

MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A
QUITCLAIM

I LOOK FOR STATIONS, SHIPS, AND SETTLEMENTS THAT MAY BE DERELICT AND INVESTIGATE WHETHER THEY ACTUALLY ARE.

I DON'T JUST WANDER AROUND LOOKING FOR THEM; THE GALAXY'S TOO BIG FOR THAT. I GET HIRED TO CHECK SOMETHING SPECIFIC ... OR, SOMETIMES, I GET A HINT.

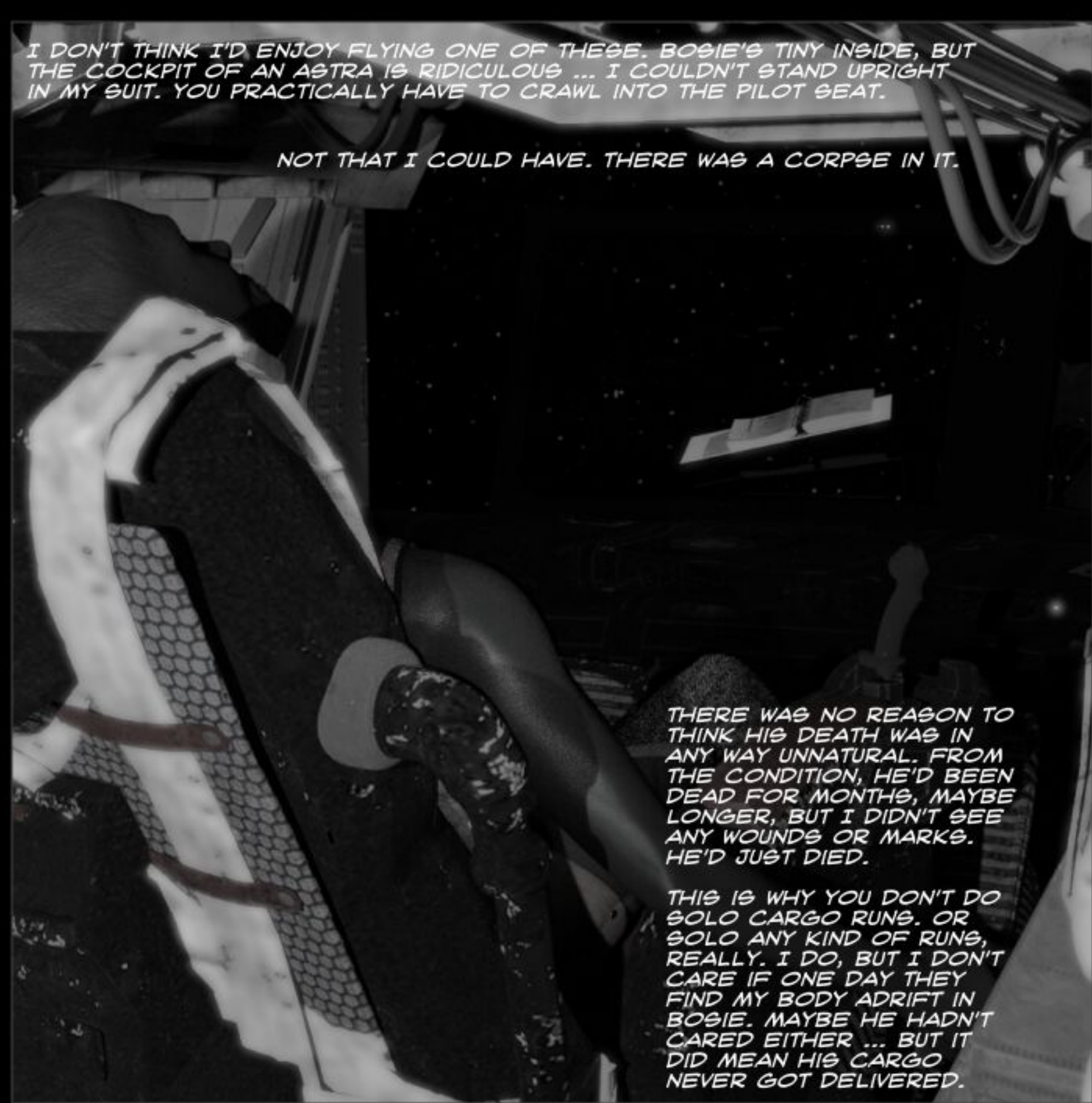
IN THIS CASE, IT WAS AN OLD CARGO PILOT IN A SPACEPORT BAR WHO MENTIONED HE'D PASSED AN UNRESPONSIVE SHIP ON HIS WAY IN AND NOTED WHERE.

I BOUGHT HIM HIS DRINKS.



AN ASTRA. THESE SHIPS ARE SO OLD MANY OF THEM STILL HAVE THE MARKINGS OF A DEFUNCT HUMAN GOVERNMENT ON THEM. HUNDREDS OF YEARS. THEY STILL FLY BECAUSE THEY'RE DURABLE AND STUPID SIMPLE. PEOPLE STILL FLY THEM BECAUSE THEY'RE CHEAP.

PANELS UP, NO LIGHTS AT ALL, NOT RESPONDING TO HAILS. I WAS GOING TO NEED TO GO IN. THAT WAS GOING TO TAKE AN EVA. THERE'S NO PLACE ON AN ASTRA THAT BOSIE CAN LATCH ONTO DIRECTLY.



NOT THAT I COULD HAVE. THERE WAS A CORPSE IN IT.

THERE WAS NO REASON TO THINK HIS DEATH WAS IN ANY WAY UNNATURAL. FROM THE CONDITION, HE'D BEEN DEAD FOR MONTHS, MAYBE LONGER, BUT I DIDN'T SEE ANY WOUNDS OR MARKS. HE'D JUST DIED.

THIS IS WHY YOU DON'T DO SOLO CARGO RUNS. OR SOLO ANY KIND OF RUNS, REALLY. I DO, BUT I DON'T CARE IF ONE DAY THEY FIND MY BODY ADRIPT IN BOSIE. MAYBE HE HADN'T CARED EITHER ... BUT IT DID MEAN HIS CARGO NEVER GOT DELIVERED.



ASTRAS ARE SO OLD THEY DON'T HAVE MUCH IN THE WAY OF SYSTEMS. THE LOG WAS PAPER.

HE WAS FLYING FOR SLIPSPACE, WHICH CAUGHT MY ATTENTION RIGHT AWAY. SLIPSPACE IS A WEIRD LITTLE COMPANY. THEY HIRE ONLY SMALL INDIES, USUALLY OLD TUBS LIKE THIS ASTRA, AND RUN NON-STANDARD ROUTES. THE IDEA IS TO NOT ATTRACT ATTENTION FROM PIRATES.

IT ALSO MEANT THE LOG WAS LYING. THERE WAS NO WAY THIS SHIP WAS RUNNING "MISCELLANEOUS SCRAP." NOT FOR SLIPSPACE. THEIR WHOLE BUSINESS WAS SMALL, SECRETIVE, EXTREMELY HIGH-VALUE CARGOES. THEY ONLY WANTED THIS TO LOOK LIKE A JUNK HAULER.



WALK AFT AND INSPECT THE CARGO? NICE TRY. ASTRAS AREN'T BUILT THAT WAY. THEY BARELY EVEN HAVE A TOP HATCH. GETTING THROUGH IT IN THE SUIT TOOK SOME WORK.

ASTRAS ARE BUILT LIKE THIS: THE ENGINES ARE ALL BY THEMSELVES AT THE STERN, THE CREW COMPARTMENT AND EVERYTHING ELSE IMPORTANT IS UP FRONT, AND BETWEEN THE TWO IS JUST A LONG RIGID GANTRY, LIKE A CRANE ARM, WITH LINES TO THE ENGINES RUNNING THROUGH IT. THAT'S THE CARGO AREA. YOU CAN MOUNT ALL KINDS OF DIFFERENT CONTAINERS ONTO IT.

A COUPLE OF KINDS, LIKE THESE DRY-MATERIALS BINS I NEEDED TO INSPECT, WERE DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY FOR THE ASTRA, BUT PEOPLE HAVE HOOKED ALL SORTS OF STUFF ON. I SAW ONE ONCE THAT HAD BEEN RIGGED TO HAUL ANOTHER SHIP. THERE'S ENOUGH ROOM TO DO IT -- THE GANTRY IS NEARLY TWICE BOSIE'S LENGTH, BOW TO STERN, AND ASTRAS HAVE ENOUGH POWER TO HAUL ENORMOUS LOADS, THOUGH NOT FAST.

PROBLEM IS, ASTRAS CAN'T LAND. THEIR MAIN AIRLOCK IS SO WEIRDLY PLACED THAT THEY CAN BARELY EVEN DOCK. THEY WERE DESIGNED TO CONNECT TO A TYPE OF SPACE STATION THAT DOESN'T EXIST ANYMORE. YOU HAVE TO BRING THEM SOMEPLACE THAT HAS CARGO ARMS, OR PEOPLE WILLING TO DO A NASTY, DANGEROUS EVA JOB, AND LOAD AND UNLOAD THEM IN SPACE.

AND SHOULD YOU NEED TO INSPECT THE CARGO IN MID-FLIGHT FOR SOME REASON ...

THE A.P.E. SUIT IS MEANT MOSTLY FOR GROUND COMBAT. YOU CAN PUT A MANEUVERING PACK ON IT, BUT I DIDN'T OWN ONE, AND FREESPACING MAKES ME REALLY NERVOUS ANYWAY.

AS IT WAS, I'M SURE I DIDN'T REACH BACK TO CHECK THE SAFETY CABLE MORE THAN ONCE EVERY FIFTEEN SECONDS.

ASTRAS WERE DESIGNED BEFORE EVERYONE FIGURED OUT THAT "ROUND" LOOKS GOOD BUT IS HORRIBLE TO WORK WITH. CLIMBING OVER THE RING OF SPHERICAL POWER CELLS TO GET TO THE BINS WAS TRICKY ENOUGH, BUT THE DAMNED BINS HAD CURVED TOPS AND NOTHING TO HOLD ONTO ONCE YOU MANAGED TO GET UP ON ONE.



IT WAS WORTH IT, THOUGH. THE NEAREST BIN WAS FULL OF PSITTACITE. DIDN'T NEED TO TAKE ANY FOR ASSAY. NOTHING ELSE LOOKS LIKE IT.

I DIDN'T CHECK THE OTHER BINS; ONE WAS RISKY ENOUGH, EVEN IF THEY WERE ALL EMPTY, ONE BIN OF PSITTACITE WAS ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY A SALVAGE RUN.

I DIDN'T THINK THEY WERE EMPTY, THOUGH.

YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHY I DIDN'T TAKE THE INFO BACK TO SLIPSPACE AND TRADE THEM A FINDER'S FEE FOR THE LOCATION AND THE SALVAGE RIGHTS.

THAT'S THE USUAL QUITCLAIM OPERATION, YES, BUT I KNEW IT WOULDN'T HAVE WORKED OUT. SLIPSPACE WOULD EITHER HAVE DENIED THEY KNEW ANYTHING ABOUT THE SHIP AT ALL -- LIKE I SAID, THEY WERE BIG ON SECRECY -- OR WOULD HAVE TRIED TO CHEAT THE INFORMATION OUT OF ME WITHOUT PAYING. I HADN'T WORKED WITH THEM DIRECTLY, BUT I'D HEARD STORIES.

THEY'D HAVE WRITTEN OFF THE CARGO BY NOW ANYWAY, AND WITH NO PRIOR AGREEMENT THIS WAS "FINDER'S KEEPERS" FOR ME. BUT I DON'T HAVE THE EQUIPMENT TO SALVAGE SHIPS MYSELF. I WASN'T GOING TO SELL THE RIGHTS TO SLIPSPACE, BUT I WAS GOING TO NEED TO SELL THEM TO A SALVAGER.

