

CHANDRALESKSHA PATEL'S STORY

"AVATAR REBORN"

"...We must, in this day and age of fading light, seize our chance for liberty...not only to free ourselves, but the future generations of Humanity, our children, and our grandchildren. We must take back what is ours...what had been usurped by those who have no right. We must purge the world of their staining presence, so that our children might grow up in a world without despots, without fear of the warped abominations we seek to destroy.

"My fellow warriors, look now at your bodies, transformed for fighting. Look at the steel under your skin, with your new eyes, and know that the pain and burden you have taken on is not in vain. When this hard fight is over, your bodies will be mended, but your scars will remain. Bear these scars with pride. When your sons and daughters ask you how you came to have them, tell them that those scars are your birthright to them...those scars are the symbols of your gift to them of freedom. Now, let us join steel hands, together, and overthrow those who would be tyrants over us..."

-Excerpt from a commencement speech given on June 1, 2014, by Colonel Peter "Mad Pete" Bonasera, Human Resistance High Command, to a graduating class of Combat-Class cyborgs.

Chandra's world was a nauseous, swirling nightmare of stinging venom and the dark realization that she was going to die soon. Worse was the fact that she didn't care anymore. The seizures had abated for the night, due in no small part to the massive amounts of antivenom and painkillers draining into her remaining good arm. The medications knocked some of the edge off of the fire coursing through her system, but it still wasn't enough. Despair and pain were all she seemed to know, and the lack of any distraction from the incessant noises coming from her life support machinery and the flickering overhead fluorescents seemed to only distill her misery.

The doctors were murmuring and keeping their conversations about her with the attending nurses out of her range of hearing. Combat casualties like herself were top priorities, but the initial whirlwind of attention she received after the return from her botched mission had tapered to sympathetic looks from the nursing staff and brave-faced visits from her team mates. She could tell she had already been written off.

The doctors fought hard to save her legs, left arm, and eye when she was first rushed into the combat trauma ward, fresh from the teleport pad. The acid dripping from her wounds and hissing combat armor ate through the gurney and floor in ragged slashes, filling the air with the sour smell of corroding flesh and bubbling tile. There was no time for anesthetics during those confused first minutes, and her screams echoed through the halls of the emergency ward as

her appendages dissolved before her one normal eye. Gauze and bloody dressings covered her other empty socket like a pirate's eyepatch where the surgeons removed her implanted combat optics.

Her armor's helmet had taken the brunt of the attack, but a sizzling bit of acid still managed to leak through her visor. The now-ruined cybernetic sensor, normally held fast to her skull by six surgical steel bolts, simply peeled away from the bone. She remembered the trauma nurse's sickened expression when the wound beneath the removed implant was exposed. When she fell to the wayside, another nurse quickly took her place, yelling orders while trying to staunch the bleeding and decay.

Every manner of tube and needle was inserted in her, and blackness mercifully claimed her just as the whine of surgical tools began to amputate her hemorrhaging limbs. That had been two days ago. Since then, her life had been nothing but intermittent episodes of pain-filled lucidity, ragged dreams of green and red fire coursing through her veins, waiting for the next round of clucking doctors. Now they were saying her raven-black hair was going to fall out due to the interaction of the antivenoms and the metafreak's poison. She was also going to lose her legs even farther above the knee if the infections did not respond to treatment. The gaping maw of nothingness was coming for her; she could feel it in her sawed-off bones.

The life support machines whirred and clicked, as was their constant habit. She watched vacantly as a new IV drip started down its clear plastic tube, ushering her into unconsciousness again. The past swirled to the forefront of her drug-numbed thoughts, unwelcome and all-too-vivid.

The raid had been her fourth mission since her graduation from the Human Resistance Force's ragtag training academy. She was assigned to one of Amazon base's premier assault teams, Team Zero Eight. The Magic 8-Ball. The crazy bastard-children that bagged both the Red Reaper and Zyklon, two metafreaks that were high on the rebellion's kill lists. She adapted readily to the team's roster, with a minimum of interpersonal bickering. No one mentioned her native India, though it was always at the back of their minds.

