

Wild Zone Guardians

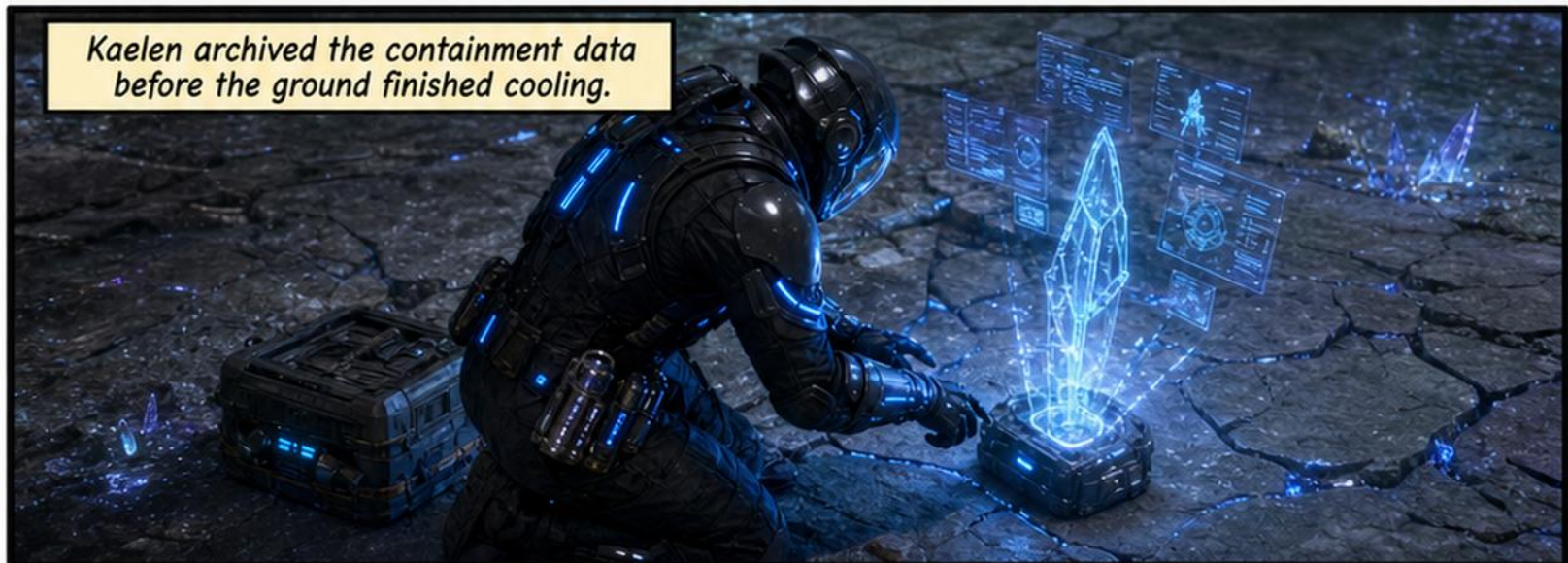
No Time To Rest



The anomaly was gone, but the work did not end when the light faded.



