

Content Warning

O u r F u t u r e I s
Q u e e r E d i t i o n

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On The Varuna

Arya wondered when they would ever breathe fresh air again as they pulled themselves up through the entry hatch. They lay for a moment on the metal grate floor, eyes closed, just breathing. As their breathing slowed, they pulled their mask off their head and set it down with a clunk. The taste of recycled air never tastes quite right.

Their body felt heavy and clumsy now that they were out of the water and in the wet porch. They set their breathing tanks down beside their mask, coiling the tubing carefully to the side. Ripping their gloves off, they pulled out their onboarding pamphlet.

“Okay,” Arya muttered to themselves as they unfolded the thick plastic paper. “So when I first arrive there should be a switch for me to alert anyone in the entry lock.” Their eyes quickly skimmed over the words they had already read dozens of times over. “Our medical team will pair you with a support staff to ease your transition to our community.”

Arya looked around. Sure enough, on the wall closest to the entry hatch was a panel. It only took a gentle touch for it to light up green. A computerized voice chirped, “Your teammate will be joining you shortly.”

It had barely finished its announcement when the metal door across the room slid open with a quiet hiss.

“You must be Arya.”

They looked up. “Sure am.” They lost their voice for a moment. They weren’t expecting – well they didn’t know what they were expecting – but it wasn’t who was standing above them.

“I’m Kai, I’m available for any support work you need.” She had dark hair and darker eyes. Kai looked strong under her scrubs but soft. She was

poised but her body language was still open. “Would you like any help with anything?”

Arya cleared their throat. “Right, yes, I do. Can you get the zipper on my dry suit?” They gestured at their back.

Kai smiled and nodded. She kneeled down and Arya’s back tensed as she began to pull the zipper across her shoulder blades.

“And if you can just pass me my cane and grab the tanks?”

“Sure. Your things are already in the entry lock. You can change out of your suit while we decompress.”

Arya carefully rose to their feet. They took the cane from Kai’s outstretched hand and limped to the doorway. Kai lifted the tanks and carefully pushed them into the tank intake slots, where they’d be taken away to be refilled for the next dive, and followed Arya to the entry lock.

The doors slid closed quietly behind. A gentle hum started as the room began to depressurize. They wouldn’t need to be in here for more than a few minutes before they would be ready to step out onto *Varuna*.

The entry lock was small; benches lined either side of it. Arya and their luggage took up one bench, the other remained empty. There was a counter at one end which had water bottles lined on top.

“You ever feel the pressure changes in here?”

Arya had already peeled their suit half off and was digging through a stuffed dry bag. Their gray cropped hair was still dripping all over the bench and their bags. They pulled something black out of it, sniffed it, and shrugged.

Kai shook her head. “No, the pressure changes are subtle. That’s why it takes a little while. You shouldn’t feel a thing.”

Arya chuckled quietly as they rolled their head from shoulder to shoulder. “I feel most things, you’ll find.”

Kai glanced at the ground uncomfortably. There was an uncomfortable silence. “So are you excited to be here?”

Arya laughed. “Boy, is that the understatement.” They pulled the shirt over their head. They shimmied out of the rest of the suit without standing up. “I’m still pretty sure this is just one very long, very lucid dream.”

Kai nodded, smiling. “Sometimes I still feel that way myself.” She looked around the entry lock. “I mean, the *Varuna* is still a brand new facility. There’s never been one this big before.”

Arya slipped their legs into their pants. “I’ve been reading about it pretty much non-stop since I got the offer. It’s the first to include entertainment areas, it has the most research teams working on separate fields. It’s pretty much an underwater city at this point.”

“Closer to small town, more like.”

“But I’ve read the most on the deep sea lab at the base. It’s opened up so many research opportunities, giving us access to some of the deepest dive spots. I wish I could see what they’ve got going down there. It’s supposed to be entirely cutting edge.”

Kai nodded, more somberly this time. “I wouldn’t hold your breath. It’s pretty much top secret, there’s only two teams working down there, and they’re not the social types.”

Arya sighed. “I’m just excited to be here.”

“Kai smiled. “Yeah, I kinda got that.”

“Decompression is nearly complete. Remember to seal the lock after all equipment and belongings have been unloaded.”

“Well, I’ll help you get all settled in for the night. Why don’t you get some rest and I’ll give you the official tour tomorrow.”

“How much will I get to see on the unofficial tour?”

