



WE'LL GET TO THE REST IN A MINUTE.



Hi-de-ho, boy
Gotta go, boy
Though it really has been swell



Got a ticket out today
so let's say a Pond Parewell



Had our hoedown
On the lowdown
And I'd never kiss and tell



Your secret's safe with me
but this must be our Pond Parewell



Our Flame has Plickered out
and I'm sure that you concur



Besides, I know that once I'm gone
you'll go right back to her



Once our passion
Was in Fashion
Now it all Peel's shot to hell



So though we may
Meet again,
until then--
a Pond Parewell!



THE SHORT GOODBYE

THE BEST I CAN SAY FOR THE DATA PACKET SYSTEM IS THAT IT'S BETTER THAN NOTHING. I MEAN, THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO DO IT, NOT WITH THESE DISTANCES.

A SHIP THAT CAN PUNCH OR MAKE RING TRANSITS CAN GET FROM POINT A TO POINT X LONG, LONG BEFORE A TRANSMISSION CAN TRAVEL THE SAME DISTANCE. SO WE USE THE SHIPS TO PASS ALONG DATA. SHIP TO SHIP, STATION TO STATION, RING TO RING, PLANET TO PLANET -- AN ENORMOUS, CONSTANT GALACTIC RELAY RACE.

THIS IS FINE FOR ENTERTAINMENT AND NEWS PACKETS, WHERE IF YOU DON'T GET THE LATEST SHOWS RIGHT AWAY, IT'S NO BIG DEAL. BUT FOR MESSAGE PACKETS, IT CAN BE A PROBLEM. THE MESSAGE WILL GET PASSED ALONG TO ANY SHIP THAT'S GOING EVEN VAGUELY TOWARD WHERE YOU ARE ... BUT WHAT IF NO SHIPS ARE GOING TO WHERE YOU HAPPEN TO BE?

I HAD BEEN A MONTH IN ONE OF THOSE CORNERS OF THE GALAXY WHERE NO ONE GOES EXCEPT THE KIND OF PEOPLE WHO DON'T WANT TO BE FOUND. THE JOB HAD ONLY BEEN TWO WEEKS; I HAD TO WAIT ANOTHER TWO FOR A CARGO SHIP WITH PUNCH TO TAKE ME TO A SYSTEM WITH A RING. AS SOON AS I PASSED THROUGH THE RING, ALL THE MESSAGES THAT HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO FIND ME BEGAN FLOODING IN.

MOST OF THEM WERE NOTHING URGENT. THERE WERE A COUPLE OF JOB LEADS WHICH WERE TIME-SENSITIVE, BUT I COULD IGNORE THOSE BECAUSE THEY'D HAVE ALREADY BEEN GIVEN TO SOMEONE ELSE BY NOW.

BUT THERE WAS ALSO A MESSAGE FROM NIGELLA FULLER.

AND THAT COULD NOT BE IGNORED.

FIRST, BECAUSE FULLER DIDN'T SEND MESSAGES UNLESS THEY WERE IMPORTANT. SO MUCH SO THAT I HADN'T HEARD FROM HER IN YEARS.

SECOND, BECAUSE SHE WAS THE CLOSEST THING I HAD TO A BOSS.



THEN, OF COURSE, I HAD TO GET TO LEVIATHAN, AND THAT TOOK DAYS. I DON'T GO INTO THE OLD SYSTEMS VERY OFTEN, AND TAU CETI IS ONE OF THE OLDEST.

HER PLACE LOOKED EXACTLY THE SAME AS IT HAD THE LAST TIME I SAW HER.

SO DID SHE.

Randa.
Glad you could come.

Still wearing those Navy pants.

If they ever wear out, I'll stop wearing them.

What am I here for?

A THING I LIKE ABOUT FULLER IS THAT SHE AND I HOLD CONVERSATIONS THE SAME WAY.

We've had a breach of conduct.

... Possibly.

The information I've gotten is disturbing if true.

I need you to go find out if it is. And if it is, I want you to deal with the situation as quickly as you can.



Who is it?

Thewis.

Is that going to be a problem?

... I resent the question.

Well, he is your recruit ...

I didn't recruit him. I suggested he might try being a quitclaim. That was all.

Anyway, it wouldn't matter. Not if he's really in breach.

If he is, and I can prove it ... how exactly do you expect me to "deal with it"?



You know how important this is.

If he is in breach, then he can't be allowed to be a quitclaim again. He can't be allowed to represent himself as being a quitclaim. He can't even hint that he once was a quitclaim.

Do whatever you need to do to ensure all that happens. I don't care what.

Do we have any idea where he is?

No. You'll have to follow the trail.

Start by talking to Berton.

LEVIATHAN IS ALSO WHERE NEW HORIZONS HAS ITS MAIN HQ. BERTON SILGRATON WAS THE CLOSEST THING TO A LIAISON TO THE QUITCLAIMS, AND I'D DEALT WITH HIM BEFORE. HE'S A PRETTY GOOD PERSON. YOU CAN ACTUALLY HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH HIM.



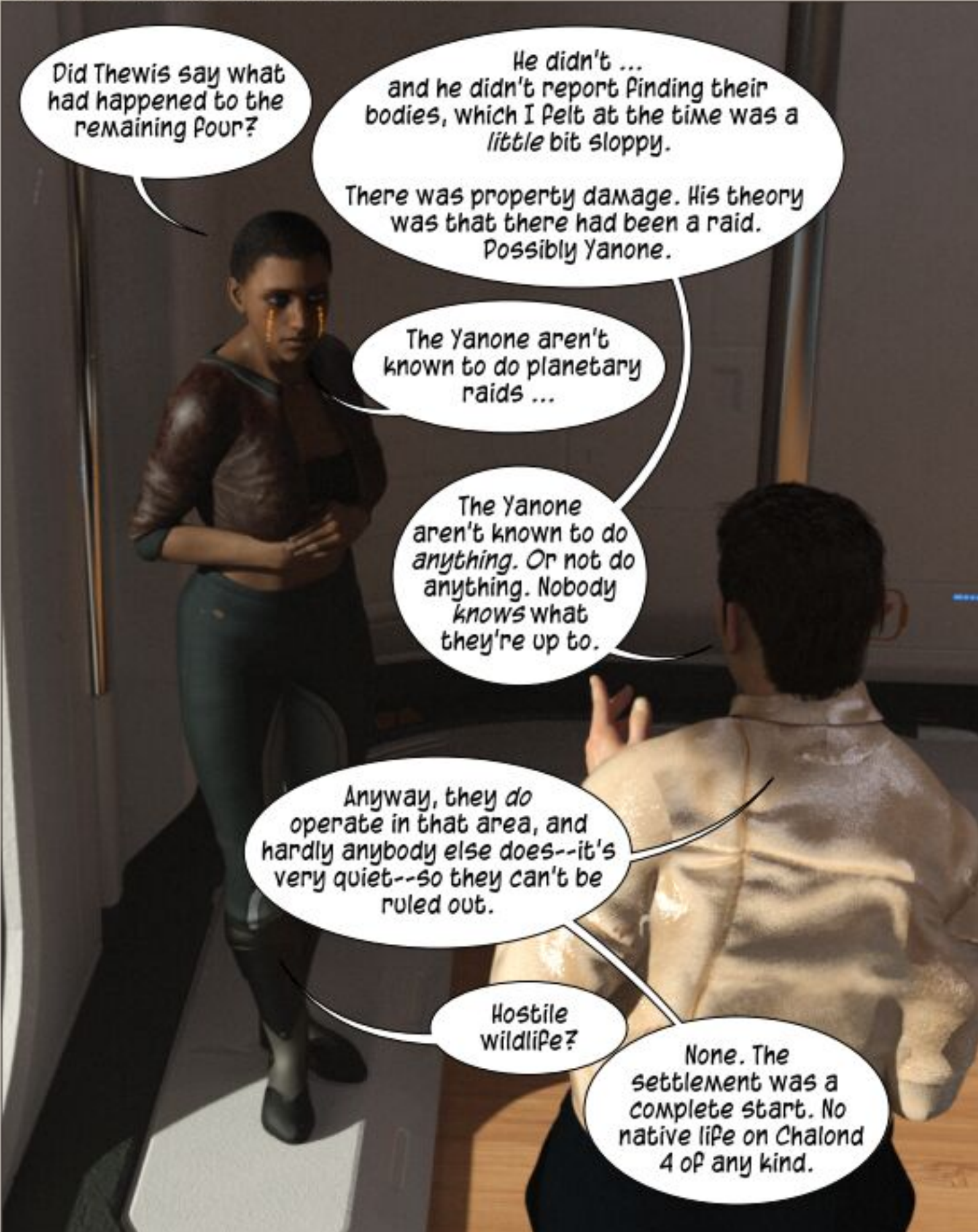
Chalond 4. Only settlement on the planet, or in the system.

They waved off a supply run. Said they had an epidemic of Corlian Fever.

Three months later, tried the run again. Four of them were left alive. Weren't sure what to do, so we let them stay.

Another six months, and the next supply run got no answer to hails and so refused to land. You know the policy.

We sent in Jall Thewis, who reported that he found no one alive, and thus the settlement was presumed derelict. He claimed his compensation and that was the end of it.



Did Thewis say what had happened to the remaining four?

He didn't ... and he didn't report finding their bodies, which I felt at the time was a little bit sloppy.

There was property damage. His theory was that there had been a raid. Possibly Yanone.

The Yanone aren't known to do planetary raids ...

The Yanone aren't known to do anything. Or not do anything. Nobody knows what they're up to.

Anyway, they do operate in that area, and hardly anybody else does--it's very quiet--so they can't be ruled out.

Hostile wildlife?

None. The settlement was a complete start. No native life on Chalond 4 of any kind.



I don't mind telling you, we're jumpy. It's a good property and we'd like to try again, but we don't want to send in--

Yeah. If you lose two settlements in the same place, that'd look bad.

Berton, I need to investigate this. I want NH's approval to go dig around the settlement.

If I learn anything, I'll share it. Gratis.

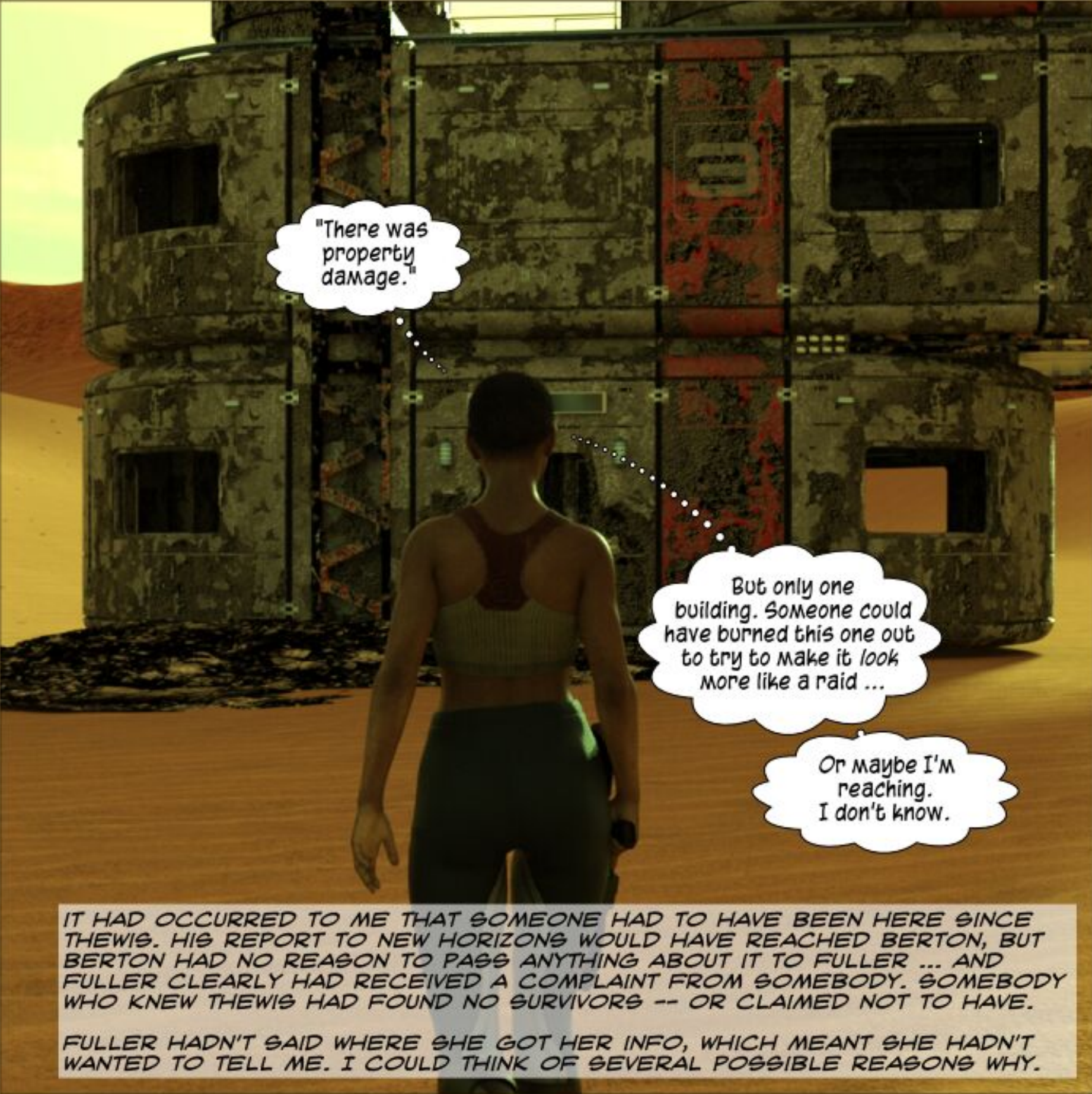
Don't see why not.

