

THE LAST WARM PLACE

CHAPTER ONE · SILENCE



The end of the world reached them as silence.

Six meters.

Professor. Eight minutes. The lead is closing.

The recorder has eleven months under that ice.

krk... krk...

The sea has all morning.

She has never respected our calendar.



Four meters.

Slow the last two.

Six minutes.

krik... krik...

Stop winch!

Stop—stop!

Thirty seconds before your hand becomes a management problem.

KNNK

WINCH STOP.

All four green.

Four minutes, Professor.

Package secure.

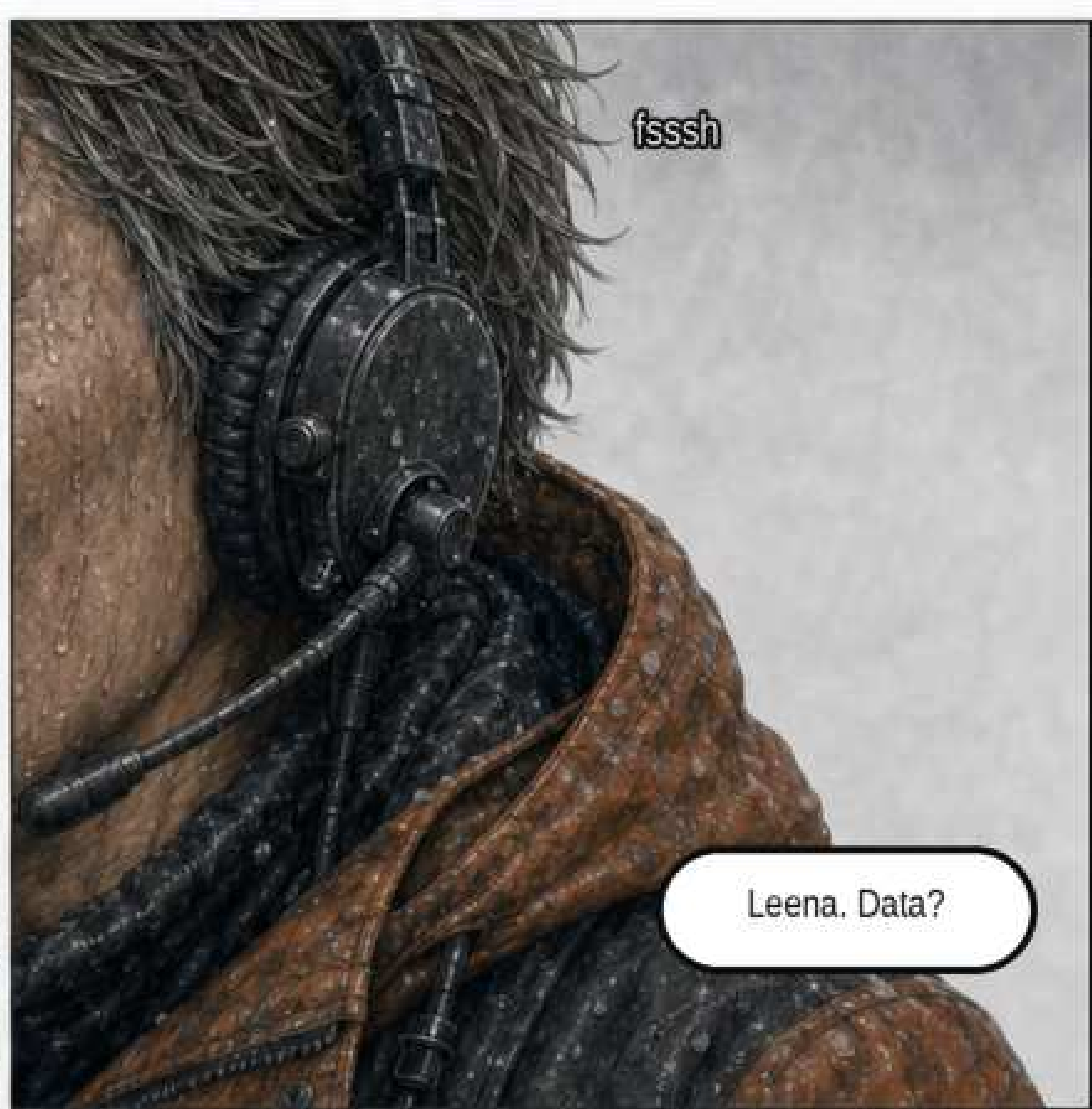
Twenty-eight.



Control, package secure.

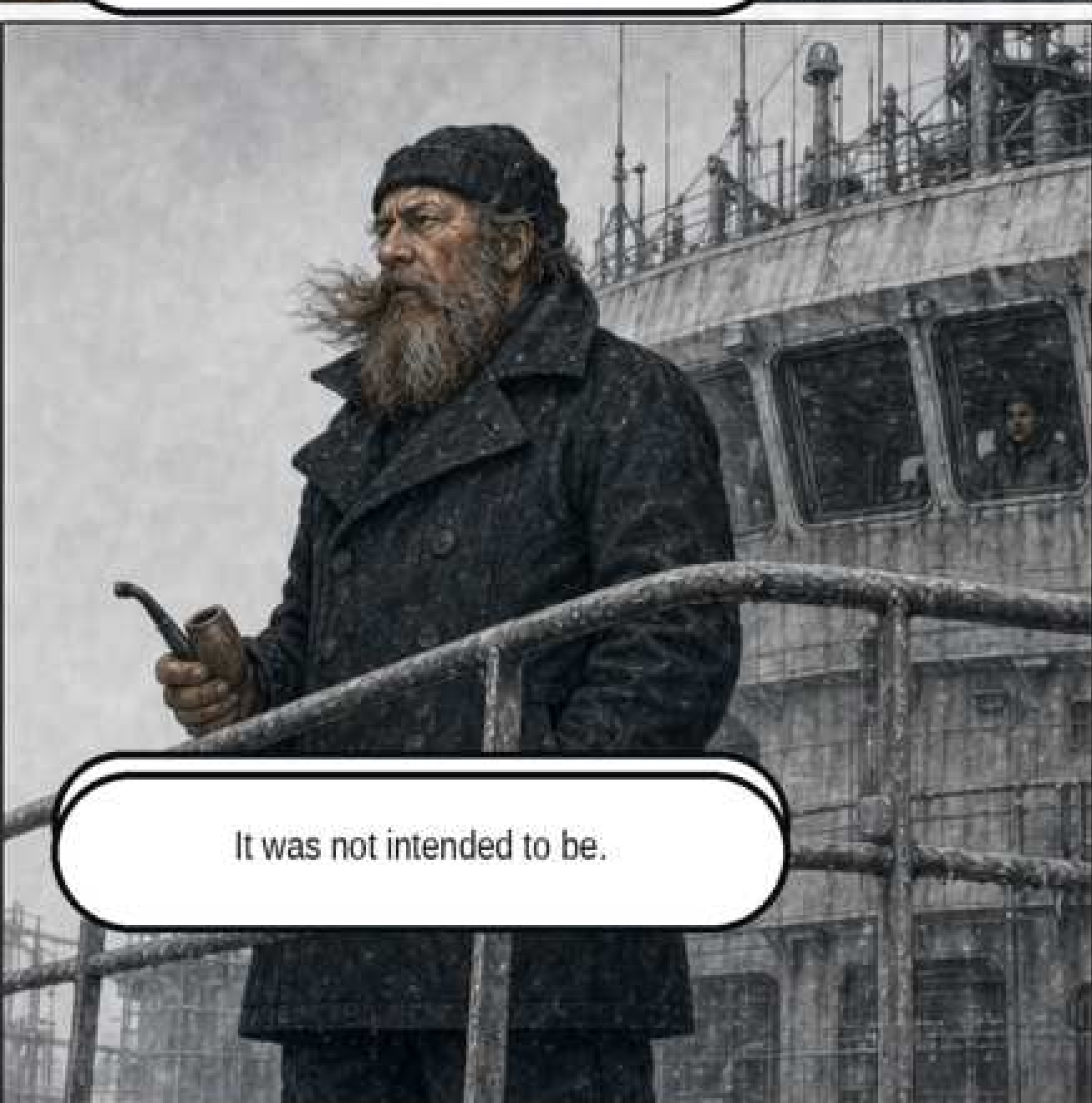
All stop.

Nothing past the ship.



fsssh

Leena. Data?

