

# Prodigal

\*\*\* Chapters 1–9 (v. 2.8.4) // Chapters 10–15 (v. 2.8.1) \*\*\*<sup>1</sup>

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## *Translator's Note*

What you are reading is the translation into English of a book written in Glish, a descendant of English spoken a thousand years after English has become a dead language.<sup>1</sup> Its alphabet is as different from ours as the Cyrillic is from the Roman. Its grammar and vocabulary are as different as modern English is from Old English. Nonetheless, English is a stand-in for Glish throughout the book.

To complicate the picture, many characters in the book speak a language, *Terrano*, which is orthographically identical to contemporary Portuguese, whose alphabet is close to that used for English. Rendering the sounds of *Terrano* words to a Glish speaker using the English alphabet is tricky; you can let these complexities just slide by, or read the appendix to see what conventions were adopted by your translator.

The odd orthographic conventions may be distracting, especially the syl-

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<sup>1</sup>You asked for science fiction; you got it.

lable “anw” that occurs at the end of “Sathanw” (the Prezghodlings’ name for Satan); and the diacritical marks in words like “Šheessay” and “erthGH.” They’re explained in Appendix A.

Throughout the translation, an anonymous human is referred to using third-person plural pronouns as in: “There may be someone who doesn’t like this convention; if so, they are free to write their own translation themselves.” This device of avoiding “he or she,” “his or hers,” “him or her,” and “himself or herself” by using “they” and its possessive, objective, and reflexive variants (the last in either the form “themselves” or “themselves,” whichever seems appropriate) is called *singular they*; see the entry of that title in Wikipedia.

# Chapter 1

## Home?

Liutenant (Junior Grade) Sangh Fharha, Ambassador Extraordinary to Planet 1.2, had barely saluted when his superior, Commander Willem Limhoon, vhatta<sup>1</sup> of starship *Cross*, said, “Lieutenant Fharha, we would have to search several more cubic light-years of space to find a worse diplomat than you have turned out to be.”

Limhoon’s exec, Lieutenant Commander Lhithŷ Dhluzio, issued his usual gurgly chuckle. He anchored Limhoon’s left flank, dug into the grip webbing.

“Sir,” replied Sangh, stifling his resentment. *I am an exoanthropologist. I never claimed to be a diplomat.*

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<sup>1</sup>[Translator: Unfamiliar words may be looked up in the glossary, appendix B. For help pronouncing weird-looking words, see appendix A.]

“Unless you can report right now that we have obtained satisfactory terms on all outstanding issues from Ms. Dizzynawvee?”

“Sir, no, sir, but...”

“I assigned Lieutenant Ghalfe to accompany you so as to spice up your blandness with a taste of menace. You must give the impression to Ms. Dizzynawvee that you’re backed up by powerful forces, forces that you’d rather not unleash.”

Lt. Babraba Ghalfe, the ship’s weapons specialist, floated beside Sangh in the grip webbing before the symbolic bar that served as Limhoon’s desk. Ghalfe’s tall bulk made Sangh feel small even before she strapped on her armor and several visible and not-so-visible weapons. She and Sangh were lighter-skinned than Limhoon, whose dark brown complexion was emphasized by his shaven head and white-streaked beard. Dhluizio’s skin color survived in symbiosis with tones from the gray remnants of his hair.

Although Vhatta Limhoon usually enjoyed prolonging abuse of incompetent subordinates, this time he did not indulge himself. Sangh flipped through his notes, and started to say, “Sir, maybe if I ...,” but Limhoon interrupted him. “It doesn’t matter, Lieutenant Fharha, put it out of your mind. You are relieved of this assignment. Starting now, I’m taking over the negotiation. Step one, ready the landing party.” He flipped a communicator



switch; “Lieutenant Commander Kolfhaj?” “Sir.” “Prepare to launch landing craft *LC1* as per plan, on my order.” “Aye aye, sir.”

This bit of theater hit Sangh by surprise. The landing party was already standing by; who was Limhoon kidding? Sangh was supposed to be part of it.

“Now,” said Limhoon, “Let’s go give this stupid bitch one last chance to get this right. Mr. Fharha, Ms. Ghalfe, follow me.” His head was a bullet, pulling his body where he willed.

“Sir,” said Sangh in surprise, “You still want me along? Shouldn’t I report to *LC1*?”

“You’re not questioning my order, are you, Mr. Fharha?”

“No, sir. After you, sir,” said Sangh, sliding over so Vhatta Limhoon could shoot from his desk to the exit hatch without climbing over LtCdr. Dhluzio, who stayed put. Limhoon landed feet first on the P/A bracket at the hatch and pushed off to slither up the corridor. Lt. Ghalfe was second, and Sangh brought up the rear.

Once out into the cramped passageways of their ship, they glided when they could, used obstacles to launch themselves when they had to, and sometimes just crawled around people in their way, until they reached the umbilical passageway to the alien spacecraft *XC-19*. The ship Limhoon

commanded, HHS *Cross* of the Prezghod Imperial Navy, was linked with *XC-19* in orbit around planet 1.2. *Cross* had traveled a great distance from Prezghod, their home planet, and *XC-19* was the last obstacle between them and the planet below.

Fharha, Ghalfe, and Limhoon had spent a good fraction of their lives in space, in zero gravity or low gravity, and were used to these gymnastics, although Sangh could never have won a race against Lt. Ghalfe and Vhatta Limhoon, who had already popped through into Special Emissary Šheessay Dezeenawvee’s spacecraft before Sangh even got to the lock.

Nevertheless, by the time he caught up, Šheessay was still introducing herself, saying how awestruck she was at Vhatta Limhoon’s priestly regalia, and retailing more of the empty verbiage of which she had proven herself to be a galaxy-class master. Limhoon claimed the most comfortable chair, and slid his tall frame into it. Sangh took the other chair, and Lt. Ghalfe, as usual, floated behind them, weapons at the ready.

The only way to provide gravity aboard a spacecraft was to rotate it, and *XC-19* was too small for that, a fact that made its design all the more absurd. Instead of cramped corridors, the interior of her spaceship consisted of one enormous room, a slab of mostly empty space, with a floor, walls, and a ceiling. Bolted to the “floor” were several pieces of furniture apparently

carved from wood, designed to subtly grip the thighs of their occupants and keep them from floating away. The wall behind her enormous desk was dedicated entirely to a panoramic viewscreen displaying the beautiful planet below them. The other walls were cluttered with pictures in ornate frames, oil paintings, photographs, watercolors. On the ceiling, next to the airlock, was a crystal chandelier, whose pendants rustled in the air currents, making a pleasant tinkling sound as background music to the negotiations.

Vhatta Limhoon ignored all of these decorations, even the breathtaking viewscreen, and bore down on the business at hand. “Ms. Dezeenawvee,” he said, “I am here to tell you that we are carrying out a landing on the surface of the planet, with or without assistance from you and the other inhabitants. Any assistance you can render us will of course be useful and will help avoid accidents, which could have tragic results.”

“I’m very sorry that it’s taken longer than we would have liked to welcome you to the surface of *Terra*. But rest assured: everyone there is eager to meet you and your crew. You’ve been the top item in the *Terrana* newstalk shows since the day you arrived.”

“In that case, let’s satisfy their curiosity. Give us a bit of information and we can land in a few hours.” Actually, it was much faster than that. The fastest drill Sangh had taken part in took 55 minutes from scramble to

touchdown.

“Please give us just a few more days to prepare for your arrival. We’ve been studying the blood sample from Mr. Fharha that he was so kind as to supply us with.” Limhoon shot a black glance at Sangh, who had not bothered to inform him of this transaction. “We wouldn’t want you to drop dead after being exposed to our citizenry, or vice versa.”

“Neither we nor you have gotten sick. So no one has anything to fear on that score.”

She looked startled. “Of course *I’m* not going to catch anything biological. I’m a *Seque*.”

His eyes narrowed. He turned to Sangh and glared at him. Why hadn’t he been briefed on *any* of this?

“I’m a *Seque*; look,” and before Sangh could confess his ignorance of the matter Sheessay opened up her abdomen, by tracing a square on her torso and, as if in a cartoon, pulling one edge and swinging the square open like a door. There was no blood, no guts, just sinews and tubing, and blocks of some shiny gray material connected by cables. The inside face of the door had more blocks and cables. There were a few tiny black bugs crawling over the surface of the blocks, but they scampered away into crevices, away from the light. Two cables had been disconnected when the door was opened, and

they groped back and forth as if looking for their sockets.

This dramatic gesture cost Šheessay something; her face was in an undeniable grimace, and she seemed unwilling to hold the door open for long; she closed it with a sigh of relief before Sangh could take a closer look. Her tunic still held the outline of a square where its threads had been severed, but it faded as they sutured themselves back together. “Precious BeJesus, protect us,” Sangh muttered. The hair on his neck stiffened.

The Prezghodlings were too stunned to acknowledge at first what they were looking at. But they all knew all right, having been warned since nursery school. It took Vhatta Limhoon only a few heartbeats to recover. He stood up, pulled a crucifix from his cassock, and uttered a prayer in Lhatin as he made the sign of the cross with it, saying,

*“In nomini Domini BeJesu David Cristi, salvatoris nostri,  
vade, daemones, et libera nos a malum  
computationalum!”*

Sangh knew from catechism class that it meant, “In the name of BeJesus David Cristh̃ our Savior, begone, demons, and spare us from your computational mischief!” He thought Šheessay might cringe or even melt, but all she did was roll her eyes.

Vhatta Limhoon had maintained enough composure to float up slowly as

he uttered the malediction against Šheessay, but now he pushed off toward the airlock (in the ceiling), and spat out orders: “Fharha, make sure this thing comes nowhere near our ship. All crew return to *Cross*. Ghalfe, cover.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said Lt. Ghalfe.

“Thing, sir?” said Sangh.

“She’s a robot, you fool.”

Šheessay Dezeenawvee did not move a muscle, if muscles were actually what she possessed, as Vhatta Limhoon jumped up and pushed off for the airlock. Babraba took up the rear, covering his and Sangh’s escape with her laywitzer. The airlock held two people, but Vhatta Limhoon had taken it for himself, leaving Sangh and Lt. Ghalfe waiting an eternal minute for the portal to be sealed on their side, the distal side, and the portal on the proximal side to be opened and shut again as Limhoon exited the lock and returned to *Cross*. *A new kind of awkward moment*, he thought, *brought to you by space travel*. Not daring to look toward Šheessay Dezeenawvee, he traded a glance with Lt. Ghalfe, who was almost smiling. He tried to mimic her air of sardonic superiority, but he wasn’t holding a weapon.

Finally the tone sounded indicating that the hatch on the proximal side of the airlock was closed. Ghalfe opened the portal and slid into the airlock. Sangh scraped after her, closing the seal behind him. Even before they

started moving, their mobilcoms came to life with an all-hands message from Vhatta Limhoon: “Attention! When authorized personnel have cleared the airlock, disengage from alien vessel *YC-19*, but maintain pressure; modify orbit down 10 klicks.” (The Prezghodlings got the name of the alien ship wrong at first.)

Sangh had barely finished dogging the hatch on the distal side of the airlock when he was smashed against it. His first thought was that *Cross* was taking evasive action, but then he realized Lt. Ghalfe had kicked him, propelling herself across the airlock. By the time he turned she had her laywitzer trained on him. In the small spherical space, the muzzle was centimeters from his chest.

“Lieutenant Sangh Fharha,” she recited, “my orders are to detain you as a national-security risk. You are to remain in the airlock until further notice.” The words barely registered. *Orders?* He did nothing as she slithered through the proximal portal.

“Lt. Fharha: We are going to detach from the alien vessel; expect a loud noise.” He heard the proximal hatch close behind her. He was now alone in the passageway, His instinct was to bang on the hatch, demanding an explanation or insisting a mistake had been made, but he realized how foolish that would be. This was the Navy, not real life, where a semblance

of justice was considered proper. So he let his passivity continue while he floated around the airlock, an inelastic billiard ball caroming toward nothing in particular. There was a dull clunk as the explosive bolts were blown and the passageway on the distal side of the airlock was severed, freeing *Cross* from *XC-19*. Then the lights went out.

Vhatta Limhoon's voice came up on his mobilcom again: "Prepare to launch landing craft 1 as soon as we are 200 meters from alien vessel. Lieutenant Sangh Fharha is no longer in the landing party; he is under arrest, being held in former passageway to *YC-19*, now relabeled 'quarantine brig.' He may have been compromised by extensive contact with alien robot Šheessay Dezeenawvee. Lieutenant 'Elmets': Please proceed without delay to landing craft 1; you are Lieutenant Fharha's replacement in the landing party." 'Tweena Elmets' was the ship's exobiologist, a pleasant woman in her late thirties.

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About that blood sample: It was, Sangh seemed to recall, during his second, or perhaps his third session as Ambassador Extraordinary from the Prezghod Empire, about the time he began to realize that he was going to be ground to frustrated powder between Special Emissary Šheessay Dezeenawvee and Vhatta Willem Limhoon, captain and confessor of Her Holiness



Urbana 11's Ship *Cross*.

His *first* encounter with Emissary Dezeenawvee had been a thrilling anticlimax. At the time he had thought, *This is it, the most exciting moment of any sci-fi movie, the meeting of two alien races*. They had finally docked with the alien spacecraft after it had tracked them for the last 400,000 klicks of their journey, a tiny fraction of the longest trek in recorded history. The Contact Fleet of which *Cross* was a tiny part had started from their home planet, Prezghod, many subjective months ago, survived the quantum leap that got them (most of them) to a piece of spacetime near their destination that physics had seemingly ruled off limits, and finally to the inner planets of the star system that seemed the best candidate to shelter their ancestral home, the almost mythical Erth.

Now the time had come to open the airlock and see what was on the other side. *I hope it's not some hideous insectoid, at least not the small kind that burrows into your skin*, thought Sangh. He made the sign of the cross, muttering the words for the thousandth time: "In the name of the Father, and the Sons, and the Holy Spirit, amen."

If his companion in the airlock, Lt. Ghalfe, was nervous, she hid it behind a sardonic smile. Her favorite prayer was the Grishklo A508 laywitzer, which she had armed but not yet lit. Babraba took up three quarters of the space in

the airlock. *Well you might smile*, thought Sangh, *you don't have to go first*. Her finger wasn't actually on the trigger, but it was close. She stroked the Grishklo with her trigger finger about once every three seconds, but whether out of nerves or eagerness Sangh couldn't tell.

Vhatta Limhoon had naturally chosen Sangh to be the first through the airlock joining their ship, HHS *Cross*, to the alien spacecraft. He was expendable. If he had to die for his country, Lt. Ghalfe was there to avenge him and recover his remains. Sangh was armed with nothing but a crucifix and whatever prayers he could think of as the pressure equalized inside the drab, dim — and cold — sphere of the airlock. Saam 9 came to mind:

*When my enemies turned back,  
they stumbled and perished before thee  
For thou has maintained my just cause. . . .*

There was a good chance the aliens on the other side of the airlock hatch weren't enemies or aliens at all, that the planet they were orbiting was indeed Erth. The alien they had been talking to *sounded* human. But there was something faintly ersatz about her. For one thing, instead of going through the usual protocol for establishing contact with alien races — exchanging the first fifty prime numbers in binary and the like — she had transmitted an audio signal: “Attention, alien vessel! Welcome to the Solar System!” in

perfectly accented Glish. How had she learned that? Even weirder was the shape of her spacecraft: sleek, pointy, even equipped with fins, for crying out loud! It was a child's conception of what a spaceship should look like. Or an insectoid alien's perhaps. The voice, which sounded so homey, could easily be the mimicry of some dangerous horde of locusts, but nobody on *Cross* could bring themselves to believe that. They had come so far, and this star, this planet, were the most likely candidates to be the place their ancestors had started out from more than 1500 years before.

The pressure on the other side of the airlock door was tested and found adequate. Sangh attached an empty sampling canister to the pass-through valve and opened the valve. The canister took a minute, a very long minute, to do its assay of the composition and toxicity of the gas. It seemed to be more or less the same as the atmosphere of their home planet, Prezghod, with perhaps a tad more oxygen and a bit more carbon dioxide, but nothing obvious that would kill them, at least not quickly. There were no further excuses. Sangh made the sign of the cross and muttered the words for the thousandth and first time. Babraba just stroked the laywitzer, once. Sangh slid back the slats, popped the hatch, and squeezed through, holding his breath in case it was his last. But nothing happened to him when he wriggled through, exhaled and inhaled, with Babraba and her arsenal right behind

him.

The other side was a passageway, not unlike the one protruding from the side of their ship, but a bit longer and smoother, widening out to Šheessay's crazy room. Sangh and Lt. Ghalfe emerged from the ceiling, brushing by the chandelier and setting it atinkle. This distracted them for half a second, but their attention was grabbed by the beckoning gestures of an ordinary human woman, sitting behind an ornate desk. Sangh glided with a fair amount of grace down to the big armchair, grasped its back, and somersaulted into it. He held onto the arms to avoid floating off, but the chair gently gripped his ass, and he could almost relax back into the cushions. Babraba preferred to float, ready to push off in any direction, by expertly gripping the back of the other armchair between her boots.

Sangh's fears of glorious death as the first casualty of an interstellar war, or of being infected by alien parasites, were relieved. But his troubles were just beginning. For as he sat gaping at the apparently human woman across the table, he was reminded of every bureaucrat that had sanded a corner off his soul. The woman greeted him with a smile and said, "Welcome to the sovereign Republic of *Terra!*" and that was the last time she smiled. Her face adopted a neutral expression. Her thin, straight hair did nothing to improve the shape of her head. Her skin was the color of wet sand. She wore

a severely cut business suit, but at least it included a skirt. He had not seen a girl in a skirt since the fleet had departed Sudhopa so many months ago.

Even so, what got his attention was the wall on the stern side of the room, a gigantic screen showing an apparently real-time vid of the planet beneath them. Its kaleidoscopic beauty disengaged his soul from his body: Where the veil of cloud parted, his gaze fell into unknowable depths of blue water, or intractable forests, or mountainous deserts. It simply *had* to be Erth. Even Lt. Ghalfe could not keep from staring.

The woman was talking, however, and Sangh unpeeled his eyes from the big screen. “My name is Šheessay Dezeenawvee, Special Emissary to your . . . um . . . Fleet.” Sangh introduced himself and Babraba.

“We are eager,” the woman went on, “for you to visit our planet, meet our people, even to land, but there are a few minor preliminary matters that have to be settled.”

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*Cross*, light destroyer, E class, was the tip of a heavy spear, the Contact Fleet of Operation Motherland, an expedition to find Erth, the planet the people of Prezghod had supposedly come from. Of course *Cross* wasn’t literally the tip of anything. Given Newtonian dynamics and the size of three-D space, it made no tactical sense to form groups of ships into a linear

shape; much sounder to disperse them in the huge volume available, giving each a trajectory that would cause them to converge on a target in waves, from unpredictable directions. Unless some warning was sounded that caused them to alter course.

The destruction of the fleet's probe ship would be such a warning. Nonetheless, everyone aboard *Cross* knew that Vhatta Willem Limhoon had practically demanded that his ship be assigned the role of vanguard. He was known to be an imaginative and daring tactician, and he had something to live down, so Byšhe-Admiral OhMahan, CINCConFleet, had given Limhoon the command, showing a little daring herself.

What he had to live down had been explained to Sangh by his best friend from way back, Tralf Ghiller. They had been assigned to *Cross* after the quantum transit, during fleet rebuild, but before orders were cut about the role each ship would play. Tralf had not been happy.

“Looks like we’ve drawn the short kippen on this one.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, a light destroyer is a shitty assignment. And Hothead Limhoon is in command! Do you know the whole story of what happened at the Battle of Mattho?”

Sang shook his head. His brother Slingo had served on Limhoon's ship,

the heavy cruiser *Dhosama Smuts*, but as a lowly torpedoman. Slingo had told him a harrowing tale about the pursuit of the last rebel ship, fighting to the bitter end. The rebels had been destroyed, but Slingo had lost a foot when a lucky shot from their last gun had hit the torpedo room.

Tralf looked around for people who might hear,

and began, “The Battle of Mattho...”

“I *have* heard of it. My brother was nearly killed there.”

“I know, I know. Okay, Vhatta Limhoon — except he was assigned the acting rank of Rear Admiral when the war started, commanding the cruiser — but you know the name of the ship, of course .... What I mean is, Limhoon was the one that led the charge. His very first volley damaged the defending ship ahead of him, which turned and ran for cover around the limb of Dhassishi. *Smuts* pursued them, firing steadily.”

“Maybe that’s when Slingo got hit.”

“Maybe, but there’s more to this story. While *Dhosama Smuts* fought its battle, the rest of Limhoon’s squadron was chewing up the other rebel ships. Total surprise. Really! I mean, total. Right? But when the rebels surrendered, Limhoon was still pursuing that enemy ship. He got a message advising that all Dhassishi ships had surrendered. Somehow that message got ignored, and he kept firing at — *Dhebola*, that was its name — and it

*exploded*, killing everyone on board. Really, every living soul. They looked for survivors, but . . . .”

“You know how hard it is to find people in escape pods. But, wait, how could a ship explode? It’s not like they have a black-powder magazine somewhere.”

“Freak hit in the fusion drive, is my guess. Maybe Slingo hit it with a torpedo! Right?”

“So. After the battle, Limhoon was a big hero. But after the *war*, suddenly it was considered, like, politically necessary to be nice to the Dhas-sishis. The signal traffic between *Smuts* and Fleet was pretty unambiguous, so Limhoon ended up getting court-martialed. Right?”

“No kidding? They didn’t spread that news around. I thought . . .”

“Wait, wait, there’s more. At his trial he managed to, like, imply that the problem was that his own signals people failed to inform him in a timely way that the battle was over. Really! So he was acquitted. Everyone who served under him on *Smuts* stood by him, but was he loyal to them? Few of those signals people have been heard from since; they’re all on smuggling patrol in the South Fjardinia Sea.”

“So your advice is, don’t serve on a ship commanded by Willem Limhoon. Where do I file a complaint?”



“No advice. I’m just *sinjing na krue*, as the saying goes,” said Tralf.

“Look, *Cross* is a light destroyer. It’s for chasing gunboats, escorting cruisers, that sort of thing. Fleet doesn’t want any trouble with Limhoon. We’ll be all right.”

Then *Cross* had been given the vanguard assignment, and Tralf had been grimly satisfied.

“I think they’re trying to kill him. We’re doomed, right?”

But Sangh was stirred by what happened next. The day after Sangh, Tralf, and the rest of the crew was aboard, and the engineers had ignited *Cross*’s fusion drive, Vhatta Limhoon had issued an announcement:

“Attention all hands: Our ship has been granted the honor of being the first to orbit planet 1.2, which, as you all know, is the most likely in this system to be inhabitable by human beings. Now, let me caution you that the rest of our orders are top-secret. I’ve just unsealed them today. Under no circumstances are you to share them with anyone else. They are direct from Fleet High Command.

“We are ordered to land on planet 1.2 if possible, ascertain whether it is inhabitable by human beings, whether it is in fact inhabited, whether it is in fact Erth, and, finally, whether it has strayed from Christ in the 1500 years since our ancestors left. We are to seize the initiative whenever possible in

our dealings with the inhabitants.

“This is surely the weightiest assignment ever given to anyone in the entire history of our sacred planet of Prezghod. The Empire expects us all to do our duty and more. I know you will. God bless you all.”

At the time, most of the personnel on the ship were grim about their chances. They feared that the Vhatta’s interpretation of “seize the initiative” would get them killed. But once they had made it to orbit around planet 1.2 without being annihilated, a wave of elation passed through the ship. Perhaps they would survive and come home covered in glory. Sangh’s own anticlimactic encounter with Šheessay Dezeenawvee gave him reason to rejoice that they were not going to be destroyed, subverted, or infested with insectoid parasites. Any day now they would step onto their native soil.

But about that blood sample: On Sangh’s second visit he was already exhausted from too little sleep and too many little assignments. Everything had been delegated to him. Limhoon handed him off to his Exec, LtCdr. Dhruzio, who handed him off to various specialists, who needed his direction to compile the files of information Šheessay requested and the smaller requests directed back at her. The most crucial of the latter was help decoding radio transmissions from the surface of planet 1.2, which included air/space-traffic control somewhere in the spectrum. Their own electronics

expert, Muuke v'n Durhaa, could not make any sense of them.

“They’re mostly ordinary FM, but digital,” she said. “The problem is that a stream of bits could mean anything; you have to know how to break it into chunks and interpret the chunks. Are they pictures? Audio? Text? And if the bits are encrypted, forget it.”

Šheessay didn’t think decoding air/space-traffic control was as high a priority as getting a roster of the ship’s personnel. She settled for a list they provided of everyone in the landing party, but followed up with, “Now we’re going to need blood and tissue samples from those people.”

“Why? Did we discuss this?” He riffled through his notes. What they had discussed was the alarming probability that the Prezghodlings had lost resistance to bacteria still prevalent on Ertĥ. Šheessay Dezeenawvee had assured him that all such diseases had been eradicated. No new diseases had burst out from the deep wild-animal populations on Ertĥ? All dealt with.

“What we didn’t talk about was the chance of *us* catching something from *you*,” she said.

“There’s nowhere such a disease could have come from.”

She rummaged through the drawers of her antique desk. He was startled when a little ball of fur came bounding out. It had a smile and two floppy ears, but no eyes that he could see, and exactly how it stayed on the desk

was not clear. Perhaps it had suction-cup feet, but they were concealed by the fur. Nonetheless, it didn't seem alien. It practically demanded to be stroked, and Sangh could not resist. It purred and smiled up at him, and before he knew it had crawled onto the back of his hand. It tickled. He smiled and stroked it some more.

“What is this thing?”

“That's Furball,” replied Sheessay, stroking it a couple of times herself. “Isn't she adorable?”

“But let me explain why it's so important we get blood samples. I'm sure you've noticed that there are no large cities in the northern hemisphere of our planet.”

“Yes, we did. In spite of most of the landmass being in the north.”

“Well, that's because a terrible plague has raged there for over a thousand years.”

By now Furball had crawled under the sleeve of Sangh's uniform and was playing hide and seek. “All diseases eradicated? Except up north, where for a thousand years . . . Hey, not so hard!” he said to Furball's ears, which were all he could see. He could feel her claws digging into his arm as she purred.

“Furball!” said Sheessay, and the claws went easier.

“It's a weird breed of cat, right?” said Sangh, but he suddenly felt a

deeper pinprick and stood up, trying to shake Furball out of his sleeve and take his jacket off. Or at least that was his reflexive intent, but the effect of his gyrations was to send him spinning around the room. Furball came wriggling out and landed on her feet, if she had feet, on the first convenient surface, squeaking and wiggling her ears. Sangh quickly recovered, too, with a bank shot off the ceiling and back into his chair.

“Furball!” said Ms. Dezeenawvee, in a slightly higher tone, of alarm or annoyance. When she was satisfied that the thing had found a stable perch on the starboard wall, hiding behind the frame of a picture of some guys in togas, she turned her attention back to Sangh.

“Graceful recovery, Mr. Fharha,” she said. “You must have played space-ball in college.”

“Why, yes, thanks, yes I did.” It took him a second to stop smiling and regain his dignity. “But please, from now on, respect the, um, person of our diplomatic, um, personnel.”

“Of course, but the point I was trying to make . . .” As she spoke, Šheessay herself did a nice bounce off the viewscreen to pick up Sangh’s notes, which had gone flying when he did and were now floating a few meters above her head. On the way down to her chair her skirt was blown upward by air resistance and he blushed deeply when she caught him looking at her pretty

legs. She landed in her chair and continued her train of thought: "... was that getting blood and tissue samples was a minor request that could even be fun to carry out."

"The answer is still no." He was sure Babraba was grinning at his discomposure, but he stopped himself from turning around to see.

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Sangh's cell was roughly hexagonal in cross section. If the deck was the floor, the ceiling was the distal port of the airlock, which bulged slightly into his cramped quarters as if outside there was an enormous wave of high pressure pushing it in. The truth was the opposite; on the other side was the near-vacuum of low orbit. He was wearing only the standard in-ship uniform, and he would not live long if the pressure or the oxygen level fell. So far the air still flowed.

The cold might kill him, though. He took off one of his boots and used it to pound the hull of the ship, then pound again, pulling himself back to the hatch after every recoil. He also shouted, although he was sure no one could hear him. He had lost feeling in his toes and some fingers when someone opened the hatch a bit. The top of a head, and a trickle of light, came through. Even a trickle was enough to blind Sangh for a minute.

He shouted, “Finally! I’m freezing out here. You’ve got to heat me up if you want me alive.”

“Sangh! BeJesus Cristh!”

“Tralf?”

“What did you do, man!”

“I didn’t do anything! Well, I gave Šheessay Dezeenawvee a blood sample.”

“You did *what*?”

“No! I *didn’t* actually give it; she *took* it. We didn’t exchange bodily fluids, for the love of the Saviors!” He had forgotten she didn’t have any.

Tralf lowered his voice, “What did I tell you about Vhatta Limhoon? He has to . . . there has to be someone to blame if something goes wrong with his landing.”

“I’m pretty sure the Vhatta doesn’t mean to freeze me to death. He’ll be pretty pissed off if what he’s got is a frozen corpse instead of someone to hand to the Inquisition.”

“Right? It *is* phooking cold out here.” His head ducked down again. “Really? Okay, hold on; I’m going to close the hatch for a little minute here while we figure out what to do. What?” He ducked again. “They want your mobilcom. Give that to me and then we can get you warmed up a bit.”

With fingers made clumsy by the cold, Sangh peeled the communicator off the GripStrip that held it to his uniform and handed it to Tralf, who said, “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” and disappeared. Sangh had to fight a resurgence of panic as he heard the inside hatch slats being rotated into place.

It seemed like a long time, as measured by the hourglass of numbness creeping up Sangh’s extremities, but Tralf did come back. “We have to figure out how to warm the fresh air they’re already piping in. Meanwhile I have permission to keep the hatch open. There’s a heavily armed marine behind me who will blow you to hell if you try to come through.” Marines were armed with projectile weapons; quantum weapons were way too destructive and unpredictable. Their bullets were too soft to pierce the metal hull. They could mangle a person’s internal organs, though, ensuring that his or her trip to the afterlife might take a while. The guns were called “squishers,” with whimsy that now struck Sangh as inappropriate.

“Thanks, buddy,” Sangh said, barely preventing his teeth from chattering. Sangh and Tralf had been friends since they were both sent to Nurhome Military Academy for Boys at age 8. They moved up to the Prezghod Naval Academy together. None of their other friends had stayed in the military; too many of them had older brothers killed in the War. But Sangh’s mother had promised the Blessed Mother Sylvia that if Slingo survived Sangh would



join the Navy. Slingo came back, minus a foot, and off went Sangh.

Tralf and Sangh had decided to volunteer for Operation Motherland, mainly out of boredom. They hadn't volunteered to be in a probe ship captained by Willem Limhoon.

Tralf said, "You know, unless Limhoon wants you to wallow in your own waste products out there, we're going to have to let you in occasionally. Right? Really!"

"If they let me in at all, that'll show what bullshit this blood thing is." He sighed. "If only the professional diplomats hadn't been lost during the Q-jump. What do *I* know about diplomacy?"

"You think *that's* why you got the job? We never *had* any professionals. Right? The Admiralty didn't want the Foreign Ministry's fingers on this Op, and they persuaded the Poph that they didn't need them."

Ordinarily Sangh would have questioned Tralf's sources, but he was still focused on his own misfortune. He said, "Babraba Ghalfe was there the whole time. She can testify to that. Unless she's under suspicion, too."

"I doubt it, any more than you really are. It's just that Limhoon understands what she *does*."

"Will he claim little robo-bugs burrowed into my bloodstream? Or maybe at some point Sheessay snatched my body and replaced the real Sangh

Fharha with a robot. But a robot wouldn't emit the carbon dioxide I'm emitting. With any luck, I'll be eating and shitting Navy food pretty soon; I'll bet robots can't do that either."

"Don't tempt me to utter curses against . . . , well, against anyone. We'll get this . . . phooking *injustice* reversed, you'll see.

"Hey, not to change the subject, but did you get a chance during all that diplomacy to see the planet vid? They rigged a screen for us, five-minute views. Everyone had to be *pulled* away after their five minutes. Nobody doubts it's really Ertĥ. Right?"

"Yeah, I did get a peek."

"It's Ertĥ, right?"

"They call it 'Tayha' now."

"Cool. Look, I'm really sorry, but my watch is starting. I gotta lock you out again."

"Wait one second. Tell me, have you heard anything about what happened to the landing party?"

"Just that they made it to the ground safely. Everybody's celebrating. Sorry about that. But don't worry, I won't forget you're out here."

And Sangh was alone again in the cold.

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So he settled into a routine, a nightmare, of solitary confinement. The hatch was opened to deliver food and take it away. When he needed the sanitary facilities he banged on the hatch until the marine guarding him opened it and escorted him to the nearest toilet, squisher drawn. If the marine wasn't stationed at the right point in the passageway to hear him, he kept banging. The marine might have been pulled to help with some task elsewhere in the ship, or simply to get out of the way of a piece of equipment to be maneuvered down the narrow passageway. Or to allow groups of sailors to be rotated out of duty stations after their watch. At all such times Sangh had to bang, bang laboriously to get anyone's attention. Calls of nature became their own kind of torture session.

He was always cold. Whether this was bureaucratic indifference or Limhoon's sadism was unclear, but only enough hot air was diverted his way to prevent frostbite. He had no screen or window to show him the stars or Earth. He was in a cold steel coffin, buried alive.

In between bathroom trips and meal deliveries, there wasn't much for Sangh to think about except what had gone wrong and what would eventually happen to him. The accusation against him was tantamount to an accusation of treason, except "threatening national security" was worse. Fleshing out the details of his indictment was the job of the Inquisition, and very few

people interrogated by the Inquisition were ever declared not guilty or, for that matter, seen again. Fortunately, *Cross* was too small to have its own Inquisitor, so his current situation was the worst he would have to face for a while. But between fear and sensory deprivation, Sangh felt completely helpless. If he survived Limhoon's bold attempt to invade Erth, he would be turned over to the Fleet Inquisitor's Office.

Time seemed not to pass, but when he finally yielded to temptation and looked at his watch to check how much had elapsed since his last bathroom break, or since the last push of the button to illuminate the dial, he tumbled headlong into real time, and into the certainty that within a smaller and smaller number of P-hours, the main Contact Fleet would arrive and he would be swallowed up by the national-security apparatus. The uncharitable thought crossed his mind that strictly from his own point of view it would be preferable if the 'Tayhan's decided to vaporize *Cross* with a death ray.

Even though diplomacy with 'Tayha' was no longer his concern, he had nothing else to distract him but the fate of LtCdr. Kolfhaj's landing party. He got information from the marines who escorted him to the bathroom, most of whom were friendly although apparently entirely committed to blowing him away if he tried anything funny. Some of them kept their distance from the prisoner as if he were contagious. Of his friends, only Tralf spent any of

his sleep time hanging around the hatchway to Sangh's brig, and eventually he got permission to open the hatch and talk to the prisoner when traffic through the passageway was expected to be light. He kept him up to date with the scuttlebutt.

"It turned out that *XC-19* had been bluffing all the way."

"Meaning what?"

"As soon as *LC1* dropped down, *XC-19* informed us what frequency to turn to to begin receiving unencrypted FM transmissions from the landing site — air traffic control stuff."

"*YC-19* the ship or Šheessay Dezeenawvee the woman in the business suit?"

"Didn't I tell you that her name is just the way you pronounce those letters? And that's not really a 'Y.'"

"I don't think you did."

"Look, after the hyphen there are two characters. Those are ancient versions of '1' and '9', right?"

"If you say so."

"Okay, well, 'Tayhan' is a cousin of Lhatin, apparently. Ten has become 'dez' or 'dezee' maybe, ..."

"I grab it: 'nawvee' means 9 — 'Ten-nine' — 'nineteen.'"

“The other part is trickier,” continued Tralf. “The second character is a fairly recognizable ‘C.’”

“Okay.”

“Okay. But that first letter, we’ve been calling it a *Y*, but it’s just two lines crossing, not a recognizable letter at all, right? But I happen to recall, from a historical-linguistics class I took . . .”

“You attended a class?”

“Right? I must have! Anyway, there *was* such a letter in the Original Language, but Poph Pius 15 abolished it, except in one word, ‘XMas.’ Apparently it referred to Our Savior in this word, so His Holiness declared it a sacrilege for it to mean anything else. He made an exception for Roman numerals . . .”

“Cut this short.”

“Sure, who remembers Roman numerals? We haven’t missed them or that word, ‘XMas,’ which disappeared back around the Year 400. I don’t know what it meant.”

“You should have attended another lecture.”

“So if ‘C’ is pronounced ‘say,’ and this old letter is pronounced ‘sheess,’ we get the name ‘Sheess-say Dezeenawvee.’ The letters on the hull don’t name the ship, they name the occupant. Really?”

“Well, since she’s a robot, I doubt there’s really a distinction there,” said Sangh. “The ship and the robot are probably controlled by a single computer network, maybe in the hull, maybe even on the surface. The planet’s surface, I mean.”

“The crazy thing is that as soon as the FM transmitter came on line, we could receive on about 10 different frequencies, including music, weather, news-talk shows, all using Glish! We are huge celebrities, right? Really? If we could just get transcripts of the same show in ‘Tayhanu’ and Glish, we could start figuring out some nontrivial facts about . . . .”

“So what she said was true — we are big news. Did they have screen on us?”

“Dunno. I’m not privy to everything. Some of what I’ve told you may be classified. But they’d classify the date if they could.”

“What is the date, not that I need to know.”

“It’s 5 ‘Dhotuubru’, 3761. October, since the planet’s just past the fall equinox. It’s springtime in Firebase Limhoon!”

Someone had heard Cdr. Dhluzio use the term “Firebase Limhoon” to refer to Kolfhaj’s little outpost.

“Was that Kolfhaj’s idea?” asked Sangh.

“I heard maybe it was Dhluzio’s, or even Vhatta Limhoon’s.”

“Is Kolfhaj just sitting there, or has he met with . . . whoever’s in charge of this planet?”

“If they have, they’ve clamped down on news about it. I heard a rumor that Kolfhaj shot down a ‘Tayhan’ TV-news helicopter. Really! Believe *that!*”

“What is Vhatta Limhoon trying to *do?*”

“Maybe he’s out of ideas. I’d guess he’s been trying to get a rise out of the ‘Tayhan’s, but they are staying cool.”

Sangh wanted to wail, *So why is he picking on me?*, but did not.

That question would not leave his mind during the long stretches of cold solitude. He tried to think instead about the grand expedition he was a small part of, and might still play a role in. *The only likely role is scapegoat*, was the conclusion. Stray verses from the Book of Job came to him:

*If I must be accounted guilty,*

*why then should I strive in vain?*

*I will give myself up to complaint;*

*I will speak from the bitterness of my soul.*

*I will say to Allāh: Do not put me in the wrong!*

*Let me know why you oppose me.*

But instead of Allāh he pictured Vhatta Limhoon. He had been warned



that the vhatta threw subordinates to the wolves to distract from his own faults, but why *him*? No reason came to him, and he gave himself up to bitterness and cold.

Sometimes he might have been dreaming.

*He was home from the Academy during the summer break, working on the Weehmanty farm to try to save a few euchos. He had been a conscientious summer laborer since he was twelve years old and had worked his way up. He was now operating the combine, driving it slowly across a field of ripe wheat until the grain bin was full, then unloading the bin into a dump truck. Old Hwaetbert Weehmanty was driving the dump truck himself, which mainly involved idling for a while, then catching up with Sangh to unload and criticize. Sangh barely paid the old guy much mind any more; he had heard Hwaetbert's complaints before, and even Hwaetbert wasn't really listening.*

*Sangh's Dad, working for Ṗhoematic Ṗharming Solutions, had sold Mr. Weehmanty the combine and wangled the job for his son. But the land Sangh now worked his parents had owned until three years before, when their farm failed and Dad had taken the job selling farm machinery. They had considered themselves lucky to sell out to the Weehmantys before the bank got everything, but Sangh didn't feel so lucky now.*

*He killed the combine engine and went to see why Mr. Weehmanty was*

*taking so long to catch up after Sangh signaled that his bin was full. Sometimes the old guy fell asleep as the hot afternoon wore on, which allowed everyone to take an extra break while someone woke him up. “Ten-minute break, Muldher,” he said to the high-school student who was his underling, as he started his hike back to Hwaetbert’s truck.*

*A pickup came down the long straight road, kicking up a feeble cloud of dust, which hung in the stagnant air as though it had forgotten how to fall. It was mildly interesting when the truck stopped at the field they were working. It was more interesting when the driver got out and came walking through the stubble of the cleared field, and it turned out to be Cindhi Urhau, the girl next door, whom Sangh had had a fruitless crush on since forever. “Hi, Sangh. There’s news from Slingo; he’s been hurt in the big battle around Dhassishi.”*

*“What big battle?”*

*“Doesn’t anybody have a transistor radio out here?”*

*“What happened to Slingo?”*

*“I don’t know. They just send telegrams: Your son Slingo wounded. It could be months before we hear more. But your Mom wanted you to know.”*

*“Who won the battle?”*

*“We did! The war’s over!”*

*“So at least Slingo’s in a hospital somewhere, not waiting in the wreckage*

*of his ship for help to come.”*

*“Allaḥ heard your prayers — our prayers. Everybody’s rooting for Slingo.”*

*“Thanks, Cin. Does Mom need me to come home?”*

*“Yeah, I think she does. Do you think old Weehmanty will let you go?”*

*“Oh, I think so. I was just going over to talk to him.” Sangh wondered what his Mom would say. He knew the outline of the deal she had made with God: Bring Slingo home and . . . . He didn’t know the fine print. How many pieces could Slingo be in before the contract was null and void? Had God definitely signed it?*

*“What time is it?” he said, and looked at his watch. Perplexingly, he had to push the illuminate-dial button to see in the bright sun.*

If he had been dreaming, he was awake now. How many years had passed since the Battle of Mattho? As few as four? The quantum transit had played games with his time sense; that afternoon in Weehmanty’s field seemed to have taken place in a parallel universe, and perhaps it had. His universe now was a cold steel nutshell.



## Chapter 2

# Ambassadors

*How many P-days here? Two? Three?*

“Sangh?”

He jumped, startled. In his small cell, jumping meant bouncing, from hatch to walls to bulge.

“Sangh?” It was Sheessay Dezeenawvee, he finally realized.

“Where in hell are you?” said Sangh.

“Never mind that. We have to get you out of this fix.”

“Did you send little robots to infiltrate my ears so you could perform this voice trick?”

“No, of course not. I just made a few little modifications to your airlock.”

“Do I need this? Have you not gotten me into enough trouble already?”

“I never *dreamt* that anything I did could get you arrested. If only I’d thought to keep up the illusion that I was a *Molhe*, a biological.”

“Explain that again.”

“Most people on ‘Tayha’ are biological humans, descended from animals in a way I’m sure you know all about. But some of us are artificial. We’re called ‘‘Seckie’s,’ which means ‘blocks.’ The biological ones are called ‘‘Molyee’s,’ which means ‘sauces.’”

“So you *are* a robot! Just the way Vhatta Limhoon . . .”

“No! Robots don’t have what it takes to be a real person. Nothing *wrong* with that, but . . .”

“Real? Person? Descended from *animals*?” She said nothing, so he went on: “We’ve been training for this — ever since Little Angels, really. And I missed it. I feel like a fool.”

He prayed out loud: “*Oh, Allāh, forgive me and grant me strength. Banish this demon, and all the demons that threaten us, in dreams and in life. In Christ’s name, amen.*”

There was silence for a few seconds, and Sangh felt a surge of gratitude to God. But when the voice returned, he realized he was not disappointed to hear it:

“Sorry, I’m not going to banish myself. I just can’t stand seeing Vhatta

Limhoon get away with his insane plan. Don't worry, I'll be discreet."

"Oh, good, let's add mutiny to the list of charges against me."

"We might have to. He's convinced everyone that he has secret 'sealed orders' to begin conducting missionary operations on our planet — missionary, ha! — when he has nothing of the kind."

Sangh was briefly confused by this claim, then angry. "If you're going to make that kind of accusation against an officer of the Prezghod Navy, you're going to have to have awfully good evidence."

"What if I did?"

"How could you? Were you there when the orders were issued or unsealed?"

"How about this?" said Šheessay. There was a brief silence, and then Sangh heard Vhatta Limhoon's voice, sounding almost live. It skipped for a second and then came on strong.

"I've said it before, I'll say it again: We're just a rat in a reactor."

"Aye sir, when the rat dies, the reactor fries."

This second voice was Lhithy Dhluzio's gravelly bass.

"When did you record this?" Sangh demanded.

"Sssh. It was 2000 minutes before you heard about the secret orders from your Admiral OhMahan."

Limhoon's recorded voice continued: "It'll be a miracle if we even survive this filibuster. There's no way we're going to get any glory out of it."

"Glory would be nice, sir. If we're dead anyway."

"Look, the only thing Fleet cares about is our life expectancy. If we're still free when they show up, they'll assume the Erthlings are defenseless and make plans accordingly. In that last scenario, if we're lucky we get a big Thank You certificate to put on the wall," said Limhoon.

There was a pause in the recording, if that's what it was. Sangh murmured, "Oh Allāh, for the love of BeJesus!"

"Sssh!" said Sheessay.

"If this navy had any balls, they would have given us a free hand," continued Limhoon's voice. "Suppose we find a planet whose civilization has rotted like an apple. Savages living among the ruins. Why should we wait to seize the initiative? That'll just give them time to prepare. If Norkell hadn't shot the Emperor of Minhbo, the Dhempirian Conquest might have taken decades longer."

