Time Passing Swift and Slow

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Time Passing Swift and Slow

by jotc

Summary

After the events of All Systems Red, Bharadwaj returns home to fully recover from the worm attack. She takes up media studies, advises the Preservation council with Arada, makes treats with her grandmother, does trauma treatment, gets involved in mineral rights negotiations, and waits for her friends to come home. And waits. And waits. (Primarily TV-verse, but probably won't be Season 2 canon compliant. References Exit Strategy events and one minor plot point from Network Effect.)

Notes

Thanks to Rakel for the prompt which inspired chapter 1. Rakel, you prompted murderathin with Gura getting emotional over having his hair washed, but my mind went straight to TV ep 10 when Gura might need help showering, and you were a good sport about my character swap <3. At the time, it was meant as a gen fic one-shot, but recently I dusted it off. Thanks to Jack Daw for the title, which is an indirect reference to the poem "Time Is" by Henry Van Dyke. And finally thanks to Mari for being a major source of inspiration and also for beta reading! When you mentioned that Gurathin/Bharadwaj was your favorite ship, I immediately thought of how well that would fit here, and knowing I had at least one reader who would be interested was hugely motivational. Gurathin/Bharadwaj currently has just 10 fics on AO3, so I'm pleased to add an 11th!

▶ contents (may contain spoilers)

Chapter 1: Showering

Gurathin had only told them he would “look into some options” regarding SecUnit’s lost memories. So when he stumbled back looking manic and ill and saying he “had it,” none of them had quite understood at first. But then he took out his hard wire and handed it to Bharadwaj.

She plugged them in. From SecUnit’s rapidly changing eyes, it was obvious that something was happening.

And then it asked about Sanctuary Moon. Hardly a sensible priority but one uniquely its own. They all broke out in delighted laughter.

"I only did it to mess with the company," Gurathin said with a smirk.

Bharadwaj hugged Gurathin from behind (he would appreciate it whereas SecUnit wouldn’t), then stayed close. He looked wobbly and she wanted to be within arm's reach to catch him if he did a header.

After everything calmed down a little, she asked, "Do you want help showering?"

The answer obviously should be yes, because he both stank and was unsteady on his feet. But it was Gura, so he stared into the distance doing some complicated calculation of his own, perhaps weighing the odds of concussion if he fell in the shower versus the horrors of being assisted by a good friend. Finally he met her eyes and mumbled “yeah.” His gaze then skittered away again, nervous and shy.

"Come on then, I’ll give you a hand."

He removed his upper clothing on his own, but she made him sit before tackling pants. No MedSystem meant his leg was healing slowly. He'd been doing okay before overextending his augments but she didn't trust his balance.

With a little combined effort, they got the pants off. Bharadwaj also stripped off the bandage and checked his leg wound carefully. It looked swollen and felt hot to the touch, but it didn't seem infected, just angry from overuse.

"It looks good. I'll give it a thorough cleaning in the shower."

"I can do it."

She suppressed an eye roll. She'd argue later.

Next they removed his underclothes. Bharadwaj kept her gaze away from his privates, feeling weird and rude about averting her eyes but knowing he would be more comfortable.

She stripped off her own clothing. Gurathin carefully avoided looking at her breasts and her crotch. Since he also wasn't meeting her eyes, this left him limited places to look. A Preservation friend would have either been completely casual or they'd have given her a little compliment. A lingering gaze and a smile, just to show she was worth looking at. But this was Gura and she knew he meant well.

In a rare example of Corporation Rim utilizing good design procedures, the shower had hand grips. Maybe when half the population couldn't get medical care, shower hand-holds were in high demand.

Deity, what a depressing thought. She shook it off and focused on the person in front of her. With one hand on the grip, Gurathin efficiently scrubbed his torso. He shifted his weight to his good leg and reached lower, but Bharadwaj said, "Let me, it's why I'm here."

"It's a little trickier than I expected," he admitted ruefully.

She soaped and rinsed his good leg first. Then the other, working carefully as she cleaned the wound. He hadn't been noisy at any point, but while she worked on his injured leg he went dead silent in a way that made her heart ache.

She stood up. He picked up the shampoo and let go of the hand grip to open it.

"Gura, let me. You're going to need me to wash your hair anyway."

"I can--"

"No concussions allowed," she said firmly.

That got a snorted laugh.

He ducked his head under the water, then pulled back. Bharadwaj gently worked soap into his hair. His breathing grew audible.

Bharadwaj had half expected this. Gurathin responded intensely to touch. Anyone on the team would be glad to fold him into a long hug, but he wouldn't let them. And yet he seemed to crave contact too.

He did better when he could be the one offering, providing something the other person needed. Earlier on the mission when they'd been taking that shuttle ride to who knows where, fleeing DeltFall, she'd been the one to rest her head on his good leg while he remained too agitated to rest. Then he'd let her touch his forehead to check for fever, a defined purpose making it easier for him to lean into her touch.

Here too she had a defined purpose. She guided his head so she could work the water through the strands without drenching his face. He let out a choked sob and tears rolled down his face.

"Sorry, sorry," he gasped.

"Oh Gura, it's fine. The shower is the best place to cry, no one's going to know."

He nodded.

"Physical touch can bring feelings to the surface like this." Cautiously she added, "Some people seek that out. It's therapeutic to release these feelings that it can be hard to voice."

"I... yeah."

She'd have loved to work his scalp over at length. She'd have loved to massage the rest of him too. Press out that tension and press in all the love that Preservation had to offer. But it was best to count this as a success and not push her luck.

She continued rinsing his hair. He shed a few more tears while she worked, then roughly scrubbed his face after she finished. She helped him dress and then he retreated to his bunk.

She thought he might need to withdraw as he sometimes did after even the slightest display of vulnerability, but he looked over at her and his face was warm and open. "That was nice," he said shyly.

"Any time, really."

He fell asleep while the others were still active. That too was new. He was usually the last to drift off, and she'd never been sure if he was keeping watch until they were all safely tucked away or staying awake to guard himself. Maybe neither and he was just a currently exhausted night owl.

And she was fading herself. She was doing well but the worm had left its mark. Thankfully she hadn’t been needed for the most recent meeting. Bharadwaj crawled into the small bunk and drifted off herself.

Chapter 2: SecUnit

SecUnit was gone.

Bharadwaj had slept poorly, as she often did since the worm attack. It came back to her in dreams, that moment when the earth fell away and something warm, hot, and stinking engulfed and pierced her through. She could still smell it, in dreams and sometimes while awake.

And yet somehow she slept through SecUnit leaving. She woke and lay there unsuspecting, taking comfort in the sounds of her friends talking in low voices. Pin-Lee using the drink dispenser, Ratthi's spoon or fork clattering as he set it down too roughly. She didn't expect to hear SecUnit; it stood so quietly.

But when she got up, it was gone.

Mensah noticed the moment she looked for SecUnit and couldn't find it. Mensah, who always stayed calm, who kept them all together.

"It left me a message," she said in a low voice. "Once everyone's up, we'll talk."

Maybe SecUnit was doing something important. Maybe Mensah had given it some kind of mission now that it had its memories back. It would finish its job and be back soon. Bharadwaj tried to persuade herself of that as she washed her face but that thought didn't fit. Mensah would have said so right away. Bharadwaj wanted to ask the others but this must be hardest of all on Mensah and Mensah said to wait.

Gurathin woke last, bleary-eyed but at least the near-bruising under his skin had faded a little. He kept his eyes averted from the others which meant he must already know. Bharadwaj approached him as he filled a water glass.

"Did you get much sleep?"

He gave her a quick smile and a nod.

He felt different. More like the Gura she knew on the station, awkward and a little odd but less sharp-edged, less huddled in on himself. Returning SecUnit's memories had restored something in him too. She patted his shoulder and sat at the big round table, the one they'd all shared a meal at just last night.

"Lets all sit down," Mensah said. She waited while the others took their seats.

Mensah said, "SecUnit chose to leave. It doesn't want to return to Preservation. It intends to explore on its own."

"Seccy can't be off on its own—"

“Where can it even go?”

“If it gets caught—”

“It barely even remembers—”

Everyone talked over each other. Everyone except Gurathin, Bharadwaj noticed. He sat quietly, looking over the faces of the others.

When the first rush of reactions died down, Ratthi asked, “Did it say why? Or where it’s going?”

“It sent me a letter.” Mensah smiled, but it was the kind of smile with tears behind it. “It was quite long. It recounted the story of the whole expedition through SecUnit’s eyes. The reasoning behind all its choices, everything it hoped for, everything it feared. And in the end, it was afraid to trust itself to us. To me.” Mensah drew in a long, shaky breath. “It said that guardian was a nicer word for owner.”

“If we hadn’t bought it—” Arada started.

Pin-Lee interrupted. “We had to. I couldn’t have gotten the injunction fast enough without that purchase. Even so, we barely got there in time. Just one more minute and—”

“Don’t say it!” Ratthi said.

“It’s true though. We were so close. Those other units we saw are all dead by now.”

Their blunt statement hung in the air.

Finally Ratthi said, “I wish…” and then just trailed off.

“Can we find it?” Arada said.

Mensah said firmly, “We can’t even look. We’ll be watched and anything we find, we risk tipping off the corporates.”

At that, everyone naturally looked at Gurathin, the one who should know about corporate espionage.

He stared at the table, then looked up and met their eyes, one by one. He was blinking back tears.

“It told me goodbye,” he said. He waited for the reactions to die down. Bharadwaj looked at Mensah, wondering if she knew. But Mensah (normally so expressive) could be hard to read when she chose to be.

“Gura, what did it say?” Ratthi asked.

“That it needed to check the perimeter. The thing is, I felt it.” He tapped his head, the same gesture he’d used when he said he “had it” while carrying SecUnit’s memories. He’d looked

so manic then.

“It isn’t angry at us. For four years every decision it made was about how not to let a client die and how not to get caught. And it’s scared of itself. It wants to be someplace where it doesn’t make decisions because of humans, and it wants to know.”

Mensah prompted him. “To know about…”

“The miners.”

“You were mean to it,” Arada said, her voice cold and accusatory.

Gurathin nodded. “I was.” His face held remorse.

“If you hadn’t been so mean to it, maybe it would have trusted us.”

Ratthi said, “Hey…”

“It’s true!” She was breathing hard.

Mensah said firmly, “Enough.”

Pin-Lee took Arada’s hand. They leaned in and said something quietly in her ear. Gurathin hadn’t looked away. Bharadwaj felt an odd tension in herself, an urge to yell, but unlike Arada she had no one she wanted to yell at.

It wasn’t Gurathin’s fault. They’d all signed on and rented a person and they hadn’t understood what they were doing. Not until the worm bit her and SecUnit brought her back at risk of its own life. After that, she still hadn’t understood. She’d been scared of it. She didn’t blame it for running away.

“Is it going to be safe?” she asked. “If it gets caught…”

“It’s smart,” Gurathin said quickly. “Resourceful.”

“But…” she cut herself off. There was no point arguing. The person to have that argument with was SecUnit itself, and none of them had thought to try to persuade it. They had just assumed.

Pin-Lee said, “This is going to be a mess. We justified the purchase on the grounds that it was evidence. We’re going to be expected to produce that evidence.”

