Pumpkin Carving

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Pumpkin Carving

by jotc

Summary

Murderbot and Gurathin carve pumpkins at Mensah's harvest festival party. (Fluff with a side helping of Murderbot wrestling with anxiety as it adjusts to living far away from its Preservation humans.)

Notes

This is set post Network Effect, and contains Network Effect spoilers. (Edit: also major Rogue Protocol spoilers!)

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Chapter 1

One of the things Mensah hadn't been able to do while she was under threat of assassination was hold her annual harvest festival party. Then the decline of GrayCris left her safer, but there was this whole thing with ART kidnapping me and Mensah's oldest daughter Amena. (ART was the world's most annoying Asshole Research Transport, also known as Perihelion. There's a whole story behind the kidnapping, but I don't want to get into that right now, except to say that Mensah got re-traumatized and I ended up joining ART's crew.)

But this year she was finally holding her traditional party, and Ratthi and I were coming back to Preservation to visit just in time for me to provide security.

I was half excited and half apprehensive. Now that I lived on ART, I could understand the appeal of parties. They provided a convenient excuse to round up a bunch of humans in one place so you didn't have to track them all down separately. Plus I could see how excited Mensah was about the whole thing. On the down side, it was a lot of humans who might want to talk to me in the space of a single evening.

I told Mensah some of this and she smiled.

"I have a room set aside for you so you can get some privacy whenever you want."

I admitted that having a place to retreat to wouldn't suck.

"Oh, and the kids are putting on a play. Later it'll be filmed and go out on the feed, but harvest festival will be the opening night."

A chance to record rare media suddenly made the party seem like much less of a chore.

Mensah told me a few other things about how the party would unfold, which was useful for security planning. Before the party started there would be a lot of baking seasonal foods, and her multitude of children and also Gurathin would carve pumpkins. She said that Gurathin carved the best ones.

I immediately wondered why Gurathin would be the best at pumpkin carving. He was never much at any Preservation-specific custom. When the team first rented me for the survey, Ratthi had to coax him to join the consensus circle. (To be fair, that might have been because he didn't want to rent me.) When the rest of PresAux danced freely to music, he bounced awkwardly in his seat, looking around like a nervous new hire who can't even imitate the others. (He'd lived on Preservation for six years by then.) And he never once joined in when the others did the we-can-talk-about-it call and response.

But maybe people carved pumpkins wherever he was originally from.

#

When I arrived early to set up the perimeter, Mensah was there to welcome me.

“SecUnit, thank you for coming.”

It was a standard greeting, but for me greetings like this were still a novelty. And while the words themselves might be rote, the warmth in her voice and the way her face lit up was all Mensah and left me feeling melty.

Various people were already busy. I set up a drone perimeter and also assigned one to each room. While I was doing that, Mensah showed me my room.

It was a tidy little space with a bed, a small dresser and night stand. Mensah said, “It used to be for our youngest, but now that Farai’s sister moved out, the kids shuffled the rooms around and we reserve this one for guests.”

“It’s nice.” The room actually was nice, but what I meant was it would be nice to have someplace I could stare at a wall without anyone watching.

Mensah left me in the room and I spent a bit of time just watching through the drones. I was temped to stay there, but if I just wanted to watch without interacting, I wouldn’t have even come in the house. I would have lurked outside like one of those monsters in media that turn out to not be evil. So I made myself leave and go to the main common room.

Farai and the kids had been off in a room planning something for the play. They finished their meeting and all entered the common area at the same time I did. They swarmed around me in an excited group, all rushing to talk to me at once. I didn’t try too hard to sort out the chatter, knowing they would repeat the important bits.

“Come carve pumpkins with us!”

That suggestion met widespread approval, so I followed them to one of the house’s two kitchens.

The youngest grabbed me by the hand, only for the older ones to tell her in a chorus that she wasn’t allowed to touch me. I didn’t mind much. She wasn’t ignoring my preferences. Rather, she was too young to understand theory of mind, so “don’t touch SecUnit” was a comprehensible but arbitrary rule.

Nevertheless, I let them scold her into letting go. Mensah, Tano, and Farai had gone to the effort of coaching the kids on how to interact with me, and I didn’t want to undermine the basic principle they were teaching: ask before you grab. Besides, if she did it once and didn’t get corrected, she might do it again, with sticky hands.