I KNEW HE WOULDN'T TURN DOWN A CHANCE TO GET A SECOND INVESTIGATION FOR FREE.

I COULD SEE WHY NEW HORIZONS DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE UP ON CHALOND 4. SURE, IT WAS STINKING DESERT, BUT IT HAD TO HAVE A LOT OF UNDERGROUND WATER. THOSE SPRAY IRRIGATORS ARE THIRSTY.



THE GREEN CIRCLES WERE A LITTLE UNNERVING. THE AUTOMATED SYSTEMS DIDN'T CARE WHETHER ANYONE WAS ALIVE TO TEND TO THE CROPS ...



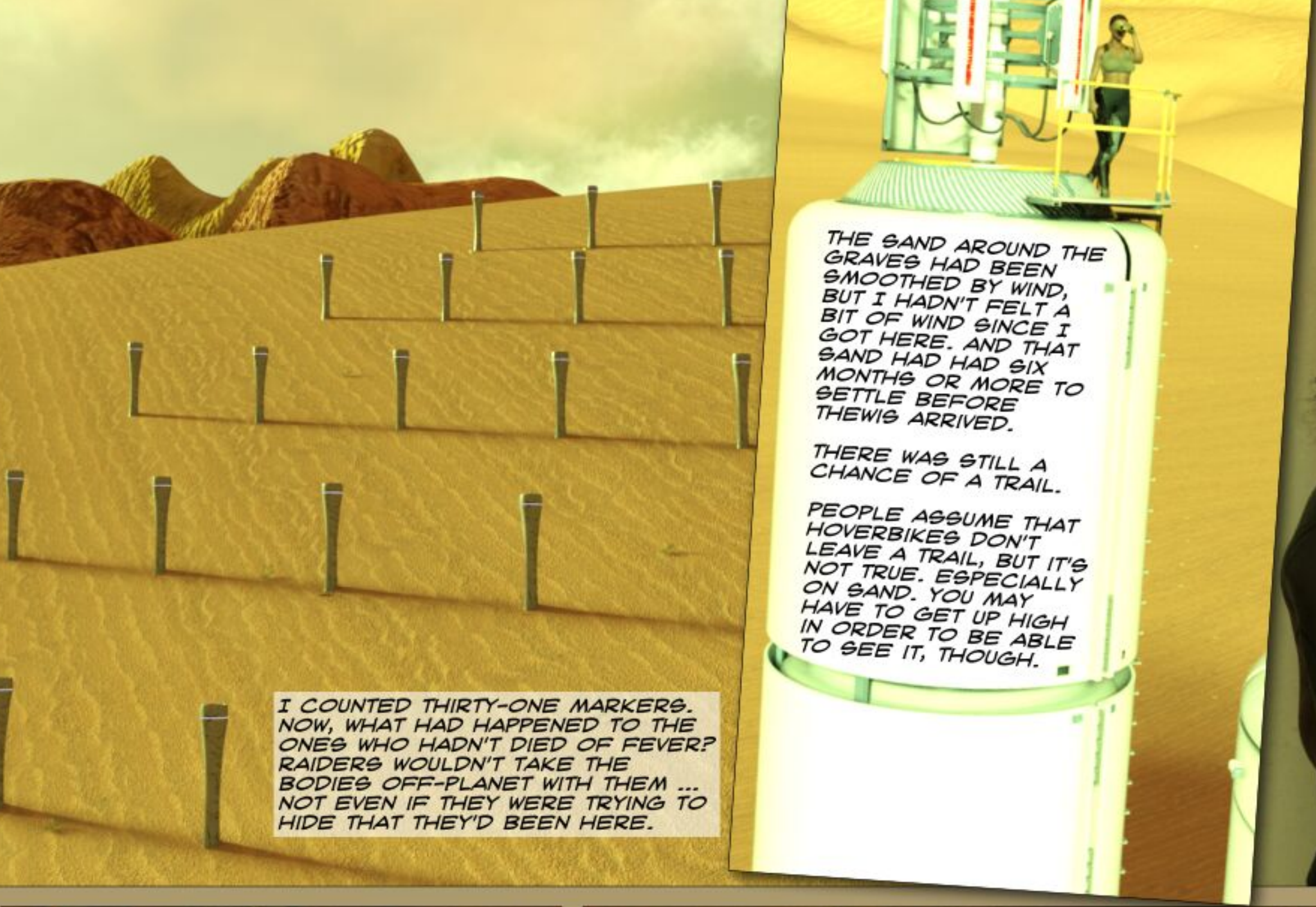
"There was property damage."

But only one building. Someone could have burned this one out to try to make it look more like a raid ...

Or maybe I'm reaching. I don't know.

IT HAD OCCURRED TO ME THAT SOMEONE HAD TO HAVE BEEN HERE SINCE THEWIS. HIS REPORT TO NEW HORIZONS WOULD HAVE REACHED BERTON, BUT BERTON HAD NO REASON TO PASS ANYTHING ABOUT IT TO FULLER ... AND FULLER CLEARLY HAD RECEIVED A COMPLAINT FROM SOMEBODY. SOMEBODY WHO KNEW THEWIS HAD FOUND NO SURVIVORS -- OR CLAIMED NOT TO HAVE. FULLER HADN'T SAID WHERE SHE GOT HER INFO, WHICH MEANT SHE HADN'T WANTED TO TELL ME. I COULD THINK OF SEVERAL POSSIBLE REASONS WHY.

CORLIAN FEVER ISN'T ALL THAT DANGEROUS, BUT IF YOUR MEDICAL CARE IS ONE OVERWORKED DOCTOR ... NEW HORIZONS WOULDN'T HAVE DONE A MEDICAL EVAC UNLESS THE SETTLEMENT WAS PREPARED TO TAKE ON THE COST. THEY'RE LIKE THAT. IF THE SETTLEMENT'S DOCTOR THOUGHT THEY HAD IT UNDER CONTROL ...



THE SAND AROUND THE GRAVES HAD BEEN SMOOTHED BY WIND, BUT I HADN'T FELT A BIT OF WIND SINCE I GOT HERE. AND THAT SAND HAD HAD SIX MONTHS OR MORE TO SETTLE BEFORE THEWIS ARRIVED. THERE WAS STILL A CHANCE OF A TRAIL. PEOPLE ASSUME THAT HOVERBIKES DON'T LEAVE A TRAIL, BUT IT'S NOT TRUE, ESPECIALLY ON SAND. YOU MAY HAVE TO GET UP HIGH IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO SEE IT, THOUGH.

I COUNTED THIRTY-ONE MARKERS. NOW, WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE ONES WHO HADN'T DIED OF FEVER? RAIDERS WOULDN'T TAKE THE BODIES OFF-PLANET WITH THEM ... NOT EVEN IF THEY WERE TRYING TO HIDE THAT THEY'D BEEN HERE.



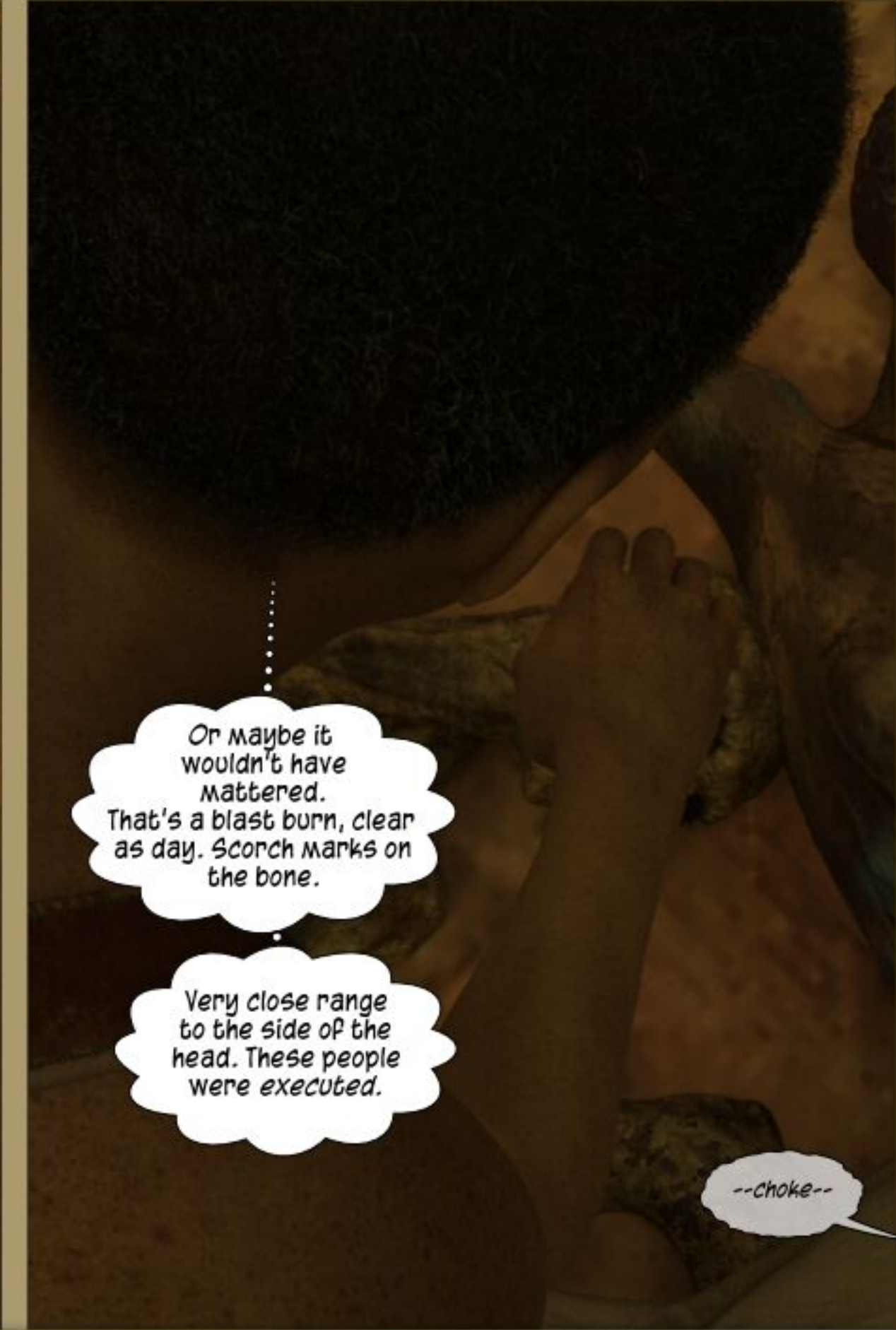
When I told Berton I was going to dig around, I probably should have realized it was going to end up being literal.



They're, uh ... I didn't expect them to be so ... well-preserved.

I guess it's because it's so dry out here ... ugh.

Still ... My Forensics needs all the help it can get, and I wouldn't get nearly as much from just bones ...



Or maybe it wouldn't have mattered. That's a blast burn, clear as day. Scorch marks on the bone.

Very close range to the side of the head. These people were executed.

--choke--



ULI!

Now, who might you be? Did you follow me? If you were back in the settlement, you're a very good lurker.



I'm Ame Izund. That's my sister Uli. Was. Is. Oh ...

I hoped ... maybe she'd gotten off the planet. Maybe she'd been hiding somewhere. Anything else but ...



But you knew she hadn't died from Corlian Fever.

We both had it when we were little. We're immune ...

Uli ...

She was tough. A lot tougher than me. Nothing could get her. Nothing ...

... I'm sorry.



Thewis, you're a filthy liar!

Yeah, yeah.

Just keep running!



We've got to kick this log away ...

Hey! Not while I'm still on it, jakaz!



"Just help me find this ship," you said.

"You have to check for survivors anyway."

Nothing about you having an army after you!

It's not an army. Can't be more than five or six. Ten at most.

And I had no idea they'd show up.



Liar.

I'm sure you know exactly why they're after you.

Oh, yeah, I know that.

I just didn't expect them to show up.

Never mind that--we're here.



I hope you can open it. We may not have much time.

I'd like to remind you that I didn't bring any weapons, because someone insisted there was no need.



I'll bet you have no idea where you're going.

I'll bet you're wrong.



Hold pull of crates. Surprise me.

Help me get one down.

... Power cores?

Class C power cores.

Shit! Close it, quick. I don't need cancer.

These were going to be the power for the settlement. But the ship crashed.

And that might have been the end for the settlement. Didn't look like they'd had a plan B.

Somebody was overcompensating. You could run that settlement for years on all this.

Or live for years on what you can get for them.

Mm. How'd you find out about this? You didn't steal the information from the people who are after you, by any chance?

In fairness, they were going to kill me and sell my ship and cargo. I thought I might as well get some compensation for the pain.

OK ... but now they're between us and our ships, probably waiting for us to come back, if they have any sense. How do you plan to get this stuff out?



