

Prodigals

VII.

The bad news didn't sink in until the next morning.

The Saraswati Shipyard had been destroyed. Thousands had gone down with the moon-station, joining the crews of dozens of dead ships that littered interplanetary space. It was the most terrible blow to Pūrvavideha yet, but the loss of the shipbuilding facility affected the entire course of the war much more. The alien fleet had focused on attacking the shipyard instead of Pūrvavideha itself, which was why, according to the official military feed, the colony got off with no damage at all. Throughout the planet, the word "defeat" hung like venomous fruit in the silences between words, in the pauses of the carefully polite announcer of the military channel, in the mind of the white-haired Director of the SCI calling it a "terrible blow." in her speech. The malaise struck Chandrika's neighborhood as well, sucking the life out of the community. Chandrika found herself going out more and more to the downtown, where people still bustled even just from necessity.

"At least, we're still all alive. That can't be said about many worlds." Rajeev said when they were at the bar.

Chandrika took another long drink out of her glass, studiously trying to ignore a G.N.-shaped hole beside her. "But the next time the aliens come, we're screwed though. Saraswati's gone and we haven't got any other decoys. They're gunning for the planet next, the bastards."

"A decoy." Rajeev looked into his glass with an air of alcohol-fueled contemplation. "That's what the Yards were, wasn't it? A decoy... All those men and all those ships. A damn fine decoy did they make!" His arm jerked upwards, clutching the glass. "Here's one for the decoys!"

Chandrika wanted to join the toast, but she couldn't quite seem to find her glass. This was real grain alcohol they were drinking, stuff introduced by the Anglos when they came to the planet and opened their bars. It was distinctively different.

"You...you remember G.N., right? We sent him off, what, years ago. And now he's being a decoy for some other colony we don't even know..."

Rajeev lowered his arm. “Yeah.” He said in a quieter tone of voice. “Haven’t heard from him in a long time.”

“He’s not the type that writes letters, I know that.” Chandrika said. “Never wrote me any.”

“That’s...that’s circular logic.” Rajeev slurred. “G.N. told me that. You can’t justify something based on something or the other...I can’t remember.”

“The bars are getting more crowded these days.” Chandrika observed. “Too crowded.” She looked at her friend in a way that was more glassy than owlsh. “Wanna take the sober-pill?”

When the duo was not too far into their drinks, the bartender had laid out two white pills on the bar counter before them. This was standard practice in Pūrvavideha.

Sounds of a fight started from the other side of the establishment. Rajeev raised his head and said, “Yeah. Let’s.” The two finished their drinks and popped the capsules. A wave of active chemicals forced their way into their bloodstreams, cleaning house.

“Ow.” Chandrika said in response to the inevitable headache. “I’ll pay the tab.” She looked over at where the bartender had lost the grip on his foam gun and was swept into the general melee. “And good timing, too.”

The reconstruction of the Saraswati Shipyards began almost immediately after the battle. Construction vessels salvaged the ruins of the massive docking complex and swept fast-moving debris from their dangerous trajectories. The Colonial Council declared that the new shipyard would be larger, tougher and more efficient than the last. A wave of volunteers hit the recruitment offices, just as every time some major event happens in the war. Unfortunately for the enthusiastic crowds, it was past the age where the number of warm bodies mattered much in military superiority so practically all the Navy hopefuls were turned away. The planetary guard, though, did undergo a massive expansion program.

“More taxes again, right?” Chandrika asked her mother one day.

“Strangely, no.” Chandrika’s mother replied through her terminal. “The SCI seems to be doing fine with leaving the civilian economy out of the loop.”

“I was joking. I know that.” She tried to summon up some interest for her current assignment. “The autonomous warships have come a long way since I was a kid, haven’t they?”

Her mother came into her room and sat down on her bed. “When Nandan and I just arrived on Pūrvavideha, the robots setting up the colony were clumsy things, yes. I remember how they needed coordinators watching them to make sure nothing goes wrong. I’ve told you before about Uncle Singh and some of the snags he hit when programming the fresh batch of AIs for the city systems. Now they’re the ones who are making sure we aren’t doing things wrong. How the wheel turns.” She sighed. “Have you seen any of those Terran spice packs? I was thinking of making something special tonight.”

“We’ve run out.” Chandrika replied. “And what’s left in the stores are entirely out of our budget. It’s probably because of those alien raids on the freighter convoys.”

“Shame.” Her mother said. “I’ll have to get something else then. Don’t work yourself to death, dear.” She left the room and padded down the stairs.