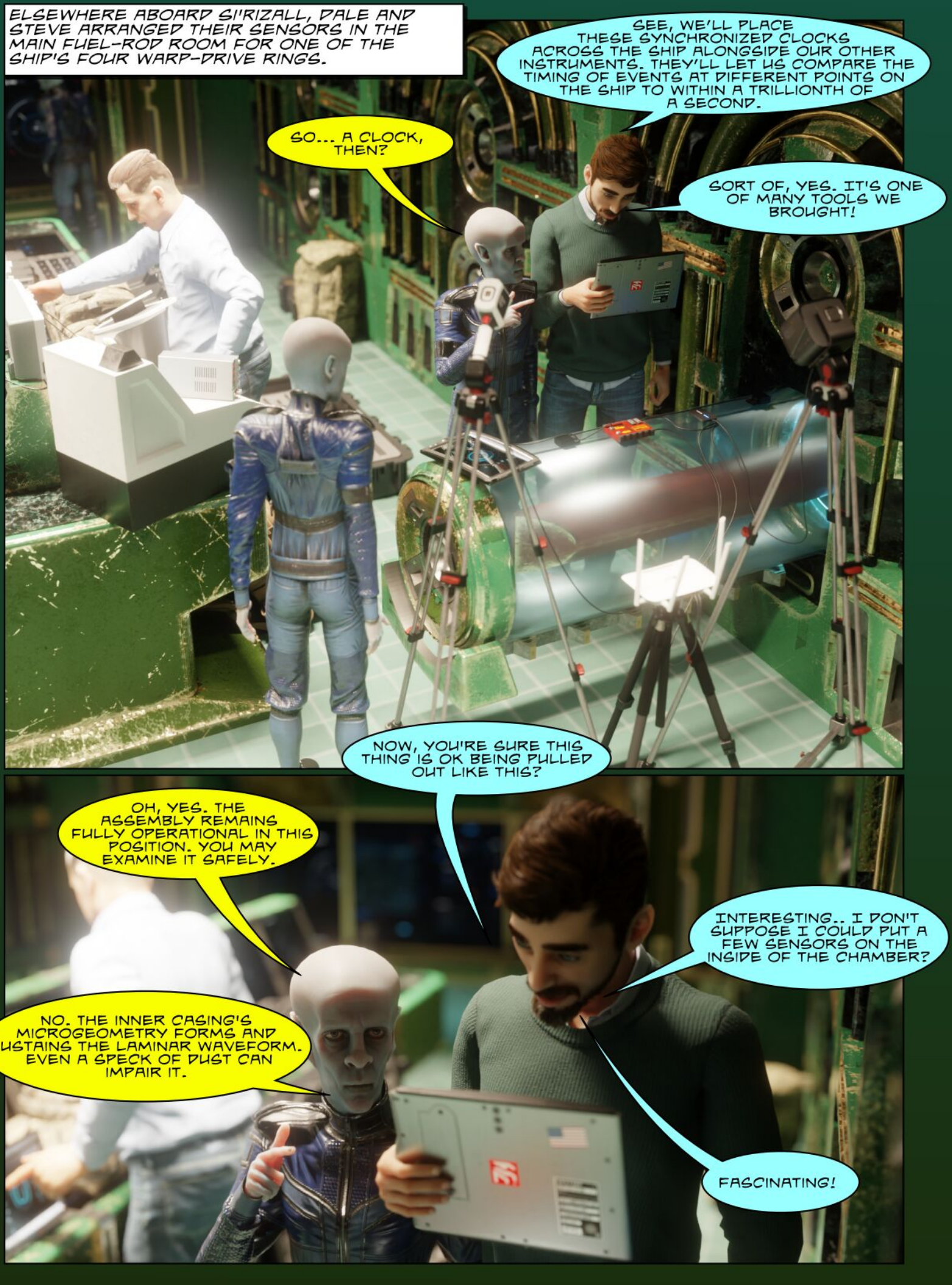
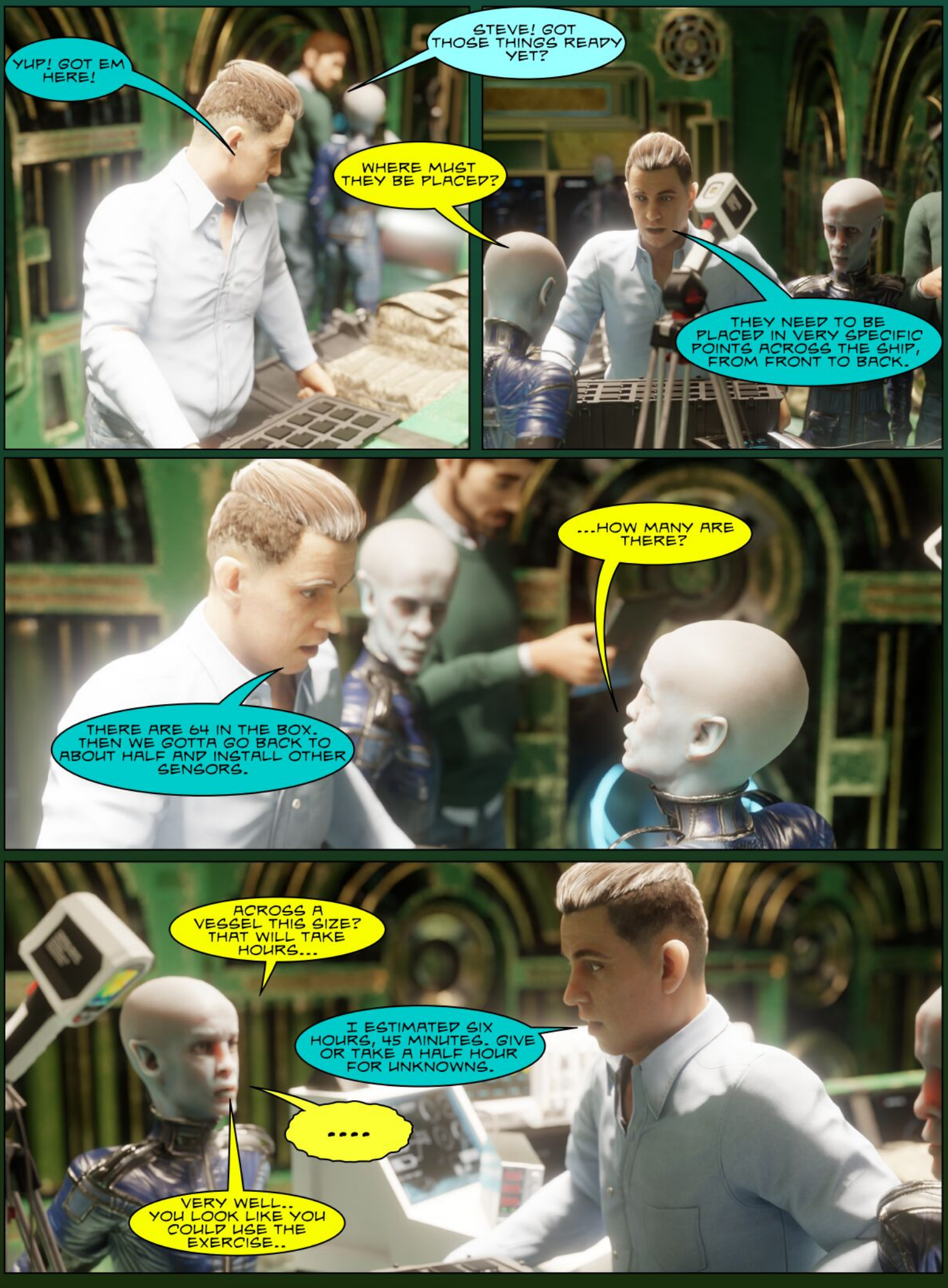
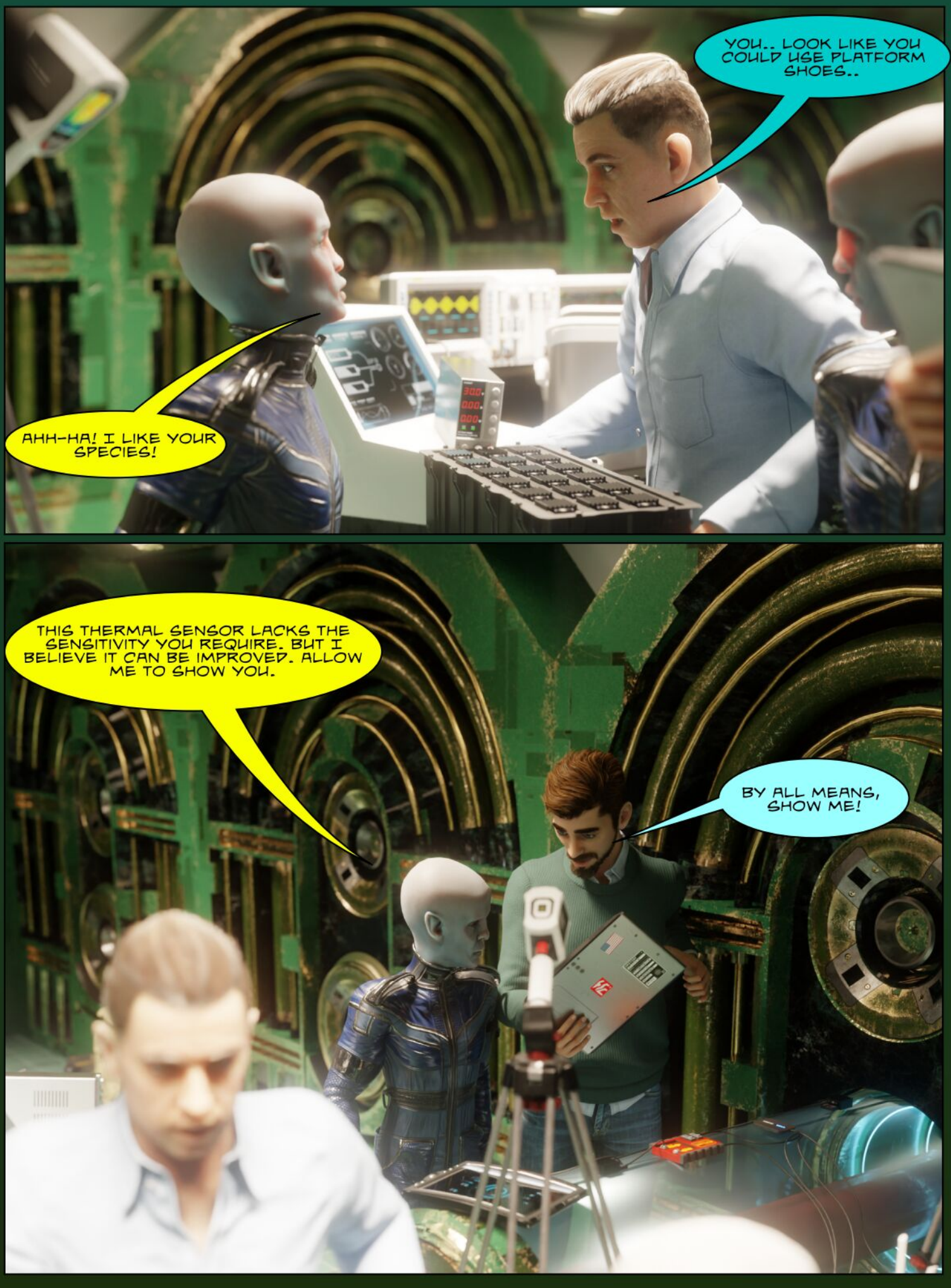

ELSEWHERE ABOARD SI'RIZALL, DALE AND STEVE ARRANGED THEIR SENSORS IN THE MAIN FUEL-ROD ROOM FOR ONE OF THE SHIP'S FOUR WARP-DRIVE RINGS.
SEE, WE'LL PLACE THESE SYNCHRONIZED CLOCKS ACROSS THE SHIP ALONGSIDE OUR OTHER INSTRUMENTS. THEY'LL LET US COMPARE THE TIMING OF EVENTS AT DIFFERENT POINTS ON THE SHIP TO WITHIN A TRILLIONTH OF A SECOND.
SO... A CLOCK, THEN?
SORT OF, YES. IT'S ONE OF MANY TOOLS WE BROUGHT!
NOW, YOU'RE SURE THIS THING IS OK BEING PULLED OUT LIKE THIS?
OH, YES. THE ASSEMBLY REMAINS FULLY OPERATIONAL IN THIS POSITION. YOU MAY EXAMINE IT SAFELY.
INTERESTING.. I DON'T SUPPOSE I COULD PUT A FEW SENSORS ON THE INSIDE OF THE CHAMBER?
NO. THE INNER CASING'S MICROGEOMETRY FORMS AND SUSTAINS THE LAMINAR WAVEFORM. EVEN A SPECK OF DUST CAN IMPAIR IT.
FASCINATING!


YUP! GOT EM HERE!
STEVE! GOT THOSE THINGS READY YET?
WHERE MUST THEY BE PLACED?
THEY NEED TO BE PLACED IN VERY SPECIFIC POINTS ACROSS THE SHIP, FROM FRONT TO BACK.
...HOW MANY ARE THERE?
THERE ARE 64 IN THE BOX. THEN WE GOTTA GO BACK TO ABOUT HALF AND INSTALL OTHER SENSORS.
ACROSS A VESSEL THIS SIZE? THAT WILL TAKE HOURS...
I ESTIMATED SIX HOURS, 45 MINUTES. GIVE OR TAKE A HALF HOUR FOR UNKNOWNS.
....
VERY WELL.. YOU LOOK LIKE YOU COULD USE THE EXERCISE..


YOU.. LOOK LIKE YOU COULD USE PLATFORM SHOES..
AHH-HA! I LIKE YOUR SPECIES!
THIS THERMAL SENSOR LACKS THE SENSITIVITY YOU REQUIRE. BUT I BELIEVE IT CAN BE IMPROVED. ALLOW ME TO SHOW YOU.
BY ALL MEANS, SHOW ME!


HOURS AFTER C.J. ENTERED THE ONTA'NIESS, JIMMY WAS STILL WAITING FOR HIM TO WAKE, AS ORDERED.
THE COUCH WAS TOO SHORT FOR HIM TO SLEEP COMFORTABLY. HIS TABLET HAD DONE LITTLE TO KEEP HIM AWAKE.
ZZZZZZZ...
OHH! HUH? FUCK..

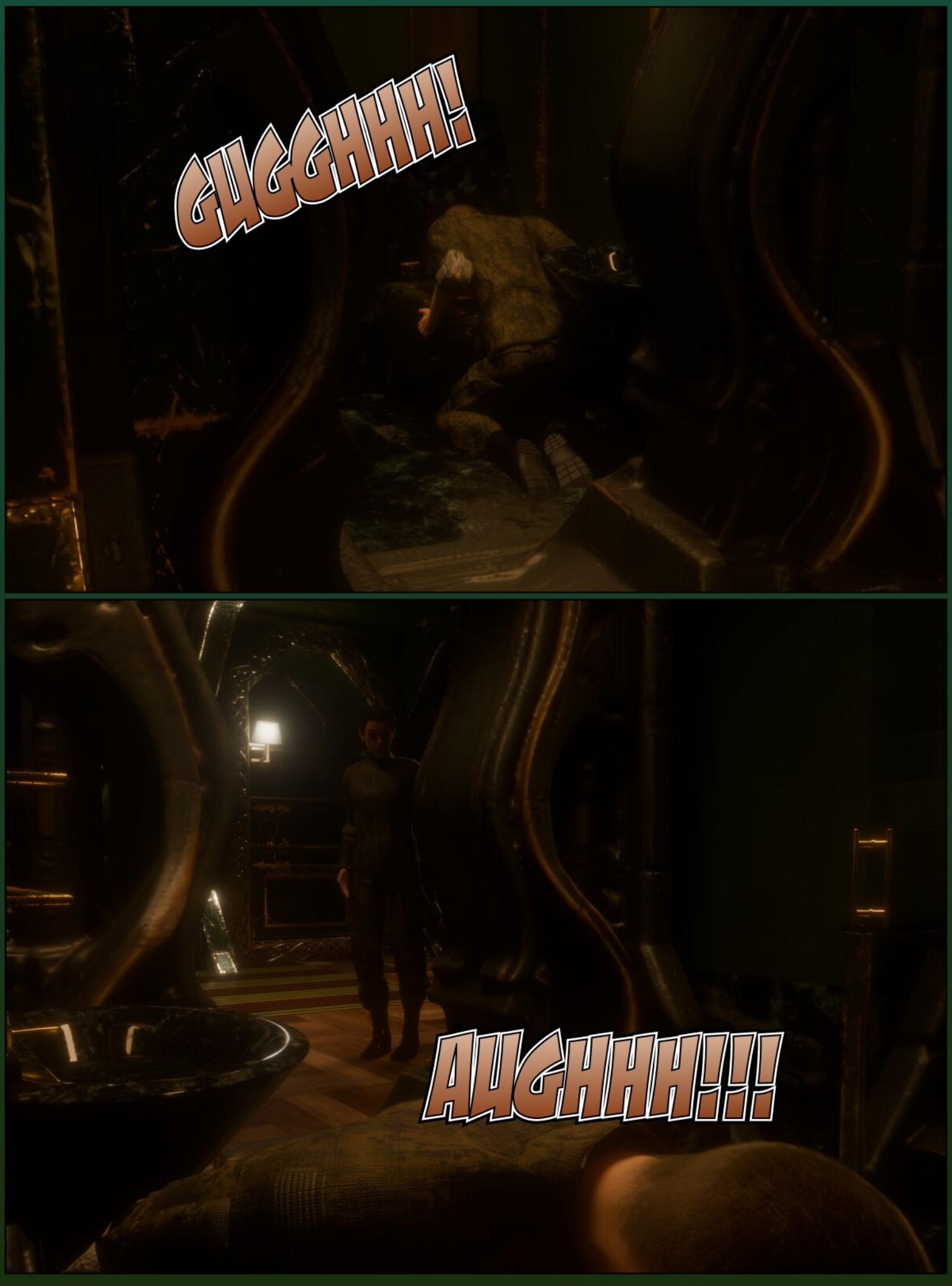

ZZZZZZZ...
GRGGGLGLGLG
A THROBBING HEADACHE AND A SURGE OF NAUSEA JOLTED C.J. AWAKE.
UGHH! HMMM?
OHH, GOD.. MY HEAD..


YO..
HMM? OHH, YOU'RE UP? 'BOUT DAMN TIME.
WH-UGHH... WHAT IN THE HELL'S GOING ON?
ACTUALLY, I WAS HOPING YOU COULD TELL ME..
YOU STEPPED ONTO THAT... THING AND JUST COLLAPSED.
GABRIEL... OR WHOEVER HE IS... SAID IT'S NORMAL AND HAD YOU CARRIED HERE.
SO... WHAT DID IT SHOW YOU?
HE WOULDN'T LET US TRY. SAID IT WOULD KILL US..
APPARENTLY IT'S ONLY FOR "HIGHER ORDER BEINGS".


UHH.. I'M INCLINED TO BELIEVE HIM.. OWW..


GULP
UHH-OH..


BLAHH!


GUGGHHH!
AUGHHH!!!


HEY, MAN, YOU PUKED ON THE FLOOR OUT HERE...
YOU SHOULD PROBABLY CLEAN THAT UP.. I'LL ASK WHERE THE MOPS ARE.
UGHH... FUCK OFF..
YOU ALL RIGHT?
YEAH, I'M FI..UHHH.



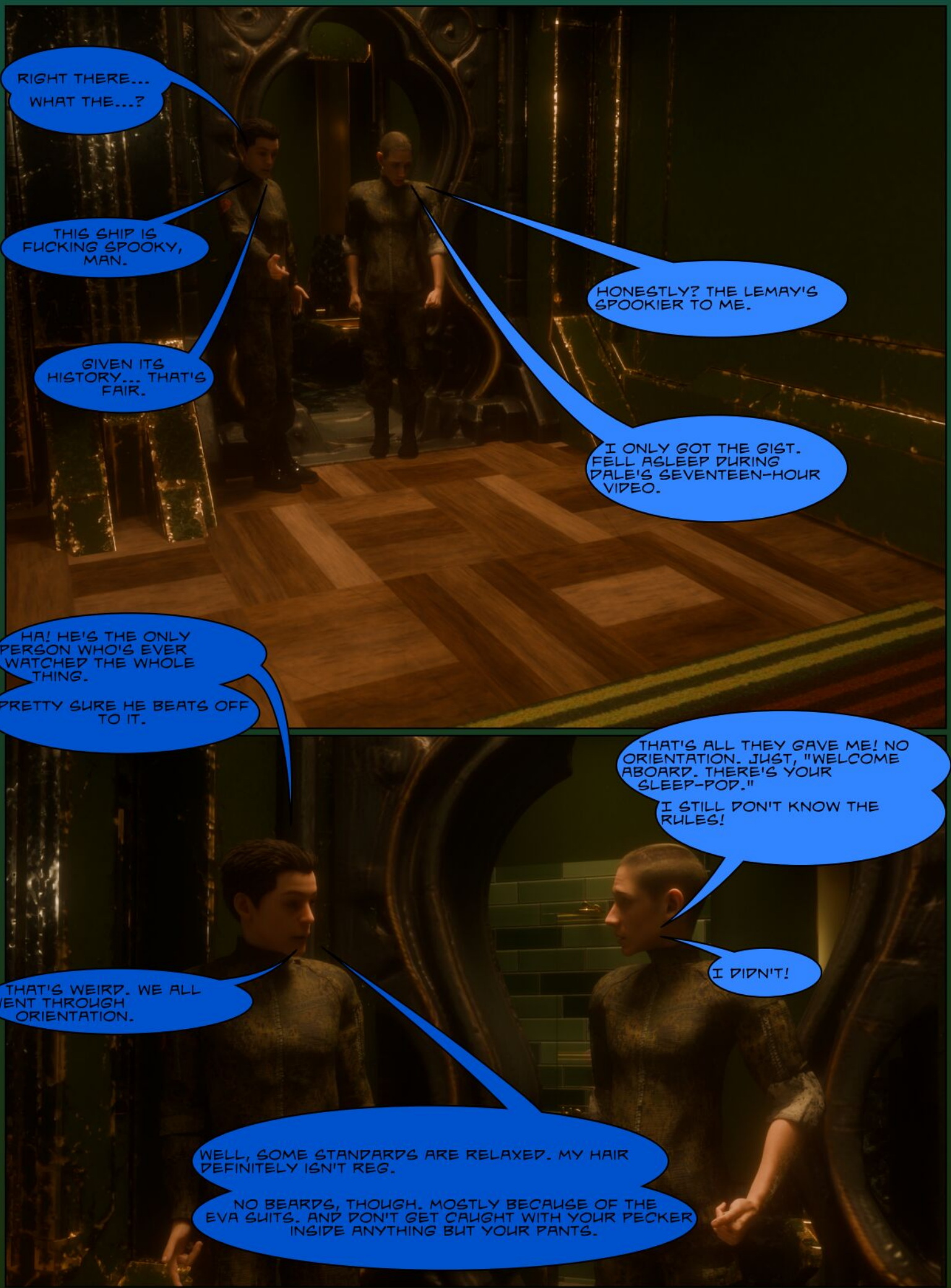


EMBARRASSING AS IT WAS, C.J. COULDN'T DENY THAT HE FELT TEN TIMES BETTER.




