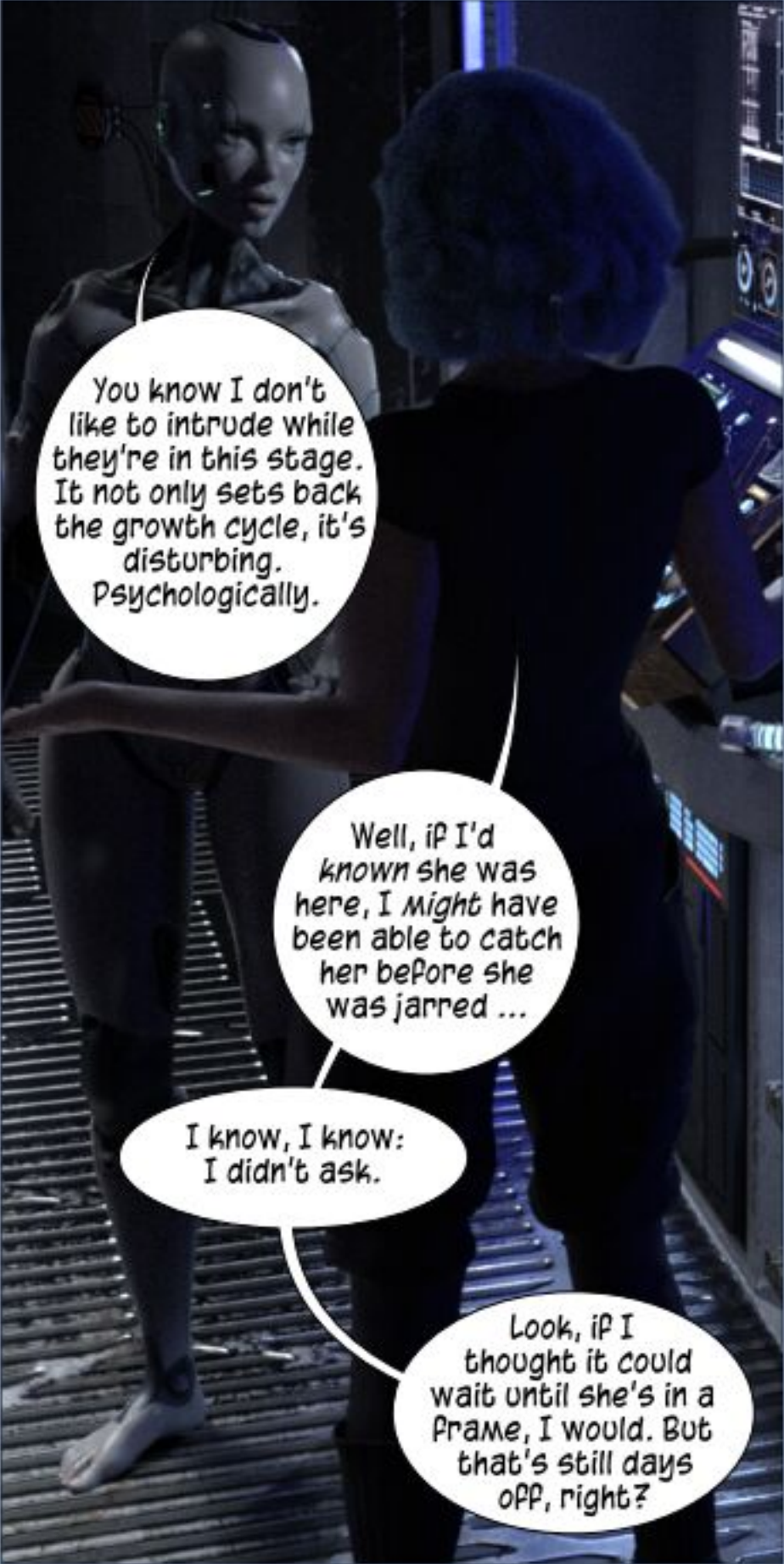


Well, that would have been a useful thing to know.