Mensah said, “Legally it is ours though. And if we don’t bring it forward, we can simply say that we didn’t find the evidence we wanted, right?”

Pin-Lee shook their head. “We can claim that, but rumors will spread. This affects DeltFall’s claim against the company as well. If they think we’re holding back evidence, they’re going to think we cut some kind of deal.”

Pin-Lee and Mensah began discussing legal tactics. Bharadwaj knew she ought to listen. This was important; whatever they did next affected SecUnit's safety as well as their own lawsuit against GrayCris. She couldn't focus though. She didn't think Gurathin was focusing well either. His brow was wrinkled and he stared as if listening intently, but he kept blinking and his eyes would go distant like they did when he was in the feed.

Bharadwaj stood up, planning to drag him off to get more rest.

"Wait," Mensah said. She looked around the table, making eye contact with each of them in turn. "We need to give SecUnit the best possible chance to get away and find safety. And to do that, we need to conceal its absence as long as possible. Tell no one. And no one but us comes and goes from this space. We'll hold all meetings elsewhere."

Mensah looked around the table. One by one, they nodded. If this was all they had to offer SecUnit, it was the least they could do.

Chapter 3: Adrift

After SecUnit's departure, Bharadwaj discovered Sanctuary Moon. At first she'd tried to assist the others. She thought she'd be able to help Pin-Lee with legal research, if only by locating relevant documents. But just keeping track of the terms proved beyond her. Any new knowledge she tried to acquire bounced off her brain like a drop of water skittering around a hot pan until it evaporated. She couldn't settle.

The others kept gently telling her to rest more and focus on recovery. The thing was, her concentration issues weren't physical. She did have lingering symptoms. Her chest ached when she breathed too deep, and yet recovery required deep breaths. She needed to keep the healthy lung tissue next to the puncture wounds moving, to keep air flowing in and out and to cough in order to push out anything that pooled up. The tender spots elsewhere weren't as bad. MedSystem had repaired the holes in her intestine and stomach quite effectively.

But none of that explained the slow, syrup-like quality of her thoughts, or the way that she couldn't hold on to what she read.

Eventually she quit fighting it. Looking for something to fill the hours and curious about what SecUnit saw in the show, she watched Sanctuary Moon's first episode.

It was nothing she would have watched for her own sake. But despite the show's absurdity, there was a certain artfulness to it. Bharadwaj began to admire the playfulness to the costumes, the odd sincerity behind the cheesy plots, and the craftsmanship in the way the show cued viewers with music and lighting. At first she'd found those cues overblown, but soon they began to feel comforting and familiar.

She also tried to find out more about SecUnits. The public archives held almost nothing. The few bits of information that seemed reliable came from very early in their creation, and more recent info was a contradictory mess.

She asked Gurathin about it. "Why is there so little in the feed? They can't be all that rare if every survey has to take them, and yet all I get are these rumors and legends." She waved her hands in frustration.

He smiled wryly. "You're not supposed to know about them. They wouldn't be as scary if you did. But more than that, no company wants any other company to know what its units are capable of. You realize one of their uses is in inter-company warfare?"

She hadn't.

"That's where I saw them in action. A hostile takeover. Such a bloodless name."

Her throat didn't want to cooperate. It had gone tight and she struggled to get the words out. "I saw the newsfeeds. About the strike. Not our SecUnit of course, but…"

"Yeah."

“They don’t have a choice.”

“Yeah. The strikers don’t have much choice either. Choice is something you inherit, purchase, or steal, out here.”

Bharadwaj looked at her hands. “I wanted to learn about it. We see all these stories, you know? Even on Preservation, we're exposed to all these stories about rogue units murdering everyone. We never see their faces. We have this philosophy about how it’s wrong to use constructs this way, but it’s just an idea floating in a vacuum. I want to learn. Even if it never comes back…”

She was fighting back tears.

Gurathin gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I might be able to find something. I never really looked, before. I guess I bought into the propaganda too.” He let out a huff of air. “How stupid of me not to realize. Everything out here is lies. And behind the lie, there’s always someone who profits.”

“So if people knew…”

“The corporations wouldn’t like it if people knew. Of course that alone wouldn’t weaken their power much. But they wouldn’t like it.”

“Maybe we can tell people about how it saved us.”

“Not without its permission,” Gurathin instantly said.

“You’re right. That’s SecUnit’s story, not ours. But maybe someday it will let us? It deserves credit.”

“It does. And I’ll try to find some sources for you. Reliable ones.”

“Thanks, Gura.”

Gurathin did turn up some intel which he found reliable. His “reliable sources” turned out to be fairly technical in nature, which meant Bharadwaj had whole new fields of study to turn her attention to.

That should have been a good thing and a cure for boredom, but she struggled to concentrate. Still, she chipped away at it little by little.

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“You should go home,” Gurathin said.

She’d been thinking of it and feeling guilty every time the thought came to mind. Part of her had hoped one of the others would tell her to go. And yet now that it was happening, she had a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“What if I’m needed?”

“We don’t all need to stay. Pin-Lee’s our lawyer, I used to live here, Mensah is the one everyone wants to talk to. You and Arada should go. Ratthi too but I don’t think he will.”

Gura could be so awkward when he was trying to be nice. He kept glancing at her eyes and then immediately glancing away.

“I suppose Ratthi is good moral support.”

Gurathin instantly said, “You’re great moral support. You make everything better.”

“Then why…”

“You have healing to do. Proper healing, at home.”

“Is it so obvious? I thought I was doing okay,” she said ruefully.

“You’re doing fantastic.” He met her gaze, and what had she just thought about Gura being awkward at this? She hadn’t been prepared for how sincere his eyes were.

He said, “It’s never over when you get discharged. I’m amazed at how resilient you are but you should be at home right now. It’s no kind of life, being here with nothing to do except cheer us on. And I’ll worry less if you and Arada leave together. The journey will be so much safer with two.”

“I suppose we have to think of those things, even when it comes to something as simple as getting a transport to Preservation,” she said a little bitterly.

He nodded. “I want to talk to you before you go, about safety and what to watch out for.”

Before, not if, she thought. And yet she knew he was right. She wasn’t useful here.

I’ll do it, she thought. I’ll go home. A heaviness swept over her, which was strange because she also felt as if some enormous weight had been lifted.

Gurathin shuffled closer and awkwardly unfolded his arms and held them slightly apart from his body. Was he suggesting a hug? She held out her own arms and he moved in. He was surprisingly good at it once he committed. She leaned her head on his chest and let out a sigh.

“I don’t want to go,” she said.

“I know.”

“I will though. I’m no good to anyone here.”

“Not true. But life doesn’t stop and besides, the Council will understand better if they talk to someone who was present. There’s things we can’t say in our reports.”

That was true, and cheered her just slightly. “I can tell them about SecUnit,” she said.

She could feel him smile by the way his posture shifted.

“Yeah, tell them. Ugh, you’re going to have to tell them about me too.”

She squeezed him tighter. She was going to have to share all of it. The 57 dead miners, the mutual invasion of each others’ minds. But also the way he’d carried SecUnit’s memories back at risk to his own health, not to mention the way he’d recognized the risk LeeBeeBee posed and kept her locked out of HubSystem. If LeeBeeBee had gotten the alien remnant coordinates she was after, GrayCris would have just moved to wipe them out without warning. She thought back to her lecture about compassion and blushed a bit.

“It’s all the same. The bitter is part of the sweet.”

“Maybe, but I wish life would quit teaching me so many lessons,” he groused.

She laughed and gave him one final squeeze. She was going to miss him.

Chapter 4: Returning Home

Arada sat forward and clenched her fists. “No, no, check his medical records! Engineer Luskofin couldn’t have sabotaged the warp controls because he was in medical due to thriftberry poisoning!”

Bharadwaj grinned at her enthusiasm. “Doctor Cogsgriffith thinks he was already recovered though. Remember how Cogsgriffith discharged him but then got called away and never found out how he collapsed in the hallway?”

“I haven’t forgotten! Cogsgriffith really should have done a genetic panel before discharge! So sloppy.”

“It’s understandable though. Cogsgriffith was handling the influx of burn injuries from the explosion which also damaged some of the portable scanners, not to mention that recent blow to her head… no, don’t arrest him!”

“The Captain will check all the details later and find the discrepancy.”

“Yes but I don’t want Flight Officer Kogi to lose a friend! They only just met and Luskofin might not even want to stay on the ship after being accused of sabotage.”

“Poor Kogi! He feels so betrayed.”

The credits rolled.

“Do you want to watch another?” Bharadwaj asked.

Arada shook her head. “Don’t wait on me if you want to keep going though. It’s funnier when you summarize the episodes I miss.”

“I don’t know how you keep track of it all without even watching! I’ve been taking notes and you still call the plot twists before me.”

Arada grinned. “I have a sister who loves CR media. You start to see patterns after a while.”

“Someday I’m going to make you sit down with me and analyze an episode in detail.”

They hugged and Arada went back to her data analysis. Unlike Bharadwaj, most of Arada’s data had survived. Bharadwaj had stored her own data in the Hab, while Arada had kept most of hers in a collection of portable data pads, most of which she left in the hopper. Bharadwaj used to tease her about how disorganized she was, but that habit had saved a great deal of her data, while GrayCris had wiped nearly everything Bharadwaj had collected.

(Her mind flashed back to Gurathin promising her they would get more data. At the time, she’d been near tears. How could she have hesitated over data at a time like that! And yet even now the lost data felt like a missing tooth she kept wanting to wiggle.)

She kept trying to see Sanctuary Moon through SecUnit's eyes. Why this show and not some other? She didn't know it well enough to guess. She also began reading media analysis books. At some point she expanded her selections, continuing to focus on the dramatic, the larger than life, the deliberately unreal.

Bharadwaj watched documentaries as well. She began to pick up a sense of the structure, the way the camera or voice over would tease information and manage tension as a tool to make the viewer understand. It could be manipulative, but a documentary with no pacing was a documentary that no one could absorb or remember.

Maybe she'd try her hand at it once she got back.

That night she heard Arada crying. Bharadwaj went to check on her.

"I just miss them so much and I keep thinking I should have stayed."

"I know, honey." Bharadwaj pulled her close and shed a few tears of her own. She struggled with the same feelings, and Arada had left a marital partner as well as dear friends behind.

Arada cried so hard it left Bharadwaj worried. She pushed a bottle of water at Arada and made her drink it and wash her face. They shared a bed that night, just for company. After that, Arada came to join her some nights.

The trip seemed to last forever, and then suddenly it was over. Suddenly instead of one friend, she had many friends, acquaintances, and near-strangers surrounding her. She had data to deliver. She had the task of making the Council understand. Bharadwaj resolved to find her focus again. She had work to do.

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The Preservation Council briefings tried both their patience. The Council members listened attentively to Bharadwaj and Arada's reports, but somehow some members couldn't absorb key points. Bharadwaj found herself making the same observations repeatedly as her patience and temper frayed. Finally Arada told her privately, "We need to show them DeltFall."

Of course. As soon as she said it, Bharadwaj understood. The murder of an entire survey team for profit was so far outside the Council's experience that they were struggling to absorb the gravity of the situation.

