



... WHICH JUST ABOUT PUTS THE THIRD BOREHOLE BACK ON SCHEDULE.

I HATE TO ADMIT IT, BUT PEL HAS BEEN REALLY USEFUL DOWN THERE ...

NOW, DON'T BE LIKE THAT. SHE WAS DESIGNED TO BE USEFUL, FOR THAT EXACT PURPOSE.



COLDPOINT'S POWER IS GENERATED GEOTHERMALLY.

I DON'T KNOW A LOT ABOUT IT, BUT APPARENTLY WHAT YOU DO IS CREATE AN ACTIVE VOLCANO AND THEN SOMEHOW CAP IT WITHOUT RISKING BLOWING UP THE WHOLE PLACE.

WE HAVEN'T BLOWN UP. SO FAR.

EVERYTHING CHECKS OUT UP HERE, BIE. I'M HEADING BACK DOWN TO THE ROUGHS.

HUH?

HEY, I'M ADMITTING IT, AREN'T I?

Sounds good.

Watch your step.



RED BOARD OUT OF NOWHERE?

THAT'S JUST NOT --

THE GEO PLANT IS ONE OF THE DEEPEST PARTS OF COLDPOINT, AND DOWN IN ITS PIT AREAS, IT'S SO HOT THAT NO ONE BUT M'S CAN GO IN THERE WITHOUT SPECIAL PROTECTION.

-- OH SHIT.



What the --?

BIEGA!

GET OUT FROM UNDER IT! MOVE!!



YAAAAGGH!

Wuuuuaa!



BIEGA, GET BACK! DON'T LET IT TOUCH YOU!

MISH, OPEN THE DRAINS!

I JUST DID ... BUT --

Mury!!

WGRHRS



WE NEED TO GET THEM OUT!

DON'T REACH IN THERE! YOU'LL LOSE AN ARM.

IF THAT BLEW, THEN ALL OF THE KEY VALVES WENT AT THE SAME TIME.

THAT CAN'T HAPPEN!

IT JUST DID.

THE MAIN, THEN.

I DON'T THINK WE HAVE A CHOICE.

BUT, MISH ... WE'RE NOT GOING TO SAVE THEM. THAT'S A TWENTY MINUTE SHUTDOWN. MURY'S ALREADY GONE.

THE PIT OF DEATH

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

MANY VARIANT FORMS AVAILABLE

It's just that I'm not happy about advertising.

I've been asked if I can let ads into the wall displays several times and I've said no, and now --

Well, I know, but we're big enough now that we can't assume people will learn things by word of mouth.

FOR E AND L FRAMES

Besides, it's working. In just the three days they've been running, we've had a lot of people come in to apply to transfer who'd been avoiding it for years.

Including, apparently, every gay male in Coldpoint.

Yeah, I know about them.

IRENE DAY, BASICALLY CHIEF ROBOTICIST.

ZUSY-Q, HEAD OF MEDICAL.

But you've never done anything?

I'd have been happy to make variant plates for them, if they'd asked.

But how would they know to ask? Especially when your only promoted position has been "Everybody gets a torso that reads as basically female, no matter what genitals they have?"

It's made life much easier in a number of ways. The kind of men who make trouble usually stop making it once they read as women. Or they refuse to transfer, and they leave.

Or they don't leave, and become even more likely to make trouble because we're not offering them any options. Or they get exploited by people like Parsons.

Look, I see where you two are coming from, but ... you've been running this place from ... let's call it a lesbian viewpoint, to the exclusion of every other. And I don't think we can afford to be that kind of exclusionary anymore.

Little bit surprised you don't have that viewpoint as well.

I never thought of myself as lesbian. I just gave up on men.

I had a string of ... uh ... really bad experiences.

Proving my point.

Not the same thing, Zusana! These people come here to transfer -- if we don't offer them something they want to transfer into, we're creating a problem, not solving one!

Anyway, my point is, there's no downside to offering options. Nobody gets upset about having more choices.

You'd think. But Suza Dee is probably out in the corridors yelling right now.

Suza Dee needs an integrity test. She doesn't count.

MODULAR UTILITY PACKAGES

Unfortunately, she does, if people are listening to her.

And she's not the only one making noise about the modulars, even though only, what, three people are using them so far?

TWIN BEAMDRILL

ZERO POINT CARGO

IRREGULAR TERRAIN

LIFTER/LOADER

We're not taking anybody's jobs! We're helping them do them!

At least with Suza Dee I understand where her crazy's coming from. What gets me are the M's who are yelling about the modulars. It makes no sense!

They're still people, Irene. People don't always make sense.

What she said. Also, you've targeted M's specifically in the ads ...

They're the ones who need them!

Irene, I agree with you, or I wouldn't have endorsed any of this. I'm just pointing out, you're always going to piss off somebody. There's no way to avoid it --

-- hang on.

First? What's wrong?

OK. How long can we go on reserve power before it's --

Oh.

I see.

I'll come down.

What's today's crisis?

Geo's down. We're running on battery right now.

... And we've lost someone. Murry Deepstone.

Do you want on-scene forensics?

Thank you for the offer, but there's nothing left of them for you to look at.

Live magma doesn't leave much.

Eww.



THANKS FOR COMING DOWN, WENDY.

FURST DEEPSTONE, HEAD OF EXCAVATION, A MAJOR ROLE SINCE SO MUCH OF COLDPOINT IS UNDERGROUND.

FOR VARIOUS REASONS, THE GEO PLANT IS HANDLED BY DEEPSTONE CLAN, NOT FULLWRENCH.

Not a problem.

I MIGHT AS WELL SPELL IT OUT RIGHT AWAY: FURST WOULDN'T HAVE CALLED ME DOWN IN PERSON FOR A POWER OUTAGE OR A REPAIR ISSUE, OR EVEN FOR A DEATH ... THOUGH HE'D HAVE NOTIFIED ME, OF COURSE. THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE AT WORK HERE.

KNOWING FURST, HE WANTED ME TO COME TO MY OWN CONCLUSIONS. HE'D SEE IF THEY MATCHED HIS AFTERWARDS.

No, they're not responding at all, at least as far as I can tell from the board.

I WAS AFRAID OF THAT.

I THINK YOU KNOW MISH ALREADY?

MS. BARLOWE.

SREETA, HAVE YOU MET WENDY BARLOWE? THE OPERATIONS MANAGER? MS. BARLOWE, THIS IS SREETA YAH.

Uh ... hello?

I MIGHT HAVE REASSURED HER THAT I DIDN'T BITE PEOPLE'S HEADS OFF, BUT I WASN'T SURE YET WHETHER I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO DO JUST THAT, OR WHOSE WOULD GET BITTEN OFF IF I DID. SOMETIMES MY JOB IS TO BE THE DISCIPLINARIAN.

And a trespasser, I see.

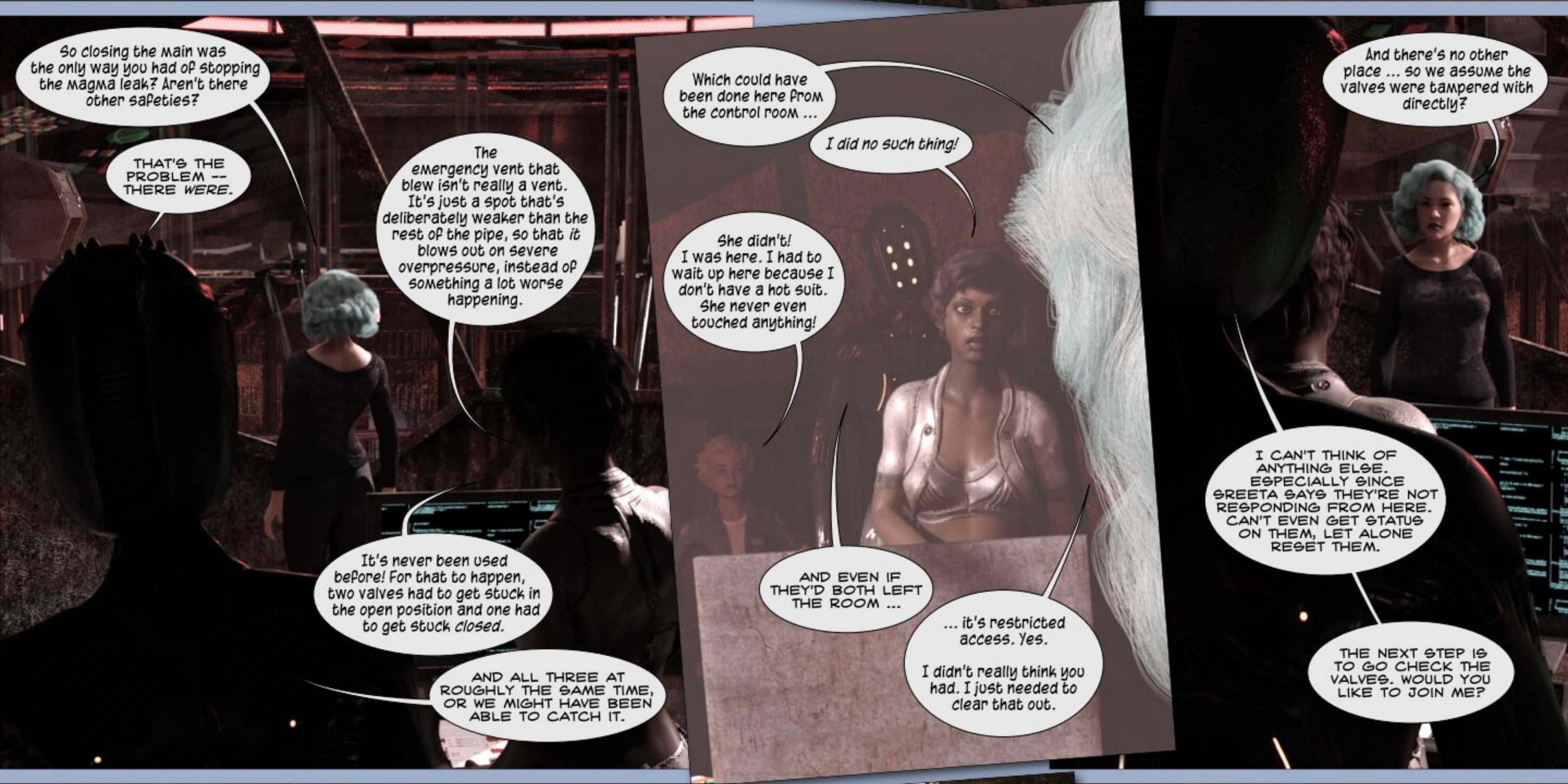
I am not! Mr. Furst said I could come with him while he did stuff.

CUSI SETRIK. THE ONLY CHILD IN COLDPOINT.

INTO EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS AND SOMETIMES IMPOSSIBLE TO SUPERVISE. SHE'S LUCKY WE ALL SEEM TO LOVE HER.

JUST 'FURST,' PLEASE, CUSI.

IT'S TRUE, WENDY. I WAS DOING NORMAL ROUNDS AND INVITED CUSI ALONG. WE WERE HERE WHEN IT HAPPENED BY PURE COINCIDENCE.



So closing the main was the only way you had of stopping the magma leak? Aren't there other safeties?

THAT'S THE PROBLEM -- THERE WERE.

The emergency vent that blew isn't really a vent. It's just a spot that's deliberately weaker than the rest of the pipe, so that it blows out on severe overpressure, instead of something a lot worse happening.

It's never been used before! For that to happen, two valves had to get stuck in the open position and one had to get stuck closed.

AND ALL THREE AT ROUGHLY THE SAME TIME, OR WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CATCH IT.

Which could have been done here from the control room ...

I did no such thing!

She didn't! I was here. I had to wait up here because I don't have a hot suit. She never even touched anything!

AND EVEN IF THEY'D BOTH LEFT THE ROOM ...

... it's restricted access. Yes.

I didn't really think you had. I just needed to clear that out.

And there's no other place ... so we assume the valves were tampered with directly?

I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE. ESPECIALLY SINCE SREETA SAYS THEY'RE NOT RESPONDING FROM HERE. CAN'T EVEN GET STATUS ON THEM, LET ALONE RESET THEM.

THE NEXT STEP IS TO GO CHECK THE VALVES. WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN ME?



So you've finally been pulled over the Cusi event horizon.

IT'S EASIER TO TAKE HER ALONG THAN TO BE PESTERED TO DEATH ABOUT IT.

ALSO, IF SHE'S GOING TO GET INTO EVERYTHING ANYWAY, BETTER THAT SHE HAVE SOMEONE SUPERVISING.

And that's as far as it goes, huh?

I DIDN'T SAY IT WAS A CHORE. SHE WANTS TO KNOW THINGS. I RESPECT THAT.

FORTUNATELY, SHE'S NOT HARD TO PUT UP WITH. EVEN MISH SEEMS TO LIKE HER.

STAY CLOSE TO US, AND NO FOOLING AROUND. THESE FLOORS CAN BE SLIPPERY, AND IF YOU GO OVER ONE OF THESE RAILINGS, YOU'LL DIE.

I promise.

YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO STAY HERE FOR LONG ANYWAY. THIS IS JUST BARELY ON THE EDGE OF YOU NEEDING A SUIT.

THE VALVE'S ABOUT THREE METERS THAT WAY. TO GET THERE, SOMEONE WOULD HAVE TO GO OVER THE EDGE TO GET INTO THE DUCT, THEN CRAWL ON THE PIPES.

Who's gonna go?

Not you.

Nobody is.



IF the valve was sabotaged, there's a chance somebody left a present. Like a proximity mine.

Let's risk a drone instead of a person.

MENICA SCOTT, MY INDISPENSIBLE HEAD OF ENGINEERING.

Hi, Min!

Cusi, how'd you get mixed up in this?

How'd you?

Furst called me.

I SUDDENLY FELT AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION.

Oh, yeah. Definitely sabotage. There's nothing left. There's a charred box where the valve switch was. Dangling wires; the connections have melted. I can see a valve piling on its own, but not like that.

Sorry I don't have a way to share the visuals.

I'M GLAD YOU DON'T. I'D JUST GET MORE DEPRESSED. THIS IS GOING TO BE A NASTY REPLACEMENT JOB, AND WE CAN'T DELAY.

SO, A RECEIVER WITH A SELF-DESTRUCT?

