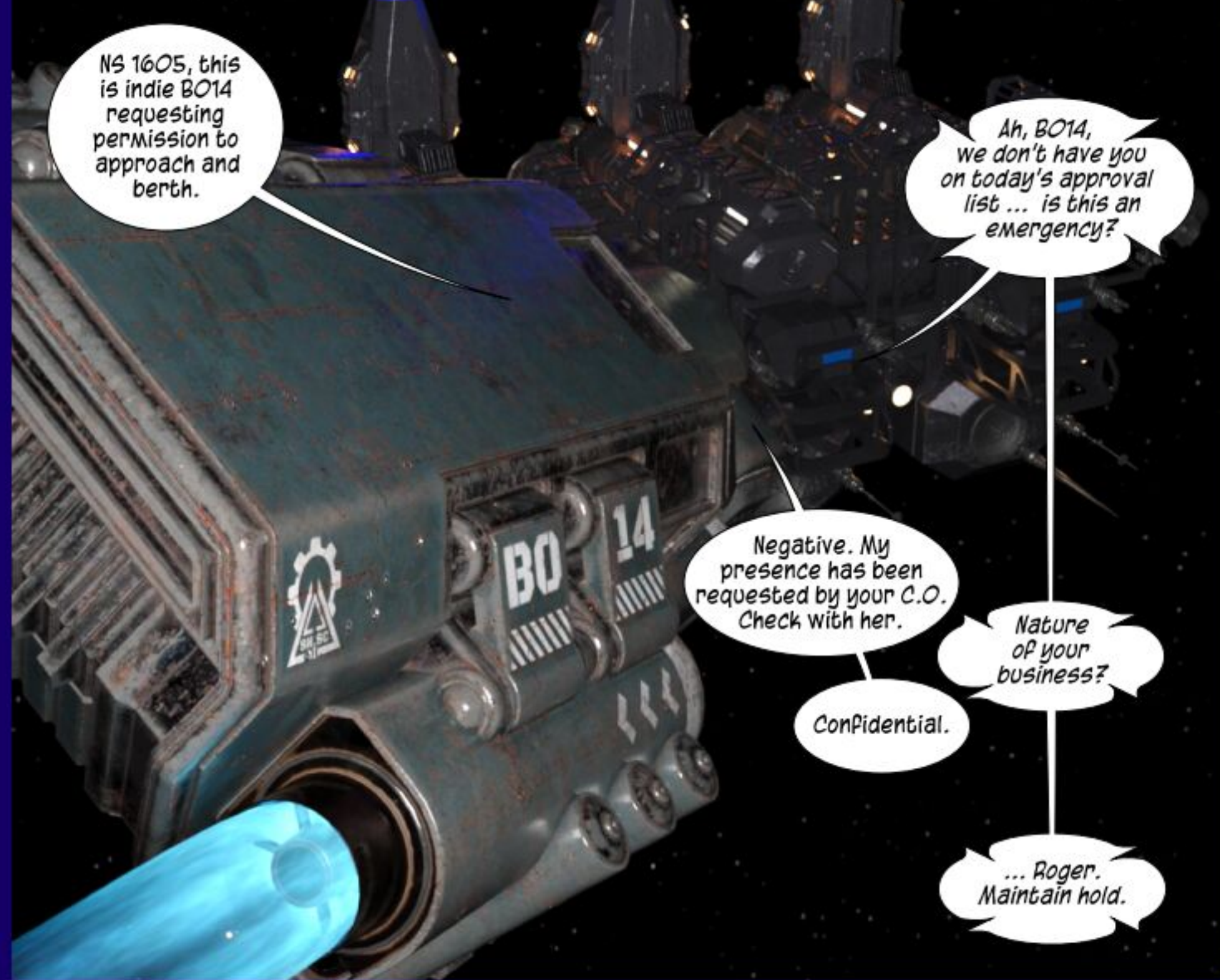


MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A
QUIT CLAIM

BUT SOMETIMES I DO OTHER THINGS. FOR EXAMPLE, FAVORS FOR PEOPLE I OWE FAVORS TO.

I OWED ADMIRAL HALPERN ABOUT A THOUSAND FAVORS, SO ALL IT TOOK WAS ONE MESSAGE FROM HER FOR ME TO DROP EVERYTHING ELSE. I REALLY DIDN'T CARE TO DEAL WITH THE NAVY AGAIN, BUT THAT'S THE THING ABOUT FAVORS--SOMETIMES YOU DON'T GET TO PICK YOUR BATTLES.



NS 1605, this is indie BO14 requesting permission to approach and berth.

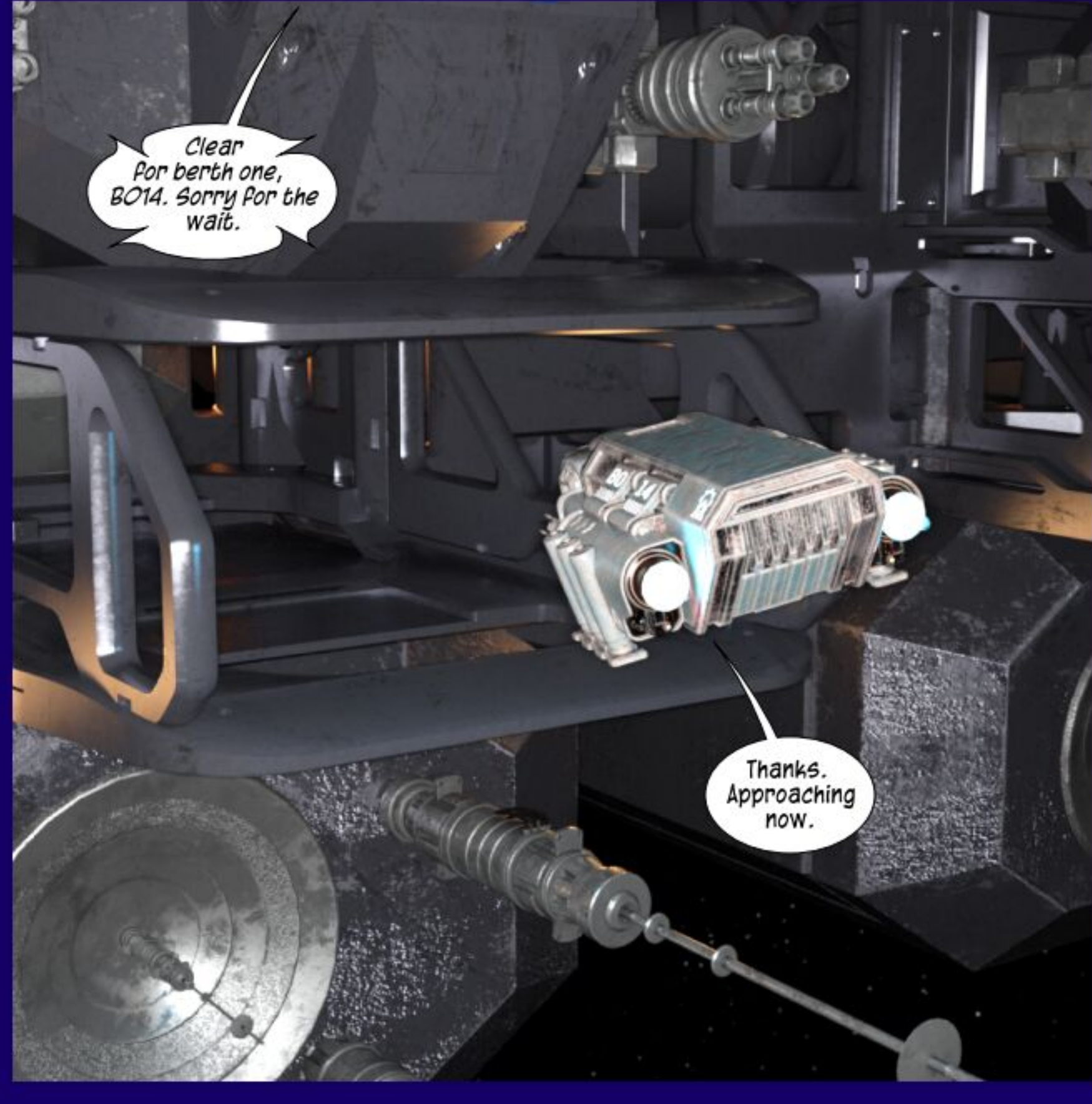
Ah, BO14, we don't have you on today's approval list ... is this an emergency?

Negative. My presence has been requested by your C.O. Check with her.

Nature of your business?

Confidential.

... Roger. Maintain hold.



Clear for berth one, BO14. Sorry for the wait.

Thanks. Approaching now.



Any clue who she is?

Nope.

... no idea why she didn't-- I'm her adjutant, if she doesn't tell me it doesn't get on the list, and she knows it.

Anyway, sorry about the trouble. I'm Ensign Gojar, by the way. Say, is that a Cricket you're flying? I haven't seen one of those in years.

Talk to me after you see her, I'll make sure to get you repowered and so on.



Commander Blakely. I'm Randa Guerrero. Admiral Halpern didn't give me any--

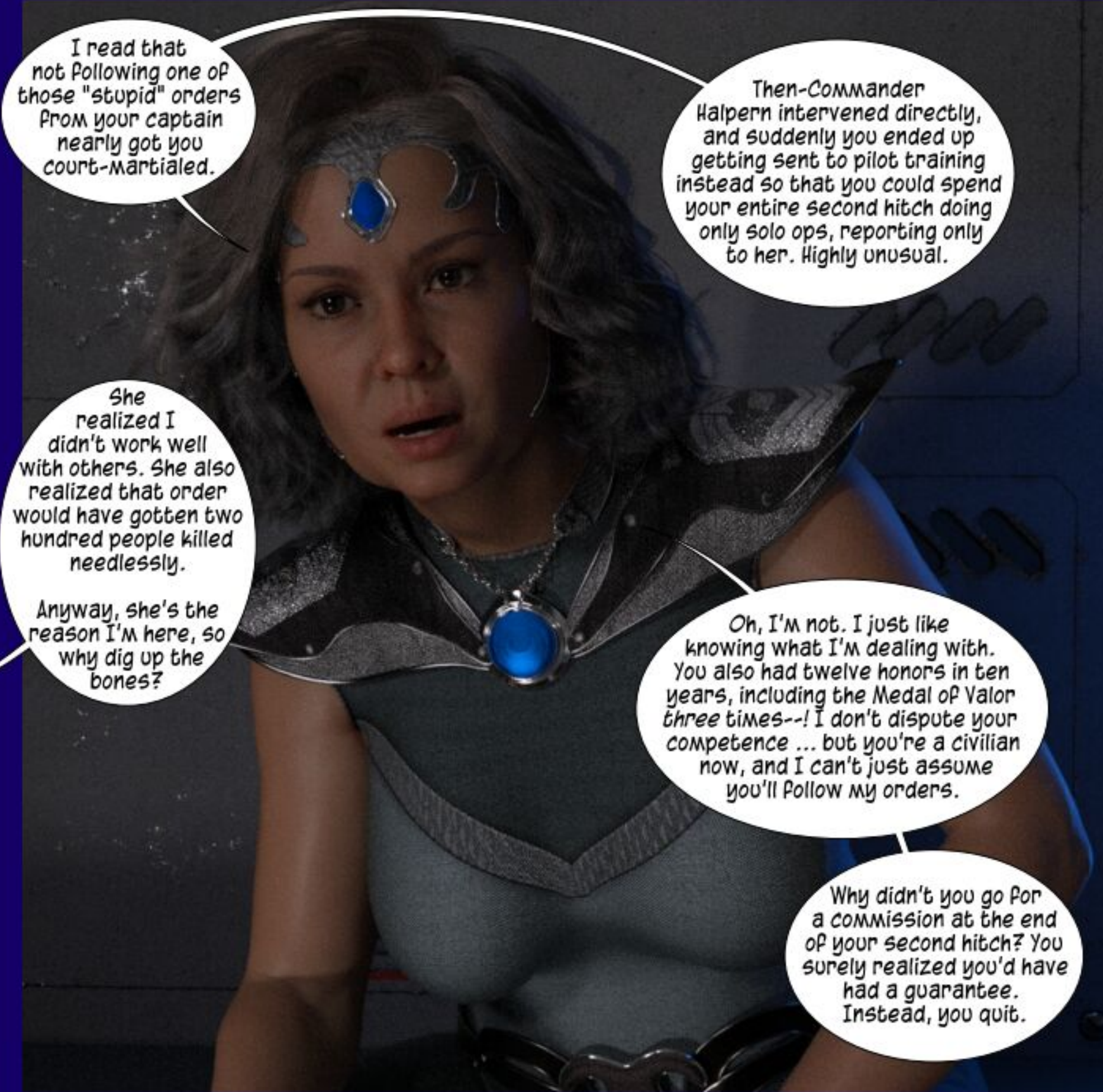
You know, you really shouldn't keep wearing part of the uniform if you're not in service.

They're the most durable things I own. If they ever wear out I'll stop wearing them. Anyway, I don't think anyone here is going to mistake me for someone on active duty.

What can I do for you, Commander?

Hmm. Your file did say you were bad at following orders.

I dispute that. I follow orders perfectly well, if they're not stupid. The problem was I got so many stupid ones.



I read that not following one of those "stupid" orders from your captain nearly got you court-martialed.

She realized I didn't work well with others. She also realized that order would have gotten two hundred people killed needlessly.

Anyway, she's the reason I'm here, so why dig up the bones?

Then--Commander Halpern intervened directly, and suddenly you ended up getting sent to pilot training instead so that you could spend your entire second hitch doing only solo ops, reporting only to her. Highly unusual.

Oh, I'm not. I just like knowing what I'm dealing with. You also had twelve honors in ten years, including the Medal of Valor three times--! I don't dispute your competence ... but you're a civilian now, and I can't just assume you'll follow my orders.

Why didn't you go for a commission at the end of your second hitch? You surely realized you'd have had a guarantee. Instead, you quit.



That's none of your business.

Notice I'm respecting your rank. Otherwise it'd be none of your goddamned business.

I need to know whether you're going to walk away from what I ask you to do. You don't seem like you give up easily, but--

My reasons for leaving the Navy had nothing to do with giving up on anything. First, I would have made a lousy officer. I don't like being in charge of anyone but myself.

Second, my assignments were beginning to feel more like "assassin" than "soldier" and I was getting tired of murder as a career.

Satisfied?



I'll have to be.

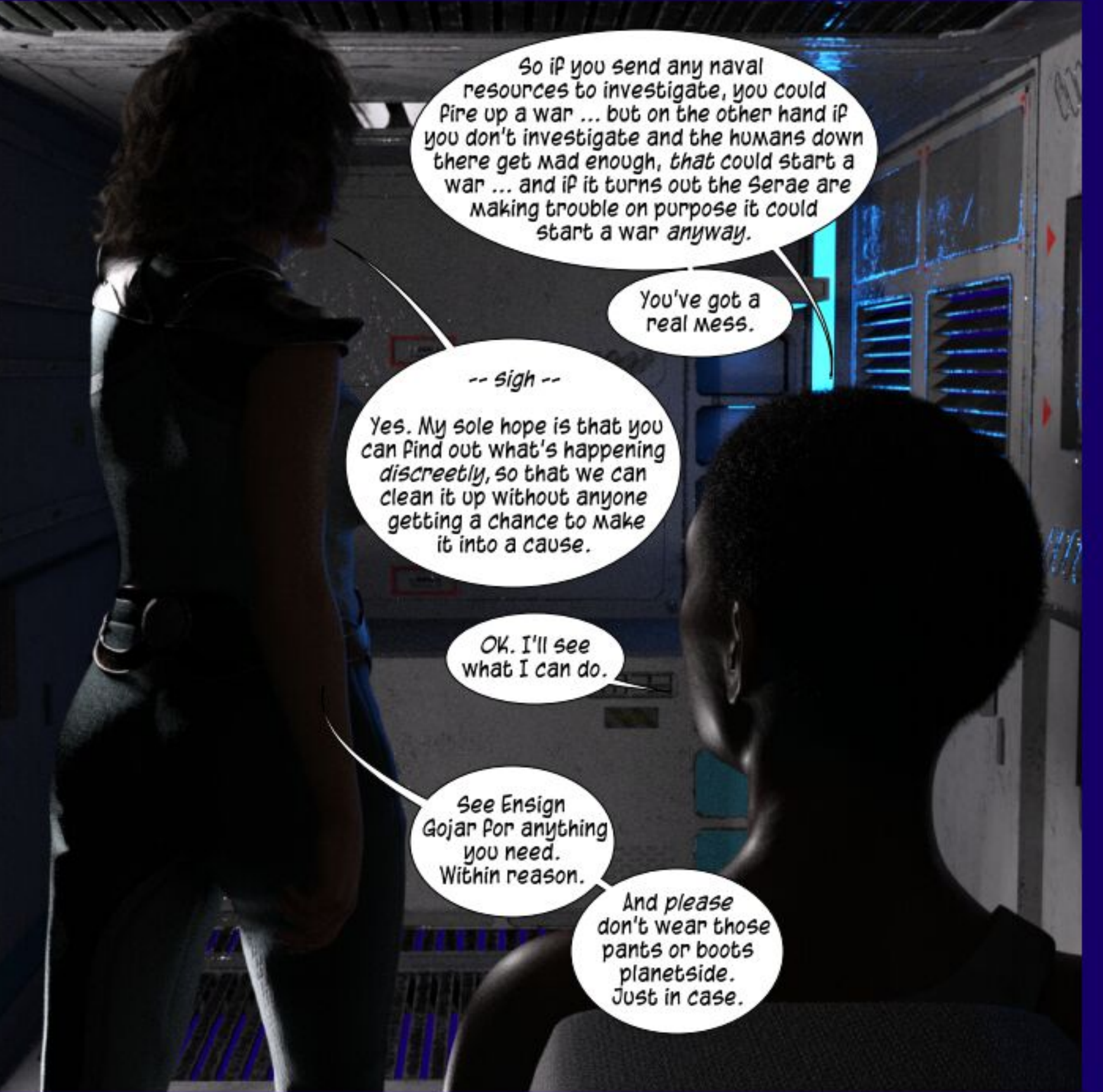
This system was disputed in the last round of conflicts. When the fighting stopped, both sides still wanted the third planet. So they're trying to share it.

