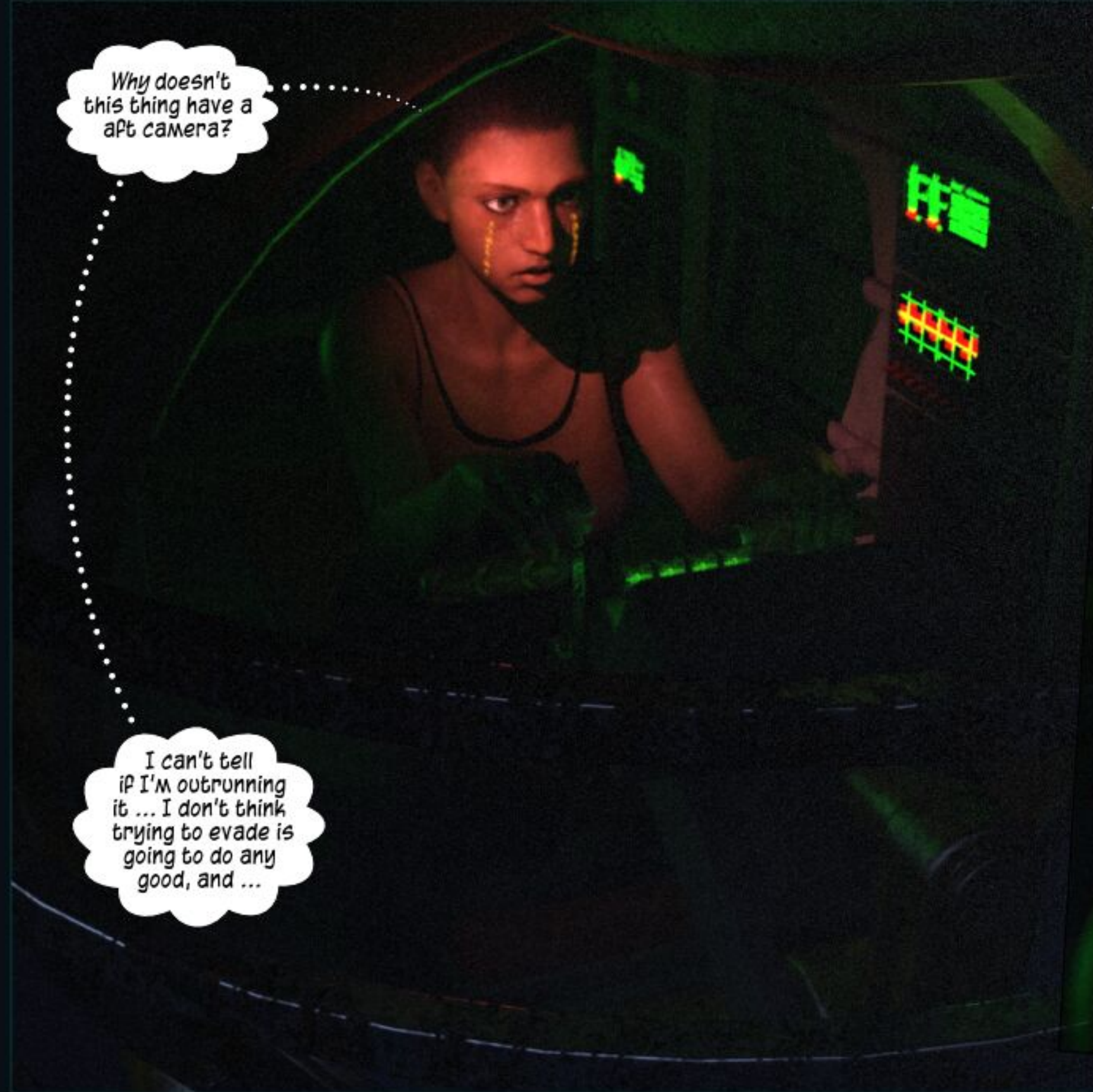


MY NAME IS RANDA AND I'M A QUITCLAIM

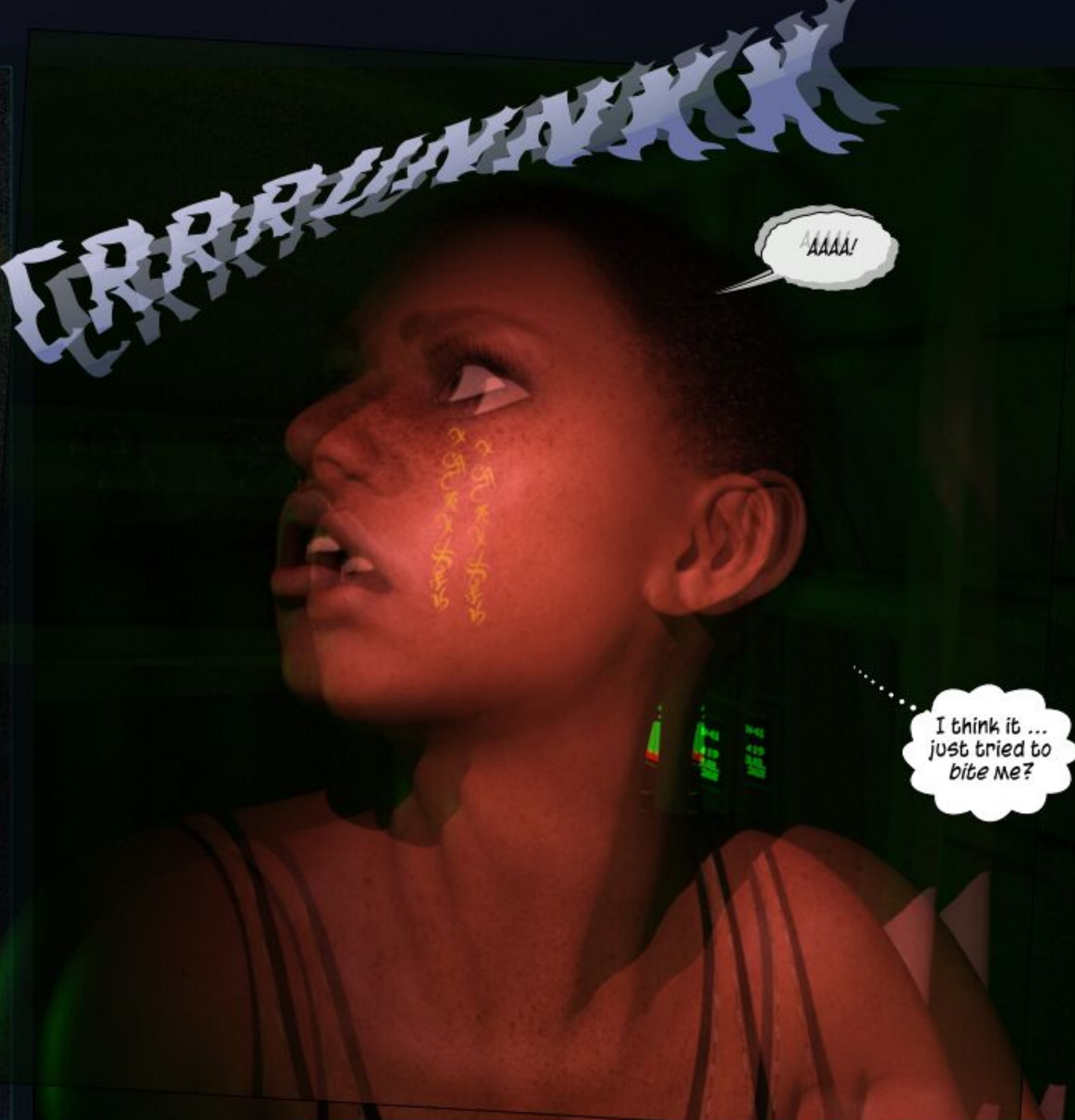
I'M NOT SURE HOW MANY SITUATIONS I'VE BEEN IN, LIFETIME, WHERE I'VE THOUGHT TO MYSELF "WHAT AM I DOING HERE? HOW DID I GET CAUGHT UP IN THIS?"

BUT THIS WAS DEFINITELY ONE OF THEM: DIVING THROUGH COLD AND DARKNESS, LOOKING FOR SOMETHING THAT MIGHT NOT EVEN BE THERE, WITH SOMETHING VERY LARGE AND UNFRIENDLY RIGHT BEHIND ME.



Why doesn't this thing have a apt camera?

I can't tell if I'm outrunning it ... I don't think trying to evade is going to do any good, and ...



AAAA!

I think it ... just tried to bite me?



I'D LEARNED A LOT OF THINGS ABOUT DEEP OCEAN SINCE ARRIVING ON BHERIA. SUNLIGHT ONLY MANAGES TO PENETRATE TO ABOUT 200 METERS. BELOW THAT IT'S PITCH DARK AND FREEZING.

EVERY 100 METERS YOU DROP INCREASES PRESSURE, BECAUSE OF THE WEIGHT OF ALL THAT WATER, BY TEN ATMOSPHERES.

I WAS SOMEWHERE AROUND 4000 METERS. THAT WAS MORE THAN TWO TONS OF PRESSURE. EVERYWHERE.

IF IT MANAGED TO BREACH MY HULL, THAT WOULD BE THE END. I'D HAVE LESS TIME TO SURVIVE IT THAN I WOULD A HULL BREACH IN SPACE.

Can it bite through? The hull's very strong ... but that thing has really big teeth ...

This ship doesn't just need an apt camera, it needs a weapon.



OK, I'm obviously not outrunning it ... I've got to figure out some way to discourage it ... before it tries for another chomp.

THE DEEP SECRET

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



LET'S GO BACK TO A MONTH BEFORE THAT.

I HAD JUST COME OFF TWO CONSECUTIVE JOBS. BOTH WERE HORRIBLE AND NEITHER PAID WELL. I DECIDED I NEEDED A FEW DAYS IN A PLACE WITH A POOL, A SHOWER, A BETTER BED, AND FOOD I DIDN'T HAVE TO REHYDRATE. FOR MY MENTAL HEALTH.



Wow. Are you twins, or were you grown in a vat?

Come with us, please.

Need a reason.

Someone important wants to talk to you.



Oh. You could have just sent me a message asking to meet.

I didn't think you'd be responsive.

SELA TYRELL. HEIR TO THE TYRELL COMPANIES. RICH, POWERFUL, PRAGMATIC, AND PROBABLY ONLY SITUATIONALLY ETHICAL.

I HAD WORKED FOR HER ONCE BEFORE.

SHE WAS FOUR RINGS FROM HER HEADQUARTERS, SO IF SHE'D COME OUT JUST TO FIND ME, THAT FELT PRETTY IMPORTANT.

... and why would you think that?

Because of the last time.

If I went back to that pretty planet in the middle of nowhere, and searched it top to bottom ... would I find Merlon McKenzie? Alive?

Maybe. I mean, I can't rule it out.

The akpesh said they'd killed him when they cut him out of the deal. If they were telling the truth--and they were scared enough to--then they could have dumped his body anywhere. They could have spaced him.

But if they were lying and he's hiding on the planet, we might still never find him. It's a big planet.

I did what I was contracted for. You got the answers.

I didn't say you hadn't.

And I know you were telling the truth about the rest of it. I sent someone to check. Found the mine with the burned Pungus beds, the remains of the Cleit camp ... It's only what you told me about McKenzie I doubt.

RANDA KNOWS PERFECTLY WELL WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED TO MCKENZIE. IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW TOO, READ "THE HARD WAY."

Doubt all you like. I can't stop you.

You know I can make life very difficult for you.

I'm aware.

... And that didn't work either.

I admit, I'm always pleased to find someone who doesn't intimidate. But now I have no levers.

Wait.

Is all this about a job? I mean, a different job? Why not just ask me?

Because I don't imagine I can get you to take it. You were notably reluctant about the other one.

Let's sit down.

I sent a team to a planet called Btheria to do a complete geological survey.

The job would have taken many months, and I didn't expect to hear much from them while they were in progress. But it develops that my agent there has had no reports from them at all. They went out and never came back, apparently. A message from her a week ago said she fears the worst.

This is the part where I ask why you don't send some of your own people. Or get your agent there to scrape up a search team.

My people are always competent ... but there's such a thing as a situation that they're not trained for. I need someone who understands--

Risk. Just come out and say it. There's some danger involved and you don't want to risk your own.

You know, you weren't honest with me about this on the other job either.

You knew exactly where McKenzie had to be. You directed me there. Why not send your own team? Because you suspected there was danger, and you preferred risking my neck.

To be fair, I ask you because you're much better at those situations than anyone else I can get. You're more likely to come back alive.

Maybe, but that's not the point. I'm much less likely to come back alive when I fly in blind.

You wouldn't think there was danger for no reason. You're not the skittish type. You think someone deliberately vanished your crew, and that means you can think of a reason why.

Tell.

Did you wonder why there was no settlement on that planet I sent you to, even though it's beautiful, temperate climate, no nasty surprises, not disputed, so on?

There are small groups of people who settle planets just to have a place to live ... but you don't do large-scale settlement just to farm. Nobody invests in it.

You can farm food and biopower anywhere. It's not compelling. What actually compels settlement is scarce resources. Things we can't grow or make. We thought that planet had some, once. McKenzie convinced me with different mining methods he could still find some. Of course it turned out he was lying.

Btheria may have resources like that. That's what we were surveying to find out. But Btheria already has people living on it. Some of those people ... would not have liked the idea of the survey. There's always some.

We find that extractive work is often unpopular with a certain segment that has ideas about keeping a planet "unspoiled" somehow, even if it means hindering their own growth.

You think it's unreasonable that someone might object to your mining the shit out of their planet and just leaving a lot of toxic waste to show for it?

Tyrell Mines do not pollute! A mine that pollutes is one that's been operated shoddily. We don't leave toxic waste, because we try not to have any kind of waste. Everything has a use. Everything.

And meanwhile Btheria is trying to scavenge an economy from fisheries, luxury homes, and tourism. They could use some industry.

Maybe ... but if it came to that, there's no question which side I'd be on ... which means this time you've got the wrong person for the job.

Ah, but even if you don't sympathize, surely you agree that killing a four-person crew just to prevent the possibility of mining is ... unreasonable?

You don't know they're dead ...

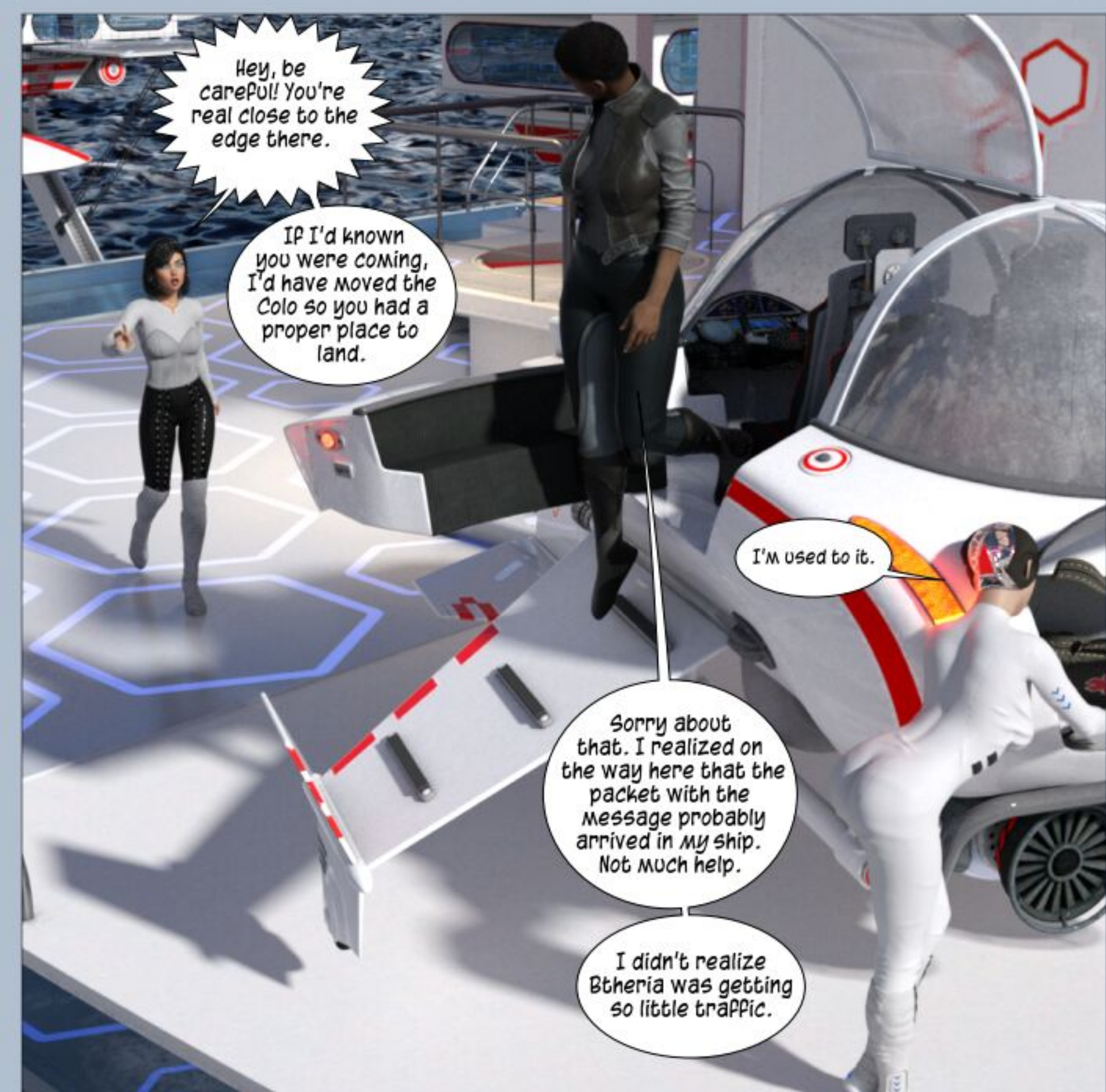
You're right, I don't. That's why I need you to find out.

Look, you can't affect the outcome here. I'm going to end up sending another crew no matter what you find. But I would like to know what I'm sending them into. As you say, flying blind is bad.

I trust you to get to the bottom of this. It seems to be what you do. I heard you also rescued a Navy squad during the McKenzie business. Just for the fun of it, apparently.

And I don't have anyone else I trust to do it, or I'd send them instead. That's the truth.

IT TURNS OUT BThERIA DOESN'T HAVE ANY LANDMASSSES. ACTUALLY, IT HAS THEM, THEY'RE JUST UNDERWATER. YOU MAY THINK THAT'S ME HAVING A JOKE, BUT IT'S IMPORTANT.



Hey, be careful! You're real close to the edge there.

If I'd known you were coming, I'd have moved the Colo so you had a proper place to land.

I'm used to it.

Sorry about that. I realized on the way here that the packet with the message probably arrived in my ship. Not much help.

I didn't realize Btheria was getting so little traffic.



Oh, but we're building steadily!

And there are so many lifestyle opportunities here right now at reasonable rates! Best to get in before the rush, you know.

I'm pleased to show you around the Blue Horizons properties, but if you'd like to see a furnished unit, we can just go downstairs; mine has the typical setup ...

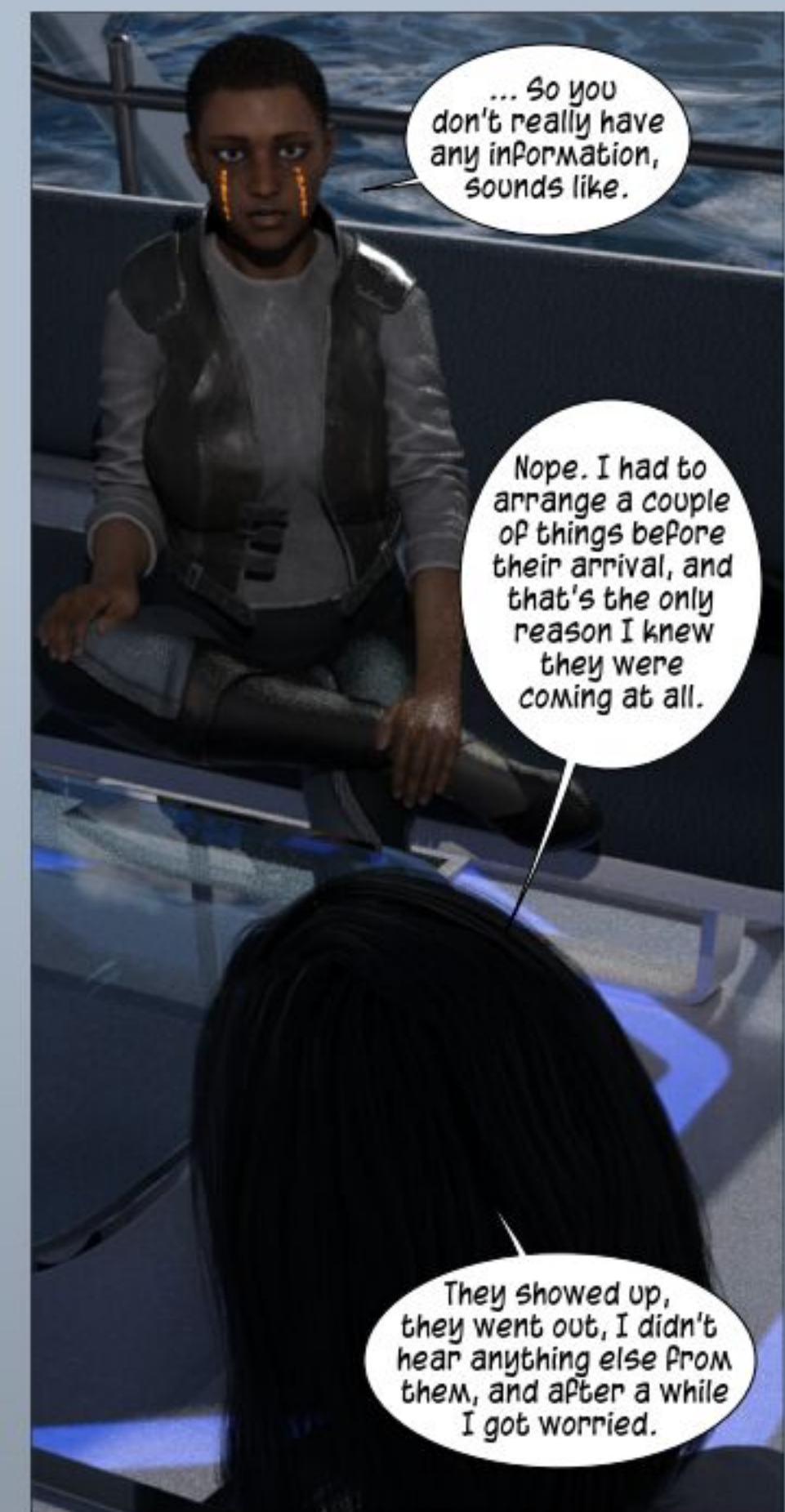
Ah ... I think you've got the wrong idea.