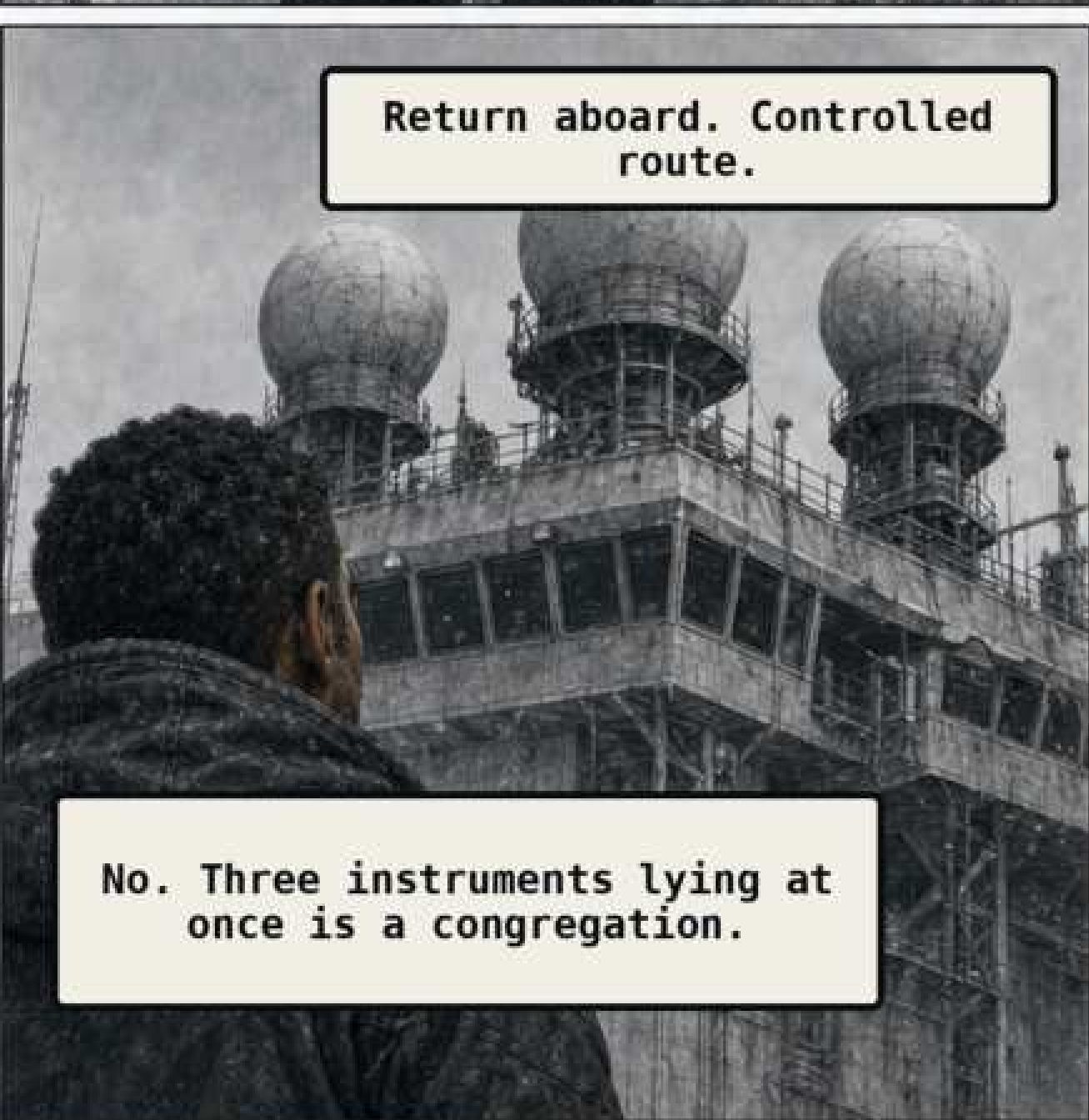


It was not intended to be.



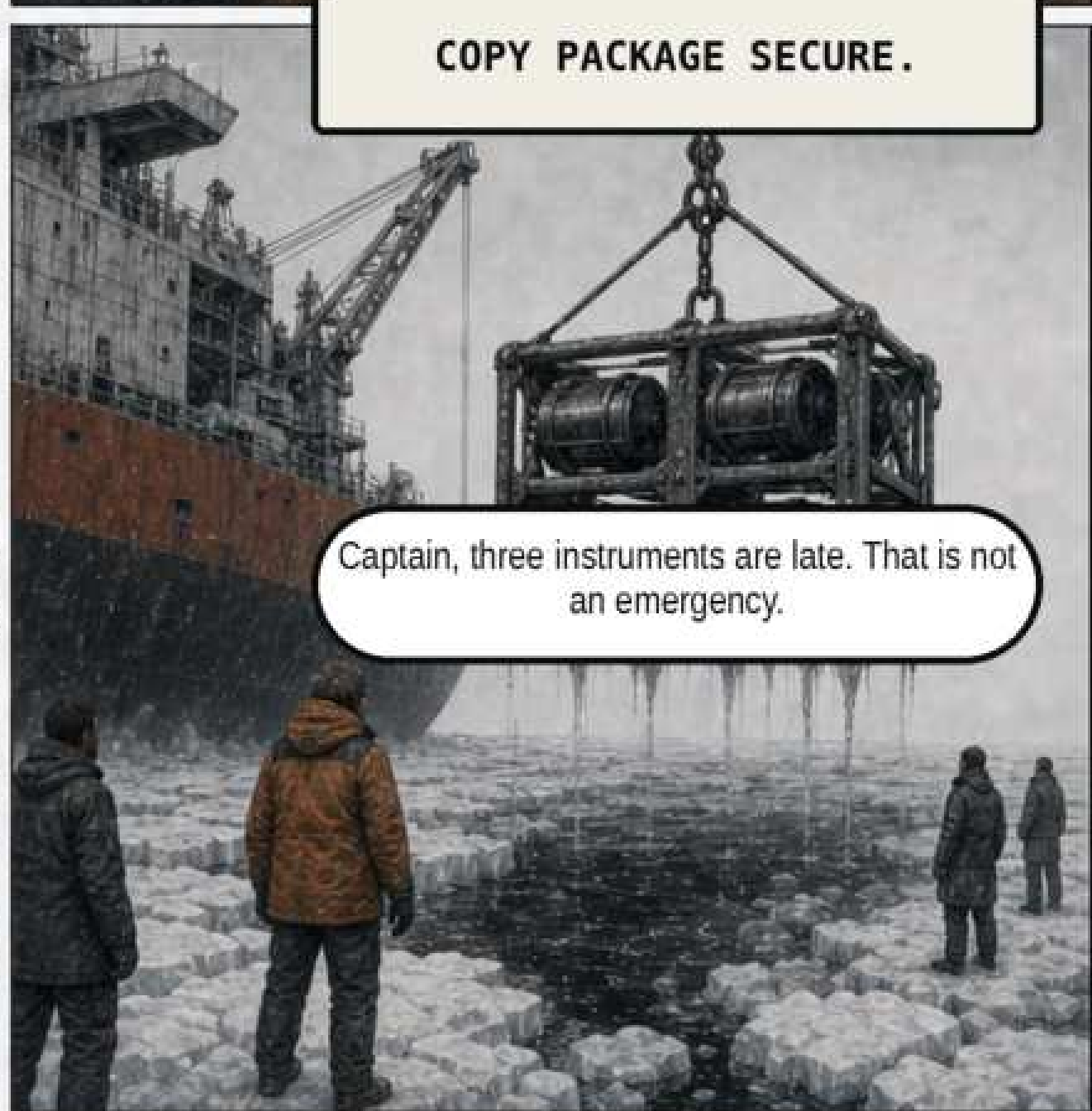
He stopped us for a missing weather packet?

That isn't reassuring.



Return aboard. Controlled route.

No. Three instruments lying at once is a congregation.



COPY PACKAGE SECURE.

Captain, three instruments are late. That is not an emergency.



Did we hear the whale?

We recovered a recorder. Hearing comes later.

Professor, methane feed froze at sixty-two.

Write the last-good time by hand. Nobody diagnoses a network with a missing notebook.



Again without the hood?

That answer remains unsupported.

Inconvenienced.



No.

The internet's dead.

For twenty-one minutes?



At home we'd call that healthy.

At home it doesn't make the captain stop the ship.



BONG—BONG

PROFESSOR VENN. DR. SATO.
ENGINEER SAARINEN. ICE MASTER
SØRENSEN. REPORT TO THE
BRIDGE.



Still inconvenienced?

Deeply.



KANG KANG KANG

I can hear the Professor disagreeing from two decks down.



They're here.



You stopped a nuclear icebreaker on instinct.



No, Professor. I stopped her on three instruments and forty years of regretting the fourth.