Can't think how else it would work. Send a signal to the valves to flip them the way they wanted ... then immediately blow up the switches so nobody could undo it.

There are cameras in the pit area, right?

You're going to want to check them for wiretaps, or other things like that. Min knows the jargon, I don't.

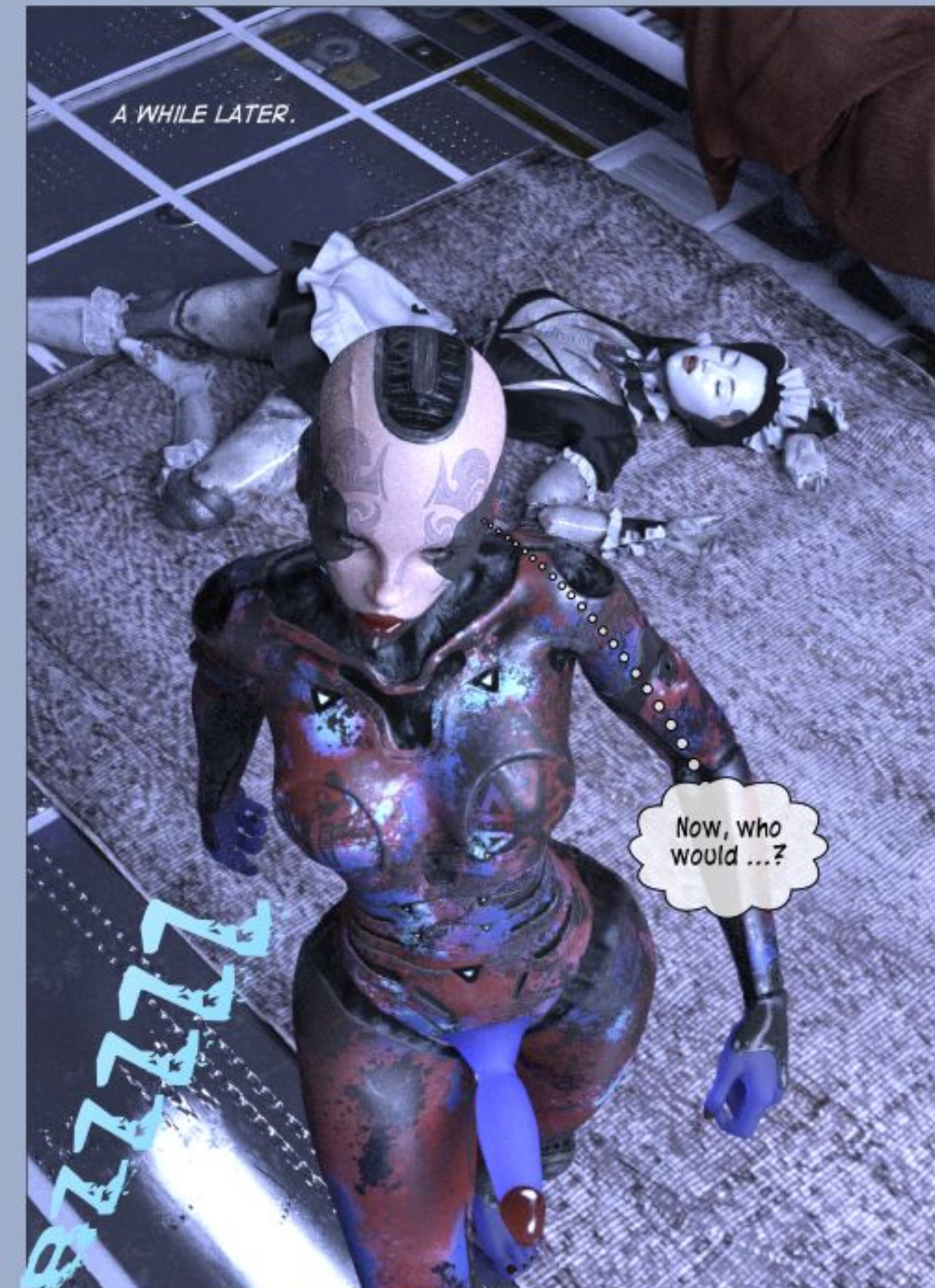
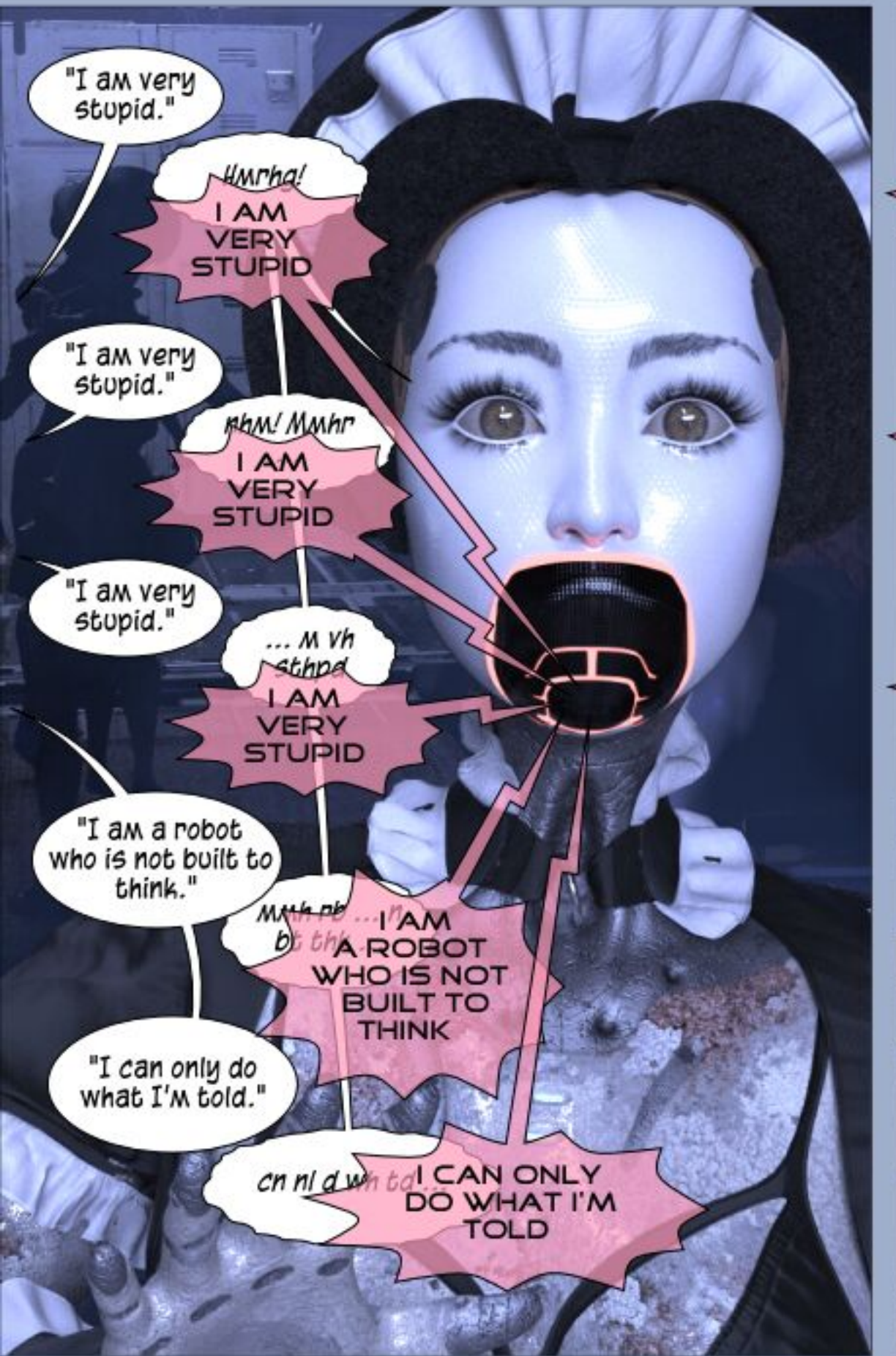
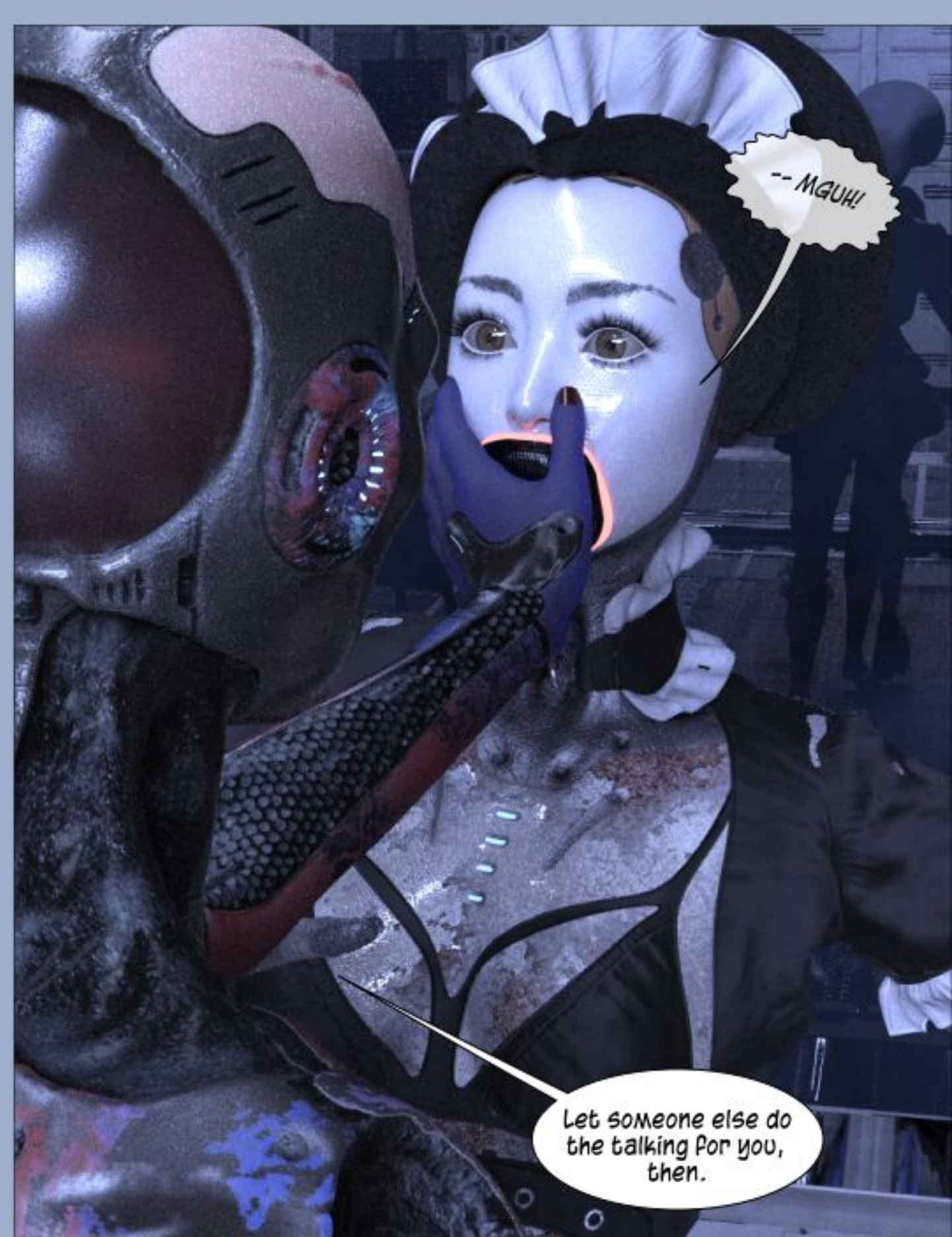
YOU THINK SOMEONE WAS WATCHING WHAT HAPPENED?

I don't know, but it makes a big difference if someone was.

IF no one was, then it was just sabotage. Pure mayhem.

But if someone cared about the timing -- about when they pushed the button -- then either they wanted someone specific there to see it happen ...

... or they were trying to kill somebody.





OK, so if we assume it was a murder ... and we assume Mury was not the intended victim ... who was?

Cusi, this may be the point where you need to be somewhere else.

You didn't want to talk about it until Mr. Furst -- uh, Furst -- until he left.

That means you think somebody wants to kill him.

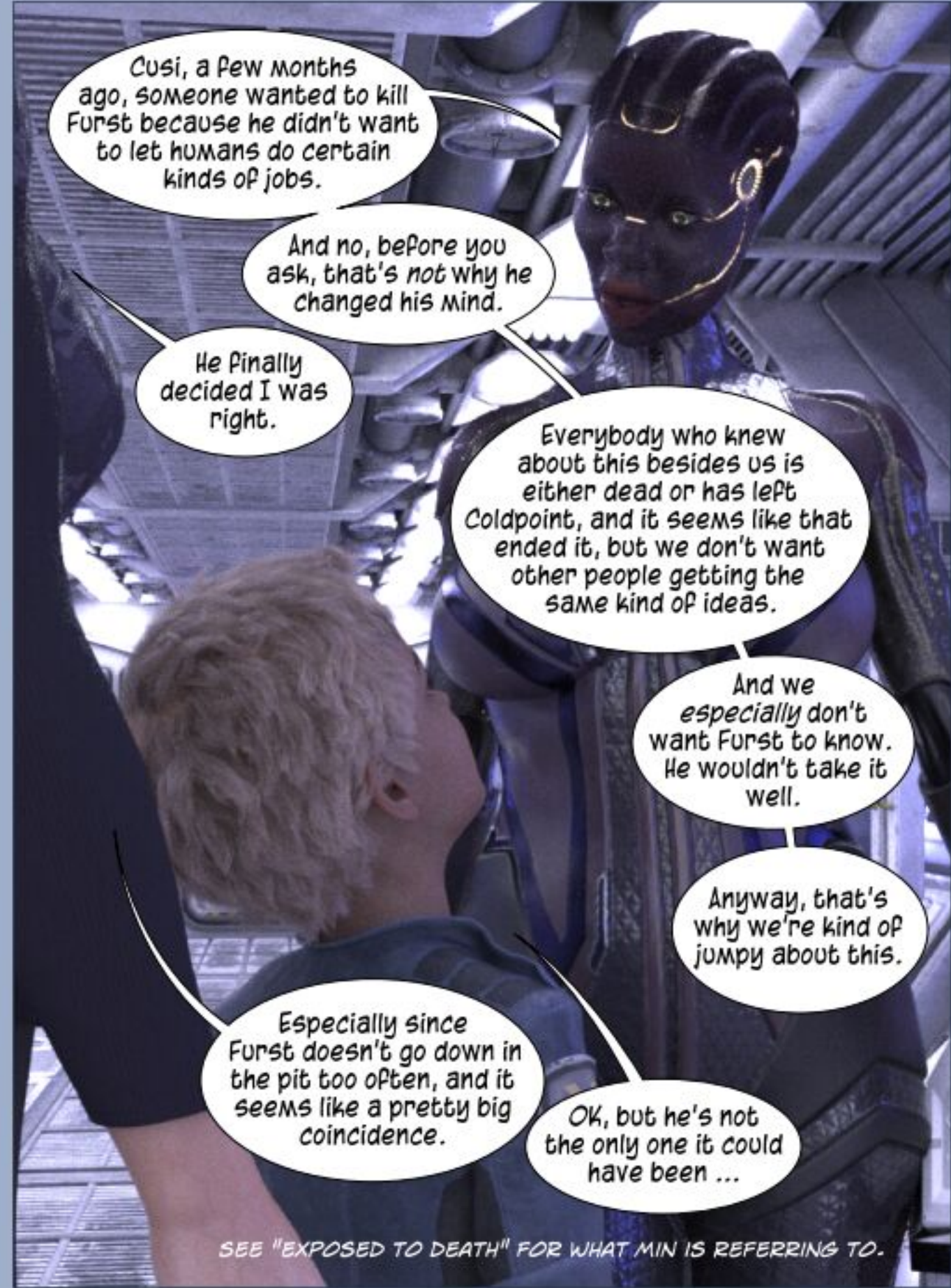


Are you sure you're eight?