"I'll put something together. I was there with Mensah when the company collected the remains, so I know what I want to show them." It hadn't been pleasant, but they'd been worried the company would tamper with the scene. It was possible that whoever took the original bribe to allow GrayCris on the planet might also pay off the rescue ship staff to obscure the truth.

"I'll help," Arada said, but it was obvious how much the mere thought of it distressed her.

Bharadwaj lay a hand on her arm. "It's all right. Leave this bit to me."

“You were so brave,” she said miserably. “I should have come to observe with you but I was too scared. I’ll help you now though. You shouldn’t have to do this alone.”

Bharadwaj shook her head. “This won’t be pleasant, but I can get through it. You know, in a way, observing the collection felt good. It felt like the one thing I could do for DeltFall, since we couldn’t save them. At least I could make sure the truth of their deaths was known.”

“I just feel so worthless. I couldn’t help you then and now I can’t even do this.”

“Honey, no. You looked after me all the way home, even though you were struggling yourself. Don’t think I didn’t notice!”

“All I did was watch media with you.”

“You made me laugh, and that’s what I needed most.”

“You’ll tell me though, if it’s too much?”

“I promise.”

Bharadwaj hadn’t ever edited video before. She gave herself a crash course in the absolute basics. This didn’t have to be fancy.

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“There’s something I need you to see,” Bharadwaj told the Council. “I know it will be distressing. I’m asking you not to look away.”

She explained the concerns about tampering with the scene which had led to Mensah’s insistence on herself and Bharadwaj being present as witnesses. Then she began to play her video.

It started with a simple circuit of the bodies to record where they had died and what state they were in. The company had done the same thing. Bharadwaj heard stifled exclamations and shocked noises. She checked their faces. They were watching as she’d asked, though some of them had their faces screwed up and clearly found it hard.

She kept the playback speed at a decent clip. What she wanted to show them most wasn’t how the bodies lay sprawled and dead, or even the poignancy of the two who had been sitting down together for a meal when they were shot. She wanted to show them the company in action. Their allies, who the Council seemed to think they could trust and rely on.

Next the company personnel collected hair and skin samples. Then they moved the bodies to photograph them from other angles. Bharadwaj moved quickly through these tasks.

And then the signal went out to remove the remains. The company employees grabbed them with all the reverence one would assign to grabbing a stray bit of trash. As if these people were nothing and no one. Then they were shoved two and three at a time into oversized bags.

“We have an agreement that if anyone passes away during a survey, the remains will be returned to the family,” a Council member said, clearly disturbed.

Bharadwaj didn’t even try to hide the bitterness in her response. “All DeltFall survey members were cremated as a group and then the mixed ashes split up, each family receiving a portion. It turns out the offer to return the remains doesn’t include a commitment to keep them separate.”

The company had mingled the remains to save the price of a body bag. The meeting broke down a bit at that point, as the Council members dealt with the shock and horror of that.

Arada came over and watched Sanctuary Moon with her after her report. It didn’t stop her from having nightmares that night but it did help. And at least various Council members stopped insisting that everything would work out and the company would handle it all.

And then Bharadwaj just had to wait.

Chapter 5: Mensah

The feed message from Preservation Council member Asare arrived late in the cycle.

Professor Bharadwaj, I know it's late, but can you come meet me? The ship from Port FreeCommerce arrived carrying news.

News, not people. Her head swam. Bharadwaj pushed back the impulse to pressure Asare for more info over the feed, and simply sent, *I'm on my way.*

Asare met her in an empty conference room. His face was tense.

"None of them came home. We received a package marked confidential with your name on it. I assume that means whoever sent it wanted you to see it first."

Bharadwaj nodded. She didn't want to open the package. What if someone was dead? What if this was a friend's attempt at kindness, making sure she had someone with her when she found out?

Or maybe they need you, she told herself sternly.

Inside she found a feed message from Gurathin. Text only, as was his habit.

> Mensah is gone. We all attended the memorial service for DeltFall. She stepped out just for a moment. Everything had been so heavy and she'd done so much to support the others. I guess she needed just a minute alone to breathe.
>
> But that's all it took. We're all kicking ourselves now for losing sight of her. Probably it wouldn't have mattered. GrayCris showed up with a group of five armed assailants posing as staff. They cut the feed, drugged her, and carried her out in plain sight. I've attached the video with analysis.
>
> Pin-Lee is going to press the company to act but we don't have much leverage, especially without SecUnit's recordings as evidence. We've tried to keep its absence a secret but rumors are spreading.
>
> Corporate wars are fought with credits. For the right price, we can pay the company to act, or we can ransom Mensah. I don't know if Preservation has enough spare credits to shift the balance of power that way. But send what you can, please. We'll need it for bribes, transport, even for staying at the kind of hotel which won't sell our location.
>
> Once you send the credits, we'll go to TranRollinHyfa and try to cut a deal. It'll be tricky. GrayCris will want us to drop the lawsuit in exchange for Mensah's life, but they're not likely to close that deal unless we also surrender SecUnit. We also can't reveal Mensah's kidnapping to the public, because that will complicate GrayCris's legal situation.

> Please don’t come. If Pin-Lee and I can’t pull this off with our combination of legal and technical skills, more people won’t help. I’d send Ratthi home but the risk of solo travel is too high right now.
>
> Bharadwaj. Jui. None of us are coming home without Mensah. I wish I could promise a good outcome but I can’t. If things go wrong, I want you to know how grateful I am that Preservation took me in, how much I treasured the new life and home I found here, and how much your warmth and kindness has meant to me. I know this letter isn’t terribly well thought out but everything is so far away and there’s no time to revise. -G

Her stomach churned. TranRollinHyfa was a death trap, which was why they’d resolved not to go. Now GrayCris had taken Mensah there and the others would follow. But what choice did they have?

She should be with them. Her heart felt heavy with shame.

And then something inside her shifted and she felt coldly furious. How dare they? What right did anyone have to treat a fellow human this way? All so they could exploit and profit from alien remnants and never mind the risk to the rest of humanity.

Bharadwaj took a deep breath, the small ache in her chest grounding her. “Our Madame President has been kidnapped. We’ll need our best security personnel to analyze the contents of these messages, and we’ll need to organize ransom.”

Asare’s eyes went wide.

“Kidnapped? Are you certain? Perhaps she just got lost?”

Bharadwaj just met his eyes and let the weight of it be carried there. To his credit, Asare swallowed once, nodded, and started over.

“What happened? What do we know?”

“I’ll fill you in. There’s also a video. Contact security first but don’t mention the kidnapping over the feed. We’ll watch the video while we wait for their arrival.”

“But…” He looked at her face and trailed off in reaction to her resolve. His eyes went distant as he sent feed messages. “All right. I’ve sent them.”

She streamed the video to a shared feed channel.

Mensah stepped out of a room, walked two paces away from the door. She stopped, leaned her back against the corridor wall. The mask of Madame President dropped away and her brow wrinkled with anxiety.

Five people walked down the corridor, one pushing a cart and the others carrying supplies. Three women, two men. Mensah didn’t pay them any notice. They didn’t appear to pay her any notice either.

Then they reached her and everything happened very fast. Bharadwaj couldn't tell who did what, only that they all moved in a blur and supplies spilled across the floor. Someone held a cloth over Mensah's mouth. Drugs, or just stifling her voice? Mensah twisted ineffectually in the grasp of many hands. Bharadwaj caught one glimpse of Mensah's eyes wide with fear. *I'm going to dream about those eyes,* she thought. Then they half carried, half walked her down the hallway, a shoulder under each arm while her head lolled to one side. She kicked her feet ineffectually. And then she was gone.

She opened the attached video analysis. Gurathin and Pin-Lee had gone through frame by frame. Their analysis identified a hand holding a syringe and tracked it through the chaos to the moment the hand stabbed Mensah's shoulder. The cloth had been for noise abatement, then.

Gurathin and Pin-Lee believed the group had used a short-range feed disruptor. Once the drug took full effect, they would have turned it off to reduce odds of detection.

Asare looked nauseated. "It's not that I didn't believe you. But seeing it…"

"Seeing it is always different," Bharadwaj agreed. "Security can review all this in detail. Our part of the job is to raise as many credits as possible, all without revealing Mensah's kidnapping."

"Without revealing it? But the public has a right—"

"They'll kill her."

"Surely that would be senseless. Even for…no, I'm sorry. You've already reported the earlier murders. It's all just so absurd."

"I know. But we have to deal with the situation as it is, no matter how much it feels like a bad media serial."

He nodded. "Let's start by deciding who can be trusted with the news…"

They worked late into the night cycle, planning how to gather enough credits to buy the life of their president and friend.

Chapter 6: Visiting Family

“Is everyone ready?” Bharadwaj’s sister Charu looked around, counting heads.

“Who has the water?”

“I put it in the hopper already.”

“Make sure the extra gloves get packed last so we can get to them right away.”

“Hey! Hands off the pakora, they’re for later!”

The sun was out, the air felt clean and fresh, they’d all be working together with picnic lunches, it was exactly the kind of outing that Bharadwaj normally enjoyed.

Yesterday she’d made a news video designed to stall her friend’s kidnappers, communicate the truth to SecUnit if it happened to see, and conceal the truth from her family and friends. Her mind kept racing, tracing along the timeline of which ship would take the news to which station.

Today she was planetside, helping her family repair storm damage to the irrigation system. She’d done as much as she could for her survey friends, and her station friends had shoved her toward the shuttle with orders to rest and refresh herself.

Gurathin’s words replayed in her head like a loop. *Everything is so far away.* She’d hugged all her friends and she wished she’d hugged them all ten thousand times more. She had nothing to do but wait and hope. And try not to think of the bodies she’d shown the Council.

Her nephew Tej touched her elbow. She flinched and spun to face him, though his touch had been gentle. She’d been too deep in thought.

“Is everything all right?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yes,” she said automatically, then added a more honest response. “Mostly. There’s some things going on I can’t talk about. Council business.” She smiled. Possibly her smile looked a bit forced, but her appreciation for Tej’s thoughtfulness was sincere.

He gave her arm another pat. Then thankfully he dropped it and began lugging more supplies out to the hopper.

#

Tracing drainage lines and digging up damaged tubing kept Bharadwaj busy enough for a while. It took an effort to stay focused. Her mind felt syrupy and slow, the way she’d been after SecUnit left.

The sky felt too close and too open all at once. Anything could happen out here. She knew Preservation had no underground predators but she kept thinking of the worm.

Probably this was a sign that her station friends were right and she needed to spend more time in the fresh air. She was all right as long as she kept eyes in front of her. She focused on her hand-held moisture sensor, the dirt under her knees and the small puzzle of finding the right tubing segments.

She kept at it until lunch time. Then she stood and felt momentarily light-headed. Suddenly it was all too much. The sky pressed in, her chest felt heavy, and she needed to be somewhere else.

While her family spread blankets on the ground, Bharadwaj headed for the trees. Planted as a wind break, they also served as a place to rest in the shade. Today the weather was cool enough so her family had chosen a sunny spot. Almost instinctively she moved to a place where the trunks came between her and the others, minimizing visibility. She didn't notice her niece Bashi following behind.

"Aunt Jui?"

She whirled to face the unexpected noise. Then as if in response to the extra jolt of adrenaline, her vision began to sparkle. She sat down gracelessly, unable to do anything better than make sure she didn't fall.