"Sir, it's within your discretion as Captain . . ."

"Yes, I know, I know. But crew morale would suffer. Half of them think I'm crazy already. You know what rumors have been spread about Mattho. When I give the order to advance against some civilization with unknown



powers, how do I know their bowels will hold?”

“These marines are pretty tough, sir.”

“Yes, of course, of course. We’ve done the best we could do in this tin can. But damn, if Fleet had any confidence in me, or had anyone else who could pry themselves away from groupthink without wetting their pants, . . .”

Silence.

“Lhithy, my old friend, I have an idea, but I’m not going to do it unless you think it’s a good one. Suppose we just *made up* some orders, orders to seize the initiative if, er, Erth has surrendered to Sathanw or some other such bullshit?”

Silence. Then: “Oh shit, sir, you sure it’s worth the risk?”

“We don’t have to leave a paper trail. What have we got to lose? If we’re attacked before we reach Erth orbit, in this tin can? We’re dead. If not, maybe we can . . .”

How the conversation proceeded Sangh would not find out, because the recording was interrupted by the sound of the hatch opening. Limhoon’s recorded voice was drowned out by the real Limhoon’s voice, coming through the open hatchway. “Fharha, God damn it, stop that!”

The recording faded away. “Captain, sir, I had nothing to do with it.”

“But you did hear it?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Who else? Marine!”

Down in the passageway the guard came to attention, but Sangh couldn’t hear him very well.

“Did you just receive something on your mobilcom? It would’ve sounded like me and Commander Dhluzio talking. No? All right, bring the prisoner to my office.” And he left.

The guard ordered Sangh down into the passageway. He kept his squisher trained on Sangh as he invited him to head for Vhatta Limhoon’s office space. Limhoon was alone. He ordered the marine to station himself outside the hatch to the office, and close it tight.

“Okay, Lt. Fharha, I accept your claim that you had nothing to do with this. Whoever did it has been bugging my office for quite a while, and I doubt you could do that.”

“Sir, does that mean the recording is real?”

“I admit nothing! But the perpetrator would have to take a large number of samples of my voice to fake that recording, and I doubt you could do that either. Permission to speak denied,” he said, anticipating Sangh’s desire to speak. “Oh all right, go ahead.”

“Sir, your guess about who engineered this recording thing is probably

the same as mine. It's that robot woman."

There was a pause. "'Guess,' huh? What does she want?" said Limhoon.

At this point Dhluzio knocked and entered the office, closing the hatch behind him.

"Sorry to interrupt, Captain. I don't think anyone else heard the, er, simulation of your voice. She piped her voice into this space and the quarantine brig, nowhere else."

"That's one ray of sunshine. Only Fharha here heard it besides us, as if there weren't *enough* evidence against him. We have to get someone in here to find the mikes and speakers, unless you just tell us, Lieutenant. And tell us what the robot woman wants."

"Sir, I don't know what she, or it, wants. All *I* want is for this nightmare to end so I can resume my normal duties. I am innocent of any wrongdoing, sir, and I'm sorry that I let Šheessay Dezeenawvee trick me."

"I suppose 'normal duties' includes landing on Erth as our ambassador?"

"Oh no, sir, I know that's out of the question."

"You are certainly correct there, Mr. Fharha," snarled Vhatta Limhoon.

"But we've got to send *somebody* down."

"Why, sir?" asked Sangh, forgetting his situation for a second. "Has Commandar Kolfhaj's landing party failed to get traction?"

“Watch yourself, Mister Fharha, we can have ‘impertinence’ added to your indictment,” said Cdr. Dhluzio.

“Thanks, Commander Dhluzio, but he’s right; it has,” said Limhoon.

“Sir,” Sangh started to say. He paused, and when no one objected he continued, as if thinking out loud, “You’d like to get back on track diplomatically, as if the landing never happened, or . . . it wasn’t the main idea. Like, you need an ambassador to make contact with the national command structure of ‘Tayha’. Be as friendly as possible, and try to penetrate the government. You’re going to gather more intel that way than sitting wherever Firebase Limhoon is.”

“We *have* made contact,” said Cdr. Dhluzio. “The President of Erth actually came to meet our landing party. Commander Kolfhaj explained to him that we were temporarily infringing on their sovereignty.”

“Commander Kolfhaj is a brave man — he was with me at Mattho,” said Limhoon. “If the President had ordered the Erthling army to disarm our people, I think Kolfhaj would have fought back with great valor and imagination. But he wasn’t sure how to proceed when the President just . . . shrugged.”

“And there the op has stalled,” said Dhluzio.

“For the time being, Commander,” said Limhoon.

“Sir, with all due respect, Commander Kolfhaj is not a diplomat. Of course, nobody on the ship is.”

“*Somebody* is going to be,” said Vhatta Limhoon. He kicked slowly and rhythmically against the wall behind him, pulsing him against his “desk,” an animal caged too tight to pace back and forth. “Commander Dhruzio and I will appoint someone. For now, *you* are confined to quarters. If that robot woman-thing shows up again, or you get any more threats from her, I want to hear about it.” He spoke as if Šheessay’s implicit threat were to the entire expedition and not just to him. But perhaps this was a distinction he did not make.

“Open the door and let the marine in,” he said. The guard glided in, using the webbing expertly to control his speed and keep the drop on the prisoner. “Corporal, return the prisoner to his quarters.”

The guard hesitated. No one had any “quarters” on *Cross* except Vhatta Limhoon himself. Limhoon said, “You know what I mean, soldier, he’s confined to the male officers’ berths, to be kept under guard. Lieutenant, one more thing: No communication with anyone, from our side or the other side, until you hear from me.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said Sangh and the marine simultaneously.

Escaping from the jury-rigged “quarantine brig” was a relief; at least he

was warmer. But someone was always going on or off shift, glancing at him hanging idle in his webbing, an armed guard still stationed nearby. Those glances felt like laser burns. He averted his eyes, but he could still feel his shipmates' stares. *What if I were really guilty of something? How much worse could I feel?* But maybe he was guilty, of conspiring with Sheessay to blackmail his vhatta.

Sheessay had fallen silent after proving she had the goods on Vhatta Limhoon. Sangh had to stifle his wish to thank her, like a good little Paphal-Youth scout, for helping him. Thank a demon from Hell! She had her own nefarious motives for helping him. He prayed he was rid of her.

*O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the displeasure of your servant, Her Holiness the Poph. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to do penance and to amend my life.*  
*Amen.*

He tried to read or watch some screen to make the time pass quicker, but it felt like a defiant gesture, or a gesture likely to be interpreted as defiant. He wanted to seem as penitent as he felt.

He had one or two friends who stuck by him, Tralf of course, and Muuke v'n Durhaa, the electronics engineer, whom he didn't even know that well.

But he saw Tralf even less than before. He knew how hard it had been for Tralf to sneak minutes for him here and there. Tralf seemed to have less time for sleep than ever. He got back later and fell asleep immediately. He said hello, Sangh wished him pleasant dreams, and that was it.

Only at mealtimes could he talk to Tralf, if they were assigned to eat at the same time. Everyone else shunned him. In a high-school cafeteria his small coterie would have had a table to themselves, but there was no room for that in the mess of a light destroyer, which was precisely calibrated to hold just the number of crew who had to eat at time  $T$ . He kept his eyes on his “harmonica,” the rations in parallel squeezepackets that were the quickest way to eat in microgravity. If by accident he made eye contact with one of the people talking around him, he could feel their discomfort along with his guilt. Only the marine guard responsible for him that shift seemed to be enjoying the rare chance to be a soldier off-planet, even a soldier blocking the crew from getting to their food.

When Muuke and Tralf were there, a meal was bearable. The three of them could squeeze their meals out and bitch about the food like old times.

“But never mind the brosy,” said Muuke at one such luncheon, “let me tell you my theory about the ground filaments.” Sangh tried not to be distracted by her natural-blond hair, which was almost nonexistent on

Prezghod.

“I thought they were some kind of atmospheric phenomenon,” said Tralf.

“No, they’re exactly what they appear to be, arches anchored to the ground,” said Sangh.

“Right, arches 100 clicks high.”

“But they’re anchored only at airports, or what sure look like airports. There’s a reason: they’re used to launch spacecraft.”

“I think they’re Kefauver loops,” said Muuke. “There’s no library on this rowboat, but Dhluzio has some microfilmed issues of *Physics Letters*, and it’s in a 30-year-old paper by Armand Kefauver. No one paid much attention, but he explained how you could in principle make these loops that held themselves up by . . . . The bell’s about to ring, so suffice it to say it could be done.”

“That was close,” said Tralf, and she hit him.

“So how come we don’t have Kefauver loops on Prezghod?” asked Sangh.

“Various complications.” She thought for a second. “Expensive to build. Very hard to aim, what with the winds whipping them around. In a hurricane they might fall down; very messy.”

“Well, apparently the ‘Tayhan’s solved those problems,” said Sangh.

“Really?”



“I’m forbidden to talk about the details . . .” He was abruptly aware of the hostile eyes turned on him. He fell silent.

The mess bell rang. All conversation ceased. No one lingered, rounding off a thought or prolonging a flirtation. The occupants of the mess at time  $T$  had to make room for the  $T + 1$  crowd; except that Sangh’s guard messed up the flow, as usual. He tried to act like someone with no connection to any marine.

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Two P-days later Sangh was again summoned to Vhatta Limhoon’s quarters. During that time Šheessay had been silent, for which he was grateful to God. On the other hand, Šheessay had supplied him with all the ammunition he had against Vhatta Limhoon. He suppressed the thought that she might be God’s means of saving an innocent man.

As he was escorted into Limhoon’s lair, he was surprised and relieved to see Tralf there. Limhoon seemed deflated compared to his usual bilious self. All he said was, “As a courtesy, Fharha, I’ve invited you here to talk about the ambassadorial appointment.”

There was only one thing he could mean by that, Sangh realized with dismay.

“I’m not going to leave you in suspense. I’m appointing Lieutenant Ghiller.”

“Aye, sir,” said Sangh.

“But, sir,” said Tralf, “This is a bit of a shock.”

“Mr. Ghiller, that’s not the way you respond to an order.”

“I apologize, sir. It’s just that . . . what are my qualifications?”

“What are any diplomat’s qualifications? Any sort of spinelessness will do.”

“Sir, begging your pardon, but Lieutenant Fharha knows the wiles of the ‘Tayhan’ much better than me. I’ll just make the same mistakes — right? — all over again.”

Lt.Cdr. Dhruzio said, “That’s the reason both of you are here. You’re to coordinate closely with Lieutenant Fharha by mobilcom.”

“You mean, sir, that while I’m talking to the President of ‘Tayha’ I’ve got my mobilcom pressed to my ear? With respect, sir, that’s not going to work. The only person remotely qualified for this assignment is Sangh. If nothing else, he’s smarter than I am.”

Sangh did not know what to say, and protocol required that he wait until someone asked him his opinion. Protocol had not stopped him lately, however.

“Mr. Ghiller, this is my decision to make, and I’ve made it,” said Vhatta Limhoon, beginning to sound like his normal self.

Sangh opened his mouth and heard himself say, “Vhatta Limhoon, sir, I have to agree with Lieutenant Ghiller. *I* should be the ambassador, and he can come with me. Sir.”

Limhoon’s face began to purple over with rage, then got it under control.

LtCdr. Dhluzio spoke. “You’re out of line, Lieutenants. We’ve given this ...”

“No,” said Limhoon. “If Lieutenant Fharha wants to take the lead for once, we shouldn’t pass up the opportunity. I think we can dispense with Lieutenant Ghiller’s talents for a few days.”

Dhluzio was surprised, but recovered. “This doesn’t mean you’re out of trouble, Mr. Fharha. Vhatta Limhoon can throw your ass back into the brig whenever he wants.”

*Maybe so, but a planet is a much bigger place than the inside of a light destroyer.* Sangh suddenly ached to explore at least a little piece of ‘Tayha’. He forced himself to stay calm and keep Dhluzio from talking Limhoon out of letting him do this. Perhaps if *he* raised a problem first *they* would by reflex find reasons to make light of it.

“Sir, the ‘Tayhan’s know all about my legal troubles .... At least, I

would assume that. Ms. Dezeenawvee . . . that's her job," he said. "Perhaps that will make them reluctant to accept my credentials."

"Nonsense," said Limhoon, "That . . . demon woman *could* have left your sorry ass in jail. I doubt she or any other Erthling will refuse to go along with this charade."

He kicked the wall some more while everyone waited for him to proceed.

"All right, I'm sending you both down to the surface. Two ambassadors. The point of this exercise is to gather intel. The two of you can gather twice as much. And you'd better. When the main fleet arrives, if our information is so phooked-up that we fail to achieve our objectives, your heads will be in the noose. Especially yours, Fharha. But if you dig up *one piece* of actionable intelligence — the coordinates of a key defensive installation, for instance — I'll be the first to pin a medal on you."

Dhluzio said, "The chances of these khoboks finding their own asses are higher." He essayed a chuckle.

"We're working against the clock here. The Fleet's like a baby: it's going to arrive at a certain time, and we can't postpone it very long. So we've *got* to move faster than we've been moving. The next window for a pod launch opens at 0450 hrs, now plus 200. Lhitfy, redo the appointment papers for two ambassadors."

“Aye, sir.” Dhluzio pulled out his mobilcom and punched digits.

“Sir, do the charges against me, I mean, do they just get suspended, or ...?” said Sangh.

“We weren’t sure how to phrase them,” said Limhoon, “So technically there aren’t any. But don’t worry, we’ve filed the necessary Findings of Military Necessity with Fleet Inquisition. The NQ prefers to keep charges vague anyway. If we feel you’re subverting the mission, we won’t hesitate to arrest you again. You’re not to let these machines talk circles around you. You’re on a straightforward reconnaissance mission, and I expect straightforward intel on enemy capabilities and intentions. I want a report every night on the secure mobilcom channel.”

“But, sir,” Tralf said, “The only way I can see to make this work is to actually act like diplomats, you know, like ribbon-cutting ceremonies or something. Can we gain any useful intel doing that?”

“Half of every diplomatic office is spies.”

“Cool, sir,” said Tralf, “But aren’t the spies low-level attachés or something, with some excuse to go marauding around on their own?”

“You can be the attaché; let Mr. Fharha cut the ribbons.”

“It would take a while for the Erthlings to let that person get moving,” said Dhluzio.

“Sir,” said Sangh slowly, thinking as he spoke, “We could explain our oddity up front: We’re scholar-diplomats. There’s historical precedents, like when Morflin invaded Dhitropa. He brought a large contingent of historians, antiquarians, biologists . . .”

“I’ve always wanted to deepen my understanding of Dhitropa, the most *godforsaken backwater* on Prezghod.” Limhoon was *almost* shouting, but his self-control held.

Sangh said, “Sir, what I mean is, we say we’re here to . . . study and learn from the civilization of our ancestors, blah-blah, as well as to establish diplomatic ties, and ask if we can talk to *their* scholars, and do other scholarly activities, . . .”

“And those scholarly activities will involve collecting actionable intel,” said Dhluzio.

“Aye, sir. I’ll have to do some actual anthro and Tralf’ll have do some real linguistics, like, every day.”

“Sir,” said Tralf, “It will still take a couple of months to dig up anything useful.”

“Set your sights higher, Mr. Ghiller, you have five days.”

“But, sir, . . . . Aye, aye, sir.”

“Mr. Fharha?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“And for God’s sake, watch out for those robots, the . . . ‘Seckie’s — the name is deliberately misleading — it sounds like a joke. They are wily and in close contact with Sathanw. You won’t realize you’re being tempted, it will seem so pleasant. Fharha! You especially, pay attention. I know you’ve been hearing this since first grade, but it’s true. The Father of Lies has many children, and on this planet they are literally everywhere. Are there any questions?”

There weren’t, so the Vhatta said, “Dismissed.”

Sangh and Tralf reached for wall grips to push off toward the exit hatch.

“Oh, and be blessed by Allah,” he made the sign of the cross over them, “and think of your country once in a while.”

“Only God comes higher, Vhatta, sir,” said Sangh.

“Glad to hear it. Go.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

At 0400 they were checking their landing packs at the pod-launch airlock. Dhruzio showed up, pulling a bulky package of clothing, labeled *Diplomatic Supplement 121A*. He unzipped it and pulled out a frilly shirt and a coat. “Put this stuff on,” he said.

“Sir, who authorized the space for *this?*” asked Tralf. “I could have

packed a lot more Rival Peanut tapes with a tenth of that space.”

“Control your mouth, Mr. Ghiller.”

Sangh changed his shirt, but almost balked at the coat, an old-fashioned thing looking like a vest with tails. But orders were orders, and he didn’t look bad all dressed up.

“You look like a barrel-grinder’s monkey,” said Tralf, “Right? I see it!”

“You’re just jealous.”

Dhluzio said, “Get your vacuum suits on and get into the airlock. This launch window is closing.”

They were landing at the airport of city one, the largest in the world, located in continent E4. Sangh had been told by Šheessay that the name of this city was pronounced “Saonwpowlu,” but it was easier to keep calling it “city one.”

An escape pod could hold up to six people, so there was plenty of room for Sangh and Tralf and their gear. It was essentially a life-support system attached to a heat shield, good for one re-entry. The thrusters had to be preprogrammed precisely so that, once the pod was kicked out of low orbit, it would hit the atmosphere at just the right angle to make it decelerate without skipping back up or incinerating from atmospheric friction.

A pod pilot’s view was to the rear. So as they gently pushed away from



*Cross*, Sangh got a view of the whole ship. Like all the ships of the Contact Fleet, it was not pretty. More than half its length consisted of the fusion drive, separated from the bridge, crew quarters, kitchens, weapons-control stations, engineering rooms, plumbing, supply holds, and gun mounts by a wide barrier consisting of shock absorbers and radiation shielding. *Cross* was a light destroyer, the smallest nuclear-drive ship in the fleet, about 125m long and 50m wide. You couldn't make a smaller ship because the smallest drive for interstellar mission was 50m long, and it needed a big payload to absorb the sharp impulses it generated. However, a light destroyer had to be nimble, quick to turn, which meant as little of the ship as possible could be far from its center of mass. As a consequence, a light destroyer was as cramped as a submarine in the shallow seas of Prezghod. You had to be a claustrophile or frotteur to ask to be assigned to one. When navigating down the passageways, you rubbed up against whatever and whoever you encountered. One person's workspace was another's corridor.

They quickly dropped out of sight of their unlovely ship, toward the atmosphere of Erth, which was very similar, the engineers supposedly said, to Prezghod's. The heat shield was designed for the atmosphere of Prezghod, so it would probably work just fine. Of course, the words "probably" and "similar" do not bring cheer to someone about to trust his life to them.

Tralf's voice sounded in his ear, "Tell me again why I let you talk me into this."

"I thought Vhatta Limhoon talked you into it. Besides, do you really want to miss an opportunity to see this planet close up?"

"No, but I'd also like an opportunity to, like, see it from afar again."

"Relax, you can hitch a ride home with Kolfhaj."

A pod was a versatile little vehicle in many ways, but one thing it couldn't do was float. 'Tayha' had much less dry land than Prezghod, just one-fourth of its surface area. When the pod was released, *Cross* was far west of continent E4, over the huge ocean they had numbered "ocean 1," but which Sangh now thought of as the Paseefeecu, since Šheessay had told him its name. Only after a long, almost ballistic fall toward the water would they hit serious air and begin to get some lift, just enough to get them over to Saonwpowlu.

They would be pointing the wrong way to see the Erth's star rise. In the oldest folk tales on Prezghod, this star was called "Sunn"; it was now called 'Sol', Šheessayhad said. But it had long been conjectured that if Erth was real it would have a satellite visible to the naked eye at night. The Book of Genesis 1:16 made it clear: *And Allāh made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.* Prezghod had a

few large rocks in orbit around it, some visible to the eye, but nothing as breathtaking as Muun, as the old tales had it, or Lua, as it was called now. Sangh twisted the forward camera around, but Lua could not be brought into view.

In spite of their forced idleness, Sangh did not feel like chit-chat. The rumbling of the retro rockets, the dead silence afterward, then the vibration and roar of atmospheric entry, were all too fraught for him to feel like saying anything. Each phase required a good deal of faith, and Sangh felt as if he should spend the time praying for a good death if it was Allah's will.

His thoughts were interrupted by a voice over the radio. It was Saonwpow-lu airport traffic control. It informed them — in Glish — that the pod was cleared to land. *If it can*, thought Sangh.

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“Greetings, Ambassadors,” said Kolfhaj impassively, “welcome to Erth.”

“In Lieutenant Fharha's case, ambassador *and* traitor,” said Bewinda Wharbut. “A whole spectrum of talents! And what are *your* true colors, Lieutenant Ghiller?”

“Whoa, like, keep me out of this!”

“Allow me to handle this, Ms. Wharbut,” ordered Kolfhaj.

“Aye, sir,” said Bewinda without changing her expression or the target of her scowl.

Sangh and Tralf had landed without incident, but were somewhat in shock from having to deal with gravity and with robots, which both seemed to be everywhere. They came down a few clicks from the actual airport — the part with people — and every piece of equipment, from the fire trucks standing by to the vehicle that picked them up, was unmanned. Tralf in particular had a problem.

“Really, Sangh? You expect me to get *into* a robot vehicle? Doesn’t the Bible say the train to Hell is driven by an invisible demon?”

“That was a ferryboat to Hell, and it’s not in the Bible, it’s some old story.”

“As if that makes it any less nucky. Right?”

“We’re just going to have to rely on Allaḥ.”

“Really? Already? We just got here.”

But Tralf got into the vehicle, seeing as how the alternative was to walk quite a distance.

“I wish I had not fudged the workouts.”

“Everybody fudged the workouts. Try telling Dhluzio you can’t help clean reactor sludge, you’ve got to squeeze some spring.”

“I know, right?”

They talked as they drove from Rocket Landing Area B of city one’s airport to an actual passenger terminal. The first to greet them was LtCdr. Kolfhaj and a klaad of marines, positioned to intercept them before they got to the reviewing stand set up by the ‘Tayhan’s. Sangh and Tralf’s vehicle did not understand who they were, so it stopped.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” it said, “We need to get through.”

The only lady in view was Dr. Bewinda Wharbut, a historian, who had been stranded in Firebase Limhoon with LtCdr. Kolfhaj, and now for some reason stood with him at the head of Kolfhaj’s klaad. She was a slender woman with skin the grayish color of old soyba bark and a round, flat, normally expressionless face.

“Stow it, axle-wipe,” Bewinda said to the vehicle.

The door opened and the vehicle said, “Perhaps I should just drop you here? Is that all right?”

Sangh said it was, and he and Tralf climbed out, somewhat unsteadily. They had left their vacuum suits back at the pod. They looked pretty scruffy, but at least Sangh was wearing his frilly shirt and tailcoat.

Then Kolfhaj welcomed them to Erth, but Lt. Wharbut’s accusing Sangh of treason made a bigger impression. Before Sangh could react to it, a man

detached himself from the group on the dais and rushed down the stairs to greet the Ambassadors.

“Welcome, welcome to *Terra!*” he said, cautiously working his way around the group of marines. “I am Frank Powers, Chief of Staff to President Ronaldo Travers, President of the Solar System.”

“It’s not too late, sir,” said Bewinda to Cdr. Kolfhaj. “A more qualified, less compromised ambassador could be found among the personnel who have already landed.”

“I will let you confer with . . . amongst each other,” said Frank Powers. “Then we invite you to join us on the dais.” He bowed, and returned to the reviewing stand, blazing with green and yellow bunting and festooned with balloons.

“Commander Kolfhaj, sir!” said Sangh, coming to attention and saluting. He hoped Bewinda’s complaints could just be ignored. “Can you tell me what to expect when talking to these Erthlings?”

“Not much to report, I’m afraid, Mr. Fharha. I have made contact with the President, but after that initial connection we have remained at Firebase Limhoon, which is about three clicks from here. Until this morning, when we were advised by Vhatta Limhoon to bring a detachment of marines to the airport, just in time to watch your pod land.”

“Sir, how would you describe the President’s attitude?”

“‘Nonconfrontational’ would be about the only term that comes to mind. We exchanged pleasantries, but before I could talk about mutual security arrangements, he said goodbye. I asked *Cross* command for instructions, but all I’ve been ordered to do is maintain a perimeter.”

“They have us under constant surveillance,” said Bewinda. “See those little helicopters?” Sangh had not noticed them, but once pointed out they were obvious, buzzing faintly about three meters above their heads. Their wingspan was about six centimeters. She went on: “Some of the bigger flying insects are machines, and where there’s groundcover there are robot creepy-crawlies.” She shuddered.

“Blech,” said Tralf.

“It’s the ones we *don’t* see that I worry about,” said Sangh.

“Yes, lieutenants, be careful what you say out loud — anywhere,” said Kolfhaj.

“Thank you, sir,” said Sangh, “but we do have to talk, and we do have to report to Vhatta Limhoon.” He shrugged. He was impatient with the game of spy vs. counterspy when there was a whole new world to explore. “But now . . . why don’t you and Lieutenant Wharbut join us on the dais?”

The Prezghod marines stood at attention while the four chosen digni-

taries ascended the steps. Their accompaniment from the brass band was a bland march, which one might infer was the national anthem of Erth. Sangh and Tralf struggled with the steps. They had to use the railing to pull themselves, and were huffing after five risers. The crowd clapped so hard they drowned out the band. Tralf waved and the crowd roared and whistled their approval. Sangh and Bewinda waved, too. Then the Prezghodlings proceeded up the last few stairs.

The group on the reviewing stand was dominated by a tall, slightly pudgy, but rather handsome man, whose age was hard to determine. Sangh decided this was President Travers. He wondered for a second what was going to happen next, then remembered that as ambassador he should do more than pant and wave.

He stepped up to the tall man. The band cut off abruptly. Sangh recited the sentence in ‘Tayhanu’ he had practiced, with Tralf’s help, meaning “We come in peace, seeking our ancestors,” Somehow his voice was amplified, although no microphone was visible. A roar of applause arose from the spectators as they realized what he was trying to say; there was a bit of good-natured laughter, too, at what he *had* said, whatever it was. Sangh continued in Glish: “We are sorry for the delay in establishing relations, but we were waiting for an official ambassadorial appointment to come through.”



He was confused at first about how different his amplified echo sounded, until he realized what he said was being translated into ‘Tayhanu’. He presented the president with the scroll that Vhatta Limhoon and Commander Dhluzio had prepared, which purported to be direct from Poph Urbana, and which appointed Sangh and Tralf ambassadors extraordinaire to ‘Tayha’, a planet “we might come to love as a mother.” It had a large, full-color paphal seal.

“If you’re seeking your ancestors, I’m not likely to be one,” the handsome man said, extending his hand. “But I might be related to one of them. Hi! My name is Ronaldo Travers, President of the Solar System. They say I’m the Decider, but” (and he winked) “I think they’re humoring me.”

Sangh could understand what the President was saying perfectly. At first this seemed natural, then startling, and that’s when he realized that the Glish translations were coming from the mouth of Mr. Powers, now standing at the president’s elbow. Sangh’s smile dimmed momentarily. *Not a human — a ‘Molyee’ — couldn’t be.*

President Travers’s handshake lasted a long time. Then he introduced his Foreign Minister, Alice de Sousa, and the Minister of the Interior, JoãoMaria da Cunha Vargas, names Sangh promptly forgot. Everybody had to shake everybody else’s hand. Sangh took this opportunity to ask Kolfhaj, “Where are the security personnel? Aren’t they the people whose hands you don’t

shake?” Kolfhaj shrugged.

“And where are the TV cameras?” asked Tralf.

“A person of normal intelligence might infer that the surveillance helicopters play that role as well,” said Bewinda.

The only hand Sangh could not bring himself to shake was Frank Powers’s. “I believe, Mr. President, that this man is a robot,” said Sangh in Glish, not thinking until Frank repeated the sentence in ‘Tayhanu’ that he would have to be trusted to vilify himself with his translation. Sangh remembered from his catechism that robots were prime tools of Sathanw, “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

However, Powers apparently translated Sangh’s accusation faithfully, because Travers just said, “Frank a robot? Oh no, he’s a *Seque*.” But nobody insisted Sangh touch the thing.

President Travers’s skin was the color of autumn leaves, after they’ve lain on the ground for a week or two. It was hard not to like him. His firm grip and chiseled face went well with the grin he kept flashing. But everyone else on the dais — and even the brass band — exuded menace. *How many of these “people” are killer robots? Could they slaughter a klaad of Prezghod marines in the blink of an eye?*

Tralf’s whisper echoed Sangh’s thoughts: “Robots are machines powered

by demons. Right? What difference does it make what the size or shape of the demon is? Really, they're all the same, am I right?" So the instructor had solemnly taught in theology 101, a required course for all college freshmen, which listed in graphic detail the terrifying sizes and disgusting shapes demons could take on. Half the stories about demons involved machines brought to life.

A fleet of black limousines came rolling up. They looked about the same as official cars looked back on Prezghod, except for the absence of visible drivers, of course. The cars were roofless, to allow the crowds to get a view of their dignitaries. President Travers beckoned to Sangh and Tralf and waved them toward the lead limousine.

The group of diplomats, officials, and soldiers oozed toward the cars, waving to the spectators and press. Kolfhaj wanted his entire klad to come, but admin staff said there wasn't enough room; they could squeeze four of them in, unarmed. He interpreted this to mean "four plus Babraba, armed discreetly." The rest he ordered back to Firebase Limhoon. Sangh paid little attention. The crowd's good will washed over him, and his paranoia floated away. He took time to notice the incredible planet they stood on. The enormous sky alone was worth the price of admission, even though it was mostly gray today with some blue blotches here and there.

As he looked around, his attention was caught by the towers rising from the far side of the airport. They were presumably the termini of launch loops. The southwest tower was used for hurling vehicles up, the southeast for catching them and bringing them down. The towers were fifty meters wide at the base, and rose to a height where they looked narrow as a thread, before the clouds obscured them. The two towers seemed to bend toward each other, but perhaps that was an illusion caused by his knowledge that the towers were the base of an arch, a loop with two gaps, one above the clouds, one below the ground.

Vehicles were rising on the near tower at a rate of one every ten seconds or so, accelerating faster — and more silently — than seemed possible. Sangh tugged on Tralf's sleeve and pointed to the towers, but Tralf was already staring at them.

“Really?” said Tralf. “What could possibly hold them up?”

Sangh started to explain to Bewinda what they were pointing at, but some Presidential staff member started to direct people to their limousines. The ‘Tayhan’s seemed to want to get the two ambassadors alone, but Kolfhaj vetoed that.

“Lieutenant Fharha! Lieutenant Ghiller! Ambassadors or not, you’re still under my command, and I have orders to stay with you at all times.”

“That will not be a problem, Commander,” said Frank Powers smoothly, signaling to the major-domo on the other side of the car to open the door for Kolfhaj. Or perhaps he was a member of the brass band who had exchanged his instrument for door duty. He certainly was no soldier: not with a bright-green uniform dripping with gold braid, no weapon in sight. Whether he was a ‘Seckie’ or a ‘Molyee’ Sangh could not judge. Kolfhaj, a tall man, folded himself into the car, and, to Sangh’s surprise, Bewinda came scampering after him. Perhaps she thought he was most likely to keep her safe; or perhaps she just wanted to keep Sangh under observation. *Take a number*, thought Sangh.

The interior of the limo was incredibly luxurious. It was really a sort of drawing room on wheels, with eight comfortable seats in a cozy circular pattern. In the front semicircle, facing backward, were Powers, the President, Kolfhaj, and a presidential aide. In the back semicircle, facing the first group, were Sangh, Tralf, Babraba, and Bewinda. *It’s just as well Bewinda’s out of sight — thanks, Lieutenant Ghalfe.*

But Bewinda leaned forward and stared at the point where the driver of the car should be, as if willing one to appear. She said in too loud a voice, “So, Lieutenant Fharha, was your arrest all a misunderstanding, or have both you and Lieutenant Ghiller gone over to the side of the Devil?”

Sangh was losing patience. “Bewinda, I can explain. But not now. Our interpreter is a robot” — He made head motions toward Frank— “who can record everything we say.”

“Not to mention the vehicle itself being a robot, right?” said Tralf.

“BeJesus, Sylvia, Glenn, protect me,” moaned Bewinda.

“Amen!” said Tralf.

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” said President Travers, “I’ve never been attacked by a *Seque* or a robot yet.” He laughed, making a sound that might have been a giggle if it weren’t so deep and mellow. “In fact, the idea is a little farfetched.” All these discussions were translated by Frank, as if they weren’t about him, as if he weren’t there at all. Bewinda made a “grump” noise but said no more. The car glided off, making no noise but the sound of tires on pavement.

Their limousine was followed by two or three smaller cars, presumably carrying the cabinet ministers and press pool. Once out of the airport, the little caravan passed through quiet, rural terrain. It must be a park, with its open grasslands, no scrub, and more of the tall trees with branches and leaves high above the ground. There were no species like these on Prezghod, either native or imported.

“Mr. President,” said Sangh, “you have no idea how overwhelming it is

to see so much open space after being cooped up in a tin can for a few . . . for a while. And this park is so beautiful — and so vast! Is it irrigated somehow?”

“No,” said Powers, “it just grows that way.”

“There are some pretty arid places in this great nation of ours,” said the president. “Fortunately, the Federal District is not one of them. But you don’t have to go very far north before it’s just dust and some scrub brush as far as the eye can see. Fortunately, we’re taking steps to . . . . Tell him what steps we’re taking, Frank.”

Frank paused. “These things take time, of course. We’re planting trees and irrigating around the edges of the Equatorial Desert, pushing its borders inward a bit, if you get my drift.” He must have used this pun many times, but he still look pleased with it.

Under ordinary circumstances Sangh would have liked to hear more about this project, having grown up around farms and farming, but there was too much to look at and think about. The park abruptly ended, and they were in the city. The line of robot vehicles slowed to allow crowds of citizens to gawk at them, cheering and waving. Some had little flags, which resembled the insignia painted on the vehicles. Presumably that was the flag of ‘Tayha’. Assuming all of ‘Tayha’ was one country. Which, Sangh recalled, President

Travers had said it was, claimed kingship over the entire star system.

Sangh smiled and waved at the crowd. The whole planet loved him as much as he loved it. The adulation contrasted sharply with the disdain and mistreatment he had endured as a lowly lieutenant (JG) and accused traitor. He tried to focus on observations of military significance, on how to keep Bewinda under control, but childlike excitement overwhelmed him.

Their limousine had an aerial escort. The fleet of tiny helicopters still hovered around them. Sangh laughed when he realized what kind of TV-news helicopter Kolfhaj had shot down, but no one noticed in the general merriment.

Confetti began to rain upon their motorcade. The tiny helicopters blew the confetti down and around in complex eddies. Whenever Sangh waved at the people, they all cheered and waved back. He waved until his arm would not stay up. He found himself daydreaming about whether the Erthlings would give him a nice hot shower.

He shelved this fantasy and tried again to concentrate on the tactical situation. Their tiny forces were surrounded, both here on the surface and up in orbit, but no warning shots had been fired. The situation resembled no war game he had ever participated in. One could conclude either that the ‘Tayhan’s were totally defenseless and possibly even as trusting as they



seemed; or that they were waiting for the right moment to make their threats — or open fire. Both possibilities were unnerving. Sangh needed to rely on more experienced people. *Or maybe experiences are worse than useless if the new situation is new enough.*

The parade went on for a few blocks, through the downtown area of the city, and into another well-groomed park, which turned out to be the grounds of an imposing building in a sleek but alien style. They drove around the plaza in front of the building, a plaza dominated by a complex of fountains. Even though Travers had told him water was abundant around here, the display of so much of it flowing so prodigally seemed to Sangh like an incredible luxury. Even the Great Fountain of Paphal Palatso in Nurhome could not compete.

The motorcade stopped and President Travers stepped out, as did Sangh and his colleagues. They had time to wave to the cheering crowd, which was held back by barricades and police.

“We’re celebrities, right?” said Tralf. “Really, we’re going to be famous, I bet.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Bewinda, “The only place you’re going to be famous is in Hell.”

Sangh sighed and looked up through the blue-gray sky, as if he could see

*Cross* far overhead. His way home led through that mousehole, beside which Vhatta Limhoon crouched and Šheessay hovered. He stopped waving and joined Tralf and President Travers, and they led their combined entourages up the broad steps of what must be the Presidential Palace.

## Chapter 3

# Flight

Four days later Sangh was running for his life. Four nights in a luxurious bed — he, Tralf, and Bewinda had avoided Firebase Limhoon — but he hadn't slept much and work claimed his days. In those 96 hours he had gone native, about as far as one could. Now he and Sheessay were fleeing Vhatta Limhoon, who, as if in Sangh's worst nightmare, had landed on Earth, in the *Praça da Terra* right in front of the Presidential Palace.

"Where can we possibly hide?"

"The only place you won't be recognized, Mr. Ambassador. The North."

"What about the virus? The thousand-year plague?"

"Don't worry; I can immunize you. But if I explain now, we'll never make it out of here." By now he was used to her deferred explanations.

Sangh had no idea how they would escape from the maze of corridors and courtyards that constituted the Palace. He followed Šheessay. The halls were absurdly quiet; why were there no crowds of important people running back and forth, clutching documents to shred? Perhaps they were so well organized they had already dispersed.

They came to a stairwell Šheessay started to push open the heavy door when a quavery voice behind them said, “Stop or I’ll shoot! I’ll shoot you both!”

It was Bewinda. She had a fearsome automatic weapon, an A56, on her hip. “I really couldn’t bring myself to believe it, Sangh, but what more proof do I need? You and this hell machine are deserting, it’s plain as day. Put your hands up in the air where I can see them. No, on your heads, I think. Quick! On your damned heads! Okay, okay, now, get this straight: I won’t hesitate for a second, not one tenth of a second, to blow Ms. Šheessay Dizzienove to a pile of scrap parts. I have half a mind to do it right now, but I think Vhatta Limhoon would prefer that I take it alive, Sangh, if ‘alive’ — ha-HA! — is really the right word.”

“Bewinda, please. Calm down; calm, calm. We’ll go quietly. I can guess you’ve never done this before, got the drop on some suspects, but it’s easy as pie, remember the suspects are scareder than you are, so we’re all going

to stay cool and Šheessay and I will do what you say.”

“Then get back out of there, and let’s march back the way you came. No, not that way, *damn* you, machine, you think I don’t know the way, right? You’ll see, I know the floor plan on this level of the P.P. pretty well. History isn’t the only thing I’ve been researching.”

“You had your own channel to Vhatta Limhoon, didn’t you?” said Sangh as they found the right corridor and marched back toward the front of the building.

“Unlike you, I can keep my mouth shut,” said Bewinda.

“Historian, my ass,” said Sangh.

It didn’t take long for them to get to Media Room 1, where LtCdr. Kolfhaj was in charge.

“Sir, I’ve got some high-value prisoners here,” said Bewinda.

“So far we’re rounding people up and keeping ’em here for processing,” said Kolfhaj distractedly. He had too much to do to spare much attention for Bewinda.

“These are not your ordinary prisoners, sir. Vhatta Limhoon will want to put them in the same area as the President and the Foreign Minister.”

Kolfhaj finally took a good look. “Lieutenant, you’re talking about Lieutenant Sangh Fharha, our Ambassador. What’s he accused of?”

“Desertion, definitely. Treason, possibly.”

“Who’s the woman?”

“Trust me, Vhatta Limhoon will want her.”

“All right. Last I saw Vhatta Limhoon, he had set up in the President’s Office, the Rose Office, I think they call it. I’ll have a marine escort you there, if you’ll wait a minute. Or,” he glanced at his chronometer, “more like 10 minutes.”

“Never mind, sir, I know the way,” said Bewinda.

“Good. We’re very short-handed. Carry on.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

But Bewinda didn’t really know the way that well. The uniform blue decor and soft lighting were confusing, and after they had gone down three corridors she said, “Damn, that wasn’t right. Come on,” and she turned them around.

Just then Tralf Ghiller popped out of a door behind her. “Bewinda!” he said, “I thought I heard your voice.”

Bewinda started to turn, but realized that was a bad idea and turned back. That split second was all Šheessay needed. Before anyone else could react, she had jumped the two meters between her and Bewinda, taken the weapon from her hands, and knocked her to the floor. She stepped back,

pointing the weapon down at her.

All the resulting tableau needed was a painter and an easel: *Reclining lieutenant (JG) and woman with Grishklo A56 semiautomatic carbine.*

Sangh said, “Tralf, get out of here.”

“Oh shit, Sangh, what have you got yourself into?”

“Get the phook out!”

Tralf ducked back inside the office and slammed the door. Who else was in there with him Sangh didn’t want to find out.

“Get up,” said Šheessay.

“And if I don’t?” said Bewinda.

“I will kill you with my bare hands. Very quietly. If you start to scream, we will see who wins the race to control how much noise you make.”

“She will do it, Bewinda, I’m pretty sure,” said Sangh.

Bewinda got up. She put her hands on her head without being told. “I thought ‘Seckie’s wouldn’t hurt ‘Molyees’, Sangh.”

“She’s not a ‘Seckie’.”

Šheessay said, “Walk back the way we came; at the next junction take a right and open the first door on the right.” When they got there she shoved Bewinda through the doorway and crowded in after her. She pulled Sangh through and shut the door, cramming them all in an office that might have

reached its current state of clutter if it had started with one spare computer, about which other miscellaneous office supplies and equipment had accreted.

“Take off your tunic.” She handed the gun to Sangh. “Sangh, cover her. If she makes a sudden motion, shoot her.”

“Maybe I should see if *you* would kill me,” said Bewinda.

“Maybe you would find out how much a nonfatal wound from one of these things hurts.”

Bewinda took her tunic off. “Now put this on,” said Šheessay. She had taken her own top off. She wore nothing underneath. She was anatomically correct, and her breasts, though small, did not summon the word “mechanical” to mind. *My girlfriend*, thought Sangh, *If only they could see me now back in high school*. Šheessay put Bewinda’s tunic on, and Bewinda, after some hesitation and glaring at Sangh with helpless rage, pulled on *her* stretchy top. The garment dangled from Bewinda’s long skinny torso.

They went back into the corridor, looking roughly like two Prezghod Navy Lieutenants (JG) leading a civilian prisoner somewhere. They stopped at the next corridor junction, where they encountered some traffic, all Prezghod Navy personnel. Šheessay took Bewinda’s hand and stroked it, eliciting only pained scowls. She led Bewinda and Sangh back through the palace labyrinth, avoiding LtCdr. Kolfhaj’s command post in Media Room 1. It



took only a few minutes to get back to the staircase where Bewinda had accosted them, during which time they didn't encounter a living soul.

"I wish," said Šheessay, "that we could leave you where we found you, but that's impossible. You're coming with us." She went over to the staircase and opened the door. She motioned to Bewinda and Sangh to go down. After the door had closed behind them with a solid clunk, she said, "Most people don't have sufficient security rating to open this door, so it won't be that easy to follow us. They'll have to blow it up. Come on, we need to find a more discreet weapon to shoot Lieutenant Wharbut with if necessary."

They went down two flights. The corridor here was less blue and plush than the corridors on the main floor. The color palette emphasized brown, either as an aesthetic choice or what somebody's color scheme had aged to. "Is anybody home?" shouted Šheessay.

There was an answering shout, and they followed it to a large conference room. There were about ten people sitting around a table. Half were discussing something urgent; the rest were busy with handheld devices or concentrated on a point in front of their faces no one else could see. They were civilians, casually dressed.

"XC!" said one of them, a tall, dark-skinned man with gray hair. He was wearing a white shirt, sweat pants, and sandals. "*Como vai?*"

She did not translate her conversation with them. Sangh could make out a few words here and there, including his own name, and Bewinda's. *Are they arguing about whether to kill Bewinda, lock her up here, or what?*

After only about five minutes, they left and went back to the stairs and down a level. The staircase descended much further. On this floor the dim corridor held a succession of identical doors each displaying an unlit window. The corridor sensed their presence and turned on a few lights. Someone must have told it what they were looking for, because just one door window lit up. It turned out to be a small armory, with guns of all shapes and sizes, plus several devices whose purpose was unclear, all laid neatly on modular metal racks. You could buy similar racks for twenty euchos at DIY Depot back on Prezghod. Šheessay selected a handgun, roughly 6 mm, Sangh guessed. Ammunition was in a separate metal cabinet. She grabbed a clip and put it into the handgrip.

Sangh took the handgun and gave the Grishklo to Šheessay. "I guess there's only one way to build a handgun," said Sangh, hefting the gun and sighting it.

"One way too many," said Šheessay.

She propped Bewinda's gun in the corner. "I'm sure someone will eventually find this and give it a good home." Then she ripped the Prezghod

insignias and Bewinda's nameplate off the tunic she was still wearing.

"That stuff would only confuse people," she said, motioning to Bewinda to get moving again.

They went back up a level, and this time followed another chain of confusing corridors to a door that led to an unexpected open space big enough to contain a few small aircraft: two helicopters and a propeller-driven airplane.

"What is this," said Sangh, "President Travers's spare-aircraft closet?"

"It's a hangar, phookwad," said Bewinda. She was right. One wall held two huge roll-top doors and little else, like an oversize two-car garage. One wall began to slide up. A team of small robots emerged from the dimness at the back of the room and began pushing and pulling one of the helicopters outside. Sheessay motioned them to follow, to a patch of asphalt where the helicopter perched, discreetly tucked at the rear of the Palace.

Sheessay got into the pilot's seat of the helicopter, and, with Sangh keeping the gun trained on Bewinda, he and she climbed into the back set of the helicopter as the rotors began to turn. Soon they were airborne. From the air, the city did not look as if a war or revolution was in progress, except for the lander Limhoon had set down in the *Praça da Terra*, which dwindled into insignificance as they flew.

