

The cemetery flat was supposed to lift after the opening verses ... everyone heard a big thump instead ... this is the counterweight, it must have come loose ... and it just fell.

TREAC!!

You can't stand here talking--you've got to dress! And your hair! Mara's waiting!

Wendy, this is Rowene Dusant, the director and stage manager, also playing the beggar woman. Rowene, this is Wendy Barlowe, the operations manager.

I, uh ... she's right. I understudy Lovett. I need to go get ready. That's ... that's it ...

... If you really intend to go on with the show after one of your cast has just died?

I'd have thought not, myself.



It is opening night. We've got a full house.

We are not going to let the audience down. They're expecting a performance. They've paid for it.

All right, but this death needs to be investigated. That's not negotiable.

So investigate it. That's why she brought you back here, isn't it?

But you don't need to hold up the show for that.



And if I give the go-ahead and someone else dies back here tonight, how does that look?

Assuming your cast have the stomach for it, I'll let you go on ... but not until after we do an inspection. I want to see all the other rigging up there. I don't want another sandbag falling.

Fine. I'll get Kely to show you around--

No. Treac will show me. You'll just have to wait however long it takes before you can dress her.

But that's--

This is not negotiable, Ms. Dusant.



Ah, you know, love ... Kely would have been the proper choice, she's the set tech, she knows all this much better than I do ...

... and I hate these catwalks ...

You're the only one I know I can trust right now, Treac.

Anyway, I don't expect to find anything else wrong. I just needed a minute to talk to you alone before you're dragged back off to the circus.

... You don't think this was mischance.



Not really, no. ... All of these look fine.

Why don't you think so?

Not sure I can put it into words just yet.

Most of you were onstage when the bag fell. Who wasn't?

Cast? Danna, obviously, though she should have been. We need everyone we can get for chorus. And Rowene is too busy running things, that's why she only has a tiny part ...

What about crew?

We don't have many. One sound and light tech, but she's always up in the booth ... Kely--that's Kely Purvis--would have been back here handling sets ... and Mara Merol in the dressing rooms. That's the lot.



You know, no one's supposed to go into that area when we're running. That's why there are stripes on the floor.

I noticed that.

Go on and get done up, Treac.

I likely won't get to watch your performance. I have to make arrangements about the body and so on. I'll have to try to see it another night.

Hey!!



I saw you up in the flyloft.

Listen, there is nothing wrong with my rigging, you understand?

THIS CLEARLY WAS KELY PURVIS. I HAD NOT BEEN EXPECTING A ROBOT, BECAUSE TREAC HAD TOLD ME A LONG TIME BACK THAT THE COMPANY DIDN'T ACCEPT ROBOT PERFORMERS. APPARENTLY THE RULES WERE DIFFERENT FOR CREW.

I checked the plies yesterday and everything was fine, and those chains don't just fall. Someone had to have sabotaged it.



Kely!

You can't talk to her right now. I need you to get that cemetery flat lifted. We'll do without it tonight.

It's already up. I pulled it when I heard we were going with it.

Then go get ready. We're starting now. If we take it from the top, we've got two numbers before Lovett comes on. That should be enough.

But I was--

It's all right. I'll talk to you later, when you're not trying to give a performance.

I'll want to talk to you later too, Ms. Dusant.

I TRY NOT TO GO TO MY OFFICE UNLESS I HAVE A NEED TO. IT'S A BIG OSTENTATIOUS SPACE, AND I'D RATHER WORK OUT OF A CLOSET, OR MY HOME. I PASSED BY THERE THE NEXT MORNING, AND I WAS SORRY I HAD.

Not a good day for it, Parsons.

No, I imagine not.

I was surprised to find out you hadn't put anybody into custody last night or this morning.

So you're going to let it slide, as usual?

Suppose you tell me exactly what it is you think I'm letting slide?

Oh, come on. Last night someone was killed backstage at the theatre performance. You know that. You were there.

It wasn't an accident, and it's obvious who did it. Kely Purvis. Who has a known grievance with the troupe because they won't let robots perform.

But because she's a robot, you'll just let her get away with murder.

First, you're making quite a leap there saying Plat-out it wasn't an accident.

Second, Purvis couldn't have done it. The mental block, remember?

She couldn't have pulled the lever. But she could have set it up. "Oh, I'm just going to mess with this weight a little, that doesn't count as harming a human." Then someone else comes along and pulls it ...

Parsons ... -- sigh -- I know you've gone so far into paranoid it's just about psychotic, but you're grasping at straws even more than usual.

As it happens--not that you're entitled to know--I do have reason to believe this wasn't an accident ... but I also have reasons for believing Purvis didn't do it.

What reasons are those?

Tell you what. Just this once, I'll make a deal with you.

I'll tell you everything I've got. All my suspicions and theories ...

... IF you first tell me how you come to be so very well-informed about an event that had no witnesses and has had no official released information.

No?

Go to hell.

COLDPOINT IS ONE OF THE TOFFLER PROJECT SETTLEMENTS. THEIR GOAL IS TO BE A HAVEN FOR PEOPLE TO LIVE AS ROBOTS. WHEN THEY ARRIVE, THEY TRANSFER THEIR BRAINS TO ROBOT BODIES AND LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER. OR THAT'S THE THEORY. UNFORTUNATELY, THE CHARTER DOESN'T FORCE THEM TO TRANSFER. SO WE HAVE HUMANS LIVING HERE LONG-TERM. ABOUT HALF THE SETTLEMENT. I WISH WE DIDN'T. THE ONLY PERSON OBLIGED TO REMAIN HUMAN IN COLDPOINT IS ME. SOME OF THESE HUMANS HAVE BAD IDEAS. LIKE CLAIRE PARSONS. SHE SPENDS HER DAYS URGING PEOPLE NOT TO TRANSFER AND STOKING ANTI-ROBOT FEELINGS. I KEPT TELLING MYSELF THAT ONE DAY I WAS GOING TO TRY TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WENT ON IN HER HEAD ... BUT I HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO MAKE MYSELF CARE ENOUGH.

Hey, Min, what's up?

You better not be interviewing murder suspects without backup.

It'll be OK.

MENICA SCOTT, HEAD OF ENGINEERING, IS ONE OF THE FOUR PEOPLE ... NO, FIVE ... I COULDN'T RUN THIS PLACE WITHOUT. SHE'S ALSO MY FIRST CHOICE WHEN I NEED SOMEONE TO WATCH MY BACK. SHE'S BEEN A LITTLE JUMPY ABOUT THIS EVER SINCE I WENT TO TALK TO SOMEONE ABOUT A MURDER AND HE THREW ME OVER A BALCONY.

I'm serious, Wendy. I can come meet you ...

Min, I'm not anywhere near the accusation stage yet. I haven't even started.

When I get there, I'll bring backup. And a weapon.

IF PARSONS HADN'T DELAYED ME, I MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN TO THE THEATRE IN TIME TO SEE THIS, AND SAVED A LOT OF TROUBLE LATER.

Made sure you didn't leave anything incriminating up there?

Huh?

Kely, nobody else could have rigged that bag to fall off when the lever was pulled. I'm not sure anybody else'd know how. And since I'm the one who pulled it, they're all going to be after me. Everybody knows something's up. That Barlowe woman's going to be after my ass. I want you out. Right now. You're not part of the company anymore.

What?? I didn't rig that bag ... and you can't just do that ... I sure can. You made a mistake, killing the only person who'd be able to overrule me. I'm sure you thought that with her not in charge anymore, we'd drop the policy on robot actors. But now I'm in charge, and I'm not going to have a murderer in my troupe.

Any excuse you can find, huh, Rowene? Fine. But you haven't heard the end of this. Not by a long way. You want to threaten me now too? You'll be lucky if I don't send Barlowe after your ass!



Can I help you with something?



Oh. Wendy Barlowe, yes? Portnoy Burgess. Call Me Noy. Excuse the hair, I'm stuck with it for a while.

Oh, right, you're playing the lead, aren't you?

I need to talk to Rowene Dusan, and I assumed she'd be at the theatre by now, but I can't find her ...

She's onstage, coaching Treac. Go out Front and through the house, it's easier from here.



No denying times is hard, sir-- Even harder than The worst pies in London-- Only lard and nothing more--

Is that just revolting? All greasy and gritty, It looks like it's molting, And tastes like-- Well, pity--

A woman alone With limited wind And the worst pies in London--! Ah, sir, Times is hard, Times is hard.

Phrase it like you're always interrupting one thought with another.

Smile there to let the audience know you know what you just did.

Good! Catch your breath visibly at the end of all that.



I'm sorry it's still so rough. If I'm honest, I didn't expect to ever have to do it.

You're doing fine! This is just tuning.

And if I'm honest, the reason I only cast you as chorus is I knew we absolutely needed a reliable understudy for Lovett, and I knew you could do it.

You've got the part almost flawless on no rehearsals, which is a lot better than I'd get from most.

Julia, you know I hold you in highest regard ... but if you bobble the middle of "Green Finch and Linnet Bird" one more time, I may come after you with a stick.

Hey!!



I wouldn't mess it up if it wasn't full of weird words. "Jubilate." "Robinet." "Damask." What does 'damask' even mean, anyway?

It's a fabric.



Hey, Wendy! Need something?

I need to ask Ms. Dusan a few questions.

As was threatened. Come on, let's go somewhere we can sit.



So. You think Danna's death wasn't an accident and you're trying to find out whether I did it. I didn't.

I suppose I won't bother to ease into it, then.

There were only three people backstage at the time. You were one of them.



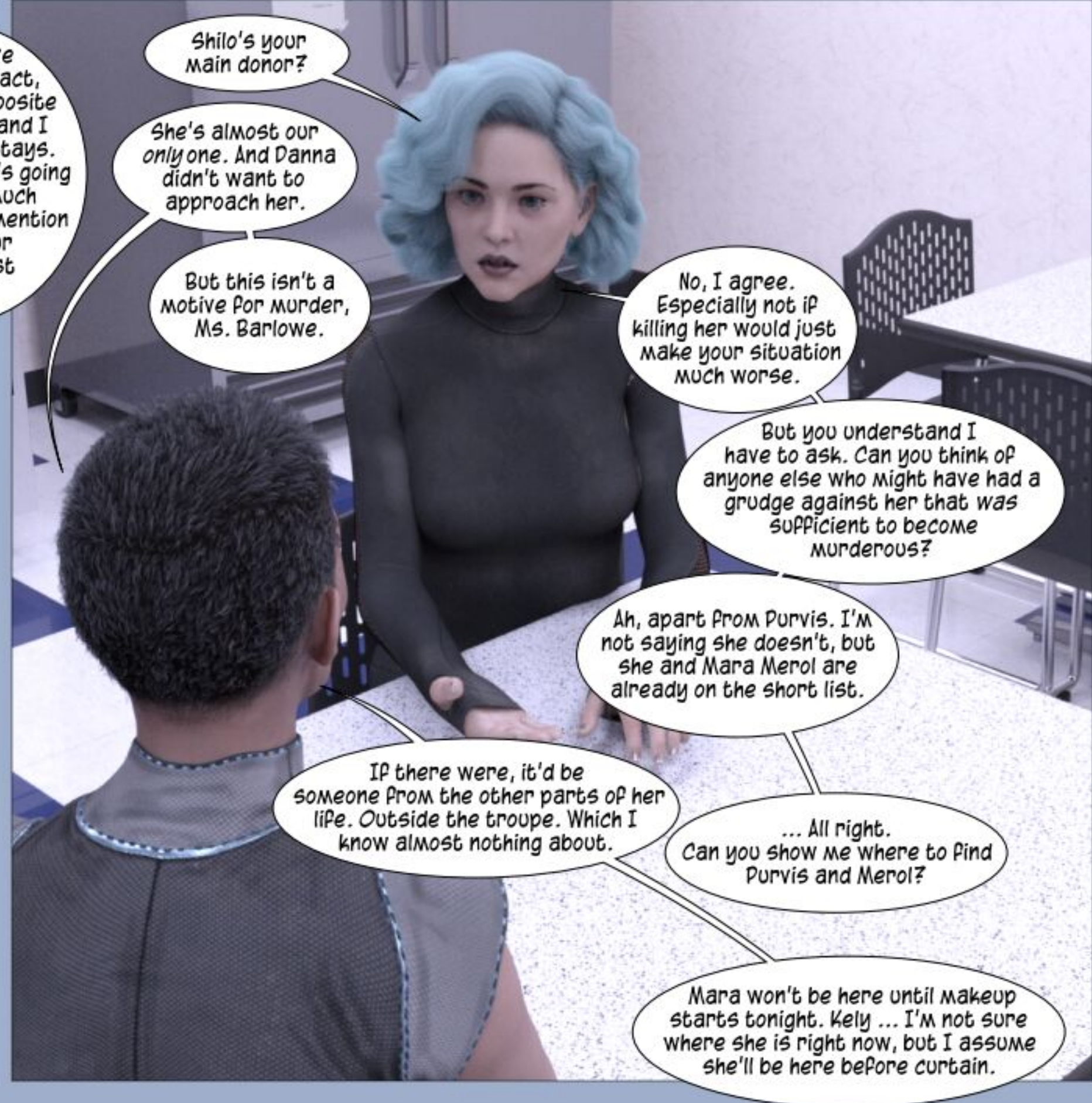
I don't have a motive. In fact, I've got the opposite of one. Danna and I were the mainstays. With her gone, it's going to be much, much harder. Not to mention she was our second-best actor.

