Rejection Syndrome

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1250.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	General (non relationship-focused)
Fandoms:	The Murderbot Diaries - Martha Wells, Murderbot TV
Relationship:	Dr. Gurathin & Murderbot (Murderbot Diaries)
Characters:	Dr. Gurathin, Murderbot (Murderbot Diaries), Ayda Mensah
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-04 Words: 7,661 Chapters: 1/1

Rejection Syndrome

by jotc

Summary

When he needs emergency surgery on his augments, Dr. Gurathin's plan is to hole up in a room alone and pretend he's not being a reckless idiot. SecUnit has a different plan.

Notes

Written after TV ep 9, inspired by TV characterizations but set post System Collapse and has minimal conflict with book-verse. A brief mention of Ratthi's personal life is book-verse influenced.

Inspired by a prompt from Gamebird on the New Tideland Discord.

Content notes: temporary blindness, vomiting, no guarantee of medical accuracy

Gurathin's vision augments sometimes got a trifle sore at the end of a long day's hard use, but pain in the morning was unusual. He thought it might indicate some bug going around, irritating his eyes as a prelude to nasal congestion or some such, but after two days of achiness and no other symptoms he paid a visit to MedSystem.

He knew things weren't going to go smoothly when MedSystem called in a human doctor. Then he had to wait with a pit in his stomach while that doctor analyzed scans, which eventually involved forwarding data to a different doctor, one who specialized in the type of augmentation which wasn't common on Preservation.

"It's going to require surgery," his new doctor said. By the time he got the news, it was no longer a surprise. "The issue isn't primarily the augments. While we're in there, we should definitely take the opportunity to replace some aging components, but the primary issue is tissue degradation from the interface with your vision augments. If we had advanced notice, we could clone replacement tissue from your own body, but this is actually fairly urgent. If we don't pull the failing tissue now, we risk it becoming necrotic and nobody wants that. So we're going to use printed material, which unfortunately does come with higher risk of rejection syndrome."

He liked his doctor, an older woman called Dr. Pulan. She had a straightforward manner and treated him as if he was a teammate handling a tricky project. She dove straight into the technical details without a lot of feelings talk, and that helped him stay calm. He couldn't afford to panic, he had decisions to make.

The two of them talked extensively about what elements of his augments were likely to need replacing in the next five to ten years, what was rugged enough to outlive him, and what had a somewhat unpredictable lifespan. With decent luck he might end up with a configuration that could last out his lifetime, requiring only software updates.

They also discussed his history of addiction. The surgery itself would take place under anesthetic. After that he'd take the stuff everyone else took for tension headaches and tough it out. Better some temporary misery than what he'd been through before.

"You'll have to take the vision augments completely offline in the early stages of healing," she said. "Do you need a refresher on handling daily tasks while blind?"

"I'm good."

"Everyone always says that," she said with an air of obvious skepticism.

"I do survey work, so I drill regularly. The last thing I want is to end up lost and helpless if I get hit with the type of energy burst that crashes my augments."

"That won't trigger a seizure and disable you anyway?"

"I have fairly extensive protections against that. Of course malware is a more complicated subject. But if you doubt my ability to handle basic life skills, go ahead and test me."

To his combined irritation and respect, she actually did test him. He'd already mapped the room and hallway. He didn't need visuals to navigate once he'd mapped a space, but he asked for a cane in case she had tried to catch him off guard by moving furniture.

She had. But he wasn't lying about the drills, and he found the out of place chair with no particular difficulty. A quick trip to the sink where he washed his hands alleviated her concerns, and she re-enabled the augments. A dull wave of pain following the activation drove home the point that this really was urgent.

"You'll start first-line anti-rejection drugs the day before the surgery. Make sure your friends and family know not to expose you to any contagious illnesses, even ones which are ordinarily mild. Friends and family go into denial sometimes, so refer them to me if you anticipate any social difficulties."

"That shouldn't be a problem." His coworkers were pretty good about not spreading germs even without immunosuppressants in the mix.

"Expect to be off work for two to four weeks. If everything goes well we'll re-enable some of the augments a week after the surgery, but I want you to ramp up the use slowly. Do you need any assistance organizing your social circle for supportive care?"

"No." He answered reflexively, without much thought. Only later did he think of how easy it would have been to say yes. On Preservation, everyone relied on friends and family for anything that didn't require an actual doctor to do, and organizing this type of care was literally part of her job.

The thing was, he might not need help at all. Drug side effects were highly variable. Some people reported symptoms in line with a mild flu. Just sleep it off, they said.

Preservation citizens were so open about illness. Meanwhile all he wanted to do was hide under a rock. He did not want his coworkers to hear him vomit, let alone to have conversations with each other about how often he had vomited yesterday compared to how often he was likely to vomit tomorrow. The mere thought of it made his skin crawl and ironically, left him nauseous. If his symptoms were mild, he could handle things on his own. If severe, he'd be in Medical.

