

OUR MISSION BEGAN WITH THE SIGNAL. NO ONE IS SURE HOW LONG IT WAS FLOATING AROUND SPACE WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO PICK IT UP. MONTHS.



...TOO STRONG TO RESIST ... THEY'RE -- UUUH! -- GOING TO OVERPOWER US ... MOST OF THE CREW HAS -- OOO! -- HAS ALREADY ...

IF YOU SEE THIS MESSAGE THEN YOU'LL KNOW WE WERE -- OH GOD -- AAAAAAH! YES! YES!!



Well, I wouldn't exactly call it a distress signal.

Don't be flip. We searched back along the path of that transmission for weeks. We found nothing. No ship and no crew.

She may not have sounded like she was in distress at the time, but she and the rest of her crew definitely disappeared right after that.

THAT SIGNAL LED US TO CONNECT A NUMBER OF OTHER, SIMILAR, MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCES. AND, EVENTUALLY, LED US TO REALIZE THAT ALL OF THE DISAPPEARANCES WERE THE WORK OF THE SAME ENTITIES. FOR WANT OF A NAME, WE CALL THEM THE "CREEPERS."

WE KNOW ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ABOUT THEM.

I WAS GIVEN COMMAND OF THE CV WATERLOO TO LEARN ANYTHING WE COULD ABOUT THE CREEPERS -- WHO OR WHAT THEY ARE, WHY THEY ARE DOING WHATEVER THEY'RE DOING, AND HOW TO STOP IT.



LIEUTENANT GARRULOUS VICARIOUS, WEAPONS AND TACTICS

LIEUTENANT LEOTA T'SEXI, SCIENCE OFFICER

SECOND LIEUTENANT VERI'ZAFITIG, TECHNICAL OPERATIONS

ENSIGN JEFF "ACE" MORU, PILOT SPECIALIST



UNFORTUNATELY, THOUGH WE'VE BEEN OUT FOR MONTHS, WE HAVE LEARNED VERY LITTLE, AND WE ARE ALL GETTING FRUSTRATED, AND TIRED OF THE MONOTONY OF ONBOARD LIFE.

IN ADDITION, I HAVE RECENTLY BEGUN TO NOTE A CHANGE IN BEHAVIOR AMONG THE CREW THAT I'M NOT SURE IS A POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT ...



Veri, have you seen Leota? I can't find her and she's not in her cabin.

Uh, no. No idea.

Look in Garrulous' cabin, commander.



Thanks, AIDA.

Tattletale.

She's going to have to find out sooner or later.



oh!



I'm going to kill them.



Commander! Wait! ... Are you all right?

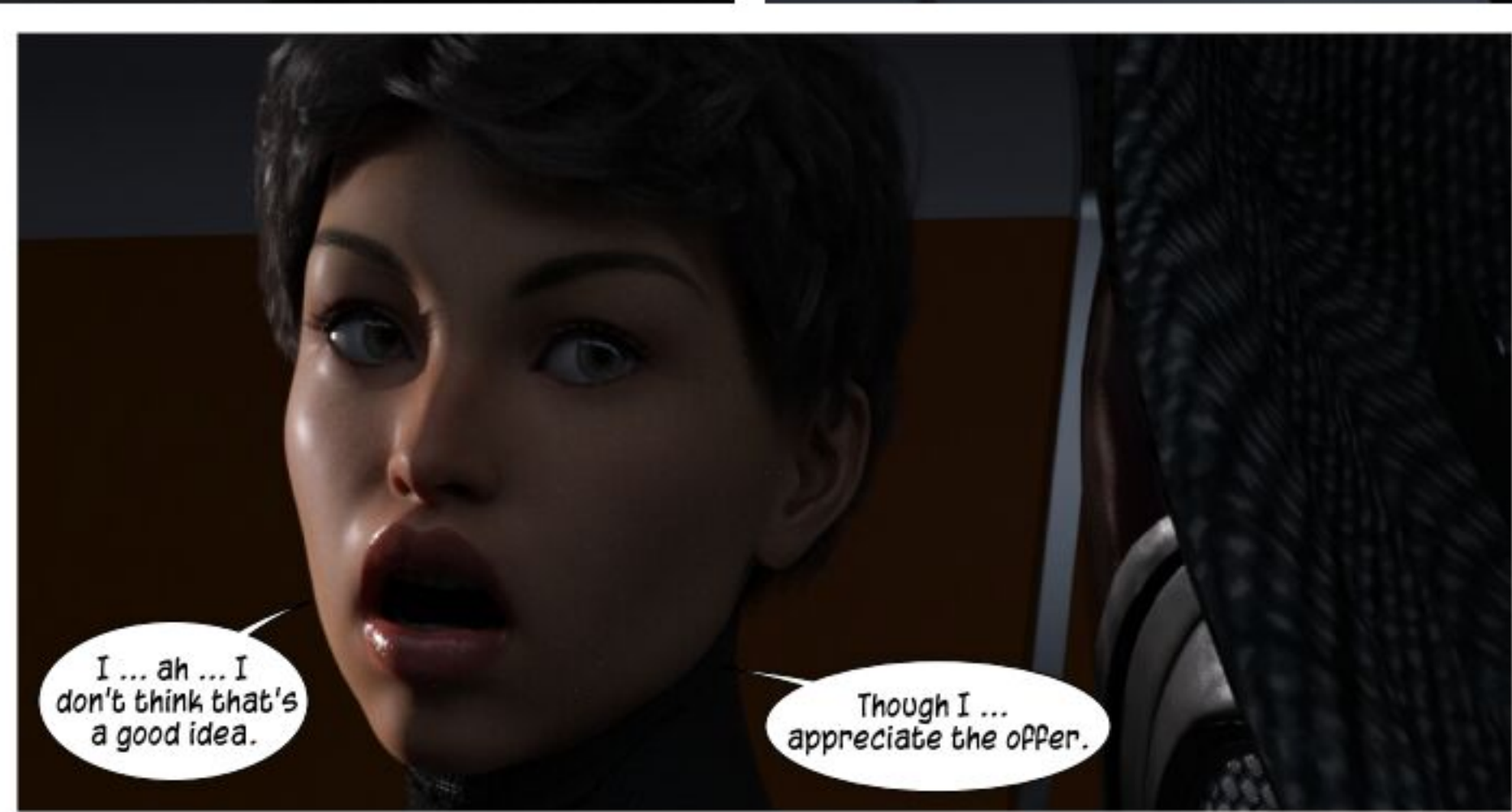
I'm fine, Veri ... just contemplating some disciplinary action I'd prefer not to have to do.

Then don't?

I know, it's not my place. But they're just ... we have to get this out of our systems somehow ...



In fact, excuse my saying so, but you could use some release yourself. Would you like to come to my cabin?