Chandra earned high marks in her graduating class, especially in marksmanship and tactics, and was selected personally by 8-Ball's leader, Captain Mark Singh. In another lifetime, Chandra would have found the tall, olive-complected man, a mix of American mutt and Indian Sikh, quite handsome. He had bright, straight teeth and exuded a magnetic confidence that reminded her of her father. The human race was at war, however, and girlish things like flirting and romance were the last things on her mind. What mattered most was that he was a solid, dependable combat leader. He provided her an avenue for vengeance, and that was all that mattered to Chandra at the time.

These were dark days for humanity. Mankind had spawned a new breed of superhuman, a bold new species whose members were initially greeted as saviors and heroes. Eventually, the most powerful among their ranks decided to

stop taking orders, and started giving them. They now considered themselves the new rulers of this world, the next advancement in the hierarchy of life. They seized power in an orgy of violence and atrocity when the nations of the world tried to oppose them. The struggle, now labeled the War of Ascension by the propaganda organs of the new overlords, resulted in the wholesale subjugation of the human race. For the most part the rule by the superhumans was a benevolent dictatorship. Starvation, war, famine, and pestilence were things of the past; so were voting, unlicensed births, freedom of speech and assembly, and other minor trifles.

Mankind's innate desire for liberty was the sticking point. Inevitably, revolts flared. Rebellion was always met with swift and brutal crackdowns. As the resentment and insurrections grew and spread, so did the inhumanity of the high-powered tyrants. London, Manhattan, and Mexico City were all smeared from the map when the combined might of the superhumans descended on them. Unable to stand against god-like beings that brushed off tank shells like raindrops, the last remnants of the free human forces went underground.

The Human Resistance was formed from these last broken vestiges of special-forces units, renegade corporations, and intelligence agencies. They clustered in the most inhospitable spots on the planet, building secret bases deep in Antarctica, the Sahara, and here, in the Amazon. The same reality-bending technologies that created the superhumans in dimensional exposure chambers also spawned the trans-materialization, or transmat, pads. The rebels used the pads to strike back against their oppressors with teams of armored cyborgs like her. The guerilla war against the metafreaks had ground on now for the better part of a decade, but it was a battle that normal humanity was steadily losing.

The resistance base deep in the Kyber Pass region fell to the abominations last month, with the loss of nearly four thousand fighters and their families. Chandra's first outing with Team Zero Eight was a reconnaissance of the killing field where the mass execution took place. It reminded her too much of her home in India, where the governess of Southern Asia had decided that population control using conventional means was not enough. Taking a page from Josef Stalin, tens of millions had already starved to death, with hundreds of millions more on the brink.

Last year her father, a village mayor, was one of the few who had publicly spoken out against the starvation campaign. Despite her mother's pleas, he continued to rail against the genocide, openly criticizing the superhumans. One day, a military convoy rumbled into their small farming town, gathering all the villagers into the common square. A tall Anglo man with long, orange hair and a skintight red uniform informed them in a booming voice that he was the commander of the district that included their small town. He was human once, but the chambers transformed him into something more. He politely asked for her father, Antar Patel, by name. Her father stepped forward, knowing what lay in store for him, brave and unafraid.

With no warning, the superhuman immolated her father, burning him alive with roiling torrents of flame that erupted from his hands. The soldiers of the convoy kept the horrified onlookers there, Chandra's family among them, shooting any who bolted. They forced them to watch the grisly scene at bayonet-point until her father's piercing screams ceased.

The village was then burned to the ground by the superhuman, razing the entire community in a matter of minutes. He had obviously taken his time torching her father to death, exacting as much pain as he could, as slowly as possible. The small town of a few hundred homes was leveled, reduced to ashes on the wind. The monster was done before the throng of refugees had even finished boarding the busses and trucks that were waiting for them. They were taken to one of the first sprawling internment camps, where their misery truly began.

Her three brothers and mother died there over a period of months. Abuse, starvation, and disease claimed them all far too quickly. Chandra's youngest brother, little Amalendu, died in her arms from malaria. Her two older brothers were shot in their rack-like beds, too starved and weak to report for the morning count. Her mother died of the beating she received when she refused to stop her weeping over their bodies. None of the visions of the many hells of her Hindu upbringing could compare.