Hmm. And you're going to tell me the two of you always got along perfectly?

If I told you that, Treac or someone else would call me a liar. We argued all the time.

We disagreed on how to do ... everything. What material to pick. Fundraising. What to charge.

Danna was very much "art for art's sake," and I appreciated that, but we also had to stay solvent--and we weren't. If I hadn't gone to Laressa Shilo with hat in hand, we wouldn't have had the last two seasons at all.



Shilo's your main donor?

She's almost our only one. And Danna didn't want to approach her.

But this isn't a motive for murder, Ms. Barlowe.

No, I agree. Especially not if killing her would just make your situation much worse.

But you understand I have to ask. Can you think of anyone else who might have had a grudge against her that was sufficient to become murderous?

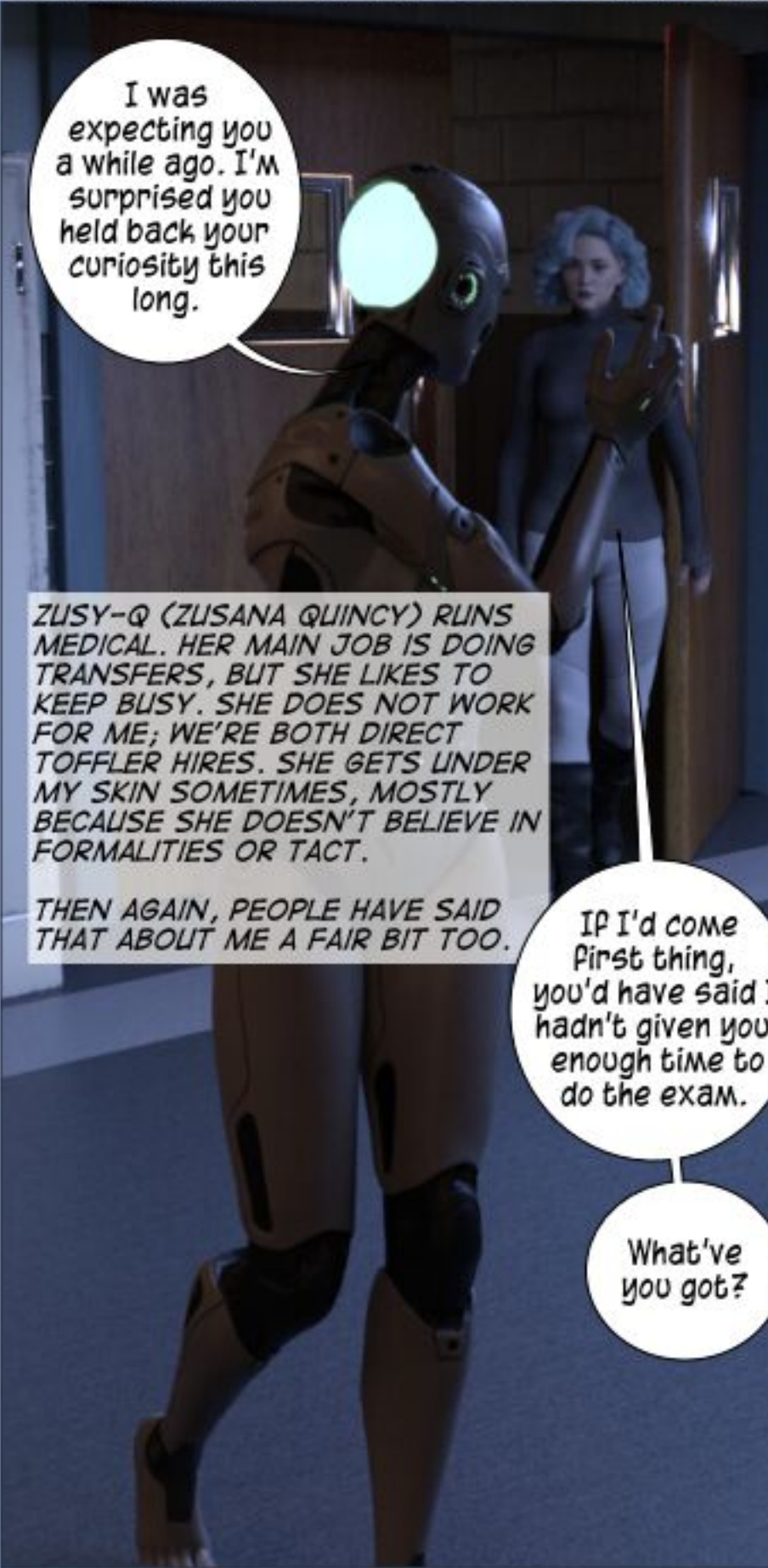
Ah, apart from Purvis. I'm not saying she doesn't, but she and Mara Merol are already on the short list.

If there were, it'd be someone from the other parts of her life. Outside the troupe. Which I know almost nothing about.

... All right. Can you show me where to find Purvis and Merol?

Mara won't be here until makeup starts tonight. Kelly ... I'm not sure where she is right now, but I assume she'll be here before curtain.

SO NEITHER MEROL NOR PURVIS WERE IMMEDIATELY AVAILABLE UNLESS I WANTED TO FIND THEM AT HOME. HOWEVER, I HAD SOMETHING ELSE TO CHECK ON IN THE MEANTIME.



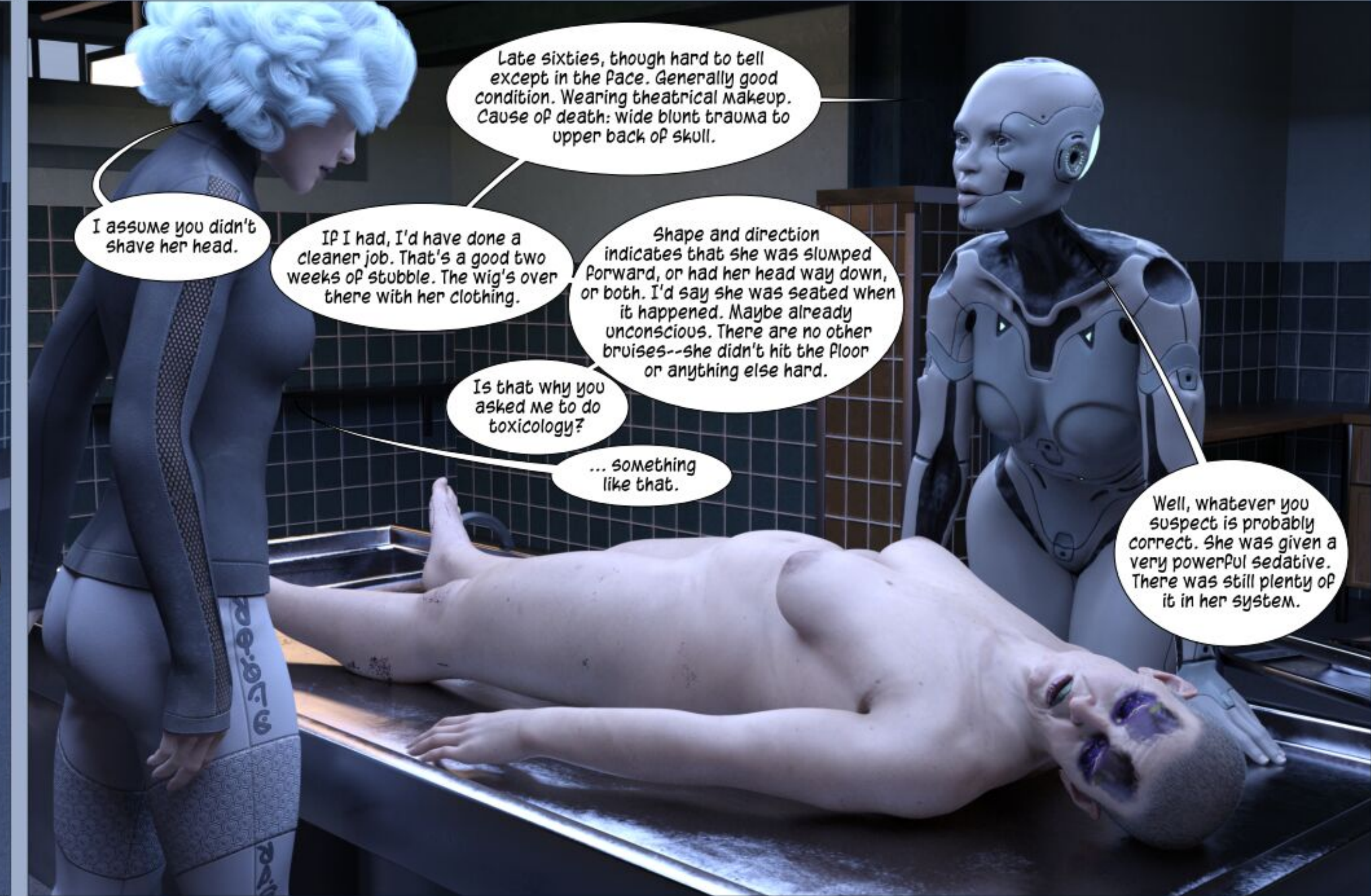
I was expecting you a while ago. I'm surprised you held back your curiosity this long.

ZUSY-Q (ZUSANA QUINCY) RUNS MEDICAL. HER MAIN JOB IS DOING TRANSFERS, BUT SHE LIKES TO KEEP BUSY. SHE DOES NOT WORK FOR ME; WE'RE BOTH DIRECT TOFFLER HIRES. SHE GETS UNDER MY SKIN SOMETIMES, MOSTLY BECAUSE SHE DOESN'T BELIEVE IN FORMALITIES OR TACT.

THEN AGAIN, PEOPLE HAVE SAID THAT ABOUT ME A FAIR BIT TOO.

If I'd come first thing, you'd have said I hadn't given you enough time to do the exam.

What've you got?



I assume you didn't shave her head.

If I had, I'd have done a cleaner job. That's a good two weeks of stubble. The wig's over there with her clothing.

Late sixties, though hard to tell except in the face. Generally good condition. Wearing theatrical makeup. Cause of death: wide blunt trauma to upper back of skull.

Shape and direction indicates that she was slumped forward, or had her head way down, or both. I'd say she was seated when it happened. Maybe already unconscious. There are no other bruises--she didn't hit the floor or anything else hard.

Is that why you asked me to do toxicology?

... something like that.

Well, whatever you suspect is probably correct. She was given a very powerful sedative. There was still plenty of it in her system.



There's no way someone could arrange for her to be standing where the weight would drop at the exact instant the lever was pulled.

The only idea that made even the slightest sense was if someone knocked her out somehow and dragged her to where they knew the bag would fall. Propped her up against a crate. Then they could pull the lever any time it suited them.

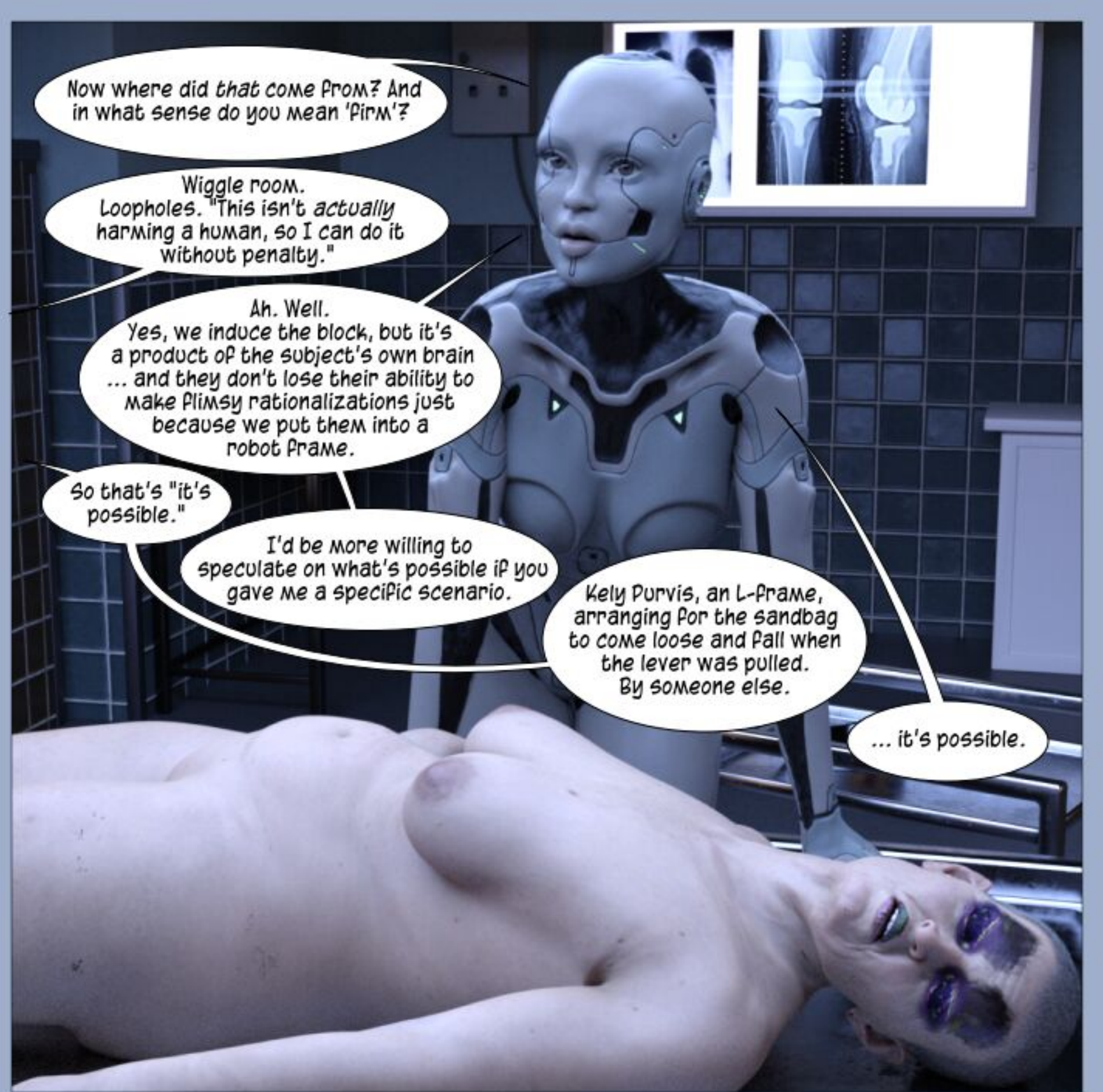
Any point in trying to track down sources for the sedative?

