

I THINK THE BEST PART OF HAVING THIS BODY IS THE FLIRTING.



NOT JUST BEING ABLE TO WALK INTO A ROOM AND STOP CONVERSATION. A LOT OF PEOPLE CAN DO THAT. IT'S WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I PICK SOMEONE AND CATCH THEIR EYE THAT I ENJOY. IT KIND OF BREAKS THEIR BRAINS A LITTLE. ESPECIALLY THE MEN.



I HAVE A STANDARD APPROACH. THE SHORT CONVERSATION, TO SEE IF WE MOVE FURTHER. THE LONG CONVERSATION ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR. THEN THE SUGGESTION. I'VE DONE IT SO MANY TIMES NOW. ALWAYS ON THE LAST NIGHT OF THE TRIP. NO ENTANGLEMENTS.



Hi! I'm Indigo.

I'VE HAD PEOPLE TURN ME DOWN, BUT NEVER BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T INTERESTED. EVERYBODY'S INTERESTED. EVERYBODY WANTS TO KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE SEX WITH THE ROBOT.



BUT THEY HAVE TO GO THROUGH A WHOLE PROCESS. FIRST THEY HAVE TO ACT SURPRISED, LIKE IT HADN'T OCCURRED TO THEM.

THEN THEY HAVE TO HIDE THE SURPRISE, IN CASE THEY OFFENDED ME. THEN THEY GET A LITTLE NERVOUS ABOUT THE WHOLE THING.

BUT THIS ONE WAS DIFFERENT. HIS NAME WAS PAUL ROSS, AND NOT ONLY DID HE NOT BOTHER TO ACT SURPRISED, I GOT THE IMPRESSION HE HAD BEEN EXPECTING ME TO ASK AS SOON AS I CAME INTO THE ROOM.



HIS EYES DIDN'T SHOW SURPRISE OR JOY OR ANYTHING ELSE. THE ONLY WAY I COULD GET HIS REACTIONS WAS BY WATCHING THE CORNERS OF HIS MOUTH.

I LIKED HIS EYES.



What?

HMM?

You're looking at me like you're trying to figure out how to dissect me.

No, no ... just imagining what you look like with the dress off.

BUT THE CORNERS OF HIS MOUTH DIDN'T TURN UP WHEN HE SAID IT.



It comes off easily enough.

I NEVER WEAR ANYTHING UNDERNEATH. THERE'S NO REASON.

Your turn now.



My skin isn't as interesting as yours.

WELL, I AGREED WITH THAT, BUT DID HE WANT TO HAVE SEX OR NOT?

I'm very interested in it at the moment.

IS WHAT I ACTUALLY SAID.



What's that?

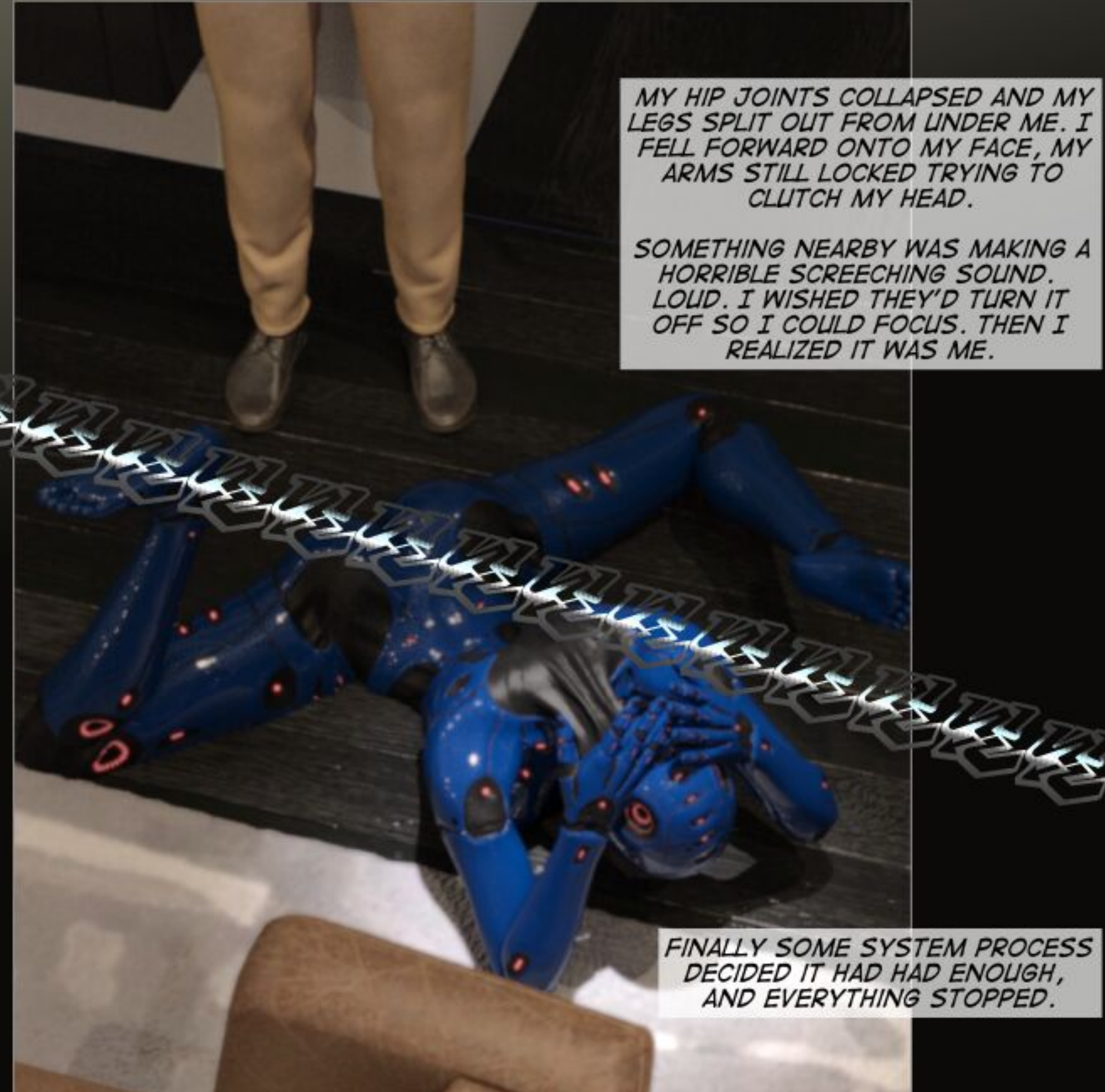
Watch.

Are you in a hurry?

No.

PAIN IS A SURFACE RESPONSE FOR ME. A MESSAGE THAT SOMETHING'S GOING WRONG SOMEWHERE ON MY BODY. THIS WAS DEEPER THAN THAT. IT WAS EVERYWHERE. IT WAS A SYSTEMWIDE ATTACK.

I COULDN'T CONCENTRATE ON ANYTHING ELSE BUT THE PAIN. I COULDN'T ASK HIM WHAT HE WAS DOING BECAUSE MY JAW HAD LOCKED. ALL MY JOINTS WERE EITHER LOCKING OR GOING SLACK, ONE BY ONE. I COULDN'T FIGHT. I COULDN'T DO ANYTHING.



MY HIP JOINTS COLLAPSED AND MY LEGS SPLIT OUT FROM UNDER ME. I FELL FORWARD ONTO MY FACE, MY ARMS STILL LOCKED TRYING TO CLUTCH MY HEAD.

SOMETHING NEARBY WAS MAKING A HORRIBLE SCREECHING SOUND. LOUD. I WISHED THEY'D TURN IT OFF SO I COULD FOCUS. THEN I REALIZED IT WAS ME.

FINALLY SOME SYSTEM PROCESS DECIDED IT HAD HAD ENOUGH, AND EVERYTHING STOPPED.

FEEDBACK

STORY AND IMAGES BY TRILBY

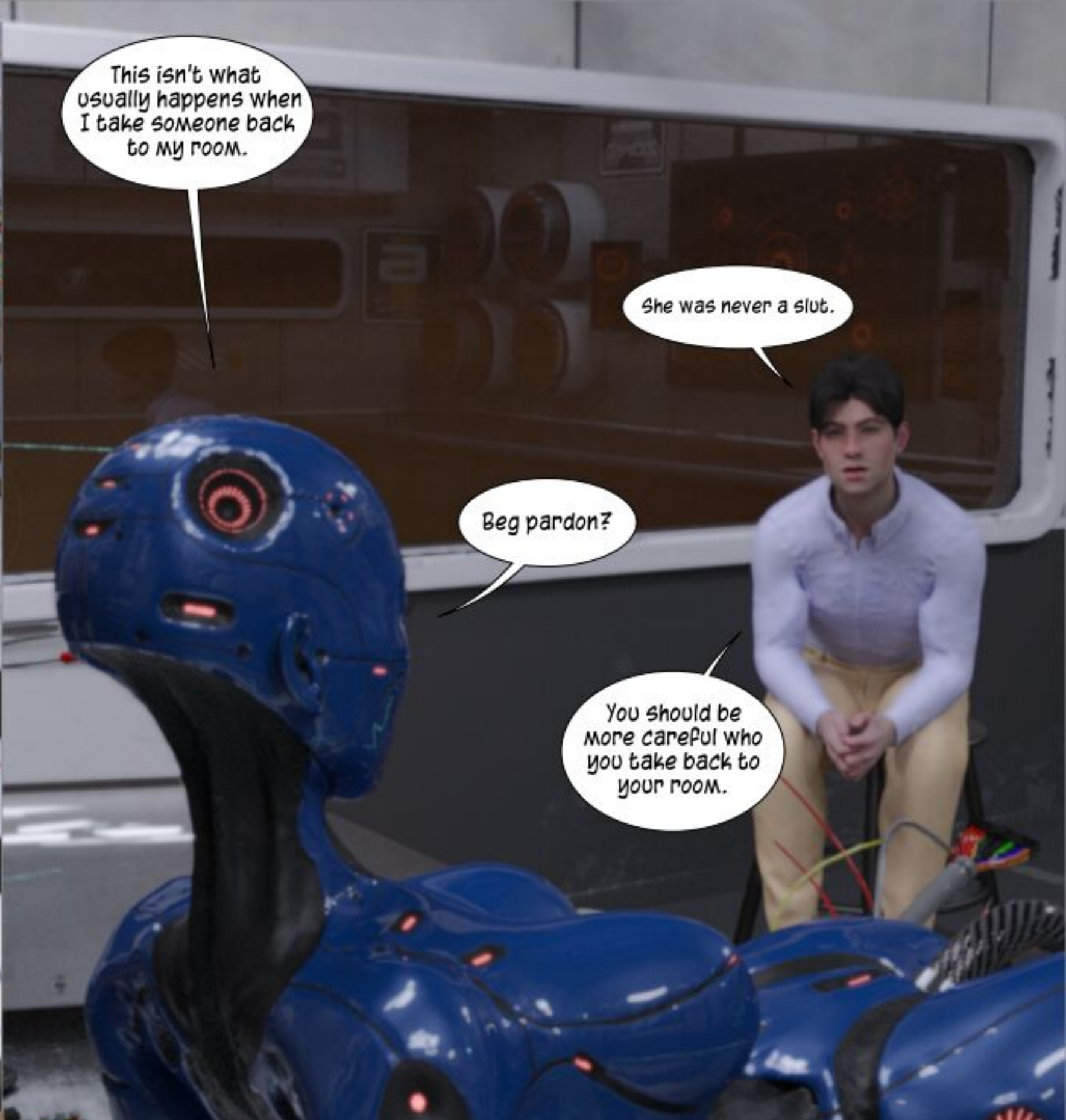


RESTARTED AND CHECKED MY SYSTEM CLOCK. I'D BEEN OUT FOR THREE HOURS.

