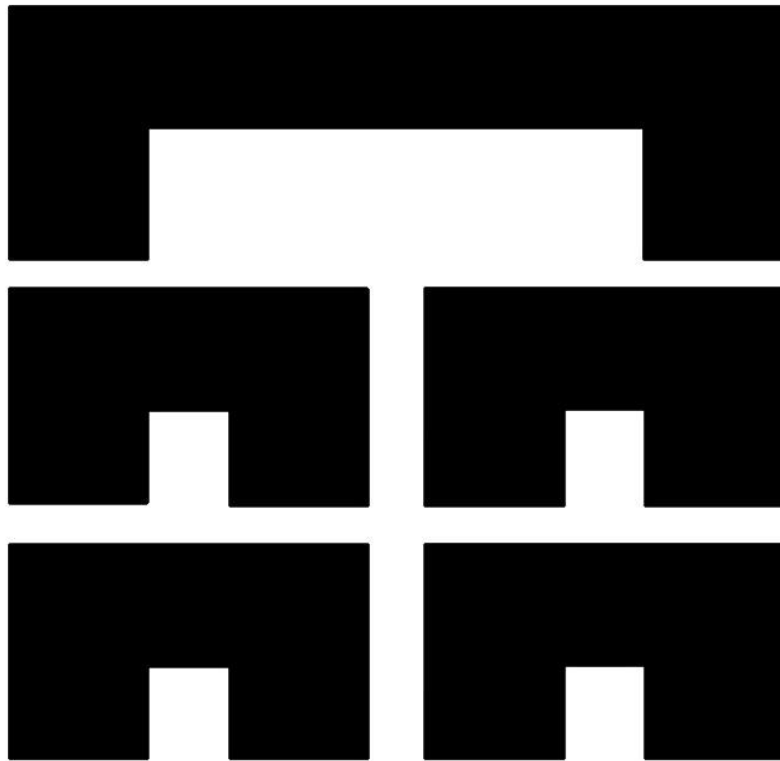


TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

# WARSONG



## First Blood



a novelette by **Tori Das**



## **Dramatis Personae**

*(In order of appearance)*

**Arai Kazuo:** twenty-five year old photographer recently assigned to aerial reconnaissance in the Gongen Armed Forces

**Masuoka Yumi:** twenty-seven year old research scholar at the University of Kazuki

**Arai Hiroe:** twenty-three year old freelance artist and activist

**Sok Mey:** twenty-one year old student of geology at the University of Kazuki

**Gargi Sadhukhan:** twenty-one year old student of geology, dropped out from the University of Kazuki

**Arshad Qasim:** twenty-three year old engineering graduate from the University of Kazuki, formerly leading Himadri's science team

**Suraj Bhatia:** twenty-two year old student of hyperspace mechanics, dropped out from the University of Kazuki

**Mrs. Kaveri Bhatia:** CEO of Himadri

**Arshi Mohan:** retired miner, trade union leader, and board member of Himadri

**Dr. Jeremy Rose:** doctor and board member of Himadri

**Alexey Zhakiyanov:** retired miner, trade union leader, and board member of Himadri

**Major Eimi Bhavnani:** leader of the military police forces governing the polar colonies at the south pole

**Mr. Sadhukhan:** retired miner, Gargi's father

**Mrs. Sadhukhan:** retired miner, Gargi's mother

## Prologue

Kazuo and Yumi herded the three strangers into the genkan, while Hiroe waited for them at the door. They took off their shoes and straightened their clothes. But the silence dragged and turned cold. It was an unexpected visit; neither the guests, nor the hosts, knew what to think of this occasion.

“I can’t believe we haven’t properly introduced ourselves,” said Kazuo at last. “I’m Arai Kazuo, this is Masuoka Yumi, and that’s my wife, Hiroe.”

One of the strangers, a Southeast Asian woman, began to speak. But before she could say anything, the South Asian woman next to her stepped forward. “You are *that* Arai Kazuo,” she said. “I saw you on the news. You were out for some early shopping for the Festival.” The woman looked at Yumi, who seemed displeased by this turn in the conversation.

“Yes, it seems quite a few people have seen that segment,” said Kazuo, fidgeting uncomfortably.

“I remembered your faces as soon as I saw you,” the woman continued. “I am Gargi Sadhukhan. This is Sok Mey, and this Arshad Qasim.”

Now it was Mey and Arshad’s turn to look at Gargi with open irritation. The air turned sour.

“Please come in,” said Hiroe. The three strangers then wordlessly followed Yumi, Hiroe, and Kazuo into the flat.

Evenings, Hiroe had always thought, were meant to be streams of colour and cacophony, best spent with a diverse cast of people away from home. That was how she had become fast friends with Uncle Kimura, a bartender in the next block. This evening was an unsettling combination of factors: it was close to six, yet she was at home. So were Yumi and Kazuo, and so were a trio of strangers too poor to afford the hotel just down the street. They were travelling to their home in Gongen South for the Festival of the Ancestors. They would be leaving again the very next morning. Yet Hiroe, who used to pride herself on being able to put the crabbiest person around at ease, had no idea how to keep everyone engaged through the night. Thankfully, the three strangers looked tired; they'd likely go to sleep soon after dinner.

In fact, the strangers looked more than tired. They were all rather young, but two of them looked almost gaunt with distress. Hiroe's heart had sunk the first time she had seen them in the genkan. Even now, after those two had washed and settled down around the low table in the drawing room, it was hard not to think of the reasons for their haggard appearance, their possibly suspicious past. These were uncertain times, with war against Earth looming on the horizon, although theirs was a relatively peaceful neighbourhood. Hiroe didn't really believe the tales of Earther spies going around the smaller towns. But it wasn't fair of her to speculate. *They're short of money and making a long and difficult journey*, she reminded herself. Of course they weren't going to look as clean and well-dressed as her cousins on their summer holidays.

A vintage cigarette lighter briefly doused the kitchen in gold. "Feels strange, having guests around," said Yumi, slipping into the corner between Hiroe and the partition separating the kitchen from the drawing room. "I keep thinking it's my dad sitting where Kaz is. Do you know how offended my dad would be if I told him that?"

Hiroe and Yumi hadn't come this close in weeks. Hiroe smiled despite her racing heart. "Are you two talking normally again?" she asked.

"Define normal." Yumi leaned against the counter and took a drag on her cigarette. "How about you?"

"Me?" Hiroe echoed, casually placing the kettle on the stovetop.

“Yeah. Have you talked to your family yet? I'm sure they'll have something to say about... You know. Well?”

“I'll get to it in a few days.” Their fingers brushed against each other as Hiroe reached for Yumi's cigarette. “That was strange, wasn't it?” asked Hiroe. “Those guys remembering you and Kaz from the news?”

“A lot of things are strange these days,” replied Yumi. “I keep thinking I know these guys.”

“Really?”

Yumi shrugged. “No, it's more like a gut feeling. I don't know. Oh, isn't that too much?” she added, nodding at the cake Hiroe had fetched from the fridge. “Don't go overboard with the tea. We want them to be hungry enough for an early dinner.”

“No, look at them, they're dead on their feet. I bet they haven't eaten properly in days. And this is the one I made last week, it's not very good.”

“Who says it's not good? Anyway, I have something to ask you.”

Hiroe's stomach plummeted; she knew what this was going to be about. It took her all her willpower to stand her ground and maintain the exact posture she had been in ten seconds ago as Yumi took the cigarette back and edged closer to her. “Are you okay with where we are now?” asked Yumi. “Or do you want to get away from this?”

“What do you mean, get away from this?” Hiroe asked in turn.

Yumi glanced once at the strangers sitting just beyond the partition. “We could, you know, leave for a couple of days,” she whispered. “Just return to our families. It's reasonable to want to visit your parents for the Festival. And then, after we've, um... Well, we could come back. Whenever we want to.”

*Leave for a couple of days.* Hiroe found her own terror reflected in Yumi's eyes. “If we leave now,” she said, “we might not want to come back.”

“I've thought about it,” replied Yumi. “And I'm okay with it. If you or Kaz don't want to come back. If that makes you happy.”

“Shut up.” Hiroe threw a fistful of leaves into the teapot and put the lid on the canister with unnecessary force. “Don't worry about me or Kaz, what about you? Will you be happy alone? And I don't want one of your canned answers. I know you won't be happy without us.”

“You don’t know that,” Yumi retorted. “No need to think so highly of yourself. I’ve talked to Kazuo as well. I’m just waiting for his answer so I can go pack my bags. And don’t forget we have guests.”

“Seriously?” The tea kettle was whistling now; Hiroe switched the heat off and turned to Yumi. “You’re the one who had to bring this up while we have guests around, and *you’re* telling *me* to keep it down?”

“You know, I was thinking,” Kazuo said loudly from the drawing room, “winter might be early this year.”

Hiroe and Yumi sighed together. “Not long after the Festival concludes,” Yumi groaned, and moved away.

Hiroe was certain that their guests had heard everything, even if they hadn’t really wanted to. She needed a way to lighten the pressure. “It’s a long journey to the South,” she said as she poured the hot water into the teapot.

“We have family living there,” Arshad Qasim replied. “The elders, mostly. They can’t bear another winter alone. So we’ve pooled our savings and decided to go home.”

“The cities might be safer than the highlands a couple of weeks down the line,” said Yumi. “You know, if Earth invades.”

“*When* Earth invades,” Kazuo corrected. “It’s just a matter of time now. You know, moving to the highlands might actually be smart. I’m expected to stay quiet about this, but I think the cities might be first in the line of attack. Takumi and Michio in particular. The poles are important, too, because we get half our drinking water supply from there. The polar colonies are small and easy to overrun. A weakness, if you ask me. But the Earthers know there isn’t a lot going on in the highlands.”

Hiroe chuckled despite herself. Kazuo could only keep himself out of a discussion on the coming war if he was sitting with his family. “You mean, apart from the mining stations and refineries over there,” Arshad pointed out.

“We’re not from the highlands,” said Gargi Sadhukhan. “Our home was on the Planum Australe.”

Hiroe paused while slicing the cake. Here in Kazuki, people rarely used old Earther names for Gongen anymore. Usually it was just ‘the poles’, or the polar colonies named individually. *What do we have here?* An awkward silence followed in the drawing room.

“So, the southern pole?” said Kazuo. “Funny how they haven’t renamed much of the South yet. They’re still focused on the global north.”

“You know, back when we were in college,” Gargi began again, “saying things like ‘global north’ could cause a small scandal. Outdated terminology from a less advanced time, when we were still blinkered Earthers squabbling over borders and resources, fighting it out in a continent-wide beauty pageant. The one with the best speech on democracy and the right of self-determination wins. It had to be ‘Gongen North’ or ‘Gongen South’. And to think that we’ve come so far that we’re waging war against Earth. What are we fighting for?”

