

MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A QUITCLAIM

IT'S NOT THE MOST RELIABLE OCCUPATION. IF YOU FIND AN ACTUAL DERELICT, YOU GET PAID A LOT ... BUT YOU CAN ALSO GO MONTHS WITH NO WORK, OR NOTHING BUT JOBS THAT AREN'T DERELICT AND SO DON'T PAY MUCH MORE THAN YOUR EXPENSES.

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, I CAN'T AFFORD TO BE CHOOSY ABOUT WHERE MY JOBS COME FROM, AND I GET A LOT OF THEM FROM PEOPLE I DON'T CARE FOR, LIKE NEW HORIZONS. I HOLD MY NOSE AND TAKE THEM.

BUT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I FIND I HAVE PERSONAL LIMITS.



Randa Guerrero?



I'm Nervet Hiliger. Representing SlipSpace Freight. We'd like to --

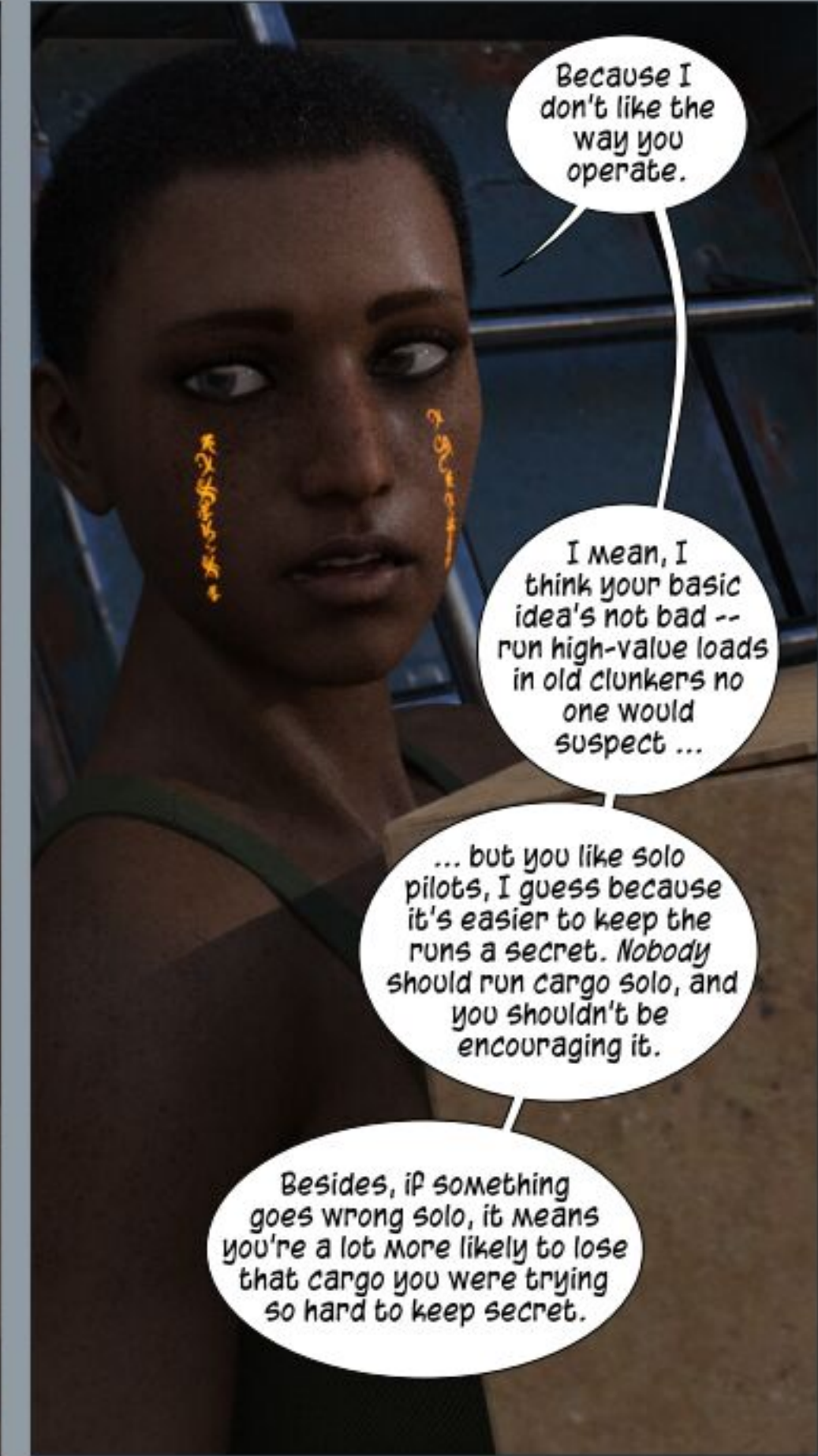
I don't run cargo.

Why would I ask a quitclaim to run cargo?

Huh. OK, score a point for your intel team.

But I'm also not interested in working for SlipSpace. In any capacity.

... May I ask why not?



Because I don't like the way you operate.

I mean, I think your basic idea's not bad -- run high-value loads in old clunkers no one would suspect ...

... but you like solo pilots, I guess because it's easier to keep the runs a secret. Nobody should run cargo solo, and you shouldn't be encouraging it.

Besides, if something goes wrong solo, it means you're a lot more likely to lose that cargo you were trying so hard to keep secret.



Seems to me like you'd see that as a benefit.

What's that supposed to mean?

Well, if the run goes sour and you find what's left ... there was a cargo of psittacite, for example ...

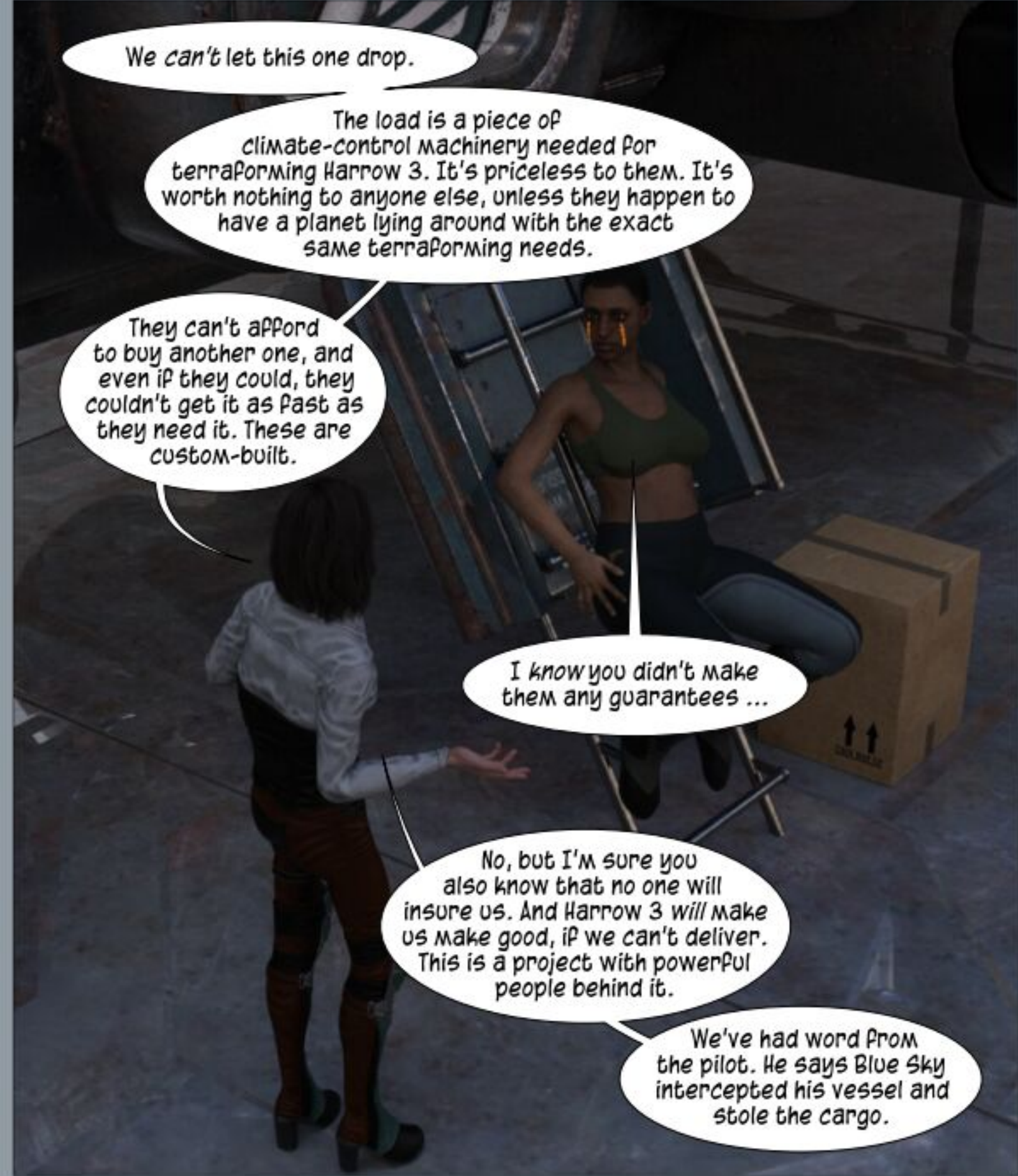
APPARENTLY SLIPSPACE HAD A VERY GOOD INTEL TEAM.

The pilot was dead. It was legitimate salvage. And I didn't come to you with it because everyone knows SlipSpace just writes off lost loads. Or you'd try to get out of paying a cut. Why don't you just write this one off too?

What one would that be?

Whatever it is you're trying to talk me into tracking down for you.

THIS REFERS TO EVENTS IN "THE DEAD DROP."



We can't let this one drop.

The load is a piece of climate-control machinery needed for terraforming Harrow 3. It's priceless to them. It's worth nothing to anyone else, unless they happen to have a planet lying around with the exact same terraforming needs.

They can't afford to buy another one, and even if they could, they couldn't get it as fast as they need it. These are custom-built.

I know you didn't make them any guarantees ...

No, but I'm sure you also know that no one will insure us. And Harrow 3 will make us make good, if we can't deliver. This is a project with powerful people behind it.

We've had word from the pilot. He says Blue Sky intercepted his vessel and stole the cargo.



I am not taking on a Blue Sky raid group by myself.

Yes, they're mostly incompetent and their ships are mostly trash ... but every once in a while you get one that has good equipment and knows what they're doing ...

So don't take them on by yourself. Get whatever help you need. Your discretion.

... and SlipSpace is prepared to pay for that?



Whatever it takes.

Huh. That must be some load.

If you peel like that, why don't you just go charter a bunch of Firepower yourself and go in with guns blazing? You're normally pretty big on cutting out the middleman.

That would be a bad idea.

You see, we haven't admitted the cargo has gone missing. And we would prefer not to have to.

Even sending in someone to investigate is going to make people wonder. Our reputation is at stake. This was a cargo that was supposed to have almost no risk of being lost in the first place. This isn't psittacite.



Ideally, we'd like to recover the cargo without anyone knowing it had ever gone missing, or that we sent you after it.

So, do whatever it takes, but be discreet? Great.

