

MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A QUITCLAIM

I LOVE MY WORK, BUT I LOVE SOME PARTS OF IT MORE THAN OTHERS, AND SOME PARTS MAKE ME WANT TO GO HIDE SOMEWHERE FOR A LONG TIME.
IDEALLY SOMEWHERE WITH A POOL.



THE PLANET I WAS HIDING ON WAS THE SECOND IN THE HURCH SYSTEM. HURCH IS LITERALLY ON THE BACK SIDE OF THE GALAXY. THE GALAXY IS A FLAT DISC, BUT IT MIGHT AS WELL BE A FLAT DONUT, BECAUSE NOBODY CAN LIVE OR TRAVEL THROUGH THE MIDDLE. THE STARS ARE TOO CLOSE TOGETHER THERE.

HALF OF THE DONUT IS HUMAN AND SERAE SPACE, WITH THE PERGATI WORLDS AND SO FORTH MIXED AMONG THEM. THE GRITH WORLDS ARE SPINWARD OF SERAE SPACE ... BEYOND THOSE, MOST OF THE BACK HALF IS SPARSELY SETTLED, FULL OF THE WEIRD PEOPLE LOOKING FOR REMOTE PLACES TO HIDE.

YEAH, LIKE ME.



If you're here to make trouble, I'm gonna warn you that I'm real mean when something interferes with my soak time.

I--ah-- I'm not here to make trouble.

I'm here to offer you a job.

That might be worse.

All right, what is it?



My name's Brenn Laq.

Yeah. Seen you around town. You run the registry.

Among other things. I'm also the local rep for Stellar Haven. Have you heard of them?

Sure. Like New Horizons, but they start up settlements for ... uh ... let's say "Pringe groups." People who want a refuge from other people where they can do their thing.

That was very diplomatic.

The reason they need a local rep is because one of their settlements is on Hurch 3.

Let me guess: you've lost contact with them.

No ... they were fine as of the last supply run a week ago.



But after what happened yesterday ...

What happened yesterday?

You don't know? How'd you miss it? The whole town was--

I haven't been in town all week.

I've barely left this pool all week.

The Blue Sky idiots raided. Out of nowhere. Tried to loot a couple of businesses.

How bad was the damage?

Not bad. Nobody was killed. We have a pretty good militia and a couple of heavy defensive guns. Haven't ever fired them, but the idiots didn't know that.



But if they came here, they could go next door too, y'know ... and those settlers don't have anything. I'm not sure they even have personal weapons.

Has there been a lot of Blue Sky activity in this system?

No. This was the first time, as far as I know. Of course I've only been here six years ...

Anyway, word is you're good with problems.

Yes and no. I could get there, find nothing wrong, and leave ... and then Blue Sky comes in and trashes the place the next day. Can't fix everything.

But I'll go take a look. To warn them, if nothing else.

STELLAR HAVEN DOESN'T HAVE THE KIND OF MONEY NEW HORIZONS DOES. THERE WERE A FEW PREFABS, BUT NOT ENOUGH; THE REST OF THE FACILITIES WERE COBBLED FROM CARGO CONTAINERS AND WHATEVER JUNK THEY COULD GET.



NO ONE RESPONDED TO HAILS. THAT WASN'T NECESSARILY BAD; THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE HAD THE GEAR.

BUT IT MEANT I HAD NO IDEA WHAT I WAS WALKING INTO. YOU CAN'T TRUST QUIET.

Help!

Hey! We got incoming over here!

AAAA!

THE PLAIN SIGHT

YOU SEE? THAT'S WHAT I MEAN.

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



Oh, no, you don't.

ugh!



Yeow!

Too many of them for me to stand out in the open. Need to get somewhere I can pick them off one by one.



This should do.



AAA!

Don't shoot me! I'm not one of them!



Keep your voice down.

And move away from that tank. I don't know what's in it. It could blow up if they hit it.

You're-- you're not--

No, I'm not one of those jakazes. I was sent to see how the settlement was doing.

Not very well.

Yeah. They're shooting to kill. Why are they trying to wipe out this place?

I don't know if I can get them all ...

... something's coming?



Those have got to be Grith ships!

And they're going after the Blue Sky clowns ...

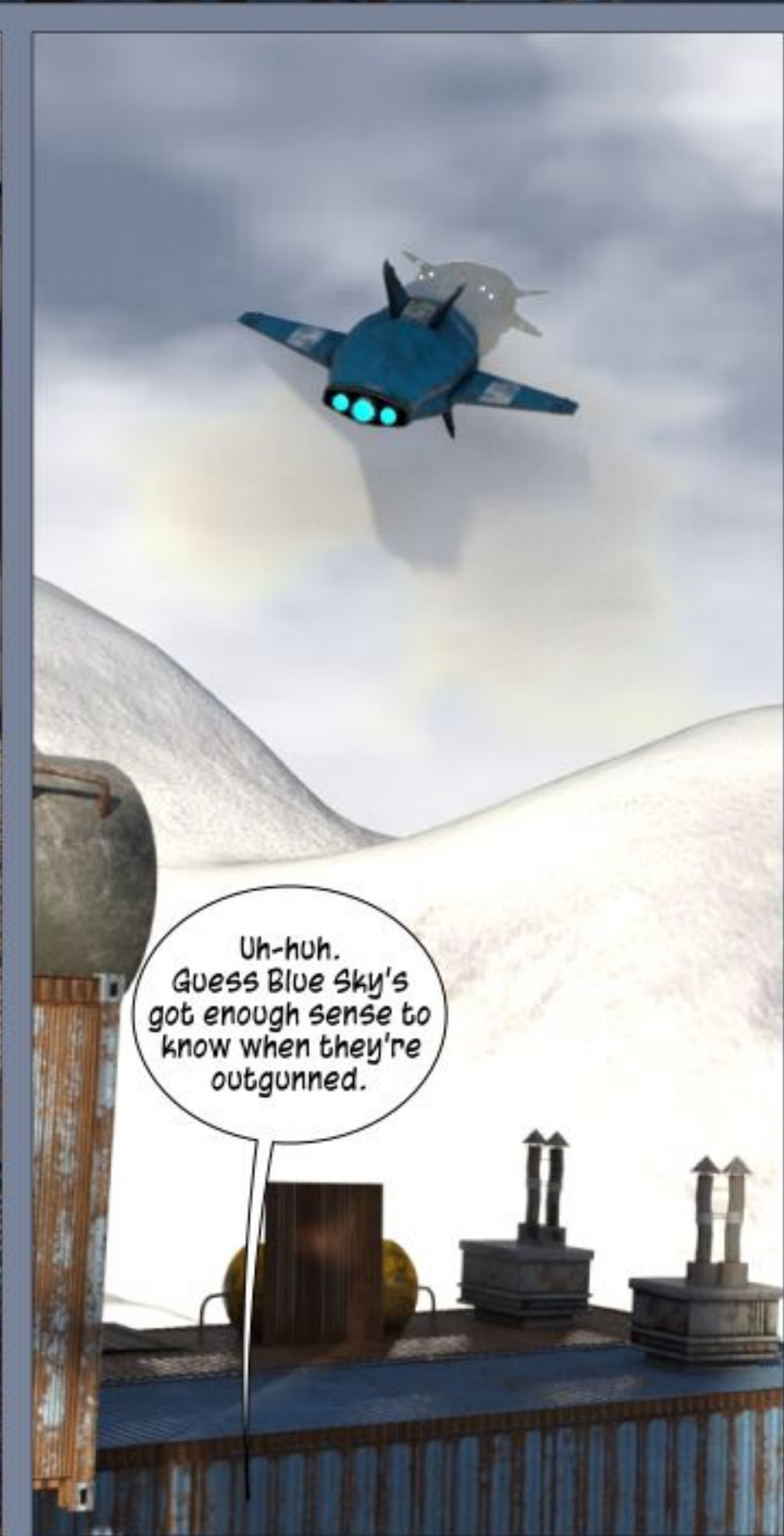


So we're saved?

I wouldn't trust the Grith that far.

They're not shooting to stun either.

I hope they don't try to blow up my ship.



Uh-huh. Guess Blue Sky's got enough sense to know when they're outgunned.

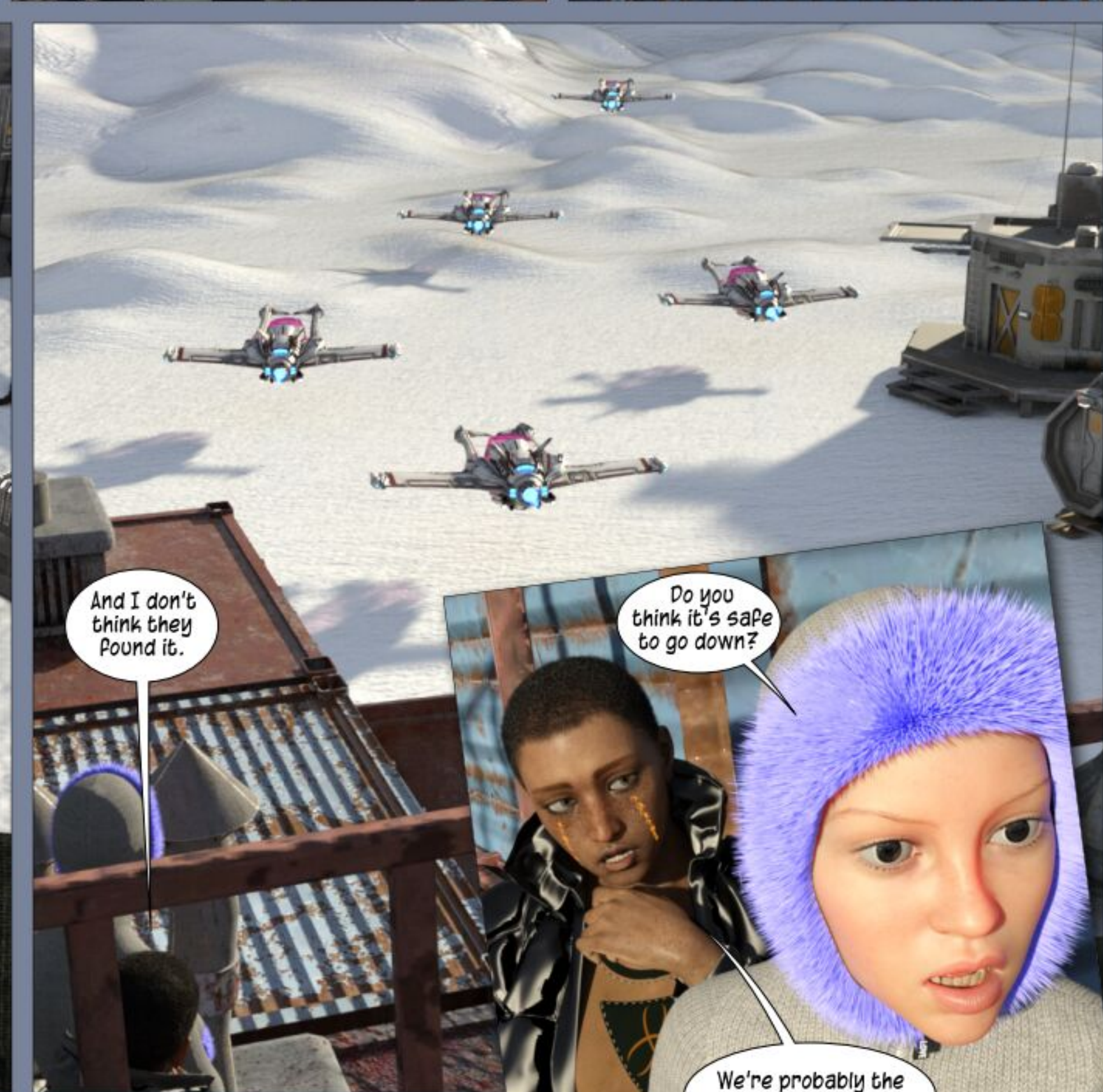


They're ... checking the bodies ...?

Not so close to the edge. They might see you.

Only the settlers. They're not bothering with Blue Sky.

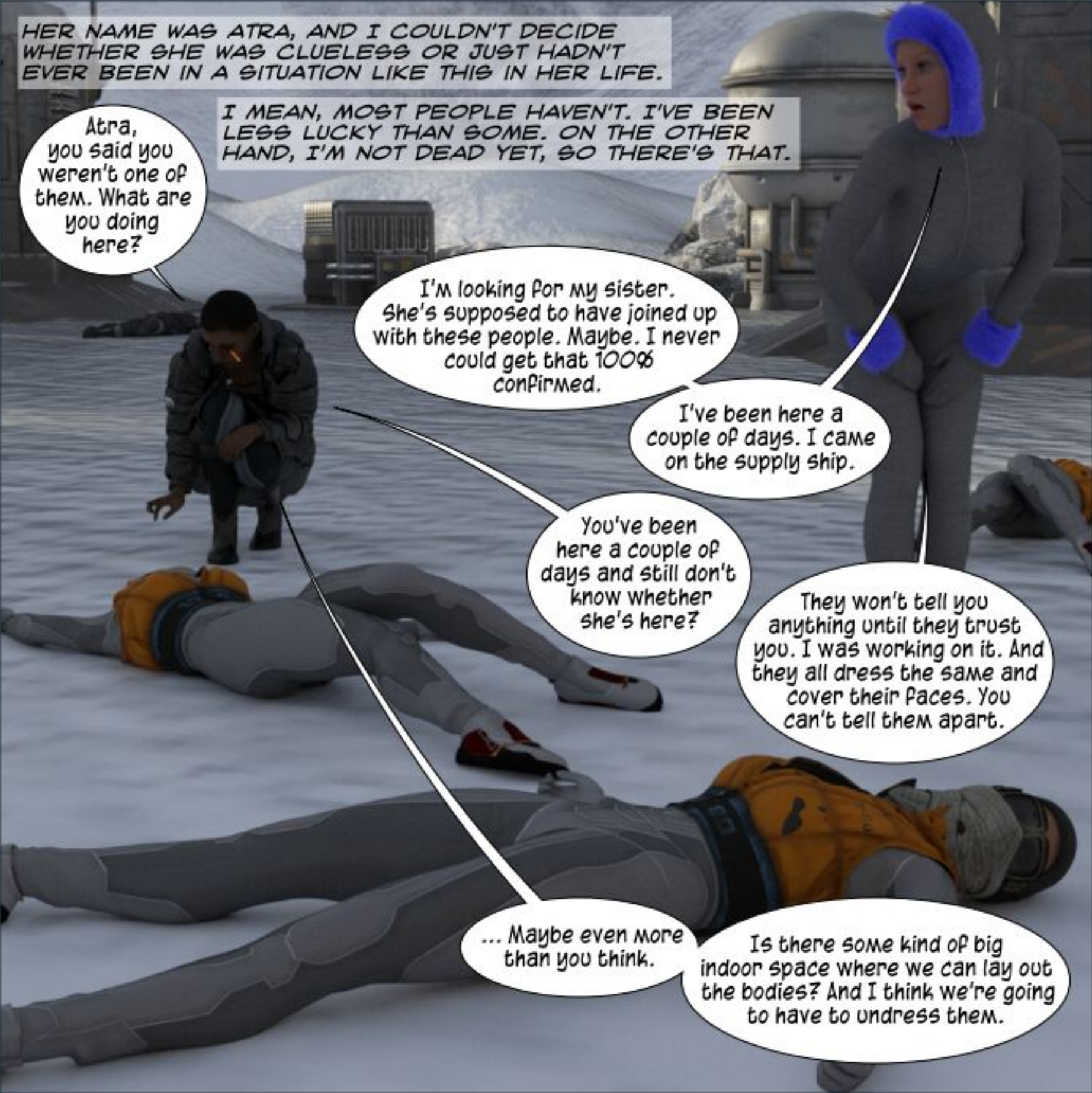
They're looking for something.



And I don't think they found it.

Do you think it's safe to go down?

We're probably the only ones alive, so yes.



HER NAME WAS ATRA, AND I COULDN'T DECIDE WHETHER SHE WAS CLUELESS OR JUST HADN'T EVER BEEN IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS IN HER LIFE.

Atra, you said you weren't one of them. What are you doing here?

I MEAN, MOST PEOPLE HAVEN'T. I'VE BEEN LESS LUCKY THAN SOME. ON THE OTHER HAND, I'M NOT DEAD YET, SO THERE'S THAT.

I'm looking for my sister. She's supposed to have joined up with these people. Maybe. I never could get that 100% confirmed.

I've been here a couple of days. I came on the supply ship.

You've been here a couple of days and still don't know whether she's here?

They won't tell you anything until they trust you. I was working on it. And they all dress the same and cover their faces. You can't tell them apart.

... Maybe even more than you think.

Is there some kind of big indoor space where we can lay out the bodies? And I think we're going to have to undress them.



That's what I thought, but I wasn't sure I should believe it.

They can't be clones, can they?

Not with different skin colors. And anyway, cloning's an expensive hobby for rich people.

They've been altered to look alike. Everything but the genitals.

But why?

Hell, I was hoping you'd know.



Hard to ID them ... hope someone kept records somewhere ...

Sorry we can't tell if any of them are your sister.

... oh ... yes ...

Though ... I hate to say it, but you hope she wasn't. No survivors ...

That's not true, though! They took two of them!

The Blue Sky people, I mean. I saw them getting dragged onto their ship ...

HMM!

Actually ... do you mind helping me bring the Blue Sky bodies in here too? I want to check something.



Do they wear these masks just to look more scary?

More likely to hide their faces. Blue Sky aren't popular.

And in this case, to hide that they aren't really Blue Sky.

They're not? Who are they?

I was already suspicious. Blue Sky aren't even really an organization. They're a bunch of pirates scraping by who sort of agreed to cooperate.

I've never seen two of them have matching equipment, let alone in condition this good. This gear never saw action before today.

And the M.O. is wrong. Blue Sky aren't killers; they'll shoot you if you get in their way, sure, but they're interested in looting. They don't come to places where there's nothing to steal and murder everybody.



She's too clean. Blue Sky live on their ships. No one who goes months with just ship facilities is this clean.