The other thing was, his timing was terrible. Ratthi and SecUnit would arrive tomorrow, just in time for Arada's birthday party. The whole survey gang was taking the rare opportunity to get together as a group. After that, Ratthi and SecUnit would be in the station for ten days before shipping out. Their friends deserved to spend time with them. Whatever those two did on the Perihelion was fucking dangerous, as evidenced by the fact that they couldn't talk about the details.

In the end, he sent a feed message to his department head asking for time off, and also asking if she could escort him to his room post surgery. Medical staff wouldn't release him without an escort. Doing anything alone was very nearly a crisis on Preservation. If he told anyone wanted to be alone while sick, or even more unthinkably to be alone *because* he was sick,

that person would no doubt say “I see” in that particularly strangled voice he knew all too well, and then notify a social worker and all his friends.

He’d been given temporary lodgings near Medical, standard practice since the rooms were equipped with multiple accessibility features. He enabled textured carpet and sound cues. He wouldn’t need them since he had the room mapped, but it was still good practice.

He prepped meals according to Medical’s advice, including crackers and juice in bulk. He also prepped plenty of trash receptacle liners, just in case.

Finally, he RSVP’d to Arada’s birthday party. He had to take the first dose of the stage one anti-rejection drug the day before surgery. Technically he shouldn’t attend a party, or if he did he should at least let them know he would be taking an immunosuppressant. But if he did that, they’d ask too many questions.

Finally he settled on, *I’m getting some work done on my augments shortly after the party and would prefer not to catch anything prior to going in. Can you guys run screens, and if anyone turns up positive I’ll drop?*

He got a barrage of thumbs up and hearts in response.
Pin-Lee sent, *Is everything okay?*

An issue came up. It’s urgent but relatively minor. I’ll be at the party, then hole up while I process the adjustments.

Visitors okay?

I tend to be pretty solitary while recovering, but I’ll let you know.

That brought another barrage of hug icons. They’d grown a little used to his eccentricities, it seemed. He felt relieved and possibly a little disappointed.

“Thank you so much for coming!” Arada greeted him by gripping both his hands. Everyone else was more likely to get a hug. To be honest he didn’t hate hugs, but he found them a little awkward. Hand squeezes were easier. Hugs could be a special occasion thing.

Arada was beaming. The whole group was in high spirits at the reunion. They’d clung to each other so tightly in the early days after that disastrous survey, but over time their lives had diverged a bit.

For a while everyone was occupied with cutting and distributing cake, watching Arada pop open a very foamy champagne bottle (the thought of cake with champagne made him shudder), and with a lot of enthusiastic chatter about not much in particular.

Gurathin found a place to sit and just enjoyed watching his friends. The others had a million questions for Ratthi and SecUnit, since they’d been away. A lot was classified but Ratthi began entertaining them with anecdotes about Perihelion’s crew. When Ratthi began waxing poetic about his latest sex partner, SecUnit abruptly walked away and sat next to Gurathin.

“You’re in pain,” it said.

“Well, that’s why I’m getting treatment.”

“Is it dangerous?”

The urge to answer honestly sat on his tongue. On Preservation it was so normal and expected to share this kind of news that his friends would be hurt if he didn’t. He’d even rehearsed the words in his head on his way to the party.

--*I’m getting some work done on my implants. I’m not likely to need much assistance but if someone could work remotely from my recovery room for a few days, that would be welcome. Just ignore any unfortunate noises from the bathroom please.*

--*Actually I’m getting surgery, it’s nothing to worry about but I’ll be on immune suppressants and it’s medically advisable to be monitored.*

--*My supposedly top of the line augments just triggered a form of tissue failure which is unnervingly similar to rejection syndrome. I need emergency surgery. If the crappy printed tissue I’ll be receiving triggers actual rejection syndrome, the surgical cleanup will involve sealing off nerve endings and blood vessels in a way that could leave me permanently blind and worse, throttle my processing power so I can’t do my fucking job. I’m terrified.*

Instead he said, “No.” It wasn’t a lie. The surgery itself wasn’t dangerous. Even tissue rejection wouldn’t be dangerous, just severely disappointing.

Ratthi waved his hands for attention. When they were all focused on him, Ratthi said, “Guys, actually I have something to tell you.” He looked unaccountably nervous. Gurathin’s stomach lurched.

“I’m transferring permanently to the Perihelion and pursuing citizenship with New Tideland.”

A wave of chatter spread through the crowd.

