Traveler's Aid, Extended

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by jotc

Summary

A ship full of people fleeing a failing space station arrives at Preservation. They left behind cryosleep pods of people they couldn't get out. Now Mensah, Murderbot, and other Preservation Station people have to dust off that old ship, the Pressy, and get those pods to safety before it's too late.

Notes

This story has very minor AU elements, and SecUnit is telling it in the unspecified future.

> Occasionally there were humans from sites that were not part of the transit network, “lost” colonies, independents who had not maintained contact with transit stations, “lost” stations, whatever. -Fugitive Telemetry, Martha Wells

I couldn’t tell this story when it happened, but a lot has changed and I can tell it now. At the time, I was on Preservation safeguarding Mensah from GrayCris assassination attempts. Mensah was still head of the Preservation Council. She’d already survived one assassination attempt (thanks to me, and even with me there it had been too close.) I could see the strain she tried to hide.

At the time, I was sprawled on her couch because I can do that now. I can just throw limbs anywhere on her furniture and if anyone complains, she judges them and not me. Mensah took a feed message from Indah. I wasn’t monitoring (every once in a while I take a break from eavesdropping on her feed just to keep her off guard) but I saw her face change.

I joined her feed channel.

I’ll call an emergency council meeting. But I assume you won’t wait?

We’re already doing pre-flight checks for the Pressy and we're rounding up a crew.

Good. It’s best to get official approval but you know we’ll answer the call.

Indah tapped acknowledgment and closed the channel.

Mensah shoved a transcript at me as she began drafting a short message for Preservation Council members. Basically, a cargo ship stuffed full to overflowing with humans (many of them children) had just arrived from a colony called Arilou. One of the adult humans named Mishra grabbed the first dock worker she spotted. She said their station’s insulation had failed, they had to evacuate, and they’d left forty-seven cryosleep pods behind because the cargo ship couldn’t handle any more humans and still provide reliable life support. She’d come here instead of other equally close-by worlds because she knew about the Pressy. Old as it was, it had been kept in top condition and was still capable of transporting cryosleep pods in bulk.

Technically, we didn’t have to go. Preservation has something called a “Traveler’s Aid” law, but it applies to people who come here and then get stuck, not to people asking us to go elsewhere. But I knew we would.

(Somehow “I” had become part of “we.” I wasn’t sure when that had happened. I guess maybe it was after that murder case when Indah asked me if I would be willing to continue consulting with station security in the future? Or when Indah said she wasn’t the one to leak my photo to the newsstreams? I don’t know why it would be because of that and not because of Mensah, except maybe that Indah hadn't known me or wanted me here and yet she came to accept me, and that made me think other people could too. Even if the stupid bot guardianship laws are annoying and stupid.)

While Mensah contacted Preservation Council members, I searched through data to find out what we knew about Arilou. Essentially: nothing. Some colonies choose to stay off the transit map. It happens with places abandoned by their original corporate founders who don't want to get rediscovered. Unfortunately that also made it hard to tell how much we could trust them. This whole emergency could be some kind of staged corporate trap.

Mensah's face took on a distant and mildly dissatisfied look.

"SecUnit…" she said in the tone of someone about to float an idea which they expected to get push back about.

"I'm not leaving you here," I said.

"I could go on the mission."

"That's a terrible idea," I said, but I found myself wondering, was it really? She might be safer on the Pressy with me than here without me watching over her. GrayCris wasn't likely to just ambush the Pressy and blow us up. Even for the Corporation Rim, tactics like that come with blowback. Most likely GrayCris wasn't involved and the emergency was real. If they were involved, the goal might just be to reduce Mensah's guard, given that the station was already understaffed due to Solstice, which was a big deal around here as holidays go. (A lot of humans had gone to visit the planet, which they referred to as "going home.")

She sighed. "Probably. My family wants me to come home." (See?)

"Because of Solstice?"

"And because it's been too long, but yes. Because of Solstice." Her face took on a contemplative look. "It's a time of renewal, the time when the longest night gives way to lengthening days. I love Solstice but I suppose I'm a bit worried that my family will expect more from the holiday than I'm ready to deliver."

I said, "You need to do the retrieved client protocol," because I'd been waiting for an appropriate time and now seemed as good as any.

"I know," she said. Her face was reflective rather than defiant. "I do intend to."

"Can't you tell them that?"

"I should be able to, shouldn't I?" She laughed a little.

