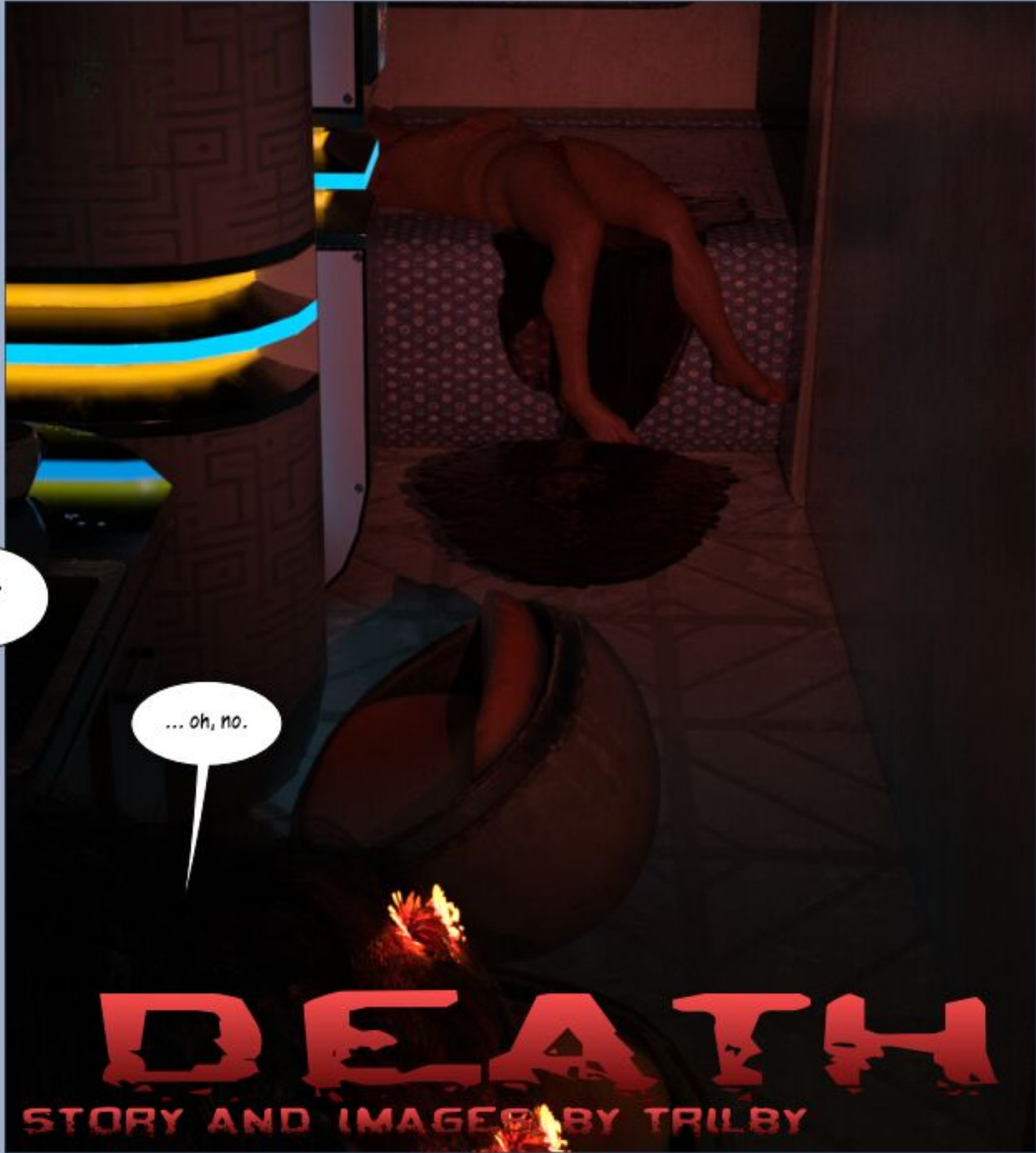
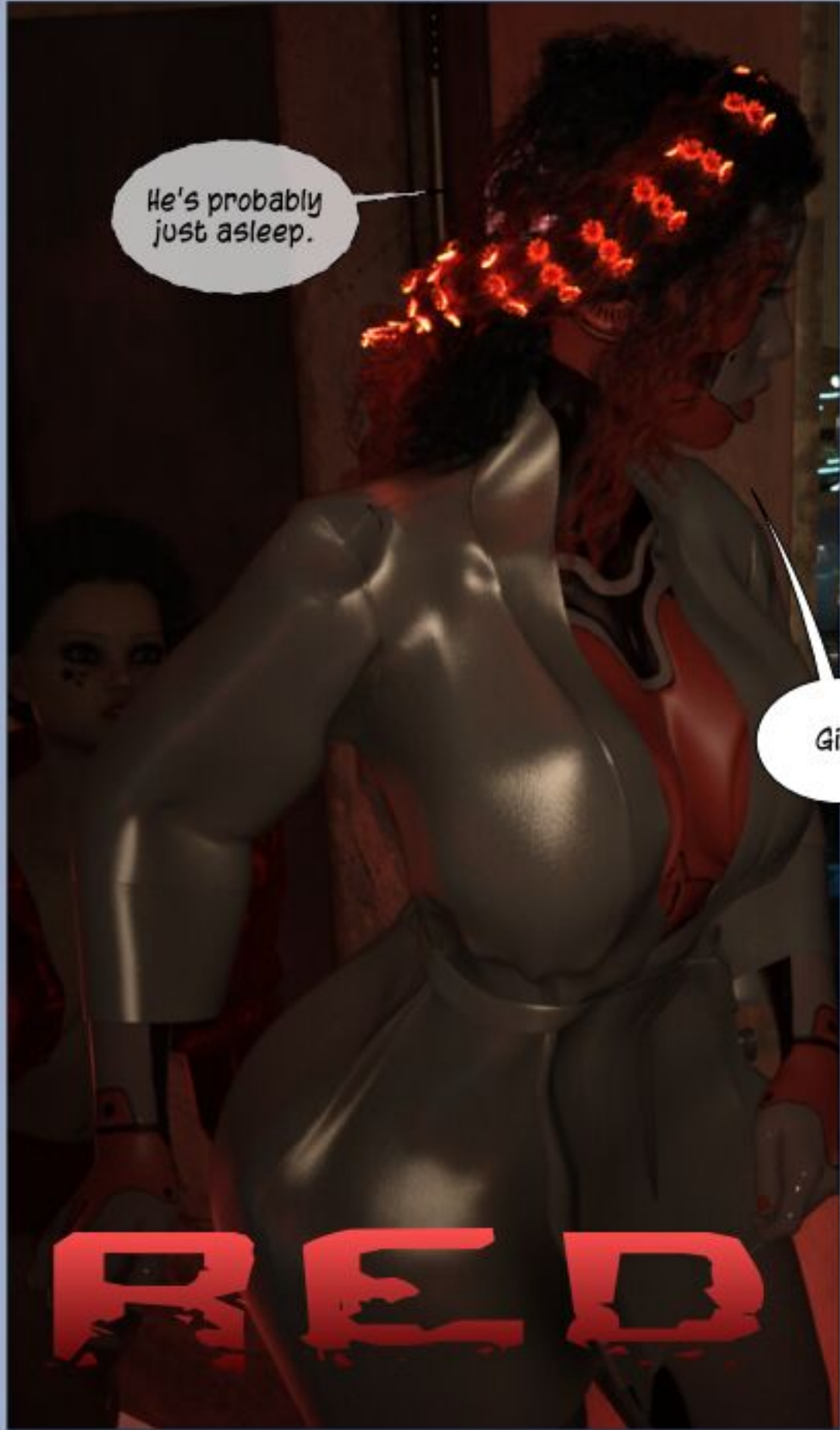




THE RED X CLUB



TO DEAL'S CREDIT, SHE DID CALL GLORIA BANTAM IMMEDIATELY -- AND GLORIA, MY DIRECTOR OF DOMESTIC MATTERS, WAS THE RIGHT PERSON TO CALL -- BUT I WONDER IF SHE'D HAVE DONE THAT IF SHE'D KNOWN GLORIA WAS JUST GOING TO CALL ME. YES, SOME THINGS CAN ONLY BE HANDLED BY THE OPERATIONS MANAGER, AND I'M SURE DEAL KNEW THAT... BUT SHE AND I WERE NOT ON FRIENDLY TERMS JUST THEN.

FILDIE HAD BLED OUT. HE'D BLED OUT BECAUSE HIS PENIS AND TESTICLES HAD BEEN CUT OFF.

THAT WAS AS FAR AS MY LITTLE LACK OF FORENSIC MEDICINE COULD TAKE ME, AND IT WASN'T GOOD ENOUGH. SO FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS WAS TO GET THE BODY TO ZUSY-Q.

THEN I GOT A SURPRISE.

Why, Dr. Quincy?

I NORMALLY WOULDN'T CALL HER THAT, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND, I HADN'T SEEN HER LEAVE MEDICAL IN I WASN'T SURE HOW LONG, SO NOT ONLY WAS IT PUBLIC FORMALITY, BUT THERE WAS A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF "WHO ARE YOU, AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH ZUSY-Q?"

Thought I'd save you some trouble. Let's have a look.

... Be careful not to step in the blood.

Well, that's Par too obvious.

Mmm. He wouldn't just have lay there to bleed to death. Unless he picked a very difficult way to suicide.

And if he was just asleep, I think someone trying to cut his penis off would have woken him up.

I'd hope.

He's been dead about two hours. If I get him back to the lab now, I can probably still find traces of whatever drug's in his system.

EITHER DEAL WASN'T VERY UPSET ABOUT GIL'S DEATH, OR SHE WAS DETERMINED NOT TO GIVE ME THE SATISFACTION OF SEEING HER UPSET ABOUT IT. AT THE TIME I FIGURED IT WAS THE LATTER.

I was with a customer. I was just finishing with him when I saw Sora trying to get Gil to come to the door.

How long were you with the customer?

About an hour? We don't watch the clock, you know. Customers get leeway. Sometimes they want seconds.

And I didn't see Gil before I went to that appointment because I was running late. I got in, and had to rush directly to the customer.

Where were you before that?

None of your business.

Look, Ms. Barlowe, I know you want to ask a bunch of questions, but I have another customer waiting...

No, you don't.

The Red X is closed until further notice.

Tell him to go home.

What?? You're already trying as hard as you can to wreck us and now you want to --

-- uh, what I mean is, we're not in great condition right now, and if you close us entirely we might not --

Ms. Deal, there has been a murder on your premises. If I didn't shut you down until it's investigated, someone would say I wasn't doing my job.

If you want to reopen Paster, then you'll help me get to the bottom of it. Which may include telling me things that are none of my business.

It's late. I'll be back to talk to you tomorrow.

-- sigh --

THE NEXT MORNING BEGAN POORLY. AS I MAY HAVE SAID IN THE PAST: ONE OF THE REASONS I HATE GOING TO MY OFFICE IS THAT PEOPLE LIKE CLAIRE PARSONS CAN FIND ME THERE.

ACTUALLY, I'VE COME TO BELIEVE THERE'S NOBODY ON COLDPOINT LIKE PARSONS.

PEOPLE COME TO COLDPOINT TO TRANSFER INTO ROBOT BODIES, BUT THE CHARTER DOESN'T FORCE THEM TO. PARSONS HAS GRADUALLY DRIFTED FROM "YOU DON'T HAVE TO TRANSFER IF YOU DON'T WANT" TO "THERE SHOULD ALWAYS BE HUMANS ON COLDPOINT" TO "THE ROBOTS ARE A MENACE."

SHE WAS SURELY HERE BECAUSE SHE'D GOTTEN WORD OF FILDIE'S DEATH SOMEHOW. A MURDERED HUMAN WITH AN IMPLICATED ROBOT WAS EXACTLY THE KIND OF THING THAT GOT HER UP IN ARMS. AND I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO DEAL WITH HER JUST THEN.

It's under investigation, and it's too soon to know anything, so go away.

Under investigation? How can it be under investigation? What's to investigate?

She's a child! This is a question of policy!

Wait -- What are you talking about?

The girl! Cusi Setrik. Arrived with her parents as part of the new batch last night.

You've been forbidden to interfere with orientation ...

I didn't! I was watching from the observation level.

You can't let her transfer yet! She's not capable of making an independent judgment --

I agree.

You do?

I mean, uh, that's very refreshing ...

I'd agree even if it weren't moot. Zusy-Q wouldn't put someone in a frame before their brain was fully grown unless it was a dire emergency.

And even though we've never had an underage arrival before, the charter anticipates this. We knew it'd happen sooner or later.

Oh! Well. All right then.

... what were you talking about?

I KNEW THAT HAD TO BE COMING, AS SOON AS I REALIZED I'D BLOWN IT.

NO WAY AROUND IT NOW, THOUGH.

Gil Fildie was found dead last night. He was almost certainly murdered.

One or more robots may be implicated in his death. That's all I've got right now, and I'd like to try to keep it quiet until I know more.

Well, that certainly sounds like a mess.

Good luck with your investigation.

I won't say a word.

... just bizarre. I wanted to ask her if she was feeling well.

I guess even Parsons has decent moments.

So, the good news is, because of the contracts issue, the Red X is operating on a skeleton crew right now.

GLORIA DENIES THAT SHE KNOWS EVERYBODY IN COLDPOINT. MAYBE SO. BUT IN TERMS OF KEEPING TRACK OF WHERE THEY WORK AND LIVE, SHE AND HER DATABASE ARE UNSTOPPABLE.

I figured. Deal said they were on the edge. She also said this was just us trying to close her down.

Well, we are, aren't we?

A WHILE BACK, ARIN-A, OUR LOCAL LABOR AGITATOR, CAME TO GLORIA WITH A COMPLAINT THAT THE RED X PUT ITS SEX WORKERS UNDER EXPLOITATIVE ONE-YEAR CONTRACTS. WE AGREED WITH HER, AND TOLD FILDIE (VIA DEAL) THAT THEY COULDN'T FILL ANY MORE HIRE CONTRACTS UNLESS THEY SWITCHED TO MORE HUMANE ONES. FILDIE (AGAIN, VIA DEAL) SAID THAT IF THEY DID THAT THEY WOULDN'T HAVE ANY STAFF; AS IT WAS, PEOPLE TENDED TO LEAVE AS SOON AS THEIR CONTRACTS WERE UP.

