

I'VE NOTICED THAT, MORE AND MORE OFTEN, PEOPLE TAKE A LOT OF LIBERTIES WITH WHAT I DO. I THINK IT MAY BE BECAUSE THERE'S A CERTAIN KIND OF JOB THROUGHOUT THE GALAXY THAT NO ONE ELSE IS AVAILABLE TO DO.

WE'RE IT. AND THERE AREN'T MANY OF US.



Sela Tyrell?  
I'm Randa Guerrero.

Hmm. Not exactly what I was expecting. Would you like something to drink?

Uh, no, thank you. I'm just here to hear what this is about. Your message was ...

Unhelpful. Yes. I wanted to discuss it in person.

I need you to find a person for me. His name is Merton McKenzie. I haven't seen him in a year, but I only began to consider him "missing" about two months ago.

Sela Tyrell is the heir and president of the huge complex of Tyrell companies. She is an only child and the last member of her family alive.

She is also extremely rich. Maybe that goes without saying.



I ... honestly have no idea if you're aware of what I do ... but that isn't it.

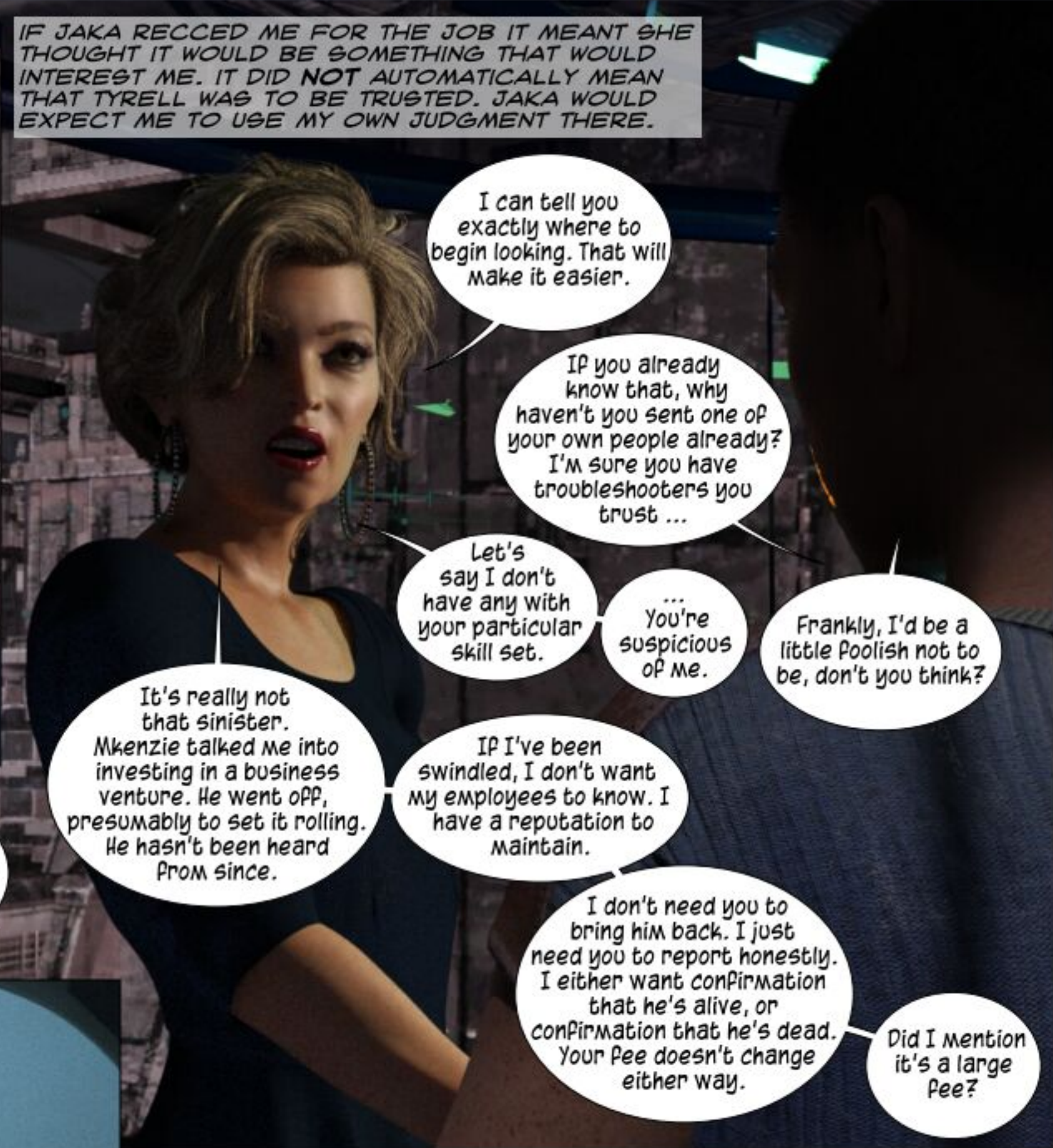
You get paid to investigate settlements and stations to see if they've gone derelict. If they have, you waive salvage rights in exchange for a bigger fee so your clients can retain the properties themselves.

I always do my research.

Well, then, why--?

Jaka Heikkonen said you were the person I should get.

I'm prepared to pay you a great deal of money. To compensate you for stepping beyond the bounds of your job description.



IF JAKA RECCED ME FOR THE JOB IT MEANT SHE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE SOMETHING THAT WOULD INTEREST ME. IT DID NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEAN THAT TYRELL WAS TO BE TRUSTED. JAKA WOULD EXPECT ME TO USE MY OWN JUDGMENT THERE.

I can tell you exactly where to begin looking. That will make it easier.

If you already know that, why haven't you sent one of your own people already? I'm sure you have troubleshooters you trust ...

Let's say I don't have any with your particular skill set.

... You're suspicious of me.

Frankly, I'd be a little foolish not to be, don't you think?

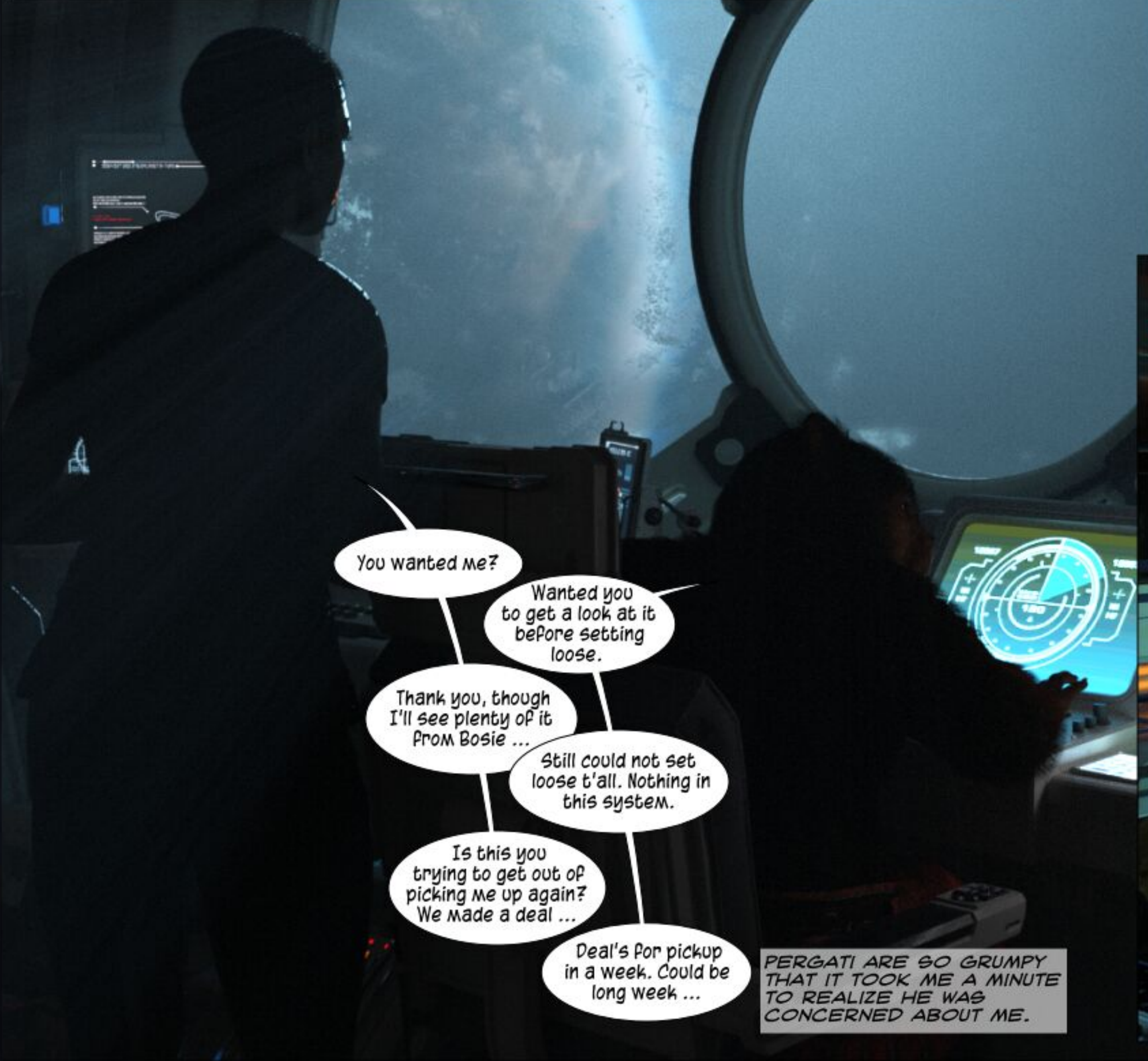
It's really not that sinister. McKenzie talked me into investing in a business venture. He went off, presumably to set it rolling. He hasn't been heard from since.

If I've been swindled, I don't want my employees to know. I have a reputation to maintain.

I don't need you to bring him back. I just need you to report honestly. I either want confirmation that he's alive, or confirmation that he's dead. Your fee doesn't change either way.

Did I mention it's a large fee?

IT WAS A VERY LARGE FEE.  
LARGE ENOUGH TO STILL HAVE PLENTY LEFT AFTER CHARTERING THE WORLD'S SMALLEST PUNCH FERRY. NO ONE WAS RUNNING ANY REGULAR ROUTES TO WHERE I NEEDED TO GO.



You wanted me?

Wanted you to get a look at it before setting loose.

Thank you, though I'll see plenty of it from Bosie ...

Still could not set loose t'all. Nothing in this system.

Is this you trying to get out of picking me up again? We made a deal ...

Deal's for pickup in a week. Could be long week ...

PERGATI ARE SO GRUMPY THAT IT TOOK ME A MINUTE TO REALIZE HE WAS CONCERNED ABOUT ME.



I'll be fine. I've stayed in Bosie a lot longer ... just don't forget to come--

Huh? Prox alert?

Aye.

What is this Puss, now?





This system isn't in conflict. I checked.

Aye. No reason for them to be here.

