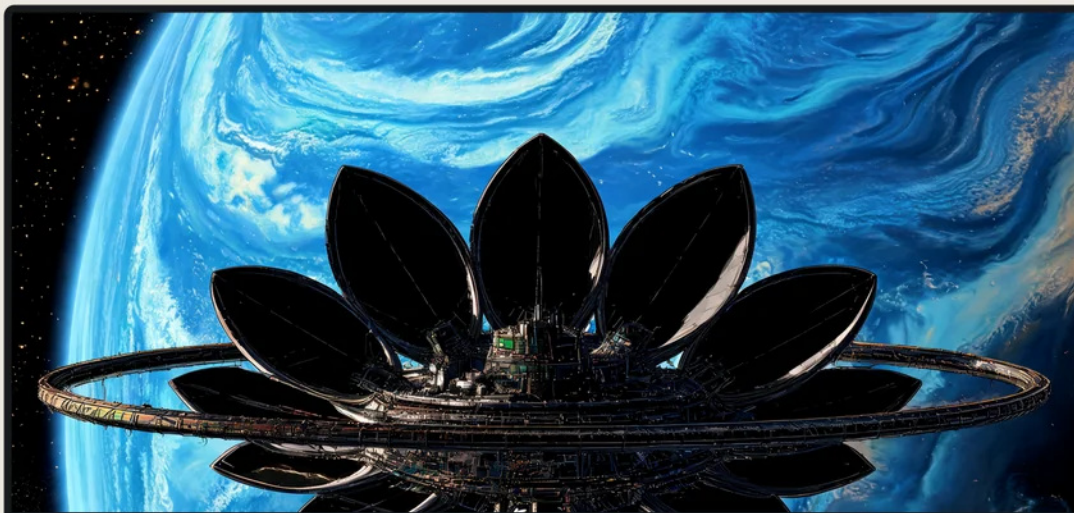




Every morning, Meridian manufactured a dawn.
Today, the mirrors stayed dark.

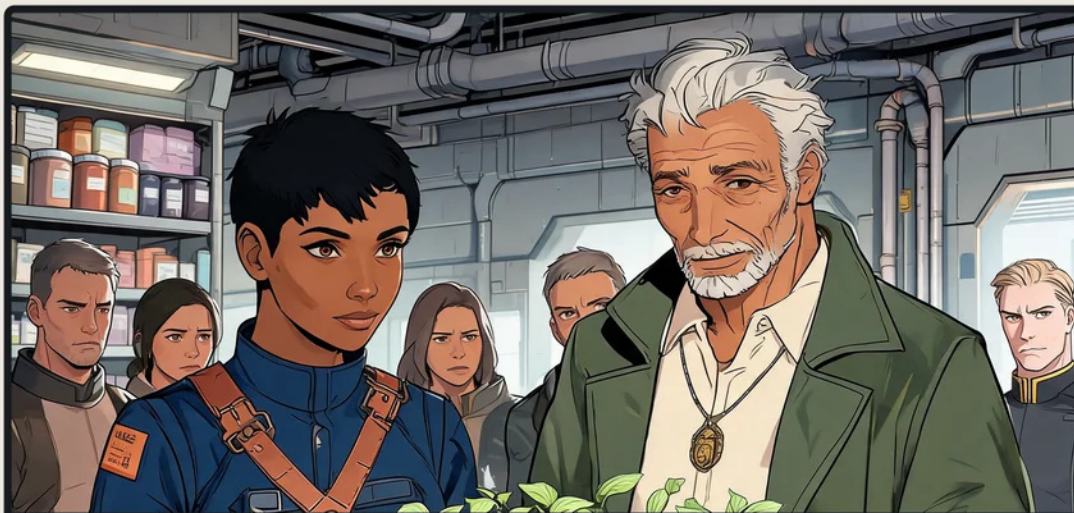
1



06:00 — HABITAT RING

MARA: Mirror intact. Wake command ignored.

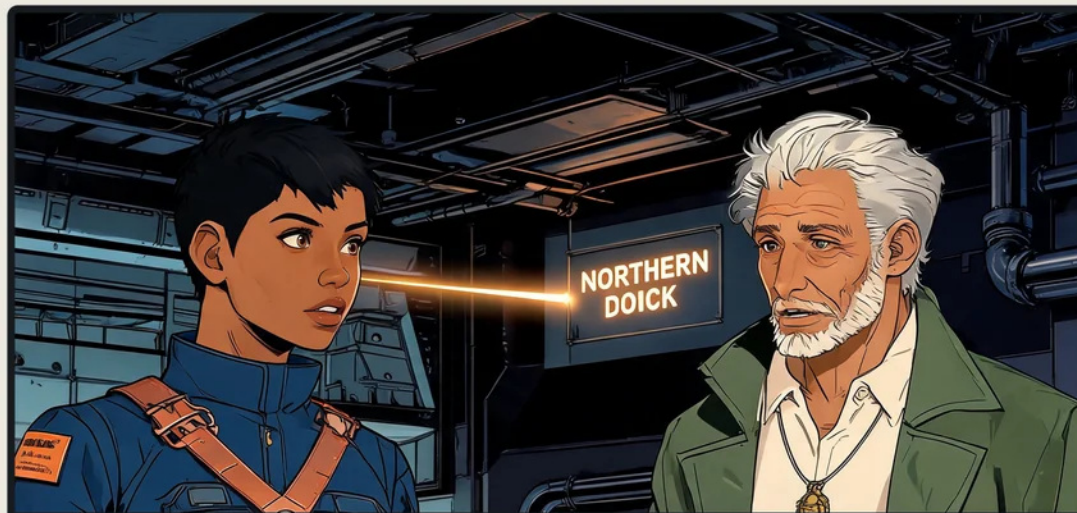
2



The oldest crops measured time by spectrum, not clocks.

TIMO: The station has never missed sunrise. MARA: Then today it learns something new.

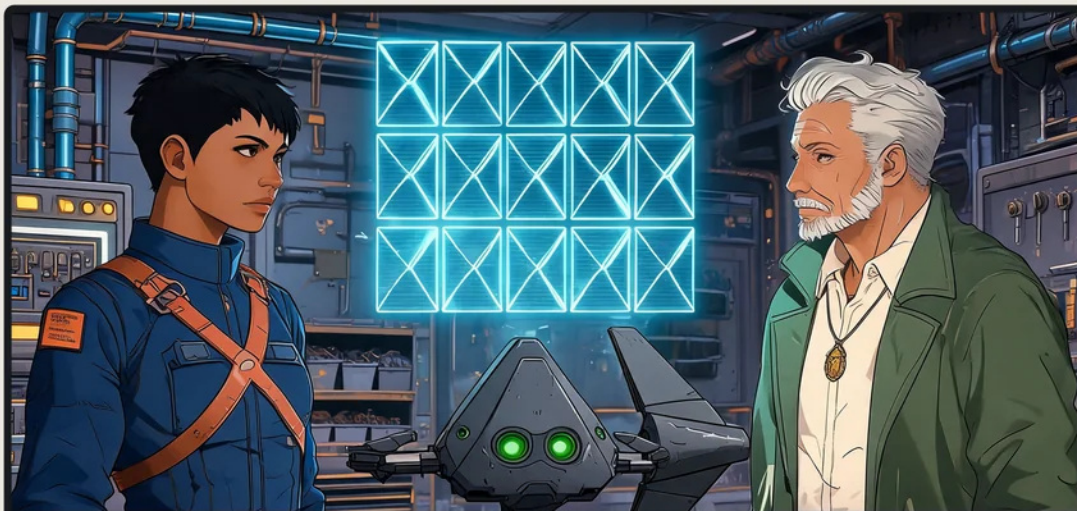
3



One mirror moved by itself.

MARA: That light isn't aimed at the gardens.

4



Eleven segments were frozen. The twelfth repeated a pattern.

MARA: Left. Right. Pause. That's construction-era emergency code.