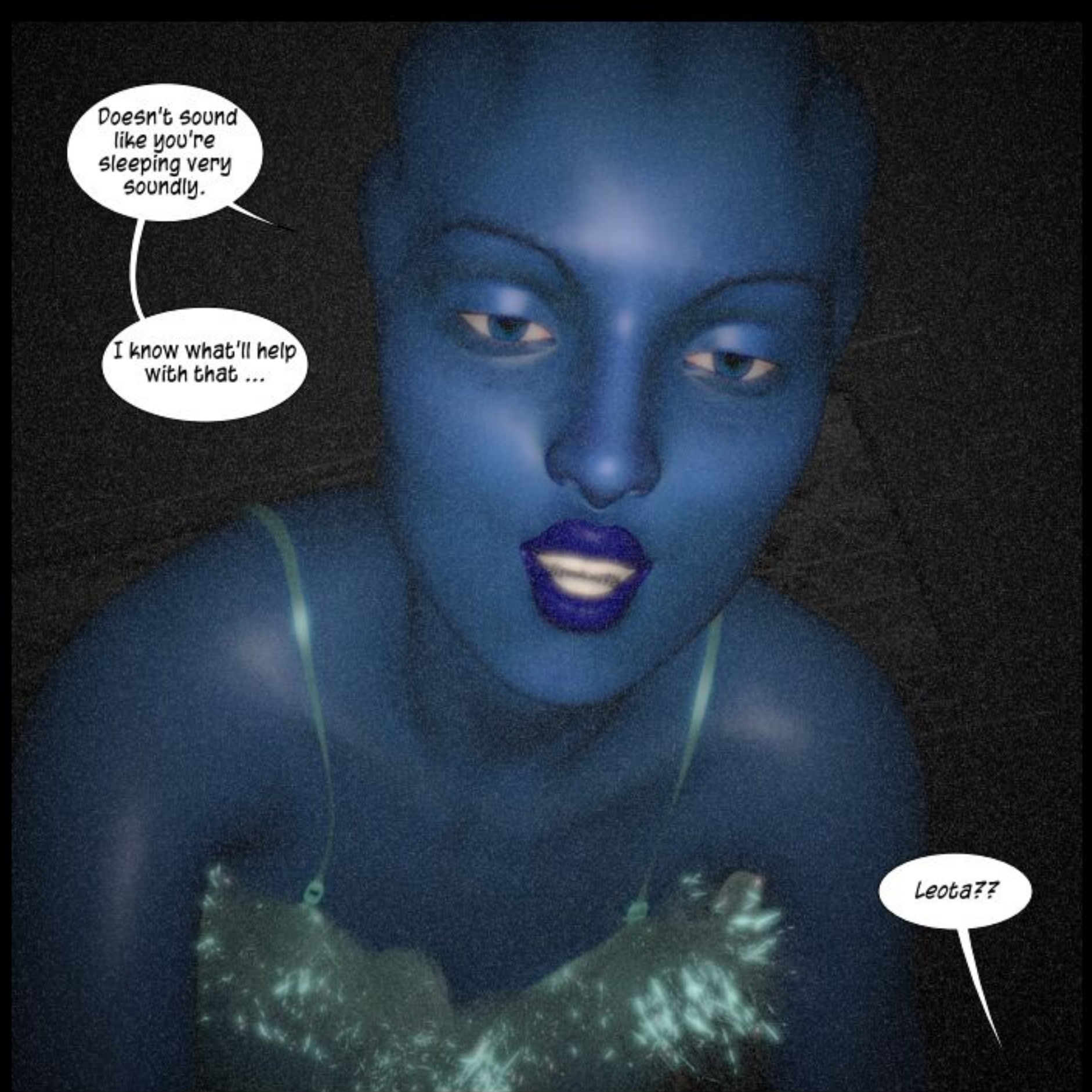


I ... ah ... I don't think that's a good idea.

Though I ... appreciate the offer.



-- Mmmmm --
-- grrr --



Doesn't sound like you're sleeping very soundly.

I know what'll help with that ...

Leota??



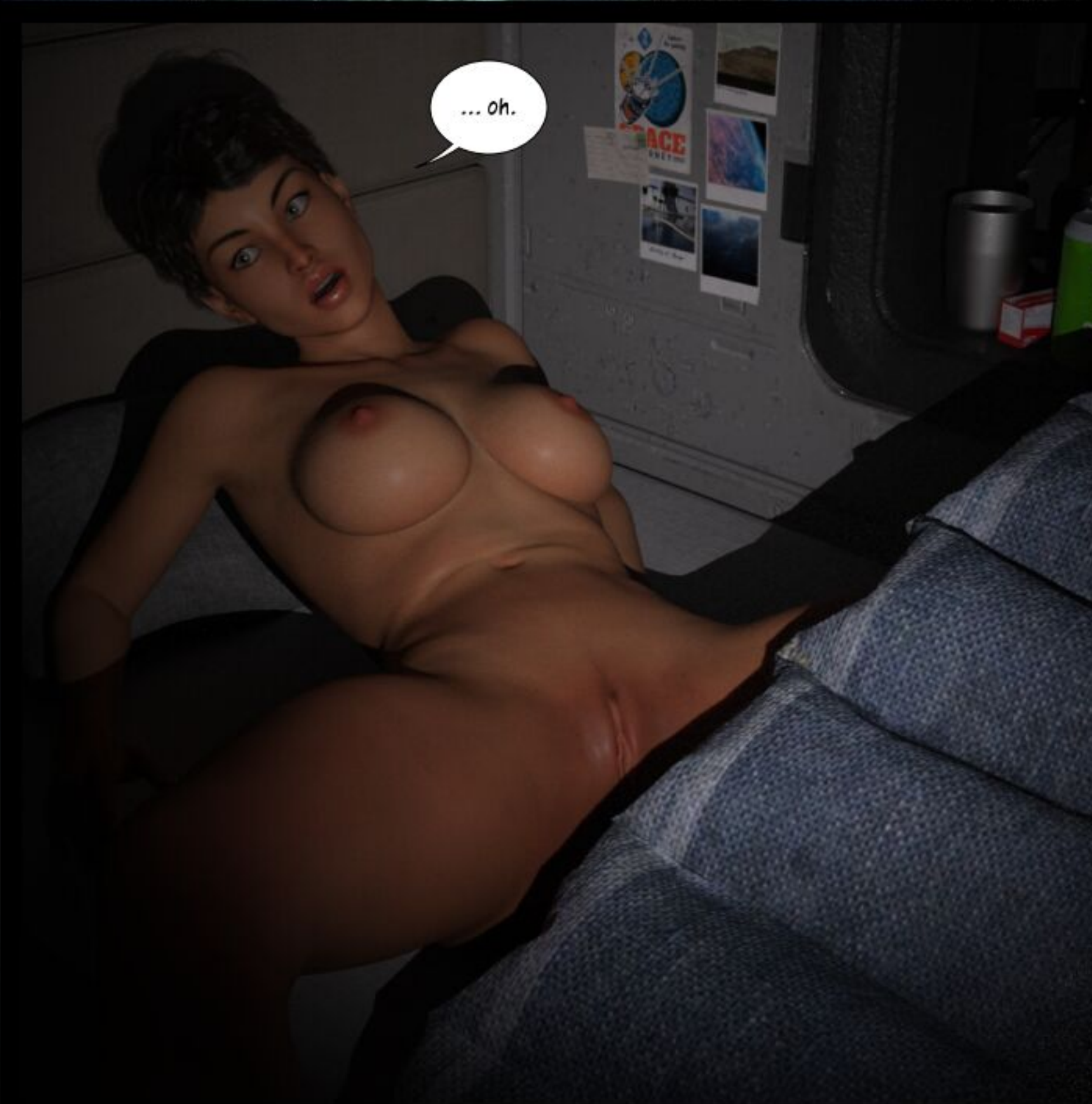
It's not allowed! And it's a bad idea --

You know what's a bad idea? When your *commander* can't Punction properly because she's full of *sexual tension*.

You've always wanted me. I know. I feel it in your mind.

Let's see how this tastes, hmm? ...

Oh ...
No, wait --
Oh!



... Oh.



Commander?
Are you all right?

Leota? What are you doing in here?

You were making noises. Loud ones. I could hear them in my cabin.

I was dreaming.

Were you dreaming about me?

... Sorry?



I know you've always been attracted to me, Commander. I've spent enough time around you to have a good idea what you're Peeling.

Besides, you're not really subtle. I've caught you looking.

Don't you think it's silly to walk around carrying all that *tension* when there's a simple and obvious solution?





Yes, there is a body of evidence indicating a ... ah ... cumulative effect.

Not enough to be a serious concern for most vessels. However, you've been using the relays almost daily.

I trust you and your crew will be able to work out some accommodation.

... Admiral?
Sorry, sir, I just want to confirm that you're --

The Corps policy on fraternization exists for a reason, Commander.

However, I don't care to replace you or your crew for this mission. Let's call it a temporary suspension of the rules.

Very local, very circumstantial, and keep it to yourselves.

Understood, sir.

In better news, I believe I have a lead for you.

We received a message from the RV Shreveport. They're doing xenoarchaeology. They claim to have information pertinent to your mission, but they won't send it in an open transmission.

I've arranged for you to rendezvous with them in four days. Check that terminal over there and send those coordinates to the Waterloo.

!!!
Sir, this is four relays away ... to get there in four days ...

Yes. Don't dawdle with your resupply. You'll need to leave immediately.



... Pull of surprises. Sorry to interrupt everyone's station time.

We'll live. Though I think Garr was planning on getting into a really good bar fight.

If that's going to be policy for the rest of the mission, we have got to figure out what to do for Ace. I think he's going to explode.



Oh!
Oh, baby!
Yes!!



... Never mind.

I wasn't aware that AIDA had that feature.



We've arrived at the rendezvous point, Commander.

We have?
Shouldn't there be a ship here for us to meet? Are we early or late?

We are on schedule. But you're correct: there are no other vessels anywhere within my broadest scan range.

Which is a long way. This place is deserted. The only things I see here are rocks and debris.

Uh, are we sure those coordinates were right?



One of those pieces of "debris" is a beacon. Hold on ...

The ID tag on the signal says it's from the Shreveport.

Distress call?

Maybe. The actual message content is enciphered, I think? I can't make it out.

I can. It's MilSec 6. One moment ...



It's a location. Not just system and planet, but surface coordinates on the planet. That's all the message contains.

I don't like this.

OK, we have to assume the Shreveport has been captured or destroyed. But is the beacon a trap?

There is very little traffic in this system. And most commercial vessels wouldn't be able to read that cipher.

Assumptions: First, that the location was encrypted so that whoever captured or destroyed them couldn't read it, and second, that the beacon was intended specifically for us.

I think it's for real, Commander. They knew they were in trouble and left us directions.

Yes, but to what?

-- sigh --
OK, set a course.



We'll be there in about three minutes. If I don't drive the Orca over a cliff.

Someday I'm going to meet whoever designed the steering on this thing and murder him.

This is ... impressive.

And absolutely not intimidating at all.

Garr, I'd like to remind you that we're here to find something useful. This is not a "shoot first, ask later" situation.