She's got a military haircut, a military body, and a military tattoo. I might even have a good guess which military.

This was a covert op. They were counting on not many people ever having been around Blue Sky enough to know what they look and smell like.

But you have?

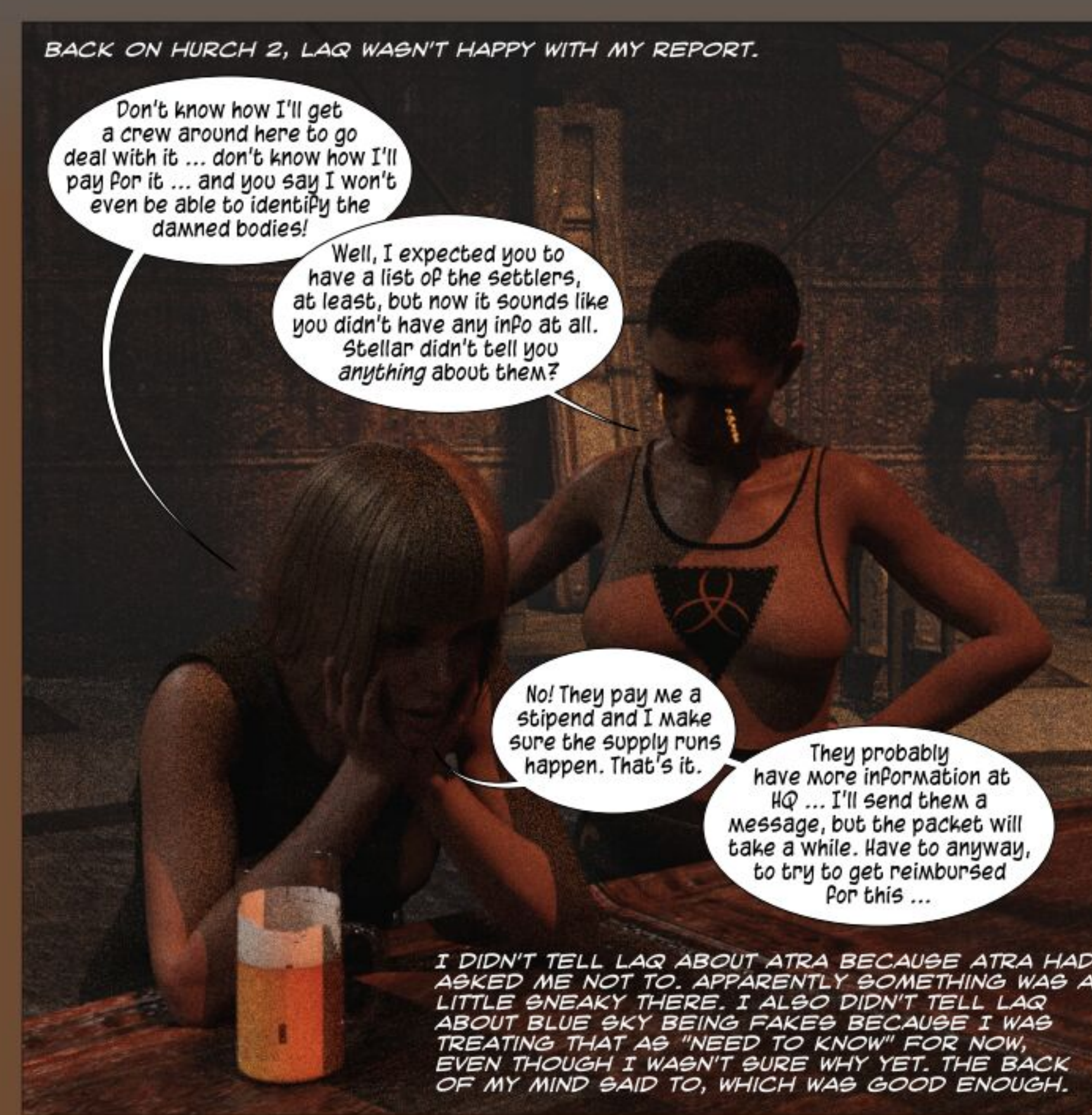
Unfortunately.



All this is going to be Laq's problem. I'm glad we found this cold storage. It'll be a little less unpleasant for whoever has to come clean up.

Uh ... about that ... I really don't want to wait here by myself until the next ship ...

Can't blame you. Get your things. I'll take you to Hurch 2.



BACK ON HURCH 2, LAQ WASN'T HAPPY WITH MY REPORT.

Don't know how I'll get a crew around here to go deal with it ... don't know how I'll pay for it ... and you say I won't even be able to identify the damned bodies!

Well, I expected you to have a list of the settlers, at least, but now it sounds like you didn't have any info at all. Stellar didn't tell you anything about them?

No! They pay me a stipend and I make sure the supply runs happen. That's it.

They probably have more information at HQ ... I'll send them a message, but the packet will take a while. Have to anyway, to try to get reimbursed for this ...

I DIDN'T TELL LAQ ABOUT ATRA BECAUSE ATRA HAD ASKED ME NOT TO. APPARENTLY SOMETHING WAS A LITTLE SNEAKY THERE. I ALSO DIDN'T TELL LAQ ABOUT BLUE SKY BEING FAKES BECAUSE I WAS TREATING THAT AS "NEED TO KNOW" FOR NOW, EVEN THOUGH I WASN'T SURE WHY YET. THE BACK OF MY MIND SAID TO, WHICH WAS GOOD ENOUGH.



THOUGH THAT DID MAKE THIS NEXT PART A TRICKY APPROACH.

Laq, those raiders didn't go there for random trouble and looting. It wasn't like their raid here. They were there for a reason, and they killed the whole settlement for whatever it was.

How many people even knew the settlement existed?

Here? Maybe ten people, in the port--the supply ship leaves from here, so they have to know where it's going and why.

I don't talk about it. To try to avoid something like this happening. Not even any personal weapons ...!

I have no idea how many people know back at Stellar HQ--

IT DIDN'T MATTER WHETHER I BELIEVED HER. IT WAS CLEAR THAT WORD COULD HAVE GOTTEN OUT A DOZEN WAYS. HERE, OR ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GALAXY ... BUT WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN WORTH CHASING THAT FAR?

SOMEONE A LOT NEARER SEEMED LIKE A BETTER BET. AND I HAD SOMETHING TO CHASE. THE QUESTION WAS WHETHER I SHOULD. THIS WAS NOT MY TROUBLE TO SHOOT.

But if I don't, I'm not going to be able to shake it out of my head.

OK. One more soak and a good night's sleep, then off to the races in the morning.

-- sigh --
Evening, Atra.

How'd you know it was me? You didn't look ...

Trade secret.
Come on over. 'Scuse my not getting up.

What's on your mind?

You said you had a good guess where those Pake Blue Sky people really came from. Does that mean you're going to go investigate?

Suppose so. My rental ends tomorrow anyway.

Is there any way I could convince you to take me with you?

You know it's probably not going to lead anywhere you want.

Well, why are you looking?

Look, beyond all of that ... I don't have any other way off this planet. I'm broke. I spent all of my money getting here and bribing the supply ship to take me.

I didn't make money on this. I charged Laq my costs only. I could have made a quitclaim arrangement on the settlement, but given the situation, I chose not to.

I don't see anything in it in the future, either. This whole thing is a loss for me.

Even if your sister was one of the two they took, the odds we can find where they went aren't great.

And if you're looking for vengeance, that's not going to work out too well either.

Because I want to find out what really happened, I guess.

Why can't that be my reason too?

So you want me to carry you ... I don't mind the trip off, I'd have to pay for the punch Perry anyway, but you can't go see my contact on Zoli with me, so I have to put you up somewhere while I do that ...

I get it. But I don't have anything else.
Could we call it a loan? I'm sure not going to be able to make any money if I'm stuck here ...

Eh ... I'd rather take you as a loss than a debt. I hate debts.

Do you have a place to sleep tonight?

Since you bring it up ... I was wondering if you wanted to ... ah ...

You don't have to try to bribe me. I already said yes.

No, it's got nothing to do with that. I just want to.

Well, in that case ...

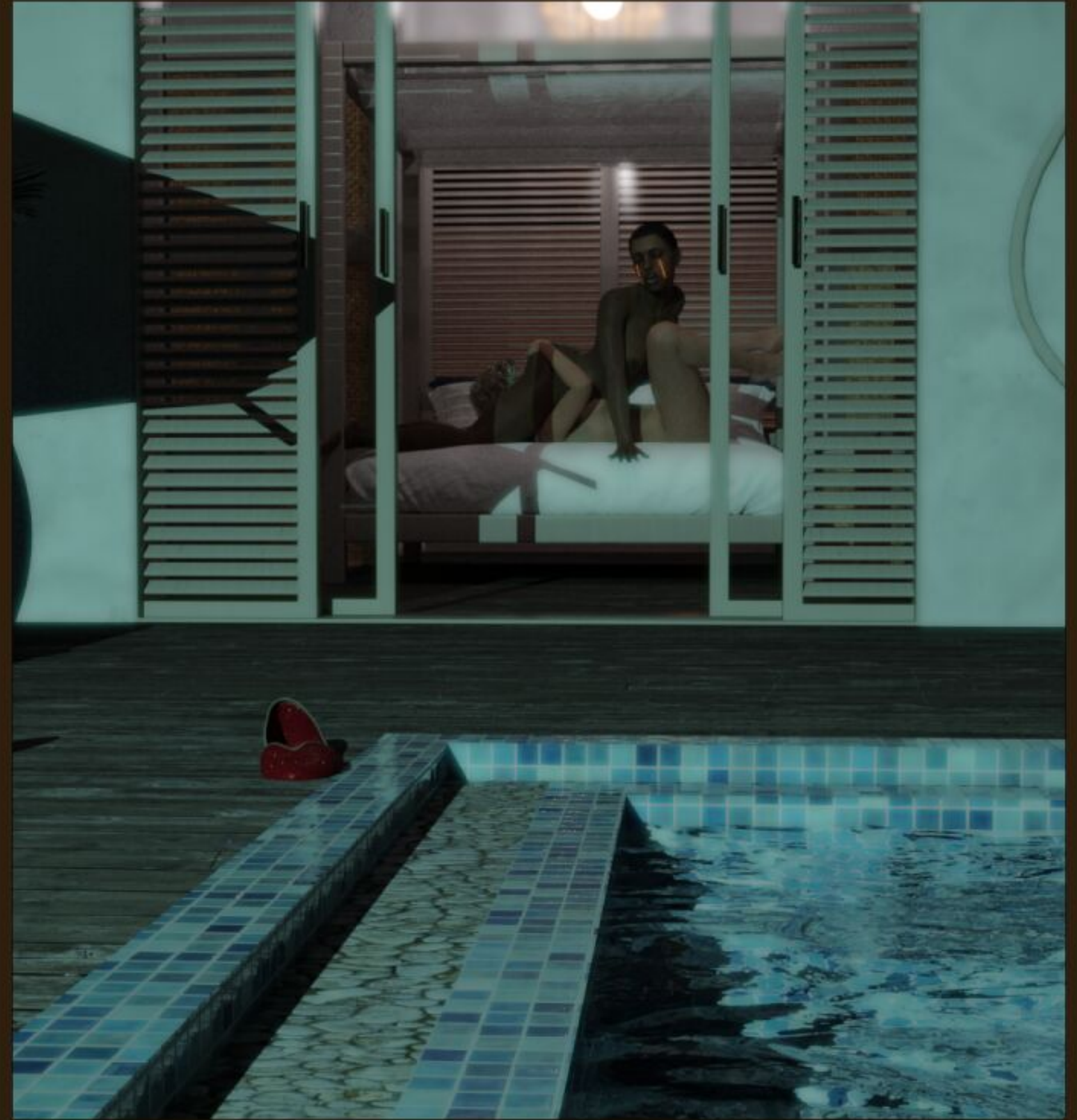
MMMM...

... I knew you'd be good ...

MMMM ... you don't want to go inside? better bed ...

Oh, this is just until I dry off.

... I think you should stay wet ...



THE ZOLI SYSTEM ONLY HAS ONE INHABITABLE PLANET, SO THEY CALL IT ZOLI TOO. ITS MAIN CITY IS CALLED ZOLI AS WELL. IT'S RUN BY THE ZOLIAN MILITARY, AND THEY'RE NOT VERY IMAGINATIVE. THEY'RE ALSO PARANOID, XENOPHOBIC (NO NONHUMANS ALLOWED ON ZOLI) AND KEEP EVERYONE ON A TIGHT LEASH. NOT MY FAVORITE PLACE.

I KNEW FRICK BUNT WHEN WE WERE BOTH IN THE NAVY. I DIDN'T LIKE HIM VERY MUCH, BUT HE SEEMED TO RESPECT ME. HE WAS THE KIND WHO RESPECTED PEOPLE HE KNEW COULD KICK HIS ASS. I WAS HOPING THAT WOULD SUFFICE.

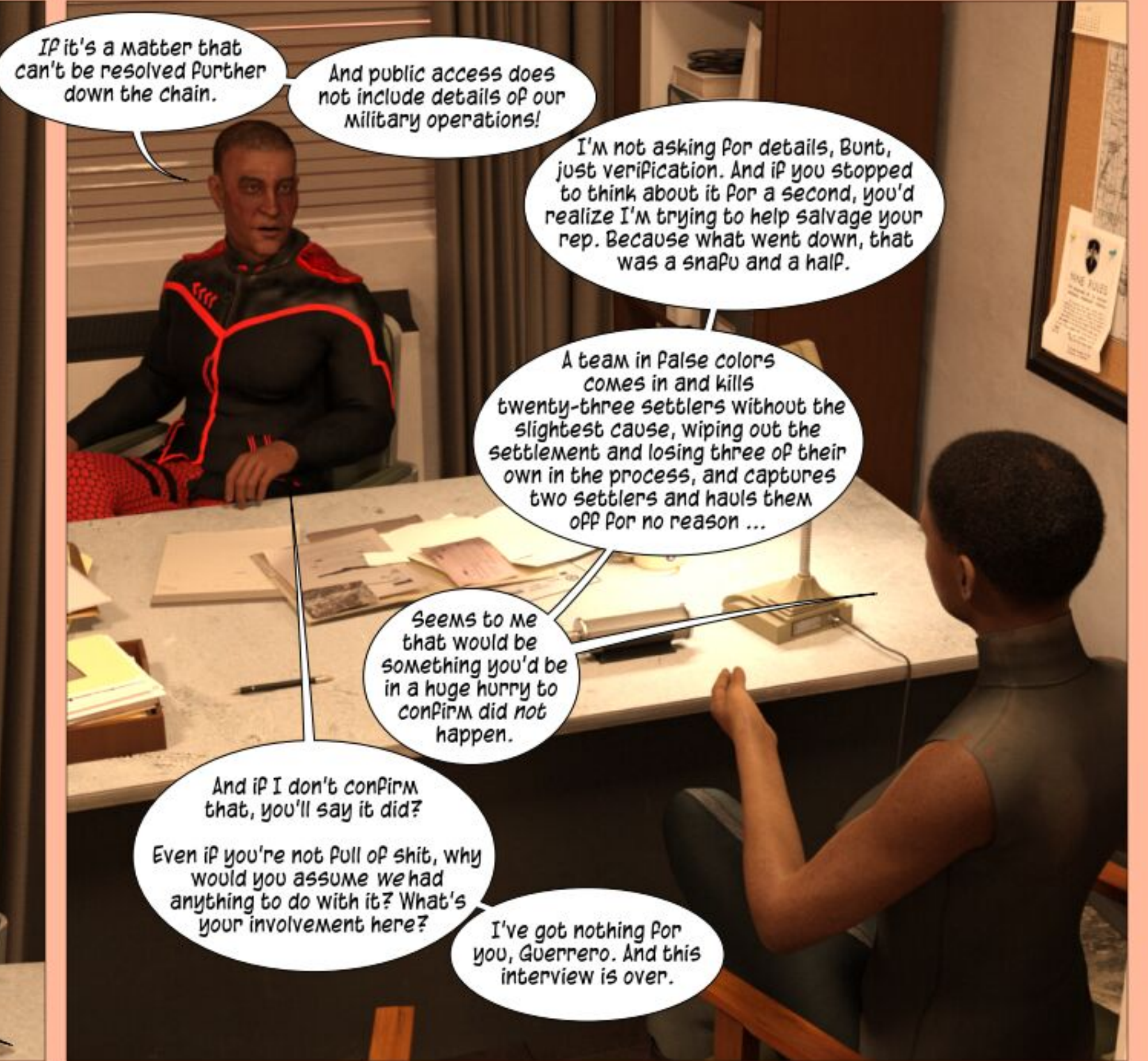


Look, Guerrero, obviously I'd love to help you out, but I'm sure you see it's completely unreasonable. In fact I'm surprised you'd even ask.

Would you storm into a Navy office and demand they tell you confidential information on no basis whatsoever?

You think the rules are different just because we're a planetary outpost?

I didn't "storm in," Bunt. It took me an hour to convince them to let me talk to you at all. You're supposed to be a public liaison ...



If it's a matter that can't be resolved further down the chain.

And public access does not include details of our military operations!

I'm not asking for details, Bunt, just verification. And if you stopped to think about it for a second, you'd realize I'm trying to help salvage your rep. Because what went down, that was a snafu and a half.