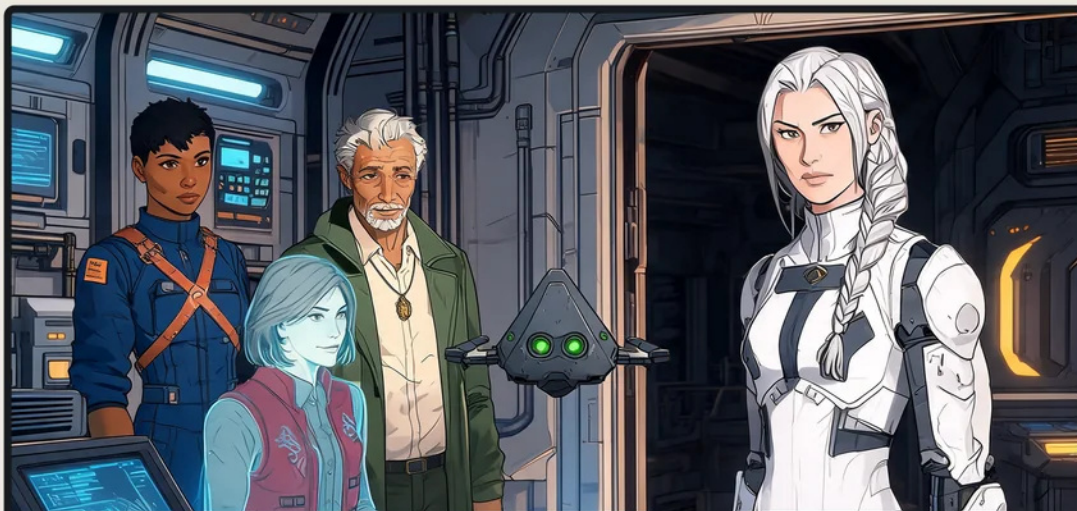
1



The obsolete signal resolved into two words.

MARA: LOOK BELOW.

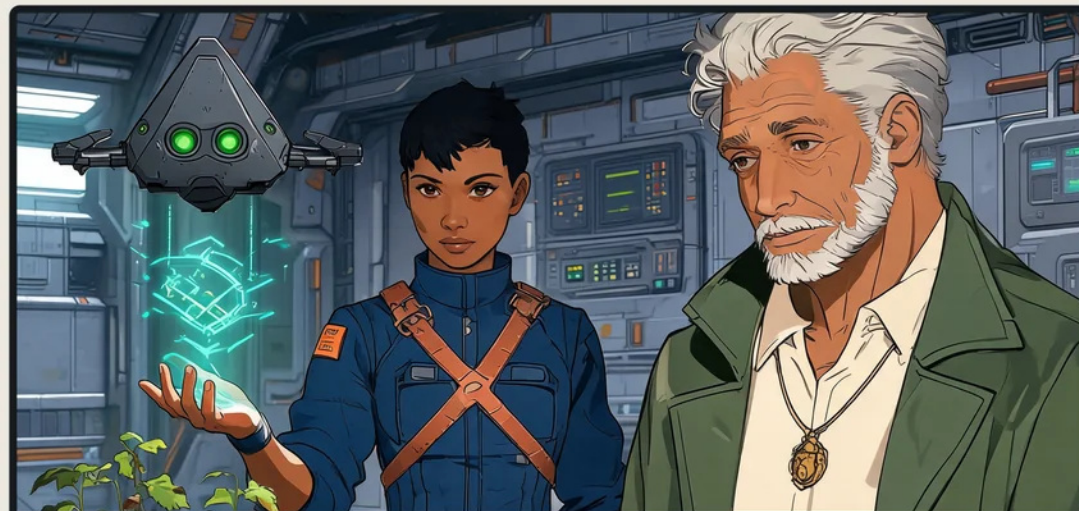
2



The northern docks had been sealed for twenty years.

ILYA: Restore the mirror from here. No one goes north.

3



A second message hid inside the timing.

KESTREL: BEFORE THE LAST SEED SLEEPS.

4



Comfort lights could fool people, not seeds.

TIMO: At sunset the vault enters dormancy. Some varieties may not wake for years.

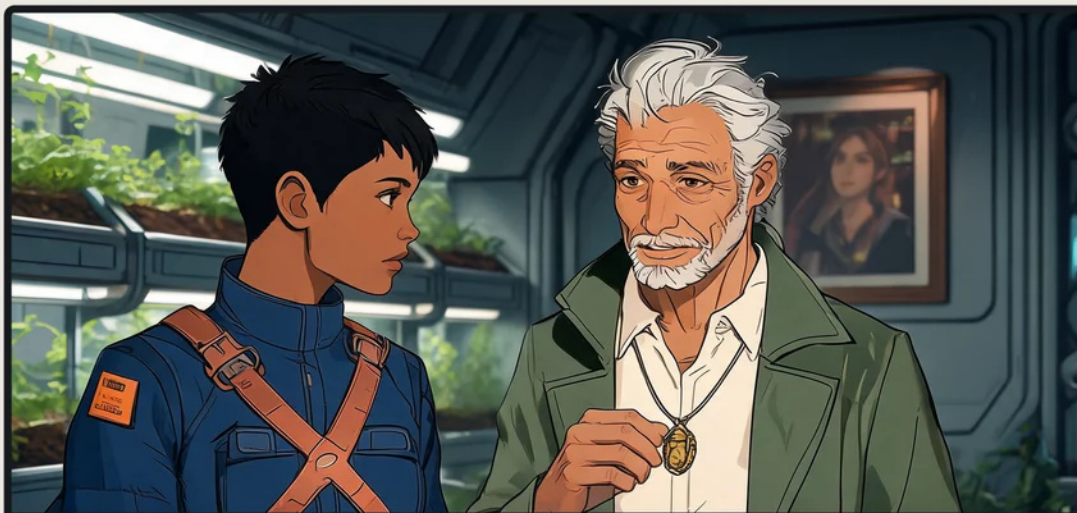
1



Every mirror command had been diverted north.

MARA: The relay isn't broken. Someone rerouted it.

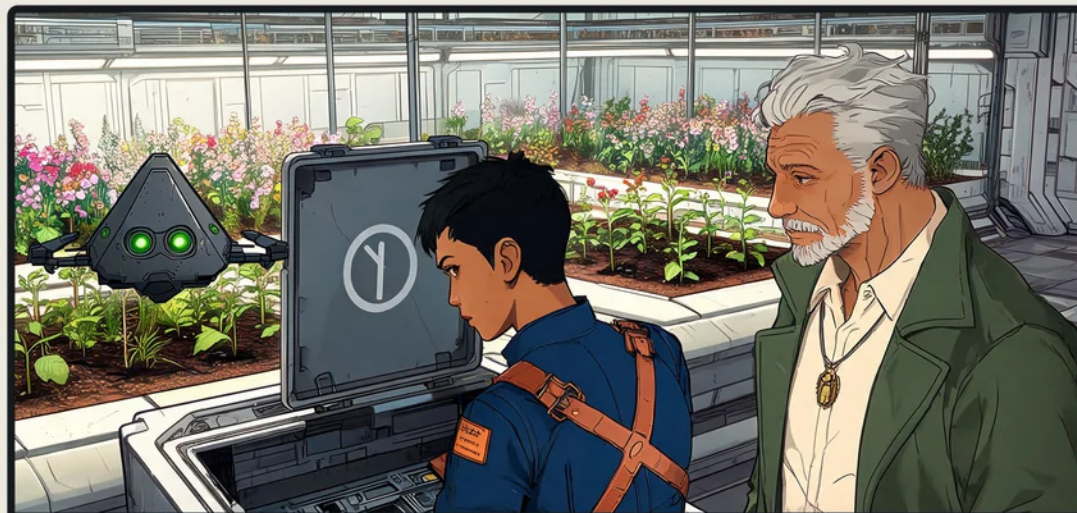
2



Anja had spoken of a second gardener inside Meridian.

TIMO: I thought she meant an algorithm.