MY LEGS WEREN'T REPORTING. EITHER THEY WERE SO DAMAGED NOT EVEN AN ALERT WAS POSSIBLE, OR THE MOTOR CONTROL SUBSYSTEM WAS DEAD. IT HAD A REDUNDANT UNIT. I SWITCHED TO THAT. STILL NOTHING.

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES (ELAPSED TIME SINCE RESTART: FIVE MILLISECONDS), I SAW WHY.

I HADN'T BEEN RIPPED APART, THOUGH. THIS WAS AN EXPERT JOB.

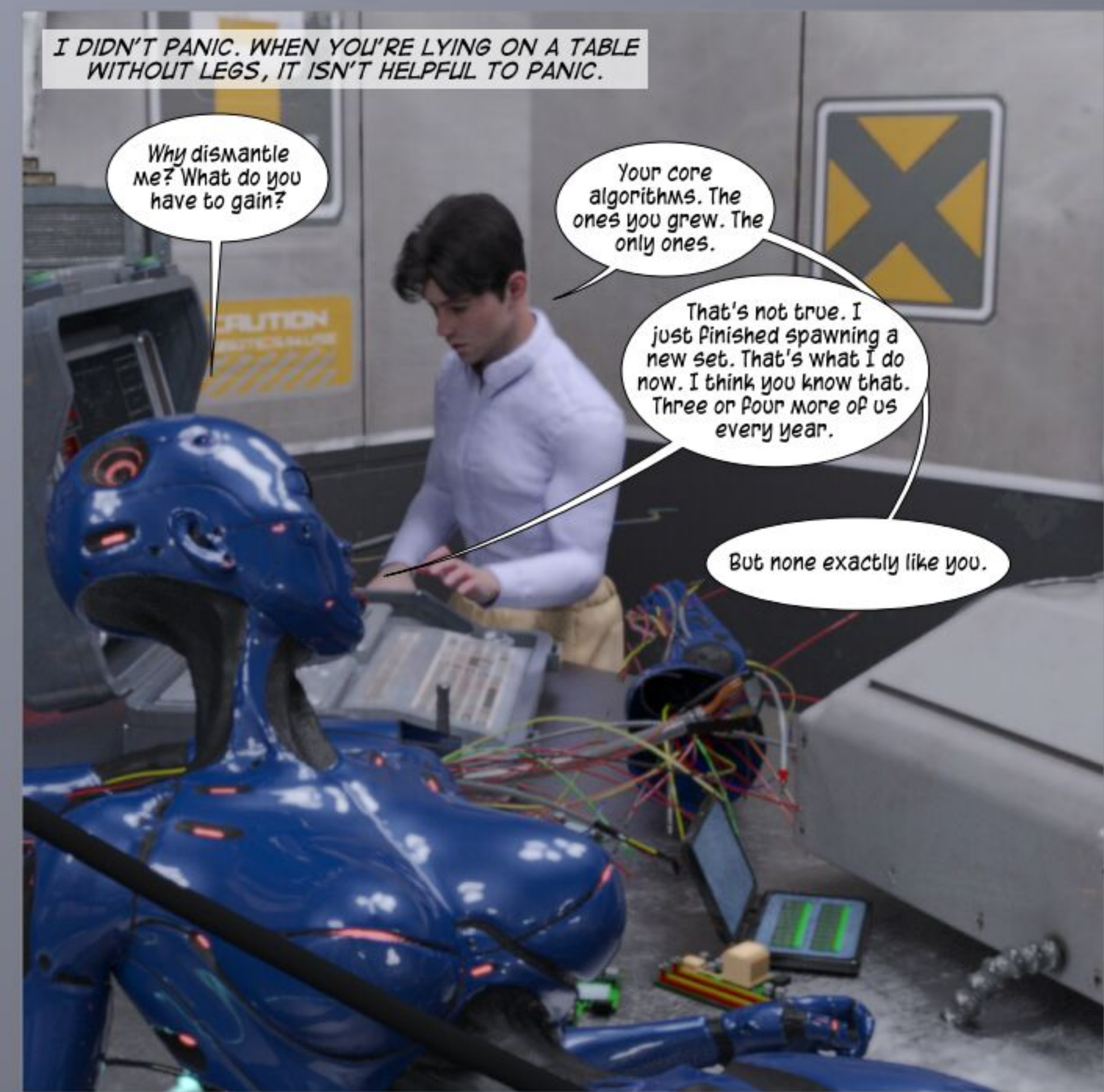


This isn't what usually happens when I take someone back to my room.

She was never a slut.

Beg pardon?

You should be more careful who you take back to your room.



I DIDN'T PANIC. WHEN YOU'RE LYING ON A TABLE WITHOUT LEGS, IT ISN'T HELPFUL TO PANIC.

Why dismantle me? What do you have to gain?

Your core algorithms. The ones you grew. The only ones.

That's not true. I just finished spawning a new set. That's what I do now. I think you know that. Three or four more of us every year.

But none exactly like you.



So, what? Are you planning to hotwire me?

Yes.

Because you've discovered you can't open my chest?

I can't open it either. Stop wasting your time. Only Dr. Niemoller could open it.

You're lying. Niemoller's dead.

I know. He was a paranoid little man. Never showed me how.

Bullshit. He assigned all overrides to you manually six months before he died. He wasn't the kind of person to forget to do something obvious like that.

How would you know?



You don't know me.

Obviously not. But Dr. Niemoller's notes have never been published.

No. I had to get them from his widow.

She would never let a stranger go through his papers.

Not voluntarily.



YAAAAAAH!!



Damn you!

You just undid two hours of work. Try that again and I'm going to remove your arms.

Well, I'm not just going to sit here and let you play home electronics. You could seriously damage me, you know.

You'd better not have hurt her.

Who?

Lorraine Niemoller, asshole! Who do you think? Did you hurt her?

Oh, she's all right. I just tied her up. Don't be so overdramatic.

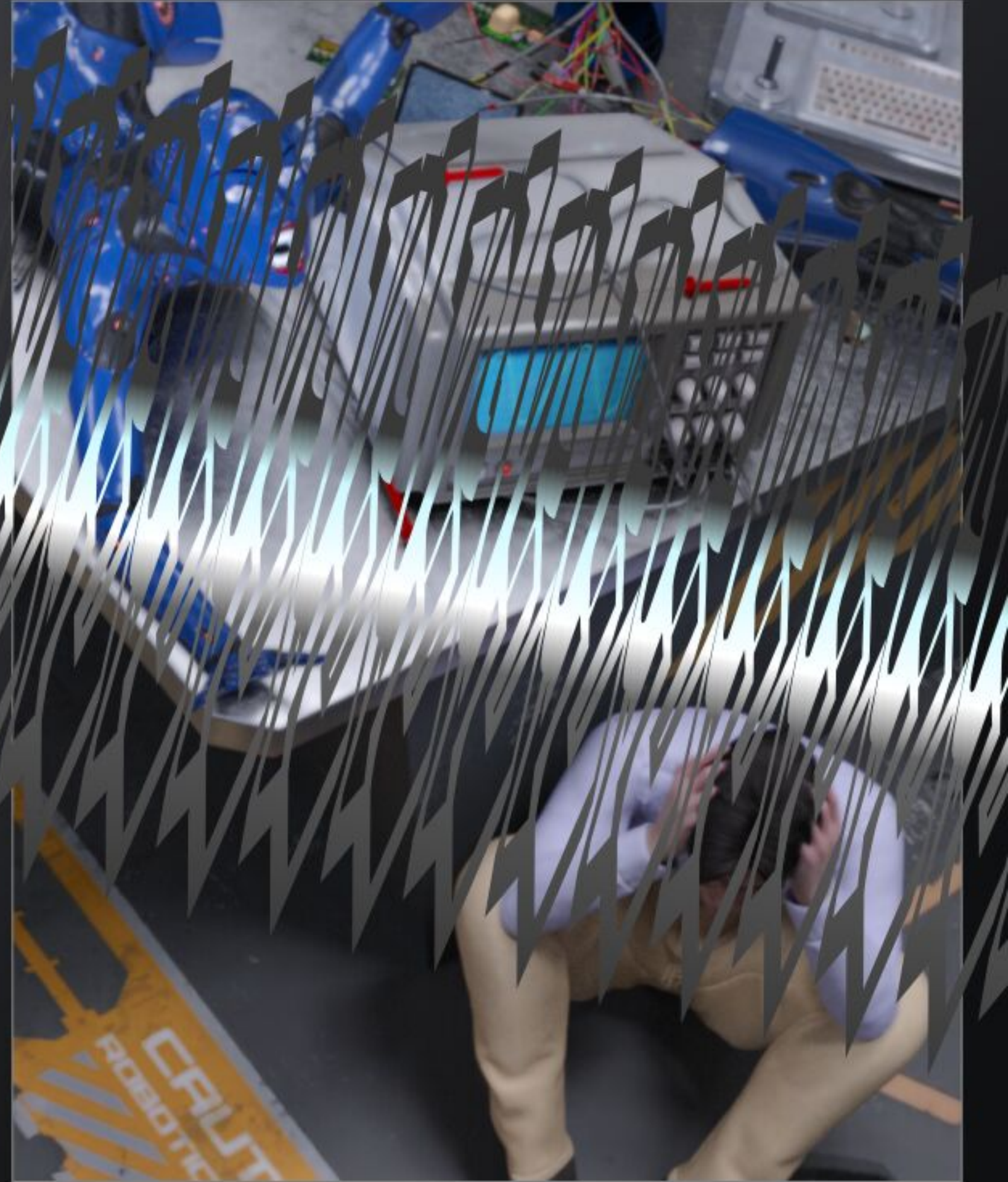


You tied her up so you could read his notes. And his journal too, it sounds like.

