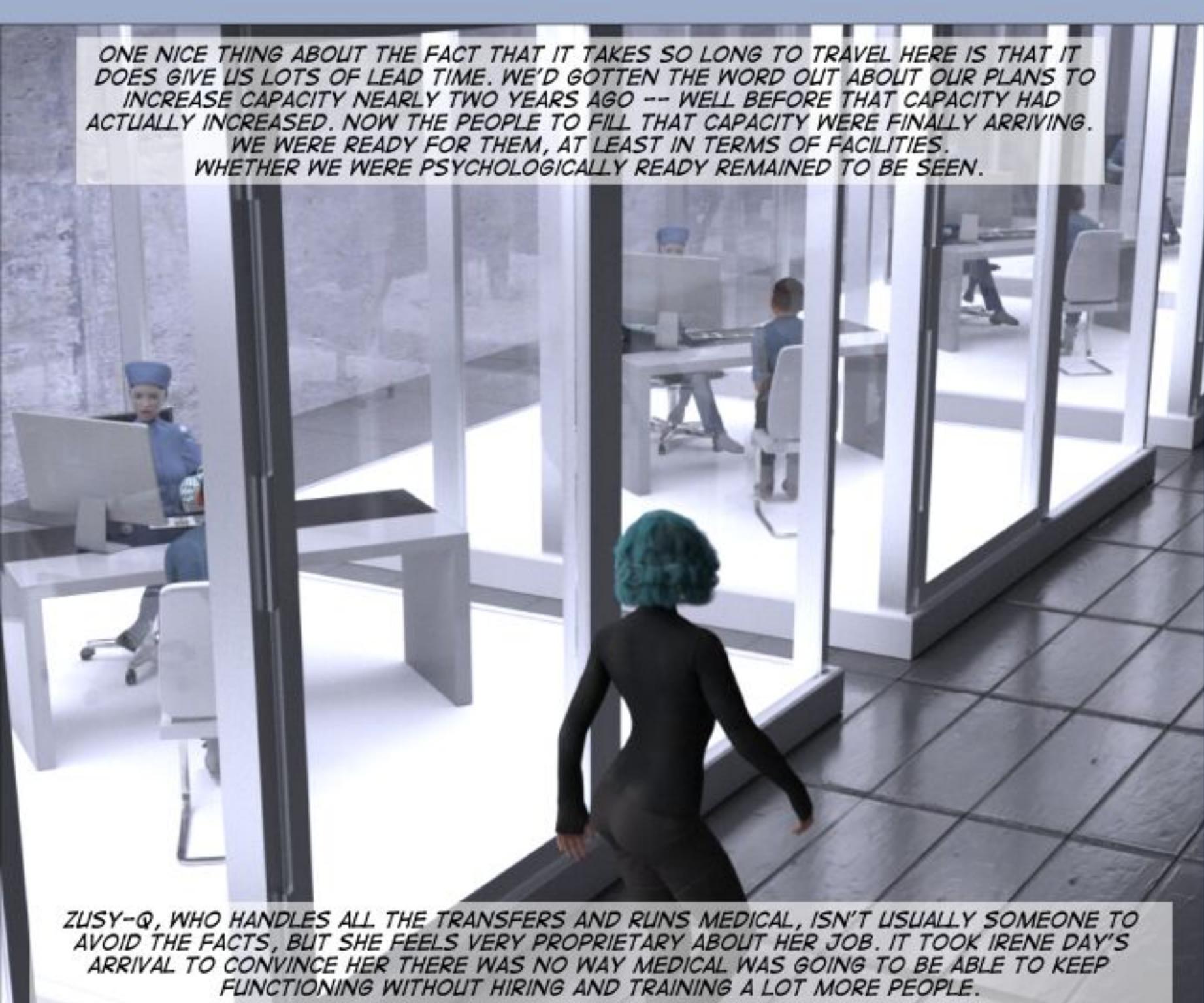




STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

# EXPOSED TO DEATH

ONE NICE THING ABOUT THE FACT THAT IT TAKES SO LONG TO TRAVEL HERE IS THAT IT DOES GIVE US LOTS OF LEAD TIME. WE'D GOT THE WORD OUT ABOUT OUR PLANS TO INCREASE CAPACITY NEARLY TWO YEARS AGO -- WELL BEFORE THAT CAPACITY HAD ACTUALLY INCREASED. NOW THE PEOPLE TO FILL THAT CAPACITY WERE FINALLY ARRIVING. WE WERE READY FOR THEM, AT LEAST IN TERMS OF FACILITIES. WHETHER WE WERE PSYCHOLOGICALLY READY REMAINED TO BE SEEN.

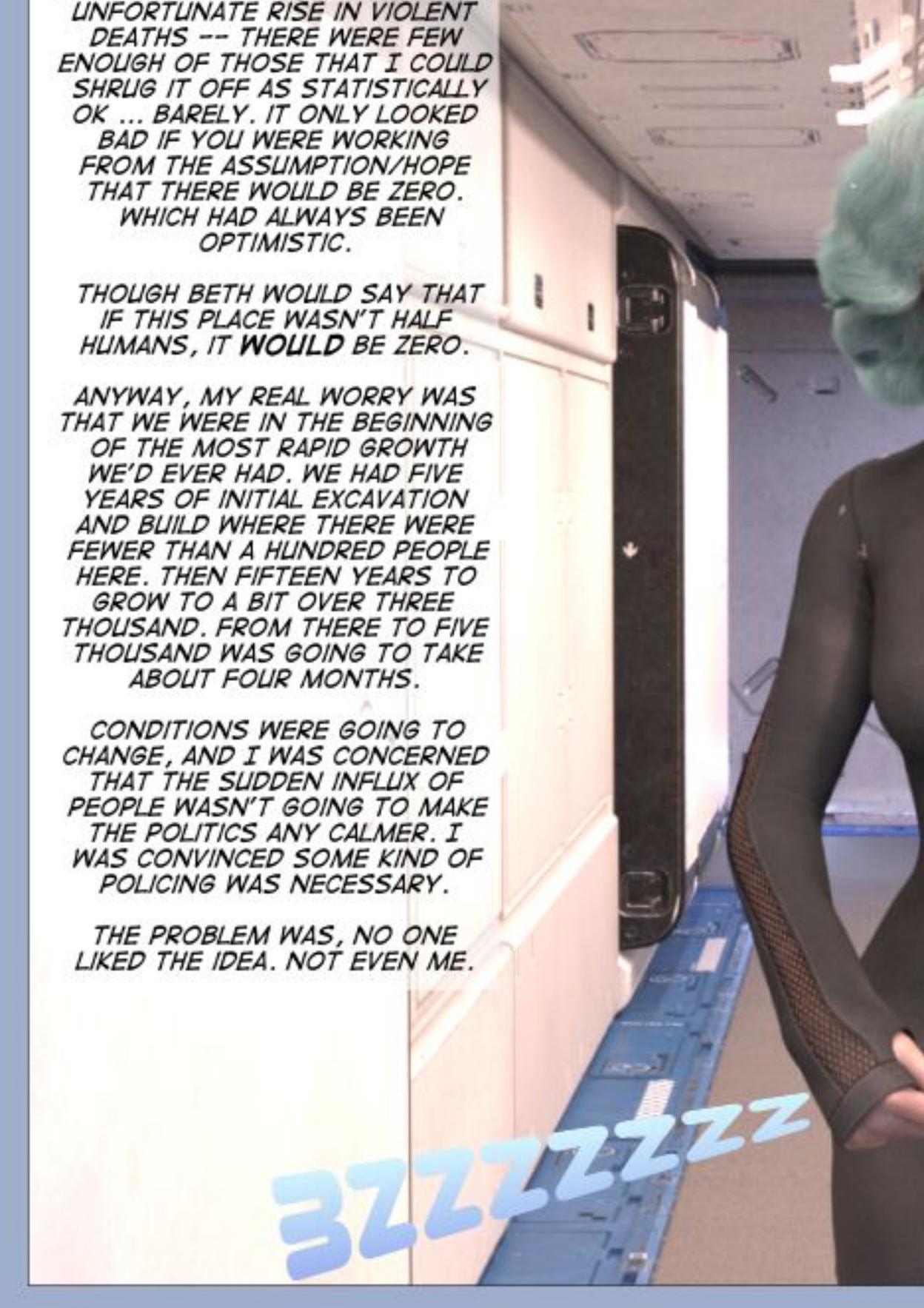
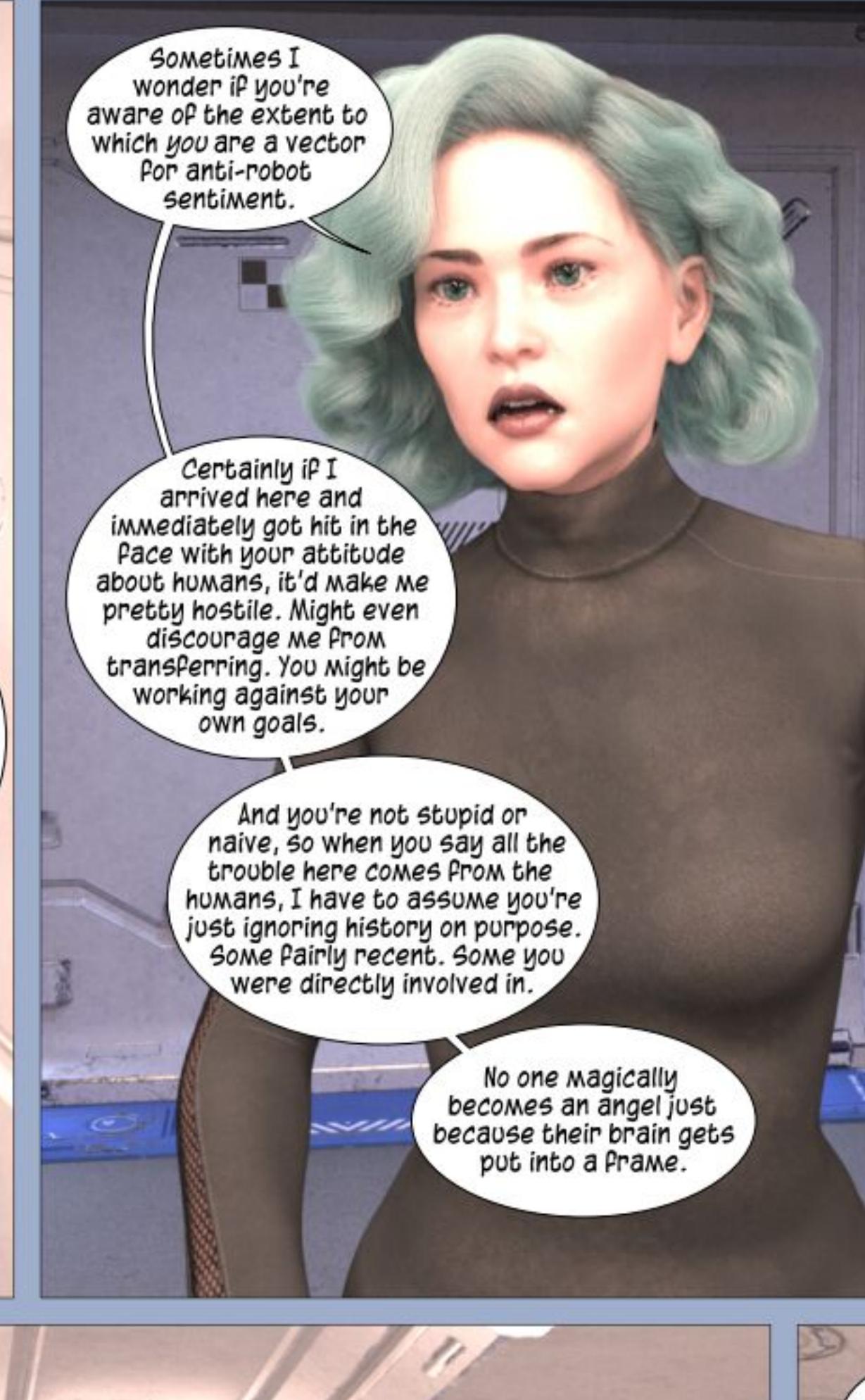
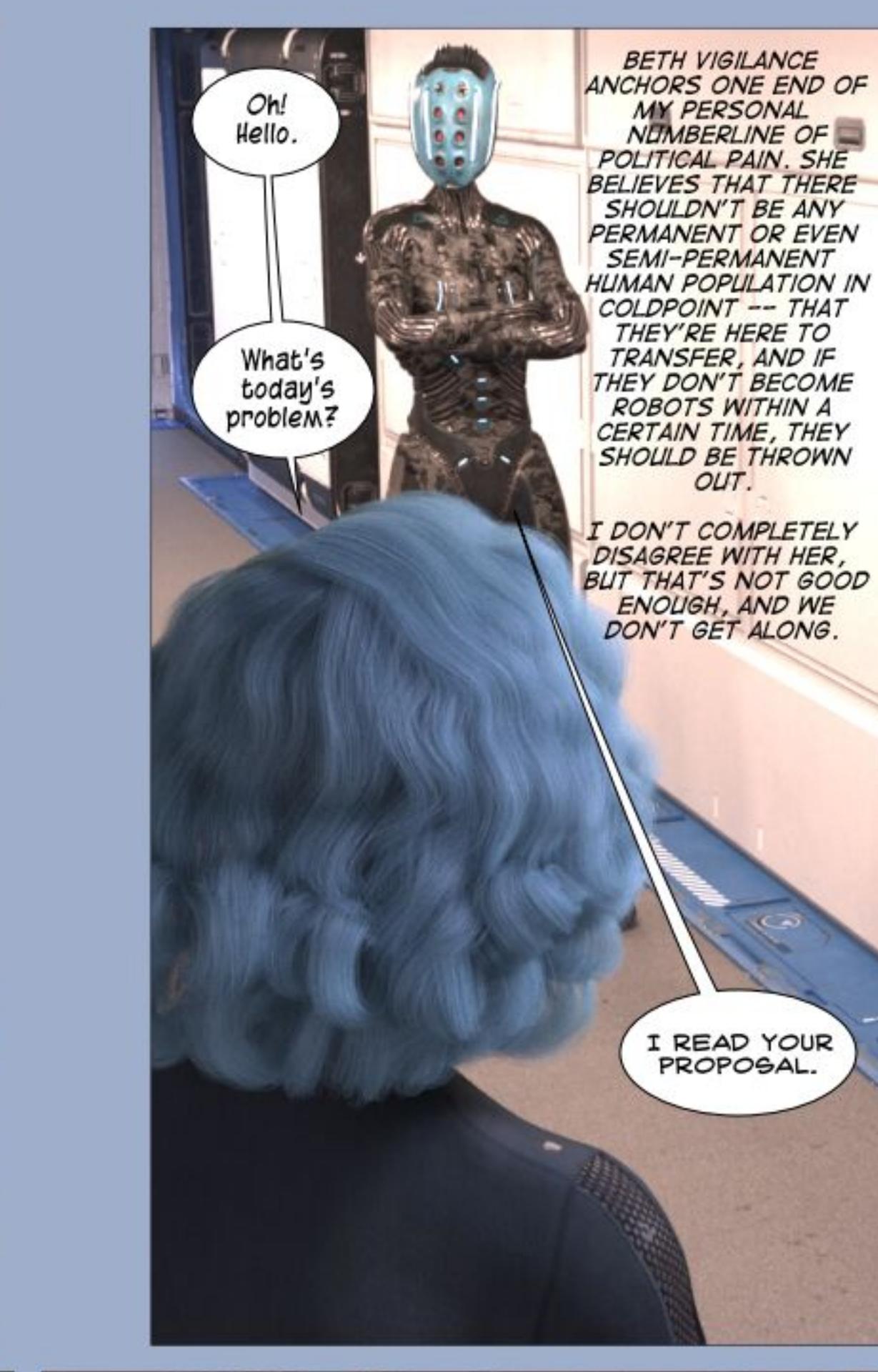


