

Doctorow, Cory

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#7

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#7

1 Mala was in the world with a small raiding party, just a few
of her army. It was late -- after midnight -- and Mrs Dibyendu had
turned the cafe over to her idiot nephew to run things. These days,
the cafe stayed open when Mala and her army wanted to use it, day
5 or night, and there were always soldiers who'd vie for the honor
of escorting General Robotwallah home afterwards. Ammaji -- Ammaji
had a new fine flat, with two complete rooms, and one of them was all
for Ammaji alone, hers to sleep in without the snuffling and gruffling
of her two children. There were places in Dharavi where ten or fifteen
10 might have shared that room, sleeping on coats -- or each other.
Ammaji had a mattress, brought to her by a strong young man from Chor
Bazaar, carried with him on the roof of the Marine Line train through
the rush hour heat and press of bodies.

Ammaji didn't complain when Mala played after midnight.

15 "More, just there," Sushant said. He was two years older than
her, the tallest of them all, with short hair and a crazy smile
that reminded her of the face of a dog that has had its stomach
rubbed into ecstasy.

And there they were, three mecha in a triangle, methodically clubbing
20 zombies in the head, spattering their rotten brains and dropping them

into increasing piles. Eventually, the game would send out ghouls to drag away the bodies, but for now, they piled waist deep around the level one mechas.

25 "I have them," Yasmin said, her scopes locking on. This was a new kind of mission for them, wiping out these little trios of mecha who were grinding endlessly against the zombies. Mr Banerjee had tasked them to this after the more aggressive warriors had been hunted to extinction by their army. According to Mr Banerjee, these were each played by a single person, someone who was getting paid
30 to level up basic mecha to level four or five, to be sold at auction to rich players. Always in threes, always grinding the zombies, always in this part of the world, like vermin.

"Fire," she said, and the pulse weapons fired concentric rings of force into the trio. They froze, systems cooked, and as Mala
35 watched, the zombies swarmed over the mechas, toppling them, working relentlessly at them, until they had found their way inside. A red mist fountained into the sky as they dismembered the pilots.

"Nice one," she said, arching her back over her chair, slurping the dregs of a cup of chai that had grown cold at her side.
40 Mrs Dibyendu's idiot nephew was standing barefoot in the doorway of the cafe, spitting betel into the street, the sweet smell wafting back to her. The sleep was gathering in her mind, waiting

to pounce on her, so it was time to go. She turned to tell her army
so when her headphones filled with the thunder of incoming mechas,
45 and lots of them.

She slammed her bottom down into the seat and spun around, fingers
flying to the keyboard, eyes on the screen. The enemy mecha were
coming in locked in a megamecha configuration, fifteen -- no twenty --
of them joined together to form a bot so huge that she looked like
50 a gnat next to it.

"To me!" she cried, and "Formation," and her soldiers came to their
keyboard, her army initiating their own megamecha sequence, but
it took too long and there weren't enough of them, and though
they fought bravely, the giant enemy craft tore them to pieces,
55 lifting each warbot and peering inside its cowl as it ripped open
the armor and dropped the squirming pilot to the surging zombie tide
at its feet. Too late, Mala remembered her strategy, remembered what
it had been like when she had always commanded the weaker force,
the defensive footing she should have put her army on as soon as
60 she saw how she was outmatched.

Too late. An instant later, her own mecha was in the enemy's
clutches, lifted to its face, and as she neared it, the lights
on her console changed and a soft klaxon sounded: the bot was
attempting to infiltrate her own craft's systems, to interface

65 with them, to pwn them. That was another game within this game,
the hack-and-be-hacked game, and she was very good at it. It involved
solving a series of logic puzzles, solving them faster than the foe,
and she clicked and typed as she figured out how to build a bridge
using blocks of irregular size, as she figured out how to open a lock
70 whose tumblers had to be clicked just so to make the mechanism work,
as she figured out --

She wasn't fast enough. Her army gathered around her as her console
locked up, the enemy inside her mecha now, running it from bootloader
to flamethrower.

75 "Hello," a voice said in her headphones. That was something you could
do, when you controlled another player's armor -- you could take over
its comms. She thought of yanking out the headphones and switching
to speaker so that her army could listen in too, but some premonition
stayed her hand. This enemy had gone to some trouble to talk to her,
80 personally, so she would hear what it had to say.