Well, as it happens, I have a brilliant idea --

Randa?



Randa?

Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know you were asleep ...

I wasn't. ... I don't think. What's up?

I went to go find the guy who handles the fares -- second mate, I think? -- and he said you'd already paid the charter and I should take it up with you.

Mmm. Pay me if you want, but it's not important. The Perry had room for your ship, and who knows how long you'd have had to wait in Chalond otherwise ...

Chartering a punch Perry is really expensive, right?

You, uh ... you must have needed to get out here in a hurry ...

I didn't pay for it.

Where are you going now? I mean, after we punch ...

I'll go report what I found to the person who paid for this.

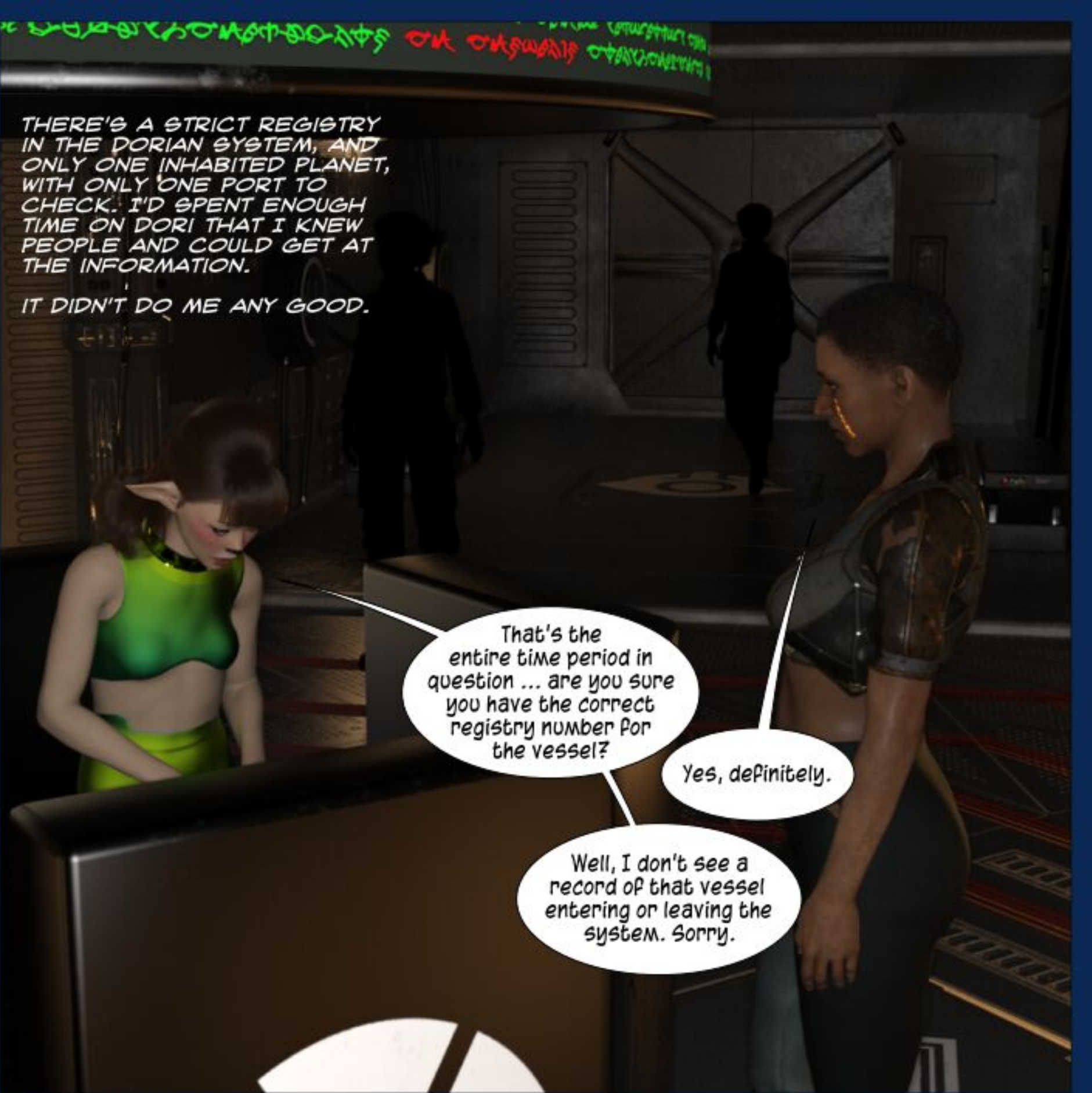
WHICH WAS TRUE -- MY EXPENSES FOR THIS TRIP WERE COMING OUT OF FULLER'S EMERGENCY FUND. BUT SHE WAS FISHING FOR INFORMATION AND I WASN'T GOING TO VOLUNTEER ANY.

THAT PART WASN'T TRUE. MY NEXT STEP WAS TO TRACK THEWIS. I WASN'T JUST BEING DIFFICULT. I HAD A FEELING THAT AME HAD AN AGENDA, AND I DIDN'T WANT ANY PART OF IT. IF SHE GOT INVOLVED IT WOULD JUST MAKE MY JOB HARDER. IT WAS GOING TO BE HARD ENOUGH ALREADY.



WE PUNCHED OUT OF CHALOND TO THE ONLY SYSTEM ANYWHERE NEARBY. THAT PART WAS OBVIOUS. THAT SYSTEM HAD ONLY ONE RING, SO THAT WAS OBVIOUS TOO.

BUT THE SYSTEM THAT RING LED TO WAS DORIAN, AND DORIAN IS A CROSSROADS; THREE RINGS AND A LOT OF PUNCH TRAFFIC. THERE WERE ALL KINDS OF POSSIBLE WAYS FOR THEWIS TO HAVE LEFT THE SYSTEM. ASSUMING HE'D LEFT.



THERE'S A STRICT REGISTRY IN THE DORIAN SYSTEM, AND ONLY ONE INHABITED PLANET, WITH ONLY ONE PORT TO CHECK. I'D SPENT ENOUGH TIME ON DORI THAT I KNEW PEOPLE AND COULD GET AT THE INFORMATION.

IT DIDN'T DO ME ANY GOOD.

That's the entire time period in question ... are you sure you have the correct registry number for the vessel?

Yes, definitely.

Well, I don't see a record of that vessel entering or leaving the system. Sorry.

SO EITHER THEWIS HADN'T PASSED THROUGH THE DORIAN SYSTEM AT ALL ON HIS WAY BACK FROM CHALOND — WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE, NOT IF HE'D HAD A PUNCH FERRY ON HAND — OR HE'D BEEN HERE AND HAD SMUGGLED HIMSELF OUT OF THE SYSTEM, OR HAD ARRANGED FOR HIS PRESENCE TO GET DELETED FROM THE REGISTRY.

I WAS THINKING HE'D BEEN HERE.

IT SEEMED MORE LIKELY THAT HE'D ARRANGED TO TAMPER WITH DATA THAN BEEN SMUGGLED. I COULD SEE BEING SMUGGLED OUT, BUT WOULD HE HAVE HAD THE FORESIGHT TO BE SMUGGLED INTO THE SYSTEM?

BUT TAMPERING WITH THE REGISTRY IS VERY SPECIALIZED. HE'D HAVE NEEDED SOMEONE TO FIX IT FOR HIM.

I KNEW WHO HE'D HAVE GONE TO, BECAUSE IT WAS THE PERSON I'D HAVE GONE TO.

MY BEST CHANCE OF FINDING SLERM OIBURT WAS TO GO TO THE CLUB WHERE HE SPENT MOST OF HIS EVENINGS.



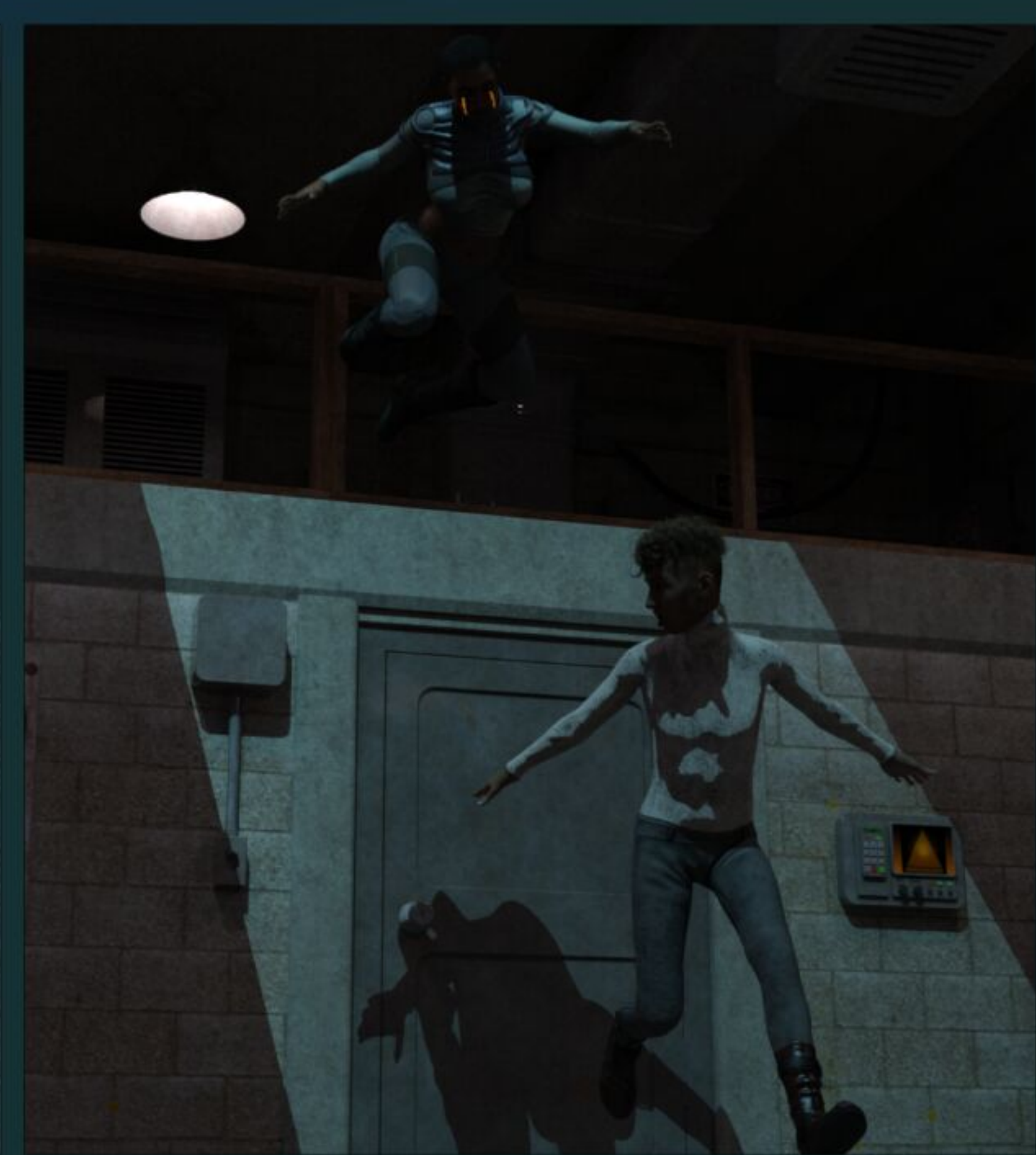
AND THAT BRINGS US TO WHERE WE WERE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY.

SO WE DON'T NEED TO SEE THAT PART AGAIN.



Hey, Slerm.

Still at the same address, I see.



Get off me!
Owww!
Let go!!

Slerm, I thought we were friends. But you run away when you see me, and you sic your goons on me -- what's a girl to think?

And all I wanted was a little information. Not even anything serious.

I don't know anything about Thewis!

I hadn't even mentioned Thewis yet. You want a do-over on that answer?

AAAA! That really hurts!



Look, I --Oww!-- I told a guy a few weeks ago I didn't know anything.

If I tell you something, and he finds out, he'll kill me.

If he finds out. But on the other hand if you don't tell me what you know, I'm 100% gonna tear your balls off right now.

Who was the guy?

... No way. Not even if -- aagh!



OK, look, I can't tell you who else was asking, all right? I can't.

But you just want to know where Thewis went, right?

I'll tell you. But you didn't hear it from me, got it? I didn't know a thing.

My lips are sealed.

All right, so.

Thewis stopped here because it was the first place he could reach that had a New Horizons office. He wanted to submit his Findings and get paid.

But he also didn't want someone to know where he was going. It wouldn't have been New Horizons -- no matter what he did or didn't do on Chalond 4, they'd have no idea. There was nothing suspicious in his report.

So someone else was looking for Thewis, and he knew it. Probably the person who was asking Sierm about him later. Which means that --

-- hang on.

hkkckh!

Not as good at the urban lurking. Maybe you do better on sand.

Hey, Ame, a question: Are you the one who sent the message to Fuller, by any chance?

--hkkck--
Who's ... Fuller ...

Registrar of quitclaims. Holds our licenses, makes sure we play nice. Doesn't ring a bell?

sent ... complaint ... quitclaim ... Thewis ...

-- hkk --

didn't ... know ... Fuller ...

Randa ...

can't breathe ...