I'll be nine in a month.

You know she doesn't miss much.

Just tell her. She's pretty good at keeping secrets.



Cusi, a few months ago, someone wanted to kill Furst because he didn't want to let humans do certain kinds of jobs.

And no, before you ask, that's not why he changed his mind.

He finally decided I was right.

Everybody who knew about this besides us is either dead or has left Coldpoint, and it seems like that ended it, but we don't want other people getting the same kind of ideas.

And we especially don't want Furst to know. He wouldn't take it well.

Anyway, that's why we're kind of jumpy about this.

Especially since Furst doesn't go down in the pit too often, and it seems like a pretty big coincidence.

OK, but he's not the only one it could have been ...

SEE "EXPOSED TO DEATH" FOR WHAT MIN IS REFERRING TO.



You saw the whole thing, didn't you? You were watching out the window.

Uh-huh.

Tell me what you saw.

Furst and Mr. Mish were -- is Mish a 'Mr'?

Mish is 'they.' This is why we don't use titles much.

-- they were walking together, and they were where the stuff came out, but they moved away. So did the one with the spider legs.

Pel.

Then the human lady in the suit --

Biesa.

-- she walked into the bad spot. It was all really fast.

How fast?

A few seconds?

There was a really loud noise. We could hear it even up in the control room. And the other one -- Mury, right? -- ran and pushed her out of the way, but got caught in it.

OK. That all matches what Furst told me.

Musical chairs.



The problem is, no one knows how much time it took to build up pressure. Could have been a second. Or half a minute. Maybe even the killer didn't know.

They might have been "aiming" for Furst and mistimed it.

Some of the M's don't like the human lady -- Biesa -- being down there. Could somebody have gotten mad enough about that?

Now where did you pick that up?

I don't know. Around. I'm right, though, huh?

Unfortunately, yes. And some people don't like Pel, for even dumber reasons.

But I'd like to hope nobody would murder over those things.

... Mish?

Hold on, let me filter noise a little ...

OK, that's better. You what now?

Uh-huh, see, told you ...

Sure. Be there in just a sec.



Mish took you seriously enough to detour and check for a tap on the pit cameras. They found one.

Wireless, so we can't trace it further than that to find who was spying.

Now Mish has had an attack of ... what was it Furst called it?

"An abundance of caution"?

That. I'm going to take the drone to check the other two valves. If you go interview ...

I'm nowhere near that yet. If I do anything dangerous, I'll find you first. I promise.

I'M NOT ALLOWED TO INTERVIEW A MURDER SUSPECT WITHOUT A BODYGUARD EVER SINCE A COUPLE OF THEM HAVE TRIED TO KILL ME.

Or bring the peace squad.

THE PEACE SQUAD



WAS A RELATIVELY NEW THING SO FAR THERE WAS ONLY THE ONE TEAM, AND WE WERE SEEING HOW THEY WORKED OUT BEFORE ADDING MORE.

CAUTION

LULA BENJAMINE, WHOM I HAND-PICKED FOR THE JOB ...

... AND PHILA RAIT, WHO HAD BEEN RECOMMENDED BY GLORIA.

WE ALL FELT IT WAS POLITIC TO MAKE THE TEAMS HALF HUMAN AND HALF ROBOT.

You're trying to make everything worse!

WE MOST CERTAINLY ARE NOT!



THIS ISN'T A CONSPIRACY, SUZA. BE REASONABLE. IT'S A VERY MINOR CHANGE.

YOU DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH US DRIVING A FORKLIFT, SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH TEMPORARILY BEING THE FORKLIFT?

Just because you don't want to be human doesn't mean you get to force it on the rest of us!

WHO'S FORCING ANYTHING ON YOU?

You're either not thinking it through or you're deliberately missing the point ...



Hiller, half of Coldpoint fears us, or hates us, or just doesn't want to be one of us, or some combination. And you M's are a large part of the reason.

They look at you and think, "I don't want to transfer, I'll lose my humanity." Or they see machines that they don't have to think of as human. That they can exploit.

What's going to happen with these mods is first it's going to be "you can do your job better with these," but then it's going to turn into "you have to have these to do your job."

They're going to crowd everything else out, and we're all going to be forced to be less human, and that's not only not fair, it's going to make the situation with the meat folks even worse.

THIS IS SUZA DEE, IN CASE YOU HADN'T ALREADY GUESSED.

SHE'S NOT STUPID. THAT'S THE MOST POSITIVE THING I CAN FIND TO SAY ABOUT HER.



YOU'RE INVENTING A PROBLEM TO AVOID THE REAL ONE ...

Here's the woman who's causing it all! Who doesn't bother to consider the consequences of her technology!

Huh?

This is why I don't like to leave medical.

You get to have a life, Zusy.



You've got to stop this! These modules ... stop making them! Stop designing them!

You're going to have us all rolling around looking like trucks or something ... no faces, no emotions ...

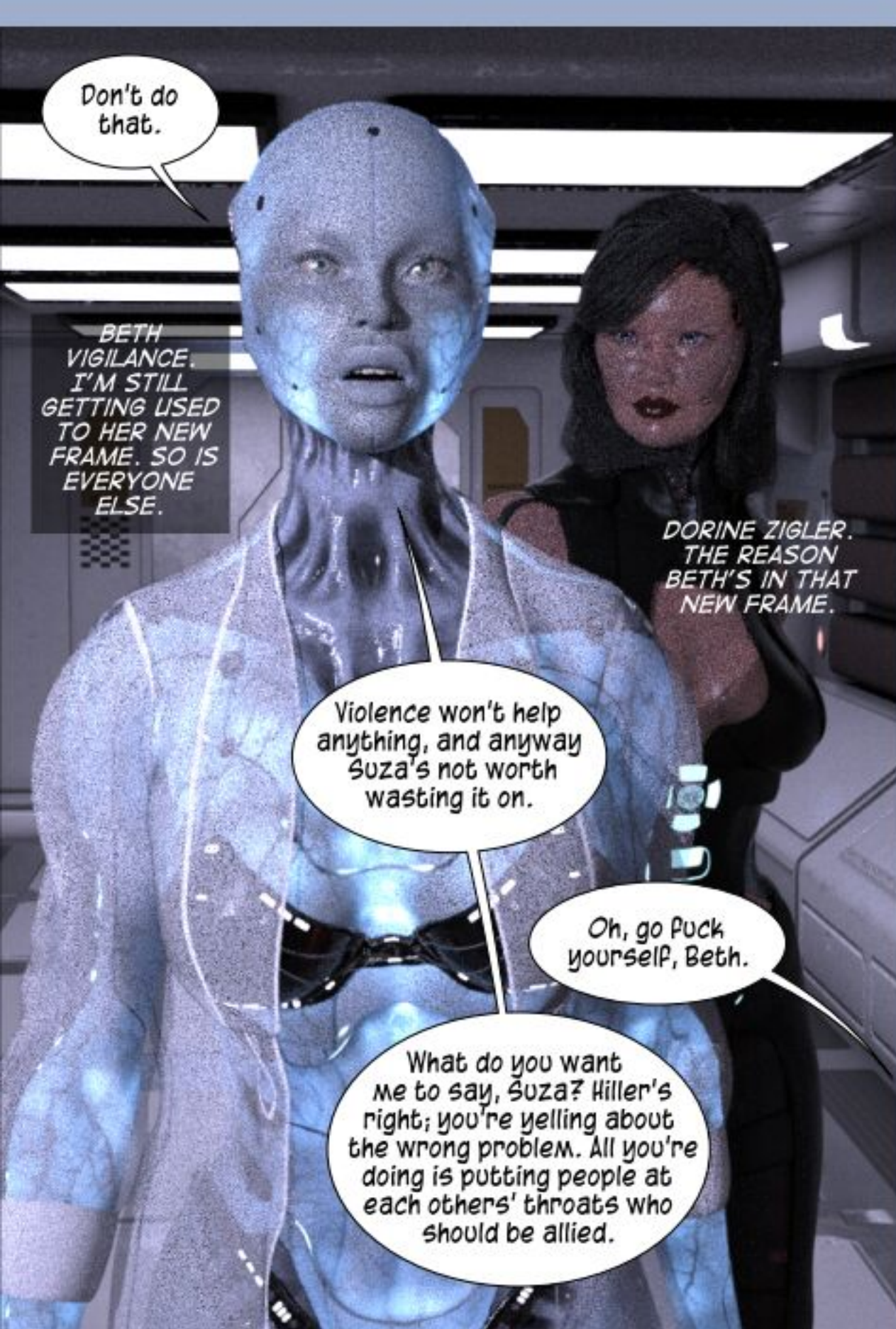
We don't want to be like them! We're people! We're not machines!

