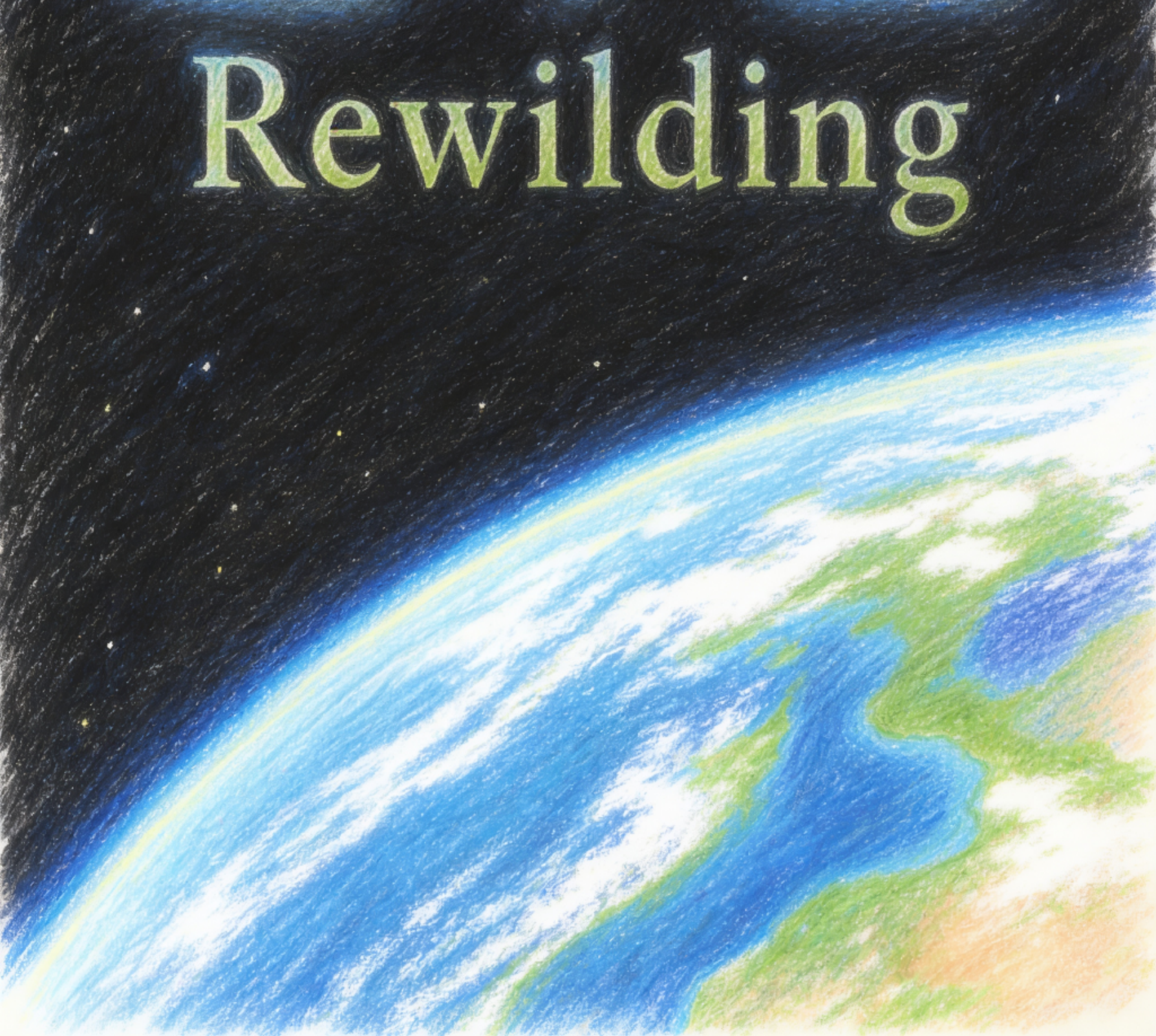
ECHOES OF EVE

Rewilding



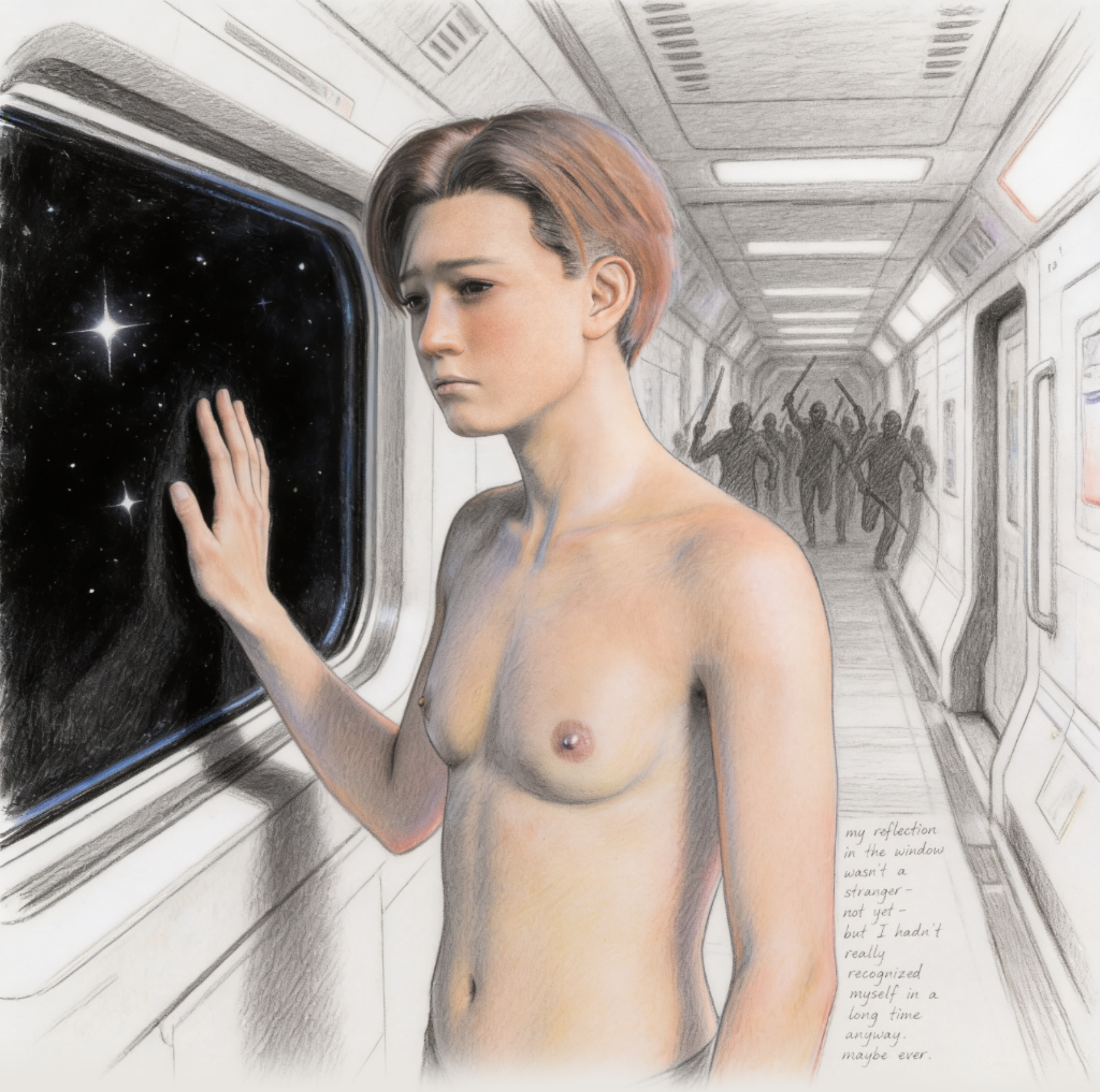


From an outside perspective, it must've been quite a strange sight. The sound profile would be routine: one more shipboard insurrection among so many others. But few uprisings could claim to have been perpetrated by men mid-way through feminisation in leisurewear. It was something none of them wished to acknowledge; that with soft hairless faces and prominent chests, these "men" trying to protect their dignity were already far past most metrics for masculinity.

