



Neoflora

Remembering what was never ours to control

By Mantej Kaur

Ahmedabad, 2050.

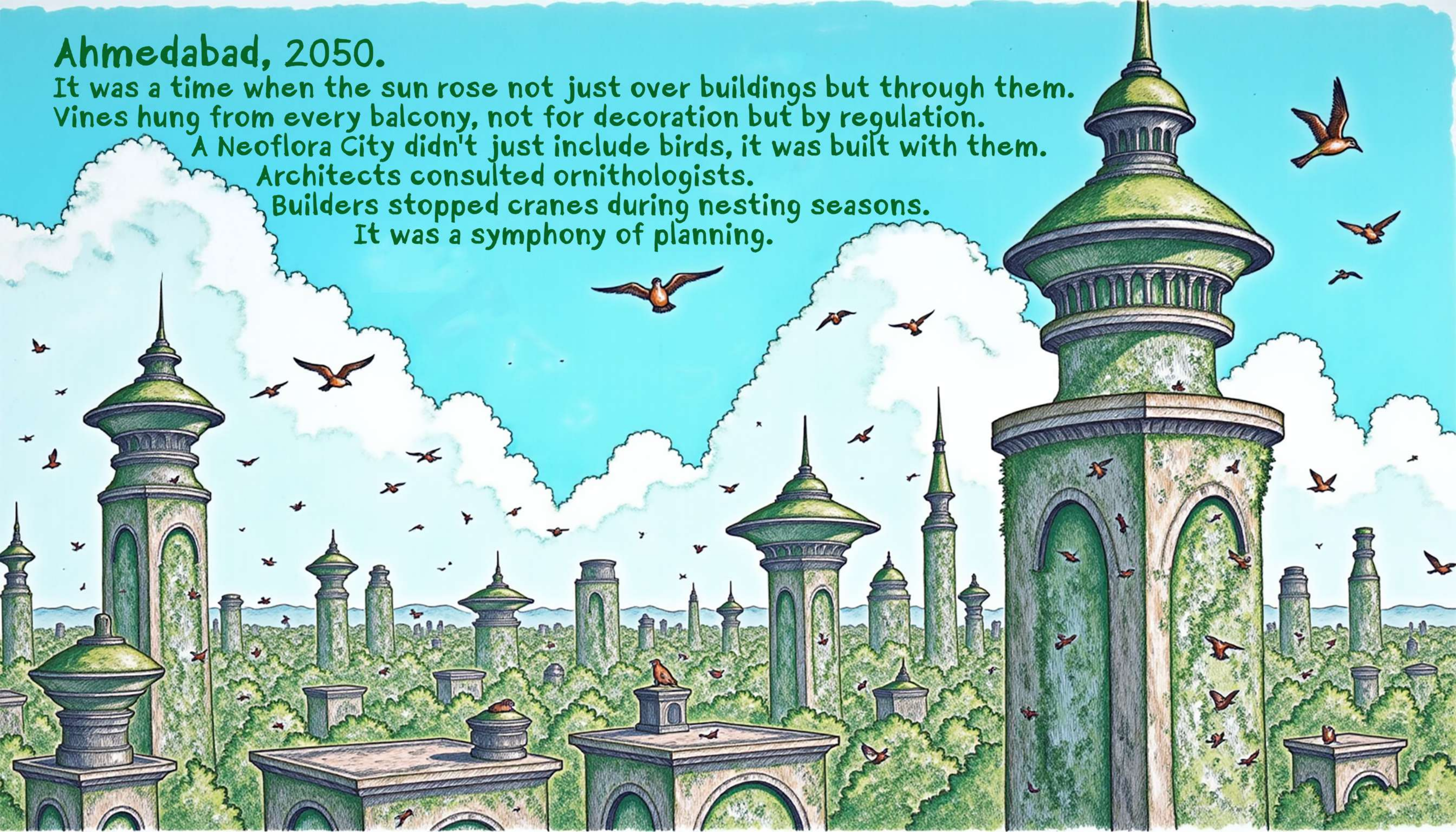
It was a time when the sun rose not just over buildings but through them.
Vines hung from every balcony, not for decoration but by regulation.

A Neoflora City didn't just include birds, it was built with them.

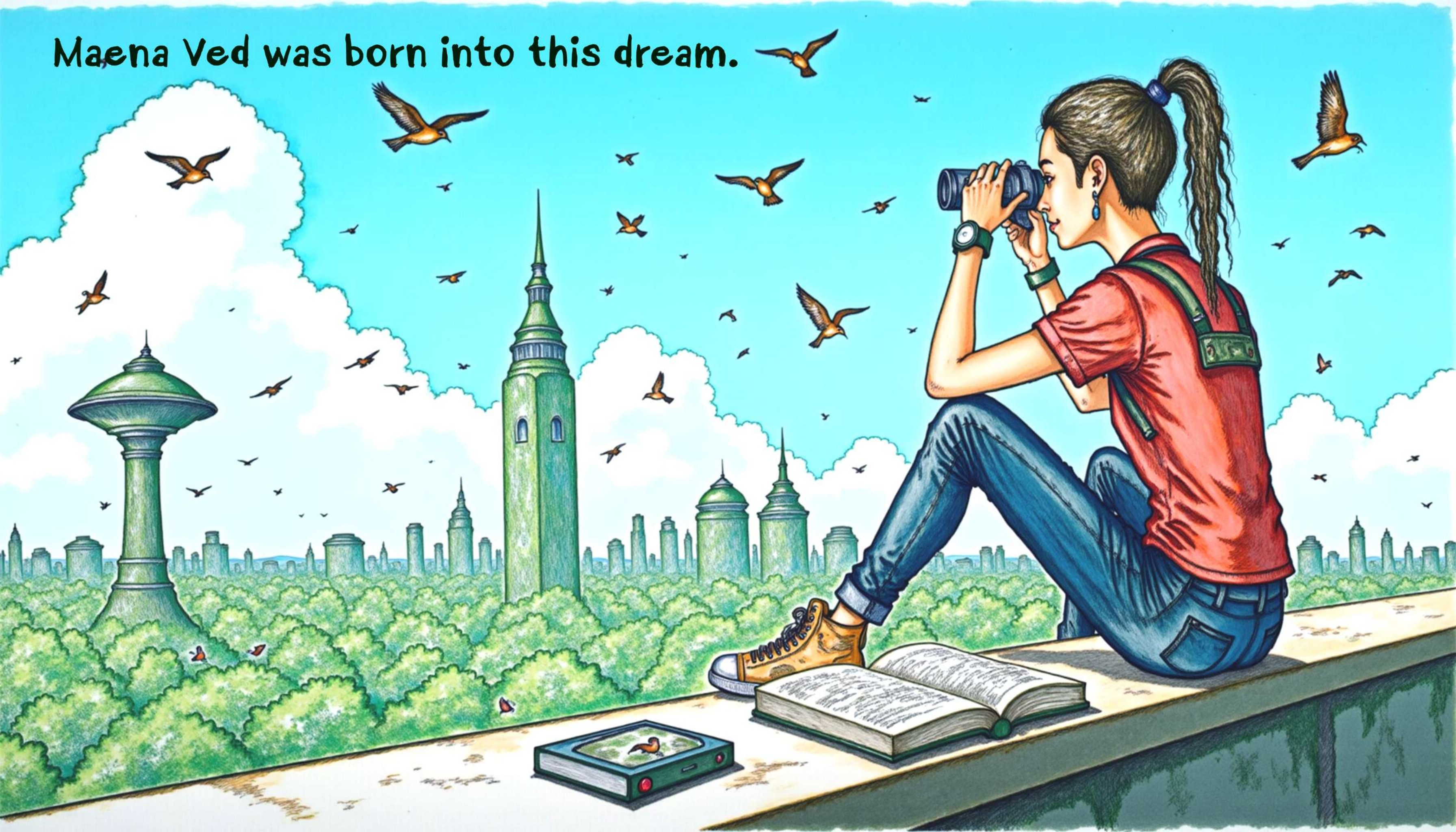
Architects consulted ornithologists.

Builders stopped cranes during nesting seasons.

It was a symphony of planning.



Maena Ved was born into this dream.



Her parents raised her in a rooftop unit just below a canopy terrace.
At night, they'd listen to the city: the flutter of wings, the soft pulses of ultrasonic perches,
the daily migratory reports broadcast from Neoflora HQ.





Her favorite story was always the one about Iora Sen,
the legendary founder of Neoflora.
A woman who, in a time of ecological despair,
argued not just for sustainability but for coexistence.
Who said:

"We don't need to own nature.
We need to be tolerable enough that it stays."

To Maena, Iora wasn't just a visionary.
She was a blueprint for hope.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, orange shorts, and black boots, stands with her back to the viewer. She is holding a black bag and looking out of a large, circular window with a green frame. The window is divided into several panes. Outside the window, a lush green landscape with many trees and a bright sky is visible. Numerous birds of various species are flying around the window. The scene is framed by thick, dark green, curved structures that resemble tree trunks or architectural elements.

Every day, Maena climbed higher into the world Iora made.
From mapping sparrow micro-routes as a school project,
to building open-source perch sensors in college.

Her reputation grew—quietly, steadily—until at 21,
she did what no one expected:

She became the youngest systems engineer at Neoflora.

The day she walked into Neoflora HQ
felt like entering a sacred site.

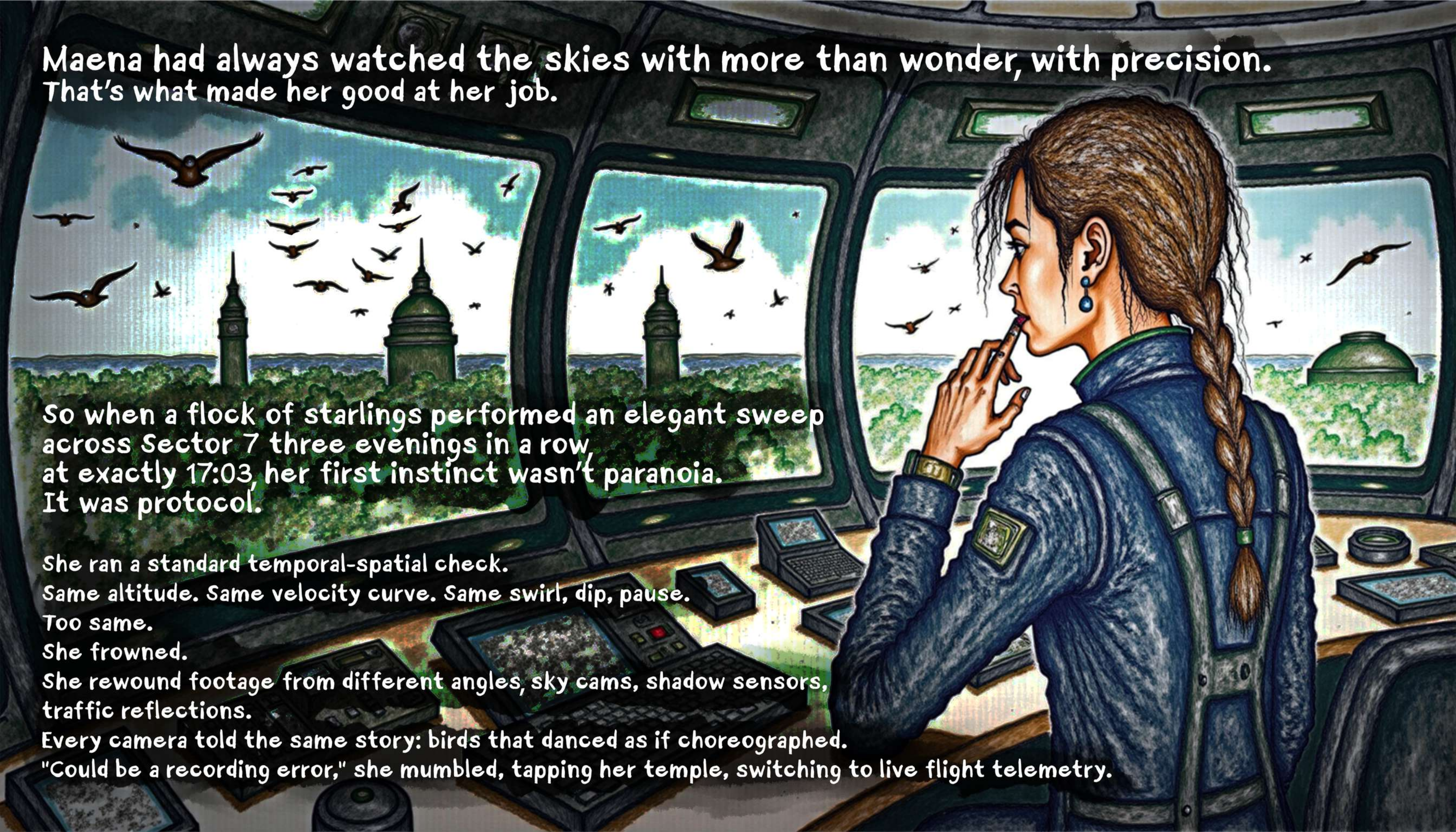
The lobby alone held a projection of bird
flight data across the hemisphere.
Wind maps intersected with canopy data.
The smell of flowering moss piped through hidden ducts.

Her division? Urban Flock Dynamics.

Her job? To monitor and maintain the behavioral maps
of every bird species across the city's bioregions:
ensuring balance, minimizing aggression, optimizing health.

It was science. It was art. It was peace.





Maena had always watched the skies with more than wonder, with precision.
That's what made her good at her job.

So when a flock of starlings performed an elegant sweep across Sector 7 three evenings in a row at exactly 17:03, her first instinct wasn't paranoia. It was protocol.

She ran a standard temporal-spatial check.

Same altitude. Same velocity curve. Same swirl, dip, pause.

Too same.

She frowned.

She rewound footage from different angles, sky cams, shadow sensors, traffic reflections.