TWELVE HOURS!?
WHY DIDN'T YOU WAKE ME UP?
I WAS SPECIFICALLY TOLD NOT TO. SEVERAL TIMES.
OH...
PLUS, YOU HAVEN'T SHUT UP SINCE YOU JOINED US. I WAS ENJOYING THE PEACE AND QUIET.
YOU'VE JUST BEEN SITTING HERE THE WHOLE TIME? WHY'D YOU STICK AROUND?
PLEASE TELL ME YOU WEREN'T, LIKE—
C.J., JUST...
I WATCHED DALE AND STEVE NERD OUT OVER THE ENGINES, THEN CAUGHT A FEW MINUTES ON THAT COUCH.
THING'S BUILT FOR SOMEBODY HALF MY SIZE.

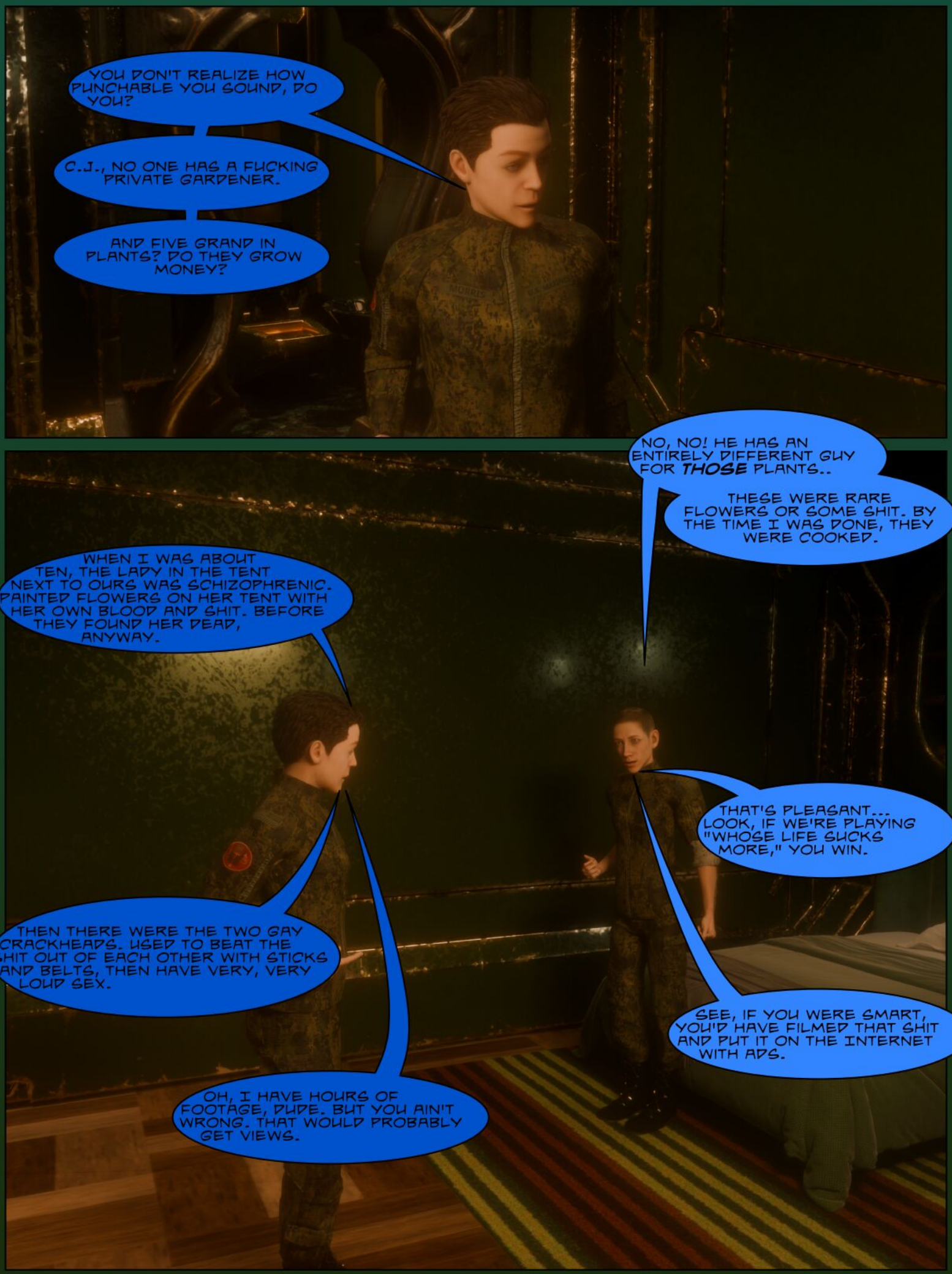

AND I WAS ACTUALLY ORDERED TO BE HERE THIS TIME. SO DON'T START.
MMM... MY HEAD STILL HURTS. YOU WIN THIS TIME.
GOOD! SO, WHAT DID THAT THING SHOW YOU?
GLOWING CUBES... LIGHTS. LIKE A PLANET-SIZED HARD DRIVE. WHOLE WORLDS OF INFORMATION IN A FLASH...
DUDE! THAT'S AWESOME!
DID YOU SEE ANYTHING SPECIFIC?
JIMMY, I'M STILL A LITTLE OUT OF IT. WAIT... DIDN'T I PUKE ON THE FLOOR?
YEAH, YOU DID.
WHERE?


RIGHT THERE...
WHAT THE...?
THIS SHIP IS FUCKING SPOOKY, MAN.
GIVEN ITS HISTORY... THAT'S FAIR.
HONESTLY? THE LEMAY'S SPOOKIER TO ME.
I ONLY GOT THE GIST. FELL ASLEEP DURING DALE'S SEVENTEEN-HOUR VIDEO.
HA! HE'S THE ONLY PERSON WHO'S EVER WATCHED THE WHOLE THING.
PRETTY SURE HE BEATS OFF TO IT.
THAT'S ALL THEY GAVE ME! NO ORIENTATION. JUST, "WELCOME ABOARD. THERE'S YOUR SLEEP-POD."
I STILL DON'T KNOW THE RULES!
I DIDN'T!
THAT'S WEIRD. WE ALL WENT THROUGH ORIENTATION.
WELL, SOME STANDARDS ARE RELAXED. MY HAIR DEFINITELY ISN'T REG.
NO BEARDS, THOUGH. MOSTLY BECAUSE OF THE EVA SUITS. AND DON'T GET CAUGHT WITH YOUR PECKER INSIDE ANYTHING BUT YOUR PANTS.


AND THE SHIPS DON'T EXIST, BUTCHER TEAM DOESN'T EXIST, AND NOTHING WE DID EVER HAPPENED. AT LEAST FOR NOW.
I DEDUCED ALL THAT ALREADY.
THEN YOU KNOW THE REST. HOW TO BE A MARINE... I HOPE.
SIMPLE ENOUGH, THEN.
JUST DON'T FUCK AROUND. LAST GUY WHO PULLED SOME DUMB SHIT WENT FOR A SWIM ON THE SUN.
SHIT. WHAT'D HE DO?
TRIED TO SMUGGLE DATA OFF THE SHIP. ZERO TOLERANCE.
DAMN. I WOULDN'T EXPECT THAT FROM THE COLONEL.
YOU'VE ONLY MET THE "CHILL" VERSION. WAIT TILL YOU MEET THE "PISSED-OFF" VERSION.
THE MAN CAN FLIP A SWITCH LIKE NOTHING I'VE EVER SEEN.
DAMN... I WISH I'D KNOWN THAT EARLIER.


YEAH, I HEARD ABOUT YOU HITTING ON WINTERS IN FRONT OF HIM. TRYING TO GET KICKED OUT, OR...?
SHE'S ALSO NOT ON THE SAME TEAM, IF YOU GET MY MEANING.
PFFT! SURE.
THEY ONLY TELL YOU THEY ENJOYED IT TO MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER.
NO, I WAS IN SHOCK, AND SHE'S PRETTY HOT. INSTINCT TOOK OVER, I GUESS.
FIRST OFF, BULLSHIT. SECOND, EVEN IF THAT WERE TRUE, I COULD FIX THAT.
HMM... YEAH. PROBABLY SOMETIMES.
OOF... MY HEAD'S POUNDING. I NEED A CIGARETTE.
YOU GOT ANY?
NO, I DON'T SMOKE. SOMEONE ON THE LEMAY'LL HAVE POUCHES IF YOU NEED NICOTINE.
NAH, I'M GOOD.
THIS BED, THOUGH... WE NEED THESE ON THE LEMAY.
YEAH, WE GET PRISON MATS. SPEAKING OF...
WHY WERE YOU IN JAIL?


OH! THAT. SOME GUY AT A PARTY GRABBED MY GIRLFRIEND'S BUTT. I PUT HIM CLEAN THROUGH A WALL.
FUNNY THING IS, I DIDN'T GET CHARGED FOR THAT. HE LEFT BEFORE THE COPS SHOWED UP. I WAS SEVENTEEN, SO THEY GOT ME FOR UNDERAGE DRINKING, OF ALL THINGS!
DAD LET ME SPEND THE NIGHT, THEN PICKED ME UP IN THE MORNING. I SLEPT THROUGH MOST OF IT.
THAT'S IT!? AW, DUDE, THAT'S WEAK.
A NIGHT IN THE DRUNK TANK DOESN'T EVEN COUNT.
YEAH. IT REALLY DIDN'T AFFECT ANYTHING.
DAD WAS MORE PISSED HE HAD TO PAY TO FIX THE GUY'S WALL.
GAVE THE GARDENER TWO WEEKS OFF AND MADE ME DO ALL HIS WORK.
WHOLE NEW RESPECT FOR THAT DUDE...
I SCREWED UP AT LEAST FIVE GRAND IN GARDEN PLANTS.


YOU DON'T REALIZE HOW PUNCHABLE YOU SOUND, DO YOU?
C.J., NO ONE HAS A FUCKING PRIVATE GARDENER.
AND FIVE GRAND IN PLANTS? DO THEY GROW MONEY?
NO, NO! HE HAS AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT GUY FOR ***THOSE*** PLANTS..
THESE WERE RARE FLOWERS OR SOME SHIT. BY THE TIME I WAS DONE, THEY WERE COOKED.
WHEN I WAS ABOUT TEN, THE LADY IN THE TENT NEXT TO OURS WAS SCHIZOPHRENIC. PAINTED FLOWERS ON HER TENT WITH HER OWN BLOOD AND SHIT. BEFORE THEY FOUND HER DEAD, ANYWAY.
THAT'S PLEASANT... LOOK, IF WE'RE PLAYING "WHOSE LIFE SUCKS MORE," YOU WIN.
THEN THERE WERE THE TWO GAY CRACKHEADS. USED TO BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF EACH OTHER WITH STICKS AND BELTS, THEN HAVE VERY, VERY LOUD SEX.
SEE, IF YOU WERE SMART, YOU'D HAVE FILMED THAT SHIT AND PUT IT ON THE INTERNET WITH ADS.
OH, I HAVE HOURS OF FOOTAGE, DUDE. BUT YOU AIN'T WRONG. THAT WOULD PROBABLY GET VIEWS.


WOAH! NOT TO BE RUDE, BUT I JUST NOTICED THAT'S A WINDOW!
THAT PLACE HASN'T GOTTEN MUCH BETTER, EITHER...
SERIOUSLY? YOU'RE KINDA STUPID FOR A ROBOT. ARE YOU A TARD-BOT?
OH, EAT A TRUCKLOAD OF DICKS.
LET'S SEE HOW OBSERVANT YOU ARE AFTER WAKING UP FROM... WHATEVER THE FUCK THAT WAS.
I FEEL LIKE I DRANK A BOTTLE OF WHISKEY TO THE FACE, THEN SLEPT IN A CENTRIFUGE.
YOU ACTUALLY GET HUNG OVER? LIKE... YOU FEEL IT?
YES.
HUH...
SO... WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FLOWER LADY?


OH, HER? RAPED AND MURDERED.


JESUS... IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAID. IT'S HOW CASUALLY YOU SAID IT.

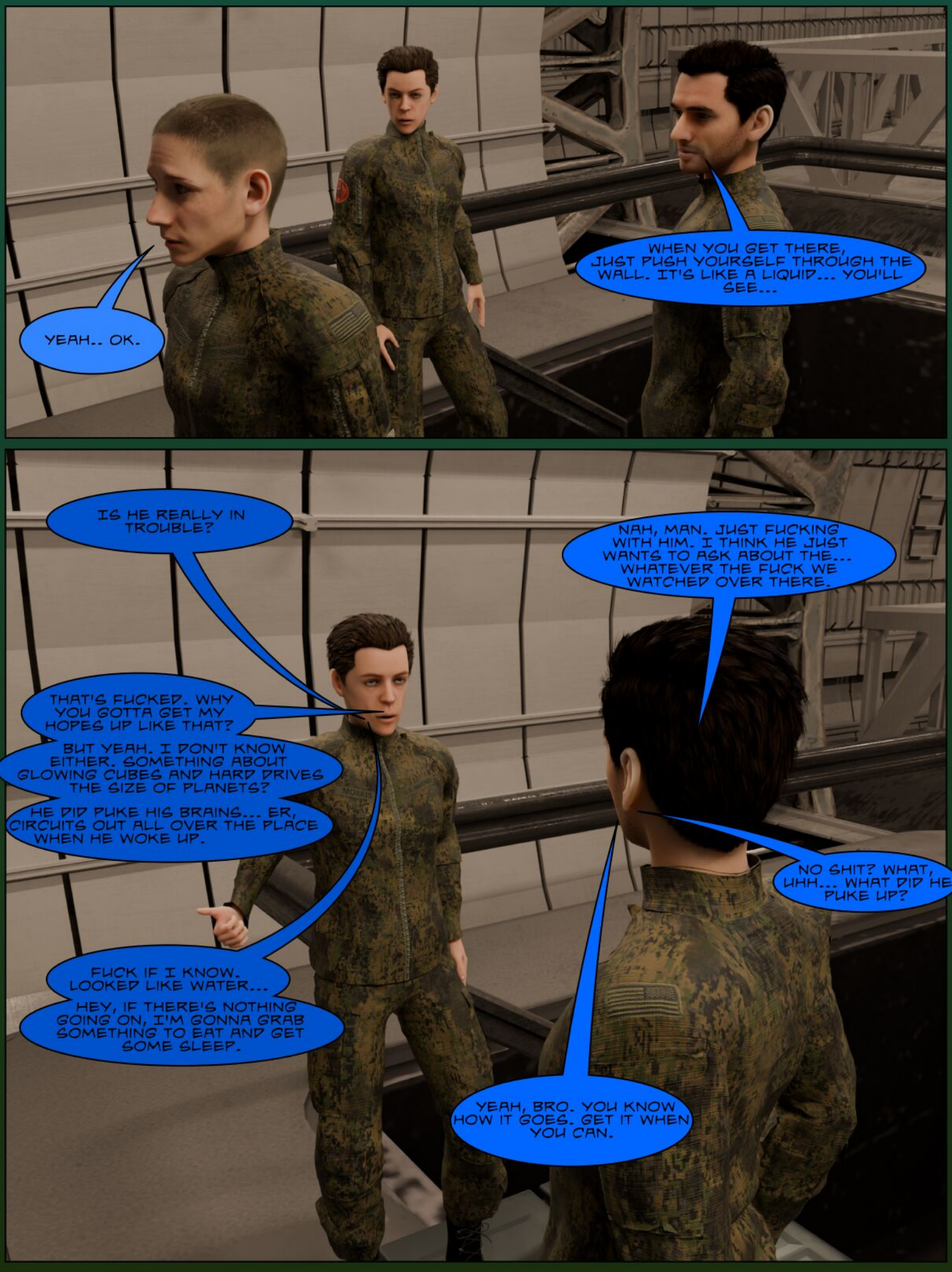

IT WAS NORMAL OUT THERE. HAPPENED ALL THE TIME. THAT'S WHY WE WERE GANG-BANGING AND CARRYING GUNS AT NINE.
ANCIENT HISTORY NOW.
FUCK, MAN... I'M SORRY.
YEAH. GOTCHA...

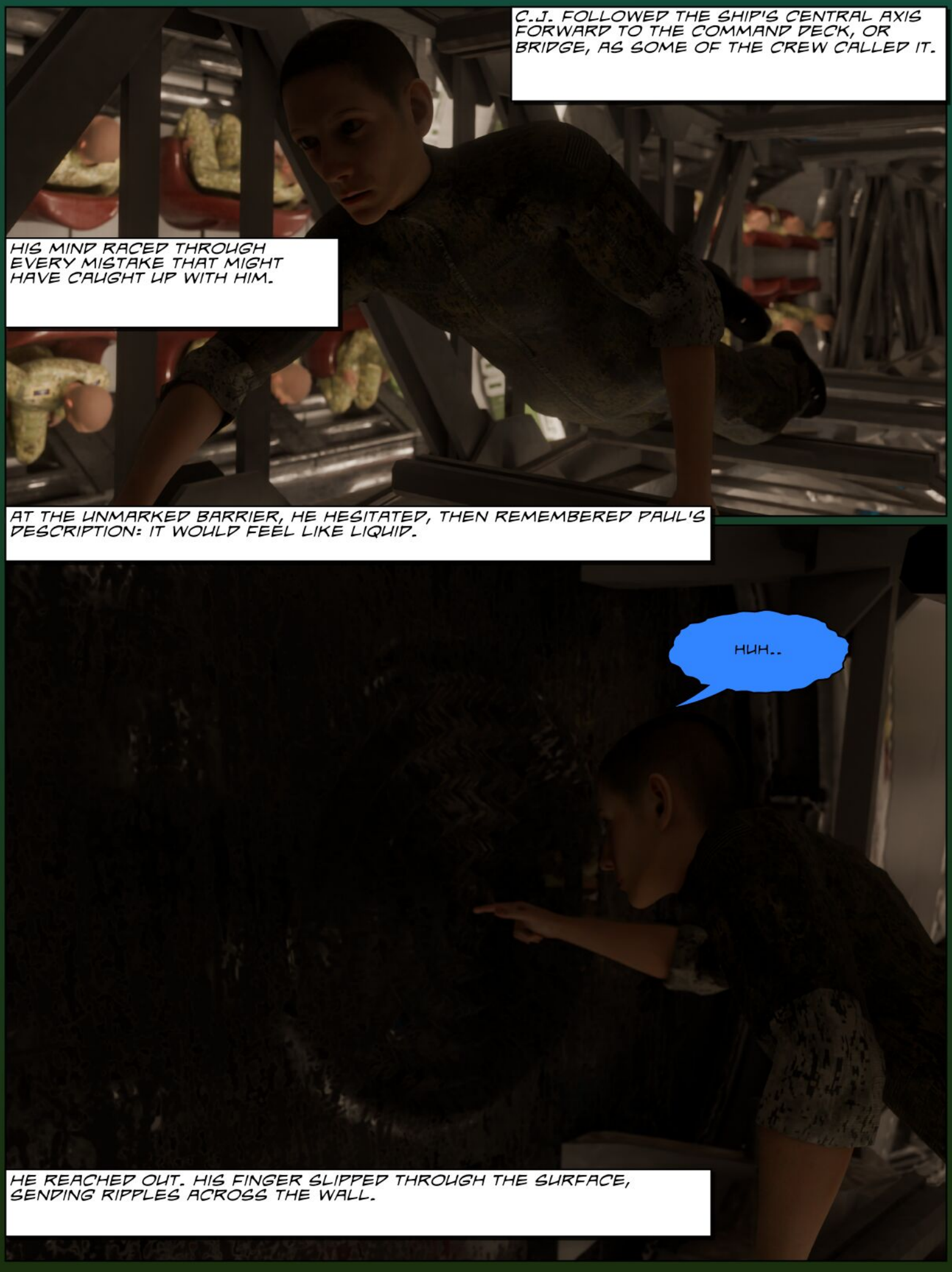

HUH... I KNEW IT WOULDN'T BE A BLUE TUNNEL WITH STARS WHIPPING BY, BUT...
"COLOR-SHIFT THING"?
YOU WERE HOPING IT'D BE A BLUE TUNNEL WITH STARS WHIPPING BY? ME TOO.
IT'S A DOMED WINDOW. CHECK IT OUT. YOU CAN SEE THAT COLOR-SHIFT THING FAST STUFF DOES.


YEAH, REDSHIFT, BLUESHIFT... I FORGET WHAT THAT'S CALLED.
DOPPLER EFFECT... I THINK?
ISN'T THAT THE WEATHER RADAR?
OHH... MAYBE.
LOOK, I WANNA GET SOME SLEEP, AND I CAN'T LEAVE UNTIL YOU DO.
GIVE ME A SECOND. THIS IS COOL! I'M GONNA GET A SHIP LIKE THIS ONE DAY!
THAT SEEMS... PLAUSIBLE, I GUESS. I ALSO NEED CHOW, SO PLEASE BE QUICK.
YEAH, FINE...