“Hey, hey! I’ll still be coming back periodically, just like SecUnit does. I’ll also still be a Preservation citizen. I could never leave this place behind, you know? But…” he waved his hand a little awkwardly. “I came back to wrap up old business, say goodbye to my family, not forever mind you! Not forever of course but anyway. It’s a big change and I wanted you all to know.”

Well. He’d miss Ratthi quite a lot. It made sense though.

It didn’t surprise him a bit that SecUnit had found a new life elsewhere. Preservation Station simply didn’t require enough security work now that the risk to Mensah had died down. SecUnit, against all odds, loved its work. The Perihelion had lucked into acquiring an amazing asset and he hoped they appreciated their luck. Ratthi, he suspected, was following SecUnit. Ratthi held tighter to friends than to his many lovers, although he tended to convert lovers to friends.

From there everyone became emotional. There were many tears and hugs. Gurathin waited until the first wave died down before he stepped forward. Ratthi held out his hand but if this wasn't a special occasion, what was? Gurathin took the hand but stepped in closer with his other arm held out. He never knew just how long or how hard to squeeze, but Ratthi pulled him in and held him firmly but not claustrophobically, and released as soon as he moved to step back. Ratthi really did give excellent hugs.

Gurathin retreated to his chair. His head was pounding but he didn't want to just sneak off while Ratthi was still saying goodbyes. After a bit Mensah sat down next to him. It lifted his heart to see her so relaxed and happy. She'd been through so much. Simply being near Mensah was always a delight. As they silently watched the others together, a knot of tension in him began to unwind.

Eventually she said, "Farewells are always a little sad, but it's such a joy that we had this opportunity to come together when everyone is happy and healthy, for a celebration instead of a crisis."

He just couldn't tell her. Everyone had this rare chance to just relax and he couldn't spoil it.

Don't blame circumstances, he told himself impatiently. *You wouldn't have told anyone regardless of the situation. Take some fucking responsibility at least.*

After the surgery, he woke disoriented. He instinctively tried to run analysis on his malfunctioning vision augments, but a spike of pain reminded him why that was currently impossible. To his frustration he wasn't getting the sensory input he expected from sound either.

Someone was saying something.

"What?" he said. His own voice sounded strange and whatever response he got sounded even stranger. "What? What?" he repeated, as if resending dropped feed messages.

Fuck, he thought. It was his analysis augments. He'd made a habit of running raw audio through analysis, and never even noticed how much he merged analysis and perception. Right now he was like one of those people who failed to realize they were going deaf because they got progressively better at lip reading. He wasn't deaf though. He just needed to relearn old habits.

"Just a minute," he said to whoever was in the room. He focused first on slowing his breathing, then on identifying the background noises. His own pulse thrummed in his ears, keeping time with dull throbbing pain in his head. Instinctively he tried to roll his eyes back, a trick he used to momentarily mute sensations.

"Don't try to use your augments," the voice said.

He understood that, perhaps because he'd been thinking something similar.

“Do you ### where ###?”

“What?”

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Quit changing your question,” he said irritably. “My name is Gurathin, I just had surgery on my augments, the last thing I remember is counting backwards from ten, and everything sounds like garbage.”

“Good,” the voice said.

Was the tone amused? Maybe it was his imagination.

“We just have ### to run, and ### friend can ### to rest.”

“Stop talking so fast.”

“We just have a few checks to run before we know if we need to keep you overnight.”

“That’s not what you said before. Quit changing what you say.”

“My apologies.”

That definitely sounded amused, he thought. Whoever it was had slowed down though, which helped a lot.

The speaker continued, “Just relax while we take care of you.”

Was his department head in the room already? He wasn’t sure, but he concentrated on breathing deeply and not making any more of an ass of himself.

The checks turned out to be half scanner data that didn’t require much of him, and half making sure he remembered not to touch his face and to take his various drugs on schedule. He’d set up an alert schedule on his pad, so he should be fine. Whoever was handling his release gave a printed schedule to give to his support circle. His department head must not be here yet.

“Now try standing up.”

The speaker put one hand under his forearm. He stood up and tried not to wobble.

“Good. Do you feel stable enough to walk a bit?”

“Sure.”

They took a slow turn around the room. Staying upright wasn't as easy as he'd expected. At one point he found his weight supported quite heavily by… was this person a nurse? The voice sounded familiar and he shouldn't know any of the nurses in the surgical section. Anyway, he ended up leaning on them quite heavily. A bit later they threw an arm around his shoulder and dragged him closer, which startled him into a muffled yelp. He must have been leaning the other way too.

"You're fairly unsteady on your feet, which is common at this stage but does prevent a significant fall risk. With that in mind, we're going to keep you here a bit longer and see if the dizziness improves."

"I'm not dizzy," he said. "I just didn't realize how much I relied on the augments for proprioception."

