

Prodigals

III.

23rd century liquor is a careful concoction of complex chemicals, based on designed intoxicants that were much safer and more predictable than alcohol. It explains how a few hours and many drinks later, the three sat considerably buzzed around the kitchen table without fear for day-after hangovers or simple total sloshedness. Empty bottles molded in transparent carbonite were strewn around the room. The remains of what the two young men had hoped in vain was just Chandrika's tipsy chemical experiment laid in filigreed glasses on the table – her cocktail-making tendencies were decidedly adventurous. The two had even helped her drag her university-issue facker from upstairs because she had needed it to fabricate her more outlandish creations, and their addled minds were still trying to decide if it was worth the effort.

“Hey.” Chandrika got up suddenly. “Let's go look at the stars.”

They decided that this was an excellent idea. One by one they staggered out of the dimly-lit kitchen and into the night, where undiluted by light pollution, the vast range of orbital satellites, passing spacecraft and celestial bodies was quite visible. Distant stars winked at them even the bright, regular blips that were orbiting space stations fought for their attention. Devoid of tall buildings, the whole hemisphere of the night hung above them in its full expanse. Decelerating spacecraft cast their plasma torches forwards, looking for all in the world like comets in reverse.

“That one.” G.N. pointed up drunkenly. “That's a big one, got a long and focused flare. That's one of the SCDF's newest and largest cruisers.” He rocked back on his heels and looked satisfied.

“How can you tell?” Chandrika complained. “From planet surface and surface...atmospheric diffraction... they all look the same.”

“Hey, it's a skill. A serious hobby of mine. Like spotting bomber silhouettes back in the 20th century. It can turn out to be very useful, you know. Very useful.”

“Or you just heard about it in the news channels.” Rajeev, who had drunk a bit less than the other two, reasoned. “Heh, you *would* be watching for this kind of thing, you military nut.”

“Nah, just me.” G.N. said with modesty. “Me and my raw talent. Is there any of that purple, syrupy stuff left? It was kind of like your eyes.”

“We’re out of everything.” Chandrika, sinking into a warm fog of pleasant dizziness, sat down and hugged her knees. “Damn, the stars sure are out in force tonight.”

Rajeev agreed with this sentiment and stood tracing the breakneck movement of a low-orbit space station with his eyes. To him it was orbiting awfully fast and he half-expected it to crash into something else, breaking up and showering the atmosphere with glowing fragments.

“You know?” He said faintly. “Just as a conjecture, a thought exercise kind of thing, when do you think we’ll run out of planets?”

“Run out?”

“You know, to colonize.”

“I have no idea.” Chandrika tilted her head skywards, where the rest of the galaxy looked back at her. “There are billions of stars out there. We can find a lot more inhabitable planets.”

“Only more,” G.N. added from the other side, “As the Q-T drive gets faster and terraforming technology improves. And if we run out, we can always stick to building space habitats.”

Rajeev appeared to think about this. Chandrika remembered vaguely that the pseudo-alcohol on Pūrvavideha distorted but did not prevent higher reasoning.

“But,” he said, “Sooner or later we’ll have to start evicting the aliens off their worlds, haven’t we? They’re sitting on real estate that we want. If they breathe oxygen, that is. And eat our, our nutritionist-approved balanced diets.”

G.N. snorted. “I thought I was the one who believed in inevitable conflict. Cosmic Malthusianism, eh?” He looked down and tried to remember why he had brought his empty glass out with him. “Cosmic Malthusianism. Hmm. That’s a good band name.”

Since they had ran out of things to drink, the trio agreed to put an end to the mini-party. They fastidiously piled the empty bottles in a heap outside the door, manhandled the gate open, and then Chandrika loaded up her network assistant and hit the big red button that executed the drunk macro. The program crossloaded her friends' addresses into her car's autopilot program then drove them back home, the purring of the motor fading into the distance. Chandrika look bleary-eyed into the dark lane, then as her consciousness slowly lost its hold like a man on a slippery cliff, she went back in the house and fell into bed. The house noticed the lingering smell of drink and turned the atmospheric cycling system to full power.

Chandrika remembered that night for the rest of her life for two reasons. The first one was when he woke up next morning, she suddenly remembered that she sent off her mover and locked the gate after it, so it could not get back into the garden by itself. Rushing down the stairs to the ground floor and thundering through the hall, she hoped that the vehicle hadn't tried to butt the gate open with its fragile composite bumper. Wrenching open the front gate, she sighed in relief when she saw it parked quite sensibly next to the entrance with all its security measures activated. Chandrika spent the next few minutes coaxing the mover back inside with her terminal – lacking data implants, it was her long habit to carry around wherever she went. After assuring herself from the mover's own log that Rajeev and G.N. had been delivered successfully, she finally had the opportunity to switch back to the inbox to see her priority news items. Then she saw the second reason.

