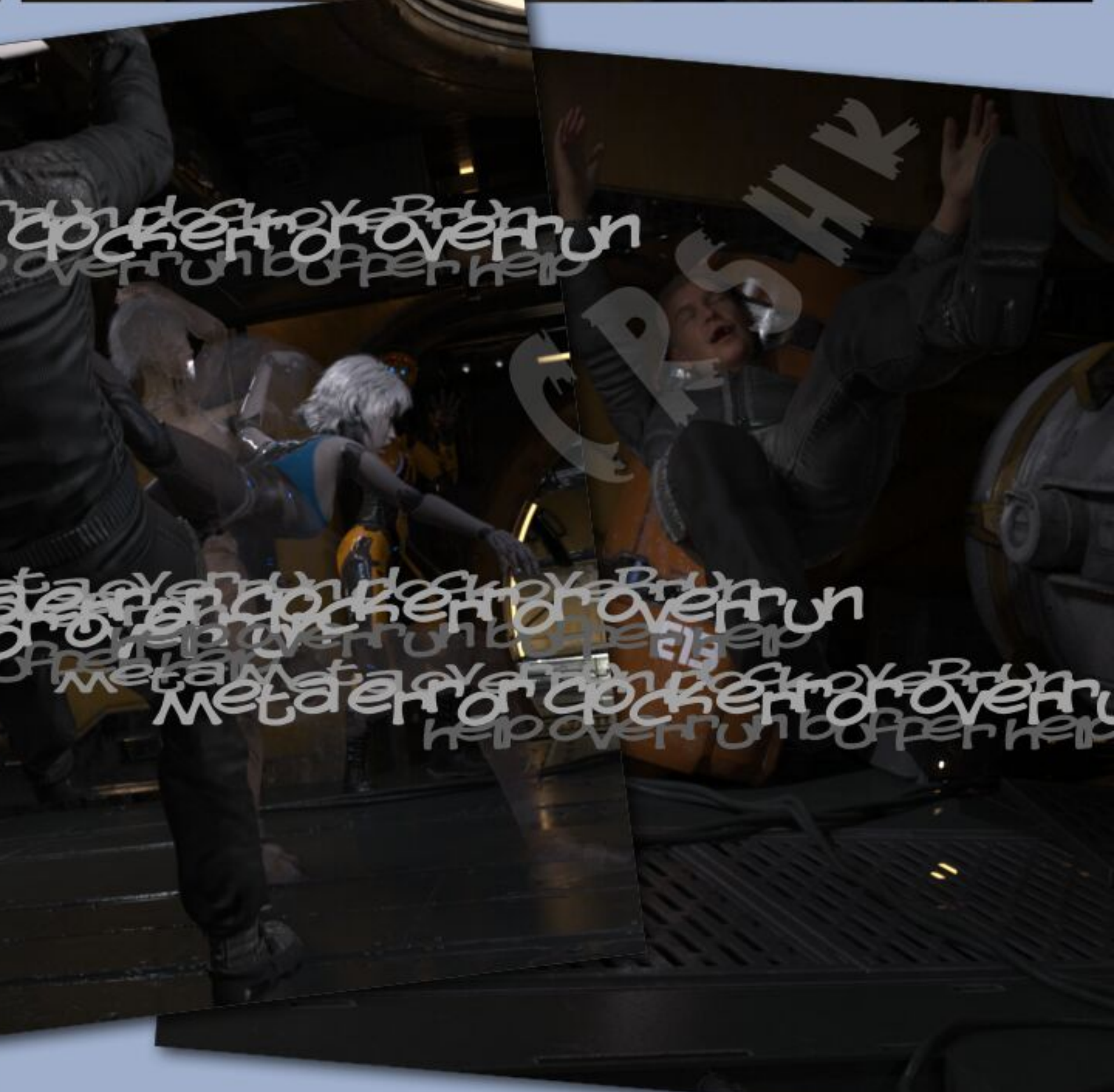




THE LAST SMALL BATCH OF TRANSFERS BEFORE THE FLOOD. IN A FEW MONTHS WE'D SEE OUR POPULATION GROW BY A THIRD. MANY OF US WERE TAKING THIS TIME TO CATCH OUR BREATH BEFORE THE CHAOS BEGAN. OR TRYING TO, ANYWAY.



HELEN ORRIS (WHOM EVERYONE CALLS "HELLO," CONFUSING THOUGH IT MAY BE) WAS THERE TO GREET AND ORIENT THE NEW ARRIVALS AS USUAL.

Welcome, Polks!
If you'll all just gather around me, I'll --



-- huh!



Well, you're clearly not transferring.

No, but I'm on the Manifest. My name's Irene Day.

One second ...
Oh! Yes.
Sorry.
I only usually look at the sleepers.

Goodness!
That's a long trip without stasis.

Wasn't so bad. I had a major paper I was trying to finish writing. Got through a lot of my reading backlog, too.

Can you tell me how to get to your medical area?



It's not acceptable!

We've got a dead human, and people who saw her do it, and she's dead too and can't tell us why ... and you say you don't know anything useful?

Never mind the yelling we're going to hear about the deaths -- do you have any idea how big a crisis of confidence this will cause?

I TRY TO ALWAYS RUN THIS PLACE IN A CALM, COLLECTED MANNER.
I ADMIT I DON'T ALWAYS SUCCEED.



Look, I know I can't order you around, and I normally wouldn't even try ...

ZUSY-Q, WHO RUNS MEDICAL, DOES NOT REPORT TO ME. SHE AND I ARE AT THE SAME LEVEL OF THE ORG CHART.

... but if we've got some kind of systemic failure in the robot frames and we don't --

Wendy!

I am not covering anything up. If I didn't know you were very upset right now, I'd be insulted by the implication.

I don't know what happened. That's the truth.

You know more about the robots and how they work than anybody, and you're saying you can't --

First, that's not true. There are many people who know more about this technology than I do. They're just not on this planet.

Second, how much more do you want me to tear myself up? You want me to pull off an arm?



I can't find the problem, despite trying everything at my disposal for the last four hours, non-stop.

You're upset and frustrated, but I promise you, it's *nothing* compared to how upset and frustrated I am right now.

And yes, I am all too aware of the level of panic that an unchecked vulnerability could cause. I don't need any further reminders, thank you.

... I'm sorry.

Oh, here you are!



You Polks really do run on a skeleton crew. Went through the whole place and the only person I saw was lying dead on a table.

Are you Zusana Quincy?

I have other people, but we don't run an all-hours staff.

I don't know you. Is there a ship in?

They didn't tell you I was coming?

They told me they were sending someone. That's all. It takes a year for us to get packets.



Wow -- locked up hard, huh? Couldn't even unkink her to put her on the --

She's dead.

She went completely haywire, and killed the man you saw on the table. So maybe choose your words better. Who are you?

My name's Irene Day. And you are ...?

That's Wendy Barlowe. The operations manager.



Oh. Uh, sorry about that.

Wendy, would you tell her what little we know? She's here to help.

This is Cici Zodia. Late last night she was seen wandering around some corridors that don't get a lot of foot traffic. She was moving very quickly but didn't seem in control of her movements. Thrashing around aimlessly.

She was also speaking rapidly. Non-stop. Too fast for anyone to understand what she was saying.

Clock overrun.

Yes, but I can't find why.

There were only three witnesses. When one of them -- Rolf Muller -- tried to help her, she kicked him into a barrel hard enough to crush the back of his skull.

She fell down, and the thrashing got worse, and then --

-- hang on.

Gloria, I can't --

-- oh, have they? All right. Thanks.

... No, I don't think I can do anything here anyway.



YOU'VE OUTSTAYED YOUR TIME! THERE IS NO REASON FOR YOU TO BE HERE! TRANSFER OR DIE!

Hey, now ..

YOU HUMANS ARE A BLIGHT! YOU'RE KEEPING COLDPOINT FROM BEING WHAT IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE! DEATH TO HUMANS!



We have as much right to be here as you do!

And if you try to do anything to us, we'll push back!

You're the ones who need to leave Coldpoint, not us! You and the rest of the robots who'd like to just kill us all! You're the blight!

Why don't you just jump in a reclaim and make everybody's life better?

They're allowed to have their position, you know!



I guess you agree with them, huh? You want to kill us too?

I don't want to kill anybody ... but they're right, you shouldn't be here. Coldpoint is for robots. If you're not going to transfer, then you should --

Show me where it says this place is just for robots.

It's the whole point of the place, stupid. Did you read the materials before you came? What did you think you were doing?

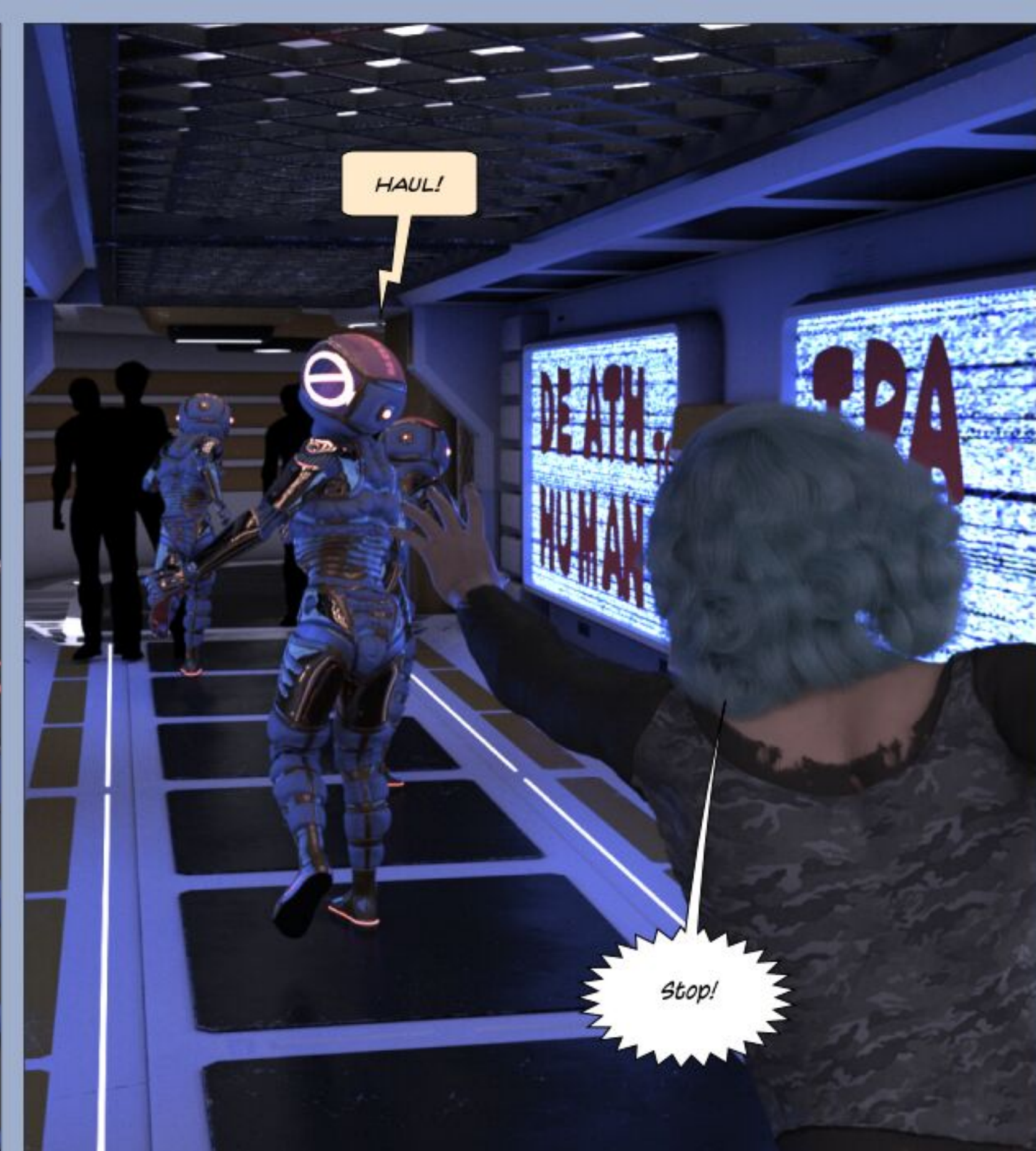


Don't call me stupid, you plastic bitch!

Well, don't be stupid, meatFace!

YES! WE ARE INCOMPATIBLE. WE CAN'T COEXIST HERE. YOU SEE? AND THE HUMANS MUST --

-- OOP.



HAUL!

Stop!



Damn.

THIS GROUP HAD BEEN DOING THIS SORT OF THING FOR A FEW WEEKS AT THAT POINT. USUALLY AN APPEARANCE EVERY DAY OR SO. WE DIDN'T KNOW HOW MANY THERE WERE, BECAUSE OF THE IDENTICAL PAINT JOB ON THEIR BODY PLATES, AND THE HELMETS.

GLORIA HAD STARTED CALLING THEM COPPERPLATES, BECAUSE OF THAT PAINT JOB. WHICH SURELY WASHED OFF, UNLESS THEY WERE HIDING WHENEVER THEY WEREN'T CAUSING TROUBLE.

I DON'T MIND DEMONSTRATIONS. I DON'T EVEN MIND THE VANDALISM -- IT WAS EASY TO CLEAN UP. BUT CALLING FOR PEOPLE'S DEATHS CROSSED A LINE.

I HADN'T MANAGED TO SCAN ANY OF THEM BEFORE THEY RAN OFF. MAYBE THAT'S WHY THEY RAN OFF SO FAST, SO I COULDN'T ID THEM.

Back off!



You want a fight? I'll knock you through a wall!

Leave him alone!

Try it! You're not allowed, remember?

All of you knock it off! Right now!!

WHEN PEOPLE TRANSFER INTO ROBOT BODIES, THEY ARE GIVEN A MENTAL BLOCK AGAINST HARMING HUMANS, THOUGH THIS TURNS OUT TO HAVE A FAIR BIT OF WIGGLE ROOM.



Look at you! At each others' throats and that asshole didn't even have to half try.

There is a place on Coldpoint for everyone.

Except maybe the people who have nothing better to do than make trouble for the rest of us. Them, I might kick out.

Now everybody take a deep breath, calm down, and go about your business.



Ms. Barlowe?

Oh! Hello, Ms. Setrik. Were you caught up in all that?

I'm sorry you came to Coldpoint just as this whole place seems to be losing its collective mind.

Please, call me Hara.

I don't think it's as bad as that. We love it here so far. Brund and I are getting along better than we have in years.

Ah ... I realize you're not in charge of keeping track of her, but ... do you happen to have any idea where my daughter is at the moment?

... Actually, I probably do.

I'll go see if I can corral her.

CUSI SETRIK IS THE ONLY CHILD ON COLDPOINT.



Now, be careful to keep your line straight ...

SHE AND HER PARENTS ARRIVED A FEW MONTHS AGO. CUSI ISN'T ALLOWED TO TRANSFER, SHOULD SHE DECIDE TO, UNTIL SHE COMES OF AGE. MEANWHILE, WE HAVE TO KEEP HER EDUCATED AND ENTERTAINED.

WE DON'T HAVE A SCHOOL. WE HAVE SOME BASIC COURSEWARE FOR HER, BUT WE FELT SHE SHOULD DO MORE THAN JUST SIT IN A ROOM. I ASKED MY STAFF TO ENCOURAGE HER COMING TO THEM TO FIND OUT THINGS -- WHICH CUSI HAS EAGERLY DONE.

SHE ESPECIALLY SEEMS TO LIKE MENICA SCOTT, MY HEAD OF ENGINEERING, AND IT SEEMS TO BE MUTUAL. MIN LIKES PEOPLE WHO LIKE KNOWLEDGE, AND CUSI DEFINITELY SEEMS TO QUALIFY.

It's really hard to see!

Yes, but that's typical. Repairs seldom happen in easy-to-reach places.

You're teaching her to weld?



Strictly speaking, I'm teaching her to do plasma seaming.

It's a much more useful skill here. We don't do a lot of old-school welding.

I imagine it is ... but, Cusi, you really do have to tell your parents when you have off.

Your Mother's been out looking for you.

And it's fun!

Hi, Ms. Barlowe!



You know, I'm happy you want to learn about everything going on ... but you do also need to do your courses at home. I don't want you neglecting those.

But they're so boring! The person just talks and talks and their voice makes me sleepy.

And they're never about anything interesting. I already know how to do math and all the important stuff. I don't want to listen to history.

History's important too, though.



WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN --

Save it.

The thing is, we don't want to jump all the way to the hard line.

We don't see a problem with a generous grace period ... but if you've been here, say, five years and you still haven't transferred, something is wrong.

Nearly half our population is human. This is a drain on the economy of Coldpoint, it prevents us from improving ...

A MONTH OR SO AGO, TWO POLITICAL PARTIES HAD APPEARED OUT OF NOWHERE. IT WASN'T CLEAR TO ME EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH, SINCE WE HAVE NO ELECTED OFFICES. WE DON'T EVEN REALLY HAVE A GOVERNMENT.

Cusi, I'm going to need a minute.

Hm.



We don't hate humans but we also don't see why --

-- oh. Hmph.

Uh, anyway, if you'd like more information, please stop by our booth in the info corridor.

EXINE TRYLER. I DIDN'T YET KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT HER TO HAVE AN OPINION ON HER, BUT THE EARLY SIGNS WEREN'T POSITIVE.

Stem, Unit, can I get you to take the sign down? Thanks.



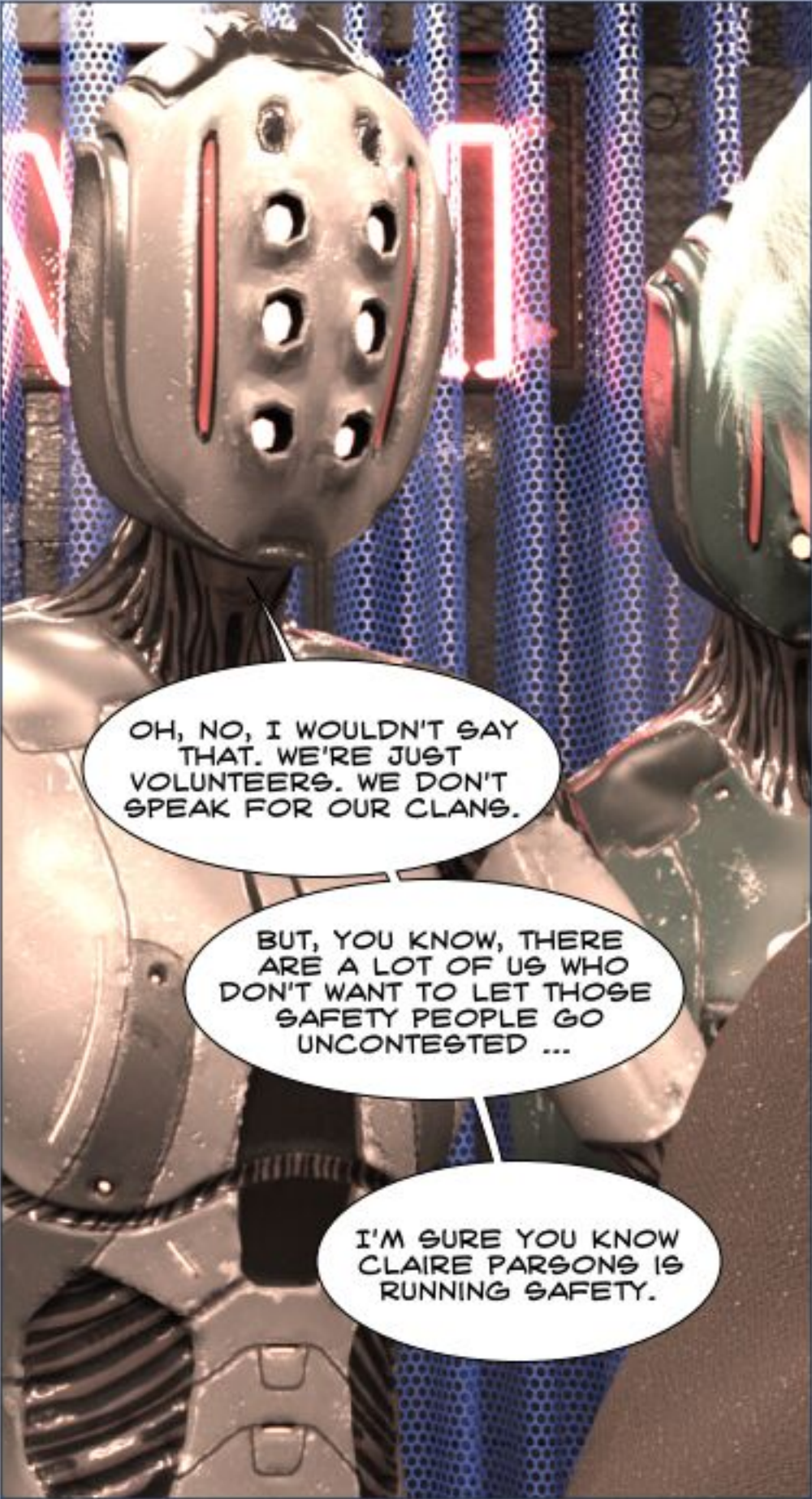
AH ... I GUESS THAT'S ALL FOR NOW, FOLKS.