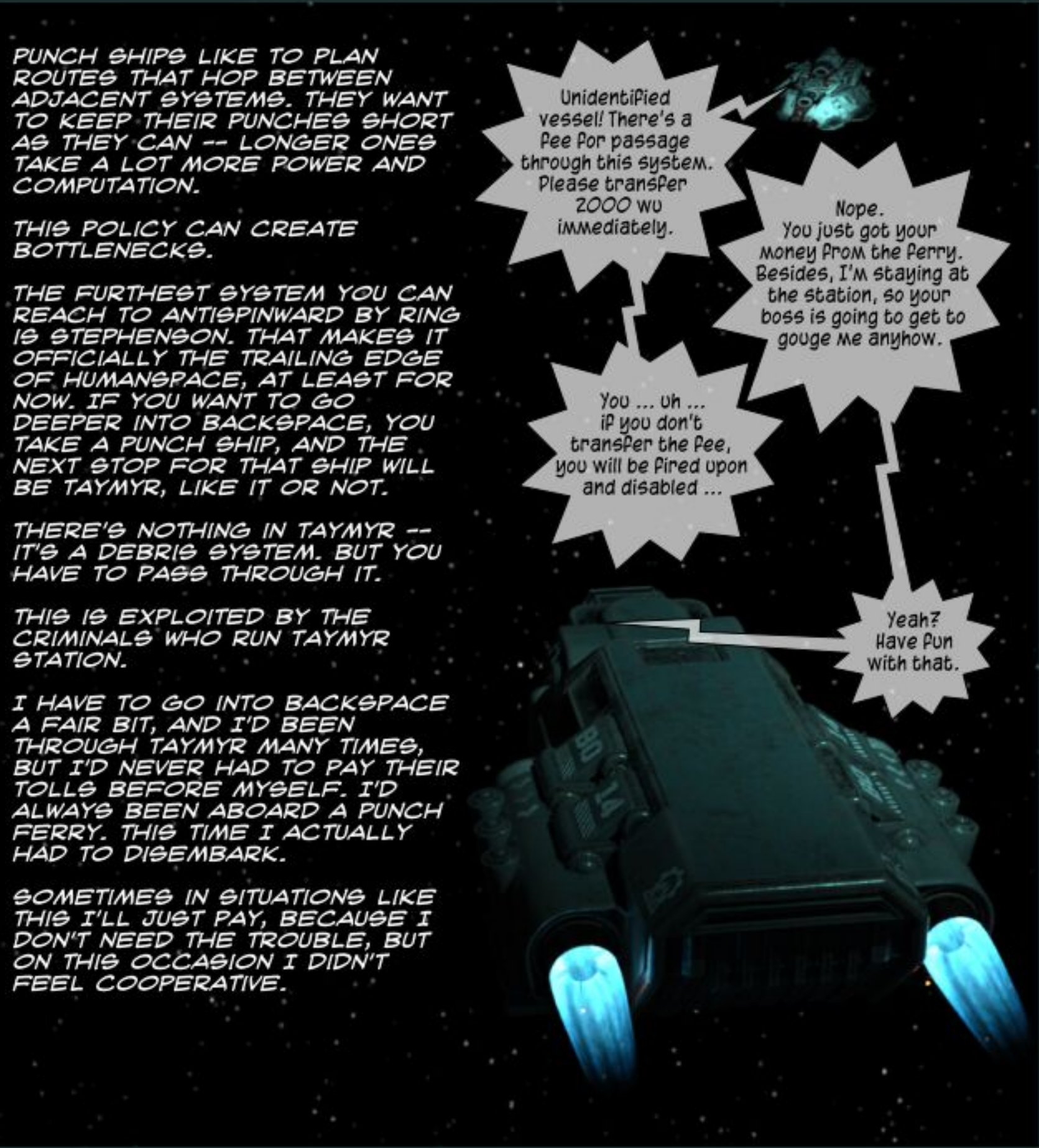
How do you know it isn't too late? This is weeks stale, if you've had time to hear from the pilot. They could have sold the goods by now.

Well, our thinking is, they can't sell it to anybody. Nobody wants it but Harrow 3, so their only option is to sell it to Harrow 3 all over again ... making them pay for it twice. If that had happened, we'd have been able to hear the yelling from here. We'd already be roasting on a spit.

We think these pirates had no idea what they were stealing, and now that they have it, they have no idea what to do with it, and it's still sitting somewhere in Taymyr system while they figure that out.

THE HOT BOX

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



PUNCH SHIPS LIKE TO PLAN ROUTES THAT HOP BETWEEN ADJACENT SYSTEMS. THEY WANT TO KEEP THEIR PUNCHES SHORT AS THEY CAN -- LONGER ONES TAKE A LOT MORE POWER AND COMPUTATION.

THIS POLICY CAN CREATE BOTTLENECKS.

THE FURTHEST SYSTEM YOU CAN REACH TO ANTISPINWARD BY RING IS STEPHENSON. THAT MAKES IT OFFICIALLY THE TRAILING EDGE OF HUMANSPACE, AT LEAST FOR NOW. IF YOU WANT TO GO DEEPER INTO BACKSPACE, YOU TAKE A PUNCH SHIP, AND THE NEXT STOP FOR THAT SHIP WILL BE TAYMYR, LIKE IT OR NOT.

THERE'S NOTHING IN TAYMYR -- IT'S A DEBRIS SYSTEM. BUT YOU HAVE TO PASS THROUGH IT.

THIS IS EXPLOITED BY THE CRIMINALS WHO RUN TAYMYR STATION.

I HAVE TO GO INTO BACKSPACE A FAIR BIT, AND I'D BEEN THROUGH TAYMYR MANY TIMES, BUT I'D NEVER HAD TO PAY THEIR TOLLS BEFORE MYSELF. I'D ALWAYS BEEN ABOARD A PUNCH FERRY. THIS TIME I ACTUALLY HAD TO DISEMBARK.

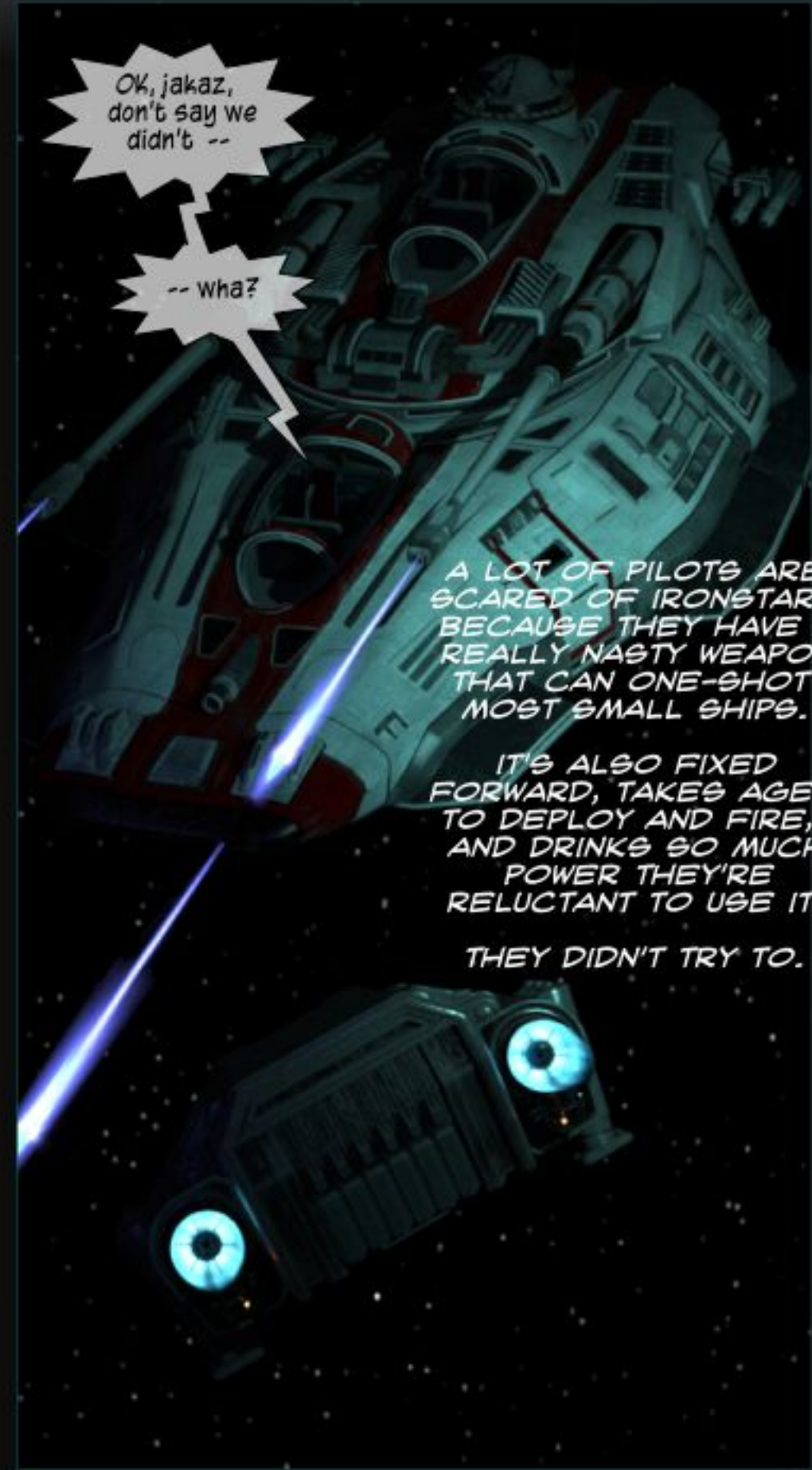
SOMETIMES IN SITUATIONS LIKE THIS I'LL JUST PAY, BECAUSE I DON'T NEED THE TROUBLE, BUT ON THIS OCCASION I DIDN'T FEEL COOPERATIVE.

Unidentified vessel! There's a Pee for passage through this system. Please transfer 2000 wu immediately.

Nope. You just got your money from the Perry. Besides, I'm staying at the station, so your boss is going to get to gouge me anyhow.

You ... uh ... if you don't transfer the Pee, you will be fired upon and disabled ...

Yeah? Have fun with that.



Ok, jakaz, don't say we didn't --

-- wha?

A LOT OF PILOTS ARE SCARED OF IRONSTARS BECAUSE THEY HAVE A REALLY NASTY WEAPON THAT CAN ONE-SHOT MOST SMALL SHIPS.

IT'S ALSO FIXED FORWARD, TAKES AGES TO DEPLOY AND FIRE, AND DRINKS SO MUCH POWER THEY'RE RELUCTANT TO USE IT.

THEY DIDN'T TRY TO.



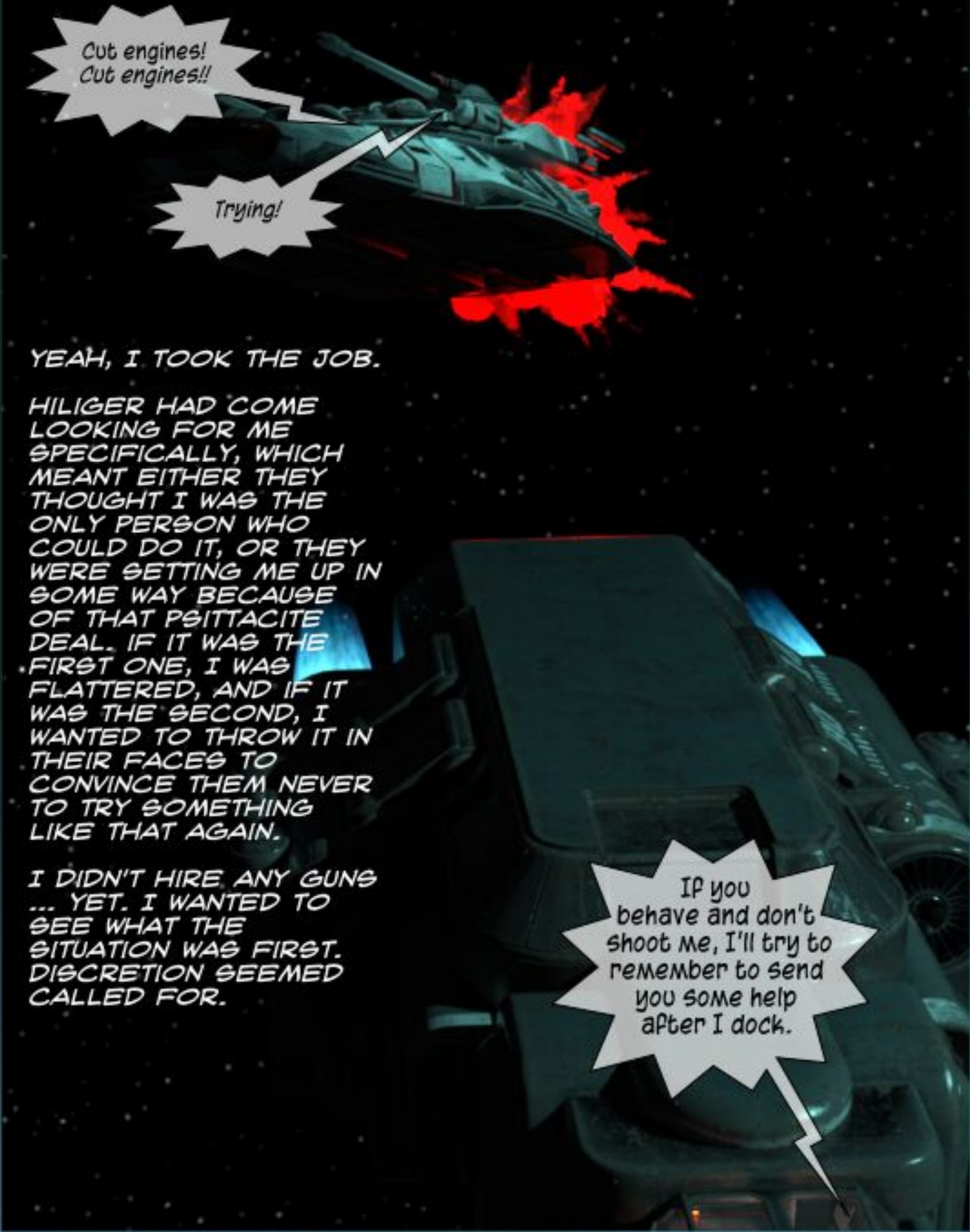
Fuck! Where is she?

