

Prodigals

XIV.

The next morning brought light and clarity to the proceedings. Alan rubbed his eyes and watched the flood of follow-up reports that confirmed the now-dead attackers as military deserters but little else. He watched with idle interest as spidery forensic bots and people in armored hazmat suits pick through the rubble from several damaged mega-tenements. It was a wonder that they could identify the remains at all from such damage. Sidelined by the firefight were some of the marches turning violent either because of the attack or not. From that aspect came rather less exciting footage of wild rioters being doused with soporifics from flying police craft and rounded up by riot-bots with superhuman efficiency. Furthermore, the city authorities had cancelled all scheduled large-scale street activities. Alan decided at that point that it was safe to venture outside his room.

He walked through the mega-tenement and strolled around the streets with his opcorder. With automated cleaners working to erase the marks of last night's rowdiness, it seemed to Alan that the tension in the city has settled down a little. He took recordings of the streets before the bots could clean everything away, posting them to his blog as a kind of after-action report. He knew he wouldn't get a lot of journalistic brownie-points for this kind of second-hand reporting, but his main job was still more important.

His minimum professional duties thus satisfied, Alan poked around the devastated quarters of the city a little bit more. Quite a lot of other journalists, bloggers and information-delivering types were doing the same, so he had some face-to-face conversations on various subjects regarding the scene. After that, because he was still not feeling very safe, he went back to his room early to watch the political finger-pointing unfold over the attack.

Somewhat to his surprise, more street protests started that night – evidently the emotions released last night wasn't enough. Mobs of millions hit the streets ignoring the police warnings, leading Alan to suspect dedicated agitators doing their work. He watched the repeat on a multitude of newsfeeds again, but this time he couldn't resist any more. Grabbing his shock pistol, palming his opcorder, dialing his jacket to maximum inconspicuousness and after some thought, activating his living will back at a secure server in Puerto Rico, he swept out of his room and headed for the streets.

Moving quietly in the busier sections, he got close to the periphery of the crowd. There he tapped on his throat-mike and started what was probably the most risky piece of reporting in his career. It was a Rejectionist crowd Alan was standing near and he could see the people holding aloft burning effigies of archaic computers and 20th century-esque tin men, shouting a multitude of slogans without rhythm. It might get ugly if Alan looked like anything more than one of the numerous bystanders.

“Damn.” Alan said to himself when he saw some kind of movement running through the crowd from the distance. The Brownian motion of the people shifted, growing louder and faster. Then he heard gunshots and the crowd scattered, a tide of people heading in his direction.

“Shit!” Alan started to run. It was that or get mowed under by the roaring stampede’s momentum. Even as he got caught in the forest of jostling elbows and hands, Alan tried to work himself to the edges, but the others were better at it than he was. Over the cries and footsteps he thought he heard more gunshots. This must be pretty close to the experience Chandrika went through when she ran in New Bangalore, he thought.

He couldn’t stop or he would be trampled under, so Alan tried his best to keep up with the crowd and resist their panic. He did not miss the opportunity to give his opcorder a few panoramic shots of the flow of humanity around him, however.

Suddenly something in the crowd’s momentum shifted: it told Alan that there was an obstacle ahead. People slowed down and began to disperse through narrow side-streets. Alan finally heard the sound of the police flightcraft above him and ahead, the clank of eerily united footsteps. Then the soporific gas pods landed around him and he didn’t remember much after that.

Alan woke up with a headache in a hospital not unlike the Refugee Recovery Center, except far less luxurious. He was still in his clothes and med-patches seem to be covering his scratches and bruises.

“Alan Piett, privileged permit holder.” A disembodied voice from above addressed him. You have been approved for immediate discharge from the 90th District Municipal Hospital. Please collect your belongings from the window and leave the building as soon as possible, as not to cause unnecessary congestion. Thank you for your cooperation.”

He got to his feet in a massive public hall. Quite a few people were comatose or moving around him and he supposed this was the place where the innocent bystanders who were sedated were laid out to recover. Alan felt completely fine apart from his headache, which he guessed was the results of some forced awakening drug. A quick search of his pockets showed that his terminal, opcorder and gun were indeed missing. He jogged over to the distant counter window, where there was a queue behind an automatic retrieval interface.

Alan joined a line of fairly diverse people, mainly African natives but also many foreigners and whose strange phenotype singled them out as off-worlders. They were all quiet and aware of the little round turrets watching them from the ceiling, ready to tranquilize them again at an instant's notice.

When it was his turn he repeated his identity to the interface, which spat out a plastic chip and told him to wait to go to another window as it retrieved his stuff from security storage.

It didn't take long. As he pocketed his battered belongings at the other window, Alan checked the terminal and wasn't surprised to find that they were a few new messages. They were mainly worried ones from Chandrika, his friends and his colleagues, which he replied with a general "all's well" message. There was also a curt message from the city constabulary.

"Mr. Piett. You were found to be carrying a firearm upon discovery by our post-tactical retrieval units. If it were not for the information in your terminal proving your identity as a special permit holder currently in liaison with the city authorities, you would have found yourself waking up in the temporary police stockades. Please refrain from putting yourself at risk in the future."

Alan's mouth quirked at that. Snide for an AI.

He squinted in the morning light as he left the hospital building. At least last night's sleep had been taken care of.

"Alan!"

He turned. Chandrika Rao, wearing those shapeless, generic clothes of a colonial refugee, was waving at him. He went over quickly.

“Are you alright?” They said practically together, but Chandrika continued. “I told you not to take risks! Now you almost ended up in the brig. I’ve seen those in the footage. They are nasty places to be in, Alan.”

“Don’t leave that on your conscience.” Alan suggested slyly. “I took risks to fulfill my own curiosity, not to see you. So you don’t need to take the blame for it.”

Chandrika spun on her heels to look away. “Oh, you. You’re like a friend I knew.”

“Besides, is it alright for *you* to be out of hospital yet? You could hardly walk two days ago and the streets aren’t exactly safe for refugees yet.”

“It’s okay if I walk slowly, and I’m not very tired yet.” Chandrika replied. “Also, I’m on trial leave and I don’t believe the Administrator AI isn’t keeping a couple of sensors on me.”

“You *look* tired.”

“Maybe a bit.” Chandrika conceded. “Is your place far away?”