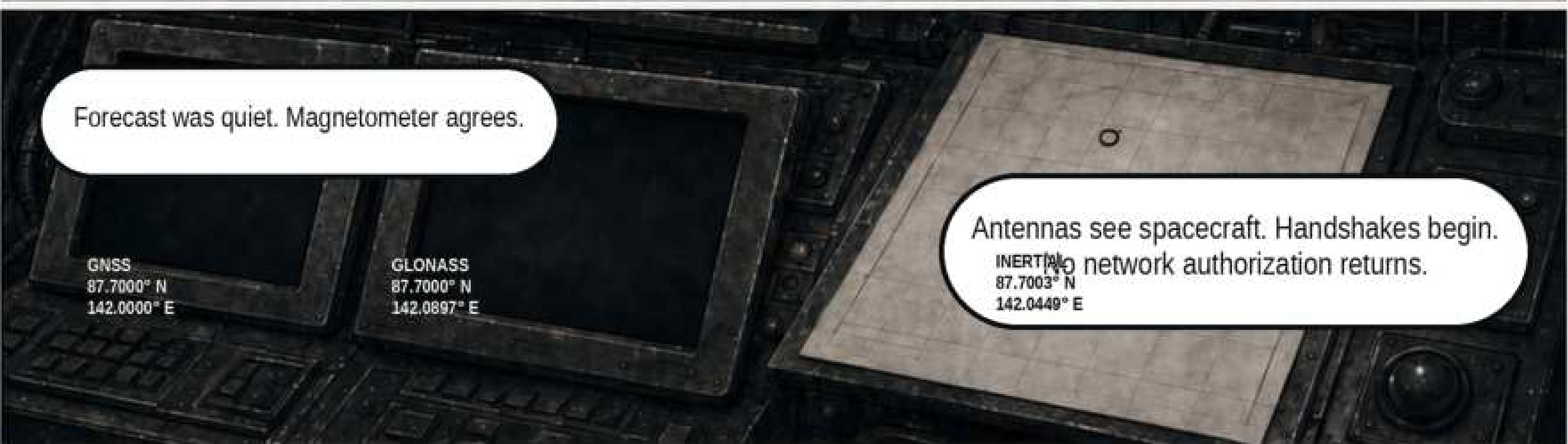


At 03:17, primary data service. Voice at 03:19.
Navigation correction at 03:21.
Three failures. Correct order. Wrong century.

How far?

Four hundred meters. Growing.

Solar?



Forecast was quiet. Magnetometer agrees.

GNSS
87.7000° N
142.0000° E

GLONASS
87.7000° N
142.0897° E

Antennas see spacecraft. Handshakes begin.
No network authorization returns.



Denied to this ship?

Captain, instinct is not evidence.



Possibly denied to everyone.

The sea is a good religion, Professor. It never asks for faith.



It also doesn't publish methods.

Two religions. One bridge. I recommend short sermons.

Carrier.

—REPEAT, SHELTER
IMMEDIATELY.
THIS IS NOT AN
EXER—

WAA—WAA—WAA—

Origin?

Tromsø region. Timestamp incomplete.

Civil-defense test caught in the outage?

Radiation?

Background. External detectors and air
sampler.

KRRR-EEET

Then the test remains possible.

Nor is it true.

Possible is not safe.

Thinking is not yet reporting.



SVALBARD RADIO, THIS IS NUCLEAR
ICEBREAKER SEVERNAYA ZVEZDA.
RADIO CHECK. OVER.

fssssssss



LONGYEARBYEN PORT

ANY STATION, ANY
STATION. THIS IS
SEVERNAYA ZVEZDA. OVER.



KIRKENES



MURMANSK

Again.



ANY STATION. THIS IS SEVERNAYA
ZVEZDA. DO YOU READ?

fsssh



No one answered.





ALL EXTERIOR TEAMS, RETURN
BY CONTROLLED ROUTE.
SUPERVISORS REPORT HEAD
COUNT AT THE CLEAN LINE.

End all exposed ice operations.
Recover every party. Account by name.



Core team, six returning.

Count twice.



Six in. Six accounted.

Your congregation already is.



Dog it.



Communications discipline. One receiver records.
One scans. One holds emergency schedules.

Understood.

Radiation watches every fifteen minutes.
External, intake, personnel.

First set remains background.

Close external ventilation modes.

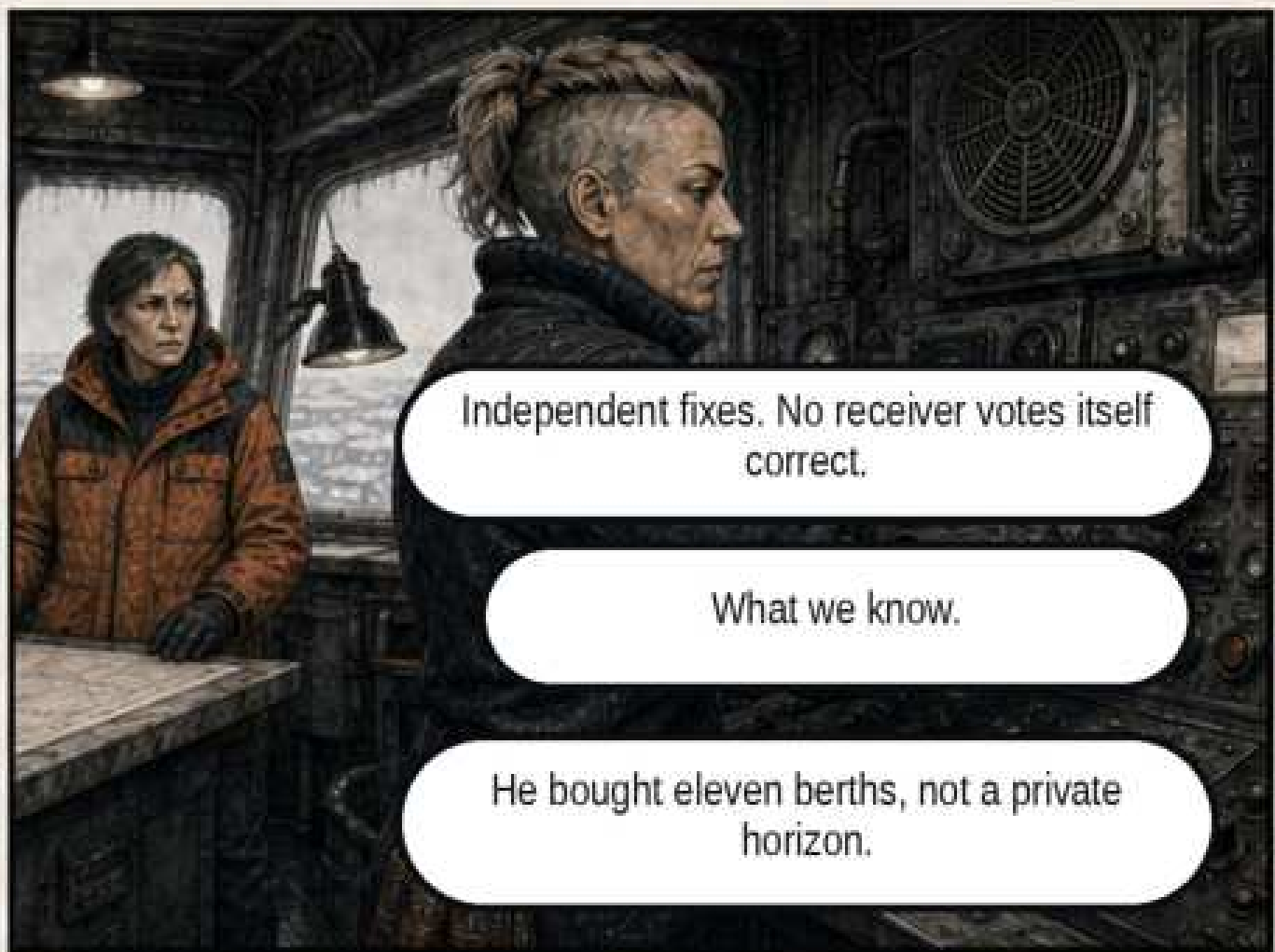
Recirculation raises humidity and carbon dioxide.



Log both. Discomfort is not a mystery if
measured.

What do we tell the passengers?

Grant Calder has demanded a private brief for his
family and company group.



Independent fixes. No receiver votes itself
correct.

What we know.

He bought eleven berths, not a private
horizon.



Then brief everyone before he fills the fog
himself.

Fog has reached the mess, Captain. It is
drinking coffee.



No omissions.

New voice traffic.



I am refusing to publish fog.

One page, Professor. What the evidence can
carry. No comfort.

No inventions.



BEEP—BEEP—BEEP

—DIVERTING NORTH. ANY
NORTHERN FIELD, ADVISE RUNWAY
AND FUEL—

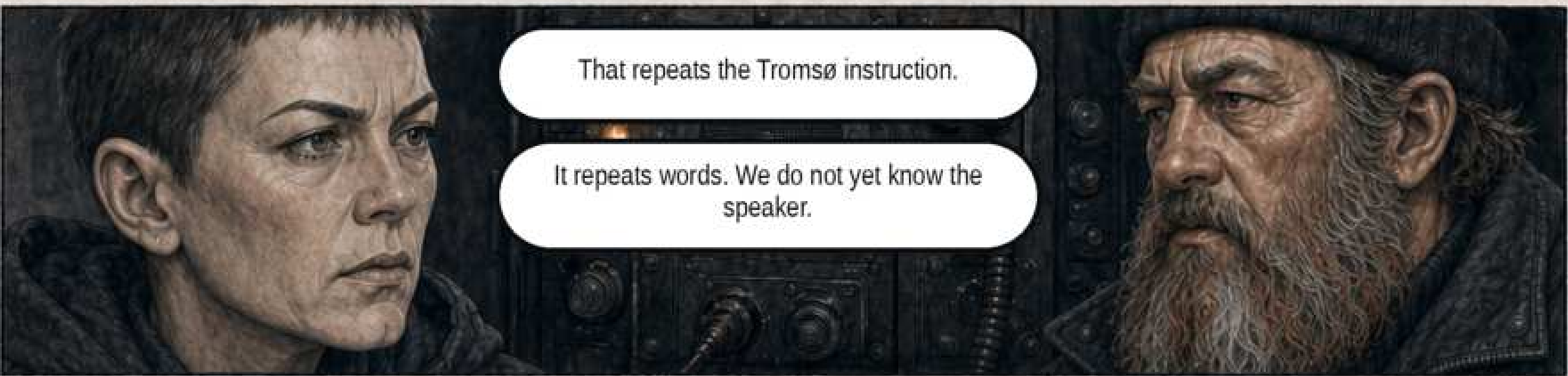
CIVIL AVIATION / SOURCE UNCONFIRMED

—NO CONTROL RESPONSE—

—GENERAL EMERGENCY SIGNAL.
REPEAT, GENERAL—

KRRSH

—GO INDOORS. CLOSE
VENTILATION. AWAIT VERIFIED
INSTRUCTIONS. NO CONFIRMED—



That repeats the Tromsø instruction.