I'm not a buyer. My name's Randa Guerrero. I'm here on behalf of Sela Tyrell.

I was told you were her agent? Tevi Toren? Did I make a mistake?

Oh!

No, that's me. Come on inside.



... So you don't really have any information, sounds like.

Nope. I had to arrange a couple of things before their arrival, and that's the only reason I knew they were coming at all.

They showed up, they went out, I didn't hear anything else from them, and after a while I got worried.

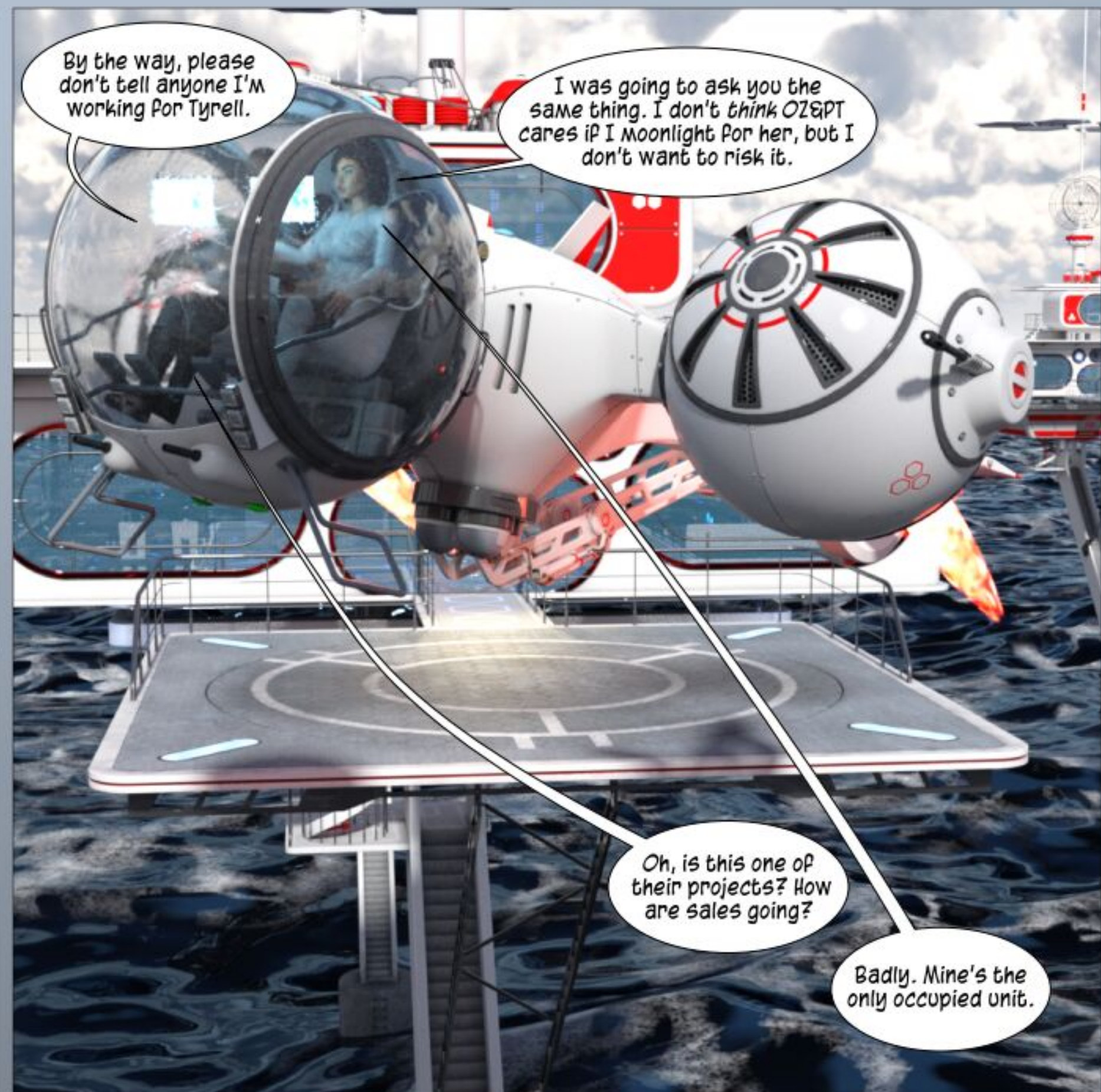


Tyrell suspects Pool play.

Yeah, that could be. The rollers probably wouldn't care, as long as they got a cut, but the backshop Polks might ... and who knows what the Pathoms think ...

I don't know what a lot of that means.

I'll explain on the way. I'll take you back to the resort islands ... I can't put you up here, there's no space and I have to keep it showroom ready.



By the way, please don't tell anyone I'm working for Tyrell.

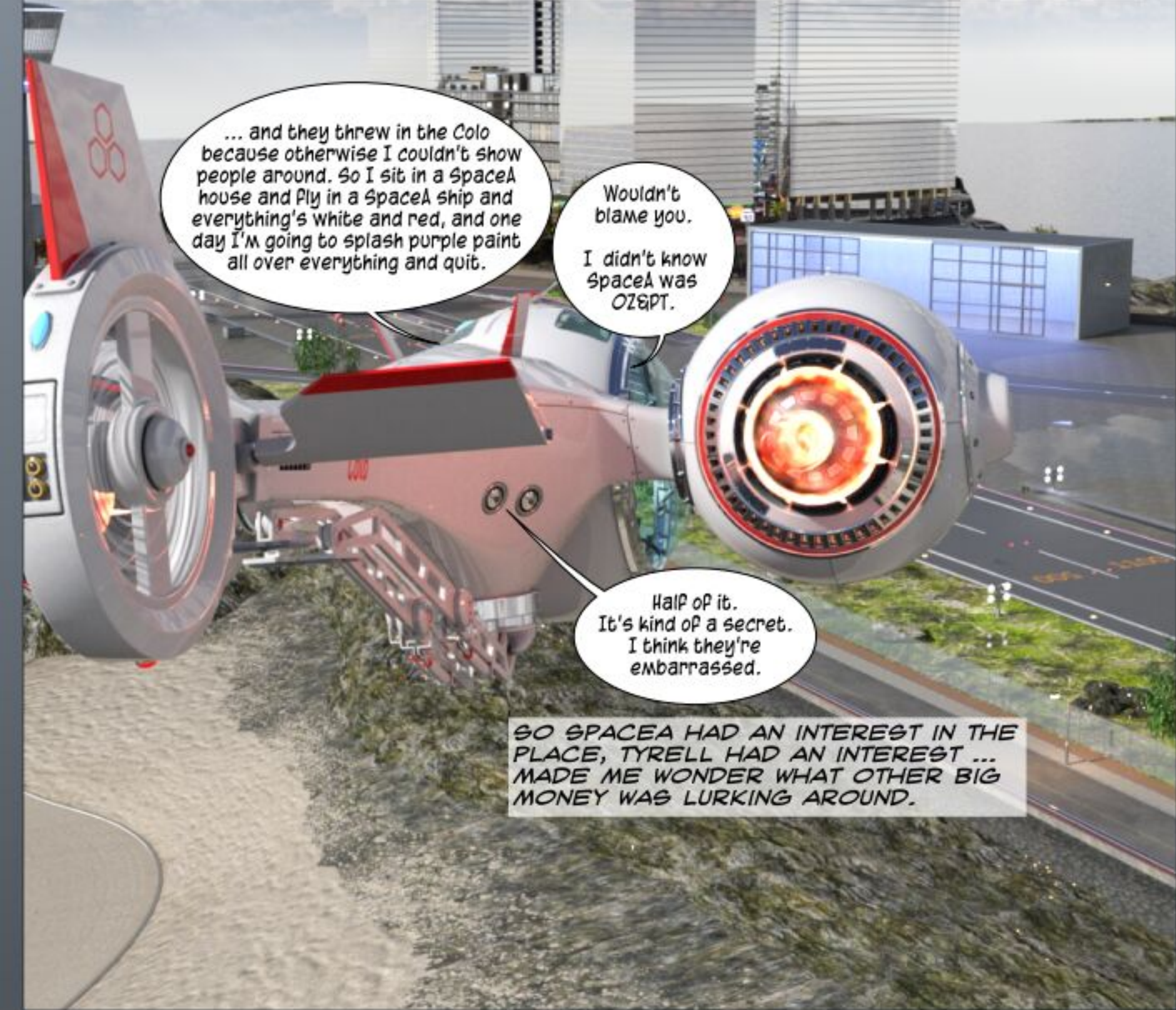
I was going to ask you the same thing. I don't think OZ&PT cares if I moonlight for her, but I don't want to risk it.

Oh, is this one of their projects? How are sales going?

Badly. Mine's the only occupied unit.

WHAT I MEANT ABOUT LANDMASSSES IS THAT THE SEA FLOOR ON BThERIA ISN'T ALL THE SAME DEPTH. IF IT WERE, PROBABLY NO ONE WOULD BE LIVING THERE. SOME PARTS, THE WATER'S ONLY A COUPLE OF METERS DEEP. ON SOME OF THOSE PARTS, PEOPLE HAD BUILT UP LAND OR DIKED OUT WATER OR BOTH, AND MADE ISLANDS. THESE WERE WHERE THE TOURISM WAS.

SUCH AS IT WAS, ANYWAY. THEY HAD AN ENORMOUS, ALMOST BRAND-NEW AIR/SPACE PORT. IT WAS SITTING EMPTY. MY ARRIVAL HAD BEEN THE ONLY OUTSIDE SHIP IN FIVE DAYS.



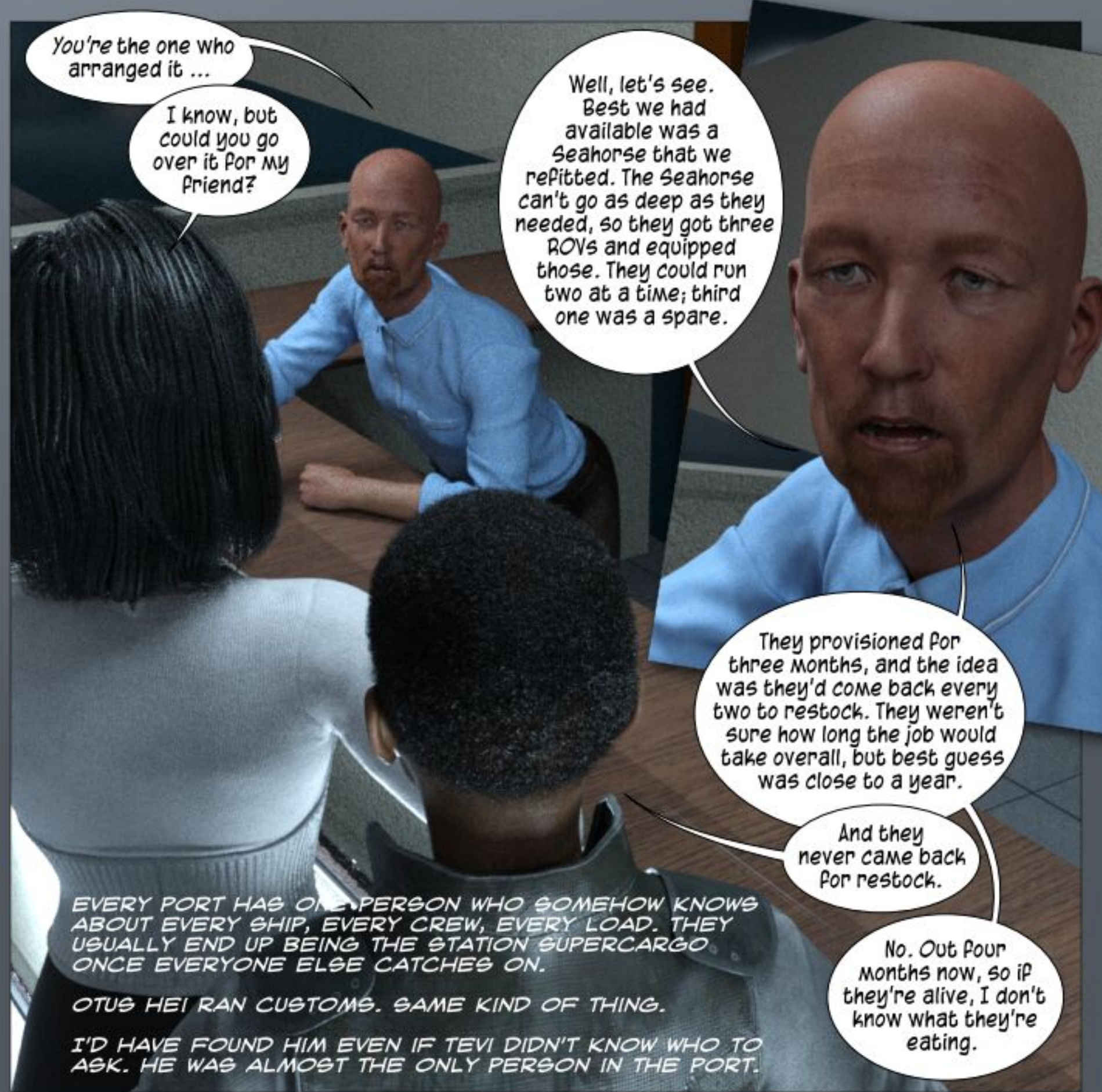
... and they threw in the Colo because otherwise I couldn't show people around. So I sit in a SpaceA house and ply in a SpaceA ship and everything's white and red, and one day I'm going to splash purple paint all over everything and quit.

Wouldn't blame you.

I didn't know SpaceA was OZ&PT.

Half of it. It's kind of a secret. I think they're embarrassed.

SO SPACEA HAD AN INTEREST IN THE PLACE, TYRELL HAD AN INTEREST ... MADE ME WONDER WHAT OTHER BIG MONEY WAS LURKING AROUND.



You're the one who arranged it ...

I know, but could you go over it for my friend?

Well, let's see. Best we had available was a Seahorse that we re-pitted. The Seahorse can't go as deep as they needed, so they got three ROVs and equipped those. They could run two at a time; third one was a spare.

They provisioned for three months, and the idea was they'd come back every two to restock. They weren't sure how long the job would take overall, but best guess was close to a year.

And they never came back for restock.

No. Out four months now, so if they're alive, I don't know what they're eating.

EVERY PORT HAS ONE PERSON WHO SOMEHOW KNOWS ABOUT EVERY SHIP, EVERY CREW, EVERY LOAD. THEY USUALLY END UP BEING THE STATION SUPERCARGO ONCE EVERYONE ELSE CATCHES ON.

OTUS HEI RAN CUSTOMS. SAME KIND OF THING.

I'D HAVE FOUND HIM EVEN IF TEVI DIDN'T KNOW WHO TO ASK. HE WAS ALMOST THE ONLY PERSON IN THE PORT.



Could they have made port somewhere else?

Can't rule it out ... but there's only one place I can think of where I wouldn't have heard about it, and I don't think that'd be too likely. Not a friendly port, let's say.

Did they pile ... whatever ocean craft have instead of a flight plan?

Great circles, in offset loops, starting at the equator. The idea was to cover the whole planet. But I don't know how far they got.



Hey!

You're very interested, huh? Know anything I should know?

Sea monsters got them! Shoun't go out in the deeps.

Chary, that's not--

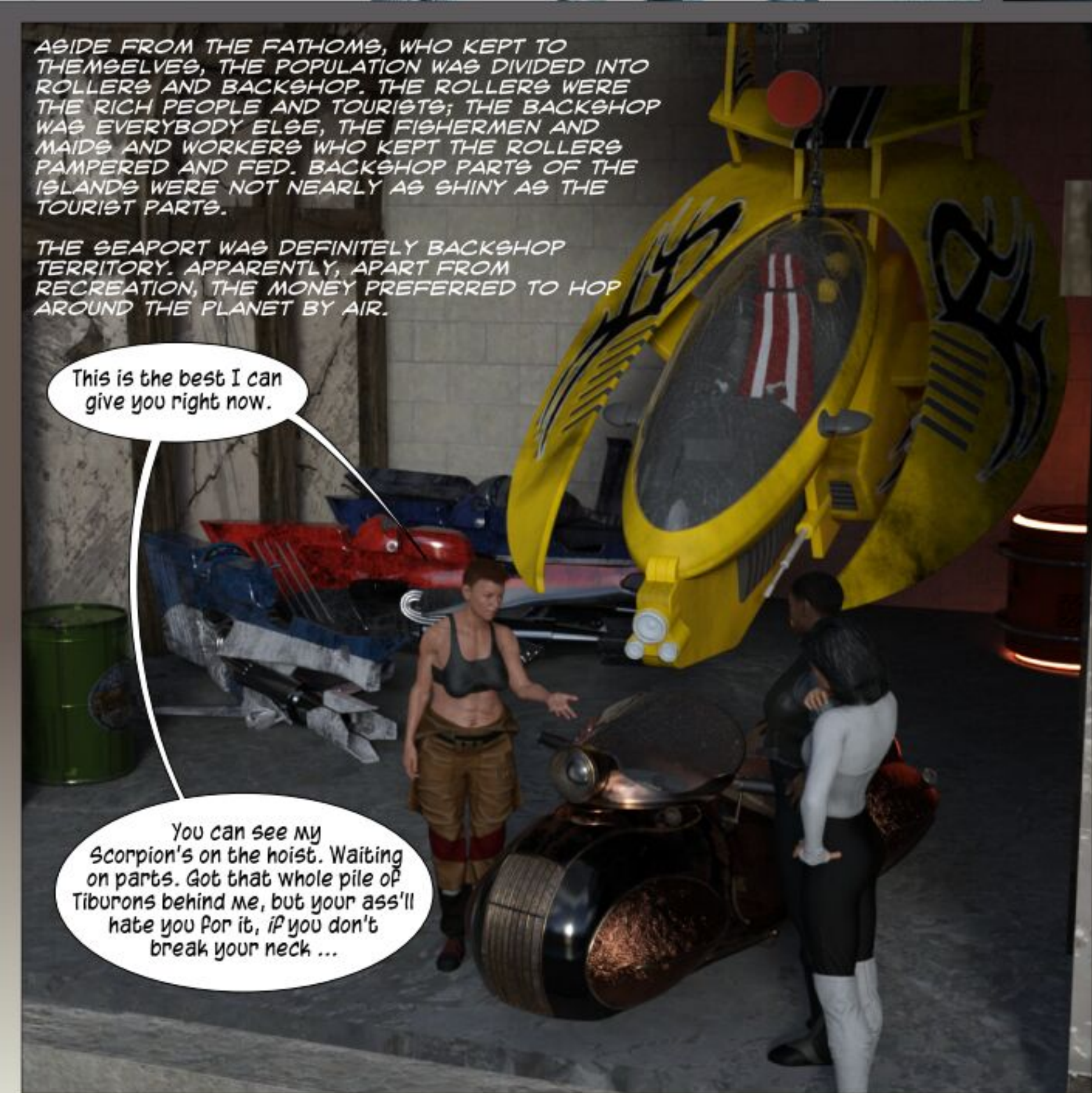
Otus don't believe us, but he don't go out none. Deeps're bad.

Sea monsters. Seriously?

Ask the hunter, don't believe me! He knows! Fishes the deeps alone. Seen things.

All right, I will. Where do I find him?

How should I know? He don't tell anybody a thing. Ask at the fishery.



ASIDE FROM THE FATHOMS, WHO KEPT TO THEMSELVES, THE POPULATION WAS DIVIDED INTO ROLLERS AND BACKSHOP. THE ROLLERS WERE THE RICH PEOPLE AND TOURISTS; THE BACKSHOP WAS EVERYBODY ELSE, THE FISHERMEN AND MAIDS AND WORKERS WHO KEPT THE ROLLERS PAMPERED AND FED. BACKSHOP PARTS OF THE ISLANDS WERE NOT NEARLY AS SHINY AS THE TOURIST PARTS.

