

Prodigals

XV.

The young woman held up admirably all the way through the monorail to Alan's room, although she collapsed onto Alan's bed a few steps in.

"This is the furthest I've gone since I...arrived on Earth. I never realized Babeltown was this big."

"I think it's the biggest city on Earth at this point, although places like Colombo and Natal are also pretty close." Alan perched on the side of the bed. "Want something to drink?"

"Yes please. Something cold." Chandrika was sweating.

Alan came back from the dispenser with two cups of icy water. "You can't drink too much fluids in a climate like this, especially with all the metropolitan waste heat."

"I hope the super-tall radiator towers get finished soon. Those should help draw off the unpleasant heat." Chandrika took her cup.

"I'm from Puerto Rico. I'm used to this weather." Alan drank from his own cup. "Ahh. I thought Pūrvavideha was pretty humid, though?"

"Oh, just because of my Indian heritage." Chandrika grumbled. "I haven't even *been* to India. Pūrvavideha had its hot parts and cold parts, but New Bangalore was actually pretty temperate."

"Big city?"

"Not as big as this." Chandrika poured water down her throat. "Of a respectable size for a colonial capital, was what it was always called. A few million people, pretty bustling as you'd expect. There was no need for orbit-scraping megastructures, though."

Chandrika seemed sunk in thought for a while. "It's like the upload vessels."

"Pardon me?"

“The rapid upload vessels the AIs used at the end of the war. The ones that saved my life. They could Q-T directly from space to the surface of planets. It had never been seen before. Who could have expected the AIs to improve on Q-T technology that quickly? And now, look at these refugee tenements. They’re so massive and yet so self-contained, and the constructors could put up so many of them in such a short time. We had refugee cities in Pūrvavideha too during the war, and these are miles ahead. Look at the radiator towers! When they’re done they will be taller than anything ever built on Pūrvavideha. The Interim Global Administration is keeping more and more people happy and alive all the time, and it’s getting even faster.” She stopped to take another drink.

Alan began slowly, “The attacks two days ago were military deserters who managed to smuggle their equipment past a corrupt customs authority. They’ve gone to ground since the Joint Admiralty fell apart and left half the fleets and armies in disarray. Some of them have tried to Q-T past the Tesseract and got smeared across the inside. Others have been fighting the loyalist units. The public is just less trustful of people in charge now.”

“If humanity is finding their own rulers so corrupted, then why the secessions?”

“We managed for thousands of years without AIs. I suppose some people don’t see a reason for change.”

“And history shows again and again that people who fail to adapt to technological progress will have it forced upon them anyway, pleasantly or not.”

“And yet history repeats itself again and again. I don’t think most people look forward to change as much as you do, Chandrika.” Alan went up and switched on the holographic windows, bathing the room in heatless sunlight. “Besides, this is the biggest technological leap humanity ever had to take. Handing over the reins of power to thinking beings that are not humans has to count as one of the most radical adaptations in human history. People don’t like such big decisions forced upon them. Especially not at a time like this.”

“A time like this...” Chandrika mused. “The end of humanity’s glory days, the beginning of our cosmic irrelevance... has anything happened about the Tesseract?”

“It’s funny you should ask that.” Alan said. “I’ve been looking through virtual media hubs and there are millions of custom newsfeeds with the same query tag. I guess that it still hasn’t been long enough for us to get used to the Tesseract yet. We are still hoping that the whole thing was a fluke and the rest of the universe still exists outside for us to go.”

Chandrika stood up. “Even though the aliens are waiting just outside.”

“I’ve met people who would rather make a last stand than wither away like this.”

“Alan, we’re *not* withering away.” Chandrika exclaimed. “My father’s upload request is going to be approved by the end of the week. His mindstate will be put into stasis until the Belt Virtual Environment is completed, then he’ll be in a place where he won’t suffer any more. And when they finish the large-scale Virtual Reality Substrate on Luna, they will be moving him there. That new substrate is powerful enough to run simulations which are basically indistinguishable from reality to the human senses. There are millions of refugees from the colonies who would kill to be uploaded to the new facility, if the CRP extends eligibility from the destitute and the long-term unadapted. In there they can live luxurious lives that would cost nothing but a bit of energy. It would better the lives of millions and take away the need for all these crazy refugee cities to go up!”

She put down her empty cup on a set of drawers. “Look at what the AIs are doing! They are cleaning the Inner System dataspace with their advanced hunter-killer programs. Before this you couldn’t even use the open network safely without half a dozen firewalls up!”

“That’s true.” Alan said. “But...”

“Look at what they are doing on Mars and Venus! The macro-terraforming techniques they designed are working miracles. In half a century people from Earth will be able to walk on the surface of those planets without any genofixing!”

“Yes, but...”

“Look at the surface to surface Q-T shuttles! They can move people from planet to planet with an eyeblink! The space elevator *right out there*, the tallest structure humanity has ever built, is becoming obsolete!”

Chandrika stared, backlit by the simulated sunlight. “I’m sorry. I just needed to get that out. My point is, whatever we’re doing the AIs are doing better. *We’re* becoming obsolete ourselves. They fought the war for us and we would all be dead if it weren’t for them. If they’re still kindly disposed towards us, what right do we have to complain?”

Alan was looking at her, a woman born only one year after him and yet looked so much younger than he was. “Chandrika. Are *you* thinking of getting uploaded?”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it.” Chandrika made a conciliatory smile. “It’s just so tempting, isn’t it? You go to sleep under a machine and wake up to live the life you’ve always wanted. Nothing stops every living human being from migrating into a virtual paradise.” She said. “Nothing. What about you?”

“Me?” Alan was taken aback. “I can’t say I have ever thought about this as much as you have. I can’t deny that it’s a very attractive idea. But it also requires a huge change in perspective and also placing a great deal of trust on beings we can’t truly understand.”

“I see what you mean.” Chandrika went to one wall and looked down at the virtual outside, where orderly rows of gargantuan tenement blocks stretched into the distance. Alan’s room was high enough that a second layer of suspended roads have been built, lightweight movers and monorail trains crisscrossing in midair. But it seemed that the virtual window had edited out their existence, to give the observer an unobstructed view of the barebones city. It lent the cityscape a monolithic appearance.

Alan stepped up beside her. “I prefer it that way.” He lifted his terminal. “But if you like, I can set it to a more realistic view. There are military flightcraft patrolling outside too, but it seems that the window won’t show them no matter what.”

“It’s okay.” Chandrika replied. “I need to be leaving anyway. The center has been ringing my terminal for the last half an hour. If I don’t go back, they will be sending in the gunships again.”

“Wouldn’t that be embarrassing.”

Alan escorted her out to the closest monorail station. “Are you okay with going back all by yourself?”

“I should be.” Chandrika crossed to the platform by herself, then turned and gave Alan a warm wave of farewell. “I’m going to be released from care pretty soon. I need the practice anyway.” She shoved her way hesitantly through the throng.

“Wait!” Alan shouted over the crowd of travelers. “I want to ask you for a favor!”

But then the train pulled into the station, so Alan waited for her to get on and threw a connection to her terminal.

“If you’re really going to get uploaded, then before that, can we meet face-to-face one last time?” He sent.

“Of course.” Came the reply.