None of them are firing. Just staring at each other--



AAARR!!

So much for that.

Durr!! Get yer butt up here! We're taking fire!



The Hawks are trying to keep the bots off us. Nice of them.

I'm not set for this! We've only the one cannon! We can't fight it out!



No, and I don't expect you to. Get on the far side of the LC.

The what now?

The light carrier. The Navy ship. Put it between us and the drones.

I'm going to Bosie.

Open the bay when you get on the far side of the LC. As soon as I'm clear, haul out. The drones won't chase you. They're not here for that.

You sure about this?

I'll be fine. Don't forget to come back in a week.



Getting a little close there, unidentified vessel ... state intent.

NLC, this is indy BO14. I have business in this system. Asking a c.b. for cover and sitrep.

Ah ...

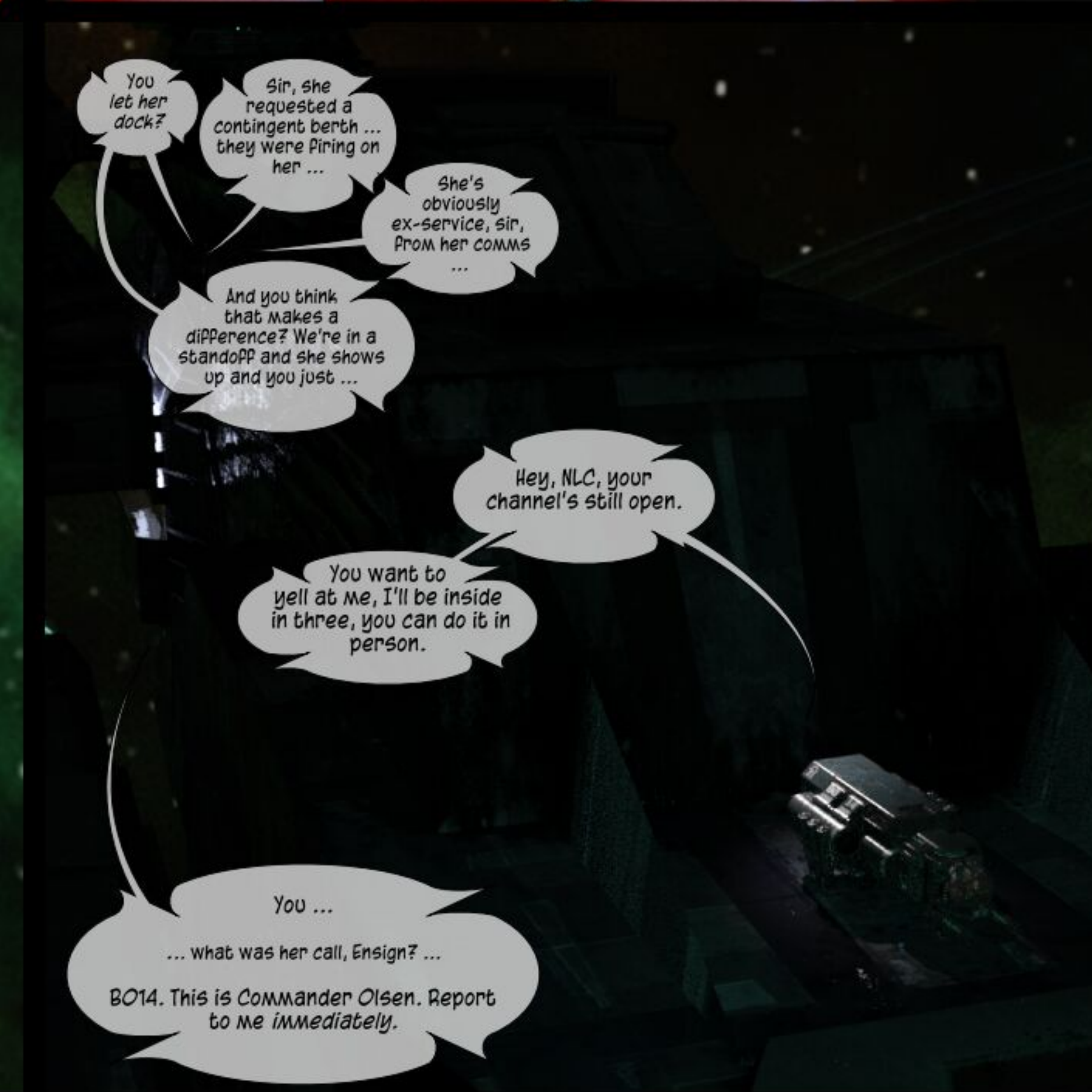
Come on, NLC. I'm no hostile, and those drones are going to track me any second.

Uh, it's not that, BO14. We don't have space in the main scoop, and you're too big for the Hawk bays ...

I don't see anything in the cradle, NLC.

The cradle? Are you ... ah ...

Yes, my ship's got suckers and I've got a suit. Permission, please?



You let her dock?

Sir, she requested a contingent berth ... they were firing on her ...

She's obviously ex-service, sir, from her comms ...

And you think that makes a difference? We're in a standoff and she shows up and you just ...

Hey, NLC, your channel's still open.

You want to yell at me, I'll be inside in three, you can do it in person.

You ...

... what was her call, Ensign? ...

BO14. This is Commander Olsen. Report to me immediately.



COMMANDER OLSEN DIDN'T WAIT FOR ME TO REPORT TO HER.



... I don't appreciate your escalating the situation ... they assumed you were reinforcements, because why else would anybody just show up here out of the blue? If you hadn't pulled out of the way as quickly as you did ...

Now they probably think we're planning to bust their blockade. They'll be ready. You just made everything harder.

Commander, I'm here to look for a missing person. I was expecting an empty system. You people are the nasty surprise, not me.

And I pulled away in a hurry specifically to de-escalate the situation, as soon as I realized what I'd wandered into.

You're calling a single ship a blockade? Sure, they've got a lot of drones, but those lousy Cleit drones can't even take down a single Hawk unless they all gang up on it ...

I'm assuming they're not interested in discussing why they don't want you landing--I know how ahpeah are--but given that, you'd be justified in blowing right through them--



They say the planet's theirs.

I dispute that. I've sent a burst to RHQ for a brief. But it'll take a while.

Until then, I'd need much more of a reason to "blow through them." We try to avoid undue provocation.

Our mission ... well, it probably won't suffer from a delay.



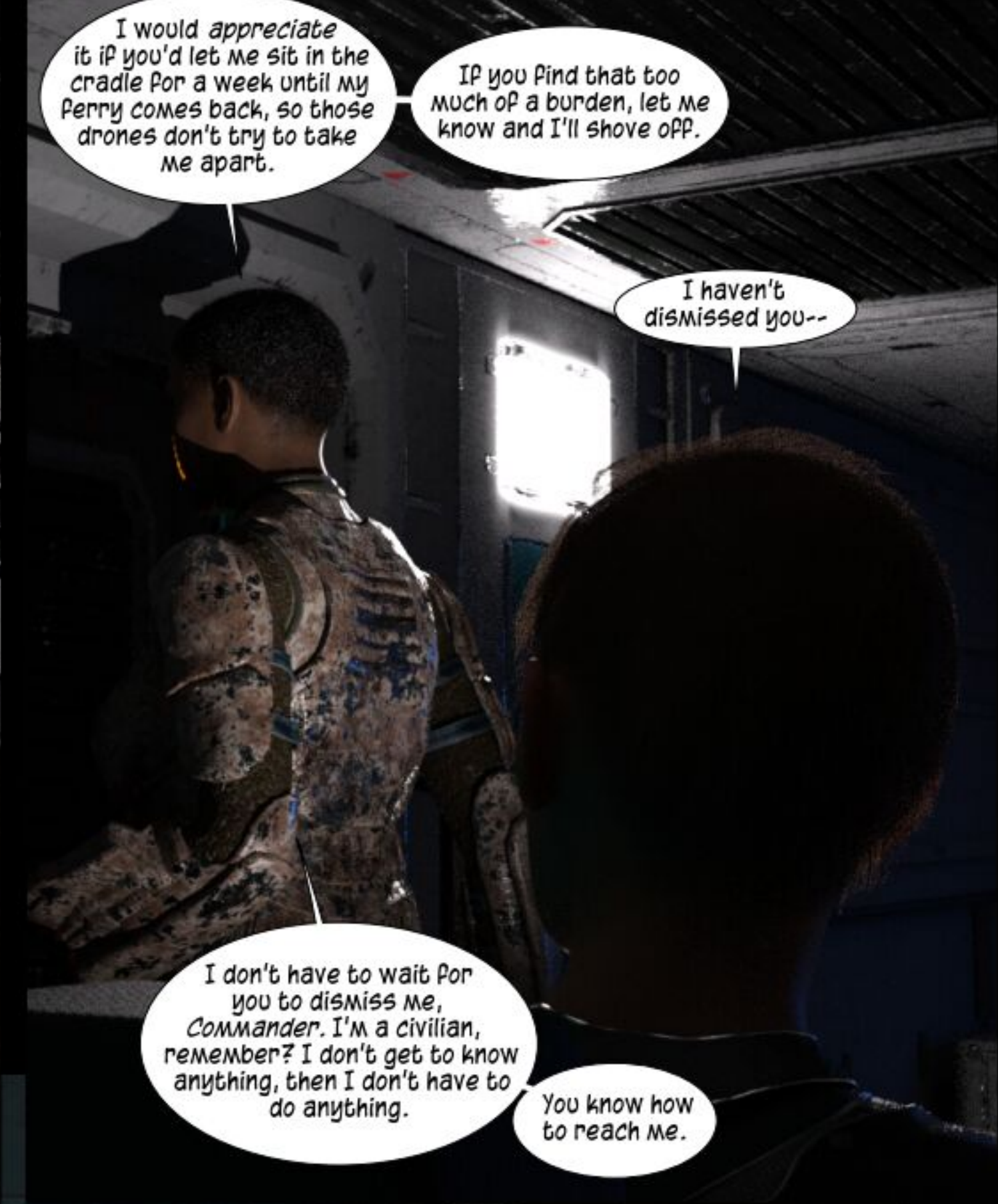
What is your mission?

Classified. At least to civilians.

Right.

Which means you haven't told the Cleit why you're here either. You won't tell them anything because you've got a protocol stick up your ass, and they won't tell you anything because they're jerks.

Meanwhile you'll both glare at each other for the next month until a reply to your burst comes back.