"Aunt Jui!" Bashi rushed over and sat next to her. Bashi was Charu's oldest and would soon leave to attend college out of system. Bharadwaj would miss her while she was away. "What's wrong?"

Bharadwaj smiled at her.

"I'm fine, I'm just a bit light-headed."

It was more than that. She could smell the worm. Her head swam and she felt as if she was falling. Hopefully it would pass quickly.

Bashi frowned in concern. "What brought it on?"

"Just stress. I'll be fine in a minute."

"Are you sure you don't need to go to a MedCenter?"

"I'm sure." Her chest felt tight and getting the words out was a struggle. She didn't want to do this here. Not in front of Bashi. She tried to exhale slowly. Bashi looked over at the rest of the family.

She'd missed whatever else Bashi had been saying. She could smell the stupid worm and she knew it wasn't real but she couldn't make the smell stop. She grabbed a handful of grass, held it to her nose, and crushed it in her first. She tried to inhale the sharp clean grass scent.

Someone was singing.

Bashi, of course. Bashi was singing. Quietly enough so the others wouldn't hear over the family chatter.

That helped, both the song and the knowledge that Bashi had figured it out. She really was a lovely young woman. Bharadwaj sat and waited. Eventually breathing came easier.

“Bashi, that was lovely. Thank you for looking after me.”

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes but I think I should go back to the house.”

“I’ll just tell the others…”

“I’d like to leave quietly. Can you take me? I’ll tell them later.” She couldn’t deal with the pressure to share, not when she literally couldn’t reveal Mensah’s kidnapping for fear of putting her in more danger. And her thoughts felt too sluggish to figure out how to say enough but not too much.

She’d talk to them later, after she thought up a way to communicate that didn’t involve sharing restricted information.

Bashi looked a little uncertain.

“It’ll be fine,” Bharadwaj said firmly. Bashi hesitated a moment longer, then nodded. Together they walked toward the hopper.

But the others noticed. Bharadwaj kept her posture casual, hoping no one would question her intentions.

Darsham spotted her and began walking over. Bharadwaj quickly got in and fastened her safety belt.

“Let’s go.” Bashi had them in the air before she even noticed.

#

She felt so much better once she was inside. The hopper ride had let her rest a bit, although she kept an eye on the controls in case Bashi needed assistance. Now there was plenty to do at home. Grandma Eswari and Grandpa Anady put her to work in the kitchen washing and chopping vegetables. Neither of them asked her questions. It was a pleasant afternoon.

It’s good that I came back, she thought. This visit is supposed to be restorative.

And then the rest of the family came back in a flood. Chattering, unloading the empty picnic baskets, rushing about. The calm she’d felt earlier gave way to creeping anxiety.

It’s just my family, she thought.

Thankfully no one asked her to explain her early departure. The only comment came from Bashi who quietly told her she hoped she was feeling better. Bharadwaj relaxed a little and listened to everyone chatter over food. She retired early.

#

“I’ll stay home,” she told the others the next morning. She didn’t want to be stuck out there if she started feeling strange again.

Darsham frowned. “Is everything all right? You left early yesterday too.”

“I’m fine. Just dealing with some stress.”

“What about? Tell us so we can help.”

Charu rolled her eyes. “Darsham! Leave it, I’ll talk to her later.” Bharadwaj felt a wave of affection for her sister.

“We can talk about it,” Darsham said firmly.

“We can talk about it,” Bharadwaj echoed reflexively, then added, “but not now. Charu and I will talk privately.”

Darsham kept pushing. “You came to visit your family, and then you shut yourself up alone. Whatever you’re going through, let us help.”

There was no point in her life where she’d have preferred to tell a crowded room full of people her troubles all at once rather than confiding privately in her sister. She was going to have to tell everyone something though.

“I’ll talk to Charu,” she repeated.

“I know the injury was traumatic. But you’re safe now, and you’re here back home. Everything is all right now.”

“It’s not,” she said sharply, part of her knowing this was a mistake but another part of her unable to bite back the words. “My friends are still in danger. Nothing will be all right until they all come home.”

“The survey’s over. Nothing bad is going to happen now.”

“You don’t know that!”

“You told us yourself, the company came to rescue you—”

“You don’t know! You weren’t there!” Her voice was rising. “Have you ever been off world? Have you ever been to Rim space? Tell me some more about the things you know for certain because you lived through them! Tell me how safe it all is! I’m the one who watched them collect the bodies! I can still smell them!”

She was yelling. She hadn’t meant to yell but she was yelling.

Darsham looked taken aback. Dismissing her as overwrought rather than questioning himself, she thought bitterly.

“It really feels like you’ve let yourself get stuck in the past. I’m glad you’re finally sharing these fears so we can help you realize how improbable—”

After that she wasn’t sure what she said, only that it contained swear words.

Her sister’s arm was around her, guiding her back to the couch. That was good. She collapsed and let herself drift for a bit. Someone else was raising their voice too. Not yelling. A lecture. No one was making her sit up so she ignored it.

When she opened her eyes, the room was empty except for Grandma Eswari.

“Upstairs with me.”

Nobody argued with Grandma Eswari. Bharadwaj dutifully followed her up the stairs.

The house (which was for the most part a two-story house) had one small room tucked into the attic, an oddly-shaped space with a sloped roof which you had to reach by steep stairs. Originally it had served as storage space, and then it had been claimed by a rotating roster of kids old enough to descend the stairs safely if they had to pee in the middle of the night but young and short enough not to hit their heads on the ceiling.

And then at some point Grandma Eswari had claimed it. She had outlived all her marriage partners and the bulk of her siblings. She had outlived her second child. She mainly dealt with things by bossing the household around and never slowing down, but at some point she said she needed the quiet. Bharadwaj thought she needed a space to let show the things she wouldn’t show her family.

Someday either Grandma Eswari would have to give up the room or the family would have to put in a lift. But for now, she could still manage the stairs.

“Lie down,” Grandma told her.

So it wasn’t a lecture. Grandma gave her an oversized shirt. She’d just slept but her head still felt fuzzy. And no one argued with Grandma Eswari. Obediently she changed into it and got into bed. Something about this felt so comforting, like she was a little girl again, rocked to sleep by her mother.

“They don’t understand but I do,” Grandma said.

Tears filled Bharadwaj’s eyes. Tears both at the kindness and at imagining what Grandma had been through herself. Bharadwaj herself had no children. She couldn’t fully imagine what it would be like to lose one.

#

She woke to a mostly quiet house. Someone was using the stove but she heard no voices.

Bharadwaj dressed. She struck her head on the ceiling and swore. Minor head bonks were an old ritual for any adult making their way up here, except of course for Grandma herself who had internalized every inch of the space.

Most of the house was empty. Grandma was in the kitchen. Bharadwaj felt like a giddy girl, yet also a little anxious about what might come later.

“They’re going to be so mad,” she said.

“They won’t. I gave Darsham a lecture. Everyone knew it was for them too. But we’re not going to talk about that. I saved you a plate. You eat lunch, and then we’re making besan ladoo. You record, and then you can make an instructional video.”

“Besan ladoo? Really? There’s nothing we’re celebrating right now.”

“We need a little sweet with the bitter.”

Bharadwaj grinned. Preservation’s feed-accessible storage already held many such videos on how to make every kind of food Bharadwaj had ever heard of, but she didn’t care. Wasn’t this how students learned, by imitating what had already been done? Besides, this would be her grandma, not somebody else’s. Grandma Eswari had such a large voice in the household and yet rarely liked to put herself forward in pictures and videos.

“I need a little time to put the cameras in position.”

“Don’t take too long about it.”

Bharadwaj hastened to set things up. She put one camera on a kitchen counter. It needed to angle downward so she carefully folded a towel into a wedge shape. She would have liked a top-down view but she didn’t have a way to affix a camera to the ceiling on short notice. Instead she held the second camera and smiled conspiratorially at Grandma Eswari.

“You can tell me to do things, but then you have to hold the camera,” she said.

“You don’t have one of those hover drones?”

“Those are for fancier projects. You have to reserve them in advance and explain what you’re using them for. Did I tell you a bird ate ours, during the survey?”

“A bird? Poor thing.”

“Yes, it’s a shame. I can’t say I spared it much sympathy in the moment though. It really picked the worst possible time!”

Bharadwaj caught as much as she could on camera. When she got pressed into stirring or rolling, she tried and failed to persuade Grandma Eswari to help film.

When the family returned, Darsham sought her out looking sheepish. “I’m sorry I pushed you,” he said.

Bharadwaj wanted to tell him that it was all right, that she understood. But it was as if the time filming Grandma Eswari had taken place in a bubble, and now the bubble popped. Her throat closed up. She forced a smile and gave him a brief nod.

Later that evening she edited the lighting, trying to balance the brightness of the two cameras. The project drew her in and she blinked in surprise when she realized it had grown dark outside.

The video came out nicely. Not professional, but real. Her family, her home.

Chapter 7: Sky

Bharadwaj packed up her things, said her goodbyes, and managed to ignore the creeping sense of unease right up until the time came to walk out the door.

And then she couldn't.

If she walked out the door, she'd be alone under the open sky.

"I forgot something," she told her family a bit stiffly and retreated to Grandma Eswari's attic room. That bought her time, but now what? She knew she should tell them but she wasn't ready. Darsham's words still bothered her.

(*Stuck in the past.* As if the crisis wasn't ongoing!)

(She wasn't holding a grudge. It's just that he'd said what most of them were surely thinking. It's not as if she could correct them given the need for secrecy.)

She messaged Arada.

This is going to sound absurd but I need to get to the station and I can't walk out the door.

Arada sent her a shower of hug emojis.

I know there's nothing to be afraid of but my brain is acting like it's a deadly hazard. It's ridiculous because even on that planet, in order to stay safe we had to leave the Hab.

Jui sweetie. Take a breath for me.

Bharadwaj fell silent.

I mean a literal breath. Deep as you can.

Bharadwaj drew in air. It still twinged to breathe so deeply but she ignored it.

Now let it out slowly.

She tried to count as she exhaled.

Did you do that?

Yes.

Did it help a little?

Yes. It had helped, some. Arada could probably hear the "but" behind that affirmation.

I'm coming to get you.

You don’t have to…

Shush. I’ve made up my mind. I bet I’ll get snacks out of it.

We made besan ladoo just yesterday, Bharadwaj sent, a smile breaking out. She’d missed Arada, even after this short time away.

See? I knew it was a good idea!

The feed call left her feeling better. She was going to have to tell her family something though.

The thought of talking to them pressed on her like a physical weight. The more she tried to find the words, the more her mind returned to the DeltFall bodies.

She shifted her focus to her breathing. She’d skipped the exercises yesterday, best not to skip them twice. Once she was done, she began watching another tutorial on video editing. It was a bit embarrassing to hide from her own family this way, but (perhaps thanks to Grandma Eswari’s lecture) none of them came to get her.

#

Arada’s arrival caused a stir as everyone rushed to greet her and break out welcoming snacks. Someone would be brewing tea. Bharadwaj waited until she heard the chatter died down and then came downstairs.