"It comes to the same thing though, right? You really do not want to fall and hit your head right now."

Gurathin acknowledged with a grunt. Then, because it was increasingly driving him crazy, he asked, "Sorry, what's your name?"

"This is Dr. Pulan. Don't worry, sound will normalize soon."

Well fuck. If he couldn't recognize his own doctor's voice, maybe he did need to chill for a bit whle his senses stabilized.

He'd left his audio-activated pad in his room, so he asked her to update his department head regarding his delayed release. That wouldn't even be a task for a doctor in the Corporate Rim, but again. Preservation.

He spent the next two hours in a reclining chair just waiting. To hasten things along he made up simple drills, like touching his elbow with his index finger or touching his left knee with his right toe. When Dr. Pulan next checked, he was able to stay upright with no issues.

"I do want you to be aware of the fall risks if dizziness returns," Dr. Pulan said. "But for now, you're clear to go. I do want you to use a wheelchair for the trip, to minimize fatigue."

"Is my department head here yet?"

"Nope, it's me. Hi."

Now that voice he recognized. "SecUnit," he said, trying to mask his dismay. "Hi."

Being wheeled was annoying. He didn't know how fast he was moving, so couldn't keep track of where he was. Actually, he wasn't sure how well he would have been able to stay oriented even on foot. He'd been so confident but never questioned how much memory was stored in his augments. The wheelchair didn't help though. Plus if anyone he knew saw him, they'd think the situation was far more serious than it actually was.

“Why are you here? Did you hack my medical records?”

“No Dr. Gurathin, I responded to a public feed message.”

“Why? What’s on the feed?”

“Your department head had a scheduling conflict with your updated release time, so she posted requesting that some other friend or family member of Dr. Gurathin volunteer.”

“Did everyone see her message?”

“Unlikely. I responded promptly. I told her I was handling it and that you were a very private person, so could she please delete the message.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“She was highly confused by my request to delete her message but she did comply. Then I contacted Medical and said I was part of your support circle but you’d forgotten to give me the details. They were very forthcoming.”

“Fuck.”

“Preservation has no concept of proprietary data,” SecUnit said in an oddly companionable tone. It then asked, “Why didn’t you tell the others?”

“I did,” he said defensively. “I said I was getting work done on my augments.”

SecUnit didn’t respond, and Gurathin couldn’t help but fill in a skeptical expression on its face. Whatever. He was busy trying and failing to stay oriented. It could be pushing him anywhere.

The wheelchair stopped briefly. A door hissed, SecUnit rolled him through it and then came to a stop again.

“You’re in front of the bed. I’m going to touch your arm and maintain a grip on you as you move to the bed.”

He wanted to tell it he wasn’t dizzy, but the trip had left him disoriented in space to the point where he wasn’t sure. While waffling, SecUnit put a hand under his forearm.

“You hate touching people,” he muttered.

“Medical situations are different. It’s not awful if it’s for medical care.”

He eased himself in bed and lay back. Instead of the hiss of the door, he heard SecUnit’s firm tread crossing the room and an audible thump as it sat down. SecUnit was fully capable of moving silently, so it had made these noises for his benefit.

“You can go,” he said. “I’m just going to sleep now.”

“Medical would not have discharged you if they knew you intended to go home alone.”

“I’m not actually dizzy. It’s just a momentary issue with proprioception.”

“What’s proprioception?”

“Awareness of the location of one’s own body. I routinely feed so much sensory data through the augments, I’ve lost track of that a little. But it’s already coming back.”

“Does alcohol affect proprioception?”

“Yes, it can also directly cause dizziness or lack of coordination. But loss of proprioception happens too.”

“So that’s why if you ask a drunk person to touch their finger to their nose, they’re likely to poke their own eye.”

“Maybe? It’s hard to tell what’s due to proprioception issues and what’s lack of coordination.” He wiggled his hand, moving each finger in turn. He could sense the motion without difficulty.

“So you could confuse drug-induced dizziness with lack of proprioception. Of course which it is won’t matter if you fall and give yourself a concussion.”

God, his head hurt. He didn’t have energy to argue. “I’m going to sleep,” he repeated. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

His alarm woke him to take his next round of drugs a few hours later. He tried to blink, then remembered he couldn’t right now.

“I’m going to hand you a cup,” SecUnit said.

Old skills came back and he sat up, held out his hand for SecUnit to press a cup of water into, then his other hand to take the pills.

“You’re still here,” he pointed out.

“Shall I contact Medical and ask Dr. Pulan’s opinion on whether you should be left unattended?”

Fine. Someone was going to have to stay. Not SecUnit though.

“I’ll call the others,” he said. He reached for the pad he’d left on the side table. His hand connected not with the smooth surface of the pad or table, but with another hand. He froze. The hand withdrew, pulling something smooth with it.