THE SEAPORT WAS DEFINITELY BACKSHOP TERRITORY. APPARENTLY, APART FROM RECREATION, THE MONEY PREFERRED TO HOP AROUND THE PLANET BY AIR.

This is the best I can give you right now.

You can see my scorpion's on the hoist. Waiting on parts. Got that whole pile of Tiburons behind me, but your ass'll hate you for it, if you don't break your neck ...



Isn't this one of the ones that corp throws in as a freebie for people who buy their giant yachts?

Yeah. That's where I got it. Guy bought a yacht, didn't need the bike.

But it's better than it looks. Fast, stable--not like those damned Tiburons--and reliable. And it's got a nav setup, so I can put coords for the fishery in for you.

I'll let it out cheap. It's just gathering dust right now anyway. Nobody rents around here.

Randa, is this a good idea?

It looks like it's in decent shape ...

I don't mean the bike.

Oh. Well, this is the only thing I have to chase right now, so I don't have a choice.

WHEN THE LOCALS SAID "THE FISHERY," THEY MEANT THIS PROCESSING PLANT. THE FISHERS HAD MOSTLY TAKEN TO BRINGING THEIR CATCH HERE INSTEAD OF TRYING TO SELL IT IN PORT, WHERE BUYERS WERE MUCH LESS RELIABLE.



Sture Jurgen. They call him "the hunter" because he acts like one.

He's not a net or long-lines fisher. He's a harpooner. Enormous spear-gun on the bow of his ship. Goes out to the deeps and looks for big prey.

Most of the others think he's crazy. They may be right. No one else goes out there unless they have to.

Because of "sea monsters"?

Been talking to some of them, I see.

It's not as ridiculous as all that. I don't think there are sea monsters as such, but Jurgen has brought in fish big enough that he had trouble hauling them.

Something that size could stave in the hull of a ship, easily, unless it was armored. Or take a bite out of it. The teeth on some of these things have to be seen to be believed.

... I definitely need to talk to Jurgen.



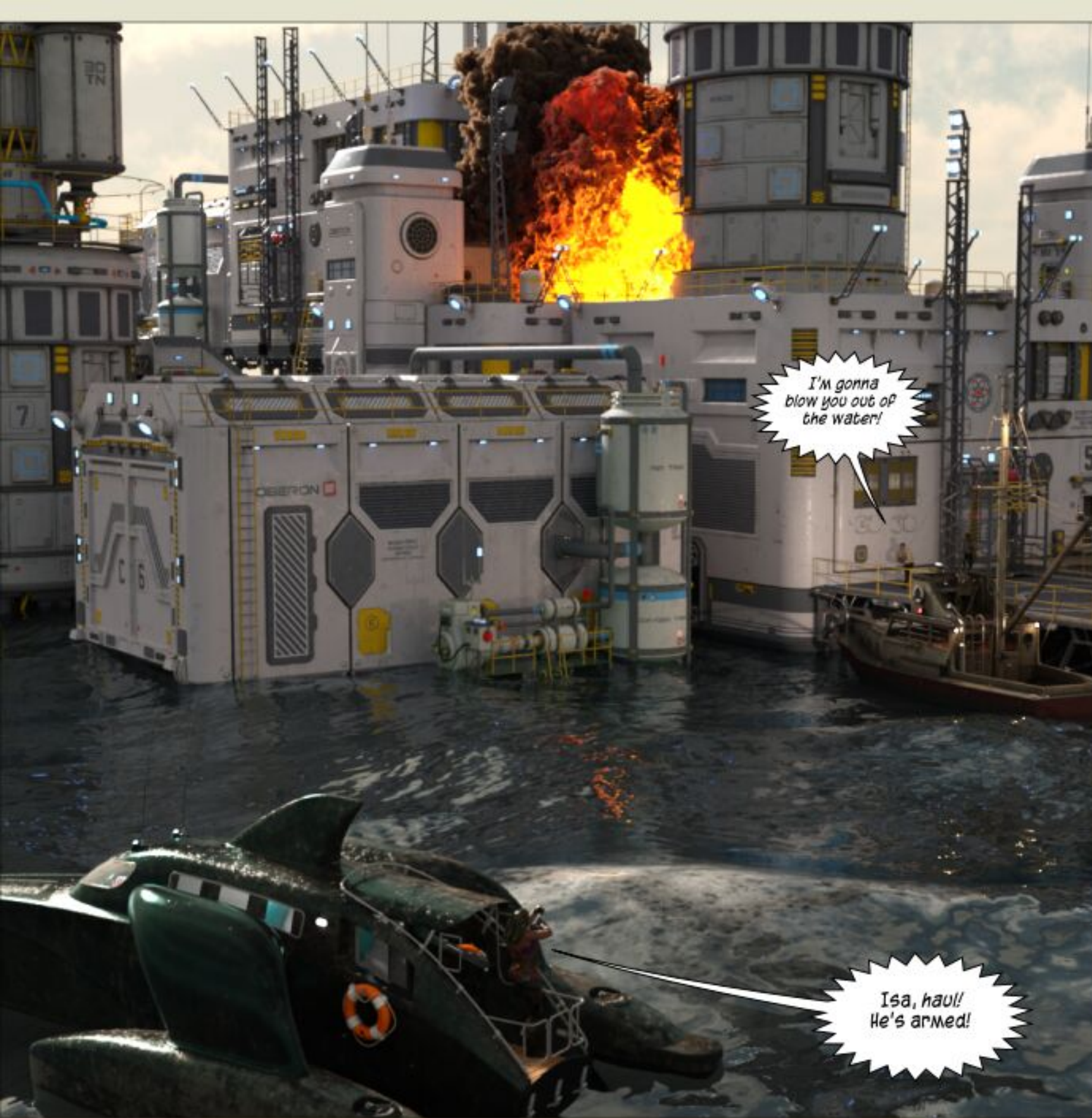
I can't tell you where to look for him. I don't know. I'm not sure anyone knows. Word is the man's also a hermit. Shows up in Backtown to get drunk sometimes, shows up here to sell his catch, and that's it.

He only comes in here every three or four days, so I don't think you want to stand around waiting for him to show up ...

Unless you want to hire out? You look like you could stevedore all right. I have a lot of crates and not enough help--

Oh, not again!

You jakazes aren't getting away with it this time!!



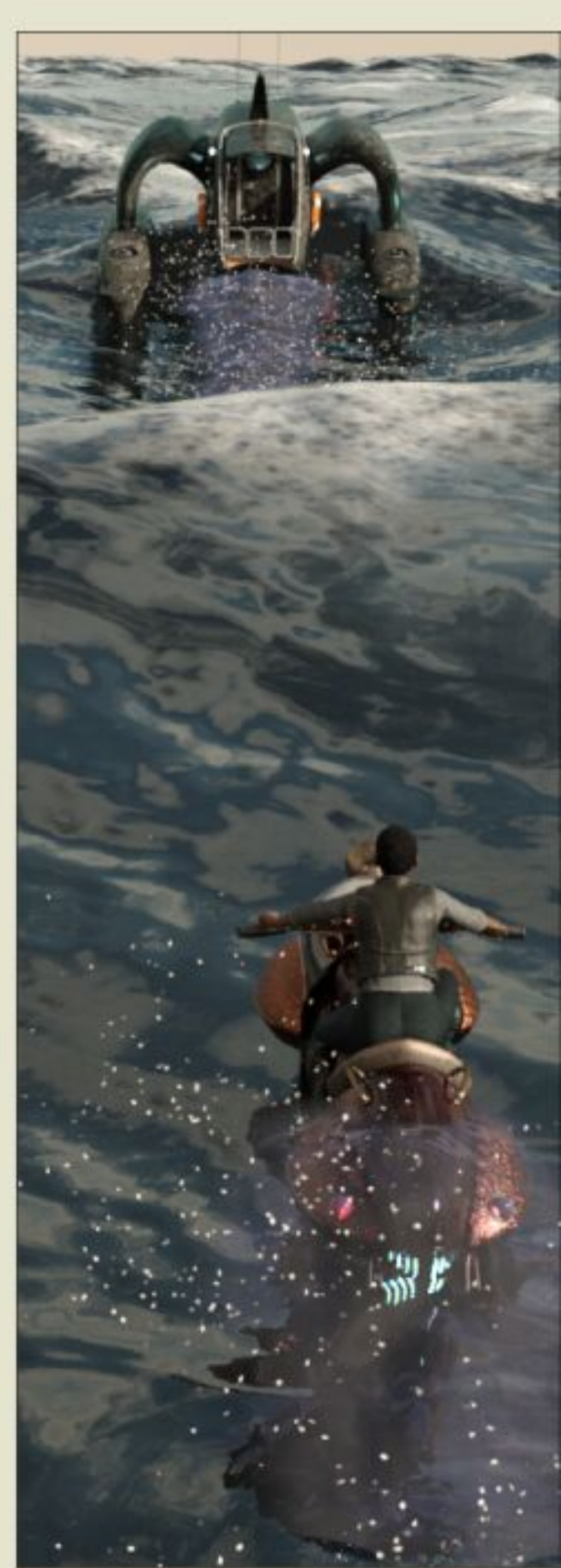
I'm gonna blow you out of the water!

Isa, hau! He's armed!



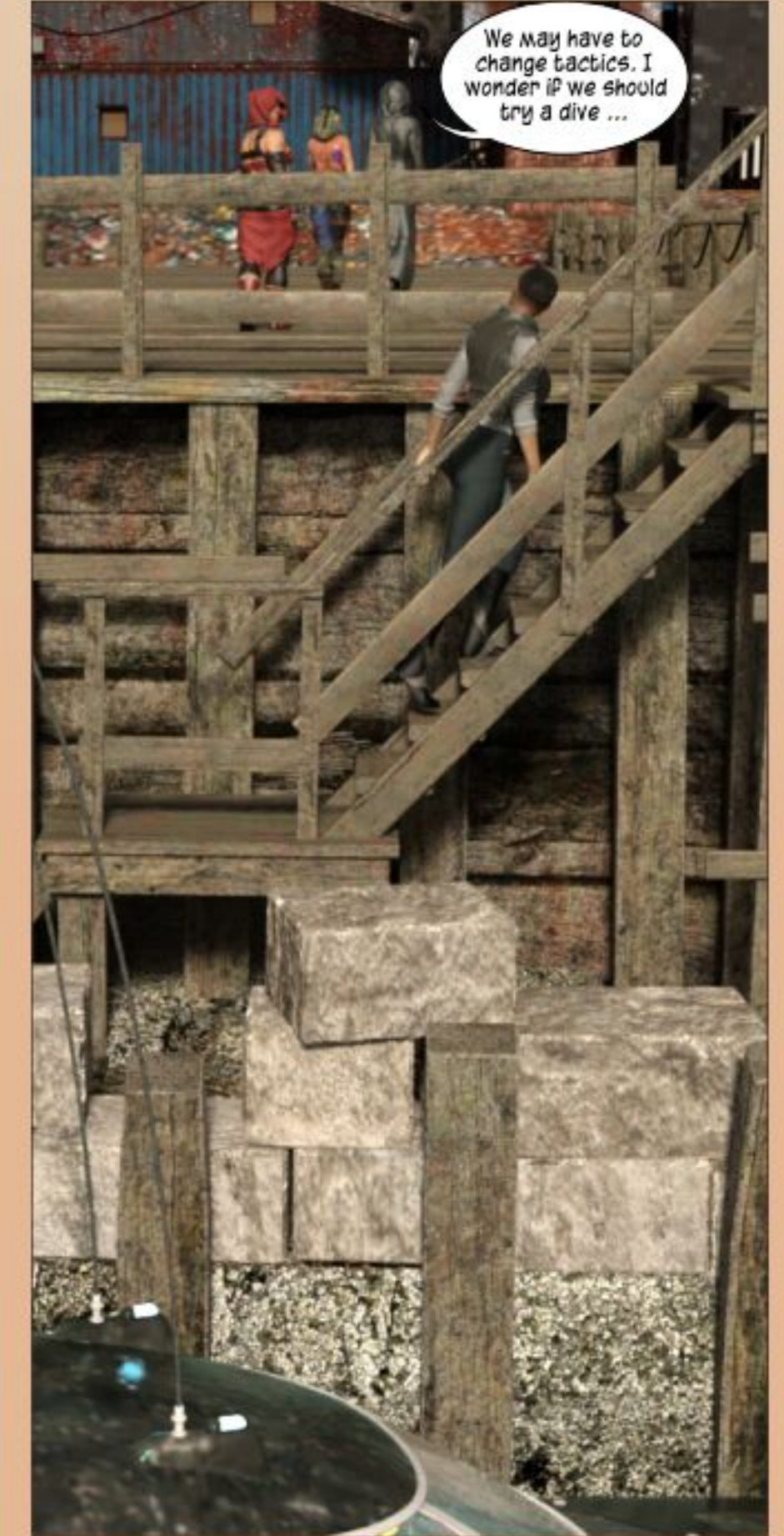
Every week with your shit ... you know how much you've cost us?

They're already out of his range. I need to get to the bike, Past.



I ADMIT IT WAS A LITTLE BIT OF A LEAP. SOMETIMES MY BRAIN DOES THAT AND I GO ALONG WITH IT AND FIGURE IT OUT LATER. IN THIS CASE THE THINKING WAS: PEOPLE WHO WOULD TRY TO BLOW UP AN INDUSTRIAL FISHERY WERE EXACTLY THE SAME KIND OF PEOPLE WHO MIGHT TRY TO PREVENT A MINING OPERATION. AND IT WAS A BETTER LEAD THAN THE HUNTER.

I RECOGNIZED THE PLACE THEY LED ME FROM TEVI'S DESCRIPTION. IT WAS CALLED BACKTOWN. TEVI HAD ALSO WARNED ME NOT TO GO THERE, SO IT SOUNDED INTERESTING ALREADY.



We may have to change tactics. I wonder if we should try a dive ...



Damn, she walks even Paster than I do. Almost lost her around that corner ...

What happened to the other two?



Don't know who you're working for, but it doesn't matter.

Oh, there you are.



THEY MAY HAVE BEEN THE MUSCLE, BUT THEY WEREN'T PROS.



AMATEURS. USUALLY DON'T PAY ENOUGH ATTENTION DURING A FIGHT.

Hold her!



WHICH MEANS THE PRO WILL HAVE THEM TRIPPING OVER EACH OTHER IN NO TIME.

ugh?

BUT THEY DID WHAT THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO DO: THEY LET THEIR LEADER GET AWAY FROM ME.

EVEN NOT KNOWING ANYTHING ABOUT BACKTOWN I COULD TELL THERE WERE A THOUSAND PLACES TO HIDE IN HERE.

MY FIRST FATHOM SIGHTING. MAYBE MY ONLY ONE. TEVI SAID THEY DIDN'T MINGLE.

Don't stare, chum.

Sorry.

Here for something in particular? Backtown's no place for tourists.

Did you happen to see a tall woman in a black cloak and hood?

... If you're from the Fishery, you can go get sculled.

No, I'm looking for a Fisher. Sture Jurgen. I was hoping she could tell me where he was.

NO, I HADN'T MADE ANOTHER BRAIN LEAP. I NEEDED SOME EXCUSE WHY I WAS LOOKING FOR HER AND THAT WAS THE FIRST THING I THOUGHT OF.

... Hm. Hunter's around the corner in Selly's.

Good luck with that.

IT WASN'T HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHICH ONE WAS JURGEN. THERE WERE ONLY THREE CUSTOMERS IN THE BAR, AND HE WAS THE ONE WITH FISH GUTS ON HIS CLOTHES.

Sture Jurgen?

Piss off.

I just want to ask you about deep marine life here. They tell me you know a lot--

Don't care what you want.

Don't care who you are.

Get sculled.

Can't even drink in peace ...

I WAITED THIRTY SECONDS TOO LONG TO DECIDE I'D BETTER FOLLOW HIM. WHEN I GOT OUT OF THE BAR HE WAS ALREADY NOWHERE IN SIGHT.

I ALSO LET HER GET THE DROP ON ME, SO I THINK I JUST MUST NOT HAVE BEEN HAVING A GOOD DAY.

We saw you follow us from the Fishery, you know.

I don't believe you were looking for me to point you to Jurgen.

But Shokla says you claim you're not a corp gun, so what do you want?

I'm looking for Jurgen. Really. But also anybody else who can give me information. Maybe you.

I'm trying to find out what happened to a crew that have gone missing--

The survey team?

Uh ... yes.

Don't look surprised. Not a lot of choices there. And everybody on this planet knows everything that happens. All the backshop anyway. Rollers couldn't care less.

My name's Isa. Isa Chandri. Who are you?

Randa Guerrero.

Look, I don't give a damn what's between you and the Fishery, I just want--

Yes, you do. Whether you know it or not.

But you want to talk to Jurgen, I'll take you to Jurgen.

He'll talk to you if I'm there.

Come on. It'll take a while. He lives out in the MidPlats.



IT TURNED OUT JURGEN LIVED A HUNDRED KILOMETERS AWAY FROM ANYTHING, IN A FLOATING SHACK BARELY BIG ENOUGH TO MOOR HIS BOAT TO.

Really.

Yeah. I wouldn't be able to stand it.



Jurgen?

Hope we're not waking him up ...

Ayo? Jurgen?



Chandri.

... You're not waking him up.



Tell me this was a heart attack or something.

Sorry. That hole in his shirt is a beam burn.



That's just-- Nobody here would do that! Why would someone kill--

DOWN!!



waaa!



Scut!!

uuuh



Yaaaaaa!

whoa!



Stop!!

oogh



He had to have followed Jurgen here, right?

Yes. Even if he knew where Jurgen lived--and not too many people did--those Tiburons don't have nav.

He's going the wrong way. Hope he runs out of power and drowns.

I can't believe he's dead ... Who'd have had any reason to kill Jurgen? He was just an old crazy fisher.

Did you see his face?

He was wearing a hood.

What do we do about Jurgen? Is there a morgue?

We bury at sea. But I need help for the rites, and I won't get it until morning.

Let's go.

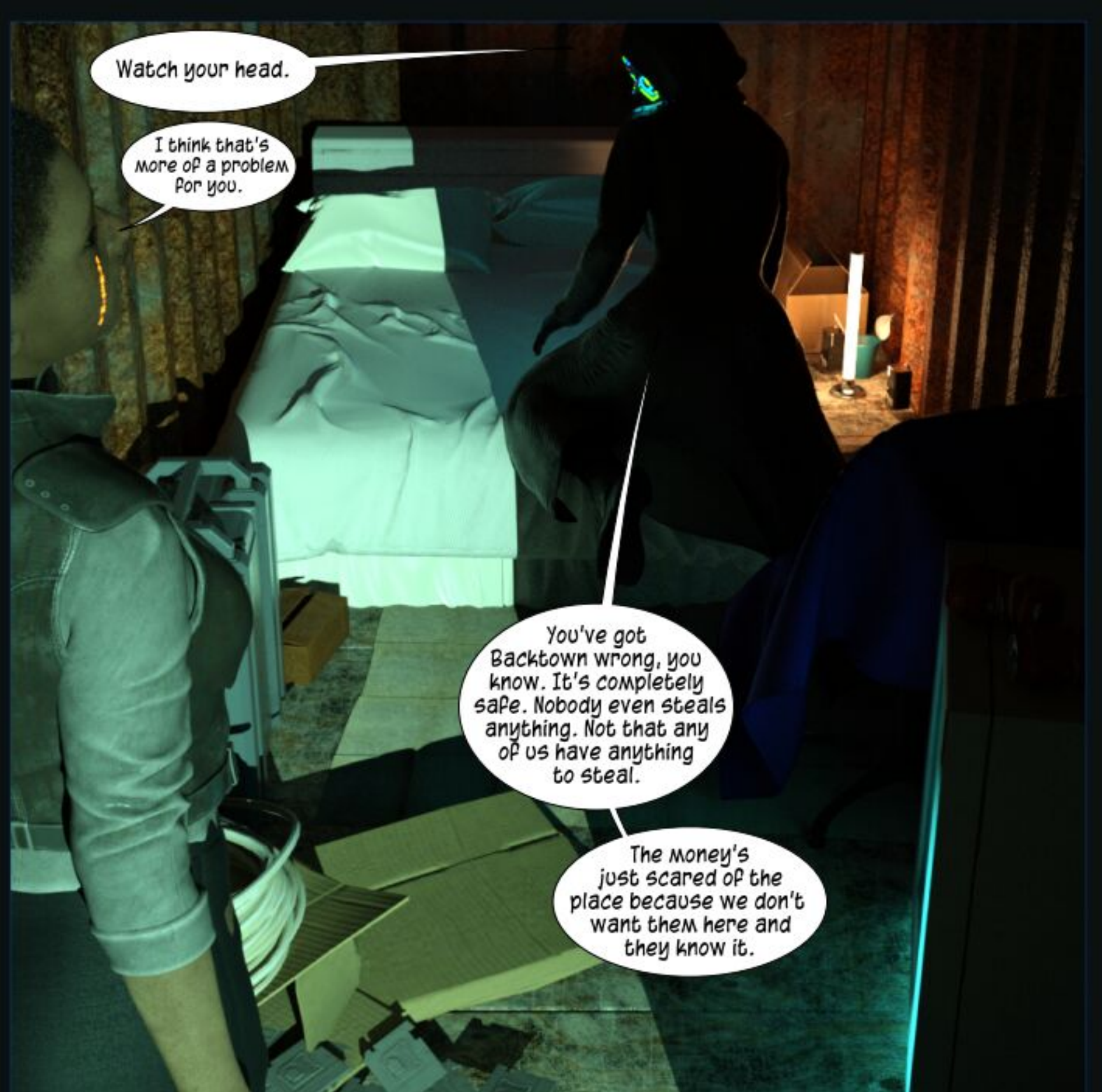


I don't think I can make that haul back to the resort islands tonight. Is there some place I can stay here? Where I stand a chance of waking up in the morning?