Sorry! I didn't realize you hadn't--

-- sigh --

Not your fault. I'm not mad at you. Just not at my best today.



You know I don't like to intrude while they're in this stage. It not only sets back the growth cycle, it's disturbing. Psychologically.

Well, if I'd known she was here, I might have been able to catch her before she was jarred ...

I know, I know: I didn't ask.

Look, if I thought it could wait until she's in a frame, I would. But that's still days off, right?



I'd like to remind you that this is very disorienting for the patient. Try not to agitate her.

What ... what's happening? Why is it dark? Who's there? Did something go wrong?

Lula, this is Dr. Quincy. Nothing's wrong. Ms. Barlowe just needs to ask you some questions that can't wait.

I'm very sorry, Lula. I'll be quick. This is about Kirc Alden.

Mr. Alden? Is he looking for me? Don't tell him where I went. He doesn't need to know!

No! He was always looking out for me. He thought Ms. Parsons worked me too hard ... I just don't want to deal with either of them, not until I'm ready ...

Ah ... no. Did he do anything to you? Threaten you, or anything like that?

Lula ... I think I had better tell you.

Alden is dead. He was murdered.

Careful.



WHAT???

I'm sorry.

Did-- Did Ms. Parsons kill him?

I can't say for sure yet, but I'm inclined to think she didn't.

So I'm looking for other people who might have wanted to. For example, from his personal life.

You're one of the only people who might know if he even had one.



Sure. Not much of one, but he did. We talked about it sometimes. Ms. Parsons couldn't have cared less.

He met the guy not long after he arrived. Claes. Uh, Claes ... Xanner. I think.

Were they doing OK? Did you get any sense of that?

They were not OK. Mr. Alden wasn't happy with how it was going. But he never said why.

That's the only person in his outside life I ever heard about. He went off to drink a couple of beers every night and that was it.

Thank you, Lula, that's very useful.

I'll leave you alone now. Sorry again to have disturbed you. Once you're in a frame, come find me if you want to talk about it.



For what it's worth, her readings indicated that her shock at the news was genuine.

Didn't occur to me to consider whether she could be faking.

She never struck me as a likely suspect.

The problem right now is that the only person who does seem like a likely suspect is the one I can't convince myself did it.

Parsons is too concerned with PR. She'd never do anything that might hurt her cause. And she'd know that getting a murder pinned on her would absolutely sink it. She wouldn't risk it. Except if she lost control, perhaps, and she--

Anyway, I guess I'll go see if this person has anything useful to say.



Mr. Xanner? I'm Wendy Barlowe, Operations Manager.

I need to ask you a few questions.

Sure, if it doesn't take too long. I have to dress for a job in a few minutes.

... This is about Kirc, isn't it? I bet this is about Kirc.



Use the chair.

You know, I'm kind of peeved that none of you told me he'd died. I had to find out from the gossip.

Well, nobody realized you were in a relationship with him. We only learned that today ... I'm sorry for your loss.

Eh. I'm just being bitchy, don't mind me. It wasn't that much of a relationship, really.

It could have been, maybe. I liked him. He liked me. But it already wasn't working out, and we both knew it.



What was the problem, if you don't mind my asking?

He had a thing about exclusivity.

He said it didn't bother him, but it did, and he didn't even bother to try to make the lie look good.

I don't operate like that, Ms. Barlowe. Some folks have a kink for monogamy, but not me.

And then there's my job ... y'know, I have sex with people. That's just how it is. Was he going to try to make me stop doing that?



Thank you, Mr. Xanner.

Say, hang on-- You aren't thinking I killed Kirc, are you? Is that why you came to talk to me?

Let's say I had to consider the possibility.

Don't worry. I just crossed you off the list.

Sorry your relationship didn't go better.

Oh, well. They had weird ideas. Nothing I could do about that.



Problem is now I'm back to not having anybody on the list ...

... Wait a second.



Huh? Did you forget something?

No, but I think I missed something.

Why did you say "they"?



We're not open yet.