None. It's not like blue salt.* There are plenty of places it could have come from ... especially since, in considerably lower doses, some people here use it as a recreational drug.

Hmm.

How, ah ... how firm is the mental block?

* ZUSY-Q IS REFERRING TO EVENTS IN "PROOF OF DEATH."



Now where did that come from? And in what sense do you mean 'firm'?

Wiggle room. Loopholes. This isn't actually harming a human, so I can do it without penalty.

Ah. Well. Yes, we induce the block, but it's a product of the subject's own brain ... and they don't lose their ability to make flimsy rationalizations just because we put them into a robot frame.

So that's "it's possible."

I'd be more willing to speculate on what's possible if you gave me a specific scenario.

Kely Purvis, an L-Frame, arranging for the sandbag to come loose and fall when the lever was pulled. By someone else.

... it's possible.

GLORIA BANTAM. DOMESTIC MANAGER. HANDLES THE LOCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REGISTRY, TRIES HER BEST TO KEEP EVERYONE HAPPY, AND IS USUALLY THE FIRST PERSON TO HEAR COMPLAINTS, OR GET WORD OF ANY TROUBLE.



Hi, Wendy! Claire Parsons was looking for you early this morning. I got rid of her.

I think she was going to go wait for you at your office.

Yes. Unfortunately, I stopped by there.

Oops.

Oh, well, it might not have been useless, at that. Always worth keeping track of what she's yelling about this week.

Gloria, I need home locations for two people. Kely Purvis and Mara Merol.

Sure.

If you like, I can get a couple of my people to come along with you. Just in case.



You've been talking to Min.

Maybe a little. But she's right, you know. We don't want you taking risks like that.

I don't think either of these Polks will be hostile. At least, not yet. Besides, they'll be less likely to tell me anything if I show up with muscle.

You know, you always expect to have the dirt, but Parsons knew all about it, too. I mean, I didn't ask that the details be kept private, but maybe I should have ...

I'm not sure that would have made much difference. You know how this place is with gossip. And the theatre people are the worst. They had a cast party last night after the show.

Hmph. Mood not dampened by a death in the family?

I don't know about that. I wasn't there. Maybe it turned into a wake. Point is, probably half of Coldpoint knew everything that had happened by this morning. Including you looking into it.



I'll send you the info so you'll have it on your phone.

Thanks.

Ms. Barlowe!

Ms. Brass.

ISADORA BRASS. COLDPOINT'S ONLY ROVING REPORTER. SHE WORKS WITH TWO OTHER PEOPLE ON COLDPOINT'S ONLY NEWS SOURCE, AND THE OTHER TWO JUST COMPILE STORIES FROM THE REST OF THE GALAXY THAT COME IN ON SHIP DATA PACKETS.

How did you know I was here?



Actually, I came to get a statement from Ms. Bantam. But one from you would be even better.

What's the current status of your investigation? Do you have any clear suspects? When do you think you'll be able to--

Now hold on.

I only started looking into it this morning. I haven't even confirmed that a crime has taken place. And you know if I had any clear suspects, it'd be a horrible idea to tell you who they are at this point.

We were just discussing how the gossip tree in Coldpoint demands constant feeding, but I'm sure you only want to publish facts.



But a public statement might help cool down some of the gossip ...

Maybe, but the problem is, I don't have anything to tell you.

How about this: I'll confirm that I do have reason to believe--at least until proven otherwise--that Danna Slene's death wasn't an accident, and I'm investigating it with that assumption.

Since everyone seems to have jumped to that conclusion anyway, that should be pretty harmless.



What about the allegation that the murder was committed, or at least facilitated, by a robot?

Unconfirmed at this time.

And, between us, I'd be very careful about publishing anything that comes out of Claire Parsons' mouth.

You know she'll do or say whatever she thinks will convince people not to transfer. Including trying to undermine confidence in the mental block ... that we only give the robots in the first place to reassure people like her.

Don't you dare quote me on any of that.

PLURVIS WAS THE ONE I REALLY WANTED TO TALK TO, BUT NO ONE WAS HOME.

MEROL LIVED IN AN UNUSUAL PLACE. NOT AN AREA THAT HAD MANY RESIDENCES. THE FASTEST WAY THERE WAS TO HEAD DOWN THROUGH THE BUSINESS ZONE OF COMPLEX A AND GO BY WAY OF CHROME CROSSING.



The Red X club uses unfair contracts!

The Red X club keeps robots in servitude!

Don't give them your business!

ARIN ATHERTON, WHOM EVERYONE CALLED ARIN-A. UNLESS THEY WERE ONE OF THE PEOPLE WHO PREFERRED TO CALL HER SOMETHING UNPRINTABLE.

I thought we had come to an agreement.

We did! I reported this place to Ms. Bantam weeks ago!

I told you last time, we can't do this kind of thing overnight. We have to investigate ...

Still, "weeks" is a while. I'll check with Gloria and see what's going on.



Are you going to make us stop?

... No. Not today, anyway. Keep protesting if you like. Just remember you can't actually block someone from going in if they want to. I'll be very upset if I hear about you doing that.

And, Arin-A ... I want you to be at my office at sixteen o'clock. I need to talk to you about this. Somewhere with fewer spectators.



Ms. Merol?

Anybody here?



Hm...

Yours is an inferior species, human!



Our law says that your kind are fit only to be sent to the oil mines.

And yet ... I feel somehow that you have ... merit.



MMM, yes ... You are well-formed. I see potential in you.

I am the empress, after all, and I follow my own counsel.

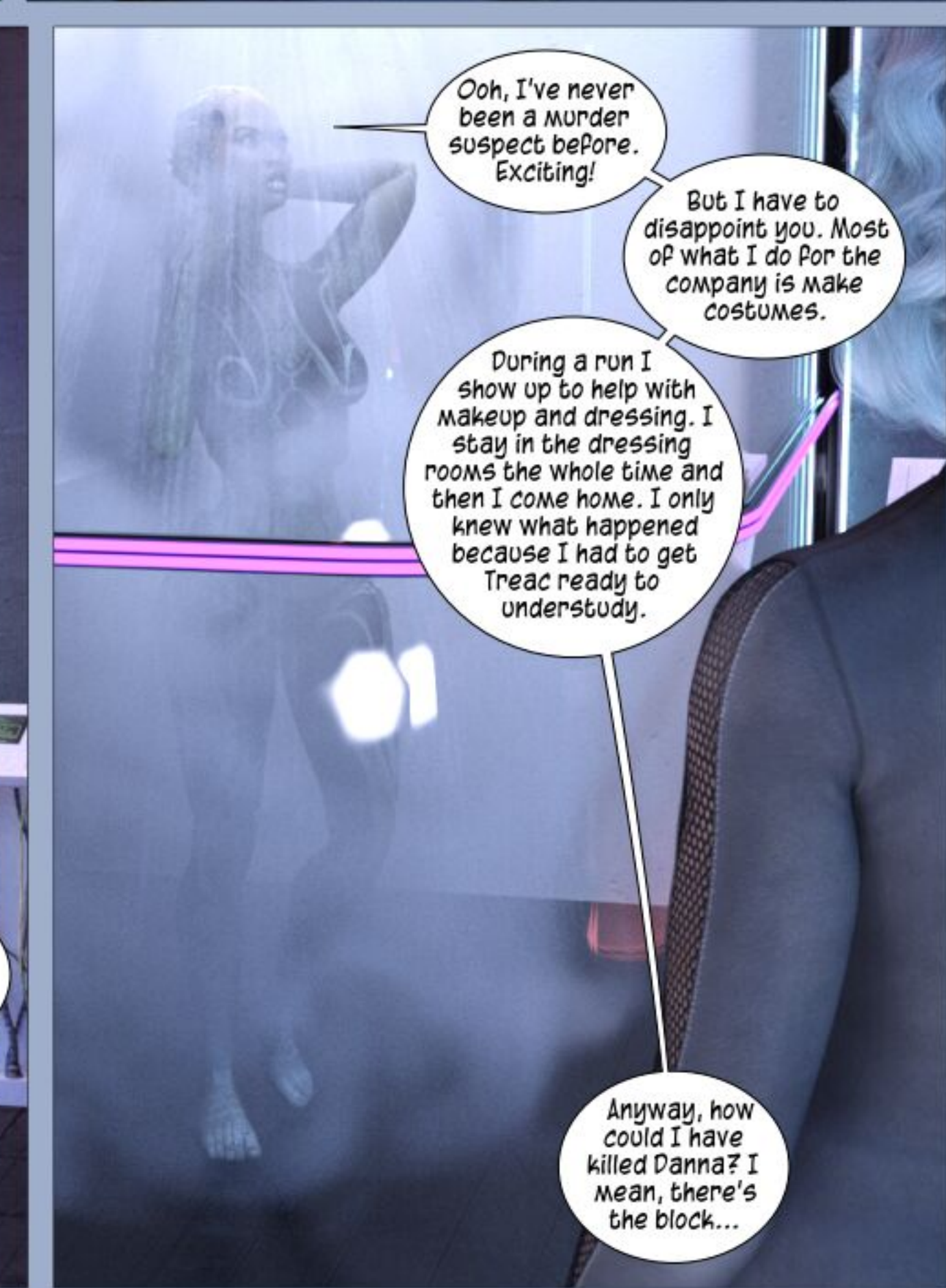
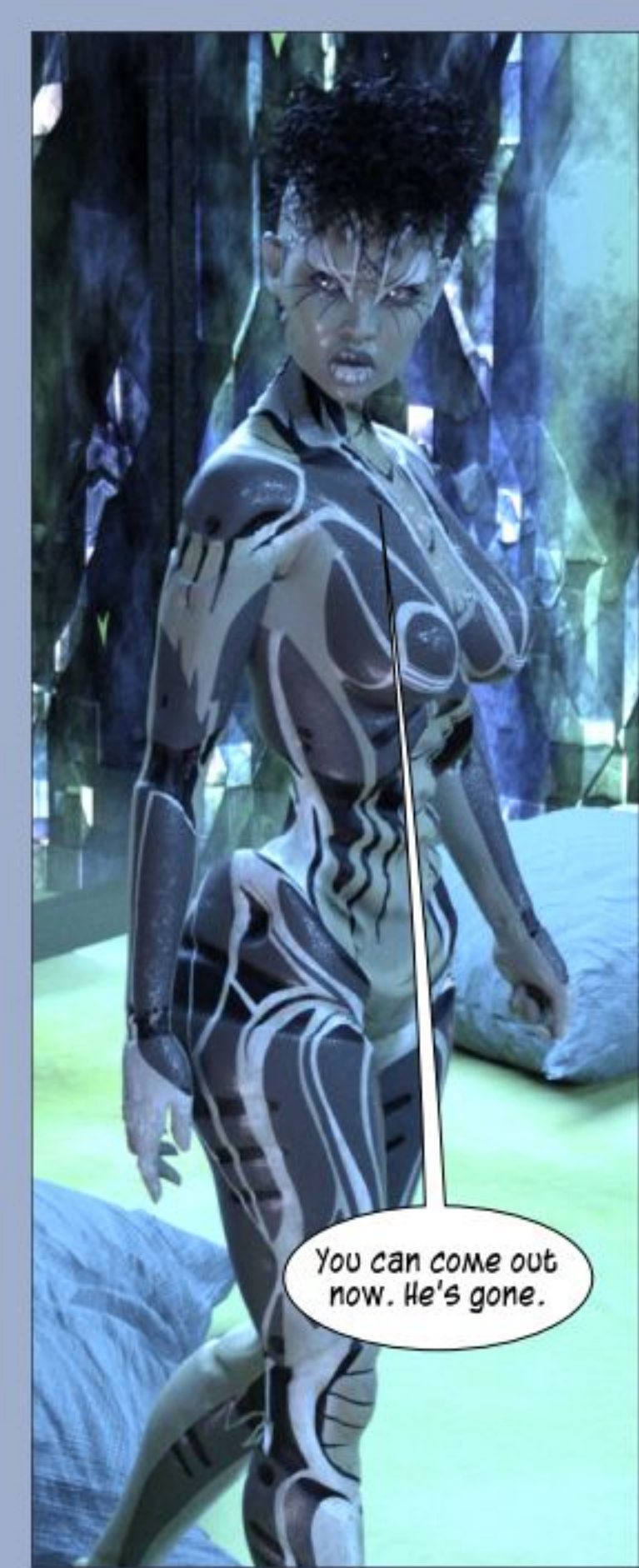
Please me, human, and you will be given special consideration.