"My name is Big Sister Nor," she said, and it was a she, a woman's
voice, no, a girl's voice -- maybe something in between. Her Hindi
was strangely accented, like the Chinese actors in the filmi shows
she'd seen. "It's been a pleasure to fight you. Your guild did
85 very well. Of course, we did better." Mala heard a ragged cheer and
realized that there were dozens of enemies on the chat channel, all

listening in. What she had mistaken for static on the channel was, in fact, dozens of enemies, somewhere in the world, all breathing into their microphones as this woman spoke.

90 "You are very good players," Mala said, whispering it so that only her mic heard.

"I'm not just a player, and neither are you, my dear." There was something sisterly in that voice, none of the gloating competitiveness that Mala felt for the players she'd bested in the game before.

95 In spite of herself, Mala found she was smiling a little. She rocked her chin from side to side -- Oh, you're a clever one, do go on -- and her soldiers around her made the same gesture.

"I know why you fight. You think you're doing an honest job of work, but have you ever stopped to consider why someone would pay

100 you to attack other workers in the game?"

Mala shooed away her army, making a pointed gesture toward the door.

When she was alone, she said, "Because they muck up the game for the real players. They interfere."

The giant mecha shook its head slowly. "Are you really so blind?"

105 Do you think the syndicate that pays you does so because they care about whether the game is fun? Oh, dear."

Mala's mind whirred. It was like solving one of those puzzles.

Of course Mr Banerjee didn't care about the other players. Of course

he didn't work for the game. If he worked for the game, he could
110 just suspend the accounts of the players Mala fought. Cleaner and
neater. The solution loomed in her mind's eye. "They're business
rivals, then?"

"Oh yes, you are as clever as I thought you must be. Yes indeed.
They are business rivals. Somewhere, there is a group of players
115 just like them, being paid to level up mecha, or farm gold, or
acquire land, or do any of the other things that can turn labor
into money. And who do you suppose the money goes to?"

"To my boss," she said. "And his bosses. That's how it goes."
Everyone worked for someone.

120 "Does that sound fair to you?"

"Why not?" Mala said. "You work, you make something or do something,
and the person you do it for pays you something for your work. That's
the world, that's how it works."

"What does the person who pays you do to earn his piece
125 of your labor?"

Mala thought. "He figures out how to turn the labor into money.
He pays me for what I do. These are stupid questions, you know."

"I know," Big Sister Nor said. "It's the stupid questions that have
some of the most surprising and interesting answers. Most people never
130 think to ask the stupid questions. Do you know what a union is?"

Mala thought. There were unions all over Mumbai, but none in Dharavi. She'd heard many people speak of them, though. "A group of workers," she said. "Who make their bosses pay them more." She thought about all she'd heard. "They stop other workers from taking their jobs.

135 They go on strike."

"That's what unions do, all right. But it's not much of a sense of what they are. Tell me this: if you went to your boss and asked for more money, shorter hours, and better working conditions, what do you think he'd say?"

140 "He'd laugh at me and send me away," Mala said. It was an unbelievably stupid question.

"You're almost certainly right. But what if all the workers he went to said the same thing? What if, everywhere he went, there were workers saying, 'We are worth so much,' and 'We will not be treated
145 this way,' and 'You cannot take away our jobs unless there is a just reason for doing so'? What if all workers, everywhere, demanded this treatment?"

Mala found she was shaking her head. "It's a ridiculous idea. There's always someone poor who'll take the job. It doesn't matter. It won't
150 work." She found that she was furious. "Stupid!"

"I admit that it's all rather improbable," the woman said, and there was an unmistakable tone of amusement in her voice.

"But think for a moment about your employer. Do you know where his employers are? Do you know where the players you're fighting are? Where their customers are? Do you know where I am?"

"I don't see why that matters --"

"Oh, it matters. It matters because although all these people are all over the world, there's no real distance between them. We chat here like neighbors, but I am in Singapore, and you are in India. Where? Delhi? Kolkata? Mumbai?"

"Mumbai," she admitted.

"You don't sound like Mumbai," she said. "You have a lovely accent. Uttar Pradesh?"

Mala was surprised to hear the state of her birth and her village guessed so easily. "Yes," she said. She was a girl from the village, she was General Robotwallah and this woman had taken the measure of her very quickly.

"This game is headquartered in America, in a city called Atlanta. The corporation is registered in Cyprus, in Europe. The players are all over the world. These ones that you've been fighting are in Vietnam. We'd been having a lovely conversation before you came and blew them all to pieces. We are everywhere, but we are all here. Anyone your boss ever hired to do your job would end up here, and we could find that worker and talk to them. Wherever your boss goes,

175 his workers will all come and work here. And we will have a chat like this with them, and talk to them about what a world we could have, if all workers cooperated to protect each others' interests."

