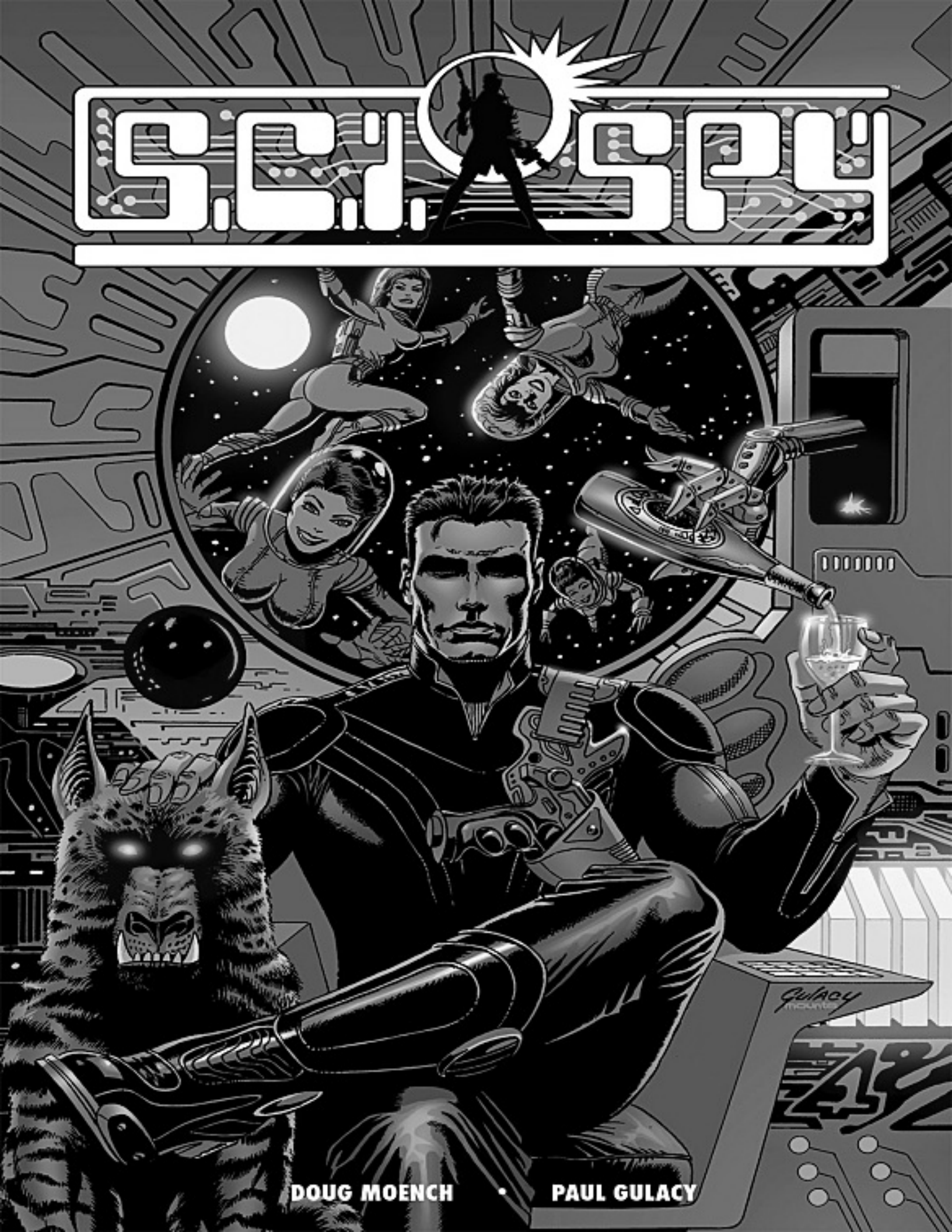

S.C.I. SPY
DOUG MOENCH • PAUL GULACY

IMAGE COMICS PRESENTS



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DOUG MOENCH

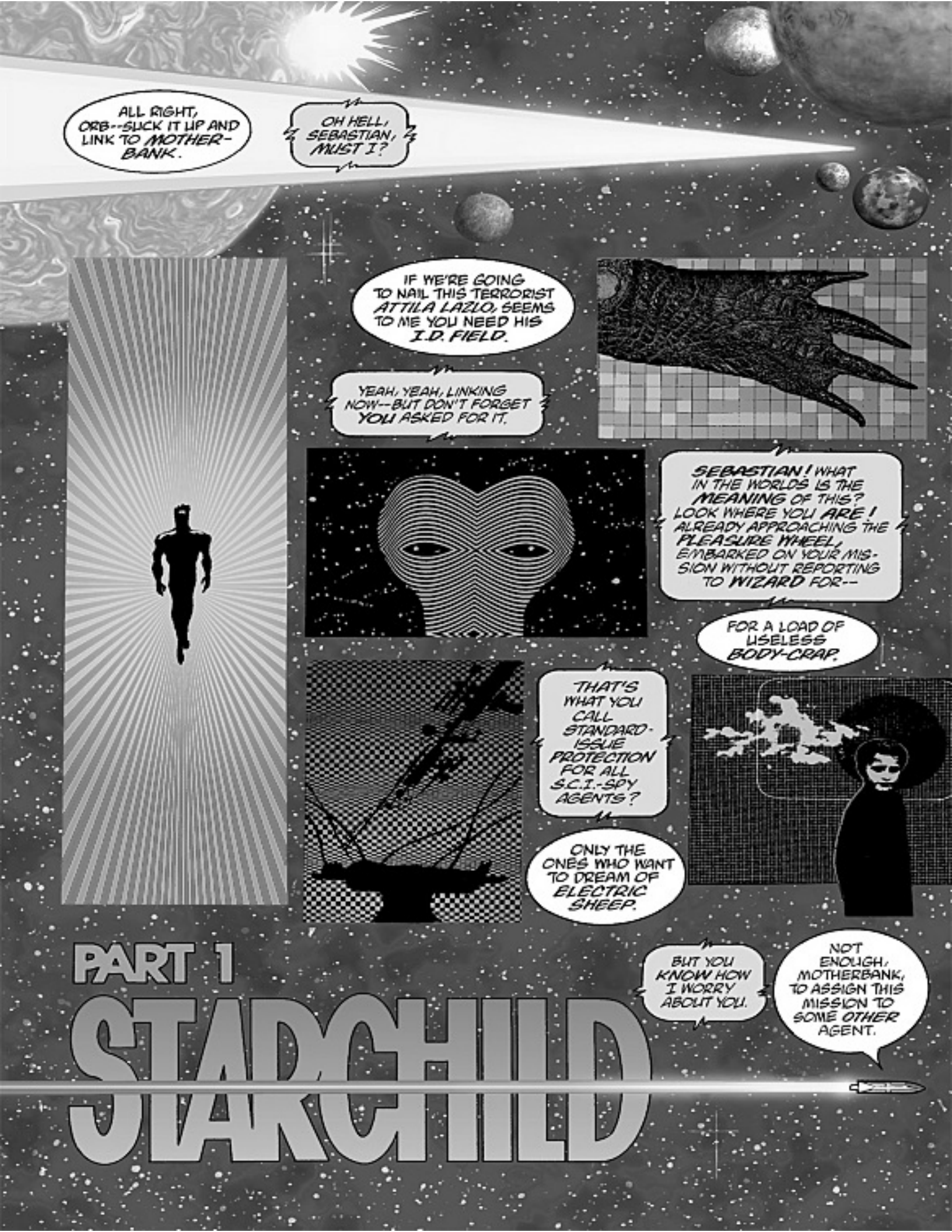
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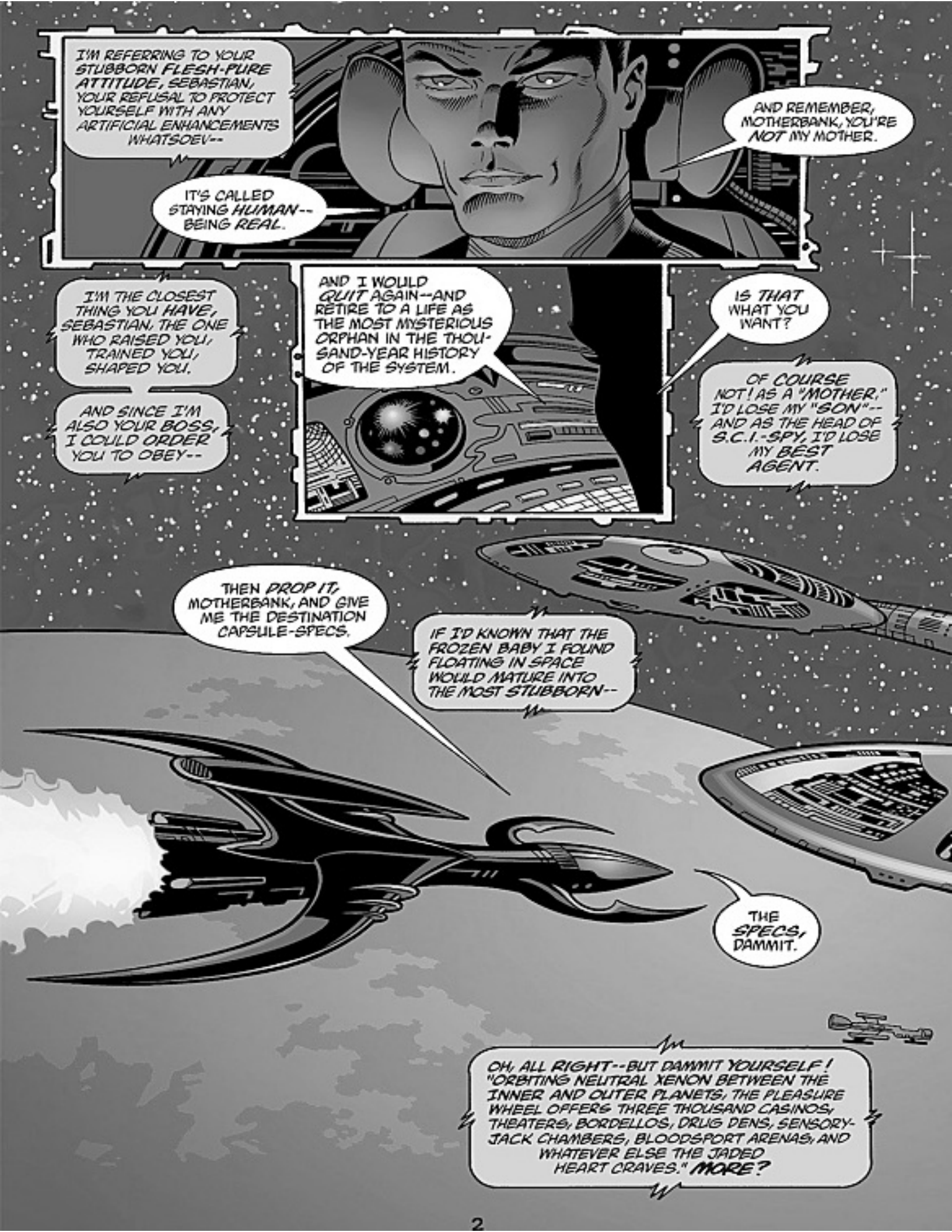
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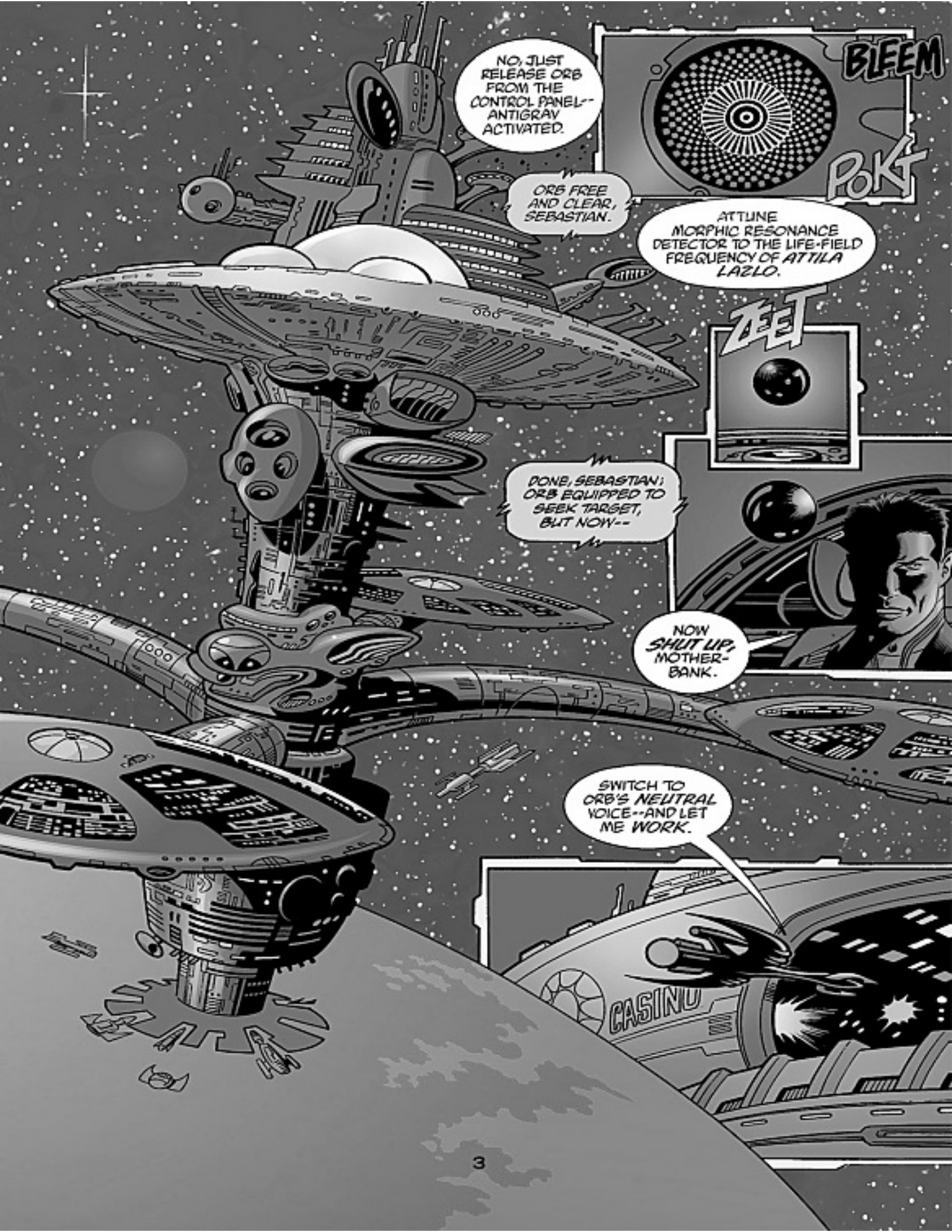
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ALL RIGHT, ORB--SUCK IT UP AND LINK TO MOTHER-BANK.
OH HELL, SEBASTIAN, MUST I?
IF WE'RE GOING TO NAIL THIS TERRORIST ATTILA LAZLO, SEEMS TO ME YOU NEED HIS I.D. FIELD.
YEAH, YEAH, LINKING NOW--BUT DON'T FORGET YOU ASKED FOR IT.
SEBASTIAN! WHAT IN THE WORLDS IS THE MEANING OF THIS? LOOK WHERE YOU ARE! ALREADY APPROACHING THE PLEASURE WHEEL, EMBARKED ON YOUR MISSION WITHOUT REPORTING TO WIZARD FOR--
FOR A LOAD OF USELESS BODY-CRAP.
THAT'S WHAT YOU CALL STANDARD-ISSUE PROTECTION FOR ALL S.C.I.-SPY AGENTS?
ONLY THE ONES WHO WANT TO DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP.
BUT YOU KNOW HOW I WORRY ABOUT YOU.
NOT ENOUGH, MOTHERBANK, TO ASSIGN THIS MISSION TO SOME OTHER AGENT.
PART 1
STARCHILD


I'M REFERRING TO YOUR STUBBORN FLESH-PURE ATTITUDE, SEBASTIAN, YOUR REFUSAL TO PROTECT YOURSELF WITH ANY ARTIFICIAL ENHANCEMENTS WHATSOEV--
IT'S CALLED STAYING HUMAN-- BEING REAL.
AND REMEMBER, MOTHERBANK, YOU'RE NOT MY MOTHER.
I'M THE CLOSEST THING YOU HAVE, SEBASTIAN, THE ONE WHO RAISED YOU, TRAINED YOU, SHAPED YOU.
AND SINCE I'M ALSO YOUR BOSS, I COULD ORDER YOU TO OBEY--
AND I WOULD QUIT AGAIN--AND RETIRE TO A LIFE AS THE MOST MYSTERIOUS ORPHAN IN THE THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY OF THE SYSTEM.
IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?
OF COURSE NOT! AS A "MOTHER," I'D LOSE MY "SON"-- AND AS THE HEAD OF S.C.I.-SPY, I'D LOSE MY BEST AGENT.
THEN DROP IT, MOTHERBANK, AND GIVE ME THE DESTINATION CAPSULE-SPECS.
IF I'D KNOWN THAT THE FROZEN BABY I FOUND FLOATING IN SPACE WOULD MATURE INTO THE MOST STUBBORN--
THE SPECS, DAMMIT.
OH, ALL RIGHT--BUT DAMMIT YOURSELF! "ORBITING NEUTRAL XENON BETWEEN THE INNER AND OUTER PLANETS, THE PLEASURE WHEEL OFFERS THREE THOUSAND CASINOS, THEATERS, BORDELLOS, DRUG DENS, SENSORY-JACK CHAMBERS, BLOODSPORT ARENAS, AND WHATEVER ELSE THE JADED HEART CRAVES." MORE?


NO, JUST RELEASE ORB FROM THE CONTROL PANEL-- ANTIGRAV ACTIVATED.
BLEEM
POK
ORB FREE AND CLEAR, SEBASTIAN.
ATTUNE MORPHIC RESONANCE DETECTOR TO THE LIFE-FIELD FREQUENCY OF ATTILA LAZLO.
ZEET
DONE, SEBASTIAN; ORB EQUIPPED TO SEEK TARGET, BUT NOW--
NOW SHUT UP, MOTHER-BANK.
SWITCH TO ORB'S NEUTRAL VOICE--AND LET ME WORK.
CASINO


WELCOME TO THE PLEASURE WHEEL, SIR! WE INVITE YOU TO SAMPLE ALL OUR DARK DELIGHTS, SINNING THE ENTIRE CIRCUIT!
I'LL DO MY WORST...
...BUT I PREFER A SHORTCUT TO THE ACTION.
RED SCORES! THE CHAMPIONSHIP IS NOW TIED WITH LESS THAN TWO MINUTES REMAINING!
HOME 4
VISITOR 4
SCAN THE CROWD, ORB--CONSTANT FEED TO THE WRIST-WATCHER.
GIVEN THE INTELL REPORT ABOUT LAZLO'S ADDICTION TO THIS GAME, IT'S A GOOD BET HE'S HERE SOMEWHERE.
TEK


CLEAR FEED--KEEP SCANNING.
DEET
MORPHIC FIELD DETECTED--HOVERING OVER ATTILA LAZLO NOW.
I SEE YOU, ORB.
COVER WHATEVER PLAY I LAY DOWN.
I'M BORED, ATTILA-HUNKIE.
WHY DON'T WE--
SPICE THE ACTION WITH A LAST-SECOND WAGER?
Eh--?
TIED SCORE WITH TIME RUNNING OUT AND BLUE HAS POSSESSION.
MY BET'S ON BLUE--THREE TO ONE IN YOUR FAVOR.
TEN THOUSAND?
THIRTY-THOUSAND PAYOUT FOR ME--A SIZEABLE LOSS...
"...UNLESS THE RED GOALSMAN SHOULD BE OUTMANEUVERED."
FASHT


WHA--?
MY EYES!
SHOOFF
CAN'T SEE--!
A SCORE AS TIME RUNS OUT!
GOAL
BLUE WINS!
AS, IT SEEMS, DO I.
I DON'T HAVE IT HERE.
THEN INVITE ME TO YOUR SUITE FOR A DRINK.
ESCORTED BY MY BODY-GUARD?
SUIT YOURSELF, BUT I'M ONLY INTERESTED IN WHAT I'VE WON--NOT IN YOUR BODY.
BY THE WAY, YOU'RE ATTILA LAZLO, AREN'T YOU?
WHOEVER I AM, I DON'T RECALL KNOWING YOU.
SEBASTIAN STARCHILD.
NEVER HEARD OF YOU.
I KNOW.

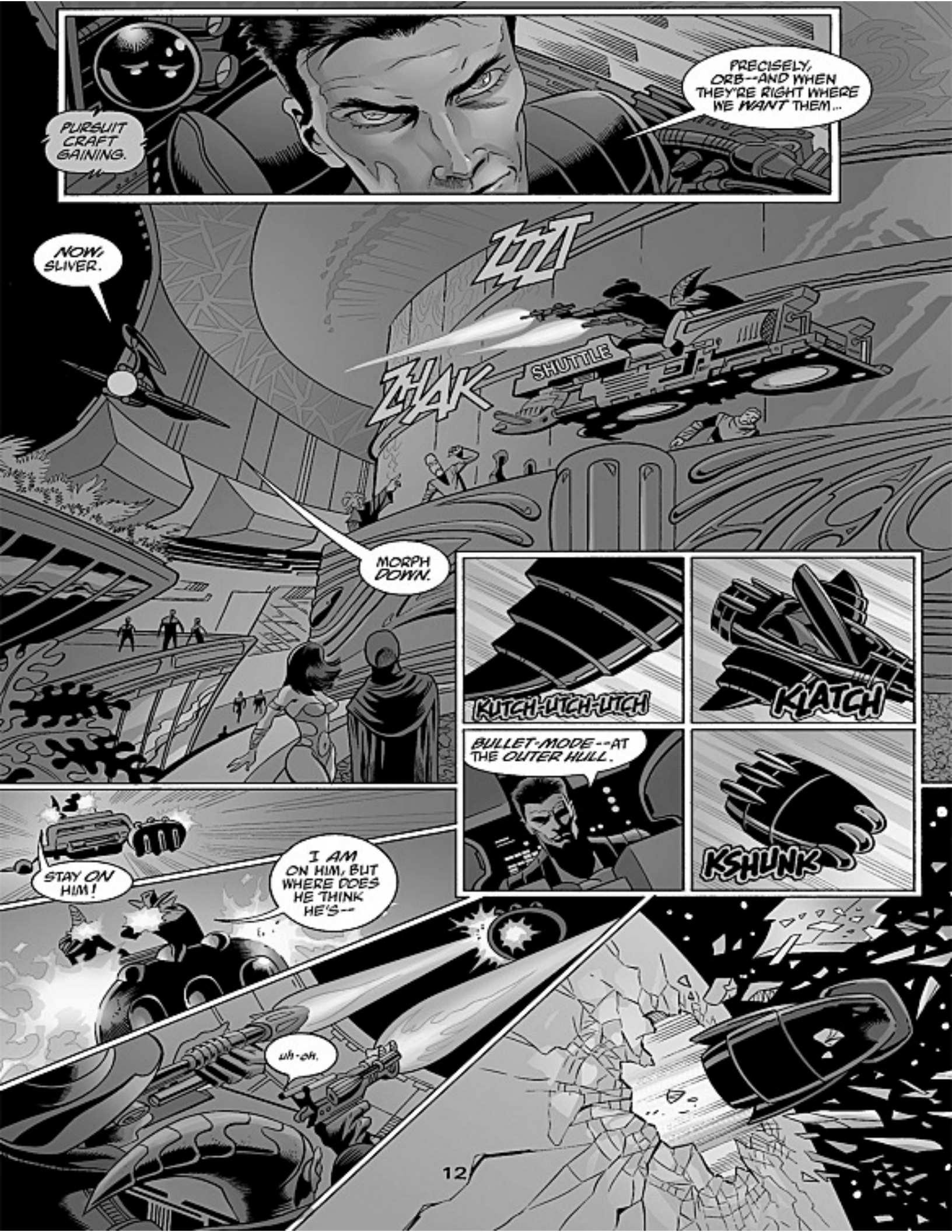

PHAEDRA, BUILD ME A DRINK.
AND ONE FOR MR. STARCHILD?
NOPE--HE'D ONLY SPILL IT ON THE CARPET...
...AFTER HE'S GUTTED.
KZHZHZHZHZHZHZHZH
SCHARK
AHRRR!
A BODYGUARD WITH NO HEART GUARDS NOTHING.
THIS IS A TESLA-9 AND YOU'RE ATTILA LAZLO, HEADED FOR INNER WORLD PRIMUS ON WHAT UNKNOWN BUSINESS?
I...YOU... I'M A COURIER FOR SHADOW BLACK...BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER.
WHY NOT?
SNAT

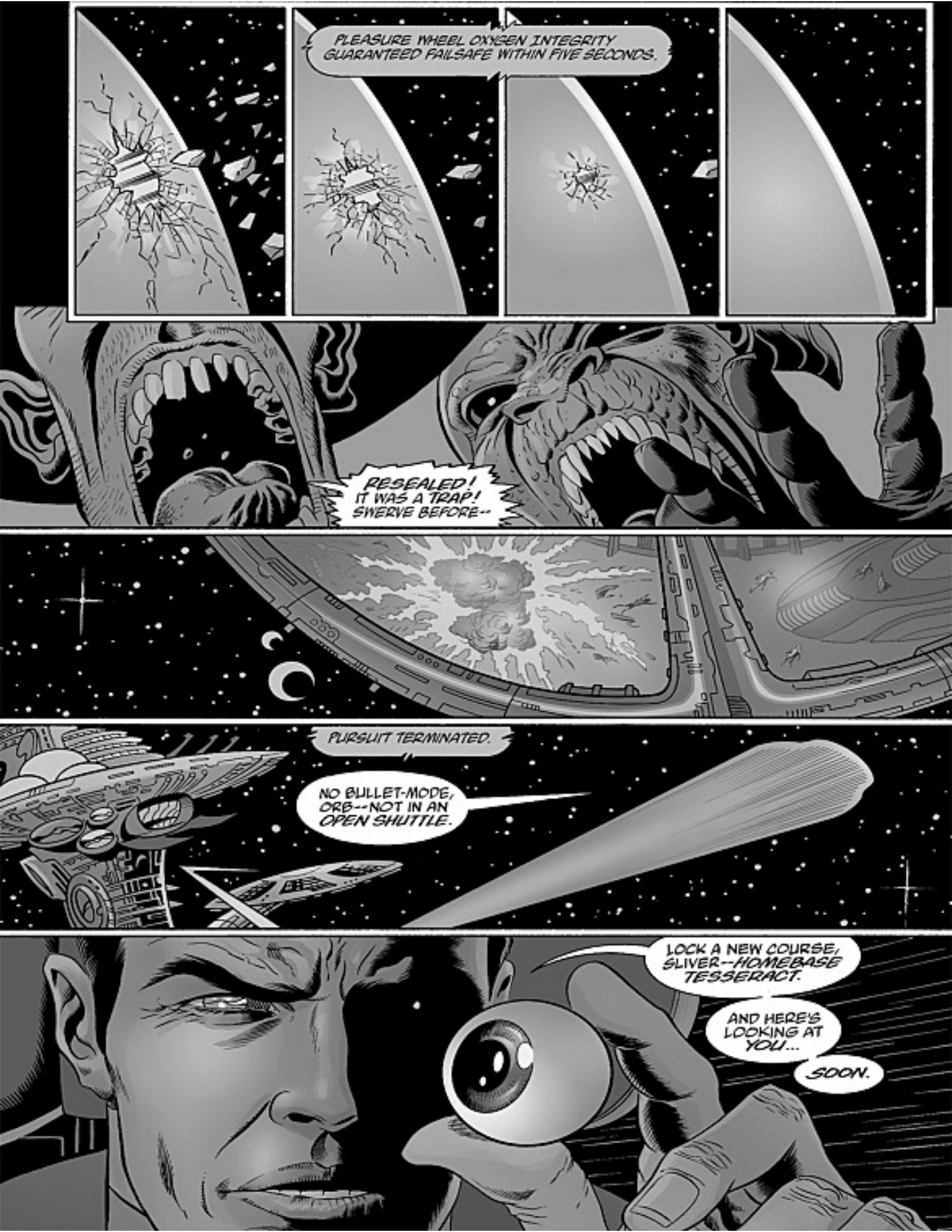

BECAUSE, YOU IDIOT, YOU FORGOT THE CROC-CLAWED CREAMPUFF!
ORB!
GONNA BANG BOREDOM BIG!
BLUKUSH
NO HEART, NO MORPHIC FIELD, NO LIFE. WARNING: PROBABLE ROBOT.
AGHK!
TH-THANKS FOR THE...
BLASH
...T-TIMELY UPDATE.

