

Chapter V – A Fine Day Out

"No, I'm not going to pick for you. This is part of it."

They found themselves in one of the less populous common areas, because as much as Derek wanted to push her out of her comfort zone, making a spectacle of her helped nobody. Here in the Foundry's gardens, everything from the grass beneath their feet to the 'sunlight' overhead, was artificial, but it was still a very soothing environment. There were lounges strategically placed where MOMs and humans alike could kick back to read or nap.

"Mixed blessing, that," Durga grumbled, her back to the wall as she surveyed the options. Derek knew she sure-as-shit wasn't going to try to pluck out a MOM from one of the little groups, but there were a handful of choices who were spending time with their trainee Pilots only. Alas, it wasn't realistic to hope for a smaller group than two for Durga to break her isolation streak on, given the whole purpose of the Foundry.

"Maybe her?" Derek's charge gestured vaguely at a four-armed MOM sitting under a (probably fake) oak tree, a tablet cradled in two of her hands and a pink-haired human seated sideways on her lap. MOMs didn't exactly get wrinkles as they aged of course, but Derek could tell she was on the younger side. Each generation of them had subtle, shared themes in their chassis, cumbersome to fully describe but easy to intuit, much like generational human fashion.

With a nod of support from him, Durga took a deep breath and slowly made her way over to the pair, her feet and eye wandering in that way when you don't want someone to know you're approaching them specifically; when you feel the need to make it look incidental. "Hey, what are you reading?" she ventured, in a stiff and vaguely demanding tone.

Derek had never heard a MOM yelp before, but there was no other word for what she did, letting out a high-pitched sound as she fumbled the tablet with one pair of hands and deftly caught it with the other. Her dexterity was very impressive.

She composed herself quickly, and as she looked up to see who was addressing her, surprise shifted into recognition. Derek cursed to himself. Of course Durga's reputation preceded her. But it was too late to intervene now; he would have to hope for the best.

"Um... Lord of the Rings," she said, her voice soft and mousy. After a brief but awkward pause, she added, "It was my old Pilot's favorite, but I never had a chance to read it before. Why do you ask?"

She was making solid effort at politeness despite anxiety, but it was impossible not to notice her trainee giving Durga the stink-eye.

"Heard good things," Durga muttered, scratching the back of her head. "Er. Aside from all the walking, anyway."

The ambiguously presenting person on the hexapod's lap cleared their throat. Derek assumed they were some flavor of enby, given the baggy clothes and fauxhawk, but caught himself mid-thought and resolved to listen for pronouns. "Hey! If it isn't Little Miss Jailbreak? Lady, I've been to two different baby showers that had to get canceled 'cuz of you!"

Derek continued to bite back the urge to defend her. It was important for him to see what she was going to do, given the instruction to at least try and be civil. So he hung back, visible but not interfering.

"It's okay," said the MOM, holding out a hand. She gave Durga a nervous smile and added, "You'll have to excuse them. Mol's very protective of me."

That seemed to be an understatement. Mol looked like they were poised to square up with Durga, and he didn't doubt that they would have made the effort.

"It's... fine," Durga trailed, hesitating but eventually taking the offered handshake. Derek definitely got the sense she was hoping to be told to fuck right off, but it looked like she'd have to carry on the conversation for now.

Mol rolled their eyes, but relaxed. "Guess I can't be too pissed at you for raging against a system. But if you're gonna trip an alarm, can you schedule it for late evening next time? I mean, anybody with an event is probably going to be wrapping up anyway by then. And you'll break up the Midwest Goodbyes, which would be a treat."

That earned a small smirk from the antisocial giant. "Heh. Yeah, I can do that."

Though he was a good twenty to thirty paces away, Mol spied Derek. They shot him a questioning glance and jerked their head toward Durga.

That seemed like as good a cue as Derek was going to get, so he made his approach, getting a good look at the MOM for the first time. She was taller than Durga and a bit more top-heavy. Unarmored, of course, but there were still a number of design flairs that could be seen. While most of her was fairly standard MOM gray, each of her arms was a different color - green and black on her left side, blue and white on her right - and her coils of "hair" were a bright cherry red. And she was pregnant. Not as far along as others he'd seen, but it was unmistakable.

"Good afternoon," he said, giving them a quick salute. "I'm Derek, Durga's new trainee."

Mol looked incredulous, but their partner smiled and returned the salute.

"It's nice to meet you, Derek. I'm Tiamat."

"Nice to meet...!?" Mol balked, gawking up at their partner like she'd grown an extra head to go with the extra arms. "Matty, try 'holy shit, Durga has a trainee'." Sliding off their cozy thigh-perch, Mol jogged over and delivered a powerless punch to Derek's shoulder. "Sly dog. How'd you manage that?"

Durga shook her head. "Eh, it wasn't my choice. Top brass stuff. Thinking they can keep me occupied or something, but this is temporary, trust me. For now it just keeps them from grinding my gears every day. Decent change of pace, I'll admit."

Mol put a hand under their chin, nodding sagely. "Temporary. Makes sense. Kinda impressive you actually walk around with him instead of stuffing him in a vent somewhere, though. Well I haven't been here that long myself, but if I can suggest one pastime for the both of you—"

Tiamat lunged, like a frazzled parent finding their child walking by with a foreign object in their mouth. "Don't!"

