

MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A  
**QUITCLAIM**

I CHECK ON DERELICT STATIONS AND SETTLEMENTS AND SO ON TO SEE IF THEY'RE REALLY DERELICT. THERE ARE SOME OTHER WRINKLES, BUT THAT'S MY JOB IN A NUTSHELL.

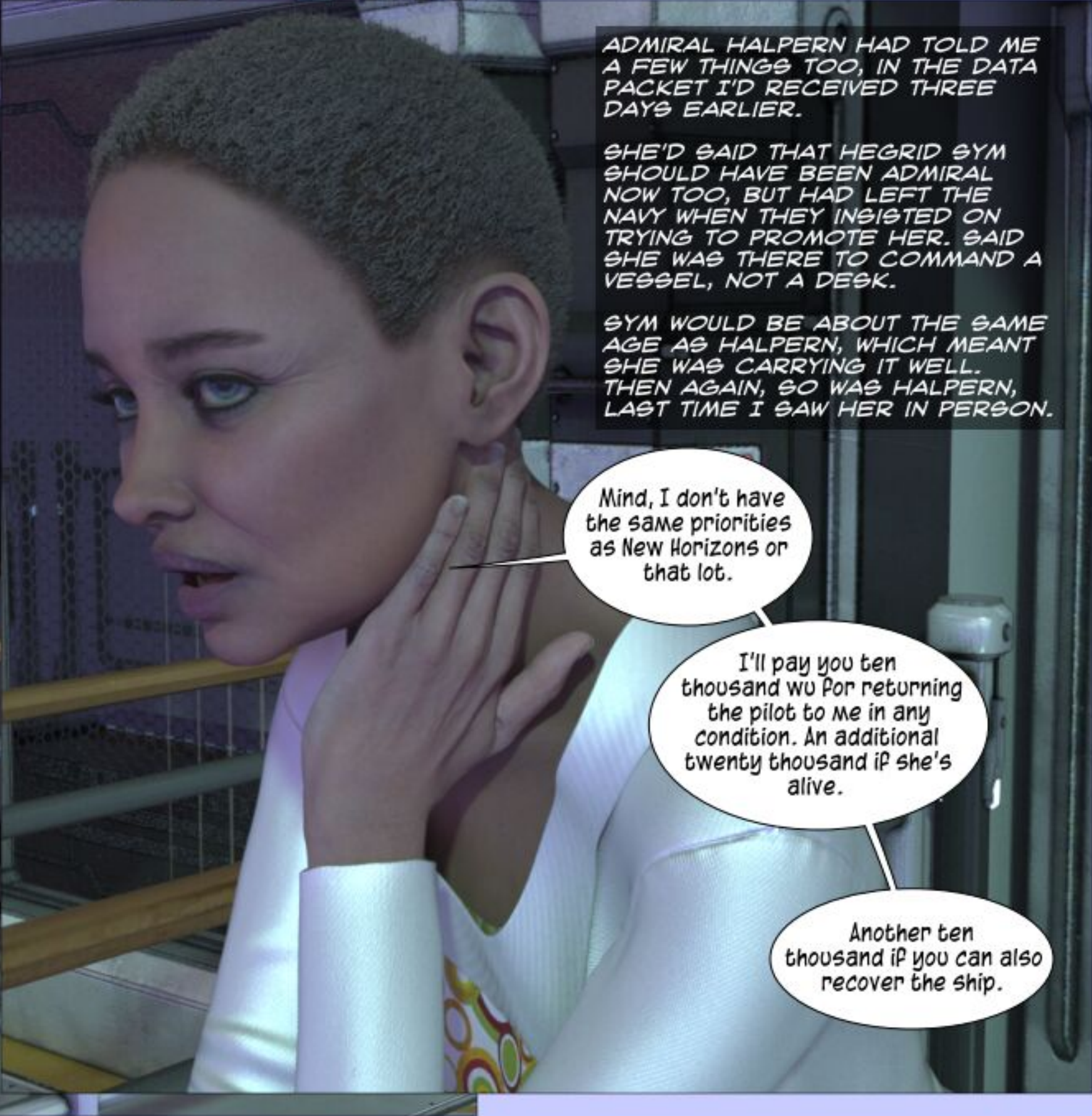


It doesn't include looking for missing persons.

But you find ships sometimes, don't you?

You're looking for a ship, too. That could make it a quitclaim job.

Admiral Halpern told me you were the only person to bother asking.



ADMIRAL HALPERN HAD TOLD ME A FEW THINGS TOO, IN THE DATA PACKET I'D RECEIVED THREE DAYS EARLIER.

SHE'D SAID THAT HEGRID SYM SHOULD HAVE BEEN ADMIRAL NOW TOO, BUT HAD LEFT THE NAVY WHEN THEY INSISTED ON TRYING TO PROMOTE HER. SAID SHE WAS THERE TO COMMAND A VESSEL, NOT A DESK.

SYM WOULD BE ABOUT THE SAME AGE AS HALPERN, WHICH MEANT SHE WAS CARRYING IT WELL. THEN AGAIN, SO WAS HALPERN, LAST TIME I SAW HER IN PERSON.

Mind, I don't have the same priorities as New Horizons or that lot.

I'll pay you ten thousand wu for returning the pilot to me in any condition. An additional twenty thousand if she's alive.

Another ten thousand if you can also recover the ship.



Well, I like your priorities ...

I can replace ships.

WHICH WAS PROBABLY TRUE. SYM WAS RUNNING A SPECULATIVE CARGO LINE NOW. TINY (WORD WAS, THREE SHIPS), BUT IF YOU DID SPEC CARGO RIGHT, YOU COULD RUN ONLY THREE SHIPS AND STILL MAKE A LOT OF MONEY. I FIGURED SHE WAS DOING IT RIGHT. WHICH WAS WHY I HAD TO ASK ...

Please tell me she wasn't running solo.



Of course not. This is her. Grethuk Herzig. That's her co-pilot, Beryl Zeed.

SYM'S TONE MADE IT CLEAR THERE WOULD BE NO EXTRA FEE FOR RETURNING ZEED.

Their flight plan was to deadhead to Zeric 5 to pick up the cargo, then take it to Fysia 2.



I have confirmation that they made it to Zeric 5 and loaded cargo. I have confirmation that they left Zeric 5.

I have nothing beyond that.



I have to ask ... I know that sometimes spec cargo can be, ah ...

I run a clean business! No contraband, and we don't break embargoes. Apart from the ethics, it's too damned dangerous.

OK, OK. Just looking for possible reasons they might have vanished.

I hate to say it, because, like I said, I like your priorities ... but the price is not right.



I'm going to have to trace them from Zeric Forward. That's a haul, and we don't know how far. Lots of rings, maybe some punch Perries ... I often have to pay for information ...

What I'm saying is, even if I get the whole Porty k-wu, that may barely cover my expenses.

Oh, I didn't mean the fee was supposed to also pay your expenses. Those are separate. I'll reimburse you for those.

But you will need to itemize them and give me an invoice. I like to know exactly what I'm paying for.

I WASN'T THRILLED ABOUT THAT, BUT IF SHE WANTED ME TO ITEMIZE, THEN, DAMN IT, I'D ITEMIZE.

**Ring transit fee to Yrgll: 2 k-wu**  
**Ring transit fee to Isalde: 2 k-wu**  
**Isalde 3 port fee: 500 wu**  
**Ship power refill: 1 k-wu**

STARTING WITH WHAT I'D SPENT TO GET OUT TO ISALDE 3 TO MEET WITH HER IN THE FIRST PLACE.

I DIDN'T CHARGE HER FOR MY NIGHT'S STAY ON ISALDE 3 BECAUSE I SLEPT ABOARD BOSIE. FAIR'S FAIR.



# THE WAGES OF SYM

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY





Ring transit fee to Yrgll: 2 k-wu  
Ring transit fee to Derecho: 2 k-wu  
1 night's lodging waiting for ferry: 150 wu

I WASN'T SLEEPING IN BOSIE TWO NIGHTS IN A ROW.

Punch ferry to Zeric: 3 k-wu  
Zeric 5 port fee: 50 wu  
Ship power refill: 500 wu

NOBODY AROUND THE PORT KNEW A THING. NOBODY IN THE BARS AROUND THE PORT KNEW A THING EITHER, WHICH MEANT SOMEBODY WASN'T TELLING. THIS TOWN WAS TOO SMALL FOR HER NOT TO HAVE BEEN NOTICED. BESIDES, SOMEONE HERE HAD TOLD SYM SHE'D LEFT.



Hey, lady! Look for somebody, huh? See you ask.

And I suppose you know where to find her?



Neh! But know Pella know all that.

Take you there ...

Uh-huh. How much?

Ten. Cheap!

Payment for information: 10 wu



Back here, huh?

Next turn!

A THING A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T TRAVEL ENOUGH TO CATCH ON TO: IF A PLANET STILL USES PHYSICAL CURRENCY, THAT MEANS WATCH YOUR STEP.

A NEW SETTLEMENT WILL USUALLY GO STRAIGHT FROM A BASICALLY PRE-CURRENCY ECONOMY TO A CASHLESS ONE AS IT GROWS. THEY'LL JUST SKIP THE NOTES AND COINS ENTIRELY. BUT PHYSICAL MONEY DOESN'T LEAVE A BOOKKEEPING TRAIL. SO IT'S USEFUL FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T WANT ANYONE KNOWING WHAT THEY'RE DOING.

ERGO, A PLANET LIKE ZERIC 5 -- OR COWLEY 6, WHERE SEVERAL OF MY FAVORITE LOWLIFES LIVE -- WHICH STILL FEELS A NEED TO KEEP CASH AROUND IS ONE WHERE YOU HAVE A LOT OF SMUGGLERS AND HACKERS AND PAYOFFS AND BRIBES.

AND OF COURSE THE OCCASIONAL ROBBERY.



Look like might have scup, lifter.

Hand over.



ATTEMPTED ROBBERY, THAT IS.



Let go! Let go!!

Thing is, I don't care about the shakedown, but you promised to do something I needed and you didn't deliver.

I bet you know who to ask, though. Or who to spy on.

I'm sure you like being allowed to rope for those older boys. What do you think they'll do if I tell them you're taking extra scup from your victims off the top?

No!

Can't! Don't know!



What's your name?

Clet.

OK, Clet, listen. Grethyk Herzig. There's a silent H in there. G-R-E-T-H-Y-K.

She came in a month ago, pulled cargo, and hauled. Indy registry. G5409.

I want to know what she was hauling. You get me a real lead on that -- I'm not talking rumors or another ambush -- and you can have another fifty wu. And your buddies don't have to know about it. Got it?

O--OK.

THE KID CAME THROUGH IN LESS THAN TWO HOURS.  
Additional payment for information: 50 wu



No way. I do business in confidence. That's why I get business.

There is nothing you could pay me to get me to tell you anything about my customers.

Sorry to hear it.

I had been planning to offer you a pretty good amount, but since you made that clear, I guess now I'll have to beat it out of you.



Now wait a minute --

For what? I'm not leaving without what I need, and I can't think of a third option. Can you?

Should I start right here, or do you want to move somewhere it'll be easier for you to get to medical care afterward?



-- Sigh -- Arms.

We talking hand weapons or --

High-power artillery. Field weapons. The kind that need a crew to run.

200 units. That's all she could hold.

I don't want your money, but you'd better make damned sure none of this ever gets back to me.



Transport to Fysia: 6 k-wu

I GOT LUCKY. A CARGO CAPITAL THAT HAD BIG ENOUGH BAYS TO SOMETIMES TAKE FERRY TRAFFIC WAS IN ZERIC THAT SAME AFTERNOON. FYSIA WAS ON THEIR ROUTE, TWO PUNCHES AWAY. SPARED ME TWO FERRIES AND A RING, AND WITH THE WAITS I'D HAVE HAD FOR BOTH OF THOSE FERRIES, PROBABLY SAVED ME FOUR OR FIVE DAYS.

THAT EXHAUSTED MY LUCK SUPPLY.

Unidentified vessel: destination and cargo?

Indy B014. No cargo, destination is Fysia 2.

B014, we're going to need you to berth for inspection. Bay 3.

PRO TIP: YOU DON'T SAY "WHO WANTS TO KNOW?" TO A CARRIER/CRUISER WITH A HIGH-WATT DUAL BEAM CLEARLY VISIBLE ON THEIR PROW AND THREE FIGHTERS IN ESCORT. NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU'RE TEMPTED TO.

THAT DIDN'T MEAN I WAS PREPARED TO BE POLITE ABOUT IT, THOUGH.

You know, there are rules about this kind of thing. Last I heard, there wasn't any interdiction in this system. Whose authority is this?

The government of Fysia 4.

I'm not going to Fysia 4.

Yes, that's the point.

Conditions between the two planets are ... well, we're not quite at war yet, but ask again tomorrow.

We're not firing on outside vessels without a good reason, but we refuse to let certain cargoes pass.

If you're clean, you'll be out of here in ten minutes.

And if I'm not?

We impound you and your ship, and hold you planetside until we figure out what to do with you.

You're not going to make this difficult, are you?

Nah. I'm just inquisitive. Carry on.

IT ONLY TOOK THREE MINUTES. BOSIE ISN'T BIG.

You're clean. That Bralo's a little sketchy, but that's not my watch.

It's legit. It was a gift.

Anyway, you're cleared to proceed to Fysia 2.

I'm not going to Fysia 2. I'm going to Fysia 4. I just changed flight plan. Tell your deck, would you, so they don't think I'm up to something?

Are you up to something?

All of this is news to me. I don't intend to land somewhere that's under blockade until I get more intel on why they are.

Hmm. Well, I can't think of any reason why you shouldn't be allowed to land on Fysia 4. Haul before I come up with one.

SHE MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO COME UP WITH ONE, BUT THE CUSTOMS OFFICER AT THE PORT WAS ABLE TO INVENT A FEW.

Fysia 4 port fee: 1 k-wu  
Ship power refill: 300 wu

FYSIA 4 DIDN'T SEEM TO BE A WELCOMING PLACE TO STRANGERS JUST THEN. IT WAS UNDERSTANDABLE IF THEY WERE ON THE BRINK OF WAR, BUT IT WAS GOING TO MAKE MY WORK A LOT HARDER.

THE REALLY ROTTEN THING WAS THAT NORMALLY HE'D HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE FIRST PEOPLE I'D HAVE ASKED FOR INFORMATION, BUT SEEING AS HOW I HAD TO PAY HIM FOUR TIMES THE NORMAL PORT FEE JUST TO BE ALLOWED TO STAY, I FELT I WAS UNLIKELY TO GET ANYTHING ELSE FROM HIM.

I ASSUME YOU CAUGHT THAT SYM NEVER ACTUALLY TOLD ME WHAT CARGO THEY WERE RUNNING. IT WAS PRETTY CLEAR SHE DIDN'T WANT TO SAY, WHICH COUNTED AGAINST HER ... BUT SHE ALSO SOUNDED SINCERE ABOUT NOT RUNNING CONTRABAND, WHICH MEANT SHE AND HER PILOT HAD NO IDEA CONDITIONS HAD CHANGED IN FYSIA, AND THAT THE CARGO HAD SUDDENLY BECOME HOT.

SO: THE SHIP HAD BEEN TAKEN COMPLETELY BY SURPRISE BY THE BLOCKADE, HAD BEEN IMPOUNDED, AND THE CREW WERE SITTING SOMEWHERE ON FYSIA 4 WONDERING HOW THEY WERE GOING TO GET OUT OF THIS, WHICH MEANT THERE WAS NO POINT IN MY POKING AROUND ON FYSIA 2. THE ACTION WAS HERE.

Alcohol (information lubricant): 10 wu

Alcohol: 10 wu  
Alcohol: 20 wu  
Alcohol: 10 wu

I COULDN'T GET ANY ACTUAL LEADS, BUT IN THE FOURTH PLACE I WENT, I FOUND A BARTENDER WHO WAS BORED AND CHATTY.

I mean, if somebody *did* get impounded, nobody with any sense would say anything about it. You get me?

Yeah, I'd suspected.

If a ship got impounded, what would happen to the crew? Would they be being held somewhere?

Oh, I doubt it. They wouldn't be allowed to leave the planet until it got settled. So there wouldn't be much reason to keep them locked up.