HEY! YOU'RE BACK! WHERE'S C.J.?
YOU DIDN'T LEAVE WITHOUT HIM, DID YOU?
NO, HE'S DOWN THERE WITH HIS JAW ON THE FLOOR STARING AT THE HANGAR WE'RE IN..


I'M HERE! SORRY, IT'S A MASSIVE FUCKING SPACESHIP! I CAN'T BE THE ONLY ONE WHO THINKS IT'S COOL!?
WELL, GET YOUR ASS UP HERE! THE COLONEL WANTS TO SEE YOU!
HE DOES?
YEAH! AND HE SEEMED PISSED TOO..
I THINK YOU'RE ABOUT TO GET IT.. SO BRACE YOURSELF. HE'S ON THE COMMAND DECK.
I THINK IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH YOU HITTING ON WINTERS IN FRONT OF HIM..
OR THE WHOLE "HIJACKING" THING.. MAYBE BOTH.. EITHER WAY, I THINK YOU'RE IN TROUBLE!
FUUUCK.. ALRIGHT..


YEAH.. OK.
WHEN YOU GET THERE, JUST PUSH YOURSELF THROUGH THE WALL. IT'S LIKE A LIQUID... YOU'LL SEE...
IS HE REALLY IN TROUBLE?
NAH, MAN. JUST FUCKING WITH HIM. I THINK HE JUST WANTS TO ASK ABOUT THE... WHATEVER THE FUCK WE WATCHED OVER THERE.
THAT'S FUCKED. WHY YOU GOTTA GET MY HOPES UP LIKE THAT?
BUT YEAH. I DON'T KNOW EITHER. SOMETHING ABOUT GLOWING CUBES AND HARD DRIVES THE SIZE OF PLANETS?
HE DID PUKE HIS BRAINS... ER, CIRCUITS OUT ALL OVER THE PLACE WHEN HE WOKE UP.
NO SHIT? WHAT, UHH... WHAT DID HE PUKE UP?
FUCK IF I KNOW. LOOKED LIKE WATER...
HEY, IF THERE'S NOTHING GOING ON, I'M GONNA GRAB SOMETHING TO EAT AND GET SOME SLEEP.
YEAH, BRO. YOU KNOW HOW IT GOES. GET IT WHEN YOU CAN.


C.J. FOLLOWED THE SHIP'S CENTRAL AXIS FORWARD TO THE COMMAND DECK, OR BRIDGE, AS SOME OF THE CREW CALLED IT.
HIS MIND RACED THROUGH EVERY MISTAKE THAT MIGHT HAVE CAUGHT UP WITH HIM.
AT THE UNMARKED BARRIER, HE HESITATED, THEN REMEMBERED PAUL'S DESCRIPTION: IT WOULD FEEL LIKE LIQUID.
HUH..
HE REACHED OUT. HIS FINGER SLIPPED THROUGH THE SURFACE, SENDING RIPPLES ACROSS THE WALL.


THE BARRIER RESISTED HIS MOVEMENT EVEN AS SOMETHING DREW HIM THROUGH.
OHH, THAT'S WEIRD!
AS ARTIFICIAL GRAVITY TOOK HOLD ON THE FAR SIDE, C.J. RECOGNIZED THE PULL AND INSTINCTIVELY GRABBED THE NEAREST RAIL.
COLONEL, SIR! I'D SALUTE YOU, BUT... I'M KINDA HOLDING ON FOR DEAR LIFE HERE..
BAH! DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT.. AT EASE, LANCE CORPORAL. JUST DON'T FALL.
YES, SIR. THANK YOU, SIR.

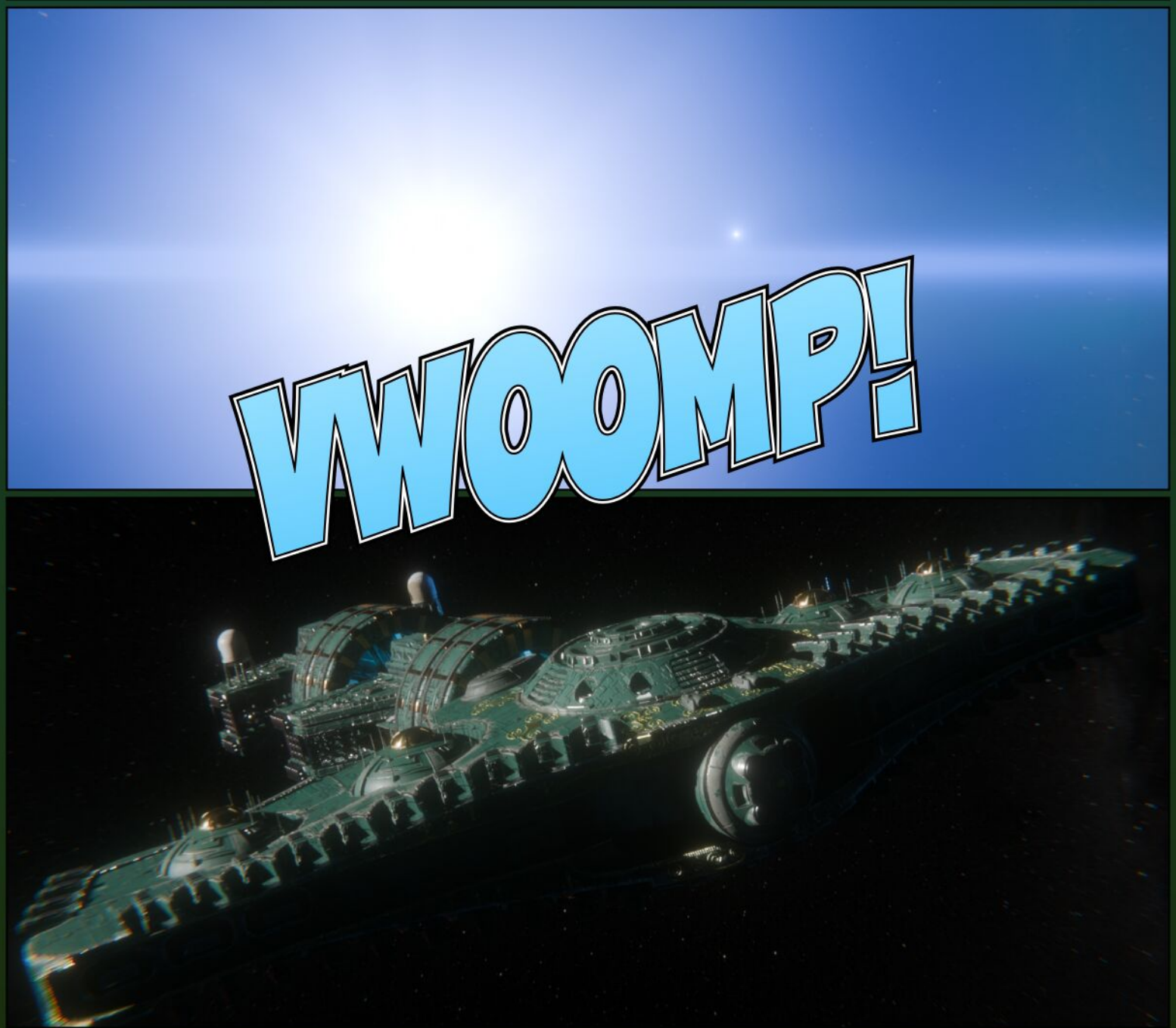

CAREFUL. THIS ONE IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT THAN THE REST. IT PULLS YOU THROUGH A LITTLE BIT.
YES, SIR. I ALREADY FELL ONCE. NOT TRYING TO DO THAT AGAIN.
YEAH, INTO THE HANGAR, I HEARD. A FALL LIKE THAT COULD KILL A MAN.
YES, SIR. IT HURT...
HAHA! I SUSPECT IT DID! IN FACT, THAT'S SORT OF WHY I ASKED YOU HERE...
THERE ARE A FEW THINGS WE NEED TO DISCUSS. IT SHOULD ONLY TAKE A MOMENT.
OF COURSE, SIR.


FIRST OFF, YOU FEELING OK? WE WERE TOLD THAT PROCESS CAN BE QUITE BRUTAL ON THE MIND AND BODY.
YES, SIR... MORE OR LESS. I FEEL HUNGOVER.
WILL YOU BE FIT FOR THE MISSION?
IT'S ALREADY CLEARING UP. I SHOULD BE FINE BY TOMORROW.
I HOPE SO. EITHER WAY, THIS SHIP OWES YOU A DEBT OF GRATITUDE.
WE'VE HAD QUITE A FEW PEOPLE JUST VANISH OVER THE YEARS. WE NEVER KNEW HOW OR WHY... NOW WE DO.
AND THANKS TO YOU AND YOUR "GIFT," I'D LIKE TO HOPE IT WON'T EVER HAPPEN AGAIN.
SAMSUNG
I WAS JUST DOING MY JOB, SIR.
PERHAPS, BUT I'M RECOMMENDING YOU FOR CORPORAL. YOU'VE EARNED IT. WE'LL PUT IT THROUGH YOUR CHAIN OF COMMAND AS SOON AS COMMUNICATIONS PERMIT.
OHH, WOW. THANK YOU, SIR!
NO, THANK YOU, SON. WE'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO GET ANYTHING CLOSE TO THE RESULTS YOU BROUGHT IN THE LAST COUPLE OF DAYS.
SEEMS LIKE A LOT OF THAT WAS DUMB LUCK, SIR.
EVER HEAR THE SAYING IT'S BETTER TO BE LUCKY THAN GOOD? I'LL TAKE THE WIN, HOWEVER IT COMES.
THAT BEING SAID, LIEUTENANT, COULD YOU BRING UP IMAGE ZERO-FOUR-TWO-SEVEN, PLEASE?

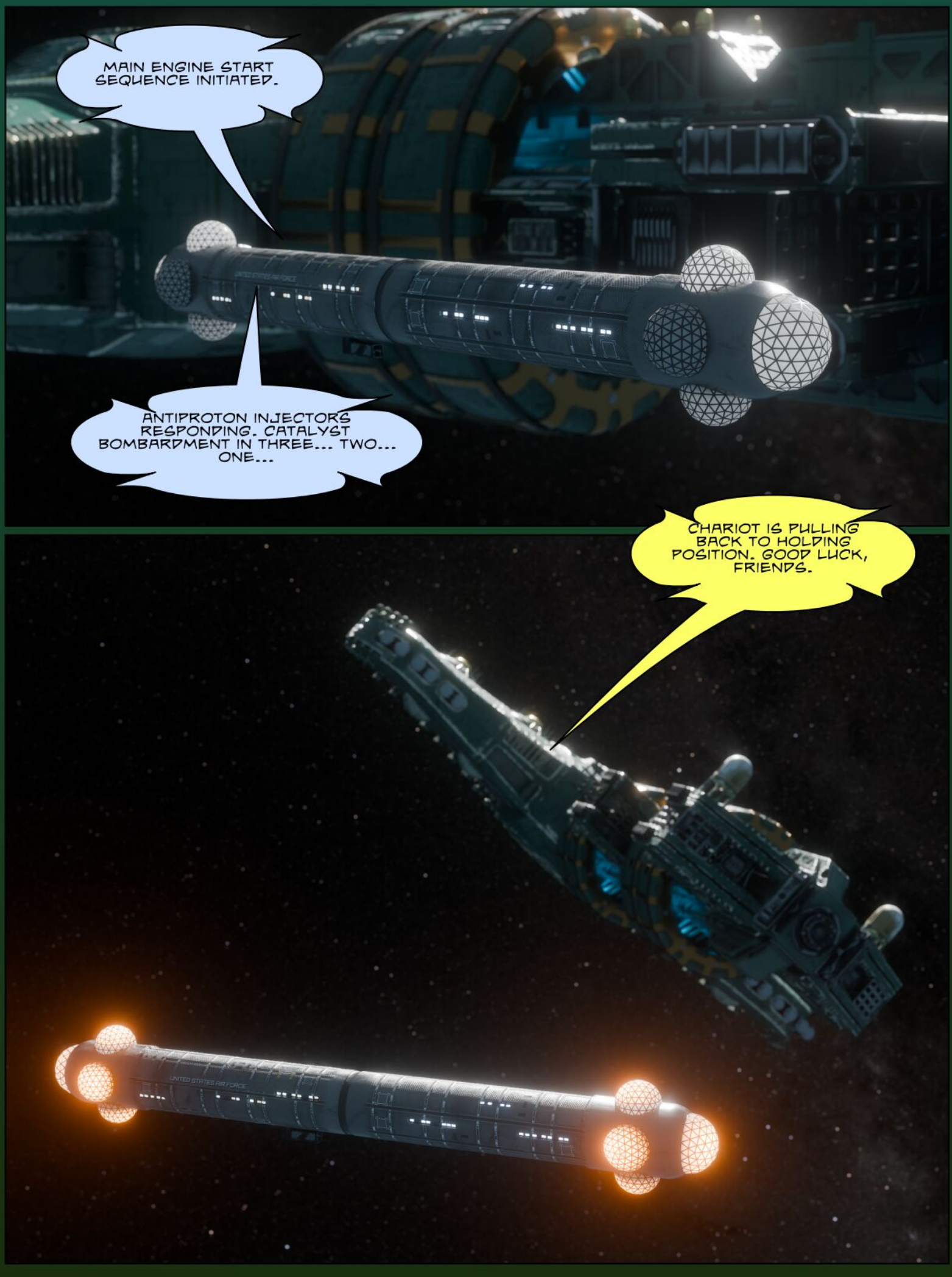

THAT'S HER...
OHH-HOO! COOL! IS THAT THE SIDE-RIZ OR WHATEVER ITS NAME IS?
I ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU MANAGED TO COMMANDEER MY SHIP FOR A MOMENT WITHOUT MY KNOWLEDGE OR PERMISSION?
UHH... YEAH... YES, SIR... SORT OF... I MEAN...
RELAX, I'M NOT MAD, AND YOU'RE NOT IN TROUBLE. FROM WHAT I HEARD, YOU WEREN'T EVEN TRYING?
NO, SIR, I WAS DEFINITELY NOT. BUT I COULD FEEL IT: EVERY NUT, BOLT, THE TEMPERATURE OF THE HULL. ALL OF IT. IT WAS KINDA COOL, BUT ALSO TERRIFYING...
ONCE WE'RE DONE WITH THIS LITTLE EXCURSION, I WANT YOU TO WORK WITH DALE TO UNLOCK THE SECRETS OF THAT SCEPTER DEVICE AND FIND A DEFENSE.
YES, SIR, I CAN DO THAT.
DO YOU THINK YOU COULD USE THE SCEPTER TO DO THE SAME TO THAT, IF IT CAME DOWN TO IT?
MAYBE... I REALLY DON'T KNOW, BUT...
WE'LL KEEP IT IN OUR BACK POCKET FOR NOW. DID YOU LEARN ANYTHING IMPORTANT FROM THAT MACHINE OVER THERE?
HEY, MARINE. YOU WATCHING TV OR TALKING TO ME?
YES, SIR... SORRY, SIR.
IT WAS A BIG RECORD OR ARCHIVE OF SOME KIND.

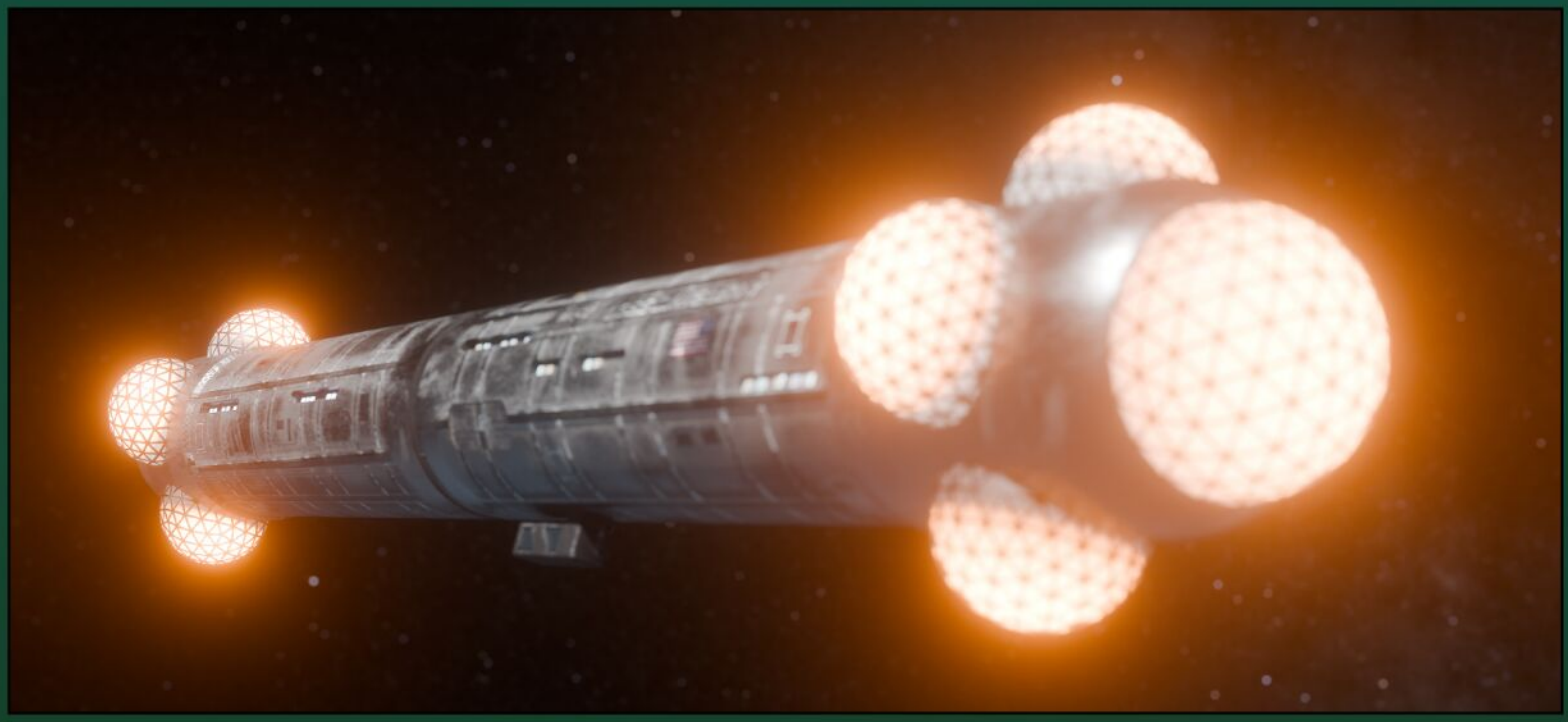

A FEW THINGS, MAYBE...
I SAW... A CUBE CREATURE. IT SHOWED ME... SLUMS? I GUESS, SIR. BUT WORSE THAN ANYTHING EARTH HAS EVER HAD...
IT'S A BIG... O'RILEY CYLINDER OR WHATEVER IT'S CALLED...
NO, SIR, I DON'T THINK SO.
BUT I THINK IT SHOWED ME HOW TO WIN...
LIKE...?
DID YOU LEARN ANYTHING USABLE OR ACTIONABLE?
"O'NEILL CYLINDER." WE'VE GATHERED THAT MUCH.
ANYTHING ABOUT THIS ALLEGED PATHOGEN?
I'M LISTENING.
WE LOAD UP THE LEMAY WITH AS MANY NUKES AS WE CAN FIT, FLY IT OUT TO THE ARK AND ISSUE AN ULTIMATUM.
WE GET THEIR DATABASE AND ALL THEIR TECHNOLOGY. IN EXCHANGE, THEY GET A PLACE TO STAY.
IF NOT... BOOM.
NOT IF... I KNOW HOW TO MAKE ITS AI THINK WE'RE FRIENDLY... HE CAN'T FIRE ON FRIENDLIES, REMEMBER?
AND HAVE THAT BATTLESHIP BLAST US OUT OF THE SKY?
DO YOU?
YES, SIR.
HIS PEOPLE HAVE TO LOSE THIS BATTLE FOR BOTH OF US TO WIN THE WAR... THAT'S HOW HE SEES IT, SIR.
HE MUST KNOW YOU KNOW THIS...
INTERESTING.
WRITE DOWN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN, ANYTHING THAT YOU THINK COULD BE IMPORTANT.
OTHERWISE, YOU'RE DISMISSED, LANCE CORPORAL.
YES, SIR. THANK YOU AGAIN, SIR.