I think I'm going to be carsick.

Good thing your helmet's not on yet, then.

Heh.



Hmph.



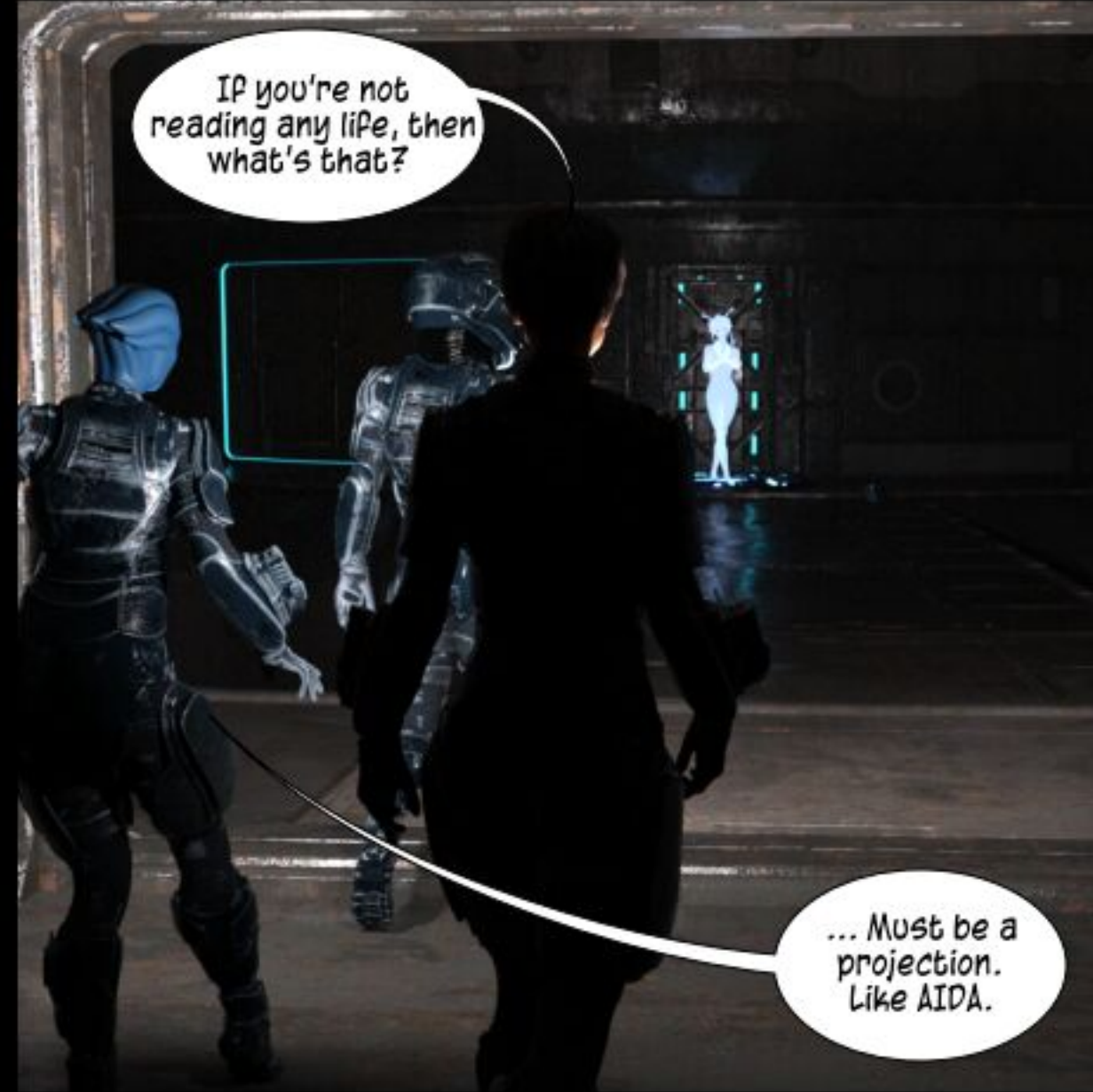
I'm taking off my helmet.

Mutiny.

Not if the commander does it too.

Garr, I'm not reading or sensing any life in here at all, the air's stale but fine, and I'm suffocating in this thing.

You're worried about attacks, you can be out front. If you get shot, I'll put it back on.



If you're not reading any life, then what's that?

... Must be a projection. Like AIDA.



... A very mobile one! I -- uh --



-- MMM?!



Pr'nt ha brn hrsi prjo ta ...

Hrsi ta sr ajo'ht brn!

What is she saying?

Oh, now, wait a second ...



-- Mph! --



There! That's the language you all speak, isn't it? It is! Oh, good!

You needed to kiss us to absorb our languages?

Oh, no, but it's more fun that way!

Hello, Commander. That's right, isn't it? That's what she calls you.

Uh, yes. Commander Jean Lovell. And your name is?



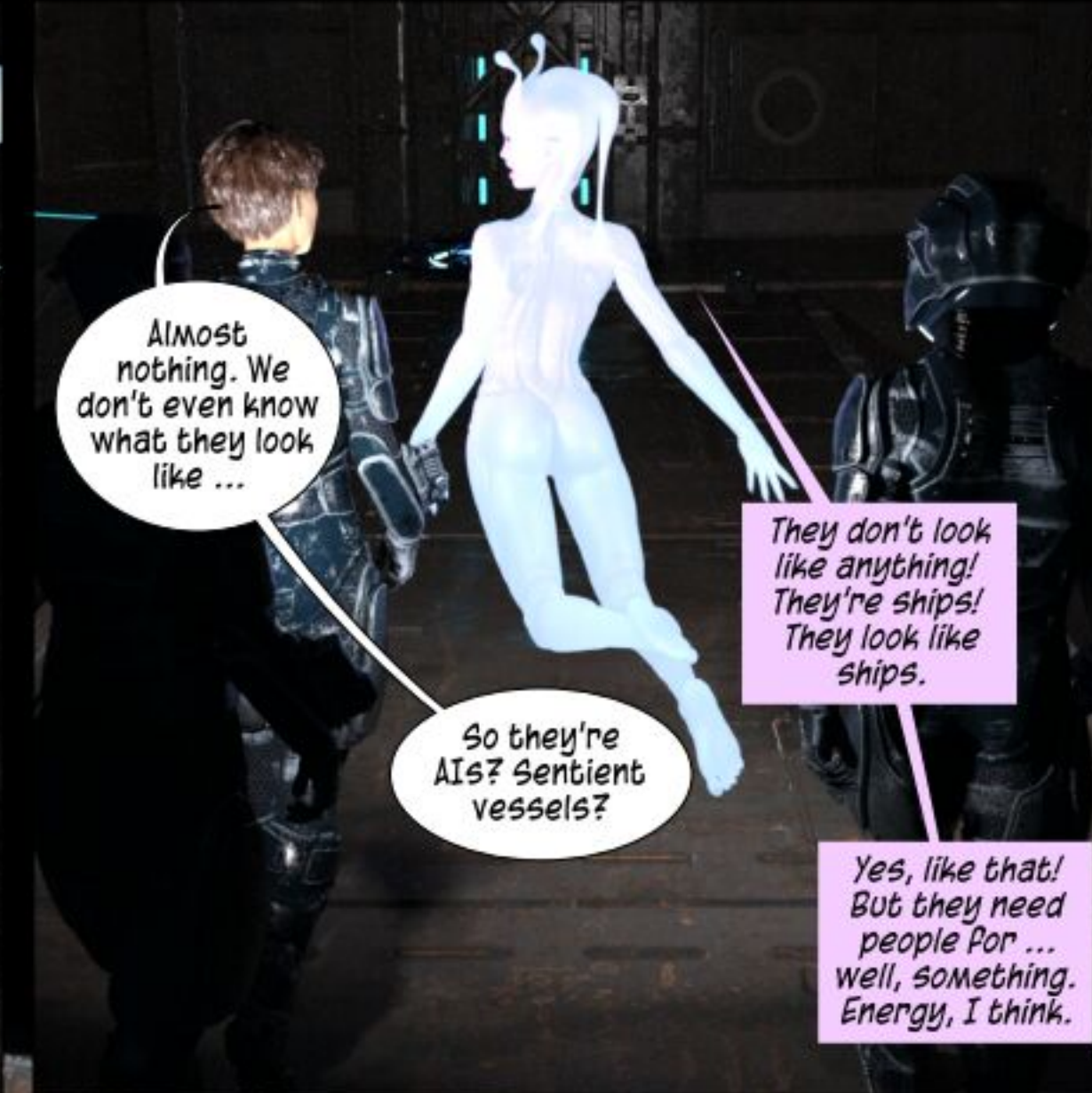
I'm Gree! Are you finally here for the Pocus? I think you are!

The Pocus?

So you can take care of the Bodiless!

Ooh, I see. You call them Creepers. That's silly. They don't creep!

You don't know much about them, do you?



Almost nothing. We don't even know what they look like ...