I'm not a customer.



Oh! ... ah, Ms ... Barlowe? Right?

Metri's not here. He likely won't be in tonight; he mostly only comes in when he's brewing.

I didn't come to talk to Call. I came to talk to you, Ms. Pajani.

Call me Pris, please. I'm not sure what I can tell you ...

You pretty much run the front of house for Call, right? So I imagine you know all about what goes on here. Maybe more than he does.



Oh, well, I don't know about that ... But go ahead. What did you want to ask?

I really only have one question. I mean, I have others, but they're not as important.

What in hell made you decide you needed to try to kill Jin Seria?



What??

You're saying I ... You've lost your mind!

See, that's the part that really gets to me. Nobody would have shed any tears over Alden. Sure, some people wanted to use it against Parsons, but even they didn't actually care whether he was dead.

But Seria was harmless, nobody hated her, and you decided to make your position a lot less safe by blowing her up. Why?



I have a pretty clear idea why you killed Alden, but Seria baffles me.

Don't suppose you'd want to shed any light? Any words in your defense?

You're crazy, and I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't kill Alden and I certainly didn't try to kill this Seria person.



And I was really hoping you'd be reasonable--

Owww!!



Where are you going to run, Pris?

Look, you can't get out of it. You knew Alden's habits here. You knew when he came in. You knew he always drank the same thing, and drank it Past.

You were one of the only ones who could have tampered with the keg, and probably the only one who could have delayed putting it on tap until the right moment.

And Claes Xanner says that you really didn't take it well when he started seeing Alden in addition to you. You wanted Claes to yourself.



You don't have any proof! All of that is just you spouting crazy talk!

I don't need proof, Pris. I need to be sure I'm making the right decision. That's all.

You're not helping change my mind right now, you know.



Damn it, enough!

AAAAIGH!!



He loves me ... I know he loves me ... We were ... For years ... and then that shit Alden came along and ...

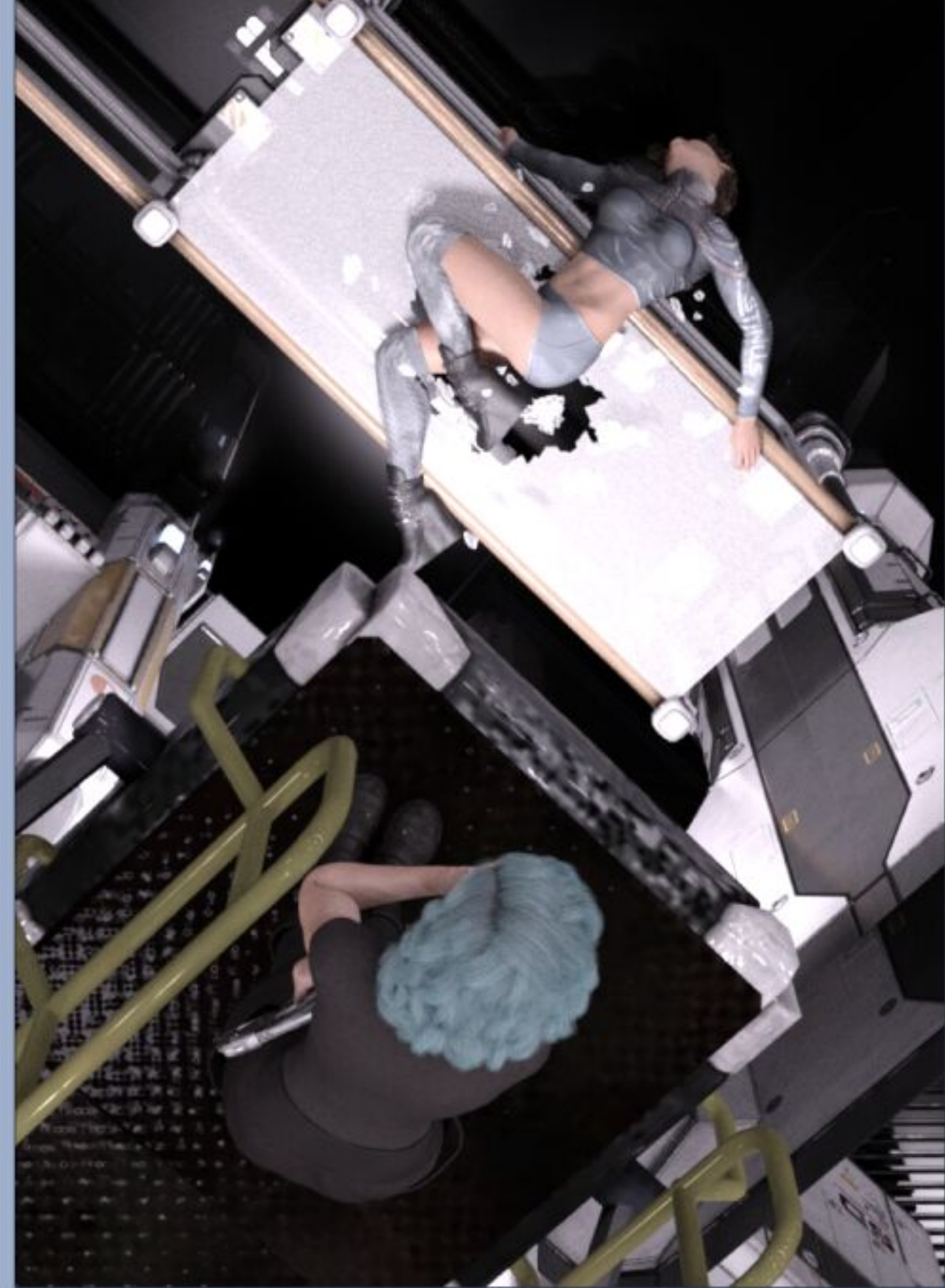
Claes still loves me! Just me!