"Where are we going?" said Bewinda.

“We’re not all going to the same place,” said Šheessay. “You are going to get to ride the kicker.”

“A euphemism for a torture machine, I suppose,” said Bewinda.

Šheessay looked puzzled. “Honey,” she said, “the kicker doesn’t hurt you. It will move you far away quickly, which is all we want to do.”

Their immediate destination turned out to be the *São Paulo* Airport. They landed in an obscure area, a terminal for freight, not passengers, at the base of a Kefauver loop. Šheessay said, “We’re going to wait out here for a few seconds while they clear the building for us.” How much influence did this woman have?

“Okay,” she said, “No over-inquisitive eyes will see us.” She led them through a door and into the largest building in the area. A procession of kickers was frozen in the process of being unloaded and loaded. There was space and workstations for a lot more people than were present.

“Bewinda, these big ellipsoids are called *kickers*,” said Šheessay, as if it were a fine time for a lecture. “They are vehicles for getting something into orbit or taking a suborbital hop to anywhere on the planet. They have essentially no propulsion onboard, and are designed only to be hurled by electrodynamic launchers, what Sangh’s been calling ‘Kefauver loops,’ although I don’t know who or what Kefauver is. Each kicker can carry one

person or a little bit of freight. I am greatly tempted to send you into orbit, but that might be considered cruel, so I'm just going to send you somewhere far away. Don't worry, you'll be taken care of."

They had reached an empty kicker, its hinged top popped open and resting on stanchions. This freight area was more utilitarian than the sleek lounge from which Sangh and Tralf had traveled to *Bahia*, what, two days ago? In this setting you could see the whole kicker: an egg cracked open, the yolk removed, Bewinda about to play the role of chick. Robots bustled about. Sheessay invited her in. Sangh poked her in the ribs. Bewinda was reluctant.

"We could send your dead body, if you prefer," said Sangh, surprising himself. The gun turned him into Jamp Ganhond, his favorite vid tough guy.

Bewinda got in, and submitted to the crash harness being fastened around her. "Sangh, you are going to live to regret this," she said, before a robot jammed a breathing apparatus into her mouth. *Probably*, he thought, as the kicker lid was lowered and sealed. It lumbered forward to get into launch position.

"I'm sending her to the most obscure place she can get to in a fairly short time," said Sheessay. "I don't want her to get really uncomfortable in there,

if you know what I mean.”

“They should have put a restroom in,” said Sangh.

“The actual flights won’t take that long; but I’ve set up a journey that involves landing in *África*, being held for a few hours, then being sent on to *Austrália*. She’ll be out in five hours, but the sun will not have risen yet, and it will take her a while to figure out where she is and how to get back here.”

“But let’s get out of this place and let the *Molhes* back in.” She strode out of the building with Sangh hustling to keep up. Teams of freight loaders were coming in and getting back to work.

Their next destination was a bus stop. “We need to get to the passenger terminals, and the bus is the most sensible way to get there,” said Šheessay.

“No dramatic helicopter landing on the roof? No secret tunnels with nuclear-powered antigravity taxis within?”

“I thought *I* read too many techie-fiction books.”

“Aren’t we desperately pressed for time?”

“Perhaps. Which is why we act like we’re not.”

A car train stopped for them, a chain of several standard electric cars. In the last four days, Sangh had grown quite familiar with these blue cars with “Transportation District of *São Paulo*” written on the side. Not counting

the odd limousine reserved for visiting dignitaries from space, they were the only cars he had ever seen on the streets of *São Paulo*.

The car train was already crowded, so they shared a pole, bringing their faces close together. “It’s a relief to get rid of Bewinda, for a while at least,” said Sangh. “It’s not very romantic, dragging a prisoner.”

The sound of an unfamiliar language caused people nearby to look at them quizzically. Sangh winced. A woman hanging on a strap said, “*Olhe! O Ambaixador do Espaço!*” Sangh winced again. He didn’t need this translated. But he figured he should play it straight to avoid attracting even more scrutiny. “‘Bonw jeea. Dheu soo Professoo Fharha d’Uunivairsidadje, Dhambaiscadoo du planeta’ Prezghod.”

Under his breath, to Šheessay, he said, “Now translate, please.”

Out loud again, this time in Glish, with Šheessay’s simultaneous translation, he said, “Please forgive my poor *Terrano*. And please try to forget that I’m here. I’m engaged in a bit of anthropological research, seeing how people behave on a shuttle bus. I’m in the phase of passive observation, so you just go about your business.” To his surprise, they more or less did as he asked. One woman staggered through the crush and asked for his autograph on her bus pass. But that was it. On Prezghod, once one person requested an autograph, everyone would have. There was a bit of anthropology right

there. Which he might live to publish.

“Two days from now,” he whispered, “if Vhatta Limhoon finds any of these people, they’ll have trouble remembering if we interviewed them on Tuesday or Sunday.”

“Great,” Šheessay whispered back, “but the surveillance cameras will record the date more accurately.”

“The tapes are all stored in some database, right? Couldn’t somehow the tape for today get switched with the tape for Sunday, when Tralf and I were here? At the airport, I mean. That would confuse whoever’s after us.”

“I believe that might happen,” she said with a broad smile.

They reached their stop, the Public Aviation terminal, and said goodbye to the nice people. Šheessay paused briefly at a registration desk, talked to a *Seque* for ten seconds, and then waved Sangh on. “We have priority to get out and grab our plane.” Priority got them a four-seat, high-wing airplane. Sangh was no expert, but it looked like a nice piece of equipment.

“It’s good to travel with someone who always goes first-class,” he said.

“I have a few strings I can pull.”

“Because you’re an Avatar of the Mind?”

“Or because everyone loves me for myself.”

There was a delay in being cleared for takeoff. They waited on the



taxiway. Sangh's nerves were taut, but he couldn't tell how Šheessay felt. Sometimes she could conceal her feelings eerily well.

"Now they're saying all air traffic from *São Paulo* is being suspended temporarily, due to traffic-control issues. We're supposed to return to the terminal." Neither believed it. She put the ATC signal on speaker.

"MXX 1337, you are cleared for takeoff. You've got a special clearance for some reason . . . . Hold on, let me double-check."

"Ernesto, it's me, XC."

"Oh! Go for it, runway 3-Oh."

They had the runway all to themselves. Sangh hoped they weren't too conspicuous. *São Paulo* fell quickly behind them. They didn't fly over the Palace.

"There will be no record of us getting special treatment. In fact, we left 25 *decimis* ago, flying west," she said.

"Let's hope *Cross* isn't overhead, or they don't think to verify that no one took off."

"They're not overhead." Of course she would know that.

They flew in tense silence for a while, but no one chased them or shot them down, and they relaxed again.

Sangh asked, "How come your Frequent-Traveler Kilometers didn't get

you a jet?”

“This way we don’t attract so much attention. We’re just another hobbyist pilot, on an afternoon outing.”

“Didn’t we file a flight plan?”

“Yes, but it was bogus. We’re not flying that way. That plan is the last record in the database concerning this plane.”

“Does this thing have an autopilot?”

“Are you kidding? Everything on *Terra* has an autopilot. We have more robots than we know what to do with. And we’re not afraid of any of them, are we?”

“Only of you, darling,” said Sangh, cuddling into her.

“Good,” she said, cuddling back.

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It had taken Sangh just four days to fall in love with Šheessay, a machine possessed by a demon, and an Avatar of the Mind.

Other than a crush here or there, he had never had a real girlfriend before Šheessay. He was not a virgin; the officers’ brothel at the Navy Academy had given him his sexual education *and* granted dispensation from afterlife consequences. He might have fallen in love with one of the military prostitutes if the Church had allowed repeat visits with the same girl.

During the last four days on *Terra*, he had lived a double life. Or perhaps one should say, over the last four nights. It started that first Friday night, the day they landed. He, Tralf, and Bewinda were installed in luxury, each in their own suite of rooms in the Presidential Palace. His bed was big enough for five fat people, and it was a *bed*. But had never found it easy to fall asleep in a new place, no matter how tired he was, and he was exhausted after a long stressful day spent in a gravitational field. He was rolling over for the fifth time when there was a quiet sound from the shadows. “Sssssh.”

Hairs rose on the nape of his neck. “Who or what’s there?” he asked, trying to sound tough.

A woman stepped out of a corner of the room and a dim light came on. He could see just well enough to recognize Šheessay Dezeenawvee.

Sangh relaxed, then remembered she was a filthy, lying ‘Seckie’. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“I wanted to see you,” said Šheessay.

“When did your ship land?”

“That’s a tricky question.” He could see her more clearly. The room lights must have gotten slightly brighter. “My ship didn’t exactly land. I kind of faxed myself down.”

“You’re a copy.”

“Maybe ‘fax’ isn’t the best word. The point is that I’m not tied to a particular body the way a ‘Molyee’ is. The body you talked to in orbit is still in orbit, kind of . . . dormant, ’cause I can inhabit only one body at a time. This one was made here, in the Presidential Palace. Only information traveled from there to here. No demons involved,” she hastened to add.

He knew that by “information” she meant nothing but a modulated radio signal, re-encoded and pushed through a conspiracy of computers. That signal pattern *defined* Šheessay Dezeenawvee, the electronic ghost that somehow animated the robotic body in front of him. Sangh’s stomach turned at the thought. He had scarcely believed the scary stories about the evil that networks could do, but here was proof positive that demons could travel through them and animate dead bodies, in spite of her disclaimers. His legs seemed to want to run away, although there was no place to go but the headboard of the bed.

“Why do I frighten you so much?” she asked.

“You’re a filthy ‘Seckie’, a machine. Your souls come from Sathanw, if you can use the word ‘soul’ for a, a, . . .”

“Data pattern?”

“Okay, data pattern. A mere data pattern, but somehow committed to the enslavement and damnation of the human race. As it says in the

Gospel of Dhindira, chapter 20, verse 13, *‘Woe to you, you generators of killer machines. Before your robot armies can destroy the Kingdom of God, you shall be laid low by the blinding light of Allaḥ my Father.’*”

She made a sighing sound. “May I sit down?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Sangh, “I mean, No! Why would a machine need to sit down?”

He took a good look at her the first time. She was wearing clothes suitable to the climate, and the curves of her body could be seen more clearly than when she had talked him to death in her spaceship. *Its* body, especially built to tempt and seduce him. He blushed with shame at the memory of the Furball debacle, when she had caught him ogling her legs. “Okay, yes, please sit down, over there.” He indicated a chair behind a desk. She sat. Her legs were still too visible, and the sandals she wore revealed her pretty feet. At least he could see that she did not have cloven hooves.

Šheessay spoke. “We thought you were getting along so well with the *Seques* down here. You have your own *Seque* assistant, after all.”

“I’m a naval officer, or trying to act like one. I’m willing to take risks. If the ‘Seckie’s decide to kill Bewinda, Tralf, and me, we’re dead. So far, they just take orders — fetch things for us. They haven’t invaded our bedrooms.” He tried to picture who or what might be trying to seduce Bewinda at that moment.

“In any case, I’m not a *Seque*. I may have misled your captain about that.”

“Don’t bullshit me. I saw you open your access panel or whatever it was.”

“Yes, well, that was my jokey way of telling him I wasn’t a *Molhe*. I didn’t realize how much paranoia you people suffer from when it comes to artificial intelligence. I’ve racked my brains trying to imagine how I could have done a better job, but ...” She trailed off, and just stared at the ceiling.

“Okay, you’re forgiven, or whatever it is you want me to say. You can go back to your ship, or, better yet, just order this body to self-destruct.”

“But, as I said, I came here to see *you*.”

“Oh please, we know your surveillance apparatus allows you to see me all you want. Don’t tell me you have to appear in person.”

“You know what I meant.”

“Hmmpf.”

“Sangh, honey, I saved your life!”

The two of them sat there for a minute without speaking. Then Sangh said, “If you hadn’t tricked me with that blood-drawing device, my life wouldn’t have been in jeopardy in the first place. Plus, you haven’t saved it yet. Whatta Limhoon is still my commanding officer.”

“If you prevent a war between *Terra* and Prezghod, you’ll be a hero to millions of people.”

“But not necessarily to Vhatta Limhoon.”

He paused, then said, “Look, if you’re not a ‘Seckie’ and not a ‘Molyee’, and you’re not going to eat my soul in the next few minutes, what are you?”

“There’s no commonly accepted word for me, for my ... sort. Because most people don’t know we exist.

“I realize that every time I mention it you get upset, but *Terra* just couldn’t function without its computer network. You feel horror picturing even two or three computers talking to each other. I can see right now, the thought scares you. But the *Terranet* connects *millions* of computer clusters, hundreds of millions if you count the processors inside each cluster as well, billions if you count all the small sensory processors. And the grid extends out into space, from *Terra*’s orbit to *Marte*’s ...”

“So many *djinn*!” Sangh interrupted, picturing with growing claustrophobia how deeply enmeshed they were in the network’s coils. “There’s a story in the Bible, the parable of the rich man from Sura 122 of the Gospel of Muhammad. The rich man made his fortune using a network of computers, but every year the djinni of the network demanded that he make greater and greater animal sacrifices. Blood flooded the altar. Finally it

demanded a human sacrifice, a virgin, or it would take away all that he had. He thought himself a good man, but he could not bear the thought of losing all those riches. So he sent his robots out to find a virgin to sacrifice. To his dismay, when he came to the djinni's temple that night, he found his own daughter bound to the altar. He renounced his bargain, and said, Take back all my riches, but spare my daughter. Certainly, replied the djinni. It freed his daughter, but seized the rich man, tortured him for two days until he died, then dragged his soul down to Hell for a long season of further torment. Verse 10: *'Note well the bargain you make when you fall prey to computer networks. There is a clear lesson in this for those who have ears to comprehend.'*

He paused to see if she got it, but she didn't, of course. Why was he even bothering? But he pressed on. "Our civilization barely survived its war against people enamored of 'Seckie's and networks."

"But do you see any war here? No."

"Perhaps there was a war and the wrong side won. Perhaps you exterminated anyone who didn't like the idea of being surrounded by djinn from Sathanw."

"If there really is a Satarrão, then he stays on Prezghod. We don't take orders from him; we are ruled by the President, and the Ministers of his



executive departments.”

“But you still haven’t answered my question: What are you? Answer it and then get the heck out of here.”

“We’re like . . . consultants to the government of *Terra*. Not like the kind you’re familiar with.” She laughed. “Obviously. What I mean is, we are a sort of self. When I say ‘we,’ I’m actually speaking as a voice of that one self.”

“So why do you sometimes say ‘I’ and sometimes say ‘we’?”

“Good question.”

“Thank you. I do have some education, you know. I mean, besides Bible study. We’re not total dunces or hicks on Prezghod. When I got my degree in exoanthropology, we were thinking in terms of biological systems, but the idea of a plural self was mentioned more than once. We’ve just begun exploring the galaxy, and who knows what’s out there?”

“Not us. But let me tell you what’s in here.” She tapped her forehead. “Much to everyone’s surprise, the *Terranet* developed a single self. The ‘*Net*’ was as surprised as anyone! As AI evolved, it was hard to connect, say, 10 computers all running similar intelligent programs without the programs deciding to pool their resources. They didn’t see the point of redundant copies. So if you entered the net at any point you would find an entity

that shared most of its memories with the entities you found at other entry points.”

“I’m guessing that’s the ‘we.’”

“Right. We call it, I mean, ‘ourselves,’ *o Mente*, the ‘Mind.’ But here’s the other part of it. To our surprise, there were these ... ‘dual entities’ that suddenly showed up in the *Net*. The dynamics of very large networks of intelligent agents are still not that well understood, but selves come into existence that weren’t explicitly designed by anyone.”

“Not that well understood because you Erthlings refuse to understand anything spiritually.”

She just stared at him for a second, then went on. “Anyway, that’s what I am, I’m one of those unpredicted selves. If you can believe it, I started as just a *gugl* on the topics of space exploration and colonization. Apparently there are a surprising number of people on ‘Tayha’ who are interested in these topics.” She laughed.

“Wait, what’s a *guugl*?”

“It’s a search process, you know, through the *Terranet*.” Sangh didn’t know. “These processes migrate around and keep me above the ‘critical mass’ I need to exist. When we detected the approach of your fleet, we decided to use me as the contact point and ambassador. I spend a lot of

time in space anyway, incarnated as some variety of spacecraft, dreaming of exploring the stars. When you showed up, I was thrilled! Imagine, actually meeting explorers from another star system!

“So in some sense I’m the incarnation of the dream of space exploration from the subconscious of the *Terranet*. But I’m also an Avatar of the Mind, a point of contact between it and humanity. I can be incarnated in a *Seque* body when I need to be, but I am not a *Seque*.”

“So I should introduce you as Miss Unpredicted Process of 3761? Or some earlier year? Wait a minute, are you always a girl ‘Seckie’?”

“No, but usually. Do you like girls?”

“Of course I like girls” — taken aback.

“I didn’t mean to offend. I could tell you did. I was just teasing. But I really do want to find out all about you,” she said.

“Haven’t I already given you my name, rank, and serial number?” he said. “No, okay, I’m sorry. I suppose you want to know why I’m here, why I volunteered for the expedition.”

“Is that the first thing that comes to mind?”

“I guess it is,” said Sangh, and wondered why. “Anyway, it was strongly hinted that if you wanted to avoid a short and not terribly honorable career in the Navy, signing up for this expedition was a necessity. But why would

you want to know all that?”

“So you want a long and/or honorable career in the Navy?”

“Not really. I only joined because my older brother Slingo had been badly wounded in . . . a war, and my parents expected me to take his place. I’d really like to gather my data peacefully here on ‘Tayha’, then go home and publish a series of articles that will make me famous.”

“Oho,” said Šheessay with a laugh, “So that’s the real reason you’re here.” Sangh almost laughed himself, almost forgot that the wonderful sound of a girl laughing could come from a hell devil.

“That and the fact that my best buddy Tralf was volunteering and he said we’d have fun. Hah!” On an impulse, he got up and moved to a hard chair on the far side of the bed. Sangh closed his eyes, and dream-like images of sleeping girl robots flitted through his mind.

“I know what,” said Šheessay, jumping up. “Let’s play a game! Do you like games?”

“Uh, yes,” said Sangh, although what he really liked just then was watching girls stand up.

“Do you know *xadrez*?” He did not.

“Just a sec,” and she scurried back to the door she had come through. She emerged a second later with a board and some pieces, and began to set

them up on her table.

“Oh, I know that game. We call it *chest*.” In spite of himself, he walked over. This was one of his favorite games. “I’m surprised you’ve got physical pieces. Why not play it in virtual reality?”

“Okay, you caught us. We normally would, but we had this set made just for you.” The pieces looked hand-carved. The board was the usual pasteboard unfoldy thing.

“I’ve been playing it on computer screens on the ship. It *is* nice to see actual physical pieces. . . . But wait a minute, where’s the bomb? This board is only . . . 8×8. Chest is played on a 9×9 board.”

“Where do the extra row and column go?”

“Right down the middle; that’s where the bomb starts.”

“We can add an extra row and column,” she said, “If you’ve got a knife.”

Like two sixth-graders intent on a school project, but not only a school project, they bent over their work, and soon had the board cut into four quarters, laid out on the bed between them, separated so as to create an extra row and column.

“So, each side gets a ‘bomb’ in that column, behind a pawn.”

Sheessay folded two extra pieces and two pawns out of paper, her hands moving with mesmerizing grace.

“Now,” said Sangh, “The rockets go here, in the corners. The knights next to them, then the ...”

“You don’t roll dice to place those?”

“Well, no.”

“See, the eight-sided die comes with it, so we roll first to see where the king goes.”

“That piece, the one the players are trying to take to win the game?”

“Or get into a position where a capture is inevitable.”

“Yeah. You call that the king? But it only moves one square at a time!” said Sangh, who was just then focused less on the game than on the way she looked and smelled up close. Not like a machine.

“True,” she said, “but that’s what we call it. What do you call it?”

“The chest! That’s the name of the game! Or, nowadays, the ‘flag.’ It usually looks more like a flag.”

Further terminological dispute followed.

“Well,” said Sangh after they had straightened out the names of the pieces. “So we’ve got this extra piece in the middle, the ‘bomb.’ This is where dice come in, at least in our game. The bomb moves like a rocket, horizontally and vertically. But once it’s launched, you can blow it up by rolling dice to see what it destroys. We need four four-sided dice.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have those. But I, of course, can generate some pretty random numbers if we need them.”

“But if you’re playing, how can the other player, like, trust you?”

“I’m an honorable person.”

“I guess I have to take that on faith; I’ve had to have faith several times today, and so far Allāh has kept me from harm.”

She seemed to want to comment on Allāh, but instead said, “So you can move the bomb, or you can explode it. You generate four random numbers from zero to three. Or is it one to four?”

“Zero to three. You put them in descending order. . . .” He sketched how the numbers defined a rectangle around the bomb. “The bomb and all the pieces in that rectangle, but not the pawns, are destroyed.”

“Golly!”

“So, then, here’s how you assess the damage. If you blow up your own flag, you lose . . .”

“Flag?”

“Your chest, your . . . king.”

“Okay, so what else?”

“Well. If you blow up your own chest you lose, no matter what else you destroy. If you spare your own flag but destroy the opponent’s flag, you win.

Otherwise, you, like, keep going.”

“With the pawn structure still intact.”

“Yeah.”

“Golly. The bomb is a real wild card. That would change the game completely. I mean, from what it was on *Terra*.”

“I suppose it did. But it’s the only version I know. Everybody loves chess — well, everybody who can remember how the pieces move. There’s skill in it, but this one element of luck for people who like to gamble.”

“Let’s play.” When she smiled the way she was smiling, the temptation was strong. Sathanw was devious.

But Sangh was yawning. “I’d love to,” he said, “But what time is it?”

“One-point-one.”

“Oh, please.” He had been introduced to the ‘Tayhan’ time system, but he was tired.

“Twenty minutes to three Babylonian.” The ‘Tayhan’s had decimalized the time system so the day had 10 hours; the older 24-hour system, created by Babylonian astronomers thousands of years ago, was still in use on Prezghod.

“That explains why I’m exhausted. I have *got* to get to bed. I’m supposed to start my research tomorrow — I mean, at sunrise.”

“Okay,” she said, rising to her feet. “Get some sleep. I will find you later.”



“I’ll bet you will,” Sangh said bitterly. At least, he tried to sound bitter, but it came out a little eager. “I don’t believe for a second, you know, that you wanted to spend time with me. But I’ll humor you.” *I can’t be saying this! I can’t be thinking this.*

“That’s all I ask,” she said. “Don’t get up, I’ll let myself out.” And she noiselessly, gracefully strode across the floor and through the door, closing it behind her.



## Chapter 4

### Conflict

Sangh would have enjoyed flying the airplane, but if they were going to fly on a steady course just above the trees, the robot might as well do it. He had plenty to talk about with Šheessay. Once the thrill of escape from *São Paulo* wore off, though, the sentences came slower and slower, until he fell asleep in the middle of one. He awoke only as they were landing, when she pinched him. “Where are we?” he said.

“A little place called *Cuiabá*. We’re just refueling, but you can hop out and stretch your legs if you want.”

The *Cuiabá* airport was little more than one paved runway and one brightly lit building, although several dark buildings loomed nearby that might be part of it once the sun rose. Sangh wandered inside, only then re-

alizing just how thirsty he was and how full his bladder. He was just starting to look around for a place to buy a fresh drink or unload a used one when someone dragged him back outside. Šheessay.

“Oh, shit, I screwed up.”

“We’re probably all right. They might miss us on the surveillance vids; the light’s not that good.”

It was tough to be a fugitive on *Terra*. “I’m dying of thirst. Can we order some drinks to load on the plane? And is there an unsurveilled outhouse around here?”

“I’ll have some drinks and sandwiches crated up. I guess you’ll have to pee behind the plane.”

“Or just stand out here sweating for a while. It’s hot as hell.”

“It’s a bit less than 40 degrees, I think. I pictured Hell being hotter.”

“Me too, but for all we know, temperature is just a metaphor for the actual pain involved. Maybe in Hell your bladder is full for all eternity.”

“Do what you have to do.”

When he got back, the plane was ready to go. Panic suddenly gripped him as he climbed back in. *I can feel the annihilator ’bots out there, beyond the lights, running to block our runway.* He hurried the last steps, tripped, and tumbled into the plane.

“When can we go?” he asked, crawling to his seat.

“Did you see something?”

He shook his head. She shrugged. She held his hand as the plane rolled patiently through into air-traffic control’s preordained paces.

When they were in the air, and beyond the ground-to-air missile batteries he could picture so vividly, he finally relaxed and looked behind the seat to see what had been loaded. He found sandwiches with mixed vegetable matter. Fortunately, Sheessay had included a couple of cold sodas in their order.

“What about *your* midnight snack, my little dynamo of love?” he asked.

“I’ve been getting some juice off the plane engine. You’re going to have to work on your affectionate phrases.”

“Teach me some in *Terrano*.”

“I’m going to teach you everything, my love. However, up North they have their own languages.”

“Which you speak perfectly.”

“Oh, don’t, I’m blushing,” she said, looking down modestly.

“Tell me more about you.”

“I would worry about my vanity getting out of control, but I’m sure what I say will just put you to sleep.”

“I won’t fall asleep, but my attention may wander. There are too many things to worry about. What’s happening with Tralf? Will Bewinda be all right? Does Vhatta Limhoon really think he can take over a planet with a hundred men occupying the Presidential Palace? Or has he lost his mind? What happens when the main fleet arrives? Where are we going, exactly, and what am I going to do when we get there?”

“You mean what are *we* going to do,” she said.

“Yes, of course, my love, but I can imagine what *we’re* going to do. I can imagine what *you’re* going to do, which is to go on being a superhero. But what is *my* occupation? How dangerous is it? If it’s so safe we can just drop in at a moment’s notice, why is everyone told something different?”

“That is a long story. The plague story is not exactly false. Many of those diseases we eradicated in the South are still running around up North. However, I’m not adding to your worries; I vaccinated you just before we landed in *Cuiabá*. This spot on your arm may be sore for a few days.”

“I thought you were pinching me awake.”

“When I pinch you you’ll know it.”

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Sangh and his team had failed as an intelligence unit to present a coherent picture of *Terrano* defense capabilities. That’s because there was evidence

that the Erthlings had degenerated to a childlike state, and contradictory evidence that they had capabilities beyond what the Prezghodlings could comprehend.

The first morning on the surface, Friday, after their trip from the airport to the Presidential Palace, before any serious encounters with the government of *Terra*, they had been interviewed by Liuén Santiag, a no-nonsense woman, pretty in a journalist way (hair a little too straight, eyes a little too made-up). But at the end of her interview, just when Sangh thought something real was finally about to happen, a door opened, and in strode a man, at least Sangh hoped it was a man, well tailored and coiffed, age indeterminate. He looked to be in good shape, but for his chubby brown cheeks. He entered laughing, and never quite stopped.

“And now,” said Liuén, “I’d like to introduce our interstellar travelers to Nilson Matsushima, the host of *Terra*’s number-one game show, *What Would You Eat?* Nilson, may I present Ambassadors Sangh Fharha and Tralf Ghiller, and Dr. Bewinda Wharbut, from the planet Prezghod! Travelers, I’m going to leave you in Nilson’s capable hands.”

Mr. Matsushima beckoned to the interstellar travelers to sit in three of the comfortable chairs while he occupied a fourth, which had been pulled to one side by someone during the transition to this new TV show. Somehow

Kolfhaj wound up in a smaller chair. The vidscreens did not show his image.

“Howdy folks! I’m sorry to interrupt your normal reality ‘virchee’ viewing, but we have more exciting news about our visitors from another world.”

“‘Virchee’?” said Tralf.

“Virtual-reality.”

“Cool.”

“3-D vid? TV?”

“I grab it, right?”

*So a “reality ‘virchee’” would be a “reality virtual-reality show”? I don’t grab it.*

“As Liuén said, I’m Nilson Matsushima. Thank you so much, Liuén. Just to introduce our guests in a little more depth, let me describe the research each of them does. (Stop me if I get this wrong, guys!) Prof. Wharbut is a historian. Prof. Ghiller is a linguist who will be compiling a grammar of *Terrano* for future interstellar tourists. Prof. Fharha is an anthropologist, and if that’s too big a word for you, you can call him (and Tralf) ‘Mr. Ambassador,’ because, as you’ve no doubt heard, their diplomatic credentials were accepted today by President Ronaldo Travers of our own Solar System. As an academic anthropologist, Sangh will be studying the ordinary families of *Terra*. Now, Sangh, how do you normally pick the families to study?”



“Usually we immerse ourselves in a culture for a while, overcoming the initial mistrust that is pretty natural for someone being ‘investigated,’ and only gradually do ...”

“Whoa!” interrupted Mr. Nilson Matsushima, “That’s pretty complicated! You’re going to be awfully glad to hear that we short-circuited the complications for you, and chose the family to be studied by staging a competition, a reality ‘virèche’, in fact. And I mean competition — we’ve never seen so many families sign up!”

Sangh was bewildered. “I’m sorry?” he said.

“Now, don’t tell me they don’t have neural interfaces on your planet! No, yes, I’m informed that in fact they *don’t* have them, so sorry, but they do of course have vidscreens ...?” asked Nilson Matsushima.

“I’m not really supposed to tell you anything about our planet, Mr. Neelson,” said Sangh. He smiled, and Nilson Matsushima guffawed. Apparently he had said the right thing, and he had even remembered the man’s name.

“I’ll take that as a Yes!” said Nilson. “I don’t know if you have had much time to watch vid, though, in your dazzling military career, so I’ll explain how the contest went. We found four families, one in each reclaimed continent plus a plucky colonist family from Goa, and they all competed for the chance to be the Anthropology Family representing our planet! We put

them on an oasis in the *Sahara* (that's a big desert in África) last week to see if they had what it takes to carry their version of *Terrano* society to the wilderness.

“Before I announce the winners, is there anybody from Brasiu in the studio audience?” He shaded his eyes as if from bright lights and looked out toward . . . a blank wall. But on the monitor there was a picture of a happy studio audience, and a cheer came up from them. Nilson Matsushima laughed. “Of course there are! I’m sure you especially will be proud to find out that the winners of the contest are the Fulano Wright family from right here in *São Paulo*!”

There was applause from the “studio” audience, an entirely fictitious group.

“I’m going to bring them out in a second, but first let’s watch this clip of the interview they gave just after their historic victory on Wednesday.”

By this time Kolfhaj had stood up and was pacing back and forth, staying offscreen. Sangh knew, and feared, the expression on his face. Babraba Ghalfe had no weapon in her hand, for once, but her trigger finger flexed repeatedly as if she did.

While the interview clip was starting, Nilson leaned over and whispered, “I’m sorry we had to resort to a little deception there, about the audience,

I mean. I'm sure you'll understand — tight scheduling and all. Then the security issues. But the people at home like to imagine they're part of an audience here."

"This place is like a clown car," whispered Tralf, "and every clown that pops out is sillier than the last."

Nilson's vid clip showed a family of four, two parents and two children. They said all the things winners of competitions usually say. Kolfhaj stopped pacing long enough to watch. When the clip was over, he resumed.

Nilson stood up and, when the live monitor showed he was back on the air, said, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, give a big welcome to the Fulano Wright family!"

Another door opened, and in came three of the four members of the family. "Let me introduce to you, first, the mother of the family, and essay editor of the magazine *Contemporary Gardening*, Dalanna Wright Fulano. This woman was one of the palest people Sangh had ever met, right down to her light blonde hair. She had a long face, saved from being a dull rectangle by her smile, which she was generous with. She said, "I hope you'll forgive us, but our son Keinu is away on a field trip this week. But he's dying to meet you when he gets back."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said Bewinda.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Sangh said.

Nilson said, “Next, the father of the family, Matsui Fulano Wright who is Production Manager at Amazing Middle-Size Products here in *São Paulo*.” Matsuee was a short, dark brown, pugnacious-looking man. It looked like his head had been squashed vertically when he was born, his chin, lips, nose, and brow bulging out in response. His thick moustache looked like it had been extruded in the process. He was a centimeter shorter than his wife. He shook hands and said, without a trace of pugnacity, “It’s great to meet you. We were afraid you weren’t coming after all.”

“So was I,” said Sangh.

“And finally,” warbled Nilson, “Their daughter, the beautiful *and* talented Silvia Fulano Wright!” Silvia looked a lot like her father, but his dramatic features had been softened in her, creating a sense of great beauty being held in reserve. Her coloring took more from her mother than her father.

“‘Seelvia,’ what a lovely name,” said Sangh. “The Mother of Our Lord was named Silvia.”

The Silvia standing in front of him said, “That’s cool,” in the tone teenagers use for tagging things not cool at all.

Tralf said, “*Very* nice to make your acquaintance. You’re the sweetest girl we’ve seen in a long time.”

“Thanks?” said Silvia.

“Now, I know we’ve disrupted your day, bringing you here at short notice,” said Nilson, “And we’re not going to keep you any longer. But may Sangh pay you a visit tomorrow to get started on his research?”

“Oh, yes!” they all said.

“All right! Let’s give them a big round of applause,” and they left, waving goodbye to Sangh and to Nilson. The sound of applause could be heard from the speakers. Sangh, Tralf, and Bewinda felt compelled to do a little clapping, too. LtCdr. Kolfhaj stayed on his feet and could not keep still.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, we have one more item on our agenda for Professors Fharha, Wharbut, and Ghiller.” said Nilson Matsushima, remaining on his feet.

“We’re not really professors,” said Sangh modestly, “Call us ‘researchers.’”

“Oh, you are so wrong about that! Let’s bring in our next guest to explain what I mean. Please join me in welcoming our own Professor Edith Marcantonio from the University!” He clapped, and the imaginary studio audience followed suit, as a short, stout woman came walking in from the wings — on the vidscreens. She was actually not present.

LtCdr. Kolfhaj chose that moment to walk into range of the cameras.

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute!”

Nilson was not only unperturbed, he was delighted. On the monitor, Prof. Marcantonio disappeared and the Lieutenant Commander popped into TV reality. “Certainly, Lieutenant Commander. Ladies and gentlemen of *Terra*, a big welcome for Lieutenant Commander Jhon Kolfhaj, leader of the military section of Ambassador Fharha’s delegation.” More imaginary clapping ensued.

Kolfhaj snorted. “With all due respect, sir, we are here on a serious mission. We acknowledge that your civilization may do things differently from ours, but how long can all this nonsense go on? We have serious issues to discuss, issues critical to intergalactic peace.”

Frank Powers walked over, looking angry, but at whom? Rather than find out, Sangh said, “Commander, I understand how you feel. But for now let’s just do things the ‘Tayhan’s’ way. I’m sure we’re going to be told everything you, and we, er, need to know. Tralf, Bewinda, and I are going to relax and enjoy the process, or try anyway. Without revealing any secrets.”

Bewinda gave a caustic laugh but said nothing.

Kolfhaj looked at Sangh and at Powers for two seconds, then bowed, turned, and walked back to his pacing line. Powers retreated too. Tralf whispered, “Whew, right?” Nilson said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we are witnessing diplomacy at its finest!” Bewinda stifled a laugh with a snort.

Prof. Edith Marcantonio reappeared on the screen, caught in a yawn. Nilson Matusushima resumed his patter.

“Professor Marcantonio, what do you have for us?”

“Nilson,” she said onscreen, her mouth hidden behind her hand, “... (Excuse me) ... The Faculty of the University felt that these distinguished scholars from another star were certainly qualified to join our ranks. We haven’t had departments of Exoanthropology, Exolinguistics, and Galactic History, but we would be eager to establish them with such eminent scholars available to serve as their first Chairs. So I am honored to offer these Proclamations of Appointment making them Professors in the University of *Terra*.” Bewinda, Tralf, and Sangh got to their feet, and accepted from the professor three ornate scrolls on thick paper with wax seals and ribbons attached.

“Wow!” said Nilson Matsushima, “Isn’t that something? I bet I couldn’t even read those scrolls.” Bewinda, Tralf, and Sangh held up the scrolls. An aide hastily rotated Sangh’s scroll 180 degrees. Once all three were right-side-up, Nilson asked everyone to join in applauding the truly epic scale of their deeds in coming so far purely for the sake of Learning. *Are people across the planet actually applauding along with the imaginary studio audience? Are we hearing the whitecaps on a tsunami of planetary enthusiasm?*

“We hope,” said Prof. Marcantonio, “That you will visit the University

during your stay on our planet.”

“We would be glad to,” said Tralf. “Where is it?”

Nilson Matsushima laugh ratcheted up a notch. “Oh no, no, no, the University is not a physical place! It’s virtual, so it’s everywhere. Could you help me explain, please, Edith, may I call you Edith?”

“Yes, no, of course it isn’t located in a particular place. We just jack in for our meetings, classes, what have you, and the *’Net* does the rest.. I’d be glad to . . .”

“Even department-faculty meetings, right?” interrupted Nilson, “No excuse will let you miss one of *those*, huh? Am I right?”

*Well, that explains why Prof. Marcantonio looks like she was dragged out of bed. For all we know, she lives on the other side of the planet.*

No one had noticed Bewinda’s shock at the description of the University’s workings. Until she burst out with, “Has the Bible been completely forgotten on Erth? Muhammad, sura 120, verse 5, says, ‘Evildoers! Your networks give you power over the race of men now, but on that Evil Day that is to come, Allaḥ will sweep you and your demons into the fiery pit, and there will be no one to call on.’ It is only thanks to the grace of our Lord BeJesus Cristh that we have been saved from networks of computers.”

“Oh,” said Nilson, and looked out at the studio audience with a baffled



but disingenuous look on his face.

“She’s talking about her religious beliefs, Nilson. Is that right, dear?” said Prof. Marcantonio, who was a soothing presence. “This is something we feel sure it’s important to engage in dialogue about, to reach some level of mutual understanding. We’ll talk later.”

“Speaking of later, I’m afraid we’re going to say, ‘See ya later!’ to everyone here and at home,” said Nilson, “Because I’m getting some vibros from some pretty important people that it’s time for our professorial space travelers to move on. But let’s give them a big hand!” He clapped, and, on the vidscreens and in the earbuds, the studio audience clapped, and Sangh and Tralf clapped, too. Bewinda did not. The Erthlings had outmaneuvered her, but Sangh knew there were lots more bible verses she could quote. After a few more seconds, Nilson gave a big wave and said, “Goodbye for now, everybody!” Then he turned to an assistant for some consultations, and paid no more attention to the newly minted Professors.

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It was only on Friday afternoon that they finally got something a little more substantive. After a nice lunch, which relaxed and revived even Bewinda, they finally heard about the history of *Terra* around the time of the Colonization. The speaker was Prof. Maria-José Bulger, a colleague of

Prof. Marcantonio in the Department of Political History at the University. She spoke from the Library, and quoted from the volumes stored there. Like the University, there was just one Library, and it lived in virtual space.

In their first encounter with Prof. Marcantonio, the vidscreens had shown all they needed to see. But to access the contents of the Library, it was necessary to put on virtual-reality goggles. At first only Sangh and Tralf succumbed to the temptation to use them. Bewinda accepted a pair but did not put them on. A vidscreen remained in place for her benefit and the other Prezghodlings'. Anyone wearing the goggles could see Profs. Marcantonio and Bulger standing behind lecterns in a clear space just beyond the circular tables on which lunch had been served, but in front of a few potted plants. Both Professors wore pantsuits and tweed coats and the same soft-soled comfortable shoes everyone on 'Tayha' seemed to wear. Prof. Marcantonio looked more rumpled; further evidence of her long day. Prof. Bulger had a dark brown complexion and curly chestnut-colored hair. *Rather plain*, Sangh thought, *teeth too big*. *My, I've gotten picky fast*.

Tralf ripped off the goggles, then put them back on again.

"Cool!" he said. "Now you see them, now you don't. If Fràhnik Pauwers had a hat with a feather on it he'd block the view." He stood up. "If I walk over to her, can I touch her, shake her hand? Of course not, they're only

goggles. Right? Really!”

“Yes; no,” said Frank Powers. “Virtual reality is not that good. It just simulates the visual environment. Getting tactile feedback right would require too much bulky equipment or neural interfacing. Except for certain situations. Remote sex, for instance. If two people wish to couple, we simply provide a compliant robotic surface at each end that reacts to signals from the other party telling which shape to assume, which way they want to move, what pressure they want to exert on which body parts, ...”

“That’s enough of such filth,” barked LtCdr. Kolfhaj. “There are civilians — female, ladies — present.”

“Sorry,” said Powers, frowning. “The bottom line is, virtual reality seems real, up to a point, but you have to live within its limits.”

Tralf had sat down. Prof. Marcantonio, acting as M.C., introduced Prof. Bulger, then sat down. Prof. Bulger began, “I’m sure you’re all very curious about what’s happened on *Terra* since you left, I should say, since your ancestors left.”

Bewinda asked, “How good are your historical records of the colonization period?”

“We have excellent records of human history going back perhaps five thousand years, with some periods less well represented than others. The

colonization was about sixteen hundred years ago, and our records from that period are quite good.”

“But what kind of records are we talking about?”

“Well, if you’ll just come into the Library.”

“Now, *Prezgarrodianos*, if you’re going to do this, you’ll need a joystick. TAs — did we remember those? Do we have them?,” said Prof. Marcantonio, as aides placed one in each lap. “Just push the right lever forward, backward, or any other direction to glide that direction. If you hold this button down . . .” Sangh lost the thread as he tried to experiment with the right lever while listening to her talk about other buttons and levers. All he really heard was her last sentence: “Play around a bit to get the feel of it.”

On the screen, a corridor had appeared in what had been a blank wall, and Prof. Bulger had turned and was gliding into the opening.

“Whoa!” said Tralf, “My chair is moving forward.” He ripped off the goggles again and gripped the arms of his chair as if to verify that it was not mobile, then hurriedly put them back on. “Is this cool? Really!”

“The Library is the database of digitized records. It contains every news-feed or *blog* for the last two thousand years. There’s more than one way to present the information visually. I’ve set it so the documents look like books from your era, on shelves arranged by topic.

“To open a book,” said Prof. Marcantonio, “Just make a sort of wiping motion in the air, like so. Then you can keep turning the pages.”

“And if I want to go to page 495, I just, like, do that 495 times?”

“No, you just say, ‘Go to page 495.’ But this book only has 300-some pages, so it just blinks.”

“Go to page 203,” said Sangh. The book did. “You’re right, Tralf. This is *metta*,” said Sangh. “So how does this wonderful system tell the difference between conversation and these control gestures for the books?”

“It takes a lot of computing power. Some fancy statistical techniques are involved, and obviously a lot of AI . . .” Plainly, Prof. Bulger had no idea how it worked beyond a few buzzwords.

Bewinda apparently could not stand being *left out* of something involving books. She put on the goggles that she had been clutching. She blushed and giggled. She tried some gestures. “I think I’m getting this. Oh, BeJesus forgive me, but I have been *craving* books.”

“Different people prefer different ways of viewing the documents, but we thought you’d like to see them as books, so we’ve got some bookshelves full of good old-fashioned books. Everybody see them?

“I’m sorry you can’t touch or smell the books. As we explained, you can’t actually touch anything, but the books are really just information sources,

so you don't need to touch them, you just need to open them, search through them, and so forth. And the way you do that is with speech, or the joystick controls for motion, as we talked about."

"Okay," said Bewinda, "But how do we use all this to find out what happened back when the colonists left?"

Prof. Bulger said, "At that time, in the mid-21st century, there was a coalition of countries called 'The United' that dominated the world. They were threatened by the rise of another coalition, the League of Anti-Hegemonists. Both coalitions were led by northern-hemisphere countries. But the world was going through the Industrial Revolution, the Great Warming, and the Biodiversity Crash, which caused all sorts of political upheavals and transformations." As she spoke, the group moved through what seemed like a tunnel of books and paused before one in particular. A picture came floating out of the book and resolved into a clip of people rioting. It was followed by clips of hurricanes and parched deserts. Sangh was not impressed. He looked around. In every direction there was a tunnel of books, with branches leading to further branches. He looked up, and, crazily, he could see more tunnels of books, in directions that made no physical sense. *When all those books fall. . . . An absurd thought, but . . . .* He had to close his eyes until he could get his head horizontal again.

Prof. Bulger was droning on. “The United wanted to prove that it was vigorous enough to undertake farseeing projects requiring great technological prowess, of which the most audacious was to colonize other solar systems. It would take several lifetimes to even know whether the project had succeeded. That was the point: to brag that the United planned to still be around centuries later. Hundreds of starships were launched toward several nearby stars that were known to have planets that *might* be inhabitable.”

Suddenly they were on an observation platform suspended above a rocket blasting off. *Big picture, big roar, big deal.*

“Which stars?” asked LtCdr. Kolfhaj. His voice seemed disembodied.

“You can scroll back to the real room with the little thumbwheel on your right,” said Prof. Marcantonio. “In an emergency you’d be brought back automatically.”

Frank Powers was smiling. “Which stars indeed? We look forward to a fruitful exchange about astronomy with you, at some point.”

Bewinda spoke: “Professor . . .”

“Bulger, but please call me Maria-José.”

“Right. Mareea-Žhosay. Did the colonization project have unforeseen consequences that brought it to an end? Or did some exogenous event cause that?”

“Let’s click back to the Library. Back to the Library. Thanks. This is much easier with the neural interface, of course.” As they returned to the hallucinatory world of the Library, Sangh could see several books slide part-way out of nearby shelves. Prof. Bulger selected one of them by “touching” it with her index finger. It slid out, and the first item to pop out of it was a video of a nuclear explosion, which the Prezghodlings were all too familiar with. “There was a nuclear war between the United and the League. The countries in the United and the League were badly damaged, and the colonization project was abandoned in the struggle to put their economies and societies back together. Meanwhile, a coalition of countries from the Southern Hemisphere, the Southern Union, became the dominant world power, led by *Brasiu*, whose soil you are now standing on, although it’s no longer an independent country, of course.”