Part of the problem was that she needed to do the trauma treatments before she could handle explaining why she needed to do the trauma treatments. The other part of the problem was that the whole assassination thing was highly classified. Nobody in her family knew why she had a SecUnit glued to her side.

So to them it looked like she was jumping at shadows. I looked like I was the one scaring her, or maybe clinging to her like a security blanket, or maybe encouraging her to cling to me. And I just wanted her to be okay.

“As long as no corporates open fire upon seeing the Pressy, this should be a fairly safe mission,” I said.

“I could float the idea and see how they react.” She considered that for a moment and then contacted her family’s grownups-only voice feed channel.

Farai answered. Mensah explained the situation and said, “I’m considering going.”

“You are?” Farai said, and the hopeful tone in her voice caught us both by surprise.

“I didn’t want to disappoint the family by missing Solstice,” Mensah said a bit cautiously.

“Oh, but don’t you think it would do you good to get away from everything? After…well, it just seems like it would do you good to get out.”

“The idea has tremendous appeal,” Mensah admitted. “I should talk to the others, but there’s not much time.”

“Never mind that, just go! And tell me later if anyone gives you grief about it. I don’t suppose there’s time for Tano or I to join?”

Mensah explained that no one currently on planet would get here in time. Then Mensah got interrupted by another feed call and they said hasty goodbyes.

I could see Mensah fighting back laughter. She looked at me and waved her hand in a way that somehow communicated, *What just happened?* I could understand though. To Farai, it looked like Mensah had finally nerved herself up to do something other than hide in her office. It looked like a step forward. No wonder Farai was on board.

#

The Pressy departed two hours after Mishra arrived. That was remarkably good speed for humans. The delay hadn’t been the council meeting, but the numerous safety checks required before launching a ship which had sat idle for so long.

We set out with Mensah, Mishra, a handful of crew required to run the Pressy, a medic, two people who specialized in station repairs and maintenance, and JollyBaby, who was capable of working outside in a vacuum if necessary. Getting those pods was our top priority but if we could fix anything or at least prevent further deterioration aboard the station, we’d do that too.

(JollyBaby was annoyingly excited. I guess the annoying part was thinking about why it never expected to leave Preservation Station. On the other hand, its human guardian came too and was equally excited. Ugh, the whole guardian system is annoying to think about so I decided not to.)

Mensah visibly relaxed after we departed and I realized that a significant portion of her strain came not from the aftermath of the kidnapping, but from the ongoing threat of assassination. (My knowledge of trauma treatment wanted to point out that changing locations could

sometimes lead to a temporary mood boost, but whatever. It was nice to see her with less tension in her shoulders.)

For most of the Pressy's crew, the voyage took on a celebratory air. Everyone just assumed we'd be successful, like we were in a heartwarming serial. A race against time during a holiday was exactly the kind of story I would expect to see on a show like World Hoppers, and of course there would be a happy ending.

Then they'd catch sight of Mishra looking miserable and they'd temporarily turn sober and quiet, for Mishra's sake more than out of any true doubts of success. It seemed sometimes that Mishra and I were the only ones worrying about arriving too late to find pods full of dead bodies.

(Maybe people who never travel outside Preservation think that life is like a serial because everything always comes out okay for them. That thought gave me complicated emotions and I nearly deleted it.)

Then someone invited Mishra to play one of the fiddly games with many pieces that humans use to pass time and got a snappy refusal. Mensah glanced over at me and then remembered it was me and looked away. I recognized the look though. It was something humans did when they wanted to check their perceptions against someone else's. Mensah just carried her worries so well that even I hadn't noticed.

Later we watched some episodes of Descendants of the Sun together. (Mensah likes it more than me, but I like watching Mensah's reactions.) Mensah mentioned that she'd noticed some tension building.

"Everyone keeps offering her food and drink and invitations. It's kindly intended but a bit oblivious. I think it was self-correcting though."

I asked why she hadn't told everyone to knock it off, the way she'd told everyone to give me space on the survey.

"That level of managing how people interact is for more serious situations. It's possible that Mishra would have taken comfort in these gestures. Or that telling everyone to stop would have dragged down their mood and hers as well."

She cast a brief sidelong glance at me. "I hope I made the right choice, telling everyone to give you space."

"You did." To this day I'm selective about which humans are allowed to discuss anything involving me and how I do in fact have emotions. Back then? One extra wrong word and I would have walked off to watch media in the wilderness until my power ran out. I would have died alone and bored to tears, out of new media and never even knowing if my clients lived or died. And they would almost certainly all have died.