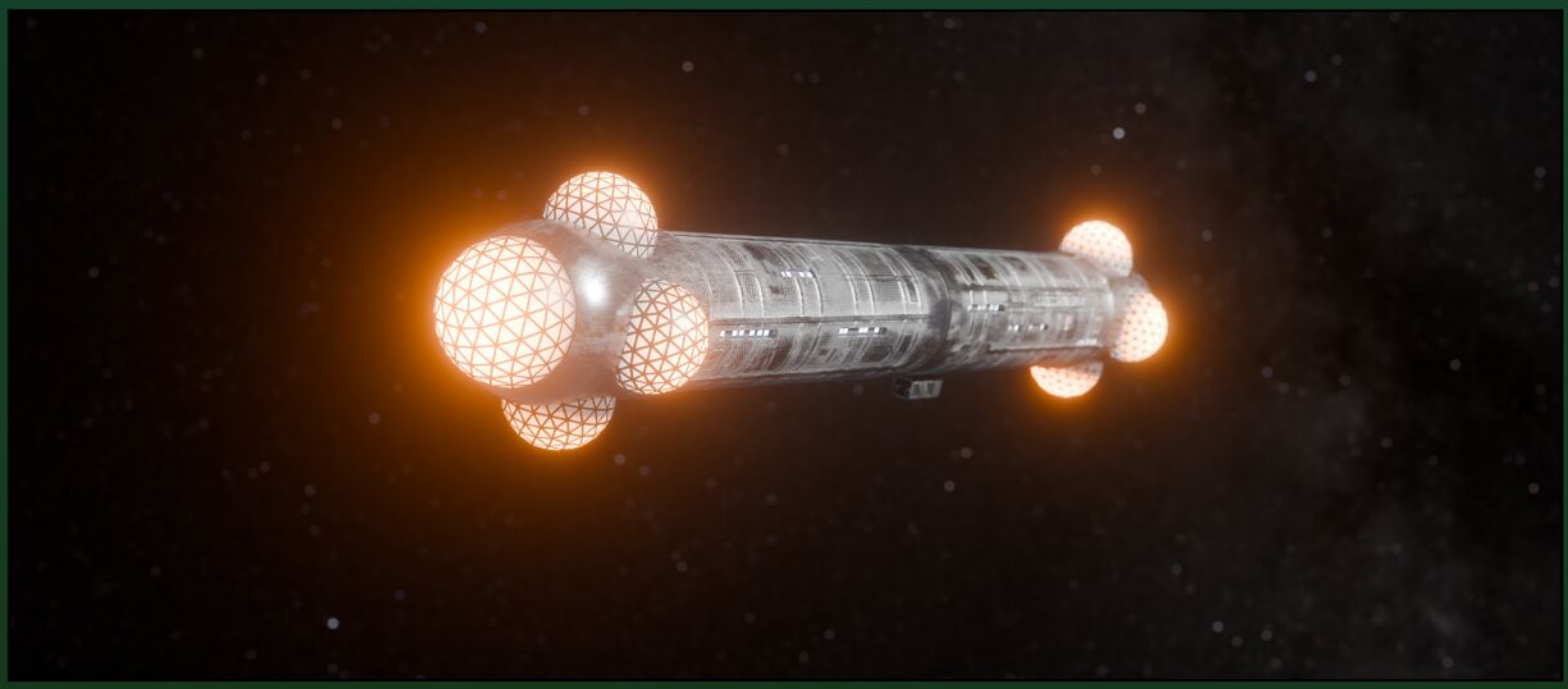
48 HOURS AFTER
DEPARTURE...

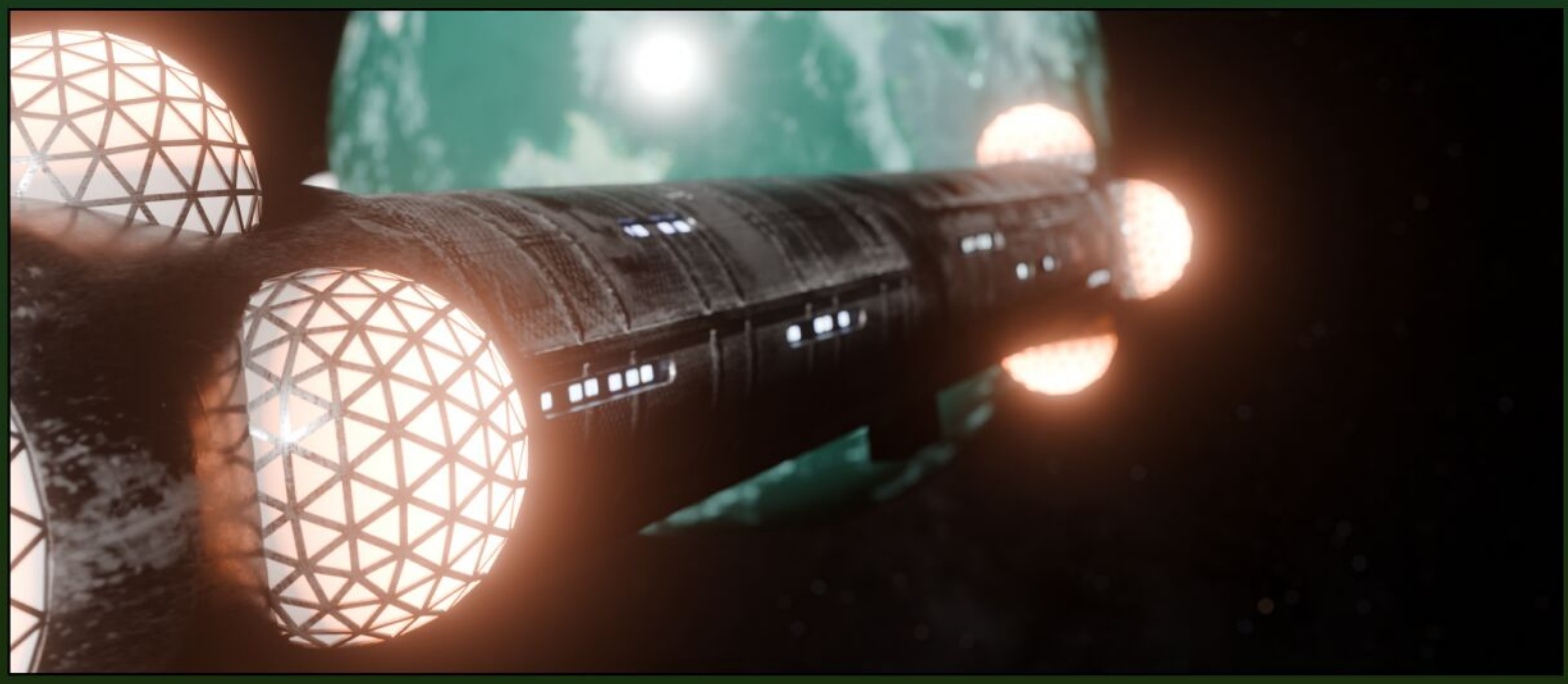



CHARIOT, BLUE EAGLE ONE. HANGAR CLEAR.
RECEIVED, BLUE EAGLE ONE. CUTTING GUIDANCE BEAM.


MAIN ENGINE START SEQUENCE INITIATED.
ANTIPROTON INJECTORS RESPONDING. CATALYST BOMBARDMENT IN THREE... TWO... ONE...
CHARIOT IS PULLING BACK TO HOLDING POSITION. GOOD LUCK, FRIENDS.










HEY, DID YOU HEAR THAT?
NO...?


ARE YOU CERTAIN? I THOUGHT I HEARD FOOTSTEPS...
A HUNDRED THOUSAND CATTLE SURROUND US. YOU LIKELY HEARD ONE OF THEM.


YES, MOST LIKELY...
NONE OF US HAS SLEPT, EITHER...
TRUE. I AM EXHAUSTED.


TOC, THIS IS ONE. I PASS JIM BEAM.






CUTTING THE POWER NOW...
DO IT!


LAST MAN...


MOVING...


CLEAR!






WHAT THE!?
WHOA!
VA'RIEL... I THINK SOMEONE IS ON THE ROOF...
WHAT DID YOU DO!?


N-NOTHING! THE BR-BREAKER PROBABLY JUST TRIPPED! IT HAPPENS!
THEN YOU WILL RESTORE IT!
YES! IT IS JUST OUTSIDE, AT THE REAR. YOU NEED ONLY RESET THE SWITCH!


RISE!
I AM TRYING... MY LEGS ARE NUMB!
I CARE NOT! RISE—UGHH...


BANG!
BANG!
BANG!
WHA...?


FACE DOWN! ON THE GROUND! BE QUIET!
PLEASE! DO NOT HURT US! WE HAD NO PART IN THIS!
AH! WHY?!

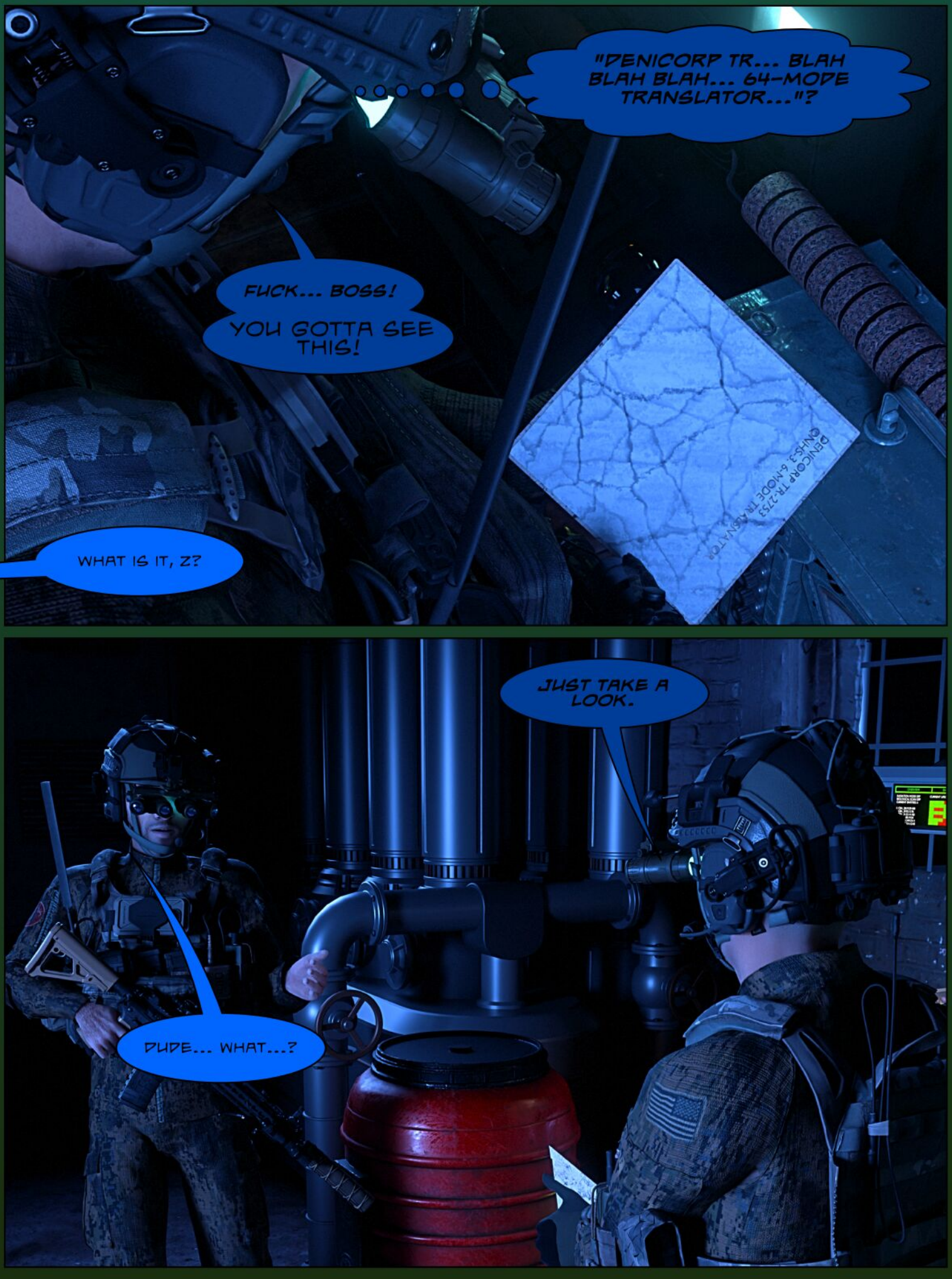

ZIP!
SECURE!


CLEAR.
ROOM CLEAR.
BOSS, THESE GUYS ARE ALREADY TIED UP.
THEY BOUND US TWO DAYS AGO! WE WORK HERE!
WHAT ARE YOUR NAMES!?
TED'RIS...
I AM AT'AMHU...
OHH, GODS! HIS HEAD IS TORN OPEN! WHAT WEAPON DOES SUCH A THING?!


HEY! FOCUS! WHERE IS THEIR WEAPON? THE BIG ONE THEY THREATENED THE FARM WITH?
PLEASE, GET ME OUT OF HERE! THERE IS BLOOD EVERYWHERE!
ALL RIGHT, JUST STAY CALM. YOU'LL BE FINE.
ON THE TABLE, BESIDE THE RADIO. YOU MUST TURN IT OFF!
TOC, BUTCHER ONE. I PASS JACK DANIELS. TWO TANGO KILO. TWO HOTEL SIERRA.
THREE, FIVE. SITREP.

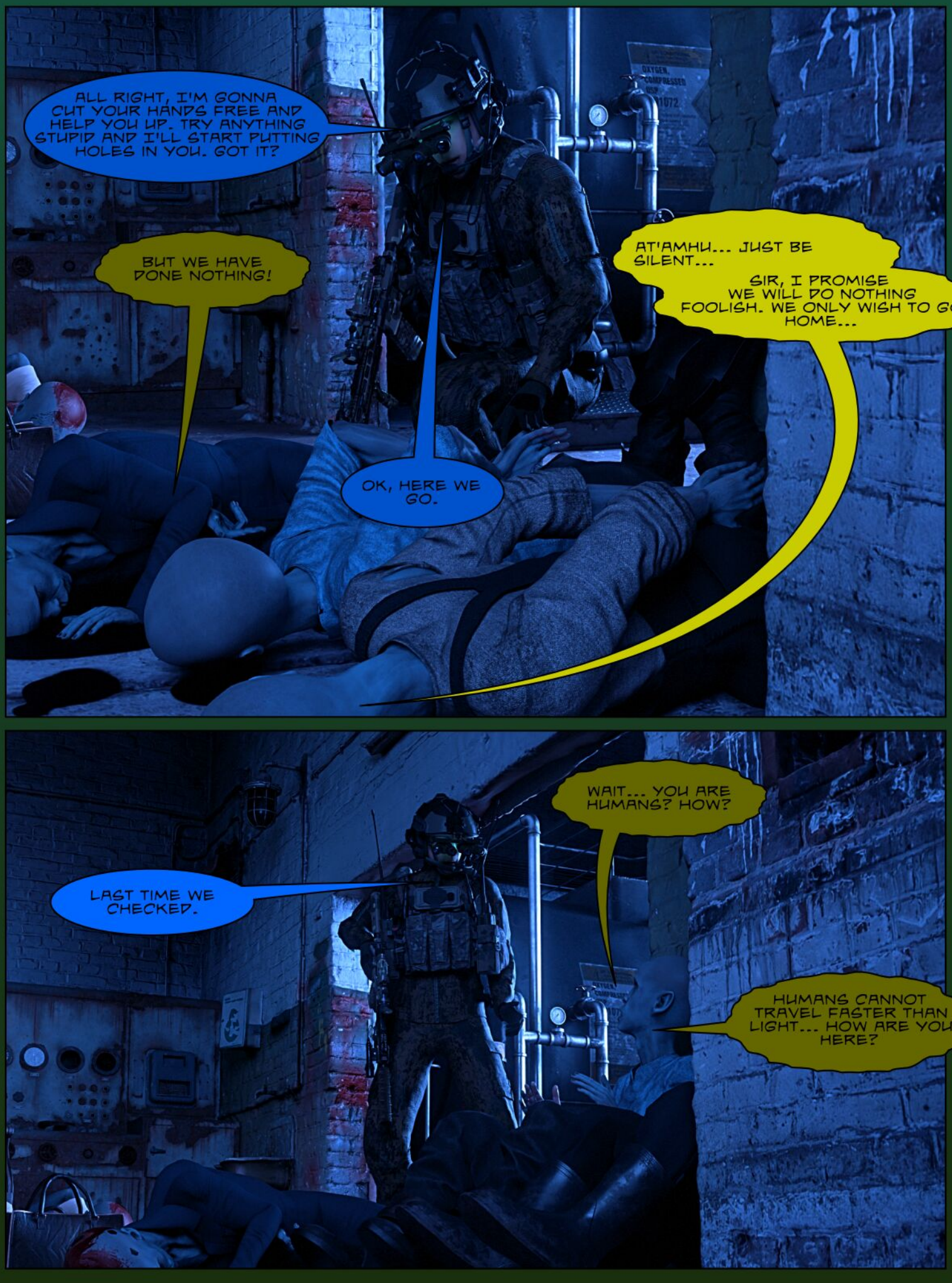

ALL QUIET, BOSS. LOOKS LIKE WE'RE STILL GHOSTS.
YO, BILL... IS IT BAD IF I'M HAVING FUN?
HELL NO! I'M HARD AS A DIAMOND RIGHT NOW!
OKAY... DIDN'T NEED TO KNOW THAT...


BLUE EAGLE, THIS IS BUTCHER 2. PASSING CAPTAIN MORGAN.
WHAT THE...?


"DENICORP TR... BLAH BLAH BLAH... 64-MODE TRANSLATOR..."?
FUCK... BOSS!
YOU GOTTA SEE THIS!
WHAT IS IT, Z?
DENICORP TR-2753
64-MODE TRANSLATOR
JUST TAKE A LOOK.
DUDE... WHAT...?


WHAT THE FUCK...?
THAT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ALIEN WRITING TO ME...
THIS WASN'T IN THE BRIEFING...
NO... IT WAS NOT...
BAG IT ALL UP. BRING IT WITH US.
ON IT.


PLEASE, LET ME RISE! I DO NOT WANT HIS BLOOD ON ME!
STAND 'EM UP, FOUR.
CAN YOU GUYS WALK?
WE HAVE BEEN ON OUR KNEES FOR TWO DAYS... I DO NOT KNOW...


ALL RIGHT, I'M GONNA CUT YOUR HANDS FREE AND HELP YOU UP. TRY ANYTHING STUPID AND I'LL START PUTTING HOLES IN YOU. GOT IT?
BUT WE HAVE DONE NOTHING!
OK, HERE WE GO.
AT'AMHU... JUST BE SILENT...
SIR, I PROMISE WE WILL DO NOTHING FOOLISH. WE ONLY WISH TO GO HOME...
LAST TIME WE CHECKED.
WAIT... YOU ARE HUMANS? HOW?
HUMANS CANNOT TRAVEL FASTER THAN LIGHT... HOW ARE YOU HERE?


THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW. BUT WE ARE HERE TO HELP.
I NEED TO KNOW HOW MANY MORE BAD GUYS THERE ARE, AND WHERE THEY ARE.
SIX IN ALL. THEY SAID SO. THEY NEVER CEASED BOASTING OF THEIR PLAN... THEY SEEMED QUITE PROUD OF IT, ACTUALLY.
TWO WERE HERE, TWO IN THE HOUSE, AND TWO ROUNDING UP THOSE WHO FLED.
PEOPLE RAN? WAS THAT AFTER THE SHOOTING STARTED?
NO, HUMAN... IT WAS BEFORE... THEY FLED FOR THEIR LIVES INTO A FROZEN FOREST FOR FUN...
AT'AMHU!
PFFFT....
BITE ME, Z..
ALL RIGHT, YOU GOT ME. THAT WAS A DUMB QUESTION...
WHERE DID THEY RUN TO?
I DO NOT KNOW! EVERYWHERE, APPARENTLY.

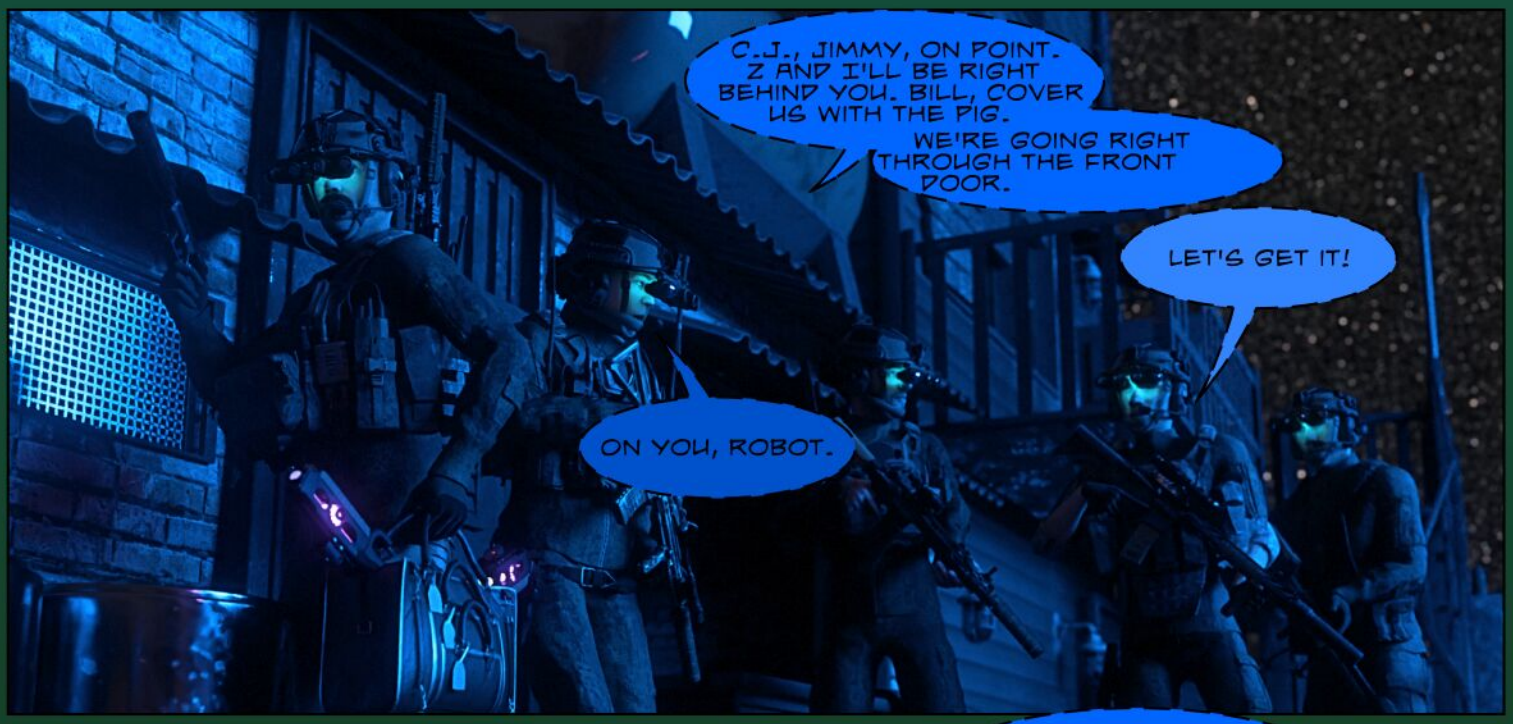

HEY, WE JUST SAVED YOUR LITTLE BLUE ASSES, SO THE LEAST YOU CAN DO IS BE RESPECTFUL.
YOU ARE RIGHT... I AM SORRY. I AM JUST... AFRAID... FORGIVE ME.
THAT'S UNDERSTANDABLE. WE'RE NOT MAD AT YOU.
BUT YOU PROBABLY HAVE FRIENDS IN THAT MAIN HOUSE WHO ARE SCARED TOO.
AND YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO HELP US SAVE THEM. SO JUST RELAX AND ANSWER MY QUESTIONS.
YES, SIR.
ALL I KNOW IS THAT MANY FLED, AND THEY SENT TWO MEN AFTER THEM. THAT IS ALL.