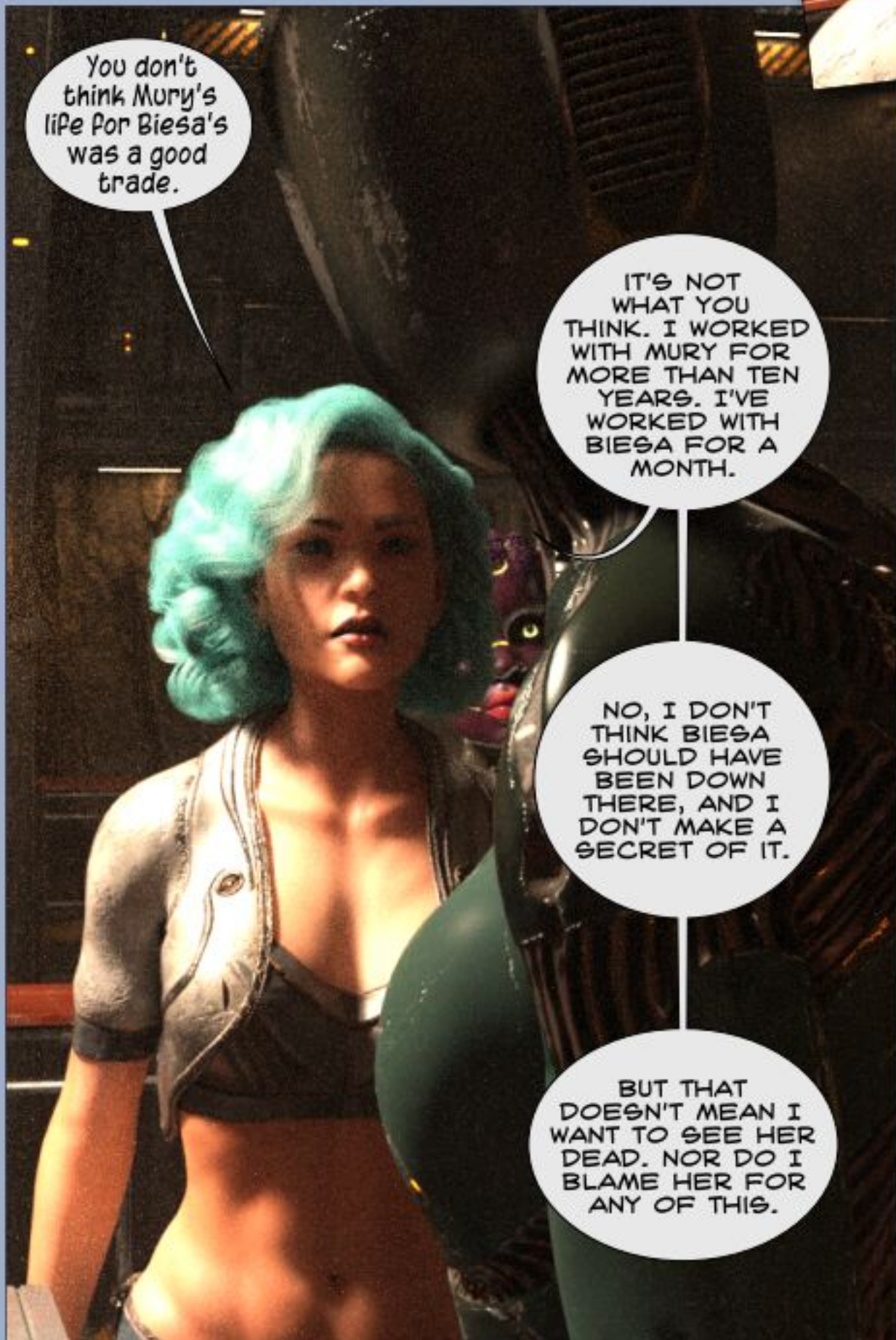


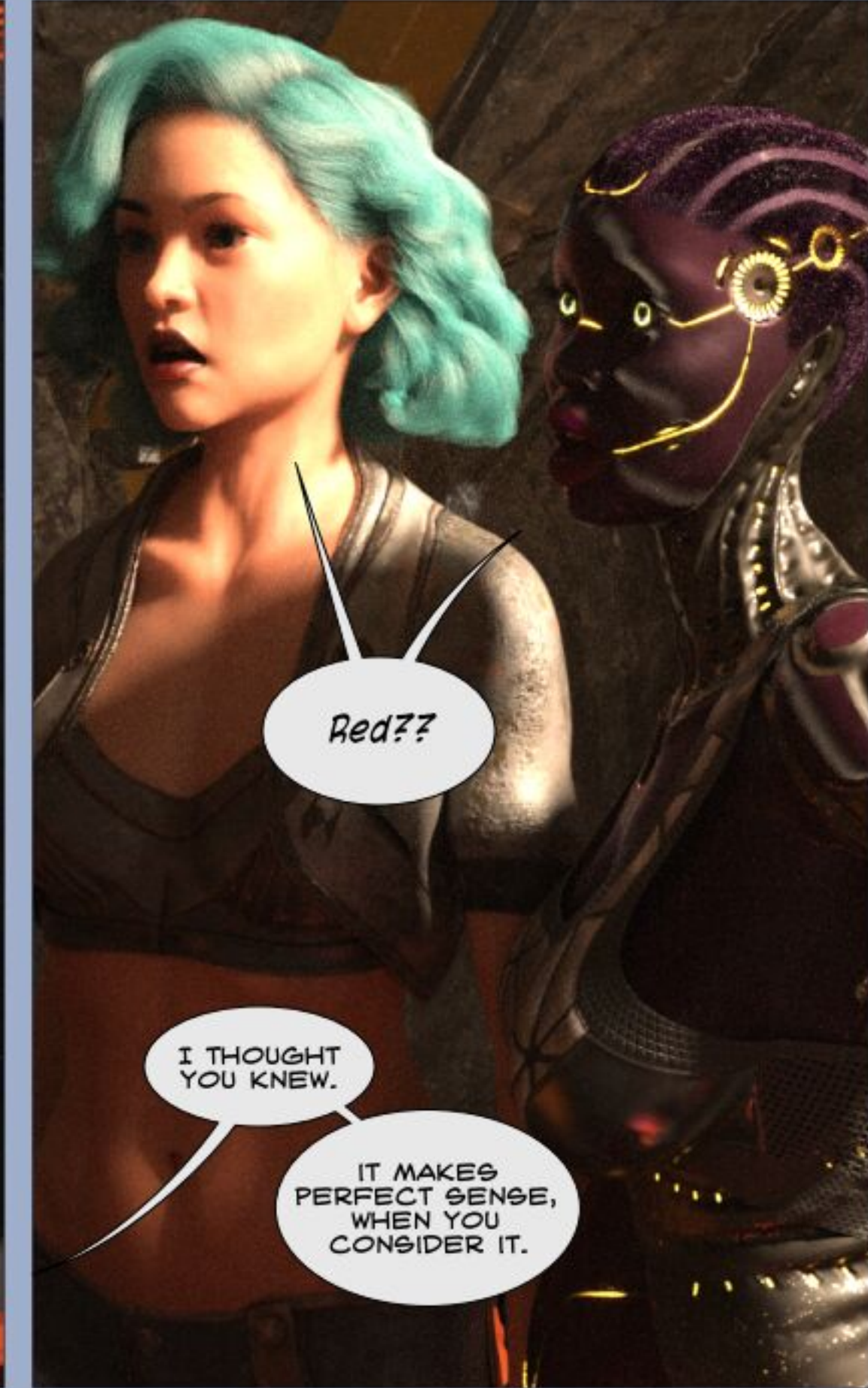
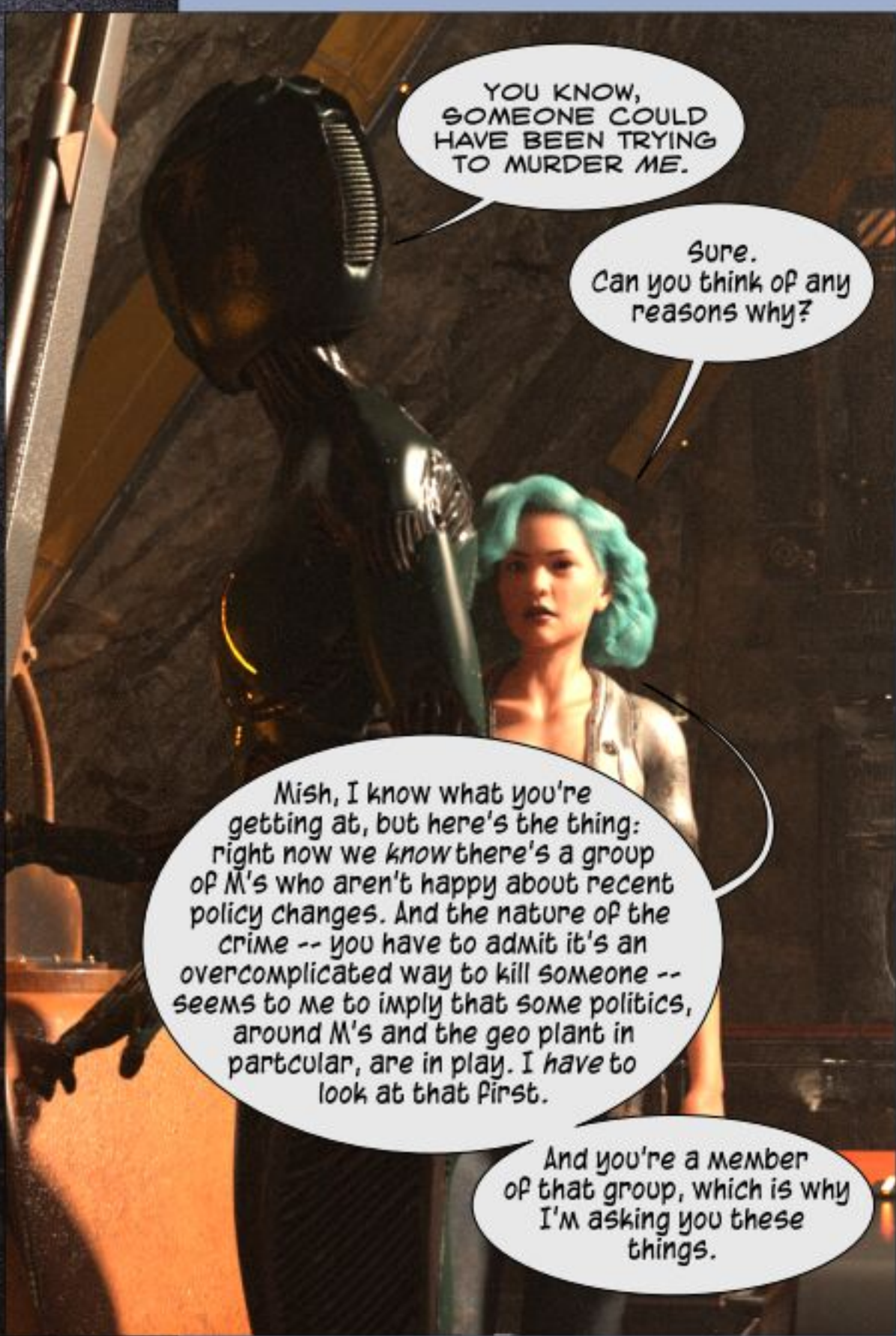
YOU KNOW ...

... THIS IS BEGINNING TO FEEL REALLY OFFENSIVE.

WE HAVE EMOTIONS, AND RIGHT NOW YOU'RE TEMPTING ME TO DEMONSTRATE A FEW OF THEM.









... YES, I'D HEARD THERE WAS SOME KIND OF ACCIDENT. I HOPE NO ONE WAS HURT?

Uh ... someone was killed, actually. Murmur Deepstone.

WHAT?

No one in the clan told you?

NO!

... THOUGH I HAVEN'T REALLY TALKED TO ANY OF THEM IN A FEW DAYS. I'VE BEEN BUSY WITH THIS JOB.

I SPOKE WITH FURST THIS MORNING, THOUGH. I'M SURPRISED HE DIDN'T MENTION IT.

RED DEEPSTONE WAS ONE OF THE TWO PEOPLE WHO COULD BE CONSIDERED FURST'S SECOND-IN-COMMAND IN THE CLAN. THAT'S WHY MIN AND I WERE SURPRISED WHEN MISH SAID SHE WAS LEADING THE PUSH AGAINST FURST'S POLICY CHANGE.

... THOUGH WHO KNOWS WHAT GOES ON IN FURST'S HEAD THESE DAYS ...



Red, I hate to go here, but we think there's a good chance that this was an attempted murder. We don't think it was meant to kill Murmur. We think the killer was going for either Furst, Biesa, or Pel.

There's a group of M's that aren't happy with Furst's reversal of policies on who can do some jobs. A lot of that anger centers on Biesa.

And you're leading that group, to the extent that anyone is ...

THAT'S A GOOD WAY OF PUTTING IT.

I'M NOT HAPPY ABOUT BIESA GETTING THAT JOB, AND I WON'T HIDE IT. SHE DOESN'T BELONG DOWN THERE, AND THERE AREN'T SO MANY M JOBS THAT WE CAN STAND TO LOSE THEM TO HUMANS ... OR TO OTHER FRAMES.

BUT I'M CERTAINLY NOT INTERESTED IN MURDERING ANYONE, AND I DON'T THINK ANY OF THE OTHERS ARE EITHER. MURDER IS WASTEFUL.



YOU KNOW, FURST IS SUCH A BRILLIANT PERSON, AND HE DOES SUCH A GOOD JOB ... MOST OF THE TIME.

THAT'S WHY IT'S SO FRUSTRATING TO ME THAT WHEN HE DOES MAKE A MISTAKE, IT'S NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO GET HIM TO ADMIT IT. EVEN THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO HIM CAN'T CHANGE HIS MIND.

BUT I'M GOING TO GET HIM. I'M SURE IF I WORK AT IT LONG ENOUGH, HE'LL FINALLY LISTEN TO ME.



YOU REALIZE THAT WE -- ME AND THE OTHERS WHO FEEL THE WAY I DO -- WE'D BE VERY STUPID TO TRY TO DO ANYTHING TO BIESA. WE'D IMMEDIATELY BECOME THE PRIMARY SUSPECTS.

You sure would.

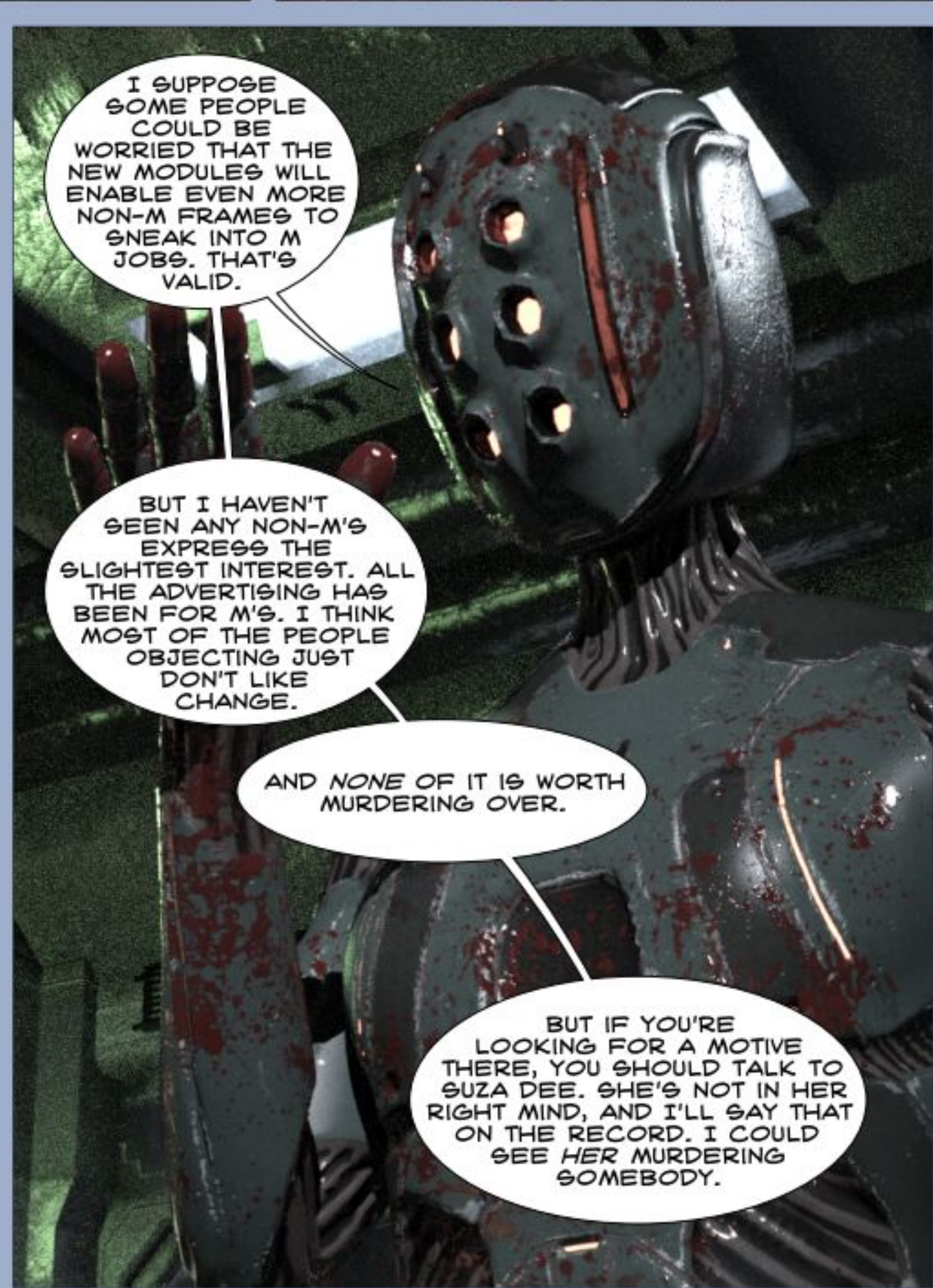
But, all right, point taken. What about Pel? I know there are some M's who don't like her using that terrain module ...