There are only about a hundred humans on Sarda 3, and probably about the same number of Serae. But the resources that keep them there also keep them dangerously near each other. And some of the humans have started disappearing.

You have a whole naval station sitting idle here. Why not send one of your own?

I can't. Anything that even smells like a military incursion--even one person in a Navy ship--could be construed as a breach of the ceasefire. And the Serae would be happy to construe it.

You know there are plenty on both sides who'd love to start the war up again. They could be killing humans just to stir the pot.



So if you send any naval resources to investigate, you could fire up a war ... but on the other hand if you don't investigate and the humans down there get mad enough, that could start a war ... and if it turns out the Serae are making trouble on purpose it could start a war anyway.

You've got a real mess.

-- sigh --

Yes. My sole hope is that you can find out what's happening discreetly, so that we can clean it up without anyone getting a chance to make it into a cause.

OK. I'll see what I can do.

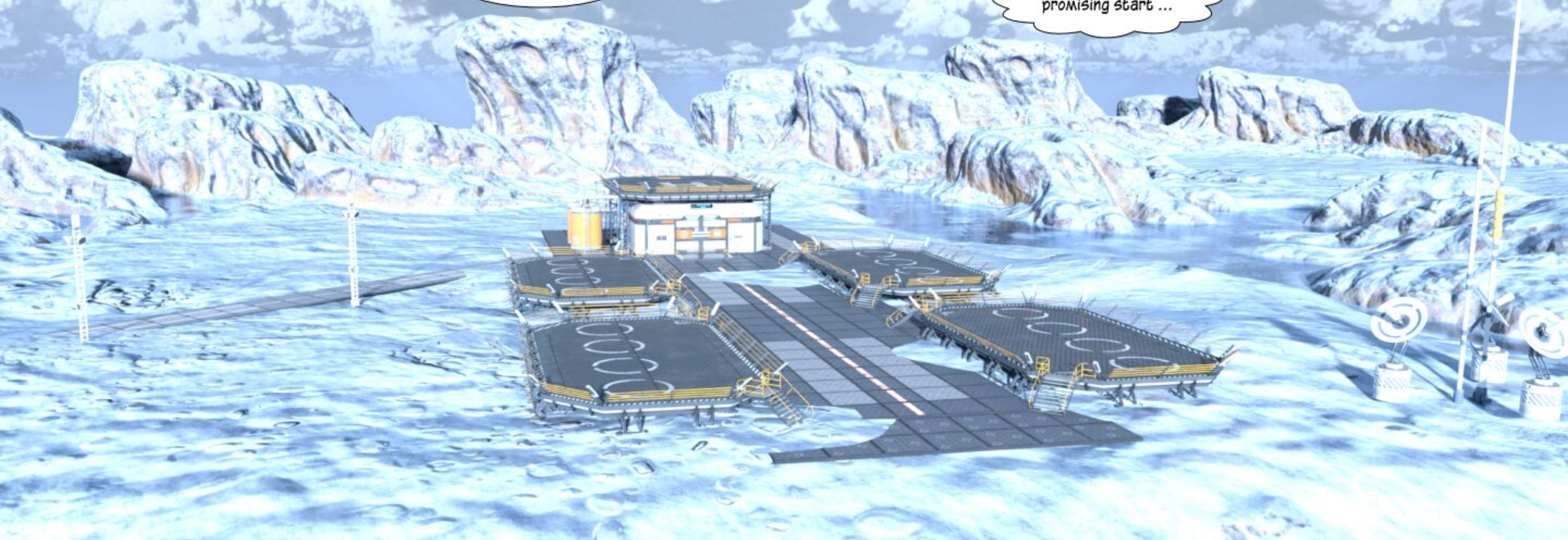
See Ensign Gojar for anything you need. Within reason.

And please don't wear those pants or boots planetside. Just in case.

Sardal 3 port, this is indie BO14.

Sardal 3 port? Acknowledge?

Well, that's not a very promising start ...



THE COLD FRONT

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



This intercom doesn't even work. This whole place might as well be abandoned.

I'd just go land over by the town, but they're already a little jumpy. My luck, they'd think it was the Serae invading.

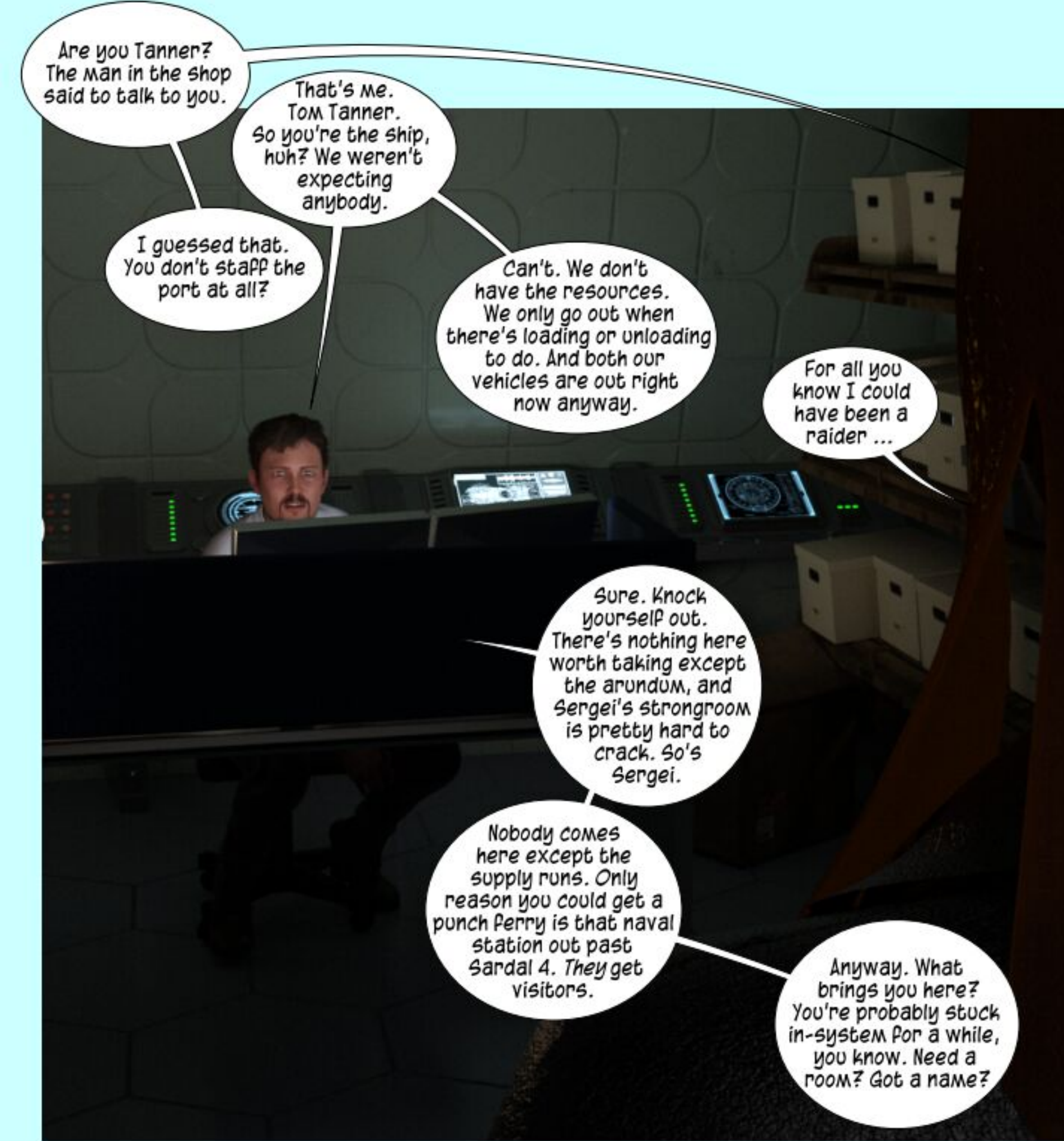


-- sigh --
Which reminds me, I'd better not use my bike. Flying in on Serae equipment might not go over real well. Especially with so few places a human can get one of those.

I guess I walk. Good thing the town's not too far.



Somebody had better have a room available. I am not walking back to Bosie every night to sleep.



Are you Tanner? The man in the shop said to talk to you.

That's me. Tom Tanner. So you're the ship, huh? We weren't expecting anybody.

I guessed that. You don't staff the port at all?

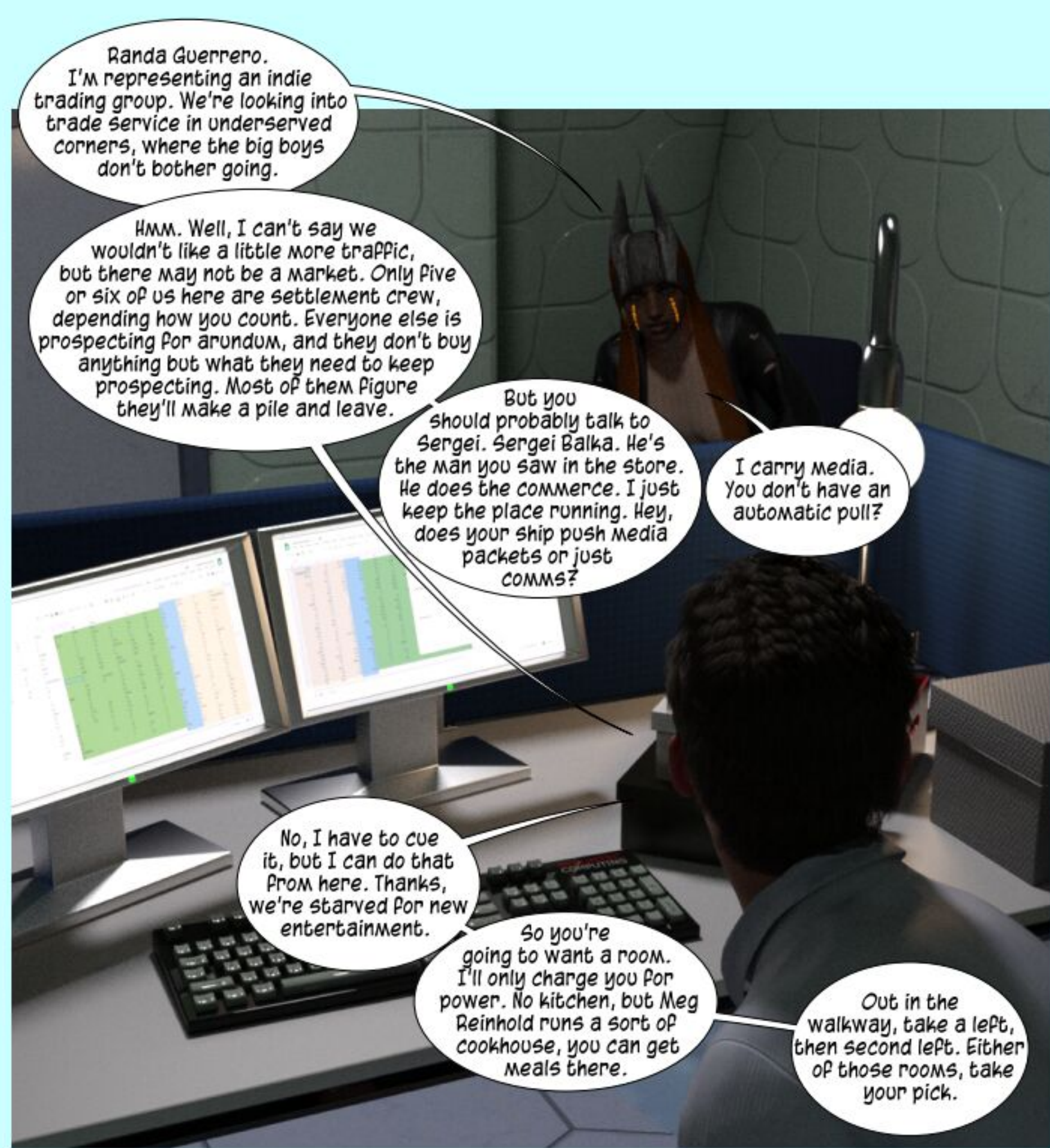
Can't. We don't have the resources. We only go out when there's loading or unloading to do. And both our vehicles are out right now anyway.

For all you know I could have been a raider ...

Sure. Knock yourself out. There's nothing here worth taking except the arundum, and Sergei's strongroom is pretty hard to crack. So's Sergei.

Nobody comes here except the supply runs. Only reason you could get a punch Perry is that naval station out past Sardal 4. They get visitors.

Anyway. What brings you here? You're probably stuck in-system for a while, you know. Need a room? Got a name?



Randa Guerrero. I'm representing an indie trading group. We're looking into trade service in underserved corners, where the big boys don't bother going.

Hmm. Well, I can't say we wouldn't like a little more traffic, but there may not be a market. Only five or six of us here are settlement crew, depending how you count. Everyone else is prospecting for arundum, and they don't buy anything but what they need to keep prospecting. Most of them figure they'll make a pile and leave.

But you should probably talk to Sergei. Sergei Balka. He's the man you saw in the store. He does the commerce. I just keep the place running. Hey, does your ship push media packets or just comms?

I carry media. You don't have an automatic pull?

No, I have to cue it, but I can do that from here. Thanks, we're starved for new entertainment.

So you're going to want a room. I'll only charge you for power. No kitchen, but Meg Reinhold runs a sort of cookhouse, you can get meals there.

Out in the walkway, take a left, then second left. Either of those rooms, take your pick.



I guess we put all his things in the storehouse?

For now. I suppose there's some chance he's not dead ...