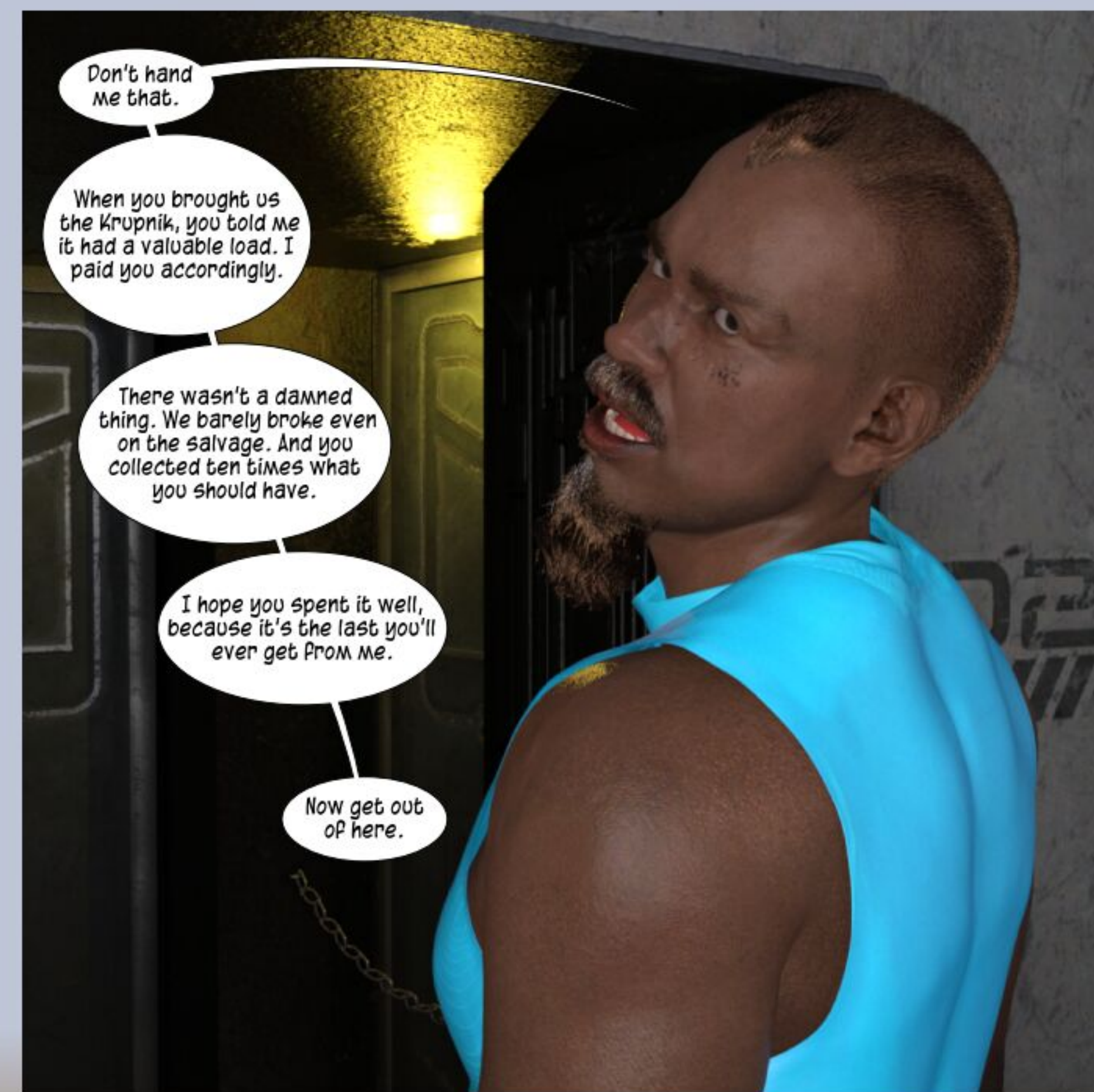
IN THIS PARTICULAR CASE IT WAS GOING TO NEED TO BE ONE WHERE THERE WAS A LOT OF TRUST ON BOTH SIDES. FORTUNATELY, I KNEW EXACTLY WHO TO GO TO.

OR SO I THOUGHT.



THE DEAD DROP

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



BIRT'S CREW WENT OUT THE NEXT DAY. WE GAVE THEM MOST OF A DAY TO START WORK, THEN CAME IN ON THE NJORDLUND, SITTING JUST OUTSIDE OF THEIR SCAN RANGE. NOT THAT THEY WOULD HAVE NOTICED US ANYWAY. TOO BUSY.

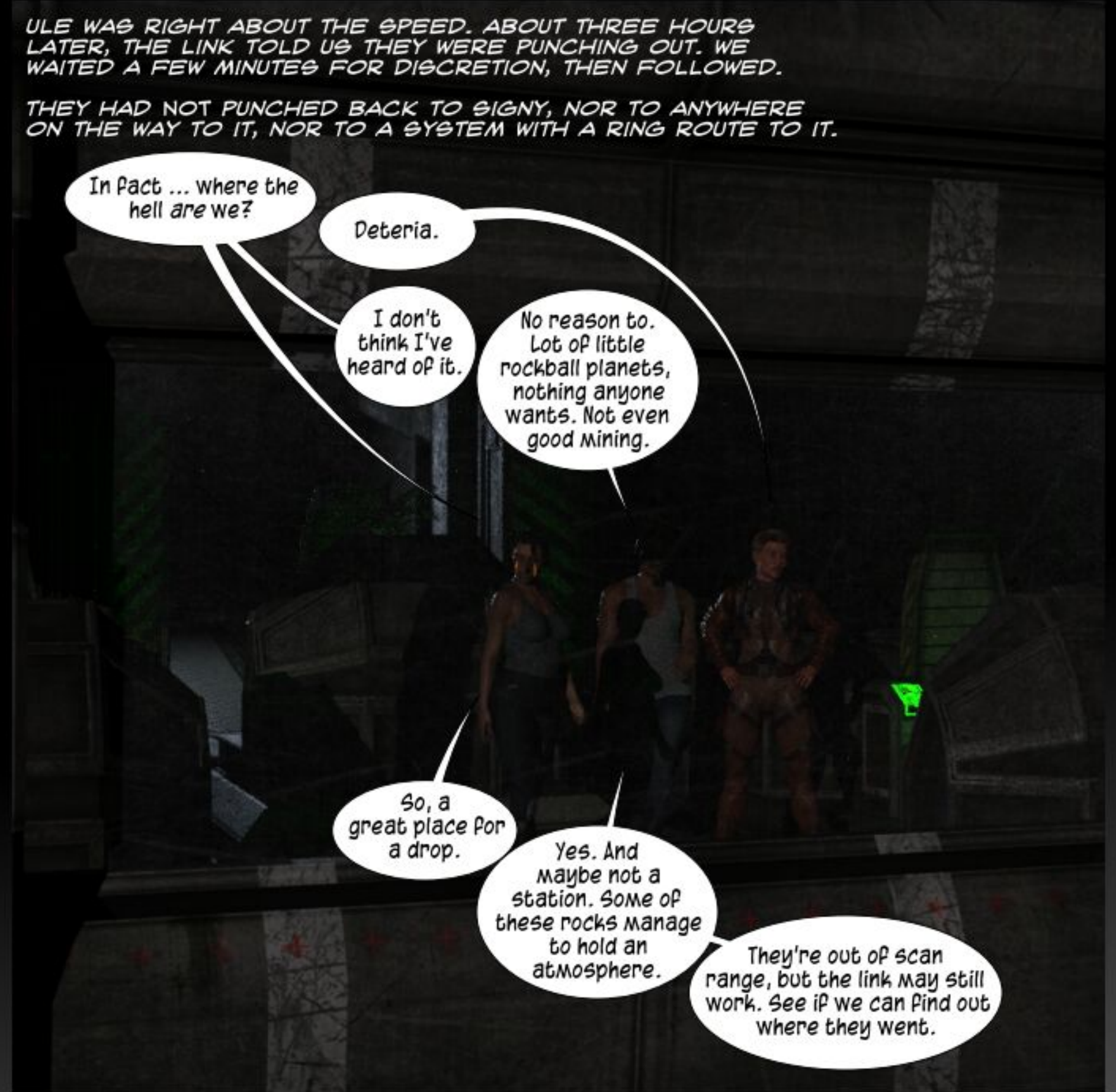


WHAT SALVAGERS DO WITH A SHIP DEPENDS ON THE VALUE OF THE SHIP. IF THEY THINK IT'S WORTH IT, THEY'LL MAKE SURE IT'S SPACEWORTHY ENOUGH FOR SOMEONE TO FLY IT BACK TO PORT, THEN THEY'LL DEAL WITH THE HASSLE OF PROVING IT WAS SALVAGE AND NOT STOLEN SO THEY CAN RESELL IT. THE ASTRA WASN'T WORTH THAT, SO THEY WERE CUTTING IT UP FOR SCRAP.

Damn! They've got all the bins in and they've done the engine mount already. We don't have long.
They've still got the whole forward area ...
That won't take any time. The power cells they're cutting loose, they want to be careful with those, but the rest, they just have to hack into small enough chunks to fit into the Polder's holds. Then we do the real cutdown back on Signy.
I'm going to call in the camera drone. By the time it gets back to us, they may be packing up.
That's a handy little toy.
Good range on it too. Nice for inspecting sites before you get too close. You could use one yourself.
Not enough room for it in Bosie.
You could also use a bigger ship, come to that. Get you one like the Njordlund. Smallest ship --
--ever to have a punch drive. I know.



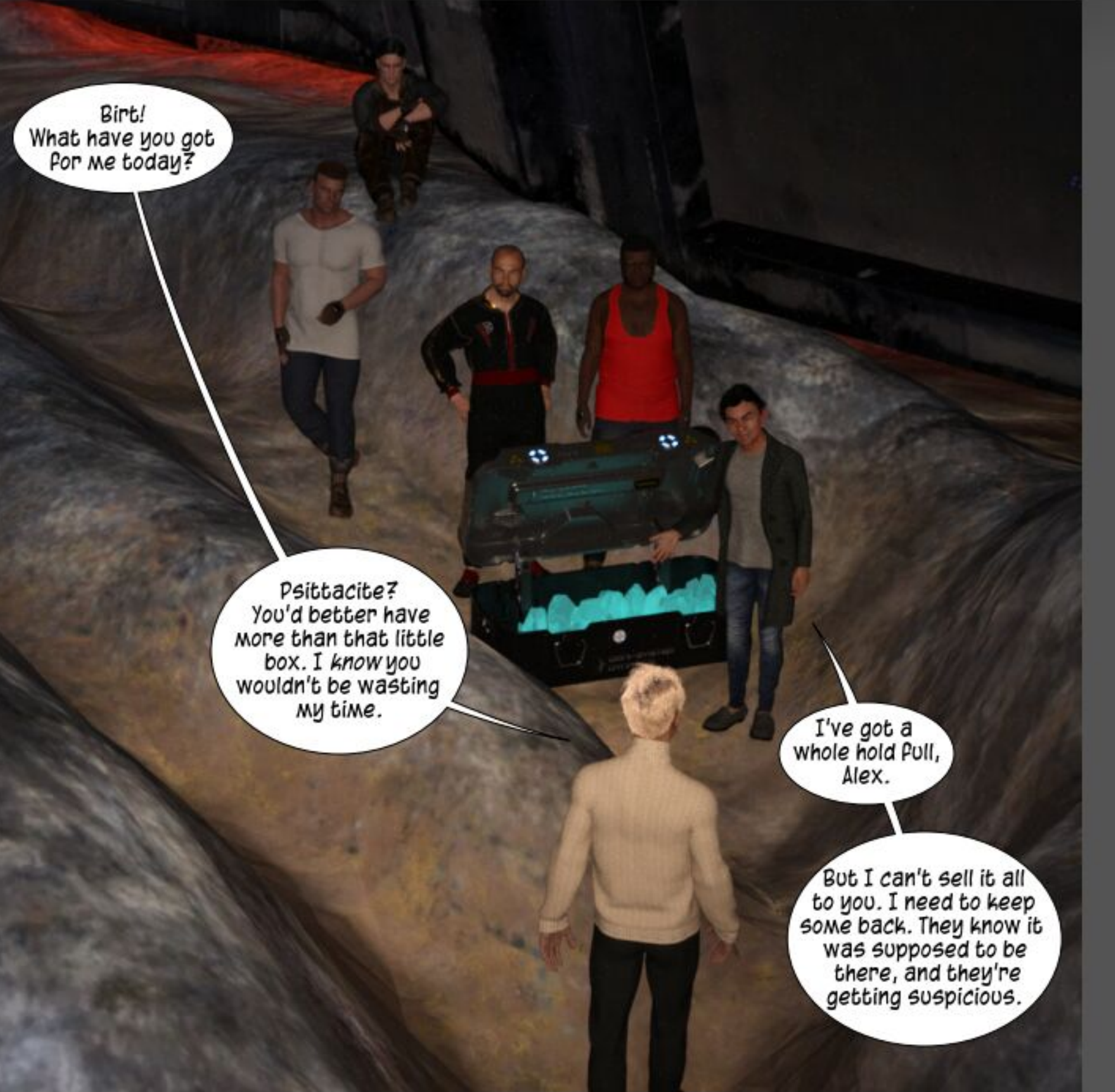
DV doesn't make the Venture model anymore, Ule. The only people who ever wanted to buy it were smugglers.
No idea what you mean.
They're moving past, Romi. Is the link working?
Perfectly.
Good. Oede, be ready to punch.
I know you haven't secretly invented a punch tracer.
The systems have a secure link. As soon as they tell their navcomp where to punch, we'll know what they set. And they won't know we're listening.
Limits to trust, eh?
Set that up long before Birt. The Polder cost a lot of money. I like to always know where my tools are.



ULE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE SPEED. ABOUT THREE HOURS LATER, THE LINK TOLD US THEY WERE PUNCHING OUT. WE WAITED A FEW MINUTES FOR DISCRETION, THEN FOLLOWED. THEY HAD NOT PUNCHED BACK TO SIGNY, NOR TO ANYWHERE ON THE WAY TO IT, NOR TO A SYSTEM WITH A RING ROUTE TO IT.
In fact ... where the hell are we?
Deteria.
I don't think I've heard of it.
No reason to. Lot of little rockball planets, nothing anyone wants. Not even good mining.
So, a great place for a drop.
Yes. And maybe not a station. Some of these rocks manage to hold an atmosphere.
They're out of scan range, but the link may still work. See if we can find out where they went.