Arada greeted her with a warm hug. Bharadwaj savored it. Hadn’t she just thought of how she wished she’d hugged her friends more? She breathed in Arada’s unique scent.

Charu poured the tea and put out besan ladoo. And then, to Bharadwaj’s surprise, it was nice. They sat and made small talk. Arada showed off her latest embroidery project. Charu showed off her set designs for an upcoming theater production.

And then it was time to go. Arada took her arm and the two of them walked out the door like it was nothing.

“I’m embarrassed I made such a fuss,” Bharadwaj said sheepishly.

“Oh never mind that! I want to hear about your first documentary.”

“I’ll have to redo everything! Grandma Eswari said I could film her, but then she made me stir and roll.”

They shared a laugh.

“You’ll have to get a drone.”

“Yes! Grandma Eswari said I should practice more anyway. And that it was a disgrace that I didn’t know, seeing as how easy it was.”

“Is it easy?”

Bharadwaj laughed again. “It is when she does it! But there’s a technique. You have to toast the gram flour just enough and not too much. And a few years ago, I tried to make it with the wrong kind of flour and it came out horrible. I was scared to offer it to anyone so it was just me, storing them in my freezer and chipping away at the world’s worst snack for months!”

With Arada at her side, it felt almost easy. Arada had twice as much reason to struggle, Bharadwaj thought a bit guiltily. She hadn’t been doing enough to check on her friend.

Best not to ask here under the open sky though. Later she realized how odd that thought was, but in the moment it felt very ordinary.

Arada kept her distracted all through the trip back to the station, then asked Bharadwaj to come with her on an errand. They chatted while they walked. Bharadwaj didn’t notice their path until they arrived at the station’s MedCenter.

“Are you here to visit someone?” Bharadwaj asked.

Arada put a hands on Bharadwaj’s shoulder and looked her straight in the eyes.

“Jui sweetie. It’s time to make an appointment for trauma counseling. I will if you will.”

“You haven’t?” She heard the hypocrisy of the question as soon as she said it and let out a little huff of laughter.

“I keep putting it off,” Arada admitted.

“I didn’t even consider doing it,” Bharadwaj admitted in turn. “I have all these excuses lined up even now, isn’t that funny? About how I’m doing better now, or how I just need more sleep. But it’s not that, is it? I couldn’t even walk out the door.”

Arada just held out her arms. Bharadwaj pulled her close.

Chapter 8: Returns

Gurathin's message came in over the feed just as she was drifting off to sleep.

We're back, all safe and sound. SecUnit's back too. It found us on TranRollinHyfa and really came through for us. We never could have gotten Mensah out without it.

SecUnit sustained a serious injury but we expect a full recovery. It's already dramatically improved. Everyone else is unhurt. I didn't set this to high priority because I didn't want to wake you, but I wanted it to be here when you woke. Don't worry, everything is going to be fine. -G

Her heart overflowed for fondness them all. Mensah was alive! They had all returned! And SecUnit was back! Of course she wanted to know at once. She'd set message alerts for everyone from PresAux the moment she heard of Mensah's kidnapping.

Although if she'd been pinged awake she would have feared another disaster. She imagined the flood of adrenaline which an emergency ping would have released and laughed, although she couldn't have explained the joke. She was the absurd one, she thought, and right now everything was wonderful and funny.

She messaged him back. *I'm still awake. Welcome back!!!! May I come see you?*

Yes please. I've missed you so much.

#

She spotted him before he saw her. He'd come out to meet her and stood at the entrance of a small garden in front of the hotel where he stayed on station. He stood awkwardly, a little hunched, but not as huddled in on himself the way he'd been in Rim space.

His face lit up when he saw her.

"Gura! It's so good to have you back."

He opened his arms, then began to pull his elbows back in as if questioning himself.

"Hug," she announced.

He laughed a little and opened his arms wider.

He felt warm and solid, his chin resting on her shoulder. She gripped him tightly. Unexpectedly, a sob welled up. His hand went to the back of her head, pulling her in tightly.

"It's okay. We're all okay."

She'd meant to fight back her feelings but his words released something in her. Without letting her go, he drew her a little away from the entrance. He led her deeper into the garden

and toward a bench. She leaned into his arms and let herself release all the fear she'd been holding.

When her tears tapered off, Gurathin handed her a packet of tissues.

"You know me too well," she said ruefully. He just smiled.

"I knew you'd worry. You and your warm heart."

"Anyone would worry!"

"Of course." He gave her one more squeeze.

"Where is everyone? Can I see them?"

"Pin-Lee, Ratthi, and Arada are together. I think they want some private time for that but they'll want to see you after. If you're still awake, that is. Mensah is with SecUnit. She's shaken up but okay. Well." He paused and rubbed his forehead. "She's *really* shaken up. She hasn't told us much about what happened while she was a prisoner."

"And SecUnit?" SecUnit, who had done so much for them. Who she'd misunderstood so badly.

"SecUnit's recovering well. It's pissed that it's not 100% yet, both in general and because Mensah is still in danger. I think it's going to stay on Preservation a while. It hasn't said that yet. But we made sure it had a way to leave safely."

"What do you mean, Mensah's still in danger?"

"GrayCris. You have to know how fucking corporates think. According to CR logic, eliminating Mensah means whoever succeeds her won't have the same personal stake in our lawsuit against them. Those assholes will want to take her out so we drop the suit. Also by corporate logic, revenge is its own satisfaction and something you do just to prove you're worthy of respect."

"Can't we negotiate somehow?"

He shook his head. "Revenge also sets you up better for rebounding. If you can prove you're not completely worthless, you up your odds of getting a decent position elsewhere. The Council thought I was just being paranoid until SecUnit independently came to the same conclusions."

Her stomach felt like she'd entered free fall. She kept the horror off her face with effort. Gurathin looked so tired and drawn. It was her time to be strong for him, not the other way around.

She gripped his hand. "What can we do?"

"SecUnit and I are making some recommendations. That's the other reason it's pissed. Preservation isn't going to change everything on behalf of safety. Not if it means giving up

our ideals about welcoming others. SecUnit isn't even being allowed cart blanche to rewrite StationSecSys, which irritates it greatly."

"And the rest of us?"

"Just be there for her. You know Mensah isn't one to spill all her troubles easily. But more than that, we can't talk about any of this. I'm working with security to craft a press release." He rubbed his forehead harder. "It's going to be an issue with her family. Everyone talks about everything here."

Bharadwaj thought wryly of her own well-intentioned family. Darsham hadn't been the only one to want to push, just the one who spoke first.

"At least we can provide her with some understanding then."

He nodded. "I should get back to it."

"One thing first."

He gave her a questioning look. She reached out and began to massage his forehead.

He melted under her touch. The tension in his face eased and he leaned in. She kept it up until he pulled back, a regretful look on his face.

"That did help, thank you. I should go though."

She nodded. Only once he was out the door did she give in to a new round of crying. These tears felt heavy. For a moment, she'd believed everything was all right.

Eventually they abated enough for her to clean her face with the last of Gurathin's gifted tissues. She retreated home and collapsed in bed with her head pounding, feeling shamefully grateful that she didn't have to put a brave face on for Arada, Pin-Lee, and Ratthi just yet.

Chapter 9: Documentary

The idea of making a documentary about SecUnit had slowly become more and more real over time. But nothing illustrated the need for it like Preservation's reaction to SecUnit's arrival.

It had saved them all on the survey. It had saved Mensah again on TranRollinHyfa. Both times at great cost to itself. And yet many people reacted with fear and suspicion.

Bharadwaj had asked Mensah if SecUnit would be upset over her plan. She was prepared to abandon the idea completely rather than cause it distress.

But Mensah looked thoughtful and said, "I think it might like that, actually. I think you should ask it to participate."

So she'd sent it a message. Mensah had cautioned them all not to pressure it.

"I wouldn't!" Ratthi said. Pin-Lee shot him a skeptical glare. "I won't," he said a bit sheepishly. "I know Seccy's going to love being in media though!"

"You know *you* would love being in media, that's all."

Arada watched them tease with an oddly wistful look. She'd been subdued since everyone returned.

All of them met often for meals, or just to work on their own projects in the company of others who understood. Mensah in particular struggled to relax around anyone but SecUnit and the survey team. Her own family didn't know about the ongoing risk of assassination, which made it difficult for them to understand why she stayed glued to SecUnit's side.

After one of those meals, Arada hung back while the others left. Bharadwaj hung back as well.

Once it was just the two of them, Arada vented her frustration. "I hate my stupid brain. Now that everyone's back, I'm more anxious than ever. It's like having them all in arm's reach made me more scared, not less. It's so absurd!"

"I cried so much that first night," Bharadwaj admitted. "At first it was happy tears. Then, not so much."

"Why are brains so stupid?"

"Well. You're a biologist. Living things are stupid on a pretty routine basis, so you should be used to it, right?"

It wasn't much of a joke but for some reason it made Arada laugh. At first she just snickered but before long she was doubled over helplessly. Her laughter was contagious but as Arada

began to gasp for air and tears formed in her eyes, Bharadwaj began to worry.

But the gale of laughter passed, Arada wiped away the tears, smiled at her, and said, “Thanks, I needed that.”

Arada pressed a quick hug on her and then left, her steps lighter than they had been in days.

#

SecUnit walked into her office without knocking, stole a nervous glance at her and immediately looked away, then approached an empty chair as if it were a wild fauna. It examined the chair at length, then cautiously eased its weight into it. Bharadwaj made sure not to look at it too directly.

“You’re making a documentary about SecUnits,” it said, its voice all but vibrating with tension.

“I am,” Bharadwaj acknowledged.

Despite its nervousness, when it started to speak, the words flooded out. “Will it have SecUnits in it? That sounds like a stupid question but it’s not. A lot of media featuring SecUnits doesn’t actually have SecUnits in it. They use ComfortUnits or bots. I guess because SecUnits are expensive and everyone’s scared of them. And maybe because the company wants us to be mysterious so we’re scarier.”

It cut itself off abruptly and stared at the wall. This was more than Bharadwaj had ever heard it say at once.

“I’m not sure if it will have SecUnits in it. Actually, I was hoping you might participate,” Bharadwaj said cautiously.

“Me too. I mean yes. Can I watch it when I’m done? I don’t want to watch the parts with me in it. Can I just watch the parts without me?”

“Of course. I can mark those parts so you can skip them if you prefer.”

“Good. I don’t want to watch myself. I want to be in the documentary though. Even though I hate being looked at in real life. It’s different if it’s media. I could show humans what it’s like to be a SecUnit. We know a lot about humans, but humans don’t know anything about us.”

Bharadwaj nodded. “We get our ideas from media, and even though everyone knows media and real life are different, we just don’t meet SecUnits in real life, at least not often enough to learn from that.”

“During the survey, Gurathin asked me what it’s like to be me. I didn’t know how to answer that because I’ve only ever been me.”

“It’s a difficult question, isn’t it? All of us live within our own perspectives.”

It nodded. “Humans are weird. But I learn a lot by watching them. Which is my job. But it’s not a human’s job to watch SecUnits. So humans never learn about us. I think this documentary can be my answer to what it’s like to be me.”

She smiled warmly. “That’s exactly what I’m hoping for. That through the documentary, humans can learn about SecUnits from the point of view of the units. Right now we all have is Corporation Rim media. We all know it’s not true but it gets in our heads because there’s nothing to counter it.”

