

## Prodigals

### VIII.

The costs of the war was being felt more clearly than ever. The malaise that so darkened the lights of Pūrvavideha ever tightened its clutch. By the time the Sols System was struck the first time by a hundred-strong fleet of alien battleships, there was little panic left in the hearts of the majority anymore. When Director Miriam Brandon once again exhorted humanity to make even greater sacrifices for the war, it was met with nothing but tiredness, because so much of the war was out of their hands anyway. It was no longer passion and effort but efficiency and meticulous planning that ruled the SCDF war machine, in which humanity was inexorably becoming the weakest cog. Parts of the new Saraswati Shipyard was already in full operation even though the finished facility would be ten times larger than the original, which by then would be churning out more ships in a day than the old facility had in a month. Even so, these triumphant proclamations from the Joint Admiralty scarcely lifted the spirits of the people around Chandrika because the military blackout continued; she saw on the newfeeds squadron after squadron of increasingly bizarrely-shaped warships leave the system and she never heard about them again. Attacks against the thirty worlds of the Human Sphere continued day after day, half of them no longer seriously defended by the battered SCDF and abandoned to the cosmos, their colonists evacuated with requisitioned civilian liners and experimental mind-rippers. The refugee cities that Chandrika saw go up on Pūrvavideha never did stop expanding, hosting new arrivals with cheap nano-fabricated food and spartan hospitality. Chandrika lent her time and her mover to monthly donation drives and watched the offerings dry up – wearied by the war, the colony's hospitality was running out.

The overwhelming effect of the picture was that humanity was on the desperate defensive, even though official news of counterattacks on alien outposts and colony worlds were frequent. Perhaps it was because the efforts of the SCDF's long-range expeditionary forces seemed to do little to dam the volume of attacks reaching into human space itself. The actions in the last few years had been pure attritional warfare and the enemy never seemed to run out of shipyards of supply depots to destroy.

Therefore, even though the alien incursions ended more often in failures than successes, it seemed that humanity would eventually be worn down. It was until the Joint Admiralty touted their latest plan for humanity to catch up with the aliens' force disparity, reinforcing the dozen or so major industrial centers of the SCI with

completely automated manufacturing operations in uninhabitable systems, cutting short the whole colonial process and relinquishing control over an entire sector of production to the creation of robot warships. Many, including Rajeev, thought the unprecedented trust placed in the AI strategic directors to be misplaced. Chandrika pointed out to him that the benefits were too great to ignore and the whole interplanetary economy was already running all-out: it was the only option. But the brushfire of debate on Pūrvavideha and other colonies did not die down for many weeks.

In any case, popular opinion could no longer oppose the military's policies, so the plan went ahead. It did not go as far as turn the tide, but the Joint Admiralty was cautiously optimistic. It concluded that at the current rate, humanity and their machine servants can slowly tip the balance against the invaders over a timespan of mere decades. Chandrika did not sleep particularly easier after knowing that. A war that would last most of her life was not something she looked forward to at all. At least, the rational part of her mind told her, victory would eventually come to her species and everything she knows, which she supposed was better than defeat of any kind. It entailed that the sacrifice of the colonies which were destroyed and evacuated meant something, casting them as necessary steps in the grand strategy that promises a final triumph. But there were also disturbing implications, as Rajeev pointed out. Even though the war production levels of the colony worlds were zealously involved, they no longer solely shouldered the burden of propping up the war effort. In a sense, every system, every factory worker and every navy crewman suddenly found his life and his efforts to be worth less. As one by one the colonies fell to alien bombardment, the significance of humans in the war would dwindle to nothing.

“That’s silly.” Chandrika exclaimed. “The automated factories are just as important as strategic targets! If anything, spreading out our assets is a good thing.”

“But they’re not *human* assets.” Rajeev said quietly, looking around to see if anything can overhear them. “It doesn’t matter to them. They just rebuild themselves and carry on. But when the aliens glass our colonies one by one until there are no living humans left, will the war still mean anything?”