It repeats words. We do not yet know the
speaker.



—NORTHERN SECTOR, GRID
FOUR-SEVEN... UNIT—

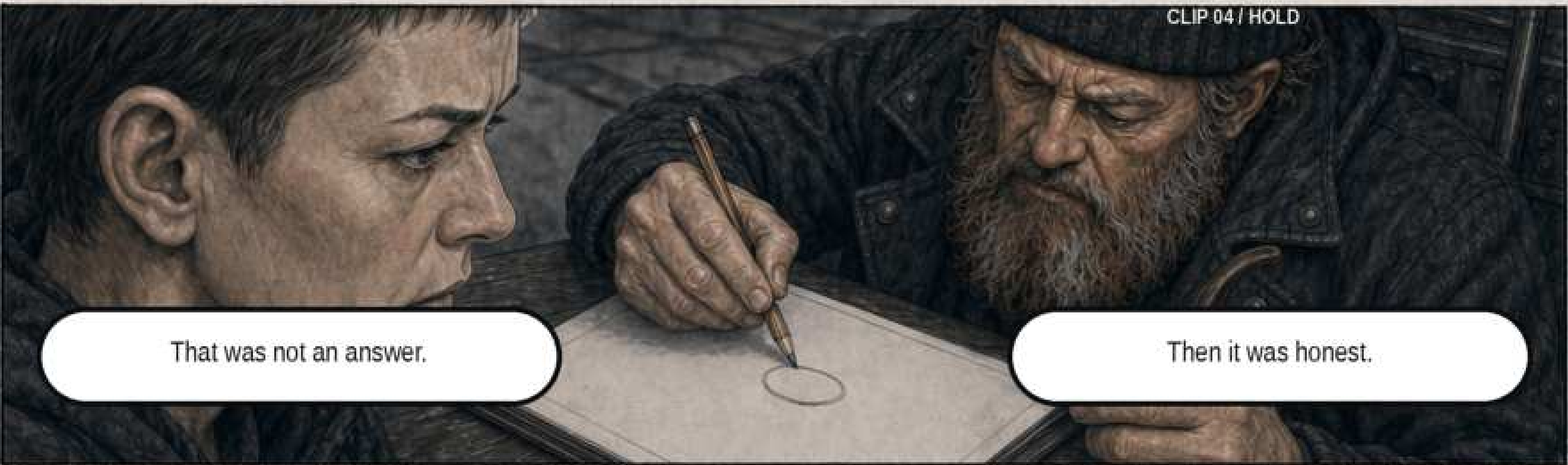
Gone.

KRT—
Preserve the complete band.



You know someone there.

I know many people everywhere.



CLIP 04 / HOLD

That was not an answer.

Then it was honest.



Fifteen hours later.

No sustained two-way contact.

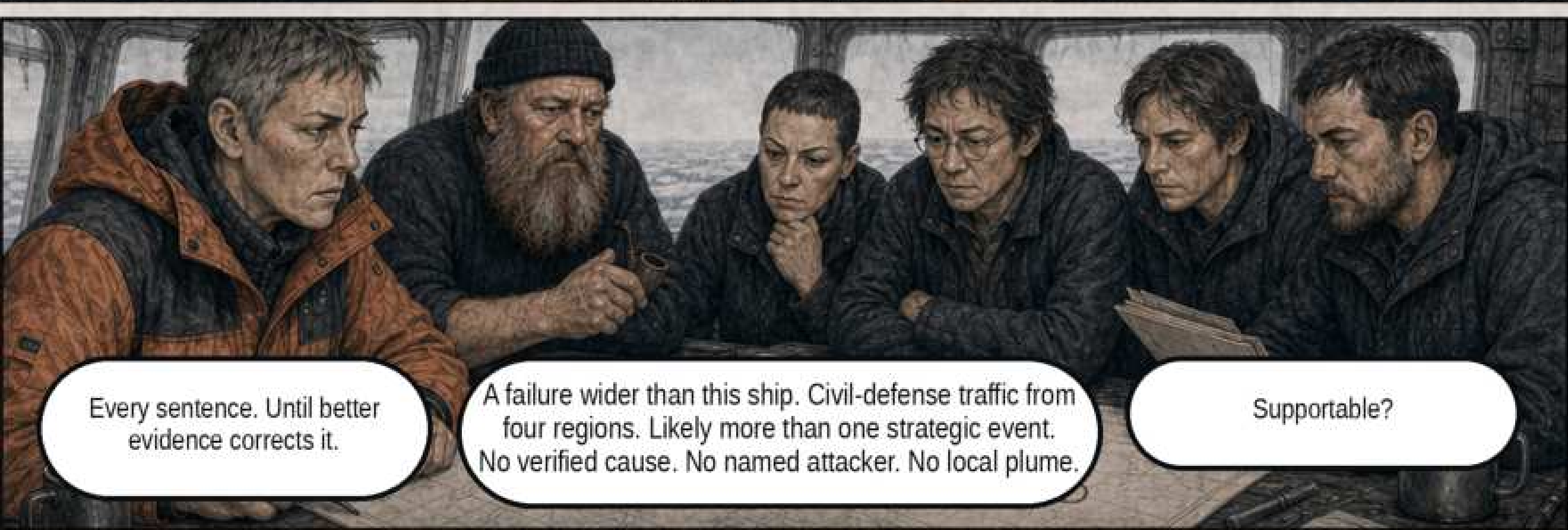
No local plume. No meaningful rise.



Yet.

Professor. Not your hope. Not my fear. What survives both?

EXTERNAL / INTAKE / PERSONNEL — NEAR BACKGROUND



Every sentence. Until better evidence corrects it.

A failure wider than this ship. Civil-defense traffic from four regions. Likely more than one strategic event. No verified cause. No named attacker. No local plume.

Supportable?



And what do you call it?

Put it in the shared record.

The machinery kept every promise the world had stopped making.

What we know.





The next morning.

A ship's manifest is a prayer written by someone who has not opened the cupboard.

The inventory program says one hundred forty-six days.

It assumes lunch in Murmansk on the twenty-fourth.



Because that was the itinerary.

Then it is an itinerary, not an inventory.

Count food that exists. Leave tomorrow's lunch ashore.

By mass, usable calories, location, and failure mode.



Good. Make pessimism earn its breakfast.

We count what can be eaten where it is, not where software wishes it were.