This line of thinking gave me a miserable twisty feeling inside, so I said abruptly, "I'm glad it was you on the survey."

“I’m glad it was me as well,” she said, smiling quietly.

The twisty feeling subsided and I thought about how things had come out so much better than I ever thought they could, back when I first hacked my governor module and then had no idea what to do next. I thought about how I was still so angry all the time but there were moments like this, too. Just us two watching media and both of us still alive.

#

Two nights before our arrival, Mishra tried to hack the Pressy. I’d used some of my drones to set up a visible patrol pattern, but others I’d left in discreet places. One of my less visible drones spotted her heading to an access point.

The Pressy is over two hundred years old with security systems to match. I’d put in my own firewalls when we set out but I didn’t plan to let Mishra test them. I moved fast through the halls but stopped outside the door to watch via drone. Mishra pulled out a cable and a handheld data storage device. I burst into the room, grabbed the data device, and pinned Mishra against the wall by her throat.

“What were you doing?” I demanded.

Her breath came rough (from panic, not because I was choking her. My grip was very precise.) She gasped out, “Nothing. I was just curious.”

That annoyed me so I just held her there and waited for Mensah. I had her data device and I could examine that, but I wanted her in restraints before I let go.

She couldn’t be much of a hacker. If they’d sent an augmented human, she wouldn’t have needed a cable. For that matter many non-augmented humans like Mensah would be able to deploy malware over the feed.

Mensah arrived along with two other crew members, Yao and Riva.

“She was trying to hack the Pressy. Restrain her,” I said.

“Do we even have restraints?” Riva asked.

We did. I’d made sure of it before we left Preservation. I sent Riva to get them while Mensah tried to reassure Mishra.

“No one’s going to hurt you. It would help a lot if you would tell us the truth about what you were up to.”

Mishra looked utterly terrified. Mensah did not suggest that I let her go, which I really appreciated. (I wouldn’t have done it but I like it when my humans trust me to know when not to let a potential hostile go.)

“I wasn’t hurting anything,” she kept insisting. Tears began to stream down her face. Ugh, that was doing uncomfortable things to my insides. I don’t like making humans cry unless they’re confirmed hostiles, and not always even then.

Yao did a pat-down search while I held Mishra in place. Eventually Riva came back with the hand and feet restraints. I examined Mishra's device.

It held a crappy hacking program that you could buy cheap anywhere in the Corporate Rim if you didn't mind wasting your money on something which wouldn't work and would also get you caught. It didn't mean Mishra was corporate. It just meant that at some point she'd set foot on a Rim station, which wasn't terribly surprising.

What I found interesting was the program's task list. It appeared to do one thing and one thing only—hack the Pressy's scanners such that when it scanned Arilou it would send back data for an inhospitable planet with no notable natural resources.

"What's on the planet?" I asked.

She just sat there, radiating misery.

Mensah sat down next to her and spoke gently. "You came to us because you trusted us to help. Unless it was all a lie and there are no cryosleep pods to rescue?"

"It's true," she whispered. "Can't you just take the pods and go? We'll leave the planet behind and never come back."

"And why shouldn't we come back?" Mensah asked.

Mishra didn't answer so I suggested the obvious: alien remnants.

It's lucky I had a drone facing Mishra. (Well, not luck. It's standard practice. But you know what I mean.) Through the drone, I clearly caught a brief startled reaction followed by what looked a lot like hope. Then she got control of her face and did her best to look defiant.

"Of course not. Everyone knows alien remnants are unsafe."

I'm not the best with human expressions. I'm good at threat displays because that's what I'm programmed to monitor. I've also gotten pretty good at reading my humans because I have a lot of high-context stored video footage to use for comparison. But in this case I was so sure of what I'd seen that I sent the video of those few seconds to Mensah.

Mensah watched the video and eyed Mishra thoughtfully. "All right, it's not alien remnants. So what is it then?"

A look of frustration passed over Mishra's face. Again, I'm not great at human facial expressions but it seemed very much like Mishra had actually wanted Mensah to believe that it *was* alien remnants and didn't know how to course correct now that Mensah had dropped the topic. It struck me that Mishra might be a poor liar just like she was a poor hacker.