Mol partially dodged, beaming with manic enthusiasm as they were caught by one leg and dragged backward through the grass. "I heartily recommend the hot, consequence-free giant robot sex—!"

Durga actually discharged steam, and Derek didn't feel like he was far off from it either. He knew that it took all sorts, but...

Rhea's slag-eating grin flashed in his mind's eye as he recalled her words.

You don't have to be a robosexual to work here, but...

And he suddenly had a great many questions about the trainee selection process, as well the process that led to *his own* selection, but that was a problem for Future Derek. Presently, he had a situation to defuse now.

Hoping that he wasn't blushing too hard, he patted Durga on the leg. "I think I'd call getting most of my bones broken a consequence."

"I take it back," said Tiamat, who was now holding Mol aloft like a misbehaving kitten. "You don't have to excuse them at all. They know what they did."

In place of an actual defense, Mol simply blew Tiamat a kiss. This earned them a long-suffering sigh and just a hint of a smile.

"Stars. L-look," Durga fumbled, continuing the conversation with Tiamat. "Do you want to like, meet up at the GYM sometime, for like a training... thing? Not a full

spar or anything," she clarified, gesturing to Tiamat's gentle tummy-dome. "It's just. Beating on dummies is getting old. We could lift weights or something."

Tiamat went back to looking surprised, but this time in a good way, and Derek was too. She had gone above and beyond for the terms of their bet, and he couldn't help but smile.

"Really?" she said. "I mean, that sounds great! I'd love to! Mol keeps telling me I should be more active, and I guess they're right." Mol only looked a little smug at that. "But I'm sure we can find other things, too! The Foundry's got so much to offer!"

"I have to say, I've been impressed so far," said Derek. The tension that had been in the air had all but dissipated.

"You can't have been here long, yeah?" said Tiamat. "Welcome, by the way! It's wonderful! I got so excited when my transfer was approved that I almost blew a gasket!"

"If you're into that sort of thing," Mol off-handedly added, picking up on a sudden flicker of discomfort on Durga's face. "Food's decent too, though I gotta lay off those not-McFlurrys. Copyright infringement just tastes too good!"

Durga nodded. "Well. Sorry for interrupting your book, I should let you get back to it."

"Yeah, she's like the best audiobook ever," Mol praised. "Her voice never gets tired. And you should hear her Gimli impression!"

The two of them stepped away, making their way back to the bench where they had started.

"That went better than I ever expected," said Derek, as he leaned back and relaxed. "Maybe socializing and making some connections isn't as hard as you... thought?"

And that was when he realized that Durga's fists were clenched so tightly that, were she human, they would have been turning white. He could have given her a lump of coal and ended up with a diamond.

"I need a drink," she groaned, sinking down on the grass next to him. "Making friends is so much easier when you're tossed together in squads. Here, it's like swimming through tar. Upstream."

Derek scooted a little bit closer to her, and since he was now in range to do so, he patted her on the shoulder.

"You still kept swimming, though," he said. "You're not going to overcome all of your problems in one day. But I'd call this a good start, yeah?"

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There weren't many human-sized quarters in the Foundry; most of Derek's fellow Earthlings here were paired with an expecting or postpartum MOM. The handful of rooms in this tiny, out-of-the-way wing were always intended as temporary dwellings. Newly promoted generals or the like, who needed to be brought in on the secret to inform the highest level of strategy against the Purifiers. According to Rhea, of the half-dozen dorms in here, at least two had never been occupied even for a night. Interesting factoid, though it did reinforce a certain feeling of lonesomeness.

Derek was used to it. Dispatchers tended to keep odd hours, and it made building a social life hard. And the space did what it needed to do, and it was comfortable. But he was restless this evening.

When he'd come around to meet Durga at her apartment, she'd turned him aside. The request was, for once, polite, so he complied and spent the rest of the day trying to get a feel for the Foundry's layout, with little success. But something was bothering him that he couldn't put a finger on.

He turned his light on and rolled over, looking up at his wall, where a framed poster of Rhea and Inanna was hung. It wasn't a particularly rare or valuable one. There were many like it, but this one was his. And at some point between being mailed from Division One and arriving in his room, it had acquired, in metallic gold ink, a little signature.

He looked up into the smiling face of Rhea's younger self, sitting on Inanna's shoulder and giving a thumbs-up, and he wondered, not for the first time, if she was right about him.

It didn't take him long to accept the fact that sleep wasn't happening. That strange feeling in the back of his head wouldn't let him go. Durga was *too* polite, and as much as he wanted to respect her wishes, it wasn't sitting well. So he got dressed and set out.

It would've been nice if the froyo place was self-serve, but alas, it wouldn't be open at this absurd hour. A vending machine offered him a can of brandless, caffeine-free cola. It wasn't bad. And since it was right next to the simulated park space, he decided to take a walk through there rather than the ultrawide concrete hallways comprising most of the Foundry. Decorated though they were, they still didn't feel like a natural space to someone of his comparatively teeny stature.

He was glad he did. He'd seen beforehand how the place simulated the movement of the sun and turned the skybox pink or orange near sunrise and sunset. But he hadn't yet tried it after dusk. It was a peaceful and fascinating compromise between natural and convenient. Crickets chirped, but they were quieter than he'd ever heard them: far off, no matter where he strolled to try to follow the sound. Street lamps lit the paths, but they gathered no moths. Fireflies flitted here and there, and Derek couldn't fathom how they could've been faked. They evaded scrutiny by disappearing whenever he cupped his hand around one.

