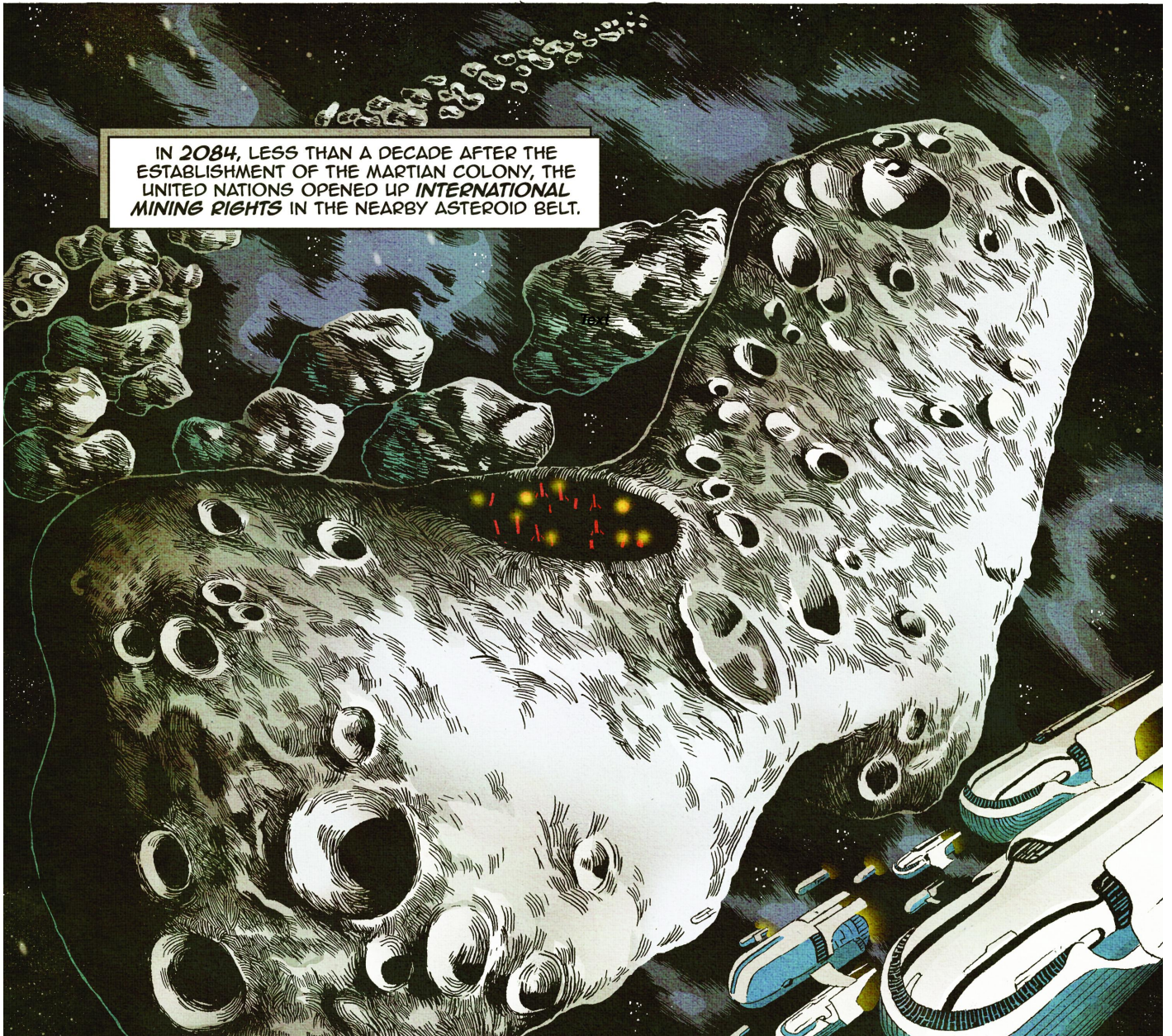




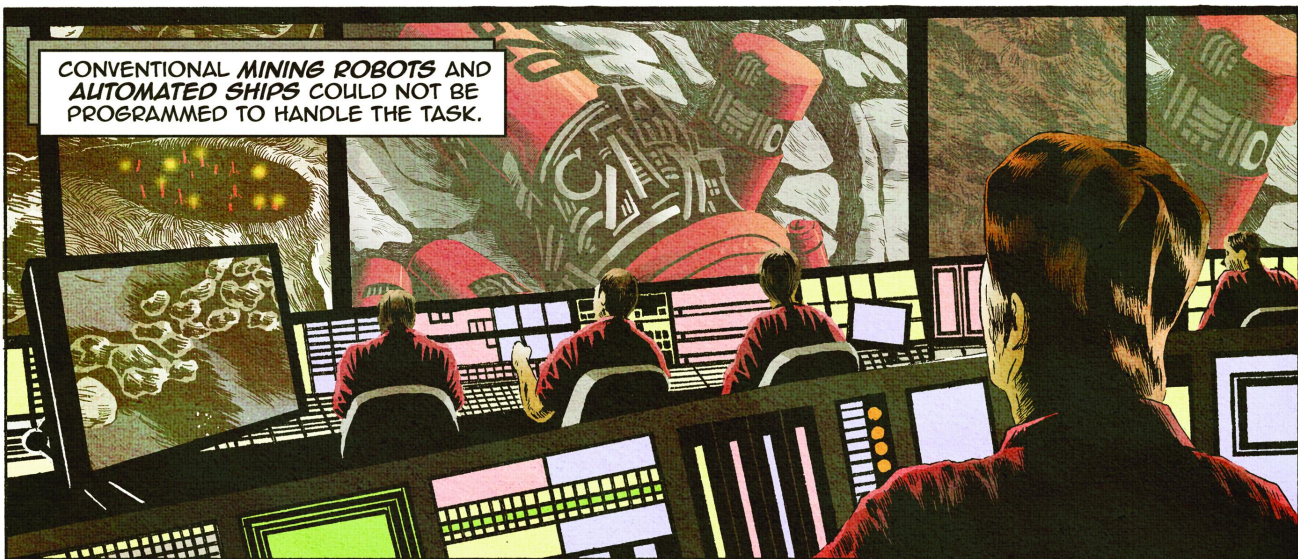
TIMOTHY JAMES DIMACALI • JOHN RAYMOND BUMANGLAG

SKYCYRSES

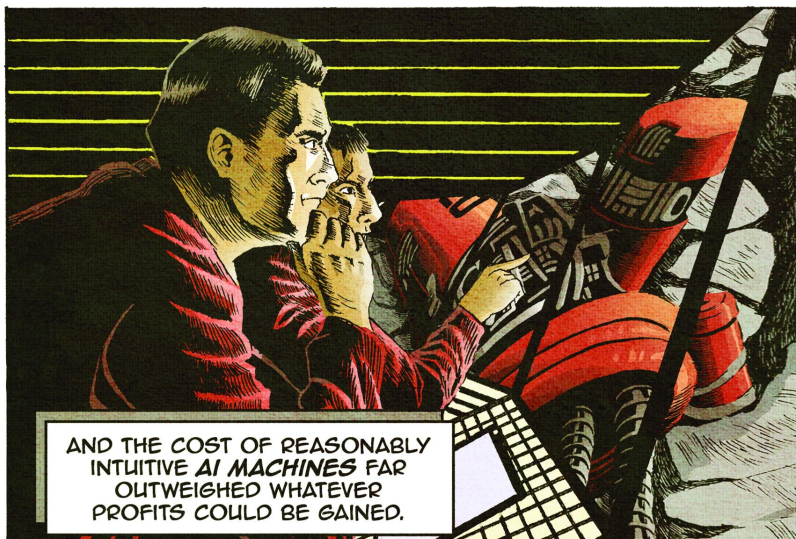




THE LOGISTICS OF THE EFFORT PROVED TO BE TOO EXPENSIVE AND CUMBERSOME.



CONVENTIONAL MINING ROBOTS AND AUTOMATED SHIPS COULD NOT BE PROGRAMMED TO HANDLE THE TASK.



AND THE COST OF REASONABLY INTUITIVE AI MACHINES FAR OUTWEIGHED WHATEVER PROFITS COULD BE GAINED.

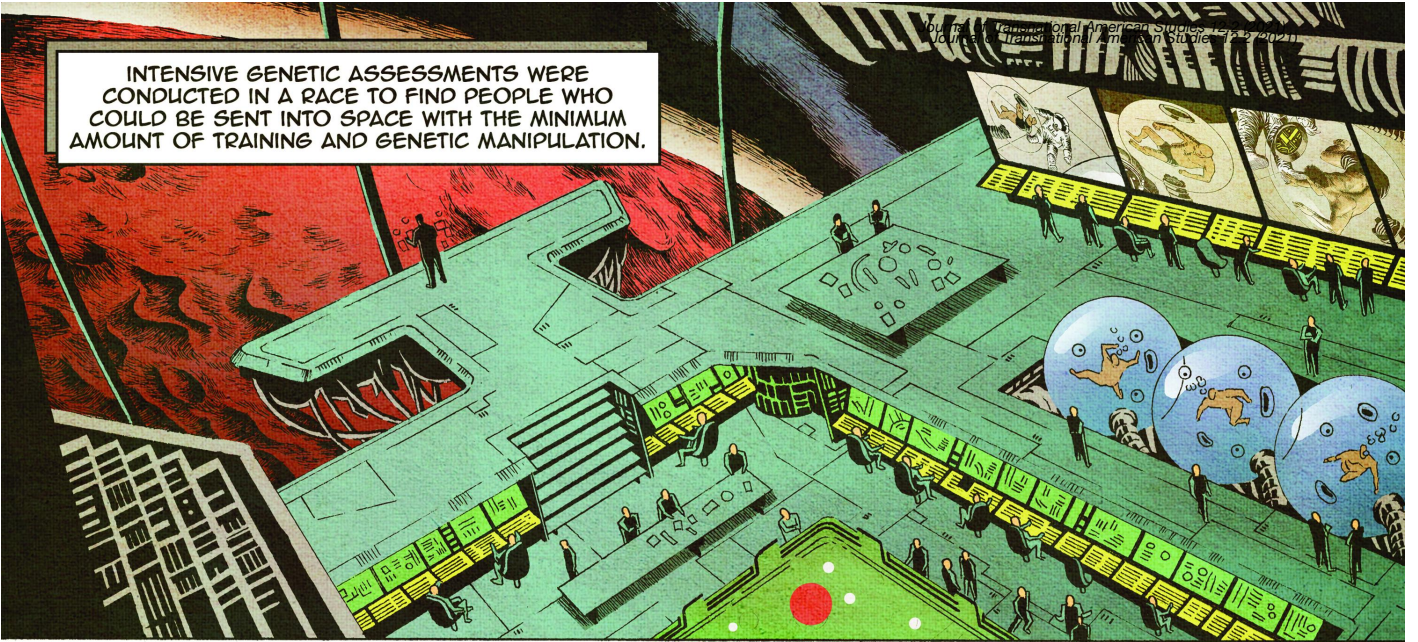


THE SOLUTION, OF COURSE, WAS--

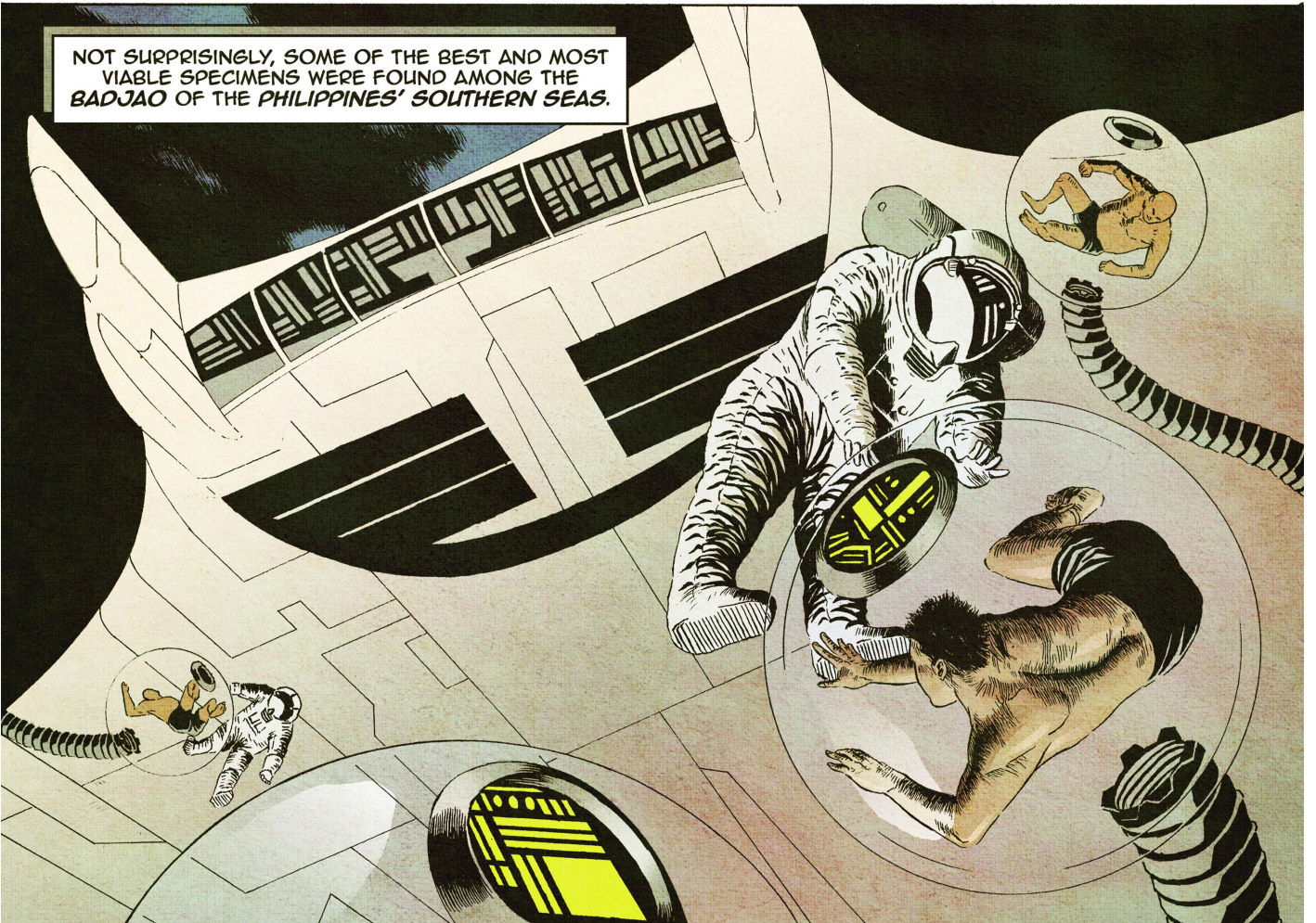


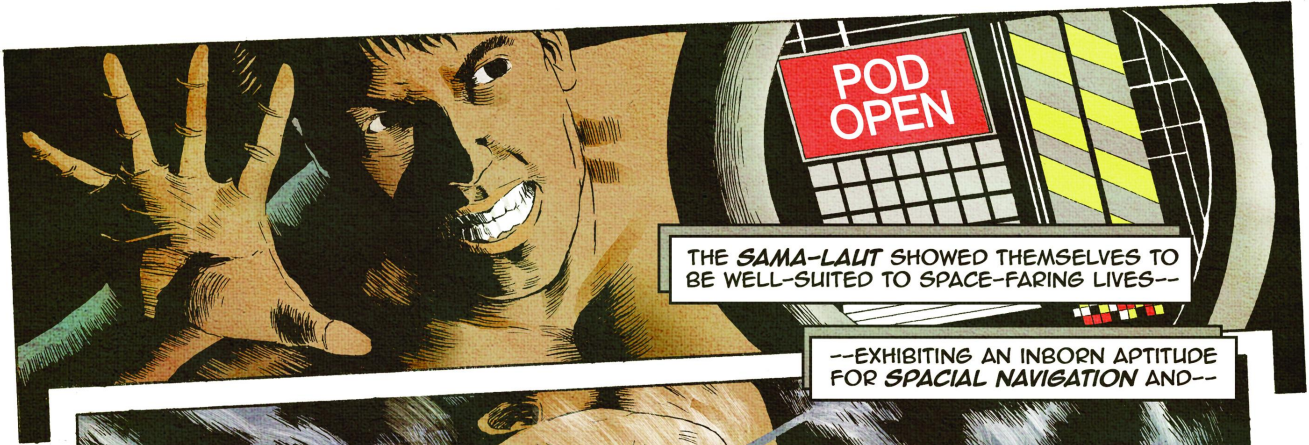
--CHEAP LABOR.

INTENSIVE GENETIC ASSESSMENTS WERE CONDUCTED IN A RACE TO FIND PEOPLE WHO COULD BE SENT INTO SPACE WITH THE MINIMUM AMOUNT OF TRAINING AND GENETIC MANIPULATION.



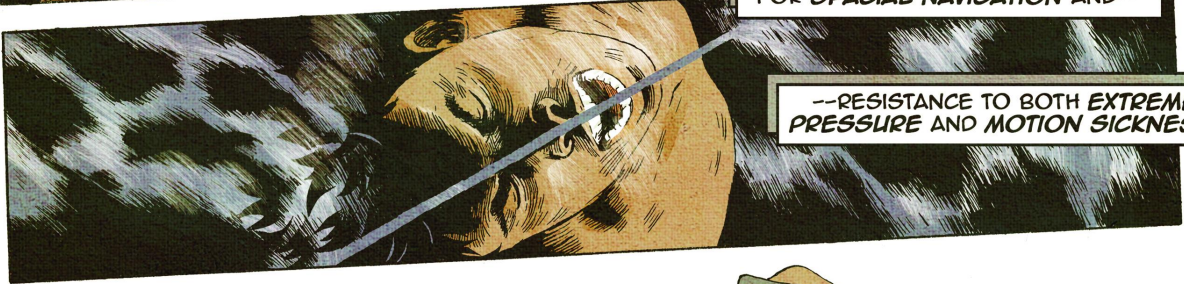
NOT SURPRISINGLY, SOME OF THE BEST AND MOST VIABLE SPECIMENS WERE FOUND AMONG THE **BADJAO** OF THE PHILIPPINES' SOUTHERN SEAS.