“Media with SecUnits is stupid. They’re constantly going rogue and killing everyone. That really doesn’t happen that frequently. I mostly watch media with no SecUnits, and then I see the humans get in trouble, and I think, this mission would have gone a lot better if there was a SecUnit along. Humans shouldn’t do their own security. Will there be missions?”

What an interesting question. Bharadwaj considered it seriously. “There will definitely be at least one mission, the one where we met you. I want people to come to know you the way we did, through how you helped us. But what do you think of also including a section where you analyze media in terms of how a SecUnit could have assisted in a crisis?”

“This is the best idea ever.” Then it stood up abruptly and said, “I have to go.”

As soon as it left, Bharadwaj gave in to the cheek-splitting grin she’d been fighting. She hadn’t expected such unbridled enthusiasm. Underneath her excitement ran a thrum of nerves. Now she couldn’t pretend this was just a silly hobby to pass the time while she recovered. Now she’d have to deliver a documentary worth watching.

Shortly thereafter she received an audio feed message from Mensah. *SecUnit asked me to pass on its apologies for being,* and here Mensah’s voice took on a very dry tone, *a giant fucking weirdo in your office.*

Bharadwaj laughed. *Please tell SecUnit that I’m not in the least offended and I look forward to working with it.* She’d liked to say something warmer about how honored she felt, but they’d begun realizing that when it came to SecUnit, sometimes less said was more.

I’ll be sure to tell SecUnit that, Mensah said, stressing the word tell. It was eavesdropping, of course. Someday they’d have to talk to it about that but right now it just warmed her heart.

Chapter 10: False Alarm

Bharadwaj's office door slid open and a woman with broad shoulders and graying hair strode toward her desk.

"I am here to see the Mensah."

The Mensah. What an odd thing to say.

Any off-world interest in Mensah called for notifying security until the risk of GrayCris retaliation dropped, so immediately Bharadwaj pinged both Indah and SecUnit. *Stranger asking for Mensah. She didn't have an appointment.*

Indah sent back, *Security is on the way.*

Bharadwaj checked the feed for a name, but nothing was listed. People asking for Mensah weren't rare, but the lack of a name sent a chill through her.

She kept a smile on her face. "Hello, I'm Jui Bharadwaj. I assist the Preservation Council with off-world mining negotiations. You have business with Mensah, you say?"

"Yes, yes. Why isn't she here?"

"Well, for starters, this isn't her office. And she's in a meeting right now. I'm also involved with mining rights negotiations though. Can you tell me what your business is? I'll help you get set up with what you need."

The woman shook her head firmly. "My business is with the Mensah. I dealt with the Mensah before, I will do so again. You are not known to me."

"It's true that we've never met. But perhaps you could introduce yourself to me, and tell me a bit more about why you came? Usually people arrange meetings in advance."

"I don't justify myself to you. I meet with the Mensah."

SecUnit sent, *There's no record of this person visiting Preservation before. Stall her.*

"If you'll give me a moment, I'll contact Mensah's aides and see when she's free. It really would be easier if you told me what this is about. Her aides can assemble any materials she might need when seeing you."

Her visitor considered that briefly. "Indium on Beliray. Station maintenance expenses have increased. And so we require more money for the mineral rights."

Bharadwaj couldn't bring the planet to mind. It was hard to think through her rapidly escalating unease.

"I see. That's certainly something we can discuss. What's your name?"

“My name is not for you. I will deal with the Mensah.”

“I’ll contact her. It’s just that it would be simpler if I could tell Mensah who she’ll be meeting with.”

“Not for you,” the woman repeated. “If I am not worth the attention of the Mensah, our deal can end.”

This couldn’t be a real representative. Bharadwaj offered her a quick, fake smile. “That’s up to your own polity, of course.” Then, remembering SecUnit’s instruction to stall, she backpedaled.

“Mensah is a diligent and hardworking person. She isn’t unavailable because she is snubbing you, but because she didn’t know to expect you. With a bit of patience, I’m sure we can work everything out. We can talk about it.”

She’d added the last bit out of habit. The woman gave her an assessing look and finally nodded.

“Very well. We can talk.”

Bharadwaj’s mind went blank. She ought to be defusing the situation. (Where was security?) She tried to organize her scattered thoughts.

“Tell me where you’re from again?”

“You have forgotten already? This is why I deal only with the Mensah.”

The two of them just stared at each other.

And then Gurathin strode in and stared the woman in the face. Two station security members followed but stayed back a bit, letting Gurathin pull attention. The sudden relief left her shaky and light-headed.

“You are here from Beliray. You are new.”

“I am Beliray Mining Rights Negotiator. I am not new!”

“Our previous Beliray Mining Rights Negotiator is known to me. This body is not known to me. Previous Beliray Mining Rights Negotiator showed courtesy and made appointments in advance.”

“My ship was rerouted and arrived early.”

Something had shifted. The situation had gone from waiting for disaster to watching a game. Gurathin knew what was expected.

I think she’s a real representative. They’ve got some weird customs. I assisted Mensah in dealing with this polity before. Her predecessor didn’t say anything about stepping down. I bet she’s overcompensating for being shoved on the job with no training.

It wasn’t a crisis. Gurathin had it handled and she was going to puke on the floor if she didn’t get out of here. Bharadwaj quietly retreated through the door separating her office from her bedroom.

Her stomach settled just a bit once the door was closed. She flopped on the bed, waste receptacle nearby in case she needed it. But lying down was bad. She couldn’t get enough air.

She sat up again.

The stink of the worm was choking her.

A knock sounded on her door followed by Gurathin’s voice. “I’m coming in.”

She tried to slow her breathing. Surely he had more urgent tasks than tending to her.

“I’m okay,” she said.

“Sure. I’ll just keep you company for a minute, all right?”

She should send him away but she couldn’t. At least she could try to slow her breathing though. All this fuss!

“I should have…” Bharadwaj was certain there was something she should have known, but she couldn’t bring it to mind.

“She was being an asshole. She’s new on the job and she was messing with you to cover her own mistake.”

“No! No, I’m going to lose the contract.”

She must have screwed up somehow. She had to apologize, not let Gurathin pick a fight. No, wait, she thought, Gura hadn’t quarreled with the woman. He’d helped. She couldn’t keep track and she couldn’t breathe.

“Bharadwaj. Jui. Never mind the meeting. What helps you calm down?”

“Scarves.” She didn’t wear these. She’d applied perfume directly to them so she could smell them when she wanted to.

She pointed toward a dresser drawer. Gurathin opened it, grabbed a scarf, and pressed it into her hands.

Bharadwaj held the scarf to her face and inhaled. Even through the perfume, she still smelled the worm. That horrible hot stink. Then SecUnit’s gun firing and the roasted flesh, the blasted hole through which SecUnit liberated her and yet the smell of it haunted her dreams.

How stupid to think of that now. There weren’t any worms on…what planet had that woman come from? Bel… She tried to remember but all she could call to mind was that terrible moment when the earth fell away.

“None of the smells are enough. I try and I try but I still smell the worm. I’m supposed to focus on my senses but it doesn’t work. And that’s not even the worst of it. Sometimes I smell…them.”

The words came out broken by gasps and half-sobs.

Gurathin took both her hands and squeezed. “It works. It will work. It takes time. It might not make that false smell from memory fully stop but it will provide a balance, a counterweight. Let’s do your other senses too.”

He talked her through what she could see, hear, and touch. The sense that she was going to starve from lack of air slowly ebbed. The worm smell, that horrible unreal smell that came from her brain rather than her environment, didn’t fully disappear but it did fade.

“I used to smell Mensah’s clothing,” he said a bit shyly, glancing at her as if for approval and then immediately looking away. “She was so kind to me, you know? And smelling her could cut through a lot of the noise in my head when nothing else could. I was worried she would take it wrong, but she said it was all right.”

“I understand. There’s nothing more tangible as a reminder of someone than their smell. And it’s unique to each of us, as much so as our voice.”

He nodded, still looking shy.

“You smell nice,” Bharadwaj said, and then covered her mouth with her hand, a bit horrified that she’d blurted that out without thought. The last thing she needed was to alienate a friend right now.

But Gurathin wasn’t upset. Rather, his face broke out in a pleased smile which he immediately tried to suppress. He glanced at her face and then immediately looked away, the smile still showing at the corners of his mouth.

“I do?”

“You do,” she said, a bit bolder now that he’d taken it well.

“You’re welcome, you know. To smell me. I mean if it helps. If you’re comfortable with that.” He spoke a bit awkwardly, sneaking peeks at her face as if to measure her reaction.

“I think the question if if you’re comfortable?”

He nodded, then held out his arm, a bit stiffly.

Bharadwaj leaned in and lay a head against his chest, her nose positioned to get a solid whiff of his armpit. He had that particular smell, warm and human and belonging uniquely to him. It also contained some hint specific to his augments. Lubrication, perhaps? Or just the way that getting the implants had altered his body? She didn’t know the reason, only that he carried subtle metallic tang that had grown familiar and dear to her.

Slowly the tension in her seeped away. She leaned against him, letting herself drift. He brought a hand up to stroke her hair.

She savored it. Finally she said, “If I’m not careful I’ll fall asleep like this.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“You wouldn’t mind now but we’d both wake up with stiff necks.”

He laughed a bit ruefully. “I suppose.”

“Thank you for this. It’s been hard to let people help. Everyone wants to, but sometimes they want to a bit too much, or in the wrong ways, you know?”

He nodded, blinking rapidly.

“That’s been an issue for you too, hasn’t it?

He nodded again.

She gave him one last squeeze and then sat up. “I think I can sleep now.”

“And I should get back to sorting out the whole Beliray mess. Our new contact will get away with less if she has someone who knows Beliray customs around.”

“Oh, she was manipulating me then? I should have guessed.” Bharadwaj felt crestfallen and raw at the belated realization.

“No more than the norm, for them. It’s expected and accepted behavior for them during bargaining. But she’s the one who screwed up her own scheduling. She’s new on the job and trying to look clever.”

That soothed her ego a bit.

Then Gurathin’s shy smile crept back. He blinked nervously. “One last hug? Or sniff?”

She laughed and all but flung herself into his arms. He held her firmly. When he let go, he pulled off his sweater.

She should tell him she didn’t need it. Instead she just sat there tongue-tied and grateful as he laid it on the bed next to her.

“Just in case,” he said with a quick smile. And then he left.

Chapter 11: Close Call

> "The two augmented humans GrayCris had sent to kill Dr. Mensah had been less sentient than hauler bots; somebody had kept them drugged and docile, waiting for the right moment for deployment." - Network Effect, Martha Wells

Take shelter. Bharadwaj was in her office in another meeting regarding mining rights when she received SecUnit's feed message.

She immediately stood up and locked the door.

Her contact blinked at her, confused.

"Security drill," she said with an awkward smile. "I'm sorry for the disruption. We can continue though, it's not likely to last long."

She focused on the meeting, because this was something she could do for Mensah. Maintain normalcy, stay on good terms with Preservation's business partners, make sure the trouble with GrayCris didn't disrupt everyone else's life any more than necessary.