Spend the night with me.

... oh.

We have some things to talk about anyway.



Watch your head.

I think that's more of a problem for you.

You've got Backtown wrong, you know. It's completely safe. Nobody even steals anything. Not that any of us have anything to steal.

The Money's just scared of the place because we don't want them here and they know it.



So you don't think someone from Backtown could have killed Jurgen.

I'm sorry, by the way. I know it hurts to lose a friend like that.

Jurgen wasn't exactly a friend. He didn't have friends. He trusted me, I suppose, which for him was saying a lot.

If someone from Backtown killed him, I have no idea why. It'd have to be a serious grudge, and he didn't ever do anything to piss anyone off.

I assume the Money killed him, but again, why? I hope it wasn't to get to me ...

Have they tried to kill you?

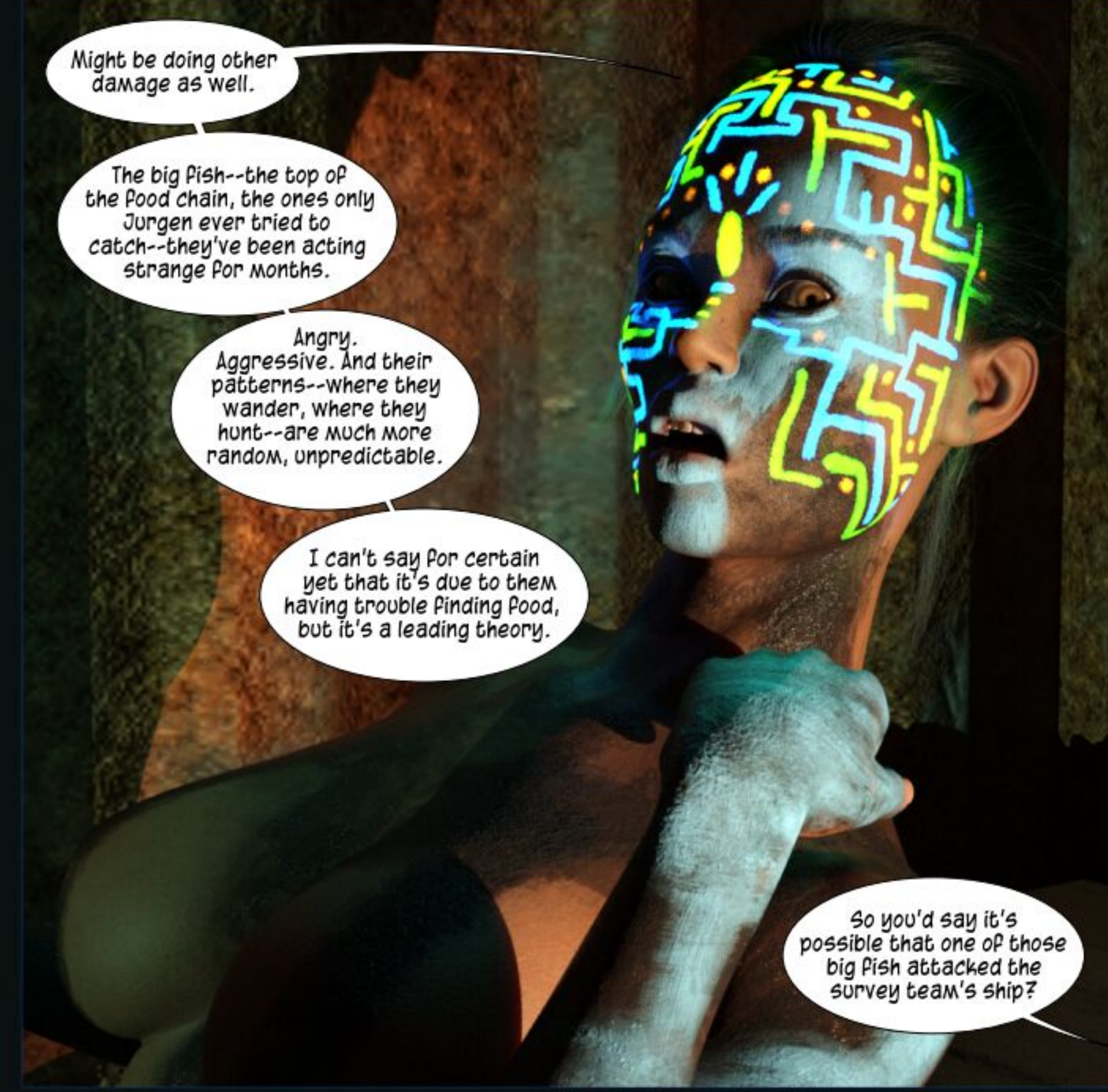


Not yet. They don't take us seriously. Ferg taking a shot at us today was the first time they've fired back.

But I expect they'll send someone once they realize we mean it.

Yeah, you thought I was a hired gun ... why destroy the fishery? Is it that bad?

It was one thing to fish for sustenance. It was still all right to fish for the resorts. I'm not some ecozealot. But this is an export operation. Most of the fishers can't resist the money, and they're fishing places bare, just to send it all off-planet.



Might be doing other damage as well.

The big fish--the top of the food chain, the ones only Jurgen ever tried to catch--they've been acting strange for months.

Angry. Aggressive. And their patterns--where they wander, where they hunt--are much more random, unpredictable.

I can't say for certain yet that it's due to them having trouble finding food, but it's a leading theory.

So you'd say it's possible that one of those big fish attacked the survey team's ship?



A year ago, no. Now ... yes, it's very possible.

Though, honestly, I think it's more likely that someone sabotaged or killed them.

Unless it was genuine misadventure. Things do happen. Equipment fails.

As far as I can tell, they planned well for mishaps. I have to lean toward the idea that someone wanted to get rid of them.

Well, I suppose if you go down that road, then I'm on your list of suspects. They were surveying for mining.

I ... wasn't sure I should mention that. Here and now.



You mean, while we're lying next to each other naked?

All I can say is that isn't the way I work. The main reason we haven't gone faster on the fishery is we don't want to get anybody killed.

I hope that's enough to at least get me an amnesty for the night.

Yes, I think so.





I WASN'T DEAD THE NEXT MORNING, SO SCORE ONE FOR TRUST.

SHE WASN'T THERE, WHICH MEANT THAT SHE WAS TRUSTING ME TOO.
I WOULDN'T HAVE BOTHERED TO SEARCH THROUGH HER STUFF ANYWAY. SHE WAS TOO CLEVER TO LEAVE ANYTHING INCRIMINATING.
I WENT BACK TO THE RESORT ISLANDS, WHERE I COULD GET AN ACTUAL SHOWER. HER WASH FACILITIES WERE A TAP, A BUCKET, AND A DRAIN HOLE IN THE FLOOR.



I was worried about you!

I thought you'd be a couple of hours, and you were gone all night ... and now you tell me you ended up in Backtown? I warned you about that place!

Chandri? Randa, she's probably your main suspect!

I don't think it's as bad as all that. And I got some useful information.

I met a woman named Isa Chandri, who--

The woman's nuts! She was a marine biologist, spent all her time doing whatever they do, and then one day she just decided to start attacking things for no reason!

At the port they call her a terrorist!



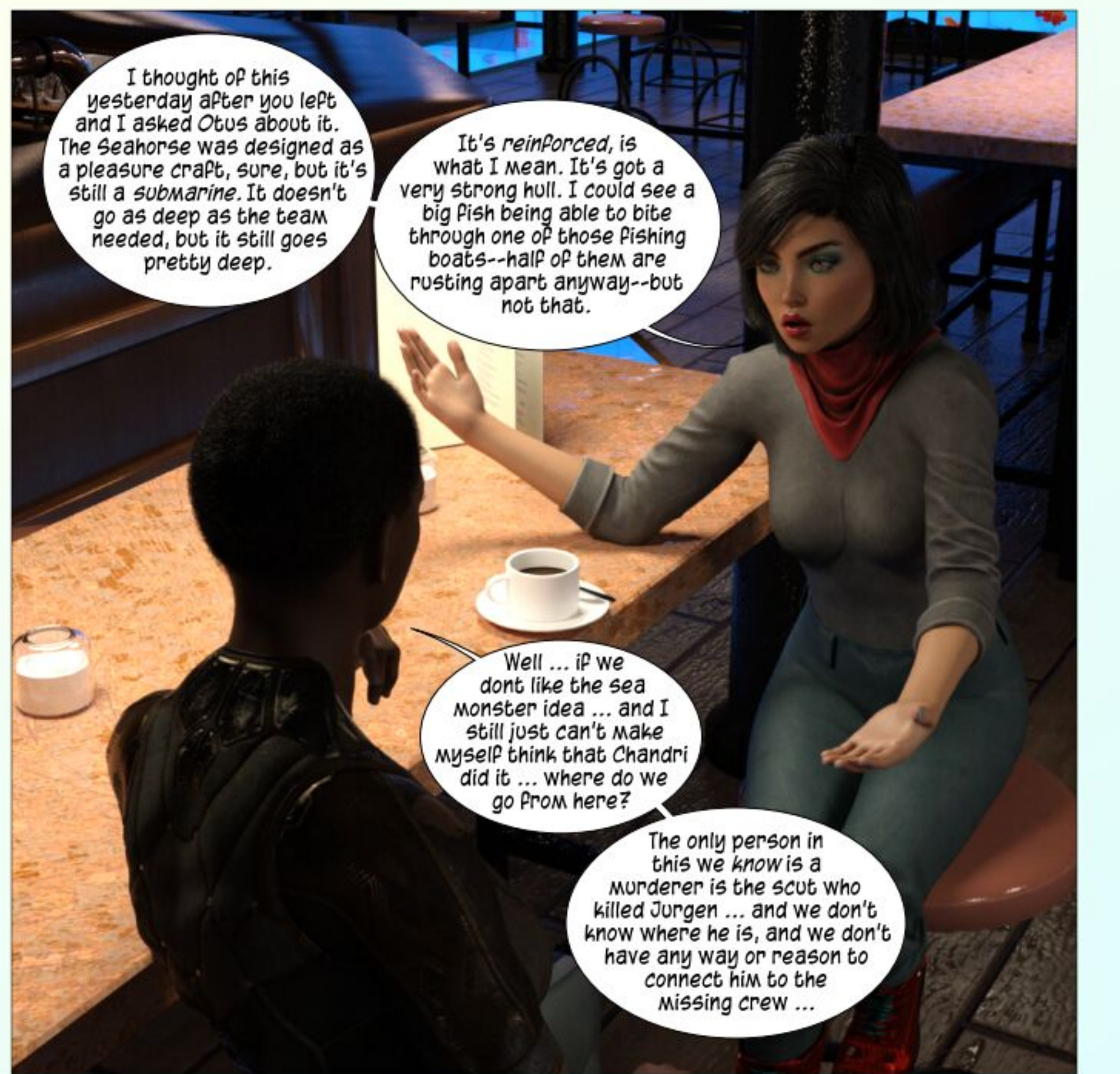
Tevi, you've got to learn to question whatever the money tells you. Especially if you're going to keep working for Tyrell.

As far as I know, Chandri only wants to attack one thing, and that's because the fishery is doing damage--overfishing like crazy and sending it all opp-planet.

She says she's not a killer, and I believe her. A person who reacted the way she did to what happened yesterday isn't going to murder poor people even for a cause.

She also told me the big fish are acting strangely, maybe because they're going hungry, and it's much more likely than I thought that one of them could have attacked the survey vessel.

OK, but ...

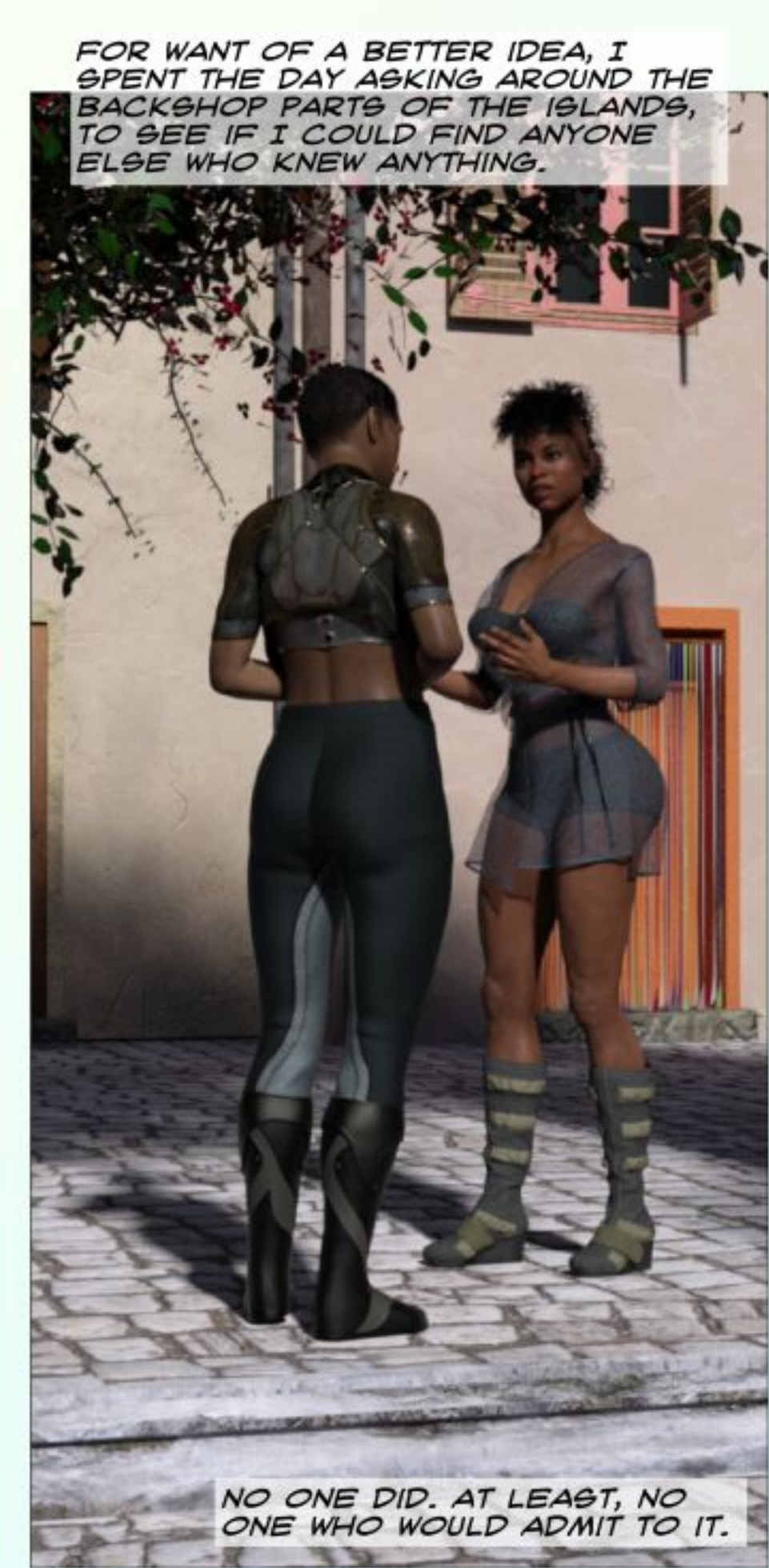


I thought of this yesterday after you left and I asked Otus about it. The Seahorse was designed as a pleasure craft, sure, but it's still a submarine. It doesn't go as deep as the team needed, but it still goes pretty deep.

It's reinforced, is what I mean. It's got a very strong hull. I could see a big fish being able to bite through one of those fishing boats--half of them are rusting apart anyway--but not that.

Well ... if we don't like the sea monster idea ... and I still just can't make myself think that Chandri did it ... where do we go from here?

The only person in this we know is a murderer is the scut who killed Jurgen ... and we don't know where he is, and we don't have any way or reason to connect him to the missing crew ...

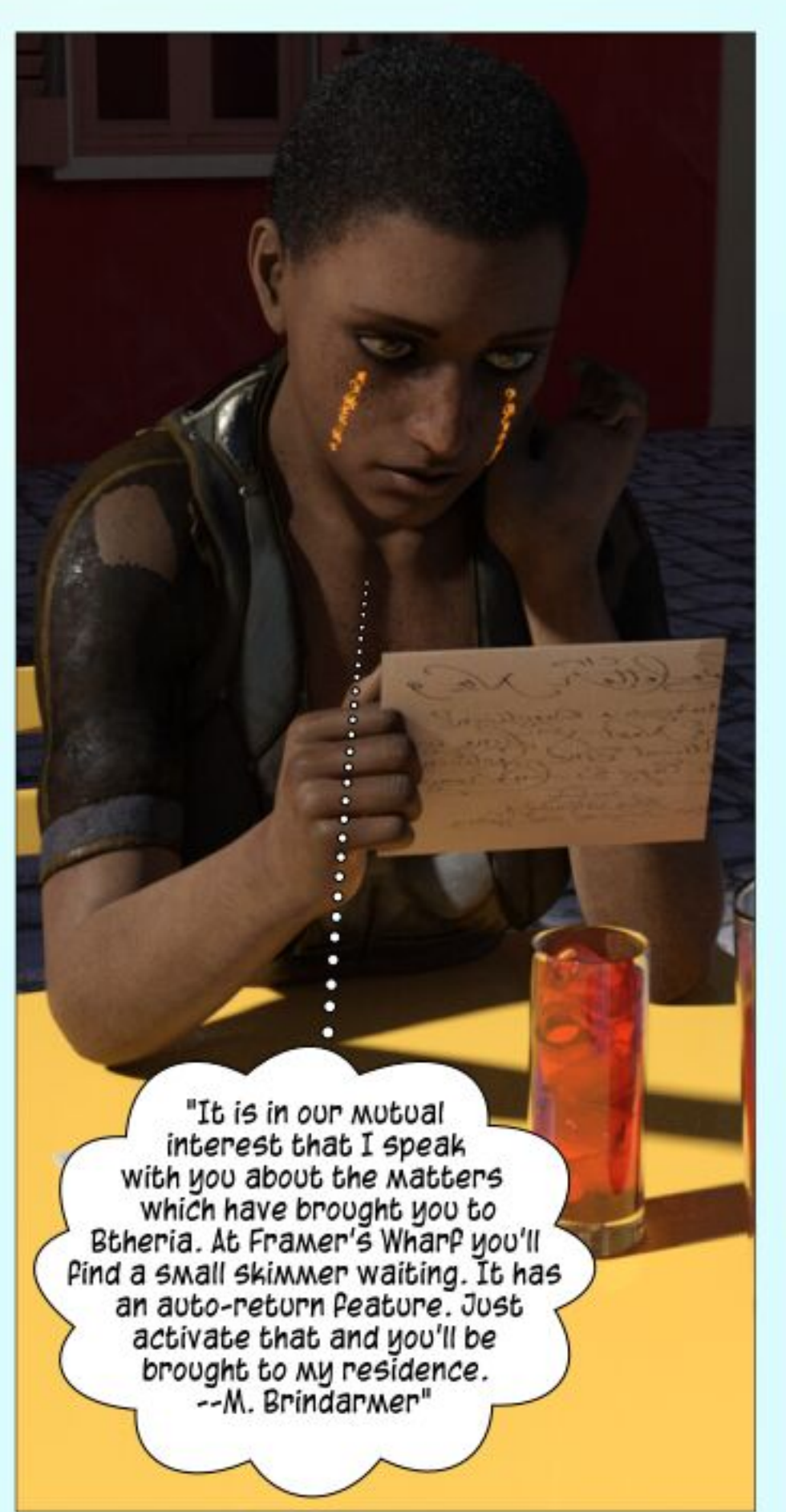


FOR WANT OF A BETTER IDEA, I SPENT THE DAY ASKING AROUND THE BACKSHOP PARTS OF THE ISLANDS, TO SEE IF I COULD FIND ANYONE ELSE WHO KNEW ANYTHING.

NO ONE DID. AT LEAST, NO ONE WHO WOULD ADMIT TO IT.



I HAD STOPPED FOR A REFRESHING BEVERAGE, AND I ASSUME I HAD MY BACK TURNED WATCHING THAT BEVERAGE ARRIVE WHEN THE NOTE WAS DROPPED ON MY TABLE, BECAUSE I DIDN'T SEE A THING.