I don't know!

Allez-churks!

IRONSTARS ALSO NEED TO BE FLOWN BY SOMEONE SKILLED AT CLOSE COMBAT FLIGHT, AND THESE SCUTS WEREN'T.

IF I WERE FLYING A SHIP BUILT MOSTLY FOR PURSUIT, THAT DIDN'T HAVE A FULL RADAR SWEEP AND HAD POORLY PLACED AFT CAMERAS, I'D HAVE BEEN YAWING AROUND THE INSTANT I REALIZED MY ENEMY WAS DOING A BACKLOOP INTO MY BLIND SPOT.



Cut engines!
Cut engines!!
Trying!

YEAH, I TOOK THE JOB.

HILIGER HAD COME LOOKING FOR ME SPECIFICALLY, WHICH MEANT EITHER THEY THOUGHT I WAS THE ONLY PERSON WHO COULD DO IT, OR THEY WERE SETTING ME UP IN SOME WAY BECAUSE OF THAT PITTACITE DEAL. IF IT WAS THE FIRST ONE, I WAS FLATTERED, AND IF IT WAS THE SECOND, I WANTED TO THROW IT IN THEIR FACES TO CONVINCE THEM NEVER TO TRY SOMETHING LIKE THAT AGAIN.

I DIDN'T HIRE ANY GUNS ... YET. I WANTED TO SEE WHAT THE SITUATION WAS FIRST. DISCRETION SEEMED CALLED FOR.

If you behave and don't shoot me, I'll try to remember to send you some help after I dock.



Got some nerve, scut!

You think you can just dock after what you did out there? You think nobody noticed?

THE THING TO DO WITH BIG MEAN PEOPLE WHO ARE FULL OF THEMSELVES IS NOT BE IMPRESSED. PISSES THEM OFF, AND THEY LOSE FOCUS. THEN IT'S EASIER TO GET THE ADVANTAGE.

I don't think we've been introduced?



Name's Porly, wiseass. Serd Porly.

I'm the fucking portmaster, and I'm the person who's going to kick your ass unless you pay up, and I mean right now. Not just your toll -- you're gonna pay for repairs to that Ironstar and the cost of --

Now, Serd ...



... seems to me she has a point. You did toll the Perry, and she's not paying for passage through the system. She's paying to stay in the system, via her lodging. Nobody should have to pay twice.

And I don't think she should have to eat the repair costs, given that it was your crew's incompetence that let them get disabled so easily in the first place. You should look into that.

hrmh.

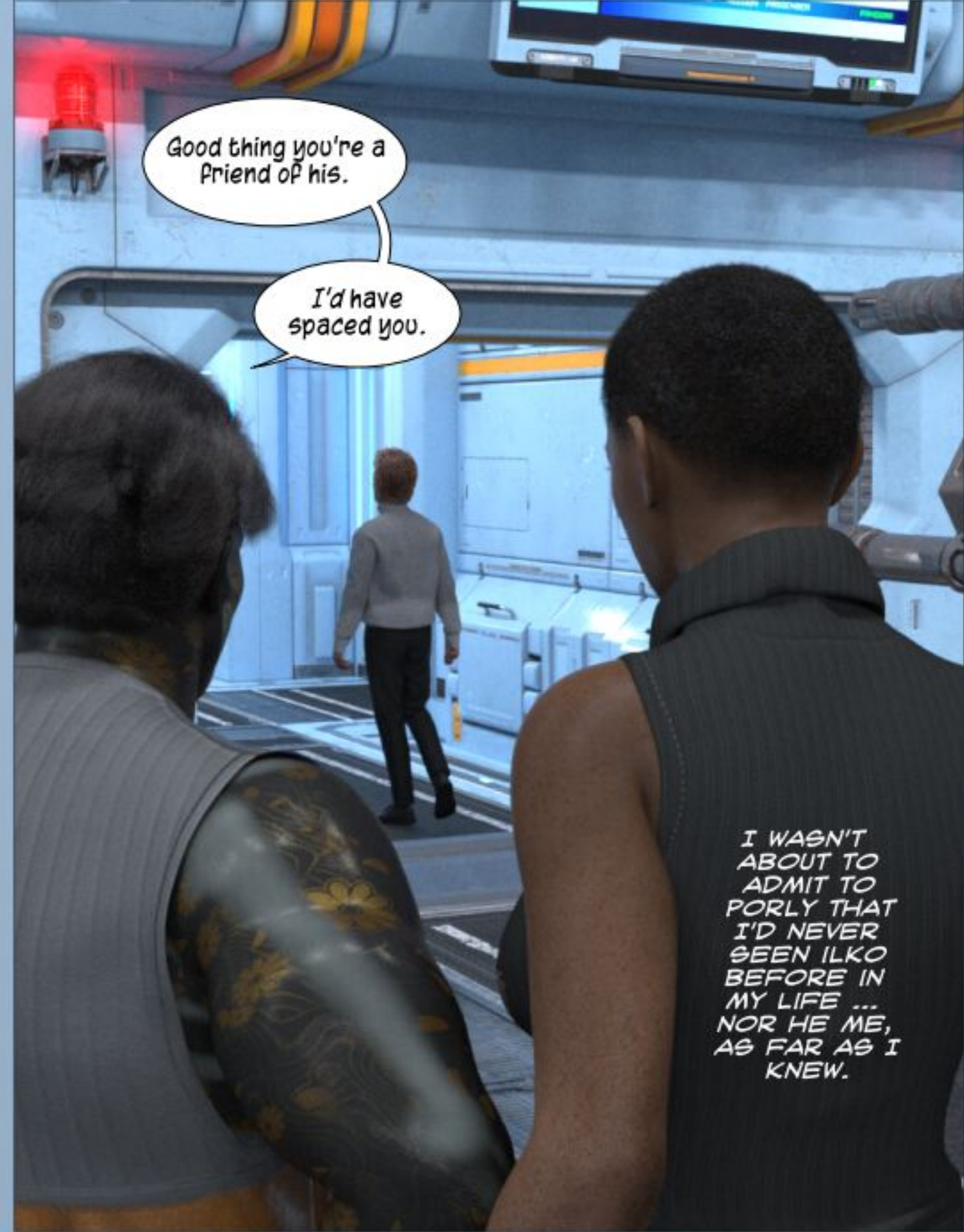
You're the boss.



Welcome to Taymyr.

I'm Vadik Iiko. I run this place, such as it is.

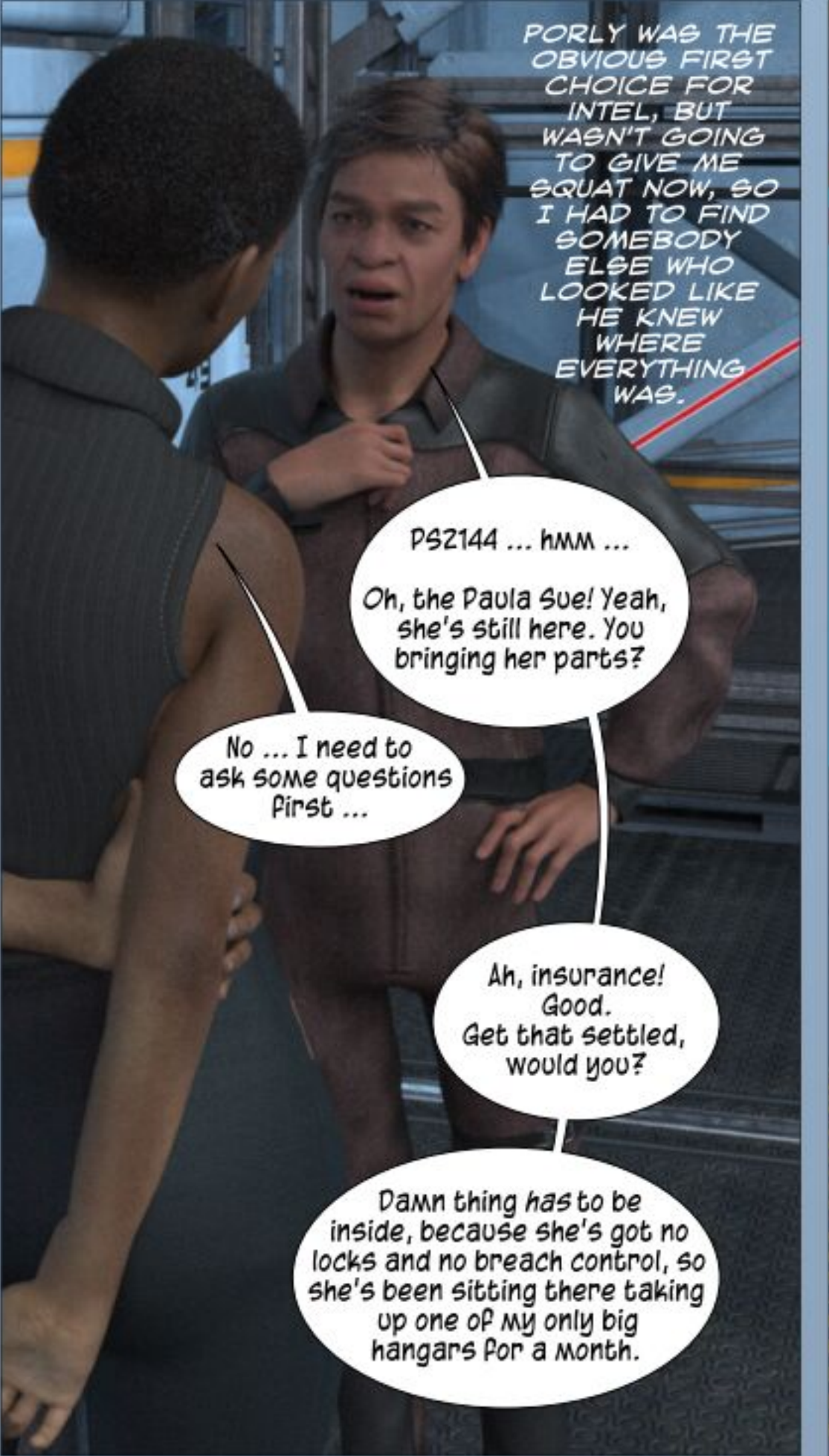
If you have any problems while you're here, come find me or Serd, I'm sure we can straighten them out.



Good thing you're a friend of his.

I'd have spaced you.

I WASN'T ABOUT TO ADMIT TO PORLY THAT I'D NEVER SEEN ILKO BEFORE IN MY LIFE ... NOR HE ME, AS FAR AS I KNEW.



PORLY WAS THE OBVIOUS FIRST CHOICE FOR INTEL, BUT WASN'T GOING TO GIVE ME SQUAT NOW, SO I HAD TO FIND SOMEBODY ELSE WHO LOOKED LIKE HE KNEW WHERE EVERYTHING WAS.