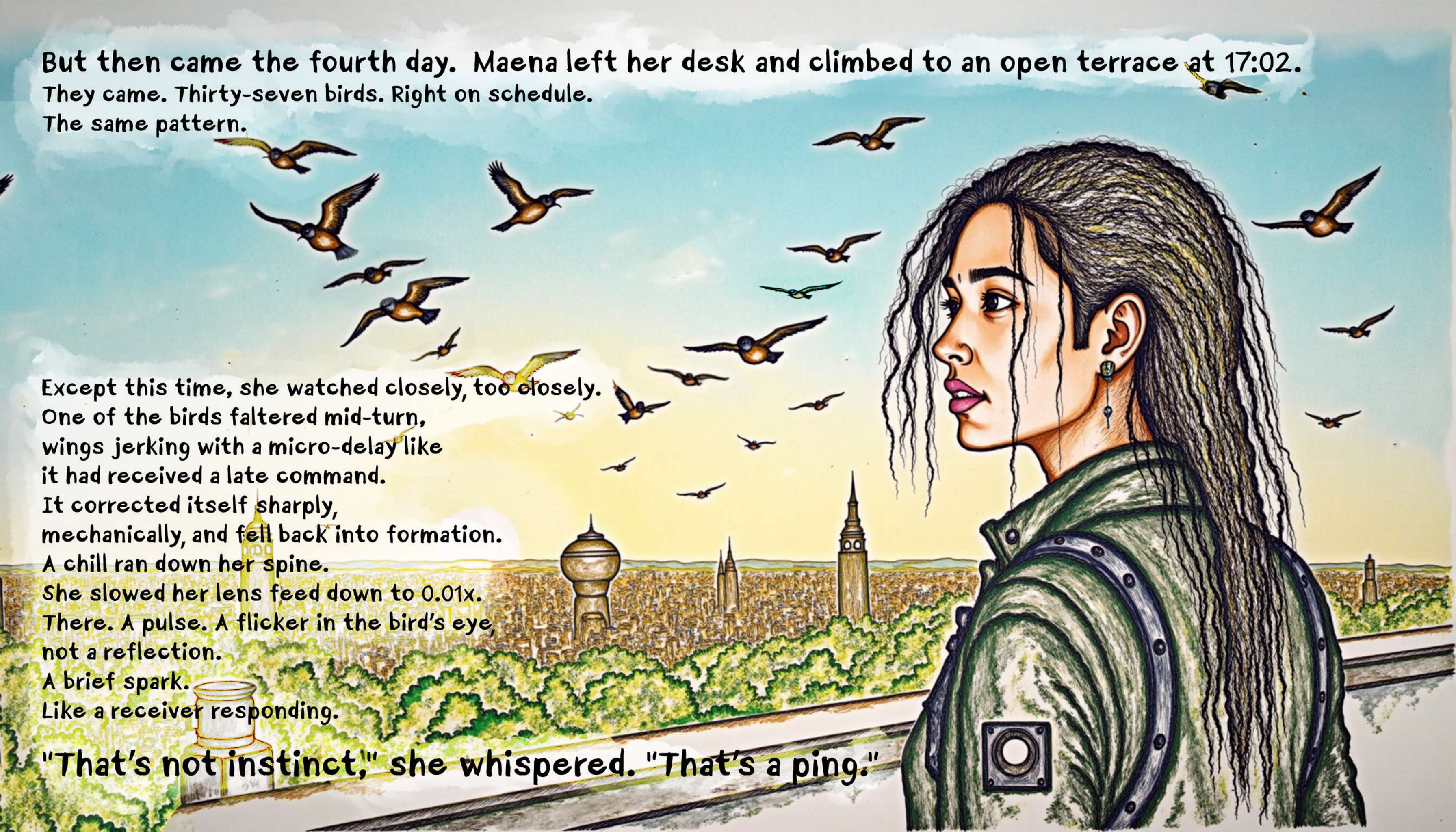
Every camera told the same story: birds that danced as if choreographed.

"Could be a recording error," she mumbled, tapping her temple, switching to live flight telemetry.

But then came the fourth day. Maena left her desk and climbed to an open terrace at 17:02.
They came. Thirty-seven birds. Right on schedule.
The same pattern.

Except this time, she watched closely, too closely.
One of the birds faltered mid-turn,
wings jerking with a micro-delay like
it had received a late command.
It corrected itself sharply,
mechanically, and fell back into formation.
A chill ran down her spine.
She slowed her lens feed down to 0.01x.
There. A pulse. A flicker in the bird's eye,
not a reflection.
A brief spark.
Like a receiver responding.

"That's not instinct," she whispered. "That's a ping."



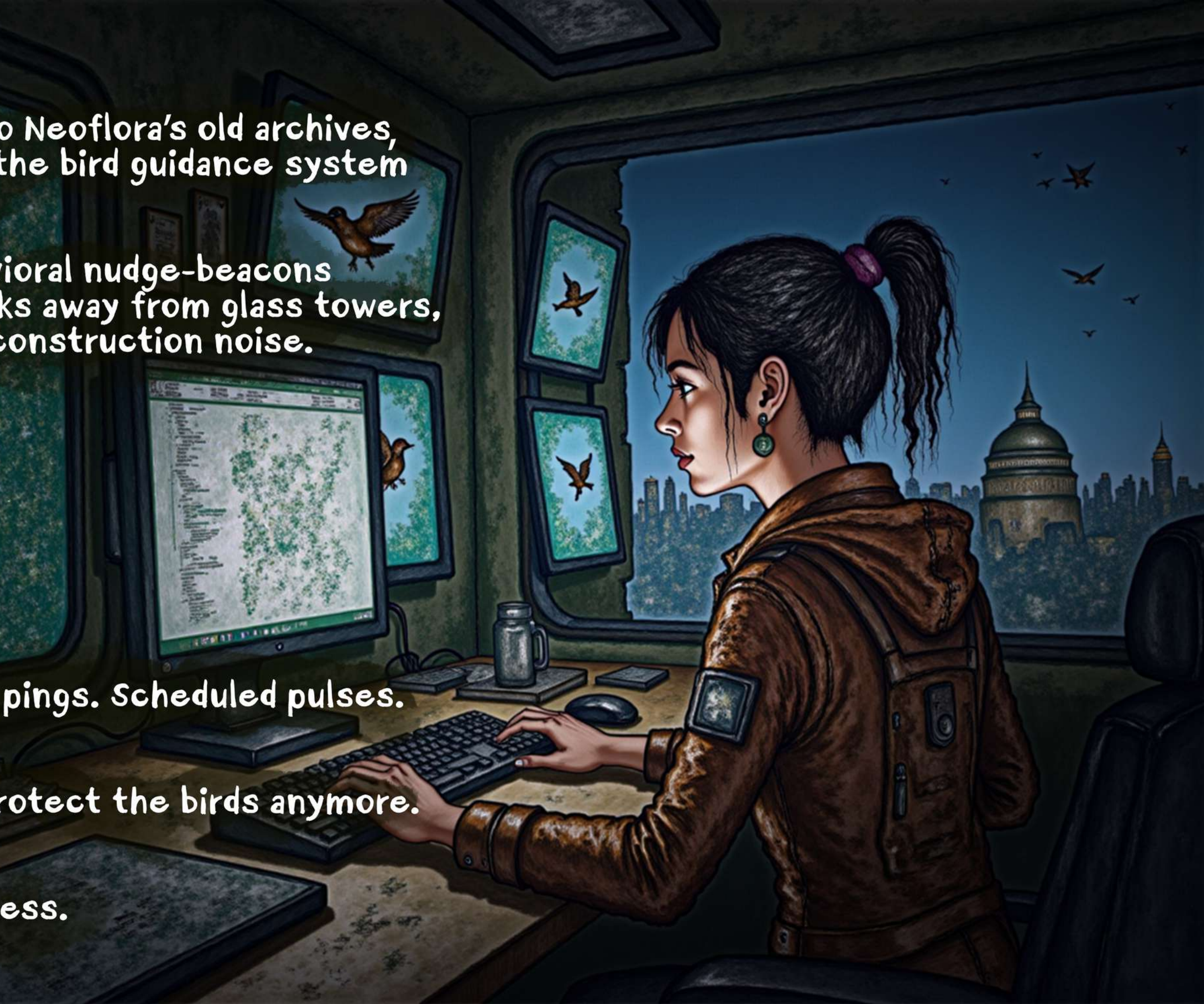
Later that night, she dove into Neoflora's old archives,
the pre-city data, back when the bird guidance system
had been a kind of safety net.

A cluster of lightweight behavioral nudge-beacons
designed to gently steer flocks away from glass towers,
electromagnetic zones, and construction noise.

Never full control.
Just... influence.

The tech had been labeled
obsolete years ago.
Decommissioned.
But the logs didn't lie.
Reactivation markers. Recent pings. Scheduled pulses.

Someone had brought it back.
Only it wasn't being used to protect the birds anymore.
It was directing them.
Orchestrating them.
Designing the illusion of wildness.



A person with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting cross-legged on a light-colored, textured floor. They are wearing a dark green t-shirt and dark pants. They are facing a large, curved window that looks out onto a dense, green, abstract pattern resembling a forest or a data visualization. The room has two wooden desks on either side of the person. The desk on the left has a computer monitor, a lamp, and a stack of books. The desk on the right has a lamp and some papers. There are two black office chairs, one on each desk. The walls are a muted green color. A framed picture of a castle is on the wall to the right. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

Maena didn't sleep that night.

The deeper she dove, the clearer it became:
the birds were no longer just flying, they were being flown.
The data logs weren't just errant; they were maintained. Clean. Tidy. Too perfect.
Like someone was curating their behavior for an audience.

Maena stood outside Kahu Verne's office for ten minutes before she was called in. Inside, the air smelled of synth-wood polish and silence. Kahu didn't look up as she entered.

"Maena. Sit. You've been poking around the old birdflow logs?"

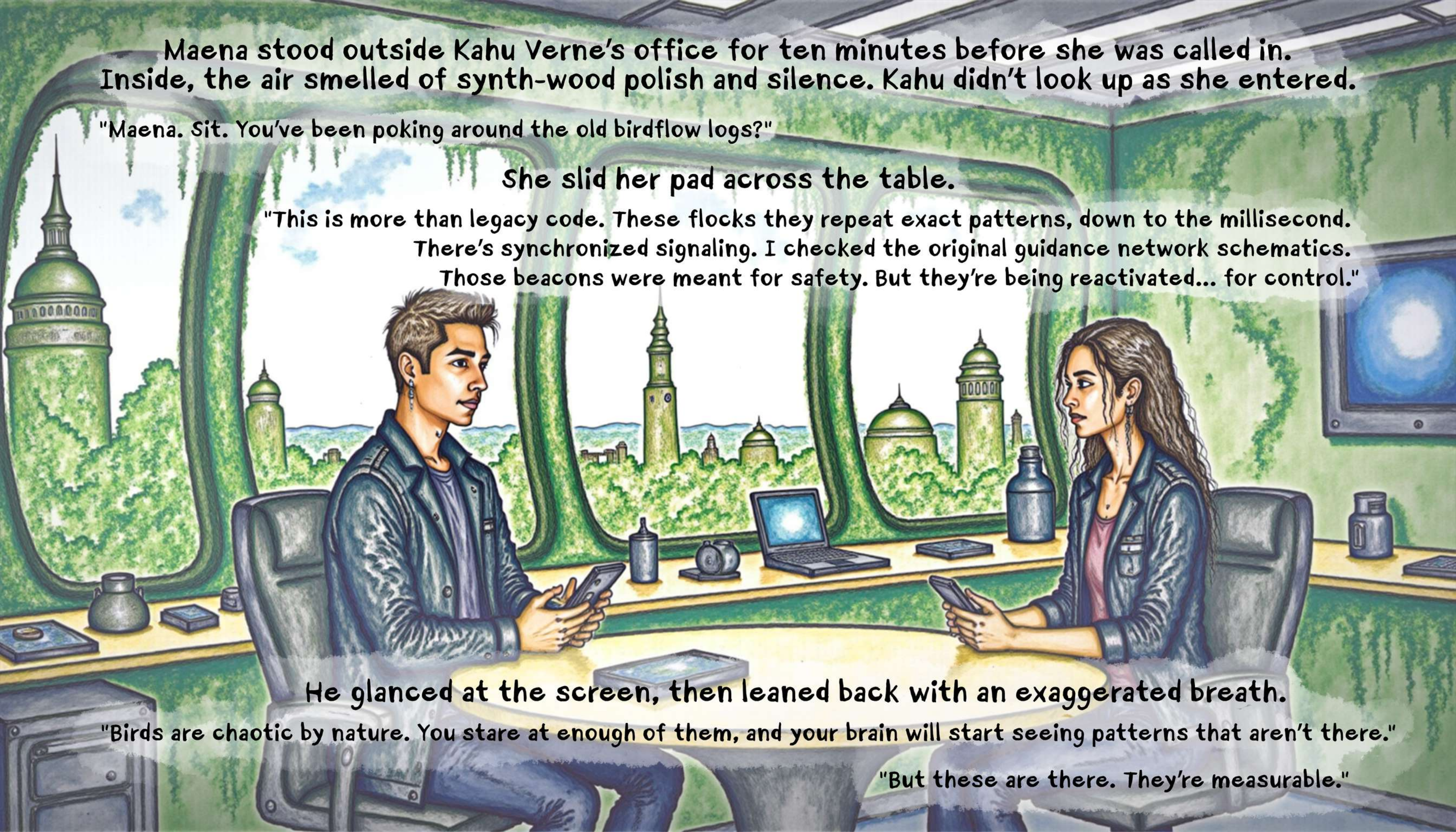
She slid her pad across the table.