IRENE NOT ONLY INSISTED ON A ROUND-THE-CLOCK MEDICAL STAFF, BUT POINTED OUT THAT ZUSY-Q COULDN'T KEEP DOING ALL THE INTAKE INTERVIEWS FOR TRANSFERS HERSELF, THAT IN FACT SHE SHOULDN'T BE DOING ANY OF THEM; SHE'D BE NEEDED FULL-TIME TO ACTUALLY DO THE TRANSFERS, SOMETHING ONLY SHE AND IRENE ARE CAPABLE OF.

AMAZINGLY, ZUSY-Q LISTENED ... THOUGH SHE DID INSIST THAT THE INTERVIEWERS ALL BE ROBOTS. SHE SAID IT WAS IMPORTANT AT THAT STAGE FOR THE INTERVIEWER TO BE TALKING TO SOMEONE WHO HAD ALREADY TRANSFERRED.







TWO -- NO, MAKE THAT THREE -- MORE PEOPLE I DIDN'T PARTICULARLY WANT TO RUN INTO, THOUGH EACH FOR DIFFERENT REASONS.

Well, you know we've now had a statement on that from Excavation ...

Yes, and that statement is complete shit.

You can quote me on that.

Furst Deepstone hasn't yet said anything that even comes close to justifying this policy. He just keeps offering up pissball excuses.

There are a hundred jobs opening in that new mine, in a community that's starved for any kind of employment opportunity.

Robots and humans both want jobs, and we all know there aren't enough of them, so how do you justify a "robots only" policy? What could possibly justify it?

And what can you possibly call this shit policy except blatant discrimination?

PULLER CORL WASN'T NEW TO COLDPOINT. SHE'D BEEN HERE A FEW YEARS, AND AS FAR AS I KNEW HADN'T EVER DONE OR SAID ANYTHING ANYONE WOULD TAKE NOTICE OF -- UNTIL A COUPLE OF MONTHS AGO, WHEN SOMETHING IN HER APPARENTLY WOKE UP AND BEGAN YELLING.

Ms. Barlowe! What's the position of the operations Manager on this issue?

The position of the operations manager is that this isn't the time, place, or medium to discuss it.

Oh yeah? Where is?

ISADORA BRASS, COLDPOINT'S ONLY ROVING REPORTER. USUALLY TOLERABLE AND SOMETIMES USEFUL, BUT OCCASIONALLY NEEDS TO BE SLAPPED.

Probably see me in hell first ...

That fucking camera had better be off now.

It's off! I swear!!

So, really? You're just going to ambush me? You know better than that!

It wasn't an ambush!

It was a legitimate question! People want to know your position on this! I know you have one ...

None that's safe to give on the record.

Any position I could take on this is just going to give me more pain and headaches. Even a "no comment" isn't a safe position. Then it seems like I'm dodging.

Well, uh ... aren't you? Kind of? I mean, you run the place.

Yeah. Would you like to run it for a while? See how it feels to not be able to take a step without pissing somebody off.

Why don't you ask Arin-A for her position? She had a balcony seat for all that. She'll give you a whole spiel about how the robots should have a lock on everything. It'll make great viewing.

Arin-A is our local agitator against exploitation or abuse of robot labor. She's got valid points but is a pain in the ass.

Hey, hang on there! I just wanted to hear what Corl had to say.

And anyway you're wrong. I'm working for fairness. I know you think I'm super-pro-robot but, you know, you've never bothered to ask.

Corl has a point. It's not a fair policy.

All right, I apologize. At least you're consistent.

Maybe I'll make you have the fight with Furst.

Do you think she's gotten a lot nastier lately?

Yeah. I'm not sure what that's about.

CLAIRE PARSONS IS THE OTHER END OF MY ANNOYANCE NUMBERS. STARTED OFF FROM "YOU DON'T HAVE TO TRANSFER IF YOU DON'T WANT" AND HAS DRIFTED TO GENUINE ROBOT-HATER. IF I HAD TO PICK, I'D SAY I DISLIKE PARSONS MORE THAN BETH, BUT IT'D BE A CLOSE CALL.

No, we've got to have someone there! It's one of our best chances to get their attention! What about Tam?

Tam's doing the dining halls. You said that was important ...

It is ... we can't spare him from there. But we don't have --

You're going to have to do the concourse, Ziz. I don't trust any of these short-timers to do it right.

But you wanted me in the booth ...