Mala was still shaking her head. "They'd just blow you away. Hire an army like me. It's a stupid idea."

180 The giant metamecha lifted her up to its face, where its giant teeth champed and clanged. "Do you think there's an army that could best us?"

Mala thought that maybe her army could, if they were in force, if they were prepared. Then she thought of how much successful war

185 you'd have to persecute to win one of these giant beasts. "Maybe not. Maybe you can do what you say you can do." She thought some more. "But in the meantime, we wouldn't have any work."

The giant metal face nodded. "Yes, that's true. At first you may not find yourself with your wages. And maybe your fellow workers would

190 contribute a little to help you out. That's another thing unions do -- it's called strike pay. But eventually, you, and me, and all of us, would enjoy a world where we are paid a living wage, and where we labor under livable conditions, and where our workplaces are fair and decent. Isn't that worth a little sacrifice?"

195 There it was, "You ask me to make a sacrifice. Why should I sacrifice?
We are poor. We fight for a very little, because we have even less.
Why do you think that we should sacrifice? Why don't you sacrifice?"

"Oh, sister, we've all sacrificed. I understand that this is all
very new to you, and that it will take some getting used to. I'm
200 sure we'll see each other again, someday. After all, we all play
in the same world here, don't we?"

Mala realized that the breathing she'd heard, the other voices
on the chat channel, had all fallen silent. For a short time, it had
just been Mala and this woman who called her "sister."

205 "What is your name?"

"I'm Nor-Ayu," she said. "But they call me ,Big Sister Nor.' All over
the world, they call me this. What do I call you?"

Mala's name was on the tip of her tongue, but she did not say it.
Instead, she said, "General Robotwallah."

210 "A very good name," Big Sister Nor said. "It was my pleasure to meet
you." With that, the giant mecha dropped her and turned and lumbered
away, crushing zombies under its feet.

Mala stood up and felt the many pops and snaps of her spine and
muscles. She had been sitting for, oh, hours and hours.

215 She rolled her head from side to side on her neck, working out
the stiffness there and she saw Mrs Dibyendu's idiot nephew watching

her. His lip was pouched with reeking betel saliva, and he was staring at her with a frankness that made her squirm right to the pit of her stomach.

220 "You stayed behind for me," he said, a huge grin on his face. His teeth were brown. He wasn't really an idiot -- not soft in the head, anyway. But he was very thick and very slow, with a brutal strength that Mrs Dibyendu always described as his "special fortitude." Mala thought he was just a thug. She'd

225 seen him walking in the narrow streets of Dharavi. He never shifted for women or old people, making them go around him even when it meant stepping into mud or worse. And he chewed betel all the time. Lots of people chewed betel, it was like smoking, but her mother detested the habit and had told her so many times that it was a "low" habit

230 and dirty that she couldn't help but think less of betel chewers. He regarded her with his bloodshot eyes. She suddenly felt very vulnerable, the way she'd felt all the time, when they'd first come to Dharavi. She took a step to the right and he took a step to the right as well. That was a line crossed: once he blocked

235 her exit, he'd announced his intention to hurt her. That was basic military strategy. He had made the first move, so he had the initiative, but he'd also showed his hand quickly, so --

She feinted left and he fell for it. She lowered her head like a bull and butted it into the middle of his chest. Already off-balance, 240 he went down on his back. She didn't stop moving, didn't look back, just kept going, thinking of that charging bull, running over him as she made for the doorway without stopping. One heel came down on his ribcage, the next on his face, mashing his lips and nose. She wished that something had gone crunch but nothing did.

245 She was out the door in an instant and into the cool air of the dark, dark Dharavi night. Around her, the sound of rats running over the roofs, the distant sounds of the roads, snoring. And many other, less identifiable sounds, sounds that might have been lurkers hiding in the shadows around them. Muffled speech. A distant train.

250 Suddenly, sending her army away didn't seem like such a good idea. Behind her, she heard a much clearer sound of menace. The idiot nephew crashing through the door, his shoes on the packed earth road. She slipped back into an alley between two buildings, barely wider than her, her feet splashing through some kind of warm liquid 255 that wafted an evil stench up to her nose. The idiot nephew lumbered past into the night. She stayed put. He lumbered back, looking in all directions for her.

