

Four thirty in the morning was too early to learn how to pilot giant robots. When the alarm bleated in Advika's ears, her hand fumbled for the clock on her nightstand before finally she knocked it over with a sweep of her hand and dropped a pillow atop it, blunting but not stopping its rousing authority. She groaned, rolling on her stomach and pulling her blanket around her head, driving her legs into the foam mattress as if trying to swim out of it before she peeked at the opposite nightstand, coated with a fine layer of sacred dust, at the picture of a woman smiling out. She went limp, staring at it a moment as the bleating continued, before she finally crumpled on to her knees. Guilt did what duty could not, and she pulled herself free of the comforting cocoon for the bathroom.

Four thirty in the morning eyes glared at her, as if wondering what she could be thinking waking at this hour. She avoided the brown and bloodshot glare as she looked at the pills, girded her stomach, shook them into her palm, and downed them in one go. Cupping her hand, she drank from the faucet to get them down, ignoring the perfectly functionable cup set out by housecleaning. A shower helped elevated her mood, and she spent some time getting the straight brown strands into some semblance of order.

The motivational poster assaulted her as soon as her door opened. 'Only together can we rebuild earth!' it declared, showing a dozen people farming, replanting, demolishing, constructing, inventing, and putting together this thing called civilization. Never ask who you were rebuilding earth for. Just accept it. Or the Lunarians have won. Advika just walked down the hall, drugs metabolizing in her brain to force her neurochemistry in a more tolerable arrangement. She imagined a dozen tiny abstract workers hammering and plowing her brain wrinkles into a happy, smooth, uniform whole.

The cafeteria was filled with other cadets and recruits shambling in to obtain calories and nutrients needed to learn the operation of forty ton robots. Most gathered in cliques limited by language. German. French. Japanese. Swahili. She picked up some comments from the dozen or so other Indian students, but went to an empty table. It was just easier in conversation if she wasn't around to hear it. Conversations would eventually get to politics, and politics would get to her father, and the surrender.

'How could he do it?' Because Earth had lost three billion people. That's how. And why. And because someone had to. At which point conversation ended or went to a fight, and she'd had her weekly fist fight with someone from the North American Exclusion Zone about 'giving up'.

Three billion. And if projections were accurate, another five hundred million over the next year to famine. The cost of picking a fight with the moon. Economists would debate the price for generations.

English remained the institutional language through inertia and for the odd Australian student. "Attention. Attention. Operational training exercises posted. Please report to staging by oh-five hundred, thirty." The message repeated and she sighed.

“Something up, Kher?” A girl taunted in ways only girls could. She looked up into the angry glare of the blonde cadet, flanked by her friends. “Not sleeping well?”

“Probably dreamt of her father surrendering to Mars or Venus next,” chided her wing girl.

“He threw away the lives of everyone who died to keep earth free,” growled the other.

“That is one popular theory, Bridgette,” Advika murmured, leaning back.

The hand lashed out to flip her tray in her face, but Advika slapped it flat with a clack that silenced dozens of conversations as the room turned their eye on her table. Bridgette’s eyebrow twitched. “You better be careful. We’re doing live patrols today. Someone might want to get even. It would be a shame if your father had to bury a daughter too.”

What could she say? Her father was president of earth only because no one else wanted the job. Three senior politicians resigned rather than accepting the role. A role made largely ceremonial since Earth was now officially being ‘overseen’ by Luna. “I’ll take care,” Advika said, the chemicals in her brain keeping her from responding as Bridgette wanted. “Was there anything else?”

Bridgette rose and turned, walking for the counter, followed by her two cronies. Advika wiped her hands clean, then forced herself to eat the damned porridge. After all, most of the planet was starving. Wasting food was a moral offense.

Down stairs, she passed the frequent warnings about hydrogen and sparks as she entered the launch bay. Twelve giant Mercedes D-12 ‘Metallritter’ hung from their slings like giants constrained by lilliputans who were constantly trying to keep the old D-12’s operational. She took her seat first in the front. The one most people didn’t want, and waited as others filled in. An elastic band smacked the back of her head. She didn’t look. At least it wasn’t gum this time.

When the instructor entered, messing around ended and the dozen students selected for live patrol sat attentively. Colonel Sandra Hoffman was like most Americans alive only because she’d been elsewhere when America died. She didn’t look at Advika as she took her position at the front of the briefing room.

“Today, you’re going to do a Patrol of the Chinese J-9 sector,” she said, bringing up a picture of the topography. “Your drop off point is here, and you’ll head north east following what remains of the road system to here. You are to mark and note any hostile militia activity in the area. This is a potentially hazardous exercise, so your D-12 will be carrying two thousand rounds of 30mm ammunition. No missiles.” There was a disappointed groan in the back. “Sorry Bridgette. From satellite and aircraft reconnaissance, the region should be pretty quiet. You’re just going to confirm that’s so. The op is scheduled to conclude in twelve hours so make sure you bring a meal kit with you and hit the head before you’re deployed.”