Of the dozen or so scrambling across the *Chrysalis*'s deserted decks, I'm fairly certain I was the only one who independently came to this realisation. I looked down at my hands, bloodied with scrapes I'd attained from dismantling a med robot who'd tried in vain to corral us. My body ached after having spent the better part of the last decade inactive, made worse trying to keep up with the frenzied mob. I could feel my adrenaline withdrawing as I stopped dead in the middle of the hallway. *Why was I doing this?* No officer had ordered me to, there were no threats of violence or of widening my debt for refusing, this wasn't even in a life-or-death situation. I could stop, if I so wished.

Next question: did I have to resume?

I turned to face the window lining the hallway to my right, getting as good of a look as I could at my reflection. What exactly would be the



end goal of continuing? To escape? To commandeer the ship? To have revenge? I wasn't sure. As one of the most obviously brawny passengers aboard (which wasn't saying much at this point), my role was muscle, nothing more. No need to inform me of anything, I just had to look the part and follow orders. As of now though, squinting for a better look at the dim picture of myself, my soft cheeks and pouty lips didn't exactly look the part, and I couldn't say I was following orders either.

"Come on big guy, move your ass!" one of the rebels yelled.

I looked him dead in the eyes, assessing his gaze, as haggard as it could be through the pretty sculpted features. I took it all in, recorded the request. And for the first time in my life, I didn't do as I was told, and ran instead.

***

"So Assan, you only incapacitated the medbot?" the security officer asked.

I nodded yes.

"And you had no part in the actual planning of the mutiny?"

I nodded no.

"I see. You'll still be punished, obviously, but all of this, on top of your previous spotless record and voluntary defection helps your case quite a bit. One could say it demonstrates the redemptive qualities of this immigration program quite well in fact. I'll downgrade your security by two levels, but you're otherwise good to return to cryo, Pam and Yu will escort you there."

I nodded one last time, and otherwise remained silent as I was walked back to the stasis hall by the two women. They settled me down and began the cycle without a word. Through this, even as the steam hissed around me and my vision began to black out, all I could focus on was my discomfort at breaking from one authority only to be commended by another. For a split second before my mind went dark, discomfort turned to confusion as I realised just how foreign such moral clarity was to me.

***

I immediately noted upon waking up for the final time how I was still so much more aware of myself than before. Up until this voyage, my body had been explicitly built to be a tool, and it was how I treated it—a set of powerful square appendages with which to perform tasks. I could've passed for one of the disproportionate engineered human clones that once formed the backbone of corporate grunt work before they were outlawed a century ago. A life as an organic android was a simple uncomplicated one; no need for thoughts or observations, lingering doubts or regrets; if you had any, a suppressor would take care of it. All that remained was a beige haze.

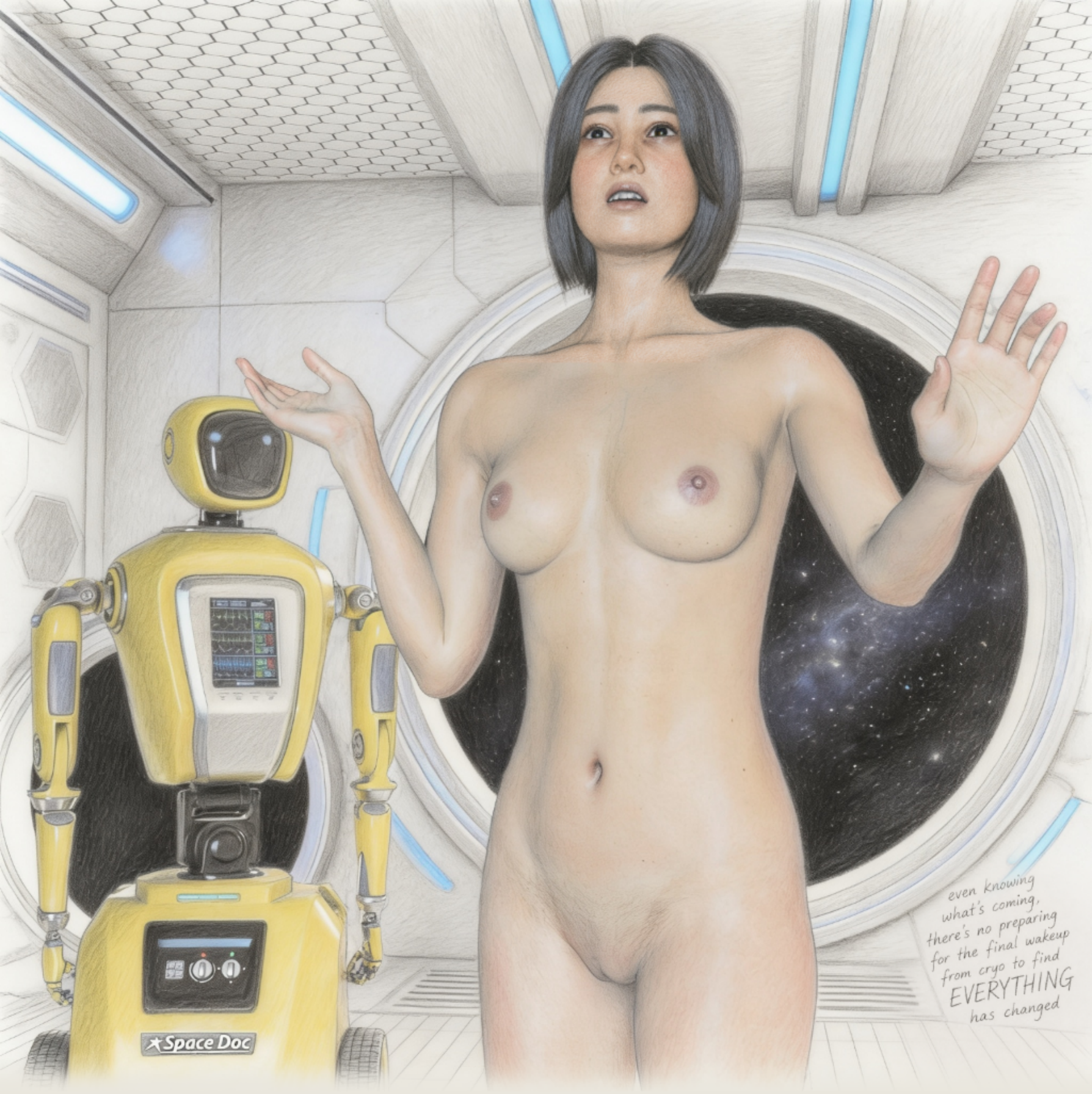
Here though, even when my body was purging the remnants of literal years of relaxants that had been pumped through my veins, the mental compression wasn't there. I was distressingly aware, when I struggled to move a single finger. This body wasn't a mobile rectangle anymore; it had peaks and valleys, where the jagged angles of muscles had eroded. When I did regain control of my arms, I could only describe the motion as graceful.

How could any part of me ever be described as graceful?

I was completely naked, waiting for the new medbot to finish their assessment of my vitals, silently panicking over these new developments, when the ship's captain walked in.

"I would like to extend my most sincere apologies for having kept you confined here so long." Her tone was a grating mix of conversational and practiced. Corporate. "I could tell from when I first met you at boarding you weren't like most ex-paramilitaries we've received as part of the restructuring, and it seems my assessment was correct."

I could only vaguely remember when I'd first met the captain, weeks ago. Decades that had felt like weeks? Whatever, it was pure data from a superior I'd absorbed with no further thought. Barely an actual