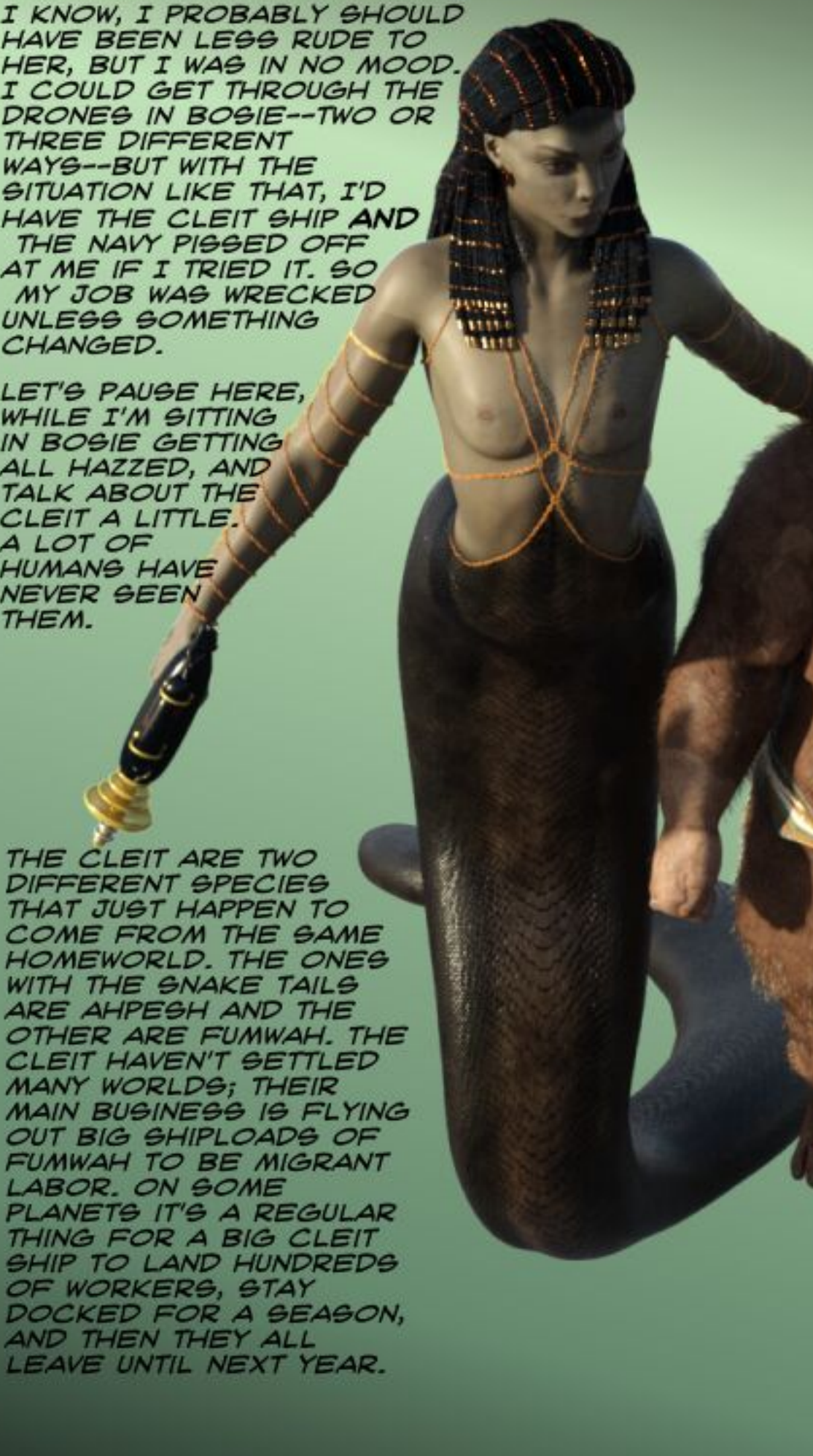
I would appreciate it if you'd let me sit in the cradle for a week until my Perry comes back, so those drones don't try to take me apart.

If you find that too much of a burden, let me know and I'll shove off.

I haven't dismissed you--

I don't have to wait for you to dismiss me, Commander. I'm a civilian, remember? I don't get to know anything, then I don't have to do anything.

You know how to reach me.



I KNOW, I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE BEEN LESS RUDE TO HER, BUT I WAS IN NO MOOD. I COULD GET THROUGH THE DRONES IN BOSIE--TWO OR THREE DIFFERENT WAYS--BUT WITH THE SITUATION LIKE THAT, I'D HAVE THE CLEIT SHIP AND THE NAVY PISSED OFF AT ME IF I TRIED IT. SO MY JOB WAS WRECKED UNLESS SOMETHING CHANGED.

LET'S PAUSE HERE, WHILE I'M SITTING IN BOSIE GETTING ALL HAZZED, AND TALK ABOUT THE CLEIT A LITTLE. A LOT OF HUMANS HAVE NEVER SEEN THEM.

THE CLEIT ARE TWO DIFFERENT SPECIES THAT JUST HAPPEN TO COME FROM THE SAME HOMEWORLD. THE ONES WITH THE SNAKE TAILS ARE AHPESH AND THE OTHER ARE FUMWAH. THE CLEIT HAVEN'T SETTLED MANY WORLDS; THEIR MAIN BUSINESS IS FLYING OUT BIG SHIPLOADS OF FUMWAH TO BE MIGRANT LABOR. ON SOME PLANETS IT'S A REGULAR THING FOR A BIG CLEIT SHIP TO LAND HUNDREDS OF WORKERS, STAY DOCKED FOR A SEASON, AND THEN THEY ALL LEAVE UNTIL NEXT YEAR.



THE AHPESH RUN EVERYTHING. THEY CLAIM THE FUMWAH AREN'T CAPABLE OF DOING ANYTHING MORE COMPLICATED THAN HEAVY LIFTING, AND THEY NEED THE AHPESH TO GUIDE THEM AND TAKE CARE OF THEM.

A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK THE AHPESH ARE EXPLOITERS AND LIARS AND THAT THE FUMWAH ARE NEITHER AS DUMB NOR AS BRUTISH AS THE AHPESH CLAIM THEY ARE.

I ONCE SAW AN AHPESH USE ONE OF THEIR NEURAL GUNGS JUST BECAUSE A FUMWAH SAID SOMETHING THEY DIDN'T LIKE. I DIDN'T KNOCK THEM INTO NEXT WEEK BECAUSE I WAS IN UNIFORM AT THE TIME. IF I'D BEEN OFF-DUTY, THEY'D STILL BE SLITHERING WITH A BUSTED TAIL TODAY. FUMWAH ARE HELL TO FIGHT, BUT AHPESH ARE PUSHOVERS AND THEY KNOW IT.



NLC435 to BO14, ack?

-- sigh --

BO14. What?

Ah, the CO would like you to come aboard to speak with her.

Please.



Why didn't you mention your service record? It was obvious you were ex-, but--

I don't like throwing it around. I'm who I am now, not who I was back then. Why does it make any difference to you?

Among other things, it makes me considerably more likely to trust you with information.

We're here for search and rescue. A squad dropped on the planet two months ago missed their return rendezvous and have not reported. When the pickup came back empty, they sent us out.

Before you ask, I have no idea why they were sent down there. I wish I did.

Yes, I can see why.



The problem is, if they are alive and in trouble, I don't in good conscience feel I can wait for a brief.

I was already considering pushing a squad past the blockade when you arrived. That's why I was annoyed, because you've made it harder.

I think I'm going to do it anyway.

I want in.

Sir.



You won't be able to wander to look for your missing person ...

I'm aware, but I'll take what intel I can get, even the hard way.

To use when you go back down to the planet as soon as we leave?

Or as a lever on the ahpesh if I have to negotiate with them.

... You're a very determined person.

BUT SHE HAD TO HAVE WANTED ME TO GO, OR WHY WOULD SHE HAVE MENTIONED IT?



Prager!  
Fine!

We're on the clock! Stop shooting the shit and move your asses! We're only half done with loadout and we still have to get suited up!

Lt. Cortiga?  
I'm Randa Guerrero--

Yeah, I know.

Now listen.

I don't give a shit if you're the CO's favorite girl, you go down with my squad, you answer to me.

That means if I say jump, you jump, and you don't stop to ask questions. Understood?

OP course.

And don't get lost. If I have to come find you, I'm gonna be real hazzed. Stay close and stay out of trouble.





Hey, Lieutenant!

You mean we gotta take a civ and the amp on the same trip?

She's right behind you, dumbass.



Prager, you shitheaded pissfuck!

If you call her "the amp" one more time, I'm not going to bother with a DR. I'm just going to drag your stupid ass to the bilge and Puck your shit up so hard that they'll have to carry you to your medical discharge. Do I make myself clear?

Yes, sir!

And the civ is here because the CO says she can handle it. If the CO says she can handle it, we believe her. Got it?

Now go be useful for a change. I want loadout done in five minutes. You hear me, people? Five. Not ten.

Then everybody go get your asses suited up.



You sure you know how to park this thing, Brell?

Piss up a rope, Prager.



Good afternoon, this is your captain from the flight deck ... thank you for traveling with us today ...

We're expecting some rough conditions in our short flight, so please remain in your seats at all times ...



Kidding aside, be ready to brace. This one's gonna be shaky.

Hawks'll run interference for us, but we'll still need to do some dodging. Sit tight.