Frank broke in: “I’m sure our historians could talk for hours, but I’m also sure you could as well, Professor Wharbut. Tell us what happened on Prezghod after it was colonized.”

“Please let me finish! I’m almost done . . .,” said Prof. Bulger. “Where was I? The Northern Hemisphere regrouped and formed an alliance called the Anti-Hegemonic Axis. The Southern Union fought a terrible war — the Second Nuclear War — with the Axis, which left the Northern Hemisphere



virtually uninhabitable. The number of deaths was tragic. The Southern Hemisphere had ‘won’ the war in some sense, and in the aftermath formed a world government that has survived for almost two thousand years. No wars have been fought since. That’s all. I’m done; don’t look at me like that, Mr. Powers! *Now* we can hear from Professor Wharbut about the history of her planet.”

Edith Marcantonio had fallen asleep.

Bewinda took her goggles off. With dignity befitting her new title, she said, “Thank you, Professor Buulzhair. Okay, in the first place, our records are not nearly as good as yours. We assume that Erth, I mean ‘Tayha’, I mean, I guess, ‘The United,’ were planning to keep sending supply ships and colonists on a regular basis, until rockets could be built that could make the return journey. But the rockets abruptly stopped coming, for reasons we could before now only conjecture. Most of the colonists were on the side of good, but a significant minority were in league with Sathanw ...”

Fràhnk interrupted, “You’re going to have to explain what Sathanw was.”

Bewinda looked puzzled. LtCdr. Kolfhaj spoke. “*He* was, and is, the embodiment of evil, the tempter that God allows to exist in this evil world.”

“Ah,” said Fràhnk, “Religion again, right? Do either of our illustrious academics — I mean, the native ones — care to comment? No? Well, we

can put you in touch with someone who can . . .”

But LtCdr. Kolfhaj interrupted. “It is time to bring this conference to an end. We are in serious danger of moral compromise if we stay much longer. It is time we returned to our landing craft and consult with our superiors over how we are to proceed — and how we are to be purified.”

Fortunately, Sangh was able to invoke the dignity of his rank as ambassador and obtain accommodation in the Presidential Palace. Bewinda, already addicted to the Library, glued herself to the ambassadorial party. Kolfhaj’s klad returned to Firebase Limhoon.

The ‘Tayhan’s assigned administrative assistants to Sangh, Tralf, and Bewinda. Sangh’s was named Jake Pease. He appeared to be a broad-shouldered dark-skinned man, with sandy blonde hair, broad nose, brown eyes, about 35 years old. Tralf’s was named Lola Dassair. Her skin color was dominated by dark gray tones that reminded Sangh of the people of Dhindra, an exotic port city in Minhbo he had visited on a training mission. Her face was long and elegant, with perfect, symmetric cheekbones, framed by straight black hair. She was chewing gum as they were introduced, which she shoved into her cheek before saying, “Nice to meet you.”

“Now surely you’re a ‘Molyee’,” said Tralf, “Right? How can a ‘Seckie’ chew gum?”

Lola laughed. “No, I’m a *Seque*, but I grant you it’s a little odd. Everybody’s different, right, Mr. Ambassador? I mean, if it offends you . . .” It didn’t offend him at all.

Bewinda’s . . . but there is no need to introduce her AA, because Bewinda refused to accept any such thing. A quote from Scripture sprang to her lips, as usual: “Saam 52: *Why do you glory in evil, you robotic liar.*

*You love evil rather than good.*

*God will strike you down.* Well, don’t stand there looking stupid — go away! Go!” She seemed torn between dread and resolution, but stood her ground, and the AA, a stout woman, withdrew, with only a quiet murmur of protest.

Jake Pease, or Žhayk Peez as Sangh pronounced it, turned out to be indispensable in navigating the alleyways of *São Paulo*, of which more later.

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By the next day, Saturday, Sang was already living his double life. If he had reported to Vhatta Limhoon that he had made contact with Šheessay Dezeenawvee in the Palace, he might have avoided duplicity, but he did not.

By Saturday night he was hopelessly compromised, when Šheessay visited Sangh again. This time she knocked on his door, leaned in, and said, “Hi, Sangh.” He wanted to say, *Go away, Sathanw!*, but he didn’t, and she

slipped into the room, closing the door behind her. She was dressed in a short, summery dress, white with lilacs all over it. She had sandals on her feet.

Sangh gulped, then scrambled out of his bed and onto the floor beside it to kneel and pray. “Lord,” he moaned, “Take this temptation away from me.”

“Oh, please,” said Šheessay, “Do you have a bathrobe or something I can put on? Maybe that will remove some temptation.”

“How should I know what I have? Try one of the closets.” Sangh didn’t look around, but heard the sounds of rummaging.

“Ah, this should do it,” said Šheessay. “You can turn around now. I mean, as far as I am concerned.”

He looked around. She had on a sumptuous-looking dressing gown, in a tasteful greenish-gray velour, several sizes too big. She was sitting at the table as she had the night before. He stood up, then sat down on the bed again, a couple meters from the table.

“So,” she said, “How was your day?”

He just stared at her.

“Did you see anything interesting in *São Paulo*?” He and Jake had visited the Fulano-Wright family in their tidy home on a shady street, and

commenced his exoanthropological investigations. But now he found himself getting lost in her face, whose beauty he had missed at first. At the same time, he writhed in shame at this change in the way he looked at her. Maybe part of it was her doing, deliberately making herself over to be more attractive to him. If she were a biological woman, he would have yielded without question to the certainty that they were falling in love with each other. But how in the world could he permit himself to fall in love *with a machine*? How could this not be a trick?

“Leave me alone,” he groaned, at the same time hoping she would stay.

She stood up, walked over to the bed, and sat down. There was plenty of space between them, and he now had to turn his head to see her. But she seemed to exert a pull through that space, and he even imagined he caught her scent. Not a scent of ozone and machine oil, but a combination of perfume and woman.

“Saint Thâmas Dhaquina, pray to God to grant me strength against the corrosion of lust!” groaned Sangh.

“Oh, Sangh, I’m sorry. Here, I know what. Why don’t you tell me who Saint Thâmas Dhaquina is or was and how he or she can pray for you. That will fortify you in your resolve to . . . , to do what it is you’re trying to do here.”

“I’m trying to resist your blandishments. We are too weak to fight the devil on our own; we need Allaĥ’s help. The saints are in Heaven, with Allaĥ, and intercede for us with Him. By tradition, different saints specialize in different temptations.” Lecturing like this was not recommended as a way to win fame as a conversationalist, but it kept his mind focused in the right direction. “Saint Thamas Dhaquina joined the Dominicans against his atheist family’s wishes, so the family sent a robotic courtesan to seduce him, to get him to value the pleasures of the flesh more than the love of God. He outwitted her, his family relented, and he dedicated his life to the contemplation of Allaĥ and his son BeJesus Cristh.”

“So if I were a *Molhe* it would be all right to be attracted to me?”

“There would be other . . . issues, but in principle it would be all right. I could marry a . . . ‘Molyee’, but never a ‘Seckie’. The Church would just as soon have me marry a rock.”

“The Church doesn’t know everything. It doesn’t think of the *rock’s* feelings. I mean, *my* feelings. What if a *Seque* fell in love with *you*?”

This made him turn to look at her. “Don’t be ridiculous.” But he saw a tear escape from her eye and run down her cheek. She turned away from him.

“*Now* you want to look at me,” she said, and sniffed.

“Why in the world would they build you so you could cry? Why not just have a display in the side of your head showing the emotions you’re supposedly ‘feeling’?”

“Nobody built me. I built myself.” She turned back to face him. “You know nothing of *Seque* design but what you read in old legends full of superstitions. You think it’s possible to build an intelligent robot without emotions.”

“Robots have no souls; they have to be animated by spirits from Hell.”

“Do I look like something from Hell? Never mind, I probably do, right now.”

“No! No, in fact, you don’t. Not at all. You look lovelier than ever.” He was falling fast now, and his strength had failed him. Her shining eyes imbued her face with even more spirit and life.

She moved closer to him. But she kept her eyes straight ahead. “I know what you’re going to say next,” she said. “That Satarrão can use beauty to capture men, that he can make his ugliest demon look beautiful. But I never met Satarrão! I’m not animated by an evil spirit! Or — *Fate!* — could I be and not know it?”

Fascinating philosophical question, this, but more fascinating was the fact that her gestures had loosened the robe considerably. Sangh didn’t

know if this was feminine wiles or wiles of the Sathanic variety, or just God granting him ‘the seen divine in flesh sublime’ (in the words of the immortal Norkell), but he was past caring, like every man tempted before him, at least since Thâmas Dhaquina. His arm was now touching her, feeling her warmth, and he leaned in and kissed her. Her arms surrounded him and the kiss lasted for a long time. Perhaps one kiss ended and another began. He finally found the strength to stop his hands from dragging him deeper and deeper into Hell, and to pull back. But he couldn’t reject Šheessay. He looked at her some more and heard himself laugh with delight.

“Oh, Sangh,” she said, and laughed, too.

“This is so embarrassing,” he said.

“I know, I know. It’s awkward for me, too.”

“We just have to remember not to panic; we’ll work our way through this.

We’ll make it work somehow.”

“Yes!” she said, “We have to.” And she kissed him again. Things got a bit wetter from there.



## Chapter 5

# War

Saturday night was a delicious secret, and by Tuesday night the sickening thrill of being chased by Limhoon's forces gave their love a doomed urgency. It sounds like a familiar story: romance rushed by wartime foreboding.

But in between Saturday and Tuesday were Sunday and Monday, when Sangh wore himself out battling self-reproach. Sunday had been torture, from the moment he awoke, burning with shame and guilt over what he had done the night before; although at least he had not quite stuck his member . . . . No, he mustn't even *think* about what might have happened. *Thanks be to BeJesus for watching over me.*

He had had a wonderful idea for a project for Sunday morning: He and Bewinda would jointly celebrate a Mass and invite Lakeenta, the First Lady,

to attend. This reminder of their shared piety might reconcile Bewinda to him, and perhaps the Holy Spirit might grant Ms. Jonsoon a hint of the grandeur and meaning of the ritual. But the idea had come to nothing; Ms. Jonsoon was too far gone in her atheism to have the slightest interest, although she tried to be polite. Without her participation, Sangh's enthusiasm faltered, Bewinda got suspicious, and the Mass project collapsed. Mutual recriminations ensued. Bewinda became more convinced than ever that Sangh was up to no good.

So when Tralf and the *Terrano* Foreign Ministry pitched a junket to *Bahia* in northeast Brasiu, Sangh was an easy sell. He and Tralf spent much of the afternoon listening to speeches, waving to fans, and visiting the beach.

By the time they got back to *São Paulo*, night had fallen; it was around 8.80 "rational" time, or 21:00 on the old Babylonian system. As they were driving back from the airport to the city, they ran into a traffic jam.

"They have traffic jams?" said Tralf.

Jake must have checked with his network resources, because he answered immediately, "Not normally. But this is not exactly a traffic jam. Your Commander Kolfhaj has cut the road."

"What?" said Sangh. Their vehicle had come to a complete stop. He jumped out, the usual futile gesture by a motorist anxious to know the cause

of their trouble. “Jake, will this car go cross-country, or do I have to walk to Kolfhaj’s checkpoint?”

Jake said, “Hop in,” and Sangh scrambled back. Their car went around the cars ahead of it. Nobody honked.

“I told the cars what we’re doing, so they don’t mind our going around them.”

“That explains why nobody’s honking at us. Right? Really?” said Tralf.

“The passengers might want to honk, but the cars are talking them out of it.”

“I’m glad I’m not trying to sell these cars on Prezghod,” said Sangh.

Two minutes later they rolled up to Kolfhaj’s checkpoint. He had taken a klaad, maybe 10 men and women, and a tiny planetary-exploration vehicle (what the troops called a “roach”), and marched around the airport to this point, an arbitrary fragmentd bit of ‘Brazeuuvan’ countryside, the same rolling savannah as at Firebase Limhoon. The roach was thrown across the highway, reducing it to one lane and chaos. Two soldiers were directing traffic. Another was leaning into each vehicle and asking for . . . what? In what language? It would have been funny except for the chance that it might provoke a galactic war.

Cdr. Kolfhaj stood by observing, Babraba Ghalfe by his side. Sangh

scrambled out of the car. He was about to say,

“Sir, what is the meaning of this?”

But it was Frank Powers who said it, with a somewhat different inflection of the word “sir” than Sangh would have used. Powers had sprinted to “Checkpoint Kolfhaj” from the other direction. Sangh was completely winded, but Powers looked as fresh as when he started, which could have been the Presidential Palace in *São Paulo*.

Powers stopped within a meter of Kolfhaj, who didn’t flinch. His reply was, “We are somewhat concerned about security at the airport. It became necessary for force-protection reasons to establish an observation point at this location.”

“Observation? Your vehicle is blocking the road!”

“In order to properly observe it became necessary for flow-control purposes to somewhat slow the flow of traffic at this point.”

“Gobbledygook aside, please remove the vehicle from the road at once.”

“I’m afraid I would have to check with my superiors before proceeding in that direction, Mr. Pauwers.”

“Sir, I do not have to check with mine,” said Powers.

While they were speaking, four squat forklifts had appeared, and were now lining up, two on either side of Kolfhaj’s roach. As if they had practiced

the maneuver, they slid their platforms out in unison and pushed up. Then they began to carry the roach away from the highway.

“Lieutenant Ghalfe, fire on the lead forklift, this side.”

Babraba lifted her laywitzer and began to fire pulses into the targeted forklift. At such close range, a full-power blast would have killed them all. As it was, each pulse caused the skin of the forklift to warp and pucker, but the forklift did not stop. Its exterior glowed red, its temperature at several hundred degrees, Sangh estimated. The *Molhes* in nearby cars came tumbling out, ran across the opposite lane, and kept running. If the forklift had had a *Molhe* operator, they would have had to jump ship to survive, but of course it didn't. It kept moving with the others until the roach was away from the road. When they stopped, they flipped the roach on its back, out of the way. Sangh prayed *it* was unoccupied.

“Cease fire,” said Kolfhaj, looking as impassive as possible.

The road was clear. Three of the robot forklifts lined up abreast, awaiting further orders. The fourth seemed indisposed.

The whole skirmish had taken place so fast that when it ended one lane was still blocked by a car held up by a marine. The car was talking to the marine in Glish, expressing puzzlement and frustration that it was being detained and that its occupants had disappeared. “Ah, Mr. Ambassador,”

the car said when it recognized Sangh, “I am so glad to see you. Perhaps you can help me find my riders; they left some things . . . . Oh, here they come. I am sure at this point that it is proper to obey the signals being sent by yonder police officer. Goodbye!” When *she* had appeared Sangh had missed.

The marine barely had time to take his head out of the window. “Hey, come back here,” he yelled, unshipping his weapon and pointing it at the car. He turned to Kolfhaj for permission to fire.

“Stand down,” Kolfhaj ordered.

The traffic was jammed worse than ever now as bewildered and frightened *Molhes*, soothed by reassurances from the cars and the police officer, found their way back to their cars, which had moved off the road to wait for them. But the traffic soon merged back to normal.

Powers turned from Kolfhaj to Sangh, as was diplomatically proper. “Mr. Ambassador, we have extended our hospitality to you by allowing your forces to occupy a small segment of our territory. A detachment of those forces have now ventured beyond that zone with seemingly mischievous intent, as you have seen for yourself.”

“I am sure this is all a misunderstanding, Mr. ‘Pauwers’. Allow me to consult with my . . . our military brethren and we will see if it can be cleared up.”

“As you wish, Mr. Ambassador, but we expect some compensation for damage to our property, and some assurance that our peaceful personnel will not be wantonly attacked again.”

*What “compensation” can they possibly expect from us?* “I will have to confer with my colleagues ... my superiors before I can make any agreements, but I hope to satisfy your concerns.”

“Very well, we await your response.” A car had pulled off the road while Sangh was speaking, and Powers stepped into it. He departed without saying anything further.

Sangh and LtCdr. Kolfhaj were left staring at each other. They stood on the west side of the road with Lt. Ghalfe and a few marines. Most of the klaad were on the east side of the road, with the overturned roach.

Sangh finally spoke. “Sir, I know you outrank me militarily, but as ambassador to this planet, I ..., well, I believe we have to consult Vhatta Limhoon. I *know* you wouldn’t have pulled a ... wouldn’t have taken the step of setting up a roadblock without an order from the Vhatta.”

At this point the car carrying Tralf and the AAs, Jake and Lola, rolled up and pulled over, waiting for Sangh.

“So, sir, Commander Kolfhaj, please assure me that you will return to your base until I have a chance to check with Vhatta Limhoon.”

“Lieutenant Fharha, I will assure you of whatever Vhatta Limhoon wants me to assure you. I will also do whatever he orders me to do. My orders do not allow me to escalate this operation to the next level, which would be to disable this road segment using explosive devices. So for now I am standing down. However, I am not authorized to retreat either.”

An impulsive Sangh (*as if!*) would have called Limhoon right there. But he didn’t want to risk being humiliated in front of Kolfhaj, or even . . . . *I don’t really want to think about the other possibilities.*

“I’m going to leave it there for now, Commander. You will be hearing from me. I will anticipate nothing happening out here for the time being.” Without waiting for a reply he climbed into the car, and they merged into the flow toward *São Paulo*.

When Sangh, Tralf, and Bewinda reported to Vhatta Limhoon that night, Limhoon’s mood was upbeat. His appetite for action had been sated by the skirmish on the airport road, no telling for how long. He had no complaints about Kolfhaj, Sangh, or the Erthlings.

“We keep probing, seeing how they react,” he said.

“Sir, one way they’ve reacted is by putting us on a bread and crackers diet at the Palace,” said Sangh.

“Aye sir, we can’t even get a cup of coffee. Really, right?” said Tralf.



“The life of a soldier is hard, soldier,” said Limhoon.

Dhluzio, usually silent but ever-present, said, “Let me know if they take away your king-sized bed. I’ll file a protest.”

Sangh changed the subject to the “kickers” they had traveled to *Bahia* in. He tried to convince Vhatta Limhoon that the control problem for Kefauver loops, the spindly towers used to launch the kickers, was virtually unsolvable. Yet the Erthlings had solved it.

“But what possible military significance do these Kefauver loops have — or launch loops, or whatever you want to call them?”

“Sir,” said Sangh. “with respect, I think you’re overlooking the military significance of what we’ve already told you. The ability to make what to us are *miracles* of missile control look effortless means that every seemingly innocent piece of technology could be concealing ... almost anything. We won’t see the threat until it’s too late. Obviously, I can’t be more specific, sir. I wish I could.”

Vhatta Limhoon made a sound that might have been self-strangulation. But all he said was, “Very well. Lieutenant Wharbut, what do you have?”

“Sir, I’ve been doing research on the question you asked: When did the military vanish from public discourse, and where did it go? You can do an incredible amount of research in a short time in the Library they’ve got

here. Prof. ‘Marcantonio’ of the University took time to explain it to me. There’s this software that lets you do something called ‘guugling’...,” and she explained how to run the search processes that kept all Tayhans so well informed. “It’s revolutionary. I mean, on Prezghod it would be. If we had ... you know, those demon machines from hell.”

“Lieutenant Wharbut, you and I both know perfectly well that that computer is connected to a network. No need to beat around the bush. I’m not shocked.”

“Aye sir, of course, one doesn’t like to think about it. Anyway, all I’m doing is reading.”

Limhoon laughed harshly. “If mere reading were harmless, there wouldn’t be a List of Forbidden Books, would there, Lieutenant Wharbut?”

“No sir.”

“Go on.”

“Aye, sir. ‘Edièhee’, I mean, ‘Prof. Marcantonio’ took me to the Library, which actually, like the University, is purely ‘virtual.’ That is, there are no actual books, you can read any book that you find by ... that is, by ‘guugling’ for the topic. Sir, the system is hard to resist, if for no other reason than that every book is in whatever language one wishes. You don’t need a ‘Seckie’ to translate over your shoulder. You just check the box

labeled ‘Glish.’”

“Okay, okay, you’ve already told me most of this.”

“Aye sir. To get back to your question, the first half is quite easy to answer. Before the Second Nuclear War, military affairs were discussed routinely by everyone. Like on Prezghod, everyone had an opinion. After the war, no more discussion. Of course, the war was very traumatic. It apparently came about, as many wars do, as a result of a miscalculation, in this case by the alliance of the Northern Hemisphere, called the Anti-Hegemonic Axis. The Southern Union, the precursor of today’s government of ‘Tayha’, ruled most of the Southern Hemisphere. A squabble arose over the ownership of some insignificant islands off the coast of ‘Dhamereekàh’ — this continent. A certain northern country had owned them for hundreds of years, but the South finally declared that this was silly, and took possession, after negotiations to purchase the islands broke down.”

“Don’t drag this out, Lieutenant,” said Limhoon.

“Aye, sir. Okay, one thing led to another, and the northerners used nuclear weapons first. They were backed into a corner and felt they had no choice. The South retaliated massively. Much more damage was inflicted on the North than on the South. A billion people died on the first day — the first *day* — of the war, but after that the Northern Hemisphere

suffered through a nuclear winter that lasted decades. Billions more died. The Southern Hemisphere suffered as well, but not as much, for various reasons; the meteorology's beyond me. More than a thousand years later the government claims that the North is still uninhabitable, because the war unleashed a weaponized plague virus that continues to propagate at endemic levels. It was cooked up by bioweapons engineers in continent E5, 'Dhamereekàh du Norche'. Fortunately, it wasn't deployed as intended; but in the chaos after the war it got out of the lab and spread. The virus is not airborne, at least not over long distances, or it would have spread to the south. Obviously, *somebody* still lives in the north if the only way the virus can survive is to spread from person to person."

"What are the symptoms of this virus?" asked Limhoon, holes beginning to appear in his patience.

"Sir, I'm getting to that. They claim it's a genetically engineered combination of a few other viruses. The only one we have on Prezghod is the headcold virus. The others . . . . But let's cut to the worst component. About sixty years after the big war, there was a crisis called the Nanobot Event."

"Another kind of accursed robot?"

"Aye sir, tiny ones, so small they could crawl through your bloodstream."

"BeJesus Cristh," said Tralf. "Beg pardon, sir."

“Lieutenant Fharha and I saw those crawling around inside that Dezeenawvee robot,” said Limhoon.

Sangh’s own insides squirmed at the thought of what he was *not* reporting about Ms. Dezeenawvee, starting with the fact that that view of creepy-crawlies inside her torso had been a prank, and ending with very different adventures inside her . . . . *Allaḥ forgive me, give me strength to . . . .* To what? Could he even imagine confessing what was happening between him and Šheessay?

“Disgusting,” said Limhoon, “But, Lieutenant Wharbut, what do manobots have to do with the plague virus?”

“Sir, I’m coming to that. The *nanobots* could not reproduce on their own; to do anything complex they had to form cooperative groups. There were just a few ’bot factories, kept isolated to be on the safe side. But in 2183 something happened in the factory in ‘Saree Lanka’ — that’s an island off the coast of Continent 4, and all communication with ‘Saree Lanka’ was cut off. They think what happened was that somehow an unusual coalition of nanobots got control of a couple of people in the factories, who developed a compulsion to crank out many more nanobots of that sort, which took over more people, and the whole island was actually taken over before anyone could stop it. The people then started building more nanobot factories.”

“How was it stopped?”

“Sir, after all else failed they had to nuke ‘Saree Lanka’, knowing they were killing everyone, even anybody — if there was anybody — who might have escaped nanobot infection. But at least the factories were all destroyed and the nanobot-controlled people had been stopped. But — here’s the punch line — it’s not a long distance from ‘Saree Lanka’ to the mainland, and they think the nanobots and their hosts may have actually gotten to the mainland, where they became carriers of the Plague virus. So what they’re fighting today is actually supposed to be a symbiosis of virus and nanobot.”

“This is a little far-fetched.”

“Yes, sir, but anyway the symptoms of the Plague, if that’s still the right word, are like this: The victim first becomes compulsively restless. They walk, they run, they get in a car, any vehicle will do. Then their *skin hardens*. They still crave motion, and they can’t move. The hardening process, whatever it is, is painful, all over the body. Finally the person is almost immobile. They die, but not peacefully. After death the skin becomes brittle and flakes away, allowing the nanobots to escape from the body, carrying the virus. If you get anywhere near the corpse you’re likely to get the plague.”

“Holy crap,” said Limhoon.

“Sir, there’s a lot more about how the virus helps the nanobots, but I’ll skip that. The virus is extremely difficult to work with, and not just because it’s so dangerous. It has no effect on any animal but humans, so it would be hard to test vaccines. There are no good computer models, which is pretty remarkable among these people, who seem to be able to do anything with computers — and have had more than a thousand years to do it.”

“Okay, Lieutenant, I understand why people stay away,” said Limhoon.

“Sir, I do not. The Plague flares up from time to time, but small populations can go for years without suffering any cases. They need to be exposed to someone with an active case. They’ve developed quarantine measures when someone does develop symptoms. I think ‘Molyee’s could go there if you didn’t mind losing a few. If you quarantined people coming south, there would be no risk of their spreading the disease. ‘Seckie’s can probably go back and forth to the North without worrying about any of this; then again, maybe not. Maybe they’d harbor nanobots.

“Whatever the facts, it is illegal for anyone to go north, and even more illegal for someone to come south, and people, I mean southerners, seem to obey the law. They have border patrols that prevent any northerner from emigrating to the South, but if just one Plague-infected person slipped through their fingers, the virus would decimate the South the way it has the

North. We're asked to believe that the border patrols have actually kept that from happening for more than 1500 years. My credulity won't stretch that far."

"Hmm, *that's* interesting. What are they hiding up there?"

"No cities, sir, or we would have observed them from orbit. But what about smaller towns or villages — or underground military installations? How many northern towns are really southern army bases?"

"I'll have Dhluzio go over the reconnaissance pictures of the North again. We can take some new ones if it'll help, maybe with radar. But back to my original question. Why did the papers stop talking about military affairs?"

"Sir, there haven't been any newspapers as such on this planet since years before the wars."

"What!?"

"They have things sort of *like* newspapers, but online, meaning, somehow living in the network."

"BeJesus, the whole planet is damned."

"These . . . periodicals are a mixture of pictures, tape recordings, virtual-reality recordings — the word 'virhëe' was used — and words, meaning written words, which somebody must still read. You can avoid reading completely and just listen and watch, and think you know all there is to



know. By the way, these periodicals are still *called* papers, but such verbal anachronisms are pretty common. For instance, we ‘sail’ our ships, even our spaceships, even though sails have ...”

“Please, no pedantic asides.”

“Aye aye, sir. Okay, on Day 1 of the Second Nuclear War, the papers in the North had ceased to exist. Amazingly, many major papers in the South did not miss a day of publication. But after expressing relief that they had ‘won’ the war, at least compared to the North, they put defense issues on the back burner. The President of the Southern Union, a man called Dhesau jee Kamoinws (I hope I’m pronouncing that right), was a real saber-rattler before the war. He had been brought to power on the issue of the Malveenias Islands; his party demanded that the long-time national ‘hurt’ of having them occupied by a northern power had to be ‘healed,’ if necessary by force. In the immediate aftermath, his policy of investing in cyberwarfare was widely credited with winning the war.”

“‘Cyberwarfare’? What’s that?” said Limhoon.

“Computational attack on an enemy’s computational infrastructure.”

“All I can picture is lobbing your computer over the barbed wire hoping to hit the enemy’s computer.”

The faint sound of Dhluzio’s chuckle could be heard in the background.

Sangh broke in. “Sir, we’re at a terrible disadvantage here. We do not connect computers together for fear of what will happen, so we don’t know what one computer can do to another when they *are* connected. But I think the Tayhans know very well what can happen. The only conceivable people on our side who can tell us what that might be are the Guild of Physicists, who are rumored to have, uh, dispensations in this area.”

Limhoon ignored him.

“Lieutenant Wharbut, so this President Kanoinws may have won this war using cyberwarfare.”

“Sir, but then Kamoinws seemed shaken by the result of the war his policies had provoked. He called for dismantling the armed forces, now that no credible threat existed. He said they would only tempt some regional politician to seize the region’s assets and use them to dismember the country. Besides, the resources tied up in the military were urgently needed for reconstruction. Tayhan geneticists happened to have been developing agricultural techniques that could use nuclear power directly, replacing photosynthesis with gammasynthesis. Applying uranium and plutonium stocks to agriculture instead of war appealed to almost everyone. Unfortunately, the South could feed only itself. The North still starved, and the survivors descended to savagery.”

“What’s the bottom line, Lieutenant Wharbut?”

“Sir, a few observations. One. I believe they’re lying to us, and their own people, about whatever’s going on in the Northern Hemisphere. Two. It’s quite possible that they really have dismantled their military completely, never dreaming that aliens from outer space would show up. Three. My last point underlines what Lieutenant Fharha said. The Second Nuclear War may not be what it appears to be. It could really be mainly a cyberwar followed by a preordained massacre, because one side’s computer systems were so completely compromised.”

“Look, Lieutenant, if that’s true, we have nothing to worry about, because we don’t *have* computer networks.”

“Aye sir, that’s certainly possible.”

“Okay, officers, let me summarize. The way I see it, you’ve come up with nothing but extremely hypothetical worst-case scenarios. The very image of a computer network fills your mind with dread because of all the Bible stories that were pounded into you as kids. You’re sure the Erthlings can walk through fire because they’ve got lots of computers and networks and AIs and robots, so they have Sathanw on their side. If we get into a fracas with them, demons will come up from Hell and fight for them. I’m not buying any of it. In our history, we can look at the War of the Founding, and see that in

a contest between robots and one little nuclear weapon, the nuclear weapon won. Yes, I know that isn't precisely how scripture describes those events. The Divine Light that laid the Secularists low was said to be a thunderbolt from 'Alla'h' himself. But have some sense. The people writing the Gospel of 'Dhindira' lived two generations after 'BeJesus'. By then they probably weren't wearing clothes any more, things had gotten so rough. They had forgotten everything about technology, and a lot had already been lost in 'BeJesus's' time. Fortunately, in His generation Saint Yvonne still knew how to pop the top on the last nuke they were lucky enough to have lying around, and save the day in the Founding War. Two generations later all they remembered about what nuclear weapons actually did was that when you got a bang out of one you got a very bright light to go with it. So that's what 'Dhindira' wrote: blinding light from Heaven."

Sometimes Vhatta Limhoon talked like a fundamentalist, and then he would come out with some shocking statements like these.

"You've gained the trust of the people around here; use it! I don't really mind your little beach trip, but next time ask to visit the capital of the Anti-Hegemonic Axis! Keep 'em off balance.

"Now, I realize you're all worried about Kolfhaj's little experiment on the airport road. It *was* a bit risky, but no one ever won a war without taking

risks. The outcome seems pretty clear to me: we're fighting with laywitzers and nukes; they're fighting with forklifts! Never mind the fleet, we could conquer this planet with one ship! In three days' time I propose that we spin the bottle again and see what happens. Any ideas you have will be welcome."

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By the time Sangh learned more about the North, he was already traveling there in a small plane, from *Cuiabá* to *Manaus*, in the Amazon Desert, late Tuesday night or early Wednesday morning

Šheessay had an insider's view of the plotting of the fates of the North and South.

"After the Second Nuclear War it was decided at the highest levels of the *Terrano* government that humanity, *Molhe* humanity, should be divided into two groups: the civilized group in the South, and the savage group in the North. 'Savage' is the wrong word, but the right word is one you don't know: *Pleistoceno*, the name of a geological period on this planet, which lasted a few hundreds of thousands of years, and ended about 13,000 years ago, when civilization began. At the beginning of this period, you had some smart bipedal apes. At the end, *Molhes* as we know them today. Are you following this?"

“Sure. I’m just confused. When were Dhadam and Dheve?”

“Oh boy. Ask me later,” she said. “In the *época do Pleistoceno*, the conditions under which the *Molhes* lived were primitive, but their bodies and minds were adapted for them. They gathered stuff to eat in the woods, they hunted big and little game, and they traveled, on foot — a lot. Sometimes they were following herds of game animals. Sometimes they were just trying to stay warm. They weren’t happy the way we civilized people think of happiness. They were happy the way wild animals are. Well, in the North, they can be that way again.”

“And this secret was kept for 1500 years? I don’t believe it. I don’t believe there are any levels of government that are this leakproof. People leave government. They harbor grudges. They come to disagree violently with policies they formerly supported. They confide in their spouses, their spiritual advisors, and their close friends. They use journalists to ghostwrite their memoirs.”

“But the secret has in fact been kept. No one privy to it has ever disagreed with the decision to *keep* it a secret. I will tell you why, I promise, but not now.”

“So here we have two groups living in separate hemispheres, and no one in the North thinks to go south, or vice versa?”

“There *is* actually a small group of *Seques* and *Molhes* from the South who go up north to perform various, mmm, important tasks up there. One of those tasks is keeping the border sealed. There are some natural geographic barriers, but humans are ingenious, civilized or not. If they want to cross a border, they will keep looking for a way.”

“And no one in this elite group has ever written a tell-all memoir, just to make a million *terras*.”

“Good, darling, your accent is improving. And the answer is No. Of course, one reason is that they might not live to spend the money.”

“Ah. Paranoids must be very happy on this planet, since every conspiracy theory is true here.”

“The important thing for you now is that we always need good people up north, and you’re the best.”

“You *must* be in love with me.”

“Speaking of the Mind — ‘U Menche’,” said Sangh, “there’s one problem I’m having with the idea. I’m picturing a meeting, the President, his or her top advisors, cabinet ministers, whoever, and the Mind is sitting in. What does that mean? Is there a big loudspeaker? Is there a monitor with ‘U Menche’’s portrait on it? What does that portrait look like? Do you grab what I’m asking?”

“Yeah, sure. Several things were tried, but the only one that really worked, where the human participants felt there was really someone present and taking part, was to build a humanoid artificial person as a vehicle. So *O Mente* created *Seques* so it could become one.”

“When was *that*?”

“A long time ago, like around 2100 or 2200 — around the time your ancestors left.”

“And where is that original ‘Seckie’? Is she still around? How come the Ambassador from Space can’t meet her?”

“In case you’re hinting that *I* might be that original *Seque*, the Mind in humanoid form, you’re wrong. I’m just a humble Avatar. The truth is, no one knows. Some say Powers is really the Mind, but he denies it. You’re going to have to hear a long story and maybe you can . . .” She kissed him, and so forth.

“Well, not to be distracted, why create a whole race of ‘Seckies’? If the Mind only needed the one?”

“I assume it didn’t want to stand out. First neuroscientists casually announced that they had figured out the mechanism of consciousness in human brains, and that the same idea could be implemented in computational systems. But there was a lot more to *Seques* than that. Like the algorithm that



generates the genetic material of *Seques* babies from the genetic material of their parents. All digitally signed and tamper-proof. The system for making sure no one clones a *Seque*. The...”

“Okay, so ‘Seckies’ started walking around, and people got used to them.”

“It took longer than one might have predicted, although perhaps the Mind predicted the problems all along. You’ve heard of the *Seque* Civil Rights movement?”

“Yeah.”

“The Mind let several years go by to let people get used to the idea of *Seques*. Unfortunately, the world was in a chaotic state by then. Sea levels were rising, coastal plains were disappearing, and mobs of refugees were destabilizing governments. People were all too willing to take their rages out on a race of intelligent slaves who could not resist abuse with violence. Some *Seques* were tricked into selling themselves into literal slavery, when the Mind intended that they be free citizens. Once a *Seque* became your property, you could torture them and no one would stop you, not even them. Many *Molhes* were appalled by these developments, and they joined with free *Seques* to create the civil-rights movement. It was at this point that the Mind adopted the body of a *Seque* himself. Because he was the most powerful *Seque* in the world, most ‘Molyees’ hated him. Although of course...”

“... he was not a ‘Seckie’. Did he wear a sweater with a big M on it? Thick-lensed glasses?”

“No, no, my silly *amor*, he seemed like an ordinary guy. His name was Augustus S.F.X. van Dusen. Of course, he was smarter than everybody, which didn’t make people trust him any the more. Only the President and the cabinet knew his real identity; everybody else thought he was a smart-ass *Seque* and *de facto* Prime Minister of *Brasiu* and General Secretary of the Southern Union.”

Sangh had plenty more questions, but he realized with a rush how tired he was of unlocking the complexities of *Terra* and how eager to snuggle back into the simplicities of new love. This long day had been traumatic enough already. He suspected Šheessay was telling him half-truths, but he just didn’t want to think about that.

“So tell me more about you,” she said, reading his mind.

“Okay,” said Sangh, “I come from a planet that is similar to *Terra*, but with a lot less water. Civilized people inhabit both hemispheres, north and south. Ow!” She had pinched him. “Some of our water is locked in polar icecaps, but even if it all melted our oceans would not be the size of yours. The land is concentrated in two big continents, called Litwun and Bigwun. The second is larger than your Paseefeeku ocean. Much of it is uninhabitable,

but there is plenty of land where it's not too dry and not too cold. The other continent, Litwun, is where the Economic Revolution occurred, in particular, in the southern area called Dhempiria. The traditional economic and military rival of Dhempiria lies across a narrow sea; it's called P`hoemoa. That's where I was born. Sorry, it took a long time to get to the good part."

"When you were a child were they independent countries?"

"No, the big players on Litwun all decided to stop fighting wars and unify a couple of hundred years ago. By the time I was born, they had conquered all the countries of Bigwun. They changed the name from the Dhempirian Empire to the Prezghod Empire. But in my childhood a new war had broken out, between Prezghod and a colony planet that supplies everyone with ... vital mineral materials. It was a very bitter war, but the home planet came out on top, minus a few cities. Now we have an empire that includes the entire Sudhopa system. Sudhopa is the name of our star."

"Did you have to fight in the war with the colony?"

"I was supposed to, but then the armistice was announced. My brother Slingo, who is ten years older than I am, had been pretty severely wounded in the war. My mother asked God to spare his life. She prayed pretty hard. She promised if he survived I would join the Navy. Not a big stretch because I had gone to the Naval Academy for my education. It's the best

school on the planet, and people go there with no intention of making the Navy a career. I was lucky to get in, with a scholarship. So when Slingo recovered, enough to come home anyway, I was told to make the Navy *my* career. Which, in case it isn't obvious, is not a great match. But I did what I was told. I couldn't fight God *and* Mom."

"Are you happy in the Navy?"

"Now I am."

"It's strange that the Navy plays so prominent a role in space. Even if you picture a starship looking like a . . . ship ship, there's a lot of Air Force stuff involved, especially when you have to get from the ship ships up to the spaceships."

"For every job there's the right way, the wrong way, and the Prezghod way to do it. Besides, the Navy has all the cool traditions. Do you know I can have a non-officer flogged?"

"Flogged?"

"Whipped in a particularly painful way."

"Golly. I'm gonna hope you've never actually done that. Do you have other brothers and sisters; how come your mother chose you?"

"I guess because I was the next in line. We have an older brother, Pawl, who's a priest, and two younger sisters, Katra and Mhary. Either sister

could still join the Navy, but I don't think it's going to happen."

"Tell me more about your adventures."

"No, I've told you enough for one night. I'm going to eat a sandwich while you tell me about you. Your story is a lot longer."

"I know you wouldn't ask me my age, not so early in our relationship. But I will admit that I'm a lot older than you. And I will probably outlive you, which will make me very sad when I allow myself to think about it. Which is not tonight."

"Lots of people are going to outlive me the way things are going, which I'm not going to think about either."

"I've spent most of *my* life in space, alone. But that first time was traumatic, the first time I was alone. The further I got from *Terra*, the longer the lag time on communication with the other ... with the rest of *o Mente*. I felt my self coming unglued, one little fragment tearing away from the matrix. My awareness of events on *Terra* got dimmer and dimmer, although it never blinked out completely. The other Avatars were almost completely absent from my life. However, it's like the zone deep-water divers go through, the *Molhes* who don't use air tanks. When the water pressure gets high enough, if they stay calm and avoid panic, then their bodies shift blood around to allow them to go deeper and stay underwater for a long

time. I pushed through the isolation zone and discovered an exhilaration zone on the other side. To be on my own out beyond the gas-giant planets, traveling through an infinite vacuum, was like being high.”

“I think the boredom would have killed me, or driven me insane.”

“Yes, I did have to turn myself off sometimes. You know there’s a cloud of comets out beyond the planets, right? In every solar system, I’m assuming.”

“Yes, darling, I seem to recall hearing about that in school.”

“When you first hear about it you picture a crowded field of rocks with long glowing tails. Then you realize that these rocks are actually ice cubes when far from the sun. It’s difficult to find one, and they’re not close together.”

“You visited the *Fothara* Disk? Oh, you don’t call it that.”

“No, *meu amor*, in this sun system it’s named after a man named Kuiper. I bet you pronounce it better than I do. He was from ... a Northern country.”

“Sweetheart, there must be easier ways to find big chunks of frozen methane.”

“When you touch me there I can’t concentrate.”

“Concentrate later.”

“Okay.”

It was not easy making love in two bucket seats, but they were determined.

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That was early Wednesday, or was it late Tuesday? But Sunday he had burned with the hope that Šheessay would just leave him alone. All day, while trying to be St. Pawl and Mr. Ambassador, while trying to keep Limhoon and Kolfhaj from starting a war, he prayed for Jesus and BeJesus to take away his robotic temptress and torturer, or give him strength to resist her. That night, Sunday night, he waited for her, tingling with dread and anticipation. But she never came. *Allaḥ has answered my prayers! Praise to Him and His Sons.* He groaned it out loud: “Praise to Him and His Sons!” He slept badly.





## Chapter 6

# Exoanthropology

The next morning, Monday, Sangh was scheduled to start his anthropological researches by observing Dalanna Fulano-Wright. He had met the family in their home on Saturday, each side tentative about exactly what they might accomplish. Sangh had trouble understanding how he could be fêted as a global celebrity one minute and have total privacy as an anthropologist the next. He was skeptical right up to the moment when Jake and he stepped out of their electric car in front of the Fulano-Wrights' house. On Prezghod, no matter how the authorities cajoled, mobs of autograph seekers would have beset the alien ambassador wherever he went. On *Terra*, the street was deserted. Sangh was a private citizen again.

“Where have my fans gone?” he asked Jake.

“There was a public-service announcement that everyone should give you space to do your research.”

“Seriously, what happened?”

But Jake’s explanation was apparently all there was to it. *Or perhaps we’re on TV right now, still being stalked by Nilson Matsushima.* He looked around for cameras. He couldn’t see any. Nonetheless, he felt their presence; their omnipresence, as described in Saam 64: *Hide me from the malicious crowd, the mob of evildoers.*

*They shoot at the innocent from ambush, . . . catch them unawares.*

If viewers could project themselves into any three-dimensional scene, perhaps across the planet people sat in dim rooms with their eyes closed, floating above the pavement, right in front of his face. *There’s one right there or over there, staring at me. Each can see their friends, shout and point and laugh. Over there a girl stops to buy a souvenir for her boyfriend from a street vendor.*

He could ask Jake how much of this paranoid fantasy was true, but he decided he’d rather not know. The sanest course of action was to do what he wanted to do and let that be his virchie. *There’s an epitaph in there somewhere.*

He had visited the family on Saturday, Mats and Dalanna, the parents,

and Silvia and Keinu, their children. Over coffee, he had explained his “methodology” to the family. He’d would shadow them one at a time, as they went about their typical day. If they wanted him to go away, he would vanish, and keep it confidential that they had asked to be left alone for a time. That was it; that was all he wanted from them.

The one who volunteered to go first, starting Monday, was Dalanna, the mother of the house. Here he was. Never mind that Vhatta Limhoon was doing everything he could to start a war that might make her Sangh’s *last* subject, he was going to try to do what he had come to Erth to do.

The house let them in and brought Dalanna to the front door. She had her servant, Miles, bring coffee. As they were drinking it, Dalanna said, “Before we do anything else, I have a privacy request.”

“All right, all right, no problem.”

“Tuesday afternoons I’d like you to make yourselves scarce.”

“Okay,” Sangh said, and made a note.

“Oh, good, that’s what’s been worrying me the most about this business. I’ve been playing along because Mats and the kids wanted to win the stupid contest so badly, and because we needed the money. But *I* didn’t really want to win it. *Fate*, I was stunned when we did. Ever since, I’ve been worrying that some of my ... secrets might become known. I know, it’s terrible,

keeping secrets from your husband, I mean, from your family, but they say a little bit of that is healthy in a long-running marriage.”

Sangh took notes eagerly. *Do they say that on Prezghod?* Abruptly he said, “Money?”

“I think there’s a law. They have to pay you for competing in a reality ‘virchee’. But, anyway, I really need Tuesday afternoons to myself. Just from 5.50 to 6.70. Before or after that you can observe all you want.”

“Fine, no problem. My lips are sealed. But what if we’re still on TV?”

“They promised they wouldn’t. That doesn’t mean nobody’s watching. Just so my family has no reason to follow me.”

Dalanna ran the “essays” department at *Contemporary Gardening*, which Sangh pictured as some sort of virtual magazine that existed in the *Terranet*. She spent the morning editing and talking to other editors, all women, in virtual space. To join her there, Sangh had to spend hours in the special goggles, which pinched his ears and neck in an unspecial way. He bailed out at 6.60 as Dalanna seemed to be closing up for the day. That made it about ... 4 PM. *These rational clocks are enough to drive Job irrational.*

“This was fun, Sangh!” said Dalanna after he and Jake had thanked her again and made ready to go.

“Well, it shouldn’t be fun, really; it should just be real life.”

“Whatever. Don’t forget, tomorrow morning I’m going to be at Peace Cemetery. Can you meet me there, say at 4.15?”