And what makes you so sure Thewis did something he shouldn't have?

-- hhh --

... saw him.

Uli sent me a message about the Corlian Fever outbreak. She said it was going to be bad. The settlement leader didn't want the debt from a medical intervention and the settlement doctor was married to him.

Her next message said there were only four of them left and they were deciding whether to abandon ... and then I didn't hear anything else.

Like I said, she was tough ... I didn't think she could be ... Finally I went to check.

He was there. I didn't let him see me. I thought he was a raider at first. I figured he killed them. Including Uli ... He left. I guess he had a Perry waiting. I had to wait for a trader to pass through. So I couldn't follow him. I tried to find Uli's body while I was waiting, and I couldn't ... I couldn't do anything!

Later, I went back to look again. Just so I could do something.

It could have been actual raiders that shot them ...

There aren't any raiders out there! Uli checked. She wanted to make sure of that before she ever signed on to go. She was careful like that.

Conditions do change sometimes.

Randa, he did it!

I looked up this quitclaim thing. They go out to see if a settlement is abandoned. If it isn't, all they get is their expenses. But if it is, they get whatever the place was worth ... the property, the salvage ... it's a lot more!

He wanted the money and saw there were only four of them left alive, so he shot them! Shot them and claimed the place!

And you're one of them, aren't you? That's what you didn't want to tell me on the Perry!

You're one of them and now you're going to cover it up and he's going to get away with it!

First off, we don't get the full value of the derelict. If we did, I'd be rich.

We negotiate a contract. New Horizons generally pays about a third of valuation if it's derelict. Others vary.

We get steadier, safer work than just randomly looking for derelicts, and they get to ensure they'll keep their property and rights. The whole point is that we sell them back our salvage claims. That's how we got the name.

But for this to work, there has to be trust. We have to trust them to honor their offer, and they have to trust that we will always follow our contract. That we won't do the kind of thing you think Thewis did.

If either side breaches that trust -- ever! -- the whole thing falls apart.

I couldn't cover this up even if I wanted to. You've already breached it. The suspicion is already there. It's too late.

I have to find Thewis, and I have to determine beyond a doubt what actually happened.

I have to do it fast, before rumors spread.

And if he did do it, I'll make him pay for it in any way I can.

At the very least, he won't be allowed to be a quitclaim ever again.

You think that's good enough?

Probably not, but it's the part I can guarantee. The rest ... is more dependable.

I'd be a lot more likely to believe you if you took me with you.

No way.

Why the Puck not? If you don't have anything to hide --

Because you'll get in the way.

Because I may need to move covertly and it's much harder with two.

Because I get the impression you're a trouble magnet.

But mostly, because I think you've already made up your mind and if you get to Thewis you'll just try to kill him before I can get the truth out of him, and that's not acceptable.

So stop trying to follow me.

OF COURSE THAT WASN'T GOING TO KEEP HER FROM TRYING TO FOLLOW ME. I WASN'T BORN YESTERDAY.

BUT THIS WAY THE GROUND RULES HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED, IN CASE I HAD TO DO SOMETHING DRASTIC, LIKE BLOW UP HER SHIP.

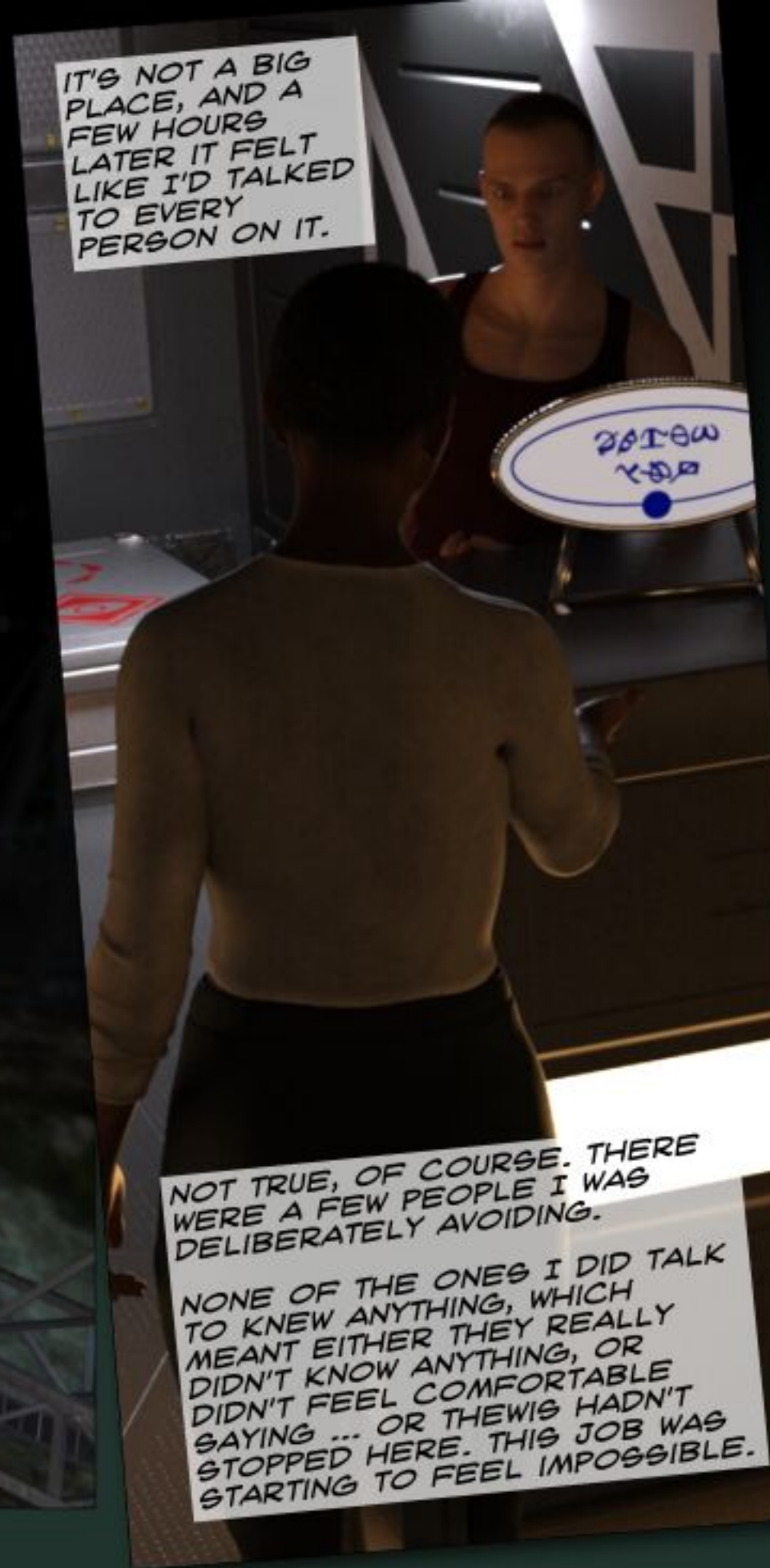
DORIAN, AS I SAID, IS A SYSTEM WITH ONE POPULATED PLANET. THAT PLANET IS FULLY DEVELOPED -- INDUSTRY, AGRICULTURE, A MEGACITY, EVERYTHING -- AND HAS A LOT OF SHIP TRAFFIC.

TWO RINGS AWAY IS YRGLL, ANOTHER SYSTEM WITH AN INDUSTRIALIZED, POPULOUS PLANET AND A LOT OF TRAFFIC.

AND CONNECTING THE TWO IS DAKPHUT, A GARBAGE HOLE OF A SYSTEM. MOSTLY A DEBRIS FIELD, BUT THERE'S ONE ROCK BIG ENOUGH TO KEEP ITS ORBIT CLEAR AND SORT OF BE CALLED A PLANET. THAT'S ALSO NAMED DAKPHUT, AND IT'S RUN BY A WOULD-BE CRIMELORD WHO GETS MOST OF HIS MONEY FROM CHARGING "TOLLS" ON SHIPS TRYING TO GET ACROSS THE SYSTEM FROM ONE RING TO THE OTHER.

IF THE SHIPS ARE FAST ENOUGH OR WELL-ARMED, THEY MIGHT MAKE IT THROUGH WITHOUT BEING HASSLED. SOME FOLKS TAKE AN EXTRA THREE RING JUMPS OUT OF THEIR WAY SO THEY DON'T HAVE TO TRY.

I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO STOP ON DAKPHUT. BUT THERE WAS ALWAYS THE CHANCE THAT THEWIS HAD BEEN THERE. OR COULD EVEN STILL BE THERE.



IT'S NOT A BIG PLACE, AND A FEW HOURS LATER IT FELT LIKE I'D TALKED TO EVERY PERSON ON IT.

NOT TRUE, OF COURSE. THERE WERE A FEW PEOPLE I WAS DELIBERATELY AVOIDING.

NONE OF THE ONES I DID TALK TO KNEW ANYTHING, WHICH MEANT EITHER THEY REALLY DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING, OR DIDN'T FEEL COMFORTABLE SAYING ... OR THEWIS HADN'T STOPPED HERE. THIS JOB WAS STARTING TO FEEL IMPOSSIBLE.



That churk! That complete slagger!

I can't believe it!

Thewis! Hold up, huh?



Fargs tipped them off! They know I'm here with the cargo! Two of them tried to jump me outside his shop!

I've been working with Fargs for years! I can't believe he'd just sell me out!

Everybody's got a price, if it's high enough.

And that many cores ... it was going to attract attention, you know. Maybe Fargs decided this was safer money.

But you're heading back to the hangar ...

Of course I am! Those cores are mine and I'm not letting them have them! I'll get out of here and sell them somewhere else!

They're going to be waiting for you in the hangar. If they have any brains at all.

I have a brilliant idea for that.



See? they're not looking up here, so we can--

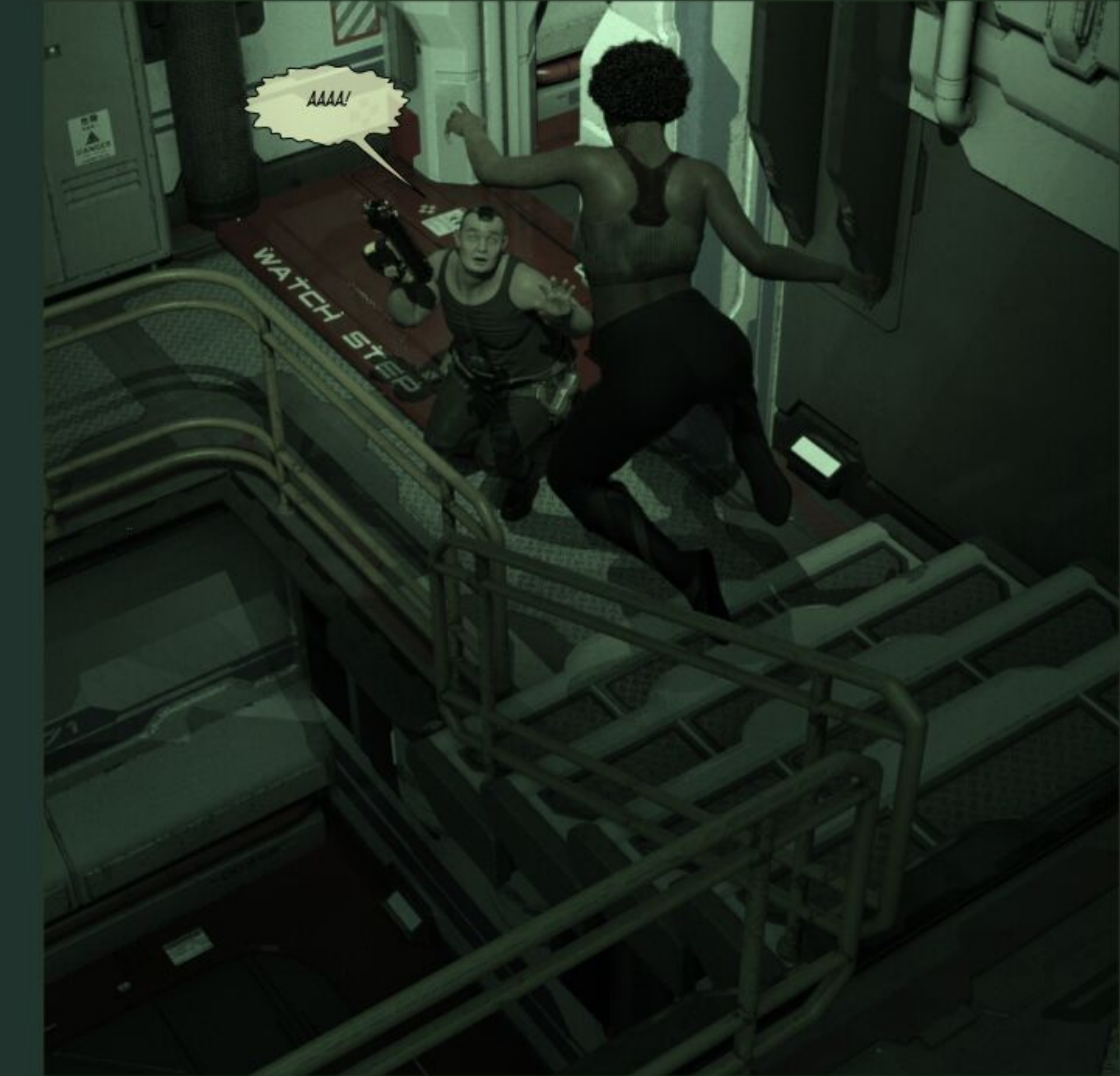
Shh! I get it.