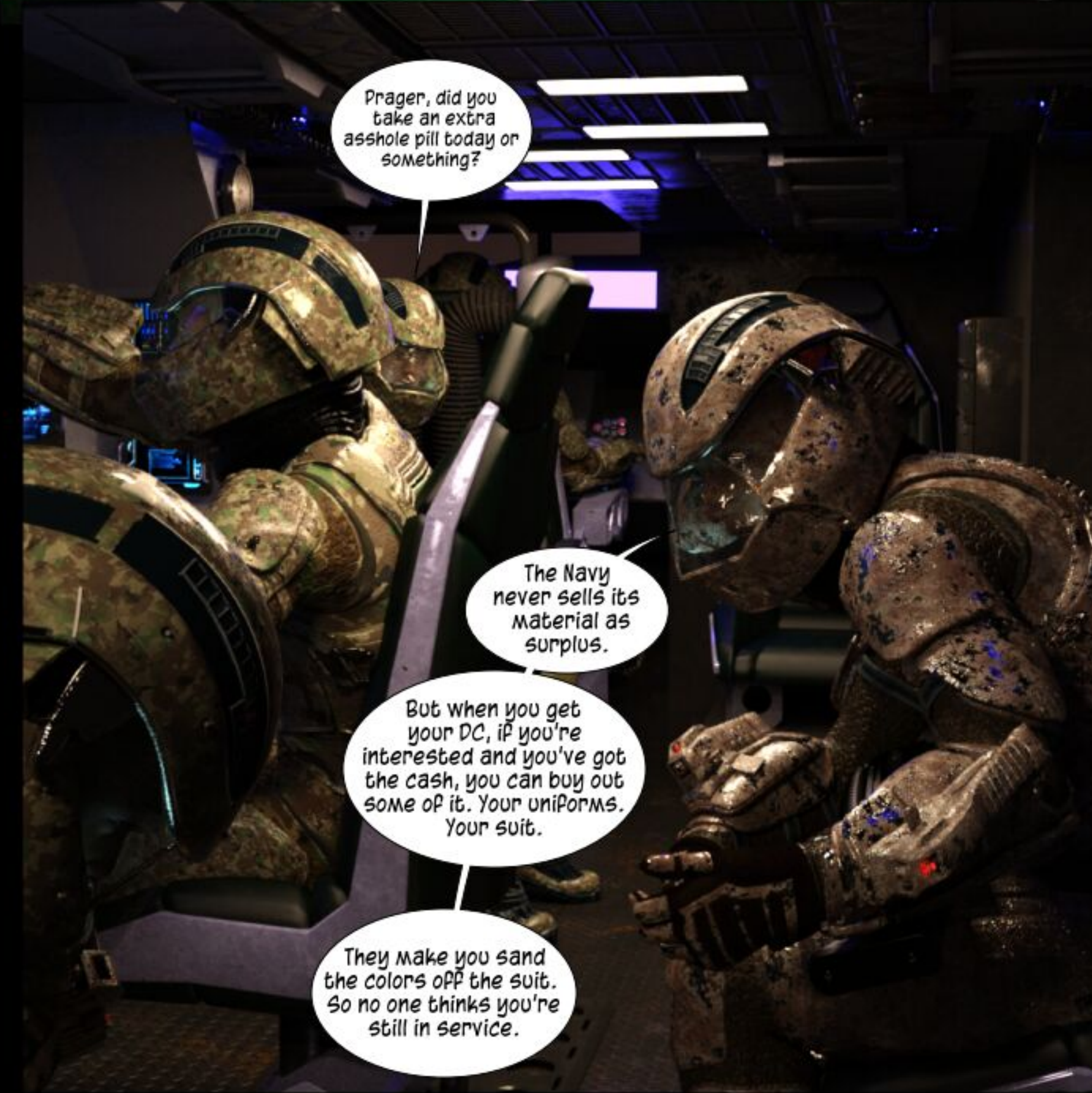


... just sayin' ... I mean, look at that suit! Did she pick that shit up surplus or what?

Prager, c'mon ...

I know you know I can hear you.

How about you just air it out loud and don't be chickenshit about it?



Prager, did you take an extra asshole pill today or something?

The Navy never sells its material as surplus.

But when you get your DC, if you're interested and you've got the cash, you can buy out some of it. Your uniforms. Your suit.

They make you sand the colors off the suit. So no one thinks you're still in service.



You OK?

I'm fine. ... sorry. Squad joke.

I'm good. Just don't like the ride much.

That's not a Navy weapon, though ...

Nope. Navy won't let you have ordnance on buyout. They reuse that.

This is a WC3 carbine. It's not bad.

I didn't want to ask the CO to issue me anything, and I'm used to this one anyway.



Making approach. Get ready.

PROCEDURE IN SITUATIONS LIKE THIS IS TO DROP WELL SHORT OF THE KEY COORDINATES AND MAKE THE REST OF THE APPROACH OVERLAND. SOMETIMES THIS PREVENTS LANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIGHT.

Good luck, APC. Keep in touch.



We're almost at their drop site, sir ... I don't see anything ...

... Belay that. Yes, I do.



Old-school drop module? I thought the Navy was phasing those out.

They are. Just not doing it fast. Lot of 'em still around ...

... and they hate to scrap equipment. Right.

I wish they would. They're a pain in the ass.

This one here looks like it nearly dropped into a tree.



Empty, sir.

Empty for a while, the way they've let the grass come up through the side plates ... but all the lights are on ...

Wherever they went, it was in a hurry.

Hey, Brell! You getting any personal beacons?



No, sir. Disabled, or they didn't have time to turn 'em on.

Fan out?

Not too far. Look for signs of which way they went. The grass is going to make it hard.

Put your lights on.



Lieutenant!

Damn. At least it doesn't have a head in it.



Lieutenant, these marks look to me like someone's been dragged.

... You're right. Through that gap in the trees back there and down into that gully.

Are we setting up a base, sir?

No. Something that disappears a whole squad ... we're sticking together. Stash that helmet in the Rat and tell Brell to join us. Have her seal up the Rat and make sure its beacon's on.

We'll do one Poray. After that we'll come back here and make camp.



--Wha?



Shit!

AAAAA!



It's on me!  
It's on me!

Damn it,  
Prager, get  
clear!

AAAIII!



Two of  
them!

It's on  
Brell!

Brell!

Stay down!  
I don't want to  
hit you!

Get  
off!  
Get off!!

I need range,  
damn it!



Came out of  
Pucking  
nowhere ...

Shit!  
What are these  
things made of?

Damn it, Linde, I  
don't want it to Fall  
on me!

Taking the  
shot--

**FFOW**

Fuck!

Oh, you're  
kidding.

Pull it left,  
Prager!

I'm trying!

Shit!

**Incoming!**

**Move!!**

**WHOOOM**



uwghh

Not my Pinest  
performance ... at least it  
was a concussion shell and not  
H.E. The sun's up; I was out  
for hours.

Don't  
see any  
bodies ... so  
that's good ...  
also bad.

Beasts  
didn't eat 'em,  
they'd have left a  
mess ...

So, hypothesis: I fell  
out of sight when I jumped away  
from the impact ... they all got  
knocked out ... and something else  
carried them off and didn't see me.  
Something a little more  
sophisticated than beasts.

Hope my  
carbine still  
works.









She doesn't do her own hunting?

That's the trade. She gives me rides, I give her food.

She eats a lot, but there's so many of those otari around, you can almost walk up to one and grab them.

Bulars are really lazy. I can't figure out if they'd rather eat already-dead meat because they like the taste, or because it means they don't have to hunt it and kill it.

Anyway, if I let her hunt I'd have to take the carriage off, and that takes a long time.



Treth ... Don't take this wrong, but what are you even doing here? There isn't supposed to be anybody on this planet ...

Who told you that?

The records ... I checked on this system before I came out ...

Of course, I also know there was a person here at some point who wasn't supposed to be, so ...

Well, I don't know about any records. There are people here, though, for sure. Not a lot. Twenty, maybe. Most of them are in ... I guess it's kind of a town. Really it's just a lot of farms close together.

Huh. I don't think anybody knows they're there, then.

You're not a farming type, I guess?



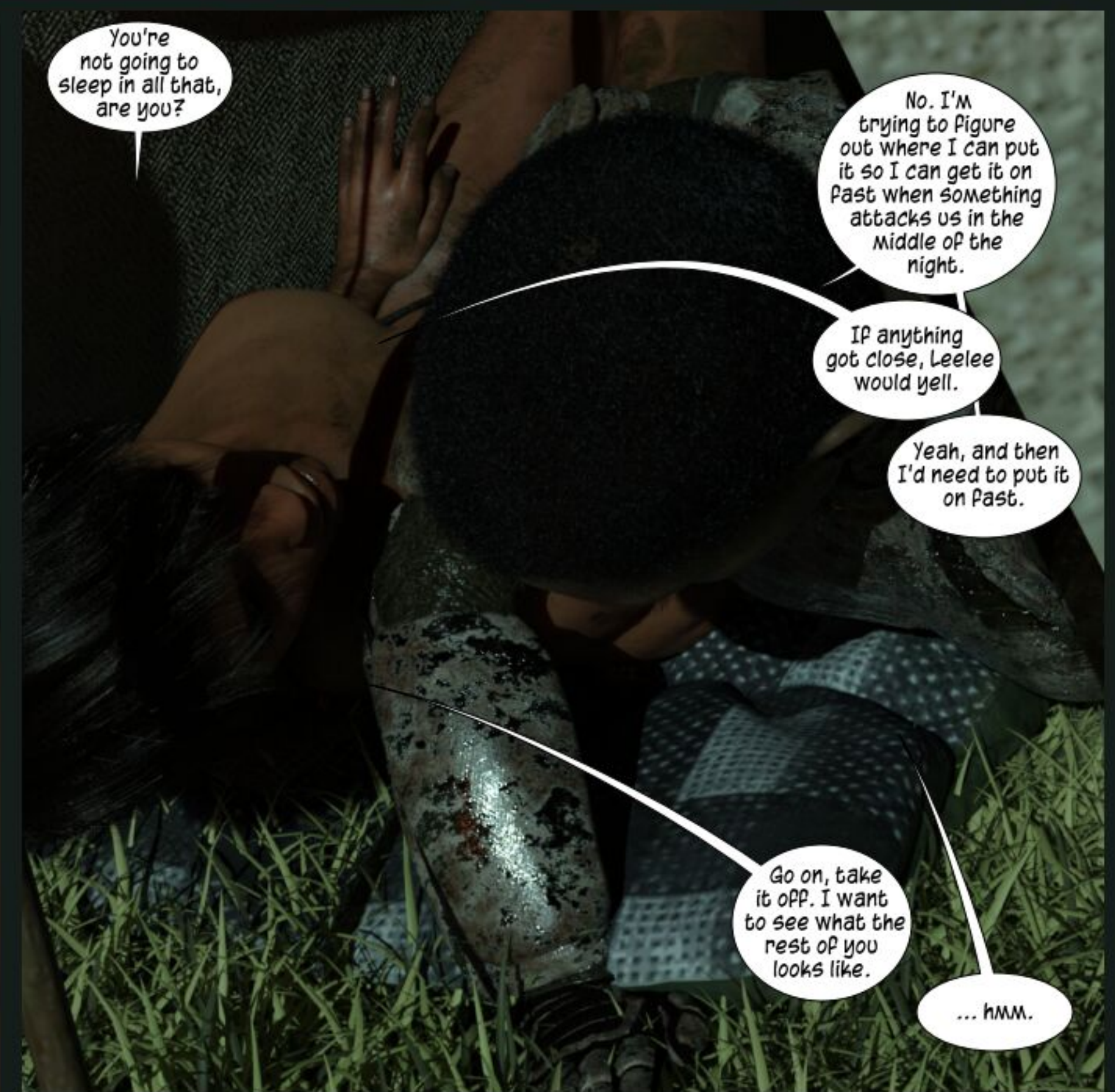
I stayed until my mommas both died. They'd have worried if I was running around.

And I go back and visit sometimes.

I don't hate them or anything. They're all right. And one of them, Ashi, I really like her ...

She wants me to stay there. She tells me every time I visit. She wants me to have a farm with her.

Farming is the most boring thing ever.



You're not going to sleep in all that, are you?

No. I'm trying to figure out where I can put it so I can get it on past when something attacks us in the middle of the night.

If anything got close, Leelee would yell.

Yeah, and then I'd need to put it on past.

Go on, take it off. I want to see what the rest of you looks like.

... hmm.



It's been a long time since I went back to town. Ashi and I ...

Do you ... do you do that?



Mugh ...

Don't you touch her!

Go away and leave us alone! You're making her nervous!

Treth, if she wanted to hurt Leelee, she could have blown her into pieces already.

Hey, unknown unit, stand down, will you? You're making me a little nervous too.



I recognize you. You're the civ that went down with the squad. What did you do with them? They've missed two checks and the APC is--

--sealed and uncrewed. I know. They're presumed captured. Probably by Cleit. We're pursuing.

Now: who the hell are you? Did the LC send you?