Opening his hand to discover another empty palm, he was astonished to find Durga's boot-foot and motorcycle-tire in front of him, her tanklike frame sunk sullenly onto an oversized bench, its metal slats painted to resemble lacquered wood. She blinked (winked?) out of a thousand-yard stare after a second or three of

looking right through him. "The fuck? Derek?" she asked, a slight hitch in her vocals.

He could only imagine that his startled expression was a mirror of hers. It was like he had been thinking about her so hard that she had manifested before him.

'What are you doing here' seemed like a stupid question to ask. MOMs didn't need to sleep, only to periodically recharge, and it didn't take six to eight hours. So there was no reason she couldn't be here.

There were, of course, other questions he could have asked. But somehow he didn't think he'd get an informative answer from any of them.

"Nice night for a walk," he said instead.

"Sure," she said, before clearing her throat. She stuck out a leg, and it took Derek's mind a few moments to realize that many of the steely studs and protrusions on her limb were actually convenient hand- and footholds to climb. She was inviting him up onto the bench with her.

He only hesitated for a moment before taking that offer, climbing up and seating himself on the opposite end of the bench. He wanted to ask if she was okay, but held back because he suspected he knew the answer. So instead he said nothing, sitting back and watching the mysterious fireflies.

Derek could read the tension in her body language, but it seemed to soothe away as he made a point of enjoying his drink. She nodded.

In time, she took a breath and started to talk. "I think... I think I have to start over if you want me to make good on our bet," she exhaled in frustration. "All the ladies here, and I had to pick this *Tiamat* to try to be friends with. Fuck, I'd probably have better luck at the Knitting Club."

Derek had so many questions about the Knitting Club, but unfortunately that was going to have to wait. "What was wrong with *Tiamat*?" he asked. "She was friendly

and outgoing, and opened up to you despite—no offense—your reputation. I thought it went really well."

She shot him a confused glance. "Hm. You didn't hear...? Maybe it wouldn't have stuck out to you," she figured. "Tiamat said *her transfer was approved*, Derek. Meaning she requested to be here. No MOM would need to put in a request unless they were still in shape to be out there, fighting."

Derek had indeed not caught that. He did notice that Tiamat did not have any obvious disabilities, but of course not all of them were visible, and it would have been the height of rudeness to ask.

MOMs weren't conscripted into this conflict. They fought for a variety of reasons; some out of a sense of justice, others for revenge. Whatever their reason, they all did it because they wanted to. So it stood to reason that there would be some number of them who didn't. But up until now, that was purely theoretical. He'd never met a MOM who wasn't ready to get out there and, if not bust heads, then at least stop other heads from being busted.

And now here was Tiamat. "Good for her, then," he judged.

Durga looked at him with disgust. "Good... for her?" she sneered. "Derek, she has a duty, like all of us! The things the Purifiers have done...! Somebody has to stop them before they steamroll this whole galaxy. We don't get to just shrug that off and take vacations!" She violently pushed herself up from the bench and started pacing back and forth on the little cobblestone path in front of it. Her foot-tire rolled along well enough when she went down long hallways, but it wasn't built for the aggressive back-and-forth she was doing now, turning her usual smooth-ish gait into an angry, obvious limp.

"Rustfuck! I know I shouldn't expect a pinky to understand. You still have civilians. Our ancestors changed our whole species into weapons so long ago we don't even remember what we used to look like! All to survive. And it still wasn't good enough to save the Pilots we shared our homeworld with!"

Derek immediately knew that he was seeing something in Durga that had been simmering for a very long time, and it was finally starting to boil over. The worst thing he could do was try and put the lid back on.

"I don't hear a lot of your sisters talk about that," he said. "Not even the older ones. And you're right. We can't know what that's like. But we can understand that it hurts."

She clenched and unclenched her fists, a glimmer of helplessness in her fiery eye. He clocked that Durga was so used to being opposed and argued against by this point in her mandatory stay that she'd been counting on him to say something to allow her to explode. She kept pacing instead.

"She has four arms! Do you know how rare that is? I'd give an ice-cream scoop of my brain to have a body like hers, and she's wasting it here!"

Derek nodded along. This was the most words he'd ever gotten out of Durga unprompted, and he didn't want it to stop. So if he couldn't put a lid on the pot, maybe he could boil it down without burning anyone.

"And if you were where she is, you'd still be out there fighting the good fight. That grinds your gears, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she growled, punching a tree at one side of the path. It was largely plastic, so the attack just left a fist-shaped impression rather than splintering the trunk. "I can't be friends with her, I wanna kick her ass just thinking about her...!"

When she looked back at Derek, her eye was actually burning, like something inside of her head was about to go critical. Derek couldn't help but wonder if this was the last thing seen by a lot of Purifiers, and he couldn't help but feel extremely soft and flammable. MOMs were gentle by nature, even ones as hotheaded as Durga, but she was still almost three times his height and several orders of magnitude heavier than him. It was hard not to be aware that if she lost her temper, she could reduce him to a smear on the turf.

What would Rhea say in a situation like this? Or Inanna? ... Probably nothing that would help, he admitted to himself. So what would *Derek* say?

"Fuck," said Derek. "If I was in your chassis, at the top of my game and cut down in my prime, I'd be pissed too."