The week after her mother died, Chandra gained her freedom when the Human Resistance smashed the perimeter walls of the camp. Hundreds died in the escape, but tens of thousands lived, flooding the countryside. Many were hunted down, but Chandra managed to make her way north, where she joined the rebellion at Khyber Pass base.

Now, she was here in the Amazon, a corpse in the making. She returned to consciousness with bile rising in her throat. Nausea washed over her as someone began to shake her from her sleep.

It was the trauma ward's head surgeon. He wasn't alone. Chandra recognized Amazon base's commander, as well as Captain Singh. Singh had been a fixture at her bedside since the botched raid, checking in four or five times a day. She must have been a sight, balding, crippled, and full of hoses and tubes.

"Trooper Second Class Patel, first name, Chandra...lesk...sha...forgive me, how do you pronounce that? Chandralesksha?" The base commander, General Hank Dennison, slowly plodded through her full given name.

"Yes, sir...`Chandra' for short," she murmured softly from underneath her oxygen mask.

"That's a beautiful name, trooper. Does it mean anything?"

"Yes, sir...my mother told me it meant 'a ray of the moon'."

"That's...that's very pretty. Chandralesksha...I like that." He seemed to turn her name slowly in his head, admiring its lyrical sound. His eyes, usually hard and evaluating, regarded her in a soft, fatherly manner. The moment

passed, and his gaze narrowed back to its usual probing, confidence-beaming gleam, “Trooper Patel, I want you to know that no matter what happens, I’m proud of how you conducted yourself on that raid. Your tough little last-stand there enabled the rest of your team to make it back to the extract point. That took some guts. If you need anything, you make sure Captain Singh here let’s me know.

“That’s not the reason I’m here, though. Doc Beckett here tells me that you’re a candidate for a very important weapons program we’ve had on the drawing board. I’ve looked over the plans, and I can say it will take some getting used to. But, if you dig up some of that same courage you showed in that firefight with that metafreak, you’re gonna pull through nicely. You think about what the doc has to say, and you hang in there, you hear?”

Without waiting for a response, he turned and left, followed by numerous staff lackeys that had been waiting outside the door.

Doctor Beckett and Captain Singh exchanged glances, far-less-confident looks on their faces. Mark Singh spoke first.

“Chandra, you...you’re still looking good. Doctor Beckett’s told me about a new program they want you to volunteer for. It...it looks like something you should do. Right, doc?”

The small man with fading hair and glasses nodded. His tightly-pressed lips pulled themselves back into a pained smile. He nodded slowly.

“That’s right. Chandra, I’m Doctor John Beckett. Look, there’s no sense in beating around the bush, so I’ll be direct.”

He grasped her remaining hand softly, “Your prognosis is not good, Chandra. Frankly, it’s a miracle that you’re still alive. We don’t know what your attacker injected into you, but it’s nothing we’ve really seen before. His powers weren’t listed among our database, so he must be a recent transformation subject, but we’ve gotten some good results with a cocktail of different anti-venoms. Strangely, it seems sea snake anti-venom is having the best affect...”

Captain Singh coughed politely, and the bookish doctor realized he was drifting, “Oh, uh...right. Well, Chandra, you’ve done a wonderful job fighting this thing so far, but I’m afraid things are not looking good. I can say, on the outside, you have a week at the most. Okay, that’s the bad news. Want the good news?”

Chandra nodded weakly.

“The good news is that we can still save who you are. Your body is dying, yes, but your mind is still relatively unaffected by the acid and venom combination. We can stabilize your condition, but...but it’s going to take some pretty unconventional means.”

Chandra felt a confused look overtake her face.

“Don’t worry about the details,” Singh offered quickly, trying to soothe her. “It looks like a good program, and the doc here would be performing the surgery himself, right, doc?”

“That’s right, Captain. Chandra, I’d be the lead surgeon on this procedure, from start to finish. In your case, we’d be taking your brain and nervous system,

the parts that really make you who you are, into a new cybernetic body. I can't go into details, since the project is still in the prototype stage, but that's the basic gist of it. Like the general said, you think about it, and I'll check in with you tomorrow. Captain, are you going to stay here?"