Her face screwed up as if she was about to cry, but one of the older kids said she could hold his hand instead, and also he would hold her up if she was too short to see the pumpkins. That mollified her enough to get her to swap targets.

The kitchen smelled like toasted nuts and sugar with an sweet and earthy undernote I attributed to the raw pumpkins. Tano was busy mixing something in a bowl.

“You should come sit in the visiting chair,” the third oldest told me. Gurathin sat at a table frowning intently at a pumpkin as he scratched it lightly with the tip of a knife. To his left was a crayon drawing of a spider. To his right was an empty chair.

I followed the horde of children over to what was evidently the visiting chair. Gurathin didn’t notice me until I sat down. Then he looked over and his face made the expression I’d labeled as “appalled.” He’d made that same expression back when I’d shown up unannounced to help the team on TranRollinHyfa Station. I don’t know why he would be so appalled to see me here though. It’s not like I was a threat, or even an unexpected guest.

Then his face smoothed out, he shifted his gaze to my shoulder and smiled that same shy smile he used for the rest of the survey. Seriously, these were some confusing mixed signals.

“SecUnit, good to see you.”

“Why are you carving pumpkins?” I asked.

The kids all answered at once, the only intelligible bit of info being that Uncle Gura carved the best pumpkins. Mensah had already told me that, so it wasn’t new intel. (“Uncle” Gura was though. I told myself I wasn’t jealous that he had a family title. Then I remembered that Amena had called me third mom and I was actually not jealous.)

“The kids like them,” he said, his cheeks turning faintly pink.

The second oldest said, “He does our drawings. You can look at the pumpkins but you can’t ask what they’re about until after the play.”

Another said, “The finished ones are out where you can see them. Uncle Gura’s are the ones with no holes.”

The finished pumpkins had been lined up on a table. I sent a drone to take a closer look.

“They don’t look like anything in the light,” the third oldest said. “Tano, can we turn the lights off for a minute?”

Tano said, “The candles aren’t in yet.”

“Can we put in candles?”

Tano shook her head and said he was busy baking, and the kids would just have to be patient. The third oldest heaved a deep sigh before accepting that.

“They’ll look cooler later,” he said.

They didn’t look bad now, actually. Most of the pumpkins had crude faces with holes for the eyes and mouth. All the faces were lopsided to some degree, but some looked deliberately twisted or skewed.

“Are they supposed to leer?” I asked.

“They’re protective figures, so they’re meant to be a little unsettling,” Gurathin said. “They safeguard the harvest until the raw materials can be processed and preserved. It’s more of a friendly fantasy than a real belief though.”

A few pumpkins had pictures instead of faces. These lacked holes, as the kids had explained. Instead, just the outer layer of pumpkin flesh had been scraped away to varying depths. These must be Gurathin’s. Compared to the simple faces, they looked bland and drab, but I knew the images would look more striking when lit. I wouldn’t say the second style was better than the faces, but these pumpkins clearly took more time to make.

I didn’t want to ask why Gurathin was some kind of pumpkin carving expert because that would be weird. Instead I asked, “Why is this the visiting chair?”

“The kids just call it that. I put it here because at first they wanted to watch me work. But they found out that’s kind of boring, so it just got used by whoever wants to chat.”

Tano grinned and added, “If they stay very long, I put them to work.”

“Do many people visit the kitchen before the party?”

“Mostly just family checking in if they can help.”

Gurathin had figured out a way to catch up with Mensah’s family members without needing to enter and exit multiple group conversations, and he hadn’t even been trying. I absolutely didn’t feel a flash of petty resentment over it.

The second oldest said, “It’s not boring to watch, we just like to get surprised. Whatever we draw always looks different on the pumpkin.”

While we’d been chatting, my drone arrived at another of Gurathin’s pumpkins.

“You did ART!” He’d simplified ART’s form, but the intention was clear. A few arcing lines behind it captured a sense of motion. A small station to ART’s upper left somehow managed to look like it was receding. I partially took it back about the pumpkins looking drab. You had to pay attention but the image itself was engaging.

“Perihelion is very striking. I thought it must be quite a ship, for you to want to stay on it,” Gurathin sort of mumbled.

“ART’s going to be so smug.”

“You could just not tell it.”

Of course I wasn’t going to not tell ART. The only things I didn’t tell it were things I didn’t want to think about. But Gurathin was the only one of the original survey team who didn’t know what had happened during that whole thing I didn’t talk about earlier. He had no idea how advanced ART was.