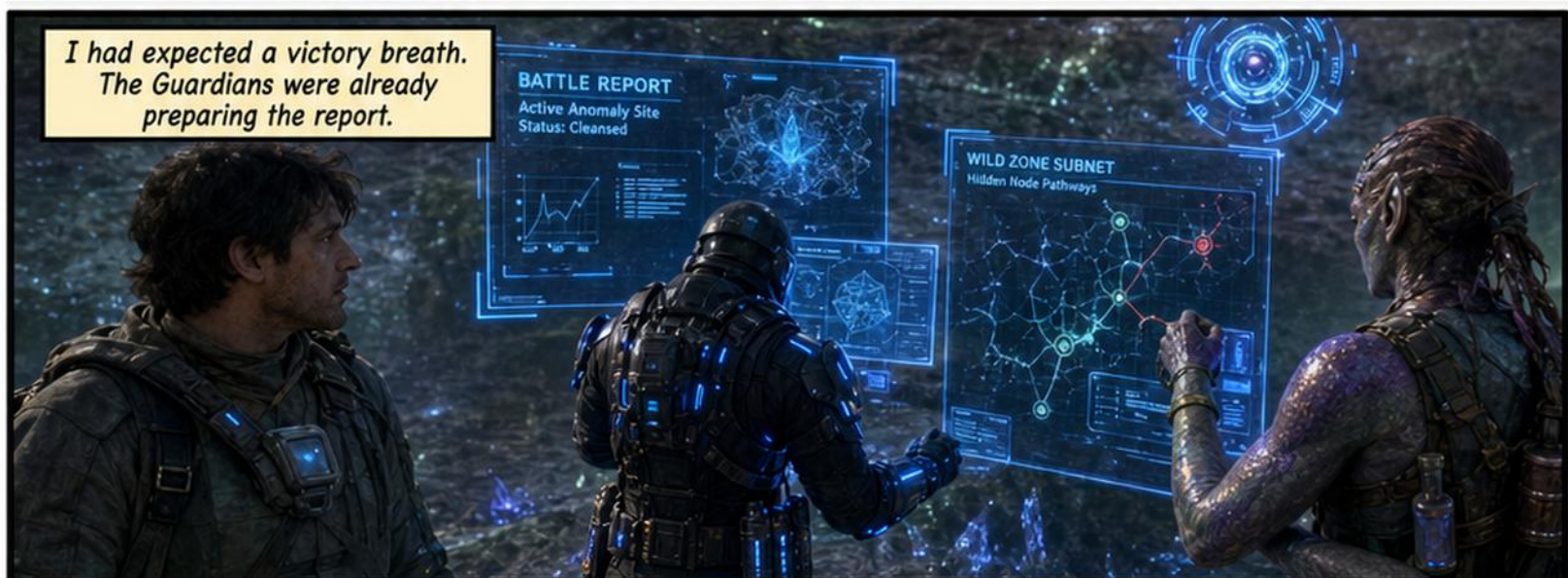
Kaelen archived the containment data before the ground finished cooling.



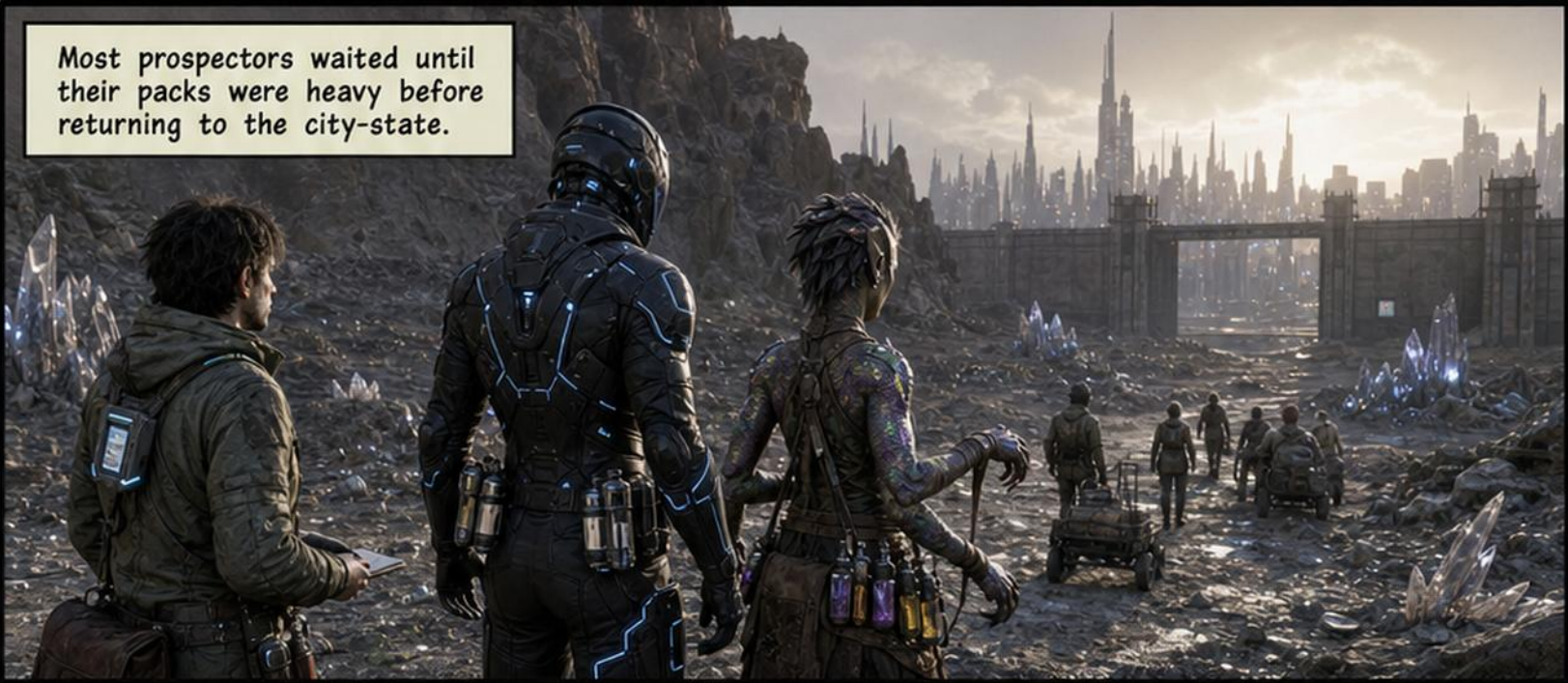
Vessara gathered residue samples like each glowing shard was both payment and evidence.