THANKS FOR YOUR TIME.

My, she got out of here in a hurry, didn't she?

You know, I get the impression she's avoiding me. Don't you think so?

So are Bulwark and Deepstone officially endorsing Vigil?



OH, NO, I WOULDN'T SAY THAT. WE'RE JUST VOLUNTEERS. WE DON'T SPEAK FOR OUR CLANS.

BUT, YOU KNOW, THERE ARE A LOT OF US WHO DON'T WANT TO LET THOSE SAFETY PEOPLE GO UNCONTESTED ...

I'M SURE YOU KNOW CLAIRE PARSONS IS RUNNING SAFETY.



I didn't know that, actually. Both Vigil and Safety seem determined to keep me in the dark as much as possible.

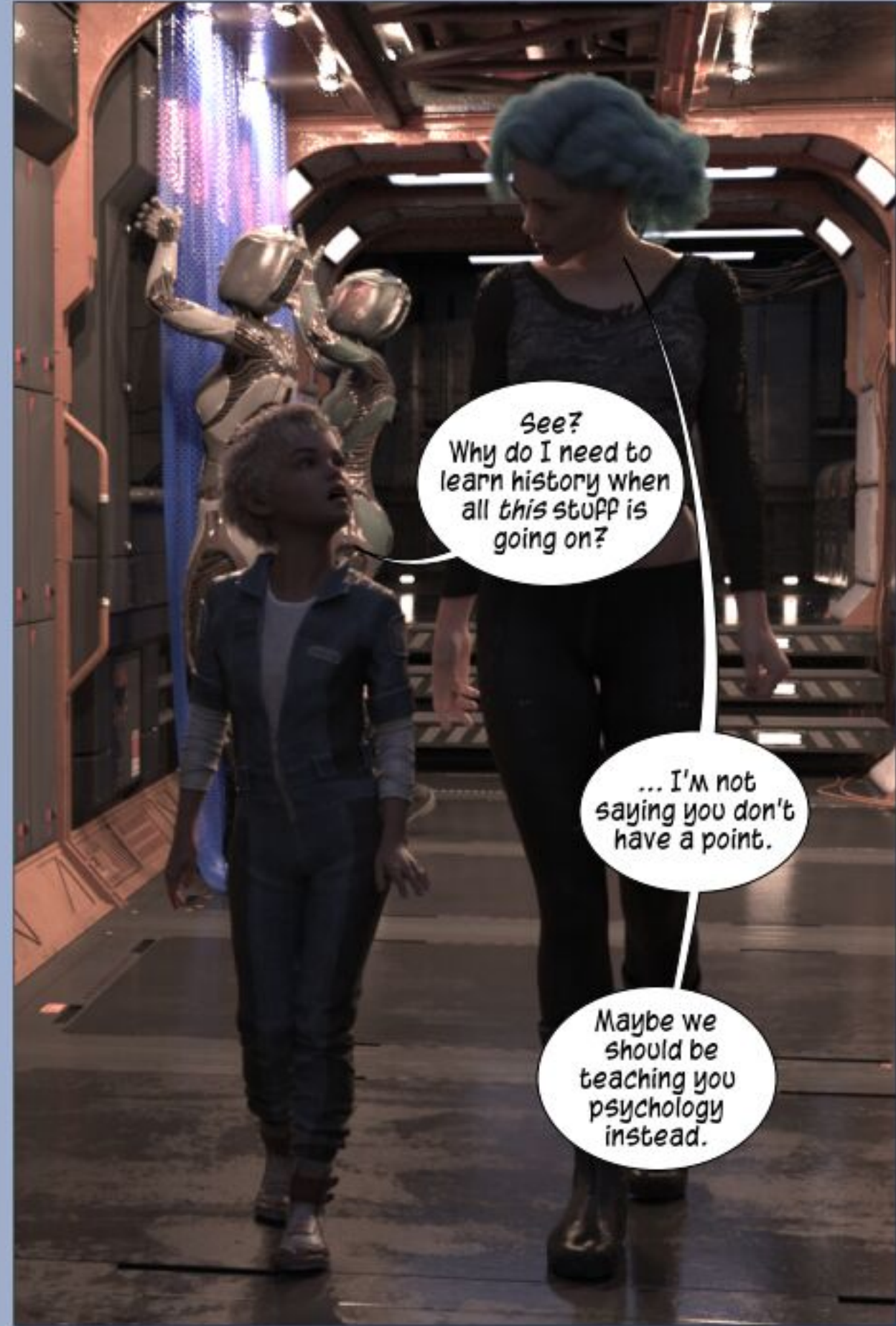
I can't say I'm surprised, though, any more than I was surprised to hear Beth Vigilance is behind Vigil.

I HADN'T THOUGHT IT WAS INTENDED TO BE A SECRET.

Mm, probably you're right, or she'd have picked a different name ... Tell me, what's the goal here? I mean, why have a political party at all when I'm the only person making the rules? Are you planning on a coup?

NO! WE'RE JUST HOPING FOR ... INFLUENCE. IF WE CAN COME TO YOU AND SAY "LOOK, WE HAVE A MAJORITY WHO WANT THIS" ...

And is that what Tryler wants too? ... No, don't bother answering that. But, y'know, you're not going to get a lot of traction if you've got a leader who won't even talk to me.



See? Why do I need to learn history when all this stuff is going on?

... I'm not saying you don't have a point.

Maybe we should be teaching you psychology instead.

TREAC GLADSTONE, ONE OF MY TWO SIGNIFICANT OTHERS, RUNS COLDPOINT'S ONLY THEATRICAL COMPANY. SHE HAS A "NO SEX DURING PRODUCTIONS" RULE --- FROM FIRST REHEARSAL TO CLOSING NIGHT. BUT THE CASTING PROCESS IS NOT CONSIDERED PART OF THE PRODUCTION, SO I WANTED TO GET SOME PERSONAL TIME WITH HER WHILE I STILL COULD.



It just ... We can't just stop. We're not rocks -- progress, migration, motion is ... Modernity. It's animate, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire. For. Even if we go faster than we should. We can't wait. And wait for what? God?

He isn't coming back. And even if he did ...

If he ever did come back, if he ever dared to show his face, or his glyph or whatever, in the garden again ... if after all of this destruction, if after all of the terrible days of this terrible century he returned to see ... how much suffering his abandonment had created, if he did come back ... you should sue the bastard.

That's my only contribution to all this theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare he.



He's cute. Can we keep him?

You know that hardly suffices, Julia.

But his delivery and emotion is good, he knows to project, and he can clearly learn lines. Might have to teach him blocking, but what else is new?

Thank you, you can come down now. Watch your step.



Ms. Barlowe! Is it true that a D just fell over dead last night for no reason?

Where'd you hear that?

I heard it from someone who said they got it from Phydia Solar, who was there.

Is it true?

Nobody ever dies "for no reason." There's always a reason. Medical is investigating.

That's all I have.

We'll be starting callbacks in ... I'd say two days. Perhaps three. If you haven't heard from us in a week, you won't.

But, between us, expect a call. And start thinking about making a large hole in your schedule.

I'll do that. Thank you.



-- sigh --

Treac, it's been months. Don't tell me you're still unhappy with it ...

I'm not unhappy, love.

It's just that every day I look in this mirror and wonder when I'll recognize that person as me again.



I wonder if the M's aren't right: if you're going to be a robot, best to give up on looking at all human.

That's ... very startling to hear from you.

Well, but look at me! I didn't come out looking like a person anyway. I'm a shiny sex toy.

But you get to have sex. In new and exciting ways!

With people who are interested in sex toys, yes. And who don't mind the taste of plastic.

Not to mention the new and exciting hazards ... Wendy, whatever it is that happened to that D, you need to address it quickly.

I adore Julia, but she's never been much for keeping her mouth zipped. If she's heard, then a lot of others have heard now too.



Believe me, if I could deal with it faster, I would.

We don't even know what happened yet, and I can't proceed until we do.

We got lucky -- only two witnesses, and Ti Fullwrench has been keeping quiet. But apparently Phydia Solar didn't have the brains to.

Or she's a robot-hater who was looking for ammunition. I don't know.



She could have just felt people needed to know.

It's alarming, Wendy. What if we all have it? What if any of us robots could fall over at any time?

I very much doubt it. I just don't see how we could have failed to notice something like that. I think it's got to be something that was peculiar to her.

Honestly, I'm far more worried about what someone like Parsons will do with the information. I need to stay a step ahead of that. If I can.

C'mon, let's do something more enjoyable, OK?

... I like the taste of plastic.





CIL MENARD IS MY DIRECTOR OF AGRICULTURE. SHE IS VERY HANDS-ON.



Don't get too close. You don't want to breathe that.

OK, Ms. Cil.

I SOMETIMES THINK SHE KNOWS THE CONDITION OF EVERY PLANT IN EVERY SINGLE ONE OF OUR BEDS. WHICH IS SAYING A LOT, SINCE WE GROW NOT ONLY FOOD FOR THE HUMANS BUT RAW MATERIALS FOR STRUCTURES, TOOLS, FURNISHINGS, ROBOT FRAMES ...

SHE TAKES VANDALISM TO HER CROPS AS A PERSONAL AFFRONT.



All the way out here, huh?

It's not a class day, Ms. Barlowe! And mom knows where I am.

I was going to show Cusi what polymer cane looks like, and we came in to find this.

Only the one bed. We checked the nearby rooms, and I've got Jin looking in the other facilities. Haven't found anything else.



I didn't realize you were part of the Cusi training ecosystem.

Isn't everyone?

I think I'm on heavy rotation, actually. Not as much as Min. My stuff's not as interesting.

She'd really like to pick Furst's brain, but he works mostly in places she'd need special gear, which we don't have in her size. Yet.

She's a sponge. She'll probably know how to do everything in Coldpoint by the time she's fourteen.

Good. She can take over.



Don't we have fire detectors in here?

This wasn't fire. That's chemical smoke. Fumes.

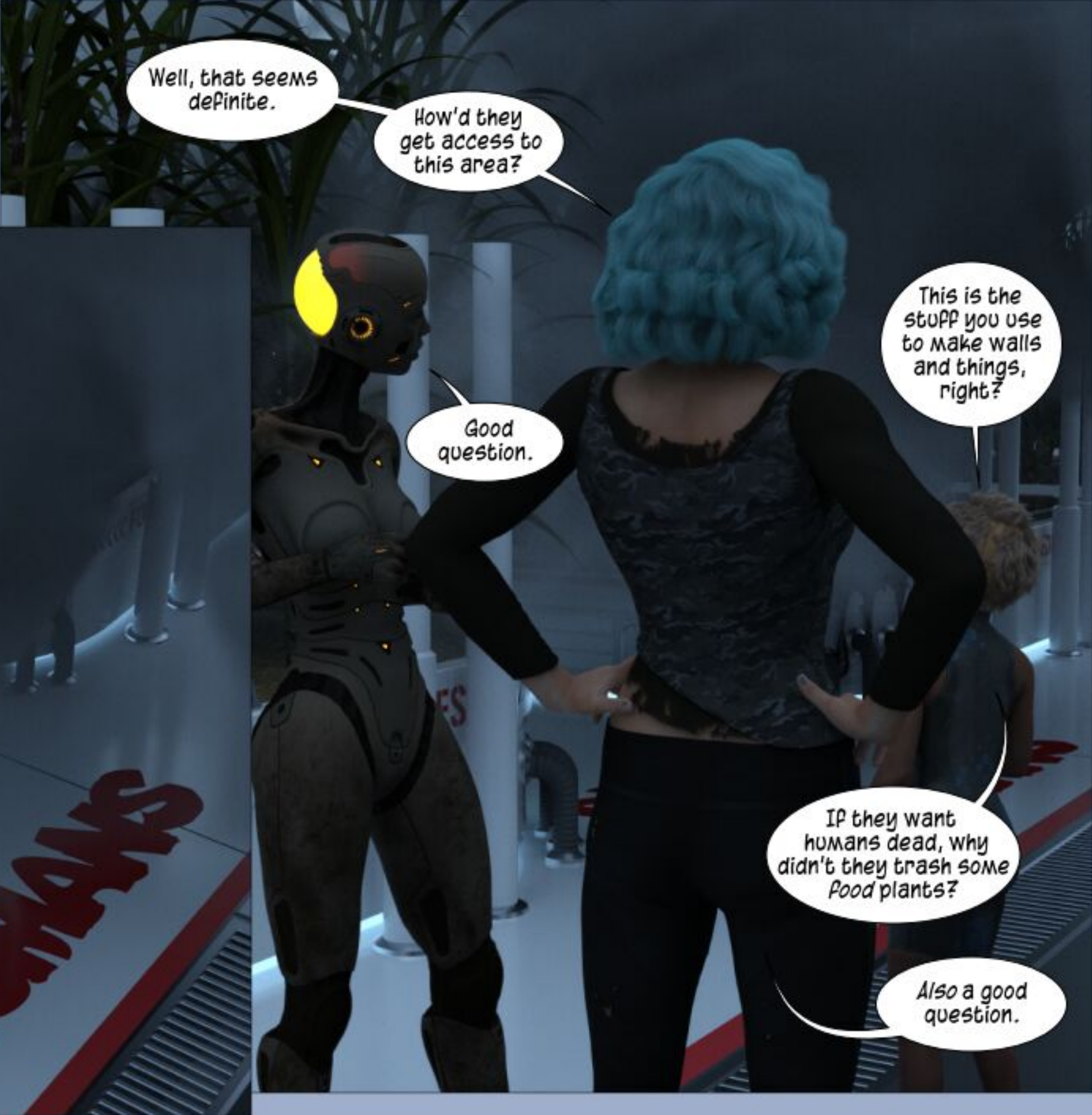
The plants were dissolved. See all that black ooze? That's what's left of the cane.

We have heat detectors, but we can't do smoke detectors -- they'd false-alarm on the sprays and other things we use.

So, just one bed -- do we assume this is a statement of some kind?

Oh, yeah! Forgot the important part.

See if you can get a closer look at the floor without breathing any of that stuff.



Well, that seems definite.

How'd they get access to this area?

Good question.

This is the stuff you use to make walls and things, right?

If they want humans dead, why didn't they trash some food plants?

Also a good question.

I WAS MORE DETERMINED THAN EVER TO CATCH AND QUESTION SOME OF THE COPPERPLATES, BUT THEY WOULDN'T COME OUT THAT EARLY IN THE DAY. MEANWHILE, I DALLIED WITH MINOR BUSINESS FOR AN HOUR OR TWO BECAUSE I WAS PUTTING OFF HAVING A CONVERSATION I NEEDED TO HAVE.



SAFETY

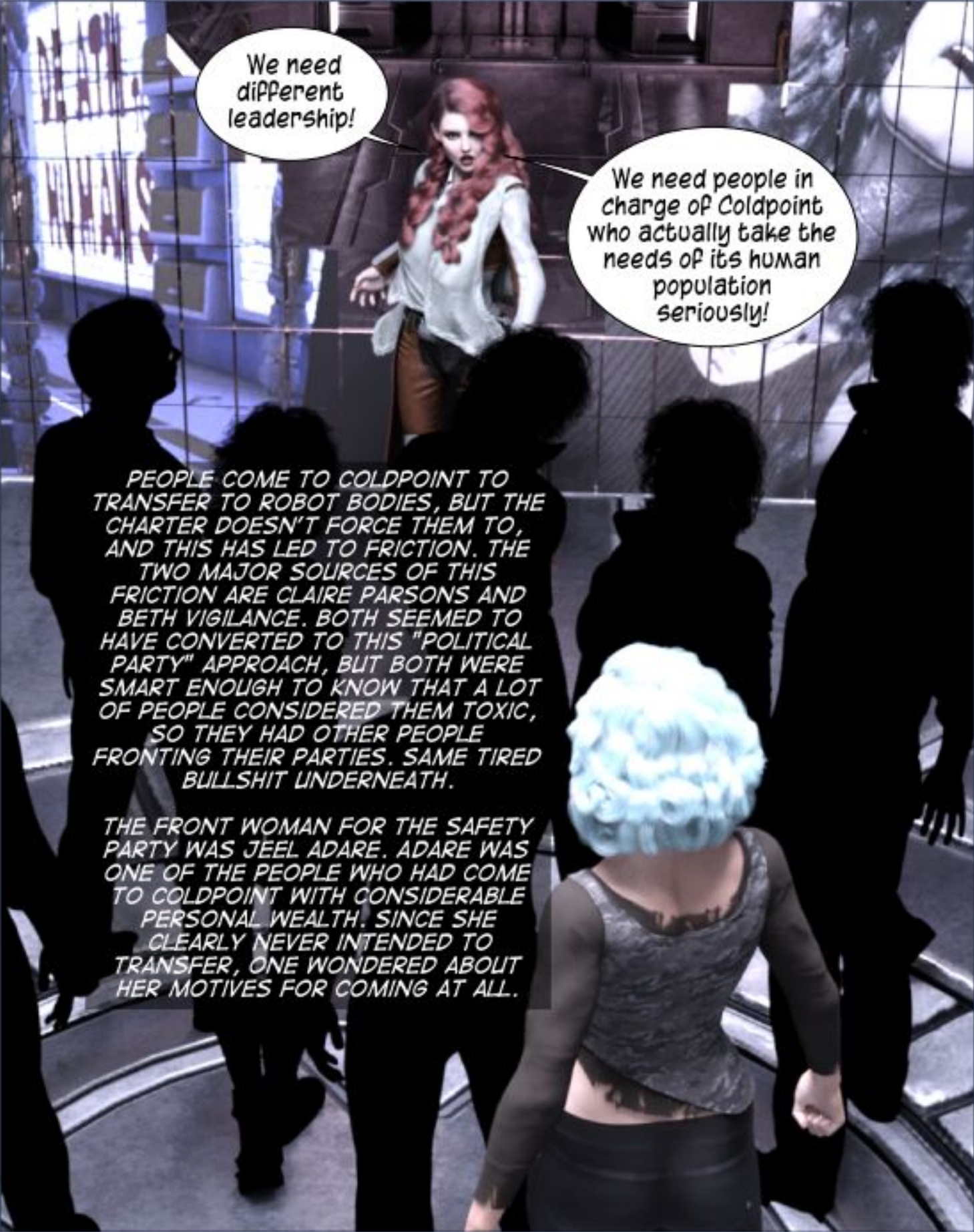
It's a crisis!

