

MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A
QUITCLAIM

I SPEND A LOT OF TIME TRAVELING AROUND THE GALAXY, AND WHAT I'VE LEARNED IS THAT WHEN YOU TRAVEL THE GALAXY, YOU DO A LOT OF WAITING.

Indy B014, you're cleared to depart. Thanks for travelling with us.

SAY YOU GO THROUGH A RING. BUT THERE'S NO OTHER RING IN THAT SYSTEM, SO YOU'RE WAITING FOR A PUNCH FERRY TO GET YOU AND TAKE YOU SOMEWHERE ELSE. OR SAY YOU'RE ON A FERRY BUT ITS NEXT PUNCH IS IN A DIRECTION YOU DON'T WANT TO GO. SO YOU LEAVE AND WAIT FOR A DIFFERENT FERRY. ONLY CERTAIN KINDS OF REALLY BIG SHIPS HAVE PUNCH DRIVES. THE REST OF US ARE AT THE MERCY OF THE RINGS AND FERRIES. SO A WHOLE INDUSTRY OF SERVICES TENDS TO SPRING UP NEAR RINGS AND THE REGULAR FERRY DROP POINTS. HOTELS. SHIP REPAIRS AND RECHARGE. ENTERTAINMENT. WAREHOUSING. SOME RINGS PRACTICALLY HAVE WHOLE TOWNS FLOATING AROUND NEARBY.

Indy B014, you're clear for unit 3, berth 9. Enjoy your stay.

0003

I HATE THE SPACESTOPS. THEY'RE EXPENSIVE, AND THE BEDS ARE NO BETTER THAN BOSIE'S, SO I'M PAYING A LOT FOR A LANDING BERTH AND A DECENT SHOWER. I HAVE ALL*, SO I'D RATHER LOOK FOR A PLANETARY PORT AND GO FIND A REAL HOTEL.

BUT THIS TIME I'D BEEN DROPPED SOMEPLACE SO BACKWATER THAT THERE WASN'T A REAL PORT ANYWHERE IN THE SYSTEM. IT WAS THE SPACESTOP OR NOTHING. AND I REALLY DID NEED A GOOD SHOWER. (IF THE SPACESTOPS HAD SWIMMING POOLS, OR EVEN BATHTUBS, I'D HATE THEM A LOT LESS.)

* A LITTLE LESS THAN LIGHTSPEED. NEEDED TO GET ACROSS AN AVERAGE SYSTEM IN HOURS INSTEAD OF WEEKS. STILL NOT FAST ENOUGH FOR INTERSYSTEM TRANSIT. SPACE IS BIG. -T



YOU CAN TELL HOW BUSY A PARTICULAR SPACESTOP IS BY THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN THE BAR. UNLESS YOU WANT TO WATCH SOMETHING IN YOUR ROOM, THERE'S NOTHING ELSE TO DO ON ONE BUT DRINK.

THIS ONE WAS DEAD. THERE WERE ONLY THREE OTHER CUSTOMERS. TWO WERE CHATTING WITH EACH OTHER. THE THIRD WAS AT THE END OF THE BAR BY HIMSELF. THAT WAS BAD FOR ME, BUT MAYBE HE WAS THE TYPE WHO LIKES BEING ALONE SILENTLY WITH HIS THOUGHTS.



NO SUCH LUCK.

Jurden. Kyl Jurden. I do trade outreach.

Welcome to the ass end of the galaxy. Got a name?

Randa Guerrero.

I'm a quitclaim.

NOT ONE PERSON IN FIFTY I MEET KNOWS WHAT THAT IS.



Ah, now, I always thought that sounded like an interesting job.

Guerrero ... hm.

You aren't the one who discovered what happened to the Ardent Colony, are you? I recall the name was something like that ...



Uh ... yes, that was me.

That was a while back. Most people have forgotten about it.

AND EVEN THE PEOPLE WHO REMEMBER IT SURE DON'T REMEMBER MY NAME.

Oh, I don't know. It was a big story, wasn't it?

Say, speaking of stories, as long as we have nothing better to do, I have one you might like to hear. It's in your line, in a way.



Hey, Leah, do me a favor and go talk to your other customers for a few minutes? I'll put some extra appreciation on the bill.



Nothing against her, I'm just kind of careful who hears this particular story.

I didn't always wander around trying to talk people into buying things. Until last year I was an indy doing supply runs. Going to places some of the big outfits weren't interested in bothering with.

A couple of those jobs were "no questions asked." I admit it. I wasn't picky, and you can usually charge more for those.

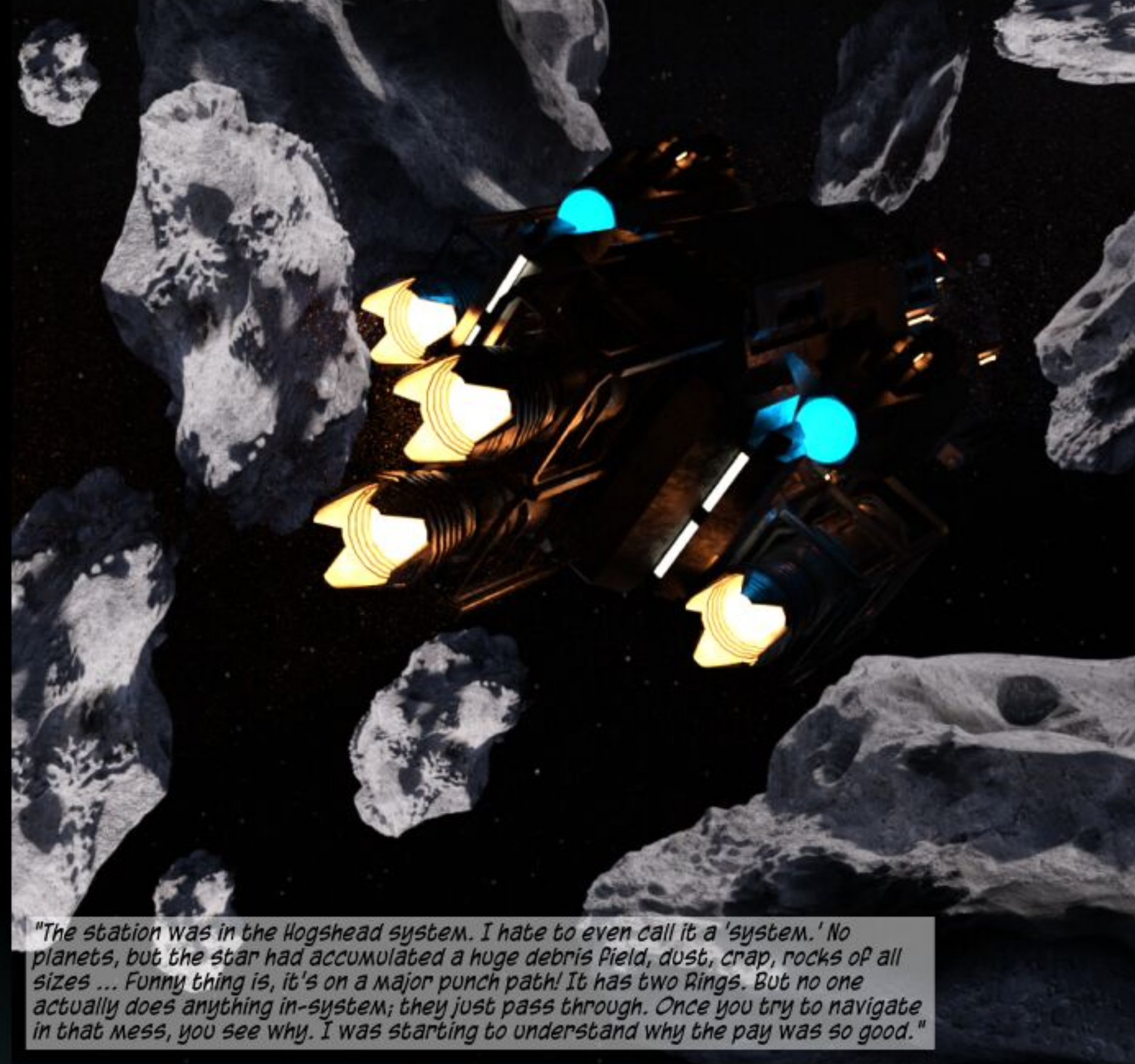
... and then he said, "we already repaired that twice" ...

You're kidding.

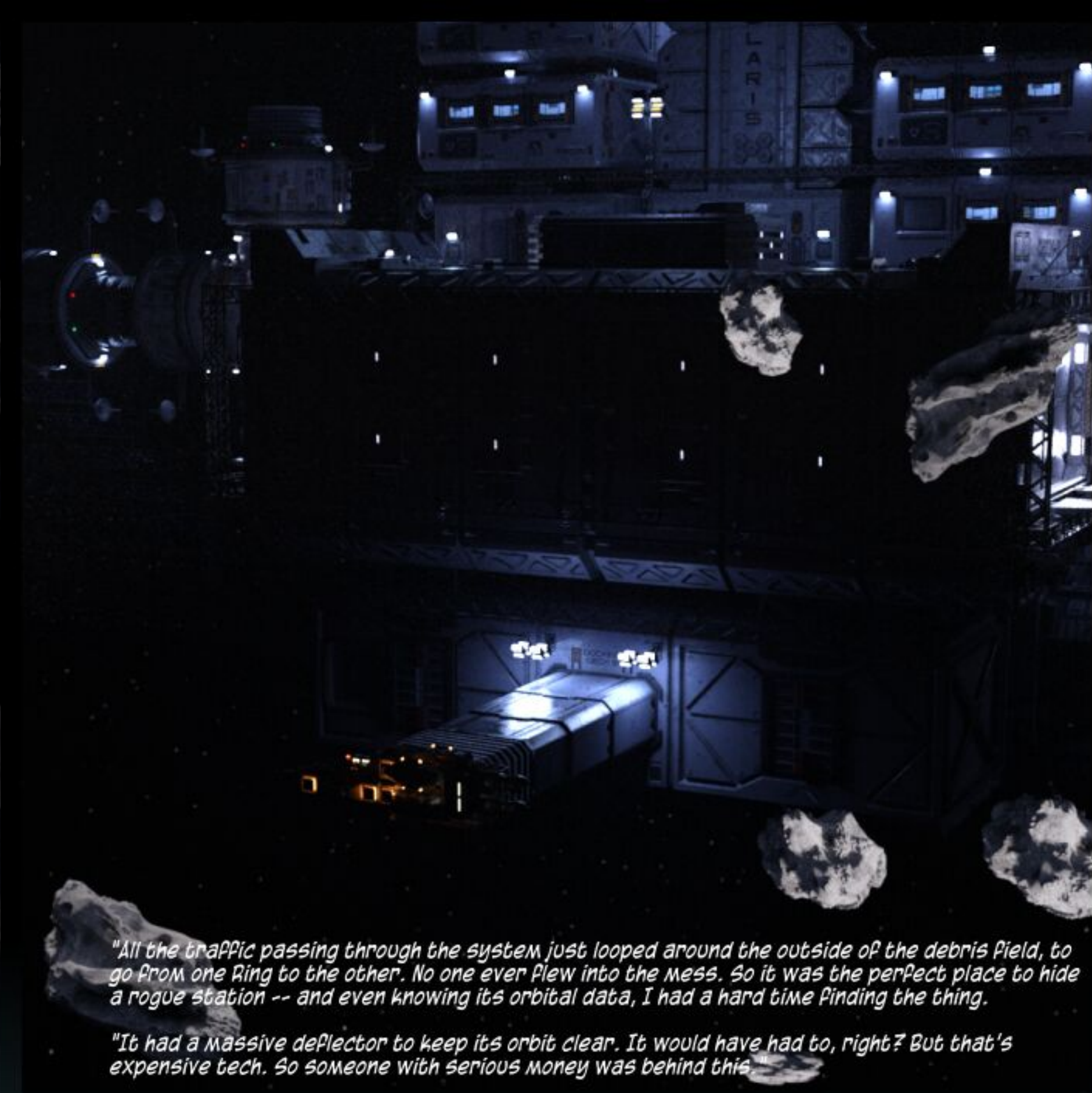
I said "I don't care if you repaired it eleven times, I'm not paying until you actually fix it."

Toward the end, I got a job that was probably about as "no questions asked" as you can get.

"They vetted me up and down. They had a Field rep who interviewed me, made me sign a secrecy bond ... only told me where I'd be going after I did all that."



"The station was in the Hogshead system. I hate to even call it a 'system.' No planets, but the star had accumulated a huge debris field, dust, crap, rocks of all sizes ... Funny thing is, it's on a major punch path! It has two Rings. But no one actually does anything in-system; they just pass through. Once you try to navigate in that mess, you see why. I was starting to understand why the pay was so good."



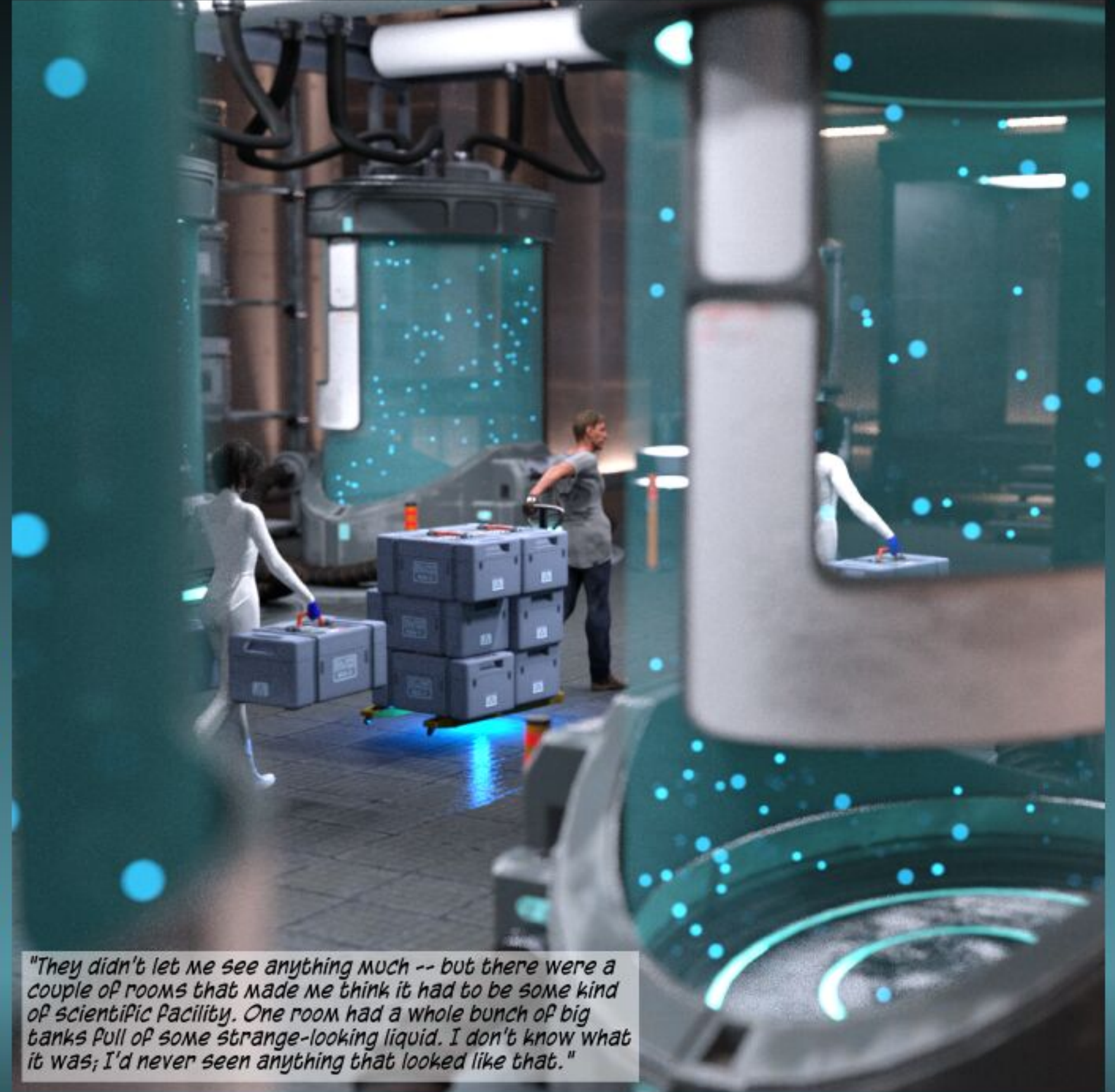
"All the traffic passing through the system just looped around the outside of the debris field, to go from one Ring to the other. No one ever flew into the mess. So it was the perfect place to hide a rogue station -- and even knowing its orbital data, I had a hard time finding the thing."