“What can we expect in the sector, ma’am?” A girl next to Advika asked.

“J-9 is Henan. The area was hit by a thousand meter impactor. Typical ruined infrastructure. The area’s officially an exclusion zone so anyone there is a squatter or looter till cleared by the regional government, whomever they end up being.” The Colonel said matter of factly. “I remind you to prioritize hostile targets over any non-combative. Try to stay away from any potential hostiles. Get data. We’ll extract at the far side at Shengqiu.”

“Let the Loonies do it!” Bridgette shouted. There was a chorus of agreement. Advika didn’t join it.

“Do you really want more Lunar forces on earth, Maxwell? Do you want them to call down a rock on anyone *they* consider a threat?” the Colonel asked, her steely blue eyes drilling into the fellow North Americaner. Advika didn’t need to look to know the girl wanted to scream ‘yes’.

“No, ma’am,” Bridgette muttered.

The Colonel then spent half an hour going over specifics. The four routes. Advika was assigned to route A, and fireteam leader with two other girls, Sophia and Himari. A German and Japanese, the two people likely most sympathetic to her situation. Advika noticed A route was almost five miles away from the other three. Vulnerability, or safety?

When dismissed, the Colonel called out, “Cadet Kher! A minute!” Advika lingered till the rest filed out. “I heard about the altercation in the mess. Is it a problem?”

Advika knew the real question: ‘Am I going to have to escalate this to doing something?’ “No ma’am. People are upset. I can sympathize.”

“Your father did what had to be done. We lost. It happens. It sucks,” the Colonel said calmly. How else can you summarize the worst catastrophe in the history of humanity other than ‘it sucks?’ She gave a nod. “I can pull you and send you back to Delhi. No one will blame you considering the circumstances.”

So she could hide under her comforter at home rather than here? “No thank you, ma’am. I have to be somewhere. It might as well be here. At least here I can help someone.” At home she’d be dressed up in a sari, asked stupid and painful questions by reporters, and watch as her father crumpled and was destroyed by the political machine desperate for someone to blame.

“I want you to know that I’ve submitted you for enrollment in the Arclight program,” she said as she folded her hands before her on the podium. “I think you’d be an excellent candidate.”

“Arclight?” she asked, confirming she’d heard right. “The interplanetary training program?”

“One candidate from each colony, plus Luna. It’s a military posting; mostly an extension of the training you’re doing now,” the colonel said with a small smile. “You’d have to get used to space, of course, but I think you’d do well.”

“What about Maxwell, Ma’am?” she said as she furrowed her brow. “Her neurokinetics are point-five percent higher. Or Obavi? She beat me at marksmanship. And I’m near dead last for academics.”

“Kher, what does Earth need right now?” the Colonel asked.

Advika thought for a moment. “Help. From the colonies.”

“Even Luna?” she asked.

Advika nodded once. “Of course.”

“That’s why. Most might see Arclight as a vanity program, but many of its participants become celebrities to the system. We stopped fighting five years ago, and the death toll is still rising. We’re signing the official peace treaty next week. We need Earthers off earth who can take our cause to a wider audience. And that Earther needs to be someone willing to ask for help, not pick fights. I believe you’re the best person for the job.”

Advika looked away. “If you say so, ma’am.” But she couldn’t help but think ‘It will get me off earth. Keep me safe.’ And a moment later. ‘I feel my father’s hand on this...’ “Can I decline, ma’am?”

“You can,” the Colonel assured her in the tones of someone who knew she wouldn’t, or couldn’t. It was like turning down a promotion. Once you did, you’d never get another. “I urge you to think long and hard about it.”

“When would I leave?”

“The Arclight is currently at Venus. I believe you’d begin in two months,” she said, “Provided you accept if the offer is extended to you. After all, it could go to any cadet in the program.”

But *her* father was president of earth.

“Understood, ma’am,” she said, “but with all due respect, it should go to someone else.”

The Colonel didn’t reply for a moment before she sighed. “Very well. Dismissed,” she said with a wave of her hand.

Bridgette was waiting in the hall, close enough to the door to overhear, far enough to deny. As she passed she heard Bridgette said, “Must be nice to have every door thrown open for you because of your last name, Kher.”

Advika paused but didn’t respond or look back. Her father’s hand had been on every moment of her life. Why should this be any different? She could refuse, and he’d somehow turn that into something that would help him. ‘See how my daughter struggles with mental illness? This war is hard on everyone.’ ‘Please don’t investigate personal quibbles while my daughter is in the hospital!’ When asked why he’d surrendered, he’d replied, ‘for my daughter.’

No wonder he wanted her off Earth.