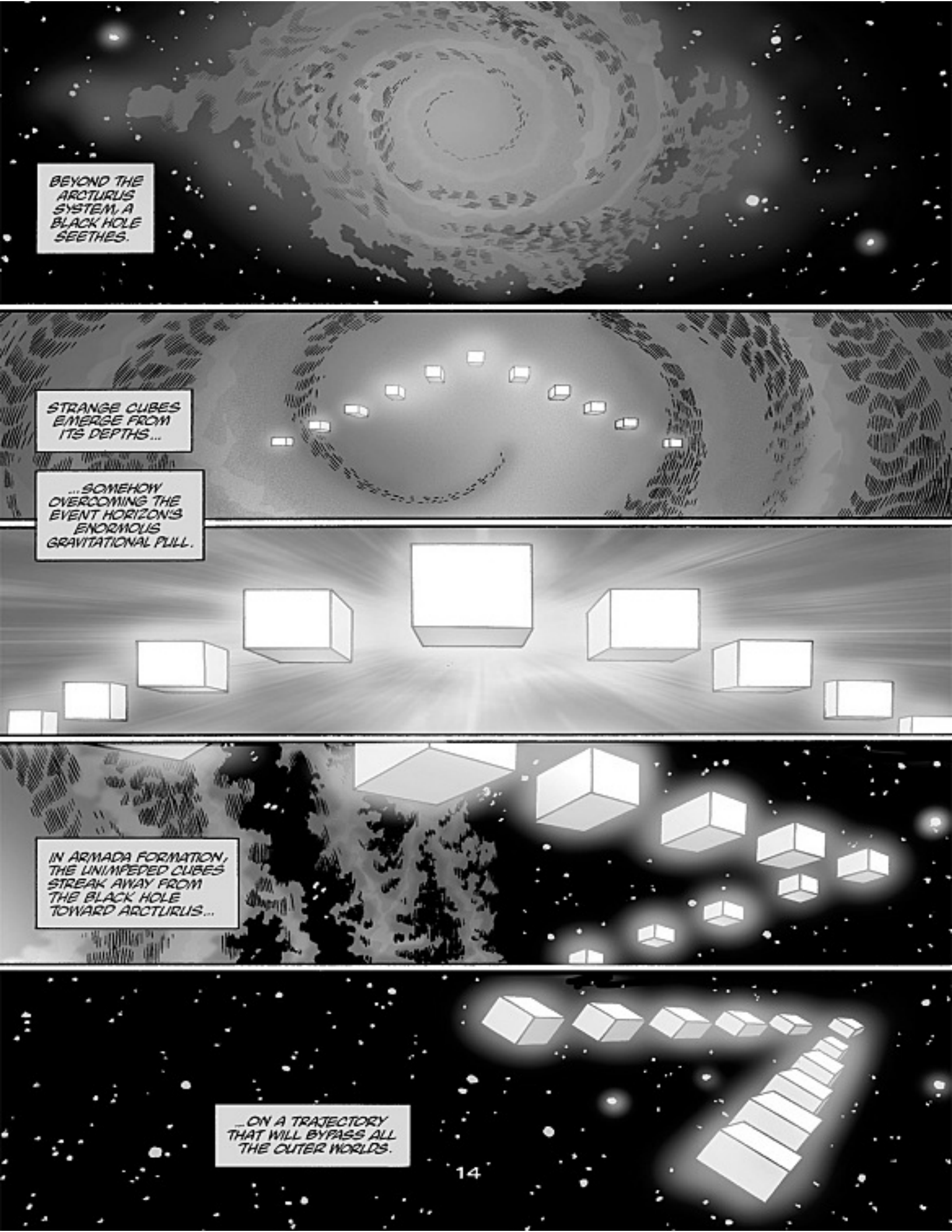

UNABLE TO LOCATE THE SYNTH-BITCH'S VITAL CORE.
THEN STOP LOOKING, ORB, BEFORE YOU LOCATE ME!
I'LL FIND THE DAMN CORE ON MY OWN!
OH, REALLY? GIVEN THE ROBOT'S NONSTANDARD DESIGN, HOW WILL YOU--
CHUN
SPOK
CHUN CHUN CHUN
PERSISTENCE.
NOW SCAN HER, ORB.
LEFT EYE INCONGRUOUS; COMPOSED OF UNKNOWN SUBSTANCE.
NO! DON'T TOUCH IT!

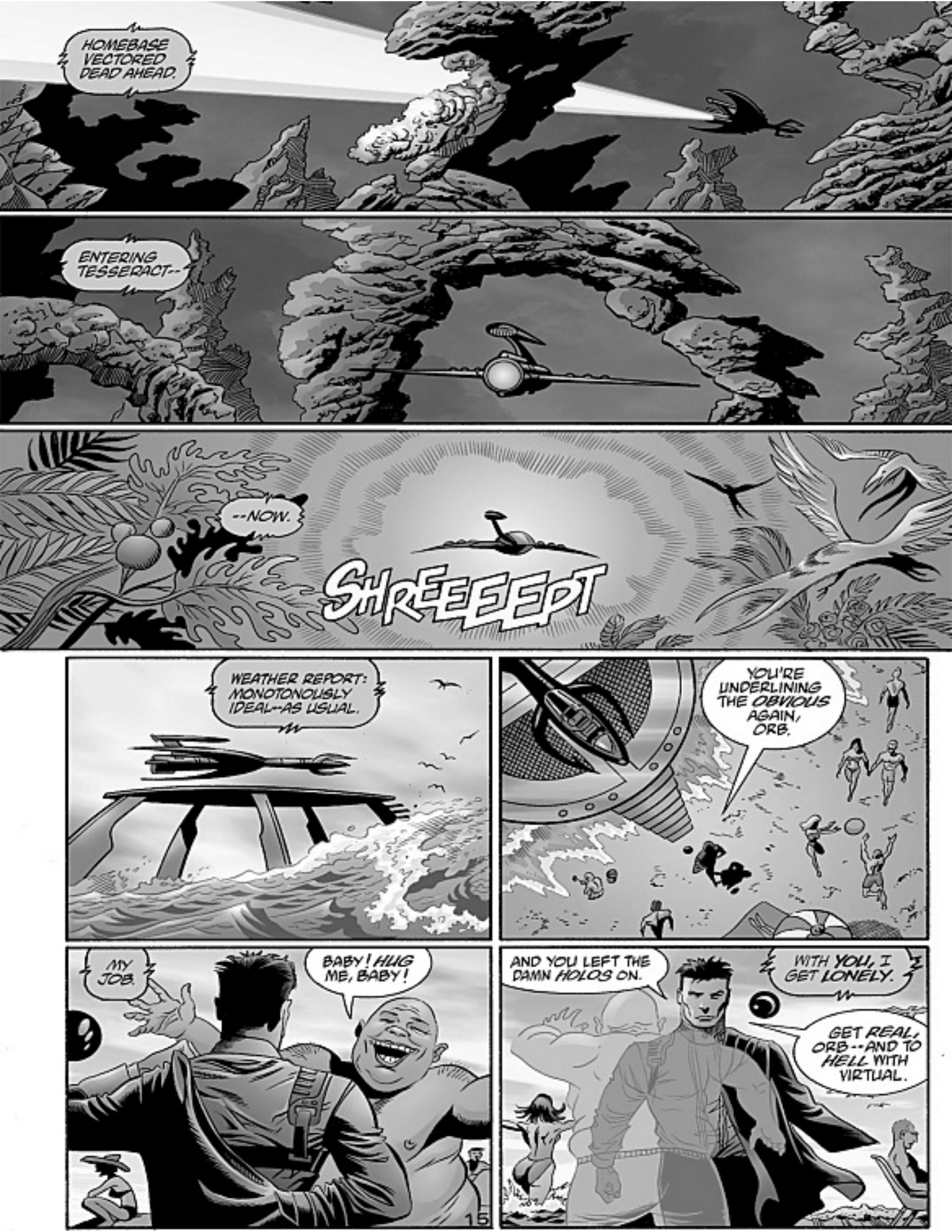

TKT
CH-KK
WHY NOT, LAZLO?
WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?
PLEKT
WHAT'S INSIDE THE EYE?
COME ON, LAZLO, HELP ME SEE.
TELL ME WHY YOUR CROC-CLAWED CREAMPUFF WAS--
LAZLO?
WEE-HAH!
ZHAK
EXPENDABLE.
SPRAKSH
CHUN CHUN CHUN
HMFF?
THIS ROUTE CLEAR--
--ALL THE WAY TO THE DOCKED SLIVER.
SLIVER, YES-- DOCK, NO.


SLIVER!
COME!
SIR?
FSHSHSH
WRONG WAY, SIR!
PLEASURE WHEEL POLICY FORBIDS UNAUTHORIZED SPACECRAFT INSIDE ANY SINNING AREAS!
PURSUIT DETECTED.
YOU HAD TO PROBE?
ALL RIGHT, SLIVER, LET'S BOLT...
...BEFORE THEY SNATCH THAT SHUTTLE.
LOOK AT THE STONES ON THAT SKIN-PURE BASTARD! HE'S JAMMING DEEPER INTO THE WHEEL!
SHUTTLE
YAAAH

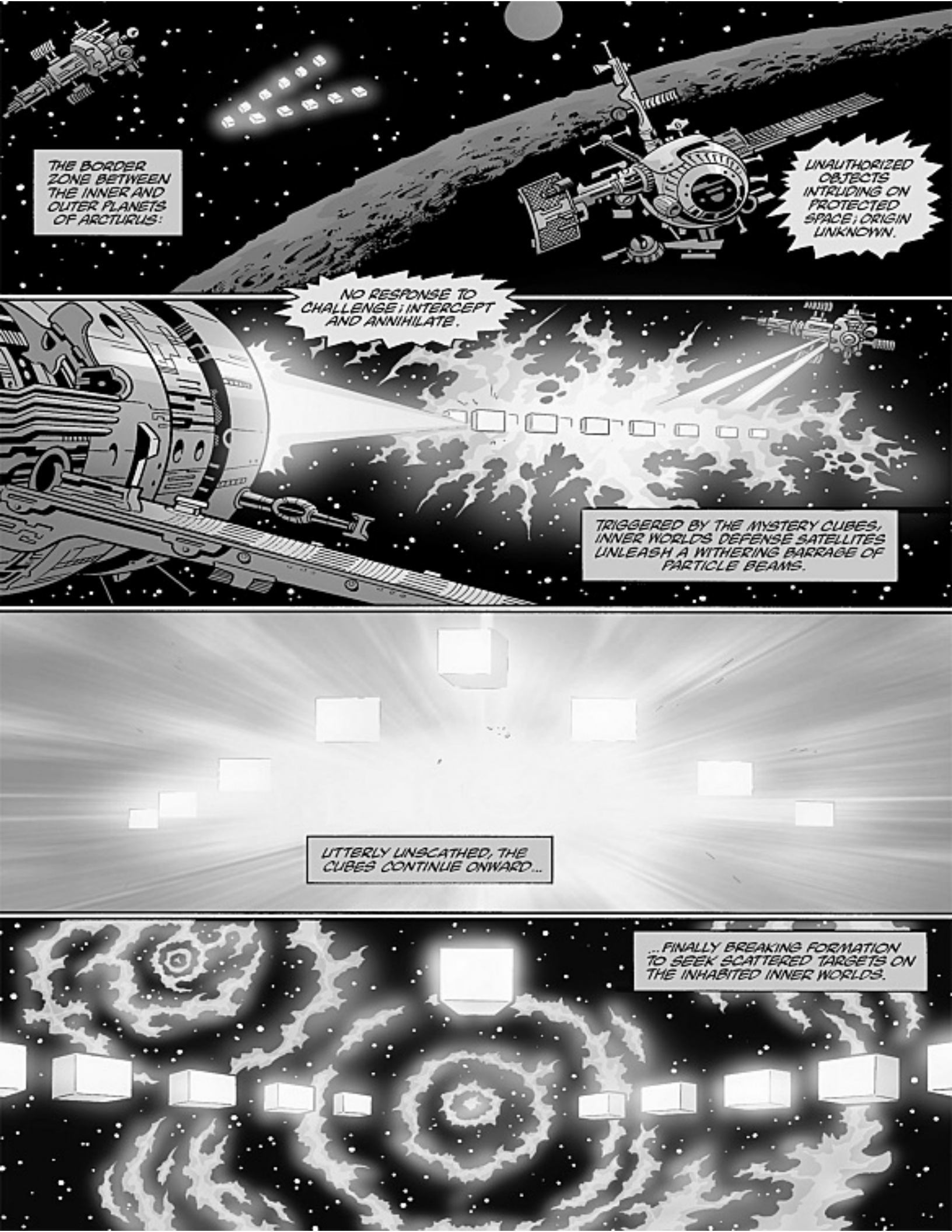

PURSUIT CRAFT GAINING.
PRECISELY, ORB--AND WHEN THEY'RE RIGHT WHERE WE WANT THEM...
NOW, SLIVER.
HIT
ZHAK
SHUTTLE
MORPH DOWN.
KUTCH-UTCH-UTCH
KLATCH
BULLET-MODE--AT THE OUTER HULL.
KSHUNK
STAY ON HIM!
I AM ON HIM, BUT WHERE DOES HE THINK HE'S--
uh-oh.


PLEASURE WHEEL OXYGEN INTEGRITY GUARANTEED FAILSAFE WITHIN FIVE SECONDS.
RESEALED! IT WAS A TRAP! SWERVE BEFORE--
PURSUIT TERMINATED.
NO BULLET-MODE, ORB--NOT IN AN OPEN SHUTTLE.
LOCK A NEW COURSE, SLIVER--HOMEBASE TESSERACT.
AND HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU...
SOON.


BEYOND THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM, A BLACK HOLE SEETHES.
STRANGE CUBES EMERGE FROM ITS DEPTHS...
...SOMEHOW OVERCOMING THE EVENT HORIZON'S ENORMOUS GRAVITATIONAL PULL.
IN ARMADA FORMATION, THE UNIMPEDED CUBES STREAK AWAY FROM THE BLACK HOLE TOWARD ARCTURUS...
...ON A TRAJECTORY THAT WILL BYPASS ALL THE OUTER WORLDS.


HOMEBASE VECTORED DEAD AHEAD.
ENTERING TESSERACT--
--NOW.
SHREEEEEPT
WEATHER REPORT: MONOTONOUSLY IDEAL--AS USUAL.
YOU'RE UNDERLINING THE OBVIOUS AGAIN, ORB.
MY JOB.
BABY! HUG ME, BABY!
AND YOU LEFT THE DAMN HOLOS ON.
WITH YOU, I GET LONELY.
GET REAL, ORB--AND TO HELL WITH VIRTUAL.


WHEN YOU HIDE YOURSELF INSIDE A PRIVATE TESSERACT, LONELINESS IS A GIVEN.
IT'S WHAT I'VE CHOSEN.
I AM ALONE HERE.
YOU THINK SO, DO YOU?
WHAT ARE YOU--
ROWF
SCHLAP
DOWN, BOY!
JUST FOR THAT, ORB, SHIFT BACK TO MOTHERBANK.
NOW YOU'RE A GLUTTON FOR NAGGING?
UNFINISHED BUSINESS.
LET'S FINISH IT.
GOOD WORK, SEBASTIAN. BUT I ALMOST DIED WHEN THAT ROBOT-BITCH JUMPED ON YOUR--
YOU ARE DEAD, MOTHERBANK, AND I'M SENDING YOU A PRESENT.
YOUR SAFE RETURN IS GIFT ENOUGH, AND--
THE ROBOT-BITCH'S LEFT EYEBALL.
HAVE IT ANALYZED --THE SUBATOMIC WORKS.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IT IS, SEBASTIAN?
ZHEEM
I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IT IS, MOTHERBANK.
THEN WHAT?
SOMETHING MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE.

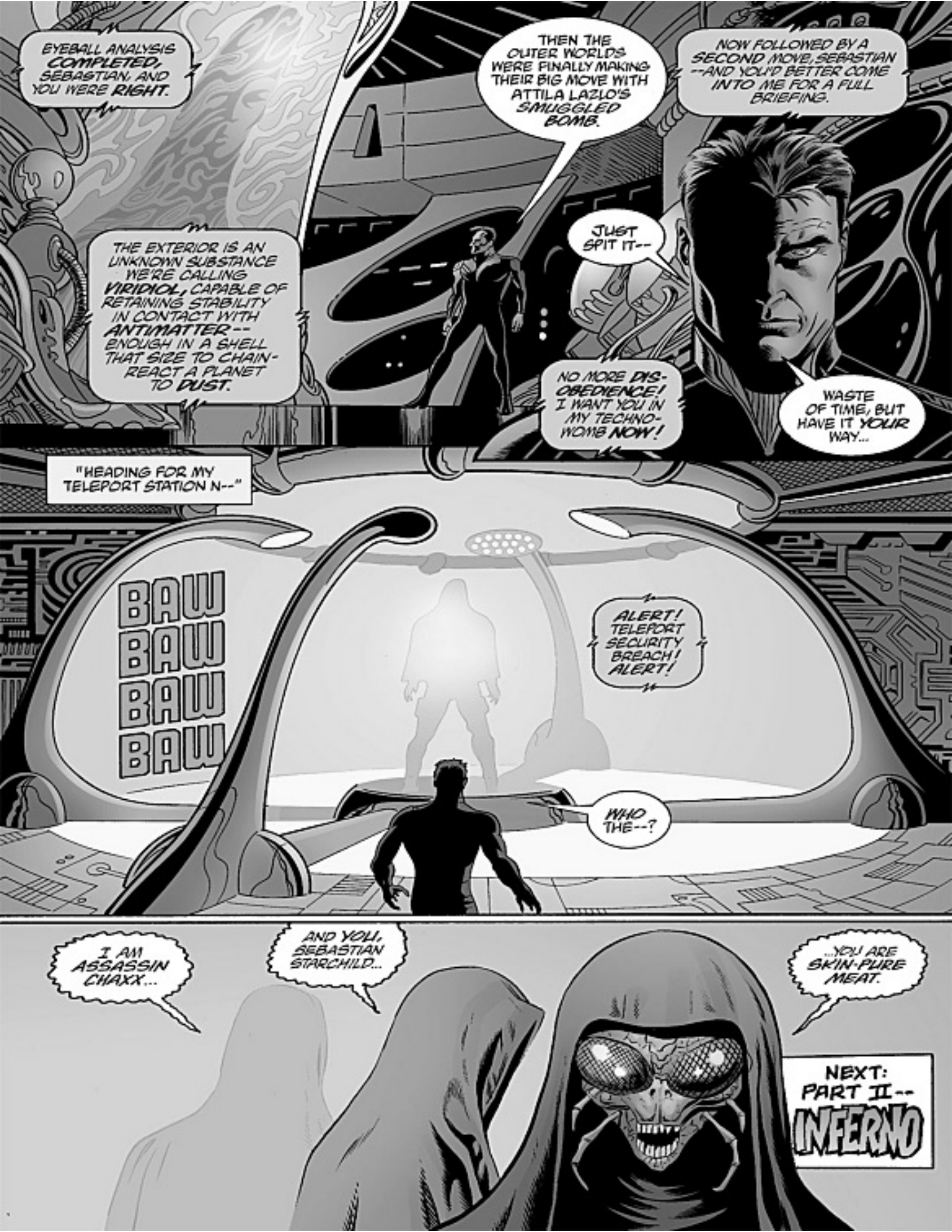

THE BORDER ZONE BETWEEN THE INNER AND OUTER PLANETS OF ARCTURUS:
UNAUTHORIZED OBJECTS INTRUDING ON PROTECTED SPACE; ORIGIN UNKNOWN.
NO RESPONSE TO CHALLENGE; INTERCEPT AND ANNIHILATE.
TRIGGERED BY THE MYSTERY CUBES, INNER WORLDS DEFENSE SATELLITES UNLEASH A WITHERING BARRAGE OF PARTICLE BEAMS.
UTTERLY UNSCATHED, THE CUBES CONTINUE ONWARD...
...FINALLY BREAKING FORMATION TO SEEK SCATTERED TARGETS ON THE INHABITED INNER WORLDS.


S.C.I.-SPY TRACKING STATION NINE ON INNER WORLD PRIMUS:
INCOMING-- SOUTHEAST QUADRANT, SECTOR FIVE.
THEN THE SENSORS DID NOT MALFUNCTION...
WHATEVER THE OBJECTS ARE, THEY REALLY DID PENETRATE THE SATELLITE DEFENSE GRID.
BETTER HAVE IT CHECKED AT IMPACT.
WHO'S OUR BEST AGENT ON WATCH?
"NO CONTEST-- ISIS NILE."
"ALL RIGHT, TELL HER TO--"
"NO NEED...
"SHE'S WAY AHEAD OF US--ALREADY SCRAMBLED EN ROUTE."
SCHAOWWW

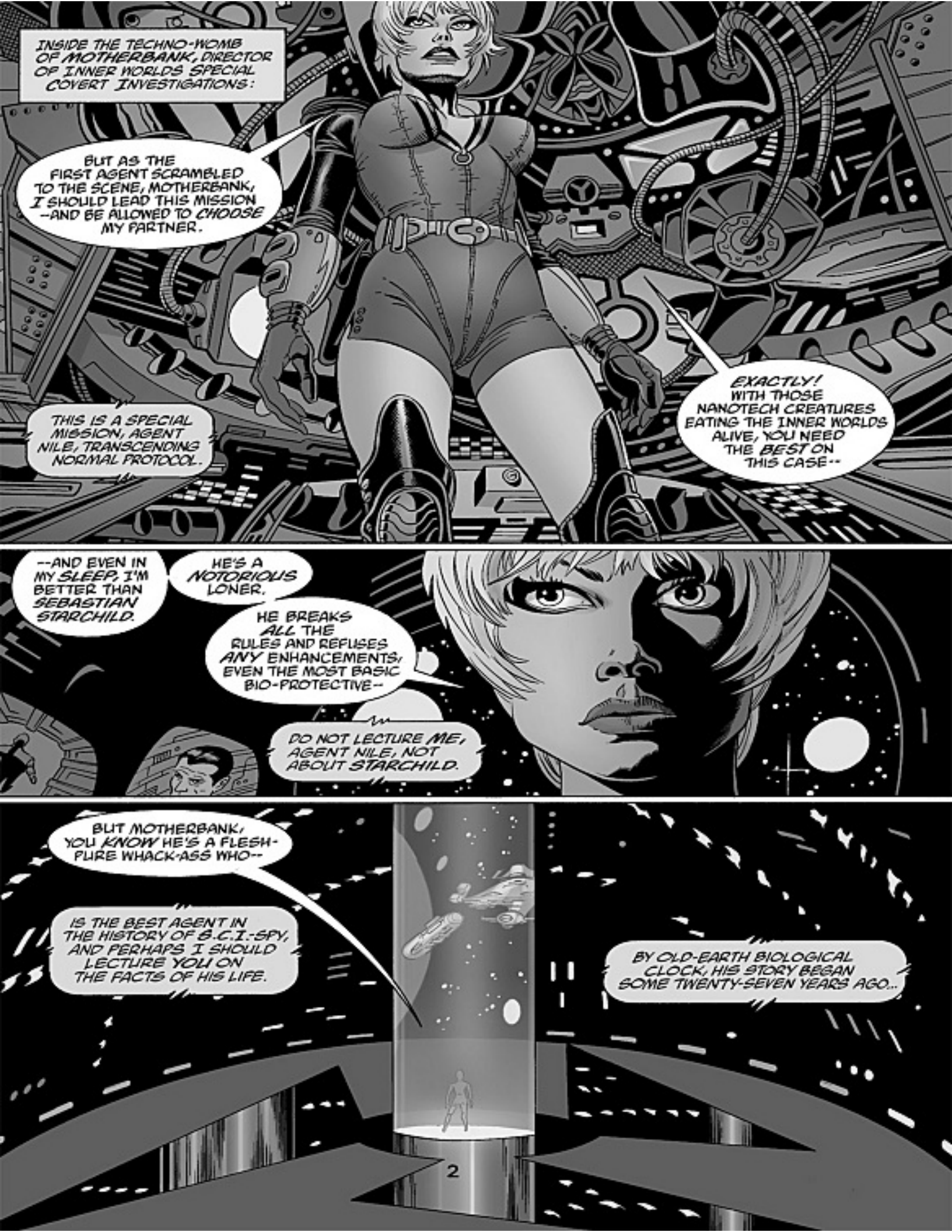

THE SOUTHEAST JUNGLE:
HMM?
KRUMPSH
CH-KLTCH
KRSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH
A... CUBE?
WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE WHAT'S IN MY MOUTH?
WH-WHAT?

