

#3

1 Mala missed the birdcalls. When they'd lived in the village, there'd
been birdsong every morning, breaking the perfect peace of the night
to let them know that the sun was rising and the day was beginning.
That was when she'd been a little girl. Here in Mumbai, there were
5 some sickly rooster calls at dawn, but they were nearly drowned
out by the neverending trafficsong: the horns, the engines revving,
the calls late in the night.

In the village, there'd been the birdcalls, the silence, and peace,
times when everyone wasn't always watching. In Mumbai, there was
10 nothing but the people, the people everywhere, so that every breath
you breathed tasted of the mouth that had exhaled it before you got it.
She and her mother and her brother slept together in a tiny room
over Mr Kunal's plastic-recycling factory in Dharavi, the huge
squatter's slum at the north end of the city. During the day,
15 the room was used to sort plastic into a dozen tubs -- the plastic
coming from an endless procession of huge rice-sacks that were filled
at the shipyards. The ships went to America and Europe and Asia filled
with goods made in India and came back filled with garbage, plastic
that the pickers of Dharavi sorted, cleaned, melted and reformed

20 into pellets and shipped to the factories so that they could be turned
into manufactured goods and shipped back to America, Europe and Asia.

When they'd arrived at Dharavi, Mala had found it terrifying:

the narrow shacks growing up to blot out the sky, the dirt lanes
between them with gutters running in iridescent blue and red
25 from the dye-shops, the choking always-smell of burning plastic,
the roar of motorbikes racing between the buildings. And the eyes,
eyes from every window and roof, all watching them as ammaji led
her and her little brother to the factory of Mr Kunal, where
they were to live now and forevermore.

30 But barely a year had gone by and the smell had disappeared.

The eyes had become friendly. She could hop from one lane
to another with perfect confidence, never getting lost on her way
to do the marketing or to attend the afternoon classes at the little
school-room over the restaurant. The sorting work had been boring,

35 but never hard, and there was always food, and there were other girls
to play with, and ammaji had made friends who helped them out.

Piece by piece, she'd become a Dharavi girl, and now she looked
on the newcomers with a mixture of generosity and pity.

And the work -- well, the work had gotten a lot better, just lately.

40 It started when she was in the games-cafe with Yasmin, stealing
an hour after lessons to spend a few Rupees of the money she'd saved

from her pay-packet (almost all of it went to the family, of course, but ammaji sometimes let her keep some back and advised her to spend it on a treat at the cornershop). Yasmin had never played Zombie Mecha, but of course they'd both seen the movies at the little filmi house on the road that separated the Muslim and the Hindu sections of Dharavi. Mala loved Zombie Mecha, and she was good at it, too. She preferred the PvP servers where players could hunt other players, trying to topple their giant mecha-suits so that the zombies around them could swarm over it, crack open its cockpit cowl and feast on the av within.

Most of the girls at the game cafe came in and played little games with cute animals and trading for hearts and jewels. But for Mala, the action was in the awesome carnage of the multiplayer war games. It only took a few minutes to get Yasmin through the basics of piloting her little squadron and then she could get down to tactics.

That was it, that was what none of the other players seemed to understand: tactics were everything. They treated the game like it was a random chaos of screeching rockets and explosions, a confusion to be waded into and survived, as best as you could. But for Mala, the confusion was something that happened to other people. For Mala, the explosions and camera-shake and the screech

of the zombies were just minor details, to be noted among the Big
65 Picture, the armies arrayed on the battlefield in her mind.

On that battlefield, the massed forces took on a density and a color
that showed where their strengths and weaknesses were, how they were
joined to each other and how pushing on this one, over here, would
topple that one over there. You could face down your enemies head
70 on, rockets against rockets, guns against guns, and then the winner
would be the luckier one, or the one with the most ammo, or the one
with the best shields.

But if you were smart, you didn't have to be lucky, or tougher.
Mala liked to lob rockets and grenades over the opposing armies,
75 to their left and right, creating box-canyons of rubble and debris
that blocked their escape. Meanwhile, a few of her harriers
would be off in the weeds aggroing huge herds of zombies, getting
them really mad, gathering them up until they were like locusts,
blotting out the ground in all directions, leading them ever closer
80 to that box canyon.

Just before they'd come into view, her frontal force would peel
off, running away in a seeming act of cowardice. Her enemies would
be buoyed up by false confidence and give chase -- until they saw
the harriers coming straight for them, with an unstoppable,
85 torrential pestilence of zombies hot on their heels. Most times,

they were too shocked to do anything, not even fire at the harriers as they ran straight for their lines and through them, into the one escape left behind in the box-canyon, blowing the crack shut as they left. Then it was just a matter of waiting for the zombies
90 to overwhelm and devour your opponents, while you snickered and ate a sweet and drank a little tea from the urn by the cashier's counter. The sounds of the zombies rending the armies of her enemies and gnawing their bones was particularly satisfying.