The doors slid open. Kai hoisted two of Arya's dry bags over her shoulders. "Mostly just the living quarters. But don't worry, you'll see the observatory."

Arya grabbed the last bag and hobbled behind slowly. They stepped out into a hallway, but all the metal and bolts that keep *Varuna* standing were nowhere to be seen. Instead the halls were warmly lit with orange lamps and yellow walls. The floors were sleek black tiles.

"So right now this space might not seem accessible to you." She made a vague gesture at her walking legs. "But once I've set you up, you'll find you'll have a lot more freedom to move around."

Arya nodded, but they were still too winded to speak. The pressure was still heavier down here and it wasn't as easy to navigate as it was underwater.

"Right now we're in the main living section. This level is where you'll find the mess hall and other communal spaces. If you'll stand here - no, make sure everything is within the lines - this is a lift that you can use to get down to the lower levels."

The platform against the wall began to sink beneath the floor. Arya grimaced at it. "That's kinda freaky."

"It's just an easy way for you to maneuver around. This lower level is for the private quarters, AKA your room." She stopped abruptly. "Most things in the *Varuna* are automated to a certain extent." She waved her hand in front of a sensor and the door slid open.

"They're very into sliding doors here. Very space efficient."

The room wasn't much. A single bed was tucked against one yellow wall. There was a red wardrobe, a red bookshelf, and another sliding door. "That door is where you'll be able to use the facilities. Because we're underwater, it leads directly to an output pipe that pumps out to our favourite sea critters."

Arya slung their bag to the floor and collapsed on their bed. It had a small bounce to it and Arya was grateful for small favours.

Kai dropped the rest of the bags next to the wardrobe. “Before I give you a chance to unpack, I’d like to show you an easier way of getting around. She opened the wardrobe doors and pulled out a long metal device. “This is the LabraChair. It’s the latest in lab accommodation equipment.”

Arya rested their cane on a bedpost and sat up. It didn’t look much like a chair, but more like an oblong segway. It had a lower back brace attached to an angled seat by a curving metal arm. From the seat, the arm forked into two bowed legs ending in short but wide wheels.

Kai wheeled it closer. The wheels spun silently and there was no sound of a motor. It was slim and a little tall. Arya stood up.

“You might need my help getting in and out at first, but it does get easier and it’s possible to do on your own.” She reached out a hand.

Arya hesitated. Then they took Kai’s hand and let them lift them up onto the footrests. They settled back into the seat and Kai closed the brace around their waist.

“These are designed to work in labs, that’s why they’re upright and so slim. This brace is designed to predict where you want to go by the pressure sensors inside. All you have to do is lean and it’ll change directions. You can have the rest of the day to practice. It’s yours to use while you’re on the *Varuna*.”

Arya sat uncomfortably still. They weren’t really sure what they were supposed to do next. “How do I -- woah!” The chair lurched forward as they leaned forward to look down at the machine.

“Yep, you’ve got it,” Kai laughed. She smiled as Arya began to shift and swivel in their seat, making the chair

pivot and roll in all directions. “Why don’t I show you the observatory?”

Arya swivelled back to Kai suddenly. “What are we waiting on?”

They rolled beside Kai, weaving along the hallways, starting and stopping. They started to see how they could shift in their seat to speed up and slow down.

“You’re catching on quick.” They smiled at each other. “And I’ll think you’ll like this.” Kai brought them to a metal steel staircase. She looked at Arya’s disappointed face. “Here.”

She stood behind them and gently nudged them towards the stairs. The wheels lined up with divots between the stair and the railing. Arya leaned forward and the wheels slid into place and they were on the stairs. They pushed forward and sped up the stairs. At the top, the wheels popped out of the tracks and swerved to an awkward stop.

Arya was beaming. They could really could move freely around *Varuna*. They might never go back to the shore again. Their excitement was so overwhelming that they almost didn’t notice as they rolled out of the yellow hallway. Almost.

Their jaw dropped. Words were incomprehensible as Arya stared straight up, whirling around in their motorized chair. Above them, all around them, were glass walls, hatched with thick metal beams. It was giant glass soccer ball that sat at the top of the base. They had caught a glimpse of it as they swum from their capsule to the base, but it had just looked like a mossy black ball from the outside.

But from this inside -- from the inside it was an enormous sky. The ocean dangled dangerously above them. The silhouettes of fish glimmered in the glow of the observatory lights. There were three levels of viewing decks, and they were on the largest middle deck.