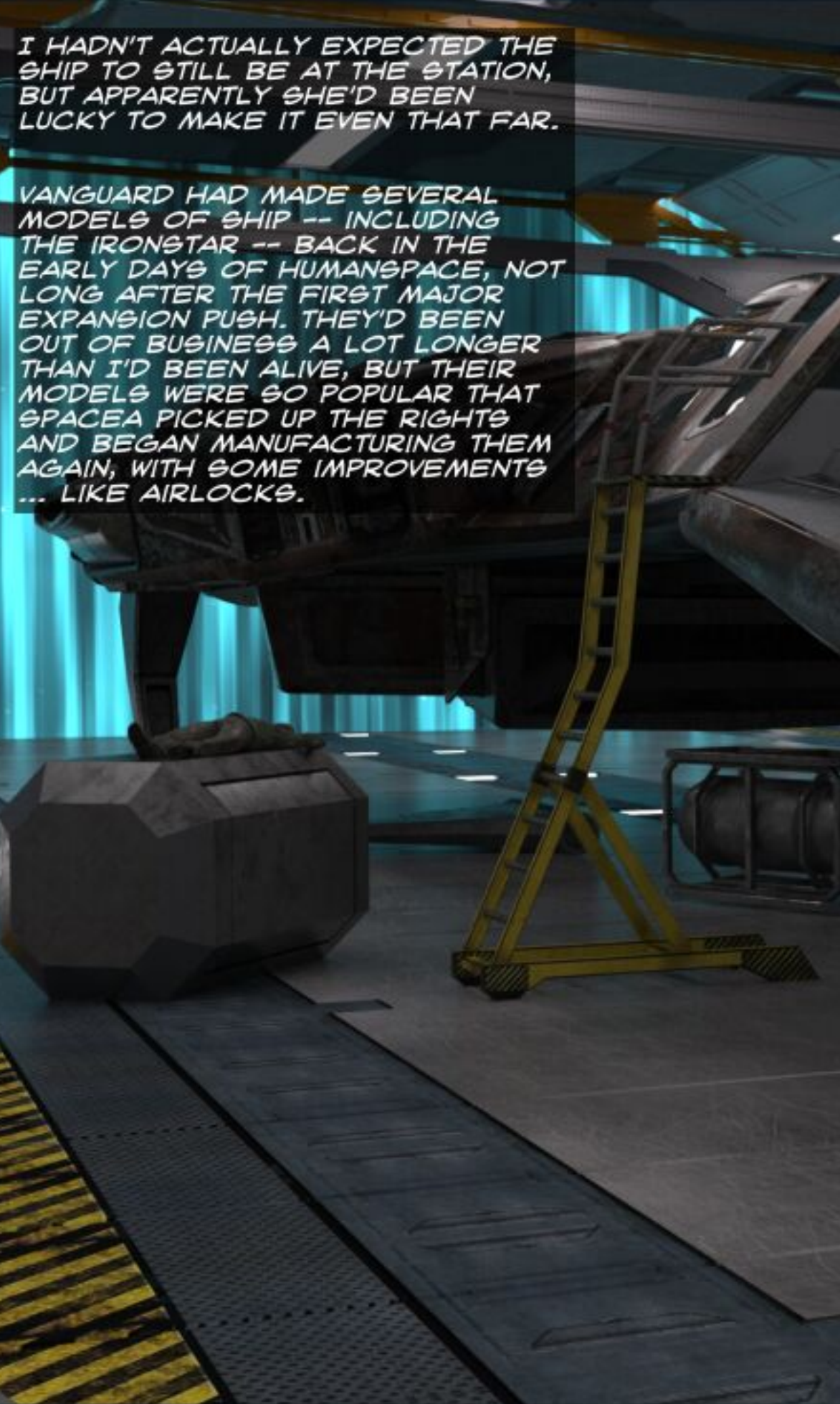
P92144 ... hmm ...

Oh, the Paula Sue! Yeah, she's still here. You bringing her parts?

No ... I need to ask some questions first ...

Ah, insurance! Good. Get that settled, would you?

Damn thing has to be inside, because she's got no locks and no breach control, so she's been sitting there taking up one of my only big hangars for a month.



I HADN'T ACTUALLY EXPECTED THE SHIP TO STILL BE AT THE STATION, BUT APPARENTLY SHE'D BEEN LUCKY TO MAKE IT EVEN THAT FAR.

VANGUARD HAD MADE SEVERAL MODELS OF SHIP -- INCLUDING THE IRONSTAR -- BACK IN THE EARLY DAYS OF HUMANSPACE, NOT LONG AFTER THE FIRST MAJOR EXPANSION PUSH. THEY'D BEEN OUT OF BUSINESS A LOT LONGER THAN I'D BEEN ALIVE, BUT THEIR MODELS WERE SO POPULAR THAT SPACEA PICKED UP THE RIGHTS AND BEGAN MANUFACTURING THEM AGAIN, WITH SOME IMPROVEMENTS ... LIKE AIRLOCKS.

THIS WAS A VANGUARD, THEIR FIRST MODEL AND NAMEBAKE. IT WAS NOT ONE OF THE REMAKES. IT LOOKED LIKE IT LITERALLY COULD HAVE BEEN THEIR FIRST MODEL. NUMBER ONE OFF THE LINE. EXACTLY THE KIND OF BATTERED OLD JUNKER SLIPSPACE LOVED TO USE.

A BIG CHUNK OF HULL HAD BEEN REMOVED, PRESUMABLY FOR BREACH REPAIR. IF THEY'D HAD TO PULL THAT MUCH TO PATCH THE HULL, IT HAD BEEN A REALLY BIG HOLE. AND EVEN THE REMAKE VANGUARDS HAVE NO BREACH MITIGATION.



Not taking jobs right now.

I can see that.

Not doing much on repairs either, looks like.

Waiting on parts. Costing me a Portune in dock Fees. Who the hell are you?

Name's Guerrero. I assume you're Jult Loois.

Between us, SlipSpace sent me. They want more details about what happened.



What happened is those Blue Sky churks blew a hole in my hull when I wouldn't comply, ganked my cargo, and flew off without bothering to see if I could make it anywhere.

I cut engines when they breached -- figured it was better to roll over and cooperate. If I hadn't, they'd probably have taken those out, and then I wouldn't have gotten here and I'd be sucking vacuum.

How do you know it was Blue Sky?

I don't. But they've been active in this system. I had bad luck with Perries and couldn't get one that was going all the way through. Had to go from one side of the system to the other myself. That's how they got me.

You know, I always thought you couldn't run a Vanguard solo ...

Can't, really. I've got it kind of hacked together so you can just barely. Can't do gunnery, but I don't have anything that would have done much good anyway.



I know it's a bad idea, but I'm also bad company, and soloing in this old lady means I get a lot of SlipSpace jobs.

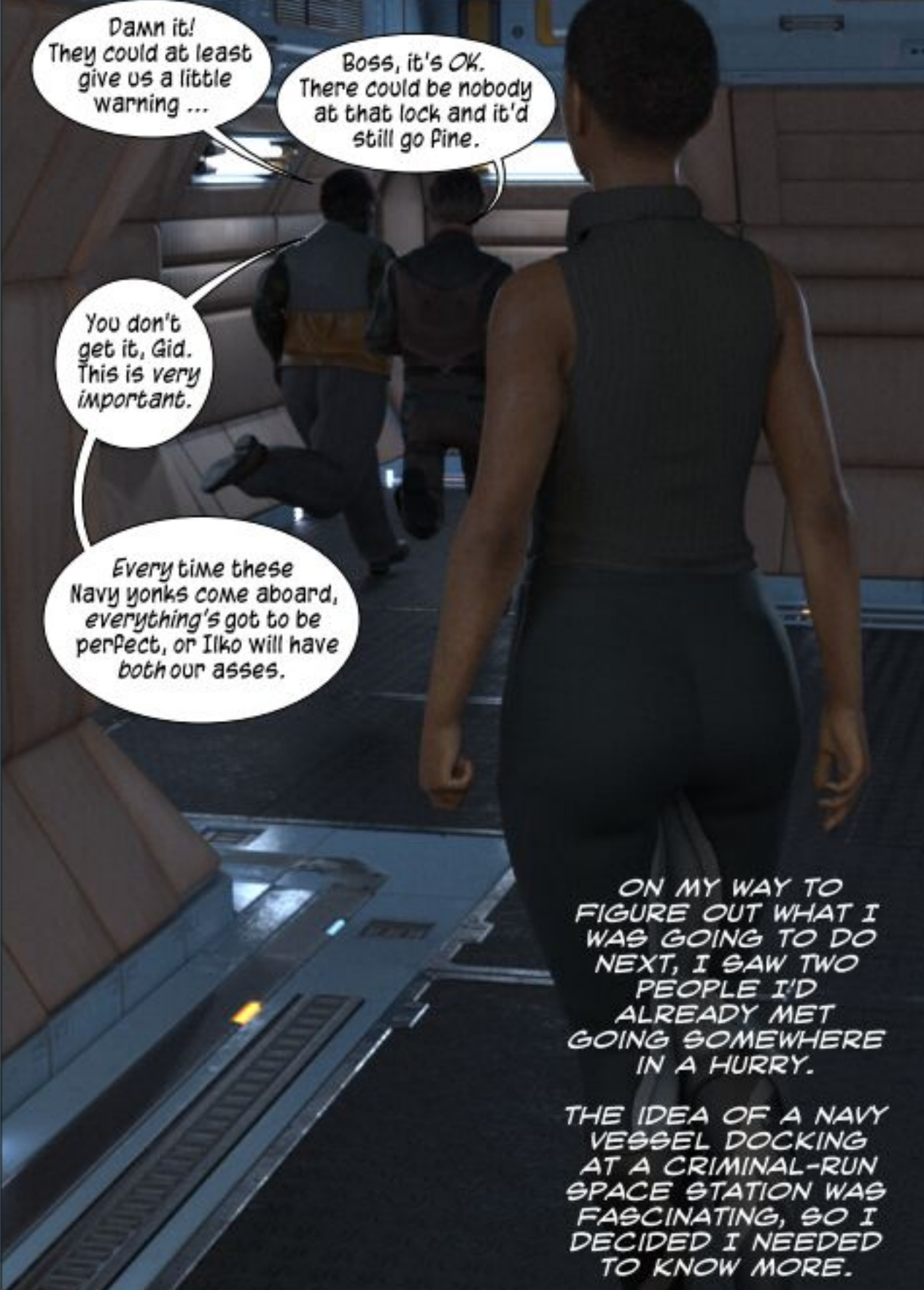
Anyway, if I'd had crew, it would have likely been some young idiot who doesn't bother to learn the rePlexes, and he'd be dead.

I never rePitted for side airlocks.

How do you figure that? Because of the breach? Looks like it was a big one ... did it take out a side airlock?

I had about three seconds to reach for my emergency tank and get my mask on. Like I said, complete rePlex. And if I hadn't been strapped in, I'd have been sucked out before I could do anything.

I don't want to think about it too much. I just hope they were disappointed when they found out all they got was one damned box.



Damn it! They could at least give us a little warning ...

Boss, it's OK. There could be nobody at that lock and it'd still go Pine.

You don't get it, Gid. This is very important.

Every time these Navy yonks come aboard, everything's got to be perfect, or Ilko will have both our asses.

ON MY WAY TO FIGURE OUT WHAT I WAS GOING TO DO NEXT, I SAW TWO PEOPLE I'D ALREADY MET GOING SOMEWHERE IN A HURRY.

THE IDEA OF A NAVY VESSEL DOCKING AT A CRIMINAL-RUN SPACE STATION WAS FASCINATING, SO I DECIDED I NEEDED TO KNOW MORE.

TAYMYR STATION IS BIG AND SPRAWLY ENOUGH THAT I WAS ABLE TO GET A VIEW OF THE NAVY SHIP, DOCKED WAY OUT AT ONE END. BUT THIS JUST ADDED A NEW MYSTERY: I'D NEVER SEEN THIS MODEL OF SHIP BEFORE.

IT HAD TO BE A TYPE THEY'D ADDED SINCE I LEFT THE SERVICE ... BUT THE NAVY HASN'T REALLY BEEN BUYING NEW FLYING STOCK SINCE THE CEASEFIRE, LET ALONE TAKING THE TROUBLE TO BUILD OR EVALUATE NEW DESIGNS.

I'D HAVE WANTED TO TALK TO ITS CAPTAIN ANYWAY, BECAUSE IF I DID NEED TO GO FIND THE BLUE SKY RAID GROUP AND TALK SOME SENSE INTO THEM, CONVINCING THIS SHIP TO BE MY MUSCLE WOULD BE A LOT SIMPLER THAN LEAVING THE SYSTEM TO HIRE SOMEONE AND HAVING TO COME BACK.

THE TRICK WOULD BE HOW TO CONVINCING THEM. THE NAVY USUALLY SAYS RAIDERS AREN'T THEIR PROBLEM, UNLESS THEY'RE DOING SOMETHING THAT ENDANGERS THE CEASEFIRE.



ANY STATION THAT ACCOMMODATES PASSENGERS FOR MORE THAN A FEW HOURS AT A TIME WILL HAVE A BAR.

Ah ... Captain?

Oh, hello! Have we met?

No. I'm Randa Guerrero.

Hulla Bonner. Ex-service, eh?

For years. There can't be that much of it left on me ...

You can read insignia. Also, you're still wearing the pants.

Won't you join me?