I had expected a victory breath. The Guardians were already preparing the report.



Most prospectors waited until their packs were heavy before returning to the city-state.



Guardians carried something more valuable than residue: fresh patterns of corruption.



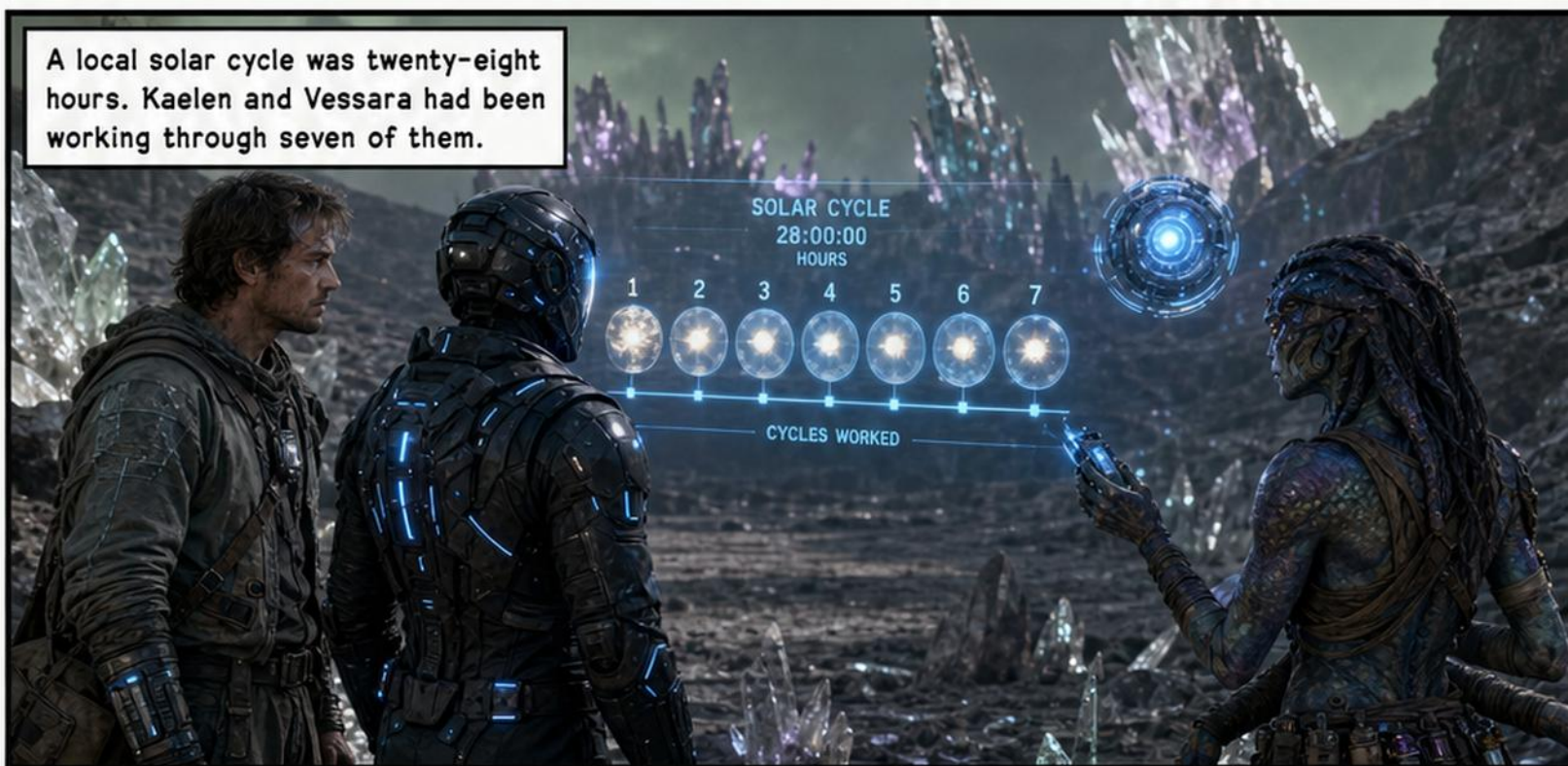
The Arcanum Guard paid for reports fast enough to adjust a defense grid before the next wound opened.