FILDIE HADN'T BUDGED SINCE THEN, AND THE RED X HAD LOST A LOT OF ITS BACK STAFF TO ATTRITION. THIS WAS WHY DEAL WASN'T ON GOOD TERMS WITH ME.

* SEE "UPSTAGED BY DEATH" AND "FRAMED FOR DEATH."

Anyway, there's four you need to talk to, I think.

Teza Deal, obviously. Sora Cheng, who's a human, of all things.

Helix, who's an L, like Teza. She doesn't have another name. Just Helix.

Wait, isn't she --?

Yes. I'm not sure what she's doing there. The fourth one is a D who's registered as "Party Girl." Don't ask me.

Surely they need more than four people ...

They do, but the front-of-house staff -- the bartenders and so on -- they don't have the same contract issues. Some of them have been there for years. Apparently Fildie didn't treat them like dirt.

GLORIA IS A VERY SWEET PERSON, BUT ON THE RARE OCCASIONS WHEN SHE REALLY DOESN'T LIKE SOMEBODY, YOU CAN TELL.

I mean, come back for names if you need to, but I don't think they're as high up the list.

You're probably right.

The real trouble is, I don't much want to talk to any of them.

... I think maybe I'll go check with Zussy-Q first.

Ah!

The body's in a cold locker. I wasn't sure when you'd come. I'll go get it.

Unless you've got something you want to show me, don't bother. I already saw more of it than I wanted.

Did we guess right?

Yes and no.

I didn't find any kind of sedative or anything similar. I did find ecsetamol.

Ecsetamol ... you asked me to ban that, and I did, but I don't remember why.

Because it's dangerous. People were using it as a sex drug ... enhances euphoria and causes mild, and I'm told pleasant, hallucinations.

But the safe dose is tricky to calculate, even for professionals ... depends on your weight, your adrenaline levels, what you last ate ... and if you overdose, usually it's lethal.

... OK, good call on the ban, then.

He might not have overdosed, though. It's hard for me to say how much was in him originally. It could have just made him comatose.

So he could have been out deeply enough that someone could have cut off his dick and not gotten a reaction out of him.

Now the question is, are either of those things by themselves serious enough to hit the mental block?

I think giving someone ecsetamol probably wouldn't count as "harming" them, especially if you didn't think the dose could possibly be fatal ... but cutting off someone's penis, that sure seems like "harm" to me ...

You have reason to aim for a robot here?

PEOPLE ARE GIVEN AN INJUNCTION AGAINST HARMING HUMANS WHEN THEY TRANSFER INTO ROBOT FRAMES. SOMETIMES IT HAS MORE LATITUDE FOR INTERPRETATION THAN I'D LIKE.

Maybe. The problem is -- I'm going to confirm this later -- there are reasons why it almost has to be Teza Deal.

But it's such a stretch ... even if we say that it was two people who didn't know what each other was doing ... the one who comes in and cuts it off doesn't know how out of it he is ... she thinks he'll get up and find help, she doesn't realize he'll lie there and die ... No, no, it's still too convoluted.

For what it's worth, whether a robot could do the excision would also depend on how they felt about the victim. Much easier to overcome the block if they hated him, or were enraged by him.

Yes, and that's the other thing.

As far as I know, Deal's the only person who liked Fildie. They'd been together for years.

I mean, things do change, but she was defending him to me just a couple of months ago ... I'm having trouble imagining it going sour enough for her to do that.

Then why try so hard to break Occam's razor? Assume a human cut off his penis. Whether that's what killed him or not, it simplifies the situation greatly.

All right, but why? The only person who has obvious means and motives is also the person who loved him ... and she has the damned mental block.

... You know, I was a lot surer of my ground before I learned just how shaky the mental block really is.

Hell, for all I know you're not even bothering to give new transfers the mental block. Who'd know, unless they did something like this?

You've always said it was just there to placate paranoid humans. What if you only told them it was there?

I'd be incredibly annoyed by that suggestion if I didn't know it was just you being frustrated at having to deal with your sixth murder in a year.

... It's been more than a year.

And one of them was only nearly a murder.

But yes.

I keep wondering if we're at some kind of inflection point ... or maybe Parsons and Beth and that lot have stirred up trouble to critical levels ...

It may just be a function of population. Perhaps we were so trouble-free for years simply because there were so few of us.

Though I recognize that's not a much more reassuring answer.

No, especially not with our next big push coming soon ... we're probably going to grow by a third, you know that.

I suppose we'll weather it. Somehow.

By the way, how's Treac coming along?

She's fine. I'm supposed to be working on her frame right now.

You didn't need to talk to her, did you?

No, no. Just checking.

TREAC GLADSTONE, ONE OF MY TWO SIGNIFICANT OTHERS, HAD FINALLY BEGUN HER TRANSFER FOUR DAYS AGO.



You're getting better. I didn't have to chase after you this time.

MENICA SCOTT, MY HEAD OF ENGINEERING. MIN HAS NAGGED ME TO TAKE HER ON SUSPECT INTERVIEWS EVER SINCE ONE TRIED TO THROW ME OFF A BALCONY.

I called you.

That's what I mean!

Well, we might be dealing with a robot who has a weakened mental block.

I mean, I didn't think it was worth bringing sidearms -- not yet, anyway -- but if somebody gets a little pushy, I may want another robot around to push back.



You know, if we keep having this kind of thing regularly, you may need to consider getting some actual peace officers.

I was just talking about that with Zusy-Q.

I really hate the idea, though.



So nobody but Fildie and Deal could get in there?

"Deal" ... that sounds so strange. If I ever called her "Ms. Deal" she'd think I'd lost my mind. Now, Mr. Fildie, if I called him "Gil" he'd probably have thrown a fit ...

Anyway, uh ... yes. Mr. Fildie liked his private quarters to be private. I didn't even really want to buzz, because I knew he'd explode, but it was important.

What exactly was the problem?

Um. It doesn't really have anything to do with this ...

Probably not, but you never know. Is there a reason you don't want to tell me?

I'D ONLY GOTTEN A BRIEF GLIMPSE OF SORACHENE THE PREVIOUS NIGHT. NOW THAT I COULD GET A GOOD LOOK AT HER, I REALIZED SHE WASN'T AS YOUNG AS SHE'D SEEMED -- WHICH, FRANKLY, WAS A RELIEF.

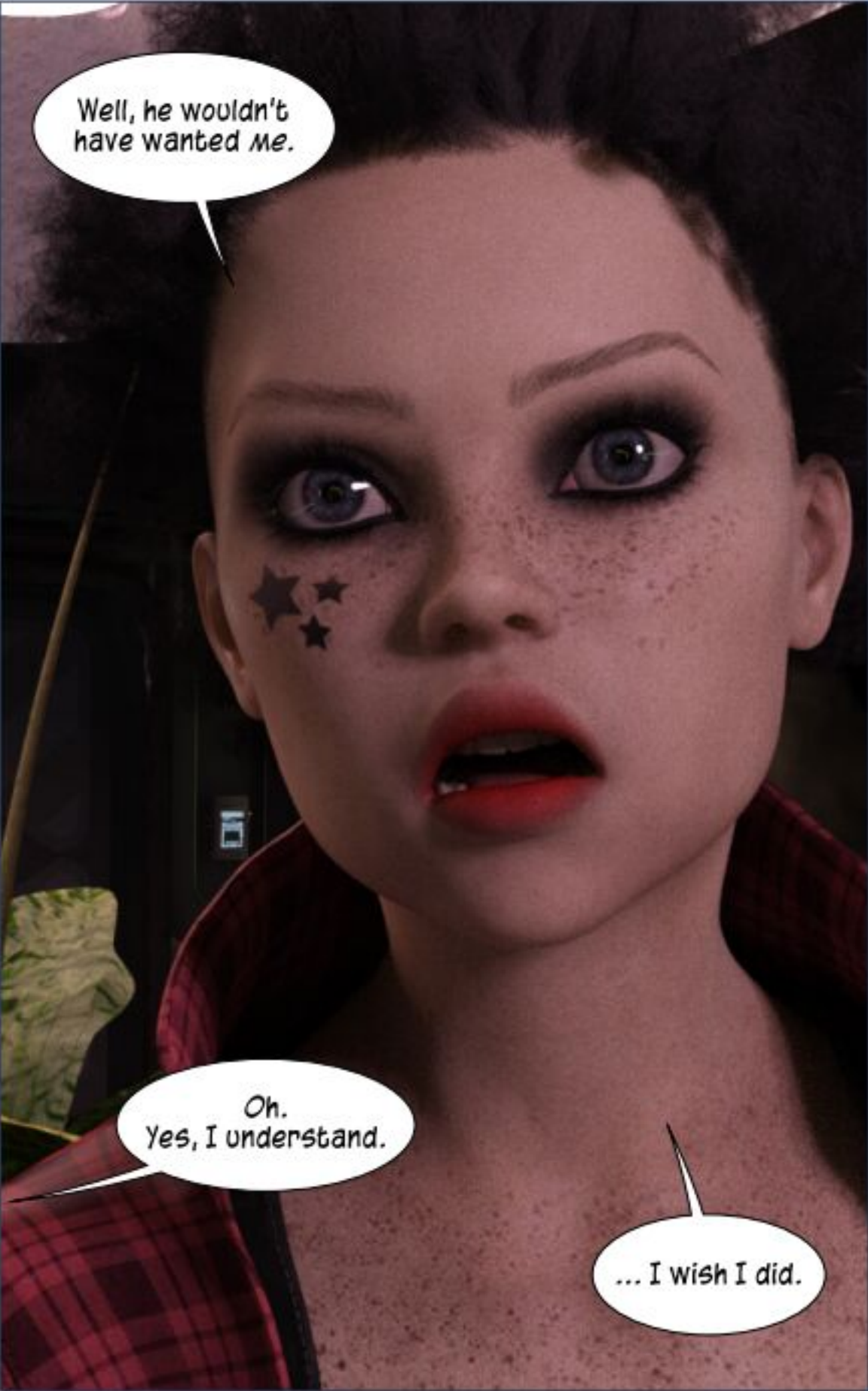


No, it's just ... Teza might not be happy I told you. She already thinks you're --

... We had a customer come in and we didn't have anybody to see him. PG and Helix were booked back to back, all night, and Teza came in and went right to an appointment without having time to say hello ...

We don't have enough people right now, and he was being pushy with the concierge about it. I sure wasn't going to be the one to have an argument with him. That's what managers are for.

You say nobody was available ... but it sounds like you were ...



Well, he wouldn't have wanted me.

Oh. Yes, I understand.

... I wish I did.



... see, I was born Patricia, and everybody called me Patty, but one time somebody messed up and wrote it as 'Party' and it just kind of stuck!

So I've been Party Girl ever since. Isn't that wild?

It's something, for sure.

So you didn't see anything last night? Nothing unexpected or unusual?

Oh, no, I was with customers all night! I had a group for a while. I was with them for three hours. I think that might be my new record!



You can't have been with customers all night ...

Just about! I barely had enough time to clean up between them. I had my first customer as soon as we opened, and my last was ... uh ... Well, it was real late, I know that, because you'd already closed us and Teza was waiting to lock up.

Popular.

We don't have enough people! That's not a secret, I don't think? If that's a secret, don't say I told you.

There's only the three of us. Well, four, but --



Hey! If Mr. Fildie's dead does that mean we can get more people now?

You don't have much of a filter, do you?

I don't know what that means. But I know it's not a lot of fun working here right now. It used to be, but there's too much for us! We need help!

Hmm. So did you kill Fildie so this place could be fun again, maybe?

Oh, no! I could never do something like that. Besides, it isn't allowed, is it? Don't we have some kind of brain thing?



I was with customers all night. Non-stop. You may have noticed we're somewhere well beyond short-staffed.

I'm told you're partly to blame for that.

Don't believe everything Deal tells you. I'm not the one who wrote those horrible contracts.

Speaking of which, Helix, I'm a little surprised you signed on for one.

Why?

Well ... you're probably the only sex worker in Coldpoint who's famous, or something like it.