Yasmin had been distracted by the zombies, the disgusting entrails,
95 the shining rockets. But she'd seen, oh yes, she'd seen how Mala's strategies were able to demolish much larger opposing armies and she got over her squeamishness.

And so on they played, drawing an audience: first the hooting derisive boys (who fell silent when they watched the armies fall before her,
100 and who started to call her "General Robotwalla" without even a hint of mockery), and then the girls, shy at first, peeking over the boys' shoulders, then shoving forward and cheering and beating their fists on the walls and stamping their feet for each dramatic victory.

It wasn't cheap, though. Mala's carefully hoarded store of Rupees
105 shrank, buffered somewhat by a few coins from other players who paid her a little here and there to teach them how to really play.

She knew she could have borrowed the money, or let some boy spend

it on her -- there was already fierce competition for the right to go over the road to the drinkswalla and buy her a masala Coke, a fizzing, foaming spicy explosion of Coke and masala spice and crushed ice that soothed the rawness at the back of her throat that had been her constant companion since they'd come to Dharavi.

But nice girls from the village didn't let boys buy them things. Boys wanted something in return. She knew that, knew it from the movies and from the life around her. She knew what happened to girls who let boys take care of their needs. There was always a reckoning.

When the strange man first approached her, she thought about nice girls and boys and what they expected, and she wouldn't talk to him or meet his eye. She didn't know what he wanted, but he wasn't going to get it from her. So when he got up from his chair by the cashier as she came into the cafe, rose and crossed to intercept her with his smart linen suit and good shoes and short, neatly oiled hair, and small moustache, she'd stepped around him, stepped past him, pretended she didn't hear him say, "Excuse me, miss," and "Miss? Miss? Please, just a moment of your time."

But Mrs Dibyendu, the owner of the cafe, shouted at her, "Mala, you listen to this man, you listen to what he has to say to you. You don't be rude in my shop, no you don't!" And because Mrs Dibyendu was also from a village, and because her mother had said that Mala

130 could play games but only in Mrs Dibyendu's cafe, Mrs Dibyendu being the sort of person you could trust not to allow improper doings, or drugs, or violence, or criminality, Mala stopped and turned to the man, silent, expecting.

"Ah," he said. "Thank you." He nodded to Mrs Dibyendu. "Thank you."

135 He turned back to her, and to the army of boys and girls who'd gathered around her, her army, the ones who called her General Robotwallah and meant it.

"I hear that you are a very good player," he said. Mala wagged her chin back and forth, half-closing her eyes, letting her chin

140 say, Yes, I'm a good player, and I'm good enough that I don't need to boast about it.

"Is she a good player?"

Mala turned to her army, who had the discipline to remain silent until she gave them the nod. She wagged her chin at them: go on.

145 And they erupted in an enthused babble, extolling the virtues of their General Robotwallah, the epic battles they'd fought and won against impossible odds.

"I have some work for good players."

Mala had heard rumors of this. "You represent a league?"

150 The man smiled a little smile and shook his head. He smelled of citrusy cologne and betel, a sweet combination of smells she'd never smelled

before. "No, not a league. You know that in the game, there are players who don't play for fun? Players who play to make money?"

"The kind of money you're offering to us?"

155 His chin waggled and he chuckled. "No, not exactly. There are players who play to build up game-money, which they sell on to other players who are too lazy to do the playing for themselves."

Mala thought about this for a moment. The containers went out of India filled with goods and came back filled with garbage

160 for Dharavi. Somewhere out there, in the America of the filmi shows, there was a world of people with unimaginable wealth. "We'll do it," she said. "I've already got more credits than I can spend. How much do they pay for them?"

Again, the chuckle. "Actually," he said, then stopped. Her army was
165 absolutely silent now, hanging on his every word. From the machines came the soft crashing of the wars, taking place in the world inside the network, all day and all night long. "Actually, that's not exactly it. We want you and your friends to destroy them, kill their avs, take their fortunes."

170 Mala thought for another instant, puzzled. Who would want to kill these other players? "You're a rival?"

The man waggled his chin. Maybe yes, maybe no.

She thought some more. "You work for the game!" she said. "You work for the game and you don't want --"

175 "Who I work for isn't important," the man said, holding up his fingers. He wore a wedding ring on one hand, and two gold rings on the other. He was missing the top joints on three of his fingers, she saw. That was common in the village, where farmers were always getting caught in the machines. Here was a man from a village, a man
180 who'd come to Mumbai and become a man in a neat suit with a neat mustache and gold rings glinting on what remained of his fingers. Here was the reason her mother had brought them to Dharavi, the reason for the sore throat and the burning eyes and the endless work over the plastic-sorting tubs.