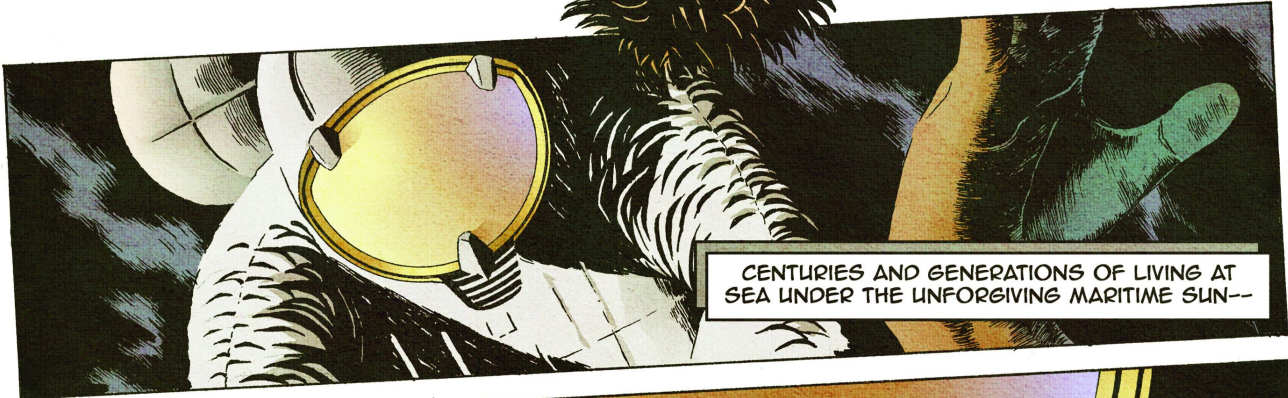
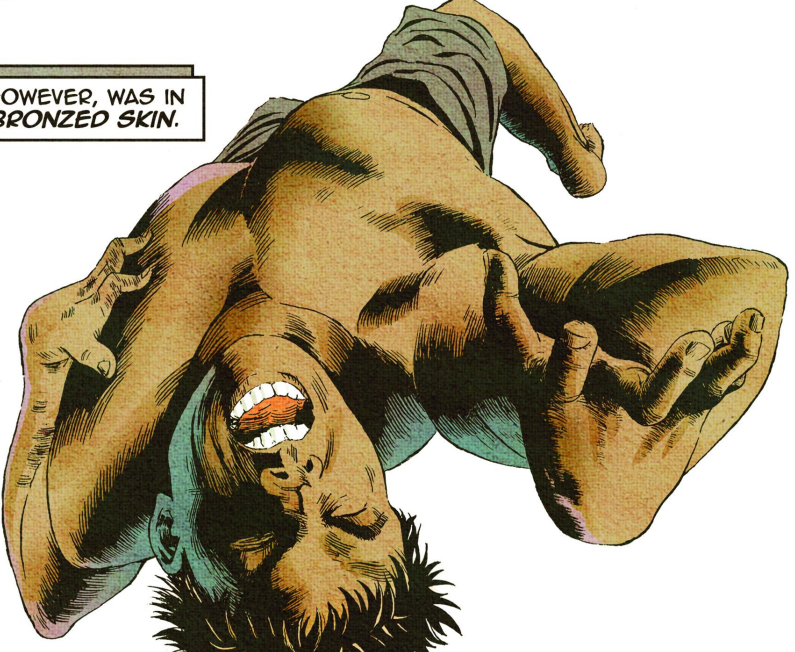
THE *SAMA-LAIT* SHOWED THEMSELVES TO BE WELL-SUITED TO SPACE-FARING LIVES--

--EXHIBITING AN INBORN APTITUDE FOR *SPACIAL NAVIGATION* AND--



--RESISTANCE TO BOTH *EXTREME PRESSURE* AND *MOTION SICKNESS*.

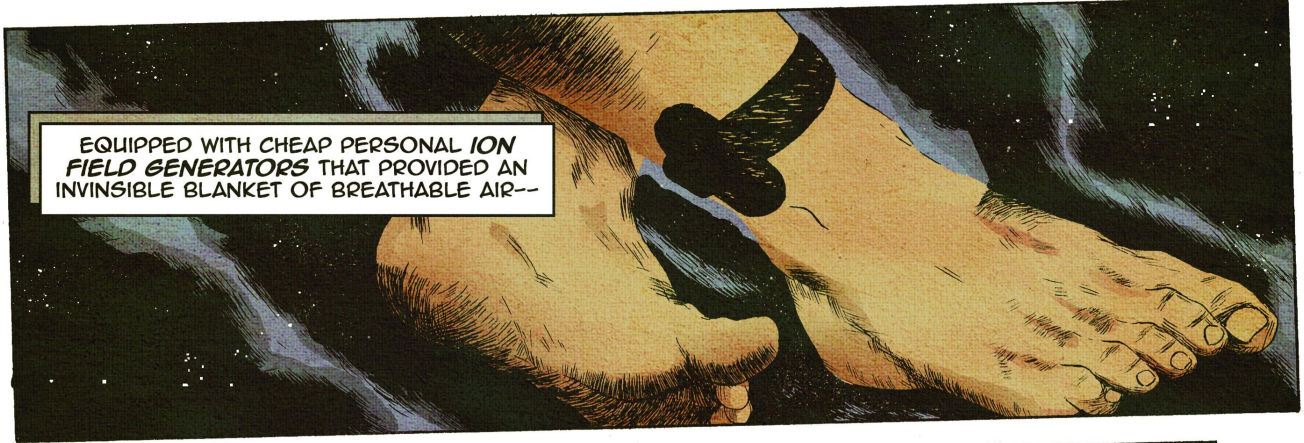
THEIR TRUE STRENGTH, HOWEVER, WAS IN THEIR CHARACTERISTIC *BRONZED SKIN*.



CENTURIES AND GENERATIONS OF LIVING AT SEA UNDER THE UNFORGIVING MARITIME SUN--



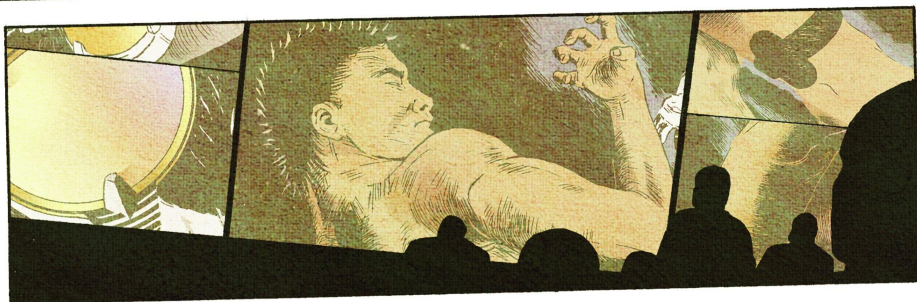
--GAVE THE *BADJAO* A *GENETIC STURDINESS* AGAINST MOST OF THE CELLULAR DEGRADATION TYPICAL OF PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO SOLAR RADIATION.



EQUIPPED WITH CHEAP PERSONAL ION FIELD GENERATORS THAT PROVIDED AN INVISIBLE BLANKET OF BREATHABLE AIR--



--AND MEAGER PROTECTION AGAINST THE HIGHER LEVELS OF RADIATION IN SPACE--



--THE SAMA-LAUT SET OUT IN SCANTILY EQUIPPED SOLAR-DRIVE SHIPS INTO THAT PLACE WHICH HAD HERETOFORE BEEN THE EXCLUSIVE DOMAIN OF TUHAN,--

--THE ALMIGHTY GOD OF THE SKY.

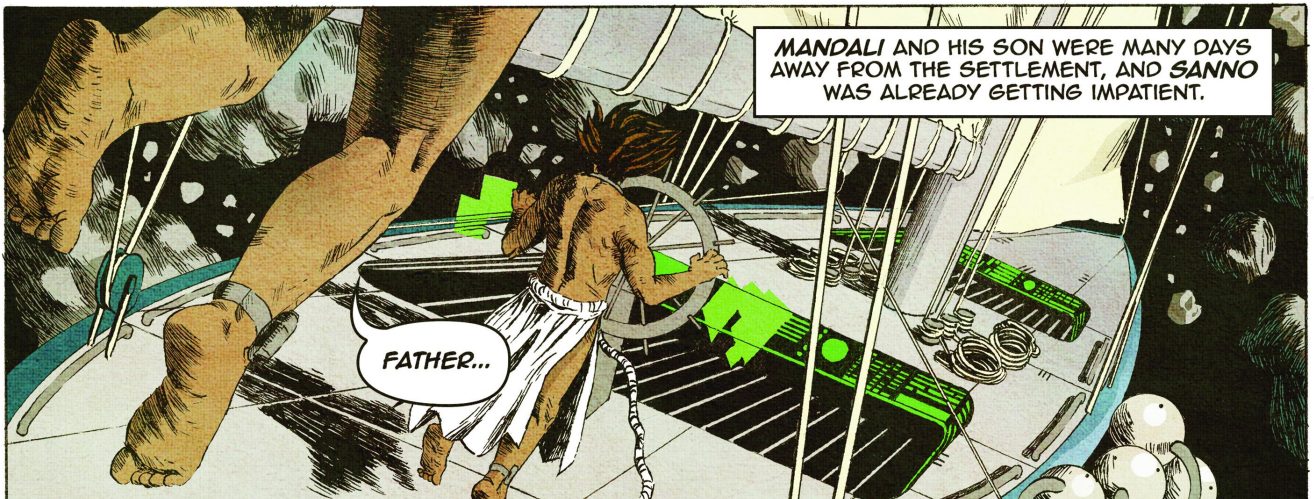
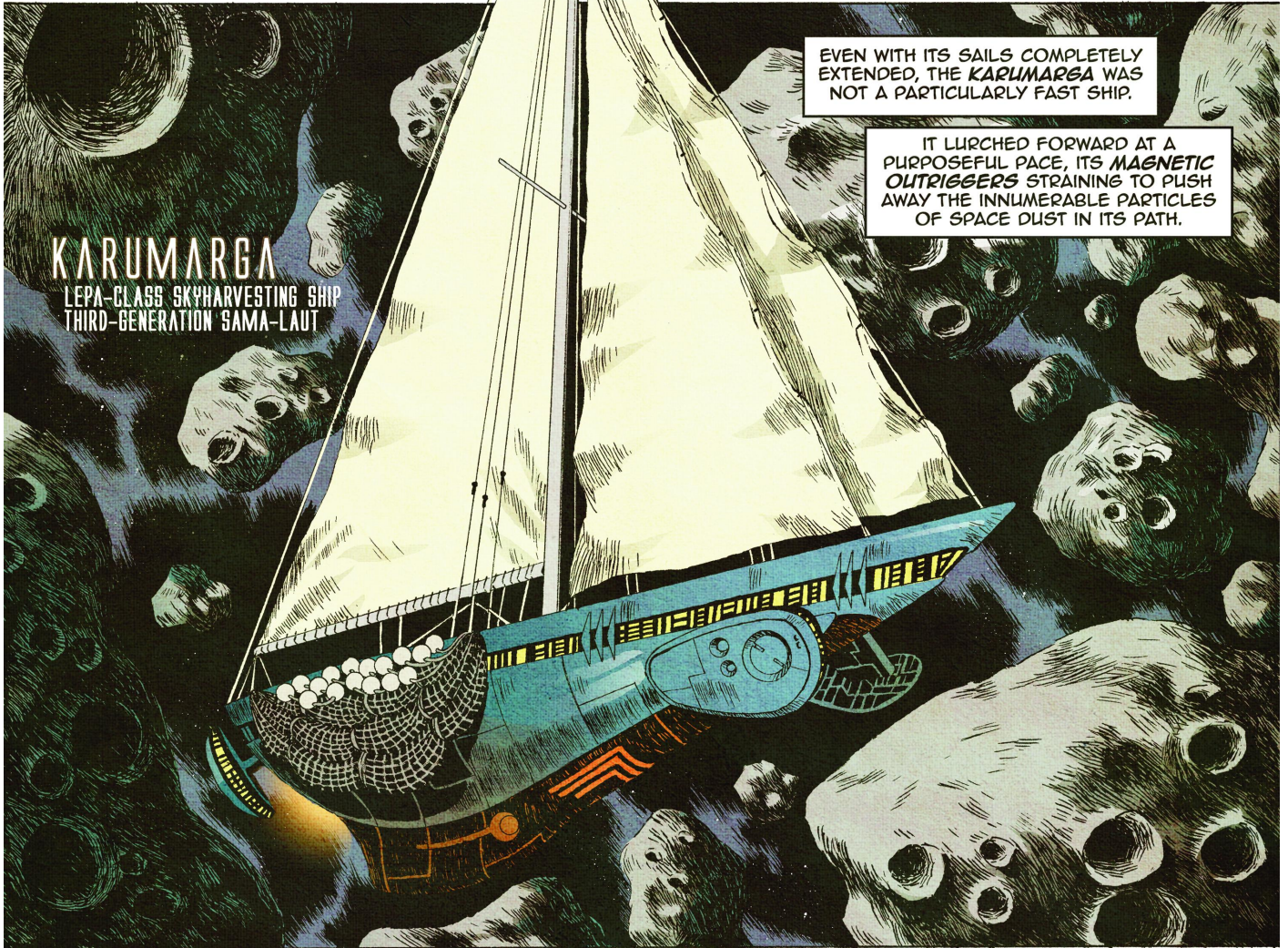
ASTEROID BELT.
BETA QUADRANT.

THE SAILS BILLOWED AT FULL MAST AS THE SOLAR WIND PUSHED THE SLIVER-SHAPED CRAFT ONWARD TO INTERCEPT A NEWLY PLOTTED ASTEROID.

EVEN WITH ITS SAILS COMPLETELY EXTENDED, THE **KARUMARGA** WAS NOT A PARTICULARLY FAST SHIP.

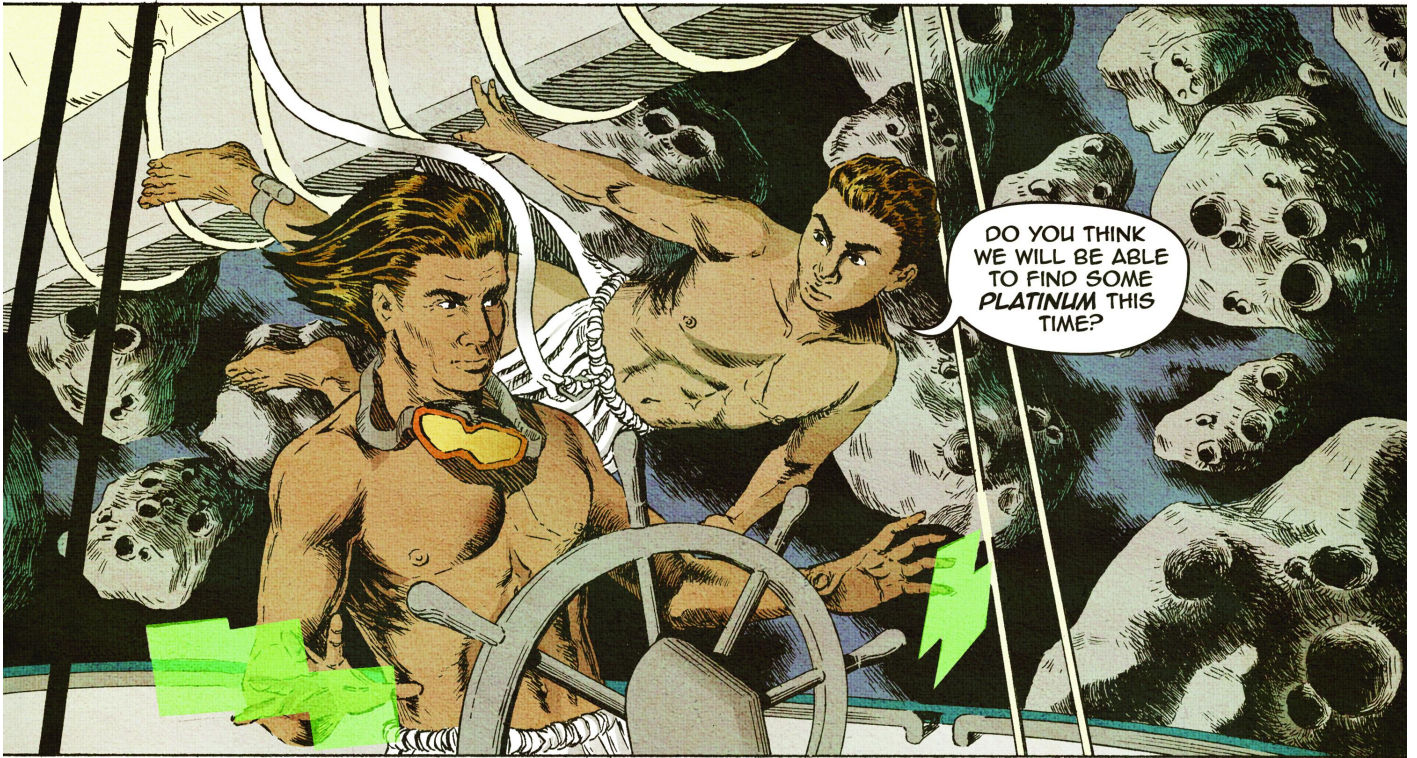
IT LURCHED FORWARD AT A PURPOSEFUL PACE, ITS **MAGNETIC OUTRIGGERS** STRAINING TO PUSH AWAY THE INNUMERABLE PARTICLES OF SPACE DUST IN ITS PATH.

KARUMARGA
LEPA-CLASS SKYHARVESTING SHIP
THIRD-GENERATION SAMA-LAUT

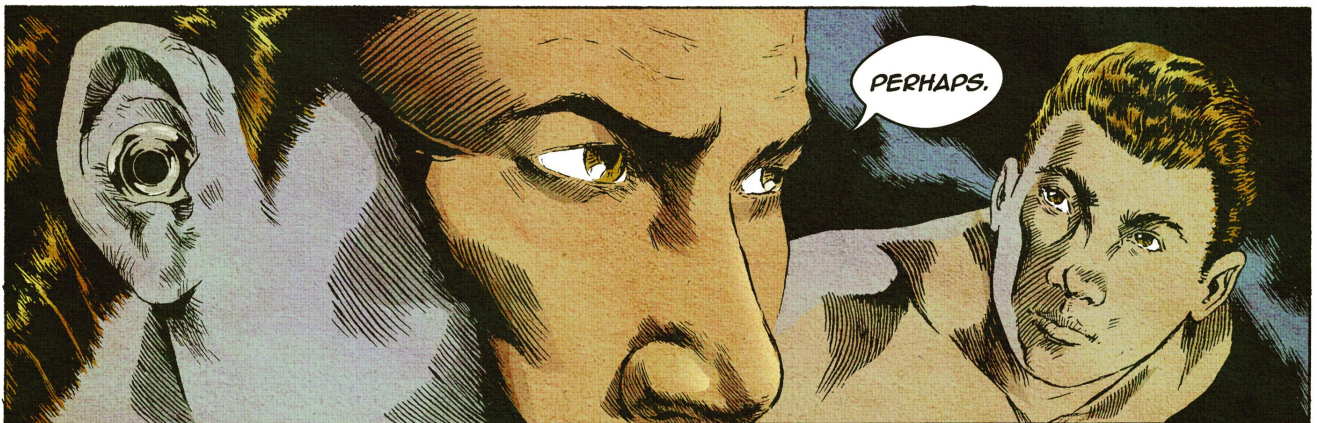


MANDALI AND HIS SON WERE MANY DAYS AWAY FROM THE SETTLEMENT, AND **SANNO** WAS ALREADY GETTING IMPATIENT.

