



OVERWATCH 2

HEROES ASCENDANT
**REBUILDING
RUINS**

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Eleven years since Satya Vaswani had last seen Niran PruksaManee.
Eleven years since he vanished from her life.

And now here she was, practically at his front door, ordered to swallow her hurts and ask for a favor. A whirlwind coaching session from Sanjay, some hastily scribbled scripts from the Vishkar Corporation legal team, a false smile on her face, and off she went.

Satya always saw her missions through. That didn't mean she enjoyed the prospect of this one.

"Thank you." She nodded a goodbye at the pilot as she exited the helijet, stepping onto one of the Atlantic Arcology's landing platforms. She'd admired the complex from above as they neared, but out here—fresh salt scent, a firm sea breeze tugging at her hair—the experience was grander than she'd imagined.

Her work took her to many fascinating locations, but she'd waited years to see the Atlantic Arcology up close. A wide bridge connected the landing platform to the central spire—a miracle molded from durovidro, the ultrahard sea glass sparkling in the sun. Automatically, she found herself approaching it, her neck craning as she took in the place where Niran now lived and worked.

Not only Niran, of course. Many of the world's preeminent scholars and artists had taken up residence in the Arcology, happy to lend their talents to the Collective. The idea of banding together with like minds held great allure. A shared goal: to better humanity. No ties to any governments or multinationals. Satya saw the appeal. She also saw the many potential pitfalls. Working for Vishkar had taught her that if something appeared too good to be true, it often was.

The spire itself, at least, lived up to the images she'd seen. It even surpassed them. The elegant curves, the fluid movements of the elevators shifting along the outside edges, the durovidro casting prisms of color in the noonday light . . .

The structure struck a delicate balance. It was a brilliant feat of engineering, every curve and support beam a glowing testament to the precision and innovation of the Collective's architects; yet, at the same time, the spire appeared as much a natural part of the sea as the schools of fish that darted around it, as though shaped over time by the water itself rather than placed by human hands.

The spire shot high into the sky, clouds obscuring its tip, and its base delved deep into the ocean. The water was unusually clear and blue, more reminiscent of the water around the Maldives. Colorful corals and wafting seaweed farms clung to the sides of both the structure and the artificial islands dotting the area. There was no fencing around the platforms—nothing around any of the spire segments or islands to obscure the expansive, beautiful sight of the ocean around them—but her trained eye spotted the slight distortion of passive energy barriers curving the edges, protecting anyone from falling into the water below.

Behind her, the helijet whirred to life, cutting short Satya's mesmerized study of the Arcology. For several moments, she stood frozen, her fists balled by her sides as she waited for the worst of it to pass. The noise, the wind, the locks of hair tugging free from the tight bun she wore it in and now whipping violently around her face—the sensations screeched across her skull.

After the helijet passed, Satya took a few moments to regain her composure, then pulled the remains of her bun loose and raked her fingers through. She'd have preferred to wear her hair up, as she usually did during business meetings, but she'd have to settle for wearing it loose and at least coaxing it into a presentable state. She wouldn't even like to face the mirror with untidy hair, let alone a business contact, let alone Niran PrukseManee—her former roommate at Vishkar's Architech Academy and once her closest friend.

Niran, who, Satya realized, was late. He should have been here to welcome her.

Interesting.

It could be perceived as a slight, but if she knew Niran at all, he might simply have gotten caught up with his work. In their younger years, she'd heard others describe him as distracted and prone to daydreaming, but Satya knew the truth. Whatever occupied his mind at the moment, he had the tendency to give it his full attention. She'd always found it an admirable trait, whether they were deep in conversation or up late studying.

Or working on the technology that Sanjay insisted belongs to Vishkar. The technology that brought her here today.

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Ah, there he was.

Satya abruptly dropped her hands to her sides.

Niran strode down the walkway to the helijet platform, all poise, from his movements to the gentle waves of his white hair. The sun cast a warm glow over his tan skin. His outfit struck her: an unusual mix of white, pink, and pale green, with golden flourishes like the sash tied intricately around his waist.

It was nothing like the uniforms they'd worn back at the Academy, but it was so elegant and playful—so uniquely *Niran*—that it was as though she'd never seen him wear anything else.

Her own crisp Vishkar uniform felt ill-fitting in comparison.

"Satya!" Niran said, his voice different than she remembered.

"It has been far too long, my friend. What a surprise to see you here."

"Did Vishkar not announce I was coming?"

"They announced *someone* was coming. They neglected to mention it was you."

"An oversight, I'm sure."

"I'm sure."

For a long moment, they watched each other, as if taking in every detail of what had changed and remained the same over the last eleven years. Niran was no longer the lanky teenager she'd seen last. His shoulders had broadened, and his hair had grown nearly as long as her own. It suited him: that combination of strength and warmth, not to mention the confidence with which he held himself.

He looked good. Satya almost wished he didn't. It would have made her mission easier to see him unhappy, regretting his choices rather than thriving in them.

Niran's gaze lingered on her hair, perhaps noticing a strand still out of place. It stung her. Back at the Academy, she'd always been the one to point out when *his* hair was out of place, and he'd have tucked it back with a long-suffering sigh and crooked smile. What did he think of seeing her like this now? What did he think of *her*, after so long?

Satya discarded the thought as quickly as it came to her. Irrelevant.

"Interesting choice of vehicle," Niran finally said, nodding at the empty helipad behind her. "We have a highly efficient transportation hub, as I'm sure you're aware."

"Vishkar's matter was urgent," she said simply, although that was only part of the truth. The other part was that Vishkar had wanted her to make an entrance. For an important discussion such as this, they would not send a delegate in a *train*, to arrive with the rest of the masses.