THERE CAN'T BE MANY. THAT'S THE SORT OF SLOPPY THINKING D'S DO, NOT US.

That attitude won't win you friends. And I've seen a pair bit of sloppy logic from M's, too.

NOT THAT SLOPPY. LOOK, THE OBJECTION -- AS I UNDERSTAND IT -- IS THAT USING THESE MODULES WILL LEAD TO A POINT WHERE PEOPLE ARE FORCED TO USE THEM FOR SOME JOBS. YES?

WELL, SO WHAT? THEY'RE MODULAR. IF YOU NEED THEM TO DO YOUR JOB, THEN AT THE END OF THE DAY, YOU TAKE THEM OFF AND PUT YOUR LEGS BACK ON. WHERE'S THE COMPLAINT?



I SUPPOSE SOME PEOPLE COULD BE WORRIED THAT THE NEW MODULES WILL ENABLE EVEN MORE NON-M FRAMES TO SNEAK INTO M JOBS. THAT'S VALID.

BUT I HAVEN'T SEEN ANY NON-M'S EXPRESS THE SLIGHTEST INTEREST. ALL THE ADVERTISING HAS BEEN FOR M'S. I THINK MOST OF THE PEOPLE OBJECTING JUST DON'T LIKE CHANGE.

AND NONE OF IT IS WORTH MURDERING OVER.

BUT IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A MOTIVE THERE, YOU SHOULD TALK TO SUZA DEE. SHE'S NOT IN HER RIGHT MIND, AND I'LL SAY THAT ON THE RECORD. I COULD SEE HER MURDERING SOMEBODY.



So protectionist she can't even see it. "Oh, it's all fine, unless it takes jobs from M's ..." The M's already have more dedicated jobs than anybody else in this place!

Which is why she's wrong about Furst, too. He listens perfectly well to people challenging his ideas.

He argued with me about this ... considered it for weeks ... and realized I was right.

It's not that he refuses to listen to her. He's listened and decided she's wrong. And she's not going to dent that, no matter what she thinks.

Yeah.

... Did you get the impression that Red ... Uh ... kind of has a thing for Furst?

Oh, I knew that. She's had that for a long time now.



I'm sure it's frustrating for her, because Furst might well be the most ...

Well, put it this way. A while back, I asked Furst whether M's self-select for not wanting sex, or whether it's a learned thing.

He said he wasn't in a position to judge, because he had never been interested in sex or romance, long before he ever transferred.

Huh.



OK, so, purely for the sake of not spinning our wheels, let's leave the protectionists completely out of it for a moment.

Possible victim 1: Furst.

He's built up his share of grudges, but who wants him dead?

Puller Cori's faction died with her, and anyway Furst's defused that himself with the policy change ...

Parsons hates and fears him, but wouldn't try to kill him ...

She wouldn't stop someone else from trying, though.

Suza Dee is mad at Irene, and probably me, but not Furst ...

... and that's all I can think of.



If we're moving to possible victim 2: Pel, then Suza totally goes on the list, though.

I won't go as far as 'crazy,' but I do think she doesn't think things through very much.

And may have poor impulse control. Sure.

Anybody else? Someone from Pel's personal life?

Who knows? I don't know a thing about her personal life.

Same problem with Biesa.



Me either.

And with Biesa that's doubly important, because if we leave out the protectionists, it's got to be something from her personal life. There isn't anything else.

-- Sigh -- OK, I guess I know what I'm investigating next.



I have to go do actual engineering work for a bit.

But don't take that to mean --

I know, I know.

I'll be good.



I just think you need to do something with it. Your mom hasn't said anything about it?

I think she wants me to grow it. But I don't like it long. It gets in the way when I do stuff.

Hey, Gloria, can I get you to ...

hmm.



Cusi, don't you have --

No courses today! I finished the unit early.

I was going to say "parents."

I think they gave up.

They spend most of their time having sex.



CUSI!

What? I know what sex is.

Anyway, it's the truth.

All right, but I'm sure they wouldn't want you telling people that ...

I wouldn't be so sure. Hara Setrik *did* tell me that transferring had saved their marriage.

Gloria, I need you to look up a couple of people for me.



GLORIA BANTAM MANAGES ALL DOMESTIC AFFAIRS, INCLUDING EMPLOYMENT. SHE HAS A DATABASE I THINK WOULD PUT ANY INTELLIGENCE AGENCY TO SHAME. (SHE DENIES IT.)

With these two, transferring had the opposite effect.

Biesa Sherry was married when she got here; they divorced. Well before she joined Deepstone.

Pel Culgin wasn't married but very clearly involved; they arrived together. That didn't last. You want locations for their exes too?

Please.

You're going to go talk to Biesa and Pel Deepstone, aren't you?

Can I come? I'll be quiet and stay out of the way. I want to see what you do.

You don't think they're the bad guys, so it won't be dangerous, and anyway if you thought it was, you'd be bringing Min or somebody with you. Please?



OK. I'll go see what Min's doing.

Cusi, I can't fault your logic ...

... but there's about a hundred other reasons why it'd be a really bad idea to bring you on an interview.

Sorry.

She might have work to do, you know!



We've got to think of some other way to keep that girl busy.

What she needs is some other children her age.

The Parsons viewpoint? ... I'm kidding!

You know better than that. But I wonder if the family should have been allowed to come at all.

Well, the project hates to turn people away. I don't think that would have seemed like a sufficient reason.

And it *did* save their marriage.

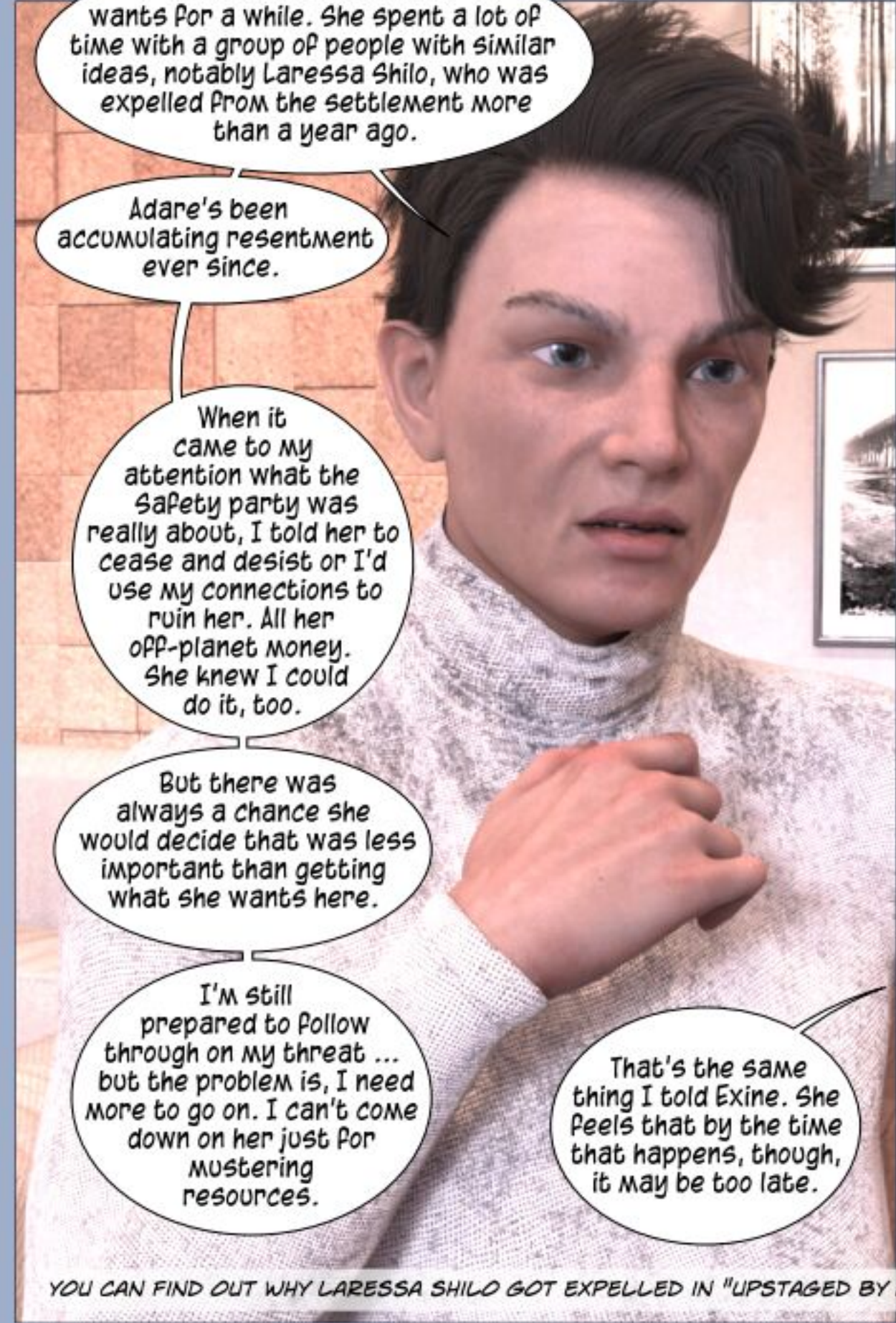


I'm not pleased to hear it, but I can't say I'm surprised.

I suspected my ultimatum would only stand for so long.

SHANE WELLS. THE RICHEST PERSON IN COLDPOINT. A MAN OF COMPLEX MOTIVATIONS.

Ultimatum?



I've known what Adare wants for a while. She spent a lot of time with a group of people with similar ideas, notably Laressa Shilo, who was expelled from the settlement more than a year ago.

Adare's been accumulating resentment ever since.

When it came to my attention what the Safety party was really about, I told her to cease and desist or I'd use my connections to ruin her. All her off-planet money. She knew I could do it, too.

But there was always a chance she would decide that was less important than getting what she wants here.

I'm still prepared to follow through on my threat ... but the problem is, I need more to go on. I can't come down on her just for mustering resources.

That's the same thing I told Exine. She feels that by the time that happens, though, it may be too late.

YOU CAN FIND OUT WHY LARESSA SHILO GOT EXPELLED IN "UPSTAGED BY DEATH."



Well, I don't think you need to worry about that. I won't let her get very far with her new world order.

Her attitudes about robots are personally offensive to me.

Huh.

Forgive my saying so -- I mean, that's great, and I'm pleased to hear it --

-- but it's not an attitude I hear very often from others in your, uh, peer group.



You mean the other rich Polks would happily exploit robots all day long, and sometimes it seems like they came to Coldpoint just to be waited on hand and foot.

Well, I was trying to be polite about it.

I mean, you *do* have three robot servants ...

Two. And they're not servants, they're employees. I pay them well and, I hope, treat them well. I couldn't function without them.

Ms. Atherton, I came to Coldpoint to spend the remainder of my life because I believe that robots are the future of humanity. And I don't mean as servants.

But I can't seem to convince many in my "peer group" to look beyond the money. They're all myopic.



I wonder if your ideas would carry more weight if you transferred.

I had initially intended to.

But when I got here, I found that they didn't offer any bodies that would ...

... let's put it this way: I would be extremely uncomfortable being parsed as a woman.



... You haven't heard about the new Frames!

How have you missed all this?

I seldom ever leave this house. There's some new technology?

Yes, and you should *definitely* look into it.



You wear the suit home?



You know, I made this suit. Designed it and built it.

No one else would develop the tech. Why, with the M's insisting no one but them could work in hot zones?

I think that's the reason Furst let me have the job. Impressed by my determination, or something.

I don't know that one of them would sabotage it, but I can't be sure of anything. They don't bother to hide how they feel about me.

So, yeah, I wear it home.



I do a good job, Ms. Barlowe.

Good as any of them, and better than some. They know that. It doesn't matter. They just don't like anybody who isn't an M.

Surely not all of them ...

Furst is OK. I mean, he gave me the job and let me in the clan. And Murry was nice.

Poor Murry! I wish I could thank them for what they did.

I Proze up, you know. Stopped dead. I'd never heard a sound like that before. It wasn't in my training. I guess it isn't in anybody's. They never expected that to happen.



But I have to work with Mish every day and sometimes it's hard even to get instructions from them. They hate to talk to me.

And the hilarious thing is, this is what I wanted! My dream job. I had to give up a lot of things to get here.

Including your marriage?

Well ... I think that was wrecked even before we got to Coldpoint. I just didn't realize.



Dono was never really comfortable with my having my own career.

I think he was hoping that when we got here and both transferred, I wouldn't feel a need to work and would be, y'know, domestic or something.

Like, he wanted to be able to say he was the sole support, or some bullshit like that. I knew it was a thing with him, but I didn't realize how much of a thing until we got here.

None of it happened the way he wanted. We divorced, and eventually I got a job and he didn't, and neither of us has transferred.

At least, as far as I know he hasn't. Gotten a job or transferred. I haven't talked to him in a long time.