So instead of explaining, I said “Do me too.”

It was a rude thing to say and I regretted the words as soon as they came out of my mouth. I really need to code that two second delay. Gurathin once again looked appalled, and I was about to tell him never mind when his face relaxed and he said, “Okay, once I finish the ones for the kids.”

It would be even more awkward to try to take it back now. He already said okay and I hate it when I say things about myself and people don’t take me seriously.

Why on earth did I even want to see my own face in pumpkin form?

Maybe he’d draw an action scene. That might be better. At least I wouldn’t have to look at my own facial features in sticky vegetable form while I decided whether or not to compliment the results.

I watched him carve for a while. He used what was basically a sharp metal loop on a stick to scratch and scoop away pumpkin flesh. The deeper he cut, the brighter that part of the final image would be. The pumpkin was fibrous he took some care to prevent strips from peeling away.

The art took shape as he worked. Fourteen minutes later, a giant spider stood in profile. Its two front legs were raised in a threat display, and before it stood a small child holding a sword.

In the original crayon drawing, a crude spider stared at the viewer with eight red eyes, while the sword-wielding enemy stood in profile. The artist had switched to marker to get a finer point for the child’s eye and for some reason, its shoes.

While the original spider had sort of a derpy menace, Gurathin’s adaptation was poised to strike, its limbs already half encompassing the child, who held out a sword as if uncertain of its function. He’d also added a poison marker on the spider’s abdomen.

“You changed a lot,” I said.

“I consulted with the artist about her intentions. She said it should look really scary and big.”

He stood up and the kids came rushing over. The original artist was the youngest. Her older sibling held her up as promised. She ran her fingers over the shape. I couldn’t tell if she liked it.

At last she said, “It’s very scary but the eyes should be red.”

“I see,” Gurathin said gravely, not pointing out that he had only one color to work with.

Satisfied with his answer, she asked to be put down and ran off.

“Maybe don’t watch me do the next one,” Gurathin said awkwardly.

“You let the kids watch.” (Why do I say these things? I didn’t want to watch.)

“They provide the art. It’s not as nerve-wracking.”

That made sense. But while I was thinking about his answer, I said, “How did you get so good at pumpkin carving?”

(Seriously, why do I say these things? I’d already decided not to ask.)

Gurathin looked uncomfortable. “When I was invited the first time, Mensah told me about how the party usually goes. She mentioned pumpkin carving, so I looked it up in the feed. I saw pumpkins like these and thought that’s what everyone would be making. I didn’t want to be the only one who didn’t know how, so I practiced at home.”

See, I told myself, asking was fine. It wasn’t even a traumatic story, if I ignored the part about Gurathin deliberately studying to fit in. Which totally didn’t remind me of myself at all, by the way.

I suddenly realized that if I didn’t leave soon, I was going to get a front row seat to Gurathin carving me. So I stood up and left. Through the drone, I could see that Gurathin looked a little relieved. I tried not to be insulted.

#

The party went well. Mensah displayed the good kind of stress when a person cares about something but they aren’t in danger or about to have a panic attack. I spoke to an excessive number of humans including everyone on the survey team, Mensah’s innumerable relatives, Indah (head of Preservation Station Security), and some of Indah’s staff who I knew from the time I helped Preservation Station Security solve a murder case.

I also spoke to two Preservation Council members, who asked me annoying questions about whether Mensah really needed the level of security which I was capable of providing. I said no. (It was a reasonable question, actually, in that it was arguably council business if Mensah was under threat.) (That didn’t stop me from being annoyed.)

It was a relief when the play started and I got a chance to have emotions about media instead of trying to navigate one conversation after another. I recorded it from multiple angles.

The story was a charming one about a bunch of kids who get left behind during a station evacuation. Various equipment failures release a fast-growing arachnid, and the kids have to safely get to a communications terminal. One by one, they perform some brave task and then get caught by the spider. Thankfully the arachnid strings them up for later instead of devouring them. The second to last child gets a message out and is then caught. The final child then traps the spider, liberates the others, and all of them are waiting safely at the docks when help arrives.

During the performance, Tano and some of the other adults had put out trays of roasted pumpkin seeds, a large bowl of sweet liquid beverage, another even larger bowl of pumpkin stew, and various other kinds of food and drink. The carved pumpkins had been put on various tables around the room and the lights had been set to low.

