

# Prodigals

## Part 1: Pūrvavideha

### I.

When little Chandrika Rao grew up in the monotonous grid of pre-fab housing that would be named New Bangalore, she remembered best the garden her family kept at the back of the two-storied complex. The garden was small, scarcely a backyard, but it was a private little wilderness that she could indulge in playing with instead of with her non-existent siblings.

All the rudimentary, pre-fabricated habitats had been manufactured by automated factories in a place called the Asteroid Belt in Sol System, more than a hundred light-years away. They were then shipped by big-bellied Q-T freighters to Pūrvavideha – for that was that her birth-world was called – and laid in orderly rows where the robot planners had already lasered out urban grids, buried pipes and dug roads. Then the robots would unwrap each drop-pod and snap the pre-fab components together, until each became a wide-domed mushroom that was home for a family of up to five. Her parents had told her that all the houses were completed before the first human colonist ever set foot on the planet, so all they had to do was pick up their papers and step in.

Chandrika was born a few years after that, and she was a little sad that she wasn't there to watch it happen, for her parents had made it sound terribly exciting. Her parents had told her that there was a lot to do in those first years – governments had to be set up, taxes arranged and a proper economy got up and running. They, like all of the first group of colonists, had been chosen by the CSI for their ability to get such things running, so they didn't have time to take a break at all until Diwali, not even to plant the garden.

“No garden? Then where did it come from?” Chandrika had exclaimed, wide-eyed.

It was getting close to one year on Pūrvavideha, her father had said during one of those rare times he tucked her into bed, and while you were swelling gently in your mother's belly, things were settling down. It was then the townspeople all noticed that all our houses looked the same. Now we've never complained about our fine houses,

made from sturdy spun diamond back in Sol, but we Indians are a colorful people, and we couldn't stand the plain white walls. And since our houses all looked the same, if it weren't for our terminals we would have walked into our neighbor's homes and not noticed a thing! But there weren't any other houses to choose from, you see? So we decided to plant colorful gardens outside our houses, so we make each of our homes different and unique. Some people chose flowers, others chose bushes, and we chose the Elephant Tree.

"But why does it look so different from the other plants?" Chandrika asked.

And the Elephant Tree was indeed a very different tree. It didn't look like anything she learned about Earth plants in her education videos, which had brown trunks and green leaves for trees and was generally green for other species. The Elephant Tree looked a little like an elephant, with leathery grey skin instead of hard bark which bled white when cut, sinuous branches that could stretch and unstretch to catch flies, and a crown of fragile, needle-like leaves colored a dangerous purple. Chandrika, who grew up with the tree, was used to its ragged shade and its twitching curly branches, but the other children never dared to play under its shadow. And the tree was unique, too. She had wandered around the neighborhood on one boring day and there was not one garden with another Elephant Tree in it. And sometimes when she was dozing under the tree on a hot afternoon, Chandrika would spy people who had come all the way across the town on their electric cars so they can stand and look at it.

Her parents didn't have the time to answer the question, so they left her with data discs about the Elephant Tree on her children-model multiplayer, along with many other things. Sitting in her bedroom, she learned how the planet Pūrvavideha originally had very different plants and animals than Earth, because its ecology had developed down a rather different path. So when the first colonists arrived on the planet, they had found that earth-plants and earth-animals could not live on the planet's surface without being poisoned to death, and that included human beings. So before her parents landed on the planet, scientists genetically modified plants and animals so they were more like the plants and animals on Pūrvavideha and could survive on the planet surface. Then they sent the robots to the planet and cleared away much of the poisonous native plants and animals, so when the earth-plants and earth-animals arrived they would have space to live. Chandrika's father had been one of those scientists who genetic modified those plants and animals which were now so successful that they were now taking over the planet with their green colors, while the

native ecosystem shrunk away into the wilderness. Far away from the landing settlements, the disc told her, you can still see purple grass.

But some of the scientists had felt guilty about displacing the native ecosystem. Despite its harmfulness it contained many wonderful creatures that deserved a right to the planet, even though none of them could think or write letters to protest like humans could. So the scientists, her father among them, had used their genetic knowledge to incorporate as much of the native characteristics as they could into an earth-planet, so it could serve as a symbol of unity and ecological friendliness between the colonists and the planet, reminding people that all life has an inherent worth. The result was the Elephant Tree, a lifeform that was not-quite-foreign and not-quite-native.