"It had a massive deflector to keep its orbit clear. It would have had to, right? But that's expensive tech. So someone with serious money was behind this."



"The station people were polite enough. They were willing to help load out cargo, which was nice, because I was crewing solo. But I couldn't shake the idea that the main reason they were helping carry was so they had an excuse to watch me every step of the way."

"Of course, with an unregistered station, they'd have to stupid not to expect me to be suspicious. And curious."



"They didn't let me see anything much -- but there were a couple of rooms that made me think it had to be some kind of scientific facility. One room had a whole bunch of big tanks full of some strange-looking liquid. I don't know what it was; I'd never seen anything that looked like that."



"Well, I did the run, and it went OK, and they scheduled me for regular service -- runs every three months. I was doing my fifth when it got weird, so that would have been a year after I started."

"It was fine until I reached the station. No one answered my signals. All I got was an automatic beacon that repeated the same thing over and over."

ATTENTION: THIS STATION IS PROHIBITED AND HAS AUTOMATIC DEFENSES. PLEASE LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY OR YOU WILL BE FIRED UPON.
ATTENTION! THIS STATION IS PROHIBITED AND HAS AUTOMATIC DEFENSES. PLEASE LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY OR YOU WILL BE FIRED UPON.



"They weren't kidding, either. Only reason I didn't catch a plasma beam was I was already pulling away. My old hauler didn't have an armored hull. That would have probably breached one side and gone right out the other."

"I left the system and didn't try to go back again. I got out of the cargo business a few months later anyway, for other reasons, so there wouldn't have been a point."



Could just be their research got to a point where they didn't want anybody coming in ...

Wouldn't they have notified me not to do the run? It wouldn't have been suspicious; I'd have assumed they decided to use someone else.

Also, all the other times I went out, they had a ship docked. Same one. Didn't look like a cargo vessel. I was thinking it was Por emergency evac.

On that last run, the ship wasn't there.

Look, at this point I don't have a stake, I'd just like to know what happened. I'll give you the orbital data. You can check it out, or not.

But if you do go and you find out something, send me word, all right?

THE NEXT DAY A PUNCH FERRY CAME THROUGH. IT WASN'T THE ONE I'D PLANNED ON CATCHING, BUT IT WAS ONE THAT WOULD TAKE ME TO A RING THAT WAS ON THE SAME PUNCH ROUTE AS THE HOGSHEAD SYSTEM.

XXXXXXXXXX

Indy B014, cleared to depart. Thanks for staying with us.

Azimuth M134, you're clear for unit 3, berth 2. Enjoy your stay.

I DIDN'T SEE ANY REASON TO NOT CHECK IT OUT ... CAREFULLY. I DIDN'T HAVE ANY OTHER WORK ON TAP, AND I WASN'T SO HARD UP FOR MONEY THAT I COULDN'T SPARE THE TIME.

BESIDES, CATCHING THIS FERRY INSTEAD OF THE ONE I'D INTENDED ALLOWED ME TO GET OUT OF THE DAMNED SPACESTOP A DAY EARLIER.

IT'S NOT ACTUALLY HARD TO GET PAST AUTOMATIC DEFENSES. FIRST YOU FIND WHERE THE GUNS ARE. THEN YOU FIND THE SPOTS THEY CAN'T REACH.

THE STATION ONLY HAD ONE GUN, AND IT COULDN'T SHOOT ANYTHING ON THE VENTRAL SIDE. INADEQUATE, BUT SOLARIS STATIONS AREN'T REALLY BUILT WITH DEFENSE IN MIND.

IT WAS A MUCH HARDER CHALLENGE TRYING TO FIND A PLACE I COULD ATTACH BOSIE TO THE UNDERSIDE OF THE STATION, ESPECIALLY SINCE BOSIE DOESN'T HAVE A BELLY HATCH.

THE STATION HAD ATMOSPHERE, BUT I WORE MY SUIT ANYWAY. ILLICIT RESEARCH SOMETIMES MEANS BIOWEAPONS, AND I DIDN'T CARE TO INHALE THE LATEST DESIGNER VIRUS.

I'm not getting anything on suit radar.

And no one's kept this place maintained in a while. Air circulation's dead, and most of the lights are either dead or fading out.

Uh-huh. Almost out of power. They have a solar array, but Hogshead's too tiny and dim to get much from that ... and the Fusion coil urgently needs new material ...

That boosts Jurden's theory. Even if they'd just gone into lockdown, they'd absolutely have resupplied that. This is looking more and more like an evac --

Whoa. That was not a good sound.

I may need to make this a real Past visit.

ERRRRRKKKK

Huh. This must be the room with the tanks Jurden mentioned ... but ...

Broken glass. Lots of it.

Aaaahhhhh!

CRHUMPF

-- Whew --

This whole place is coming apart. I don't know why that tank hadn't gone through the floor already. Waiting for me, I guess.

It's a miracle the hull hasn't breached. I definitely shouldn't stay long.

Everything down here looks ... corroded. Came from above -- what was in those tanks?

And what's that over there?

Hmm. Guess not everybody managed to evac.

I wonder how many did.



Whatever research they were doing, it's all been wiped. Someone was real careful before they left. Not even any log files.

... Personnel roster ... that could be useful.

Only three people on this list would have been able to get that ship away from here. You can't fly a ship out of a debris belt on automatic, and no one else had pilot training.

So let's assume at least one of those pilots survived long enough to do the evac.

If I follow up, that's where to start.



But now I better grab this data and get out.

CRERRRKKKK



THERE WAS NO GOOD REASON TO KEEP CHASING THIS.

THE STATION WAS WORTH NOTHING TO A SALVAGER; IT WAS COMING APART, AND EVEN IF I GOT TO IT IN TIME, IT'D COST MORE TO GET A TEAM IN THERE SAFELY THAN THE VALUE OF THE SCRAP.

I ALSO DIDN'T THINK THERE WAS ANYTHING TO FIND OUT THAT WAS VALUABLE TO ANYONE; WHATEVER RESEARCH HAD BEEN GOING ON, THAT INFORMATION WAS IN THE HANDS OF THE EVACUEES, WHO PRESUMABLY HAD REVEALED OR SOLD IT BY NOW.

ALL I CAN SAY IS, SOMETIMES MY CURIOSITY HAS MORE INFLUENCE OVER ME THAN IT PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE.

IT'S NOT VERY HARD TO TRACK PEOPLE -- LESS DIFFICULT THAN MOST PEOPLE ARE COMFORTABLE ADMITTING. WE ALL LEAVE A MASSIVE DATA TRAIL, AND WHEN SHIPS GO SOMEPLACE IT'S HARD FOR THEM NOT TO LEAVE ANY KIND OF RECORD THEY WENT THERE.

I ONLY NEEDED ABOUT A WEEK, AND A LOT OF THAT TIME WAS SPENT WAITING FOR TRANSIT AND BUREAUCRACY.

THE FIRST PILOT WAS NAMED BO SPENCER AND HE WAS CURRENTLY LIVING ON PILCHARD 4. THERE ARE SOME FAIRLY ADVANCED CITIES IN THE PILCHARD SYSTEM, BUT NOT ON THAT PLANET; HE WAS IN A PLACE THAT WAS JUST BARELY PAST FIRST-SETTLEMENT FRONTIER STATUS.

THE SECOND PILOT, ROEN ALDER, HAD GONE TO ASTRA. IN CASE YOU'VE BEEN IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION, THAT'S ONE OF THE BIGGEST CITIES IN THE GALAXY, SO WELL-KNOWN THAT WHEN YOU SAY YOU'RE GOING TO ASTRA, PEOPLE ASSUME YOU MEAN THE CITY, NOT THE PLANET OF THE SAME NAME IT'S ON.

I DON'T CARE FOR ASTRA MUCH, AND SINCE I REFUSE TO TAKE JOBS FROM THE TAURAN GOVERNMENT (I DON'T LIKE SOME OF THEIR POSITIONS), I'D MANAGED TO MOSTLY AVOID IT. THE THIRD PILOT, MAY LITI, WAS LAST SIGHTED WAY OUT IN THE EXTREMITIES, AT THE FAR SPINWARD EDGE OF HUMANSPACE, AND EVEN THAT WAS JUST A RUMOR THAT COULD TAKE A LONG TIME TO CHASE.

GIVEN THE CHOICES, I WENT TO PILCHARD 4 FIRST.

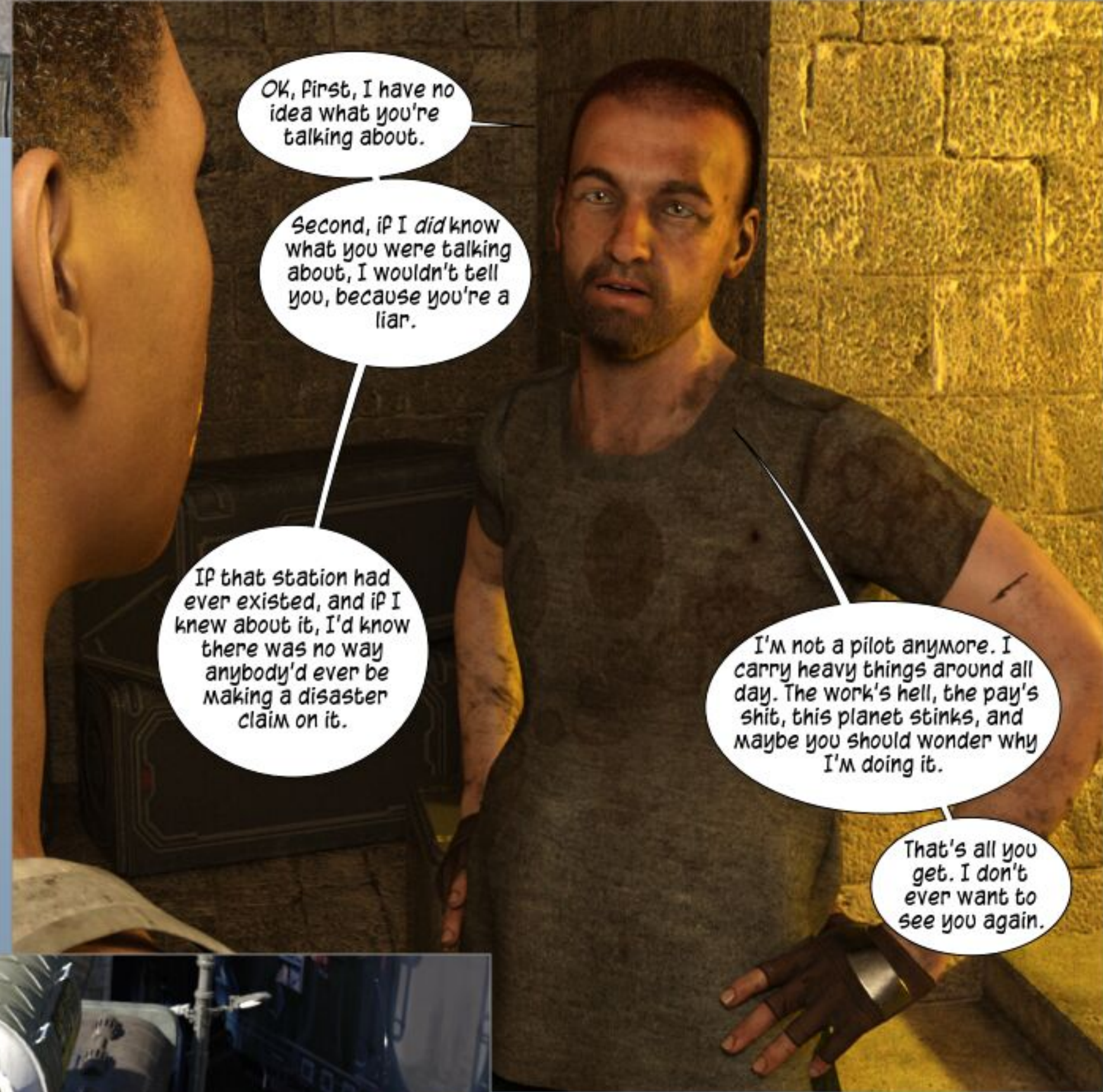


Bo Spencer?

Yeah. Who are you?

My name's Randa Guerrero. I'm investigating a disaster claim. A station in the Hogshead system that was evacuated.

... Come in here for a second.



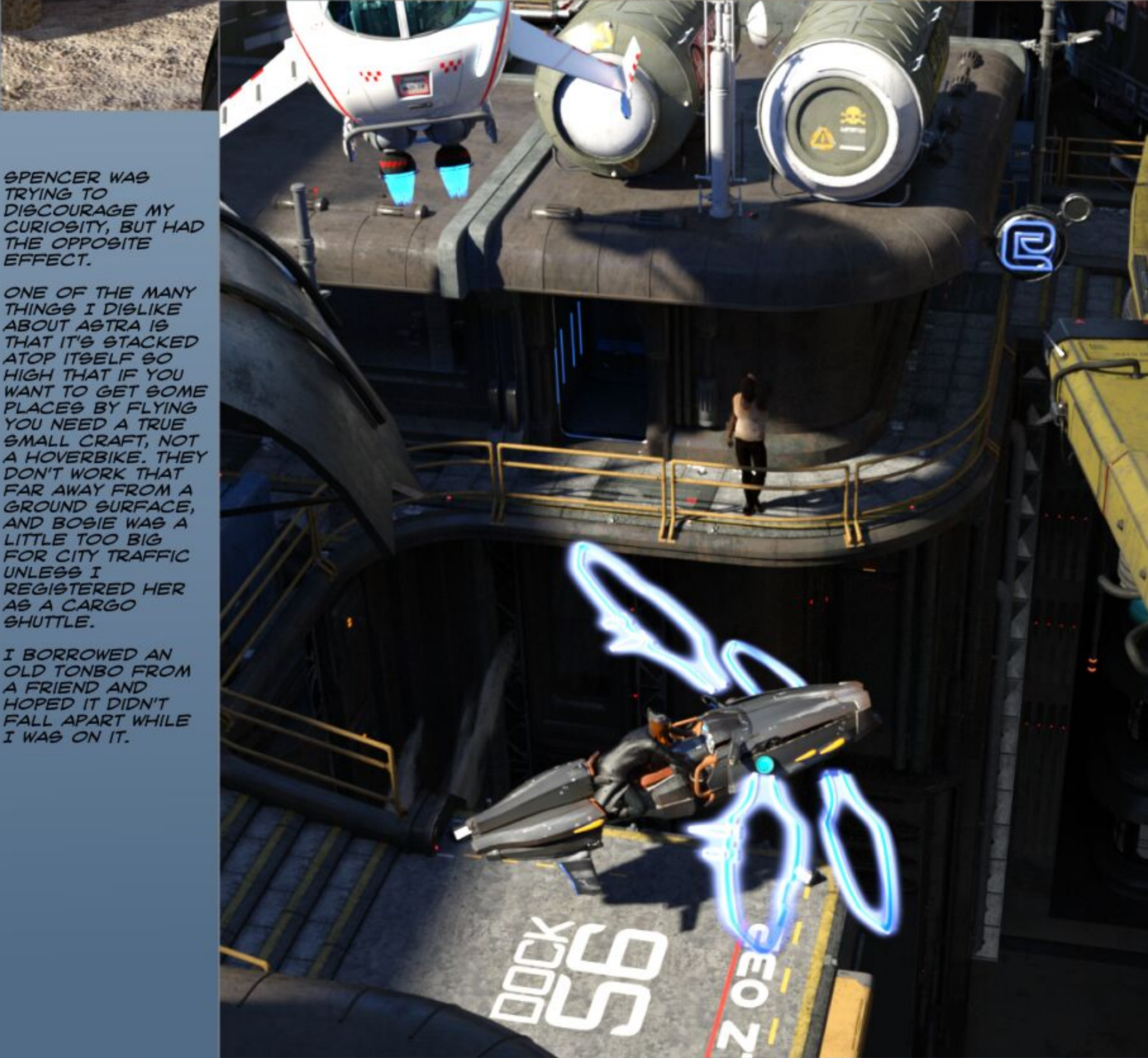
OK, first, I have no idea what you're talking about.