Now that the pumpkins held candles and sat in shadow, the faces flickered and shifted as if alive. If this were media, they would wait until no one was looking to transform into more

ominous shapes.

Gurathin's drawings took on a luminous glow and the contrast between the carving and the intact skin popped. Risk assessment didn't respond to carved vegetation but something in my organics shivered a little at the sight of the giant spider menacing a small human.

I knew from my drone that Gurathin was standing around awkwardly like he didn't know who to talk to. Because he was watching the crowd, he saw me find my pumpkin.

Gurathin was deliberately not looking at me. I was deliberately not looking at Gurathin. It took me a couple of seconds to stop not looking at Gurathin and actually look at the pumpkin.

Rather than try to capture my features, he'd carved a small, crude figure with a visor concealing my face. He'd placed multiple small scenes around the entire pumpkin.

Here I was on top of a mountain, holding out my hand as if to catch a snowflake. Here I stood on the rim of a station looking at a star (one tiny diamond stood in for the rest.) Here I stood in a grove of trees looking at a falling leaf, and here I was next to a river looking at a crab, and here in space again, floating next to a ship.

I hated planets but Gurathin didn't. And although the little figure representing me didn't have a visible face, the tilt of its head somehow captured a feeling of curiosity and exploration. Beneath them ran a wavy line like a trail.

My face was doing a thing. My insides were melting and it felt good but so intense that it almost felt like pain.

"You drew my perimeter walk," I said. My voice came out kind of husky.

"Yeah." His voice was a little husky too. "It's good you came back."

"And then I left again."

"That's okay. It's not the same thing."

"I hate having to choose."

He made that appalled face again and looked straight at me. (I was starting to think maybe "appalled" was the wrong label.)

"You miss Preservation?" he asked.

"I hate that I can't be both places. I wished you were on our last mission, we could have used another systems analyst."

"None of us really had much choice about who ended up where," he pointed out, which was true but annoying. (Ratthi, Pin-Lee, Arada, and Mensah's oldest ended up on the other side of a wormhole with ART and me while everyone else present got left behind, which again was a whole thing I'm not going to get into right now.)

“You’re the only one who hasn’t signed the non-disclosure agreement. Even Bharadwaj signed, so I could talk to her for the documentary.”

It came out sounding angry. I didn’t mean to sound like that. The trouble with talking to people is you find out things about your feelings that you didn’t even know about.

I hated that I couldn’t tell him about ART. I hated that I had to choose who to be with. I wanted all my people in the same place, but life didn’t work that way. I could visit Preservation, but anything could happen here and I wouldn’t know until later. Meanwhile, anything could be happening back aboard ART.

These were the kinds of thoughts that made me want to go stare at a wall. Which was stupid, because if I had limited time with people, I ought to spend it actually interacting with them. But thinking about how stupid I was being just made me want to stare at a wall even more.

I don’t think Gurathin noticed my tone, because he didn’t react defensively at all. He just said, “Do you have a copy with you? I didn’t want to overstep, but if it’s really all right, I’d love to know.”

ART was going to be so incredibly smug. ART had insisted that I get advance approval from Seth, because without Seth’s approval the document would be invalid. I hadn’t wanted to ask because that would mean admitting I wanted to talk to Gurathin. And then it turned out that Seth had to check with people back at PSUMNT, and they also had to check with Mensah, who fortunately did not try to have a conversation with me about any of it. She just confirmed that Gurathin sometimes assists with Preservation polity security decisions and thus has high clearance.

I sent him the document. He got the glaze-eyed look that meant he was reading something in the feed but didn’t want to close his eyes. The NDA contained some dire penalty clauses, so it was just as well he was reading it thoroughly.

Watching him read it was oddly stressful, so I went to talk to Ratthi.

“If I ask you a weird question, can you not make it more weird?” I asked.

“Sure!”

He didn’t even hesitate before agreeing. This is why Ratthi is my friend. I showed him a still of Gurathin’s appalled face.

“What expression is that?”

He laughed. “Startled alley cat! It’s kind of adorable how his face freezes and his eyes go wide like that. It never lasts more than an instant. I suppose it’s a survival instinct but I find it charming. Why?”

“I think I don’t always read him right.”

“I guess he’s not as open as those of us who were born here. You two are getting along these days, right?”

“He’s an asshole, but he’s still my client.”

That just made Ratthi smile warmly like I’d said something sentimental. I don’t know why. It was just a statement of fact.