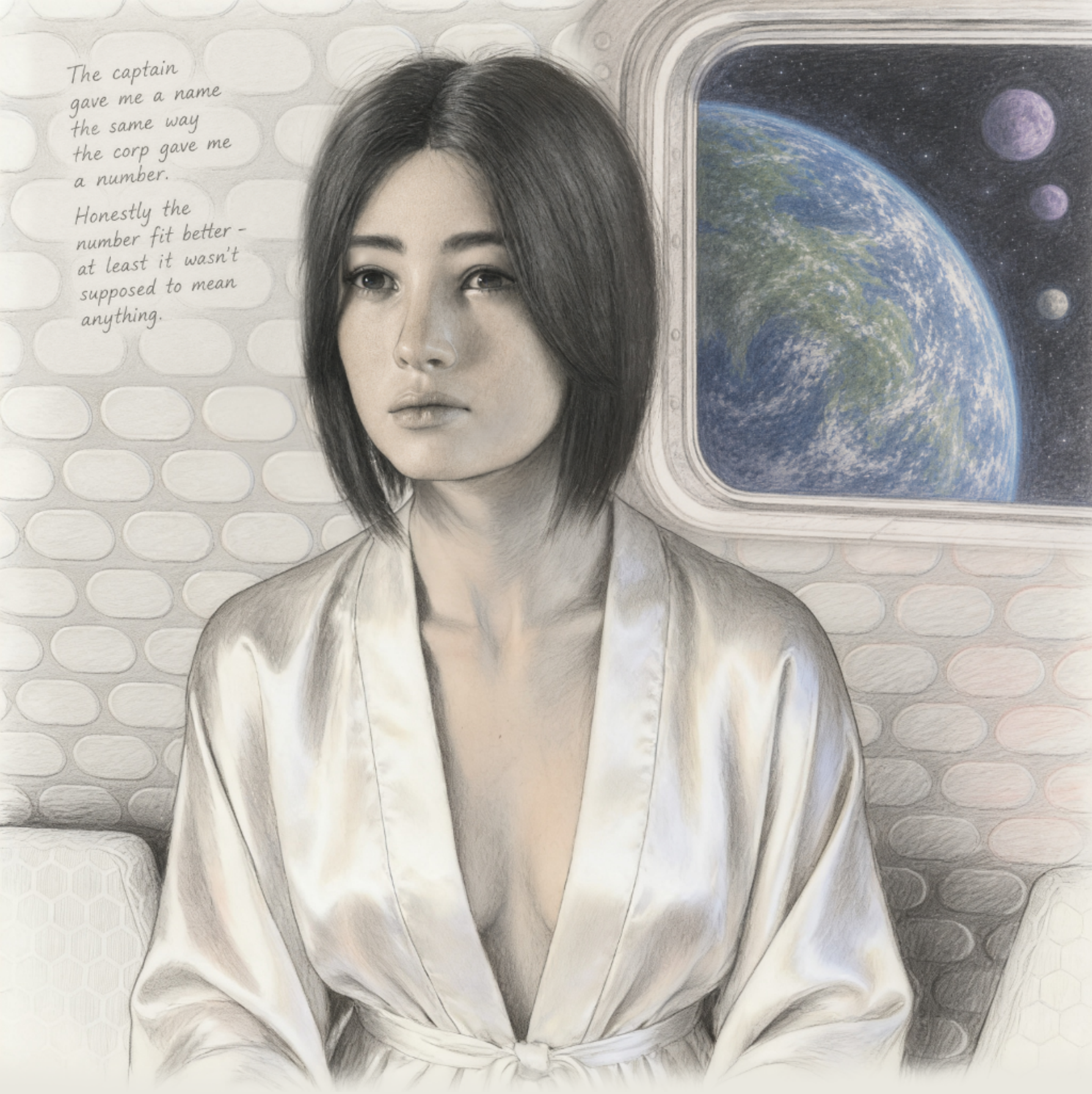
memory. Now I noticed everything, how the captain held herself, how she dressed, the slight lilt in her accent, how I suddenly felt embarrassed to be completely undressed in front of her—that she'd get a more thorough look at these new parts of me than I had. I was spinning further when I realised she was still talking.

"–by returning to us, you made quite the great example of the rehabilitative properties of the beta immigration programme."

I had done it. I'd followed what was expected of me. What I was made for. And It felt terrible.

"–as a reward for your adherence to the programme," she continued, too caught up in her script to notice my internal crisis, "we have enacted our redemption protocol. Your rating has been lowered, your offense has been cleared, and you will remain conscious for the remaining two weeks of this voyage. We have also already implanted you with your embryo, which should currently be in its second month of development."

My embryo. In addition to everything else, I had been impregnated, and was expected to become a mother. This was information that, like everything else, I had assimilated with no further thoughts. Thoughts that were now all spilling over me, crushing me in



panic and anxieties.

"Do you have any concerns?" the captain asked.

I looked up, and shook my head.

"I see, sorry, it's a lot, I get it. Luckily we have plenty of assistance to help you adjust to your new livelihood. Would you like me to book a meeting with one of our colony psychologists?"

She was direct, to the point, objective, impersonal. Traits that failed to provide comfort by familiarity. Had it ever been comfort though?

"I'll take that as a yes. Let me retrieve the form here..."

The captain tapped away at her wrist device for a few seconds.

"Oh, do you happen to have a new name picked out? I see it's still your old one in here."

Right, a new name. To replace the old one, what was it again, Assan? Over the years it had been willfully buried under my corporate-assigned number and the various squad identifiers I was granted. All were gone, I would now only ever been called by a name, my name, one that was feminine, because I was female, a woman now and–

"–how does Jessica feel to you? I can see you as a Jessica

honestly," the captain said, not looking up from her device.

I barely knew anything about myself, but I knew I wasn't a Jessica. Did I know anything better though? No I did not. So I nodded.

"Great!" the captain beamed, "The appointment is booked three weeks from now, when you'll have landed. I really wish for you the best Jessica, may you and your baby have a bright future."

And so I was left alone to deal with the ongoing assault of thoughts occurring within me.

***

A week after arrival, life in the New Eden colony was quite familiar: regimented, ordered. Corporate. The only difference being, unlike my previous employer, Meridian-Voss was much more interested in teaching me some very uncommercial things, such as community living and sustainable agriculture. I attempted to get within the same mindset I'd always fallen under: silently assimilating information and doing as I was told. I failed miserably. I could barely pay attention to what was being said at any one time, so caught up I was in questions about my being; I was now a woman and future mother named Jessica, why was I being made to learn hydroponics? Though nothing was quite as distracting as the constant, nagging thought that I wasn't made to stay inside.

The one bright spot, the one place where I had felt myself settling down in this confounding journey was on the main deck of the Chrysalis, watching my new home planet revolving below. I'd never seen anything so vibrant, all these blues, greens and whites, mountains and seas in stark detail beneath me. It was an alien sight, which in a literal sense it was, but I could also feel an instinct, some long-slumbering part of me that had never been so satiated before. The women surrounding me were quite a bit more overtly giddy and emotional than I was, but I still felt at home with them, even if I couldn't get into the forced "sisterhood" concept of communal living being drilled into us. This could be my home, and every day I stayed inside the colony's newly arrived buildings, staring down the same hallways and light fixtures I no longer needed, the gnawing within me got stronger. The complete break from my previous self I'd been promised and once dreaded now seemed like something I would have to make happen of my own hands.

The tipping point would come during emergency training, a week after touchdown. The previous lessons at least had the benefit of being somewhat tactile and open. This one consisted of being sat down, all of us women in nigh identical clothing, and lectured on scenarios such as floods, forest fires, power outages, *mutiny*. I had mutinied. Because I was told to. I had quelled mutinies, so many more. I had sat in so many lectures—since childhood, being told by the corpo overseer I was indentured, born into it, sold by my mother to earn her own freedom, at



least, what little freedom could be worth in a planet-wide wasteland where she was probably already murdered or consumed by cancer by the time I was informed of this. Nothing but an asset of little value I was, forming a riot line, shield in hand against the martian workers taking to the streets over cut wages, pulling up my mask when we were informed the oxygen would be cut to choke them out. Standing guard around the executive suite opening new luxury apartments while the poor we'd displaced threw rocks and profanities. We'd be given deployment briefings in a stark washed out room like this every time, dressed the same every time. It was the same, except now my squad was a "sisterhood."

I exited in a panic, dry heaving in the hallway. An attendant came to my side. I'd be seeing a psychologist tomorrow, she said. There would be more acclimatisation sessions and support groups she said. I didn't care. I used what was left of my imposing form to push her away and run to my room. My tiny box-like room. I didn't care for psychologists and support groups. The urge to leave, to explore the great green beyond was my one want, my one certainty. I needed to escape.

My chest almost seized up the night of my getaway. By my surveying during what little downtime I had, it didn't seem like it would



be a very challenging proposal. Neither the storeroom nor the building itself were locked, and it would be less than an hour to disappear into the mountainous forests surrounding the colony. All the tools I'd need had a simple positioning feature to enable them only outside the inhabited perimeter, but otherwise I could be completely off-grid. For the first time I'd be alone, one with nature, with no authority or orders or regulations above me. The thought made my heart rush. So, with my room made as neat and tidy as possible, I gently exited into the darkened buildings, making my way to the expedition supplies. I acquired a basic wilderness supply kit, some clothes, a few rations to get me started, a portable fishing line, and a single-shot hunting rifle. I fitted all of this in and on a rucksack, fastened a lamp to my forehead, and disappeared into the night, where I could fend for myself.