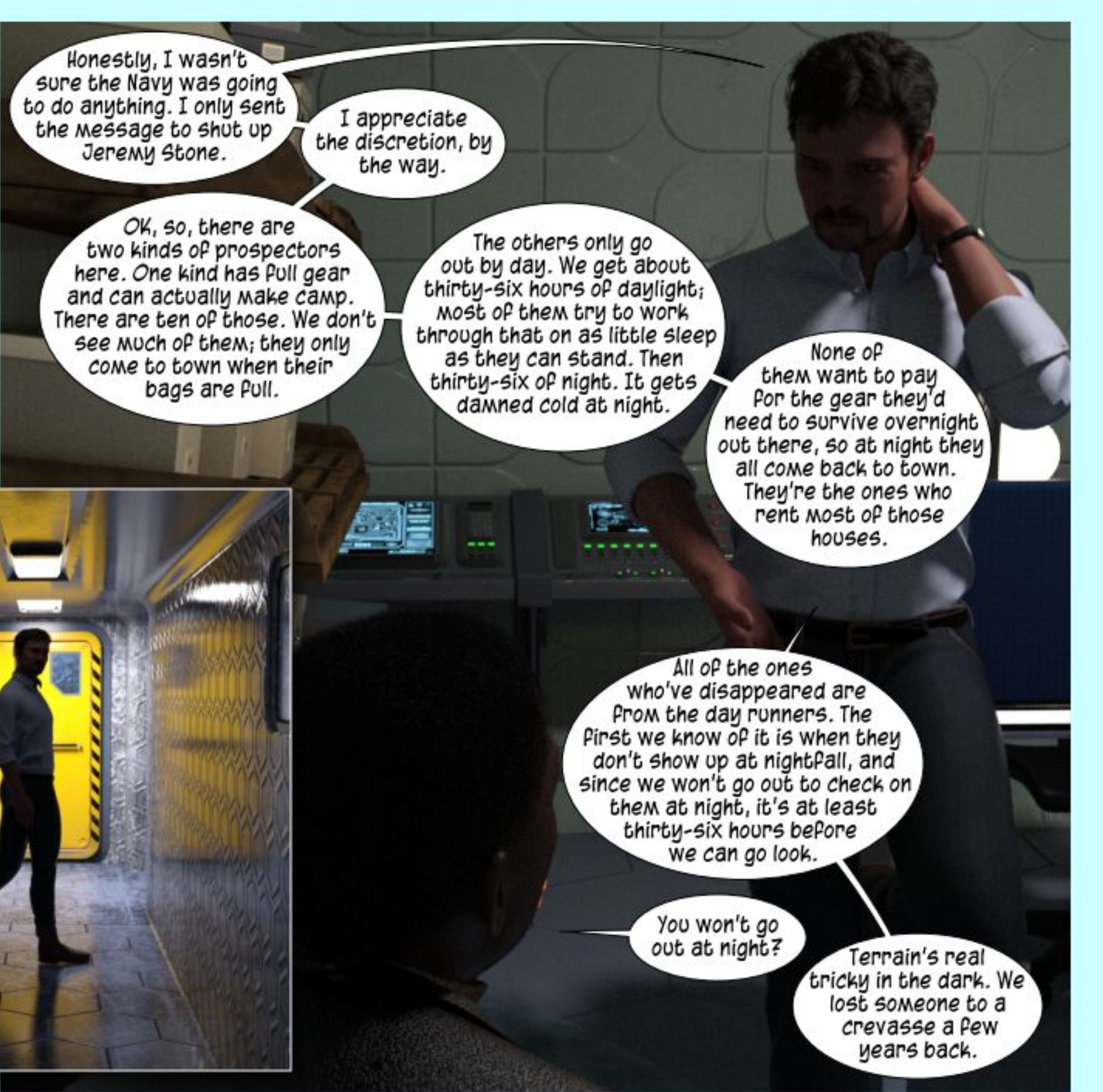
Mr. Tanner, he was working an open face and he didn't have night gear.

I know, I know. Maybe he was kidnapped. Let me believe, at least until we find a body.

Thanks for doing the run, Igor. Look, keep this to yourself for now, OK? When Stone finds out there's been a fourth, he's going to start screaming for the Navy even louder.



Ah, Tanner, can I talk to you? Privately?



Honestly, I wasn't sure the Navy was going to do anything. I only sent the message to shut up Jeremy Stone.

I appreciate the discretion, by the way.

OK, so, there are two kinds of prospectors here. One kind has Pull gear and can actually make camp. There are ten of those. We don't see much of them; they only come to town when their bags are full.

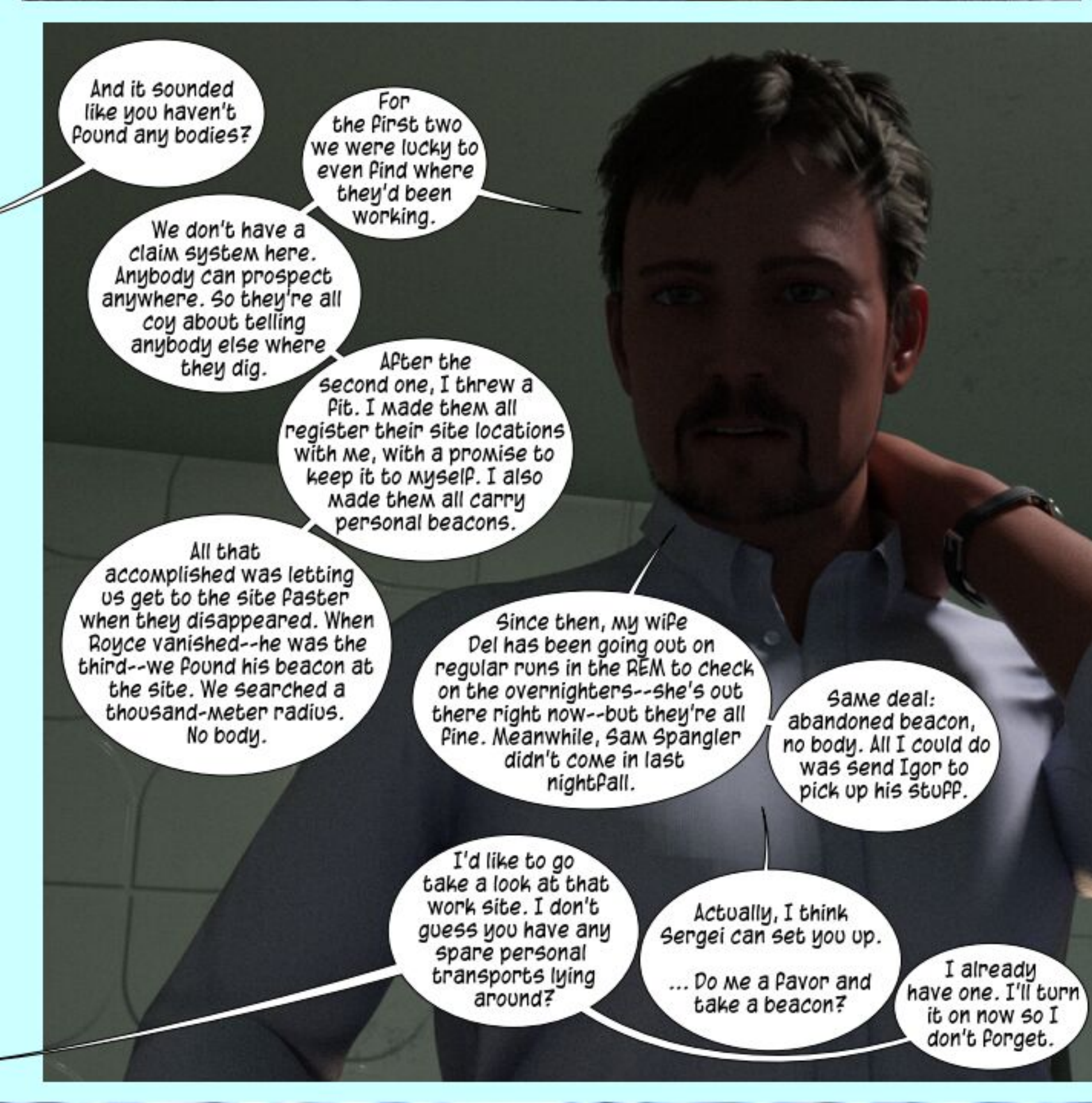
The others only go out by day. We get about thirty-six hours of daylight; most of them try to work through that on as little sleep as they can stand. Then thirty-six of night. It gets damned cold at night.

None of them want to pay for the gear they'd need to survive overnight out there, so at night they all come back to town. They're the ones who rent most of those houses.

All of the ones who've disappeared are from the day runners. The first we know of it is when they don't show up at nightfall, and since we won't go out to check on them at night, it's at least thirty-six hours before we can go look.

You won't go out at night?

Terrain's real tricky in the dark. We lost someone to a crevasse a few years back.



And it sounded like you haven't found any bodies?

For the first two we were lucky to even find where they'd been working.

We don't have a claim system here. Anybody can prospect anywhere. So they're all coy about telling anybody else where they dig.

After the second one, I threw a pit. I made them all register their site locations with me, with a promise to keep it to myself. I also made them all carry personal beacons.

All that accomplished was letting us get to the site Paster when they disappeared. When Royce vanished--he was the third--we found his beacon at the site. We searched a thousand-meter radius. No body.

Since then, my wife Del has been going out on regular runs in the REM to check on the overnights--she's out there right now--but they're all Pine. Meanwhile, Sam Spangler didn't come in last nightfall.

Same deal: abandoned beacon, no body. All I could do was send Igor to pick up his stuff.

I'd like to go take a look at that work site. I don't guess you have any spare personal transports lying around?

Actually, I think Sergei can set you up.

... Do me a favor and take a beacon?

I already have one. I'll turn it on now so I don't forget.



Oh sure. Use Pete Mills' old screamer. Out back. Igor will show you. Igor!

Pete flew it into a crevasse, but it's still in good shape. Better shape than Pete.

Use it as long as you need. Just pay for power.

Even have a helmet for you.

No life insurance, though.



So much for clear tracks. Spangler walked around his cut so much I can't even tell who else was here. I know Igor was, and Tanner said his wife searched the area ...

No obvious tracks leading away, either. Guess that makes sense, if everybody here's got a personal flyer ... just load the body onto that and take it anywhere without leaving a trace. I mean, assuming he was killed.

On the other hand ... if you cut through that ice, and dumped a body in there, your hole would freeze over past after dark ... that'd be a lot less work ...

I wonder where that flows to.



Made it back alive, eh? And found Spangler. Not bad!

Do you Polks have a doctor?

Dr. Noguchi. She'll want a look. Well, might not want it, but ...

Set down. I'll help you carry.



I don't mind you observing, but if you have to puke, do it outside.

No, I've seen worse.

HMM.

Wish he hadn't been in water. Kept him from freezing all the way. He'd smell better if he had. Where'd you find him?

The stream he was dropped in wasn't deep. There was an especially shallow part where he'd gotten stuck.

Well, he was definitely killed. This hole's from a beam drill. A handheld, or it'd be a lot bigger. I see these once in a while when someone gets careless. But that's always in the extremities. No one gets careless in the middle of someone else's sternum.



Handheld beam drill--so, something just about everybody here has?

Has, or can pick up lying around with the owner not noticing it's missing for weeks. There are probably two of these for every human on this planet.

And two for every Sera as well. I can't tell the difference between a human and Serae drill from the wound. As Stone will point out, first chance he gets.

I hear him ranting at Tom out in the office right now.



... so you're just going to sit here and watch as they kill us off, one by one? Is that your idea of how to run a settlement? Just roll over and die?

Jeremy ...

... we've discussed this. Fifty times. Even if they are being killed, we don't have a bit of proof the Serae are doing it.

I don't like seeing this happen either, but what do you want me to do?

You know damned well what I want you to do, Tanner! And if you don't do it soon, I might just decide to go to the port and send them a signal myself.

So you'd start a major war over something that is a strictly local problem? No offense, I'm not saying it's not important ...



Who the hell are you?

I'm an eccentric billionaire. I'm looking the place over to see if I want to build a vacation home here.



Oh. You think you're punny. I get it.

Hey, Jeremy, did you come in early just to come gripe at us?

You weren't having another bad prospecting day, by any chance?



Go to hell, Del.

All of you can go to hell.

Damn it, I was going to get him to help with Sam.

We really need to take care of him before dark, and it's best to have six. I was going to get Igor too ... I hate to ask Meg, she's busy getting dinner ready right now.

You have six.

I wasn't going to ask you ... I mean, you're not--

No, it's Pine. I brought him in; I should help show him out.



I didn't have time to cut a stone ... I can bring one next daylight ...

It's OK, Igor.

Next daylight is Pine.



Picked a great time to close up, Balika ...

Yeah, yeah. Keep your shirts on.

They were waiting for assay. Most of them go straight to Sergei when they come in; he pays them for the crystals then and there. Igor and Sergei will be very busy the next few hours.

Then some of them will come over here for a meal. Meg, this is Randa, she's visiting.

Glad to meet you. It's lentil stew tonight. If you help me put out the bowls and such, I'll give you a discount.



I figured they'd be a little rowdier.

They're tired. I can't get them to sleep enough when they're in the field. Some of them just come in and fall into bed.

When they wake up in the middle of the night, then they'll have some fun.



Pip! It's after sundown. I was starting to get worried.

Did you do any better this run?

I'm fine, Soj.

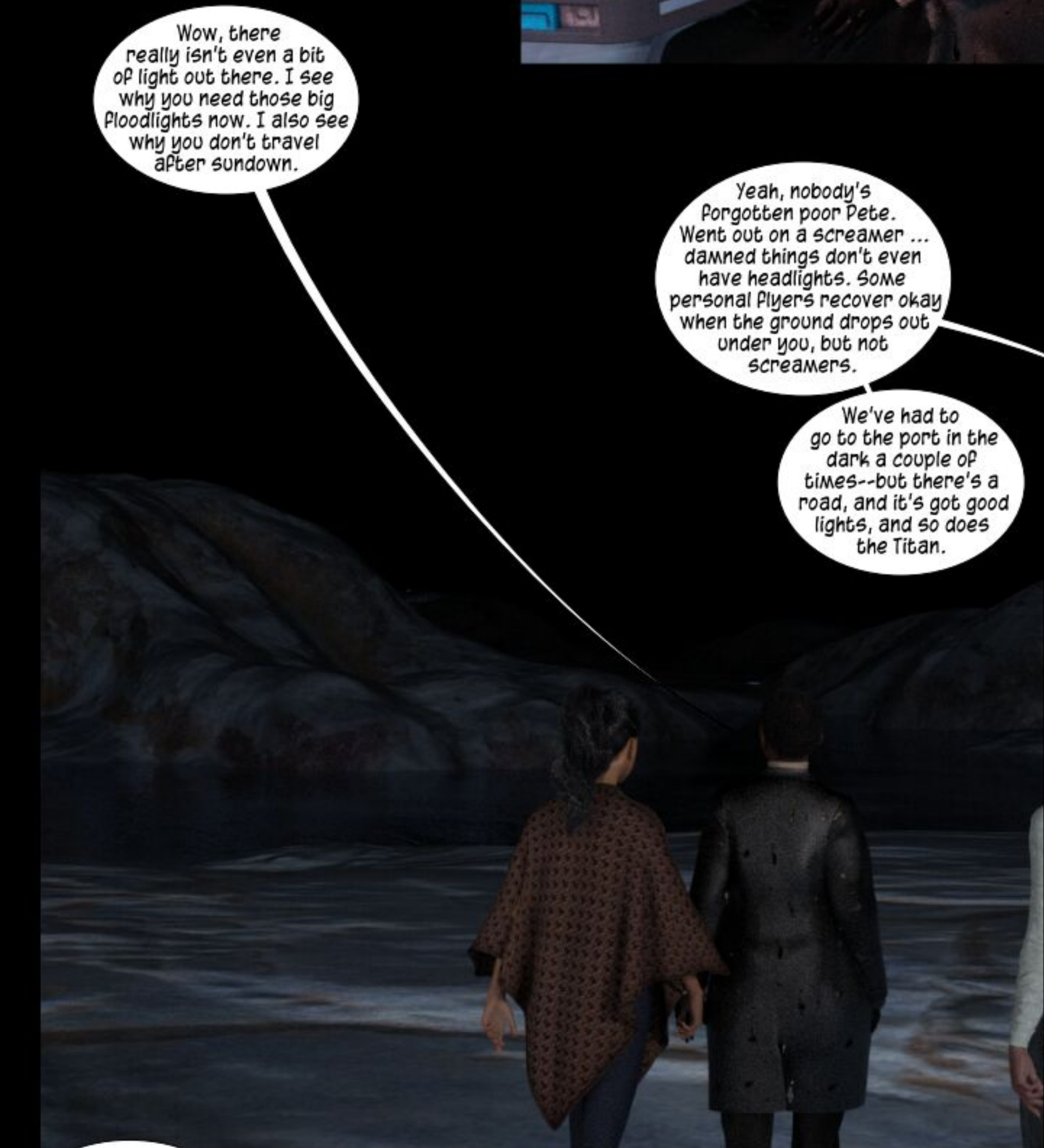
And no.



What was that drama?

Pip and Soj were a thing for, oh, more than a year. We even thought they were going to start doing runs together, which for the prospectors means you might as well be married.

Then a while back it just ... ended. Seems to have been entirely Pip's decision, because Soj isn't happy about it.



Wow, there really isn't even a bit of light out there. I see why you need those big floodlights now. I also see why you don't travel after sundown.