I suggested that to Mensah over the feed. *Either she's not good at lying or she's excellent.*

She was chosen as spokesperson in part due to her language skills. Technically we all speak the same language, but there's been a fair bit of linguistic drift and she's had more exposure to Preservation speech. She might be a bit out of her depth.

Aloud, Mensah said, “Is whatever you’re trying to hide really more dangerous than letting us show up without knowing what to expect?”

Mishra said, “There’s nothing to hide. It’s our world and we don’t want people to know its potential.”

(That wasn’t even internally consistent but it had an odd air of sincerity to it.)

“You’re afraid of corporate rediscovery, followed by invasion?”

“Yes, exactly. You can understand that, can’t you?”

“Then you think you’ll be able to return?”

“Maybe? It depends on what went wrong with the station. But either way, it’s ours.”

“Our priority is to rescue those cryosleep pods. Preservation isn’t a threat to your world and we have nothing to gain by exposing whatever resources you’re trying to hide. As polity leader, I have some discretion in these kinds of situations, and I’ll ensure that the scan results are kept discrete. When we return, I’ll propose that they get deleted entirely. Is that satisfactory?”

“Yes, perfect!” Mishra scrubbed tears from her face.

Mensah added, “All this of course is assuming you give me no reason to suspect ill intent.”

We brought Mishra back to her quarters. I made it clear that a drone would follow her if she left. Mensah and I discussed her story a little more.

“She’s obviously hiding something more specific than terraforming potential,” Mensah said.

“Agreed. Why is she so bad at everything?”

Mensah smiled. “A harsh judgment. Presumably she has her areas of competence. She found aid very effectively.”

That was true. She’d come straight to Preservation and she’d known exactly what to ask for.

Mensah added, “Her colony is very small. Sometimes these small colonies struggle with maintaining a solid knowledge base. Humans learn from each other, not only from books. And even on Preservation, I think most people wouldn’t know how to hack a ship like the Pressy.”

I imagined sending Ratthi or Arada on such a task and shuddered. “Fair,” I conceded.

“As for the lying, we all learn that from each other when we’re toddlers. On the one hand, not everyone is skilled under pressure. On the other hand, we haven’t managed to get the truth out of her yet.”

Ugh, that was true too. I was a SecUnit, I wasn’t trained in interrogation. Mensah wasn’t either. Like Mishra, we were out of our area.

#

Well-maintained stations glow like luminescent sea creatures. Arilou's station sat half light and half dark, a dead lump in space illuminated only by the sun.

There were no corporate ships lying in wait. I hadn’t expected any but it was still good to have confirmed. The Pressy’s automated scanners collected data on everything in the vicinity. As we’d agreed, I redirected the planetary data to a partition which only Mensah and I could access.

Basma, our pilot, began bringing the Pressy near the docking area. He wouldn’t be able to actually dock but once we got as close as possible, we’d take a shuttle to an emergency airlock and enter there. Then we’d use a portable generator to power the docking bay doors and force them open so Basma could land the shuttle inside.

While I waited for the Pressy to get into position, I analyzed the scan data. Arilou could potentially become the kind of place humans waxed poetic about, but right now high acid levels meant nobody could breathe the air or grow the kinds of crops that humans can eat. We didn’t have any data on when Arilou had been settled, so I couldn’t tell if this was strange or not. I sent the analysis to Mensah.

“We’re as close as is safe,” Basma said.

“I’m going,” Mishra said. (Mensah had brought her to the bridge.)

“No,” I said.

“I came to you for help!”

Mensah looked at her calmly. She said, “Mishra, the shuttle team will notify us as soon as they have news. I understand this is a stressful time. We won’t keep you waiting a moment longer than necessary.”

“I know the fastest way to the interior.”

“So do I,” I pointed out. “You drew us a map.”

“I also know the ways around if anything’s fallen apart to the point where paths are closed off.”

The rest of the Pressy’s crew were all looking away and radiating discomfort. This wasn’t part of the feel-good story of a Solstice rescue. Normally I wouldn’t care. But ugh, I didn’t want to leave her here with Mensah unless we put her in more substantial restraints than we were currently using, and I also didn't want to put her in heavier restraints. The crew didn’t even like seeing her in wrist cuffs. Going beyond that would cause distance between Mensah and the others. During the voyage, Mensah had actually started to relax. I didn’t want to wreck that.

“I guess I can watch her,” I said.

So we set out in the shuttle with me, Mishra, four human crew members, and JollyBaby. Everyone except JollyBaby put on environmental suits. (JollyBaby didn’t need one.) We docked with the emergency airlock, which was thankfully intact.