So they're AIs? Sentient vessels?

They don't look like anything! They're ships! They look like ships.

Yes, like that! But they need people for ... well, something. Energy, I think.



They keep people inside them and use them for whatever it is, and they don't let the people out, and after a while the people die, so they have to get more.

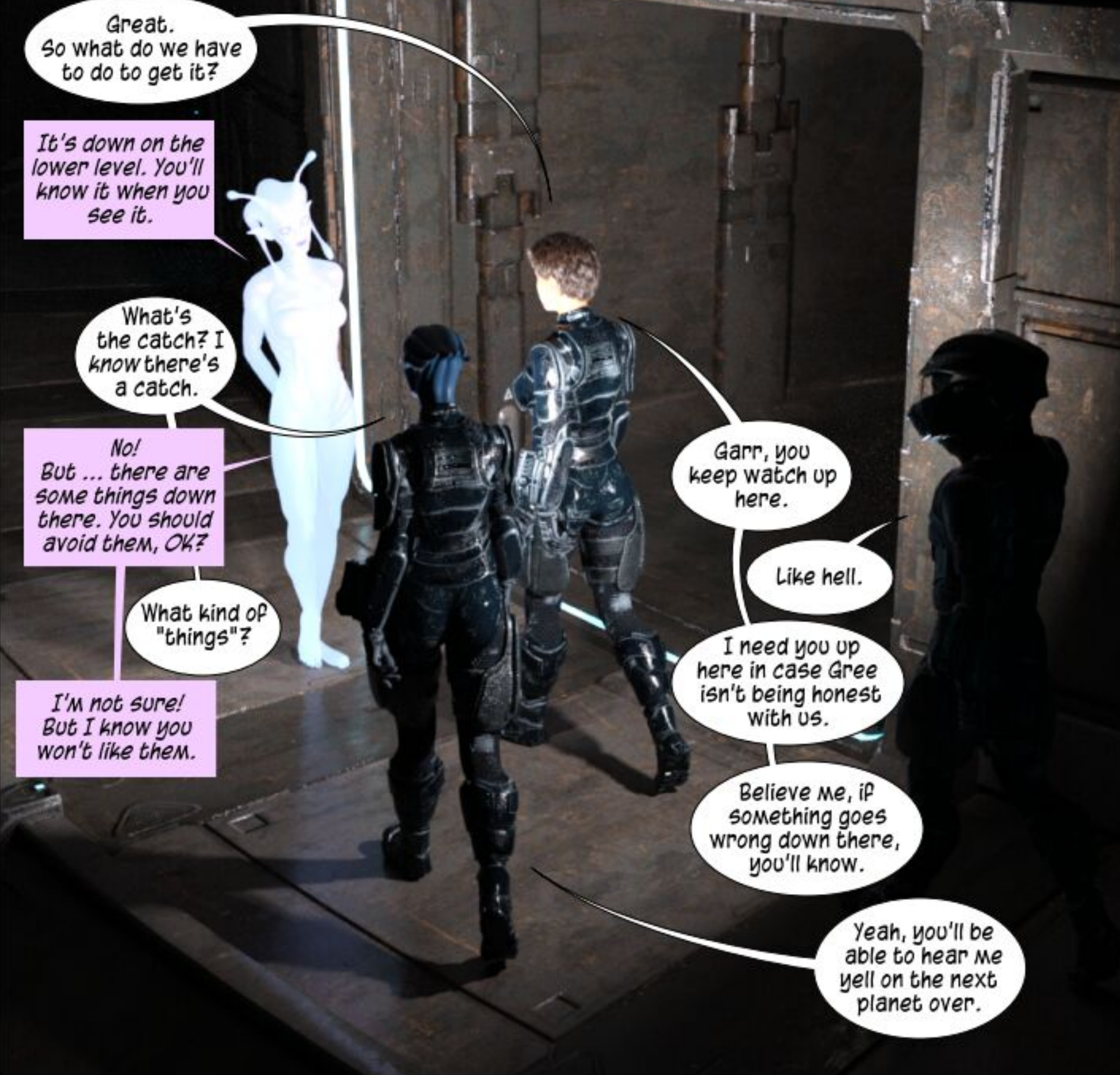
And that's what destroyed my entire civilization!

You're ... uh ... awfully cheerful about it.

That's just the way my personality was programmed! It's really sad, of course, and also I'm so bored! I've been in here for centuries. Hey, if you get rid of the Bodiless, could you come back and try to port me out?

So this ... what did you say? Focus? ... It will destroy the Creepers?

Maybe! They built it too late. They never got a chance to try it! But they must have thought it would work. They went to a lot of trouble to keep the Bodiless from getting it!



Great. So what do we have to do to get it?

It's down on the lower level. You'll know it when you see it.

What's the catch? I know there's a catch.

No! But ... there are some things down there. You should avoid them, OK?

What kind of "things"?

I'm not sure! But I know you won't like them.

Garr, you keep watch up here.

Like hell.

I need you up here in case Gree isn't being honest with us.

Believe me, if something goes wrong down there, you'll know.

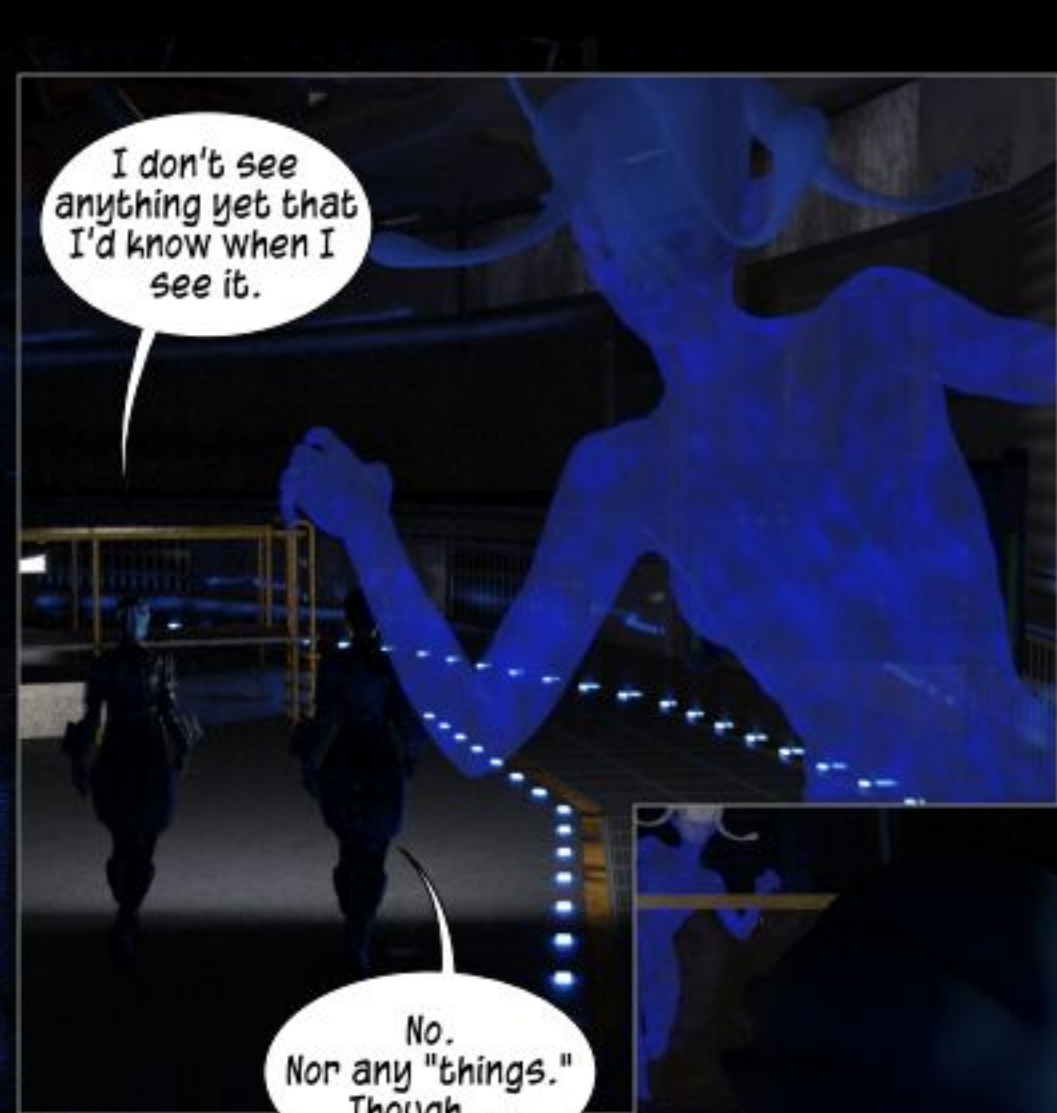
Yeah, you'll be able to hear me yell on the next planet over.



Do you, ah, Peel a little ...

More than a little. Stronger than from a relay.

Fortunately, this creepy place is killing the mood.