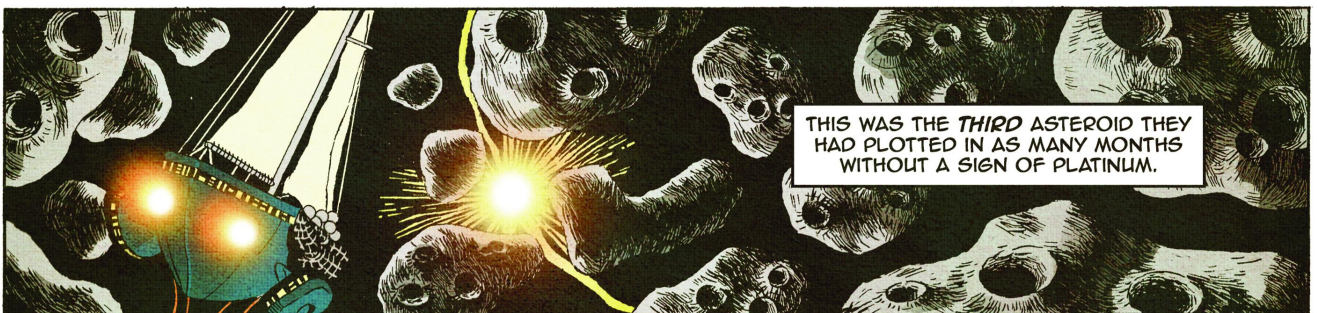
FATHER...



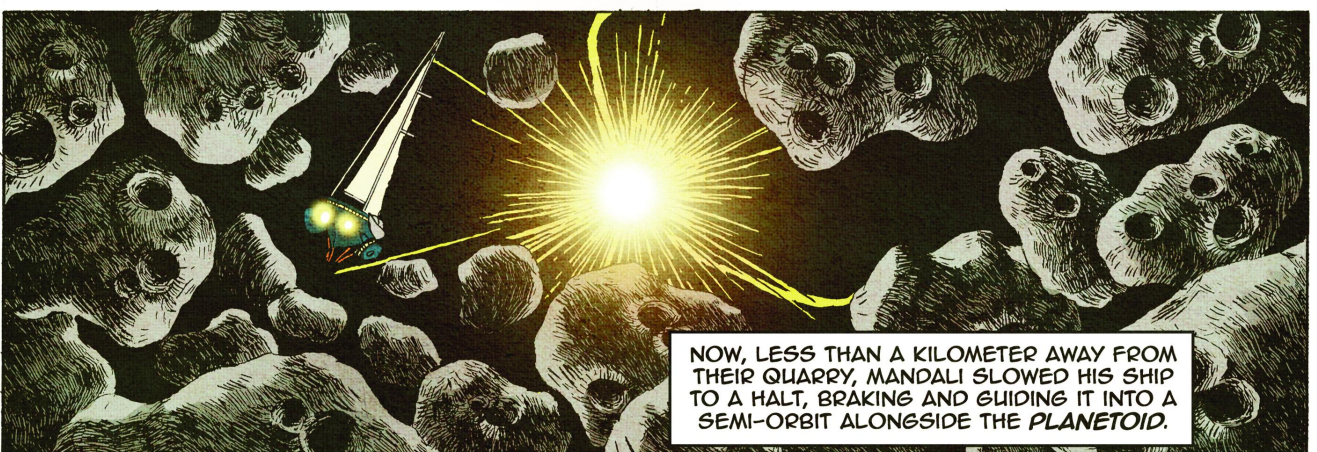
DO YOU THINK WE WILL BE ABLE TO FIND SOME PLATINUM THIS TIME?



PERHAPS.



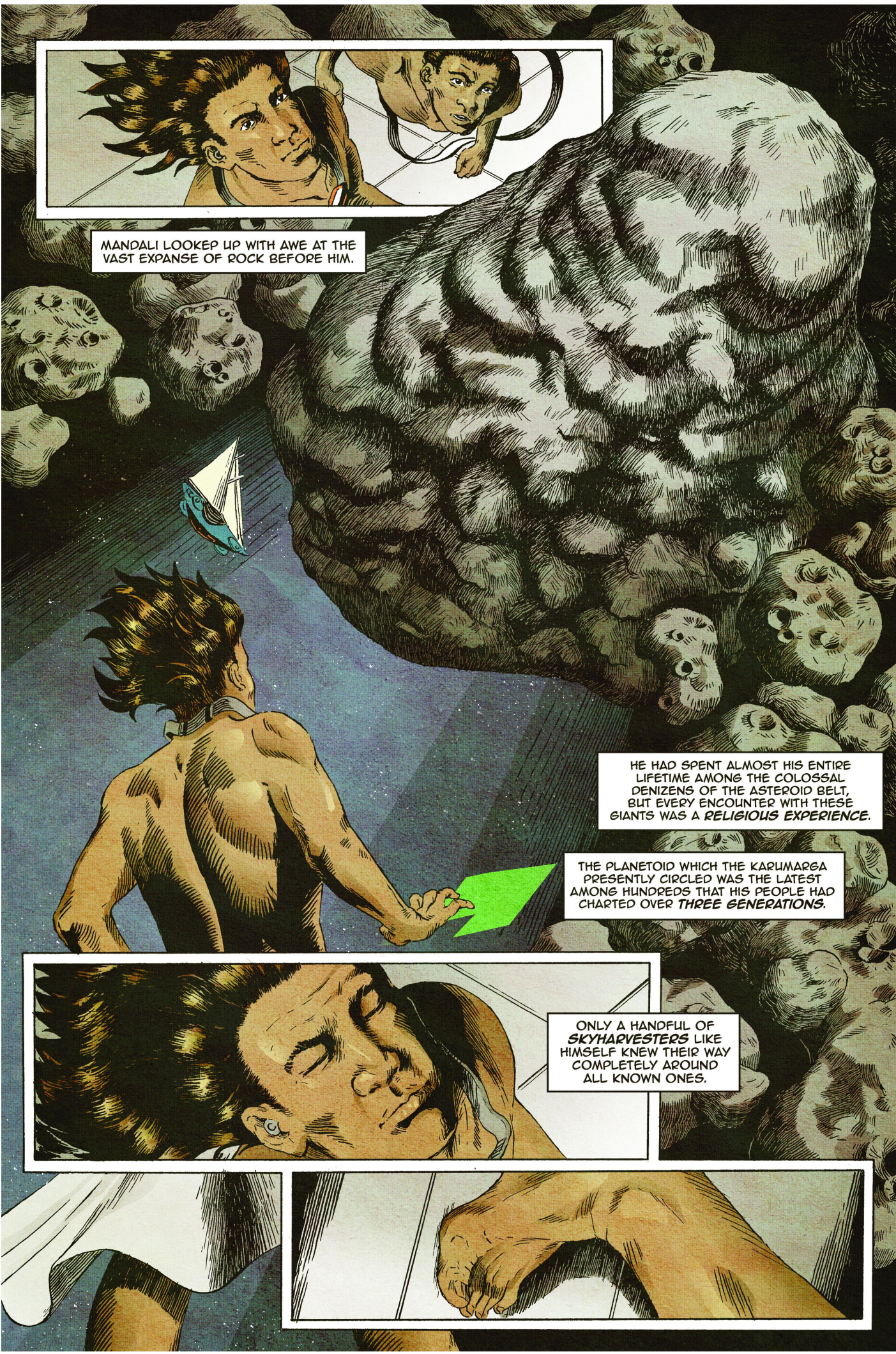
THIS WAS THE *THIRD* ASTEROID THEY HAD PLOTTED IN AS MANY MONTHS WITHOUT A SIGN OF PLATINUM.



NOW, LESS THAN A KILOMETER AWAY FROM THEIR QUARRY, MANDALI SLOWED HIS SHIP TO A HALT, BRAKING AND GUIDING IT INTO A SEMI-ORBIT ALONGSIDE THE PLANETOID.



MANDALI LOOKED UP WITH AWE AT THE VAST EXPANSE OF ROCK BEFORE HIM.

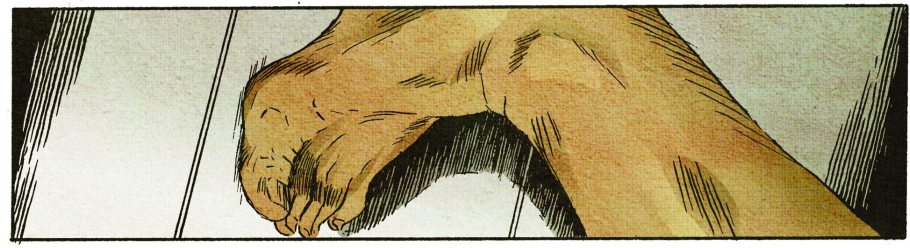


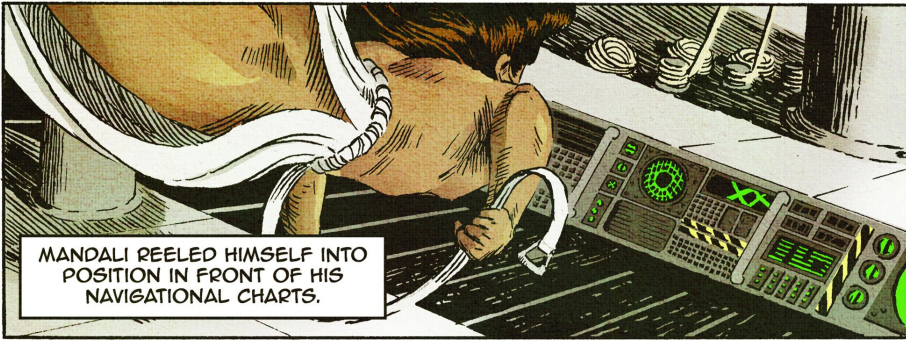
HE HAD SPENT ALMOST HIS ENTIRE LIFETIME AMONG THE COLOSSAL DENIZENS OF THE ASTEROID BELT, BUT EVERY ENCOUNTER WITH THESE GIANTS WAS A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

THE PLANETOID WHICH THE KARUMARGA PRESENTLY CIRCLED WAS THE LATEST AMONG HUNDREDS THAT HIS PEOPLE HAD CHARTED OVER THREE GENERATIONS.

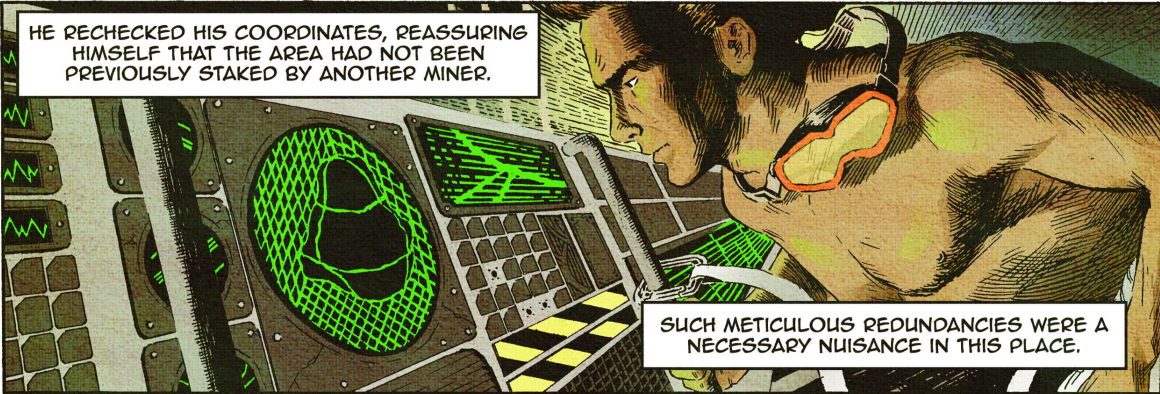


ONLY A HANDFUL OF SKYHARVESTERS LIKE HIMSELF KNEW THEIR WAY COMPLETELY AROUND ALL KNOWN ONES.



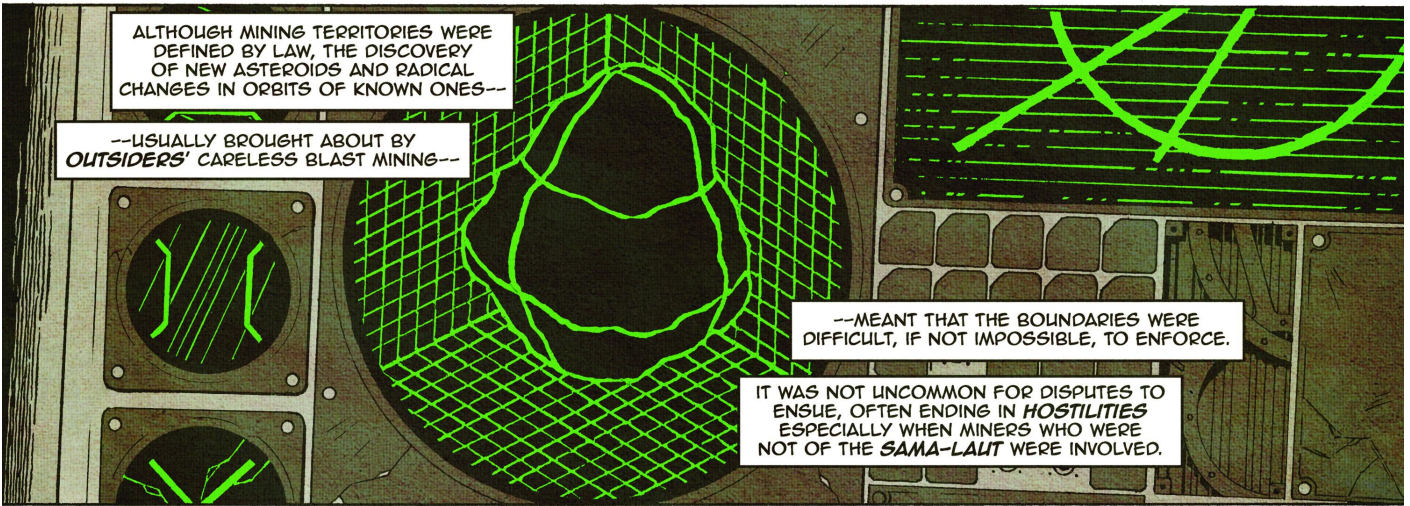


MANDALI REELED HIMSELF INTO POSITION IN FRONT OF HIS NAVIGATIONAL CHARTS.



HE RECHECKED HIS COORDINATES, REASSURING HIMSELF THAT THE AREA HAD NOT BEEN PREVIOUSLY STAKED BY ANOTHER MINER.

SUCH METICULOUS REDUNDANCIES WERE A NECESSARY NUISANCE IN THIS PLACE.



ALTHOUGH MINING TERRITORIES WERE DEFINED BY LAW, THE DISCOVERY OF NEW ASTEROIDS AND RADICAL CHANGES IN ORBITS OF KNOWN ONES--

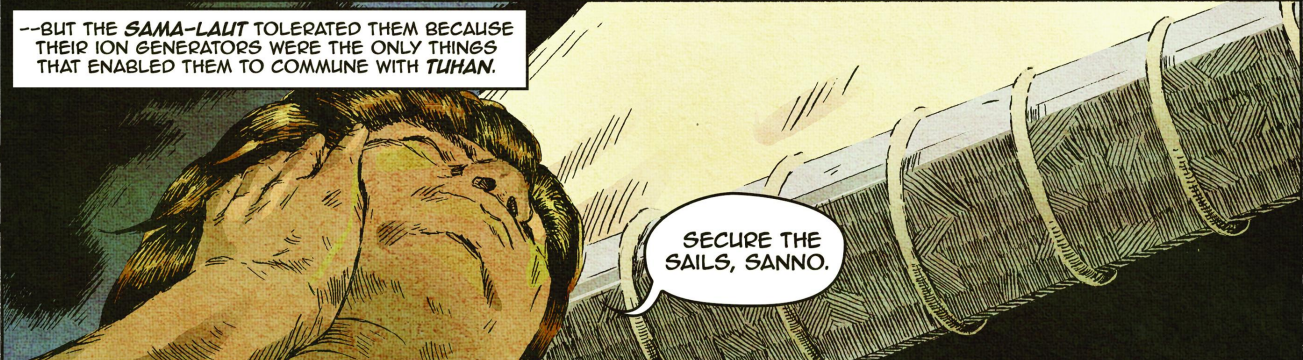
--USUALLY BROUGHT ABOUT BY *OUTSIDERS'* CARELESS BLAST MINING--

--MEANT THAT THE BOUNDARIES WERE DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, TO ENFORCE.

IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON FOR DISPUTES TO ENSUE, OFTEN ENDING IN *HOSTILITIES* ESPECIALLY WHEN MINERS WHO WERE NOT OF THE *SAMA-LAUT* WERE INVOLVED.



HIS PEOPLE WERE WEARY OF THE *OUTSIDERS*. THEY HAD NO RESPECT FOR *TUHAN'S* DOMAIN,--

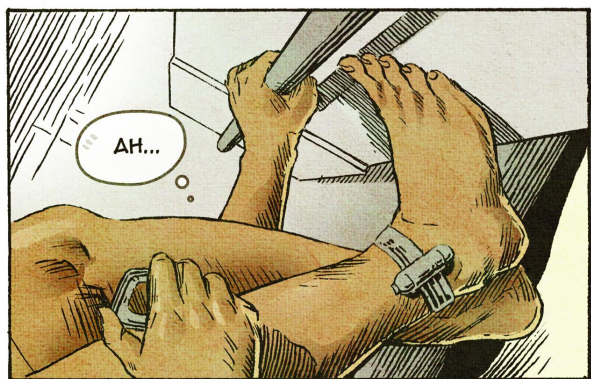


--BUT THE *SAMA-LAUT* TOLERATED THEM BECAUSE THEIR ION GENERATORS WERE THE ONLY THINGS THAT ENABLED THEM TO COMMUNE WITH *TUHAN*.