... can just about make the jump ...

Jail! Down!!



AAAA!!

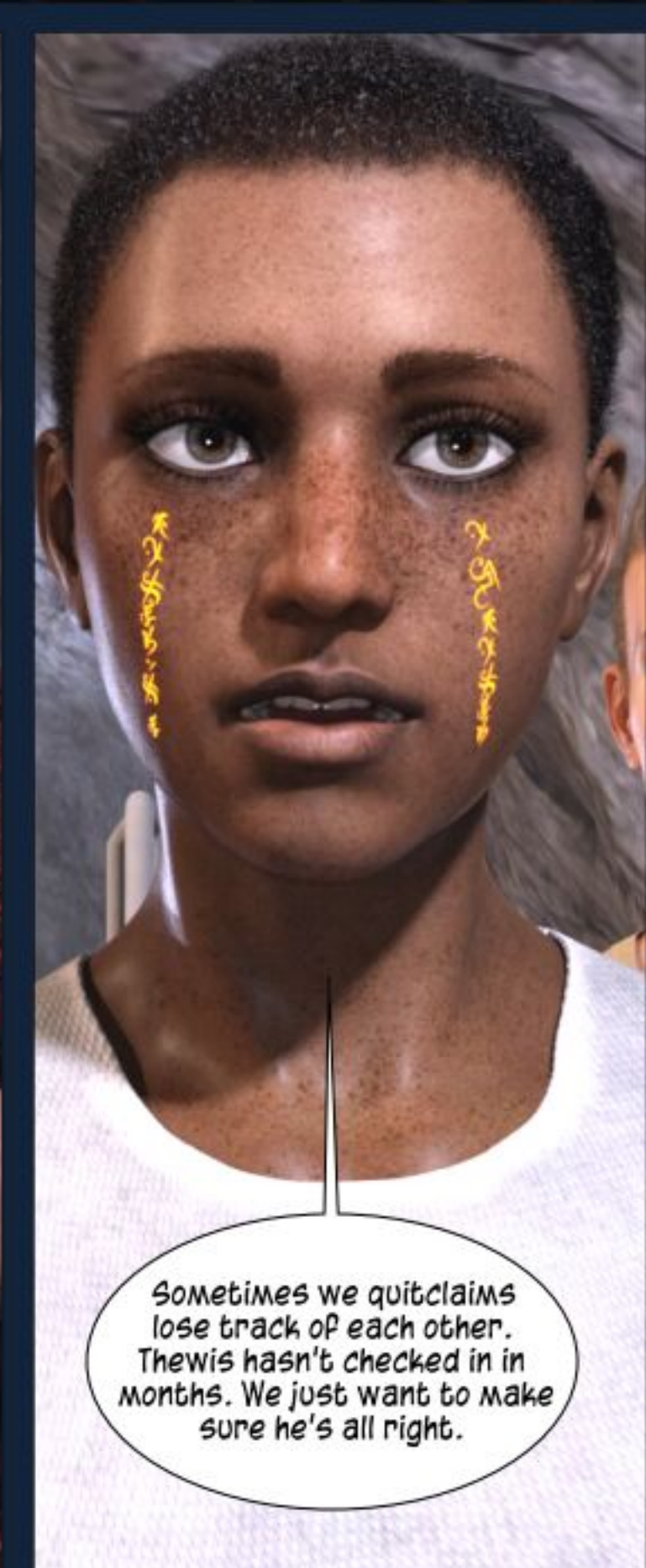
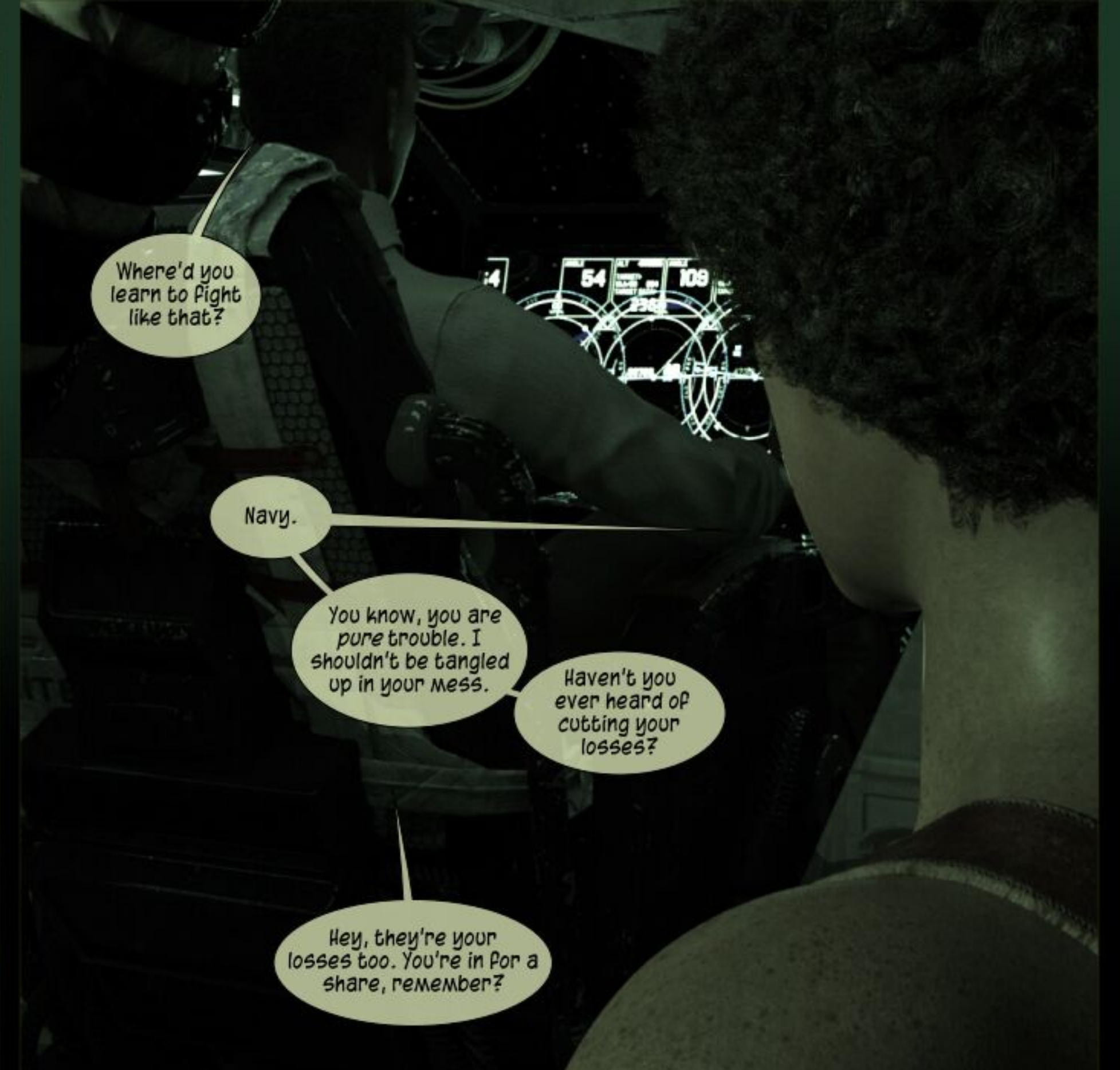


AAAA!



Randa!

Start the Pucking ship, Jail!



IT'S NOT THAT COMMON TO ENCOUNTER OTHER SHIPS WHILE TRAVELLING. SPACE IS JUST TOO BIG.

BUT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN SHIPS HAVE TO CONVERGE ON A COMMON DESTINATION, LIKE A PLANET. OR A RING. THAT'S WHEN YOU MIGHT GET INTO TROUBLE.

M'aidez!
M'aidez!
Any in area --

I'D STUMBLED UPON FIGHTS BETWEEN SHIPS OFTEN ENOUGH THAT I HAD A POLICY: I NEVER INTERFERED WITHOUT HAVING A CLEAR IDEA WHAT I WAS GETTING INTO. IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW EXACTLY WHO YOU'RE PISSEING OFF.

THE BIG SHIP WAS CLEARLY ONE OF MECHIV'S, TRYING TO COLLECT A "TOLL" FROM THE SMALL SHIP, AND PREPARED TO SHOOT IT APART IF IT DIDN'T STOP. GETTING IN MECHIV'S FACE, WHILE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SATISFYING, WAS NOT WORTH THE PAIN.

... EXCEPT THAT I RECOGNIZED THE SMALLER SHIP. THERE MAY HAVE BEEN MORE THAN ONE OLD RATTY VALKYRIE KICKING AROUND THE AREA, BUT ONLY THIS ONE HAD THAT SCORCH-BLACKENED PORT ENGINE POD.

AME WAS DOING A FAIRLY GOOD JOB STAYING OUT OF THE PLANE OF THEIR FORWARD GUNS, WHICH LOOKED LIKE THEIR STRONGEST ARMAMENT.



M'aidez!
Hostile craft--
taking damage--

BUT SHE COULDN'T OUTFRIN THEM, AND SHE COULDN'T USE HER ONE TURRET, NOT CREWING ALONE, NOT AND DODGE AT THE SAME TIME.

IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DENT THEM ANYWAY. BUT I HAD WEAPONS THAT COULD.

Can't blast the bridge. That'd be a little too fatal.

But it doesn't look like they have anything aft ... a couple of hits on their engines in the right places and I can disable them ...



THAT'S WHEN THE SHIP THAT WAS FOLLOWING ME (OF COURSE I KNEW THEY WOULD; LIKE I SAID, I WASN'T BORN YESTERDAY) DECIDED THAT DEFENDING THEIR BUDDIES WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN STAYING COVERT.



shit!

THEY HAD THE BEST WEAPONS IN THE FIGHT, AND NOW AME AND I WERE BOTH IN DEEP TROUBLE.

AND THEN SOMETHING REALLY INTERESTING HAPPENED.



Hunter!
We're taking serious damage!
Get them off us!

Can't, Trawler!
I've got one too!
need to pull away--

Where'd they come from?

Wow.

Yaaaah!
We stand down!
We're standing down,
do you hear?

Back off!

NO ONE KNOWS WHO THE YANONE ARE, WHERE THEY CAME FROM, OR WHAT THEY'RE DOING. THEY NEVER RESPOND TO HAILS.

WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THEY'RE REALLY CALLED. THEY GOT THE NICKNAME FROM AN ARROW DESIGN ON THEIR SHIPS. WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THAT THEY DON'T SEEM TO HAVE A PROBLEM TAKING ON THINGS MANY TIMES BIGGER THAN THEY ARE. AND THAT THEY ALWAYS WIN.



Ame!
Ame, it's Randa!
Are you all right? Are you breached?
Can you get to the Ring?

Randa!
I'm breached but I've got it sealed off. Had to divert some power, but I still have ALLL ... I can make it.

Go!
While they're distracted. I'll follow you through.

BO14.



BO14, ack.
... Who is this?

We were not on Chalond 4.



Uh ...

Understood.

... Thank you.



Ame!

So how bad is it?



A lot of breaches. All starboard. That side's a little blind when you fly. Mostly in the cargo hold.

And a big chunk of the main power system overloaded and will have to be replaced.

Putting aside how I'm going to pay for it ... they're telling me at least a month of drydock.



Ame ...

If you're just going to keep following me and getting into trouble, then you might as well come along with me while your ship's out of service, and that way maybe we can avoid some of it.

The problem is, I know you only want to find Thewis so you can get revenge--



And why wouldn't I? He killed my sister, Randa. My only family. He needs to pay.

I still don't know he did. And the only way I'm going to find out for sure is by talking to him. I can't do that if you kill him.

Then talk to him! If he didn't do it--if you can convince me, after you talk to him, that he didn't do it--I'll leave him alone.

But if he did it--

I won't stand in your way.



Randa?

C'mon, Randa, where are you?

We've got to move!



RANDA!



uhk



Ah, shit.

Jail!

Don't bother! Just jam the door! We've got to get out of here!



Oh, now you're in a hurry.

Can your ship blow out those bay doors?

Uh ... Yeah. Easily.

But we can't just fly off ... they're faster and armed to the teeth ...

Don't worry about that! Just get us out.



Whoa!!

What was that?

Nothing much. Just a ship losing a lot of power very fast.



I locked their whole power system into an overload loop. Boom.

If I did it right, they're on emergency reserves now. No weapons, no engines. They're dead in the water.

You probably don't believe that ...

Sure I do.

You stunned that clown in the corridor. Using one of their guns.

They sure weren't shooting to stun, so you had to have stopped and changed the setting.

But not actually dead.

I don't like to kill anybody unless I absolutely have to. Even jakazes like those.

Yeah, me neither.



I don't really think you're horrible, you know.

WE SPENT FOUR DAYS ASKING AROUND FOR THEWIS WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A CRUMB. I COULD TELL A ME WAS LOSING PATIENCE. FRANKLY, SO WAS I.