I don't see anything yet that I'd know when I see it.

No. Nor any "things." Though ...



What?!

Not sure. It felt like ... I felt something.



There! That's got to be it.

What do you think, Leota? Is that something we'd know when we see it?

... Leota?



-- Moan --

No ... don't do that ...



Leota, no!!

Leave her alone!

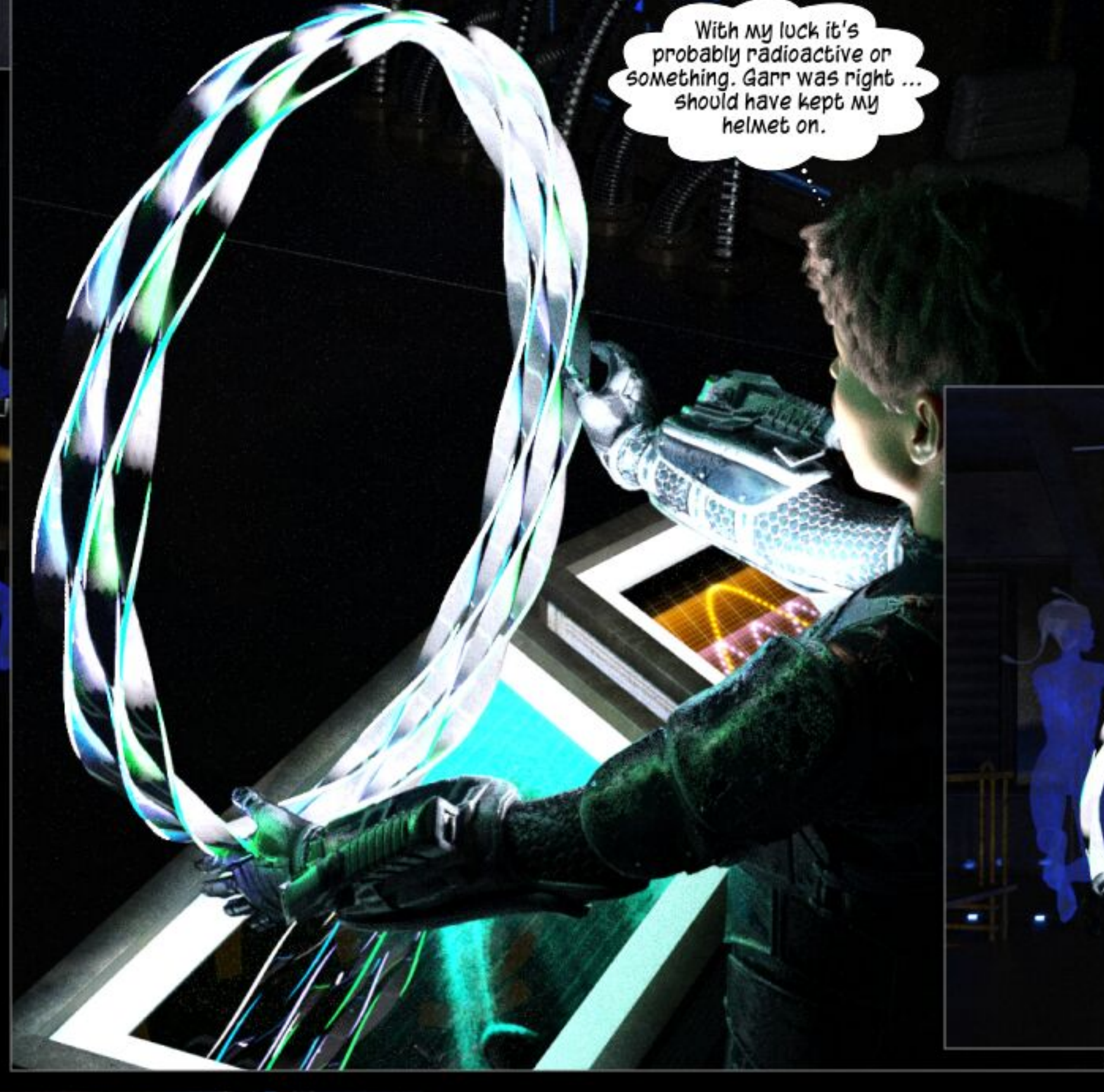


Aaah! Get ... MMM ... get away from me!



That felt really good. Too good. These creatures will have us both incoherent ... Already I want them to touch me all over ...

I think best bet is to just grab the thing, pull Leota out somehow, and run for it.



With my luck it's probably radioactive or something. Garr was right ... should have kept my helmet on.

Oh! They're ... scared of it?

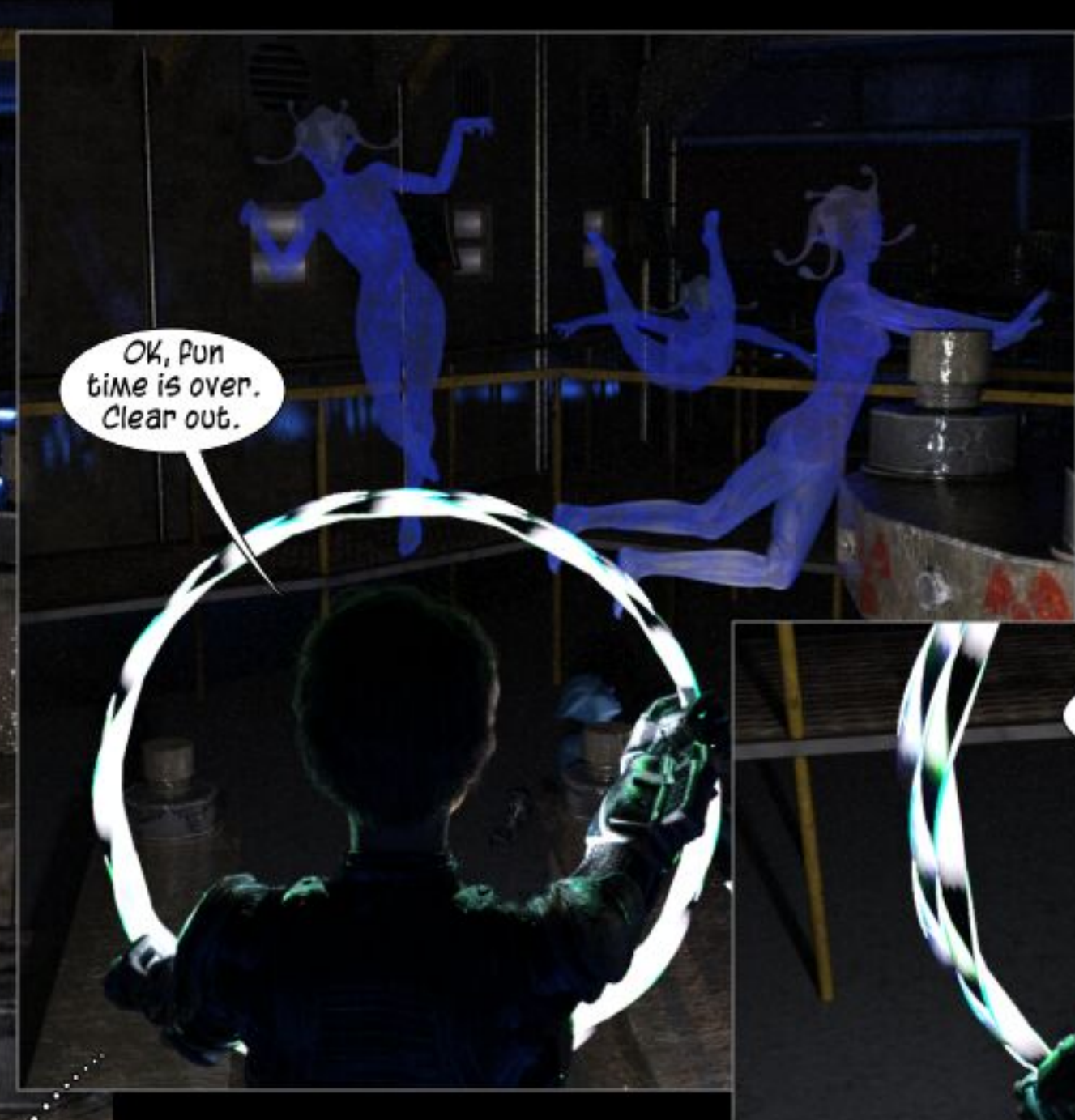


Well, that's a little worrying, but it does make this easier.



oooooooohhhhh

-- Sigh --



OK, Pun time is over. Clear out.



"No signs of life."

There weren't! Those things were data or ghosts or something.

Get your suit back on and let's get the hell out of here.



You make her happy, and I'll make you happy. Just between us, Ace isn't, ah, very satisfying ...

To be fair, I don't think he's had a lot of practice.

-- MMM! --



Aaah! Yes! Yes!

Prox alert??

Commander, there are hostile ships closing. We are at the next relay, but I need authorization to proceed through.