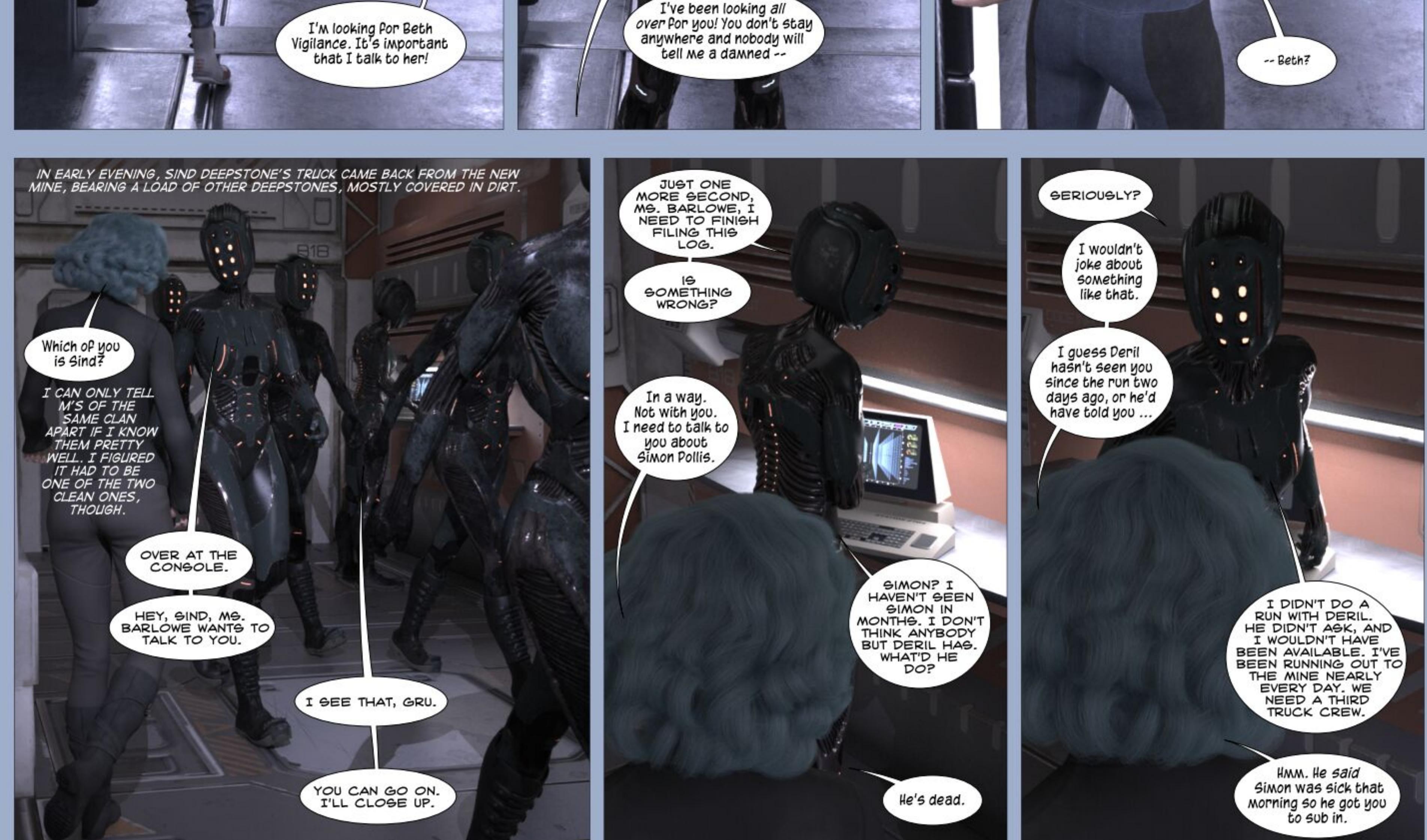
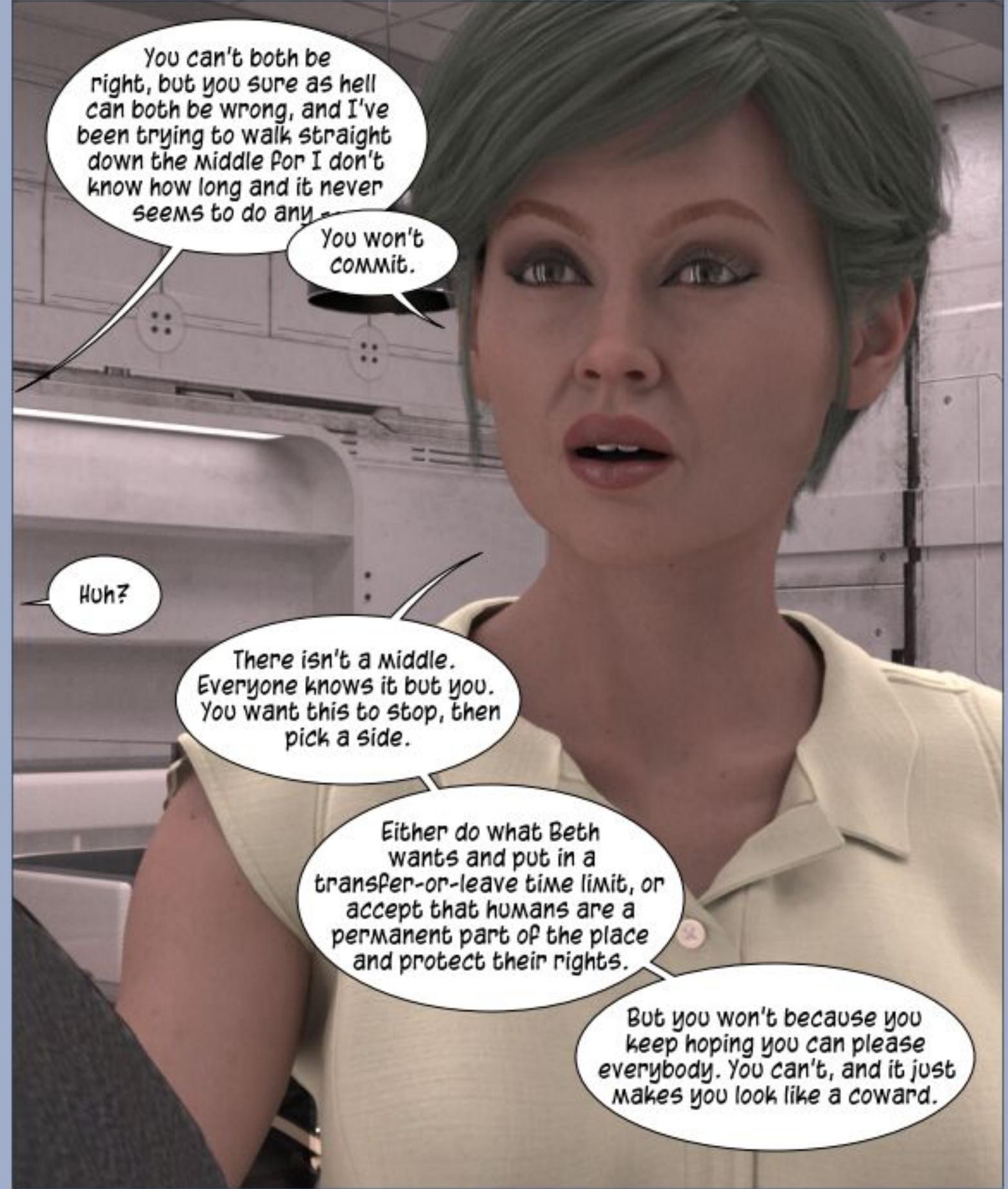
I'll do the booth! As soon as I can. It's not as important as working the concourse. These people don't even know the info corridor exists yet.

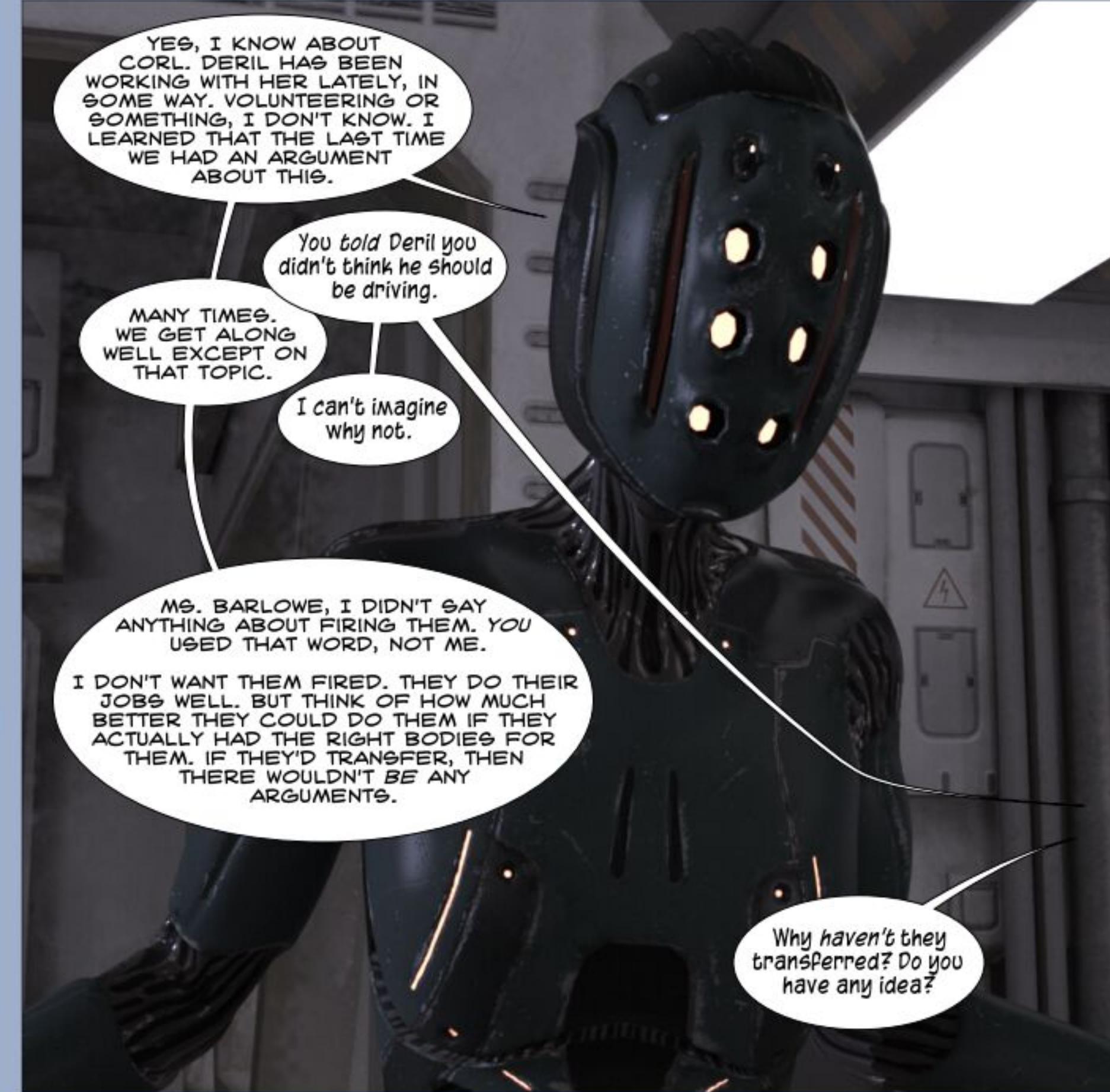
What do you want?

Don't let her push you around.

And that's not funny.

ZIZ FLYN, ONE OF PARSONS' ONLY UNSHAKABLE LOYALISTS. NEVER BEEN ABLE TO FIGURE OUT WHETHER THAT MAKES HER REALLY HORRIBLE OR REALLY DELUSIONAL. NEVER CARED ENOUGH TO FIND OUT.