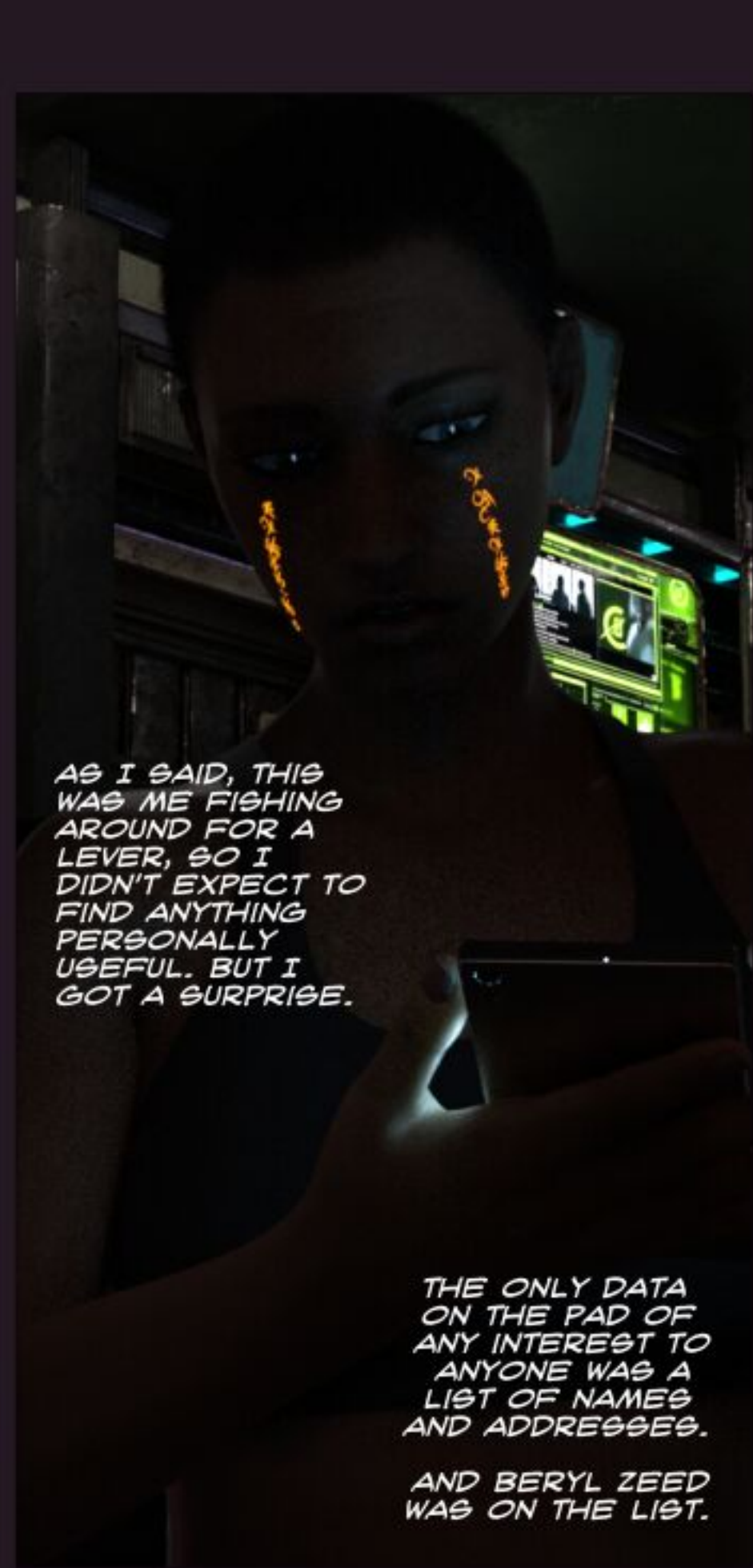
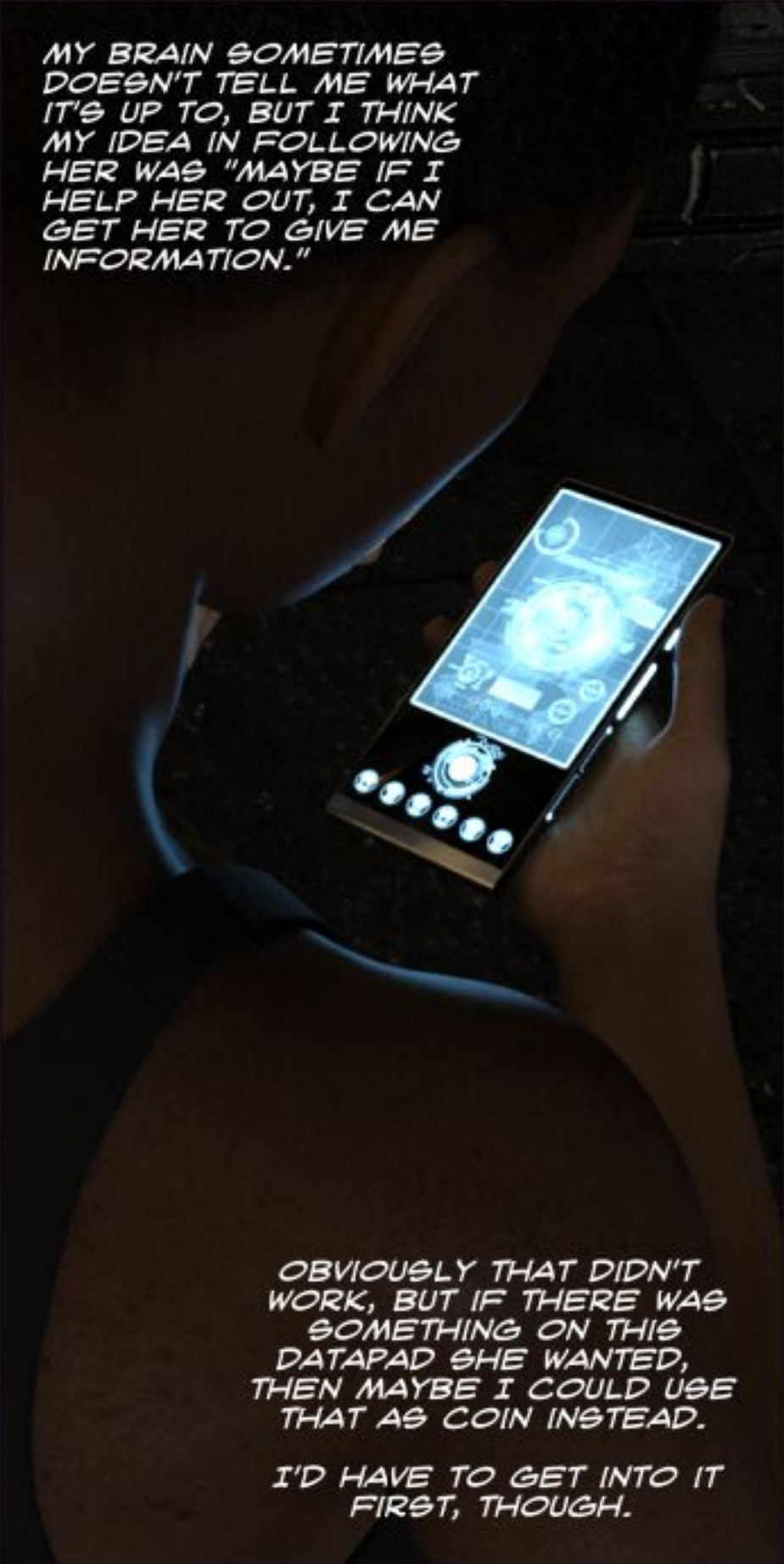
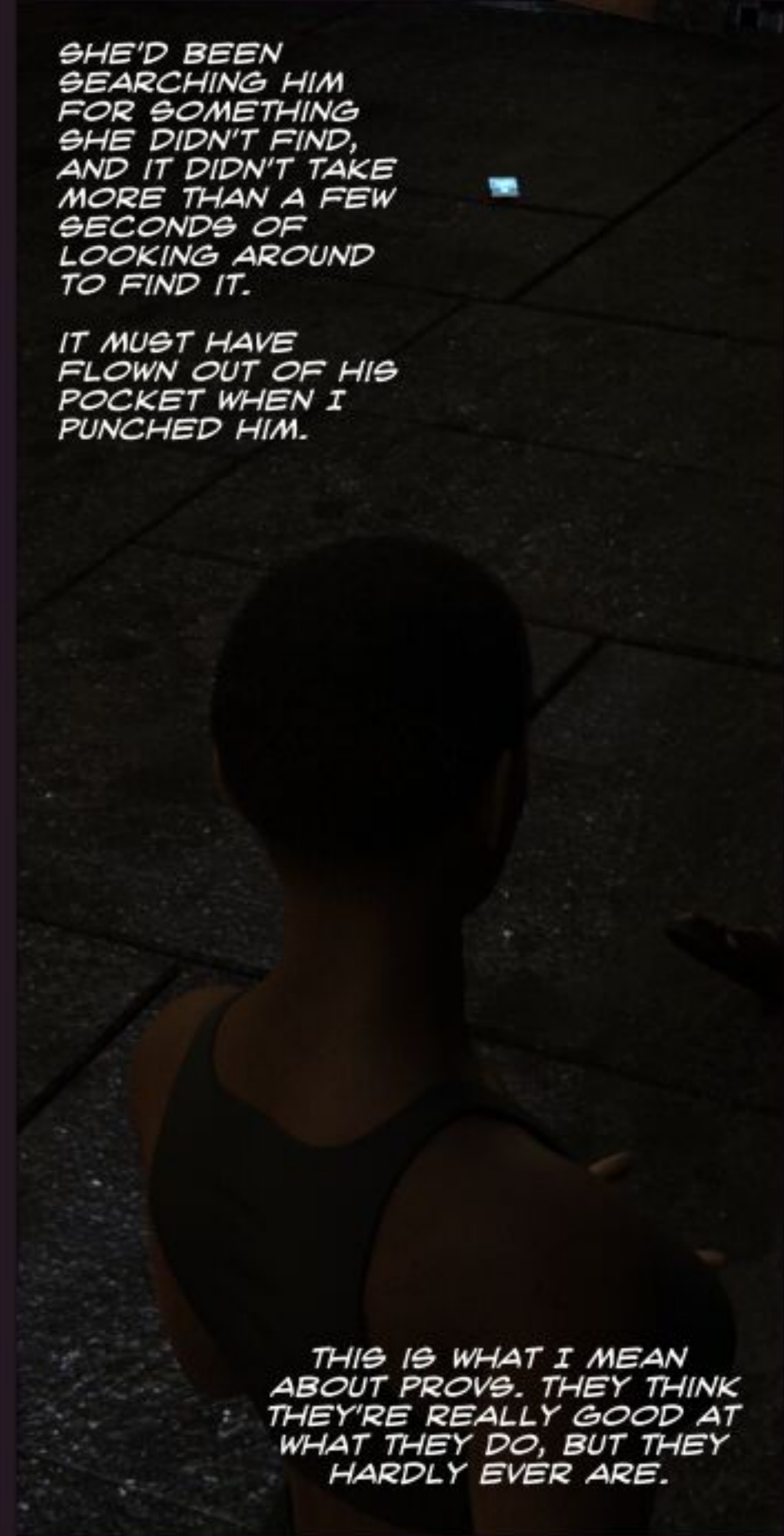
THE WOMAN IN THE BLACK HOOD HAD BEEN IN THREE OF THE FOUR BARS I'D VISITED. SHE WAS CLEARLY A PROV, AND LIKE ALL PROVS, WASN'T NEARLY AS GOOD AS SHE THOUGHT SHE WAS. THAT'S ASSUMING SHE WAS TRYING TO BE STEALTHY. MAYBE SHE WASN'T BOTHERING, BUT I WAS PRETTY SURE SHE WAS.

BUT I MAY NOT HAVE BEEN GIVING HER ENOUGH CREDIT, BECAUSE IT WASN'T ACTUALLY ME SHE WAS INTERESTED IN. SURE, SHE CLOCKED ME, BUT SHE WANTED THE TWO SITTING IN THE BACK. AND THEY DIDN'T NOTICE HER AT ALL.

WHEN THEY LEFT, SHE FOLLOWED THEM.

I DECIDED IT MIGHT BE WORTH MY TIME TO JOIN THIS CARAVAN AND SEE HOW IT PLAYED OUT.







Transportation rental: 20 wu



I'D HAVE PREFERRED TO RENT SOME REAL PERSONAL TRANSPORT. (MY OWN BIKE WOULD ATTRACT TOO MUCH UNWANTED ATTENTION.) BUT THIS CITY APPARENTLY DIDN'T BELIEVE IN THAT KIND OF THING. OR IN TAXIS. INSTEAD THEY HAD THESE RACKS OF MONOWHEELS EVERYWHERE.

IT WAS A SURPRISINGLY SMOOTH RIDE, FOR SOMETHING THAT ACTUALLY HAD TO ROLL ALONG THE GROUND LIKE IT WAS THE 22ND CENTURY.

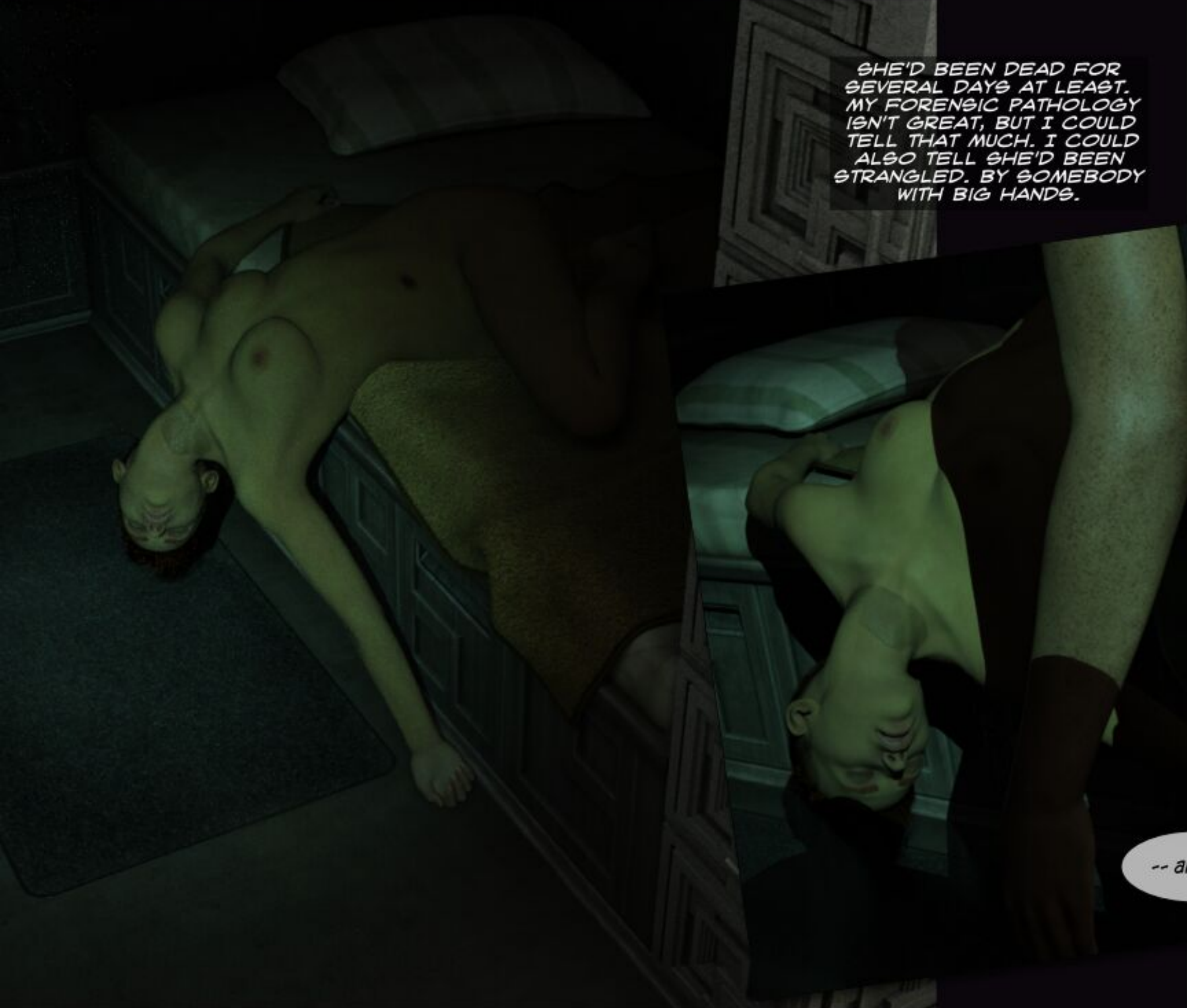
ZEED'S PLACE WASN'T IN WHAT I TOOK TO BE A GREAT PART OF THE CITY.

THEN AGAIN, I THOUGHT THE WHOLE CITY LOOKED KIND OF RUN DOWN.



Ayo?  
Anybody home?

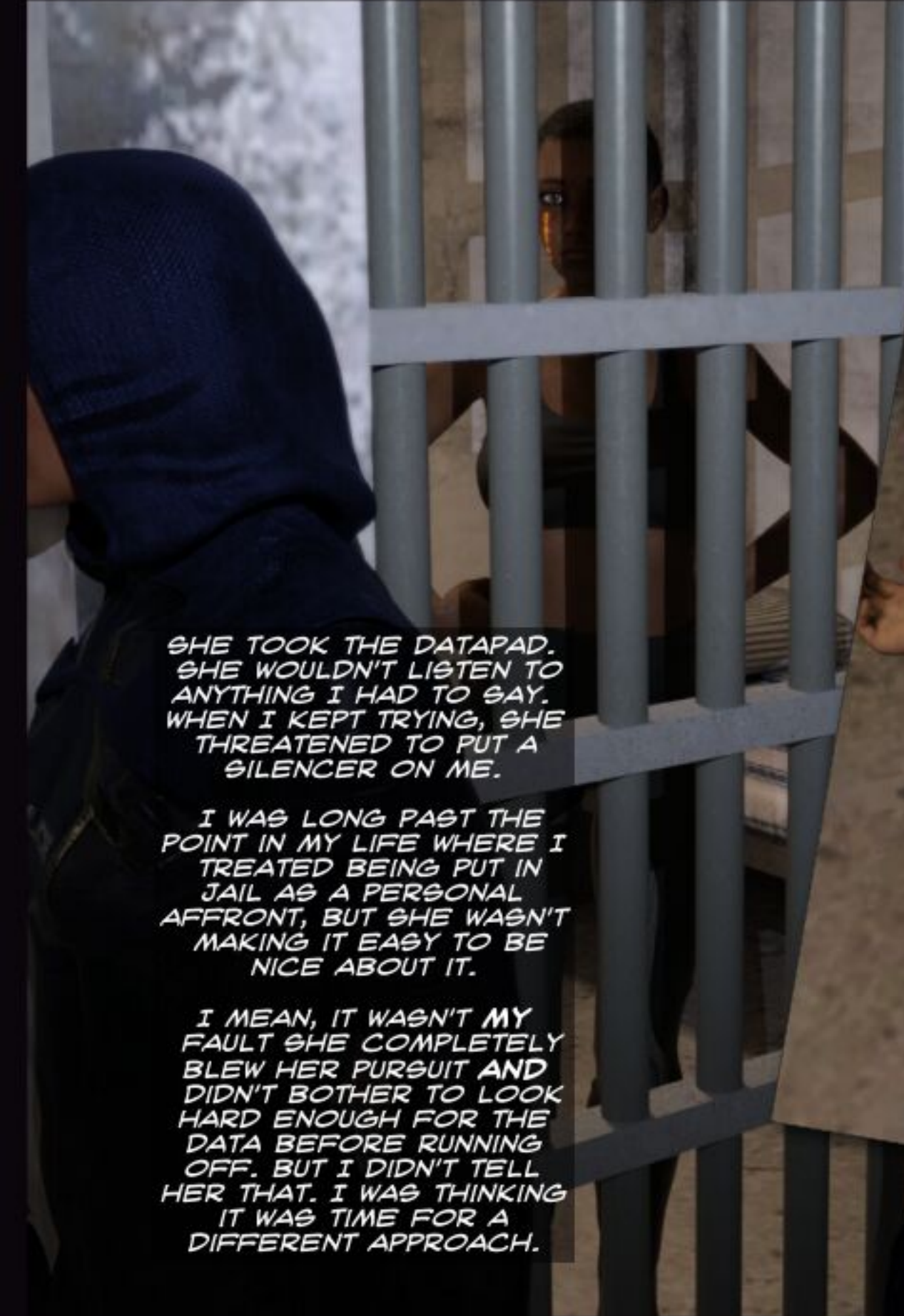
Zeed?  
Are you in here?



SHE'D BEEN DEAD FOR SEVERAL DAYS AT LEAST. MY FORENSIC PATHOLOGY ISN'T GREAT, BUT I COULD TELL THAT MUCH. I COULD ALSO TELL SHE'D BEEN STRANGLED. BY SOMEBODY WITH BIG HANDS.



