

Children of Sushupti

No I would not give you false hope, on this strange and mournful day.

One Day.

Mariam burned her alias documents and unloaded her weapon. She'd debrief later. She wished she could just retire, stop sleeping. Live a normal, linear life with her daughter. So tired of this endless cycle.

Mariam called the sleeptech. "Do NOT do it until I get there." Her voice sharp, desperate.

"Of course not ma'am. We'll be ready when you arrive."

She didn't bother to ask whether he was awake. He was never awake.

"Mommy!" The little girl yelled and flung her arms wide.

"Amelia! Hi, sweetheart!" She kissed her daughter's forehead and scooped her up out of her pod, hugging her long and hard. "Oh, mommy's so glad to see you!"

A voice boomed down the hall. "Are those my ladies I hear?" Mariam was shocked to hear her husband's voice; he never woke up for these little reunions.

"Daddy!" Amelia ran around the corner and was swept up by the Director's massive hands. The small family of strangers was awake together for the first time in over two decades.

The Director went back under the next day; Mariam had begged him not to. To stay awake with her and Amelia.

"Damn you, be a father, spend some of your life with your *family*!" She'd screamed at him. She hated him when he slept.

The Director kissed her. A cold, patronizing kiss. "I've got big projects I need to see on the other side, hon. Just don't let the kid grow up, ok?"

He didn't see why she had to nag about this. Sleeping didn't expend life, that was the whole point! They were masters of sleep, controlling when they were awake. Put the kid under, skip forward, the kid's still six, still a perfect kid at the perfect age. No big deal. Progress at its finest.

Amelia was alone in her room when Mariam got home.

Three months later, tears rolled down both of their faces. She didn't know how much longer she could keep doing this to her daughter, to herself.

"But mommy, I don't wanna sleep now." She sobbed as the tubes went in, stimpatches were fastened.

"I'm so sorry sweetie, Mommy has work, I'll be right back." She pleaded, bit her lip hard, "Then we'll do whatever you want- a movie, some ice cream- anything- ok?"

Amelia nodded through big tears. "Ok."

"I love you sweetheart. I'll see you so soon, I promise."

"Love you too mommy."

She nodded to the tech and walked out, her face hot and stung with tears. She glanced scornfully at her husband's occupied pod.

On board, Mariam ended the commlink with the client and strapped herself in. Cold and alone, she stared blankly at a picture of Amelia.

She sighed deeply. "How long is this one?" She asked the computer.

"Nine years each way, ma'am."

The mist put her under.

Ten Years Earlier.

The Shift Chief narrowed his eyes at the tech. "Can we hurry this up?"

"This is a delicate process. We rush this, I'm fired, and he's dead. Gimme a second." Ops guys. Always in a hurry.

"Electrolytes, good. No infection. O2 levels normal. Parenteral Nutrition utilization is stable." Down the checklist he knew by heart.

"And... no sign of thromboembolism. Ok, I think we're ready." The tech cast a peevish grin to the Shift Chief, who looked poised for an old-fashioned heart attack.

"Fine. Do it."

The Shift Chief gave the Director a moment. Those first few waking gasps were always undignified- especially for a man of the Director's stature. Consciousness tortured the body as it adjusted to a battery of harsh new stimuli. The Shift Chief always half-expected the subject to croak. Flushing agents coursed through the Director, ridding him of anti-shiver narcotics. Core temp would stabilize within the hour.

The tech breathed a sigh of relief. Another successful wakeup. The incidents were getting further apart.

The Director's eyes snapped open, he was a pro. He glanced at the tech, a bookish little nerd. Cogs. He saw a man in uniform- a Shift Chief- waiting patiently, hands behind his back.

"What year?"

"Ninety-eight, sir. Same century."

"Damn. Had three years left." Something had gone tits up, but they'd get there. He didn't recognize the Shift Chief.

"You new? What happened?"

One concern at a time. "Sorry to wake you early, but this one meets criteria, sir. Lost a colony ship. I'd be glad to give you the full classified brief, but we need to head to the shuttle, sir." The Shift Chief explained before adding, "Twelve years with the company. Came on right after you last went under."

The Director winced as the tech removed his nutrient tubes and neuromuscular stimpatches. That part always hurt.

"Ok, let's go." Fully alive now. The Director relished leadership during crisis.

The restraints opened with a metallic thunk and the Director stepped out of his pod. He donned his uniform and took a deep breath. Time to go to work.

The Director and his Shift Chief strode purposefully, past an empty pod, past the sleeping Amelia. The Director had a sudden thought.

"Hey we got anything to eat on the shuttle? I'm starving." Chuckling, he added, "Those damn tubes are terrible for my cheeseburger intake."

His Shift Chief smiled wryly. "Certainly, sir. I'll make the call."

Forty-Eight Hours Later.

"Well, how was he?" Hestia asked with a smirk.

"Oh, fine." The Shift Chief took a long drag from his cigarette. "Probably should have let him sleep. I can read the damn manual. Anyway, thanks for keeping things running while I was with the Director."

"Just doin' my job, boss. Got your back." She grinned and swiped at his nose. "Got some brown stuff there."

He ducked and laughed. "Go to hell. Don't you have work to do?"

"I suppose so, *sir*." She flicked her cigarette over the railing and made for the door. "Oh, and the Director's wife is on her way back, the spook job-due back in ten years. Anyway, see ya in there boss."

In ten years he'd be retired. No more contract- maybe he'd buy a pod, see the future. He'd always been curious.

"Okay, thanks. See ya inside." He watched her go. The best Deputy a Chief of Night Operations could hope for, and a damn fine friend. She kept him afloat in this insanity.

"Hey one thing," she paused in front of the door. "Did he even wake her up? Say hi? Anything?"

He knew exactly who she was asking about. He shook his head. "Nope. Walked right by her, not a word. Asked for fuckin cheeseburgers..."

"Damn." Hestia looked upset. "How old is she now? Or still?"

"Six." He responded.

"Actual years?" She followed up.

"Seventy-three," he said sheepishly, as if knowing the truth made him complicit.

"Damn," She muttered again. "The hell kinda childhood is that? Doling out life in spurts, little dribblets here and there." She paused for a moment, then added, "And people think we're the ones making the sacrifice?" She snorted derisively.

"Drinks after work?" Hestia called back over her shoulder.

"Where else would I be?" He answered before lighting another cigarette.

Twenty-Eight Years Later.

God that was rough. Mariam tried to forget it, think about home. Couldn't remember her last visit, struggled to picture Amelia's face.

She saw a woman, familiar, with her daughter and grandson, all walking together. Someone she knew from the Ops staff? They laughed and smiled, three generations moving through time, together. Mariam watched them, numb. She'd never seen that before, always envied the Ops staff, prohibited from sleep. Seeing them all together like that... She couldn't imagine how happy they were. It was all she'd ever wanted.

Hestia recognized Mariam staring at them and waved, "Welcome home, ma'am."

"Um," her dazed reply. Watching the happy family, Mariam suddenly felt like an anachronistic spectre in her own life. A ghost skulking forward in time. She thought of Amelia. Eighteen years. What kind of madness is this?

Mariam called the tech. "Do NOT do it until I get there." Her voice sharp, desperate.

"Of course not ma'am. We'll be ready when you arrive."

Mariam exhaled deeply. She dreaded repeating this cycle. Maybe this time.

"Mommy!" Amelia yelled and flung her arms wide like she always did.

Mariam's worry vanished as she hugged her little girl long and hard. Still beautiful. Still perfect. Still six years old.

Actual Years? 101.