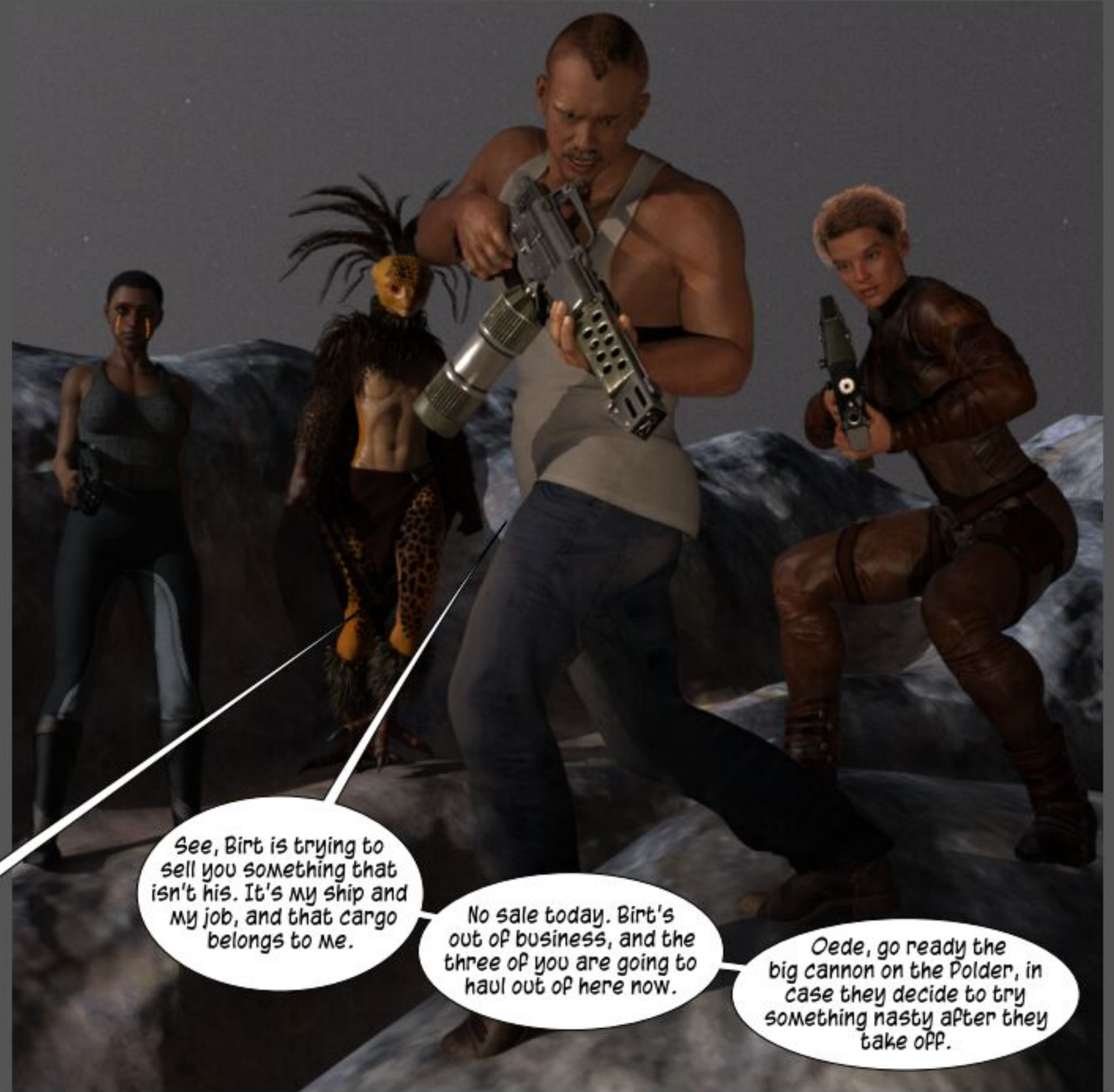
About damned time.



Birt! What have you got for me today?
Psittacite? You'd better have more than that little box. I know you wouldn't be wasting my time.
I've got a whole hold full, Alex.
But I can't sell it all to you. I need to keep some back. They know it was supposed to be there, and they're getting suspicious.



Then you shouldn't have mentioned it. I can't stand the idea of someone else getting it, you know.
I'll take it all. Minus the usual discount, of course.
C'mon, Alex! If they bust me then I can't sell you anything ...
Not my problem. Let's get loading.
Hold up a moment on that.



See, Birt is trying to sell you something that isn't his. It's my ship and my job, and that cargo belongs to me.
No sale today. Birt's out of business, and the three of you are going to haul out of here now.
Oede, go ready the big cannon on the Polder, in case they decide to try something nasty after they take off.



Birt, you and your crew are fired.

You can have this crate of psittacite. Your pay for the shipbreaking job.

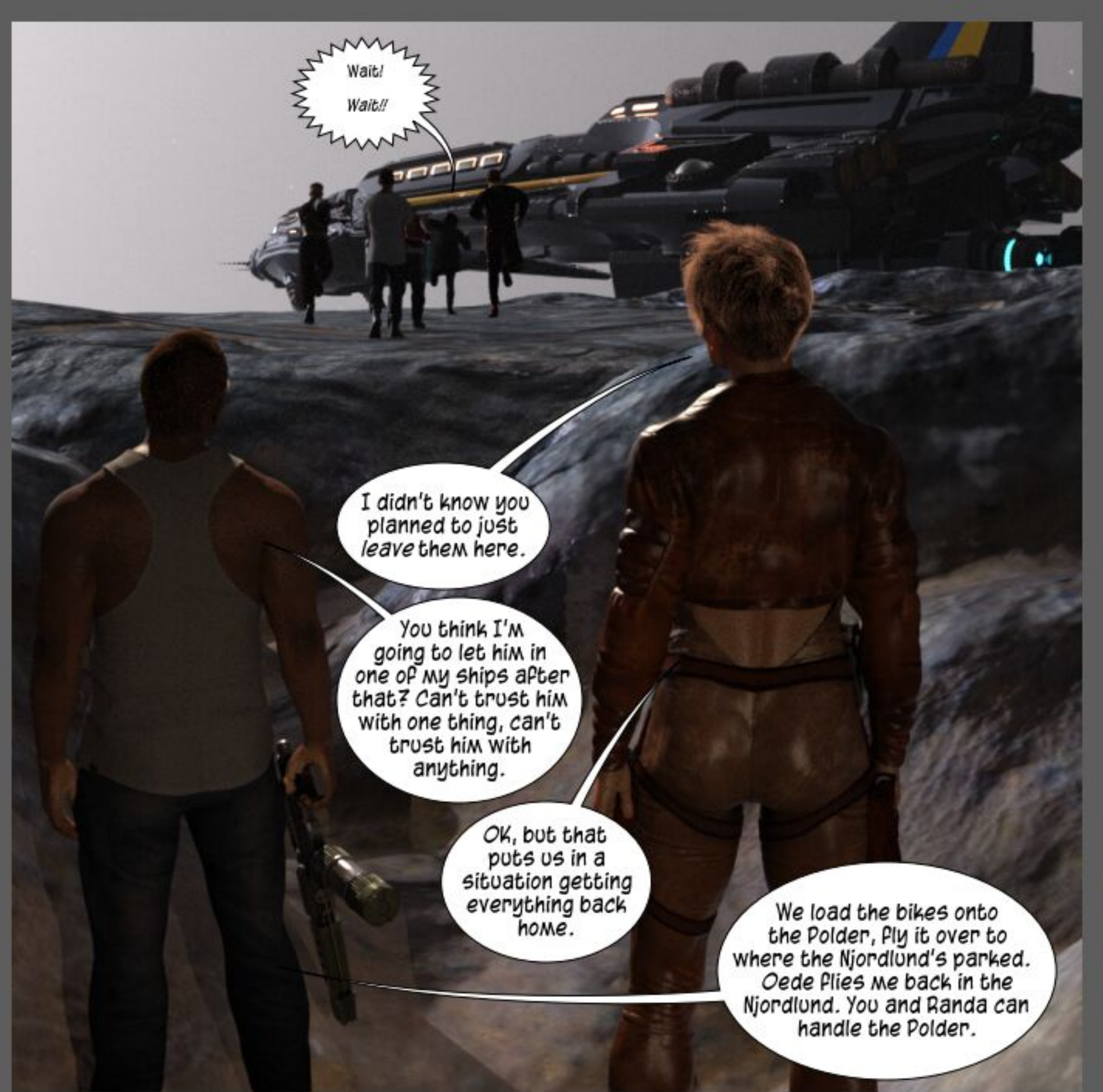
Might want to get clear. The Polder's leaving in a minute.

Wait ... Ule, you can't just leave us here! There's nothing on this rock!

HM, you're right.

Better hurry go get your friend to give you a ride.

Maybe you can pay him with the psittacite.



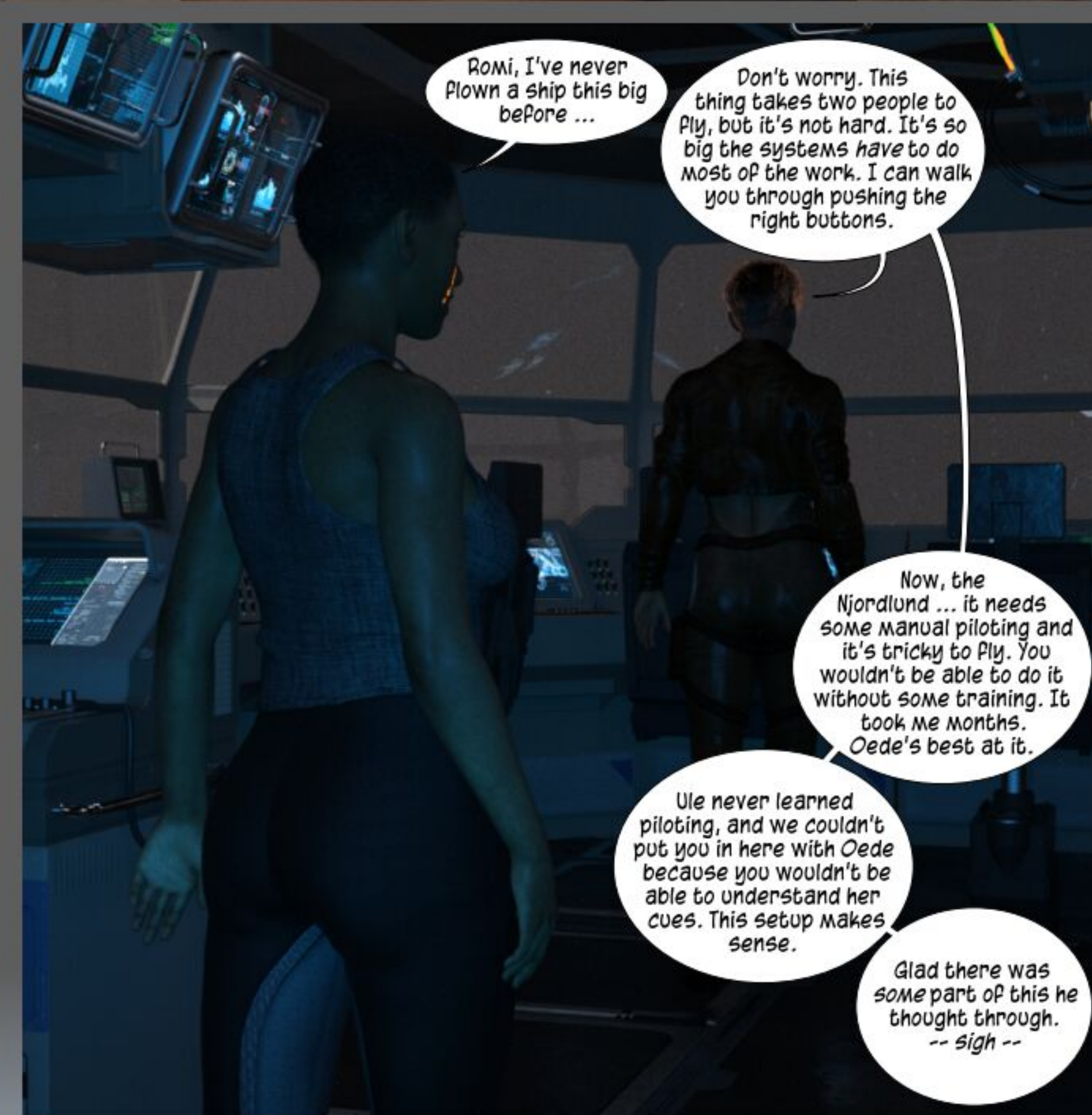
Wait! Wait!!

I didn't know you planned to just leave them here.

You think I'm going to let him in one of my ships after that? Can't trust him with one thing, can't trust him with anything.

OK, but that puts us in a situation getting everything back home.

We load the bikes onto the Polder, fly it over to where the Njordlund's parked. Oede flies me back in the Njordlund. You and Randa can handle the Polder.