-- ahem --

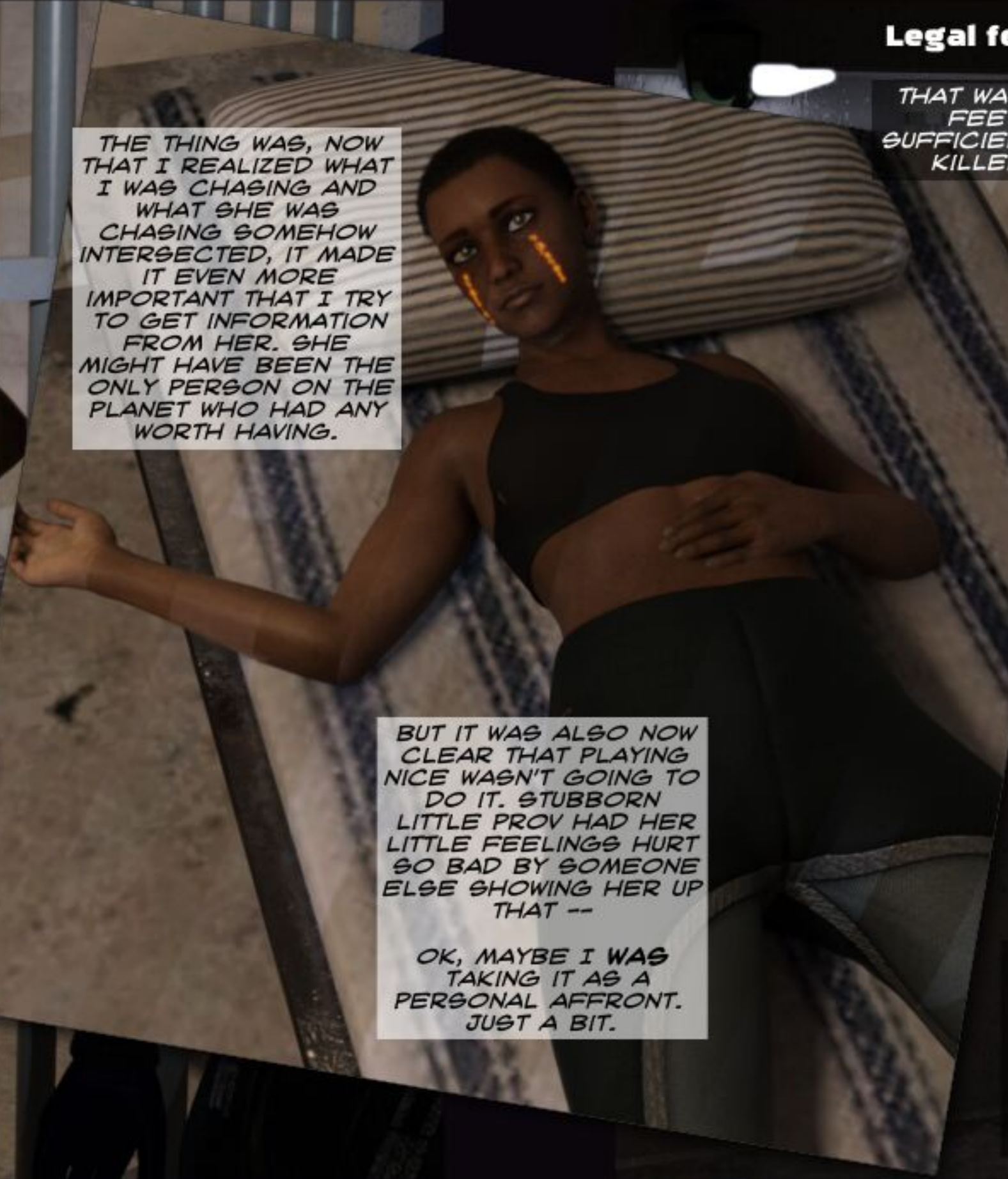


SHE TOOK THE DATAPAD. SHE WOULDN'T LISTEN TO ANYTHING I HAD TO SAY. WHEN I KEPT TRYING, SHE THREATENED TO PUT A SILENCER ON ME.

I WAS LONG PAST THE POINT IN MY LIFE WHERE I TREATED BEING PUT IN JAIL AS A PERSONAL AFFRONT, BUT SHE WASN'T MAKING IT EASY TO BE NICE ABOUT IT.

I MEAN, IT WASN'T MY FAULT SHE COMPLETELY BLEW HER PURSUIT AND DIDN'T BOTHER TO LOOK HARD ENOUGH FOR THE DATA BEFORE RUNNING OFF. BUT I DIDN'T TELL HER THAT. I WAS THINKING IT WAS TIME FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH.

THE THING WAS, NOW THAT I REALIZED WHAT I WAS CHASING AND WHAT SHE WAS CHASING SOMEHOW INTERSECTED, IT MADE IT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAT I TRY TO GET INFORMATION FROM HER. SHE MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE ONLY PERSON ON THE PLANET WHO HAD ANY WORTH HAVING.

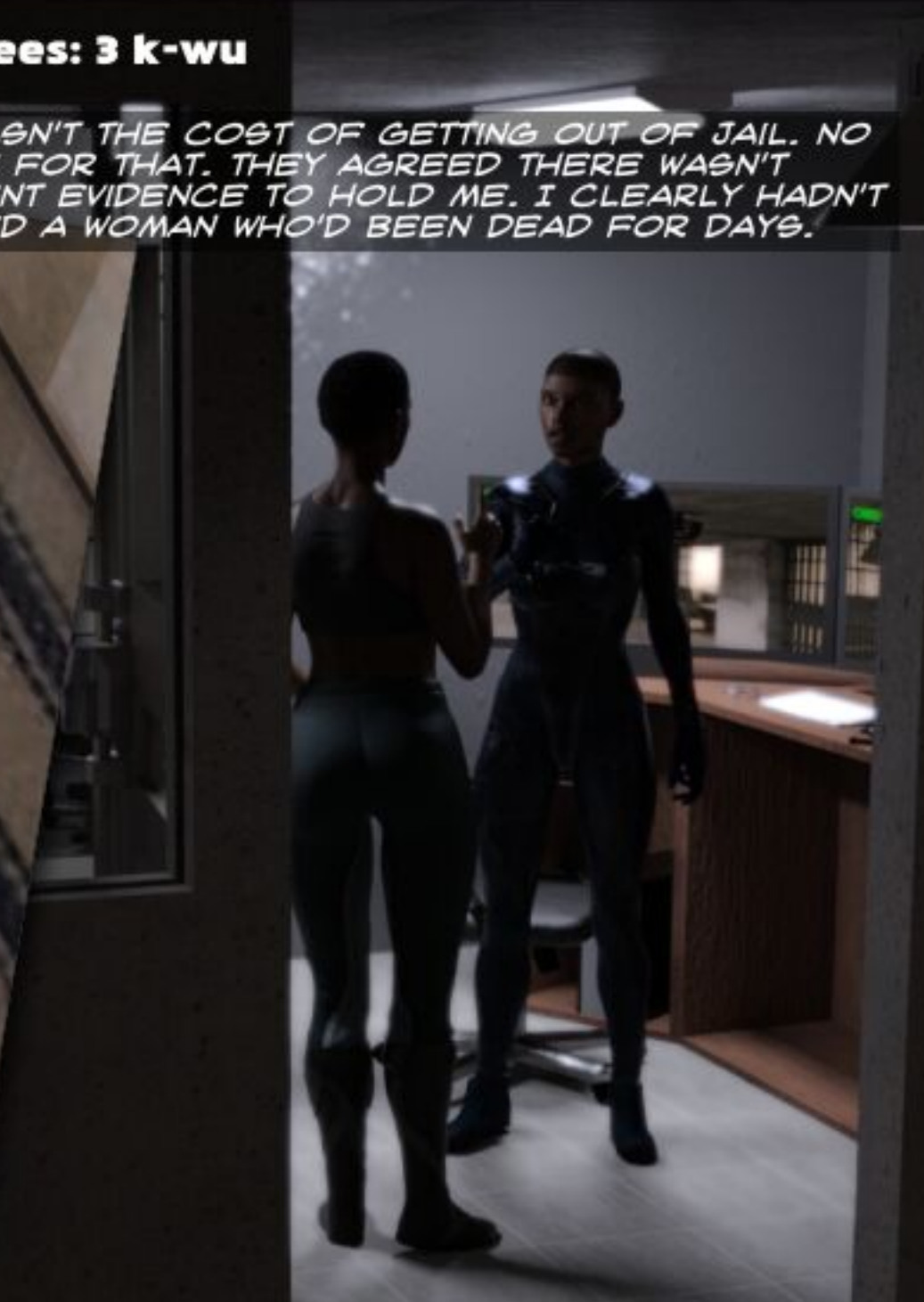


BUT IT WAS ALSO NOW CLEAR THAT PLAYING NICE WASN'T GOING TO DO IT. STUBBORN LITTLE PROV HAD HER LITTLE FEELINGS HURT SO BAD BY SOMEONE ELSE SHOWING HER UP THAT --

OK, MAYBE I WAS TAKING IT AS A PERSONAL AFFRONT. JUST A BIT.

Legal fees: 3 k-wu

THAT WASN'T THE COST OF GETTING OUT OF JAIL. NO FEE FOR THAT. THEY AGREED THERE WASN'T SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE TO HOLD ME. I CLEARLY HADN'T KILLED A WOMAN WHO'D BEEN DEAD FOR DAYS.



NO, THE THREE K WAS WHAT IT TOOK TO GET ONE OF THEM TO TELL ME THE NAME OF THE FEELINGS-HURT PROV AND WHERE SHE LIVED. CHEAP, REALLY, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET IT AT ANY PRICE IF THEY HADN'T BEEN SCARED I WAS GOING TO CAUSE LEGAL TROUBLE FOR WRONGFUL DETENTION. IF YOU HALF-ASS ME, I WILL USE IT.

Transportation rental: 20 wu

THERE MIGHT ALSO HAVE BEEN A GENERAL FEELING THAT SINCE SHE WAS THE ONE WHO HAZED ME, I WAS HER PROBLEM NOW.

IT'S POSSIBLE SHE DIDN'T INSPIRE MUCH LOYALTY FROM HER CO-WORKERS.



HER NAME WAS TRIT Heler.

I CAN'T CRACK A DATAPAD, BUT I'M PRETTY GOOD WITH DOORS.



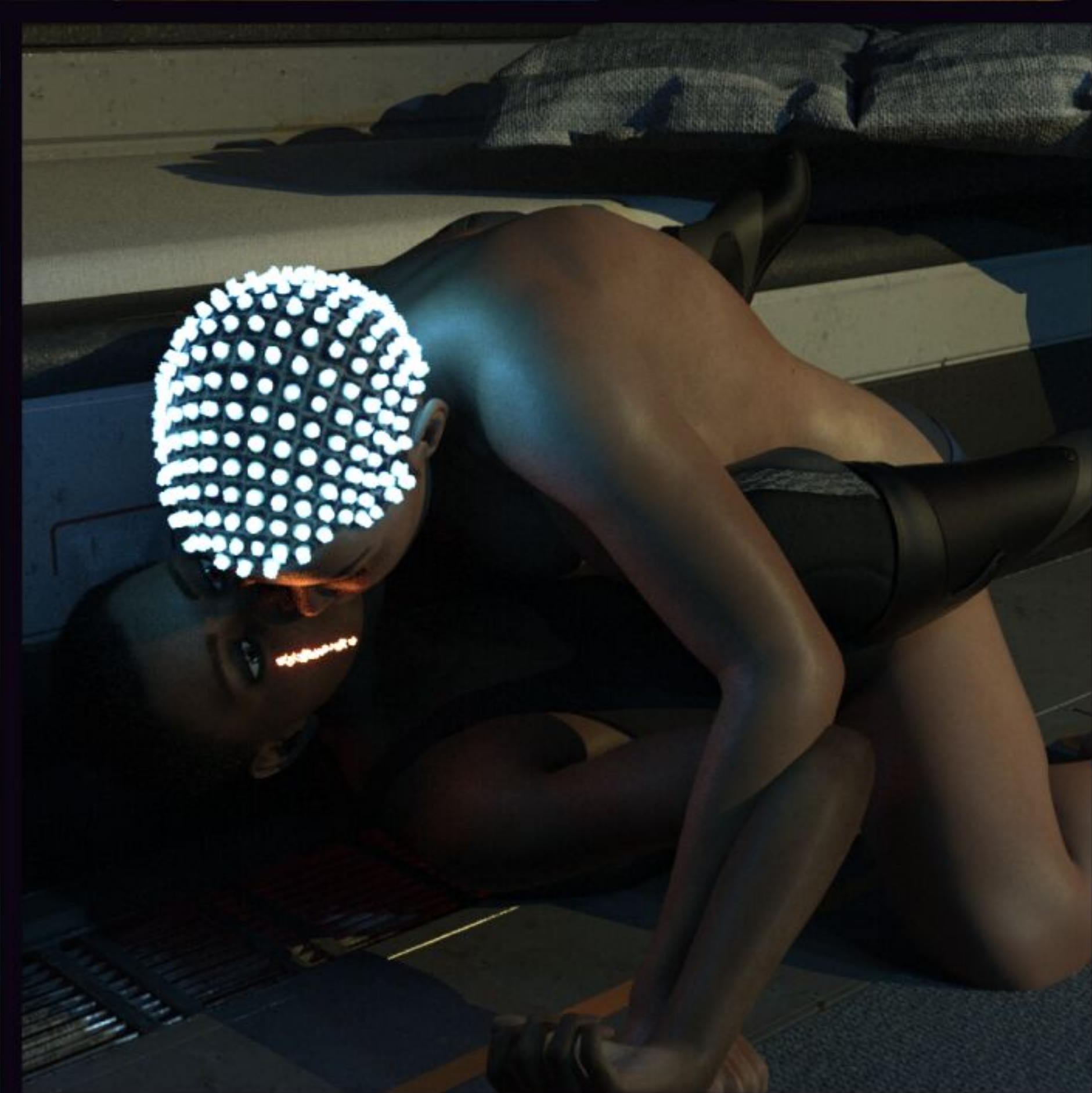
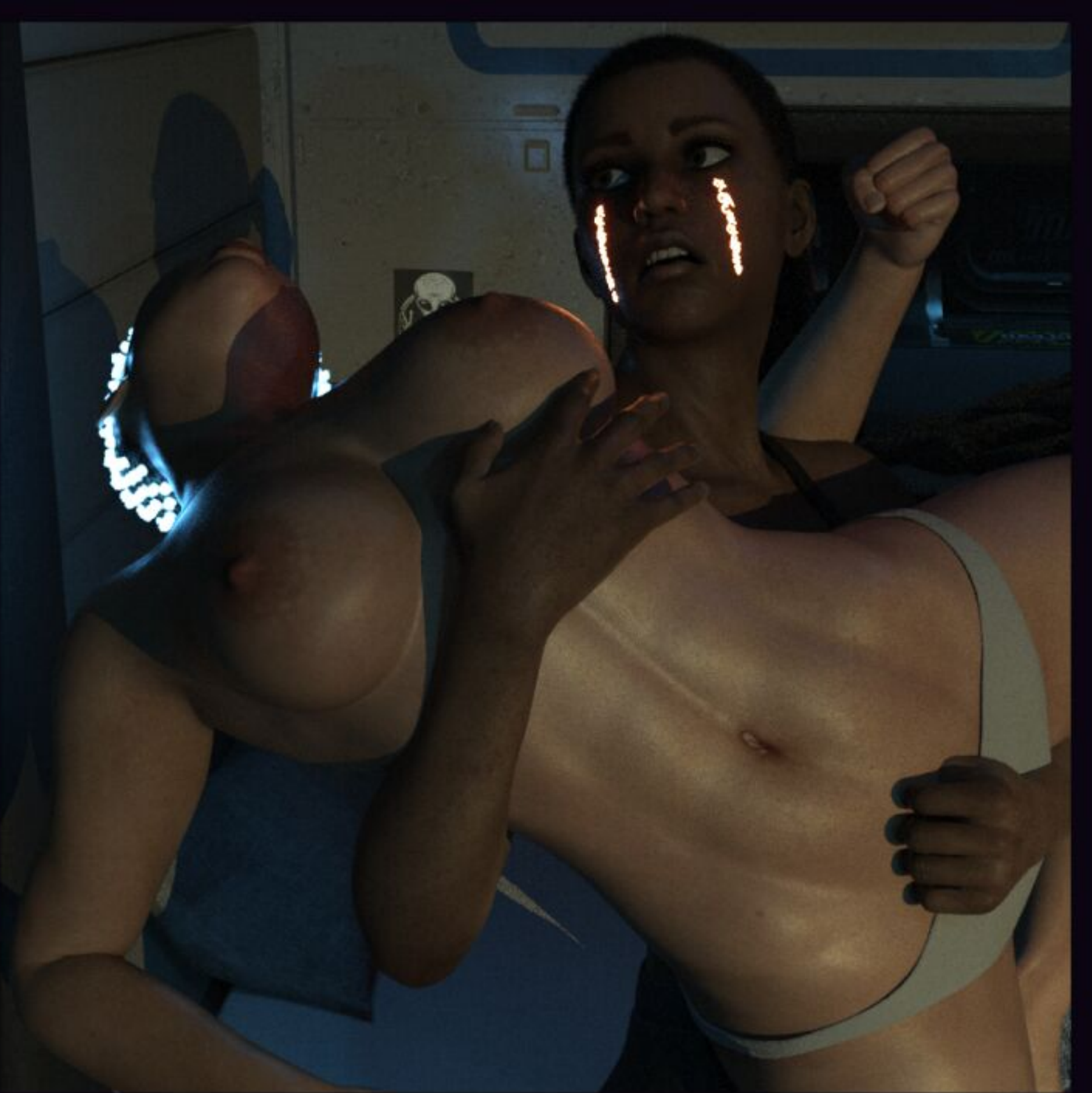
How do you sleep with glowy hair? I'd lose my mind. It'd be like having a night light I couldn't turn off.



Since you wasted so much of my time today, you're going to make up for it by telling me who the goons were, why you were talking them, and why you wanted that list.

Think so?





I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING AND HADN'T BEEN THROWN OUT AND HADN'T BEEN DRAGGED BACK TO JAIL. WHERE TRIT WAS CONCERNED, THOSE WERE THE ONLY TWO THINGS I WAS CERTAIN ABOUT.







"Corin Rede, the governor-general. A good person. Everybody loved her."

"She was leaving a social function. She had her majordomo and her consort with her. Her majordomo was also her closest advisor and, at times like this, her bodyguard."

We've never had anything like this happen before. There hasn't ever been a need for any more elaborate public security."



"When we searched the area, we found they'd dropped a couple of things when they ran. One of their weapons -- the kind used by the Fysia 2 Military. A helmet, also Fysia 2. Ours don't look anything like that."