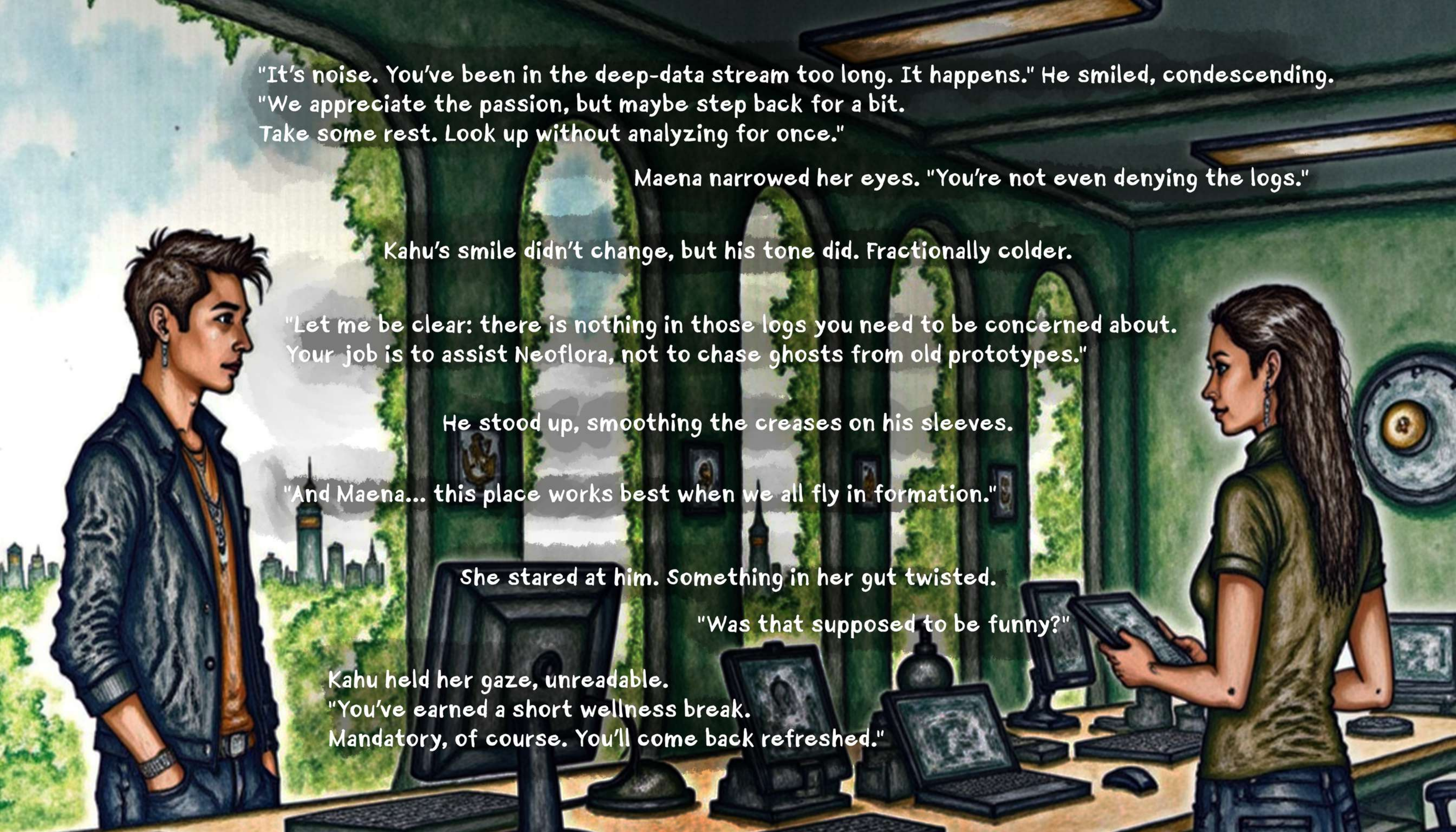
"This is more than legacy code. These flocks they repeat exact patterns, down to the millisecond. There's synchronized signaling. I checked the original guidance network schematics. Those beacons were meant for safety. But they're being reactivated... for control."

He glanced at the screen, then leaned back with an exaggerated breath.

"Birds are chaotic by nature. You stare at enough of them, and your brain will start seeing patterns that aren't there."

"But these are there. They're measurable."



A man with short brown hair, wearing a dark jacket over an orange shirt, stands on the left. A woman with long brown hair, wearing a green short-sleeved shirt, stands on the right holding a tablet. They are in a room with large arched windows that look like they are covered in ivy, offering a view of a city with a prominent tower. Several computer monitors and laptops are on a desk in the foreground.

"It's noise. You've been in the deep-data stream too long. It happens." He smiled, condescending.
"We appreciate the passion, but maybe step back for a bit.
Take some rest. Look up without analyzing for once."

Maena narrowed her eyes. "You're not even denying the logs."

Kahu's smile didn't change, but his tone did. Fractionally colder.

"Let me be clear: there is nothing in those logs you need to be concerned about.
Your job is to assist Neoflora, not to chase ghosts from old prototypes."

He stood up, smoothing the creases on his sleeves.

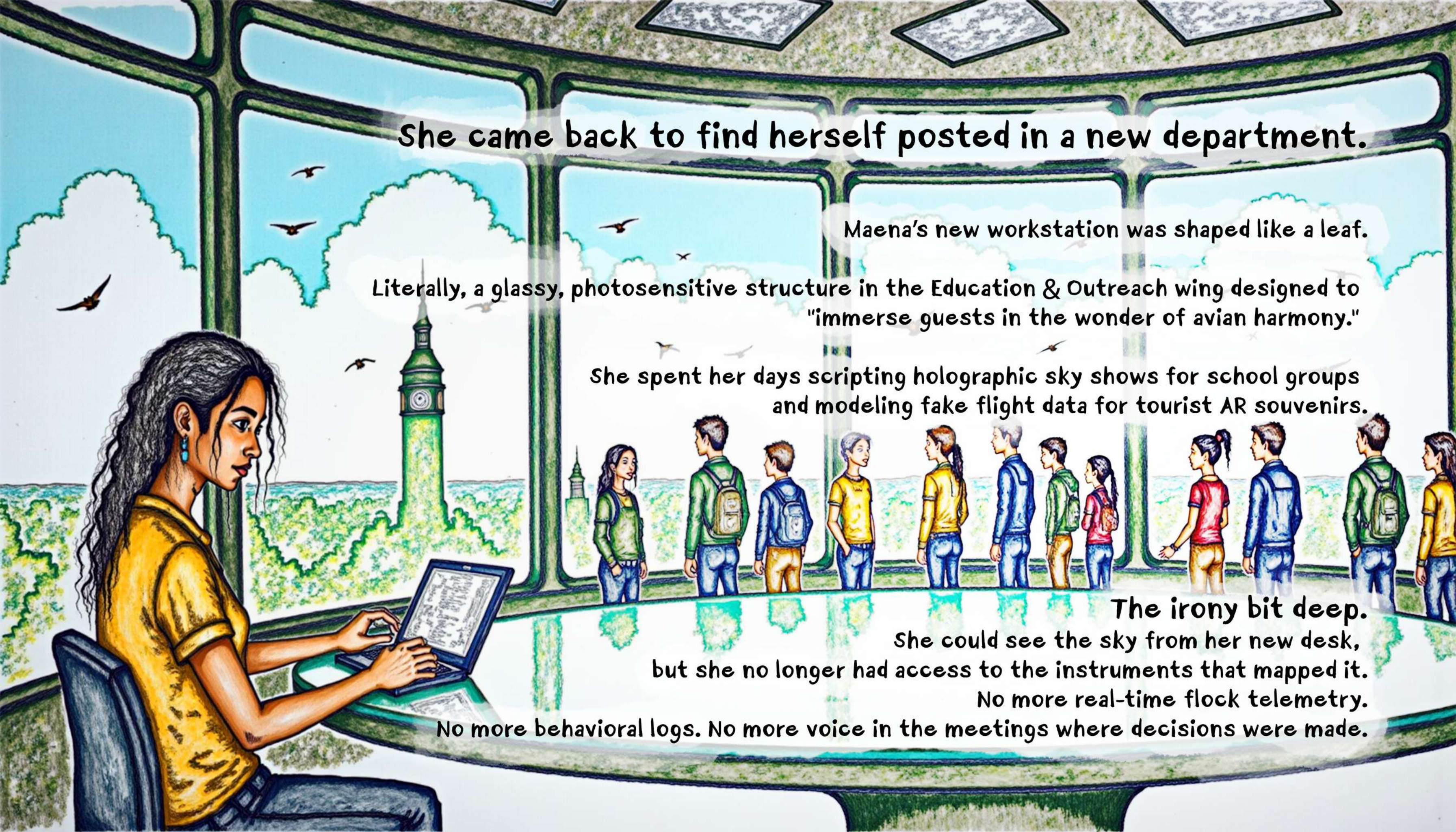
"And Maena... this place works best when we all fly in formation."

She stared at him. Something in her gut twisted.

"Was that supposed to be funny?"

Kahu held her gaze, unreadable.

"You've earned a short wellness break.
Mandatory, of course. You'll come back refreshed."



She came back to find herself posted in a new department.

Maena's new workstation was shaped like a leaf.

Literally, a glassy, photosensitive structure in the Education & Outreach wing designed to "immerse guests in the wonder of avian harmony."

She spent her days scripting holographic sky shows for school groups and modeling fake flight data for tourist AR souvenirs.

The irony bit deep.

She could see the sky from her new desk, but she no longer had access to the instruments that mapped it.

No more real-time flock telemetry.

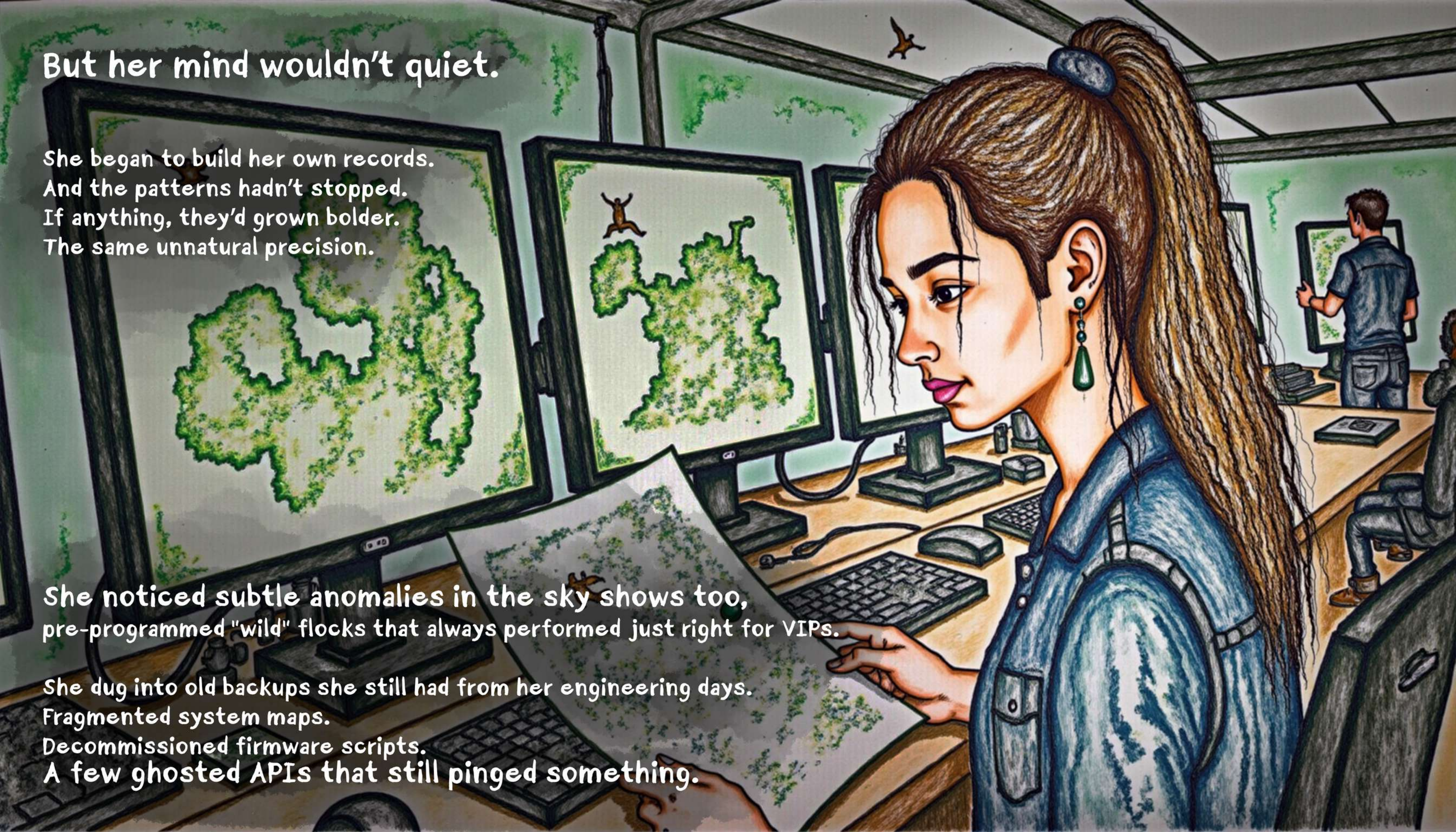
No more behavioral logs. No more voice in the meetings where decisions were made.

But her mind wouldn't quiet.

She began to build her own records.
And the patterns hadn't stopped.
If anything, they'd grown bolder.
The same unnatural precision.

She noticed subtle anomalies in the sky shows too,
pre-programmed "wild" flocks that always performed just right for VIPs.

She dug into old backups she still had from her engineering days.
Fragmented system maps.
Decommissioned firmware scripts.
A few ghosted APIs that still pinged something.





Then came the feather.

A bird collided with one of the rooftop sensors, unusual, given the repelling frequencies.

It wasn't injured, but it fluttered down awkwardly.