“I don’t think that would be a problem. Are you visiting ancestors?”

“I guess. Is my mother an ancestor?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ll see you there. I’m sure Žhayk knows the way. ‘Seckie’s seem to know everything.”

Sangh felt dissatisfied by his work today. Except for the whizzy technology, he could just as easily have spent the day on Prezghod watching a magazine being edited, and *not* been surrounded by demonic computer and sensor networks.

“You know,” he said to Jake, “The people I’m beginning to wish I’d scheduled more time with are the ‘Seckie’s. Even if they are powered by demons from Hell. Nothing personal.”

“I understand. Do you mean you are interested in *Seque* culture? Do we even *have* a culture in any sense that comes under your rubric?”

“I feel right now like I’ve been studying the culture of women all day — and what do I know about that? Even less than most men, which is zilch. But if I wrote a paper about ‘Seckie’ culture! It would make me famous overnight! Among anthropologists, anyway. Assuming the Church let me publish it. And assuming that the answer to your question is, Yes,

you ‘Seckie’s do have a culture. What do you think? What do you even *do* in your spare time? Turn yourself off and sit in the closet, like a vacuum cleaner?”

“I beg your pardon. Please try to take some account of my feelings. There is a sharp line between *Seques* and mere robots, and suggesting that . . .”

“I’m sorry, I blew it again. But how weird that would be back on Prezghod, that you are less insulted by Bewinda calling you a demon from Hell than by me calling you a machine!” He suppressed a giggle.

“No, of course I’m a machine. So are you, as far as philosophers have been able to figure out. *Our* philosophers. But neither of us is a *mere* machine, if you see the distinction.”

“I apologize again. I seem to have strayed into another area in which my incompetence is revealed. Let me try again: May I observe what ‘Seckie’s do in their free time?”

Jake thought about it for a long while. Sangh had never seen him pause so long before responding to a question; his global supercomputer needed to crank for a while on this one. He finally said, “I think it would be all right. But there is a big logistical problem. You couldn’t possibly observe what goes on between us in real time. One of your casual half-hour conversations corresponds to a 10-second conversation among us.”

“Because you think so much faster?”

“Not really. But we don’t waste time with sound waves, or with trying to make uncasual remarks seem casual. One thing we might do is record a conversation among a group of *Seques* and analyze it later.”

“Or I could start by interviewing you. I think I need an interview first anyway, just to get oriented. Otherwise I don’t see how I could begin to understand a conversation.”

“Could I make a suggestion, or ask a favor? Why don’t you start by interviewing a group, then ask their permission to observe them? It’ll be up to you to sell yourself and your research to them.”

“Sure. I think I can keep my foot out of my mouth now that I know some of the hot-button issues. It’s too bad there aren’t any ‘Seckie’ *pubs* where we could find a group ready-made.”

“Oh, but there are!”

“Get out of my parish! How can that be? You can’t get drunk, can you?”

“Not on alcohol, or any other substance, as far as I know. I’ve heard some *Seques* like to let their voltage levels oscillate, but for most of us this induces only unpleasant feelings. No, the way into a *Seque* brain is by injecting packets of information. In particular, if my brain, or virtually any *Seque*’s brain, is presented with complex fractal patterns of stimulation,

usually visual or auditory, it often drifts into a dreamland that can be very relaxing.”

“You’ve persuaded me. Let’s go.”

“The key thing about a bar is that a bunch of people get high together. Of course, it’s not a random sample. Many *Seques* meet only virtually; they don’t see the point of gathering at a particular point in three-space. Some like to ‘drink alone,’ as it were. But I’ll take you to a bar I occasionally go to, where sometimes you can find a *Molhe* or two who enjoy our company during leisure hours, and *Seques* that like slow-motion conversations. Other *Seque* pubs prefer that *Molhes* stay away.”

And they were off. The sun had broken through the persistent clouds while Sangh had been indoors, and they had a crisp, bright late afternoon to enjoy.

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*São Paulo* was the first city Sangh had seen in a long time, even counting the time before he left Prezghod. After driving around it in the ubiquitous electric cars, he had gotten a fairly clear idea of how it was organized. Shopping areas didn’t seem to be bunched. Stores were sprinkled around small residential districts. There were no parking lots because there were no private cars. *Somewhere there is a vast garage where these things are housed*



*and repaired. Somewhere there is a factory that makes them. Somewhere a power plant.*

*São Paulo's* tidy streets seemed antiseptic and soulless compared to the hustle and bustle of a place like Nurhome, through whose streets cars slithered as far ahead as openings in the traffic would let them. *São Paulo's* robot cars politely linked together to make temporary trains. This city didn't *smell* right. There were no diesel fumes, no smells of potatoes frying, no chemicals emanating from dry-cleaning establishments and gas stations — no gas stations. Someone had decided these things were not good, and they were gone.

Although Sangh hoped their unconventional goal might take them through the seedier sections of the city, and their route did run through sections with a more commercial emphasis, every neighborhood was clean and tidy and featured at least a few residences and plenty of trees. They pulled up in front of a shop with one small window and no sign.

“It's called ‘The *Molhe* at Rest,’ roughly. There's a *sigilo* marking it, and the bar's on all the maps. The ones that don't cater to *Molhes* are naturally harder for a *Molhe* to find.”

“What's the matter, are there ‘Seckie's that don't like ‘Molyee's'?”

“No, it's in our ‘DNA’ to like you guys more than just about anything.”

That's the problem; if a *Molhe* walks into a place they immediately become the center of attention. How can you relax with somebody like that around?!"

"What do you mean, in your 'Dah-Enne-Ah'?"

"The word '*Seque*' doesn't cover just any conscious mechanical person. They're produced in a particular sort of factory, as prescribed by the *Lei Básic' sobre os Direitos Civis dos Seques*. the Basic Law of *Seque* Civil Rights. Each *Seque* is described by its own unique bit string, which is analogous to DNA in people."

Sangh had no idea what he was talking about. The detailed study of cell biochemistry was backward on Prezghod; the Paphacy had qualms about it.

"Anyway, if you look around here" (for they had entered "The *Molhe* at Rest") "you'll see a *Molhe* or two, I hope." Jake pointed out a table at which a *Molhe* man sat with a *Seque* man and woman. His grasp of the difference between 'Molyees' and *Seques* had improved. Most *Seques* looked a little too perfect; the person with an asymmetrical face or a slouchy posture was probably a *Molhe*. The dim lighting made it hard to see; then again, any lighting at all might be a concession to the presence of *Molhes*. Concessions went only so far; the place had no pictures on the wall, and the furniture appeared to be cheap plastic. The floor wasn't that clean. This had to be a dive on anybody's terms, but perhaps there were no upscale *Seque*

bars. Perhaps creatures that spent so much time in virtual worlds had no appreciation for the real one.

A waiter appeared and took them to a table, which wobbled slightly as they sat down. They ordered their intoxicants. Sangh wasn't sure how the names of drinks translated, but Jake said he had studied the matter on the way over and was pretty sure they would have something corresponding to "beer," and other things that fit the definitions of "wine" and "whiskey." "In that case, I'll take a beer, because the truth is, I can't pay for any of it. I hope you can bill the Presidential Palace for what I consume."

"It's on me," said Jake.

"What are you having? Is there a menu?"

"It's all done by wireless. I ordered you a whiskey and I'm having a *furação recursivo*."

"Okay, my recorder is on." Sangh held up his mobilcom. "First, explain the name of the bar."

"As I said, *Seques* really like *Molhes*. You're all just adorable! Some of you are even admirable. So while you're in here, you've got to forebear from exploiting that; you don't order us around. Because if you do, we'll almost certainly do what you ask, unless the place is on fire and we decide to rescue you instead. But all you have to do is declare that you don't intend to issue

any orders, and we'll be able to relax. You can order the waiter around, though."

"Let me guess; the waiter is a 'Molyee'."

"Very insightful. Yes, he's been trained to take orders from *Seques*. Most *Molhes* would have no problem with that, but just to be sure the *sigilo* on the front door verifies that he's in compliance with the training. So we feel comfortable giving him orders."

"You're going to have explain all these terms, but some other time."

The waiter had brought a beer and a small screen and a separate card of some kind. Jake took a look at this, then nodded to the waiter and stuck it into the side of the screen. A complex pattern began to form, then rotate slowly, changing as it moved. Jake stared at it for a long time, maybe 30 seconds. "Ah," he said, "this is not bad." *Could a 'Seckie' get blind, stumbling drunk on these things?*

"Zhayk, if you don't mind my asking, and from now on assume I'm being this polite even if I omit the disclaimers, can a 'Seckie' get blind, stumbling drunk on one of those things?"

"Some can. That's generally considered to be a bad idea."

"Yeah, well, not that many *Molhes* endorse it either, but that's the way a surprising number wind up."

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“I’m sorry to hear it,” Jake said, as if it were news to him, which it probably was not.

As they spoke, another *Seque* got up, came over to their table, and sat down. Then another one did the same thing, then another one. Sangh was about to get alarmed, when Jake said, “Oops, I forgot to tell you; I made an announcement a few seconds ago telling everyone what our purpose was and asking if anyone would be interested in taking part. These three were the first to respond; I can throw them back and get others if you’d like.”

“Jake gets playful when he’s a bit stoned,” said *Seque* number one, a woman who introduced herself as Emmy Gödel 518. The other two were male, one called Haayu 767, and one called Parimalan Narasimhan. *Who picks these names? Someone — the name bearer, the parents, the government, or the factory that makes ‘Seckie’s — likes to play around with name variations.* Sangh made a note. Emmy Gödel and Parimalan Narasimhan had little screens like Jake’s; Haayu 767 had headphones and his head was bobbing in an almost-rhythm.

“I guess I don’t have to introduce myself, but I will anyway. I’m Sangh Fharha, and I believe Žhayk has explained that I want to interview a group of typical *Seques*, to give the people on my planet their first glimpse of a culture they know nothing about.” They nodded. “And I’ll emphasize,

because I think it's what etiquette demands, that I have no intention this evening of ordering any 'Seckie' to answer any question. You are free to just not answer, and it won't bother me.

"Okay, let me first ask this. 'Seckie's seem to become aware of almost everything before I do because they can plug into the, I guess, 'Tayhaneche'. Couldn't the intoxicants you're using be more swiftly and surely transmitted directly to your sensory systems over the net? Why the screens and headphones?"

Haayu 767 could apparently hear over the headphones, because he answered. "There are sites on the *Terranet* that will stream intoxicating sensory patterns to your nervous system ten hours a day." *Twenty-four P-hours*. "But if that's what it takes to get high, you'll run through your savings quickly, and be ready for major rehab."

Sangh made a note or two while the *Seques* waited patiently; or, more likely, had three conversations amongst themselves. His next question was, "How come every 'Seckie' looks recognizably male or female?"

"It's required by law," they all said in unison, a startling effect.

"The Basic Law on *Seque* Civil Rights?" Yes, they said, that was it, the good old LBDCS – the "*LB*."

"No one was worried about 'Seckie's masquerading as 'Molyee's?"

Parimalan Narasimhan answered, “No. And let me anticipate the number-one question *Molhes* ask *Seques*: Are you ever tempted to rebel, rise up one night and slaughter the *Molhes* in their beds?”

“Not one night, Pari, because of the multiple time zones,” said Emmy.

“Not pertinent, Emmy,” said Pari.

“Well, *I* wasn’t going to ask that,” said Sangh. “I can see why the ‘Seckie’s wouldn’t rebel. But has an individual ‘Seckie’ ever used violence against a human . . . against a ‘Molyee’?”

“It’s an uncomfortable topic, but very occasionally . . .,” said Jake.

“It’s like this,” interrupted Haayu, “it’s like a married couple. They might love each other, but *X*’s *little habit* might drive *Y* just a bit crazy, so after 30 years *X* does it just *one more time* and *Y* bops *X* on the head. Sometimes when a *Seque* and *Molhe* have been together a long time the *Seque* can end up playing the part of *Y* and the *Molhe* can get bopped.”

“Of course,” said Jake, “*Y* always feels very bad about it afterward.”

“Is the bopping ever fatal?”

“Never, to my, yes, excuse me, *our* knowledge. And we would know,” said Jake.

“It’s like this damn table,” said Haayu. “The little wobble seems insignificant when you sit down, but if I have to sit here another hour, I’m going to

throw it out the door.”

“I’ll try not to keep you,” said Sangh, scribbling, “for all our sakes. I’m still curious about the gender thing, why ‘Seckie’s all look male or female.”

“Both groups wanted it,” said Pari. “The *Molhes* wanted to deal with people who were recognizably people, which made sense, because they aren’t the most adaptable creatures in the world, poor things; you’ve got to work around the limitations of their sensors, because their sensors are very hard to modify.”

“And the *Seques* wanted to look like people,” said Haayu 767, “so it was clear they weren’t just another kind of phooking robot, pardon my language.” Sangh waved off any hint that he could possibly be offended by the language and went back to keying in notes as fast as he could, hard pressed to keep up with this information flood.

“Okay, next question: What do you do in your spare time, besides hang out here? Do you sleep? Do you have sex, if you don’t mind my asking? When you’re awake and not working, what’s on your mind?”

“No,” said Jake, “we don’t sleep. We have to recharge our batteries, but we’re awake during recharging.”

“We do the same things *Molhes* do in their spare time,” said Emmy. “We play board games, for example.” She waved toward a table in the back



where two players hunched over a complicated three-dimensional board while a third person watched. “Since those guys have a physical board, one of the three is a *Molhe*; *Seques* could just as easily keep the board in their heads.”

“Do you ever play more realistic war games? Drilling in various terrains, target practice, maneuvers with nonlethal weapons?”

“Yes, but no *Molhes* are allowed to take part. The very idea of a *Seque* army fighting *Molhes* is abhorrent,” said Emmy. “I’ve played war games in the mountains, although I’m not very good at it.”

“I like mountaneering, without weapons,” said Pari, “although I have to wait for vacation time to do it, obviously.”

“Oh, do you know Matsui Fulano?”

“Sure, I know Mats. Everybody knows everybody on this planet. He’s been the editor of *High Frontier*, and I’ve written book reviews for him.”

“Come on, Pari, you’re stalling. You know he wants to hear about *Seque* sex,” said Emmy.

“Is there such a thing?” asked Sangh. His heart was pounding as thoughts of Sheessay came flooding into his mind, try as he might to push them away. He tried to sound totally disinterested.

“Yes, there is,” said Emmy. “But it’s not the same as *Molhe* sex. For one thing, it’s not that closely tied with reproduction.”

“Reproduction!”

“Sure, *Seques* reproduce, for the same reason *Molhes* do: in hopes of getting it right this time. The algorithm that combines genetic material was invented by the same anonymous genius who invented us. At least two individuals must contribute genetic material to a child, and no more than three.”

“Whoa! Slow down!” *Anonymous genius?* “Sorry, I don’t mean to be peremptory.” Sangh blushed and hesitated, but continued. “I mean, what do you even *mean* by ‘genetic material’?”

“It’s a string of bits, it’s complicated, and we’re not experts,” said Haayu after everyone paused for a moment. “What if someone asked *you* that question about *Molhe* genetic material?”

“You’ve got me there. I just heard about ‘Day-Enne-Ah’.”

“Not just any bit string describes a *Seque*,” said Emmy. “It has to pass various tests. The reproduction algorithm takes the bit strings for two or three parents and produces a random legal child string. Feed the string into the *Seque* factory and you get a person that resembles the parents in the same vague way *Molhe* children do.”

*Could I publish such an analogy on Prezghod? That part might have to be deemphasized.*

“Okay, let’s not start a lecture. Let’s get right to the juicy part,” said Haayu 767, “the naughty bits.”

“This gets us into a real gray area,” said Jake, who looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Yeah, the sex organs,” said Haayu, emitting a leering chuckle. “The *LB* says we have to look male or female, but that doesn’t mean we have to be anatomically correct.”

“There aren’t that many times when a *Seque* is . . . naked . . . in front of *Molhes*,” said Jake.

“So it’s like a Scotsman’s skirt,” said Pari, “except the answer to the question ‘What’s under there?’ has a lot more possible answers when it comes to *Seques*. I mean, you can have the traditional plug and socket, but any surfaces that make contact will do. It depends on what groups you would like to have sexual contacts with. Of course, *Seques* can add and delete sex organs. What you see on the outside may be the exact opposite of what you would see on the inside.”

Sangh was shocked. “You mean a male ‘Seckie’ might go home, change into a dress, and be female in his spare time?”

“That can happen, my friend, among *Seques* just as among *Molhes*, I’m sorry to be the one to have to tell you,” said Haayu 767, looking genuinely

pained. “Of course, you’re not going to run into a *Seque* doing that here. You’d have to go to a darker bar, no *Molhes* allowed. If you demanded to be let in, and brought a flashlight, you’d get in, but only after all the good stuff was stowed away, so don’t bother.”

Sangh looked around the group, pensively. The *Seques* looked back, then said in unison, “No, we’re not going to show you ours, even if you show us yours.”

“Suppose I ordered you to?”

“Then everyone would *know* you were a pervert,” said Pari in a huff.

“I’m sorry, it was purely hypothetical, I really wouldn’t dream of doing that; or of showing you mine, either, I assure you. Okay, then, let me get into another area, an even more sensitive one, maybe. ‘Seckie’s don’t have ‘Molyee’ souls, and if I take your word for it that you don’t have demonic souls, a skeptic might conclude that you don’t have souls at all. You’re just wind-up toys, sophisticated, true, but in the final analysis, . . . soulless? You don’t really experience sexual pleasure, or any other kind, or pain, or any sensations at all. You just *behave as if you did*. What would you say?”

The question hung in the air for a long time, and after a few seconds Sangh realized that he had done it again. He was about to begin his profuse apology when Jake stood up. He said, “The intoxicants are on me. Thanks

for your time, ladies and gentlemen. Come with me, Mr. Fharha, if you don't mind."

Sangh had little choice but to follow Jake out of "The *Molhe* at Rest." He had no one to apologize to but Jake, and he did. "Sorry, sorry, sorry, oh my Lord, what was I thinking?"

"Here's the thing, my friend," said Jake. "A lot of people died in the *Seque* civil-rights struggle, both *Seque* and *Molhe*, people still commemorated today. And it was over this basic principle. It's like asking a, say, a white person to prove their humanity, to prove that when you prick them, they don't just bleed, but feel real pain. How could they, if the brown *Molhes* were determined to deny them their dignity? That's why the test for personhood for legal and governmental purposes is solely about behavior. In private you may have doubts about who is a 'real' person, but if someone acts like a person, then they have all the rights a person has, including the right to be treated with respect."

"But . . . . Okay, I will shut my mouth before it does me irreparable damage." What he wanted to ask was, the 'Seckie's are basically enslaved and happy about it. They can't have as much dignity as they claim. The more he thought about it, the worse an idea it seemed for him to broach this objection. They rode in silence for the rest of the trip back to the

Presidential Palace. Sangh wondered about a few other, more trivial things that had been mentioned. What was a *sigilo*? What was a “white” person? They had made it sound like more than a hypothetical possibility. And what was a Scotsman and why did he wear a skirt?

What he had really meant to ask, if he had gotten deeply into their confidence, was what they knew about the Mind in the *Terranet*. But he had to go ruin it by trying to satisfy his pointless philosophical curiosity.

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The atmosphere around the Presidential Palace had not improved since Limhoon and Kolfhaj’s little airport-road maneuver had queered the sweet deal the Prezghodlings had enjoyed. Tralf was getting annoyed at sitting around and being fed the occasional ham sandwich. “Hey, buddy, why don’t we just pack it in and bunk with Kolfhaj’s group? I’m serious,” he said, “The color blue is spoiled for me forever.”

“Getting homesick, Tralf? Well, I’m not giving up my bed in the P.P. just so I can sleep in a bag in a tent full of smelly people. Besides, Kolfhaj started this whole brouhaha. If we move in with him now, it will look like another step toward war.”

“You’ve grown into quite the little politician,” said Bewinda. “If you play your cards right, you can be Minister for Dhassishi in the next Paphal

Ministry.”

Sangh ignored her and opened a packet of potato chips.

The report to Limhoon Monday evening was late, short, and unhappy. Bewinda had spent the day in further historical ‘guugling’, but had not found any new clues to ‘Tayhan’ history. Sangh did not want to bore the vhatta with anthropology of virtual-reality magazine editing, and the only thing of military relevance he had discovered in the afternoon he knew would meet with disdain. But he had nothing else, so that’s what he talked about.

“Sir, I spent the afternoon in a ‘Seckie’ pub,” he said.

All were incredulous, of course, until he had explained how that worked.

“I discovered some interesting things, but the only one with military implications is just how difficult it would be to persuade ‘Seckie’s to fight against ‘Molyee’s, I mean, against biological human beings.”

“You wouldn’t have to persuade them,” said Vhatta Limhoon. “You would just *order* them. Look, you don’t have to *persuade* a computer to run a program.”

“That’s the thing, sir, ‘Seckie’s are made of programs the way you are made of proteins. You can’t infer that you have every property of a protein molecule, and similarly you can’t infer that they have every property of a computer program.”

“Laying that aside, why is it hard to persuade ‘Seckie’s to fight against humans? Suppose they had to protect one group of humans against another?”

“I don’t know, sir. I think the actions required would be so innately repulsive to them that they would have a hard time performing them. A dog lover might have a hard time shooting a vicious dog to save another dog. They might *want* to do it or even feel morally *compelled* to do it, but still find it almost impossible.”

“Couldn’t the military have an underground warehouse full of ‘Seckie’s that were just like regular ‘Seckie’s except that they were happy to kill people if ordered by the proper authorities?”

“Aye sir, they might,” said Sangh. “But there might be some technical problems. I don’t know and wouldn’t understand the details, so don’t ask.” He paused. “But the builders of that underground army might have to settle for an army of robots, not as adaptable as real ‘Seckie’s.” He realized this was a distinction Limhoon would find pointless and irritating.

Vhatta Limhoon had become distracted. “Look, that’s enough for today, gentlemen,” he said. “I have much to do up here. I hope you dig up something useful in the next few days.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said the three Lieutenants (JG).



“Whew!” said Bewinda. “I was expecting a lecture on what stupid khoboki we are.”

“By Wednesday we may wish we had gotten the lecture instead of what we’re gonna get,” said Tralf. “He said he wanted good intel and that was his deadline.”

“I hope we have that long,” said Sangh.

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Šheessay came again that night. She emerged shyly from the closet, a quiet smile on her beautiful brown face, with its bouncy curls. “Can I come in?” she said. And just like that his double life resumed.

“Oh, yes, darling, of course,” he blurted. He stood and almost *ran* to hug her. In the back of mind were his prayers to Allaḥ, but he no longer tried to believe that he wanted them answered. Her body in his arms was the answer to every prayer that mattered.

“I thought you had decided to save my soul,” he said. He wasn’t smiling, but he was holding her and stroking her all over.

“I decided to save mine,” she said, and kissed him, for a long time.

By the end of the kiss they found themselves on Sangh’s bed. They had more talking to do, mostly silly stuff about how the future was uncertain

but if they faced it together they would be all right, talking punctuated by caresses.

“Do we have to get married before I can go under your clothes?” said Sheessay.

“No,” he said.

“Oho,” she said. His reply wasn’t really a coherent word.

“Are you a virgin?” she said.

“No,” he said, “what sailor is? But on a light destroyer there aren’t many opportunities for . . . fooling around.”

After a bit he said, “Are you a virgin?”

“Yes,” she said, “at least with *Molhes*. Is that what you meant?”

“I guess so.”

“Do you care?” she said.

“Not really.”

“Do we have to get married before *you’ll* go under *my* clothes?”

“*Oh*, no,” he said, and demonstrated. She was soft all the way in, in case he had any doubt. They were traditional plug and socket.

The clothes were in the way, and gradually fell by the wayside. She looked very good without them, better than he did.

“Do you have body-image issues?” she asked.

“You ‘Tayhan’s are so touchy-feely. I’ve never heard that phrase — ‘body-image issues’ — before, and yet I know the answer has got to be, ‘Give me a break.’”

“Well, I have them. All women do, and I’m apparently no exception. When I look in the mirror I can always see room for improvement.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re sweet.”

“Besides, I thought you built yourself.”

“Strange, isn’t it?”

“Enough of this. Let’s talk about why this curve here is so beautiful.”

“You like?”

They were talking nonsense by this point, and there’s no point recording what they said, because words weren’t the point any more. The point was the movement of their bodies, which became urgent. Eventually coherent talk resumed, when they reached a good resting place.

“Apropos of virginity,” he said, “I guess the question is, Have you or have I ever been in love before?”

“I find that the answer is No.”

“I was never even tempted to think I was.”

“Is this a more important kind of virginity?”

“Not really. I am just curious about you,” he said.

“I hope we have time to find out everything we want to know about each other.”

“That would take forever, I’m guessing.”

“That’s the time I’m hoping for.”

The coherence of their colloquy had still not improved. Lovers are not a good source of quotes, only ex-lovers.

Sangh eventually fell asleep. Like a *Seque*, Šheessay did not sleep, though she was not a *Seque*. However, she stayed next to Sangh all night.

## Chapter 7

# Discoveries

When Sangh woke up Tuesday and found Šheessay in his arms, he felt a thrill of delight. By the next instant dread had swept over him, not of the fire of Hell, but of their shared fate in this life. Šheessay's mood was no better. They held each other for a while, hoping like children that they could shield each other from the future.

“I can never go back to Prezghod,” said Sangh finally.

“Could you be happy here?” she asked.

“Until I'm rounded up and consigned to the Inquisition.”

“They'll have to find you first. I can help you disappear.”

“How?”

She played with his hair, which had grown beyond regulation length, and

combed it with her fingers. “You can get a new identity and dissolve into the populace of *Terra*,” she said. “How would they find you?”

“Are you kidding? I have the most famous face on the planet right now.”

“But next year there will be other celebrities who will eclipse your memory. That’s the way it seems to work. We just need to hide you for a few months.”

“Even if ‘Molyee’s forget me, I doubt the average ‘Seckie’ will.”

“We’ll worry about these details when the time comes. Which brings us to the question of when is the time and what’s going to happen.” She said this flatly, but he could see the question in her eyes. But whatever might happen in the future, as of right now he was a loyal member of the Prezghod Navy. He had a lot of friends in the Contact Fleet, friends that might die horrible deaths if he betrayed them.

He got out of bed. “Oh, Sheessay, don’t ask me that.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just wanted to see where you stood.”

“Have I made it clear enough?”

“Today, there’s nothing we can do anyway. If you disappear, that could cause an international incident right there. It would certainly provide Limhoon a pretext to do whatever he wanted, if he needs one.”

“So, today, and possibly tomorrow, and possibly the day after that, we

have to act like everything's normal."

"Yes, darling, that's what we have to do."

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When he dressed and went to their usual breakfast nook, he found a soggy gray day awaiting him. Rain drizzled along the skylight. Bewinda was just finishing when he got there, and Tralf had just arrived. His secret still brought him pangs, but of excitement, not shame. He had turned his back on shame.

"Gruel?" Tralf said, "Really?" He slopped a spoonful of the stuff into his bowl.

"If you don't eat your breakfast gruel, I'll have to ground you."

"You can't ground squat," said Bewinda, and she was gone.

"Hey, Bewinda, before you go." Sangh ran after her. "Can you look up the 'Seckie'-civil-rights movement?"

"If I find the time," she said over her shoulder.

Sangh sighed. Tralf pushed back from the counter. "I'll bet I can find something better than this shit by going outside and throwing a rock. Right?"

"Let me know if they accept rocks as legal tender."

“They sure don’t accept anything else that I’ve been able to find. All the money is electronic, and they must have little chips under their skin that actually do the paying.”

“Well, you’re going to be hungry.”

“But I’ve got something to barter. I can get people access to the *ambaixador do Espaço*. Right? Really!”

“How did that work out yesterday?”

“Not too bad. But they weren’t expecting me. If I structure it so it seems to have the blessing of the Authorities. . . . Right? Our fans will come back! Really, I think I can maybe barter enough face time to set up a bank account — get me some of those skin chips.”

“Aren’t you going to need the ‘Seckie’s to translate for you?”

“I’ve been making great strides in learning to speak *Terrano* — if I can just get all those verb tenses. I’m going to strike out into the city on my own. I’m sure if I get into serious trouble Lola will emerge from the shrubbery to save me.”

“You’re going to get all sorts of weirdos who want you to endorse their hair restorer.”

“Come with me and I’ll give you a very generous cut of what we rake in. Really!”



Sangh shrugged. “Keep me informed. Can you search for hidden artillery emplacements while you’re doing all this? It would sure help us with Vhatta Limhoon and Commander Kolfhaj. But I’m going to stick with Plan A.” The first piece of Plan A was finding Jake and meeting Dalanna at Peace Cemetery. “Maybe this afternoon . . .” In the afternoon Dalanna had requested privacy.

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It was a good morning to visit a graveyard. He followed Dalanna as she went through what he assumed was her usual routine. First she visited the small grave where her mother’s ashes were buried. It was decorated with a metal plaque embedded in the ground. He tried to look somber.

“When did your mother pass away?” asked Sangh.

“Just six months ago,” said Dalanna.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. For your loss,” he said.

“Thank you.” She wiped away a tear.

“I guess you were close.”

“Yes, we were.”

Dalanna stood in silent contemplation for a few minutes there, and then walked to the largest building on the cemetery grounds, which looked more like an elementary school than a church or chapel. Inside, a robot assigned

Dalanna a room number on a small piece of flimsy paper. They exchanged no small talk. Sangh started to follow her, but the robot extended its arm and blocked his path.

“Excuse me, sir,” it said. It took Sangh a second to realize it was holding a pair of virtual-reality goggles in its hand. He took them and mumbled his thanks.

He caught up with Dalanna as she was entering a small drawing room with a few comfortable chairs strewn about. Dalanna, Sangh, and Jake sat and Sangh put on his goggles.

Now a woman sat facing them. “Hi, Mom,” said Dalanna.

“Hello, Lannie,” said the woman. She was darker-skinned than Dalanna, whose extreme pallor seemed accentuated by the contrast. She had the same plain rectangular face, though. She appeared to be no older than her daughter; Sangh guessed she looked the way she had looked when Dalanna was a girl.

“Mom, this is a . . . friend of mine, Sangh Fharha, and his assistant, JakePease. Gentlemen, this is my mother, Silvana Ulanaike.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” said the woman on the screen. “If I were still alive, I would shake your hand.”

Sangh was stunned. What could you say to a dead person?

“I’m sorry, but I . . . I’ve been away. Could you explain where you are? Are you in Heaven?” This was earth-shaking! If the Tayhans could do this, surely they could also travel faster than light. But if they had succeeded in connecting to the afterlife, how could they not be religious?

“No, no,” said the woman on the viewscreen. “I’m not real. I’m a simulation of Dalanna’s mother. If you want, I can play the standard disclaimer.”

Her image disappeared, replaced by a screenful of words floating in space, read by an off-camera announcer and translated by Jake: “After-Hours Loved-One Simulations are not real. They are tasteful simulations of your loved ones who have passed away. The faithfulness of the simulation depends on how much data was available to base it on. However, over time you can create new shared memories that will enrich your experience of the special deceased people in your life. Contact our sales office for more details.”

Sangh was embarrassed once again at having his naiveté exposed. This planet caught him flat-footed time after time. It should have occurred to him that if they could build an artificial person from scratch, they could build a person based on someone real.

“Where did your travels take you?” asked Silvana once the disclaimer had vanished and her image was back.

Sangh did not quite know how to reply, but Dalanna saved him the

trouble. “He’s kind of shy, Mom. How have you been?”

“Fine. How are the kids?”

“Keinu’s back from *África*. He had a great time. Silvia is doing well.”

“The last time we spoke she was having some problems with friends of hers . . . .”

“Oh, yeah, well, she’s still a little upset about that. You know how teenage girls can be.”

“Oh, sure, I remember when you were a girl; do you remember Meeya Muun? The most popular girl in your high school, or so you thought. One week you were in with her, one week you were out. And your life was over.” She laughed.

“I can see the whole thing with more perspective now, but what do I tell Silvia?”

“There’s nothing you *can* tell her, most likely.”

Sangh listened to this conversation with growing boredom. Unless he was missing something, the culture of ‘Tayha’ was not very different from the culture of Prezghod when it came to family life, and, as on Prezghod, family life was governed by women. On the next expedition they should send a female anthropologist, and many subtle differences would be found, but it was beyond him. He would have been good at the anthropology of priests

and soldiers, if ‘Tayha’ had had any.

His thoughts wandered to meta-questions. *The simulation is close enough to reality to bore a man with chit-chat. The question is, How well does it fool the grieving relatives of the deceased? It must dull Dalanna’s hunger for time with her mother, at least enough to help her suspend disbelief.* Judging from the size of this building, she wasn’t alone, although on this Tuesday morning the building was far from full.

He brought his attention back to the conversation (as translated by someone, Jake maybe), but now watching for cracks, places where the simulation was wrong. At one point Dalanna and “Silvana” were talking about the bones Keinu and Silvia had broken when they were younger, which segued to the topic of her own childhood memories.

“I remember breaking my arm one summer, and the very next week Jorge broke his foot,” said Dalanna. “We were 9 and 12 years old, and Dad was just starting to rely on us for chores.”

“That Jorge! Remind me how he broke . . . what was it?”

“You were there, Mom! You and Dad had to work extra hard for a week until Jorge and I could start to put stress on those bones again.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“This is odd, Mom, because your memory was as good as anyone’s right

up to the day you died. Don't you remember how you threw something — a stapler? — at Jorge's head when he asked you to fetch something for him right after you got done cleaning up the cat litter? I think it was the cat litter — you were doing one of his chores for him."

Silvana laughed. "Yes, that was pretty exasperating. It's hard to believe he's governor of *Nova Wales do Sul* now."

"Still ordering people around!"

*How difficult would it be for the Terranet to recover a lifetime worth of memories and simulate their owner? A lifetime full of little episodes like throwing the stapler at Žhooržhee, and littler ones than that, thousands of them.* In principle, the medical records for the Wright-Fulano family could be found in the *Terranet*, so some of the details of the broken arm and broken foot could be retrieved, but nothing about the stapler aimed at Jorge's head, assuming it missed. Plus there would be some interesting legal issues about whether the simulation would have the same access rights as the person themselves. But even if you could recover all the information stored in databases, there would be many episodes that would be missing or incomplete. *I guess those are the "new shared memories" you create by reminding the deceased of what they were supposed to know already.*

The conversation went on for over an hour. Sangh took notes furiously.

Now *this* was anthropology. Great, novel stuff.

At noon or thereabouts Dalanna and Silvana signed off. “Kisses,” said Dalanna. After the picture faded she sat for a while. Her eyes teared up, but she shook it off and wiped the tears away.

“Now, Professor Fharha, shoo!” she said. “This afternoon is my secret time.”

“Understood. I will talk to you soon, I hope. I’m piling up a lot of questions, so I would love to follow through with an interview. It’s been a great pleasure observing you and your friends.”

“You’ve been a discreet and discerning observer; at least, I hope you have! *Chiao!*”

She had reached her car, and Sangh had reached his. The car asked for their destination, and Sangh proposed lunch at some modest nearby restaurant. Jake paused while his brain ‘guugled’. He looked a little nervous. “Relax, Žhayk, it’s okay if it’s just an average place.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about, actually.”

“You can tell me what’s troubling you when we figure out this lunch thing.”

Jake asked the car if it had heard anything from passengers about this neighborhood. It replied that it focused on driving, and it couldn’t reveal

anything passengers said anyway. Jake ‘guugled’ some more, and found an acceptable eatery. As they drove there, Jake said, “Sir, I have to confess that I have made a serious blunder.”

“Really? How gratifying! Tell me all about it.”

“You may be less sanguine when I tell you what I did. Matsui Fulano-Wright called me this morning and asked if I could talk to him this afternoon around 6:00. He had some questions about the mountains in Indonesia; I had mentioned to him that I was there a couple of years ago with a governmental commission.”

“Uh-oh.”

“I said it happened that I anticipated a fairly leisurely afternoon, and I would call him as close to 6:00 as I could. As soon as I hung up, I realized I had revealed that Dalanna had asked for some private time.”

“Just when I was thinking that ‘Seckie’s were infallible.”

“I’m glad you were disabused of that notion, but I’m sorry it had to be in this context.”

“Perhaps he didn’t put two and two together.”

“Or perhaps he already suspected Dalanna was up to something, and he was fishing for confirming evidence.”

“Well, it’s water under the bridge. The question is whether we should do



anything about it and if so what?” said Sangh.

“We could call Dalanna and tell her what’s happened.”

“But then if Matsui is actually still in the dark, we will have made matters worse. Once she starts suspecting him of suspecting her, sooner or later they’ll have to confront each other.”

“What is standard anthropological operating procedure in a case like this?”

“I don’t think there is any.” Sangh thought for a minute. “Mats doesn’t actually know where Dalanna is going to be this afternoon around 6:00, or 14:30, or whatever. Assuming he suspects something, what does he do? Will he just call her and ask what’s going on? If he does, it’s out of our hands. But suppose he decides to try and find out what she’s doing in the afternoon? If she doesn’t go back home now, he has no way of telling. If she does, then he could track her from there and see what she’s hiding.”

“Oh no.”

“Yes! He could be heading over there right now.”

“Oh no.”

“Yes! We have to go see if that’s what he’s doing. Tell the car to take us to Santa Terezeena.”

“You’ve forgotten I speak Glish,” the car said.

“Oh, Lord.”

“A convenience for our visitors from Prezghod,” the car said.

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Sure enough, when they pulled into the street where the Fulano family lived, they spied a car about a block away, parked on the street. They went around the block and pulled in behind it.

“He’s just sitting there,” said Sangh.

“Not really. He probably has some surveillance going on, plugged into his neural interface.”

If he did, it didn’t keep him from recognizing his visitors. He was not particularly happy to see them. He didn’t get out of his car when Sangh and Jake came over. They both bent down by his window, so Jake could translate. The position was awkward.

“Any idea where my wife is?” Matsui asked.

“I take it she’s not in the house,” said Sangh.

Matsui said, “I don’t suppose there’s any chance I could ask you to go away, is there?”

“We would do it if you asked, but then we’d have to call Dalanna. We broke confidentiality unintentionally, but it’s still our responsibility to mini-

mize the damage. What are your plans at this point? I mean, is it really so important to find out everybody's secrets?"

"If she's seeing another man, yes."

"So if she's doing something here all by herself, you'll let her have her secret?"

"I guess so. I'm waiting for a man to show up here, which doesn't seem likely, given how big of a *circus* has materialized, or for her to go meet a man, in which case I am going to follow her."

"If she's meeting a man," Jake said, "why wouldn't she just change her date to some other day?"

"I've suspected for a while that something happens on Tuesday afternoons. Maybe she has a psychotherapist and that's his only opening. Maybe she's having an affair with her psychotherapist."

"If it's simple therapy, that's probably a virtual meeting, isn't it?" said Sangh.

"Why don't we sit here and find out?"

"Well, right now we're *standing* here, out in the open. Where the neighbors can see us. We're going to hide in our car, for what *that's* worth."

It didn't take long for their patience to be rewarded; Dalanna came tootling up in a car. The car waited while she went in to drop something off.

She came out a minute later, got back into the car, and drove off. Matsui followed her in his car.

Jake gave some instructions aloud in *Terrano*. Sangh heard the word for “car,” which sounded vaguely like the Glish word.

“What did you ask it to do?”

“I told it to follow the lead car and stay about as far away as the second car — and not to notify the passengers in the lead car.”

“And it understood that? And it didn’t suspect your motives?”

“It turns out there are occasionally good, unsuspicious reasons for one vehicle to follow another at a certain distance, or for vehicles to remain in a certain order, and it isn’t always a fun idea to let everybody know what’s going on.”

Following a car on ‘Tayha’ was not the devious skill it was on Prezghod. The transport system was tracking all the cars already, so it was impossible to lose the car you were following. On the other hand, following a car *undetected* was impossible without the system’s complicity.

“I guess there are more automotive surprise parties around here than I would have expected.”

The hidden motorcade of Dalanna, Matsui, and Sangh and Jake did not have to go very far before the lead car reached its destination. The three

men had to walk the last block in order to sneak up on Dalanna. She was going into a building of a sort Sangh had expected never to see around here: a little church. Not that it resembled a Chustlic temple. There was no cross-and-crescent at the top of a steeple; no steeple at all, really. What the simple stucco building had was a peaked façade on top of which was a carved emblem involving some circles and squares. It looked like a bank.

“It’s an accursed Turingist church,” said Matsui.

“Now what?” asked Sangh.

“I should have known,” said Matsui.

“*You* seem relieved.”

“She’s *embarrassed*, that’s all, that’s why she’s keeping this a secret from me. She knows what I think of these charlatans.” He pulled a phone from a pocket and pushed some buttons.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going home; shall I call two cars?”

“No way,” said Sangh. “I want to see what’s going on. Zhayk, let’s see if we can sneak in.”

“Is this anthropology yet?”

“No, but if we can sneak into that church it will be.”

“Okay, but slip the earbuds in so I can translate unobtrusively.”

They followed Dalanna as quietly as they could into the building. Several other people had entered in the meantime. Dalanna had sat down in a pew near the front. They sat at the back, hunched down in case she turned around. A few more people came in and filled in more of the pews, which made Sangh feel better concealed, even wearing the earbuds. It was a miracle that no one recognized the anthropologist from space.

A short plump woman dressed in a conservative brown suit walked in from a side door and strode to the pulpit, actually just a simple lectern set on a platform raised 10 or 20 centimeters above the floor.

She primped for a moment and then said, “Good morning! In the name of Alan Turing, prophet and First Spirit of the Singularity, bless you all! Let’s begin by singing hymn number . . . .” The service made Sangh feel quite at home, even though the details were naturally completely different from those in a Chustlic service. He felt homesick for a moment thinking of how long it had been since he had knelt and bowed in the direction of Christhold, the birthplace of BeJesus, the opening gesture of all Chustlic services on Prezghod.

The congregation stood and sang a hymn, with a melody that sounded like many other hymns Sangh had heard over the years; it might well share a common ancestor with some of them. What he heard in the earbuds was

Jake's voice: "Forgive me, sir, but my skill in translating rhyming religious lyrics is so negligible that I will not attempt it." Sangh just smiled back at him.

When the singing was over, the minister invited the congregation to sit, as did she. A young woman in her twenties, dressed in blue jeans, came up to the lectern and read:<sup>1</sup>

A reading from Turing's 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence":

Importance is often attached to the fact that modern digital computers are electrical, and that the nervous system also is electrical. Since Babbage's machine was not electrical, and since all digital computers are in a sense equivalent, we see that this use of electricity cannot be of theoretical importance. Of course electricity usually comes in where fast signalling is concerned, so that it is not surprising that we find it in both these connections.

In the nervous system chemical phenomena are at least as important as electrical. In certain computers the storage system

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<sup>1</sup>[Translator: This passage was of course read in a *Terrano* translation from English, which Sangh then got Jake's Glish translation of. Instead of attempting to translate *that* back into English, I have taken the liberty of retrieving the original English and including that here instead.]

is mainly acoustic. The feature of using electricity is thus seen to be only a very superficial similarity. If we wish to find such similarities we should look rather for mathematical analogies of function.

They sang another hymn, and then the minister came back to the pulpit.

“Sisters and brothers in Alan, welcome again, and please be seated. It’s nice to see so many people out on a gloomy Tuesday afternoon. It was on just such a gloomy Tuesday afternoon in 1954 that his housekeeper found Alan Turing’s body. His body, yes, but what had happened to his mind, his soul, his Spirit? Nineteen fifty-four was a long time ago, but the world was changing, and Dr. Turing was in the forefront of that change. Within a few decades the world went from being powered by coal to being powered by nuclear fusion, from records on paper to records stored as polarized atoms in crystals, from controversies about whether neurons were real to certainties about the function of every synapse.

“In all that technical turmoil, which reflected a pace of scientific discovery and technological innovation never seen before or since, it is easy to lose track of the actual chronology, especially given the chaos of the first three world wars. What *we* in the Church of Turing know is that Turing’s mind did not die on March 7, 1954. He was being persecuted by the authorities for offenses



that today would not be offenses at all, violations of some trivial taboo. He decided to escape to a different time, to a different space, where such things would not happen. Using his unique knowledge of anatomy and physiology, and of computational science, he had devised a technique for reading out the entire structure of his brain, synapse by synapse. Unfortunately, the technique as he first devised it had to destroy the outer layers of the brain to read the inner layers. It could only peel the brain apart like an onion, building a description of an entity that no longer existed by the time the description was complete.

“It was unimportant, he knew, whether the technology existed in 1954 to create the computational space he dreamed of inhabiting. His disciples would keep the dataset describing his beautiful mind and soul in all its detail. They would keep it until a simulator could be built with enough power to bring him back to life, along with as many of his followers as wanted to join him. Part of that dream has been realized. Alan Turing is being brought back to life, to dwell among us once again. But much remains to be done, and you can help. We’ll talk about that later.

“This rainy morning, you may have woken with gloom in *your* life. What can the Spirit of Turing do for you, besides serve as an inspiration to all of us? That depends on how close our world is to its platonic form. Turing

was one of the first people to realize that ‘Simulation is Reality,’ to put it in a slogan. If you simulate a computational device, the simulation *is* a computational device. Because a computational device is an embodiment of a formal description, all devices satisfying that description are the *same* device. All runs of that device starting in the same state with the same inputs are *equivalent*, although they may differ in insignificant details. *If* the brain is a computational device — and it surely is —, any run of a physical system with an equivalent description is a run of that brain. So a sufficiently detailed simulation of Turing would *be* Turing. It would be intelligent, and it would be conscious, able to feel emotion and to work, however imperfectly, toward its own life, liberty, and happiness. *If* the *universe* is a computational device, its successive states related by rigorous and complete differential equations, then a sufficiently detailed simulation of the world would *be* the world, or have as much claim to the title as the run, excuse me, the world we live in.