I mean, even I've heard of you, and I'm often the last person to know about anything --

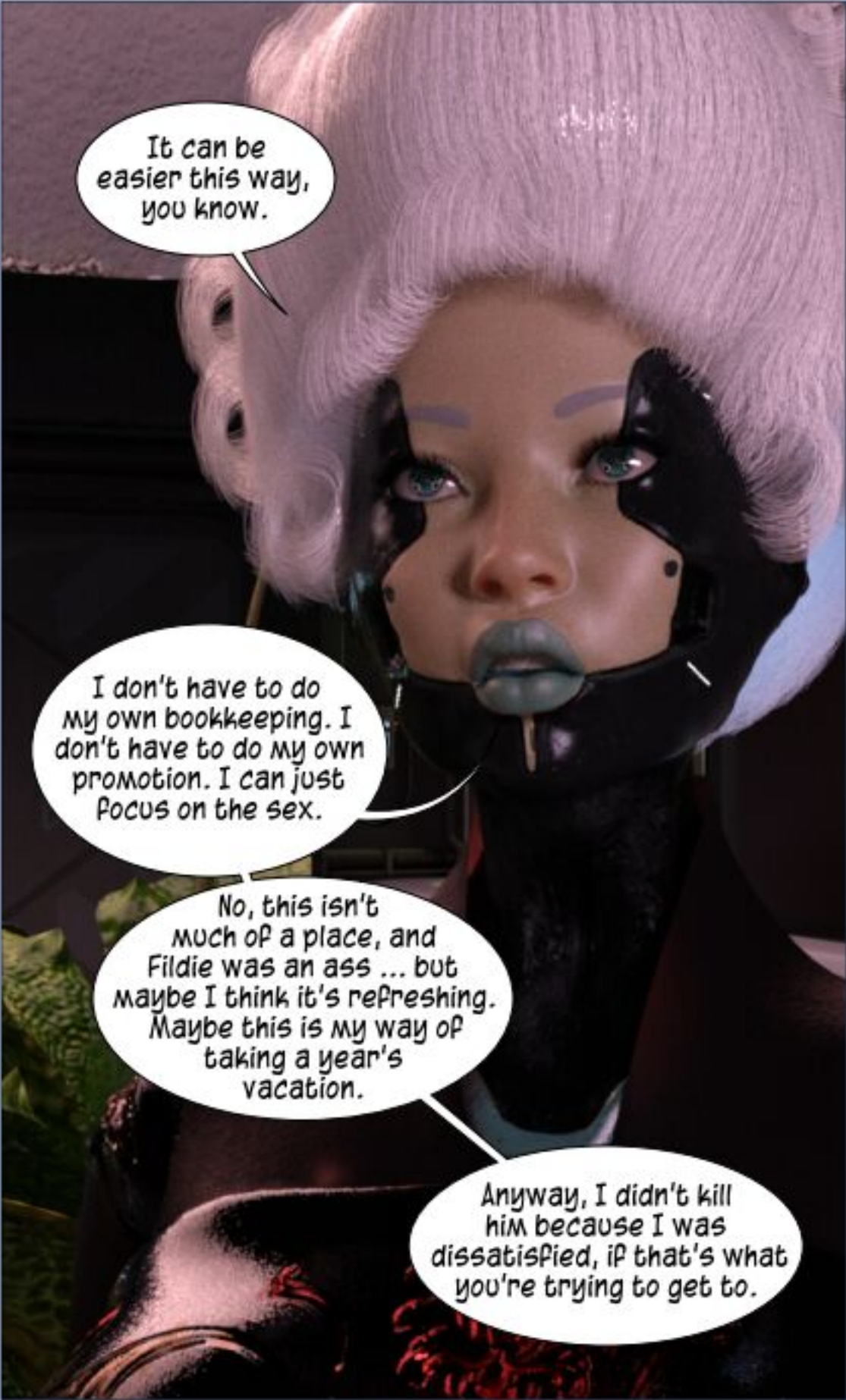


You think I'm slumming.

I wouldn't put it like that. But it does seem like you were doing very well on your own, so I'm not sure why you'd want to join a house.

Unless you had some other incentive I'm not seeing.

I resent your implication.



It can be easier this way, you know.

I don't have to do my own bookkeeping. I don't have to do my own promotion. I can just focus on the sex.

No, this isn't much of a place, and Fildie was an ass ... but maybe I think it's refreshing. Maybe this is my way of taking a year's vacation.

Anyway, I didn't kill him because I was dissatisfied, if that's what you're trying to get to.



Oh, here we go. The part where you try to get me to tell you I killed Gil.

It'd really make your life simpler if I just rolled over for you, huh? Then you could just shut me and the Red X down and not even bother with the shitty excuses you've been using so far.

Your bad contracts aren't just an "excuse," Ms. Deal ... We didn't cut you off out of malice, you know --

Like hell you didn't. And my name's Teza. Even to you.

Why don't you go ask Arin-A if she did it? She's been looking for a way to close this place for ages.



Could Arin-A, or any other outsider for that matter, get into these back rooms without your concierge seeing her and stopping her?

... no.

Do you find any of the front staff to be a likely suspect for any reason?

No, but --

Could anyone get into Fildie's quarters besides you and him?

He could have let somebody in ...

Or you could have.

Damn it, I didn't kill him!

OK. Let's say you didn't. Tell me about these other three.



I don't know if I want to do that where --

They can't hear us. I sent them into the front and told them to stay there.

Fine.

They're a pain in the ass.

Gil's hiring is a complete disaster. Always has been, but it seems like he got worse after people started staying away because of the contracts. I think he got desperate. These are the last three, and they're just ...

Party Girl's sloppy. She loves the work, but she doesn't bother to do it well. Enthusiasm but no talent. I'd fire her, but I need everybody I can get.

Helix has too much talent. I don't know what she's doing here -- she was making a lot more money on her own -- so I don't know if I can depend on her. If it weren't for the contract --



And Chene?

Sora definitely shouldn't be here. I don't know what Gil was thinking.

I like her, OK? She's a good kid. She might even be good at sex. But I don't know, and I likely never will. She's dead weight.

None of this seems like it has much to do with possible motives for murder.

Well, what do you want me to tell you? I don't know. I'm sure they didn't like Gil. But a lot of people didn't.

Mhm. Where were you before you got here last night?

That's still none of your business.



Teza, I'm investigating a murder.

If you don't tell me, then I might have to --

Have to what?

What else can you possibly do to me?

Kick me out of Coldpoint? Toss me in a reclaim?

You're going to do whatever it is you're going to do anyway.

I didn't kill Gil, and I'm not telling you where I was last night ... and I don't want to talk to you anymore, so you can just take your investigation out of here.

THERE DIDN'T SEEM TO BE A POINT IN PUSHING HER ANY FURTHER JUST THEN, SO I COOPERATED. BUT I KNEW I'D HAVE TO TRY AGAIN LATER. SO DID SHE.



There was something back there I didn't pick up.

When Chene said "he wouldn't have wanted me," and then what Teza said later --

Oh. I guess you wouldn't have any reason to know. I didn't know, and I probably should have. Not until I started spending time with Byla. She's told me all kinds of things about the sex business here.

Our sex workers are almost all robots. Their customers are always human.

There are very few exceptions, apparently. And when there are, like Chene, they don't do very well.



That ... seems strange.

Not really.

The robots wouldn't see a point in paying anyone for sex. I'm sure by now you've seen how the robots find sex with other robots ...

"Wanna go have sex?" "Yeah, sure."

Exactly. And when they have sex with humans on their own time, it's with friends and lovers ... y'know, not business.

Why the humans don't generally pay other humans for sex ... that's more complicated. Some of them are like "I can get that at home for free if I want it." You know -- if they're paying, they want something they think is more exciting. Or interesting. I don't know. But the robots are the value-added for them.

And some of them just have weird ideas about the status of robots and the status of sex work, and those bounce off each other in an unpleasant way.



What, you mean like, "this is beneath me?"

Pretty much. They think sex work is demeaning, and they think demeaning jobs are what the robots do.

Some of these people make me want to ...

You've been transferred for a while now. Have you started getting any of the nastiness?

I don't think I get out enough to notice. Besides, I'm pretty high up the ladder. I mean, they'd be scared to give me grief to my face.

And if they aren't scared of me, they're sure scared of you.

You'd think.

They probably would say my job's a "robot job." I mean, I get my hands dirty a lot.

I wonder what they think is a "human job."

Nothing.



Sorry, that was mean.

I just ... There's a group of humans here that seem to think the goal is to sit around and let the robots wait on them hand and foot, and sometimes I feel like I'm being far too tolerant of them.

I worry that people think I'm giving implicit approval, just because I haven't had the time or energy to throw all their asses out.

... I've got some other things I need to do. I'll see you later, Min.

I'll call you if I think I'm going into anything risky.



THE BACK OF MY MIND THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE BEST TO HAVE A LITTLE PRECAUTIONARY TALK WITH THE SETRIK FAMILY.

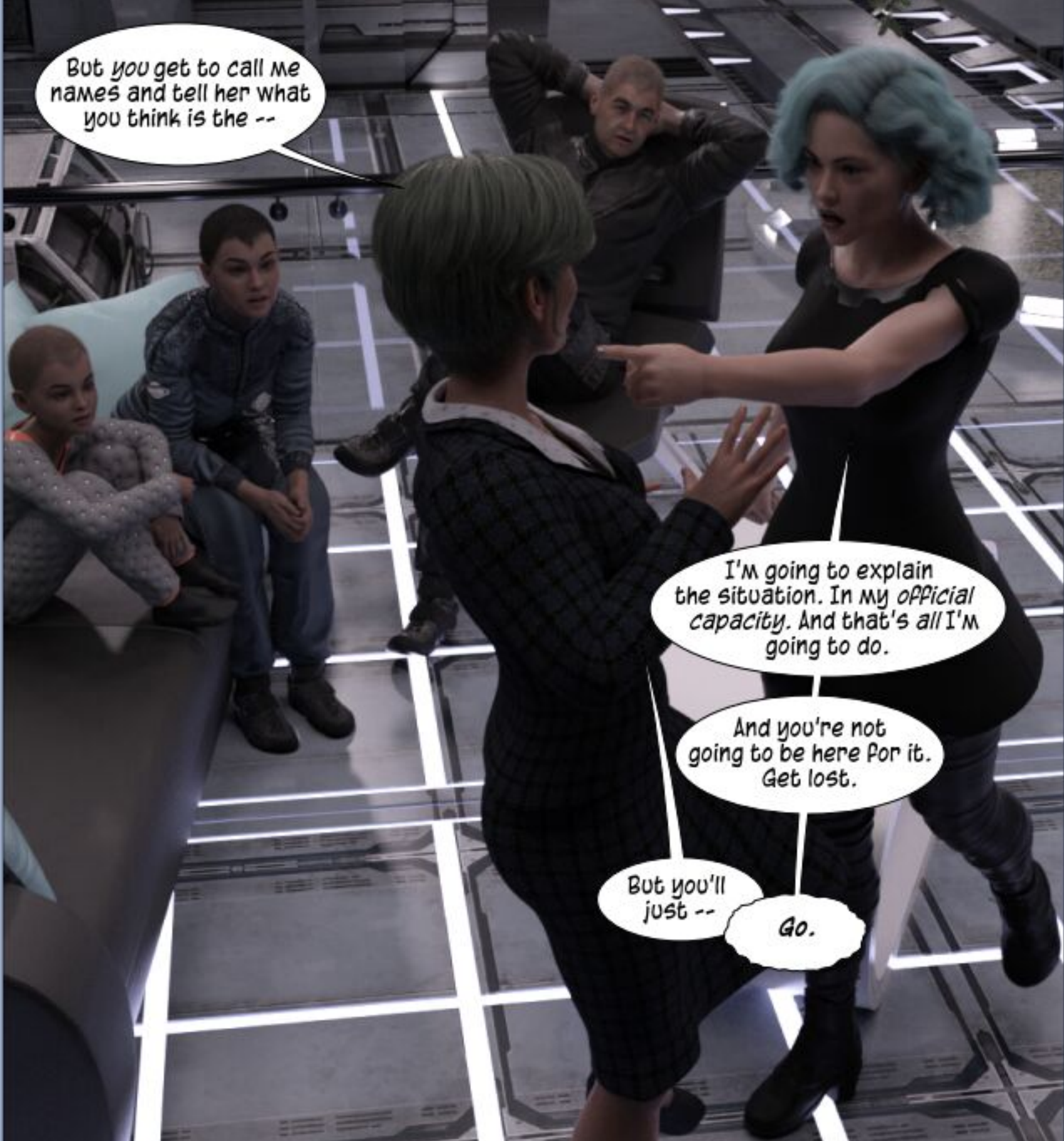


PARSONS!!

yiii!

When we talked about policy this morning, that *didn't* mean you get to slide in and peddle your garbage!

I don't get to influence her, you don't get to influence her ... *nobody* does. We *all* leave her alone. Do you understand?



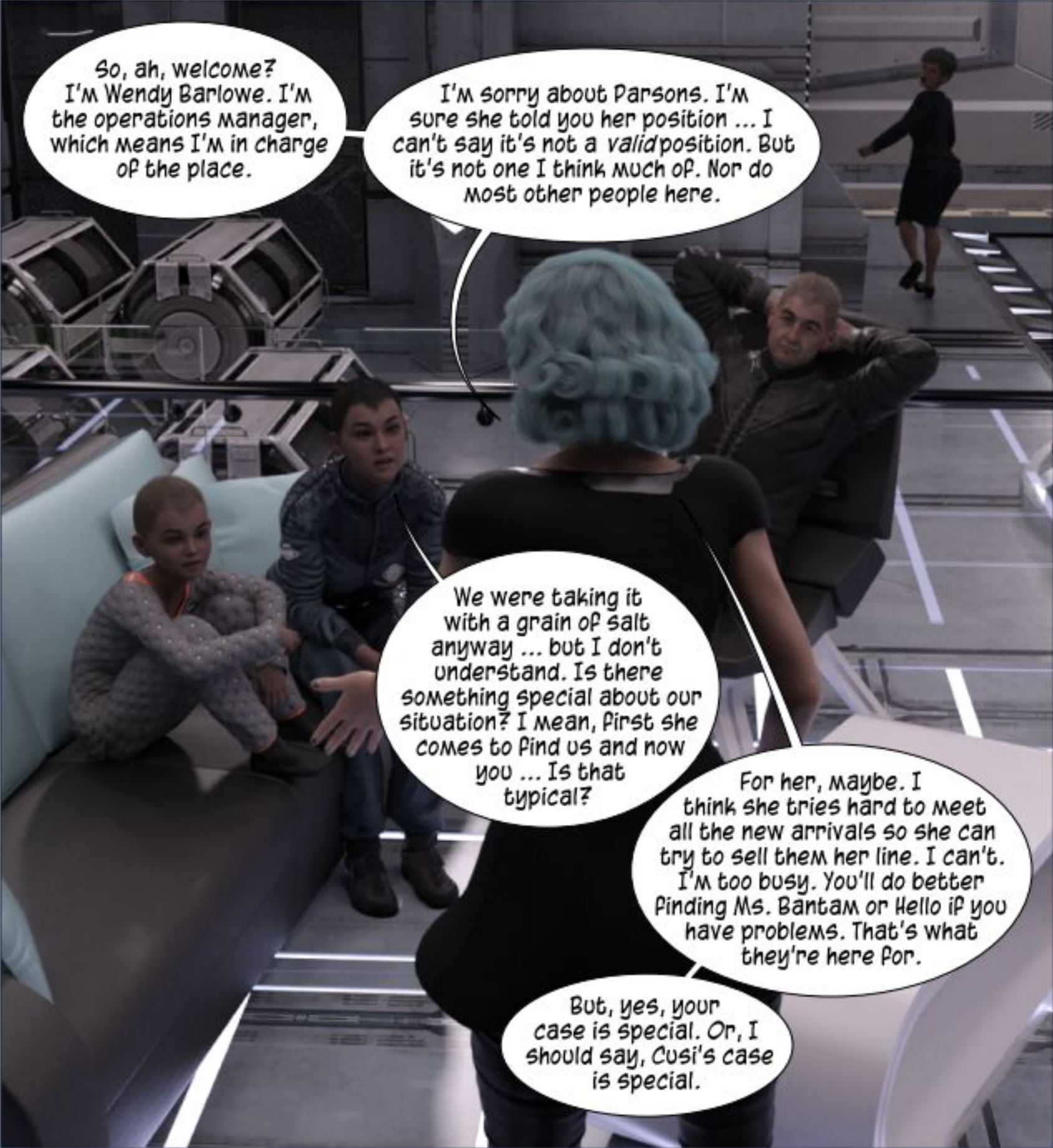
But you get to call me names and tell her what you think is the --

I'm going to explain the situation. In my *official* capacity. And that's *all* I'm going to do.