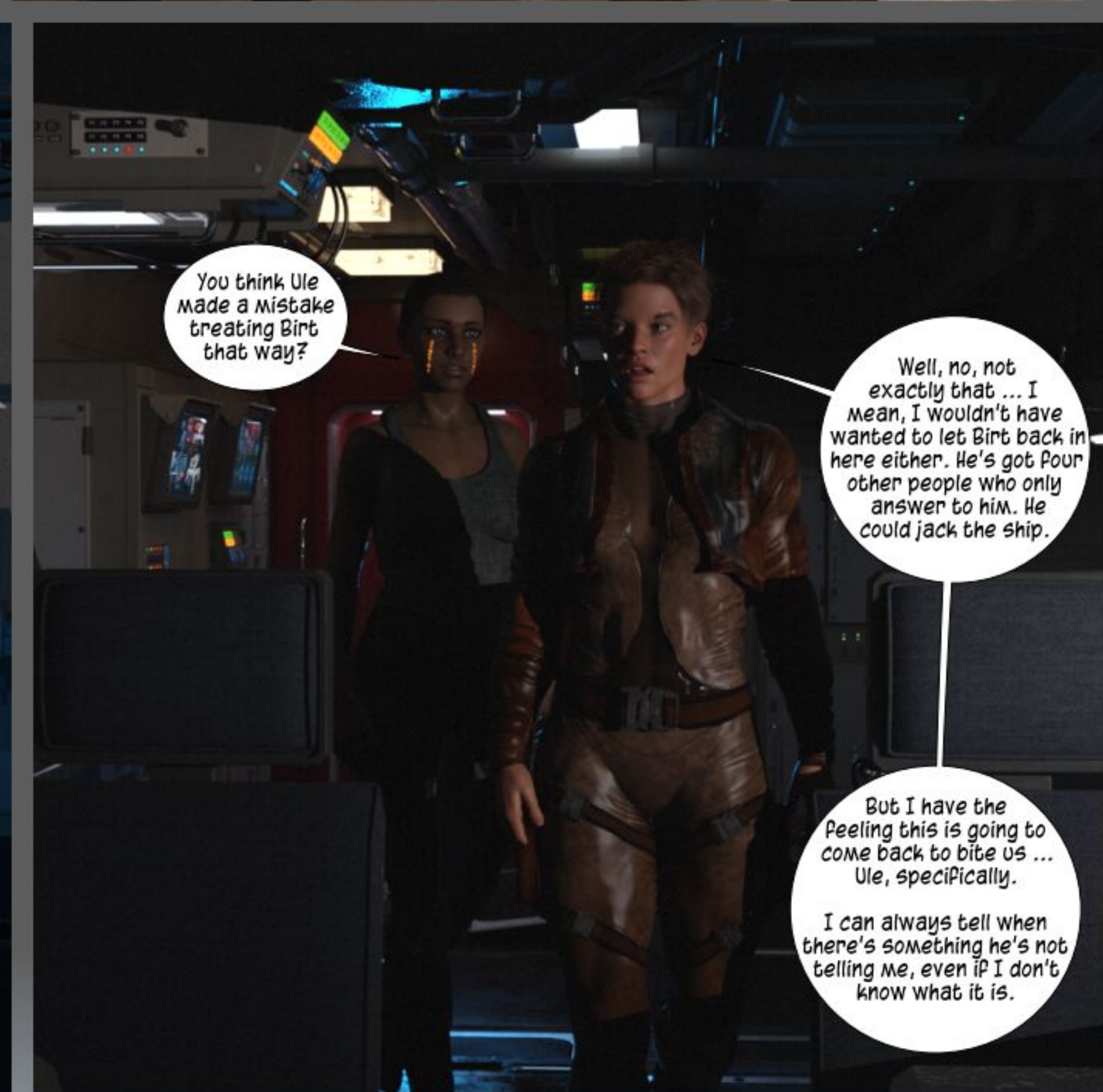
Romi, I've never flown a ship this big before ...

Don't worry. This thing takes two people to fly, but it's not hard. It's so big the systems have to do most of the work. I can walk you through pushing the right buttons.

Now, the Njordlund ... it needs some manual piloting and it's tricky to fly. You wouldn't be able to do it without some training. It took me months. Oede's best at it.

Ule never learned piloting, and we couldn't put you in here with Oede because you wouldn't be able to understand her cues. This setup makes sense.

Glad there was some part of this he thought through. -- sigh --



You think Ule made a mistake treating Birt that way?

Well, no, not exactly that ... I mean, I wouldn't have wanted to let Birt back in here either. He's got four other people who only answer to him. He could jack the ship.

But I have the feeling this is going to come back to bite us ... Ule, specifically.

I can always tell when there's something he's not telling me, even if I don't know what it is.

I WENT OFF AND DID OTHER THINGS, AND DIDN'T GIVE ANY MORE THOUGHT TO WHAT ROMI SAID ... UNTIL THREE MONTHS LATER, WHEN I GOT A MESSAGE FROM THEM ASKING ME TO COME TO SIGNY.



I just don't get how you and Ule walk around this place with bare arms. I don't notice cold much, but I have limits.

Heh. Ule says it's because we're hot-blooded. But I think you'd get used to it.

Randa, someone's trying to kill Ule. They've made two attempts. The second one nearly got him.

Ule's being completely Ule about it -- "Let them come at me! I'll take them all, and if they get me, then I'll go in glory!"

Personally, I'd rather have him alive in caution than dead in glory.



Guess Ule doesn't know you sent for me?

Definitely not.

I know it's not what you do, but you were the only one I could think of who might be able to shut this down.

I could probably track whoever it is if I could keep watch, but I can't do that and guard Ule. I can't even admit I'm doing that. Ule would be pissed at the idea he needs a guard.

Well, I can't afford to go on vigil here for weeks ...

I don't think you'll have to. Ule hasn't gone outside since the second attempt. That's how I know he's more worried than he admits. But tonight we have a ship to go to we can't skip on.

You may have come at exactly the right time.

Are we talking sniper, or throat-cutter? Close or far?

Far. If they'd tried for the kill up close, I'd have grabbed them and broken them in half already.



THAT NIGHT.



Glad you showed up. I was getting really cold waiting.

Mph!



hrp



AAAI!!



Help!

I'm thinking about it.



See, I need you to stop trying to kill my friend and tell me who hired you.

If you break both your legs, that might make you a lot more helpful.

On the other hand, you could land on your head.

What do you think I should do?

TWO DAYS LATER AND THREE RINGS AWAY. IT'S PROBABLY BETTER IF I DON'T SAY WHAT SYSTEM.



Hey! Mr. Ilko doesn't want to be disturbed. Haul oPP.



Get out of my face. I have business.

wphh!

BORIS ILKO WAS ONE OF THE BIGGER BOSSES IN CHERNIY MEDVED. IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THEM, YOU PROBABLY WONDER IF I'D LOST MY MIND, COMING IN LIKE THAT. I HADN'T.

I FIGURED IT WAS EXACTLY WHAT ILKO WOULD LIKE. PEOPLE LIKE HIM ONLY UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT ONE THING: WHO PUSHES WHO, AND WHO GETS PUSHED. THEY DEMAND YOU RESPECT THEIR AUTHORITY, YES, BUT THEY ALSO LIKE PEOPLE WHO DON'T JUST ROLL OVER.



That wasn't nice to poor Danilo. He needs those. He has six women.

You're a little crazy, eh? Business? What's your business? I don't know you.

You're trying to hit a friend of mine. Ute Karlisen.

I need to know why, and what it'll take to get you to stop.



Inga, haul oPP for a while.

It is business.



Usually I'd break someone's jaw for coming in here asking questions.

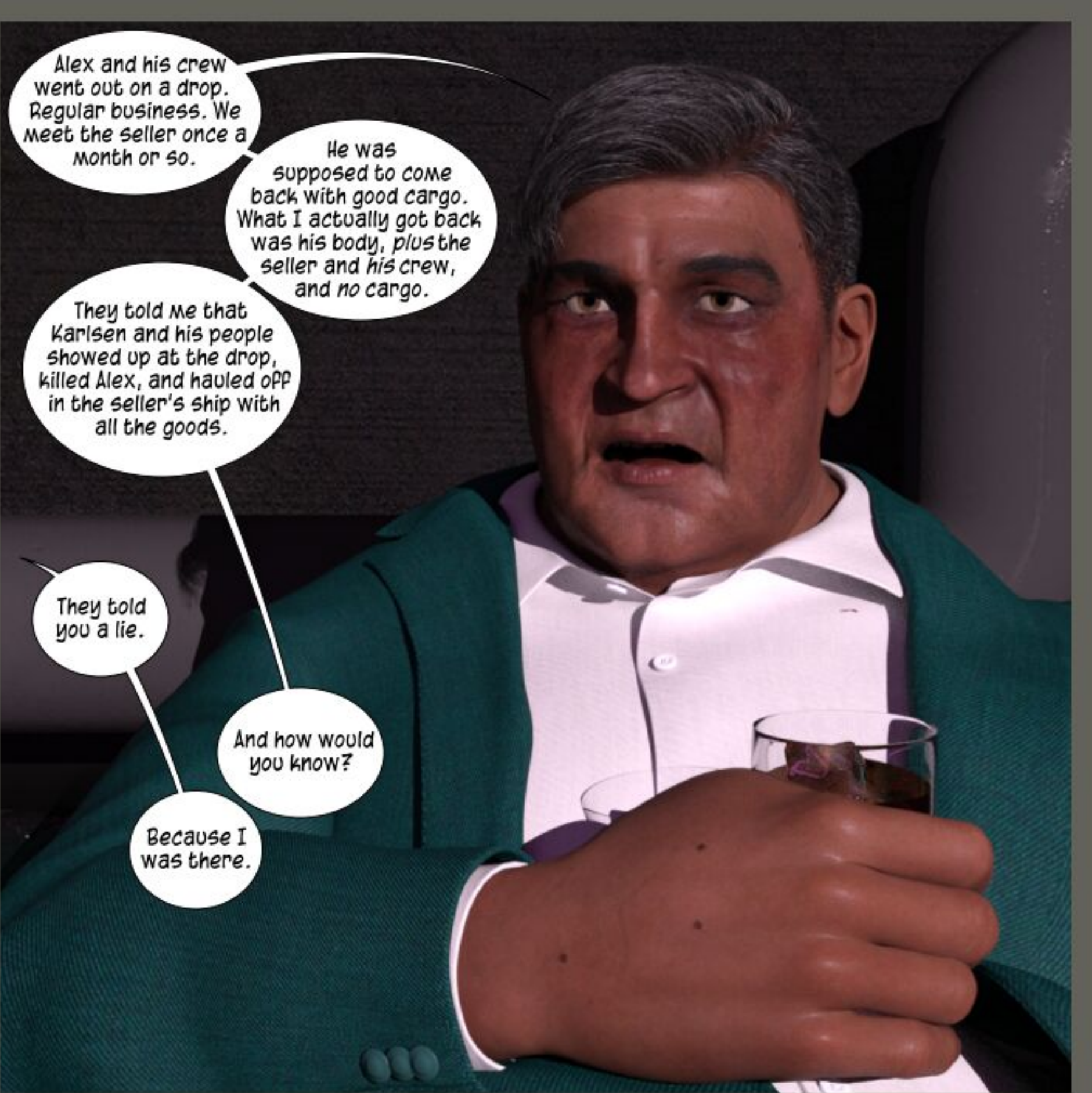
But I know that look on you. Easier to tell you. He killed Alex Gulbrak. Alex was like a son to me. I owe him this. And you can't buy Karlisen out of it.

"Alex" ... this wouldn't have been a bleached blonde with a badly broken nose and a couple of facial scars?

That was him. Who are you? How did you know him?

When did this supposedly happen?

ugh!



Alex and his crew went out on a drop. Regular business. We meet the seller once a month or so.

He was supposed to come back with good cargo. What I actually got back was his body, plus the seller and his crew, and no cargo.

They told me that Karlisen and his people showed up at the drop, killed Alex, and hauled off in the seller's ship with all the goods.

They told you a lie.

And how would you know?

Because I was there.



Did Birt Cord ever bother to tell you that the goods he sold Gulbrak, he got by skimming from Ule? He'd go on shipbreaking jobs, then sell the high-value stuff to Alex before coming back in.

He didn't mention it. So what?

Ule and I and some of his crew followed Birt after a job to catch him doing it. We went to the drop, took the ship -- Ule's ship -- and the cargo, and hauled. That was it. Nobody killed anybody. All of them were alive when we left.

There's no way Ule killed Gulbrak.

If it really did happen on that run, then I'd say Birt did it. Sounded like his doing business with Gulbrak wasn't all by choice, right? Maybe he'd had enough. Or maybe Gulbrak gave him hell about the drop falling through, and then Birt snapped.

Anyway, if you know anything about Ule Karlisen, you know that's not his style. Why would you be so quick to believe he'd done it?



I think I know more about Karlisen than you do. I knew him when he was a smuggler. He has some grudges from then. So do I.