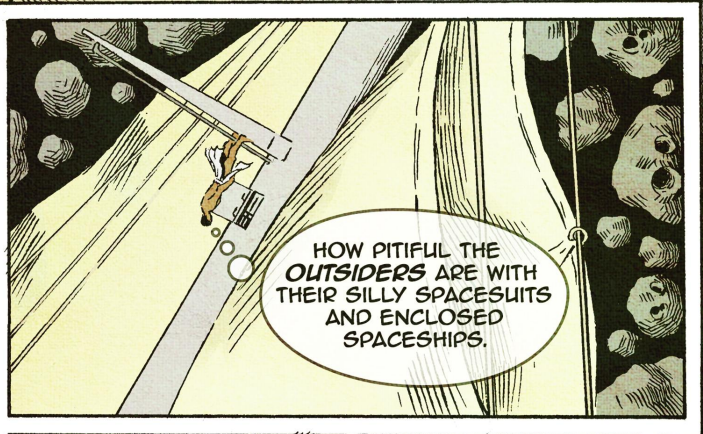
SECURE THE SAILS, SANNO.



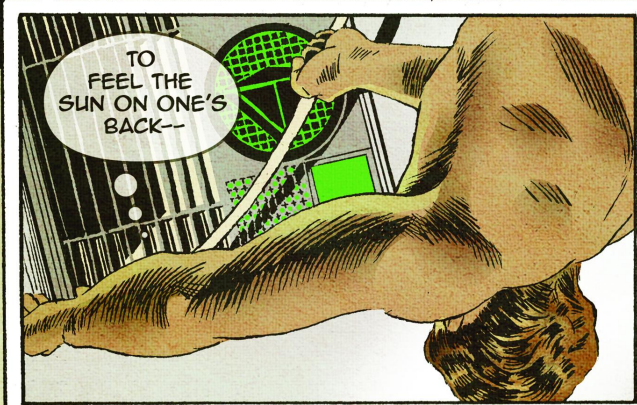
THE BOY PUSHED OFF FROM THE DECK IN SILENCE.



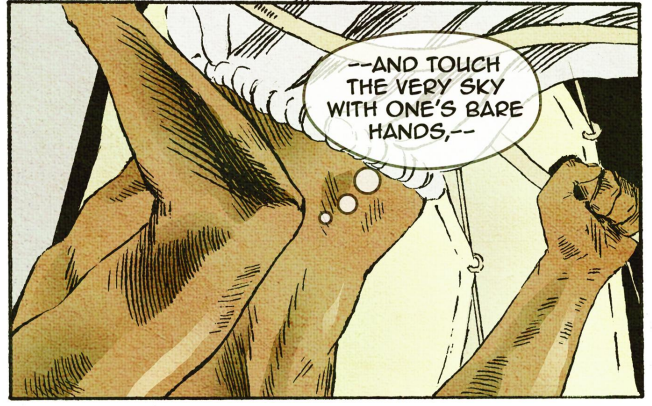
AH...



HOW PITIFUL THE **OUTSIDERS** ARE WITH THEIR SILLY SPACESUITS AND ENCLOSED SPACESHIPS.



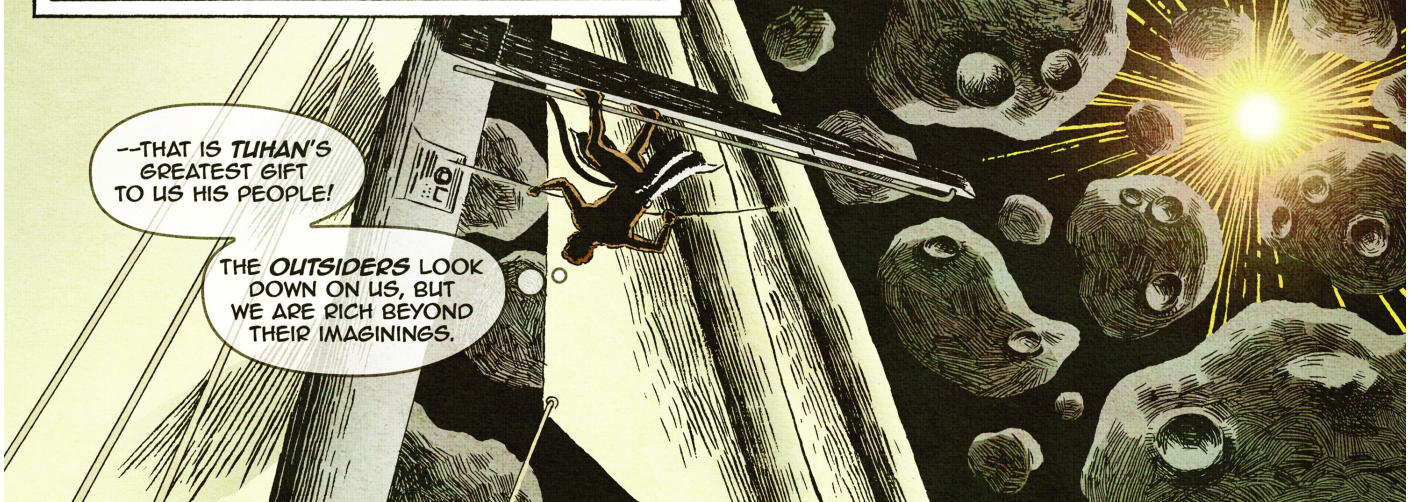
TO FEEL THE SUN ON ONE'S BACK--

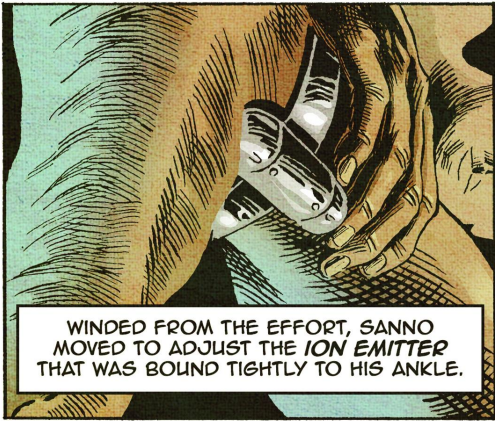


--AND TOUCH THE VERY SKY WITH ONE'S BARE HANDS,--

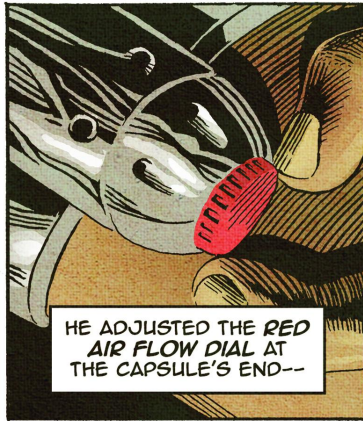
--THAT IS **TUHAN'S** GREATEST GIFT TO US HIS PEOPLE!

THE **OUTSIDERS** LOOK DOWN ON US, BUT WE ARE RICH BEYOND THEIR IMAGININGS.





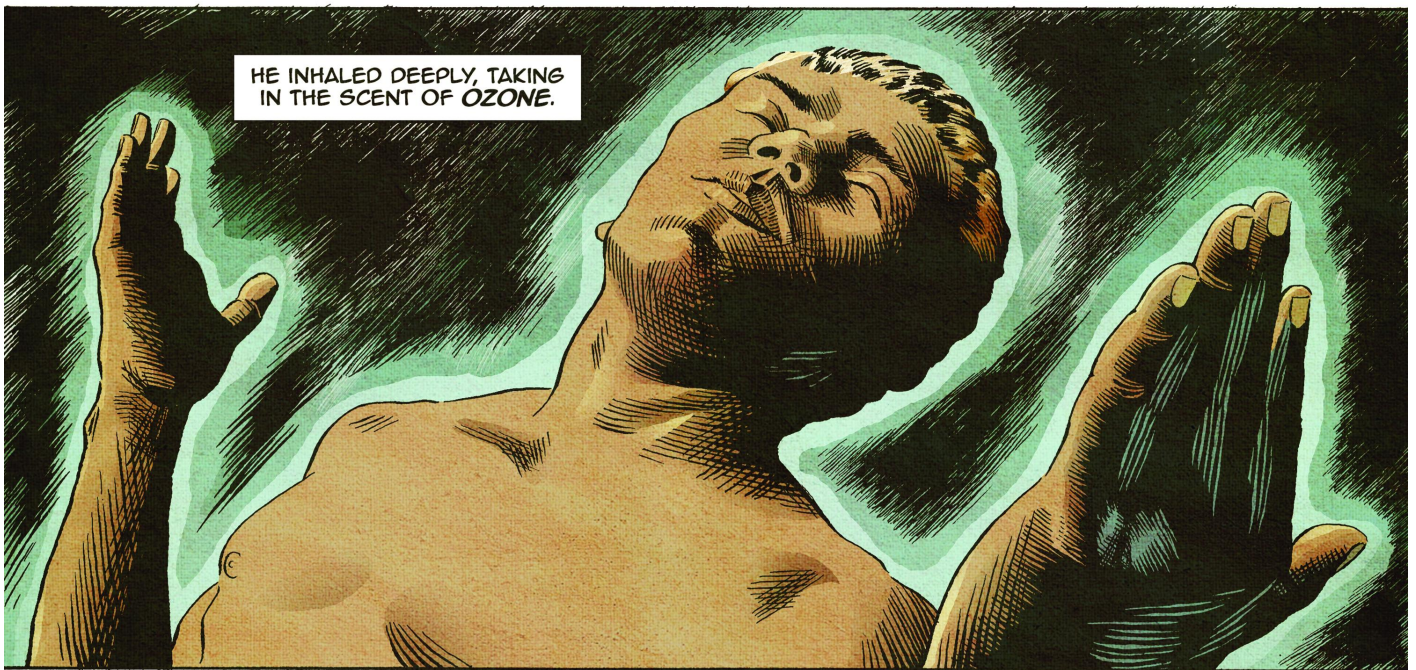
WINDED FROM THE EFFORT, SANNO MOVED TO ADJUST THE ION EMITTER THAT WAS BOUND TIGHTLY TO HIS ANKLE.



HE ADJUSTED THE RED AIR FLOW DIAL AT THE CAPSULE'S END--



--SENDING A RUSH OF FRESH AIR ALL OVER HIS BODY.



HE INHALED DEEPLY, TAKING IN THE SCENT OF OZONE.

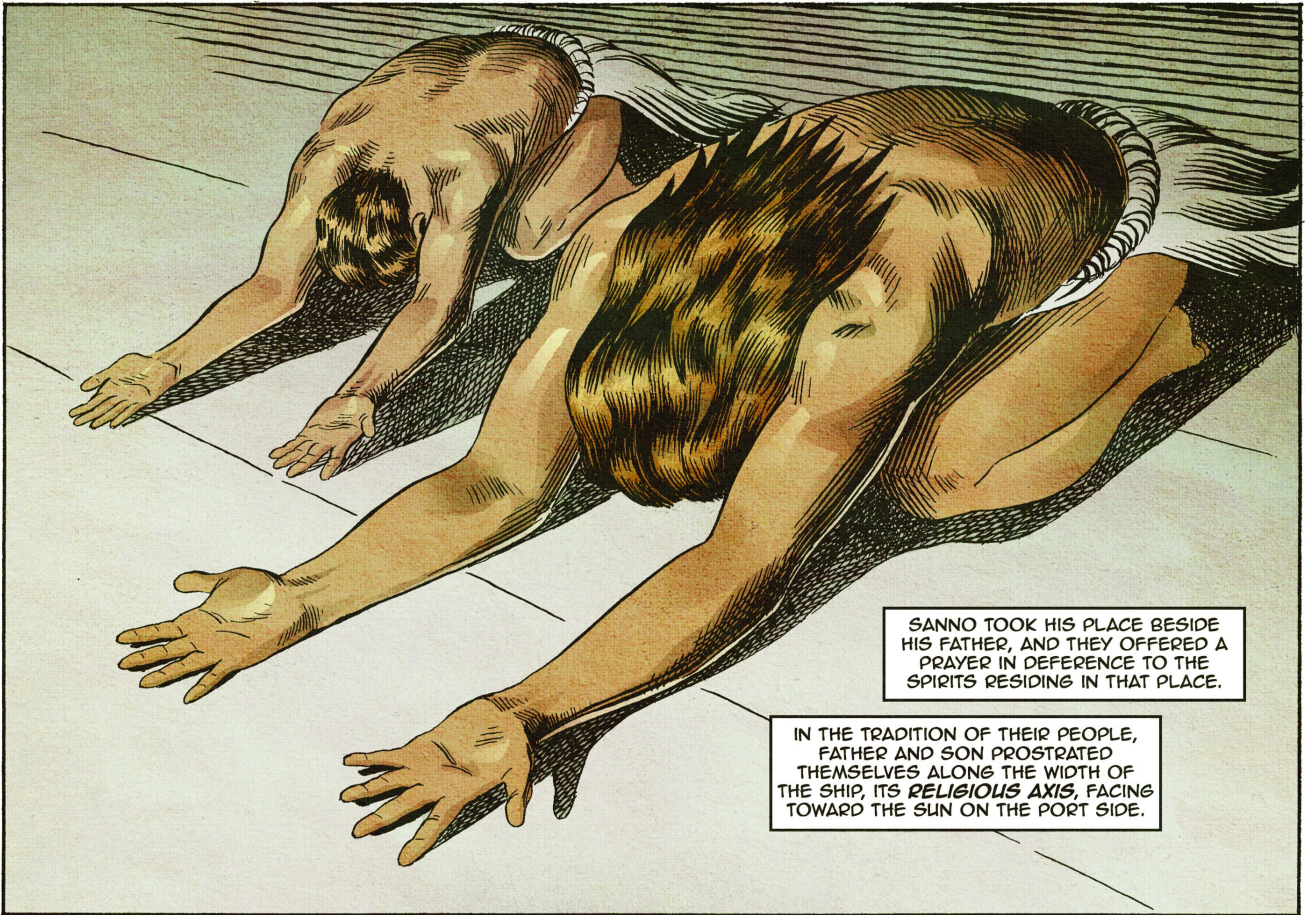


WHEN HE WAS DONE, SANNO RELEASED HIMSELF AND--



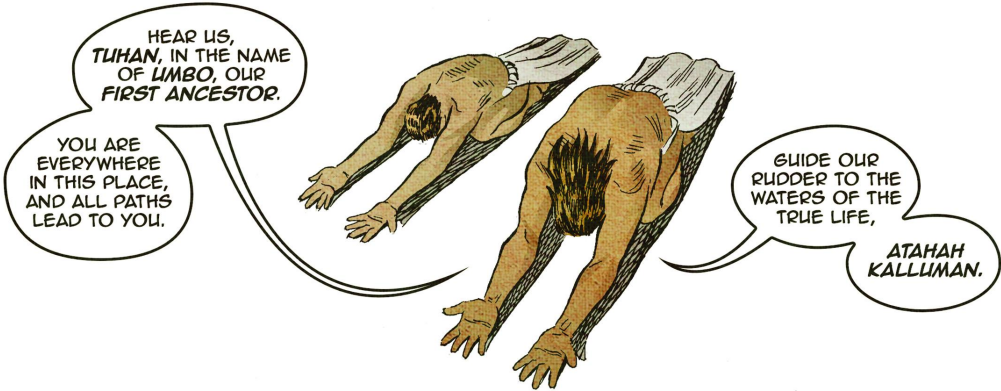
--SLOWLY DRIFTED GENTLY BACK TO THE SHIP'S SURFACE.





SANNO TOOK HIS PLACE BESIDE HIS FATHER, AND THEY OFFERED A PRAYER IN DEFERENCE TO THE SPIRITS RESIDING IN THAT PLACE.

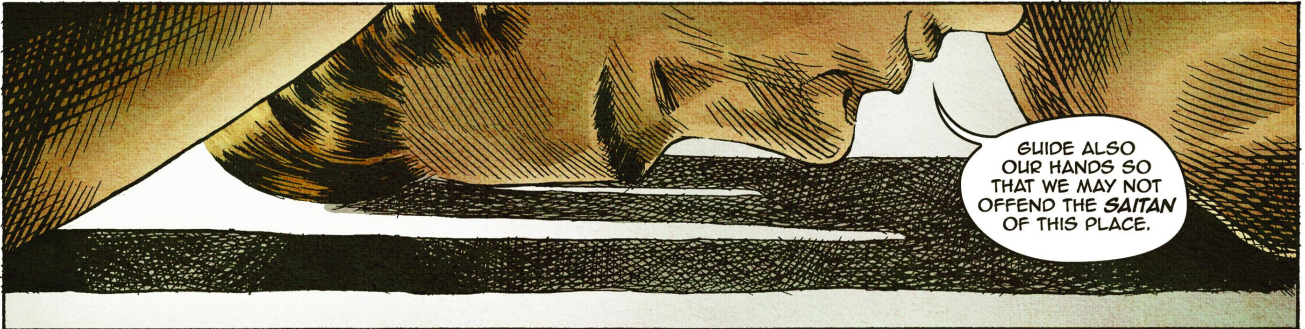
IN THE TRADITION OF THEIR PEOPLE, FATHER AND SON PROSTRATED THEMSELVES ALONG THE WIDTH OF THE SHIP, ITS *RELIGIOUS AXIS*, FACING TOWARD THE SUN ON THE PORT SIDE.



YOU ARE EVERYWHERE IN THIS PLACE, AND ALL PATHS LEAD TO YOU.

HEAR US, TUHAN, IN THE NAME OF LIMBO, OUR FIRST ANCESTOR.

GUIDE OUR RUDDER TO THE WATERS OF THE TRUE LIFE, ATAHAH KALLUMAN.