And you're not going to be here for it. Get lost.

But you'll just --

Go.



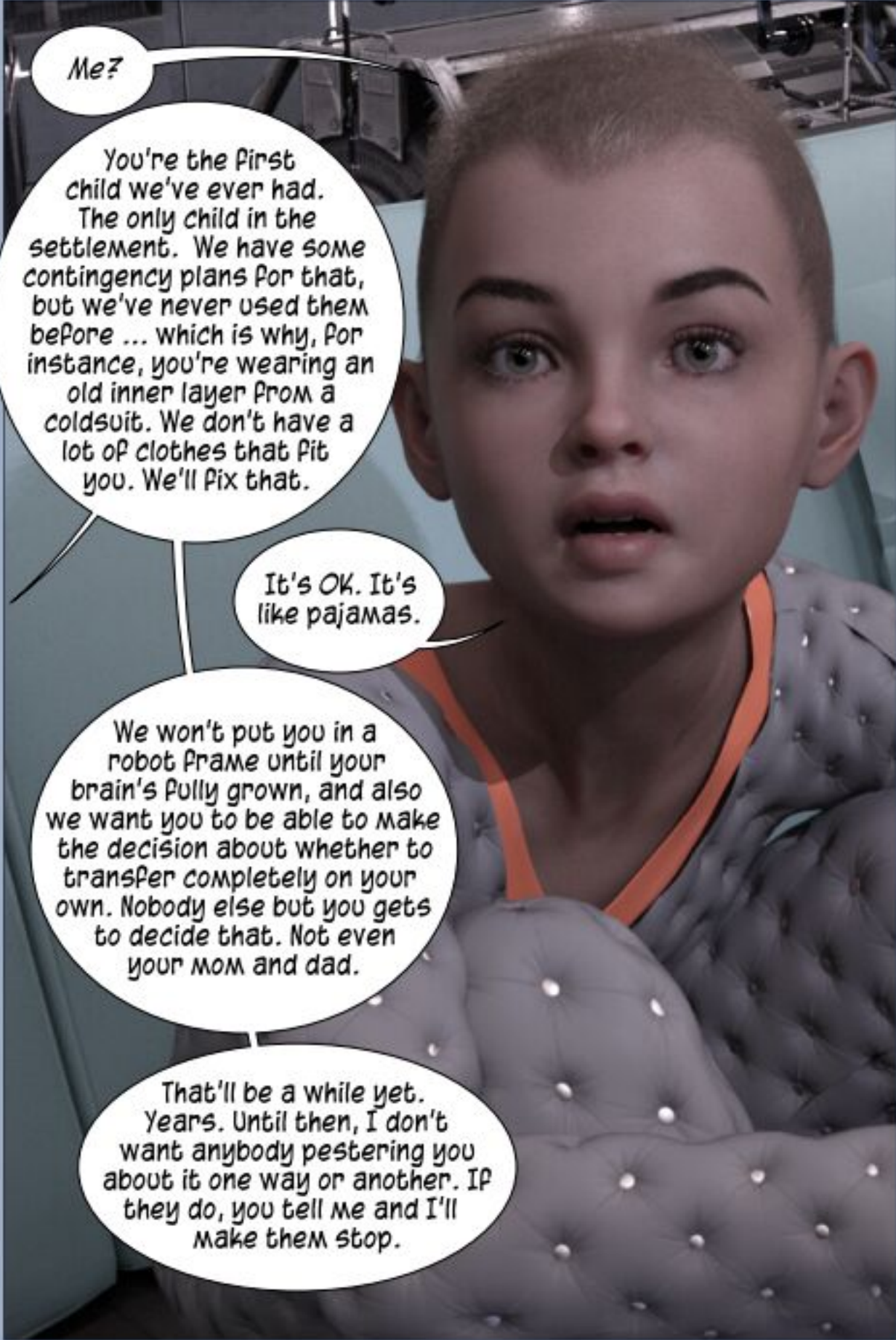
So, ah, welcome? I'm Wendy Barlowe. I'm the operations manager, which means I'm in charge of the place.

I'm sorry about Parsons. I'm sure she told you her position ... I can't say it's not a *valid* position. But it's not one I think much of. Nor do most other people here.

We were taking it with a grain of salt anyway ... but I don't understand. Is there something special about our situation? I mean, first she comes to find us and now you ... Is that typical?

For her, maybe. I think she tries hard to meet all the new arrivals so she can try to sell them her line. I can't. I'm too busy. You'll do better finding Ms. Bantam or Hello if you have problems. That's what they're here for.

But, yes, your case is special. Or, I should say, Cusi's case is special.



Me?

You're the first child we've ever had. The only child in the settlement. We have some contingency plans for that, but we've never used them before ... which is why, for instance, you're wearing an old inner layer from a coldsuit. We don't have a lot of clothes that fit you. We'll fix that.

It's OK. It's like pajamas.

We won't put you in a robot frame until your brain's fully grown, and also we want you to be able to make the decision about whether to transfer completely on your own. Nobody else but you gets to decide that. Not even your mom and dad.

That'll be a while yet. Years. Until then, I don't want anybody pestering you about it one way or another. If they do, you tell me and I'll make them stop.



Are you going to want us to not transfer until she's of age?

Oh, no, I don't see any reason for that. You both can transfer whenever you want.

You might not want to both do it at the same time, so that one of you is around to parent.

But if you'd rather go together -- a lot of couples do -- then talk to Ms. Bantam and she'll arrange someone for Cusi to stay with while you do.



THIS IS SILE PERLIT.

HE HAD ARRIVED A FEW MONTHS AGO. AT THE TIME OF THESE EVENTS, HE WASN'T ON MY RADAR IN ANY WAY, OR ON ANYONE ELSE'S. IF I'D ASKED GLORIA TO LOOK HIM UP, ALL SHE'D HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TELL ME WAS THAT HE HADN'T YET REGISTERED AN OCCUPATION, HADN'T APPLIED TO MOVE OUT OF TEMPORARY HOUSING, AND APPARENTLY WASN'T IN ANY HURRY TO TRANSFER.

THIS IS ONIKA. I KNEW HER IN A VAGUE WAY. SHE'D BEEN ONE OF THE MEMBERS OF THE SPECIALTY GROUP OF SEX WORKERS. BYLA HAD BEEN RUNNING WHEN WE FIRST MET.



Don't be shy, now. Take that shirt off! I want to see what the rest of you looks like.

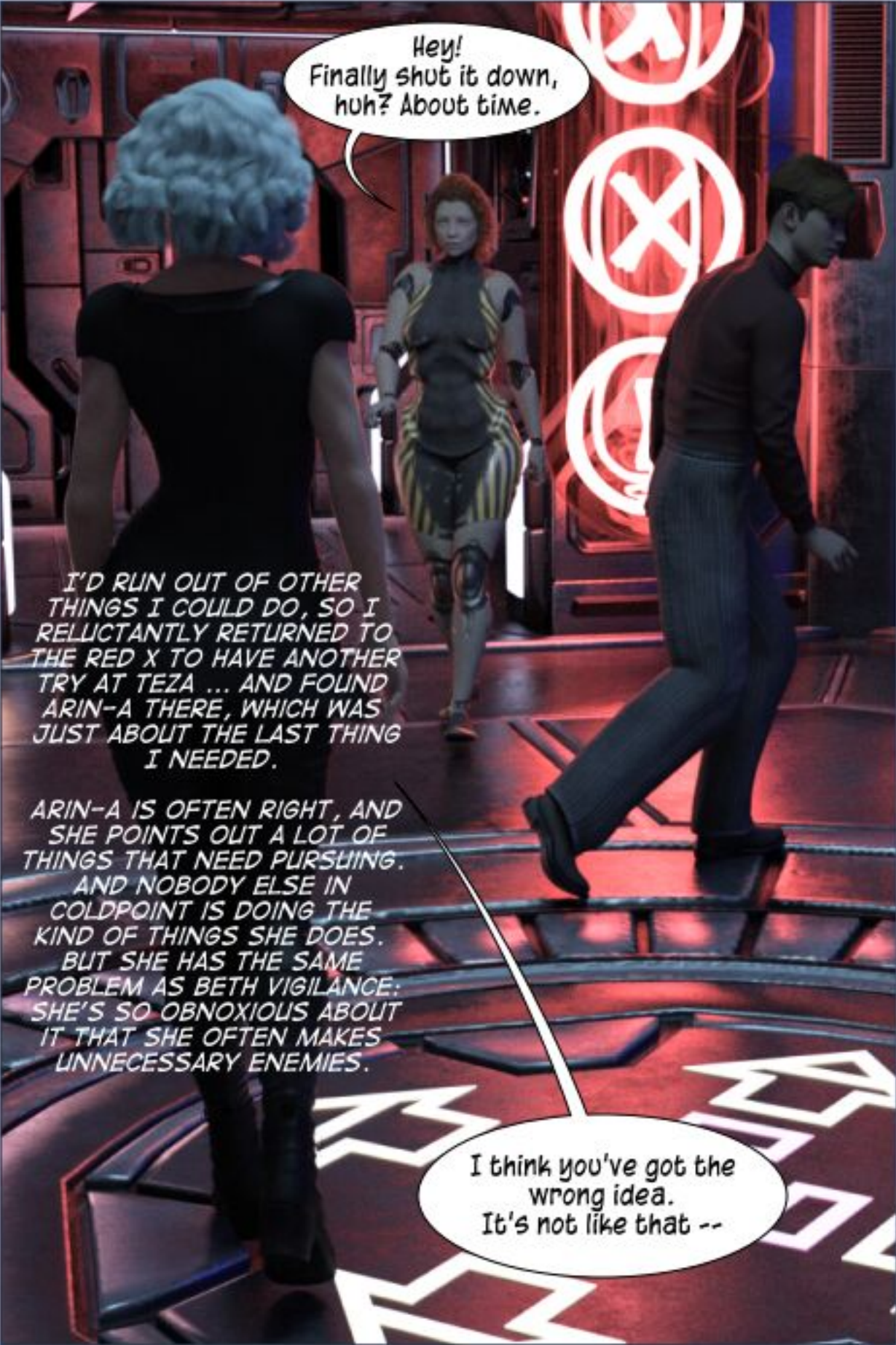
Mm-hm.

I haven't -- uh ... I ...

urhhhhh



Let's just assume it would have been fun.



I'D RUN OUT OF OTHER THINGS I COULD DO, SO I RELUCTANTLY RETURNED TO THE RED X TO HAVE ANOTHER TRY AT TEZA ... AND FOUND ARIN-A THERE, WHICH WAS JUST ABOUT THE LAST THING I NEEDED.

ARIN-A IS OFTEN RIGHT, AND SHE POINTS OUT A LOT OF THINGS THAT NEED PURSUING. AND NOBODY ELSE IN COLDPOINT IS DOING THE KIND OF THINGS SHE DOES. BUT SHE HAS THE SAME PROBLEM AS BETH VIGILANCE: SHE'S SO OBNOXIOUS ABOUT IT THAT SHE OFTEN MAKES UNNECESSARY ENEMIES.

I think you've got the wrong idea. It's not like that --



Come around to do a victory lap, you dry plastic cunt?

Is this how you get your jollies?

You hate sex, so I guess the only way you can get off is to fuck up everybody else's life, huh?

Get your cheap thrills from ruining people. Why the fuck didn't you just pick an M frame and go off and be a sterile stick-ass like them?

Or if that's not it, then what is your fucking problem?



I don't hate sex!

I hate seeing robots being exploited. And the problem I have with you isn't the sex, it's that you're helping exploit them! You're a robot exploiting other robots!

If you had any conscience at all, you'd be ashamed to show your face!

Oh, OK. So I'm not just a slut, I don't have a conscience?

You know what? I think you need to be knocked through a couple of walls. Maybe that'll recalibrate your fucked-up brain!



That's enough, both of you!

Teza, I've said before and will say again: the problem isn't the sex work, it's your contracts.

You can run a house without exploiting your workers. Others do.

Arin-A, I have not closed the Red X permanently, so don't you go telling anybody I have.

This closure is temporary and circumstantial. I'm sure they'll be open again very soon.



Sure.

Don't patronize me.



You know, I would really appreciate it if you didn't antagonize her. Not ever, but especially not right now.

I am investigating a death, I need her cooperation, and I don't need her even more defensive than she already was.

A death, huh?



You sure you didn't mean to say a murder?

ISADORA BRASS, COLDPOINT'S ONLY ROVING REPORTER. SOMETIMES ANNOYING, BUT BASICALLY DECENT.

Murders involve death. It's definitional.

Do you have some reason to believe there's been a murder? Not withholding information, I hope, Ms. Brass?



I have too much trouble getting information from you to ever withhold any.

I think it's a murder, or at the very least a suspicious death, because you closed the club. If Fildie had died in his bed of clogged arteries you wouldn't have bothered.

Well, if it is a murder, then I'm going to need you to not do or say anything that might prejudice the investigation. You'll have to wait for the details.

Though ... uh ...



OK, Arin-A left. Good.

Look, there's some weirdness about two of the Red X back staff. Why they're there, the circumstances under which they were hired ... I'm looking for more information. I, uh, need the dirt.

I can guess why you didn't want Arin-A hearing that.



I don't have what you need, though.

You know who probably does.

Yeah. -- sigh -- I was hoping to avoid her.

Well, at least it's late enough in the day that she'll be awake.