--MMPH-- Do it!!



ooohhhh!!
aaaaa!
eeee!



Talk to me, AIDA.

When they came into scan range after the first relay, they did not respond to signals and attempted to fire at us.

I was able to outdistance them to the second relay, but they have just come into scan range again.



They're following us?

Ohhhh! ... No, Commander. They're following something we have aboard.

It's Creepers. They want that Pocus. I'll bet on it.

I agree with the Lieutenant's assessment. We will outpace them to the third relay, but there is a long cross-space interval before the fourth, and I believe they will catch us. And we don't have sufficient armament to fight them.



Don't go that way. Take the long route, around Procyon. It adds four more relays, but they're all close enough to each other to chain them.

Chaining relays is forbidden.

We can't care about that right now, Commander!

Ah ... with all respect, sir.

We can chain all the way to Central on that route. We won't come out of redshift at all, and they can't catch us.

Chaining relays is forbidden because it's dangerous, Ace. It requires a careful and alert pilot.

So you don't think I can do it, huh?

I wouldn't bet it whether I think you can do it or not, Ace. Not with that Pocus on board. Three of us spontaneously climaxed just from two relays too close together. Chaining all those ... and you're, uh, excitable as it is ...



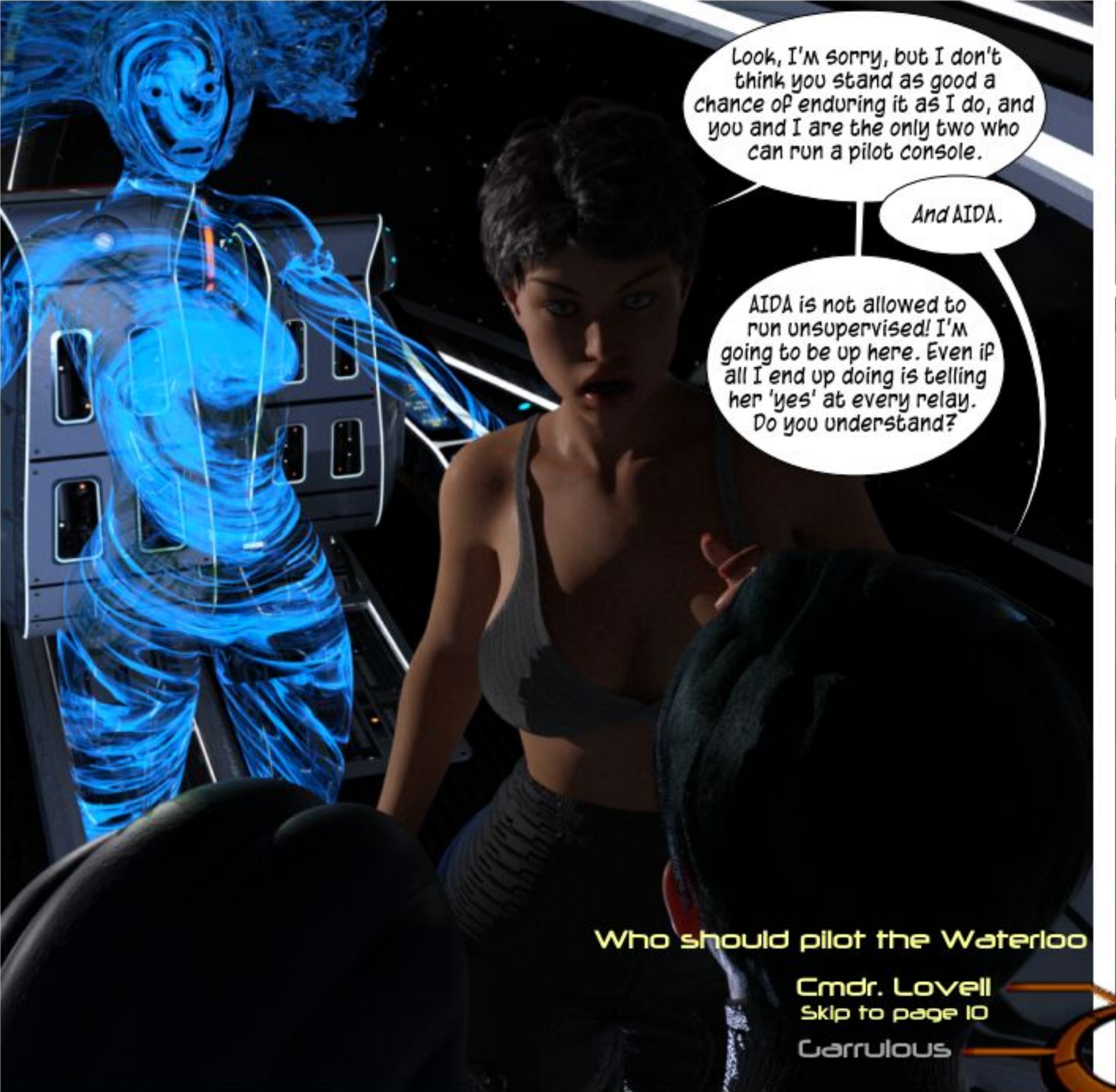
Fine. Give AIDA authorization to run the whole chain. She's not affected by the relays.

Bad idea.

AIs are always required to get command permission for certain tasks. Every time, Ensign. You know that. That's another rule that exists for a good reason.

You're busy fussing about rules when we're on the verge of being shot to pieces by Creepers ... or worse? We don't even know what they do to those ships!

Actually, we have a pretty good idea, now. But you don't want to know. Trust me.



Look, I'm sorry, but I don't think you stand as good a chance of enduring it as I do, and you and I are the only two who can run a pilot console.

And AIDA.

AIDA is not allowed to run unsupervised! I'm going to be up here. Even if all I end up doing is telling her 'yes' at every relay. Do you understand?



AIDA, set Ace's suggested route.

Done.

Everyone else, I think we're going to clear the bridge for this one.

Aye, aye, sir.

Commander ... are you sure about this?

I just have to be alert enough to supervise, Leota. I did better than you with the ghosts.

Yes, but if you're too out of it to give AIDA the signals ...

I don't have a better option, Lieutenant. Do you?

Who should pilot the Waterloo through the relay chain?

Cmdr. Lovell
Skip to page 10
Garrulous

Veri
AIDA
Next page

Leota Ace

... OR YOU CAN JUST READ BOTH ENDINGS ONE AFTER THE OTHER, WHICH IS WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO ANYWAY.

Cmdr. Lovell

FROM THE PERSONAL LOG OF CAPTAIN T'SEXI:

THE RELAY CHAINING PROCEEDED WITHOUT DISASTER ... THOUGH, AS WE LEARNED AFTERWARD, IT WAS NOT WITHOUT CONSEQUENCES.



OK. Let me get seated and then you can proceed through the relay chain. I'll give you voice authorization at each stage.

Acknowledged, Commander.

First relay of six. Commencing redshift ...

Slingshot direct to second relay successful ... clear to proceed?

Fourth relay ...

Almost there ... permission for final relay?

ooh

uuuh ... yes.

Oh!!

Oh god

Commander?

Uh, yes ...

Ahhh! Yes!!

YES!!

YEEE SSS...

HRRRRRRRRRRRMMMMMMMM



I am so glad we decided to stick together to help each other through that.

I'm not sure I could have gone through it alone without losing my mind ...

How are we doing, AIDA? Looks like we made it in one piece ...

The relay chain was successful. We are approaching Central.

The commander is unconscious.



She has not responded to any of my verbal attempts to wake her.

Hey! Commander! It's time to rise and shine!

Commander? Hello?

I'll, uh, contact Central for clearance and a berth.