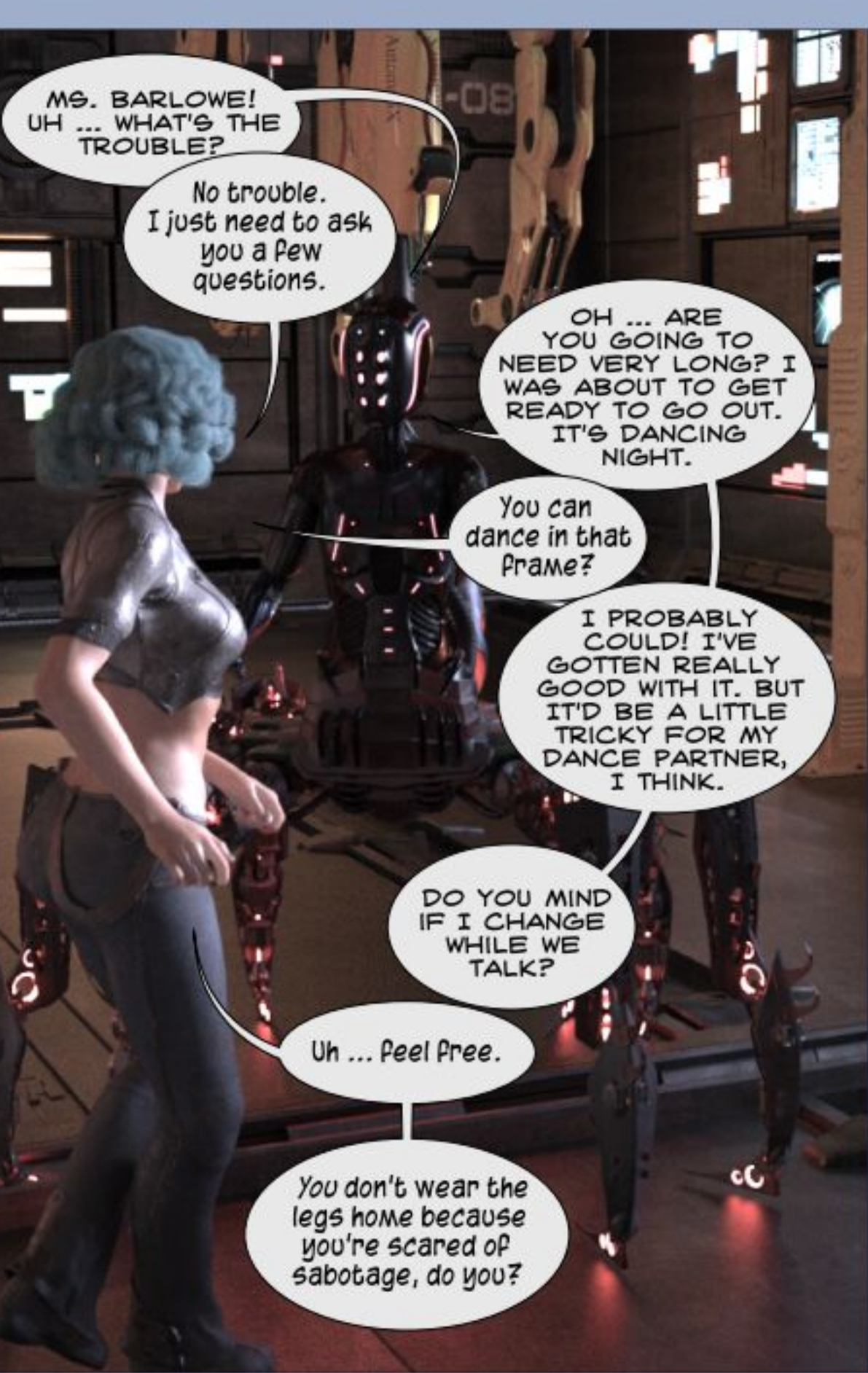


Just out of curiosity, why not transfer? Avoid some of that friction ...

Oh, well ... you know, M's don't ... uh, I don't have much of a love life, but I --

I understand.

And if I went in for some other frame, I'd still need a hot suit, and some of the Deepstones would still give me just as much hell. So why bother?



MS. BARLOWE! UH ... WHAT'S THE TROUBLE?

No trouble. I just need to ask you a few questions.

OH ... ARE YOU GOING TO NEED VERY LONG? I WAS ABOUT TO GET READY TO GO OUT. IT'S DANCING NIGHT.

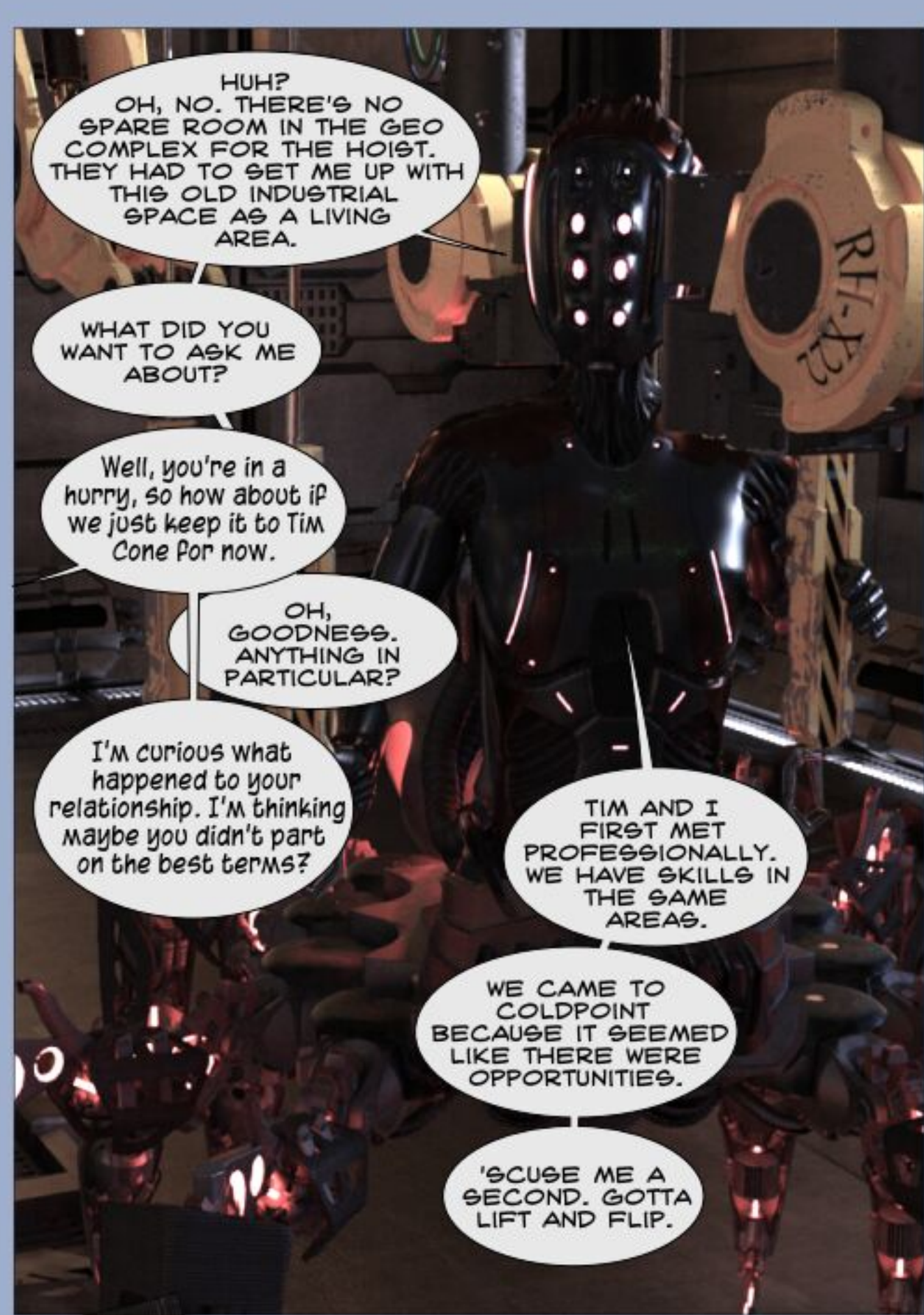
You can dance in that frame?

I PROBABLY COULD! I'VE GOTTEN REALLY GOOD WITH IT. BUT IT'D BE A LITTLE TRICKY FOR MY DANCE PARTNER, I THINK.

DO YOU MIND IF I CHANGE WHILE WE TALK?

Uh ... Peel Free.

You don't wear the legs home because you're scared of sabotage, do you?



HUH? OH, NO. THERE'S NO SPARE ROOM IN THE GEO COMPLEX FOR THE HOIST. THEY HAD TO SET ME UP WITH THIS OLD INDUSTRIAL SPACE AS A LIVING AREA.

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO ASK ME ABOUT?

Well, you're in a hurry, so how about if we just keep it to Tim Cone for now.

OH, GOODNESS. ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR?

I'm curious what happened to your relationship. I'm thinking maybe you didn't part on the best terms?

TIM AND I FIRST MET PROFESSIONALLY. WE HAVE SKILLS IN THE SAME AREAS.

WE CAME TO COLDPOINT BECAUSE IT SEEMED LIKE THERE WERE OPPORTUNITIES.

'SCUSE ME A SECOND. GOTTA LIFT AND FLIP.



ALLEZ-OPI!

HEH. PARDON ME.

WHEN WE GOT HERE, WE REALIZED THE KINDS OF JOBS WE WANTED ALL WENT TO M'S. I WAS OK WITH BECOMING AN M, BUT HE WASN'T ... AND WE BROKE UP.

THESE DAYS, HE COULD PROBABLY GET ONE OF THE JOBS HE WANTED WITHOUT HAVING TO BE AN M ... BUT I GUESS HE HASN'T FIGURED THAT OUT, AND I'M KIND OF GLAD HE HASN'T.



I MIGHT END UP WORKING WITH HIM, AND HE'D PROBABLY BE A REAL A&S ABOUT IT.

SOMETIMES I THINK I WAS ALREADY LOOKING FOR AN EXCUSE TO LEAVE HIM.

Forgive my going here, but ... was sex more important to him than to you? Was that part of it?

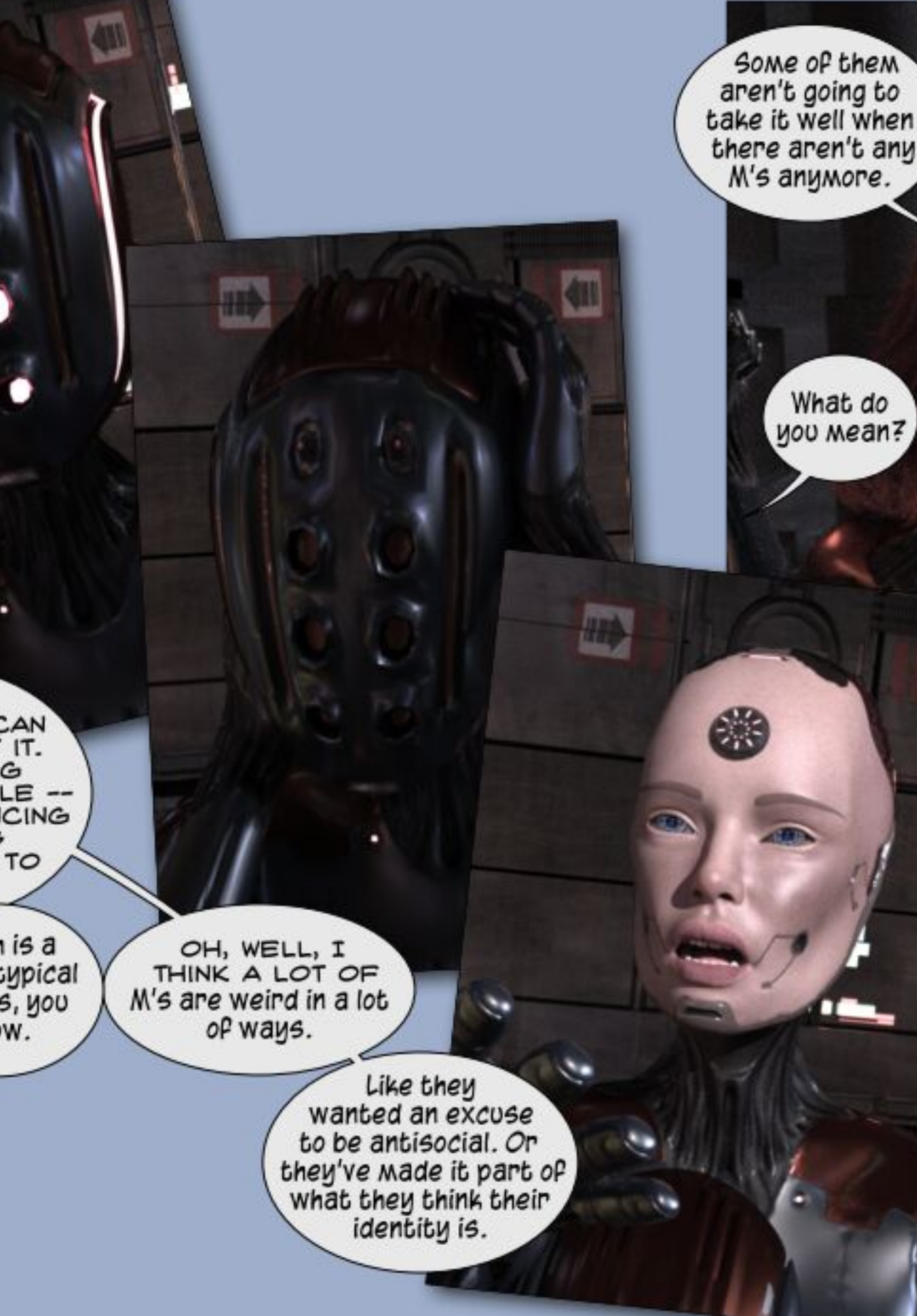
BECAUSE OF THE M FRAME, YOU MEAN? HM. YOU KNOW, IT COULD HAVE BEEN. IT PROBABLY WAS. I NEVER ASKED.

SEX IS FUN, BUT I CAN LIVE WITHOUT IT. NOW, BEING AROUND PEOPLE -- TALKING, DANCING -- THAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME.

Which is a little atypical for M's, you know.

OH, WELL, I THINK A LOT OF M's are weird in a lot of ways.

Like they wanted an excuse to be antisocial. Or they've made it part of what they think their identity is.



Some of them aren't going to take it well when there aren't any M's anymore.

What do you mean?

Well, look at me, for example. I've got a variant frame and a variant head. I like to have a face when I'm socializing.

IF I decided I really wanted genitals again I'm sure I could get a mod for that too. Am I still an M? Does anybody need to care?

It's all going to go modular. Pick your legs, pick your face. If everybody is completely mix and match, then what does being an M or a D or an L even mean?



Thanks for coming.

I probably should have just gotten the peace squad ...

Eh. I finished my work, and I'd just as soon be the one keeping an eye on you anyway.

So we've moved on to suspects now?

Well, possibly. First up is Dono Sherry. Biesa's ex-husband.

He may not be thrilled to talk to us.

Even given your position, I don't see why I should just answer any questions you ask ...

Especially not about *that*. It didn't end pleasantly, and I don't like to talk about it without a much better reason.

I'll be happy to give you one.

There's a good chance that someone tried to murder Biesa.

If that was the case, then there's an even stronger chance that you're a suspect. So you should probably try to convince me that you're not.

Murder --?

What, I'm a suspect because we divorced?

You just said it didn't end pleasantly. People can hold grudges a long time.

But that's ridiculous!

Maybe so. Tell me about it.