MIMI LANIER RUNS THE "ALL NIGHT" CLUB AND MOONLIGHTS AS AN INFORMATION BROKER. WE DON'T GET ALONG.



Mimi! Don't you need to get up?

Mmgh



Mmh ... come back to bed ...

Can't. Got things to do.

And I'm thinking you do too, so shake tail --



Was that the club door?

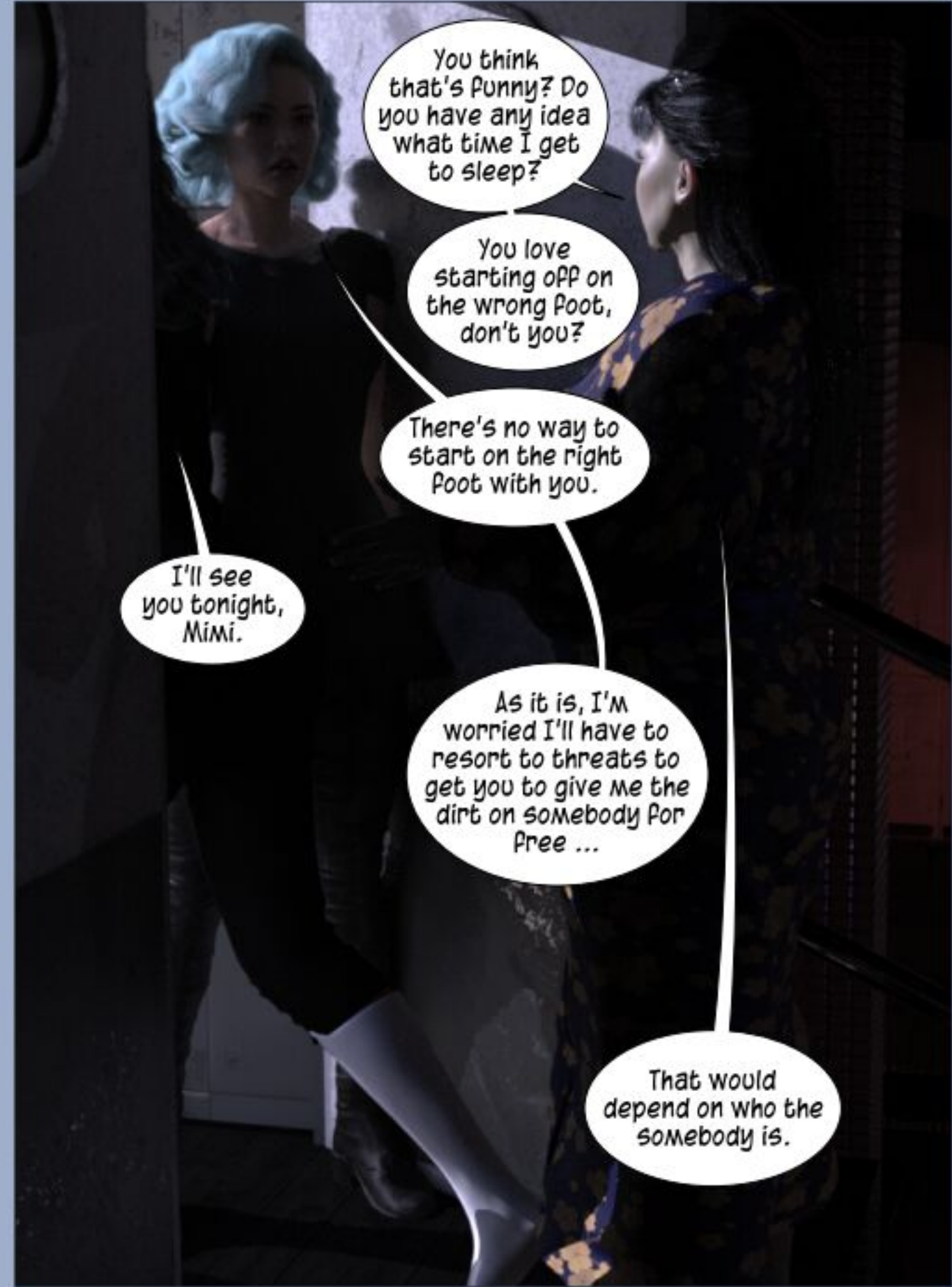
... Yes. And we don't open for hours.

I'll deal with it. I was going down anyway.

No, wait. Let me throw something on, and I'll go down too.

If it's legit business, they'll want to talk to me anyway, not you.

And if it's not, then I want to tell them to fuck off in person.



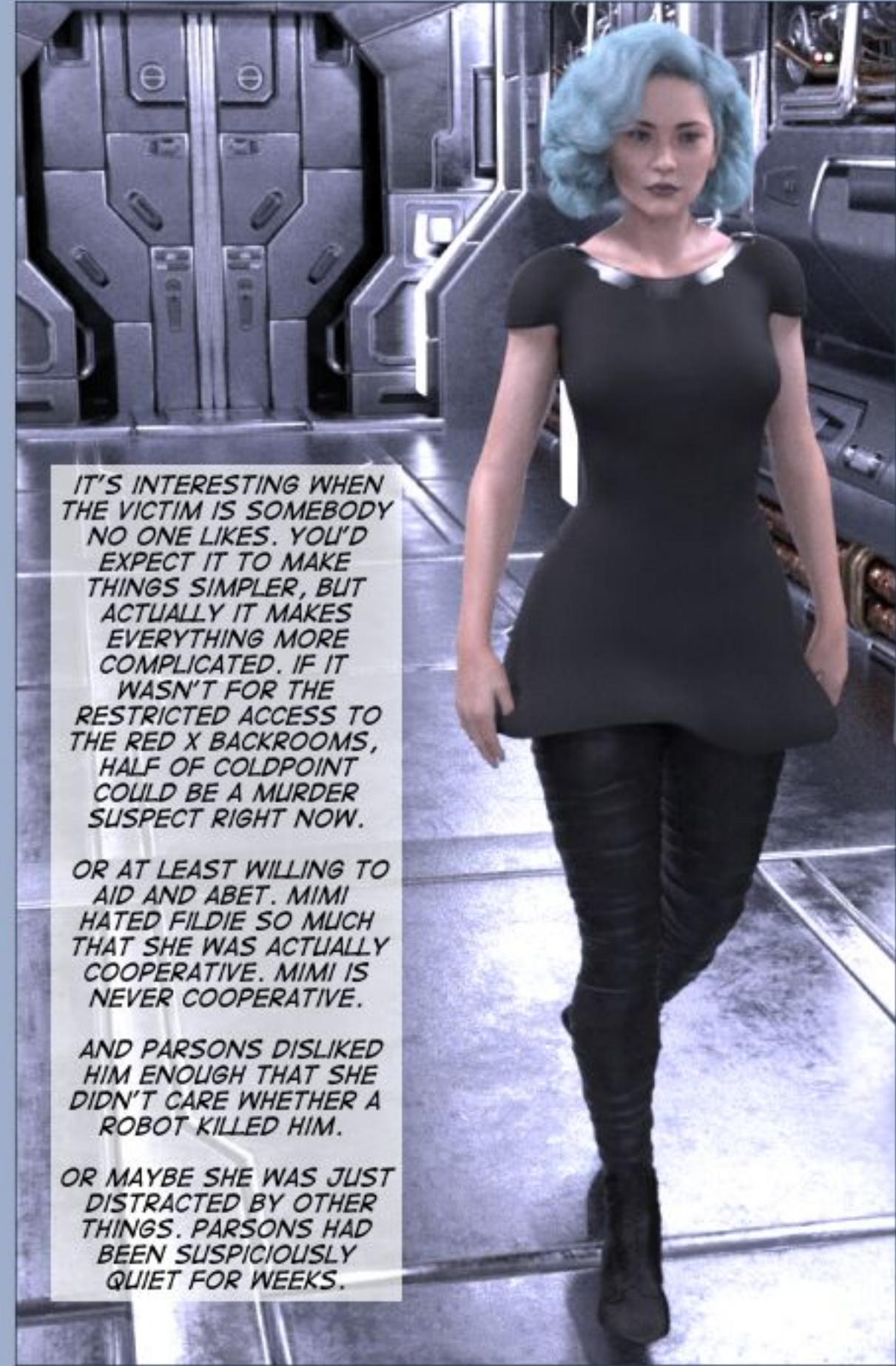
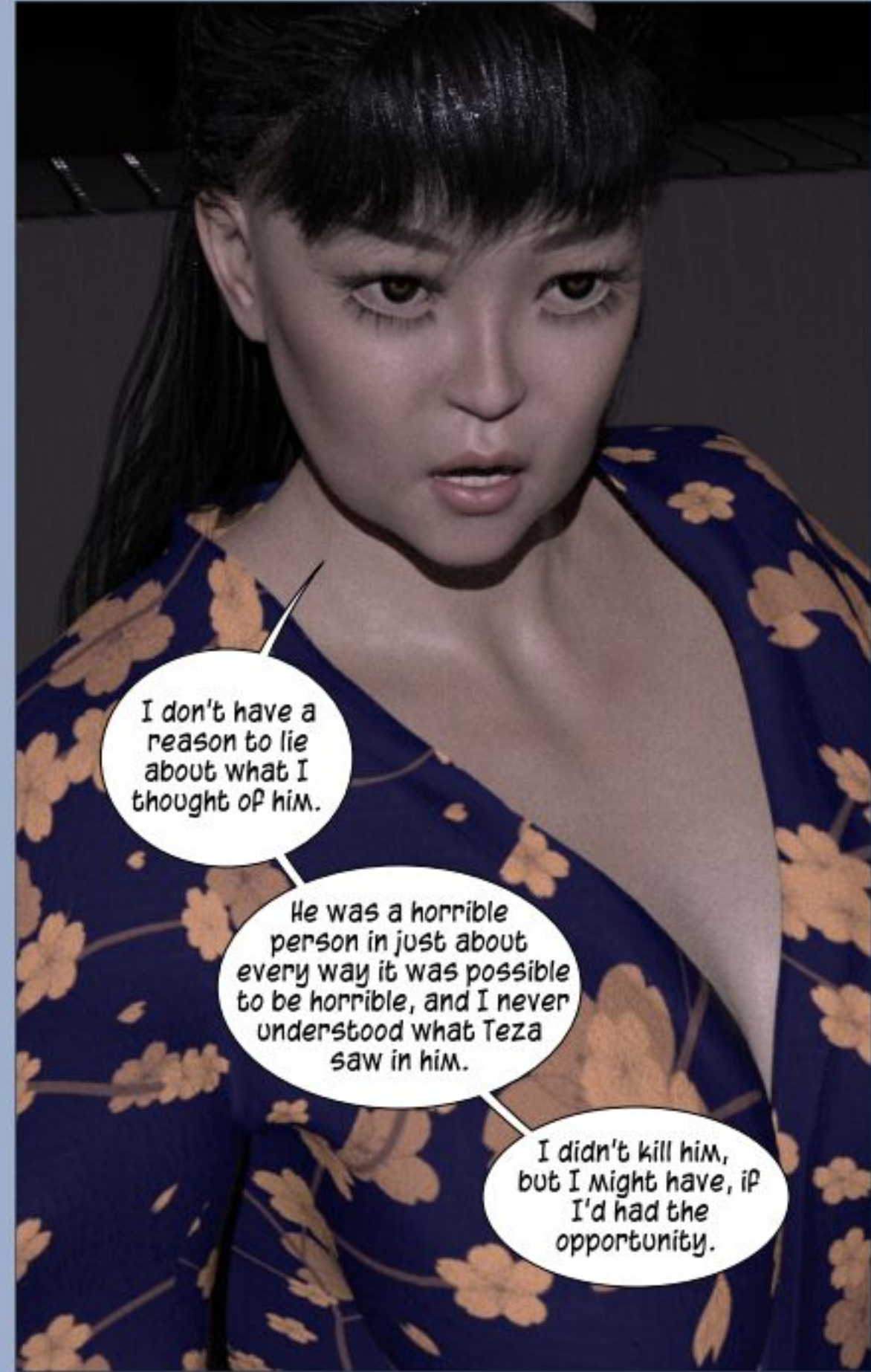
But I fucked up. I didn't know Megrin was one of those types who's got issues with his wife being in charge, and takes it out on other women.

Sora came to me. She needed a safe way out, and there was a really simple one. I arranged for her to get word anonymously to Megrin's wife Helda that Megrin was seeing Sora. Helda didn't take it well. I knew she wouldn't. I also knew she wouldn't blame Sora.

She really blew. She had all the money, so Megrin suddenly got divorced and broke. He's lucky he didn't get broken too. Helda's more than a head taller than he is, and big.

The problem is, Fildie found out about this somehow. So he went to Sora and said if she didn't work for him, he'd tell Megrin what really happened.

How'd you find out about that last part?



I just don't know if there's a point anymore, Sile. I hate to admit it, but I'm out of ideas. We're never going to get anywhere while she's running the place.

Robot lover ... I just don't understand it. Doesn't she realize it's them or us?

Maybe she doesn't see herself as particularly human.

Well, I could certainly believe that ...

The thing is, even if she dropped dead tomorrow, we'd still have a problem. People come here to transfer. That's what Coldpoint is promoted as, and we can't compete with the Toppler people on promotion.

So eventually, even without Barlowe's thumb on the scale, we're going to be an endangered species.

It would help if I could get the humans here to have babies ... but that's discouraged. "That's not what you're here for." The hell it isn't!

Claire, I'll say it again: You need direct political action. It's the only thing that'll work.

What do you think we've been doing? For years!

No. I mean direct political action.

If we tried a coup, Furst Deepstone would send out the M's and we'd all be thrown out. At best. If it came down to it, all the robots would be on her side.

I was thinking something a little less blatant.

You know, this is starting to be a mature settlement, and self-rule is a natural stage of the evolution of these things.

The Toppler Project shouldn't run this place from afar forever, after all. Eventually Coldpoint should have its own government.

Why not start now?

I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I HAD ANY OTHER LINE OF ATTACK BUT TEZA, SO I WENT BACK TO THE RED X AND HOPED SHE'D CALMED DOWN ENOUGH. UNFORTUNATELY OTHER PEOPLE KEPT GETTING HER WORKED UP AGAIN.