"A helijet seems rather wasteful."

"Do you plan to chastise me for much longer, Niran?"

That seemed to give him pause. Perhaps it was the sound of his name: *Niran*. In the past, she'd always called him by his nickname: *Bua*.

Or perhaps she'd simply been too familiar to tease him, letting her feelings get in the way of a proper negotiation. Sloppy.

Satya forced a polite smile. "I'd simply like to get to the purpose of my visit. As I stated, my business is urgent."

"After said visit," Niran said, "are you meant to summon the helijet again for your return trip?"

"Yes." Under normal circumstances, it would've remained here until she finished. After yesterday's Null Sector attack in Paris, however, the world was on alert. Vishkar needed every vehicle on hand, and for all they knew, these negotiations could take the better part of the day.

"In that case, you can call Vishkar right now. I'm afraid your visit is over."

So, Niran was going to toy with her. Wonderful.

"Unless?" Satya said, refusing to be intimidated.

His lips curled into a slight smile. "Unless you agree to take a train back to the mainland, afterward."

Vishkar wouldn't like it. Neither would Satya, in truth. Trains were crowded and busy and draining. A helijet, for all its noise, at least allowed her some personal space.

Still. The mission was more important. If this was required for the negotiations to take place, so be it.

"I'd be glad to see for myself just how efficient these trains of yours are," she said.

Niran raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't even finished my pitch. I was about to praise the comfort, sound isolation, and privacy of the personal cabin we'd offer you."

Oh.

Niran knew her too well.

"Generous," Satya said, recovering quickly. "And also, appreciated."

"Naturally." He gestured for her to precede him. "After you, Satya."

YOU LEFT ME, SHE WANTED TO SAY. AND I WISH I WAS HERE TO REPAIR OUR FRIENDSHIP.

Satya strode ahead along the walkway, entering the main spire into an enormous plaza. It was *busy*—too busy for her, but also filled with fascinating people and structures and devices. Her eagerness won out over her discomfort.

"Tell me," she said, without thinking, "is it true that all the technology and labor that built this was offered freely? You had no outside funding at all?"

"Indeed." Niran guided her to take an escalator up, leading to a mezzanine. "That is one of our fundamental tenets, Satya. Every member of the Collective contributes in whatever way they can. Everyone shares in the fruits of those labors."

Satya found this mind-boggling, frankly. "Then everything must be taken on trust. That sounds difficult."

Another pause. Satya was so focused on the pod of whales swimming contentedly below the great glass structure that it took her a while to notice Niran was watching her with an odd expression. His silence dragged on too long for comfort.

Finally, he said, "I know trust doesn't come easily to you."

For good reason. Trust tended to go poorly.

You left me, she wanted to say. And I wish I was here to repair our friendship.

She still didn't understand why that friendship had worked as well as it did. Satya, the daughter from the slums of Hyderabad; Niran, the son of a wealthy Chiang Mai family. Satya, structured and focused and precise; Niran, sociable and rebellious and quick-witted.

At the same time, they'd both been outsiders, both been brilliant, both taken Vishkar's teachings and applied them in their own ways. Their friendship *had* worked: all those shared, quickly stifled smiles across the Academy classrooms; striding through the halls side by side, him talking animatedly about his latest trip abroad with his family while she listened in silent fascination. How often had she interrupted him because he'd gotten so caught up in his personal projects that he'd forgotten they still had class that day? How often had he kept her company as she practiced her dancing, repeating the same movement for hours on end until she was finally satisfied she'd perfected it?

It felt like a lifetime ago. They had changed, both of them.

But that had nothing to do with her mission today. She kept her tone neutral: "I would like to discuss the Null Sector attack that occurred in Paris yesterday. The city needs help to heal its people and rebuild." She offered a polite, inviting smile, the kind she so often struggled with, working for Vishkar. "We think the biolight technology you started at Vishkar years ago could be of great use to them."

Niran's gaze didn't waver. "In your experience, is Vishkar among those I should trust, Satya?"

She'd left that particular sore spot wide open for him. At least she managed to maintain her forced smile.

Her pride and trust in Vishkar had taken a hit recently. She'd spent a long time as Vishkar's trusted closer—the talented architect the company turned to for high-profile projects. But over the last few years it seemed all Satya did was clean up corporate's messes. It had pulled back the curtain on the unsavory side of their business: from gentrification and slumification to large-scale environmental destruction—floods, famines, ashy and desolate landscapes where there had once been rich rainforest and wildlife. While Niran had cut ties with them long ago over rumors of this kind of damage, she'd stayed and trusted that the ends must justify the means.

She wasn't so sure anymore.

And the last thing she wanted was for Niran, of all people, to pick up on that.

"Let us stay on topic, please," she said calmly. It had taken her too long to reply. Niran must know he'd rattled her. She tugged at the hem of her uniform, which felt uncomfortably tight.

To her surprise, he laughed. "Satya! All work, as usual. What kind of host would I be if I didn't give you a proper tour before we get down to business? Come."

Niran escorted her to a balcony, which detached smoothly from the wall and began to ascend slowly up the spire. The open interior bustled with activity, as though an entire city were contained within. Niran showed her one of the many overlooks for marine study, a gallery and art institute where residents' work was displayed and sold, and restaurants that served food from all over the world. He highlighted the hydroponic gardens that grew residents' produce and told her about his own garden in which he cultivated and crossbred several rare species. The spire, he explained, made the most of the talents and contributions of all its inhabitants. Working together, they had equipped it with cutting-edge technology that automated essential services and harnessed clean, renewable energy to power those services.