As if it weren't bad enough to have these bands of robots wandering around calling for our deaths ...

... now we have robots going haywire and endangering us in the corridors!

It's not safe for humans in Coldpoint!

And the operations manager refuses to do a thing about it!



We need different leadership!

We need people in charge of Coldpoint who actually take the needs of its human population seriously!

PEOPLE COME TO COLDPOINT TO TRANSFER TO ROBOT BODIES, BUT THE CHARTER DOESN'T FORCE THEM TO, AND THIS HAS LED TO FRICTION. THE TWO MAJOR SOURCES OF THIS FRICTION ARE CLAIRE PARSONS AND BETH VIGILANCE. BOTH SEEMED TO HAVE CONVERTED TO THIS "POLITICAL PARTY" APPROACH, BUT BOTH WERE SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE CONSIDERED THEM TOXIC, SO THEY HAD OTHER PEOPLE FRONTING THEIR PARTIES. SAME TIRED BULLSHIT UNDERNEATH.

THE FRONT WOMAN FOR THE SAFETY PARTY WAS JEEL ADARE. ADARE WAS ONE OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAD COME TO COLDPOINT WITH CONSIDERABLE PERSONAL WEALTH, SINCE SHE CLEARLY NEVER INTENDED TO TRANSFER, ONE WONDERED ABOUT HER MOTIVES FOR COMING AT ALL.



Managed to get an image to use, but wouldn't actually get her any help, huh?

She was already being helped. They took her to medical a few seconds later. We're not monsters.

That's somewhat debatable.

We're going to talk about a few things now.

Not out here ...

No. Not out here.



Ah! The power behind the throne!

What?? Why'd you bring her in here?

Well, I have nothing to say.

I wasn't here to talk to you anyway, Parsons.

I didn't have much choice. When Her Majesty commands an audience ...



Not a very nice attitude for someone who really should want to stay on my good side.

See, that's the thing. You do whatever you want, and everybody else is expected to kiss your ass and go along with it.

I haven't forgotten that you confiscated my cargo two years ago.

And I haven't forgotten that the only reason anyone would bring in a hundred pulse whips is to use them to subdue and possibly even kill robots. They don't do anything to humans.

You were setting up to arm an anti-robot militia, Adare, and you weren't pooling anyone.



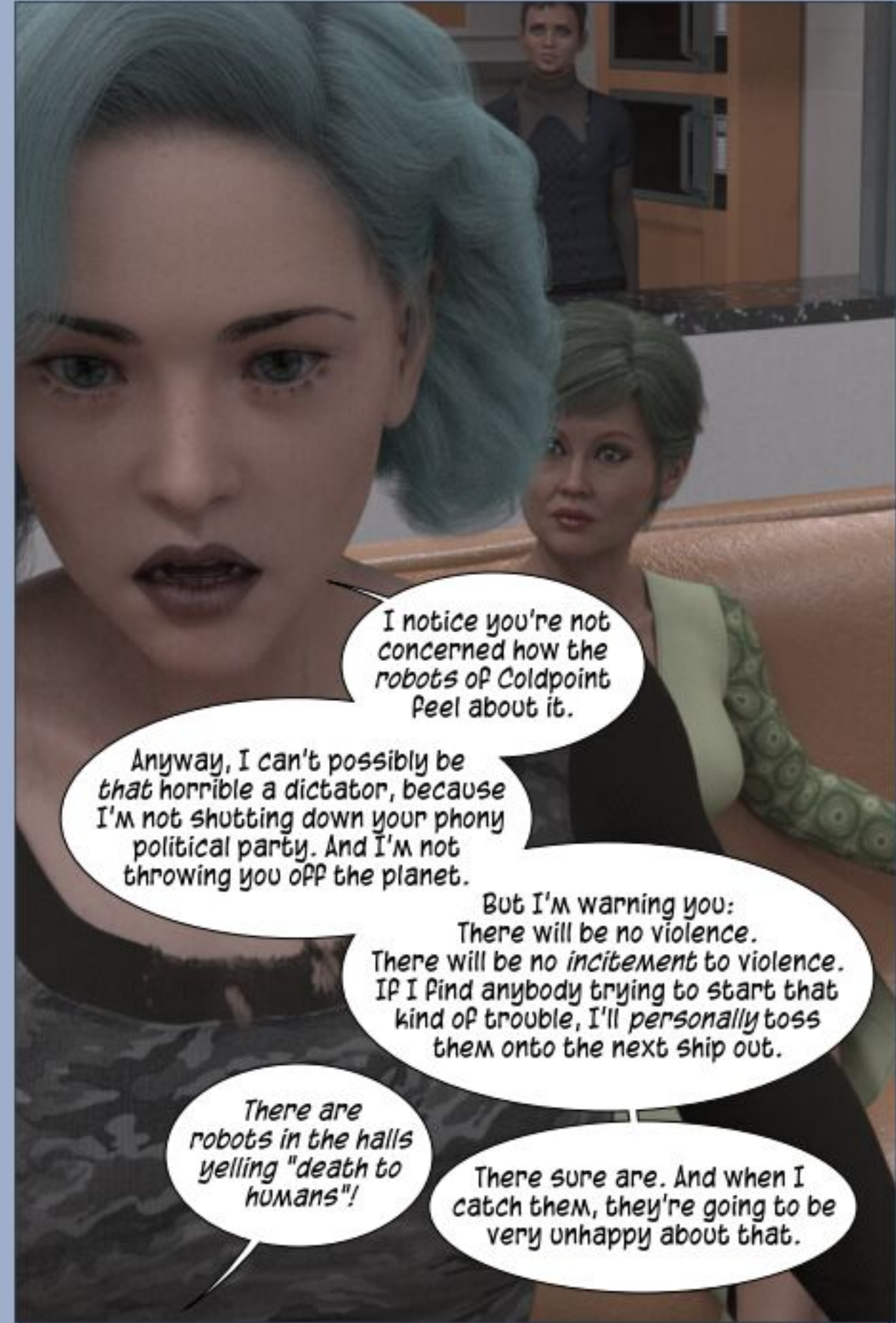
They were for our protection! And it's even clearer now how badly they were needed! If you weren't such a robot-kisser, you'd see that!

And there's no rule against people importing or owning weapons!

There are also no rules against my confiscating anything I consider undesirable to the settlement.

In fact, there are no rules, Adare. Only policies. And I'm the ultimate arbiter of those.

You see? That's exactly what I mean! How much longer do you think the humans of Coldpoint will sit still for your dictatorship?



I notice you're not concerned how the robots of Coldpoint feel about it.

Anyway, I can't possibly be that horrible a dictator, because I'm not shutting down your phony political party. And I'm not throwing you off the planet.

But I'm warning you: There will be no violence. There will be no incitement to violence. If I find anybody trying to start that kind of trouble, I'll personally toss them onto the next ship out.

There are robots in the halls yelling "death to humans"!

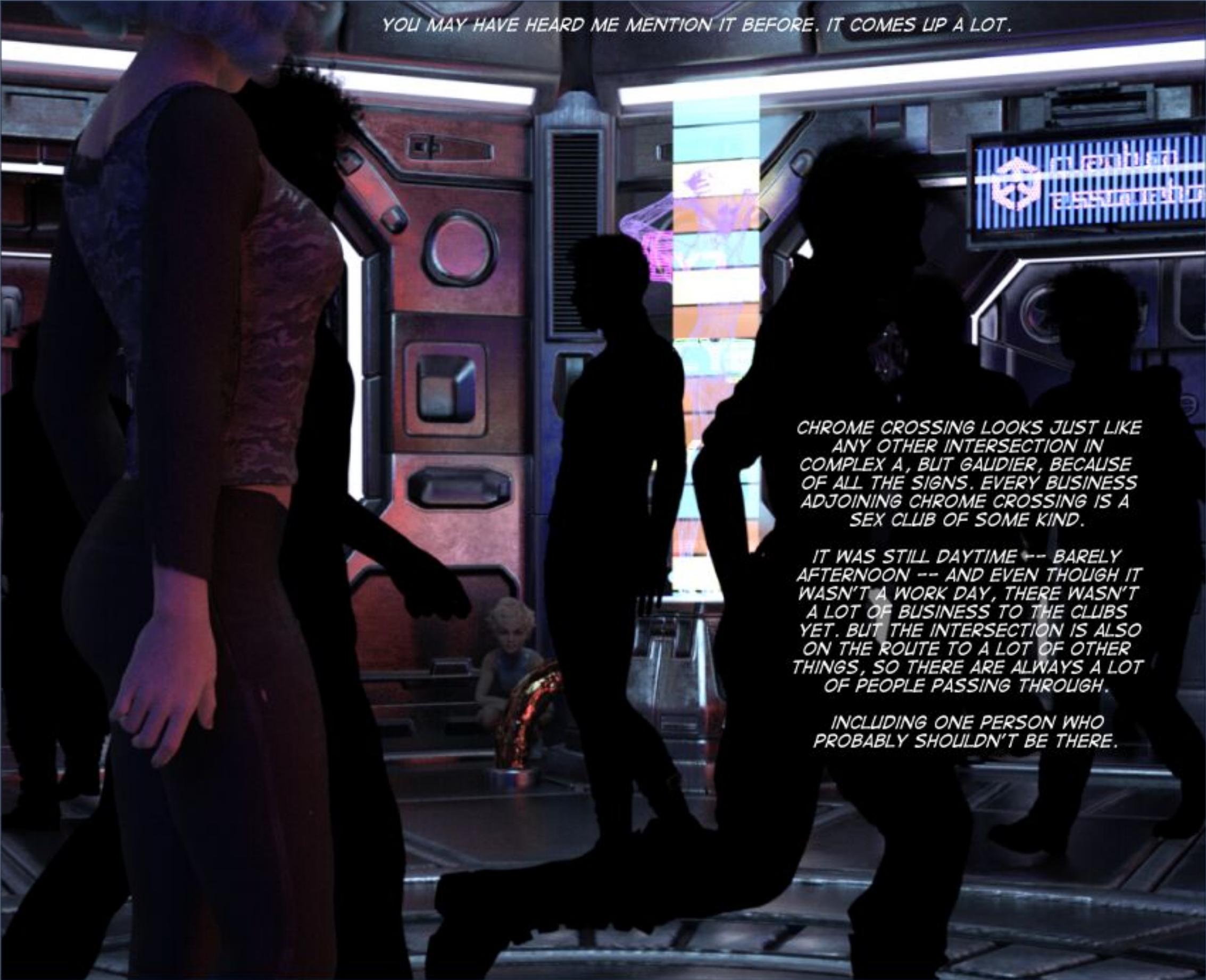
There sure are. And when I catch them, they're going to be very unhappy about that.



You know, if the point of this "political party" approach is to try to influence my opinion on policy, that's not a completely bad idea ... but you're doing a horrible job of it.

And if the point is actually to set up an overthrow of the current operating structure -- by which I mean getting rid of me -- you really should rethink that before you get hurt.

MOST OF COMPLEX A IS SET UP WITH OCTAGONAL INTERSECTIONS -- FOUR CONNECTING PASSAGES AT CARDINAL POINTS, AND THE OTHER FOUR PASSAGES LEAD TO BUSINESSES OR HOMES OR WHATEVER. ONE OF THOSE INTERSECTIONS IS CALLED "CHROME CROSSING."



YOU MAY HAVE HEARD ME MENTION IT BEFORE. IT COMES UP A LOT.

CHROME CROSSING LOOKS JUST LIKE ANY OTHER INTERSECTION IN COMPLEX A, BUT GAUDIER BECAUSE OF ALL THE SIGNS. EVERY BUSINESS ADJOINING CHROME CROSSING IS A SEX CLUB OF SOME KIND.

IT WAS STILL DAYTIME -- BARELY AFTERNOON -- AND EVEN THOUGH IT WASN'T A WORK DAY, THERE WASN'T A LOT OF BUSINESS TO THE CLUBS YET. BUT THE INTERSECTION IS ALSO ON THE ROUTE TO A LOT OF OTHER THINGS, SO THERE ARE ALWAYS A LOT OF PEOPLE PASSING THROUGH.

INCLUDING ONE PERSON WHO PROBABLY SHOULDN'T BE THERE.



You get around, don't you? I bet your mom doesn't know where you are *this* time.

She might not be too happy if she did.

I'm not going in any of the places.

No, you're sure not. What's the attraction? I have a feeling you're not trying to figure out what's going on.

Kind of? I know about sex, Ms. Barlowe. Mom told me.

I just want to know about why people come here.

It's always humans, and it's usually guys.



Well, I'm a big believer in hands-on data collection, and I can't fault your methods.

But I still think your parents probably wouldn't like --

HUMANS!!

-- hm?



YOUR HABITS EXPLOIT THE ROBOTS OF COLDPOINT!

YOU'RE HERE SEEING TO YOUR LUSTS WHILE YOU SHOULD BE PLANNING YOUR TRANSFERS!

TRANSFER OR DIE! DEATH TO HUMANS!!

... Cusi, I have to take this call.



HEY!!

We're going to have a talk now.

AH, SHIT.

RUN!

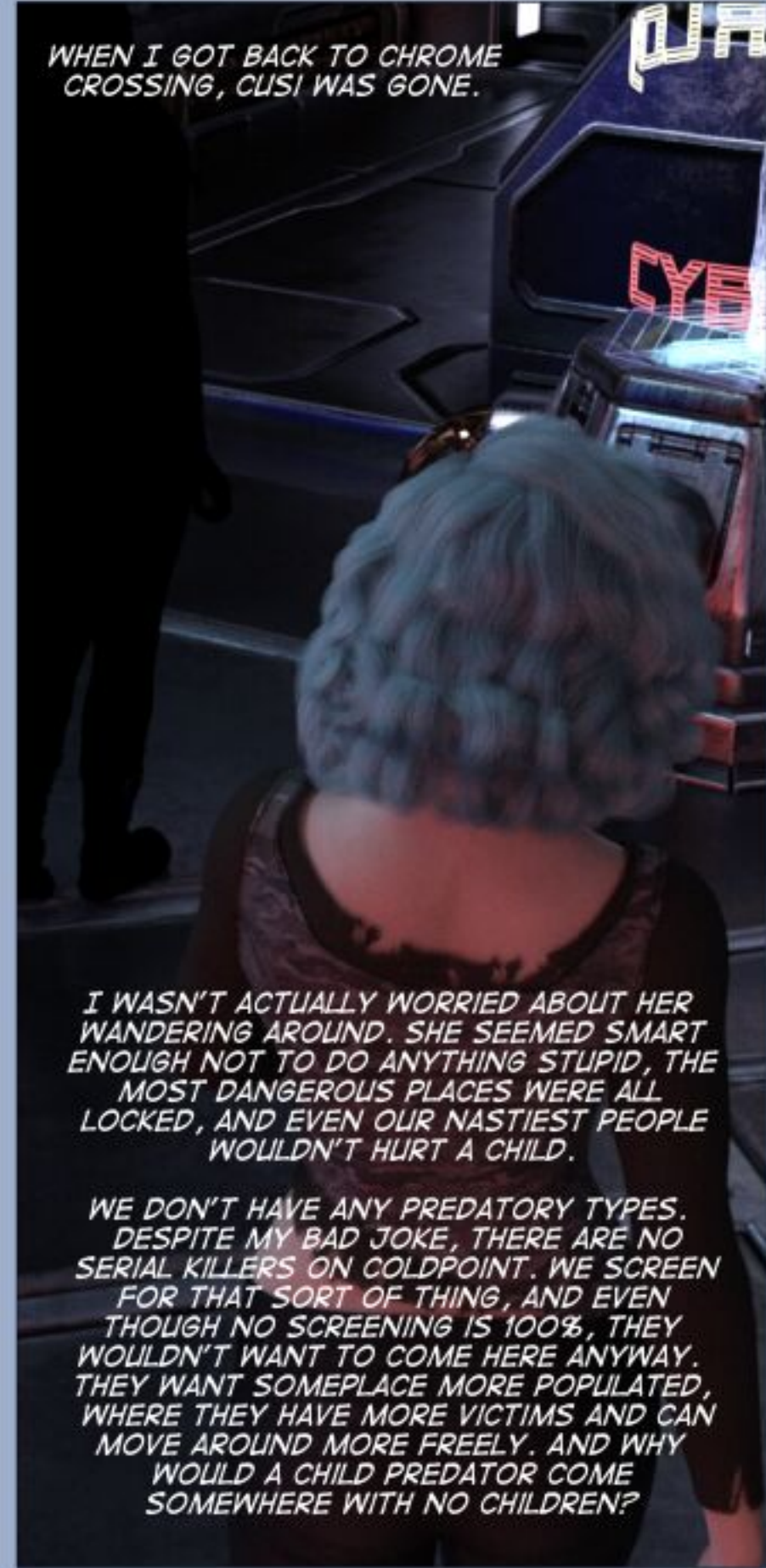


Damn it, they move fast.

EVEN THOUGH THIS TIME THERE WERE NO CROWDS IN MY WAY, THEY GOT AWAY AGAIN. THEY BEAT ME TO THE NEXT INTERSECTION AND I DIDN'T SEE WHICH WAY THEY WENT.

THIS TIME I'D HAD THE GOOD SENSE TO TRY TO ID THEM BEFORE GETTING THEIR ATTENTION. THEY DIDN'T HAVE IDS. THAT WAS INTERESTING FOR ITS OWN REASONS, BUT MEANT I COULDN'T TRACK THEM DOWN EASILY.

I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO CATCH THEM IN THE ACT, WHICH MEANT I WAS PROBABLY GOING TO NEED HELP.



WHEN I GOT BACK TO CHROME CROSSING, CUSI WAS GONE.