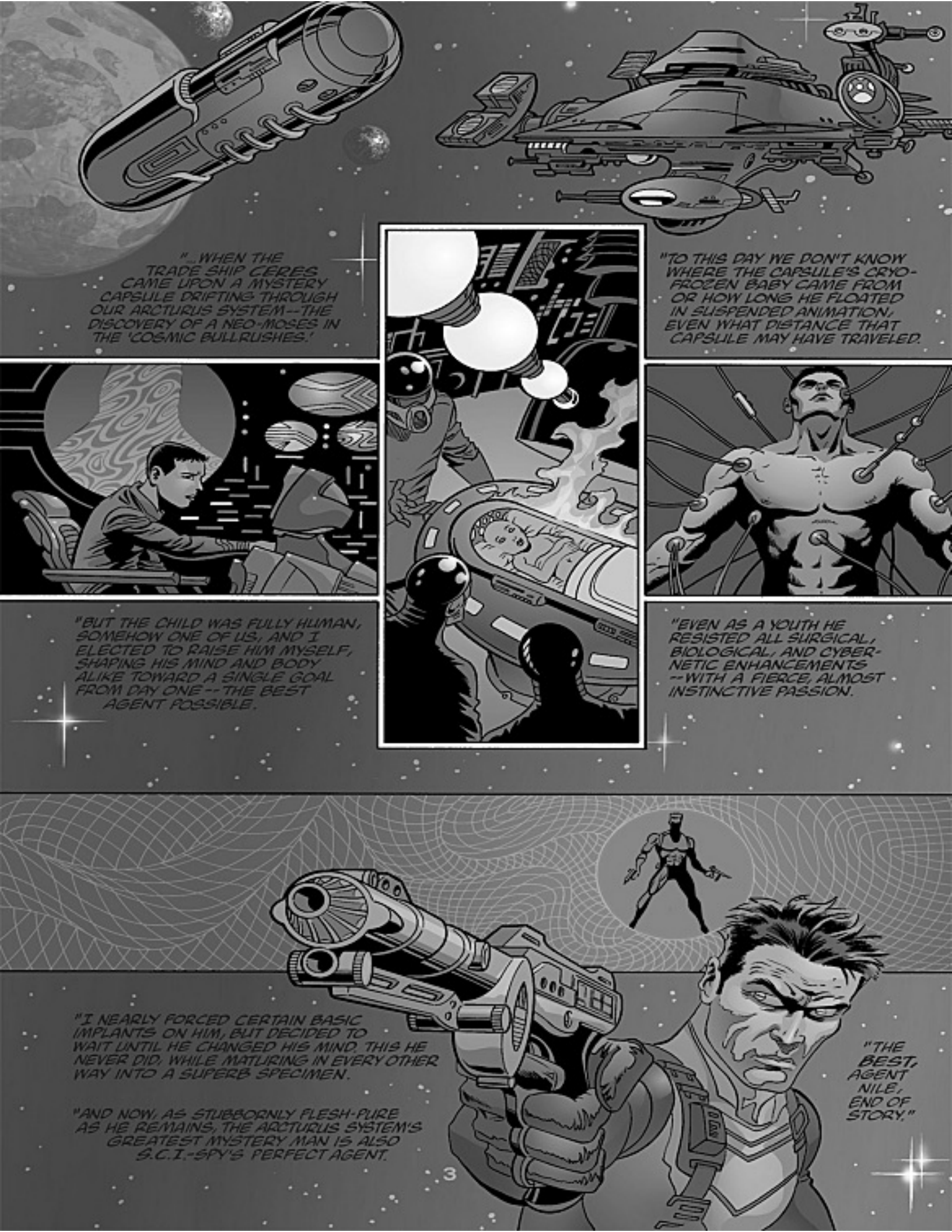

YOUR MOUTH?
IT HUNGERS FOR YOU.
SPLETCH
N-NO...!
KRK KRK KRK KRK
KRK KRK KRK KRK
YAAAIIIIIIIIIIEEEE
KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK
KLAKA LAKA KAKT
KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK

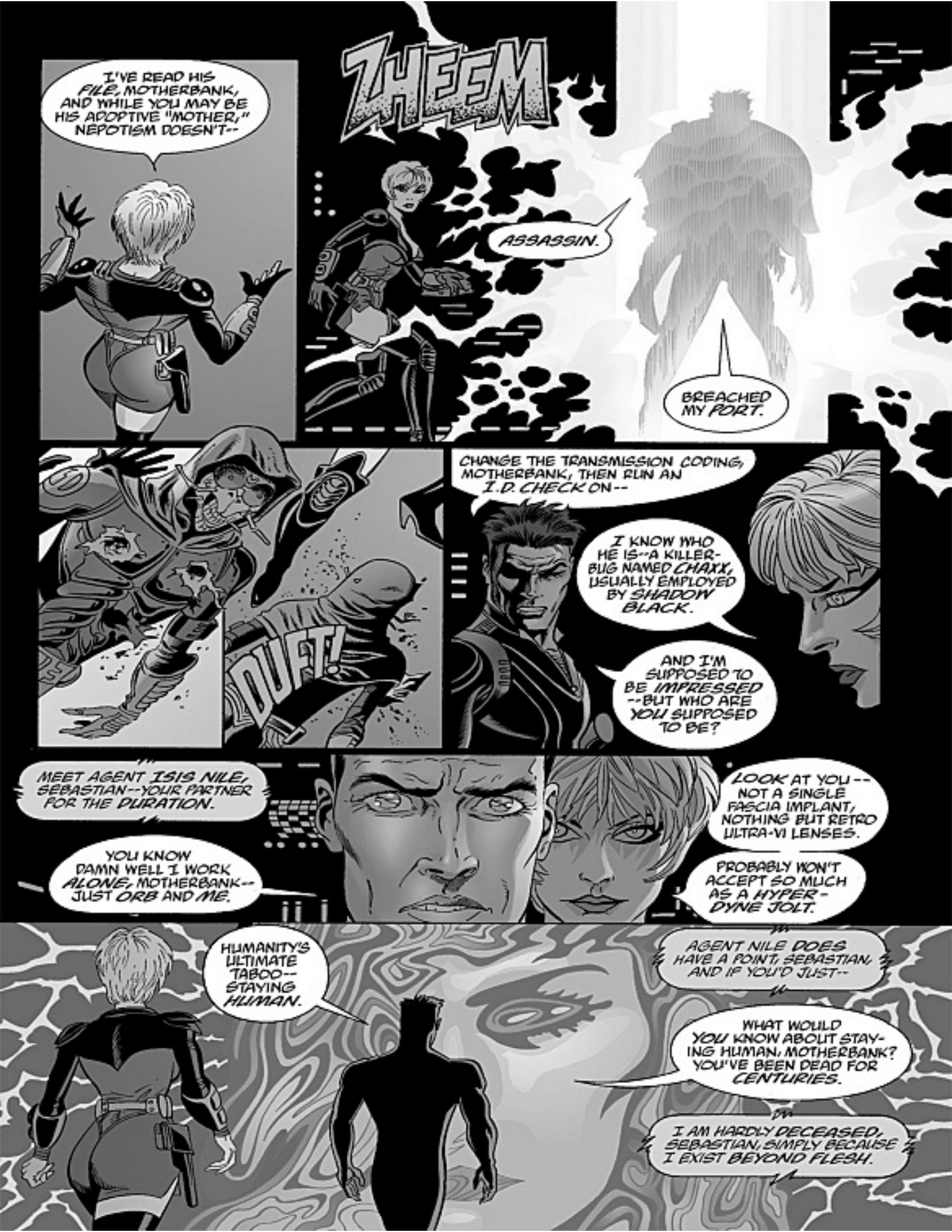

NANOTECH FEED-AND-MULTIPLY CYCLE INITIATED.
KRK-ETCH
MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.
KRK KRK KRK KRK KRK
BAM
BAOUM
AGENT NILE TO TRACKING STATION NINE!
YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BELIEVE THIS...
...BUT WE'VE JUST BEEN INVADED BY WHAT SEEMS TO BE...FEEDER-BREEDER BUGS.
VERY HUNGRY BUGS.
MAYBE EVEN...WORLD EATERS.

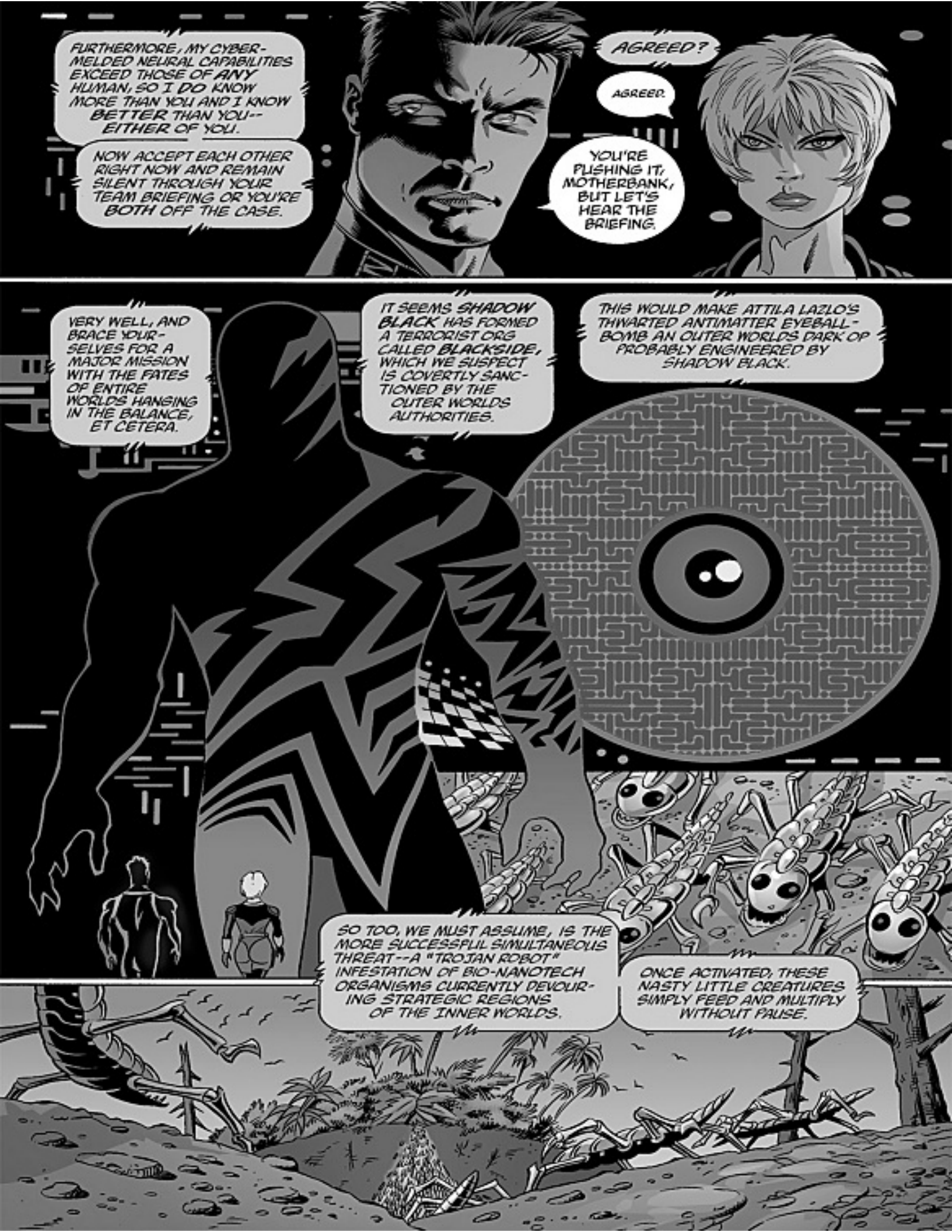

EYEBALL ANALYSIS COMPLETED, SEBASTIAN, AND YOU WERE RIGHT.
THEN THE OUTER WORLDS WERE FINALLY MAKING THEIR BIG MOVE WITH ATTILA LAZLO'S SMUGGLED BOMB.
NOW FOLLOWED BY A SECOND MOVE, SEBASTIAN --AND YOU'D BETTER COME INTO ME FOR A FULL BRIEFING.
THE EXTERIOR IS AN UNKNOWN SUBSTANCE WE'RE CALLING VIRIDIOL, CAPABLE OF RETAINING STABILITY IN CONTACT WITH ANTIMATTER -- ENOUGH IN A SHELL THAT SIZE TO CHAIN-REACT A PLANET TO DUST.
JUST SPIT IT--
NO MORE DISOBEDIENCE! I WANT YOU IN MY TECHNO-WOMB NOW!
WASTE OF TIME, BUT HAVE IT YOUR WAY...
"HEADING FOR MY TELEPORT STATION N--"
BAW BAW BAW BAW
ALERT! TELEPORT SECURITY BREACH! ALERT!
WHO THE--?
I AM ASSASSIN CHAXX...
AND YOU, SEBASTIAN STARCHILD...
...YOU ARE SKIN-PURE MEAT.
NEXT: PART II -- INFERNO


TELEPORT SECURITY BREACH! INTRUDER ALERT! UNAUTHORIZED LIFEFORM TRANSMISSION!
BAW BAW BAW
GUESS WHAT, STARCHILD?
SHAZZ
YOU'RE DEAD!
FORCE-FIELD--ONE-WAY FILTER.
TEK
TEK
VMMM
WHRR
KLTCH
KLAICH
POOM
POOM
POOM
SRUKSH
INTRUDER ELIMINATED.
MORE LIKE EXTERMINATED, ORB.
HE WAS STARTING TO BUG ME.
MAX RESPONSE-- LOCKED ON WRISTWATCHER TARGET.


INSIDE THE TECHNO-WOMB OF MOTHERBANK, DIRECTOR OF INNER WORLDS SPECIAL COVERT INVESTIGATIONS:
BUT AS THE FIRST AGENT SCRAMBLED TO THE SCENE, MOTHERBANK, I SHOULD LEAD THIS MISSION --AND BE ALLOWED TO CHOOSE MY PARTNER.
THIS IS A SPECIAL MISSION, AGENT NILE, TRANSCENDING NORMAL PROTOCOL.
EXACTLY! WITH THOSE NANOTECH CREATURES EATING THE INNER WORLDS ALIVE, YOU NEED THE BEST ON THIS CASE--
--AND EVEN IN MY SLEEP, I'M BETTER THAN SEBASTIAN STARCHILD.
HE'S A NOTORIOUS LONER.
HE BREAKS ALL THE RULES AND REFUSES ANY ENHANCEMENTS, EVEN THE MOST BASIC BIO-PROTECTIVE--
DO NOT LECTURE ME, AGENT NILE, NOT ABOUT STARCHILD.
BUT MOTHERBANK, YOU KNOW HE'S A FLESH-PURE WHACK-ASS WHO--
IS THE BEST AGENT IN THE HISTORY OF S.C.I.-SPY, AND PERHAPS I SHOULD LECTURE YOU ON THE FACTS OF HIS LIFE.
BY OLD-EARTH BIOLOGICAL CLOCK, HIS STORY BEGAN SOME TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AGO...


"...WHEN THE TRADE SHIP CERES CAME UPON A MYSTERY CAPSULE DRIFTING THROUGH OUR ARCTURUS SYSTEM--THE DISCOVERY OF A NEO-MOSES IN THE 'COSMIC BULLRUSHES.'
"TO THIS DAY WE DON'T KNOW WHERE THE CAPSULE'S CRYO-FROZEN BABY CAME FROM OR HOW LONG HE FLOATED IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION, EVEN WHAT DISTANCE THAT CAPSULE MAY HAVE TRAVELED.
"BUT THE CHILD WAS FULLY HUMAN, SOMEHOW ONE OF US, AND I ELECTED TO RAISE HIM MYSELF, SHAPING HIS MIND AND BODY ALIKE TOWARD A SINGLE GOAL FROM DAY ONE--THE BEST AGENT POSSIBLE.
"EVEN AS A YOUTH HE RESISTED ALL SURGICAL, BIOLOGICAL, AND CYBER-NETIC ENHANCEMENTS --WITH A FIERCE, ALMOST INSTINCTIVE PASSION.
"I NEARLY FORCED CERTAIN BASIC IMPLANTS ON HIM, BUT DECIDED TO WAIT UNTIL HE CHANGED HIS MIND. THIS HE NEVER DID, WHILE MATURING IN EVERY OTHER WAY INTO A SUPERB SPECIMEN.
"AND NOW, AS STUBBORNLY FLESH-PURE AS HE REMAINS, THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM'S GREATEST MYSTERY MAN IS ALSO S.C.I.-SPY'S PERFECT AGENT.
"THE BEST, AGENT NILE, END OF STORY."


I'VE READ HIS FILE, MOTHERBANK, AND WHILE YOU MAY BE HIS ADOPTIVE "MOTHER," NEPOTISM DOESN'T--
ZHEEM
ASSASSIN.
BREACHED MY PORT.
DUFT!
CHANGE THE TRANSMISSION CODING, MOTHERBANK, THEN RUN AN I.D. CHECK ON--
I KNOW WHO HE IS--A KILLER-BUG NAMED CHAXX, USUALLY EMPLOYED BY SHADOW BLACK.
AND I'M SUPPOSED TO BE IMPRESSED --BUT WHO ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE?
MEET AGENT ISIS NILE, SEBASTIAN--YOUR PARTNER FOR THE DURATION.
YOU KNOW DAMN WELL I WORK ALONE, MOTHERBANK-- JUST ORB AND ME.
LOOK AT YOU -- NOT A SINGLE FASCIA IMPLANT, NOTHING BUT RETRO ULTRA-VI LENSES.
PROBABLY WON'T ACCEPT SO MUCH AS A HYPER-DYNE JOLT.
HUMANITY'S ULTIMATE TABOO-- STAYING HUMAN.
AGENT NILE DOES HAVE A POINT, SEBASTIAN, AND IF YOU'D JUST--
WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW ABOUT STAYING HUMAN, MOTHERBANK? YOU'VE BEEN DEAD FOR CENTURIES.
I AM HARDLY DECEASED, SEBASTIAN, SIMPLY BECAUSE I EXIST BEYOND FLESH.


FURTHERMORE, MY CYBER-MELDED NEURAL CAPABILITIES EXCEED THOSE OF ANY HUMAN, SO I DO KNOW MORE THAN YOU AND I KNOW BETTER THAN YOU-- EITHER OF YOU.
NOW ACCEPT EACH OTHER RIGHT NOW AND REMAIN SILENT THROUGH YOUR TEAM BRIEFING OR YOU'RE BOTH OFF THE CASE.
AGREED?
AGREED.
YOU'RE PUSHING IT, MOTHERBANK, BUT LET'S HEAR THE BRIEFING.
VERY WELL, AND BRACE YOURSELVES FOR A MAJOR MISSION WITH THE FATES OF ENTIRE WORLDS HANGING IN THE BALANCE, ET CETERA.
IT SEEMS SHADOW BLACK HAS FORMED A TERRORIST ORG CALLED BLACKSIDE, WHICH WE SUSPECT IS COVERTLY SANCTIONED BY THE OUTER WORLDS AUTHORITIES.
THIS WOULD MAKE ATTILA LAZLO'S THWARTED ANTIMATTER EYEBALL-BOMB AN OUTER WORLDS DARK OP PROBABLY ENGINEERED BY SHADOW BLACK.
SO TOO, WE MUST ASSUME, IS THE MORE SUCCESSFUL SIMULTANEOUS THREAT--A "TROJAN ROBOT" INFESTATION OF BIO-NANOTECH ORGANISMS CURRENTLY DEVOURING STRATEGIC REGIONS OF THE INNER WORLDS.
ONCE ACTIVATED, THESE NASTY LITTLE CREATURES SIMPLY FEED AND MULTIPLY WITHOUT PAUSE.


EXPANDINGLY CONCENTRIC EVACUATIONS ARE UNDER WAY, BUT IT WON'T BE LONG BEFORE THE RATE OF NANOTECH SPREAD OUTPACES OUR ABILITY TO STAY AHEAD OF IT.
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO HALT THE EXPONENTIAL MULTIPLICATION OF THE ENTITIES--BY NULLIFYING WHATEVER RADIATION FREQUENCIES TRIGGERED THEM TO LIFE.
WE'RE CYCLING THROUGH THE POSSIBLE FREQUENCIES NOW, BUT IT WILL TAKE AN ESTIMATED THREE WEEKS TO ISOLATE THE CORRECT COMBINATION--AND THAT'S ON THE STATISTICALLY LUCKY SIDE.
LONG BEFORE THEN, OF COURSE, THE INNER WORLDS LAND SURFACES WILL BE NOTHING BUT SEETHING MASSES OF NANOTECH "HUNGERBUGS" ENDLESSLY EATING AND RESPAWNING EACH OTHER.
SO WE HAVE OUR TICKING CLOCK AND YOU'D BEST GET BUSY.
FIRST PRIORITY: PENETRATE SHADOW BLACK'S ORG TO LEARN THE NANO-TECH FREQUENCIES BEFORE EVERYTHING'S BEEN EATEN AND CONVERTED TO HUNGERBUGS.
WHICH MEANS WE GO UNDER-COVER.
AND THAT MEANS WE'RE OFF TO SEE--


"--WIZARD."
CHECK THE MAGIC, MANCHILD, OF MY DISAPPEARING-HAND TRICK.
YOU REJECT ALL MY BEST STUFF FOR YOUR OWN SKINBONES-SELF, SO I'VE FITTED YOUR ORB WITH THIS FOURTH-DIMENSIONAL TESSERACT POUCH--ACCESSED HERE.
VERY NICE, WIZARD.
"NICE," THE FLESHBOY SAYS--AFTER I CONVERT HIS ORB INTO A BOTTOMLESS BAG OF TRICKS WHOSE INTERIOR VOLUME IS TEN THOUSAND TIMES GREATER THAN ITS EXTERIOR DIMENSIONS.
SAME SMALL SIZE ON THE OUTSIDE, SEBBO, BUT NOW VAST ON THE INSIDE--ALTHOUGH LIMITED, OF COURSE, BY THE ACCESS HATCH'S DIAMETER.
YOU RIDE WITH THAT? YOUR ORB CAN NOW STASH MANY SMALL THINGS, BUT NO SINGLE LARGE THING.
ALREADY STOCKED IT WITH A WHOLE STORE-HOUSE OF GOODIES.
YEAR'S SUPPLY OF NUTRITIONAL AND MEDICINAL PROVISIONS...
...FIFTY SPARES OF YOUR FAVORED SIDEARM, THE TESLA-9 ...A THOUSAND POPPERS, FIVE HUNDRED ASSORTED SMART-GRENADES, KNOCKOUT BANGS, AND OTHER EXPLOSIVES...
...TEN THOUSAND FUEL PELLETS FOR YOUR SLIVER... A DOZEN QUARTER-SCALE CLONE DUPES OF THE ORB ITSELF...AND SUNDRY OTHER SURPRISES.
AND SHE DON'T EVEN WEIGH A GRAM HEAVIER--STILL FLOATS LIKE STINK ON A BREEZE.
SO WHO'S YOUR FELLOW MOTHERBANK-SLAVE FOR THIS JAUNT?
I'M NOBODY'S SLAVE, WIZARD, AND SOON I WON'T EVEN BE ISIS NILE...


"...NOT AFTER WE GO LOOKING FOR WORK AS TERRORISTS."
JUST CROSSED THE BORDER ZONE BETWEEN INNER AND OUTER WORLDS, NILE, SO I ASSUME THAT'S THE "DIVE" YOU KNOW ABOUT?
THAT'S IT, STARCHILD, BUT YOU SURE DON'T LOOK LIKE ITS HARDBITTEN MERCENARY CLIENTELE...
MORE LIKE SOME SKIN-PURE GALACTIC PIMP.
WITH YOU DISTRACTING ALL ATTENTION AS MY CAT-EYED BITCH.
HNH.
JUST KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT, STARCHILD, AND LET ME LAY ALL THE LIP.
LIP AWAY, NILE, AND I'LL COVER.
WE'RE LOOKING FOR WORK.
ANY OF YOU SCABROUS BASTARDS HIRING?
WHAT KIND OF WORK?
WHAT KIND DO YOU THINK?
THE KIND THAT DISHES GRIEF TO MOTHERBANK'S PRECIOUS INNER WORLDS.
OVER HERE.


HOW 'BOUT SOME HEAVY LIFTING IN HELL?
DEPENDS ON WHO THE DEVIL IS.
SOON'S I HIT BOTTOM ON THIS DRINK, I'M HEADIN' FOR BLACKSIDE INFERNO.
TOO EASY?
MAYBE.
IF THAT'S A SHADOW BLACK BASE, IT'S JUST WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR.
TROUBLE AHEAD?
PROBABLY.
THE JACKPOT?
DEFINITELY.
INFERNO: A WORM-TUNNELED AIR-SHEATHED MOONLET PERPETUALLY SYNCHED TO THE DARK SIDE OF OUTER WORLD SCORPIO...