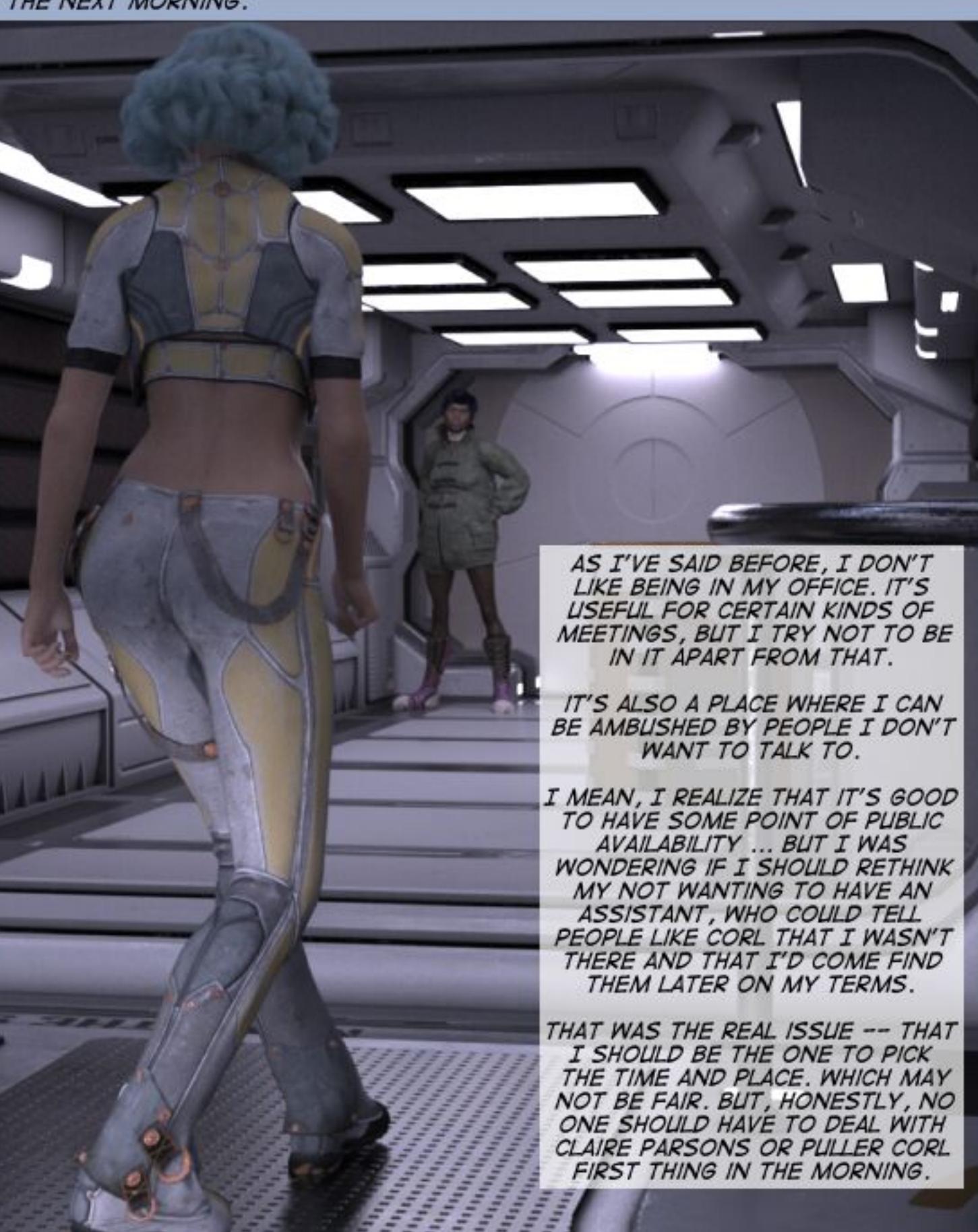


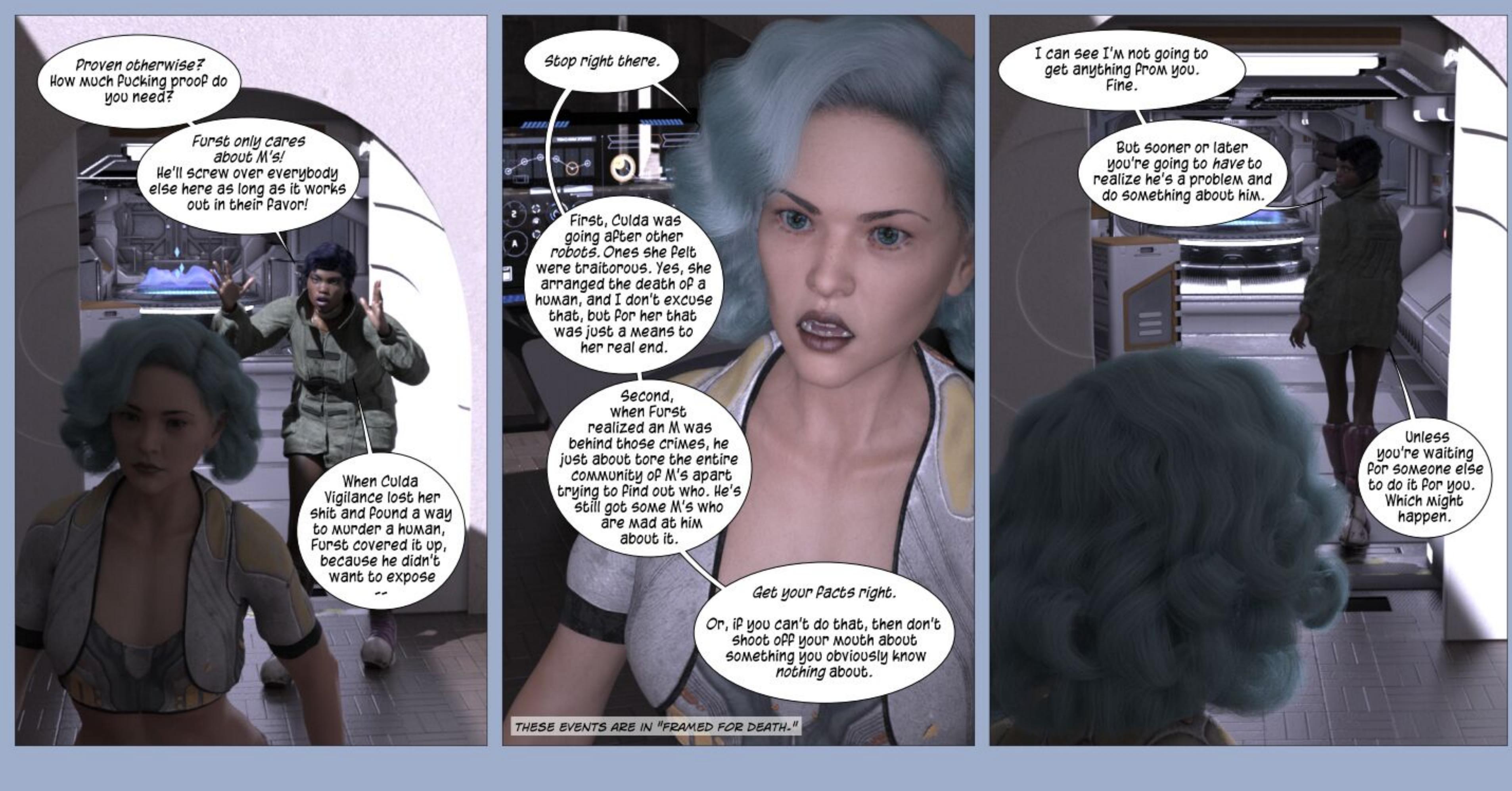


BYLA AND TREAC, MY SIGNIFICANT OTHERS, HAD ARRANGED A SPECIAL NIGHT AT THE RED X, THE CLUB BYLA'S NOW PARTLY RUNNING. I DIDN'T HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THEY WERE PLANNING UNTIL I SHOWED UP.



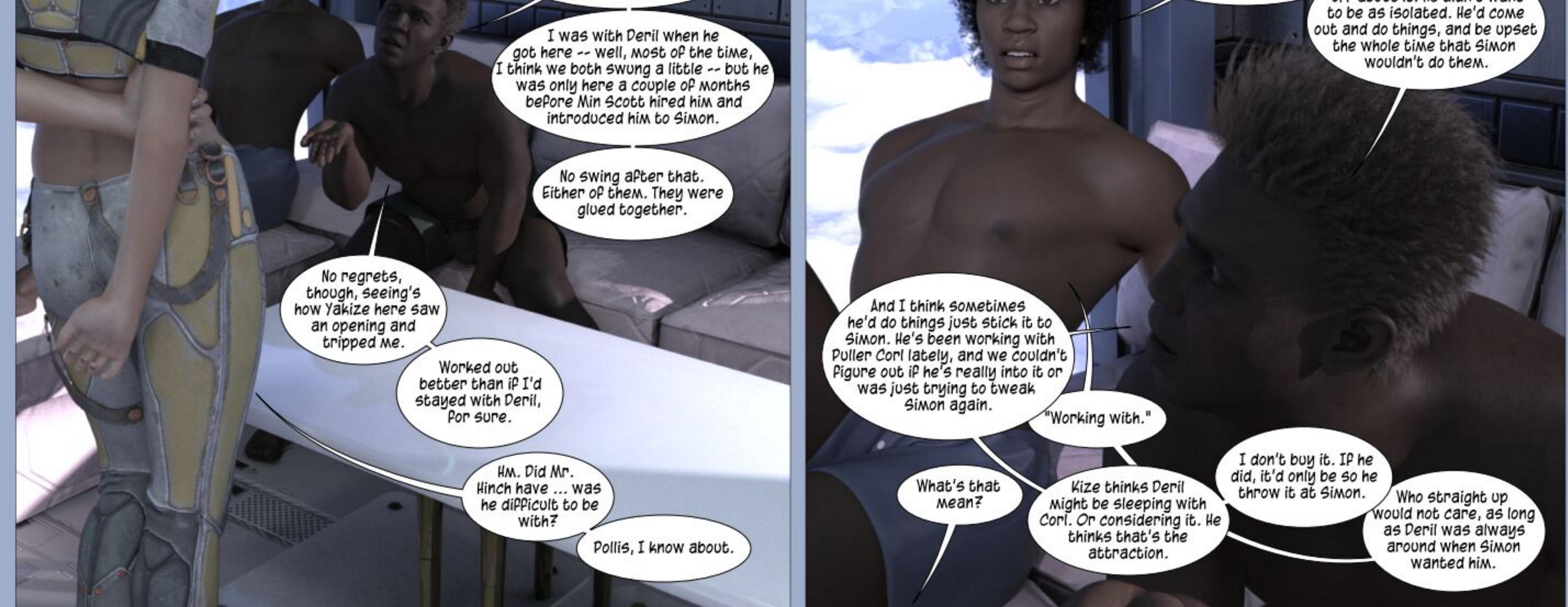
THE NEXT MORNING.