Satya folded her arms behind her back as she walked, wrapping her fingers together to keep her hands still. She'd endured many drawn-out tours, arrogant managers showing her around terminally dull buildings; this tour, at least, was genuinely fascinating. None of the interest she showed had to be feigned.

Finally, the balcony slowed to a stop near a set of durovidro doors. With a wave of Niran's hand, they slid open to reveal an intriguing space. The glossy main structures were similar to the rest of the Arcology, but the lines here were especially clean and aesthetically pleasing. The furniture, also clean and minimal, was built for both comfort and function. The personal possessions tidily stored away in open, easily accessible shelves suggested it was living quarters.

"What is this?" she asked, wondering why—with all the marvels the Arcology had to offer—Niran had chosen to show her a residential space.

"Too many countries are either silent on or outright hostile to the issue of omnic equality. We're seeing more and more omnic refugees flee to the Arcology."

"This is their space, then?"

"Yes. It's one of my contributions to the Arcology—a bit outside my usual work. I aided a group of omnics who developed a plan for a residential section." He pointed to a set of doors at the far end of the large, welcoming space. "We've completed the personal quarters past those doors; roughly three dozen omnics have moved in so far. This area here is a little minimal because we haven't quite finished it yet. It will be split up into several sections, primarily as living and leisure spaces. Like other living spaces in the Arcology, it'll prioritize entertainment, comfort, and personal development, but this particular space will do so in a way that caters to its omnic residents specifically."

Satya nodded. "Understandable."

Her time spent with Zenyatta and the other omnics in Suravasa had taught her a lot—including about omnics and ways their experiences and perceptions might differ from those of humans. Even when buildings included spaces meant for omnics, they might not be tailored to them, or merely hastily retrofitted. A place like this, built from the ground up with omnic needs in mind, was a rarity. Having people consider omnic needs to begin with was unusual at best.

While it was hardly the same as her autism, Satya could relate to that particular element. Now in a high position at Vishkar, she had some amount of control over her living space and personal routine, but it had been different at the Academy.

She remembered vividly how proud the school management had been of the food quality and diversity they offered their students, surprising them with every meal; Satya, for her part, had felt nothing but anxious every time she dragged herself to the dining hall without knowing what to expect. The high-pitched whine from the lights that no one heard but her, the ever-changing and unpredictable curriculum, the way the paintings in the hallways weren't hung *quite* at even distances from each other, the teachers demanding Satya make eye contact while answering questions . . . Even when the Academy had honored her during the graduation ceremony, allowing her to sit on stage while Vishkar's CEO spoke about its founder, Dr. Bhatt, it had all been for

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Vishkar's sake, not hers. They could show off their prize student, plucked from post-Crisis poverty and molded into perfection; for her part, Satya had been unable to hear a single word of the CEO's speech, too wrapped up in following the instructions she'd been given. *Keep your legs demurely crossed. Don't tap your feet. Look into the audience, make sure to smile, pretend you can see them even though the lights will be blinding. Keep your hands in your lap, and keep them still—you don't want to look immature, or distracted, or rude, or strange, or . . .*

Afterward, Satya's own speech had been flawless, but it had taken her a week of curling up in bed to recover from the ordeal.

She hadn't even had Niran to cover for her, claiming illness and keeping people at a distance as he'd done in the past.

He'd left long before graduation.

She tried to shake the memories. Here and now, she had a mission to focus on.

Niran went on: "Omnich-oriented architecture and design is still in its infancy. Overhauling thousands of years of human-centric knowledge will take some time. But it's an honor to be invited to work on this project. In particular for omnich refugees, who have already been through so much pain, it's essential they have a place to feel . . ."

"Welcome?" Satya prompted.

"Mmm, not quite. Welcome implies they're still a guest. This should feel like home. Their needs come first here, rather than having them feel obliged to adapt and adjust to an environment where they're merely an afterthought." Niran looked out at the hall. As incomplete and imperfect as the space was in its current state, it didn't seem to bother him. Satya detected something else entirely: pride.

She'd never been particularly good at recognizing emotions, but pride—that one, she knew well by now.

This was a different flavor of pride than the one she saw in Sanjay and the other Vishkar leaders, though. This was not pride in oneself; this was pride in one's work. Pride in what one could contribute.

"There are ways to make some of these hard-light structures more efficient," Satya said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," Niran acknowledged. "Your expertise would be appreciated, if you care to offer it."

Satya's mind was already spinning with possibilities. She had no place offering the Arcology anything, though. She changed the subject. "Shall we move on?"

"By all means."

The balcony floated higher, passing a garden full of merry, industrious children working and giggling under the watchful eye of a teacher. Satya tried to remember the last time she had seen anyone, of any age, having so much fun. It distressed her that she couldn't trace such a memory in recent years. She had to go further back, all the way to her childhood at the Academy. For all its flaws, there had been times there that she'd enjoyed. She'd had fun. Usually with the person standing next to her.

"Everyone looks content," she remarked, eager to get her mind off their shared history. "People are moving with purpose, but they're not in a rush. They stop to converse. They appear relaxed."

"Most people come to the Arcology seeking refuge," Niran reminded her. "There is nothing for us to fear here. No one we need pretend for."

What a luxury that must be.

She didn't reply, too preoccupied with burying her bitterness.

Niran stepped closer. "Satya? I can't help but notice that you seem troubled. If there's something bothering you, you know you can talk to me."

Could she, though? That wasn't what she was here for.

Maybe she hadn't done as good a job hiding her thoughts as she'd hoped, or maybe Niran just knew her that well, even after all this time, but he seemed to realize the effect his words had had on her.

"If Vishkar's making you do something you're not comfortable with . . ." He hesitated. "You don't owe them anything. You don't have to stay with them. It doesn't matter how much time has passed. If you need help, I'm here for you."