UNDERSTOOD. HOW OFTEN WERE THEY CHECKING IN WITH EACH OTHER? WERE THEY USING COMMS OR RUNNERS ON FOOT?
MOSTLY ON FOOT BY DAY, I THINK. THEN RADIOS AT NIGHT... THAT ONE'S RADIO WAS IN HIS POCKET...
Z, FIND THAT RADIO... HOW OFTEN?
I DO NOT KNOW... I WAS MORE CONCERNED WITH THE PAIN IN MY LEGS AND NOT DYING...
WHAT'S YOUR BEST GUESS? THREE TIMES A DAY? TWENTY? WHAT?
PERHAPS EIGHT OR NINE TIMES BY DAY? FIVE OR SIX AT NIGHT? I TRULY DO NOT KNOW...


THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH. IS THERE A KEY FOR THE MAIN HOUSE HERE, OR IS IT ALWAYS UNLOCKED?
YES! IN THE WIDE DRAWER BENEATH THE RADIO. THE LARGE SILVER ONE OPENS THE FRONT AND REAR DOORS. THE SMALL BLACK ONE IS FOR THE TOOL SHED.
HERE'S WHAT I NEED YOU TWO TO DO. GO OVER INTO THE CORNER BEHIND ME AND HIDE UNTIL YOU'RE TOLD OTHERWISE. KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN.
THIS'LL BE OVER SOON ENOUGH.
BLUE EAGLE, BUTCHER ONE. ELEMENT MOVING TO STOLICHNAYA NOW.
THREE, FIVE. COLLAPSE OVERWATCH, PREP FOR ASSAULT.


YEAH, COPY, ONE. WE'RE OSCAR MIKE.
YOU READY FOR SHIT TO GET REAL?
FUCK YEAH!
HERE, I'LL HELP YOU UP...
OW! STOP! I CANNOT RISE...
I WILL DRAG YOU IF I MUST!


COME ON, YOU CAN DO IT!
I AM TRYING!
READY UP, BOYS!
READY!
LET'S GET IT DONE AND GO HOME!
BLUE! BLUE!


C.J., JIMMY, ON POINT. Z AND I'LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU. BILL, COVER US WITH THE PIG.
WE'RE GOING RIGHT THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR.
LET'S GET IT!
ON YOU, ROBOT.


Z, CACHE THAT BAG UNDER THE STAIRS.


LET'S HOPE SO.
THAT'LL HAVE TO DO.
I REALLY WANNA TRY ONE OF THESE, BOSS.
YOU AND ME BOTH, Z.
GOT ONE DOWN HARD HERE... YEAH, HE'S GONE.

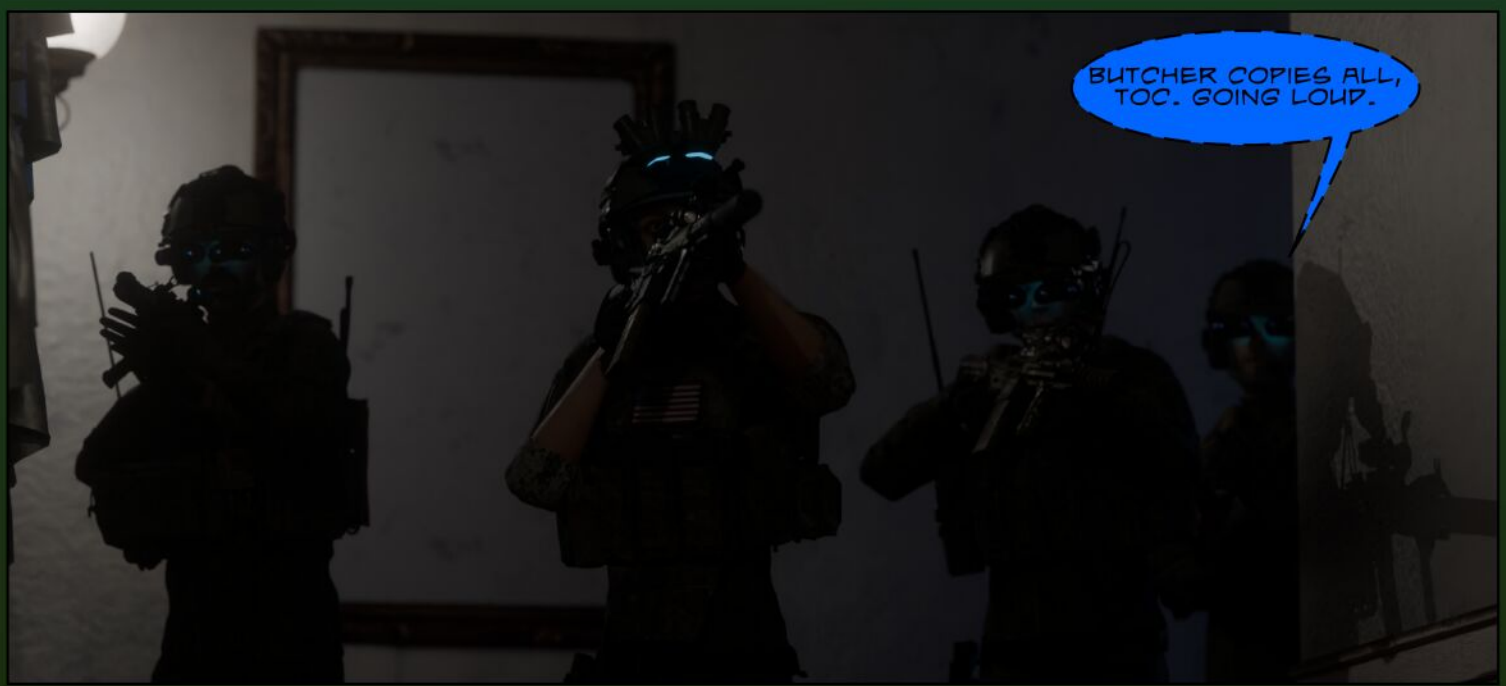


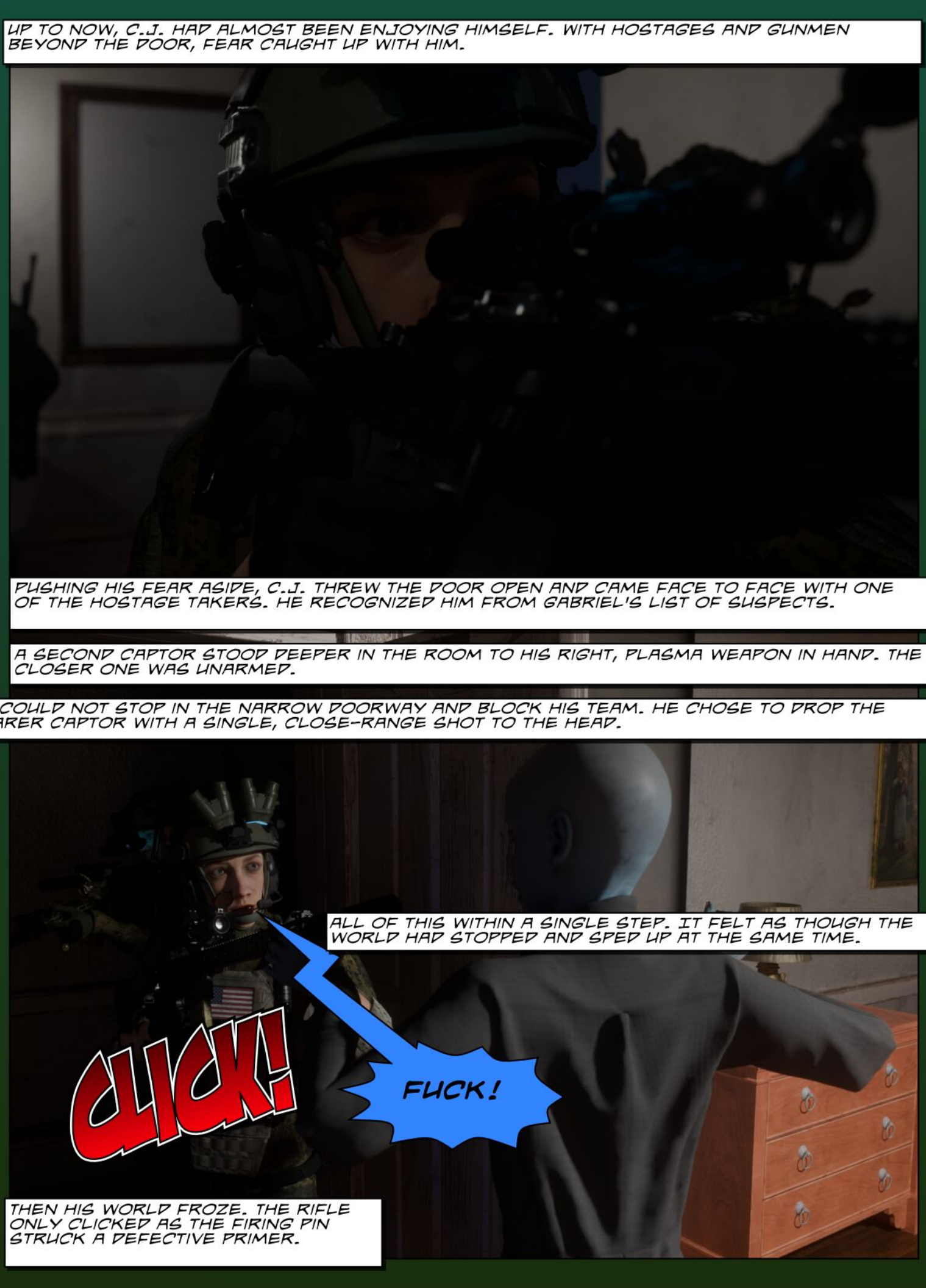

TOC, ONE.
CONFIRMING, HOTEL KILO
ON THE PORCH.




ALL BUTCHER ELEMENTS. ISR IS SHOWING MULTIPLE HEAT SIGNATURES IN THE CENTER OF THE HOUSE. FIRST FLOOR. REST OF IT LOOKS CLEAR. LOOKS LIKE THE FIRST DOOR ON YOUR LEFT. OUT.




BUTCHER COPIES ALL, TOC. GOING LOUD.


UP TO NOW, C.J. HAD ALMOST BEEN ENJOYING HIMSELF. WITH HOSTAGES AND GUNMEN BEYOND THE DOOR, FEAR CAUGHT UP WITH HIM.
PUSHING HIS FEAR ASIDE, C.J. THREW THE DOOR OPEN AND CAME FACE TO FACE WITH ONE OF THE HOSTAGE TAKERS. HE RECOGNIZED HIM FROM GABRIEL'S LIST OF SUSPECTS.
A SECOND CAPTOR STOOD DEEPER IN THE ROOM TO HIS RIGHT, PLASMA WEAPON IN HAND. THE CLOSER ONE WAS UNARMED.
HE COULD NOT STOP IN THE NARROW DOORWAY AND BLOCK HIS TEAM. HE CHOSE TO DROP THE NEARER CAPTOR WITH A SINGLE, CLOSE-RANGE SHOT TO THE HEAD.
ALL OF THIS WITHIN A SINGLE STEP. IT FELT AS THOUGH THE WORLD HAD STOPPED AND SPED UP AT THE SAME TIME.
CLICK!
FUCK!
THEN HIS WORLD FROZE. THE RIFLE ONLY CLICKED AS THE FIRING PIN STRUCK A DEFECTIVE PRIMER.

C.J. HAD NEVER BEEN SO TERRIFIED. AS THE CAPTOR REACHED FOR HIS RIFLE, HE DROVE THE MUZZLE INTO THE ALIEN'S MOUTH WITHOUT SLOWING, KNOCKING OUT TWO TEETH.



AFRAID THE SECOND GUNMAN WOULD OPEN FIRE, C.J. TACKLED THE FIRST OVER THE NEARBY COUCH, CLEARING THE DOORWAY AS HIS TEAM RUSHED IN BEHIND HIM.





FIRST THROUGH THE DOOR BEHIND C.J., JIMMY DROPPED THE SECOND GUNMAN WITH THREE ROUNDS.

DESPITE HIS SLIGHT BUILD, THE ALIEN FOUGHT WITH A STRENGTH, SPEED, AND SKILL THAT SURPRISED C.J.

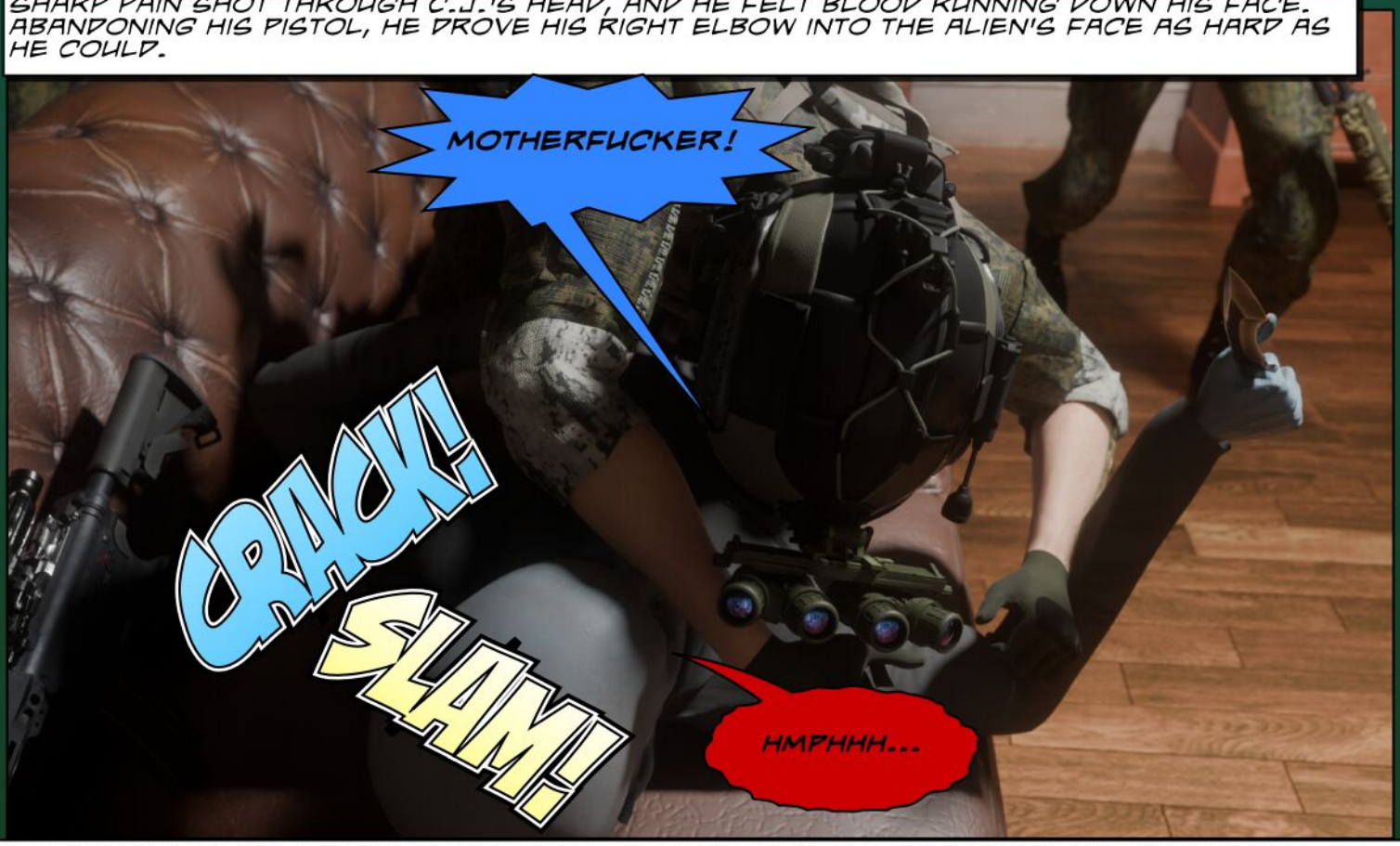


UNABLE TO OVERPOWER C.J., THE ALIEN DREW A LARGE KNIFE FROM HIS WAISTBAND AND THRUST IT TOWARD THE SIDE OF HIS HEAD.



AS C.J. REACHED FOR HIS PISTOL WITH HIS RIGHT HAND, THE ALIEN'S LONG REACH CARRIED THE BLADE PAST HIS GUARD. IT CUT INTO THE SIDE OF HIS HEAD, STOPPING AGAINST THE METAL FRAME WITH AN AUDIBLE DING.

Sharp pain shot through C.J.'s head, and he felt blood running down his face. Abandoning his pistol, he drove his right elbow into the alien's face as hard as he could.



The alien raised his left arm to block. C.J.'s elbow smashed through his guard, dislocating the alien's elbow and fracturing his forearm before striking his face and knocking him unconscious.



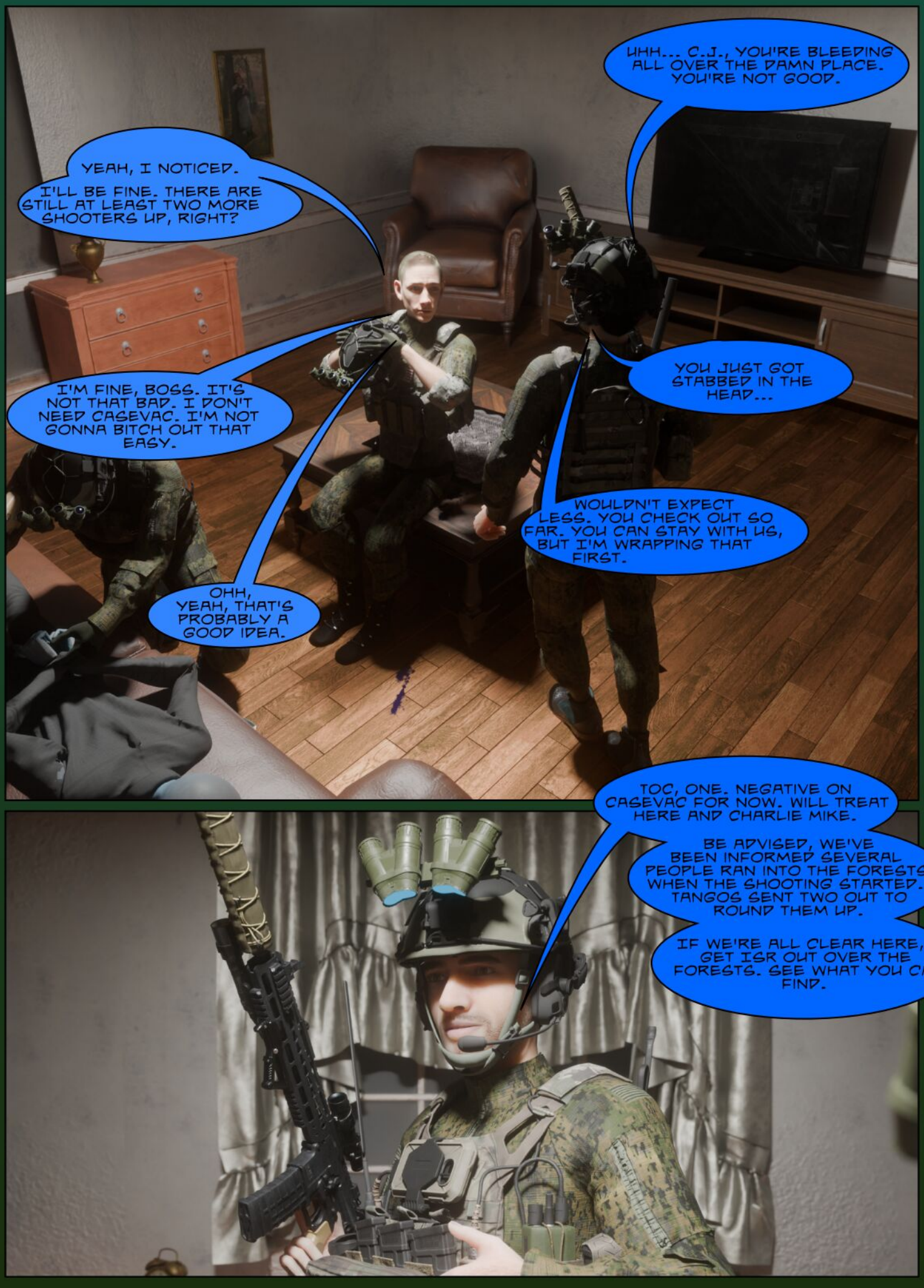
As C.J. clutched his face, Bill grabbed his vest and pulled him off the alien and onto the floor. Paul covered them both from behind the couch.