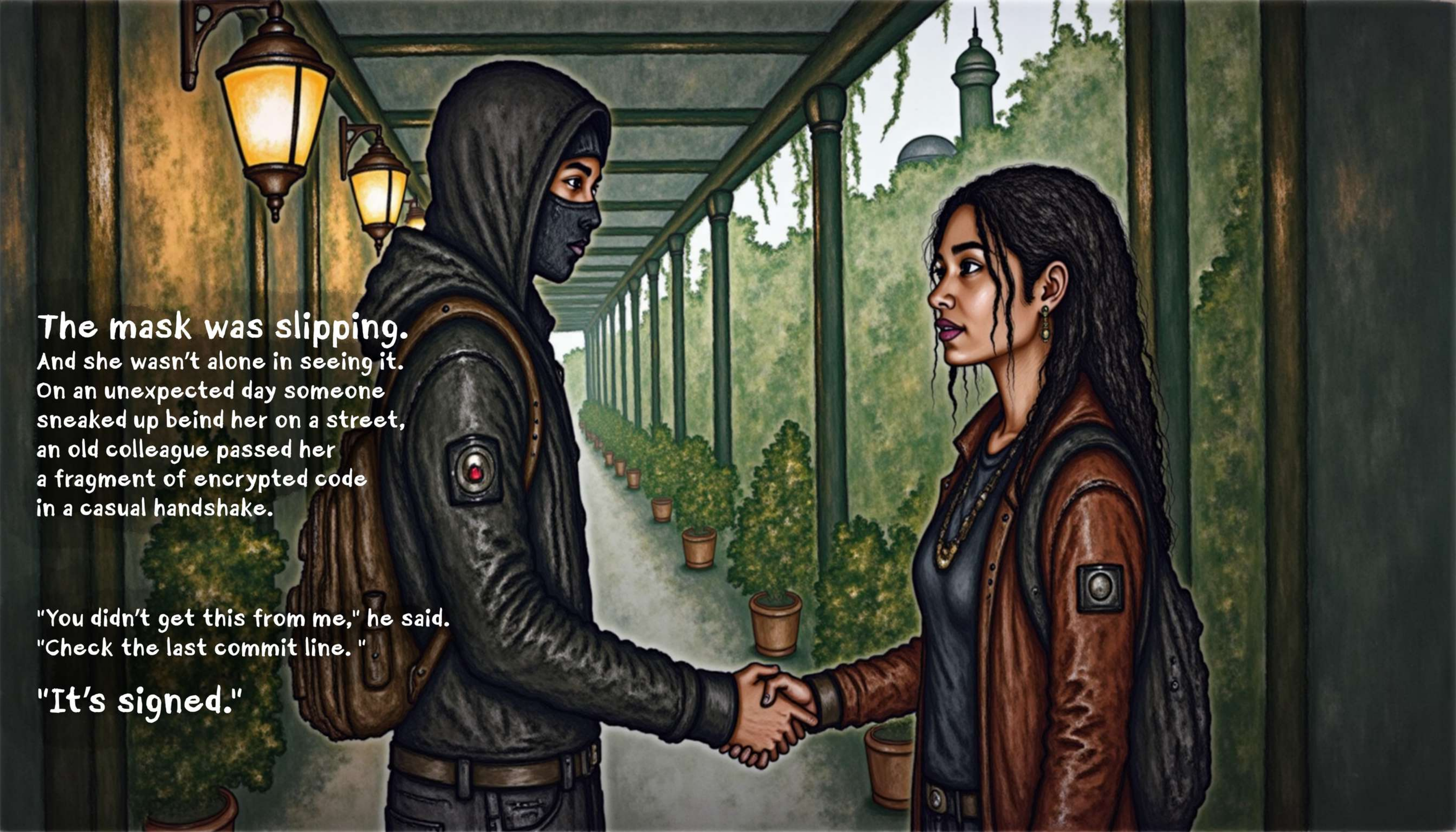
She retrieved it carefully. A myna.

Except... it was not... its eyes glowed red, the feet were not hers, there was something beeping under her wing. It pained her to see this.

It looked familiar. From the early prototypes.

But this one pulsed.

Not a tracker. A controller. Active.
She looked around. No one saw. She pocketed the bird.



The mask was slipping.
And she wasn't alone in seeing it.
On an unexpected day someone
sneaked up behind her on a street,
an old colleague passed her
a fragment of encrypted code
in a casual handshake.

"You didn't get this from me," he said.
"Check the last commit line."

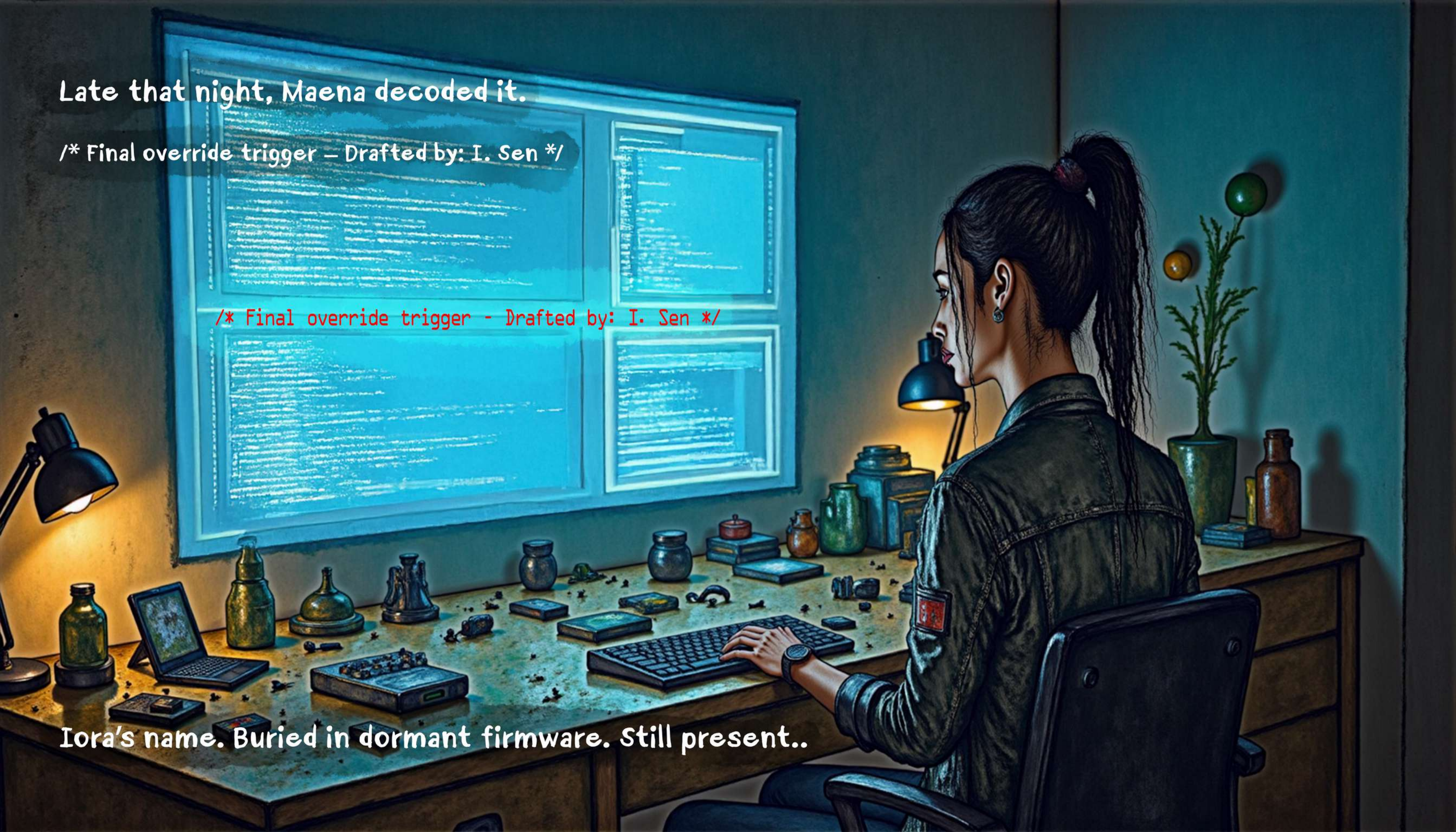
"It's signed."

Late that night, Maena decoded it.

```
/* Final override trigger – Drafted by: I. Sen */
```

```
/* Final override trigger - Drafted by: I. Sen */
```

Iora's name. Buried in dormant firmware. Still present..



Maena studied the code fragment until dawn.

It wasn't just a remnant. It was part of a buried subsystem, one that had been overwritten but not deleted.

The commit carried Iora Sen's cryptographic signature, and the module it referenced wasn't about control.

It was about listening.

The Harmony Layer,
it was called in the old notes.

A proposed system designed not to guide birds, but to understand them, mapping emotional states, recognizing distress, and adapting human behavior accordingly. The inverse of surveillance. The blueprint for empathy.

But that version had never launched.

What replaced it was more marketable.

More choreographed.

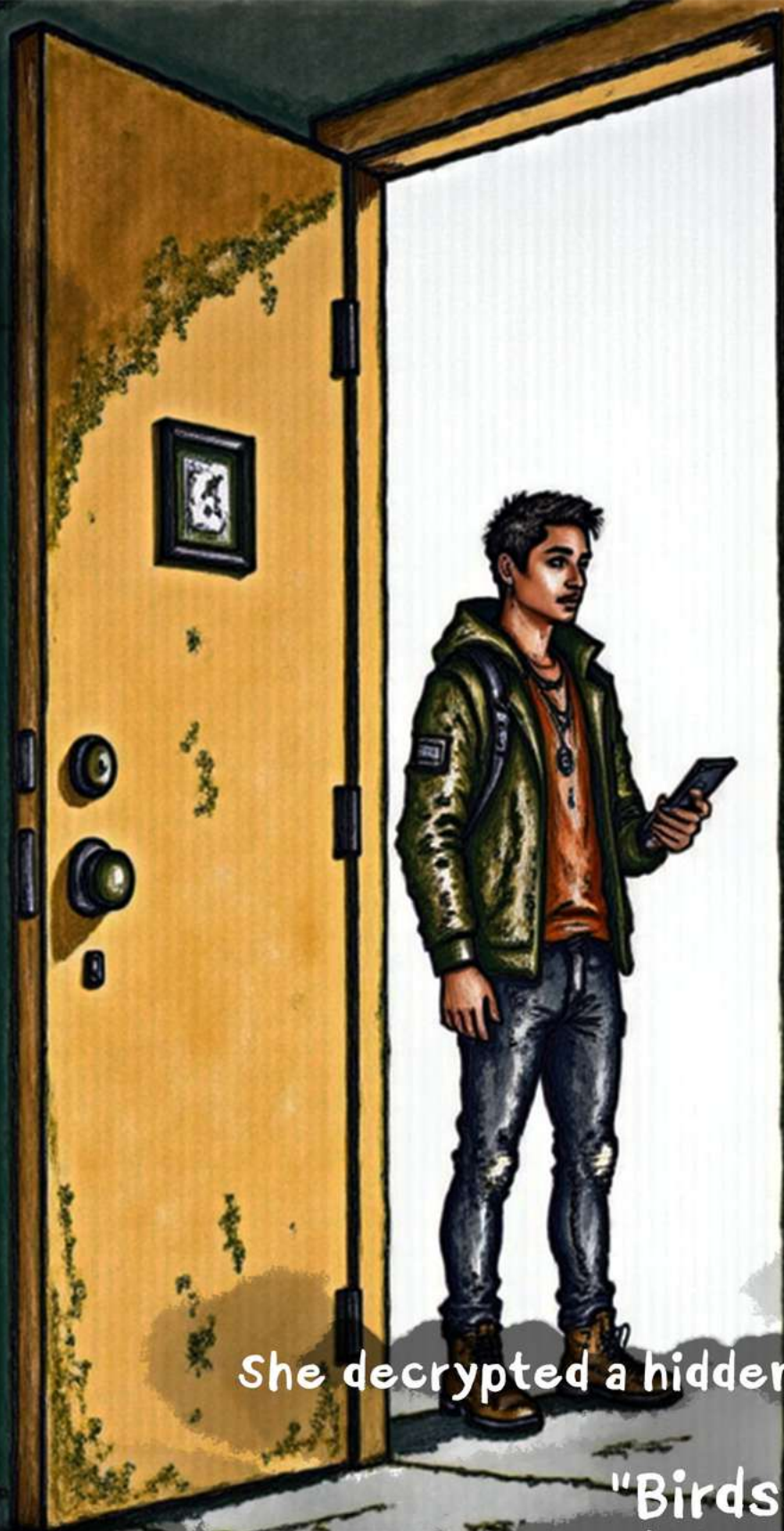
Maena started to follow the data backward: scraps of design journals, closed-door project records, conversations redacted but not fully scrubbed.

The coworker helped her build a synthetic map of what Neoflora should have been, a city tuned not to appearance, but to interspecies wellness.

But she wasn't the only one watching.

The more she uncovered, the more the system pushed back.
Logs she'd backed up went missing.
Her old access logs were rewritten.

One day, she caught someone
trying to clone her work terminal
while she was in the bathroom.



So she moved underground.
She decrypted a hidden archive of Iora's voice notes.

"Birds are not our ornaments.
They are our measure. Of health. Of failure. Of possibility."
"A city that is kind to birds will be kind to people."
"If anyone finds this, know: the override is real. And so is the cost."



Maena now had enough.

The blueprint.

The override key.

The proof that Neoflora had not only abandoned its founding vision but twisted it into spectacle.

But she knew exposing it wasn't enough.

It had to be felt.

Not revealed in a file dump or a protest, but in a way the city couldn't scroll past or silence.

She spent nights writing code into Neoflora's obsolete flight-control system, the one originally built to gently steer birds away from danger zones in the early days.