I went through the airlock first because even now, risk assessment still hadn’t fully given up on the possibility of corporate sabotage. The airlock opened onto an empty access hall. The walls, ceiling, and floor dripped melting ice. The air was 88°C and rising. Until I saw the access hall, there was some faint hope that the station’s interior still had power. This rapid temperature cycling proved it didn’t.

This wasn’t great news for the pods, but hopefully the humans had rigged something with portable generators. (The pods also have batteries, but those only last a few hours.)

Sounds echoed oddly in the empty access hallway. Places which used to hold people but don’t any more always take on a strange feeling. I ignored the shiver down my spine and called the others forward (except JollyBaby, who wouldn’t fit.) The station had no gravity but my environmental suit came with magnetic grips on the feet which let me walk on the floor.

We entered the docking bay. The humans set up the portable generator and unlocked the docking bay doors. Two of them returned to the shuttle and brought it into the bay.

“So far, so good,” Yao said.

It was strange being on a space station and not talking to SecSystem. I wondered, did it know what had happened? Did it stay awake while the station fell apart around it? Could it still be restored?

Questions for another time. I was here to do client retrieval and we had pods to find.

Mishra said, “This way.”

We followed her into the station’s interior. These halls were wider, allowing JollyBaby to join us. It radiated light from its head and multiple leg joints.

light sources equals new feature it told me proudly.

The featureless corridors gave very little sense of what kind of place this station was. The stations in the Corporate Rim overflow with advertising. Preservation Station is full of educational displays and artwork. I’d never seen a station so blank and bare. Was this section of the station left empty due to low population? Maybe the other areas would look more lived in.

We passed through a large open area of the sort that would have been filled with small shops and displays on Preservation. Then we turned toward what would have been “down” if the station’s gravity still worked. Since it didn’t, we walked on what would have been a wall.

Basma sent a message to the team feed. *We just received a message from the surface. There’s people in one of the old terraforming stations asking for evac.*

I pinned Mishra to a wall. “Talk. Now.”

Even through her suit’s face plate, I could see she was terrified.

“Another ship was supposed to come. We thought everyone on the surface would be gone by now.” Her voice shook.

“Who are they?”

“They’re just us. Part of the colony.”

“Can they survive indefinitely on the planet?”

She didn’t answer and her eyes darted away.

“Why do you want them dead?”

“I don’t! I didn’t know they were here!”

I pushed harder. Her environmental suit creaked. Without its temperature control, she wouldn’t last long down here.

“The time for keeping secrets is over. Tell me the truth now, or we turn back.”

Her eyes fluttered and for an annoying moment I thought she might pass out. Then she took a deep breath and sent me a message in the feed.

I’ll tell Mensah.

Do it now. (She didn’t seem to know that I could hack her feed.)

She sent just to Mensah, *There’s intelligent life here. Not the aliens who left remnants everywhere. They’re native to this planet. That’s why we can’t terraform and that’s why no one can know. Can you imagine what the corporations would do to this place if they found out?*

Mensah said, *I see,* which covered a host of possible reactions. She then added, *They say they have life support for now. We’ll pick them up after we get the pods.*

I said aloud, “Let’s keep moving.”

We hit just one blocked spot where a hallway had warped and enough layers of water had frozen to block the way through. JollyBaby hammered cracks in the ice and the two of us pried chunks loose.

SecUnit plus JollyBaby equals good team, it said.

The pods had been stored in a school auditorium. Its central position provided some thermal shielding from the worst of the temperature fluctuations, and the humans had set up a host of batteries and emergency generators to fuel the pods. They'd tied everything down so things

wouldn't float about. The whole thing had a hasty, hodgepodge look but it had worked. The humans had even set up a suction pump to stop the whole affair from icing over as water ran loose through the station.

We checked the pods. All but two were still attached to the generators, and the other two still had battery power. Once we checked the final pod, Mishra burst into sobs. She pressed a hand to her face but of course she couldn't touch it through the face plate.

Riva patted her on the shoulder and said, "They're all safe. It's okay. Let's get them out of here now."

Mishra nodded.

The two pods which had been on battery power needed to be recharged before we moved them. We swapped them with two others. Then we moved them out two at a time until the shuttle had a full load of eight. Then back to the Pressy to unload and get them into charging ports, then back again and again. Through it all, the ice melted into steam which blocked our view, then froze into ice, then melted again. It was a long cycle of work but by the end of it, we had every pod to safety.