Hiroe glanced at Yumi leaning against the doorframe, who looked just as curious. “I think I should add here that neither of us is an EarNat,” said Arshad.

“EarNat?” asked Yumi.

“Earth Nativist,” explained Hiroe. “Bunch of weirdos who hate Shocho and glorify our Earther past. They think everything since the nuclear accident has been a fall from grace. By the way, if we’re talking politics, may I suggest a lower volume, because the lady downstairs gets easily disturbed. And it’s the weekend, so her tea shop will be open till late at night.”

“Oh, politics again?” said Sok Mey, coming out of Yumi’s bathroom with her hair wrapped in a towel. “I swear it’s talk of the war everywhere these days. Why not try something else?”

“Like what?” asked Hiroe as she waded into the drawing room carrying the tea tray. “Our plans for the Festival? As if that makes for more stimulating conversation.”

“We aren’t the ones waging war, though,” Kazuo said, as he and Arshad moved to make room for Hiroe next to Gargi, and Mey settled down in the corner between Gargi and Kazuo. “Earth is invading us. First they dump us in ghettos and colonies, then they push us onto a desert planet that none of us would’ve survived if not for Grandfather Shocho. And now that we’re back on our feet, they won’t even let us have Gongen.”

Hiroe admired Kazuo’s faith in the world; but on occasions such as these, his naivete disturbed her. “I think Ms. Sadhukhan has a point,” she said while pouring the tea out.

“Please just call me by my first name,” Gargi said stiffly.

“Sorry. I believe what Gargi wanted to say is that we’re not really one united Gongen.” Some tea was dripping down the side of the spout. Hiroe tried to steady her nerves. “We can’t fight a full-scale war against Earth when we still fight over things that we should’ve put behind us long ago. And speaking of democracy —”

“But if we don’t defend our home, who will?” Kazuo protested. “There are dedicated units in the army learning about Earth’s capabilities in the coming war. And I tell you, we’re more than capable of matching them. And I don’t see how this matter of infighting changes anything. Yes, we do have fights between us, what sort of family doesn’t? I

mean, look at Earth. Perfectly peaceful over there, nobody giving anyone any trouble. And if someone does..." Kazuo poked his tongue out and mimed his throat being slashed. "That's the end for them. What's important is that when the time comes, we put our differences behind us and present a strong front to our enemy."

Gargi smiled. "But that's literally all that it's going to be," said Arshad, shaking his head. "Sorry, I didn't want to get into this. But that spiel about uniting against a common enemy, forgive me if I don't pretend that it means anything. We're doing nothing to protect the miners and the farmers. The war effort is draining the life out of us. We're just as much a part of Gongen as Sato Shintaro or He Lifang. But with every policy and PR campaign, the government makes it clear that the war isn't being fought for *us*."

"Wow, look at us yelling," Mey interrupted with a forced laugh. "It's like we didn't hear Ms. Arai's suggestion of speaking softly. So, what are your plans for the Festival? We three have dropped everything to go South because our boring old home is waiting for us. But what are you doing in this corner of Kazuki? Don't you have folks in the plains? Most people who do have left already."

"Not to mention the fact that anywhere on the planet looks safer than the equator right now," said Yumi as she came to sit between Hiroe and Gargi. "Kazuo was right, the cities are indeed the most vulnerable. How about we all move South temporarily? Let's just build an underground bunker and stay there till this trouble blows over. Hey, we could even grow our own food. Ice deposits are easier to find under the dunes, right? So we'll just need a decent greenhouse."

Gargi and Arshad paled. "You still have to dig," Mey replied. "And good luck dealing with industry representatives when they come knocking on your door, asking why you're disturbing the crust. Honestly, it's not worth it. I can barely think of ourselves so far away from the capital, anyway. Dealing with provincial grandpas and old gossipy aunties, ugh! I'm going to miss the cinema the most —"

"You said you're from the south pole," Yumi cut in. Stubbing her cigarette, she turned to Gargi and asked, "So what's it like? Home on the Planum Australe?"

Everyone except Yumi and Kazuo froze. Hiroe peered around Yumi to look at Gargi. *What are you playing at?*

Gargi met Yumi's gaze. "It's not there anymore," she said levelly. "It's dead."

Mey slumped against the partition and scratched her eyebrow, defeated. Arshad lowered his head. Kazuo looked around, confused. "What do you mean, dead?" he asked.

Yumi nodded and began to pile the teacups back on the tray. "Lock the front door," she ordered. "We're done for tonight. The drawing room isn't the best place for this. Let's go into the kitchen."



## II

Gargi remembered the day she had seen Arai Kazuo and Masuoka Yumi on the news vividly. Three months ago, she and her husband, Suraj Bhatia, were having their breakfast on the rooftop of the cabins serving as headquarters for Himadri. The Ito Ryu Polar Colony sprawled out below them, and beyond, the snow on the southern horizon blanked out the sky with its glare. Gargi and Suraj had been watching a discussion on mobilisation against Earth. But Suraj quickly got bored by the conversation going around in circles. He'd switched to the culture segment on another channel, and watched the preparations in Kazuki for the Festival of the Ancestors.

Then it was Gargi's turn to get bored, until she realised why Suraj was low-key addicted to news from the heart of Gongen. The good, obedient son that he was, he'd never said a word when his mother, Kaveri Bhatia, the CEO of Himadri, had commanded him to return to the colony in the South. Acquiescing to the combined requests of Suraj, Mrs. Bhatia, and her own parents, Gargi had come home, too — now as Mrs. Bhatia's daughter-in-law, rather than just a daughter of the colony. But it had cost them dearly to leave Kazuki, suspend their studies at the University, and abandon their dreams. Gargi had coped by keeping to herself, not letting anyone into her heart. Suraj's drug of choice had been nostalgia, trawling the news channels in the hope of seeing once again the familiar streets, the landmarks that had shaped his life in the equatorial city.

Gargi shook herself out of her reverie when Hiroe placed a slice of cake in front of her. It was hard not to think of all sorts of things, now that she was in a flat very similar to the one she had dreamed of owning one day with Suraj and Mey. It was even harder seeing the flat occupied by a polycule about the same age as her and Mey, and on the brink of collapse, too.

"Did you know who we were when you met us?" Mey asked Yumi as they settled down on opposite sides of the table.

"No, but after a while, I remembered seeing a news headline one morning," replied Yumi. "It wasn't there for long, but it was about a subterranean lake being discovered at the south pole. As a result of illegal mining, too. It said the local government had caught the people responsible, but there wasn't much else. Found that weird."

“Arshad was the first to find it,” Gargi said with a wry smile.

“In that vein, I should say it was my team who got there first,” replied Arshad. “To be more specific, one of my assistants —”

“Never mind that,” Mey said impatiently. “Now that you know, what will you do with us?”

“Wait, what do we know?” asked Kazuo, baffled.

“Exactly,” added Yumi. “My guess is you’re not going to the South. You’re running from it. Which is why you didn’t want to enter the hotel down the street. Too many cameras. It’s easier to hide in small town households, if rather unorthodox these days. The biggest tell, of course, is that you’ve forgotten to deny any of this. No, the only thing I know is that you have a story to tell.”

“A *story*?” echoed Mey.

“Can you let up on them for a minute?” said Hiroe, as she sat down between Yumi and Gargi. “Fugitives or not —”

“So what do you want us to do?” demanded Mey. “Eat your food and tell you everything, and then again to the police? There’s a war coming. You know they won’t even look at us. They’ll just see our names, where we’re from, and throw us into jail for who knows how long.”

“We’re not going to the police,” said Kazuo.

Kazuo faltered as Yumi and Hiroe gave him a bemused look. “At least that’s what I’m doing,” he continued. “I can’t speak for someone else. But it’s not up to me to report people. I wasn’t there, I didn’t do it, I didn’t even see it happen. So it’s not my job to judge anyone.”

Yumi made an *if-you-say-so* face. “At least you can tell us what happened.”

“What if we don’t?” argued Mey.

Gargi laid her hand on the table — a honey-coloured processed wood with a beautiful light grain. “We should, though,” she said. “I think more people should know.”

“Yeah, like the police deserved to know?” snapped Mey, rounding on Gargi. “Like you told the entire battalion where —”

“If you don’t want them to know,” Arshad put in, “you don’t have to tell them these details either.”

Mey glared at everyone, her cheeks burning with frustration. “Damn it Gargi,” she said through gritted teeth. “First you don’t contact me for months, and now THIS.”

Gargi smiled and closed her eyes. She knew she was responsible for the disaster, and that Arshad and Mey would blame her for their broken lives for the rest of their days. It wasn’t something she was interested in refuting, even if she could.

Hiroe sighed. “Fine. I’m not telling anyone, either. I’ll take this to the grave, et cetera. But do consider that, wherever you’re going next, it might be easier for you if you shed your burden a little.”

“I’m not saying anything,” said Mey. “I didn’t start this. I risked my life to give you two an out. Talk if you want to. But after this, we’re done.”

Silence again. Nothing but the sound of everyone breathing, waiting. Sometimes, in the darkness, Gargi could hear Mrs. Bhatia, and the sounds of the lake as she walked in water. But there was only one person whose consent Gargi needed to tell the story. She looked at Arshad sitting next to her. When he looked back, his eyes were clear.

“You may have heard of the Himadri Water Mining and Management Cooperative Group,” began Gargi. “First private business on Gongen, and the first Indian venture, to work directly with the Gongen Water Management Board.”

“We did,” said Yumi. “Although it’s been a little quiet on that front for a while now.”

“There’s a reason for that. Three months ago, at the south pole...”

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“You should be downstairs,” said Arshad, having climbed to the rooftop.

“Yeah, once we finish lunch,” Suraj replied absently, sitting on the parapet and watching the news from Kazuki on his phone.

“Switch to where they were discussing mobilisation,” said Gargi, before stuffing a large piece of roti and dal into her mouth.

“They’re just saying the same thing over and over again.”

Arshad sighed. “You’ll regret sitting out here if Chachi sees you.”

“Fine, fine.” Gargi dusted her hands and got up, wobbling on her heels for a second before nudging Suraj with her toe. Her husband made an unhappy noise as he pocketed his phone and gathered the lunchboxes.

Most of the people on the company board were already present in the meeting room downstairs. Arshad called for tea and hit a crashed computer before restarting it. “Let that one be,” Kaveri Bhatia told him as she entered the room. “It’s a dinosaur of Gongen, just pull the plug on it. Now, I hope you’ve heard the news.”

Kaveri swiped her phone, and everyone else’s phones in the room pinged at once. “Photos of a Maverick settlement right on our threshold,” she explained. “And an informal request for permission to build greenhouses — that’s to the police — and water.”

“Have they met the governor yet?” asked Gargi.