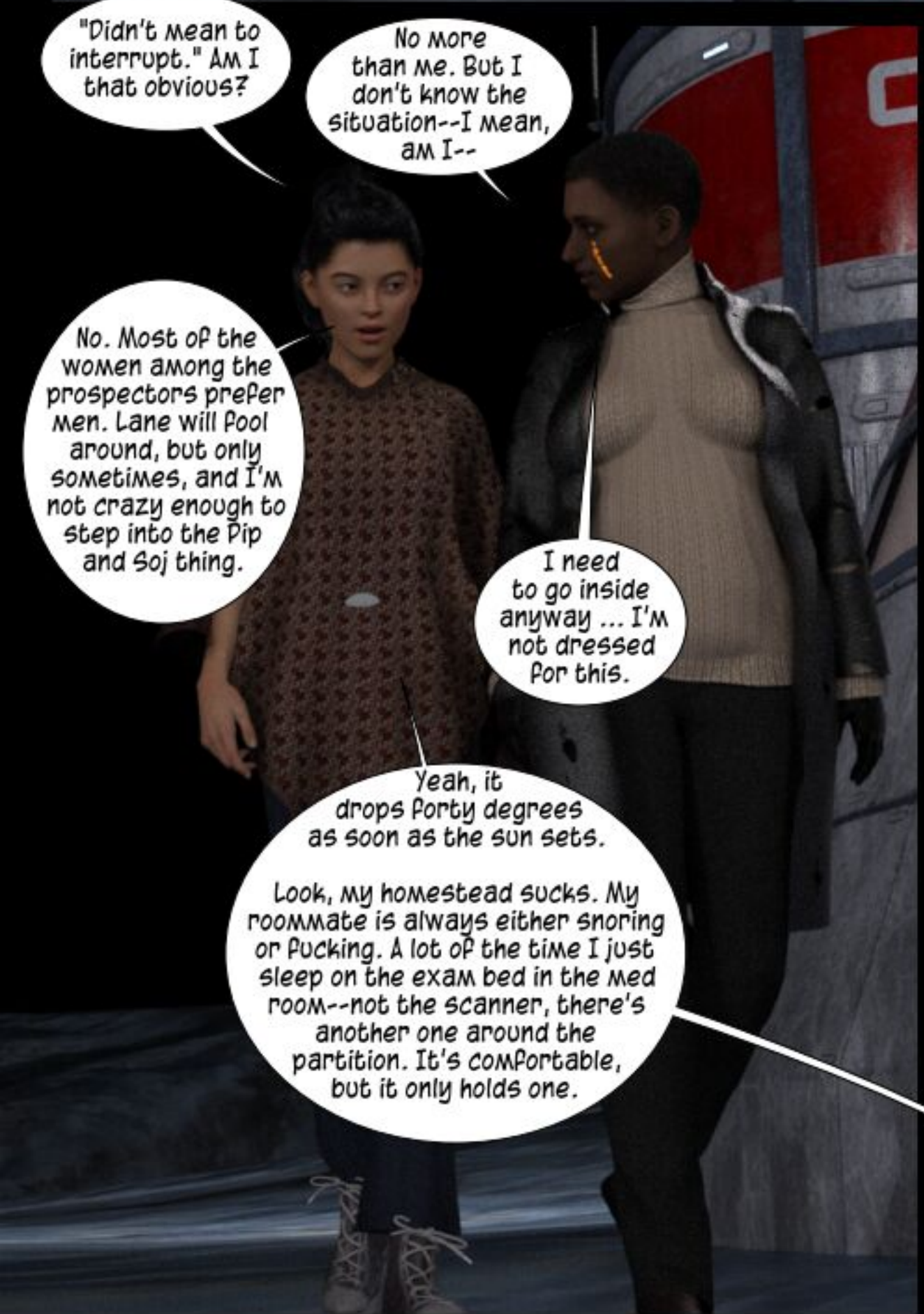
Yeah, nobody's forgotten poor Pete. Went out on a screamer ... damned things don't even have headlights. Some personal flyers recover okay when the ground drops out under you, but not screamers.

We've had to go to the port in the dark a couple of times--but there's a road, and it's got good lights, and so does the Titan.



Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came over to ask if you'd take a run with me in the REM next daylight. You had good luck finding Spangler--I'd like to try again to find Royce, with your help.

Sure.



"Didn't mean to interrupt." Am I that obvious?

No more than me. But I don't know the situation--I mean, am I--

No. Most of the women among the prospectors prefer men. Lane will pool around, but only sometimes, and I'm not crazy enough to step into the Pip and Soj thing.

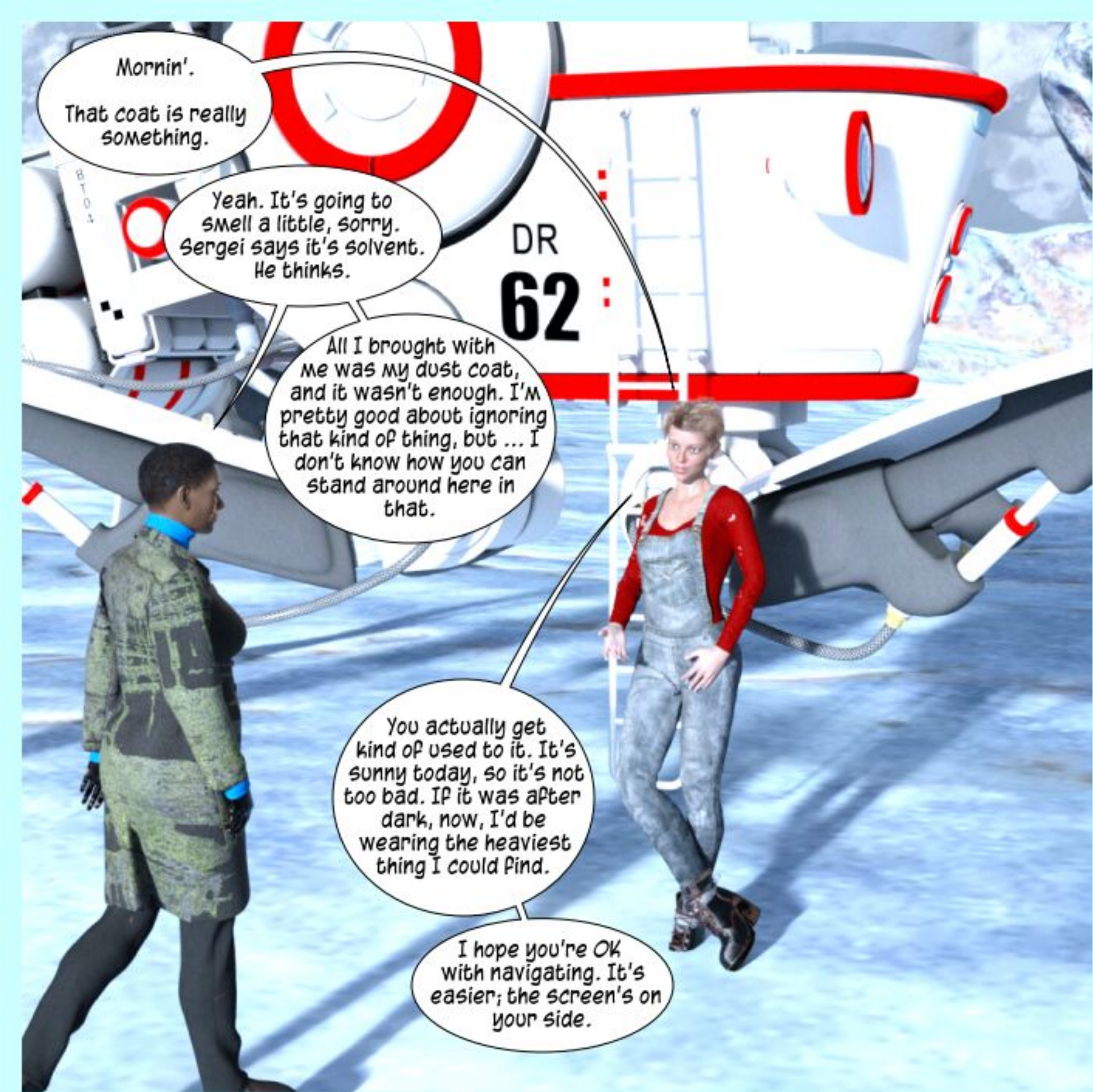
I need to go inside anyway ... I'm not dressed for this.

Yeah, it drops forty degrees as soon as the sun sets.

Look, my homestead sucks. My roommate is always either snoring or puking. A lot of the time I just sleep on the exam bed in the med room--not the scanner, there's another one around the partition. It's comfortable, but it only holds one.

The bed in your room is a lot better. Just saying.





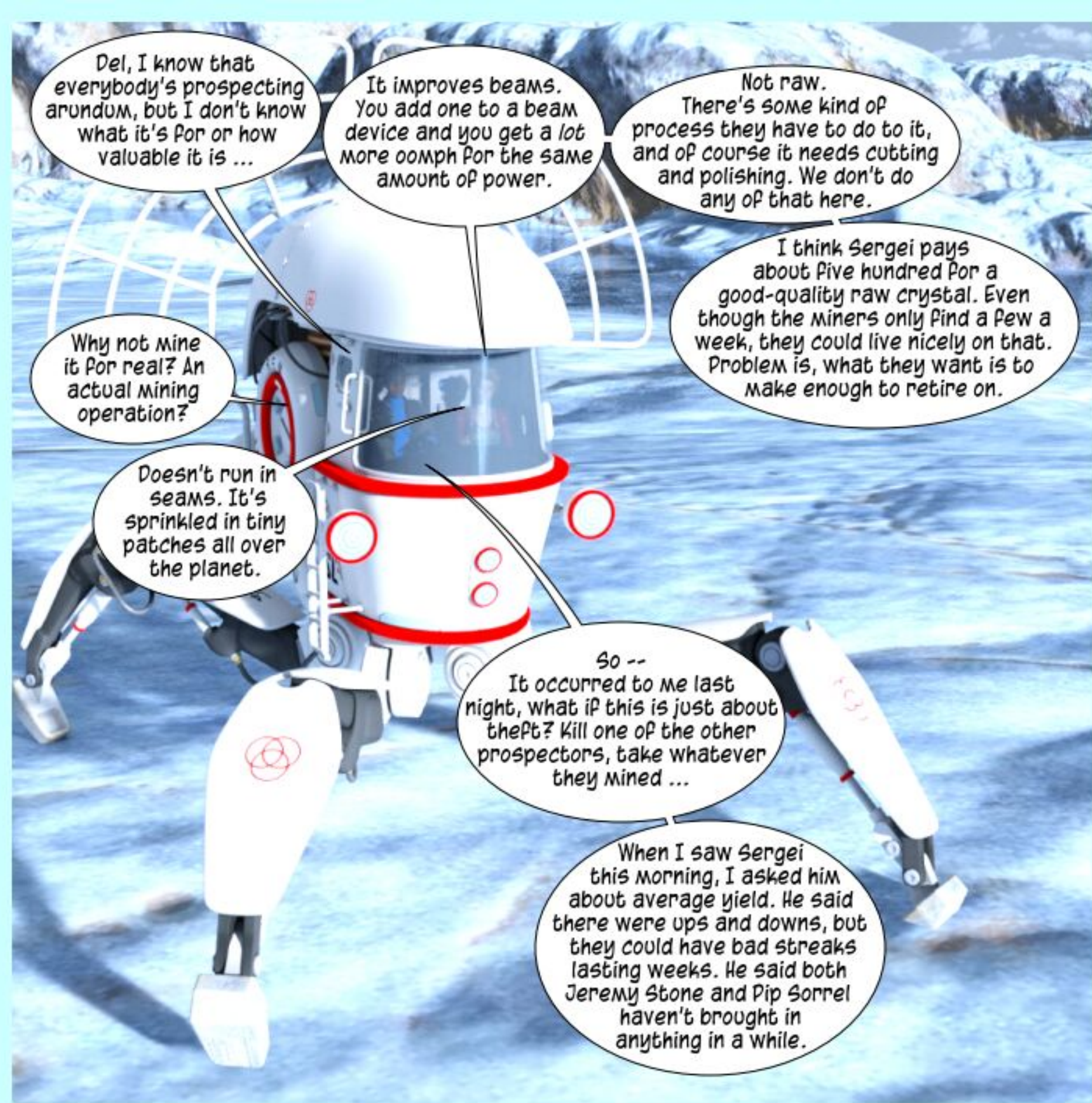
Mornin'.
That coat is really something.

Yeah. It's going to smell a little, sorry. Sergei says it's solvent. He thinks.

All I brought with me was my dust coat, and it wasn't enough. I'm pretty good about ignoring that kind of thing, but ... I don't know how you can stand around here in that.

You actually get kind of used to it. It's sunny today, so it's not too bad. If it was after dark, now, I'd be wearing the heaviest thing I could find.

I hope you're OK with navigating. It's easier; the screen's on your side.



Del, I know that everybody's prospecting around, but I don't know what it's for or how valuable it is ...

It improves beams. You add one to a beam device and you get a lot more oomph for the same amount of power.

Not raw. There's some kind of process they have to do to it, and of course it needs cutting and polishing. We don't do any of that here.

I think Sergei pays about five hundred for a good-quality raw crystal. Even though the miners only find a few a week, they could live nicely on that. Problem is, what they want is to make enough to retire on.

Why not mine it for real? An actual mining operation?

Doesn't run in seams. It's sprinkled in tiny patches all over the planet.

So -- It occurred to me last night, what if this is just about the P? Kill one of the other prospectors, take whatever they mined ...

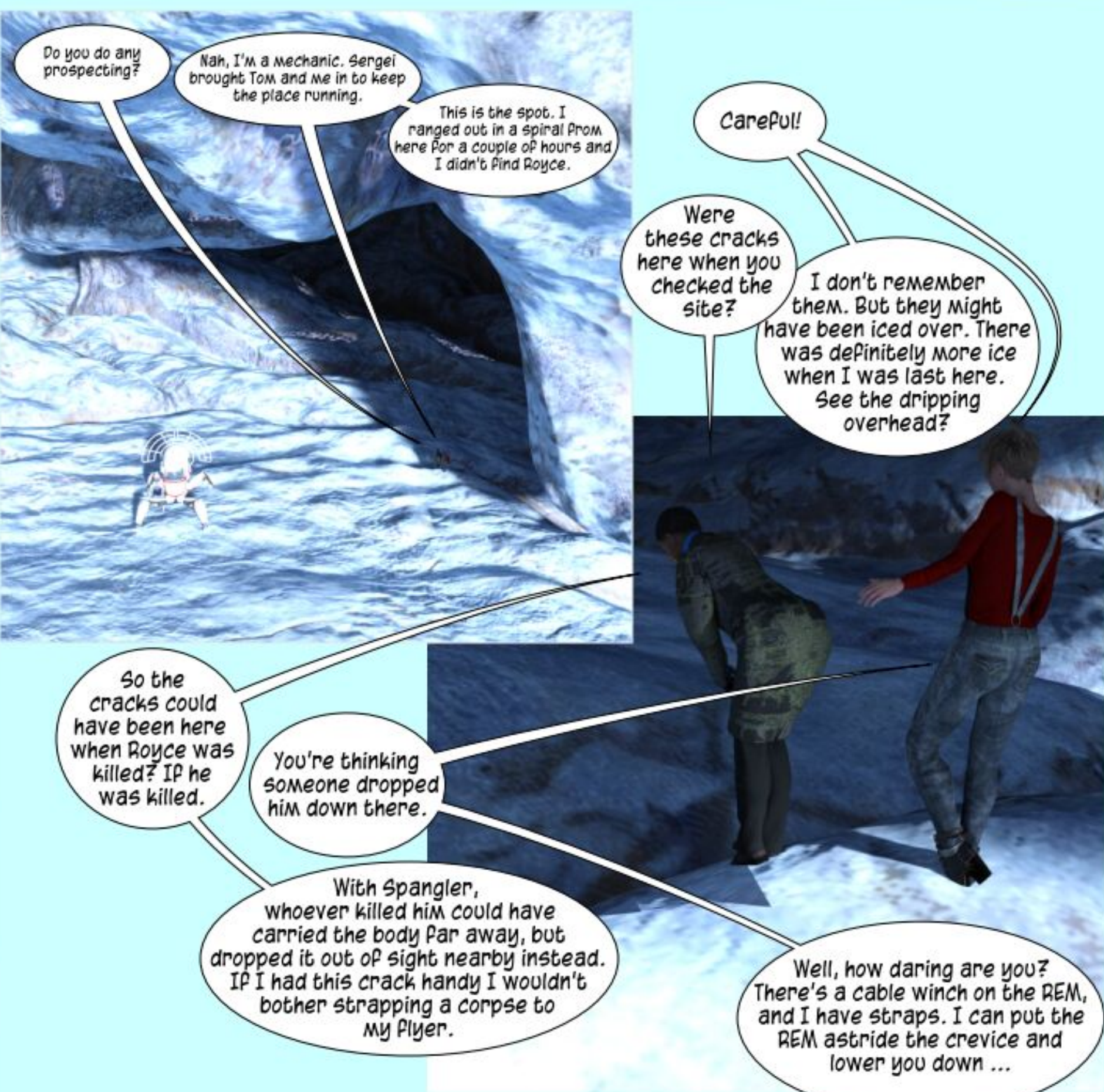
When I saw Sergei this morning, I asked him about average yield. He said there were ups and downs, but they could have bad streaks lasting weeks. He said both Jeremy Stone and Pip Sorrel haven't brought in anything in a while.