#

Mensah, Mishra, and I set out to rescue the researchers. I hate planets but I didn't hate the excitement on Mensah's face as we entered the atmosphere. Mensah piloted the large hopper through a pale green sky with thin clouds.

Mishra said, "Swing over the ocean and you'll see them drifting."

"They're gliders?"

"During this stage of their life. They go through several stages, but we think each individual only experiences some of them."

I didn't know what Mishra meant by that. I would have put it down to the company's shitty education modules if Mensah hadn't also looked confused.

"There! Don't get too close, you'll disturb them."

Mensah put an image on the hopper's screen. Thousands of small gliders drifted above the water. They were pale green just a shade or two lighter than the sky. Their bodies looked like furled-up triangles. Their skin was translucent and I could see a beating heart within.

"They drift with the wind over the continent and come down into the ocean. From there they change. The wing tips bifurcate and grow into tentacles. They look a lot like a four-tentacled squid and they grow until they're up to three meters long."

Mensah was too good a pilot to just stare at the screen, but I could tell she wanted to. I was having an emotion. I couldn't have told you what it was except that it wasn't entirely good.

"How amazing! How does their life cycle start?"

“We’re not even sure. But we think each individual only goes through part of the cycle. The creatures we’re beginning to communicate with will die before they ever reach this stage.”

“What, really?”

(That sounded weird to me too, but what did I know.)

“We’ve struggled to track them. But the form we interact with looks a lot like a crab. They’re about a meter in diameter, and they communicate by clicking their claws. Or at least that’s part of it.”

“What connects the crabs to the other forms?”

“The crabs climb the mountains, lay eggs, and die. Then the eggs hatch into a many-legged insect form. Those are pretty small, about six inches like the gliders. The insects crawl to high places, form cocoons, and hatch as the gliders. But we don’t know where the crabs come from. Just that they emerge from the caves.”

“No one’s gone in?”

“We have, just not deep enough. And we can’t communicate well enough to get the full story.”

Mensah swung back over the continent and landed at one of the facilities. We entered through an airlock. Three humans (who I named Researcher One, Researcher Two, and Researcher Three) greeted us warmly.

“I can tell you it is really very good to see you,” Researcher One said.

“Why didn’t you go to the station and use the cryosleep pods like everyone else?” Mishra asked.

“We didn’t get the alarm in time. Storm interference. When we heard, we tried to go back. The docking bays had already lost power and we couldn’t get in. We found an airlock but it had been damaged and wouldn’t open.”

Researcher Two added, “We were going to try again if no one came. But we still had life support here. Our most urgent limitation is food, and we have enough to last for weeks with just us three. Honestly, if we’d heard the news sooner we would have suggested more people join us here. Are the pods okay?”

“Yes, all of them.”

The humans made various exclamations of joy and relief. I didn’t hate that bit.

“We can’t linger, but may I see these beings just briefly before we leave?” Mensah asked.

All three of them rushed to say yes. They all but dragged Mensah deeper in the facility, Researcher One explaining how the crabs had shown up after the terraforming engines went live, how they’d tapped in rhythm and the workers had recorded them and started tapping

back just for fun, how at some point someone noticed how the crabs passed news around, how they learned a few words and a few more and never mind the rest because it's all public knowledge now and you can look it up.

"I wish I knew if the ones we've met will go on to become the squid form," Researcher Two said, and then the others were all arguing.

"They say they look forward to the time of water, that must mean—"

"I think they're every life form on the planet, personally."

"That's absurd—"

"No, it makes sense. We've already confirmed multiple forms—"

"It's more likely that they transfer memories via some kind of RNA encoding—"

"That's never even been proved to be possible."

Finally Researcher One cut them off. "It's time to say goodbye. I just wish we could leave them with better protection."

"It's a shame there weren't any alien remnants here," I said, and then I had a thought.

#

Three blue and speckled crabs stood outside near a speaker. (Do crabs stand?) (I know they weren't really crabs. I don't care about the details of fauna names.)

(Although these weren't fauna, I guess. Somehow they'd become clients. An entire planet full of confusing, complicated clients.)

Researcher One entered, "We travel soon" into an interface. The speaker emitted clicking noises.

The crab with the biggest claws clicked back. The interface translated it as, "We travel soon. Soon is the time of water."

Researcher Two said, "They're obviously looking forward to it. They must transform somehow, not just die."