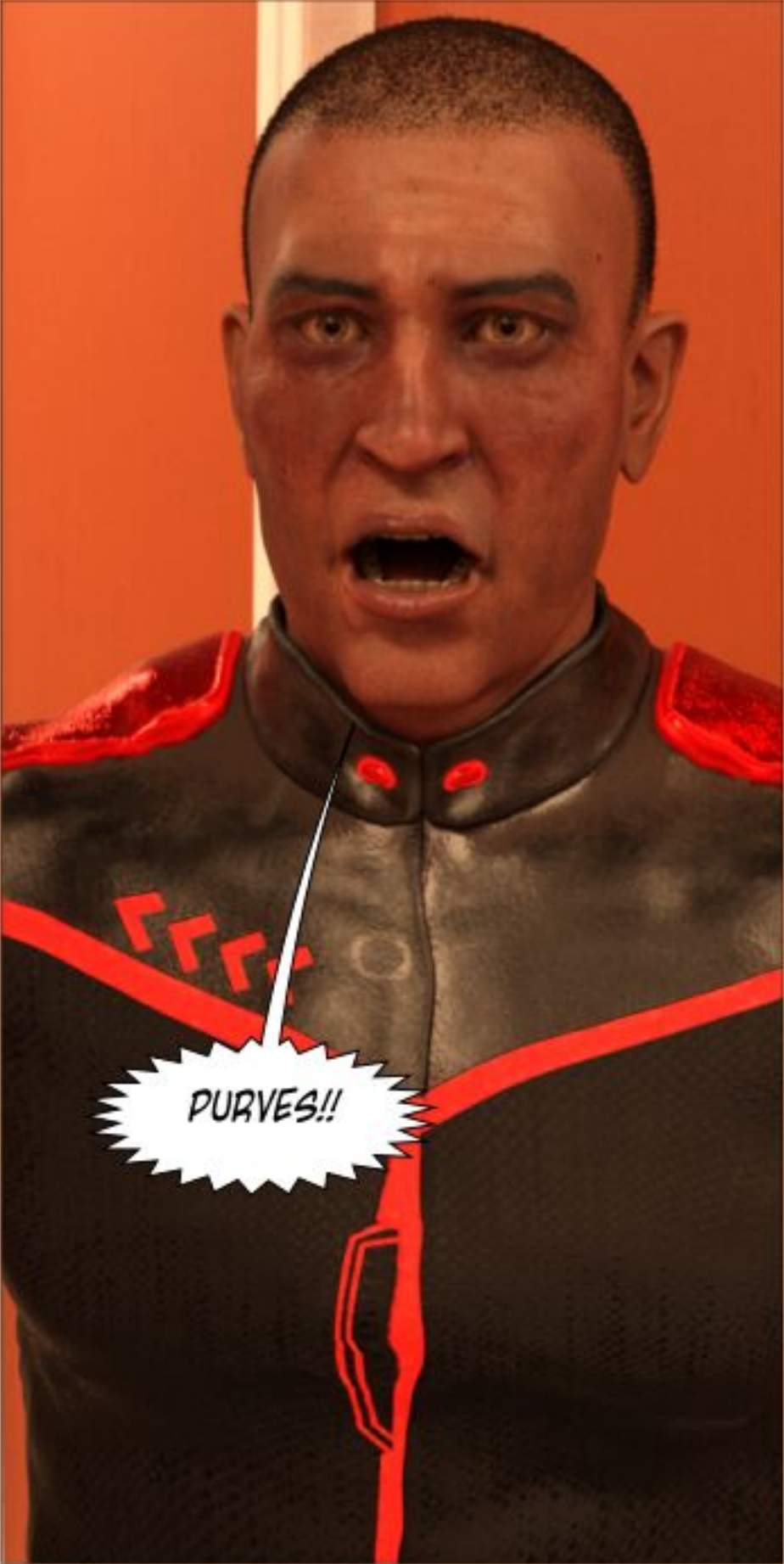
A team in false colors comes in and kills twenty-three settlers without the slightest cause, wiping out the settlement and losing three of their own in the process, and captures two settlers and hauls them off for no reason ...

Seems to me that would be something you'd be in a huge hurry to confirm did not happen.

And if I don't confirm that, you'll say it did?

Even if you're not full of shit, why would you assume we had anything to do with it? What's your involvement here?

I've got nothing for you, Guerrero. And this interview is over.



PURVES!!



You did not tell me there were that many civilian casualties. More like a slaughter, from what I've just heard. Important difference, don't you think?

I don't appreciate being blindsided.

And what's this about two captives? Why were they taken? Where were they taken?

Sir! I wasn't aware of the extent until after I briefed you ...

And you weren't in a hurry to tell me, eh? This could be a disaster! What about these captives?

I ... ah ... to the best of my knowledge, sir, that isn't true ...

Then where did Guerrero get it? All right. We know where she's staying. Find out what she knows. Immediately. Bring backup. She's dangerous.



Atra!

And I have to get out of here without being stopped, it's going to take a while ...

Fucking port registry. Military's got to know everything about everybody ...



No signs of anything. Am I too late?



You're OK!

Why wouldn't I be? How'd the interview go?



Badly.

They may have been waiting for me to get here. I need to check the area. All my weapons are locked in Bosie, but if I can get the drop on them ...

What are you talking about? Who's 'them'? Is someone after you?

Us. You'd better stay with me.



Huh.

... Are they ...?



No. But they're going to be out cold for a long time. Something zapped them hard.

C'mon. Back to the room. We've got to get our things and haul.

I think I can sneak us a berth to stay in an hour if we hurry.



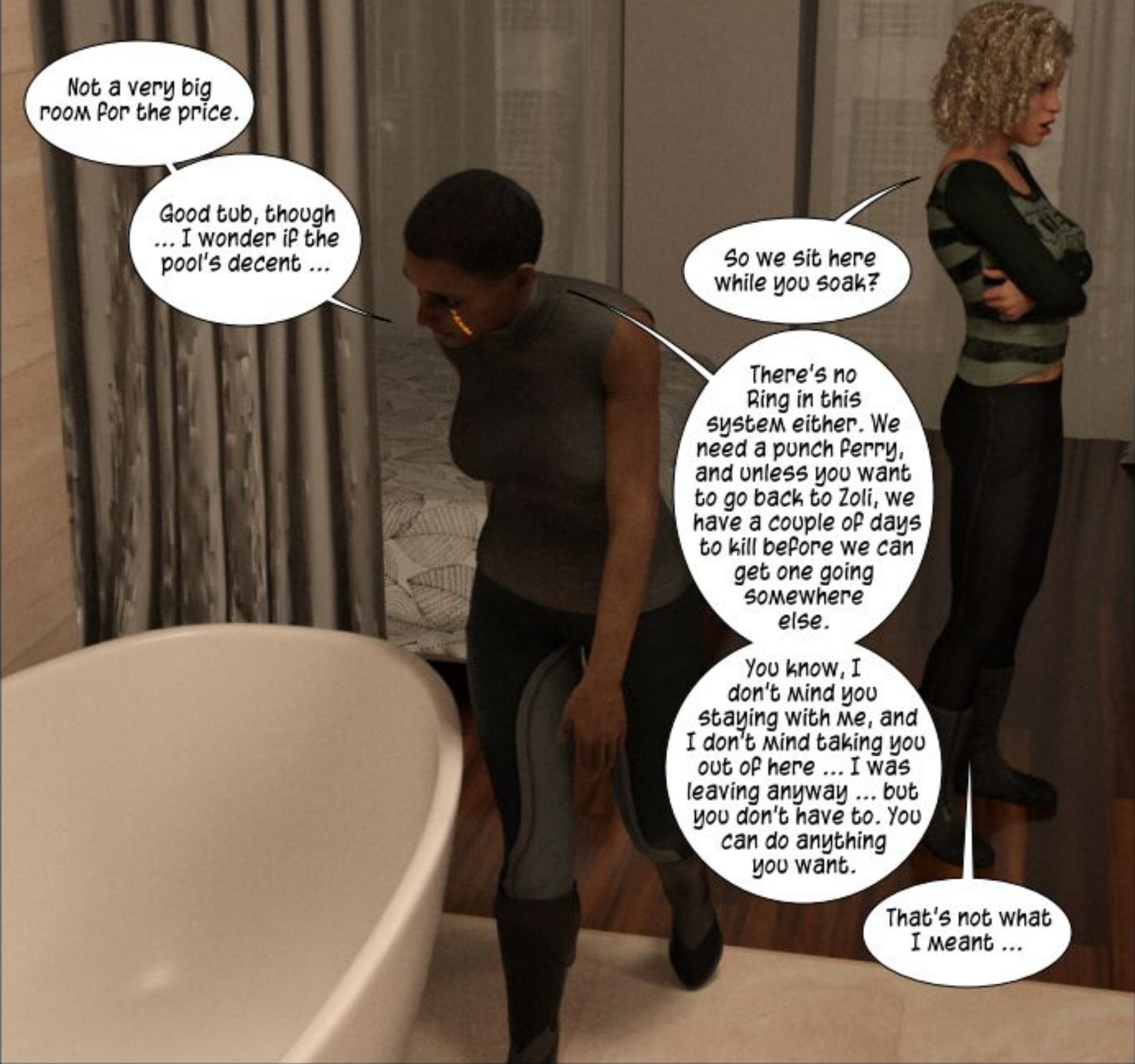
We're leaving?

We're both people of interest now. You don't want to be in one of their back rooms.

They're going to think we did this, so even more of them will be looking for us.

We're done.

COLONDA, THE MAIN CITY ON STAJ 5. NEXT SYSTEM OVER. A MUCH MORE PLEASANT PLACE TO BE THAN ZOLI.



Not a very big room for the price.

Good tub, though ... I wonder if the pool's decent ...

So we sit here while you soak?

There's no Ring in this system either. We need a punch Perry, and unless you want to go back to Zoli, we have a couple of days to kill before we can get one going somewhere else.

You know, I don't mind you staying with me, and I don't mind taking you out of here ... I was leaving anyway ... but you don't have to. You can do anything you want.

That's not what I meant ...



... I just hate dropping it. I mean, I feel like we should be doing something else ...

What, though?

We know the Zolian Military did it. We don't know why, but I learned enough from that interview to realize I'm not going to find out.

First I hoped he'd tell me for Friendship, and then I hoped I could scare him, and neither worked. I don't have any other levers. We're not going to get anything else from them, we'll be in danger if we try, and I don't have anything else to chase.

I'm going to change and check out the pool. Are you coming?

... I don't think I'm in the mood.



I don't know why people always want to bother me while I'm soaking.

You looked interesting. I don't think you're from here. Most of the humans on this planet are very dull.

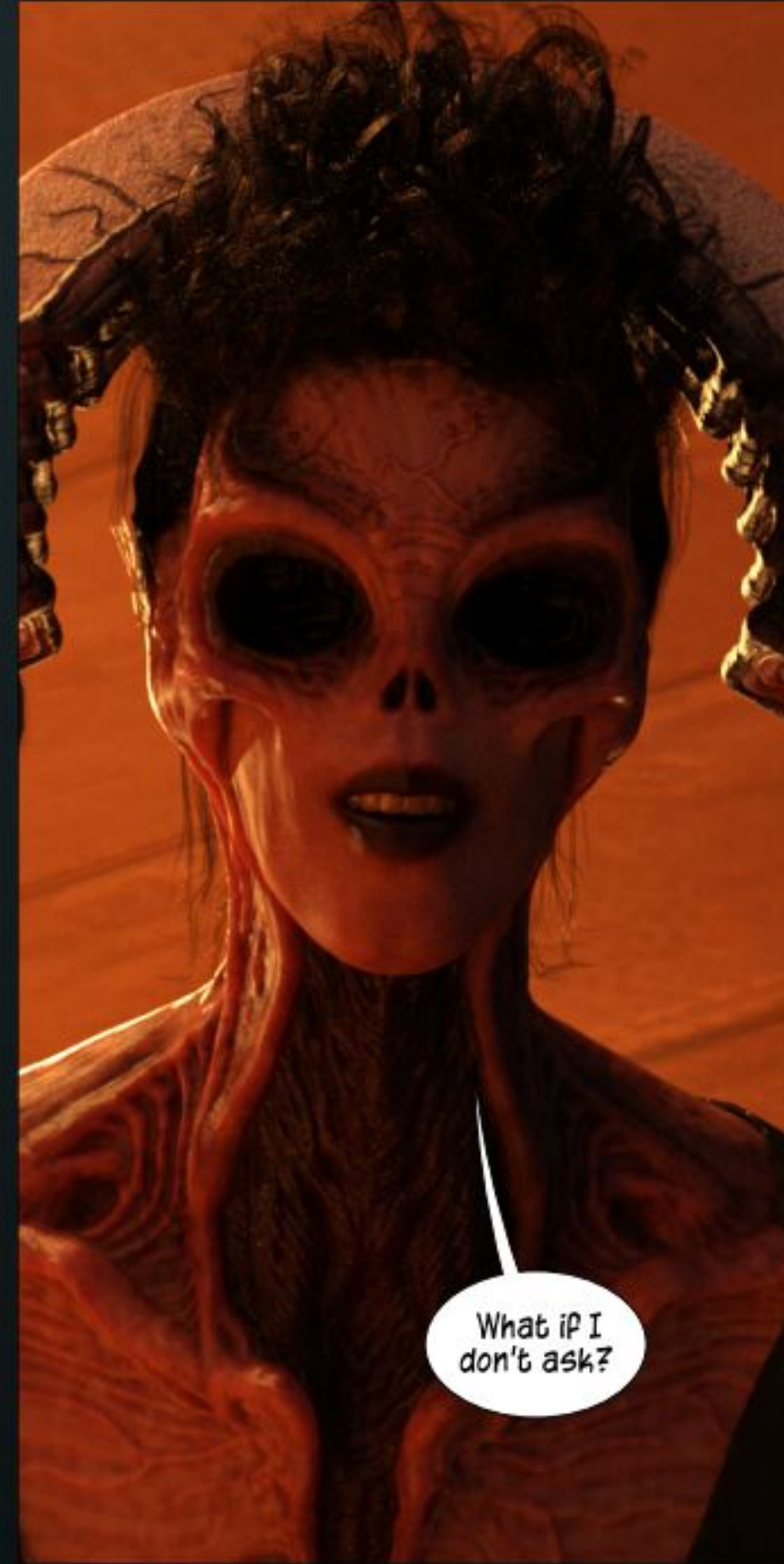
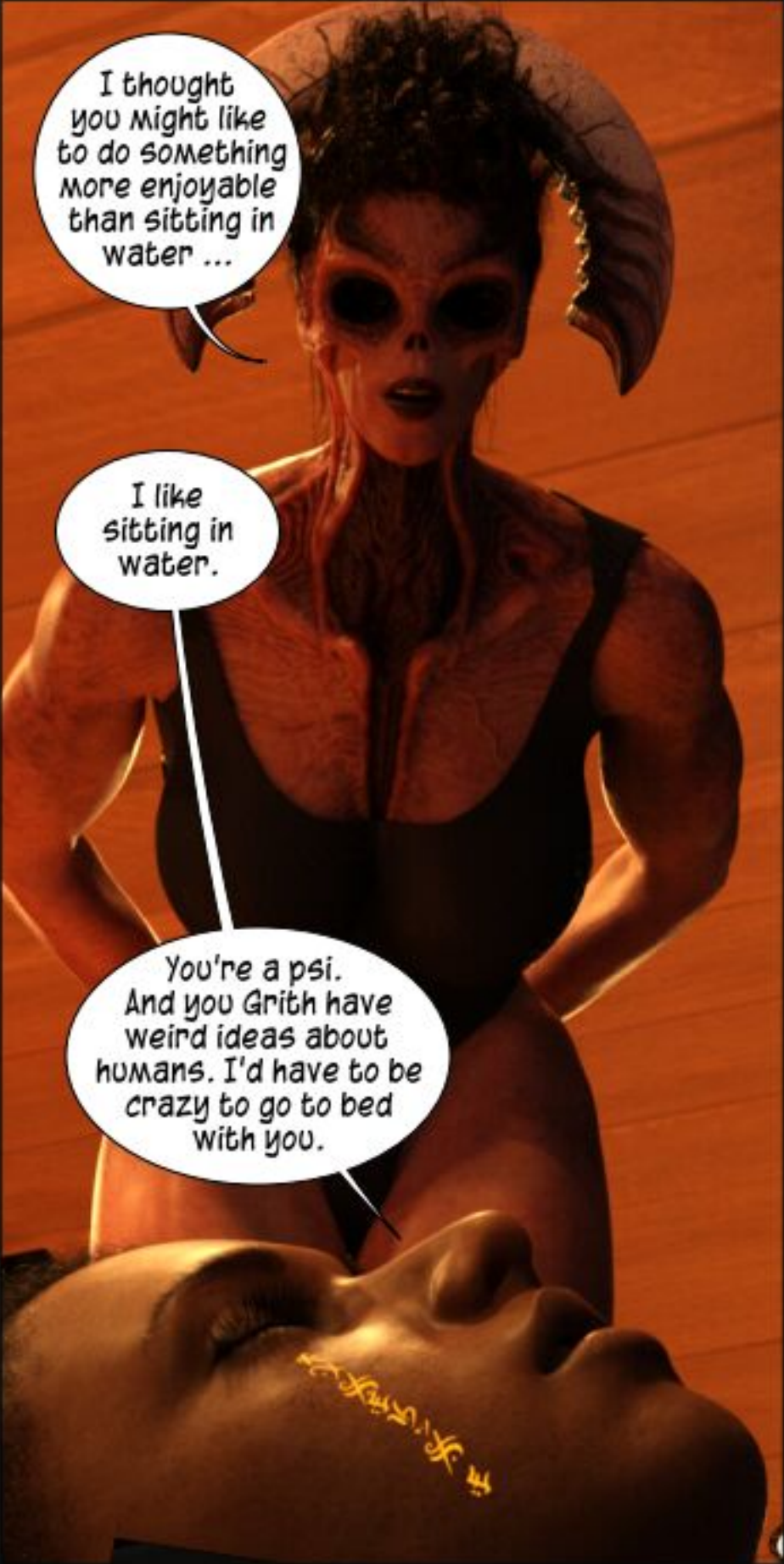
This is a hotel. No points for your guess.

Anyway, Grith think all humans are dull, don't they?

I saw you watching me as I came in.

And you were interesting to watch.

You move with purpose.