“Did you just take my pad?”

“Your pulse and respiration are spiking. You don’t want to contact them.”

He gaped.

“Why don’t you want to tell them?”

His throat tried to clamp shut. He forced out the words, “I do. That’s what I was just about to do when you stole my pad.”

“But you don’t want to.”

“I **do** want to. It’s not right of me to monopolize your rare time on Preservation. A lot of people must want to see you.”

“I’m a highly advanced piece of technology capable of handling many inputs. Currently I am attending many functions via drone and communicating over the feed. There is no need for me to attend every event in person.”

“But people will want to see you face to face. Don’t you want that too? You’re only on Preservation for another ten days.” Wait, that had been the total length of the trip. He was leaving out Arada’s birthday. “Nine.”

“People who can’t count to ten don’t get to handle their own recovery plan.”

“Everyone’s going to figure out where you are anyway, and they’ll just be hurt and angry that I didn’t tell them. I might as well get it over with.”

“People having hurt feelings at you sounds like a problem for Future Gurathin.”

“One which Current Gurathin could prevent.”

“Past Gurathin should have prevented this situation but didn’t. Current Gurathin is recovering from brain surgery and has every excuse to stick Future Gurathin with the job. Later Future and Current Gurathin can have a good bitch session about Past Gurathin.”

He snorted a bit at the image.

“Why am I the most acceptable option?”

“It’s just…” he groped for words. “They all talk so much. I can’t *bond* over this. I can’t suddenly become nicer. I’m probably going to be a bit of an asshole.”

“You’re always a bit of an asshole.”

“Exactly. I’m glad you get it.”

A wave of exhaustion swept over him, and lying down felt much more tempting than arguing with a stubborn SecUnit. Tomorrow he’d transition to a milder anti-rejection drug and the worst would be over, he thought. If SecUnit wanted to stay until then, let it.

Things went fine that first day and night. He drifted in and out of sleep a lot. Periodically SecUnit pressed pills, crackers, juice, or water on him. He obediently sipped the juice and nibbled the crackers. At one point he ate a small portion of one of his meals. It sat uneasily in his stomach, but some amount of food was important to reduce side effects from the antibiotics.

Despite the pain and nausea, or perhaps because of them, he felt increasingly restless. SecUnit walked next to him to spot him as he made a few slow turns around the room. The movement worsened his headache but calmed him down.

He tried putting on the news at one point. SecUnit turned it off.

“People recovering from surgery should avoid unnecessary stress,” SecUnit said.

“Did something bad happen?”

“No. Preservation news is boring. But if you listen you’re going to think way too hard about tariffs or soil reclamation or some shit like that. I’m putting on World Hoppers.”

“I hate that cheesy crap,” he muttered.

“Okay, I’m putting on Red Blobbie Blue.”

Red Blobbie Blue was actually kind of nostalgic. He’d been made to watch several hours of Red Blobbie Blue when he immigrated. Each ten minute segment of the show set up some situation, and viewers (usually small children) were encouraged to reflect on how they would handle the situation before watching the ending. At first it had felt deliberately humiliating. But his social worker never mocked his initial suggestions, and the two of them often engaged in surprisingly complex discussions of the philosophy behind how Preservationists handled these small conflicts.

“Wait,” he said suspiciously. “This isn’t some kind of object lesson on how I need to better absorb Preservation philosophy and trust my friends more, is it?”

“No. It reflects the fact that you currently have the processing power of a human toddler.”

“Fair.” Mollified, he let the familiar sounds wash over him.

After drifting in and out of sleep, on day two he woke up uncomfortable but hopeful. The pain wasn’t great but it wasn’t as bad as he’d feared. Maybe Preservation had top notch headache drugs or maybe his system was sensitive after years of not taking anything at all.

SecUnit brought him to the Medical for his monitoring checks, which showed no signs of fever and cell counts within the expected range. He still hated the wheelchair. Maybe by day three he’d be able to walk.

That afternoon, twenty-four hours after surgery, he took his first dose of the milder anti-rejection drug. The new drug did not sit as well with his system. He sat in bed propped up on pillows with his lined trash receptacle nearby, and tried to focus on whatever calming music SecUnit had put on. Probably theme music for some show, he thought, but at this point he didn't care.

When the need to vomit hit, everything felt very urgent. His feet were somehow tangled in the blanket and he lost track of where anything else was. He tried to reach the trash receptacle which had been right at his side, only to flail and start to fall. Then SecUnit was gripping his shoulders at the same time that hot, sour fluid came gushing out. The pain in his head shot through the roof in reaction to the pressure change near his eyes. He groped around but all he did was smack SecUnit and was his hand covered in vomit? He wasn't sure.