Somehow Ratthi and I ended up standing in front of my pumpkin. Ratthi didn’t say anything, but he shot a quick smile at my drone and then gazed at the pumpkin for some time, smiling softly.

“I want to do one too,” I said.

“Let’s go talk to Tano, there should be extras in the kitchen.”

It took me a bit of experimentation to learn how to peel away the rind without tearing the edges. I wasn’t aiming for something detailed with a lot of shading though.

While I was working, Gurathin sent me the signed NDA. I sent him back my mission report with instructions not to read it at the party. He tapped to acknowledge. Then he started walking toward where people stored their coats and outdoor shoes.

Don’t go yet, I said, feeling like a complete idiot.

I want to read the report. You were upset that I didn’t already, right? I usually don’t stay late at these things anyway.

So he had noticed my reaction. Ugh.

I’m carving a pumpkin and I want the whole team to see it.

Again, I felt like a total idiot sending that. I knew my face was making and expression and I was glad no one was looking at me. But since I’d already said this much, I added, *What if everyone changes too much and it’s like we don’t know each other any more?*

He responded immediately. *That won’t happen here. Preservation is too stable, people don’t change overnight like that.*

The speed of his response was somehow comforting, as if he’d wrestled with this fear himself and was sharing what he’d found to be true. I thought about how people in the Rim could get forced into indentures and shipped away, or transferred via a hostile takeover and cut off from their old friends. Or in my case, memory wiped by the company. He was right, that wouldn't happen here.

Humans still find trouble. Something could happen to you while I’m away.

That’s just life. Bad news can come without warning even if you see someone every day.

Oddly that did make me feel better. I was used to not being able to control anything. Now that I could control some things, maybe I still needed to accept that others were out of my control.

I did want the whole team to see my pumpkin, or alternately I wanted to delete the memory of ever having said I would carve one and pretend ignorance if anybody asked. But the part that wanted to finish was stronger so I continued working.

I drew small crude human shapes, barely a step above stick figures. Beneath each I put an identifying mark.

Mensah got the symbol of Preservation itself. Ratthi got a spiral shape often used to symbolize wormholes. Bharadwaj got a crystal because if I drew any other kind of rock, it would just look like an irregular lump. Pin-Lee got the symbol on her lawyer's badge. Arada got a crab. I thought about doing the giant hostile from the survey but I worried it might upset people to see it. Besides, I liked the connection to Gurathin's work. Gurathin got a hand backed by the frame of a display surface, for the way he so often used his hands when manipulating the feed.

And finally, me. Instead of a symbol, I'd carved myself with hands raised to make a barrier. Beneath us all, I carved a solid, straight line.

The pumpkin fell short of what I'd envisioned yet somehow making it made me feel satisfied, as if I'd had an especially rewarding conversation with myself.

I put in the candle and brought it out. Gurathin and Ratthi were chatting, but Gurathin must have been watching the way to the kitchen because he spotted me immediately. I set the pumpkin next to the one he'd done of me and looked away so I wouldn't have to see their reactions. But then I watched their faces through a drone anyway.

Ratthi said "It's us!" A big grin spread over his face and he began rounding up all the survey members. Mensah, Pin-Lee, Arada, and Bharadwaj all came to look and they all took turns exclaiming and admiring various elements more than was really called for.

"You're protecting us," Mensah said. I thought about saying something sentimental but the whole point of carving it was to express what I couldn't say aloud.

In that case, what did Gurathin's art say? He'd carved my perimeter walk, but he'd left out all the terrible bits. Ganaka Pit wasn't shown, nor was Miki's death. There was no scene of me staring at a wall trying so hard not to stop caring.

And yet somehow his carving felt right. Like he'd shown the good bits and made them more real, more worth remembering while the other stuff could not be forgotten, but could recede in importance. Maybe he'd just carved his good wishes. Gurathin's pumpkin and mine felt like one combined work of art, like a two-part episode of the same serial.

Actually, maybe now that I said it in art, I could say it in words too. My humans would like that.

"You're all still my clients and if you need me, I will come. And if anything tries to hurt you, I will rip its intestines out," I told them. (ART thinks the bit about intestines is my way of avoiding direct expressions of emotion, but what does ART know? Few things are more direct than a promise to rip intestines out.) This was enough emotion for one evening, so I

retreated to my room before they could wave their hands or exclaim at me. But I watched through my drone and saved everything to permanent storage.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

People kept joining conversations with Gurathin and saying, “You’re still here” in this tone of surprise and delight. And every time, Gurathin would smile back awkwardly.