Thankfully her visitor today was someone she'd dealt with before and genuinely enjoyed meeting. If they'd lived in the same polity, they'd have been friends.

The *Hostiles down, remain in shelter for cleanup* message came 10 minutes later. So it hadn't been a false alarm. Bharadwaj felt an odd mix of relief that it had been handled and tension over knowing that something had happened.

The final all clear came about 20 minutes after that. Bharadwaj brought her meeting to a close and sent everyone from the survey quick hug sigils in the feed.

Mensah updated the group survey team channel. *Everything's fine. SecUnit and our security team handled it. SecUnit required medical treatment, but it's recovered completely and it's with me now. It and Gurathin are assisting security with incident analysis.*

Mensah was too good at using the feed without subvocalizing. The words were as neutral as if they'd been typed. Bharadwaj wondered exactly what had happened, but she couldn't ask over the feed. Even with SecUnit around to monitor for eavesdroppers, they'd agreed to keep sensitive information off the feed.

Bharadwaj sent, *Do you want more company?*

Not tonight, thank you for asking though.

It wasn't surprising that Mensah felt the urge to withdraw a bit. Bharadwaj would just have to hug her extra tight the next time they met.

Later than night, Gurathin messaged her. *How are you doing?*

I'm fine. It didn't even disrupt my meeting. How about you?

OK. May I come see you, actually?

He arrived at her door looking tense and weary. She took his hand and drew him inside.

"Everything's all right now," he said.

"Can you tell me much about what happened?"

"It's what we've been fearing. GrayCris sent assassins. If they'd just read their own fucking reports, they'd know to leave us alone. SecUnit identified them as soon as they disembarked, but the agents were heavily augmented. Not like me." His hand rose, fluttered near his data port, then dropped again. "They wouldn't…"

"Gura, sit with me."

She led him to her bed. They sat side by side. Bharadwaj took his hand.

"It took our whole security team to stop one of them, and SecUnit assisted. Then SecUnit chased the second one and took him down just before he got to Mensah. SecUnit says Mensah could have reached out and touched him. That's how close he came. And she can't even tell anyone. She has to carry that all alone."

"Not all alone," Bharadwaj said firmly. "It's awful that she can't tell her family. But she has you, and SecUnit, and all of us. We're not going to let her be alone in this. And I'm not going to let you be alone in it either."

He pressed his free hand to his mouth, fighting back a reaction to that.

"Tell me, honey."

Haltingly, he said, "They're dead now. It's better. The way they were augmented…it's not like what you've seen. It's…there wouldn't have been much of anything left of them. I shouldn't even tell you this."

"You shouldn't carry it alone," Bharadwaj said firmly.

"I don't want…I'm just going to upset you."

"This hits at you, not me. I have my own weak spots, which you've guarded. Please tell me Gura, it's going to suck but I can feel how badly you want someone to understand, if only a little."

He turned and looked at her face, his eyes searching. She met his gaze steadily. He swallowed and nodded.

“We call it augmentation but it’s not. Augmentation adds. What was done to them…it replaces. And I think sometimes about if I’d tested a little lower, if I’d fallen a little faster and deeper into addiction…no, I was probably too old by the time it got bad. Gotta get them while the flesh is young and strong. So you can scoop out the self-ness and make a cheaper version of a construct, one with less metal and less brains.”

“Oh, Gura.”

His free hand went to his elbow, pressing down hard. “I just keep thinking it could have been me.”

“Come here.”

She took him in her arms. Finally he gave way to the tears he’d been resisting. Even now each sob felt like it was being wrenched out of him. He wasn’t one to let go easily, Bharadwaj thought.

“Don’t fight it. I know this hurts but don’t fight it.”

She wasn’t sure how long his reaction lasted. When the tears stopped, she continued to hold him close. Eventually he sniffed messily and pulled away a little. She patted his shoulder, then got up and brought the tissues and water, just as he’d done for her not long ago. He retreated into the bathroom to blow his nose.

He emerged looking awkward.

“Gura, I don’t think you should be alone tonight. Will you stay here?”

“I…that’s all right. I’m all right.”

“You don’t need to be *not all right* to accept a little moral support. And I’d feel better having you close.”

He hesitated. He’d drawn in on himself the way he always did when stressed, and yet he wasn’t trotting out some standard assurance or excuse.

“I don’t mean to pressure you. I just want you to know you’re welcome here. Wanted, even.”

“Thank you. It’s a kind offer. It’s just there’s something I should tell you. I don’t want to do anything on false pretenses.”

His eyes rolled up as they did so often in moments of intense emotion. Bharadwaj waited. A moment later he was able to continue. “I have certain feelings. For you, I mean.”

She’d wondered just a little when she’d complimented his smell and he acted so pleased.

“I wasn’t sure you felt those “certain feelings,” as you put it, for anyone,” she admitted. “But you know it’s not going to be a problem for me.”

He hunched over, gripping his arms with bruising strength. She laid a hand on his, willing him to let go before he hurt himself.

“Gura. No matter what comes next, tonight I just want you to be with someone. I’m not up for anything sexual, not tonight. Even if you were, which I suspect you’re not.”

“You all say these things so casually.” He smiled wryly. With some apparent effort, he let go of his elbows but then immediately clenched his hands. She once again put a gentle hand over his.

“I know these things are complicated. But tonight doesn’t need to be, if you don’t want it to be. I’d like you to lie down and rest, and I’d like to lie down next to you. Or if not next to you, near you. The couch unfolds into a guest bed which one of us could use. I want to be a place of rest and safety for you, the way you have been to me.”

That triggered more tears. These came easier than his earlier wrenching fought-back muffled sobs. She opened her arms just a little, a hint rather than the clear signal she sometimes gave him. He leaned in and lay his head on her shoulder.

Eventually the second storm passed.

“Would you like to lie down with me?”

He wavered.

“Honey, I just don’t think you should be alone tonight.”

“All right,” he said in a small voice.

After that came the awkward practicalities. Bharadwaj found a spare toothbrush while Gurathin hovered nearby, obviously feeling out of place. She put on a oversized t-shirt to sleep in. She had nothing that would fit Gurathin, but he stripped down to a single layer, a light cotton shirt that he wore under his sweater.

And then it was time to lie down.

Gurathin hesitated. “If I respond oddly…” He trailed off.

“I’m honestly not sure if you mean more tears, an erection, or nightmares. But it’s all fine.”

He laughed a little.

“I’m not sure either,” he admitted. “I just know it’s been a long time.”

“Do you have a preferred side of bed?”

“The left.” His hand fluttered self-consciously near his ear, then withdrew. “I often sleep on my side, and I don’t like pressure on my data port.”

They lay down. He took the position of big spoon and despite all his earlier shyness, he pulled her close.

Bharadwaj let out a sigh. It felt nice, having another warm body next to hers. But more than that, he was letting her help. She'd ached to give back some of the comfort he offered her any time she was upset. So often he closed himself off. Regardless of what happened in the morning, she'd treasure this night.

The side snuggles didn't last. He proved restless, turning on to his back, then each side in turn, his legs moving restlessly and eventually kicking as if due to some unwelcome nerve or muscle signal.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be. I'm not short on sleep right now. The point of you being here is that I want to be with you. I don't want you to worry about how often you roll over. But if me being next to you is stressing you, I can move to the guest bed."

"No!" He gripped her hand. "It's just a bit embarrassing."

She squeezed back.

"Would a massage help?"

"Not tonight. You're just stuck with me thrashing, I'm afraid. It's one of those things."

"Mmm."

Then, to her surprise, his hands went to her back. His deft fingers began seeking out every knot and tense spot.

"If I'm not being too forward here…"

"Mmm no! It feels so nice." Whatever hesitation he felt about being touched evidently didn't apply to touching her. Another noise slipped out as he hit a tense muscle.

"Did that hurt?"

"No, no, keep going! It feels amazing!"

He worked her back for some time. She'd deliberately avoided fantasizing about his hands. Now she couldn't help but think of how deft and strong they were, how his black nail polish might stand out against her own skin if she could see him work.

She tried not to indulge excessively. Now wasn't the time. But when his hands began to work the small muscles along her ribs, the ones close to the sides of her breasts, she couldn't hold back a sharp inhalation. It wasn't quite a gasp but he must have heard the shift in tone. His hands stilled and then withdrew.

“I’m sorry.” A moment later he added bitterly, “I should have known I couldn’t trust myself here.”

She turned to face him. “Couldn’t trust yourself? Gura, I didn’t mind!”

“You said nothing sexual.”

“Because I didn’t want to pressure you. Because I was afraid you’d regret it and it would come between us as friends. Honey, if it was just down to what I want myself, I’d say yes in a heartbeat.”

He’d pulled back his hands and clenched them together.

“We can talk about it,” she tried.

“I can’t. I’m sorry, I know that’s how people do things here. You talk about everything. But I just can’t right now.”

“Gura, there’s just one thing I need to know for certain. Is this some kind of self-harm? Or something you’re doing because it feels bad in a way that distracts you from whatever else you’re going through?”

“It’s not,” he said quickly. “It feels good to make *you* feel good. It’s just hard knowing I can’t be what anyone wants.”

“Honey, you don’t have to be anything but yourself for me. If you get me in a certain state and then want to stop, it just means I’ll step into the other room for a bit. And as for you, I want you to be free to feel whatever feelings that are in you and need to get out.”

His eyes rolled up at that, and he brushed away tears when the moment passed. *How many tears does he have stored up?* Bharadwaj wondered.

“It won’t last. If this is the only time, if this is all, do you still want me to?”

The thought hurt but he was right here, warm and alive and so beautiful. “I do,” she whispered.

He drew her close and ran his fingers through her hair. Despite his earlier hesitation, he pressed kisses along her neck with confidence and enthusiasm. He moved from her neck down to her breasts and oh, she felt this right to her core.

His fingers traced her shoulders and worked down her spine. One hand found its way to her buttock and gave her a firm squeeze while the other lifted up her shirt. She wriggled it further up. He continued to grip her buttock while his mouth found her nipple.

The heat between her legs grew and he hadn’t even touched her there yet. Meanwhile she could feel his erection growing and pressing against her leg, but she already knew the implicit rule: he was in charge of touching. It wasn’t how she normally approached lovemaking. She put her hands on his shoulders to stop herself from exploring everything else.

How on earth had he thought he would be bad at this? But maybe that wasn't the source of his anxiety. Bharadwaj had no time to wonder though. His expert tongue teased and worked her nipple while his hands discovered just how much she liked having his fingers lightly tease her knees.

She cried out, her back arching and her cunt pulsing. He'd brought her to this state without even touching her there. He began teasing her nipple with gentle little bites and licks while his fingers worked their way up her thighs, slowly drawing closer.

Then he stiffened and thrust once against her. Hot seed shot out. Bharadwaj had just a moment to enjoy the delicious mess of it when Gurathin began apologizing.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"Don't be!"

"I don't always."

Bharadwaj wasn't sure what he meant. He didn't always orgasm? Or didn't come so soon? But she had no time to think. He'd pulled his hands away briefly after he came but he put them back, teasing and sliding up her thighs. His fingers found her entrance. She should do more to check on him, she thought, but she had no time. His fingers began to thrust and tease and she could think of nothing else.