There she stood, waiting for him to give up, but he would not. Back and forth he charged. He'd become the bull, enraged, tireless,

260 stupid. She heard his voice rasping in his chest. She had her mobile
phone in her hand, her other hand cupped over it, shielding
the treacherous light it gave off from its tiny screen. It was 12:47
now, and she had never been alone at this hour in all her 14 years.
She could text someone in her army -- they would come to get her,
265 wouldn't they? If they were awake, or if their phones' chirps woke
them. No one was awake at this hour, though. And how to explain?
What to say?

She felt like an idiot. She felt ashamed. She should have predicted
this, should have been the general, should have employed strategy.
270 Instead, she'd gotten boxed in.

She could wait. All night, if necessary. No need to let her army
know of her weakness. Idiot nephew would tire or the sun would rise,
it was all the same to her.

Through the thin walls of the houses on either side of her,
275 the sound of snoring. The evil smell rose up from the liquid below
her in the ditch, and something slimy was squishing between her toes.
It burned at her skin. The rats scampered overhead, sounding like
rain on the tin roofs. Stupid, stupid, stupid, it was her mantra,
over and over in her mind.

280 The bull was tiring. The next time he passed, his breath came
in terrible wheezes that blew the stink of betel before him like
sweet rot. She could wait for his next pass, then run.

It was a good plan. She hated it. He had -- He'd threatened her. He'd
scared her. He should pay. She was the General Robotwallah, not merely
285 some girl from the village. She was from Dharavi, tough. Smart.

He wheezed past and she slipped out of the alley, her feet
coming free of the muck with audible plops. He was facing away
from her still, hadn't heard her yet, and he had his back to her.
The stupid boys in her army only fought face to face, talked about
290 the "honor" of hitting from behind. Honor was just stupid boy-things.
Victory beat honor.

She braced herself and ran toward him, both arms stiff, hands
at shoulder-height. She hit him high and kept moving, the way
he had before, and down he fell again, totally unprepared
295 for the assault from the rear. The sound he made on the dirt was
like the sound of a goat dropping at the butcher's block. He was
trying to roll over and she turned around and ran at him, jumping
up in the air and landing with both muddy feet on his head,
driving his face into the mud. He shouted in pain, the sound muffled
300 by the dirt, and then lay, stunned.

She went back to him then, and knelt at his head, his hairy earlobe inches from her lips.

"I wasn't waiting for you at the cafe. I was minding my own business," she said. "I don't like you. You shouldn't chase girls or
305 the girls might turn around and catch you. Do you understand me? Tell me you understand me before I rip out your tongue and wipe your ass with it." They talked like this on the chat-channels for the games all the time, the boys did, and she'd always disapproved of it. But the words had power, she could feel it in her mouth, hot
310 as blood from a bit tongue.

"Tell me you understand me, idiot!" she hissed.

"I understand," he said, and the words came mashed, from mashed lips and a mashed nose.

She turned on her heel and began to walk away. He groaned behind her,
315 then called out, "Whore! Stupid whore!"

She didn't think, she just acted. Turned around, ran at his still-prone body, indistinct in the dusk, one step, two step, like a champion footballer coming in for a penalty kick and then she did kick him, the foetid water spraying off her shoe's saturated toe as
320 it connected with his big, stupid ribcage. Something snapped in there -- maybe several somethings, and oh, didn't that feel wonderful?

He was every man who'd scared her, who'd shouted filthy things after her, who'd terrorized her mother. He was the bus driver who'd threatened to put them out on the roadside when they wouldn't pay him
325 a bribe. Everything and everyone that had ever made her feel small and afraid, a girl from the village. All of them.

She turned around. He was clutching at his side and blubbering now, crying stupid tears on his stupid cheeks, luminous in the smudgy moonlight that filtered through the haze of plastic smoke that hung
330 over Dharavi. She would up and took another pass at him, one step, two step, kick, and crunch, that satisfying sound from his ribs again. His sobs caught in his chest and then he took a huge, shuddering breath and howled like a wounded cat in the night, screamed so loud that here in Dharavi, the lights came on and voices
335 came to the windows.

It was as though a spell had been broken. She was shaking and drenched in sweat, and there were people peering at her in the dark. Suddenly she wanted to be home as fast as possible, if not faster. Time to go.

340 She ran. Mala had loved to run through the fields as a little girl, hair flying behind her, knees and arms pumping, down the dirt roads. Now she ran in the night, the reek of the ditch water smacking her in the nose with each squelching step. Voices chased

her through the night, though they came filtered through the hammer
345 of her pulse in her ears and later she could not say whether
they were real or imagined.