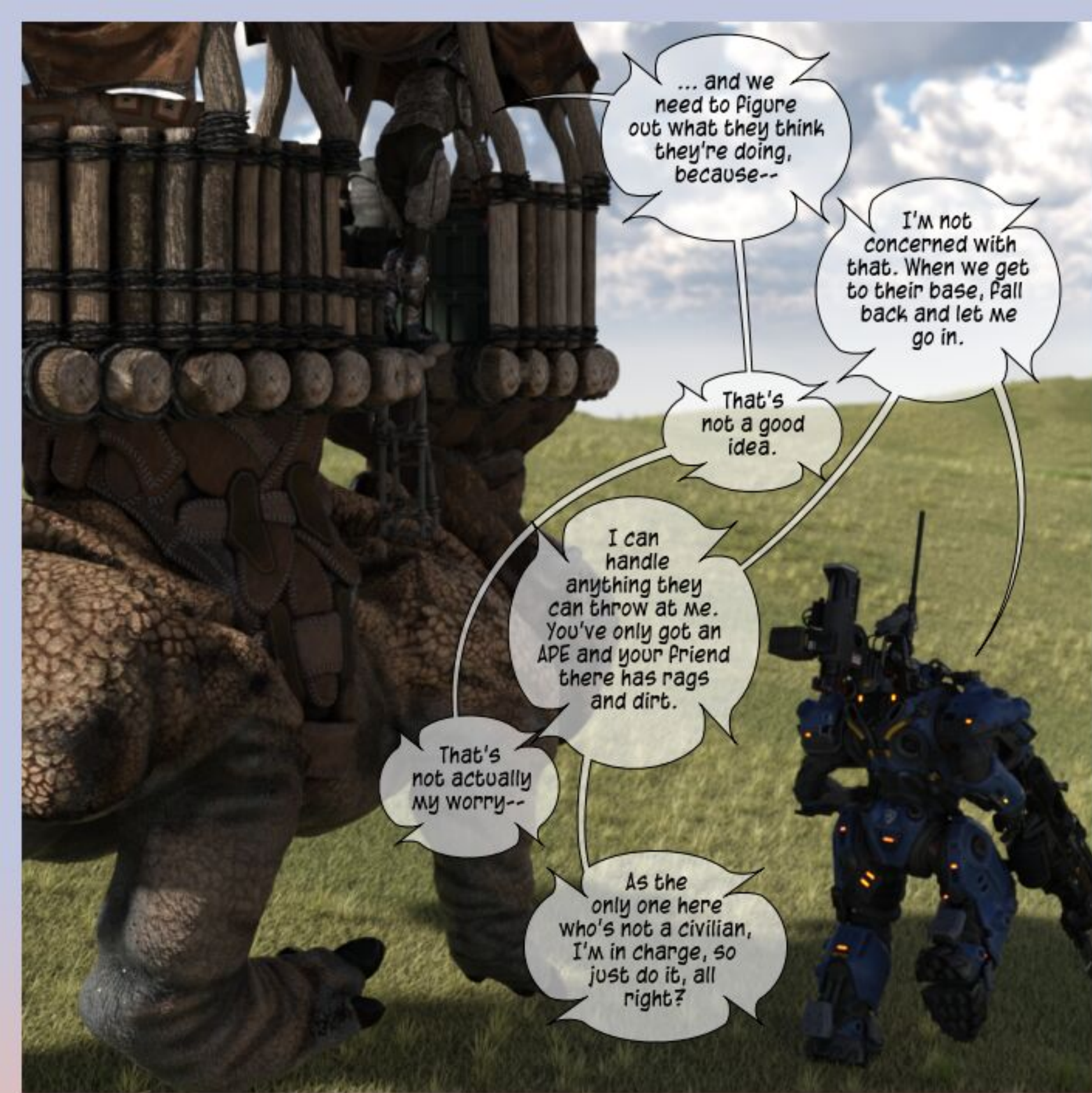
I was already here. I stay on the dropship unless backup is needed. You two are all we could find from the air.

Oh! You're the one with the prosthetics. Uh ... Stcheck? Is that right?

That's right. ... The whole squad? And you're the pursuit?

Let me suit up and I'll fill you in on the way. Except ... Treth, I don't think Leelee can take that weight, can she? That suit looks like ...

500 kilos. I can keep pace on foot.



... and we need to figure out what they think they're doing, because--

I'm not concerned with that. When we get to their base, pull back and let me go in.

That's not a good idea.

I can handle anything they can throw at me. You've only got an APE and your friend there has rags and dirt.

That's not actually my worry--

As the only one here who's not a civilian, I'm in charge, so just do it, all right?



--sigh--

Is she trouble?

She's thinking with her suit, not her head.

Happens a lot.

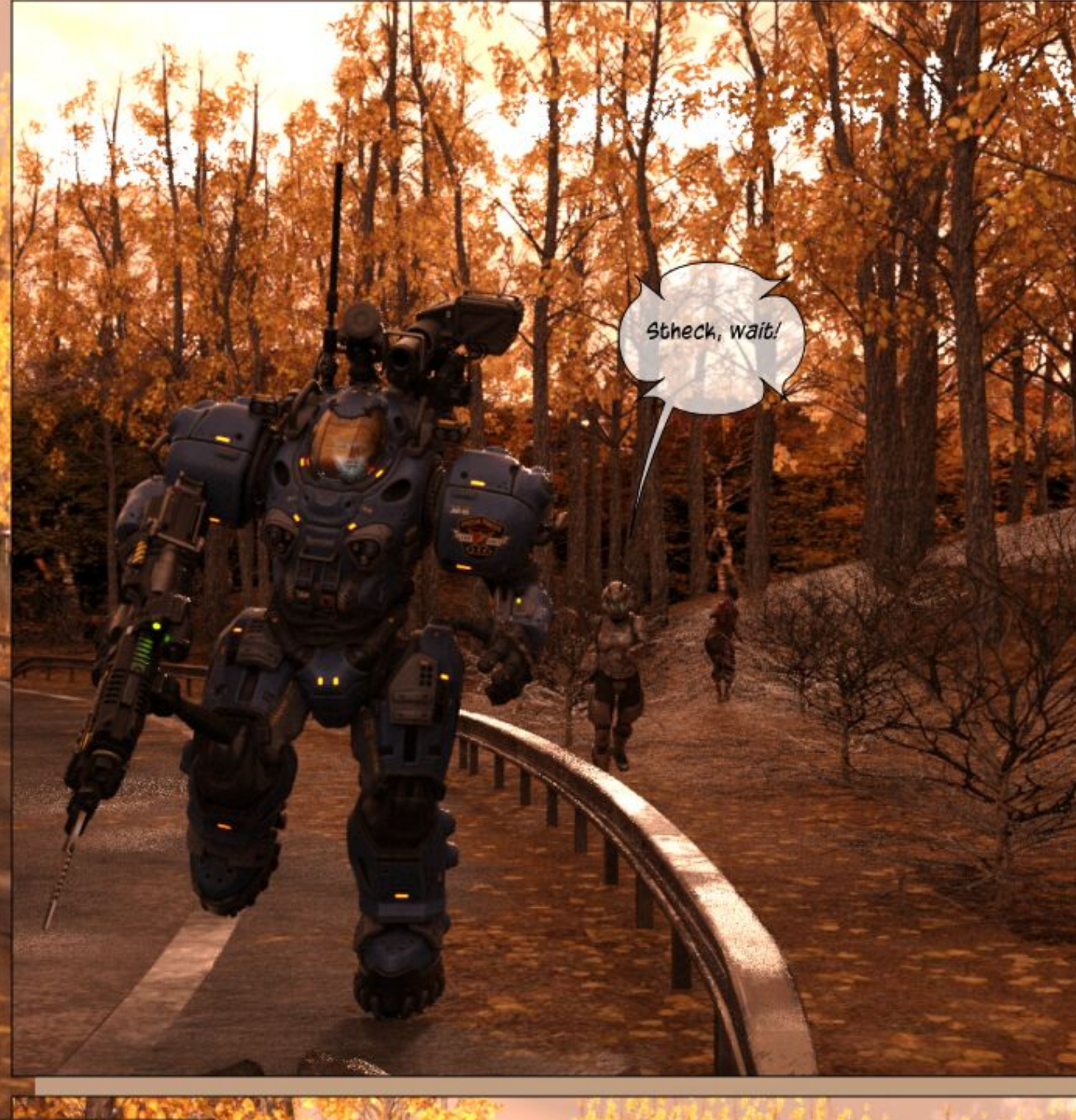
AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAINS, THE CLEIT HAD MADE A SORT OF IMPROMPTU BASE OUTSIDE A LARGE TUNNEL LEADING INTO THE HILLSIDE.



An actual road, too. A lot of infrastructure for something that isn't even supposed to be here.

No fortifications at all. Foolish.

One or two heavy cannon rounds should completely disable that dropship ... Then I can clean up the rest of it.



Stheck, wait!



What? I've got a clean shot, they're not even paying any attention! I can cut off their escape, and then--

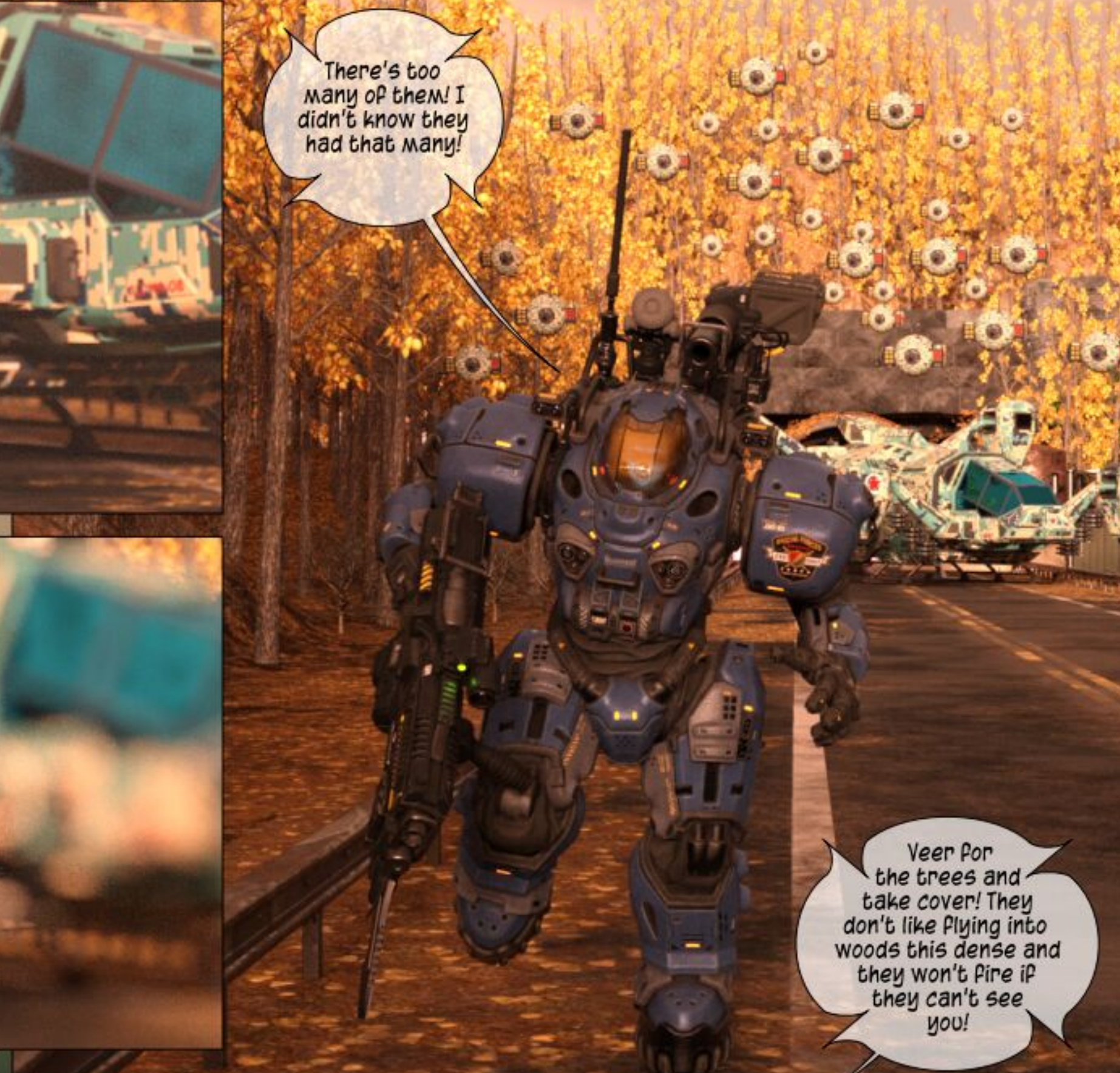
Stheck, listen to me. Adjust your TX. Focus past the ship. What do you see?