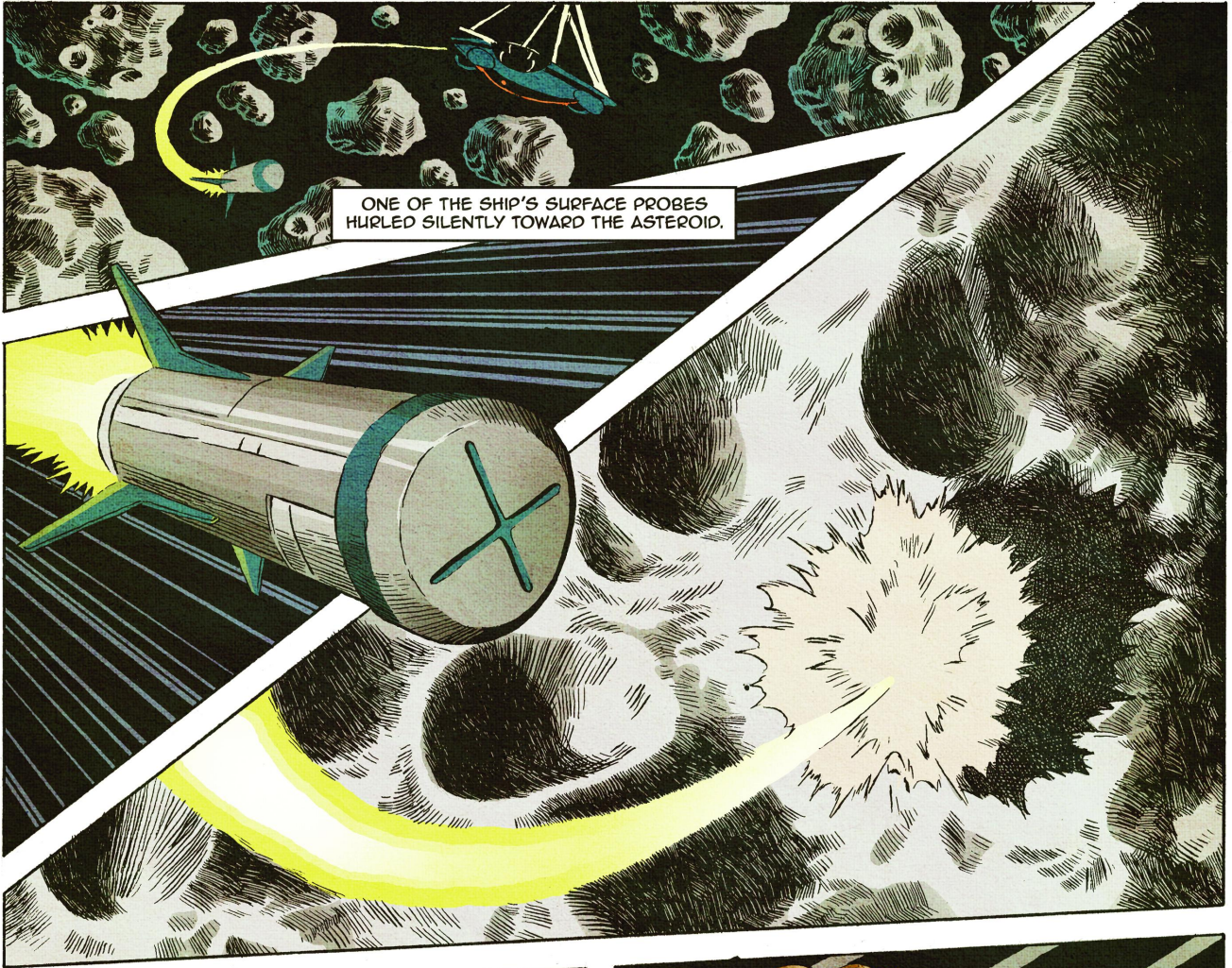


GUIDE ALSO OUR HANDS SO THAT WE MAY NOT OFFEND THE SAITAN OF THIS PLACE.

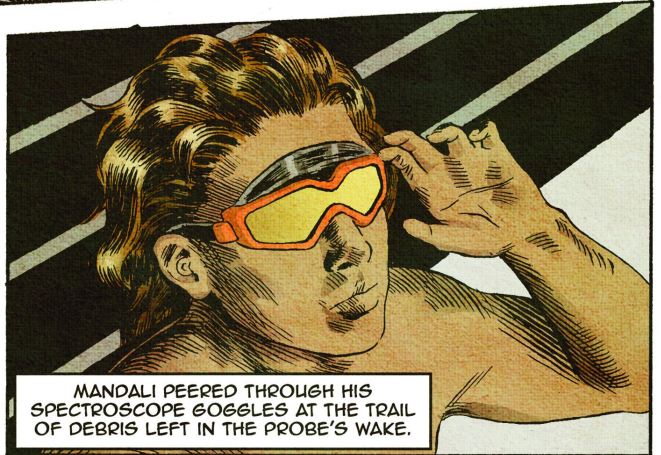


SANNO, MAINTAIN THE POSITION AROUND THE ASTEROID.

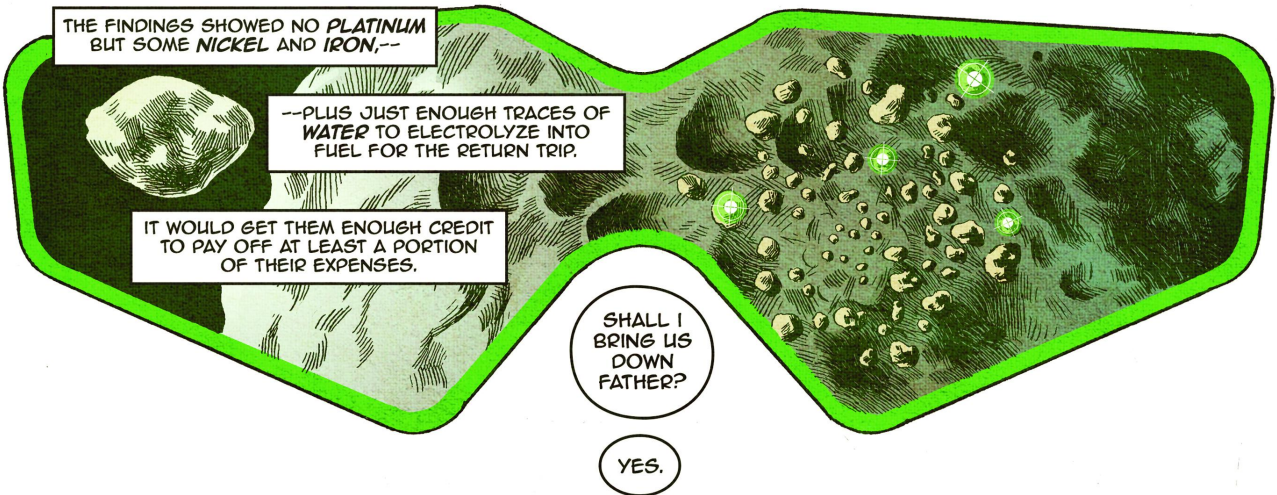
WE'RE MOVING IN.



ONE OF THE SHIP'S SURFACE PROBES HURLED SILENTLY TOWARD THE ASTEROID.



MANDALI PEERED THROUGH HIS SPECTROSCOPE GOGGLES AT THE TRAIL OF DEBRIS LEFT IN THE PROBE'S WAKE.



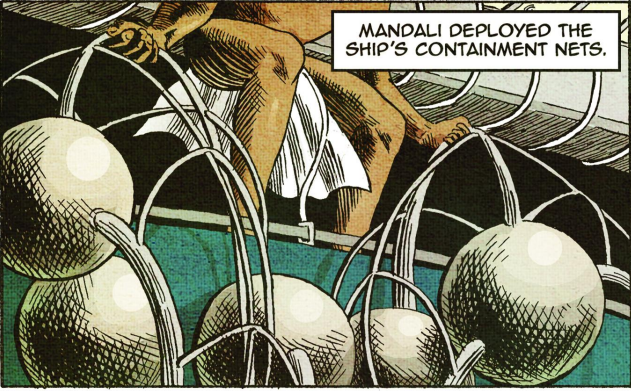
THE FINDINGS SHOWED NO PLATINUM BUT SOME NICKEL AND IRON,--

--PLUS JUST ENOUGH TRACES OF WATER TO ELECTROLYZE INTO FUEL FOR THE RETURN TRIP.

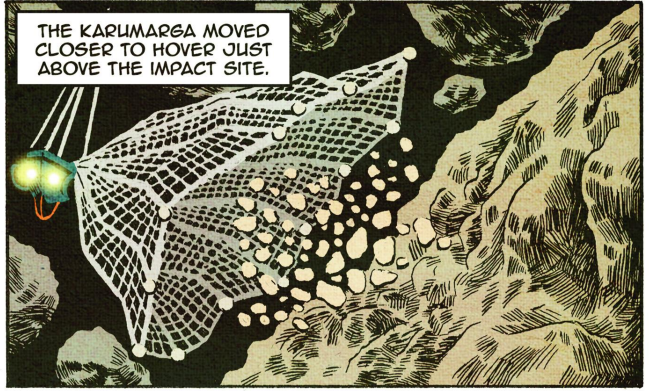
IT WOULD GET THEM ENOUGH CREDIT TO PAY OFF AT LEAST A PORTION OF THEIR EXPENSES.

SHALL I BRING US DOWN FATHER?

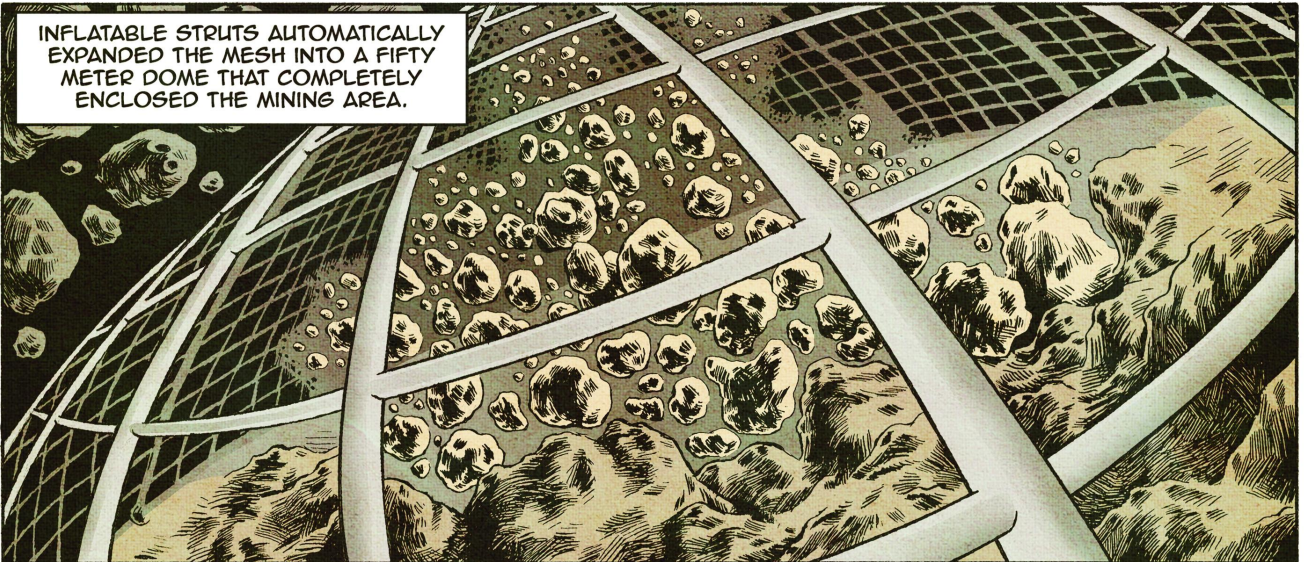
YES.



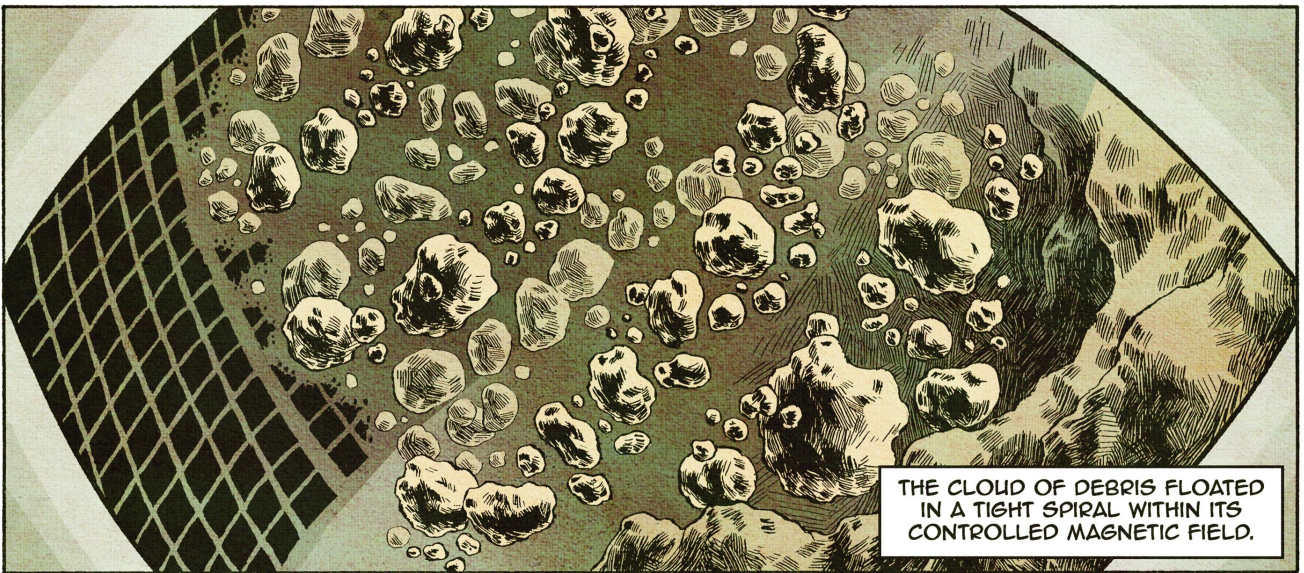
MANDALI DEPLOYED THE SHIP'S CONTAINMENT NETS.



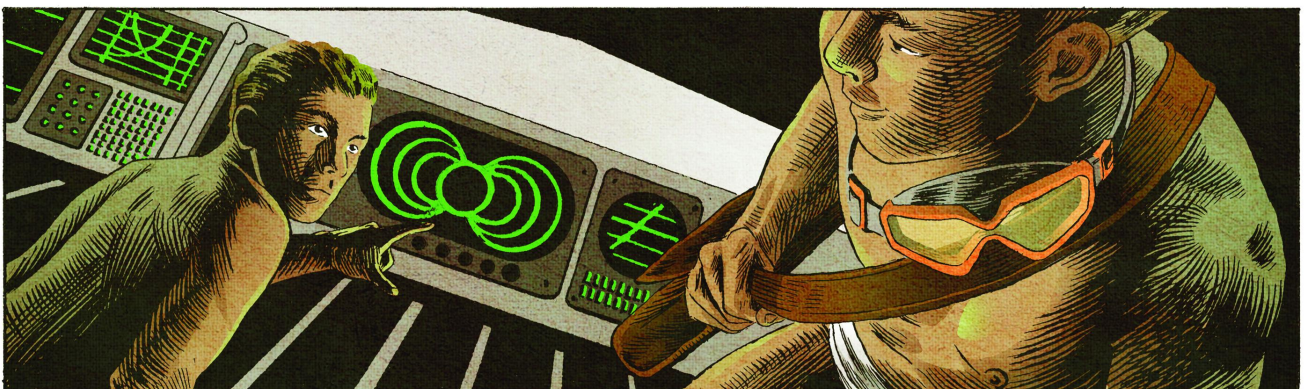
THE KARLMARSA MOVED CLOSER TO HOVER JUST ABOVE THE IMPACT SITE.

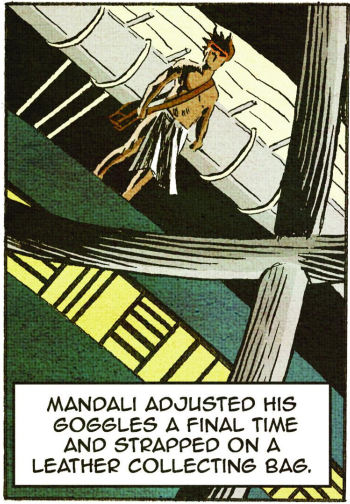


INFLATABLE STRUTS AUTOMATICALLY EXPANDED THE MESH INTO A FIFTY METER DOME THAT COMPLETELY ENCLOSED THE MINING AREA.



THE CLOUD OF DEBRIS FLOATED IN A TIGHT SPIRAL WITHIN ITS CONTROLLED MAGNETIC FIELD.





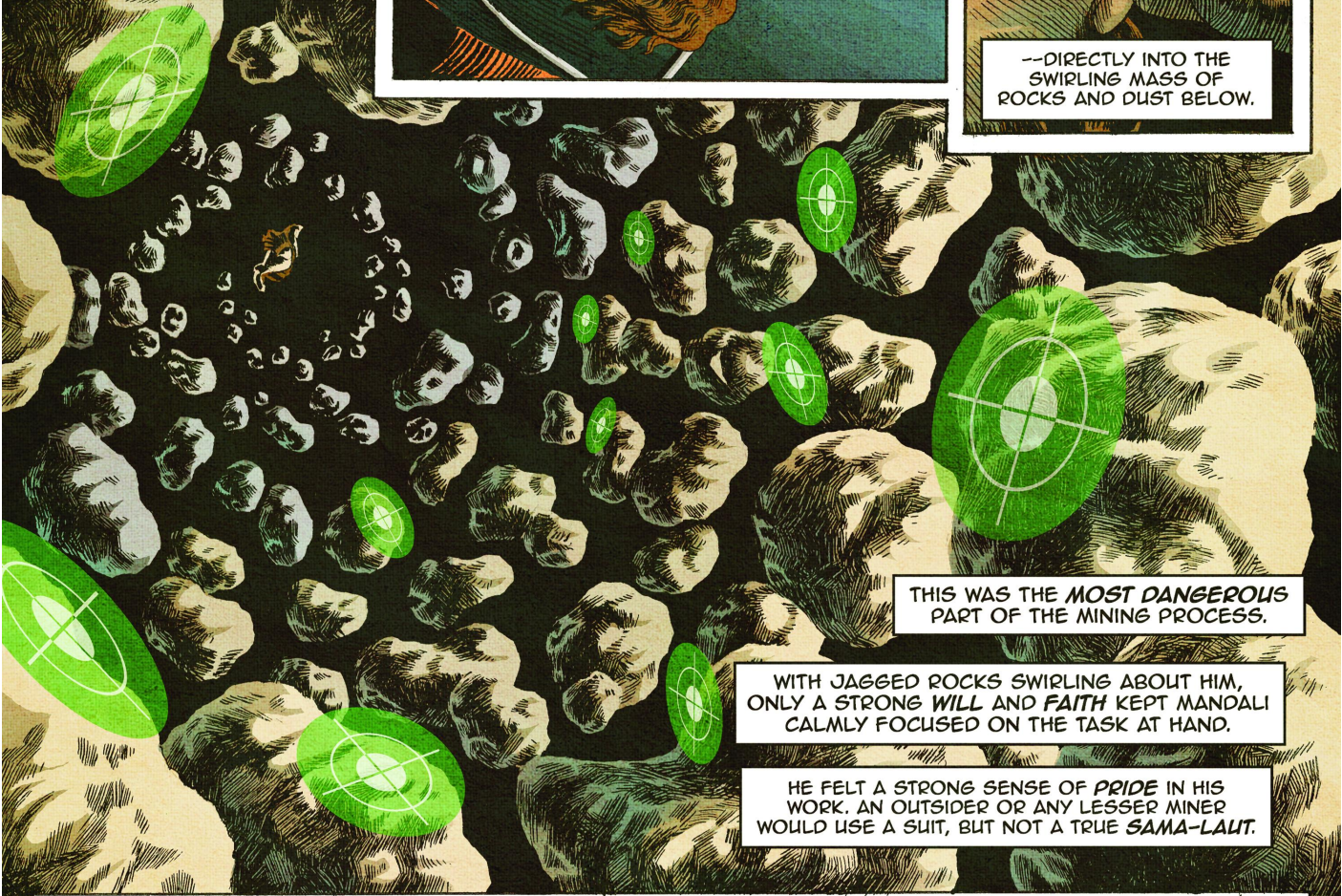
MANDALI ADJUSTED HIS GOGGLES A FINAL TIME AND STRAPPED ON A LEATHER COLLECTING BAG.