Second, if I did know what you were talking about, I wouldn't tell you, because you're a liar.

If that station had ever existed, and if I knew about it, I'd know there was no way anybody'd ever be making a disaster claim on it.

I'm not a pilot anymore. I carry heavy things around all day. The work's hell, the pay's shit, this planet stinks, and maybe you should wonder why I'm doing it.

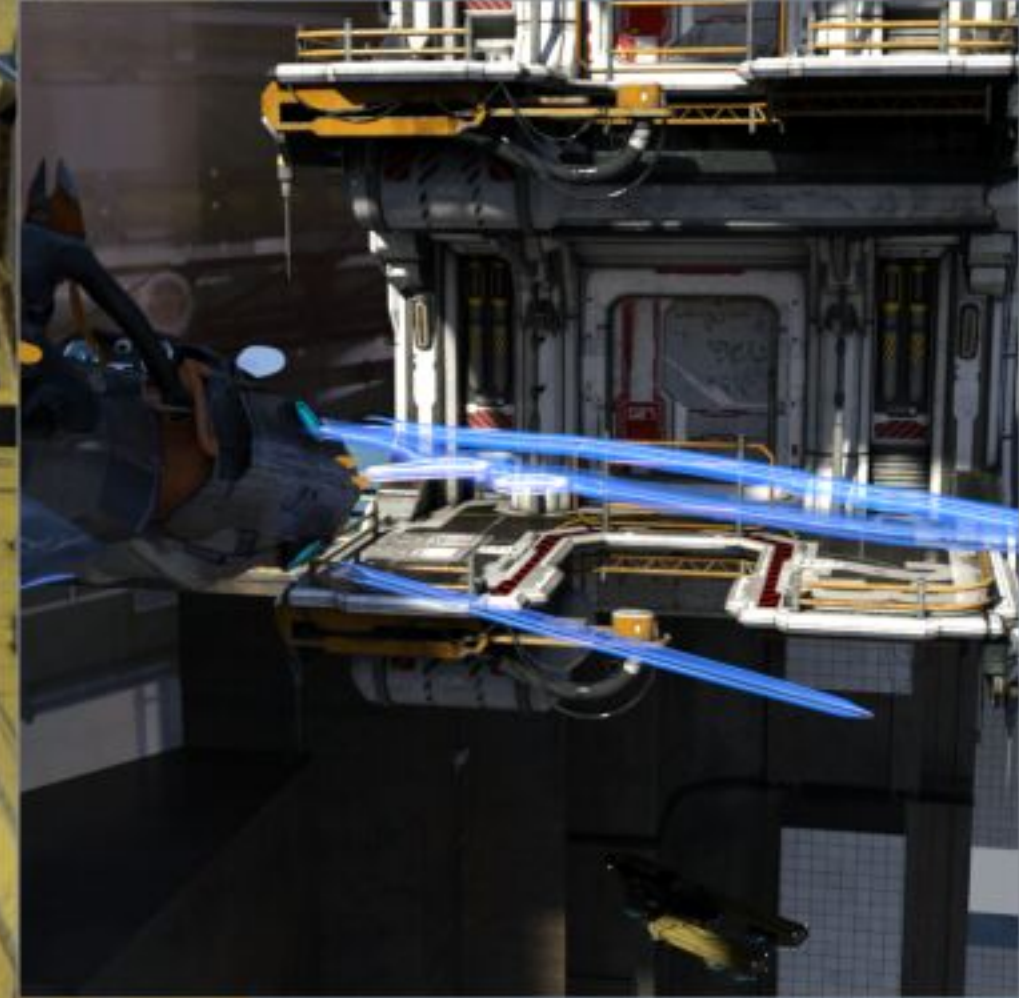
That's all you get. I don't ever want to see you again.



SPENCER WAS TRYING TO DISCOURAGE MY CURIOSITY, BUT HAD THE OPPOSITE EFFECT.

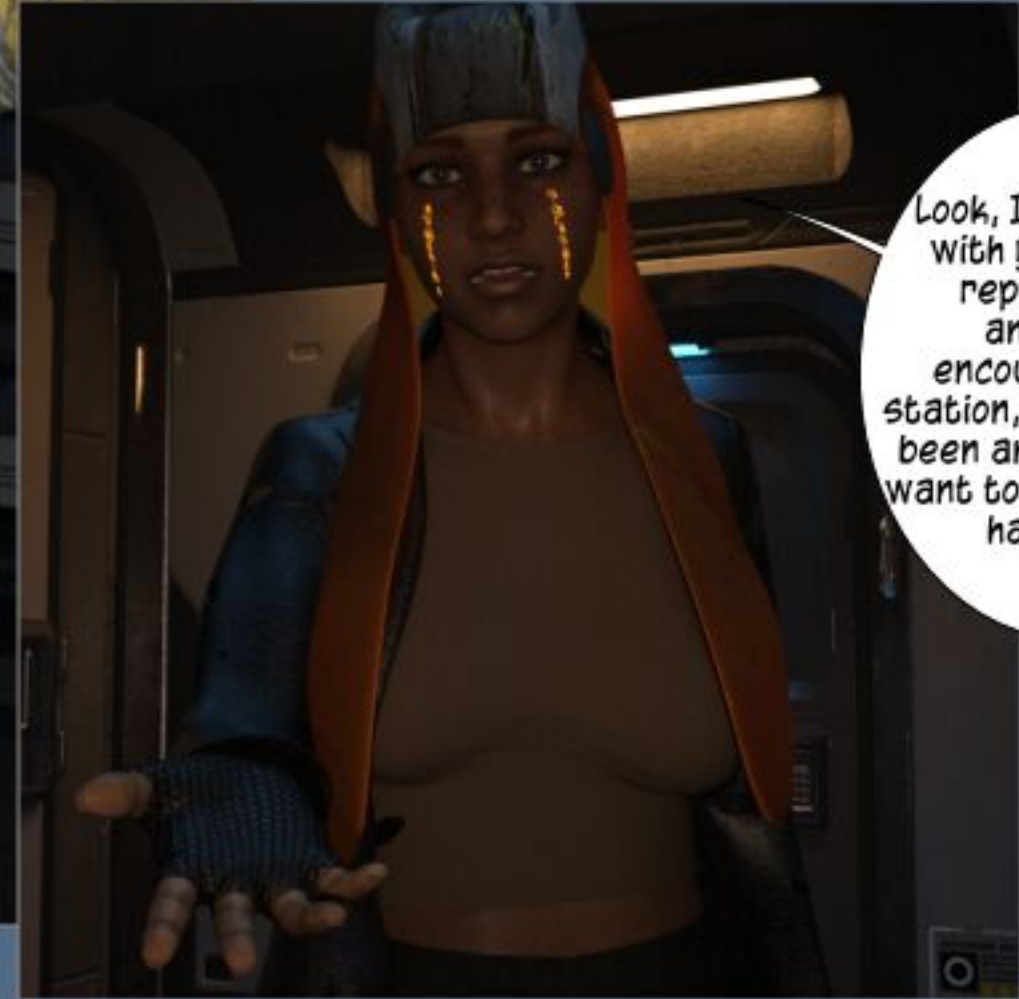
ONE OF THE MANY THINGS I DISLIKE ABOUT ASTRA IS THAT IT'S STACKED ATOP ITSELF SO HIGH THAT IF YOU WANT TO GET SOME PLACES BY FLYING YOU NEED A TRUE SMALL CRAFT, NOT A HOVERBIKE. THEY DON'T WORK THAT FAR AWAY FROM A GROUND SURFACE, AND BOSIE WAS A LITTLE TOO BIG FOR CITY TRAFFIC UNLESS I REGISTERED HER AS A CARGO SHUTTLE.

I BORROWED AN OLD TONBO FROM A FRIEND AND HOPED IT DIDN'T FALL APART WHILE I WAS ON IT.



MOSTLY ASTRA BOTHERS ME BECAUSE IT'S JUST TOO CROWDED. IF I EVER SETTLE ANYWHERE IT'S GOING TO BE A PLACE WHERE I CAN AFFORD A HOME THAT'S AT LEAST BIGGER THAN THE INTERIOR OF BOSIE.

ROEN ALDER'S PLACE WAS PROBABLY NOT. I'D HAVE NEEDED TO MEASURE.



Look, I'll be honest with you. I'm not representing anybody. I encountered the station, I saw there'd been an evac, I just want to find out what happened.



You went aboard? Was it ... I mean, did you see ...?

Oh, damn.

Look, I'm not supposed to talk about it. Any of it.

It's not safe.



Can you at least tell me why it isn't safe? Has someone threatened you?

N-no ... it's just ...

There are people who don't want anyone to know that station existed, OK?

And you really shouldn't be asking questions about it. Especially in Astra.

THIS GOT MORE AND MORE INTERESTING BY THE MINUTE.





I HAD TWO DAYS' WAIT BEFORE I COULD GET ON THE PUNCH FERRY THAT WOULD TAKE ME IN THE DIRECTION OF MAY LIT. I COULD JUMP THROUGH THREE RINGS AND WAIT FOR IT IN A SPACESTOP, OR I COULD KILL TWO NIGHTS IN ASTRA BEFORE RING-HOPPING. NO CONTEST.

NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE MAY TELL YOU, NTN ARE GOOD PEOPLE, AND THEY ENJOY WHAT THEY DO. I LIKE THEM. I HADN'T DECIDED WHETHER I WANTED TO PAY FOR NIGHT SERVICE, BUT I DID KNOW GOING TO BED WITH AN NTN WAS A LOT MORE RELIABLE BET THAN WITH A RANDOM HUMAN.



Hey, are you only interested in NTN?

SHE PRONOUNCED IT CORRECTLY.

Well, I... I'm open to suggestions.

Oh, good. I have one.

My name's Glor. Glor Robay.



My hotel's not Par Prom here.

SHE WASN'T A SEX WORKER, OR SHE'D HAVE SETTLED PRICE BEFORE WE LEFT THE CLUB.

Is this ... ah ... usual for you?

Not really. But I'm bored to tears and you were the most interesting thing in there.

I don't bite. You don't look like you do either.



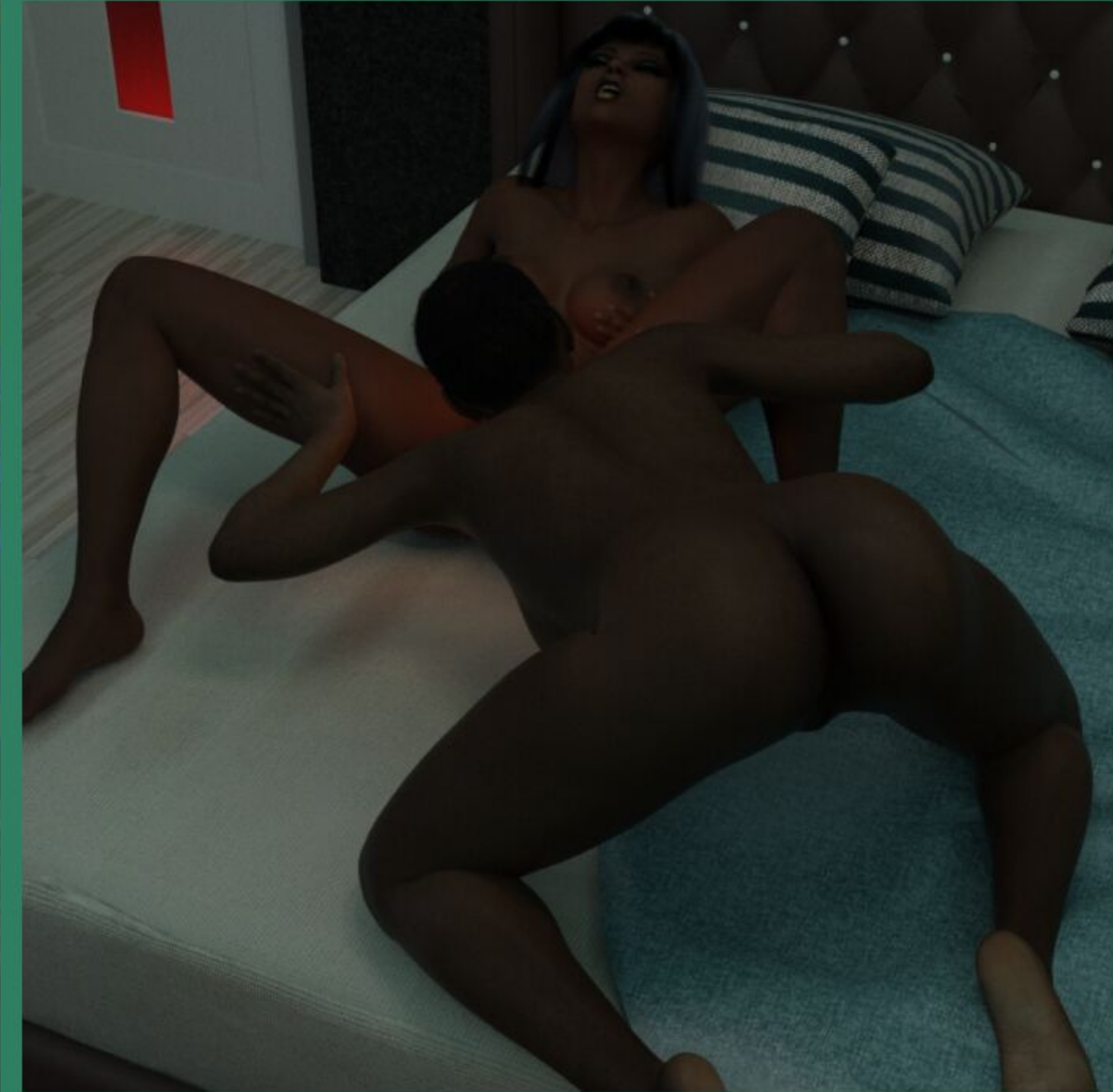
Nice room.