SOME WOULD SAY THE BAR IS THE WHOLE POINT OF HAVING A STATION.

MOST OF A DRINK LATER ...

... So suddenly things like raiders are in the Navy's purview? They've always insisted that was for planetary govts to deal with ...

I think there was pressure from the govts. After all, the planets pay the Navy's budget, so now that we're not at war, there's been some "what are we paying for?"

And keeping the spaceways safe does seem like it could be the Navy's business. The mandate is "security of humanspace," and that feels like an all-humanspace problem, don't you think?

Anyway, it's an experiment. We're the only unit on that duty so far. What about you? What brings you out to this useless place?



Well, as it happens, I'm also chasing raiders. There's Blue Sky activity in this system and they've stolen something I'm trying to retrieve.

Actually, our missions could overlap ...

... but I'm not sure we should discuss it in here.

Probably not.

Do you have a room on the station? Our shipboard beds are horribly small.



Uh, as a matter of fact ...

AND I'D BEEN TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW I WAS GOING TO PROPOSITION HER!

Oh, good. I mean, you're interested, yes? You seem interested.

And you're not in service, so the sleeping-down rule doesn't apply.

NAVY LIAISONS ARE ALWAYS PRETTY DIRECT, AND CERTAINLY I'D DONE MORE THAN A FEW MYSELF, SO I DON'T KNOW WHY I WAS SURPRISED. MAYBE BECAUSE IT WAS COMING FROM A CAPTAIN.



I'M TOLD THAT FOR CENTURIES THE NAVY TOOK A VERY DIM VIEW OF INTRASERVICE INTIMACY. THAT CHANGED, ABOUT THE SAME TIME WOMEN BECAME THE MAJORITY IN THE SERVICE.

THE RULE IS YOU CAN'T SLEEP DOWN. IN PRACTICE THAT MEANS "DON'T HAVE SEX WITH SOMEONE YOU HAVE COMMAND OVER."

IT'S TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY AT HIGHER RANKS. SQUAD LEADERS GET AROUND IT SOMETIMES, FOR EXAMPLE, BY JUST SLEEPING WITH EVERYBODY IN THEIR SQUAD, TAKING TURNS. BUT IF YOU'RE IN COMMAND OF A VESSEL, YOU'VE GOT A REAL PROBLEM, BECAUSE EVERYBODY ELSE ON THE VESSEL IS OFF-LIMITS.

SPACE TRAVEL IS LONG AND DULL, AND THE PEOPLE WHO DO IT NEED AN OUTLET.

AND SHE CLEARLY NEEDED AN OUTLET. BADLY.



WE NEVER DID TALK ABOUT A COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENT, BUT I FIGURED IT COULD WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW.



BUT SHE WASN'T THERE WHEN I WOKE UP. CAPTAINS HAVE TO GO TEND TO THEIR SHIPS, AND ALL THAT.

SHE DID LEAVE A NOTE, SAYING THEY'D BE DOCKED FOR STATION LEAVE FOR ANOTHER TWO NIGHTS WITH AN OBVIOUS IMPLICATION OF WHERE SHE'D LIKE TO SPEND THOSE TWO NIGHTS.

I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE ON MY GUARD, BUT TO BE FAIR, I HADN'T THOUGHT THERE WAS ANYTHING ON THE STATION TO BE ON GUARD AGAINST.



I HATE GETTING STUNNED OUT. IT TAKES HOURS FOR MY HEAD TO FEEL RIGHT AFTERWARD.

ON THE OTHER HAND, IT BEATS THE ALTERNATIVE.



Damn it, I liked that shirt!

It's in the back. The bindings would have torn it. You can have it later.

I guess it's good there's a "later."

You know, you could have just talked to me. You already picked up most of it in the bar anyway.



We didn't steal whatever you're after. We haven't been able to raid for weeks. Every time we try, that Navy ship interferes.

You're pests. They have the right idea.

We're just making a living ... and you're chummy with even worse people. That station's run by Cherniy Medved, you know.

Yeah. I don't like them either. What's your name?

I don't think you need to know that.

Listen, you obviously want something from me that takes trust. You want to start making some trust?

I just want you to convince them to back off ... you're encouraging them to come even harder ...

I don't believe you. And I couldn't convince Capt. Bonner to do that anyway. She has a mission.

... Yeah.

Anyway, I'm Kharin Galbar. And this is the Prxis Anat.

Welcome aboard.



THEY HAD A VERY GOOD SETUP. MOST BLUE SKY RAID GROUPS DON'T HAVE THEIR SHIT TOGETHER LIKE THAT. (BLUE SKY ISN'T REALLY ANY KIND OF ORGANIZED GANG; THEY'RE A BUNCH OF SCUTS WHO JUST HAVE AN AGREEMENT NOT TO SHOOT EACH OTHER.)

THE BIG SHIP -- AND IT WAS A BIG SHIP, SMALL FOR A CARGO PUNCH BUT HUGE FOR A RAIDER -- WAS A UX03. THOSE HAVE VENTRAL BAYS ... I COULDN'T SEE WHAT WAS IN THEM, BUT THEY COULD HAVE BEEN CARRYING TWO OR THREE SMALL LOADERS, TO BOARD SHIPS AND GRAB CARGO. THEN, WHEN THE BIG SHIP'S HOLDS WERE FULL OF LOOT, THEY HAD THEIR OWN RIDE OUT OF THE SYSTEM. TIDY.

THEY'D MANAGED TO FIND AN ORBIT IN THE DEBRIS FIELD WHICH WOULD MAKE THEM NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO SPOT ON RADAR, DUE TO THE CLUTTER. THEY WERE HIDING.

What's your part in all this? Gun?

THAT UX03 WAS STURDY, BUT NOT WELL-ARMED ON ITS OWN, UNLESS THEY'D DONE SOME SERIOUS REFITTING. THEY'RE CARGO HAULERS, NOT CRUISERS.

Yeah. I'm the one who convinces ships we mean business.



Don't pull anything, now.

No promises.

I can take you down without a weapon.

You could try.

MAYBE SHE REALLY THOUGHT THAT. SHE'D LEFT HER WEAPON ON HER SHIP, AND DIDN'T CARE THAT I KNEW IT. BUT I DIDN'T THINK SO. I DIDN'T THINK SHE CARED WHETHER SHE COULD TAKE ME OR NOT.

THE THING ABOUT JOL IS THAT THEIR ONLY REAL GOAL IN LIFE IS TO NEVER BE BORED. THEY'LL PICK THE ROAD THEY THINK HAS THE MOST ACTION AND EXCITEMENT. SO YOU CAN'T ALWAYS EXPECT THEM TO DO THE REASONABLE THING.



What the Puck are you doing, Kharin? Have you lost your slagging mind?

Uh ... this is Zumer, captain of the Shebya.

He's usually not this rude.

I'm supposed to be polite? This Navy ship's hounding us to death ... Ilko's people probably want our asses too, after that business that was their own Pucking fault ...

And you bring this churk aboard, show her where we are, and now you're handing out names? Why don't you just tell her our reg number too? Make it nice and easy for her?

THAT LAST PART WAS JUST BILLY. KNOWING A SHIP'S REGISTRATION DOESN'T MAKE IT EASIER TO FIND. IT MIGHT MEAN THE SHIP GETS BLACKLISTED AT SOME PORTS, BUT IF YOU'RE A PIRATE, THAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN ANYWAY.



She's just looking for lost cargo, Zumer. If we show her we don't have it, then she's not interested in us anymore.

And that Navy captain likes her. She might be able to convince her to back off ...

So I'm supposed to just let her search our holds? Give her the run of the ship?

We don't answer to anybody. We don't have to prove anything. Anybody who thinks they can make us can have a plasma packet up their ass, on me.

We can outlast the Navy bitch, and we can deal with anything Ilko throws at us. We don't settle and we don't surrender.

And you should Pucking know that, Kharin.



We should space her.

Drashik, why don't you try using your brain for once? You might like it.

Just because we don't stand down doesn't mean we make trouble for ourselves.

If Kharin's right and that Navy captain does like her, and we kill her, we just gave them a grudge. Do you understand?

I suppose we could ransom her for peace, but --

You know, that Navy ship's going to stay docked for another two days.

And we could get clear of the debris to punch out in ten minutes.

C'mon, Zumer. It's time to be somewhere else. It's not a surrender. There's better places.



Call me "captain" when you say things like that.

Our holds are almost empty. We've been in this system for weeks and have had one successful boarding. We are not leaving until we justify having come to this Pucking system in the first place. We aren't taking the loss, do you understand?

Now, go put your guest in one of the small extras. We'll figure her out later.

If the Navy really is docked for two days, then maybe we can get in some actual runs in the meantime.



That didn't go the way I hoped.

Don't worry. I'm not going to let him space you.

I THOUGHT THAT WAS A VERY INTERESTING THING FOR HER TO SAY. BOTH PARTS OF IT.



THE "SMALL EXTRA" WAS AN UNUSED BUNKROOM. SCRAPES ON THE FLOOR TOLD ME THEY USED IT FOR CARGO STORAGE SOMETIMES.

FIRST BUSINESS WAS TO GET OUT OF THIS BINDING. IF I ENDED UP NEEDING TO KICK EVERYBODY'S ASS, THAT WOULD MAKE IT A LOT EASIER.



I DIDN'T SEE A NEED TO DEAL WITH THE DOOR JUST YET. I COULD AFFORD TO GIVE IT A LITTLE TIME TO SEE WHAT SHOOK OUT.

WHAT ACTUALLY SHOOK WAS THE SHIP, ABOUT HALF AN HOUR LATER. IMPACTS AND LOUD NOISES, YELLING AND RUNNING.

I HAD THE FEELING I'D BETTER GET READY FOR A VISITOR.



Randa!!

Don't jump me!

SEE, SHE KNEW I'D CUT MYSELF LOOSE. SHE PROBABLY ALSO KNEW I COULD HAVE TAKEN OUT THE WHOLE BRIDGE WITH MY HANDS TIED.

We're taking Pine! Your Navy ship wasn't in dock! They found us!

We've got to get to the Prxis Anat right now!



Don't know why I should help ...

Look, I only brought you here to convince Zumer to clear out. He won't listen to me. Turns out he won't listen to anybody else, either.

I just want us to get out of the system safely. You can get behind that, right?

And you said the Navy was in port for two days ...

They were! I had that straight from Bonner. I don't know why she'd change her mind. Unless --

UNLESS BONNER HAD NOTICED I WAS MISSING AND CAME OUT TO LOOK FOR ME, WHICH WOULD BE A LITTLE SURPRISING, BUT MAYBE SHE ENJOYED THE NIGHT BEFORE EVEN MORE THAN I THOUGHT.



HA!!

Whoaaa!



Knew you were a trap! Led her right to us! But does he ever listen to me?

And you're helping, huh, Kharin? You can have the next one --



-- urk!

Gimme that, jakazi!

RAAAHH!

Hey!



HA.

En. He had it coming. He's been a pain in my ass since I got here.

But you did just kill my gunner.

You let him be your gunner?

Didn't have a choice. I can't do both at the same time, and nobody else of Zumer's knew how.

I hope you know how.



Actually, I don't, not in your ship. Gunnery differs so much by loadout ...

But I can fly just about anything.

You want me to let you fly my ship. In a debris system.

Remember what I said about trust? I wouldn't claim I could do it if I couldn't.

I WAS WORRIED I'D HAVE TROUBLE GETTING CLEAR OF THE SHEBYA. I DIDN'T. WHEN I HAD ENOUGH DISTANCE TO COME AROUND AND GET A LOOK, I SAW WHY. THE NAVY CRUISER'S FOCUS WAS ELSEWHERE.



THE SHEBYA HAD COME OUT TO THE EDGE OF THE DEBRIS ORBITS TO LOOK FOR VICTIMS. NOW THEY WERE TRYING TO PULL BACK IN TO HIDE. THE CRUISER WAS TRYING TO FORCE THEM TO STAY OUT IN THE OPEN. THE SHEBYA'S PILOT WAS REALLY GOOD -- DODGING THROUGH A DEBRIS FIELD WAS TESTING MY REFLEXES, AND I WAS IN A MUCH SMALLER CRAFT -- BUT THEY WERE BEING BROADSIDED, AND THEY WERE GOING TO LOSE.



They'll be destroyed!

No. The Navy's shooting to disable.

PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT I WAS ON BOARD.

Randa, I don't want them to get taken! They're good people!

Well, except Drashnik.

I don't know that any raiders are good people ... but OK.