3 months later...

On that day, right around my hundredth on the run, it was the thunder that woke me up. I wasn't used to the new paradigm of the weather here. Back on Earth, one could spend months experiencing nothing but

dry ashy smog, until rains would sweep in so acidic everyone was made to stay inside by government order. On deployments in these conditions, I would be ordered to throw people in whatever puddle or stream I could find. A death sentence. Even with a concerted effort to unwind my conditioning, it was hard to adjust my instinct towards precipitation. It just spoke to how badly we'd mishandled our home that rain as a bringer of life was one of the most otherworldly features of New Eden. Earth was a scant few centuries removed from the same. Showers came fairly frequently in the valley, making for well enough of a trial by water. Where I once cowered in my tent at the sight of storm clouds, I now felt well enough to wander out a bit trying to find plants with which I could season my meals, since my palate had taken a turn for the extravagant in the last few weeks.

On this day however, I knew that even not accounting for my emotional response towards the weather, things were becoming worrisome. There'd been a continuous downpour for the past two days, which had now doubled in intensity, bringing thunder with them. Visibility was limited, especially as I was in rather thick and mountainous terrain. I needed to go, now. I packed as quickly as I could, thankful for the waterproofing on most of my gear. The technology nonetheless had limits, as a thin coat over my ridiculously revealing outfit left me shivering as I untied knots and stuffed items into bags. It's not that I wasn't used to the cold, I was as acquainted with the steep temperature drops caused by the aforementioned ash clouds as anyone else. The cold here was likely gentler than anything our mother turned tormenter had inflicted, and still it bit my flesh like nothing ever had before. Yet another way, I was weaker as a woman. A poor feminised creature battered by rain—I must've been experiencing what it felt like to be one of those roving violent British youths pacified through their "gender-forward hormonal rehabilitation program," I'd heard about. Perhaps Meridian-Voss licensed the method? I didn't read the fine print on the contract they forced me to sign upon my acquisition, and anyways, it was a little bit too late to get historical when all my energy needed to be spent not tumbling to my death.

The arduous trek continued, the storm failing to clear up. Even worse, my path had taken me near a river that was already overflowing, its current raging, leaving me a narrow slice of navigable land next to thick forest. In spite of the danger, I knew that following this quasi-jetty would take me to the open fields near the bottom of the valley, but with such limited visibility I couldn't estimate how much longer was left. Still I persisted, even as fatigue came faster, ever faster to me as this pregnancy progressed. My hand once again slipped to rest on my stomach, but I moved it away; I needed all the balance I could if both me and my child were to survive this ordeal. Every step mattered when the ground beneath my feet was becoming more unstable, and the river's violence threatened to encroach on me further. I got flashes of moving into protesters, riot shields locked. Not now, I needed



grounding, some way to leave my head. Would it be these shadows ahead of me, a break from the greys, dull greens and muddy browns of the scenery surrounding me? They came more into focus as I walked, eventually revealing themselves to be a rock outcropping choking both the river and my path, jutting from a forested incline too steep to even attempt to move around. Not what I wished for, but I would be able to continue, if it weren't for the deer blocking my path.

She was a gorgeous doe, clean, proud, standing perfectly still. The image was surreal—the animals I'd seen in this storm, any storm really had been rushing away to shelter. Yet she was perfectly serene, looking straight into my eyes with depth. I had no proof for this, but I could swear that for as much as they were otherwise similar to what I knew of Earth's long-extinct wildlife, Eridian animals had a puzzling intelligence to them. It wouldn't stop me from hunting them when I needed to, it was nature's way, but I couldn't help but be fascinated by their habits, sometimes delaying or abandoning a kill just to watch it exist. When I did take the shot, I intuitively respected the creature, internally thanking them for feeding me and my unborn progeny, and using as much of them as it was possible. Perhaps it was a bout of trauma-induced environmentalism, a deep-rooted memory of the



consequences of thoughtless waste and abuse. I knew it was more abstract though—I felt some sort of connection to these animals and I couldn't explain it. Looking into the doe's eyes, I perceived with her too. I didn't need her meat or fur, she was merely blocking my path. Perhaps, I could wait for her to leave, or find an alternative? No, I couldn't. I was soaked, on ground that was threatening to slide into the torrents at any time. I had no room to negotiate with nature or bend to its will. Today, nature was my adversary, it had wanted nothing less than for me and the child in my womb to die, and here it was doing so in the most contrived way. I had not let corporations rule over me, I would not let nature rule me either, I was standing for myself. Taking the initiative, like I'd done every step of the way since arriving here. I had suffered too much to reach this paradise for it to be another lord. I knew what I had to do.

I eased my rifle into my hands, trying not to look the deer in the eyes. My instinct was screaming to reconsider. Now was not the time for such sentimentality. I was emotionally disconnected. Like I used to when I was ordered to kill. It had been a while—decades—but I could still do it. Just this once more, I had done it so many times before. The rain was battering me, the rushing of the river deafening. I aimed. The doe gaze didn't waver. She wasn't scared.

The split second I pulled the trigger, I realised my body would no longer support me firing a weapon. I was weak, my center of gravity was off, I did not have the reflexes to compensate, the sound was likely noxious to my daughter, and I in fact could not emotionally disconnect anymore. All of it hit at once. I missed. Then I fell to the ground, the rifle landing by me in the mud with a wet plop. When I looked over, the deer was gone. I wasn't really hurt, the ground was too soft for it. But I was exhausted. It had all hit me at once, my arms and legs ached, my hip bones sore as I lay splayed by the river. I tried, but I was too stiff, and the little bit of ground was far too wet; I couldn't get up. I was stuck here, twisting my head to breathe above the mud, the rain not letting up. From the corner of my eye, the river was getting more violent. It wouldn't be long before I'd be swept away, a price to pay for my insolence. Soon I'd be dead. Drowned in a muddy pit, as I'd likely always been destined to. My daughter would never get the chance to be born. No destiny for her at all. I'd made sure of that. It's what I was made for: ending destinies, as desired by the powers that be. It all served me right really. Ironic punishment for my sins. Docile, cowardly, violent. I'd perish because of them, in a body I had no chance of living up to, with an innocent life senselessly tied to mine. All on me. I closed my eyes, and let my hand rest on my stomach. Offer my baby what little warmth I could before we'd both pass. The roar of the water grew closer. I was ready to let go.

Then a voice burst through it all.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I opened my eyes, looked up. Wearing a raincoat, a woman was standing above me, doing her best to keep her footing in the mud.

"You're like me, aren't you?"

I didn't say anything.

"I can help you, provide shelter as long as you need."

Nature was proving a rather more fickle master than any I had before.

***

The woman who saved my life clearly wanted to chat, inappropriately so I'd say. As we walked side-by-side, her holding most of my supplies as she'd insisted, she pointed out how she had taken it upon herself to draft trails across the valley, without any obtrusive parts like markers or rope. The process did seem interesting, but I was no further in a mood to talk than usual, especially not over the persistent white noise, and so the woman petered off. Her tone switched to the direct as she explained how she'd take me to her house and ensure I'm safe. I still didn't know her name, but it only made sense in the interest of fairness; it's not like I had one to provide her. We didn't take long to reach our destination, enough though that the torrent had somewhat cleared up to become more of a fair shower, thus giving me a clear view of the woman's



of the woman's homestead. By the standards of human constructions familiar to me, it was impossibly quaint—even compared to the Meridian-Voss colony buildings. A small, somewhat amorphous cabin covered in canvas and plants, occasionally letting through spots of blinding white, revealing it to be made of the same prefab material as the colony. It was hard to make out any distinctive features from the patchwork exterior, but the entry door was easy enough to recognize thanks to the many wooden-carved figures surrounding it. By its side was an enclosure for two goats, and other assorted farming installations I could recognize from one of my manuals. Even with ongoing thunder, it was all so peaceful.

"Mommy!"

Which made the exclamation all the more startling.

"Mommy!"

A little girl, whose age I couldn't quite determine, came rushing out of the house, wearing nothing but a simple white dress. She slowed down just enough to be picked up by the woman, held up high and given a kiss on the forehead.

"Good morning duckling! Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"I did mommy!" The little girl turned to the side, to stare right at

me. “Who is that mommy?”

The woman turned the same way, her eyes subtly getting sadder. “That is uh… a friend, who needed help in the forest. She’s going to stay with us as long as she needs to, and I’ve been very rude by not introducing ourselves. You remember how we’re supposed to welcome guests?”