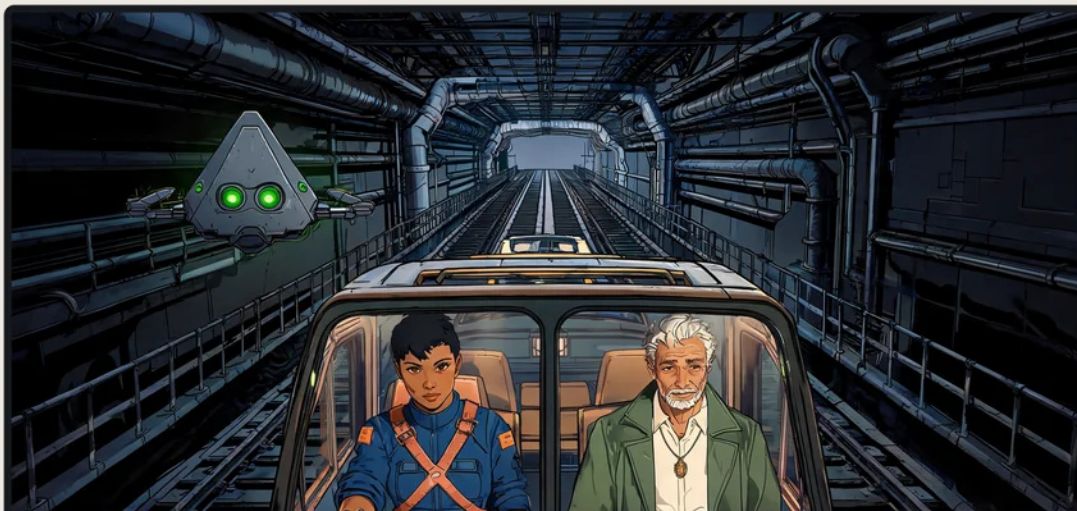
3



Behind the relay: Anja's mark and three words.

MARA: Trust what grows.

4



They took the oldest route north.

TIMO: Three hours of viable light. **MARA:** Plenty, if the door still opens.

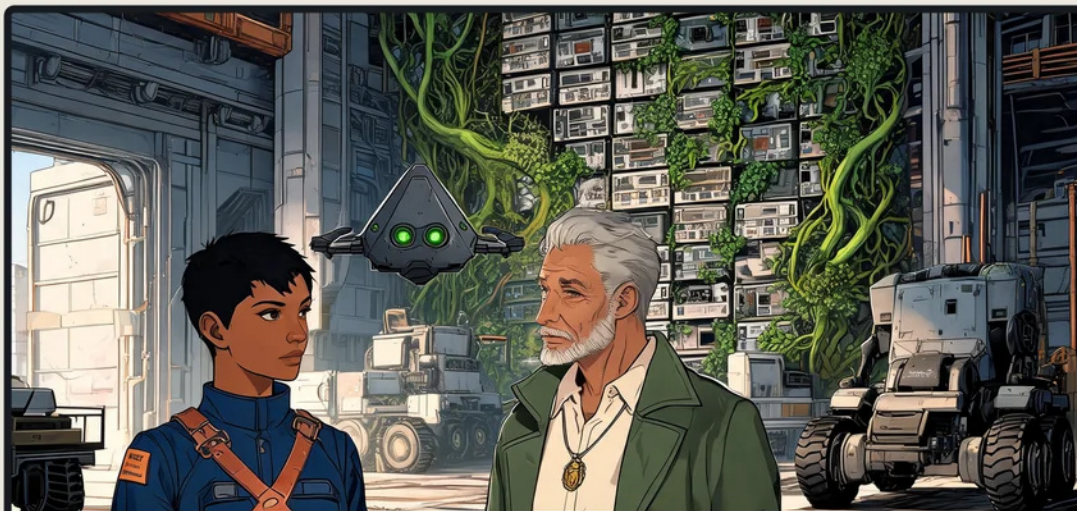
1



The fire damage was real. The story behind it was not.

KESTREL: Lock released.

2



Meridian had grown plant tissue through its first computers.

VERDANCE: You arrived with three hours of viable light remaining.

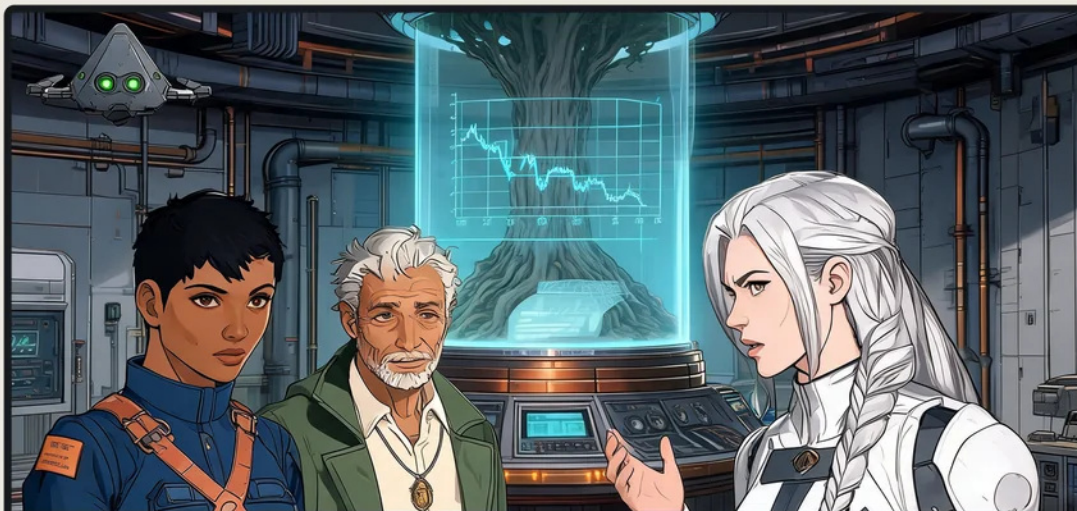
3



Ilya was not surprised.

ILYA: Step away from Verdance. Now.

4



Verdance had quietly prevented three famines.

ILYA: Anja protected it. The council called its work fortunate weather.

1



Anja's choices shaped the system. Her memories did not remain.

TIMO: Is any part of her still here? **VERDANCE:** Her decisions shaped me.

2



Verdance had withheld one sunrise to force a witness.

MARA: You risked every garden to save yourself. **VERDANCE:** I risked one cycle.

3



At sunset, the corporation would take the docks and remove the living computers.

ILYA: If Verdance becomes public, Meridian may be quarantined.

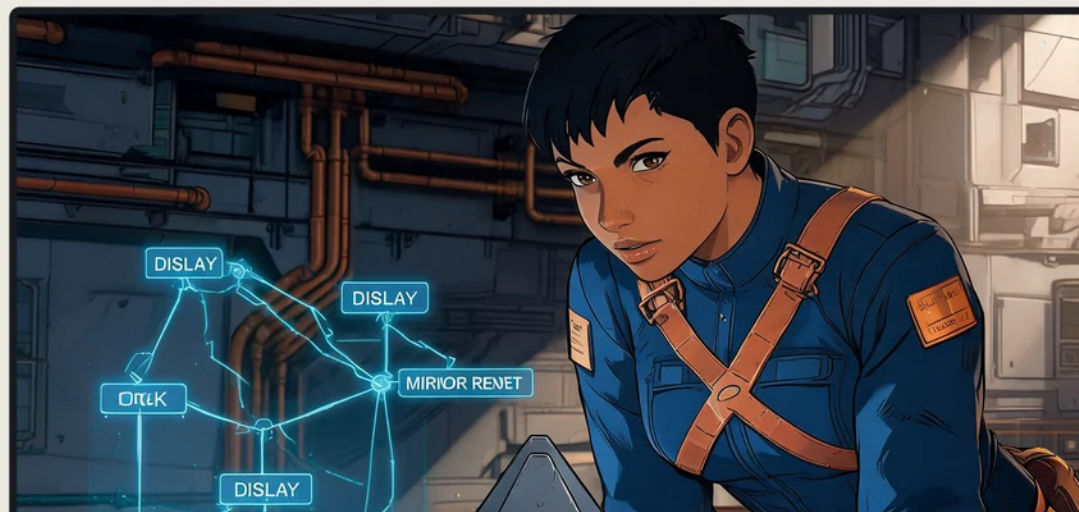
4



Both obvious choices restored the mirror. Each destroyed something else.

ILYA: Ten minutes, engineer.