Well, it's not a bad thought. But I was first at all four work sites, and there was around there nobody had taken with them.

I didn't leave that for Igor. REMs are notorious for not having any cargo space, but I can fit a few crystals. Sergei's holding that money for the prospectors in case they turn up alive.

Not that that seems likely, unless Royce shows up via miracle. Frank and Mojan were months ago; I don't expect we'll ever see them again.



Do you do any prospecting?

Nah, I'm a mechanic. Sergei brought Tom and me in to keep the place running.

This is the spot. I ranged out in a spiral from here for a couple of hours and I didn't find Royce.

Careful!

Were these cracks here when you checked the site?

I don't remember them. But they might have been iced over. There was definitely more ice when I was last here. See the dripping overhead?

So the cracks could have been here when Royce was killed? If he was killed.

You're thinking someone dropped him down there.

With Spangler, whoever killed him could have carried the body far away, but dropped it out of sight nearby instead. If I had this crack handy I wouldn't bother strapping a corpse to my flyer.

Well, how daring are you? There's a cable winch on the REM, and I have straps. I can put the REM astride the crevice and lower you down ...



You actually found him?

Don't get too close, Tom. Go get Sally, would you?

The only reason we don't have to disinfect the REM--and us--is he was frozen solid. But he's thawing real fast now.



You know, you didn't have to do this twice just to impress me. Autopsies are not my favorite part of the job.

Sorry.

Well, it's confirmed, anyway. Another beam burn hole. Little sloppier this time. Might not have been immediately fatal ... he wasn't putting up a fight after it, though.

Yeah, and then he got dropped twenty feet into a crevice.



So, Sally's confirmed that--

Jeremy? Do you ever go out mining these days, or is your new job pissing everybody off?



You're not funny, Del. Go on, finish what you were about to say. What's confirmed? That Royce was murdered, like Spangler was?

... Yes.

We know it wasn't a money motive, so now the question is who here had enough of a grudge against all of them to want to--



Arrgh!

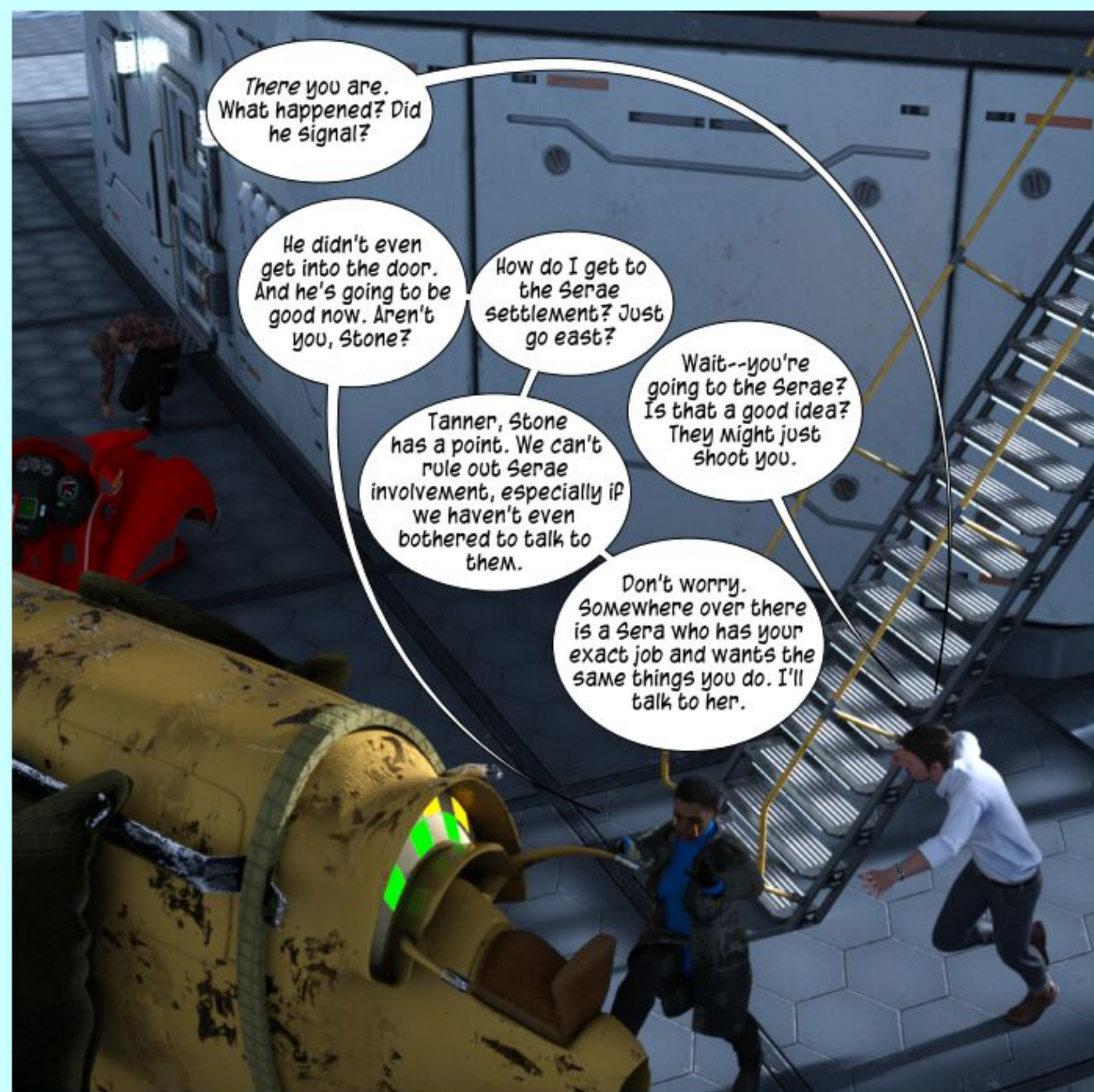
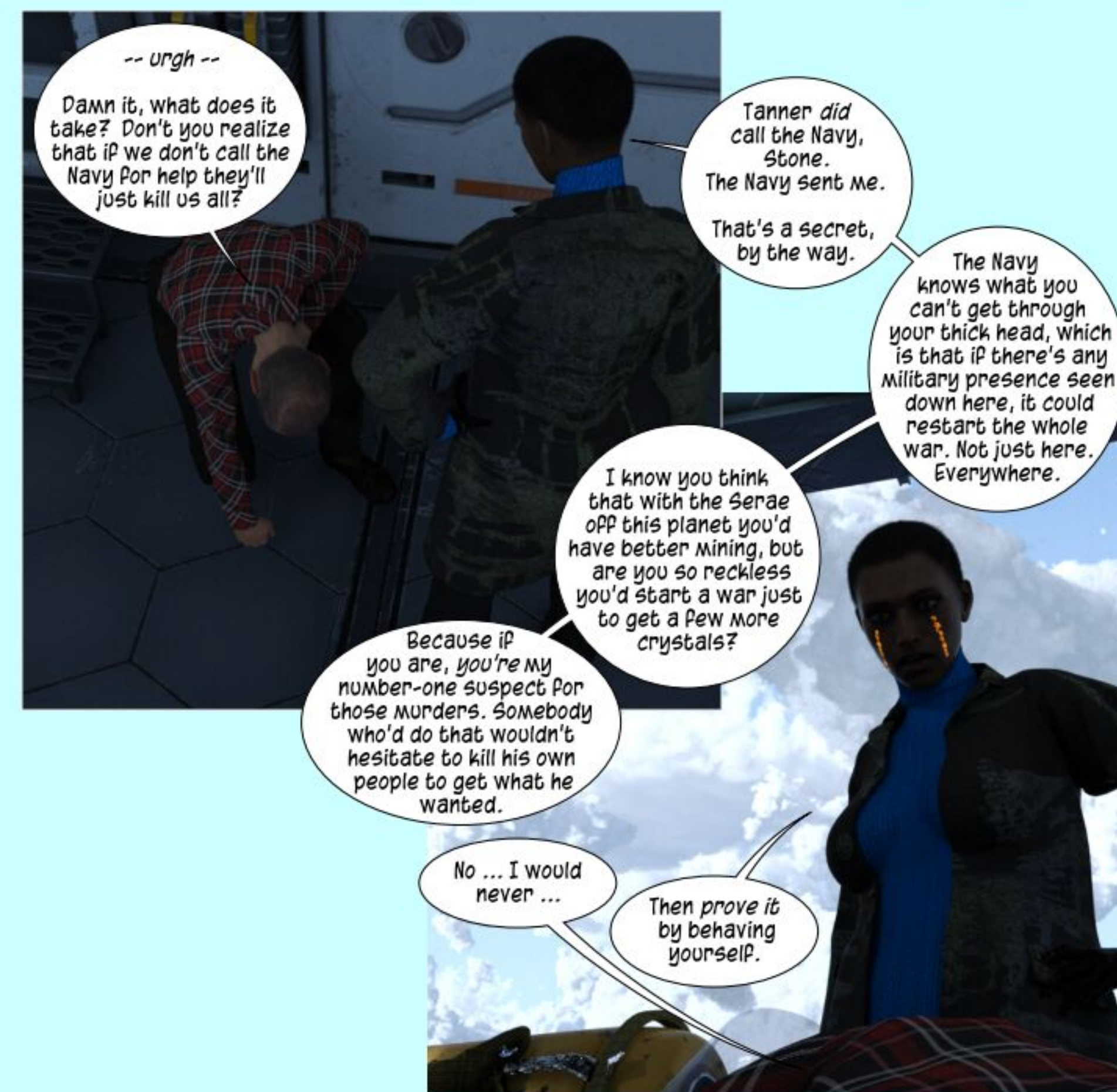
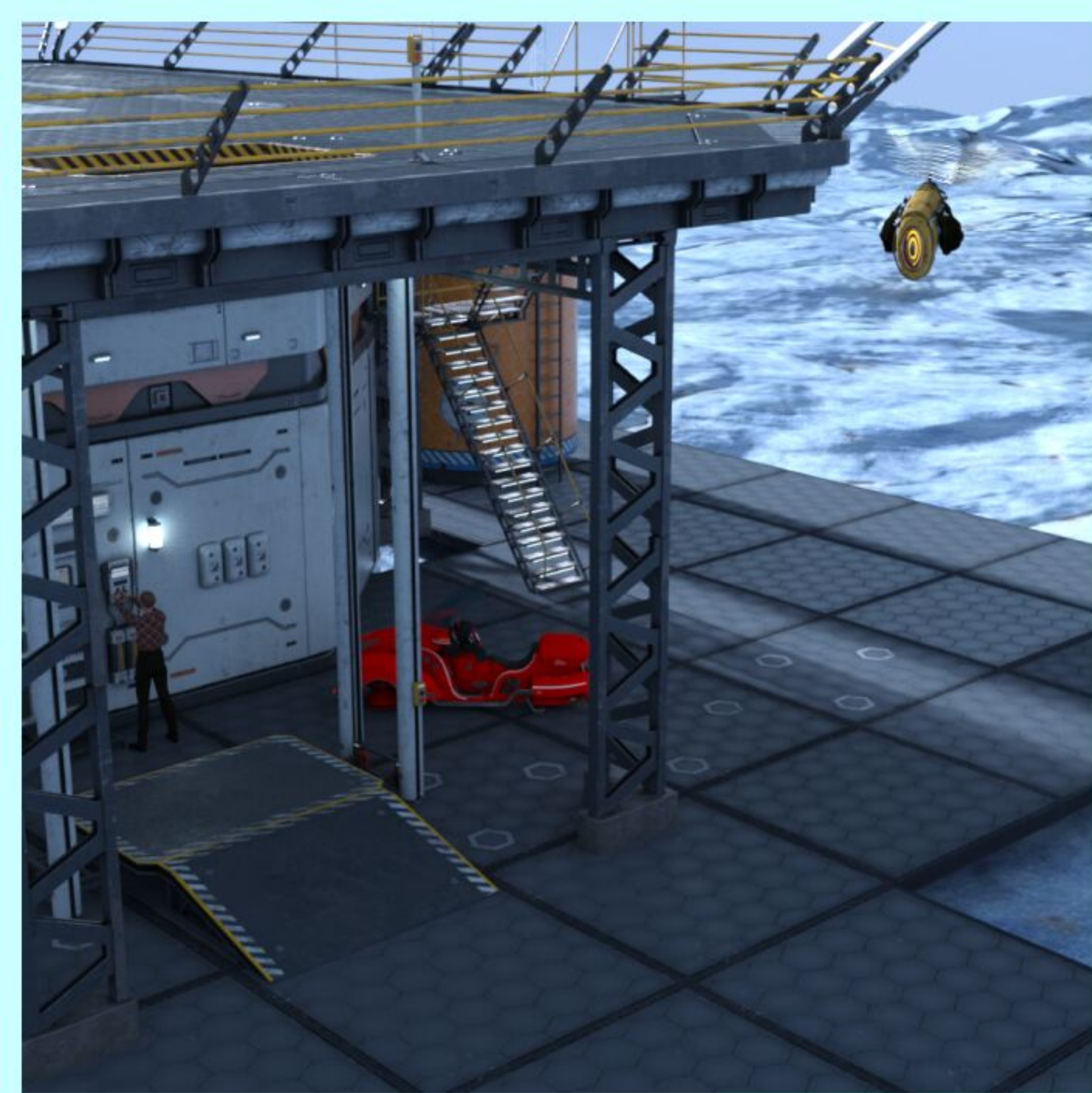
You are all really something. You'll grab at any explanation instead of looking at the obvious. You'll make out everybody here to be a criminal before you go after the actual problem!

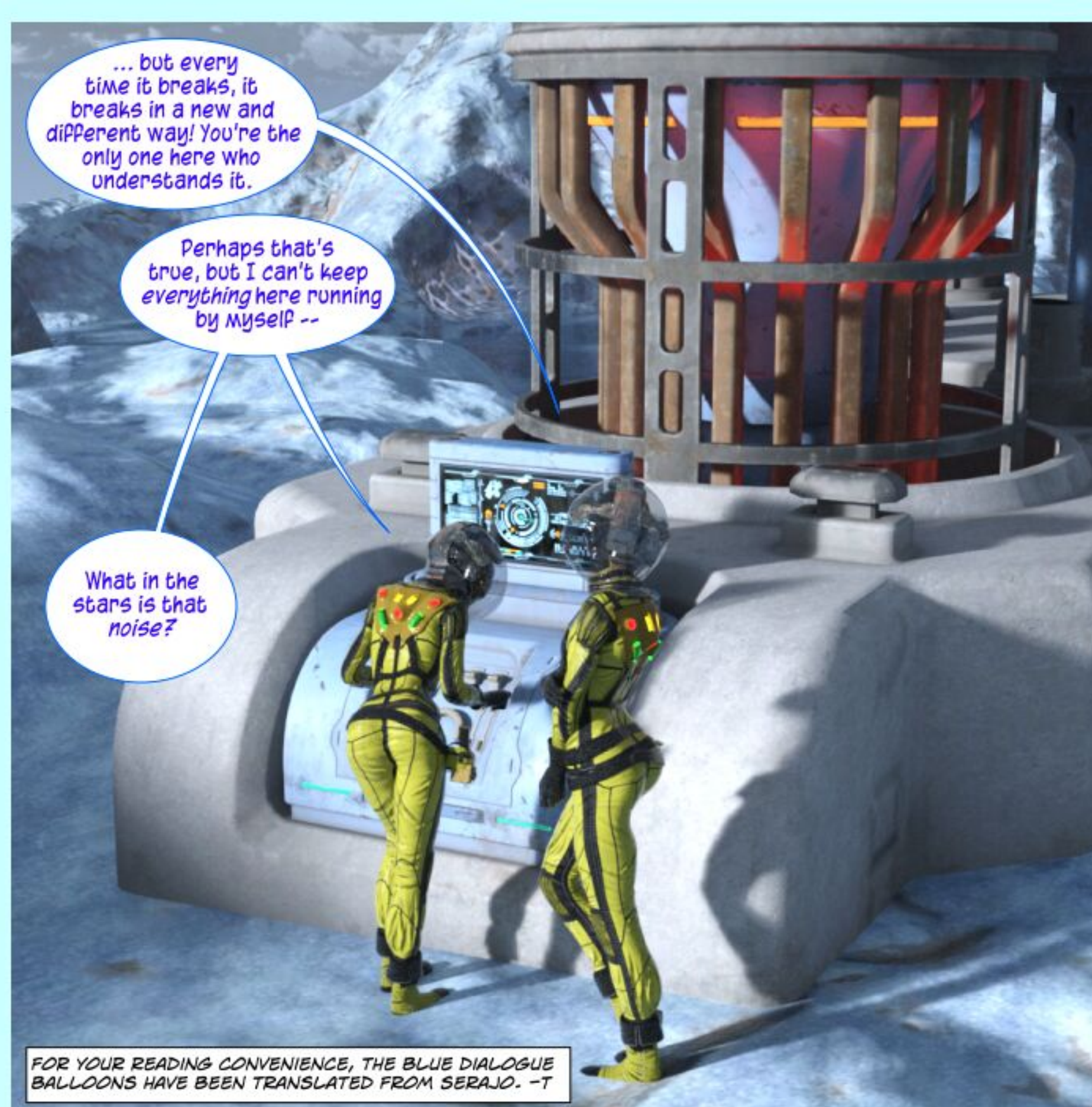
I'm done. I'm going to go deal with this the way you should have dealt with it weeks ago.