"The two shooters opened fire for fifteen seconds and ran as soon as they were sure she was down. There was no chance to save her. Her consort survived with serious injuries. Her majordomo had been wearing light armor and was barely hurt. She was able to chase the shooters, but lost them."

"I'm starting to see where this leads. Were the two planets not getting along? I mean, before that happened."

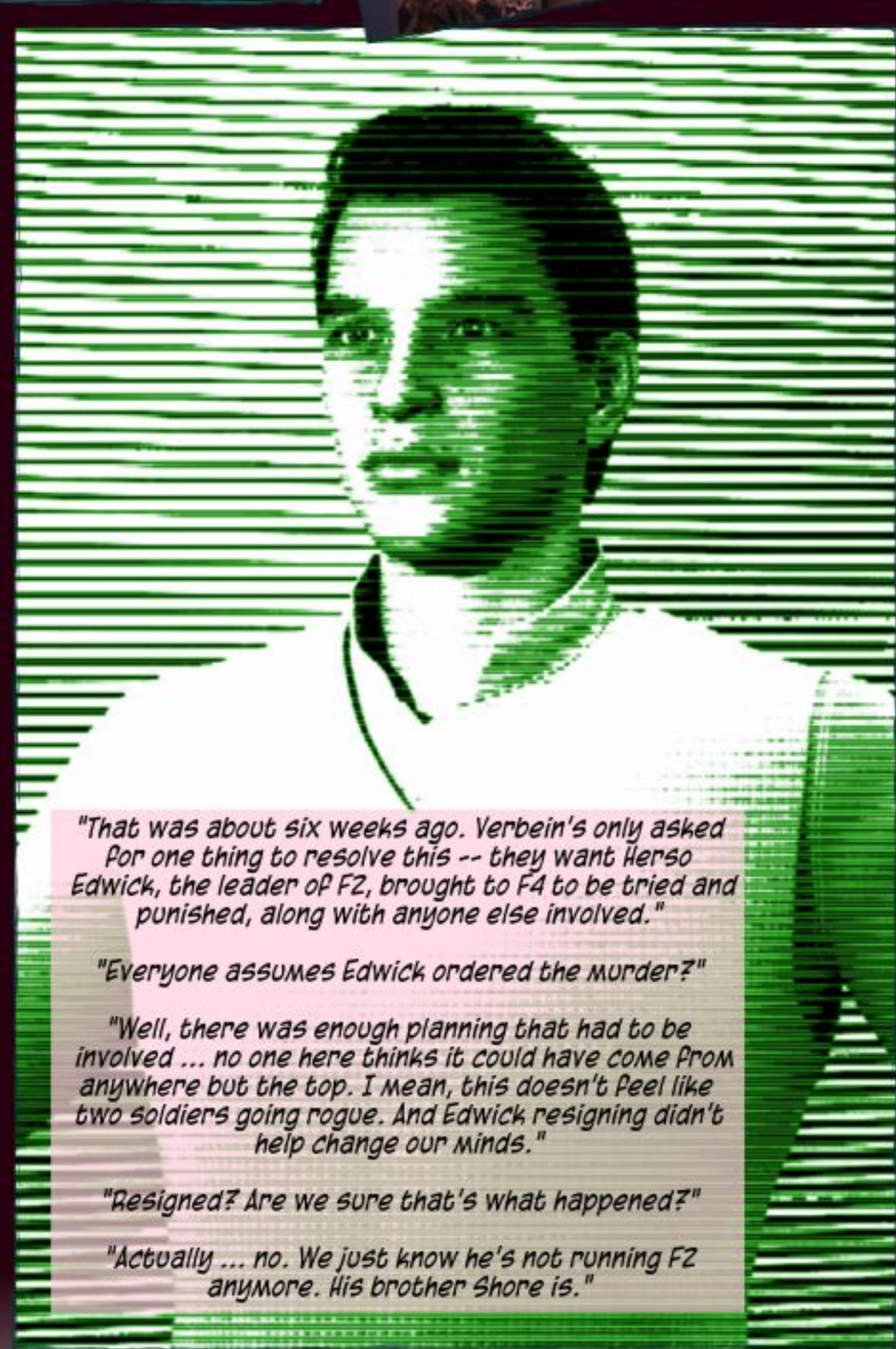


"No, it was Pine! Just ... F2 is pushy sometimes. Wants to get into F4 things that aren't any of their business. We don't run our planet their way. The theory is that the F2 gov arranged the murder because they knew Sul Verbein would replace Rede, and they thought Verbein would be easier to push around."

This is unacceptable, and must be considered an attack on Fysia 4 and its people. We will not stand for it.

Unless the government of Fysia 2 meets our demands for justice, we must assume that we are in a hostile state of relations and act accordingly.

"If that was their reason, it didn't work out the way they wanted."



"That was about six weeks ago. Verbein's only asked for one thing to resolve this -- they want Herso Edwick, the leader of F2, brought to F4 to be tried and punished, along with anyone else involved."

"Everyone assumes Edwick ordered the murder?"

"Well, there was enough planning that had to be involved ... no one here thinks it could have come from anywhere but the top. I mean, this doesn't feel like two soldiers going rogue. And Edwick resigning didn't help change our minds."

"Resigned? Are we sure that's what happened?"

"Actually ... no. We just know he's not running F2 anymore. His brother Shore is."

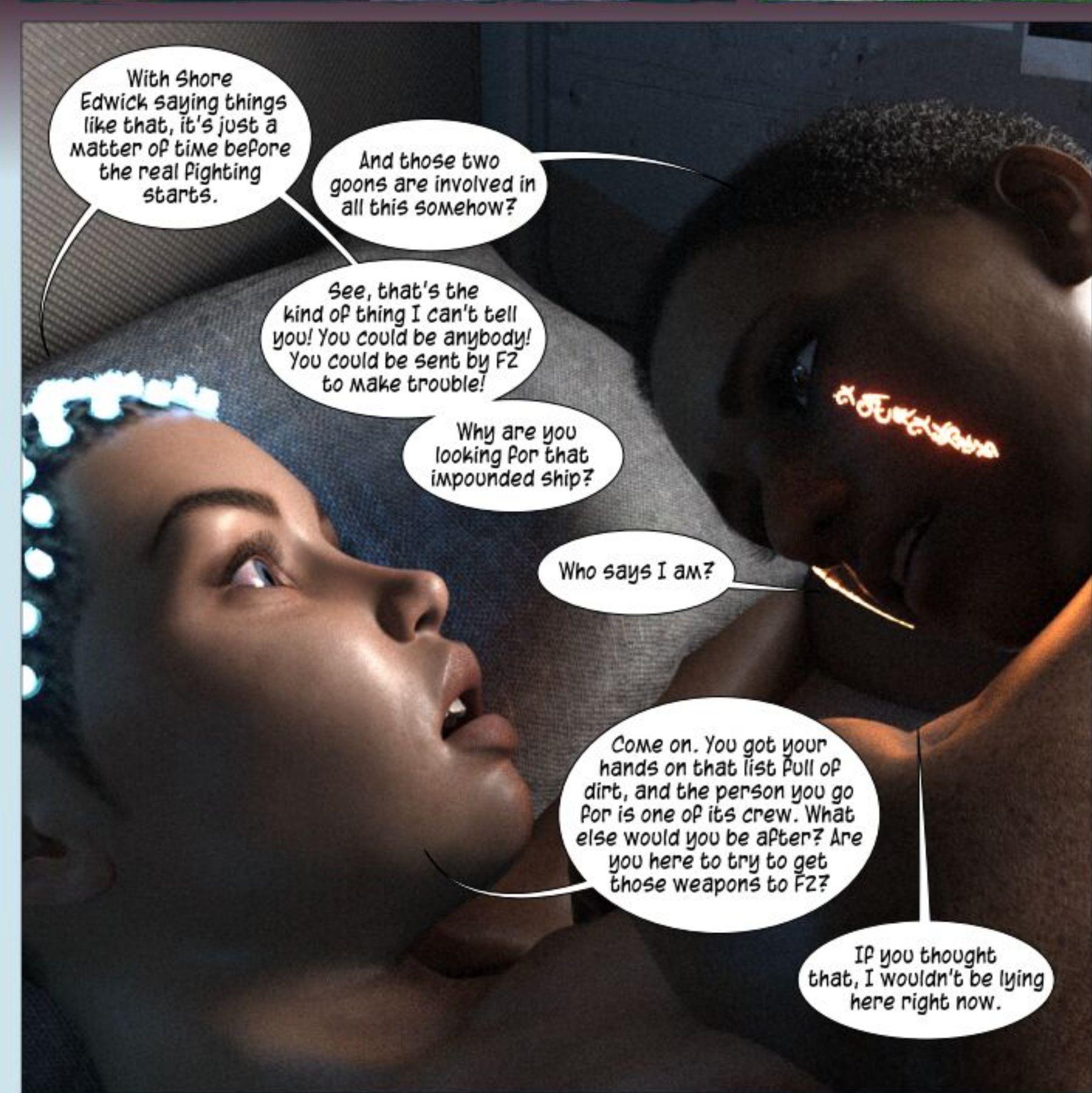


"And he's not giving an inch, last I heard."

Fysia 2 has no obligation to respond to these demands!

And, frankly, we refuse to give any credence to this ridiculous conspiracy Verbein and their people have invented.

If Fysia 4 is looking for an excuse for war, then they can have war. We're ready.



With Shore Edwick saying things like that, it's just a matter of time before the real fighting starts.

And those two goons are involved in all this somehow?

See, that's the kind of thing I can't tell you! You could be anybody! You could be sent by F2 to make trouble!

Why are you looking for that impounded ship?

Who says I am?

Come on. You got your hands on that list full of dirt, and the person you go for is one of its crew. What else would you be after? Are you here to try to get those weapons to F2?

If you thought that, I wouldn't be lying here right now.



OK, Pine, I don't think you're here for that, and I know you didn't kill Zeed.

But you obviously don't want to tell me your real business here, and if I told you anything my chief would kill me ...

... so I'm thinking that's about as far as we can go.

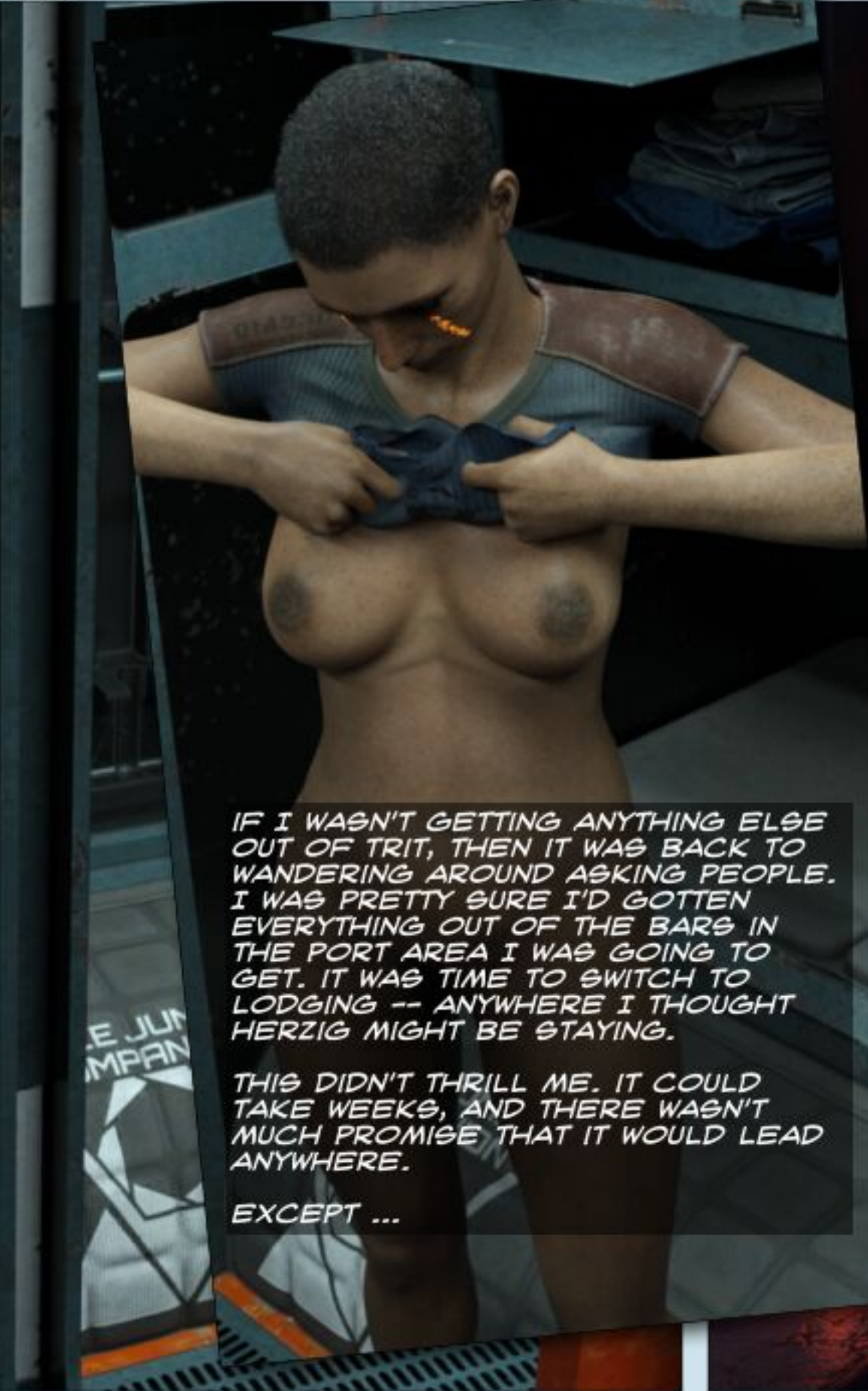
I'D BEEN ON THE MOVE EVER SINCE I LANDED -- STRAIGHT TO INTERVIEWS, THEN THE FIGHT, THEN DETAINED, THEN TO FIND TRIT ... I'D NEVER CHECKED INTO ANY LODGING, NOR BROUGHT SPARE CLOTHES FROM BOSIE.



FORTUNATELY THE PORT STAYED BOUGHT, AND GAVE ME NO FUSS, INCLUDING ABOUT A WATER HOOKUP.

Port services: 50 wu

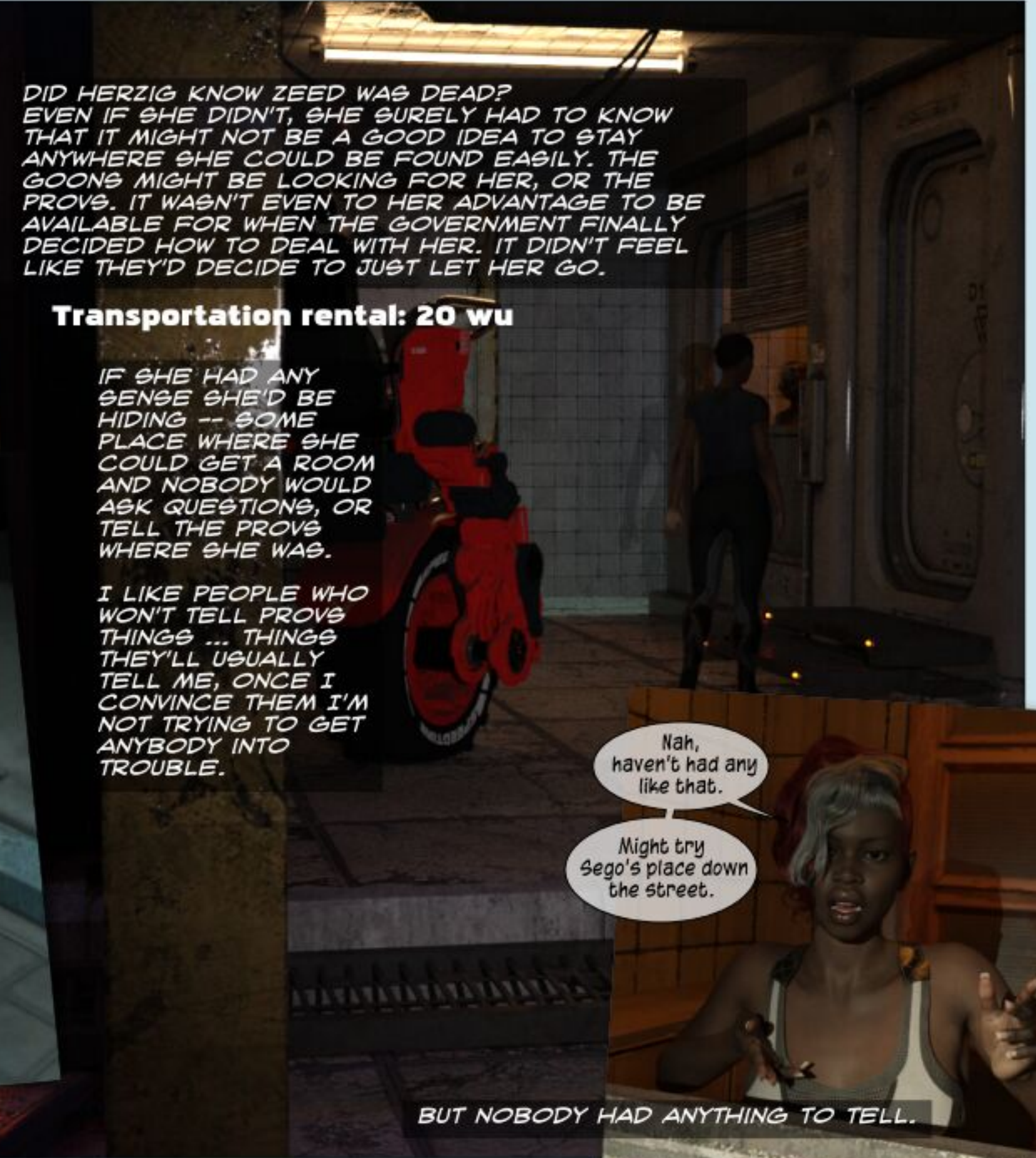
BOSIE'S WATER SYSTEM IS HORRIBLE AND YOU CAN'T REALLY TAKE A SHOWER WITHOUT AN EXTERNAL SUPPLY.



IF I WASN'T GETTING ANYTHING ELSE OUT OF TRIT, THEN IT WAS BACK TO WANDERING AROUND ASKING PEOPLE. I WAS PRETTY SURE I'D GOTTEN EVERYTHING OUT OF THE BARS IN THE PORT AREA I WAS GOING TO GET. IT WAS TIME TO SWITCH TO LODGING -- ANYWHERE I THOUGHT HERZIG MIGHT BE STAYING.