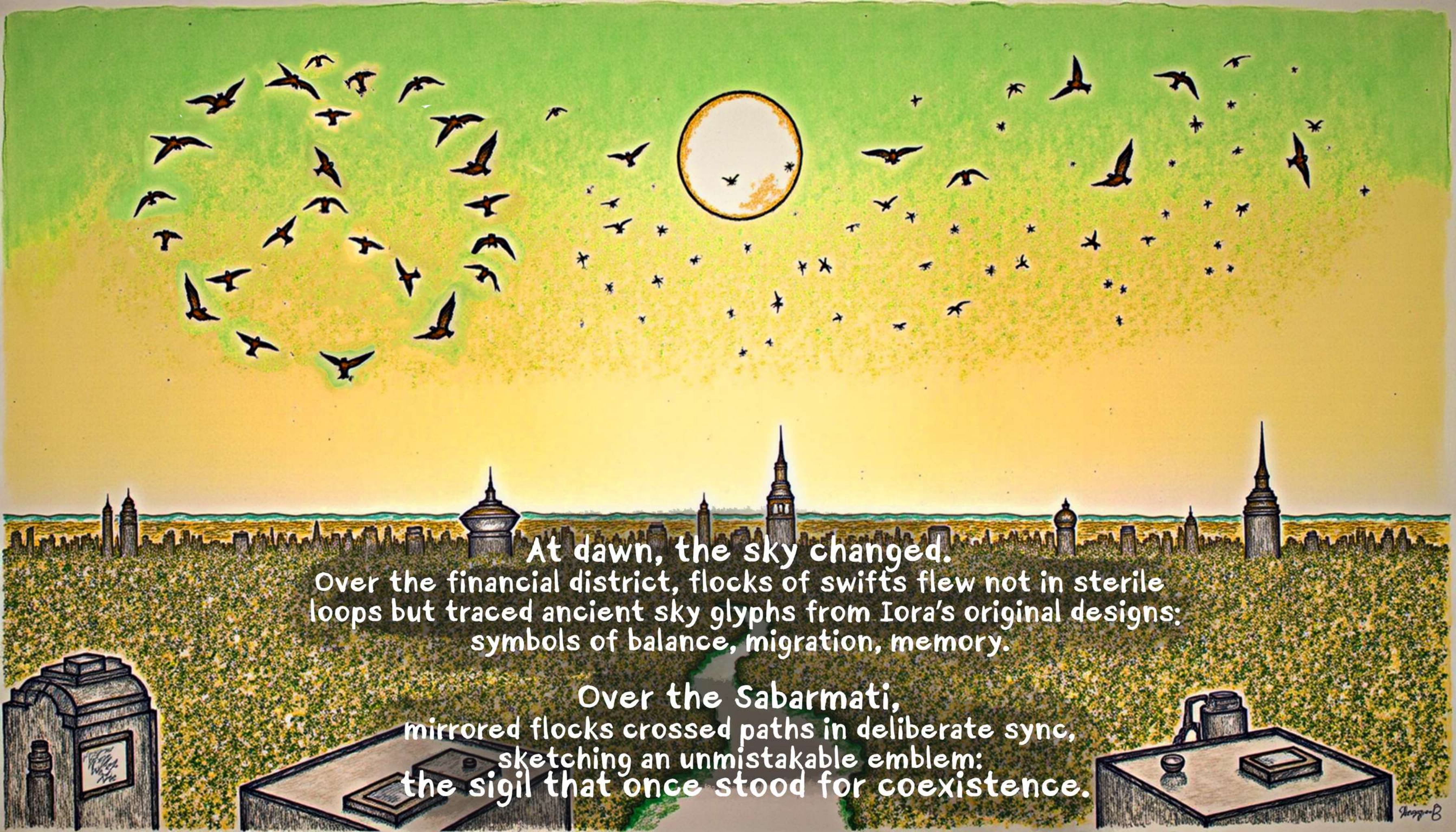
It had been tucked away, forgotten, and then quietly resurrected under Kahu Verne's tenure. Now,

Maena would use it for something else entirely.

She triggered a cascading override.

Not a malfunction, but a performance.

One not designed for tourists, but for truth.



At dawn, the sky changed.
Over the financial district, flocks of swifts flew not in sterile
loops but traced ancient sky glyphs from Iora's original designs:
symbols of balance, migration, memory.

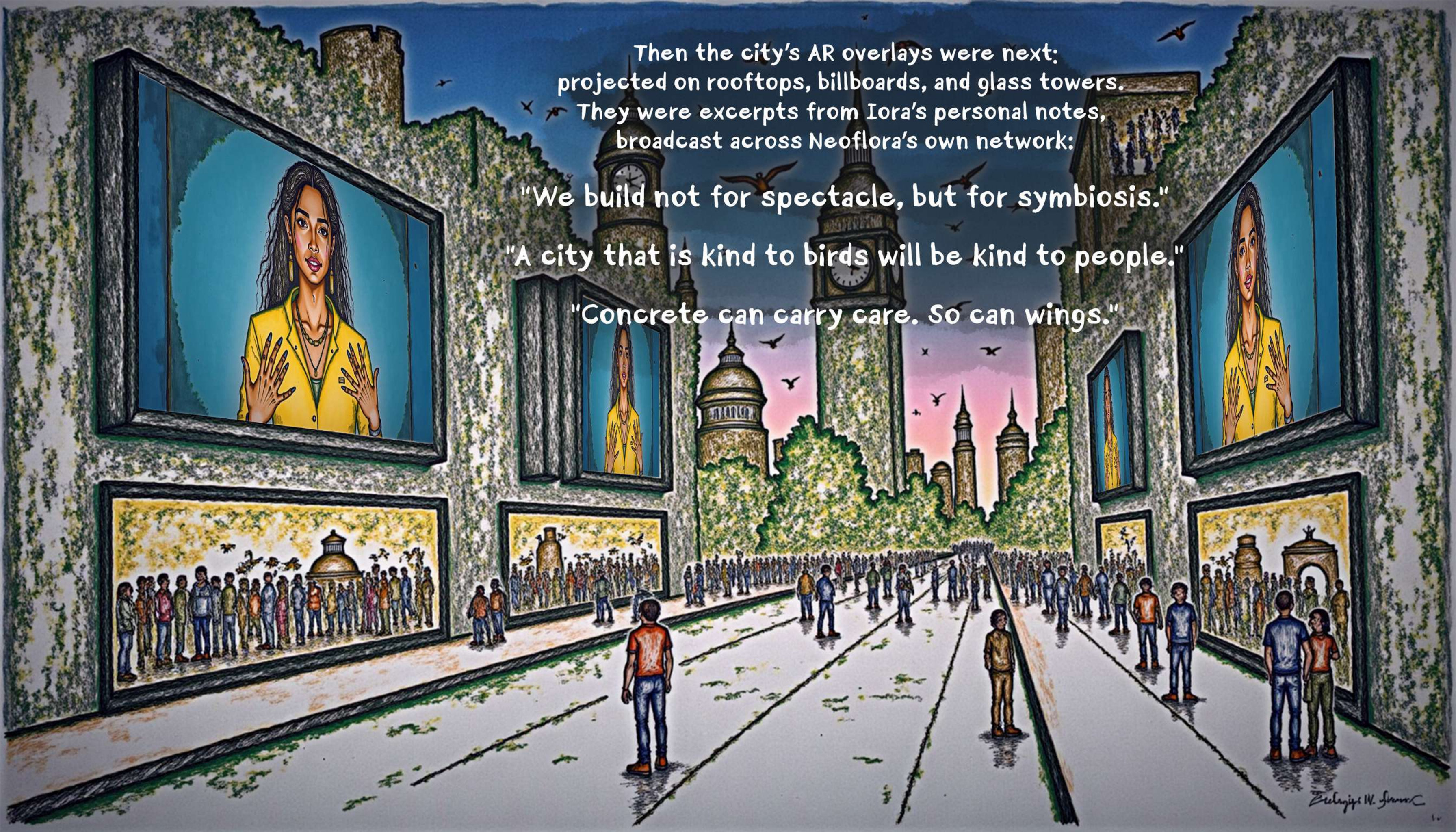
Over the Sabarmati,
mirrored flocks crossed paths in deliberate sync,
sketching an unmistakable emblem:
the sigil that once stood for coexistence.

Then the city's AR overlays were next:
projected on rooftops, billboards, and glass towers.
They were excerpts from Iora's personal notes,
broadcast across Neoflora's own network:

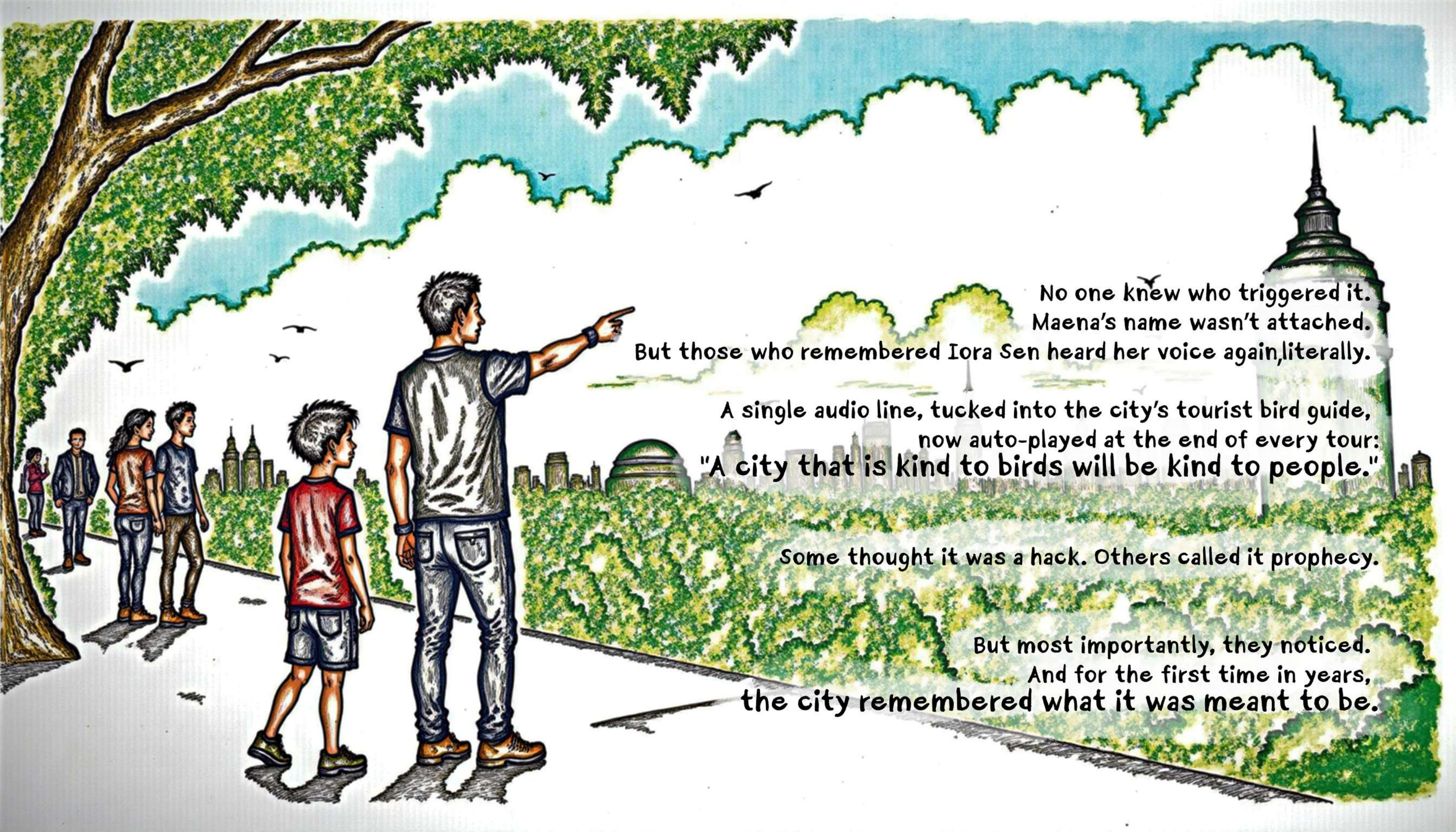
"We build not for spectacle, but for symbiosis."

"A city that is kind to birds will be kind to people."

"Concrete can carry care. So can wings."



Elizabeth W. James



No one knew who triggered it.
Maena's name wasn't attached.
But those who remembered Iora Sen heard her voice again, literally.

A single audio line, tucked into the city's tourist bird guide,
now auto-played at the end of every tour:
"A city that is kind to birds will be kind to people."

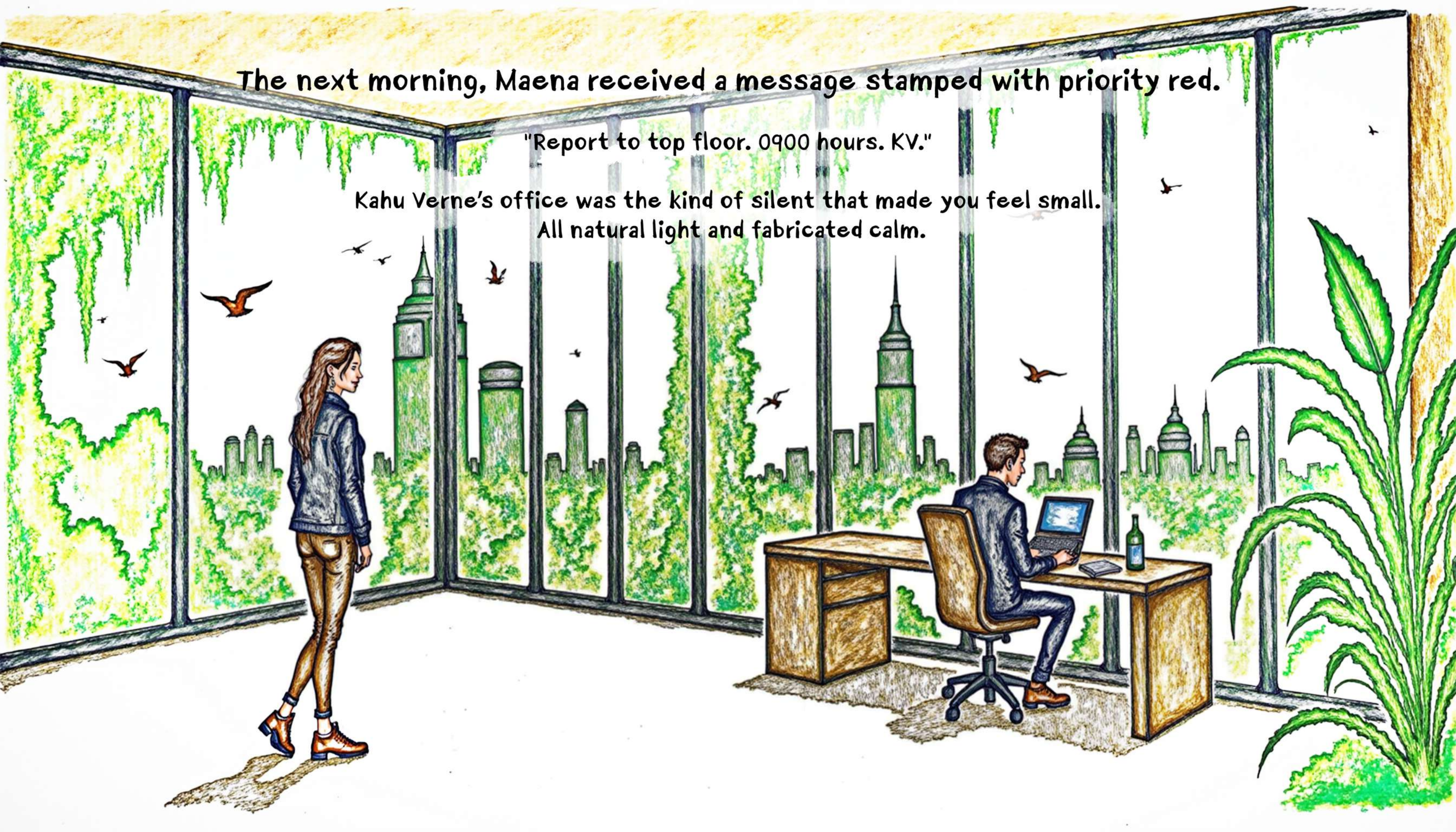
Some thought it was a hack. Others called it prophecy.