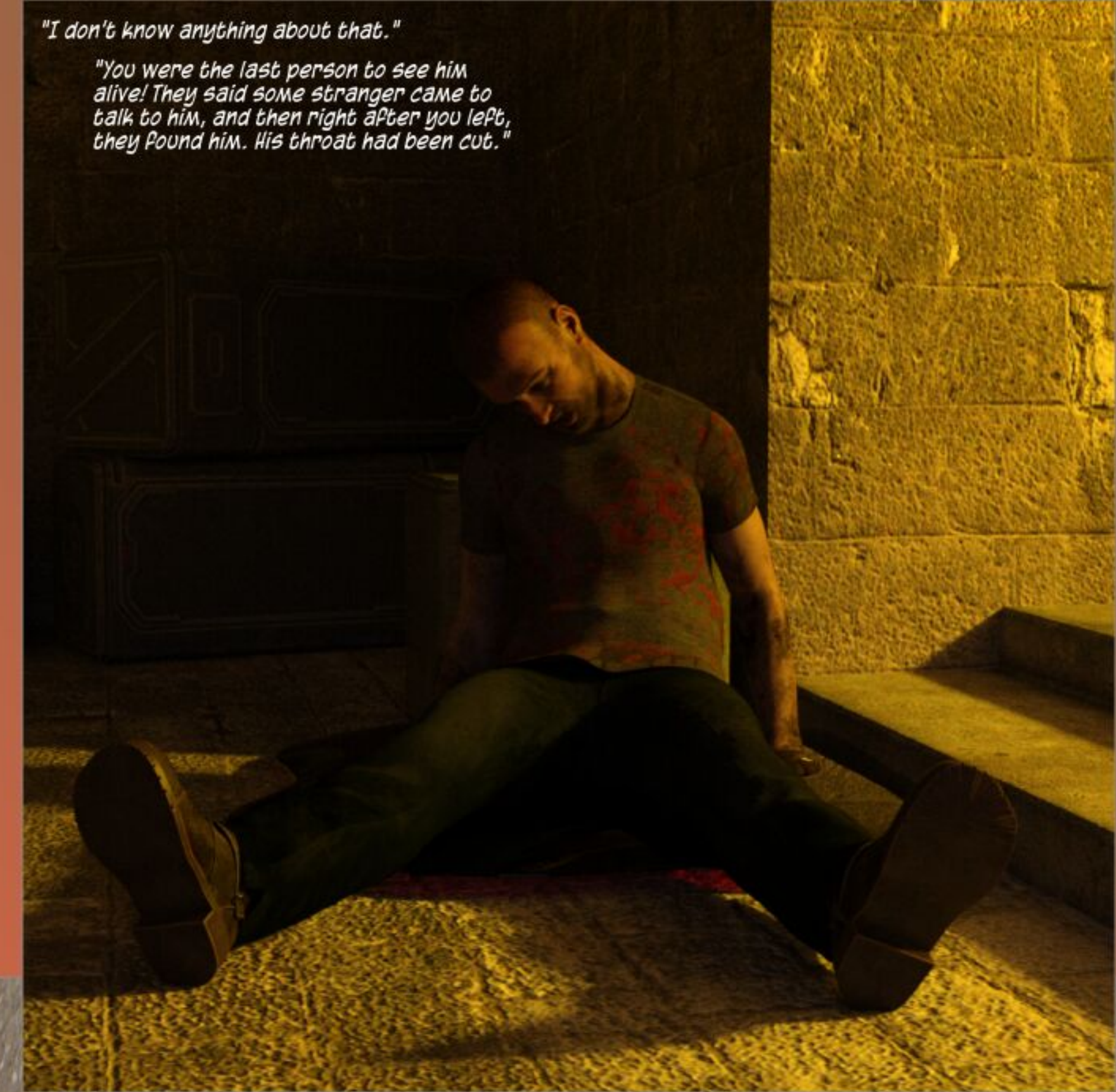
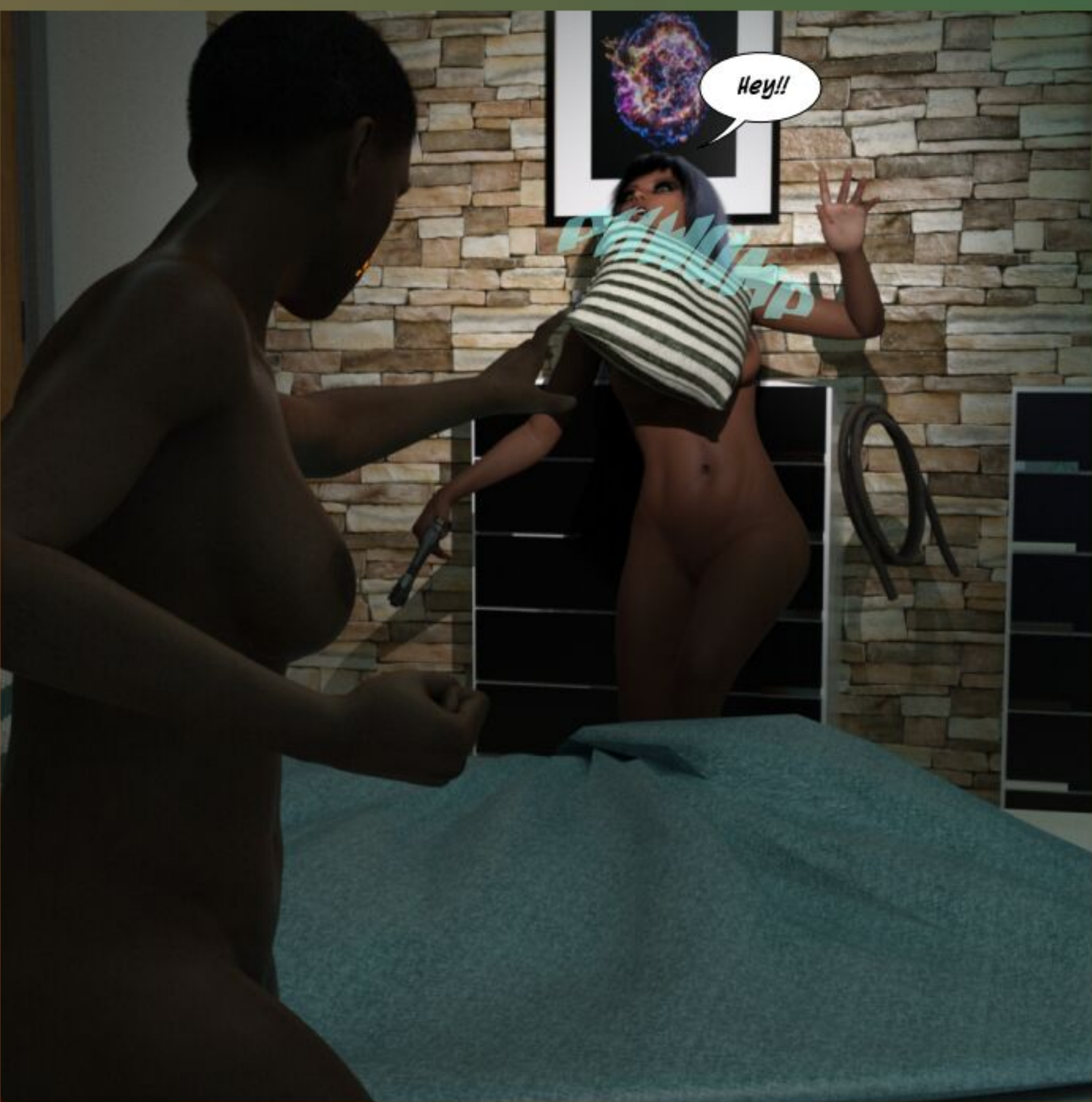
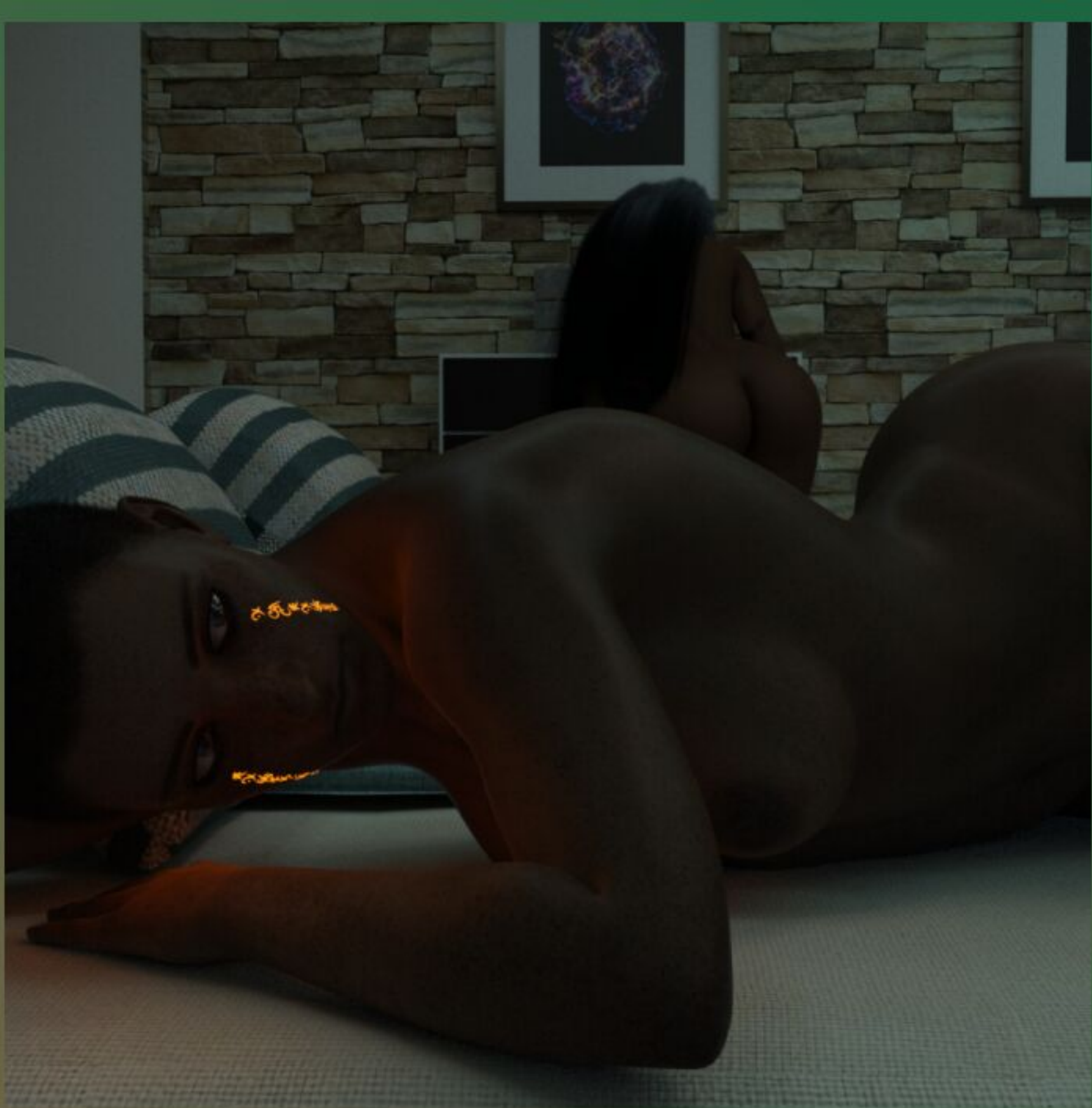
Thanks. I didn't pay for it. My job makes me travel so much the least they can do is put me in good hotels.

Help me out of this dress, please?



I DIDN'T TRUST HER A BIT, BUT I DIDN'T SEE ANY REASON THAT SHOULD GET IN THE WAY.







Roen. Hold on. Stay with me. I'll get you to a hospital.

... no good ...

What's no good? Roen, no! You'll be OK!

... liar ...

Come down ... close ... hard to talk ...

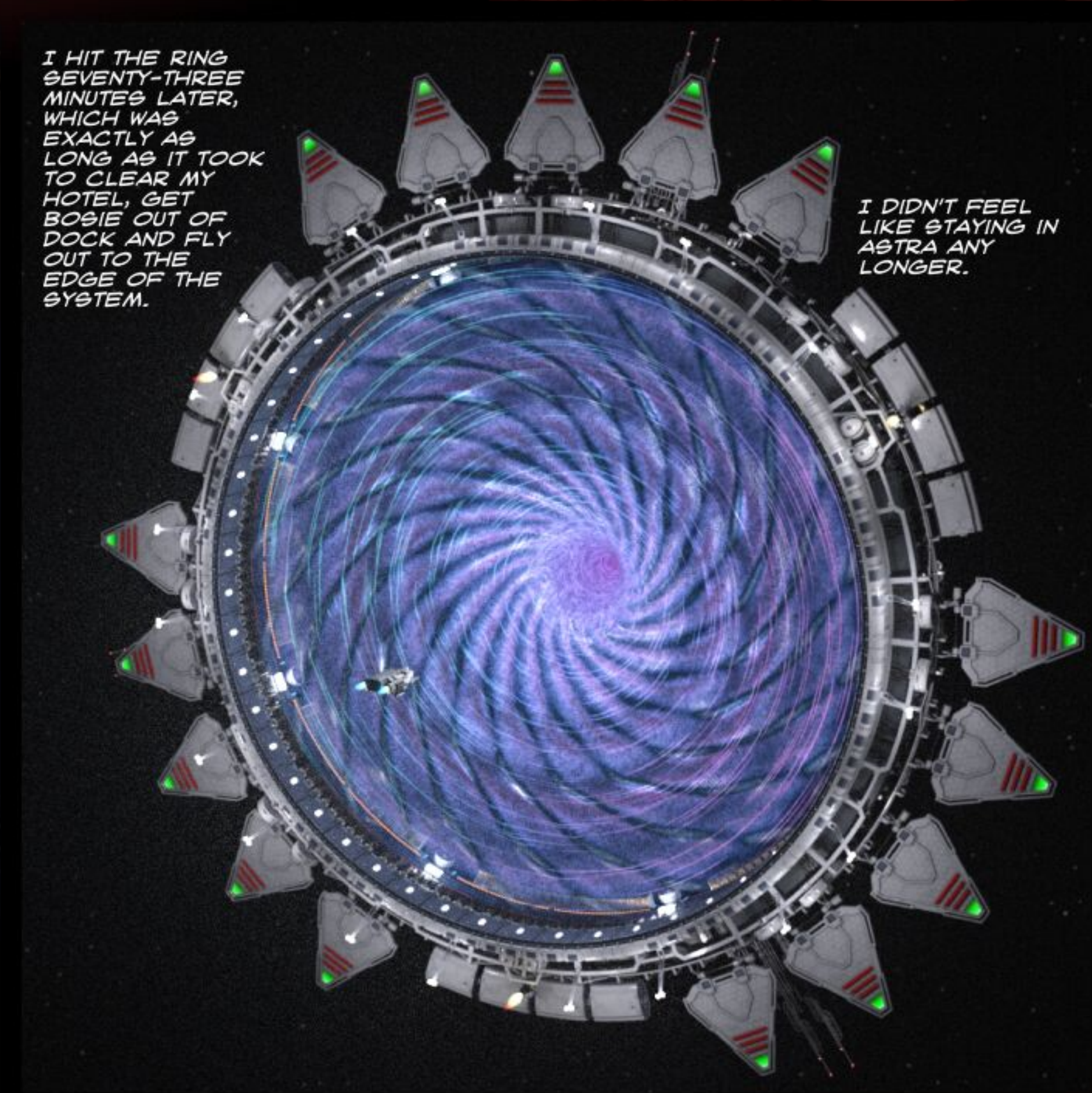
Then don't talk! You've got to hang on ...

too late ...

... listen ...

have to tell you ...

... secret ...



I HIT THE RING SEVENTY-THREE MINUTES LATER, WHICH WAS EXACTLY AS LONG AS IT TOOK TO CLEAR MY HOTEL, GET BOBIE OUT OF DOCK AND FLY OUT TO THE EDGE OF THE SYSTEM.

I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE STAYING IN ASTRA ANY LONGER.

COWLEY 6. COWLEY IS IN TAURAN SPACE, BUT JUST BARELY. THE PLANET HAS A NUMBER OF FUNCTIONAL NAMES, BUT THE TAURAN GOVERNMENT REFUSES TO RECOGNIZE ANY OF THEM. ALL OF THEM ARE RUDE.



I'm told you do traceless messages?

Nothing's traceless.

You know what I mean.

Sure. Twenty wu. It'll take three times as long to get there.

Yes, I know. Do you have a station I can use?