THIS DIDN'T THRILL ME. IT COULD TAKE WEEKS, AND THERE WASN'T MUCH PROMISE THAT IT WOULD LEAD ANYWHERE.

EXCEPT ...



DID HERZIG KNOW ZEED WAS DEAD? EVEN IF SHE DIDN'T, SHE SURELY HAD TO KNOW THAT IT MIGHT NOT BE A GOOD IDEA TO STAY ANYWHERE SHE COULD BE FOUND EASILY. THE GOONS MIGHT BE LOOKING FOR HER, OR THE PROVS. IT WASN'T EVEN TO HER ADVANTAGE TO BE AVAILABLE FOR WHEN THE GOVERNMENT FINALLY DECIDED HOW TO DEAL WITH HER. IT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE THEY'D DECIDE TO JUST LET HER GO.

Transportation rental: 20 wu

IF SHE HAD ANY SENSE SHE'D BE HIDING -- SOME PLACE WHERE SHE COULD GET A ROOM AND NOBODY WOULD ASK QUESTIONS, OR TELL THE PROVS WHERE SHE WAS.

I LIKE PEOPLE WHO WON'T TELL PROVS THINGS -- THINGS THEY'LL USUALLY TELL ME, ONCE I CONVINCE THEM I'M NOT TRYING TO GET ANYBODY INTO TROUBLE.

Nah, haven't had any like that.

Might try Sego's place down the street.

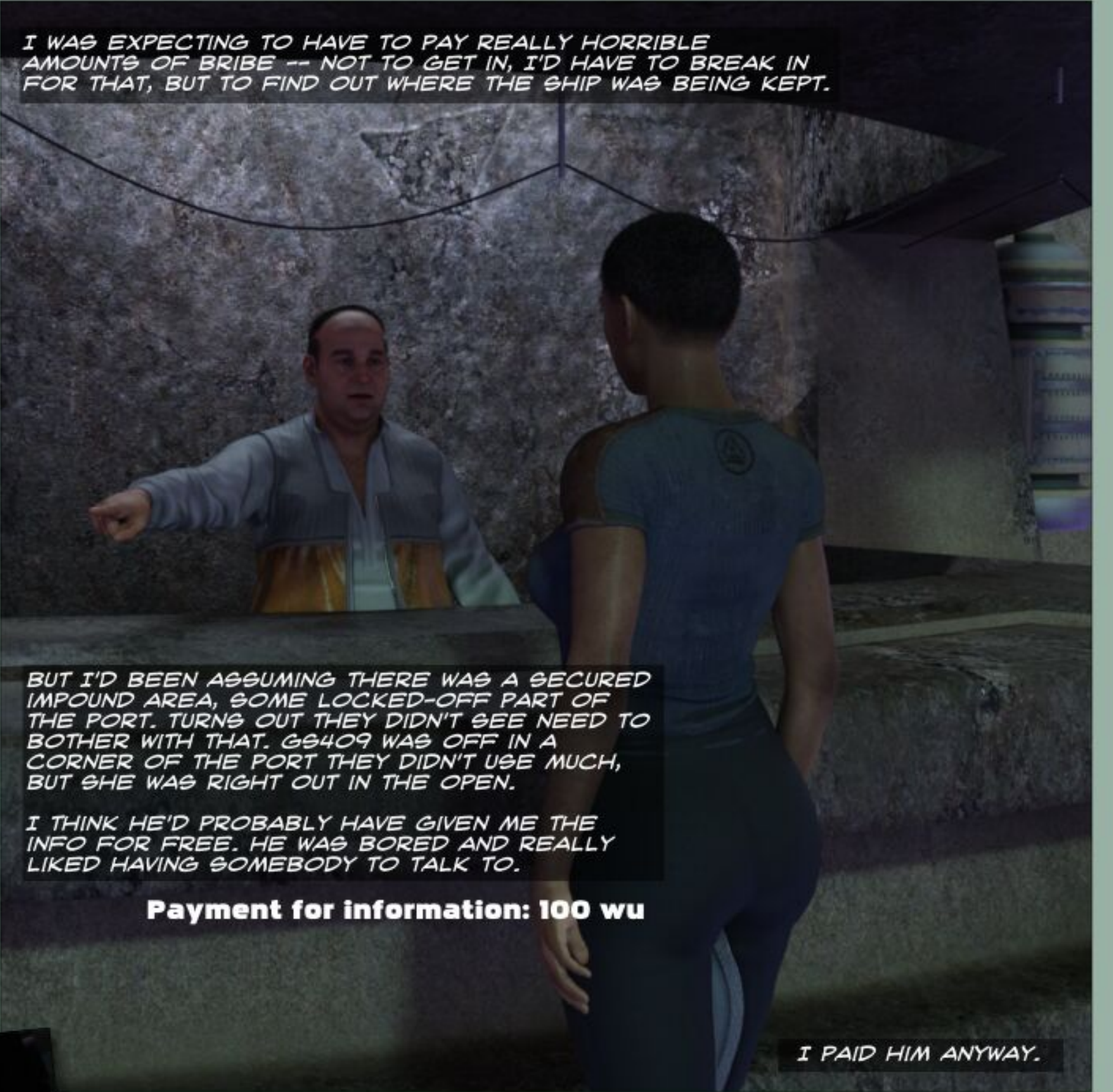
BUT NOBODY HAD ANYTHING TO TELL.





OK, IF I WAS ON A PLANET I COULDN'T LEAVE, AND I NEEDED TO HIDE UNTIL I HAD A CHANCE TO GET OUT OF THE SYSTEM, WHAT WOULD I DO?

WELL ... I'D PROBABLY SNEAK BACK INTO THE PORT AND HIDE IN BOSIE, EVEN IF BOSIE WAS IN IMPOUND. HARD FOR ANYBODY ELSE TO GET INTO THE SHIP AND NOT LIKELY THEY'D LOOK FOR ME THERE. ASSUMING I WAS WELL STOCKED AND POWERED, I COULD LIVE IN BOSIE FOR WEEKS. I'VE DONE IT, THOUGH I DIDN'T ENJOY IT MUCH.



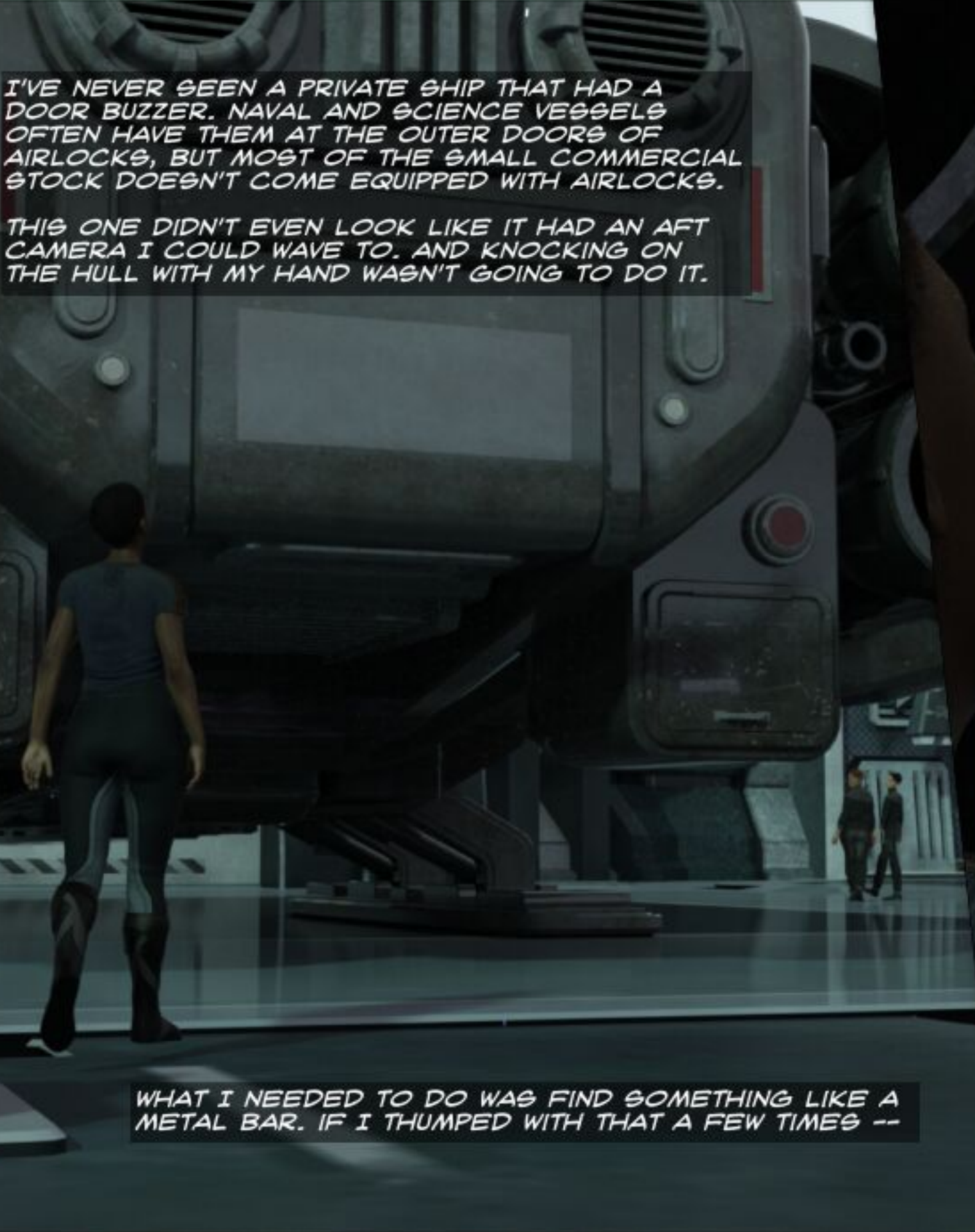
I WAS EXPECTING TO HAVE TO PAY REALLY HORRIBLE AMOUNTS OF BRIBE -- NOT TO GET IN, I'D HAVE TO BREAK IN FOR THAT, BUT TO FIND OUT WHERE THE SHIP WAS BEING KEPT.

BUT I'D BEEN ASSUMING THERE WAS A SECURED IMPOUND AREA, SOME LOCKED-OFF PART OF THE PORT. TURNS OUT THEY DIDN'T SEE NEED TO BOTHER WITH THAT. GS409 WAS OFF IN A CORNER OF THE PORT THEY DIDN'T USE MUCH, BUT SHE WAS RIGHT OUT IN THE OPEN.

I THINK HE'D PROBABLY HAVE GIVEN ME THE INFO FOR FREE. HE WAS BORED AND REALLY LIKED HAVING SOMEBODY TO TALK TO.

**Payment for information: 100 wu**

I PAID HIM ANYWAY.



I'VE NEVER SEEN A PRIVATE SHIP THAT HAD A DOOR BUZZER. NAVAL AND SCIENCE VESSELS OFTEN HAVE THEM AT THE OUTER DOORS OF AIRLOCKS, BUT MOST OF THE SMALL COMMERCIAL STOCK DOESN'T COME EQUIPPED WITH AIRLOCKS.

THIS ONE DIDN'T EVEN LOOK LIKE IT HAD AN AFT CAMERA I COULD WAVE TO. AND KNOCKING ON THE HULL WITH MY HAND WASN'T GOING TO DO IT.



THAT WAS NOT PART OF THE SHIP. AND IT WASN'T AN IMPOUND LOCK.

Ah, hell.

WHAT I NEEDED TO DO WAS FIND SOMETHING LIKE A METAL BAR. IF I THUMPED WITH THAT A FEW TIMES --



urgh ...

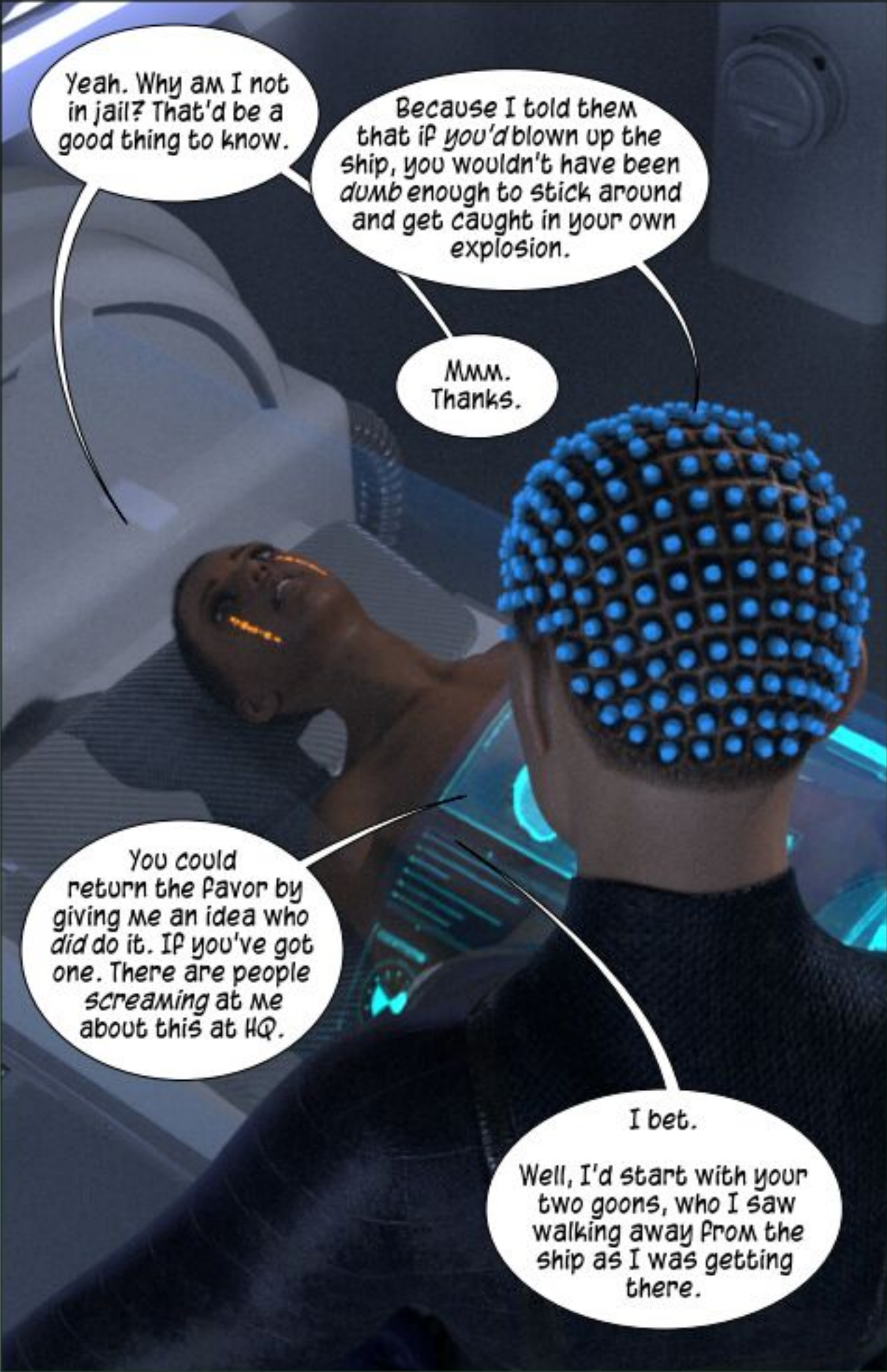


You have got to be just about the luckiest human in the galaxy.

Really, you should be dead right now.

Years of "dive for cover" experience.

Or in jail.



Yeah. Why am I not in jail? That'd be a good thing to know.

Because I told them that if you'd blown up the ship, you wouldn't have been dumb enough to stick around and get caught in your own explosion.

Mmm. Thanks.

You could return the favor by giving me an idea who did do it. If you've got one. There are people screaming at me about this at HQ.

I bet.

Well, I'd start with your two goons, who I saw walking away from the ship as I was getting there.



But that's --

Why would F2 ops want to blow up *that* cargo? They wanted it back, not --



-- Aw, shit.

Gotcha.





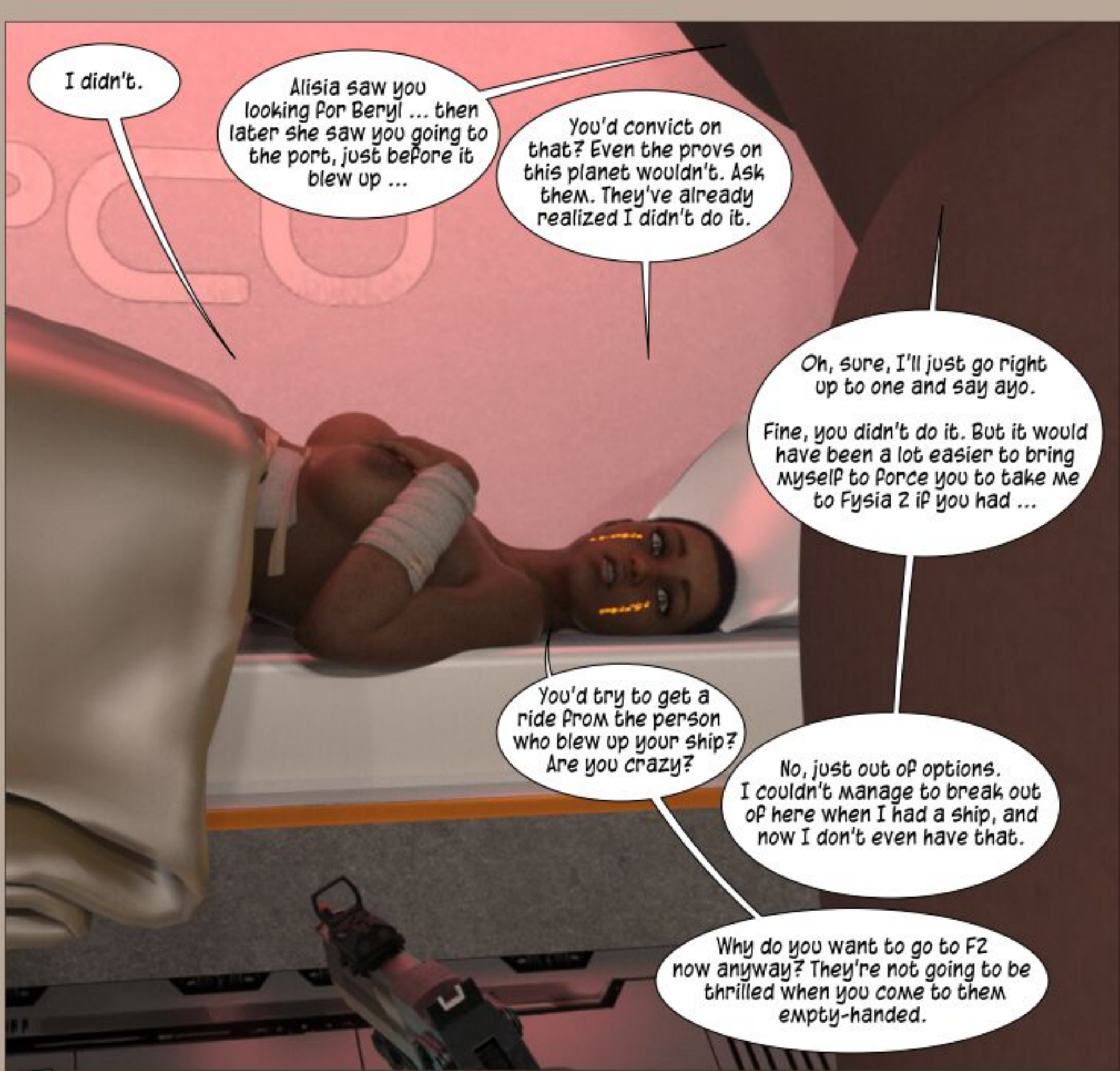


HOPEFULLY NOT LITERALLY.