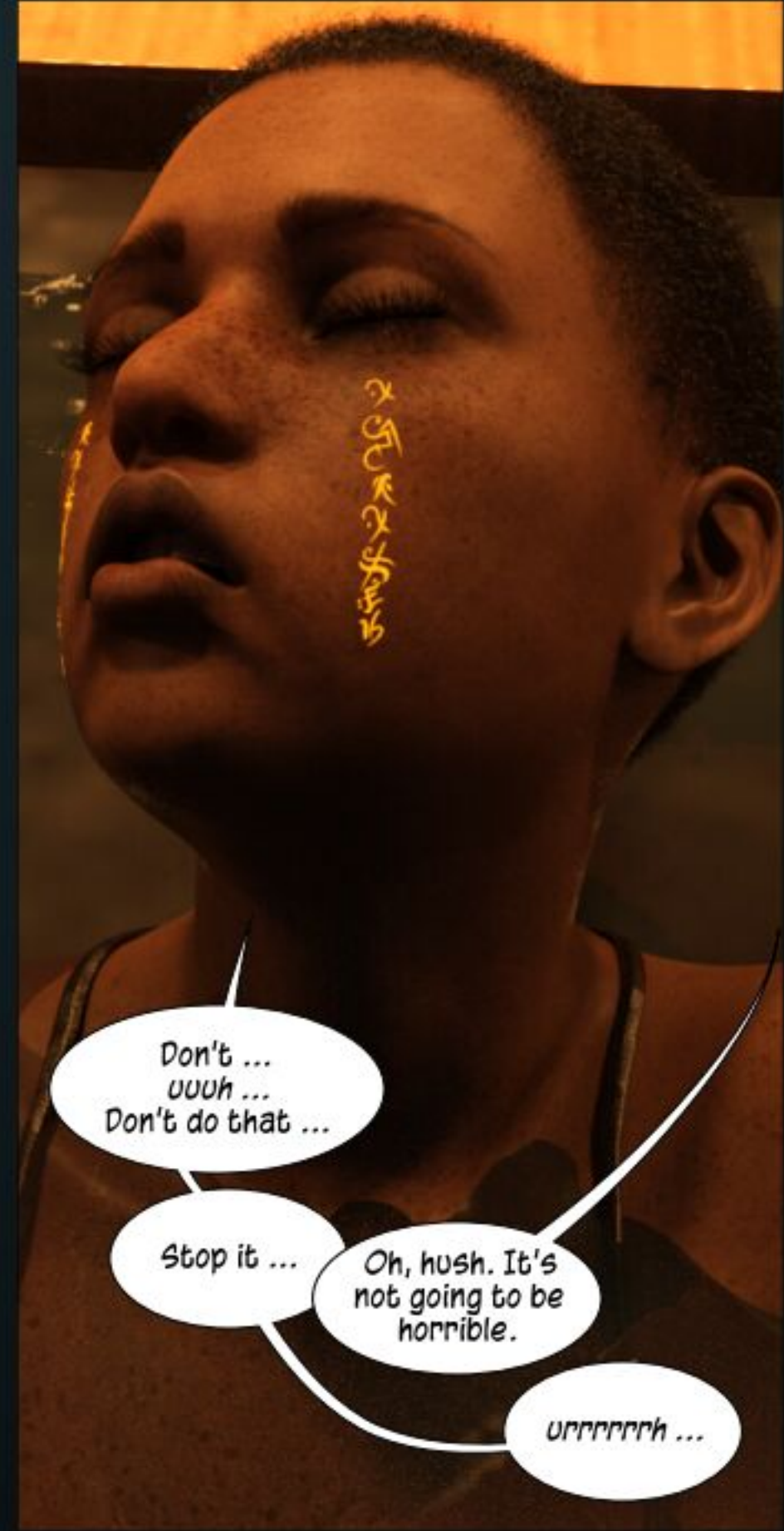


I thought you might like to do something more enjoyable than sitting in water ...

I like sitting in water.

You're a psi. And you Grith have weird ideas about humans. I'd have to be crazy to go to bed with you.

What if I don't ask?



Don't ... uuh ... Don't do that ...

Stop it ...

Oh, hush. It's not going to be horrible.

urrrrrrh ...



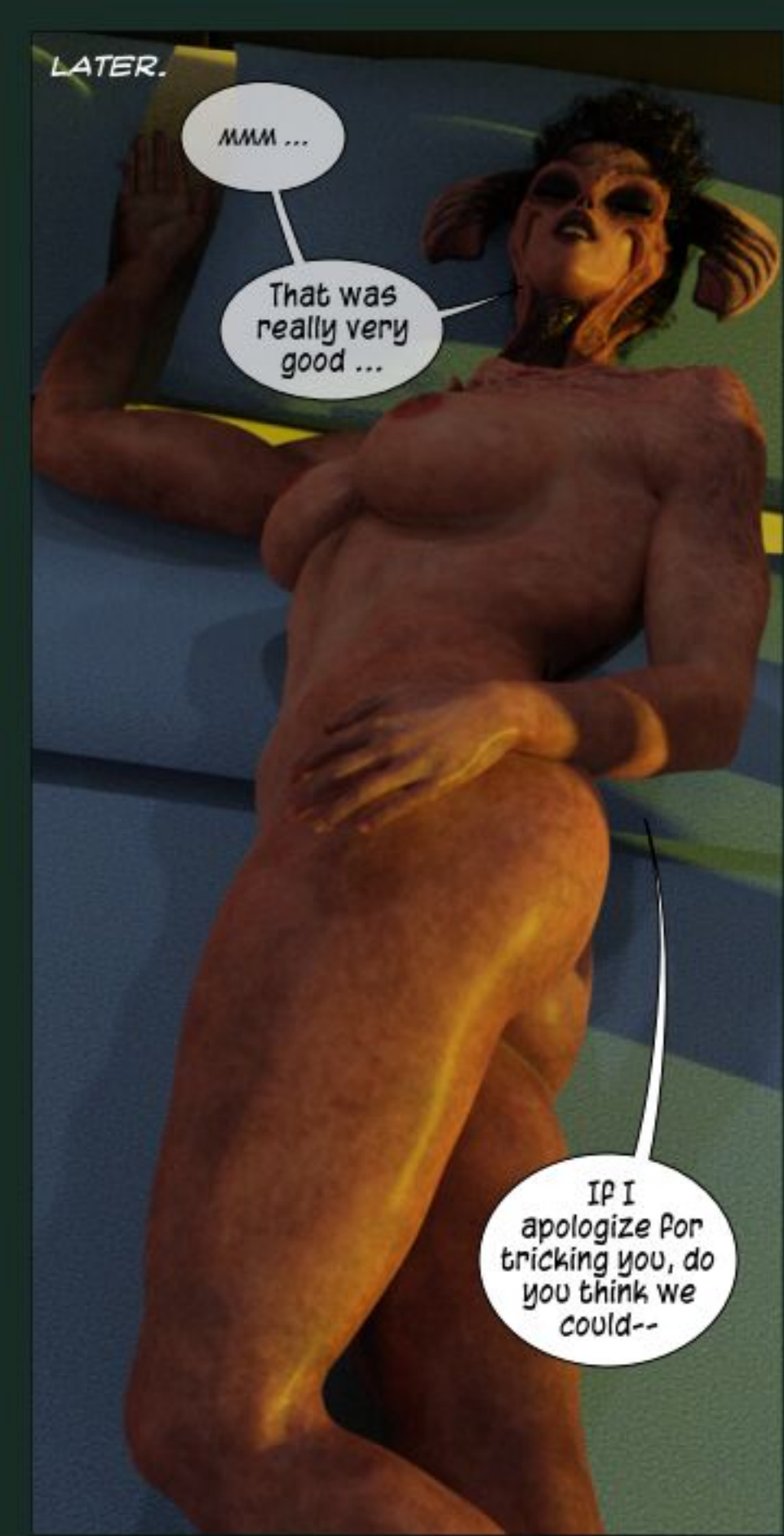
I've noticed you humans don't have any resistance at all. It's entertaining.

urrrrrrh

Haven't you ever wondered what Grith taste like?



That's ... MMMH! ... that's a good little human ...



LATER.

MMM ...

That was really very good ...

If I apologize for tricking you, do you think we could--



I POUND this nice little dual in your STUFF.

If My head starts to Peel Punny I'M going to use it to cut your arc OFF.

NO!!

Be good, then.

You didn't pull that just because you wanted to Puck a human.

What do you really want with me?



Nothing!

You got there just before we did. You couldn't know anything useful.

I needed to keep you busy so my people could get to the other one.

Ara? What do you want with her?

Wait, you were on Hurch 3, weren't you? I thought I saw you before ...

Yes, and we saw you. Saw you arrive, saw you leave.

All right, get up. You're taking me to her. And remember, the first twinge in my head ...



You didn't need to steal my clothes.

Probably steal your gun, too.

I wasn't going to walk the streets barefoot in a bikini, and you made me leave my robe at the pool.

And I'd hardly call these 'clothes.'

If the garda see you, they'll arrest you. There's a weapon-carry law in this city.

If the garda come along, I think they'll be more interested in what you've been up to.



This is it ...

Stop.

Don't do anything that would warn them we're coming in. I'd hate to have to shoot you all.

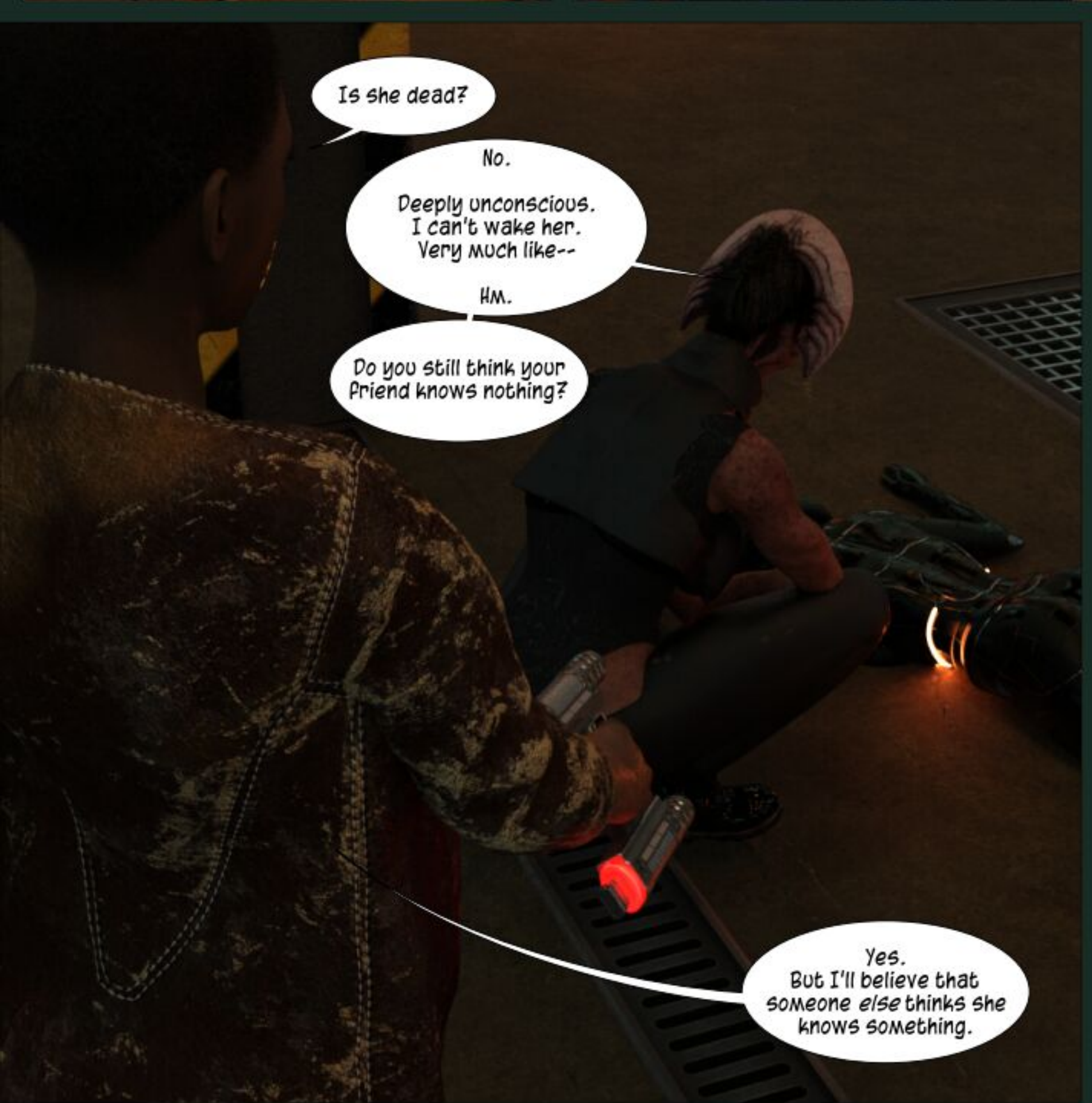
--sigh-- I do like that you move with purpose, though.

You know, Ara doesn't know any more than I do about what happened. All you've managed to do is haz us both ...



--gasp--

And maybe not just us.



Is she dead?

No.

Deeply unconscious. I can't wake her. Very much like--

Hm.

Do you still think your friend knows nothing?

Yes. But I'll believe that someone else thinks she knows something.

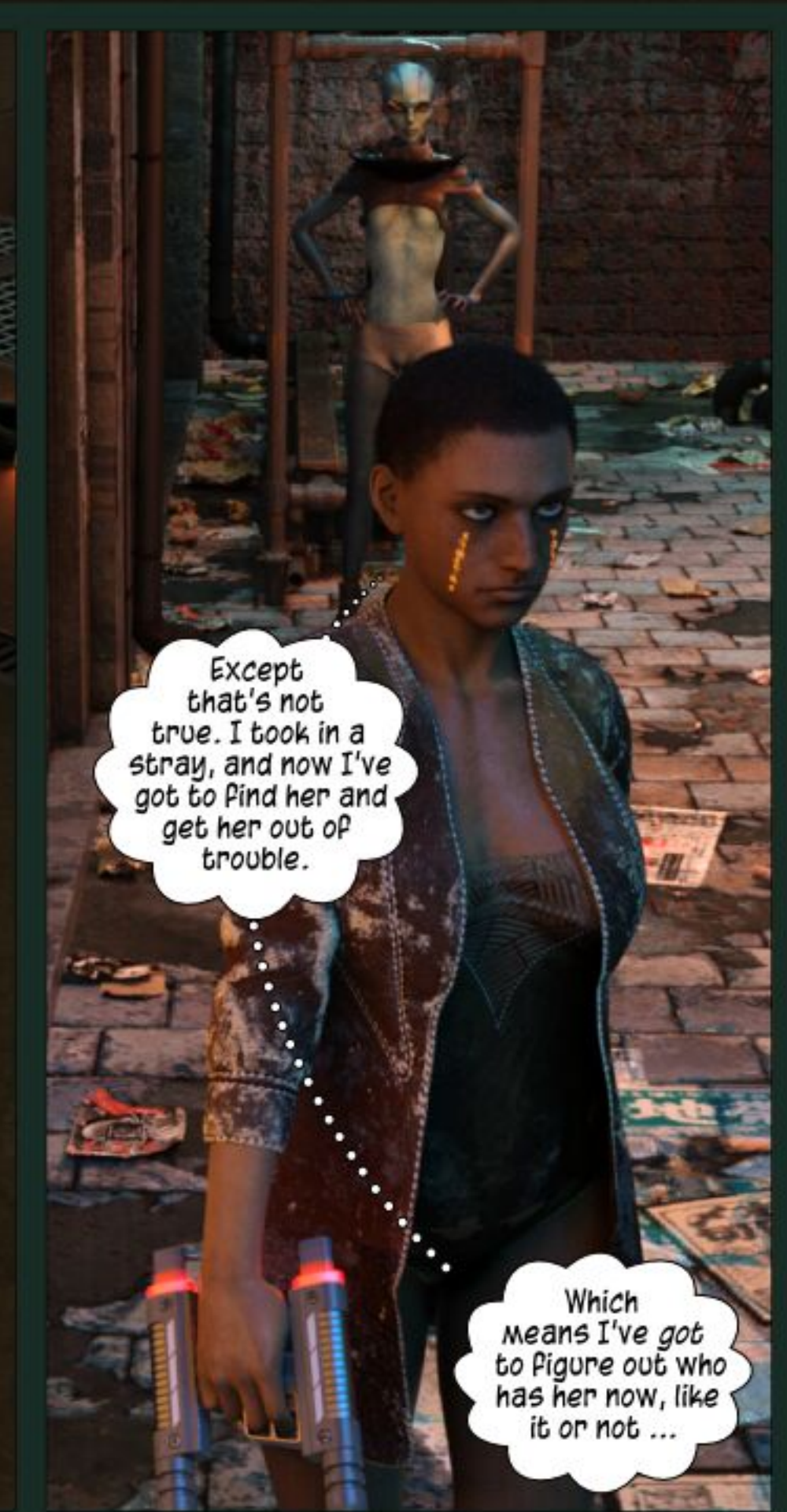


And you have no curiosity to find out about that?

What about your friend?

Can't always move with purpose.

My only interest here is keeping people from constantly trying to ruin my day.



Except that's not true. I took in a stray, and now I've got to find her and get her out of trouble.

Which means I've got to figure out who has her now, like it or not ...



Human! Wait!

The next person who calls me 'human' is going to get shot.

... I have nothing else to call you.

I am seeking information about one named Patricia Shend.

Never heard of her.

And yet you have gone into this building with Salla's Phir ... What is your business with her?

Oh, is that her name?

My business with her is none of your business.



But I promise you, it wasn't voluntary and I hope it won't be repeated.

I've had a long day and I'm done with everybody.

If you want to know what Salla is up to, go on in and ask her.

I'd bring a weapon, though.

She's not in a good mood either.

SEEING GRITH IN COLONDA WAS NOT A HUGE SURPRISE. THEY CAN'T GET THROUGH SERA'S SPACE, SO THEY'VE BEEN TRYING FOR A CLEAR ROUTE TO THE HUMAN WORLDS THE BACK WAY.

SEEING A SERA IN COLONDA, THOUGH ... THAT WAS A SURPRISE.

I WENT BACK TO THE HOTEL TO SLEEP. I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO START LOOKING FOR ATRA AND I WAS GETTING TOO TIRED TO THINK.