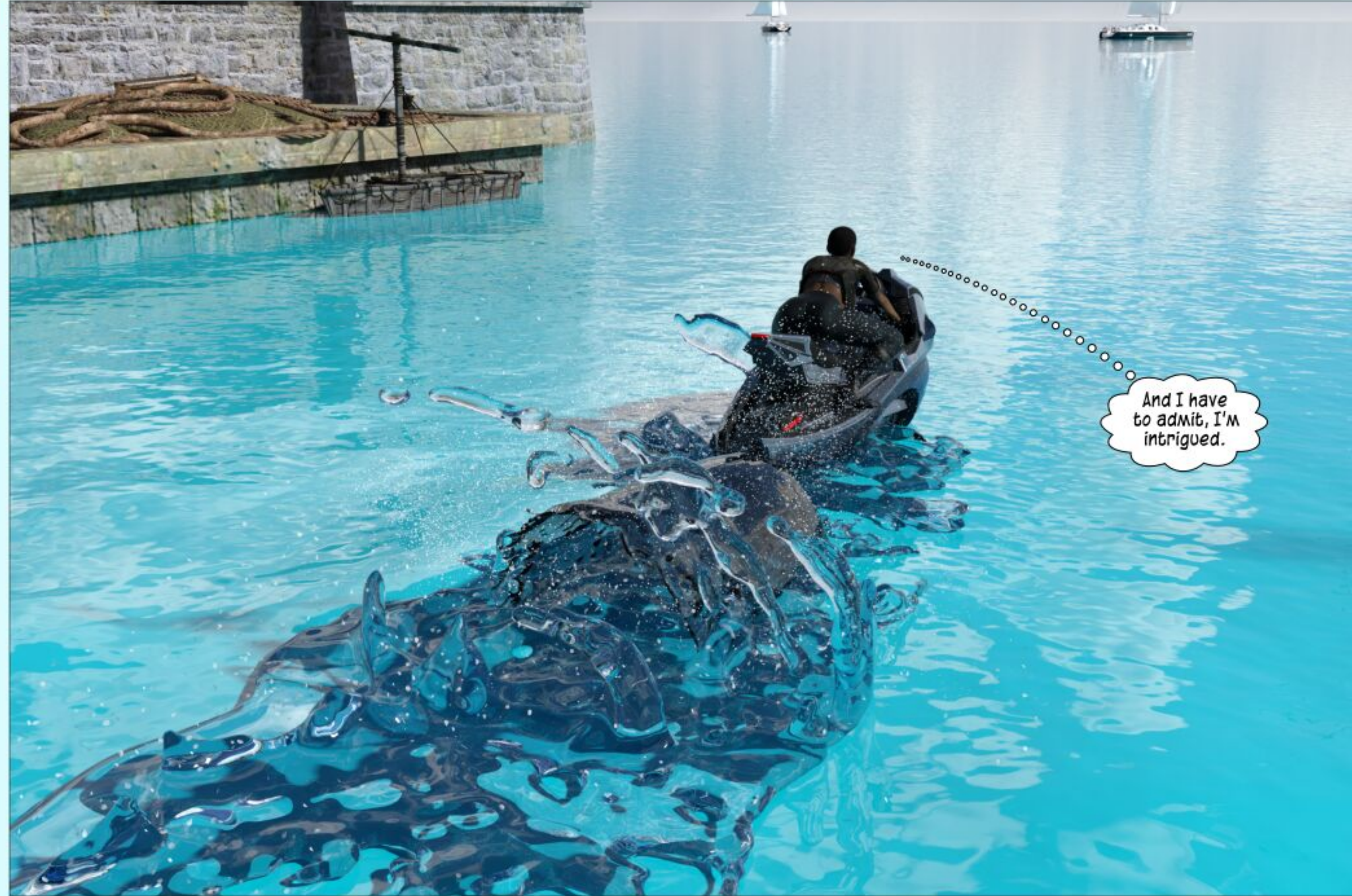
"It is in our mutual interest that I speak with you about the matters which have brought you to Btheria. At Framer's Wharf you'll find a small skimmer waiting. It has an auto-return feature. Just activate that and you'll be brought to my residence. --M. Brindarmer"



Well, well.

On the one hand, this is probably a horrible idea.

On the other, it seems too elaborate just to be a way of getting rid of me.



And I have to admit, I'm intrigued.



Fully automated.

That's nice, but I was hoping to be met by somebody ...



Hmm.

I knew some of these rich Polks used their yachts for round-the-clock parties, but I wasn't really expecting that kind of party.



I guess if I wander long enough, someone will notice the person walking around looking confused.



Hey! There's a place to change clothes one deck down.

Uh ... thanks, but I'm sticking with what I have on.

But nobody's going to want to play with you if you're dressed like that!

... Do you know where I can find Brindarmer?

Who?

-- sigh -- Thanks anyway.



If Brindarmer's one of the people who's ... occupied, it could be a while.

You must be Randa Guerrero.



Mortz Brindarmer.

Don't mind the goings-on. I like my guests to enjoy themselves.

It can be a little distracting, though. Let's go sit somewhere more quiet.



The bridge?

It's one of the few places guests can't go, and the others don't have chairs.

Just be careful not to touch anything.

Shouldn't you have a crew?

We're anchored. I barely ever move it; I just Perry people back and forth. My captain's not even on board at the moment.



Now, you're here to find out what happened to that survey team--

Is that a question? Doesn't sound like one.

It's very hard to keep secrets on Btheria. Much smaller planet than it looks. Anyway, I had inside information.

Tyrell has a charter to mine if the survey's good. I know. I'm one of the people who signed off on it.

Now, what are you doing tooling around with the number-one danger on the planet?

I don't know what you mean.



I'm referring to Isa Chandri, and I think you knew perfectly well what I meant.

The woman's become a menace. She was supposed to be studying and cataloging marine life, so we had some idea of what we had here. You know two-thirds of the planet is still technically unexplored?

The fishery is leading people to overfish. It's causing a lot of damage.

She says I dispute her findings. We haven't seen any decrease in catch.

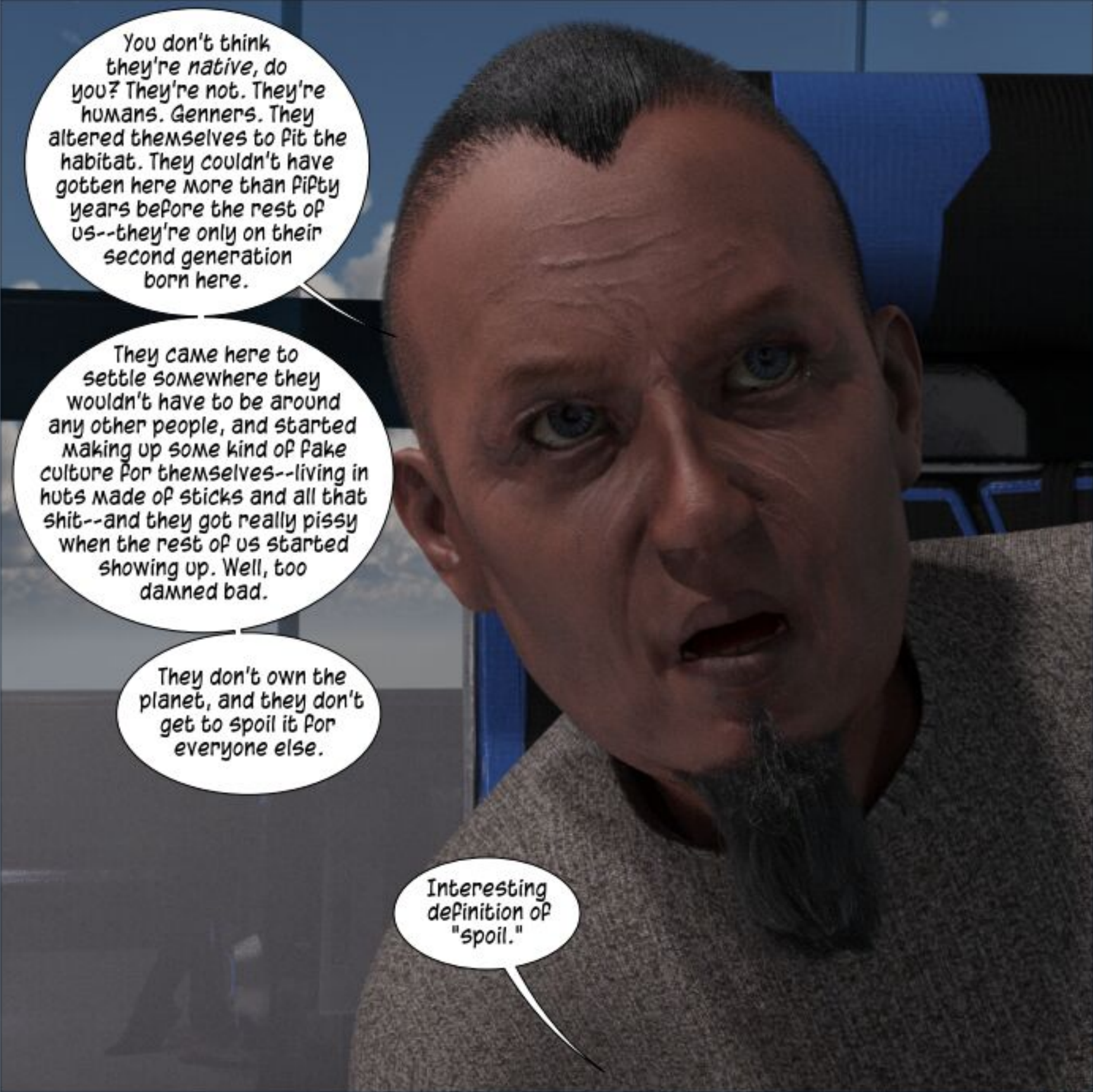
And now she's devoting her time to trying to shut down the one successful industry we've had--

Do you have a financial interest in the fishery, by any chance?

That's not the point! So do a lot of other people here. Did she make herself out to be some kind of crusader? Because I guarantee the fishers aren't with her on this. They like making a living.

The only people who support her are the damned Pathoms, and they'd be happy if we all went away. They'd like to see everything we've built on this planet washed into the ocean just so they can keep the place the way they want it. They have a story in their heads about how we came in and ruined everything.

Well, they're the original inhabitants, aren't they? Seems like they might have reason to--

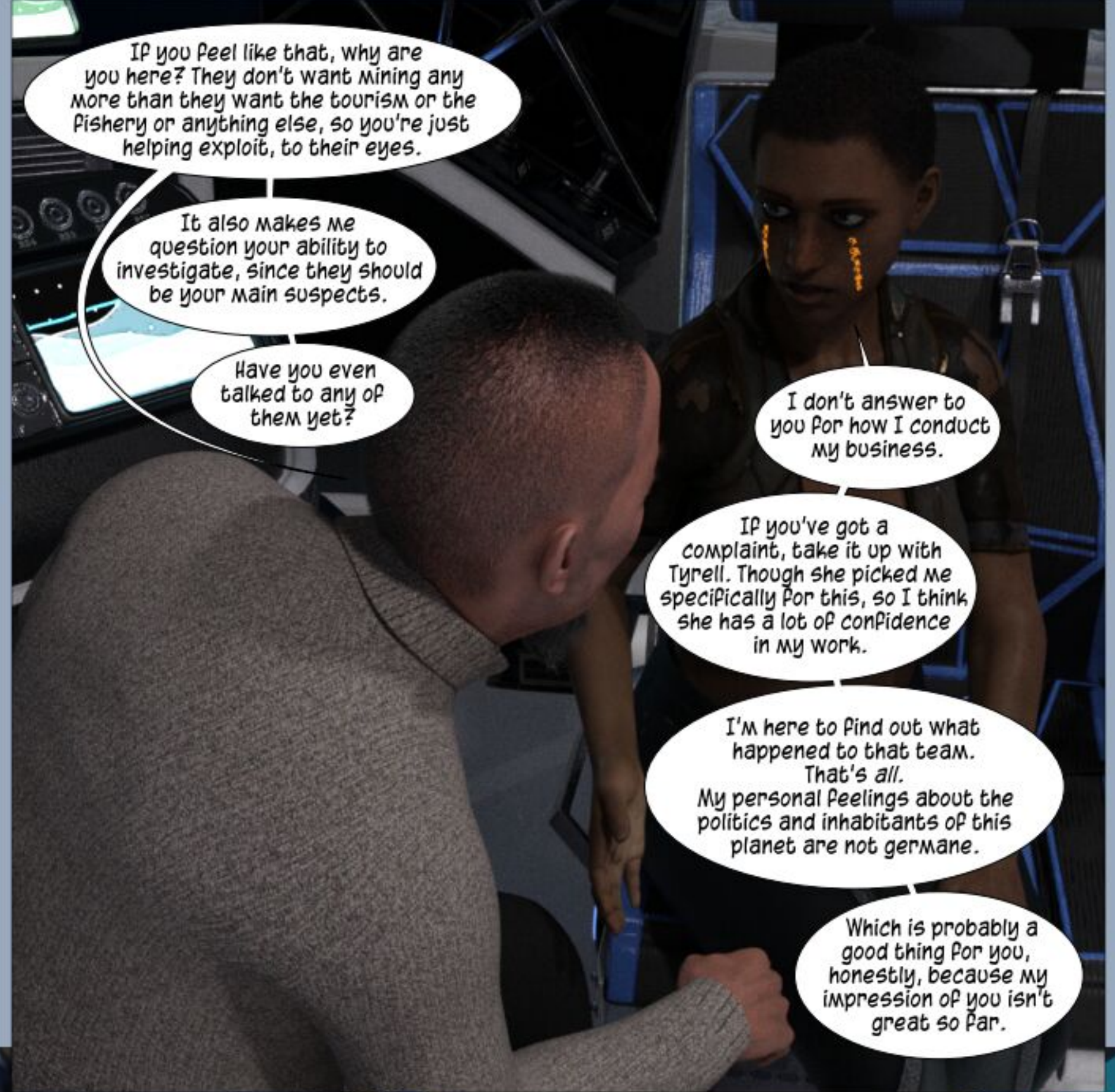


You don't think they're native, do you? They're not. They're humans. Genners. They altered themselves to fit the habitat. They couldn't have gotten here more than fifty years before the rest of us--they're only on their second generation born here.

They came here to settle somewhere they wouldn't have to be around any other people, and started making up some kind of fake culture for themselves--living in huts made of sticks and all that shit--and they got really pissy when the rest of us started showing up. Well, too damned bad.

They don't own the planet, and they don't get to spoil it for everyone else.

Interesting definition of "spoil."



If you feel like that, why are you here? They don't want mining any more than they want the tourism or the fishery or anything else, so you're just helping exploit, to their eyes.

It also makes me question your ability to investigate, since they should be your main suspects.

Have you even talked to any of them yet?

I don't answer to you for how I conduct my business.

If you've got a complaint, take it up with Tyrell. Though she picked me specifically for this, so I think she has a lot of confidence in my work.

I'm here to find out what happened to that team. That's all. My personal feelings about the politics and inhabitants of this planet are not germane.

Which is probably a good thing for you, honestly, because my impression of you isn't great so far.



Well, since you're being blunt, I can say the Peeling's mutual.

I hope you're serious about leaving your own positions out of it.

And if I were you, I would avoid Chandri in the future. She's about to become someone it's definitely unsafe to be around.

Siz will fly you back. It was interesting meeting you.



Don't forget what I've told you!

No danger of that.

THE NEXT MORNING, I HEADED FOR BACKTOWN TO TRY TO TALK TO CHANDRI. I COULDN'T FIND HER, SO I DECIDED TO HUNT AROUND FOR DIRT A BIT.



I GOT A BETTER RECEPTION TO MY QUESTIONS THAN I WAS EXPECTING, BUT IT DIDN'T MATTER. IT WAS THE SAME AS EVERYWHERE ELSE I HAD ASKED--EITHER NOBODY KNEW ANYTHING USEFUL, OR WASN'T ADMITTING IT.



Randa Guerrero, right?

Suppose so. Who's asking? Haven't I seen you before?

Most likely. I've sure seen you. Name's Perdo. Praz Perdo. I've heard you're looking for that survey crew.

I don't know what happened to the crew, but I can show you what happened to their ship. I know where it is. Interested?

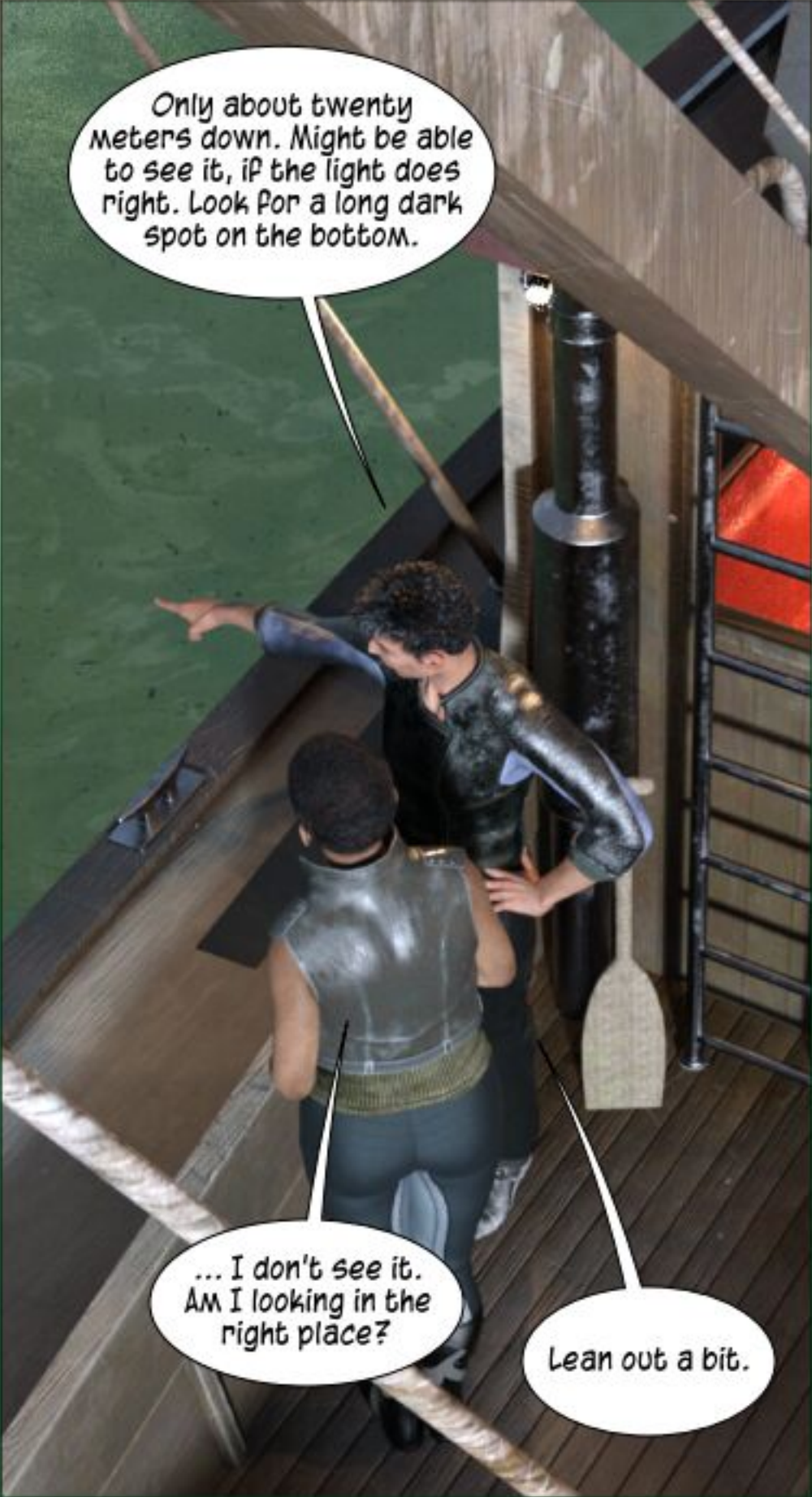


It doesn't seem like we're heading to the deeps.

It's not in the deeps. Ran aground in the kelp flats.

Don't imagine the crew was in it when it did. Like I said, no idea what happened to them.

We're just about there.



Only about twenty meters down. Might be able to see it, if the light does right. Look for a long dark spot on the bottom.

... I don't see it. Am I looking in the right place?

Lean out a bit.



Who would I talk to to arrange a d--





urvvgh

Oh, good. I was starting to worry a little, even though I checked you for concussion. You've been asleep for hours.

What happened ...?

You don't remember any of it? You were awake when I brought you here. Well, kind of.



He knocked you on the head, tied a weight to you, and pushed you overboard.

I got you out pretty quick, though, and you started breathing again on your own once I got your head above water. So I carried you back here.

... How were you there?

Oh, I followed you. I knew he'd do something. Why would you go anywhere with Perdo? The guy is nothing but trouble!

Well, I didn't know that.

Though I probably should have been more suspicious.

Especially since I'm pretty sure he's the guy I saw follow Jurgen out of Selly's.



Yeah, I'd believe he killed Jurgen, for sure.

Perdo does dirty work for one of the corp types around here. I don't know why they'd want Jurgen dead, but give me a few minutes and I'll think of a reason.

The corps have decided we're against everything, and they want to get rid of us any way they can. Perdo probably dumped you in the kelp flats--right near us--so people'd think we did it.

You're not? Against everything, I mean. The Fishery. Mining.

No! We just want, y'know, moderation. Fish without stripping the place bare. Mine without making a mess. We know it can be done; they just have to get their shit together.

And we want to be consulted! We get a say in this. We were here first.



You know they're trying to spread it as hard as they can that you Pathoms are--

Don't call us that!

We're Btherians. It's our planet. They call us 'Pathoms' because they don't want to admit that.

I'm sorry. Really. I had no idea.

... Well, you wouldn't have had any way of knowing.

I'm glad you apologized, because I'm going to take your clothes off now and it's really better to be friends with someone if you're going to have sex with them. Don't you think?



I FELL BACK ASLEEP AGAIN AFTER THAT--I GUESS NEARLY DYING IS EXHAUSTING--AND I DON'T KNOW IF SHE WOKE US UP A FEW MINUTES LATER, OR A FEW HOURS.

Good morning!

Shokla, I thought I was the only human you ever slept with.

I'm a little offended.



No, you're not.

--MMM-- No, I'm not.

