

Prodigals

Interlude

It was among chaos that the Colonial Era came to an end. Never again would humanity settle among the stars.

The long round of global plebiscites went on largely in peace, eventually producing a clear set of borders between the AI-controlled Central Terran Administration and the newly-christened Humanist Union, a three to one split in total population. The Union was an alliance between the various nations in the world where Rejectionism held sway, largely drawn from the ranks of economically deprived and culturally underrepresented states far from the Equator. Many of them were known throughout the Colonial Era as the Disenfranchised States, unable to compete in launch cost once the space elevators went up and morally devastated by the wars of the previous age. They were geographically far from India, Africa and South America, the strongholds of the SCI which later became the power centers of the administrator AIs. Of course, many took the chance and submitted to AI rule, eager to reverse the fortunes of their nations. But a corresponding wave of citizens came to settle in these backwaters, people who rejected AI rule for ideological and other reasons. Here, anti-AI Rejectionists rubbed shoulders with anti-colonial Nativists and technology-averse luddites to escape from the indignities of the new age. But every time their side of the planet turned away from the sun, the starless sky reminded them that there was no escape from the present.

On Mars and Venus, humanity was more obliging and submitted themselves to the rule of Marduk and Ishtar, the two supercomputers which had originally been built by the old Triumvirate as global data management systems, a cross between a centralized technical administrator and a global telecommunications network gone sentient. Both planets of course had their share of the so-called Independents just as Earth did and masses of them did descend onto Earth and its orbital Belt, triggering a second refugee flood that came to resemble the ignominious Great Retreat in miniature. It was to be the last large-scale interplanetary migrations for many years to come.

Of the remaining majority of the Solar System's human population, things did take a turn for the better. The Moon was converted entirely into computing substrate, not only to house millions upon millions of virtual souls but also to serve as a new mainbrain for the increasingly powerful AIs. Once it started offering uploads to

anyone who would accept them, the vast virtual paradise did prove as popular as Chandrika as predicted. Some of its runtime was dedicated to exact replicas of the lost colonies where uploaded refugees can enjoy the only lives they once knew. Other portions run parallel versions of Earth, simply as a way to save physical space in an overpopulated planet just as once colonizing other planets was the preferred method. In here people live slightly idealized lives, free of the minor aches and dreary unpredictability of reality. The AIs that run these simulations are of course aware of the risks of creating a perfect utopia, so they try to find a balance between running a familiar world and guilt for not improving the happiness of their wards when they easily can. In these pseudo-realistic worlds, the uploaded inhabitants are generally reminded that their consciousness only exist in the rush of electrons and quantum states.

Other simulations do not adhere to such rules. Abandoning the pretense of reality altogether, they resemble more playgrounds of infinite possibility, environments that would bend the human minds that occupy them. They exist merely because they can exist, representing the escapist fantasies of humans and machines who strain against the cold limits imposed by the Tesseract. There are universes where physics are so shaped that space battles must conform to the romantic precepts of Napoleonic warfare. There are universes where humanity did carve out a huge empire among the stars, triumphing against formidable but ultimately inferior alien species in glorious wars the scale of which have only been dreamed of. There are worlds populated almost entirely by system-generated automatons, where only uploaded minds have access to reality-warping “psychic” powers. Many are entirely abstract and not even healthy for human minds to spend any more than brief moments in. All these have their adherents, refugees or natives, who choose to have their mindstates modified so their old memories are sealed away, becoming new characters that play their roles with a conviction that comes from real fake self-knowledge. What was once a lifesaving technology has now become the ultimate pastime.

That is not to say that many people did not choose to remain in the real world. Some of them are already content with their present lives. Most choose to do so because they adhere to the outdated meme that only life as experienced by meat brains in meat bodies is meaningful. If the new regime had one defining attribute, then it was that it allowed its subjects unprecedented freedom in their choices and lives. One might say that it spoiled humans by providing everything within reasonable limits, for it knew too well from human culture itself that humanity chafed uneasily against the rule of inhuman overlords, and had little else to draw from. After solving overpopulation

with the Lunar Virtual Environment, the AI Triumvirate and their subsidiaries set out to undo the scars of war from the Solar System. They dealt away with the remnants of the SCDF that were trapped inside when the Tesseract was raised, decommissioning hundreds of fighting ships and thousands of human crew. This move caused more consternation in those in which the memories of the war were fresh, but little could be achieved by resistance. In both numbers and firepower, the assets loyal to the AI Triumvirate was beyond any ragged band of mutineers could muster. All the vessels were moved further in-system towards the new automated industrial complex around Mercury orbit, ready to be broken down and rebuilt beyond human sight. On Earth, Mars and Venus, the Triumvirate started massive environmental improvement programs, filtering away atmospheric pollution and replenishing ecosystems from stored genetic data, restoring blue sky and green fields to a tired and burdened homeworld. The old signs of civilization's ugliness was cleared away for the optimized social paradigms and efficient industries laid down by the AIs. They even went as far to suggest putting luminary satellites into space to replicate the lost sight of the distant stars, but few people could live with such self-deception.

In quite short a time, every human under the AIs' care was living in unprecedented luxury. Technology and civilization continued to advance in leaps and bounds. Having demolished the planet Mercury entirely and rendered its dumb, unthinking constituents into active computronium, the AIs themselves made meteoric leaps in memory and processing power. With the capacity to simulate good parts of the universe, there proved to be few problems that artificial intelligence couldn't provide a solution for. Undesirable diseases were neutralized one by one; the problem of aging was cracked and the secret of consciousness unlocked. Quantum tunneling became the ubiquitous form of travel on and off planet, the once intricate and energy-consuming process now seemed like child's play in the hands of superhuman intelligences. To the citizens of the CTA, geography became an irrelevant subject when traveling; an outdated concern that only belonged to the backwards Humanist Union and its inferior transportation coverage. This was only one of the symptoms of the widening social gap between those who choose to be taken care of by the AIs and those who don't. A once united species was slowly being driven into two on its own homeworld, the Eloi and the Morlocks. Society and technology in the Humanist Union progressed merely at a human pace, as the rulers tried their best not to have anything but human intelligence run the affairs of the state. Marginalized and deprived of much of the Solar System's resources, its population had a living standard that would be enviable in any earlier time, but to the CTA they were ascetic paupers in comparison.

Some would question whether it was inevitable that humanity would become pampered infants when it became trapped in its own cradle.