WHEN I GOT TO THE ROOM, I SAW THAT ALL OF ATRA'S THINGS WERE GONE.

YES, SOMEONE COULD HAVE COME IN WITH HER AND STOOD THERE WITH A WEAPON POINTED AT HER WHILE SHE PACKED. IT WOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN LONG; SHE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH.

OR ... SHE COULD HAVE GOTTEN AWAY FROM WHOEVER IT WAS THAT TOOK HER, RUN TO THE ROOM TO GET HER THINGS, AND GONE OFF SOMEWHERE TO HIDE.

IT WAS A LITTLE HARD TO BELIEVE, BUT THE EVIDENCE ACTUALLY FAVORED THE SECOND THEORY.

No, she didn't look upset or anything ... and there was no one with her ...

I mean, I didn't actually speak to her. She came down, crossed the lobby and left.

Is there a problem?

That's what I'm trying to find out.

But if there is, it isn't with the hotel. Thanks for your help.

OF COURSE, THERE COULD HAVE BEEN SOMEONE WAITING FOR HER OUTSIDE. BUT FOR SOME REASON I DIDN'T THINK SO. I WAS STARTING TO REALIZE THERE WERE A LOT OF THINGS ATRA HADN'T TOLD ME.

Excuse me, please, yes?

The Adept would like to ask of you why are you looking for the woman?

The Adept, huh?

If the Adept wants to know, then she'll have to ask me herself.

Interrogation's bad enough without having to do it by proxy.

The Adept does not speak in the way of your understanding. I must relay.

Does she know where the woman is, or is she just fishing for information?

She is wanting to try to find the woman.

A lot of people seem to be. No sale. Nice talking to you.

The Adept is afraid for the safety of her!

Yeah.

So am I.

HOPPING SYSTEMS WILL MESS WITH YOUR INTERNAL CLOCK. I HAD WOKEN UP EARLY IN THE MORNING ON HURCH 2, LOCAL DAY; GOT ON A PUNCH FERRY RIGHT AWAY, SPENT ABOUT AN HOUR GETTING TO ZOLI, WHERE IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON; SPENT ABOUT THREE HOURS ON ZOLI BEFORE THAT WENT SOUR, GOT LUCKY WITH THE PUNCH, WAS ON STAJ 5 AN HOUR LATER, WHERE IT WAS FAIRLY LATE AT NIGHT. IT HADN'T BEEN THREE HOURS SINCE I HIT THE POOL. I'D ONLY BEEN AWAKE MAYBE TEN HOURS BY MY BODY CLOCK? BUT IT WAS INSISTING I NEEDED TO COLLAPSE. THEN AGAIN, A LOT HAD HAPPENED IN THOSE FEW HOURS. I WENT TO BED.

WHEN I WOKE UP, I FOUND MY BIKINI AND ROBE IN A BAG OUTSIDE MY DOOR.

FAIR'S FAIR, SO AS I HEADED TO CHECK OUT, I STOPPED OUTSIDE SALLA'S ROOM AND DROPPED OFF HER CLOTHES. I EVEN GAVE HER BACK THE DUAL.

I HOPED IT WAS A SIGN OF PEACE, BUT I DIDN'T BELIEVE IT. I WAS SLEEPING IN BOGIE FOR THE REST OF MY STAY. MORE SECURE AND A LOT CHEAPER.

I ALSO STOPPED AND BOUGHT SOME PRECAUTIONS.

THAT TURNED OUT TO BE A SMART THING TO DO.

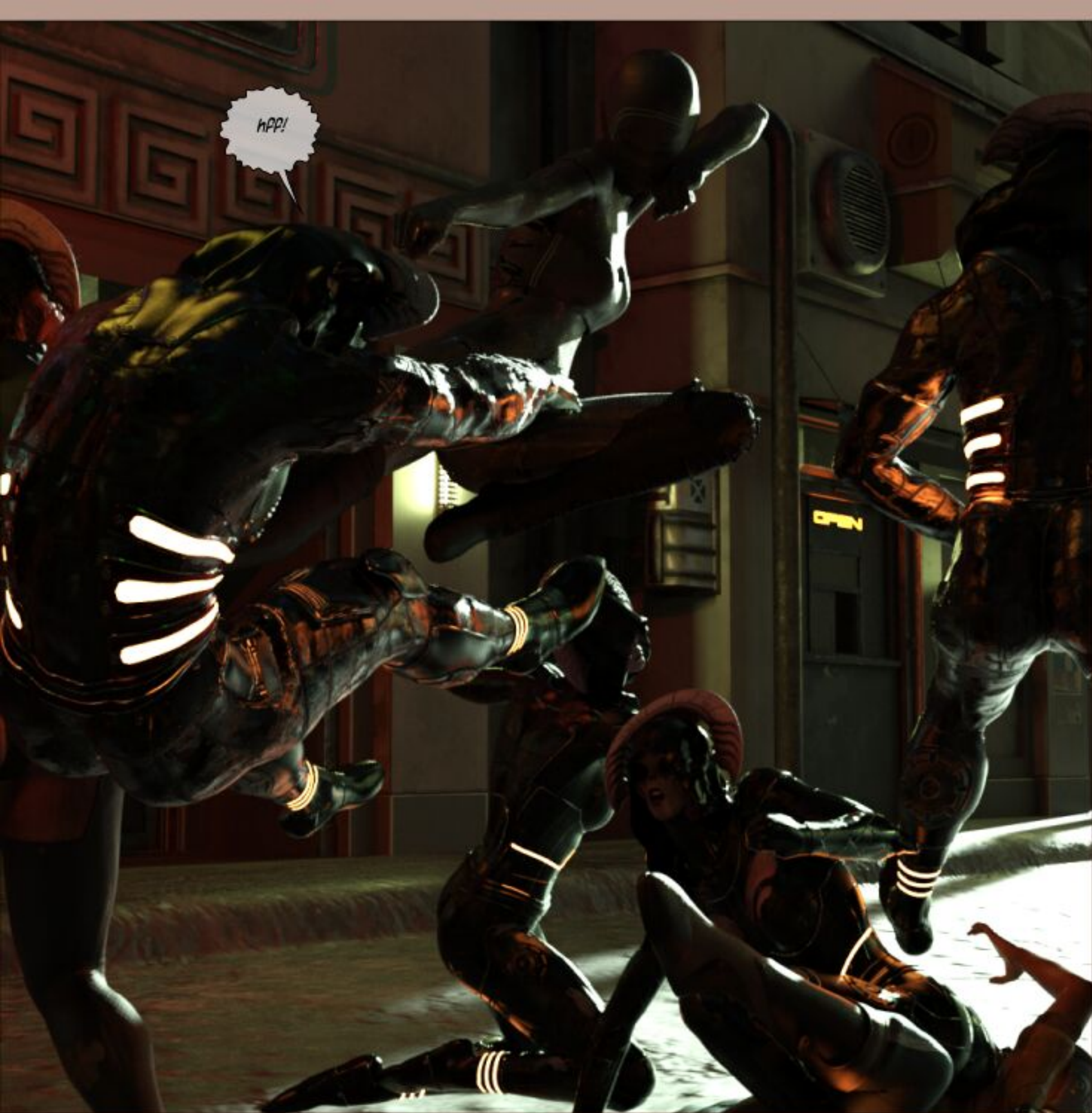
AAAAII!!

urg!

THE PSILENCER WORKED PRETTY WELL. THAT BURST HAD HURT ... A LOT ... BUT WITH FIVE OF THEM FOCUSING ON ME, WITHOUT IT I'M SURE I'D HAVE BEEN OUT COLD. OR ON THE GROUND CURLED UP IN A BALL OF PAIN.

NONE OF US WERE CARRYING WEAPONS. I WAS BEING LAW-ABIDING, AND THEY WERE DEPENDING ON PSI. WITH THEIR PSI BLOCKED, THAT MADE THIS A PHYSICAL FIGHT. I FIGHT PRETTY WELL.

BUT I CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH AGAINST FIVE.

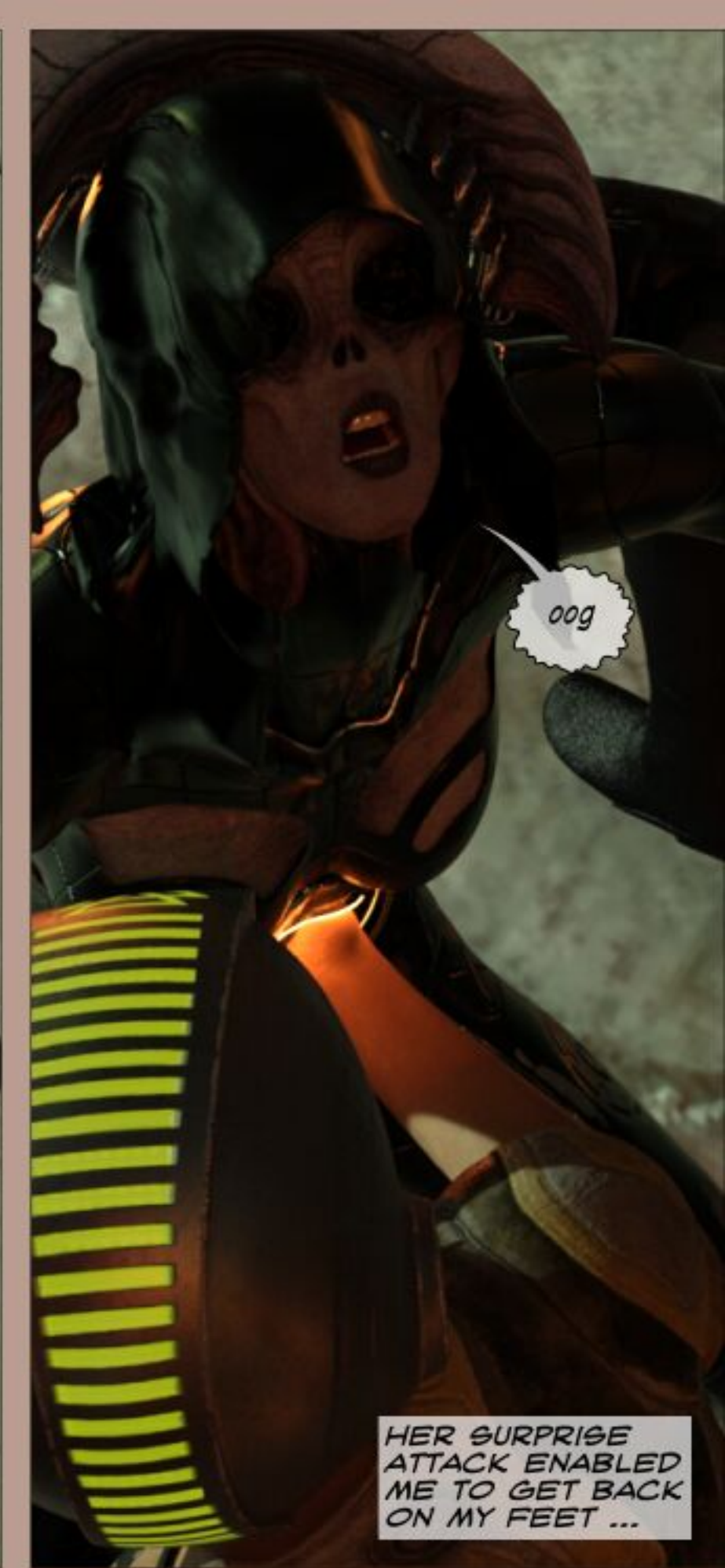


hrr!



yaaa!!

I HAD NO IDEA WHO SHE WAS, BUT I WASN'T GOING TO COMPLAIN.



oog

HER SURPRISE ATTACK ENABLED ME TO GET BACK ON MY FEET ...



... AND A MINUTE OR TWO LATER, THEY WERE ALL DOWN ... EXCEPT SALLA, WHO HAD LET THE OTHERS DO ALL THE FIGHTING, AND WHO WATCHED US RUN AWAY WITHOUT SAYING A WORD.



Hey!

Don't you dare run off. I have questions.

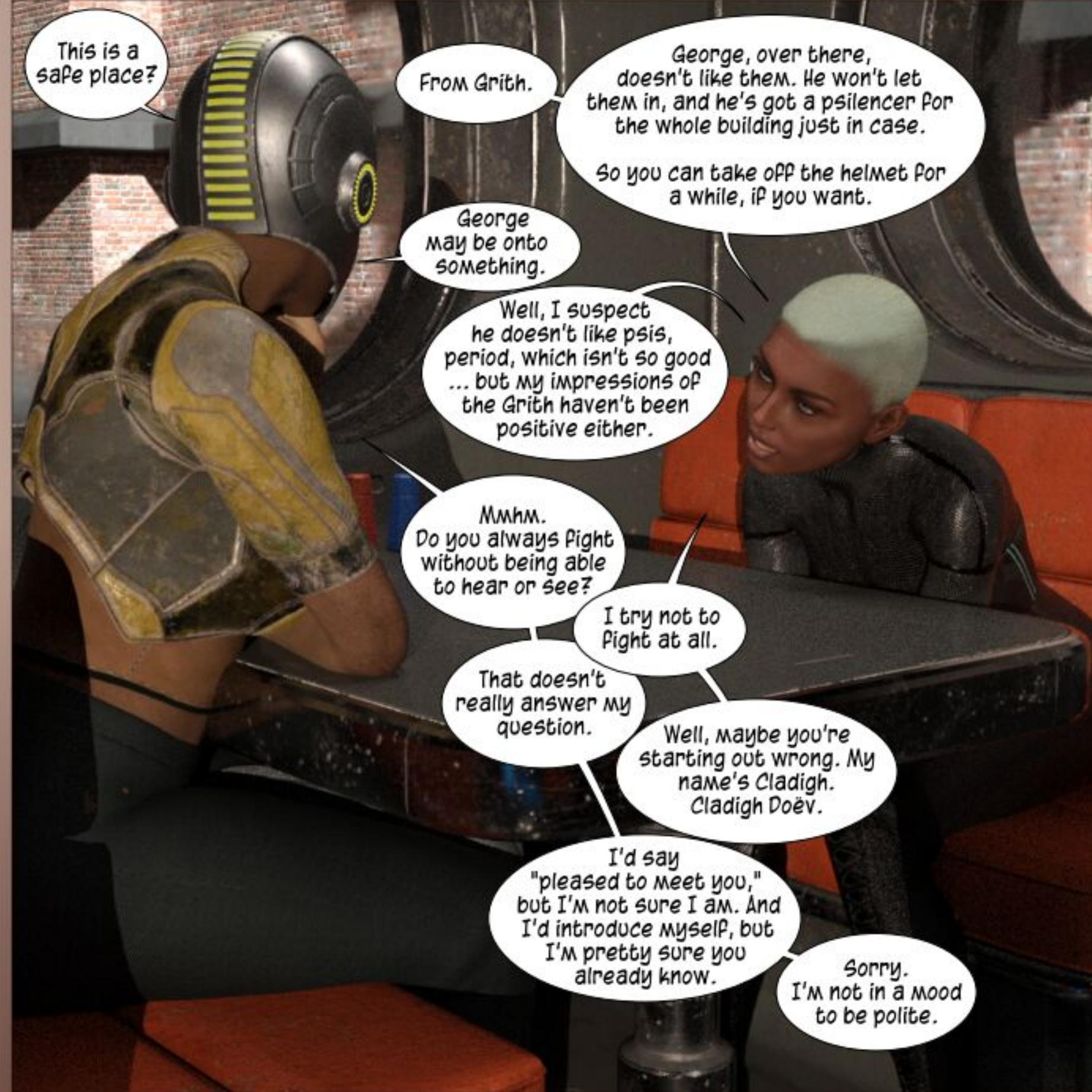


You hear me? I'm serious ... huh?



Give me a second, I can't hear you yet.

I wanted to get to a safe place before we talked.



This is a safe place?

From Grith.

George, over there, doesn't like them. He won't let them in, and he's got a psilencer for the whole building just in case. So you can take off the helmet for a while, if you want.

George may be onto something.

Well, I suspect he doesn't like psis, period, which isn't so good ... but my impressions of the Grith haven't been positive either.

Mmm. Do you always fight without being able to hear or see?

I try not to fight at all.

That doesn't really answer my question.

Well, maybe you're starting out wrong. My name's Cladigh. Cladigh Doev.

I'd say "pleased to meet you," but I'm not sure I am. And I'd introduce myself, but I'm pretty sure you already know.

Sorry. I'm not in a mood to be polite.



This is all about psis, isn't it? I've figured out that much.

Yes. Is that a problem for you? How do you feel about them?

I'm live and let live. If they don't mess with my head, I leave them alone.