Why was he still here? I’d asked him to stay so I could show everyone my pumpkin. I hadn’t meant that he had to stay indefinitely, and he was too much of an asshole to stay just because he thought it might please me.

But maybe he was just waiting for the right moment. I saw him excuse himself from a cluster of people, wander toward one of the food tables, then shift direction and head toward the place where everybody had put their shoes.

But then Ratthi (who was also heading toward the food table) (except in Ratthi’s case it was because he wanted food) spotted him and announced, “Gugu! You’re still here!”

Gurathin winced. Ratthi was a tiny bit tipsy and louder than usual. (Ratthi isn’t exactly quiet but he’s not usually attention-getting levels of loud unless he’s doing it on purpose.) (Like that time on the survey when he asked me to make a speech.) (No, I’m not still mad about that. He meant well.)

Anyway, Ratthi noticed the shoes despite being tipsy, so then he said, “Oh, were you just leaving?” but in that same loud voice.

And Gurathin, like an idiot, said, “Not quite yet.”

I could see his remorse as soon as the words came out. Did he just reflexively deny something because he’d made a lifelong habit of being a contrary asshole? You would think an ex-CR spy would have better spy craft than that.

I think Ratthi was skeptical but unwilling to challenge him, so Ratthi dragged him over to meet someone from the wormhole department. And that conversation went fine until the power briefly dropped.

The room went dark. A lot of people got startled into silence, and when they started talking it was to chatter about the outage instead of whatever they were saying before.

Mostly people didn’t get too upset or unnerved. Humans hate being plunged into darkness but in this case the pumpkins provided some degree of light, their faces flickering and shifting. But the real reason most of them didn’t show a strong stress response was because they didn’t associate a power dip or even a full outage with anything bad, and they knew the secondary systems would come online soon.

Sure enough, roughly three seconds later the room lights came back up. Conversations rapidly went back to normal, with no one seeming overly rattled except Gurathin.

Gurathin clutched both arms above the elbow the way he had so often on the survey. His pulse rate had jumped. (A lot of people had displayed a spike in pulse rate initially, but most of them quickly trended back toward baseline while his continued to increase.) Then he let go of his elbows but it looked more as if he was forcing his hands down than as if he'd relaxed.

"Maybe it's time to head home?" Ratthi asked quietly. (Evidently even tipsy Ratthi could tell this wasn't something to be loud about.)

"In a minute," Gurathin muttered. His breath was growing strained.

In the past I considered it "not my job" if a client showed emotional distress. Emotional support and murderbots don't mix. That was before I figured out I could run interference between Mensah and the people who wanted to crowd her after her kidnapping. I also had a good record at distracting her from distressing conversations by peppering her with absurd budget requests.

In other words, it still wasn't my job but I wasn't completely incapable on this front. And I didn't want Gurathin to have a panic attack in the middle of the party for the same reason I hadn't wanted to risk walking out of the party to check the perimeter, or worse, facing a wall in full view.

I walked up to Gurathin and said, "I can take you to the quiet room."

He didn't respond right away. Ratthi said, "Oh, there's a quiet room now? Nice addition!" I think he was just giving Gurathin time to find words.

"Sure," Gurathin said. It wasn't very enthusiastic but that was fine. I'm never very enthusiastic when I want out of a situation.

I led him to the little room. He actually looked more stressed when we arrived, but what he said aloud was, "This is nice." He followed it shortly after with, "I'm fine. You don't need to stay and babysit."

That annoyed me somehow even though I have a history of not wanting people to stare at me when I'm feeling emotions.

"Do you want me to leave?" I asked.

"No. But you can. I'm fine."

I thought things over and decided to try telling the truth. It had worked out pretty well so far tonight. "I don't want to go back to the party. I want to stay here. I don't care if you have a panic attack. You don't have to talk to me."

That sounds rude but I didn't say any of it in a rude way. He nodded.

I stood facing the wall. Gurathin sat on the bed. At first he sat legs over the edge, like a couch. Eventually his breathing calmed down.

He looked pale. His skin tone is on the light side but there's a different sort of pale that light-skinned humans get when they're distressed. He rubbed one of his hands with the other as if trying to warm it up.

"There are blankets," I pointed out.

His gaze briefly flicked to the quilt.