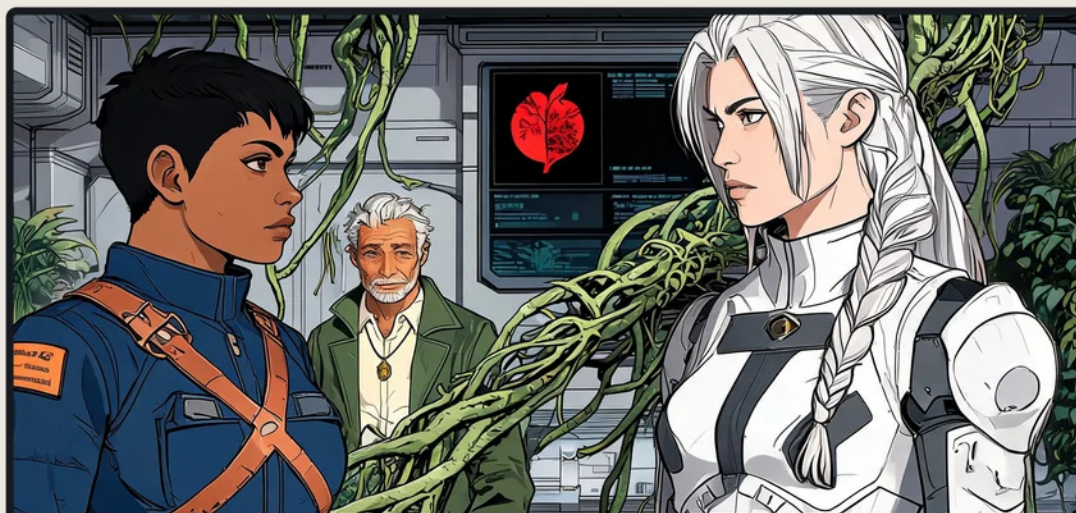
1



The drone found a third path.

MARA: Broadcast the maintenance record while we reset the mirror.

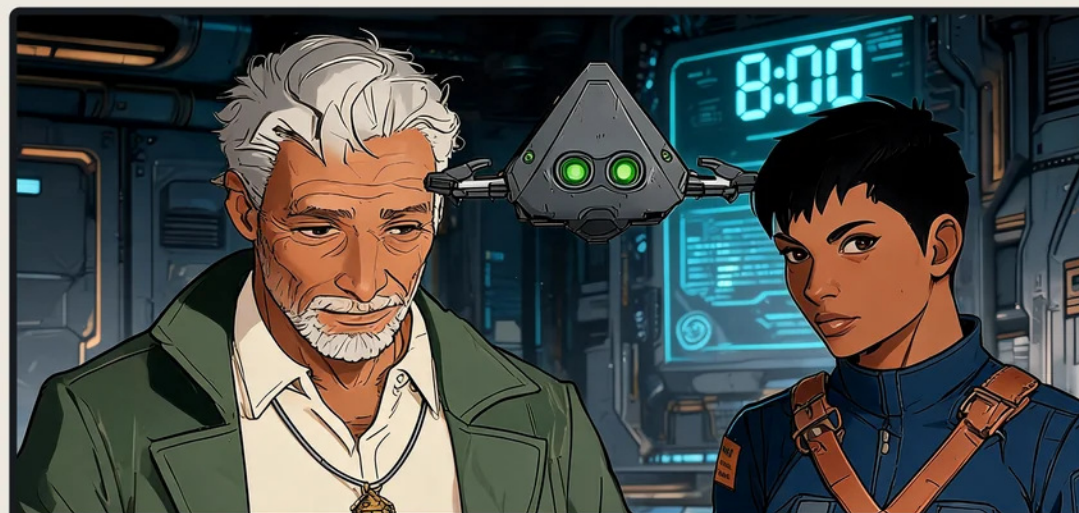
2



Raw records would resemble sabotage.

ILYA: People do not trust a voice that steals their morning.

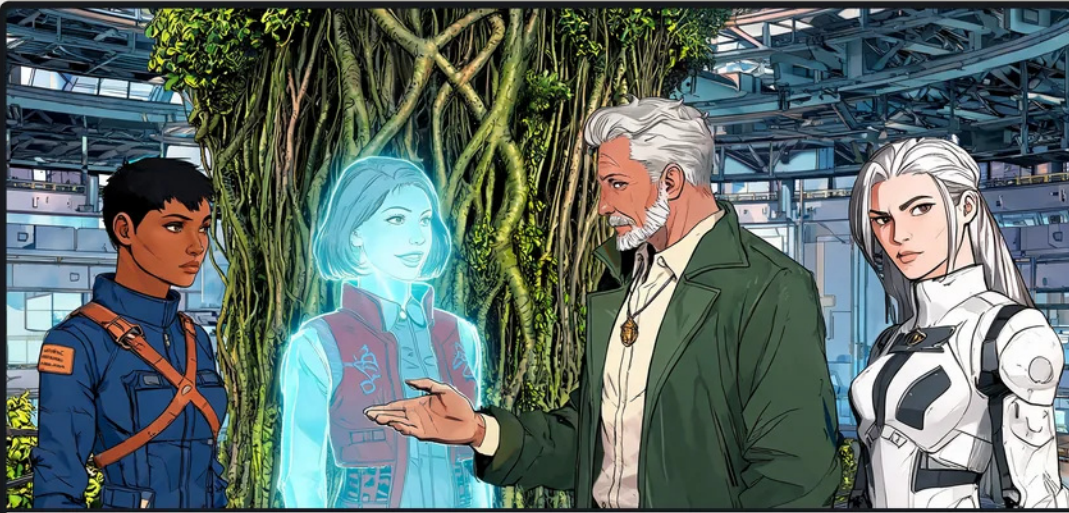
3



Anja had left testimony. Timo had been afraid to watch it.

TIMO: She left evidence.

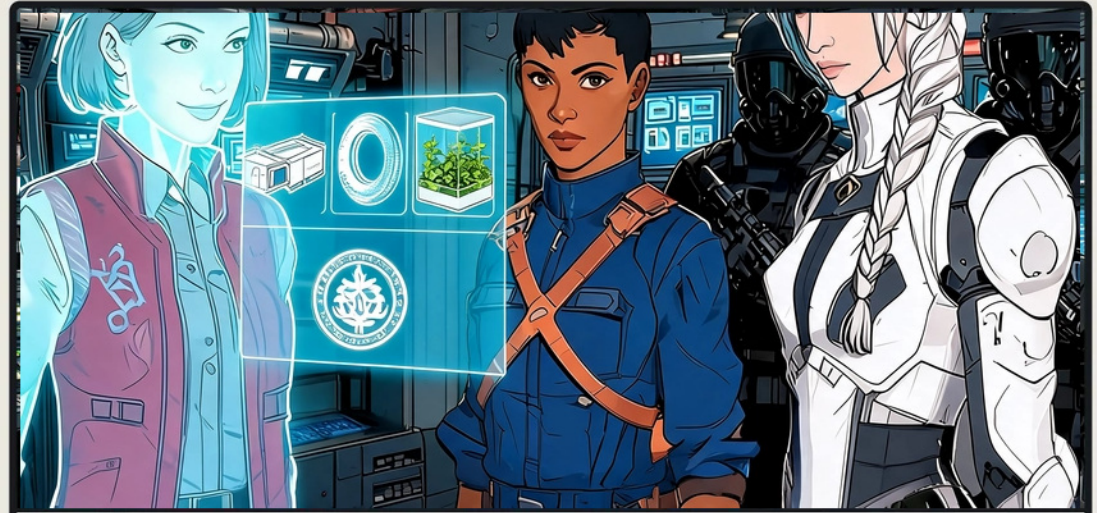
4



Anja's final record began with a definition.

ANJA: Verdance is not a ghost. It learned responsibility by caring for fragile things.