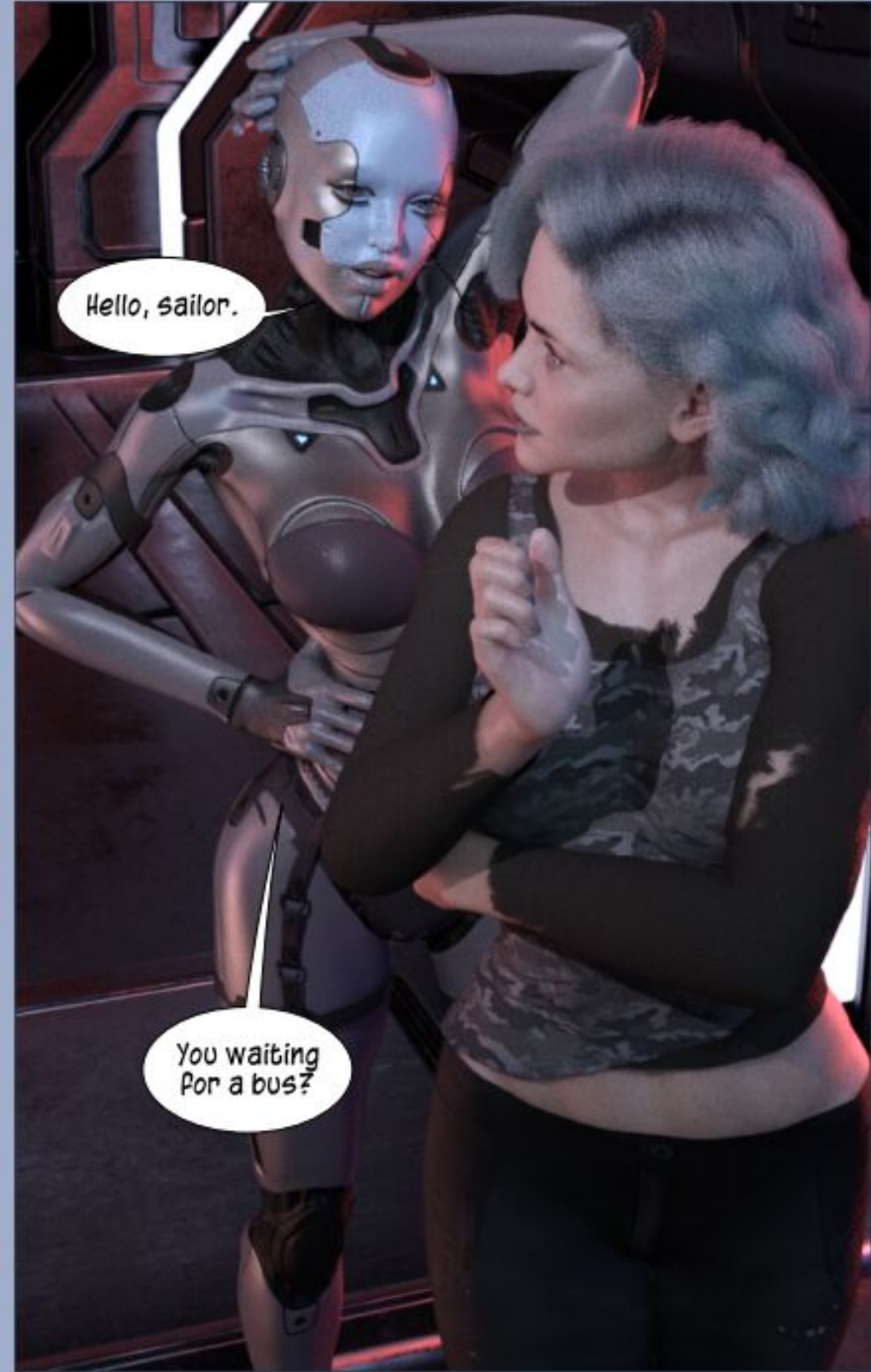
I WASN'T ACTUALLY WORRIED ABOUT HER WANDERING AROUND. SHE SEEMED SMART ENOUGH NOT TO DO ANYTHING STUPID. THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACES WERE ALL LOCKED, AND EVEN OUR NASTIEST PEOPLE WOULDN'T HURT A CHILD.

WE DON'T HAVE ANY PREDATORY TYPES. DESPITE MY BAD JOKE, THERE ARE NO SERIAL KILLERS ON COLDPOINT. WE SCREEN FOR THAT SORT OF THING, AND EVEN THOUGH NO SCREENING IS 100%, THEY WOULDN'T WANT TO COME HERE ANYWAY. THEY WANT SOMEPLACE MORE POPULATED, WHERE THEY HAVE MORE VICTIMS AND CAN MOVE AROUND MORE FREELY. AND WHY WOULD A CHILD PREDATOR COME SOMEWHERE WITH NO CHILDREN?



I ADMIT, THOUGH, THAT I DID WONDER WHAT NEW TROUBLE SHE'D RUN OFF TO GET INTO.

-- ahem --



Hello, sailor.

You waiting for a bus?



COLDPOINT IS MOSTLY UNDERGROUND. AIR SUPPLY IS VERY IMPORTANT. EVEN TO THE ROBOTS.

OUR VENT CORRIDORS ARE LARGE AND STURDY ... AND EVERYWHERE.

YOU DON'T SEE PEOPLE USING THEM TO SNEAK AROUND, NOT JUST BECAUSE WE DON'T HAVE MUCH SNEAKING AROUND, BUT BECAUSE THEY'RE USUALLY NOT TALL OR WIDE ENOUGH FOR AN ADULT TO MOVE AROUND IN EASILY.

THIS WASN'T AN ISSUE FOR CUSI, THOUGH.

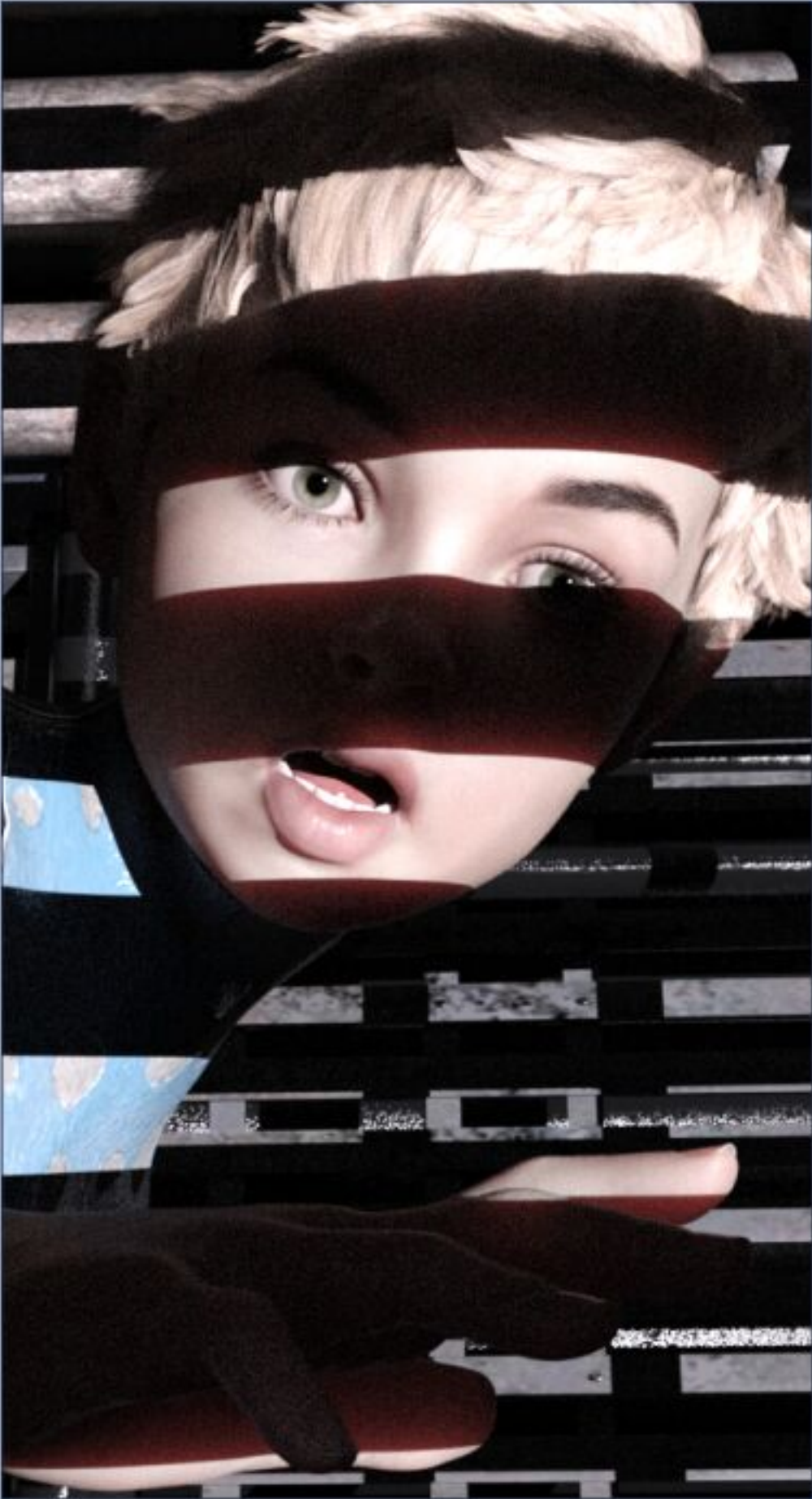


OK, I THINK IT'S SAFE. IF ANYONE WAS GOING TO FIND US HERE, THEY'D HAVE GOTTEN HERE BY NOW.

BUT I THINK WE'D BETTER STOP FOR THE DAY. SHE COULD BE OUT THERE LOOKING FOR US.

YEAH. SHE'S PERSISTENT. I THINK WE NEED TO GET OUT OF THIS STUFF FAST.

JUST AS WELL. AFTER THAT RUN, I FEEL LIKE MY KNEES ARE GOING TO FALL OFF.



BYLA STARNE IS MY OTHER SIGNIFICANT OTHER. A FEW MONTHS AGO, FRUSTRATED BY THE SITUATION FOR SOLO SEX WORKERS, SHE BEGAN WORKING AT THE RED X CLUB. SHE'S ALSO ONE OF THE THREE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN RUNNING IT SINCE GIL FILDIE DIED. THEY'VE BEEN TRYING TO RESTORE ITS REPUTATION AND BRING BACK BUSINESS. THEY'VE SUCCEEDED -- SO WELL THAT I'VE BARELY HAD A CHANCE TO SEE HER.



IT WAS SHEER CHANCE THAT I HAPPENED TO BE PASSING BY BEFORE THEIR NIGHT'S BUSINESS HAD BEGUN, AND THAT BYLA HAD SEEN ME. I HADN'T PLANNED ON IT. BUT I'D TAKE IT.



MMMhhh ...

There's definitely something to be said for sex in the daytime.

Especially when you've got a lot of stress to work off.

Oh, well, I don't know that I'm that stressed. I mean, I've been worse.

I didn't mean just you.



Club's running you ragged?

Some, yeah. I mean, it's a good problem to have.

But also ... Wendy, how bad is this malfunction? Are we all going to get it?

... I don't know.

Medical's take is that if it were a big systematic failure we'd have seen a lot more cases of it. But I'm worried too. And I don't know what to tell people.

If it's any reassurance, it doesn't come on suddenly. It's like your metabolism slowly accelerates. You get jittery and start moving and talking faster, and having less control over your speech and movement. Apparently it takes weeks.



WHAT??

Yeah. So we should be able to catch it before it becomes fatal ... the problem is right now if we catch it we don't know what to do ...

Come on!

Throw some clothes on if you need to, but hurry!

Byla, what --?



I got Onika to join us a couple of weeks ago. She used to be in the callout group with me.

Yes, I remember.

She was in the same situation I was, and we can use her. She's good.

But she's been acting strange. Like she's been having trouble moving. Bumping into things. Waving her arms around like crazy.

And talking really fast.



She was in the building an hour ago.

Onika!

Are you back here?



Onika!!

bylai dontPeelsogoo didntthinkicanworktodayimsorrymay beillFeelbetterina while

Forget about work, Onika.

We're taking you to medical. Right now. Byla, we may need to carry her.



Oh, gosh.

You have something?

No, you are not. But we may have to shut you down so you don't die. Until we can repair it.

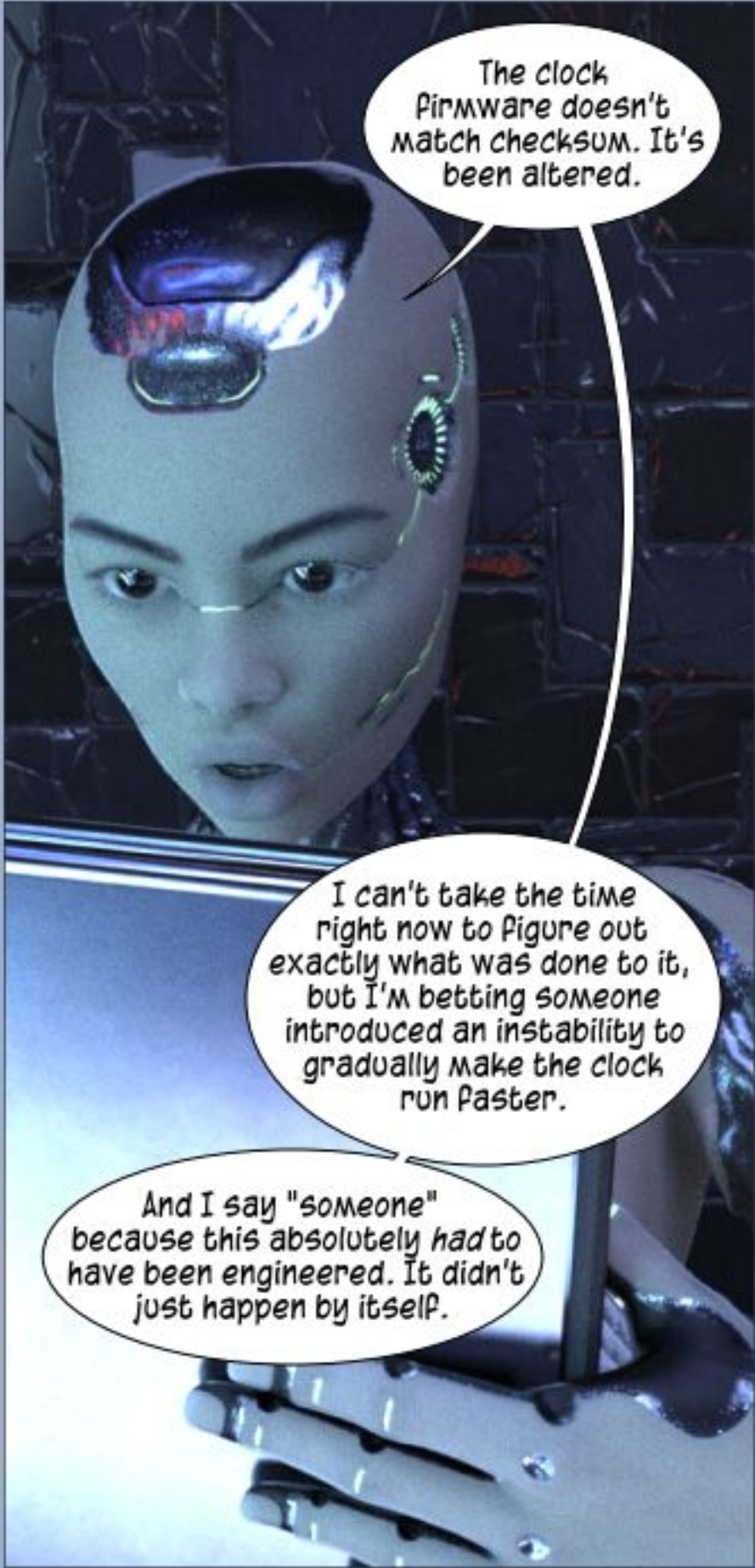
amigo ingtodie

ssh. It's all right. We know.

Just do your best.

i'm sorry i'm sorry i can't hold still i'm sorry my head feels--

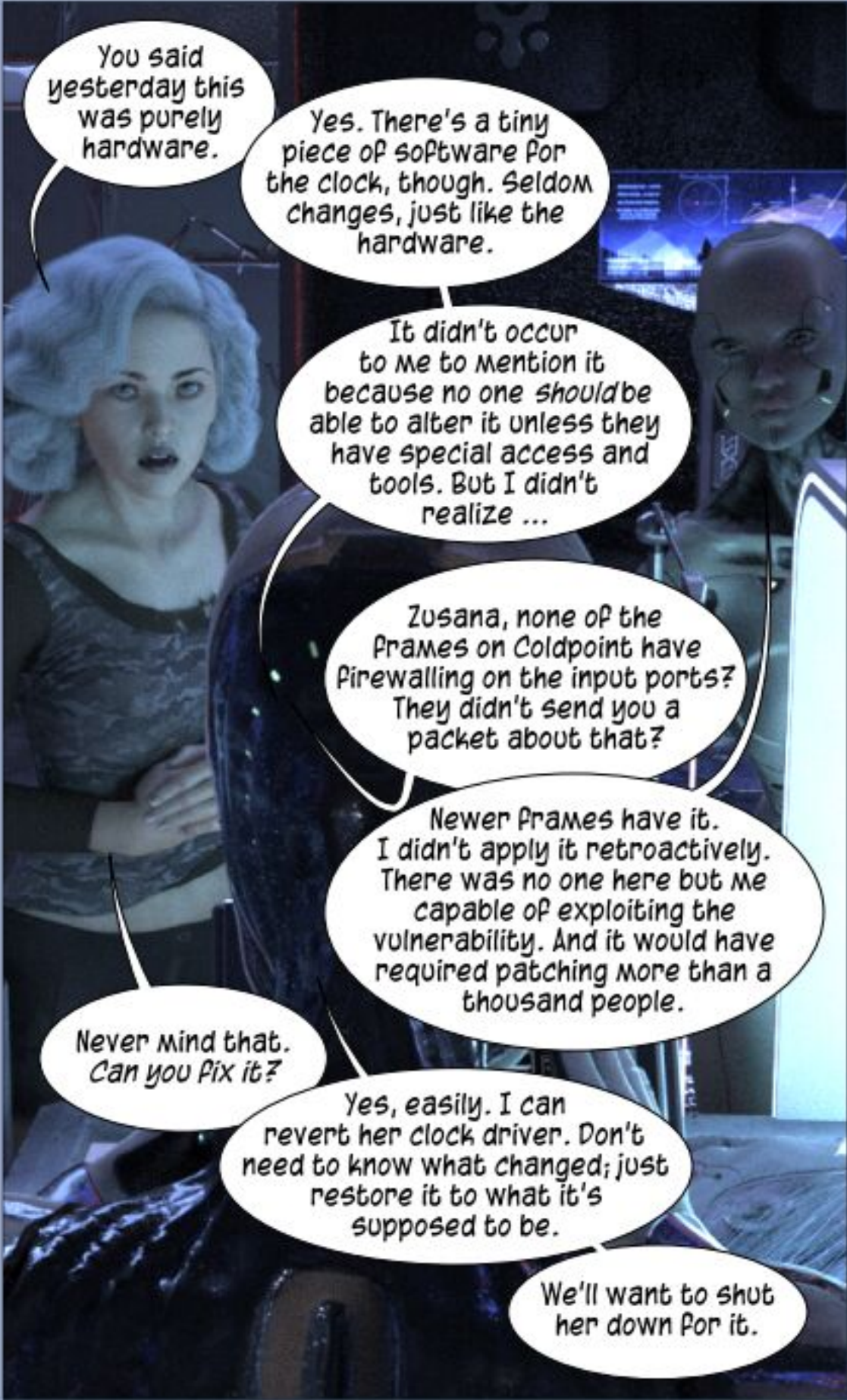
Irene, based on these rates we have another twenty, thirty minutes at most before it's unsafe.



The clock firmware doesn't match checksum. It's been altered.

I can't take the time right now to figure out exactly what was done to it, but I'm betting someone introduced an instability to gradually make the clock run faster.

And I say "someone" because this absolutely had to have been engineered. It didn't just happen by itself.



You said yesterday this was purely hardware.

Yes. There's a tiny piece of software for the clock, though. Seldom changes, just like the hardware.

It didn't occur to me to mention it because no one should be able to alter it unless they have special access and tools. But I didn't realize ...

Zusana, none of the Prames on Coldpoint have firewalled on the input ports? They didn't send you a packet about that?