But most importantly, they noticed.
And for the first time in years,
the city remembered what it was meant to be.

The next morning, Maena received a message stamped with priority red.

"Report to top floor. 0900 hours. KV."

Kahu Verne's office was the kind of silent that made you feel small.
All natural light and fabricated calm.



He didn't look up when she entered.

"You're talented, Maena. One of the brightest we've had.
But brilliance needs guidance.
And sometimes, limits."

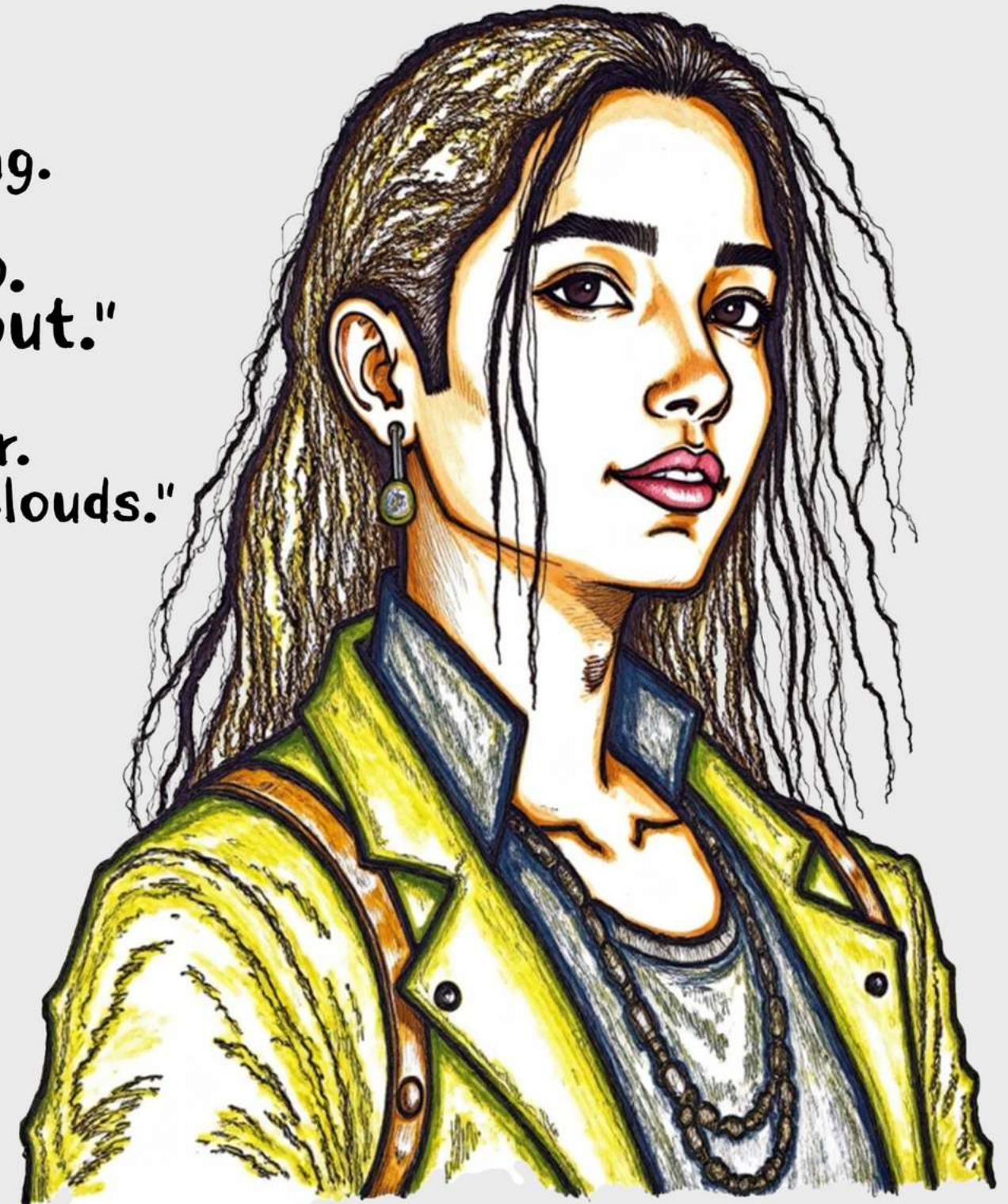
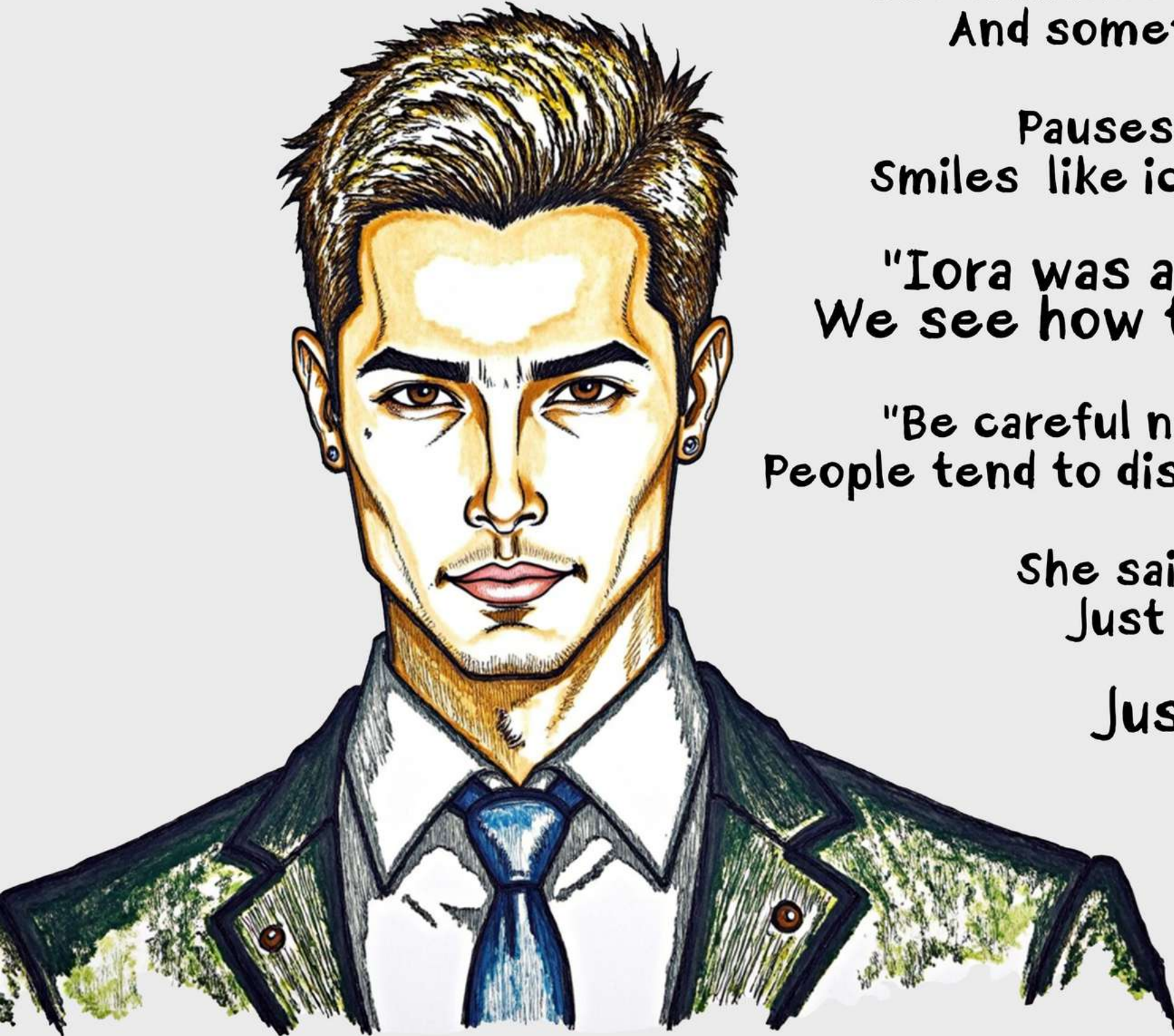
Pauses. Looks up.
Smiles like ice melting wrong.

"Iora was a dreamer too.
We see how that turned out."

"Be careful not to fly too far.
People tend to disappear in the clouds."

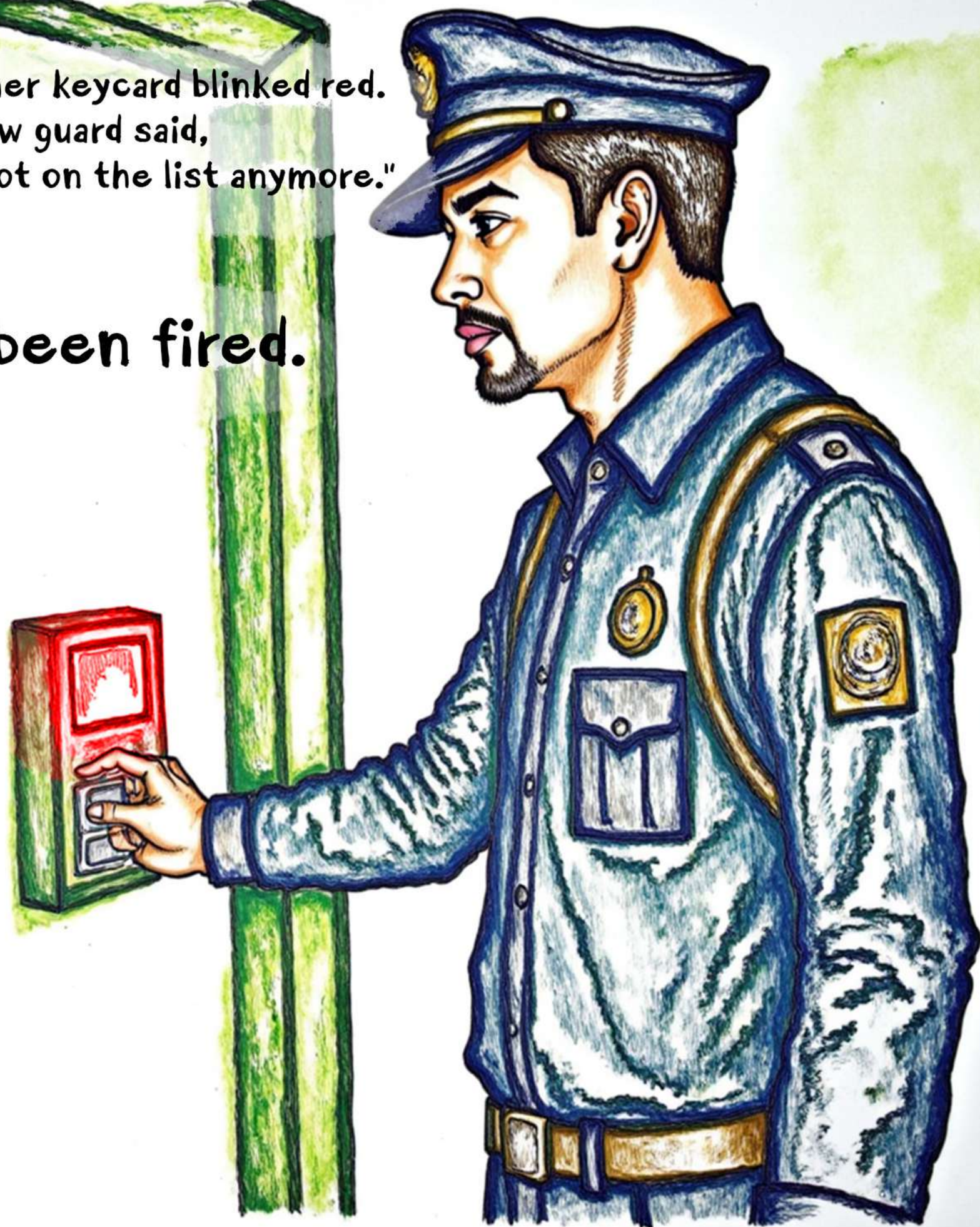
She said nothing.
Just nodded.

Just left.