THESE TWO ARE PROBABLY SPIES.
TORTURE 'EM TILL THEY TALK.
I'LL GO TELL BLACK.
YOU GET NO ORDERS WITHIN AN HOUR, KILL 'EM BOTH WHETHER THEY'VE TALKED OR NOT.
FAR ENOUGH.
YOUR WEAPONS-- NOW!
NOW!
HOW MANY YOU GOT, ORB?
LOCKED ON TWO; NINE AND THREE O'CLOCK.
DO IT.


SCHARK
SCHARK
ZOP
CHUN
NOW, NILE!
ZOP ZOP ZOP
CHUN CHUN
ANTIGRAV SPHERE! BLAST THE THING BEFORE--
BAW BAW BAW BAW BAW
AUTOMATIC ALARM, STARCHILD--BRINGING SCUM ON THE RUN.
IF WE BAIL RIGHT NOW, WE JUST MIGHT MAKE IT.
I AGREE, NILE.
AGH-K!
WHICH MEANS?
WE GO THE OTHER WAY--DEEPER INTO INFERNO TO GET WHAT WE CAME FOR.
GOOD ANSWER.


BAWBAWBAWBAW
STAY HERE, ORB.
HOVER HIGH--AND TRY TO KEEP THIS PASSAGE CLEAR.
NOW WHAT DO YOU NEED, NILE?
ACCESS TO BLACKSIDE'S DATA BANK.
ANY INFERNO TERMINAL SHOULD DO.
THEN LET'S FIND ONE.
BAWBAWBAW
THERE.
HWUK
MAKE IT FAST, NILE! I CAN HOLD THIS POSITION FOR A WHILE...
...BUT WHATEVER HAPPENS, WE DON'T HAVE LONG.
NO SHIT, STARCHILD...


"...AND NEITHER DO THE INNER WORLDS--NOT WITH THOSE NANOTECH HUNGERBUGS ON THEIR CHAIN-REACTION FEAST."
THIS IS FUCKED! THE FEW WE DESTROY JUST FEED THE OTHERS TO HELP THEM MULTIPLY FASTER!
SCHOOM
CHARK
JUST KEEP BLASTING! BUY TIME FOR THE EVACUEES!
BAWBAWBAW
CHUN CHUN
COME ON, NILE!
PAKT
YOU'VE BEEN BRAGGING ABOUT YOUR TECH SKILLS...
HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU NEED?
GOT IT--BUT IT'S NOT HERE.
WHAT?
THE NANOTECH FREQUENCIES ARE ENCODED IN SOMETHING CALLED "THE LUCIFER FILE".


IT'S STASHED IN A CAVE OF AMMONIA ICE ON OUTER WORLD NAGA.
NAGA'S NO WORLD.
IT'S A BARREN HELL.
YES, AND I'VE GOT THE CAVE COORDINATES MEMORIZED.
WE CAN SURRENDER NOW--AND WITH ANY LUCK...
KATHKAAK
...WE'LL MEET SHADOW BLACK HIMSELF BEFORE OUR BIG MIRACLE ESCAPE.
KLAKT
CHAXX CLONES, HUH?
EASY, BUGHEADS--YOU MAY HAVE US...
"...BUT I'LL BET YOUR BOSS WANTS US."
SPIES, SHADOW--FROM THE PRIVILEGED INNER WORLDS.
YOUR CLONES HAVE BROUGHT US WHAT, CHAXX?
SENT BY HOLIER-THAN-THOU MOTHERBANK, THEN, IMMORTAL FOUNDER OF THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS AGO...
ODD HOW ALL THE WORLDS RUN ON EARTH-YEARS, ISN'T IT?--REGARDLESS OF ACTUAL SOLAR ORBITS.


BIOLOGICAL CLOCKS KEEP THE BEST TIME, BLACK.
OR PERHAPS SOME THINGS, SPY, JUST RUN IN THE BLOOD.
LIKE EVIL?
IF I'M EVIL, WHAT DOES THAT MAKE YOUR PRECIOUS MOTHERBANK?
A HUMAN PSYCHE EMBEDDED IN THE SYSTEM'S MASTER CONTROL PROGRAM.
A PROGRAM FAVORING THE INNER WORLDS--EVEN AS THEY EXPLOIT THE OUTER ONES.
YOU DECLARED YOURSELVES SEPARATE, BLACK--BY STARTING THIS COLD WAR OF SABOTAGE AND TERRORISM.
WE WERE KEPT SEPARATE--BY THOSE MONOPOLIZING SUPERIOR CONDITIONS.
THE INNER WORLDS WERE THE FIRST ONES TERRAFORMED AND COLONIZED.
IT'LL TAKE TIME FOR YOUR OUTER WORLD CONDITIONS TO CATCH UP.
IT'S A FUNCTION OF ELITISM, SPY, NOT TIME!
MOTHERBANK WANTS US TO REMAIN BACKWARD--A SOURCE OF CHEAP LABOR AND RESOURCES!


SHE WANTS TO KEEP THE INNER WORLDS PERPETUALLY SUPERIOR-- PRIVATE EDENS THRIVING AT THE EXPENSE OF THOSE WHO WERE KICKED OUT! SHE WANTS--
THAT'S ENOUGH, CHAXX.
WHAT DO YOU EXPECT, BUGFACE?
THE ORIGINAL SETTLERS OF YOUR OUTER PLANETS WERE ALL CONVICTS-- LUCKY TO GET A SECOND CHANCE BEYOND PRISON.
A "SECOND CHANCE" DOING ALL OF MOTHERBANK'S DIRTY WORK!
THAT'S HOW YOU JUSTIFY DEVOURING A THOUSAND YEARS OF TERRAFORMING WITH YOUR NANO-TECH HORDES?
THE DEBATE'S OVER, CHAXX! THEY CLEARLY HAVE NO IDEA WHO AND WHAT MOTHERBANK REALLY IS!
OUR ANCESTORS WERE USED AS SLAVES, AND WE'RE GOING TO--
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, BLACK?
WHO IS MOTHERBANK? WHAT IS SHE?
I DON'T ANSWER MY ENEMIES' QUESTIONS.
I LET THEM DIE IN DARKNESS AND IGNORANCE.
EJECT THEM INTO SPACE.
NAKED.


NOT BAD, NILE--YOU ALMOST BAITED CHAXX INTO SPILLING.
UNTIL YOU YAPPED MY PLAY COLD.
LAY DOWN ANOTHER--AND THIS TIME I'LL TOP IT.
YOU'RE ON.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
NOTHING CRAP ABOUT WATCHING YOU TWO HIT SPACE NAKED.
AT LEAST LET ME WEAR MY WRIST-WATCHER...
IT WAS A GIFT--FROM MY MOTHER.
THE FACT THAT YOUR PRIME GETS TO HANG IN SHADOW BLACK'S SHADOW--LEAVING THE CRAP WORK FOR HIS MERE CLONES.
HAND IT OVER--NOW.
YOU'RE RIGHT--ONCE I'M DEAD, IT'LL BE AS IF MY MOTHER NEVER GAVE BIRTH.
JUST ONE REQUEST...
PLEASE DON'T PRESS THE UPPER RIGHT BUTTON.


THIS BUTTON?
TEK
WHY NOT?
"BECAUSE IT SUMMONS THE EXECUTIONER."
DEET
"WHAT EXECUTIONER?"
VTHHHHH
AHAHAH
SCHARK
YOURS.
ZERT ZERT
SCHARK
THIS IS OUR BIG MIRACLE ESCAPE?
UNLESS YOU HAVE SOMETHING BETTER.
AHRRR!
THIS'LL DO...


...PROVIDED YOU CAN FINISH.
DEFINITELY.
OPEN YOUR NEW TESSERACT, ORB.
WITH A BANG.
SCHASP
DEET
DEFINITELY HOW?
SEVERAL BIG BANGS, IN FACT.
SOME OF WIZARD'S BUTTON BOMBS?
YEP--GIVING US SIXTY SECONDS TO VACATE INFERNO.
SCHASP
ALREADY COUNTING DOWN.


--SECONDS TO VACATE INFERNO. ALREADY COUNTING DOWN.
YOU HEAR THAT, CHAXX?
YOUR CLONES LET THEM ESCAPE-- AND THEY'VE DROPPED EXPLOSIVES.
OUT-- NOW!
WIZARD MAKES GOOD BOOTS, STARCHILD.
JUST LIKE HIS BOMBS, NILE...
THIRTY SECONDS.
CHUZZ
SHARP
ZERT
LAUNCH, CHAXX-- FAST!
MAX SPEED, SLIVER-- IMMEDIATE DEPARTURE.
GET IN, NILE-- FIFTEEN SECONDS!
GO, CHAXX-- GIVE IT EVERY-THING!


FIVE SECONDS, NILE!
THREE... TWO... ONE...
WE'RE CLEAR, STARCHILD-- BUT ARE WE FAR ENOUGH?


YES.
BUT SO IS SOME-ONE ELSE.
REPORT, ORB.
SENSORS DETECTED ANOTHER LAUNCH, FROM AN INTERNAL DOCK, SHORTLY BEFORE OURS.
SHADOW BLACK AND CHAXX PRIME?
PROBABLY--BUT OTHER THAN THAT, WE PLAYED OFF EACH OTHER FAIRLY WELL.
WELL ENOUGH TO STOP RESENTING THE HELL OUT OF EACH OTHER AND MAKE A DECENT TEAM?
WELL ENOUGH TO DECLARE A TRUCE AND TRY.
ONWARD TO NAGA, THEN.
AND TO ITS AMMONIA ICE-CAVE...
"...BEFORE THE INNER WORLDS ARE EATEN DOWN TO NOTHING BUT NANOTECH CANNIBALS."
NEXT: PART III
revelations


PART III:
REVELATIONS
NAGA: HARSHEST OF THE OUTER WORLDS, VIRGIN AND UNINHABITED, A PLANET OF BARREN CRYSTAL...
THE BIG GUNS, STARCHILD?
WHEN THE TARGET'S UNKNOWN, NILE...
...THE BIGGER THE BETTER.
NOW LET'S JUST HOPE YOU MEMORIZED THOSE COORDINATES CORRECTLY.
INFERNO'S COMPUTER SYSTEM PINPOINTED AN AMMONIA ICE CAVE...
...JUST LIKE THAT-- PERFECT PLACE TO STASH THE "LUCIFER FILE."
ALSO A PERFECT PLACE FOR SOMETHING ELSE.
SUCH AS?
OUR DEATH-TRAP.


THEN WE'LL JUST HAVE TO STEAL THE CHEESE WITHOUT GETTING OUR TAILS SNAPPED.
SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN, NILE--BUT ONE WITH A PROBLEM.
NAMELY?
RECOGNIZING THE TRAP BEFORE IT'S--
--SPRUNG.
SHOOM SHOOM SHOOM
A MECH-SENTINEL.
GOOD EYE, STARCHILD--BUT NO CHEESE.
KLLT
BECAUSE WE HAVEN'T ENTERED THE REAL TRAP, NILE ...NOT YET.
COME ON--LET'S DO IT.


YOU SAID THIS "LUCIFER FILE" IS A METALLIC POLYHEDRON?
THAT'S WHAT THE INFERNO COMPUTER DEPICTED--BUT DON'T ASK ME WHY SHADOW BLACK WOULD SECURE NANOTECH ACTIVATION FREQUENCIES IN A DESIGN LIKE THAT.
ALL RIGHT, I WON'T --BUT I WILL ASSUME THAT'S IT.
GOOD ASSUMPTION-- AND IT DOES LOOK LIKE DANGLED BAIT.
EXACTLY-- TEMPTING US FROM THE END OF WHAT LOOKS LIKE A GAUNTLET.
THE REAL TRAP--AND ITS CHEESE.
NO DOUBT, NILE...
...SO WHO RUNS THE GAUNTLET AND WHO COVERS?
YOU FIGURE IT OUT, STARCHILD...
...I'M ALREADY GONE.
COVER ME!
WAIT!
BLP
CH-KLK


BUKSH
KUSHT
HEADS UP, STARCHILD--I JUST TRIGGERED SOMETHING!
WHRRR-CHKT
MORE MECH-SENTINELS...
WHRRR-CHKT
...AND I JUST FREED THEM!
WHRRR-CHKT
CHAOW
I'LL TAKE THE ONES TO THE LEFT! COVER MY RIGHT!
GO, NILE!
I'LL COVER LEFT AND RIGHT! YOU JUST SNATCH THE PRIZE!
SHOOM


ALL RIGHT, STARCHILD...
SPRAKSH
KRAKSH
...BUT DON'T LET THAT GOOD EYE GO BAD NOW.
MADE IT! TIME TO--
KLTCH DEET
OH HELL.
K-K-K-K-K-K
WE WERE BOTH WRONG!
KRAKSH
THE REAL TRAP IS THE ICE-CAVE ITSELF!
RUN, NILE--AND DON'T STOP!
TSH
PSH
KSH


SPRAKSH
KRUKSH
FASTER, NILE! THE WHOLE CAVE'S COMING DOWN!
KRAK-K-K-K-K-K-K-
KRAK-SH
PERFECT TRAP MAYBE, STARCHILD--BUT ONLY UNTIL IT MET OUR UNSNAPPED ASSES.
STILL GOT ITS BAIT?
ONE METALLIC POLYHEDRON "LUCIFER FILE" RIGHT HERE--AS IF I'D GIVE THE DAMNED THING UP AFTER THAT.
THEN LET'S GET IT TO MOTHERBANK...
"...BEFORE THE NANO-TECH HUNGERBUGS DEVOUR HER AND EVERYTHING ELSE ON THE INNER WORLDS."
SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN WITHOUT A PROBLEM-- YOUR PLACE OR MINE?
EVER BEEN INSIDE A TESSERACT?
SEE, I KNEW I'D GET YOU TO TALK DIRTY.
NILE, YOU AIN'T HEARD NOTHIN' YET.


AS YOU CAN SEE, AGENTS STARCHILD AND NILE, WE WERE ABLE TO DECRYPT THE LUCIFER FILE FREQUENCIES--
--WHICH ARE NOW BEING DEPLOYED TO DEACTIVATE THE NANOTECH HORDES, THEREBY HALTING THE THREAT TO THE INNER WORLDS.
THERE'S STILL A MASSIVE CLEANUP AHEAD, BUT NICE WORK, BOTH OF YOU.
MISSION ACCOMPLISHED, ET CETERA, AND IT'S NICE TO SEE YOU'VE BURIED YOUR MUTUAL ANIMOSITY.
I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT SHOULD YOU DECIDE TO BECOME LOV--
PRIVACY, MOTHERBANK.
OFF.
DEET
AN ENTIRE OLD-EARTH BEACH, STARCHILD, TUCKED INSIDE YOUR PRIVATE POCKET OF HYPERSPACE.
NICE PLACE-- PRIMITIVE, RESTFUL.
EXCEPT IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE THE DANGER'S OVER, DOES IT?
ASIDE FROM THE USUAL POST-MISSION LETDOWN, NO.
FEELS LIKE SAVING THE WORLDS WAS FAR TOO EASY.
BUT MAYBE WE JUST WORK WELL TOGETHER.
...AND MAYBE IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.
I COUNTED AT LEAST FIVE, NILE-- AND SPEAKING OF WHICH...


FWSHSH
YAHH!
DAMN YOU, STARCHILD!
HOLOS OFF, ORB.
SPOILSPORT!
MMNHNNN...


WH-WHA...?
ISIS?
NILE?
SHE'S... GONE?
TELEPORTED TO HER PRIMUS STATION TWO HOURS AGO.
THEN WHAT THE HELL, ORB... HOLOS ON.
BEAUTIFUL SCENE, SEBASTIAN.
WHOLE LOT OF EVERYTHING, ORB --EXCEPT WHAT I WANT.
WHAT DO YOU WANT? YOUR REAL MOTHER AND FATHER? ISIS NILE?
SOMETHING REAL, WHICH DISQUALIFIES YOUR "BEAUTIFUL SCENE."
HOLOS OFF.
MAKE UP YOUR MIND!


WHY BOTHER? EITHER WAY, I'M STILL ALONE...


"FOREVER ALONE."
INCOMING LIFEFORM TRANSMISSION.
TEK
NOT AGAIN.
SHUNK
SAPT
WHAT GOOD IS A TESSERACT HIDEOUT--
BAW BAW BAW
--IF MOTHERBANK WON'T CHANGE MY TELEPORT SECURITY CODES?
SHE DID CHANGE THEM.
THEN WHO--?
relax, starchild...
IT'S YOUR PARTNER.
NILE.
AND YOU CAME BACK --EVEN THOUGH OUR MISSION'S FINISHED.
IT'S NOT FINISHED, BUT DON'T SHOW IT.
ROMANTIC NIGHT OUT THERE.
LET'S ENJOY IT.
PRIVACY, ORB-- OFF.
DEET


ALL RIGHT, NILE, NOW WHAT'S THE BIG--
WE'RE UP AGAINST *MORE* THAN SHADOW BLACK.
OF COURSE--HIS BLACKSIDE ORG IS COVERTLY SPONSORED BY THE OUTER WORLDS AUTHORITIES, AND WHETHER BLACK ESCAPED OR NOT, THEY'LL PROBABLY TRY *AGAIN*, BUT...
THAT'S NOT WHAT I *MEAN*--NOT AFTER SNOOPING THROUGH OUR DEFENSE SATELLITE FILES TODAY.
WHY?
TO TRACE THE TRAJECTORY AND SOURCE OF THE TROJAN ROBOT MYSTERY CUBES.
OBVIOUSLY ONE OF THE *OUTER WORLDS*.
WRONG.
AND THE *ACTUAL* ANSWER MAKES NO SENSE--BECAUSE THERE'S NO WAY THE CUBES COULD HAVE *GOTTEN* HERE FROM THERE...
NOT WITHOUT AN *IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY*--WHICH THEY SOMEHOW *MADE*.
SPIT IT *OUT*, NILE.
THE CUBES CAME FROM THE ONE PLACE FROM WHICH *NOTHING* CAN EMERGE, NOT EVEN *LIGHT*...
IMPOSSIBLE.
BUT TRUE.
A BLACK HOLE.


NO...NOT A TRUE BLACK HOLE.
WHAT THEN?
A DOORWAY TO SOMETHING EVEN STRANGER...ONE END OF A TUNNEL...
...A CONNECTION BETWEEN TWO BLACK HOLES, THEIR GRAVITATIONAL SINGULARITIES MESHING TO OPEN A WARP THROUGH THE SPACE-TIME MATRIX...
...ENABLING THE VAST SPACE BETWEEN THE TWO BLACK HOLES TO TO BE TRAVERSED IN BRIEF TIME...
... A WORMHOLE-- A COSMIC SHORTCUT-- AND THE OTHER BLACK HOLE, THE OTHER END OF THE TUNNEL... COULD BE ANYWHERE.
LIKE I SAID, THIS GOES WAY BEYOND BLACKSIDE.
THE EYEBALL-BOMB'S NEW SUBSTANCE, CAPABLE OF CONTAINING ANTIMATTER WITHOUT CHAIN-REACTING...
...THE UNPRECEDENTED DESIGN OF THE LUCIFER FILE--WITH NANOTECH FREQUENCIES EMBEDDED IN THE VIBRATION RATE OF ITS CRYSTALLINE STRUCTURE..
...THE WORLD-DESTROYING SCOPE OF BOTH ATTACKS..


THERE'S A MYSTERY FACTOR, STARCHILD, SOME OTHER FORCE--AND BLACKSIDE'S IN LEAGUE WITH IT, MAYBE CONTROLLED BY IT.
EVEN WORSE, NILE, MOTHERBANK KEPT US IN THE DARK --EVEN THOUGH SHE KNEW THE SOURCE OF THOSE CUBES.
AND GIVEN WHAT SHADOW BLACK SAID ON INFERNO...
THEY CLEARLY HAVE NO IDEA WHO AND WHAT MOTHERBANK REALLY IS.
I THINK I'M EITHER PISSED OR SCARED.
YEAH--HELL OF A MISSION WHEN SAVING THE INNER WORLDS TWICE IS ONLY THE START.
BUT WHATEVER THE MYSTERY FACTOR IS, DO YOU REALLY THINK MOTHERBANK COULD BE...INVOLVED?
GOOD QUESTION, NILE.
MAYBE IT'S TIME TO GO ROGUE...
...AND FIND OUT.


A TRANSPORT WAREHOUSE ON OUTER WORLD GLAXIS, TWO DAYS LATER:
WHAT'S THIS HAUL? ANOTHER LOAD O' FANCY-CRAP FOR THE ASSHOLE UPSTAIRS?
YOU GOT IT--STRAIGHT UP TO THE PALACE AGAIN.
SO WHAT THE HELL DOES HE DO WITH ALL THE STUFF WE'RE ALWAYS BRINGIN'?
CONSUMES IT, ENJOYS IT, TRASHES IT.
WHY DO WE CARE?
ALL RIGHT, CREW--YOU'RE LOCKED, LOADED, AND READY TO RIP.
YEAH, THANKS, AJAX.
I'M SERIOUS HERE...
HOW THE HELL DOES HE BURN THROUGH SO MUCH CRAP SO FAST?
BEATS ME, BUT--
WE'LL TAKE IT FROM HERE.
HUH?!
WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TWO?


WE TWO...
...ARE THE NEW CREW.
THEY'RE HIJACKERS! BUT IS THIS THING WHAT I THINK IT IS?
YOU'RE THINKIN' A POPPER?
YEAH.
THEN YOU'RE --
PUK
POK
PUK
POK
PUK
POK
PUK
POK
--R-RIGHT...
YOU BIND AND STASH THEM IN THE CARGO HOLD...
"...WHILE I TAKE THE CONTROLS FOR LAUNCH."


THERE IT IS, THE ORBITING PALACE OF THE OUTER WORLDS MAGISTRATE, AND LET'S HOPE THEY'RE EXPECTING--
INCOMING SUPPLY SHIP...
LOADING DOCK OPENED.
PERFECT.
ABOUT TIME YOU GOT HERE.
HE'S ASKING FOR SOME CRATE OF SPECIAL WINE HE ORDERED, AND YOU KNOW HOW HE--
WAIT A MINUTE--WHO ARE THOSE TWO?
WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!
HWOK
CHUT
SPECIAL DELIVERY.
16


GO--BEAT THE ALARMS!
MORPHIC RESONANCE FIELDS?
NONE DETECTED--THEY'RE JUST ROBOTS.
CHUN
SRAK
ZOP
ALL RIGHT, LET'S DO IT FAST.
WE FIND THE MAGISTRATE...
...NAIL WHAT WE NEED, AND GET OUT.
CHAKT
VZHZHT
JACKPOT.

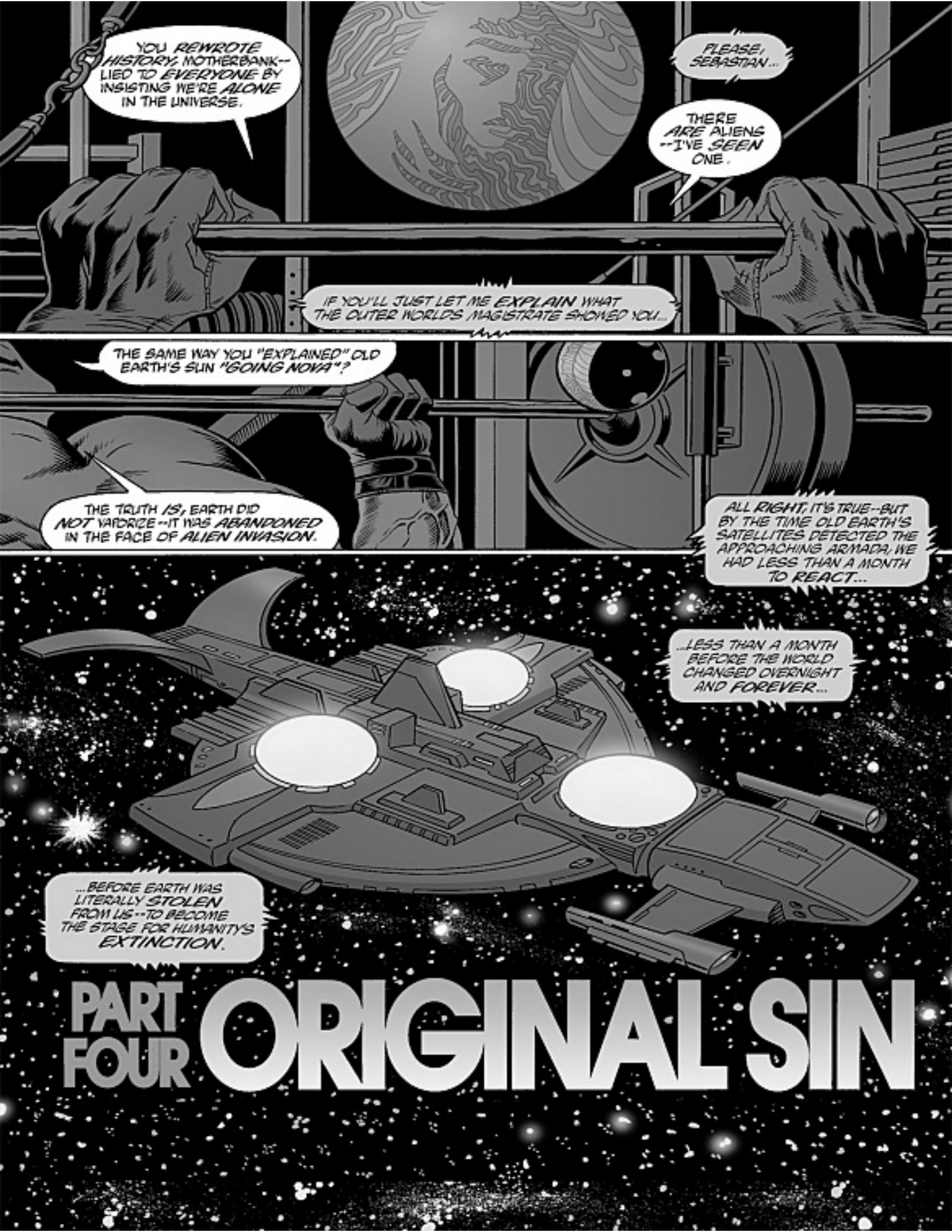

THE MAGISTRATE'S PLEASURE DOME.
FRESH MEAT...AND ALL PRIME.
SINCE I DO NOT RECALL ORDERING A TESLA-9 -- --OR ANY OTHER SIDEARM, FOR THAT MATTER --I ASSUME THIS INTRUSION PORTENDS TROUBLE?
HUGE TROUBLE, MAGISTRATE.
UNLESS YOU COOPERATE.
AND IF I REFUSE?
WE BROUGHT FRESH SUPPLIES, BUT YOU'RE ALL OUT OF OPTIONS.
YOUR AIDES AND ROBOTS ARE DOWN--AND YOU'RE ORBITING ALONE NOW. ALL ALONE IN YOUR COLD PALACE.
THERE'S NOTHING BUT YOUR TECHED-UP PLEASURE DOLLS --AND US.
NO PROTECTION, MAGISTRATE, NO AUTHORITY, NO POWER.
YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE SAFE UP HERE, ABOVE IT ALL--


AND YOU WERE--UNTIL WE CRASHED THE PARTY.
AND JUST WHO ARE YOU?
THE ONES ASKING THE QUESTIONS, MAGISTRATE.
ALL OF THEM.
SEBASTIAN STARCHILD AND ISIS NILE --AGENTS OF S.C.I.-SPY.
YUMMM.
STARCHILD, EITHER YOU SMACK THAT CYBER-BITCH FLAT OR I--
HEY!
YOU WANT SOMETHING, SNAKE?
MMMORE.
YEAH? TWITCH THAT TONGUE AND I'LL KNOT IT AROUND YOUR THROAT.
ENOUGH, DOLLS-- THEY'RE LACKEYS OF MY OPPOSITE NUMBER, THE INNER WORLDS MAGISTRATE.
WRONG--WE DON'T HAVE A SINGLE RULER...
THE INNER WORLDS ARE INDEPENDENT-- AND MOTHERBANK IS NOTHING BUT DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL COVERT INVESTIGATIONS.
HAVE IT YOUR WAY, BUT SHE STILL RUNS AND RULES HER INNER WORLDS--AND THEREBY CONTROLS THE FATES OF MY OUTER WORLDS.