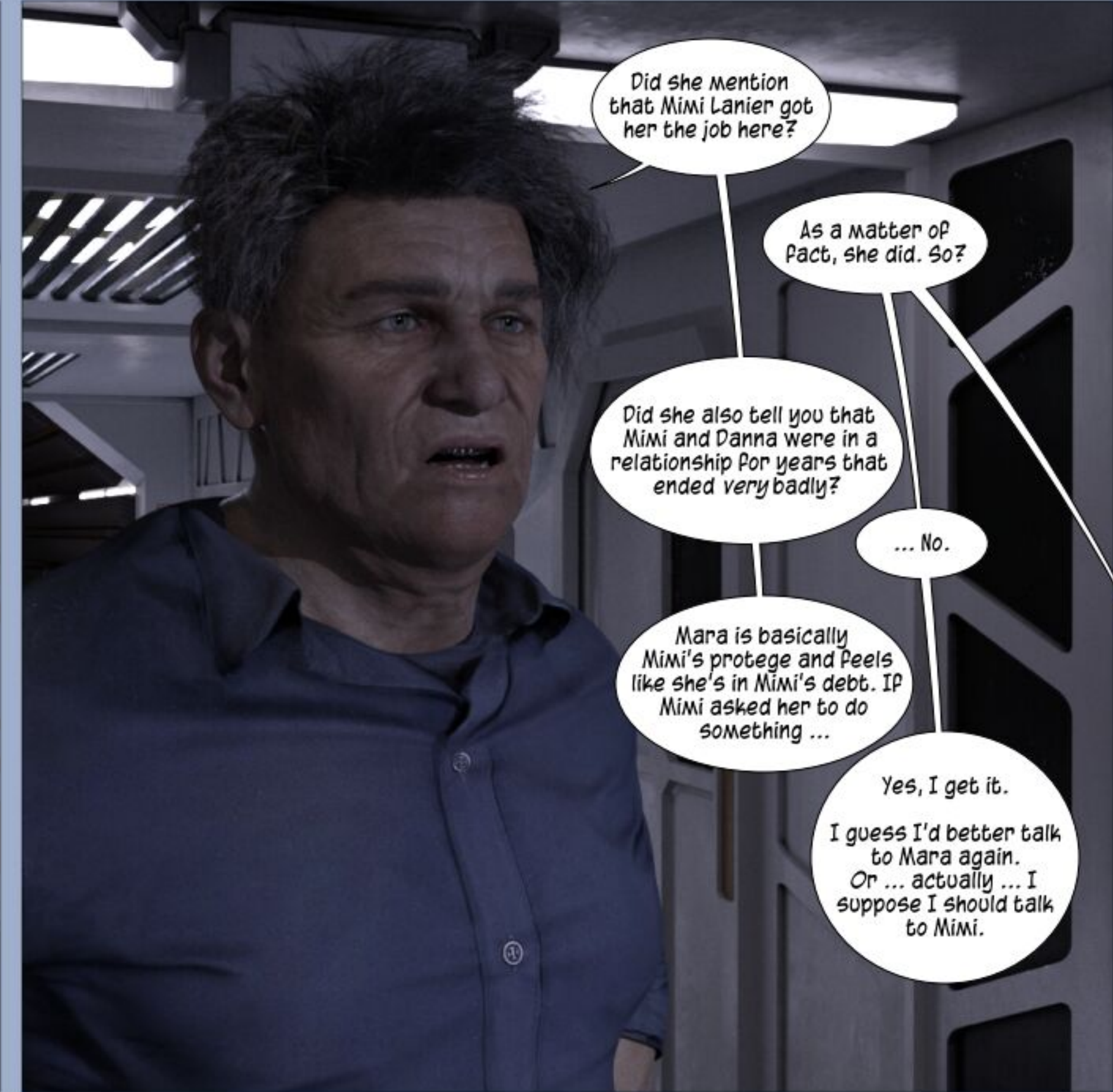
Ohhh!

Oh, yes ... your empress is most pleased ...

WAAAAAAAAH!!!



PURVIS WAS STILL NOWHERE I COULD FIND HER, INCLUDING THE THEATRE.



I WASN'T THRILLED ABOUT THAT, BECAUSE I KNEW MIMI WOULD BE EVEN LESS THRILLED ABOUT IT.

We don't open for hours--

Oh, no.

I know. If I came while you were open, you'd be too busy to talk to me.

I might be too busy anyway.

I don't know anything about your murder.

I find that hard to believe. You know everything about everything.

For example, I'm sure you know that Mara Merol is a suspect.

Mara? You leave her alone. She's a good kid. She couldn't murder anybody even if she wasn't a robot.

I tend to agree. So how about you help me clear her out of the picture?

I need to know about your relationship with Danna Stone. Especially why it crashed and burned, and how bent out of shape both of you were about it.

You can go jump in a reclaim.

I already don't like the way you storm in and think you can get anything you want.

I'm sure as hell not going to start volunteering information about my private life. It's none of your business and you don't have a right to ask. Murder or no murder.

Close me down. I don't care. I don't like being pushed around.

I've never once tried to push you around.

You threatened me about the Gessit thing*, or have you forgotten that?

No. I tried to point out what would be in your best interest.

Just like I'm now pointing out that if you have an interest in Merol's welfare, you might reconsider your position. Because right now you're making hers look a lot worse.

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

* IN "DEATH AND DENIAL."

MIMI'S REAL OBJECTION TO MY QUESTIONS IS THAT SHE MOONLIGHTS AS AN INFORMATION BROKER. THE ALL NIGHT CLUB IS GOSSIP CENTRAL IN COLDPOINT. SHE HATES GIVING OUT ANYTHING FOR FREE, AND I REFUSE TO PAY FOR IT. BUT I WAS ALSO IN NO MOOD TO FORCE THE ISSUE JUST THEN. THE TIME FOR THAT MIGHT COME LATER. OR MIGHT NOT.

MEANWHILE, I HAD AN APPOINTMENT TO KEEP.

Well, I'm here.

I talked to Gloria about the Red X. She says they're still working on it.

What's to work on? They trap robots in ridiculous contracts! Shut them down!

Don't tell me you need more proof of that. I gave Ms. Bantam all kinds of information. Like you asked.

The problem is that the contracts are already in place. It's very hard to void them. We have to find a basis to break each one. Individually.

We've already made it clear to them that contracts like that are unacceptable in the future, but they don't want to give up the ones they have ...

Just shut their asses down! You wouldn't piss around like this if it was humans being exploited ...

I would handle it exactly the same way if it were humans being exploited. Though it never is. Places like Red X seem to think -- well, never mind that. The point is, we're going as fast as we can.

I'm sorry, but I have some trouble believing that.

--sigh-- The humans believe I favor the robots and the robots believe I favor the humans. I don't know what I can do to convince people I'm just trying for fairness to everybody.

Well, if you want to prove you mean it, I've got a situation too high for me to crack.

Larissa Shilo is keeping at least one robot in a situation they can't get out of.

I'm not going to get anywhere protesting in front of her home.

No, I wouldn't think so. You mean she's got a robot under an exploitative contract?

Ah ... not exactly. I mean she has a robot in a situation they literally can't get out of.

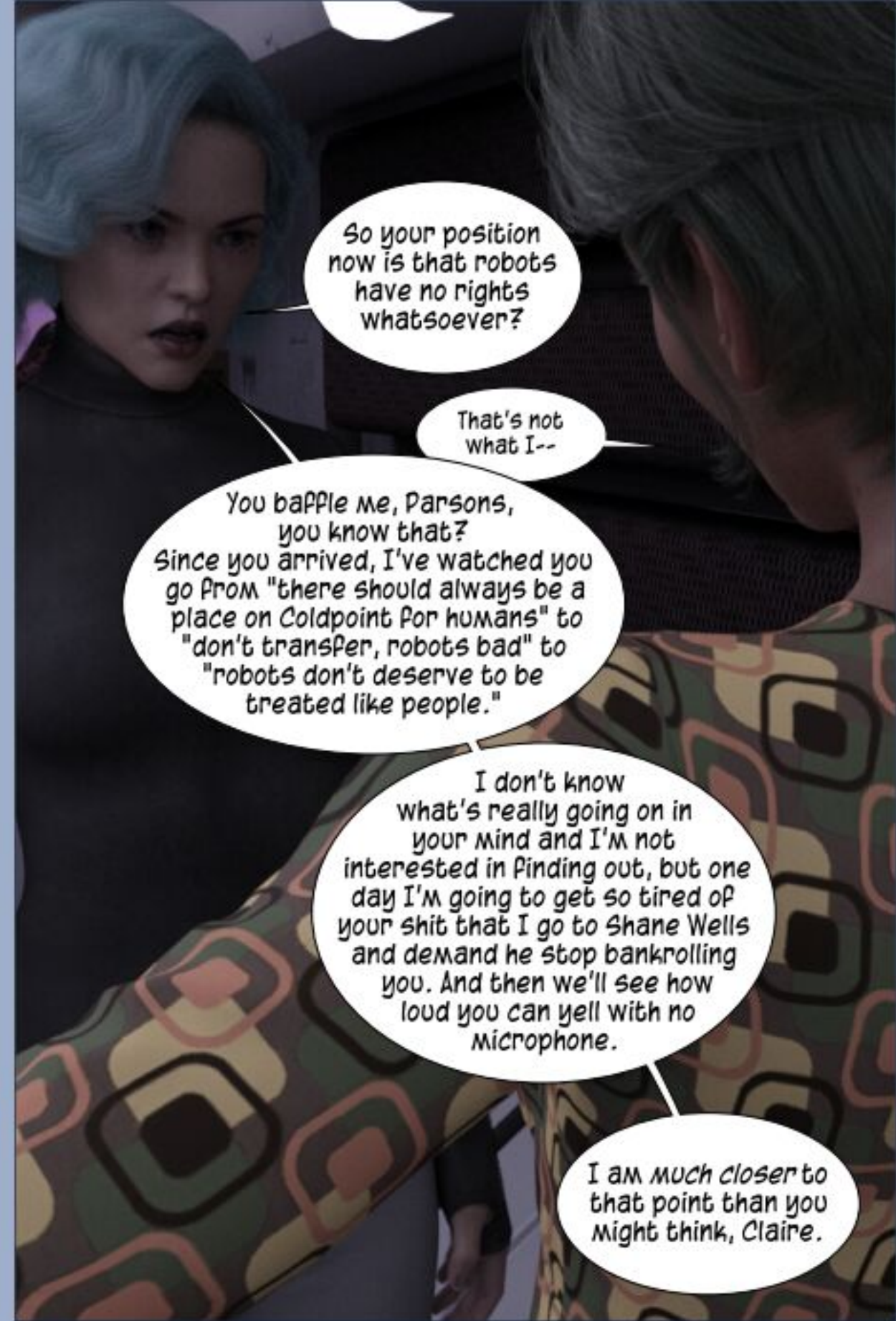
Look, I don't think you'll believe me unless you see it for yourself. But I promise you won't like it when you see it.

If you're for real, that is.

I'll ... go talk to her.

It won't be today.

BY THAT POINT IT WAS CLOSE ENOUGH TO THE EVENING'S PERFORMANCE THAT I FIGURED PURVIS HAD TO BE AT THE THEATRE. SHE WAS, BUT NOT WHERE I EXPECTED.



I'D REACHED THE POINT WHERE I WAS UNREASONABLY ANNOYED WITH EVERYBODY, TO THE EXTENT THAT I WAS FEELING ON THE VERGE OF COMMITTING A MURDER MYSELF. SO I DID THE ONLY SENSIBLE THING.

I CHANGED INTO SOME BETTER CLOTHES AND THEN WENT TO SEE A SHOW.



UNFORTUNATELY, WHILE IT WAS A VERY INTERESTING SHOW, IT WASN'T THE KIND THAT LEAVES YOU WITH A WARM HAPPY FEELING AFTERWARD.

AFTER THE SHOW.

Treac?

Are you all right?

I'm fine.

Oi, what a night, though.

Rowene didn't tell anybody she'd fired Kelly. The rest of us only found out when we saw her protesting.

