

Home Soil

By Miriam Ruff

Kreya thrust her knee into the back of the Earther's suit, right below the portable air unit, and twisted his left arm up higher, so it almost reached his head. Big suit. Clumsy suit. The kind people wore when they didn't live in space. He slammed up against the outside wall of the airlock and grunted inside his helmet.

"Tell me when you planning hit us, mahn," she spat into the comm of her own suit. "We not looking more Earthers comin for what ours now."

"The hell I will," the man hissed. "You ungrateful space rats, you don't know what a good life we've given you."

"Ah, so good we starve when you no feel like sendin food, that be? Then you tax what you do send so we can't eat, and charge high for air so kids can't breathe right. Well, we grow our own food now, heavy mahn. You not know? We got food and air. We no need you any more. We got good life with no Earthers messin our stuff. It been 200 years and you still think you control what never yours. We light and livin out here Mars."

The man twisted in Kreya's grasp, but she had him pinned too tightly to do much more than squirm.

"Go to Hell."

"No, it be you who goin, mahn, if you no tell me. One last chance - when you hit us?"

"You're as good as dead, dust-eater."

"No me, Earther. It you be flyin back to Earth in no suit. I find out some other way what you plan."

Kreya reached with her free hand across her body, pulling a five-inch utility knife from a side pocket of her skin-tight reflective suit. And, maintaining pressure on the man's back, she dug the blade deeply into his protective casing, leaving a wide gash. The hiss of escaping air whistled over the comm link, and the man gave a strangled scream. When she released her knee, he dropped, gasping, to the ruddy soil. His arms flailed and thrashed as he tried to suck in air that wasn't there. She stepped back and watched, her dark eyes glinting like steel from behind the wide faceplate of her sleek helmet. Her chocolate-colored face hardened, too - this was not her first kill, but it was clearly a necessary one. The entire expanded colony - her people - depended on it. She waited until the thrashing stopped and the man lay looking at her with empty eyes.

Kreya peered out at the rocky plain surrounding the spaceport. It was still the dawn shift in Mars' perpetual twilight, and there weren't many ships coming in and out at this time. She was sheltered by the bulk of the airlock protruding from the port's loading dock, but she knew she couldn't leave the Earther here. No one could track his death to her, specifically, but trouble between Earth and Mars had been brewing for decades, and she knew, regardless, that the SMM would be blamed. And the Sovereign Mars Movement couldn't afford to become entangled in that right now, especially when they were so close to gaining their independence, despite what the diplomats said.

There was an access shaft behind the airlock that was only used when the generator had to be taken offline; that would do for now. Kreya dragged the body to the shaft and turned the large wheel that would open the metal seal. It was stiff from disuse. Even in Mars' light gravity, dragging the man and hoisting him into the shaft was difficult - she was fifth-generation Martian, and well-adapted to her planet. Mass was still mass, no matter where you were from, and Earthers carried more muscle from pulling against their gravity.

"Mahn, why you be so big load?" she murmured into the silence. "Damn Earther make more problem even when is dead."

She poured him in headfirst, pushing on his legs to get the rest of the body over the seal's lip. The hatch shook slightly as her burden hit bottom, and convinced he would not be discovered anytime soon, she swung the wheel in the opposite direction and took to brushing the drag marks from the reddish dust to avoid any unwanted attention. Real, red dust. The Earther was right about one thing - she was a dust-eater through-and-through, and damn proud of it. Then putting her palm to the airlock's plate, she waited for the door to cycle and went back inside.

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The SMM war room had been built in an abandoned maintenance cavern 29 levels below the planet's surface. It had taken 10 years of covert effort to turn it from a dust-filled hollow to a state-of-the-art surveillance and attack center, as the Martians took as much technology from the Earthers as they could get away with and re-engineered it to improve its function. Banks of video monitors lined the walls, each monitor trained on a different level and section of the colony. At the far end of the room from the entrance stood a long, squat console, whose switches and knobs operated a wide range of ordnance aimed at targets both inside and outside the main dome, defending the inhabitants from The Enemy. There was only one - the planet next door - and everyone here knew it. Kreya had grown up in this room, learning the ins-and-outs of every console, every weapon from Mars' top minds, and she had grown to become one of the SMM's leading stealth agents.