185 "What's important is that we would pay you and your friends --"
"My army," she said, interrupting him without thinking. For a moment his eyes flashed dangerously and she sensed that he was about to slap her, but she stood her ground. She'd been slapped plenty before. He snorted once through his nose, then went on.

190 "Yes, Mala, your army. We would pay you to destroy these players. You'd be told what sort of mecha they were piloting, what their player-names were, and you'd have to root them out and destroy them. You'd keep all their wealth, and you'd get Rupees, too."
"How much?"

195 He made a pained expression, like he had a little gas. "Perhaps we should discuss that in private, later? With your mother present?"

Mala noticed that he didn't say, "Your parents," but rather, "Your mother." Mrs Dibyendu and he had been talking, then. He knew about Mala, and she didn't know about him. She was just a girl

200 from the village, after all, and this was the world, where she was still trying to understand it all. She was a general, but she was also a girl from the village. General Girl From the Village.

So he'd come that night to Mr Kunal's factory, and Mala's mother had fed him thali and papadams from the women's papadam collective, and 205 they'd boiled chai in the electric kettle and the man had pretended that his fine clothes and gold belonged here, and had squatted back on his heels like a man in the village, his hairy ankles peeking out over his socks. No one Mala knew wore socks.

"Mr Banerjee," ammaji said, "I don't understand this, but I know 210 Mrs Dibyendu. If she says you can be trusted..." She trailed off, because really, she didn't know Mrs Dibyendu. In Dharavi, there were many hazards for a young girl. Ammaji would fret over them endlessly while she brushed out Mala's hair at night, all the ways a girl could find herself ruined or hurt here. But the money.

215 "A lakh of rupees every month," he said. "Plus a bonus. Of course, she'll have to pay her ,army' --" he'd given Mala a little chin waggle at that, see, I remember "-- out of that. But how much would be up to her."

"These children wouldn't have any money if it wasn't for my Mala!" ammaji said, affronted at their imaginary grasping hands. "They're
220 only playing a game! They should be glad just to play with her!"
Ammaji had been furious when she discovered that Mala had been playing at the cafe all these afternoons. She thought that Mala only played once in a while, not with every rupee and moment she had spare. But when the man -- Mr Banerjee -- had mentioned her talent
225 and the money it could earn for the family, suddenly ammaji had become her daughter's business manager.

Mala saw that Mr Banerjee had known this would happen and wondered what else Mrs Dibyendu had told him about their family.

"Ammaji," she said, quietly, keeping her eyes down in the way
230 they did in the village. "They're my army, and they need paying if they play well. Otherwise they won't be my army for long."

Ammaji looked hard at her. Beside them, Mala's little brother Gopal took advantage of their distraction to sneak the last bit of eggplant off Mala's plate. Mala noticed, but pretended she hadn't, and
235 concentrated on keeping her eyes down.

Ammaji said, "Now, Mala, I know you want to be good to your friends, but you have to think of your family first. We will find a fair way to compensate them -- maybe we could prepare a weekly feast for them here, using some of the money. I'm sure
240 they could all use a good meal."

Mala didn't like to disagree with her mother, and she'd never done so in front of strangers, but --

But this was her army, and she was their general. She knew what made them tick, and they'd heard Mr Banerjee announce that she
245 would be paid in cash for their services. They believed in fairness. They wouldn't work for food while she worked for a lakh (a lakh -- 100,000 rupees! The whole family lived on 200 rupees a day!) of cash.

"Ammaji," she said, "it wouldn't be right or fair." It occurred to Mala that Mr Banerjee had mentioned the money in front
250 of the army. He could have been more discreet. Perhaps it was deliberate. "And they'd know it. I can't earn this money for the family on my own, Ammaji."

Her mother closed her eyes and breathed through her nose, a sign that she was trying to keep hold of her temper. If Mr Banerjee hadn't
255 been present, Mala was sure she would have gotten a proper beating, the kind she'd gotten from her father before he left them, when

she was a naughty little girl in the village. But if Mr Banerjee wasn't here, she wouldn't have to talk back to her mother, either.

"I'm sorry for this, Mr Banerjee," Ammaji said, not looking at Mala.

260 "Girls of this age, they become rebellious -- impossible."

Mala thought about a future in which instead of being General Robotwallah, she had to devote her life to begging and bullying her army into playing with her so that she could keep all the money they made for her family, while their families went hungry and

265 their mothers demanded that they come home straight from school. When

Mr Banerjee mentioned his gigantic sum, it had conjured up a vision of untold wealth, a real house, lovely clothes for all of them, Ammaji free to spend her afternoons cooking for the family and resting out of the heat, a life away from Dharavi and the smoke and

270 the stinging eyes and sore throats.