Look, we had different ideas about marriage, that's all. I'm very traditional. I thought she knew that, but I guess she didn't.

Then, when she refused to transfer, that sealed it. There was no recovering from that.

We both did a lot of yelling. I admit it. It was a bad time.

But that does not lead to either of us wanting to kill each other!

No, perhaps not.

Why haven't you transferred?

Oh, well, you know ... I was never really as invested in it as she was ...

You never actually intended to transfer.

You came here assuming she'd transfer, because you also assumed she'd then become subservient. You wanted an obedient robot wife.

Now, you can't --

I know what men mean when they say they want a "traditional" marriage, Sherry. I wasn't born yesterday.

She wouldn't play along, and you've been sitting here on your ass sulking since then ... too pissy to find a job, so you have no means of support ...

I still wouldn't have killed her! Even if any of that were true.

And you're wrong. I do have a job. It's not a settlement job, so it's not on the registry.

I work for Jeel Adare. Administrative tasks.

... of course you do.

What's that supposed to mean?

Never mind.

You haven't convinced me. You're still a suspect, so don't do anything stupid. ... More stupid.

Warped ideas about women and robots.

Well, at least he's made his position obvious, working for Adare.

The day I crack and toss her into a matter reclaim, now I won't feel bad about throwing him in too.

I wonder if Biesa knew what was really going on in his head and was just too polite to tell me.

I bet she did and wanted you to draw your own conclusions. You wouldn't prejudice a witness ...

Mm, good point.

I thought we were going to talk to Pel Deepstone's ex ...

He lives down here?

WE WERE IN THE LOWER AND GRUBBIER PARTS OF COMPLEX A -- FORMER INDUSTRIAL SPACE, EMPTIED ONCE WE MOVED MOST OF THAT OUT TO COMPLEX C, AND NOT YET REPURPOSED.

He doesn't live anywhere. He has an illicit business down here. He doesn't pay for the space. Gloria hasn't gone after him, since we're not using it anyway.

He does minor repairs and electronics. Apparently his customers are mostly people who don't want a robot to do it, for whatever reason.

Ah.

Yeah.

Wendy Barlowe, huh? Didn't know you ever came down here.

... Fuck off.

I need to ask you some questions.

Keep 'em. Not interested.

You know, if you know who I am, you also know it's probably better to not be rude to me ...

Sure. I'm horrible. Throw my ass out.

I'm serious. You got a problem, toss me out of Coldpoint and do me a favor.

Just remember, if you do, you have to pay my fare.

If you feel like that, why are you still here?

You're a little slow, huh?

Do I look like I can afford it? I've been trying to save enough to clear out for months. I'm barely scraping food and power money down here.

I blew everything I had coming out to this Pucking place and you can see how well that went --

-- Hey, don't mess with that!

You have to be careful with those! Do you just randomly pick up people's shit all the time?

Oh. OK then. Gently it is.

Look, if I answer your Pucking questions, will that get you to stop Pondering my equipment and leave? What do you want to know about?

...

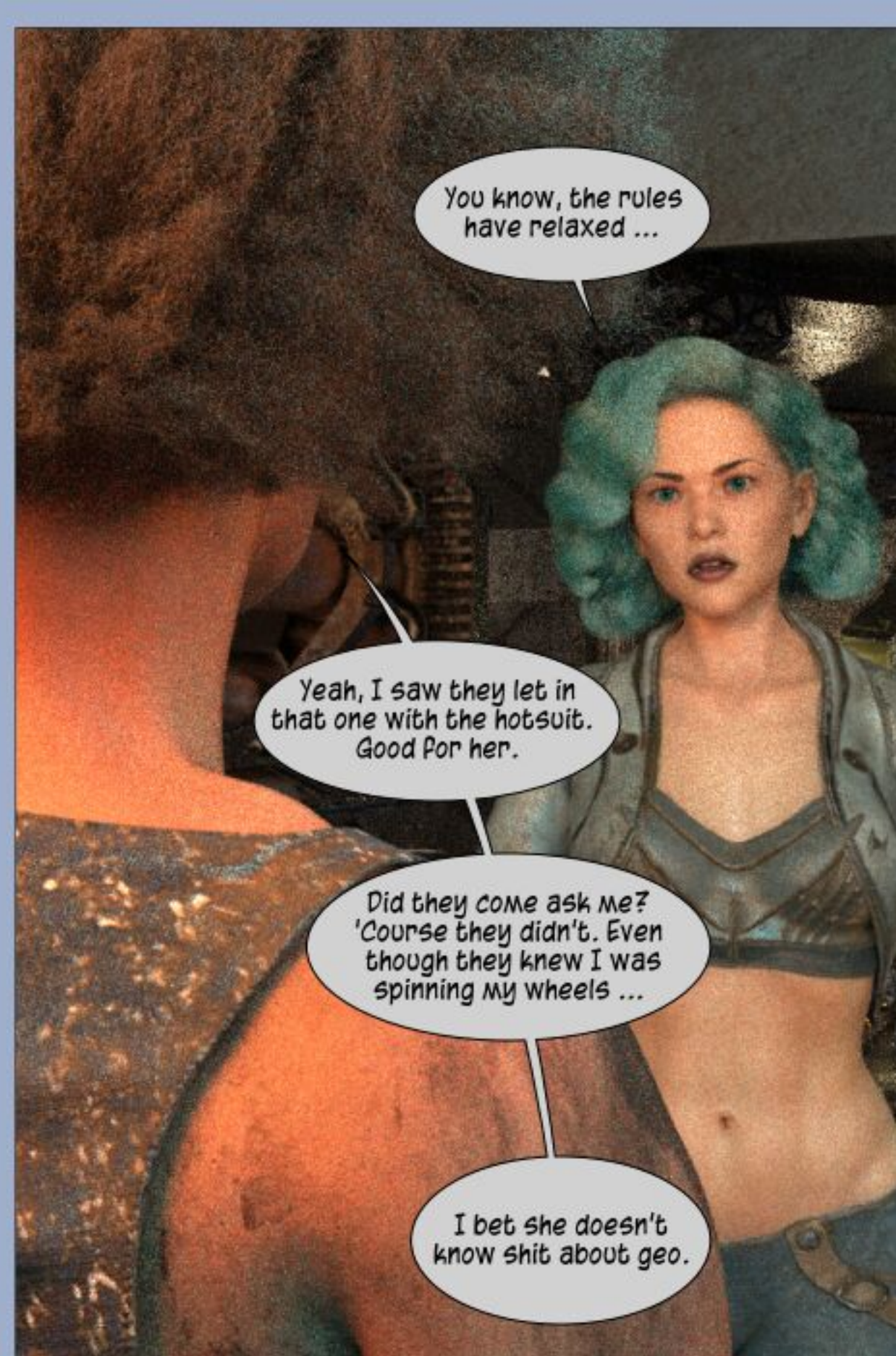
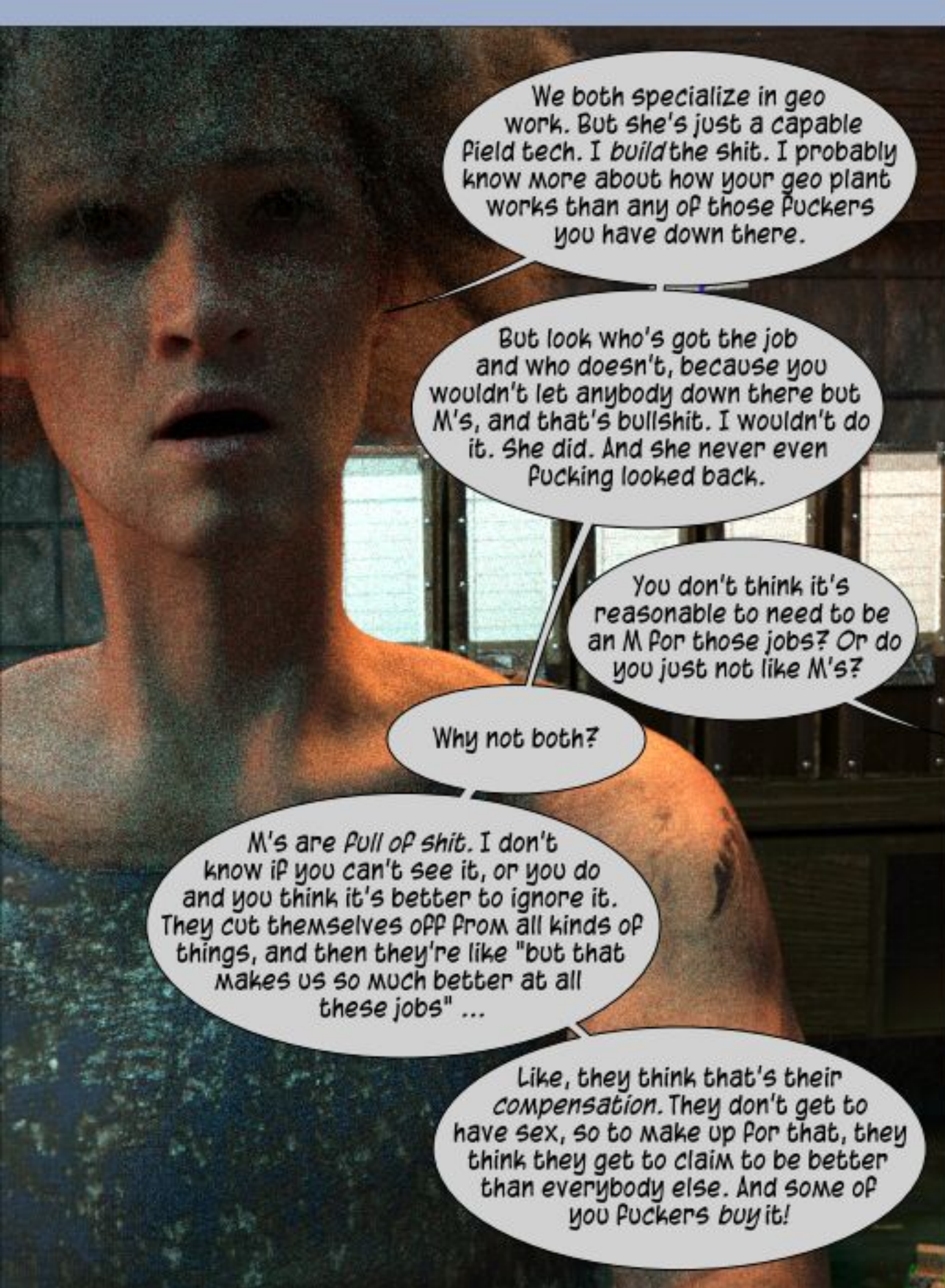
You can Puck all the way off.

I wouldn't ask lightly ...

I don't give a shit how heavy it is! Lady, of all the things, you pick the one thing I want to talk about least in the Pucking world? The person who's why I'm stuck in this shitty situation?

What happened between you and Pel.

You blame her for that? Maybe you should explain.





So she quit her job?

Yep! Weeks ago, Gloria says. No visible means of support. Full-time activist. The Beth Vigilance approach.

OK, but I don't think Beth is paying Suza Dee's power bills.

Ha! No, I'd say not.

If she doesn't have a job, and she's not at her home, we could be looking for her all day.

Yes ... but Gloria had a suggestion where to check first.



No more modulars!
No more dehumanizing!

How that woman knows what she knows ...

-- sigh --
It's way too early in the day for this.



Suza, you can't block access to Medical.

I'm tired of people telling me what I can and can't do.

Why don't you just push us out of the way, then?

You've got one robot and we've got four. I like the odds.



What if she has help?



Sure, the Vigilance way. Just push through everything you don't agree with.

Isn't that what you were just threatening to do?

You're stirring up the M's and causing trouble we don't need. You've got a cause, OK, great, but how about we skip the avoidable fights?

You wouldn't be like this if it was your fight someone was trying to step on!

I might pick better fights.



I also wouldn't be pissing off people I need as allies.

Here's the peace squad. Still like the odds?



NOW, THIS PART OF THE EXCAVATION WE'RE GOING TO IS FINISHED ENOUGH THAT IT'S SAFE FOR YOU ... BUT I STILL WANT YOU TO STICK VERY CLOSE TO ME.

THIS IS A BIG JOB AND THERE ARE M'S FROM THREE DIFFERENT CLANS WORKING IN HERE, AND WE HAVE ENOUGH TROUBLE NOT STEPPING ON EACH OTHER ALREADY.

I get it.

When's the sidewalk going to be done?

HARD TO SAY, ESPECIALLY SINCE WE'RE RUNNING BEHIND. A FEW MORE MONTHS, AT LEAST.



NOW, WHERE'S RED? SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO MEET US ...

FURST!

HAVE YOU GOT A MOMENT? THERE'S SOMETHING I NEED YOU TO SEE ...

I CAN'T BE LONG, CHARL.

NO, NO. THREE MINUTES, NO MORE.

ALL RIGHT. CUSI, STAY PUT, PLEASE.



WE'VE HAD A DISTRIBUTION FAILURE ...

AGAIN?

THAT'S NOT THE POINT!

THE POINT IS THAT YOU LIED TO ME AND NOW MURY IS DEAD!



I'M COMPLICIT IN THE DEATH OF ONE OF MY OWN PEOPLE! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW THAT FEELS?

Look, I never guaranteed there was no risk ... there was always a chance ...

I DON'T BELIEVE YOU! I THINK YOU DID EXACTLY WHAT YOU MEANT TO DO, EXCEPT YOU HIT THE WRONG TARGET!

AND NOW YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING TO COME BACK AND TRY AGAIN?



WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT THIS HERE. AND YOU SHOULDN'T BE HERE AT ALL. GET OUT.

BUT WE'RE NOT DONE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO DO YET, BUT IT'S GOING TO HAPPEN.



AH, THERE YOU ARE!

HAVE YOU SEEN CUSI? SHE'S WANDERED OFF, EVEN THOUGH I SPECIFICALLY ASKED HER NOT TO.

... I DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE SHE WAS HERE.







Damn it, Cone, if Min's hurt, I swear you're going to --



Ask me if I give a shit.

-- hrk



You can't do a Pucking thing to me somebody hasn't already done.

aaaaa!!!!!!



What --?

... Oh, sure. Figures you'd have a nonlethal weapon.

Is there some way to give this Pucking thing more kick?

Hey, Mister Stupid!!