Rowene had to do back and I had to help run things, and everyone was everywhere and nothing went the way it was supposed to ...

And to top off, Rowene acted like it was everybody else's fault, as if she hadn't made the problem in the first place ...

Well, for what it's worth, I don't think any of that showed in the performance.

Look ... do you want to, uh, waive the rule? Just for tonight? Seems like you might need some support.

TREAC HAS A STRICT POLICY: NO SEX DURING A PRODUCTION, FROM FIRST REHEARSAL TO CLOSING-NIGHT CURTAIN. SHE SAYS IT DISTRACTS HER. SHE DOESN'T EVEN LIKE TO SHARE A BED WHILE A SHOW'S RUNNING.



Aw, love, I appreciate the thought. But I'd better not.

And really, company is not what I need right now.



WHICH WAS FINE, BUT I FOUND THAT I NEEDED COMPANY. A SURPRISING AMOUNT.

Hey ... I know it's late and on no warning, but ... are you free right now?



Sorry for the unexpected call.

Don't be silly. -- MMM --

You know if I had a customer I'd have said so.

If you had a customer you wouldn't have answered your phone.

Very true.



Does make me wonder if the murder isn't going so well, though.

Want to tell me about it?



There's less to tell than you think. There's only two points I can push on ... who rigged the sandbag to fall and who moved Slene into position.

Something Mara Merol said made me realize those two don't have to be the same person ... and when I thought about it some more, I realized it didn't even have to be any of the three who were backstage then. Slene was in a place they didn't usually go during a show. She could have been there for hours.

Oh, is Mara in this? Right ... she does costumes for them, doesn't she?

You know her?

I send business her way sometimes. She does things that are more ... elaborate ... than I'd try.



Anyway ... mmgh ... I just feel like I've gone backwards. I know less now than I did when I started this morning.

I think you just need to step away from it for a while.

I bet it'll look cleaner tomorrow.



NEXT MORNING. ISH.



Oh. Wh' time is it?

Early for you. I'm sorry.

I need to talk to you. Put something on and we'll go get breakfast.

Or lunch, as may be.

IT TOOK THREE CUPS OF TEA BEFORE TREC WAS CAPABLE OF FORMING SENTENCES.



I'm sorry I was harsh last night.

... That wasn't harsh.

It's just ... you know I want to concentrate completely on the role, even more since I hadn't been rehearsing it ... and now all of this ... I'm having to spend time doing some of Rowene's job so that she can do Kely's job ... and she's being really horrible for some reason ...

But you want to talk about the murder, don't you? Are people not cooperating?

It's not so much they're not cooperating as I'm not sure I'm asking the right things. I might not even be asking the right people.



I realized it doesn't have to be the three who were backstage. The whole thing could have been set up well in advance.

I don't think someone from outside the troupe could have done it easily, for reasons of access, but everyone in the troupe's a possibility.

Motives are strange. I mean, what if it turns out that someone was upset because they thought they should have played Lovett? it could be anything.



I think that's a bit far. I mean, no one kills someone on a whim, right? Unless they're a psychopath.

Professional jealousy ... the thing is, there were only three in the troupe who could have played Lovett. One passed up the role to direct, one's dead, and one's me.

We've got a lot of amateurs and they all know their limits. Julia'd love to move to bigger roles, for example, but she also knows she's not ready yet. She's working on it.

Honestly ... I'd rather you didn't repeat this ... unless it was something from Danna's outside life, it was Rowene or Noy.



How so?

They're the only ones who have enough history together to have grudges deep enough.

Danna, Rowene and Noy are the core of the company. The Pounders. The old guard. They've been working together for a long time, and I'm certain they've all been lovers at one point or another, and you know how that sort of thing goes. Lots of past drama.

On the other hand, they've been bickering constantly the whole time I've been in the troupe, and nothing has ever come of it before.



IT SEEMED LIKE THE NEXT THING TO DO WAS TALK TO EITHER DUSANT OR BURGESS SOME MORE, BUT THE THEATRE WAS DESERTED.

I know they get home late, but ...

Uh ... Ms. Barlowe?

ALMOST DESERTED.



Hello, Julia. It's Julia, right? Julia Urde?

That's right. You're trying to figure out what happened to Danna, aren't you?

There's something you should know. But please don't tell anybody I told you, OK?



On opening night, maybe an hour before curtain ... I heard a noise, and I looked up, and Mr. Burgess was up in the PLYLOFT.

I couldn't see what he was doing. I thought it was weird, because he never had any reason to go up there, but I didn't realize it might be important until I heard people talking about the weight being rigged ...

Yes, I'd say that's important. I wish you'd mentioned it yesterday.

I didn't know! Also I had to wait until I could talk to you with nobody else around. Rowene's being so nasty ... she'd probably try to kick me out or something ...

Don't worry. Your secret is safe.



... Wendy?

What's wrong?

Oh, hell, Min, I'm sorry.

I didn't think I was likely to be waking you up, at this hour.

Uh ... You didn't wake me up ... it's just that--



An unexpected visitor, carrying not one but two sidearms!

Looks like a call to danger and excitement!

... Wendy, you remember Stej Orlo.

Of course. Hello, Stej.

I hope there won't be danger. I can't vouch for the excitement.

STEJ HELPED THEM IDENTIFY A SUSPICIOUS CHEMICAL IN "PROOF OF DEATH."



So how long has this been a thing?

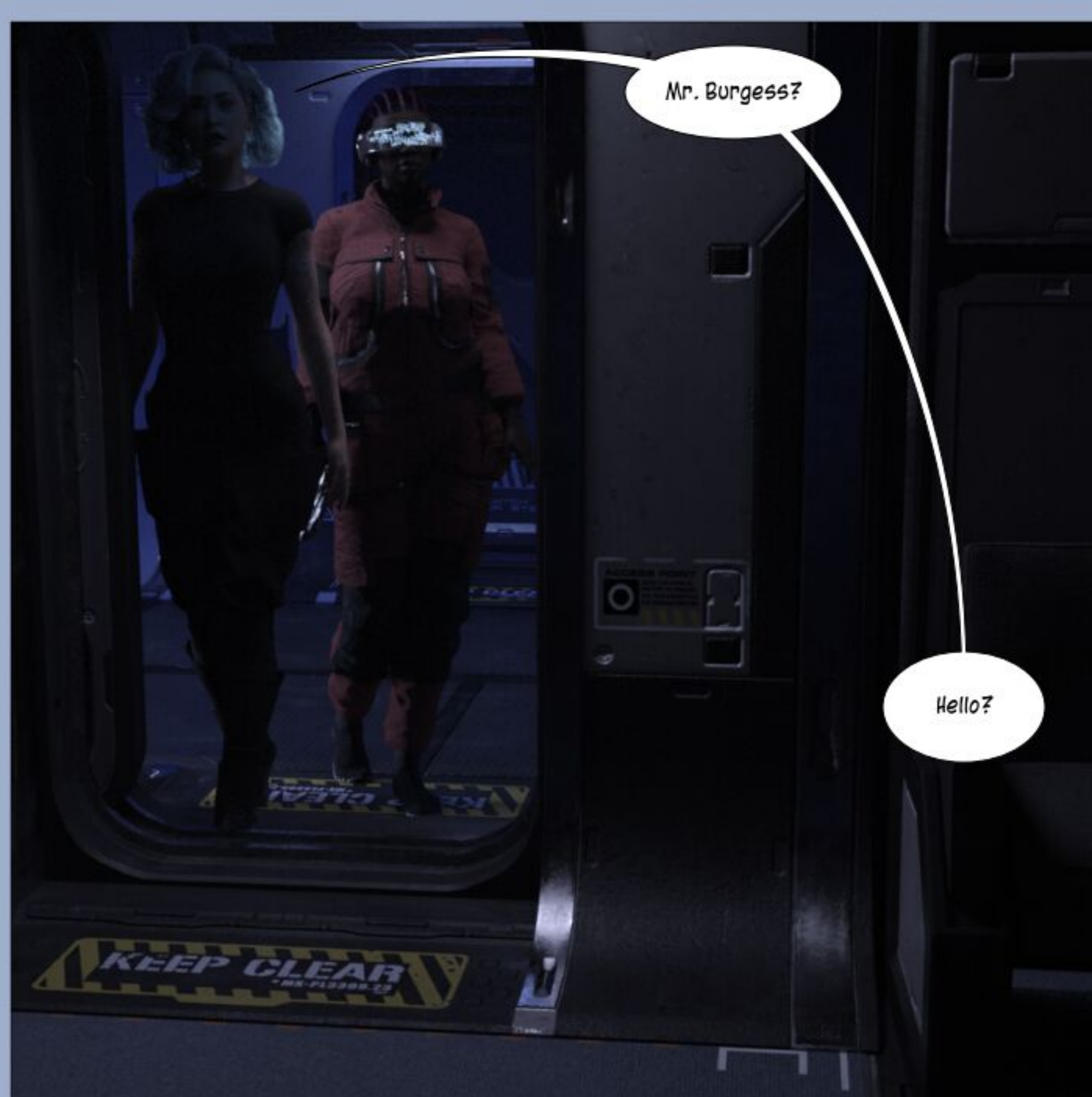
It's not a thing yet. We've seen each other three times.

I'm thinking it might be, though. We have a lot of interests in common.

Her sense of humor is really strange, but I like it.

So what are you getting me into?

We're interviewing an actor named Noy Burgess. I don't really expect trouble, but you wanted me to be cautious, and he just moved a lot closer to being the murderer.



Mr. Burgess?

Hello?



One thing about beam burns, they're tidy.

Mm-hm. Right through him, and cooked everything as it went.

Not a weapon, as such, I don't think. This is more like--

Min, I need to ask a huge favor.

I can't carry him by myself.

No. Call Gloria and ask her to send some of her guys. They'll help you get him to the morgue.

Tell Zusy-Q there's no rush. I think we're clear on cause of death.

I GOT MIN TO HANDLE THE BODY BECAUSE THERE WERE TWO PEOPLE I NOW NEEDED TO TALK TO, AND ONE OF THEM COULD TAKE HOURS TO FIND, SO I KNEW I'D NEED TO START LOOKING IMMEDIATELY. HOWEVER, AS IT HAPPENED, I GOT LUCKY.



BETH VIGILANCE IS THE PROBLEM AT THE OPPOSITE END OF THE SPECTRUM FROM CLAIRE PARSONS. SHE AND HER CLAN THINK THERE'S NO REASON ANY HUMANS SHOULD BE ON COLDPOINT; THAT THEY SHOULD BE FORCED TO TRANSFER UPON ARRIVAL. THEY SPEND THEIR DAYS AGITATING FOR THIS.



OH.

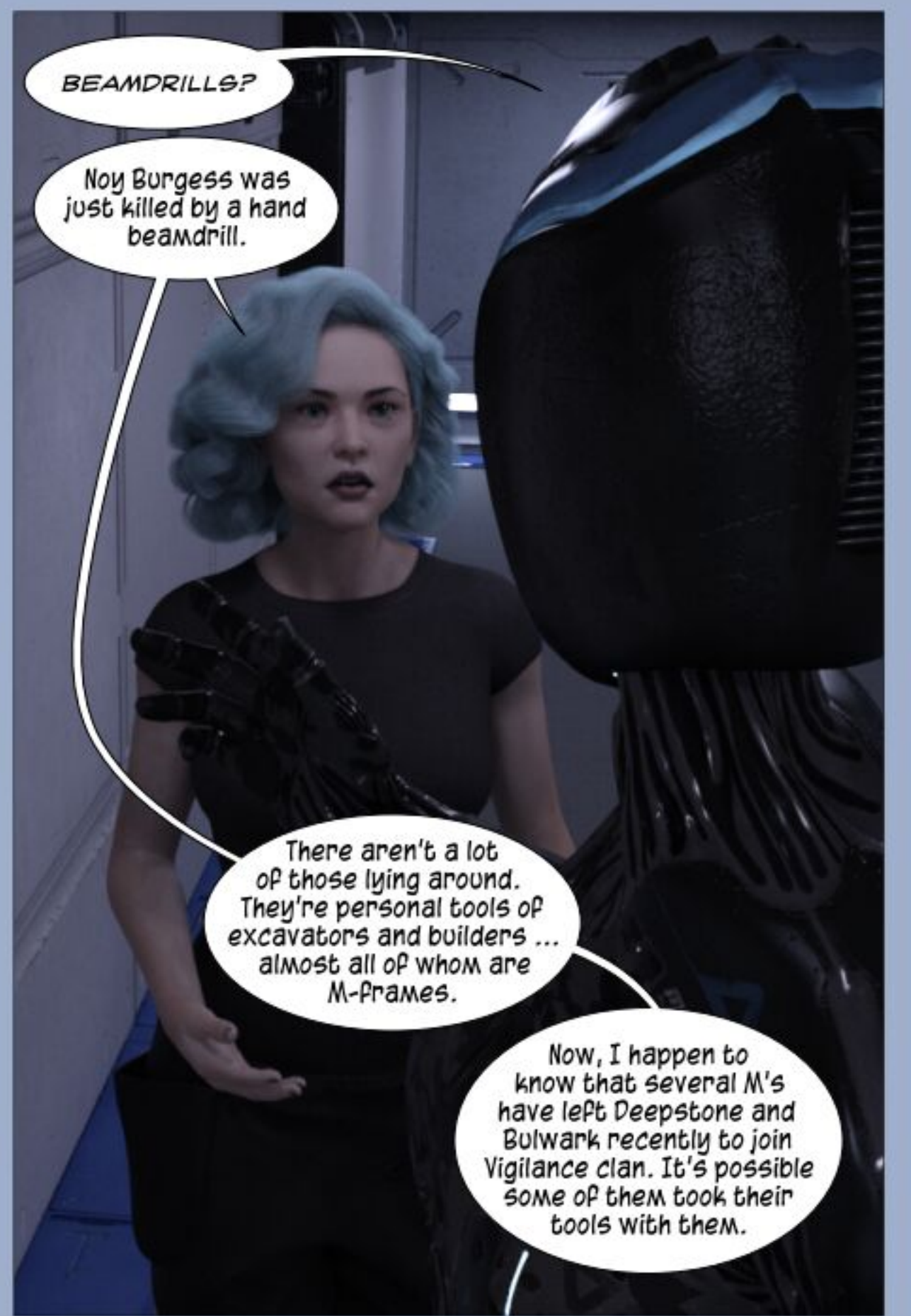
I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY TO YOU.