YRGLL DIDN'T HAVE A STRICT PORT REGISTRY LIKE DORIAN. ANYONE COULD COME AND GO FROM THE SYSTEM AS THEY PLEASED, WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A GOODBYE, AS LONG AS THEY WEREN'T TRYING TO SKIP OUT ON THEIR DOCK FEES.

I CAME UP WITH SEVERAL IDEAS AND NONE OF THEM HAD DONE US ANY GOOD. THEWIS CLEARLY HAD NOT WANTED TO BE TRACKED. THAT, BY ITSELF, WAS MAKING ME LEAN MORE AND MORE TOWARD AN ANSWER I DIDN'T LIKE. BUT IT STILL WASN'T DEFINITE. AFTER ALL, HE COULD HAVE BEEN RUNNING FROM SOMETHING ELSE.



How long do we give it before we admit we can't find him?

That's a good question.



HMM.



Came in person, no less.

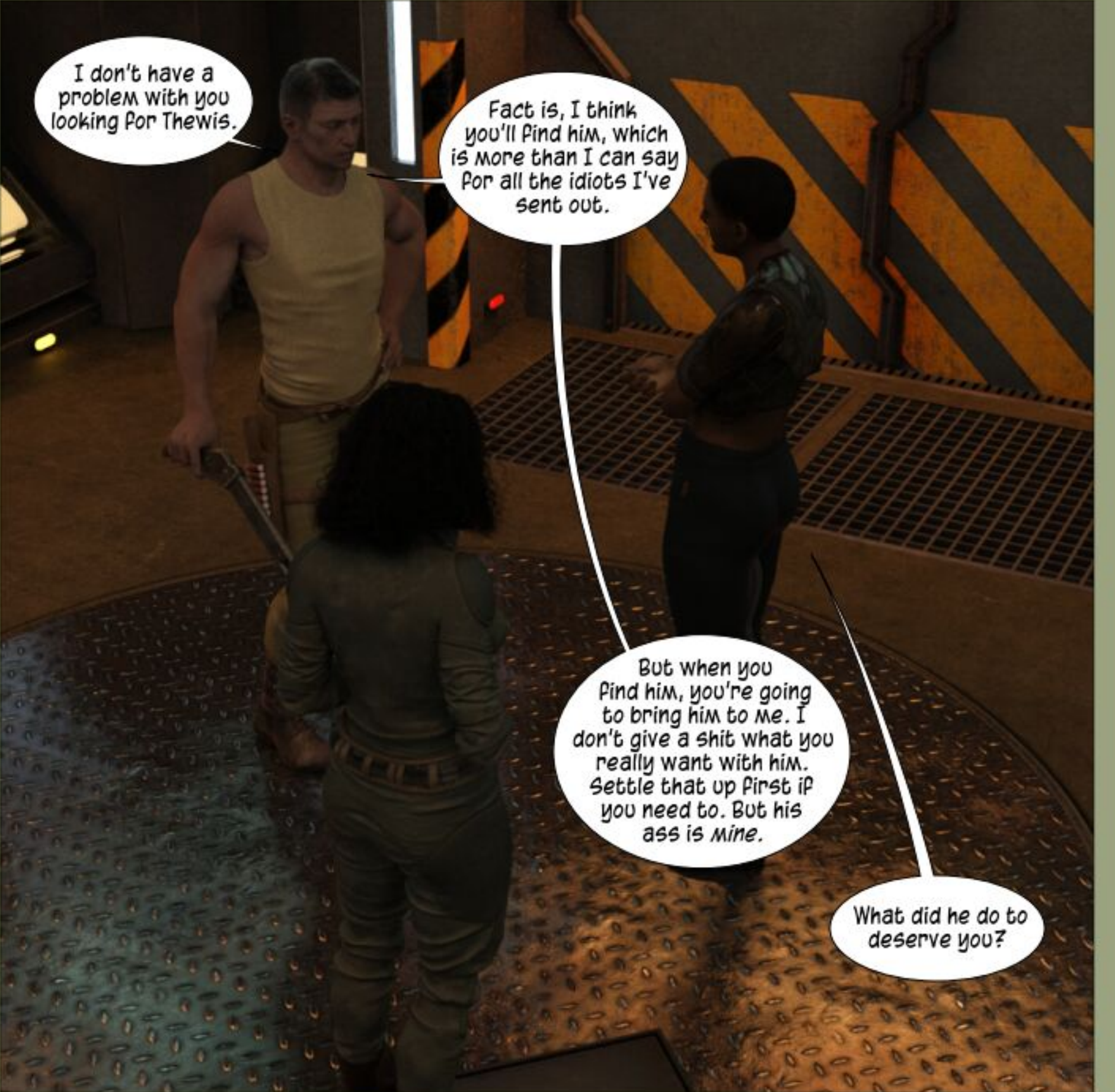
After that fuckup? Yeah, I figured I'd have to do it myself.

Burke was supposed to follow you, not get his ship almost blown in half.

You know, I bet you're not real popular in this system ... I'm surprised you'd show your face.

I'm not staying long enough for them to catch on.

Come on. I want to talk to you, but not out here.

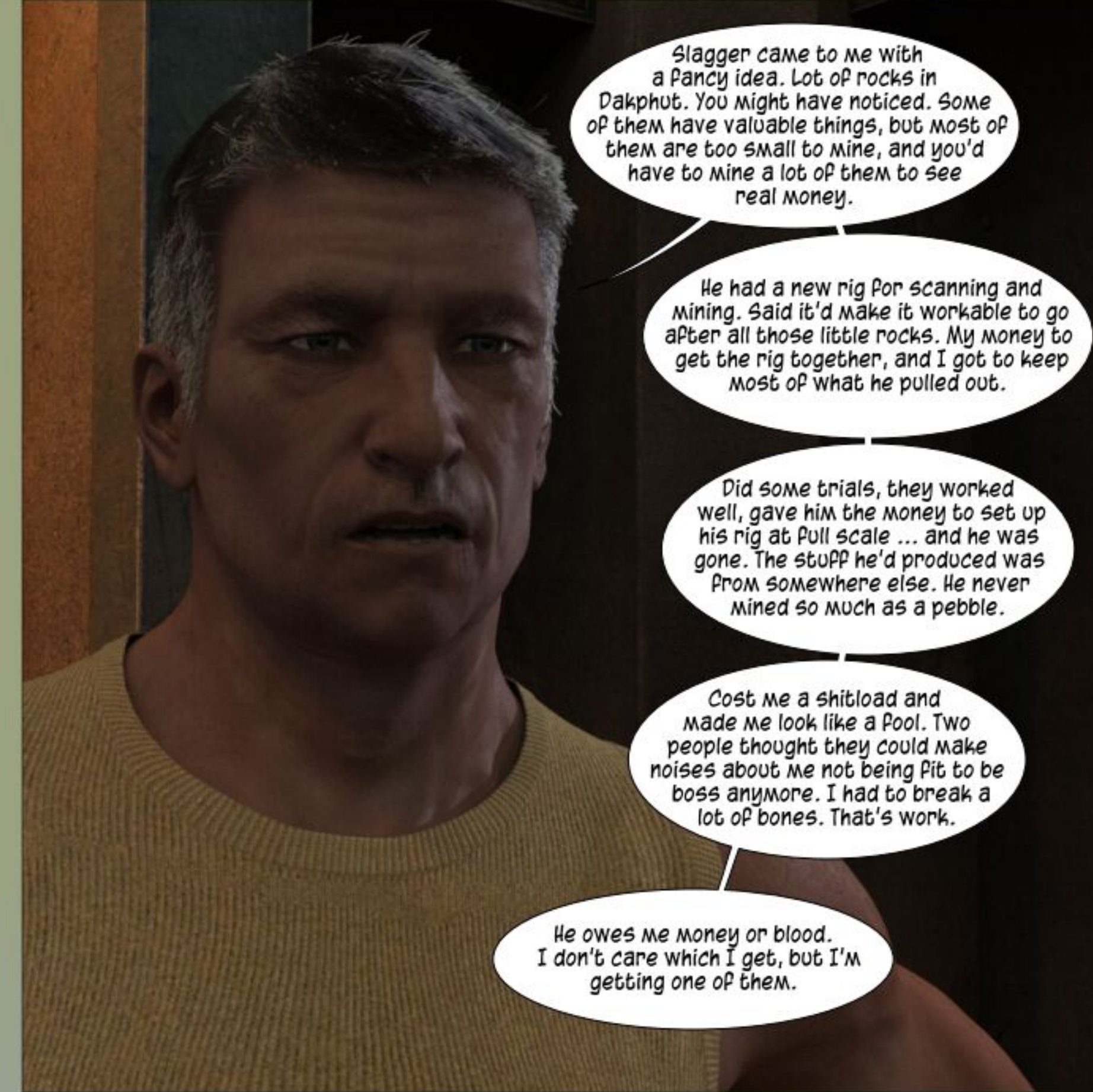


I don't have a problem with you looking for Thewis.

Fact is, I think you'll find him, which is more than I can say for all the idiots I've sent out.

But when you find him, you're going to bring him to me. I don't give a shit what you really want with him. Settle that up first if you need to. But his ass is mine.

What did he do to deserve you?



Slagger came to me with a fancy idea. Lot of rocks in Dakphut. You might have noticed. Some of them have valuable things, but most of them are too small to mine, and you'd have to mine a lot of them to see real money.

He had a new rig for scanning and mining. Said it'd make it workable to go after all those little rocks. My money to get the rig together, and I got to keep most of what he pulled out.

Did some trials, they worked well, gave him the money to set up his rig at full scale ... and he was gone. The stuff he'd produced was from somewhere else. He never mined so much as a pebble.

Cost me a shitload and made me look like a fool. Two people thought they could make noises about me not being fit to be boss anymore. I had to break a lot of bones. That's work.

He owes me money or blood. I don't care which I get, but I'm getting one of them.



I thought I had him when he had the cheese to run Dakphut again. Wouldn't have figured he'd come anywhere near.

But the lucky shit made it all the way across.

The trouble is, we've run out of options. We were just discussing that when you came along.

Yrgll's a dead end and Thewis doesn't want to be found. Guess why?

Doesn't matter.

I think you'll find him sooner or later. I can wait.

I'm just saying: When you do find him, you bring him to me.



uuuurrrgh

... Are you OK?

I'm great.

Why wouldn't I be great? A pisspot backworld crimelord has the utmost confidence in me.

Wish I felt the same.

... I had kind of been thinking that being a quitclaim sounded like a nice job.

A lot better than trying to make a living hauling cargo and barely breaking even ...

But I guess it's not all that--

Oh, thanks a lot.

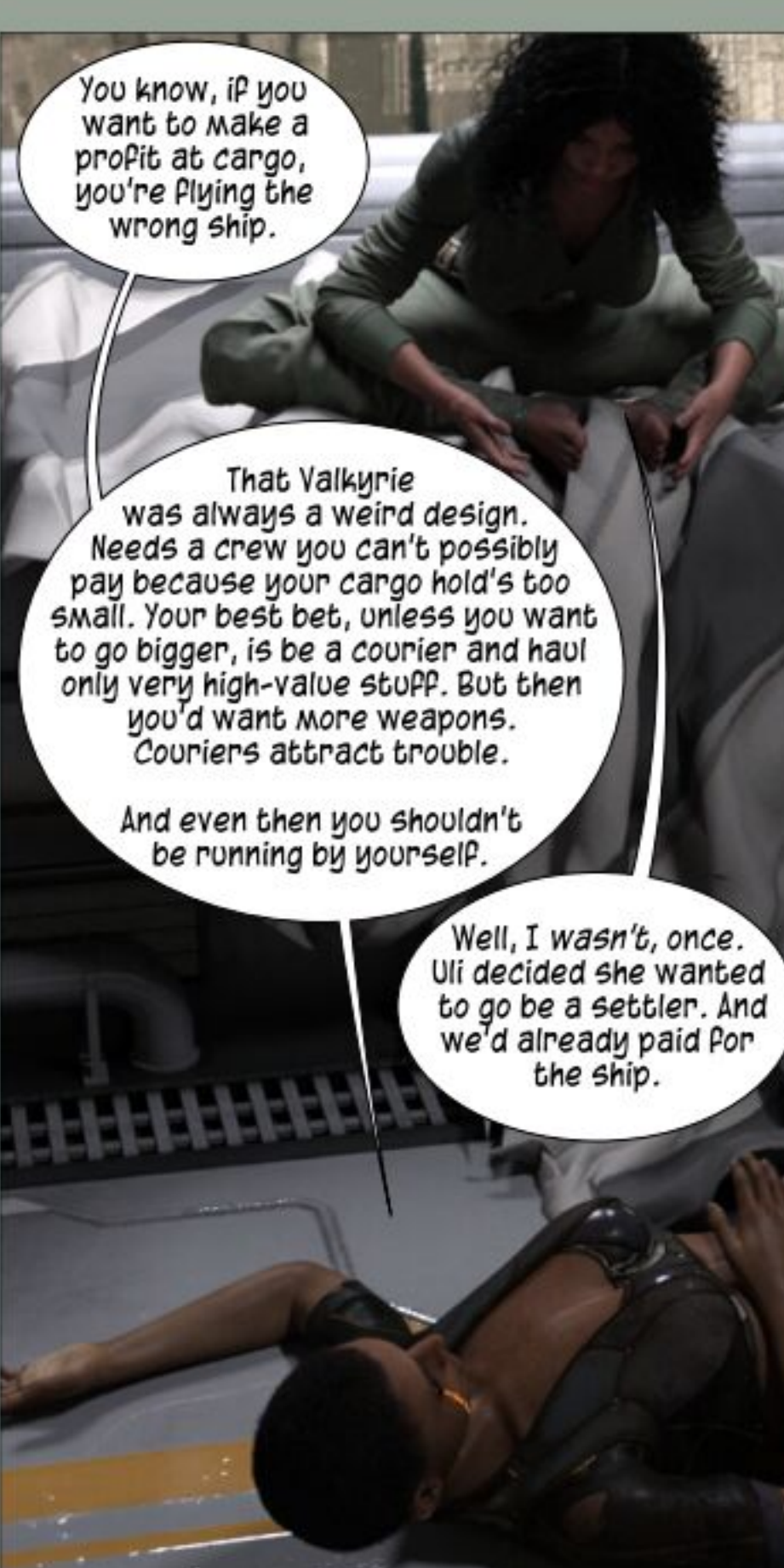


I'm sorry! I just meant that--

I knew what you meant.