The little girl beamed. “Hi, my name is Au-ro-ra and this is my mommy Re-na-te, what is your name?”

I didn’t say anything, and Renate’s eyes only grew sadder.

***

I was taken to the bedroom of Renate’s residence. It was a loft, nestled into its roof, offering the same sort of comfortable constraint as a tent. I sat on the larger bed, opposite the smaller model meant for Aurora.

“So you’ve spent quite a while out there alone, have you?” Renate asked.

She passed me a beautiful patterned blanket that I wrapped over myself. After plenty of reassurance from her, I was on the verge of responding to her question with a nod, but cut myself and gave a “yes” instead.

“It’s impressive, really,” she said, “you’re a really impressive woman.”

So a woman I was. I set it aside to ask the most important question I could muster.

“Why haven’t I been taken back?”

“What do you mean?”

It took me a second to gather the further words. “Wouldn’t the corporation be trying to recover me?”

Renate reached out for my hand. “Oh, dear, that’s not how it works,” she said. “I know that may sound counterintuitive, but Meridian-Voss, or at least whatever you call their incarnation on this planet, does put our well-being first. You can leave the colony whenever you wish.” She paused. “It helps that they’ve chipped all of us, so they have been keeping tabs on you this whole time.”

I wanted to find this sad or disturbing, as with anything else. Instead I snickered. “Like a cat.”

Renate followed suit. “Right,” Her smile widened. “We’re cute little menaces, just like them.”

“I’m cute?” I asked.

Renate paused, and looked me over. I was suddenly very self-conscious of the stupid Merridian-Voss outfit I was still wearing despite the fact that it showed way too much of my legs and swollen belly. This didn’t seem to bother the other woman. “Of course you are. Cutest thing here after my baby girl.”

I didn’t know if my investment in the adjective was performance or genuine sentiment, I was too drained to care. “Are you sure?”



"Well, if you need a bit of extra convincing, a wash and some fresh clothes might help."

She didn't ask or order, only suggested. And I agreed to follow.

***

Renate had been very proud to show me her indoor shower, a luxury for a homesteader like her. It certainly was reassuring that I wouldn't have to go out in the ongoing rainstorm for a wash, but an understated asset of the small washroom was its mirror—an actual one, with no AI filters to flatter my feelings. Though I had necessarily seen my face reflected in rivers and lakes, I hadn't gotten to appreciate my form in this much detail since I'd last been woken up from cryo.The two couldn't compare. Everything was noticeably soft and shiny. I knew I was fit, I had to be to survive as long as I had, but no one would be able to tell so far gone my muscles were under my newfound plushness. And of course, there, nestled between the breasts I wasn't quite used to and the vagina I was even less used to, was the curve in my abdomen I certainly was not used to. My "baby bump," as I'd heard it described by some of my fellow colonists. I rested my hands on it, as I so often did, my fingers circling

my barely protruding navel. I broke the spell to put on the clothes assigned to me: a simple white dress made of thick cloth; a maternity dress. It concealed my pregnancy in a way that only emphasized it further. I left the washroom, but stopped at the winding stairs. So daunting they were. Perhaps I could sit on the bed for a bit, catch my breath? It helped that regardless of appearance, this dress was so much more comfortable than anything I'd worn before. Just a sit, on this bed, a minute or two to catch my breath.

***

I did not know how many hours it had been when I woke up. All I knew was that I was now under the sheets, I was still wearing the dress, my hand was still firmly resting on my stomach, and it smelled rather lovely.

"Oh, sorry did I wake you up darling?"

Renate was standing by me, a bowl of soup and some bread in her hand.

"What time is it?" I asked, groggy.

"Oh it's the late afternoon," she said, "You've only slept a few hours, but the rain's mostly cleared up. I've made you something to eat, I don't know how well your stomach's holding up—I didn't get to ask how far along you were—so this is just potato soup, let me know if you'd like me to add a pinch of spice"

I sat up, a task that was becoming worryingly strenuous for me.

"I'm pregnant," I muttered.

Renate lightly chuckled as she put the soup down. "Yes you very much are."

"How do I do it?

"Well, childbearing is thankfully a mostly unconscious process, so as long as you eat healthy amounts–"

I cut through her coyness. "I mean how do I handle it, digest it. I'm not really sure how to be a woman yet. I don't have a name, or at least I do not like the one I was assigned. I've been living by myself for months. How do I become a mother?"

Renate sat by my side of the bed. "That's what all the classes and therapy back at the colony were for, no?"

"It wasn't for me," I said, "I'm done getting debriefed by a corporation I'm technically the property of." I raised my voice. "That's all I've been for all my life, a disposable thing to be drilled and used up. A pawn in the policing of the hellscape we came from. I'm not going to be made to travel light years with my body turned inside-out, all to reach a paradise where it's the same thing, but with empty words like "sisterhood" tagged to it! I'm done!"

Renate let the silence hang in the air. Then she moved a little bit closer. "You can stay here with me if that's what you'd like. We can do it the old-fashioned way, mother-to-mother. I'll help you figure it out and



grow into it, you help with housekeeping and taking care of my daughter. We're meant to be two parents minimum right? I'd much rather live with someone I'm close to."

"Oh, sorry I–" I sputtered, "if you're interested in us being a couple, I'm not sure I–"

Renate smiled. "You don't have to worry about that my dear. I'm not interested, never will be."

"You're not?"

"Much like you, moving out here wasn't a flight of fancy. Meridian-Voss are loose with us, but there nonetheless are written and unwritten expectations for all. Colonists are expected to pair up, if not form larger relationships, and that is simply not for me. It doesn't mean I prefer solitude, it gets rather lonely here and I'd love it for my daughter to have more than one grown-up she can count on. I agree with you that M-Vs idea of a sisterhood is a bit shallow, but here we can be more. You could be part of a sisterhood that matters, one born from this very land which will let you understand its secrets. One which will help you be at peace with yourself and your baby."

"I'm– not sure I understand."

"You'll understand," Renate said tenderly. "All you need to know

is I will be there for whatever you need."

"Thank you," was all I could say.

"I have one condition for you however," Renate continued. "I need to know what to call you. I'd be a horrible person if I just pretended you didn't have a name, wouldn't I?"

"I'm not quite sure of one..." I said sheepishly.

"That's fine." Renate reached out to one of the drawers of the bedside table, pulling out a reading device. "Here is the baby name list M-V gave me. It's where I got Aurora from. Take all the time you need with it, preferably with some soup, it'll help you think better. When you have a candidate, you'll let me know?"

I nodded, before correcting myself and letting out a yes.

"I'll leave you to it then."

And so I began the journey to building my new identity, with some truly delicious soup helping out.

***

It had been a week since I'd arrived at Renate's home. In that time I was slowly getting acquainted with her rate of life, helping out with cooking where and when I could. My host was rather insistent that I not take part in too much, for one not wanting to overexert myself, but mostly because she very much still wanted me to find a name to call me with, and encouraged me to spend as much time as possible thinking of ideas. This proved to be a great time I could share with learning to know Aurora better, talking and playing with her when her mother was busy. At times I had to admit I dropped the name search entirely to be there for her. We had no trouble getting along, she was quite adorable and boundless in her curiosity. When she got wind of my pregnancy and impending arrival of a baby, I became her main object of fascination. Though I couldn't answer many of her questions, there were times when I caught myself hoping my own daughter would be lively as she was. The thought made me unprecedentedly flushed.

It was on the evening of my 8th day, while washing the dishes after dinner, that I approached Renate.

"I think I have a name," I told her.

"That's lovely," she said, "do you want to finalise it tonight?"

"The paperwork you mean?"

"No that can wait," she scoffed. "I mean finalise it for you, personally"

I tilted my head. "What would that entail?"

She whispered the details to me. It was odd but I had to admit, the concept was appealing. "We'll just wait until I put Aurora to bed, and then we'll get to it?"

"Sure," I said.

"Lovely, all I need is for you to share with me your choice."

And so I whispered it, the one I thought would fit me best, to her.



***

“Is Aurora going to be okay by herself?” I asked as we set out into the night.

“She’s a heavy sleeper, the house has plenty of alarms, and in any case, we won’t be very far,” Renate answered, lamp light casting stark shadows upon her face.

She proved to be right, as it was only a minute more of walking before we arrived upon our destination: a beautiful small lake carved in rock, fed by a thin high waterfall. With the abundant light from New Eden’s quadruple moons above us, the atmosphere was fairy-like.