Good morning.

Why did you blow up my ship?



I didn't.

Alisia saw you looking for Beryl ... then later she saw you going to the port, just before it blew up ...

You'd convict on that? Even the provs on this planet wouldn't. Ask them. They've already realized I didn't do it.

Oh, sure, I'll just go right up to one and say ayo. Fine, you didn't do it. But it would have been a lot easier to bring myself to force you to take me to Fysia 2 if you had ...

You'd try to get a ride from the person who blew up your ship? Are you crazy?

No, just out of options. I couldn't manage to break out of here when I had a ship, and now I don't even have that.

Why do you want to go to F2 now anyway? They're not going to be thrilled when you come to them empty-handed.



That's none of your business.

It is if I'm taking you to F2. I'd want to know what I'm getting into.

You will take me?

I might. Can you pay me?

Uh ... what are we talking? Passenger rates?

Hell, no! You're not allowed to leave the planet, and F4's running a blockade up there ... I'd consider it for ... let's see ... five k-wu.

I don't have that. I can get it, but not until I can ... uh ... not until I'm done on F2.

Hmm. No, under the circumstances, that wouldn't be good enough. I'd need it up front.



Damn it, you were just hazzing me! You never were going to take me!

I should shoot your ass right now on principle --



-- WHAPP --



OK, great, you got me. Hope you're proud. What are you? F4 security?

No, I'm an indy like you, ... but I'm getting tired of being jacked around.

I'll take you to F2. No charge. You just have to do one thing.

What?

Say 'please.'

**Berthing fee for past two days Fysia 4: 500 wu  
Ship power refill: 10 wu**

ALWAYS TOP OFF THE TANK BEFORE YOU LEAVE.

I'D KNOWN I WAS GOING TO TAKE HER TO F2 AS SOON AS I REALIZED THAT WAS WHAT SHE WAS TRYING FOR. A COUPLE OF THINGS WERE BECOMING CLEAR, AND ONE OF THEM WAS THAT I WASN'T GOING TO BE ABLE TO GET HER SAFELY OUT OF THIS SYSTEM UNTIL SHE DID WHATEVER SHE WAS REALLY HERE TO DO, AND CAME OUT THE FAR END OF IT, HOPEFULLY ALIVE. IF I CAME ALONG FOR THE RIDE, MAYBE I COULD HELP HER STAY THAT WAY.



I DIDN'T TELL HER WHY I WAS LOOKING FOR HER. IN FACT, I DIDN'T TELL HER I WAS LOOKING FOR HER. AS LONG AS I COULDN'T GET HER TO TELL ME ANYTHING, I INTENDED TO RESPOND IN KIND.



You can come out now. We just left their patrol range.

I guess they figured if they'd already checked me before and the port said I didn't take on any cargo, that was good enough.



That's a cute little holdout. You rig that yourself?

Yes, but there's less to it than you think.

It was a bad design -- unmarked door no one can tell is a door. All I did was put in some hidden latches.



I don't break a promise, but I've got to say, I think you're helping the wrong side.

If F2 did what I'm told they did, they sound like the villains here.

Who says I'm helping them?

Listen, I really do think the less I tell you the better, but I can tell you this:

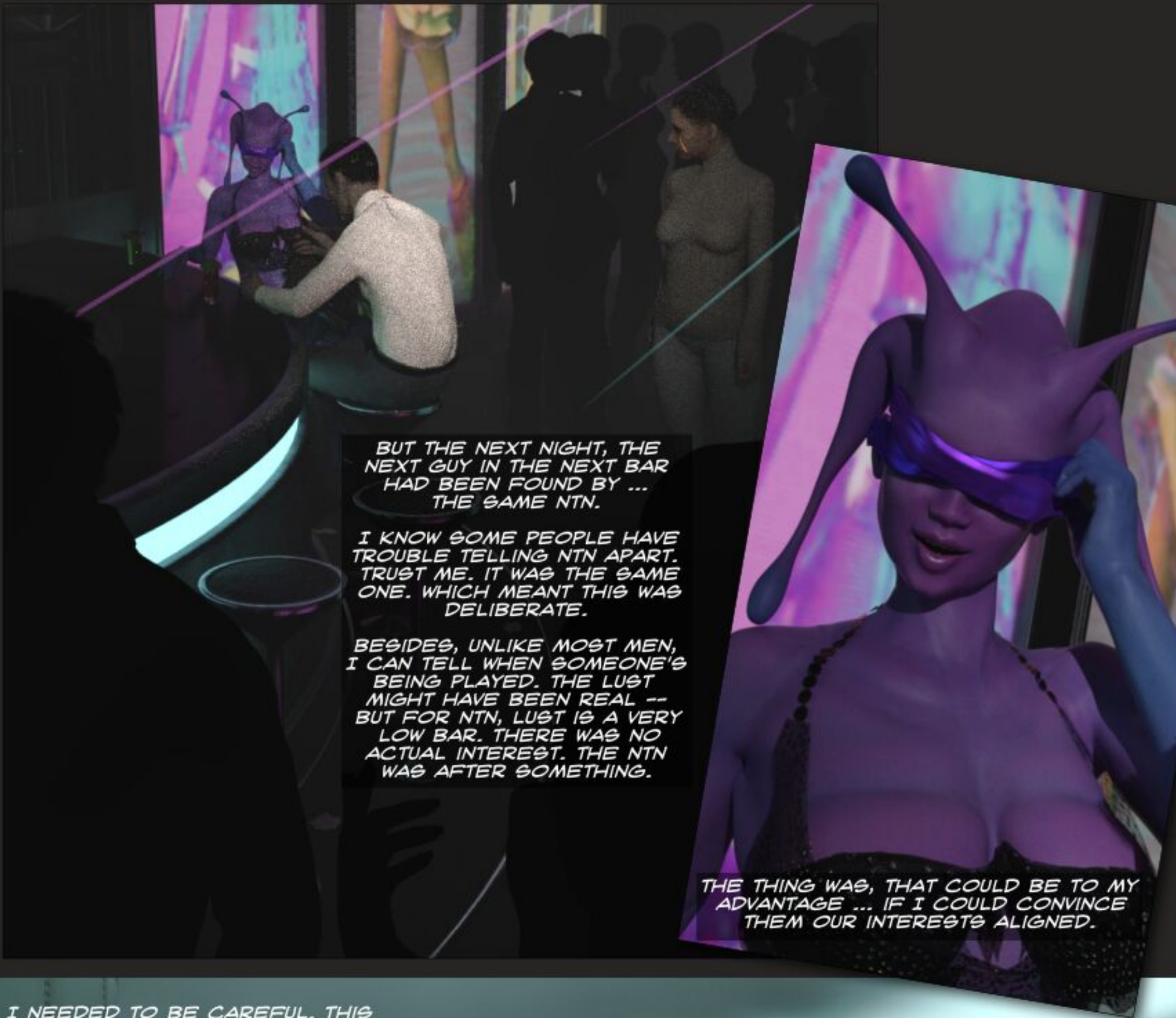
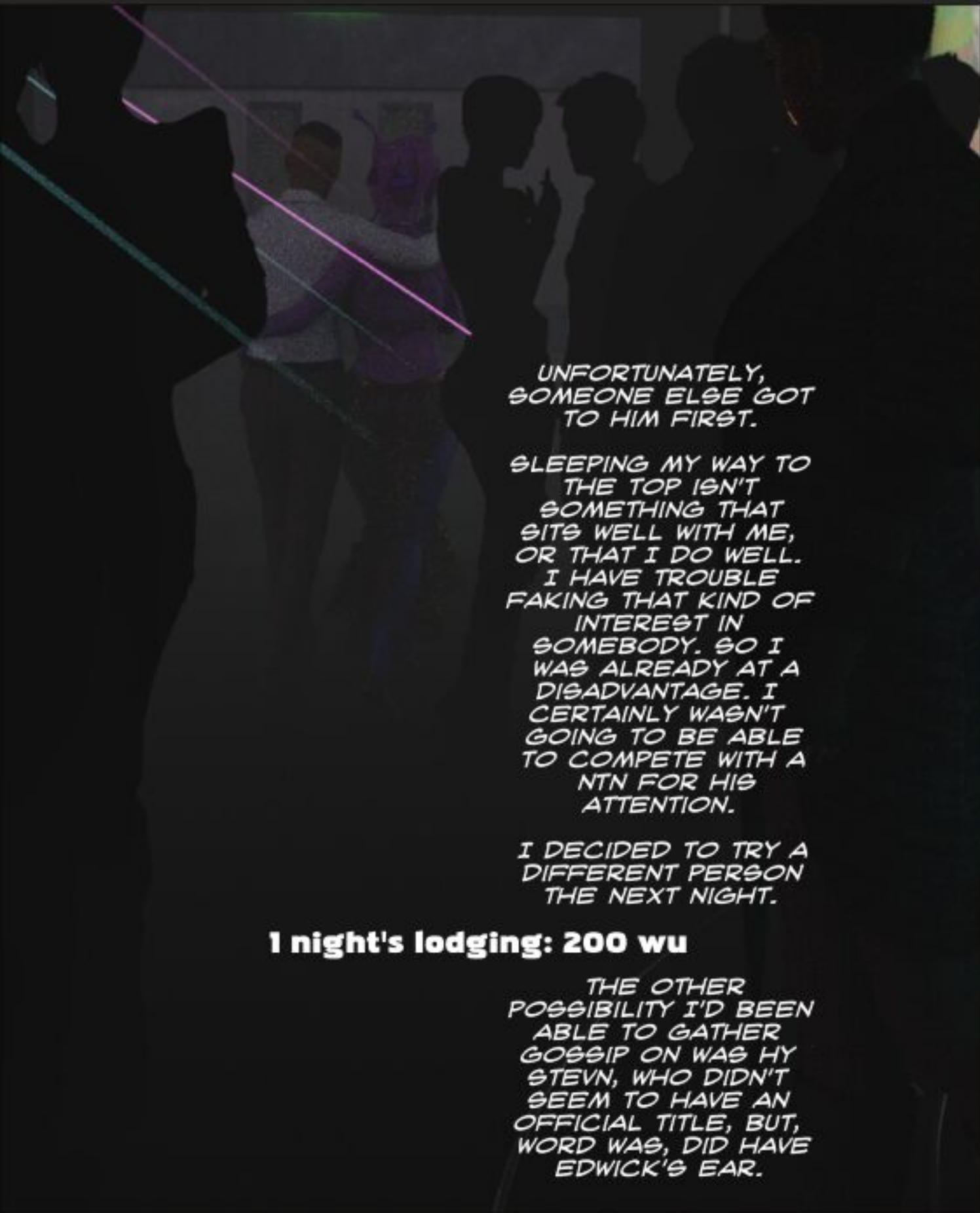
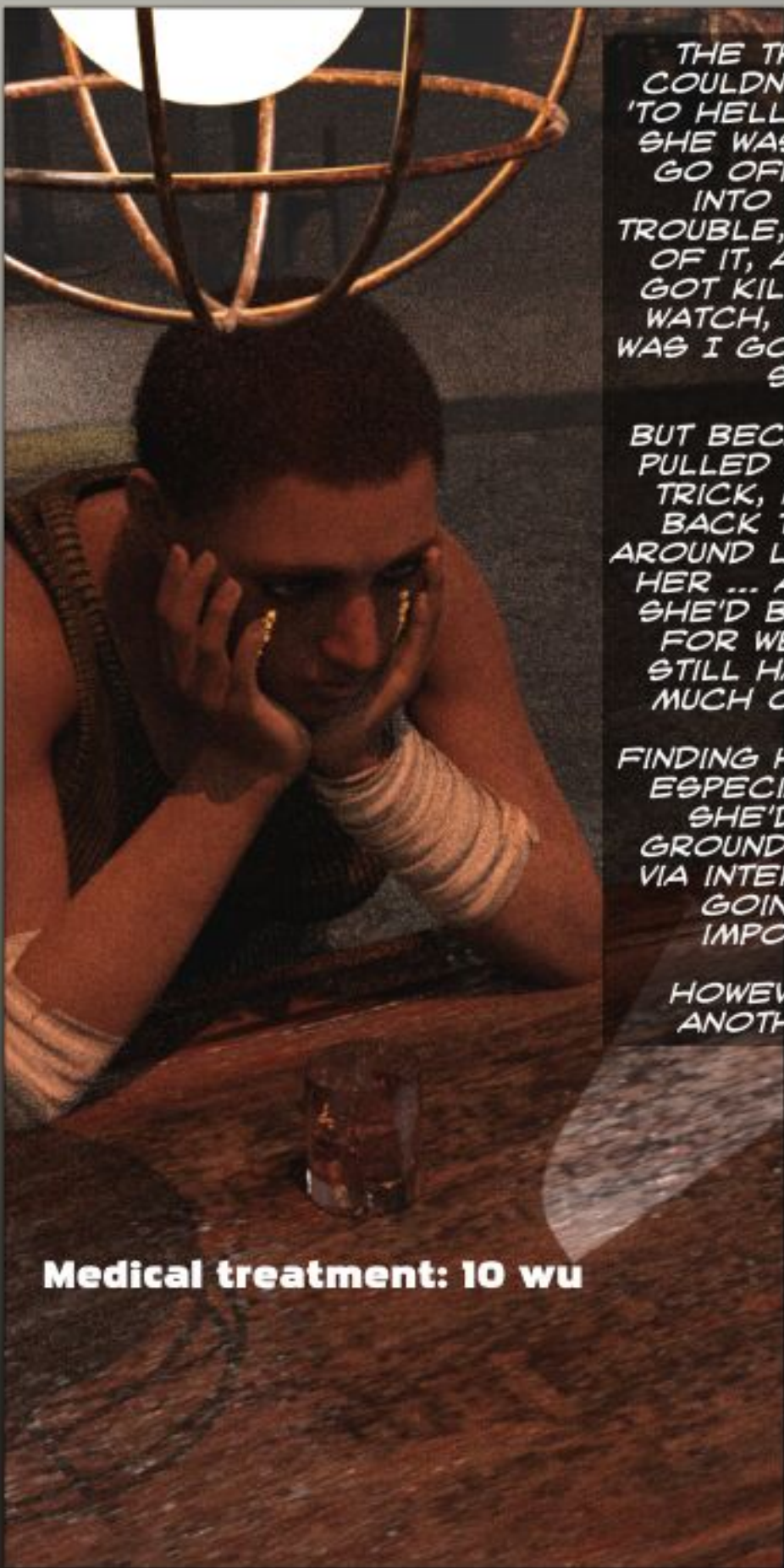
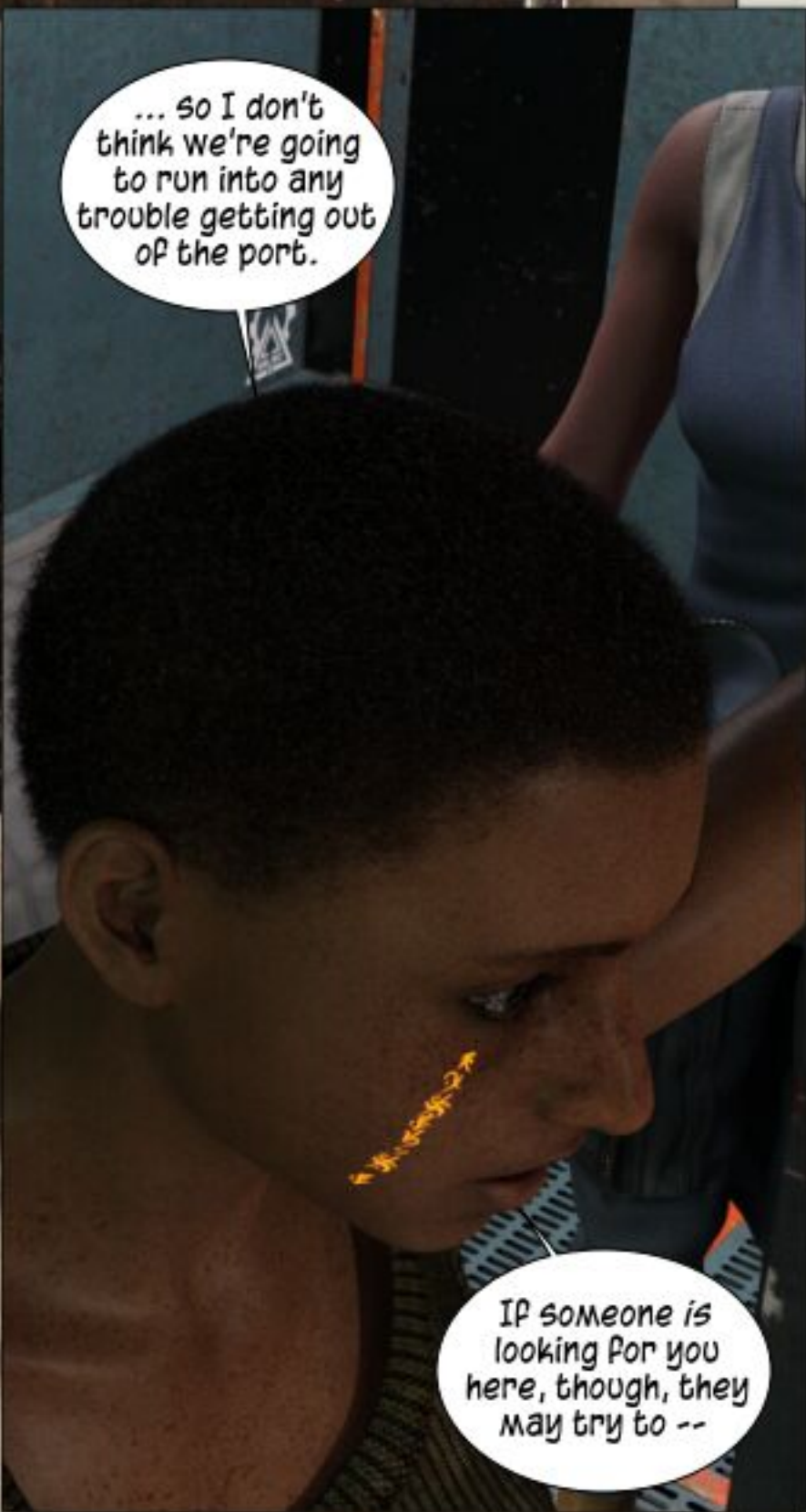
Shore Edwick wants war. He benefits from it financially, and he doesn't think F4 has the ability to damage F2 enough that the blood would start to hurt him politically.