I'm going to go catch some breakfast, and then you can take our friend back.

Do you know she got on a boat alone with Perdo?

Oh, Randa. Really?

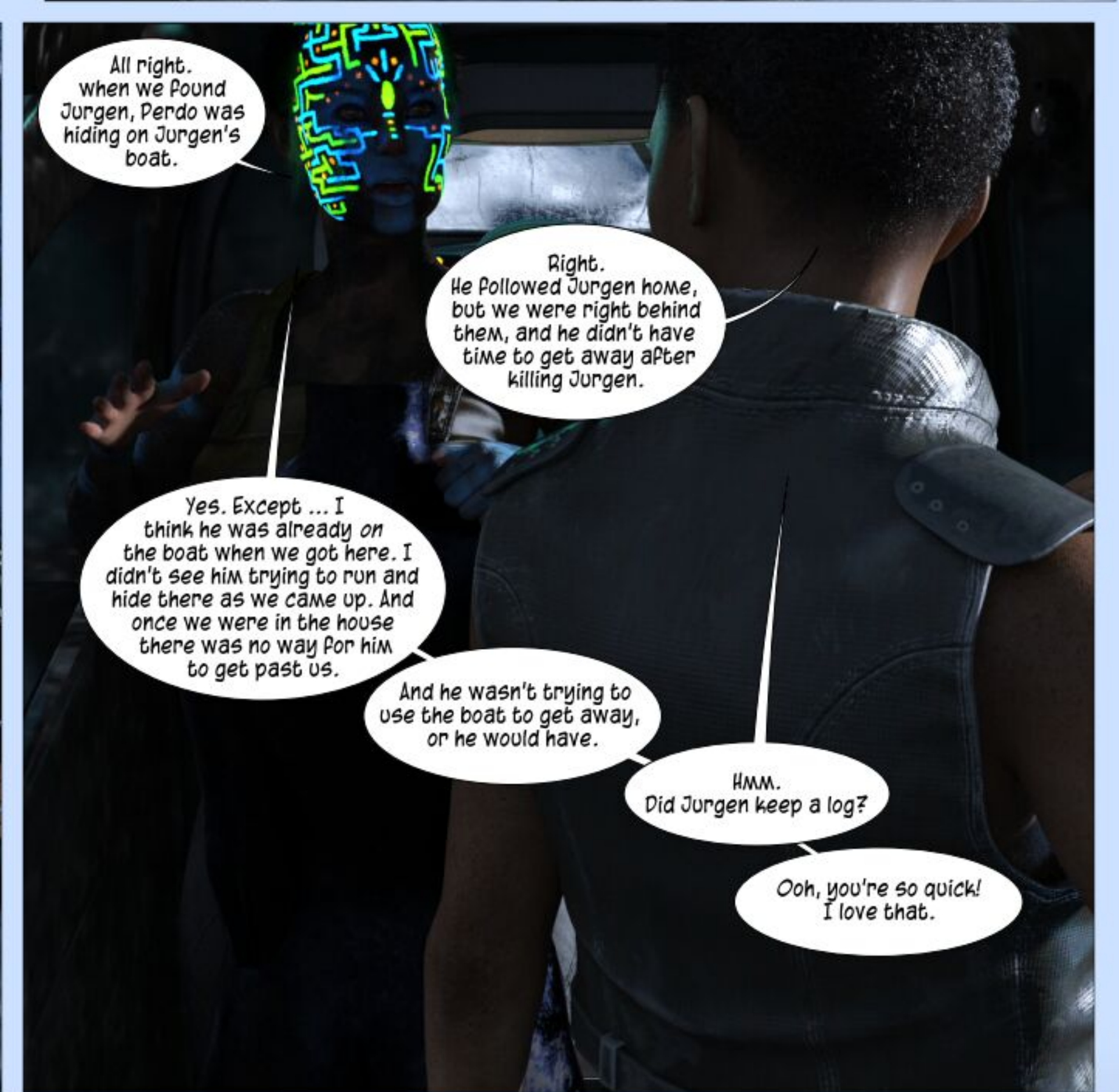
... Yeah, yeah.



Shokla, wait! I brought breakfast. We can eat on the way.

We've got something important to do, and three would be better than two.

Bring your headlight.





That was a big fish you pointed out.

And that one was about Midrange. There's some out in the deeps who think that one's snack-sized.

We shouldn't see ones that large in these waters. I really do think it's a shortage of food. They're hunting in places they never would before.

Lucky for us, he'd found some, or we'd have looked like lunch.

Oh, this is going to be less work than I thought.

Jurgen wasn't wordy. Most of these entries are just positions and what he caught that day.

But he thought this was important enough to make a note.

This entry is nearly three months ago. He saw a ship on the horizon with a profile he couldn't identify, and got out his binoculars instead of going closer to hail them. Jurgen was a cautious guy.

That enabled him to watch as someone tied up all four crew members at gunpoint and pushed them overboard. Ugh.



I guess that's confirmation. I'm sorry.

It's confirmation, but it's not proof. He doesn't say who the murderer was. Maybe he didn't recognize him?

More likely he didn't want to say. I'm a little surprised he put down this much. He'd have wanted to stay out of it if he figured out what it was about, and he'd have figured it out pretty fast. Jurgen was no fool.

But come on. It's got to be Perdo. Especially if Perdo saw Jurgen watching. That's your motive for him to kill Jurgen, right there.

... three months later?

I mean, I agree, but it's not good enough. Not if I'm going to do anything about him.

Sure, I can go back to my client and say "here's who did it but we can't prove it" ... and then he'll just try again with the next survey.



Do you think there'd be something useful on the survey vessel?

Uh ... maybe? But we don't know where it is. Or do you?

I can find it. Jurgen noted its estimated position, based on his.

It's been adrift since then. Surface currents are very predictable on Bheria. I'll just need to do a little math with a map in front of me.

It may turn out to be the kind of trip we'll actually need to provision for.

IT DIDN'T TURN OUT THAT WAY. THE DRIFT PATTERN WORKED IN OUR FAVOR, AND THE TRIP WAS ONLY A FEW HOURS.



I think I see it!



Otus said they had three ROVs ...

Well, things do happen. Maybe a fish ate one.



Perdo didn't turn anything off. He may have hoped it'd run out of power. Or he just didn't bother.

I'm surprised it hasn't. Must have a huge supply.

You're used to spacecraft, aren't you? Those are a lot thirstier.

This ship probably had enough to run six months, including keeping the ROVs charged. Longer, maybe, depending on how they kitted out.

They'd have needed to resupply food long before that, for a crew of four.



This is a very fancy ship.

Yeah. The Seahorses are luxury craft. For underwater sightseeing tours. Or underwater parties.

The whole bow's curtained off. Looks like they converted that to sleeping space.

Wonder if we can get anything useful off those systems--



Whooah!

Shit!

Were we just hit? Are we breached?

Don't know! Get above deck, Past!



My ship!

Move!!

Who did this? Where are they?



Had enough of you, scut!

Yiii!



You miserable bag of chum!

You owe me a ship!

waaaah!



--oof-- Go fish for it, sculler!

Yeow!



oog

Yaaaa!



Isa!

I'm OK! Break his Pucking neck!



... Don't need to.

That's one thing I really don't like about beam weapons. They don't have a "stun" mode.

Yes, but they work underwater.



I can't believe he sank my ship ...

Already almost under ... no chance to do anything ...

Not that I'll lose any sleep over that one ... but he could have told us something useful, maybe ...

There's still something big missing here, and now we may never know what.



Isa. Isa.

Come on, it's OK. We'll take his boat. You're entitled.



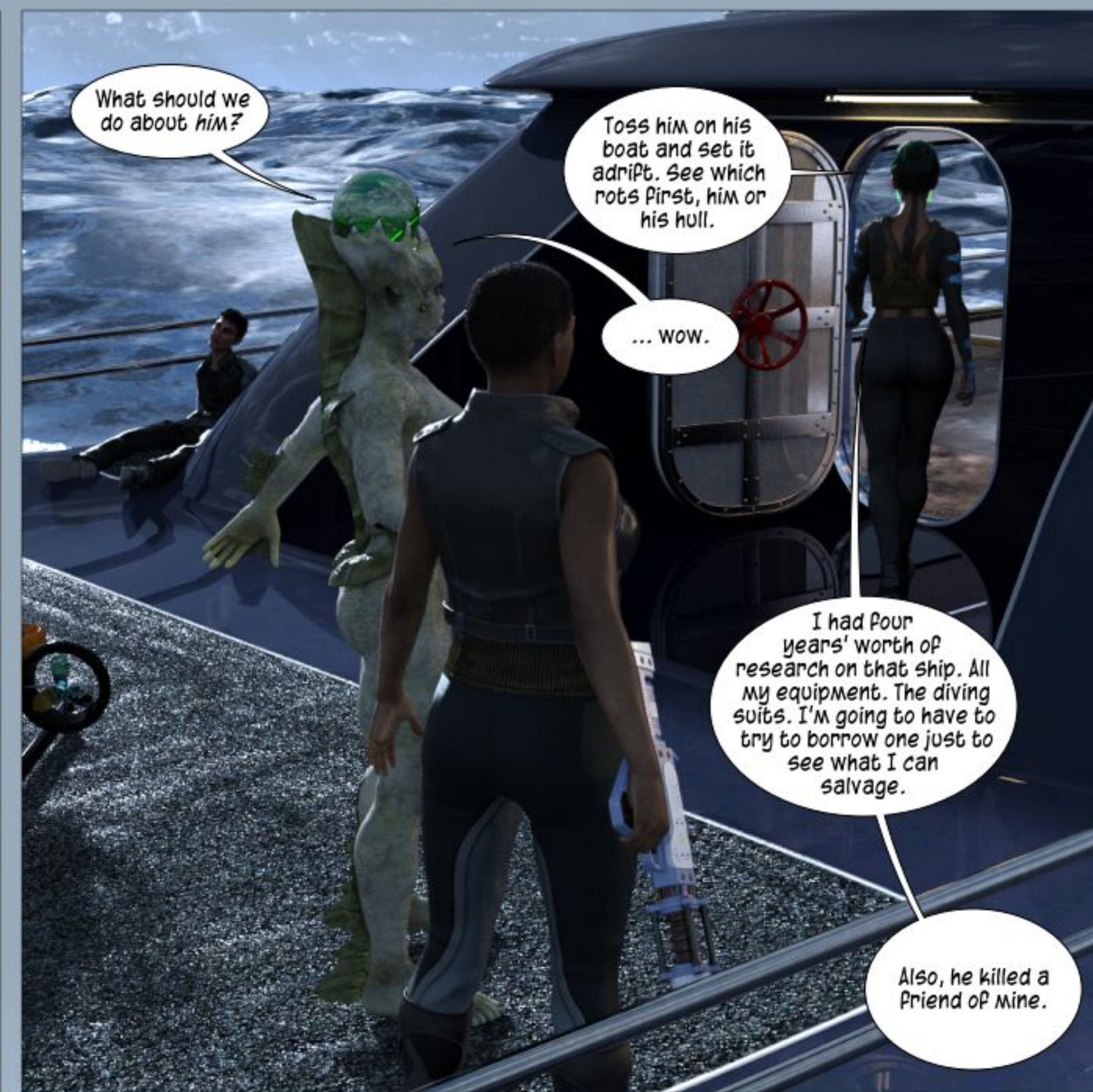
I'm not taking his pissant little chumscuttle.

I'm taking the Seahorse. It's derelict. I claim it.

But, uh ...

As someone whose business is derelicts, I say she's on sound footing, Shokla.

And if anybody gets upset about it, they can take it up with me.



What should we do about him?

Toss him on his boat and set it adrift. See which rots first, him or his hull.

... wow.

I had four years' worth of research on that ship. All my equipment. The diving suits. I'm going to have to try to borrow one just to see what I can salvage.

Also, he killed a friend of mine.

I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I WAS READY TO LEAVE BThERIA YET. I WASN'T DONE. I COULD PROBABLY HAVE GONE TO TYRELL WITH WHAT I HAD AND CALLED IT A DAY, BUT I KNEW I WASN'T DONE, AND IT WOULD BOTHER ME UNTIL I FILLED IN WHATEVER BIG CHUNK OF IT WAS MISSING FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE PUZZLE.

BUT SINCE I HAD NO IDEA HOW TO FILL THAT IN, I SPENT THE NEXT TWO DAYS LYING AROUND IN THE SUN DOING NOTHING, ASKING IMPORTANT QUESTIONS LIKE "HOW CAN THERE BE BIRDS ON BThERIA ANYWAY? SURE, I SUPPOSE THEY CAN SLEEP ON THE WATER, BUT WHERE DO THEY LAY EGGS?"



Ayo, Randa! Good day for it.

Isa. Got bored with the bodypaint?

I usually don't keep it on if I'm doing a lot of dive work. Just makes a mess.



So I guess you've been salvaging from your ship?

Mhmm. Worked out all right. I saved pretty much everything that was worth saving. Took a lot of dives though.

And then once I finished that, I started going through the survey crew's data.

Randa, there's a weird thing in their logs. You remember you noticed they lost a ROV?

I don't have information on what happened to the ROV--there's nothing in the log, and the only transmission to and from the ROVs when they're underwater is sonar, so you can't see what their cameras have recorded until they get back up to dump their data.

But whatever happened, it spooked the crew. They held position for the next two days. Doing nothing. I think they were trying to figure out what to do next.

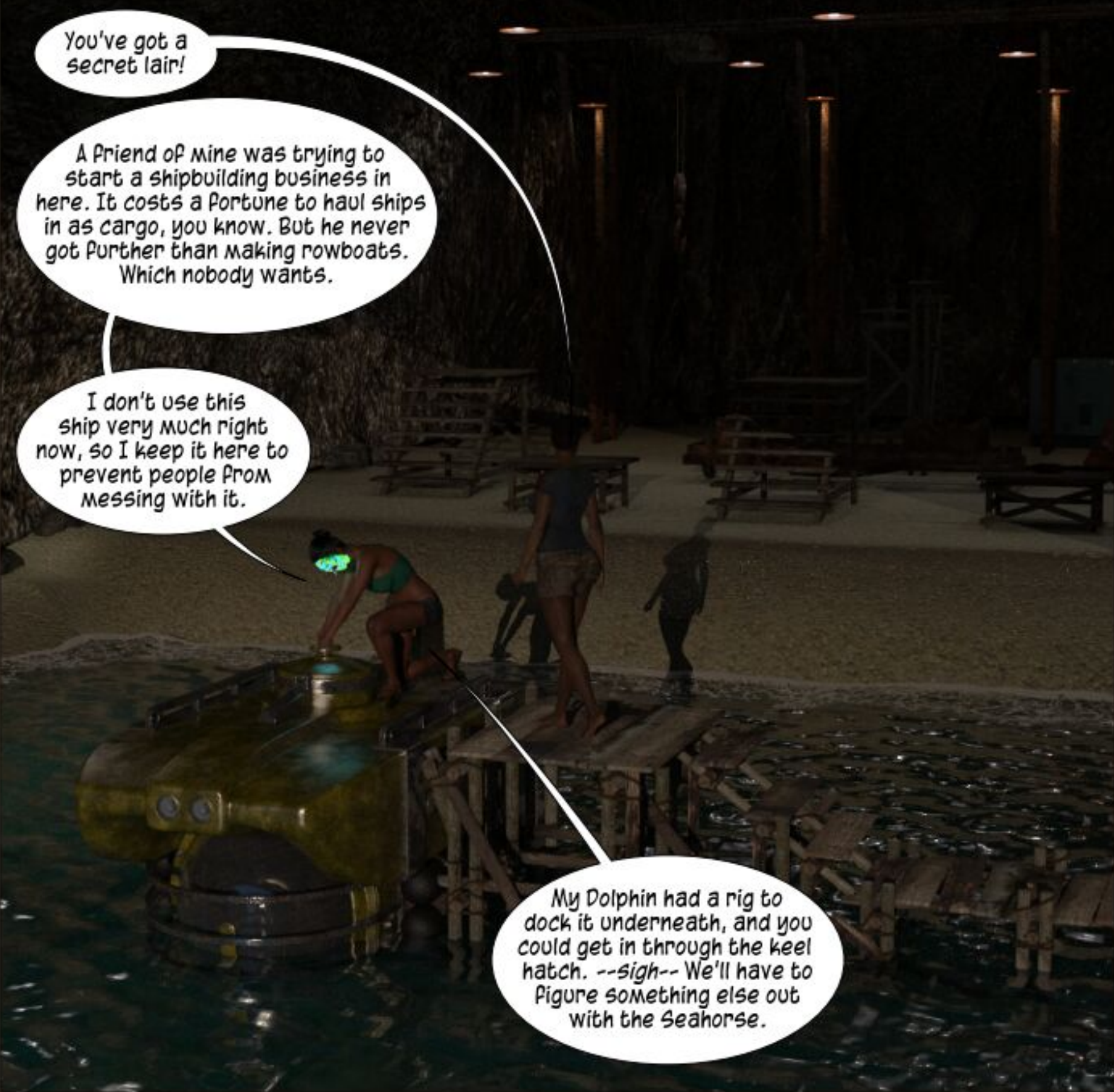
That's where they were when Perdo found them.



OK, but we don't have a way to investigate, unless you want to risk losing another ROV ...

Oh, no, we do, but it's ... ah ... well, it's a different risk.

And it'll take a lot of preparation.



You've got a secret lair!

A friend of mine was trying to start a shipbuilding business in here. It costs a fortune to haul ships in as cargo, you know. But he never got further than making rowboats. Which nobody wants.

I don't use this ship very much right now, so I keep it here to prevent people from messing with it.

My Dolphin had a rig to dock it underneath, and you could get in through the keel hatch. --sigh-- We'll have to figure something else out with the Seahorse.



SHE TRAINED ME ON THE CONTROLS FOR HOURS--I THINK MORE OUT OF CONCERN FOR HER SHIP THAN ANYTHING ELSE. I CAN RUN JUST ABOUT ANY SMALL CRAFT IN THE GALAXY AT THIS POINT, AND THIS ONE WAS SO BASIC IT WAS ALMOST DUMB. ACTUALLY, I HAD TROUBLE BELIEVING SHE'D GONE TO THE DEEPS IN IT MANY TIMES.

... and no breach remediation either?

There wouldn't be a point. This isn't like an atmosphere or space craft. When you breach there you lose pressure; here you're letting it in. Sealants and patches wouldn't hold. And an integrity field would need so much power to sustain it wouldn't be workable.

You know, that's the second time I've gotten the idea you've Plovn things that weren't in water.

Flown, like Plovn it myself? No. But I was exobi crew on a couple of jobs for several years. Picked up some knowledge.

Yeah, and here you have a lot more knowledge than I do. It really should be you going down there.

It has to be you, though. My reputation here is wrecked. If I go down and find something rotten, I likely won't get anybody up here to believe it. You might be able to get it to stick, stranger or not.

Besides, your burden of proof is mostly for yourself.



Ugh. I'm dripping. It's molten in that little cabin.

You'll want that heat at five thousand meters.

Besides, I like seeing you work in just your panties.

Wanging around Shokla has given me her attitude toward clothing, I think.



You know, I probably shouldn't be helping you. As soon as you resolve this, you're going to report back, and you say she'll just send out another survey ...

My loyalties are with the Btherians. It's my planet now too; I don't figure I'll ever leave. And even if I did, I still wouldn't want anybody to wreck it.

Well, I couldn't do this without you, so I'm glad you are.

I'm not happy about the mining either, but I think it's probably inevitable, and it would be better to have it go with someone who at least has some sense of limits.

I don't picture Tyrell trashing the place. She'd say it was bad business practice.

THE NEXT DAY WE WENT BACK TO TOWN FOR SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT BEFORE HEADING OUT. THE JOURNEY TOOK ANOTHER DAY AFTER THAT.



Now, remember what I warned you about the bottles ...

Yes, I know.

You've got a distress ping on sonar, and I'll hear it, but once you're below about 4000 I can't get to you.

Please be careful.



Already running out of sunlight and I just started.

I don't know why darkness feels more intimidating here than it does in space ...



Also Peels really empty. Like, shouldn't I be seeing more fish?

Not that I can see anything unless it's right in front of my--



--nose ...!

I'M SURE SOME OF YOU WERE WONDERING JUST HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE TO GET BACK TO WHERE WE WERE AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS STORY.



I'm not going to shake it. I've got to do something to discourage it, but what? No armament at all on this thing ...