Uh ... powered cage of some kind? Looks like there are people in it ...

Oh, hell.

Right. Pull back and let's rethink, OK?

Damn! I've been seen!



There's too many of them! I didn't know they had that many!

Yee for the trees and take cover! They don't like flying into woods this dense and they won't fire if they can't see you!



We're going to be waiting for a while yet--do you want to take off some of that?

No, it's hell to put back on again without the loading frame, and I don't have my limbs.

... I really blew it.

I could have endangered the squad, and now the Cleit know we're out here and will be prepared for us ...

It's recoverable. Don't kick yourself too hard.

At least you did stop before blowing up that ship right next to them. I wish you'd listened before, though.



I'm sorry.

The regular squads don't like me. They call me things. They hate that I come along as backup.

I hate being backup, but not because of that. I went through a lot to become an exo unit. I'm better armed and armored than that whole squad put together, and I can do more. So why isn't the Navy putting together whole exo squads? Why don't they really use us?

... I wanted to save all their asses. That'd shut them up. And maybe show the Navy something too.

I wasn't thinking about anything but that.

Sometimes the easy way is the hard way.

Don't worry, we're still going to save their asses. We're just going to be more sneaky, is all.

You may have done us a favor. Now the Cleit will be looking for us to come up the road again, and we won't be.





OK, who's going to be the first to admit they speak some Trade\*, so I don't have to get rough about it?

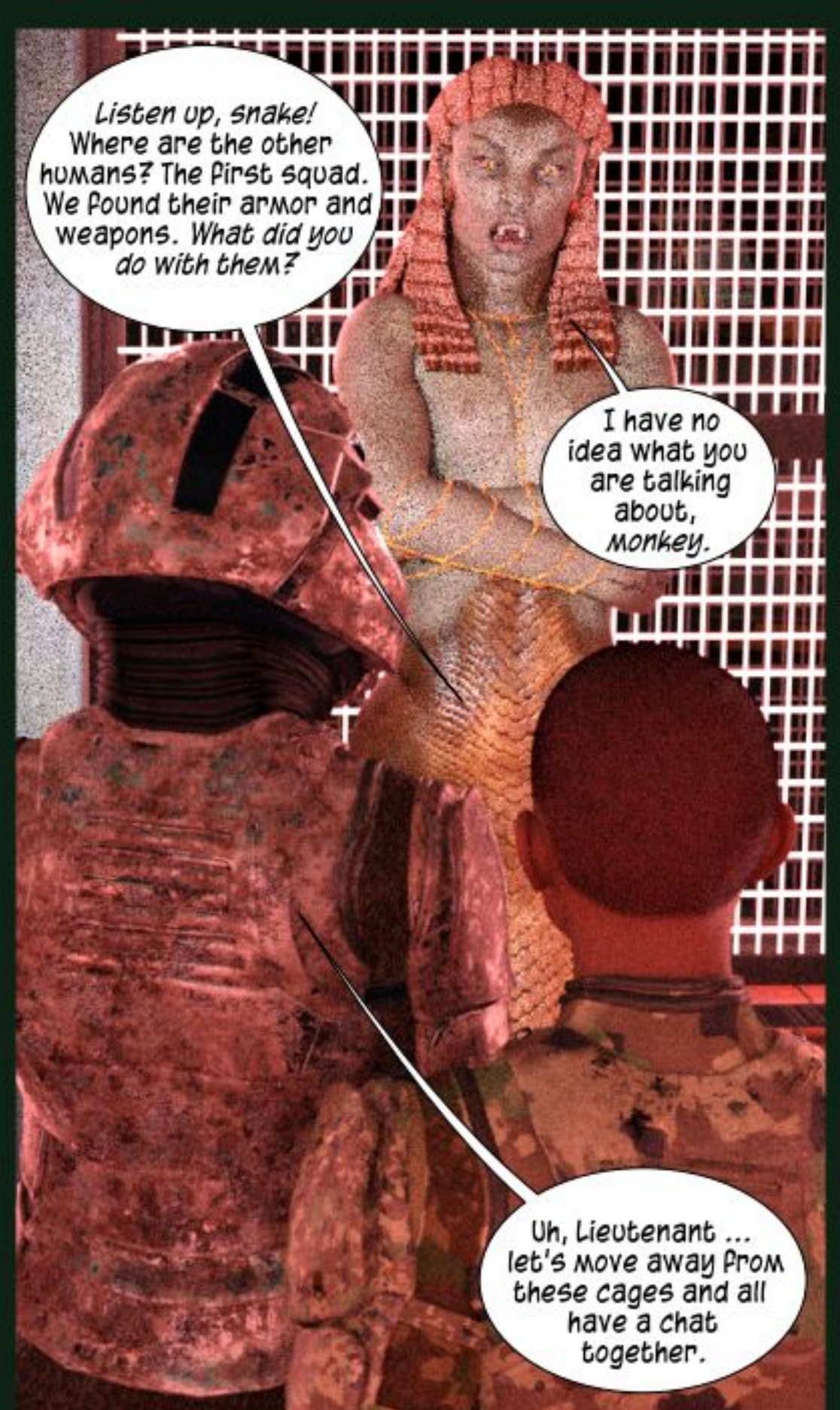
I will also accept Pergati.

We have nothing to say to you. You think to help them ... What can you do? You will be attacked when you leave the planet.

You should never have become involved. But you humans ...

I'm not sure what you think is going on here, but it's not--

\* WHAT RANDA AND THE OTHER HUMANS ARE SPEAKING.



Listen up, snake! Where are the other humans? The first squad. We found their armor and weapons. What did you do with them?

I have no idea what you are talking about, Monkey.

Uh, Lieutenant ... let's move away from these cages and all have a chat together.



Sorry to bring you so close to the Mine, but ahpesh have really good hearing.

This is a mine?

Is or was. There's old mining equipment everywhere. Those rusty things Stheck's standing between are beandrills.

Lieutenant, you can't get much from ahpesh even when they're friendly. Doesn't matter. We know the ahpesh got to the squad. I don't think they would have killed them. Why capture them, bring them here, just to kill them?

Either the squad escaped--and they could be anywhere-- or they're down in the Mine. I think they're in the Mine.

I don't know if you've realized, but these ahpesh are behaving weirdly. They're assholes, but they're not usually belligerent like this. I think there's something down in that Mine they want to attack -- maybe eliminate. They think we're here as reinforcements for whoever or whatever's down there.



The other strange thing is: where are the Pumwah? The ahpesh don't do anything without their labor force. They hate to lift a finger themselves.

Maybe there are Pumwah in the Mine. I hear of cases a lot lately of Pumwah deciding they don't want to put up with their working conditions any more ...

I do know the ahpesh wouldn't bring Pumwah on a mission if it was Pumwah they were planning to fight.



OK, so what? Why do we care who the snakes are hazzed about? You think our people are down there? That's all we need. We go down, get them out, and go home.

That's probably a bad idea.

Hey, lady, here's a burst: you're not my squad leader. I don't have to give a shit what you think is a bad idea.

OK, Prager, this is your squad leader speaking.

It's a fucking bad idea.

I think she's right about what they want, so why are they just sitting here? If they thought they had enough strength to storm in, they'd have done it already. They've probably tried and gotten their asses kicked.



Though that makes our next move interesting ...

We have a lot of firepower, especially with Stheck. Fight our way in slowly?

I'd like to propose a different idea.

Mines usually have some other way in. An airshaft somewhere uphill from here, if nothing else. If we can get a small team in from behind, we can at least find out what we'd be running into if we went in the front.

I don't think we lose anything by trying that first, anyway.

That sounds like you're volunteering.

Sure, why not? This job's gone so far off course already ...

You're the one who wanted to come! All right, who else are you taking?



Stheck and Treth.

If they're willing.

Treth? Who's--

Oh.

You sure that's a good idea? I mean, uh, look at her ...