Look, the contract was with Gil. Gil's dead. That means the contract is void, as far as I'm concerned.

That's not the point! The point is, you're the only other competent person I have besides myself! If you leave, I might as well just give up completely!

I'm not saying you can't leave, I'm asking you not to!

You're not exactly asking, Teza ...

Oh, well. What difference does it make? This bitch is never going to let us open again anyway.

Go on. Do whatever the fuck you want. I don't care.

I wish you'd talk to her. The last few months she's just gotten angrier and angrier ...

I'm trying. She doesn't want to listen.

Anyway, I just now decided I want to talk to you instead.

... Not here. Let's go to my place.

Forgive me. I hate having to wear red. I look horrible in it. I try to wear the least amount of it I can get away with.

I'm hoping that now that Gil's not in charge, that whole idea will end.

You're assuming Teza will try to pick up the pieces.

Well, she could, though. If she ever stopped whatever this fit is she's having right now.

The only thing that's been holding the Red X back is Gil's bad decisions, and Teza knows it. She could make that place amazing.

If I don't decide she murdered him.

Anyway, I thought you wanted to quit?

If you thought she did it, you'd have hauled her in already.

You know, if you're going to take such an important role in our futures, I really feel like we should get to know each other much more closely.

This isn't the time or place for that.

Hmph. You're probably one of the ones who doesn't do it with robots.

You know, there are people who'd give their arm to go to bed with me.

But not at the Red X?

Well ... not the way it is right now ...

Then why are you there?

I don't think I should tell you that.

Look, this is a murder, and like it or not, you're a suspect.

If you're covering up a motive, I'll find out sooner or later and then I'll be pissed off you made me work for it.

On the other hand, if you're honest with me, not only does it help your case, it buys you goodwill. Virtue will be rewarded, and so on.

Your choice.

I used to give my customers ecsetamol.

I mean, they knew about it. It was part of the package. That's why some of them came to me. Little something extra.

I stopped doing it, though.

So what's the problem?

I didn't stop doing it until a couple of months after the ban.

I had a supply to use up, see ... I paid a lot for it ...

Gil found out somehow.

He said if word got out, I wouldn't be allowed to be in business any more ... sex work's the only thing I like doing ...

So he blackmailed you into working for him.

That was a lie, you know. I'd have just confiscated the rest of your supply and left it at that.

Oh, well. I don't know if it really matters anyway. The kind of customers I get now ...

I mean, I can't blame it all on the Red X, y'know?

I can't help but wonder -- how much of my reputation was me, and how much was the ecsetamol?

Maybe I belong there. Maybe I'm not nearly as good as I thought I was. I don't know.

BETH VIGILANCE IS PARSONS' OPPOSITE --- JUST AS MUCH OF A PAIN IN THE ASS, BUT IN THE OTHER DIRECTION. SHE WANTS HUMANS TO TRANSFER AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND NOT LINGER AROUND; SHE BELIEVES COLDPOINT IS EXCLUSIVELY FOR ROBOTS.

AS YOU CAN PROBABLY GUESS, WE DON'T GET ALONG. THEN AGAIN, A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T GET ALONG WITH BETH. EVEN OTHER ROBOTS.

I'M JUST SAYING, IF BARLOWE'S PUSHING TOO HARD, WE HAVE THE MEANS TO PUSH BACK. WE CAN HELP.

Uh-huh. And what's behind this sudden attack of cooperation?

WE ... RECOGNIZE THAT WE NEED A DIFFERENT APPROACH.

AND TO GET THERE, WE NEED TO PROMOTE UNITY AMONG THE ROBOT POPULATION.

Unity?
You've got to be kidding.

You've been calling me names and saying horrible things about me for years.

You hate me, because you don't like sex, and you try to get rid of everything you don't like. Which seems to be most things.

Unity.
My ass.

And anyway I'm not with you politically and I never will be.

Think about it for a second, Beth. Use your brain for once.

If there are no humans on Coldpoint, then I don't have any customers.

BUT ... IF THERE ARE NO HUMANS, YOU DON'T NEED CUSTOMERS. YOU WON'T HAVE TO DO THIS FOR A LIVING ...

You see?
You just don't get it.

And you're never going to get it, because your ideas are psychotic and you don't realize. You have no idea how bizarre you are.

I don't think I could explain you to you if I tried, and I'm not going to waste my time trying.

Get out of here.

BYLA STARNE IS MY OTHER SIGNIFICANT OTHER.

I ADMIT IT. A LARGE PART OF WHAT HAD GOTTEN ME THROUGH THAT DAY WAS KNOWING I WAS GOING TO SEE HER THAT NIGHT.

Hi!
Give me a second, I'm running a little behind.

I had a customer stay later than I expected.

I just got out of the shower, but I also want to change the bedding.

Sometimes it's really not great doing this kind of work in your home.

But I can't afford another place just for jobs.

I'd offer to get you a second location for free under the table, but ...

... no, you wouldn't. You're too honest to do that, and I'd be too honest to accept.

That's one thing about the Barlowe administration: absolutely no graft.

It's very refreshing. I come from a place where all the politicians are as corrupt as can be.

Yes, that's probably a big reason I'm not a politician.

Byla, how do you decide whether somebody's good or bad in bed?

I mean you personally. What are your, y'know, standards about that?

Where'd this come from?

I interviewed someone today who seemed like she was very worried about it. Like it was a major thing to her.

It had never occurred to me to give it any thought. I always figured if I had a good time, and the other person had a good time, that was good enough.

That's a pretty good standard. For a pro, it's a little different -- we have to prioritize whether the customer has fun -- but other than that, that's pretty much where I am too.

But some people are jaded -- they're always looking for ways to try to get more out of the experience.

So you get ratings and all kinds of other unhealthy thinking.

I mean ...
-- unh! --

... if you worry about ... your performance ...

-- hhh! --
... don't.



Mmh ... best way ... get to sleep ...

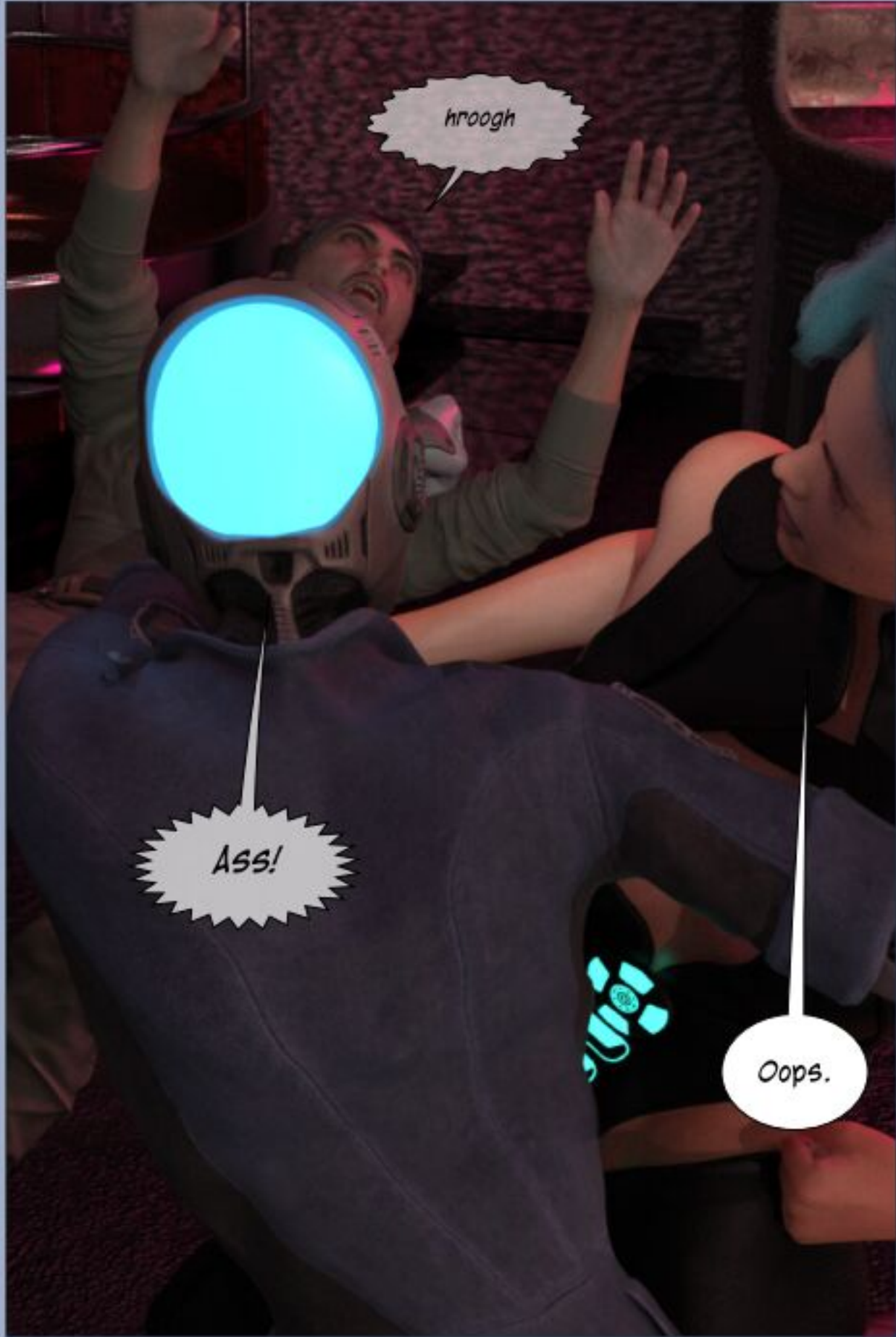
Yes, though I wish we had talked a little first.

What did Wendy Barlowe want today?

not much ...

jus' wanted ... know 'bout ... Gil Fildie ...







That was quite a punch. IP by some miracle he comes to in the next few minutes --

I'll sit on him.

Works For Me.

Teza, I'm sorry, but we have to talk.



There's something important I don't think you get:
I don't want to shut down the Red X.

I know there are people who want to, but I'm not one of them, and I never have been.

I think it can be saved. I'd like it to be saved. I think you could make it much better than what it was. And I'm not the only one who thinks that.

But we can't do anything until we deal with Fildie's death. We absolutely have to clean that mess up first. And it really is a "we" -- I can't do it without your help.



I don't know if there's such a thing as extenuating circumstances for murder. I do know -- it's become very clear since his death -- that there were a lot of people in Coldpoint who'd cheerfully have murdered him in his sleep.

Two days ago I'd have hesitated to tell you "Look, Teza, Fildie was an irredeemable jerk and everyone knew it." I'd have felt it was needlessly hurtful.

I'm not worried about that now, because now I think you were probably one of the first people to figure it out.

There's nothing left to protect. Nothing to defend.

How long ago did it start to go sour?



Pretty much from the beginning. I wasn't using him, I genuinely liked him -- but he turned out to be ... well, he wasn't what I'd hoped he was, how's that?

The thing is, it wasn't just the work I liked. I found out I really liked running the place. It was the best thing that had ever happened.

But Gil would only let me keep managing it if I stayed his lover. He liked that. He liked being able to go places with me, haul me out and say "Hey, look what I got." He cared about that a lot more than he cared about the business.

And then it got where he was making so many bad choices he was running the place into the ground ... and I couldn't stop him, because nobody could tell him a damned thing ... and I couldn't leave, because I loved the place too much to let it collapse ...

Yes, his dying was probably the best thing that could happen.
But I didn't kill him!
And I didn't arrange for anyone else to kill him!



I don't know what I can do to get you to believe me ...

You don't have to do much. I was already pretty sure you hadn't.

It was clear even when you approached me months ago that you were a lot more concerned about the Red X than about Fildie.

And his body being found the way it was, where it was, didn't do you or the Red X any favors.

You're very clever, Teza, and you pay attention to details. I think if you had killed him, you'd have made sure the body was never found at all.



... I'm not sure how to take that.

Take it as evidence in your favor.

But it would really help to know where you were before you arrived at the Red X, the night of the murder.



I was in bed with this jackass.

The more I thought about Sora's hiring, the more questions I had, and Gil refused to tell me anything.

I'd found out that Daniel was Sora's only customer, for a long time. That ended just before she came to us. I was hoping I could coax some information out of him, but he didn't have any.

I didn't expect to see him again. I sure didn't expect him to come in on a rampage looking for Sora.

I think your visit with him must have shaken loose a couple of his brain cells. He's got to have one or two in there somewhere. You gave him ideas.

But ideas about what?



In addition to being an idiot, he's also abusive.

Sora needed a way out of their business arrangement that wouldn't lead to him retaliating against her. She decided the best way was to get someone to leak the word to Daniel's wife about her. Basically, she pinked on herself.

His wife didn't care about the sex, I'm told, but she was very upset about the deception. She divorced him and cut off his cash flow. He's probably been trying to figure out who busted him ever since.

You're not going to like this part. Fildie found out what Sora did, and blackmailed her into taking a job here. He said that if Sora didn't work for him, he'd tell Daniel everything.



But why would he even want that? He knew we couldn't really use Sora ...

I mean, unless he was just doing it so he could hold it over her?

Yeah, he might have enjoyed that. Damn him.

And how did he even find out about the bit with Daniel in the first place? Who knew about it besides Sora and whoever she got to help out?

I'm not sure about that myself.

But I do think I know where Sora is, so I guess maybe I'll go ask her.

BYLA AND I MOVED MEGRIN TO MY HOLDING ROOM. SHE'D HIT HIM SO HARD HE DIDN'T WAKE UP THE WHOLE TIME, EVEN WHEN WE DROPPED HIM OFF (EMPHASIS ON 'DROPPED'). HE WAS OUT SO COLD THAT IF SHE'D HIT HIS HEAD, I'D HAVE WANTED TO TAKE HIM TO ZUSY-Q TO CHECK FOR CONCUSSION. AS IT WAS, HE MIGHT HAVE HAD A BROKEN RIB OR TWO. I'D WORRY ABOUT THAT LATER. MUCH LATER.



I really appreciate your sticking around ...