Jeremy, wait!

Damn it! He's going to the port to jack the transmitter. He's going to send an alarm call to the naval station!





... but every time it breaks, it breaks in a new and different way! You're the only one here who understands it.

Perhaps that's true, but I can't keep everything here running by myself --

What in the stars is that noise?

FOR YOUR READING CONVENIENCE, THE BLUE DIALOGUE BALLOONS HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED FROM SERAJO. -7



A human?

I should go get a weapon ...

Don't be ridiculous. You know how they are. If it wanted trouble it would have been shooting as it flew up.

And it certainly wasn't trying to sneak up on us, not on that thing.



Teraja. Sorry for the noise. It was the only thing available.

Do either of you speak any Trade? I need to speak with the leader of your settlement.

Teraja. I am that one. I am Chib.

Randa. Pleased to meet you.

Come to my home. We will speak.

Be careful.

You're just annoyed because you have to finish repairing the condenser by yourself.

TERAJA = GOOD DAY, HELLO
TRADE = WHAT ALL THE HUMANS IN THESE STORIES SPEAK (WHAT, YOU THOUGHT IT WAS ENGLISH?)



... and I thought I had better at least come ask you.

It is good of you, but you know it means nothing. If I say "no, we do not do that," you then choose if to believe me.

And what if there is one of us who decides to go and kill yours without my knowing? I would not approve, but I also cannot say for certain there is not ...

I understand.



But, for what worth it has, I do say "no, we do not do that."

All of us remember the war. None of us want it to come again.

And even if we did, that would not be our way. We would bring our military again, not sneak and kill as cowards.



Do you believe her?

As far as I can. I mean, she said herself that she couldn't guarantee she didn't have some loose cannon among her people.

But here's the thing. Two things.

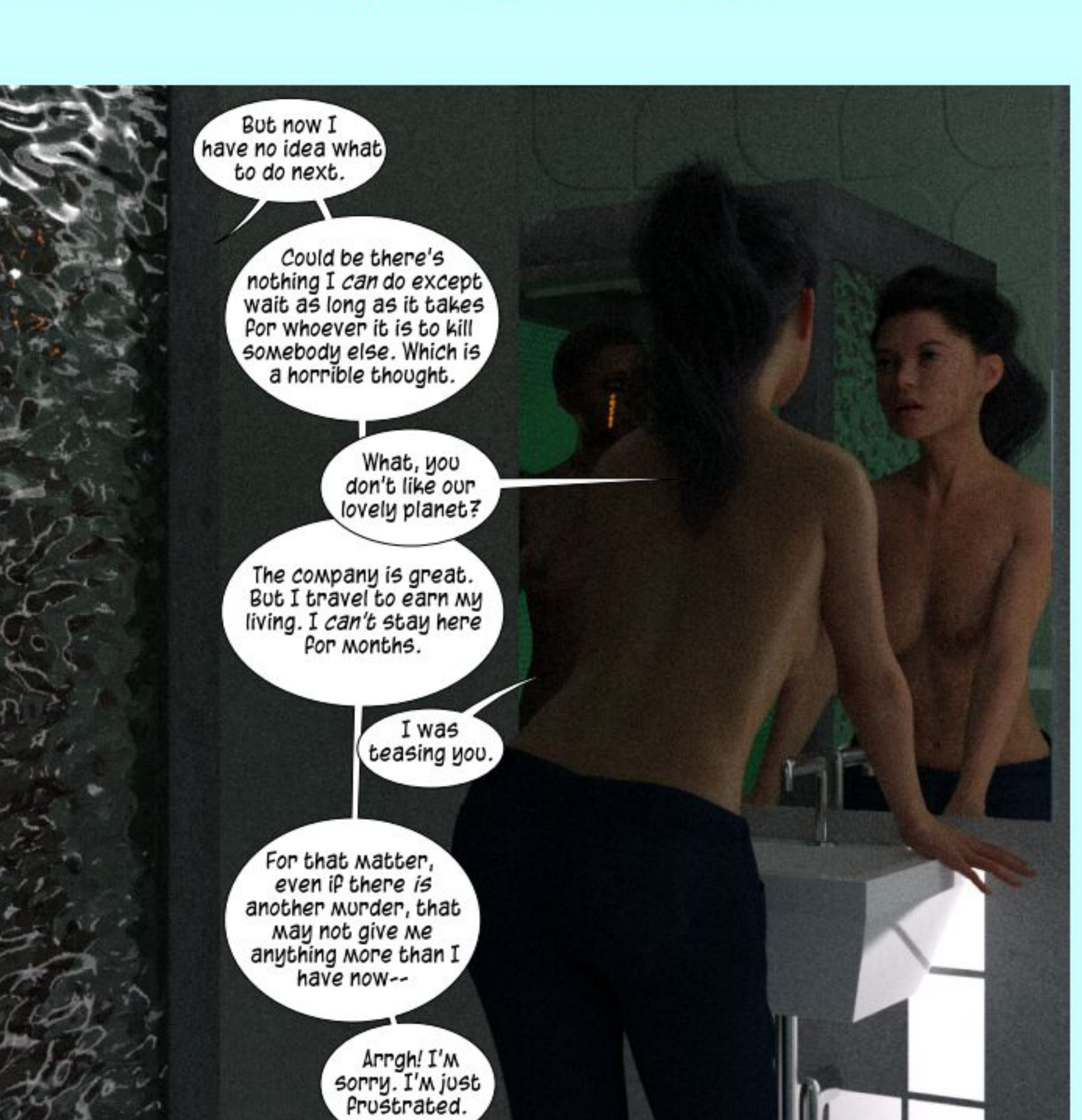
First, she's right. That's the way they always fought -- they prefer open engagement. Sneaking around assassinating would strike almost all Seraje as ... do you know any Serajo? "Niktorni." Uncultured. Rude. Barbarian. Like that.

Second, if they wanted to make trouble --

Look, don't freak out about this, and whatever you do, don't tell Stone, but they've got a PyPr there, complete with repowering tether. And two Strij. I saw them. Don't know if those two were in flight condition, of course.

Aren't PyPrs the ones they used for blowing up towns?

Yeah. Air-to-ground strafing is what they're built for. The Seraje never got into bombs much; they didn't need to. That PyPr could take this settlement apart in about five minutes. But I figure they only have it as insurance.



But now I have no idea what to do next.

Could be there's nothing I can do except wait as long as it takes for whoever it is to kill somebody else. Which is a horrible thought.

What, you don't like our lovely planet?

The company is great. But I travel to earn my living. I can't stay here for months.

I was teasing you.

For that matter, even if there is another murder, that may not give me anything more than I have now--

Arrgh! I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated.



There has to have been some strange behavior, though. I mean, in order to do what they did, they'd have had to follow the other prospector, or somehow know where their work site was.

And don't say they got it from Tom, because even if he'd tell where someone was--and he wouldn't--he didn't start keeping track until after the second disappearance.

OK, but I don't see where you're going --

I think you're going to need to find a way to check on everyone. See if they're really going out to work when they say they are. See if they do anything weird some morning.

Still might take forever, but better to catch them before than after the next murder, right?



There. Bark 1 wasn't really OK. We had a bad storm a year back that hit it hard. Keep it switched off and just use the fallbacks and you'll be fine.

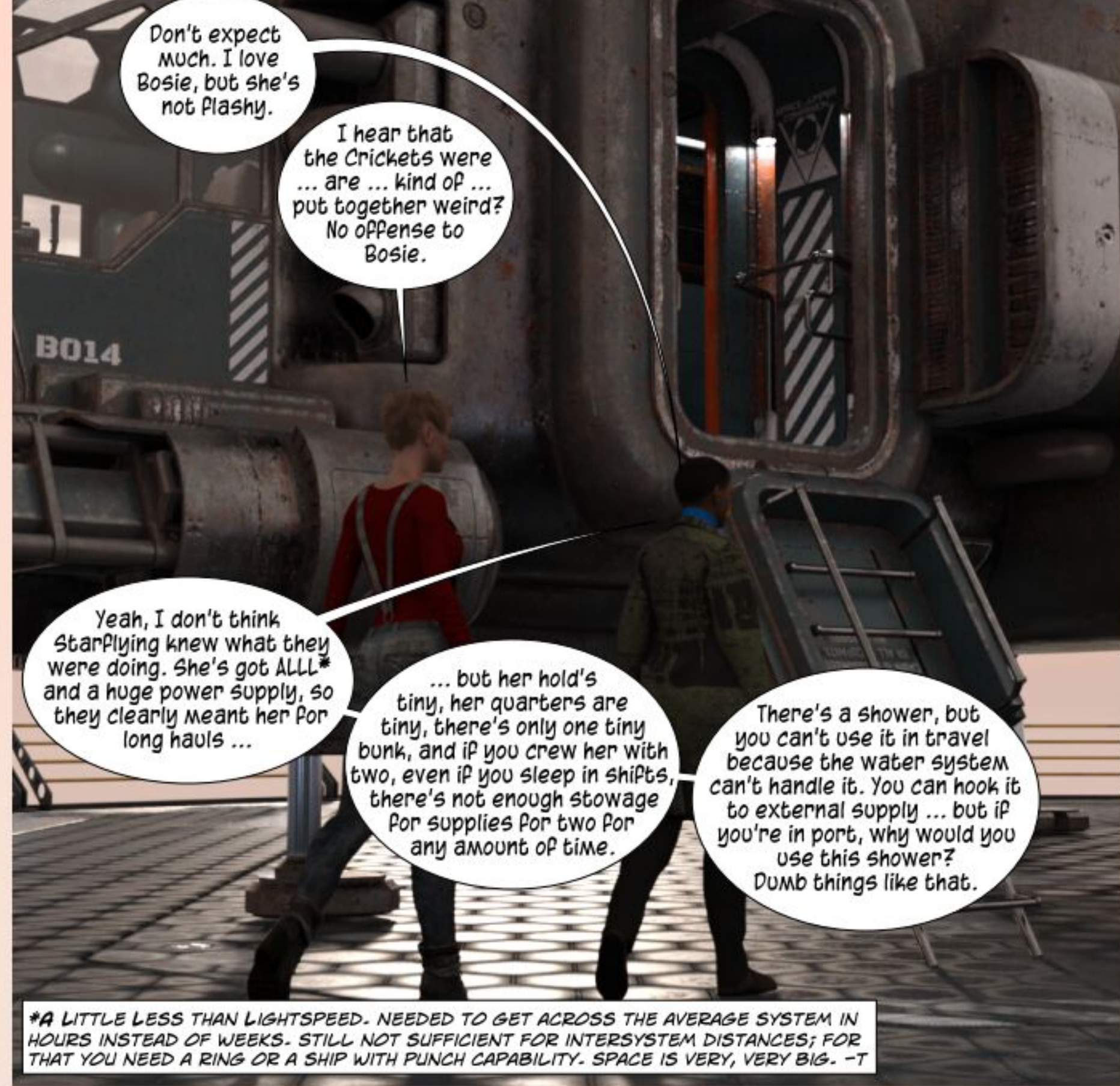
I MOVED MY OPERATIONS TO THE PORT, WHERE I COULD USE THE BIG ANTENNAS TO TRACK THE LOCATIONS OF ALL THE HUMAN PROSPECTORS VIA THOSE PERSONAL BEACONS.

Thanks, Del. I could have been diagnosing that for days. I wouldn't have guessed the green light was lying to me.

You're going to need a console, though. There's nothing to actually monitor the signals down here.

Yeah, I figured I'd do that in Bosie. That's why I moved her to the roof pad. If she can't get signal, I can run a cable up.

Bosie's your Cricket? Can I have a look? I've never been inside one before.



Don't expect much. I love Bosie, but she's not Plashy.

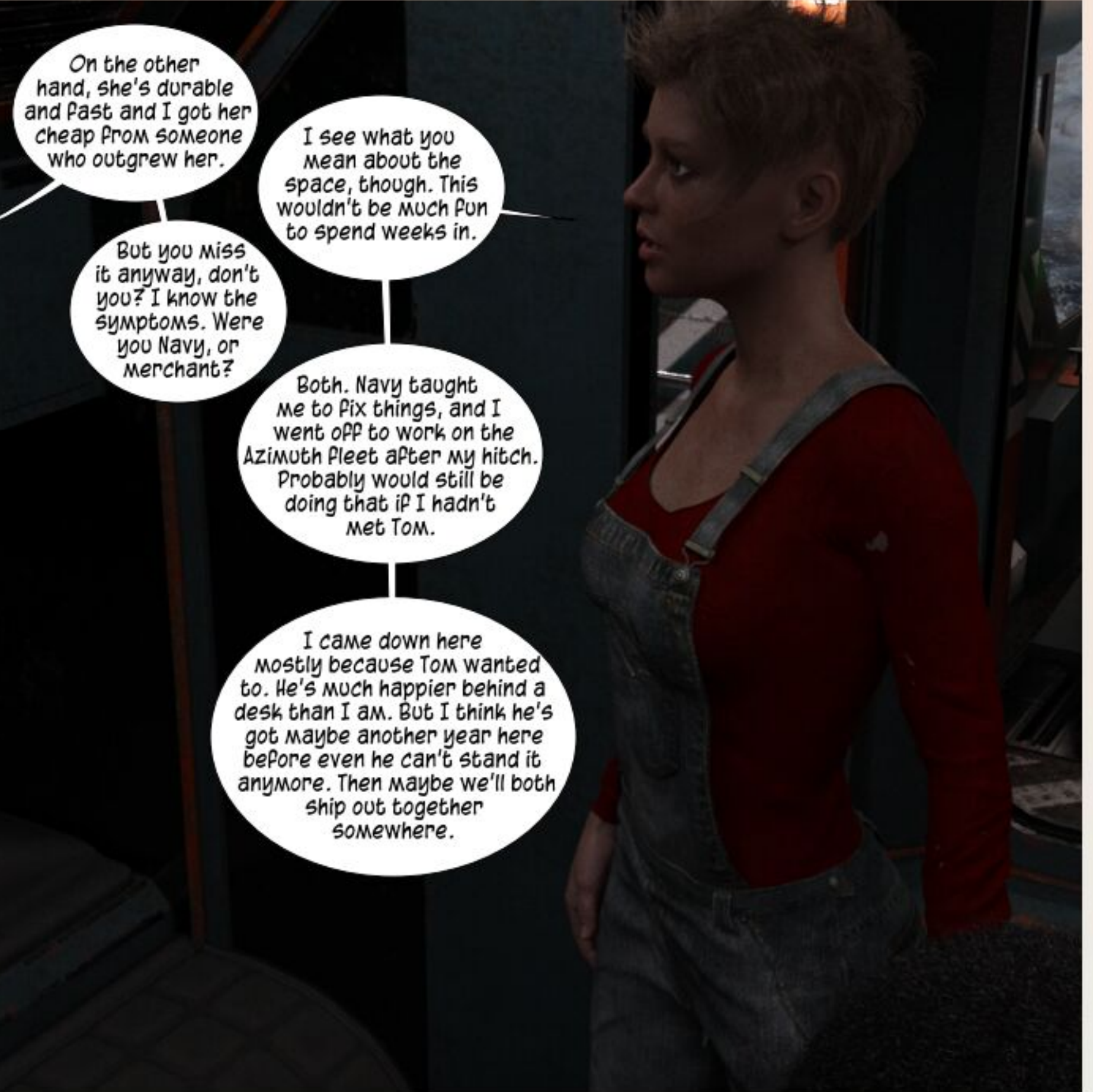
I hear that the Crickets were ... are ... kind of ... put together weird? No offense to Bosie.