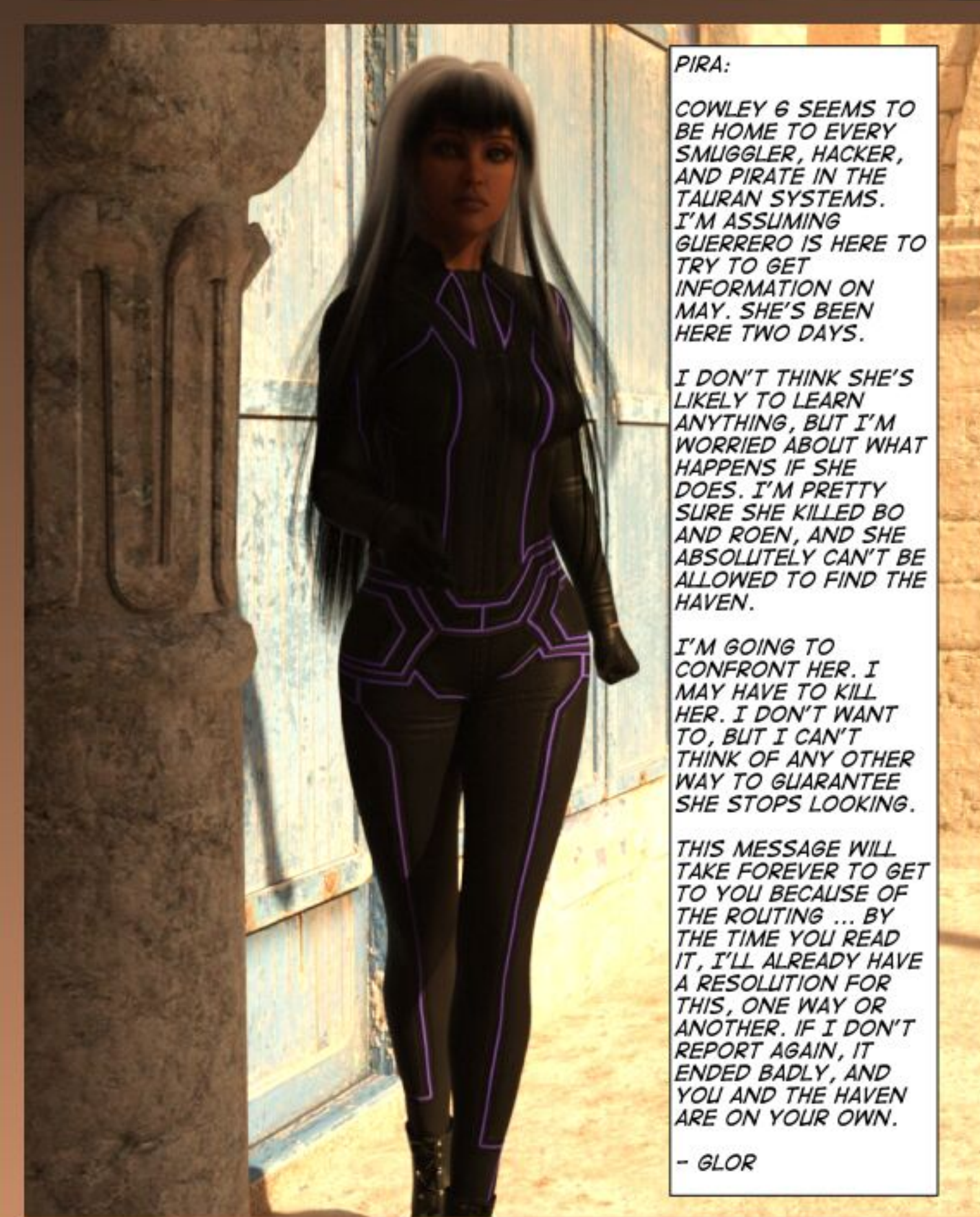
Over on your left.

How much extra do I pay to make you traceless?

You know no one gives a shit, right? No one ever bothers sniffing comms packets.

Enter your destination and hit send when you're done. The routing algorithm picks it up and I never even see where you sent it.

I don't keep logs.



PIRA:
COWLEY 6 SEEMS TO BE HOME TO EVERY SMUGGLER, HACKER, AND PIRATE IN THE TAURAN SYSTEMS. I'M ASSUMING GUERRERO IS HERE TO TRY TO GET INFORMATION ON MAY. SHE'S BEEN HERE TWO DAYS.
I DON'T THINK SHE'S LIKELY TO LEARN ANYTHING, BUT I'M WORRIED ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS IF SHE DOES. I'M PRETTY SURE SHE KILLED BO AND ROEN, AND SHE ABSOLUTELY CAN'T BE ALLOWED TO FIND THE HAVEN.
I'M GOING TO CONFRONT HER. I MAY HAVE TO KILL HER. I DON'T WANT TO, BUT I CAN'T THINK OF ANY OTHER WAY TO GUARANTEE SHE STOPS LOOKING.
THIS MESSAGE WILL TAKE FOREVER TO GET TO YOU BECAUSE OF THE ROUTING ... BY THE TIME YOU READ IT, I'LL ALREADY HAVE A RESOLUTION FOR THIS, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. IF I DON'T REPORT AGAIN, IT ENDED BADLY, AND YOU AND THE HAVEN ARE ON YOUR OWN.
- GLOR

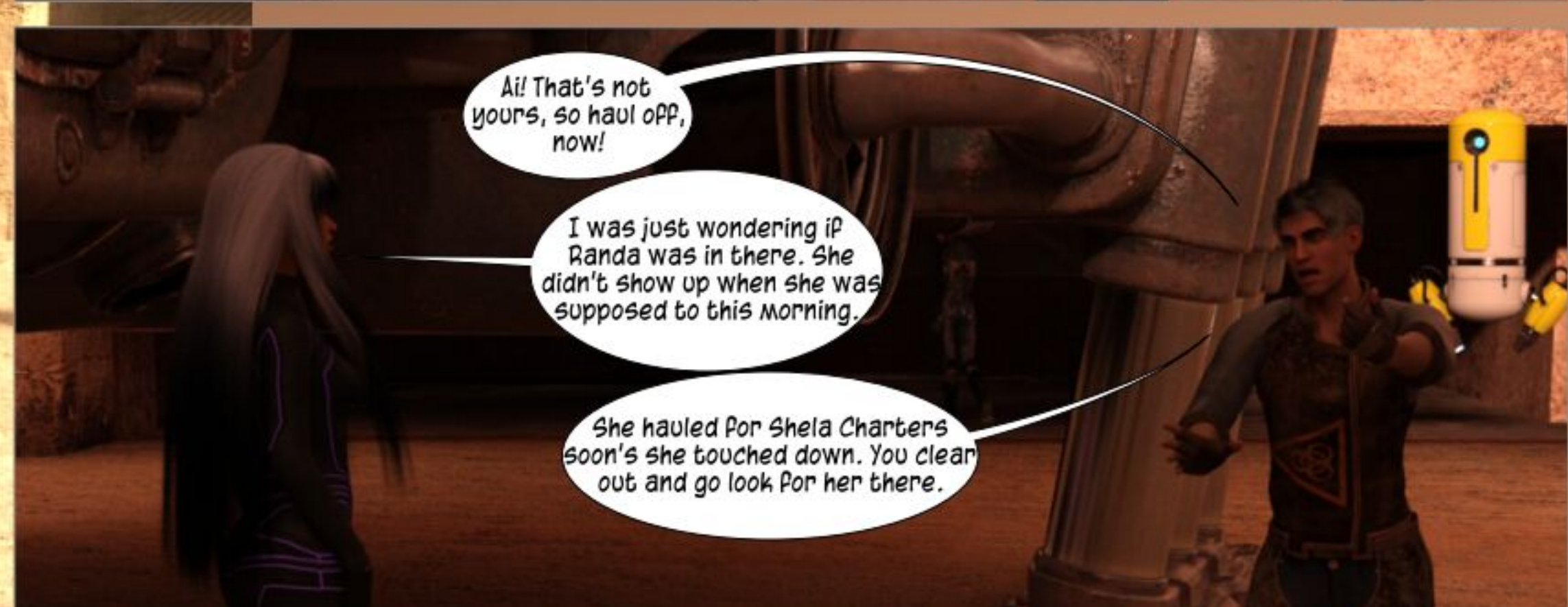


Hours of asking and nobody's seen Guerrero ... and this place Peels really small for a city this big ... everybody knows everybody else's business ...

She wouldn't have been sitting in her ship the whole time, would she?

I can't believe what he changed for that shuttle trip.

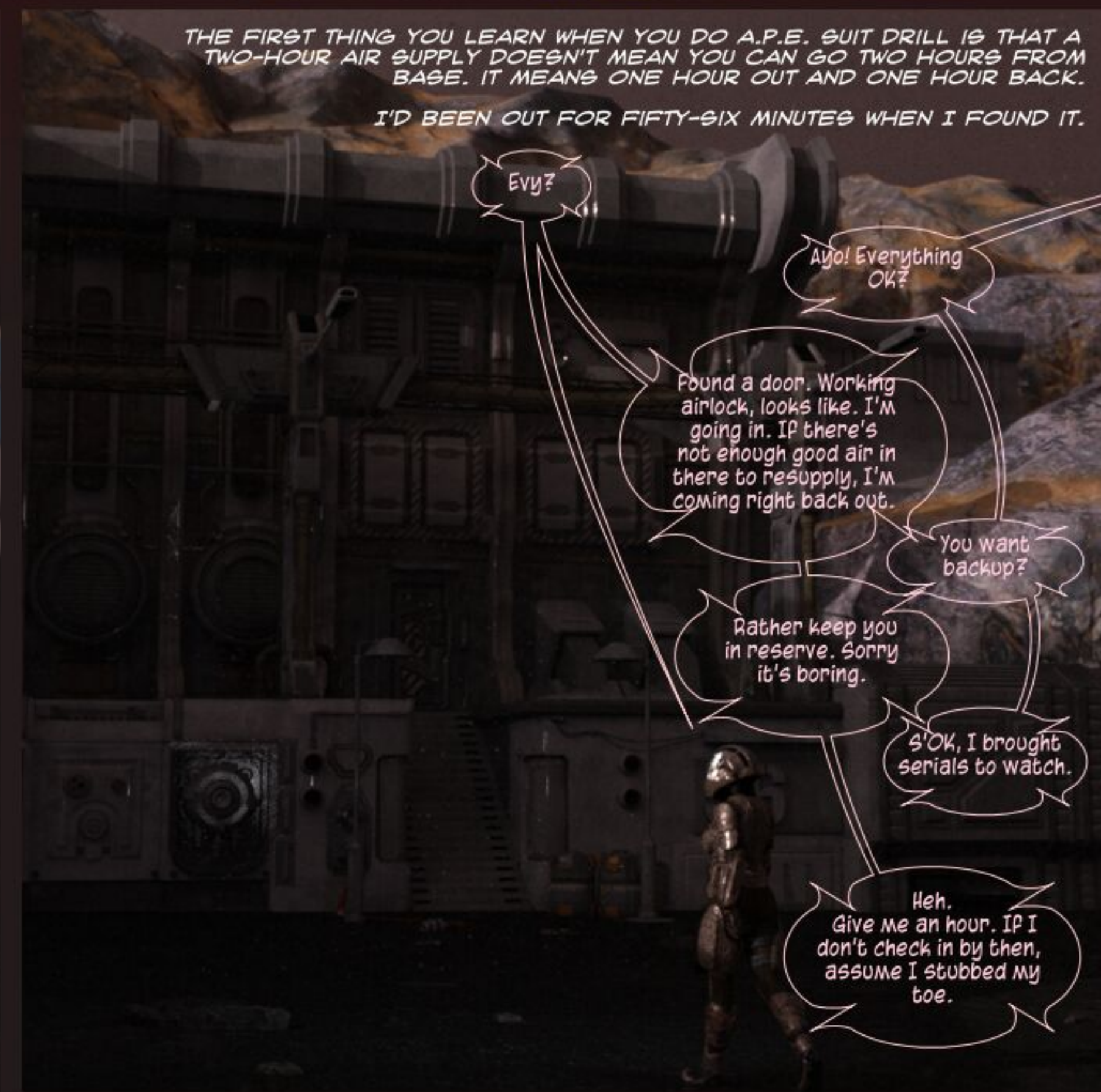
Told you we should have hired an indy.



At! That's not yours, so haul off, now!

I was just wondering if Randa was in there. She didn't show up when she was supposed to this morning.

She hauled for Sheila Charters soon's she touched down. You clear out and go look for her there.





Power station or demonic dungeon? Hard to say.

Let's let this barrel cross first.

I don't know why, but I don't like this bridge.



Oop. Good trick.



Ledge isn't even all that narrow ... just making me take a longer walk ...



If you're going to shoot me, can you wait until I finish this, please?

One of those power tanks over there is about to overload.



I'd rather not shoot anybody.

I just want to know what the hell is going on.

HER NAME WAS PIRA JOHANNES. IT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH TALKING TO GET HER TO TELL THE STORY. I GOT THE IMPRESSION SHE'D BEEN WANTING TO TELL IT FOR A WHILE.



... and you really went in? I'm amazed it didn't fall apart around you. Actually, I'm amazed it's still there.

It tried to. And it won't be there much longer. It's running out of power. When the deflector falls, the debris field will tear it apart.

Good. Can't happen too soon ... you sure you don't want a chair?

I'm Pine. It's hard to sit down in this suit.

There were twenty of us. Twelve scientists and eight support crew, including me. I was the station's doctor.

The two scientists in charge were Burn Taler and Stel Gorish. Stel was a geneticist, and Taler ... you know, I'm not sure. I never asked.

"I'm told they got along once ... but if they did, that ended when we all came to the station."



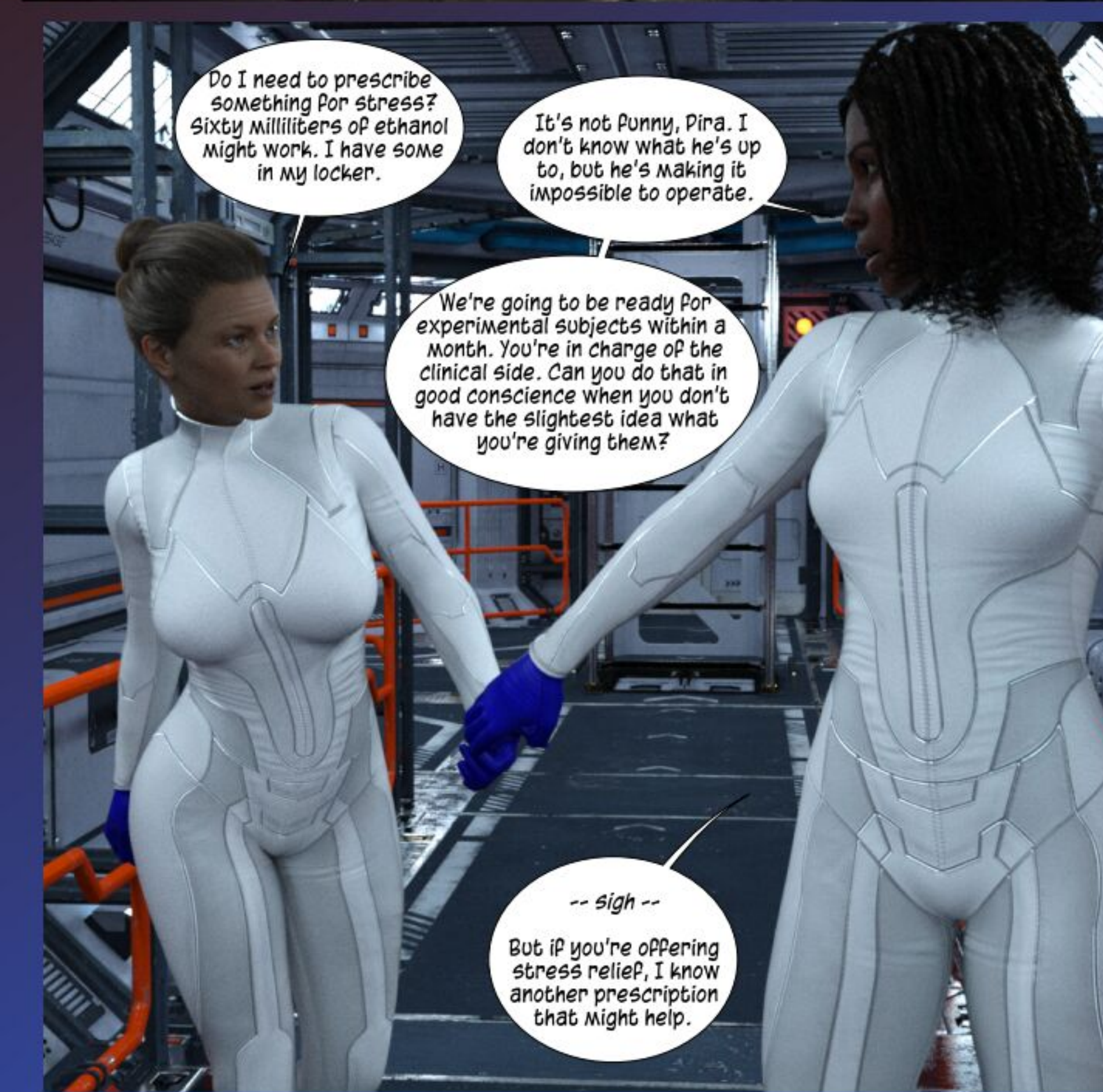
I am not trying to usurp your authority, Stel!