“Tomorrow,” answered Kaveri. “One Sterling Barkby —” she wrinkled her nose as she said the name, “— will meet him in the morning. I’ll be there, of course.”

“Production is tight as it is,” remarked Arshi Mohan, a retired miner now leading one of the smaller trade unions. “Hard to tell where we can make room for a new supply line.”

Suraj swallowed his last bite of food before peeking from a corner. “A new supply line? The police have already banned any interaction with the Mavs.”

“That’s, technically speaking, illegal,” said Jeremy Rose, a doctor and senior board member. “Mavericks are allowed to live here now.”

“Like anybody really cares what’s illegal,” Arshad muttered.

“The police will, if they don’t like it,” Suraj replied.

“We’re talking about water and food here,” said Ms. Mohan, as Arshad excused himself to get a phone call. “Everyone needs it, and Mavericks too.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Bhatia. “Provided they can pay.”

“Are you thinking of a deal?” asked Dr. Rose.

“A deal with them?” growled Alexey Zhakiyanov, another retired miner and one of the first to join the company. He made no secret of his hatred for the Mavericks.

“Mavericks have their uses,” Mrs. Bhatia said quietly.

“So what will you charge them?” asked Ms. Mohan.

“Ammunition,” answered Mrs. Bhatia. “And tech support for building a subterranean water storage facility.”

A small gasp echoed around the room. “That's insane,” Suraj said flatly.

“The Mavericks are the best smugglers in the system,” said Mrs. Bhatia. “Water doesn't come cheap.”

“The Major has been looking for a reason to arrest you since you met her,” said Suraj. “We might as well be raising an Earther flag from our rooftops.”

“And it's only been a year since the Board gave you the contract to ship water,” said Dr. Rose. “Maybe this is too early to push further.”

“On the upside,” said Ms. Mohan, “an underground storage facility of our own means we won't be limited by government rationing. We get our own water, we get our own colony.”

“But water isn't all you need for an independent colony,” Dr. Rose countered.

“You want to keep it underground to hide it.” Suraj now approached the table. “You know every bit of architecture here is thoroughly mapped, right? Shocho will know before anyone else if we try our own stunts here. And if Shocho intervenes —”

“Since when did Shocho care for the polar colonies?” scoffed Kaveri. “Grandfather has bigger priorities, such as mobilising for war with Earth.”

“So that's certain, then?” said Zhakiyanov. “We're fighting Earth?”

“War with Earth is not the point,” said Mrs. Bhatia. “Let's focus on the battle we have here. We get less than a fifth of the total volume of water we mine every day. We live like refugees on our own planet. If we ever want to be free... If we want to take back control over our home, we'll have to start somewhere. This deal with the Mavericks is the beginning.”

Zhakiyanov shook his head. “An ambitious idea. But there are too many risks. Even if you can hide the construction efforts from the police and the satellites — which, I say, is an uphill task in itself — you'll be a fool to trust bloodless Mavs.”

“There's also the trouble about water supply,” said Ms. Mohan. “We have a strict productivity quota. If you make this deal, we'll have to supply extra to the Mavericks and keep some for ourselves. And the ice mines can't be extended, or we threaten the sheet itself.”

“We won't start storage until the facility is ready,” said Mrs. Bhatia. “So we'll get to that later. Besides, what does our science team think about this?”

Arshad led the science team. But at present, Gargi was the only team member in the room who also happened to be on the board. “Ms. Mohan is right,” Gargi sighed. “If the mines must be extended without damaging the ice sheet, we risk trespassing into the neighbouring colonies. So we’ll have to get in touch with the people over there, too. And the risks multiply.”

“No enterprise comes without risks. We cannot miss this opportunity.” Nobody else saw the look of disappointment Kaveri Bhatia threw at Gargi; but it crushed Gargi nonetheless.

The door flew open, and Arshad re-entered the room, his expression dark. “We’ve found a lake,” he said.

“A lake?” Ms. Mohan repeated blankly.

“A subglacial lake,” said Arshad. “It goes under a third of our colony, but the biggest part reaches westward into the neighbouring colonies.”

“Do we have satellite photos?” asked Gargi, scrambling to her feet. “Don’t go public with this right now.”

“Hang on, an actual lake of water?” cried Suraj. “Is that freshwater?”

A hush fell over the room as they considered the implications of the discovery. Mrs. Bhatia’s phone pinged. Gargi watched her frown and then blanch slightly.

“What is it?” asked Gargi.

“Message from Major Bhavnani,” answered Kaveri Bhatia. “I have to meet her tonight to discuss new productivity quotas. At least four cities — Kazuki, Takumi, Michio, Hozin — have doubled their demands for water.”

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Yumi looked thrown. “All this over water?” she asked.

“Of course,” replied Arshad. “Water is a precious non-renewable resource. What did you think?”

“I don’t know,” Yumi said as she lit a fresh cigarette. “I thought you were Earthers or something.”

Arshad burst out laughing. Even Kazuo looked embarrassed. "I told you the poles are a weak spot," he said. "It's hard work, mining the ice sheets safely for water. No matter how much water we recycle, it's never going to be enough for our population."

"And then there's the entire matter of waste," said Hiroe, refilling Gargi's teacup. "All the fountains and pools in the presidential quarters, the precious gardens in the administrative district..."

"Wait, seriously?" Kazuo stared at Hiroe in disbelief. "Now you sound like an EarNat!"

"Just because I don't watch exuberant Higen Shijin biopics doesn't mean I'm an EarNat, Kaz," said Hiroe. "You can praise Gongen and still discuss how we continue to fail major numbers of our people."

"Do I smell dissent in the ranks here?" drawled Mey. "Do we have someone who's possibly anti-Sato?"

"Well, yes," said Hiroe, throwing her hands up. "Just because I've left academia doesn't mean I've given up on my politics as well."

"And there you have it!" Yumi shouted in excitement. "We're back to politics. Tough luck for you, Mey."

"You said you lived like refugees on your own planet," said Kazuo, before Mey and Yumi could start another argument. "So the nationalist sentiment had been building up for a while before you met the Mavericks?"

"You say 'nationalist' like a dirty word," replied Gargi. "Which it is, but you say that as if it doesn't apply to you as well. We're all nationalists here, lapsed or not. You just replaced the name of one of the old Asian nations with *Gongen*."

"No, I mean, clearly, there's not much wrong with it," Kazuo hastened to add. "That subject always comes up during the elections."

"Or whatever goes by the term 'elections' over here," Hiroe murmured.

"You wouldn't have felt so cornered and desperate if the government had done good for you," Kazuo continued. "You have to look after your own when nobody else will look after them for you."

Gargi laughed bitterly, and her mind went five months back, to when she was Suraj Bhatia's newly wedded wife.

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“The tragedy of today’s generation,” said Gargi’s father, “is that they care far less about their own history than they should.”

“Or perhaps they just don’t obsess over it,” murmured Gargi, confident that she will be ignored.

She was right. “The young ones look around themselves today,” Gargi’s father continued, “and think this is all there is. They think this is Gongen! But they don’t know they are owed so much more. All they see is the mud and the snow here, down south, where no high-nosed officer will go willingly. But Indians come from a land of trees and rivers, where you only need to drop a seed anywhere to make it grow.”

“We still study the geology of Asia, first year in college,” said Gargi. Only Arshad, sitting next to her, paid her any attention. “It was definitely not all fertile and riverine. There were people living where —”

“Our home was green, and it filled our hearts with joy.” Gargi’s father drank from his mug of tea laced generously with liquor. “Here, we have been condemned to the merciless cold. We all paid the price when Shijin Higen's nuclear plants brought disaster upon us. Yet, it is Higen’s people, the Chinese and the Japanese, who hold all the power today.”

“There are Koreans and Armenians there, too,” said Gargi. “Just as there are Tibetans and Mozambicans here.”

“Stop interrupting,” Gargi’s mother hissed from behind her.

But the man heard neither of them. “We were carted off to the poles to turn ice to water and ship it all to the cities on the equator. But do we get the water we find? No! Every single thing here is rationed, even water and electricity. For the good of Gongen, they say! But what is Gongen? Where some people live in shining domes and say they have blood as red as the ground beneath them. But the ground is red with the blood of their workers, people whose blood is never considered red enough. Kazuki drinks our blood to grow!”

Twenty six people roared in unison. Gargi looked on, speechless. This was an irrefutable truth. Her hands grew cold as she remembered the silhouette of the administrative district she saw on the rare occasions that she took a shuttle to the university.

“It’s time for them to pay!” said Gargi’s father. “Mrs. Bhatia has the right idea. Today we are exporting water across the southwestern sector of Gongen. But one day, we will control the water supply to the whole planet. The Board that had deigned to give the woman her contract will cower at her feet like dogs!”



Arshad looked wary. “He should be careful,” he said. “Someone could be listening in...”

“It’s not like they don’t know,” said Gargi. Major Eimi Bhavnani, leader of the military police stationed at the colony, openly distrusted Kaveri Bhatia. Gargi’s mother-in-law had managed to marshal the entire workforce in the colony in a year. Miners working under Himadri had loyalty burning in their gaze; but it was never meant for Gongen, for the police and the Board. The company knew one leader only, and it was a fifty-one-year-old widow.

“And what greater joy could there be for me,” said Gargi’s father, “than to marry my daughter to the son of that great woman!”

Gargi nearly swore. Somehow the entire gathering found exactly where she was in the cabin.

“My daughter has lived in the cities for more than a decade,” he said, teary-eyed. “But now, she’s back home, where she belongs! At last, I know what true happiness is.”

Mentally, Gargi gnashed her teeth at Suraj. Her husband clearly had experience in evening parties such as this. She was surprised when he hadn’t wanted to gather for tea; she’d thought it was basically custom. Now she knew why.

Arshad huffed. “How does your friend in Kazuki feel on the subject?”

“Exasperated,” replied Gargi. “The student council hates her, she’s such a contrarian.”

“Any word from her?”

“No,” said Gargi, jaw clenched. The day after she’d invited Mey to her wedding, Mey sent her a message stating that she doesn’t want to be the useless sidekick waiting on a married woman to find time for her. Therefore, it would be best if they never spoke again.

“She’ll come around,” said Arshad.

“If anyone asks,” said Gargi, getting to her feet awkwardly in the crowd. “Tell them Suraj called.”

Gargi crept along the edges of the cabin to the door and stepped out — and instantly regretted it. The midnight sun and the breeze drenched the world in a diffuse silver pink. When she could finally focus in the light, she saw the static charges running across the dome high above her, like an amoeboid constellation. Buses slowly streamed past, carrying the next shift of miners to the ice sheets. And perched on the boulders, far on the other side of the road, were a small squadron of the police in their blue and red

armour. Like jackals on the edge of a grassland, Gargi recalled, in the oldest fairy tales. She wondered about the first settlers here, stepping down on the frosty regoliths and looking out around them. Had they felt as alien here as she felt now?