Yeah, I don't think Starflying knew what they were doing. She's got ALLL* and a huge power supply, so they clearly meant her for long hauls ...

... but her hold's tiny, there's only one tiny bunk, and if you sleep in shifts, there's not enough stowage for supplies for two for any amount of time.

There's a shower, but you can't use it in travel because the water system can't handle it. You can hook it to external supply ... but if you're in port, why would you use this shower? Dumb things like that.

*A LITTLE LESS THAN LIGHTSPEED. NEEDED TO GET ACROSS THE AVERAGE SYSTEM IN HOURS INSTEAD OF WEEKS. STILL NOT SUFFICIENT FOR INTERSYSTEM DISTANCES; FOR THAT YOU NEED A RING OR A SHIP WITH PUNCH CAPABILITY. SPACE IS VERY, VERY BIG. -T



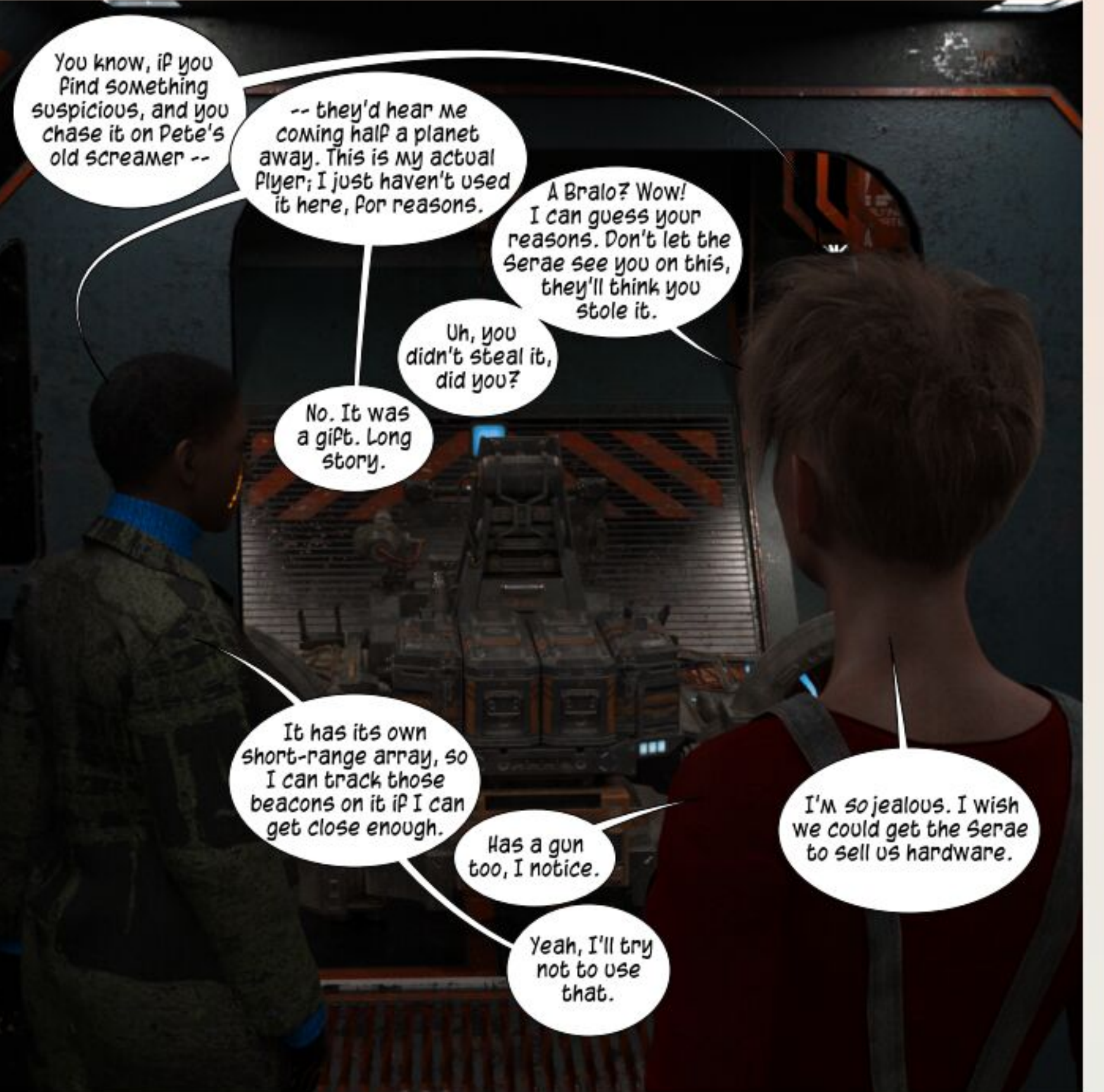
On the other hand, she's durable and fast and I got her cheap from someone who outgrew her.

I see what you mean about the space, though. This wouldn't be much fun to spend weeks in.

But you miss it anyway, don't you? I know the symptoms. Were you Navy, or Merchant?

Both. Navy taught me to fix things, and I went off to work on the Azimuth Fleet after my hitch. Probably would still be doing that if I hadn't met Tom.

I came down here mostly because Tom wanted to. He's much happier behind a desk than I am. But I think he's got maybe another year here before even he can't stand it anymore. Then maybe we'll both ship out together somewhere.



You know, if you find something suspicious, and you chase it on Pete's old screamer --

-- they'd hear me coming half a planet away. This is my actual Ployer; I just haven't used it here, for reasons.

A Bralo? Wow! I can guess your reasons. Don't let the Serae see you on this, they'll think you stole it.

Uh, you didn't steal it, did you?

No. It was a gift. Long story.

It has its own short-range array, so I can track those beacons on it if I can get close enough.

Has a gun too, I notice.

Yeah, I'll try not to use that.

I'm so jealous. I wish we could get the Serae to sell us hardware.

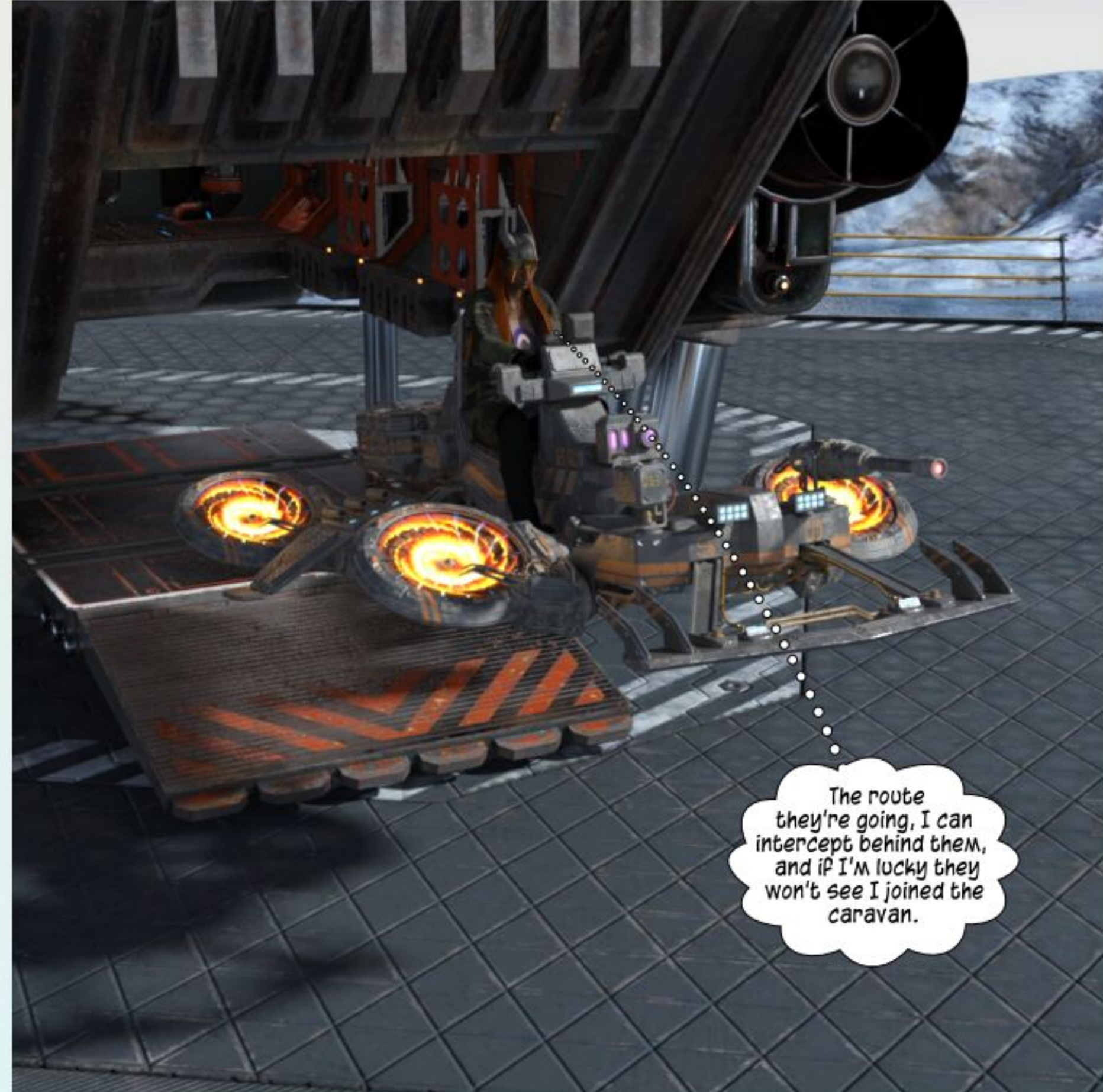
I EXPECTED TO BE SITTING THERE WATCHING A SCREEN FOR WHO KNOWS HOW MANY DAYS, BUT THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKED OUT. WELL AFTER SUNRISE THE NEXT DAY -- LONG AFTER MOST OF THE PROSPECTORS HAD HEADED OUT AND REACHED THEIR WORK SITES -- I SAW A BEACON GOING SOMEWHERE IT HAD NO GOOD REASON TO GO.



Why is Pip Sorrel heading east?

And Soj Mascar is following her. Trying to find out where Pip is going, no doubt.

... I'd like to know that too.



The route they're going, I can intercept behind them, and if I'm lucky they won't see I joined the caravan.



Pip has got to know Soj is behind her. That thing just makes too much noise. And if she hasn't noticed yet, she will when they get into those canyons--the sound is going to echo like crazy.

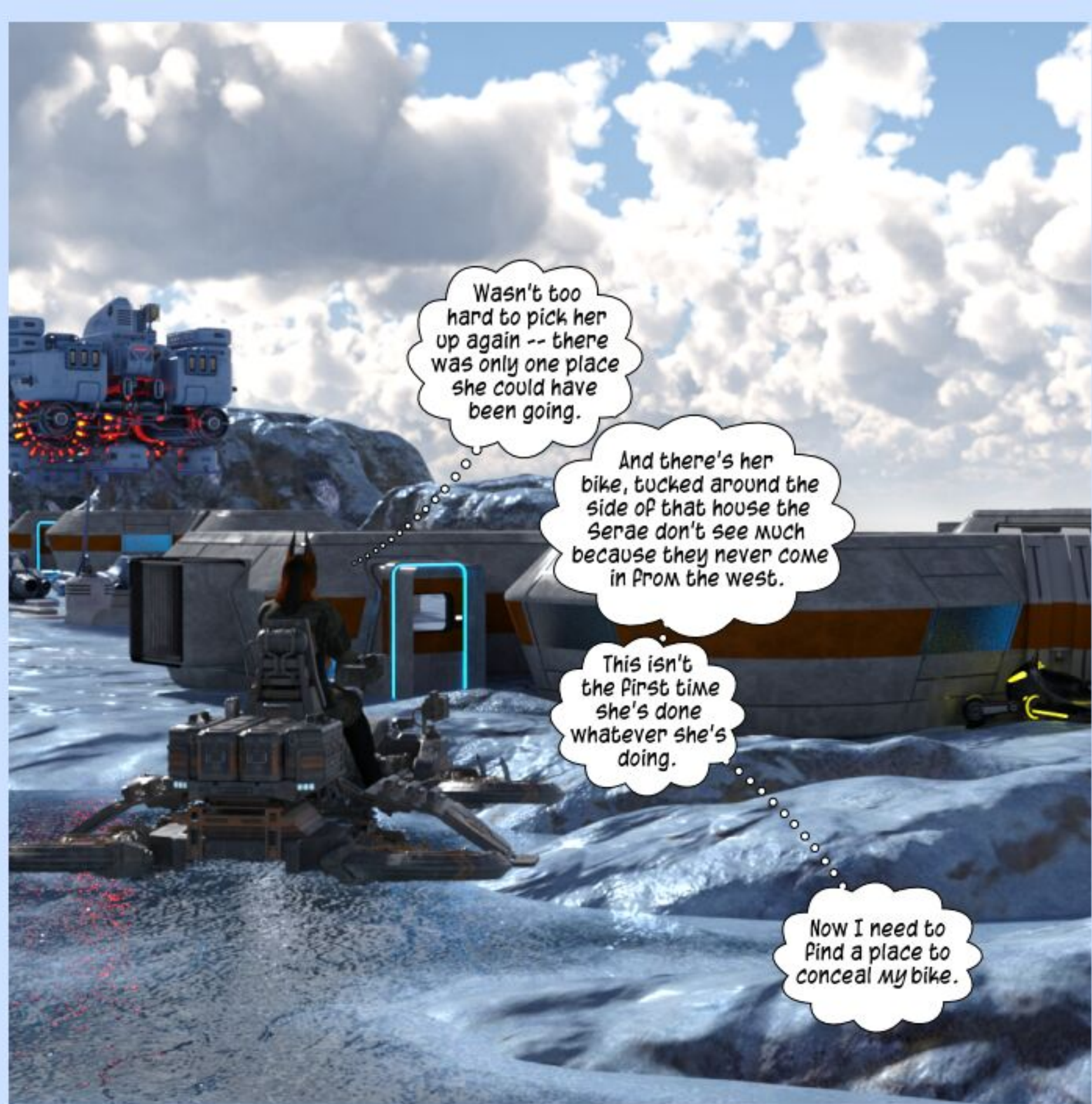


Whoops! Right back out again. What was that all about?

Oh wait, I bet I know! Pip must have lost her. Soj is going back home in disgust.

Well, she's too pissed off to have noticed me ... or if she did, she thought I was a Sera. We are getting very close to Serae territory.

... I definitely need to keep after Pip. This Peels like trouble, if nothing else.



Wasn't too hard to pick her up again -- there was only one place she could have been going.