Oh, it's no problem! Actually, it's kind of exciting.

Not the sort of excitement I like.

I'm definitely just being overcautious now. I don't really think Mimi would turn violent.

Although we're going to have to wake her up, so you never know.



You think Mimi knows where Sora is?

I think Mimi knows a lot of things she doesn't say, and that it's almost impossible to get her to say them without a very strong lever.

I don't have that lever, which means this could get pretty unpleasant. I hate threatening people, but ...

We'll buzz instead of just going in. There's no reason to make her even more hostile.



Though, honestly, at this hour of the day it's not going to make much difference.

... And it's moot anyhow, because she's not answering.



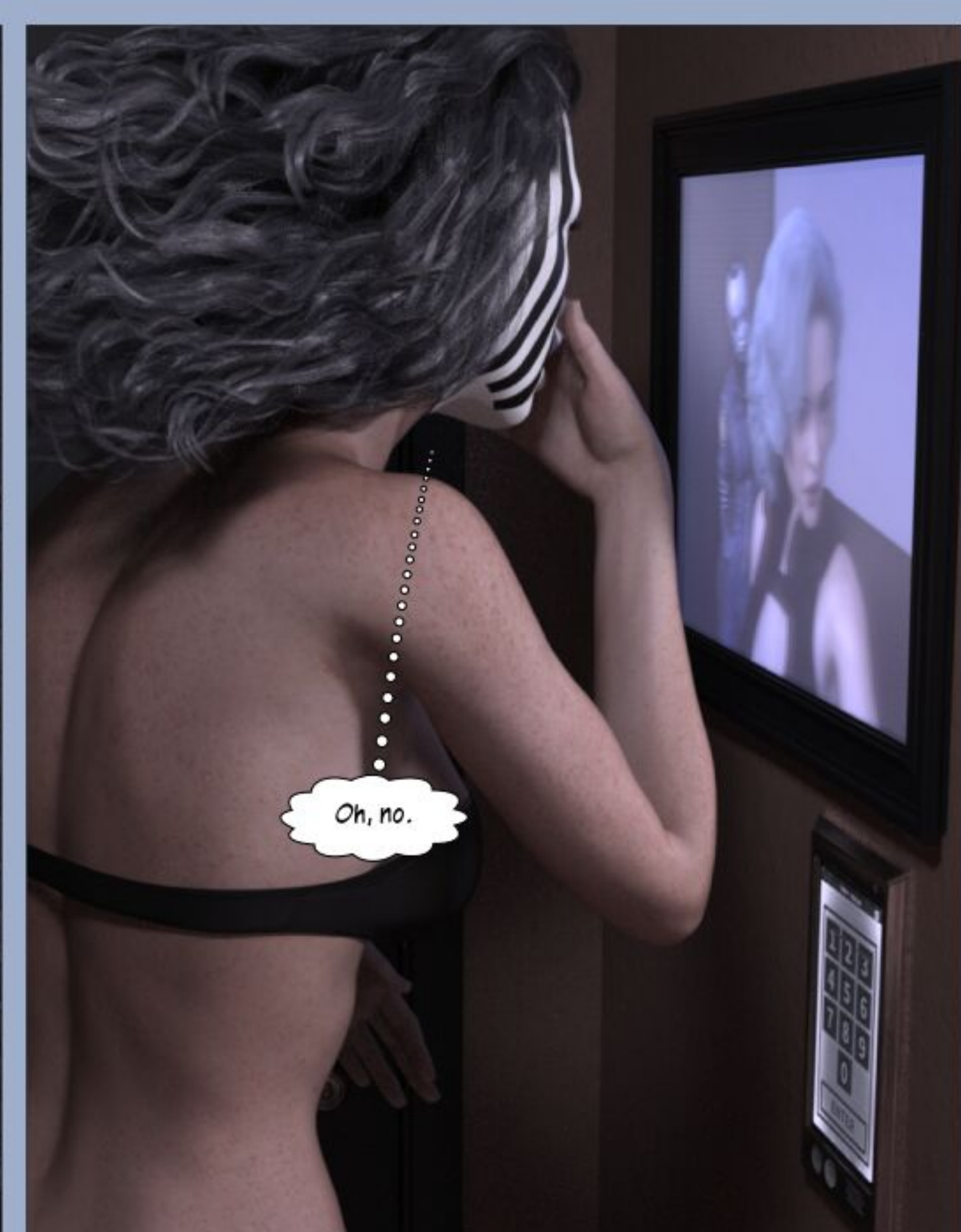
At this hour?

Everybody knows Mimi's habits better than that ...

Not that it matters, since she's not even hearing it.

-- Sigh --

I guess I can go look ...



Oh, no.



MIMI!!

aghk!

Eleis ... what ...?

You told her! You did, didn't you? You told her, and now she's here to take me in!

What are you ...



I trusted you! I only ever asked one thing of you, and now you go and --

GRRAGHHH!!



Before I go, I'm going to make sure you regret it, you traitor!!

Eleis --

-- OW! --

Eleis, stop!

-- aaa! --

I don't know what you--



That's enough.

YIAAA!



Don't you touch me!

hrrp



EEEEEE!

Does this count as a touch?



Stay down there. If you try to get up, I'm going to get Byla here to step on you.

Mimi, what is this nonsense?

h'k'h

I ... I don't ...

I think it might have been because ... uh ...

... Well, it's too late now, anyway.



Eleis used to make and sell ecsetamol.

I guess she thought I'd told you. But I didn't!

I didn't tell you because I didn't want her to get into trouble for something she'd stopped doing ...



If she'd stopped doing it, why would she be in trouble?

I certainly wouldn't have had reason to go after her for selling ecsetamol before the ban.

Oh, hey! Somebody with a working brain. Nice.

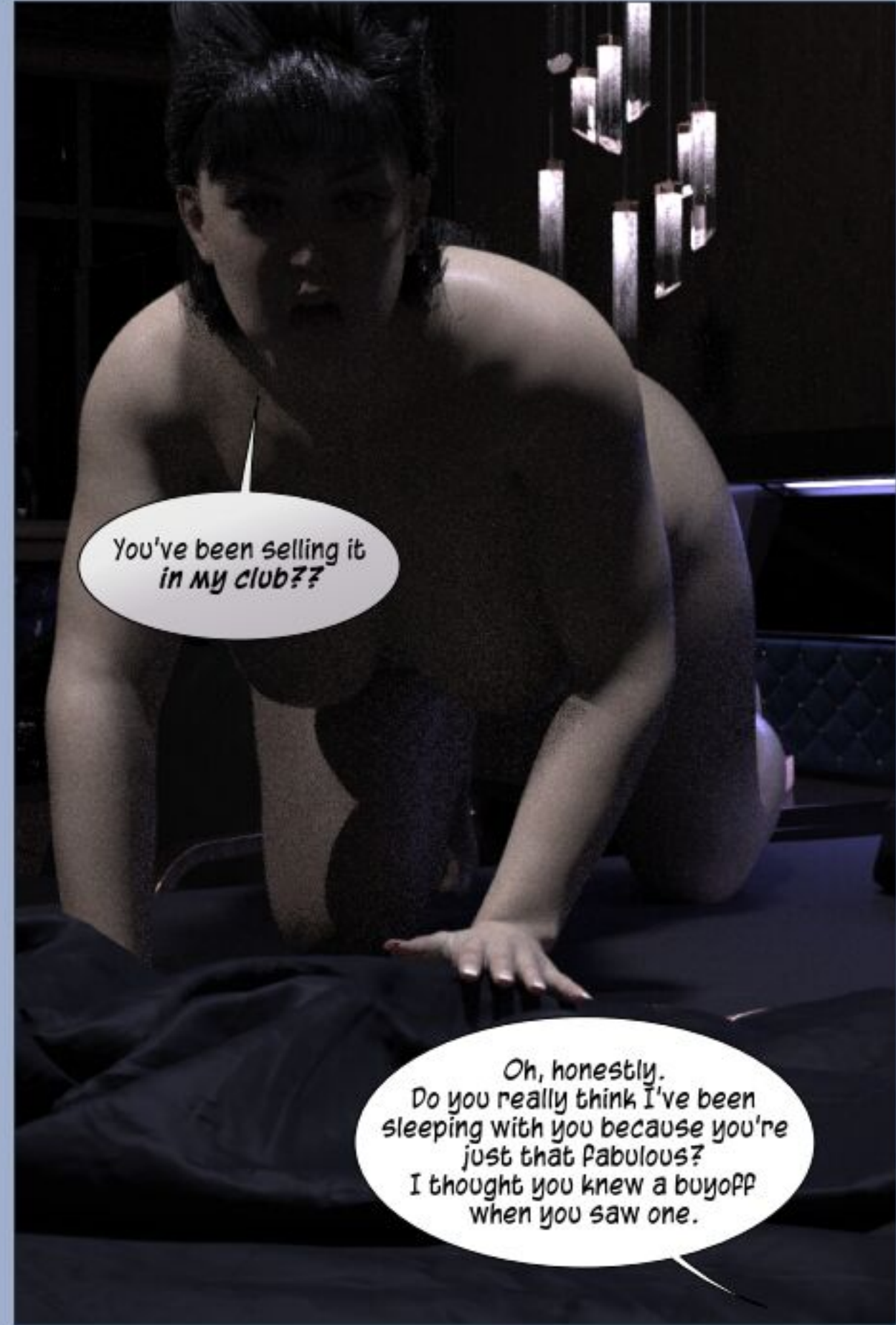


... Eleis?

Oh, don't make that face.

What did you *think* I was doing downstairs every night, you stupid cow?

Where did you think I went every day?



You've been selling it *in my club*??

Oh, honestly. Do you really think I've been sleeping with you because you're just that Pabulous? I thought you knew a buyoPP when you saw one.



AAAAITGHH!!

AAA!

Hey!

strrrp!

hhhh!

Should we stop her?

Eventually.



WE STOPPED HER WHILE ELEIS' FACE WAS STILL FIXABLE. BUT JUST BARELY.

Uh, so, you should know ...

... Helix used to get ecsetamol from Eleis ... and Gil --

-- was blackmailing her about it. I know.

You *could* have mentioned it when I asked.

I know, I know ... you didn't want to get Eleis in trouble.



Expect me back later, Mimi. We have things to talk about.

And you *will* be available.

I STARTED TO SAY TWO OR THREE THINGS -- HOW THIS WAS UNUSUALLY BAD DECISION-MAKING FOR HER, HOW I THOUGHT SHE WAS SMARTER THAN THAT, SO ON -- AND I BIT THEM ALL BACK.

I JUST COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO KICK HER WHEN SHE WAS THIS FAR DOWN.

WE GOT ELEIS PATCHED UP AND PUT HER IN THE HOLDING ROOM. WHEN WE DID, WE HAD TO DEAL WITH MEGRIN. I'LL COME BACK TO THAT. IT WAS EXHAUSTING, AND WHEN YOU ADD IN TWO SEPARATE TRIPS TO MEDICAL, TOOK MORE TIME THAN I WANTED TO SPEND ON EITHER OF THOSE TWO JERKS.



I promise you, this much "excitement" is not typical.

I was beginning to wonder. What are you going to do with them? Throw them out?

Haven't gotten there yet. Megrin probably shouldn't be allowed to stay, not if he's just going to keep beating people.

Eleis -- I've got to go get the rest of her inPo from either Mimi or Gloria, I don't know her last name -- I'm not sure. We'll see. I'm not going to toss her just for selling ecsetamol, but I'm also not thrilled about keeping her around, y'know?

And none of this has anything to do with the murder I'm trying to solve. I don't think.

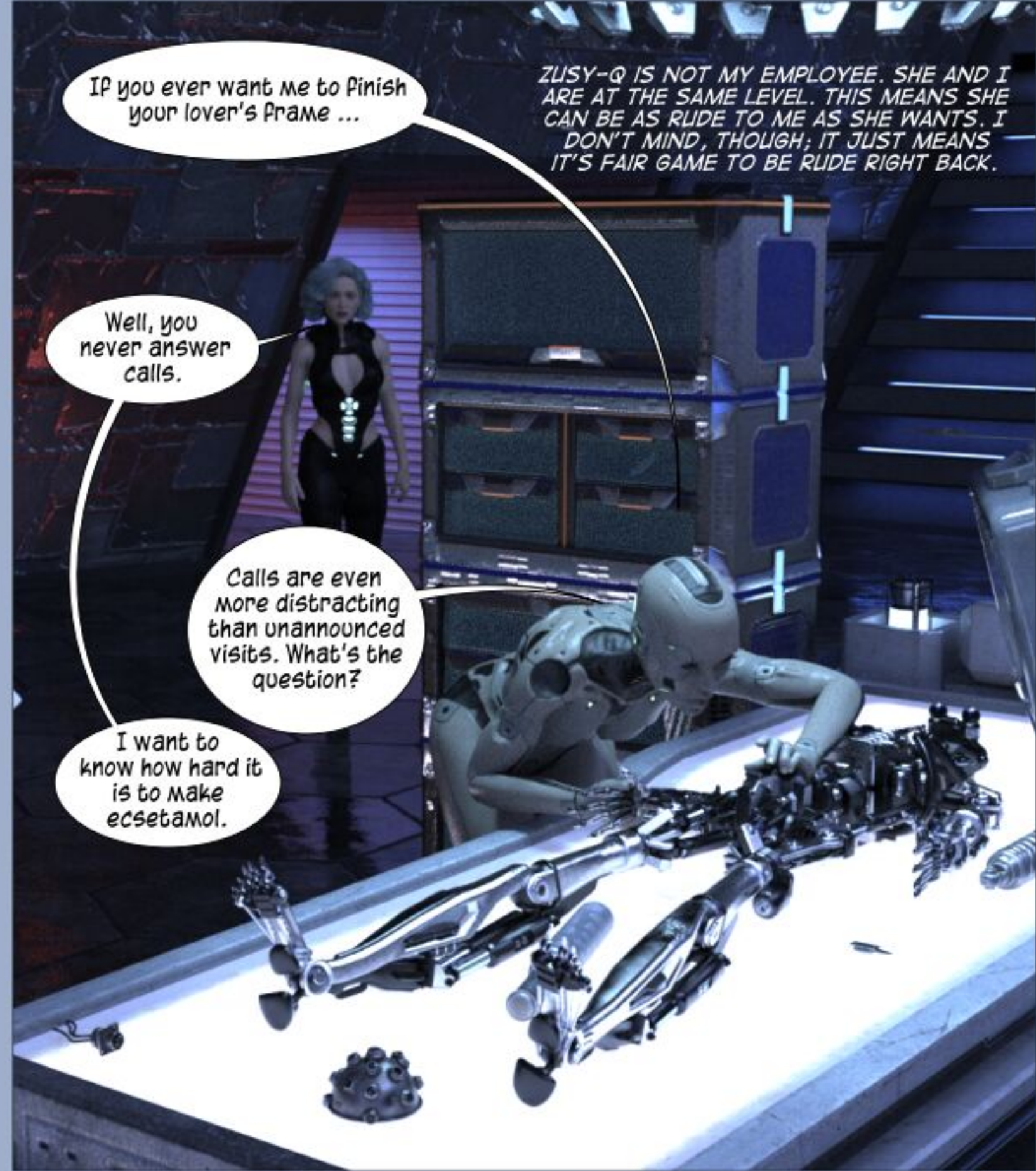
Anyway, that's enough excitement for you today.