You don't even know what I'm going to ask you about.

YOU'RE GOING TO ASK ME ABOUT YOUR STUPID LITTLE MURDER.

I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT IT, I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT, AND--

Wrong! I'm going to ask you about beamdrills.

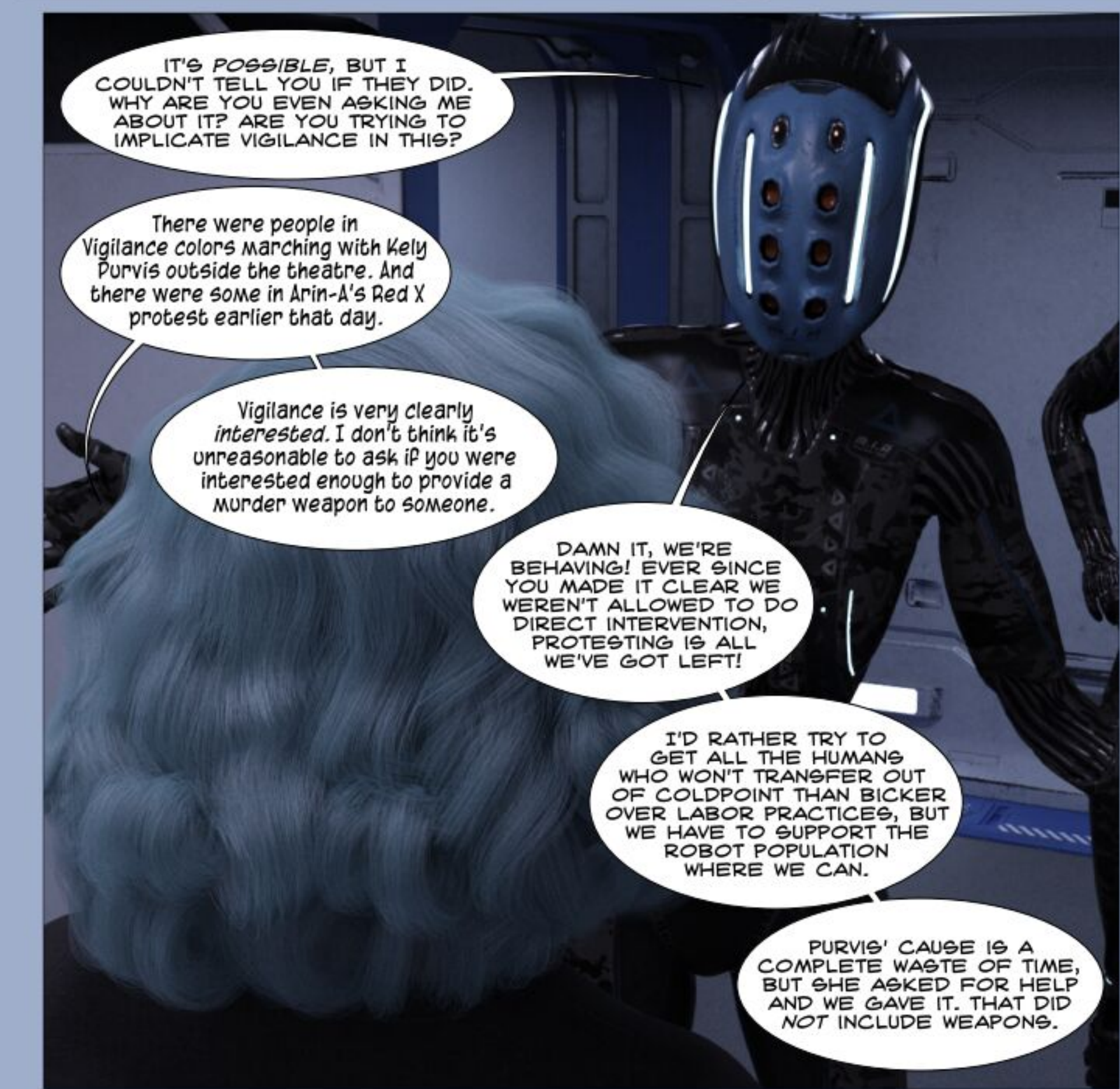


BEAMDRILLS?

Noy Burgess was just killed by a hand beamdrill.

There aren't a lot of those lying around. They're personal tools of excavators and builders ... almost all of whom are M-Frames.

Now, I happen to know that several M's have left Deepstone and Bulwark recently to join Vigilance clan. It's possible some of them took their tools with them.



IT'S POSSIBLE, BUT I COULDN'T TELL YOU IF THEY DID. WHY ARE YOU EVEN ASKING ME ABOUT IT? ARE YOU TRYING TO IMPLICATE VIGILANCE IN THIS?

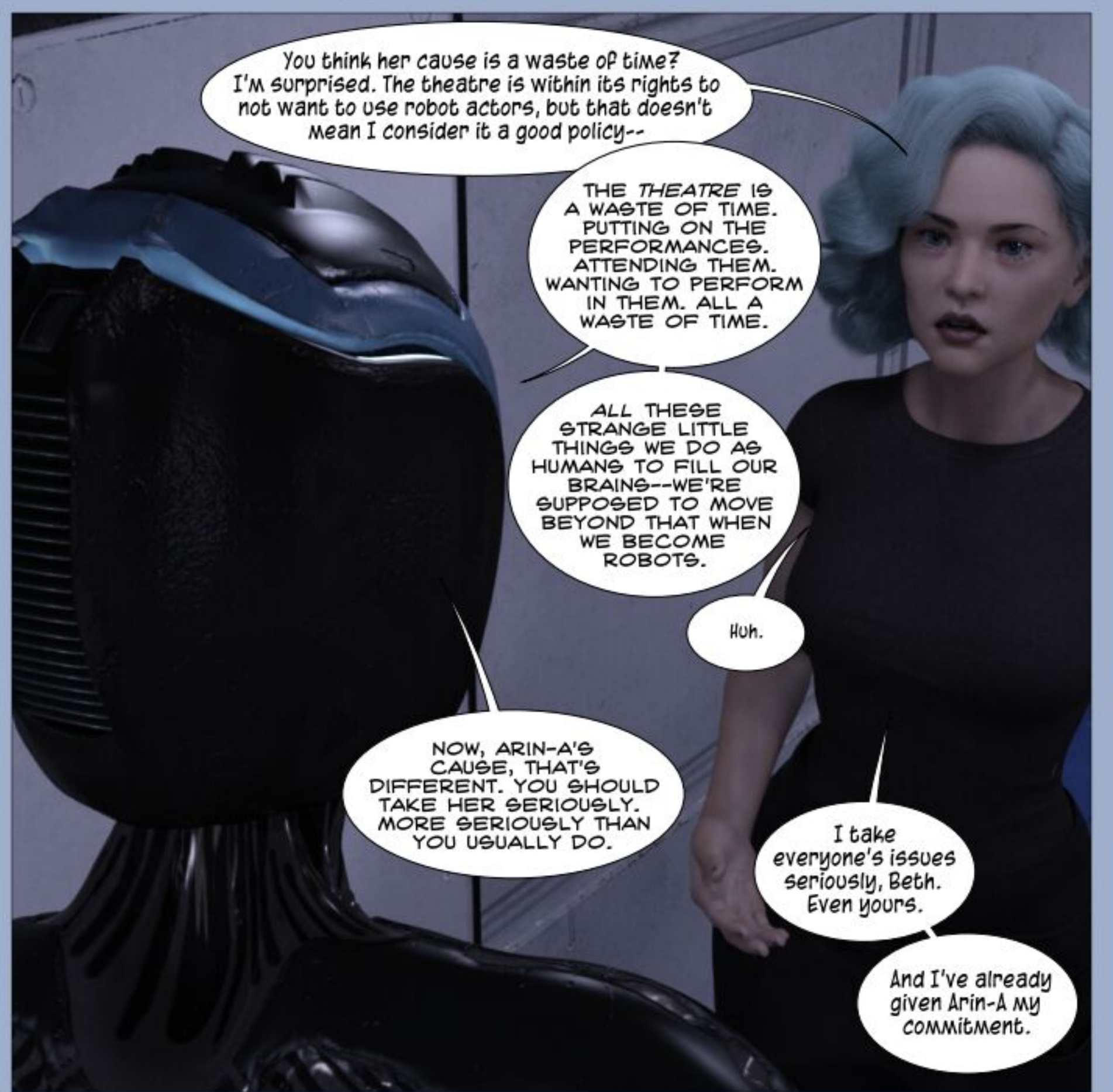
There were people in Vigilance colors marching with Kelly Purvis outside the theatre. And there were some in Arin-A's Red X protest earlier that day.

Vigilance is very clearly interested. I don't think it's unreasonable to ask if you were interested enough to provide a murder weapon to someone.

DAMN IT, WE'RE BEHAVING! EVER SINCE YOU MADE IT CLEAR WE WEREN'T ALLOWED TO DO DIRECT INTERVENTION, PROTESTING IS ALL WE'VE GOT LEFT!

I'D RATHER TRY TO GET ALL THE HUMANS WHO WON'T TRANSFER OUT OF COLDPOINT THAN BICKER OVER LABOR PRACTICES, BUT WE HAVE TO SUPPORT THE ROBOT POPULATION WHERE WE CAN.

PURVIS' CAUSE IS A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME, BUT SHE ASKED FOR HELP AND WE GAVE IT. THAT DID NOT INCLUDE WEAPONS.



You think her cause is a waste of time? I'm surprised. The theatre is within its rights to not want to use robot actors, but that doesn't mean I consider it a good policy--

THE THEATRE IS A WASTE OF TIME. PUTTING ON THE PERFORMANCES, ATTENDING THEM, WANTING TO PERFORM IN THEM, ALL A WASTE OF TIME.

ALL THESE STRANGE LITTLE THINGS WE DO AS HUMANS TO FILL OUR BRAINS--WE'RE SUPPOSED TO MOVE BEYOND THAT WHEN WE BECOME ROBOTS.

Huh.

NOW, ARIN-A'S CAUSE, THAT'S DIFFERENT. YOU SHOULD TAKE HER SERIOUSLY. MORE SERIOUSLY THAN YOU USUALLY DO.

I take everyone's issues seriously, Beth. Even yours.

And I've already given Arin-A my commitment.



Rowene?

I just got some news from Wendy.

... Noy's dead.



I know it's going to be hard to think about right now, but we need to get something together *fast*, unless you want to close the show ...

Rowene?

Are you listening?



Hey, Seb ... yes, yes, I know ... but it's urgent.

You're going to have to understudy ...

No, I'm quite serious. I'll explain when you get here ...

I know. I know. Believe me. I'll help you rehearse ... we'll just have to do the best we can.

Ah ... no ... I think Rowene ... isn't handling it well.

FINDING BETH MUCH FASTER THAN I EXPECTED GAVE ME SOME LEEWAY TO GO LOOK FOR FURST ... WHO, AS USUAL THESE DAYS, WAS OUT IN THE COMPLEX C SITE, SUPERVISING.



Well, this is certainly a big room.

Since Cil's here, I'm assuming this'll be plant beds?

FURST DEEPSTONE, DIRECTOR OF EXCAVATION. SINCE ALMOST ALL OF COLDPOINT IS UNDERGROUND, THAT'S SIGNIFICANT, AND INCLUDES MOST NEW CONSTRUCTION.

CIL MENARD, DIRECTOR OF AGRICULTURE. THE MOST DOWN-TO-EARTH EMPLOYEE I HAVE, IN EVERY SENSE OF THE PHRASE.

FURST'S THE TALL ONE.

Yep! Bioplastics.

That's the priority?

It has to be. We have enough food to handle a new wave of arrivals, but without the bioplastics, we can't build out this complex to have a place to put them.