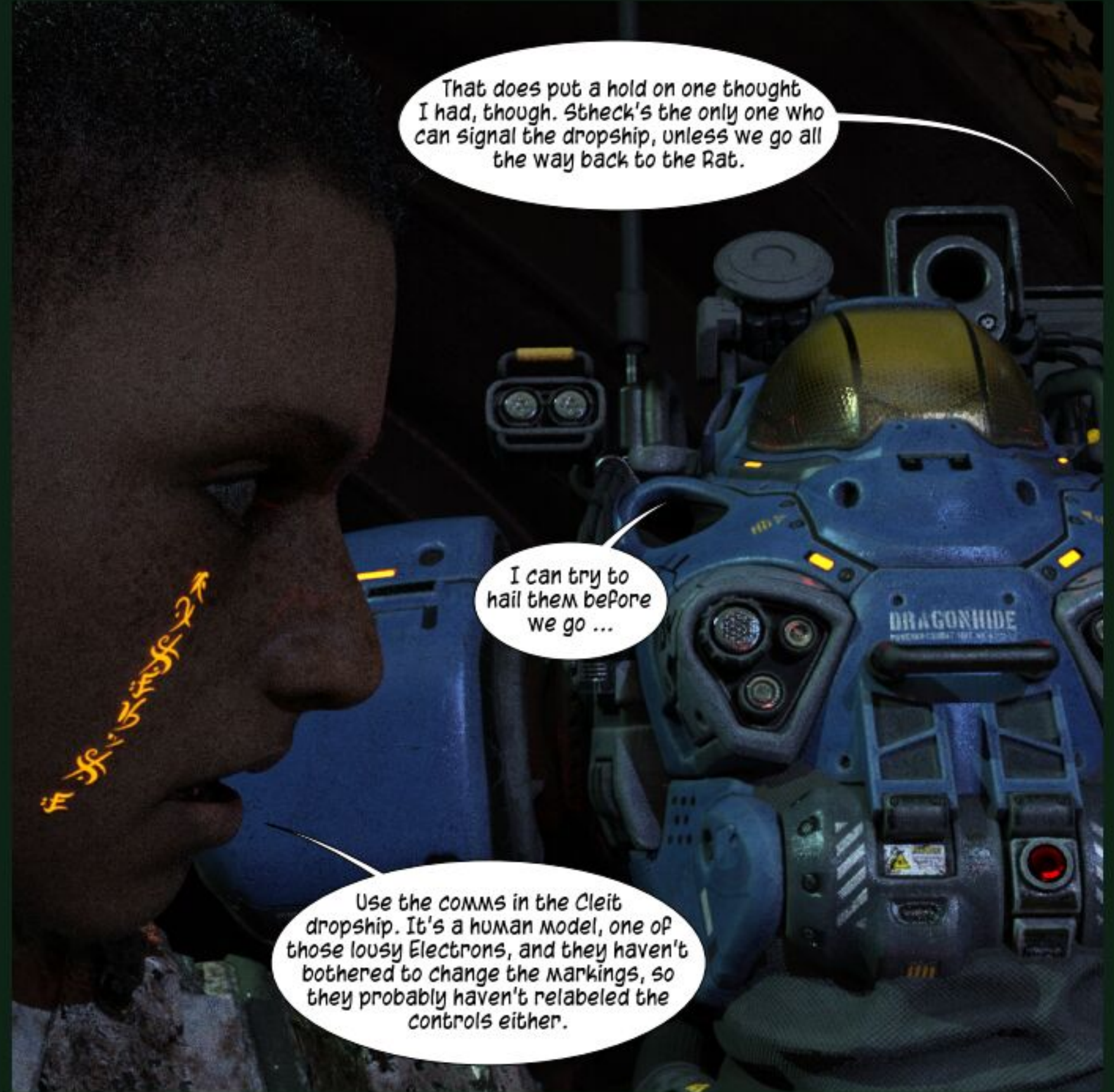
I saw her hunt down two deer, in almost no light, with a spear. In under an hour.

Also, those creatures that attacked us? They're called bulans and she tames them. She's using one as a vehicle.

Besides, I know I can work with her. No offense, but some of your squad, I'd have to murder after ten minutes out.

I have no idea who you mean.

All right, carry on.



That does put a hold on one thought I had, though. Stheck's the only one who can signal the dropship, unless we go all the way back to the Rat.

I can try to hail them before we go ...

Use the comms in the Cleit dropship. It's a human model, one of those lousy Electrons, and they haven't bothered to change the markings, so they probably haven't relabeled the controls either.



I thought this might be what you had in mind. Airshaft, my ass.

There's probably an airshaft too. But why climb a mountain and then rappel down? This cave has wind blowing out of it. It connects to something.

Do I really need to use this strange gun?

You really do. I know you prefer physical combat, but that's a big mistake with Pmwah. They'll crush you.

These neural guns were designed by the appesh to use on Pmwah. They hurt. They'll knock one out, if you can hit them for more than a few seconds. Not much else does, except when they run into a wall hard enough.



At least you got a neural gun.

Your finger is too big to fit into the trigger guard.

You're the only one of us who can tangle with a Pmwah by brute force and expect to walk away from it. Use your body. Toss them around if you have to.

But don't use your guns unless you absolutely have to, Steck. I'm thinking the Pmwah aren't really the problem here, and I don't want to kill or seriously hurt any of them unless I learn different.



Look at that. I guess we won't have to rappel ...

No. Turn off your big lights, would you?



I hear movement, but I don't see anybody. I think we can advance a little.



Oh ... look at these weird plants! Set out in beds ... so they're growing them on purpose ...

All over the place, too. Not enough of them to be for air cleaning, though. And too many to be just for the hell of it.

Now where have I ...



Get away from them! Don't breathe near them if you can avoid it.

I remember where I've seen them. That's Pynchon's Pungus.

Randa, you and I need to switch to our closed air. And we need to find something for her.

Am I going to die?

No, it's a slow buildup. You'll be fine if you don't stay down here too long. But the less you get, the better.

Why would anybody grow something like that?

To refine for bioweapons is my guess. Right, Steck?

Which of course is completely--



Randa!

さぐと さぐと

AAAACK!!



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It worked!

'Course it worked. Come on, run! Every Pmwah in this mine heard her squealing.

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IT WAS DAWN WHEN WE ALL CAME OUT. I THINK LT. CORTIGA WAS IMPRESSED.



Well, look at this.



Ensign Kyle.  
I'm Fine.  
Sorry--Boatswain Fine, I mean.  
We have all your armor and weapons. They just threw them into a storage container.  
Except one helmet. That's back at our APC.

So everybody's out, but there's still a lot of cleanup. I imagine you'll want to burn the Pungus, and McKenzie's a question ... but mostly, we have to figure out what to do about the Pumwah. If the ahpesh just hunt them down--and they're angry enough to try to--there was no point in their leaving the mine.

Prager.  
Atla.



I tried out an idea on Lieutenant Foss on the way up. We both think it'll work, if we can sell it. But you're in command and I don't want to step on your toes ...

Am I in command? Seems like you've been running the show.

... Nah, I'm just giving you grief. Your ideas have done well so far. What do you have in mind?

WE ALL TOOK A MOMENT TO REGROUP. SOME OF US NEEDED FOOD, SOME OF US NEEDED A SHOWER. BADLY. THEN WE HAD SEVERAL HOURS OF PREPARATION TO DO BEFORE WE WERE READY TO DEAL WITH THE AHPESH.



THERE WERE ALL KINDS OF AFFAIRS TO SETTLE.

Randa ... I need your help with something.

Sure, Treth. What's wrong?



What is this? Smoke? What did you do?

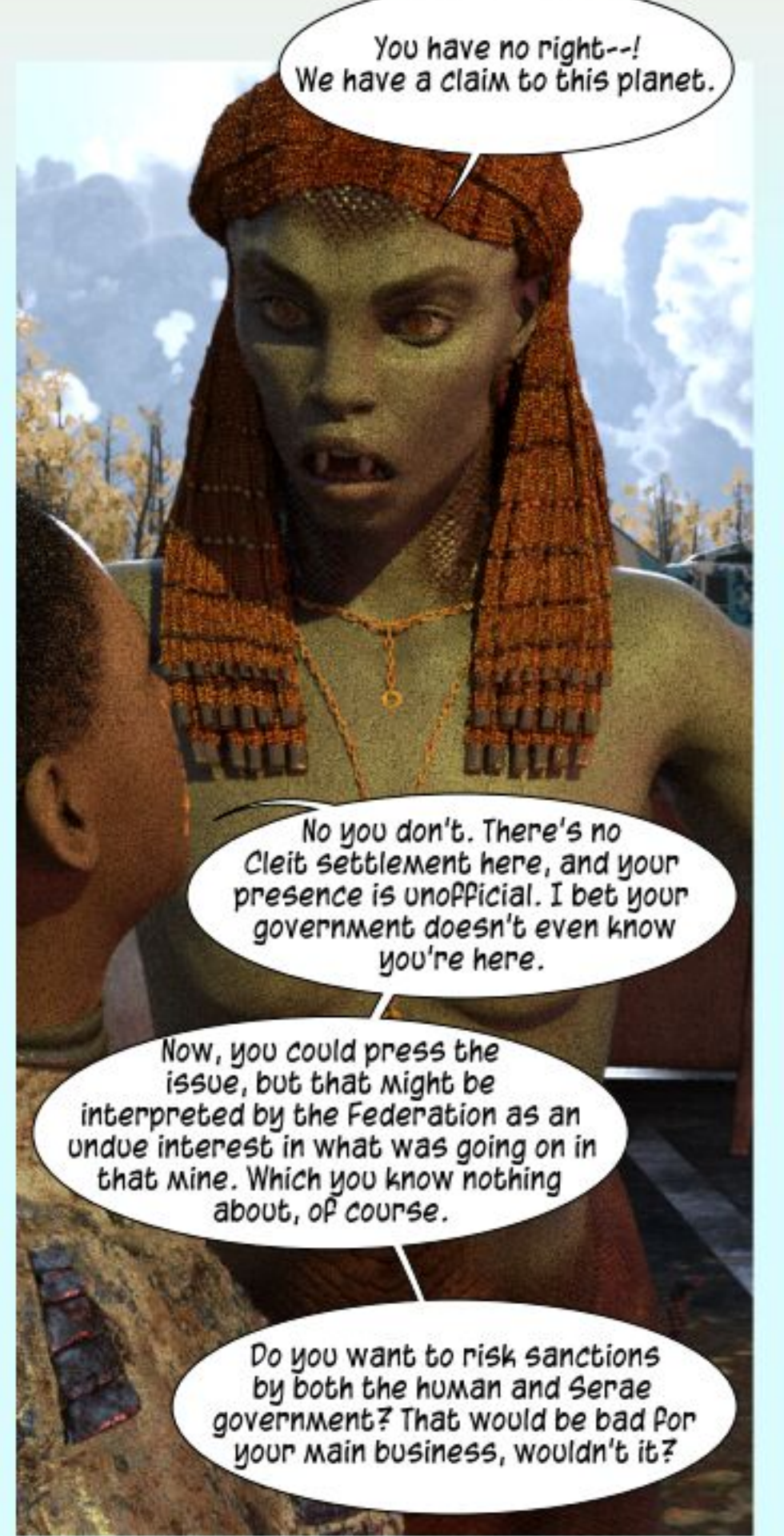
Well, you see, we found someone had been growing some illegal plants in that abandoned mine. In keeping with Federation policy, we had to destroy them.

We also found a lot of Pumwah who requested asylum. We've transported them off-planet and we'll be taking them elsewhere.

I see. You take everything. And now you jail us or kill us.

Oh, no, we wouldn't do that. We're going to let you go. On one condition.

Get off this planet right now. Go back to your ship, leave this system, and don't come back.



You have no right--! We have a claim to this planet.

No you don't. There's no Cleit settlement here, and your presence is unofficial. I bet your government doesn't even know you're here.

Now, you could press the issue, but that might be interpreted by the Federation as an undue interest in what was going on in that mine. Which you know nothing about, of course.

Do you want to risk sanctions by both the human and Serae government? That would be bad for your main business, wouldn't it?



You're a good liar.

Not really. Only if I have my story ready in advance.

But I also knew they wouldn't look closely for holes.