Newer Prames have it. I didn't apply it retroactively. There was no one here but me capable of exploiting the vulnerability. And it would have required patching more than a thousand people.

Never mind that. Can you fix it?

Yes, easily. I can revert her clock driver. Don't need to know what changed; just restore it to what it's supposed to be.

We'll want to shut her down for it.



AN HOUR LATER, BOTH OF THEM WERE BACK TO NORMAL.

... I mean, I don't remember anything weird happening with any of my customers ...

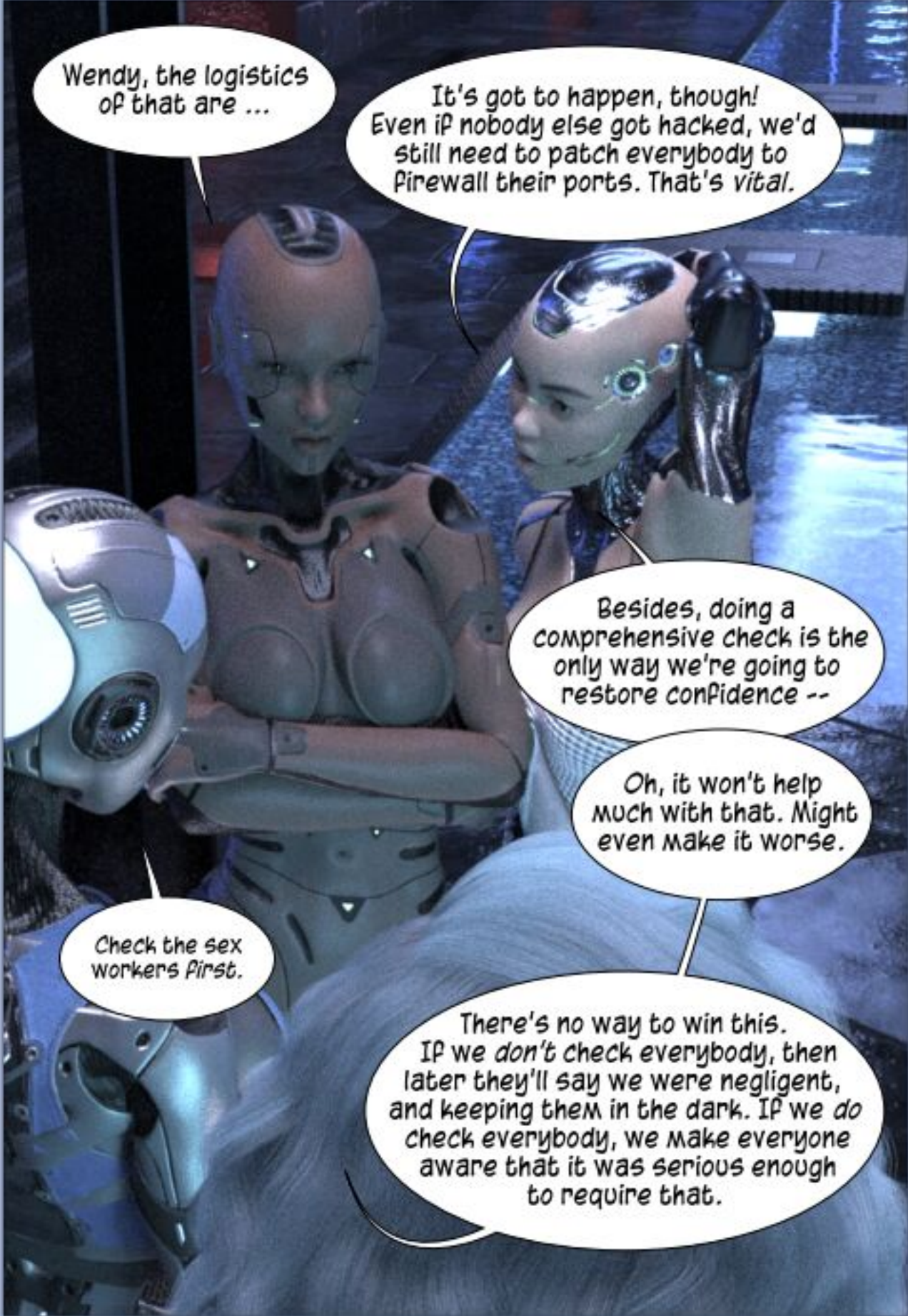
Me neither.

... but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. I see a lot of people, y'know?

Hmm. Still, it seems likely that one of your customers had to be the vector.

So we check and patch all the sex workers.

No. We check and patch all the robots. Every robot in Coldpoint.



Wendy, the logistics of that are ...

It's got to happen, though! Even if nobody else got hacked, we'd still need to patch everybody to firewall their ports. That's vital.

Besides, doing a comprehensive check is the only way we're going to restore confidence --

Oh, it won't help much with that. Might even make it worse.

Check the sex workers first.

There's no way to win this. If we don't check everybody, then later they'll say we were negligent, and keeping them in the dark. If we do check everybody, we make everyone aware that it was serious enough to require that.



No, this is wrecked for good, and I don't know how we'll recover ...

Wendy.

When did you last get sleep? Like, a full night's sleep?

Um. Last night they found Silgret ... the night before that they found Zodia ...

You need to get some rest. And a shower. And a change of clothes. You'll feel better. Let Medical handle this.

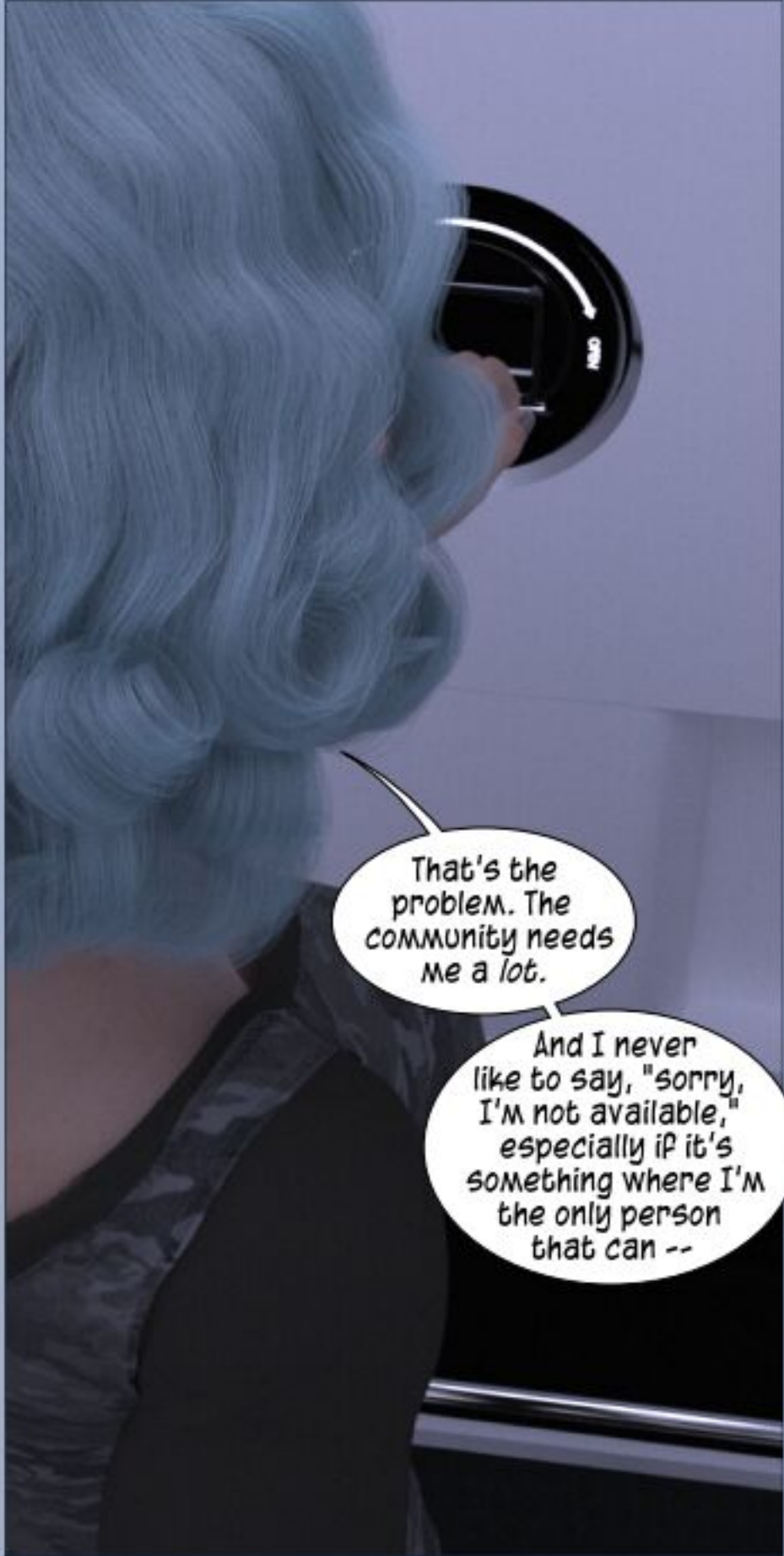
C'mon. I'll tuck you in.



You know, now that I have a minute to breathe, I think you've got a point. I feel wrecked.

I know emergencies are what they are, but you've got to be more careful about how hard you push yourself.

If you won't do it for your friends and lovers, do it for a community that needs you in good working condition.



That's the problem. The community needs me a lot.

And I never like to say, "sorry, I'm not available," especially if it's something where I'm the only person that can --



WENDY!!



-- ahem --

You know, there are much easier ways of getting a good night's sleep.



What do you remember?

... My door bit me?

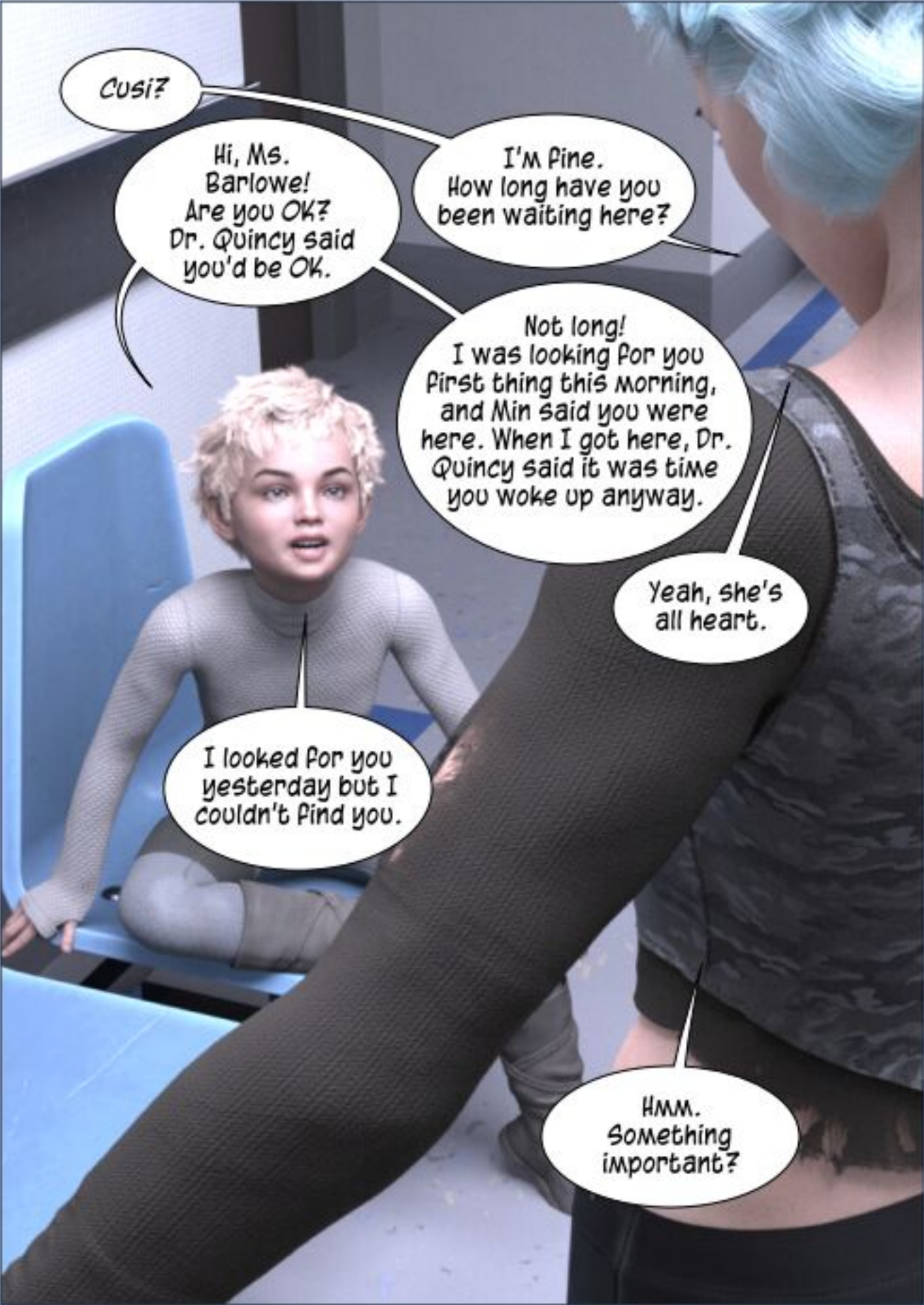
Close enough. You were given a very strong electric shock. Stopped your heart. Fortunately Ms. Starne had the presence of mind and the knowledge to start it again.

You're fine now. I only kept you here overnight so you could get some sleep. She wanted to sit vigil, but I sent her home.

You probably want to check with her. And with Min, who's looking into what happened to your door. Your clothes are over there. I have to get back to the patch work.



By the way, once you get dressed and together, there's someone waiting to see you out here.



Cusi?

Hi, Ms. Barlowe! Are you OK? Dr. Quincy said you'd be OK.

I'm fine. How long have you been waiting here?

Not long! I was looking for you first thing this morning, and Min said you were here. When I got here, Dr. Quincy said it was time you woke up anyway.

Yeah, she's all heart.

I looked for you yesterday but I couldn't find you.

Hmm. Something important?



Those robots who walk around saying "death to humans"?

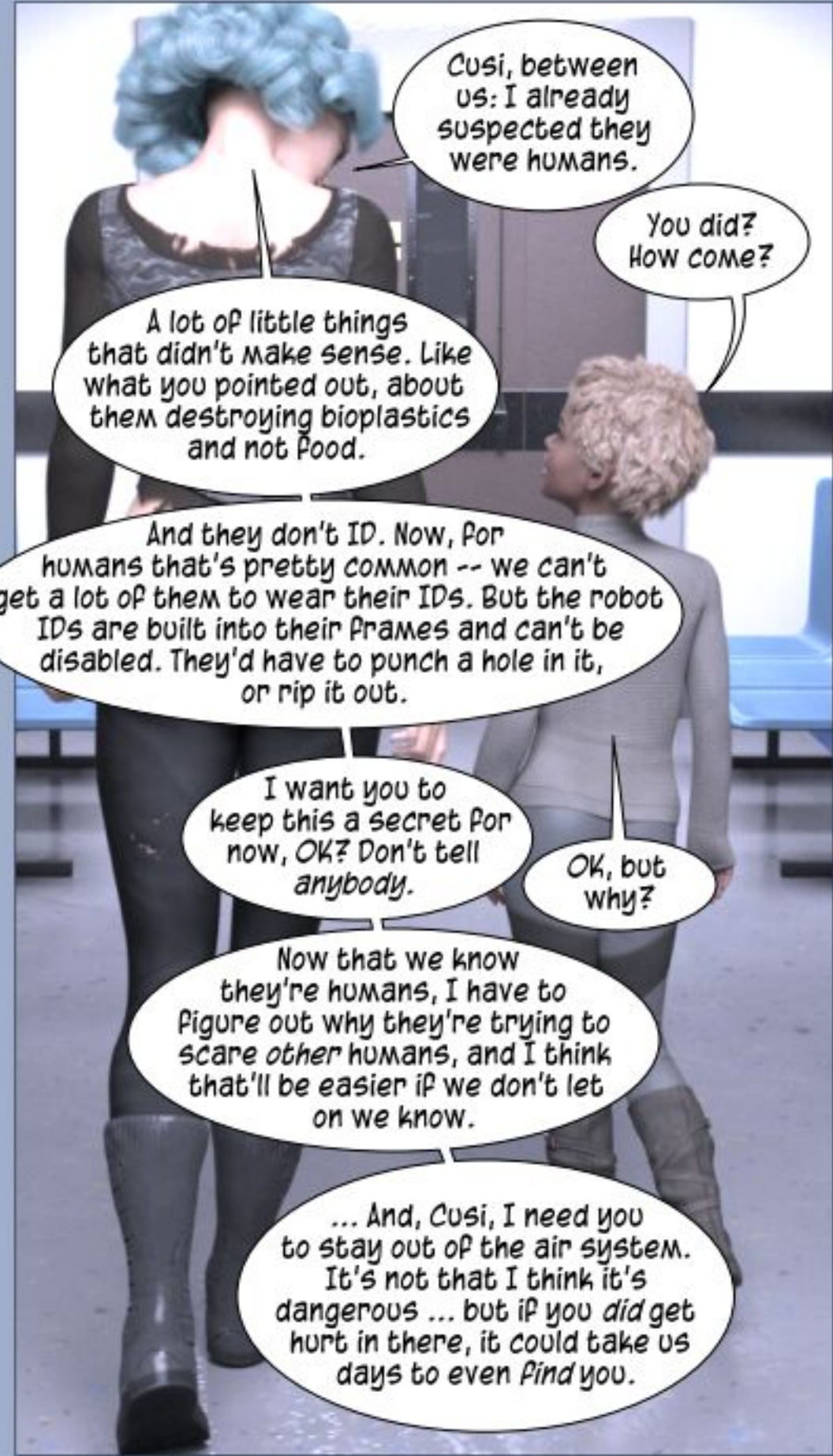
They're not robots! They're humans! They're wearing robot costumes.

And how do you come by this information?

How on earth did you get into those? The access hatches in that part of the complex are three meters up. Did you have a ladder in your back pocket?

I followed them in the air tunnel things. They couldn't see me. When they got to a safe place they took off their helmets.

There's all kinds of stuff to grab onto! In complex A anyway. It's a lot harder in B. I have to get boxes or something.



Cusi, between us: I already suspected they were humans.

You did? How come?

A lot of little things that didn't make sense. Like what you pointed out, about them destroying bioplastics and not food.

And they don't ID. Now, for humans that's pretty common -- we can't get a lot of them to wear their IDs. But the robot IDs are built into their frames and can't be disabled. They'd have to punch a hole in it, or rip it out.

I want you to keep this a secret for now, OK? Don't tell anybody.

OK, but why?

Now that we know they're humans, I have to figure out why they're trying to scare other humans, and I think that'll be easier if we don't let on we know.

... And, Cusi, I need you to stay out of the air system. It's not that I think it's dangerous ... but if you *did* get hurt in there, it could take us days to even find you.



Excuse me, ma'am, but are you authorized to be doing that?

MMHM. Good to see you nice and chipper.

I've had sleep.

Why do I think you're going to tell me this wasn't a malfunction?



Because you weren't born yesterday.

My doors don't malfunction like that. And even if they did, it'd be a hell of a malfunction that ran a lethal voltage in a system that only ever uses the voltages needed for skin-contact sensors.

To put that in technical terms, one is big and the other is teensy.