But finally she was home and pelting up the steps to the third-floor
flat she had rented for her family. Her thundering footsteps raised
cries from the downstairs neighbors, but she ignored them, fumbled
350 with her key, let herself in.

Her brother Gopal looked up at her from his mat, blinking
in the dark, his skinny chest bare. "Mala?"

"It's OK," she said. "Nothing. Sleep, Gopal."

He slumped back down. Mala's shoes stank. She peeled them off,
355 using just the tips of her fingers, and left them outside the door.
Perhaps they would be stolen -- though you would have to be desperate
indeed to steal those shoes. Now her feet stank. There was a large
jug of water in the corner, and a dipper. Carefully, she carried
the dipper to the window, opened the squealing shutter, and poured
360 the water slowly over the her feet, propping first one and then
the other on the windowsill. Gopal stirred again. "Be quiet,"
he said, "it's sleep-time."

She ignored him. She was still out of breath, and the reality
of what she'd done was setting in for her. She had kicked the idiot
365 nephew -- how many times? Two? Three? And something in his body had

gone crack each time. Why had he blocked her? Why had he followed her into the night? What was it that made the big and the strong take such sport in terrorizing the weak? Whole groups of boys would do this to girls and even grown women sometimes -- follow them, calling after them, touching them, sometimes it even led to rape. They called it "Eve-teasing" and they treated it like a game. It wasn't a game, not if you were the victim.

Why did they make her do it? Why did all of them make her do it? The sound of the crack had been so satisfying then, and it was so sickening now. She was shaking, though the night was so hot, one of those steaming nights where everything was slimy with the low-hanging, soupy moisture.

And she was crying, too, the crying coming out without her being able to control it, and she was ashamed of that, too, because that's what a girl from the village would do, not brave General Robotwallah.

Calloused hands touched her shoulders, squeezed them. The smell of her mother in her nose: clean sweat, cooking spice, soap. Strong, thin arms encircled her from behind.

"Daughter, oh daughter, what happened to you?"

And she wanted to tell Ammaji everything, but all that came out were cries. She turned her head to her mother's bosom and heaved with the sobs that came and came and came in waves, feeling like

they'd turn her inside out. Gopal got up and moved into the next room,
silent and scared. She noticed this, noticed all of it as from a great
390 distance, her body sobbing, her mind away somewhere, cool and remote.

"Ammaji," she said at last. "There was a boy."

Her mother squeezed her harder. "Oh, Mala, sweet girl --"

"No, Ammaji, he didn't touch me. He tried to. I knocked him down.

Twice. And I kicked him and kicked him until I heard things breaking,
395 and then I ran home."

"Mala!" her mother held her at arm's length. "Who was he?" Meaning,
Was he someone who can come after us, who can make trouble for us,
who could ruin us here in Dharavi?

"He was Mrs Dibyendu's nephew, the big one, the one who makes trouble
400 all the time."

Her mothers fingers tightened on her arms and her eyes went wide.

"Oh, Mala, Mala -- oh, no."

And Mala knew exactly what her mother meant by this, why she was
consumed with horror. Her relationship with Mr Banerjee came from Mrs
405 Dibyendu. And the flat, their lives, the phone and the clothes
they wore -- they all came from Mr Banerjee. They balanced on a shaky
pillar of relationships, and Mrs Dibyendu was at the bottom of it,
all resting on her shoulders. And the idiot nephew could convince

her to shrug her shoulders and all would come tumbling down --

410 the money, the security, all of it.

That was the biggest injustice of all, the injustice that had driven her to kick and kick and kick -- this oaf of a boy knew that he could get away with his grabbing and intimidation because she couldn't afford to stop him. But she had stopped him and she could not --

415 would not -- be sorry.

"I can talk with Mr Banerjee," she said. "I have his phone number. He knows that I'm a good worker -- he'll make it all better. You'll see, Ammaji, don't worry."

420 "Why, Mala, why? Couldn't you have just run away? Why did you have to hurt this boy?"

Mala felt some of the anger flood back into her. Her mother, her own mother --

But she understood. Her mother wanted to protect her, but her mother wasn't a general. She was just a girl from the village, all grown up. 425 She had been beaten down by too many boys and men, too much hurt and poverty and fear. This was what Mala was destined to become, someone who ran from her attackers because she couldn't afford to anger them. She wouldn't do it.

No matter what happened with Mr Banerjee and Mrs Dibyendu and 430 her stupid idiot nephew, she was not going to become that person.