She nodded as her pacing slowed. Without her armor on, Derek could see the muscles in her neck draw tight, and her jaw set. The fire sputtered and weakened, but it did not go out. Fitful wisps of smoke, or maybe steam, wandered from the edge of her eye.

Derek stood up on the bench to get slightly closer to her height, for the little it was worth, and he took a breath to compose himself. "There's another version of my life where I lost everything that was important to me. I grew up in New Portland. That probably doesn't mean anything to you; it shouldn't, but it's not what matters. When I was a kid, it could have been ground-zero for one of the biggest Purifier attacks since M-day... but it wasn't, because of your sisters. If that had gone a different way? Yeah, I'd be angry. I'd be spitting mad. And if anyone told me that I shouldn't be, I'd punch them." Looking down at his slim arms, he added, "It probably wouldn't have gone well for me, but that's beside the point. I bet you've wanted to punch a lot of people since you got here."

She shook her head, still shaking with emotion, but the earth-shaking rage had cooled. "I dunno," she admitted, passing her palm over her 'good' side, now angled away from Derek's point of view. "Some of these gals have been through worse shit than I have. Gave more to the war than I did. I respect that. I'm grateful. But they all treat this place like some fucking vacation; they're all just so sickeningly happy to be here and no one, not one person other than you gets why I hate every minute of it. Most of them don't even ask! Maybe I don't want to punch them... just pick them up and shake them until they understand."

She leaned over and rested her forehead on the damaged tree. "I've got like 75% of my kin here too scared to even look at me, Derek. And the fucked up part is that I'm so, so *lonely*. I had a squad out there. Connections. Reputation. Friends. I miss that...!" she admitted, her voice cracking. "But I'll go nuts if I try to be friends with

people who sit down for afternoon tea and cakes like they do. So Raging Bitch is all I can be."

Slowly, Derek approached her, in the manner of a naturalist trying to tag a startled predator. "Everyone processes things in their own way. Maybe they're trying to reach out to you like that because that's what worked for them. I don't know. But I think they get it."

He reached up and, only needing to strain a little bit, put his hand on hers. "What happened to you, fucking sucks, Durga. You can't wallow in it, but you don't have to pretend it didn't happen, either."

She slumped, sitting onto the ground with her back to the bench's seat. "I don't know what the fuck to do with that," she grumbled, "but thank you." She nodded in appreciation and gingerly squeezed his hand with two fingers.

Derek shrugged and let himself scoot a little bit closer. "I'm a phone jockey, remember? Not a therapist. But I think a good first step is letting yourself be okay with being mad about it. And the second step is maybe coming to terms with the fact that you haven't burnt all your bridges. Barely singed them, really."

She gave him an incredulous glance. "Look," he added. "Tiamat was clearly aware of your reputation as a, quote, raging bitch. But she still gave you a chance."

"Sure," Durga admitted, "but there's two small problems with that silver lining, Derek: just because she's willing to talk to me doesn't mean I won't suplex her the next time I see her." She paused for effect. "The second problem is the same as the first, I just thought it should get two mentions."

Derek smirked and gave her hand a squeeze. "Maybe try asking her nicely first?"

Frowning with confusion, Durga clarified, "To suplex her?"

"I can think of worse icebreakers."

"Ha!" her body rocked from the force of the singular laugh. "I don't know. If someone who's barely met me can believe in me, maybe I can give believing in myself a try. Just to see if I like it. You're alright, Derek."

Derek smiled to himself. Only a few days and he was upgraded to 'alright'. What could you call it but progress?

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Rhea's personal phone rang that evening. Very few people could reach her on that line, and since it wasn't currently an emergency, she had a good idea who it was when she reached out and picked it up. "Something amiss, Derek?"

He hesitated for a moment. "I'll be brief. MOMs at the Foundry are allowed outings, right? For training purposes?"

"Uh-huh?"

"And they all need to be approved first, right?"

"Uh-huh?"

"I want to take Durga out. I'm asking you to approve it, because nobody else will."

There was a long and significant pause. "You're aware that if I sign her permission slip and she does a runner, it's both our asses, right?"

"I am aware, ma'am."

"Good. Mail the form to me and I'll get it back to you in the morning." She hung up without waiting for an answer.

"What do you suppose he's planning?" asked Inanna.

Rhea threw up her hands. "No idea. Should be interesting to find out, though. Or at least funny."

"Come back to bed, you gadfly."

Rhea chuckled as she leaned back, Inanna's chest closing up over her once again.

Chapter VI – First Flight

Through a combination of careful planning, fastidious personnel management, and more dumb luck than anyone wanted to admit, Undisclosed Location (and by extension, the Foundry) had been kept off the Purifiers' radar since its inception. Keeping it that way was a careful balancing act.

The most tricky thing about it was that the Foundry wasn't *just* a bunker. The MOM residents weren't confined there, and like any other living being, too long without fresh air and real sunlight had ill effects on their mental health. But even without any other sign of civilization in a hundred-mile radius, nobody wanted to just let a bunch of MOMs run loose willy-nilly. Outside time was very carefully regulated.

Nobody wanted to use the term "permission slip," but that was basically what they were. The little chits became an informal currency among the residents, tacitly traded for favors despite the administrators insisting that they not do so. On this morning, one such chit was being carefully scrutinized by Durga after Derek presented it to her.