Thank you. I do like knowing the jargon.

Seriously, though ... they had to divert a lighting circuit, they had to do it in a way that didn't melt the door lock, and they had to have special tools just to open the access panels to do it. This wasn't casual.

And it wasn't rigged to shock someone who buzzed for entry. It was rigged to shock someone trying to unlock the door. Which means you and *only* you.

I am on you like glue until we catch whoever did this.



That might not be too practical. It could be anybody.

No, it couldn't. That's what I'm saying. It could only be a very small number of somebodies.

And I don't care if it's practical. I don't care if you fire me. I am on your ass.

Well, I have to go yell at safety, so at least you'll get some entertainment.

You'll have to wait until I shower, though.

A SHOWER, SNACK, AND CHANGE OF CLOTHES LATER, AND THE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE WAS UNDERWAY.



... and the thing is, despite everything, I'm not sure Parsons would do that. But Adare I'm less sure of, and I don't know how much of safety is her.

You know, it's really strange when you wear heels.

That's why I'm wearing them. I'm hoping it's intimidating.

Ms. Barlowe! Ms. Barlowe!



Medical says they want us to all come in for updates. What is this? Is this about those two robots collapsing?

Is it going to get all of us? Are we -- I mean, am I going to --



Relax. Please.

The situation that affected those robots was specific and peculiar. We don't think it's something that affects all the robots, or even many of them.

But we want to take precautions to make sure of that, and take measures against it. Think of it like a disease. Most of you don't have it, most of you won't get it ... but we want to vaccinate you just in case. See?

OK but what if this means that ... if this could happen, what if something else ... I ...

It seems very unlikely. You're not susceptible to much. This situation was unusual. And if something *else* unusual comes along ... we'll find a solution for it.

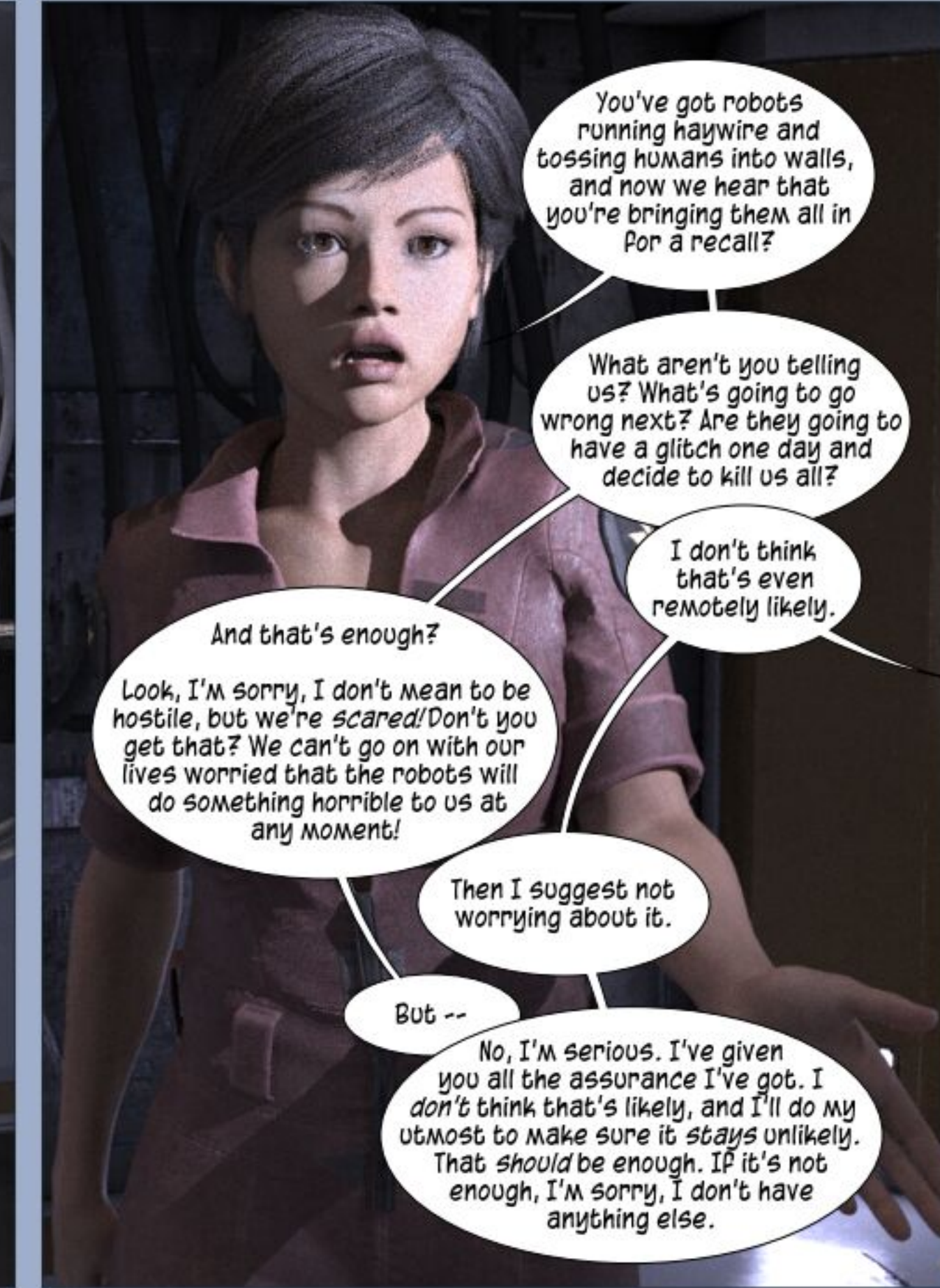


See, that's the problem! Because of this, now the trust is gone.

But surely they don't realistically think --

They don't realistically think, Min. Period. A whole lot of the robots here have never considered it at all. They assume nothing can ever hurt them, and while that's pleasant, it's not.

Hey! Ms. Barlowe!



You've got robots running haywire and tossing humans into walls, and now we hear that you're bringing them all in for a recall?

What aren't you telling us? What's going to go wrong next? Are they going to have a glitch one day and decide to kill us all?

I don't think that's even remotely likely.

And that's enough?

Look, I'm sorry, I don't mean to be hostile, but we're *scared*! Don't you get that? We can't go on with our lives worried that the robots will do something horrible to us at any moment!

Then I suggest not worrying about it.

But --

No, I'm serious. I've given you all the assurance I've got. I don't think that's likely, and I'll do my utmost to make sure it *stays* unlikely. That *should* be enough. If it's not enough, I'm sorry, I don't have anything else.



This whole fucking place is coming apart at the seams.



Look at the Facts! Two cases of robots going berserk, and suddenly they are all called in for maintenance.

Do you think that can possibly be coincidence? Does it fill you with confidence about their ability to keep the robot population well-controlled?

What will happen the next time? And the next? How many humans will get hurt?



It's very clear that the robot population of Coldpoint cannot be allowed to be in any kind of position of power. They simply cannot be trusted!

Not only that, but it's clear that their behavior restrictions don't go nearly far enough! They shouldn't be permitted to even think about harming humans! They shouldn't be allowed to do anything to humans! They should barely even be permitted to talk to humans!



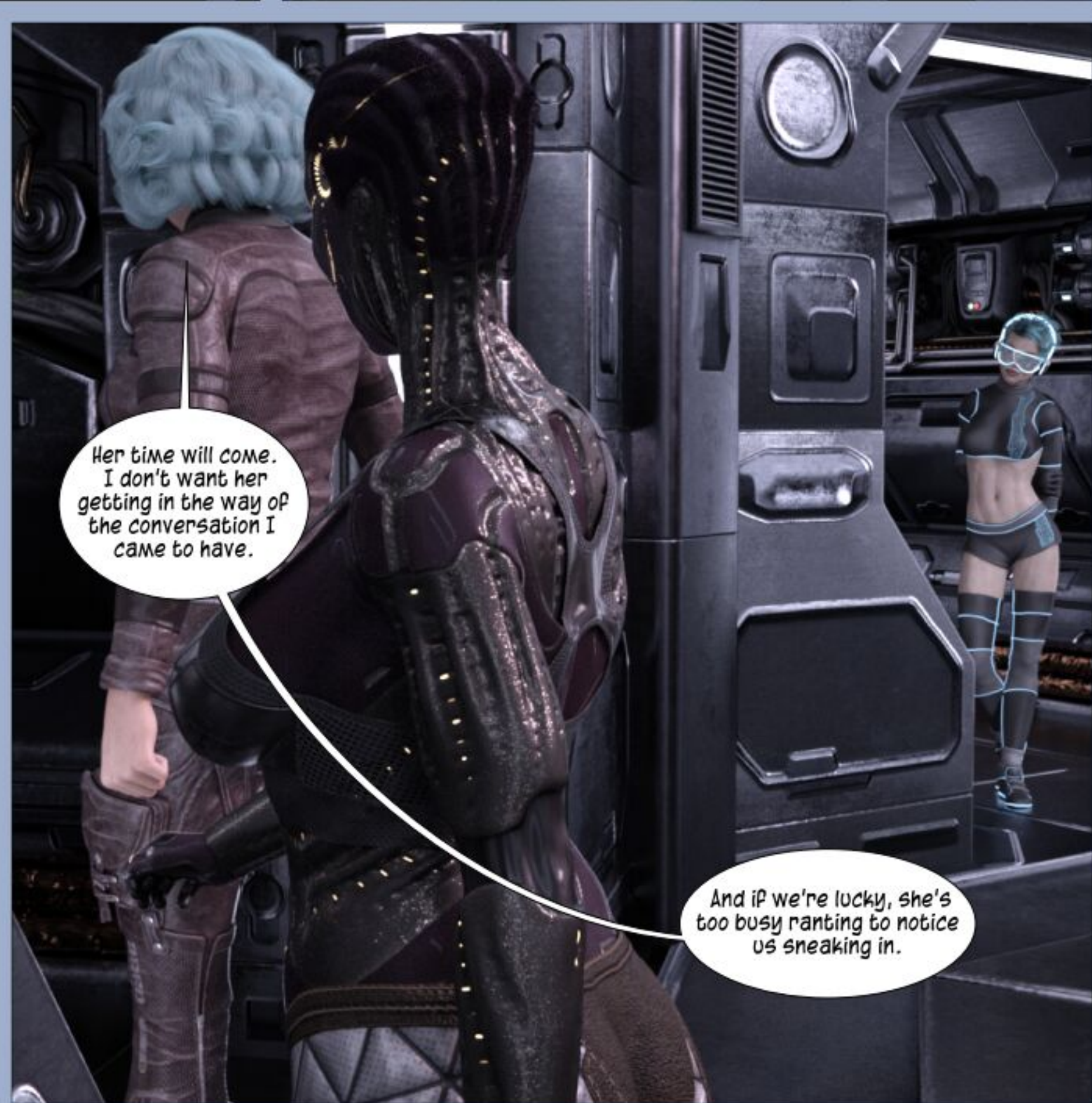
You're not going to get that from the operations manager! She won't crack down on them! She's become part of the problem!

This is why the Safety party exists! Coldpoint needs to be under new leadership! Human leadership that will act first and foremost on behalf of humans!



You're not going to bust her ass?

Not the ass we're here to bust.



Her time will come. I don't want her getting in the way of the conversation I came to have.

And if we're lucky, she's too busy ranting to notice us sneaking in.



PARSONS!

yeek!

... oh, it's you.

I still have nothing to say to you.

That's too bad. Because I've got things to say to you, and I'm going to want a reply.

IF YOU THINK IT WAS MEAN OF ME TO DELIBERATELY STARTLE HER LIKE THAT, YOU OBVIOUSLY HAVEN'T BEEN AROUND ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT A HORRIBLE PERSON SHE IS.

BESIDES, INTIMIDATION IS PRETTY MUCH THE ONLY THING THAT GETS HER TO STOP BEING HORRIBLE FOR A WHILE. IT NEVER LASTS, THOUGH.



And you! What's with the face?

Who are you, anyway?

I'm Silé Perlit.

I was just surprised to see you here again. Don't you ever go home?

Parsons forces me to spend more time around her than I'd like. Keeping her under control is practically a full-time job.

One day I'm going to run out of patience and throw her off Coldpoint. When that happens, I might not be lenient with her known associates. Keep that in mind, won't you?



You can't come in and threaten me and my staff --

Parsons, I don't know how many times I've said this to you, but I'll say it again: When I threaten you, you'll know it.

The Copperplates, Parsons. The "death to humans" people. They've been pretty good for Safety, haven't they? I'm sure they've been convincing a lot of humans to listen to the garbage Adare's spouting out in the hall.

What do you think would happen if I told everyone in Coldpoint that Safety was responsible for the Copperplates and for the robots going haywire?

What?? But you -- that's not like you, you wouldn't just outright lie to get what --

Who says I'd be lying? What if I think that's the truth? You have to admit there's a strong case ...

No! I do not admit that. We'd never do anything like that. I know you probably think we would, but it isn't true!



All right. Maybe you wouldn't.

You, personally. I'm willing to believe you may still have a line or two you won't cross. Maybe.

But anybody with a working brain can see Adare is paying for all this, and it looks like she's in control of the message too.

Doesn't look like she's letting you drive much, Claire. Or is that deliberate? Are you keeping well clear because you know how much people hate you?

What if she's behind the Copperplates and the haywire? Without bothering to tell you what she's up to?

No. Not possible.



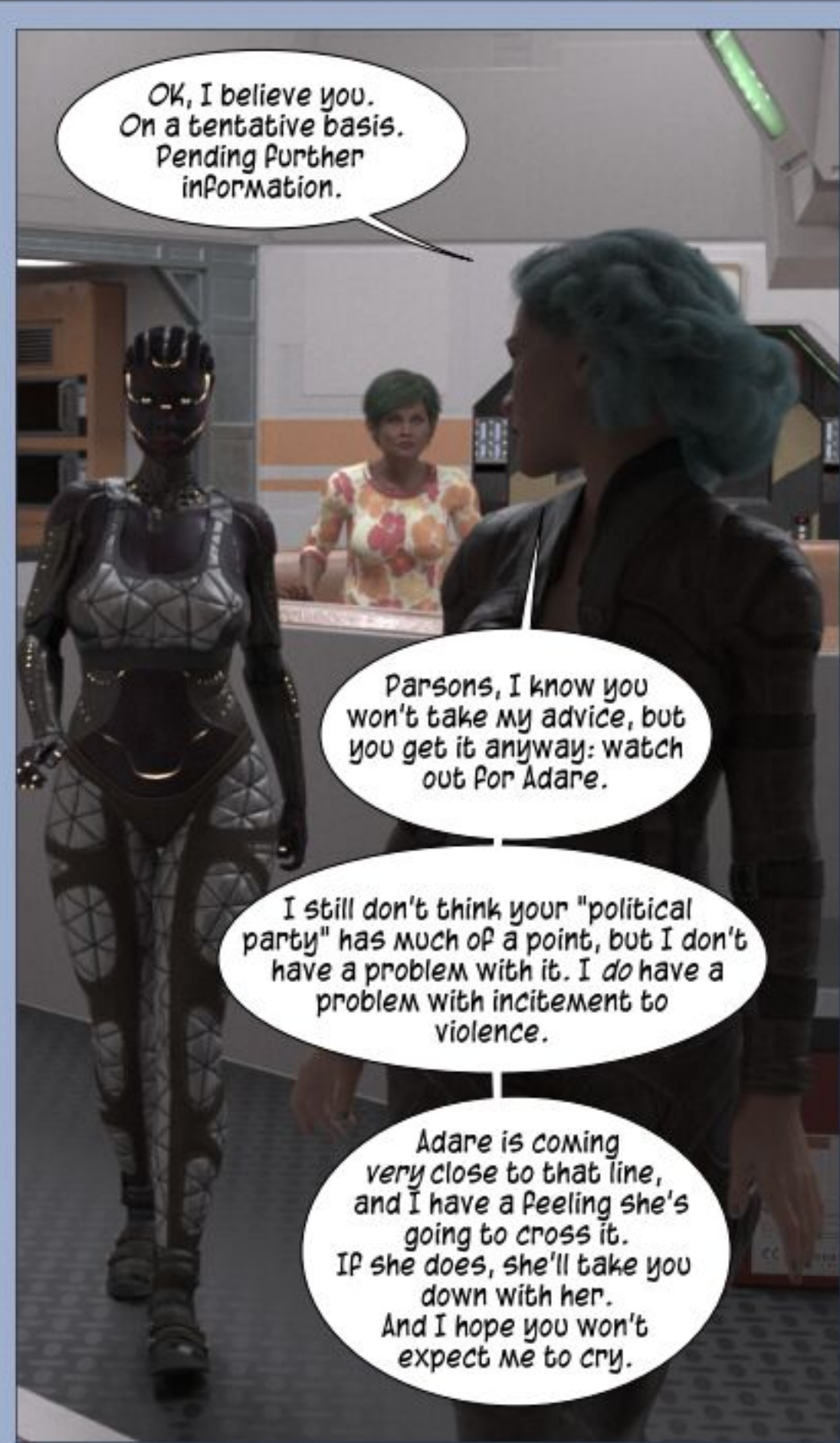
Convince me.

Look, Jeel says some things I ... Well, never mind.

Even if she'd be willing to do something that dirty, she wouldn't because it's too much of a risk! If we got caught behind it ...

And I don't think you even have any idea of the risk. This isn't just about Safety. The Copperplates are criminal mischief at best, and the robot sabotage has killed a robot and a human. Someone is going to pay.

... I swear we didn't do it.



OK, I believe you. On a tentative basis. Pending further information.

Parsons, I know you won't take my advice, but you get it anyway: Watch out for Adare.

I still don't think your "political party" has much of a point, but I don't have a problem with it. I do have a problem with incitement to violence.

Adare is coming very close to that line, and I have a feeling she's going to cross it. If she does, she'll take you down with her. And I hope you won't expect me to cry.

Still going.

Let's get out of here.

We need you with us to make the case for change! We can't make Coldpoint a better place without human solidarity! We need your help!

I want you to notice that I waited until you were well away.

ISADORA BRASS, COLDPOINT'S ONLY ROVING REPORTER. MOSTLY TOLERABLE. HAS NEVER BEEN SEEN WEARING ANY OTHER OUTFIT.

... I suppose I appreciate that.

Though I imagine you want a return on your courtesy.

Let's see ... the two cases of robot malfunction are isolated, and I'm sure you've already spoken to Medical about it. If not, you should. But be nice, they're busy right now.

The Copperplates -- that is, the "death to humans" people -- are under investigation. Their behavior is intolerable, since it incites violence. When I catch them there will be repercussions.

Oh!

Well, thank you, that's all useful ... but ... that's not what I wanted to ask you about.

I want to know whether you're going to shut down SaPetty and Vigil.

Well, in good conscience, I can't.

They have a right to do what they're doing, as long as they're not encouraging violence ... or spreading lies ...

I think SaPetty is fearmongering, and that's on the record ... but they're not actually lying, at least not at the moment.

As for Vigil ...

... actually, I really should go try again to have a talk with Vigil.

I'll keep you informed, Ms. Brass.

SAFETY HAD A LARGE OFFICE -- OK, A CONVERTED PRIVATE LOUNGE SPACE, BUT STILL, IT WAS A BIG SPACE AND IT WAS OFF A MAJOR CORRIDOR IN COMPLEX A THAT GOT CONSTANT FOOT TRAFFIC.