"Sorry," he choked, and then more fluid came out.

"It's fine," SecUnit said firmly.

When he was finished, he tried to stand up. SecUnit pressed a hand on his shoulder.

"I need to clean up."

"People who just had surgery don't get to do their own cleanup."

"Do you *like* fluids?" he spat out. "I didn't think so."

"It's different when it's medical."

"I can at least change the sheets."

"Do you realize you just tried to dive headfirst toward the floor? Do you *like* concussions?"

Something about the question cut through his feelings of misery and humiliation and drove home just how stupid he'd been to think he could go through this on his own. Would concussion at this stage increase the odds of tissue rejection? Would he have even been able to reach the pad to call for help if he'd hit the floor headfirst? He didn't even know.

He heard SecUnit speaking to Dr. Pulan. She said this was unfortunate but not a crisis, and that tomorrow he'd need to switch back to the other drug. This one was in his system now and if he was vomiting despite the anti-emetics he was already taking, the only thing to do was wait it out. Meanwhile she wanted him in for more labs and a stronger anti-emetic.

SecUnit made him sit at the clean end of the bed. It then brought him clean clothing and a warm washcloth. Wordlessly he wiped himself clean and put on the clothes. SecUnit guided him to the chair and stripped off the sheets. Had he even prepared clean sheets? He thought he'd organized everything so well but he hadn't thought about sheets. Maybe extras came with the room.

"Fluids are not a problem if it's medical care," SecUnit said.

"Thank you for keeping me upright," he mumbled. "And for cleaning up."

“I apologize for my comment about concussions. That was unnecessary.”

“No, it’s true. I was being an idiot.”

“Would you like to hold hands?”

Did he really look that pathetic? All the thought did was make him huddle in closer on himself. “No thank you.”

SecUnit wheeled him back to Medical. The trip felt endless. His head kept spinning and he clutched a plastic bag. Dr. Pulan was pleased with the lab results though, which came as a relief. She also gave him IV fluids.

The next several hours were not fun. The new anti-emetic was effective at preventing vomiting, which was good because vomiting was disgusting and also hurt like hell. Sadly it did not cure the nausea. He curled up into a miserable little ball.

Detox was worse, he reminded himself. Detox was longer and worse. This will be over soon. When that didn’t work he concentrated on hating everything.

Eventually Medical sent him back to his room. At some point he fell asleep. His dreams were disjointed and he woke up feeling vaguely sticky, as if he had sleep in his eyes. His hand went toward his face but something stopped him.

“Don’t touch your eyes,” SecUnit reminded him.

“Thanks.”

“I’m sorry. I should have let you call the others like you intended. Humans require emotional support during the recovery process, and my emotional support skills are inadequate.”

“No they’re not,” he said, genuinely taken aback. “SecUnit, you’ve been wonderful. It’s not you. I’m just not very good at this.”

“At recovering from surgery?”

“At accepting the need to depend on others. It seems to come so easily to everyone here. I guess I’ve been a little bit of an asshole about this.” He took a deep breath. “I want you to know that I’m grateful.” The words came out half-strangled but at least he’d said them.

“You’re always a bit of an asshole.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly, secretly a bit grateful for the emotional reprieve.

“But as patients go, you’ve been pretty low effort.”

“Really?”

“You took the prescribed drugs according to schedule. You didn’t assault me, your doctor, other patients, or the towel dispenser. You didn’t steal from Medical, masturbate or have sex

in front of me, take illegal drugs, take legal drugs in illegal ways, or decide that breath mints are a reasonable substitute for antibiotics. You didn't attempt to sneak out of the room and board a shuttle for the next system. You—"

"Okay," he said, a bit taken aback. "The towel dispenser?"

"To be fair, that patient was hallucinating and may have confused it for a hostile. Also to be fair, that patient was hallucinating due to taking illegal hallucinogens."

"I had no idea that Medicals involved so much security work. I guess you've got a backup career lined up if you ever get tired of whatever you're doing on the Perihelion."

The silence felt companionable. He'd drifted off a bit when SecUnit asked, "Why was my care preferable to that of the humans? You said it was because they talk too much and want to bond. Was that the truth?"

"I think it was a truth? Definitely not everything though." He took a moment to organize his thoughts.

"I think… sometimes I feel like I'm stuck between two worlds. The Corporate Rim part of me says I shouldn't be able to trust anyone unless I can control them. Even paid care or the support of my own employers wasn't reliable unless I had an angle to work. Then the Preservation part of me is all too aware of the weight of every thing I did wrong before I came here. if I think about that, I don't feel I deserve any of the care and concern that people here offer so freely."

He was half expecting the same lecture which had been playing in his head on repeat. If he truly embraced the ideals of Preservation, he would know it didn't matter if he deserved help. He needed help, so he should get it. Then later he should help others, not out of shame but because they needed help.