On the contrary, I think that your part of the project is much less susceptible to bias if you operate in a black box. As it were.

I am attempting to preserve experimental integrity. I'd have thought you'd have realized that.

I can't work like this, Taler! You can't expect my team to give you what you need when you keep us all in the dark!

And I'd like to remind you, we're supposed to be running this together! You're not king here ...



Do I need to prescribe something for stress? Sixty milliliters of ethanol. Night work. I have some in my locker.

It's not Punny, Pira. I don't know what he's up to, but he's making it impossible to operate.

We're going to be ready for experimental subjects within a month. You're in charge of the clinical side. Can you do that in good conscience when you don't have the slightest idea what you're giving them?

-- Sigh --

But if you're offering stress relief, I know another prescription that might help.



Pira ... I am going to have to do something about this. Not only are conditions intolerable ... I just don't trust him anymore.

I want to get into his team's locked files.

... He won't take that well.

Which is why I can't get caught. Do you have any ideas?

You need to talk Glor around. She's the best with the systems. If you convince her, she'll keep it secret. But you'll have to convince her. You can't force her into it.



OK, I think I have what you want.

Here, you try to read it. Your jargon is completely different from mine.



!!!

Glor, he's been lying to me from the start!

I recruited my team to do beneficial mutagen research. We thought we were working on selective mutations to cure things.

What he's talking about here ... he's using our targeted mutations to make ...

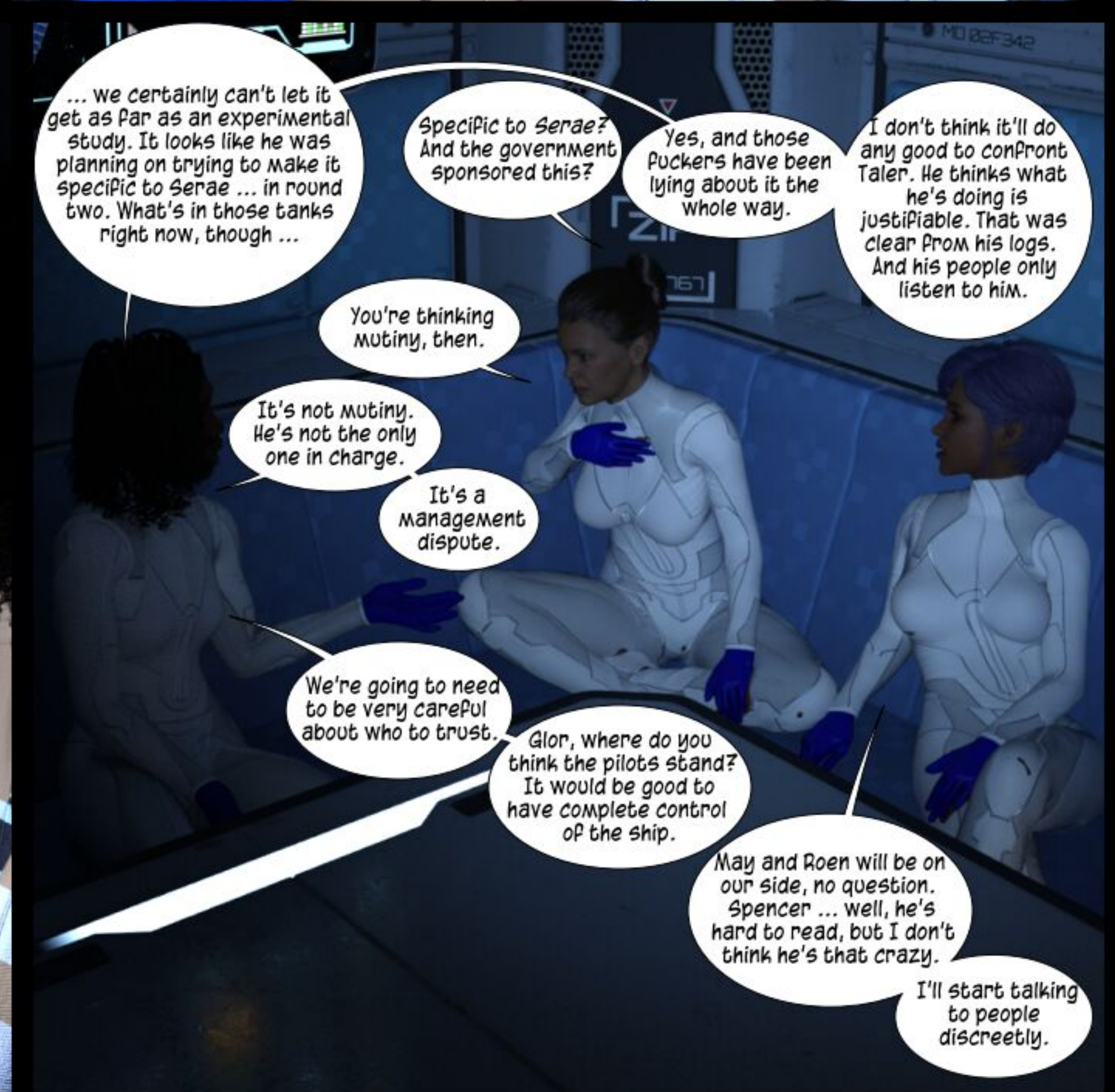
Those tanks full of what he and his team have been brewing? That's a chemical weapon. And a biological weapon. Either. Both.



What do we do now?

... I'm not sure I need to go talk to Pira.

I'm coming with you.



... we certainly can't let it get as far as an experimental study. It looks like he was planning on trying to make it specific to Serae ... in round two. What's in those tanks right now, though ...

Specific to Serae? And the government sponsored this?

Yes, and those Pucker's have been lying about it the whole way.

I don't think it'll do any good to confront Taler. He thinks what he's doing is justifiable. That was clear from his logs. And his people only listen to him.

You're thinking mutiny, then.

It's not mutiny. He's not the only one in charge.

It's a management dispute.

We're going to need to be very careful about who to trust.

Glor, where do you think the pilots stand? It would be good to have complete control of the ship.

May and Roen will be on our side, no question. Spencer ... well, he's hard to read, but I don't think he's that crazy.

I'll start talking to people discreetly.

"Do that. Pira, I think you'd better start preparing in case we need to leave in a hurry."

"All right. What about you?"

"I'm going to see what I can do about a little harm reduction."



Damn it, there isn't really anything I can do. At least not without causing a big mess ...

What I need is a way to drain these tanks into space where they can't hurt anything, but the infrastructure isn't there ... I'd have to run hoses, and this stuff would probably eat right through them.



Although ... huh. That won't help, but it'd be useful to set up, just in case ...



She was at this one?

Yes.

Well, nothing's been touched. It'd be hard to sabotage anyway. She could blow them up, I suppose, but she's not that stupid.

And you say she was at the consoles in the chem lab office?

With Glor Robay. I think they were looking at your logs.

Hmm.

I think we might as well change the access to this room. Members of my team only.

I'll take a few other steps as well.

TWO DAYS LATER.



Way I see it, we have two choices. We break out the guns, confront them and figure out somewhere on the station to lock them up ...

Ah ... about that.

I went to the arms locker like you asked. It was already cleaned out. I think Taler has figured out something's going on.

Crap. OK, that leaves us with plan B ...

... hang on a second.



Luce!

My own assistant. You little Pink! No wonder Taler's caught wind.

I don't -- -- hrk! --

I don't work for you! Burn hired me, not you!

And you just do what you're paid to do, huh?



"Fell down an open hatch. Such a shame. She really should have paid more attention to what she was doing."

No!!!

Stel, come on. We can't just kill her.

-- sigh --
Fine.



You know, I wondered why Taler ordered so many of these post-mortem crates. I didn't realize he was planning on murdering test subjects wholesale ...

Noooo!!!

Oh, shut up. I'll bring you food and water. If I remember.

MMMMMM!!!

What? I opened one of the vents. She'll be fine.

Glor, we've got less time than I thought. I need you to do the thing.

Stel ...

Now?

I don't think we can wait.



I suppose it was as much Stel's fault as Taler's, the way things worked out ...

But, you know, I go over all the ways it could have gone, in my head, and none of them are much better, and some of them are a lot worse.

It was another day or two after that ...



Shame we can't take the garden with us. Lee and Roen worked really hard on it.

Stel!



You've gone too far. Wiping out all our research? All our notes? I realize you're not happy about the direction of this project --



I erased my team's as well, Taler. This "project" is over. I don't think you understand. This isn't "not happy." This is unconscionable.

Even if that were true, you had no right to decide that unilaterally!

And you haven't stopped this project. You've merely caused us an enormous delay.

Not least of which will be the time it takes to find a new geneticist.

Grab her!



Let me go!

All six of you and guns ... you fucking cowards ...

Can't take risks. Someone who'd destroy two years of work could be capable of anything.

Since we can't resume research until we get a new genetics team, we might as well proceed with some of the first-round testing, don't you think?



Don't you dare!!

Honestly, right now I'd love nothing more than to give you some of it undiluted and watch it dissolve you from the inside.

But we're trying to test a mutagen, not a molecular acid. We already know what that does to someone.

Taler ... you're even more of a monster than I thought.



I'm not sorry about this.



What did you --



Bitch!

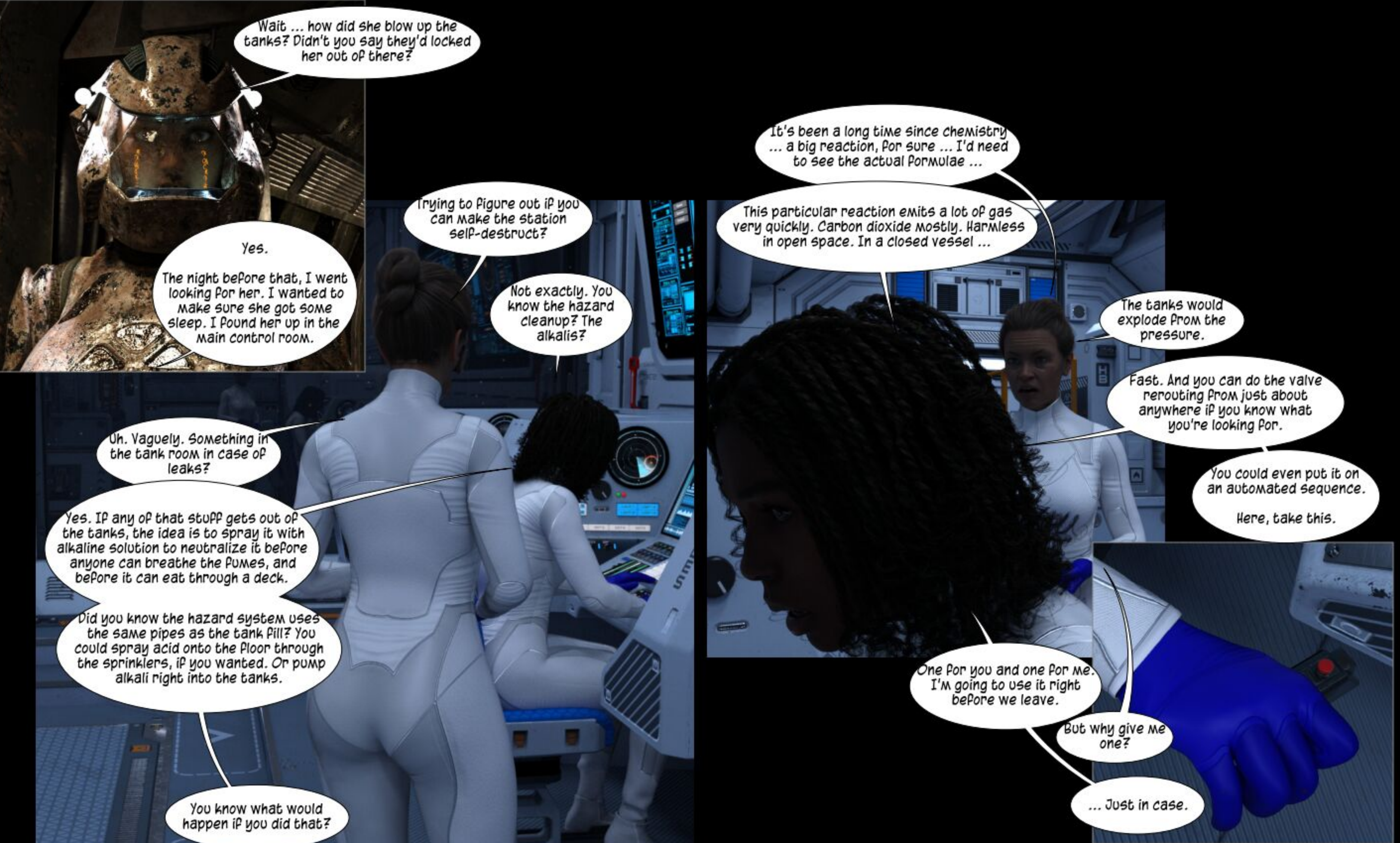
-- khhhh --

I'm -- khh -- ... I'll kill you!

-- kapp --

heh.

Little late.



Wait ... how did she blow up the tanks? Didn't you say they'd locked her out of there?

Yes.

The night before that, I went looking for her. I wanted to make sure she got some sleep. I found her up in the main control room.

Trying to figure out if you can make the station self-destruct?

Not exactly. You know the hazard cleanup? The alkalis?

It's been a long time since chemistry ... a big reaction, for sure ... I'd need to see the actual formulae ...

This particular reaction emits a lot of gas very quickly. Carbon dioxide mostly. Harmless in open space. In a closed vessel ...

The tanks would explode from the pressure.

Fast. And you can do the valve rerouting from just about anywhere if you know what you're looking for.

You could even put it on an automated sequence. Here, take this.

Uh. Vaguely. Something in the tank room in case of leaks?

Yes. If any of that stuff gets out of the tanks, the idea is to spray it with alkaline solution to neutralize it before anyone can breathe the fumes, and before it can eat through a deck.

Did you know the hazard system uses the same pipes as the tank fill? You could spray acid onto the floor through the sprinklers, if you wanted. Or pump alkali right into the tanks.

You know what would happen if you did that?

One for you and one for me. I'm going to use it right before we leave.

But why give me one?

... Just in case.

"It wasn't until much later I realized that by then she was already sure she wasn't going to make it off the station."

"I don't know whether she realized not enough of the stuff would be neutralized, or did it on purpose. We were hours from leaving. She might have wanted to let the station come apart and take Taler's team with it."



I think maybe two more trips, and that'll be everything we should bother to load ...