Usually it's pretty good. Not for everybody, but I like it.

This particular job's special. In too many ways.



You know, if you want to make a profit at cargo, you're flying the wrong ship.

That Valkyrie was always a weird design. Needs a crew you can't possibly pay because your cargo hold's too small. Your best bet, unless you want to go bigger, is be a courier and haul only very high-value stuff. But then you'd want more weapons. Couriers attract trouble.

And even then you shouldn't be running by yourself.

Well, I wasn't, once. Ull decided she wanted to go be a settler. And we'd already paid for the ship.



I probably wouldn't make a good quitclaim.

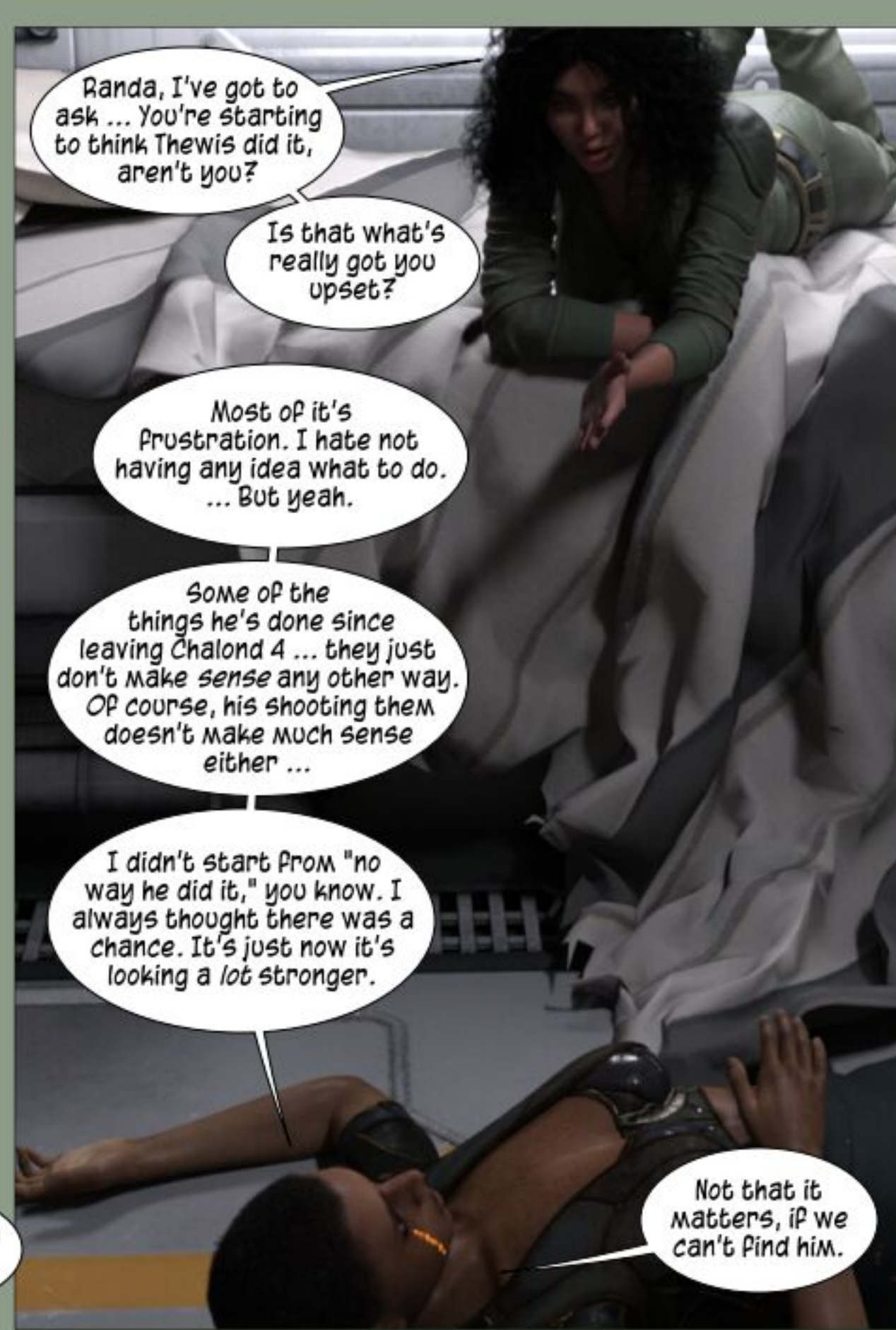
Don't have the nerves for it. How you could be so calm with a gun pointed at you ...

Usually if they want to shoot you, they just shoot you. Probably when you're not looking. If they point a weapon at you and don't shoot it, they don't want to shoot you, they want your attention.

Of course, sometimes they just want your attention for a second before they shoot you, so you have to be careful.

Also he may have thought we had the Yanone on our side.

Kind of wish we did.



Randa, I've got to ask ... You're starting to think Thewis did it, aren't you?

Is that what's really got you upset?

Most of it's Frustration. I hate not having any idea what to do. ... But yeah.

Some of the things he's done since leaving Chalond 4 ... they just don't make sense any other way. Of course, his shooting them doesn't make much sense either ...

I didn't start from "no way he did it," you know. I always thought there was a chance. It's just now it's looking a lot stronger.

Not that it matters, if we can't find him.



I don't have any idea where to look for him ...

... I hate thinking about what I'm going to have to say, and maybe do, if I do find him ...

Why?

... and I can't drop it. I'm not really allowed to. Well, I could, but Fuller would never forgive me. She sent me because she thinks he's my responsibility.

I guess you could say I discovered him. I was doing a quitclaim job and he was on the planet looking for some salvage.

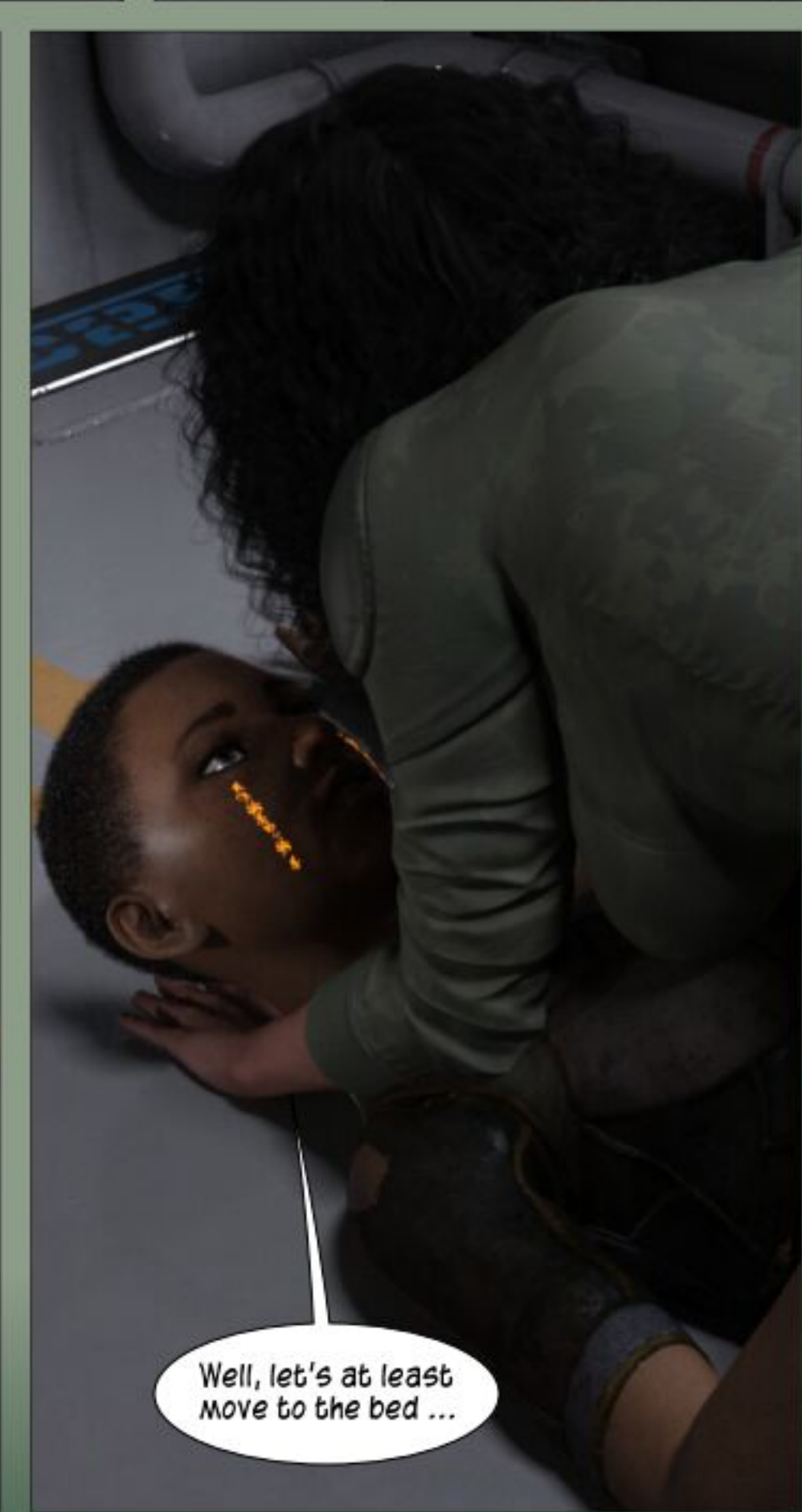
... That was a long time ago, though, and I haven't ... we didn't stay in touch. If she thinks it's going to give me insight into his head ...

Maybe you need to do something else for a little while.

You know, distract your brain. Give it a rest.



Hmm.



Well, let's at least move to the bed ...



You don't want to celebrate our daring escape?

I want to celebrate a daring shower.

I wouldn't say no to a daring nap either, but I'll have a wait in the port. I might be able to get one there.

I've got to get back to my ship before someone decides it's salvage, and it's a long way from here.



You sure?

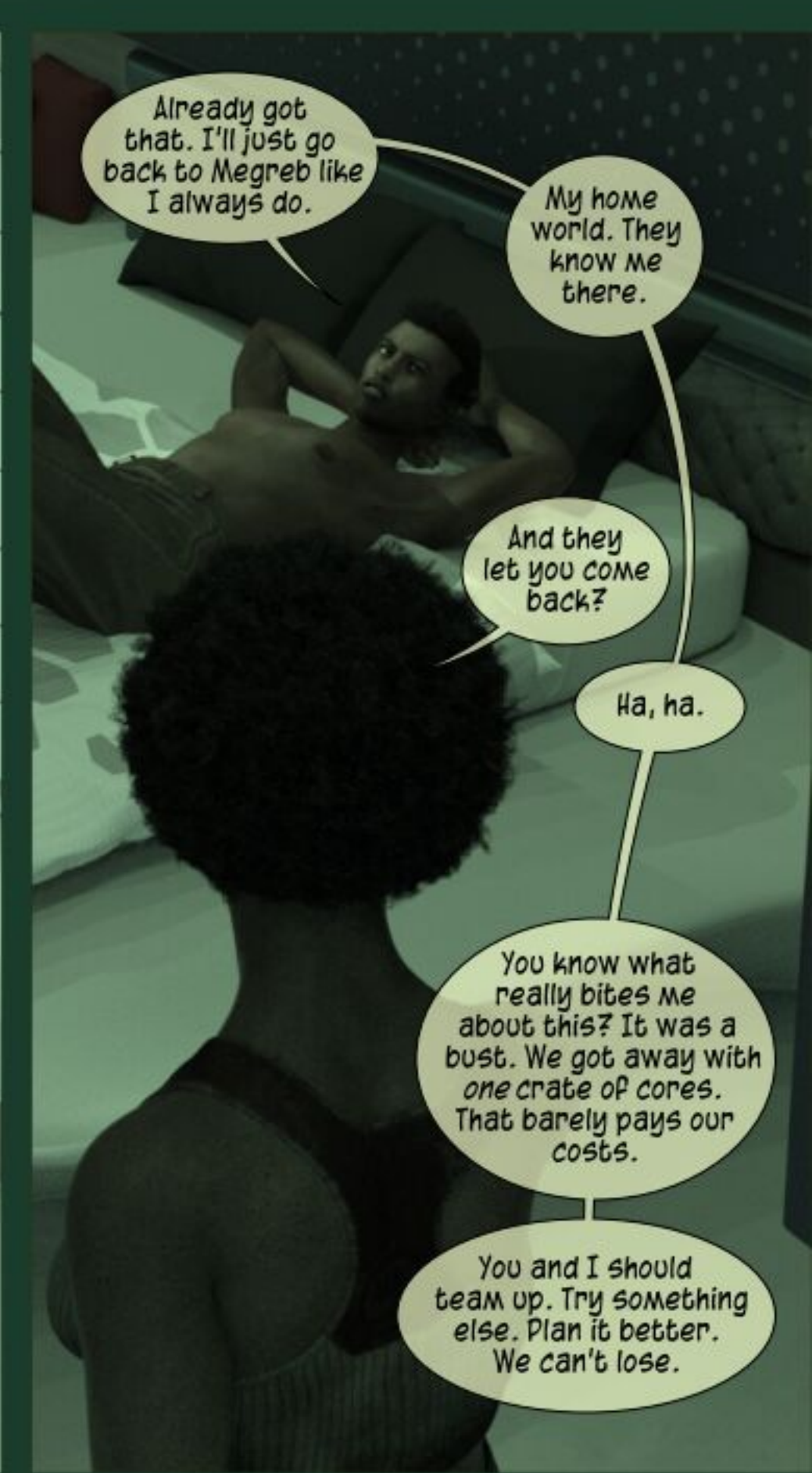
Jail, you're all right, but you are very much not my type. Not physically, anyway.