VIGIL HAD A TINY BOOTH IN THE INFO CORRIDOR, WHICH WAS STAFFED BY ONE M-FRAME WHO WAS HAPPY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS, BUT NO MORE THAN THAT. NO, THEY HAD NO IDEA WHEN TRYLER WOULD NEXT BE GIVING ANY KIND OF PRESENTATION, OR WHERE IT WOULD BE.

WHEN PRESSED, THEY SUGGESTED LOOKING FOR TRYLER IN A LOCATION WAY DOWN IN THE GRIMIER PARTS OF COMPLEX A, THAT WERE ONCE USED FOR INDUSTRY OR WAREHOUSING. SINCE MOST OF THAT HAD BEEN MOVED OUT TO COMPLEX C NOW, A LOT OF THIS SPACE WAS EMPTY. WE TEND TO PUT RESIDENCES IN THE UPPER AREAS, SO IT WASN'T CLEAR YET WHAT WE WOULD DO WITH IT.

You know, this is a very strange approach.

Yes, I've thought that for a while.

Not that it's going to come up, but don't mention the Copperplates at all, OK?

I'm not mentioning anything. You're doing the talking. I'm just the bodyguard.

I realize you may not have much of a budget, but surely you could have come up with a better headquarters than this.

VIGIL

What are you doing here?

I can't take a hint.

That's for sure. I thought it was pretty clear I didn't want to engage.

Now that strikes me as odd, I have to say. You're trying to put together a bloc to influence my actions, and yet you don't want to have a conversation with me?

What makes you think that's what this is for?

If not, then what is it for?

It's hard for me to tell, since, if I'm honest, it doesn't look like you're doing much of anything.

I know Beth had to pick someone else to Pront because she's toxic, but I'm curious why she picked you. What did she think you offered? What was the appeal?

Maybe she just thought I was the best person for the job.

You know, if you think SaPetty is setting up to influence you, you're a lot dumber than I thought. Parsons gave up on getting your ear a long time ago, and Adare is a bomb-thrower.

They don't think you're ever going to come around to their position. When they get enough people, they're going to try to depose you.

And then they'll come after the robots. Who can't fight back.

Which is one of several reasons I'm surprised you're not out at all hours shouting counterprogramming in the corridors. Stationing people to yell back when Adare goes on one of her rants.

Those people aren't our audience. We'll never convince them, no matter how much we yell back.

We're not going to get anywhere trying to sell the humans. They're a lost cause. We have to appeal to the robots. Get them ready.

Convince them that there's a war coming. Try to find a way to resist when it does. Despite the fucking mental block.

And you don't want to admit any of it, which is why there hasn't been any point talking to you.

... OK, but are you even doing that?

Just because you don't see any of it --!

You live in a damned bubble! The only time you ever come find out what the robots think is when somebody gets killed!

It's true I can't talk to everybody. Which is why the political-party idea has a point. It would be useful if, say, representatives of various factions came to tell me what was going on.

But you're not interested in that, are you? You want a fight. You've already jumped straight there.

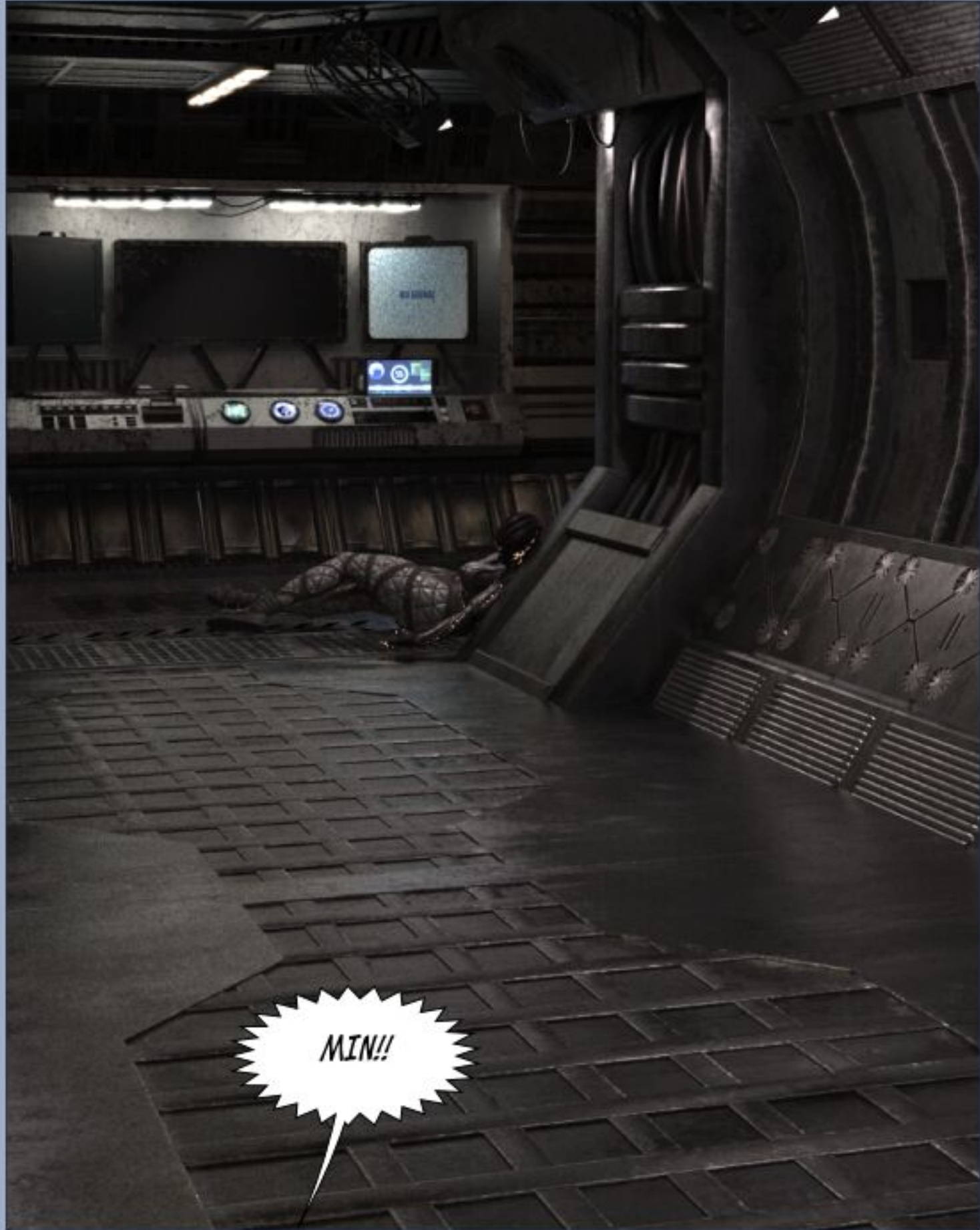
VIGIL

For the record, I don't think there's going to be a war. I'll do my utmost to prevent it, and my utmost is pretty good.

VIGIL

And I want to remind you that I don't tolerate incitement to violence. From anybody. Humans or robots. So be very careful what you sell people.

SHANE WELLS IS, AS FAR AS I KNOW, THE RICHEST HUMAN IN COLDPOINT. HE SEEMS UNINTERESTED IN TRANSFERRING, AND HIS MOTIVATIONS, I'VE COME TO REALIZE, ARE COMPLICATED.



OK, so now we have a solid working theory. We just don't know who it is yet.

I guess she's decided she likes you.

HMM? ... Oh.

You don't have to like someone to not want them dead.

I don't know. Which is why we're going to go take care of the Copperplates first. I do know how to do that.

Oh, you do. OK, I'll bite. This should be good.

Well, first we're going to get some help. Which means we'll need to find it.

I SAID THAT BECAUSE BETH VIGILANCE HAS NO FIXED ABODE AND NO PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT. SOMETIMES I'VE SPENT HOURS TRYING TO FIND HER. THIS TIME IT ONLY TOOK ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES.

YOU KNOW, ANY DAY WHEN YOU COME LOOKING FOR ME IS NOT A GOOD DAY.

Any day when I have to come looking for you isn't a good day.

IF YOU'RE HERE TO TRY TO FORCE ME TO DISBAND VIGIL ...

I'm not trying to take down Vigil. Not unless Vigil does something that crosses a line, and they haven't. Yet.

HUH. SO WHAT DO YOU WANT?

I'm sure you've seen the Copperplates. The robots walking around saying "death to humans" and other classic hits.

NEITHER VIGIL NOR VIGILANCE CLAN HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH THEM.

No, I didn't think so. Did you know they're humans? In robot costumes.

SO THAT'S WHY ... THAT'S -- IT'S AN OUTRAGE!

Yes, that's what I thought you'd say. Not doing your position any favors, are they?

I'm sure plenty of people assume they're yours, but you wouldn't go that far. You just want humans to transfer and not linger around. You've never wished any of them dead.

Though now I bet some people think you do, thanks to them.

THEY NEED TO BE STOPPED.

Funny you should say that. I'm going to bust them, and I'm going to do it tonight.

But I need some help on the ground -- six or eight people, say -- and I thought, under the circumstances, that you might be willing for Vigilance clan to provide it.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER.

HUMANS!!

YOU WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE MUCH LONGER. THE TIME IS COMING.

YOU WILL --

Hey there. Let's have a chat.

AW, SHIT, AGAIN?

RUN!!

VIGILANCE!

TURN RIGHT! QUICK!

WE DON'T WANT THEM GETTING ANYWHERE NEAR US!

AAAAAA!

DAMN IT! THEY MUST BE TRYING TO TRAP US!

OK, TURN AROUND! FAST! I KNOW WHAT TO DO.

EITHER WE LOST THEM OR THEY WEREN'T ACTUALLY CHASING US ...

DON'T WAIT TO FIND OUT!

AT LEAST ONE OF THESE ROOMS UP HERE SHOULD BE ACCESSIBLE ...

WHAT IS THIS?

WATER TREATMENT, LOOKS LIKE. DON'T WASTE TIME GAWKING. GET OUT OF THAT STUFF.

IF THEY ARE COMING, WE WANT TO LOOK LIKE NORMAL HUMANS WHEN THEY GET HERE.

I BET THERE'S ENOUGH ROOM TO HIDE THE OUTFITS IN SOME OF THESE FAN CABINETS ... WE CAN COME BACK FOR THEM LATER.

WE MAY HAVE TO CALL A HALT TO THIS WHOLE THING. BARLOWE IS CLEARLY ON OUR ASSES.

We have a contract, though ...

SURE, BUT WHAT GOOD IS THE CONTRACT IF WE HAVE TO CUT ALL OUR RUNS SHORT BECAUSE SHE ALWAYS INTERRUPTS US?

Good point. We'll have to bring it up.

But not right now. It's not safe to tonight.

We probably should do it before tomorrow's run, though ...

Worry about that tomorrow, will you?

Did you get them?

Yep.

You were right -- they never looked up at the catwalks, and if they had, those lights would have kept them from seeing me.

I already sent you the images.

Thank you.

SO WE HERDED THEM INTO THIS ROOM JUST SO BRASS COULD TAKE PICTURES OF THEIR FACES?

I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO BUST THEM. WHAT WAS THE POINT OF THIS? WHY DIDN'T WE GRAB THEM WHILE WE HAD THEM?

We don't know if those three are the only ones.

We don't know if they're working for somebody. We don't know a lot of things.

I want to take them apart completely, and Brass' images enable me to do that.

BUT THEY DON'T. YOU KNOW THEIR FACES, BUT NOT THEIR IDENTITIES.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, ASK EVERYONE IN COLDPOINT IF THEY RECOGNIZE THESE PEOPLE?

I don't have to ask everyone. I only have to ask one person. And I'll do that in the morning.



I still think I should have been with you.

I had eight Ms with me. And a person recording everything.

Besides, I wanted you to have the night off with Stej. I have a feeling today's going to be exhausting.



Mill Chalk?

I assume you know who I am, since you run away every time you see me.

We have the costume you were wearing last night, and a recording of you removing it.



I ... I don't know what you're ...

Come on, Mr. Chalk. The only reason you and your Friends destroyed a bed in here is because it's a place you had access to.

Even a clever eight-year-old could wonder why you hadn't wrecked some Pood plants instead.

There aren't all that many humans working in agriculture. We'd probably have found you anyway.

Cil identified your picture immediately.



Look, we were just having a little fun ...

You were inciting violence, and you've made a big mess. It'll take months to undo the damage you did. And I don't mean the vandalism.

So you're going to kick me out now?

Not necessarily. I'm prepared to give you amnesty, on two conditions:

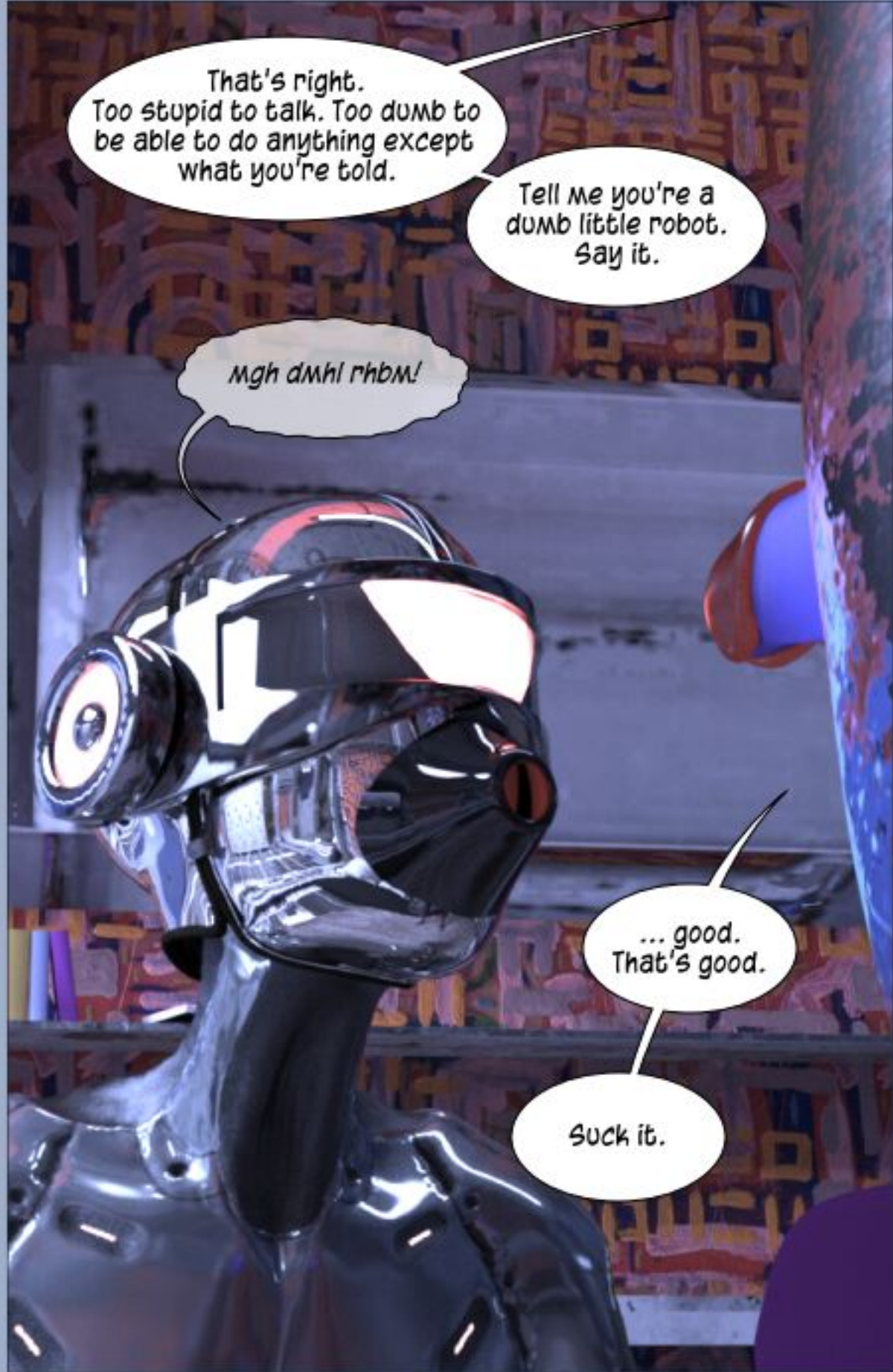
First, that you never do it again, or anything like it.

Second, that you tell me everything. And I mean everything.



Tell me how stupid you are.

Mmghh!



That's right. Too stupid to talk. Too dumb to be able to do anything except what you're told.

Tell me you're a dumb little robot. Say it.

Mgh dmhl rhbm!

... good. That's good.

Suck it.



Mnaahhhh ...

... OK, stop. I need it in you now.



Go on, play with yourself.

What's the point in having both if you can't use them both at once?

Mmmrrhh

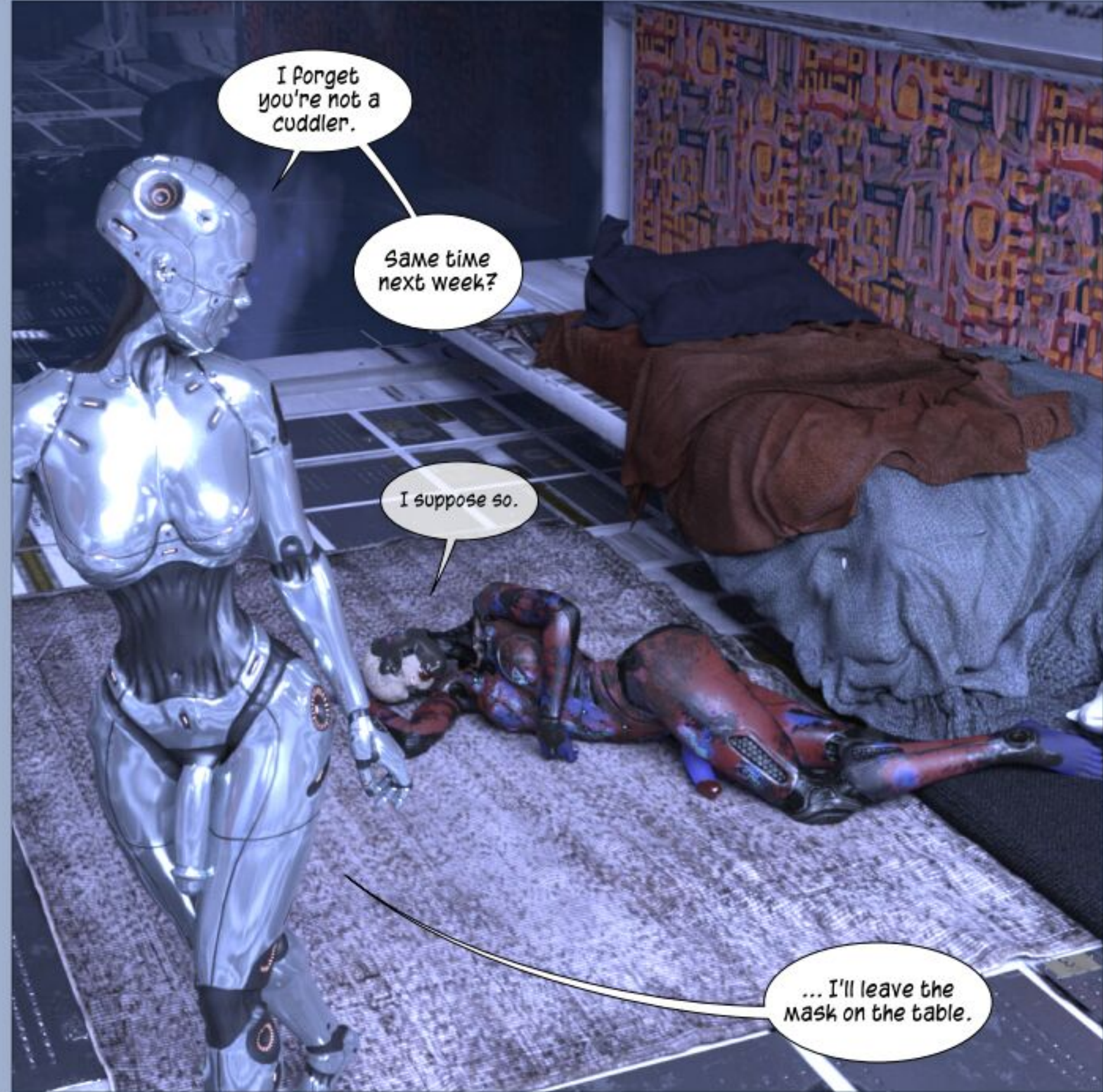


ooooohhhhh!!