She pulled out her phone and found her mother-in-law's ID. Mrs. Bhatia appeared in the celadon green salwar suit Gargi had first seen her in. "Mummyji, I'm sorry if this is a bad time —" Gargi began.

"How many levels of bureaucracy were you familiar with in Kazuki?" demanded Kaveri.

Gargi blinked. "At the university? Um... five?"

"Little girl," said Kaveri, "here in Takumi, I'm dealing with nine levels at once. Watch and learn."

Gargi snorted. "Yes, ma'am. Actually, I wanted to ask you something, it's important."

"Let's get it over with."

"I'm going back to Kazuki."

Mrs. Bhatia gazed back serenely. "Whatever for?"

"Suraj must've told you, I didn't finish my degree when I came here to get married. The University contacted me yesterday, they're ready to route this month's stipend to my account as soon as I get back. Term starts next week."

"I thought you've closed that account already. Suraj hasn't finished the paperwork yet?"

"What?"

"I told Suraj you're going to be too busy with your new duties to give this much time," Mrs. Bhatia explained. She had appointed Gargi to the company's science team on the same day she made her daughter-in-law. "I'll remind him, and then you won't have to worry about this anymore."

"No, wait." Gargi took a deep breath. "Mummyji, I must go back. I don't understand what you're saying. I have a scholarship from the Gongen Geological Survey, I have to finish my studies."

"But your studies are done. You're home now. I'll return in a few days, and then I'll show you the ropes, everything you need to know about the company and the colony. Enough theory, now you'll learn on the job." Kaveri Bhatia leaned forward with a

beautiful, cold smile. “Forget Kazuki. You and I, we’re going to make a new Gongen, and we’re starting at the south pole.”

### III

Kazuo's promise to their guests about not reporting them to the authorities had been a lie. He had no misgivings about saying something when he didn't mean it. It was just words, anyway. No, this was for Yumi and Hiroe. Allowing the strangers into their flat had been his call; and, earlier there had been the debacle with the news reporter. He'd wanted to be generous and kind to the poor strangers, because the Festival of the Ancestors was almost upon them. Even if he could never please his family or Gongen, he wanted to do right by someone. After all, this Festival he was going to spend alone. He'd lied to Yumi about that as well. He had no plans of returning to his family, even if the three of them didn't remain together, even if the coming war against Earth killed them all. If he was going to pretend to be a one-person family for the rest of his life, he had to make a good start.

But there had been no good start. Kazuo's act of kindness had turned out to be a stupid mistake, endangering the lives of the women still associated with him. Now it was up to him to make things right again. But he had no idea how to do so.

"Did you actually sign a deal with the Mavericks?" he asked Gargi.

"Arshad never really warmed up to them, but yes." Gargi bit into the slice of cake Hiroe had served her. But it was a mechanical motion; she didn't seem to have any appetite. "We were compelled to. The deal seemed to be the only option other than grovelling and begging."

"What happened to litigation and protests?" asked Yumi. A strong cold gust had begun to blow outside; Hiroe got up to shut the windows.

"The same thing that happens to every litigation these days," replied Arshad. "Thrown onto a pile of junk mail, forgotten within the week. As for protests, some of us considered the idea. Gargi wanted Mrs. Bhatia to meet the governor and ask for the colony to be made autonomous and placed under her leadership. But it never gained much traction. Mobilisation had started in full swing here in the cities. And the cops were ready to beat or shoot anyone who didn't toe the line."

"How did that happen?" asked Kazuo. "You said three months ago, you were discussing company policy."

“Yeah, things took a turn for the worse just two *days* later. Two, wasn’t it?” said Gargi, looking at Arshad.

Arshad nodded in agreement. “Two days after Major Bhavnani notified the company about the demand for extra water,” he said, “water supply in the colony was stopped without warning. Four days of fatigue and confusion. There was almost —”

“Hold up,” said Hiroe, settling into her chair again. “You lived on the ice plains, right? Surely you could’ve made some water from the snow around you?”

Gargi laughed scornfully. “You’ve never been to a polar colony even on school trips, have you? No snow inside the domes. And you can’t go out of the domes to casually dig for snow, that’s forbidden. Anything that can make water at the poles belongs to Gongen, not the miners who already get their rations.”

Kazuo frowned. What were these strangers playing at? What did they really think of Gongen? Once again, he wondered if they might really be Earther spies spreading misinformation and provoking the common people against their government. But wouldn’t spies be cleverer and quicker to cover their trails? These people just looked... defeated. And here they were, not even bothering to keep out the incriminating details from their story. They seemed to have fallen headlong into Kazuo, Hiroe, and Yumi’s sympathy trap.

“So the new system of ‘water breaks’ was announced,” Arshad resumed. “Every four hours, tankers would arrive at designated spots in the settlement, where people could gather to get a drink of water or clean up a little. If someone missed their chance, or if the tankers emptied before everyone had had their fill, they would have to wait for the next break. It was fine for the first few days. That’s to say, however you define the term ‘fine’. Then the gap between each break started stretching to five hours instead of four. And the tankers were bringing only two-thirds of their total capacity of water.”

Hiroe sighed and stretched her arms. Kazuo could almost see the tension headache building up at the base of her skull. Yumi still looked sceptical. “So you made a deal with the Mavericks and started sharing illegally mined ice water between yourselves?” she asked.

“Not a lot of it,” replied Arshad. “We were keeping most of it for underground storage. And the Mavericks weren’t even getting any rationed water, so they took up the bulk of it.”

“Not exactly the bulk,” Gargi pointed out.

“Okay, I’m not clear on the details, that was between you and Mrs. Bhatia. I was just a scientist. Most of my time was taken up in explaining to everyone over and over again why we couldn’t just use the water from the subterranean lake instead.”

“Why couldn’t you?” asked Kazuo.

Arshad rolled his eyes. “Because it wasn’t freshwater. It wasn’t drinkable, it was saturated with salts that would’ve shrivelled the body if it wasn’t properly treated first. And we didn’t have the systems in place to treat the water. The underground reservoir was still under construction.”

“And the other, equally important factor was that it’s fossil water,” Gargi added. Bitterness melted away from her expression to reveal an almost ferocious serenity, a reverence Kazuo had seen only in the senior-most army personnel for their nation, their Gongen. Even Arshad looked surprised. “That water was ancient,” Gargi continued. “It had life, microorganisms that predate our entire civilisation. Those molecules of liquid were relics of an age of this planet that we’ll never touch again. It wasn’t just water, it was a treasure from the depths of space and time.”

A moment passed in silence. Yumi offered a cigarette to Mey, who declined it.

“... Was?” asked Hiroe.

Gargi and Arshad exchanged a grim glance. “The ice ruptured,” said Arshad. “The sheet was being mined too heavily. A mining accident caused a breach that triggered an earthquake. And the lakewater got contaminated in the breach.”

“You’re joking!” cried Kazuo.

But Kazuo’s exclamation was unwarranted. Arshad and Gargi were dead serious.

“That day we were sitting in the front office of a school that had been closed recently,” Arshad continued. “We were having a small quarrel, actually. Suraj and Gargi were having problems in their marriage. Mey was involved —”

“What did I do?” demanded Mey, startled. “I wasn’t even talking to them back then.”

“Exactly,” said Gargi. She looked at Mey, who averted her gaze. Yumi watched them with interest.

“Go on,” Hiroe prompted.

“Gargi wanted Mrs. Bhatia to keep the Mavericks present when they were supposed to meet the governor again, regarding the demand for an autonomous polar colony. She wanted a strong, united front. But Mrs. Bhatia didn’t like that idea. She didn’t want to alienate the people in the government who hated the Mavericks, and Zhakiyanov and his cronies. *Best to have a clean house when you’re bringing people over*, she’d said. Gargi didn’t trust that. Suraj thought they were both mad to be doing this under the Major’s nose. I wasn’t even thinking much, apart from how to keep the lake a secret from the government. We were shocked out of our minds when the earthquake struck.”

“Not me,” said Gargi. “I knew that was only a matter of time.”

“You knew and did nothing?” Yumi probed.

“Would you rather we’d all died of thirst?” Gargi retorted. “Or under the Major’s boot?”

“You said yourself that that lake is a precious artefact! You knew it’s a major geoarchaeological feature. You’re a geology student, for god’s sake!”

“Yes, and I still went on with everything because we had to boost our own power any way we could. We had to do something. And anyway, you saw the lake on the news, how could you ever know what it cost us, what it cost *me*. I saw the lake with my own eyes. *I was there.*” Gargi’s face flushed with anger — and grief. “Underneath the broken ice and drifts of fog, the lake seethed, vast and black. All that millennia-old water, the first groundwater reserve on the planet to be exposed to air. I thought I knew what that meant, but, really, I couldn’t begin to imagine. Debris littering the shore. The entire base had gone underwater. We couldn’t wrap our minds around the losses. The damage to the biome, the colony, was... incalculable. All the data and models on Gongen could never contain the trauma I saw in the water.”

Kazuo couldn’t begin to imagine the situation, either. He sensed a further disconnect between him and the strangers. What sounded like possible hyperbole to him, may have been real for them. But he, who had lived in Kazuki all his life and dreamed of becoming a soldier one day, dreamed of gunning down vicious Earthers, anyone who threatened his home and his family — he had very different concerns. They were fighting different enemies. He couldn’t relate to them.

“What happened then?” asked Yumi.

“The first three days we were just trying to save everyone from the flood,” said Arshad. “Half my lab had been swept away. With whatever we had left, we monitored the spread of waterborne diseases. There were unidentified pathogens coming back to life. Dehydration and hypothermia was killing people. The water tankers came only once a day. Mrs. Bhatia was furious. The entire place was hopelessly saline. And then the fighting broke out.”

“Naturally,” Yumi commented.

“Mrs. Bhatia was still focused on the real problems. And the Major had her eye on her. The greenhouses were damaged. The Mavericks were trying to help, but they’d sustained casualties as well. No one knew whether to turn them away or just relax and be friends with them. We were hungry, and thirsty, and sleep-deprived. No help was on the way. The police had blocked contact with the neighbouring colonies. To contain any risk of rioting, they said.”

“That’s ridiculous!” said Hiroe. “What are you supposed to do, just die?”

“Basically,” said Gargi.

He’d heard enough. Kazuo got up, grabbed Yumi’s lighter and cigarettes from the table, and went out into the small balcony next to the kitchen.