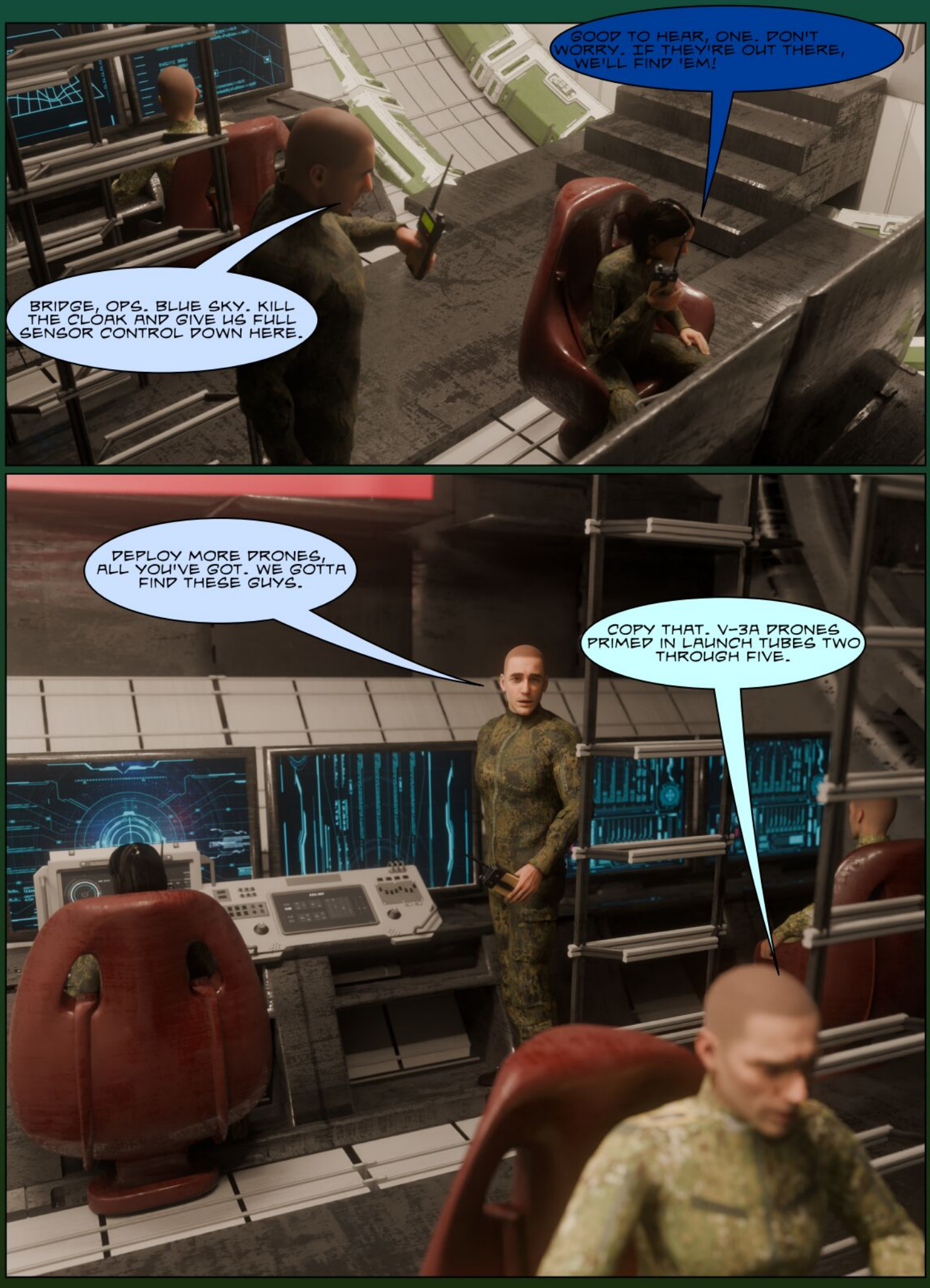

I COUNT TWENTY-SIX IN HERE, D1. TWO HOSTILES, ONE EKIA.
ON IT!
YEAH, COPY THAT, Z. LOCK THE BOTTOM FLOOR DOWN AND GET PICTURES FOR F.R.S.

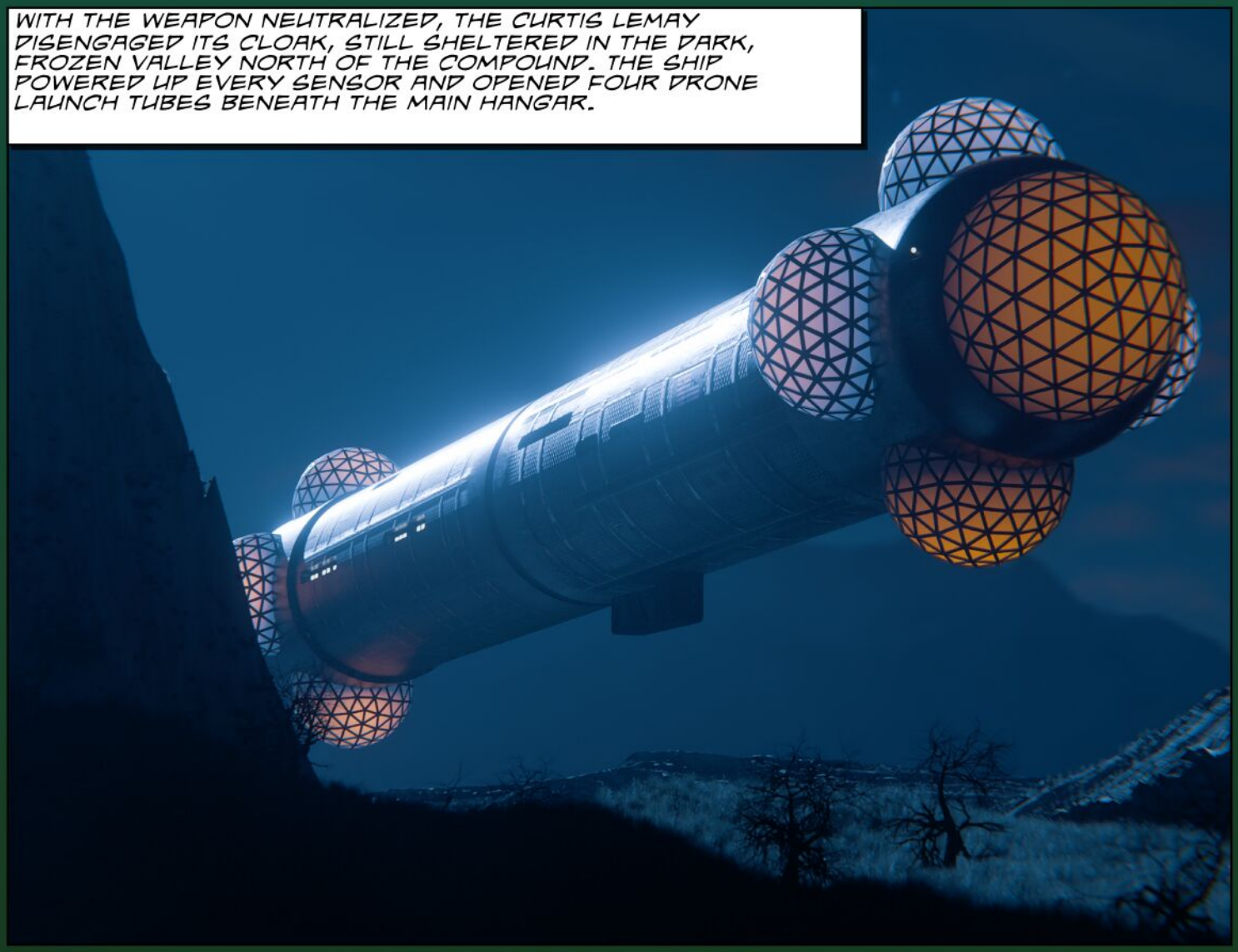

TOC, BUTCHER ONE. I PASS STOLICHNAYA AND SOUTHERN COMFORT.
ONE TANGO KILO, ONE IN CUSTODY. TWENTY-SIX TIMES HOTEL SIERRA.
BE ADVISED, WOUNDED EAGLE. BUTCHER FIVE TOOK A KNIFE TO THE FACE. STATUS TO FOLLOW.
BILL, GET HIM ON THE TABLE THERE AND GET HIS HELMET OFF.


YEAH, GOOD COPY, ONE. STOLICHNAYA AND SOUTHERN COMFORT.
BE ADVISED, WE'RE PREPPING A CASEVAC DRONE NOW IN CASE YOU NEED IT.
FOCUS, STAFF SERGEANT. THEY CAN HANDLE IT.
PASS THE WORD ON TO GABRIEL.
OHH, NO!
YEAH... RIGHT.
SI'RIZALL, THIS IS LEMAY OPERATIONS. BLUE SKY. I SAY AGAIN, BLUE SKY.
GET A CASEVAC DRONE READY!
YEAH, COPY THAT. GIVE ME TWO MIKES.

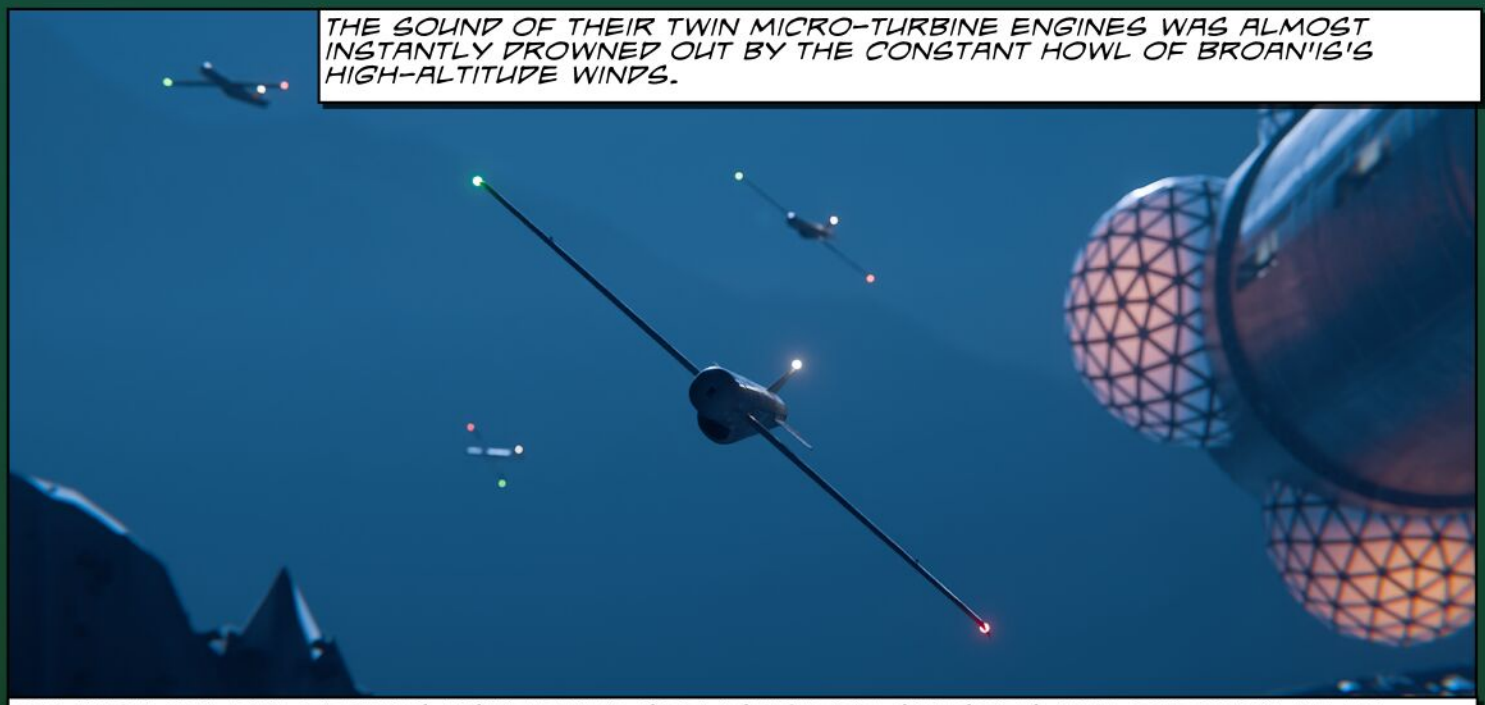

LET ME SEE...
AHH! MISSED THE EYE. THAT'S NOTHIN'! "'TIS BUT A SCRATCH," AS THEY SAY...
STILL HAVING FUN?
I DON'T THINK HE GOT MY EYE... I CAN STILL SEE.
BAHH! IT'S NO FUN IF THEY DON'T PUT UP A LITTLE FIGHT, RIGHT?
IT'S FINE. WE'RE NOT DONE YET, ARE WE?
THAT'S NOT "NOTHING," MAN. THAT'S TO THE BONE... ERR, FRAME?
THAT'S THE FUCKIN' SPIRIT!
BILL, SECURE THIS IDIOT SLEEPING ON THE COUCH, WOULD YA? THEN GO PULL SECURITY AT THE FRONT.
YUP!
I'M GOOD. LET'S GET THIS FINISHED.


UHH... C.J., YOU'RE BLEEDING ALL OVER THE DAMN PLACE. YOU'RE NOT GOOD.
YEAH, I NOTICED.
I'LL BE FINE. THERE ARE STILL AT LEAST TWO MORE SHOOTERS UP, RIGHT?
YOU JUST GOT STABBED IN THE HEAD...
I'M FINE, BOSS. IT'S NOT THAT BAD. I DON'T NEED CASEVAC. I'M NOT GONNA BITCH OUT THAT EASY.
WOULDN'T EXPECT LESS. YOU CHECK OUT SO FAR. YOU CAN STAY WITH US, BUT I'M WRAPPING THAT FIRST.
OHH, YEAH, THAT'S PROBABLY A GOOD IDEA.
TOC, ONE. NEGATIVE ON CASEVAC FOR NOW. WILL TREAT HERE AND CHARLIE MIKE.
BE ADVISED, WE'VE BEEN INFORMED SEVERAL PEOPLE RAN INTO THE FORESTS WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED. TANGOS SENT TWO OUT TO ROUND THEM UP.
IF WE'RE ALL CLEAR HERE, GET ISR OUT OVER THE FORESTS. SEE WHAT YOU CAN FIND.


BRIDGE, OPS. BLUE SKY. KILL THE CLOAK AND GIVE US FULL SENSOR CONTROL DOWN HERE.
GOOD TO HEAR, ONE. DON'T WORRY. IF THEY'RE OUT THERE, WE'LL FIND 'EM!
DEPLOY MORE DRONES, ALL YOU'VE GOT. WE GOTTA FIND THESE GUYS.
COPY THAT. V-3A DRONES PRIMED IN LAUNCH TUBES TWO THROUGH FIVE.


WITH THE WEAPON NEUTRALIZED, THE CURTIS LEMAY DISENGAGED ITS CLOAK, STILL SHELTERED IN THE DARK, FROZEN VALLEY NORTH OF THE COMPOUND. THE SHIP POWERED UP EVERY SENSOR AND OPENED FOUR DRONE LAUNCH TUBES BENEATH THE MAIN HANGAR.


FOUR V-3A MULTIROLE ATTACK AND SURVEILLANCE DRONES UNFOLDED THEIR WINGS AND DEPLOYED INTO THE FRIGID, DARK NIGHT.



FLYING LOW, THE DRONES USED THEIR SOPHISTICATED SENSORS AND ONBOARD AI TO SEARCH FOR THE TWO REMAINING ATTACKERS AMONG THE COUNTLESS HEAT SIGNATURES.




EVERYONE STAY CALM. WE'RE... WE'RE TERRAN MARINES. WE'RE HERE TO HELP. FOLLOW OUR INSTRUCTIONS, AND WE'LL GET YOU FREED.
NO SUDDEN MOVES, AND DON'T TRY TO GRAB US OR OUR WEAPONS. UNDERSTOOD?
YES. I UNDERSTAND. I AM DHAN'EL, FACILITY MANAGER.
DHAN'EL, IS ANYONE IN THIS ROOM NOT PART OF YOUR CREW?
NO, SIR. THESE ARE MY PEOPLE. BUT AT LEAST SIX ARE STILL MISSING...
HEY, DHAN'EL. YOU'RE SAFE NOW, OKAY?
THEY MURDERED MY SON... PERHAPS MY GRANDSON, TOO...
I'M SORRY. I NEED YOUR HELP FINDING THE OTHERS, ALL RIGHT?
...VERY WELL.
HOW MANY GUNMEN ARE OUTSIDE THIS ROOM?


FOUR. TWO IN THE RADIO HOUSE. TWO SEARCHING FOR THOSE WHO FLED... MY GRANDSON AMONG THEM.
HE'S MY SON! VA'DON! HE'S ONLY EIGHT! HE WAS PLAYING OUTSIDE WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED. DID YOU SEE HIM?
HOW LONG HAS HE BEEN MISSING?
OVER TWO DAYS! PLEASE... TELL ME HE'S ALIVE.
I DON'T KNOW. BUT WE'LL DO EVERYTHING WE CAN TO FIND HIM.

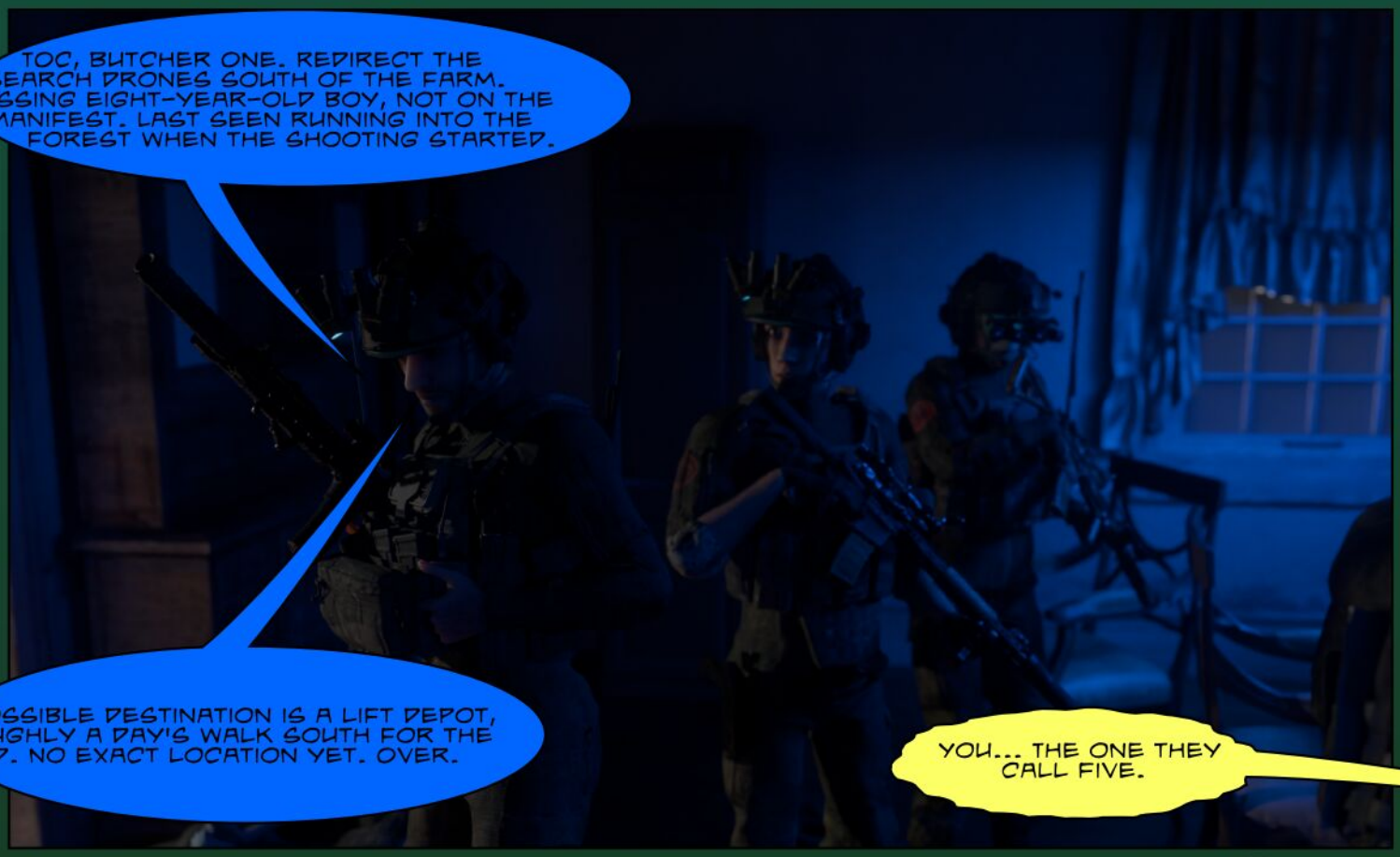

HEY, DI. NEED YOU IN HERE. ASAP.

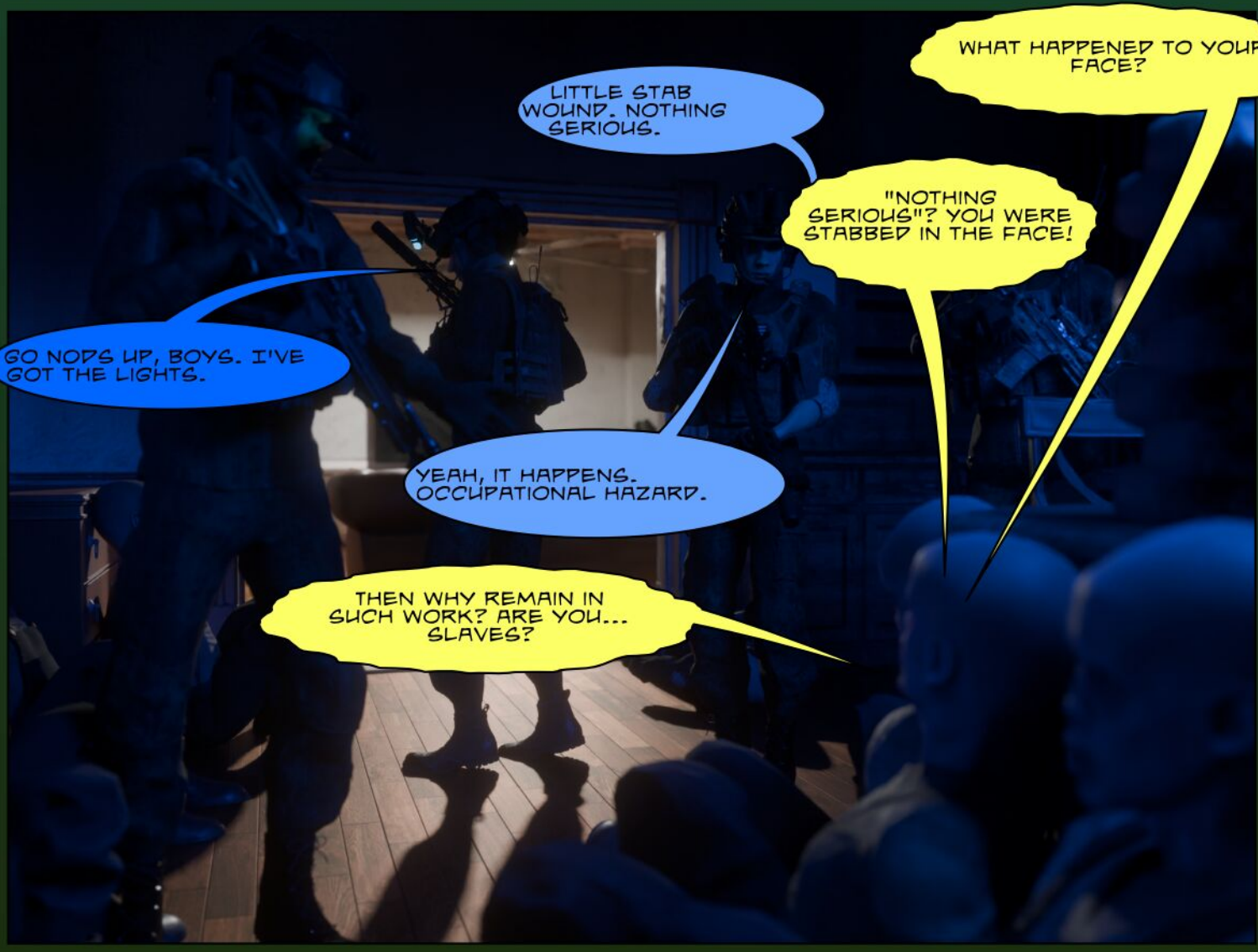

YEAH, COMIN', Z.
WELL, THAT WASN'T TOO BAD, RIGHT!?
YOU REALIZE IF YOU WERE HUMAN, YOU'D BE GOING HOME IN A BOX WITH A FLAG OVER IT?
SOMETIMES IT'S NICE BEING A FUCKIN TERMINATOR, BOSS!
I THINK THAT'S SEVEN..?
YOU'RE STILL COUNTING!? COME ON!
YUP!