And you think he's decided, out of the blue, to act on those grudges after more than twenty years? That seems more likely to you than Birt being a slime?

I know that about Cord. He owes me a lot of money. Selling to Alex was how he'd arranged to pay his debt. Percentage off the top.

Cord and his crew have a new job now. I didn't give them a choice. If you want, I'll tell you where to find them. If you can get Cord to say he killed Alex, I'll take it.

And suddenly it's my job to go ask the questions you should have asked?

Didn't say you had to do anything. But if you want me to stop the hit on Ule ... I'll give you some grace, but if you want to save his neck, bring me a different neck. That's my offer.

I WASN'T HAPPY WHEN ILKO TOLD ME WHERE I'D BE GOING, AND WASN'T IN ANY MOOD TO BE INTERCEPTED ON MY WAY OUT, BUT SHE WASN'T GIVING ME A CHOICE. SHE PRACTICALLY TAKKLED ME.



Who are you and what do you want?

My name is Pwola. Pwola Ulora.

I heard some of what you were saying to Boris. You're going out to find the person who killed Alex.

I want to go with you.

That's not a great idea. Anyway, why?



Alex and I were close. Very close.

If you're going to find who killed him, I want to be there when you find him.

So you can get revenge? I think Ilko has already made first claim on that.

Oh, I'll let Boris kill him. But I want to make sure Boris *does* get to kill him. And that I get to watch.

Vicious. Don't trust me to actually bring him in?

I don't trust anybody.



I'm not sure there's even a point in my going. That might be looking in the wrong place.

Birt was risking a lot to pay off his debt to Ilko. That meant he was scared of Ilko. Why would he kill one of Ilko's people and bring the down the wrath of Cherniy Medved?

Hey! Don't say that so loudly. Not even in here.

I thought it'd be Birt until Ilko told me about the debt. Now I think it's probably one of Alex's crew. But I don't know why yet.

Then you're still making the trip. When they came back, Boris got just as mad at them as with those other people. They're out there too. Same place. All being punished.

Let me go with you. I might be able to help. Alex's crew know me.



-- sigh --

Berth 142. I haul in half an hour. Wear something more reasonable.

Don't make me regret this.



... We'd have been together ten years next month ... if he hadn't been ...

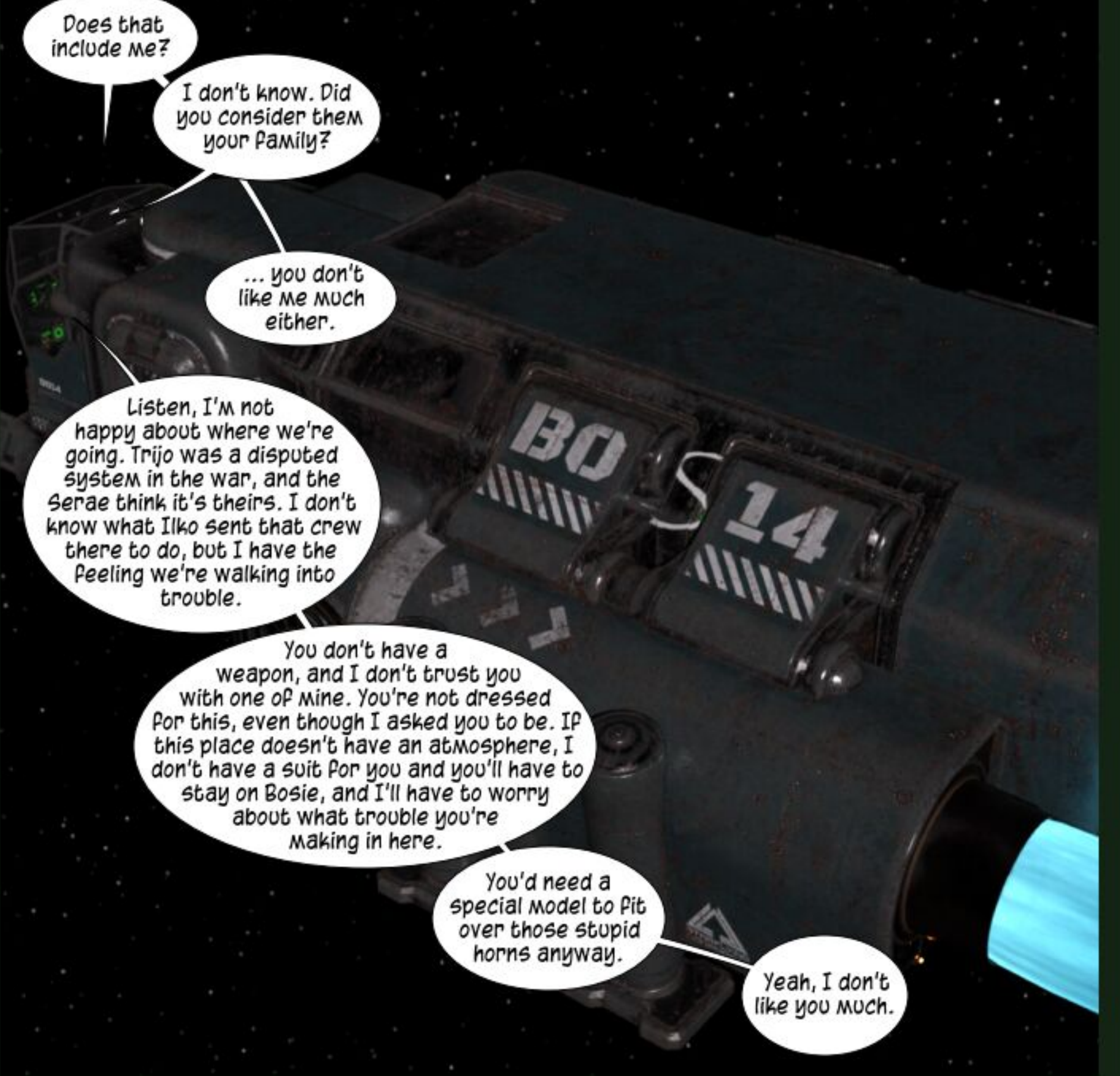
-- snf --
You know, we weren't either of us the kind to get married, but it was always just me, from as soon as we met. Very unusual for Boris' people. He got kidded about it.

I guess there's somebody for everyone.

You didn't like him. But you didn't even know him.

I heard him say maybe three sentences. That was enough.

And anybody whose "family" is Cherniy Medved is not going to be a good person. They don't have any good people.



Does that include me?

I don't know. Did you consider them your family?

... you don't like me much either.

Listen, I'm not happy about where we're going. Trijo was a disputed system in the war, and the Serae think it's theirs. I don't know what Ilko sent that crew there to do, but I have the feeling we're walking into trouble.

You don't have a weapon, and I don't trust you with one of mine. You're not dressed for this, even though I asked you to be. If this place doesn't have an atmosphere, I don't have a suit for you and you'll have to stay on Bosie, and I'll have to worry about what trouble you're making in here.

You'd need a special model to fit over those stupid horns anyway.

Yeah, I don't like you much.



I didn't bring a gun because I've never learned how to shoot one.

I work in Boris' club, so this is as practical as my clothes get. I could have gotten my hands on a suit but you didn't ask me to bring one and you didn't give me a lot of time because you didn't want me to come.

And as for my horns --

OK, OK.

You asked, you know.

Never mind. Tell me what you know about Alex's crew.



Not much to tell. He kept his crew small. Just two people he trusted.

Pyotr isn't tall, but he's built like a wall. He crews as a loader, but he was also Alex's bodyguard and enforcer.

Jordi is main pilot. He's the long skinny one. He talks even less than Pyotr. No one's really sure what he's into when he's not crewing.

Both of them have been working for Alex, and only for Alex, for years now. Which is why I think your theory's got to be wrong.

TRIJO 3 HAD A BREATHABLE ATMOSPHERE, SO I COULD CROSS THAT OFF MY LIST OF PROBLEMS. I HAD A BIGGER ONE TO REPLACE IT. BIRT AND CO WERE NOT WHERE BORIS TOLD ME THEY WOULD BE.



Nice place.

Yeah. Lovely.

Well, excuse me for trying to be civil.

Sorry. It is a nice planet. It'd probably be heavily settled, if it hadn't been a war zone for so long.

But I don't have the supplies to spend a couple of weeks scanning it for Birt and the others. They could be anywhere, assuming they're still on this planet at all.

Bosie doesn't have enough space to hold food and water for two people for that long. And she only has one bunk. And it's small.



Two people can fit into an awfully small bed, if they're OK with getting really personal ...

Not two hours ago you were telling me how much you miss your lover of nearly a decade.

Yes, I was. And I do! But I'm not going to give up sex just because I miss Alex. You know?

That's ... ah ...

Hang on. Someone's coming.



Oh, hell. And I'm sitting here without a weapon handy.

That bad?

I haven't dealt with any Grith personally. And she doesn't look hostile. But be ready for anything. I hear stories.

And they're psis, so if your head starts to peel Punny, scream.

IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN A GRITH BEFORE, OR HAVEN'T EVEN HEARD OF THEM. THEY'RE FOURTH IN POPULATION IN THE GALAXY, AFTER HUMANS, SERAE AND PERGATI ... BUT THE SYSTEMS THEY CONTROL ARE SEPARATED FROM HUMAN SPACE BY THE SERAE WORLDS. NOT TOO MANY HUMANS HAVE MADE IT ALL THE WAY THROUGH SERAE SPACE TO SEE A GRITH SYSTEM ... AND THE GRITH ARE AT WAR WITH THE SERAE, SO THEY HAVE SOME TROUBLE CROSSING OVER TO OUR SIDE OF SERAE SPACE WITHOUT GETTING BLOWN UP.

THE FACT THAT A GRITH WAS FLYING AROUND ON A DISPUTED WORLD ON THE SERAE-HUMAN BORDER WAS ALREADY SUSPICIOUS, EVEN WITHOUT FACTORING IN THE OTHER RUMORS FLOATING AROUND ABOUT THEM.



Humans. Interesting.

And at these exact coordinates.

Are you ... looking for someone?



Boris Ilko sent us. He's getting a little jumpy. But I don't guess you'd know anything about that?



Of course. I'm the one who told him about it in the first place.

Chrcthis ks Kre. I'm sure Boris mentioned me when he sent you.

I did warn him that it would be very hard to send progress reports.

Like I said, he gets jumpy.



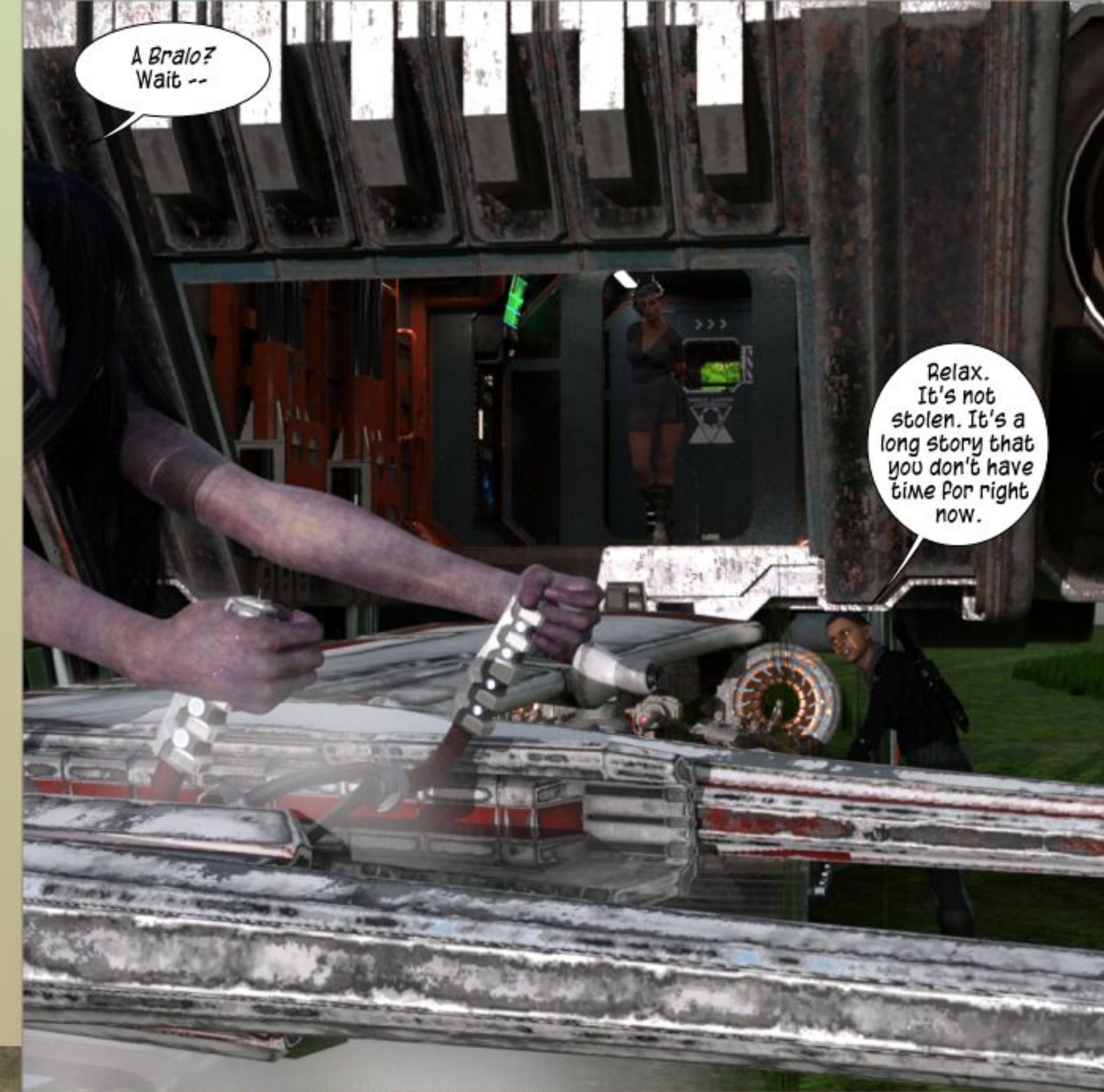
I would direct you to the site ... but I don't have actual coordinates; I navigate there by eye.