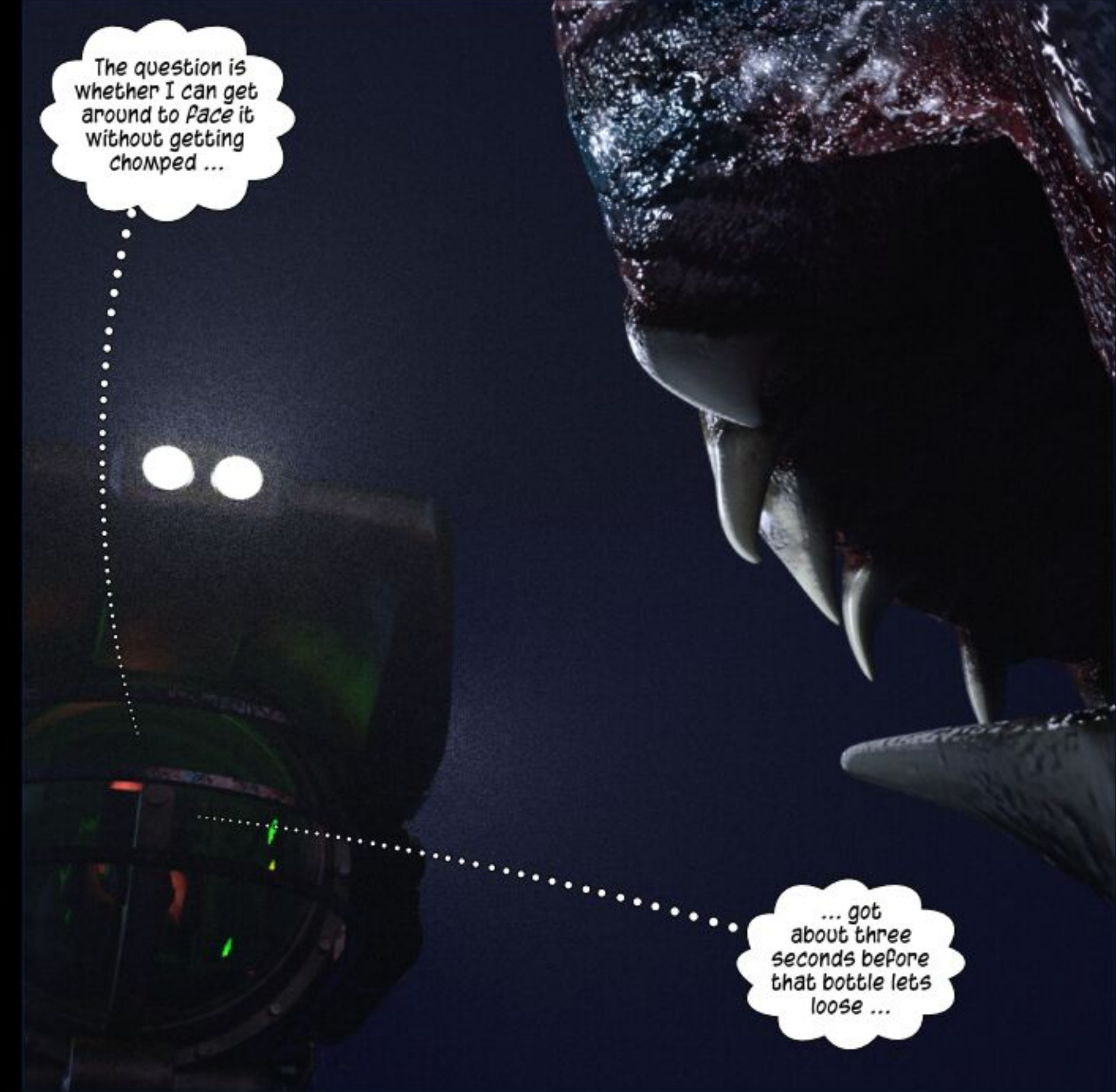
... Wait.



What she warned me about with the gas bottles. They've got two valves, an automatic sensor and a manual safety. But if you disable the automatic for some reason, you have to also close off the safety ...

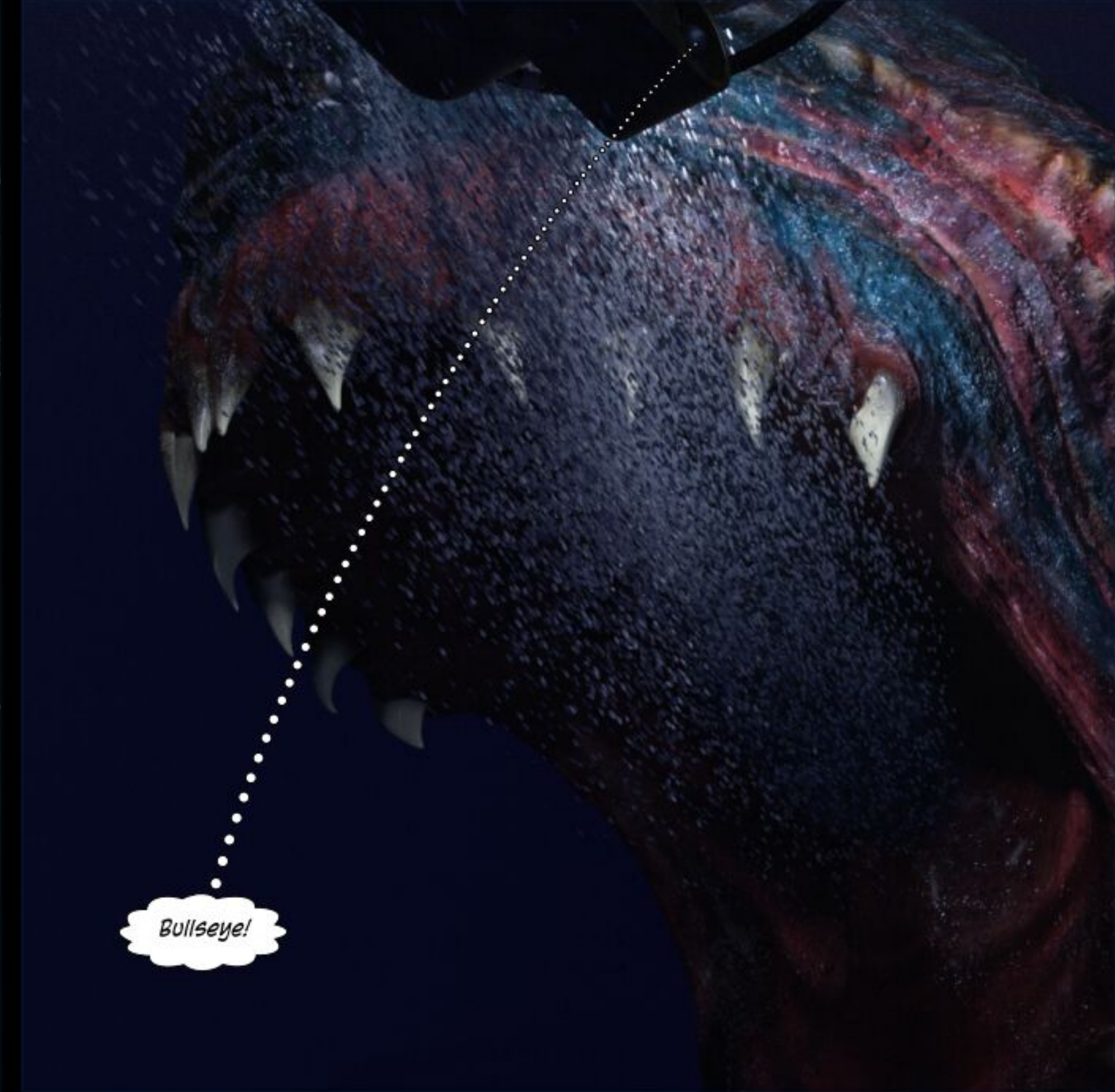
... or it builds up pressure, breaks loose at the valve ... and launches itself from the ship.

Like an air rocket.



The question is whether I can get around to face it without getting chomped ...

... got about three seconds before that bottle lets loose ...



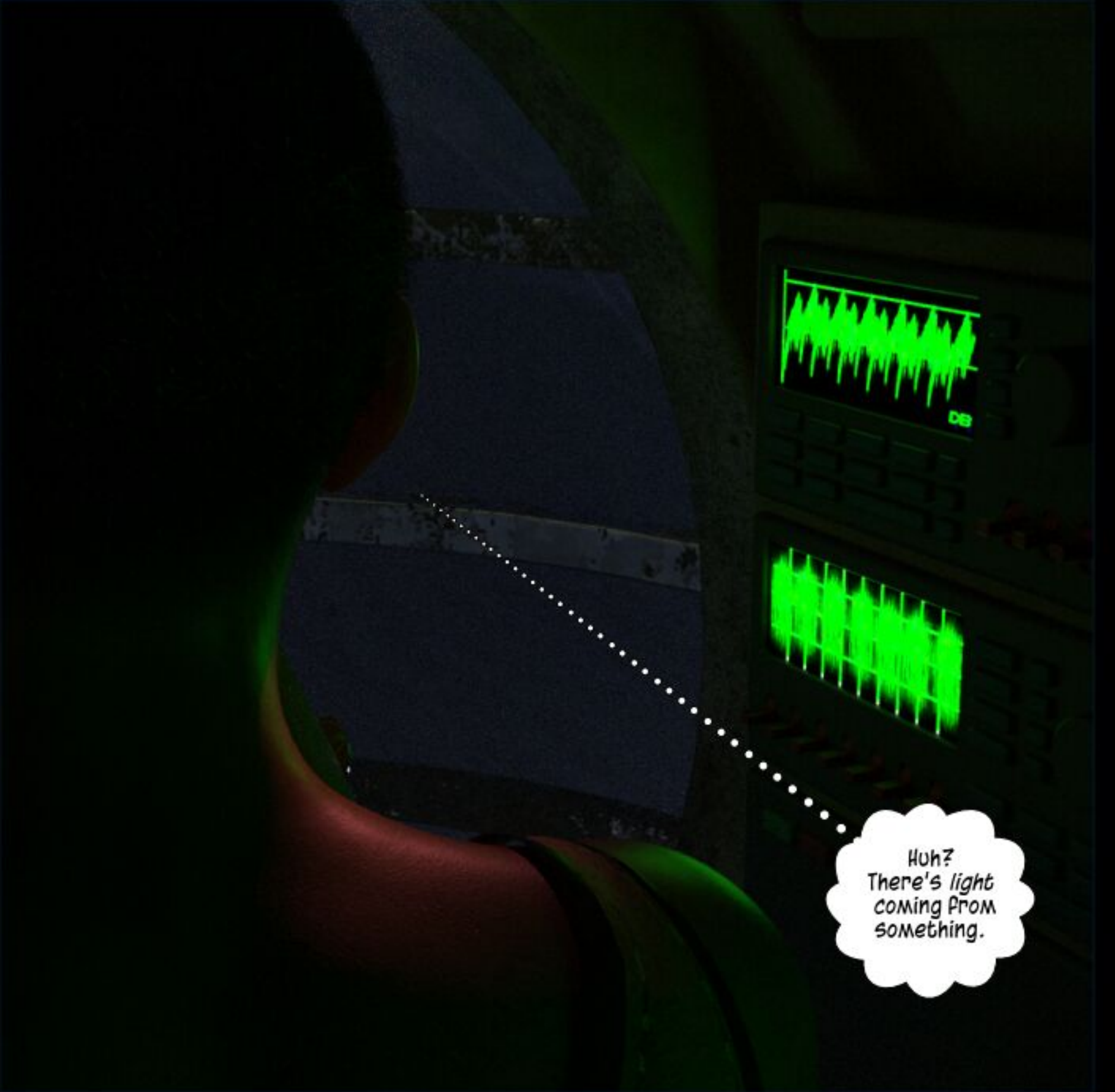
Bullseye!



Gave you indigestion, huh? Good.

With any luck I won't run into any of your friends or family the rest of the way down ...

Should be almost there. Whatever 'there' is.



Huh? There's light coming from something.



Well, what do you know.

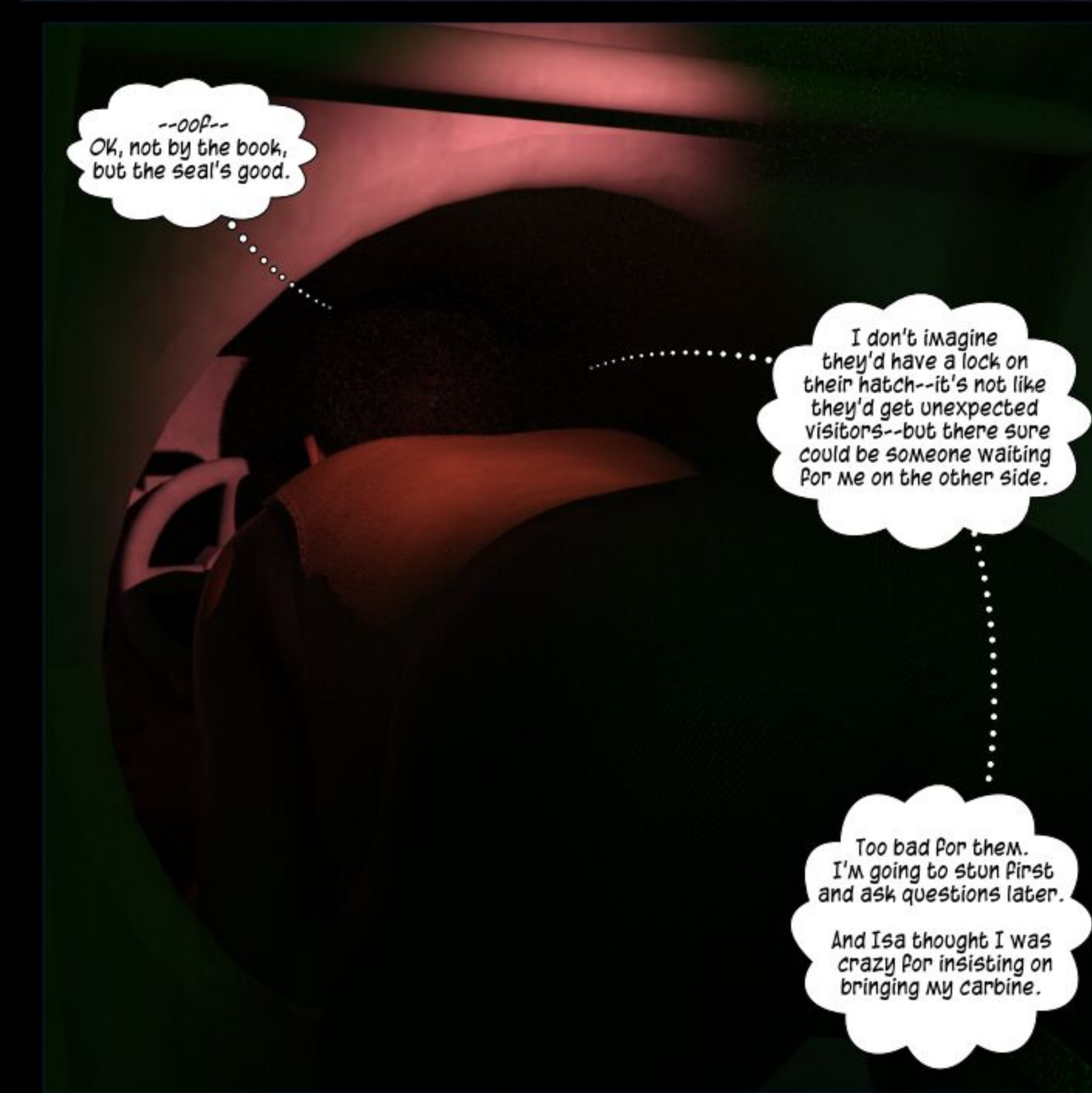


If it weren't at the bottom of the ocean, I'd say this looked like a refining plant. Chemicals, or ...

Oh, no, hang on. I know what this is. I bet.



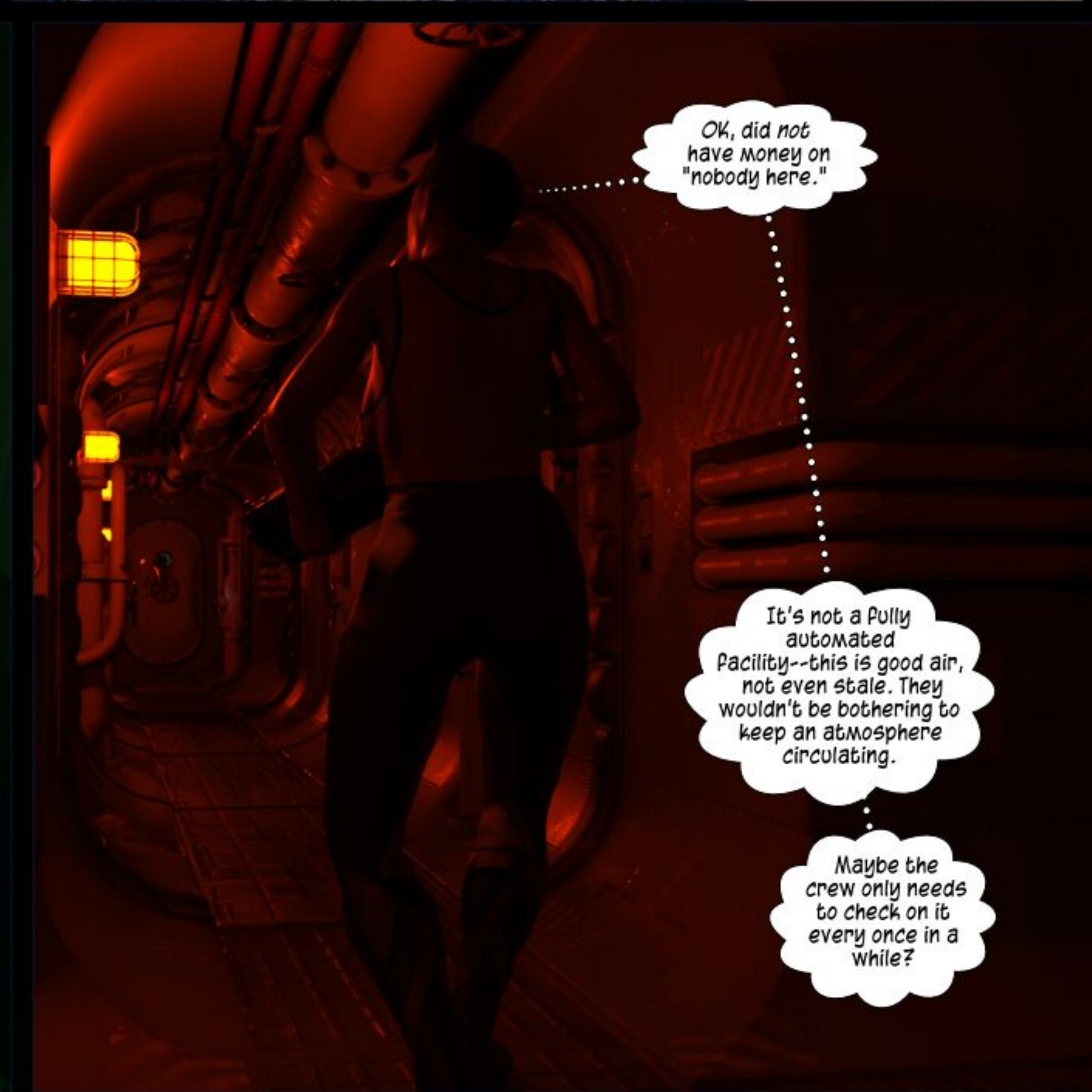
I see a Plex hatchway over on this side. I can use it ... if I can get this ship to roll ninety degrees and stay that way ...



--oof--
OK, not by the book, but the seal's good.

I don't imagine they'd have a lock on their hatch--it's not like they'd get unexpected visitors--but there sure could be someone waiting for me on the other side.

Too bad for them. I'm going to stun First and ask questions later. And Isa thought I was crazy for insisting on bringing my carbine.



OK, did not have money on "nobody here."

It's not a Pully automated Facility--this is good air, not even stale. They wouldn't be bothering to keep an atmosphere circulating.

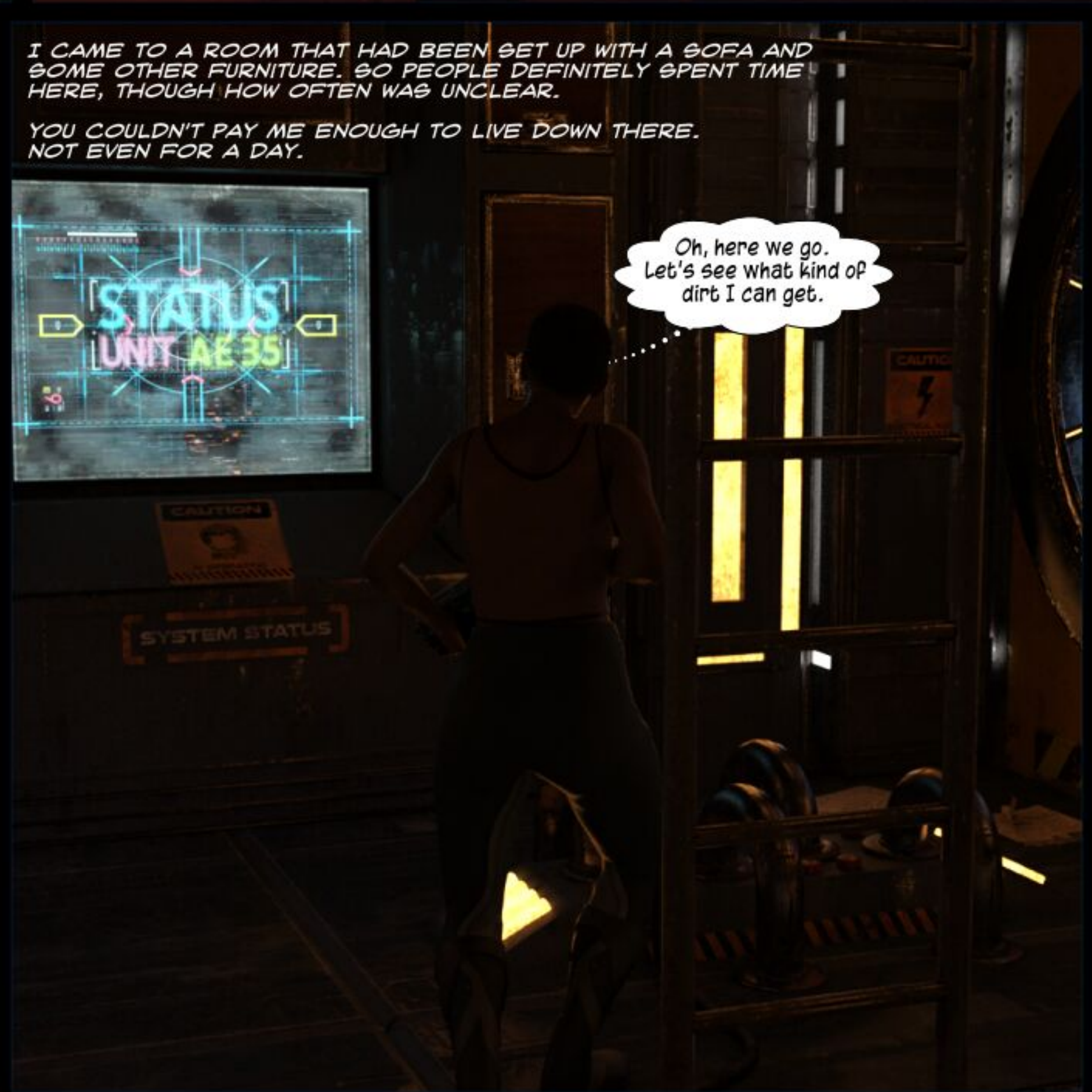
Maybe the crew only needs to check on it every once in a while?