Pris, stop moving! You can't walk off one of those shots, and if you're not careful you'll--



PRIS!

AAAAAAAAAAAAA!!



A WEEK LATER.



Hello, Ms. Parsons.

... Lula?



Lula, I'm very disappointed.

Yeah, I know. I'm OK with that. I'm disappointed in you too.

You know, I meant to transfer as soon as I got here. But I got caught up in what you were doing ... because I thought you were trying to do something worthwhile.

But then you had those arguments with Mr. Alden, and I realized: you both wanted the same rotten things. You just disagreed about how to do it.

I guess I owe Mr. Alden for that, because if it hadn't been for how horrible he was, I might not have realized how horrible you are.

Anyway, I just came to tell you that. That's all.



You can go to hell!

Sure. See you there.



So why did she go after Jin Seria?

Hmm? Oh. ... I don't think she felt like she had a choice.

Seria didn't lie to me, but she did evade a little. I'd just accused her of spying for Parsons and she was understandably defensive.

She told me later. I got to talk to her for a little while before she started the transfer.

She said she hadn't given blue salt to anyone unauthorized. But Pajani was authorized. On Metri Call's behalf.

Seria had given her a lot of it not long before Alden's death. Seria just figured Call had finally run out and was getting a fresh supply.



Pajani didn't figure anyone would catch on, until she heard me talking with Call about the amounts needed.

That's when she realized she was going to have to try to keep Seria from telling anybody.

I assume she was hoping everyone would think the explosion was an accident.



You know, it's almost ... I want to say disappointing. I mean, I don't want any murders, but it was much better when I thought it was political intrigue.

Maybe I lack passion or something, but I don't think I could kill someone over relationship issues. You talk it out, maybe you don't talk it out and you break up ... but murder?

I'm with you. I resent her dragging me into something that stupid.

And you don't lack passion, love.



Well, it's moot here. I don't think we have that issue.

No, we just have problems with availability!

Maybe we'll make a schedule.

Ooh, I love this song! Let's go dance.

Yeah!

C'mon, Wendy! I promise not to pick on your dancing this time.

I'm going to hold you to that.

END