Get ready. This will need timing.



Wait! What are you doing?

We can't win a fight with them!

Not gonna be that kind of fight. Read the ship.

Their only heavy weapons are at the bow. Their broadside protection is four lousy turrets that would take forever to dent us, and they have blind spots.

Now check out that modular construction. Self-contained units all fastened to a central gantry. Great for some things ... horrible for others.



Drawing fire!

Finally noticed us. Too late!

Where the engine block joins to the gantry. Dead ahead. On signal, hit that hard.

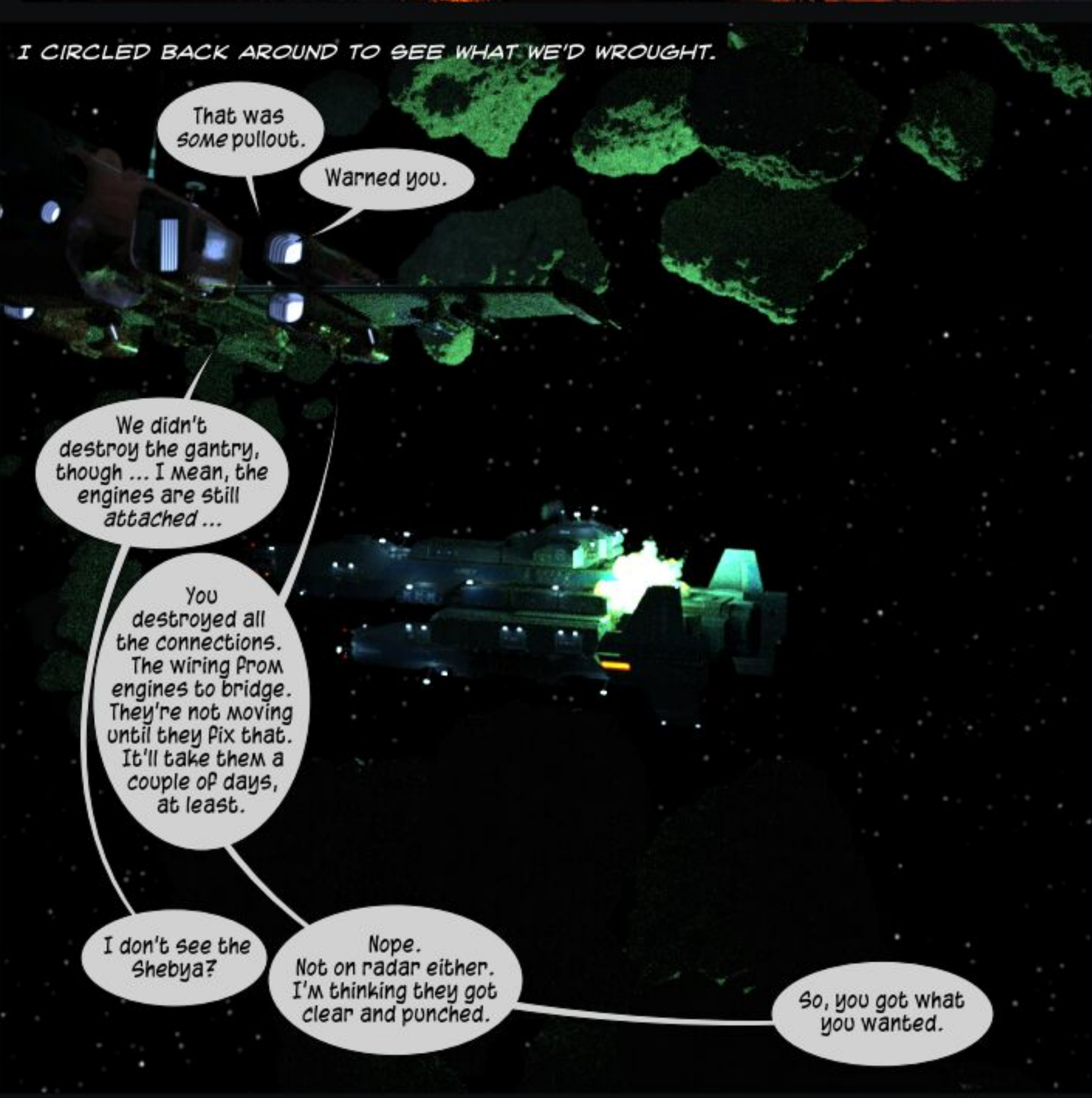
Then brace, because I'll have to pull up sharp.

Get ready ... almost ... almost ...

NOW!



iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii



I CIRCLED BACK AROUND TO SEE WHAT WE'D WROUGHT.

That was some pullout.

Warned you.

We didn't destroy the gantry, though ... I mean, the engines are still attached ...

You destroyed all the connections. The wiring from engines to bridge. They're not moving until they fix that. It'll take them a couple of days, at least.

I don't see the Shebya?

Nope. Not on radar either. I'm thinking they got clear and punched.

So, you got what you wanted.



Yeah, except I'm not with them. They could be anywhere now, and I have no way to find them again.

I don't know if I'd want to find them again. Especially not after shooting one of them. Which they may blame you for too. Sorry.

Good point. Actually, I was starting to get a little bored with that gig.

But now I don't know what to do next. I need a punch Perry, one with big bays or at least a big cradle.

I guess I go out to one of the drop points and wait for one ... I don't know if it's a good idea to go back to the station ...

We'll need to go back to the station anyway, at least long enough to drop me off. I'm not abandoning my ship, and I still have business there.

Still after that cargo? We didn't take it.



I know you didn't.

But someone did ... and since it wasn't you, the odds are that someone in the station either took it, or knows who did.

I wouldn't rule out Ilko stealing the cargo and managing to make it look like a Blue Sky job. I wouldn't rule out someone with Cherniy Medved trying anything.

You don't fear much, do you?



You know, there's probably no reason we couldn't just go to the station. Even after that incident with Ilko ...

What exactly was that incident?

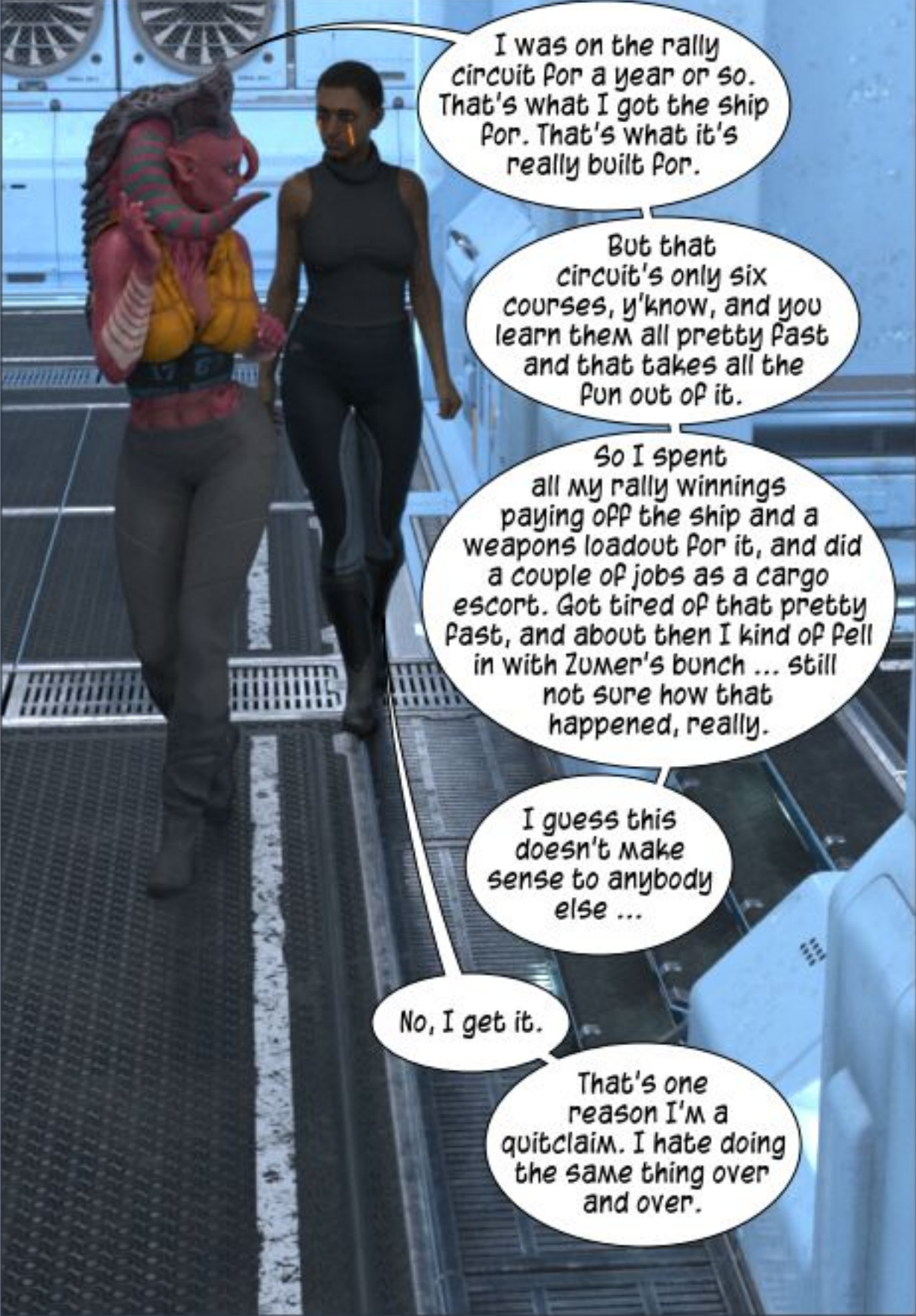
We disabled one of his ships. Zumer insists we were provoked, and had no choice.

Ilko doesn't like us working in the system. Guess he thinks we're cutting in on him.

It's not just that. His tolls are for "protection." If he can't protect ships from raids, he can't justify the tolls.

Anyway, the point is, I don't think they ever got a look at the Prxis Anat. I've docked at the station twice since then and nobody's given me any trouble.

NO ONE GAVE US ANY TROUBLE.



I was on the rally circuit for a year or so. That's what I got the ship for. That's what it's really built for.
But that circuit's only six courses, y'know, and you learn them all pretty fast and that takes all the fun out of it.
So I spent all my rally winnings paying off the ship and a weapons loadout for it, and did a couple of jobs as a cargo escort. Got tired of that pretty fast, and about then I kind of fell in with Zumer's bunch ... still not sure how that happened, really.
I guess this doesn't make sense to anybody else ...
No, I get it.
That's one reason I'm a quitclaim. I hate doing the same thing over and over.