"I shouldn't monopolize the room. Someone else might want it."

"They won't."

He looked momentarily confused and then his eyes narrowed. "It's your room," he said, sounding a bit accusatory. (Was that me misinterpreting again?)

"It's fine. I don't need the bed."

He did that thing where he was trying too hard not to look at me and it was almost worse than if he just looked. Then he let out a gusty sigh and crawled under the covers.

It was a little weird. Not as weird as the time a human client named Tapan fell asleep next to me while I was pretending to sleep (I was playing the role of an augmented human.) She had crept as close to me as possible without actually touching me. I don't know exactly what I felt in that moment. It wasn't bad but it had felt fragile somehow. ART thought I was reacting to the fact that she trusted me.

Standing around with Gurathin sleeping wasn't quite that weird, partly because we weren't close enough to touch and partly because he already knew what I really was. It was still pretty weird, but I decided not to bother examining whatever weird feelings I had and instead watched Sanctuary Moon.

Gurathin woke abruptly, about two hours later. His eyes shot open as if he'd programmed an alarm into his augments. Maybe he had. I watched through a drone as he blinked, checked the room, startled and then relaxed when he saw me, and finally relaxed into a sort of bleary-eyed sleepiness reminiscent of when he'd woken to say goodbye after the survey.

He got out of bed, pulled a face when his feet hit the floor (it wasn't especially cold but it was colder than the bed), and began tidying the sheets and quilt. Through the drone I could see him stealing glances at the door, his face supremely unenthused.

(I know I had an imperfect history of interpreting his face, but in this case context was on my side. It was storming out. If he left he would have to walk past all the remaining guests who thought he'd already left and might want to talk to him and then go home in the storm.)

"Mensah has spare hygiene kits," I said.

He looked longingly at the bed. "It won't be uncomfortable for you?"

“No.” (I don’t think that counted as a lie. It fell within the acceptable amount of truth-shading that counts as manners.)

He messaged Mensah over the feed and a little while later, she showed up with a hygiene kit. Mensah is always happy whenever people she likes get along but I could see she was trying not to make a fuss. She showed him the second floor hygiene area and he disappeared to do human things before returning and crawling back under the covers.

“Thanks,” he said awkwardly. “It’s a bit embarrassing. I should be past having reactions like this. I was for a while.”

“Power outages were never good news, back there.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t just that though. I thought I was doing okay being around the drinking but it snuck up on me.”

“Is it dangerous for you?”

“You mean in terms of temptation? No. I never drank heavily and actually never much liked it. I quit completely after…well, it’s standard advice. But I don’t like being around intoxicated people. No one here gets really drunk but I guess the smell reminds me.”

Drunk clients led to so many unfortunate outcomes. I hadn’t thought about humans picking up that kind of aversion.

“Why did you stay?”

“I always want to. And I did all right at first, you were doing security and that helped me relax. So I thought it would be okay.”

Knowing he found my presence reassuring was giving me an emotion. But he still looked awkward, pale, and unhappy which was giving me a different emotion.

“I can leave if you don’t want me here all night.”

“No!” His pulse spiked and his breath picked up speed again. “I can leave if you don't want to share the room.”

“I don’t want you to leave. I thought you might want privacy during the night. I wasn’t sure if me being here while you napped would be the same as me being here all night.”

“It’s kind of the opposite. This is stupid but I don’t want to sleep in a house full of people in a room with no lock.”

(He didn’t add, unless you’re here, but it was implicit and it left me feeling warm.)

He let out a frustrated huff of air. “It’s stupid. I should be past all this. I know no one here is going to do anything.”

I’d suspected something, actually, and I’d been wanting to ask. “Are things getting worse?”

“You mean stress reactions and so forth?”

I nodded (while wondering what symptoms he was lumping under “and so forth." I’d never been more tempted to hack his medical records.)

“A bit, but don’t get the wrong impression. I’m just complaining. It’s normal for symptoms to flare up and then subside from time to time, in reaction to life events.”

“Did you get that phrase from a therapy module?”

“So what if I did?” he asked, scowling. Then he smoothed out his face and said, “Sorry. And yeah, I did. But that just means that professional mental health experts have verified that it’s true.”

“Do the modules talk about how annoying it is when you have to explain everything?”

He just blinked at me.

“That’s why you’re doing modules instead of seeing a person, isn’t it? Because if you talk to a Preservation-trained therapist, you have to explain every little thing. Like power outages.”