"I only got one of these before," she muttered, holding it up to the light. "That was escape attempt Numero Uno. In retrospect... yeah, it was kinda obvious of me. No surprise that I got body-checked out of the sky by Inanna. Even if somebody else traded theirs to me, I couldn't use it... so how in the fuckvoid of space did you manage to get one with my name on it? Signed by Rhea, no less?"

"I asked very, very nicely," said Derek, only looking a little bit smug. "And I'm going to trust that you won't make me regret it. You coming, or what?"

The mousy-looking human at the front gate examined the pass even more closely than Durga had done, but there was no disputing Rhea's signature. Either it was genuine and nobody wanted to argue about it, or it wasn't and somebody was going to catch a level of hell that was far beyond their pay grade. And so the two of them were on their way up toward the surface in short order.

The ride up felt much longer than the ride down. Maybe it was? Derek realized he hadn't been topside since he got here, but he'd been so laser-focused that he hadn't even been thinking of getting out for sunshine himself. Apparently workaholic tendencies only got worse if your literal idol showed up and handpicked you for an important task.

Durga kept shaking her head and looking at the evenly spaced lights disappearing under the rising platform one by one, as if she expected the whole apparatus to freeze up and reverse at any moment. "Don't let this go to your head or anything but... I'm starting to think there's something to all your positive-outlook crap, if this is the kind of results they get." Her head tilted. "Though I haven't ruled out witchcraft yet. How much do you weigh?"

Derek shrugged. "I've seen too much shit to call myself an optimist. But I also believe that nothing's ever as bad as it seems, and that—excuse me? Uh, 150 and change, I think?"

The sudden question threw him off so suddenly that he answered it before he could think about it.

"More than a duck, so that nixes that theory," she said with a grin. She'd been watching some of the classics he'd recommended, then. "So, did you have any hopes and dreams for our four-hour excursion? It's been a while since I looked around but I can tell you there ain't any MOM-sized buildings within roaming distance. So that basically leaves hiking... unless you're up for something a little more thrilling? But that would involve trusting me."

"I wouldn't have stuck my neck out like this if I didn't trust you," said Derek, giving her a pat where he could reach, which was about mid-thigh. "And honestly, I was going to leave that to you. It's been so long since you've had a chance to touch grass that I'm happy to let you be a free-range MOM until it's time to come back."

"Ha!" she threw her head back. "I shouldn't laugh, I might very well eat the stuff at this point. It's been WAY too long. But if there's one thing I miss more than grass, it's the sky." She knelt, tapping a slanted cylinder welded to the outer strut of her wheel-leg. "Serendipitous timing, too. Can't believe Reshmi actually figured out how to put a jump-jet on a wheel after all."

Derek's ears perked up at the mention of a name, one that he'd seen on a dossier somewhere but never had much in the way of context for. He wasn't planning on bringing it up: Durga's Pilot. He knew that she wasn't deceased, thankfully, but that was all he knew. But since Durga had broached the topic...

"Can you tell me a bit about her?" he asked. At the narrowed-eye look Durga shot him, he raised his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm not grilling you, promise. I'm just interested."

Durga squinted upward, but the top hatch wouldn't open until they were very close, making it difficult to determine just how far away they were from the surface. "Yeah, fair enough." She sat herself down on the empty platform. Even now, she reflexively tried to pull herself into a cross-legged posture, but the shape of her altered leg clanked against her other shin, too bulky to obey her muscle-memory. She grumbled and splayed it out to one side instead.

"Reshmi was—and is again, I guess—part of an artillery team. Huge nerd, so I'm sure you would've liked her. She knows things about projectiles and trajectories that make even my metal head spin. Rockets aren't her specialty, but hey, if it makes something go up and go fast, Reshmi knows at least a little about it."

Derek sat down next to her, mimicking her posture to the best of his ability. "She does sound cool," he said. "I hope I get to meet her someday. But... I'm guessing that's why she isn't here? Good artillerists aren't something we have in abundance."

Durga's metal head bobbed. "I told her I'd hang her by her ankles in the rafters if she didn't get back out there and do what she could, instead of following me around in here while I moped. One hell of a guy, and a good—fuck me." She growled, tapping her forehead with a fist in self-reproach.

"Forgive me. When we met, Reshmi was still... figuring things out. It was a whole big thing. Suffice to say I got a crash course in human gender identity early on by helping her truck through it. Still fuck up the colloquialisms now and then, though."

Derek couldn't quite suppress a smile. Reshmi's story was an amazingly common one. It turned out that sharing bodies with a giant woman-shaped robot tended to push a lot of buried feelings to the fore very quickly. 'Rarer than a cishet Pilot' was a commonly-heard simile in this community.

"You know, people tend to be surprised when they learn that I'm comfortable with my masculinity," said Derek. "My whole deal tends to throw folk off a bit." He paused to gesture to all of him. His soft, smooth, and (not to put too fine a point on it) effeminate features tended to give people certain ideas. "But y'know, as the saying goes, there are dozens of us."

"You do seem... in the minority," Durga tactfully followed. "But yeah, doesn't seem to make you uncomfortable one bit. Which is more than I can say for the occasional visiting general." A nostalgic laugh brightened her expression. "Watching that fossil's face get redder and redder as he got one dressing-down after another from misgendering and assuming shit—including from Reshmi? That was solid gold. Easily my second-favorite day here, and funny enough to make me totally forget that I was here against my will."