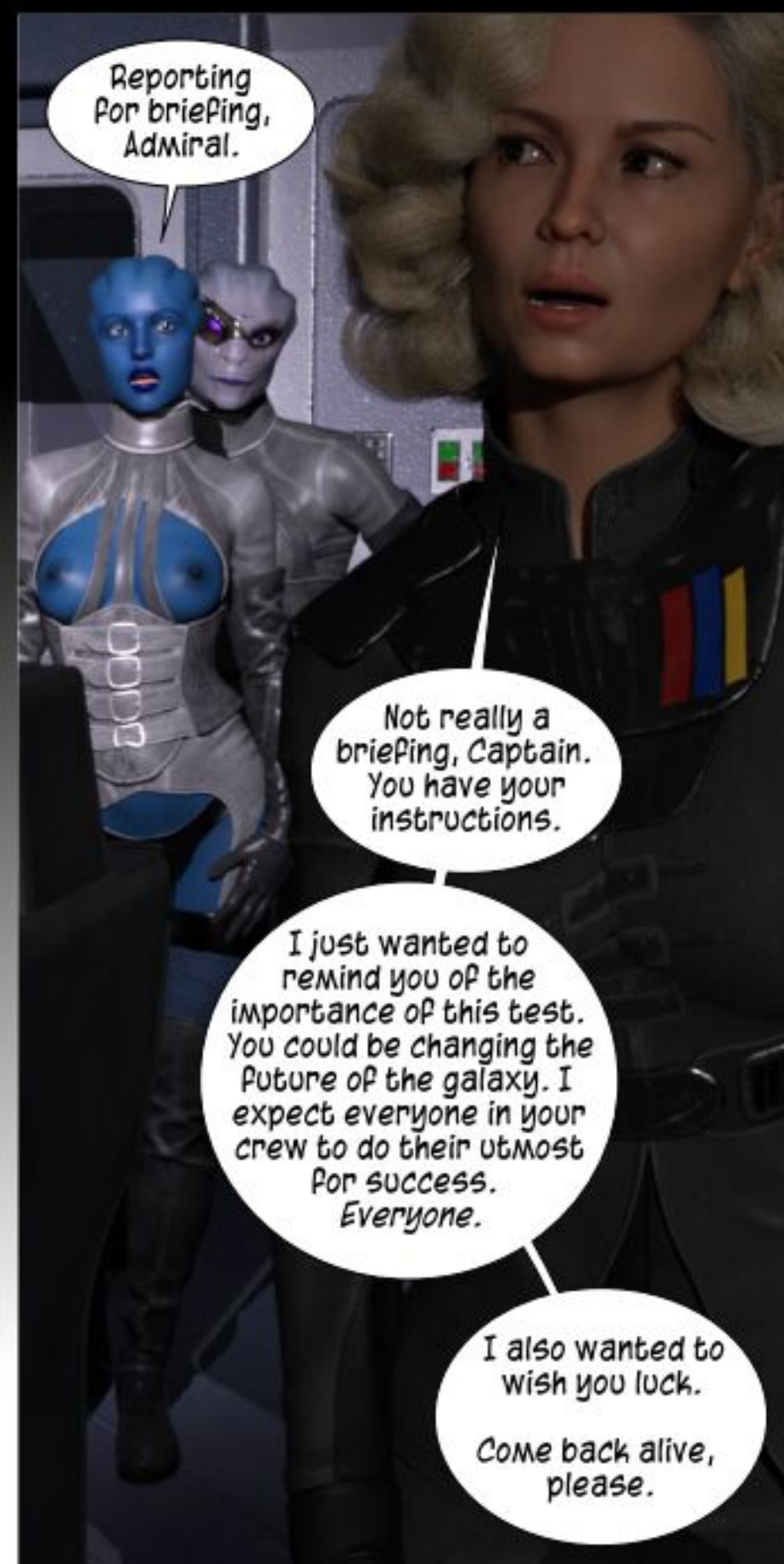
Lieutenant, let me take care of the commander. You and Garr should go get dressed. You're going to need to take the Pocus to the admiral as soon as we dock.

FOUR MONTHS LATER.



I realize they're trying for a mood here, but don't you think these special new uniforms are a bit much?

Eh. Worn worse.



Reporting for briefing, Admiral.

Not really a briefing, Captain. You have your instructions.

I just wanted to remind you of the importance of this test. You could be changing the future of the galaxy. I expect everyone in your crew to do their utmost for success. Everyone.

I also wanted to wish you luck. Come back alive, please.



We've got one? Already? We didn't even have to go all that far.

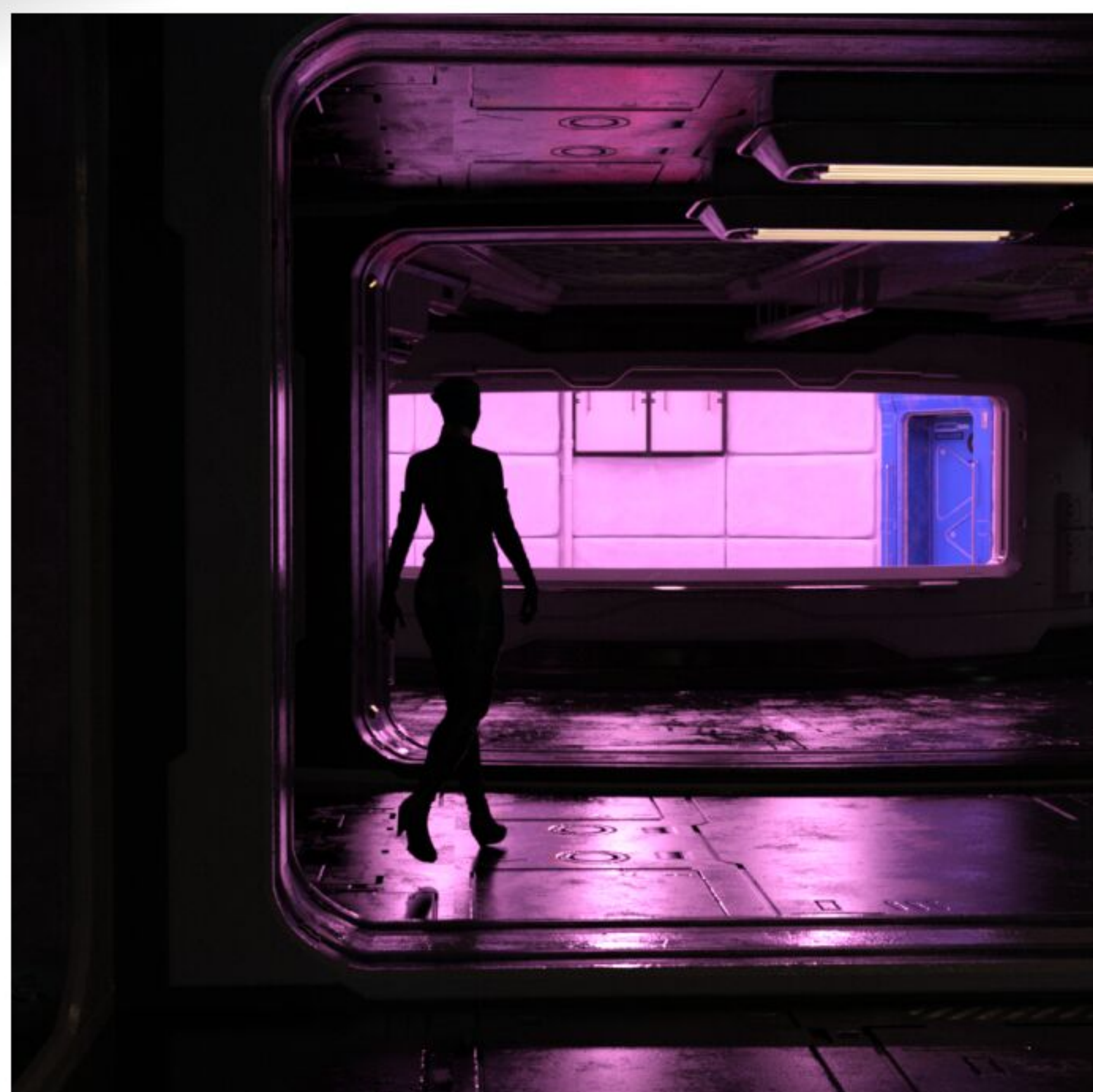
The new tracking technology appears to be working. We can find them now.

Excellent. Does anyone object to my having the first try? Inaugural run and all that?

Captain's prerogative!

Heh. All right, I'm going below, then. Remember, stay out of their scan range until I signal we're ready. When Veri activates the Pocus, close as fast as you can.

Aye, aye, sir.



Ooooh!

Happy to see me? ... I'm looking forward to this too.

WATCH STEP



MMMM!

Whoa!

Hang on, there, Commander. I have to get some of this off you ... and get some clothes off me ... and I was, you know, maybe going to dim the lights a little ...

No? I guess not.



Did you completely drain that?

-- giggle --

No wonder you're ... hmm, we're going to have to find better batteries ...