HURRY THE FUCK UP, FIVE!
YEAH, YEAH. BITE ME.


WHAT'S UP?
MISSING KID. EIGHT YEARS OLD.
WHAT!?
RAN INTO THE WOODS WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED.
THERE WEREN'T ANY CHILDREN ON THE MANIFEST.
IT... WAS MY IDEA.
NO, FATHER. IT WAS MY FAULT! WE BOTH WANTED HIM TO LEARN HARD WORK AND DISCIPLINE. WE SMUGGLED HIM ABOARD... I'M SO SORRY.
NOTHING LIKE THIS HAS EVER HAPPENED HERE. I THOUGHT HE WOULD BE SAFE!


I SAW VA'DON RUN SOUTH INTO THE FOREST. I DARED NOT TELL THEM... FORGIVE ME, DHAN'EL.
NO. YOU DID THE RIGHT THING, MER'AZ.
WE'VE ACCOUNTED FOR ALL THIRTY-ONE WORKERS. IF THOSE TWO ARE STILL SEARCHING, THEY COULD BE LOOKING FOR HIM.
YES... THE LIFT DEPOT! IT'S SOUTH OF HERE. HE KNOWS TO GO THERE IN AN EMERGENCY!
HOW FAR?
A DAY'S WALK FOR A BOY HIS SIZE. THROUGH FROZEN FOREST...
CUT ME FREE! I MUST FIND HIM!
YOU'RE HURT. YOU WON'T HELP HIM BY COLLAPSING OUT THERE. GIVE US A CHANCE TO FIND HIM FIRST.
PLEASE... PLEASE FIND HIM.


TOC, BUTCHER ONE. REDIRECT THE SEARCH DRONES SOUTH OF THE FARM. MISSING EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY, NOT ON THE MANIFEST. LAST SEEN RUNNING INTO THE FOREST WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED.
POSSIBLE DESTINATION IS A LIFT DEPOT, ROUGHLY A DAY'S WALK SOUTH FOR THE KID. NO EXACT LOCATION YET. OVER.
YOU... THE ONE THEY CALL FIVE.


WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE?
LITTLE STAB WOUND. NOTHING SERIOUS.
"NOTHING SERIOUS"? YOU WERE STABBED IN THE FACE!
GO NODS UP, BOYS. I'VE GOT THE LIGHTS.
YEAH, IT HAPPENS. OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD.
THEN WHY REMAIN IN SUCH WORK? ARE YOU... SLAVES?


PFFFT... SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE IT! BUT NO. WE CHOSE THIS.
OH...
THEN YOU'RE... MAD?


HE IS. I'M PERFECTLY SANE.
PFFT. YEAH.
HE'S NOT EVEN REAL. HE'S A ROBOT.
POSSIBLY A DEMON.
CHEATS ON HIS GIRLFRIEND, TOO.
YOU MISSED A FEW DETAILS... IT'S NOT CHEATING IF SHE'S FILMING IT!
SEE? DEMON.
SEE? BAT-SHIT CRAZY.
NOTICE HE DIDN'T SAY I WAS WRONG.
HE'S WRONG.


THE WORKERS LOOKED FROM ONE MARINE TO THE OTHER, NO CLOSER TO UNDERSTANDING EITHER.
I CANNOT MAKE SENSE OF IT.
"ROBOT"? "DEMON"?
WE NEITHER UNDERSTAND YOUR PETTY QUARREL NOR CARE. COULD YOU PLEASE UNTIE US?
WE'RE CLEAR HERE, BOYS.
WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER TWO?
AND THE KID?
DRONES ARE SEARCHING FOR THE KID AND THE OTHER TWO GUNMEN. THE LEMAY'S CHECKING THE DEPOT. WE'LL KNOW MORE WHEN THEY GET EYES ON IT.
QRF'S ABOUT TWENTY MIKES OUT. LET'S GET THESE PEOPLE READY TO MOVE.


VERY WELL... IT IS NEARLY TIME TO RETURN ANYWAY. IF HE IS NOT IN THERE, WE ARE GOING BACK.
IF HE'S IN THERE! I'M GONNA CUT HIS FEET OFF! YEAH!
NO, YOU WILL NOT... WE ARE TAKING HIM BACK TO THE MAIN HOUSE, JUST LIKE THE OTHERS.
OK! TO THE MAIN HOUSE! I'M STILL GONNA BITE HIM! HAHAHAHA!
WHATEVER... START DOWN THERE. I WILL CLIMB BACK UP THE HILL AND SEE IF I CAN REACH THE OTHERS BY RADIO.



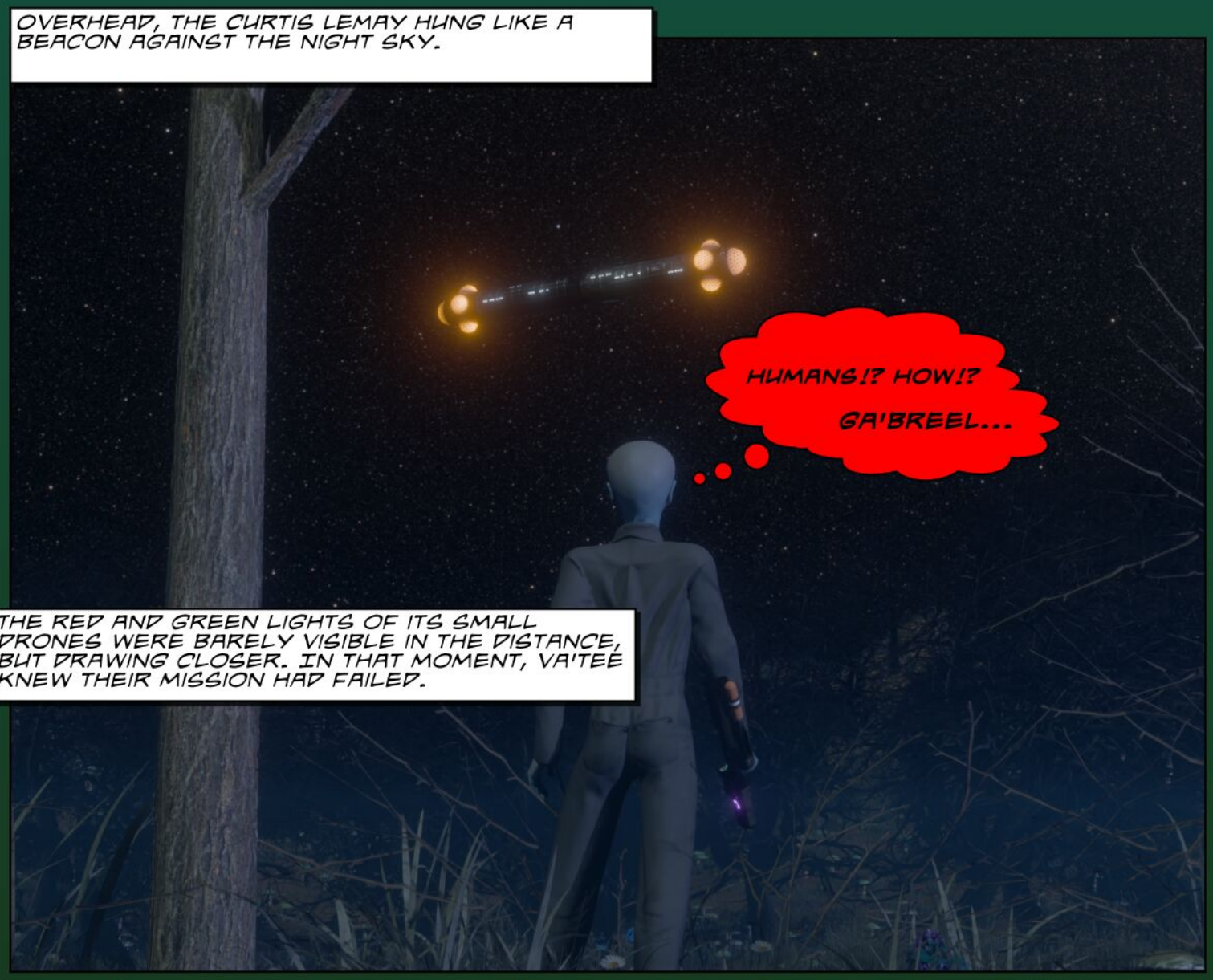
KRI'DALL PLUNGED DOWN THE HILL, CRASHING THROUGH THE BRUSH AND HOLLERING AND HOOTING ALL THE WAY.



VA'TEE PAUSED TO CATCH HIS BREATH, ENJOYING A BRIEF RESPITE FROM KRI'DALL BEFORE CLIMBING BACK UP THE HILLSIDE.

AT THE TOP, HE FROZE. FOR A MOMENT, HIS HEART SEEMED TO STOP...

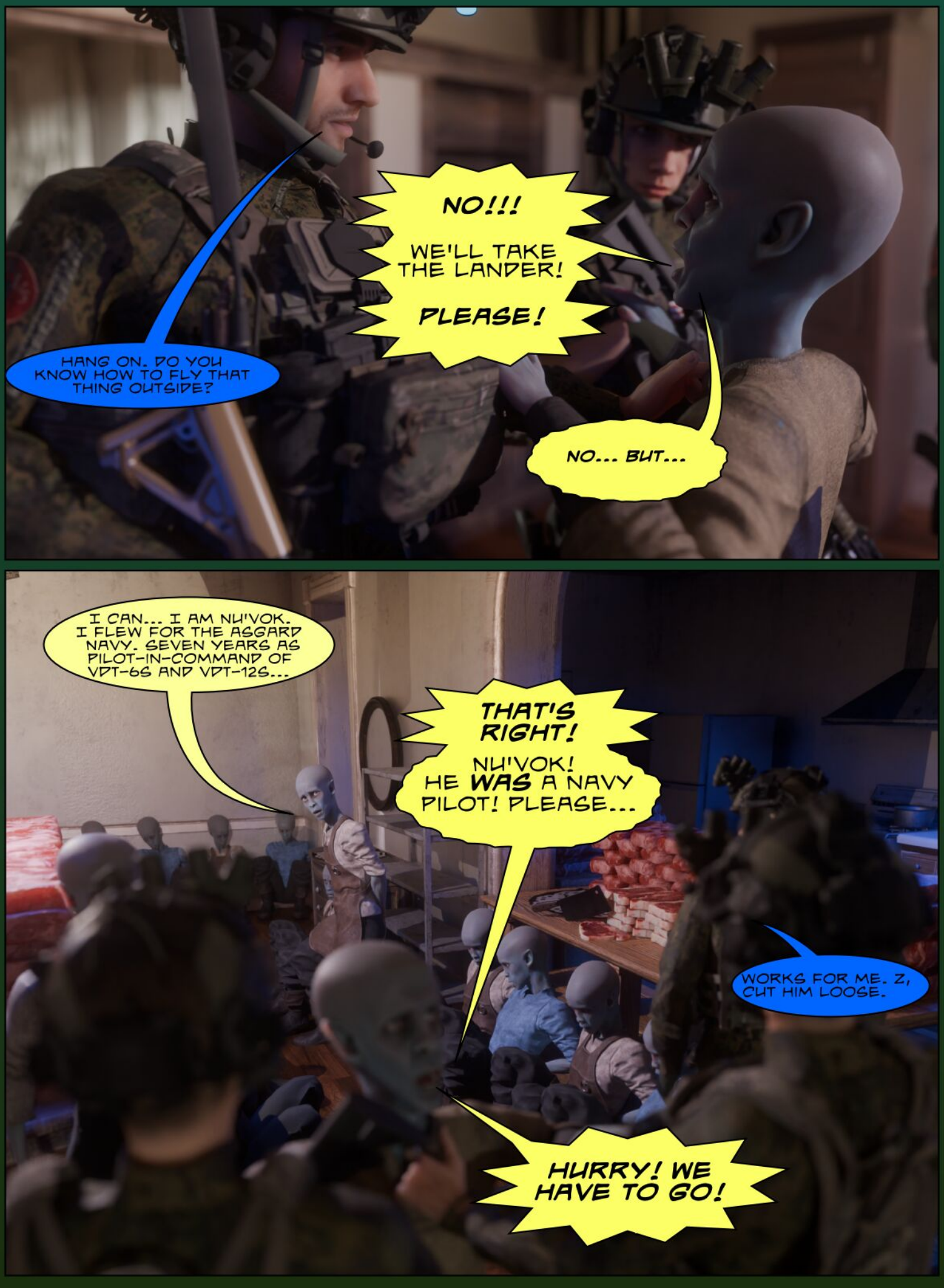



OVERHEAD, THE CURTIS LEMAY HUNG LIKE A BEACON AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY.
HUMANS!? HOW!?
GA'BREEL...
THE RED AND GREEN LIGHTS OF ITS SMALL DRONES WERE BARELY VISIBLE IN THE DISTANCE, BUT DRAWING CLOSER. IN THAT MOMENT, VA'TEE KNEW THEIR MISSION HAD FAILED.


KRI'DALL! WAIT!


GOT SOMETHING HERE! ONE HEAT SIGNATURE... TWO MORE NEARBY... APPEAR TO BE ARMED.
THE SOUTH DEPOT?
CONFIRMED. ONE INSIDE. THE OTHER TWO ARE ON THE HILLSIDE, ABOUT 400 AND 800 METERS NORTH OF THE DEPOT.
THAT'S GOTTA BE THEM! WINTERS.
ON IT, MASTER SERGEANT!
BUTCHER ONE, TOC, WE'VE LOCATED WHAT APPEARS TO BE OUR NEW H.V.T.
SINGLE HEAT SIGNATURE INSIDE THE SOUTHERN DEPOT. BE ADVISED, TWO ARMED CONTACTS APPROACHING FROM THE NORTH. NEAREST CONTACT APPROXIMATELY 400 METERS OUT.
WE'RE TRYING TO WORK THE PROBLEM NOW. WILL ADVISE. HOW COPY? OVER.
THAT'S ALMOST TWENTY KLICKS AWAY. THEY'LL NEVER MAKE IT IN TIME.
CAN WE GET A HUNTER-KILLER DRONE IN THERE?
FUCK! THIS IS WHY I WANTED A TEN-MAN TEAM, NOT FIVE! DAMN CHAIR-FORCE, IN ITS INFINITE WISDOM, SAID "NO"!
NO OFFENSE.
ALMOST CERTAINLY, BUT THEY'LL BE AT THE DEPOT BY THEN. IT'S A KAMIKAZE DRONE. THE BLAST WOULD LEVEL HALF THE PLACE, WITH THE KID INSIDE.
NONE TAKEN.

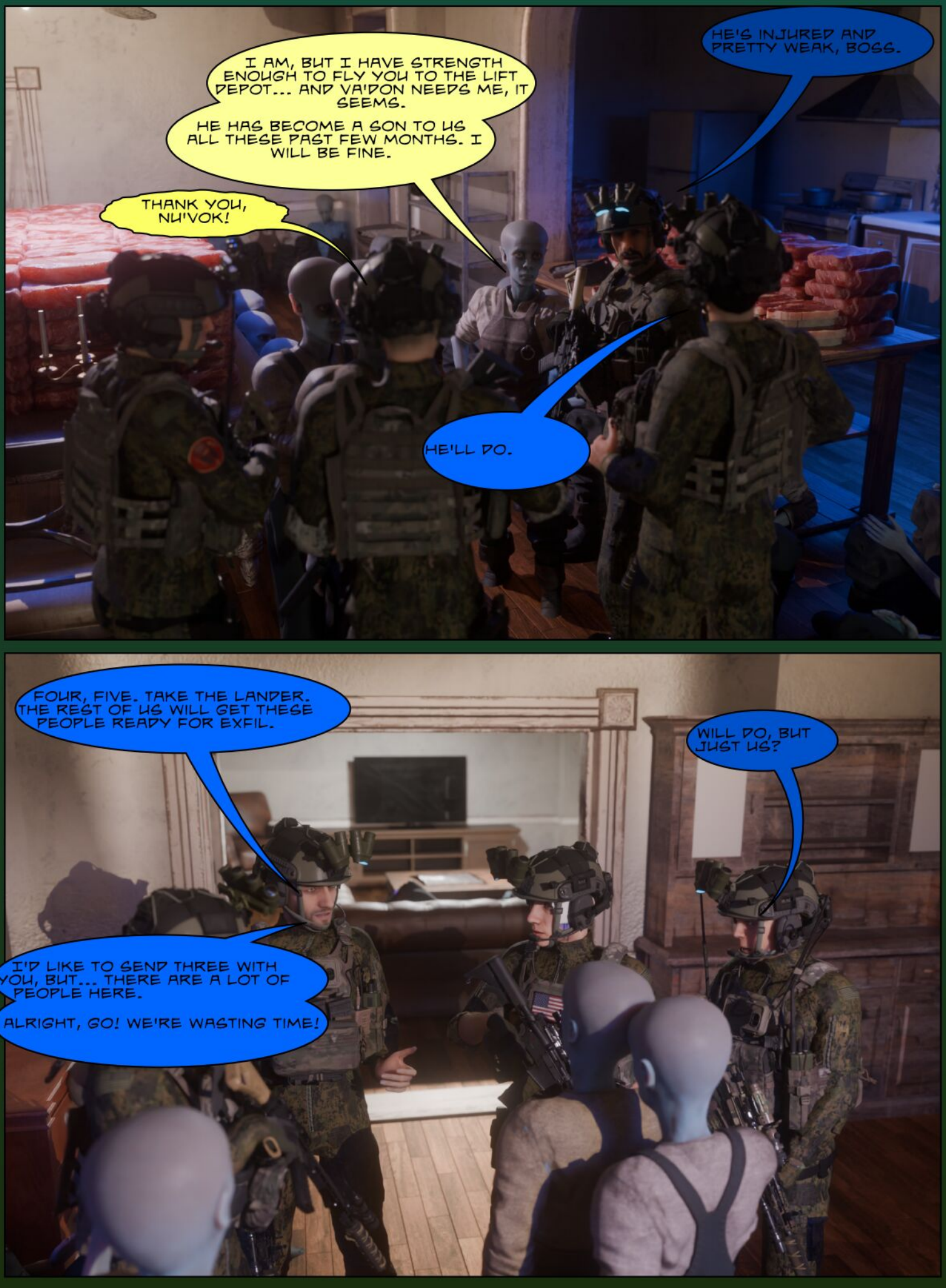

WHAT'S GOOD, BOSS?
FUCK... YEAH, SOLID COPY, TOC.
THE LEMAY THINKS THEY LOCATED THE H.V.T. TWO ARMED CONTACTS CLOSING FAST...
WHAT IS "H.V.T."?
DID YOU FIND MY SON!? IS HE ALIVE!?
MAYBE. WE FOUND SOMEONE HIDING AT THE LIFT DEPOT.
PLEASE TELL ME HE'S ALIVE!
WE CAN'T CONFIRM IT'S HIM... AND THOSE TWO GUNMEN ARE CLOSING IN.
THEN LET'S GO!
OUR SHIP IS WORKING THE PROBLEM, ALRIGHT? WE'RE TOO FAR AWAY TO HELP.
RIGHT NOW, LET'S FOCUS ON GETTING EVERYONE IN HERE FREED.


HANG ON. DO YOU KNOW HOW TO FLY THAT THING OUTSIDE?
NO!!!
WE'LL TAKE THE LANDER!
PLEASE!
NO... BUT...
I CAN... I AM NU'VOK. I FLEW FOR THE ASGARD NAVY. SEVEN YEARS AS PILOT-IN-COMMAND OF VDT-6S AND VDT-12S...
THAT'S RIGHT!
NU'VOK! HE WAS A NAVY PILOT! PLEASE...
WORKS FOR ME. Z, CUT HIM LOOSE.
HURRY! WE HAVE TO GO!



PAUL WAS THEIR TEAM LEADER, THEIR MEDIC—THE MAN THEY COUNTED ON TO KEEP THEM ALIVE ON THEIR BEST DAYS AND THEIR WORST. C.J. WASN'T ABOUT TO STAND THERE WHILE SOMEONE THREATENED TO KILL HIM.