AND THAT JUSTIFIES YOUR SPONSORSHIP OF THE BLACKSIDE ORG?
I HAVE EMPLOYED SHADOW BLACK IN THE PAST, BUT ONLY FOR MINOR OPERATIONS.
IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL THEM, MAGISTRATE? ANTIMATTER BOMBS AND NANOTECH PLAGUES ARE "MINOR OPERATIONS"?
YOUR REFERENCES ELUDE ME, AGENT NILE, AND I'VE NOT SEEN SHADOW BLACK IN MONTHS --NOT SINCE I REJECTED HIS LATEST PROPOSAL AND BANISHED HIM FROM THIS PALACE.
HE'S LYING, STARCHILD, COVERING SOMETHING UP--JUST LIKE MOTHERBANK--AND THE KEY IS THE BLACK HOLE, THE OTHER FORCE INVOLVED.
I AM NOT LYING, ALTHOUGH YOU ARE QUITE CORRECT ABOUT "ANOTHER FORCE."
WHO?
NOT WHO, BUT WHAT-- AN ALIEN FORCE.
THERE ARE NO ALIENS! WE'VE SEARCHED FOR MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS! THERE'S NO ONE BUT US!
WE'RE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE!
THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE WRONG, AS I WILL SHOW Y--
HIT THAT ALARM AND YOUR BRAIN EJECTS!
ALARMING, YES, BUT I ASSURE YOU...
...THIS IS NOT AN ALARM.
TEK


YOU SEE, I MET ONE...
WHAT DID--?
THE FLOOR, STAR-CHILD!
OPENING.
SOMETHING RISING.
...AND I MET IT IN THIS VERY DOME.
IT...IT WASN'T AN ALARM.
IT'S...A TROPHY.
OR A TRICK.
THAT CAME THROUGH THE WORMHOLE?
FROM WHERE? WHERE IS THE WORMHOLE'S OTHER END?
THE LAST PLACE ANY OF US WOULD THINK.
THE ONLY WORLD WHICH IS NOT ALIEN.
THE HOME-WORLD.
OLD EARTH?
IT WAS DESTROYED WHEN ITS SUN WENT NOVA, FORCING OUR ANCESTORS TO FLEE, TO MIGRATE HERE AND COLONIZE ARCTURUS!
A LIE, AGENT NILE, NOTHING BUT AN AUDACIOUS COVER STORY-- CONCOCTED BY YOUR PRECIOUS MOTHERBANK TO MASK THE TRUTH.
INDEED, EARTH'S ACTUAL FATE IS VEILED BEHIND THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM'S GREAT SECRET AND GREAT SHAME.

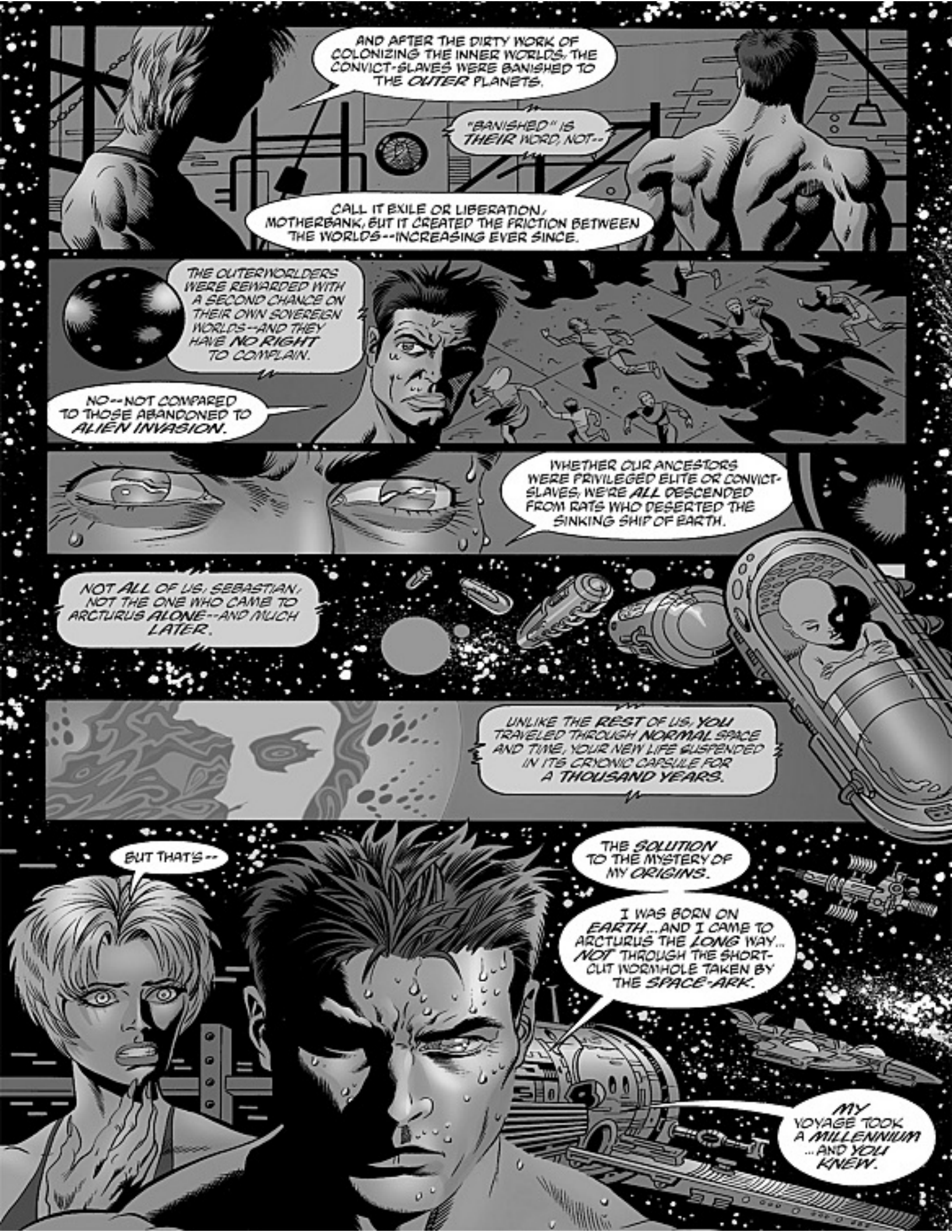

OUR HISTORY IS NOTHING BUT *MYTH*, A CLEVER MYTH -- EVEN *I* BELIEVED--UNTIL SHADOW BLACK BROUGHT *THIS* TO ME, HOPING I WOULD *SANCTION* HIS DEAL WITH THE DEVIL.
INSTEAD, I *KILLED* THE DEVIL --NOT SUSPECTING, THEN, THAT THERE WAS A WHOLE *WORLD* OF SUCH DEVILS.
ON *EARTH*... OCCUPYING OUR *HOMEWORLD*...EVER SINCE THEY *EVICTED OUR ANCESTORS*.
AND IF THERE'S A NEARBY *WORMHOLE*, AS YOU CLAIM, THEN IT MEANS THE DEVILS ARE *COMING* -- PROBABLY *SOON*--TO FINISH WHAT THEY STARTED ONE THOUSAND YEARS IN THE PAST...
THE COMPLETE AND UTTER *CONQUEST OF HUMANITY*.
NEXT: PART III ORIGINAL SIN


YOU REWROTE HISTORY, MOTHERBANK--LIED TO EVERYONE BY INSISTING WE'RE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE.
PLEASE, SEBASTIAN...
THERE ARE ALIENS --I'VE SEEN ONE.
IF YOU'LL JUST LET ME EXPLAIN WHAT THE OUTER WORLDS MAGISTRATE SHOWED YOU...
THE SAME WAY YOU "EXPLAINED" OLD EARTH'S SUN "GOING NOVA"?
THE TRUTH IS, EARTH DID NOT VAPORIZE--IT WAS ABANDONED IN THE FACE OF ALIEN INVASION.
ALL RIGHT, IT'S TRUE--BUT BY THE TIME OLD EARTH'S SATELLITES DETECTED THE APPROACHING ARMADA, WE HAD LESS THAN A MONTH TO REACT...
...LESS THAN A MONTH BEFORE THE WORLD CHANGED OVERNIGHT AND FOREVER...
...BEFORE EARTH WAS LITERALLY STOLEN FROM US--TO BECOME THE STAGE FOR HUMANITY'S EXTINCTION.
PART FOUR
ORIGINAL SIN

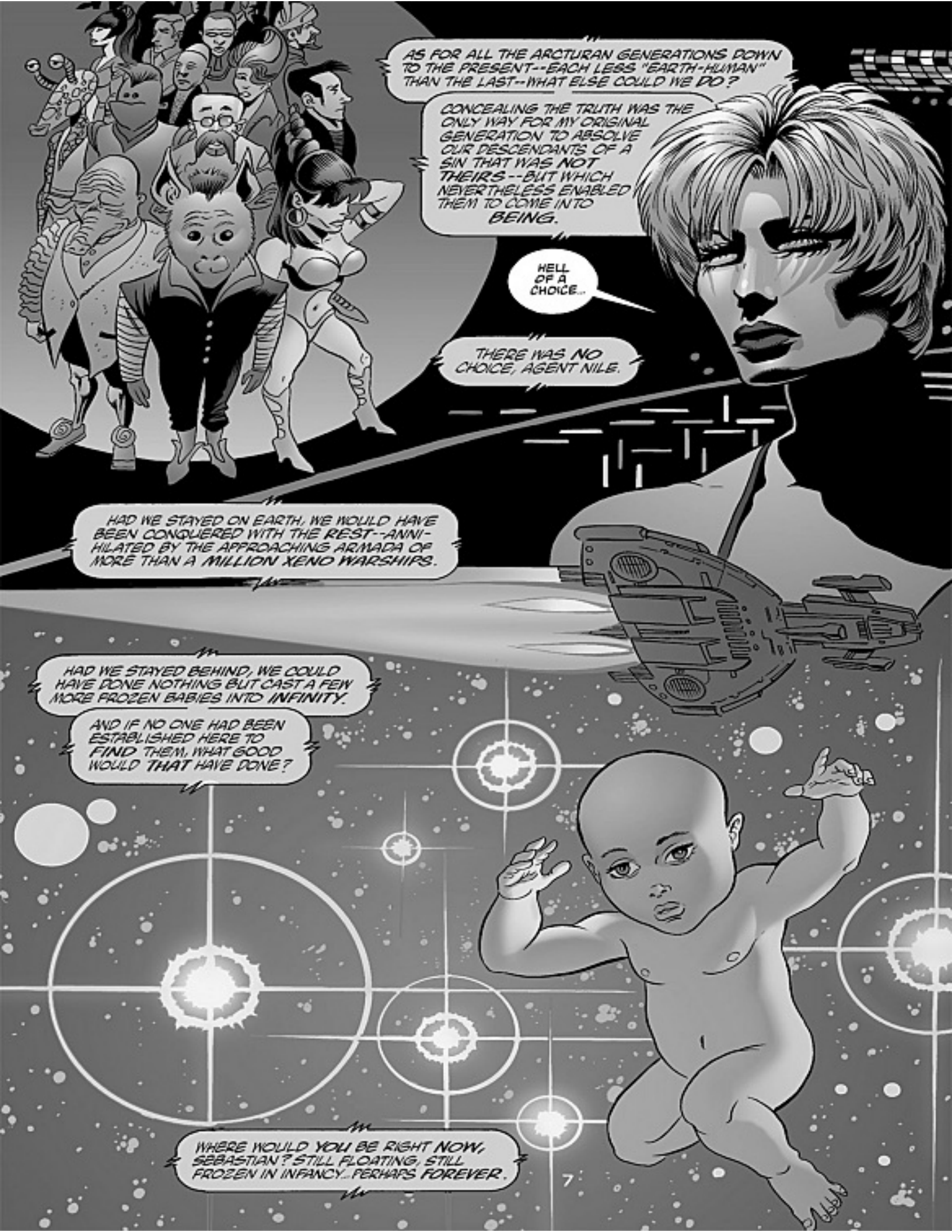

THERE WERE SO MANY SHIPS, SEBASTIAN; ALL OF THEM HUGE--A CONQUERING FORCE THE SIZE OF A WORLD POPULATION.
WITH NO WAY TO OPPOSE SUCH AN ATTACK, FLIGHT WAS THE SOLE OPTION...
AND WITH SO LITTLE TIME, WE FELT LIKE NOAH--ABLE TO PREPARE ONLY A SINGLE SHIP WITH LIMITED PASSENGERS.
BUT IF NO ONE FLED THE ONCOMING XENO INVASION--
HOW WAS IT DONE, MOTHERBANK? HOW DID YOU DEVISE YOUR SPACE-ARK'S MANIFEST?
DID EARTH'S POPULATION DRAW STRAWS? OR DID YOUR "BEST AND BRIGHTEST" KEEP THE CRISIS A SECRET FROM ALL THE REST?
DID YOU HOARD SALVATION FOR YOURSELVES?

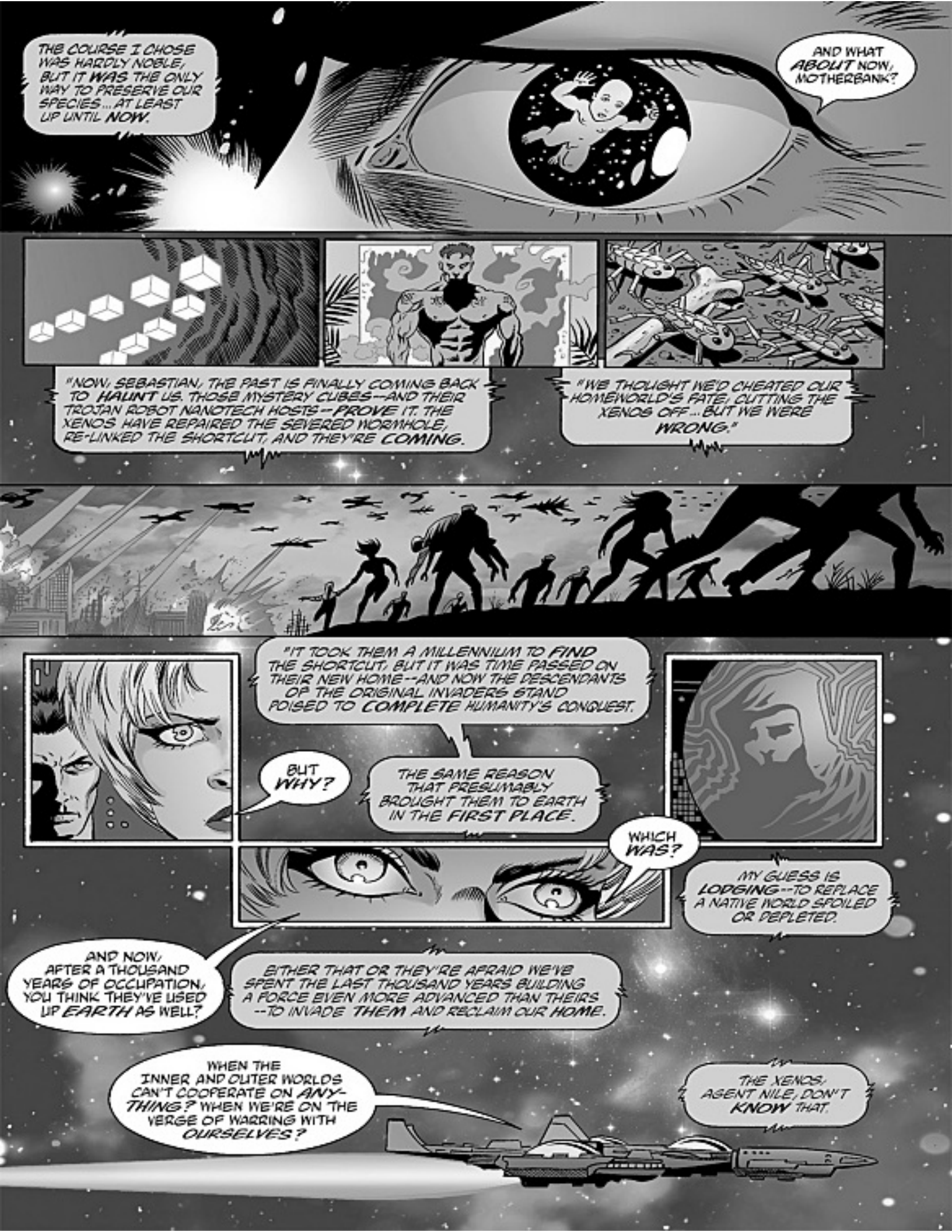

ONLY A FEW COULD ESCAPE--TO PROPAGATE THE DISPLACED HUMAN RACE--AND YES, THEY WERE A PRIVILEGED ELITE, THE BEST INDIVIDUALS EARTH COULD OFFER.
WHO MADE THE EVALUATIONS, MOTHERBANK? WHO CHOSE THE FORTUNATE "ELITE"?
AS PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED AMERICAS, I DID... AND MY CONSCIENCE HAS BEEN RAVAGED EVER SINCE... FOR A THOUSAND IMMORTAL YEARS.
BUT YOU DID IT.
SHADOW BLACK AND THE OUTER WORLDS MAGISTRATE WERE BOTH TELLING THE TRUTH.
YOU PLAYED GOD, MOTHERBANK, SAVING THE FEW AND TURNING YOUR BACK ON THE MANY...
...LEADING A COWARDLY ROUT UNDER THE GUISE OF A NOBLE "EXODUS."
THAT'S ENOUGH, SEBASTIAN! I DID WHAT I HAD TO DO! THERE WAS NO TIME FOR ANY-THING ELSE--


OUR ONLY HOPE WAS ESCAPE THROUGH A WORMHOLE--A WARP-TUNNEL LINKING TWO DISTANT BLACK HOLES, ONE NEAR EARTH AND THE OTHER HERE, NEAR ARCTURUS--AND WE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IF IT WAS SALVATION OR SUICIDE...
ONCE INSIDE THE WORMHOLE'S GRAVITY WELL, WE COULD HAVE BEEN CRUSHED OR STRETCHED TO SUBATOMIC--
BUT YOU WEREN'T--YOU SURVIVED THE VOYAGE...
...AND YOUR ELITE FEW HAVE BEEN FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLYING, TERRAFORMING AND POPULATING THE ARCTURAN WORLDS --EVEN AS THEY REJECTED THEIR NATIVE HUMANITY AND CHOSE TO BECOME FREAKS.
THE ELITE WEREN'T THE ONLY ONES, STARCHILD--NOT IF SHADOW BLACK AND CHAXX-PRIME HINTED AT THE TRUTH OF THEIR ORIGINS.
WHAT ABOUT IT, MOTHERBANK?
WERE THE LOWER BERTHS OF YOUR SPACE-ARK CRAMMED WITH SLAVE LABOR CULLED FROM EARTH PRISONS?
RECRUITMENT OF THE NECESSARY WORKFORCE HAD TO BE KEPT SECRET--TO PREVENT USELESS PANIC--AND THEY WEREN'T ALL CONVICTS.
THEY WERE ENGINEERS AND--
BUT THE MANUAL LABORERS WERE FREED TO BECOME SLAVES.

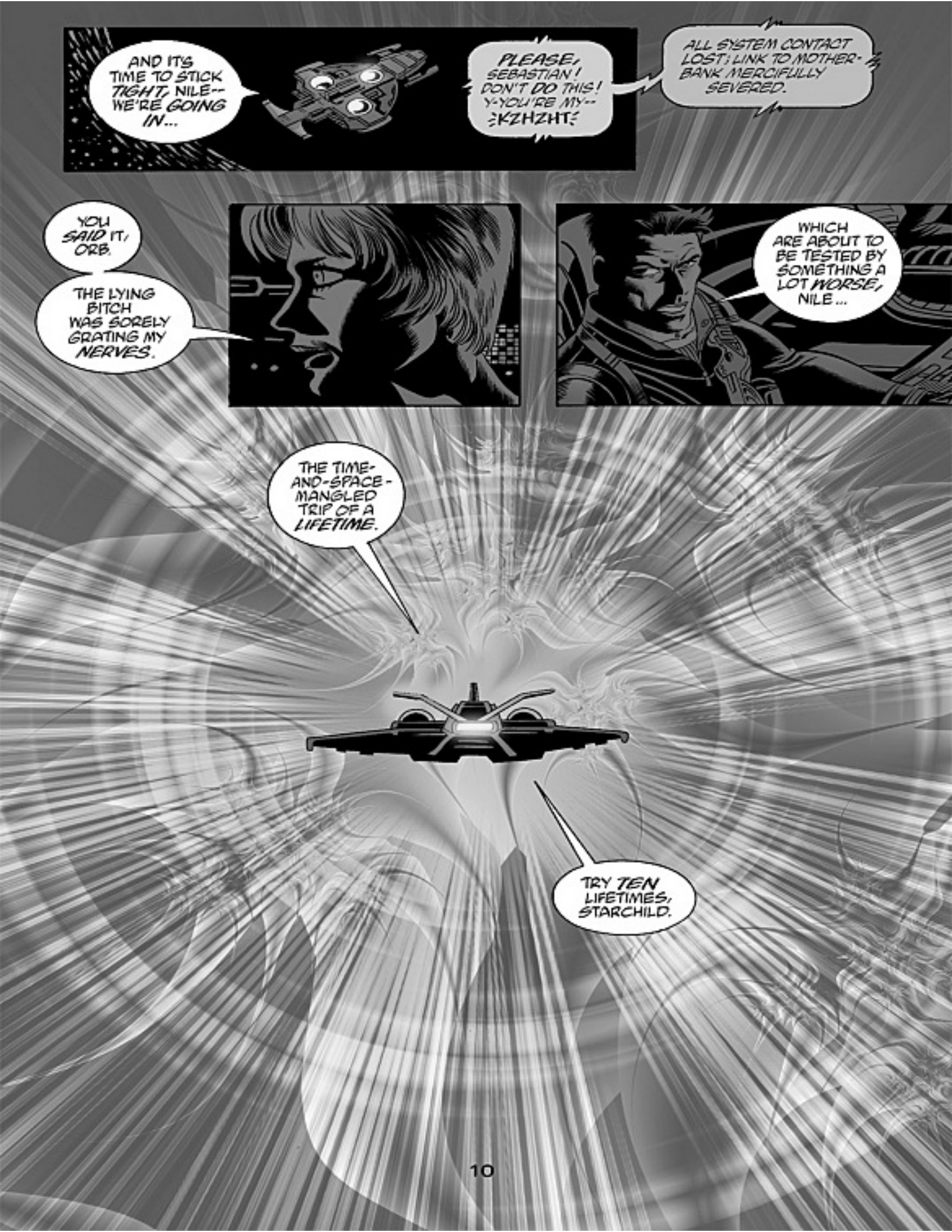

AND AFTER THE DIRTY WORK OF COLONIZING THE INNER WORLDS, THE CONVICT-SLAVES WERE BANISHED TO THE OUTER PLANETS.
"BANISHED" IS THEIR WORD, NOT--
CALL IT EXILE OR LIBERATION, MOTHERBANK, BUT IT CREATED THE FRICTION BETWEEN THE WORLDS--INCREASING EVER SINCE.
THE OUTERWORLDERS WERE REWARDED WITH A SECOND CHANCE ON THEIR OWN SOVEREIGN WORLDS--AND THEY HAVE NO RIGHT TO COMPLAIN.
NO--NOT COMPARED TO THOSE ABANDONED TO ALIEN INVASION.
WHETHER OUR ANCESTORS WERE PRIVILEGED ELITE OR CONVICT-SLAVES, WE'RE ALL DESCENDED FROM RATS WHO DESERTED THE SINKING SHIP OF EARTH.
NOT ALL OF US, SEBASTIAN, NOT THE ONE WHO CAME TO ARCTURUS ALONE--AND MUCH LATER.
UNLIKE THE REST OF US, YOU TRAVELED THROUGH NORMAL SPACE AND TIME, YOUR NEW LIFE SUSPENDED IN ITS CRYONIC CAPSULE FOR A THOUSAND YEARS.
BUT THAT'S--
THE SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY OF MY ORIGINS.
I WAS BORN ON EARTH...AND I CAME TO ARCTURUS THE LONG WAY... NOT THROUGH THE SHORT-CUT WORMHOLE TAKEN BY THE SPACE-ARK.
MY VOYAGE TOOK A MILLENNIUM ...AND YOU KNEW.