“On July 22nd 2235 Earth Standard Time, unknown alien forces attacked the colony world of Ophir, which was founded in 2233. Several civilian vessels have fled the system shortly before authorities lost contact with the colony, and the precise casualties and damage caused by the attack is so far unknown. The spokesman of the SCDF, A.I. Gilgamesh, stated that a task force of military starcraft has been sent to ‘investigate the situation, assist in any rescue operations and launch a counterattack at remaining enemy forces within the system if necessary.’ Stay tuned for further developments.”

It was the most-viewed news article across the entire Human Sphere. Online discussion forums roiled with debate. Work and life on the planet practically crashed to a stop as people denounced the attack with spit and vigour, speculated endlessly at the nature of the hostile alien civilization and sold their stocks before the Pūrvavidehan Colonial Exchange crashed entirely. The atmosphere was most clearly felt when Chandrika entered the campus of New Bangalore University, where the

youthful energy of idle, bright students was most concentrated in the city. As she was driving to the university grounds, her terminal plucked updates from the buzzing planetary data-net: masterful speeches from every single political leader who mattered, fact-capsules about the assailed colony, interactive graphics that guessed and plotted the progress of the relief fleet heading towards Ophir. There will be a formal remembrance day, she also had heard, but as she feared – no holiday was announced. As she walked past bustling throngs of excited students in the university grounds, she muttered to herself, “Of course. Holidays only happen when they are positive remembrances.” She opened her terminal and checked the schedules of G.N. and Rajeev, feeling slightly disappointed that she didn’t have the time to catch the former say “I told you so” to the latter for the first time on that day.

“He messaged me literally five seconds after the news broke. “ Rajeev looked morose. “Of course, I accepted the possibility that there could be hostile alien civilizations out there – ones that were lucky enough not to have annihilated themselves before developing spaceflight. I always thought we were one of them, for example, and we had to do something about it before it was too late.”

“It turned out that humanity have more important things to worry about, no?” Chandrika said lightly.

“It’s too early to tell if we are fighting for our survival yet, without knowing even anything about the enemy. I say this though, even as I understand the Fermi paradox: it is extremely unlikely that we will fight alien civilizations that exist concurrent in time on an equal footing. We can catch a break if they happened to be a relatively low-tech species that developed interstellar flight through some fluke; attacking us with primitive nukes from chemical rockets. But chances are they’re far, far beyond humanity in terms of technological development. We’ve only been in space for two centuries, after all. Barely a blink in the eye of the cosmos.”

Chandrika looked at her friend sideways. Rajeev was plainly upset, and that was before he even had the opportunity to have a long talk with G.N. She checked her terminal as she finished her yogurt, discovering with mild satisfaction that G.N. was still having a class and couldn’t sneak up on them. So summoning up her meager knowledge about aliens, she said, “Let’s hope they’re not Berserkers.”

“Oh, if they really have wiped out every other lifeform in the universe so far, then we’re screwed.”

“Unless they’re the movie ones, in which case a single daring special forces team with a six-pack of nukes should be able to take care of them, eh?”

Rajeev’s usual humor momentarily broke through, and he laughed. “In-deed.”

“In any case, the SCDF fleet should have reached Ophir by now. We’ll just have to wait until the evening when they report back.”

“If at all.” Rajeev stood up for no apparent reason other than to move his legs. “Although that would be a message in and of itself.”

Chandrika stood up as well. All the news bombarding her has made her feel a bit restless. Ophir is currently the farthest and newest colony from Earth, representing the mark of the ever-expanding boundary of humanity’s presence among the stars. The attack on such a symbol discomfited her in some fundamental way. It sent a message: The Universe is not free for the taking, it said to humanity; there is a line which you have crossed, and beyond it lays dragons. But that could easily be a coincidence. It was highly unlikely that whatever this hostile alien force was, it knew exactly about humanity’s colonization timetable, right?

Either that or the dynamic newsmen of the SCI News Network was doing its job too well; instilling feelings of panic and unease to augment the impact of its message. Chandrika had followed the civil lawsuits that accused them of infringing upon freedom of thought. Familiar conspiracy theories rose to the fore. She didn’t have to check the net to know that the usual pundits are already dismissing the whole attack and news delay to be a government hoax.

“Chandrika?”

“Uh, yes?”

“You were zoning out there.”

“Sorry.”

“Let’s go look for G.N. He should be done with his class by now and I haven’t actually met him today yet.”

They crossed the manicured university green, walking by chatting groups of students. On the way to the auditorium, the two met G.N. striding for the exit, eyes still intent on his slab-sided terminal. Something made him look up before the two called out to him and Chandrika saw in his eyes a strange light, a kind of eagerness tinged with resignation.

“Well, it begins.” was the first thing he said.