That meant the team lived between two dangers: the Wild Zones in front of them and the city narrative behind them.



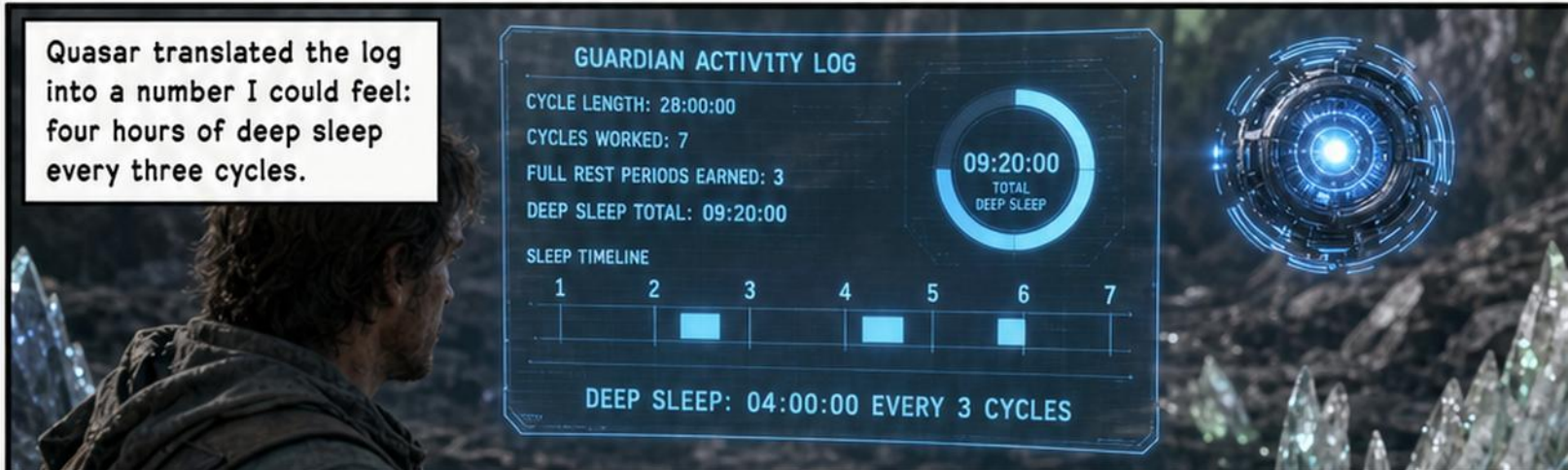
A local solar cycle was twenty-eight hours. Kaelen and Vessara had been working through seven of them.



In that time, they had earned only three full rest periods.



Quasar translated the log into a number I could feel: four hours of deep sleep every three cycles.



The Wild Zones did not only corrupt the land. They trained heroes to ignore their own breaking points.



The city supplied vitality stimulants to field operatives, sharp little miracles with sharp little costs.