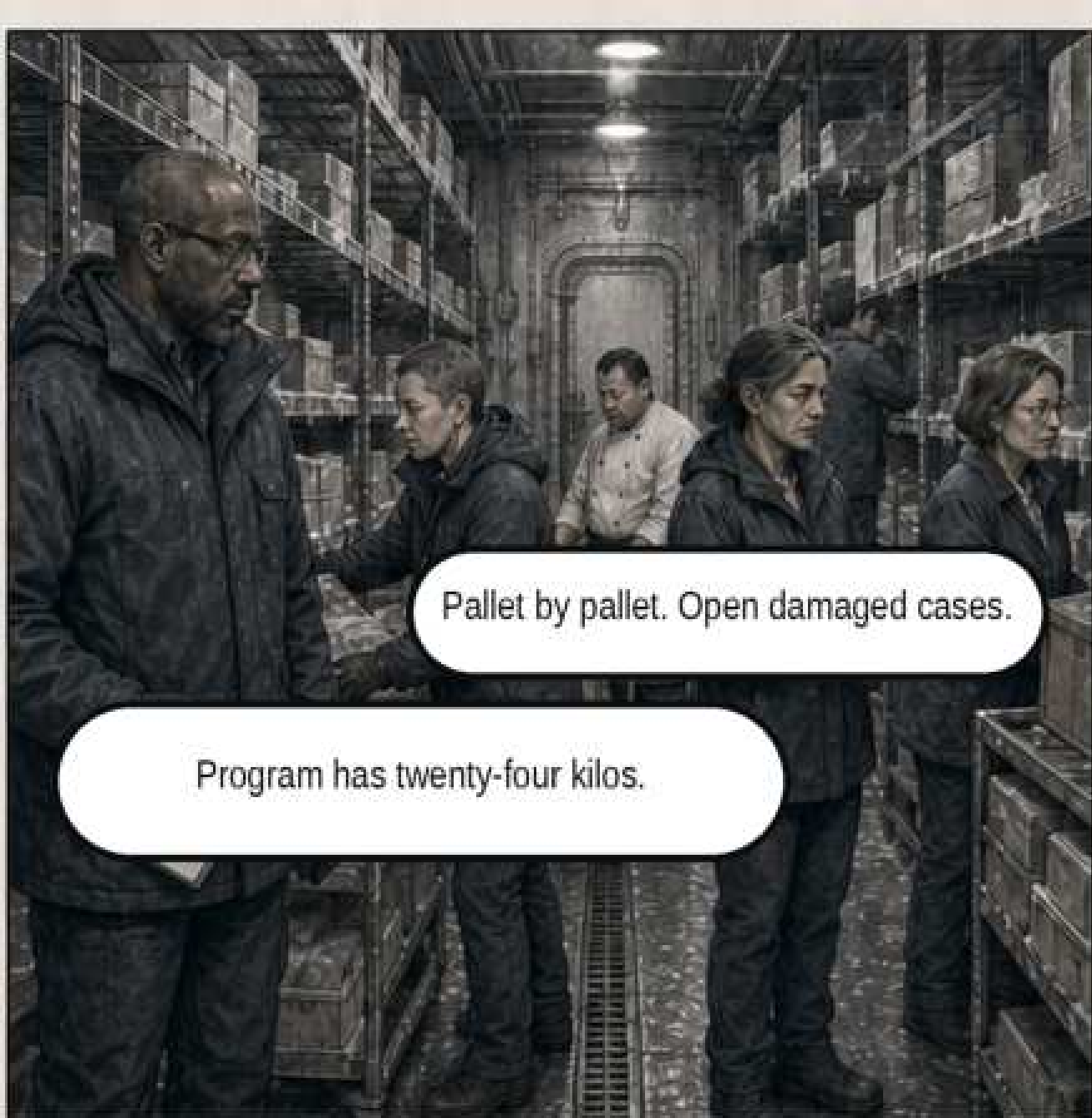
Professor Venn will want the assumptions.

Professor Venn wants everyone's assumptions.



Then count.

THUMP—HSSSS



Pallet by pallet. Open damaged cases.

Program has twenty-four kilos.



Seal intact cases after verification.

Usable is nineteen point six.



Renal, diabetic, allergy-safe, and pediatric supplements stay tagged.

scrтч bip scrтч

FREEZER A

FREEZER B

CHILLED



Counted, not reassigned.

Can we combine the rooms?



On paper, yes. In a failure, no.



One number can hide three ways to lose it.



Dry stores. Oils. Supplements. Bottles.

The program gives these menu value.



Decorative alcohol is not survival food.

Secure it anyway.



Calories are not nutrition.

No. But calories are the first clock.



CREW — 54

Then publish the other clocks before people mistake one date for safety.



EXPEDITION STAFF — 16
PASSENGER MANIFEST — 94



TOTAL ABOARD — 164



And fed by the same stores.

One hundred sixty-four.
Accounted by name.



EDIBLE ENERGY — 49,500,000 KCAL

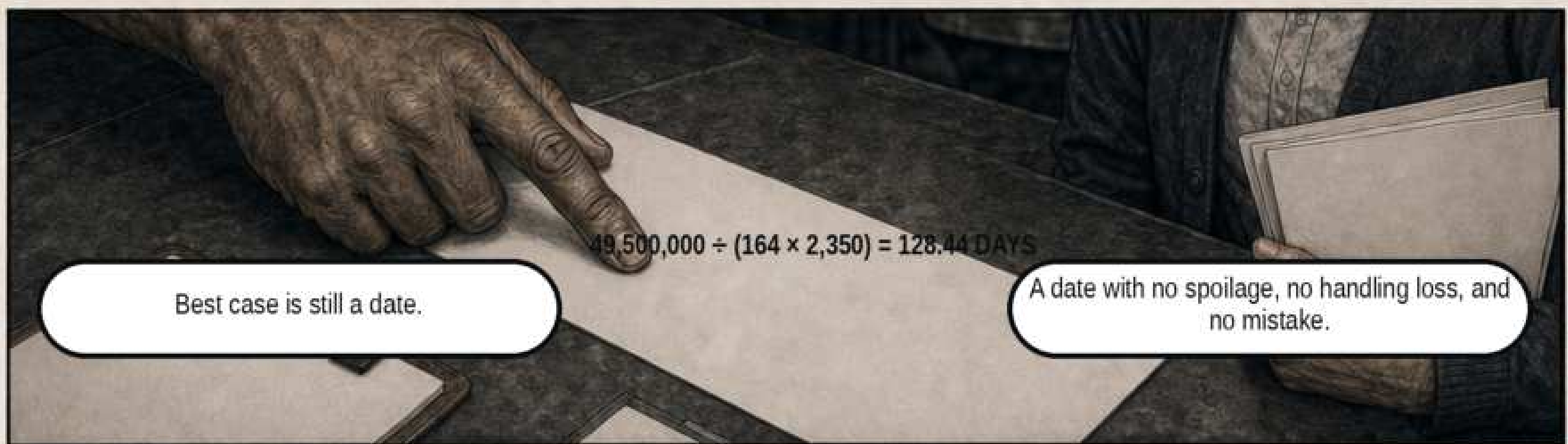


Planning ration: two thousand three hundred fifty kilocalories per person per day.

Average, with medical and labor adjustments later.

Four months.

Best case.



Best case is still a date.

A date with no spoilage, no handling loss, and no mistake.



Food fails in rooms. In seals. In hands. In assumptions.



Captain is assembling all hands.





BONG—BONG

Shore contact is lost.
We have emergency traffic consistent with multiple detonations. No source has named an attacker. External radiation here remains near background.



Multiple—?
Where?
"What about—?"

Ordinary mission rules are suspended. Navigation, nuclear safety, medical control, stores, and external access remain under emergency command.
This is not a declaration that we know what happened. It is a promise that we will not invent certainty because fear asks nicely.



My family and the Palisade group require an operational brief.

They require the same truth as everyone.
Then show them the inventory.



Professor—



You promised what we know.



Aggregate stores can be briefed. Locations, categories, and weak points remain crew operational detail.

Anything that can start a riot is operational.

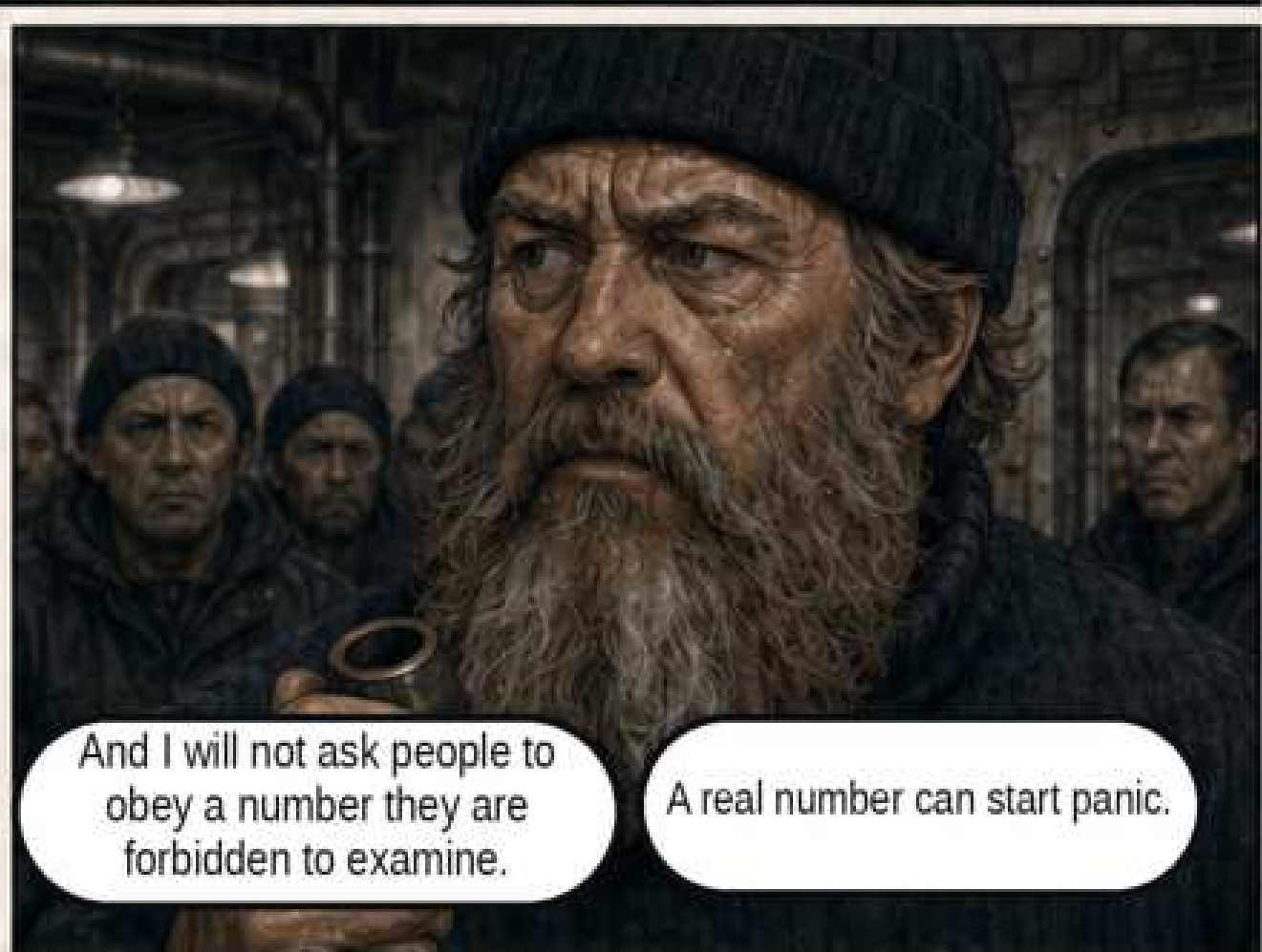
The date is not operational detail.