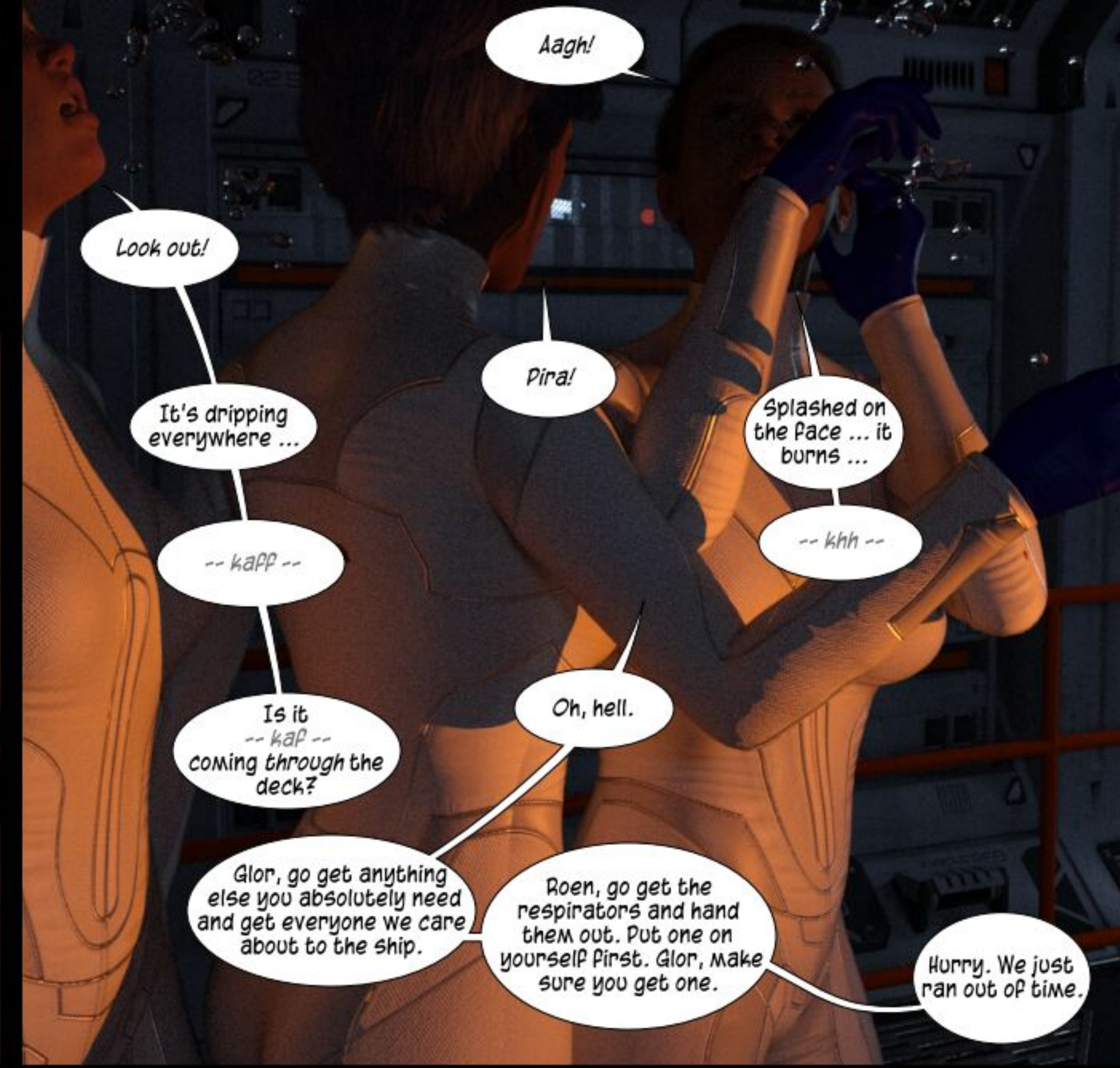
... did you hear something, just then?



Oh!

Emergency lights? What happened to the power?

No idea, but I think --



Look out!

It's dripping everywhere ...

-- kaPP --

Is it -- kaPP -- coming through the deck?

Glor, go get anything else you absolutely need and get everyone we care about to the ship.

Aagh!

Pira!

Oh, hell.

Roan, go get the respirators and hand them out. Put one on yourself first. Glor, make sure you get one.

Hurry. We just ran out of time.



Oh, shit! Luce!!

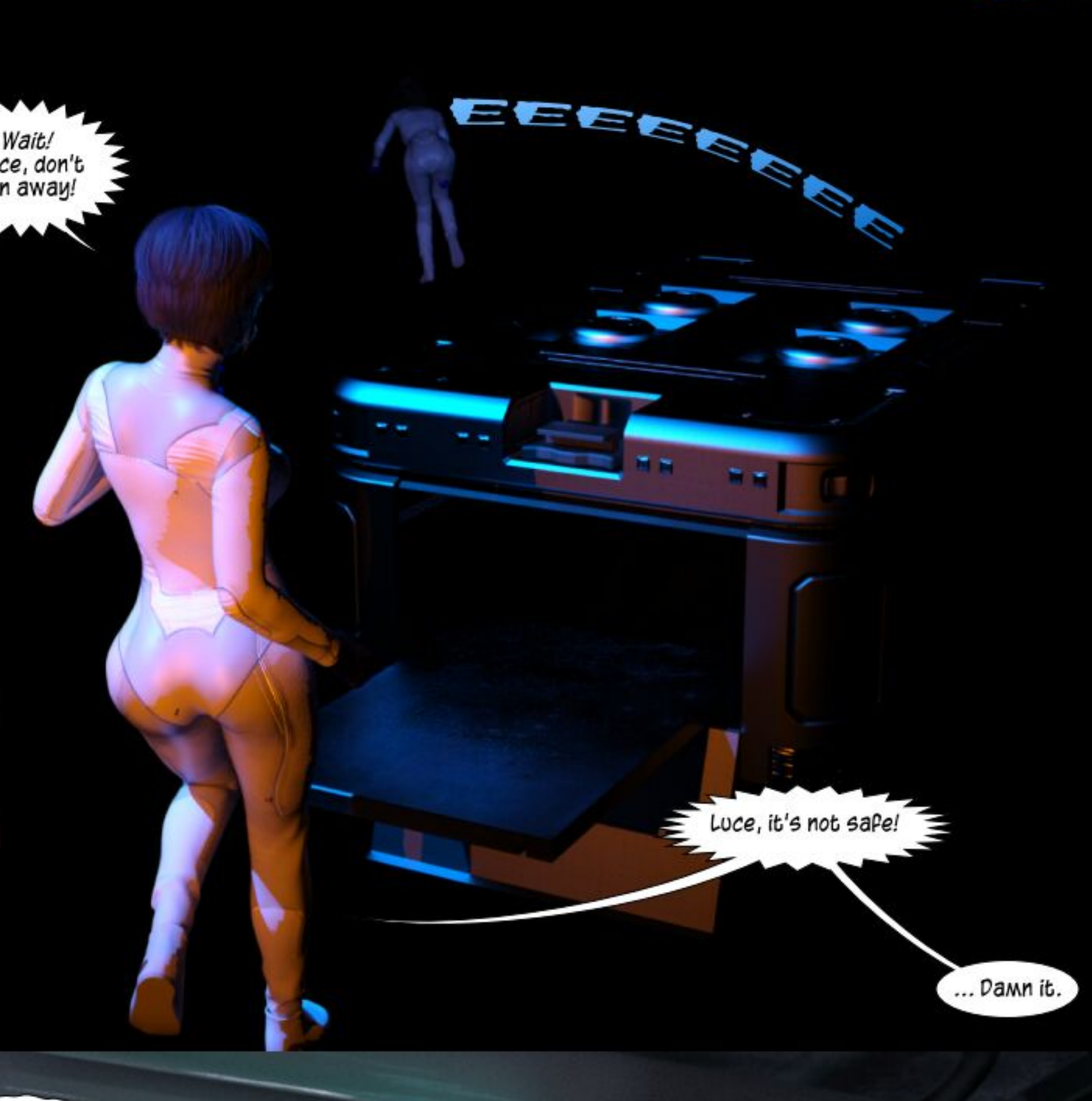
Even if she doesn't come on the ship, I can't just leave her in that box ...



... Luce?



Wait! Luce, don't run away!



Luce, it's not safe!

... Damn it.



This is going to hurt even more than the acid ...

... Uh-huh. Should keep it from eating my face, though. Now for some masks ...

... Stei?

My god.



Pira, stop!

... can't walk in here! There's still too much ...

Get everybody ... get them out ... Past ...

Already doing that. Right now I need to get you out.

... no.

I'm already dead.

Pira ... they'll try to bury it.

You all need ... don't let them find you ...

Get out now.



We very nearly didn't get the ship away. The dock was collapsing. Lee didn't make it out; a beam fell on her. That's why I was surprised the station was intact enough for you to enter ...

How many did make it?

Eleven. Myself, Glor, five support, four of Steel's team ... but five of them are --

Pira!
Don't tell her where anybody is! She killed Bo and Roen!
Go and Roen!!



I didn't kill either of them.

Come on. If you didn't, who did? You start asking around and suddenly two of our people are dead -- you expect me to think that's a coincidence?

Glor, look out! Move!



Hey!



Damn it! If you'd just come back to me with what you found out after visiting the station, that wouldn't have had to happen.
You could have walked away.



-- oop! --



urgh

And if you were competent, you'd have realized your gun was never even going to dent this armor.

My carbine, on the other hand, is set right now to roast your ass. So move carefully.

... sorry I had to knock you into a wall, Glor. Get his gun, would you?



Did you follow me all the way from the spacestop?

... until you lost me with the ship change. But by then I'd seen Robay, so I followed her.

Huh. Who is this jackass?

He says his name's Kyl Jurden. But that could be a lie. He claimed he once did resupply runs to the station, and I knew that was a lie from the beginning.

The hell you did.



Oh, yes, I absolutely did.

First, you recognized my name. No small indy hauler or travelling salesman would ever know my name. Some gov and corp types do. Maybe some Navy, but you weren't Navy. I'd know.

Second, nobody hauls alone unless they're desperate or a Pool. Ever. It's too risky. And they definitely don't go into a tricky place, like a debris field, by themselves.

So. Are you Tauran government, or are you just working for them?



-- oof! --

Hey!



I'm sorry, Randa, I was paying attention to you instead of him ...

He can't be trying to make it outside? We've got his helmet!

He could make it, if his ship was right outside the airlock ...

If he reaches it, I'm going to have to call Evy and have her shoot him down.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEE!!!



No, the bridge trap was up. When I came in, I saw someone had set it off, so I raised it again. Just in case.

Did he ... just run straight into the magma?

But ... he had to have known to go around. Either he saw me do it or figured it out himself. Or he never would have gotten in!

Maybe he was in such a hurry he forgot.

Incompetent to the end.



I still can't believe they'd really send someone to kill us.

Stel warned me, and yet ...

Oh, I can.

Incidentally, I don't recall saying which government sponsored the project.

You didn't need to.

The current Tauran leadership is hugely xenophobic. They argued so hard against the cease-fire that it nearly cost them their Federation seat.

One of the conditions of the cease-fire is a ban on chemical and biological weapons. Using them, making them, or researching them.

If it got out that they were sponsoring Serae-targeted bio-warfare ... losing their Federation presence might be the least of their worries.



Listen. Jordan really was incompetent.

I'm not sure if he never actually went into the system because he didn't want to risk the debris field, or whether he made a trip in and couldn't get past the automatic defenses.

Either way, it's clear he'd been wandering around for a while trying to figure out who he could get to do his dirty work for him, instead of going back to his employer and getting some better resources. That was just dumb.

My point is, the next one might not be dumb. You probably shouldn't stay here. Better to wander. No fixed location.

... I can't do that.



Why not?

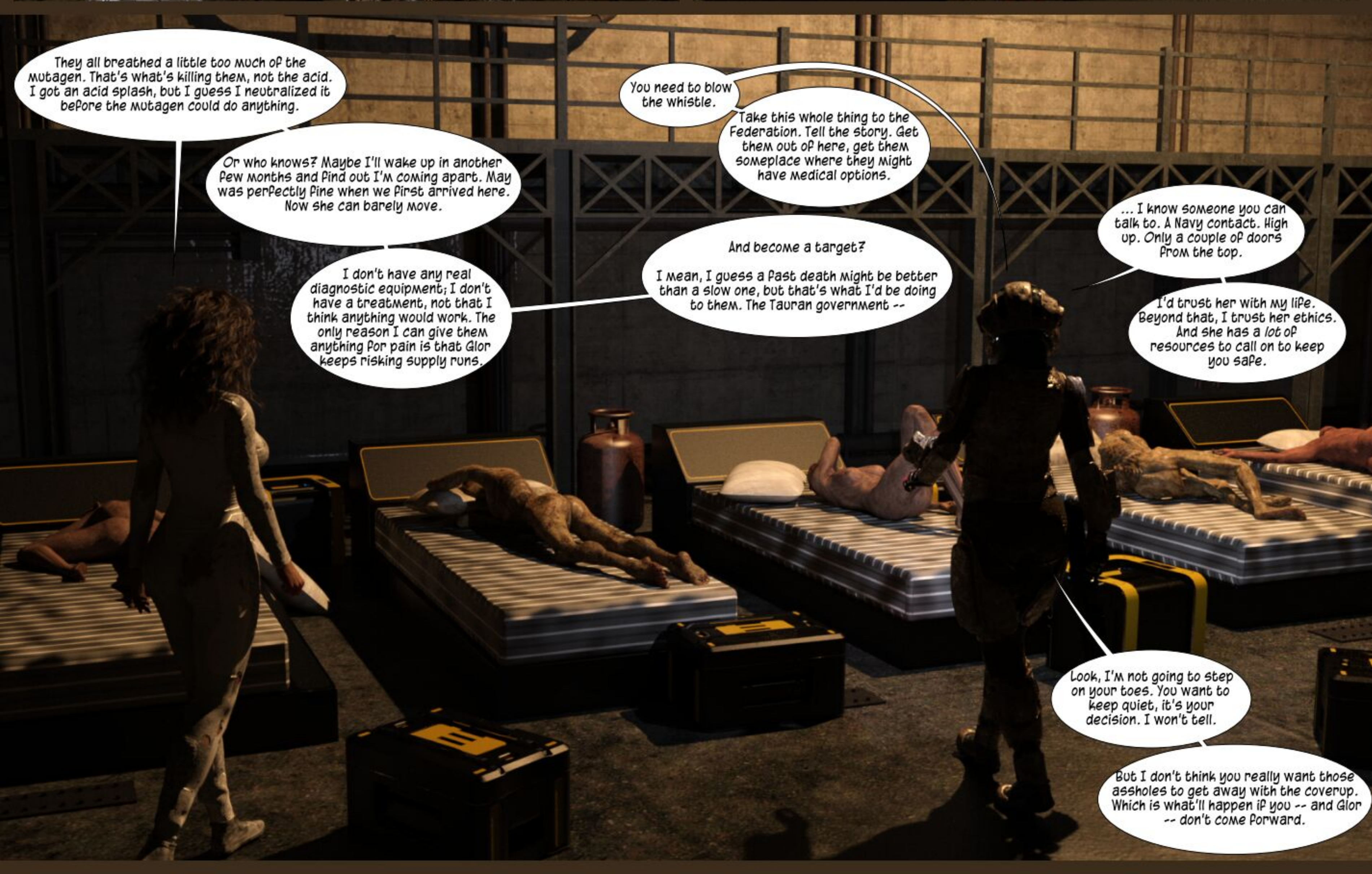
I'm showing you.

Four of us who escaped were already not well enough to go out on their own when we hid here.

May Liti ferried the others to various places ... I stayed here with the sick ones ... May sold the ship so it couldn't be traced.

A couple of months ago, May got in touch with Glor, who'd gotten pilot training since then. Glor brought her back here.

She came back here to die.



They all breathed a little too much of the mutagen. That's what's killing them, not the acid. I got an acid splash, but I guess I neutralized it before the mutagen could do anything.