It took only a moment for him to find that sweet spot, that angle and motion that hit her clit just enough and not too much. She cried out as waves of orgasm rolled through her.

He stroked her hair as the waves passed. She lay against the pillow limp and happy.

"I'll clean up." He bolted for the bathroom, avoiding her gaze. Bharadwaj let out a sigh. He was going to break her heart. Half with whatever had left him struggling so hard to accept care and affection, half because she doubted she'd ever get to do this again.

She hoped it hadn't been a misstep to accept this. But what was done was done. While he was occupied, she quickly stripped off and replaced the sheets.

When he emerged, he glanced at the bed and his face broke out into a shy smile. "You changed them." He sounded touched, as if she'd done him some special favor.

She just smiled, relieved that he hadn't withdrawn as much as she feared. She quickly took her turn cleaning herself and came out of the bathroom to find him standing next to the bed.

"May I…?"

"Of course!"

And to her absolute delight, he took up the position of big spoon once again.

Except while her own orgasm had left her whole body relaxed and happy, his didn't seem to have done much for him. He kicked and twisted even more than before, as if unable to find

any position which gave him more than momentary comfort.

At one point he let out a frustrated sigh. She resisted the temptation to reach out and soothe him the way she would have done with most bed partners. A moment later he asked in a small voice, “Could you stroke my hair?”

Delighted at the offer, she rolled to face him and began running her fingers through his hair. The smooth strands felt so satisfying in her hands. She began applying just a bit of tension. He reacted with a long slow exhale, completely unlike the frustrated huff he’d let out moments before.

Her hand brushed past his data port. He let out a stifled “mmphf.”

“Oh, sorry!”

“No, it’s all right. It feels nice.”

“You said you didn’t like pressure there?”

“Not from the pillow. It’s sensitive. You can touch it though.”

She gently explored the skin around his port with her fingers. He let out another low noise, not exactly a moan of arousal but something was definitely happening.

“Humans carry electric charge. I can feel your fingers.”

“That’s fascinating! I wouldn’t expect that low of a signal to have much effect?”

He was silent for a moment. Then he blurted out, “I wrote a program to amplify the sensation. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course, honey. How wonderful that you can do that! I didn’t know you had a program like that.”

“I meant I wrote it just now. So I can feel how nice it is in more places. That’s not weird to you?”

“I think it’s marvelous.”

His legs began to shake. It was a little similar to his earlier kicking but didn’t seem to trouble him as much.

As if guessing her thoughts, he said, “Things misfire sometimes. I was in an accident a while back, there’s some lingering nerve issues. Sometimes it’s good to get the weird false signals released.”

“Mmm.”

She ran her thumb over his data port. This time his sharp inhale definitely suggested arousal.

“More of that, or no?”

He answered with an inarticulate noise of appreciation.

She teased and played with his data port, wondering if it might lead somewhere. But his breathing slowly deepened and then he lay still. He must have fallen asleep.

Her own arousal had crept back up but she felt no urge to act on it. She savored the warmth between her legs. Tomorrow she might get her heart broken. But that was tomorrow.

Chapter 12: Morning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When she woke in the morning, Gurathin was already up. He'd made coffee and brought back egg burritos from one of the station shops. She could see from what he wore that he hadn't gone home, but he'd tidied his hair as much as possible.

He looked anxious. But he often looked anxious and she couldn't read the specific flavor of whatever he was poking at.

"Thank you for last night," he said.

She couldn't read his tone. Her heart ached both for him and for herself. Knowing he had feelings and also knowing she'd promised him that last night obligated him to nothing, she simply said, "Any time, honey."

If he wanted to walk out and treat last night's confession like it never happened, she needed to let him. No matter how much her own heart ached, no matter how much she would have liked to be closer. He'd trusted her and she needed to honor that.

He'd brought burritos for two though. He sat down at her small table and ate his with dogged determination and many stolen glances at her face. She tried not to watch him too obviously but she couldn't resist sneaking peeks. She felt a flush creep into her cheeks.

Finally the tension wore her down. She reached out and lay a hand over his. "You told me last night you had feelings. Nothing needs to change, but if you would like things to change, I might as well tell you that I have feelings for you too."

He blinked rapidly. "It isn't that I'm not interested. It's that I can't bear to lose you. I won't be what you want."

His voice radiated such misery. And yet he kept stealing glances at her face. Was it wishful thinking or was there hope buried under the tension?

Whatever came of this, she couldn't let him walk away from this without challenging his blunt declaration of his own inadequacy. Because that's what lay at the core. He didn't think that the two of them were poorly matched or that she had unreasonable expectations, but that he himself fell short.

"Compatibility is important, of course. It's not my intention to pressure you. But I'm curious why it is you see us as so incompatible?"

"I hold people too tight. I'm afraid of losing them and then I cling too hard and chase them away."

“It’s interesting that you describe yourself that way. Because to me, so often I want to be closer. I wish you’d let me in more, as a friend if not a lover. I haven’t wanted to scare you off by chasing after.”

“I never wanted to hurt your feelings.”

“Oh honey, you haven’t. You’re here every time I need someone to lean on. It’s just that I’ve wanted to return the favor.”

He relaxed a little at that. No, she thought, relax wasn’t quite the right word. The tension in him shifted and became less laden in self-doubt and misery. He met her gaze and something in him opened up.

“I’m possessive. I do cling to people. I’ve done therapy—”

Therapy modules, she thought, but didn’t interrupt.

“—and I can recognize certain impulses but there are things about me not easily changed. I don’t think I can do a group marriage. And I don’t want to enter into something brief and transient, then get asked to step aside when you meet someone you can actually plan a family with.”

She was still absorbing that when he rushed to correct himself. “Not that anyone can guarantee that a relationship lasts forever, of course I wouldn’t expect—”

She squeezed his hand. “Gura, I didn’t take it that way.”

He smiled a bit self-consciously. It still lifted her heart to see him smile at all.

“Group marriages are common here but not universal, you know. And I don’t think Ratthi will ever marry at all. And as for me, I’ve done duet relationships before. In fact, it’s my preference.”

“It is? I thought it was seen as…unenlightened here.”

“It’s jealousy and possessiveness which are unenlightened. And one way to avoid that is to know your own tendencies and seek out a relationship which meets your needs.”

“It didn’t work out though?”

“For unrelated reasons,” she assured him.

He nodded, taking her at her word. “There’s another thing. I don’t want children. I just can’t.”

“Why is that?”

His face twisted into a bitter smile. “What idiot would trust me with a child? I’d never trust myself. They’re so vulnerable, so trusting. So easy to mistreat. To insist on controlling, telling myself it's so they won't get hurt. So fragile, to the rest of the world but also to me. I’d be a horror.”

“It’s not dislike of them, then?”

“No, not at all. I love being uncle to Mensah’s crowd. I have fun with them and then someone else does the hard parts. But being a parent myself? I don’t think I can grow into that.”

“That’s actually one way in which we’re compatible then. Because I don’t want children either.”

“You don’t? But you’d make such a wonderful mother!” He spoke with such artless sincerity that it warmed her heart.

“Thank you, that’s a lovely compliment. I love my nieces and nephews. But I have other priorities.” She took a moment to brace herself against old hurt. “Not wanting children of my own is why some of my previous relationships didn’t work out.”

He gripped her hand. “I’m sorry. It’s just not something that can be resolved via compromise, right?”

“Exactly. And one person I was with…He thought he would be all right not having kids when he was younger. But as he matured, his desires changed. Or perhaps his understanding of his desires.”

He squeezed her hand once more. “Other priorities, you said. Like your survey work?”

“Yes, although now I’m not planning to continue.”

“You’ll find other roles,” he assured her. “Like your documentary.”

She found herself blinking away tears. “You’re the first person I’ve told about stepping away from surveying. My family is starting to suspect but I’ve put them off.”

“You’ve done your part. No one could fault you for seeking a change.”

“Thank you. I’m going to miss the others so much though.”

“Whereas selfishly, I’ll be glad to see more of you here.”

Oh but he had to stop smiling at her like that. It wasn’t fair of him to smile that way when he was so close yet not within reach. She felt a blush creeping into her cheeks.

And then he looked down and the same anxiety crept back into his face.

“I won’t be what you want. I try to control things, I close myself off, I withdraw from certain kinds of touch…”

“Gura. Can’t you make that a question and not a statement?”

He blinked as if startled. Then his brow furrowed as he considered. “I’m afraid I won’t be what you need.” His brow furrowed even deeper and he hastily added, “That’s still not a question, sorry. But it all comes so easily to everyone here.”

“Intimacy or sex? Or both?”

“Both. But I was thinking of sex. Someone like me…it might seem okay at first, to work around my issues. But there’s this expectation of healing here. Or for things to be even better than before the were broken.” His hand fluttered and waved toward the mending on his sweater.

“Kintsugi,” Bharadwaj said. “Mending something without hiding the original damage.”

He nodded. “So that it’s even more beautiful, and functional as well.”

“The term comes from repair of pottery. But did you know that for pottery, pieces repaired this way still can’t withstand the same use as they once did?”

Suddenly she was the focus of his intense interest, as if the piece of him which had looked inward at his own fears now shifted to her words alone.

“Pieces repaired with kintsugi shouldn’t be put in automatic cleaners or heaters. Care must be taken even with hand cleaning. They shouldn’t be exposed to direct sunlight. They should be extra well padded if shipped or stored.”

He laughed a little. “No direct sunlight? I can’t tolerate direct sun either, due to my skin. At least not without special care.” His hand fluttered toward his face. “It’s almost too on the nose as metaphor, right?”

“I’d say it’s just right. But another thing it seems no one’s told you. You’re not the only one who struggles in this area. Perhaps it’s less common on Preservation than in the Rim. But we’re not immune to trauma, and healing doesn’t always mean returning to the same state as before. And for that matter, for some people, some of these struggles seem inborn.”

He took a moment to absorb that. “It’s not that I’d wish these struggles on anyone else. But it is nice to know I’m not…” he waved a hand at himself, “…uniquely incapable.”

“We both have feelings for each other. I think what this comes down to is, do you trust me to treat you gently, as a thing of great worth? Do you trust yourself enough to endure my touch, even if it is gentle in intent? Can you stop me from hurting you? Because I think that’s the only real way to break both our hearts. To let me hurt you. I think we could be well matched. Nothing needs to change, but if you’d like to try, I would too.”

Accept any answer, she told herself. *No matter what comes next, accept it with a smile and make sure he knows he’s still your dear friend.*

He looked her straight in the eyes. The deeper she looked, the more hope rose in her heart.

“I do want to try. I just ask for your patience.” He opened his arms and stepped forward, the look on his face a bit like that of someone to dive into possibly cold water.

Bharadwaj didn’t care. Her heart was soaring. She stepped into his arms and he held her tightly.

Chapter End Notes

Time is
Too Slow for those who Wait,
Too Swift for those who Fear,
Too Long for those who Grieve,
Too Short for those who Rejoice;
But for those who Love,
Time is not. -Henry Van Dyke, “Music and Other Poems," 1904

Thanks once again to Rakel for the chapter 1 prompt, Jack Daw for the title, and to Mari for inspiring me to pair these two, for beta reading and for cheerleading the bit I was most attached to yet most anxious about!

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