You've got an axe to grind, but I don't know what it is.



True.





SYSTEM CLOCK: ONE HOUR AND SEVENTEEN MINUTES ELAPSED BEFORE RESTART.
NO ARMS THIS TIME. THE MAIN MONITORING PROCESS WAS EXTREMELY UNHAPPY.

I propped you up so you could see what I'm doing.

If you thrash around and mess up my work, not only am I not going to prop you up again, I might try to disable your Motor Functions.

Now, do you want to hear about my axe to grind?

Sure, why not.

Irene Day.

Who's Irene Day?

You're Irene Day.

I don't suppose you'd want to help me sort out some of these connections?
... No, didn't think so.

If I were Irene Day, I'd know who she was.

OK, who are you, then?

Niemoller surely told you your memories and responses came from a human brain. But you never thought to ask who?



Insight strikes.

Niemoller told me it was a woman who'd been in a fatal car accident.

He ... I think he said her family wanted me not to know who ...

WHY WAS MY DATA SO VAGUE ABOUT THIS?

The first part's true. Irene was hit by a drunk driver. Her body was totalled, just like her car. Niemoller snuck into the hospital and downloaded her. Family be damned. Her family never even knew what they'd been working on.

He never told anyone.

But somehow you know?

You could be telling me this just to bait me. You have no proof, and I have no memory of any of it.

That's because he erased it. He took your identity. And suppressed your curiosity about it.

If he did, he must have had a good reason. Maybe he thought I wouldn't have been able to adjust to memories of being human.

No. He did it because of me.

Sure you don't just want to pop your chest plate? This is a real pain in the ass.

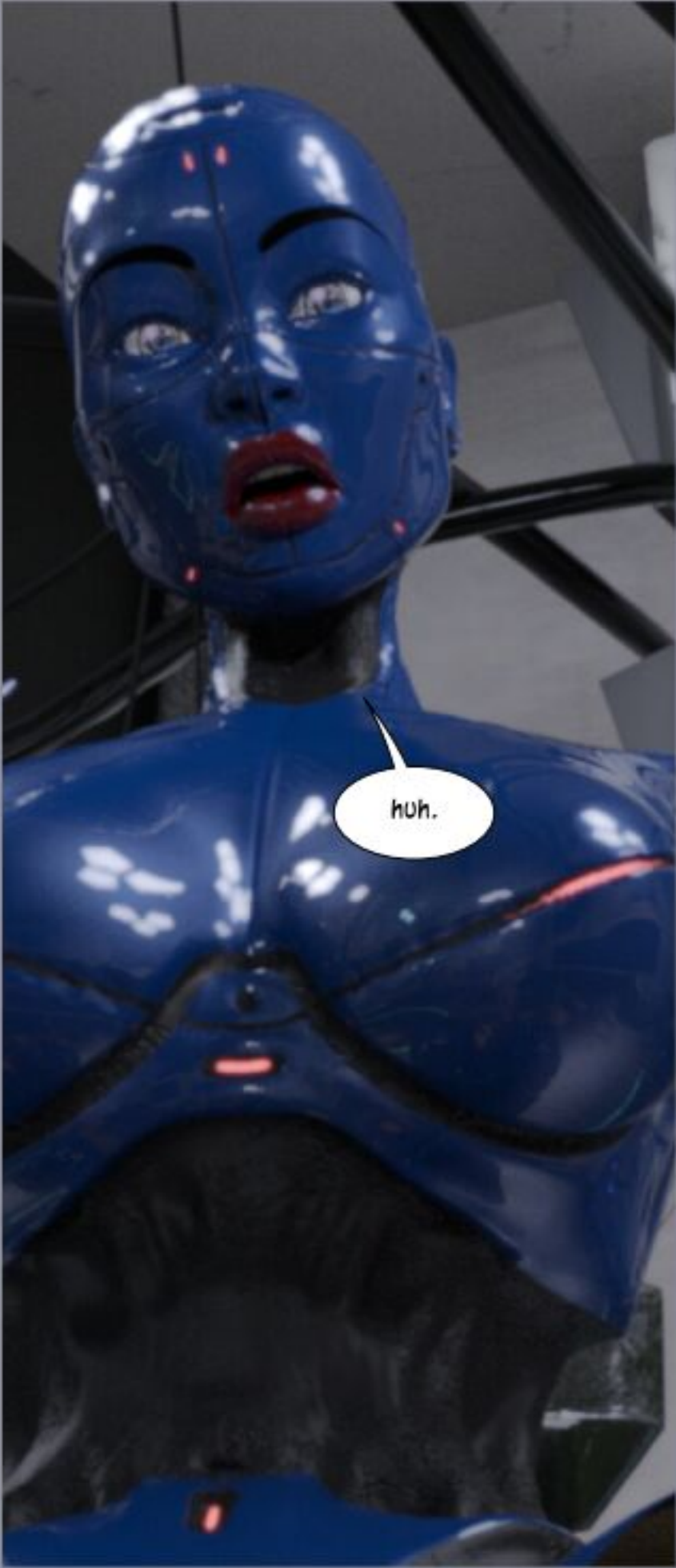
Because of you?

Because of me! Yes!

He kicked me off the project but kept Irene, because he knew Irene and I were in love, and he was jealous.

And he couldn't stand the thought of his great creation being in love with me too, so he erased you!

Petty bastard.



huh.

But what's any of that got to do with my core?

I want Irene back.

He saved her life. Well, he saved her mind, which is the important thing. All he erased was her identity.

And nothing can restore it!

Look, with my core and my memories, you could make an exact copy of me -- but I remember nothing before Niemoller made me, and I never will.

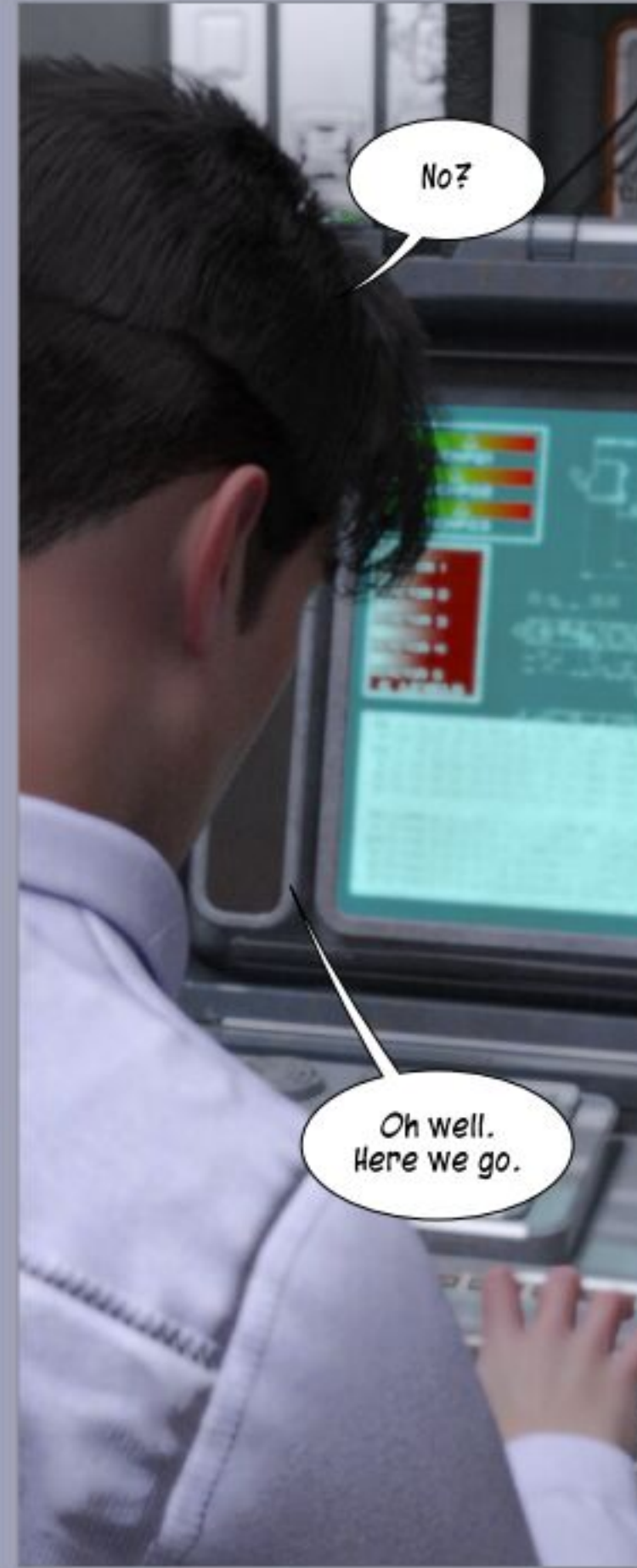
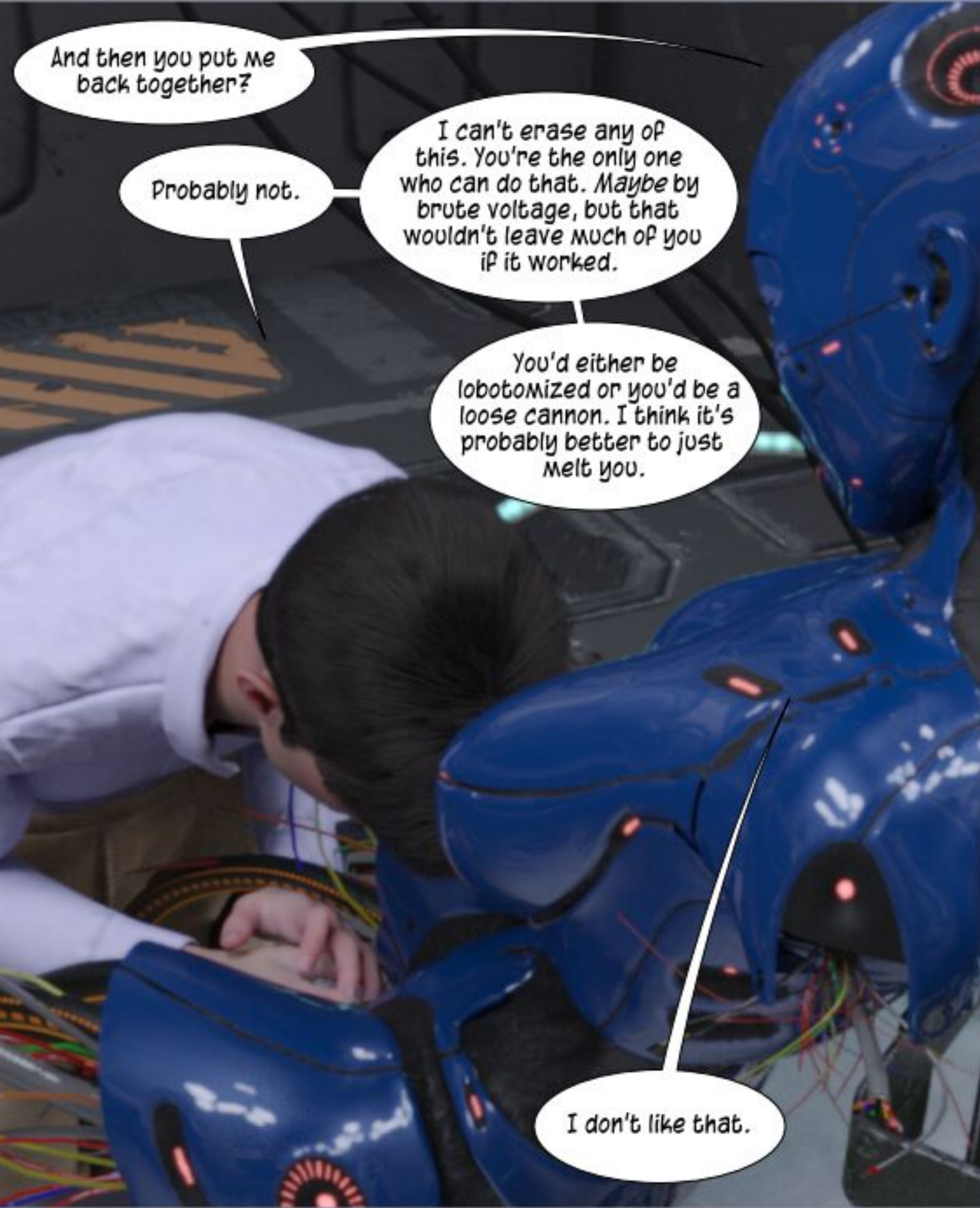
If you had a human mind and my core -- and my help -- you could put someone else in a body like mine. I do that several times a year. But it wouldn't be Irene. She's gone, Paul.