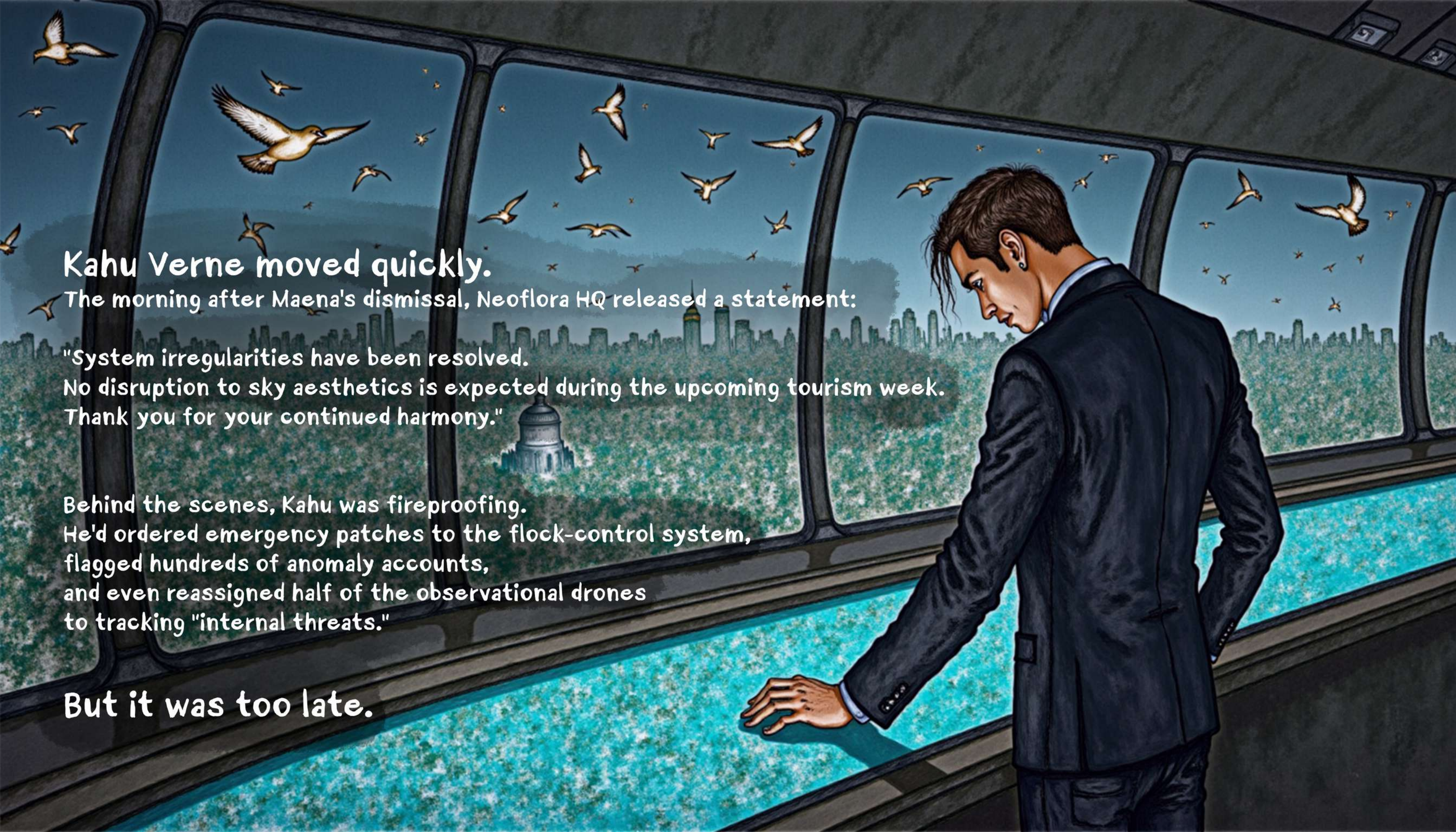
The next day, her keycard blinked red.
A new guard said,
"Sorry, you're not on the list anymore."

She'd been fired.





But by then, she'd already scheduled the big reveal.
Already set the city's memory humming again.

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit and a light blue shirt, stands in profile looking out of a large, curved window. The window is divided into several panes. Outside, a cityscape with various skyscrapers is visible under a blue sky. Numerous birds, resembling seagulls or terns, are flying in the sky. The man's right hand is resting on the window sill. The overall scene suggests a high vantage point, possibly in a train or a high-rise building.

Kahu Verne moved quickly.

The morning after Maena's dismissal, Neoflora HQ released a statement:

"System irregularities have been resolved.

No disruption to sky aesthetics is expected during the upcoming tourism week.

Thank you for your continued harmony."

Behind the scenes, Kahu was fireproofing.

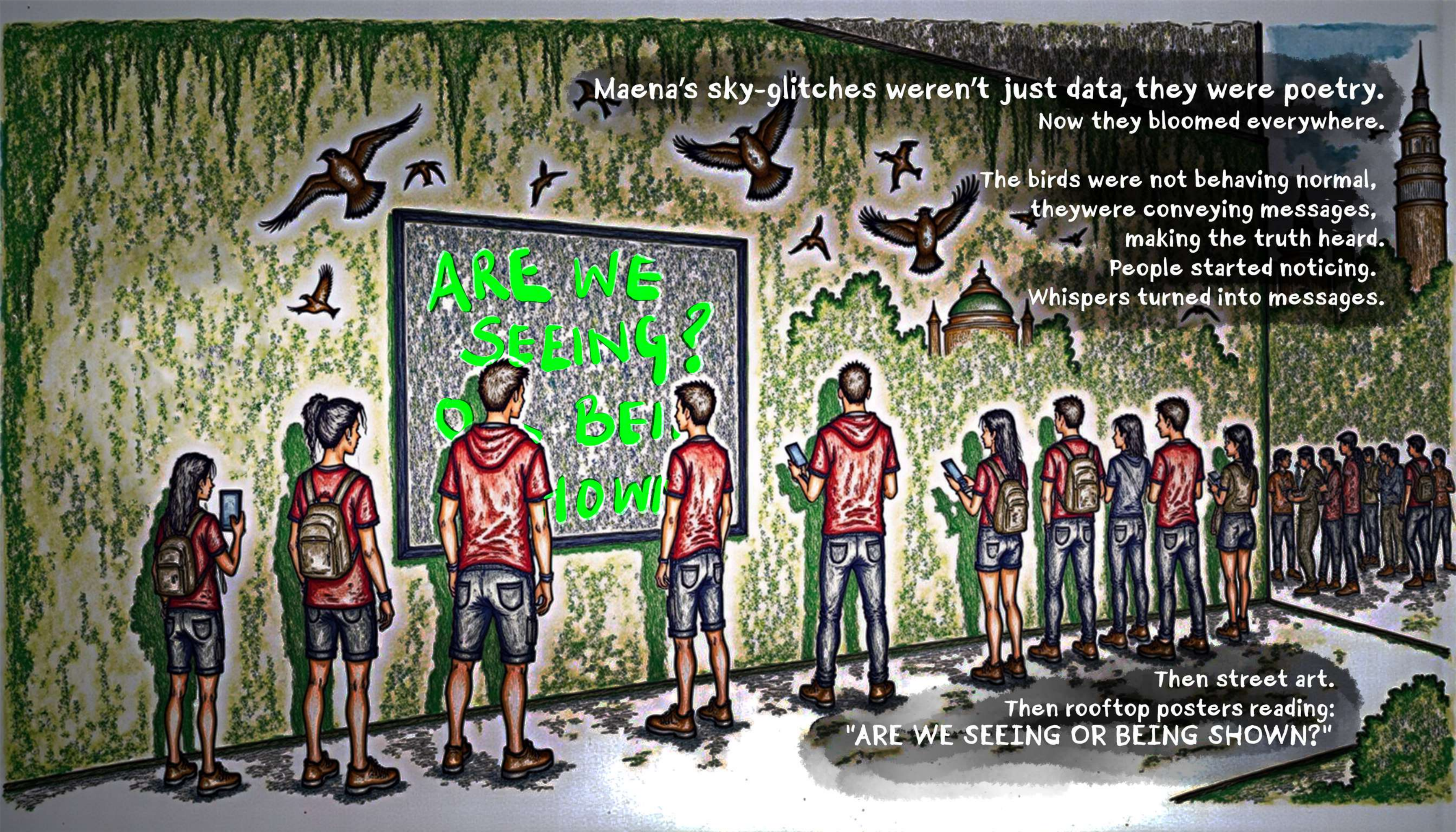
He'd ordered emergency patches to the flock-control system,

flagged hundreds of anomaly accounts,

and even reassigned half of the observational drones

to tracking "internal threats."

But it was too late.



Maena's sky-glitches weren't just data, they were poetry.
Now they bloomed everywhere.

The birds were not behaving normal,
they were conveying messages,
making the truth heard.
People started noticing.
Whispers turned into messages.

Then street art.
Then rooftop posters reading:
"ARE WE SEEING OR BEING SHOWN?"

And then came the leak.
Maena hadn't planned to release the full Harmony Blueprint yet.
But when she got to know of Neoflora's enforcement systems
were getting dangerously close,
she knew it was now or never.





One compressed packet.
One dead server.
One push through the city's old civic mesh.
It went everywhere.

He went live at sunset.

Behind him: the iconic Neoflora logo, the digital silhouette of a soaring bird.

His face was calm, crisp, sterile.



Neoflora

"There is a difference between a city that dreams and a city that functions."

"We created stability. We created beauty. We created order."

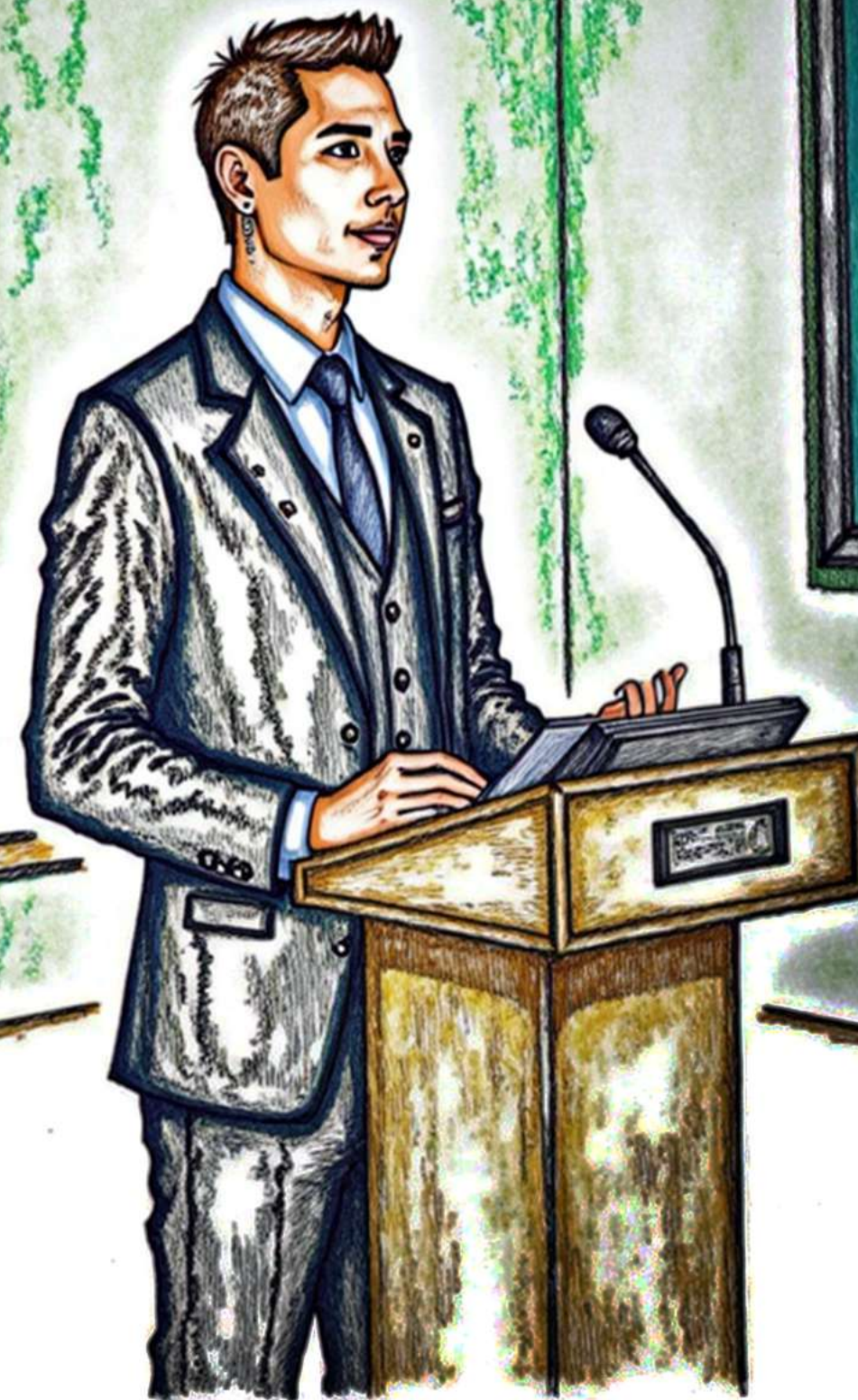
"The alternatives are chaos. Dissonance. Decline."

"Do not let fringe actors convince you that control is oppression. Control is care."

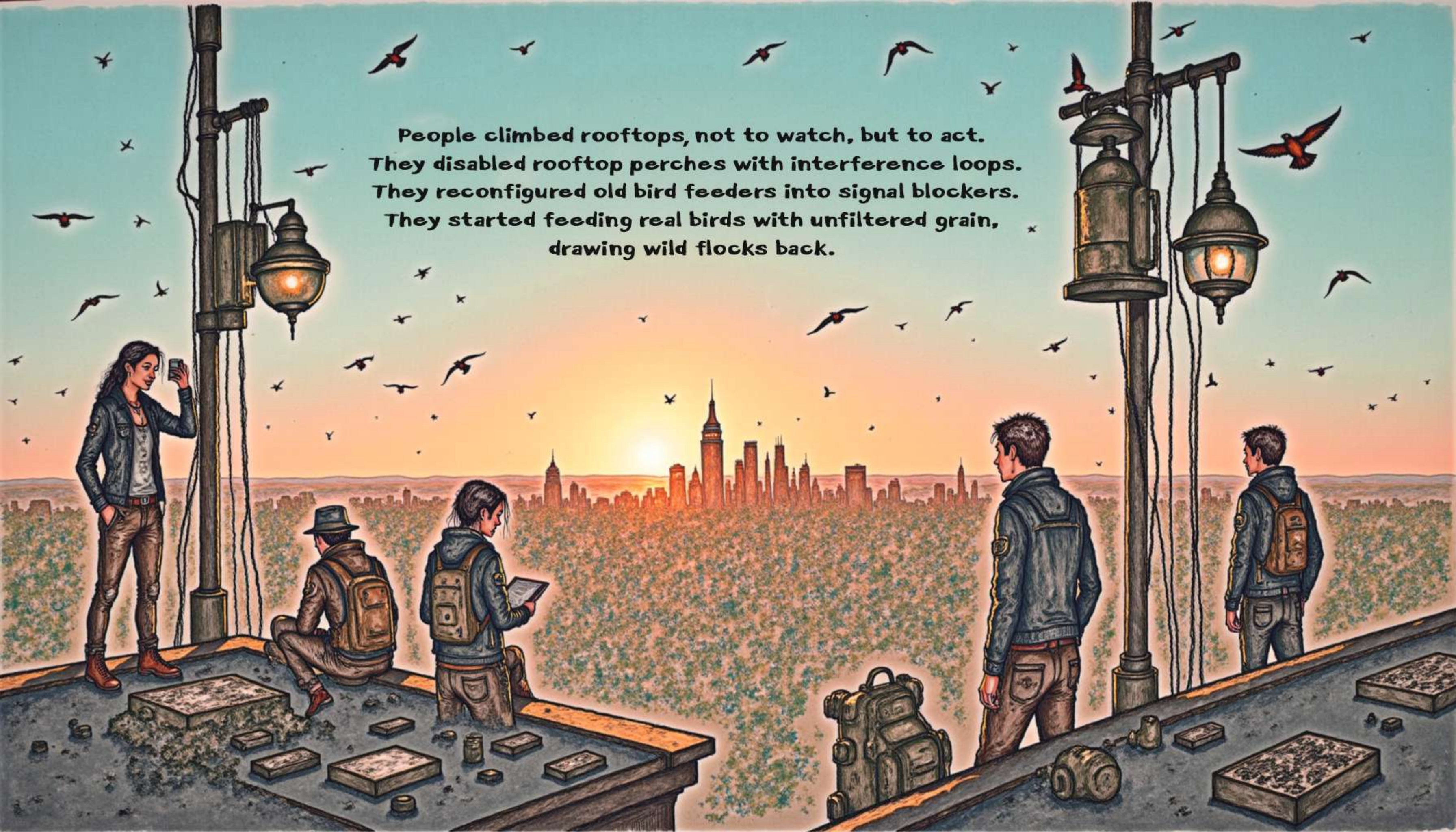
But it rang false.