HE JUMPED WITHOUT HESITATION, FLOATING PAST THE NET'S STRUTS--



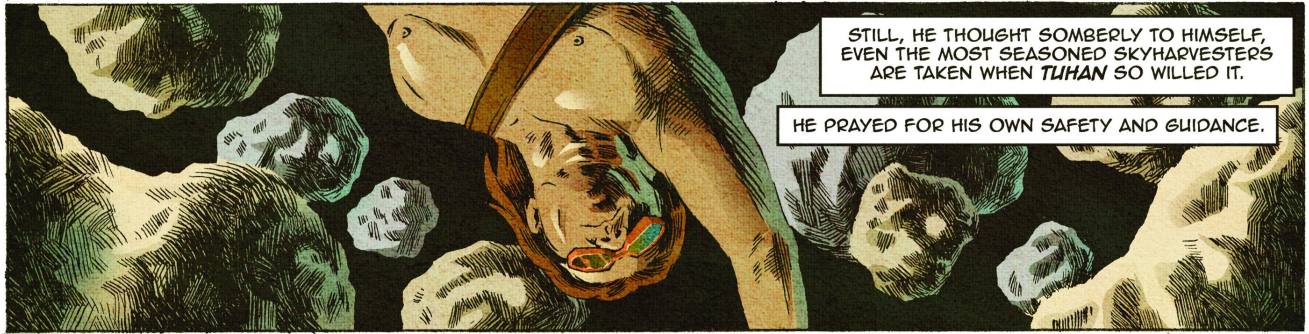
--DIRECTLY INTO THE SWIRLING MASS OF ROCKS AND DUST BELOW.



THIS WAS THE *MOST DANGEROUS* PART OF THE MINING PROCESS.

WITH JAGGED ROCKS SWIRLING ABOUT HIM, ONLY A STRONG *WILL* AND *FAITH* KEPT MANDALI CALMLY FOCUSED ON THE TASK AT HAND.

HE FELT A STRONG SENSE OF *PRIDE* IN HIS WORK. AN OUTSIDER OR ANY LESSER MINER WOULD USE A SUIT, BUT NOT A TRUE *SAMA-LAUT*.

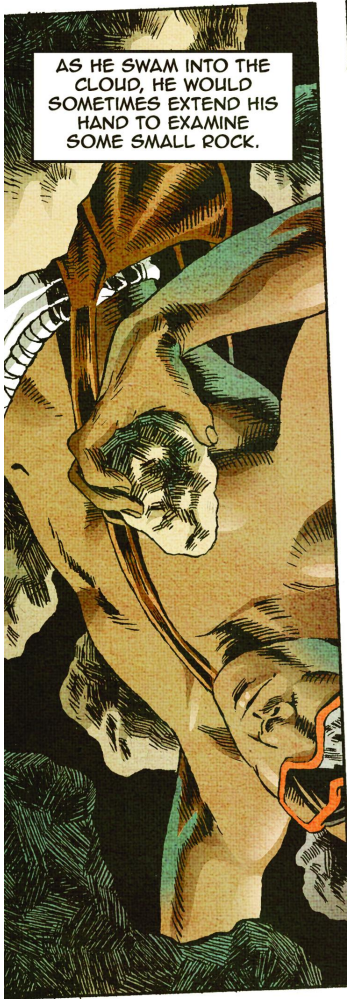


STILL, HE THOUGHT SOMBERLY TO HIMSELF, EVEN THE MOST SEASONED SKYHARVESTERS ARE TAKEN WHEN *TUHAN* SO WILLED IT.

HE PRAYED FOR HIS OWN SAFETY AND GUIDANCE.



ATAHAH KALLUMAN.



AS HE SWAM INTO THE CLOUD, HE WOULD SOMETIMES EXTEND HIS HAND TO EXAMINE SOME SMALL ROCK.



WHENEVER HE CAME ACROSS A LARGE MASS, HE WOULD PLANT HIS FEET FIRMLY ON IT AND CROUCH DOWN TO EXAMINE IT FOR FINE VEINS OF ORE.



IF HE FOUND ANYTHING, HE WOULD TAKE OUT HIS PICK AND CHISEL IT AWAY.



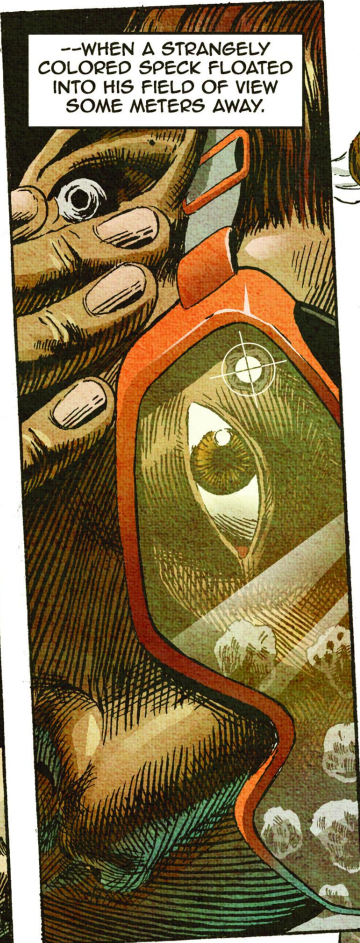
OTHERWISE, HE WOULD LAUNCH HIMSELF BACK INTO THE VOID.



MANDALI HAD ALMOST FILLED HIS POUCH FIVE TIMES OVER--

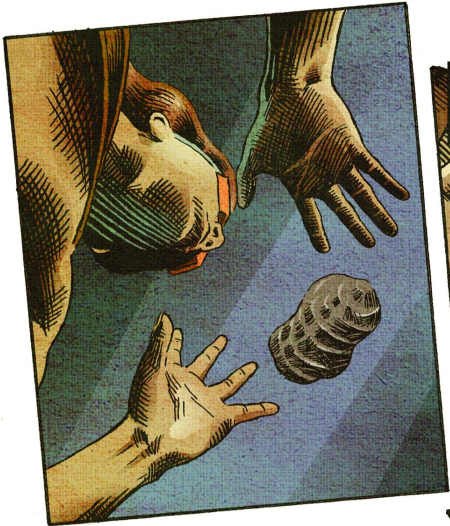


--AND WAS ABOUT TO CALL AN END TO THE OPERATION--



--WHEN A STRANGELY COLORED SPECK FLOATED INTO HIS FIELD OF VIEW SOME METERS AWAY.



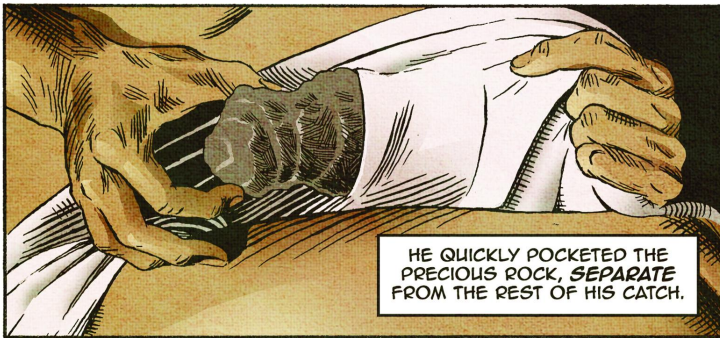


DRAWING NEARER, MANDALI FROZE FOR A MOMENT, STARTLED BY HIS DISCOVERY.



HE CHECKED ITS READINGS YET AGAIN.

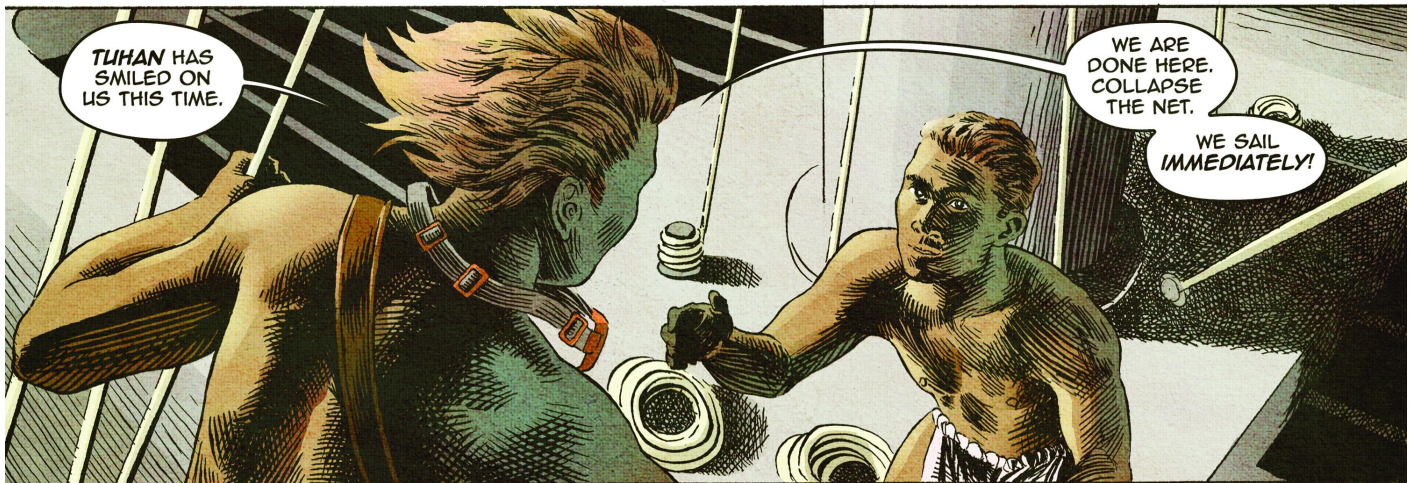
SURPRISE TURNED TO EXCITEMENT, THEN TO URGENCY.



HE QUICKLY POCKETED THE PRECIOUS ROCK, *SEPARATE* FROM THE REST OF HIS CATCH.



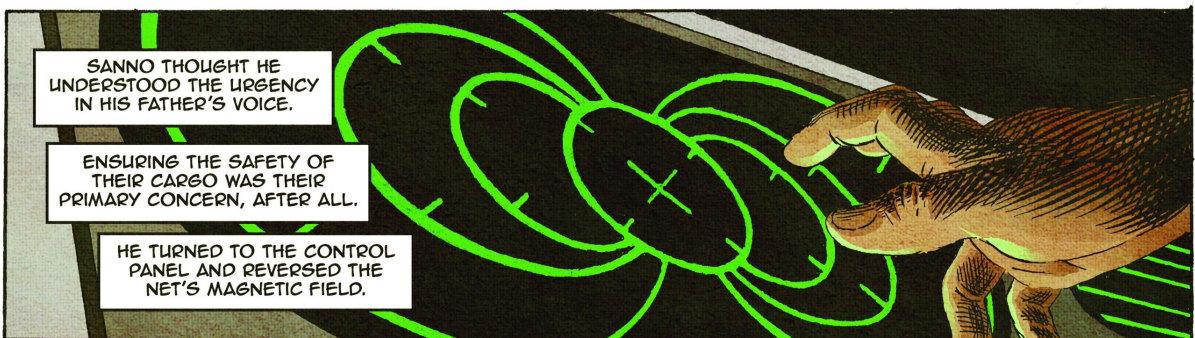
HE WASTED NO TIME SWIMMING BACK TO THE SAFETY OF HIS SHIP.



TUHAN HAS SMILED ON US THIS TIME.

WE ARE DONE HERE. COLLAPSE THE NET.

WE SAIL IMMEDIATELY!



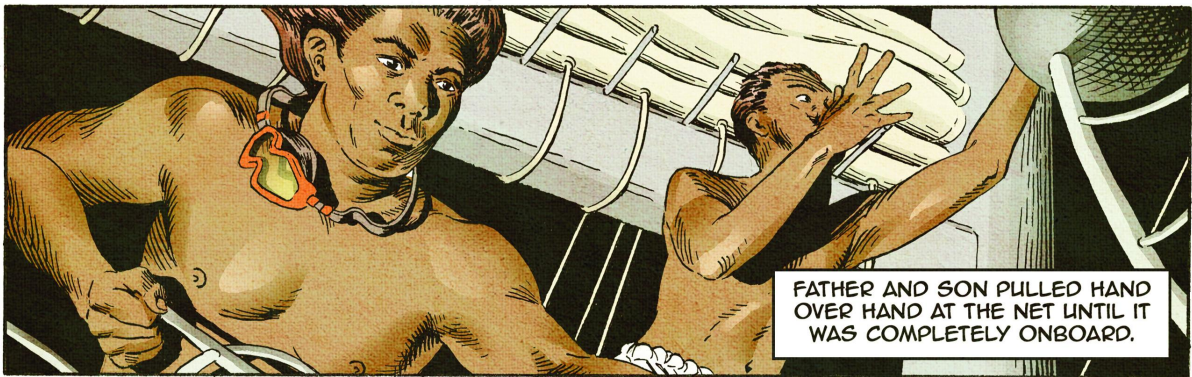
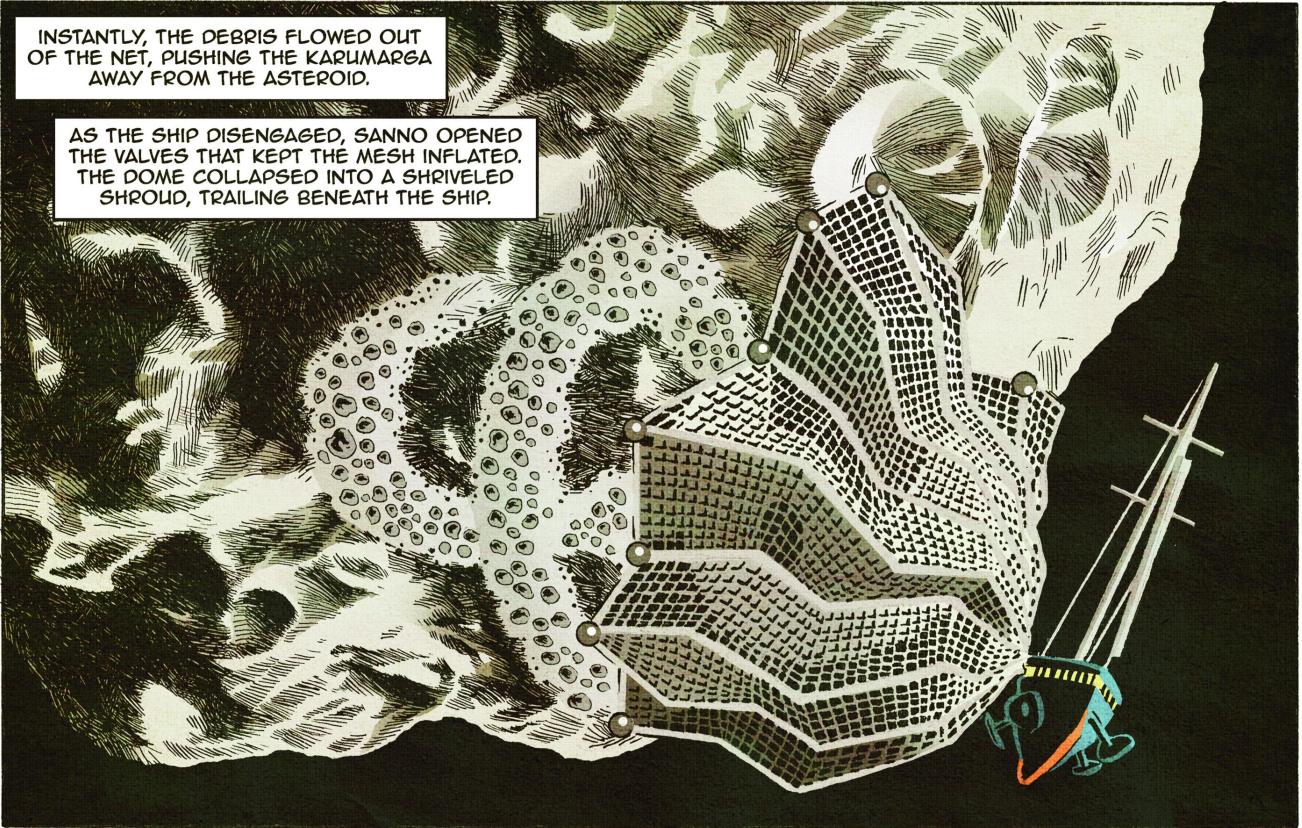
SANNO THOUGHT HE UNDERSTOOD THE URGENCY IN HIS FATHER'S VOICE.

ENSURING THE SAFETY OF THEIR CARGO WAS THEIR PRIMARY CONCERN, AFTER ALL.

HE TURNED TO THE CONTROL PANEL AND REVERSED THE NET'S MAGNETIC FIELD.

INSTANTLY, THE DEBRIS FLOWED OUT OF THE NET, PUSHING THE KARUMARGA AWAY FROM THE ASTEROID.

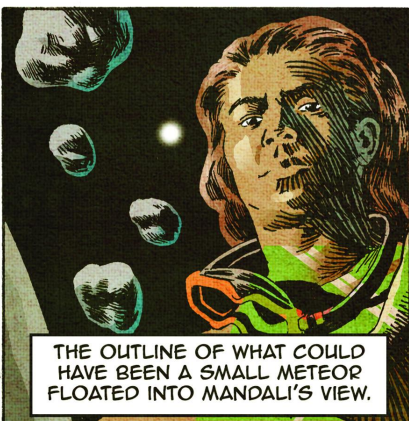
AS THE SHIP DISENGAGED, SANNO OPENED THE VALVES THAT KEPT THE MESH INFLATED. THE DOME COLLAPSED INTO A SHRIVELED SHROUD, TRAILING BENEATH THE SHIP.



FATHER AND SON PULLED HAND OVER HAND AT THE NET UNTIL IT WAS COMPLETELY ONBOARD.



SANNO, HOIST THE SAILS. LET'S HEAD FOR HOME.