Hmm. The timetable was too optimistic, then. I was hoping we could authorize expansion within the next couple of months, but if we have to grow a crop just to get the raw materials to finish getting ready ... that's, what, more than three months seed to harvest? And then another six to build out?



I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THAT. WE COULD RELOCATE A LOT OF THE INDUSTRY OUT HERE. THAT WOULDN'T TAKE THE SAME AMOUNT OF OVERHEAD, AND OUR INDUSTRIAL FACILITIES IN COMPLEX A ARE SHOWING THEIR AGE ANYWAY.

WE HAVE ENOUGH CURRENT RESOURCES TO RENOVATE THE INDUSTRIAL AREAS OF COMPLEX A AS RESIDENTIAL, WITHOUT NEEDING TO WAIT FOR A CROP.

Oh, I like it. See what Min thinks, but unless she has some engineering objection, let's consider that the plan.



DID YOU COME OUT TO FIND ME, OR CIL?

You, but it was mostly an excuse. It's peaceful out here.

Someone was killed using a hand beamdrill. I was hoping you could check around your clan and Bulwark, and see if one's gone missing. Not incriminatory, just might help to know where it came from.

WILL DO. VIGILANCE MAY HAVE A FEW AS WELL.

Yes, I already spoke to Beth, and got the usual nothing useful.

Say ... speaking of Beth ... is it an M thing to not be interested in ... well, entertainment? Movies? Theatre? Fiction? Hobbies? She said she considered it all a waste of time and robots were supposed to be past that.

I think that must be a 'Beth thing.'

I AGREE WITH CIL. CERTAINLY I'VE NEVER HEARD ANY OTHER M SAY SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

PERSONALLY, I ATTENDED THE PERFORMANCE OPENING NIGHT.



FOR SOME REASON, THE M-FRAMES, EVEN MORE THAN THE OTHER TYPES, SEEM TO HAVE A DEEP URGE TOWARD FUNCTIONALITY, ESPECIALLY PHYSICAL FUNCTIONALITY. WE NEED TO WORK WITH OUR BODIES, AND I DON'T MEAN SEX WORK.

I THINK BETH THROWS HERSELF INTO HER ACTIVISM AS STRONGLY AS SHE DOES BECAUSE SHE HAS NO OTHER PURPOSE AT THE MOMENT. I WONDER HOW MUCH IT DISTRESSES HER TO NOT HAVE SOMETHING PHYSICAL TO DO, PERHAPS SHE'S TRYING TO MAKE A VIRTUE OF IT.

Wow.

Furst, I never knew you were paying that much attention.

I MAY NOT BE A "PEOPLE PERSON," CIL, BUT I'M NOT ASLEEP.

IT WAS POINTLESS TO TRY TO TALK TO MIMI UNTIL LATER IN THE DAY--SHE KEEPS CLUB HOURS, WHICH ARE EVEN WORSE THAN THEATRE HOURS--SO I TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND WENT TO FIND LARESSA SHILO.

It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Barlowe.

I'd be surprised it hasn't happened sooner, but Shane Wells says you don't like to socialize. Or at least, not with our set.

He says you don't like the money.

He's not completely wrong.

Now, is that a skybox garden, or is it just a wall screen? I can't tell.

And you think I'm doing something unacceptable with staff contracts?

I assure you, I'm not. I keep a very small household and they're all quite well-compensated.

If that's the case, you surely won't mind if I do a little verification.

Now wait a minute ... you're not entitled to just wander through my house--

Hmm. Now what's this?

"Contractual" and "consensual" sometimes aren't the same.

You keep her strapped to this ... whatever it is? I see she's plugged into power ...

Just stuck here, huh? Can't see, can't move ... can she hear? Talk?

That is a completely consensual and private arrangement!

She has a month-to-month contract. It's her job. I pay her for that. Don't you dare judge me.

What could she possibly have to say?

It's just a fancy way of masturbating, Ms. Barlowe. When I'm on her, I might as well have a mirror to look into.

Don't look at me like that. Like I said, we have a contract. She knew what she was doing.

And every month you unstrap her and take off the faceplate? Let her move around and ask her whether she wants to renew?

Did you know robots have internal timekeeping?

I'm taking this off. I want to ask her some questions.

No, wait--!

TWO YEARS??

Two years, bitch?

Don't try to sound like you didn't --hgggh--

And to think I didn't believe her.

I'm taking the amount you owe her for the past two years from your account.

Plus a substantial penalty for fraud, illegal captivity, and ... I don't know, being awful.

And if you ever try anything like this again I'm throwing you off Coldpoint.

You Toppler people are idiots! And all the people you talk into transferring are idiots too!

You think you're making some kind of better world! You think one of these days you're going to make humanity all robots and everything will be sunshine and socialism, and you won't have to put up with any of us people who actually make things happen!

You know what you've really done? You've made the new group of people to exploit! You think the rest of the galaxy's going to welcome your robots ... sure they will! They'll welcome them as slave labor! That's what you've built!

Your suckers don't even realize what you're getting them into ... and you won't admit it, just like you won't admit you're never going to break the money!

You idealists make me sick! Throw your robots at us, and then get mad when we give them the treatment they deserve!

If you peel that way, I think you had better just go ahead and leave Coldpoint and save us both some time.

There's a ship in four days. I expect you to arrange passage on it. If you don't, I'll arrange passage for you, and my way will be a lot less comfortable.

Two years ... two years ... what do my friends think happened ...?

You can't do that! You don't have the right--

I just did.

And don't try to make trouble in the meantime. I'm going to be spreading the word. I want you scared to leave your house.



This is my private space, damn it.

Mimi ...
So far today I've found an unexpected corpse, gotten so angry I actually struck someone, and had to ban someone from Coldpoint.

This is not a good day for it, is what I'm saying.

You think any of that makes a bit of difference to me?



The corpse was Noy Burgess. He'd been shot.

It's time to talk.



There was this whole little group. Noy, Danna, Rowene, a couple of others. They all slept with each other. I didn't try to keep track.

They thought they were the literati. You know, like they were the only culture here on Coldpoint. Pretentious little shits. And so much drama, all the time.

I've noticed the tendency. I can't tell if Treac has less of it than most, or if I'm just biased with her. Is that how it was with you and Slene?

... I don't love anyone. I'm too old for it.

But Danna and I understood each other. I thought for a while that was good enough.

The one of them pulled Laressa Shilo into the circle, and I realized pretty fast that Danna wanted her. Badly.



You asked yesterday how bent out of shape we got. We didn't. She saw something she wanted more, we both knew it, we called it quits. No drama. For once.

I'm better off out of it. All the fights that didn't mean anything, the backstabbing, the breakups and makeups and hatesex and ... ugh, it's so exhausting, y'know?

But none of them ever killed each other over any of it!

And there may be some people I think deserve to die, but not Danna or Noy.

You better find out who did it.

I sure hope I can.



... and the thing is, it doesn't get me anywhere at all.

It just adds this little web of lovers and jealousies and about ten thousand more possible motives ... none of which strike me as being sufficient for two murders.

Don't even have anybody you like for it?

For which one? With Slene, someone could have killed her without knowing that was what they were doing. But not Burgess. Burgess was killed with intent, by someone he knew well enough to answer the door in his underwear, and trusted enough to turn his back on them.

Seems like that almost has to be Dusan--and I can't come up with a motive for her.

Wish I could pin it all on Laressa Shilo. I mean, I'm already throwing her out.



Heh.

Speaking of, is that going to make political trouble for you?

No, I don't think so. I'm within my authority ... and I think most people will sympathize. Certainly the robot population will, and any of the humans with any decency.

I gave the story to both Mimi Lanier and Isadora Brass. That means all of Coldpoint's got it by now.



You know, I didn't want to throw her out. She funds a couple of good things. The theatre company, for example--

--huh.

... Did you just solve it?

I don't know.

I need to go find somebody, Min. Talk to you later.



I GOT LUCKY AGAIN. SHE COULD HAVE TAKEN HOURS TO FIND.

Arin-A!

Yes, and I need to ask you something about that.

Shilo never let the woman--Ria Tzchern--out of captivity. Tzchern's friends had no idea where she was.

How did you find out that Shilo was holding her?

Well ... uh ...

Did Danna Slene tell you?



I heard you busted Laressa Shilo ...



Yes. She did.

Wait, are you telling me that's connected with--

I'm afraid so. But it's not your fault.

Thank you. I have to be somewhere now.



Rowene!
I can't believe you just want to ...
this isn't like you!

Seb's mostly got it! He just
needs a little more rehearsal.
We can make this work!

... I can't.

I just can't,
Treac. I don't have
anything left.

If you want to
try, try. I won't
stop you.

Don't go anywhere,
Rowene. We need to talk.

Could I get you
two to leave us
alone for a few
minutes?



I've
already told you
everything I
know.

You've barely told
me anything.

How many days before her
murder did Slene tell you
that she was going to sic
Arin-A on Laressa Shilo?



... you
actually
got it?

I'm full of
surprises.

Slene would have
known about Shilo's
capture; she'd been to
Shilo's house many times.
Did you? Or did you first
learn about it when
Slene told you?



No, I knew. Laressa
stopped sleeping with
Danna and started sleeping
with me. A few months back. I
didn't ask for it. Laressa just
decided she was bored with
Danna one day. Danna
didn't take it well.

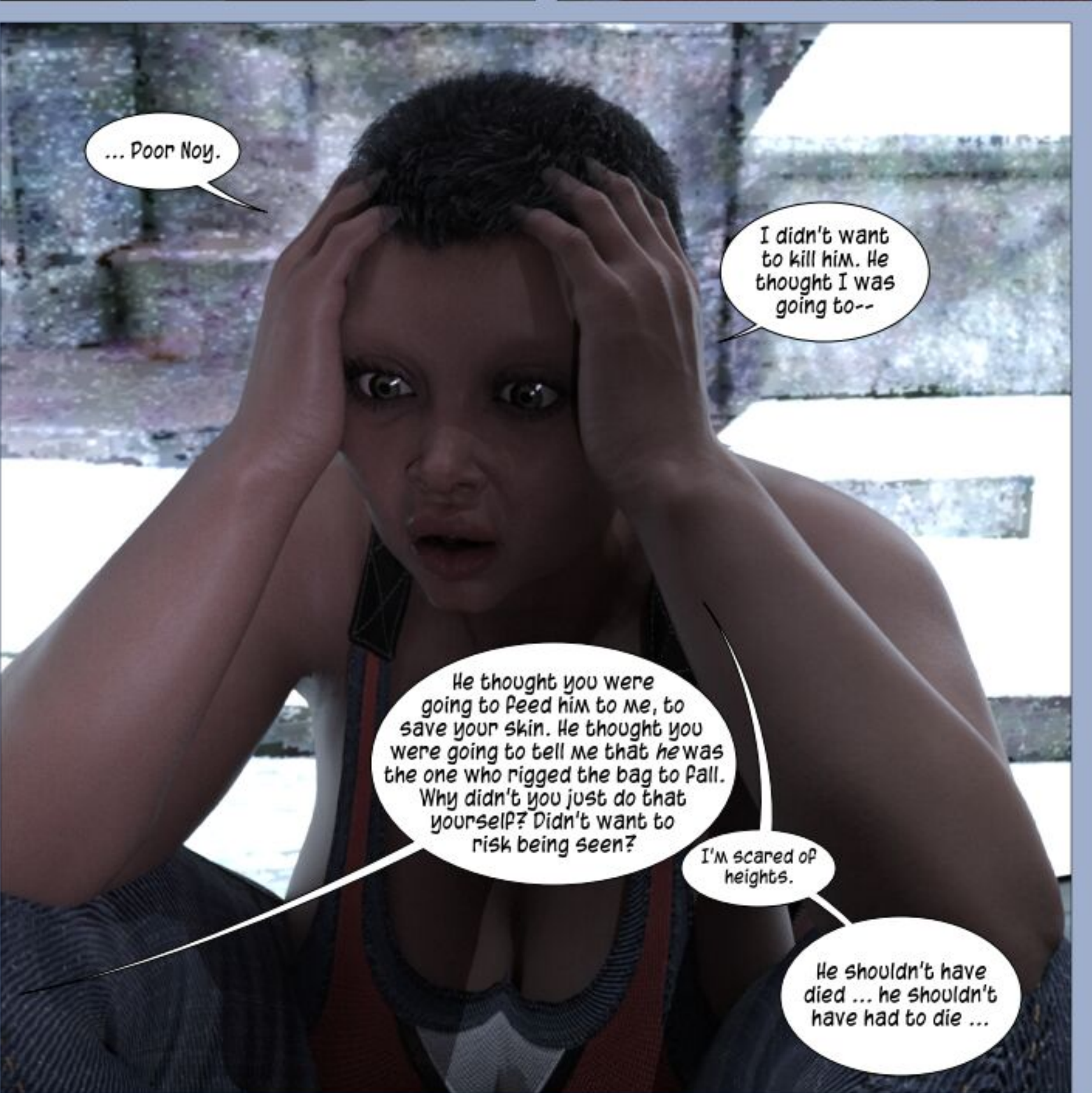
That's the thing--Danna
wanted to punish me because I
was with Laressa and she wasn't. It wasn't
because she was really shocked by what
Laressa was doing, or she could have
done something about it a long time
ago. It was revenge.