"Yes, doctor, I'll be here for a few minutes, and then I've got to get to a raid planning session."

"Good, then, and good luck. Chandra, I'll see you soon. I've got to get back to my rounds."

Doctor Beckett left the room, closing the door behind him. Singh turned to her, as if to continue the persuasion routine, but she spoke first.

"Captain--Mark, I don't want to do this. I'm done."

"What do you mean, 'you're done?'"

"I'm done, Mark. I'm...I'm tired. I'm tired of the pain, the drugs...I'm tired of being carved up while I rot slowly. I'm done."

"Chandra, they've briefed me on this thing. It looks like your best chance. They've even said you'd come back to Zero Eight."

"They...they can't even save my face, sir. See this?" She motioned at her hair, a few strands floating between her fingers, "they can't even save my hair! What am I going to be, some goddamn killing machine? Am I that far gone?" She felt the anger start to tinge her words.

Mark was quiet, trying to wrap his thoughts around the right words.

"Listen, without this, you're going to die, Chandra."

"Good."

"No, bullshit, don't you give me that 'good' crap."

She propped herself up on her elbow, and screamed at him through the oxygen mask, "GOOD!"

He got up, and began to pace at the foot of her bed.

"Listen, Chandra, I know you've been put through the grinder. I know what you went through in that camp. I also know that I, and Maui, and Chajewski, and the rest of the team are alive because you turned and faced that bastard that had just dissolved Melissa and Baker. This...this is just High Command's way of rewarding your actions back there."

"A reward?!?! What, I don't have enough body left to pin a medal to, so instead they're going to encase me in some damn tin can?"

"Hey, we've all got some metal in us! See this leg?" he thumped his left thigh, giving off a hollow sound, "this leg is still in Stockholm somewhere. I lost it my first mission out. I had a building dropped on me, by Hellhammer himself, no less. You're not the first one to go through something like this!"

"Yeah, well, you're not the one who's going to be turned into a...a..." she drifted off, choking back a sob.

"A what?"

"You're not the one who's going to be turned into a goddamned robot, that's what! You heard him! They're going to turn me into a brain floating in a bottle!"

“Would you prefer to be turned into a corpse?”

“Yes!”

“Bullshit! That’s bullshit and you know it. You’re not a quitter, Chandra. The Chandra I know walked halfway across the subcontinent to Kyber Pass base so she could exact some payback on metafreaks. The Chandra I know turned and faced the enemy, even after she saw two of her teammates get wasted right in front of her. You’re not a quitter, and you know it!”

“Give me your pistol, Mark, and we’ll see who’s not a quitter.”

“I’m not going to let you blow your brains all over this room. I like the wallpaper too much.”

“You—,” her intended response froze in her throat with an abrupt sound. Mark’s snarled expression turned comedic as he looked at her, puffing out his cheeks as he pointed at her shocked silence. She couldn’t help herself, and burst into laughter as her eyes watered.

Chandra felt one, then two, then a torrent of tears stream down her cheeks, curling around the edge of her oxygen mask to gather under her chin. Mark came to the bedside, wiped her face with a tissue, and squeezed her hand. He removed the mask gently, getting the last of the tears, and they stared at each other. There was nothing to be said. She didn’t know if it was cumulative affect of the drugs, or the hopelessness of the situation had finally won. She began to weep, and pulled him to her.

“Oh, Mark...”

He tried to soothe her, “Hey, it’s alright. You’ve been through a hell of a lot over the last couple of days.”

He hugged her as her tears flowed. “You get some sleep, Chandra, and we’ll talk about it more tomorrow, if you want.”

She continued to burble and weep into his uniform’s sleeve. She didn’t want to die, but she sure as hell didn’t want to become a piece of meat locked inside a machine. There just seemed to be no way out. She wanted him just to hold her, to block out all the pain. She wanted to kiss him, though she didn’t know why. Chandra pulled back, sliding her good arm across his broad, strong back, and looked into his deep, dark eyes. The life support machinery whirred and clicked, just as she brought him closer to her again. Unconsciousness took her just as her lips brushed against his neck and jaw. Her hand slipped off the grip of his pistol, the retention snap clicking softly as she fell back onto the pillow with a slump. Damn.