The words, an echo of the dear, dear friend she'd once had, cracked something inside her.

"Why?"

Niran's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Why did you leave?" Satya asked, the words tumbling out along with years of hurt. "We were friends. We grew up at the Academy together. You were the person I trusted more than anyone. And you knew the company would forbid me from contacting you and that I would have no choice but to stay! Why did you take Vishkar's technology and flee?"

"My technology. I created it."

"Using the education and resources *they provided you*, with the understanding that they would have exclusive rights to it," she pointed out. It was one of Vishkar's lines, one she'd memorized before leaving for the Arcology.

"Vishkar taught me much that I'm grateful for, but I moved on. They don't own me, nor my mind, nor my technology."

"You plan to profit off it yourself."

For the first time of the meeting, Niran looked genuinely surprised. "*Profit?* Is that what they told you?" He swept an arm wide, gesturing at the Arcology around them. "You know how the Collective works, Satya. Surely you can see that nothing I did here has been for *profit*. Can Vishkar say the same?"

Satya had known she was wrong as soon as she said the words. In truth, she'd never fully believed what Sanjay told her about Niran's departure. It would've been easier if she had.

None of that impacted the reason she was here. "Vishkar is helping people. They could've helped *more* people if you'd stayed. The resources they could provide—"

"I do not deny they've done good work, but you must know that they also cause catastrophic damage in their quest for profit and influence."

"I came here to ask for your help. Not to listen to you criticize me."

"Not *you*, Satya. *Them*."

"I'm *part* of them!"

Niran folded his arms, giving her a look that was both firm and kind. "I've known you for too long to believe that."

Satya stepped back, furious with herself for becoming so emotional. Until just now, she'd been doing well—she'd kept her true thoughts to herself, she'd fixated on her mission, she'd done exactly as Sanjay had instructed.

Maintaining the image of Vishkar's perfect employee always took its toll on her, but today, with Niran right in front of her, it was harder than ever.

She didn't want to convince him, to defend herself, to argue, to pretend.

She just wanted to go back to the way they used to be.

***ON THEIR SIDE. PART OF THEM. WAS SHE? SHE KEPT
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"It's been a long time, Niran," Satya said, but her words sounded flat, exhausted. "People change."

"They do, but I don't believe you're really on Vishkar's side in all this."

On *their* side. Part of *them*. Was she? She kept telling Niran as much, but Satya no longer felt the same conviction she once did.

One day, she would have to make a decision. She would need to weigh the bad she'd seen Vishkar do against the good it accomplished. She believed in the greater good, and yes, there had to be a line *somewhere*, but . . .

Satya wasn't ready to draw that line yet.

Niran, though, seemed to have drawn it a long time ago. She could not read his expression, nor did she need to. "You don't intend to return to Vishkar, do you?"

"No," Niran said simply.

She smiled wryly. "We spent all this time on pleasantries and diversion, when you were never planning to entertain my plea." She was so tired all of a sudden. She didn't want to keep going. She had to, though. This mission was about more than her versus Niran, about more than Vishkar versus the Collective. "I'm here because there are people, vulnerable humans and omnic alike, who could benefit greatly from your work."

"I understand that," Niran said. "Believe me, I do. But if I gave my technology to Vishkar now, would it still be accessible to those who need it? Or would it stay locked away behind proprietary laws and licensing fees? Vishkar's communities cater to the wealthy and leave the rest behind, Satya. You know that. It stands to reason they'd use my technology the same way." He shook his head, firm in his opinion. "I am doing what I can to help those who need it, in Paris and elsewhere, but I will help in my own way. Not theirs."

"Then why not tell me that as soon as I arrived?"

"I would have, had Vishkar sent anyone but you." Niran did not look apologetic. "I intended to dismiss their emissary immediately. But when I saw you . . . It's been *years*, Satya, years without a word from you—my dearest friend. How could I simply send you away? I wanted to show you the place I have made my home."

"You wasted my time."

"Only if you feel that your time has been wasted." He cocked his head, still a bit of the boy he once was. "Has it?"

Satya could not bring herself to say it had. It would have been a lie.

The floating balcony came to a silent halt. They'd entered a sleek, busy transportation hub.

"You're seeing me to my train," she said.

"I am. I don't want to waste more of your time." There was hurt in his voice, she thought, but she saw no trace of it on his face.

What Satya might have said next, she would never know. They were interrupted by an unexpected sound.

A scream.

She whirled to see where the voice came from. Across the station, passengers spilled en masse from a train that'd just arrived from London—some falling, others stumbling onto the platform.

"What . . . ?" Niran's eyes went wide.

The passengers' screams blended into one another as they fled from the train. Panic and chaos washed over the hub.

"What's happening?" Satya didn't wait for an answer, already running for the train. Whatever was going on, one thing was clear: people needed help.

She would do what she could to offer it.

Extending her gauntlet, she threw up a hard-light shield over those who'd fallen from the train, guarding them from the hail of energy projectiles behind them. Several of the passengers looked badly hurt.

"Get them out of here," she yelled at Niran, but her voice was lost in the noise. She chanced a look over her shoulder, but she didn't see him.

He ran to get help, perhaps. Didn't matter. She needed to focus.

As she reached the train, a new shape stood in the nearest doorway. Gleaming metal, angular edges. An omnic passenger, Satya thought first, but no. Too calm. Nothing behind its eyes. No soul. And the arms . . . rather than tapering into hands, they widened into sleek energy weapons, the likes of which she recognized from recent news reports.

This wasn't a passenger. This was what the passengers were running *from*.

"Null Sector," she whispered. There was no mistaking it. Yesterday's attack in Paris had been a preamble to further chaos, just as Sanjay had said it might be.