WORSE THAN THAT, MOTHERBANK, YOU KEPT THE WORMHOLE'S EXISTENCE A SECRET FROM THOSE LEFT BEHIND.
IT...IT WAS MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT.
OUR ONLY HOPE WAS TO AVOID PURSUIT, AND AN ESCAPE ROUTE "DISGUISED" AS A BLACK HOLE WAS PERFECT...
ONCE THE WARP-VOYAGE WAS COMPLETED, AND AS AN ADDITIONAL FAIL-SAFE, WE SEVERED THE WORMHOLE BEHIND US.
BUT IF EARTH FELL TO THE ALIENS, HOW WAS I...SENT?
OBVIOUSLY YOUR PARENTS--PERHAPS AN ENTIRE ENCLAVE OF HUMANS, SOMEHOW SURVIVED LONG ENOUGH TO DELIVER YOU FROM THEIR FATE.
IT MUST HAVE BEEN AN ACT OF BLIND FAITH AND HEARTBREAKING HOPE IN THE FACE OF DOOM...BUT IT SUCCEEDED, SEBASTIAN.
YOU CAME TO US--AND YOU ALONE ARE INNOCENT OF THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM'S GREAT "ORIGINAL SIN."


AS FOR ALL THE ARCTURAN GENERATIONS DOWN TO THE PRESENT--EACH LESS "EARTH-HUMAN" THAN THE LAST--WHAT ELSE COULD WE DO?
CONCEALING THE TRUTH WAS THE ONLY WAY FOR MY ORIGINAL GENERATION TO ABSOLVE OUR DESCENDANTS OF A SIN THAT WAS NOT THEIRS--BUT WHICH NEVERTHELESS ENABLED THEM TO COME INTO BEING.
HELL OF A CHOICE...
THERE WAS NO CHOICE, AGENT NILE.
HAD WE STAYED ON EARTH, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN CONQUERED WITH THE REST--ANNIHILATED BY THE APPROACHING ARMADA OF MORE THAN A MILLION XENO WARSHIPS.
HAD WE STAYED BEHIND, WE COULD HAVE DONE NOTHING BUT CAST A FEW MORE FROZEN BABIES INTO INFINITY.
AND IF NO ONE HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED HERE TO FIND THEM, WHAT GOOD WOULD THAT HAVE DONE?
WHERE WOULD YOU BE RIGHT NOW, SEBASTIAN? STILL FLOATING, STILL FROZEN IN INFANCY... PERHAPS FOREVER.


THE COURSE I CHOSE WAS HARDLY NOBLE, BUT IT WAS THE ONLY WAY TO PRESERVE OUR SPECIES... AT LEAST UP UNTIL NOW.
AND WHAT ABOUT NOW, MOTHERBANK?
"NOW, SEBASTIAN, THE PAST IS FINALLY COMING BACK TO HAUNT US. THOSE MYSTERY CUBES--AND THEIR TROJAN ROBOT NANOTECH HOSTS--PROVE IT. THE XENOS HAVE REPAIRED THE SEVERED WORMHOLE, RE-LINKED THE SHORTCUT, AND THEY'RE COMING.
"WE THOUGHT WE'D CHEATED OUR HOMEWORLD'S FATE, CUTTING THE XENOS OFF... BUT WE WERE WRONG."
"IT TOOK THEM A MILLENNIUM TO FIND THE SHORTCUT, BUT IT WAS TIME PASSED ON THEIR NEW HOME--AND NOW THE DESCENDANTS OF THE ORIGINAL INVADERS STAND POISED TO COMPLETE HUMANITY'S CONQUEST.
BUT WHY?
THE SAME REASON THAT PRESUMABLY BROUGHT THEM TO EARTH IN THE FIRST PLACE.
WHICH WAS?
MY GUESS IS LODGING--TO REPLACE A NATIVE WORLD SPOILED OR DEPLETED.
AND NOW, AFTER A THOUSAND YEARS OF OCCUPATION, YOU THINK THEY'VE USED UP EARTH AS WELL?
EITHER THAT OR THEY'RE AFRAID WE'VE SPENT THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS BUILDING A FORCE EVEN MORE ADVANCED THAN THEIRS --TO INVADE THEM AND RECLAIM OUR HOME.
WHEN THE INNER AND OUTER WORLDS CAN'T COOPERATE ON ANY-THING? WHEN WE'RE ON THE VERGE OF WARRING WITH OURSELVES?
THE XENOS, AGENT NILE, DON'T KNOW THAT.

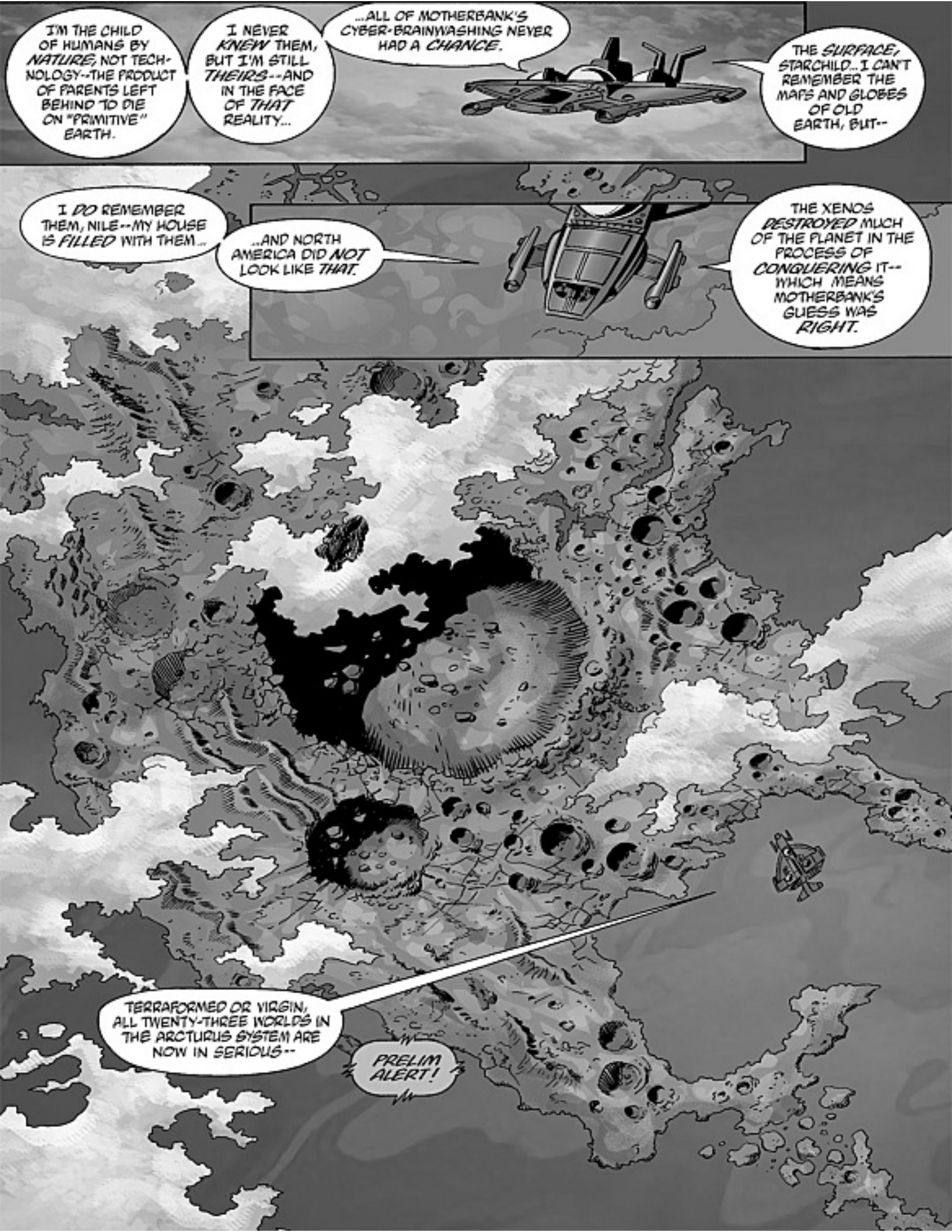

THEN YOUR CREATION OF THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM ONLY POSTPONED THE INEVITABLE --AND HUMANKIND STILL FACES EXTINCTION.
UNLESS, SEBASTIAN... YOU FULFILL YOUR DESTINY.
YOU CAME TO US FROM THE HEAVENS JUST IN TIME. "AND LO, A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM"...
YOU THINK I'M--
MANKIND'S LAST BEST HOPE.
I'M NO SAVIOR, MOTHERBANK, BUT I AM WAY AHEAD OF YOU.
IN FACT, I'M ABOUT TO JACK OUR OWN "TROJAN ROBOT" THROUGH THE WORMHOLE'S OTHER END.
SEBASTIAN, WHAT ARE...YOUR SHIP'S TRAJECTORY! YOU'VE ALTERED YOUR COURSE AWAY FROM PRIMUS! YOU'RE HEADING FOR --
THE BLACK HOLE, MOTHERBANK--DEAD AHEAD.
TURN BACK! IT'S THE ENTRANCE TO THE REOPENED WORMHOLE! YOU CAN'T RISK--
I'VE JUST BREACHED THE EVENT HORIZON--NO TURNING BACK NOW, NOT EVEN IF I WANTED TO.
THE BLACK HOLE'S GRAVITY VORTEX WON'T LET ME.
BUT YOU CAN'T UNDERTAKE A MISSION OF THIS MAGNITUDE WITHOUT PREPARATIONS AND--
I PREPPED THIS NEW SHIP AND EVERYTHING ELSE, MOTHERBANK, BEFORE ORB LINKED TO YOU.
BUT THIS IS TOO BIG! YOU CAN'T ATTEMPT IT ALONE!
THANKS TO YOUR COMMAND, I'M NOT ALONE-- NOT WITH ISIS NILE GLUED TO MY ASS.

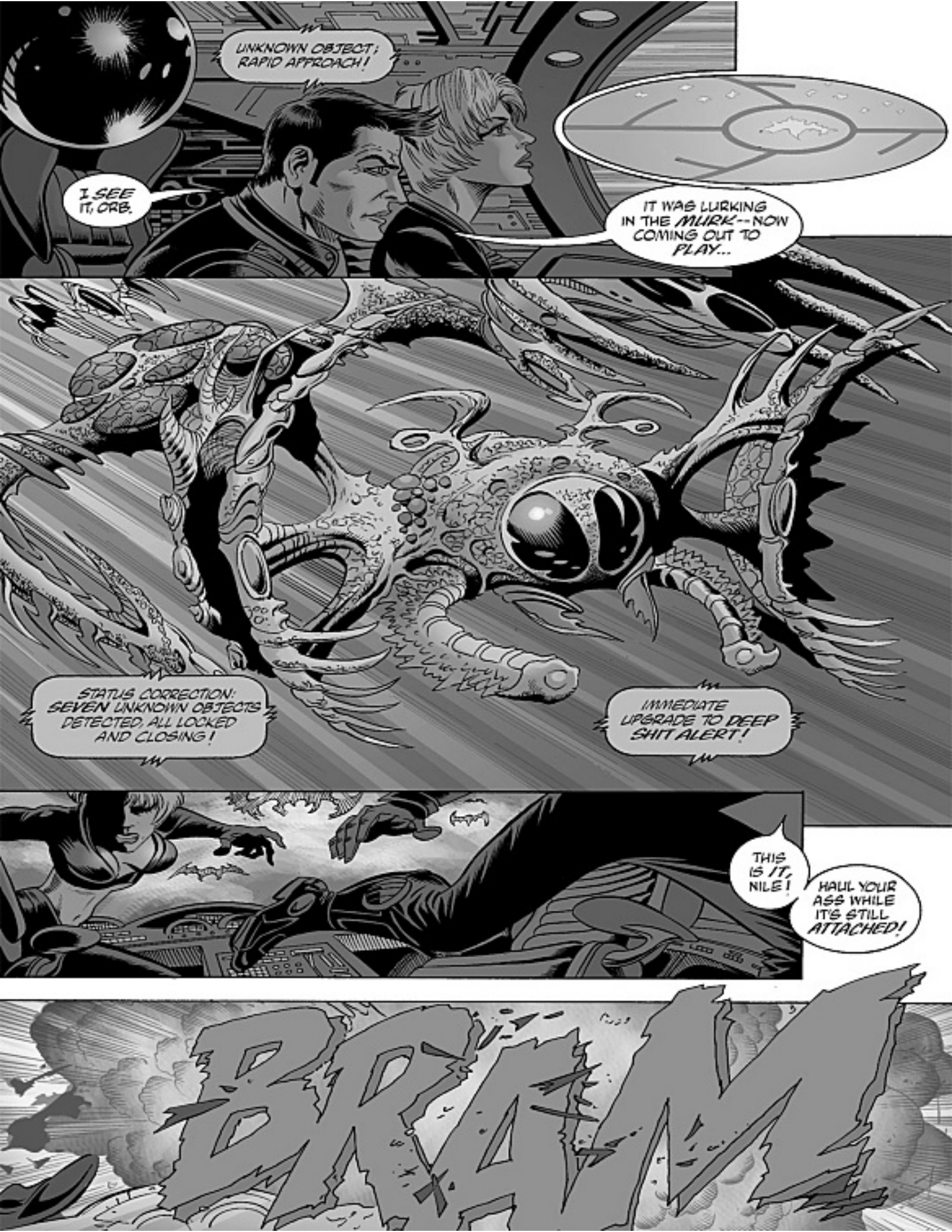

AND IT'S TIME TO STICK TIGHT, NILE-- WE'RE GOING IN...
PLEASE, SEBASTIAN! DON'T DO THIS! Y-YOU'RE MY-- :KZHZHT:
ALL SYSTEM CONTACT LOST; LINK TO MOTHER-BANK MERCIFULLY SEVERED.
YOU SAID IT, ORB.
THE LYING BITCH WAS SORELY GRATING MY NERVES.
WHICH ARE ABOUT TO BE TESTED BY SOMETHING A LOT WORSE, NILE...
THE TIME-AND-SPACE-MANGLED TRIP OF A LIFETIME.
TRY TEN LIFETIMES, STARCHILD.


AND IF I MAY BE ALLOWED ONE QUESTION, STARCHILD?
HIT ME, NILE.
HOW THE HELL DO WE SURVIVE THE TRIP?
EITHER WE PULL OFF THE SAME TRICK AS THOSE MYSTERY CUBES THAT CAME THE OTHER WAY...

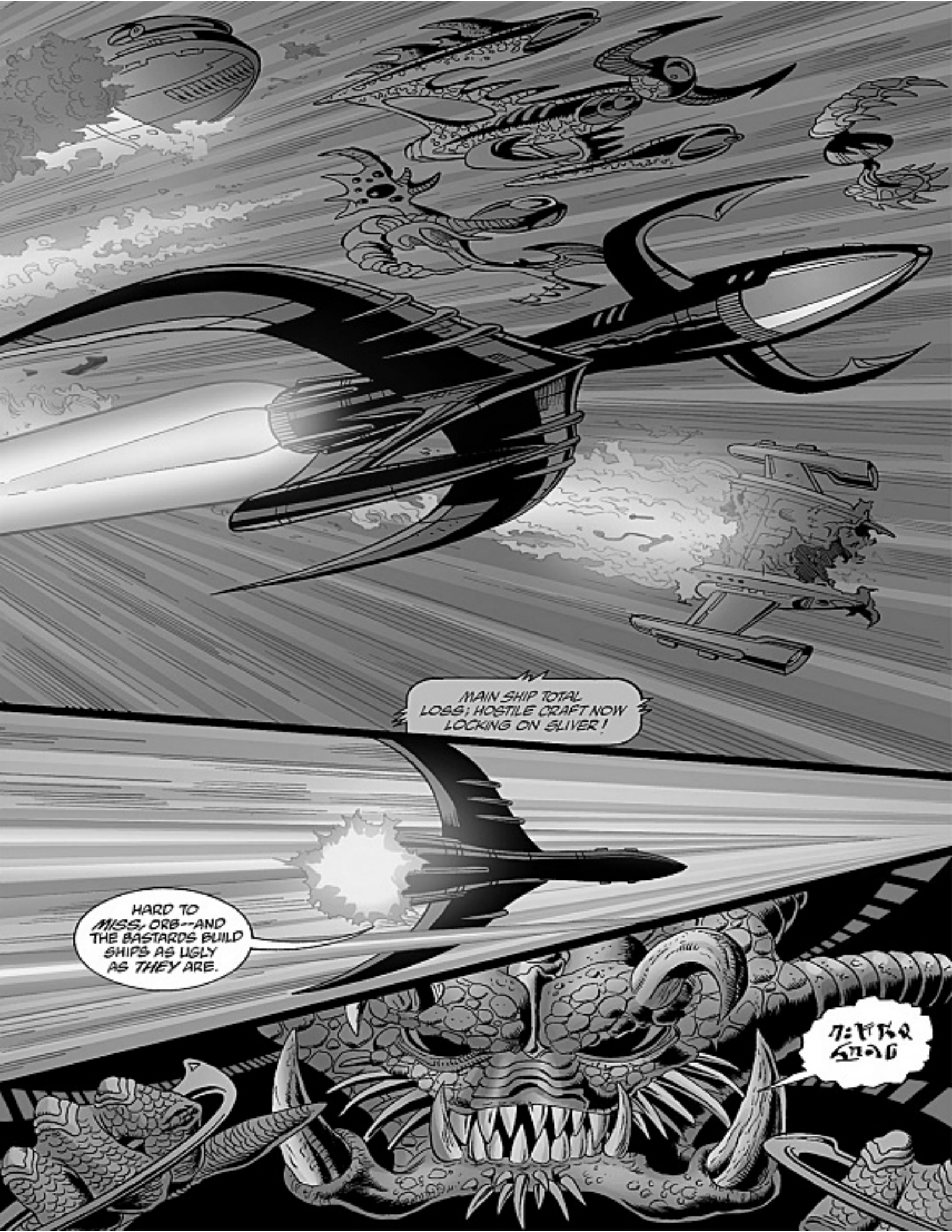

...OR WE DON'T SURVIVE IT.
I SEE.
VERY REASSURING.
SO GOOD OF YOU TO ANSWER.
DEET
SPIT IT, ORB.
WORMHOLE'S OPPOSITE TERMINUS DEAD AHEAD; WE'LL BE CRASHING IT AT MAXIMUM SURVIVABLE FORCE AND VELOCITY.
ENOUGH TO OVERCOME THE BLACK HOLE'S GRAVITY PULL?
YOU BETCHA; BREACHING EVENT HORIZON INTO NORMAL SPACE NOW; AUTO-RETROS REDUCING SPEED.
MY GOD, STARCHILD, WE...WE MADE IT!


A THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS FROM ARCTURUS--IN LESS THAN AN HOUR.
BUT NO ALIEN SHIPS IN THE VICINITY.
DID WE EMERGE IN THE RIGHT PLACE, ORB?
YEP--THIS IS THE SOL SYSTEM, WITH PLANET EARTH COMING INTO VIEW...
...NOW.
BUT HARDLY THE EXPECTED VIEW, ORB --NOT THE "BEAUTIFUL BLUE MARBLE IN SPACE" FROM THE ANCIENT PHOTOS...
MORE LIKE ...A BROWN BALL OF DEATH.
NOT QUITE; SPECTRUM ANALYSIS INDICATES NONLETHAL GASEOUS HAZE--NOXIOUS BUT STILL MOSTLY BREATHABLE.
MY TRUE HOME, NILE... THE PLACE WHERE I WAS BORN... RUINED BY THE XENOS WHO STOLE IT--AND WHO MURDERED MY PARENTS.
NEVER THOUGHT I'D HEAR A QUAVER IN YOUR VOICE, BUT THIS DOES EXPLAIN A LOT...
WHY YOU'RE SUCH A FLESH-PURE LONER... WHY YOU OBSESSIVELY COLLECT ANCIENT HOMEWORLD ARTIFACTS.
COMPARED TO THE REST OF US, YOU'RE AN ALIEN-- A NATIVE OF THIS WRETCHED PLANET.
YOU SKIPPED ALL THE THOUSAND YEARS OF ARCTURAN ADAPTATION AND HERITAGE...
...MAKING YOU ACT AS IF HUMANITY'S OLD EARTH WAYS ARE EMBEDDED ON A GENETIC LEVEL.
MAYBE THEY ARE, NILE...


I'M THE CHILD OF HUMANS BY NATURE, NOT TECHNOLOGY--THE PRODUCT OF PARENTS LEFT BEHIND TO DIE ON "PRIMITIVE" EARTH.
I NEVER KNEW THEM, BUT I'M STILL THEIRS--AND IN THE FACE OF THAT REALITY...
...ALL OF MOTHERBANK'S CYBER-BRAINWASHING NEVER HAD A CHANCE.
THE SURFACE, STARCHILD... I CAN'T REMEMBER THE MAPS AND GLOBES OF OLD EARTH, BUT--
I DO REMEMBER THEM, NILE--MY HOUSE IS FILLED WITH THEM...
...AND NORTH AMERICA DID NOT LOOK LIKE THAT.
THE XENOS DESTROYED MUCH OF THE PLANET IN THE PROCESS OF CONQUERING IT--WHICH MEANS MOTHERBANK'S GUESS WAS RIGHT.
TERRAFORMED OR VIRGIN, ALL TWENTY-THREE WORLDS IN THE ARCTURUS SYSTEM ARE NOW IN SERIOUS--
PRELIM ALERT!


UNKNOWN OBJECT; RAPID APPROACH!
I SEE IT, ORB.
IT WAS LURKING IN THE MURK--NOW COMING OUT TO PLAY...
STATUS CORRECTION: SEVEN UNKNOWN OBJECTS DETECTED, ALL LOCKED AND CLOSING!
IMMEDIATE UPGRADE TO DEEP SHIT ALERT!
THIS IS IT, NILE!
HAUL YOUR ASS WHILE IT'S STILL ATTACHED!
BRAM


"ABANDON SHIP! EJECT SLIVER--NOW!"
NINE MORE JOINING THE ATTACK!

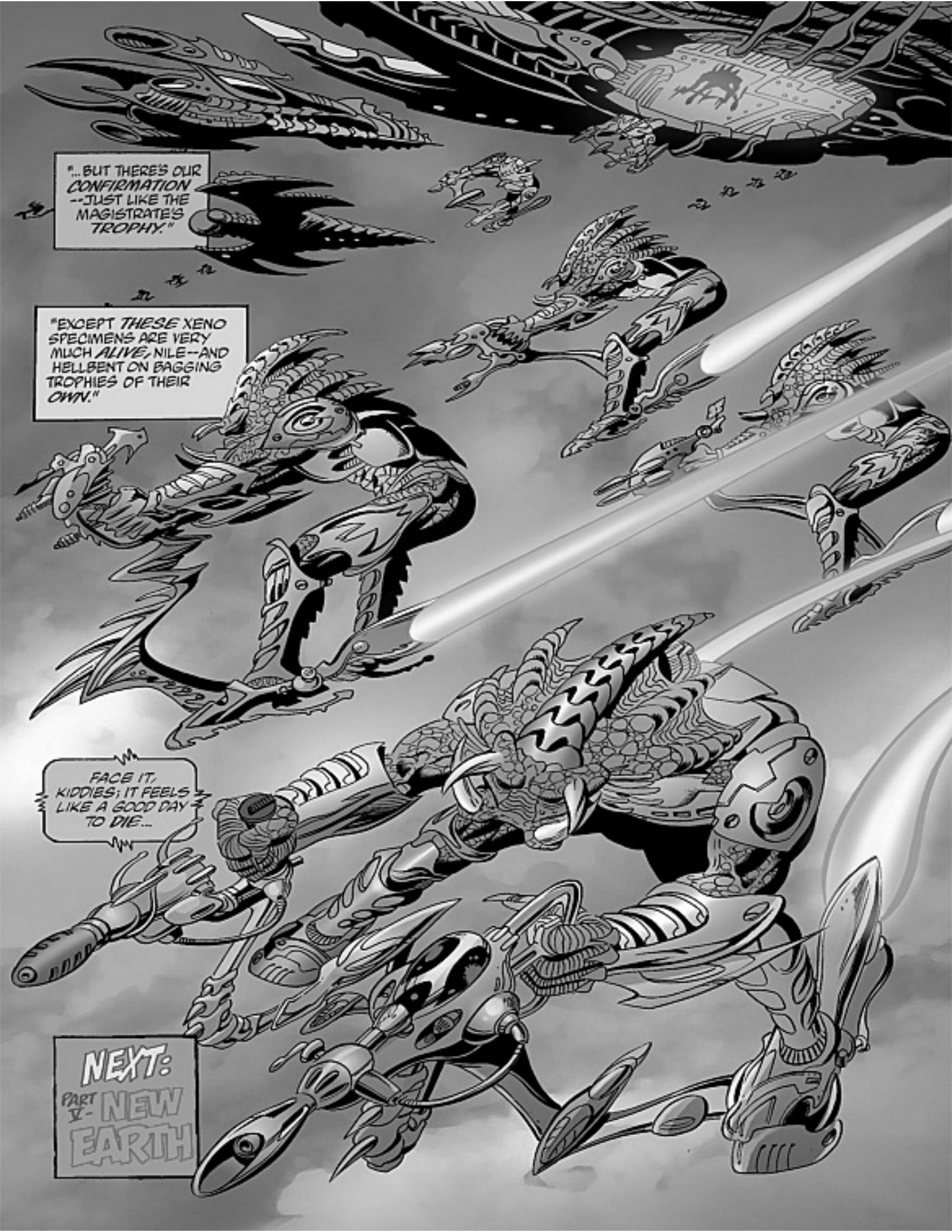

MAIN SHIP TOTAL LOSS; HOSTILE CRAFT NOW LOCKING ON SLIVER!
HARD TO MISS, ORB--AND THE BASTARDS BUILD SHIPS AS UGLY AS THEY ARE.