Chandrika had no answer to that. She supposed that she had to accept the fact that Pūrvavideha could be assailed again at any time, and it wouldn’t go as well as the first time. With that, she carried on her college studies as best as she could, the city’s mood alternating between despondency and grim determination.

When the attack did come, she was driving her mover home. A smoking crackle suddenly enveloped her as the firmware on her car crashed violently. Mechanical safety overrides kicked in and barely prevented her from losing control and crashing into a building. She jumped out of the car and a scene of panic unfolded before her; her fears were confirmed that the electro-magnetic pulse had struck at least most of New Bangalore. But there had been no warning...

Just as she thought of consulting her terminal, Chandrika became aware of the heat coming from her jacket pocket. She reached in to grab the offending item, screamed when her fingers wrapped around searing-hot plastic, and quickly tossed the overloaded terminal away, which hit the road and bounced. Around her, other vehicles were not so lucky and collided like bowling pins. People were running and shouting for help. Then something incandescently bright flashed in the west and an impossibly deep roll of thunder crashed into her and nearly knocked her off her feet. She looked and saw the skyline below the setting sun wreathed in flame. She started to run.

Chandrika didn't know where she was running. Her terminal was knocked out and she had only the vaguest idea where the closest blast shelter was. But some animal part of her brain saw other people running and decided that it was a good idea to run, and the other parts of her mind weren't about to argue. She headed of the city center and headed for the suburbs, gradually falling in with the stampede as bombardment rounds continued to fall behind her. The police and guard units had managed to set up a guiding cordon, herding the people into what Chandrika fleetingly noted was some kind of order, but their general absence led her to suspect that their hardened communication network hadn't been spared either. Was it a surprise attack? Even so, how did the aliens sneak past the system defense fleet? There was no warning, no warning at all.

Chandrika looked up. The twilight sky was a fiery maelstrom of disintegrating orbitals and scrambling spacecraft. Distant explosions and sinuous thruster flares vied for the eye's attention. It was the scene that numerous war films had already instilled in her, people dying above and people dying below. But the wrongness of it, or perhaps the *realness* of it, pulled at her attention. Chandrika kept snatching glances at the sky as she avoided tripping and bumping amongst the flow of fleeing bodies, yearning for meaning.

An orbital shot landed close to her and Chandrika was flung into the air before she knew what happened. Blackened and leaking blood she noticed herself lying in the plastic grass of someone's garden. The crowd had grown even more chaotic, panicked shouts now intermixed with groans and cries of pain. Chandrika propped herself up and found that the police speeder which she had been following was nowhere to be seen. Getting shakily to her feet, she tried to ignore the bits of her screaming in pain and looked for anything, any sign.

A man grabbed her. His face was covered in blood but his eyes were white with hysteria. He flailed one arm in the air and screamed, "They're ours! They're ours!"

"What?" Chandrika said faintly.

The man shook her shoulder with his other arm and intensified his flailing. "The ships!"

Chandrika looked up. The flame-filled vista superimposed with an unfolding scene that now seemed so many years ago, when three friends had looked up at the same sky. Through the haze she pushed the man away, noting in the process that her left hand was missing several fingers. The shock tore another scream out of her throat even though the pain had yet to kick in.

High on shock and adrenaline, she stumbled on through the ravaged streets until she lost count of time, the people and landscape around her fading into moving blurs.

(In the tunnels of her vision she saw vaguely familiar scenes of a better time. She supposed she was dying now.)

An outrush of air knocked her from her feet a final time. Chandrika tried to roll over but she couldn't feel her body any more. Then something cold and firm grabbed her and lifted her upright, ignoring her feeble struggles. But the cold hands was pointing her in the right direction and instead of a crater, she saw through her dimming vision a strange construct like a pod made of struts and baroque machinery. Then the vision grew closer in jolts, so she could only assume that her capturers were bringing her towards the thing. As her consciousness submerged, the last sensation she thought she could feel was something being attached to her head.