Captain Singh left a few minutes later after tucking her gently under her hospital bed’s sheets. He placed a kiss on her forehead and hand before he stepped out of the door. That night, she slept in ragged spurts interspersed with more crying and soul-searching.

Early the next day, Doctor Beckett checked in on her, asking a little too eagerly for her decision. She thought about Mark Singh’s confident smile and straight, white teeth, and the sidearm that had been just out of reach. She

thought about her little brother, drawing shallow breaths in her arms on the dirt floor of a prison camp hut. The doctor continued to yammer, showing her schematics, charts, and diagrams with an awkward zealot's vigor. She thought of her father, screaming in a halo of flame, and chose.

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Captain Mark Singh sprinted up the ramp to the ready pad, where his team was waiting to board the transmat pad. Mental checklists whirled in his chip-assisted mind as his thick armored boots clanked over the metal grating.

"Saddle up, Zero Eight. Section leaders, give me go or no-go."

The nine waiting cyborgs assembled themselves into a loose formation of two rows. Something huge waited off to the side.

Singh started from the far end of the back row. "Gonzales?"

The short man held up a pair of satchel charges and his heavy automatic shotgun, loaded with high explosive rounds. The man and woman beside him did the same. "Demolition is go, Captain."

"Fernley?"

"Communications and data capture ready, skipper."

"Maui?"

"Assault is a go, sir."

He walked across the front of the formation, inspecting his heavily-armed and armored troops. He arrived at the front of the first row, and looked over to the massive figure off by itself.

"How about you, big girl?"

The armored nightmare flexed giant hydraulic-powered claws, and drew itself up to its full height of nine feet. The glare from the rotating warning lights surrounding the transmat pad seemed to be sucked into the abyss of its deep black paintjob. Weapon barrels, antennae, and sensors protruded at odd points from its sleek profile, but it exuded an unmistakable grace and power. It was a mechanical vision of death on legs; a titanium and steel avatar of Kali, the Hindu goddess of slaughter. A small speaker mounted behind its unmoving death's-head face plate produced a soft, feminine Indian voice.

"Who are you calling 'big girl,' captain? I used to weigh 45 kilos before they stuck me in this thing."

"A thousand pardons, my petite flower." Captain Singh brought the visor down on his combat helmet with a smirk and a wink, and turned them all to march onto the pad. He keyed his suit's command and control radio through the datajack in the back of his neck.

"Alright, Magic 8-Ball, just like you were briefed. We're going back to hit the abomination factory in Bern today. Resistance is expected to be moderate, and our intel sources say that two or three high-powered freaks have been assigned as security for the transformation chamber. Local time on target is

almost 0400 hours, so most likely they're going to be asleep. However, feedback off the chamber means we can't teleport as close as we usually like to, so we're going to have to cover some ground. We'll probably get noticed enroute to the chamber, but you all know what to do.

"Data collection, your mission is second priority, but unless something goes wrong, Demolition will be waiting on your signal before setting off their charges. Get what you can off the control computers, and when you're done, let Gonzales know.

"Chandra, you're with me."

The eleven of them strode onto the transmat pad, one set of footsteps heavier than all the others combined. General Dennison was visible on the command deck. He gave them a salute before he stepped back into the control booth. Steel and lead shutters hissed into place on pneumatic slides, sheltering the technicians from the warping energies of the tear in reality they were about to create.

The assault team arrayed themselves in a defensive formation around the pad, guns pointed outward in every direction. Sirens wailed, drowning out the recorded warning announcements that accompanied them. The rotating warning lights became washed out as the transmat pad began to glow, bathed in the reaction of unearthly particles to the normal universe. Power surged from the moaning capacitor banks. There was a blinding flash of light, the muffled crack of displaced air, and the members of Team Zero Eight found themselves standing in the cool, predawn streets of Bern, Switzerland.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Chandra's Story wrote itself quickly. It takes place a number of years after the Peacekeeper seized power, from the short selection titled, "The Peacekeeper's Story: Ascension". Obviously, Tom Betts' vision of how things were going to be made better did not pan out, turning his intended utopia into a tyrannical regime.