The sharp wail of an alarm blared through the screams.

The Arcology is under attack. The voice came from speakers mounted throughout the station. *All*

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residents and visitors, please follow emergency action plan A and seek shelter in your designated living quarters. Security, report to the transportation hub.

The Null Sector unit emerged from the train. Two nearby passengers were instantly knocked back.

More units exited from further down the train, cutting through anyone in their path. Satya moved to throw up more shields, barely protecting an older couple and giving an injured omnica the chance to limp out of the way. The crowd had opened up around the train doors, desperate to escape the emerging forces and leaving behind only those injured—and those aiding them.

Like Niran.

A glimpse of white hair and the glow of his biolight told her what she needed to know. Niran hadn't gone to get help. He *was* helping.

The realization caught her by surprise, although it shouldn't have. This wasn't one of her Vishkar colleagues; this was *Niran*. He must've gone to tend to the wounded long before she'd shouted for him to do so.

A massive leaf unfurled by two children hunching over an unconscious adult, their faces red and tear-streaked. No, not a leaf: a petal. A lotus petal, one of several. The biolight flower gave off a soft pink glow as it scooped up the family and whisked them to safety.

For a moment, the sight of Niran's abilities mesmerized her. She'd seen his biolight in action before, but they'd been children then. It had only been the seed of what it could become: His shapes still unformed, his light dimmer and prone to an unsteady flickering. A hint of a leaf shape. A glimmer of a branch.

This was nothing like that. He was an adult now, and this was Niran at his most powerful.

The sight was glorious.

Satya's attention snapped back to the robots. If Niran was protecting the injured, she could go on the offense.

Satya was a creature of dance, not war. Fighting was not in her nature. But that didn't mean she couldn't do it. She'd spent her youth powerless and afraid. As an adult, Vishkar's combat training

had offered a solution. With the limitless potential of hard-light at her disposal, learning to fight had been an easy task compared to her studies as an architect.

Destruction was always easier than creation.

Icily, she turned to the massive robot in front of her, using her gauntlet to materialize a photon projector. "You are not welcome here."

The enemy unit paid her no mind. It stalked past her. In the gleaming metal of its skull, she saw the reflection of a frightened omnic behind her, cowering against a pillar.

Her photon projector took care of the Null Sector unit, burning a clean hole in its torso.

"Run," she told the omnic behind her. They scrambled out of the way.

The unit had been easier to get rid of than she'd expected. She and Niran might stand a chance.

The sound of a train screeching on the tracks grabbed her attention. She whirled toward the noise. The train rolled into the station—dented, windows shattered. All across its hull, enemy units clung to the metal like swarming insects, some working their way into the passenger cars, others leaping away from the train and toward the panicking crowd in the station.

The next several minutes were a whirlwind of photon blasts and lasers and the smell of fried electronics, a tumult of screams and blood and fear. Satya locked it all out, focusing only on her next target and the most efficient way to dispose of it.

An otherworldly metallic groan cut through her concentration. She flinched, watching one of the cargo compartments on the newly arrived train bulge—the metal hull distorting and shifting, as though something massive inside was pressing up against the walls and ceiling. In some places, the metal tore from pressure. In other places, it split in straight lines, aided by the weapons of the enemy forces now scattered around the platform.

The roof of the compartment pulled loose and was flung back, crumpling against a wall. Inside the train, the rhino-like unit that'd been straining to get out finally unfolded itself to its full height, easily the size of the helijet she'd flown in on.

It moved one leg. The walls of the train folded like aluminum foil under its weight.

"Satya! Get to cover!" Niran's voice came from farther into the station. He had his hands extended. Biolight vines snaked through the air to aid a group of omnic fleeing the violence.

Satya fixed her eyes back on the mechanical beast, observing the massive unit as it lumbered onto the platform toward Niran and the evacuating crowd. The weapons of the Arcology security forces pinged harmlessly off its outer shell. Its movements, the mechanics pushing it forward . . . in all its size, there had to be a weakness for her to exploit.

Or perhaps she needed something of a similar size. She'd have to move fast, while the space around the giant was still empty. A swift movement of her arm, a step to the side to avoid an

incoming attack, a precise twist of her fingers as though she were holding a pen and signing her name . . .

Several feet above the unit, a teleporter spawned and unfolded. As its metal legs dug into the stone of the ceiling, its portal flared wide. The cool blue glow stretched at least a dozen feet across.

Satya flung the other teleporter unit at the train tracks beside her, directly underneath the damaged front carriage of the first train to carry in the fighter bots.

The carriage shifted, groaned. Its front sagged down into the portal. Above the massive enemy unit, the underside of the carriage could be glimpsed through the other portal.

For a moment, it seemed like the carriage might stabilize there, might not go through—

Then, with a metallic shriek, it shuddered back into movement. Right on time. A fraction of a second before the portal snapped shut, the carriage crashed through and landed atop the rhino unit. The noise thundered through the station—rivets snapping off, metal twisting and tearing open like wet cardboard. The unit slammed flat to the ground, splintering the stone platform.

Whether it was enough to take it out fully, she couldn't say, but she wouldn't take any risks. As Satya switched to her photon projector and took aim at the metallic skull—or what remained of it, misshapen and barely distinguishable from the twisted, crumpled train carriage that had landed on top of it—the Arcology's security forces swarmed the unit. They were well trained. Some fired precision shots in between layered armor plates; others planted explosives and promptly took distance.

The giant twitched once, twice, but stayed down.

Satya surveyed the scene. Her breathing still came heavy. Most of the civilians had been evacuated from the station. The security forces were working on taking out the remaining Null Sector robots. Niran sat in a crouch near several of the injured, his hands hovering over their wounds while his eyes were fixed on Satya.