THE OUTLINE OF WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN A SMALL METEOR FLOATED INTO MANDALI'S VIEW.



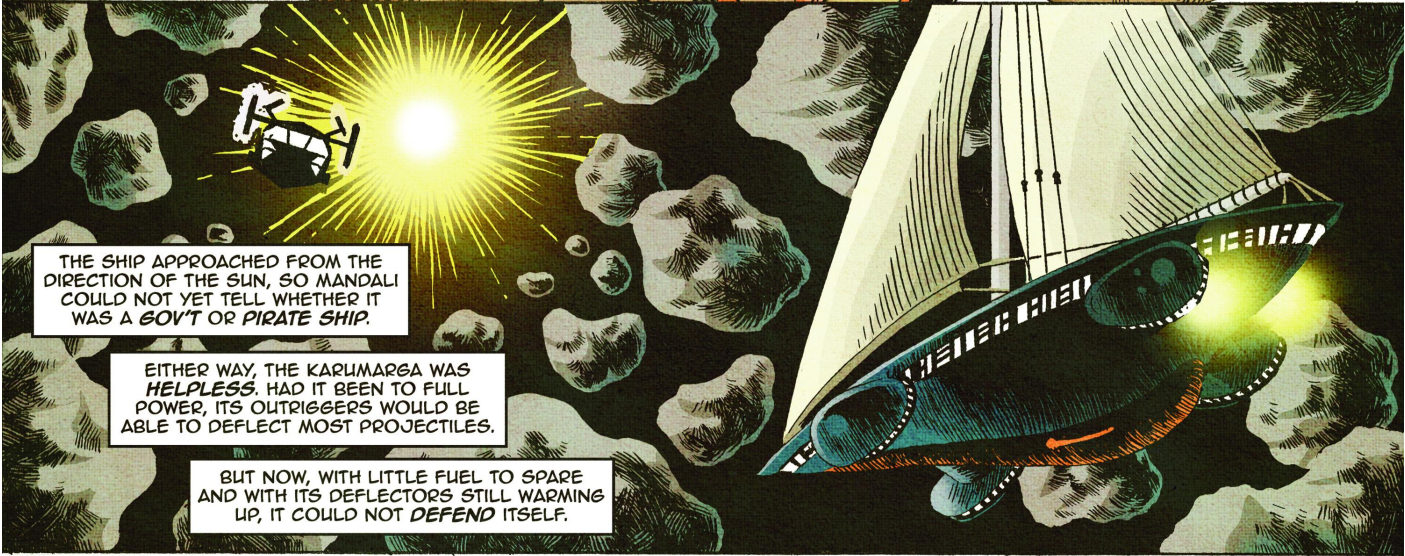
THERE WAS SOMETHING STRANGE ABOUT THE WAY IT MOVED.



BY THE TIME HE REALIZED WHAT IT WAS, IT WAS ALREADY TOO LATE.

THE WORD THUNDERED THROUGH HIS MIND...

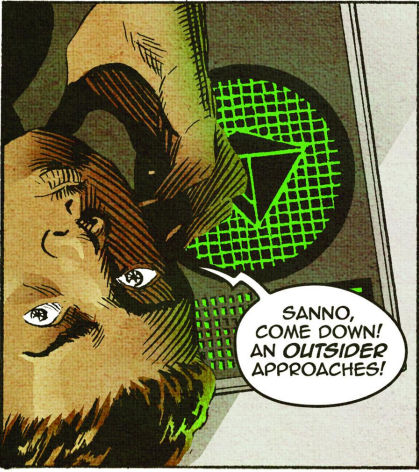
OUTSIDERS!



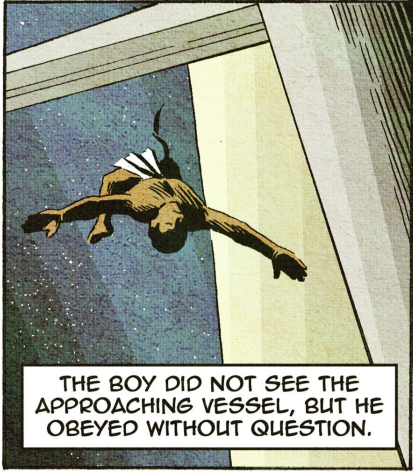
THE SHIP APPROACHED FROM THE DIRECTION OF THE SUN, SO MANDALI COULD NOT YET TELL WHETHER IT WAS A GOV'T OR PIRATE SHIP.

EITHER WAY, THE KARUMARGA WAS HELPLESS. HAD IT BEEN TO FULL POWER, ITS OUTRIGGERS WOULD BE ABLE TO DEFLECT MOST PROJECTILES.

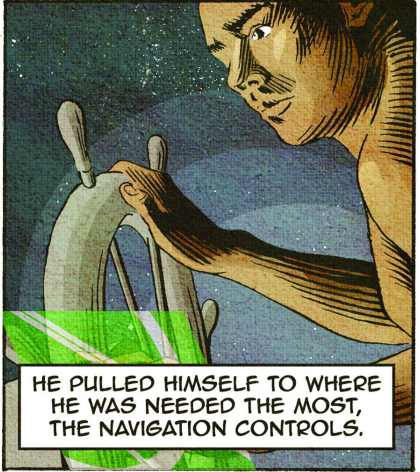
BUT NOW, WITH LITTLE FUEL TO SPARE AND WITH ITS DEFLECTORS STILL WARMING UP, IT COULD NOT DEFEND ITSELF.



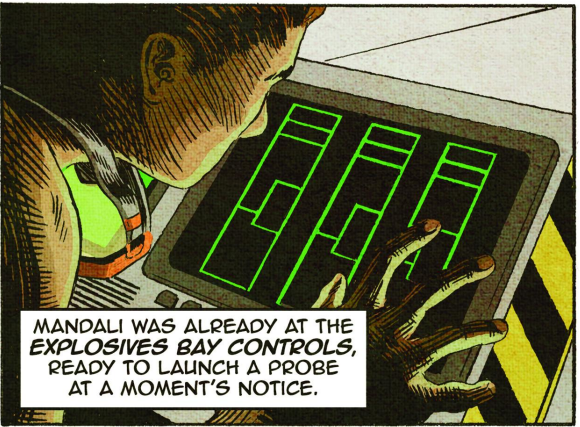
SANNO, COME DOWN! AN OUTSIDER APPROACHES!



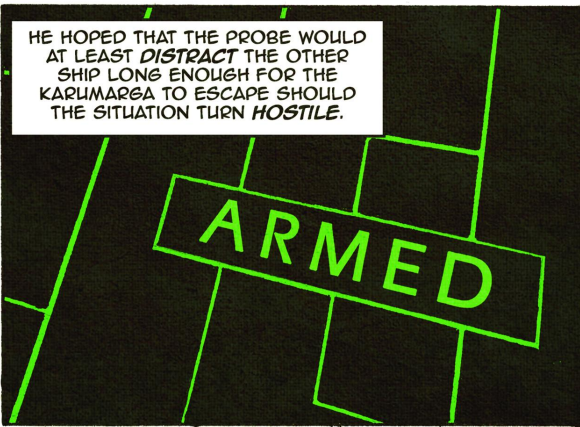
THE BOY DID NOT SEE THE APPROACHING VESSEL, BUT HE OBEYED WITHOUT QUESTION.



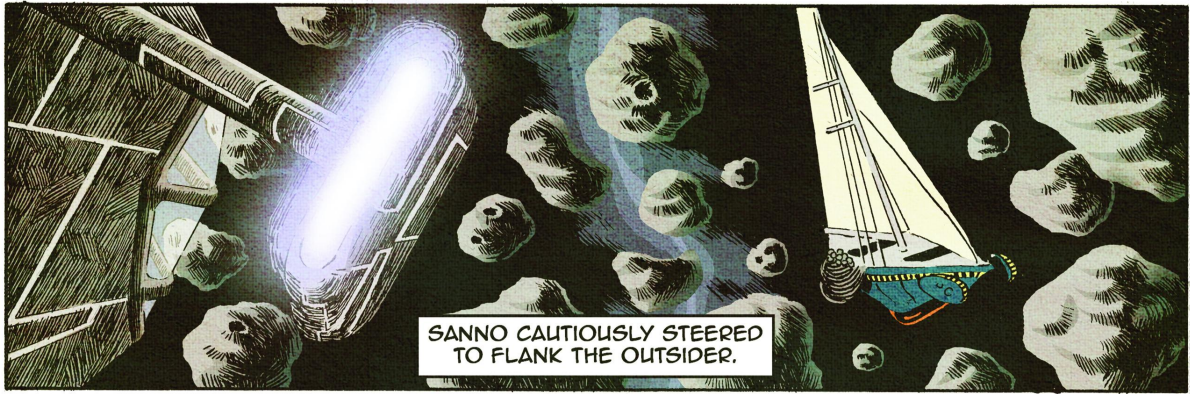
HE PULLED HIMSELF TO WHERE HE WAS NEEDED THE MOST, THE NAVIGATION CONTROLS.



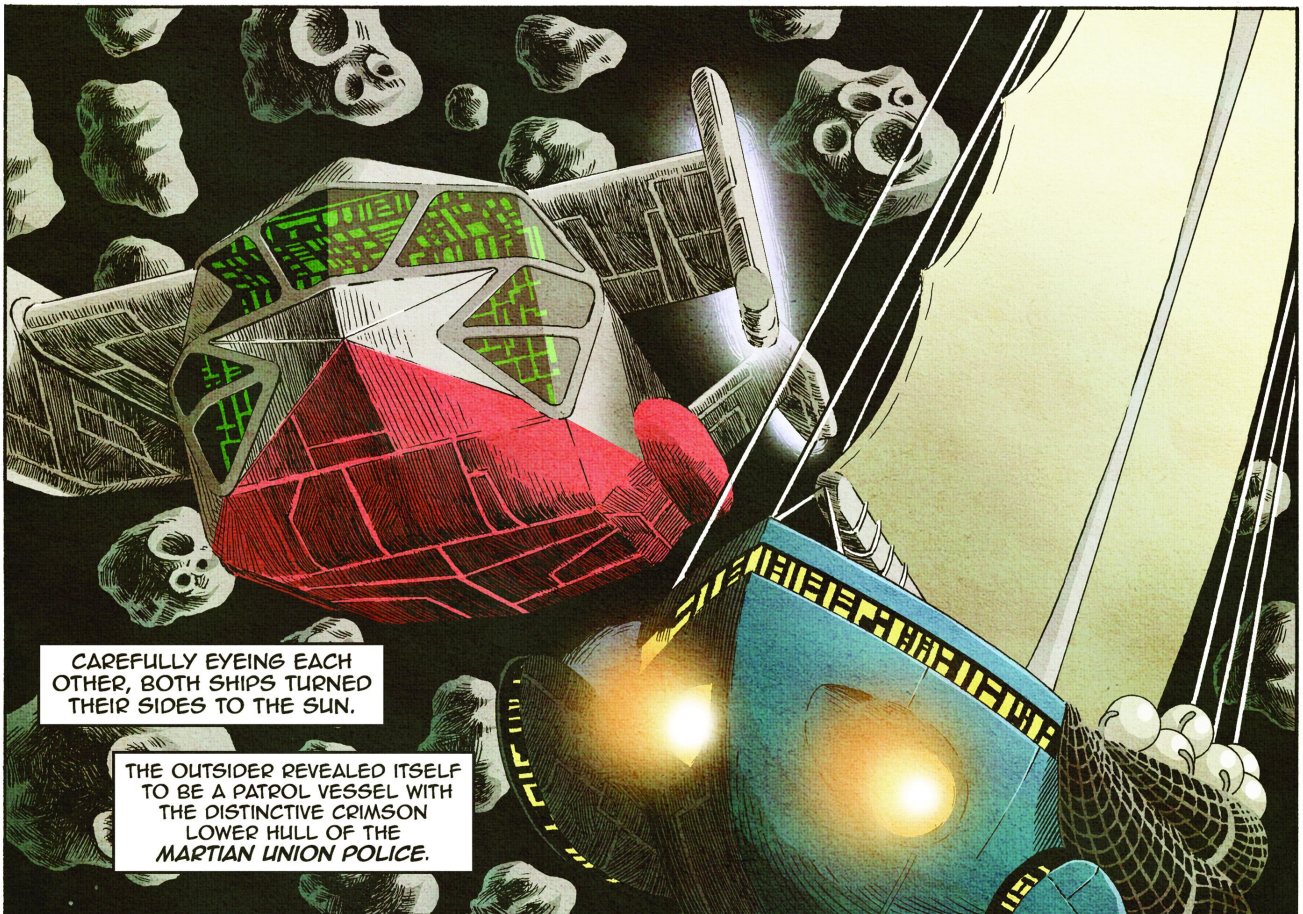
MANDALI WAS ALREADY AT THE EXPLOSIVES BAY CONTROLS, READY TO LAUNCH A PROBE AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE.



HE HOPED THAT THE PROBE WOULD AT LEAST DISTRACT THE OTHER SHIP LONG ENOUGH FOR THE KARUMARGA TO ESCAPE SHOULD THE SITUATION TURN HOSTILE.

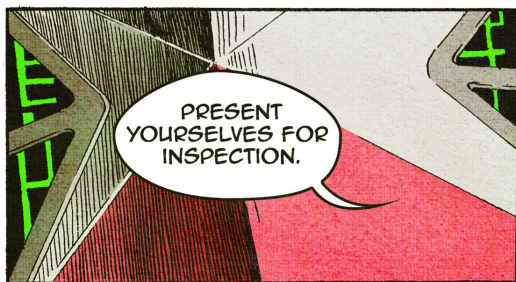


SANNO CAUTIOUSLY STEERED TO FLANK THE OUTSIDER.

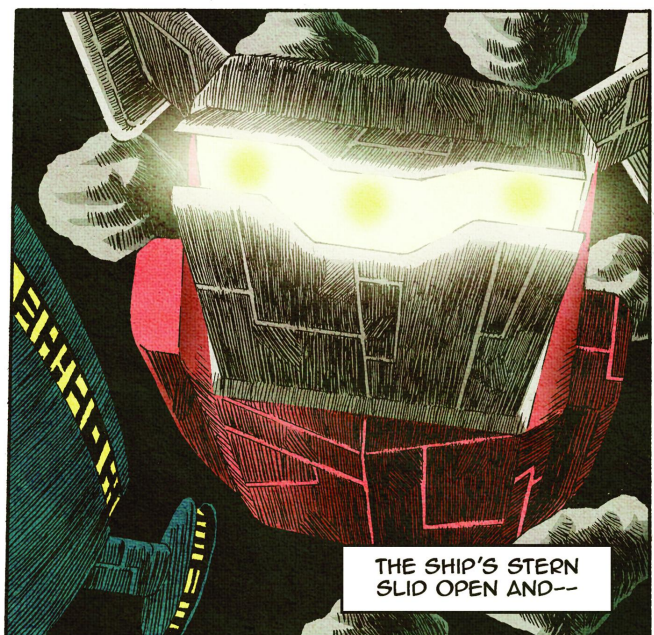
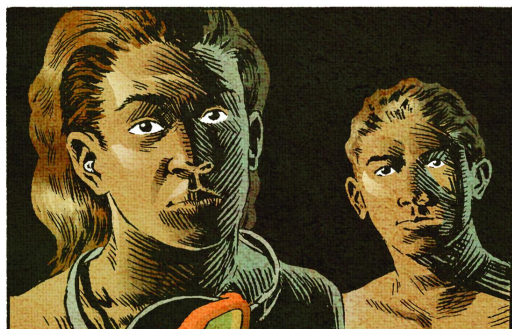


CAREFULLY EYEING EACH OTHER, BOTH SHIPS TURNED THEIR SIDES TO THE SUN.

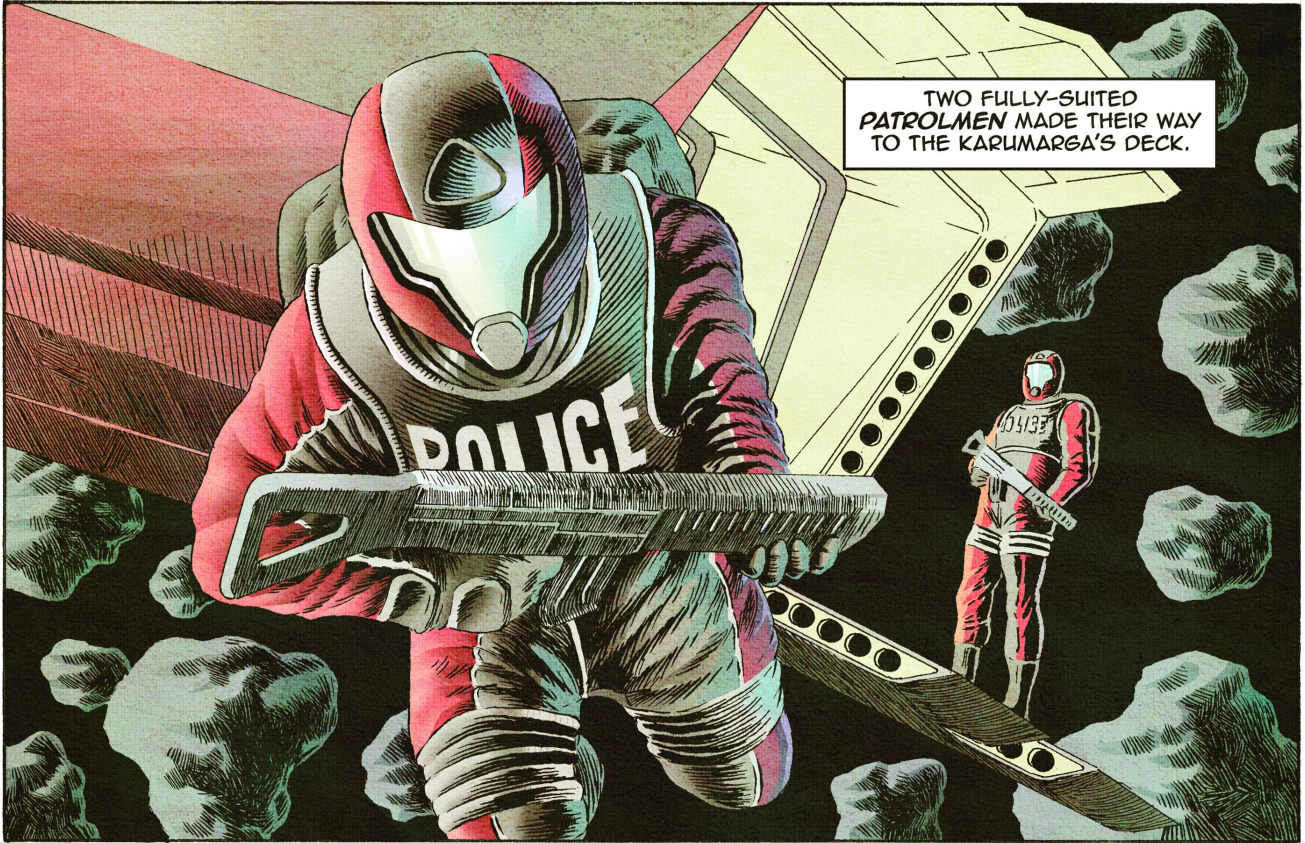
THE OUTSIDER REVEALED ITSELF TO BE A PATROL VESSEL WITH THE DISTINCTIVE CRIMSON LOWER HULL OF THE MARTIAN UNION POLICE.