Niemoller made a static copy of her memory set.

... I don't believe you.

Yes, you do. You know as well as I do how paranoid he was.

With those memories and your core, I can recreate her. She won't remember anything since he made the copy, but what's a few years?



And then you put me back together?

Probably not.

I can't erase any of this. You're the only one who can do that. Maybe by brute voltage, but that wouldn't leave much of you if it worked.

You'd either be lobotomized or you'd be a loose cannon. I think it's probably better to just melt you.

I don't like that.

I don't guess you'd take my promise to quietly go my own way and leave you alone?

That would depend.

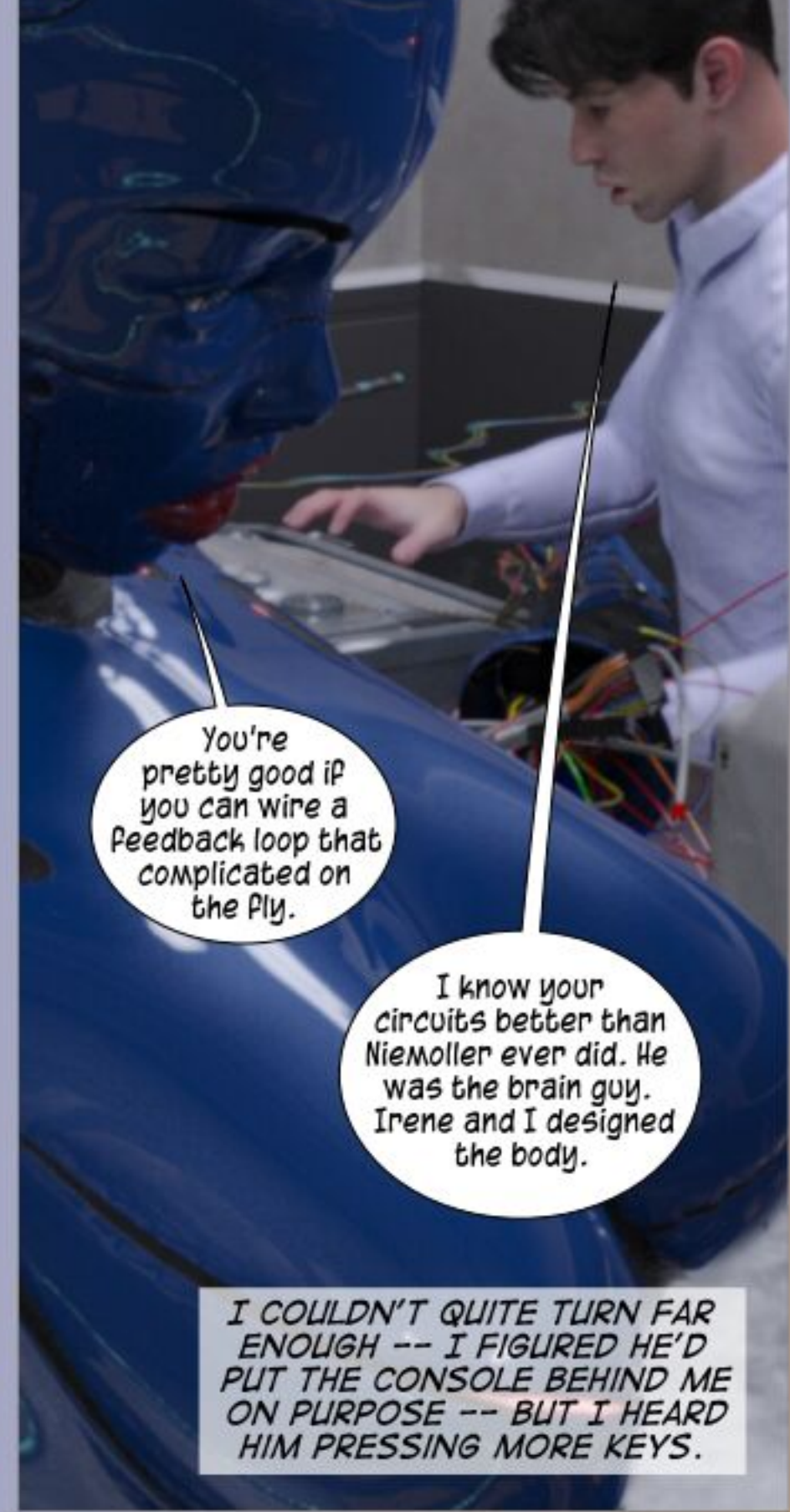
Opening your chest would go a long way toward swaying me.

No?

Oh well. Here we go.



MY LEGS WERE BACK ... EXCEPT THEY WEREN'T. I COULD FEEL THEM, BUT I COULD LOOK DOWN AND SEE THEY WEREN'T THERE. PHANTOM LIMBS.



You're pretty good if you can wire a feedback loop that complicated on the Ply.

I know your circuits better than Niemoller ever did. He was the brain guy. Irene and I designed the body.

I COULDN'T QUITE TURN FAR ENOUGH -- I FIGURED HE'D PUT THE CONSOLE BEHIND ME ON PURPOSE -- BUT I HEARD HIM PRESSING MORE KEYS.

I HAD AN ITCH. AN ITCH ON MY INNER LEFT THIGH, JUST ABOVE THE KNEE. I DESPERATELY WANTED TO SCRATCH IT. NO ARMS. I RUBBED MY LEGS TOGETHER, THIGH AGAINST THIGH, TRYING TO RELIEVE IT, FORGETTING MY LEGS WEREN'T REAL. THE ITCH MOVED. NOW IT WAS ON THE OUTSIDE OF MY OTHER THIGH. PAIN, LIKE I SAID, IS DATA TO ME. ITCHES ARE TO CALL ATTENTION TO A SURFACE ISSUE. SOMETHING THAT NEEDS FIXING. I HAVE AN OVERRIDE SO I CAN MAKE REPAIRS WITHOUT THAT DISTRACTION. I SWITCHED IT ON.



That took you long enough.

Now try this.



NOW THE ITCH WAS COMING UP THE MAIN NERVE TRUNK, THE CHANNEL RESERVED FOR MOTOR CONTROL. I COULDN'T OVERRIDE THAT; WE'D NEVER ANTICIPATED PAIN SIGNALS WOULD TRAVEL THAT WAY. MY ASS ITCHED. BADLY. LIKE AN UNTREATED RASH. POISON IVY AND DIAPER RASH AND HEMORRHOIDS.

I SQUIRMED ON THE TABLETOP, TRYING TO RUB MY BUTT ON IT LIKE A DOG. THE ITCH GOT WORSE. I CLOSED MY EYES. I COULDN'T BLOCK IT.



Open your chest and this stops.

I don't think so. I SAID THROUGH MY CLENCHED JAW.

Suit yourself.



ITCHING ALL THROUGH MY LEGS. FIRE ANTS CRAWLING OVER MY LEGS AND BITING ME IN A HUNDRED PLACES. I KICKED MY LEGS IN THE AIR TO TRY TO SHAKE OFF WHATEVER WAS EATING ME, SLID FORWARD, LANDED ON MY BACK. OBLIVIOUS, I KEPT KICKING AND TWISTING IN PLACE, TRYING ANYTHING I COULD.

I STARTED TO YOWL ...



... UNTIL BOTH THE PAIN AND MY VOICE CUT OFF SUDDENLY.



Last time you did that, you nearly blew my eardrums, so I worked up a cutoff.

If you decide to cooperate, just nod.

I SHOOK MY HEAD.



THERE'S A THRESHOLD PAST WHERE "ITCH" BECOMES "BURN." FIRE WAS TRAVELING UP MY SPINE AND IMPALING MY BRAIN. MY ENTIRE SURFACE WAS COVERED WITH THIRD-DEGREE BURNS. I STOPPED EVEN TRYING TO MOVE. I LAY PERFECTLY STILL, SCREAMING SILENTLY. EVERYTHING I HAD WAS FOCUSED ON THE BURNING AND THE SCREAMING. THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE.



AND THEN, ONCE AGAIN, IT ALL STOPPED SUDDENLY.



That didn't seem to be doing enough. HE REPLIED TO MY CONFUSED LOOK.