Arya glided over to the nearest wall. Their hands hovered above what they saw to be thick plates of glass, curved and layered together to adjust for

the refraction and withstand the deep sea pressure. They didn't notice when Kai silently left, a smile on her face. They didn't notice anything else for hours.

The tour the next day didn't compare to the night before. They rolled through the mess hall, sampled the lunch cuisine, and was taken to the entertainment sector. The upper level had a surprisingly large theatre room where movies could be put on by bored researchers just trying to get a break. There was a library for personal reading. Kai would make suggestions for how she could help, and then explain how they could do it on their own.

But nothing took their breath away quite like when they saw all of the sea balancing on top of them.

They breezed through the research sector before ending up at the mess hall again.

"You'll be spending enough time in the lab, we don't need to spend today doing that," Kai explained as they piled sandwiches onto a plate. "Why don't we take the rest of the day to make sure you're all settled in?"

"I hope I won't be spending *all* of my time in the lab," they murmured.

"Well, you structure your hours here depending on how much work you're able to--"

"No, no, I don't mean that. I mean I hope I won't be stuck inside this can the whole time."

"You want to go diving."

"I'd love to go diving."

"Well, then let's go diving," she chirped as she stood up.

Arya hesitated. "If you have other things to do, you don't have to help me out with it. I've gone diving on my own plenty of times."

The corner of her lips tugged down. “I would much rather go for a dive than get back to work, what do you say?”

Arya nodded. “But maybe we should wait until after eating,” they added with a wink.

Getting into their dry suit was much easier this time around. Kai only stepped in when asked and the process was smooth. Arya had dove with a few companion divers, and they usually just slowed down the process. Arya had a system and Kai flowed with it, and they could tell by the way she repeated the instructions back to herself under her breath that it was very conscious.

Arya had jumped at the chance to swim with the *Varuna*'s upgraded dry suits. Instead of the heavy and clunky suits they were used to, there were sleek and light. It fit their form in a single piece suit. Arya usually preferred to be able to take off their gloves when they needed it, but these gloves fit snugly around their fingertips, leaving them nearly as agile as bare. They managed to still stabilize pressure to some extent. You couldn't dive much deeper with these suits, but if you swam up, you wouldn't risk and pressure sickness.

They watched Kai zip up their own suit, their legs dangling out of the hatch. As Kai pulled a headband across her hair, they gestured shyly at their own zipper. She kneeled down behind them and began to slowly pull the zipper closed.

Arya's eyes were fixed in front of them down through the hatch. Their breath was caught in their throat. They just stared at the blue down below their dangling legs. They stared so hard that for a moment they thought they

saw the flicker of a tail, and the thrashing of limbs just further than they could see.

“How much do you actually see around here?”

Kai’s hand fluttered. “Depends on the day, I guess. I’ve only been here a couple months myself, but I’ve seen quite a bit. We’re still within diving range of a lot of animals. But then there are other days where I’m in the water for hours and don’t see anything.”

“Them’s the ways of the sea,” Arya agreed. “Well I hope I get to see something today.”

They sealed their helmet closed and clicked on the intercom switch on the helmet controls. The speaker crackled on.

“You read me?” Kai’s voice filled their helmet.

“Loud and clear.”

They dropped down into the hatch together. Arya’s vision was blurred by the flurry of bubbles around them.

Now that they were in the water, Arya felt weightless. Which they knew wasn’t true because of all the extra pressure. But suddenly their leg wasn’t a problem anymore. Their body didn’t ache with the pressure of holding them up. They could just glide away with an easy movement. Not even the LabraChair was this fun.

“You’re going to be working with Nervo Team right?” Kai’s voice pierced the quiet inside of their helmet. They were pulled back into the moment.

“Oh yeah, but I’m just a research intern. I pretty much begged for the position. But you know, I had the most life experience.” They laughed as they kicked out with their right leg.

“What happened to your leg?”

“I was born.” Suddenly they weren’t sure if they could even hear the white noise of the microphone, it got so quiet. “I’ve just always been like this, I’m used to it.”

Kai made a noise of quiet acknowledgement. “So what is your team working on?”

“We’re just looking at if any of the fish down here have the capability of regenerating nerve damage. It might help us repair existing nerve damage and prevent any further deterioration.”

The waters were still pretty still. It was dark down there, and other than a few spotlights from the facility, they only had their headlamps to guide around. Still Arya was just excited to be off their feet. They preferred to slither around in the water.