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Night had fallen on Kazuki. Kazuo looked at the packet of cigarettes in his hand uncertainly. He’d quit smoking a year ago; but the daily anxiety as Gongen hurtled towards war against Earth, and everyone, ranging from his parents to the media to the army officials who had once briefly lauded him for enrolling himself early on as a matter of principle rather than the ongoing mass conscription programme, failed to talk of anything except the coming war, he’d found himself drawn more and more to his old habit. Earlier, while seeing him drop his habit of smoking, Yumi had tried to adopt a new rule of never smoking in the same room as Kazuo. But for the last three months, as their family of three began to wander apart, she’d forgotten her rule, and, in fact, smoked much more frequently now than she used to.

Kazuo’s parents, of course, thought nothing of either his decision to quit smoking, or his growing attraction to them after a year of staying clean. They were much more concerned about whether his job as a photographer was making him enough money, if it wasn’t too late to become an engineer like his older cousin brother, and make Gongen proud. His parents wanted to know when Hiroe would become a mother, and if he was happy with Hiroe and didn’t resent his decision to marry so early, and if he was indeed happy and grateful, then why did he feel the need to entertain an outsider like Yumi, and allow her to corrupt their familial bonds?

And then the sudden interview on the news with him and Yumi. The reporter had found them near the Masuke Tomi restaurant, where they’d gone for a small celebration of their own, reliving the memories of their dates while they’d been in college. But whatever hopes they’d had of finding something extra to those memories, something in the past that would enliven their present and carry them through another year, they were dashed under the glare of the reporter’s camera.

And then the barrage of calls from his family, even distantly related cousins he thought had no business prying into his private life. His parents were now convinced that his marriage to Hiroe had been a mistake, that it was actually Hiroe’s fault, and that he should’ve married Masuoka Yumi instead. Wasn’t it amazing how they had completely missed the obvious, Kazuo’s parents had told each other. Of course young Kazuo wasn’t happy with his young, graceless wife. Of course he needed a girl mature enough to fulfill his needs. Well, the decision to marry young had indeed been unconventional for their times, but Kazuo had always been such an earnest and eager



little boy, always pretending to be a red-blooded Gongen soldier even when he and his cousins played mock battles during their summer holidays. He'd just always wanted to make his family proud. No, Kazuo had only made a few small mistakes, nothing that couldn't be amended. It could all end up happily for their families if Kazuo left Hiroe, and moved in with Yumi in a flat closer to their family homes. A perfect compromise.

Kazuo shook his head in vain, wishing he could forget how humiliated the entire incident had made him feel. But he couldn't forget, not even in his sleep, that he had to make a decision, and before everyone on Gongen died in the coming war. The cigarettes only made him feel worse, reminding him how he had failed even in his promise to himself to remain clean. With nowhere else to go, Kazuo stepped back into the kitchen, slammed the door to the balcony shut, and threw the packet of cigarettes into the waste bin.

The five of them still sitting around the dining table had been talking animatedly about something. They now looked at Kazuo with some concern.

Whether or not he was really going to call the authorities and hand the three poor fugitives over to them, or he was going to tell Hiroe and Yumi the truth — that he couldn't imagine a life without them, and even if everyone died in the war and he remained alive, it wouldn't really be *life* — or whatever the hell he was going to tell his family, Kazuo found himself taking a small decision just for now, just for the moment he was in. "I want to hear the rest of the story," he said.

## IV

The dim blue haze of dawn never failed to remind Arshad of the oceans his ancestors had once revered on Earth, although he had never seen one. He and Mey were dragging Gargi's limp and dehydrated body out of the partially constructed subterranean reservoir, towards the shuttle waiting for them just a dozen feet away. She was delusional from fever, mumbling like a madwoman. Mey had asked Arshad, "Where's Suraj? How do we get him?"

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"You said you were married," Yumi was saying to Gargi. "What's your husband up to now?"

"He's dead, like his mother," Gargi answered bluntly. "He got lost."

"Lost?"

Arshad swallowed the lump in his throat. "We don't know where he went," he said. "Last time we saw him, he was very ill, dehydrated and starving. He'd contracted something, we were trying to help him. But there were too many people, too many problems. Chachi — I mean Mrs. Bhatia — she was pleading with the governor and the Major for more water and food. Gargi and I used to spend hours, entire days, trying to put our equipment back together and screen everyone's symptoms, and save water for those who needed it the most, like the children and the elders, and the sick. Suraj must've wandered off. We couldn't find him, and then once we started fighting the police —"

"You what?" Kazuo spluttered.

"Yeah, we were fighting — and there was no time to go look for him. The parties who went out looking for him were coming back without a clue. The police were no help. Chachi wouldn't let me and Gargi go, she said it was too risky to go out of the dome,

she wouldn't let us risk our own lives. She said Suraj knew he had to come home. She said she *knew* he would come home, eventually."

There was nothing but silence for a whole minute as Kazuo, Hiroe, and Yumi processed what they were hearing. "Not to speak ill of the dead —" began Yumi.

"I know what you're thinking," Gargi cut in. "What kind of mother doesn't go look for her own missing son?"

"Okay, but what about you?" Yumi retorted. "You just did as you were told?"

Suddenly, Gargi's lower lip trembled. "It was one less worry that way," she said in an odd voice. "It was easier to believe her, think he'd come back. Like he'd just gone to look for something he'd forgotten on the lakeshore. I couldn't — we —"

And then, to Arshad's immense surprise, Gargi began to choke, tears starting to spill onto her cheeks. It came like an avalanche. Hiroe sprang out of her chair, rushing to wrap her arms around Gargi. Kazuo, bewildered, poured Gargi a glass of water, then put it down again as he realised she was in no condition to drink. Mey sat frozen in her chair, her expression torn between contrition and scepticism. Finally, Yumi got up and went to Gargi, raising her slowly to her feet and guiding her towards the sink.

Arshad could only wonder how slow-to-change, yet unpredictable Gargi could be. Just over a week ago, they had had a different conversation.

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"Do you think the Earthers are watching us?" asked Gargi, sitting with her chin resting on her knees.

"Maybe not what's happening right now," replied Arshad. He'd been helping Kaveri rearrange the hastily erected lakeside shelters for the last three hours. Now his curly head was heavy with dust. "But they see what they want to — East Asians at the helm of the giant red planet next door. That's all they've ever known about Asia, and that's all they want to know about Gongen."

"'East Asians'," laughed Gargi. "That alone can get you shot."

"At this point, I'd quite like a bullet in my head," Arshad groaned. "At least I wouldn't be hungry, sleepless, and thirsty." He lay down on his back, ignoring the sharp pain in his lower back, and watched Gargi observe Kaveri Bhatia. The matriarch was

discussing strategy and housekeeping with Sterling Barkby and a few others. “What do you think?” he asked. “When are we going to look for Suraj?”

“We’re not,” said Gargi. “Mummyji says we shouldn’t, and of course we can’t now. We’d be shot at sight.”

About fifteen hours ago, a public quarrel between Mrs. Bhatia and the Major on the broken shores of the newly excavated lake had boiled over into a full-fledged armed conflict, with the settlers of Ito Ryu Polar Colony going head to head alongside the Mavericks, and the arms they had smuggled in over the last two months. The resentment against Major Bhavnani’s troops had finally reached its breaking point. But Kaveri, Arshad, and Gargi had a bigger problem, which had forced them to resort to violence sooner than Arshad had anticipated. Major Bhavnani had filed her reports to the Gongen Water Management Board about the disaster: Himadri’s assets would be liquidated, and the management would be tried and sentenced in Takumi for fraud, illegal mining, and causing widespread damage to the planet’s natural resources. So the armed ‘rioters’ had risen against Gongen, committing sedition and a dozen other crimes in the process, and when the police arrived with reinforcements, they had planted booby traps in the ice around the lake, and hidden themselves in the lakeside shelters.

Arshad swallowed bile. “So what are we going to do?” he demanded. “I don’t know what Chachi is thinking, or you, for that matter. Are we just going to abandon Suraj out there? We can’t *not* look for him.”

“I don’t know,” said Gargi. “Ask your Chachi, then. I don’t know where to look for him, I don’t even know if he’s still alive —”

“Exactly!” Arshad almost yelled. “We have to make sure. And if... Even if he’s dead, we have to bring him home. For the funeral.”

“What funeral? You’ll just put him in the recycler, it’s not like we still burn the dead with ghee and honey.”

Arshad stared at Gargi in disbelief. “What’s the matter with you?” he found himself thinking aloud. “Suraj was — is — our friend. We grew up together. He’s your husband.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Gargi tore at the hem of her dupatta. “You never talk about Chachaji and your sisters anyway.”

Arshad huffed. “Bano and Sada should be fine in the north. As for Amma...” He caught a glimpse of Gargi’s curious, almost hungry look, and promptly stopped talking. He had no wish to discuss his family with someone who consistently refused to open up about herself.

Gargi seemed to understand. “The media you called for hasn’t arrived,” she said.

“I shouldn't have hoped.” Arshad had tried to get a line to Kazuki using Gargi's home comms ID from when she still lived in the city. But his attempt at raising awareness in the media hadn't worked. Arshad didn't have to check the news to know that the journalists were still shouting about mobilisation against Earth. And in any case, the police had blocked communications in the area now.

“Give me the patch code,” said Gargi, bringing out her phone.

“What?”

“I have an idea.” Gargi squinted at the screen, scrolling through her contacts. “Mey has a few useful contacts in Kazuki. I'm going to ask her for access to Shocho.”

“What I'm telling you is, these quarters are too damn small for your bulk,” Zhakiyanov was saying loudly behind them. ‘Maybe if you tried using your nuts and bolts for something other than physical mutilation —’

Arshad blinked. “Shocho?” he said, trying to focus. “How the hell is she going to get Grandfather on the line? Is Sato Shintaro her family? And they've blocked —”

“A small audio message should go through,” said Gargi, starting the recorder. “This is our last shot. Forward the patch code.”

Arshad swiped his phone, and Gargi went to work. “Mey,” she began, “I know we haven't spoken in months. But I need your help...” Then she frowned.

“What's wrong?” asked Arshad.

“The signal isn't good,” replied Gargi, restarting the call.

“Then drop it, it's too risky.”

“Wait, let me try again...”

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“Wait, let me check to be sure,” Mey was saying. “Gargi, are you finally feeling sad for Suraj? I thought you'd forgotten him.”

“I don't care what you thought, Mey,” said Gargi, having buried her face in her hands. “You heard me. You can think whatever you want to.”

Mey trembled with an indescribable emotion. “Suraj meant something to me,” she said. “To both of us. And I’m not just thinking that up. We were friends, we — we were *something*.”

Across the table, Kazuo’s expression changed. Hiroe looked at Mey, Gargi, and Arshad, helpless and sorrowful. Yumi was shaking her head.

“We — I dreamed of a very different future,” Mey continued. “I really thought we had a good shot together, you know.”

“I know,” Gargi replied. “I remember everything.”

“Then how could it go so wrong?”