And I'm not sure you can follow me at low altitude easily in that ship.

I could bring them a message ...

I have a bike. Give me a moment to get it out of the hold.

Oh .. All right, then. But I can't wait long.



A Bralo? Wait --

Relax. It's not stolen. It's a long story that you don't have time for right now.



Hang on tight. We're going to have to haul hard to keep up with her.

Why'd your bike hazz her out like that?

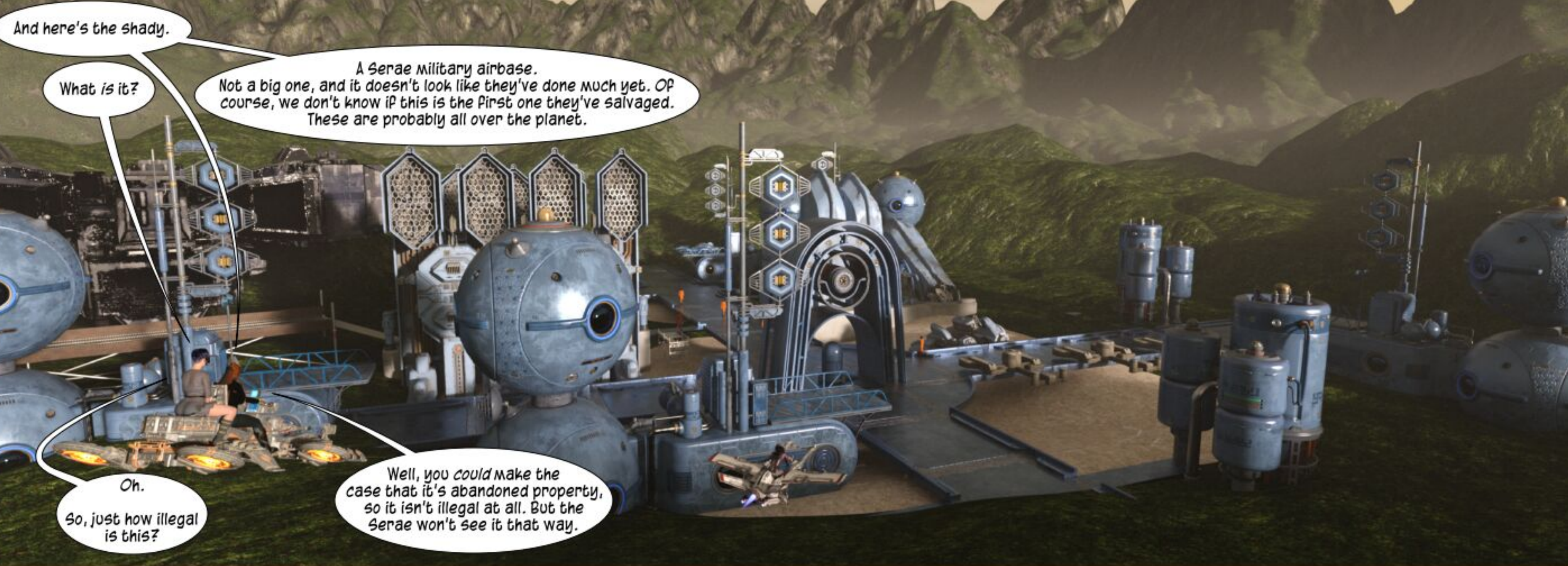
It's a Serae bike. That would make it suspicious, for her. But she's suspicious anyway. She thinks we're lying, but she's going to take us there and then let the crew bust us.

Either that or she's up to something bigger and doesn't care.

I noticed you stopped to get that big gun.

A Grith who speaks perfect Trade hauling around on a planet hostile to her? Who put the humans onto something I suspect is pretty shady? Who says she doesn't know the coords that she absolutely has memorized?

IP I thought you could shoot it straight, I'd have given you a weapon too.



And here's the shady.

What is it?

A Serae military airbase. Not a big one, and it doesn't look like they've done much yet. Of course, we don't know if this is the first one they've salvaged. These are probably all over the planet.

Oh. So, just how illegal is this?

Well, you could make the case that it's abandoned property, so it isn't illegal at all. But the Serae won't see it that way.



I guess we might as well be direct ...

Hey, people! My name's Randa. Boris Ilko sent us to get a few questions answered. It'd be really good if you could --



You!!

This is all your fault!



You sure?



Now let's talk.



The thing we're sitting on is a repowering tether for a PyPr. That thing down there in the sand is a wrecked PyPr.

They aren't fast or well-armed, but they have a pair of really nasty fixed beam weapons that point straight down. Built for ground strafing.

The Serae have never released the specs on their beam weapons, and won't sell any of their tech to humans. If I were running this op, that wreck down there is what I'd have broken first.

Which is why I figure either Ilko had no idea what he was getting you into, or knew and didn't tell you anything.

Tough luck for you. Doesn't excuse everything you did.

I was trying to stay alive! I suppose you've never had to do things you didn't like --

Plenty of times. But I wouldn't have gotten tangled with Ilko in the first place.



You know I'm not going to let Ilko kill Ule. That means I have to bring him someone else.

Right now you're the top choice.

Me? Why the hell would I kill Alex and make everything a lot worse? You think I'm stupid?

You don't want me to answer that.

Anyway, the alternative is that one of his crew did it, and that's a lot harder to believe. Pwola is sure you --

... Pwola?

Hmm. I hope she's not making trouble somewhere.

Listen. When we ran for the ship -- because Ule was going to Pucking abandon us -- the pilot, Jordi, saw us on scan and let us in. Pyotr, the goon, met us in the lock and said Alex would have to say yes. The two of us walked to find him. We found him ... with his throat cut.

So Pyotr's your alibi. Would he agree if we asked him?

If he doesn't, he's a Pucking liar.

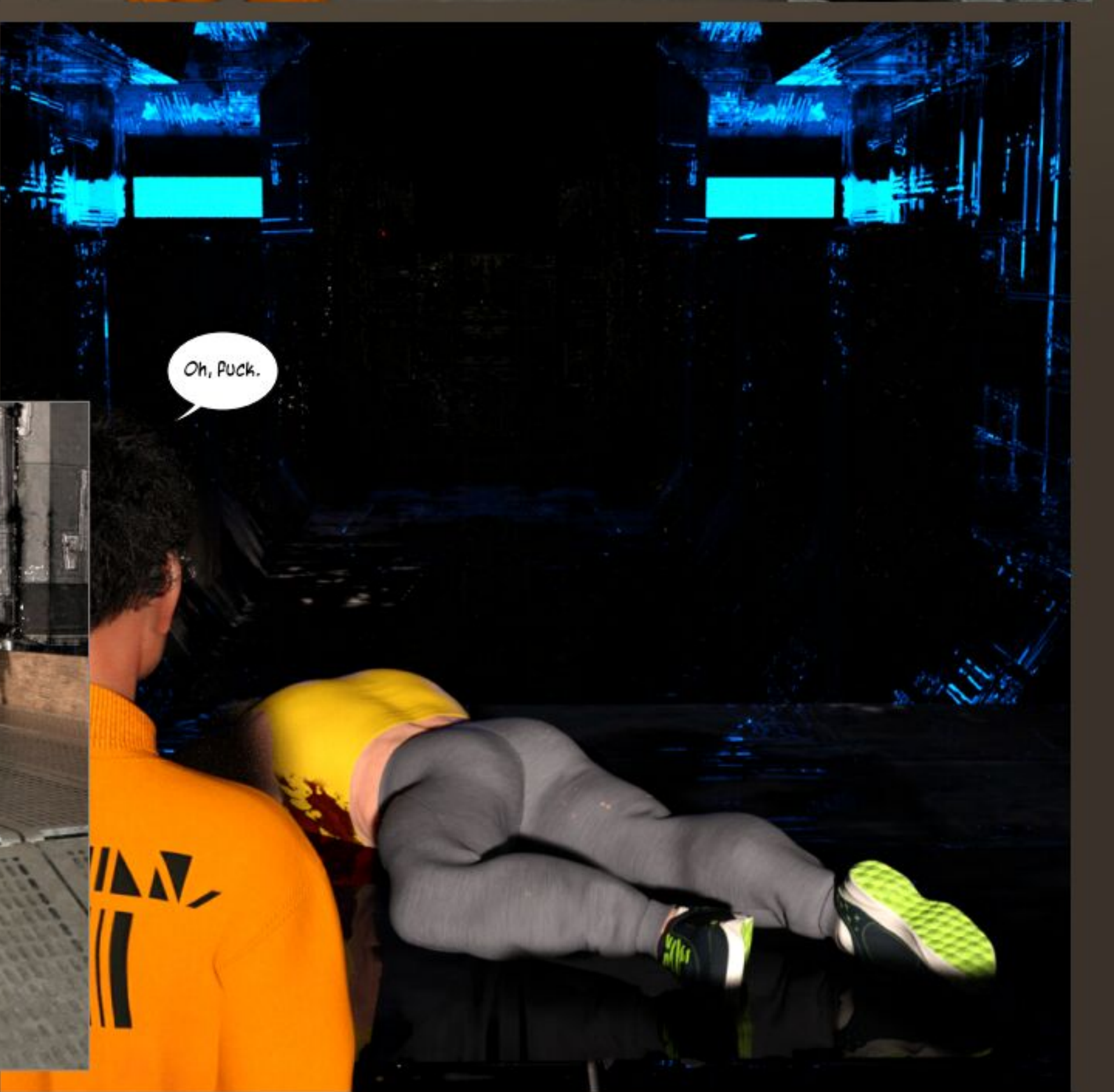


Oh, there you are.

Chrchtis says this is the second site of three she gave them. Jordi says the first one took them two months.

Where's Pyotr?

I think he went aboard ship.



Oh, Puck.



Throat cut.

Now, you know I didn't do this ...

No, you're the only one who couldn't have. I wasn't keeping track of everyone else while we were talking.

Doesn't get you off the hook for Gulbrak.

Come on! The same person did both. It's obvious! And that means it had to have been Jordi ...



What in hell's that?

BRHRROOMMM

Someone's Piring on the ship!

Out! Now!





Which of you is squad leader?

I am that one. Who are you? Why have you brought a Grith?

My name is Randa. I'm here to retrieve a human criminal.

The Grith is Chrchis hs Kre. It brought these humans here to salvage this site. It assured them they would be safe.

But it actually wanted you to catch the humans, and when it thought they had enough cargo to make it clear, it made sure you were informed something was going on. Isn't that so?

... We were informed. I am not certain how the information came to us.

Why would it do that?

FOR YOUR READING CONVENIENCE, BLUE DIALOGUE IS TRANSLATED FROM SERAJO. -T



I'd heard rumors about this. The Grith would like the cease-fire to fall apart. Any trouble they can make between humans and Serae helps them, they think. They want us to start fighting you again.

Sorry to bring it to you unconscious, but they're psis and I don't know the extent of their abilities, so it was safer.

We know how to take care of that. We'll see to it.

But these other humans ... you understand, even if they were misled, we still cannot tolerate their actions. They must be punished.



I know. Though you may want to know that they're not here voluntarily. They were forced to come here to pay a debt.

I would appreciate it if you'd let me take my murderer with me.

Irregular ... but you've done us a service. The presence of a Grith in this system is disturbing in itself, let alone its behavior.

You may take one of them away with you.



Randa! What's going on? What are you saying to them?

The one that's speaking to me.

So be it.