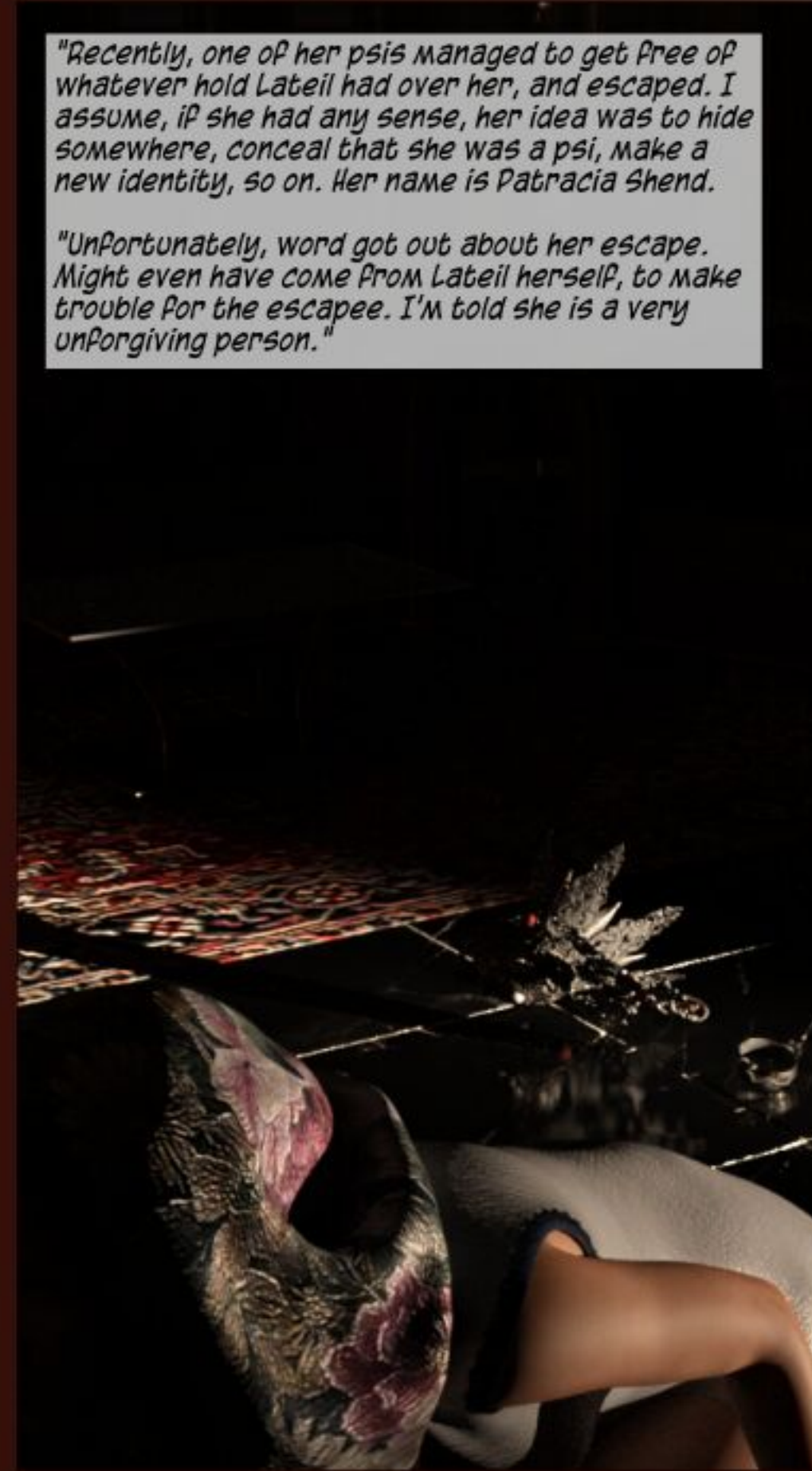
Mostly I'm just annoyed at the things I get sucked into.

... OK, tell me the story.

Over in the Pleiades there's a woman named Simi Lateil. She cultivates psis. "Cultivates" is her word. I say she enslaves them.



"She has some way of keeping them under her control, even though as far as anyone can tell, she's not a psi herself. Rumors about the uses she puts them to range from unethical to seriously unpleasant."



"Recently, one of her psis managed to get free of whatever hold Lateil had over her, and escaped. I assume, if she had any sense, her idea was to hide somewhere, conceal that she was a psi, make a new identity, so on. Her name is Patricia Shend.

"Unfortunately, word got out about her escape. Might even have come from Lateil herself, to make trouble for the escapee. I'm told she is a very unporgiving person."



I don't know if I need to explain what Shend is up against ...

No. When I was in the Navy there were rumors about a couple of them kept deep in some secure facility somewhere. That never felt right to me.

Half of humanspace would want to kill her on sight ... Any gov or mil that finds her probably would try to turn her into a weapon or a research subject ...

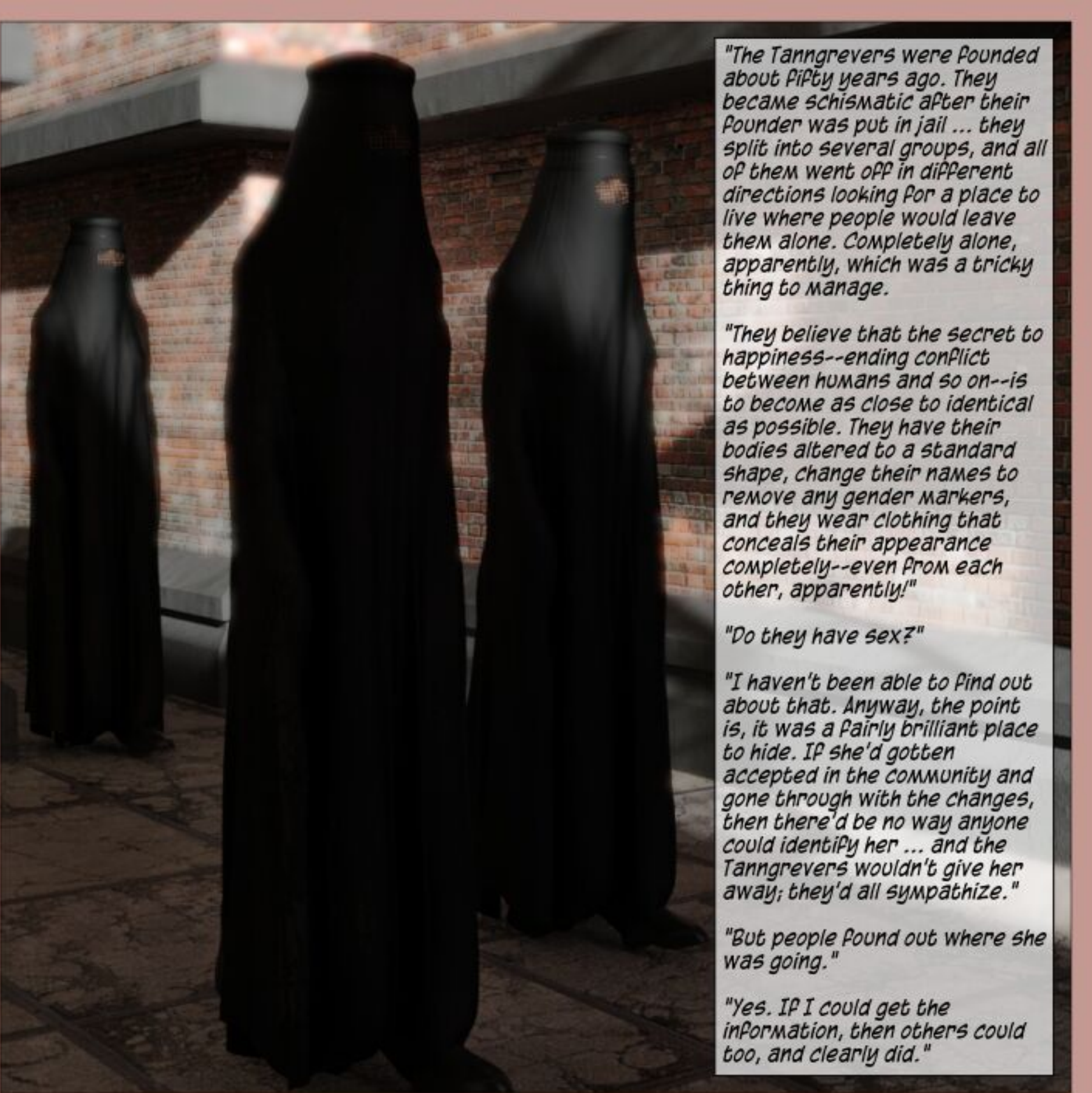
So she went off to the back side of the galaxy to hide.

Not just that. She found out that there was a group of Tanngrevers who had come out to settle on Hurch 3.

Do you know anything about Tanngrevers?

Never heard of them.

Neither had I. And the research wasn't easy. No one knows about them and they like it that way.



"The Tanngrevers were founded about fifty years ago. They became schismatic after their founder was put in jail ... they split into several groups, and all of them went off in different directions looking for a place to live where people would leave them alone. Completely alone, apparently, which was a tricky thing to manage.

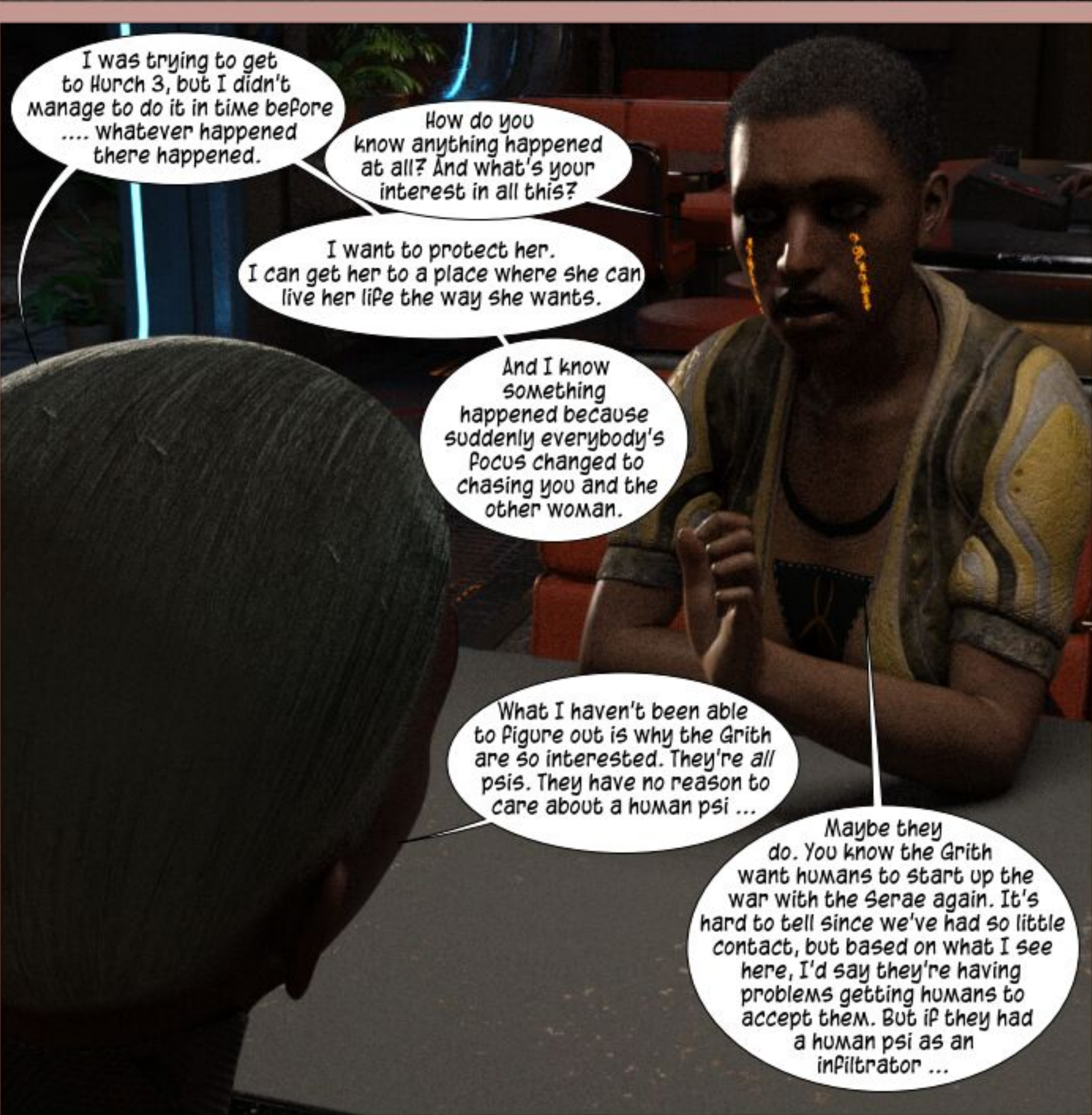
"They believe that the secret to happiness--ending conflict between humans and so on--is to become as close to identical as possible. They have their bodies altered to a standard shape, change their names to remove any gender markers, and they wear clothing that conceals their appearance completely--even from each other, apparently!"

"Do they have sex?"

"I haven't been able to find out about that. Anyway, the point is, it was a fairly brilliant place to hide. If she'd gotten accepted in the community and gone through with the changes, then there'd be no way anyone could identify her ... and the Tanngrevers wouldn't give her away; they'd all sympathize."

"But people found out where she was going."

"Yes. If I could get the information, then others could too, and clearly did."



I was trying to get to Hurch 3, but I didn't manage to do it in time before ... whatever happened there happened.

How do you know anything happened at all? And what's your interest in all this?

I want to protect her. I can get her to a place where she can live her life the way she wants.

And I know something happened because suddenly everybody's focus changed to chasing you and the other woman.

What I haven't been able to figure out is why the Grith are so interested. They're all psi. They have no reason to care about a human psi ...

Maybe they do. You know the Grith want humans to start up the war with the Serae again. It's hard to tell since we've had so little contact, but based on what I see here, I'd say they're having problems getting humans to accept them. But if they had a human psi as an infiltrator ...



Oh, that makes sense. Nasty, but very Grith.

Not sure they're the low ground here. The Serae probably only want her to keep the Grith from getting her. And word is they don't treat psi's much better than humans do.

At least we know the Grith wouldn't hate her just for being psi. For being human, maybe.

Hmm. ... So what did happen on Hurch 3?

I'm not sure I should tell you.

You don't trust me.

I don't know enough to. You could be sent by Lateil to drag Shend back. You could be working for some gov. You could be anybody--

--ahem--



Would the two of you come with us, please?

You're supposed to give us a reason. Are we under arrest?

We want to ask you some questions.

That's nice. Are we under arrest?

... Come with us, please.

I HATE PROVS. THEY ALL HAVE AN EXAGGERATED IDEA OF THEIR OWN POWER AND IMPORTANCE. THE GARDA IN COLONDA WEREN'T TOO BAD, I'D BEEN TOLD ... AND THEN THEY GO AND PULL SOMETHING LIKE THIS.

WE WENT WITH THEM, THOUGH. THEY'RE EXEMPT FROM THE WEAPON-CARRY LAW, OF COURSE, AND DISARMING THEM AND TOSsing THEM DOWN THE ALLEY WOULD HAVE ATTRACTED TOO MUCH ATTENTION. THAT KIND OF THING REALLY GETS THEM HAZZED. THEY HATE TO BE REMINDED HOW BAD THEY ALL ARE AT THEIR JOB.



STANDARD PROV BULLYING TACTIC IS TO LET YOU COLLECT DUST. WE SAT THERE FOR AN HOUR, IN CUFFS, BEFORE HE CAME IN.

Ah!

Sorry about the wait. It took a while for me to get word they'd found you.

I should make it clear--you're not in any trouble. We just have some questions we need answered.



We try to cooperate with the Zolian government whenever possible. They can be belligerent, and it helps keep them off our backs.

They inform us--Guerrero, is it?--that you have information on recent events on Hurch 3, and you left Zoli without providing it.

So, we just need you to tell us everything you know about what happened on Hurch 3. And then you're free to go.

I have no idea what you're talking about.

Never been to Hurch 3.

You must have the wrong person.



Oh, that's unfortunate.

Illegal detention usually is.

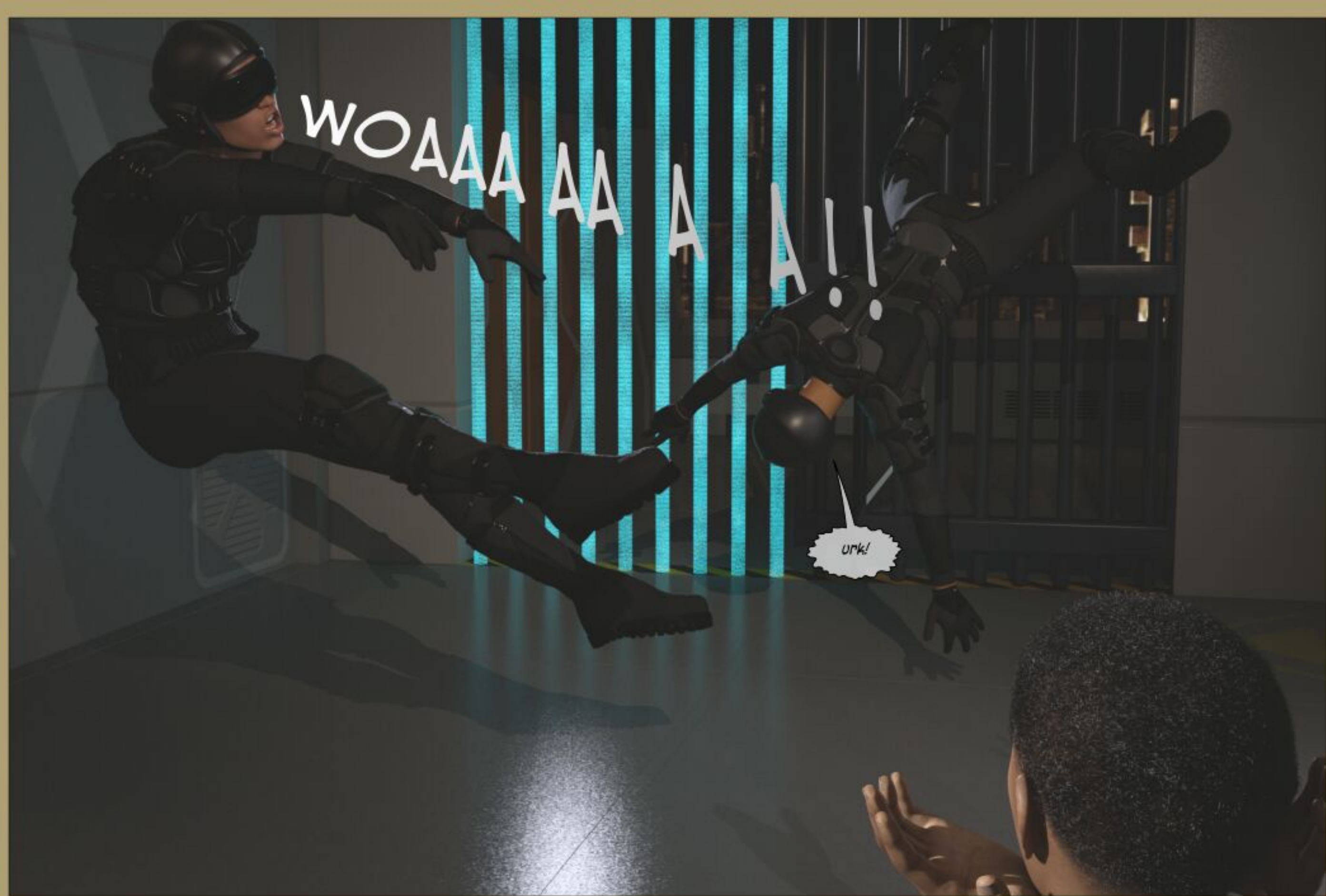
No, it's unfortunate because I have different information and I don't believe you.