Around them all, bodies lay unmoving. Some human. Many omnic.

Strange. On most of those omnic bodies, the external damage was minimal. Even stranger: a spiked device sat attached to their skulls, covering their faces.

What in the world . . . ?

And that wasn't the only thing Satya noticed. The bodies of the victims outnumbered those of the aggressors.

Satya whirled in place, her eyes flitting from body to body. She counted less than thirty destroyed warbots in total, scattered across the transportation hub. Far fewer than had arrived on the trains.

SHE SOUGHT OUT NIRAN'S EYES ACROSS THE ROOM, BUT THERE WAS NO TIME. SHE HAD TO MOVE.

"Where . . . ?" she murmured.

She knew, though.

The first unit she'd fought had prioritized the omnic behind Satya over Satya herself. Add that to the devices clinging to the heads of the downed omnics, and it was clear that whatever Null Sector wanted, it had to do with them.

And the majority of the omnics in the Arcology weren't here, high in the transportation hub. They would be below, sheltering in their living quarters, as the evacuation broadcast had instructed them to do.

Her first thought was to shout orders at the security forces, but there was still too much chaos, too much noise.

She sought out Niran's eyes across the room, but there was no time. She had to move.

All she could do was trust that he saw her and would understand.

Satya ran back the same route she and Niran had taken earlier, finding shortcuts where she could. In one place, she could avoid the evacuees by leaping down to a ledge and sprinting across; in another, she could bypass the entrance hall, creating a simple teleporter to send her instantaneously across the massive space.

Here, too, security forces were fighting Null Sector units, and here, too, bodies were scattered over the ground. Most of them omnic, with the same strange device as before attached to their skulls. Satya hissed through her teeth. As much as she wanted to help, she knew there had to be more enemy units ahead.

The chaos in the station, the massive rhino unit . . . All of it had been a distraction from their real goal. How could she not have seen it earlier?

Satya tapped her gauntlet as she ran, crafting another set of teleporters to bring her from the hall directly to the omnic living quarters that Niran had shown her. Adrenaline fueled her, sending her leaping into the portal without hesitation, but she could feel herself growing tired. Her abilities were an art, not a sprint. Rushing them took a lot out of her.

The world flew past. Just like that, she tumbled out of the other teleporter, landing in a crouch.

At least a dozen warbots were barraging the durovidro doors two meters ahead. Rapid-fire

blasts slammed into the glass, which trembled from the impact. The doors themselves would hold; the walls keeping them in place, though, were showing large cracks.

At least Null Sector hadn't made it inside yet, let alone into the personal quarters beyond, where dozens of omnic had to be taking shelter.

If it was up to Satya, this was as far as the enemy went. She extended both hands, tugging at the air with nimble fingers. A barrier flared to life, its blue glow blocking the hail of their fire and protecting the damaged walls.

Satya inhaled deeply, steeling herself for what was to come. The combined force of all the units around her would take out her barrier within seconds if her focus faltered for even a moment.

There was an easier way to deal with the situation, she knew. The robots themselves weren't tough. If she focused on attacking them directly, she might take them out before they reached a single omnic, but that meant dropping her barrier, and that would destroy . . .

No, she couldn't risk that. She only had to hold on a couple more moments.

So she did. She mended cracks in the wall, even as new cracks formed alongside them. She reinforced the most vulnerable sections, filled in each gap, and scanned the barrier for any weakness that needed strengthening.

Some of the units got wise and turned to attack her. She spun a quick shield around herself. Barely in time. It caught the worst of the attacks, but it was too fragile to stop all of it. A blast seared the side of her leg.

She couldn't falter. The wall needed her full attention. Just a few moments more—

"Satya!"

There he was.

Niran's voice—no, Bua, *Bua's* voice—was the most welcome sound she'd heard in a long time. A biolight lotus floated down, appearing where the elevator normally would, carrying Bua on its surface.

"You're late," she said, her words strained.

Bua stepped onto the floor, the lotus dissolving behind him. "You know me too well for that to be a surprise."

Despite her focus, despite her pain, she smiled.

After that, the time for talk was over.

Bua moved forward with a whirl—throwing out his gauntleted hand and sending a flurry of biolight spikes through the air. He came to a stop by Satya's side right as the spikes—thorns, almost—slammed into their targets. Metal tore. Sparks flew.

The units' focus shifted from Satya's barrier to Bua and Satya themselves. She didn't dare release

the shield, didn't dare lose concentration, but it provided enough relief to allow her to multi-task. Within moments, she'd crafted a teleporter behind two nearby units. Bua understood. He flung a set of thorns at the warbots, pushing them through the portal. Outside, a few dozen meters beyond the spire, the units came tumbling through the other side of the portal, into the sea.

Satya wouldn't be able to repeat that trick. The teleporters she'd used to get here and the massive one she'd built in the transportation hub had taken too much from her gauntlet.

Satya tossed a few sentry turrets onto the ceiling, which instantly damaged a unit that'd been approaching Bua from behind. She evaded an attack to her right and spun to take it out with her photon projector. More of Bua's thorns whizzed through the air behind her, stirring her hair but never once clipping her. Satya whirled through the space, blending dance and fight, elegance and grit, seemingly unfazed by the sight of more drones arriving from below.

Every now and then, a few of the units renewed their assault on Satya's shield, eager to reach the omnics beyond; Satya would pause her attacks, dedicating herself fully to maintaining the wall, while Bua stepped in to guard her back.

Only when the final unit collapsed to the floor—a sparking, metallic mess—did she dare release the shield. It snapped into nothingness, like the quiet *pop* of a soap bubble.