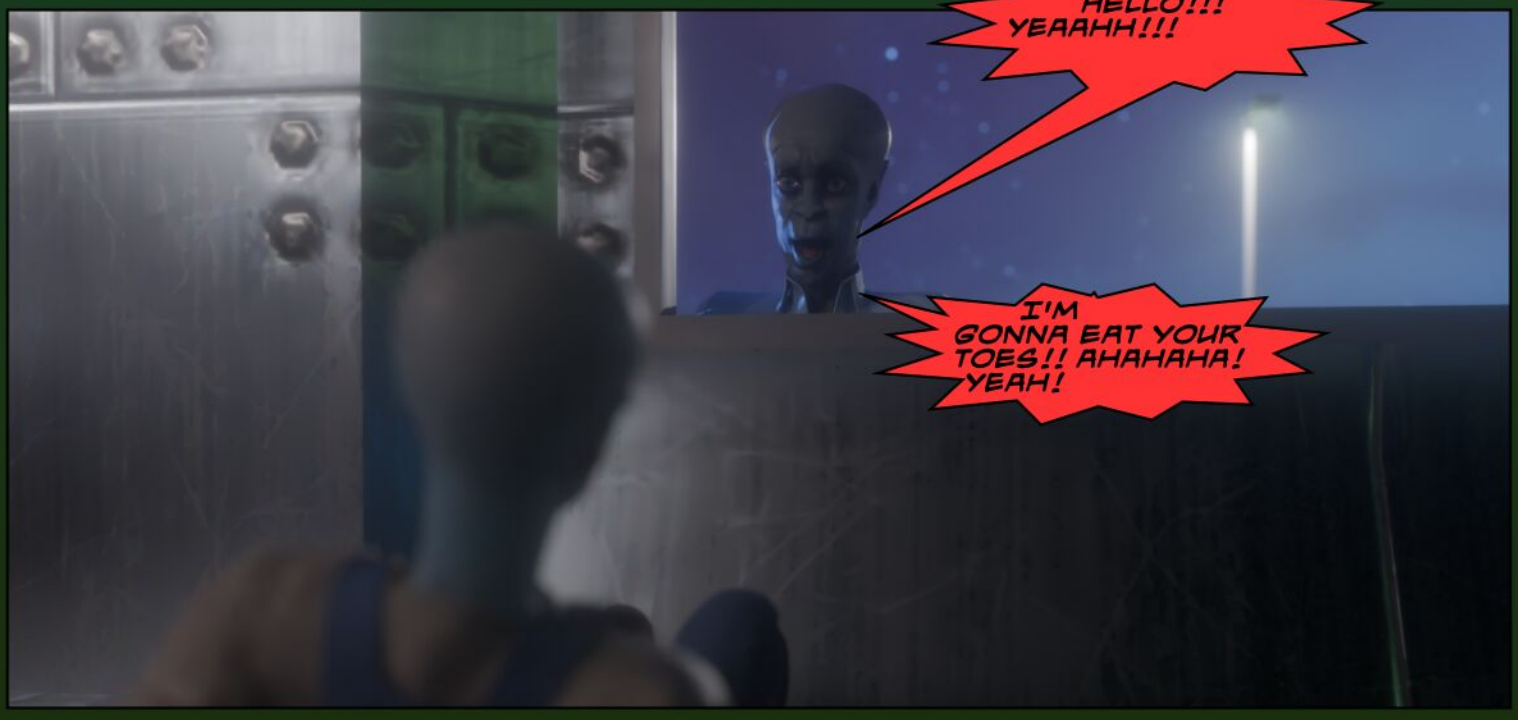

HE'S INJURED AND PRETTY WEAK, BOSS.
I AM, BUT I HAVE STRENGTH ENOUGH TO FLY YOU TO THE LIFT DEPOT... AND VA'DON NEEDS ME, IT SEEMS.
HE HAS BECOME A SON TO US ALL THESE PAST FEW MONTHS. I WILL BE FINE.
THANK YOU, NU'VOK!
HE'LL DO.
FOUR, FIVE. TAKE THE LANDER. THE REST OF US WILL GET THESE PEOPLE READY FOR EXFIL.
WILL DO, BUT JUST US?
I'D LIKE TO SEND THREE WITH YOU, BUT... THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE HERE.
ALRIGHT, GO! WE'RE WASTING TIME!

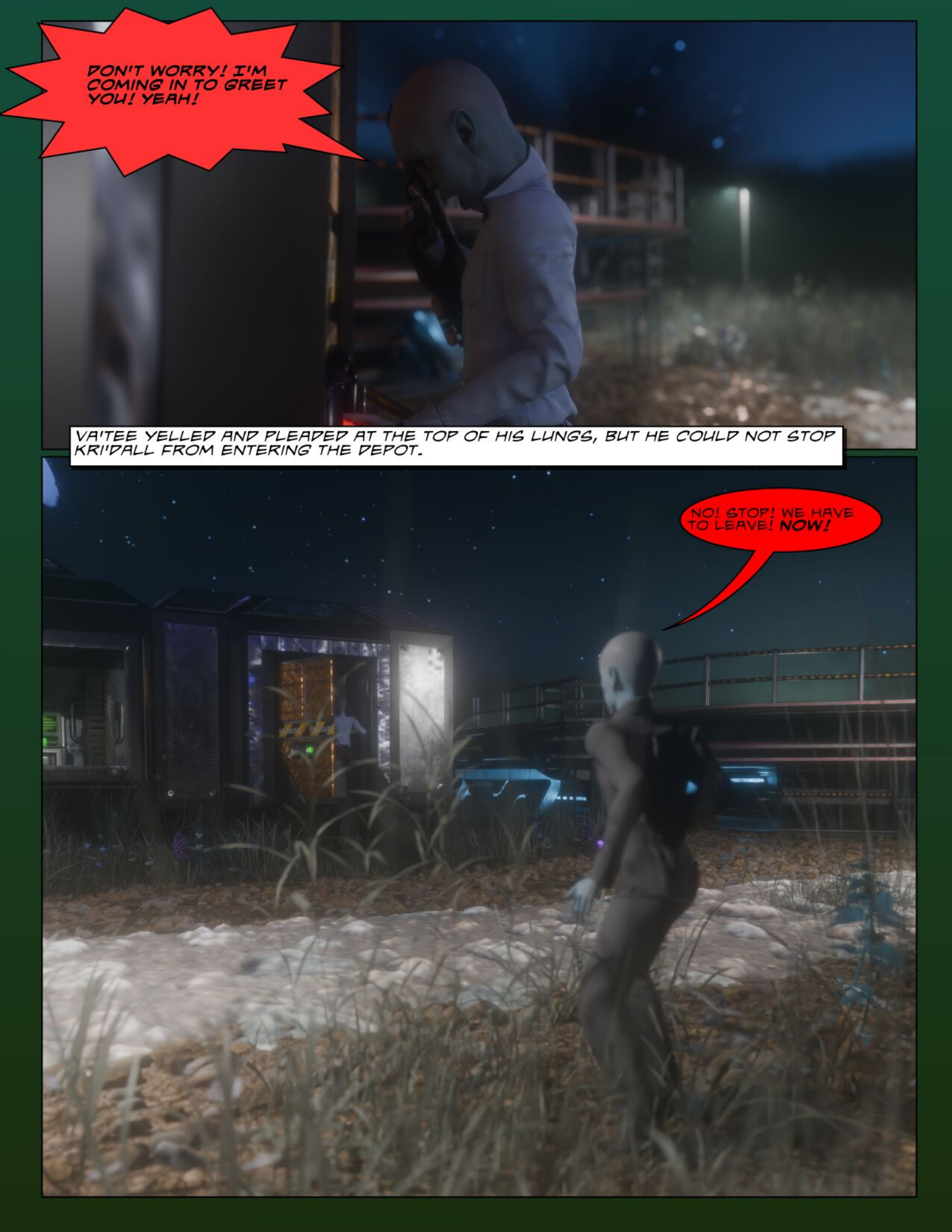

zzzz....
BACK AT THE LIFT DEPOT, VA'DON HAD FALLEN ASLEEP NEAR THE FRONT DOOR. HE HAD SPENT THE PREVIOUS DAY HIDING AND WATCHING THROUGH THE WINDOW.
BZZT!
AHHHH!!! HAHAHAHAHA! COME ON OUT OR DIEEEE!!!! YEAAAHH!!!!


HUH...?
AWAKENED BY PLASMA WEAPON FIRE AND FRANTIC SHOUTING, VA'DON SCURRIED TO THE WINDOW TO SEE WHAT WAS HAPPENING.
AHHHAHAHAHAHA!
ANYONE HOMMMEEE???
AHHH!! I FOUND YOU! YEAH!!!!
PRESSURE


AHHH!!!


KRI'DALL! STOP!
WE HAVE TO GO!


HELLO!!! YEAAHH!!!
I'M GONNA EAT YOUR TOES!! AHAHAHA! YEAH!


DON'T WORRY! I'M COMING IN TO GREET YOU! YEAH!
VA'TEE YELLED AND PLEADED AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS, BUT HE COULD NOT STOP KRI'DALL FROM ENTERING THE DEPOT.
NO! STOP! WE HAVE TO LEAVE! NOW!

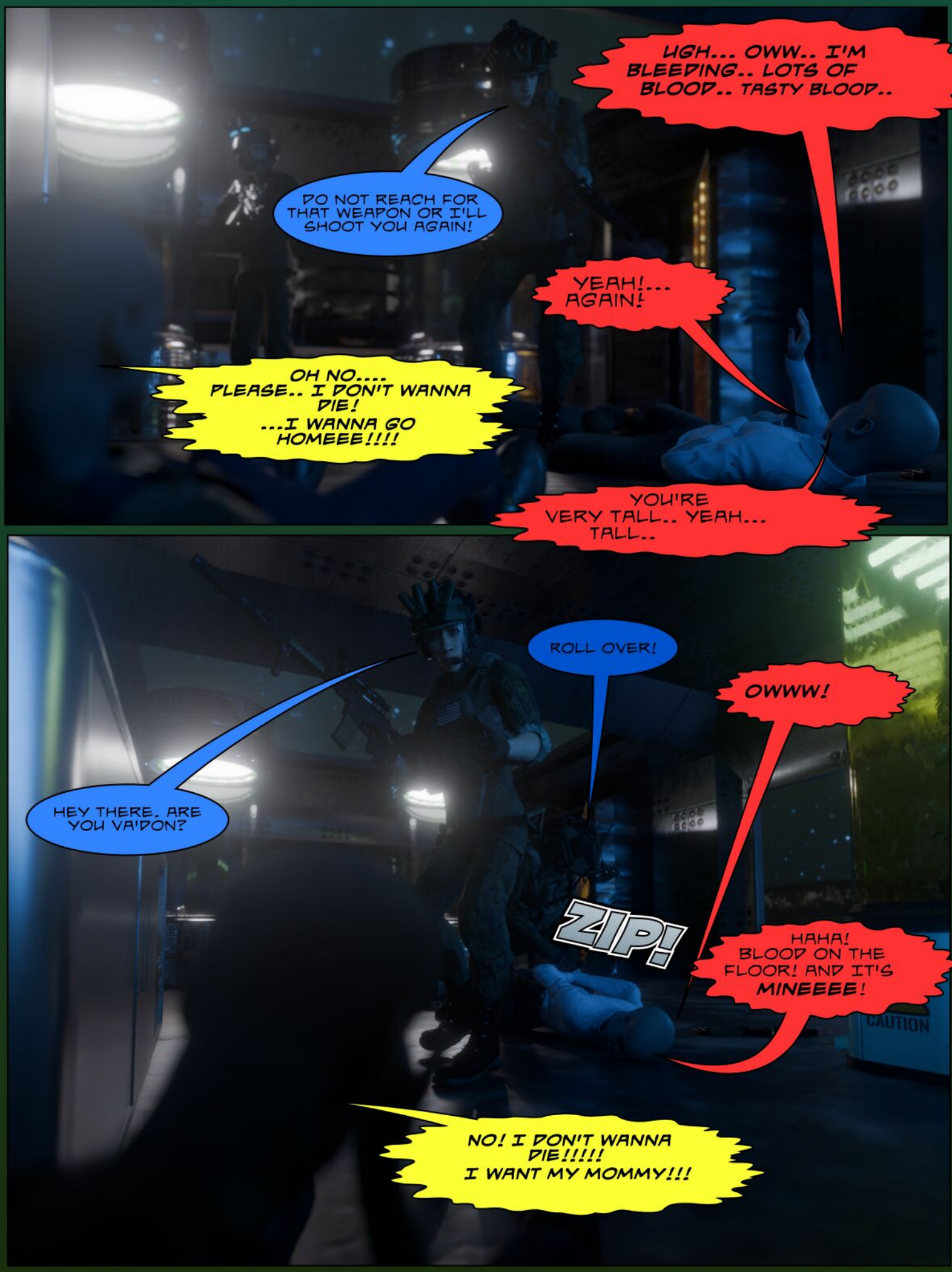

YEAAAAHH!!!
I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU!!
NO! PLEASE!
HEELLLPP!!!


AHH-HAHAHA! YEAH! I KICK YOU!
KRI'DALL!
AND STOMP YOU! YEAH!!


WE ARE VICTORIOUS!
KRI'DALL, PLEASE LISTEN! WE HAVE TO LEAVE!
WE HAVE CONQUERED THEM!!!! YEAAHH!!!!
OWWWW!! HEELP!!!
KRI'DALL! WE HAVE TO LEAVE NOW!
NO! WE ARE MIGHTY! YEAHH!!!! WE WON!!
YES! BUT WE MUST REACH THE EMERGENCY SITE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?
THE PLAN DID NOT WORK! WE WILL GO HOME AND TRY AGAIN.
NO, IT WORKED! WE ARE POWERFUL! YEAH!


YES, VERY POWERFUL, BUT... HMPPFFFF!
SMACK!
HUH!??
BANG!
VA'TEE!?
BANG!


BANG!
AHHHHHH!
OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD!
AGHHHHHH!
AHH-HAHAHA!


UGH... OWW.. I'M BLEEDING.. LOTS OF BLOOD.. TASTY BLOOD..
DO NOT REACH FOR THAT WEAPON OR I'LL SHOOT YOU AGAIN!
YEAH!... AGAIN!
OH NO.... PLEASE.. I DON'T WANNA DIE! ...I WANNA GO HOMEEE!!!!
YOU'RE VERY TALL.. YEAH... TALL..
ROLL OVER!
OWWW!
HEY THERE. ARE YOU VA'DON?
ZIP!
HAHA! BLOOD ON THE FLOOR! AND IT'S MINEEEE!
NO! I DON'T WANNA DIE!!!!! I WANT MY MOMMY!!!


OK, WELL, I'VE GOT SOME VERY GOOD NEWS FOR YOU.
WE'RE... TERRAN MARINES. WE'RE HERE TO TAKE YOU HOME, OK?
YEAH, REALLY! CAN YOU TELL ME YOUR NAME FIRST?
REALLY...?
M-MY N-NAME? IT-IT'S.. V-VA'DON...
IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU, VA'DON. I'M C.J.
OK...
ARE YOU HURT?
NOT REALLY...
CAN YOU WALK?
UM... NO... NOT RIGHT NOW...
OH? WHY NOT?


IT'S EMBARRASSING...
I POOED...
OK... BUT... IT'S GROSS...
OK...
WHAT'S WRONG?
OHH! HEY, IT HAPPENS. YOUR SECRET IS SAFE WITH US, ALL RIGHT?
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. LET'S GET AWAY FROM THE CRAZY GUY FIRST, OK?
I KNOW. I'M SORRY... BUT YOUR DAD IS OK.
HE'S BACK AT THE MAIN HOUSE WAITING FOR US TO BRING YOU BACK TO HIM.
SO YOU READY TO GO?
TH-THEY... THEY KILLED UNCLE VA'NIRR...
DADDY!? WHERE IS HE!?
YES!


OH... HE-HELLO...
HI THERE!
VA'DON, THIS IS JIMMY. HE AND I ARE GONNA TAKE YOU HOME.
HAHA! BLOODY FLOOR! BLOODY FLOOR! YEAH!! I'M SWIMMING!
WEEEE!
YOU GUYS ARE TALL... ARE YOU GIANTS?
HA! NO, WE'RE PRETTY MUCH AVERAGE FOR HUMANS!
OHH...
TOC, BUTCHER FOUR. JACKPOT. H.V.T. SECURE AND MOBILE. ONE TANGO KILO.
SECOND TANGO DOWN HARD. STILL ALIVE AND SECURE, BUT IN NEED OF AID. REQUESTING PICKUP AND CASEVAC AT OUR POS.
BLOODY FLOOR! HEHEHE! YEAH!! WARM AND TOASTY!
AND MAYBE A DAMN STRAITJACKET AND A BOTTLE OF LITHIUM FOR THIS ONE... WHAT THE FUCK...


DAMN RIGHT! THAT'S HOW IT'S DONE!
SOLID COPY, FOUR! ALLIED Q.R.F. IS INBOUND WITH CASEVAC.
ALL BUTCHER CALL SIGNS! JACKPOT! H.V.I. SECURE AND MOBILE! R.T.B. ONCE THE Q.R.F. TAKES OVER. COME ON HOME!
TOC, THIS IS ONE. GOOD COPY. WE'RE JUST GETTING THE LAST OF THESE GUYS UNTIED NOW.
GOOD NEWS! WE GOT YOUR BOY. HE'S ALIVE AND SAFE.
OHH! THANK YOU!


THANK YOU, HUMAN!
I OWE YOU MORE THAN I CAN EVER REPAY!
OHH! HEY! YOU'RE VERY WELCOME, BUT YOU DON'T OWE ME ANYTHING.
YES, I DO! I OWE YOU MY LIFE!
NO, YOU DON'T... THIS IS MY JOB.

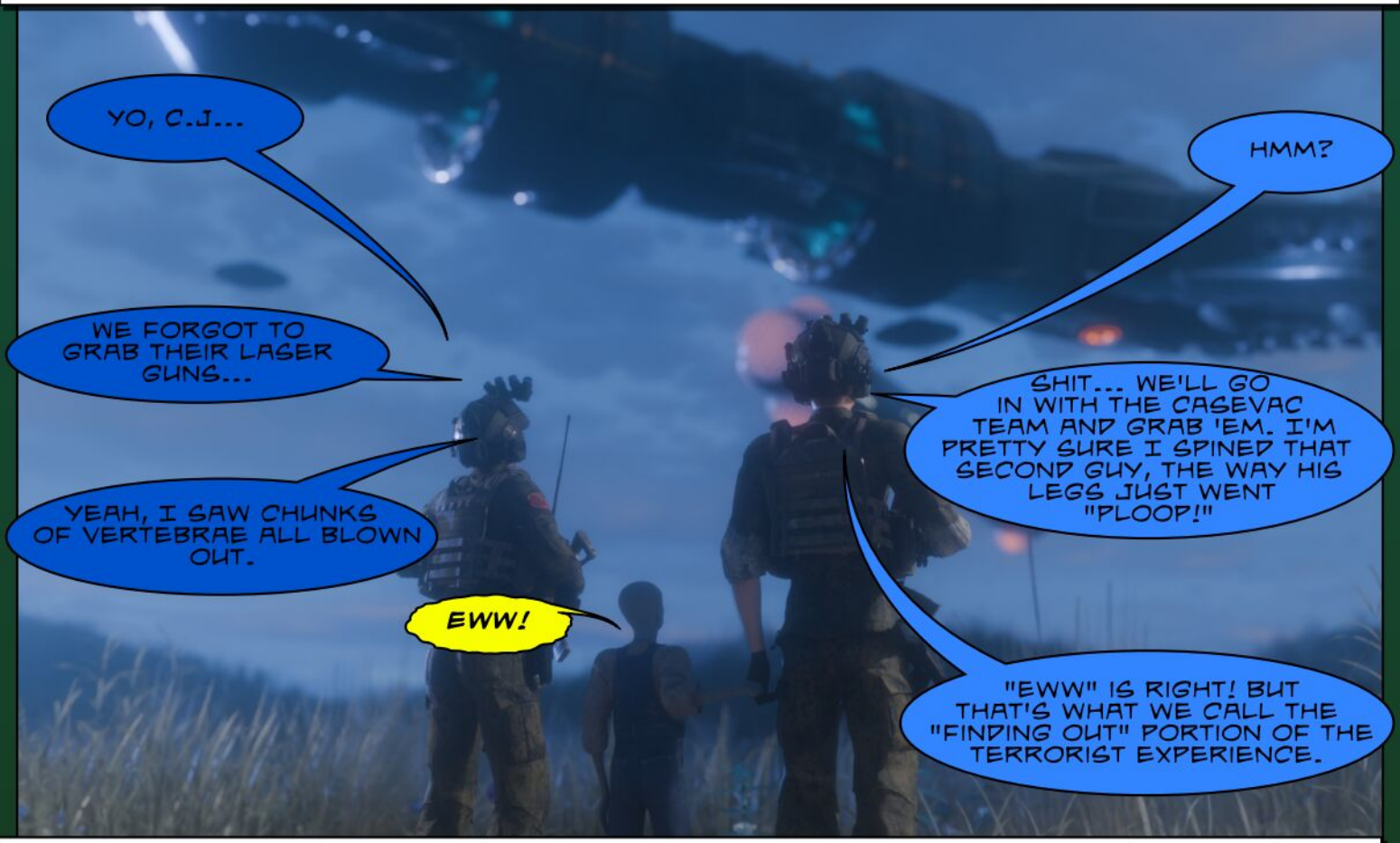
C.J. AND JIMMY STARED IN AWE AT THE MASSIVE MI'ARR BATTLESHIP FLOATING OVERHEAD IN THE MORNING SKY. THE LOW, STEADY HUM OF ITS ENGINES SEEMED TO SWALLOW THE HOWLING WIND.







C.J., JIMMY, AND VA'DON STOOD AT THE EDGE OF THE ROAD, WATCHING SHIPS, LANDERS, AND DRONES WORK TOGETHER LIKE A WELL-OILED MACHINE.



AGAINST THE PALING SKY AND RISING SUN OF AN ALIEN WORLD, THE AERIAL DISPLAY WAS MESMERIZING, CALMING ALL THREE. THE CURTIS LEMAY FLEW LOW OVERHEAD AS LANDERS SEEMED TO POUR IN FROM EVERY DIRECTION.