"Not now," Researcher Three said impatiently.

(I found myself skeptical about the rigor of the linguistic analysis taking place here.)

Researcher One entered, "Is there a place which alters your minds or bodies?"

The crab clicked, "Travel—" and then something untranslatable.

"Where is that place?"

“No. Travel—” and then untranslatable.

Researcher one tried various other ways of asking the question, but got nowhere.

Eventually I said, “We don’t actually need to find alien remnants. We just need to report them so the planet will be interdicted.”

“True, but what if someone comes to confirm?”

Mensah said, “Then we deal with that issue when it arises. I do think filing the report will be safer than just leaving the planet though. I’ve heard too many stories of corporations showing up long after a colony is abandoned, with intent to reclaim it.”

The researchers began packing up their data and belongings. And then, when nobody was paying much attention and after two of the crabs had left, the third one clicked. The interface displayed: untranslatable, south west cave, no travel, and untranslatable.

“I think it just gave us directions,” Researcher One said, stunned.

“Put that location in the report,” Mensah said. “But we’re not going there. The risk is too great.” (If you’re wondering why, cave entrances aren’t always easy to find. It’s not as if the crab gave us feed coordinates. South and west—okay, how far? If we somehow managed to find it, I could try to send in a drone. But Arilou had no feed emitters which meant I would have limited range. The odds of getting usable data versus blundering into trouble were not in our favor.)

Despite not verifying the remnants, even tentative confirmation from the crabs felt good.

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The crew completed their Solstice rescue but the station was lost. It hadn’t been corporate sabotage, which meant it had most likely a maintenance error. It wasn’t my job to care. But somehow knowing that decent, well-intentioned people had utterly trashed an entire station left me feeling unsettled. I don’t know why but I wished it had been sabotage. I guess maybe then there would be something to fight.

I was watching Sanctuary Moon on Mensah’s extra chair trying not to visibly mope. The trip had helped her mood but I could see tension creeping back into her shoulders as we approached Preservation. I didn't want to make things worse.

But sometimes my face does a thing without me noticing. Also Mensah knows me too well, which would be terrifying if it wasn’t Mensah.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I wish we could have saved the station. Or that there was a bad guy to shoot.”

She chuckled softly. “It is a bit of a mixed success, isn’t it? But SecUnit, the station’s failure wasn’t something we had any control over.”

“I know,” I said a bit sulkily. Not having any control over it didn’t make me happier. And then, because it was Mensah, I told her the truth. “They lost everything because they tried to do what was right.”

“I’m sorry it’s hard. May I offer you a different view?”

“Yes, please.”

“Everyone lived. These people didn’t have the ability to do the linguistic research they wished to do, or the economic capability to keep the station afloat, or a plan for how to seek help to do these things. It’s not their fault. It wasn’t incompetence or laziness. They just didn’t have enough people to do what needed to be done, or even to recognize how they were spinning closer and closer to disaster.”

Here Mensah stopped and looked directly at me, then realized what she was doing and averted her eyes.

“You can look,” I said. (I don’t like eye contact. But sometimes when I want to drive a point home, I make eye contact. I knew that’s what Mensah was doing and I wanted her to do it.)

“But,” she said, letting the word hand there for a moment. “They accomplished the things they wanted most. They protected those beings and they all got out alive. They’re coming to Preservation where they will receive assistance in starting new lives. No one has died, no families will be broken up, no one is being sold into indenture. And I got to experience a marvel, if only briefly.”

Here she looked off into the distance, a warm smile spreading across her face. “Meeting those beings, even if only for a moment, was a marvel I will carry with me all my life. And it’s a reminder of how much is out there that we haven’t seen and still don’t know, a reminder that the universe is full of mysteries and wonder.”

I thought then that Mensah’s view of things was as true as my own. No, it was more true. I’d seen only the bad parts. She’d seen the bad and the good together.

I wasn’t ready to feel what Mensah felt about discovering intelligent life. I think it frightened me a little to wonder what other beings like humans might be out there, doing all the bad things which humans do or maybe something even worse. But not everything came out for the worst and if I couldn’t feel what she felt, I could at least enjoy watching her.

My face was doing another thing but this time it wasn’t bad. I just let myself feel something good in the moment. I didn’t know then how many things would change, or how soon it would all happen.

“You’re smiling,” Mensah said.

“I’m glad you got to meet them,” I said. “I’m glad we’re here.”

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