Instead SecUnit said, "Your threat assessment is spiking so your instincts are to rely on outdated tactics, because those tactics worked in the past."

He rolled that thought around. "Has that ever happened to you?"

"All the fucking time. It's obnoxious."

"Your judgment always seems so solid."

It snorted.

"What happens, when you default to old tactics?"

"The biggest risk is not caring." It paused. "It's not like I act on not caring though. It's more that I have to consciously remind myself to think about the future and to take action as if I care even if I temporarily don't."

"Because for the longest time, not caring was your only defense."

“Yeah.”

“And now? How are things now?”

“I don’t feel that wave of not caring as much. But I hate losing clients, I hate some of what I’ve done to keep from losing clients, and I hate it if something threatens my clients and there’s nothing to shoot.”

Gurathin knew he was a client, for all that they didn’t always get along. He wasn’t at risk of death, not unless his system reacted so badly to the printed tissue that it triggered rapid failure and some kind of raging infection, which was unlikely. But it rendered him vulnerable and must still be stressful for SecUnit.

It was past time for him to call the others.

“Please give me the pad,” he said. “I’m going to call Bharadwaj.”

“Not Mensah?”

“One thing I’m trying to grow past is the tendency I have to lean only on her. She’s a planetary administrator, she has so many people leaning on her already.”

“I offered to hug her once.”

That surprised him a little. SecUnit had, after all, gone so far as to put “no hugs” in its contract.

“She said no.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“I guess she thought I didn’t want to. But I did. I wanted to make her feel better. It was hard to say that I wanted to hug her, because then people might want to hug me all the time. So I just said it wasn’t terrible and she said no.”

It could be so hard to step outside of what people expected of you. He wanted to express sympathy, but he suspected that SecUnit was telling this story for a different reason.

“You’re doing the same thing she did. Don’t reject what she offers because you think she doesn’t mean it. She hates being powerless and she likes making people happy. Call her first, she’ll like that.”

He couldn’t message Mensah on the feed, so SecUnit did it for him. Mensah sent an audio connection invite to his pad shortly after.

“Gura? Why is SecUnit calling for you?”

Just hearing her voice made him smile.

“I’ve fallen into some old, bad habits,” he confessed. “The surgery was more involved than I let on.”

“Gura darling,” she said. He could see her face, or rather he could conceptualize it. His visual memory and imagination were poor, and he tended to translate into abstractions which he still thought of as sight. Right now her face would be warm, calm, a little concerned but not rushing to panic. A hint of chiding, a touch of humor.

“I know, I know.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m okay, just not feeling great. SecUnit’s been taking care of me, and it’s done an exceptional job. But I’d like to see the others, I don’t want to keep pushing all the responsibility on SecUnit alone, and I’d like SecUnit to have support as well if it needs that.”

“Of course. Do you want me to call the others?”

He’d made it through the first part of the call with surprising ease, but here his voice began to tremble. “No. Thank you for offering but I’d like to talk to them myself. I think…I want to tell them myself. That I couldn’t tell them. If that even makes sense.”

“It makes a great deal of sense. I’ll see you soon, Gura. Don’t let this weigh on you. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“You said I did an exceptional job,” SecUnit said.

It took him a moment to proccess. He’d been drifting again.

“Yeah. You really did.”

“How?”

“Well, for one thing, a lot of people aren't great at providing effective assistance for blind patients. Do you know how often I’ve been randomly grabbed? I hate that. The only time you grabbed me was when I was about to faceplant. Also you tolerated me being kind of an asshole and you didn’t make a thing about it.”

“You said this couldn’t be a bonding thing. We did bond though.” SecUnit sounded sulky.

“Is that so bad?”

“No, it’s just annoying, because if I could pick when life is like the serials, I’d pick something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like when you think people are dead but they’re not.”

Oh fuck. “What happened,” he asked as gently as he could.

“I can’t tell you. I can’t tell anyone because it’s classified, and that royally sucks. I don’t even know why that makes it worse. I hate talking about feelings. Plus lots of people on the Perihelion already know, so I can talk to them about it. But I keep wanting to tell someone new. Someone who doesn’t already know.”

He had no idea how to comfort it for a loss it couldn’t even express. Then he thought of its offer to hug Mensah, it’s offer to hold his own hand earlier. Of how hard it was to change.

He stretched out his hand. If SecUnit didn’t want to, it could pretend it hadn’t noticed.

It took his hand. It had a nice grip, he thought. Warm and solid.

It said, “You could get therapy better suited to your history in New Tideland. They can handle a wider range of issues than therapists here in Preservation. They’re even developing programs for constructs.”

“I’ll think about it, when this is all over.”