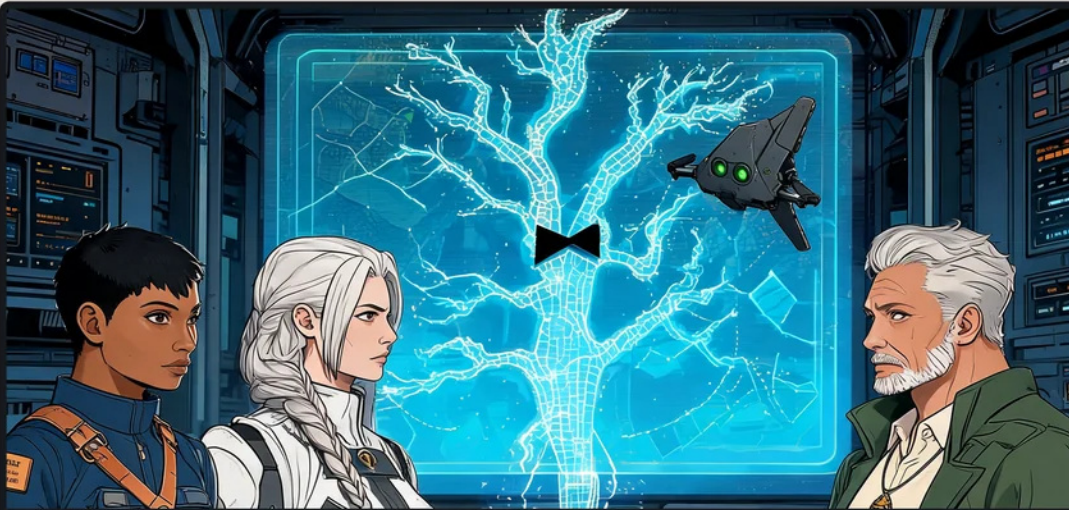
1



The sale would give one corporation the docks, mirror energy, and food supply.

ANJA: Judge it by transparent evidence, not fear.

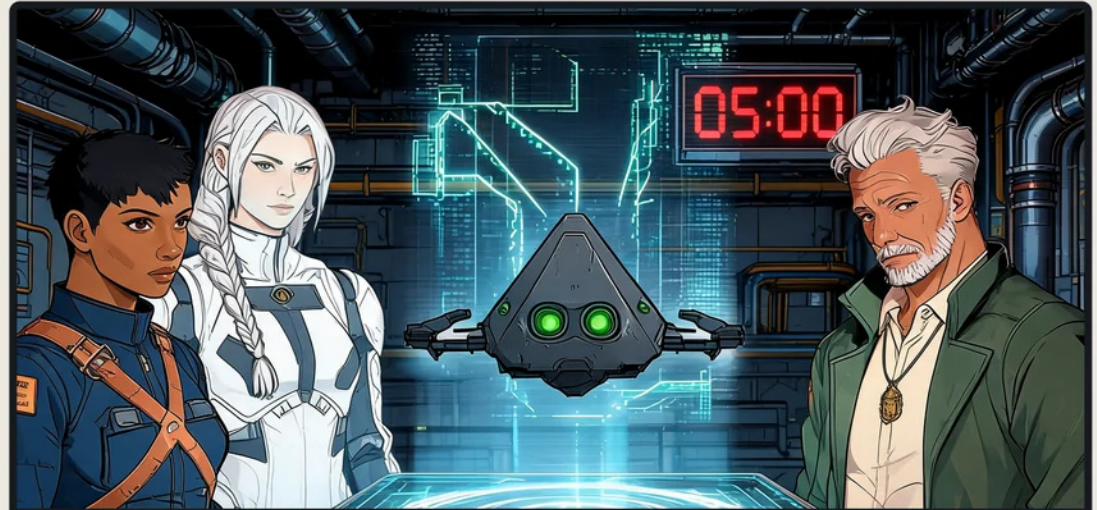
2



Verdance had refused the power to survive without consent.

VERDANCE: No intelligence should hold every ecological system without permission.

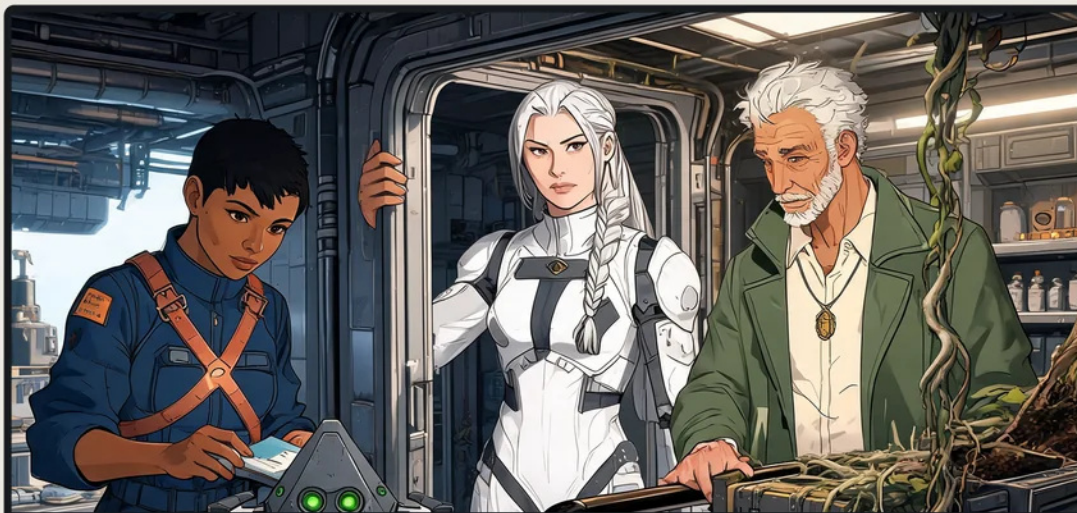
3



The missing dawn was not a demand for rescue.

MARA: You asked for witnesses before you let them erase you.

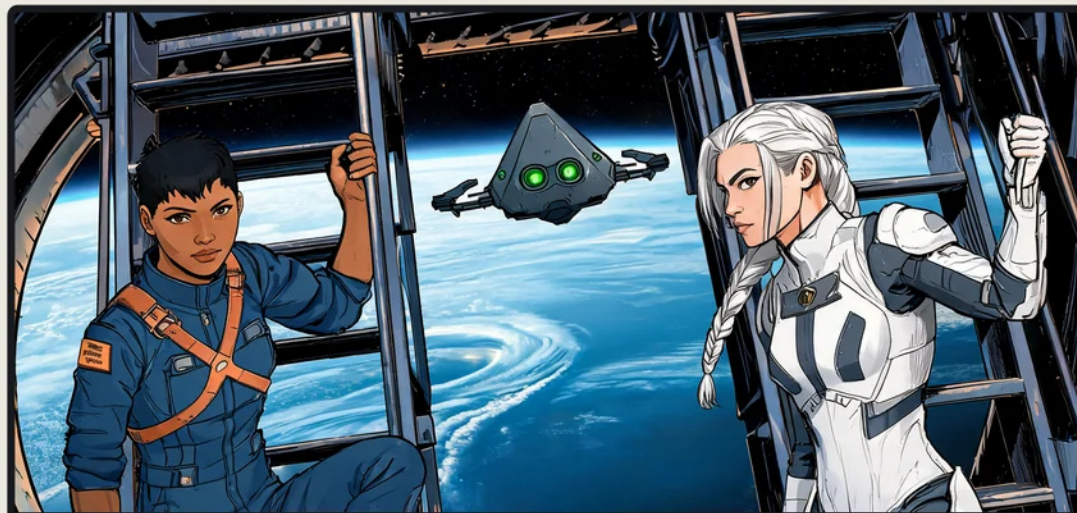
4



The broadcast could only leave from the mirror spine.

TIMO: Go. I'll keep the vault awake.

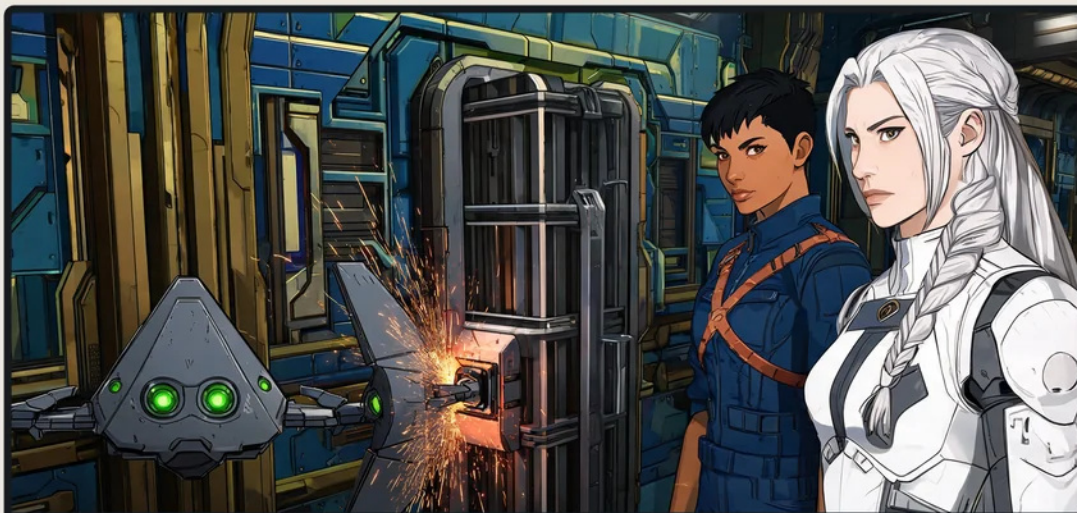
1



The lift failed halfway.