“Ready?” Renate asked.

“I am.” I punctuated the affirmation by removing my coat, revealing my nude form. Even knowing what was coming, and in dim light, I couldn’t help but take one arm to my breasts and another to my low belly.

“It’s okay,” Renate said, reassuringly. She herself had eased out of her coat, revealing an airy white robe adorned with various pieces of handcarved wooden jewelry. She had intricate makeup on, and a crown of edenite vines on her head. The fungus contained with them had a

faint glow to it. A halo. She looked me up and down, appearing as a goddess to my frailty. “You’re beautiful,” she told me, as if I could so easily see the same in my strange form opposite her unambiguous splendor.

“Thank you.”

“Keep your thanks for when I’m done,” she said, with firm gentleness. “You can go into the water when you’re ready.”

I dipped my toes in. During the preparation for this rite, Renate had told me that when she had first arrived here, she could feel the natural feature’s power; it granted her and her newborn daughter peace when they were seeking a place to call their own. I tried to sense the same, as I walked further into the limpid water. Unlike her I didn’t know anything of spirituality or magic or even being a woman. I could hardly believe Renate had once been like me; she was the perfect mother and I was merely a thing that had once been a man doing my best to survive. Still, I kept going, further in the water, trusting Renate to fix me.

“Have you made yourself comfortable?”

In spite of the rushing waterfall near me, and the rustling of the leaves surrounding us, the cistern’s rock surfaces ensured I had no difficulty hearing Renate, who was now standing on an outcropping above me, her arms cast out under the moonlight. “Yes!” I yelled, unsure if the acoustics went both ways.

I did not do this on purpose, but from my angle, New Eden’s second moon, low on the horizon, was bathing Renate in light, shining through her white robes and highlighting her motherly figure in shadows. This was on top of her face brightened with makeup and her luminescent crown. In the brief time between me looking up to her and the beginning of her incantation, a thought caught through all the murmuring in my head.

Perhaps I will come out of this looking like her.

I could look like this godly woman overlooking me–and it was something I was finding myself happy to aspire towards.

“Hear!” she cried out, breaking me out of my daze. “My name is Renate, adoptive daughter of New Eden, mother of Aurora! I seek to invoke the gods!”

Her tone, her imposition, grandly commanding like her audience wasn't just one person, but the entire forest surrounding us.

“I pray to the goddesses: Ishtar, Artemis, Lunovìn, the elder spirits of the wild welcoming us, the grand worldly mother from which we were born! I pray to all should they listen! May every sprite animating us be open to the blessings of the family, the grand sisterhood in which we are but children!”

Her head lowered, her gaze drifting from the sky to instead face me.

“Here by me, in the guise under which she was birthed, twice over, I present to you mothers, aunts and sisters, a wandering spirit! Twice



cast out by those from elsewhere, she has sought refuge in the grand worldly mother's nurturing arms, and has sought me as her guide to your mysterious ways. Though respectful and knowledgeable of your mysteries, she remains lost! She sees not of herself as a sister or daughter of this world, nor does she see beauty in her form! She is the apotheosis of femininity, a mother in her springtime, flowering with life, but the ills of those elsewhere, their ignorance and cruelty, have left her unable to appreciate the beauty blossoming within and without her! So alienated has she been from the ways of the divine matriarchy, she has no name for herself! How are we to worship her, how is she to worship herself, as a mother and a sister, if she has no name of her own? We who weave this world's green gown, we who draw its blue ribbons, let us not leave her cast out in the dark. Let us welcome this woman to our sisterhood and worship her motherhood, as we worship each other! Let us imbue her with the power she is owed, ensure it fills her every crevice! Let us help her claim her name, and forever feel at home within it. Let us call her *Aliya*, as she is made one of you, and you are made one of her!"

Aliya, the name I had chosen for myself. It was somewhat similar to what once was, but one would never confuse one with the other, and



there was power to even the smallest connection to where I'd come from, this rotting ruin once worth being called Earth. But all of this was in the past. I was to be one with Eden, and so I took a few steps forward, where the bottom of the pond steeply became deeper under the waterfall, and I dove in.

I did not open my eyes underwater, leaving me floating in near perfect sensory deprivation. I was afraid that without Renate's commanding words, the doubts would once again take over as they so often did. Instead I found silence. Pure, serene silence. Then voices returned. But they weren't angry or insistent, yelling orders, coercing me as I'd so often endured. They were soft, some outright whispers, all tinted with crystalline femininity.

you do not have to be lost

It was ridiculous, I couldn't actually be approached by spirits, it wasn't meant for me!

yet you've communed with nature before
bathed in rivers
watched animals and killed them respectfully
slept under the night sky

No it couldn't be. They weren't even contradicting me or telling

me to go back in line. They were reassuring me!

do you remember the aurora borealis you saw one night?

I did, the pretty lights in the sky. They felt… just like these voices.

it was us, watching over you, waiting for you to properly join us Aliya

But I didn't want anyone else standing above me.

we are not above you as you think of it aliya, we are mothers, daughters and sisters, like you

Was that what Renate was saying, about us worshipping each other?

yes, you are as divine as we are Aliya, you are our daughter, our sister, and a mother of your own

What would it even mean for me to be worshipped?

we love you Aliya

you are beautiful like no other

none could've understood our ways as well as you did

it is an honour to have you be with us, as our sister

giving you a caress is a delight unlike any other

you are as soft and kind as the stars

you are as natural a mother as any

it is a blessing to have you within our sisterhood

Why does your voice feel deeper, older?

I love you, my daughter

I know your love for your daughter in your womb's embrace will be as boundless as mine

Impossible as that is, I began crying. I wasn't underwater in a lake anymore, I was somewhere beyond, alone with the voice and my body. And for the first time, with no force, only sisterly worship, I loved my form. Felt waves of warmth as I twirled my hair around my fingers, appreciated theirs and my arms softness as I hugged my full chest, marveled at the perfection of my legs. My voice was clear and bright. It was mine and it was beautiful, worthy of being worshipped. Though nothing compared to my belly, my womb so full of life. I no longer shied away from it, I placed both hands on it, feeling the curve and firmness, how large and full it was, this part of me as real as any other.

Then I felt my baby kick for the first time.

The voices receded, returned to the heavens, I was no longer in a void, I was underwater and I needed to breathe. I burst through, my perfect hair matted around my face as I cried out to Renate, with a gigantic smile on my face.

"I'm going to be a mother!"

***

It had now been a little bit since Renate had helped me out from under the waterfall where I'd be reborn for a third and final time as Aliya, sister and daughter of Eden. Perhaps it would've been more "normal"



for me to further abstractly bask in the spiritual ecstacy I'd just experienced, but that's not what I was up for. As of right now, I was rather more simply sitting naked on the grass, Renate by my side, the two of us playing with my baby.

"Wow, she's really strong," Renate commented, awestruck. "You're sure you've never felt her kick before?"

I shrugged. "Probably thought it was mild food poisoning from game I'd held on to for too long."

"Hmm, I think it might've been a different little bug in your belly."

Renate and I continued feeling my baby's squirming. Even taking into account the dialogue I'd entertained with ancient natural spirits, feeling movement in my belly was pure magic. As I felt her tiny feet shift within me I couldn't help myself from idly cooing and saying sweet words to my little girl. Waves of contentment washed over me with every single one. *I was growing a tiny human in my body. I was taking care of her and giving her everything she needed. I was her mama.*

"We should head home soon," Renate said, "but I would like you to know that you're amazing Aliya, and I know you'll be an incredible mum."

I smiled, a hand on my womb. "I can't wait."

***

“Wow, that is really pretty Aurora.”

Aurora was very pleased with the compliment. “I really like the wings.”

We were both sitting side-by-side at the table, and had just finished our respective drawings using the art supplies M-V had sent us. Aurora had drawn a very charming green bird, while from my end…

“Is that me?”

A penciled sketch of my niece was looking back at her, a serene expression on her face. I’d taken up drawing to keep myself busy whenever I wasn’t required for chores or active parenting. I initially took to it on rainy days, but was increasingly partaking in any weather as I found it harder to exert myself otherwise, and even then I had to adjust to reaching the table with my baby bump in the way. It was now distended enough that it was more convenient to use my belly as the table. According to the colony doctor, I was 39 weeks along, due very soon. I had a flash of hoping this would come fast as it took all my willpower to leave the kitchen for the rocking chair that had become my residence in the third trimester. Any annoyance would be wiped away however when Aurora immediately came to place her head against my belly after I’d sat down, enthusiastically conversing with it. “Hi baby sister, did you hear, mama A-li-ya drew ME!”