“So what do you do here -- I mean other than me,” they blurted. They stuttered for a moment and then sighed. “I mean--”

“No, I’m not just a support staff. *Varuna* doesn’t have that much left over budget for dedicated support workers, but there’s only a few of us needed so far right now.”

“So what else do you do around here?”

“I mostly work with medical. I’m pretty new too, not much more than an intern myself.”

“So you’re all about keeping us all healthy, huh?”

“Sounds like you are too.” Arya couldn’t see Kai, but they could feel her smile. They had already remembered her voice pattern, the way her voice rises and deepens.

“Come here, let me show you something.”

Kai took Arya’s hand and pulled them towards a section of the facility. It was a little darker back behind it. One of the spotlights was dimmer than the rest, leaving a shadowy corner where one of the hallways connected to the

main ring. In that corner there was a small formation of coral that had started to form on the outside.

“Just imagine what this base will look like in hundreds of years,” Kai murmured.

Arya spun slowly and stared out at the open waters around them. “If it survives that long.”

Kai helped pull Arya back in through the hatch again. She unclipped their tanks and laid them out on the floor before dropping her own beside her. They both collapsed to the grate floor, panting. They tossed aside their masks with a little less care than when Arya first arrived.

They had spent several hours in the water, just exploring and trying out the equipment. They didn't see much wildlife other than algae creeping across the glass of the observatory dome. Arya hadn't been able to dive for so long in a while. This was the first time they didn't have to take time to decompress before returning to the surface. They were thankful, though they were acutely aware of the weight of the air in the hatch.

Kai began peeling off her dry suit. It was the first time that Arya really looked at her without her scrubs. Her body was as fit and strong in her tank top and leggings as they had first thought. They shifted their eyes suddenly, realizing their gaze was lingering a little too long.

Arya sat up. “Kai--”

Their voice halted in the air as if the vibrations had been stifled suddenly. Their body jerked suddenly and rolled away from the hatch.

“Ary -- what is *that*?”

Gnashing jaws broke through the hatch. There was a low raspy growl that accompanied the snapping rows of teeth. It looked like the head of a

crocodile, if that crocodile was twenty feet long. They could hear the screech and clanging of sharp talons scraping at the metal cage.

Kai stumbled back against the wall. Her eyes were wide and horrified, her jaw flapping wordlessly. Arya was still splayed out on the floor. They had caught a glimpse of the jaws just moments before they snapped just inches from them. Arya's eyes darted around the wet porch. The LabraChair was still sitting where they had left it when they put their tanks on.

Arya sprung to their feet as best as they could. They threw themselves into the chair and closed the harness around them. They leaned forward as hard as they could, speeding forward at the beast thrashing around in front of them. They grabbed a tank as they flew past it, it was heavy and their elbow felt a little click as they swung it in front of them.

Arya cried out as the metal crashed into the jaws. They tried to lean back to reverse, their wheels nearly following the beast back into the water. They had leaned back too hard and crashed backwards.

Kai came back to life. They jumped forward, grabbing the lid of the hatch and slamming it down. She pressed the seal button and slammed her hand against the sensor on the wall.

"The doors will be open for you shortly," the computer chirped.

There was another violent thud against the hatch and then silence filled the room. The only sounds were their panting.

Kai crept over to Arya. They were stuck in their chair, but otherwise seemed okay. Tears streamed down their face and they were holding their elbow. Kai helped roll the chair back into an upright position and then walked back to the hatch.

"Guess it's good you're a medical staff member," groaned Arya. They hissed as they prodded the swollen joint.

Kai still stared at the floor. Silently, she knelt and picked something off the floor.

“Are you okay Kai?”

Arya started to get concerned. Kai might be in shock, she still hadn't spoken a word yet. She turned around and Arya looked into her eyes. She held up what she picked off the floor. It was a piece of yellow plastic with a symbol printed on it.

“What is that?”

Arya was trying to get Kai to say something.

“It belongs to us.”

About The Author

Mariah “Mari” Ramsawakh is a queer, disabled, genderfluid writer. They write both fiction and nonfiction in an attempt to transform the world around them into a safer space for queer, trans, disabled, racialized, and mentally ill people.

Their fiction has also been published in *Hart House Review* and their nonfiction on *The Establishment*. They run a blog called Indivisible Writing. They’re trying to start publishing zines of their fiction, poetry, and essays.

You can recognize them with either their cane or their crutch, or maybe you’ll catch their pink hair.

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