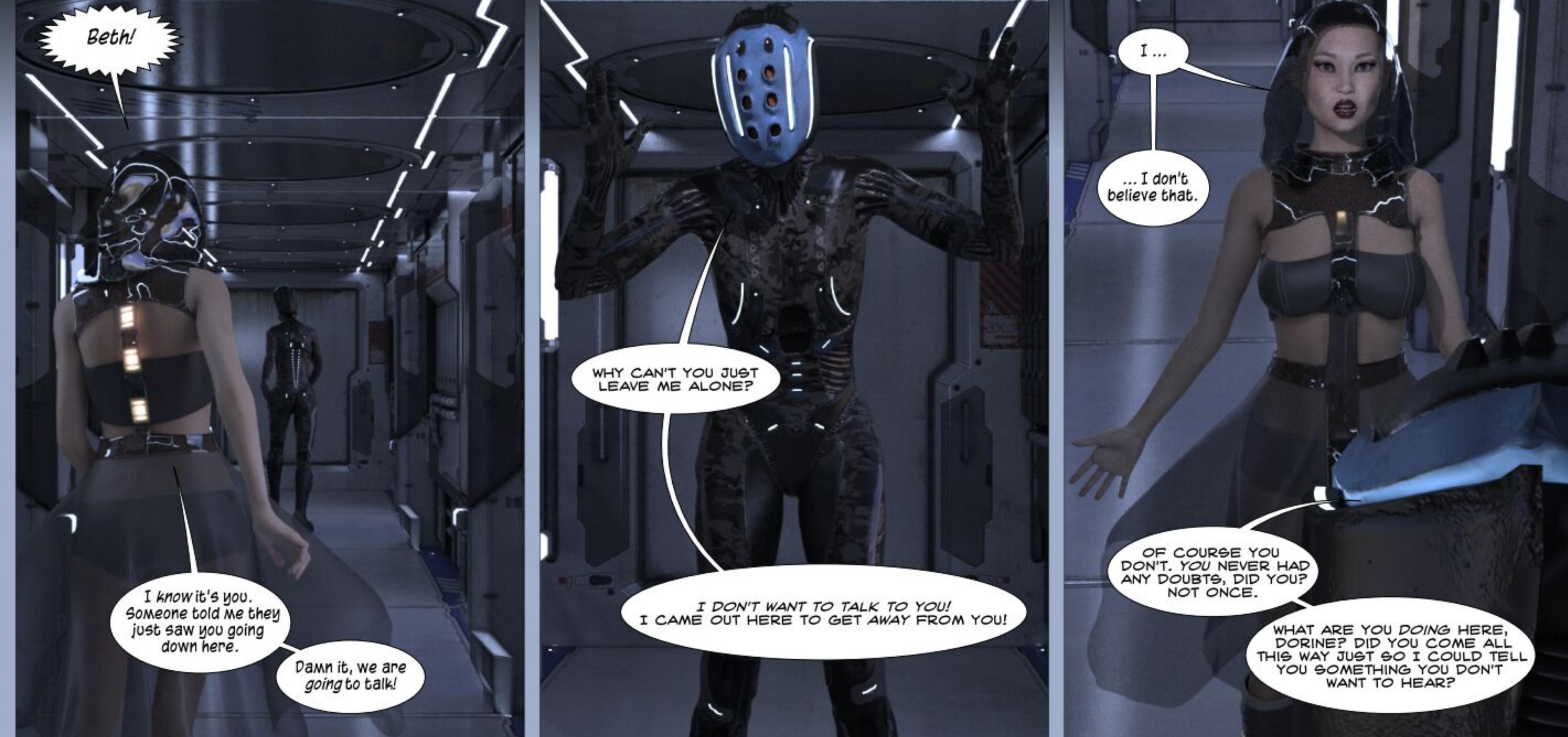
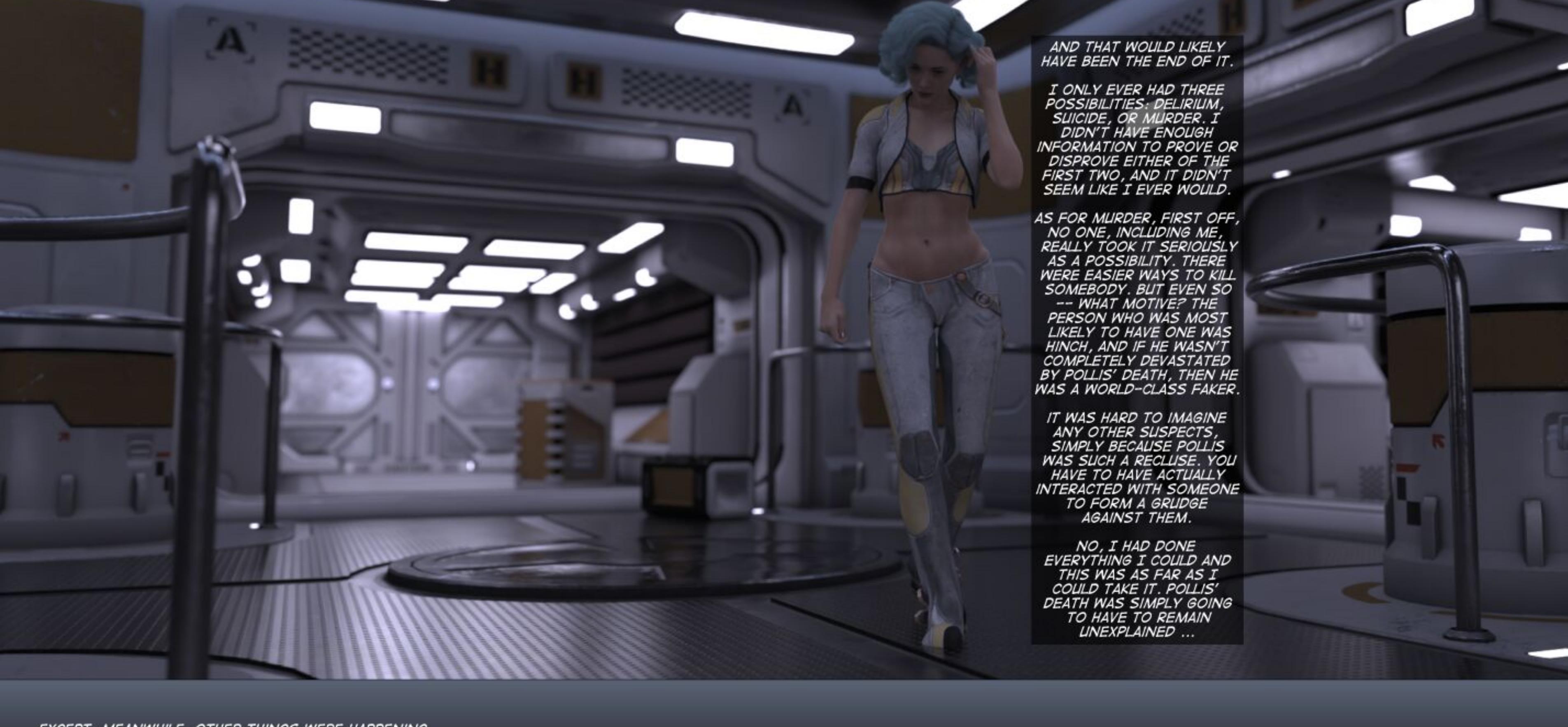