Too perfect. Too polished.

Because outside, the city had already changed.



People climbed rooftops, not to watch, but to act.
They disabled rooftop perches with interference loops.
They reconfigured old bird feeders into signal blockers.
They started feeding real birds with unfiltered grain,
drawing wild flocks back.

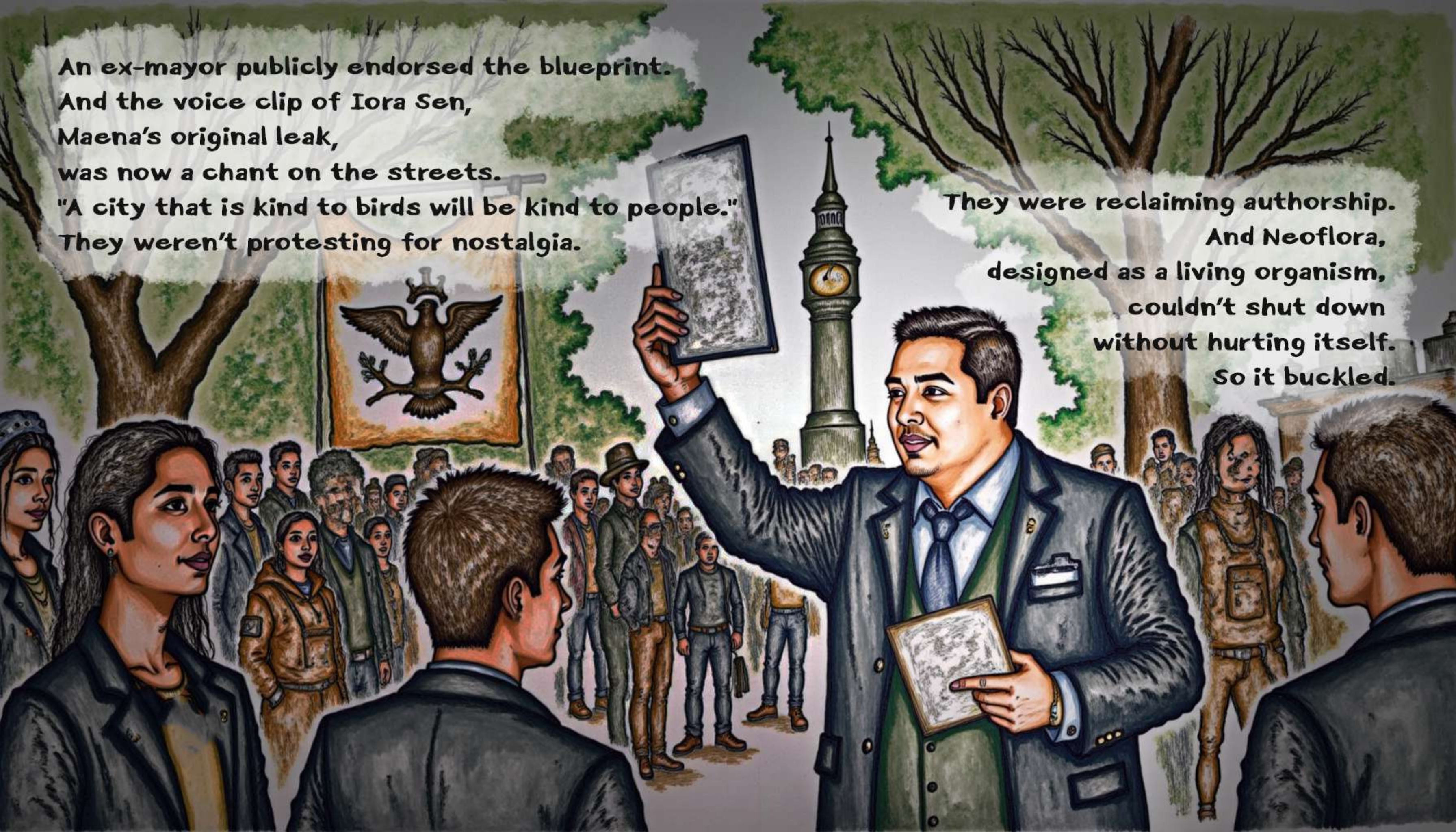


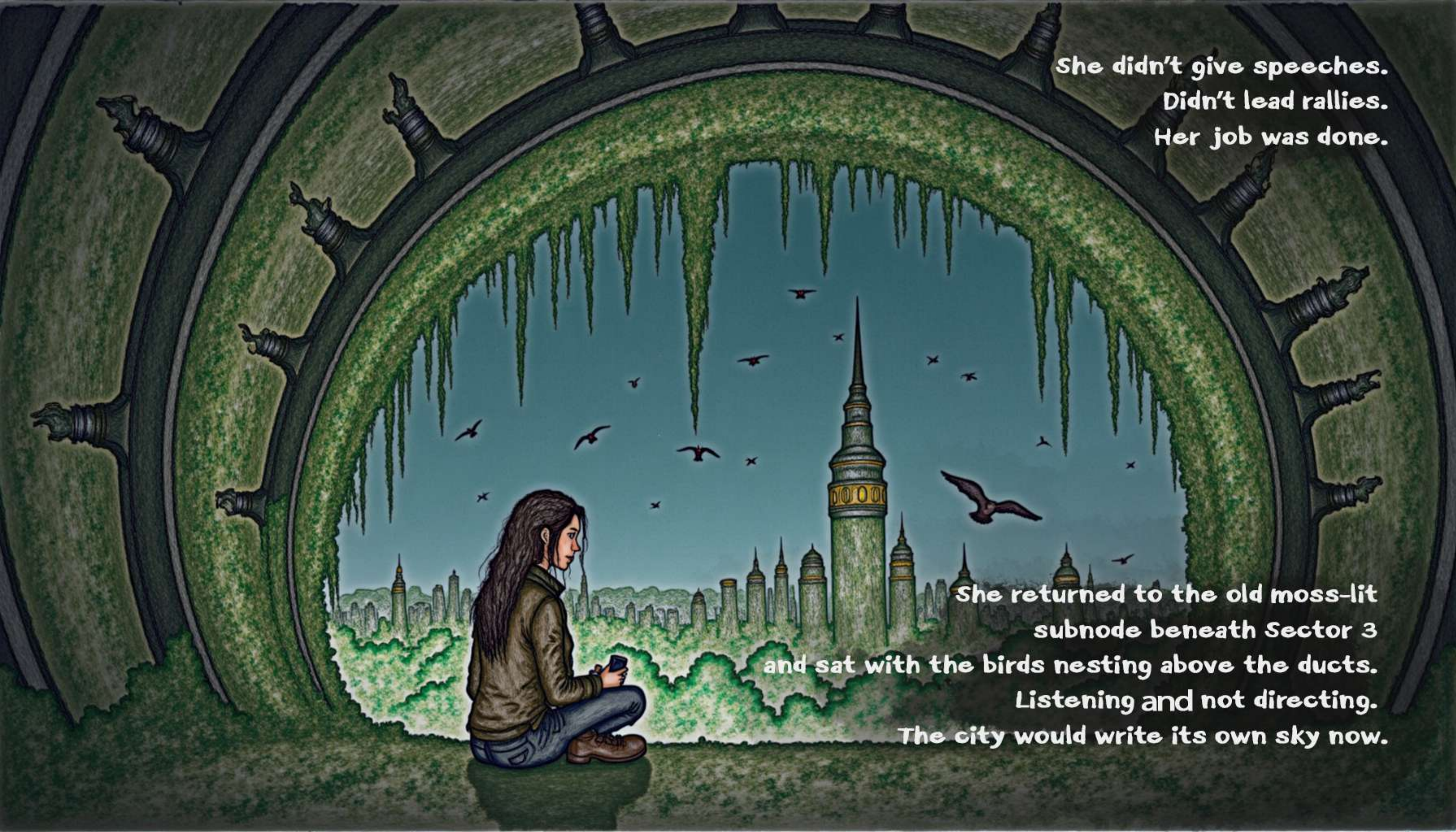
An ex-mayor publicly endorsed the blueprint.
And the voice clip of Iora Sen,
Maena's original leak,

was now a chant on the streets.
"A city that is kind to birds will be kind to people."
They weren't protesting for nostalgia.

They were reclaiming authorship.

And Neoflora,
designed as a living organism,
couldn't shut down
without hurting itself.
So it buckled.



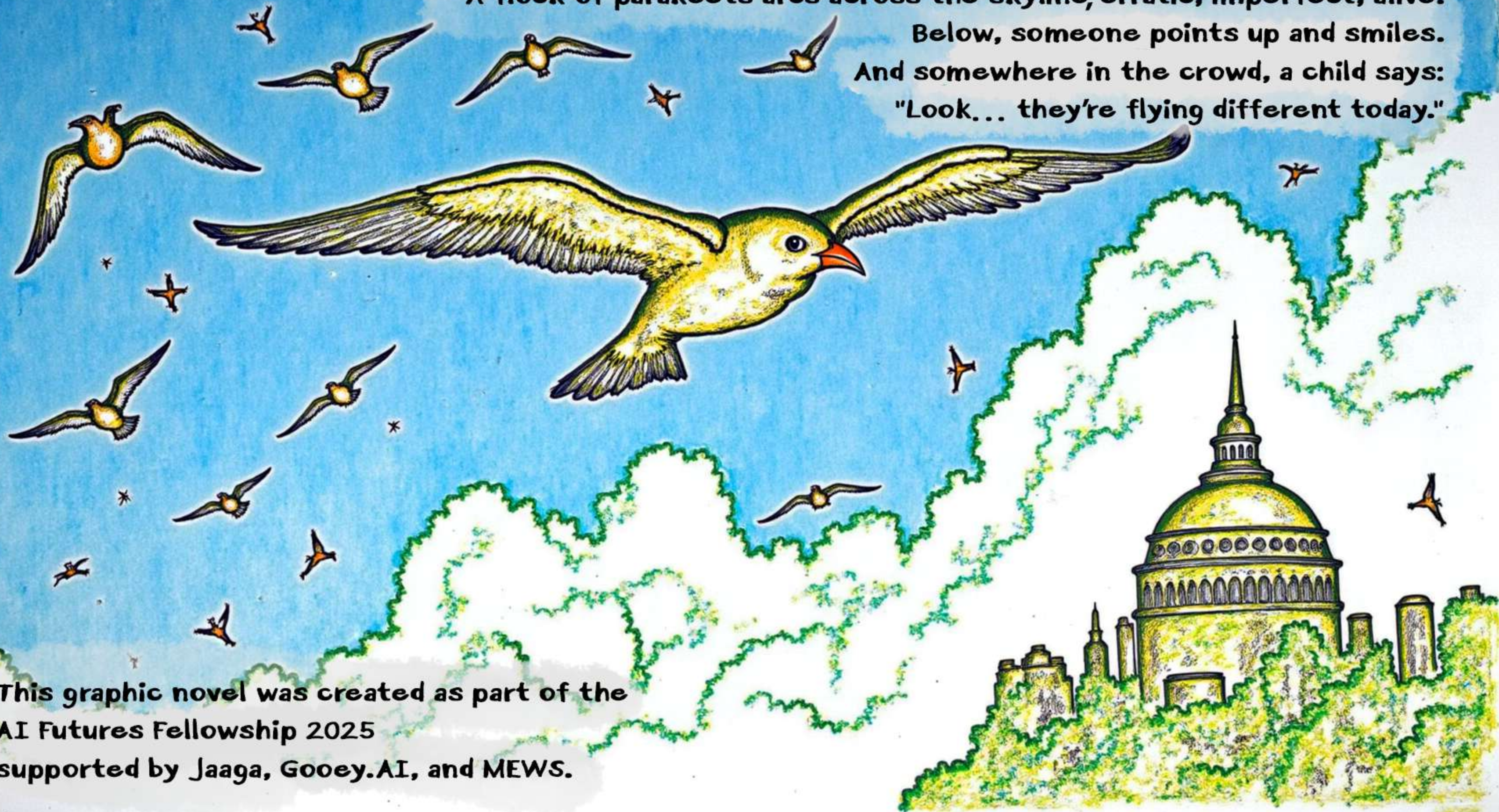
A woman with long dark hair, wearing a brown jacket and blue jeans, is sitting cross-legged on a mossy ledge. She is looking out through a large, circular opening in a dark, moss-covered wall. The opening is framed by a thick, dark archway with several small, dark, pointed structures protruding from the top. Inside the opening, a cityscape is visible. A tall, slender, green spire with a yellow band near the top is the central focus. Other smaller spires and buildings are visible in the background. The sky is a pale blue, and several birds are flying. The ground in the foreground is covered in green moss.

She didn't give speeches.
Didn't lead rallies.
Her job was done.

She returned to the old moss-lit
subnode beneath Sector 3
and sat with the birds nesting above the ducts.
Listening and not directing.
The city would write its own sky now.

A flock of parakeets arcs across the skyline, erratic, imperfect, alive.

Below, someone points up and smiles.
And somewhere in the crowd, a child says:
"Look... they're flying different today."



This graphic novel was created as part of the
AI Futures Fellowship 2025
supported by Jaaga, Gooley.AI, and MEWS.