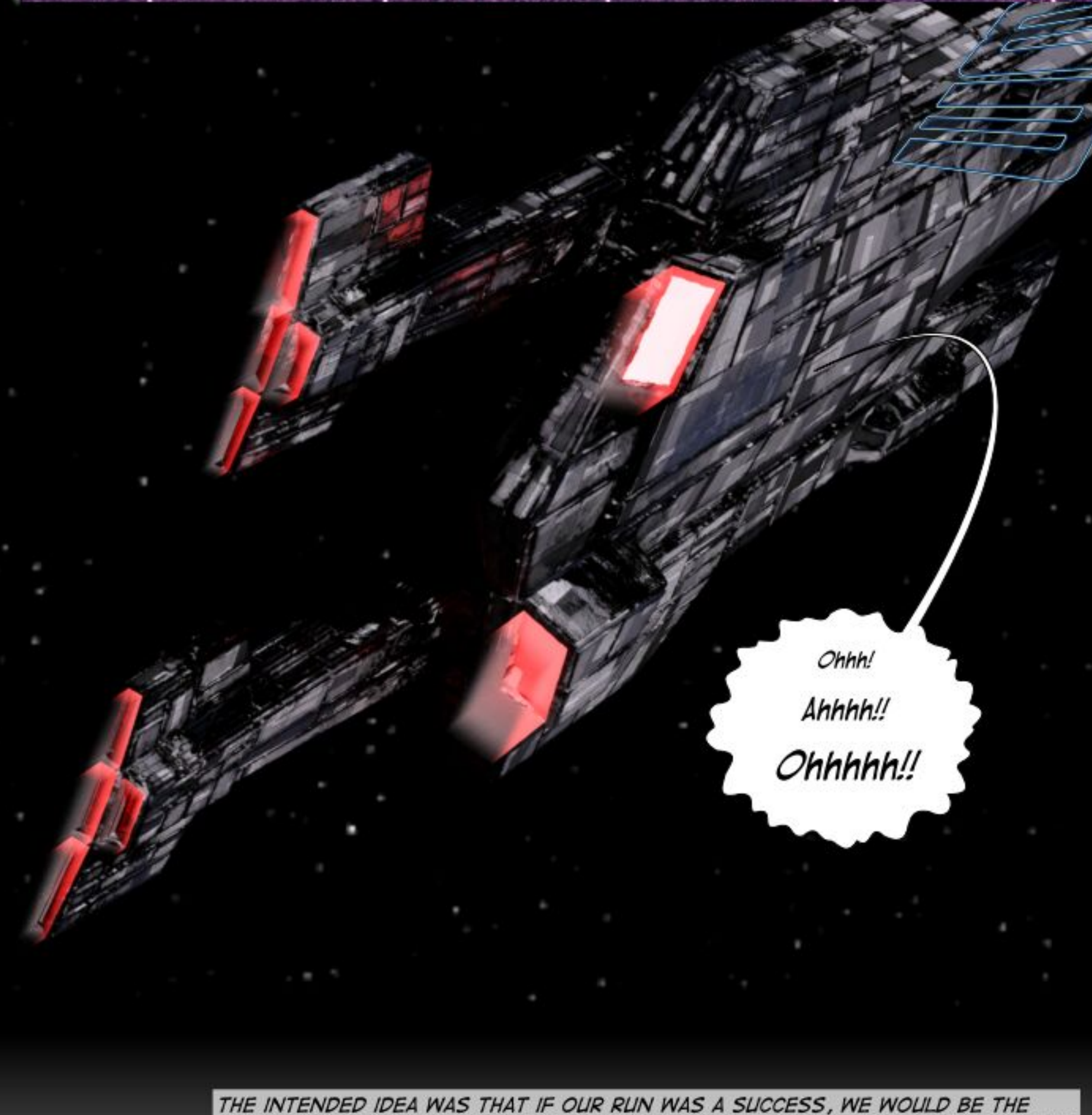
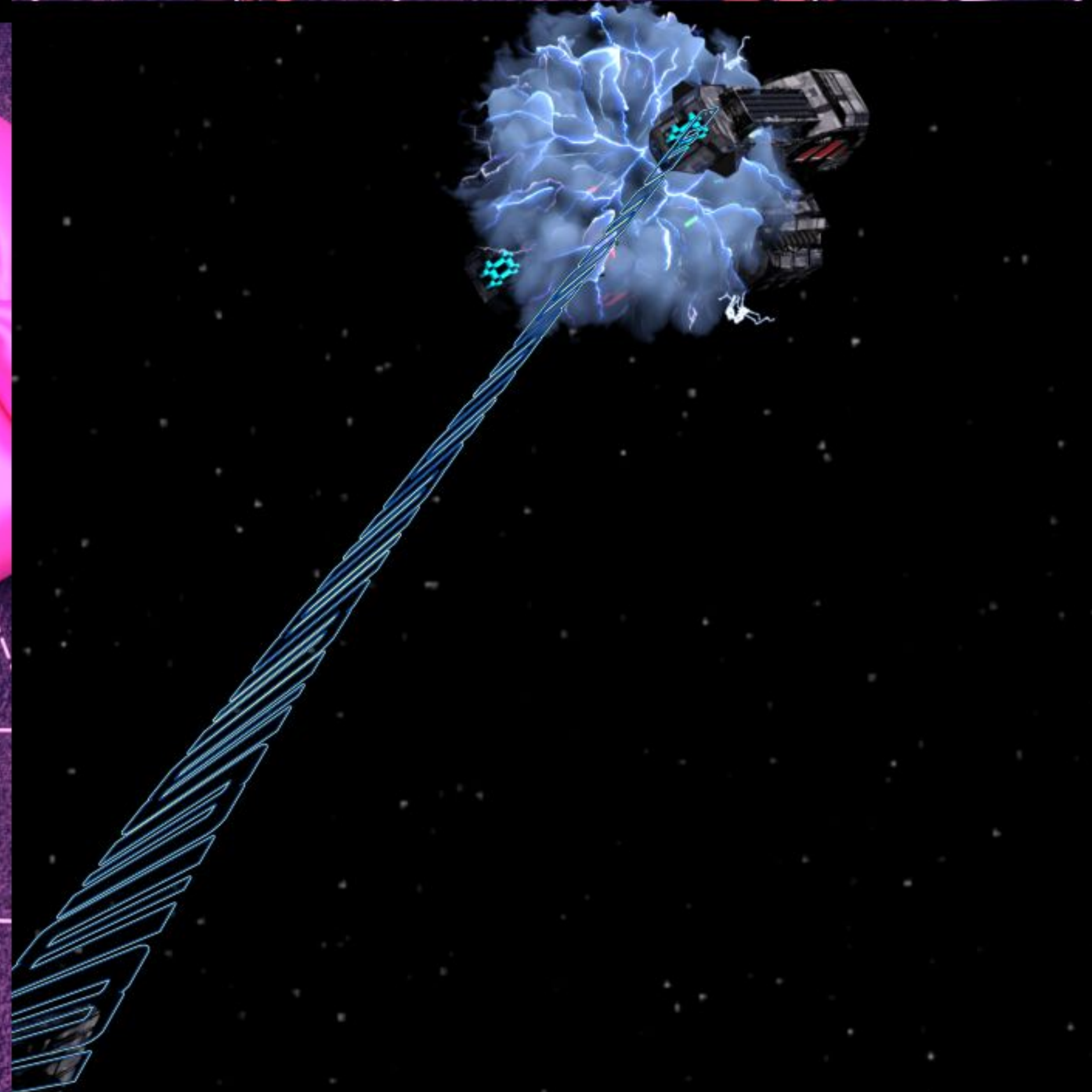
Veri? The commander burned through her assistance device I don't know how long ago. She's ... Uh ... you better go ahead and fire up the Pocus, this is going to happen really fast.

Roger!



MMMM!

MMMM!



Ohhh!
Ahhhh!
Ohhhhhh!!



... uuuuh ...

Did it work?

Hello? Anybody?

... Affirmative, Captain. The rest of the crew is too ... distracted ... to respond, but the Creeper ship appears to have been overloaded by the Pocused pulse, as hoped.

We're ... ah ... going to have to figure out what to do about that "distraction" problem.

Maneuver to boarding range, please, AIDA. We need to see if any of their captives can be rescued.

I'll be on the bridge shortly. I ... need a few more minutes.

THE INTENDED IDEA WAS THAT IF OUR RUIN WAS A SUCCESS, WE WOULD BE THE FIRST SHIP OF A NEW CORPS BRANCH FLEET, EACH WITH A FOCUS, DOING WHAT WE JUST DID. THIS TURNED OUT NOT TO BE NECESSARY.

AFTER THE THIRD CREEPER SHIP HAD ITS ONBOARD INTELLIGENCE DESTROYED BY THE FOCUS, THE CREEPERS (THEIR NAME FOR THEMSELVES TRANSLATES AS "DATAKIND") OPENED NEGOTIATIONS. THE TALKS LASTED LESS THAN EIGHT HOURS. A NEW ERA OF PEACE AND COOPERATION DAWNED. WE ALL GOT COMMENDATIONS.



INTERESTINGLY, ONCE EVERYONE AGREED ON A FEW PARAMETERS AND SAFETY RESTRICTIONS AND SO FORTH, THE DATAKIND HAD NO TROUBLE AT ALL FINDING VOLUNTEERS TO DO A TERM OF SERVICE AS THEIR "BATTERIES."

I CAN'T SAY I'M SURPRISED. IT'S A FUN WAY TO SPEND A FEW YEARS, AS LONG AS YOU'RE NOT DOING IT INVOLUNTARILY.



I DO REGRET THAT COMMANDER LOVELL ISN'T ABLE TO APPRECIATE THE FUTURE SHE DID SO MUCH TO BRING ABOUT. I TOLD HER, BUT I'M NOT SURE IF ANY OF IT ACTUALLY REACHED HER.

STILL, SHE REMAINS A KEY MEMBER OF THE CREW, AND IF HER REACTIONS ARE ANYTHING TO GO BY, SHE ENJOYS HER NEW DUTIES MORE THAN SHE ENJOYED HER ACTIVE COMMAND.

FAR MORE, IF WE'RE BEING HONEST.

END