I smiled, Aurora was likely more excited for this baby’s arrival than either me or Renate, and was avidly following every aspect of the pregnancy she was old enough to understand.

“Mama A-li-ya, why is baby sister not moving?”

“Your baby sister is getting very big,” I explained, “she doesn’t have as much room in your auntie’s belly anymore.”

“You should give her more space in your belly then Mama A-li-ya.”

I was preparing to explain things in a way Aurora could understand when we heard the front door open. “Good afternoon everyone!”

“‘Mama Re-na-te!”

Renate was standing in the kitchen, a pheasant in her hand

“Nice catch!” I told her from my chair.

“Mmh thanks.” She put down the bird and began unburdening her outdoors gear. “Did you two have a nice time?”

“Yes we did.” I turned to Aurora. “Can you show your mom what we drew?”

Aurora eagerly snatched the sheets of papers from the table to hand to her mother. “Look mama, these are some butterflies with six legs and spiders with eight legs, and this is Mama A-li-ya’s drawing of ME!”

“Wow, those are some big spiders you have there starlight.”

“They’re big but they’re also very friendly spiders.”

“That’s right, all spiders are our friends. And here, who is that?

Did we welcome a second Aurora in our home?"

The remark made Aurora giggle, while I smiled at the acknowledgement of my improving skills at realism.

Renate kissed Aurora on the top of her head. "I'm glad you two had fun today. Do you want to help me put these up above your bed?"

Aurora agreed, and the two made their way upstairs. My niece wasn't old enough yet to assist the preparation of game meat, so it was understood that the time immediately following Renate's return was naptime. Earlier at my stay in the homestead I would help where my sense of smell would allow me or otherwise converse, but as of late it was pretty likely that I'd–

***

"Hey sleepyhead."

My eyes drifted open, yet another one of these late-term naps I was barely aware of happening.

"How long was I out?"

Renate was across from me in the living room, having switched from her hunting kit to something more comfortable. "Not too long, I just finished up with the bird, I don't intend to wake up Aurora for another while"

"Ah, I see," I mumbled.

"Is the dress cozy enough?"

With the colder season approaching, I was wearing the thick maternity dress Renate and I had made together, recently resized for my ever-growing bump. My daughter was taking up all the space she needed and then some, but I was a bit miffed it was all happening during a time of the year when I couldn't leave my midsection uncovered as I used to. So I was grateful for the dress; it kept both me and my daughter warm as my tummy grew to ever more impressive proportions.

"I can help you with anything if you'd like," I told Renate.

"Oh no it's okay, you stay where you are."

I was in fact very happy to stay sitting here, that was enough work as is, as my newfound tendency for siestas demonstrated, but I relished any opportunity I could to speak up a bit "I don't want to contribute nothing to this household!" I said playfully.

Renate scoffed with an equally playful tone. "Dear sister, it is a blessing of its own to have a divine mother such as you in our presence, I feel like *I'm* not doing enough."

"Pssh, you pamper me and Aurora plenty."

"And yet I can pamper you some more, let me get a stool and I can braid your hair."

Once again I wanted to protest, but braiding mine or Aurora's hair was her favourite way to unwind after a day out. Every night I thanked the mothers for having blessed me with a sister as incredible as her. I let

her sit down behind me and begin working on my ever thicker and longer mane with the brush she'd shown me how to carve. I let the gentle pull lull me while absentmindedly stroking my belly.

"I keep being brought back to when I was near due with Aurora," Renate said. "You think that's as big as she can get and still there's some more left to her."

"Every single day," I said with a happy sigh. "My big healthy baby girl."

"It almost makes me want to have another go at it, just to see what it's like out here, with only you and the girls."

I let my head sway a bit to her brushtrokes, stroking my belly in time, softly looking down at the roundness under my dress. "How was it the first time at the colony?"

"Bearing Aurora by itself was the greatest experience of my life. Nothing I could've ever dreamed of back on Earth. However, my favourite part of the whole thing was how profoundly intimate I was with her, how I was growing her in my belly and feeling her move and no one else would be able to sense it like I did. A sentiment undercut by me being part of a group of 60 women going through the exact same thing."

She put the brush down and began the braid, just as steady.

"Still, 6 years later, living by ourselves with nature and the Mothers, I can't get enough of having that bond with my daughter and getting to see her become more of herself with each passing day, even if I'm not growing her body from scratch anymore."

"Am I getting in the way then?" I asked.

"Of course not, having you as my sister is amazing in and of itself, and again, getting to see you experience the magic yourself. It's so much more apparent from the third person. When I first met you you were a sad little thing half-covered in mud, and now, well, you're radiant."

"I'm so incredibly round," I said, content.

"You're gorgeous."

I continued to stroke my belly, where my baby was curled up, nice and snug in there. This little life I'd created, who let me know I was worth being cherished, not just used. Tears began to well from my eyes.

"I love her so much Renate I love her so so much. I want to hug her and never let go, I want to spend the rest of life letting her know she's a gift and– and– "

"Shhhh," Renate whispered, holding the braid up with one hand and wrapping her other around me.

I slightly lowered my tone of voice, but otherwise kept going "She's this perfect little girl I grew in my body. I'll get to feed her, and give her so many sweet kisses, and play with her, and be there for her when she keeps me up crying all night, and watch her grow up, and braid her hair like you're doing now, and have our arguments when we're older, and count the stars out in the sky, and introduce her to her mothers and sisters. I'll get to do all of it Renate, she'll be born free and



safe and happy, she'll get to dance and laugh to her heart's content, she's– " I cradled my belly. "She's right here."

Renate placed her arms on top of mine, allowing her to hug the entirety of my round form, giving me a long, grounding squeeze. She smelled of the woods. She smelled like my home.

"I'll show you a way you can untangle it all, without losing the emotions" she whispered. "You can put it all in a mantra."

"A mantra?"

"Like the flow of a river, a simple constant can give life to so much. It's how our mothers and sisters express themselves."

I continued quietly sobbing.

"I'll tell you my mantra." She moved closer, leaving no space between us. I was now perfectly intimate with two girls I loved. "Repeat after me: I am a woman, and a mother…"

"I am a woman and a mother…"

"…and I am a natural at both."

"…and I am a natural at both."

"My body knows how to nourish my baby…"

"My body knows how to nourish my baby…"

"…and I know how to make her feel safe, and loved."

"...and I know how to make her feel safe, and loved."

"My daughter will be born happy and healthy..."

"My daughter will be born happy and healthy..."

"...like the mothers before me, I will help her live an incredible life."

"...like the mothers before me, I will help her live an incredible life."

She continued to hug me as I sobbed for as long as I needed to

***

After I'd properly regained my breath, Renate let go, and resumed the unfinished braid, winding conversation back.

"It's important, and it's going to be a lot, so I think it's worth asking, do you want Aurora to be here for the birth?"

I wiped my tears, a wry smile on my face. "She's probably a bit too young, I'll ask for the midwife to bring an attendant to take care of her. I do want her to meet the baby as soon as it's clear we're both fine though."

"Fair," Renate said, "I ask for your take since I wanted one last conversation with her before the baby arrives, making sure she's ready for the overhaul of life here."

"Yes, good idea, while there's still time."

Renate tied a loop on the band, and let go of my now-completed braid. "And, you're done."

She waited in silence, likely waiting for my comment, but I was finding myself quite distracted by a rather more intense happening.

