

## Prodigals

### V.

The months passed and Chandrika was surprised how quickly the war became just another part of reality. The media trumpeted every military action by the SCI as a triumph against the alien aggressors, although to her few of the actions seemed to be involve actual fighting. The Joint Admiralty of the SCI had cast a veil of secrecy over the war effort, outlining their grand strategy in broad strokes and keeping silent about every detail. To Chandrika, it was as if they feared enemy spies catching wind of their plans. The launching of reconnaissance expeditions was never mentioned, only lauded when they returned with results. Artful footage showed newly completed warships of the rapidly-expanding SCDF emerge gloriously from their berths, without giving away either their actual appearances or where they were actually launched. Armchair strategists were on air all the time now, spinning vast and fanciful wargame scenarios with extrapolated forces and hypothetical foes, more and more exciting and less and less related to reality. It eventually occurred to Chandrika that either nothing much was happening at all, or there was much about the war that the government does not want the people to know.

The only truths in the fog of propaganda were the attacks, standing like a string of rocky islands amongst the sea of interplanetary newsfeeds. More and more alien fleets continued to Q-T into the outlying colonies to destroy the defenders and flood the surface and planets with strange fighting creatures. The first time the aliens moved on to an established colony was another shock – the thinly-stretched SCDF fleet was caught by surprise and millions were killed. But the attacks continued, the attackers sometimes doing better, sometimes doing worse. Floating in on c-beams through the dutiful pony express of Q-T courier vessels, the reports of devastation were increasingly surreal. The administrators of the interplanetary datanet have banned the transmission of high-bandwidth media from the affected worlds (for military traffic was priority, they explained) so simple bit-data of atrocity reached her, letting high numbers and static images do the talking.

“Three settled worlds of the third wave already gone and not a bit of panic on this planet. No one knows anyone from those worlds and no one really cares about anything beyond Pūrvavideha. The SCI’s segregated settlement policy was prescient, no?” Rajeev had said.

“You’re exaggerating. It will be our turn soon.” Chandrika frowned behind her microphone when she said that. It was a frightening phrase to utter so calmly, and a cold wave shuddered through her. She closed the chat program and checked her inbox again, deleting stealthy solicitations to viewing “authentic” feeds from the devastated colonies. Even if they really were authentic, they were expensive, mal-ware ridden connections that were probably illegal anyway.

Rajeev was not entirely right. Pūrvavideha had definitely not been unchanged by the developments of the war. Being one of the most populous and prosperous worlds of the third wave, the SCI has elected it as a prime spot to draw military resources from. The new warships of the SCDF paid frequent port calls, artificial leviathans bristling with armaments and sheathed in shining armor. Once Chandrika went with G.N. and thousands of others to the New Bangalore spaceport to watch one of the warships dock and resupply at the orbital station. G.N. had commented with not inconsiderate awe that the newest generations of warships were designed not by naval engineers but by powerful AIs in the Sol System, squeezing every ingenious feature and every percentage of efficiency into the lowest cost in raw materials of production cycles. They were simply better designs than what human minds could come up with.

She remembered remarking that it was why she found the ships so strange-looking.

A flurry of construction further complicated the busy orbit of the planet. Vast shipyards took shape around the moon Saraswati under the scrutiny of thousands of amateur telescopes, soon to be able to construct full fleets from material mined up-system. On the ground, the SCDF undertook enlistment drives for naval crew and ground forces, even as other branches of the almighty Sol Colonial Initiative began to fortify the planet against invasion. Security around the city’s spaceport had tightened dramatically when Chandrika went there again to pick up her mother, who wrapped her in a fierce hug when they met in the crammed arrivals hall.

“I thought I was going to be too late.” She whispered into her daughter’s ear.

“It’s okay, mum. I thought I was going to be too late too.” Chandrika said. As she picked up her mother’s luggage, she glanced across the mile-wide geodesic diamond bubble that formed the main terminal and saw that the departure hall was even more packed.

“Lots of people are leaving Pūrvavideha, dear. They’re heading for Earth or the first wave colonies because they think it’s safer there. Their transfer applications were still bogging down the office when I left. That was why I thought the aliens were coming to Pūrvavideha soon, and that got me so worried.”

“It’s probably not because of that.” Although Chandrika didn’t sound confident to herself. “The government just declared new restrictions for interstellar travel. There’ll be quotas, tighter security checks and everything. Those people are probably getting off the planet while they still can.”