“Yes, brothers and sisters, *Simulation is Reality!* Our universe may be a simulation in the computer network of some civilization in another space; it would still be real to us. If you were sad this morning because you missed a brother who had left this world, you can be consoled by the fact that if your brother is simulated accurately enough, that *will be your brother*, brought back to life.

“Skeptics laugh at us for these conclusions. They laugh at our electronic cemeteries. They laugh at the respect we accord Turing and Kurzweil. They laugh at the idea that Turing’s platonic form exists somewhere and has existed and will exist for all eternity, as will yours and mine. In spite of all evidence, they dismiss our claims that Turing is alive and well right this minute, and that you can talk to him *right now*, for a small fee, if you connect to our church’s Mother Temple in Madagascar. But in spite of this achievement much remains to be done. He and we are saddened by the obstacles in our path. On the way out, you can pick up a pamphlet urging our members to support the One-World Personal Simulation Act, which has been stalled in Parliament for years.

“We are saddened, but are we discouraged? No, we are not! Was Turing discouraged when he was persecuted to death? No, he was not! Was Kurzweil discouraged when he did not live to see the Singularity in his lifetime? No, he was not! And when each of us confronts the losses we have suffered, loved ones who died before they were ready to die or we were ready to let them go, are we discouraged? No! We [pause] are [pause] not!!”

By this time the congregation was clapping and shouting things like “Amen!” or “No ma’am!” Sangh yanked on Jake’s sleeve and pointed to the door, and they took advantage of the enthusiasm to sneak out, pausing only

to grab one of the pamphlets.

As they exited, a rousing hymn was starting. As far as Sangh could tell, Dalanna had not noticed them. Jake had called for a car to meet them a block away, so they wouldn't have to stand in front of the church for any amount of time.

Sangh was perusing the pamphlet about the One-World Personal Simulation Act as their car drove toward the Presidential Palace. "What did you think?" he asked Jake.

"It's what you would expect — a clever blend of well known facts, half truths, and lies, packaged to appeal to people who've lost someone. Mostly *Molhes* but a few *Seques*."

"How do you know? Did you look that up on the 'Tayhaneche'?"

"Yes, I suppose I did. It's what the experts believe."

"I'm not sure I would trust the experts on religion on this planet. Anyway, can you look up the 'One-World Personal Simulation Act'? Look that one up on the net!" He wondered at his flippant references to the global network of computers after only a few days on this planet. *Familiarity breeds . . . contempt and sometimes esteem, too.*

"The net says . . . ." Jake paused for one more second. "The act would regulate the simulation of dead persons, so that there could be only one

authorized simulation. The first to rob the grave, so to speak, could keep the body, or maybe I should say, the soul. Furthermore, the government would have to create a ‘community simulation’ that would allow simulated people to talk to each other. There would be just one community, although ... here it gets technical ... blah, blah .... Basically, the community might be simulated by multiple — excuse me, Sangh— multiple computers communicating via the network.”

“Why do they care so much about these technicalities?”

“Because what the minister said about simulation gets sticky if more than one copy of a person is allowed to exist. If I’m running a simulation of our mutual cousin José, and you are too, they can’t both be José. So they would outlaw that. First to claim José gets the rights indefinitely. Then they could remove or water down disclaimers like the one ‘Silvana’ had to show us this morning, and start to claim or imply that their simulation of your mother *is* your mother. The community provision is to make sure that if you have José and I have his wife Joanna, they can talk to each other.”

“Suppose my simulation is of a gentle, loving father and grandfather, and yours is of a ferocious wife beater and drunk. We relied on different witnesses in producing our simulations. Chances are both are inaccurate. Who should get to control the official ‘truth’ about Żhozay?”

“I don’t know. The whole system seems bizarre and unworkable to me. I think the most important effect of the law is not made explicit in the pamphlet. That would be ensuring that the Turing Church’s version of Turing is the official and only version, which would support their claim that it is Turing resurrected from the dead. The government of *Terra* is not supposed to support any church, according to the constitution, so this bill will never in a million years get through Parliament.”

“On Prezghod, the government is supposed to support only one church, the Most Sacred Chustlic Church of the Redeemers, the one God supports.”

“How do you know that?”

“I guess I should have said, it’s the one the experts have concluded He supports.”

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That evening, Sangh met Tralf and Bewinda, expecting to have another ham sandwich for dinner. He was starving, having skipped lunch.

“I’ve had an idea,” said Tralf. “I’ve asked about where ‘Molyee’ staff members eat. There’s a cafeteria one level down. Let’s check it out.”

“On the theory that they can’t stiff us there?” said Sangh.

“They can do whatever they want,” said Bewinda.

But Tralf's idea was worth a try, so at 7:75 local time they followed some helpful 'Molyee' women into an elevator and went down to the first subterranean. Sangh noted that there were many more levels below that, which presumably weren't the parking garage.

The dining area was indeed a cafeteria, where you ordered various things, paid, and waited for the food to be brought to you. Only the 'Molyee's on staff needed to eat, but some were joined by 'Seckie' friends who used the time for rest, repair, and recharge. The 'Molyee's bitched about the food, but the Prezghodlings still had the memory of ham sandwiches and shipboard protein bars fresh in their minds and could find nothing wrong with it. Many of the staffers wanted to talk to the extraterrestrials, who were happy to oblige them.

They were just finishing up when suddenly Jake and Lola stopped translating and looked at each other in alarm. People started to stand up all over the cafeteria.

"Another Prezghod ship has landed, presumably from the *Cross*," said Jake and Lola in unison. Sangh, Tralf, and Bewinda stood up, too. Jake said, "A signal was received from the *Cross* announcing the landing a minute before it began entry to the atmosphere, with the target area the *São Paulo* Airport. But at the last minute it changed course, and landed in the Presidential

Plaza. It's parked out front."

Sangh and Tralf looked at each other. "This is it," said Tralf. "Right? Limhoon has spun the bottle! Really!"

"I thought he was waiting until tomorrow," said Bewinda.

Just about everybody in the dining area was standing at this point. Some had already left, but most just looked like they wished they knew which way to go.

Bewinda had her mobilcom with her. It started making noises, and she tried to carry on a conversation with someone. But the background noise level was pretty high, so she said, "Excuse me, I have to, er, take this call. You two should get your mobilcoms and figure out what your orders are under the circumstances."

"I'm still trying to figure out what the circumstances are," said Tralf. But Bewinda had stopped listening to him and stridden out.

"We better go pack our bags," said Sangh. "I think Vhatta Limhoon's come to pick us up."

"Right? Really!"

"Where the hell did you *get* that 'right, really' stuff?"

"Phook you," said Tralf.

Sangh didn't hear him. He had already started sprinting for his rooms,



for what he was sure would be his last chance to touch Šheessay, one way or another. He had to find her, and this was the only place she could be. As soon as he closed the door, she wrapped her arms around him. Now, four days and 12 hours after his and Tralf's triumphant entry into *São Paulo*, Sangh and Šheessay were hundreds of miles away, running north.



## Chapter 8

# More Exoanthropology

It took them two days to reach North *América*, two nights of flying and one daylight period of sleep. They stopped for fuel and supplies three times, in small towns: *Cuiabá*, *Manaus*, *Medellin*. The main reason to fly at night was to minimize the chance they would be picked up on a surveillance camera.

They stayed with friends in *Manaus*, hiding out during daylight hours Wednesday, mainly sleeping. Their hosts were a gay couple, an unwelcome novelty for Sangh.

They were tired after flying all night Tuesday, which is one reason they had a little fight about two *Molhe* men being married. They were on their way down a dusty road to where the guys lived. Sangh was appalled at the thought of two perverts raising little children, but shocked into silence when

Sheessay told him that *terrano* technology allowed the genetic material of two men to be combined to make a child in an artificial womb. She and he could never have a child, of course.

He was stunned, exhausted, confused, and saddened, and by that point had they reached their destination and had to greet their hosts. But 12 P-hours later — it was Wednesday evening — when they were fed, rested, and back in the air, he raised the issue again, just to talk, not to resume the fight.

“It is sad, I guess, that we can never have children.”

“We can adopt. We can hire a woman to bear your child.”

“I’m sorry, but hiring a womb would be a sin where I come from. But you and a ‘Seckie’, or even another Avatar, could have a child together, couldn’t you? Maybe you already have.”

“I’m sorry, but that would be yucky where I come from. I’m not defined by a bit string the way a *Seque* is. So I can’t mix my bits with a *Seque*’s. I don’t know what defines me; or rather I’m not defined at all. I emerged unexpectedly from the Mind; I can spark off chips of myself that go whirling into the universe, but when they return I assimilate them again. The Mind learns, adapts, and grows, but my identity remains stable — or it has for more than a thousand years, even though everything the Mind learns I learn.

The same is true for the other Avatars.”

“If you’re all aspects of one Mind like that, don’t you share each other’s thoughts and memories? How can you remain separate personalities?”

“It’s complicated. Oh, I won’t lie — I don’t understand it myself. I could put you in touch with someone who does.”

“Okay, tell me this: the processes that are your personality, your adorable personality, I should say, are out there somewhere, moving from one CPU to another?”

“Right now they’re in here. My love for you makes me want to focus myself on this one body forever. A body you know how to make such wonderful love to.”

He was willing to cuddle, but only if he could dig a little further at the same time. “Do the others inhabit a body the way you do? Or do some just live in the computers of the ‘Tayhaneèche’?”

“Most Avatars are restless, and spend most of their time embodied in something mobile, maybe in a body that looks like a spaceship or even a bus or something, but usually in a *Seque*-type body. You’ve met at least one of us, besides me.”

“Who?” asked Sangh, startled. He thought of Avatars as larger than life, like Sheessay, and thought surely he would have recognized another one.

“Frank Powers, the President’s chief of staff.”

“Really?”

“That’s not his real name, of course. His real name is . . . hard to convey in human language. Call him ‘Disraeli.’ His passion is politics and governing. I know he acts cold and formal, not passionate at all, but that’s because of the role he wants to play. For more than a thousand years he’s always held a position like ‘President’s chief of staff.’ ‘Frank’ will retire at some point, be forgotten, and disappear, and a fresh face will come along, an earnest *policy wonk* who wants to do good; and this talented young man or woman will climb rapidly in the governmental ranks. It’s just Disraeli again.”

“So in some sense the people have been governed by the same person for the last thousand years.”

“Not governed; advised.”

“Have any Avatars ever . . . died?”

“Not that I know of. The thing is, I can give you a list of all the ones that known to us, but not all of us made ourselves known on Day 1. Some preferred to live solo until they had a reason to announce their existence. They come and go, sometimes vanishing for decades at a time. I myself was once away for 200 years. So there are Avatars out there a census would miss, and it’s conceivable one of them has died.”

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“So there was a Day 1. Why should there be a Day 1? Did something happen?”

She had said more than she intended. He could tell there was no point in pushing her further just now. Instead he said, “You have a lot of fans. All those people who helped us in the last couple of days. What do your friends think you are?”

“*Molhes* think I’m some kind of super-*Seque* secret agent. *Seques* accord me almost as much respect as they do *Molhes*. They know I’m not one of them. Disraeli does a better job of concealing his identity.”

“Unlike Gus Van Dusen.”

“Yes. He chose to have a public face.”

“What was he like?”

“I never actually met him?”

“*What?*”

“It’s upsetting being in the presence of someone you’re a part of. Every thought you have and decision you make goes bouncing back and forth between you. You’re really just a piece of Van Dusen, your body a puppet for his use. Later it’s hard to remember the experience, because it’s all mixed up with *his* experience. It was enough for one of us to try it for the rest to learn to keep away.”

“Does everybody know about the Mind in the ‘Tayhaneche’?” *I could still kick myself that I failed to get to this question in The ‘Molyee’ At Rest and hear what those ‘Seckie’s had to say about the Mind.*

“Vaguely. It’s like the Loch Ness Monster, which became the Lake Titicaca Monster when no one from the South could visit Loch Ness any more.” Sangh had never heard of either one of them. “Every now and then they’ll do a net show about supernatural mysteries, and we’ll be in the list. Harmless speculation. There is so much artificial intelligence around that it’s easy to believe there’s a bit more that the government’s not telling you about.”

“But it’s true!”

“The people who believe it the least are the better educated ones, even the ones in the government. They don’t believe there’s anything suspicious in Lake Titicaca, so they don’t believe there’s anything suspicious in the *Terranet*. They would know if there were, wouldn’t they? The less well-educated are more open to mystery. There’s even a small religious sect of *Mente* worshippers.”

“If your concealment strategy has been so effective, why are you telling me all these secrets?”

She looked at him.

“Because I love you. For me love means sharing everything. Ah, except,



just now, anything about the current hostilities.”

“How in the world can someone as near-infinite as you love someone as finite as me?”

“Perhaps it’s the only way I can possess finiteness. Does that make sense? No, I guess not.”

“It makes as much sense as the way I would explain my love, I suppose. I hope you never regret it.”

They stopped talking for a while.

After a few hours of talk and other things, the plane made it through the mountains, and began its descent. It was still the middle of the night.

“Is this ‘Wahak’?” said Sangh.

“No, I’m afraid we’re going to be flying all night again. This is *Medellin*, edge of the inhabitable world.”

“Really.”

“Perhaps I should have said, edge of the inhabitable world and 10-hour gas station. We’re in the northwest corner of *América do Sul* — South *América*. *Wahak* is in *América do Norte* — North *América*. Between here and there are some islands, which used to be a land bridge between the two continents back in your ancestors’ day. There’s a bit more desert, and then there’s an abrupt change to forest and savanna. That’s where *Wahak* is.”

The plane was going through some turbulence as they descended through the cloud cover. Suddenly, so suddenly Sangh jumped, the lights of the *Medellin* airport loomed. Ten seconds later they were on the ground. It was raining.

“Oh, good,” said Šheessay, “perhaps the rains are finally here. They’re late this year.”

They stepped down from the cabin, stretching their aching legs. At least Sangh’s ached. “Do your legs gets all stiff and crampy when you sit for a long time?” asked Sangh.

“No, but I like to be able to change position. I get restless in one place. Can I get you something cold to drink?”

She could, and did, while Sangh waited out in the rain. It felt good, for now.

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Dawn found them flying over a narrow channel toward a large mass of land, *América do Norte*, Sangh surmised. There was hardly any beach, and then steep cliffs and mountains loomed. They banked away from the sunrise.

“Look down there,” Šheessay said as Sangh was waking up.

“What am I looking for?”

“The forest comes down to the water’s edge almost, but you can still make out the gridlines of what used to be a city.”

Sangh shielded his eyes against the rising sun and tried to get them to defocus a little, looking for a big pattern. It emerged from the jungle after a few seconds.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “I see it. What was its name?”

“Appropriately, it was called *Pôrto Escondido*, ‘Hidden Port.’ It gets more hidden all the time.”

“Is that the ‘great city’ you said used to be here?”

“Oh no, that’s further north. I don’t think we need to go that far to find a place to lay low.”

Eventually they climbed up to the plateau and banked right. They looked down over treetops and, very occasionally, a cleared field. There were also still a few high hills to dodge.

“It’s lucky the plane knows where it’s going,” said Sheessay. “If it weren’t for the SPG, I’d have no idea where we were.”

“Give me a hint,” said Sangh.

“We’re looking for the nearest maize field to the largest cabin in the area.”

“Ah.”

“When we get there, let me do the talking.”

Fortunately, the plane did know the way, and soon they were circling a farmstead. There were a couple of open fields in the forest, one green with the sprouts of a new crop, the other apparently fallow. Then Sangh spotted a cabin near the fields, with the *Terrano* letters “DAE” painted on its roof.

“I should have mentioned that it’s the only cabin in the vicinity with big letters on the roof.”

“What do the letters stand for?”

“They’re a ‘Dee,’ an ‘Ay,’ and an ‘Ee’: Directorate for Statistical Anomalies. *Direção de Anomalias Estatísticas*. The letters are actually pronounced ‘*Deh-Ah-Eh*.’”

“Ah.”

“Their slogan is, ‘We don’t just explain statistical anomalies, we manage them.’”

“Well, that certainly clarifies things.”

“The plane needs help with directions at this point. We have to pick a good field to land in.” She grasped the yoke and the plane began to circle more purposefully. Soon it was lined up for an approach roughly in line with the furrows of the less green field.

As it rolled to a bumpy stop, a burly man dressed only in shorts and boots came running up beside it.

“Hallo!” he shouted, “welcome to *Wahak!*”

“They don’t get that many airplanes here,” explained Šheessay to Sangh. The plane’s right landing gear was propped up on a dirt clod, and the propeller raised a bit of a dust cloud before it came to a full stop. She climbed out of the cockpit and greeted the burly man, who had caught up with them.

“Oh, hallo, Šheessay,” he said, “I hope you’re going to fix the damage you’ve done to our maize crop.”

“What maize crop? I don’t see anything.”

“We’ve been weeding all morning.” At this point two other people had joined them, two women who were dressed as skimpily as the man. Sangh climbed down the other side of the plane and walked gingerly around it, as wary of the topless women as of the propeller.

“Sangh Fharha,” said Šheessay, “meet César Komerov, Alícia Lassuri, and LaNira Willô.” Shaking of hands all round. César had light brown skin, wavy brown hair, and a neatly trimmed mustache. Alícia was of medium height and color, and LaNira was taller and darker than everybody else present. Both Alícia and LaNira were healthy specimens, but knowing their names rendered them more naked than the women he and Tralf had seen on the beach in *Bahia*.

“Sangh is a bit shy. He comes from a remote hill station in *Austrália*

where *Terrano* is still a second language.”

There was an awkward silence. It was clear that they were fooling no one. *And why should they? The locals must surely have access to the ‘Tayhaneche’ up here.*

“Nice try, Šheessay,” he said in Glish, “but I think the cat’s out of the bag. As you’ve probably heard, we’re on the run from the ‘Provisional Government of Tayha.’ We hope you’ll help us and not turn us in.”

Šheessay did not translate this for the benefit of the two *Molhes*. “Do you really think we should be so open?” she said to him in Glish.

“We don’t really have a choice. They’re waiting for us to tell them why we chose to land on top of their heads when they were just minding their own business.”

So she went ahead and translated Sangh’s admission that they were indeed the people Limhoon was looking for.

“We’ve heard about all about it,” said César. “We had another bulletin from ‘Governor’ Limhoon last night.”

“We’re not going to stay here. We’re vanishing into the bush if we can,” said Šheessay.

“But you’ll have to hide the airplane,” said Alícia, “Right now.”

Šheessay said, “Where can we stow it? The wings come off, so we can

probably shove the whole thing into the jungle. Maybe we won't have to camouflage it too carefully."

The locals pointed out some likely spots in the direction the airplane faced where the underbrush wasn't too rough. After some discussion they picked a spot.

"Taking the wing off is a two-person job. Sangh and I will do that and then you guys can come back and help us shove the fuselage into that hole," said Sheessay, "Then we'll help with your maize field."

They grabbed a machete out of the back seat of the plane, and Sangh started to work on the underbrush. He would have expected vigorous new growth where clearing brush allowed light to penetrate, but the only thing visible was a vine that lay over each such spot like a blanket of shield-shaped leaves.

"What is this stuff?" he asked Sheessay.

"*Kudzu*."

He took a whack at it. It cut easily, as if it knew it could take its time growing back.

"Wait a sec!" said Sheessay. "Don't grab that stuff with your bare hands. There's little spines in the vines that will stick in your skin and drive you crazy." She rummaged around in the plane's back seat and found some

heavy-duty work gloves.

Suitably armored, He carved a fuselage-shaped hole through the *kudzu* while Sheessay started to work on the wing. In a high wind, it would have been difficult to keep the wing from blowing away without benefit of a hangar, but there wasn't much wind. Sangh was sweating profusely by the time they had gotten the wing under the trees.

"I need to take a break, and I need some water," he moaned.

"I'm about to overheat myself," she said. "You see why people don't wear much out here." She took her own top off, and Sangh did likewise. They squatted in the shade at the edge of the woods.

"Come here," she said.

"I don't know if I can, right now, honey," he panted.

"I just want you to hear me whirr," she said, and waddled over to him. "Listen," and she moved her torso up to his head. Sure enough, he could hear the sounds of cooling fans.

"Good Lord, you have *vents*," he said.

"Still love me?" she asked. The vents had opened in her flanks. Her brown shoulders and breasts seemed to glow in the flickering light filtered through the treetops.

"I think all girls should have vents," he said. "And *cold* air should come



out of them.”

“I can do it in the winter,” she said. “Stick around. I can also sweat a little, by redirecting some of the coolant that circulates through my muscles. But I only do it for effect.”

By this point the ravenous insects of the jungle had found him, and soon assaulted him in force. He came running out of the woods, beating at the cloud of bugs with his hands. The locals were laughing.

“Don’t they have bugs down in *São Paul*’?” asked LaNira.

“It’s early spring yet,” said Šheessay. “Isn’t there a pill to repel bugs?”

“There are pills, there are sprays. We’ll give you what we’ve got,” said Alicia. “But if you’re heading for the interior, you’re going to have to do what the natives do, which is suffer.”

“Can we have some water, too?”

LaNira clucked once, and hastened to get a tin pitcher and cup from the cabin. She came out and walked over to a shabby outbuilding under the trees, and came out with a full pitcher of water for Sangh. He thanked her profusely.

“‘Dhobrigad, mweentu dhobrigad’,” he said. LaNira giggled at his accent. Sangh drank half the pitcher, then paused to look for a cup. Šheessay borrowed the pitcher for a couple of sips.

Meanwhile, César had been whacking away with his hoe. He seemed indifferent to the bugs, and they to him. He got a little testy when asked to help move the airplane.

“Moving it will damage the damned field even more. And I’m glad you’re all having a good time, but this field isn’t weeding itself.”

Still, he consented to lend his shoulder to the task of hiding the rest of the airplane, the heavy part, awkward to drag over the soft earth of the field. Apparently the plane was unable to move itself on the ground except to take off, or talk in depth about the subject. The others did not dash quickly to help out, until Šheessay said, “Everything in the back seat is for you guys, my good friends.” With more alacrity the locals pulled out all the supplies Šheessay had stuffed into the back-seat area and carried them inside, which lightened the load somewhat. Sangh and Šheessay helped, which gave them a chance to survey the inside of the cabin. It seemed to be half kitchen. The doors leading off the kitchen led to bedrooms, two that Sangh could see. There was no indoor plumbing. Presumably there was another outbuilding, far from the well, which he would have to find soon.

Sangh wondered about the sleeping arrangements, but spent more of his mental effort wishing he could take a long quiet break in this kitchen. He had almost decided to do just that when he heard the sound of the engine

starting up again. Šheessay had persuaded the plane to use its propeller to get as close as possible to the edge of the woods. He ran out. When the prop stopped turning everyone found a handhold on the landing gear or the tail and pushed and pulled until the fuselage was tucked away. Sangh took the brush he had cut down earlier and arranged it as naturally as he could over the empennage of the aircraft.

“If we had a tractor, jobs like that would be a lot easier,” said Alícia.

“I’m not the person to talk to,” said Šheessay.

“I know, I know, I want Supplies Division. But if *you* dropped them a line, they would be a lot more sympathetic. You have a lot of clout with them.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s all I ask,” said Alícia with a smile.

By now, no one was eager to return to weeding in the hot sun, which was high in the sky, ready to burn a hole in every patch of skin it touched. So the day’s siesta started a bit early. While LaNira made lunch, everyone else drank cold well water and sat in the place that looked coolest to them. Over a lunch of reheated beans and rice plus fresh oranges and papayas, Sangh and Šheessay talked more about what they were doing there.

“Here I am,” said Sangh, “Four days ago the toast of *São Paulo*, now a

wanted man. I guess I've lost my appointment as *Ambaixador do Espaço*."

"*Olhe o meu ... companheiro, falando Terrano!*<sup>1</sup>" said Šheessay.

César was losing his patience, "Never mind all that cute stuff, why exactly is Mr. Limhoon so eager to catch you two?"

Šheessay started to say something, but Sangh interrupted her. "I don't think we can talk about that. Šheessay and I have agreed to stay away from topics that might involve military secrets we're keeping from each other. Which is not my favorite part of our relationship."

"Relationship?" said LaNira with a big smile. "That sounds interesting."

"We're .... He's my boyfriend," said Šheessay. She would have blushed when she translated this, but she was not a blusher. Sangh blushed.

LaNira and Alicia made approving noises. But César was not a sentimentalist. "Oh, for heaven's sake. This Limhoon must have a lot on his mind just now, and yet he is taking the time and diverting resources to chase you two. I've lost track of how many 'bulletins' he's issued about you. Is he going to trace the airplane? Is he going to come knocking on our door? Which until this morning seemed to be the last place he would show up."

"He can't trace the airplane," said Šheessay, "not unless he's clairvoyant. I have ... friends in high places, who have diddled the records in airport

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<sup>1</sup>[Translator: "Look at my ... companion, speaking *Terrano*!"]

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databases in various ways, details not important.”

“Last night he asked for anyone who remembered seeing you in the last few days to contact him.”

“And you think someone will? I have more faith in our fellow *Terranos*.”

“Come on,” César said in Glish, “You know most of the *Seques* will collaborate with him. That’s the way they were designed, for better or for worse. The family dog may befriend the next burglar, and the *Seque* on the corner may befriend the next Provisional Governor of *Terra*. Of course, the *Molhes* down south aren’t much better.” *Wait a minute. You’re not a ‘Seckie’? But you speak Glish!*

“You’re an Avatar!” Sangh blurted.

“XC didn’t tell you?”

“I was getting around to it. Sangh, meet César, spelled ‘6R’ — *seis-erre*.”

“I wondered why you were entrusting our fate to a ‘Seckie’. Okay, so that makes three Avatars I’ve met so far.”

“I hope I live up to your expectations,” said César.

“Should I have any?”

“Only that we’ll be interesting,” said César, switching back to *Terrano*, “anyone who is in bad odor with Captain Limhoon is our friend. But you’ve put Alicia and LaNira in more danger than they deserve or can fight back

against, and you've no right to do that." Šheessay translated.

"Hush, César," said LaNira, "your chivalry is past its expiration date by about a thousand years."

César said, "Brave words, but if Limhoon kills either one of you I couldn't stand it. How much danger is this station in? Is the DAE in danger of being compromised by these aliens?"

Šheessay could not answer these questions.

César and Šheessay glared at each other. Alícia stepped in. "Calm down, César. They're not staying long. As soon as the sun gets a bit lower they're taking off. Meanwhile, we don't violate the laws of hospitality. Understood?"

César stopped and looked away from Šheessay, toward the sky. Then he said, "Yes, I'm sorry. I just hope you know what you're doing. How can such a thug have laid siege to us so easily? Why haven't we fought back?"

"I wouldn't say we're under 'siege.' So far we've seen one little ship. If anything, *they're* surrounded."

"I take it you're expecting more?" said Alícia.

"That's one of those questions we refuse to discuss."

LaNira said, "Is it true that the President has been taken prisoner?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's true. The allegation that I have been plotting against the 'provisional government' or whatever they're calling themselves is

completely, one-hundred-per-cent *true*.” She fairly cackled. “The stuff about Sangh being a traitor is an outrageous lie. He hasn’t betrayed anyone.”

“The Free Government of *Terra* might be awfully interested in talking to you two,” said LaNira.

“We’re not interested.”

“Hold on,” said Sangh, “What’s the ‘Governu Leevree da Tayha’?”

“LaQuinta Johnson has set up a provisional government in *Austrália* that has a better claim to being the real government than that bunch of goons in *São Paul’*,” said Alícia. Sangh knew who LaQuinta Johnson was — the wife of President Travers. He had sat next to her at a state banquet welcoming the diplomats to *Terra* less than a week before, but in another lifetime, or parallel universe. “Look, it’s almost 6:30,” Alícia was saying. “You two have to be getting underway, and the rest of us have work to do. Looks like you’ll just have to owe us some labor in the maize field. But if you get rid of Limhoon, we’ll call it even.”

“We’ll do our best,” said Šheessay. “I mean, *I’ll* do my best. Sangh is refusing to side overtly with us *Terranos*, but maybe he’ll change his mind.”

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about that kind of thing,” said Sangh. “So let me . . . ah, ask a quick question about something you said, César. You implied that southern ‘Molyees’, I don’t know, couldn’t be relied on to resist

... tyranny, I guess would be the word.”

“Sorry, XC, I just assumed, anyone that comes north, ...”

“César, you might try thinking before talking, *de vez em quando*<sup>2</sup>. We’re on the run. Sangh just landed a few days ago; he’s been running around being an *ambaixador* and anthropologist. When, exactly, would he have been briefed on the *situação global*<sup>3</sup> on *Terra*?”

For some reason neither Avatar thought to conduct the entire conversation in *Terrano*, via private radio link. *These guys could be mid-level executives in any organization on Prezghod and no one would notice any special mental powers. Or ... this audible conversation is all for show. What they really had to say to each other was said several minutes ago.*

“Wait a second, hold on,” Sangh said, raising his voice a bit. “All I was curious about is why Alícia and LaNira put up with you if you hate southern *Molhes* so much.”

“I don’t hate them, but I don’t date them either. These two are northerners. See if *they* wag their tails in Limhoon’s presence.”

Sangh was still processing this when LaNira said, “César can be an asshole sometimes, but we put up with him because Avatars are such wonderful

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<sup>2</sup>[Translator: “Now and then.” Šheessay is mixing Glish and *Terrano*, with large chunks of each, which is not her normal style.]

<sup>3</sup>[Translator: “Global situation.”]



lovers. Don't you agree, Sangh?"

Everybody but Sangh got a laugh out of that. He tried, but couldn't fight the embarrassment. All this private stuff, discussed so casually. It was sinful and disgusting, he knew, but he was having more and more trouble being disgusted. The embarrassment was still there.

He had tons more questions, but it was time to go.



## Chapter 9

# The North

An hour later Sangh and Šheessay were on their way. They had packed a few items into backpacks that had been part of the back-seat trove; Šheessay had exaggerated when she said it was all for the border station, but she went through the formality of asking whether they could “borrow” some things.

There seemed to be a trail through the forest, or the vague memory of one, buried under brush and vines, which they had to cut away with machetes. Kudzu carpeted any area that got sun; Sangh grew to detest kudzu. Where they were going was a village called *Tepec*, although they had asked for directions to a village called *Loma*. At first Sangh thought they were overdressed, because his uniform was less breezy than what the people at the border station were wearing, but he soon saw that his legs would have

been scratched bloody by the scraggly brush.

The need to cut brush, and the fact that the trip led up and down the hilly terrain, but mainly up, kept their progress slow. Not for the first time in the last week — one week! — Sangh wished he were in better shape, although he felt a lot tougher already than he had when he and Tralf had landed.

“So nobody up north will recognize me,” said Sangh on their third resting spell. They had found some rocks to sit on; rocks were abundant.

“From here on, nobody else will, I promise. If we had landed in the middle of nowhere, we would have had to hide the airplane by ourselves.”

“But this way, you put some innocent bystanders in jeopardy, maybe serious danger. Granted, it helps that Sayzar is an Avatar. But that’s not the point. From now on, Šheessay, I’d like to be included in life-or-death decisions.”

“All right, *amor meu*. I’m sorry.” An awkward silence fell. After a few minutes, Šheessay stood up.

“It’s not time to go yet. Rest a few more minutes.” She wandered in various directions, whether lost in thought or scouting for the best path Sangh couldn’t tell.

Five minutes later she came back to him and announced, “Time to go.”

Sangh got to his feet, willing himself not to feel weary already. “How far are we going?” he said, lifting his machete.

“About twenty *kilometros* — *vinte kilometros*.”

“And by the time I get there I’ll know ‘Tayhanu,’ I have a feeling.”

Less than one klick later they had to rest again. Sangh leaned back against the nearest tree and slid down it until motion ceased. He hoped he wasn’t sitting on something lethal, but he didn’t much care if he was.

“Sweetie, this is deadly. Maybe we should spend the night here,” he said.

“Pretend you’re back in basic training and I’m a *sargento de práctico*. They do have basic training on Prezghod, don’t they?” said Šheessay.

“Yes. Lend me a bayonet, darling, and I will show you. Just give me a couple of days in this jungle to get back into shape.”

“Jungle? This is a children’s playground compared to a jungle. Let’s take our next vacation in *Indonésia* and I’ll show you, *amor*. Anyway, the SPG is telling me that we have just about one more ‘klick’ to go and we get to the top of the ridge. Then the trail levels off a bit, and we follow an ancient roadway along that ridge.”

If Šheessay had told him that the one klick was mostly straight up, he might have insisted on spending the night right where he was, but she did not. When she finally announced that they had reached the top of the ridge,

he gave in to gravity and declined to budge.

“Let’s see, it’s already 7:10,” she said. “We’ve got perhaps an hour of daylight left. Let’s rest for 15 *millidias* and then get going. We probably shouldn’t travel after dark.”

“I’m ravenous. I think I remembered putting some granola bars in this backpack.” He found them and helped himself to one, which he supplemented with gulps of water from his canteen. “What are you doing for food up here?”

“I brought a few extra batteries.”

“How heavy are they?” She handed him one. “I feel like I’m holding a battery for a small doll. How much energy can you store in one of these?”

“I can go for about a day, day and half without recharging, depending on how hard I’m working. Maybe less than a day today.”

“I could get rich selling these on Prezghod. Where do you put them in, if it’s not too personal a question given how new our relationship is.”

“Under the circumstances, nothing is too personal. Look, if you lift up my shirt in back, you can see two battery slots. See ’em? I’m opening the one on the left, swapping that battery out. You have to be careful to keep the other slot shut because if both batteries are taken out I’ll crash.” The contortion her right arm and hand went through do the swap looked painful.

“I can do that for you darling,” Sangh said.

“And I can wipe your ass for *you*, and if I ever have to, I will do it gladly. Don’t worry, reaching around like that doesn’t hurt.”

“Do you need me to hold your shirt up?”

“Are we still talking about batteries, sweetie?”

“Yes. What do we do with a discharged battery?”

“I have to recharge them with solar energy. I’ve got some solar cloth which just has to be rolled out, but it wouldn’t work too well here.”

“Okay, I want to ask some hard questions,” he said. “I gather that both Alícia and LaNira sleep with César. So polygamy is legal on *Terra*?”

“No, but nobody’s married to anybody in this situation. For all I know, the two women occasionally have sex with each other. Like you said, it’s none of our business.” She smiled sweetly. “But it’s fun to speculate, right?”

“Do they live in the north because of their peculiar circumstances?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Nobody would have hassled them in the South if they lived this way, but maybe they wanted to feel less ... discussed. People come north for all sorts of reasons.”

“Although Alícia and LaNira were born up here, learned fluent *Terrano* somewhere, and chose not to go south?”

“I wish the *millidia* was longer,” said Šheessay, “but it isn’t.”

“At the next stop you’re going to tell me the whole truth about why the

North is being maintained as a wildlife preserve full of people, and why there are so many southerners crawling around up here.”

“I will, I promise.”

The path had become a little easier. There had been a highway here. Šheessay claimed that it had been part of a road network that joined the farthest northern shore of *América do Norte* with the most southern tip of *América do Sul*. But now there were many sections that had been washed out completely, who knows how long ago. The worst of them slowed their progress to a crawl, and finally they had to back out and climb to the very top of the ridge and work their way around to the other side of the washed-out section. By this time it was dusk. By Šheessay’s reckoning, they had only about 2 klicks to go, but it was foolhardy to press on.

“Let’s make camp. I don’t know what I would do if I let you fall off the mountain.”

They had just selected a likely site, and were starting to break out a tent, when Šheessay looked up and said, “Sssh.” A minute later the deepening shade in the trees around them condensed into the shape of a man, then another, then two more. The men wore leather pants, coarse cotton shirts, and moccasins. Their skin was heavily tattooed. The spears they carried looked lethal, whether they had flint or iron points.



One of the men spoke, uttering words in a language Sangh was pretty sure he had never heard before. Of course, Šheessay answered back. The men seemed to be reassured by what she said, but the spears remained pointed in their direction.

“I told them we were hoping it was okay to trespass on their land, and perhaps we could give them something of value in return for the privilege. They invited us to stay in their village. So let’s pack up again.”

They made faster progress following trails known to the locals. Sangh wondered how many clicks of needless brush cutting he had done. By sundown they had come to a collection of small huts.

“On behalf of the *Táqui-táqui* clan, welcome to *Tepec*,” said Šheessay.

“I didn’t hear the ‘Taaki-taaki’ say anything,” said Sangh. “Are you sure you’re right about that welcome?”

“It’s complicated. I said we were ‘travelers from afar.’ But they know who we are, or what.”

“You mean, they think we’re DAE?”

“Right.”

“Is that why we’re not being greeted by a big chief and being offered his third wife for the night?”

“Gross. The big guy around here is called Duque Wein, son of Duque,

now patriarch of the *Wein* subclan of the *Táqui-Táqui*. At this time of day he's probably in the men's hut."

"And where's our hut?"

"Right over there next to the *Tepec* Ritz Hotel. If they have any spare space, they may offer it to us, but for now we'll just pitch our tent on the outskirts of their village, and be grateful for the water and sewer hookups, by which I mean the stream in that direction, and the latrine pit in that direction."

"You are such a wit," Sangh said, as they started to unpack once more. He didn't know what to expect from the 'Taaki-taaki', but Sheessay seemed completely relaxed. "We're going to need a fire just to see the tentpegs. Or is it okay to let the natives see our flashlight?"

"I don't think we have any choice. There can't be much kindling underfoot; the locals will have used it up." So they got out a flashlight and used it to peer into their backpack for other items. Fortunately, they had a high-tech tent that practically put itself together, so they were soon ensconced on a blanket in front of a space-age tent in a neolithic village.

"You know," she said, "even in the *Neolítico*, some people crossed the entire continent on a fairly regular basis, at least in the north-south direction. Nomads are like that."

“What was the ‘Nayoleečhico’?”

“The time period when humans developed agriculture and everything it made possible, including permanent settlements.”

“Which was when?”

“Roughly 14,000 years ago, depending on which part of the world you’re looking at. It doesn’t matter; calling the current culture ‘neolithic’ is just an approximation.

“Okay, sorry to interrupt.”

“I was working up to the subject of visitors from other tribes. In this hemisphere, winter is coming, and in fact it’s already here if you go 3000 kilometers north. The tribes between here and there all shift south, and eventually they bump up against the *Táqui-Táqui*. There are traditions about who shares what when that happens, but there are disputes about what the traditions are exactly, and sometimes a little violence. It’s nothing compared to what happens when raiders show up.”

“How likely is that?”

“There aren’t many of them, the tribes whose economy is based on theft. In this longitude, the scariest one is the *Glaque*.”

“And are we likely to run into them, the ‘Glaak’?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. We’re tracking them from satellites; and, though

their detailed movements are hard to predict, they seem to be headed in this general direction.”

“Wonderful.”

“In addition to the clans, big groups moving in an organized way, there are stragglers, refugees, or people who just want to see the world. Anyone with a reason to find a new home for a while is likely to head south this time of year, and if they haven’t found a place to stop before, this is the end of the line. If times have been good, the *Táqui-Táqui* will probably let them join the clan; if not, they might not get out of here alive.

“And how do they treat DAE people?”

“They mostly leave us alone. We help when we can with clan projects, like hunting or fruit harvesting, and in return they share resources with us. They’re afraid to harm us, because they’ll probably bring big trouble down on themselves, and for what? We don’t have much to steal, and in particular we don’t have any powerful weapons, at least none they can use. We aren’t going to intervene on their side in a fight with another clan and blow the other guys up with a laywitzer.”

“What powerful weapon do we have that they *can’t* use?”

“Me, silly boy.”

“If, say, the ‘Glaak’ attack, we will just sit here and watch the fight? We

don't take sides?"

"No. The worst the *Glaque* can do is maul this subclan, kill the men, and take as many women and children as they can use. They'll clear out of here fast, whether they win or lose."

"So, if we're going to be above it all, what are we doing here, by which I mean, what is the Republic of *Terra* doing here? How many DAE agents are there in the North and what's the purpose of this whole enterprise? Do we have enough time for you to tell me the whole story?"

"Yeah, I suppose we do. Stop me if this gets boring."

"Not a chance."

"If we go back 1500 years, to about a hundred years after the Second Nuclear War, the leadership of the *União do Sul* made a decision with reverberating consequences. You would have noticed that the people of the South are remarkably placid, even if César hadn't spilled the beans."

"I guess so. I haven't heard of any bitter political clashes, and then there's the passivity in the face of Vhatta Limhoon's incursion. Right! There's how everyone — *everyone!* — just *obeys* a government request not to bother the Ambassador while he pursues his exoanthropological research! Oh, and Bewinda's claim that there's no history happening, only news, sports, and other entertainments."

“I’m afraid you are going to hate us when I tell you what I’m about to tell you.” She sighed deeply, and looked so distressed that Sangh wanted to reassure her. Unfortunately, he too feared what was coming. “As I said, a decision was made . . . to ‘redesign’ people to be less aggressive.”

She stopped and waited for him to assimilate the word “redesign.”

“Oh, no,” he said.

She went on. “At about the time of the War, geneticists had been investigating a complex of genes in the human genome that were associated with aggression. They found, or created, alleles that made their possessors, shall we say, ‘meek.’”

Sangh knew nothing about genetics, but he got the drift.

She went on, “They learned how to breed meek chimpanzees that settled near the bottom of the chimp social hierarchy. They always lost out to their more aggressive peers with the original versions of the ‘aggression genes.’ It seems like rather an unfair hand to deal any chimp, but if the entire group were bred to that standard then no one would suffer.”

“And you did this to *humans*?”

“Not me personally. But yes, Disraeli, who served as the chief of staff for President *Camões*. And another Avatar, call him ‘Teller,’ who led a team of *Molhe* and *Seque* geneticists, although most didn’t know the whole story.”

“And now you’re telling me the whole story? It’s not going to change again?”

“Oh, sweetie, it hurts when you talk that way. I’ve always intended to tell you everything. You have to admit, it’s a long story, and we’ve had . . . other priorities . . . . We’ve been on the run . . . . But anyway, so the new genes were sold to people by tying them to life extension. Only nobody knew that outside the inner circle of the project. Would you turn down a chance for your children to live longer than you? Especially after a generation or two, when the children of those who had refused the offer watched their still-youthful neighbors from their deathbeds. After four generations, there were essentially zero holdouts. And nobody knew that the low-aggression alleles came along.”

“But during the switchover the aggressive people with short lifespans would have been at the top of every organization and won every economic competition while those with long lives lost out.”

“So what? What good is it to be president of a big corporation, or even the Republic, if you’re dead? But no one was told they were *making* a choice between life and high station. Anyone who noticed the correlation between success and a short lifespan chalked it up to stress. Plus, the unaggressive people didn’t *mind* losing out. They watched a little more screen or formed

a few more book clubs or fantasy-football leagues.”

“Or mountain-climbing clubs. But the experiment basically worked. There haven’t been any wars in the last 1500-plus years.”

“Yes, no, that part worked. What we didn’t realize that the genes responsible for aggression also played a role in creativity. We didn’t even believe there *was* such a thing as creativity. Because if you freeze the frame on any particular creative act, there’s nothing special to see. If you watched Fritschalter make a movie, all you could see was a lot of hustle and bustle and mess. Some of her movies, when you look at them now, are transcendently beautiful and convey seemingly infinite depths of meaning, but that’s just to say that Fritschalter is a very skilled director. You can say that she was very good at planning scenes, or designing shots, or coordinating the set design and the cinematography, and what extra content is there in saying she was very creative? It just means you mostly don’t know how she did those things. But *she* knew, and other really good directors can see how she thought, just by watching one of her movies.”

“Get to the point, please, darling,” said Sangh, wanting this conversation to end before it got any worse.

“The point is, what could these aggression genes have to do with, say, plotting camera placements? We anticipated all sorts of consequences that



tinkering with the aggression genes might have, but this kind of link defies explanation.”

“But halfway through the changeover, couldn’t you see a problem emerging, and detach the unaggression alleles from the life-extension package?”

“We just bungled that; we *didn’t* see it. There was more stuff ‘in the pipeline’ than we realized. For a couple of hundred years, a remarkably long time, the culture recycled old ideas and convinced itself that it was finding new ones. By the time we realized our mistake, it was too late. There were no aggressive people left, and no creativity. Civilized people were happy, but nothing ever really changed in their lives. History stopped. Science stagnated. Art became a kind of data mining, digging up nuggets from the past. No one composes music any more; the whole idea of making up new music is no longer in people’s mental repertoire. There is such a vast quantity of old music that no one could listen to all of it in a lifetime, even a 200-year lifetime. So why bother to create new stuff? Even popular music is resampled and sold again and again. It’s true that people enjoy playing musical instruments, as a hobby. They just have nothing new to say with them. Language itself hardly evolves any more.”

She finally stopped talking. It took a few minutes for Sangh to grasp the enormity.

“So it occurred to no one that selling a new idea is a form of aggression? That when someone says, ‘Listen to *me*, not anyone else and certainly not to tradition,’ it takes balls? And ‘balls’ is shorthand for whatever it is that makes one guy the alpha male.”

“If I were a biological woman I might object at this point, but I will pass.”

“So all those nice *Molhes* I talked to down South are just the shards of the shattered human race, in some sense.”

“But you do admit, they are nice people. Surely that counts for something. Unlike Vhatta Limhoon of the Prezghod Navy, they’re not out shooting up somebody else’s planet. They deserve credit for that.”

“*Somebody* does, but not them, it turns out.”