Herso Edwick does not want war. Neither did Rede. And the two of them got along very well. Socially as well as politically.

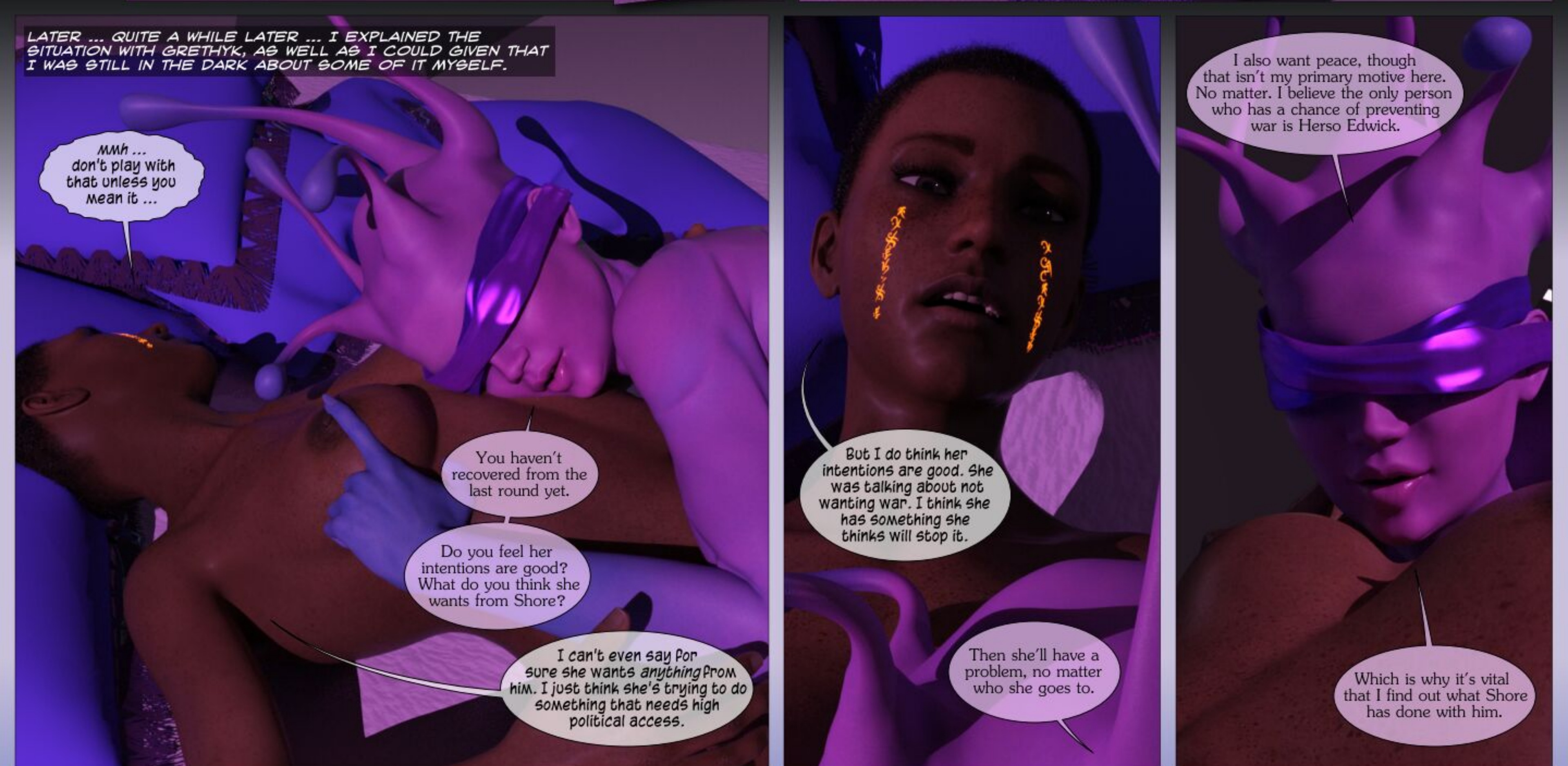
If they were such good friends, why'd he have her killed?

That's the big question, isn't it? See what answers you can come up with.







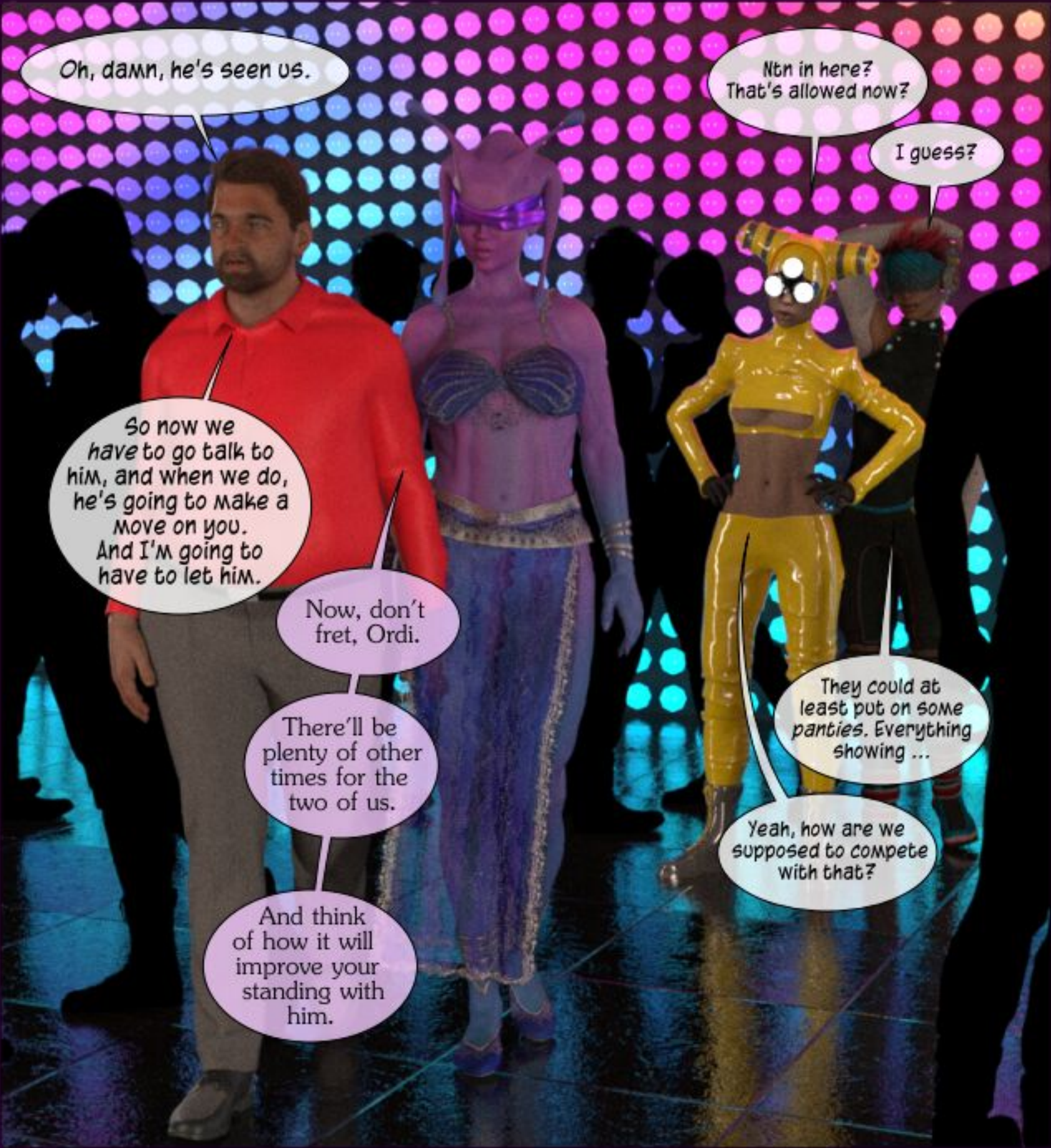


**1 night's lodging: 200 wu**

STQD'S PREVIOUS TWO PROSPECTS -- THE ONES I SAW THEM CHASE -- HADN'T LED ANYWHERE, BUT THIS TIME, THEY SAID, THEY HAD A GOOD ONE. HE WAS TAKING STQD TO A FUNCTION THAT NIGHT WHERE THEY'D HAVE A CHANCE TO GET SHORE'S ATTENTION. MEANWHILE, I SPENT THE NEXT DAY TRYING TO FIND GRETHYK THE HARD WAY.















A FEW MINUTES LATER.

I don't want to kill them. I hate killing people. Even if they deserve it.

But we need to take them out of commission, and I mean long-term. If they come back they'll just make more trouble for us.

I can probably arrange that.



This is Tuti. She used to run cargo.

I used to smuggle cargo. You can fight. Ex-Navy?

Yeah.

I know somebody who can send these two somewhere that'll keep them busy for a real long time. But I won't be able to talk her into less than 7k, and I don't have that lying around.

I'll give her more than that if she can expedite. Like, immediately. We need them gone, and then Grethyk and I need to be somewhere else.

Now, hold on ...

I'll call her.

Emergency waste disposal: 10 k-wu

1 night's lodging: 200 wu  
Transportation rental: 20 wu



I'm sorry about stunning you.

It wasn't that I didn't trust you. I just ... I didn't want you to be involved. I didn't want to risk anybody else.

And you were worried I might try to keep you from doing whatever stupid thing it is you're doing.

Also, you don't trust me. I don't mind that, I think you're right to be careful ... but now that I've saved your ass twice, you might at least get the idea that I'm on your side.

No, I do trust you --

Not enough to tell me what you're actually up to.



You're asking too much! This is --

Look, I'm trying to prevent a war. Isn't that good enough? Do you really need to know more than that?

If this puts a target on my back? Yes.

Nobody asked you to get involved!

If you're trying to prevent war, then why were you bringing in weapons for F2? Funny way to do that.

Randa, I can't --



Listen, the Luna Moths on F4 took me in and hid me! They believed me, and they had a lot less to go on than you do!

If they could trust me, why can't you?

Maybe I'm a lot less faith-based than they are.



Oh, I'm sorry. I should have buzzed first.

No, you're Pine. That's why I gave you access.

Who is this?

This is Stqd, Grethyk. An ally.

How'd it go? Did you get to Shore?



Shore? Shore Edwick? But he's the --

What are you two up to? You yell at me about trust and then come in with this?

Grethyk. Knock it off.



The two of us are probably the only people on this planet right now you can trust. Us, and maybe your friend Tuti.

It is time to come clean. So that we can get done with whatever it is you're doing and get out of here.

I'll use the same idea on you that you used on me: your mother sent me to come find you and get you out of trouble. If she trusts me to do that, then, damn it, you can too.



My mother? I -- I don't know what you're --

Give me a break. I knew you were her daughter as soon as she showed me a picture. I just didn't see any point in calling her out on it.

Do you use that last name all the time, or did you just make it up for this job?

... Herzig's my middle name.

We think it's better not to let the other cargo crews know I'm the boss' daughter.

I don't know what the point is in telling you anything. It seems like you already know all of it. Why don't you tell it, and I'll tell you if you're wrong.



-- sigh --

OK. It started making sense when I realized that neither you nor your mother actually cared about your cargo.

The weapons weren't your real cargo. Your real cargo is something a lot smaller. You're probably carrying it on you right now. The weapons were just something that F2 bigwigs wanted, and not publicly ... so you'd have to get access to them to make delivery. The weapons were your way in.

But you didn't know that F4 had started its blockade. That took you completely by surprise, and then you were stuck on the wrong planet.

What happened next? Zeed sold you out?



I don't think Beryl was looking for money. I hope she wasn't. I trusted her ...

I think she just couldn't stand sitting there any longer. She thought the job was a wash, she wanted to know why we didn't just try to clear out.

She told me she had. She thought she was doing the right thing ... but the job wasn't a wash yet, and I had to leave her there ... I had to run ...

Anyway, she got out, so I hope it was worth it to her. She'll never ship with us again.

Uh.



Grethyk, I hate for you to find out this way, but ... she didn't get out.

She picked the wrong people. She went to those two F2 agents we beat up this evening. I don't guess she knew that's what they were.

Oh, no ...

Yes. They killed her. Probably when she couldn't produce you. Loose end.

And then they started looking for you, to kill you.

I suspect they blew up your ship because they thought, like I did, that you were hiding in it. They wanted those weapons for F2, but what you have is more important.

Important enough that more people are going to die unless we finish this fast. So let's hear it.



OK, so there's this guy named Max Minwell. Mother's known him for ages. He'd been sitting on F2 for a month, waiting for a cargo contract that nobody was bothering to tell him wasn't going to happen, because then they'd have owed him a default and they didn't want to pay it.

Then he lost his co-pilot, who announced he was going to be staying on F2 for a while. Didn't say why. That was the last straw for Max. He decided he was going to have to fly out of F2 solo, because damned if anything good or useful was going to happen there. To hell with the default. He was just going to admit the whole trip was a dead loss, and go look for work and a new crew somewhere else.

This is all important because Max didn't decide on any of that in advance. He went to a cold ship, that hadn't moved for a month, and was going to lift on no notice.

So he started working his way through the lift checklist, you know, and somewhere in there he saw there were some people standing right in front of his starboard landing cameras.

They didn't know the cameras were on. The ship was way out in the long-berthing area of the port, and they hadn't seen Max go aboard. The airlock's up high on the other side of the ship. They thought they'd picked a good place for a private conversation.

And Max knew who one of the people was. The undersecretary for the Military. Shore Edwick.

Max is a sneaky old mover -- probably done a lot of stuff he doesn't want anybody to know about -- and he's got some instincts. I guess that's how we explain what he did next.

I know you've seen Bulldogs, Randa. The main cargo door is smack in the middle of the bow, and the landing cameras are at each bow corner. The cargo door has an intercom so someone can ask to be let in. It wasn't far from the cameras. Max turned its mic on, so he could get some sound to go with the picture, and then he started recording.

... Look, you're asking for two things that can't both happen!

You didn't want to use anybody who's actually worth something, because of the risk ...

... but they've also got to be good enough to not fuck this up ...

I don't want to hear it. Do you have them or not? That's all I care about.

Yeah. And we're not worried about them doing the job all the way --

You'd better not be. We can't start this war with a failed assassination. Rede has to die. She can't escape. She can't be saved in the hospital. Dead on the spot.

-- but we are worried about them getting caught after.

So?

You haven't told them anything, have you? They have no idea who's ordered the job. If they get caught, let F4 take them to pieces. It'll still work out.

That's if they remember to drop the equipment. Do not let them forget that. At least two pieces, in case those idiots on F4 can't pick up a hint. A gun and a helmet, or something.

Everybody has to know that F2 killed Rede. Everybody has to be sure of it. Or the whole thing falls apart. And I come find you two and break your necks. So get it right.

Max hauled as soon as the three of them walked off, and he didn't stop until he was two rings away. He was worried they'd see him leaving, realize he'd been in the ship, and figure out what he'd done.

Once he realized he was clear, he went straight to Mother with all of it, and dropped it in her lap.

You know ... your mother's a Navy hardcase who went into spec cargo. Pragmatic. I'm finding it a little hard to believe she'd get involved in this -- and involve you! -- just on principle.

I mean, I'm sure she doesn't want a war, but ...

... not her fight. Yeah. There's more than that.

Shore Edwick served with her. When she got promoted, he didn't take it well. I know the Navy's got a bias, but Mother says he didn't rank because he was unfit for command.

She became his CO, and a year later she had to have him court-martialed. She won't tell me what he did. He got a dishonorable discharge. I think she felt it reflected badly on her command. So she's got a grudge.

He got a DD during the war?

Yeah. Why?

Navy was desperate for people then. You had to do something really horrible to get thrown out. A lot of people got DDs ... after the ceasefire.

OK. So your plan is to take this to a member of the secretariat --

More than one, if I can. Any I can get a private talk with. I have one lined up for tomorrow. I'd just confirmed that when those two goons happened.

I'm not sure that's going to be good enough. I've been poking around at the politics here a little. I don't know if you can sell enough of them to confront Edwick. They're all either in his camp, or they don't want to stick their necks out, or both.

I think the person we need to find first is Herso Edwick. He still has friends. He might have a lever we don't.

That presents us a problem.

Shore has no idea where Herso is.

I had assumed he was holding Herso captive, and he might well have tried if he could ... but he says Herso disappeared as soon as the accusations broke, and I believe he's telling the truth.

Oh, great. So my approach won't work, and we can't find yours?

I may have an idea about that.

I had an encounter on the street today that got me thinking ...

Do the Luna Moths on F2 do things the same way as the ones on F4? I mean, do they have the same principles?

Huh?

Very much. They're the same organization. They communicate constantly.

I know someone among the Society here whom I trust well. Shall we arrange to speak with her?

STQD WAS EFFICIENT. WE WENT TO MEET THEIR CONTACT THE NEXT DAY.

**Transportation rental: 20 wu**

You keep checking behind us. You think there's going to be more trouble?

I think more people know you're on this planet than either of us is comfortable with.

You can relax for a while. We've arrived.

The Society had to close this sanctuary until they can clean up some vandalism. So no one will be looking in here.

Please excuse the mess.

Some people decided to express their dislike. I suppose it's better than having things thrown at us. But this was where we broadcast our sessions for those who can't attend in person. We've had to move those somewhere else for the moment.