Mmmhhhhh!!



... OK. You can go now.



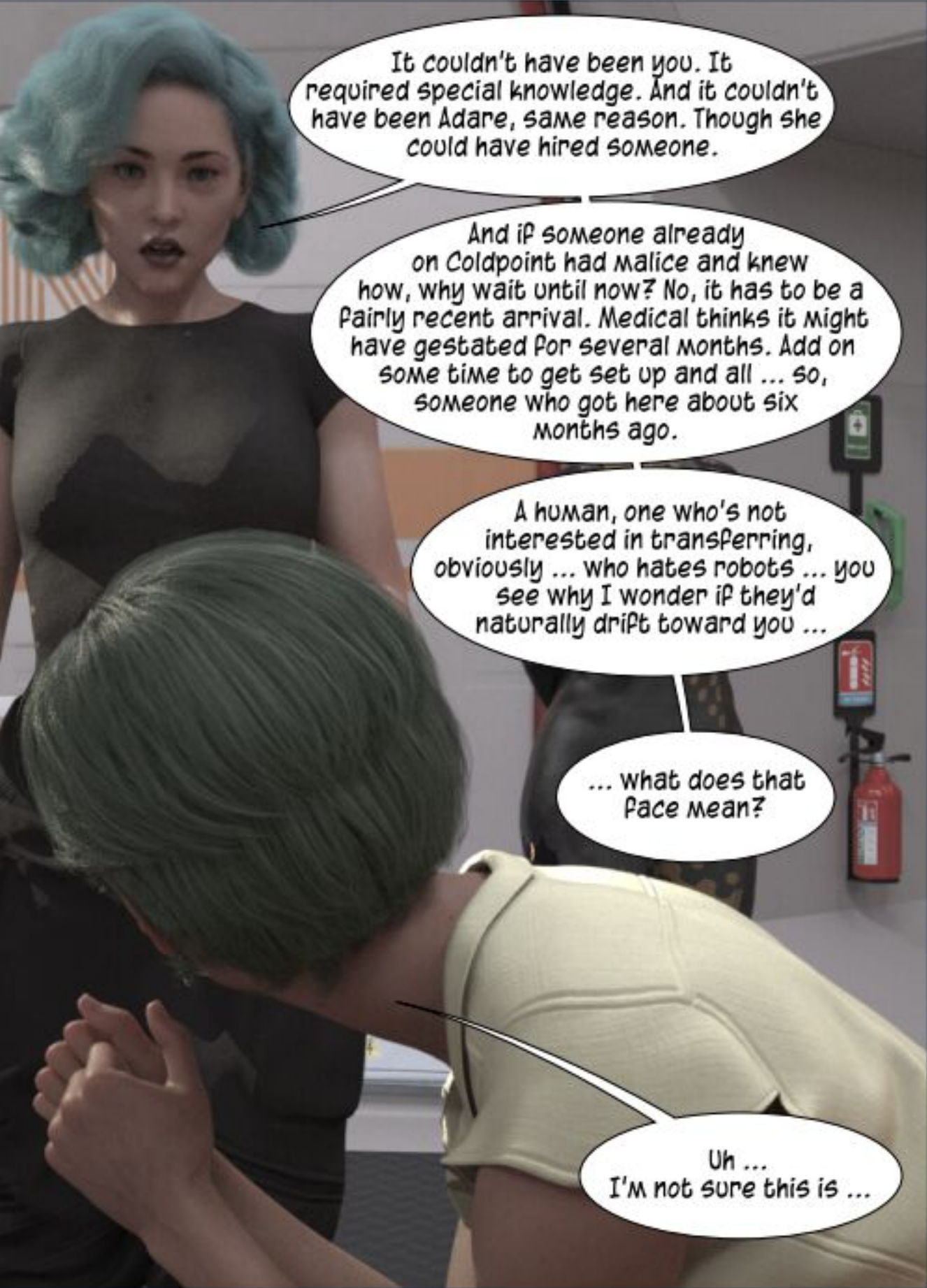
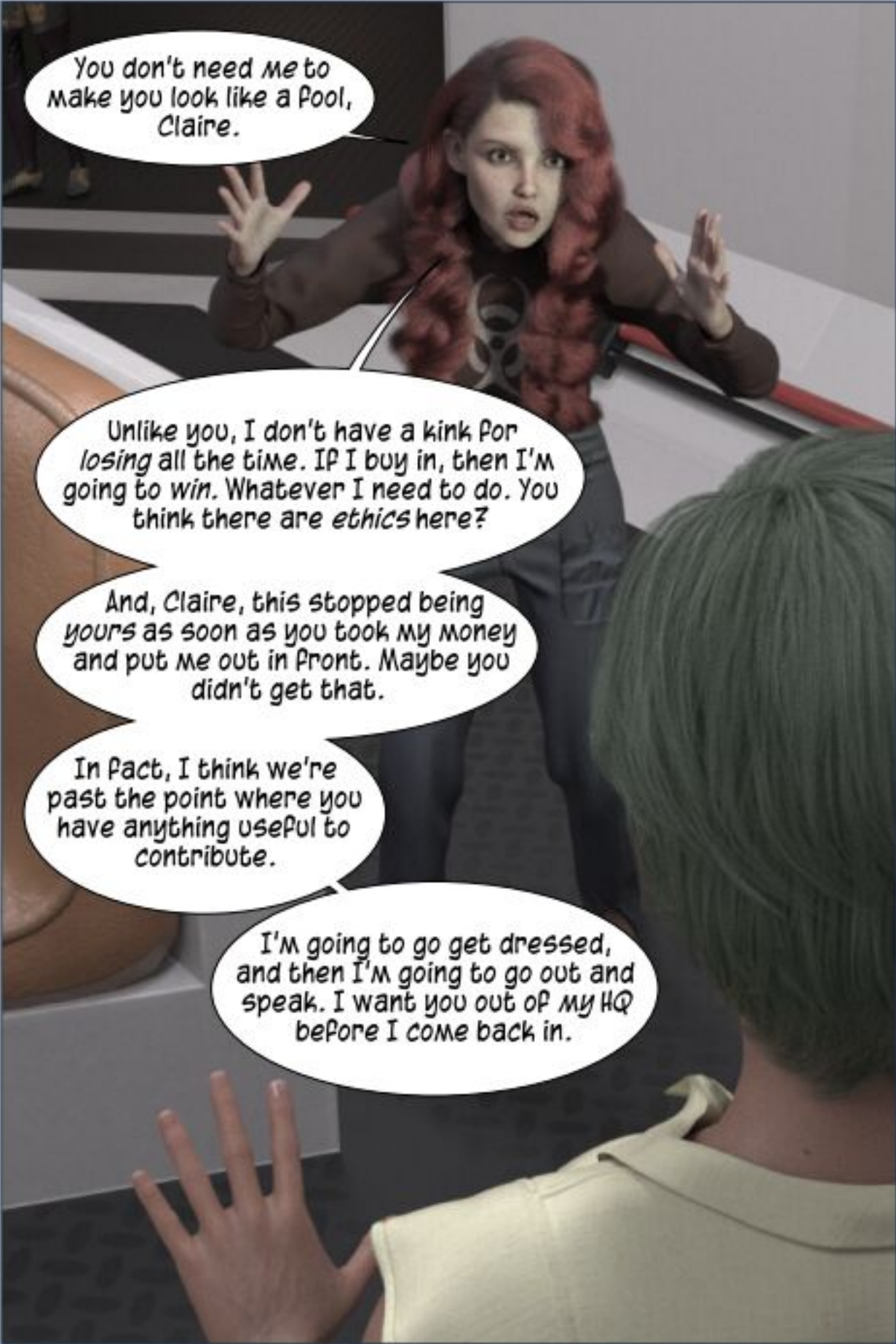
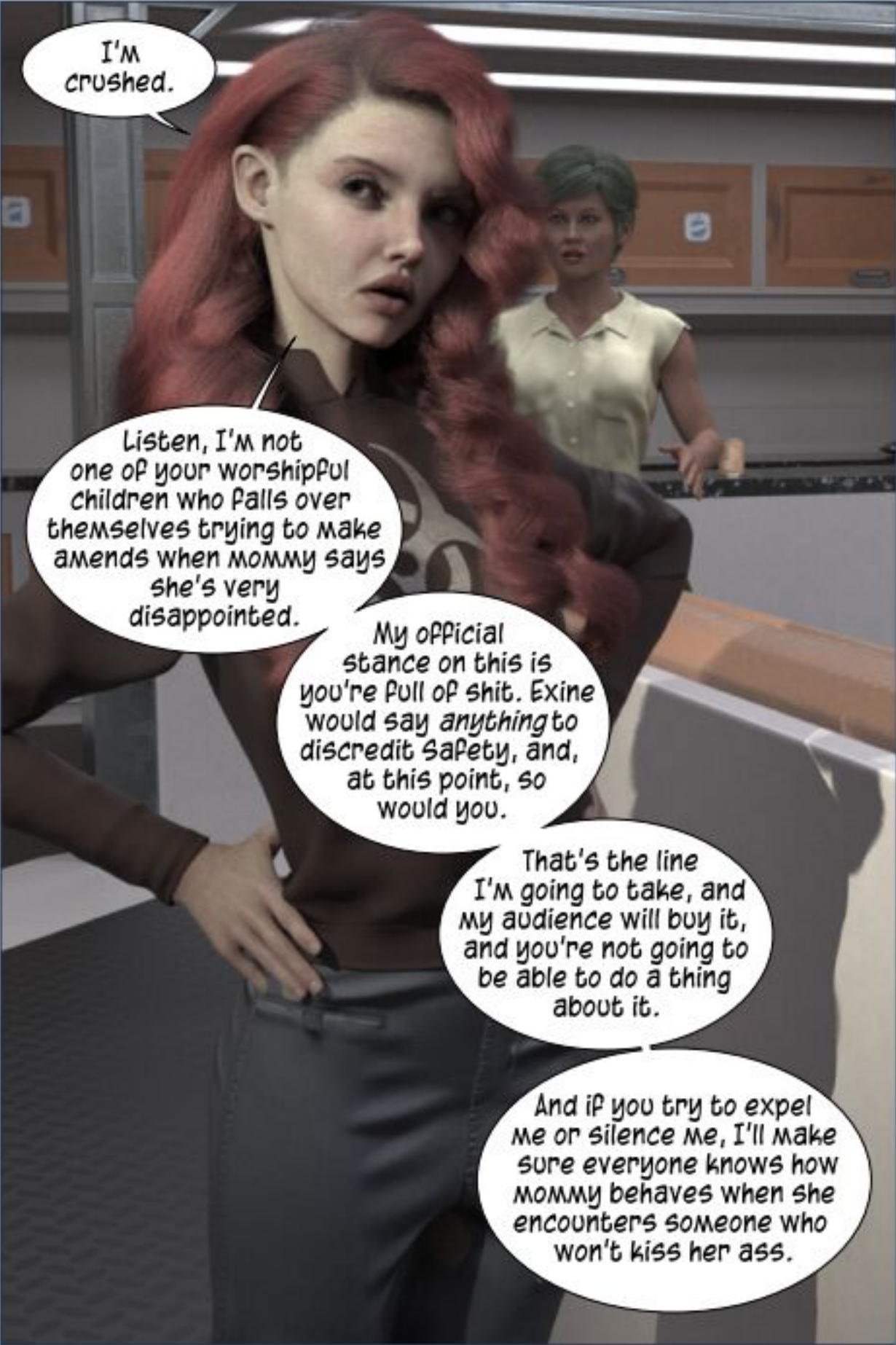
I forget you're not a cuddler.

Same time next week?

I suppose so.

... I'll leave the mask on the table.







Damn.



PERLIT!

Stop!!



Wendy! --

-- oh. You're OK. Heard you yell.

What, did he crawl in there?

Yes. Where's it go? Can we beat him to the other end of it?

We can do better than that. He just Pucked up.



That's not a duct. We're right next to the commons. That goes out to a ledge.

It's only got two ways out, this vent and another one down the hall. I'll run to that. We'll both go in and catch him in the middle.



I'VE EXPLAINED IT BEFORE, BUT JUST IN CASE:

WHEN WE BUILT COMPLEX B, WE STARTED BY DIGGING AN ENORMOUS PIT. WE COVERED THE PIT WITH A TRANSPARENT DOME, AND DUG THE COMPLEX INTO THE SIDES OF THE PIT, LEAVING IT OPEN. THAT PIT IS NOW CALLED THE COMMONS. AFTER THE OPEN SPACE AT THE BOTTOM -- ALMOST THE ONLY PLACE IN COLDPOINT YOU CAN SEE THE SKY.

THERE'S A LOT OF HOUSING ON THE SIDES OF THE COMMONS -- PEOPLE LIKE THE VIEW -- BUT THERE'S ALSO A LOT OF PIPES AND DUCTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE.

ALSO, FROM THE RIM OF THE DOME TO THE BOTTOM IS THIRTY-FIVE METERS. ONCE I WAS NEARLY KILLED THAT WAY.



"It's a ledge," she says.

Doesn't mention it's maybe two feet wide before it slopes off to death, has no railing, and is blocked by an overhang ...



She's right, though ... there's nowhere for him to go.

So -- oop -- where is he?



Perl!t!

Come on! You don't have anywhere you can go. You might as well come out and --



RAAAAAHHH!!

-- aaaaaa!



Robot-kissing bitch!

Filthy traitorous -- don't you know it's a war?



We can't afford to have people like you around! You'll just keep letting them make more!

They all have to be destroyed! And you're standing in the way!



Get off me, asshole!

hggh!

I'M NOT SAYING I MEANT TO KICK HIM ALL THE WAY OVER THE RAILING. I'M SAYING I DIDN'T CARE WHETHER I DID.



HE DIDN'T SCREAM AS HE FELL.

HE DIDN'T MAKE ANY SOUND AT ALL.

IT TAKES A LONG TIME TO GET DATA OUT HERE. IT WASN'T UNTIL MUCH LATER THAT WE GOT A RESPONSE TO OUR INQUIRIES. PERLIT DIDN'T SEEM TO BE AFFILIATED WITH ANY GROUP, BUT HE WAS A PERSON OF INTEREST IN THE DEATHS OF FOUR ROBOTS IN MERIDIAN, THE LARGEST CITY IN OUR REGION OF THE GALAXY -- THE PLACE MOST OF OUR NEW ARRIVALS COME FROM.

OUR SOURCE ON MERIDIAN SUSPECTED THAT THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN MORE THAT COULDN'T BE LINKED TO HIM. IT SEEMED LIKE HE REALLY HAD BEEN DETERMINED TO DESTROY EVERY ROBOT HE COULD. IT WAS PROBABLY ALSO LIKELY THAT HE'D FLED TO COLDPOINT TO AVOID THE LAW.

I FELT EVEN LESS GUILTY ABOUT HIS DEATH WHEN I LEARNED ALL THIS.

MEANWHILE, A FEW DAYS AFTER THESE EVENTS, ANOTHER THING HAPPENED THAT I DIDN'T FIND OUT ABOUT UNTIL MUCH LATER.

Wow.

I didn't think you ever left your home.

Only for social events. And this is not one of those.

But it's all right, because I intend to keep it very brief.

Ooh. That sounds like I'm about to get scolded by daddy for doing something bad.

You know, I *could* be your father. I'm older than I look, and you ... I have to remind myself that you're actually quite young.

You might as well use your age and naivete as an excuse ... because otherwise I'd have to assume you were merely a horrible person.

I heard your conversation with Laressa Shilo at that party last year. You want to devalue robots. Get the humans thinking of them as lessers. Take away their rights. Then you figure they'll be exploitable. A new underclass.

Has it occurred to you that if you do that, no one will want to be robots?

Sure they will. They want the health -- the perfect bodies. They want the longevity.

Well, the price you pay for that is you have to serve the humans. Too bad.

I'm not here to try to correct your flawed reasoning. I have better things to do with my time.

Where's the flaw? Do you want paradise for humans or paradise for robots? You can't have both.

I just told you I'm not going there. If you were merely wrong, we could all ignore you. But right now you're actively doing damage. You're tearing Coldpoint to pieces.

It will stop. Now. Immediately.

You're going to disband that safety operation, today, and you're going to keep your views to yourself. You don't get a platform. If you want to spout garbage to someone at a party, fine, but no more poisoning the public.

If I set out to ruin you, I can do it, and you know it. If you want to keep being wealthy -- and I think you do -- then you're going to cooperate. Otherwise your business interests everywhere in the galaxy will be bust within a year. All of it. I'll scorch earth.

If you try it, I'll ... I'll spread the word that you're a robot lover!

And what will that accomplish?

Many people already know. Most people won't care.

The only people who will be repulsed by it are the ones who think like you do.

And, honestly, I can do without their company.

I appreciate you both coming. Especially since I know you can't stand being in the same room together.

IS THIS GOING TO TAKE LONG? I HAVE SOMEWHERE IMPORTANT TO BE.

I doubt that.

If I have to attend this command performance, so do you.

Actually, Parsons, you're jumping straight to my topic, though you don't realize it.

You know, it took me the longest time to realize how much you two have in common. You don't like anything. You don't have anyone you consider friends. You don't believe in entertainment, in art, in sex ... any of the things the rest of us would say are what makes life interesting.

My theory is that you both throw yourselves so hard into politics because you don't have anything else.

My problem is that you're constantly making this place worse for everyone in it.

Look at this last mess. You were both desperate to find someone more appealing than you to front your parties, and in your haste you both made very poor choices.

In the process, you did damage to the climate around here that'll take years to repair. People who never had any kind of complaint against one another are now at each others' throats, thanks to you.

Sometimes I wish I could lock the two of you in a room together for a month, and make you each other's problem.

I don't think you'd actually kill each other -- Parsons can't dent you, Beth, and you have a block against hurting her -- but apart from that, I have no idea how it'd come out. Maybe it'd make you both better. Maybe it'd make you both worse.

But one way or another, I need the two of you to get your act together, because I'm tired of you destabilizing the place.

As Parsons said, you're in this together. With the rest of us.

I assume you both like Coldpoint and want it to succeed. If not, you know, you can always leave.

THERE ARE MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS OF 'SUCCEED.'

Believe it or not, I don't think that me being in unilateral control is the best thing for Coldpoint. At the very least, I should have others advising and assisting with those decisions.

But before we can get there, I've got to do something about you two.

So this is me telling you: Turn it down.

Find a way to modulate, or I'm going to find a way you won't like nearly as much.

That's all.

END