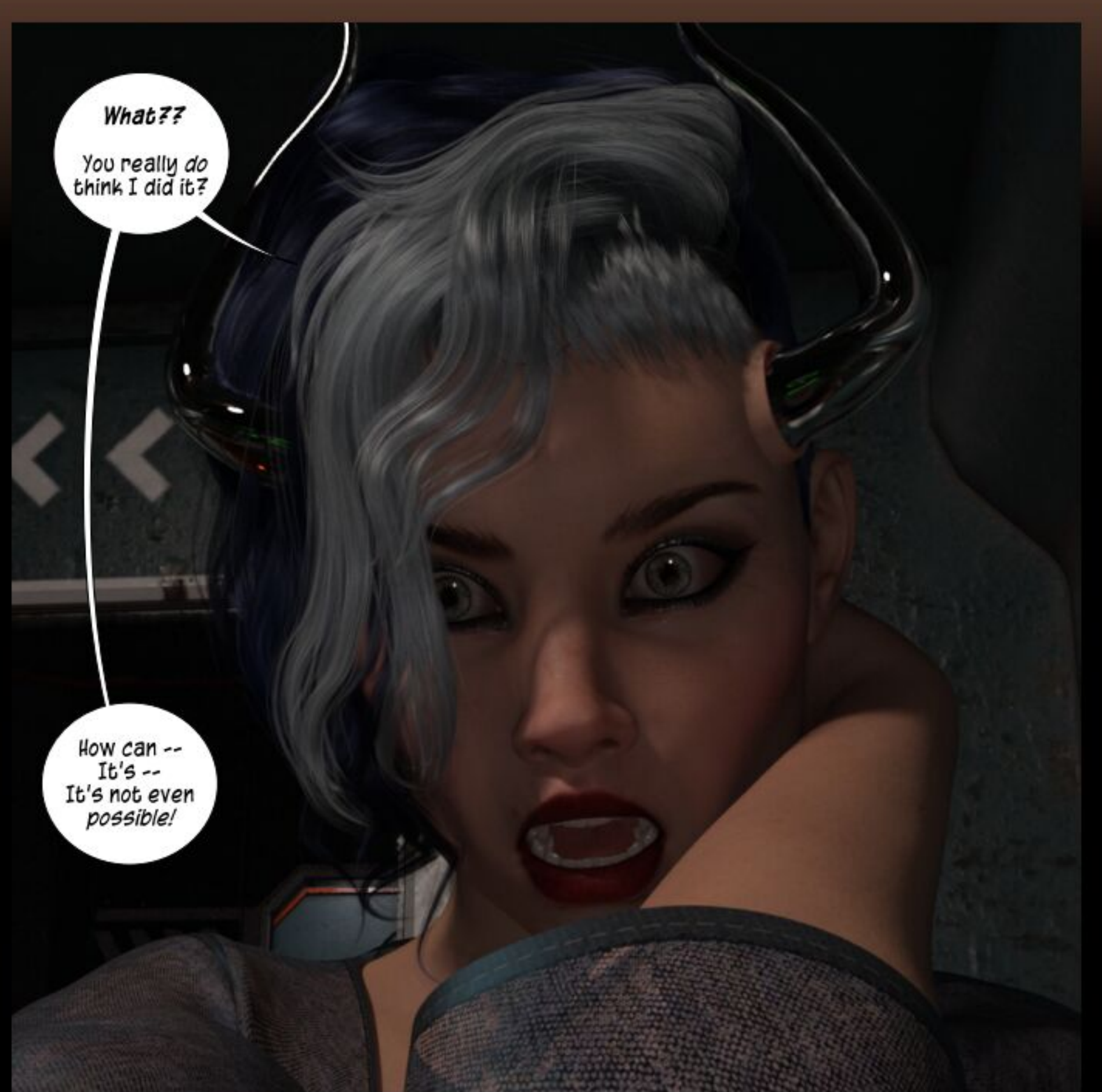
So you had to tell them I was the killer so you could get me off the planet?

Thank you so much! I could, y'know, try to show my gratitude ...

That's not what I said. And don't touch me.

If you try anything, I'll toss you into the hold -- hard -- and lock you in there until we get back to Ilko.

And I'd like to remind you that you don't know how to fly this ship, so if you're thinking of cutting my throat, think twice.



What?? You really do think I did it?

How can -- It's -- It's not even possible!



C'mon, Pwola. Even Birt thought it had to be the same person who did both.

And everybody else involved had Pirearms. Even at the site ... the crew had salvaging tools which might as well be Pirearms, if they used them as weapons.

I noticed that even when you took off your other jewelry for the trip, you kept the bracelet. I got a good look at it a while ago. That curve on the tail of the snake ... it's got a nice sharp edge, doesn't it? Almost like a little sickle.

It's an interesting way of carrying a concealed weapon, I admit.



That's not -- anybody can -- Maybe they wanted to do it quietly. Maybe they didn't want to use a gun inside a ship.

Sound thinking, both of those things.

I was stuck for a little bit on why you'd even bother to kill Pyotr, but once I realized the only way you could have killed Gulbrak, that gave me the other part.

Pyotr was really startled when you showed up with me at the site. He went into the ship right after that. He was hiding from you.

Did he see you stow away on Gulbrak's ship for the drop run? Is that what you wanted to keep him from telling me?



OK. Fine. Yes, I snuck aboard.

Pwola?



You shouldn't be here. This is a business run.

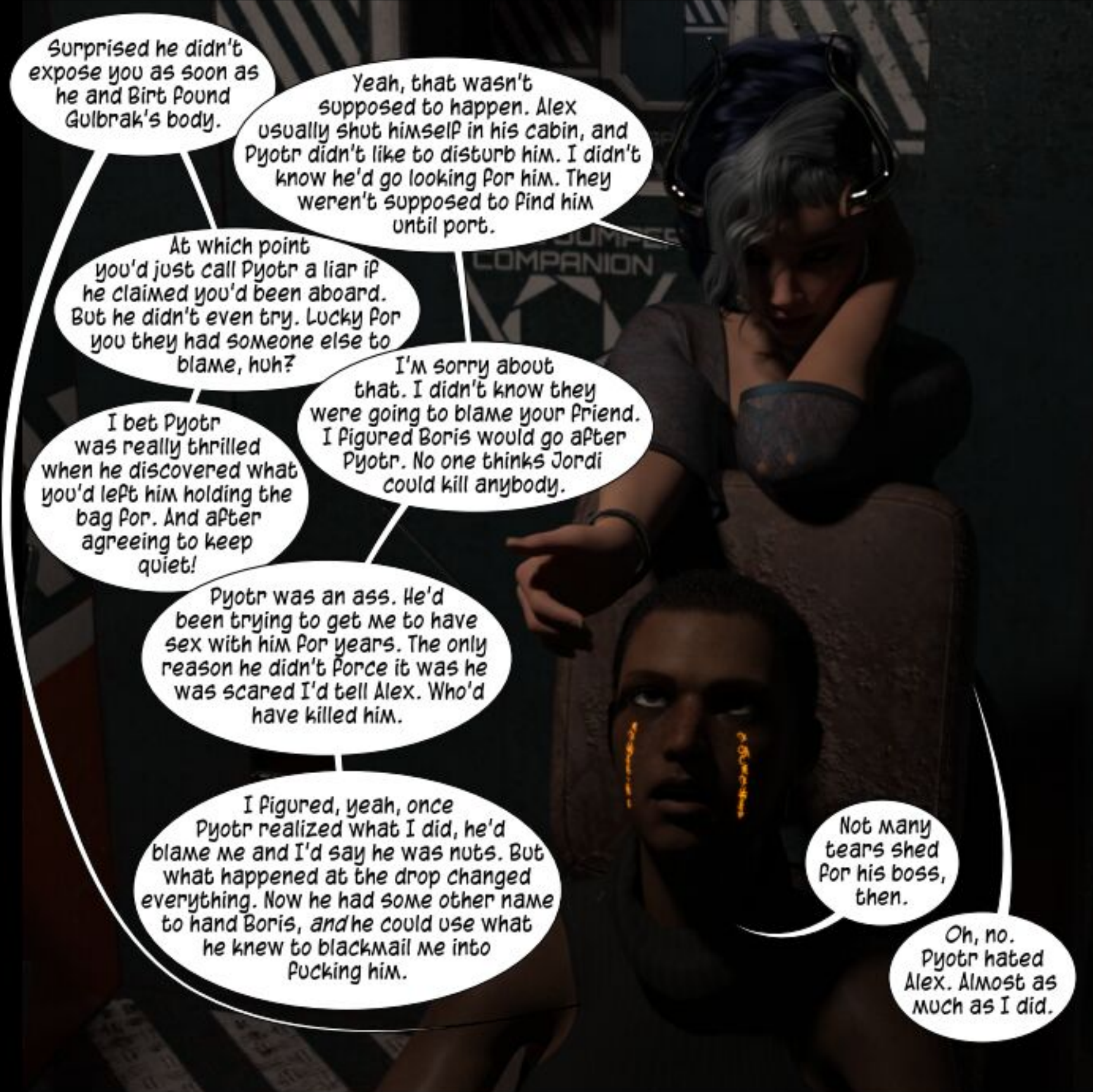
Alex will be pissed.

Aw, Pyotr ... I just want to give him a little surprise on the way back. It'll be OK.

You're not going to tell, are you?

All right ... but you're going to owe me.

And don't blame me if he doesn't like your surprise.



Surprised he didn't expose you as soon as he and Birt Pound Gulbrak's body.

Yeah, that wasn't supposed to happen. Alex usually shut himself in his cabin, and Pyotr didn't like to disturb him. I didn't know he'd go looking for him. They weren't supposed to find him until port.

At which point you'd just call Pyotr a liar if he claimed you'd been aboard. But he didn't even try. Lucky for you they had someone else to blame, huh?

I'm sorry about that. I didn't know they were going to blame your friend. I figured Boris would go after Pyotr. No one thinks Jordi could kill anybody.

I bet Pyotr was really thrilled when he discovered what you'd left him holding the bag for. And after agreeing to keep quiet!

Pyotr was an ass. He'd been trying to get me to have sex with him for years. The only reason he didn't force it was he was scared I'd tell Alex. Who'd have killed him.

I figured, yeah, once Pyotr realized what I did, he'd blame me and I'd say he was nuts. But what happened at the drop changed everything. Now he had some other name to hand Boris, and he could use what he knew to blackmail me into fucking him.

Not many tears shed for his boss, then.

Oh, no. Pyotr hated Alex. Almost as much as I did.



Everybody hated Alex. Everybody except Boris. He called people names and was horrible to them. The closer you were to him ... his bodyguard, his lover ... the worse he treated you.

So everything you said to me about your relationship with him, how you felt about him ... that was all lies?

What did you expect me to say? "Oh, yeah, I hated his guts?"

For all I knew you were another of Boris' people.



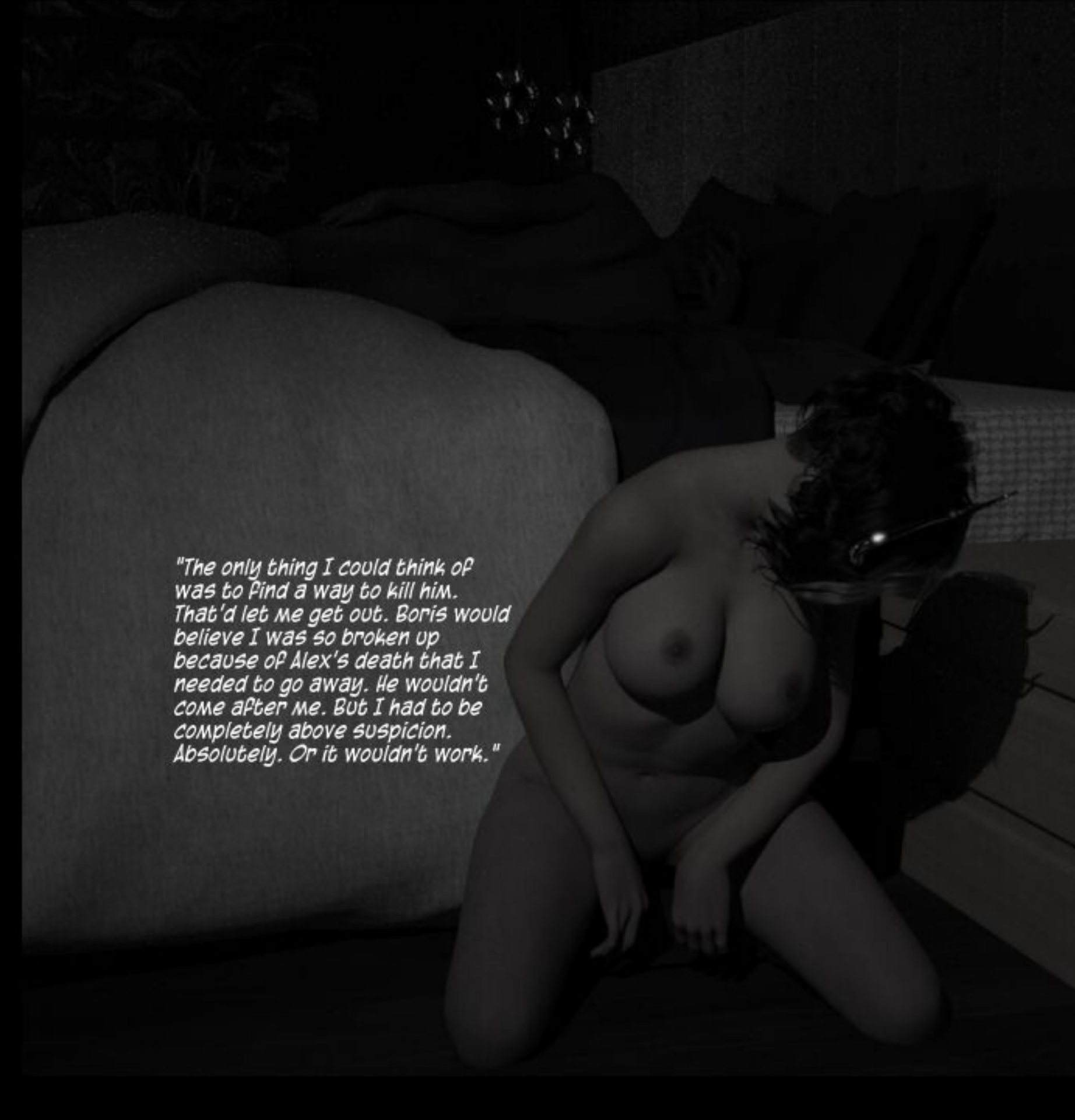
"Look, I'm not saying I didn't go in with my eyes open. I realized pretty fast that when you work for Boris you kind of want to find some way to get a little job security, y'know?"