It was now time for the day-evening shift switch, and in the chaotic movement of people on all the levels, about 100 individuals had been able to break away and make it to the room undetected. They sat in the chairs, against the walls, or between machinery, wherever they could find a space. Hevor, a tall, dark-skinned man of about 40 sols moved to the front of the room, and a hush descended, though the air still crackled with anticipation.

"We be glad you come," Hevor started. His voice was deceptively soft for his size. "Know it difficult but we near the time. Deimos put it within a week. Kreya, anything on the Earther?"

She dropped her chin slightly. "No, and he gone."

"Okay, Salis?"

He turned his gaze toward an Asian man near the back of the room. "Been over manifests they post. If they carrying, they not showing it there."

A gray-haired woman raised her voice. "Hevor, got intel. All you need hear."

Her voice was gravelly - she had spent her whole life breathing in the planet's dust, and it commanded a certain respect - like everyone in the room, she was a Duster through-and-through. Everyone turned as one to look at her.

She continued. "Two ship inbound, docking in three sols. "Hurley" carry Earther people-killer machine - wipe Dusters out with no damage to dome. Needs get inside to use it, though, so we got room. "Casey" got maybe 2,000 troop. They plannin for big fight. No prisoner me thinkin."

"How solid the evidence?"

"Confirm off Netlink, and got send-through from our Duster in military office. We right in it."

Hevor considered this for a moment. "Evacuation?"

Kreya spoke up. "All not old enough to fight goin to down-below. Bulkheads down and everyone else know be shield. We be ready."

Hevor peered out at the group before him. "We got one chance get this right. We gotta know everyone in and knows what doin."

"We all good," Kreya told him decisively. "Been long time waitin. Not gonna screw up."

Hevor nodded. "Good. We get maybe five minute when they dock for them to realize the airlock no cycle for them and get their suits on. We gotta be in by then. Not gonna lie - won't be easy. We gonna lose some, but we have surprise. To them Mars just old space rock; to us home, and we fight for home. Show them Dusters don't take no beatin from the heavy mahn."

The group cheered their assent.

"Nayan give final posts tomorrow noon," Hevor told them. "Be there, be ready, and this time Mars finally be free. Now go. Don't want no Earthers wondering where their space rats go to."

One by one they filed out, moving into the crowds as inconspicuously as they could.

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It was all in the planning, Kreya told herself as she wriggled tighter into her hiding space between two large cargo containers in the docking area. It was hard to move with her suit on, but she needed the protection in the airless bay. The Earthers would land in about 20 minutes, their ships descending from the surface platform into the bay, which was supposed to seal and pressurize so they could disembark. They didn't know that Tarent had sabotaged the cyclor, but it wouldn't take them long to figure out how to override it. That was the time upon which all their plans depended - getting to the ships and the crew before they were fully pressurized and before they knew what hit them.

She was in charge of the laser cutter. She had always shot on target, and now she would have her biggest target yet - an Earther ship, which she was to slice open like a ration tin. The trick was making the gash quickly enough and deep enough so that many of the Earthers wouldn't have even suited up yet. If they weren't caught in the fire, they should suffocate in the vacuum of the bay. The rest, who were suited, would put up the biggest fight, and that's where the casualties would start to mount up. "Be quick cut," she whispered to her weapon, and she tensed her grip on it.

"Comm check," came Hevor's voice in her ear.

"Bay cargo ready," she replied, and she heard each of the other hidden fighters reporting in. She kept her comm open for any additional orders.

Kreya felt the vibration as the entire bay shook before Hevor's voice came again: "Ships locked on pads. Headin your way, cargo. Fight well. We back you up."

The bay shook as the ships descended, and she felt herself holding her breath. "No, breathe, Duster," she told herself. "Life in the breathin."

Minutes went by, she and she could see the bottom of the platforms entering the bay. The large bay doors were starting to close. It was now or never.

Kreya let out a whoop of excitement. "You go nowhere, Earther scum! Hit now!"

She and at least ten other shooters targeted the ships and began drilling. The Earthers had named this planet after their god of war. Well, it had come to war. And in that war she knew she would either live or die, but it would be worth all the effort, no matter what. Mars, her world and its colony of people, would live forever.

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