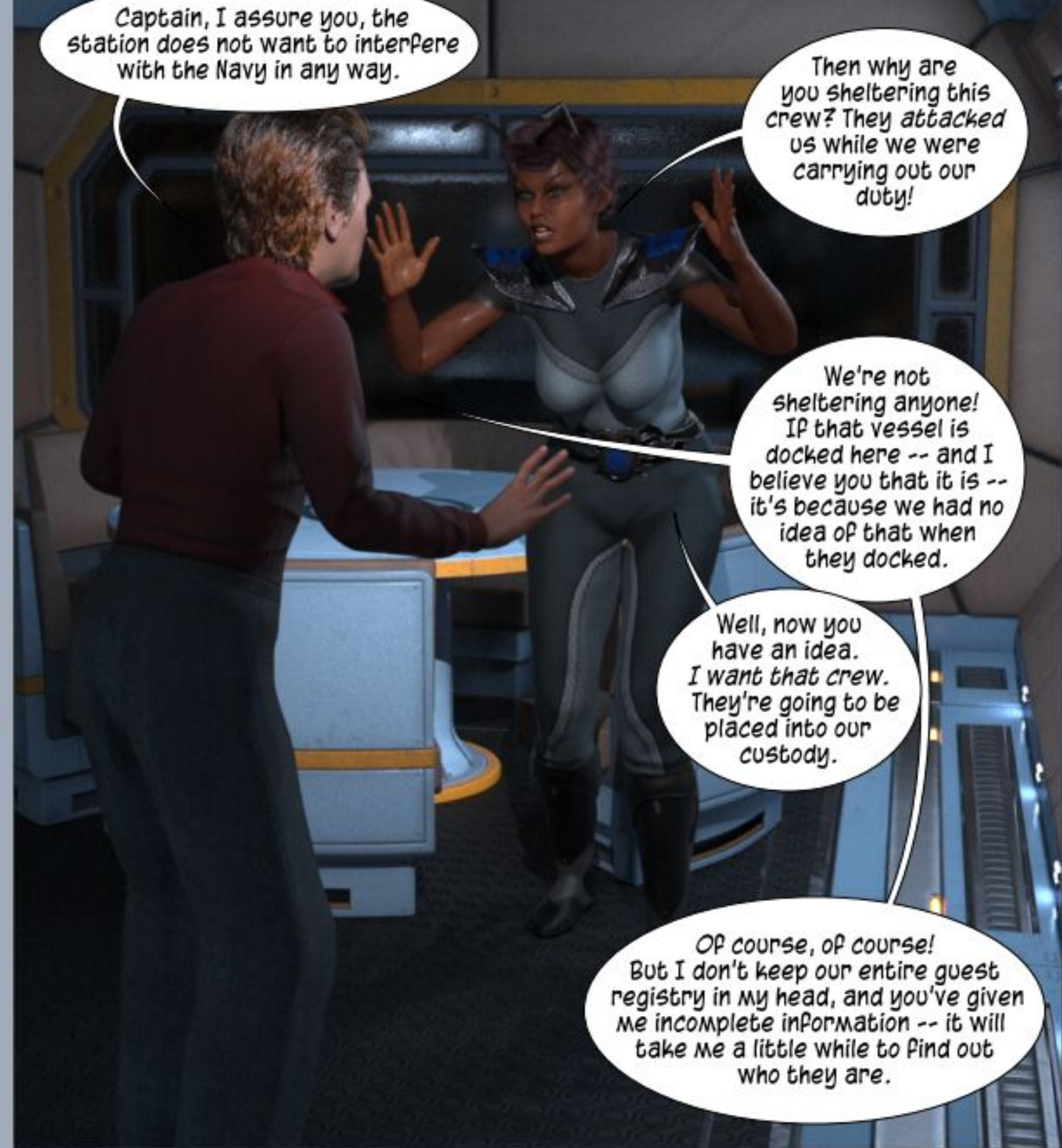
I like you. I think you're crazy in the same ways as me.
That was definitely some crazy flying ... you know, I've never let anybody fly my ship but me?
That was what Drashik would get all hazed about, that I wouldn't let him pilot. Well, and that I wouldn't have sex with him.
Bet you anything that if he'd shot us both, next thing he was going to do was take my ship.



THE NEXT MORNING.



... is unacceptable!
You know, that was a pretty good breakfast. Better than ship food, for sure.
So what's your next move?
Well, I can't ask Ilko directly, so I'm going to have to find a way to --
-- hang on.
I know that voice.



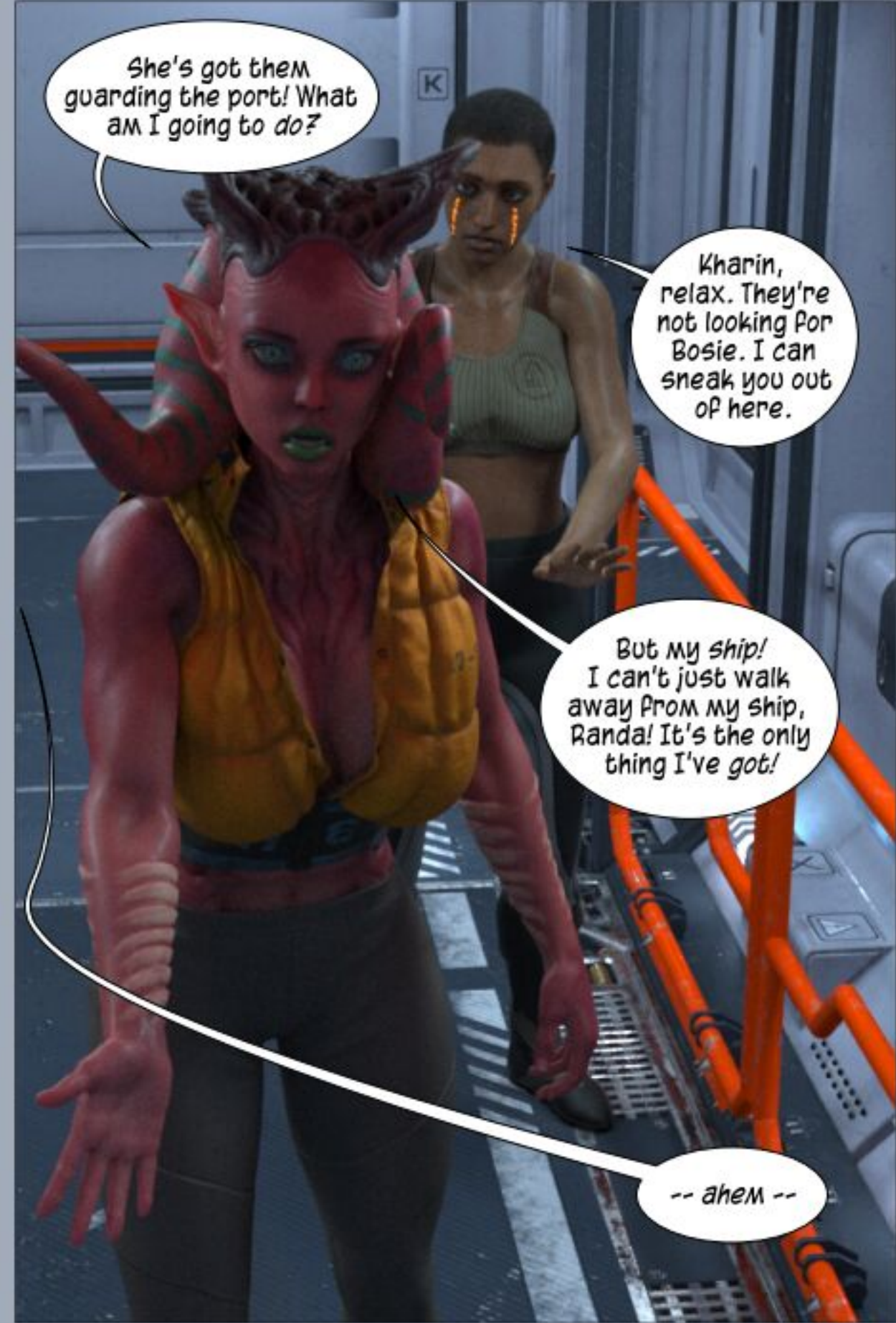
Captain, I assure you, the station does not want to interfere with the Navy in any way.
Then why are you sheltering this crew? They attacked us while we were carrying out our duty!
We're not sheltering anyone! If that vessel is docked here -- and I believe you that it is -- it's because we had no idea of that when they docked.
Well, now you have an idea. I want that crew. They're going to be placed into our custody.
Of course, of course! But I don't keep our entire guest registry in my head, and you've given me incomplete information -- it will take me a little while to find out who they are.



You bring that to me the instant you have it.
Yes, absolutely.
How did they manage to limp back to the station that soon?
She must have a hell of a field repair crew.
Randa, that's not important!
She knows it was the Praxis Anat! And Ilko will track me down right away.
I've got to get back to the ship and get out of here, fast!



Oh, no!



She's got them guarding the port! What am I going to do?
Kharin, relax. They're not looking for Bosie. I can sneak you out of here.
But my ship! I can't just walk away from my ship, Randa! It's the only thing I've got!
-- ahem --



I may be able to solve a few problems for you ...
... if you're willing to help me out a bit.
Come with me and let's talk.



I'm sure you both realize that the last thing this station wants is the Navy intruding into our business.
Fortunately, they seem to be concerned only with raiders, but it's still very important to keep them happy so they don't decide we're part of the problem.
I should be upset with you for annoying them, but apparently your interference enabled that Blue Sky ship to get away ... and with them gone, hopefully the Navy will move on and pester somebody else.
Blue Sky was a minor annoyance anyway; the only reason I didn't deal with them myself was because I've been too busy trying to solve a bigger problem.
The Yanone have been appearing in the system. They've prevented a third of our toll collections in the last two months, and that number is rising.
I need to convince them -- forcefully -- that this isn't acceptable.



Nobody has ever won a fight with the Yanone. To the best of my knowledge, I once saw two of their fighters take apart two much larger ships, in less than fifteen minutes.
So I've heard. I think that's just because people haven't thrown enough of the right kind of firepower at them.
I'm not asking you to exchange fire. You won't be at risk. I need you to be the bait.
I want you to act as if you're being tolled. When they interfere, I'm going to have a surprise for them.
In return, I'm sure I can come up with something to get Capt. Bonner off your backs until she leaves the system, which shouldn't be long anyway.



It'll have to be Bosie, with yours under impound. Unless Ilko's prepared to release it?
I'd rather not try to do that just yet.
I'm in.
When do you want to attempt this?
It may take several runs before they bite, so ... the sooner the better, I think.
I can have everything ready in an hour.

NO ONE KNOWS WHO THE YANONE ARE OR EVEN WHAT THEY'RE REALLY CALLED. I'D HAD ONE BRIEF PREVIOUS ENCOUNTER WITH THEM, WHICH HAD EXPLAINED NOTHING. IN FACT, IT HAD LEFT ME WITH EVEN MORE QUESTIONS.

BUT IT DID CONVINCE ME THAT ILKO WAS MAKING A MISTAKE.



That's a weird-looking cargo ship ...

That's because it isn't one. I think it's a light carrier. He's put a shell over the deck.

He had a whole crew ready to fly that thing?

He's flying it alone. Most of the bridge is on automatic.

... I know, really bad idea, but apparently he needed everybody else to fly the fighters.

He won't be able to do gunnery ...

I don't guess he plans to need to. He's barely got any anyway.



Unidentified vessel! There's a Pee Por passage through this system. Please transfer 2000 wu immediately.

Here we go. You think they'll show up?

They already have.

Switch your display over to radar for a second. Use the longest range.

You think that's them all the way over there?

I know it. I have their signature.

And they move really fast.



Oh, you weren't kidding ... no warning or anything, huh?

Never. They don't signal and they don't reply.

Ilko better not wait to blow that canopy ...



Huh. Five Vampires. Not bad. He wasted a ton of money on this.

Of course, he might have stolen them.



You think it was a waste of money? You don't think they can win?



AAAAAAHHH!!!

Not really, no.

Oh.



... And that's what I was afraid of.

They usually just disable ships. But he attacked them, and that pissed them off.

Now they're going to blow him to pieces.



Are we going to do anything?

Yes. We're going to survive.

If we fire a single shot, we could be fair game too.

Wait it out. I think there's going to be a third act.



Escape pod!

Figured he'd have one. C'mon, let's grab it.

Will they ...

I don't think so. Not for a rescue. Besides, they're leaving.



You OK in there, Ilko?

Under the circumstances, yes.

HOURS LATER.



grrurgggghhh

Hey, could be worse.

We got you out in one piece ... and all your pilots are OK ...

And Gid even says the Vampires are fixable. Well, four of them.

Yes. But now I don't know what to do about these Yanone mudaks. I'm going to have to find something bigger.

Still, we have what we have ... and I saw you helped bring them all in. I owe you both, and I keep my promises.



You, we need to get loose from Bonner. I know what to do.