"Alex can be really charming, before you get to know him. And he's not bad-looking. It was sure better than going to bed with Boris and maybe ending up as the next Inga ..."



"But I couldn't get out. That was the problem. Alex actually loved me, I think. Either that or he really, really liked the sex. I don't know. But I did know that if I left he'd hunt me down, and he'd have Boris' resources behind him."

"I was trapped. I couldn't stand it much longer, but if I left, I was as good as dead."



"The only thing I could think of was to find a way to kill him. That'd let me get out. Boris would believe I was so broken up because of Alex's death that I needed to go away. He wouldn't come after me. But I had to be completely above suspicion. Absolutely. Or it wouldn't work."



And then you come along and mess up the whole thing! I mean, I don't want your friend to suffer for it either, but don't you see that Alex and Pyotr both deserved what they got?

Well, I only have your word for it that they did.

But, OK, suppose I believe you. Congratulations and good riddance.

Now: What the hell do I tell Ilko?



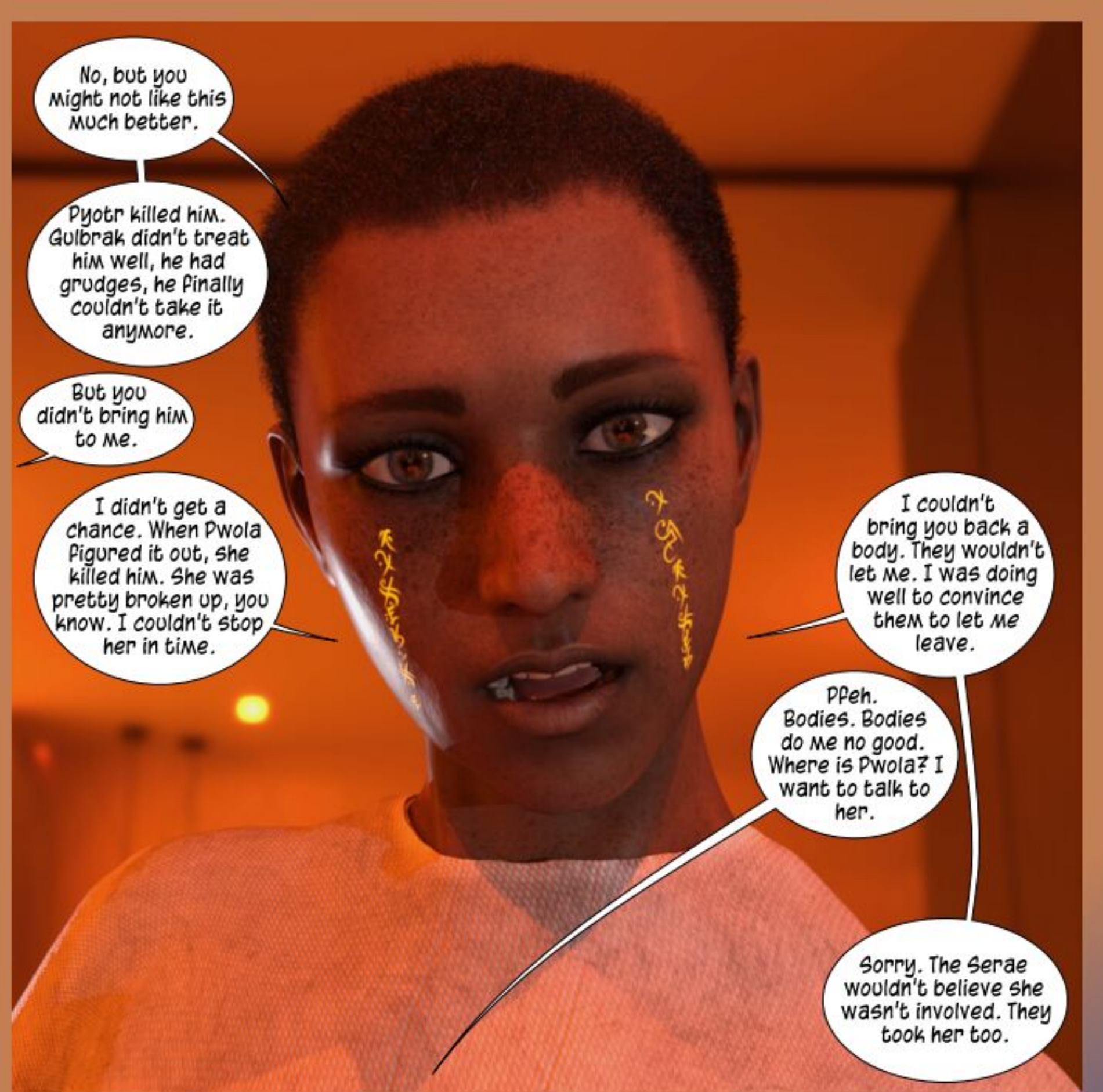
All of them? The ship too?

The Serae were pretty pissed off. Blame your contact. Chrchis planned to turn your crew in all along. She wasn't interested in business; she was trying to start a war.

The good news is, because it was really her scheming, the Serae'll probably be lenient. Your crew may get out after only a few months.

Eh, don't give a damn about the crew. But that ship cost a lot of money. Have to see if I know anybody who'll steal it back ...

What about finding out who killed Alex? You're going to tell me there's nothing because the Serae have them now?



No, but you might not like this much better.

Piotr killed him. Gulbrak didn't treat him well, he had grudges, he finally couldn't take it anymore.

But you didn't bring him to me.

I didn't get a chance. When Pwola figured it out, she killed him. She was pretty broken up, you know. I couldn't stop her in time.

I couldn't bring you back a body. They wouldn't let me. I was doing well to convince them to let me leave.

Pfeh. Bodies do me no good. Where is Pwola? I want to talk to her.

Sorry. The Serae wouldn't believe she wasn't involved. They took her too.



So you come back with nothing.

Well, I found out who did it. I mean, I'm sorry you didn't get to kill him yourself ... but he did get what he deserved.

Also, if I hadn't been there, and hadn't been allowed to leave, you'd have no idea what happened, and a couple of months from now you'd be wondering where your crew and your ship was.

Hmph.

Not much, but something, yes. All right, get out of here.

I'll leave Karlisen alone. But when you see him next, tell him I remember him.

And if you ever see that Chrchis again ... you come tell me where.



It's me. You can come out.

They'd have to blow open the ship to get in without my permission.

Well, I wasn't sure.

I'll take you to Signy. You can get other transport from there.

You can drop me somewhere closer if it's a problem ...

No, I need to go there anyway. I want to talk to Ule and Romi about all this.



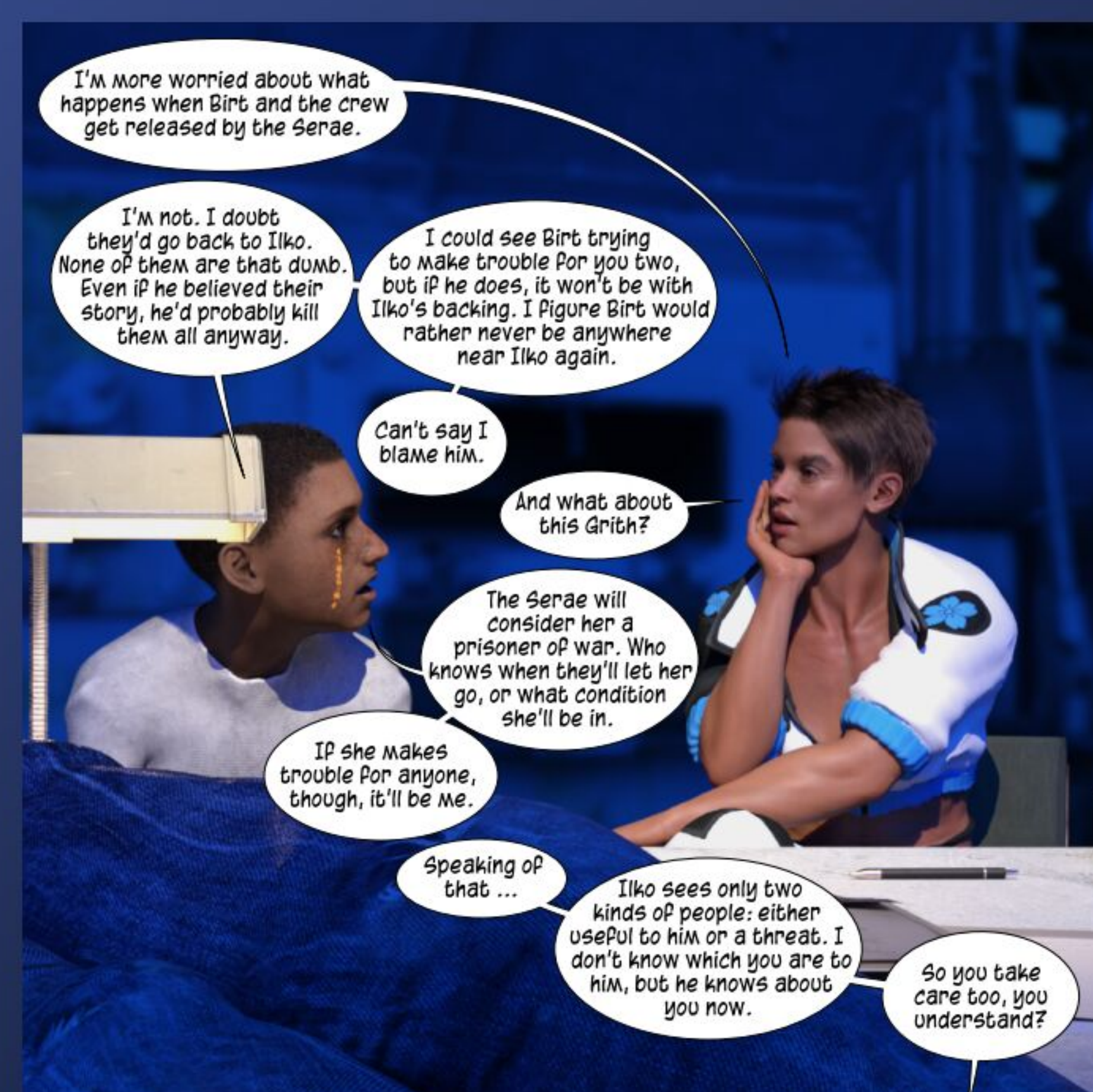
Yes, Ilko and I have a little history. I did some jobs for him, but I didn't like working for him, even then. You can't trust him.

It's people like that who teach you "honor among thieves" is a big lie.

You could have told me about this.

It was a long time ago, Romi, and he hadn't given me any trouble since. And I'm not a smuggler anymore.

Well, he definitely hasn't forgotten you. So be careful, OK?



I'm more worried about what happens when Birt and the crew get released by the Serae.

I'm not. I doubt they'd go back to Ilko. None of them are that dumb. Even if he believed their story, he'd probably kill them all anyway.

I could see Birt trying to make trouble for you two, but if he does, it won't be with Ilko's backing. I figure Birt would rather never be anywhere near Ilko again.

Can't say I blame him.

And what about this Grith?

The Serae will consider her a prisoner of war. Who knows when they'll let her go, or what condition she'll be in.

If she makes trouble for anyone, though, it'll be me.

Speaking of that ...

Ilko sees only two kinds of people: either useful to him or a threat. I don't know which you are to him, but he knows about you now.

So you take care too, you understand?



WHAT ULE SAID HAD ALREADY OCCURRED TO ME.

BUT I TRY NEVER TO WORRY ABOUT THAT KIND OF THING; THERE'S NO POINT IN IT.

IF I CROSSED PATHS WITH BORIS ILKO AGAIN -- AND I WASN'T PREPARED TO BET AGAINST IT HAPPENING -- THEN I'D DEAL WITH IT. THERE ARE PEOPLE LIKE HIM ALL OVER THE GALAXY. IN THIS BUSINESS YOU EITHER LEARN HOW TO HANDLE THEM, OR YOU DON'T STAY IN BUSINESS LONG.

SO FAR, I WAS STILL IN BUSINESS.

END