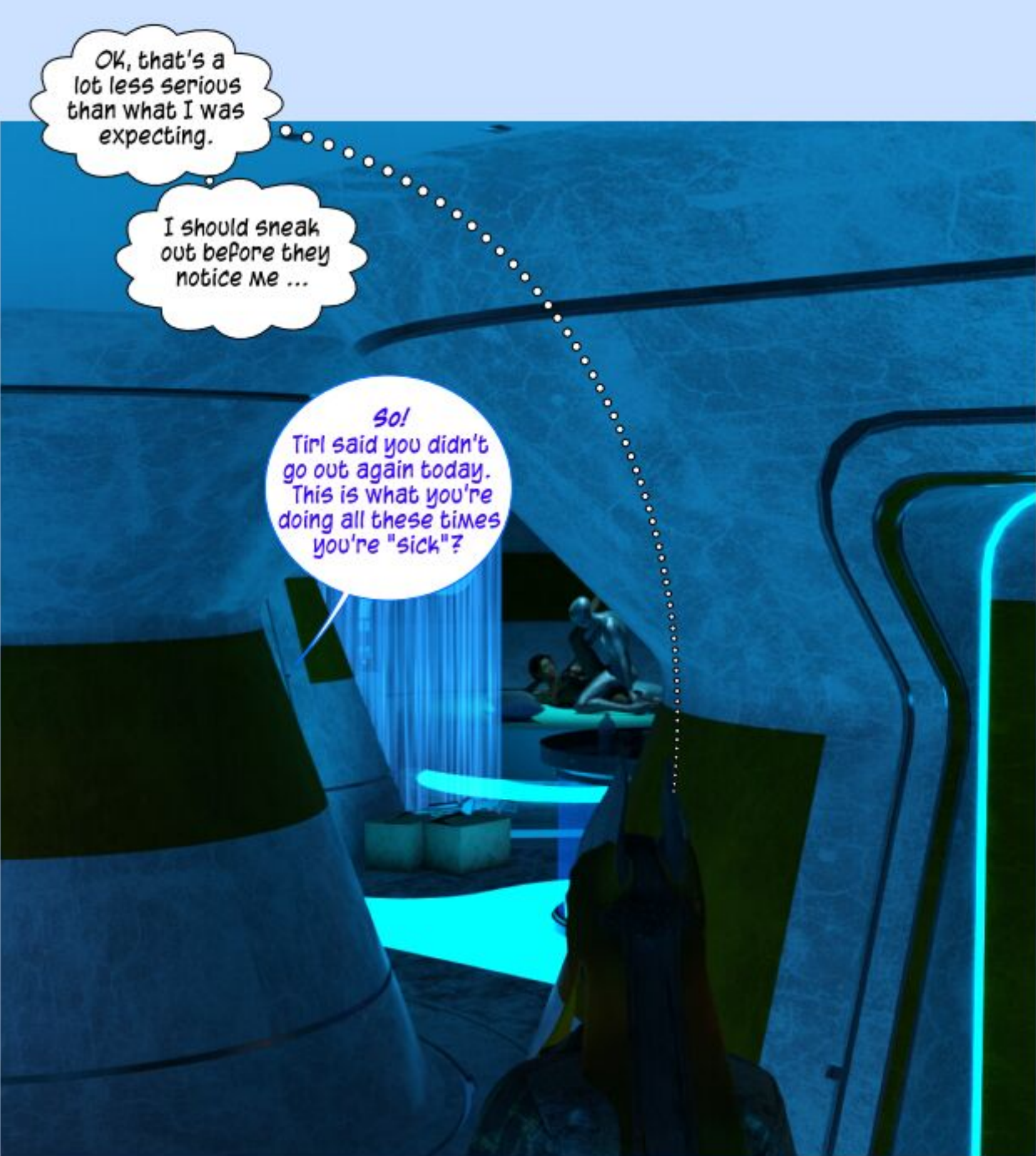
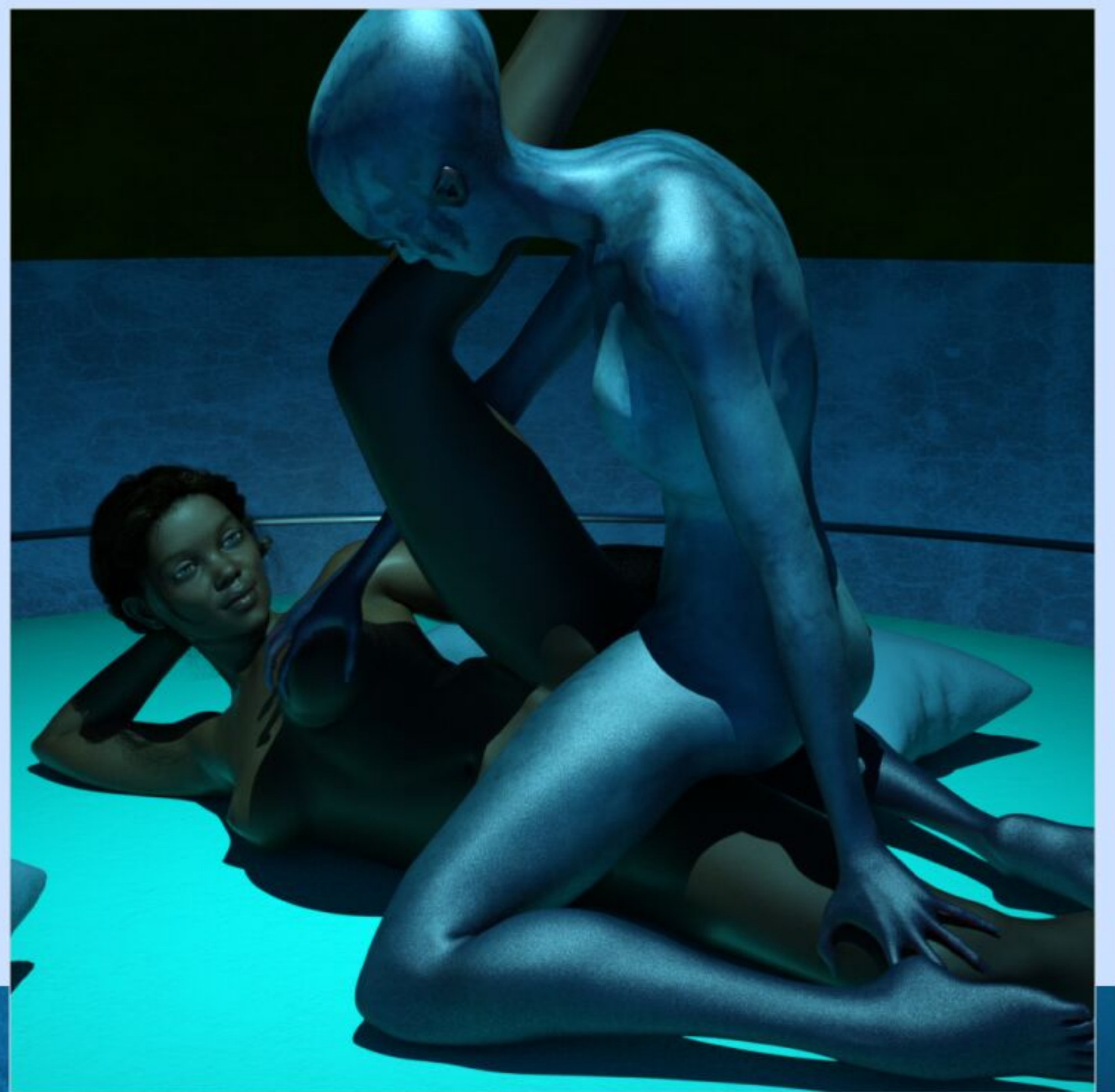
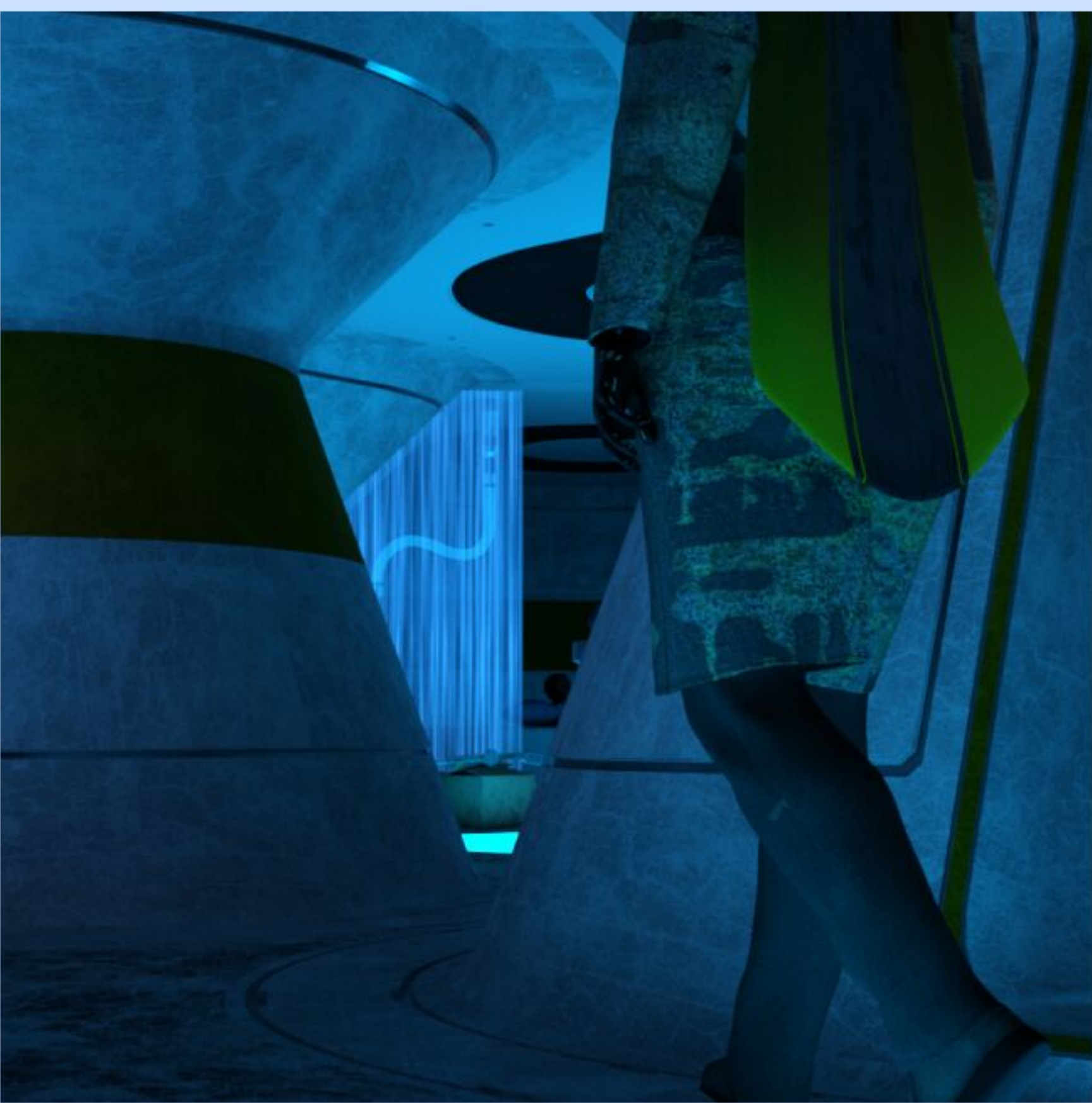
And there's her bike, tucked around the side of that house the Serae don't see much because they never come in from the west.

This isn't the first time she's done whatever she's doing.

Now I need to find a place to conceal my bike.



Heh.



OK, that's a lot less serious than what I was expecting.

I should sneak out before they notice me ...

So! Tiri said you didn't go out again today. This is what you're doing all these times you're "sick"?



Mother! You can't just come into my house -- I'm not an egg anymore!

You expect me to treat you as an adult when you make bad decisions like this?



How could you do this? These nikturni ... Agh, it hurts me even to think of it. And with Resk practically throwing herself in front of you --

Resk is horrible. I like Pip. She's fun in bed and she makes me laugh.

Uh, Zhelk, just so I know, should I be running for my life right now?

Listen to it. It doesn't even understand our language.



Whereas I understand Serajo quite well.

And by the way, honored Chib, you are a real durliej.

You! I thought you might be holding out on me. What are you doing here? Are you responsible for this?

No. They were doing this long before I got here. Pip has been coming here in secret for months.

Listen ... I can't tell you what to do, but ... you can't control your daughter's life, and if you think about it, they may have handed you an opportunity.

Relations between the humans and Serae on this planet aren't good, and if they don't get better, they'll escalate and bad things will happen. Why not try something else?

DURLIEJ = SNOB, SOMEONE WHO LOOKS DOWN ON OTHERS



Oh, wow.



They know you don't need that helmet, by the way.

I'm not accustomed to the smell of human.

Will any of them speak my language apart from you?

Tom was a supercargo, so he might; he'd have found it useful. Del also may have picked some up. Sergei -- well, nothing about Sergei would surprise me.



... We both have those among us who would fight, who want us to stay enemies ... but as we see, we also have some who want to become, ah, closer.

I think our settlements should try to work together. Become friendly. And the ones among us who want to fight will see, and be convinced. Perhaps.

I'd be delighted to try. No, I would be honored.



A Sera?

All this time ... everything I've done ... and that's who you were -- a fucking Sera?

Aaaaargh!



Zheik!!

-- hkk! --

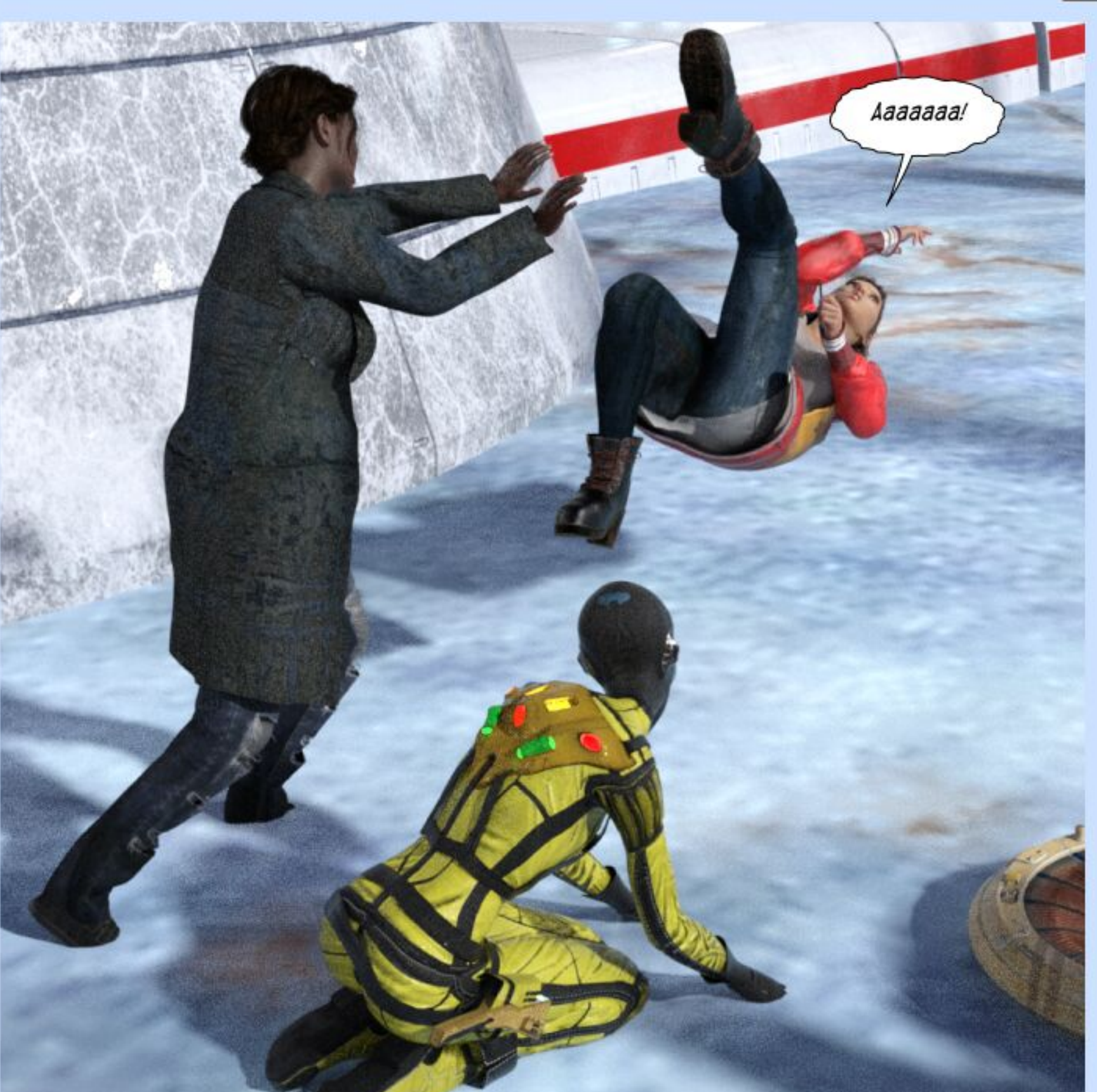
Don't need a gun for you -- I'll snap your skinny little neck --



Get off her, you crazy bitch!

-- uhnf --

Pip, you can't ... you can't love her ... you can't love this ... thing ...



Aaaaaaa!



OK. So that's how it ends ... I guess ... I'll just have to ...

No.