“Yeah. I guess it’s worse for you, right?”

I’d tried some of the therapy modules from the Corporation Rim. They tended to be designed for humans who weren’t disposable, because nobody cared about the mental health of indentured humans in places like mining facilities, they just hired SecUnits to keep them in line. I didn’t find much that helped me. But I wasn’t talking about me right now.

“You could find better therapy at PSUMNT.”

He blinked at me again but I could tell he was focusing his attention. After a bit he shifted his gaze to the wall over my shoulder.

I felt a bit bad about accidentally insulting Preservation therapists, so I explained, “By better, I mean a better match for your background. You could talk to a human who knows Corporation Rim basics.”

Gurathin immediately shook his head. “I couldn’t leave.”

“Why not?”

“Mensah needs me. I assist with Preservation security.”

“Was I wrong to leave?”

“Of course not.” He stole a quick glance at me and his face went soft. “She’s proud of you, you know.” He hastened to add, “not in a condescending way.”

“It’s okay. I’m proud of her too.” (I’m proud of all my humans. Even Gurathin.)

It was a nice moment and I let it linger a bit. Then I said, “Are you more important to Preservation security than I am?”

“No, but that’s not the same.”

“Why not?”

“This is my home. Mensah saved me, this is where I belong.”

“So you can never leave?”

“No! Quit twisting things.” He’d grabbed his arms again.

“I’m not twisting things. Even the young people leave and come back. Amena’s going to attend PSUMNT.”

I gave him a minute to absorb that.

“You’re cleared to know about ART’s crew now, so I can tell you this. We have one crew member who was enslaved into a corporation death squad. The therapy he received at PSUMNT helped him a lot.”

“Why did he join ART’s crew?”

“ART’s crew needed someone who knew CR tactics, he wanted to help, and the faculty director recommended him. Seth was initially hesitant but it’s worked out well.”

“And he’s really okay to go out and fight them?” Gurathin looked genuinely impressed. (As the newest crew member, Tarik is the butt of a lot of teasing, so it was weird seeing this reaction from someone who hadn’t even met him. But actually when I thought about it, it was impressive.)

(When I thought about it, I’d also escaped from being a corporate enforcer and become someone who fought them. I don’t think of myself as impressive, but maybe I kind of am? It was a weird thing to consider.)

I said, “You wouldn’t know it from what just happened, but ART and its crew really do try to handle things peacefully. But yes, he fights when he has to. I was glad to have him along when we ran into trouble. I think you two would get along. And I asked him who he saw.” I sent him the information in the feed.

Gurathin said, “I’ll think about it.” Sometimes that means shut up and quit bothering me, but in this case Gurathin followed the feed links I’d sent him. (He didn’t open a shared channel, but he didn’t mark his activity as private either. That basically counted as an invitation.)

He read about the program for a bit, but just thinking about it must have stressed him out, because his pulse started rising. After a while he switched to the mission file I’d sent him earlier.

“Humans need rest periods,” I said.

“Oh shut it,” he grumbled, but I had a drone on his face and I could see him smiling. A moment later he added in a much softer voice, “Thank you, SecUnit. I really will think about it.”

He fell asleep not long after. I guarded the door. Initially me providing security for Mensah’s party had just been an excuse, a way for me to stay calm about my presence here. It was always easier to be at an event like this if I had a purpose. But I’d actually performed security. Not the way I would have been forced to in the past by my governor module, but this new way I was learning, where I combined my function with goals of my own. And it felt good.

Chapter End Notes

When I originally wrote this, I wanted to end it with Gurathin committing to therapy at PSUMNT. But I also wanted to get it done before Halloween and things just weren't quite coming together. When I posted, I didn't have any plans to add, but I found that it bugged me not to come a little closer to my initially desired ending. Gurathin wasn't ready to say yes just yet but I did what I could :)

I would also like to share links for some of the pumpkin carvings that inspired me (I myself am not skilled at it!) I don't know how long they'll stay good, but here they are.

Spectacular child-and-spider combo:
https://www.reddit.com/r/pumpkincarving/comments/1ggwqrt/spider_pumpkin_special_request_by_my_4_year_old/

Traditional pumpkins with a slightly unsettling air:
https://unsplash.com/photos/a-group-of-carved-pumpkins-sitting-on-top-of-a-forest-floor-LeTW9ss1OYw

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