Secret numbers identify different targets. Crew. Cooks. Anyone people think is protected. If the date governs work, medicine, and whom we can rescue, everyone aboard is subject to it.



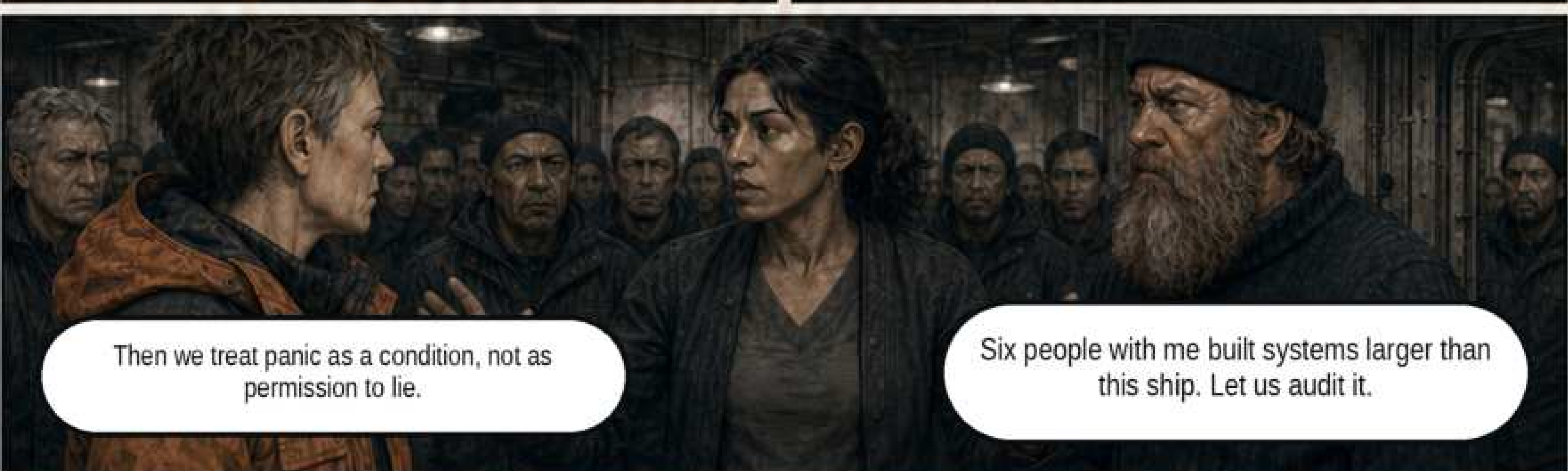
While this remains a ship, I will not publish which door hunger should break first.

People will invent a hidden number if we do not publish a real one.



And I will not ask people to obey a number they are forbidden to examine.

A real number can start panic.



Then we treat panic as a condition, not as permission to lie.

Six people with me built systems larger than this ship. Let us audit it.



You can examine the public assumptions with the galley worker beside you.

Then publish why.

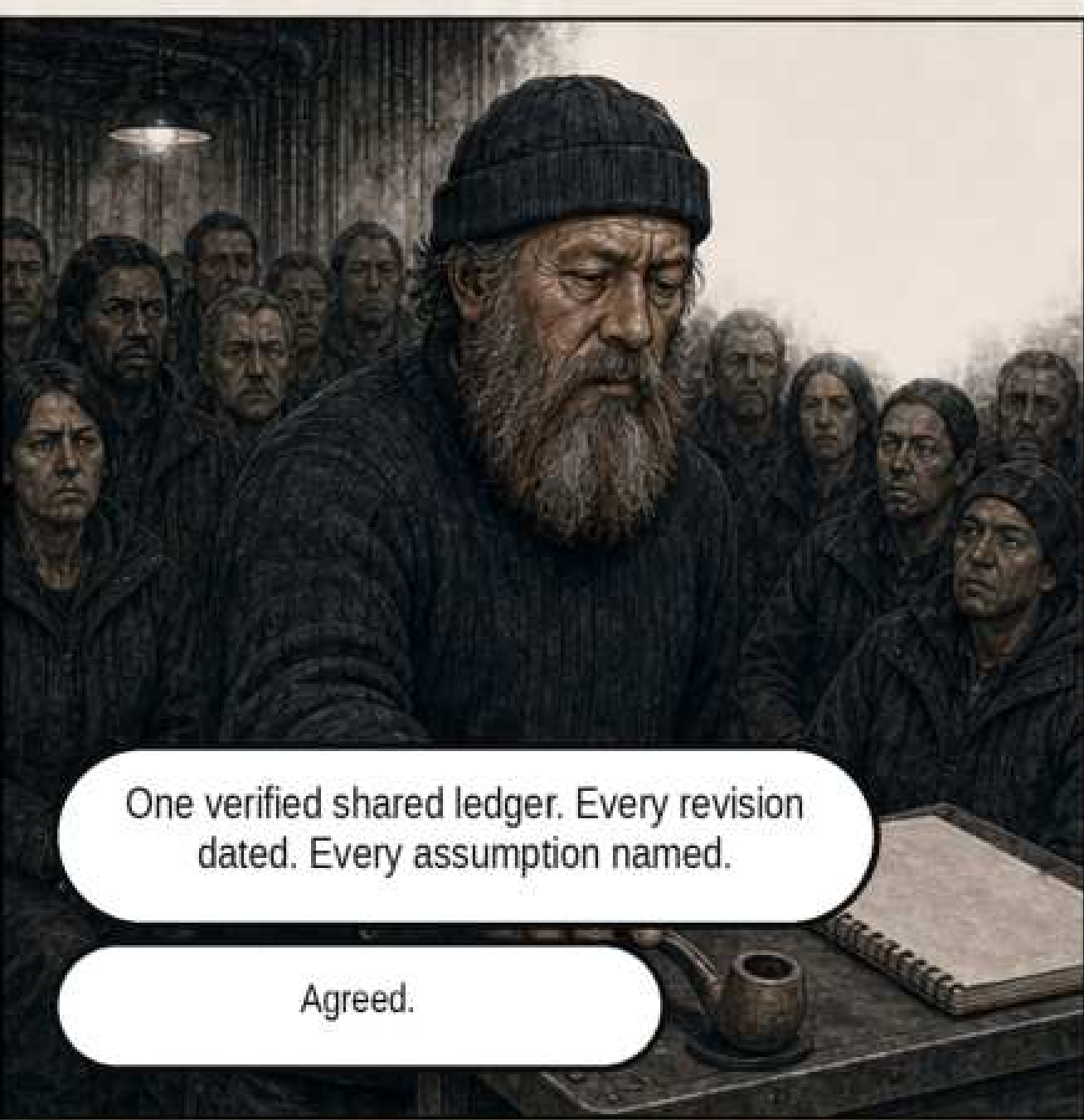
Were you asked, Ice Master?



The number is not final.