CONVERGING FAST; EVADE, EVADE, EVADE!
SCREW THAT, ORB, TIMES THREE.
PRIME THE WEAPONS, NILE--AND GET READY TO RIP WHEN I SWERVE INTO THEM.
artillery
TEK
GOTCHA.
CHAK
KLAK
VMM
NOW!!
SCHAOWW


NOT BAD, NILE, BUT NAILING THREE WON'T DO IT...
TOO MANY OF THEM--ALL FASTER THAN THEY LOOK!
KRASH
AND HERE COMES A--
WE'RE GOING DOWN!
TOLD JA TO EVADE.


LAND AHEAD--NOT FAR.
CAN YOU REACH IT?
HARD TO SAY.
WE'RE CRIPPLED BAD...
TOOSH
TOUCH AND GO ALL THE WAY...
PSHSH
...BUT IT'LL BE CLOSE.
KRUMP
MADE IT--BUT WE'RE SKIDDING OUT OF CONTROL, NO WAY TO STOP!
BRACE YOURSELF, NILE!


SHRRRLIMPH
NILE! CAN YOU MOVE?
I...Y-YES, I THINK SO..
THEN DO IT! OUT--NOW!
WE'RE A DEAD TARGET SITTING HERE!
BOTH SHIPS DESTROYED.
WE'RE STRANDED... STUCK IN THESE RUINS WITH NO WAY BACK TO THE WORMHOLE..
WHICH THE SLIVER COULDN'T WITHSTAND ANY-WAY--EVEN IF WE REPAIRED IT.
NO WAY BACK TO ARCTURUS OR--
HEADS UP AGAIN: ATTACKERS FROM ABOVE.
DAMN.
HELL OF A WAY TO SOLVE THE MYSTERY, STARCHILD...


"...BUT THERE'S OUR CONFIRMATION --JUST LIKE THE MAGISTRATE'S TROPHY."
"EXCEPT THESE XENO SPECIMENS ARE VERY MUCH ALIVE, NILE--AND HELLBENT ON BAGGING TROPHIES OF THEIR OWN."
FACE IT, KIDDIES; IT FEELS LIKE A GOOD DAY TO DIE...
NEXT: PART V- NEW EARTH


PART FIVE
NEW EARTH
HUMANITY'S HOMEWORLD, A THOUSAND YEARS AFTER OCCUPATION AND GENOCIDE:
REMIND ME, STARCHILD -- YOUR LOVE FOR THIS WRETCHED PLANET IS BASED ON WHAT?
SHUT UP AND BOLT FOR THE RUBBLE, NILE! GRAB SOME COVER FAST!
BRILLIANT STRATEGY...


...BUT I DON'T THINK WE'LL MAKE IT.
YOU'RE RIGHT.
CHUN CHUN CHUN
TOO MANY OF THEM.
MAKE A STAND! CUT DOWN THE PURSUIT!
CHUN CHUN
BAOUM
SPIKE-SKULLED BASTARDS.
ZOP ZOP


SPAK
PAK
NOW WE'LL MAKE IT.
GO!
CHUN
BUKSH
I'LL FINISH THEM!
ZOP ZOP ZOP
LIKE HELL YOU WILL.
LAST OF THE XENOS ROASTING NOW, SEBASTIAN.
SCHARK
YOU'RE CLEAR.
FAR FROM THE LAST OF THEM, ORB--AND WE'RE FAR FROM CLEAR...


"IN FACT, WE'RE ALREADY TOO LATE."
MY GOD, STARCHILD--A SHIP CANNIBALIZED FROM THE CITY ITSELF... BIG ENOUGH TO TRANSPORT MILLIONS...
AND THEY'RE BOARDING, NILE-- READY TO ABANDON TRASHED EARTH JUST AS THEY JUNKED THEIR OWN RUINED WORLD MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS AGO.
MY HOME... THE PLANET OF MY BIRTH... DESTROYED BY INVADERS FROM THE OTHER END OF THE UNIVERSE... EVIL SCUM WHO COULDN'T MAKE THEIR OWN WORLD WORK, SO THEY HIJACKED OURS...
AND NOW THEY'RE EMBARKING ON ANOTHER EXODUS-INVASION.
PROBABLY WITH SHIPS LIKE THAT ABOVE EVERY MAJOR CITY ON THE PLANET-- ALL PREPARING TO ENTER THE BLACK HOLE, PASS THROUGH THE WORMHOLE SHORTCUT, AND POP OUT NEAR ARCTURUS...
...READY TO FINISH OFF THE HUMAN RACE AND TAKE OVER THEIR NEXT HOMES.


"SO MUCH FOR OUR RECON MISSION, NILE..."
EVEN IF WE STILL HAD A SHIP, WE'D HARDLY GET BACK TO ARCTURUS IN TIME TO DO ANY GOOD.
AND AS IT IS, WE'RE ABOUT TO BE STRANDED HERE--WITH NO WAY TO WARN ANYONE.
SO WE FLIP TO PLAN B--AND STOP THE INVASION.
YEAH, SURE...PIECE OF CAKE.
STAR-CHILD, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
JUST LOOKING AT WHAT'S LEFT, NILE... AND WONDERING ABOUT MY PARENTS.
YOUR PARENTS--?
WHAT ARE YOU--
THEY DIED A THOUSAND YEARS AGO...SOMEWHERE HERE ON EARTH...AFTER LAUNCHING THEIR FROZEN CHILD INTO THE SLIM HOPE OF INFINITY...
BUT WHAT HAPPENED THEN?
WHERE ARE THEIR REMAINS?
SNAP OUT OF IT, STARCHILD.
IT DOESN'T MATTER WHERE THEY ARE, NOT NOW, NOT WITH OUR OWN BONES TO WORRY ABOUT.
EASY NILE, I'M STILL WITH YOU--AND PLAN B IT IS.
WE WAIT FOR COVER OF DARK, SPOT OUR OPENING...
...AND KICK ALIEN ASS.


NIGHT:
SPOT OUR OPENING YET?
THOSE CARGO CONTAINERS, STARCHILD...
SAME WEIRD SHAPE AND SUBSTANCE AS THE LUCIFER FILE--AND THAT CLINCHES IT.
THE ANTIMATTER EYEBALL BOMB, THE MYSTERY CUBES WITH THEIR TROJAN ROBOTS AND NANOTECH HUNGERBUGS... THEY ALL CAME FROM HERE.
THE XENOS WERE BEHIND EVERYTHING ALL ALONG.
I DO BELIEVE WE ALREADY KNEW THAT, NILE.
YEAH, BUT--
THE ONLY MYSTERY IS HOW THE XENOS KNEW WHERE TO SEND ALL THEIR ALIEN MASS DESTRUCTION CRAP--HOW THEY KNEW A SEEMINGLY NORMAL BLACK HOLE COULD BE CONVERTED TO A WORMHOLE PORTAL ACCESSING ARCTURUS.
SO, GENIUS-- HOW DID THEY KNOW?
NO CLUE-- BUT TIME TO GET COZY AND FIND OUT.

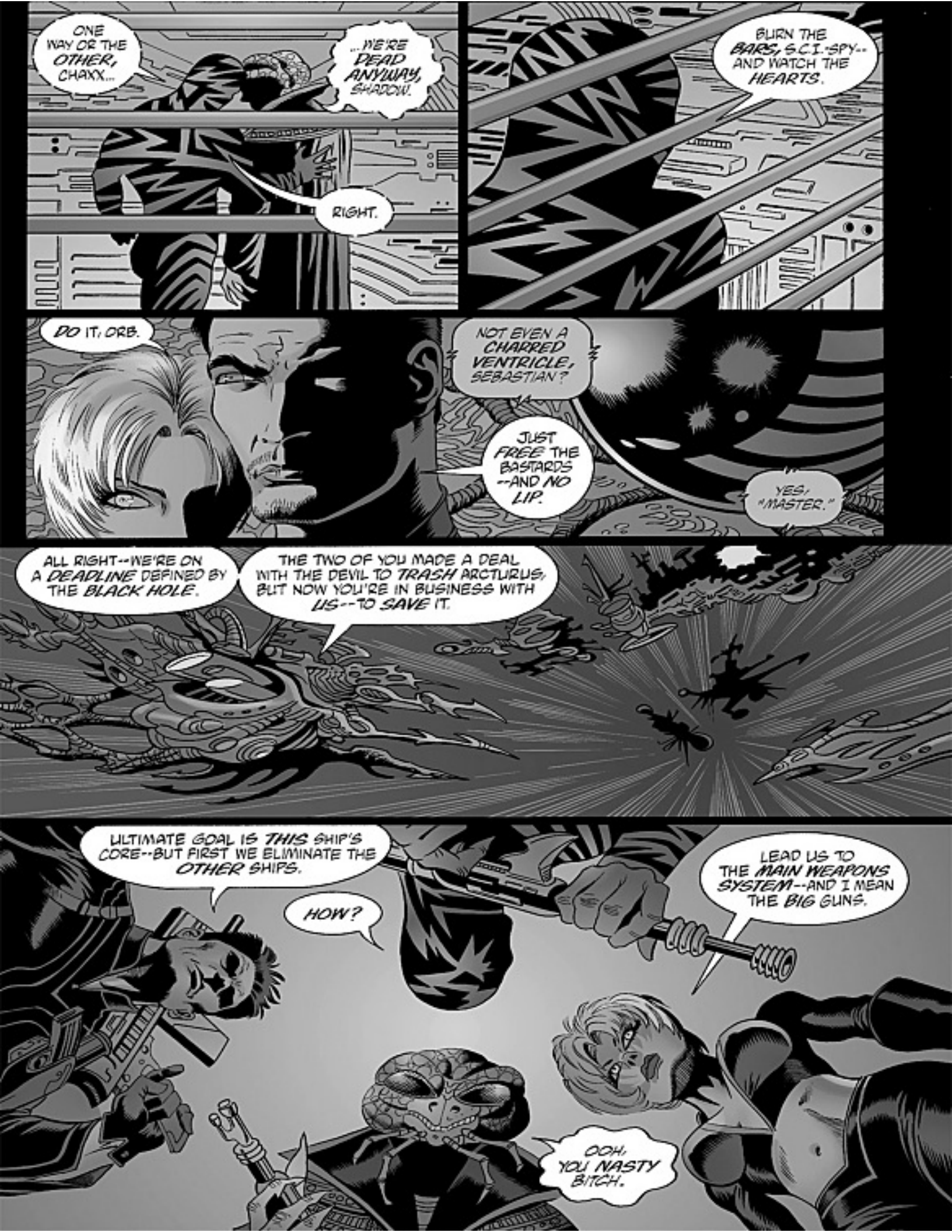

DAY:
ONE SPY'S COZY, STARCHILD, IS ANOTHER SPY'S CRAMPED--SO WATCH THE ELBOW, HUH?
YOUR OWN FAULT, NILE...
...FOR STICKING OUT IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES.
RIGHT PLACES--AS IF YOU HADN'T NOTICED.
AND NIGHT AGAIN:
THINK IT'S SAFE YET?
ONE WAY TO FIND --UHN! FEEL THAT?
YOU MEAN THE VIOLENT LURCH THAT JUST DUMPED YOU IN MY LAP?
THE VERY ONE.
THEN I FELT IT, ALL RIGHT...
"...ALONG WITH ALL THE UMPTEEN ZILLION XENO BASTARDS KISSING EARTH GOODBYE."


WHICH MEANS THE EXODUS-INVASION IS UNDER WAY--AND COZY OR CRAMPED--
...WE'RE OUT OF THIS DAMNED THING.
ALL CLEAR, ORB?
SO FAR, SO GOOD; STOW-AWAY STATUS STILL SECURE.
THAT WAS ORB I WAS SITTING ON?
CUTE, NILE--BUT WHAT WAS PLAN B AGAIN?
STOP THE INVASION.
RIGHT.
MAYBE THIS WAY.
BUT LIKELY NOT.
IF YOU'VE GOT A BETTER IN--
ERA'!:Ω
SHH! FROM BELOW--ALIEN GIBBERISH.
BUT WE HAD A DEAL.
PLUS SOME-THING MORE FAMILIAR, IN THE GRATINGLY HOLLOW VOICE OF--
--SHADOW BLACK.
YOU CAN'T BACK OUT NOW.


PRECISELY.
I KNOW--BUT THE CHAXXES AND I ASSUMED HE WOULD JOIN US!
HOW COULD WE KNOW THE OUTER WORLDS MAGISTRATE WOULD REJECT OUR OFFER--
--LET ALONE STUFF AND MOUNT YOUR ASSASSINATED EMISSARY?
BRILLIANT, CHAXX--REMIND HIM AGAIN, WHY DON'T YOU?
BOOHT
HEY!
MY LAST TWO CLONES!
POOHHT
THAT WAS UNCALLED FOR, XENO BULLY--NOT TO MENTION EXPENSIVE!
OUR DEAL CAN STILL WORK!
YOU GET THE INNER WORLDS --AND WE OWN THE OUTERS!
NO WAY THE XENOS KEEP THAT BARGAIN.
LOOKS ASIDE: BLACK AND CHAXX ARE STILL HUMAN--
--AND ONLY BEING KEPT ALIVE FOR THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND GUIDANCE ONCE THE INVASION REACHES ARCTURUS.
SLEAZY PROSPECT, BUT WE NEED THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND GUIDANCE RIGHT HERE AND NOW.


TEK
MMM
SHUFT
CHUD
AOW!
NOW I'M REALLY PISSED!
OR NOT.
"HATE TO SAY IT, NILE...
SLAM
PLPT
"...BUT IT COULD SAVE TIME."
KZH ZH ZHT
HYELLO!
SCHARK SCHARK
AND GOON-BYE!
YOU! YOU DID ESCAPE INFERNO... BUT WHAT THE HELLS ARE YOU DOING HERE?!
WE'RE CALLING IT PLAN B, SHADOW BLACK.
STOPPING THE INVASION AND SAVING THE WORLD--TIMES TWENTY-THREE.
ALL THE ARCTURAN WORLDS.


THE WHOLE TWO OF YOU?
BAD MATH ASIDE, YOU'RE LOOKING AT EVERYTHING HUMANITY NEEDS.
SUPERBLY BUNDLED, NO LESS.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE UP AGAI--
I THINK WE DO, BLACK! THE XENOS DIDN'T FIND AND REPAIR THE WORMHOLE! YOU DID--AND YOU USED IT TO BETRAY THE INNER WORLDS, SHOWING THE ALIENS A SECRET ROUTE TO CONQUEST IN RETURN FOR SPARING YOUR OUTER ASSES!
YOU WERE A DAMNED FOOL, SHADOW BLACK.
WHAT WE WERE, S.C.I.-SPIES, WAS HOPELESSLY OUTMATCHED BY YOUR BELOVED MOTHERBANK'S INNER WORLDS RESOURCES!
AN ALLIANCE WAS OUR ONLY HOPE--AND THE XENOS AGREED!
HOW COULD WE KNOW THEY'D--
WANT EVERY HUMAN DEAD? EASY, CHAXX! WHEN YOU USED THE WORMHOLE TO REACH EARTH, YOU COULD HAVE OPENED YOUR BUG-BULGING EYES AND LOOKED AROUND AT ALL THE SKELETONS!
ALL RIGHT, SO IT WAS A DEAL THEY COULD REFUSE! SO WE WERE STUPID! SO WHAT DOES IT MATTER NOW?
A HEAP--IF YOU KNOW WHERE THIS SHIP'S CORE IS LOCATED.
AND IF WE MIGHT HAVE A GOOD GUESS?
THEN I'VE BURN YOU FREE --INSTEAD OF BURNING YOUR HEARTS.


ONE WAY OR THE OTHER, CHAXX...
...WE'RE DEAD ANYWAY, SHADOW.
RIGHT.
BURN THE BARS, S.C.I.-SPY-- AND WATCH THE HEARTS.
DO IT, ORB.
NOT EVEN A CHARRED VENTRICLE, SEBASTIAN?
JUST FREE THE BASTARDS --AND NO LIP.
YES, "MASTER."
ALL RIGHT--WE'RE ON A DEADLINE DEFINED BY THE BLACK HOLE.
THE TWO OF YOU MADE A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL TO TRASH ARCTURUS, BUT NOW YOU'RE IN BUSINESS WITH US--TO SAVE IT.
ULTIMATE GOAL IS THIS SHIP'S CORE--BUT FIRST WE ELIMINATE THE OTHER SHIPS.
HOW?
LEAD US TO THE MAIN WEAPONS SYSTEM--AND I MEAN THE BIG GUNS.
OOH, YOU NASTY BITCH.


CHUN
SPUKSH
REMEMBER, NILE...
CHUN
...THE REST OF THE ARMADA WON'T SUSPECT ONE OF THEIR OWN.
SO DO IT FAST --AND DON'T BLOW THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE.
UNKNOT, STARCHILD...
IF THIS SYSTEM'S GOT MULTI-TARGET SPLASH, I'LL FIND IT.
CRIPPLE WILL DO.
NO NEED TO DESTROY.
JUST MAKE SURE THIS IS THE ONLY SHIP TO REACH THE BLACK HOLE.
YEAH, YEAH, JUST LET ME...
GOT IT!
STAB THAT SQUARE BLUE BUTTON ON THE COUNT OF THREE.
ONE...
TWO...


"...THREE."
IT WORKED, STARCHILD! PLAN B LIVES!
I'M READING DAMAGE TO EVERY TARGET IN THE VICINITY-- AND THEY'RE ALL FALLING AWAY...


...LEAVING THIS SHIP ALONE ON TRACK.
ALL RIGHT, BLACK --WHERE'S THE CORE?
RIGHT NOW, IN A VERY BAD PLACE.
WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TRYING TO--
EASY, S.C.I.-SPY--
WE'RE NOT XENOS TRYING TO BACK OUT OF A DEAL.
IT'S JUST THAT THE SHIP'S CORE IS LOCATED DOWN THERE...
...INSIDE THAT CENTRAL PILLAR --AND RIGHT IN THE THICK OF SOME RATHER ALARMED ALIENS.
IF I HAD TO GUESS, SHADOW, I'D SAY THEY'RE RUSHING TO INVESTIGATE A PROBLEM WITH THEIR MAIN WEAPONS SYSTEM.


LOOKS LIKE PLAN B'S COMING UNDER HEAVY ASSAULT, NILE.
YEP-- GOOD THING I'M A ONE-WOMAN ARMY.
FACE IT--WE'RE OUTNUMBERED AND OVERWHELMED.
FAR TOO MANY XENOS FOR THE FOUR OF US TO--
SHE WASN'T KIDDING, CHAXX--AND WE'RE A LOT MORE THAN FOUR.
WHAT ARE YOU--
JUST BACK OFF AND BEHOLD.
ALL RIGHT, NILE--TIME TO TURN OFF AND OPEN UP.
WHAT THE--?!
KAHZH
HHHH
MY GOD, SHE...
...SHE'S NOT REAL.
I TOLD YOU, BLACK--YOUR MATH IS BAD.
PARTY TIME.
LET'S GO! OUT!


BUT SHE ...SHE'S--
AN ANDROID DUPLICATE OF AGENT ISIS NILE.
ABOUT TIME, STARCHILD-- AFTER ALL THE BOREDOM STASHED INSIDE.
A "TROJAN ROBOT" OF OUR OWN--FITTED WITH AN INTERNAL TESSERACT...
...EXTRADIMENSIONAL TRANSPORT FOR A SMALL CAMOUFLAGED ARMY OF S.C.I.-SPY AGENTS...
...MUCH LIKE GREEK SOLDIERS SMUGGLED INTO THE ANCIENT EARTH CITY OF TROY.
EXCEPT THE NILE-BOT HAS MORE ROOM FOR AMENITIES THAN A WOODEN HORSE--
...INCLUDING, THANK GOD, A FULLY FUNCTIONAL LADIES' ROOM.


HEADS UP AND LET IT RIP!
HERE THEY COME!
AND GIVEN THEIR NUMBERS, STARCHILD, THE NILE-BOT SHOULD'VE BEEN EVEN ROOMIER--OUR RANKS SQUARED, IF NOT CUBED!
WE'VE GOT THE HIGH GROUND! USE IT TO SLAP 'EM BACK AND PIN 'EM DOWN!


WHOOSH
WE'VE BEEN FOLLOWING EVERYTHING FROM INSIDE, STARCHILD, THROUGH THE EYE-CAMS OF THE TESSERACT-BOT--WHICH, BY THE WAY, WOULD'VE FOOLED ME!
EXACTLY LIKE THE REAL ISIS NILE!
BECAUSE IT'S BEEN RUNNING ON A MIND-CHIP MELD OF THE REAL NILE'S CONSCIOUSNESS!
NO SHIT--BUT EVEN THESE DAYS, MIND-CHIPS ARE RARELY THAT SMOOTH AND CONVINCING!
WIZARD DOES GOOD WORK--AND MOTHERBANK OWES A FAT BONUS!
EXCEPT MOTHERBANK DOESN'T EVEN KNOW ABOUT THIS LUNATIC MISSION OF YOURS!
SO SHE'LL LEARN--WHEN SHE GETS WIZARD'S BILL!


FIGURE'S--ACTION'S ALREADY HOT.
AND WHY AM I ALWAYS THE LAST AGENT DEPLOYED?
SPLAKSH!
OOPS.
DRAMATIC TIMING, I GUESS.
EASY MARKS DOWN THERE, BUT TOO MANY FISH IN THE BARREL! WE NEED A FASTER ROUTE TO THE CORE!
LINES, ORB--THREE OF THEM!
WHY THREE, S.C.I.-SPY?
SHK SHK SHK
TO HELP TWO WORMS TURN--IN THE DIRECTION OF REDEMPTION!
GRAB YOUR LINES, WORMS!
AND HOLD TIGHT--WE SWINGERS GONNA ZIGZAG!


DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHIPPING US LOOSE, ORB!
CHUN CHUN CHUN
JUST EVADE!
THIS IS WHAT YOU CALL "PLAN B"?
IT'S CALLED STOPPING THE INVASION, CHAXX, BY DESTROYING THIS SHIP--AND USING ITS DESTRUCTION TO SEVER THE WORMHOLE!
AND HOW DO WE-- UHH!
WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?!
SHIP MUST'VE REACHED THE GRAVITY WELL--WHICH MEANS WE'RE ENTERING THE BLACK HOLE NOW...
...AND THAT MEANS WE'RE ALMOST OUT OF TIME!
POP YOUR TESSERACT, ORB!
ZHEEM
I'M OPEN, BABY--SO JUST BE GENTLE, HUH?