Derek nearly fell over from laughing. "Some people just don't want to let go of the idea that the whole concept of what a military force looks like is so radically

different from even a century ago. For one thing, we're actually fighting for something worth fighting for."

Durga was denied any potential follow-up quip as the morning sun finally hit them. Stepping up with her non-wheeled leg, Durga held out a hand to help him clamber up the last three feet onto the topsoil. Now that he was on this side of the trip, he could see there was a stowable human-sized ladder on the underside of the hatch. It really didn't seem like it would get much use.

As the lid closed behind them, leaving them in the most painfully average-looking soybean field ever cultivated by human hands, Durga filled her lungs and let out a satisfied sigh. "Smells a little like fertilizer, but it still knocks the rust off my lungs. I owe you one, Derek."

"With respect, Durga, you don't owe me jack," said Derek, as he took in a few breaths of the grassy air. Fresh air was one of those things you never realized you missed until you got some after going without for too long. "I did this for a lot of reasons... and granted, one of which was because my personal idol came to me and asked. But once I met you, I could see right away that you needed help that you weren't getting, and I couldn't let that stand."

Hoisting him onto her shoulder, Durga made for the road. There was a whole pamphlet she'd had to read about Acceptable Outdoor Activities, and hanging out near the door was pretty high on the Don't list. "And if you'd said that basically anytime before now, I'd have told you to take your Savior Complex and fuck off somewhere else," she admitted. "So that's... progress, I guess. Still don't really get it, though. You're not like, a counselor or anything. Pretty sure I threatened to hurt you, and yet you just hung around."

Derek yelped in surprise upon being picked up like a rag doll, and held onto Durga as she strode off. This hadn't lost its novelty yet, and he hoped it never did.

"What can I say? I'm an empathetic soul. And I was pretty sure that you'd get into serious trouble if you actually stepped on me. ...Pretty sure."

"I mean yeah, I would," she agreed, doing her level best to avoid squashing the half-grown plants. "Thing is, most of my steel-clad ilk have been so goody-two-shoes through this whole war that I'm almost sure there's no MOM-jail on the whole of planet Earth. As far as options for imprisoning a dangerous MOM, the Foundry is probably already the best place. So if I'd come after you, where would they have sent me?"

She let that question hang, and Derek felt his blood go frigid from the terror that could only come from realizing that you had not thought your clever plan all the way through. Mercifully, the moment passed quickly.

"Feels weird to admit it to you," Durga continued, "but I did think about it pretty seriously after that whole 'don't threaten me with a good time' comment of yours. Risky fucking move, Derek. But again, can't argue with your results..."

"I saw the way Inanna looked at you," he said, moving past that fear without ever looking back. "I don't think I had ever seen anyone, human or MOM, look so sad. And when I saw the way you looked at her, I had a feeling that the last thing you wanted was anything that could be construed as pity. I've hung around enough frontliners to pick up some of their sense of humor, so it seemed as good a tactic as any."

Derek instinctively looked both ways as they hit the street, but of course there were almost never any cars passing through UL. "This should work for a runway," she nodded appreciatively. "And as much fun as it would be to watch you cling to my pauldron up there, I think you'd be better off with someplace more secure. Eh... no pressure though," she mumbled, setting him down on the gravel curb. "You can totally wait on the ground while I stretch my wings, if you'd rather."

"What do you mean, someplace more—?" When he turned back to look at Durga, the MOM was on her knees with her torso opened up, in the way that he'd seen MOMs do hundreds of times before. Was she really inviting him to...?

He wanted to ask if she was sure, but Durga wouldn't have said anything if she wasn't. But could it really be that simple? Slowly and hesitantly, as if he were

approaching a skittish animal, he stepped forward. "I assume you know I've never done this before?"

"Yeah, I know that," she testily answered. "And it'll probably be weird. I figure you'd probably rather get the lay of the land in a lecture or textbook—and that's valid, but... I'm not really a great teacher." Her hands were fidgeting to either side, awkward and uncomfortable as she literally bared herself while he paused in front of her. Inside she was softer. He knew there was a rigid, capsule-like structure in her to protect the Pilot, but the interior was plush, and molded into a vaguely humanoid shape.

"So... honestly, no judgment or offense if you don't want to," she reiterated. "But if you ask me to walk you through what it's gonna be like... I'm probably going to chicken out. I'm... a wimp." The last word came out in almost a whisper.

Derek looked her in the eye. The question most asked to Pilots by civvies was, "What's it like?" Derek was not immune, and everyone had their own answer.

"It's like sinking into a warm bath, except the tub is full of gelatin."

"Think of the tightest, safest, most secure embrace you can imagine."

"Ever seen Neon Genesis Evangelion?"

Asking Durga that question would have been fruitless. Whatever happened between them would be a unique experience, and he could do nothing to prepare himself. But he wouldn't have gotten this far if he wasn't willing to trust her.

"Do you have seatbelts in here?" he asked, as he climbed up and prepared to settle in.

"Uh, no?" she smirked, as if the question were ludicrous. "But you'll be snug in there. The padding holds you in place." She pressed down on the top of her torso-door with one hand until it sealed with a hiss and a click. Derek was left in pink-tinted darkness, feeling like he was gently smooshed between two soft mattresses, with a few inches of clearance in front of his face. Exhaling didn't seem

to make the air grow warm or stale, as if it were being cycled somewhere out of view.

"Oh. Usually this gets asked way beforehand. You're not claustrophobic right? You should tell me now before the Link fully activates."

