

Prodigals

Part 2: Babeltown

IX.

It was a week after the stars vanished that Alan Piett finally obtained the permission to visit his assigned subject on the other side of the world. He packed his opcoder and booked a seat on the Trans-Atlantic vac-tube, head full of expectation. It was a miracle that amidst the disorder on Earth that anything went into the bureaucracy got through. It was a miracle that the vac-tube trains were running at all.

Nevertheless, he was ready for disappointment as he headed for the Brazil Natal Terminal by plane, even though the electronic confirmation caught up with him from Puerto Rico halfway through the flight. It was all too easy to believe that hardly anything was in order in the Sol System since Miriam Brandon resigned and the entire SCI collapsed into obsolescence. Even so, life went on. Alan reminded himself that he had a job to do.

In the cavernous Brazil Natal Terminal, the multi-storey train was waiting to be loaded into the trans-oceanic tunnel like a cannon round. The budget-class compartment Alan found himself in was packed with people. Haggard disenfranchisees hung desperately onto their belongings and rubbed shoulders with military-looking types and the few foolhardy travelers determined enough to not let anything spoil their holiday, not even the stars going out. He got to his not particularly comfortable seat and tried to stop people from sitting on his coat. The large circle of self-employed journalists he belonged to had been driven to a frenzy by the events of the past few months and Alan prided himself as a particularly adaptive member of his field. It was an inglorious thing to cover, mankind's final defeat among the stars, but someone had to do it. And while the decade-old news juggernaut that was the SCI News Network hung in legal limbo, it was outsourcing its work to journalists who they didn't need to cover the costs for. People such as himself.

It was a pittance they were paying, but it was a job. It was also a job that grabbed on to his journalistic love for the new and would not let go of his mind. Alan Piett liked to think that he wasn't a journalist just for the money, so he looked forward to the appointment as best as he can.

After a few hours in the cramped compartment, the train pulled into Equatorial Guinea Terminal, off the west coast of Africa. Alan looked up from his blogging and stretched, then followed the stream of passengers off the train, trying not to look at the security cameras installed down the length of the building. Just because life went on didn't mean everything was normal. The disintegration of the SCI had kicked off a power struggle between its backers and the centuries-old political unity of Earth was looking shakier by the moment. The abrupt end of the long war, which had for a decade been the single source of pan-colonial unity and the loss of a common foe, was stirring up old grievances between the nations which had once pushed humanity into the stars. Terrorists, militias and uprisings of all sorts were on the rise.

Alan looked around the terminal and saw the evident security. It was not just the gun-toting guards in impassive powered armor, but also the advanced combat drones that made silent patrols over the heads of the crowd. His opcorder picked up constant sensor sweeps through the floors and he knew that every passenger who got off the train was being watched. Making his way out of the station, Alan submitted himself to a rather more intimate security check through the customs section and had his credentials checked out by an AI officer through the optical sensors of a stern-looking puppet. Then he found himself breathing the hot tropical air of Central Africa, heartland of the orbit-surface industry and stronghold of the remaining SCI corporate holdings on Earth. The busiest of the four orbital elevators on the planet was found here and the purposeful sounds of commerce and construction had long edged out the noise of the jungle. Even on the ferry off the coast, Alan could see the silvery stalk stretching up into the blue sky until it vanished from atmospheric diffraction to the naked eye. He knew that at the base of the stalk was a city called Babeltown, and that was his destination.

The traffic coming in and out of the city was positively stupendous and Alan had to spend several days heading inland, his mass-mover spending most of the time gridlocked on the overloaded roads. The AIs in charge of the remaining SCI assets had decided to turn Babeltown into their administrative capital, attracting a flood of immigrants seeking opportunities in the big city, already awash with garrisoned soldiers and colonial refugees. With a no-fly zone imposed over African airspace for security reasons, the ground network was forced to handle to full weight of transportation.

During the trip, Alan had to sleep and eat on the overcrowded multi-storey vehicle. Shopkeepers and waystation owners made a brisk business catering to travelers on

their nimble bikes or low-altitude hovercraft. Having some forewarning from friends who lived in Babeltown, Alan was well-prepared to the delay and had resolved on spending his time constructively while his public mover worked through what was the largest traffic jam on the planet.

He checked the status of his permit to visit the interviewee and was relieved to find that it was still valid. No one had worked out what the central authority of Babeltown was yet – the city would have become a cluster of squabbling fiefdoms if it weren't for the administrative AIs running the day-to-day work. Even so, vital public facilities fell into the grasp of different factions at different times. He felt lucky that the 54th Refugee Recuperation Center remained firmly in the hands of the only ones who knew how to run it.

Meanwhile, Alan updated his blog from his portable terminal. He was pleasantly surprised to find that a swarm-network had formed over the self-proclaimed Guinean Corridor, a virtual community composed of roadside residents and millions of semi-permanent travelers like him who were slogging through the logistical logjam. There were forums where travelers swapped stories of strange sights along the road and self-help guides on how to deal with the slowness of the traffic. There were helpful inquiries from hopeful immigrants to those who had made their way to Babeltown and made a living there. But most numerous of all were the solicitations offering a shortcut through the roadside jungles, a business both dangerous and illegal. Frantic construction work was going on in the jungle to lay down parallel roads and intersections to ease the traffic flow and news of encounters with sneaking traffickers occurred almost every day.

After four days and five nights on the road, Alan finally stepped off the cramped transport into the streets of Babeltown, which were almost as crowded. "How apt." he muttered as people of seemingly all nationalities squatted and hawked in nano-fabbed tenements. The city was spilling out of its borders, constantly expanding to take in the stream of colonists being awakened from mind-storage and reunited with their new bodies. There were millions upon millions of these minds in virtual deep freeze, evacuated from a dozen worlds by the last generation of compact robotic transports designed to save and transport humans the most efficient way. And now with only three planets left to humanity's name, they were being methodically provided with new bodies to settle on what's left.

Alan doubted that the society and resources left on Earth could handle such a sudden influx of displaced refugees, even with Enlil's superhuman organization abilities. The old superturing in fact had a primary node right under the base of the Babel space elevator, with others scattered around the world and in orbit. Here in Babeltown, right under the shadow of one of the vital organs of the administrator of the planet, there seems to be little signs of order. As Alan looked for a room, he considered it a most interesting time to be alive in.