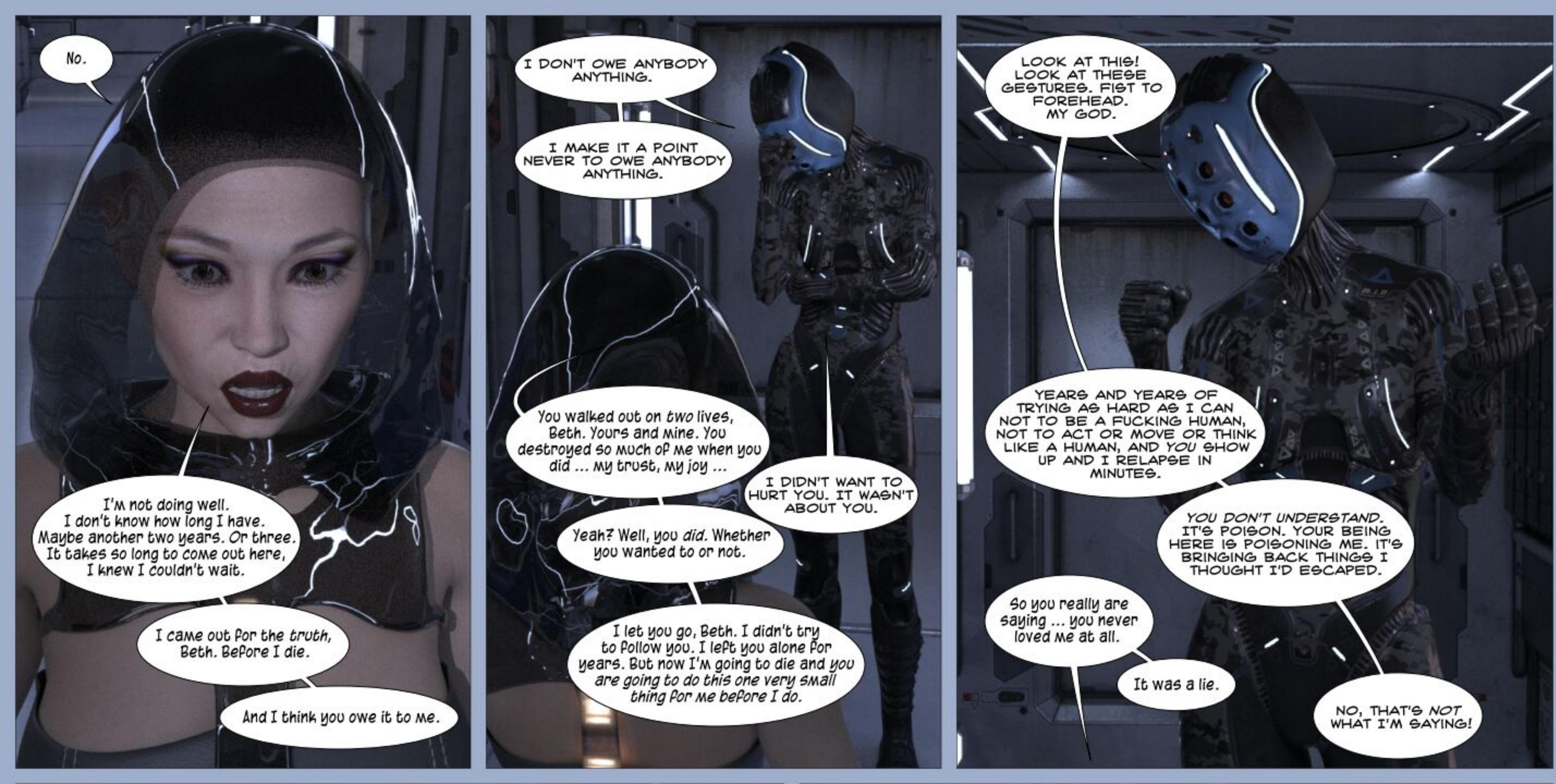


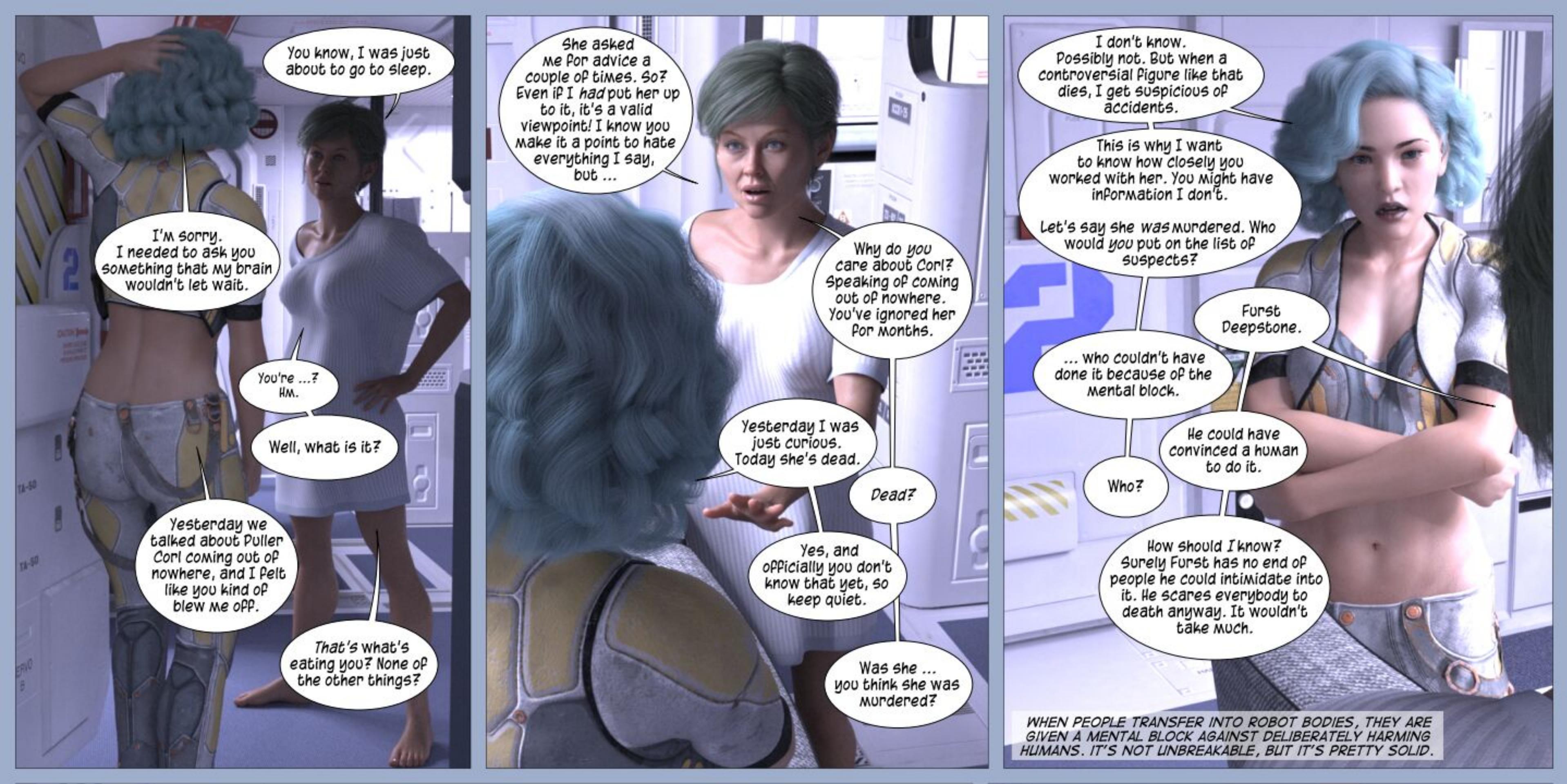


FURST HAD SAID SOMETHING IN THERE WHICH SET SOME WHEELS TURNING IN MY BRAIN, AND I DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO GO AHEAD WITH A VISIT THAT I PROBABLY WOULD HAVE MADE LATER THAT DAY ANYWAY.

