Today was only my second day at the Kathmandu Outpost. I was nervous, timid, hopeful and enthusiastic all at once. This was Project Atlantis, my dream job, and I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit an Outpost along the borders of the former Indian Confederation.

Yesterday, I was among the newest interns who arrived and unpacked their gear, equipment and luggage after the long flight from Oceania. We were all unprepared for the frigid temperatures and needed a day to readjust from the humid tropics to the tundra-like atmosphere. Now we were being given a tour of the immense facility. Many of the interns were anthroids like me, but a few had augmented limbs or animal features that contrasted with their human bodies. However, our focus remained on our Instructor.

“—and this is the Archive & Special Collections Room. If you look to your right, you’ll find our team actively analyzing the latest artifact discovered last week in the Kathmandu ruins.”

Glancing right just as our Instructor said, my eyes flickered in awestruck wonder. Three metallic limbs the size of a fallen tree trunk lay disconnected from a central rectangular body, itself large enough to house a squadron. The insignia displaying “The Destroyer” called Shiva was engravened into the side of the mech, which had definitely seen better days as scientists examined it closely. It had to have been built during the early years of the Himalayan Glacier.

“Is that a genuine Indian-made supply mech?” I asked, looking over the remains.

The Instructor, an ageless albino lioness withholding her Cantonese accent, smiled at me.

“That is correct, Ms. Miho,” she pointed towards the missing left limb. “Due to the mountainous terrain of the Himalayan Mountains, and the advantage of the former Republic of China having better air defenses, these supply mechs allowed the Indian Confederation to bring provisions and goods to the Tibetan rebels. Care to tell me if this was before or after the first nuclear bombardment of Northern India?”

The glass optics that were my eyes allowed me to see vast distances (one of the many reasons I was accepted into the internship), as well as down to the microscopic level. As I stared closer at the fallen mech, currently being catalogued inch-by-inch via Recording Drones behind the protective glass, the other watching interns made me feel like I was under an oppressive spotlight. I could feel it in the back of my neck, but it didn’t stop me from visually deducing the mech’s origin.

“Well…the Indian Confederation had already been pr-preparing for a military conflict for the past…six? No, seven years. After the First Bombardment, many unmanned mechs were used to bring supplies to the Tibetan Front for a prepared counterstrike while newly constructed assault mechs stayed behind to defend the homeland and keep order in the chaos. This mech is most likely built post-First Bombardment, due to the fact most manned mechs did not have a protective layer for radiation…I think.”

Moments later, the Instructor clapped her paws together. “Fantastic eyes, Ms. Miho. Everyone give her a round of applause.” The room of interns clapped momentarily, some more tired or reluctantly than others. Meanwhile, I was flustered by the attention or lack thereof.

“T-Thank you…” I half-smiled. “Thanks.”

“Now,” the albino lioness continued on the tour, “If you’ll look to the window situated on your left, you will see the engineers hard at work in what we call the ‘Low-Tech’ Department’. On the tables, can anyone tell me what the items they’re currently cataloguing are?”

No one knew. Sighing, the albino lioness pointed to one of the metallic items.

“This is a digital versatile disc, or a ‘DVD’ for short,” she explained in slight annoyance, “Before digital files, these little things were considered the most popular way to store video and audio files, from film to video games and TV shows.” The Instructor cleared her throat. “So, let’s head over to the Outpost’s west wing, where you will be housed for the duration of your stay here…”

A few of the interns whispered something behind my back. Being an anthroid, I picked up the phrases ‘x-ray freak’ and ‘teacher’s pet, literally’ amid most of them, causing my ears to fall at their words. Disappointedly, peer pressure still existed in this era, even among amalgamated beings like ourselves, whether we had a robotic arm, an anthroid’s ears or a tail.

“Don’t let them get to you, Miho.”

I turned to find another intern, this one a fully-human female. Her features held European and African ancestry, but her defining feature were the robotic arms and legs jutting from her crystal-white uniform. Most likely the result of either an accident or birth defect, the latter most likely based on her confident strides, and the way she smiled at me.

“Thank you…” my voice trailed.

“It’s cool, what you got. If I had the guts to become an anthroid, I’d definitely want to get me a pair of robot eyes.” She laughed and held out a hand. “My name’s Lee by the way, Marta Lee. You’re Miho Murasama, yes?”

I nodded right as the Instructor began to speak again.

“This Outpost is expecting all of you to be fully acclimated into your roles by next week, but until then, I have one last surprise for everybody here. Tonight, we will be going on an expedition to Kathmandu near Sector Five. There, we will be surveying a site that will allow us to see what you’re all made of as recruits. For now, you’re all dismissed.”

The entire group relaxed, each of them speaking in groups as everyone made their way to the Outpost’s recruit lounge. I expected to relax in my room alone, but Marta Lee from earlier shared her excitement. The next thing I knew, she was inviting me to play chess in her room.

“As long as you don’t use your eyes to cheat,” she joked.

I laughed aloud, and no longer felt so alone out here.