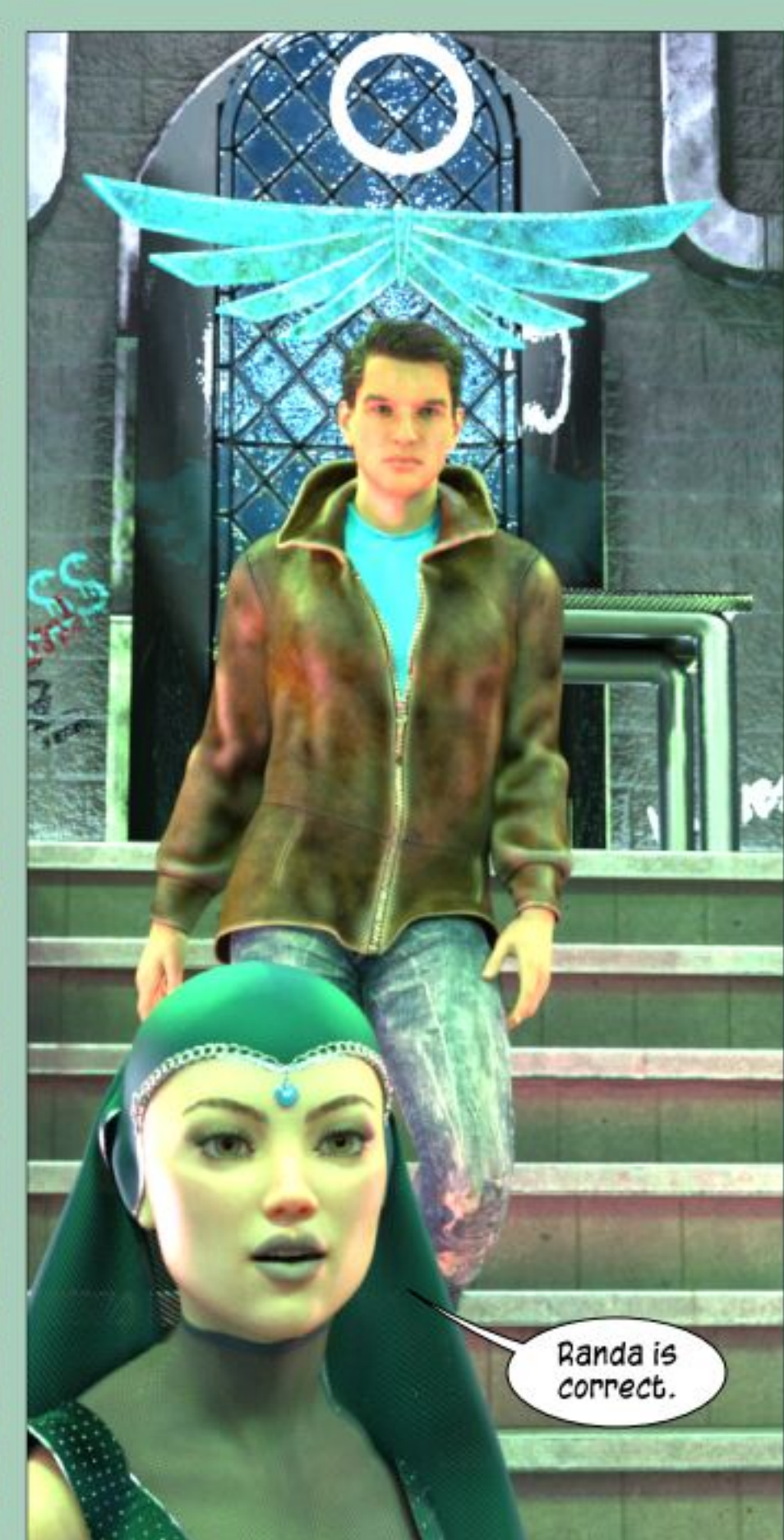
Hmh.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised it's you.

No, you probably shouldn't.

Maybe I wasn't mistaken about what you were seeking.





IT TOOK US THE REST OF THE DAY TO SET EVERYTHING UP AND SEND EDWICK A MESSAGE. IT WAS FAIRLY LATE THAT NIGHT WHEN HE SHOWED UP, LATE ENOUGH THAT I WAS WONDERING IF HE WOULD.







I never mentioned money. You assumed it was blackmail.

I just wanted you to see it before I send it to a bunch of people on both planets.

Oh. You're *that* kind. Think you're entitled to piss in everybody's soup.

Doesn't bother you that you'd be ruining a good leader and a good planet.

I'm not ruining this planet!

And if you mean you -- real modest, there, by the way -- how can you call yourself a good leader when we just saw you arrange a murder to start a war?

I think you don't have the slightest idea what a good leader is.



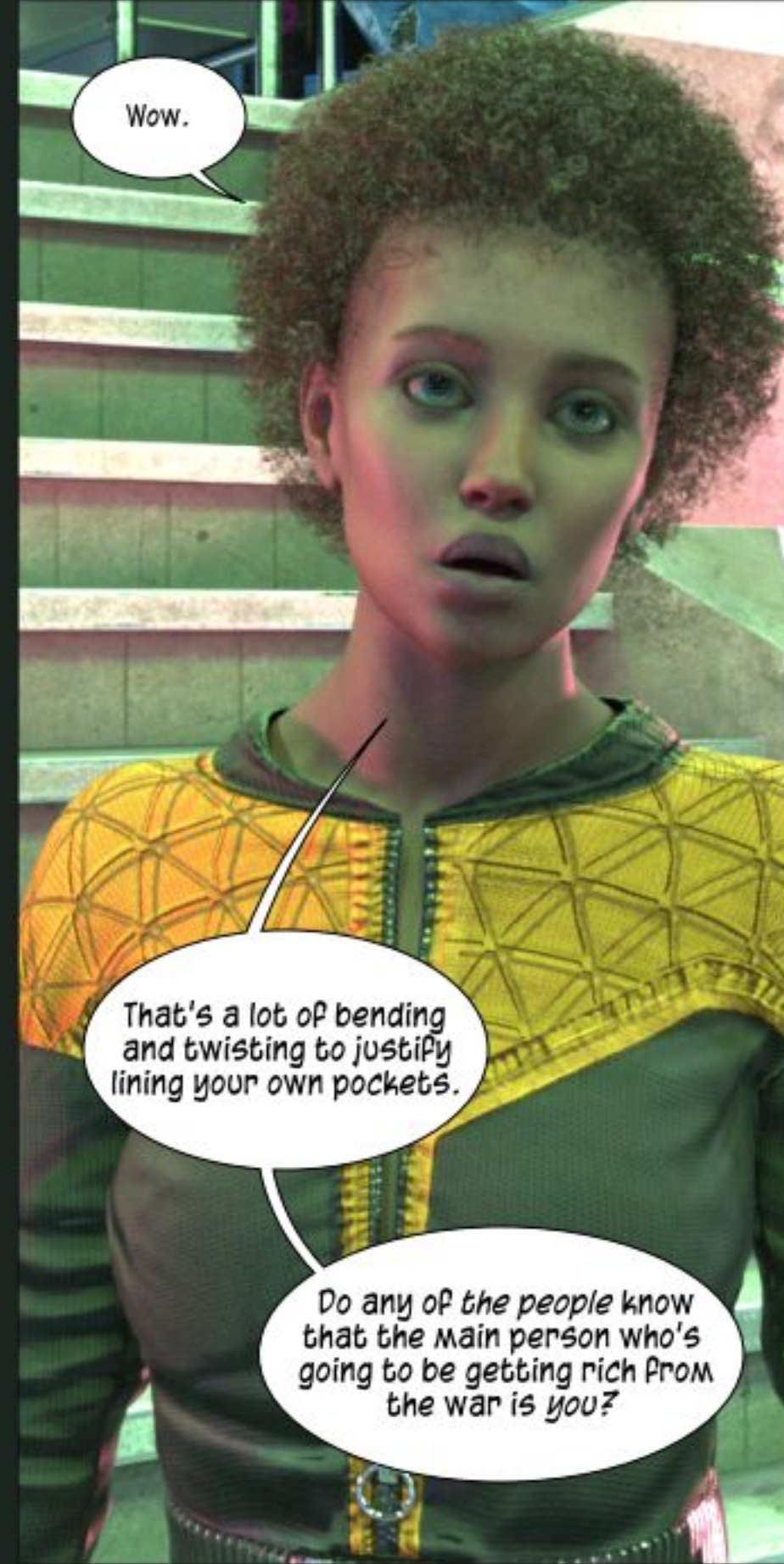
You sound just like my idiot brother. You know, they only put him in office because he was younger and better looking? The people are idiots, just like him. They wouldn't know good leadership if it bit them in the face!

They don't know what they want! You can talk about things like "peace" and "happiness" all you like and they'll buy it, but what they want is prosperity! You know what that means? It means they want *money*! They want their businesses to do well! They want to be able to afford luxuries! They want *wealth*, and they don't really care what else happens if they get it.

Yes, there's going to be a war, and some of the people here are going to yell about it for a while, until they see how good it is for the economy. They'll stop yelling when they start raking in the cash. Especially since it's not going to cost them any blood. We'll cut through any F4 resistance like nothing. The tricky part will be making the war last *long* enough.

... and what about the people of Fysia 4 that you'll be annihilating?

That's what they get for buying into Rede's crap. She was even worse than Herse. She wanted an *alliance*! She wanted a joint government. So both planets could just sit there and rot together. But hey, at least there'd be *peace*, eh? Disgusting.



Wow.

That's a lot of bending and twisting to justify lining your own pockets.

Do any of the people know that the main person who's going to be getting rich from the war is *you*?



Well, I didn't expect you to understand.

And it doesn't matter anyway. You're not going to be leaving this room.

You'll save me a lot of trouble if you're dead.



You're going to kill me from over there?

What, with your sparkling personality?

You don't think I'm going to touch you, do you? I'm not even here. This didn't happen.

I brought people for that.

Though I don't know what's keeping them.

Looking for someone?



Who the hell are you supposed to be?

Safety patrol.

I'm here to make sure nobody gets hurt trying to cross the street.

Funny.

Not really.

I found some trash outside that belongs to you. I left it in an appropriate receptacle.

... what do you two think this is going to get you? I'm the damned *secretary-general*. Nobody is going to believe you!

Well ...



I thought you and your nutjobs had abandoned this place!

Oh no, we're just waiting until we have the money to clean and repair it.

We're not a rich organization, you know. We can't just walk away from a good property. Especially not when it has a very expensive recording and transmission studio.

And speaking of which ... it seems that equipment was left running earlier today. Careless.

I'm afraid your conversation has been broadcast all over the planet. In an hour it will also reach F4.



You ...

You think you have me, don't you? Well, you don't!

I'm not letting a bunch of women ruin me again!

I'll come back from this! Wait and see! And when I do --



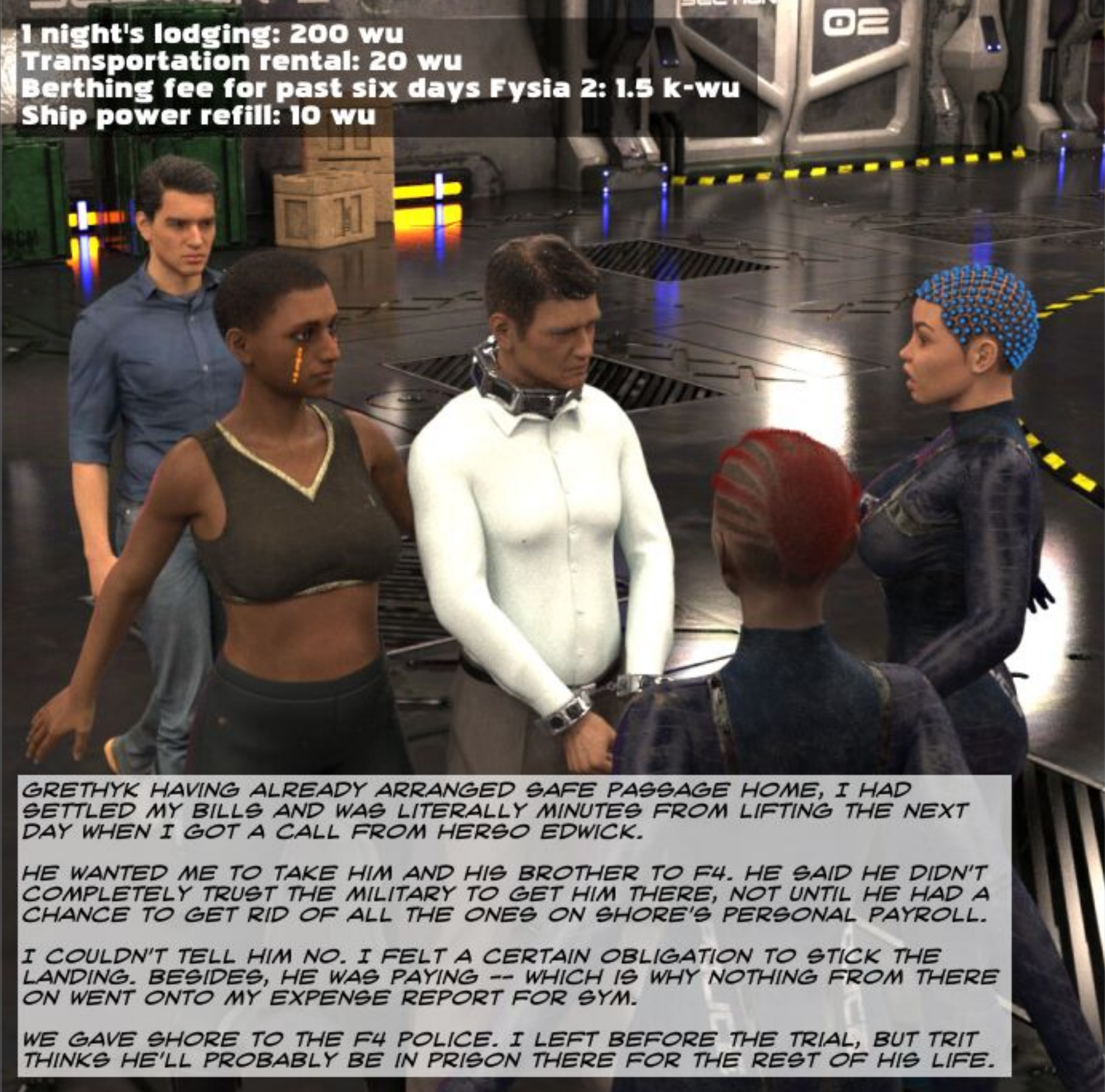
-- hgh --



"I'm not letting a bunch of women ruin me again?"

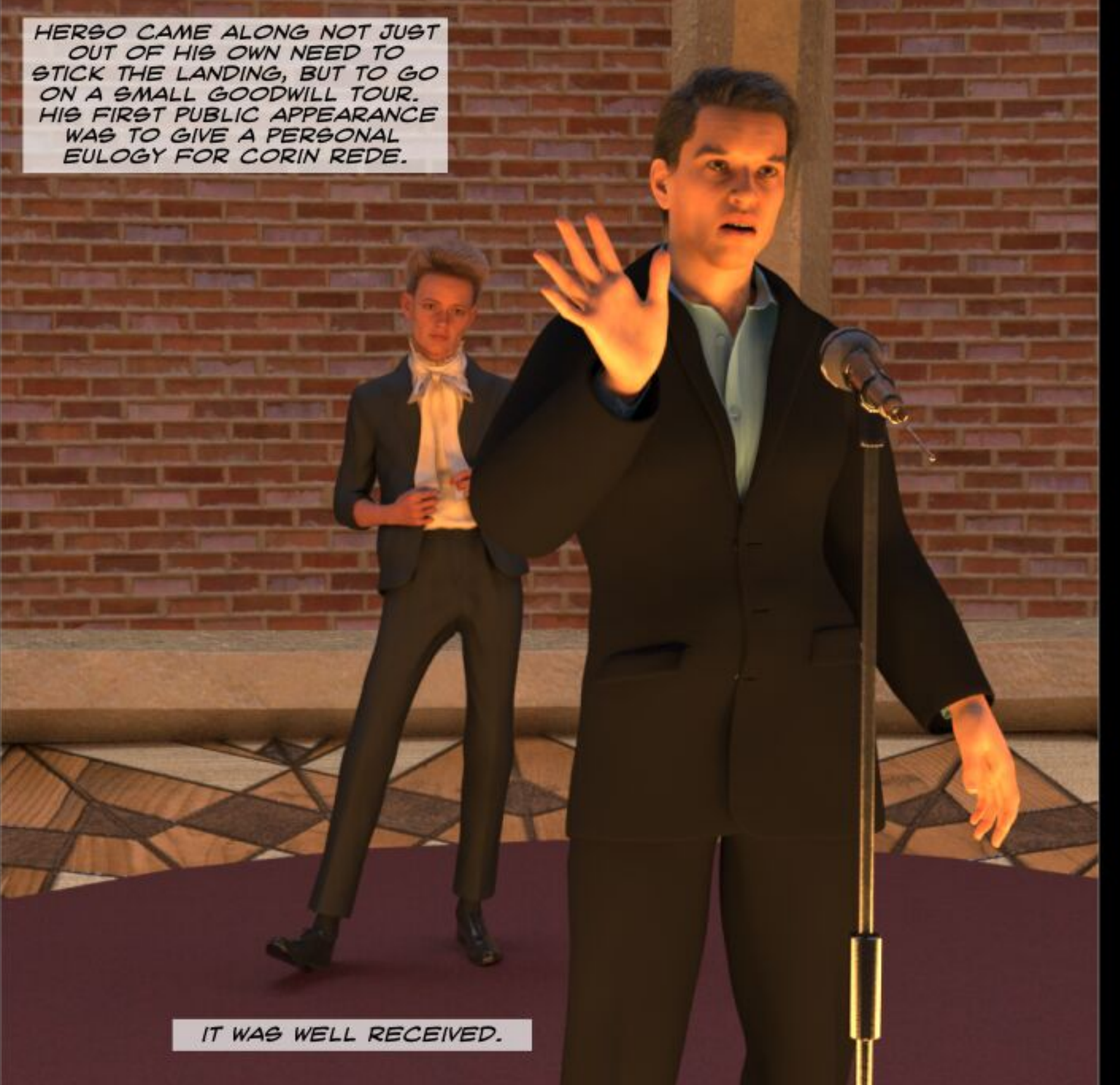
Mother did say he never got over the Navy thing.





HERSO AND STQD PLANNED TO SPEND SEVERAL DAYS ON F4. HERSO OFFERED THE OPPORTUNITY FOR ME TO TAKE A MINI-VACATION WITH THEM, ON THE HOUSE. I ACCEPTED ONE NIGHT, WHICH I SPENT WITH TRIT, AND THEN LIFTED.

I HAD OTHER PLACES TO GO, AND INVOICES TO SEND.



From: R Guerrero [roaming packet] UmFuZGEgR3VlcnJlcm8gNDgwMzo3NjQ1OQ==

To: H Sym [Isolde 3] SGVncmlkIFN5bSA4OTQzMzo1ODAA0jMwMjUy

With job complete, attached is my invoice for 40000 wu fee, plus 38740 wu expenses, itemized in separate attachment.

I am aware that by the terms of our agreement my fee should be 30 k-wu, since I was unable to retrieve your ship. However, I am submitting for the full fee, which I feel I have justification to do.