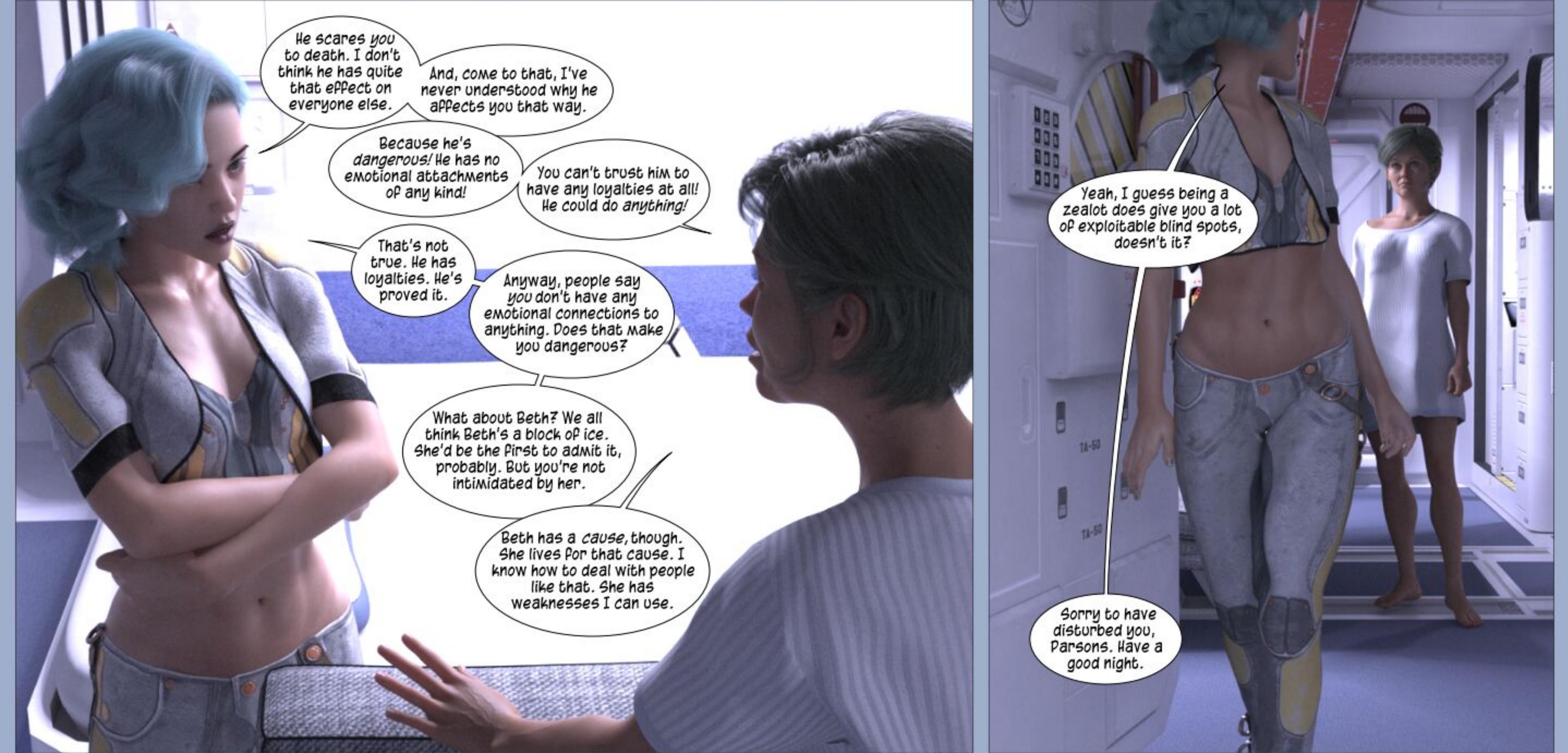




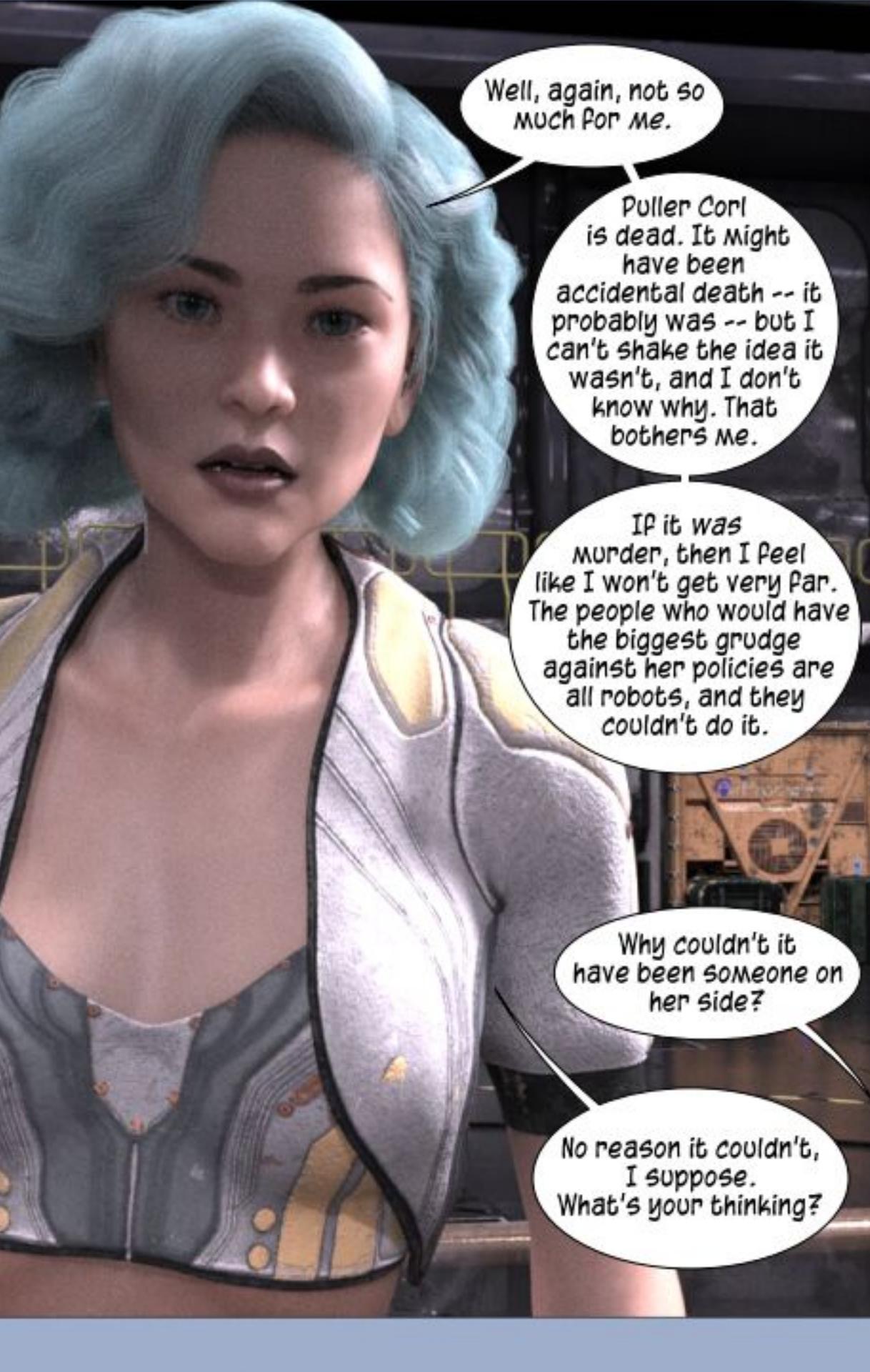
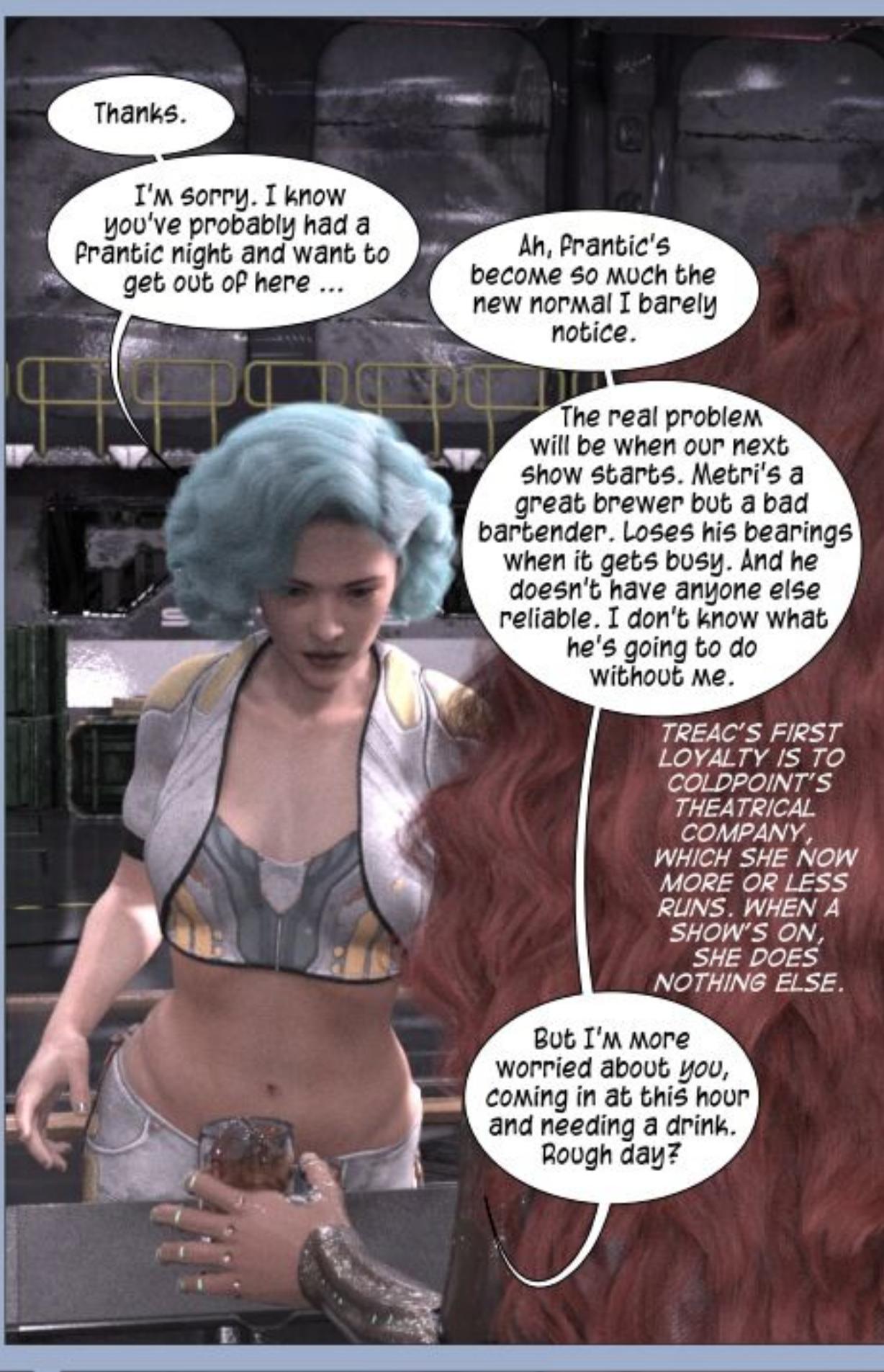




WHEN PEOPLE TRANSFER INTO ROBOT BODIES, THEY ARE GIVEN A MENTAL BLOCK AGAINST DELIBERATELY HARMING HUMANS. IT'S NOT UNBREAKABLE, BUT IT'S PRETTY SOLID.



CALL SIGN: METRI CALL'S BAR. CALL HAS THE BEST BEER AND WHISKEY IN COLDPOINT, MADE ENTIRELY ON PREMISES. THE NEW ARRIVALS FIGURED THAT OUT FAST AND THE PLACE, ALREADY POPULAR, HAD MORE BUSINESS THAN THEY COULD HANDLE.



THE NEXT MORNING.



AT THIS POINT YOU MAY BE WONDERING IF THERE'S SOMETHING THAT YOU MISSED -- SOME CLUE OR INDICATOR I PICKED UP ON THAT YOU DIDN'T, OR THAT I HAVEN'T TOLD YOU ABOUT. THERE ISN'T.

ALL I KNEW, AS I BEGAN THAT MORNING, WAS THAT MY BRAIN KEPT INSISTING THERE WAS A HOLE IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS -- SOMETHING IMPORTANT THAT I WASN'T SEEING.

EVEN AFTER GETTING THAT INFORMATION FROM PLANCK, I STILL WASN'T SURE EXACTLY WHAT THE HOLE WAS, OR WHAT WAS IN IT.

BUT I COULDN'T SHAKE THE IDEA THAT IT WAS THERE, AND IT WAS DEFINITELY NOW CLEAR THAT THERE WAS SOMEONE INVOLVED IN THIS WHO HADN'T BEEN HONEST WITH ME.

Mr. Hinch?

Sorry to let myself in, but you didn't answer, and we need to talk.

Are you here?

Go away.

Sorry. Wish I could.

Min, see if you can turn some lights on, please?

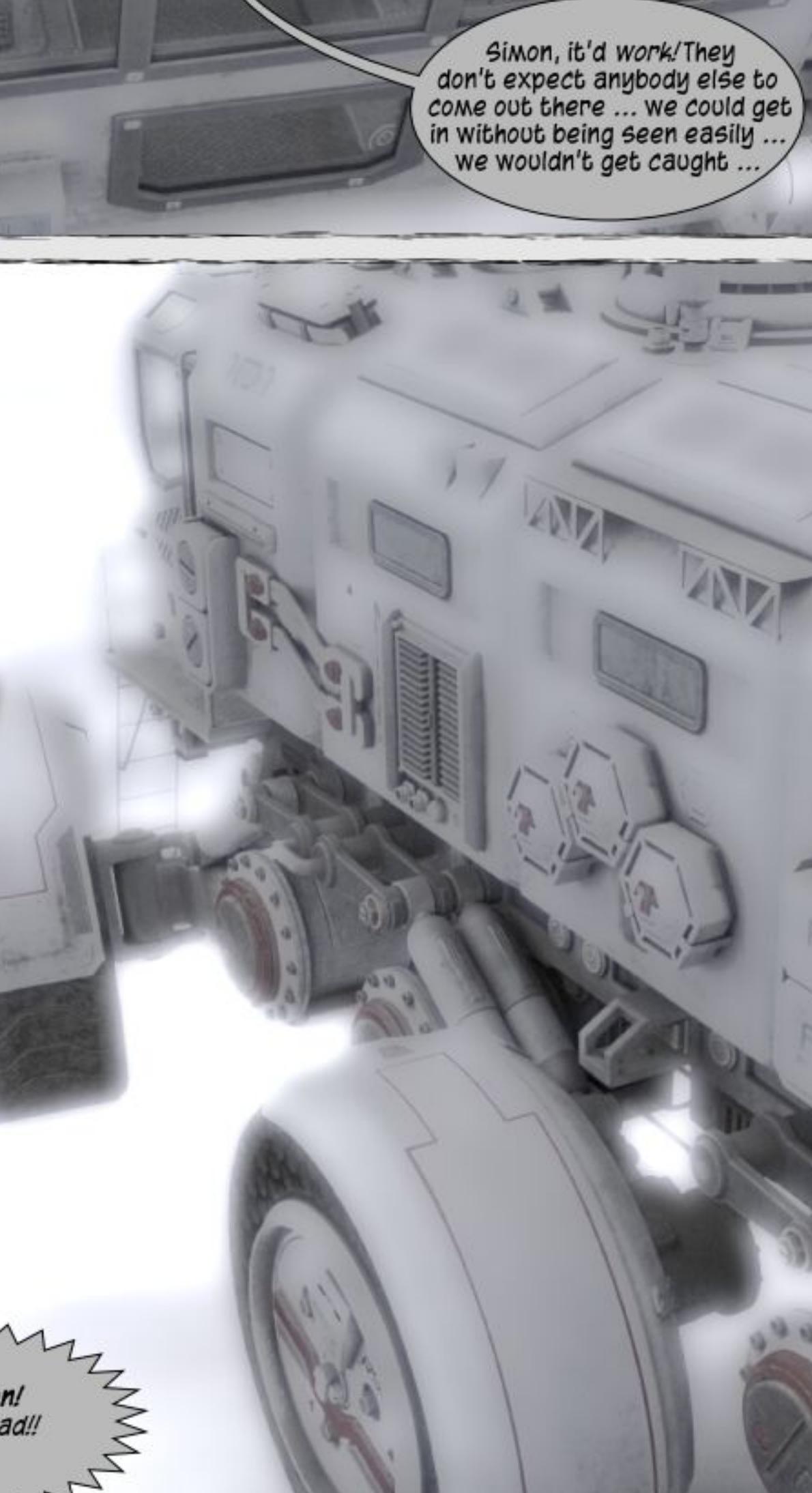
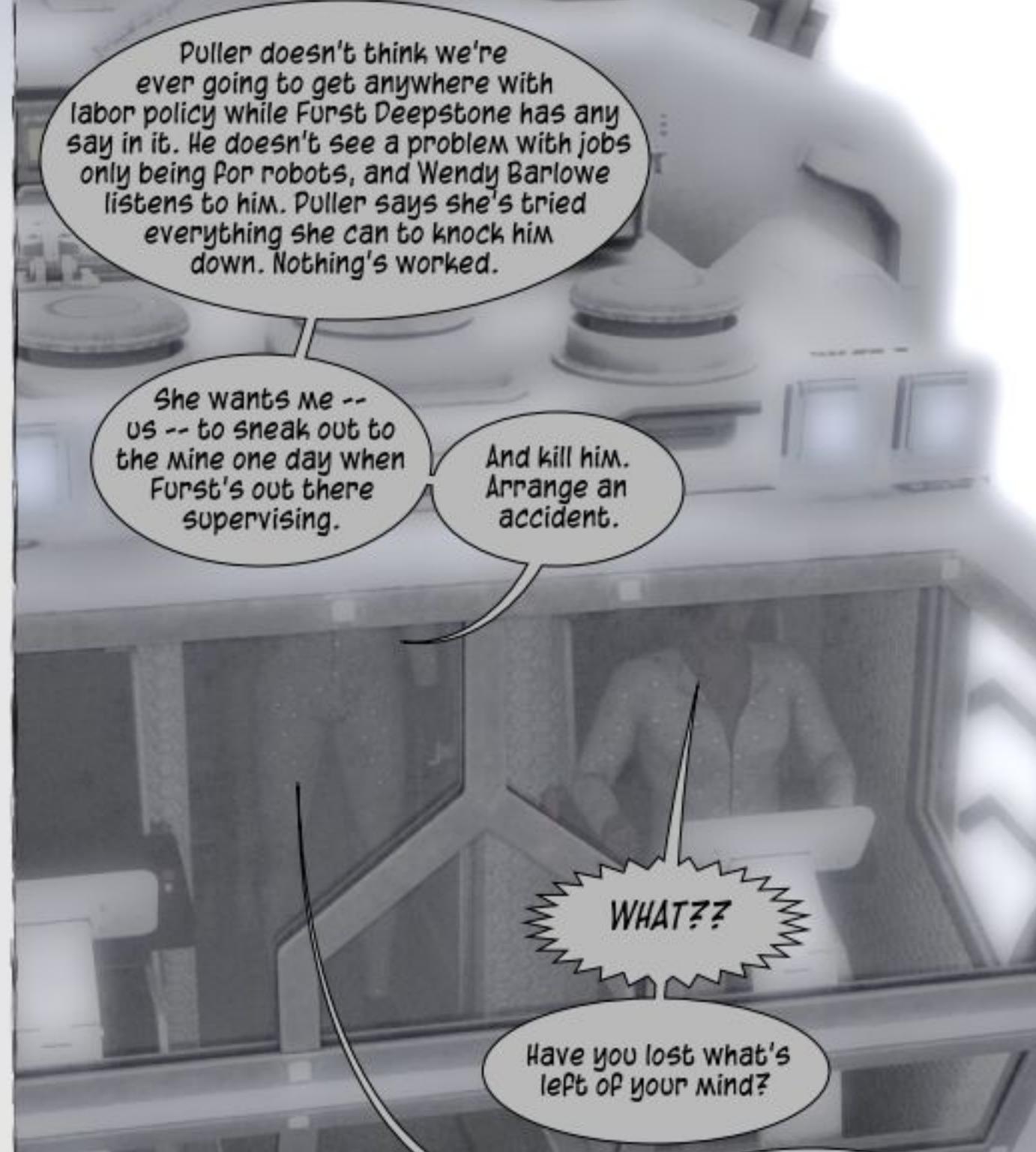
When the surface door was used at ten, four days ago, it wasn't Pollis wandering out in a fever.