Anyway, I don't know why you think you can celebrate.

They're going to be after you. You, a lot more than me. They were mad at you before they ever saw me, and they never saw my ship.

You should be trying to figure out where you can go hide for a few months while they forget about you.



Already got that. I'll just go back to Megreb like I always do.

My home world. They know me there.

And they let you come back?

Ha, ha.

You know what really bites me about this? It was a bust. We got away with one crate of cores. That barely pays our costs.

You and I should team up. Try something else. Plan it better. We can't lose.



You don't have to split the cores with me. I've got a quitclaim fee coming, remember?

... I was going to suggest you try being a quitclaim instead.

It's safer and more stable than ... whatever it is you do. I don't know if it pays better, but you might live longer. If you care about that.

If you can keep honest.

Huh.

You think I'm cut out for it?



... Ame?

I know.

I know where he is.

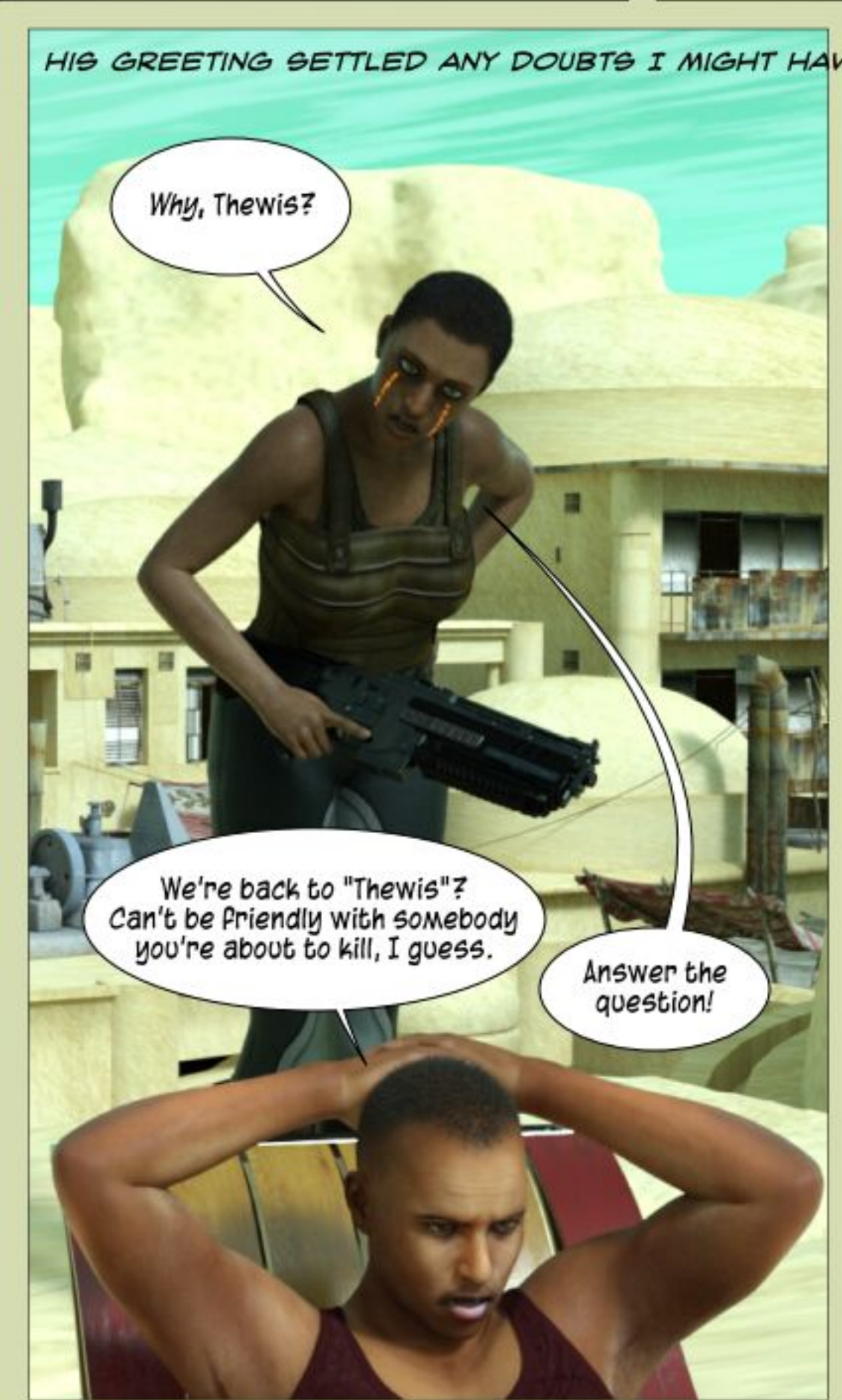


HE HADN'T NAMED THE SYSTEM, ONLY THE PLANET. BUT I COULD ONLY FIND ONE "MEGREB" IN THE GALACTIC INDEX.



I'd been wondering if you'd remember.

I almost didn't.



Why, Thewis?

We're back to "Thewis"? Can't be Friendly with somebody you're about to kill, I guess.

Answer the question!



You're not going to understand.

I thought you did, for a little while, but then you left. I wanted you to stay. We'd have done all kinds of things.

I knew you didn't get it when you said I should try being a quitclaim. I stuck with it for a while, but it was never interesting. Never the same.

So you scammed Mechiv because you were bored?



He deserved it! He's scum. I don't know why Dorian hasn't come in and shut his ass down.

Because he's with Cherniy Medved and they don't need that pain.

And the Navy won't move in because local crimelords aren't a Federation problem.

He didn't let up after you scammed him. So you paked the derelict so you could get the money to pay him back.

It was supposed to really be derelict. New Horizons thought so. They hadn't responded to hails.

Then I got there and it turned out their COMMS were down. The person who knew how to fix them had died of Corlian Fever. There were only four of them left, they were in bad shape, everyone thought they were dead already ...

No one was going to miss them!



One of them was my sister, churk!

Yaaaah! Who are you?

This is Ame, Thewis. She's real pissed at you.

You deserve to die!

Now, hold on--

You didn't pay opp Mechiv, though, Thewis ...



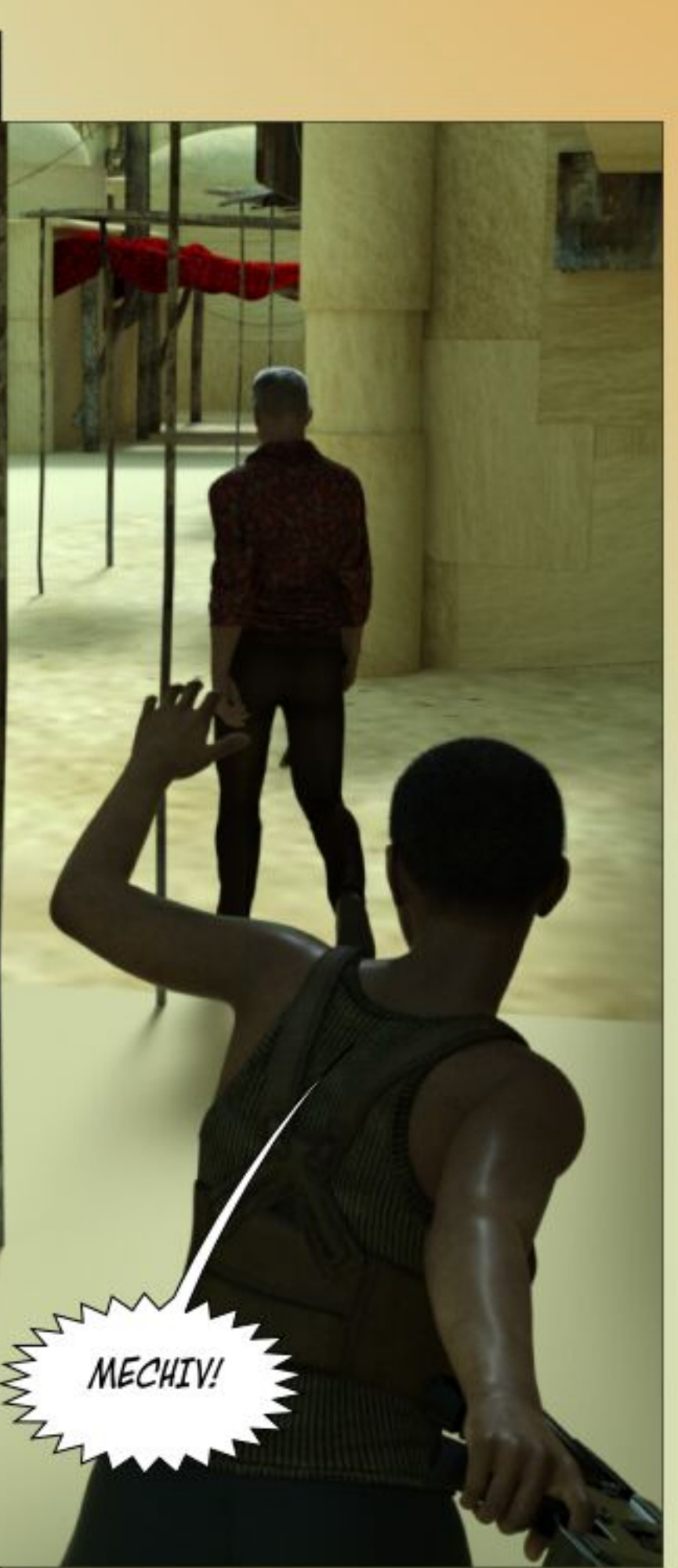
I was going to. I got as far as Dakphut.

Then I thought, why the fuck should I? He's scum. Let him stay mad.

Besides, I was going to need the money; I couldn't be a quitclaim again after that and --

AAAAAAGH!

Thewis!!



MECHIV!



Money or blood, Guerrero.

Money or blood.

I TOOK AME BACK TO YRGLL AND THEN, FOR SOME REASON ... JUST DIDN'T LEAVE. FOR WEEKS.

You still down?

How long have you been in this pool? Days?

I've been thinking about some very important things, I'll have you know.

Oh yeah? Like what?

Like whether I owe Igor Mechiv some trouble.

I still can't believe he kept tailing us.

Yeah, he's almost as determined as you are.

hmph.

I don't think you owe him trouble. Actually I think you might owe him thanks. In a weird way.

How do you figure that?

Well ...

Would you have killed Thewis?

um ...

Probably not.

He wasn't going to try to be a quitclaim anymore, which was the important part ...

And there are laws on Megreb, I'd hate to have another planet I couldn't set Pool on ...

Would your boss have been OK with your not killing him?

She's not exactly my boss.

I don't know. Maybe not.

So your idea is Mechiv did me a favor. Hm.

You know, I'd been thinking about handing you the gun and letting you decide. Would you have killed him?

... I have no idea.

Anyway, come out of there. I want you to kiss me goodbye.

Oh, they've finished?

This morning. And the loan went through, so I'm settled up.

This is a nice planet ... but I can't wait to be off it.

And you should probably get off it too, y'know.

I'm wet.

I don't care.

I'm taking your advice and going into courier cargo.

I've already got a run lined up on Dorian. Gonna haul to Astra.

Please go the long way to Dorian.

Definitely. And when I get to Astra I'm going to look into finding a crewmate.



Ame ...

Were you seriously thinking about being a quitclaim? Or was that just ... you know ...

Oh, I was serious.

But it's not for me. I was pretty sure. Now I'm really sure.

Being a quitclaim may not have been exciting enough for Thewis, but it's a little too exciting for me.

Send me a message sometime, huh? We'll meet up and you can tell me your adventures.

I think that's how I prefer them. Secondhand.

See you around.

END