DAMN THING'S STASHED IN HERE SOMEWHERE ...ALONG WITH ALL OF WIZARD'S OTHER CRAP...BUT WHERE THE--
GOT IT!
A CROC-CLAWED SQUEEZE-BOT'S LEFT EYEBALL-- OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE ANTIMATTER BOMB-- YOU AND THE XENOS PAID ATTILA LAZLO TO SMUGGLE ONTO INNER WORLD PRIMUS...
WH-OH.
CHAXX, I DO BELIEVE HE'S HOLDING--
AND ONCE ITS VIRIDIOL SHELL IS CRACKED--
THE RELEASED ANTIMATTER WILL CHAIN-REACT WITH THE CORE'S POSITIVE MATTER--
--AS WE COMMIT ATOMIZED SUICIDE.
PRECISELY, BLACK--EXCEPT GOOD GUYS CALL IT ATOMIZED SACRIFICE.
CONCLUDED NEXT ISSUE:
PART VI INVASION

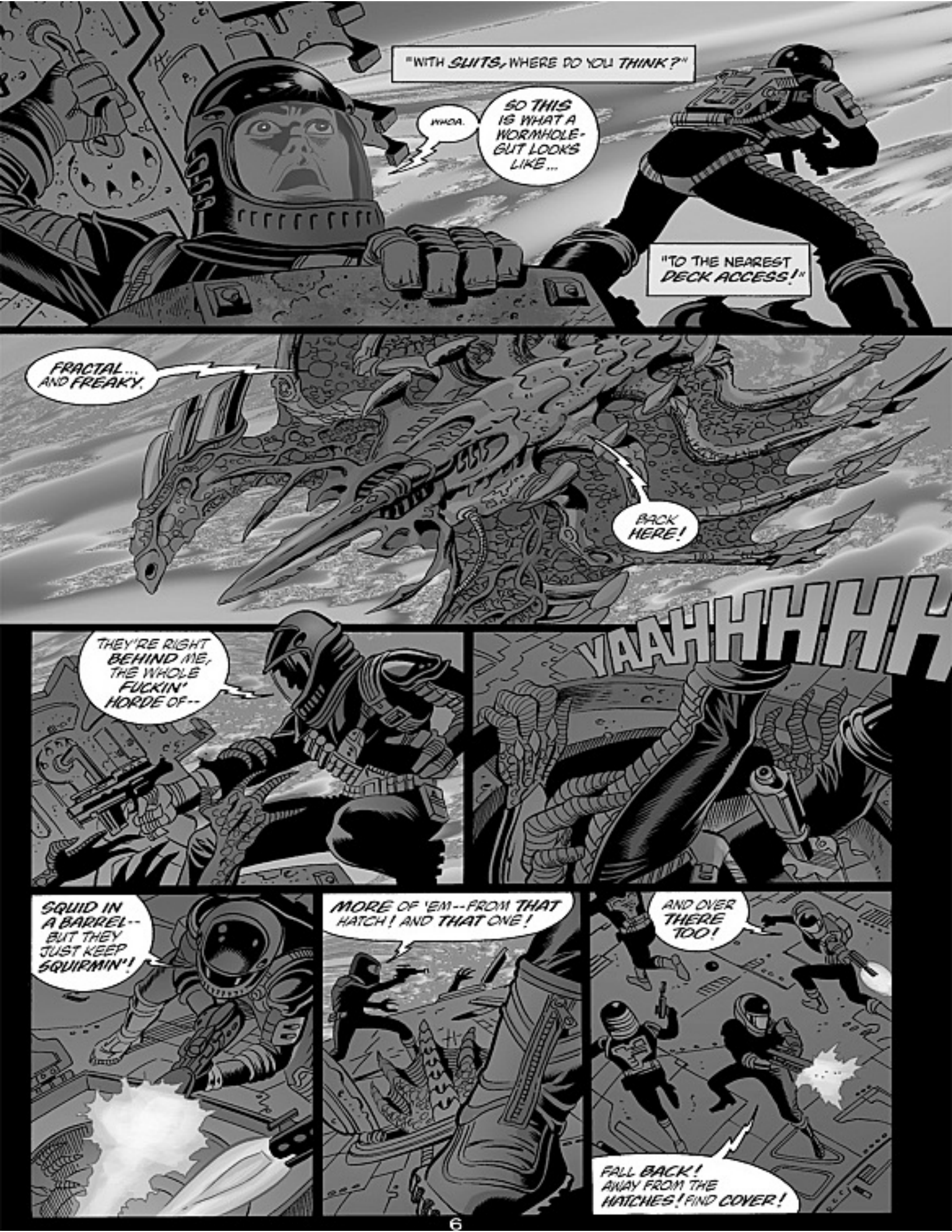

BLACK AND CHAXX--CHECK YOUR GUTS!
TIME TO SEE THIS THING THROUGH!
CHUN CHUN CHUN
GOTTA HOLD OFF THESE XENOS --AND STAY ALIVE LONG ENOUGH TO PLUG THIS DAMN EYEBALL INTO THE SHIP'S CORE!
GIVEN HINDSIGHT, CHAXX-PRIME, I DO BELIEVE OUR MASTER PLAN MAY HAVE BEEN LESS THAN MASTERLY.
INDEED, IT IS NOW LIKELY THAT WE CHOSE THE WRONG SIDE--IN WHAT CAN ONLY BE CONSIDERED A TACTICAL BLUNDER.
AND A BLUNDER, SHADOW BLACK, OF COLOSSAL PROPORTIONS --BUT AT THE TIME, WHO KNEW?
PART SIX
INVASION


YOU HEAR ME?! WE'RE BURNING A SHORT FUSE!
THIS SHIP'S ALREADY INSIDE THE WORMHOLE--AND ITS XENO CREW IS HIGHLY PISSED!
"MY AGENTS CAN OCCUPY ONLY SO MANY OF THEM--"
--AND HERE COME A WHOLE LOT MORE--
--SWARMING THIS SIDE OF THE CORE-PILLAR!
NOW ARE YOU TWO WORMS READY TO TURN OR NOT?! ARE YOU GOING TO HELP ORB COVER ME WHILE I SET THE EYEBALL-BOMB, OR ARE YOU JUST GOING TO--
SHUT UP, S.C.I.-SPY--WE'RE DISCUSSING IT!
2

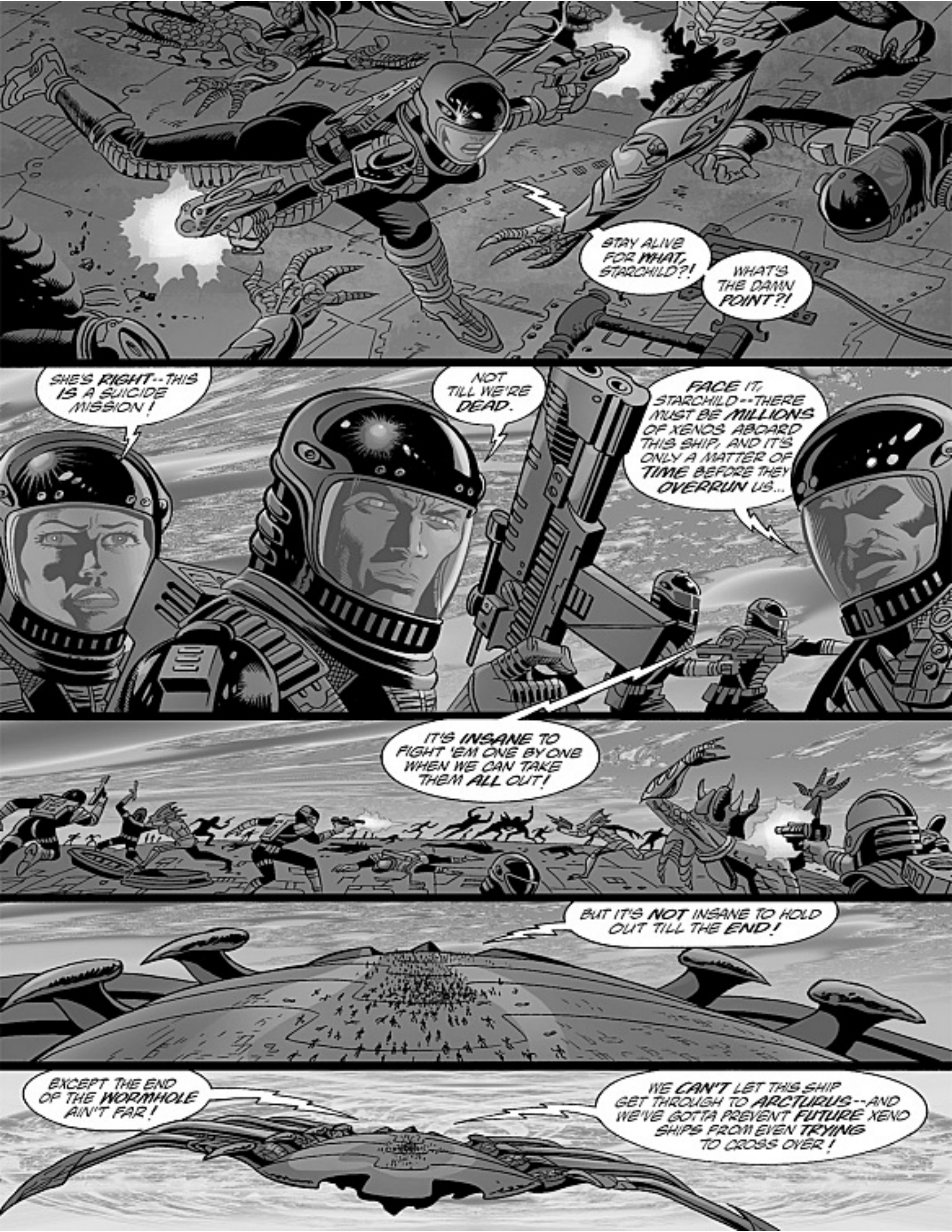

MUCH AS I DESPISE MOTHERBANK AND THE INNER WORLDS, CHAXX...
RIGHT--OUR ERSTWHILE XEND ALLIES ARE PROBABLY WORSE, HELLBENT ON EXTERMINATING ALL THE ARCTURAN WORLDS, INNER AND OUTER...
"PLUS THE INHUMAN BASTARDS ARE UGLY AS SIN."
YOU SHOULD TALK --BUT WE'RE AGREED? SELLING OUT THE HUMAN RACE WAS A MISTAKE?
NOPE...BUT UNDERESTIMATING THE HUMAN RACE SURE AS HELL WAS.
"JUST LOOK AT STARCHILD'S AGENTS --DYING IN SCREAMING DROVES, BUT NEVER SAYING DIE."
WE HOMO SAPS ARE INDEED HIGHLY MOTIVATED MOTHERFUCKERS.
NOT TO MENTION MEAN.
SO LET'S PROVE IT, CHAXX!
WITH GONZO GUSTO, BLACK!
3


NYAAAHRRR!
FINALLY.
JUST PLANT THE DAMN BOMB IN THE DAMN PILLAR, SEBASTIAN, AND LET'S--
DON'T SWEAT IT, ORB...
SUCK PARBEAMS, XENO SCUM!
LAP IT UP, YOU HEINOUS BASTARDS!
AHN!
NFF!
THESE BURN-POCKS ARE JUST THE RIGHT SIZE--
--TO SOCKET THE EYEBALL.
ALL RIGHT, BLACK AND CHAXX-- THE BOMB'S PLANTED!
LET'S-- eh?
NEVER MIND.


WELL, ORB, I SUPPOSE THAT WAS SOME KIND OF REDEMPTION.
YEAH, THE GOOEY KIND.
ALL AGENTS!
THIS IS NO TIME TO LOSE OUR HEADS--
NOT WHEN THE ISIS-BOT'S ALREADY GOT IT COVERED...
SO LISTEN UP!
ODDS ARE, WE'RE ASS-DEEP IN A SUICIDE MISSION--BUT I SAY WE FIGHT TO THE LAST NANOSECOND!
I'M WITH STARCHILD!
THEN CLIMB BACK INTO THE BOT AND GET OUR SUITS!
ALL RIGHT, START SHOVING 'EM OUT--FAST!
LET'S GO!
SUIT UP AND FALL BACK IN FIGHTING RETREAT!
TO WHERE?


"WITH SUITS, WHERE DO YOU THINK?"
WHOA.
SO THIS IS WHAT A WORMHOLE-GUT LOOKS LIKE...
"TO THE NEAREST DECK ACCESS!"
FRACTAL... AND FREAKY.
BACK HERE!
THEY'RE RIGHT BEHIND ME, THE WHOLE FUCKIN' HORDE OF--
YAAHHHHH
SQUID IN A BARREL-- BUT THEY JUST KEEP SQUIRMIN'!
MORE OF 'EM--FROM THAT HATCH! AND THAT ONE!
AND OVER THERE TOO!
FALL BACK! AWAY FROM THE HATCHES! FIND COVER!


MOVE IT!
GO, GO, GO!!
LOOK OUT!
XENOS EVERYWHERE, SEBASTIAN!
THEN BLAST EVERY-WHERE, ORB!
KEEP FIGHTING!
STAY ALIVE!


STAY ALIVE FOR WHAT, STARCHILD?!
WHAT'S THE DAMN POINT?!
SHE'S RIGHT--THIS IS A SUICIDE MISSION!
NOT TILL WE'RE DEAD.
FACE IT, STARCHILD--THERE MUST BE MILLIONS OF XENOS ABOARD THIS SHIP, AND IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THEY OVERRUN US...
IT'S INSANE TO FIGHT 'EM ONE BY ONE WHEN WE CAN TAKE THEM ALL OUT!
BUT IT'S NOT INSANE TO HOLD OUT TILL THE END!
EXCEPT THE END OF THE WORMHOLE AIN'T FAR!
WE CAN'T LET THIS SHIP GET THROUGH TO ARCTURUS--AND WE'VE GOTTA PREVENT FUTURE XENO SHIPS FROM EVEN TRYING TO CROSS OVER!


DO IT, STARCHILD-- NOW!
I AGREE, SEBASTIAN; IT'S TIME TO HIT THE DETONATOR AND MELT THAT HARD-PLANTED VIRIDIOL EYEBALL...
...LET ITS INTERNAL ANTI-MATTER REACT WITH THE POSITIVE MATTER OF THE SHIP'S CORE TO--
THE PLAN WAS MINE, ORB, AND I UNDERSTAND ITS GOAL--BLOW THIS SHIP TO SHRAPNEL...
...USING THE EXPLOSION TO SEVER AND SEAL THE WORMHOLE--BUT BEFORE THAT, I HOPED SOMEBODY MIGHT GET ANTSY WAITING OUTSIDE THE OTHER END ...MAYBE BRING IN A--
RESCUE SHIP--UP AHEAD!
COMING FROM THE ARCTURUS END--BUT NOT ONE OF THE S.C.I.-SPY FLEET...
IT'S A PERSONAL CRAFT--AND I'VE SEEN IT BEFORE! IT BELONGS TO--


DEET
NILE.
VREEB
--THE REAL AGENT ISIS NILE.
DEAD-AHEAD LOCK ON MORPHIC RESONANCE FIELDS OF SEBASTIAN STARCHILD AND CADRE OF S.C.I.-SPY AGENTS; NO SIGNAL, HOWEVER, FROM YOUR TESSERACT SIMULACRUM.
FUCK THE BOT--AND HANG ONTO YOUR SWEET ASS, STARCHILD!
I'M HAULIN' IT FROM THE FIRE!
BRING IT ON, NILE! TRASH THIS SUICIDE MISSION AND SLAP US WITH A MIRACLE!
OH HELL, ORB--IS THAT WHAT I THINK IT IS?
'FRAID SO, SEBASTIAN...
KARRUNK!
XENO FIGHTER CRAFT--RISING TO MEET THE RESCUE SHIP!

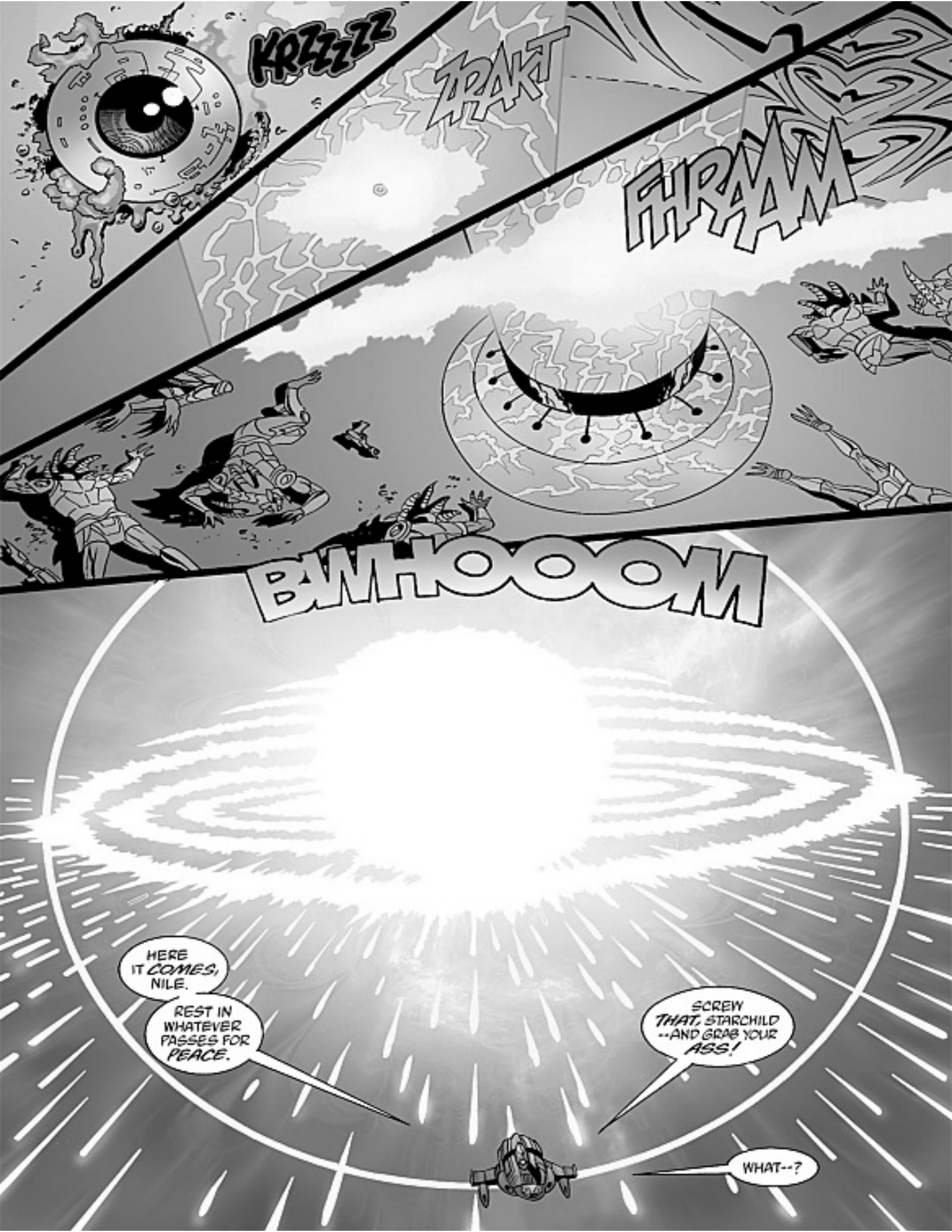

OUTPACING THEIR MOTHERSHIP WITH A LEADING EDGE ATTACK!
HATE TO SAY IT, STARCHILD, BUT YOUR NEW FLAME FACES A REAL SHITSTORM...
INCOMING ENEMY FIRE: OVERWHELMING.
MISSION PROGNOSIS: DOOMED.
SO IT AIN'T GONNA BE EASY...
SO SHUT UP AND LET ME SWEAT THE HARD STUFF!
THERE GOES THE MIRACLE.
NILE DOESN'T HAVE A PRAYER AGAINST THAT.
LIKE HELL SHE DOESN'T-- SHE STILL HAS US!
ALL AGENTS, FORM A SINGLE UNIT! FLANKERS PROTECT THE REST!
THE REST...
...BLAST THOSE FRIGGIN' FIGHTERS DOWN!


DON'T STOP! GIVE NILE A CLEAR CORRIDOR TO REACH US!
PROGNOSIS "DOOMED," HUH?
PROGNOSIS REVISED DUE TO UNFACTORED INTERVENTION BY--
THE HUMAN ELEMENT.
NOW SHUT UP AND PRIME THE TRACTOR-BEAM FOR A HUGE SCOOP OF SAME.
SHE'S GETTING THROUGH! BUNCH UP AND HOLD TIGHT FOR EVAC!
KEEP BLASTING --HIGH AND LOW!
SUPPRESS THE XENO FIRE FROM BELOW--AND TAKE OUT AS MANY FIGHTER CRAFT AS POSSIBLE!


NO CELEBRATING! IT'S NOT OVER YET!
EVEN WHEN WE'RE ABOARD, THERE'S STILL AN ESCAPE TO NAIL!
NICE SCOOP, NILE--AND ABOUT TIME.
LIKE YOU DON'T CUT IT TO THE WIRE, STAR-CHILD?
ALWAYS BETTER WHEN IT'S THRILLING.
AND BY THE WAY, NICE TO SEE YOUR HEAD AGAIN.
YEAH?
WELL, MUCH AS I'D LOVE TO BASK IN YOUR INCOMPREHENSIBLE COMPLIMENTS...
...IT'S TIME TO JAM OUR WAY OUT OF HERE.
OH HELL, NILE--WE'RE THIS CLOSE TO THE END?
THOUGHT YOU LIKED IT THRILLING.
TEK


ONLY WHEN YOU CAP THE THRILL WITH A HAPPY ENDING.
NICE TRY ON THE RESCUE, BUT WE'RE OUT OF WORMHOLE ROOM-- WITH NO WAY TO OUTDISTANCE THE DETONATION.
WE'LL MAKE IT!
NO.
NOT WITH THE RIM DEAD AHEAD-- AND THE XENO WARSHIP RIGHT BEHIND.


AND DEFINITELY NOT IF WE CAN'T FULL AHEAD.
DAMN SHIP'S PACING US, LOCKED ON OUR TAIL...
...AND NO DOUBT PACKED TO THE GUNWALES WITH NANOTECH EATERS, ANTI-MATTER BOMBS, AND A WHOLE HOLOCAUST OF OTHER ALIEN CRAP.
WE CAN'T HOLD OFF ANY LONGER--CAN'T RISK LETTING IT FOLLOW US OUT.
GOTTA DESTROY IT AND CUT THE WORMHOLE WITH THE SAME BIG BANG--EVEN IF IT TAKES US OUT TOO.
YOU PRIMED THE LAZLO EYEBALL?
WITH THE HELP OF THE LATE CHAXX-PRIME AND SHADOW BLACK, NO LESS--AND IT'S OUR ONLY HOPE, NILE.
I...GUESS YOU'RE RIGHT.
GIVE ME YOUR HAND.
WE'LL GO OUT TOGETHER.
READY?
HELL NO--BUT DO IT.
DEET


KRZZZZZ
KRAKT
FHRAAM
BWHOOOOM
HERE IT COMES, NILE.
REST IN WHATEVER PASSES FOR PEACE.
SCREW THAT, STARCHILD --AND GRAB YOUR ASS!
WHAT--?


SHOCK-WAVE CRESTS AHEAD OF THE HEAT--AT LEAST FOR A WHILE...
...MAYBE LONG ENOUGH FOR US TO RIDE THE EXTRA OOMPH OUT OF HERE BEFORE WE MELT.
SHE'S RIGHT, STARCHILD! THE EXPLOSION'S ACTUALLY HELPING--
--CATAPULTING US AHEAD!
YEAH, BUT IS IT ENOUGH--OR IS IT ALREADY TOO LATE?
IT'LL BE PLENTY--OR I'LL GET OUT AND PUSH!
NILE, YOU ARE ONE SWEET PIECE OF WORK.
I HOPE.
WORMHOLE'S ALREADY SHREDDING AND COLLAPSING BEHIND US. NO WAY WE--
MADE IT! WE'RE SPLASHING THE RIM...OUT INTO NORMAL SPACE--
--BUT NOW COMES THE REAL TEST...


THE WORMHOLE'S SLASHED--AND BOTH ENDS JUST REVERTED TO NORMAL BLACK HOLES...
WITH ABRUPTLY RESTORED GRAVITY WELLS.
EXACTLY, STARCHILD!
AND THE ONE AT THIS END IS WORKING LIKE A BITCH TO SUCK US RIGHT BACK IN...
...ALONG WITH EVERYTHING ELSE IN THE VICINITY!
SO THE QUESTION IS...EVEN WITH THE SHOCK WAVE'S BOOST, DO WE HAVE ENOUGH MOMENTUM TO OVERCOME THE EVENT HORIZON?
THAT'S THE QUESTION, ALL RIGHT, AND PAINT THE ANSWER BLEAK...
WE'VE BEEN JAMMED TO THE MAX SINCE I SCOOPED YOU INSIDE THE WORMHOLE--BUT WE'RE SLOWING DRASTICALLY NOW, LOSING THE TUG OF WAR!
IF WE COME FULL STOP, WE SLINGSHOT STRAIGHT BACK INTO THE HOLE--AND THEN WE DISINTEGRATE.


ALMOST HALTED NOW, NILE.
ANY HOPE AT ALL?
NONE THAT I CAN--
WAIT! MAYBE ONE LAST HOPE-- AND HOPE IT HARD, BABY!
HOPE NOTHING BIG HITS US--
--BECAUSE THERE GOES OUR ARMOR!
SHIP'S STRIPPED NAKED-- BUT--
YES! WE...WE'RE ACCELERATING AGAIN...JUST BARELY, AND--
IT WORKED!
WE JUST BREACHED THE EVENT HORIZON!
WE'RE OUT OF THE GRAVITY WELL-- AND FLASHING FREE, DAMMIT, BOUND FOR ARCTURUS!


NEXT STOP...
INNER WORLD PRIMUS.
YEAH!
BORDERLINE HARROWING, NILE--BUT NOT BAD FOR A PLAN B.
"PLAN B"?
I FORGOT--THAT WASN'T REALLY YOU, WAS IT?
WHO WASN'T?
HE'S TALKING ABOUT OUR RIDE, NILE, THE YOU WHO LOST HER ROBOT HEAD--AND TALK ABOUT BIRTH-PAINS, YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN US SQUIRM OUT OF YOUR TROJAN-BOD.
DO WE DISCUSS DETAILS, STAR-CHILD, OR DO I BITE MY TONGUE?
BRING IT ON, NILE...
...AND ALLOW ME.
WHOO.
GO GO GO GO GO


NOW THAT YOU KNOW THE TRUTH ABOUT EARTH'S END AND THE ORIGIN OF ARCTURUS...WELL, WHATEVER YOUR DECISION, SEBASTIAN, I'LL UNDERSTAND.
THE PRIVATE TESSERACT ESTATE OF SEBASTIAN STARCHILD, NINETEEN HOURS LATER:
DO YOU WISH TO RESIGN YOUR COMMISSION AS AN AGENT OF S.C.I.-SPY?
SEBASTIAN...?
UHRR
WHEN I DECIDE, YOU'LL BE THE FIRST TO KNOW ...MOTHER.
THAT...THAT'S THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE SHORTENED MY NAME, SEBASTIAN, THE VERY FIRST TIME YOU'VE ACTUALLY CALLED ME--
EAT.
ROWF
CHOMP
SWALLOW.


GULMP
MOTHER-BANK OFF--ORB ON.
CAN YOU HEAR ME IN THERE, ORB?
WHERE THE HELL ELSE WOULD I BE ABLE TO HEAR YOU?
IF THE DAMN BEAST DEVOURED ME--AN INNOCENT BYFLOATER NO LESS--THEN I MUST BE IN THE DAMN BELLY OF THE BEAST.
SCHLAP
BUT MOTHERBANK'S GONE?
I TOOK THE BIG BITE AS A SUBTLE HINT TO CUT HER OFF.
CUT THE HOLOS TOO --I NEED PRIVACY TONIGHT.
YOU ALSO NEED ME, PAL.
QUIT BELLY-ACHING, ORB.
SOONER OR LATER, YOU'LL COME OUT JUST FINE.


NIGHT:
I'M EARLY, STARCHILD--SO WHAT'S WITH THE WRIST-WATCHER?
GOT IT ENHANCED, NILE.
OH?
WIZARD JUST INSTALLED A NEW MICRO X-RAY SCANNER AND IT WORKS LIKE A DREAM.
QUITE A SIGHT.
WHAT SIGHT WOULD THAT BE?
THE SIGHT OF YOU--NOT WEARING UNDERWEAR.
AH, BUT THAT'S WHERE YOU AND WIZARD ARE WRONG--BECAUSE I AM WEARING UNDERWEAR.
DAMN--MUST BE RUNNING AN HOUR FAST.
OHO.
GIVING YOU PRECISELY SIXTY MINUTES, WISEASS, TO PROVE IT.
AND IF I SHAVE IT TO SIXTY SECONDS?
MMMM... BONUS POINTS.
END

ACTION/SCI-FI

When an interplanetary Cold War flares hot, agents Sebastian Starchild and Isis Nile scramble to avert Armageddon in an epic saga best described as James-Bond-meets-Star-Wars.
A mindblowing stew of sci-fi concepts, brimming with futuristic espionage, hyper action, wild humor, sleek romance, and aliens galore!



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