But it was
going to bring
down the entire
company! Without
Laressa's support,
we were done
for!

I couldn't
make her
understand that
was a lot more
important than
any --

And to
keep me from
getting there, first
you tried to throw
suspicion onto
Purvis ...

... and when it
became clear that
was never going to fly,
you got Burgess to put
me onto Merol, via
Mimi Lanier.



... Poor Noy.

I didn't want
to kill him. He
thought I was
going to--

He thought you were
going to feed him to me, to
save your skin. He thought you
were going to tell me that he was
the one who rigged the bag to fall.
Why didn't you just do that
yourself? Didn't want to
risk being seen?

I'm scared of
heights.

He shouldn't have
died ... he shouldn't
have had to die ...



That goes for Slene as
well. She'd already told Arin-A
about Shilo before you killed her.
You've murdered two people for
nothing at all.

Yes, and it's all
your fault!!

Mine?

The way you
treat robots! You give
them more rights than
humans! They're not human
anymore and they don't
deserve anything, but
you'll put them over us
every time!

If it
weren't for you,
nobody would be
protesting us! If it
weren't for you, nobody
would care if Laressa
was keeping a robot
strapped to a
table!

Hmm.
And all this time I
thought Slene was
the robot-hater in
the troupe.



Danna?
That's hilarious.
Danna just thought that if
we had robot actors it'd be
too hard for the audience to
tell who was playing whom.
She always missed the
point completely.

I never could get her to
understand. They're coming
for us! They're coming for
all of us! They don't just
want to take all the
labor, they want to take
our theatre, our books and
everything else! And you
want to let them!!

Can you repeat that a
little louder, please?
For the back row.



WHAT???

Can we get someone to
open the curtains, maybe?



Best comic monologue I've
ever heard on this stage. Don't
you think, Beth?

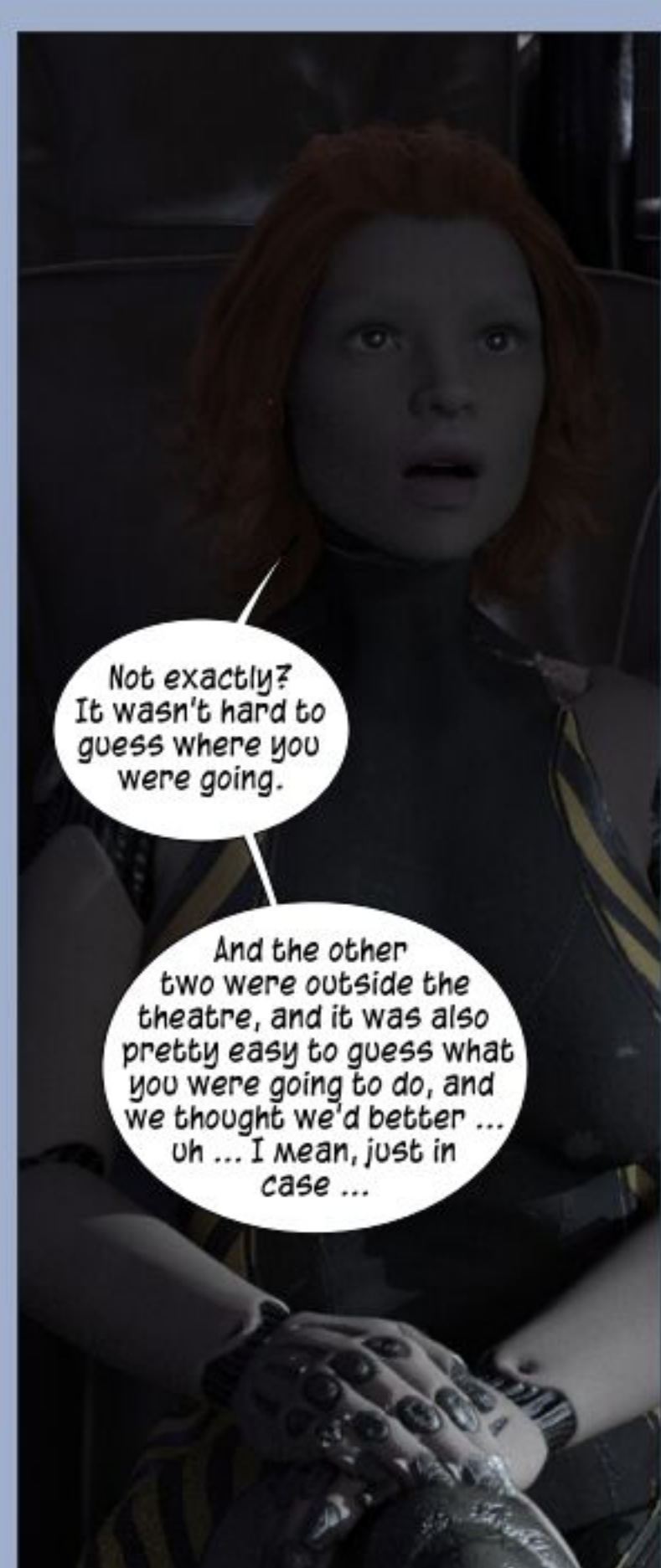
IT ISN'T
FUNNY.

We should have gone into
the booth and recorded it.
For posterity.



No, don't you go anywhere.

Arin-A ... Did you follow me?



Not exactly? It wasn't hard to guess where you were going.

And the other two were outside the theatre, and it was also pretty easy to guess what you were going to do, and we thought we'd better ... uh ... I mean, just in case ...



Just in case what??

Just in case I decided to sit on it? You really thought there was a chance I'd do nothing about two murders?

Well, I-- You shouldn't believe everything Beth says, you know. Just because she's got a persecution complex doesn't mean you have to as well.

HEY!



More like we wanted to see what you were going to do.

Yes, isn't that an interesting question? We don't have a prison.

Sending her away Peels ... inadequate ... and killing her ... well ...

... I just don't see how you Pix murder with more murder.

But is that what you want? Are you calling for her head? Even though I'm the one who'll have to take it?

What do you think I should do?

FOUR DAYS LATER.



-- sigh --



Come on, it's not that bad. It's over and you did the right thing.

Except maybe it's not and maybe I didn't.



You don't really buy Shilo's theory of how it's going to play out ...

I don't. But other people do. And if enough people do, then it becomes very hard to beat.

I had to reveal Shilo's thinking in order to expose her. But when I did, I also spread the poison around. There's somebody in Coldpoint right now who's thinking, "Yeah, that makes a lot of sense." Most of the rich people here probably already do.

I wish I could throw all of them out. And even then we'd just be pushing the problem out of sight. Who knows what damage Shilo will do now, where we can't see her do it?



What really bothers me is that we got nothing positive from this at all. Two people sent away who'll hate us forever, two deaths, a lot of bad information ... and no good done whatsoever.

You might be wrong. For all you know, there's some positive change happening right now that you just can't see.

SHANE WELLS HAS BEEN MENTIONED TWICE IN THIS STORY. HE'S THE RICHEST PERSON IN COLDPOINT, AND A MAN OF PECULIAR MOTIVATIONS.



Claire.
Thank you for coming out on such short notice.
You know I'm happy to do anything for the man who pays my bills.



Yes. Well.
As it happens, that's what I needed to talk to you about.
I've decided I will no longer be funding your organization.
Effective immediately.



But ...
We don't have any other-- You're stranding us ...!
I'm aware. I'm sorry.
Why? What brought this on all of a sudden? What did we do?



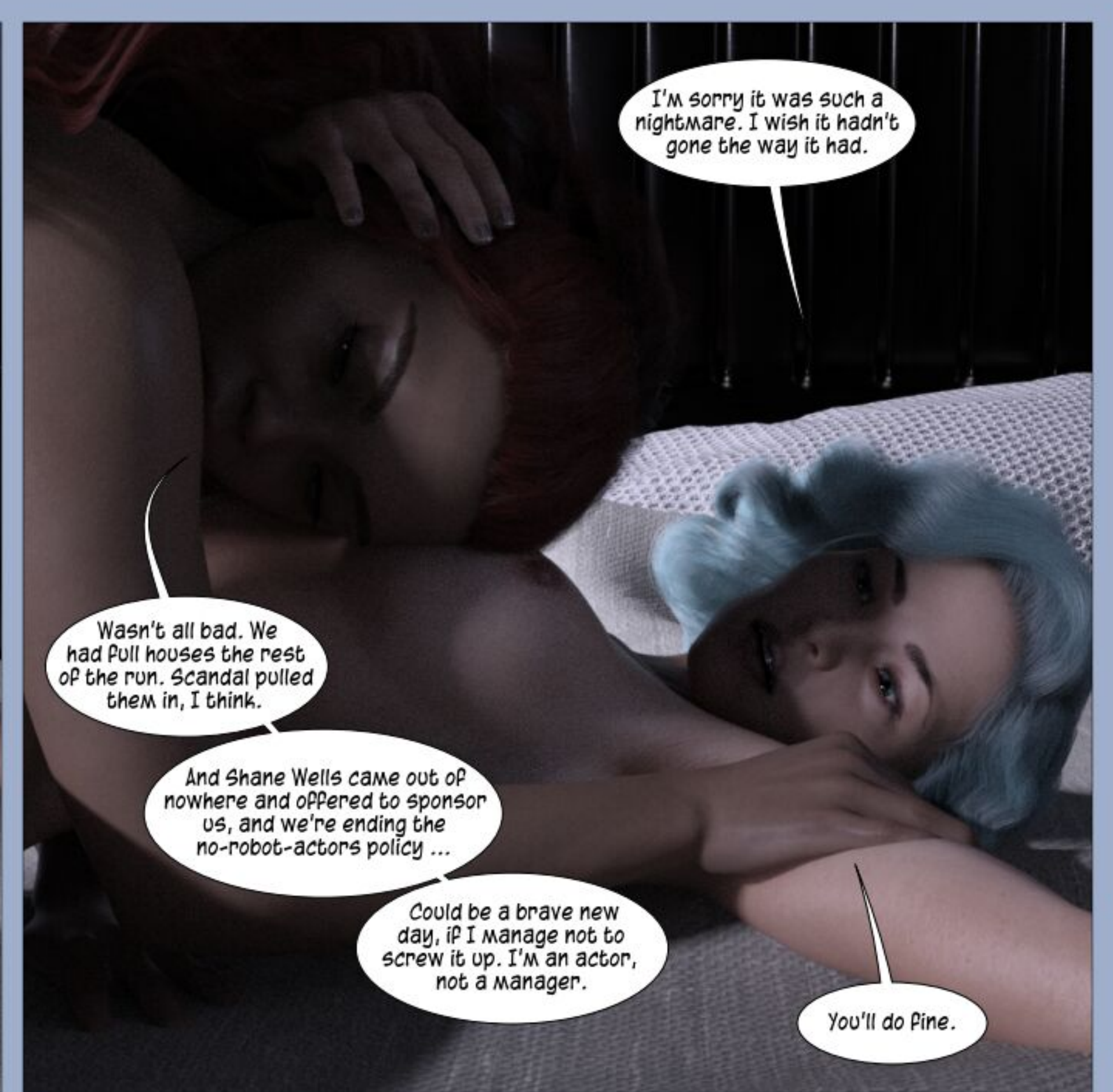
I'm sure you followed the recent events with Laressa Shilo. She was a friend. I was shocked and hurt to hear some of the things she believed. I trust Wendy Barlowe's account, unfortunately.
I'm not saying that your ideas are the same flawed ideas Laressa had. I'm saying that it seems to me that following the beliefs you have does lead inevitably to where she was, sooner or later.
I don't believe that robots are subhuman and deserve to be exploited. In fact, I tend to feel the opposite; I'm very impressed with them, and I hope they will become the norm one day.
I backed you because I don't believe Coldpoint should be entirely robots at this time. But I see now where you'd like it to end up, and probably I should have seen sooner.



If you think I'm giving up, Mr. Wells, you're mistaken.
Oh, no, I know you too well to think you'll give up.
Though I do wonder if perhaps you should.



--MMM--
You know, I like your shows, and I know how much joy they bring you, and I'd never want to change that ...
... but I do love closing night.
... especially this one.



I'm sorry it was such a nightmare. I wish it hadn't gone the way it had.
Wasn't all bad. We had Pull houses the rest of the run. Scandal pulled them in, I think.
And Shane Wells came out of nowhere and offered to sponsor us, and we're ending the no-robot-actors policy ...
Could be a brave new day, if I manage not to screw it up. I'm an actor, not a manager.
You'll do fine.



Wendy? Would you be ... ah ... that is ...
how would you feel if I ... transferred?
What do you mean, how would I feel? Why would it matter how I feel? It's your choice.
It's just ... the company's policy was the only reason I hadn't, years ago. I can't not act. But now ... I don't want to if it means that you'd ...
Don't be ridiculous! I've already got one robot lover, you think I'd have a problem with two?
You know I'll love you no matter what you are. Though I am a little worried about my ability to keep up, with my frail human physique ...



Pft.
You'll just ...
--MMM--
... just have to work at it. Diligently.
MMAUUh!
... I'll do my best.

END