Wild Zone food could carry trace corruption, so most meals came from ration packs sealed behind official runes.



Meditation, timing, chemistry, discipline: none of it changed the truth that rest was being replaced, not restored.



A hero team could survive that way for a while. A world should not require them to.



Corruption did not care where life began. Root, fang, flower, wing: all of it could be rewritten.



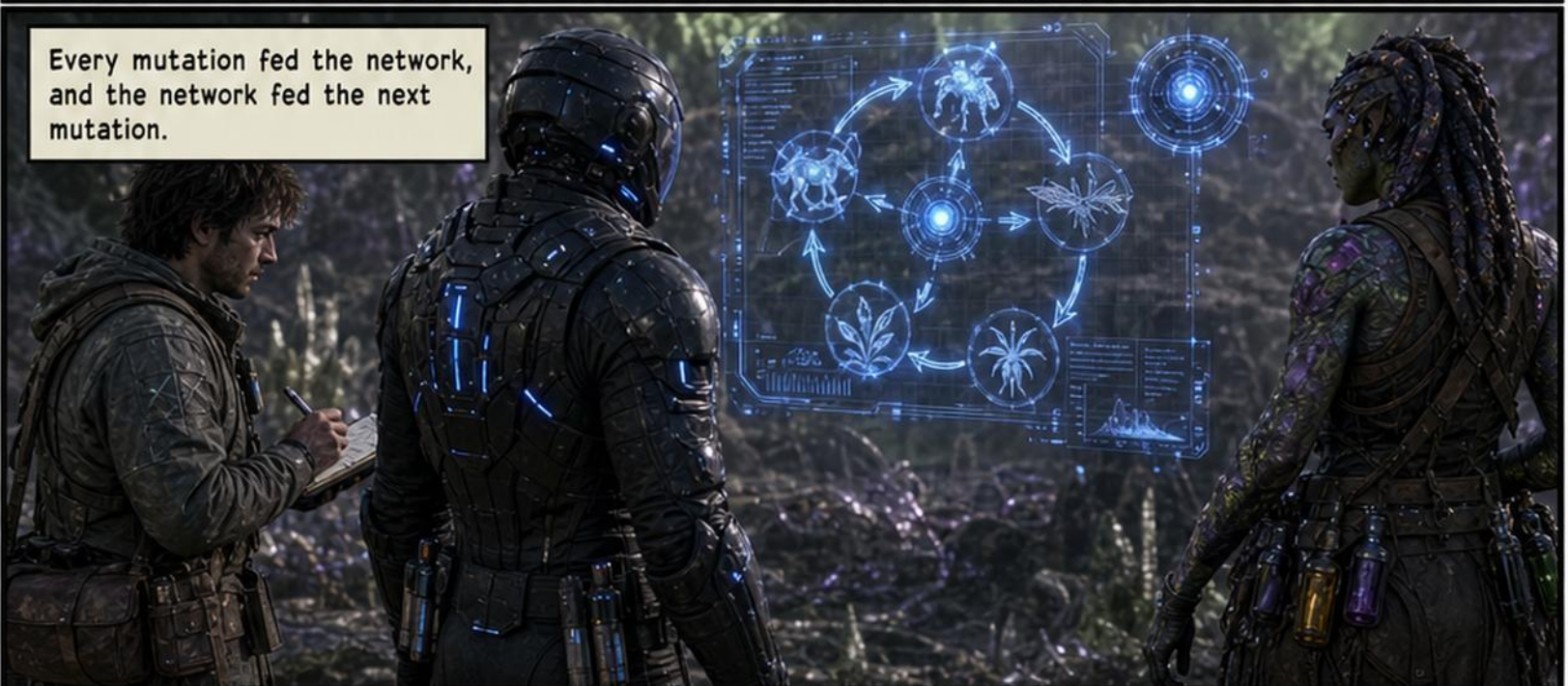
Beasts that fed on corrupted flora grew stronger, angrier, and easier for anomalies to pull into violence.



Plants changed differently. Vines learned to move. Flowers learned to trap. Hunger became architecture.