When Chandrika finished the data disc, she grew a little afraid of the tree and stayed out of its shade whenever she was in the garden. When her parents came home a few days later, Chandrika raised the question after the warm family dinner.

“Daddy, so is the Elephant Tree poisonous?”

Her father laughed and said, “Of course it isn’t! We took all the native metabolic pathways out of the genome and used Earth trees as a basis. While it looks just like a Pūrvavidehan plant, it is really quite harmless! Do you think Daddy would let her little princess play around a poisonous tree?”

Chandrika grew relieved; although she wasn’t that worried in the first place because she had been playing with the tree in the garden as long as she can remember and only got sick from it once and her mother had said that it was only a cold. So she pushed on with her questions; it was custom for her parents leave her with lots of data discs whenever they set off on long work-trips around the planet. The elementary-level videos usually left her with more questions than answers, so her parents answered them on every rare occasion that they had dinner together.

So pushing around a bit of rice, she asked “Where are all the other Elephant Trees? I have never seen another one.”

“You’re right, Chana. There isn’t another one in a hundred kilometers. But all the other scientists who helped design the tree have one in their gardens, I think. Too bad they all live so far away.”

“If we weren’t so busy working around Pūrvavideha, we would take you to see some of Daddy’s friends.” Her mother added. “Nandan, should we let her access the remote-view system? I keep thinking that it’ll do her a lot of good rather than sending her all those dull videos.”

Chandrika’s father rubbed at his stubble. “That means we’ll have to set her up for a higher privilege level. I don’t think the council will approve of that. Besides, the planetary net still isn’t very stable for public use. I’ll have to talk to the Network Backbone people about that. Hmm.”

His gaze wandered back to her daughter. “The trees! Don’t you pout, Chana, I can ask them to send a few images of their gardens.” He said brightly.

“Isn’t that giving them too much trouble...?”

“I’m sure they will have a folder or two on hand for study purposes. Those trees are a labor of love, you know.”

Chandrika’s head buzzed with new information. Other Elephant Trees! The remote-viewing network! A higher network access level than the one she had! Was it the same one her parents used? The possibility of a family trip! Would she ride a sub-orbital shuttle or the new maglev train? She wondered if the trees are friends.

Something nagged at her at the back of her mind and brought her attention back to dinner where her parents’ conversation had moved on to something incomprehensible and official-business-like.

“Daddy, the video said you genetically modified all the plants and animals from earth so they could live on this planet. Did you do that?”

Chandrika’s father put down his spoon and picked up a towel. “Yes, dear, we did. A lot of very smart scientists and I worked on it so we could all live on this new planet.”

“So did you genetically modify me as well? Me and mama?”

Chandrika’s mother turned to her with a mingled look of pride and concern. “Should she know?” She said quietly.

Chandrika's father sighed massively. "She will know sooner or later. It'll better to get the ridiculous notion of anti-tampering out of her as soon as possible."

"Yes, Chandrika" He turned to an attendant Chandrika. "You weren't born yet when we took the retroviral treatment, but I and your mother were among the first to take the mod. Which means that it's passed on to you as well, only it's a lot more natural in your genome. We all truly belong on Pūrvavideha now."

Chandrika's father had that expectant look on his face, so she nodded her little head gravely. His comment about anti-tampering had thrown up another cloud of questions in her mind, but everyone was finishing dinner and she knew that her parents can only answer so many questions every evening. Nevertheless, as they cleaned the table, one spark of curiosity got the better of her.

"Daddy?" She began, one dirty dish halfway to the washbox. "So if we go to Earth, will we be poisonous to the people there?"

Her father came over and scolded her for not finishing her job first, but after she closed the lid on the washbox and activated the tiny nanites inside, he patted her head and said, "Of course not! All Pūrvavidehan-adapted lifeforms can thrive both on Earth and here. Do you think Daddy would want people to drop down dead around his little princess?" He laughed and tried to pick her up and spin her, but she was already too heavy. Her mother came in and protested that the daughter was too old for such play, but nothing else came out of it.

That night, Chandrika laid quietly under her sheets, but as she began to drift off to sleep she couldn't quite keep one thought out of her consciousness: a vivid image of her walking amongst all those skyscrapers on Earth and people dropping like flies around her.