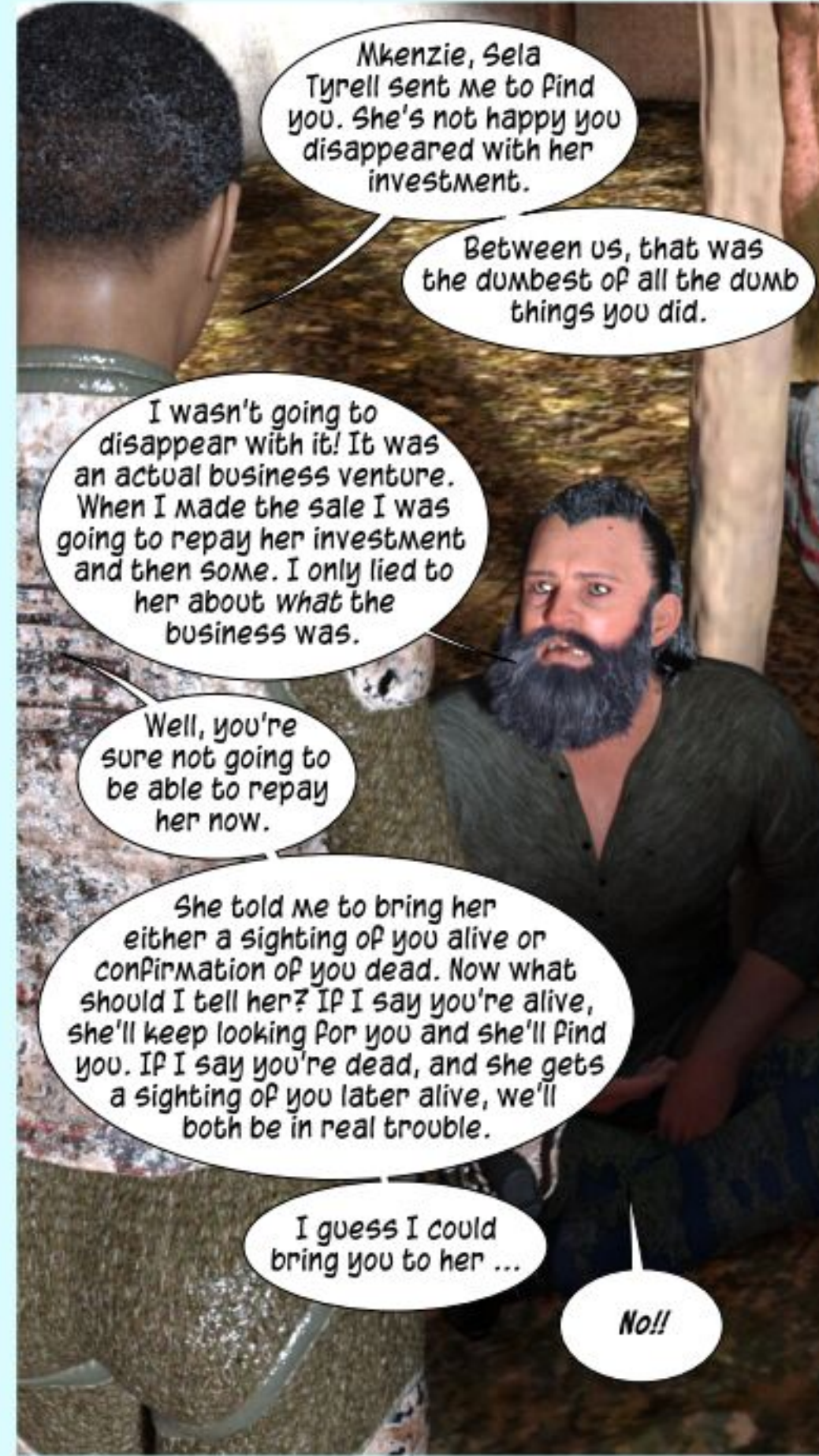
They know we can beat them in a fight, and there's nothing for them here now, so they're taking their loss ... and not bothering to ask whether we could actually evac twenty Pumwah, or whether the Federation actually cares.

The Pumwah will do fine living on the planet, especially since we let them strip the camp for supplies. No one will find them.

And that leaves only one loose end to clean up.

On behalf of the Navy, I declare him your problem.

Don't take too long, we all want to get out of here.



Mckenzie, Sela Tyrell sent me to find you. She's not happy you disappeared with her investment.

Between us, that was the dumbest of all the dumb things you did.

I wasn't going to disappear with it! It was an actual business venture. When I made the sale I was going to repay her investment and then some. I only lied to her about what the business was.

Well, you're sure not going to be able to repay her now.

She told me to bring her either a sighting of you alive or confirmation of you dead. Now what should I tell her? If I say you're alive, she'll keep looking for you and she'll find you. If I say you're dead, and she gets a sighting of you later alive, we'll both be in real trouble.

I guess I could bring you to her ...

No!!



Oh, that's not a bad idea.

Treth has a suggestion.



You must be kidding.

Look, you agree it's not safe for you to leave this planet for a long time, right? Maybe ever. You want to try surviving in the wild? It's rough out there.

Leelee, this man's going to take you back to Ashi. I want you to be nice to him, OK? He's all right, I said so.

Be good for Ashi... I'll miss you.

What about her?

She's made other arrangements.



But ...

Just tell her to go to the farm. She knows what that means and she knows where it is. Keep reminding her. She gets distracted.

It'll take you four days. Don't travel after dark. You should probably sleep up here in the carriage, it's safer.

I guess you can't hunt, huh? The big crate has dried meat. Give her one piece in the morning, one in the middle of the day, and one when you stop at night. You can eat it too, but you'll need to cut it pretty small. I left you my axe. There's water in the big bottle thing.

When you get there, look for Ashi. She'll take care of Leelee. Tell her ...

... tell her I'm sorry I didn't want to stay, and it's not her fault.

BY THE TIME WE ALL RETURNED TO THE CARRIER, THE CLEIT HAD LEFT THE SYSTEM. I ADMIT I HADN'T BEEN SURE UNTIL THEN THEY'D BOUGHT THE STORY.



Ensign Stcheck.

It was a pleasure and a privilege.

Uh ... likewise.

... Thank you.



We're going to punch out in fifteen minutes. Everything in order?

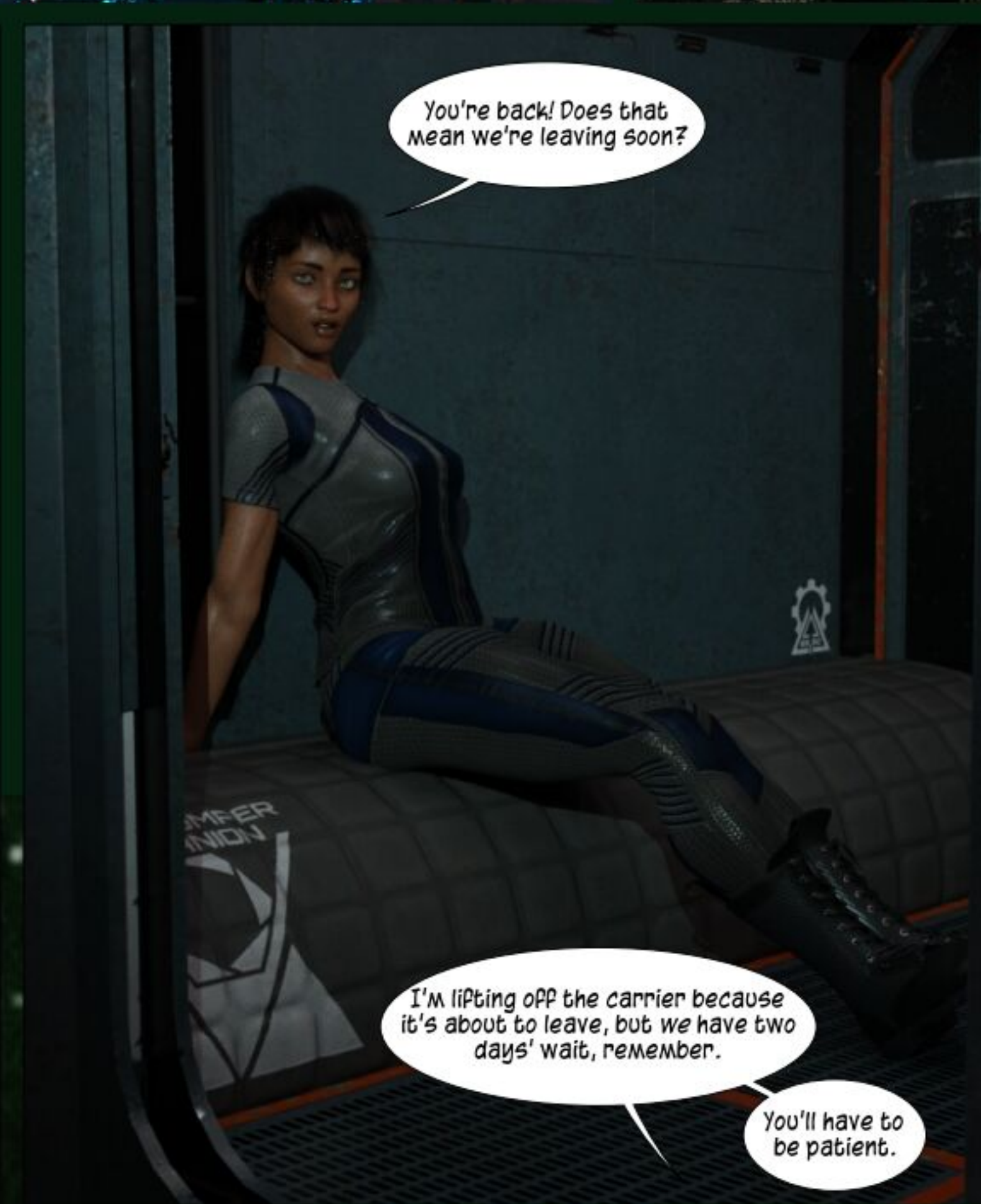
Yes, sir. I was just on my way back to the cradle. We'll be off in five.

The quartermaster wouldn't let me reimburse, even though I'd told them I was buying, not borrowing ...

A couple of sets of old Patigues and a work suit that's been patched six times. We can spare it. It's the least we can do.

You're sure you don't want to punch with us?

I've got a contract. If the Perry shows up and I'm not here to be on it, he'll be worried. Thank you, though.



You're back! Does that mean we're leaving soon?

I'm lifting off the carrier because it's about to leave, but we have two days' wait, remember.

You'll have to be patient.



I know ... I'm just so excited to be seeing somewhere else ...

Most people, I think, if they were basically entering civilization for the first time, would be a little bit nervous about it.



I'm too excited to be nervous!

Though ... I don't really know how I'm going to get started. There are all kinds of things I'll need to learn, right?

All kinds of things.

But I'm taking you to a friend who can help you out with all that. She'll get you started. Don't worry.

So now we just have to figure out what to do while we wait?

I showed you how to watch movies ...

Yes ... but I think something else would be more fun.

I don't think we can do that for two days.

... We could try.

END