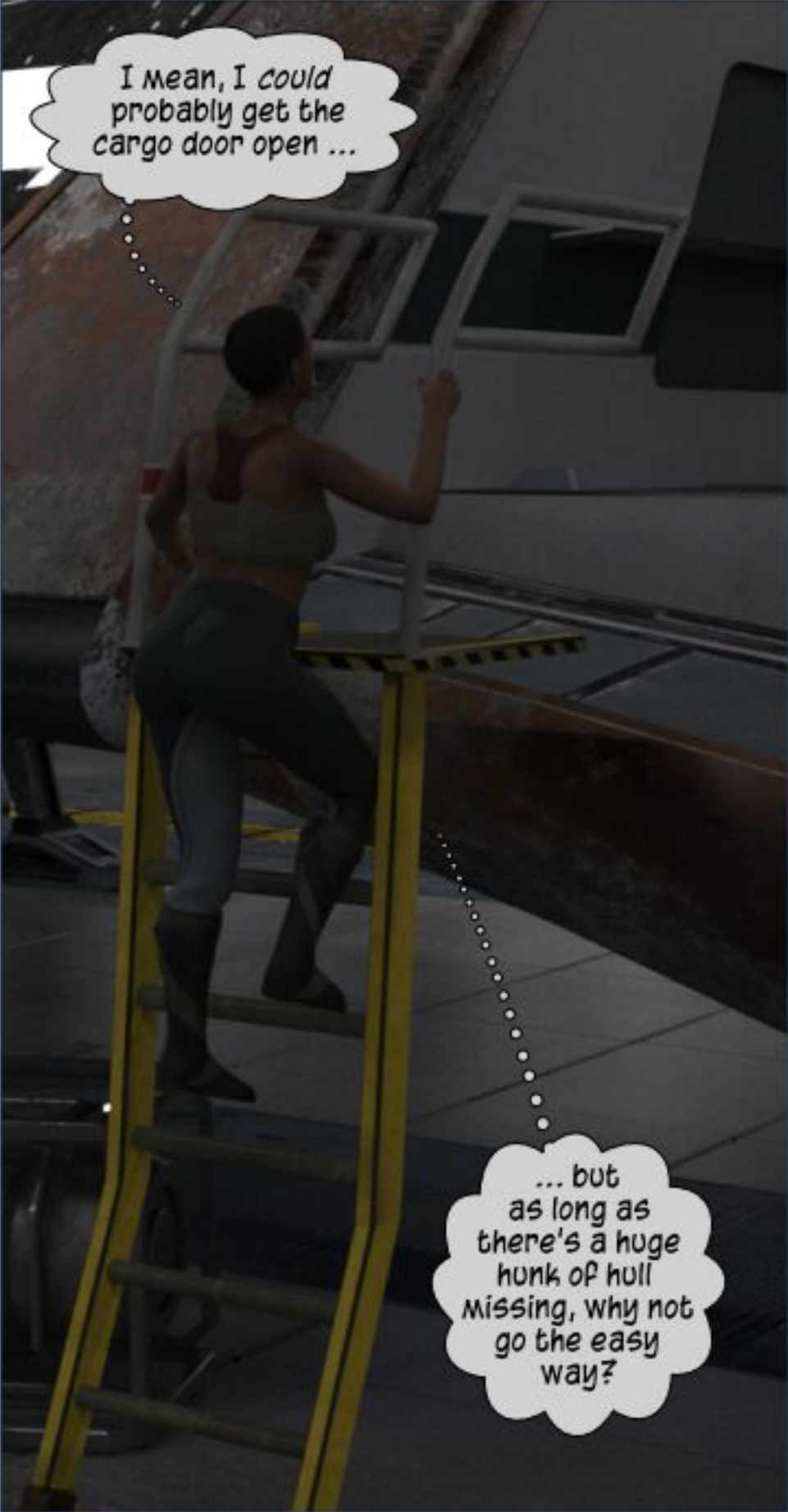
I'm going to tell her she can't prove that was your ship, and that I'm not convinced it was. You're under my jurisdiction, not hers. She won't like it, but she won't riot about it.

Thank you.



I owe you something too, but I don't know what. Do you need a favor?

Actually, I do ... and you won't have to go far for it.



I mean, I could probably get the cargo door open ...

... but as long as there's a huge hunk of hull missing, why not go the easy way?



Mhmm. Never left.

I'm amazed they got it in. I bet it scraped some paint. Not that this ship has much paint to scrape.



I don't take well to trespassers.

Especially not in these circumstances, mm?

Be careful with that, would you? I saw you in the bar when I was coming here.

You wouldn't want to actually shoot a hole in your hull.

What happened? You got tired of what SlipSpace was paying you?



Might not get tired of it if they paid worth a shit.

They don't like us to know what we're hauling, but this time I asked the right people.

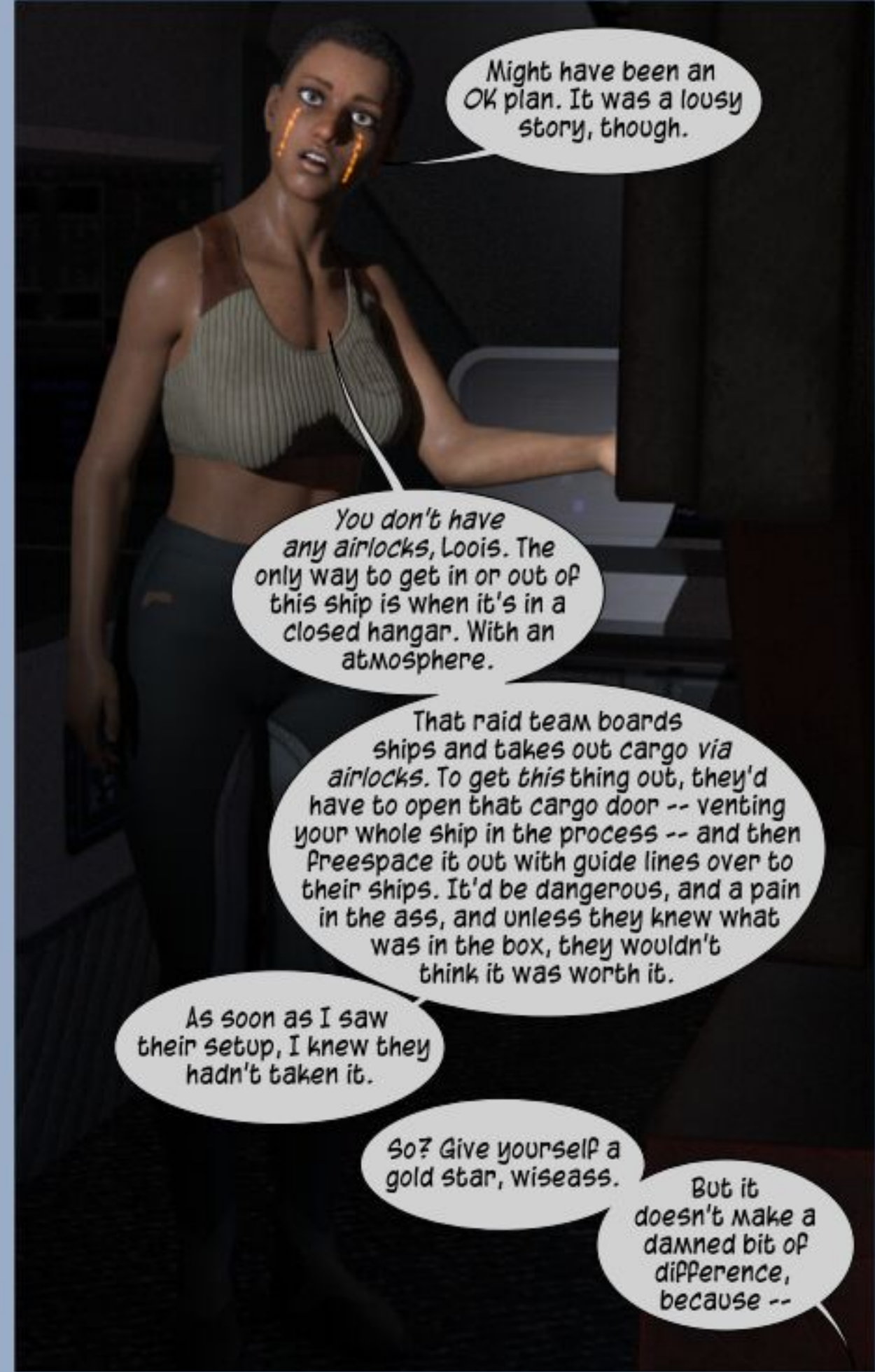
When I found out what this damned box is worth, and how little of that I'd get to see ...

So you made up the raid story, and when you got here, took your ship apart a little so people would think you were fixing damages.

Really, though, you were sitting around waiting for Ilko to figure out how he could get it to Harrow 3 and extort them for you.

Because you realized you couldn't do it. SlipSpace would find out and you'd never get a job from them again. At best.

It was still a good plan! It just had to be adjusted.



Might have been an OK plan. It was a lousy story, though.

You don't have any airlocks, Lois. The only way to get in or out of this ship is when it's in a closed hangar. With an atmosphere.

That raid team boards ships and takes out cargo via airlocks. To get this thing out, they'd have to open that cargo door -- venting your whole ship in the process -- and then Presspace it out with guide lines over to their ships. It'd be dangerous, and a pain in the ass, and unless they knew what was in the box, they wouldn't think it was worth it.

As soon as I saw their setup, I knew they hadn't taken it.

So? Give yourself a gold star, wiseass.

But it doesn't make a damned bit of difference, because --



-- HEY!

Ilko?

Our arrangement's canceled.

You said you always keep to your deals!

You know, deals require both sides to act in good faith.

When I told Vadik how upset SlipSpace was about this and how hard they were going to chase it, he agreed you had misrepresented the situation a bit. You were going to bring them down on his head.

Damn it, SlipSpace never tries to recover lost cargo!

They're recovering this one. You made a bad choice.



I'll make sure it gets to Harrow 3. With no additional markup. That's a promise.

I appreciate it. I can't take it; it won't fit in my ship.

I can't believe you're walking away from this, Ilko.

And what do you plan to do about me? You going to space me for trying to make a living?



No, I'm going to let you put your sorry-ass ship back together and get off my station ...

... as soon as you pay the docking fees you owe me for your extended stay.

Docking fees?

Those were going to be paid out of what we'd get for the box!

I realize that, but I didn't waive them, Lois. That was just an alternate way for you to pay them.

You might be able to work off your debt by doing me a favor ... I seem to have a cargo that needs to get to Harrow 3 in a hurry. We could trade that for your dock fees. I'd need you to bring someone to supervise you, of course.



You want me to make the run for nothing?

Consider your position, Lois.

Besides, imagine if you show up to deliver the cargo despite adversity.

You might even be able to salvage your reputation with SlipSpace!

You think you can trust Ilko?

In general? No way in hell.

In this particular case? Yes.



AHA!

I knew I'd find you lurking around here somewhere!

I don't care what Ilko says, you attacked a naval vessel and I'm not letting you get away with it!

But I --

She didn't do it, Captain.



And you!

I went out because I thought you'd been kidnapped, and look what that got me!

I thought we had ... interests in common ... and now I find out you're in league with these criminals!

Why should I believe you? Why should I trust anything you say?



She couldn't have pinned on you because she was busy rescuing me from them at the time.

I think that Blue Sky group had a shooter flying the same model of ship as hers, and you got them confused.

That ...! How stupid do you think I am?

I don't think you're stupid at all. I think you're very smart. Smart enough to realize that right now, everybody's alive, your mission in this system's complete because that raid group isn't coming back, and the only penalty was some damage to your ship that you've already mostly repaired.

Smart enough to know that if you try for some other answer, you'll just make everything worse.



... All right. Fine.

But, Galbar, if I ever catch you doing anything that even smells of piracy again, I'll have your ass.

And you ... I can't do anything to you, but I know you've got a Navy file and I'm going to make sure that a record of this incident goes into it.

And both of you stay out of my sight.



I didn't want to get you in trouble with the Navy ...

Relax. The Navy knows perfectly well how I feel about them, but that doesn't stop them from trying to use me as a troubleshooter every chance they get. This won't be either.

And she hasn't actually seen my file, or she'd know better than to say something like that. Besides, captains can't pull ex-service records. You need to be at least a commander for that.

She's just hazzed because we made her look bad. She'll recover. She'll go back to the Navy with an analysis of that little fight, she'll make recommendations for how to keep that from happening again, they'll improve the ship, and she'll get a commendation.



Worst case, somebody in the Navy will say I owe a favor for this. Big deal. I operate on that basis a lot. As long as they pay my expenses, I don't mind.

You sound a little like Ilko.

Is that why you said you could trust him on this?

Kind of. Ilko and I have very different ethics. But, yeah, we take promises and contracts very seriously. It's personal.

I don't know if everybody in Cherniy Medved's like that. Maybe they are. I dealt with someone who has to be related to him, once. Another Ilko. He was the same way.

IN "THE DEAD DROP."

They're still horrible people, though. You should avoid them whenever you can.



You get into a lot of interesting situations, don't you?

I don't guess you're looking for a crewmate?

We'd kill each other after a week.

Ha! ... Yeah, probably.

Oh, well.



But I'll give you a rec.

Go look up Evy Shela on Cowley 6. Shela Charters. I'll give you the address. She's an old friend. And a Jo. Tell her I sent you.

I don't know if you'd think that running charters has enough excitement, but Evy knows a lot of rocks to turn over and I'm sure she can find you something good.



I'll do that.

Before we head off in different directions ...

... There's no reason we couldn't spend one more night, is there?

I can't think of one.

I could even do breakfast.



- END -