Her legs buckled. She nearly collapsed, but caught herself on the nearest wall and remained upright. She chanced a look up at the main hall, several floors above. A haze hung in the air from the fight, but she couldn't see any more flashes from weapons firing. It didn't look as though new Null Sector units would be arriving.

"Satya, you're bleeding." Bua approached with a concerned look on his face. "Let me look at that."

"It's nothing," she said, but when she took even a small step forward, her leg suggested otherwise. "Ah. Perhaps it is something. Very well, then. The threat is gone?"

Bua summoned a hard-light earpiece, listening in to the security channels, then nodded. "All scans point that way. Our airspace is clear. The warbots must have come from other cities under attack. Security forces and medics are taking care of the situation and have closed the transportation hub while they assess. Sit, sit." He helped her move away from the scene of the fight, sitting her down instead amidst the partially constructed leisure space she'd been guarding.

"The omnics. Null Sector was planting devices . . ."

Bua's face was grave. "They're neural suppressors of a sort. I fear for those affected . . . but the Arcology has its top researchers looking into it. We'll have to wait to hear more." Gently, he moved away a flap of her uniform to reveal a deep scorch wound on her calf. "You can rest for a minute, Satya. You *should*. This will not be an easy fix. It's a nasty wound."

*THE PRECISION, THE CARE, THE WARMTH.
A HOME FOR THOSE WHO HAD ALREADY LOST
A HOME BEFORE, OR WHO'D NEVER HAD ONE AT ALL.
BUA WAS RIGHT TO BE PROUD OF HIS WORK.*

"Nastier than I expected," she admitted.

He steadied her leg with one hand. His other moved around the air, the movements slow; she was so focused on the gestures of his fingers that she almost missed the thin biolight shape growing from the ground underneath. A sapling, she realized. It sprouted branches as it weaved its way up through the air, a dreamy glow at its core.

"Beautiful."

"Thank you," Bua said.

She hadn't even realized she'd said the word aloud.

"Satya . . .," Bua started, still crafting the tree. "Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why didn't you simply attack the bots instead of maintaining that barrier? From what I saw down in the transportation hub, you could've taken them."

"The refugees . . ."

"There were at least two more barriers between the drones and the omnic refugees sheltering in place. Even if the doors fell, you would've had time to take the drones down."

"Perhaps. But if I'd done that, the fight would've spilled into this section." She glanced around. While still under construction, the space was full of promise, and she could see the endless amounts of work and love that had already gone into it. The precision, the care, the *warmth*. A home for those who had already lost a home before, or who'd never had one at all. Bua was right to be proud of his work. "What this place stands for . . . it's too important to be collateral damage."

"You put yourself at risk."

"Only briefly. I knew you'd be coming."

He was silent for a moment. "You put a lot of faith in me, then."

"It worked out, didn't it?"

"Thank you. For your trust, and for what you did here." Bua nodded at the space around them.

She couldn't meet his eyes. She watched him work instead. The tree had grown to the ceiling. The gentle glow suddenly brightened, pulsing once, and then a wave of warmth washed over her skin. She studied her leg in quiet awe. Raw, damaged flesh grew into fresh skin.

Satya had known from the start that Bua's biolight technique might go far, but this . . . The sheer artistry was a magnificent sight, but the practical potential was endless. Even his gauntleted hand, black and gold and so different from Vishkar's equipment, seemed to work like a seamless extension of him, each ripple of its surface a small powerhouse of light.

The fact that Bua had channeled his technology into healing applications said a lot about him. Others might not have been so noble.

What about Vishkar? She was certain that with technology like Bua's, they could do a lot of good.

She was also certain they would not stop there. Not when there was money to be made.

"The reason I was late to welcome you after your arrival," Bua said, talking slowly, "is because when I saw Vishkar had sent you, I needed a moment to steel myself."

"You saw me as I got off the helijet?"

"Yes."

"With my hair in *that* state?"

"I've never seen a more charming bird's nest, Satya," he assured her.

"Lovely," she said.

No doubt it was in a similarly disheveled state after the fight. The rest of her certainly was. It felt wrong, but if anyone had to see her like this—it helped, just a bit, for that person to be Bua.

"Your arrival simply caught me by surprise. I'd often hoped to see you visit the Arcology. Just not by means of a Vishkar-branded helijet, wearing that stiff Vishkar uniform."

Satya glanced down at herself. Where the hydraulic fluid from the Null Sector bots had splashed her, the white-purple Vishkar uniform stuck uncomfortably to her skin, but what was worse was the fabric; the seams were always itchy, and now they were joined by the ragged edges of where the uniform had been torn in the battle.

"As much as I dislike this uniform," she said, "it does help, in a way."

"Oh?" By now, the tree had faded. Cautiously, Bua shifted his hand to hover over the newly healing skin on her calf. She tensed in anticipation of pain as a small lotus flower blossomed onto her skin, but the biolight felt warm and comforting, much like Bua himself.

"I prefer my dresses," she said. "I won't lie. They're custom-made by a tailor from my old neighborhood, before Vishkar. They let me do my best work, whether I'm dancing, creating, fighting. They're *Satya*, in a way that no uniform could ever be."

"But?"

"But sometimes," Satya said, choosing her words carefully, "all that discomfort—the chafing, the itching, the restrictiveness—helps me remember what I'm doing. It makes it easier to keep my face on. To do my job."

Perhaps she was not phrasing that correctly, but Bua's thoughtful nod showed her he understood.

The uniform was not *Satya*, but neither was her work with Vishkar. It was a means to an end. Scripting, rehearsing. Faking smiles, forcing pleasantries. Vishkar forever pushed the boundaries of her discomfort, whether physical or mental or moral, but in the end . . .