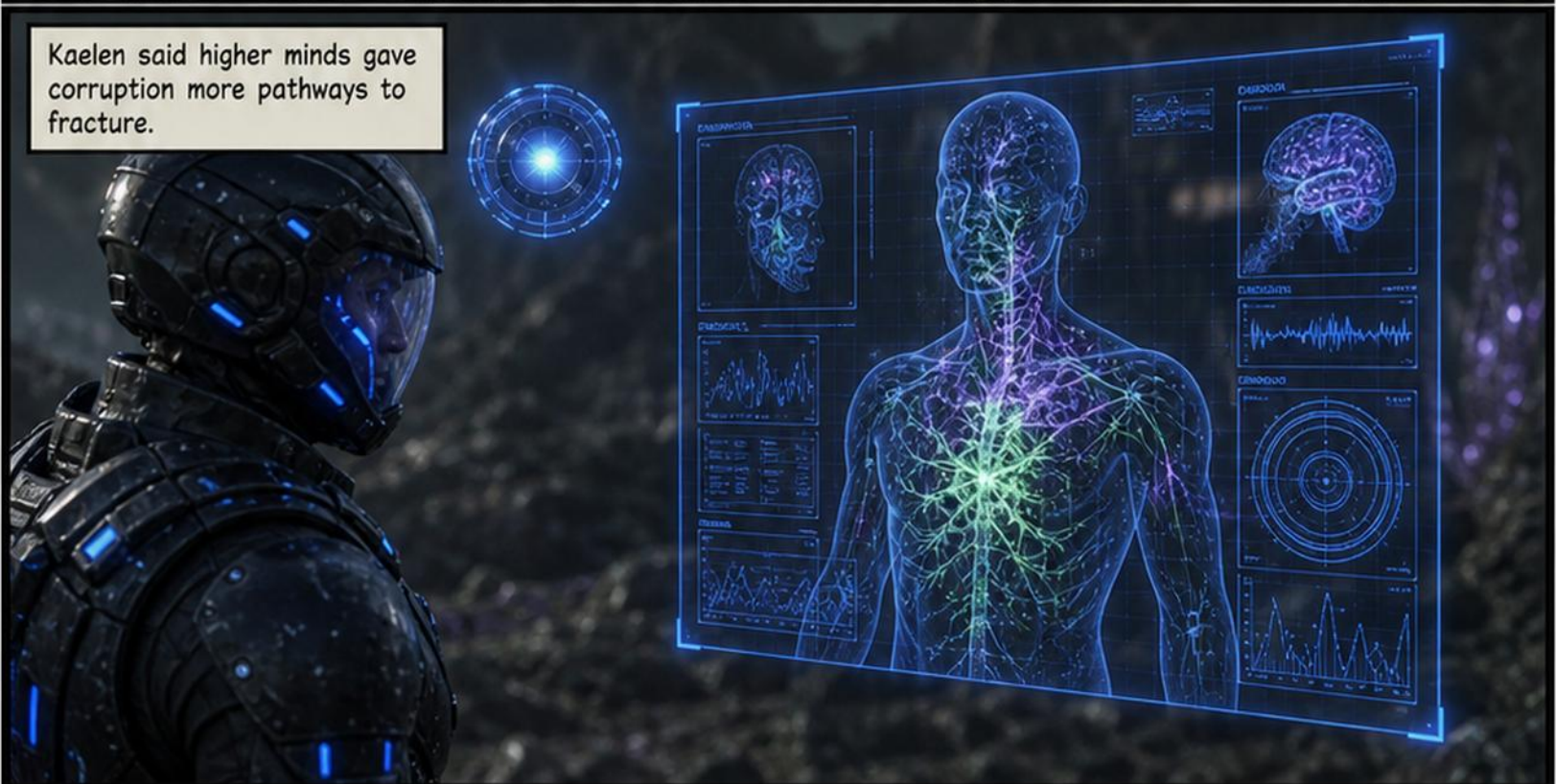
Every mutation fed the network, and the network fed the next mutation.



Then I asked what happened when the victim was intelligent enough to know they were changing.



Kaelen said higher minds gave corruption more pathways to fracture.



Vessara called the worst symptom false hunger: a starving command from a body that could no longer understand food.



The answer walked out of the rocks before anyone could soften it.



She was not a beast. She was a person, huge and shaking, with corruption burning around her mouth.



She reached for our residue and whispered, "Need it... for the hunger."