Heh. I can still stay if you need me --



No, love, thanks. I really do appreciate it, though. You've been a great help.

-- MMH -- Let me know how it comes out.



IF you ever want me to finish your lover's Prame ...

Well, you never answer calls.

Calls are even more distracting than unannounced visits. What's the question?

I want to know how hard it is to make ecsetamol.

ZUSY-Q IS NOT MY EMPLOYEE. SHE AND I ARE AT THE SAME LEVEL. THIS MEANS SHE CAN BE AS RUDE TO ME AS SHE WANTS. I DON'T MIND, THOUGH; IT JUST MEANS IT'S FAIR GAME TO BE RUDE RIGHT BACK.



How hard it is?

Yes. Is it a "melt a bunch of things together in a pot" kind of job, or does it take a doctorate in chemistry?

Not if you can follow recipes ... but you couldn't do it in your kitchen.

You need specialized synthesis equipment, and there are only a few sets in Coldpoint ... none of which are open for anyone to walk in and use them.

Finding out who stole time on them could be hard, though ...

Oh, I don't need to do that. I just want to know how likely it is that only one person was ever making ecsetamol. That there was a single source.

I'd say ninety-five percent. At least.



You showed up at the scene. You never came to the scene. You barely ever leave medical.

What's the story?

It's not all that. I just didn't get a chance to tell you.

Helix came to find me that night. After all, as you say, I don't answer calls.

She said there'd be something at the Red X worth my going out to see in person. Then she rushed off without explaining. She was here maybe two minutes.

Helix is a friend, so I decided I had better go have a look, even though I wasn't sure I believed her.

I HADN'T REALIZED ZUSY-Q HAD FRIENDS.



She rushed because she was between customers. Or was getting a customer to cover up for her. She was supposed to be booked all night.

You realize this means that Helix either did it or knows who did.

These are not the readings I'm supposed to be getting. This servo may be defective.

... Well, I don't think it was the former.

But I *do* think you're not taking the mental block seriously enough.

And, yes, she has one.

There are only four choices, and if we take the block seriously, three of them couldn't have done it, so for the moment I'm pretending it's not a factor.

Party Girl is out. She had no motive, and she couldn't get her three brain cells collected long enough to kill anybody. I'm amazed she can remember how to get to work.

Chene -- the only one who could have done it, by your rules -- has the weakest motive of the other three, because killing Fildie wouldn't have gotten her anything but personal satisfaction. It wouldn't improve her situation in the least, and might make it worse.

Teza has the strongest motive and looks like she was the only one with opportunity. The problem is, I'm pretty sure she didn't do it.

That leaves Helix ... but you're pretty sure she didn't do it. So where do I go from that? Somebody's wrong.

I still think you're going the long way around the block. Pardon the phrasing.

You're getting mired in motive and opportunity, because you're going to great lengths to ignore the incontrovertible, because you don't want to think Chene did it.

But Occam's razor, again, practically insists that Chene did it.

... I don't trust the mental block nearly as much as I used to. Did I mention that?

Damn it, Wendy, Cuda Vigilance was an anomaly! You can't base anything on her!

You'd better not be turning into Parsons ...

Don't be insulting.

ZUSY-Q IS REFERRING TO THE EVENTS OF "FRAMED FOR DEATH."

EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS NO ONE IN THE CLUB AND IT WOULDN'T OPEN FOR HOURS, MIMI HAD TURNED ON THE LIGHTS AND MUSIC, LOUD ENOUGH FROM BELOW THAT SHE COULDN'T HAVE POSSIBLY HEARD ME COMING.

BUT SHE KNEW ANYWAY.

I feel like you have a few debts to pay.

What, I'm supposed to thank you?

Or ... no, you just think you're entitled to everything now.

Well, maybe you are. Some, anyway.

But I've already given you all I've got. You know about Sora and Helix ... you know how I felt about Gil ...

I don't want more information. At least, not from you.

I want Chene.

Sora?

What makes you think I --

Come on, Mimi. She worked out of here and you helped her out ... she came to you when she needed to deal with Megrin ... where else would she go if she needed to hide?

Besides, I've checked around. She's not anywhere else.

Look, I'm not just going to haul her in. I don't know that she did it. I'm still working on that.

But her hiding doesn't help her case -- you see that, don't you? The longer she tries to stay hidden, the more suspicious she becomes.

And if she *did* do it, I think full disclosure can only work in her favor, because I'm pretty sure she had a lot of cause.

... I'll go get her.

You know, I never wanted to be anything else but this. It's the only thing I'm good at.

I didn't come to Coldpoint to transfer -- I came because it was a small place and I figured there wouldn't be much competition ...

... and then it turns out that not only do you have tons of people doing this, but nobody wants to have sex with humans!

And the one guy I found was rotten ... I don't know what's wrong with this place.

Some days, neither do I.

So ... I know what Fildie did ... though nobody's really sure why he forced you to work for him, since he knew perfectly well you wouldn't have any customers ...

Oh, he didn't care about that. He wanted somebody he could have under his thumb.

He said I was lucky -- he was paying me to do nothing, and it wasn't like I was going to get work anywhere else -- and that I owed him.

And mostly what I owed him was that I had to have sex with him whenever he wanted. Which, OK, but he wanted it a lot.

I got tired of it, y'know? But I couldn't tell him no. So I got somebody to give me something I could dose him with. He liked to have a drink first. He'd pass out, he wouldn't remember, he'd think we'd had sex, and I'd get a night off.

That night was the first time I tried it. I figured if it worked I could get more and do it again when I needed to ... but something went wrong!

He didn't pass out! After a minute or two he started shaking really hard, thrashing ... before I could go get some help, he was dead!

I didn't think anybody'd believe I didn't do it on purpose, so I decided I'd just go out. I knew if I stood at the door for a while, one of the others would come out and see me ...

What about his ... uh ... injuries?

Yes. I cut it off.

That was just ... I was so angry ... for everything he'd done, and then probably wrecking what was left of my life by dying like that ...

I mean, what have I got left now? I didn't have much before he got hold of me, but ...

Anyway, I didn't have anything else to lose, and cutting it off made me feel a little better.

I threw it in a reclaim.

OK.

I think that's all I need. Thank you for cooperating.

I want you to go tell Teza the truth. The whole truth. She deserves to know.

Wait, what?

You're not ... arresting me or whatever?

For what?

Fildie died of an overdose of ecsetamol. Which you didn't know you were giving him.

I mean, you shouldn't have been trying to drug him at all -- please don't do that in the future -- but under the circumstances, I'm not comfortable coming after you for that.

And I'm certainly not going to try to make a case about your cutting the dick off a dead man. Let's just pretend that part didn't happen.

AS I MENTIONED BEFORE, WHEN WE BROUGHT ELEIS TO MY HOLDING ROOM -- I ONLY HAVE THE ONE -- MEGRIN WAS THROWING AN ABSOLUTE TANTRUM. SHOUTING, CURSING, HURLING HIMSELF AT THE DOOR. WHEN HE TRIED TO ATTACK ME, I GOT OUT ONE OF OUR WEAPONS AND STUNNED HIM REPEATEDLY. THEN WE DRAGGED HIM TO MEDICAL, WHERE HE WAS NOW SEDATED AND STRAPPED TO A BED. HE WOULD REMAIN THAT WAY UNTIL WE PACKED HIM UP TO DEPORT HIM. IF I HADN'T BEEN CONVINCED OF THAT DECISION BEFORE, I WAS NOW.

IT WAS JUST AS WELL. I HAD SOME THINGS TO SAY TO ELEIS, AND HE DIDN'T NEED TO HEAR THEM.



Eleis Lateen. Employed for a while in biochem synthesis, but not for a couple of years now.

I'm thinking you must still have a friend or two there who lets you use the equipment, eh?

I really wish you'd stopped making ecsetamol when we banned it.



Yeah, well, even with the cost of raw materials and paying people off, I made five times as much selling it as I'd made working in the lab. And it was a lot more fun. So that wasn't gonna happen.

You true-believer types make me sick. You really do think all of us want to work our asses off for a pittance because ... what? For the greater good or something? We all want to do our part to make this hole in the ground a fabulous place? Everybody buys in?

You spend too much time around the robots. They believe in that shit. Easier when you don't have any expenses, I guess.

And now you're going to get on your high horse and throw me out, just for giving people what they want.

I'm not throwing you out because of the drugs. That's why I came, to make sure you knew that.

I'm throwing you out because you murdered somebody.

I didn't kill her! I barely bruised her. She did a lot worse to me. You know my eye implant is completely broken?

Huh? Oh. I don't mean Mimi. I'm talking about Gil Fildie.



Fildie died of an ecsetamol overdose. That ecsetamol came from you.

Even if there had ever been anybody else on Coldpoint making it ... Chene told me it was you.

You know, if you want people to protect you, maybe don't do and say cruel things to them.

You intended for him to overdose, or what was the point in not giving Chene what she asked for, and lying to her about it? She thought you were giving her a sedative. And you wouldn't have given her ecsetamol just so Fildie could have a good time.

You meant for Fildie to die, and you meant for Chene to feel responsible for it, and the only reason I'm not going harder on you than I am --

-- is you can't prove a damned bit of it.



I guess you don't know how this works. I don't need to prove anything except to my own conscience.

I don't want to ever get it wrong ... but with you, that's not a risk. You've made it very clear what you are.

No, the reason I'm not throwing you into a reclaim right now is that I just can't bring myself to be that harsh over killing Fildie.

No one's hurt by his death. No one's shedding any tears over him. His lover least of all. I don't excuse murder, but Fildie was a horrible, horrible person.

Well, you got that part right.



Don't you want to know what he did to me?

Not particularly.

Next ship's in twenty-two days. I'll see about bringing you something to read.

THERE WERE A COUPLE OF LOOSE ENDS I STILL WANTED TO PURSUE ... FOR MY OWN KNOWLEDGE, IF NOTHING ELSE. BUT I DIDN'T GET A CHANCE TO DO THAT UNTIL TWO DAYS LATER.



STARTING WITH MIMI.

SHE DIDN'T LOOK LIKE SHE WAS IN GREAT EMOTIONAL SHAPE.



It's getting harder to find people ... I wait for ages for someone to come along, while I sit here rotting ... and then when someone does, it always goes bad ...

I just want someone who actually wants to be with me. Is that asking too much? Seems like the world's telling me it is.

I'm going to end up like ...

... eh, not that you care, I don't know why I'm telling you. What do you want?



Actually, I do care, at least a little.

Which is why I'm not going to tell Chene what you did. I don't think you need to lose another friend right now.

Sora. Her name's Sora. You're the only person in Coldpoint who's always so damned formal. If you say "Chene" nobody knows who you mean.

What I did? What did I do?

Formality is a gesture of respect. I don't know her well enough to call her by her first name.

I only call you by your first name because you insist on it.

You don't think you know me well enough?

Mimi, most of the time I think I don't really know you at all.

... I'm sure you know what you did. Want to tell me about it?



One of the aggravating things about you is the way you ask people questions you already know the answers to.

I don't usually know. I'm just fairly sure. That's seldom good enough.

And I can't usually know for certain unless I hear it direct from the source.

Fine. Well, you're right. Gil found out that Eleis was Helix's supplier. He also found out I was sleeping with Eleis.

Everything was blackmail material to that son-of-a-bitch.

And before you give me that face: I don't blackmail anybody and I never have. I just sell information.

He said he needed people, that you were squeezing him to death, and that I was going to come up with somebody, he didn't care who, or he was going to get Eleis in trouble. I figured that meant her past. Now I think he knew she was still selling the stuff.

Seems like everybody knew but me. How was I so stupid?

So you fed him Chene. Told him about Megrin and all of that.



Sora. I told myself it was actually kind of a good thing. I mean, she'd have work -- she'd have a place -- how bad would it be?

If I'd known what he was going to ask her to do ... I never would have ... I'd have spit in his face, and damn the consequences.

... thank you for not telling her.

You're welcome. Thank you for the truth.



How did you guess that, anyway?

When I told Teza how Fildie had been blackmailing Chene, she said "How did he ever find out about that?"

Once I thought about it, I realized the only other person besides Chene who had all the information he'd need to blackmail her was you.

It's a good thing you don't blackmail anyone, Mimi. It might even be your saving grace.

THE OTHER PERSON I WANTED TO TALK TO WAS HELIX. I TRIED AT HER HOME FIRST, AND WHEN SHE WASN'T THERE, WENT TO THE RED X. I DIDN'T REALLY EXPECT HER TO BE THERE; I WAS JUST HOPING TEZA MIGHT BE ABLE TO TELL ME WHERE TO FIND HER.

THE RED X STILL HAD A "CLOSED" SIGN ON THE DOOR, BUT THE DOOR WASN'T LOCKED AND I HEARD PEOPLE TALKING INSIDE, SO I WENT IN.

NOT ONLY WAS HELIX THERE, BUT TO MY SURPRISE, SO WAS BYLA.