"What? No, I don't think—"

And then Derek felt *everything*. The second prior, he could see nothing. And now, suddenly, he could see too much. All of his senses were overwhelmed. Senses he didn't even *have* before were overwhelmed. His field of view was too wide and there were new colors and new sounds and he felt too heavy and too light and he could feel the world up and down and around him and every little bit of movement in any direction was a new shock of input and it was all too much too much *too much!!!*

"Shit—!" Durga snarled, lurching to the left. Derek felt himself topple with her, his eyes too high up from the ground. The wheel-leg landed on the pavement in an attempt to compensate for the loss of balance, but he couldn't feel it in the way he was getting full tactile feedback from her other leg. So the tire rolled out from under them and suddenly they were in a drainage ditch together, ass over teakettle.

"Ugh. Okay, we should've stayed sitting down for this. Breathe, dude," Durga advised him, closing her eye for the moment and shutting out the bloom-riddled onslaught of visual information. But Derek could still *hear* too much, including the steady pulse of a miles-distant radar dish north of here. He could feel the blades of grass poking between gaps in her armor. He knew the exact temperature of both the air and Durga's metal surfaces. He could probably make a good guess as to the composition of the soil beneath them.

Derek willed himself to be calm. And only now did he really and truly realize how inaccurate the term "Pilot" really was. He wasn't riding Durga, and he certainly wasn't driving her. He *was* Durga. He saw what she saw, felt what she felt, heard what she heard. And if he really wanted to...

Slowly, as if it was immersed in molasses, he lifted his/her/their arm. He held it in front of their face and flexed their fingers.

Durga's eye crept back open at his instinctive prompting, squinting somewhat to shut out the flood of other input. Durga took a breath and nodded. Control was disorientingly fluid between them, but he could at least tell the difference between something he'd moved and something she was using instead. "Yeah. Hard to explain, right?"

It wasn't just muscles and joints though. He could feel... frustration. Resentment. Deep, but quiet. Unobtrusive, but also impossible to ignore, like a 30-foot monument of silent stone. Almost enough to drown out the shyness and fascination—and the fear of rejection.

There were no words. It *transcended* words. It was more than a connection, it was a melding. He didn't know if MOMs had tear ducts, but his were certainly working overtime.

"The sky looks so wonderful," he said, without using his voice box. "The colors... you can see into the UV spectrum? And everything is so... a bird just took off from a tree about half a kilometer south-southwest. A house sparrow, if I'm not mistaken. Is this how you see the world all the time? Incredible."

And then he was struck by a terrible thought. If he could feel what she was feeling, then there was no doubt that it went both ways. It wasn't quite balanced, of course. He got no indication that she could see from his perspective, nor control *his* body. Though from the way some of her padding around him expanded or receded, it was clear that she could at least feel his tactile sense as easily as her own, and respond to maintain his comfort.

"...So how are *you* doing?"

"I'm dizzy and overwhelmed because you are," she explained. "Worried that I overstepped—but that one's all me. Hoping I'm not giving you dysmorphia or anything. And..."

He could feel some of her words before he heard them, and the next ones were pulling back, timid. But they did come.

"I'm concerned about... signals."

"I think I'm okay. I'm starting to get used to all the new input."

And indeed, as they just sat there, existing in their temporarily-shared body, he slowly adjusted to his new and expanded senses.

"You should probably drive without me this time around, Durga. On that note... you mentioned flying?"

"I did," she nodded, slowly pulling upright and sitting on the edge of the ditch while she dusted the grass off themselves. "The Link is all-or-nothing, though. So when we're up there, you've got to focus on keeping your arms and legs mostly still. I can override any small impulses—like if you twitch or something—and I can lock you out entirely in an emergency, but then you won't be able to see shit. So you need to just relax and let me do my thing. Think you can handle that?"

He didn't know if it was because of the contact buzz he was getting from Durga's anticipation, but Derek was feeling his anxiety melt away. He wanted this almost as much as she did.

"Let's fuckin' go."

Pulling herself up and walking to the center stripe of the road, she did a final check for clearance and a few preliminary stretches. Some digital readouts scrolled along the visual feed she was giving him, but it was clear he wasn't expected to understand or calculate it. Durga started to jog lightly, her tire initially braked to

use as a kind of peg-leg before smoothly transitioning to a roll. She pushed off with her boot, building up speed like a skateboarder.

The jump jets on her legs started to flicker and warm as her velocity increased. She leapt as she hit a small rise in the road, clearing a good twenty feet in the air before thumping back to earth. "Scrap. I'll get there, don't worry." Faster. She started to coast longer and longer on her wheel, relying on it rather than compensating for it. Durga's injuries meant she could no longer maintain the speed and maneuverability that fighting Purifiers required, but she could still haul like nothing of Terran origin, and the next thing Derek knew, he was leaving the ground behind. As she crested north of 80 mph, the jump jets flared again, and Derek's stomach felt like it was floating up between his lungs as he waited for a fall that didn't come.

From the Wright Brothers to the space race, humanity had always dreamed of soaring ever higher, and had continuously invented more magnificent ways of doing so. But compared to this, the space shuttle was a rocket-powered go kart. When you could take to the skies with nothing between your body and the air, feeling the sun and wind on your skin, nothing else would ever come close. And Derek's response was appropriately measured.

"WOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

The sound was perfectly echoed out of Durga's own lips. His friend was enjoying herself every bit as much as he was! She put her arms out to either side, subtle shaping and varying thickness in the armor plates giving her a touch of control over lift and air currents. Her body flattened out and she swooped down, arching up her spine to give the soybeans a good rustling without summarily eating a truckload of dirt.

Up, up, up they soared. Her thrusters crackled, roasting the air behind her in a majestic and perpetual explosion of force. She put out a fist and punched a fucking cloud before cutting the propulsion, backflipping in the heartbeat of zero-gravity, and then zooming off again above the private cumulus curtain.

In this moment, Derek felt Durga's backdrop of pain washing away as she experienced the unadulterated joy of open air for the first time in who-knew how long. And Derek was overjoyed as well. He'd thought he was satisfied with his lot in life, working alongside MOMs but never truly *with* them. But he had been wrong—how could anyone who had a taste of this ever want to go back? He'd always admired them from afar, those goddesses rendered in silicone and steel, but how could he truly appreciate them with his eyes only? This was real, and in this moment of two becoming one, he could feel everything wonderful about her. Beautiful. Graceful. Sensual. Voluptuous.

A femtosecond too late, Derek's brain tried to pump the brakes.

"Whuh?"

Durga faltered, the opulence of the heavens giving way to humid, opaque fluff as they fell back into the clouds. She drew up her limbs and hugged herself in a ball; Derek felt that paralyzing wave that only comes when you realize you're naked and someone you didn't notice can see you bared.

He couldn't, in fact, see her. But he could feel the curves of her body, the shy tremble of warmth between her thighs. The world flickered as she almost cut the Link, but she pulled herself out of the deadfall and straightened her limbs again, gliding into a wide circle that was only barely a descent.

"Dammit, Derek!" she hissed. "That wasn't... that wasn't..." Uncertainty. Embarrassment. Confusion? But where was the anger? "That wasn't... what I was expecting."

The Link opened back up, a little deeper than before. Things that were difficult to put into English were trickling in as instinctive truths instead. There was lust in him, and she'd seen it now. But she'd expected something filthy, something greedy. Either the crass pleasure-chasing of a jarhead flyboy or the impatience of a would-be Pilot seeking to get her to build him a synth on-demand.

And for just a moment, his defenses obliterated by embarrassment, Derek was laid bare before her.

She saw a young boy with an affinity for mecha cartoons. She saw a preteen who, when his peers started play-dating, never really saw other people—other humans—that way. She saw a teenager researching asexuality and wondering if the term fit. A slightly older teen, caught in the midst of a Purifier attack and seconds away from being flattened when a powerfully-built MOM stepped in front of an oncoming blast. A young adult having some very peculiar thoughts and fantasies, bound up in the gratitude for his life. A fresh graduate making peace with the fact that even though he'd never touch, he'd at least get to look, and reaping the the satisfaction of helping them—even if it was only ever help. A man, promoted to Division One and feeling like it was a dream come true.

And then, 4.2 seconds later, the present caught up with them. "Oh," Durga uttered, her thoughts and his filtering through each other, a complex interaction of nuance that informed and filled in the gaps of expectations with truth. The Link weakened for a moment as Durga processed what she'd learned in partial privacy, allowing him to do the same.

Gently, that mental door opened again, this time into a fantasy. It was no interactive VR experience; it was no more immersive than his own imagination could be. But in it, he saw Durga's now-familiar room, the two of them watching some mindrot flick he'd likely suggested. Only now, the both of them were wearing very little clothing... and Derek was in her lap, resting his head back against exposed underboob while feeling Durga's body rise and fall with each breath. Tense breaths.

"I'd never even dream of crossing a boundary you weren't comfortable with," said Derek, his voice sounding strange and distant. "I would *never* let my... preferences... get in the way of a solid working relationship."

"You keep them impressively deep under wraps," she stiffly observed. "But... I think we both know we're not strictly work colleagues at this point. We're friends, right?"

Derek chuckled. "I'd like to think so, yeah. I didn't know if that would be presumptuous of me or what, but... yes. I want to be your friend, Durga."

"Glad to have you," she grinned. "Now tell me if you're interested in benefits."

Derek's imagination didn't quite play the sound of a record needle scratching. But the sensation was equivalent. "I'm sorry, what?"

Durga gave him a smirk that was equal parts amused and sardonic. "I am talking about sex," she flatly clarified. "I had a lot of reasons to avoid it, but that doesn't mean I was never interested in it. There were things I was afraid of finding, in the Link, but I was wrong about that. I trust you... and selfishly? I think I could have fun with a wound-up personality like yours. Respectfully."

Derek was silent for some time, and he could feel himself starting to heat up. "I never want you to think it's something that I ever *expected* of you. But unless something went wrong with the joining and I had a stroke and this is my brain feeding me a comforting image... how could I possibly say no?"

Durga smiled at him, and it wasn't as sharp and sardonic as usual. It was a smile that made Derek's heart pound. Then, slowly, the harmony between them faded away, and the next thing Derek knew, his eyes were being stung by sunlight as Durga's chest opened up once again, letting him out onto the ground.

"I guess we have some things we need to discuss, then," said Durga.

"I guess we do," said Derek, as he shook out his limbs. "But, um, first thing's first. Do you remember how we get back?"

Durga looked around the rolling fields of soybeans, each identical to the next. "I was really hoping that you did."