So I'm going to temporarily relieve these two of their sidearms--to avoid accidents--and then let them work it out with you.

I'll come back in an hour and we'll talk again.



You really don't want to do this.



WOAAA AA A A!!

urk!



What'd you do that for?

I was supposed to sit here and watch them beat you?

I'd have taken them apart. Provs think they can fight but they can't, and they cupped me in front because they're sloppy.

Now you've blown your cover.



Appreciate the thought, though.

--oof--
Let's see ...

Control for the door field's usually in their glove or belt ...

... key for these cupps so I don't have to snap them ...



So we're fugitives.

Only just now thinking of that?

Relax. I know an off-book op when I see one. No names, no protocol ... this didn't happen. The garda aren't going to be searching for us in the streets.

These jakazes might, though, and if they're actually garda they can get at registry data, so they know what ship's mine.

We'll need a different place to hide, at least for a few hours while they decide to give up on us.

... I can provide that.



If I didn't know better, I'd say we were sneaking in.

Ssh!

Your escorts don't know that their Adept goes out and gets into trouble?

Damn it!



You won't trust me, but you know everything I'm trying to keep secret, so I don't have a choice about whether to trust you. That seems unfair.

And yes. They're a little overprotective. They're not nearly at this level of training yet and they don't know how capable I am.

For what it's worth, I do trust you--now. And I'm not going to tell your secrets. Though if you don't want people thinking you're a psi, maybe don't fight with your eyes and ears covered.

How did you get there?

The Adept was also clearly a psi. I could feel ... something ... even across the room from her.

I didn't realize you were sensitive.

Neither did I. Then you showed up--another psi with the same touch. Had to have been the same person. With the same agenda. Which I'm trusting is as benign as you say it is.

We are the Raycenes. A community of psis. The only voluntary community of psis in humanspace. And that is a very large secret.

I want to offer this psi a life of her choosing, not under anyone else's control.



She may be hard to find.

I got to Murch 3 just in time to see the Zolian military--disguised as Blue Sky raiders--slaughter the entire settlement.

They carried two people off alive, though, I'm told. The assumption is that the psi is one of those two.

But I can't get answers from the Zolians, if she's down in one of their dungeons I can't get at her ... and if she's not, they could have taken her anywhere.

Except ...



Except?

Well, there are things that don't make sense. For example, if the Zolians have her, why get those garda to question us?

And I feel like there's some player in this I haven't even spotted yet, now that I know it isn't your group ...

Anyway, somebody's lying, for sure. Maybe more than one somebody.

... What are you doing?



We need to hide for a while and there doesn't seem to be anything else we can do at the moment.

And we've decided we're trusting each other.

... oh.



LATER.



... Why cover your eyes and ears?

MMM?

oh.

Close off regular senses, enhances the psi ones ... "see" better with my eyes covered ...

Every human psi I know of does it ... Grith don't, but I'm told that bone arc's like an antenna ...

Yeah.

Rumor is Serae chop them off when they want to destroy a Grith's psi abilities.

Haven't verified that, but I threatened to cut off Salla's and she got real upset.

Would you have?

Probably not. Seems too cruel.

I wasn't.

Cladigh, I think I've figured out why the puzzle doesn't fit together.

And unless she was lying about not having any money, I know where to find Atra.

What I don't have yet is a way to keep all three of us out of trouble if we go get her.

... Tell me everything.

... oh, don't get up yet ...



That's your ship?

Mhmm. Intact, and not under impound lock. Good.

Looks like someone took a shot at her though ...

Those dents have been there for years. From before I got her.

What's the next step?

If I'm right, all we need to do is be seen ...



Randa!!

There we go.



You should have stayed. It would have been a lot safer.

I didn't want you to get in more trouble because of me--they weren't looking for you--

But you didn't have any money, so your only way off-planet was to wait for me to come back to Bosie.

Not a bad idea, but--

Get the lights!



And here we are again.

Hand her over.

Or your people will attack us while you stand and watch?

And run away when we win?

I wouldn't count on winning. Especially since you're not wearing your little hat.

Made my head itch.

Stand down!



Leave immediately and peacefully or we will take action!

Oh, Por ... Don't you know when you're not welcome?

... As I was saying, Atra, the problem is everyone else could figure it out too.

You have no claim here, Salla hs Phir.

Neither do you, Krie!

You Serae think you get to make all the rules. It's never wrong if you do it, just everybody else. And you wonder why we hate you.

I note that you don't wonder why we hate you. The list of Grith atrocities--

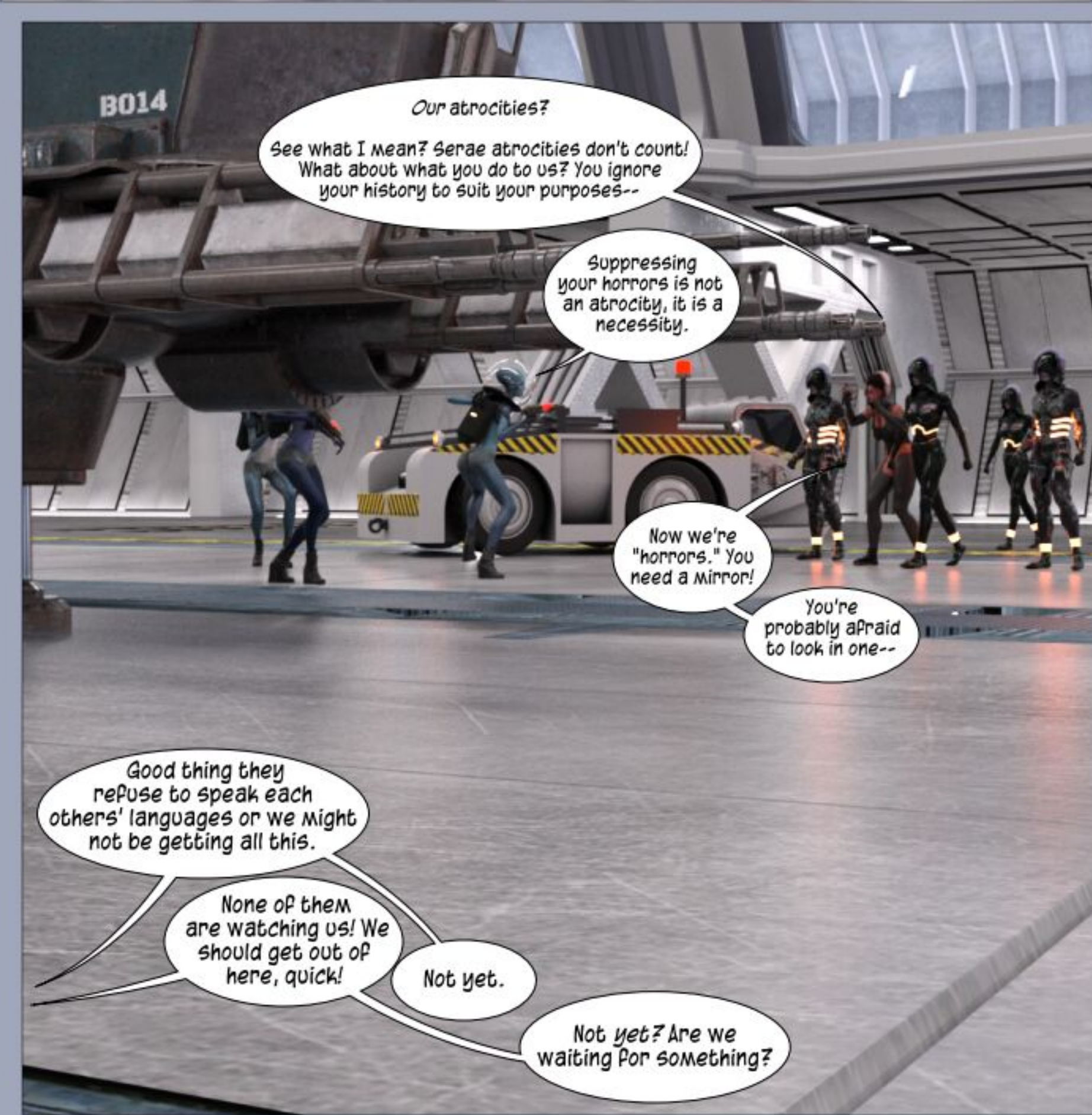


And run away when we win?

I wouldn't count on winning. Especially since you're not wearing your little hat.

Made my head itch.

Stand down!



Our atrocities?

See what I mean? Serae atrocities don't count! What about what you do to us? You ignore your history to suit your purposes--

Suppressing your horrors is not an atrocity, it is a necessity.

Now we're "horrors." You need a mirror!

You're probably afraid to look in one--

Good thing they refuse to speak each others' languages or we might not be getting all this.

None of them are watching us! We should get out of here, quick!

Not yet.

Not yet? Are we waiting for something?



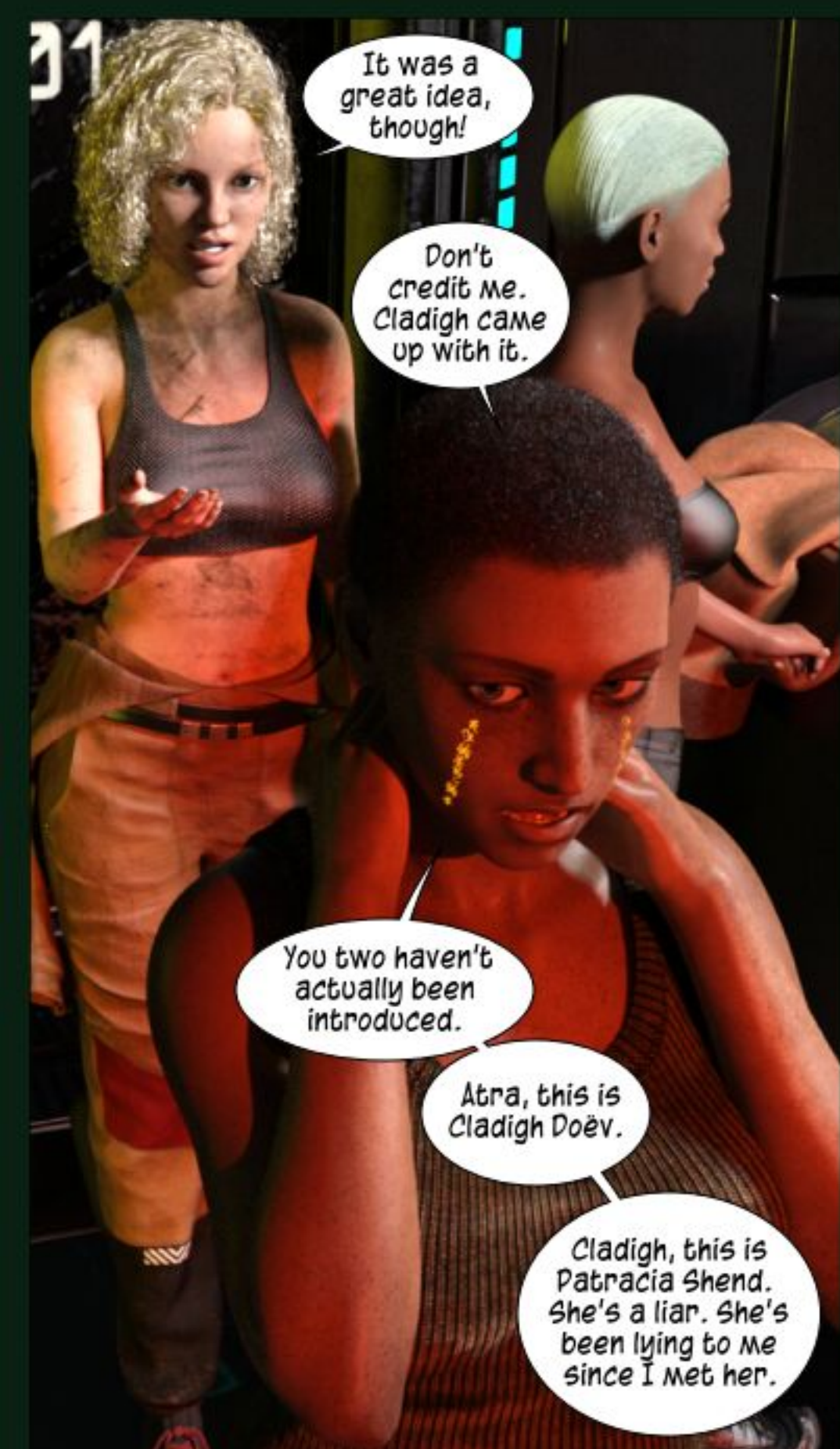
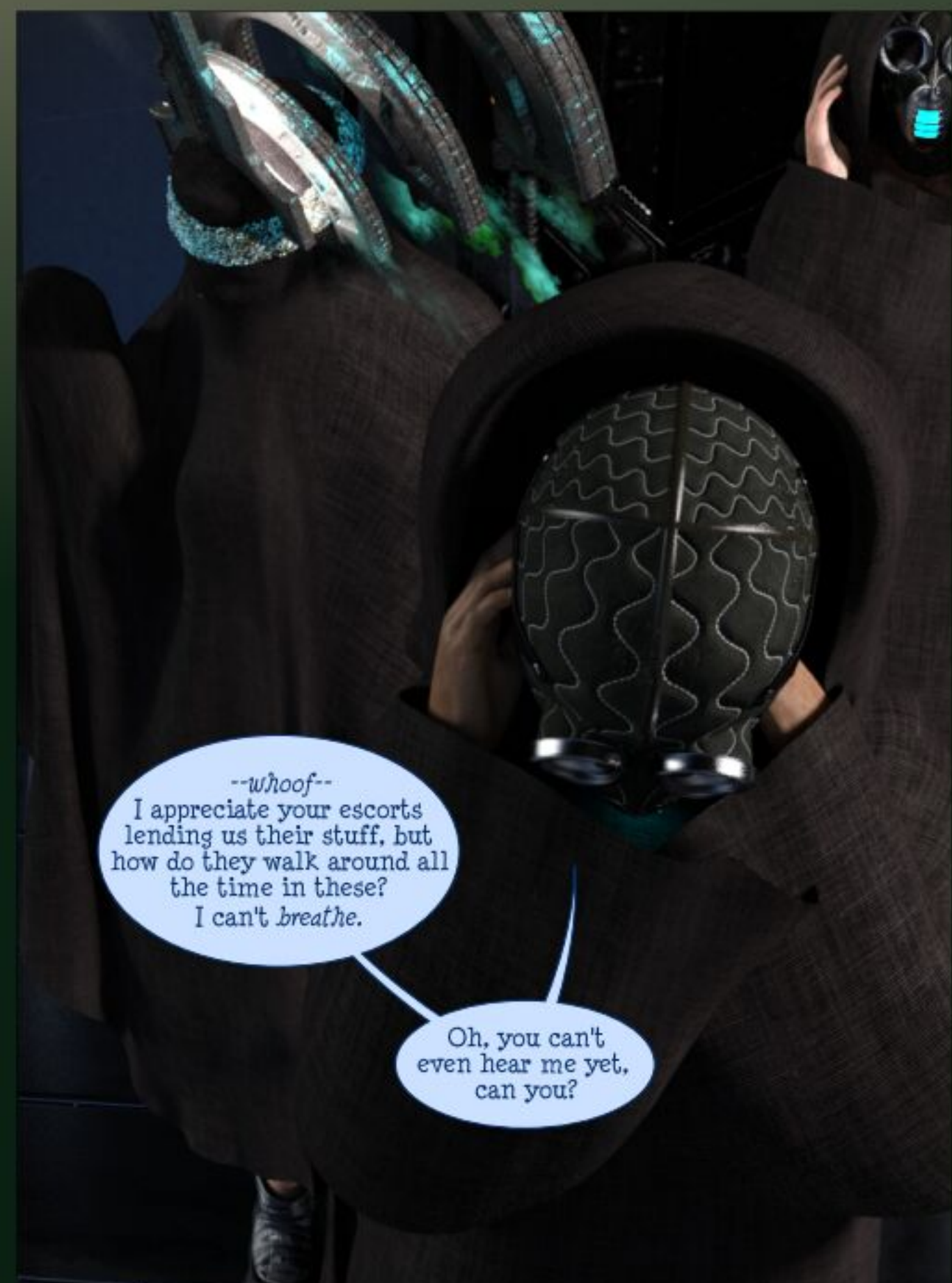
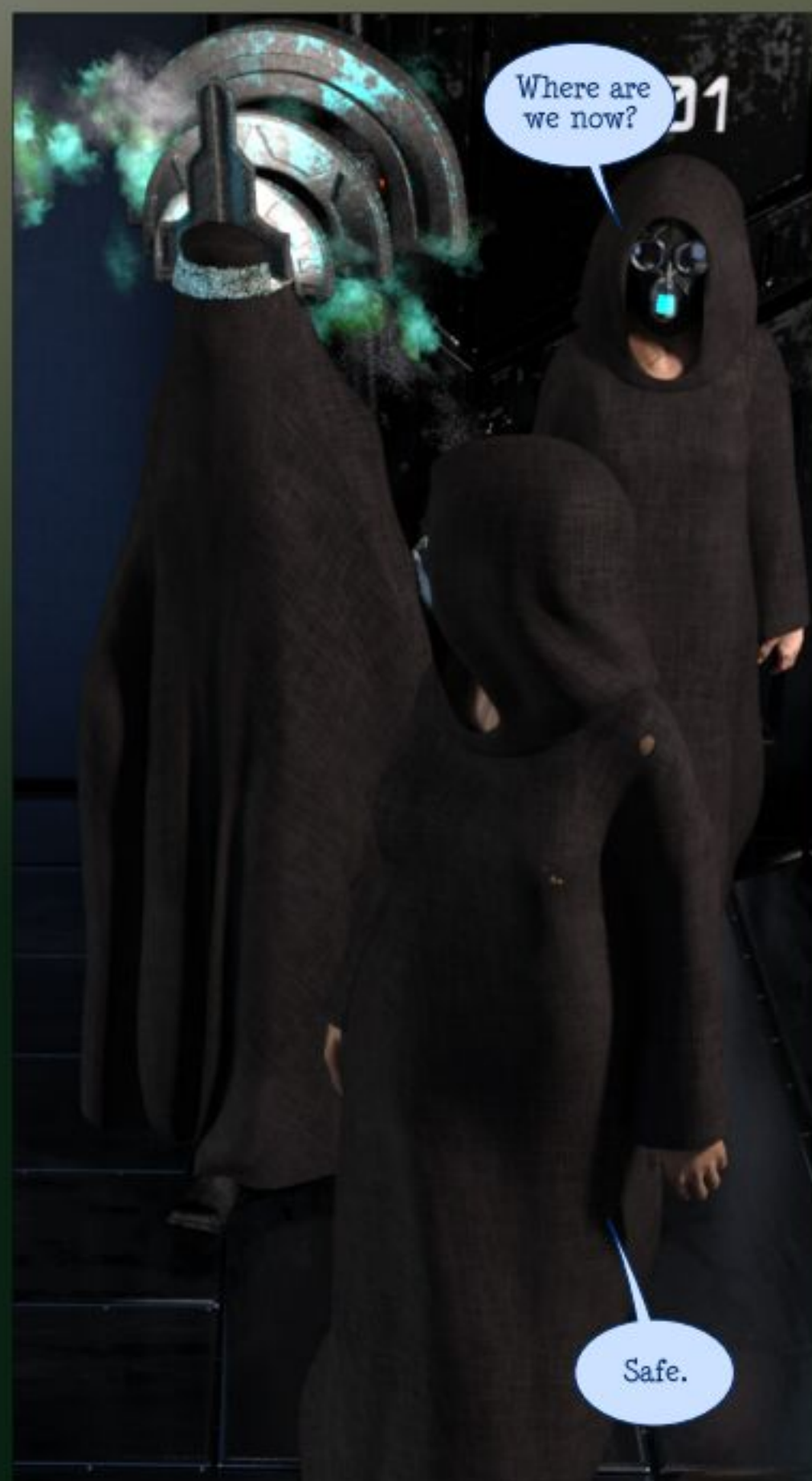
--ahem--