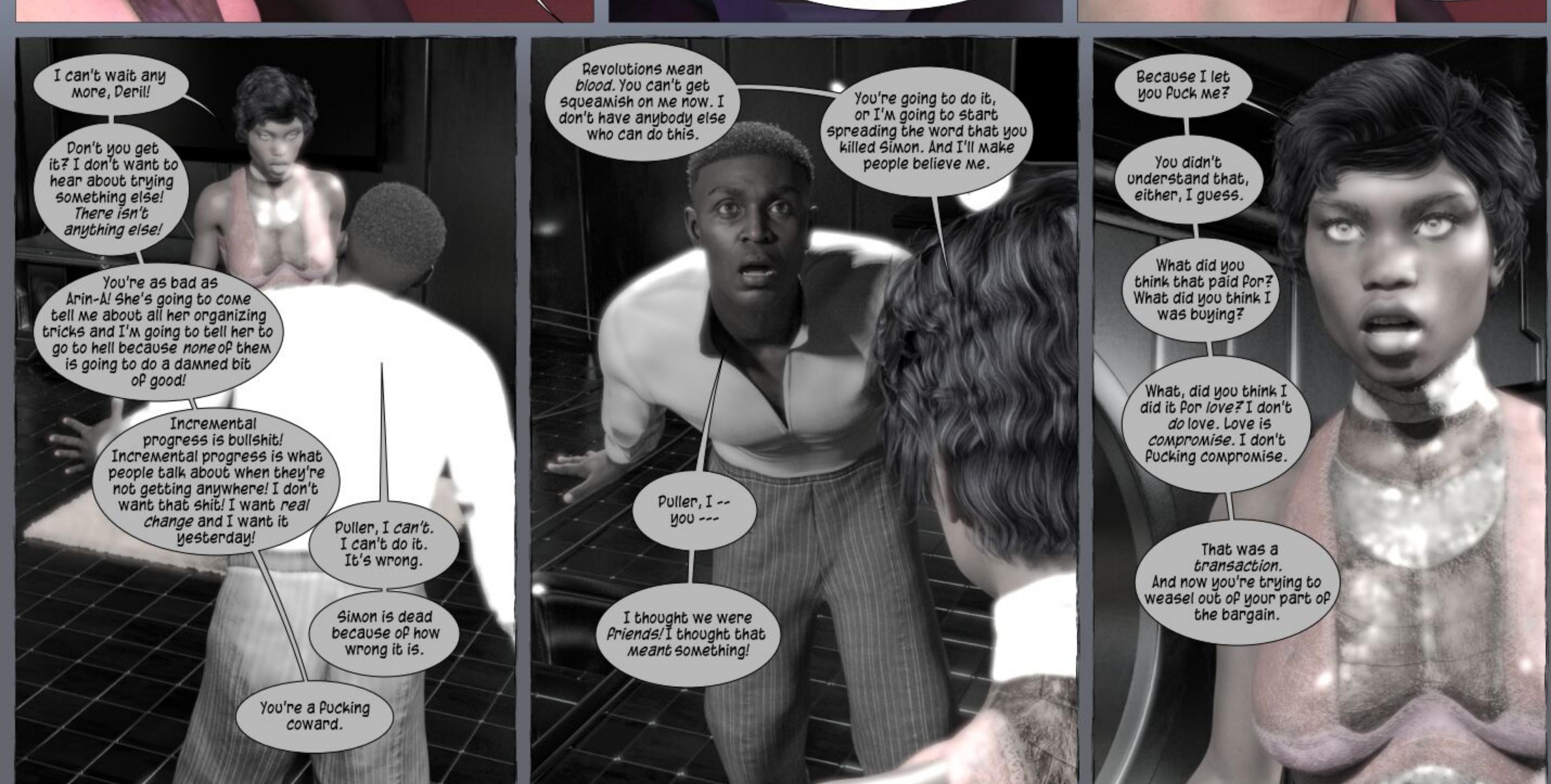
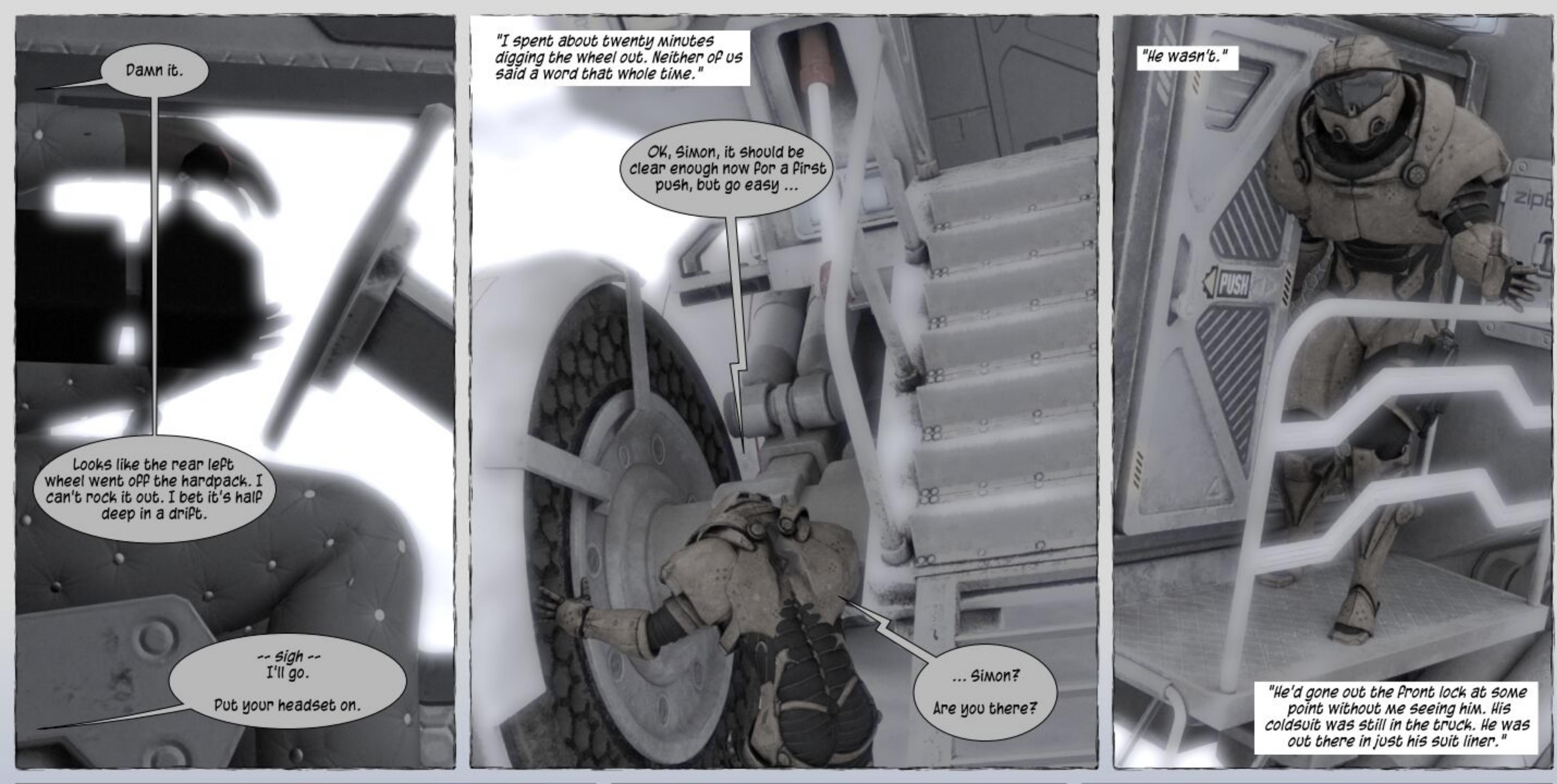
It was a surface repair team walking out to fix the transmission relay.

The door didn't register their coming back in, around eighteen, because they came back in with you. You gave them a ride.

That means the only time Simon could have gotten out there was at six. He was in the truck with you. He went out on the run with you.

And he wasn't with you when you came back. Something happened to Simon somewhere in there. Tell me about it.







THE NEXT MORNING. STEJ ORLO, MIN'S SIGNIFICANT OTHER, ANSWERED HER DOOR FOR HER. STEJ SPENT A LOT OF TIME AT MIN'S, SO THAT WAS NOT A SURPRISE.