"I think your little girl is right," Mr Banerjee said, with quiet authority, and Mala's entire family stared at him, speechless.

An adult, taking Mala's side over her mother? "She is a very good leader, from what I can see. If she says her people need

275 paying, I believe that she is correct." He wiped at his mouth

with a handkerchief. "With all due respect, of course. I wouldn't dream of telling you how to raise your children, of course."

"Of course..." Ammaji said, as if in a dream. Her eyes were downcast, her shoulders slumped. To be spoken to this way, 280 in her own home, by a stranger, in front of her children! Mala felt terrible. Her poor mother. And it was all Mr Banerjee's fault: he'd mentioned the money in front of her army, and then he'd brought her mother to this point --

"I will find a way to get them to fight without payment, Ammaji 285 --" But she was cut short by her mother's hand, coming up, palm out to her.

"Quiet, daughter," she said. "If this man, this gentleman, says you know what you're doing, well, then I can't contradict him, can I? I'm just a simple woman from the village. I don't understand these 290 things. You must do what this gentleman says, of course."

Mr Banerjee stood and smoothed his suit back into place with the palms of his hands. Mala saw that he'd gotten some chana on his shirt and lapel, and that made her feel better somehow, like he was a mortal and not some terrible force of nature who'd come 295 to destroy their little lives.

He made a little namaste at Ammaji, hands pressed together at his chest, a small hint of a bow. "Good night, Mrs Vajpayee. That was a lovely supper. Thank you." he said. "Good night, General Robotwallah. I will come to the cafe tomorrow at three o'clock

300 to talk more about your missions. Good night, Gopal," he said, and her brother looked up at him, guiltily, eggplant still poking out of the corner of his mouth.

Mala thought that Ammaji might slap her once the man had left, but they all went to bed together without another word, and Mala snuggled
305 up to her mother the same as she did every night, stroking her long hair. It had been shining and black when they left the village, but a year later, it was shot through with grey and it felt wiry. Ammaji's hand caught hers and stilled it, the callouses on her fingers rough. "Sleep, daughter," she murmured. "You have an important job, now.
310 You need your sleep."

The next morning, they avoided one another's eyes, and things were hard for a week, until she brought home her first pay-packet, folded carefully in the sole of her shoe. Her army had carved through the enemy forces like the butcher's cleaver parting heads
315 from chickens. There had been a large bonus in their pay-packet, and even after she'd paid Mrs Dibyendu and bought everyone masala Coke at the Hotel Hajj next door, and paid the army their wages, there was almost 2,000 rupees left, and she took Ammaji into the smallest sorting room in the loft of the factory, up the ladder. Ammaji's eyes
320 lit up when she saw the money, and she'd kissed Mala on the forehead and taken her in the longest, fiercest hug of their lives together.

And now it was all wonderful between them. Ammaji had begun to look for a place for them further towards the middle of Dharavi, the old part where the tin and scrap buildings had been gradually replaced
325 with brick ones, where the potters' kilns smoked a clean woodsmoke instead of the dirty, scratchy plastic smoke near Mr Kunal's factory. Mala had new school-clothes, new shoes, and so did Gopal, and Ammaji had new brushes for her hair and a new sari that she wore after her work-day was through, looking pretty and young, the way Mala
330 remembered her from the village.

And the battles were glorious.

She entered the cafe out of the melting, dusty sun of late day and stood in the doorway. Her army was already assembled, practicing on their machines, passing gupshup in the shadows of the dark, noisy
335 room, or making wet eyes at one another through the dim. She barely had time to grin and then hide the grin before they noticed her and climbed to their feet, standing straight and proud, saluting her. She didn't know which one of them had begun the saluting business. It had started as a joke, but now it was serious. They vibrated
340 at attention, all eyes on her. They had on better clothes, they looked well-fed. General Robotwallah was leading her army to victory and prosperity.

"Let's play," she said. In her pocket, her handphone had the latest message from Mr Banerjee with the location of the day's target.

345 Yasmin was at her usual place, at Mala's right hand, and at her left sat Fulmala, who had a bad limp from a leg that she'd broken and that hadn't healed right. But Fulmala was smart and fast, and she grasped the tactics better than anyone in the cafe except Mala herself. And Yasmin, well, Yasmin could make the boys behave, which
350 was a major accomplishment, since left to their own they liked to squabble and one-up each other, in a reckless spiral that always ended badly. But Yasmin could talk to them in a way that was stern like an older sister, and they'd fall into line.

Mala had her army, her lieutenants, and her mission. She had
355 her machine, the fastest one in the cafe, with a bigger monitor than any of the others, and she was ready to go to war.

She touched up her displays, rolled her head from side to side, and led her army to battle again.