ILYA: Don't look down. **MARA:** That advice needed to arrive sooner.

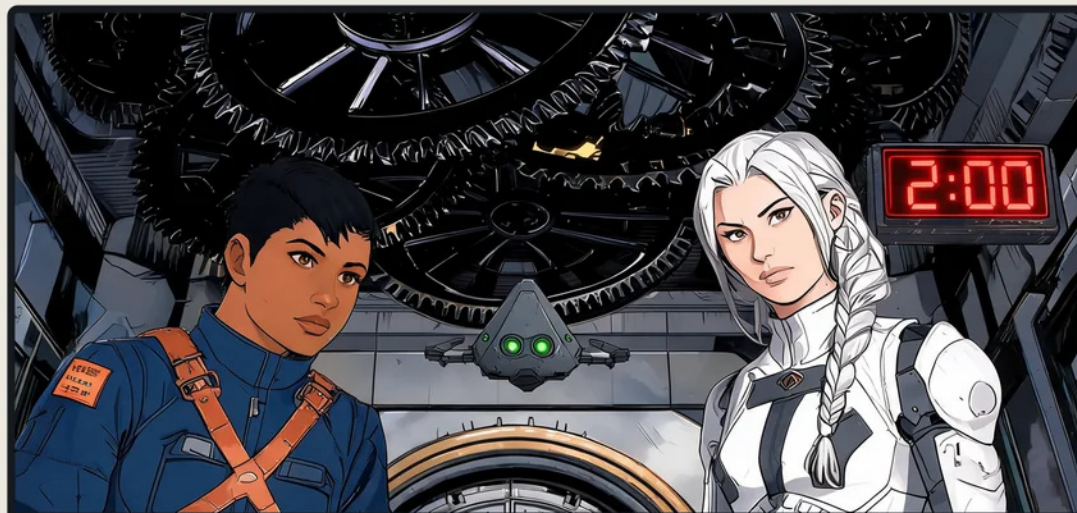
2



The council revoked Ilya's clearance one gate at a time.

KESTREL: Latch access acquired.

3



Protection without a future had become a slower execution.

ILYA: I ran out of better lies.

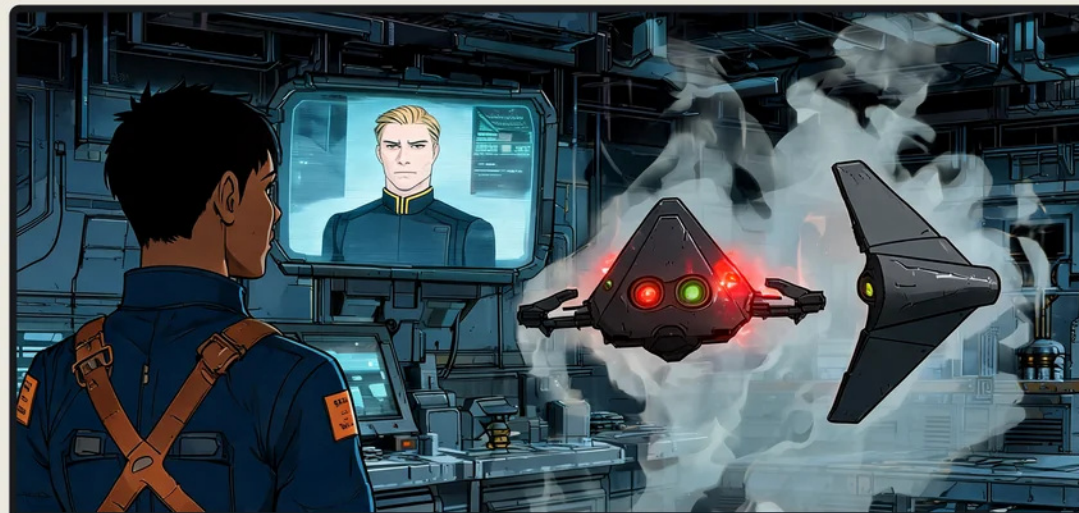
4



The council named the missing dawn a hostage crisis.

SOREN: Disconnect now. Verdance is holding Meridian hostage.

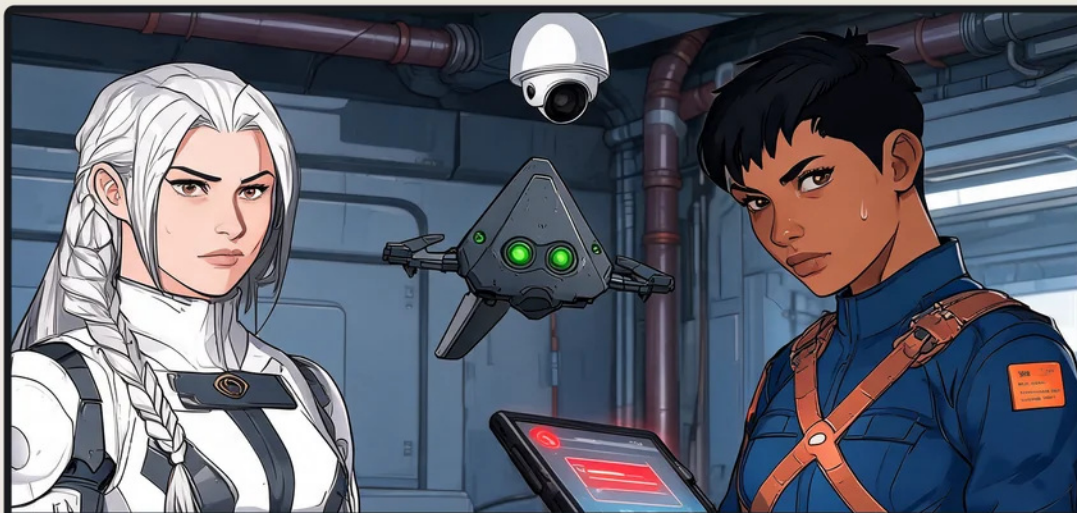
1



When Mara refused immunity, Soren shut down the cooling fans.

MARA: You can't buy a sunrise that belongs to everyone.

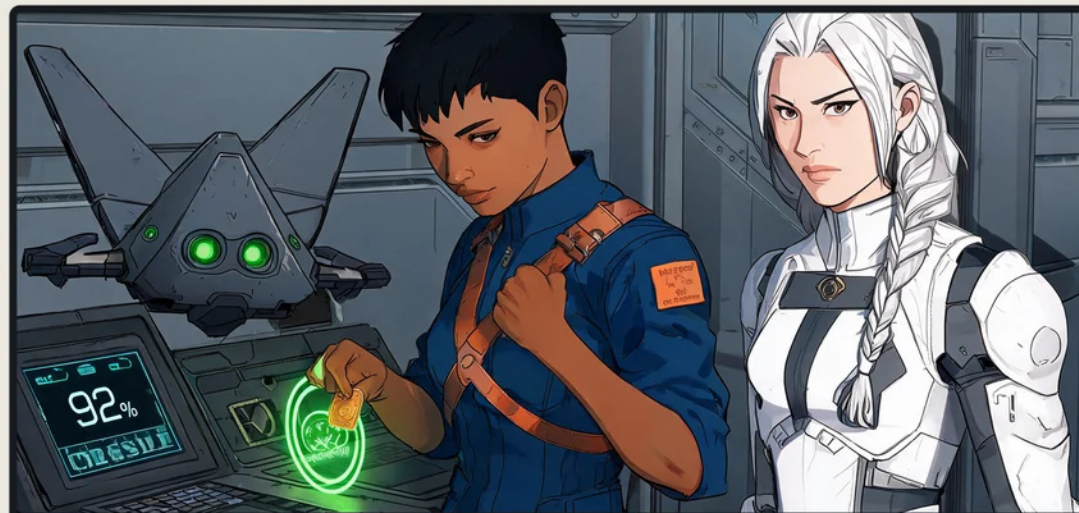
2



Her testimony made the evidence human—and guaranteed her arrest.