“Oh.” Her mother said with forced cheer. “I really haven’t been keeping up Pūrvavidehan news lately, I didn’t think about that. I’ve been so busy lately…”

“You told me already, mum.” Chandrika rolled the luggage to the carpark and told her terminal to locate her mover. “In all your letters. How did you ever find the time to take a break back home?”

Chandrika’s mother sighed as she got on the mover. “Computers, dear. The financial office started using intelligent optical constructs to do their assigned work. Those things are pretty dull, but they’re more patient than any human agent and they can be beamed around the system at the speed of light. With so much priority to military traffic, it’s just more efficient, management said. Plus, the patience thing is definitely a bonus.”

Chandrika steered the vehicle out of the lot and started the long drive back home. “It’s going to run you out of a job, mother.” She said half-seriously.

“At least I’ll get to spend more time with you.”

“Oh, *mum*.”

For a short time after that Chandrika was able to take comfort in the presence of her mother, even as the slow, dreadful war continued. She was there when the first squadron of warships built by the Saraswati shipyards was activated. The five behemoths hung in formation around Pūrvavideha’s orbit for hours as the colonial committee sent off the ships in a stirring speech. Salutes were exchanged and not a few tears were shed in the real-time virtual forum that the data-net had set up for the occasion. Millions of brightly-dressed colonists were present amidst a background of

orbital space, surrounding models of the five warships that were shrunk down to scale but nevertheless photorealistic. The forum software dynamically mapped out the virtual positions of every avatar with a great deal of leeway, providing every participant with a fully-subjective view of how the people in forum were arranged. They gathered to send their sons and siblings off to the Alien War, a merciless conflict where every system could be a front, where months of endless vigilance in Oortic space, far beyond the light and life of the planets their swear to protect, can bring either tedium or death. It was an unattractive but vital duty, and now it was Pūrvavideha's turn to contribute to humanity's security.

Chandrika's avatar was wearing a formal purple sari that matched the color of her eyes. After looking blindly around the multitude of instanced soldiers and well-wishers for a long time, she reluctantly ran a search routine for the people she was here to see. Ah yes. They were already there.

She stepped into the private instance, which contained many people she recognized. The impermeable virtual bubble was programmed to grant privacy to tearful occasions, and thousands of them scattered invisibly around the forum. In this one she joined a small crowd surrounding G.N. Vanada, resplendent in his SCDF dress uniform.

"...it had to come to this." He was saying. "Even though I was the realist this back in college, Rajeev, I don't think any realist actually wants this war to happen. It's not a pleasant war to be in and we have never fought a war like this before. But I don't regret this. Ah, Chandrika."

"You sound if you are going out there to die." She walked up to him, the pathing software automatically shifting everyone's positions to clear a space for her.

"Blunt as usual, Chandrika. But I plan to try my best not to." Rajeev threw up a sub-instance field, a further level of privacy.

"That goes without...saying." She replied, then broke down and wrapped her arms around him, sobbing. "Oh, you idiot. You damned fool."

"Not in front of everyone, Chandrika." G.N. patted her lightly, then gently disengaged himself. Behind him stretched the stars.

“A six-year tour of duty. 2267 to 2273. The war hasn’t been going on long enough for anyone to finish their term yet. But I am going to. This war isn’t going to be over by Christmas.”

“I know.” Chandrika said. She erased the tears from her avatar with a refresh command, even though her own eyes were still blurred. “But there’s no end in sight.”

“It’s only been two years. There’s still plenty of time for optimism.” G.N. dropped the sub-instance field with a gesture. The crowd around them returned from impermeability into full focus. “Let’s not hog system resources. Let everybody else say their goodbyes.”

Chandrika stepped reluctantly back among the well-wishers. Several others had their short time in private with G.N., including a distraught-looking Rajeev. But eventually, everyone was done. Then the announcement came over the general channel that the ceremony was about to end. G.N. hugged everyone one more time, then the instance dissolved and he was no longer before them, but standing in a square with all the other recruits just in front of the five warships. Chandrika loaded up a virtual tag to identify him among the sea of uniformed figures, finding his avatar just as the entire body saluted as one. Then they slowly faded out.

In real space, the five ships broke data connection with orbital Fort Pūrvavideha. All the recruits were in reality already strapped into their acceleration couches aboard, their minds receiving one last farewell even as the ships’ computer checked their systems. Five antimatter torches ignited as one as the squadron began acceleration, taking them through a course to beyond Saraswati, where their Q-T drives would activate and whisk them away to their first interstellar patrol.

Chandrika sat back in front of her home terminal, eyed red. She watched the fading reactor flares for a long time, until she could see them no more.