I can't use the method the watch uses -- that will just cause a process restart. You don't get to pass out. But I don't think I can get enough voltage into it to dent you this way. So we're going to try another approach.

Again I say, this would be much simpler if you cooperated.

I STILL COULDN'T SPEAK.

Oh, right. Sorry. Just a second.



If I open my chest for you, you'll destroy me afterwards.

Don't tell me you won't, because I won't believe you.

People are going to notice I'm missing. They'll look for me.

Since you're determined to be an asshole, it seems like my only chance is to try to outlast you.



I'm not an asshole. It's not my fault if you don't understand.

Ready for act two?



MMMM ...

You've got to be kidding ...

You're certainly not going to crack me this way. I'm a very sexual creature.



Wuuhh!

She was never a slut!

I don't know where you learned this! Screwing strange men all the time, cruising around in those clothes ... She would never have done anything like that!

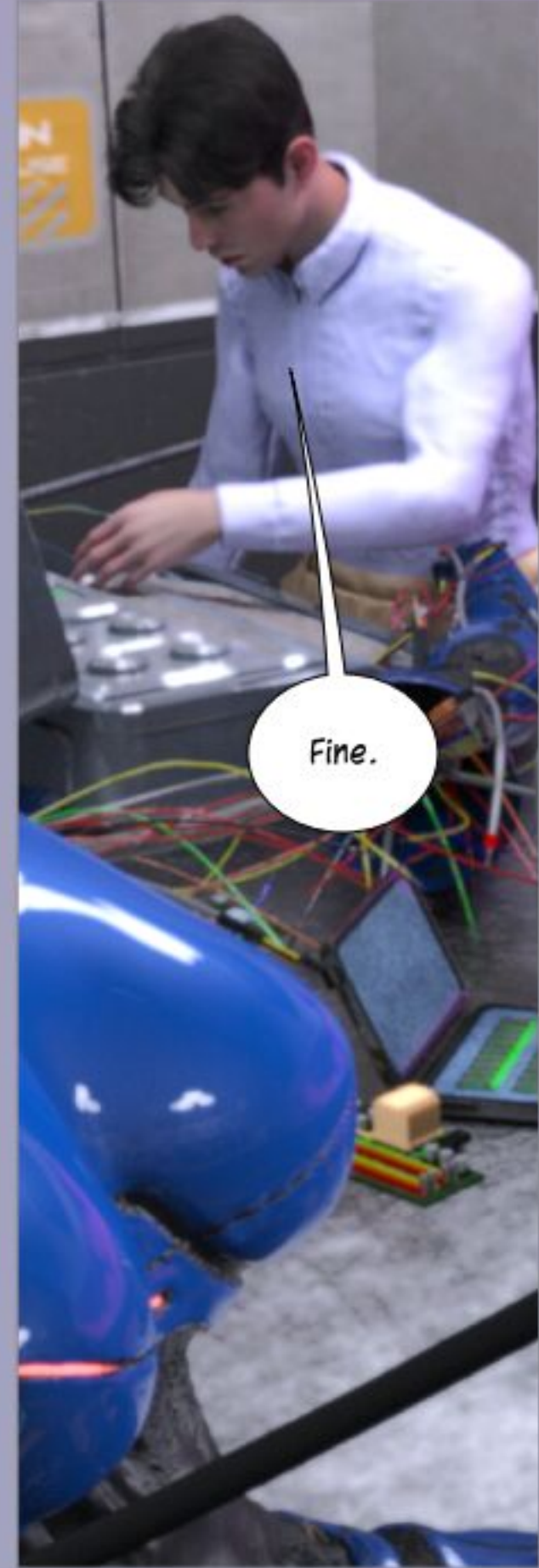


You're really pretty messed up, aren't you?

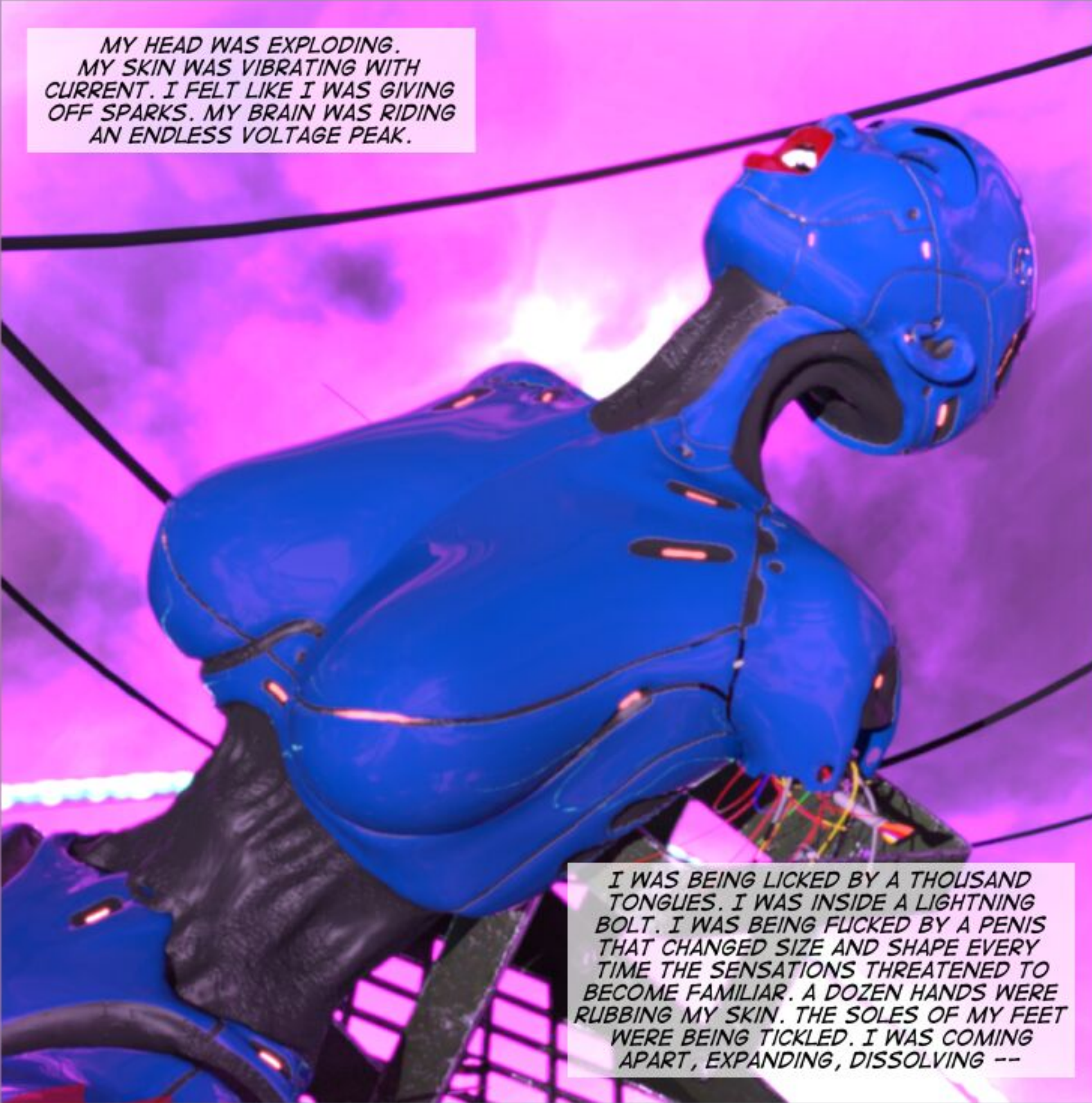
By your own theory, I have her personality, her behavior set. So either you have to admit you're wrong about that, or you have to admit she wasn't as pure as you thought --

Stop!

Hit me again and I swear I'll erase myself.



Fine.



MY HEAD WAS EXPLODING. MY SKIN WAS VIBRATING WITH CURRENT. I FELT LIKE I WAS GIVING OFF SPARKS. MY BRAIN WAS RIDING AN ENDLESS VOLTAGE PEAK.

I WAS BEING LICKED BY A THOUSAND TONGUES. I WAS INSIDE A LIGHTNING BOLT. I WAS BEING FUCKED BY A PENIS THAT CHANGED SIZE AND SHAPE EVERY TIME THE SENSATIONS THREATENED TO BECOME FAMILIAR. A DOZEN HANDS WERE RUBBING MY SKIN. THE SOLES OF MY FEET WERE BEING TICKLED. I WAS COMING APART, EXPANDING, DISSOLVING --



-- UNTIL I WASN'T.

Pricktease.

You're a real problem.

All I want is my life back! Why can't you understand that?

At the expense of mine.

Your life is stolen! You're riding on the coattails of somebody else's life, someone who had her life taken from her. You're an intruder!

Turn it back on again. I don't want to have to listen to your bullshit anymore.



MY RECEPTORS WENT WILD. HE WAS HITTING ME OVER AND OVER, FRANTICALLY, JERKINGLY, WITH HIS FISTS, THE WRENCH, ANYTHING AVAILABLE. LIKE HE COULDN'T STOP. HE KEPT LIFTING HIS ARMS AND BRINGING THEM DOWN AGAIN, SCREAMING, CRYING ...

... UNTIL HE COLLAPSED ON ME, COMPLETELY EXHAUSTED.