"I can do *good* with this uniform." Satya tugged at a frayed edge of her sleeve. "It is exhausting and difficult and far from perfect, but for now, when I look at the people I've helped, the wonders I've built . . . It's worth it."

"A conscious compromise," Bua said.

"Yes."

"I'm glad to hear that. I worried you might be accepting discomfort only for the comfort of others. Working to create change in yourself where none is necessary. Those who stand out are too often pressured to fit in instead."

A smile hovered on her lips. "I am not so easily pressured."

"I'm learning that," he said. "And I'm glad. I'm quite fond of you, precisely as you are."

Could she tell him the truth? Having trusted him in the heat of battle, she knew, logically, that there was no reason not to trust him now. And Satya was nothing if not logical.

"I have had concerns about the way Vishkar goes about achieving their ends," she admitted. "And I know that I have been lied to. *But*," she added, before he could interrupt her, "if I leave, if I try to stop them, what do I become? An enemy in their path. I would waste my energy fighting them, rather than helping others. Vishkar allows me to do things and reach people I never could by myself; those resources are invaluable. From the inside, I can help direct those resources to better ends."

Bua considered that, then nodded. "I hope, for everyone's sake, that Vishkar will accept your guidance."

Satya reached for his hand and squeezed it briefly. "It has been wonderful to see you again, my friend."

"I am glad you count me as your friend still." He paused.

"Also, you may need to arrange that helijet for your way back after all. The transportation hub will be out of commission for a little while."

*I'VE MISSED SEEING IT, YOU KNOW." HIS HEAD COCKED.
"LIKE YOUR HANDS ARE DOING THEIR OWN LOVELY
LITTLE DANCE. IT SUITS YOU.*

"Certainly. I am not in a rush for Vishkar to arrive, however. Are you?"

A smile grew on Bua's face. "The Arcology could certainly use another pair of hands right now."

The next hours were hard work, but with her friend by her side, it didn't feel like it. Satya helped manage the crowded med bays while Bua healed the worst of the injuries; after, they went around to repair what they could of the destruction the enemy bots had left in their wake. One of the Collective's security coordinators tagged along, partly to survey the damage, partly to pick their brains on the Arcology's security protocols and what they might know of the devices Null Sector had placed on the omnics.

Finally, the two of them found a secluded spot at one of the restaurants overlooking the Arcology's gardens and waited for Vishkar's helijet there—a few precious, fleeting moments of peace at the end of a long day. They made the most of them: talking about Bua's projects and Satya's time in Suravasa, catching up on the parts of each other's lives that they'd missed, and laughing nostalgically about their shared childhood.

One particular memory bubbled to the surface: Once, their Academy teachers had taken the class on a field trip to the old Ulsoor lake bed in Bangalore to practice manipulating hard-light outside of the strictly controlled Academy environment. Satya and Niran had been paired off as usual, his elegant and artistic flourishes complementing her precise and practical structures, and he'd been in such a playful mood that he'd made her laugh. Out loud. In front of her classmates. The surprised, pleased look on Bua's face had been worth the loss of control.

He leaned in. "You're thinking about that day at the lake bed, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"I keep telling you, Satya. I know how to read you."

That had bothered her when she'd first arrived. It didn't bother her anymore.

"You've always been a menace," she said.

Bua laughed, then remarked, "Your hands."

"Hm?" She'd had them raised above the table, she realized, thoughtlessly repeating the same movement: fingertips touching one by one, a flourish, a twist, fingertips touching again.

She lowered them abruptly. "Sorry." The response was automatic.

"What? No. Don't apologize. I only meant to say I liked it. I've missed seeing it, you know." His head cocked. "Like your hands are doing their own lovely little dance. It suits you."

Satya had learned long ago to keep her hands still around others. It distracted from her work.

But she was not working now. She was simply talking to a friend. Determined, she raised her hands again. Touched her fingertips to each other.

It had been so long since she'd consciously done this where someone could see her that she expected it to feel wrong, even shameful, the same way she'd used to feel at the Architech Academy when a teacher had caught her. Instead, it felt good.

It felt safe.

"Remember when you returned from class," Satya mused, "and you couldn't get into our room anymore because I'd blocked the door by accident?"

Bua's eyes lit up. "Yes! You'd attempted a hard-light construct from that book you'd been reading. Even though it was from three grades above ours."

"And then—"

"When you tried to take it down—"

"The doorframe! I had used it to strengthen the construct while I was still crafting supports—"

"It completely collapsed! Poor Suraj had to rescue us."

Their words tumbled over each other, memory after memory, and by the time they spotted the dot of the helijet approaching the spire, it felt like no time at all had passed.

Minutes later, down on the landing pad with her hair whipping around her face, Satya offered Bua a small smile. "I hope to see you again soon."

His smile, as always, was broader and brighter. "Let's not leave it another eleven years, hmm?"

She approached the open doors of the helijet.

"Satya."

She paused, glancing back.

"If you want more answers to the questions you have about Vishkar, look into its founder."

"Dr. Bhatt?" Satya held up one hand to keep her hair from her face. "Why?"

"The legacy of Vishwakarma Bhatt was the reason I stayed with Vishkar for so long, and ultimately why I left." Bua stepped in closer to be heard. "But his vision for his technology, for Vishkar . . . was very different from the path the company took."

"Do you already know what I'll find?"

"Not precisely. But I have my suspicions."

"And if those are correct?"

"Then the Arcology will be delighted to have you."

Satya laughed and strapped herself into the helijet seat. She felt an ache in her chest, the pain of a farewell she wished hadn't been necessary. But that was all right. Farewells weren't forever. She had answers to find, a world to improve—

And whenever she needed it, a friend to return to.

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