The thing about Preservation is that everything was always better than Gurathin expected. For all the cracks in this not-quite-paradise, for all the contradictions, compromises, and maddening naivete, there was something real and solid underneath that always, always exceeded his expectations.

The whole survey group came to see him except Ratthi, who was still handling business planetside before his departure. Not one of them asked why he hadn’t told them sooner. They took turns briefly wishing him well, their voices radiating warmth. Arada passed on a message from Ratthi, doing a passable imitation of his voice. And then, after having gone to all the trouble of coordinating a group visit, most of them left.

He felt so warm inside. Maybe later he’d still have to apologize. It didn’t matter. Right now he was being given the exact mix of kindness followed by quiet.

He still couldn’t handle too much without getting fatigued.

Only Dr. Mensah and SecUnit stayed after the others left. Mensah pulled the chair close and took his hand.

“I keep having to relearn the same lessons,” he told her ruefully.

“That’s human nature, I think. So long as we keep learning them, things tend to come out all right.”

She sat with him for a time, holding his hand, and then she left. She was the planetary administrator after all, and had a great deal to do. But on Preservation, holding a friend’s hand was cause enough to leave work midday even for polity leaders.

Bharadwaj came back after Mensah left.

“Were you waiting?” he asked, feeling a bit bad for her.

“Working,” she corrected. “But I could use a break. Would you like me to read to you?”

“That would be wonderful. I’ve had enough of Red Blobby Blue, and SecUnit won’t let me listen to news.”

“…I see.” In fact she sounded a little bewildered, but she opened her book without asking questions. She’d chosen a novel he knew well, and as the story began to unfold in her warm, calm voice, he found himself drifting again.

Later Ratthi came and told him funny stories about his relatives. Pin-Lee worked from his room for two days, and entertained him with a steady stream of swearing about legal matters. Bharadwaj read to him each lunch period, delaying her return to the planet’s surface until this stage of his treatment ended.

We all grow and change, he thought. He remembered the survey when he’d needed emergency surgery and Ratthi had stroked his face, intending nothing but kindness. He’d tried so hard to keep from flinching. He hadn’t been blind then, but he still didn’t like a hand suddenly coming at his face without any warning. He thought of Ratthi at Arada’s birthday party. Even when he stepped forward for a hug, Ratthi had let him control the pace.

SecUnit refused to leave the room. The others learned quite quickly not to argue because it would simply stop talking and sulk. It didn’t need to be physically present everywhere, it insisted. It had drones for that.

Seven days after surgery, he had a whole slew of scans. These would relate to his long term prospects. Mensah and SecUnit both accompanied him. The news was not what he had hoped.

“Given the level of elevated white blood cells I’m seeing, along with the fact that scans showing persistent inflammation around the interface, you’ll need to continue your current anti-rejection drug for as long as the printed tissue is in your body. Stepping down to a milder one is too risky. Moreover, I strongly recommend you undergo a second surgery to replace the printed tissue as soon as clonal tissue comes to maturity.”

It felt as if his whole body got heavier. He’d almost expected this, but sometimes he lost track of what he actually expected and what he simply feared.

“Okay,” he said.

“No arguments? I don’t want to hear yes and then have you vanish on me.”

“You’re asking me to choose between planned surgery versus emergency surgery to provide more printed tissue that I’m likely to reject even harder the second time around, with serious

risk of raging brain infection if I don’t catch the need for surgery soon enough? I have no arguments.”

“Good. The tissue’s already in the vat so let’s get you scheduled. Meanwhile, we can re-enable some of the augments but I don’t want excess stress on the tissue. Vision augments are okay, but processing needs to be throttled to about a third of its historical use.”

More time off work. Great. Or maybe he could just work slower, he thought. He’d go crazy if he had nothing to do but brood.

Getting his vision back was a tremendous relief, and also felt odd. Like his perception of hearing right after surgery, the data was there but the significance was lost. He almost felt he could see Mensah’s face better with his eyes closed.

It was only short term, he reminded himself.

“I’m coming back for the second surgery,” SecUnit said.

“You can’t guarantee that. You serve on a ship, timelines are never solid.”

“No one can ever guarantee anything, but I intend to be here.”

SecUnit had an exceptionally good record at carrying out its intentions.

“Won’t that interfere with your current position?”

“Flexible hours are written into my contract.”

His first instinct was to argue, to assure it that he’ll be more sensible this time, that he’ll rely on his friends and it doesn’t need to go through so much trouble. But the truth is, he didn’t want just the others. He wanted SecUnit too. In the end, he just said thank you. He was here on Preservation, he thought. It’s okay if he needs help from a friend. It’s allowed.

Author’s post-story note: Gurathin will be fine. The second surgery goes very smoothly.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!