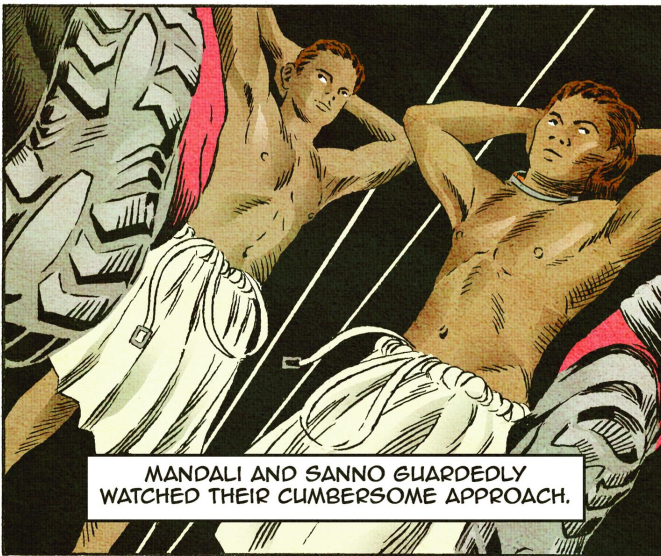
PRESENT YOURSELVES FOR INSPECTION.



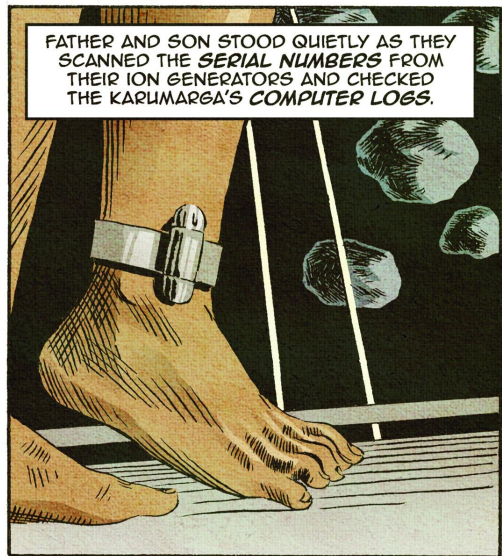
THE SHIP'S STERN SLID OPEN AND--



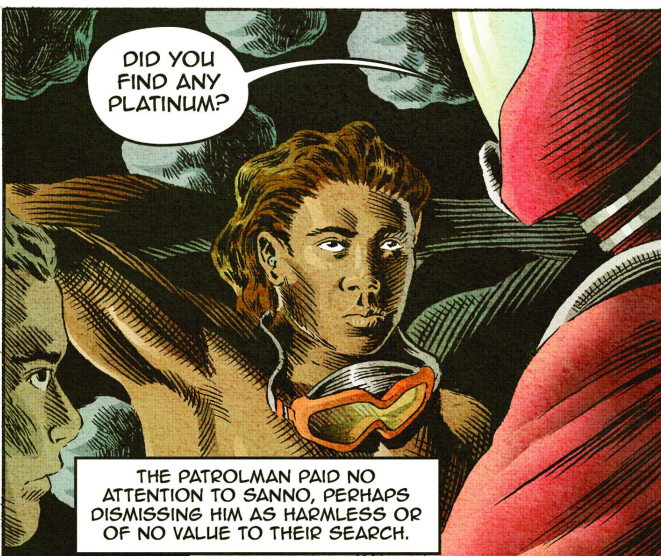
TWO FULLY-SUITED PATROLMEN MADE THEIR WAY TO THE KARUMARGA'S DECK.



MANDALI AND SANNO GUARDEDLY WATCHED THEIR CUMBERSOME APPROACH.

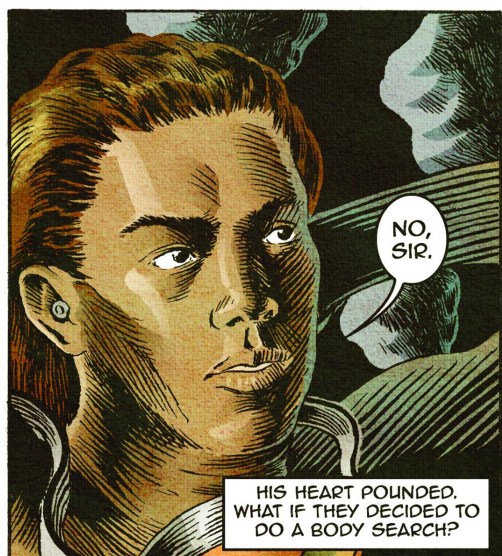


FATHER AND SON STOOD QUIETLY AS THEY SCANNED THE SERIAL NUMBERS FROM THEIR ION GENERATORS AND CHECKED THE KARUMARGA'S COMPUTER LOGS.



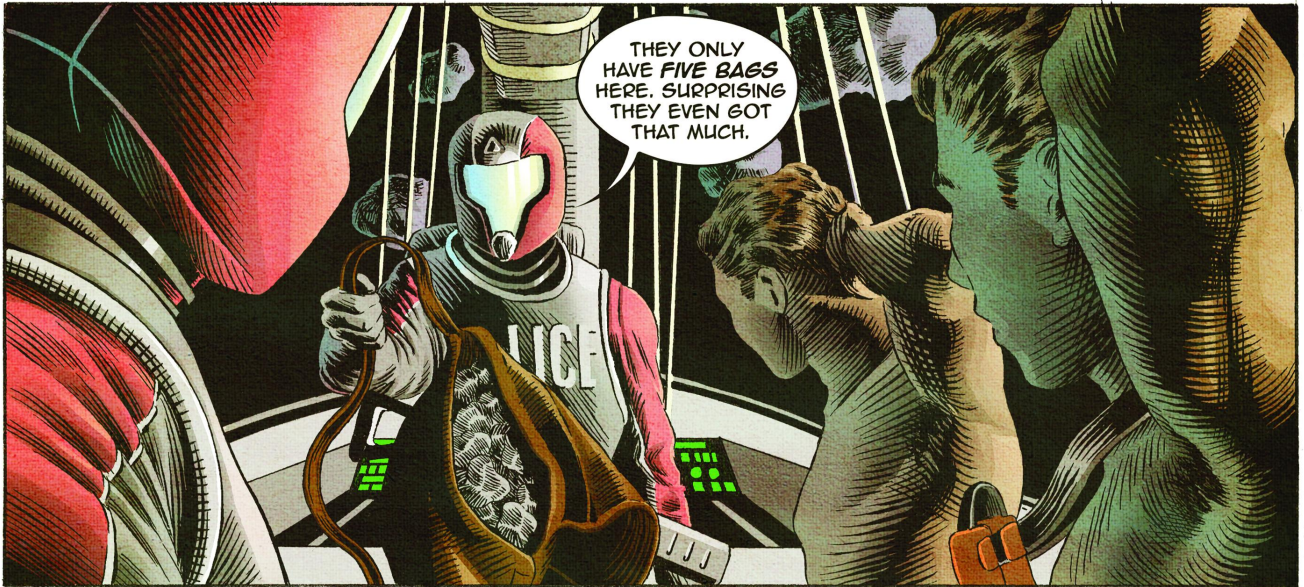
DID YOU FIND ANY PLATINUM?

THE PATROLMAN PAID NO ATTENTION TO SANNO, PERHAPS DISMISSING HIM AS HARMLESS OR OF NO VALUE TO THEIR SEARCH.



NO, SIR.

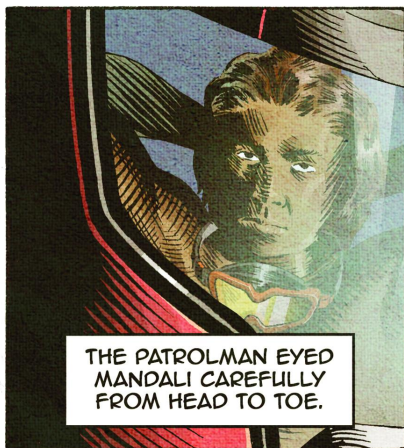
HIS HEART POUNDED. WHAT IF THEY DECIDED TO DO A BODY SEARCH?



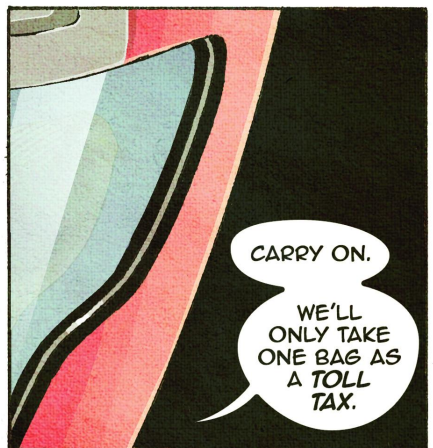
THEY ONLY HAVE FIVE BAGS HERE. SURPRISING THEY EVEN GOT THAT MUCH.



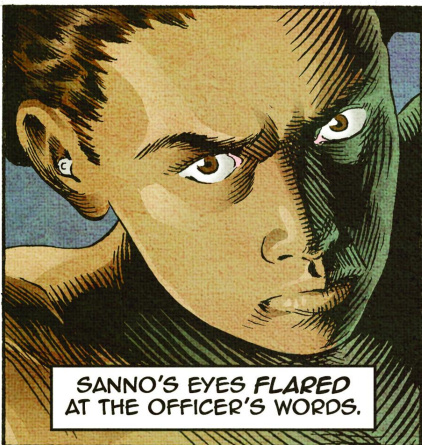
THERE'S LITTLE USABLE ORE IN THIS SECTOR ANYWAY.



THE PATROLMAN EYED MANDALI CAREFULLY FROM HEAD TO TOE.



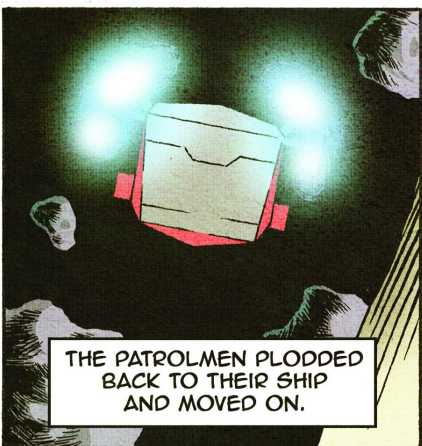
CARRY ON. WE'LL ONLY TAKE ONE BAG AS A TOLL TAX.



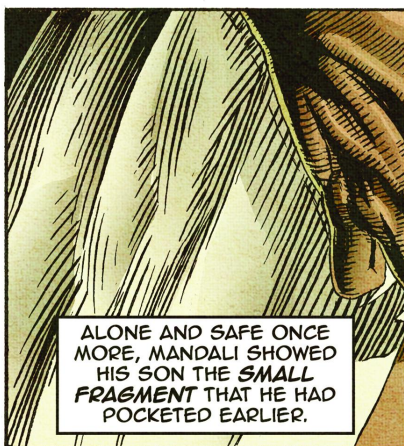
SANNO'S EYES FLARED AT THE OFFICER'S WORDS.



CERTAINLY, OFFICER. AND THANK YOU.



THE PATROLMEN PLODDED BACK TO THEIR SHIP AND MOVED ON.



ALONE AND SAFE ONCE MORE, MANDALI SHOWED HIS SON THE SMALL FRAGMENT THAT HE HAD POCKETED EARLIER.



WHAT IS IT FATHER? IS IT PLATINUM?

NO, BUT
WHATEVER IT IS,
IT WAS *TUHAN'S* WILL
THAT WE SHOULD
FIND IT.

TO SANNO'S NAKED EYES, THE
CHUNK OF ROCK SEEMED
UNREMARKABLE SAVE FOR MINUTE
TRACES OF SOME KIND OF
DARK TAR-LIKE SUBSTANCE.

YET, WHEN HE PUT HIS FATHER'S
GOGGLES TO HIS EYES, THE ROCK
SHOWED *FAINT WISPS OF BLUE*
RISING FROM ITS SURFACE--

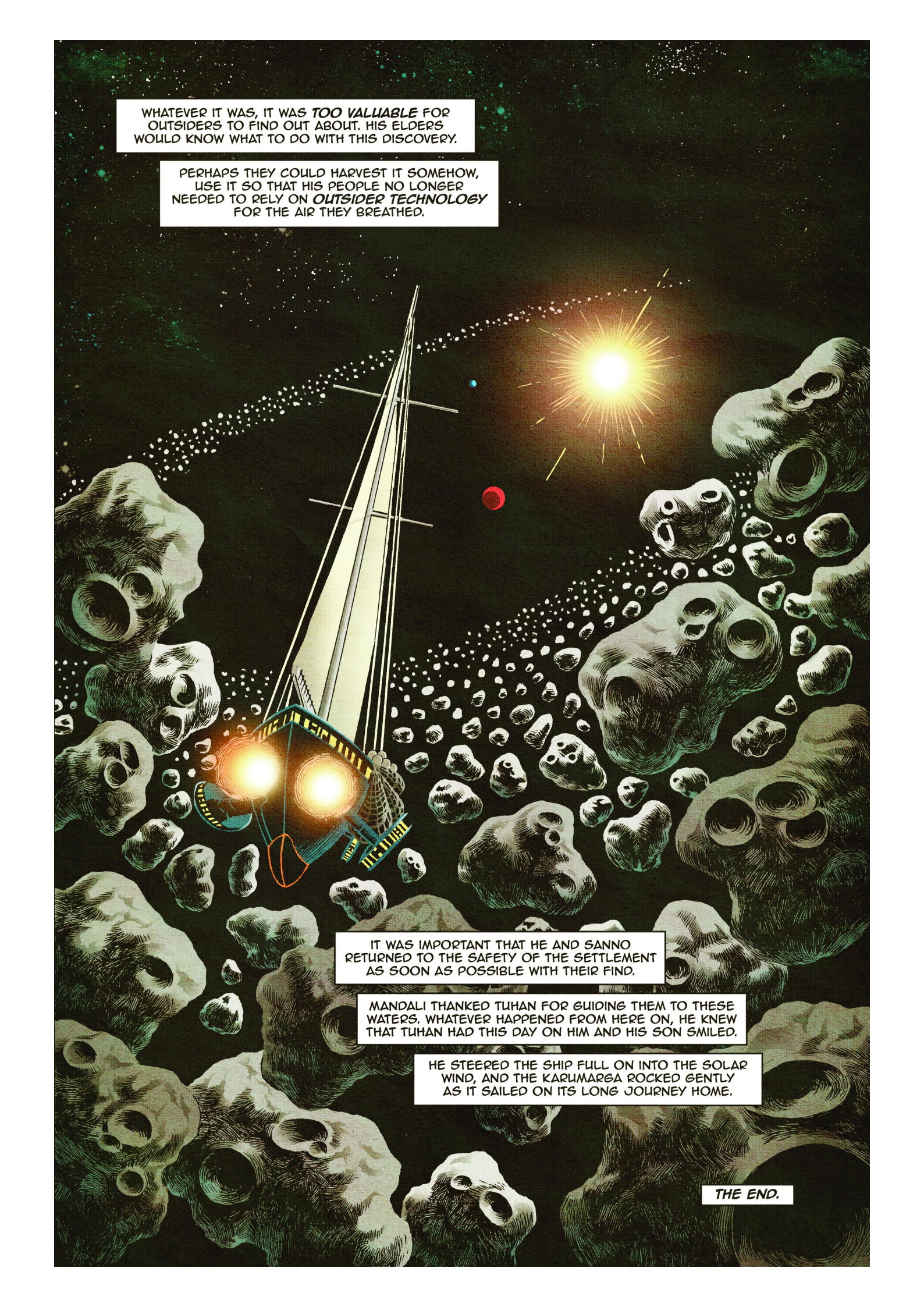
A TELLTALE SIGN OF *OXYGEN*.

SANNO LOOKED CLOSER AT THE
FRAGMENT'S HEAT SIGNATURE.

ORDINARY CHUNKS OF ASTEROID WOULD
REGISTER A *COLD AND LIFELESS BLACK*.
BUT THIS ROCK WAS *REDDISH*, EMITTING
AMOUNTS OF HEAT IN SOME KIND OF
CONTROLLED CHEMICAL REACTION.

SOMEHOW, SOMETHING WAS BREAKING
DOWN THE ROCK AND RELEASING *OXYGEN*
INTO SPACE. THE STRANGE STICKY TAR
MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH IT.

A LIFE FORM PERHAPS, SIMILAR TO THE *TINY WATER
PLANTS* OF EARTH'S SEAS THAT HIS ELDERS USED
TO TALK ABOUT? MANDALI COULDN'T TELL FOR SURE.

A detailed illustration of a space ship, the Karumarga, sailing through a dense field of asteroids. The ship is a large, multi-masted vessel with a prominent mast and rigging. It has two large, glowing orange lights on its front. The ship is moving towards a bright, sun-like star in the upper right, which is surrounded by a solar wind of smaller particles. A red planet is visible in the distance. The scene is set against a dark, starry background.

WHATEVER IT WAS, IT WAS **TOO VALUABLE** FOR OUTSIDERS TO FIND OUT ABOUT. HIS ELDERS WOULD KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THIS DISCOVERY.

PERHAPS THEY COULD HARVEST IT SOMEHOW, USE IT SO THAT HIS PEOPLE NO LONGER NEEDED TO RELY ON **OUTSIDER TECHNOLOGY** FOR THE AIR THEY BREATHED.

IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT HE AND SANNO RETURNED TO THE SAFETY OF THE SETTLEMENT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE WITH THEIR FIND.

MANDALI THANKED TUHAN FOR GUIDING THEM TO THESE WATERS. WHATEVER HAPPENED FROM HERE ON, HE KNEW THAT TUHAN HAD THIS DAY ON HIM AND HIS SON SMILED.

HE STEERED THE SHIP FULL ON INTO THE SOLAR WIND, AND THE KARUMARGA ROCKED GENTLY AS IT SAILED ON ITS LONG JOURNEY HOME.

THE END.