All at once, Arshad realised what had happened between Suraj, Mey, and Gargi. They had been a family, until Suraj and Gargi got married on Kaveri Bhatia’s command and went home to Gongen South, leaving Mey alone in Kazuki. And thus, their relationship had ended. *You don’t know what I’m burning to help you two get out of here*, Arshad remembered Mey telling him in the shuttle, on their way to the city. *I’m not talking about my brother or his friends, although they’ll have to work for the rest of their lives to repay their debts. I’m not talking about the bribes I’ve had to pay, either. This isn’t a favour. This is a sacrifice. Gargi will never know that I destroyed my own integrity for the sake of something we once believed in.*

Arshad felt sick in the pit of his stomach. He remembered the almost-quarrel between his hostesses earlier in the kitchen, the heated argument he couldn’t help but overhear until Kazuo put a stop to it. Kazuo, Hiroe, Yumi — the three of them were another family like Suraj, Gargi, and Mey, not just friends rooming together like the woman in the tea shop downstairs had told them. *Ya Allah, what have we all gotten into?* Things were starting to feel like a dream again.

“I’m sorry,” Hiroe said softly. “I wish we — I wish I could help you.”

“You’re not going to Gongen South,” said Yumi. “You’re running away from it. Where are you going, really?”

Arshad sighed. The truth was somewhat along the lines of *away from here, away from where we were*. Although with every word, every step away, he felt himself sinking deeper into the past.

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“Alexey, please,” warned Mrs. Bhatia. “I’m sorry, Sterling. I’m just saying we need to expand our living area.”

“Doesn’t look like it to me,” the Maverick chieftain replied. “Even if we do stretch about, you lot will keep complaining just because you’re stuck here with us.”

Gargi rolled her eyes at them. “This isn’t working,” she sighed, pocketing her phone. “I’m going outside.”

“Keep an eye out,” Arshad called after her before moving to check on the row.

“We’ve been fighting together for so long,” Arshi Mohan was saying. “We can stick out a little longer. We’ll reach a breakthrough soon.”

“Yeah, when we die from hunger and dehydration,” said Zhakiyanov. His face, gaunt with fatigue and bitterness, was now pale with anger. “The food and water barrels we retrieved are ours. We shouldn’t have to share it with those who don’t need it.”

“We helped you store that water,” Sterling retorted. “And we’re not bots.”

“I’ve checked the reserves,” said Arshad. “If we keep to the rationing system that we followed before, we should last another day.”

“Two more days,” said Zhakiyanov. “If the food and water goes to the people who own it.”

“Nobody owns the water,” Mrs. Bhatia snapped. “The company does. Gongen owns it. Are you a bloody Earther who fights over everything?”

Zhakiyanov stepped close to her. “I am Gongen,” he growled. “And because I have red blood in my veins, it upsets me to live next to those who willingly erase their humanity.”

“He’s right,” said Gargi’s father. “Need has blinded you, madam. It’s important we don’t forget who we are.”

Arshad fought to stay calm. “If you really did remember, kaka, we wouldn’t be quarreling right now.”

“Shut up,” Gargi’s father roared, his concealed anger flaring upon Arshad. “What do you know of loyalty, little boy?”

“Don’t take it out on him, bhaisahab,” said Kaveri, herself angry now. “We don’t fight among family.”

“Don’t tell us what to do,” shouted Zhakiyanov. “We don’t sacrifice family for the sake of personal gain. It’s been a week. Why haven’t you gone to search for your son? Or don’t you care about him anymore?”

“Because I know he’s not coming back!” Kaveri snarled. “He’d have found his way to us if he had even an ounce of life in him. I’m not going to endanger anyone else for his sake.”

Sterling Barkby laughed. “You can’t blame us for not taking a side anymore,” they said. “Gongen, Earther — fight it out amongst yourselves. I’m done. If you’re unhappy here, you can leave anytime you want. But don’t expect us to leave. We built these shelters just as you did.”

“Fine!” Zhakiyanov swung around and faced the people amassed behind them. “I am leaving!” he declared. “But if anyone wants to come with me, I won’t refuse you. Anyone who still has humanity left in them —” he glanced snidely at the Mavericks at the other corner of the cabin, “— will never be turned away. Gongen belongs to us.”

Gargi’s father shoved past, and her mother glared at Arshad. “Where’s my daughter?” she asked.

Arshad shrugged, disgusted. “Ask her. I don’t know.”

“Stupid boy,” hissed Gargi’s mother. “Well, I suppose it’s pointless. She’s married, she’s not one of us anymore.” So saying, she followed her husband out the door.

“This is a mistake,” said Ms. Mohan, as two people, then five, and then seven got up to follow Zhakiyanov and Gargi’s parents. “Where will you go?” she pleaded. “D’you think the police will happily take you back into the fold? Don’t go, we’re stronger together!”

“Forget it, Arshi,” Kaveri said through gritted teeth. “Let them go. Let them die. Arshad beta, close the door.”

Sterling Barkby waved, and his people returned to making the beds and cleaning up. Arshad quietly went to the door and did as he was told, as he’d been doing for the last five years. But the image of those ten people marching stubbornly into the foggy night lingered even after the locks clicked into place.



## V

"I can't really get over the fact that you decided to fight the military police," said Kazuo, with a smile that was more of a grimace. "What possessed you to take up arms against *them*? And siding with Mavericks, of all people!"

"Why, what's wrong with the Mavericks?" asked Mey.

"Nothing, technically," said Yumi. Mey wasn't the sort of person who would easily back down in a debate. Yumi felt compelled to defend Kazuo against her, although she was making up half of what she was saying on the fly. "I won't pretend I understand them," she continued. "But, just as a matter of practicality, they are useless allies. They belong neither to Gongen, nor to Earth. You can't win with them."

"Mummyji had the same opinion," said Gargi. "It didn't matter, in the end. Against Earth, against Gongen, we're all in it together, regardless of how much we have in common."

"And you don't need to have something in common with someone to sympathise with them," said Mey. "The Mavericks are a politically weak minority in Gongen. They are proud people, but their pride is seen as threatening, while their needs are ignored. We should help them, if only to justify our own humanity."

Mey wouldn't be popular among student political circles in Kazuki, thought Yumi. Most of the parties in and around the University were just as loud about what the people of Gongen wanted, as they were about how the Mavericks were a waste of breath and living space. "I get your point," said Yumi. "But the militia are just going to double down if they see a Maverick with you. And that's what happened down South, did it not?"

"We were dead anyway," Gargi continued. "We died the moment we decided to form Himadri. Every moment since has been a struggle against the inevitable."

"What's the time?" Arshad asked suddenly. "We need to be up early tomorrow."

"Close to nine," said Hiroe. "But I want to know what happened thereafter. How your fight ended. It ended, right? Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Of course, that's only if you're willing to tell us."

Gargi, Arshad, and Mey lowered their eyes, trapped. Yumi felt a rush of pride for Hiroe. She would never stop loving her, even if they weren't together anymore. Yet, the

joy was tarnished by Yumi's doubt in what she was doing to the three strangers. Hiroe had been right in saying that a story must be shared, a secret unburdened, for life to move on. But there wasn't enough sharing going on at all. Yumi remembered the aptitude tests she had taken at the end of high school. The examiner, someone affiliated with the Gongen Armed Forces, said she would be good in the espionage department. The knowledge had made her skin crawl, just as it did now. There were personal limits that Yumi wasn't willing to push, even though she couldn't help but push other people to theirs. It was an internal paradox she hadn't been able to reconcile with. She had to admit to herself that the storytelling had begun as an interrogation, and she had truly enjoyed the part she had played in extracting the truth from unwilling participants.

As if on cue, Mey asked, "Why do you want to know? What makes you think we're obliged to tell you? You have no right to our story, if that's all this is to you."

Blood rushed to Hiroe's cheeks. Kazuo looked utterly dumbfounded. It was a question only Yumi was going to be able to answer. "Because I want to *know*," she said. "Because yours is a story of Gongen that I haven't heard before, and most of the people living here in the equatorial cities are unaware of. Maybe because it has nothing to do with the war against Earth, and I'm tired of the war being all that anyone talks about these days."

"Then let me ask you: what will you do with this knowledge?" Mey's large, deep-set eyes blazed as she charged. Yumi guessed that they both knew Mey had the winning edge this time round. "What does this story mean to you? Is it just so you have live entertainment for a night? Is it just so you have a story to tell on other evenings such as this, when this story *you* tell will win you a round of conversation over tea? So that you can go to bed at night, knowing how much better off you are than unlucky people like us, and feel grateful?"

"What does that have to do with what you're telling us?" Kazuo retorted. "You'll either say it or you won't. It's your choice."

"Is it, really?" cried Mey. "We didn't start this, but you made us. You had to keep needling us until —"

"I understood that at least one of you wanted the story to be told," said Hiroe, looking at Gargi. "That it was something of a spiritual need, even. And why *wouldn't* you tell us? Your secret is safe with us."

"Or so you say," Arshad chimed in. "What guarantee can you give?"

"None," said Kazuo, angry now. "But you're welcome to leave in silence."

*That escalated quickly.* "Kaz," warned Yumi.

“Look, you’ve already told us so much,” said Hiroe, “a little more can’t possibly make any difference.” She lowered her legs from the chair and leaned forward, her expression grave. “And if it’s a particularly sensitive subject, you don’t have to go into it. You don’t have to say anything that you don’t want to. I’m sorry if we hurt you. I won’t ask you again.”

“You’re right,” Gargi said at last. “I want the story to be told. I never thought I would, but we change with time. That’s not the point. What I’m trying to say is, I don’t want us to be the only ones burdened with the truth, and living with it so that the rest of the planet can continue living in self-deception. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Kazuo. “We still don’t know if you’re telling us the truth at all. We only have your version of events.”

“And that’s *all* you need to know,” Gargi argued. “You could’ve waited for the news to give you a clean report. Why didn’t you? No, we’re the ones who lived this story: me, Arshad, Suraj, and Mey. It may be just a story to you, but it’s real to us. And to have our reality told to you, there’s a price.”

Yumi laughed out in shock. Even Hiroe frowned in confusion. “What price?” she asked. “When did we start bargaining?”

“The moment Yumi got us into the kitchen,” said Arshad. “The moment it became clear that we had to say something to keep the peace, to be allowed to stay the night in a *relatively* safe place. The moment Kazuo gave us his word that he won’t report us to the authorities, and we took it.”

“And, believe it or not, we haven’t told about ourselves to every single person we’ve met,” said Gargi. “And we aren’t going to, not again. No, Ms. Arai, as of now, apart from the authorities who are very busy mobilising against Earth, you’re the only ones in Kazuki, or in any of the cities, who know what really happened down South. You must give us something in return for this information.”