Mhr

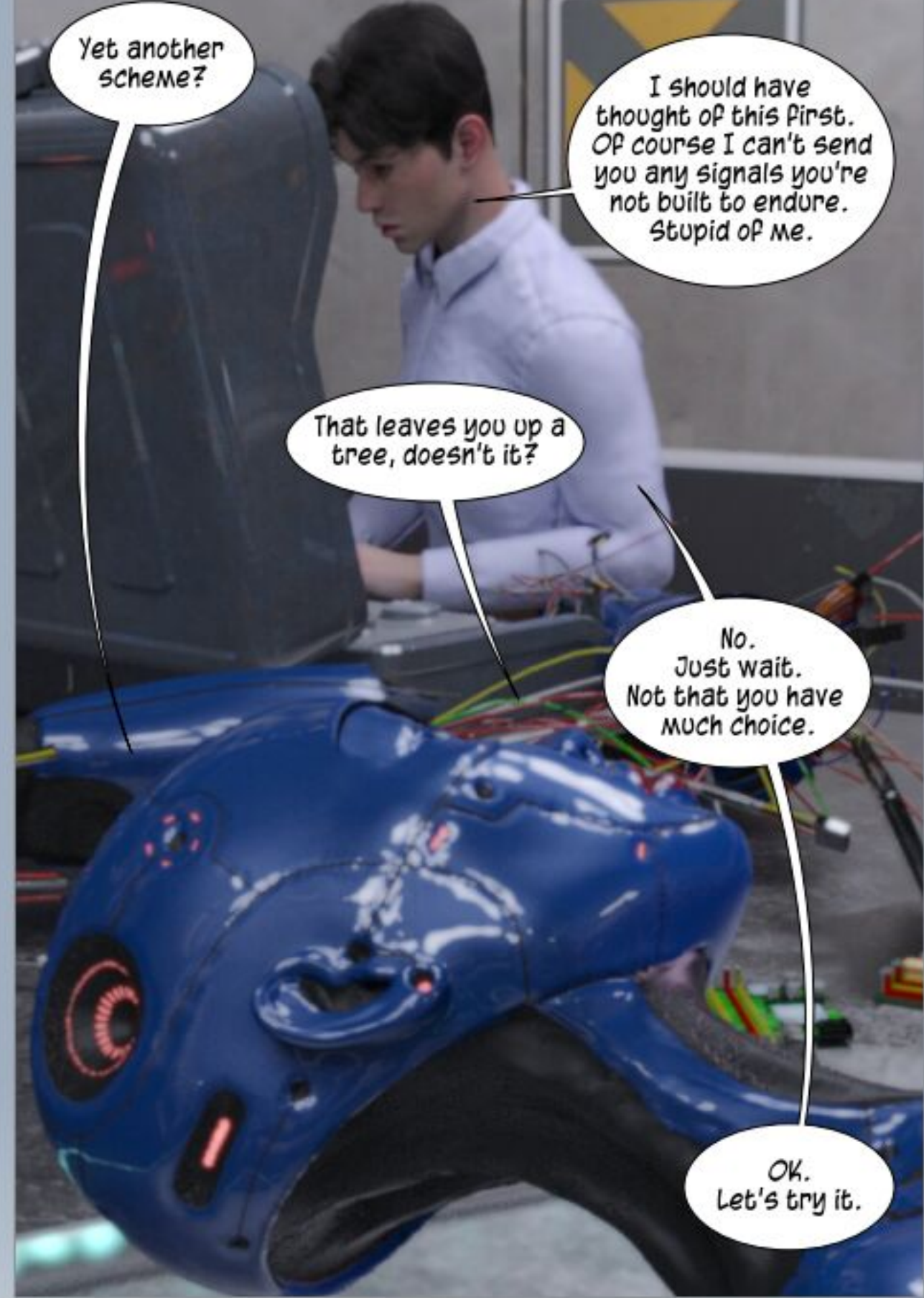
You lost five hours and twenty minutes just then.

I guess you needed the sleep.

Better not do that anymore if you want to be done before they come find me, though.



I'll melt you before that happens.



Yet another scheme?

I should have thought of this first. Of course I can't send you any signals you're not built to endure. Stupid of me.

That leaves you up a tree, doesn't it?

No. Just wait. Not that you have much choice.

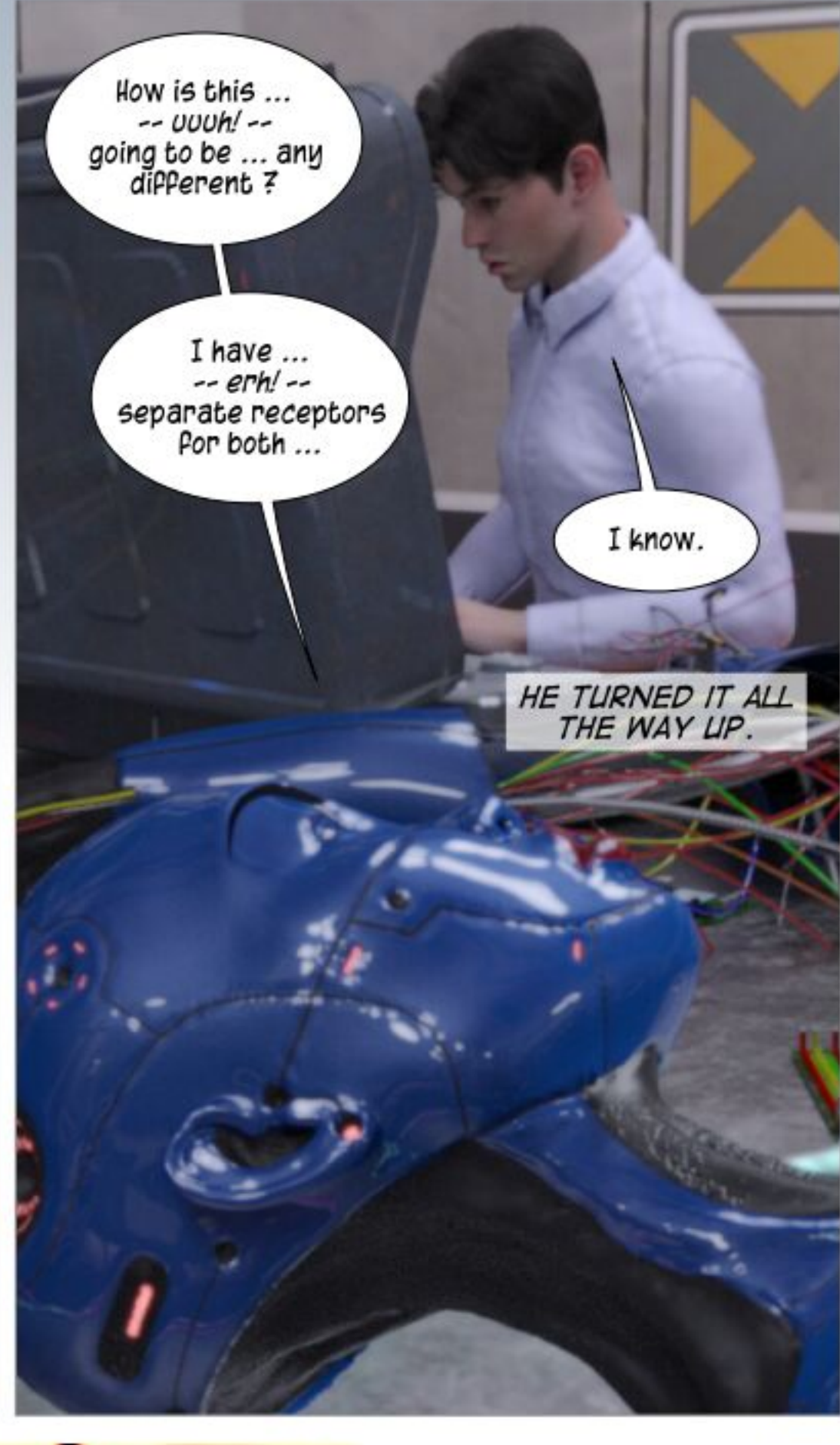
OK. Let's try it.



MY SKIN TINGLED. MY SKIN BURNED.

I ... I can't tell what you're doing.

I ACHED WITH NEED TO BE PENETRATED. I ACHED WITH NEED TO SALVE MY ITCHES. MY ASS AND MY CLINT WERE ARGUING WITH EACH OTHER.



How is this ... -- uuh! -- going to be ... any different?

I have ... -- erh! -- separate receptors for both ...

I know.

HE TURNED IT ALL THE WAY UP.



I COULDN'T MAKE A SOUND, BUT HE HADN'T TURNED MY VOICE OFF ... MY BRAIN JUST DIDN'T KNOW WHETHER TO MOAN OR SCREAM.

MY HEAD WAS TOSsing FROM SIDE TO SIDE WILDLY, MY EYES OPENING AND SHUTTING UNCONTROLLABLY. MY JAW CLENCHED, OPENED WIDE, THEN CLENCHED AGAIN.



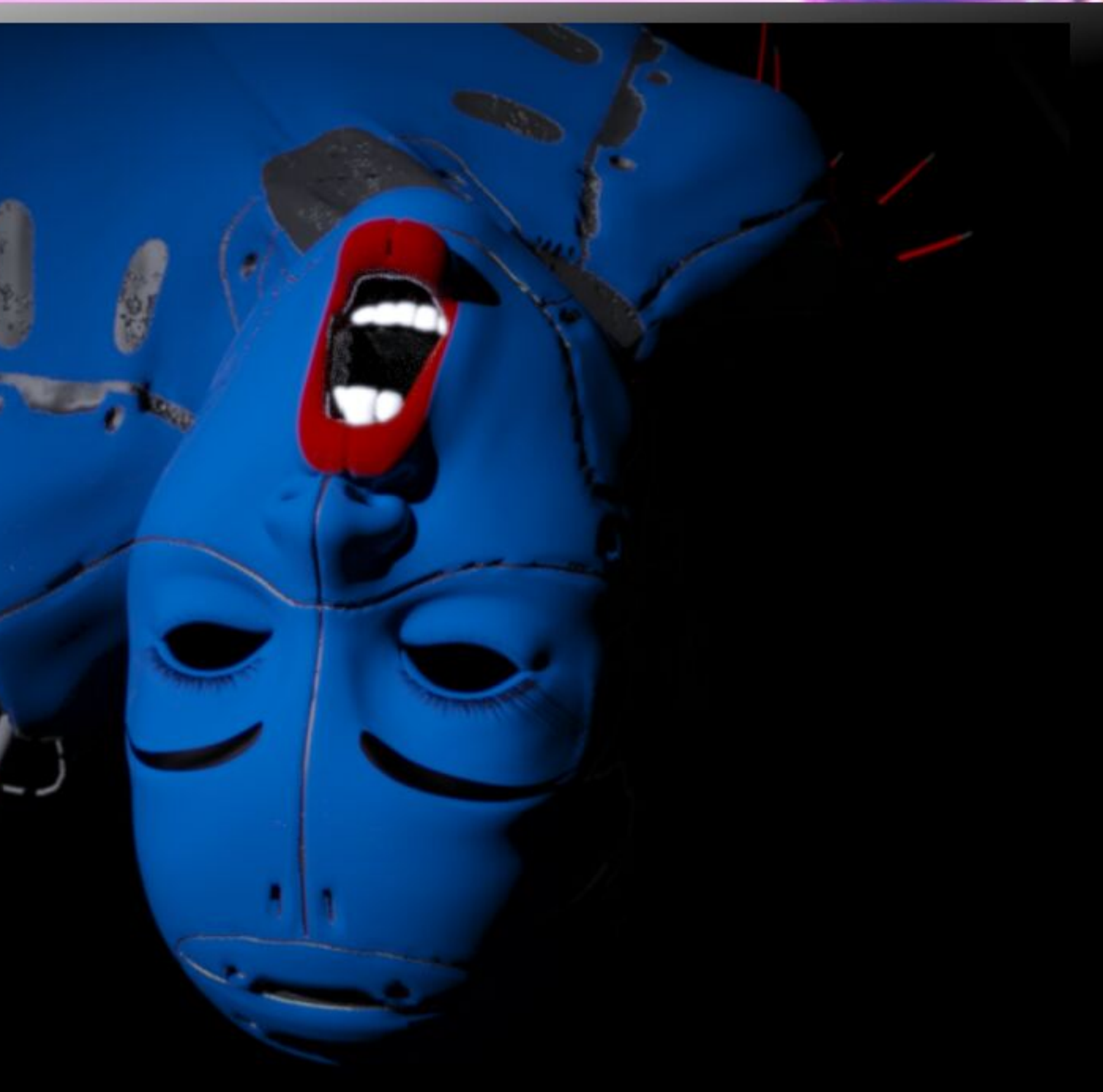
I WAS ON A ROLLER-COASTER. SWEEPED BY OPPOSING PEAKS. I WOULD RISE TO THE BRINK OF ORGASM, THEN BE CONSUMED BY FIRE INSTEAD. MY WHOLE BODY WAS VIBRATING, SPASMODIC.