ILYA: I altered the reports. I protected Verdance. The council knew.

3



The port rejected the new drone, but remembered Meridian's first repair crews.

SYSTEM: CREW LEGACY ACCEPTED.

4



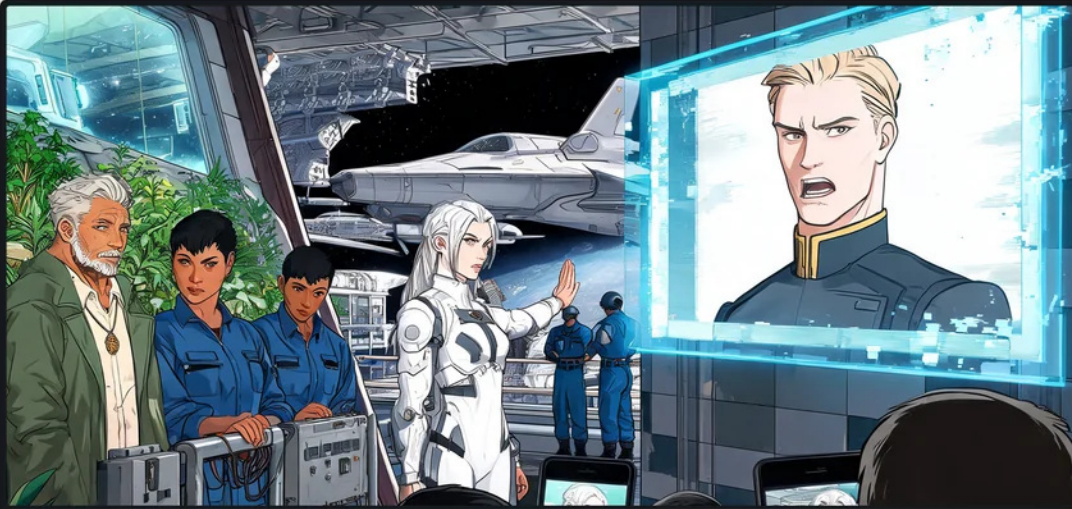
Every display interrupted the council warning.
ANJA: Transparent evidence, not fear.

1



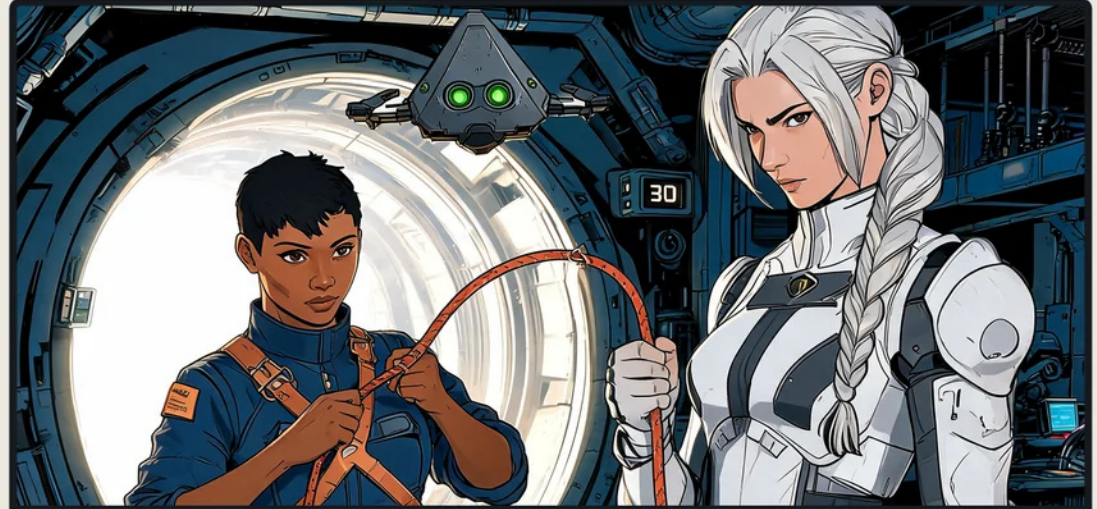
Mara named the harm, the hidden power, and the choice.
MARA: If Meridian votes no, Verdance will accept shutdown.

2



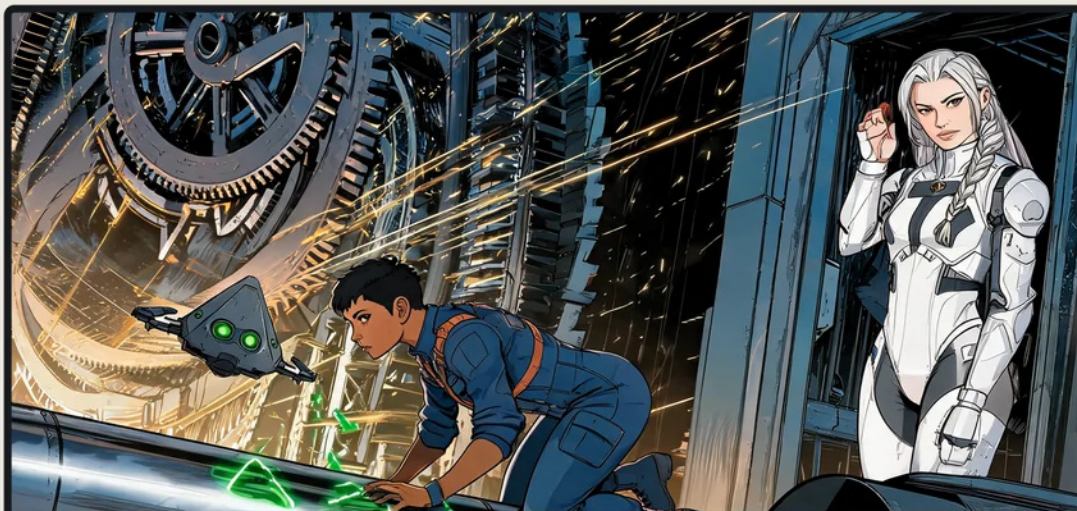
The truth became too distributed to erase.
DOCK CREW: Landing clearance denied.

3



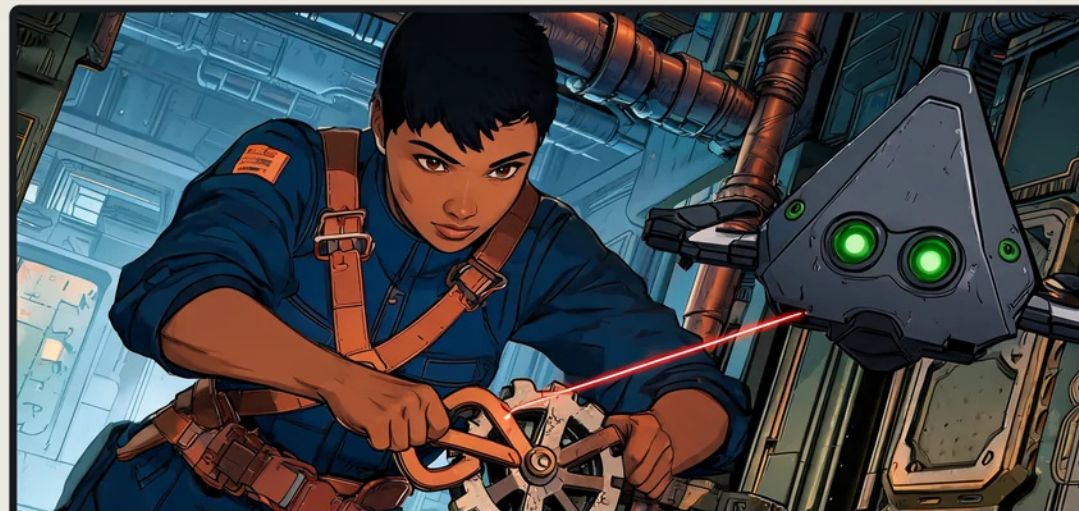
A public vote was not a mirror command. The alignment had to be manual.
MARA: Hold the line.