“Information that can get you thrown into prison,” Kazuo pointed out. “So you’re trying to blame us for finding out what *you* did, and guilt-trip us into paying you some *price*. Honestly, I don’t understand why we’re still allowing this.”

“Is that so?” demanded Mey. “Are you absolutely certain you don’t have blood on your hands? You, one of Higen Shijin’s people?”

“What does that mean?” growled Kazuo.

“It means we have privilege on Gongen,” said Hiroe. “It means it’s time we admitted that, and paid a symbolic price for what our privilege has cost others.”

Kazuo stared at the three guests in disbelief; but, despite her frustration with Mey's refusal to back down, Yumi could see their point. "What do you want us to do?" she asked.

Everyone fell silent. Mey gnawed the inside of her lower lip, pondering the question. "Give us something only you can, and something you can't take back," said Arshad. "A truth in exchange for a truth. That's the only way there is."

"So, more information?" said Hiroe. "You realise we don't have a criminal history behind us, so we can't tell you anything remarkable."

Now it was Gargi's turn to pipe up again. "That's not what I'm asking of you," she said. "Actually, there's something I do want to know. Tell me about that interview you did with the news reporter three months ago."

"What?" Yumi, Hiroe, and Kazuo said together, at the same time as Mey turned to Gargi and said, "Wait, seriously?"

"You haven't seen that one, have you?" Gargi asked Mey.

"I really don't know what you're talking about," replied Mey.

"How come you remember something from three months ago?" Arshad asked in turn.

"It was the same day you broke the news of the lake," Gargi explained. "Remember the board meeting? Suraj and I were having our meal on the rooftop before the meeting started."

"Oh, yeah, that day," said Arshad, although it didn't seem to be much clearer to him now.

"So it was then that we saw the interview on the news," Gargi continued. "Kazuo and Yumi were on the news for getting a bit of shopping for the Festival."

"Your memory is incredible," Yumi had to admit.

"It's all I've got now," Gargi said simply. "Well?"

"What do you want to know about that day?"

"How did it begin? How did you end up on the news?"

"Are we really doing this?" Kazuo demanded. "This is personal."

“We’d broken into personal territory long ago,” said Yumi. She had to take matters in her own hands now — if only for the fact that she had finally begun to touch the knot of doubt in her heart.

“Why does that interview interest you so much?” Hiroe asked Gargi. “It was three months ago, after all. A lot of things have happened since then.”

Gargi shrugged. “Maybe it’s just that,” she said. “Sometimes we remember details from bygone days that aren’t all that relevant to our lives. Maybe it’s so memorable because it has nothing to do with my life.”

“And it has everything to do with ours,” said Yumi. “Which, of course, you noted when you first saw us. It’s convenient, isn’t it? Get us to talk about something deeply affecting, even humiliating, in return for all the ways that you’ve been exposed.”

“I don’t mean to humiliate you,” Gargi said quietly. “Just as we haven’t really been *exposed*. We opened up.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Hiroe. “It was only a brief moment on the news. Hundreds of young couples like us have been interviewed by reporters before, and hundreds will in the future. It’s just a party craze. The Festival is almost upon us.”

“But you’re not an ordinary couple,” Gargi countered. “You say ‘we’, but you weren’t there that day. In fact, if I hadn’t come to your flat, I wouldn’t have known that Kazuo is married to a woman who isn’t Yumi Masuoka.”

Hiroe flinched — an instant, involuntary response to pain that had no cure. A slow, pale fire began to sear through Yumi’s veins. She didn’t need to check Kazuo’s expression to know that he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole, to save him from this moment.

“Kazuo, Hiroe, and I are together,” Yumi said, careful not to let her emotion show. “We always have been.”

Gargi nodded, smiling faintly. Mey raised an eyebrow. Arshad just sighed and stretched his arms.

“We love each other,” Yumi continued. “So, really, we’re just as ordinary as anyone can be.”

“And yet?”

Yumi hissed in frustration — the woman simply wouldn’t let up. “The interview was a freak of nature,” she said. “We weren’t supposed to be seen like that. That would explain how tired and uncomfortable we both looked that day. I know, I’ve seen that segment repeated. Twice during the morning and afternoon broadcasts the day after.

And our families have let us know, very kindly and in full, precise detail, as you can imagine. Kaz married Hiroe because they didn't have many ideological objections to marriage — unlike me. It was a good cover. To get married and move into a flat together. Kaz's family knew that there's a third person living with them. But they didn't know *who* until the interview was broadcast. And it turns out Kaz's father knows my father very well, too. It's just that the three of us didn't know each other as well as we'd thought. Not that well."

Yumi breathed, and the fire in her veins, the hurt and anger that she had repressed over the last three months, exploded in her cheekbones. "Are we done now?" she asked, closing her eyes to stop the heat from flowing out. "Is that enough for you?"

Nothing but silence prevailed around the table.

## VI

*Six months before this night with Kazuo, Hiroe, and Yumi —*

The trams were full; five to six people were standing under every air vent on the hot afternoon. End of term at the University of Kazuki had come at an inopportune moment. Had the department not chosen to prepone the exams to be able to take the juniors to the volcanoes before winter, Sok Mey and Gargi Sadhukhan may have had the Festival of the Ancestors to themselves, too. They planned to visit the Aranoshikyu Valley, north of Kazuki. Mey had family living there, relations that her parents were still close to. Their orchards were famous in the region for their beauty and fresh fruit.

“We should call a shuttle,” said Gargi.

“A shuttle, here?” cried Mey. “They’ll skin us alive for extras.”

“We’ll miss the 1747 if we wait!” Gargi yelled. The crowd on the other side of the road had finally peaked in volume.

It was an anti-Maverick demonstration: unexceptional in its rancour, but not so in strength. The Atarashii Hajimari’s decision to allow Mavericks to live on Gongen has ticked off a biggish portion of Gongen society. Even the police in charge of crowd control seemed uninspired. One man, his face red with protest, walked right past the scanner at the intersection while carrying a banner showing a hirsute bottom painted green, crawling with Maverick-shaped ticks springing into Gongen space. “Greenbacks, take back your filth!” the man bellowed.

“Headed for the station?”

Suraj had appeared out of nowhere. Term for students of hyperspace mechanics had ended a week ago; he hadn’t told her he was still around in the city. Mey continued looking for a tram resolutely. She was in no mood for sentimental goodbyes. Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but throw a line at him. “Out of tickets to Iti?” she asked.

*Iti* was what the Ito Ryu Polar Colony in the south was called here in the cities. Michio’s sister city, inaugurated a year ago, had been named Ito in honour of the hawkish statesman. Suraj’s colony has had to settle with a diminutive instead.

“Managed to get one late,” Suraj grinned back. “Gargi, we have exactly twenty three minutes till the last train this week.”

“I’m not going to Iti,” said Gargi.

“Yes, you are,” Suraj repeated.

A chill crept through Mey’s veins. She should’ve seen this coming. “No,” she said, her jaw tensed. “Gargi and I are headed to Aranoshikyu for five weeks.”

“What’s in Aranoshikyu? Gargi, you haven’t been back for years. I spoke to your mum —”

“You did what?” demanded Gargi.

“Why, I’m going to be her son in-law in a month, I do have the right to call her when I like.”

Mey turned to stare at Suraj in disbelief. They’d been quarreling about this for two months. Suraj’s domineering mother had called her son back to the colony to serve national interests, as she’d put it. Suraj was determined that he wouldn’t go home alone. He wanted Gargi to go with him as his wife. Gargi, to Mey’s increasing alarm, was finding it difficult to say no.

This time, however, Gargi sounded truly angry. “No you don’t,” she said, “and how long have you been scheming behind my back?”

“Dina kaka says he’s found a good date for the nuptials,” said Suraj.

Mey’s fists balled as she fought the urge to grab Gargi’s hand and wrench her away from Suraj. If Suraj was going to be a coward who couldn’t stand up for himself, that was his choice. But Mey wasn’t going to let go of Gargi. They had been together ever since middle school. Suraj had only joined them as a partner two years ago. Mey could make her peace with the fact that they weren’t meant to be with Suraj, after all.

Gargi sighed. “Why do we have to marry now? Let me get my degree.”

Suraj held his hands up placatingly. “Anything you want to say, talk to my mum.”

Mey inhaled sharply. “Your mum?” repeated Gargi. “So this is all her idea?”

“Dina kaka is your family, not mine,” Suraj hedged.

“You coward,” said Mey. “Getting your elders to force a conclusion.”

“What’s it to you?” said Suraj, rounding on her.



Mey glared at Suraj. *She's mine. You just let us both down, you filthy nationalist.*

"She's my friend," Gargi retorted. "And my mum isn't pushing me to settle down. My family knows I should finish my degree and find a good job — here, in Kazuki."

"Kazuki isn't everything," said Suraj, with an irritating lucidity. "There are other ways to be a good Gongen."

Mey couldn't bear to look at Suraj anymore. She wished she could pull out her jetpack and spirit Gargi away to Aranoshikyu with her. The sight of a tram at the intersection made her heart soar. "Oh look, there's a tram with room!" she cried.

"Listen, I'm not talking out of my backside," Suraj pleaded. "It's a good time down South now. Call your mum. Talk to your parents."

The tram was inching closer, pushing through the traffic. "It's here," said Mey. "Come on, the first car. It's stopped at the light, so you can get in position. Gargi — Gara, are you listening?"

Gargi turned to look at Mey. They had a rule about never saying each other's nicknames out loud in public. Mey willed Gargi to see her panic in her eyes. *If we leave now, if we go like this, we're not getting back together. Suraj won't come back, and he won't let you, either. Don't go. Don't leave me alone.*

"There's still time," Suraj said softly.

Gargi flipped out her phone. "If this is some twisted way of stopping me going to Aranoshikyu..." she said as she sped through the process. Mey watched in growing horror as the window widened to show three people in a dimly lit cabin, huddled over mugs of tea.

"Ma?" Gargi asked.

The lady in the fore had been staring into the screen quite intently; but as Gargi's voice reached through, she sighed and blinked rapidly, eyes glittering with tears. "Mamon?" she called back. "Come home."

"Yeah, about that..." began Gargi.

"Your would-be husband's mother is here with us tonight," said Gargi's father. "Madam said she wanted to talk to you as soon as she had returned from her business trip to Takumi. We are having a great time together, chatting over tea and making plans. Here she is, talk to her."

At this, the woman waiting towards the back stepped in front of the screen. In one sinuous movement, she took off her khaki coat as she sat down, to reveal a salwar suit

completely devoid of embellishments, in a solid celadon green colour. Fractions of the second seemed to pass like flotsam on a mythical Gongen river as she draped her long greying braid over her shoulder. Her hard, deeply lined face filled with a cool smile as she met Gargi's eyes.

"Hello," she said. "I am Kaveri Bhatia. Suraj must've told you about me."