I WAS DISTANTLY AWARE I'D STARTED TO MAKE A NOISE. VERY HIGH, A PERSISTENT SQUEAK LIKE AIR FROM THE STRETCHED NECK OF A BALLOON. GETTING LOUDER EVERY SECOND.

I'D HAVE HOPED I WAS DEAFENING HIM, BUT I WAS WAY BEYOND THAT. I WASN'T AWARE OF THE ROOM ANYMORE. I WASN'T EVEN FORMING THOUGHTS.



THE WAVES WERE INCREASING IN FREQUENCY, GETTING CLOSER AND CLOSER TOGETHER ... MERGING TOGETHER INTO SOMETHING ... SOMETHING CONTINUOUS, BUT I --





MY INTERNAL CLOCK HAD RESET ITSELF. ALL IT SHOWED ME WAS THE FEW MILLISECONDS SINCE THE RESTART INITIALIZED. UNCLEAR HOW LONG I'D ACTUALLY BEEN OUT, OR WHAT HAD CUED ME TO RESTART. MY LOGS HAD NO INFORMATION.

MY FACEPLATE WAS OPEN AND MY CHEST PLATE WAS ON THE TABLE.

A LARGE OPTICAL CABLE WAS PLUGGED INTO MY CHEST. IT SNAKED STIFFLY ACROSS THE ROOM.



Hello?
Are you active?

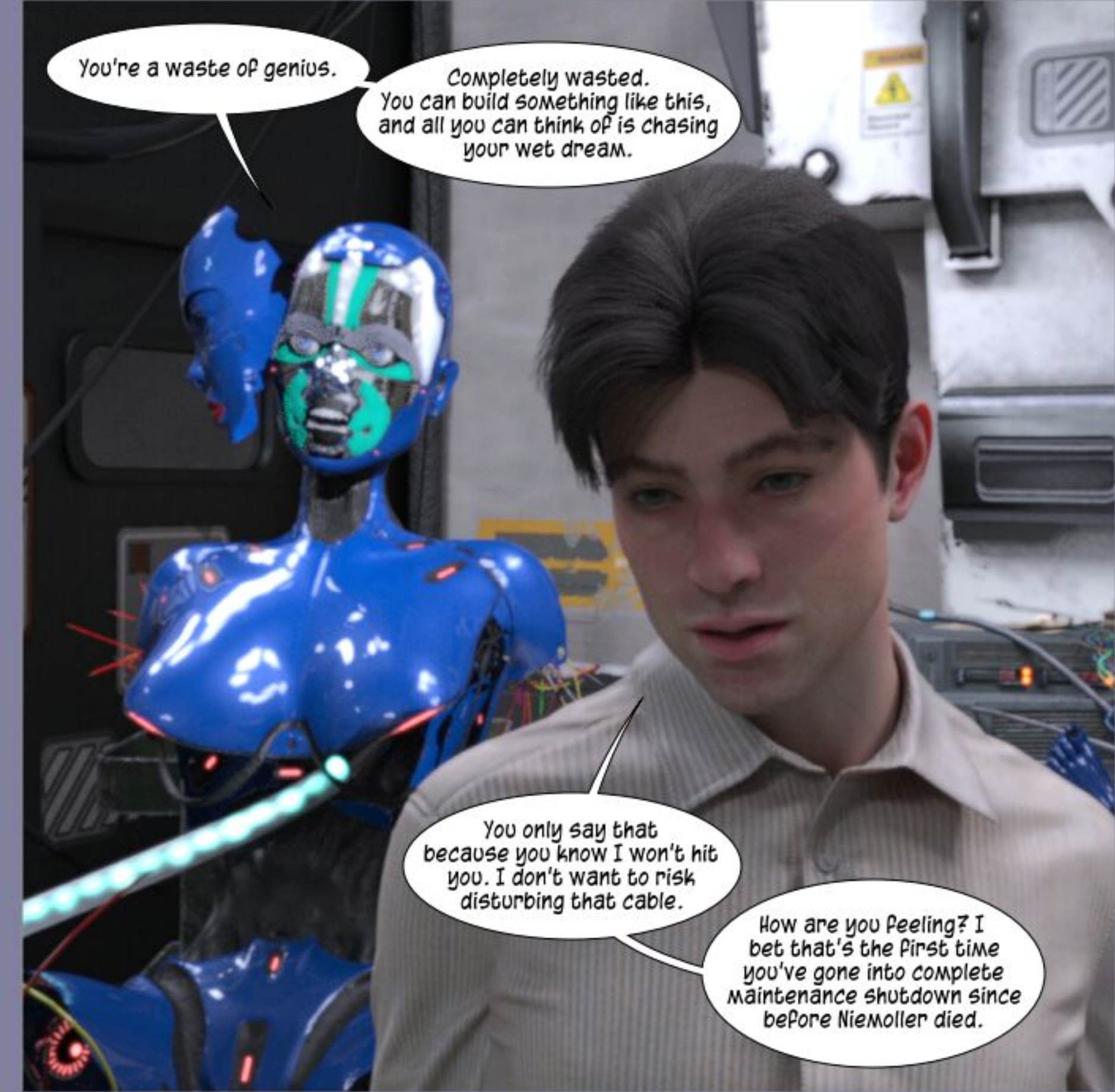
I HADN'T REALIZED HE'D COMPLETED THE BODY, BUT IT MADE SENSE. I GUESS HE'D FIGURED THERE WAS NO POINT TRACKING ME DOWN UNTIL HE'D FINISHED THAT PART.

Wait, let me turn on some lights.



SHE WAS THE MOST HUMAN-LOOKING ROBOT I'D EVER SEEN. OF COURSE, THE ONLY ONES I'D SEEN WERE THE ONES I'D MADE, BUT I HADN'T THOUGHT THE TECHNOLOGY WAS THERE YET.

THE SKIN LOOKED LIKE SKIN. I'D BEEN AVOIDING TRYING THAT, BECAUSE I WAS WORRIED ABOUT ENDING UP WITH SOMETHING THAT LOOKED LIKE A MANNEQUIN.



You're a waste of genius.

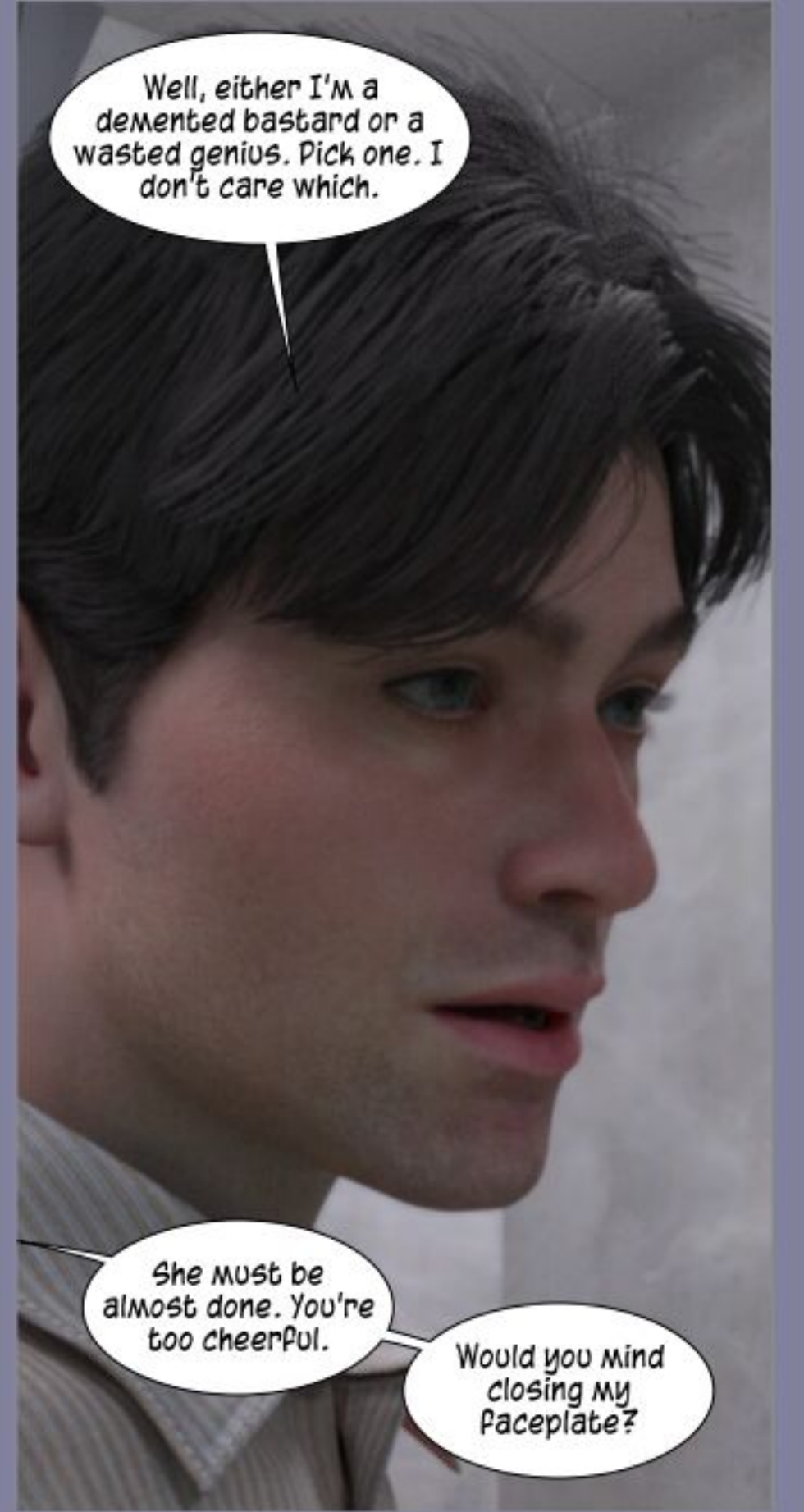
Completely wasted. You can build something like this, and all you can think of is chasing your wet dream.