Everyone stop right now!

These three will be placed in custody of the garda. They are wanted for questioning, and two of them for escaping custody and assaulting our personnel.

If the rest of you disperse peacefully, we'll overlook your illegal use of weapons ...

That.



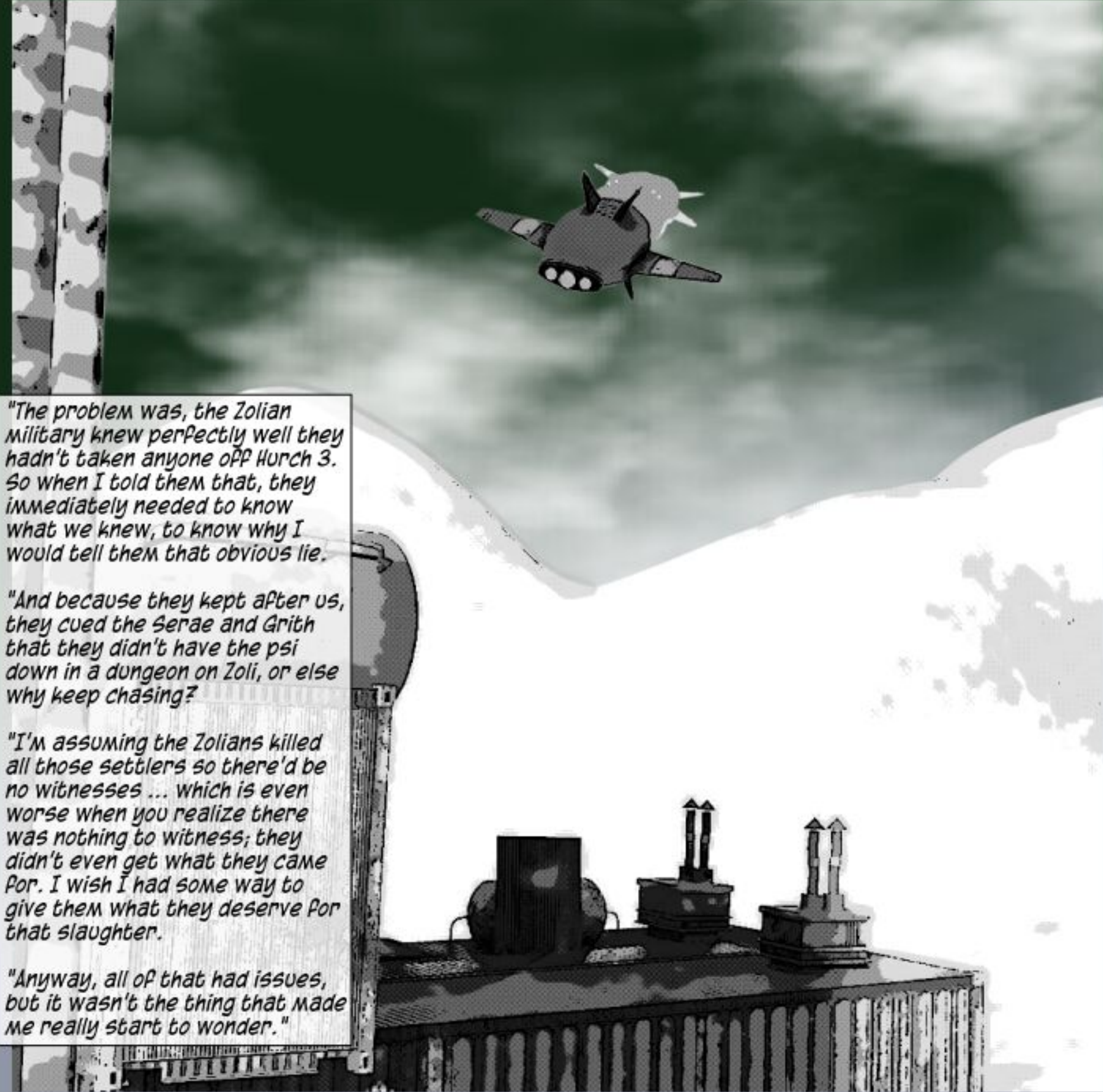


I admit you think Past on your Feet. And I was willing to accept your lack of reaction to your sister possibly being dead. Maybe you were just stunned.

Anyway, it's the other lie that really got us both into trouble.

You had to tell it--if you hadn't said at least one settler was taken, then later, when I found out this was all about psis--and you had to assume I would--then I'd know the psi was you.

And saying you thought two were taken left you more wiggle room later if you needed it.

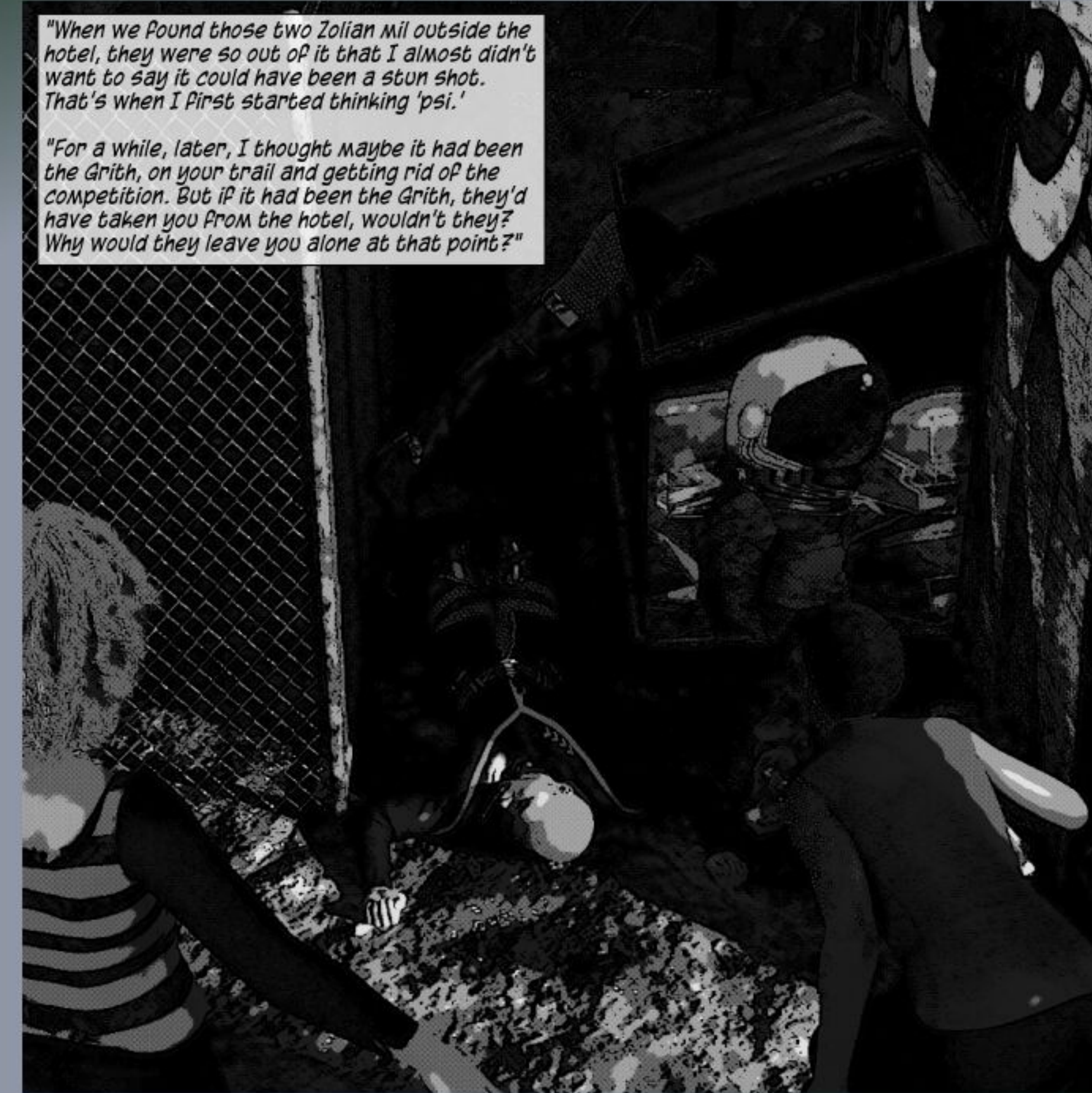


"The problem was, the Zolian Military knew perfectly well they hadn't taken anyone off Hurch 3. So when I told them that, they immediately needed to know what we knew, to know why I would tell them that obvious lie.

"And because they kept after us, they cued the Serae and Grith that they didn't have the psi down in a dungeon on Zoli, or else why keep chasing?"

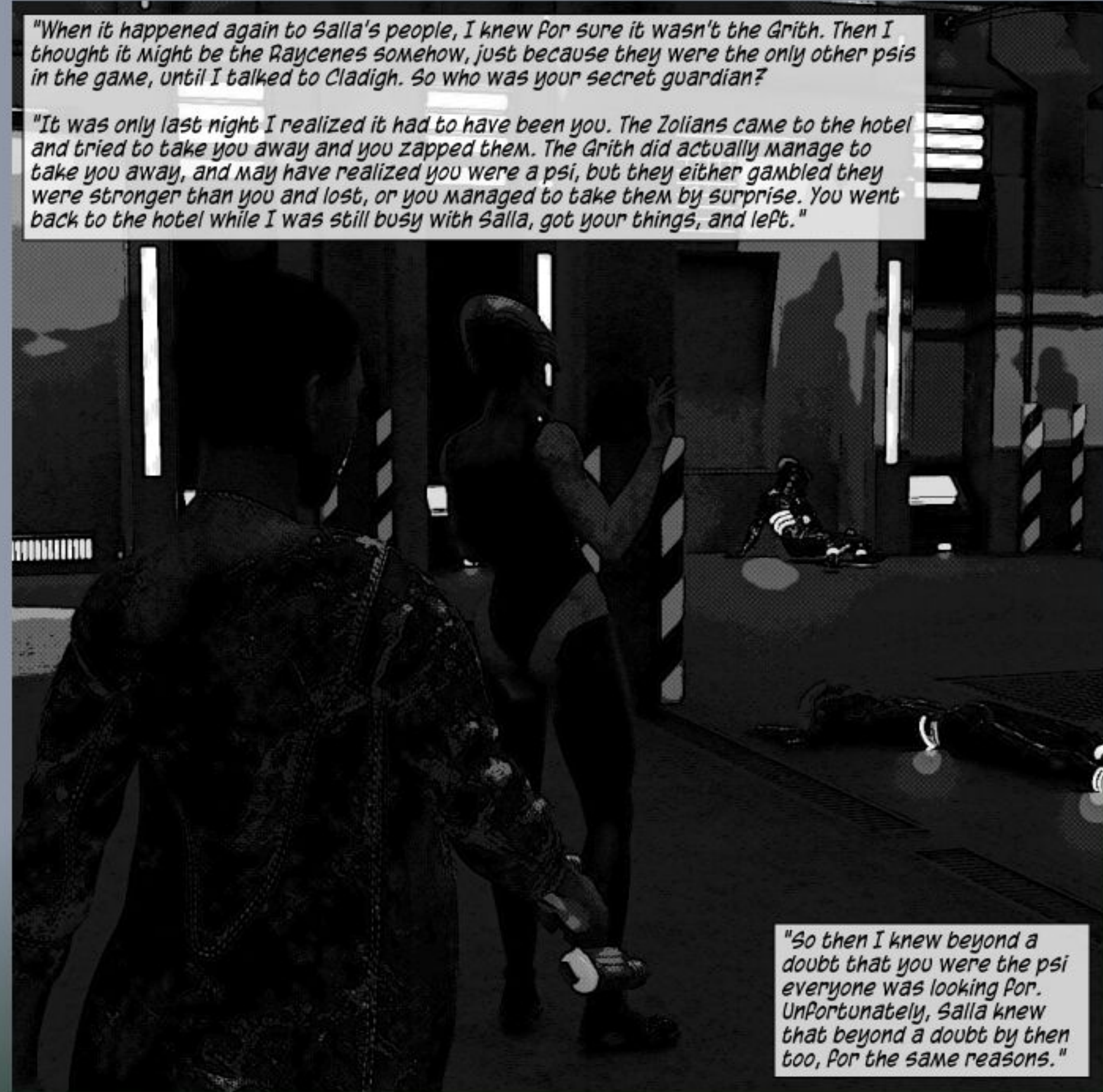
"I'm assuming the Zolians killed all those settlers so there'd be no witnesses ... which is even worse when you realize there was nothing to witness; they didn't even get what they came for. I wish I had some way to give them what they deserve for that slaughter.

"Anyway, all of that had issues, but it wasn't the thing that made me really start to wonder."



"When we found those two Zolian mil outside the hotel, they were so out of it that I almost didn't want to say it could have been a stun shot. That's when I first started thinking 'psi.'"

"For a while, later, I thought maybe it had been the Grith, on your trail and getting rid of the competition. But if it had been the Grith, they'd have taken you from the hotel, wouldn't they? Why would they leave you alone at that point?"



"When it happened again to Salla's people, I knew for sure it wasn't the Grith. Then I thought it might be the Raycenes somehow, just because they were the only other psis in the game, until I talked to Cladigh. So who was your secret guardian?"

"It was only last night I realized it had to have been you. The Zolians came to the hotel and tried to take you away and you zapped them. The Grith did actually manage to take you away, and may have realized you were a psi, but they either gambled they were stronger than you and lost, or you managed to take them by surprise. You went back to the hotel while I was still busy with Salla, got your things, and left."

"So then I knew beyond a doubt that you were the psi everyone was looking for. Unfortunately, Salla knew that beyond a doubt by then too, for the same reasons."



At that point, throwing all of them against each other was our best bet.

And we got away, which is great, but ...

They're not going to stop coming after me. Simi's not going to stop sending people after me. She doesn't forgive.

I can't join the Tanngrevers. That group's all dead--because of me--and if there are other ones, I don't know where to find them.

Where do I go now? Where do I hide?

That's Cladigh's department.



We have a community on Cowley 6. The culture there is such that nobody ever gets in anybody else's business.

You should come join us. I think you'll like it there.

It sounds like you're already pretty strong, probably already adept, but there's plenty still to learn.

I've been there for years and I'm still learning things. Nobody but us is studying use of psi abilities for the benefit of the people who have them.

We don't want to make you a weapon or experiment. We just want you to have a good life.



That ... sounds nice.

Will we be able to get there? I mean, with people looking for me?

Absolutely. We'll just walk you out in a robe and mask again. No one here has any reason to suspect the Raycenes of anything, other than being kind of strange.

We have some packing to do, but we can probably leave in two days or so.



Well, as the saying goes, I think my work here is done.

Please try to use your powers only for good, OK?

No, wait!!



You can't just go like that!

Stick around for a couple of days ... we could all leave at the same time ...

I'm flattered.

But I also have a punch Perry I want to catch today, and unlike you, I don't have a free out. I'm going to have to sneak to the port, and I may need to bribe someone when I get there ... I don't think I'll be coming back to this system for a while.

But, just so you know, I have friends on Cowley 6 and I pass by there a fair bit.

What I think you should do is become better acquainted with each other.

Now that's an idea.



I'm still peeling like I didn't get nearly enough soak time.

I wonder if I can find a job somewhere that's got a lot of water ...

END