Or who knows? Maybe I'll wake up in another few months and find out I'm coming apart. May was perfectly fine when we first arrived here. Now she can barely move.

I don't have any real diagnostic equipment; I don't have a treatment, not that I think anything would work. The only reason I can give them anything for pain is that Glor keeps risking supply runs.

You need to blow the whistle.

Take this whole thing to the Federation. Tell the story. Get them out of here, get them someplace where they might have medical options.

And become a target?

I mean, I guess a fast death might be better than a slow one, but that's what I'd be doing to them. The Tauran government --

... I know someone you can talk to. A Navy contact. High up. Only a couple of doors from the top.

I'd trust her with my life. Beyond that, I trust her ethics. And she has a lot of resources to call on to keep you safe.

Look, I'm not going to step on your toes. You want to keep quiet, it's your decision. I won't tell.

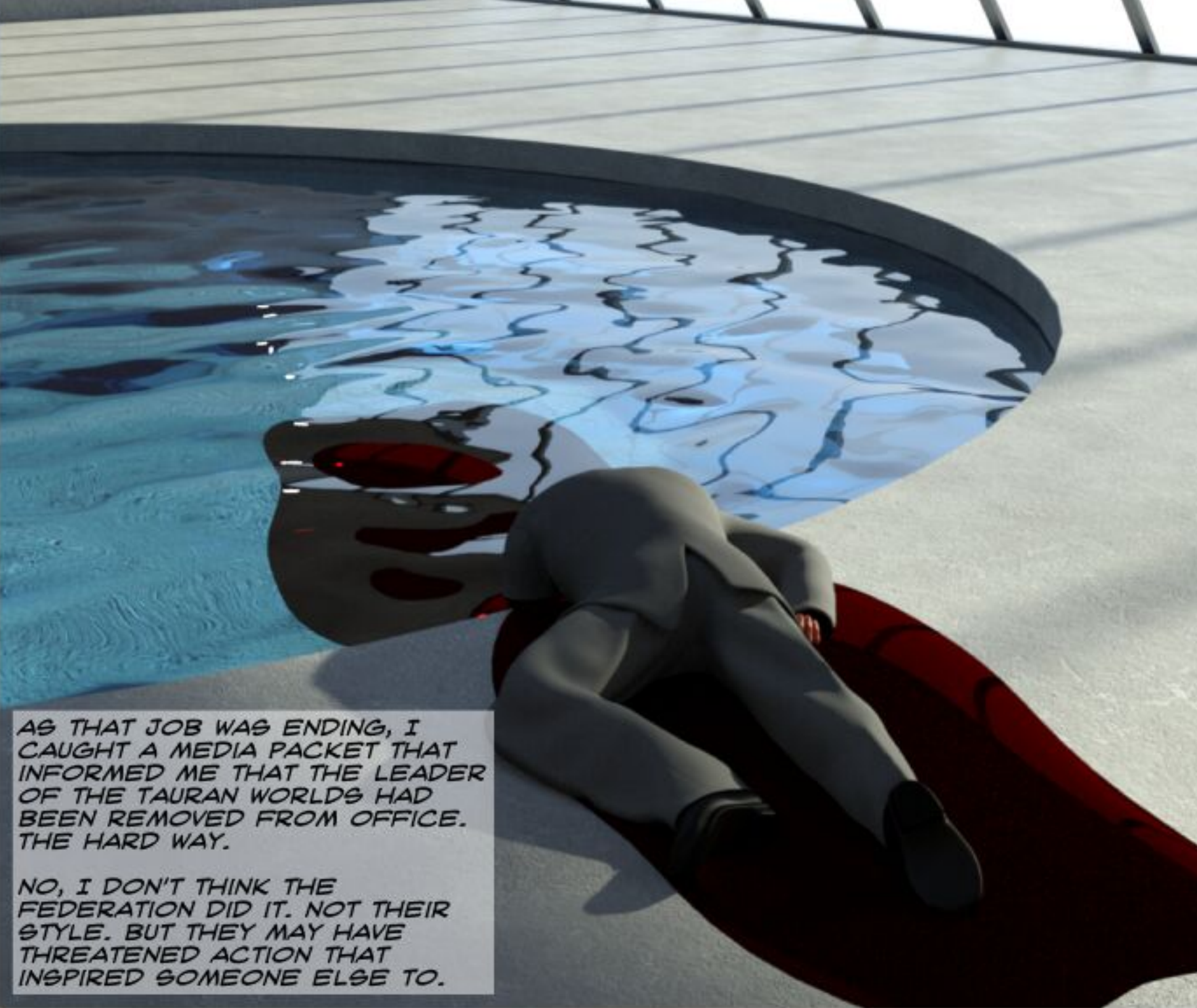
But I don't think you really want those assholes to get away with the coverup. Which is what'll happen if you -- and Glor -- don't come forward.

THEY DECIDED TO TRUST ME.

THE NEXT SEVERAL WEEKS WERE A LONG BLUR OF SETTING UP CLANDESTINE MEETINGS AND GETTING PEOPLE TO THEM SAFELY, URGENT HIGH-PRIORITY COMMUNICATIONS, EVACUATING FIVE PEOPLE IN VERY BAD CONDITION ... THINGS LIKE THAT. ONCE EVERYONE SEEMED TO BE IN GOOD HANDS, I WENT OFF TO DO SOME PAYING WORK.

AS THAT JOB WAS ENDING, I CAUGHT A MEDIA PACKET THAT INFORMED ME THAT THE LEADER OF THE TAURAN WORLDS HAD BEEN REMOVED FROM OFFICE THE HARD WAY.

NO, I DON'T THINK THE FEDERATION DID IT. NOT THEIR STYLE. BUT THEY MAY HAVE THREATENED ACTION THAT INSPIRED SOMEONE ELSE TO.



ONE THING FOLLOWED ANOTHER, AS IT DOES, AND NONE OF IT CROSSED MY MIND AGAIN UNTIL FIVE OR SIX MONTHS AFTER WE'D GOTTEN EVERYONE RELOCATED OFF MARDUK 2. THAT'S WHEN A MESSAGE FROM GLOR ROBOY REACHED ME. SHE WANTED TO SEE ME. IN ABRA. SOCIAL, NOT TROUBLE. SHE WAS CLEAR ABOUT THAT.

I BORROWED MY FRIEND'S OLD TONBO AGAIN. IF I STARTED VISITING ABRA ON A REGULAR BASIS I MIGHT NEED TO BUY A REAL FLYER OF MY OWN, BUT EVEN WITH A CHANGE OF REGIME THAT DIDN'T SEEM LIKELY. IT'S STILL NOT A PLACE I LIKE FOR MORE THAN SHORT VISITS.



Randa! I almost didn't recognize you with all that stuff on.



Bike clothes. Hang on, let me show my Pace.

Who's your friend?

You've seen her, but I wouldn't say you'd actually met. This is May Libi. May, this is Randa Guerrero.

Oh!

You're definitely looking, uh, in better condition than when I last saw you.



Right? I still look like the walking dead, with the grafts and scars and all, but I'm alive.

They tell me that when I finish the tissue regeneration in a couple of months, there are some things they can do for my skin.

Anyway, I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for you. That's why I wanted to meet you, to thank you.



That goes for me too. The other day I was thinking how nice it was not to have to look over my shoulder everywhere I went.

May and I are going to start a charter business, we think.

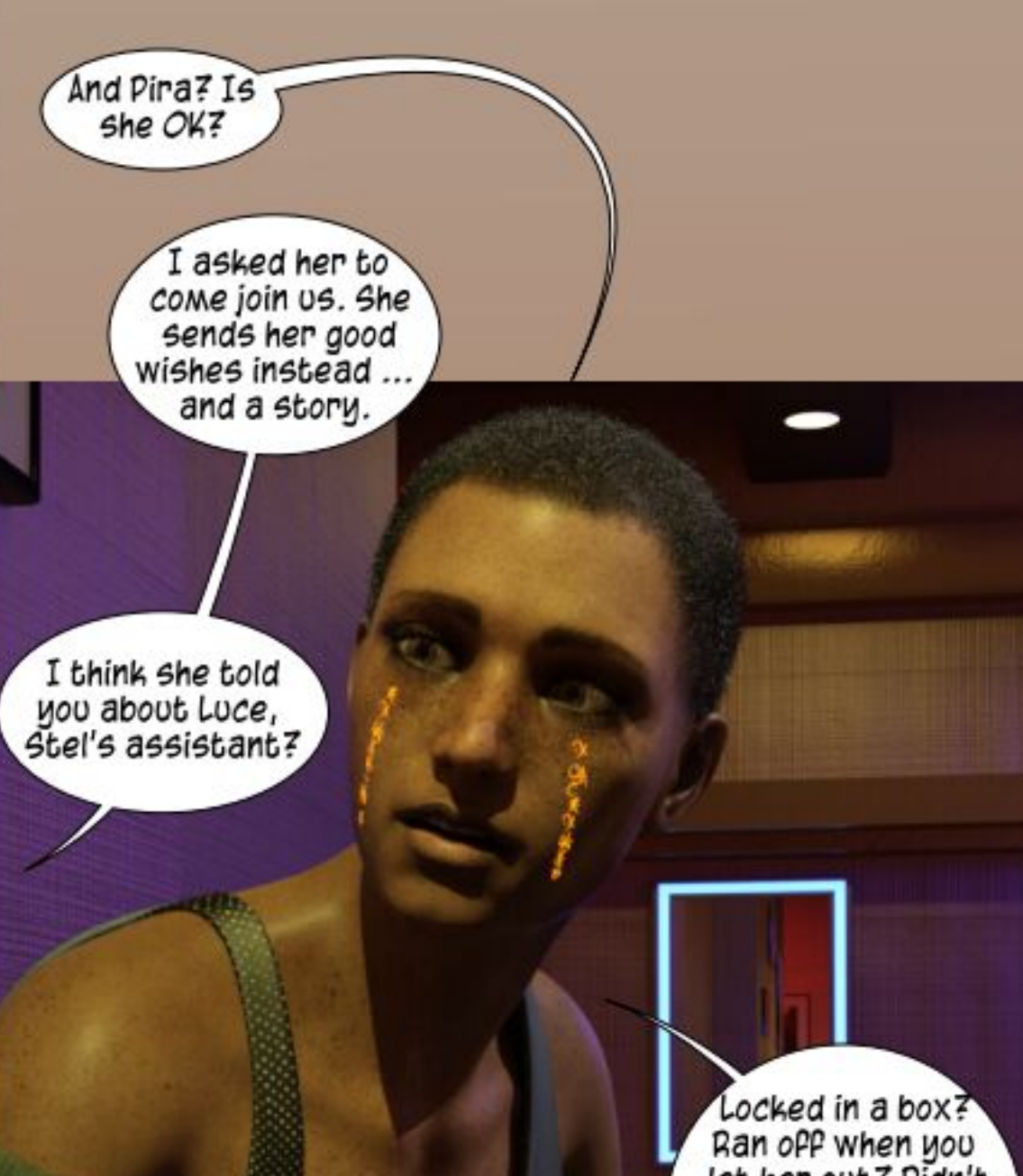
Sounds like a good idea.

Did any of the others ... make it?

Sadly, no.

I was way less further along than they were.

I'm sorry to hear it.



And Pira? Is she OK?

I asked her to come join us. She sends her good wishes instead ... and a story.

I think she told you about Luce, Stel's assistant?

Locked in a box? Ran off when you let her out? Didn't make it out on the ship -- or at least Pira didn't say so ...

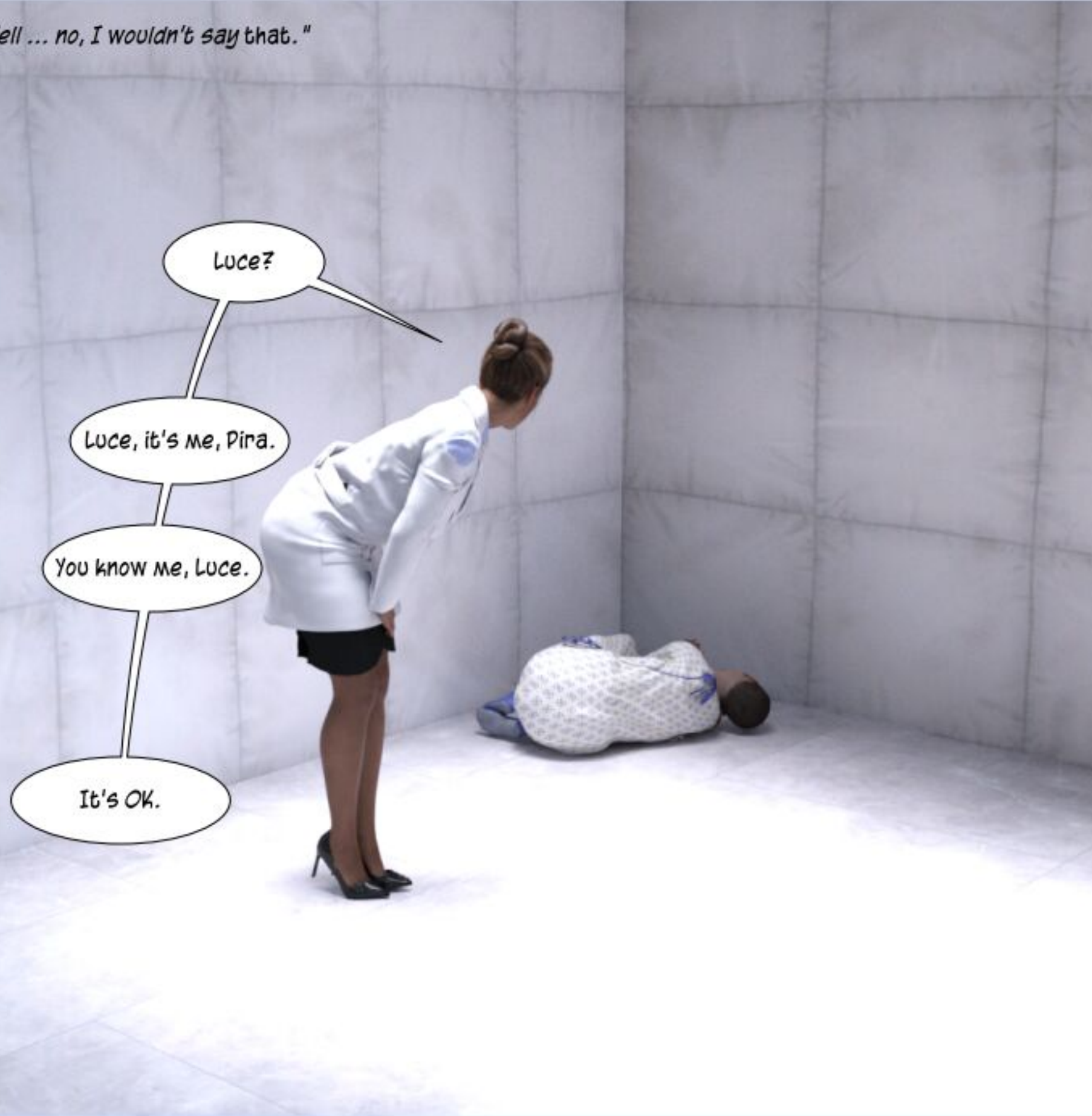
"You do pay attention. So, the Navy sent a crew into the system once this all came out. They wanted to make sure all of the mutagen was destroyed, I guess. The station hadn't fallen apart yet! So they went in ... I'm thinking really carefully ..."

"You're not going to tell me they found Luce alive, are you?"

"I know, it's ridiculous. One part of the station was still structurally sound, I guess, and we'd left a fair bit of food ... and somehow she managed to not breathe any of the junk ..."

"So she came out of all this completely undamaged?"

"Well ... no, I wouldn't say that."



Luce?

Luce, it's me, Pira.

You know me, Luce.

It's OK.



NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

no no nono nonononono no no no no no no

not OK not OK it's everywhere!

Acid!

Acid!

Acid!

END