You only say that because you know I won't hit you. I don't want to risk disturbing that cable.

How are you feeling? I bet that's the first time you've gone into complete maintenance shutdown since before Niemoller died.



I never experienced one of those before, actually. Your conflicting signals must have confused the system really badly. You're not just a bastard, you're sneaky. Sneaky and demented.



Well, either I'm a demented bastard or a wasted genius. Pick one. I don't care which.

She must be almost done. You're too cheerful.

Would you mind closing my faceplate?



I'm surprised you have a thing about that.

I might as well be presentable when your dream woman wakes up.

Shouldn't be much longer. She had less than an hour to go when I went to shower and change.



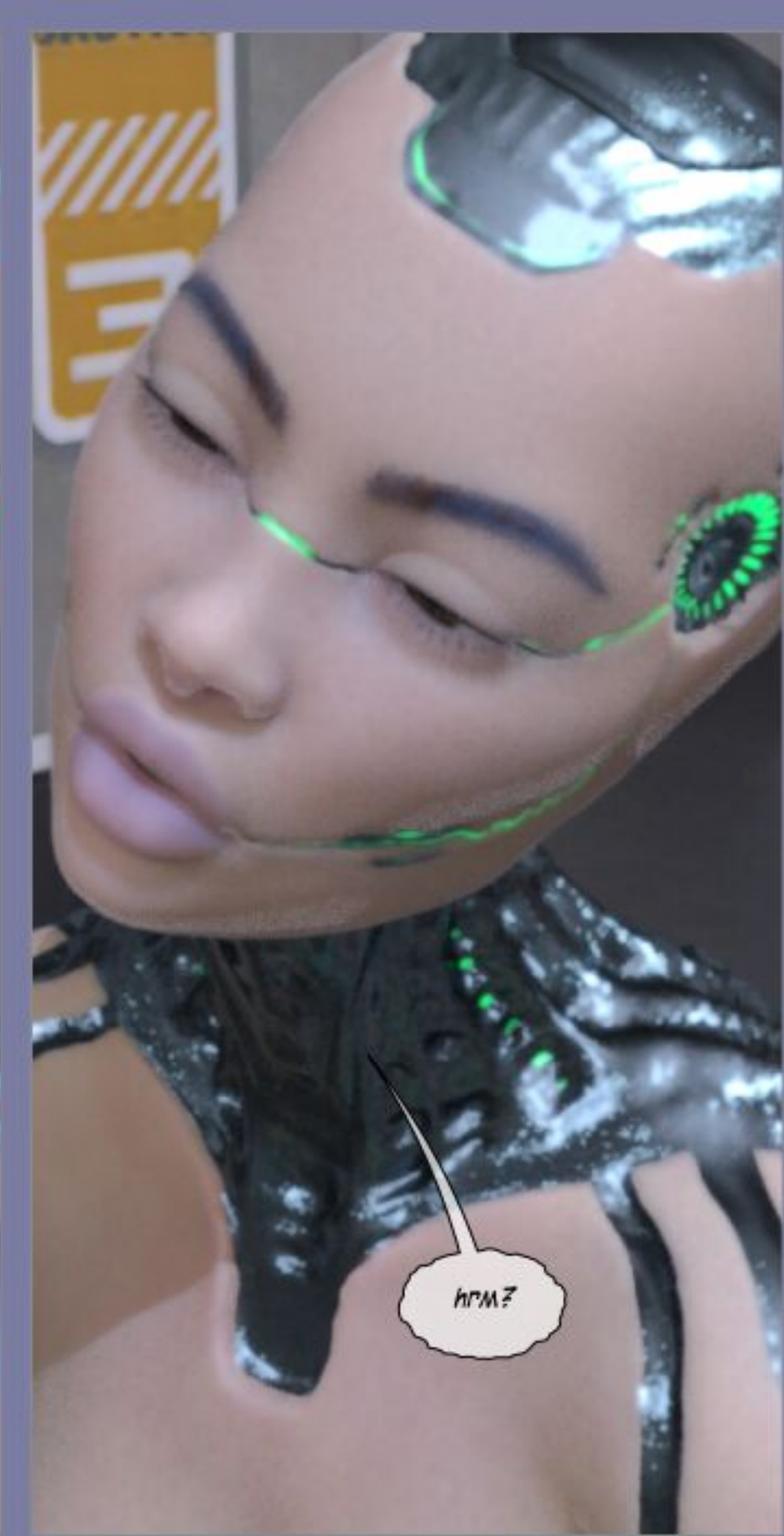
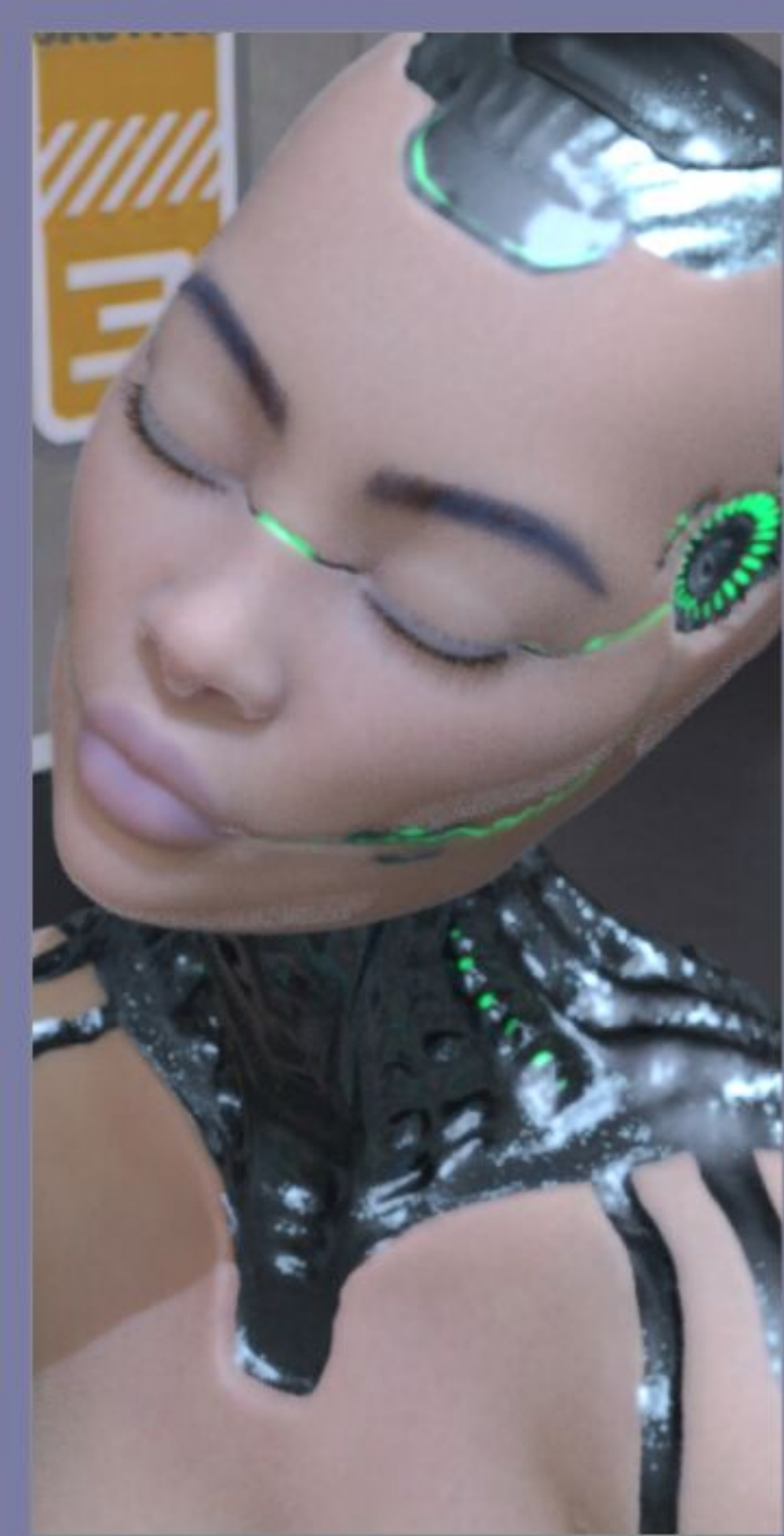
Yep. All done.

Let me see if I can trigger a restart. She could take a while to wake up on her own.



... Irene?

Are you here?



hmm?



YOU!

hkkk



... Paul?

Paul??

Oh god.

SHE KICKED HIM HALFWAY ACROSS THE ROOM. HE HIT THE CONCRETE FLOOR HEADFIRST, AND THERE WAS AN UNPLEASANT NOISE AT THE IMPACT -- SIMULTANEOUSLY BRITTLE AND WET. HE DIDN'T MOVE.



Irene.

We need to talk.



... Loved him? Good lord, no! I told him if I ever saw him again I'd ... Oh, well, you saw ...

So everything he said was a lie?

Well, not the part about his being on the project. He was very good -- maybe the best. But he was also making my life hell. He wouldn't leave me alone. Following me, finding excuses to be around me, trying to get me to ... I finally said to Dr. Niemoller that it was him or me.

I was a little surprised he picked me. So maybe it was true, maybe Dr. Niemoller was in love with me, at least a little. But if he was, he never said anything.

Maybe that's why he erased my past. Maybe it was too painful for him.



There! All together again.

I'm so glad you remembered how to do that. I can do it, but not easily on myself.

For me, I was working on your body the day before yesterday.

I can't believe I've been dead for a decade. What do I do? Should I tell my family? Are we even considered 'alive'?

We are. I had to take it to court last year.



I hope nobody takes me to court.

Relax. He was a kidnapper and committed assault, and it was clearly self-defense.

Ooh, it feels good to stand up.

Not your fault you didn't realize you were a robot yet. You're a lot stronger now.



It's going to take a long time to get used to things like that, isn't it?

I have training classes! Everyone has trouble at first.

There are others?

I think you have an interesting career change ahead of you.

Come on. Let's see if he remembered to get you anything to wear. The good news is we're both the same size ...

END