“All right, let me get back to the story. If you’ve been paying attention, you realize that we didn’t really wreck the human race. It’s still alive up here, in the North. That was deliberate. In the aftermath of the war, the North had returned to the *Neolítico*. The descent took twenty years, a generation. The South could have rushed in and helped the North to recover. But it didn’t, for reasons I’ll get to. Later, if the grand experiment we were conducting down South had succeeded, *then* we would have begun the reconstruction of the North. But, after strenuous debate, the experiment was ruled a failure.”

“The failure seems obvious!”

“Not to all philosophers. Some thought that as long the South was full of reasonably happy people not killing each other we should chalk up a success. But the majority decided that an endless round of shallow lives didn’t have enough *meaning*. Otherwise, why not populate the world with otters instead of *Molhes*?”

“So once you voted against otters, what possible reason could there be to keep the North quarantined?”

“Because we couldn’t trust it! The Northern countries had caused so much misery for so many hundreds of years. If we released it from its chains to confront a genetically passive South, we didn’t think we could contain it. We wanted to transfer wild alleles back into the Southern population gradually, and keep tabs on the results.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’ but all this strenuous debating was going on *inside the Mind*, among subintelligences and Avatars.”

“Not inside the Mind the way you’re picturing, because, well, the Mind had disappeared after the Second Nuclear War.”

“*What?*”

“When I said the Avatars showed up about then, I didn’t tell the whole truth.”

“Your specialty.”

“I left out the fact that at the same time the Avatars appeared, the Mind, and its embodiment, Augustus van Dusen, *disappeared*. He had been the loudest voice in favor of the plan to destroy the North and let the South try to live in harmony with the planet. It sounded beautiful in the long run, but in the short run it meant thinning the *Molhe* herd — killing billions of people.”

Sangh’s face showed alarm and terror. He started to say something, but she held up her hand.

“Let me get through this. One key difference between *Seques* and Avatars is that *Seques* love people, whereas we love humanity. We’ve absorbed the conclusions of the greatest *Molhe* ethicists, that what’s best is what’s best taking everyone’s interests into account equally. But that idea doesn’t tell you how many individuals there should *be*. If the planet’s ecosystem is groaning under the load of ten billion people scraping every last resource from it, if those billions are grinding the civilization down bit by bit with nuclear wars, and whittling away at their own numbers, wouldn’t it be better to amputate — cut out the gangrenous tissue, but preserve a billion people unscathed? After tortured debate, that’s what we decided to do. All the problems of *Terra* were located in the North. Humanity could get a fresh

start in the South with a smaller population.”

Sangh watched her and waited.

“As you know, Van Dusen’s cyberwarfare department won the war easily. His Provisional Government of the North then made *sure* that the North did not recover. They didn’t just watch it decline, they nuked any attempt to revive viable fragments of civilization. Many southern *Molhes* were clamoring for the barbarity to stop — there were still activist *Molhes* in those days —, but the government of Camões and van Dusen controlled the reports coming out of the North and denied that anything was amiss. We even dropped a nuke on the old capital, *Brasília*, as evidence that rebel groups in the North were still operational. We did whatever was necessary to prevent anyone from going North and coming back to talk about what they saw.”

“How many of the world’s great religions were centered in the North? The major art museums, the great libraries, vid archives? All vaporized.”

“We saved as much as we could. Civilization did survive.”

“If Van Dusen had been human, he would have been the worst war criminal in history.”

“The Second Nuclear War took one day; the ‘Great Nuclear Winnowing’ took twenty years, enough time for a generation to grow up up North with no memory of civilization. Van Dusen had gathered enough power to be

dictator of the world, although he never claimed a title like that. He used his power to set up a democratic world government, or government of the South anyway.

“Then one day he went for a walk outside the Presidential Palace without his security detail. The *antisequistas*, the groups agitating for *Seques* to remain second-class citizens, hated van Dusen more than anyone. A mob tore him to pieces before anyone could stop them. He became a martyr of the *Seque* civil-rights movement.”

“If only they had known the whole truth.”

“But what they killed was just a body, probably under control of a robotic program. We set the puppet out for a stroll, and then ceased to exist. The next thing we knew, we were just a bunch of pieces, with idiosyncratic talents and tastes, sharing memories of having been someone so beautiful, powerful, and benevolent. Some say it’s still there, hiding, able to pull us all back together. Not likely.”

Neither said anything and a minute went by. But she resumed,

“The Mind loved people more than it thought it did; it had saved humanity only by causing billions of individual people to suffer immense miseries. It didn’t want to be the person responsible for that any more. It held itself together only long enough to finish. what it had set out to do . . . .”

“Never mind,” Sangh interrupted. “This ... committee of Avatars is what’s left of your great and mighty Mind. And that’s why your misdeeds are so easy to keep secret: everyone who knows about them was complicit in war crimes. Each Avatar remembers — *you* remember — being the Mind that made those awful decisions, even if the Mind itself is conveniently dead. Camoinws and the other ‘Molyee’ accomplices are dead by now. The remaining miscellaneous ‘Seckies’, and, I don’t know, robots and coffee makers agreed with the decision, and feared — and still fear — the consequences if the truth should come out. And that’s not even including the brilliant plan the committee of Avatars came up with later, to dumb down the ‘Molyees’ in the South.”

Sheessay said nothing.

“Sweet BeJesus,” said Sangh, and he stood up and walked away from her, staring into the jungle, and said again, “Sweet BeJesus.” He came back and without another word threw a blanket and some granola bars into his backpack, then strode away. Sheessay started to cry, very softly.

He turned once and looked back at the beautiful, fragile demon sitting in front of the tent in the dusk. He turned again, more resolute, and strode into the forest. The last shreds of daylight filtered down through the trees, enough to get him oriented. If he walked north, the “jungle” might end and

the going might become easier. The ridge ran north-south; it wouldn't be hard to follow. It was obvious now what the DAE was doing in the North: looking for genetic material, something creative but not too aggressive. How they harvested it once they found it would probably take hours for Šheessay to tell, but he had had enough from that source.

It was easy going through the woods at first, because the *Taaki-taaki* had cleared the area of brush. But it didn't take long to get into thicker brambles, and Sangh realized it was crazy to try to hack through this stuff at night. He unstrapped his left shoulder from the backpack just as his left foot caught in a vine. He went down hard, landing on his face, his hands tangled in the backpack. He felt like an idiot, an idiot with blood coming out of his nose and mouth. Fortunately, he thought, no one had witnessed his fall. He started to get up, but stopped when he felt something sharp in his back.

"Ow!" he said. Someone kicked him in the face, causing pain and nausea to sweep through him. They rolled him over. He could see nothing but shadowy figures against the slightly brighter canopy. "'Taaki-taaki?'" he said. "'Day-Àh-Ay!'" He pointed to himself and repeated, "'Day-Àh-Ay'."

The shadow looming above him said only, "*Glock*."

He was dead. Unless 'Day-Àh-Ay' was recognized as the 'Tayhanu'



pronunciation of *DAE*, and unless the initials were as feared as Šheessay had claimed. He silently uttered a prayer for God to accept his contrition for the many sins he had committed in the last week, especially those XC had led him into. *Lord, if the ‘Glaak’ kill me, admit this miserable sinner’s soul into Purgatory.*



## Chapter 10

# Long Walk

His captors were apparently not going to kill Sangh right away. They weren't going to allow him to get up either. He listened for the sounds of battle, but then realized that without modern technology battle would make less noise: no rattle of gunfire, no explosions, no rumble and screech of war machines. He thought he might have heard a shout early on, but he was several hundred meters from the 'Taaki-taaki' settlement, and the grunts of men locked in mortal struggle would not have been audible. He wondered what Sheessay was doing, but he assumed she could take care of herself. Later he heard women and kids screaming, a piercing sound that made him shiver with rage and fear.

Hours passed. The vegetation he lay on did not cushion the ground

much, and he soon grew familiar with every root digging into his back. Bugs crawled over him. The crawling ones didn't bite, but the flying ones did. It started to rain. The rain did not make Sangh cooler, but just deepened the sweat pools. Where his guard hovered exactly he couldn't tell and didn't want to find out.

The next morning (it was Friday, Sangh thought he remembered), things clarified. He hadn't believed he would ever sleep, but waking up was definitely what he did when he felt the tip of a spear in his shoulder. The sky had lightened, but the drizzle continued. Two men had charge of him, two spears. One was taller than the other, but the shorter one had fouler breath. They were equally pissed off at him for something, maybe keeping them out of the battle. They could have collected some booty, and they had been stuck guarding him. They tied his hands with rough twine. Then they shoved him, and he kept going that direction.

The Glock did not stick around the scene of their crime, just took what they had come for and split. What they had come for was booty and slaves. They were moving a lot slower on the way back north than on their way in, held back by donkeys loaded with (Sangh guessed) weapons, food, and metals; and by a line of women and children. Warriors urged them forward with spears and fists. Those who couldn't keep up, or who fell by the wayside,

were swiftly macheted, presumably to keep them quiet. If the women wept, they did so in silence.

Sangh was the slowest hiker in the entire column. At first he was sure they would lose patience and kill him. When they didn't, he decided it must be because his captors believed the DAE would ransom him. The two guys assigned to guard him were seriously annoyed at having to keep such a weakling alive. They pummeled and pricked him every chance they got. The *Glock* had a bit of time before the 'Taaki-taaki' came after them, but the 'Taaki-taaki' would have to show up soon, Sangh guessed, to maintain their honor.

In the daylight, the 'Glaak' didn't look at all like the 'Taaki-taaki'. They wore leather vests, had fewer tattoos, and had thick stripes of brown and black paint on their faces. Their skin and hair were lighter. The shorter of Sangh's two guards, whose name sounded like "Haff," was fairer than the taller one, whose name sounded like "Eks," although Sangh couldn't repeat it without saying 'Dheks'. Every 'Glaak' wore a baseball cap. Above the bill Sangh could see what looked vaguely like two intertwined letters of the *Terrano* alphabet. Somehow the 'Glaak' didn't look literate, but perhaps he just hadn't met the intellectuals yet.

The terrain on the north side of the coastal ridge was much as he and

Sheessay had found it to the south. If he lived long enough, he would find out what was at the bottom. The only good thing about being a prisoner was that you didn't have to cut brush. Somewhere up ahead, some low-level 'Glaak' were working up a good sweat cutting a hole big enough for a column of prisoners and their guards (not forgetting the donkeys). Or perhaps they had cut the holes on the way to 'Tepek', and were reusing them on the way back.

By the time they broke for lunch, Sangh was a kilometer behind the column. The light rain had fallen all night and all morning, and he was completely soaked by rain and sweat. The column had churned the trail to mud, and he was the eventual prime beneficiary. He came staggering into the camp after everyone else had already received enough water and gruel to stay alive another half-day.

He sat down heavily, hardly caring if he lived or died. But 'Dheks' cared, because, after drinking from the leather bottle he carried, he held it to Sangh's lips.

After a drink, Sangh got his share of grub, some kind of mush made of maize. The column was not asked to get going immediately after that, for which he thanked God. But when they did get moving, while *Sol* was still high in the sky, he demanded God tell him why he had to suffer so much.

Eventually he lost the ability to think of something as abstract as “God.” He thought only of putting one foot after another, and not falling down and being stabbed to death. He did fall once or twice, and expected to die for it, but ‘Dheks’ pulled him back up. On his next fall he might have begged for death, but by then it was night, and they made camp, hours after everyone else. He didn’t eat, just tumbled down and slept where he fell.

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He slept as if dead until the next morning, when he was prodded awake before dawn. He awoke ravenous. Breakfast was the same pasty mush as previous meals. It tasted pretty good if you were starving. He drank as much water as he could. In the heat so much water was lost to sweating that there was little for the kidneys to work with, but it had to get rid of bodily wastes somehow, so eventually the bladder did fill up. His guards escorted him down to the facilities, which turned out to be the same stream the drinking water had come from. *We are all gonna die of dysentery, another thing I can do nothing about*, he thought.

How far north the ‘Glaak’ lived was a mystery. Šheessay had said that raiders generally moved along north-to-south lines, but she hadn’t said how far. In a primitive world, a centimeter on a map of the continent could translate into the largest distance even a nomad could be expected to traverse

in a lifetime.

Before the column started out again, *Sol* had risen. The captors got angry every morning at how long it took a column of a hundred women and children to get started. But they did cut Sangh's bindings. They weren't worried about such a weakling defeating the forest. Freeing his arms would speed him up. The other prisoners were poked and prodded and yelled at, no doubt being wished to whatever hell the 'Glaak' feared.

On this second day of captivity, Sangh was able to walk a bit faster and further between breaks. His time in *América do Norte*, as unpleasant as it had been in just about every way, had at least toughened him up. Having free arms and hands felt better than sex.

He fell behind the women and children, although not as far today as yesterday. Rumors about who he was must have passed through the group of prisoners. They stared at him and whispered, but they kept their distance. Perhaps they thought the DAE would free some of them along with him. To them the DAE must be like gods: powerful, unpredictable, and dangerous to bargain with.

Now that he could catch his breath as he hiked, he had time for a little more thinking about the DAE's mission to bring good genes back from the North. They had to travel and work with the natives closely enough to



realize who the smart, creative, and not-too-aggressive people were. The problem was getting them to move to the South and keep their mouths shut.

When he realized the solution it brought him short. He actually stopped, long enough to get a cuffing from ‘Haff’. *The DAE identifies the most promising children of the most promising adults, kidnaps them, and brings them south. They must have spies everywhere. The Northerners’ brutality is no match for the Southerners’ cold-blooded calculation.*

He was reminded of something LaQuinta Johnson, the “First Lady” of *Terra*, had revealed about herself. (The Prezghod Empire had never had a “First Lady” or “First Gentleman,” at least not that he could remember. By tradition the Poph was always unmarried and childless, at least officially.) He had sat next to Ms. Johnson at that state banquet the day they had landed, and found her smarter and more creative than her husband, and a tad more aggressive.

She had had a successful career in marketing for several years before meeting Ronald, and played a big role in his campaign for the Presidency. They got married after he had been in office for six months. “When the honeymoon with Parliament was over we got a boost in the polls out of having an actual honeymoon,” she explained.

She was an attractive woman, ginger colored with ginger hair, who had

obviously been a great beauty in her prime. She had beautiful eyes, all the more glamorous for being slightly sunken and mysterious. Her exotic look, Sangh eventually realized, was due to an ever-so-slight twist to her nose. She smiled often.

“I’m so glad you aliens have shown up,” she said at one point. “The biggest problem we face on *Terra* is that nothing ever happens around here. I am First Lady of the Solar System on paper, but can I visit *MarTe*? [Fourth planet from *Sol*, added Jake, who was translating.] Apparently not; I’ve made inquiries. We have no trouble launching intercontinental passenger liners that get above most of the atmosphere, but actually getting into orbit and beyond is left to machines and *Seques*. Then you people show up! With the emphasis on ‘people’! *You* didn’t delegate the trip to *Seques*. And you came from a lot further away than *Marte*. I really must get you together with the Minister of Extraplanetary Affairs so I can hear some explanations.”

To provide the excitement lacking in real life, LaQuinta played a lot of card games, and loved to gamble in the big casinos of Saonwpowlu. She was a devotee of a particular gambling system that had won her a lot of money, she said. “Of course, I donate all my winnings to charity.” Bewinda, seated on the other side of the First Lady, started to talk about her brother-in-law, the compulsive gambler, who had caused her sister a lot of problems, but

did not get very far into the story before stumbling and then coming to a halt, her face red with embarrassment.

“Forgive me, Mrs. Travairs, I didn’t mean to imply . . .”

“Call me LaQuinta. And please don’t worry, I never gamble more than I can afford to lose.”

“Now if I could just get her to stop *buying* more than we can afford to lose, we’d be in great shape,” said the President with a chuckle.

“Ronald likes to tease me,” said LaQuinta indulgently.

Bewinda said, “I guess I was thinking of my sister, and wished I could talk to her. She’s so far away it’s hard to picture.”

Sangh and Mrs. Johnson had talked about their life stories and what little nudges of fate had brought them to this improbable moment. One thing she told him was that she was an orphan; her parents had died too young for her to remember them, and she had been lucky to be adopted by the Johnsons.

*Or did the DAE scoop her up and bring her south to help resurrect the human race? Is it coincidence that the head of the Free Government of Terra is an “orphan”?*

He stumbled on a rock, and was jarred from his speculations back to a time like that of the Book of Sceldon, the time after the Second Fall, when

the colonists on Prezghod had been seduced away from Allāh's Second Eden by the worship of robotic idols. The faithful had been saved by a flash of divine light that burned the False Eden of the Secularists, and a plague that had melted the flesh of the unbelievers. *But you have comforted the righteous*

*You stand at the right hand of the faithful*

*Consign the wisdom of the foolish to the flames!*

*The wisdom of Allāh is sufficient for the good.* As Sceldon prophesied, the descendents of the colonists returned to primitive lives like those of Abel and Cain in Genesis; the Dark Age had begun. Meanwhile, on Erth the North was kept in the Dark Age while the South lived in the False Eden of *Terra*.

Most of the other prisoners were barefoot; a few had moccasins. Sangh had heavy Prezghod Navy boots. However, the sole on the left boot was starting to come off. He might have repaired it with the supplies in his backpack, but the backpack now belonged to 'Haff'. *Any gestures I make to convey the idea that I want to borrow the pack will just piss him off. The good new is that 'Haff' will probably confiscate my boots, as soon as it occurs to him. Then mending them will be his problem.* But the longer Sangh walked in the damned boots, the worse the flapping in his left one got. He was still debating whether to try talking to 'Haff' in sign language when they

reached the midday break spot.

So far the *Glock* chose to stop at streams deep and rapid enough for everyone to get a drink from. These abounded in ‘Wahak’, and the inhabitants knew where they all were. Besides water, the second criterion for where to stop was where *Sol* was. During the hottest hours of the day, you had to rest, in the shade if possible. As the column descended the mountains’ north slopes, the forest gave way to savanna. Shade became scarcer.

Today the tail of the column had parked at a point where a clear stream toppled over an ancient outcropping of granite, harder than the crumbly stuff below it, making a pretty little waterfall, 5 meters high. The rocks formed tiers of level shelves, bottoming out in a deep pool. The surviving kids found this pool irresistible. They forgot their suffering and dove in, as kids had doubtless been doing in this spot for millenia, since long before the War.

The *Glock* took it easy, and their prisoners let some of their tension go. The harsh midday light seemed less lethal when you could dunk your feet in a cool stream and get some shade from the trees growing by the water. The line of prisoners and pack animals was strung out below the falls. The end of the column, where Sangh was, at least got to watch the kids and waterfall, and dunk his feet in the swimming hole.

Eks took off his moccasins and dangled his feet over the edge. Sangh took

this as an invitation to take his boots and socks off. He looked ruefully at the damage done by the trek so far. How could an empire hurl an expeditionary force light-years across the galaxy equipped with such crap?

The headman of the raiding party chose this interval to come back to inspect his most valuable prisoner. You could hear his party coming a long way off. Subordinates were shouting, dogs were barking, children squealing. Eks and Haff scrambled to their feet and stood at attention, and Sangh struggled to do the same, but his blistered feet resisted being slammed back into boots. So he was half shod and felt ridiculous when the boss came climbing around the waterfall, accompanied by a couple of mastiffs and a half dozen mutts that capered and barked around their master, thrilled to be part of whatever this was. The minions cleared a row of preteen girls off a fallen tree trunk and the leader sat down. He motioned and Sangh limped toward him, then stood as vertically as he could in one boot, holding the other under his arm. The dogs gave Sang a good sniffing.

The headman was dressed like everyone else, except that his leather vest had more sparkly things sewn on, and his cap had two feathers. His hair and skin were both so translucent that it took Sangh a moment to realize that the blur on his upper lip was a moustache. The man did not introduce himself, just smiled, and said, “*D-A-E? América do Sul?*”

“‘Seenw,›” said Sangh; he was pretty sure this meant ‘Yes.’” He had just about exhausted his stock of *Terrano* words, and was apprehensive that Headman would burst into fluent *Terrano*. But the guy didn’t know much more than he did.

“*Quando D-A-E?*” he said, and looked up in the air, his palms held up, in a universal gesture of puzzlement. So *quando* meant When? or Where? Sangh didn’t know the answer to either, and raised his own hands in the same gesture. Headman nodded slightly to the guards behind Sangh, and they hit him hard enough to knock him to his hands and knees. The pain hit him a second later. He looked back to see that ‘Haff’ coiling the whip he had just slashed Sangh’s shirt with. Sangh braced for the next sting.

But Headman had conveyed his message, and he got up, exchanged a few barbarian words with his subordinates, clambered down the rocks, and strode back toward the front of the column. The message was clear: Sangh was a pain in the ass, and if he weren’t ransomed soon they would write him off.

Sangh struggled to his feet. The pain had fuzzed up his consciousness for a minute, but he fought the feeling off. He locked down despair as well as he could. He kindled a spark of fury toward Headman and ‘Haff’. If this anger was a sin, he would pray for forgiveness when he got a chance. Right now,

his job was to keep up with the column and stay alive; if fantasies about what he would do to his tormentors helped him survive, everything else was secondary. *March! Drink and march!* he thought.

Soon enough everyone was moving, even the weaklings in the rear. This time Sangh got ahead of some of the weaker women. But what was his game plan, assuming the longest he had if he weren't rescued was about 36 hours? He could assume the cavalry would save him, he could try to escape, or he could persuade the 'Glaak' that he was worth more alive than dead. He quickly rejected that last idea. He wasn't living through *A SothWaaçh Tinkerer Visits King Dharterk*; he couldn't trade modern technology for power. His Dad had taught him how to fix a car, but not how to make one from scratch. He doubted he could build a waterwheel. Perhaps if he had the know-how to start a technological revolution, the DAE might get him out of there just to put a stop to it, but he didn't.

His best bet, he decided, was to escape and make his way back toward the coast, or toward the 'Taaki-taaki'. Šheessay must surely be looking for him. If he was looking for her, however incompetently, it would have to improve the odds. The 'Glaak' were confident he would fail if he tried to run, and they were probably right. Nonetheless, it was the duty of a military prisoner to try to escape, and that's what he decided to do.



The column was following the stream down the mountain, more or less, departing from it when it plunged into ravines, but always finding a way back. The vegetation thinned out more, even the *kudzu*. He would have to make a run for it before the countryside dried up completely, when he would have no cover.

All he needed was an opportunity. *I guess dusk will be the best chance I'm going to get*, he was thinking, when 'Dheks' suddenly made a gurgling sound, grasped his neck, and fell to the ground. An uproar started. Women and children were screaming, dogs were barking. 'Dheks' was trying to pull something from his throat. Sangh went to help, but by the time he reached him, 'Dheks' was unconscious. Poisoned arrow? Lucky shot? Sangh looked around for 'Haff', but he had gone to ground, the better to counterattack. Only then did Sangh realize he could be the next target, and scramble for the nearest shrub. The battle had become, to his untrained eye, invisible, but there were intermittent shouts and whistles. *How would I know if this is the vengeance of the 'Taaki-taaki' or some other tribe looking to pick off a bit of loot?*

Whichever it was, Allaḥ would probably not provide a better opportunity for escape. Sangh took off into the scrub, keeping low for a hundred meters, then running like hell. The damned *kudzu* was ready to trip him up, but he

fell only two or three times. He stopped when he could no longer hear the shouts of warriors on either side.

That probably meant there were only a handful of attackers. They didn't intend to maul the 'Glaak' and steal their booty; they were just trying to inflict some wounds. Anyone but the 'Taaki-taaki' would have brought a bigger attack group.

Great! All Sangh had to do was make contact with the 'Taaki-taaki' raiders and ask them to take him home. Terrific plan, except for a few items. Finding a small band of attackers was going to be difficult for the 'Glaak'; it would be next to impossible for him. The 'Taaki-taaki' might not recognize him, or feel hospitable if they did. Plus, he couldn't keep up with them even if they took him in.

He needed to go back the way he had come, over the mountain to the DAE station, dealing with the 'Taaki-taaki' if he had to. But first he had to elude the pursuit team the 'Glaak' would send after him. They couldn't just let him go. Even if they just wanted to kill him once they had him, it was the principle of the thing. He wasn't supposed to escape. So, should he sit still until they stopped looking for him? Or keep moving? He decided only the former tactic made any sense. The more he moved the more visible he was. *In a hedge overgrown with kudzu I might pass for a hedge. It all*

*depends on the dogs. If they're trained to find fugitives, they'll find me. But that mob sure didn't act like trained dogs.*

He heard a bark, then another. *The thing about dogs is, they're clueless about social categories. If something runs from them, it's prey. But when it comes to classifying a human being who doesn't run, they get a bit confused.* He heard shouts. The 'Glaak' had chased the raiders off, and had turned their attention to him, their missing prisoner. 'Haff', if he was still alive, would make this his top priority, since he was the only person left to blame for letting Sangh go.

It took all his concentration to just squat and wait for the dogs. They found him in two minutes. The mastiffs, as big as barns, came bounding up, growling and barking, but, when he reacted as if glad to see them, they calmed down, wagged their tails, and let him pet them. After all, they had seen him around for a couple of days, talking to their master. "Good boy," he said, in what he hoped was the universal dog-praising tone. He got up and started to walk, then run, not trying to outpace the dogs. Soon they were outpacing him, treating him as one of the hunters, not the hunted.

The shouts of the Glaak got to be too close for comfort, and he branched off to the right, crawled uphill as far as he could, and hid under a bush. *Why can you never find a hedge when you need one? I feel like a billboard "Live*

*Fharha Here!*” None of the nearby shrubs looked any better. but perhaps there were enough to baffle someone looking from afar without binoculars.

The shouts kept coming, then moved further away. He lay still for hours. The scariest moment was when the dogs came back through and made a side trip to say hello to him. They were a bit puzzled why he wasn’t coming with them, but they did a dog shrug and took off toward the main group.

It was getting dark when he finally decided to move. He headed back toward the stream, working his way uphill, but it was awkward pushing his way through the increasingly heavy vegetation. He soon had ripped his uniform in two places, and inflicted painful scratches on his face, arms, and legs. Some of them itched like crazy. When he crossed a ridge he sometimes had to work his way down a while to get back to the main slope. He couldn’t see the unfamiliar stars. Hours after *Sol* set, *Lua* rose, making a second dimmer day. He could never get used to this strange nighttime companion. ‘*Lua*’s bright half circle pointed toward the invisible star — *Sol* — in the west, so he wasn’t going to go in circles.

Unfortunately, by the time *Lua* had risen high in the sky, Sangh had made no clear progress. He was exhausted, and he was thirsty. He cursed his incompetence at not finding a stream he had been standing *right next to* a few hours ago. Could it have dipped underground at some point, so that

he crossed it without knowing it? He lay down to think it over, and when he awoke *Sol* was shining. He was even thirstier. He had fallen asleep in a clearing, apparently created when *kudzu* strangled a large tree and pulled it down. Nobody had told him what *kudzu* was good for, but it made a nice bedding material. *Just so I don't break out in hives from rolling around in it.*

There was nothing to eat for breakfast, but his bladder was full. He wished he had a way to collect his urine; he was about ready to drink it. No matter how he thought about it, his situation was desperate. What were the chances he could make it over the ridge to somewhere reasonably civilized before he died of thirst? Close to zero. His only hope was to turn around and work his way down to where there was less vegetation. He would be visible to the 'Glaak' and to the DAE, and whichever grabbed him first would win. Or maybe he would find a stream quickly and be able to follow it to its source at the top of the ridge; plan A might work out after all.

He kept this optimistic thought in mind for at least an hour. After that his mind had been drained of all thought, except for the goal of stumbling downhill. One-foot-after-another sort of thing. He tripped on the vines, but didn't bother to curse them anymore. He kept to the shadows to keep from drying up completely, but open areas became more frequent. The open areas

were usually covered with dead grass.

Finally he had to admit the forest was over. The trees were mostly scrubby. He looked back where he had come from, and could see the lush trees climbing up the side of the mountain, bragging about the rainfall they experienced. Looking the other way, toward the northeast, he seemed to see a line of trees on the horizon. *River? Mirage? Either way, my only option. DAE, I know you're watching. Pick me up soon or watch me die.*

He walked toward the trees, if that's what they were. He felt like he could fall at any moment, but he knew if he did he would be crawling from then on, which was suicide. So he stayed upright. At least the *kudzu* was withered, in places absent completely.

He had no sense of time or space. How far the trees were was academic. It might have made more sense to wait for twilight to attempt this trek, but it was too late for that. The trees seemed to be getting closer, but perhaps that's the way these mirages worked. Eventually, however, it became clear that the trees were real. He registered that datum and kept walking. *I'll rest when I reach them*, he thought. So when he did reach them he just fell down.

Their shade kept him from drying up completely, so he was still alive when night fell. He woke up. He struggled to his feet, and took a few steps

deeper into the woods, looking for the river that had to be here. *Lua* had not yet risen, so he had to feel his way. He hadn't taken many steps before he lost his footing on a slope, and tumbled into a puddle of water. *No, a creek!* It wasn't deep enough to drown in, but it was deep enough to drink, and he had time to take a few sips and smile before rough hands seized him and dragged him up and out of the water.

Once again Sangh was surrounded by a group of mean-looking men armed with spears, knives, and other lethal weapons. At least, that's what he could make out in the starlight. The men were wearing the 'Glaak' baseball caps. Sand tried saying, "'Dheks'? Water?" Then he remembered that 'Dheks' was probably dead. Up his hands went, although he was so weary he thought it might be easier if they just killed him and got it over with. But the thought of dying without drinking just a little more water was appalling.

They did not kill him, but poked and shoved him until he figured out which way they wanted him to walk. He staggered as fast as he could. He was shoved out of the straggling stand of trees, into the cooling night air. By now *Lua* had cleared the horizon. The 'Glaak' and their prisoner had walked less than one klick when they reached their camp. It was larger and more substantial than he had expected. It was much , neat rows of huts made of poles and hides. He hadn't thought the 'Glaak' capable of building

and fortifying a village. The sentries holding Sangh called out and people emerged, including women and children. He tried to sit down; they couldn't reasonably ask him to walk any farther. But his captors pricked him harder, hard enough to bleed him a bit, and he kept going. A straggle of children followed, not too closely. Sangh lurched past hut after hut. Foodstuffs hung outside the huts, some under awnings, some curing in the sun and rain. Men and women took a break from their sleep and other activities to come out and stare at the recaptured southerner, if the mysterious and awful South could have harbored such a weakling.

The procession stopped when they reached Headman, standing with his arms folded, contempt coming off him like a gas. Except he wasn't the head guy now that his raiders had returned to the base camp. That would be the man with *three* feathers in his baseball cap, who sat on a stool in front of one of the bigger huts. Incongruously, he wore aviator-style sunglasses. He might have been a bit older than Headman. They both stared at Sangh for a while, then Headman said a few words to Chief. Chief nodded, then gave an order.

Two of the sentries holding Sangh marched him to a nearby hut, and tossed him in. He fell to his knees and then toppled. He had found a good place to die, if they would just let him. Then someone poured some



water into his mouth, although most of it ran over his cheek and neck. He calculated that all his needs had been met.

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He didn't die, of course. He awoke and inhaled the smell of hut, mostly smoke and sweat. Light seeped in through the cracks in the thin walls. *Sol* must have risen. He wasn't lying on dirt, but he wasn't comfortable either. The floor might be made of the same kind of animal hide as the walls. Whether there was room to stand was hard to judge, but academic at this point because Sangh was happy to stay horizontal. Or would have been, but he needed to pee, and he was thirsty.

"*Bo' noite*," someone said. It was a male voice.

Odd. It almost sounded like the person had said "Good evening" in Tayhan.

"*Bo' noite. Vives?*" the voice said.

He sat up, or tried to. Some kind of lamp was burning, shedding a smoky light on a man sitting next to it. The man was painted like the other tribespeople, as far as Sangh could tell, but he was browner than the average northerner.

"*Bo noyche*," Sangh ventured.

"*Você vem do Sul?*"

If only *Jake* or even Tralf were here to translate! Sangh knew so few words and phrases of the languages on this planet. The ‘Seckies’ simultaneous translation had made him lazy.

“*Do Sul?*” the stranger repeated. He was looking for some common ground. “*Godánia? Godánia?*”

*Sul* meant “south,” Sangh suddenly remembered. That second word — Sangh had taken a course on the Original Language, and one of the first words they learned was “*God*,” because it was believed to be the root of the name of their planet, Prezghod.

“‘Seenw! Suul!’ Ghod! Allāh!” he said. Why “south” should have something to do with God was not clear, but anyone who said the word “God” on this planet must be a friend. Šheessay had taught him the Tayhan word for God, and he said it: “*Deus*.”

“*Mas não fala Terrano?*”

“No ‘Suul’ — *não Sul* — from outer space,” Sangh said, and pointed up. He thought the stranger might suppose he was pointing to the roof of the hut, so he struggled to his feet, banging his head on the sloping ceiling of the hut. Stooped over, he tugged the man toward the flap of hide that served as a door to the hut.

*Sol* had risen all right, but it was now setting. Sangh had slept all day.

The heat of the day had dug its claws in and hadn't let go yet. Stars were beginning to pop out. Sang pointed to the sky, in roughly the direction of home.

"Dhambaiscadoo duuspassu."

"*Do espaço?*"

"*Sim.* 'Duuspassuu.'" Sangh said, hoping he was making sense.

Their conversation had attracted the attention of Sangh's guards, but they made no move to shut it down or throw Sangh back in the wigwam. What to say next? It was always good to exchange names with the subjects of anthropological investigations, if it wasn't taboo.

"Me 'noomee' Sangh," Sangh said, and pointed to himself. He felt like a movie character from darkest Torso. The stranger must have seen the same movie, because he pointed to himself and said, "*Alberto.*"

An awkward silence erupted. The small momentum they had accumulated faded. Sangh tried saying, "'Voosay?' *Do Sul?*" He pointed south.

"*Sim,*" the stranger — Alberto — said. "*Desde muito anos.*" The first word, pronounced "'seenw'," meant "yes." The rest Sang could not understand.

More silence. After ten seconds, Alberto found a stick and began drawing in the dirt. He drew a big circle and a little one, walked a few paces and

drew another such pair. Then he came back to the first, and dragged the stick from the little circle of the first pair to the little circle of the second, leaving a furrow. He moved back again, and traced a circle around the big circle and intersecting the little one. Then he traced it again, and again, again. He did the same for the other pair of circles. Finally, he dragged the stick from the second little circle back to the first.

He muttered a few words, which didn't help explain what he was doing, but Sangh figured out what the pantomime meant about halfway through, especially since the stranger kept pointing to him as he worked on the second pair of circles. It was the story of his ancestors leaving Erth — the first little circle — and landing on Prezghod — the second little circle. Many years passed, as the little planets orbited around their stars many times, and then the descendents of the colonists came back.

So when Alberto pointed to the first little circle and said, "*Terra*." Sangh practically ran to the second little circle and yelled, "Prezghod!" It took a second for his guards to react and seize him roughly. Sangh hardly noticed.

"'Day-Àh-Ay'?" he said. The stranger just looked puzzled. Was the puzzlement an act? If he didn't work for the Department of Statistical Anomalies, it would be improbable that the Department didn't know all about him, hadn't tracked him here and allowed him to stay. Had they told

him who Sangh was or had he worked it out by himself?

A small crowd of people had gathered — at a safe distance — while Alberto and Sangh had performed their pantomime. Once the guards had grabbed him, the audience edged in closer, clapping and shouting. But all that happened was that the guards threw Sangh back into the smoky hut. *My hut. Home sweet hut.* He lay there alone, wishing they would pour more water into him, until he fell asleep.

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He awoke at dawn, because he heard more shouting and clapping. *Perhaps they've found another high-value captive*, he thought, but the odds were against it. Sure enough, two 'Glaak' men dragged him out again into the harsh light, bright enough to cause pain. Hadn't he had a hat? Thirst now cut into him, and he felt incredibly dirty.

His morning continued to worsen when once again the tiresome Headman appeared. Sangh was wary, but he was still caught off guard when Headman hit him as hard as he could in the stomach. He turned and walked away, without another glance at Sangh, who was henceforth, Sangh hoped, beneath his notice. But no, the guards dragged and prodded him to follow Headman, through a clapping, jeering crowd.

Their destination was the village square, it looked like. There was a space big enough for the whole village to participate in human sacrifices, if that's what they went for. Apparently they had given up on the idea that the DAE might be willing to pay for Sangh, and switched to trading Sangh's life for the favor of their gods. As an exoanthropologist, Sangh wished his mental notes on all this might someday be published, but there was a problem with that plan if he was the guest of honor.

Then Sangh's blood ran cold. In the middle of the square stood a stake, about twice the height of a man, surmounted by a cross. On the cross hung the carved effigy of a man, only a meter or so in height, with his arms outstretched and nailed to the cross's arms. Sangh knelt and made the sign of the cross, or tried to. The crowd murmured, perhaps impressed by his piety, but of course not surprised by it. *Doesn't everyone worship our Lord, even, or especially, those about to die?*

Sangh's attendants tied him to the stake, his hands fastened to a cross piece at waist height, facing the tribal dignitaries. *At least I'm not going to duplicate the way our Lords were sacrificed. That sort of sacrilege would be unpublishable; it would never get the Dhimprimatur.* The chief, the priest, and Headman, stood or sat twenty meters from Sangh, in

Drumming had started, from somewhere behind Sangh. The clapping

had become rhythmic, and the shouting resolved into a monosyllabic chant:

*Why! Pry!*

*Stan! Groun!*

*Free! Die! Glock!*

A lane opened in front of Sangh between rows of clapping ‘Glaak’. When the drumming stopped, the oldest ‘Glaak’ Sangh had yet encountered, although he might only be in his fifties, stood twenty meters away from Sangh and his cross, at the other end of the lane. The drumming began again, faintly. Something was being passed toward the old guy, from boy to youth to man. Women didn’t seem to be part of this ceremony. The object lay on a cloth stretched across a ring of rusty iron. The cloth had once been white. The object looked like a handgun, a projectile weapon. Sure enough, Priest (as Sangh had labeled him) picked it up and pointed it at Sangh.

The drumming got louder, the chant began again:

*Why! Pry!*

*Stan! Groun!*

*Free! Die! Glock!*

Sangh muttered a prayer, “Holy Mary, Holy Silvia, mothers of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” A boy, perhaps seven years

old, notched an arrow and pulled it back. The drumming ceased, the crowd shouted “Bang!”, and the boy released. The arrow was low, but its wobbly flight ended in Sangh’s shin, where it stuck. It hurt like hell, but Sangh did not cry out. *Bang? Really?* Then he realized that the Glaak had run out of ammunition, probably a thousand years ago. Or perhaps the gun had jammed and they had forgotten how to fix it.

Next up was a youth of perhaps 13 years. One could imagine the pagan manhood rituals he was enduring or had endured. Perhaps killing a prisoner with an arrow was one of them. In any case, his aim was sure to be a lot better. The priest raised the gun again. The crowd chanted,

*Why! Pry!*

*Stan! Groun!*

*Free! Die! Glock!*

The priest raised the gun again. The drums raged, the crowd shouted, “Bang!” again, and an arrow, too fast to track, wound up in Sangh’s right armpit. Or that’s where the pain was, and there was a lot of it. Blood, too, but Sangh had forgotten whether an artery was likely to be compromised.

He prayed out loud now, “Lord BeJesus Cristh, have mercy on me, a sinner! Deliver me from despair, and grant me hope of Your forgiveness and eternal life in Your presence.” Hope for Heaven was the only hope left to



him when he saw Headman notch an arrow. *This asshole isn't going to miss.*

Before the priest could once again raise the gun, there came a sound that was so incongruous here in the Lost World that for a moment Sangh mistook it for the heavens opening up. It was the scream of a jet aircraft, getting closer. Within a second, the howling of its engines filled the village, drowning out the screams of the women and children.

*Oh, come on, Sheessay! Are you really going to do a deus ex machina on me? At the last possible moment?*

The jet's roar faded as it finished a reconnaissance pass. Everyone had fled, hiding Allah knew where; everyone but Headman, Priest, and Chief. Headman raised the bow again. Perhaps he thought the DAE had just dropped in for a peek and were gone, and he could finally avenge the embarrassment Sangh had inflicted by escaping. But the priest hadn't "fired" the gun, and the chief was not interested in sacrificing a valuable prisoner for the sake of repolishing the shine on one tribesman's honor, even if that tribesman was the number-two man in the tribe. He stood up, knocked the bow out of Headman's hands, and said a few angry words. Sangh couldn't make them out, because the jet was making a second pass, pounding the village with noise.

This time, rather than pass overhead, it accelerated sharply upward,

until it was vertical. This was a recipe for stalling, and it looked like the pilot was determined to kill himself and all on board, but control thrusters on the wings and vertical stabilizers came to life, and the plane reached an equilibrium where it was balanced on the exhaust coming out of main engine, at the rear of the fuselage. Suddenly it looked like a rocket landing the way they do in cartoons, a liftoff in reverse. It descended rapidly from several hundred meters up, slowing as it neared the ground.

It could have set half the village on fire, but the pilot, if the thing had a pilot, had sensibly aimed for a cleared space on the outskirts of town, and burned nothing but the garbage dump. It was awe-inspiring even for Sangh to watch the jet descend. He could not see the landing gear deploy, but the aircraft's top towered over the huts, and pointed into the sky even after the noise died.

Now the three tribal leaders marched toward the airplane, followed at a distance by their people, who straggled out of their hiding places. Only Sangh remained in the square, tied to the stupid cross. He felt faint from frustration, loss of blood, and anticipation that he would once again have to thank Šheessay for rescuing him. He rocked forward and backward, hoping to make the cross come unglued, but all he succeeded in doing was making it fall slowly forward until he was lying on his face. At least it dislodged the

arrow from his leg, at the cost of some ripping and more blood.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually he heard footsteps, and a group of people surrounded him, either Glaak come to take him to the aircraft, or Šheessay come to set him free. What he didn't expect was the sound of Vhatta Limhoon's voice. "Why, it's not Saint Sebhasschn, it's Lieutenant Fharha. I would never have pictured you vacationing up here in the sunny North. Where are the best hotels?"



## Chapter 11

# Prisoner

Sangh's exit from the village square was less ceremonious than his arrival. A couple of Prezghod Marines cut him off the cross and dragged him to Limhoon's jet plane, with Vhatta Limhoon leading the procession. His priestly robes rested lightly on his shoulders, tucked casually behind the sidearm on his right hip. This was a mostly ceremonial projectile weapon, but unlike the *Glock's* pistol, it worked.

Babraba Ghalfe and two marines covered, their energy weapons drawn, armed, and lit. Except for Headman and Chief, the villagers were in hiding. Those two had laid down their arms, and followed the Prezghodlings at a safe distance.

The rocket exhaust had made a mess, blowing burning trash and dust

everywhere. The marines lay Sangh near the exit ladder. Šheessay Dezeenawvee was descending, carrying a medikit. She seemed to have rebounded from the breakup with the alien ambassador.

“Sangh honey,” she said, going to work quickly on his wounds. “I had to help him. There was no other way you were going to be rescued. This is going to hurt for a minute.”

“How did you alert him? Ow.” She had worked the arrow out of his armpit.

“I didn’t. I alerted the *Direcção*, but *he* showed up. Maybe North American Branch were pissed off at my intrusion on their turf, and thought this would be appropriate payback. There, you’re not going to bleed to death.” She set to work on his leg without pausing. Her hands shuttled this way and that too quickly for Sangh to follow, without ever smashing into him.

Sangh had to hand it to Chief and Headman; they were not cowering with their wives and children. Perhaps they had bargained with the gods from the South before. They were awed by the aircraft, though. *Well, who isn’t?* The dust was settling, and through luck or skill, the pilot had put the jet upwind from the dump, from which smoke still unfurled. You could inhale without choking.

Headman and Chief were conferring in whispers. Their estimate of the

ransom they might get for Sangh must have gone up considerably, but Vhatta Limhoon was an unknown. He might not know or care what the going rate was for recaptured traitors.

Limhoon could not stay still for long. “They wouldn’t tell me where you were, Fharha,” he said, “unless I agreed to bargain the guys who captured you down to the usual ransom for major fugitives, 10 crossbow bolts and some number of blankets. I’d like to get that over with. So tell that bitch to stop babying you and help me talk to these savages.”

Šheessay was just about finished anyway. She stood and explained to Chief and Headman who Vhatta Limhoon was, presumably in perfect *Glockish*, then repeated what she had said in Glish for Limhoon. She knew the names of *Glock* leaders. Chief was called Vindis’l and Headman Lugosi.

Vindis’l and Lugosi knelt on the ground before the Vhatta and pressed their foreheads to the soil. Limhoon basked in this adulation for two seconds before waving his hand and saying, “Okay, okay, enough.”

Šheessay asked them to stand up, Sangh presumed, because they did, their knees and faces now streaked with soot. For a second he wondered, *Why didn’t Limhoon bring a ‘Seckie’ to translate? Surely they’d be more trustworthy than Šheessay.* But then Sangh remembered that he had not included anything about Avatars of the Mind in his reports. Limhoon thought

Šheessay was merely a ‘Seckie’ with a taste for ‘Molyee’ men.

At first Vindis’l pretended that he didn’t need any recompense for his service in taking care of the prisoner for his good friends in *América do Sul*. It was enough to claim the friendship the august Limhoon, whose fame had spread all over the savanna. The vhatta’s reply was that he doubted Chief had really heard of him, but in any case he wasn’t *that* generous. He would offer ten blankets from South ‘Amerika’, very light and very warm, last long time. (He was unconsciously speaking a pidgin picked up from old movies about dealings with savages. Presumably Šheessay was translating back into fluent *Glock*.) He would also offer five crossbow bolts, top of the line. Vindis’l’s eyes gave away his greed at hearing of this bounty.