Looking more and more like I was right every second.

This is a mining-related Facility, or I'll eat my carbine. Processing raw ore, or something like that.

Looks like whatever they do outgasses a lot, too.



I CAME TO A ROOM THAT HAD BEEN SET UP WITH A SOFA AND SOME OTHER FURNITURE. SO PEOPLE DEFINITELY SPENT TIME HERE, THOUGH HOW OFTEN WAS UNCLEAR. YOU COULDN'T PAY ME ENOUGH TO LIVE DOWN THERE. NOT EVEN FOR A DAY.

Oh, here we go. Let's see what kind of dirt I can get.



Oh, wow.

Well, I think that covers all my questions.

... Now, the problem is what to do about ...
... hmm.

... I think destruction really is the only answer here.



Safeties locked out at the console ... turn off these valves and the gas buildup can't go to overflow ...

... Which means the primary gas catch tank will explode.

And that'll compromise the station's integrity enough that the ocean will take the rest of it apart in a hurry.



Maybe more of a hurry than I want!

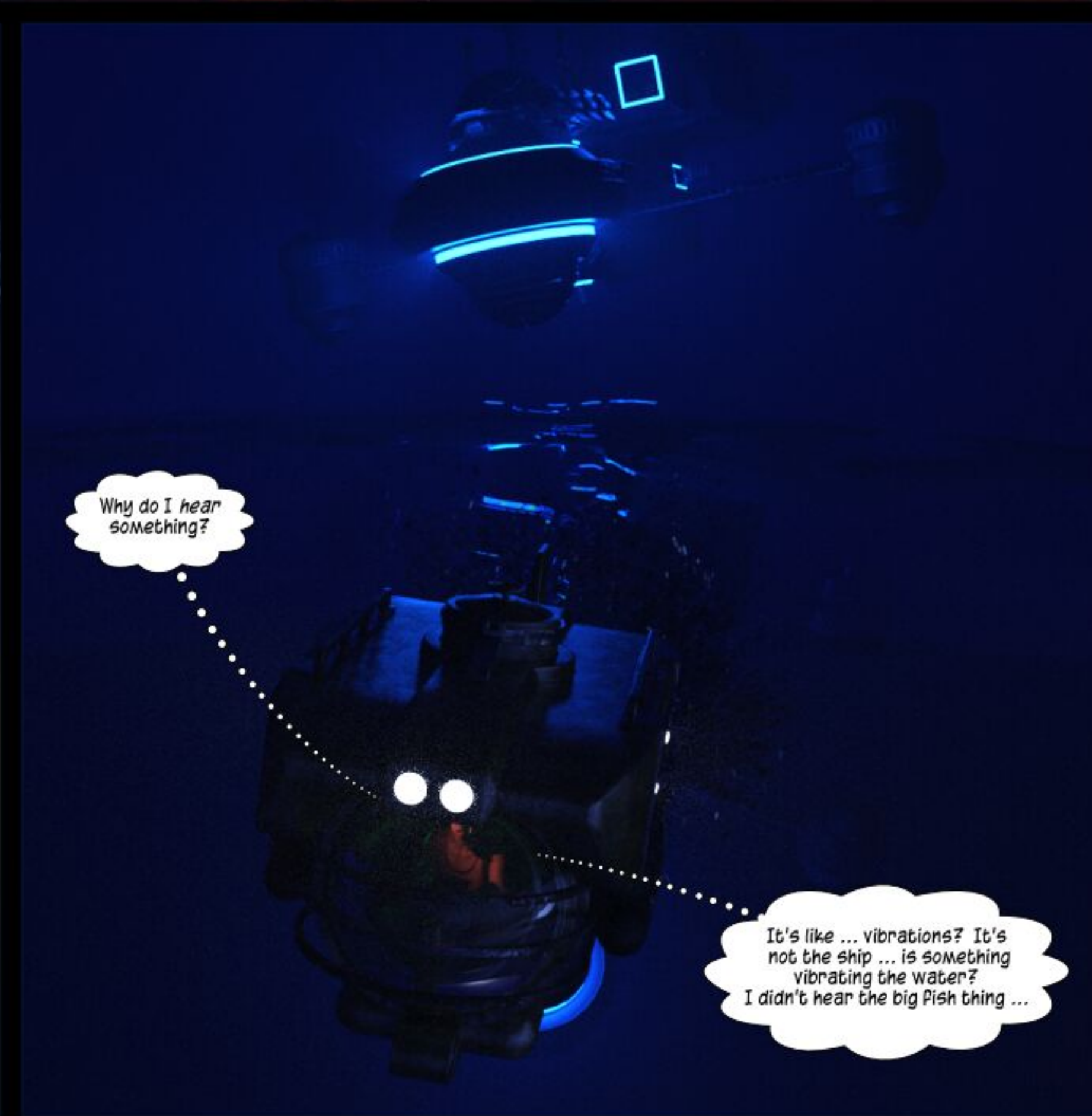
That sounds like something's going to go any second ...

Time to run.



--Whew--

Let's see if I can get to 3000 meters before that place collapses.



Why do I hear something?

It's like ... vibrations? It's not the ship ... is something vibrating the water? I didn't hear the big fish thing ...



Yeeeeooow!

Beam drill! Almost breached me. Probably left a scorch.

Crew wasn't in the station because they were out in their mining rig, dummy!



aPt camera aPt camera My kingdom for an aPt camera

Gotta stay ahead of that beam ... somehow.

Wait a minute. Now I'm not hearing the vibration as much.

I can't be outrunning them. Did they stop?



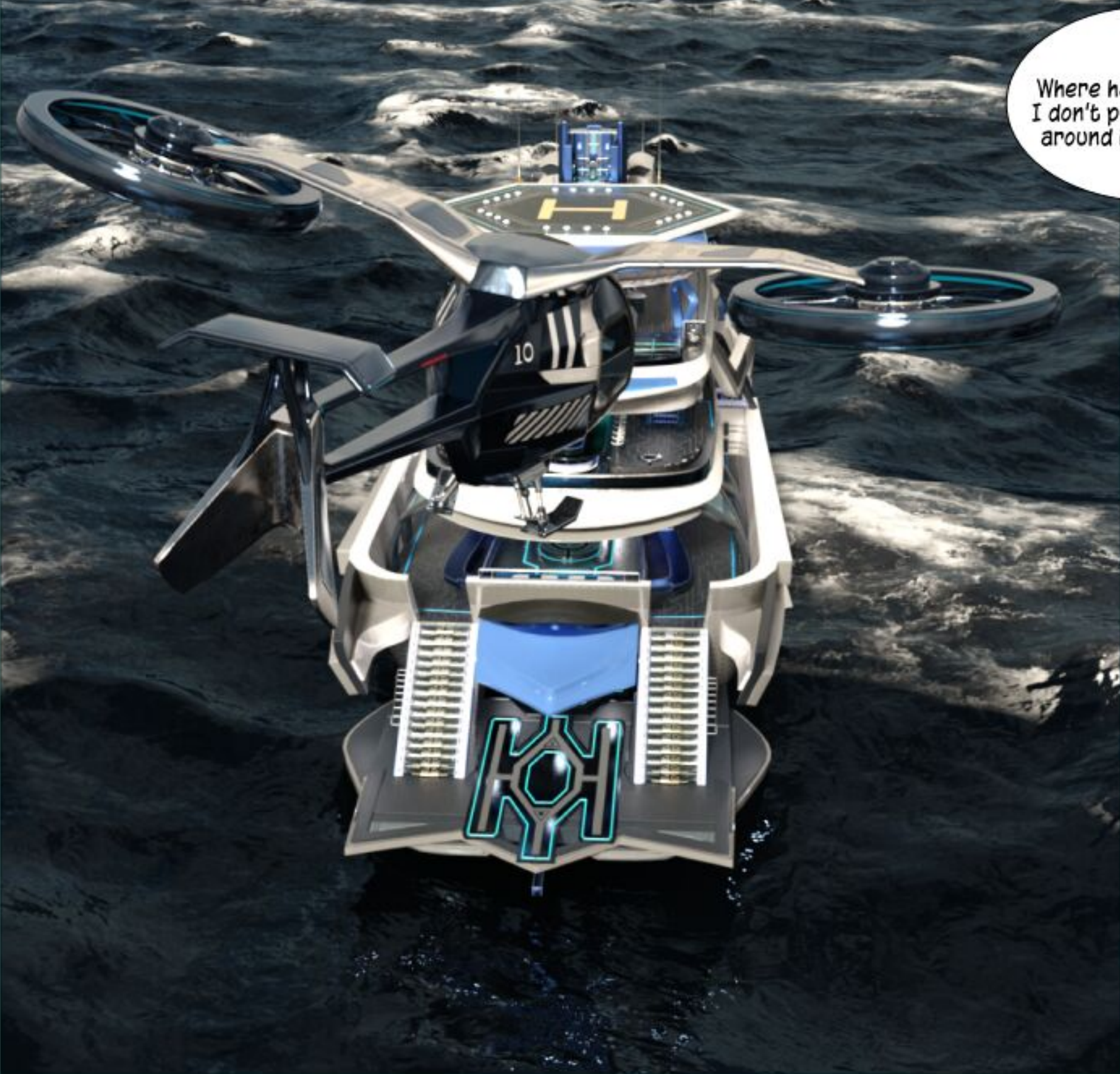
... Oh.



Sorry about that, Polks.

But I'm not sticking around to be its dessert.

THREE DAYS LATER.

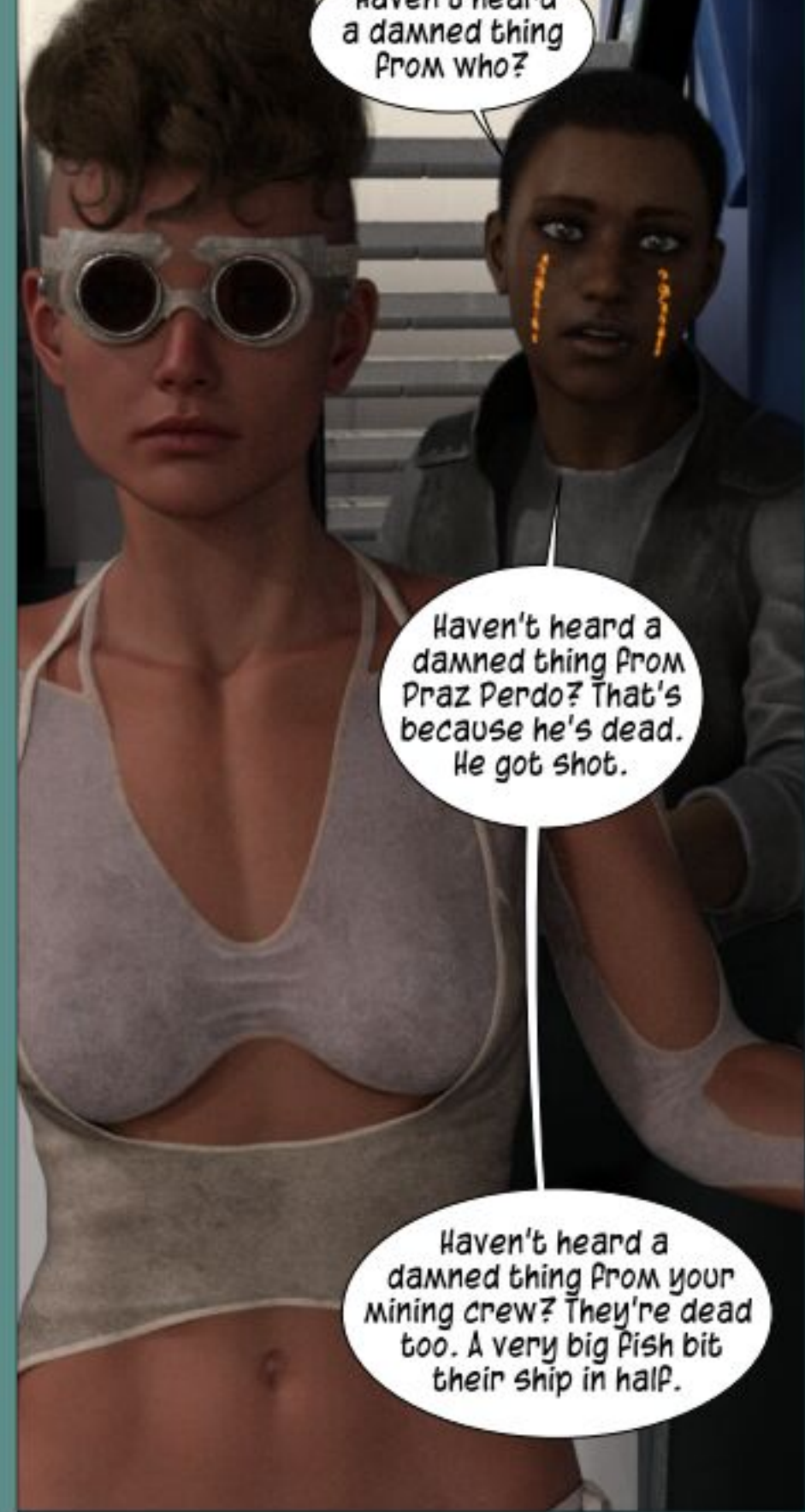


Siz!
Where have you been?
I don't pay you to hang
around in town all day
...



I still haven't
heard a damned
thing from--

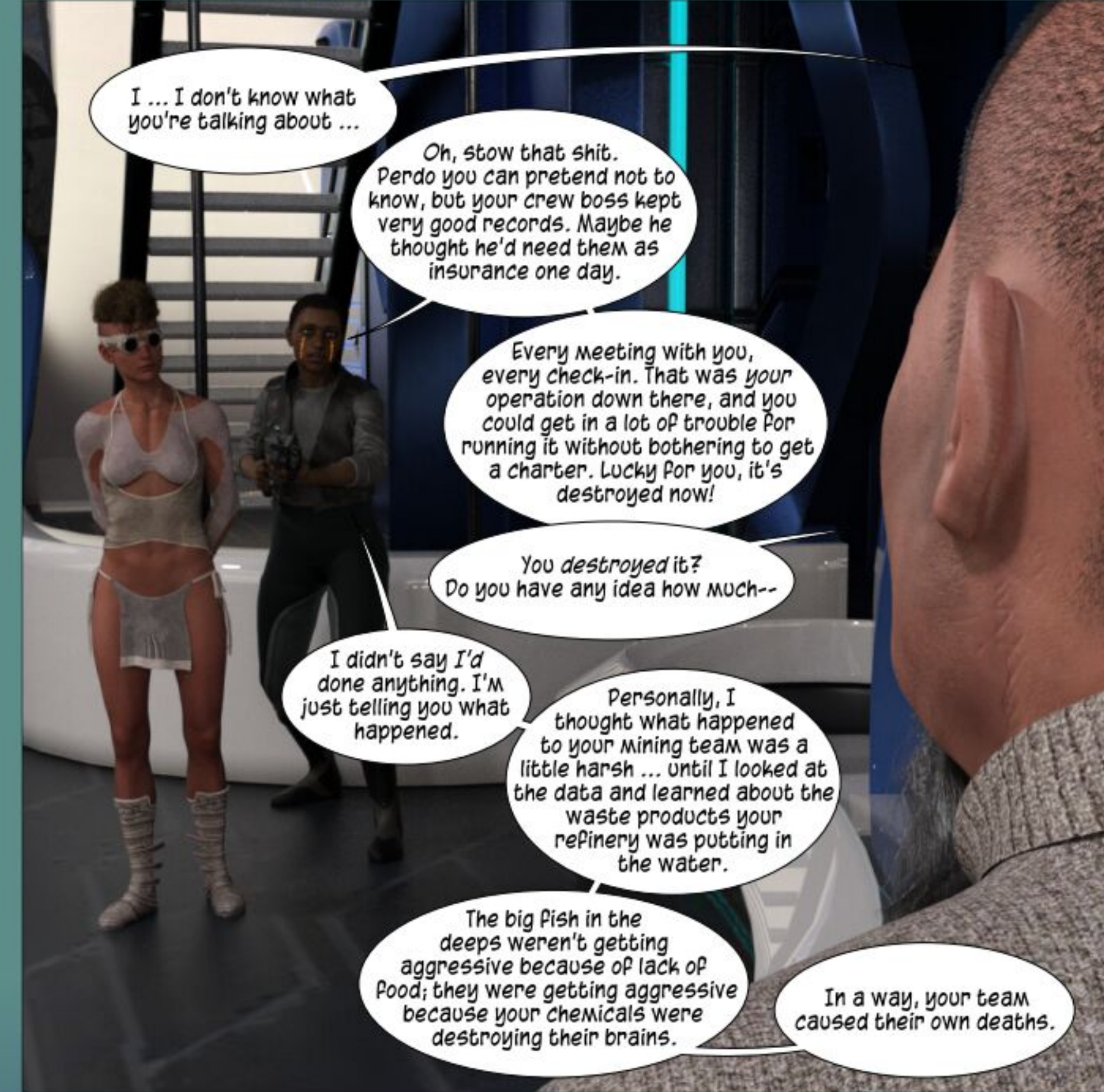
--oh.



Haven't heard
a damned thing
from who?

Haven't heard a
damned thing from
Praz Perdo? That's
because he's dead.
He got shot.

Haven't heard a
damned thing from
your mining crew?
They're dead
too. A very big fish bit
their ship in half.



I ... I don't know what
you're talking about ...

Oh, stow that shit.
Perdo you can pretend not to
know, but your crew boss kept
very good records. Maybe he
thought he'd need them as
insurance one day.

Every meeting with you,
every check-in. That was your
operation down there, and you
could get in a lot of trouble for
running it without bothering to get
a charter. Lucky for you, it's
destroyed now!

You destroyed it?
Do you have any idea how much--

I didn't say I'd
done anything. I'm
just telling you what
happened.

Personally, I
thought what happened
to your mining team was a
little harsh ... until I looked at
the data and learned about the
waste products your
refinery was putting in the
water.

The big fish in the
deeps weren't getting
aggressive because of lack of
food; they were getting aggressive
because your chemicals were
destroying their brains.

In a way, your team
caused their own deaths.



Anyway, I just dropped
by to tell you that.

And to tell you that I've
given all this information to the
Btherian Development Council, who
have decided to cut you out. Your
fellow plutocrats aren't any more
ethical than you are, but you're
now a liability.

Anybody who'd piss off
Sela Tyrell is not someone they
want to associate with. And speaking
of that, she's not going to be pleased
with you, and you should probably
consider your options real hard.
Fast.

By the way,
that's all a done deal,
so trying to shut me up
after the fact won't do you
any good. If you send
someone to kill me, it'll
just annoy me, and I'll
come find you.

You can have
Siz back after
she returns me
to the port.



Fancy!

Well ... it's my last
night here, and I thought
maybe we should have
somewhere nice.

And it's got a big
enough bed.

So much Puss. If
you want to Puck
underwater, why not just
Puck underwater?

We don't all have
gills, you know.

Well, you should.



So you're leaving ... and
soon Tyrell will send someone and
we'll start over ...

I don't think so.
I'm not saying Tyrell
doesn't lie, but she's
too smart to tell a direct
lie about something I could
so easily check. If she
says Plat-out that her
mines don't pollute, then
I have to assume
they don't pollute.

Besides, since I'm
recommending that she
hire you as ecological
advisor for her operations on
Btheria, and I think she'll do it
if I make the case strongly
enough, you'll be able to
keep her honest.



You're
what?

I can't
work for
Tyrell!

What happens
when she does
something
horrible?

Then you quit. And
you're no worse off than
you were before.

But if she listens to
you, then maybe it'll
keep her from doing
something horrible. And if
you ask her to rein in the
fishery, she'll have the
clout to do it.

And it'll restore
your reputation with
the money, so you can
show your face without
being worried someone
will try to shoot it.



Plus the
arguments are going
to be a lot of fun to
watch.

Oh, sure, laugh
now. Just wait till I
get you in as liaison
to the Btherians.

Hey, that's
not a bad
idea.



You better come
back to check on us,
though.
I demand it.

I
-- MMMH! --
I don't think that'll
be a problem.

END