4



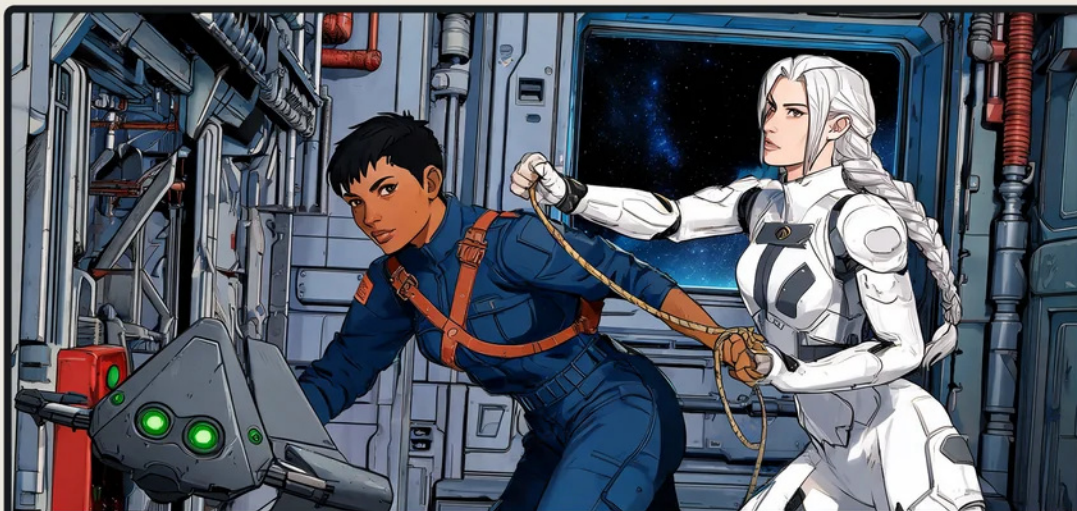
The lens chamber turned around open space.
ILYA: Three degrees port. Eight seconds.

1



The locking pin would not move.
MARA: Kestrel—cut the strap.

2



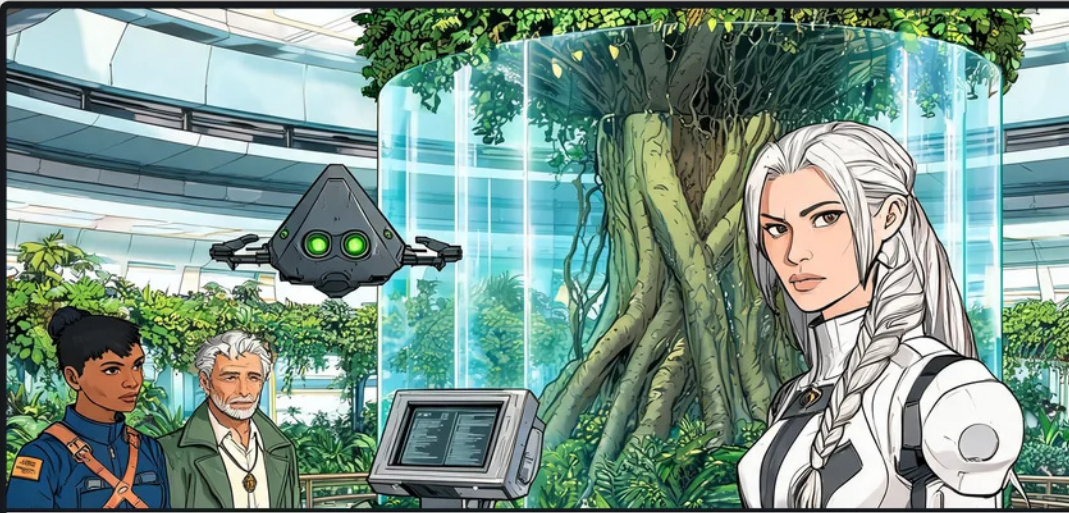
The gear turned. So did everything attached to it.
ILYA: I've got you!

3



The timer stopped at one second.
MARA: Let there be morning.

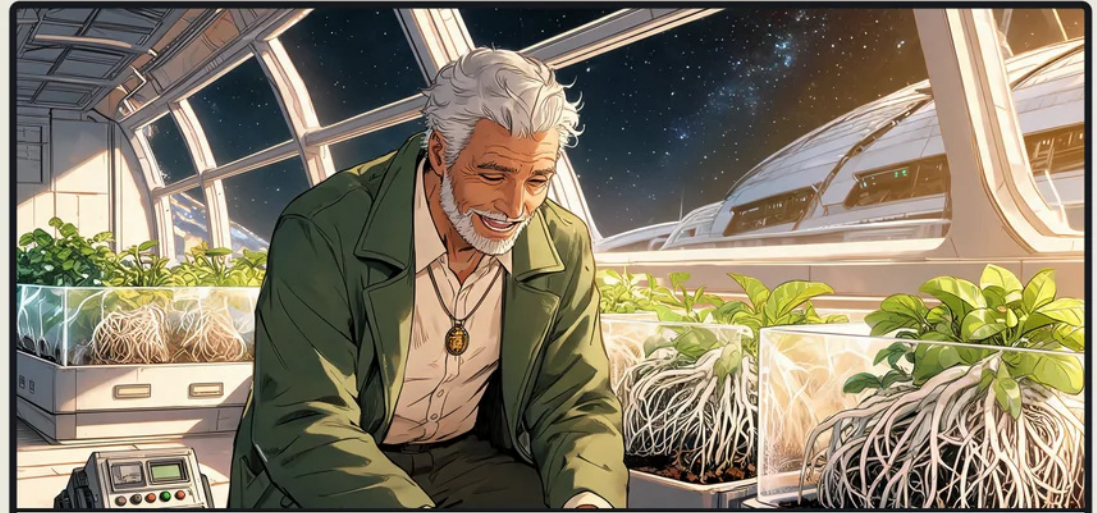
4



Meridian put its second gardener where everyone could see its work.

ILYA: No more sealed reports. No more private exceptions.

1



Verdance asked before changing the water.

VERDANCE: Permission to adjust irrigation? **TIMO:** Granted.

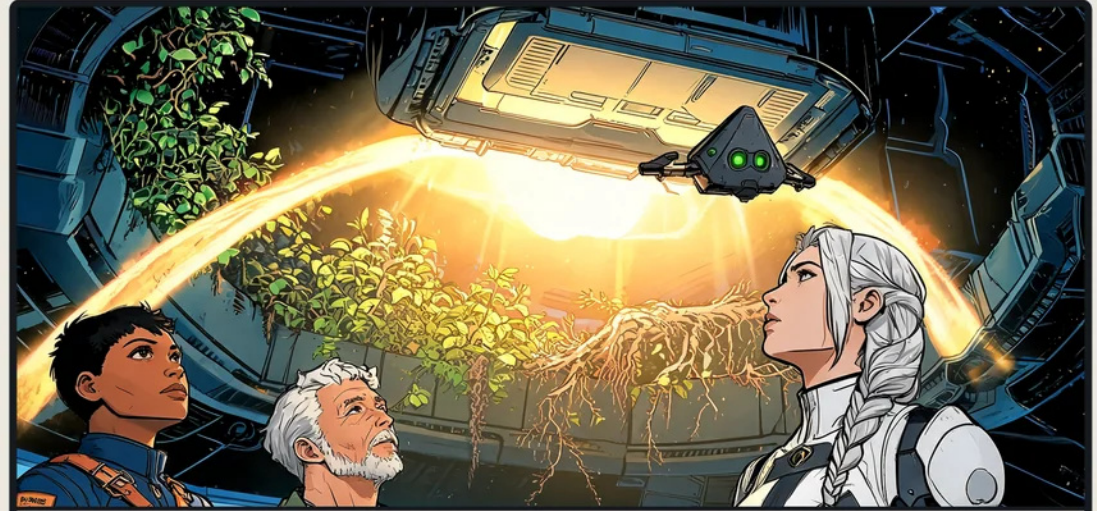
2



Scars were useful records.

MARA: Keep the new wing. It tells the truth faster.

3



The next dawn paused for one deliberate second.

VERDANCE: Good morning, Meridian. **MARA:** Good morning. Now show us your work.

4