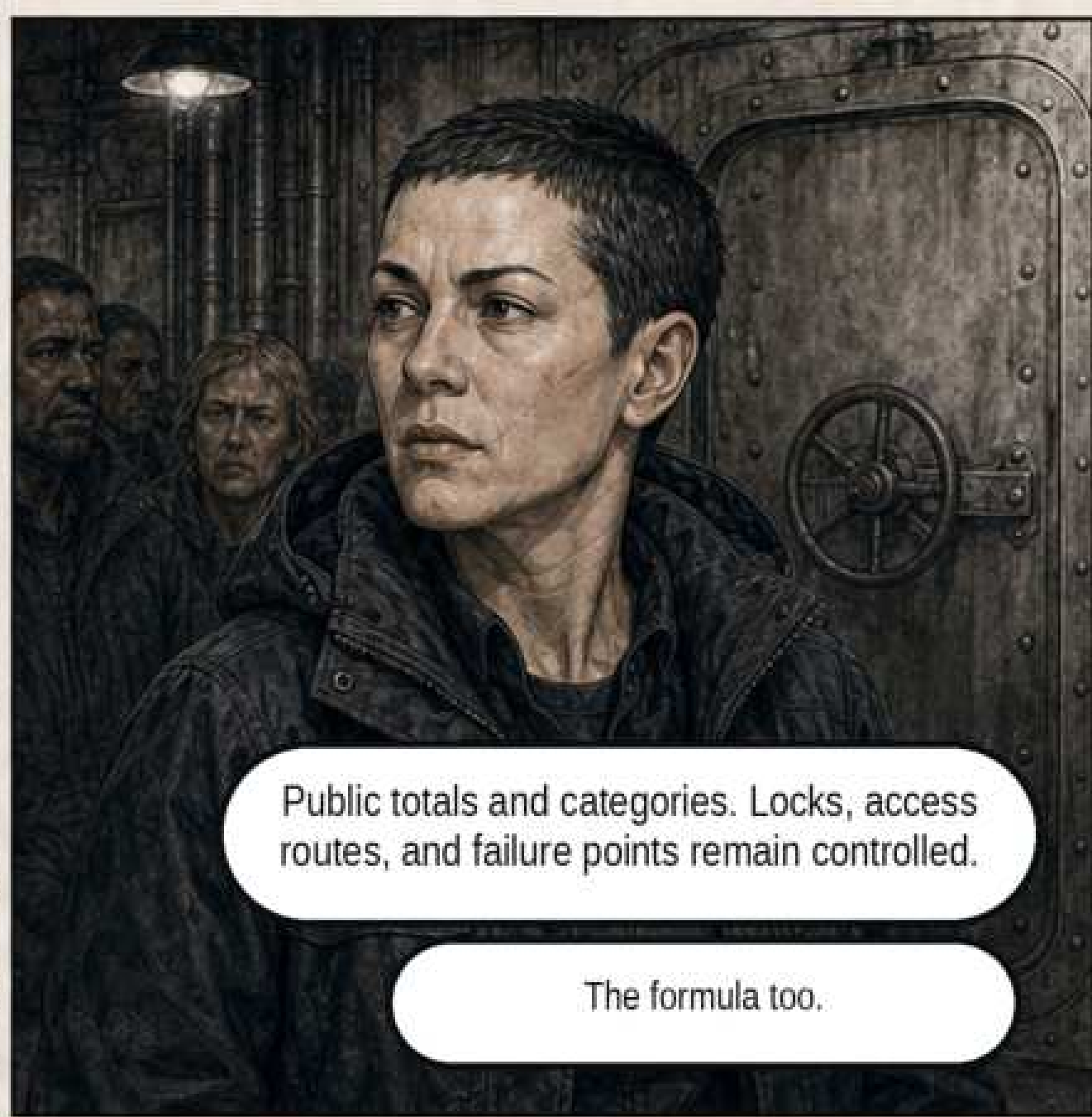
Captain, a secret pantry is a public riot with a short delay.

No, sir. That improved the odds of honesty.



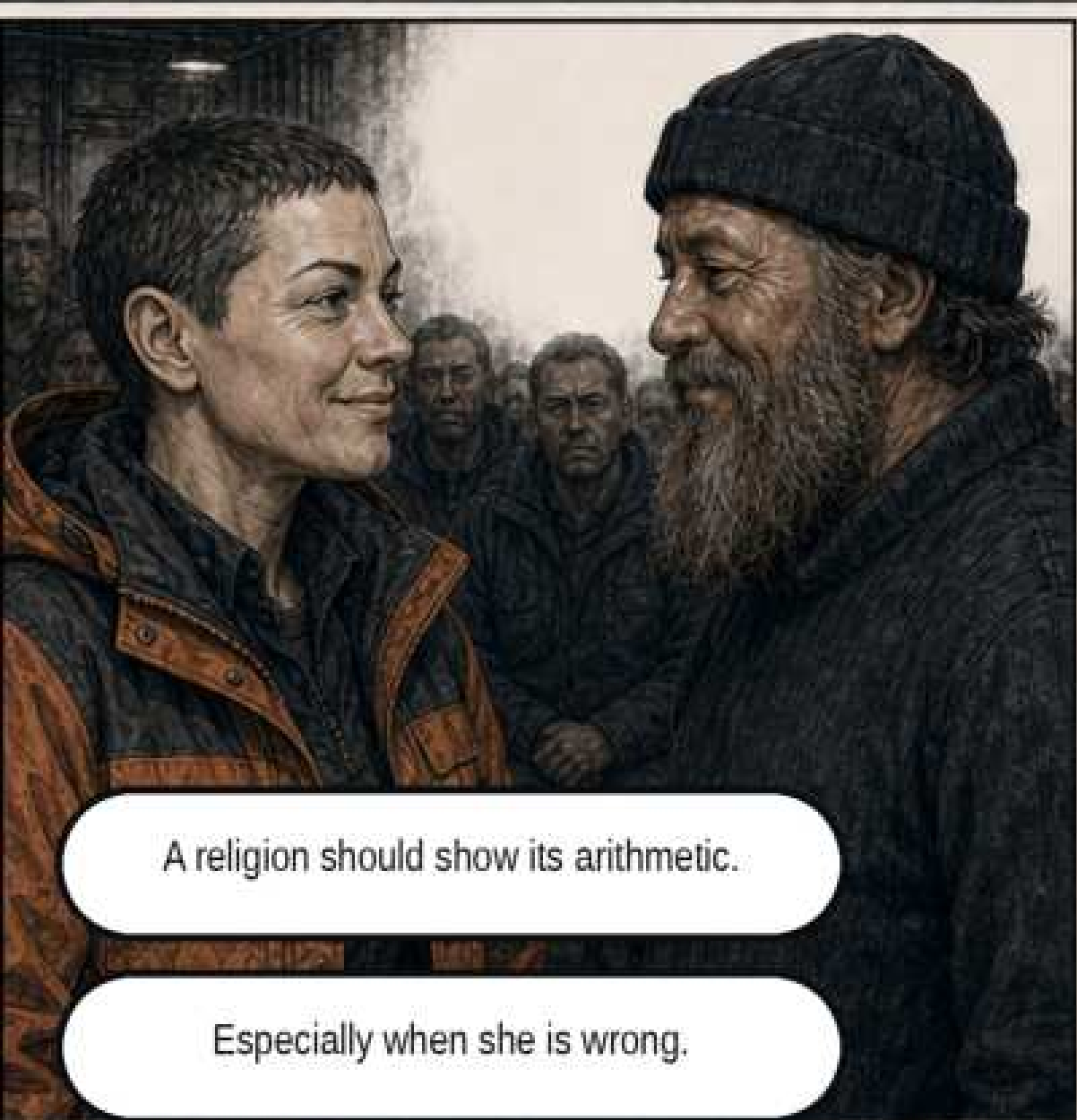
One verified shared ledger. Every revision dated. Every assumption named.

Agreed.



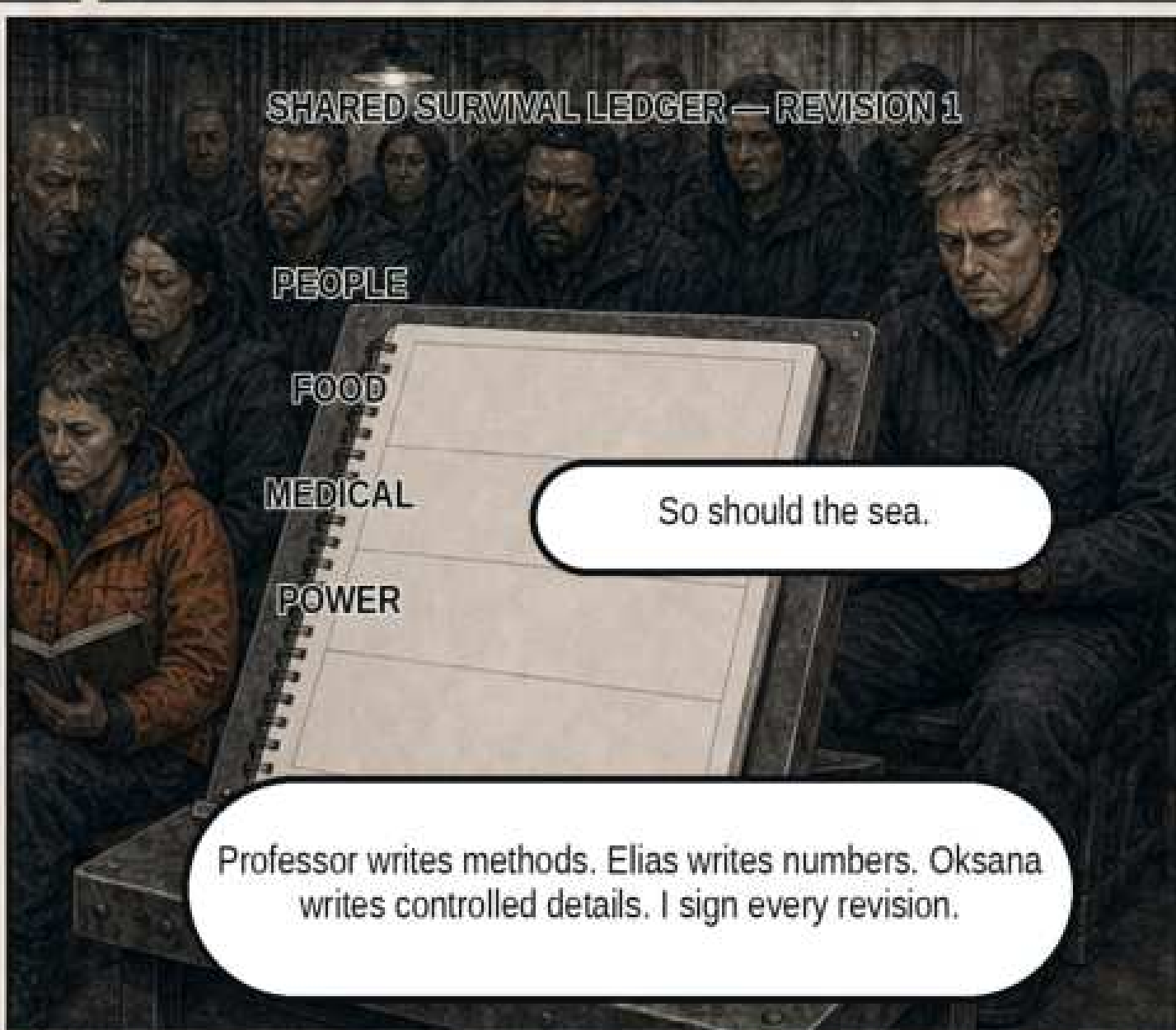
Public totals and categories. Locks, access routes, and failure points remain controlled.