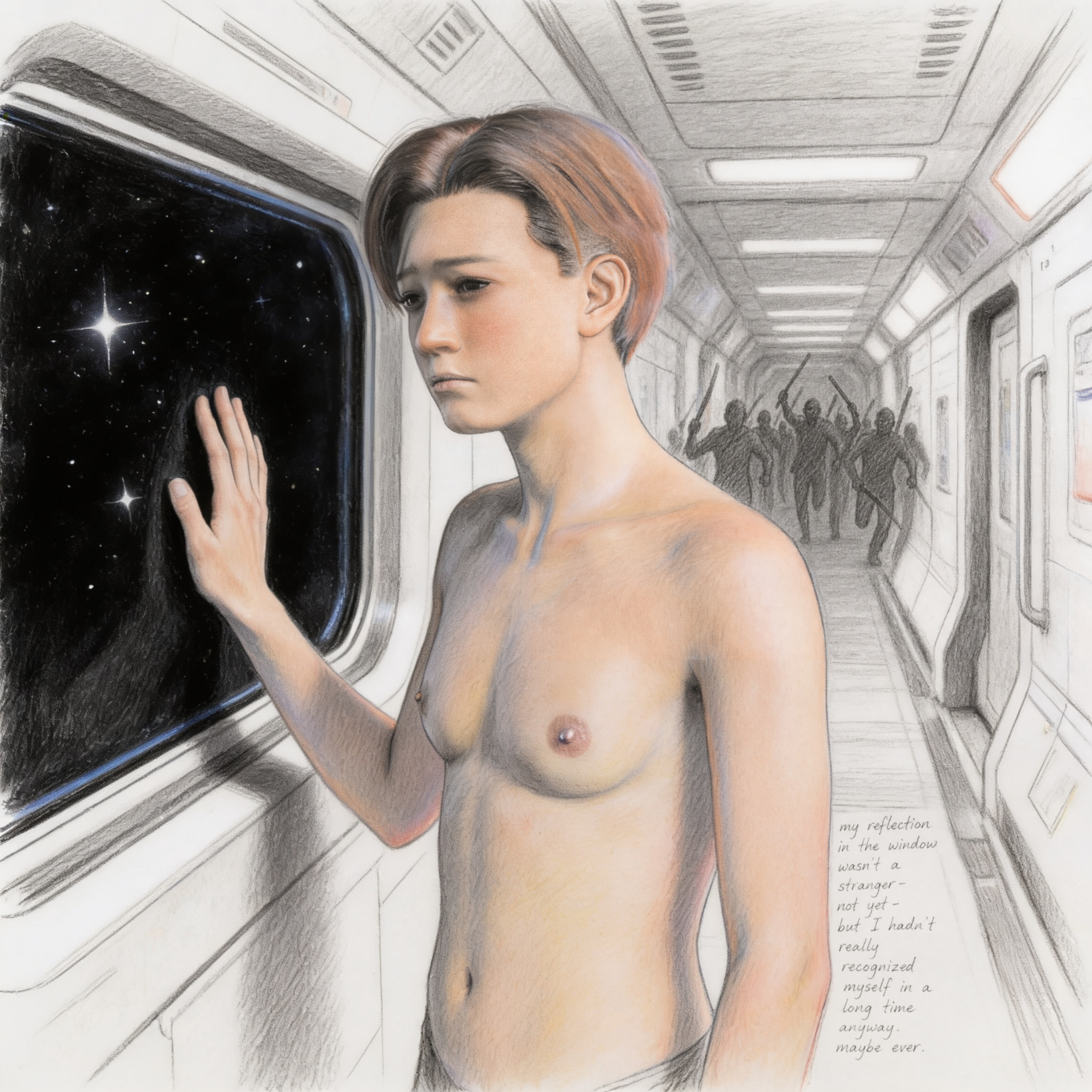
"Hey, Renate," I groaned, "do whatever you need accomplished right now, because I think I'll need your help very soon."

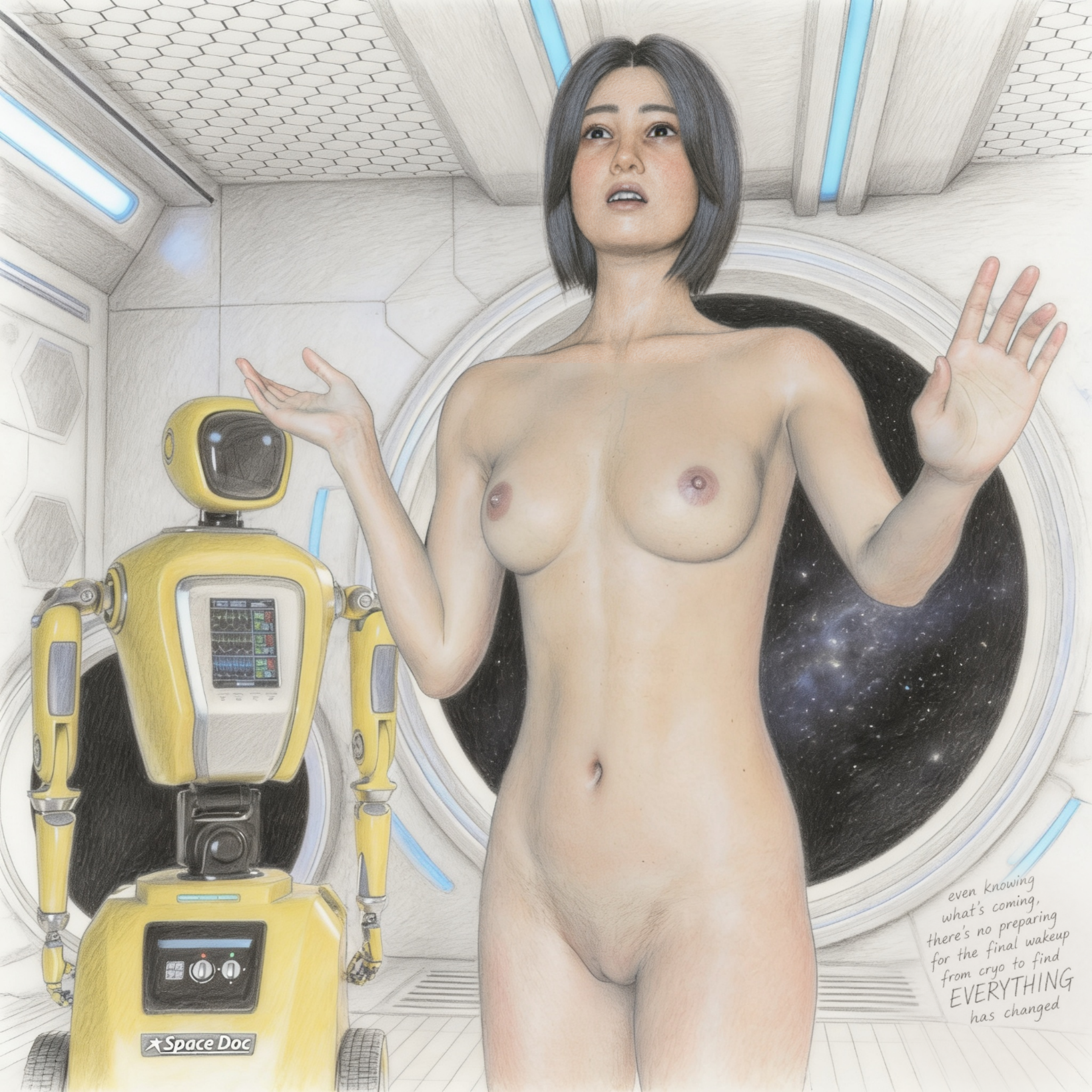
Renate stepped out from behind me, eyes wide. "Oh, I see."

I chuckled. "Forget being nice and cozy for a bit longer in my belly and giving me and her cousin time to get ready, it turns out that much like her mama, this baby might just be very against the idea of following orders."


My darling Emina —
I wrote all this, and drew these,
before I could lose my nerve.
I wanted you to know who I was
before I was your mama. I'm not proud of all of it.
But the first order I ever refused gave me my life,
and the first name I ever chose gave me myself.
You've been refusing orders
since before you were born.
I think you got that from me.
— Mama

Woke up aboard the Chrysalis, blood on my hands again – at least only mine that time


my reflection in the window wasn't a stranger - not yet - but I hadn't really recognized myself in a long time anyway. maybe ever.


Space Doc
even knowing
what's coming,
there's no preparing
for the final wakeup
from cryo to find
EVERYTHING
has changed

The captain gave me a name the same way the corp gave me a number.

Honestly the number fit better - at least it wasn't supposed to mean anything.

On Earth,
I was a man,
a killer, a tool.
Now, I was
a woman...
and what else?
Had I simply
traded one set
of chains for
another?



Some of the animals here seem connected to the world in a way I have never seen - perhaps how we used to be connected to Earth, before we murdered her.


On Earth, I'd committed violence without thought. Now, each pull of the trigger seemed to cost me something I could never get back.


The woman
who saved
me.


fascination
and fear
still warred
inside me












i'd never cried happy tears before - it's like dancing in a sunshower.