The tram that had been waiting at the traffic light broke free of the crowd and rushed past with a scream of invisible mechanisms. Suraj pressed his hand over his mouth to ward off the small cloud of dust. But Mey knew there was no going back. She could tell just from Gargi's expression that she'd already bent before the woman with the charm of a serpent.

Neither Suraj, nor Gargi would look at Mey. She knew she would have to go to Aranoshikyu alone. *Give me strength*, she prayed to the powers that were. *Don't let me break — not here, not in public*. "We missed it," was all she could say out loud. "It's gone. You made me miss the 1747."

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"Now you know."

Mey looked at Gargi, having finally seen what she had been trying to get to. Six months ago, Mey had vowed that she would never forgive Gargi for her betrayal. A year before that fateful day in front of the University, Mey and Gargi had vowed they would never abandon each other unless it was for something uniquely devastating, like an invasion by Earth. It had seemed ridiculously unlikely back then, a ghost story only old people in the dark corners of the city clung to. Now, Mey felt like the whole world was whirling faster than it should, spinning desperately like a ship circling a black hole. "Not all of it," she had to say. "You haven't told *me* what happened. You kept that between you and Arshad."

"A truth in exchange for a truth," said Hiroe. She wiped the tears off her face roughly and cleared her throat. "It's your turn again. Tell us how this ends."

Kazuo had sat down upon the threshold next to the partition, curled up into himself as if winter had come to the city with sudden force. Yumi's flush was fading; she looked merely drained of emotion now. Mey looked again at Arshad and Gargi. Arshad knew what had happened. Mey was certain he had been a witness to it all. But he wasn't going to say anything. A corollary of the unspoken agreement that had emerged between him and Gargi as they had come out of the ruins of the Ito Ryu Polar Colony,

the simpatico that Mey was starting to envy them for. Gargi met Mey's gaze and smiled — a ghastly grin that brought no light to those once-loved, still familiar eyes.

“When the police crackdown happened,” began Gargi, “we were already on borrowed time. Personally, I had no hope left for the community. I knew we were at a dead end. I only hoped that the story wouldn't die with me. I hoped that Mey would find me, validate my death. When they tore down our shelters and stormed in, and we began running, I had no thought left but the screams. I listened to the screams with every inch of my soul. I had to, because it was my fault the crackdown was happening that very day. I had hacked an opening through the blanket block on the region's comms. I had sent my coordinates to Mey, and a full video message showing her the lake, and our shelters. She wouldn't have believed me if I didn't show her what I meant, the terrible stakes. But in so doing, I had doomed every last one of us.”

Gargi had been right; it was the image of the lake, an unending, moving abyss under the night sky, that had convinced Mey to do everything she was capable of to help Gargi. Yumi sighed and put her head down on the table. Hiroe gazed on, open-mouthed with horror.

“I don't know what happened to Sterling Barkby and the Mavericks,” Gargi continued. “Nothing good, of course. What had begun with a search for fresh water had turned into a bloody rout. But we didn't go help them. We couldn't, we had to save ourselves first. Arshi Mohan was Mummyji's best friend on the company board. The stampede took her down. I saw Dr. Rose die right in front of me, his skull blown open by a projectile sent our way by one of Major Bhavnani's war dogs. Arshad, Mummyji, and I ran full speed to a tunnel made long ago, running around the foundations of the underground reservoir. The tunnel was the only safe place we thought we still had. We had to do something, but we had no idea what, exactly. Everything was lost. Then I told Mummyji what I'd done, how the police had found us.”

A chill ran down Mey's spine. She remembered Mrs. Bhatia's hard face — those cold, piercing eyes under thick greying eyebrows.

“I don't know what I'd expected,” said Gargi. “Arshad reacted just as I'd thought he would, and I loved him for that. I don't deserve a friend like him, really. But Mummyji didn't change. There was no great retribution. She — she just shot herself in the leg.”

The strange phrase made Mey frown, unable to tell if it was metaphorical or not. But it didn't make sense. Yumi's wearied glance at Gargi made her explain. “Yes, she really did shoot herself,” she said. “She'd taken a gun off the body of an officer Arshad had killed at the mouth of the tunnel. In self-defence, of course.”

“Why the hell would she do that?” cried Kazuo, perplexed.

“She said it was her fault for not seeing me clearly,” answered Gargi. “Not seeing me for who I am. She didn't say it was my fault. She didn't say she was wrong to have

trusted me. I didn't know what to do. Neither did Arshad. She was bleeding all over the place, her leg below the knee was gone. She was screaming in agony. I couldn't bear to listen to her. Screaming at the gods, screaming at herself, screaming at her ancestors, but not at me. She couldn't have survived very long without help. Help that we weren't going to get. So when she asked to be taken to the lakeshore one last time, we didn't know what to say. It was a dying wish. Arshad and I held her by the shoulders. Her blood was all over our clothes. I'd never thought I'd find her like that one day."

Mey remembered burning Arshad and Gargi's clothing on disembarking from the shuttle once they had reached the safe spot outside Kazuki. She remembered how heavy they had been with filth. Arshad was crying now, his face buried in his hands.

"She asked to be taken right up to the water's edge. She wouldn't let Arshad carry her anymore. She took me with her to the waterside. It was only there that I realised what was happening. Mummyji had stepped onto a landmine, one of the ones we had planted in the ice to ward off the military police. I hadn't, but I was holding her. The explosion would kill me as well."

"So she'd lost her mind, literally," said Yumi.

"I didn't die that day." Gargi lifted a leg to place it, folded, over the edge of her chair, and propped her elbow on her knee to reach up and massage her neck — as casually reflective as if she was discussing the latest musical inventions in the cafeteria back at the University. "Arshad saved me. Snuck up close when Mummyji was too deranged to notice, avoiding the mines because he knew where they were in the ice. He grabbed my arm and pulled me aside at the last moment. The landmine went off, it took Mummyji and a bit of the ice shelf with it into the lake. But it felt the same, as if I'd died. Before she fell into the lake, she told me she regretted us having to see this day. That was what she regretted the most, she said. She said she'd thought we really had a chance, we could make something new together. I didn't really know what she was talking about, but listening to her, I could feel her regret all the same, as if it was mine."

Mey sat still, unable to breathe.

"So Arshad and I ran back down the tunnel into the underground reservoir. The place had been flooded by the lake, but there were a few spots safe enough. It was the only safe place we knew anymore. The salt and the humidity was melting our skin off. I got a fever, went half-mad from it. I only remember what happened next from what Arshad and Mey told me, actually. Mey has a brother who works in the army, who called in a few favours and got the shuttle to the polar colony. Mey got us out of there. And now we are lost, homeless. I'm supposed to be dead. Arshad is a fugitive on the run. We don't know anybody else who survived the crackdown. We're not going to be in Kazuki here much longer. Just tonight; then, tomorrow, we get a train North, towards the plains. Mey reckons we can live mostly fine over there, if we can keep a low profile."

That had indeed been Mey's logic. She'd been thinking of taking them to Aranoshikyu, just like they were supposed to go, anyway. Perhaps she could help them find work in the orchards. There were several hundred people there who made a living off the greenhouses. Not a lot of young people live there around the year, either. Mostly middle-aged and elderly people, farmers who appreciated hard work and the commitment to nursing trees. They weren't likely to go around asking too many questions, if Mey had to guess using the example of her own uncles over there. Now, though, after hearing Gargi's story, everything seemed that much more uncertain, fluid.

Kazuo rose to his feet, wobbling slightly, and leaned against the doorframe. "I'd promised you that I wouldn't report you to the authorities," he said. "And that's a promise you can hold me to. I'm speaking on behalf of all three of us — me, Yumi, Hiroe. Your secret is safe with us. You can go wherever you want to. We won't send anyone looking for you." Then, looking at his partners, he added, "You two have dinner without me tonight. I'm not that hungry. I'll see you all tomorrow. Good night."

So saying, he crossed the kitchen into the hallway in the back, heading for his room.

Mey, Arshad, Gargi, Hiroe, and Yumi sat around the table for a quiet moment. Just when Mey thought she would fall off her chair from exhaustion, that she only wanted to sleep for a long night and not have to think, Hiroe clambered out of her chair. "It's late," she said. "You have a long journey ahead of you. Let's get dinner."

## Epilogue

The three strangers departed late the next afternoon, rather than early in the morning as they had planned. Kazuo had checked the train timings to make sure they would get one as soon as they reached the station, a half-hour walk if they moved briskly. Walking was the best idea, to avoid leaving traces in Kazuki's database. Hiroe had packed them food in a large pile of small boxes — enough to last them a whole day. Yumi had nothing to give them, except an unspoken promise to herself, and the guests, to start investigating the matter as soon as talk of the war against Earth had subsided. Arshad, Gargi, and Mey had been too tired, and too overwhelmed, to decline the gifts. They had quietly thanked their hosts and gone on their way.

Yumi watched them from her window as they walked down the street. They walked fast, indeed. They began with a respectable distance between them. But as the sharp cool afternoon breeze blew, they came closer together. Mey and Gargi joined hands, and Arshad put his arm around Mey. Slower than earlier, but surer, every matching step with a weight of its own. When they disappeared around the corner, Yumi waited with her fingers pressed to the panes, uncertain about what she was hoping for. The day was turning bluer as it drew to a close. Theirs was a peaceful, almost uneventful neighbourhood. The street stood empty until Yumi drew the blinds down.

Hiroe had a surprise waiting for them back in the kitchen. She had brought out a big record from her great-grandmother's collection, to be played on the vintage record player that Kazuo took pains to fix every now and then, because it was part of Hiroe's family treasures. "I thought you were over old songs," Yumi remarked as she approached the table.

"Just for old times' sake," murmured Hiroe, as the scratchy, morbidly passionate song came to life, whirling on the record player.

"What's the song about?" asked Kazuo.

"It's an ancient French chanson," said Hiroe. "It's about regret, and lost hopes."

As the song neared its bridge, Hiroe added, "But the best part about it is, there's nothing to regret. She's made her peace with whatever's happened. So have I, I think."

Yumi considered if she should wait for them to reach for her, as Kazuo and Hiroe linked their arms and leaned into each other. But as the ending chorus soared, she

dropped her fears like a stone into a river, and went to them, drawing them into her arms.

## From the Publisher's Desk:

Its been a long road, but we're finally here on the verge of the endgame: the Battle of Phobos is in sight, and things are about to heat up.

We've been so excited to bring you Tori's story for ages now, and it's so excited to put it out into the world finally. Her perspective on the world has been a wonderful addition to the WARSONG Universe, and we hope you've enjoyed this story as much as we did.

If you're curious were things go next, go pre-order or order WARSONG: Codettas—this is the dramatic end to the Battle of Phobos Saga, and you won't want to miss it!

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-James Wylder

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