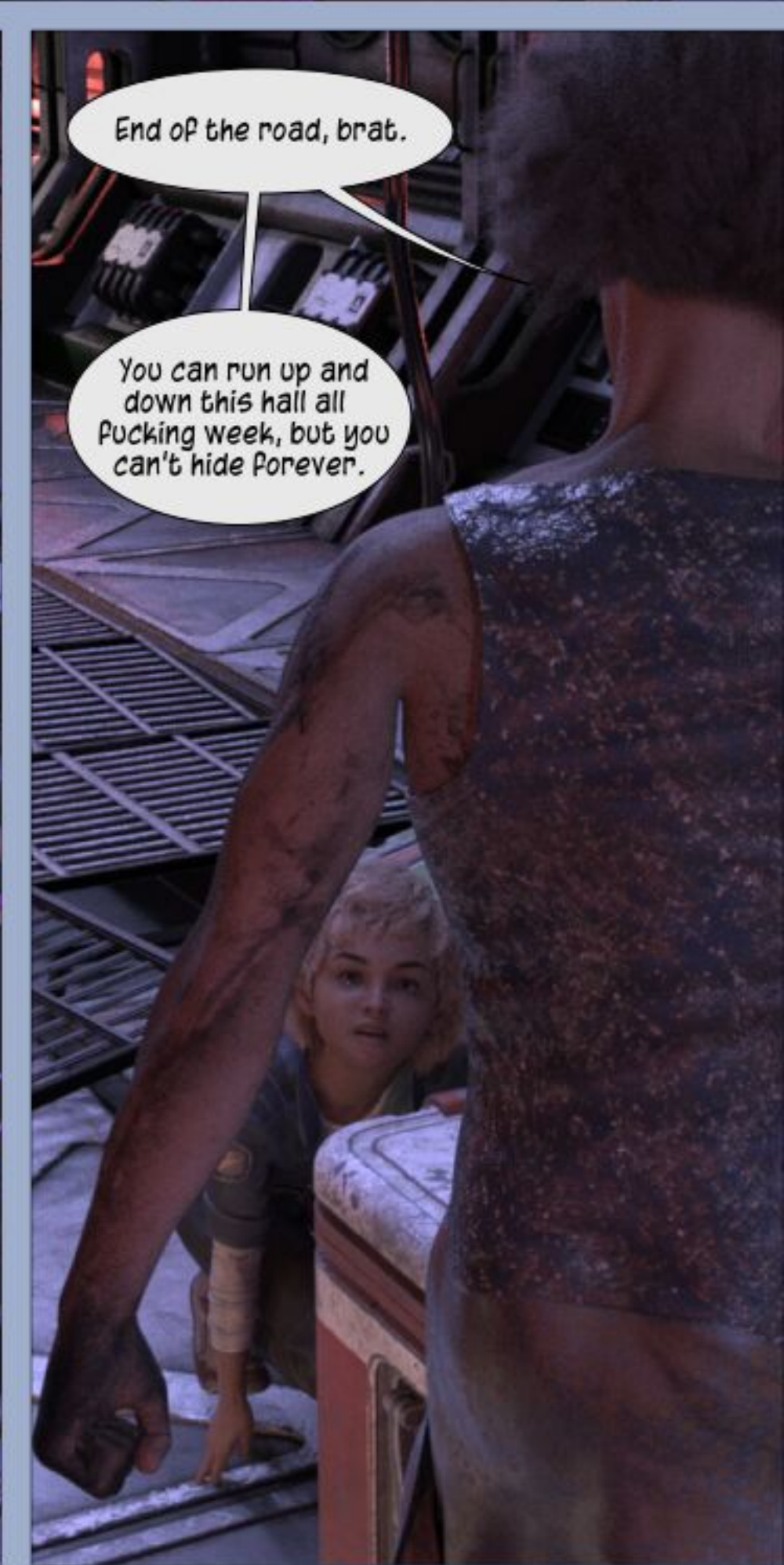
uurh



Gotta catch me!

Kid, you are so Pucked. I've had enough of your shit.

Cusi, no ...



End of the road, brat.

You can run up and down this hall all Pucking week, but you can't hide Forever.



I wasn't trying to.

Wooww! Is he dead? Did you kill him?

Uh ... not on purpose.

I guess I tossed him a lot harder than I thought.



Can't say I'm too broken up about it, though.

Cusi, Your mother is going to confine you to home for a year.

Not if you don't tell her.



LATER THAT NIGHT, AFTER CLEANING UP THE MESS AND SWEEPING A FEW THINGS UNDER THE RUG ...

Zusana.



Oh! ... Wendy.

Are you here about the corpse? I didn't think you'd need an autopsy for this one --

No, I know how he died.

He died because Min threw him into a wall.



She was angry, yes; she was defending Cusi, yes; she probably overcompensated, for sure.

But she still shouldn't have been able to bring herself to do that at all. It should have been an unacceptable risk of harm.

You didn't give her the mental block.

You'd better have a really fucking good reason why.



Because, like it or not, protecting you has become a major part of her job.

I'm not going to be able to talk her out of that. Neither are you. She's the third-most-stubborn woman in Coldpoint, after the two of us.

The peace squad won't work for this because she doesn't trust them to protect you adequately. She takes this personally.

I want her to be able to do that part of her job. I want you to stay alive too. She can't depend on you adequately with that mental block holding her back.



Do you have any idea how much screaming there will be if this gets out?

Then don't tell anybody.

She knows better than to be blatant about it. The only reason she was willing to let loose here, I'm sure, is that only you and Cusi were witnesses.

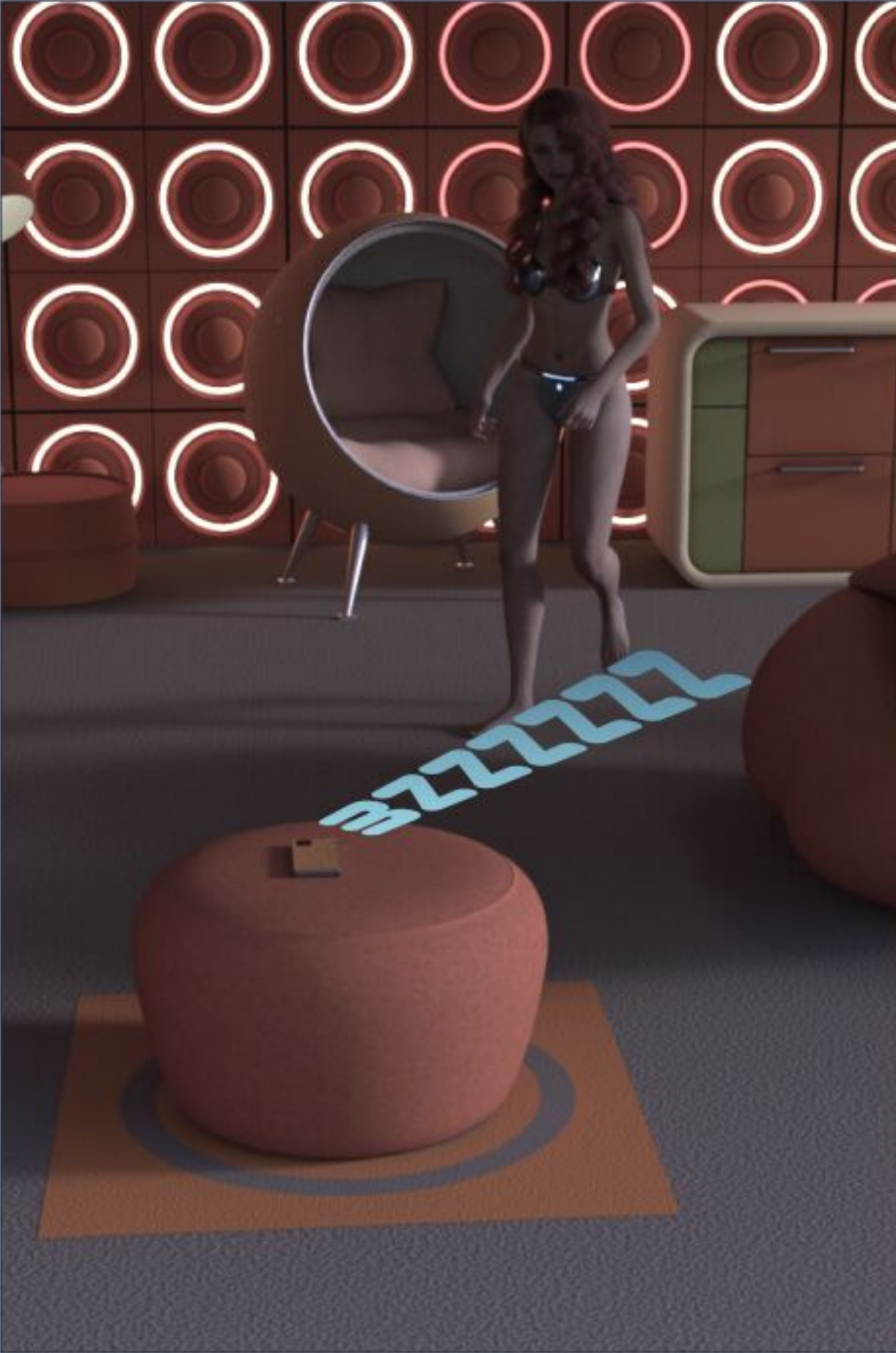
And Cusi knows when to keep her mouth shut. Far more than I'd expect from someone her age. Besides, I imagine Min will speak to her about it, and Cusi listens to what Min tells her.



"Don't tell anybody" seems to be the theme of the day.

I'm wondering if that isn't a policy that will cause more problems than it solves.

JEEL ADARE'S RESIDENCE.



It's late.

I know. Sorry.

But I thought you needed to know right away.

Cone is dead.



WHAT?

How did it -- was it accidental, or -- did someone ...?

No idea.

I only managed to find out about his death at all because a friend saw his body being moved. I have no other information.

Under the circumstances, I don't think we can afford to assume it was an accident.

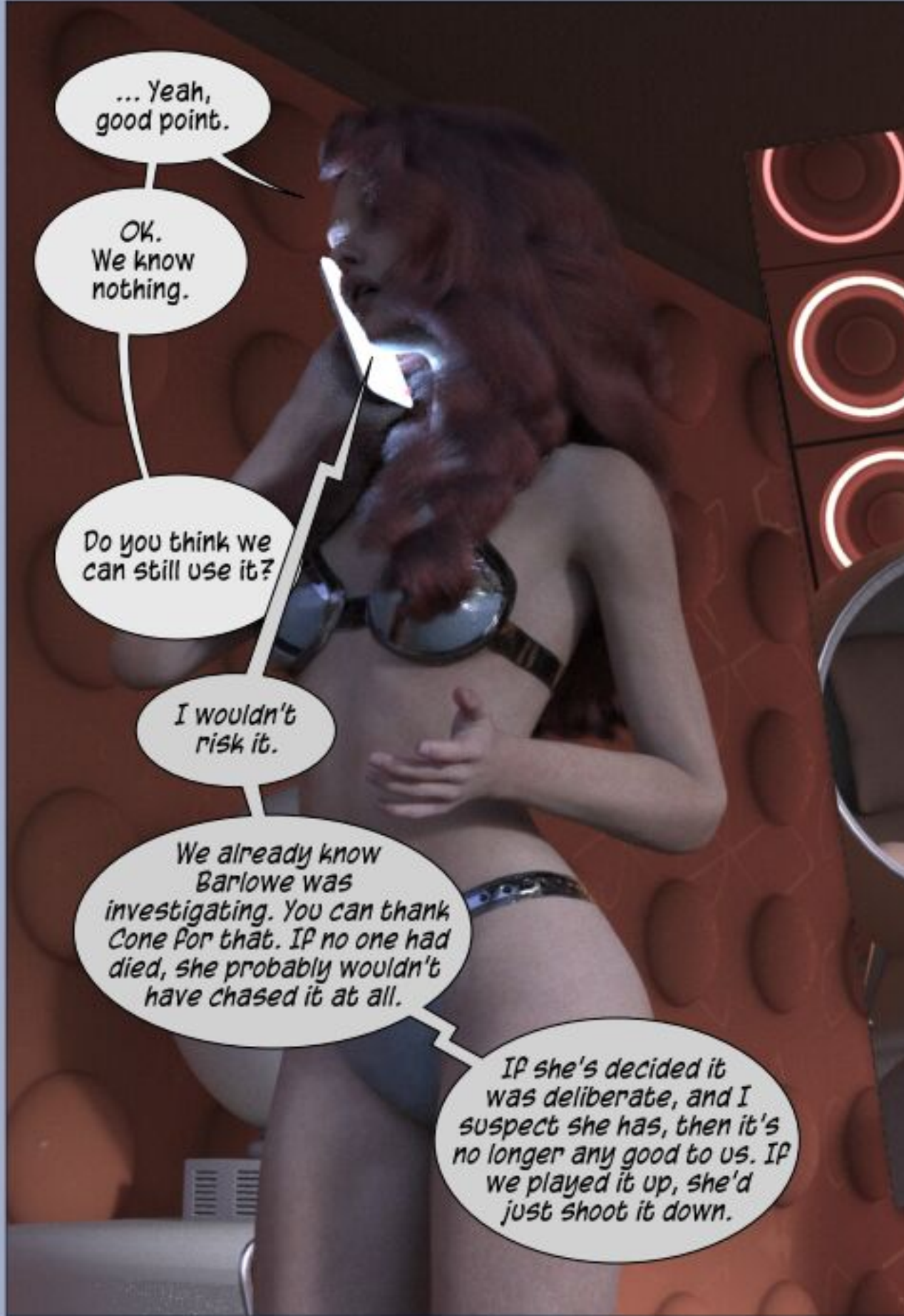


Shit!

Do you think he told anybody he was working for me?

I think we can assume that if he did, it wasn't anybody that mattered.

I mean, if he'd told Barlowe, for example, she'd have already been knocking down your door.



... Yeah, good point.

OK. We know nothing.

Do you think we can still use it?

I wouldn't risk it.

We already know Barlowe was investigating. You can thank Cone for that. If no one had died, she probably wouldn't have chased it at all.

If she's decided it was deliberate, and I suspect she has, then it's no longer any good to us. If we played it up, she'd just shoot it down.



All right.

We'll just have to come up with something else.

END