The formula too.



A religion should show its arithmetic.

Especially when she is wrong.



So should the sea.

Professor writes methods. Elias writes numbers. Oksana writes controlled details. I sign every revision.



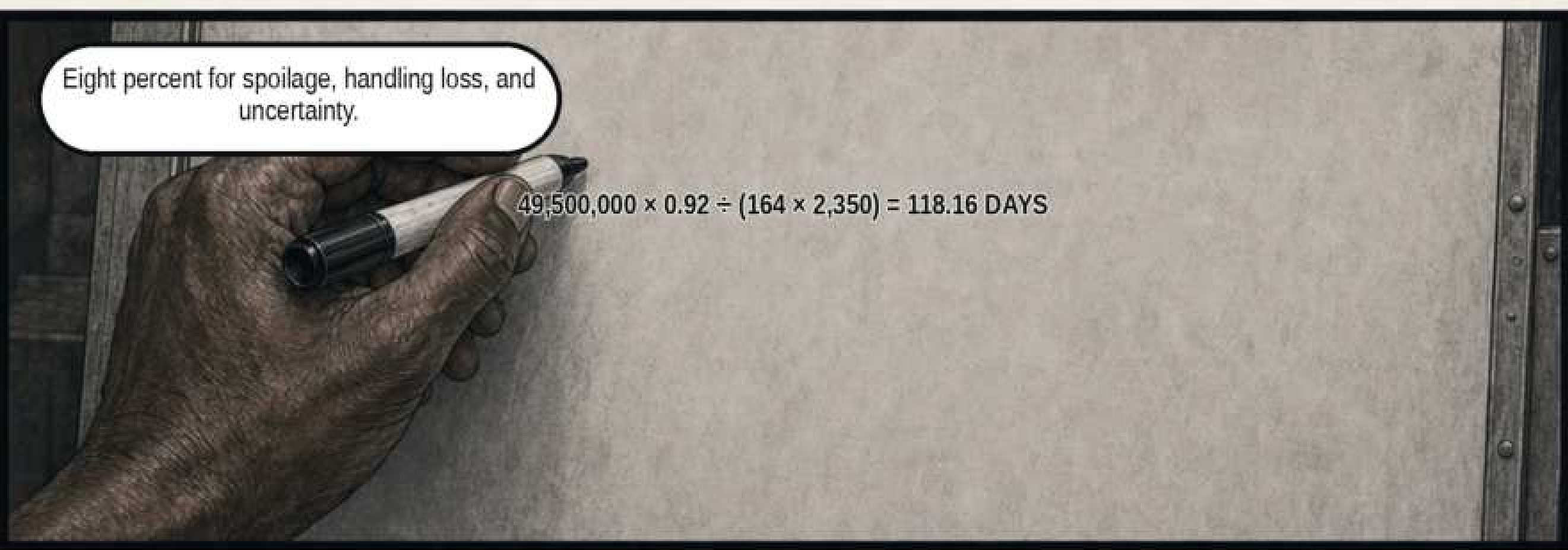
And corrections?

January.

Especially corrections.

That is the answer if nothing is lost.

Eight percent for spoilage, handling loss, and uncertainty.


$$49,500,000 \times 0.92 \div (164 \times 2,350) = 118.16 \text{ DAYS}$$



21 JANUARY 2035

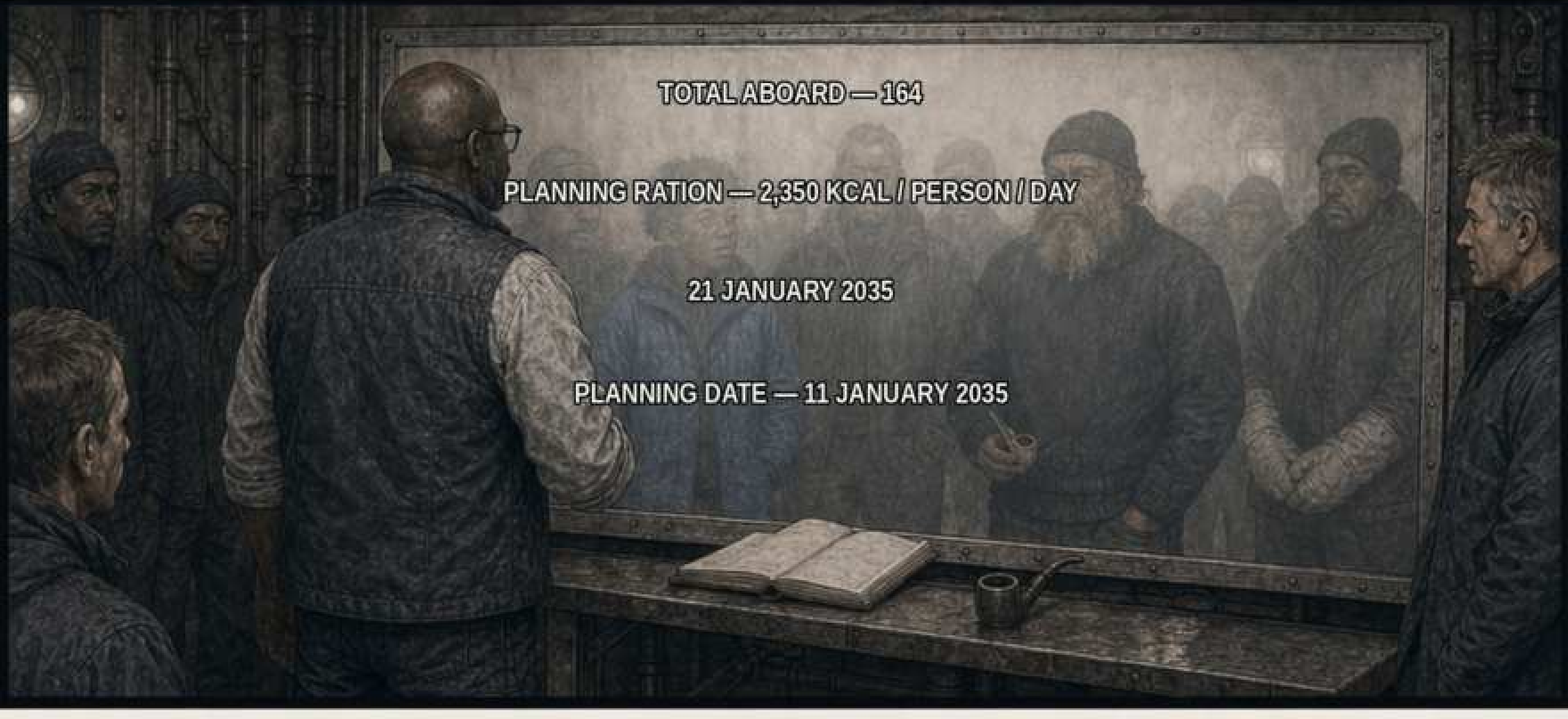
SKRRR

11 JANUARY 2035



What happened to the other ten days?

We admitted we never had them.



TOTAL ABOARD — 164

PLANNING RATION — 2,350 KCAL / PERSON / DAY

21 JANUARY 2035

PLANNING DATE — 11 JANUARY 2035