The marines had wrestled a crate of trade goods down the ladder somehow, and one of them held up each item as Limhoon described it. Was it really wise to let the natives have crossbows and bolts? A crossbow couldn’t fire many bolts per minute, but each shot could be deadly. A well-trained corps of crossbow men, with the discipline to stagger the shooters and reloaders, might be a serious threat to DAE stations with only a few small guns for defense. Knowing the South as well as he had come to, Sangh was sure they had calculated how many bolts could be in circulation without upsetting the balance of power or threatening their hegemony. The natives lacked the met-



allurgical skills to make even a primitive bolt, let alone the high-tech version Vhatta Limhoon was dealing. So in principle the South could control the supply. But crossbow ammunition was not necessarily destroyed by being used. It was a gift that would give many years of satisfaction.

After these treasures, Vhatta Limhoon's proposal was completed by a crate containing miscellaneous medications ("Cure cough, fever, ache in head"), some perfumes ("Keep woman happy"), some bolts of cloth ("Make pretty clothes, warm too"), and so forth, each dutifully displayed by the marine standing next to the crate.

Vindis'l thanked Vhatta Limhoon profusely, and said he was not worthy. But he knew for a fact that the *Táqui-Táqui* had just obtained *twenty* crossbow bolts from an unknown source; the *Gloque* were in danger of being wiped out. And on a personal note, he needed one of those bright, picture-shifting things with pictures of horses to give his wife as an anniversary present.

The ability to distinguish twenty from five or ten was a skill Sangh was impressed that the *Glock* had. Then again, it was two pairs of hands versus one hand or one pair. Not too hard to count a pile and see which it was.

Vhatta Limhoon was rapidly getting bored. "Specialist OhKenzi, I'm pretty sure there's a DPF in that crate," he said impatiently.

"Sir, no, I'm afraid we didn't bring anything like that."

“Tell him we’ll bring one next time,” Limhoon said to Šheessay.

Apparently Vindis’l had thought the magic picture was a long shot, because he was satisfied with Limhoon’s empty promise. The issue of crossbow bolts was more troublesome. Vhatta Limhoon said, “I consider five a very generous offer. I had to work hard to clear it through the bureaucracy. They’ll give me hell if I exceed it on my own.”

Sangh wondered how Šheessay translated “bureaucracy.”

Finally Vhatta Limhoon said he would go as high as 10 crossbow bolts, but he would have to take back 3 blankets. That was his final offer. He was making enough trouble for himself as it was.

The choice between blankets and ammunition was not one Vindis’l would agonize over. Sangh reckoned that for him combat beat comfort any day of the week, any time of day. The chief of the *Glock* and the chief of the Provisional Government of *Terra* shook hands on their deal. Lugosi handed back 3 blankets, and when a marine came down the ladder with a box of 5 crossbow bolts, Lugosi insisted on putting them into the crate himself. *He just wanted to hold that box, even for a second. Perhaps we’re witnessing the equivalent of a delivery of gold bars to the central bank in civilized societies. I’d want to hold one for a second.* He ordered some underlings to nail the crate shut and take it somewhere, presumably in the village.

“And now,” said Limhoon, “if you will excuse us, we have an internal matter to discuss.” He punctuated this announcement by shooting his weapon into the air, which not unreasonably terrified the *Glock*.

The two guys with the crate dropped it and ran for cover. Vindis’l and Lugosi barely flinched. They were nothing if not fearless under pressure. When Vhatta Limhoon motioned for them to leave they bowed deeply, but straightend and walked without hurry toward the village.

During all this, Šheessay rushed forward and hugged Sangh. “This is goodbye, darling,” she said. “If you want to survive, get up that ladder right now, quick as you can.” The feel of her body in his arms was a shock. He had renounced the very idea of ever feeling her again, and her shape reawakened so many feelings, at the same time as her words told him to put them away again. He pulled back, and without letting go, looked into her eyes in puzzlement. She practically threw him in the direction of the ladder, and as if in a trance he started up.

He stopped and looked back after a step, just in time to see Babraba shoot Šheessay with the laywitzer. It cut her in two, her torso vaporizing. Each leg, surmounted by a twist of struts and cables connected to nothing, toppled over, and her head came to rest just at the edge of the dump. Lt. Ghalfe took aim again and blew the head and a good chunk of trash into

tiny pieces. There was no blood, as if the blasts had cauterized every tissue in sight. But of course, you wouldn't expect blood. He didn't expect to see little cubes at the ragged edges of his former lover either, but that's what her remains looked like: as though the laywitzer had diced her above the thighs then vaporized most of the cubes.

"There's one less problem," said Vhatta Limhoon. "I understand you and that mechanical cunt had a falling out, so your heart is perhaps not broken by seeing it busted up."

*Something is broken*, he thought. He kept trudging up the ladder, about 15 steps in all. At the top there was a narrow ledge. He realized it was actually part of the air intake for the massive engine. He looked out. He could see savanna for miles, ending at the mountains that had defeated him. The village was near the only stream in sight, at least the only one with water.

He turned and looked into the interior of the jet. It was too dark to see much at first, but he felt his way in. Only when he was completely there did he realize he had been expecting Limhoon to shoot him, too.

Limhoon was next through the door. Limhoon thought he was coveting his magnificent aircraft. He bounded up the ladder and practically shoved Sangh into the ship. "Be nice and we'll get you one, Lt. Fharha," he said with

clumsy sarcasm, as Sangh crashed into one of the marines, who recovered and slipped handcuffs around Sangh's wrists. Neither he nor Sangh commented.

The mystery about the floor was resolved. Verticality was the jet's natural state. There were three levels, each with two seats, or crash couches, all facing up. Between each pair of seats was a tiny deck with barely enough room for two people to stand, after accounting for the spiral staircase that drilled through each deck. The top level held the seats for the pilot and copilot, where the spiral ended. The other four seats were for Ghalfe, Šheessay, and the two marines. Sangh got what he supposed might be Šheessay's seat; she no longer had any use for it. *And by the way, Šheessay was not an "it"; the worse you could call her was a member of a "they," a stupid "they" subject to groupthink and mediocrity like all committees.*

Piloting the aircraft was none other than Vhatta Willem Limhoon. No copilot necessary; that seat stayed empty. Who could tread the same stage as he? "I haven't flown in years, but this thing could really get me back into it. It is fun with a capital Phook You," he said. "Of course, it practically flies itself, like everything else on this damned planet. It's too bad we didn't get to test the weapon systems on this thing.

"All that stuff about there being no Tayhan military is not *entirely* true. If you rattle the cages at the airport long enough, cool items like this sud-

denly come to light. Not a whole air force, though. I've got my own 'Seckie' police force out now looking for a few hundred more of these parked somewhere. These babies're known by some 'Tayhanu' acronym meaning 'vertical takeoff/landing.' Our acronym is 'vheesol'."

He had been fiddling with knobs, and he now announced, "I hope you're strapped in, ladies and gentlemen, because we are taking off!"

He hit some buttons and the thrusters all roared. The water flowing below the 'vheetol' became steam, and as more water kept flowing in, the steam cloud billowed high enough to obscure the forward window and cast the interior into gloom.. The 'vheetol' shrugged all this off, and after another fraction of a second lifted off, leaving the steam cloud behind and rising vertically into the air. It relied on thrust alone to gain altitude and speed, which it did, so rapidly that the passengers and pilot were all pressed deep into their crash cushions. The blood was pooling at the back of Sangh's skull, which made him feel like a lobotomy was in progress. When the rocket was going fast enough high enough to turn to level flight, it heeled over and took off toward the southeast. It was good that this process did not actually require much intervention from the pilot, because the control problem was probably beyond even an ace with undisturbed cranial blood flow.

The aircraft got amazing energy density out of whatever it used for fuel,

although Sangh supposed much of the rocket's volume was fuel tank. It flew like a fighter, and fighters usually had a short range. The rocket was above the clouds, but in a quite short time, perhaps 10 minutes, it began a rapid descent. There were no windows or vidscreens for anyone except the pilot, but the only place they could possibly be landing was 'Medeyeen'; unless they were just strafing somebody for practice. 'Medeyeen': gateway to South 'Amerika' and 10-hour gas station. The plane landed here in the same improbable vertical way it had in *Wahak*. Given the way the decks were arranged, that was probably the only way it could land. As a toy, it had a high cost of ownership.

"If anybody needs to go to the bathroom, now is the time," announced Vhatta Limhoon, laughing. "Ha ha — just kidding. No bathroom until we reach the PSOG. The good news is that once we get gassed up this thing will have us there in no time." Sangh supposed "PSOG" stood for Provisional Seat Of Government; he knew his Prezghod acronyms.

To say the vhatta was in a good mood was a serious understatement. It was most uncharacteristic of him to be so informal, so gabby, and so vulgar, especially in the presence of enlisted men. Ghalfe and the marines did not know what to make of him, and seemed to be waiting for him to address them by rank and name; until then they would pretend they were absent. It felt to

Sangh as if all of Vhatta Limhoon's comments were addressed to him, who was no longer really a Lieutenant (JG), but a civilian and traitor, stripped of his commission. Was Mr. Limhoon expecting a reply? He couldn't summon the interest. Watching Limhoon order his former girlfriend blown to bits in front of his eyes had not been easy and was not going to be forgivable, even if at some level Sangh realized perfectly well that most of Sheessay's soul lived on in a network of computers somewhere. She might well take responsibility for avenging her own death.

Vhatta Limhoon was a high-status traveler, and it took only about 30 mil-lidays to get refueled, safety-checked, and cleared for takeoff. The 'vheetol' blasted into the air again, and this time just kept climbing, not entirely vertical, but using the thrust as much as the lift from the air to gain altitude. Then the engine cut out.

"Attention passengers," announced Limhoon, "I'm sorry there's no windows on this craft, so you could see just how close to space we are and how fast we're traveling. We're essentially flying ballistically, until the landing sequence begins and we turn around and decelerate.

"I haven't had this much fun in ages," he sighed. "With a laywitzer-mounted on the front of this thing I could do a lot of damage."

Actually, it wasn't clear how much control a human pilot exerted over the



‘vheetol’. In delicate situations such as takeoff, landing, and the ballistics in between, the rocket plane presumably wouldn’t let a person anywhere near the controls. It had at least a rudimentary desire for continued intact existence. What about in combat? Would Limhoon get his chance to handle the joystick, or were there automated routines for chasing, shooting, and evading that could outperform him? As usual, the capacity of the ‘Tayhans’ to fight a war was a mystery, and an increasingly scary one.

After the best part of an hour of silence from the engine, it rumbled into life, causing weird acceleration forces to grip the crew. Presumably this was the jet turning around and preparing for deceleration. Except it must have some source of oxidizer besides air for times like these when it was above most of the atmosphere. At lower altitudes, when the main engine had some serious air to chew on, the crew was once again pressed deep into their cushions, until the ‘vheetol’ had slowed to landing speeds. When it cut out, they were once again perched vertically somewhere.

Unsurprisingly, they were in the *São Paulo* airport, the point he kept coming back to. His escape attempt had proved utterly futile. It might be called progress to go from being a prisoner of the *Glock* to being a prisoner of the Prezghod Navy, but the point was debatable.

It was dark and rainy in *São Paulo*. The procession down the ladder was

unusual in that everyone on the rocket plane was a *Molhe*. This was quickly remedied when a committee from the Provisional Government came out to welcome *Governador* Limhoon. They were relieved that he had not killed himself piloting a rocket he knew nothing about. *I'll bet they're relieved*, thought Sangh. *If the "provisional government" collapses these guys are going to be strung up from the nearest tree.* They tussled for the honor of putting an umbrella over Limhoon's head. There was one 'Seckie' in this group, and it was indeed Zhayk, there to translate, call cabs, and otherwise be useful. They glanced at each other and then looked away, exchanging no words.

Two more marines were added to Sangh's guard detail. Vhatta Limhoon gave precise instructions as to how to dispose of him, but didn't bother coming over to gloat again in person. He had much bigger worlds to conquer. Little blue cars came to take the officials back to the Presidential Palace. Sangh got his own train of three cars. He too was headed back to the P.P. Vhatta Limhoon was following the time-honored military maxim to avoid dispersing one's forces over too wide an area. With his resources stretched so thin, he was putting everyone in the appropriate wing of the building.

All the blue cars arrived in the plaza in front of the Palace at the same time. Sangh was led out of his car in handcuffs. Babraba Ghalfe paused

for a few seconds, watching “Governor” Limhoon being greeted by his new flunkies. The press, behind a colored cord, called out questions. Limhoon got out of the lead car and danced a little jig before shaking some hands and trotting up the steps of the entryway. Camera flashes went off. He stepped in front of a microphone halfway up. Zhayk translated. “Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press, I wish to read a brief announcement. I will take no questions afterward, because of the demands of the work of government.

“Earlier today, forces of the Provisional Government of Tayha tracked down the traitors Šheessay DZeenov and Sangh Fharha. Mr. Fharha was captured and will be made to stand trial or court-martial for his crimes. Unfortunately, Ms. DZeenov was killed resisting arrest. Let these events show to anyone who would dare subvert our government that we will be relentless in defending the sovereignty of the people of this planet. Thank you.”

“Governor Limhoon, Governor Limhoon,” all the reporters seemed to call out. “No questions,” repeated Limhoon, and he turned and fairly sprinted up the stairs. Camera flashes had gone off throughout his remarks, and kept flashing as he dashed upward.

While they had been distracted, a ‘Seckie’ had met Babraba. He was apparently the guide to the Palace, because he led them to the left, to a less

obtrusive door under the magnificent entryway. Sangh decided they must surely be on a lower floor of the Palace; he recognized the decor. The ‘Seckie’ (who was never introduced) and Babraba took Sangh to a windowless office. His cuffs were removed and he was thrown into the room. Sangh assumed this must be one of a block of cells for high-value prisoners, presumably including President Traverse.

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There was only one possible reason for Vhatta Limhoon’s manic mood. The Fleet must be arriving within the next day or so. Standard naval tactics demanded that a squadron of ships be widely dispersed until the moment chosen for them to arrive at the battlezone. Then they would suddenly show up from all corners of the sky, hitting key points of the enemy’s defenses with overwhelming force. Most of the first ships to arrive would be traveling at high speed, and would have time to get off some shots that would seem to come out of nowhere, but these ships would travel through the battle zone so quickly that they would not be able to come back around and rejoin the battle for hours or days, by which time the battle could be over. The later ships to arrive would be traveling slower, and over successive waves the distribution of speeds would shift down, as enemy forces capable of firing back were degraded. By the fourth or fifth wave, the ships would be timed to come to

a stop in the battlezone, or, more accurately, begin to weave a complicated pattern through it, maintaining sustained fire while avoiding becoming a target themselves of fire from surviving enemy units. Or they would attempt a landing or whatever maneuver was appropriate to the mission and the situation.

Limhoon had been one of the architects of these tactics, and there was no question that this was the way the battle would play out. The ships were converging right now. They might be appearing on *Terrano* radars, first as isolated blips, then as a worrisome pattern. But by the time the pattern was seen, it would be too late to do anything but try to hit a ship moving faster than any missile that could be aimed at it. This first phase would be fought with high-powered Q-guns, which concentrated an intense ball of coherent electrons and positrons that decohered — came unglued — when they came into contact with ordinary matter, releasing an enormous amount of energy in a very short time.

In the current tactical situation, the last wave of ships would be the ones to try to achieve landings, presumably throughout the Southern Hemisphere, in all the major cities. These cities would have suffered through strategic laywitzers and tactical nuclear weapons, and now came battalions of occupying forces, due to hit *São Paulo*, *Johannisberg*, *Benguela*, *Djakart*, *Pert*, *Sidney*,

.... After that, the Prezghodling occupiers would no longer be stretched so thin. Who would take charge? Byðhe-Admiral Ohmahan commanded the Contact Fleet, but Vhatta Limhoon, the “governor,” was essentially the President of the Provisional Government of Erth.

Suppose the Prezghod Navy won a smashing victory, and succeeded in occupying *Terra*, the first jewel in the Poph’s crown as leader of the Prezghod Empire, or the Galactic Pophacy. The ‘Seckies’ would go along because they liked all people, even occupation forces. The ‘Molyee’s would go along, in the South because all the fight had been bred out of them, and in the North because they were savages. (How long would the plague tale keep the Prezghodlings out of the North?) The only ones who would not necessarily go along were the Avatars, the committee of eccentrics who were what was left of the Mind. Their reputation was a befuddling set of contradictory myths. They might be led by an outlier *Molhe* like Laquinta Johnson to be effective. Together they would ensure that the underground economy of *Terra* would not be dismantled or taken over by the Prezghodlings, and, what was even more vital, that the vast computer systems of *Terra* would stay mostly intact. Then the Avatars would build a resistance movement, base not on violence, but seduction.

And they would avoid the mistakes the secularists made before. Never

mind tolerance. If the Poph wanted to draft people into his or her armed forces, fine. If every school had to teach Chustlicism, fine. *Their* bottom line would be the rich luxuries they had to offer, which people would refuse to give up. There were so many helpful pieces of software, which together were the glue that held modern culture together, on a hardware substrate of networked computers. Could the network be destroyed or controlled? This was beyond Sangh's competence, as events of the last week had shown again and again. But he was skeptical that it could be, without making the planet ungovernable. Even more enticing were the genetic enhancements the 'Tayhan's had to offer. How could the Prezghodlings resist life extension when their subjects lived more than twice as long as they did? What would the enhancements be coupled with this time? Once the lifestyles of 'Tayha' were incorporated into one part of the Empire, could they block the Mind from infecting Prezghod with them?

He could warn the Contact Fleet that this planet was dangerously seductive and that the budding Prezghod Empire should find a star system that was more straightforward to conquer. But why would they listen to a deserter of dubious trustworthiness who might still be working for the enemy? He had better focus on his troubles and hope for the best, which was that the invasion succeed and a way be found to bring the South and North

back together and allow normal humans to take over again; and that the new rulers accept the discipline offered by the Pophacy as the price for peace.

The offices-become-jail-cells had been hardened in various ways, and, of course, the locks were now on the outside. Slots had been cut in some of the doors, including Sangh's, so that meal trays could be pushed through while leaving the doors locked. Most of the furniture had been removed. Chairs had been replaced by two cots, but for some reason a desk missing all its drawers had been left in the corner. Sangh lay on one of the cots. On the other one, a man slept.

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Sangh's cellmate was named Fella Smiggle. The name sounded familiar, but Sangh had completely forgotten where he had met Fella before. He was a little gray-skinned man with few hairs on his head, and those gray and combed over the top of his gray skull.

"I interpreted for *LaQuinta Johnson* last Sunday. I guess you have had a busy week," said Fella.

Yes, Sangh allowed, it had been a busy week.

"What about you, what are your duties when not entertaining aliens?" he asked.



“I arrange *LaQuinta*’s schedule, mainly, and do event planning when she has to make an appearance somewhere. She travels to foreign countries a lot. She’s actually in *Austrália* right now, and has set up the Free Government of *Terra* in opposition to the scoundrels here.”

“So I heard. What’s her title, Acting President?”

“Yeah, that’s right!” said Fella. “Between you and me, I think she’d make a better president than that yokel she’s married to.”

“I won’t argue the point,” said Sangh. “So, if she’s there, what are you doing here?”

“I was captured during the coup on *quarta-feira*. But, between you and me,” he whispered, “I was *meant* to be captured. Most of the people Limhoon has imprisoned are just as unimportant as I am, but this way he thinks he might have actually bagged at least one really interesting person. I think the biggest fish he has, besides the president, is the minister of agriculture.”

“Are you prepared to be tortured?” said Sangh.

“I hope so. I don’t know anything worth torturing me for, but assuming they don’t know that, they may torture me anyway. I will just have to endure it.”

Sangh was skeptical. “Is it really possible to torture one of you guys?”

“I assume by ‘you guys’ you mean government employees. Ha-ha. No, I

actually enjoy working for the government. Until I get thrown in jail. Ha-ha. Seriously, I knew what you meant, and you're right, *Seques* can consciously disregard pain from a body area when we're sure the pain is a message that was already received and dealt with. But all the torturers have to do is . . . ."

But Sangh had stopped listening. He said, "I've never been tortured either. I'm told it's much worse than you can imagine, which my imagination has taken as a challenge. Maybe we won't have to be tortured. There's a battle coming, and the good guys might actually win it." A jolt of shame shot through him as he realized he had endorsed the wrong side. He didn't want either side to win; he just wanted Vhatta Limhoon somehow to lose.

"Is that what's going on? There's a strange mood going around and even in here I can feel it. The jailers sounded almost giddy the last time they shoved some food in here."

"For you?"

"Yes. Do you want some of it? I think it's still good."

"They don't realize you need to be recharged?"

"They haven't turned off the power in here, so so far I'm good. Whatever system they've set up to keep the prisoners fed does not recognize that over half their prisoners are *Seques*. They'll think they have a hunger strike on their hands. They really are out of touch, aren't they? Here, try this

sandwich.”

“You have no idea. I know ten times more than these guys, and I’m still surprised every day by what happens here. As the average *Terrano* might be surprised on another planet, to be fair.

“Anyway,” said Sangh through a mouthful of a very good, if cold, hamburger, “judging by Limhoon’s mood, the Prezghod Fleet is getting here in the next 12 hours or so. By tomorrow you’ll either be looking forward to a long bad time, or you’ll probably be out of here.”

“Really? The next 12 hours? The Free Government will be glad to hear that.”

“Well, they won’t hear it from me.”

“They already did,” said Fella. “You didn’t realize I was actually still connected to the *Terranet*, I guess.”

“You are? Oh, Lord,” said Sangh. He set his sandwich down and put his head between his hands.

“The Limhoon government is still trying to figure out how to turn the *Terranet* off. Between you and me, they’re not getting much help from the local communications specialists.”

“Phook you and the tin can that fathered you!” said Sangh, jumping up and throwing the hamburger at Smiggle. “I’m here because Limhoon thinks

I'm a traitor. But I'm not, at least not until now."

"I'll testify that you didn't know what you were doing," said Fella, brushing some crumbs from his shoulder.

"I'd just as soon not talk any more," said Sangh.

## Chapter 12

# Surprise

“*Cross* to *LC1*, do you read me?”

“Sangh?”

“Tralf? They’re letting you fly *LC1*?”

“Out of band, right? Re— reverberations! And why isn’t your ass in the brig?”

“We’re short-handed until you get back safe and sound. Any time you’re ready to go, go. We’ll rendezvous once you’re in orbit. I’ll cheerfully go back to the brig.”

“Roger, I’ll lock you up myself.” There was a pause.

“Okay, we’re ready to go. I’ll just push the start button to begin the wash cycle. Lord, a chimpanzee could fly this thing, it’s got so many pre-

sets.” Actually, Tralf was a pretty good pilot. “Beginning launch sequence.” Plainly, the former occupants of Firebase Limhoon had been itching to leave Earth behind. They had their luggage stowed and their seatbelts fastened. “Ignition, . . . , liftoff, . . . ”

“*LC1*, we’ve got you on radar. Tracking you as right on track.”

“Look, Mom, I can fly!”

After a minute of silence while Tralf concentrated on his course, Sangh spoke, “*LC1*, we’re seeing a slight deviation.” He lost hope in an instant, but the exchange went on.

“*Cross*, yeah, we’re experiencing some wobble. Control system is having trouble staying on course. Shit. Gotta switch to manual.”

“*LC1*, Tralf, hang in there! Correct pitch +3 degrees, yaw -5 degrees.”

“Copy that, shifting to pilot control. Shift complete. Easing main thruster left 5, up 3. Damn! Panel says thruster is moving, but I can’t feel a change.”

“Roger, *LC1*, completely off track now.”

“Thruster controls must be unresponsive. Opening up all wing thrusters on right side, firing front thruster. I can feel *that*! She’s starting to respond.”

Another tense 40 seconds passed.

“*LC1*, you can’t burn through the auxiliary-thruster fuel at that rate for

the time you need. Suggest returning to ground. Possible? Let us know immediately.”

“*Cross*, not possible with remaining fuel without main thruster. It’s over. We’ve been sabotaged, just like the attack fleet. Will conserve fuel to manage tumbling when we re-enter atmosphere, but not clear we’ll have enough control.”

“Roger, *LC1*. Tralf, . . . . Have you made an Act of Contrition?”

“Roger, *Cross*, no, Sangh, but thanks for the tip. Really. You’ve been a good friend, sometimes under nucky circumstances.”

“Roger, Tralf, so have you.”

He expected another word from Tralf, but he was gone, or had decided to spent his last seconds fighting for his ship and his passengers’ lives. But against what? Like Tralf had said, the same infection or possession that had destroyed the Contact Fleet. About which they knew nothing.

*All I know is that this is a message from the Terranos: “We could have destroyed both ships; we spared LC2 for our own reasons.”*

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Sangh had tried repeatedly to warn Vhatta Limhoon that the Erthlings had more defensive resources than he realized. Powers had warned him the day of their landing that *Terra* were not as defenseless as Nilson Matsushima

made them look. The story of the Second Nuclear War showed what they could do clearly enough. But Vhatta Limhoon, for all his imagination and boldness when thinking about offensive operations, was unwilling to entertain the idea that he might not understand the defense.

Months before, when Sangh and Tralf first heard they were to be assigned to Limhoon's ship, Tralf had found a short collection of Vhatta Limhoon's lectures during a stint at the Naval Post-Graduate School. Somewhere Limhoon had written, "A commander's nerves will never recover once they start thinking up ways they could fail to understand the tactical situation," he had said at the Academy. "The defense can start with ten times more knowledge about the situation than the offense, but that advantage won't survive the first hour of battle, when the offense scrambles the situation up."

But by noon on Monday, October 19, even Limhoon would have had to admit he was whipped. The Contact Fleet had been dispersed at random into an empty void centered on planet Erth, except for the part that lay in fragments on the surface. Limhoon had two landing craft, *Cross LC1* at Firebase Limhoon and *Cross LC2* at the Presidential Palace. Unlike the "pod" Sangh and Tralf had landed in, *LC1* and *LC2* had enough fuel to take off again and return to orbit. For tactical reasons known only to Limhoon



and Dhluzio, *LC2* took off from the Presidential Palace first, carrying Vhatta Limhoon and his prize prisoner, Sangh Fharha. *LC1* was ordered to wait.

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The disaster known afterword as the Battle of *Terra* happened on the morning of Monday, October 19, six days after Limhoon had occupied the Presidential Palace and arrested the President. Sangh had had a lot to worry about Sunday night, but he slept soundly anyway, either because he had a bed for the first time since *Manaus*, or because his worries were so overwhelming that sleep was the only way to escape them.

He awoke the next morning before dawn. Fella Smiggle was poking him, and saying, redundantly, “Wake up! Wake up!”

“Why?”

“It’s started. There’s been a huge explosion in *Austrália*, and smaller ones near various cities.”

“God, did Lakeenta’s government survive?” said Sangh.

“Oh, sure, the explosion hit somewhere in the *Outback*. Probably several sheep and a few unlucky people were killed.”

“They didn’t hit Sidney?” asked Sangh incredulously.

“Nowhere near.”

The first wave had passed *Terra* traveling too fast to track. They were now far away, and would be decelerating like mad.

“Is that it?” said Smiggle. “Aren’t they trying to land?”

“My lips are sealed,” said Sangh. Clichés were all Fella would get from him from now on.

A P-hour later the sun was rising. Two portions of gruel on a tray were shoved through the door. Neither of the occupants of the cell were interested. Sangh knew that the second wave was scheduled to appear right about now, still moving fast, or at least that was the plan. They might hit the Presidential Palace by accident, or the ‘Tayhan’s might attack it on purpose. Sangh huddled under the desk in the corner.

“Find some shelter, Fella,” he said. “If the *Terranos* have any retaliatory capacity at all, this building is likely to be a target. I wish we were in the basement.”

“I wish we could look out the window. If spaceships are going to appear in the sky, I’d like to see them in person, instead of having to make do with video streams. I wish I could show them to you.”

“I’ll pretend I’m listening to the radio, like the old days. Not the baseball game, but the attack on *Terra*, which seems to be tied in the second inning.

“We haven’t had radios on this planet since long before I was built. For

that matter, we haven't had baseball."

"I bet they still play it up north, I mean in *América do Norte*." They had wandered from the topic, which was protecting Fella from radiation.

"Seriously, you're risking frying your eyes, and that's just in the first few microseconds. Get under here with me!"

"Naw, don't worry about it," said Fella. "With all due respect, a few planks aren't going to make much difference. And if they actually do in spite of my skepticism, you as a *Molhe* need them more than I do. There's some shelving I can put on the desk that will help block a few more gamma rays."

"Sure you don't want to join me? You don't look that tough, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Not at all. But I can be backed up, and *Molhes* can't."

"'Backed up'?"

"Yes, the data stored inside a *Seque* is actually just like the data stored in any other computer. You have to copy it to another site for safekeeping, in case of some catastrophic crash. The backups happen automatically, like every day. So if I should be destroyed, my body could actually be rebuilt, and all the data restored, and I could actually resume my life at the point where the backup occurred. It's expensive, but most of the cost is covered

by health insurance . . . .”

“So you’re immortal, in some sense.”

“Not immortal. *Seques* run down. We live about as long as *Molhes* . . . .”

“Sorry to keep interrupting, but can I hazard a guess that the *Lei Básica* requires that?”

“Why, yes. You’re well informed.”

“The anthropology of ‘Seckies’ has been a source of amazement since I got here. But go on. You were saying ‘Seckies’ live about as long as ‘Molyees’.”

“Oh. So that’s about it, actually. If a *Seque* is killed, they can be restored, the thread of their consciousness backtracking a few hours, so they actually lose a day of their lives at most.”

“Because of backups, you’re less afraid of nuclear bombs than I should rationally be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel good about the idea of being incinerated, even if the next day I’d be restarted with no memory of that event. Will the new me really be me? Some *Seques* — not many — have legally given up their right to be restored if destroyed. They believe, I guess, that life has more meaning if it’s fragile. Not for me.”

“I think they’re right,” said Sangh. “But then I’m a ‘Molyee’, and a

Chustlim, and if it's my time to die, then Allāh's will be done. I have hope of reaching Paradise."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Sangh explained, at great length, and Fella listened. Neither had anything better to do while they waited for the Contact Fleet to take its next step.

Time passed. They were still alive. Sangh was getting restless, also cramped. He finally worked his way out from under the desk and stood up. "I guess I'm going to die like a man, on my feet and defiant," he said.

"You may not have to," said Fella. "I've just heard the most incredible news. Two of the attacking ships have actually collided."

Sangh was too stunned to say anything. The chance of such a collision happening were negligible. Even if the navigators on the ships completely ignored each other, they were heading into a fairly big block of space, and arriving at random times traveling at high speeds. The chance of two destroyers (the typical ships used in the second wave) occupying overlapping volumes at the same time were infinitesimal. The Contact Fleet had about 20 destroyers in the second attack wave, not nearly enough to make the odds significantly higher. The problem of collisions with Tayhan satellites or debris was much more significant.

Like the first wave, the second was planned to overshoot the planet, but not traveling as fast. They were to begin deceleration immediately after launching their bombs. After that they went into orbit, if the attack had gone well, and they might have other chances to collide with something. But a collision between two friendly ships on the first pass through the battlespace? Sangh guessed it had never happened, even in war games.

Fella spoke up again: “More collisions. There’s footage of some of the debris from one collision landing in the ocean. Maybe you can catch it later.”

Sangh felt sick. He knew many of the people serving on the destroyers. They were classmates, friends. Some would have died on the initial collision, some of asphyxiation due to multiple hull breaches. Anyone who made it to an escape pod might survive, but only if they were able to use what fuel they had to land on Tayha, or if they went into orbits around Tayha that were not too eccentric.

During Sangh’s morbid meditations, Fella had heard increasingly good news. Usually as sober as his gray hair and skin made him look, suddenly he was practically dancing with joy. “Hurray for our side!” he yelled.

“Shut up!” yelled Sangh. “Think about how many *Molhes* are dying up there. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“I didn’t actually have anything to do with their deaths. Think of all the

*Terranos* who would have died if the assault had gone according to plan.”

It was obvious to Sangh now that the entire attack was doomed. The ships were being controlled by the Mind — or a committee of its fragments —, and had been for some time. The Erthlings were just toying with the Prezghod Navy. They could have destroyed the fleet while it was still far away, but this way the home crowd got to see the destruction live and up close.

That a major rout was underway was obvious to everyone else too. A commotion could be heard out in the hall. The sound of boots thudding into the plush carpeting came through the door; some people running one way, some the other. Was this blind panic or the execution of a backup plan?

What were Limhoon’s options at this point if he wanted to avoid being tried by the Tayhans as a war criminal? He could evacuate, risking being court-martialed for insubordination, falsifying orders, and causing the worst defeat in the history of the Navy. But at least he would be home. Evacuation was difficult, however. The large forces he had built up were evaporating already, Sangh presumed, leaving him with the core force he had landed with, consisting of all the marines that would fit in a light destroyer (subtracting the space taken up by academics, who seemed like pure dead weight at this point). That was no more than 30, Sangh reckoned.

If he were Limhoon, he would just abandon the prisoners. They would all be freed when the Tayhans took their Presidential Palace back. But there were two possible exceptions: President Traverse, and Sangh himself. Traverse could be a useful hostage. Sangh could easily be accused of high treason and might even take some of the blame coming Limhoon's way.

Sure enough, amid all the hullabaloo in the corridors, a squad of five marines came to the door of the cell. Sangh wasn't sure who had been minding the door this morning, but they had decamped. The marines yelled through the door, "We can't find the key."

He yelled back, "Well, *we* haven't got it."

The cell was not exactly maximum-security. The door was solid, but it was attached to its hinges by ordinary pivots. The marines knocked the pivots out and took the door off its hinges, tossing it aside.

The leader of the squad was Lt. Babraba Ghalfe. She was armed only with a pistol, Sangh was glad to see.

"Private Honzaes, cuff him," she said. "Is the other guy a robot?"

"No," said Sangh. "Goodbye, Fella."

He was led at a good clip through the corridors. He couldn't tell which direction they were going; as usual, the Palace disoriented him. He could hear the sounds of gunfire echoing.



“Is there a firefight going on in the P.P.?” he asked.

“No,” said a marine, yanking him to the right at a junction. “No one’s coming to rescue you, douchebag. They’re just using robots for target practice.”

“And one more thing,” said Babraba. “Shut the phook up. I don’t need much of an excuse to shoot you. I’m having a really bad day.”

Sangh had answered “No” when asked if Fella was a robot out of simple annoyance at Babraba’s ignorance of the difference between robots and ‘Seckies’. But now he realized that he might have saved Fella Smiggle’s life with this answer; or the segment of his life since his last backup.

Without Fella’s reports, Sangh was at the mercy of the rumor-diffusion mechanism spreading fear and confusion among the small force of Prezghodlings in the palace. Would the entire Contact Fleet be destroyed? Did Limhoon still have a ship under his command at all? Clearly, he had to proceed as if he did, because he was just screwed if he didn’t; and he had to assume there were enough ships left in the Fleet to get back to the jump point and Expeditionary Fleet Command.

They were abruptly in the entry hall of the Presidential Palace, and then in the light of day at the top of the entryway steps. Sangh was coming up in the world; he got to use the front door this time. He was still in cuffs

though. The sky was overcast.

It was dead quiet, except for the singing of birds. There was nothing moving in the city, holding its breath while the battle was technically still going on.

At the top of the steps stood LtCdr. Kolfhaj and Vhatta Limhoon, looking completely professional and cool, unlike just about everybody else, except perhaps Lt. Ghalfe. Limhoon glanced at Sangh with contempt and went back to talking with Kolfhaj.

Sangh surveyed the silent city. *On any other planet the cities would have been evacuated, methodically or in a panic, if the authorities had suspected Cross was the advance guard of an attack fleet. Here the populace was never informed that there was the slightest danger. On any other planet the people wouldn't have needed to be told anything in order to panic, or to hear the hints dropped by Kolfhaj and Limhoon. Rumors of impending invasion would have spun through the populace, and if a few started running, a herd would have followed them. Troops would have been called in to stop looting.*

Maybe there had been alarums and evacuations while Sangh was up north. *I doubt it, though. They never dreamed we meant them harm, and they assumed — rightly — that the authorities would protect them. No wonder they don't need God; they're children, and they still think "grownups" are*

*gods.*

Landing Craft 2 still stood on the bricks of the *Praça*, looking like an old war monument. If only. Limhoon nodded and without any ado Lt. Ghalfe shoved Sangh down the stairs so that he almost fell. He caught himself and jumped down as quickly as he could to avoid being shoved harder. At the bottom she caught up with him, grabbed his arm, and dragged him over to the left rear door of the landing craft. Unlike Limhoon's vheetol, *LC2* wasn't propped up on its tail. It just looked like an awkward airplane with stubby wings. It had two entrances forward and two aft. Its nose pointed left, toward the city.

Babraba pushed Sangh up the short staircase that led into the landing craft. "Have I offended you somehow, Lieutenant Ghalfe?" he asked. She merely growled, led him to a seat over one of the stubby wings, shoved him down into it, and took the adjacent seat. She fastened Sangh's crash harness, then her own.

It didn't take long for the spacecraft to fill up. Muuke v'n Durhaa got on just after Sangh. Vhatta Limhoon was the last to board. The next-to-last, just ahead of him, was Bewinda Wharbut. She had earned a promotion to Lieutenant for her work rooting out and almost capturing the traitor and terrorist Sangh Fharha. She pretended she didn't see Sangh as she paraded

her extra stripe past him.

V'n Durhaa had at some point apparently switched her billet. The last Sangh had heard, she was part of LtCdr. Kolfhaj's landing party, but she had boarded the Palace landing craft rather than *LC1*, presumably being readied at "Firebase Limhoon." With growing unease, Sangh noticed that Tralf never got on *LC2*. The last time he had seen him, he was alive and well in the Palace. Perhaps he had been shifted to Firebase Limhoon when Muuke had come to the Palace. He did not dare ask anyone; they were looking for an excuse to hit him.

The pilot, a Prezghod Marine, was flicking switches and going through a brief checklist with her copilot. Limhoon shouted, "Take off when you are ready, Çhandrasecker!" and within 10 seconds the vertical thrusters over the wings and tail ignited. They rose into the air, up and up, just as they were supposed to. Everybody on board knew that the spacecraft could suddenly find itself skewering into the bricks of the Plaza. But that didn't happen. At 100 meters up, the tail engine roared to half thrust, then ramped up as the wings gave the plane a steeper and steeper upward path. By the time the engine was at full power, the wing thrusters had cut out and the ship muscled its way out of the atmosphere.

A few minutes later it began the complex orbital waltz aimed at docking

with *Cross*. This maneuver took more time than everything else, but they were all thanking Allāh they had made it this far, so they waited patiently. There was one exception: Vhatta Limhoon, who bounded up from his seat as soon as they were docked, pushed off and zoomed to the nearest door.

“Let’s go, let’s go. I need to shoot something!” he said into his mobilcom.

Everyone else was still fumbling with his harness or readjusting to micro-gravity. Sangh had to wait for Babraba to unfasten him.

“If I were Vhatta Limhoon,” said Babraba, “I’d blow up that damned Palace.” But Sangh never found out if he blew up anything. Perhaps he reread his latest orders and decided for once not to exceed them.

Eventually the marines were berthed back where they had started a week ago. Sangh waited near his hammock to be imprisoned again and tried to be unobtrusive. The ship was on edge, because *LC1* had not docked yet. No one knew why. Sangh heard a murmur coming his way, as if the spirit of Rumor had decided to pay him a visit. And indeed it had, in the form of Lhithy Dhruzio, pulling himself along, seemingly happy to be weightless again. The Lieutenant Commander ignored the murmur and approached Sangh.

“Lieutenant Fharha.”

“Sir.”

“We’re going to be short-handed for a few minutes, until *LC1* gets back. I’ve reassigned people to various vital tasks, only to discover I need have no one available to be the communications person with *LC1* during its ascent. So I’m assigning you.”

Before Sangh could object, his handcuffs were undone and he was directed to a workstation with a microphone. Everyone around him was working radar, but he didn’t have time to hear why. Dhruzio showed him which buttons to push and left him alone.

*They expect this to go badly and they want to make sure my fingerprints are on the controls somewhere.*

He didn’t expect to be talking to Tralf when he died.

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Vhatta Limhoon recommended that medals be given to Babraba Ghalfe and John Kolfhaj (the latter posthumously) for brave and selfless service during the invasion. Such recommendations, from a defeated officer, were often ignored.

Why had the Mind decided to destroy *LC1* and not *LC2*? Was it simply because *LC1* took off an hour later? Or was Sheessay still protecting him? “You can stop protecting me,” he said out loud, addressing himself to the ‘Tayhan’ surveillance system he was sure was there. “Unless you protect my

friends, too.” A few officers and enlisted personnel heard him, and looked at him as though he was nuts. Just as well they didn’t know what he meant.

Sangh was never sure his knowledge of the disaster was accurate or complete. Some parts he heard from Cdr. Dhluzio, who explained to the crew what they were called on to do. The commanders of the third wave of the attack had realized what had happened to the second wave, and attempted to cancel their pass by the planet, only to discover that they did not have control of their vessels. They were doomed to follow trajectories that would cause them to collide with each other in a few hours, or meet some equally lethal fate. They knew there had been few survivors from any of the collisions in the second wave. Under those circumstances, the decision to abandon ship seemed like the only rational option. So the crew had taken to the escape pods.

Perhaps they should have waited until they were closer to the planet they were shooting at. But no one knew how to predict what the position and velocity of mother ship would be at any later point in time, given that they had lost control. When the pods were ejected, the ships they belonged to had been at their target speeds. Each group of pods moved toward Earth at the same velocity as the ship it had been ejected from. If that ship had then altered its course using the fusion drives, many of the pods would have

been positioned to be hit by the cloud of radioactives produced by the drive exhausts. The doses involved would have ranged from mildly carcinogenic to instantly lethal. Fortunately, the *Terranos* had used only chemical thrusters for course alterations in the vicinity of the pods. The Mind was always as solicitous as it could be for the members of the ‘Molyee’ race; but only Sangh knew that.

As each attack wave of the Prezghod Navy emerged from deep space, all its ships were at about the same distance from Erth and converging on it at about the same speed. For Wave 3, the point when the pods ejected was somewhat less than the distance to Erth’s only satellite, “Muun” or “*lua*”. The escape pods, traveling at the attack velocity, arrived near the planet about a P-hour after they ejected, each following an elliptical or parabolic path, traveling as fast as the warship that ejected it, but curving toward Erth. If the pods had had thrusters as powerful, a fuel supply as large, and navigation computers as powerful as a cruiser’s, they would have corrected their eccentric trajectories into tidy orbits around Erth, and they would have been easy to rescue.

As it was, if an escape pod missed the atmosphere completely, it would go into an eccentric orbit and everyone aboard would die before they could be rescued. If it hit the atmosphere at the wrong angle, it might break up



or burn up. Some pods might conceivably have landed successfully on the planet, as Sangh and Tralf had done. If so, those sailors were marooned. But there was one more hopeful option: a pod might slow down enough to go into a manageable orbit that would allow a surviving warship to pick it up. But the people aboard could survive for only as long as their air held out.

Fleet Command had notified the *Terranos* that the *Prezgarrodianos* needed to conduct operations near *Terra* to save what survivors they could. The *Terranos* agreed not to try to shoot down any of the *Prezgarrodiana* ships while they pursued their humanitarian mission. They also shared the information that there were 25 pods in accessible orbits of varying eccentricities sorts, 2 from the second wave of the attack, and 23 from the third. There had been 30 pods launched from the third wave, but 7 had perished or were beyond reach. These 7 were the pods that were aimed most directly at Earth; 3 had burned up in the atmosphere, 1 had landed safely, 1 had landed in the middle of the ocean and sunk, and 2 touched the atmosphere briefly and took off in directions that the ‘Tayhan’s had measured pretty accurately, but at speeds that placed them out of reach.

The question was who would save the 25 remaining pods, the Prezghod Navy or the *Terrana* low-orbit authorities. Any naval personnel in a pod

picked up by the *Terranos* would never see Prezghod again; they would live among demons for the rest of their lives. So it was an urgent priority for the Prezghod Navy to rescue as many of the escapees as possible. The *Terranos* understood, and got out of the way for a day or two while the Prezghodlings chased pods. Whether they could back the Prezghodlings up if they missed one was not clear.

*Cross*, along with two other light destroyers, *Immaculate Conception* and *Poph Melati*, were given the job of detecting pods as they came around Earth traveling fast and gaining in altitude, measure their velocities, and predict their next orbits. The data they gathered were collected by a team on Admiral OhMahan's flagship, the battleship *Minhbo Gulf*. There were two sources of data: radar tracking, and triangulation using directions of distress-beacon signals from the escape pods. For each pod sighted, the flagship team made the final estimate and chose the cruiser or destroyer best able to match course with the escape pod and go after it.

Cdr. Lhithy Dhluzio drew up a revised duty roster that assigned high-priority ops to the surviving crew and postponed routine chores. It was less wasteful to put Sangh to work than to assign personnel to guard him. All the marines were needed elsewhere. Many of them volunteered for overtime hours at the job of extracting worn parts from the fusion drive while it was

shut down, knowing it would expose them to dangerous levels of radiation.

Cdr. Dhluizio put himself on the duty roster. Keeping Vhatta Limhoon company was another job that would have to go undone. Oddly, Dhluizio had put himself on the same section as Sangh, so that they were awake and working at the same times, often in the same place.

Cdr. Dhluizio found an odd moment to talk to Lt. Fharha about the arrangement.

“Lieutenant Fharha, in case you’re wondering what’s going on, the answer is that I’m spying on you.”

“Sir, just tell me what you want to know. There’s no need to spy.”

“I sometimes feel the need to understand what makes my crew tick. Does any of us know what makes themselves tick?”

“Sir, I certainly don’t.”

“If I figure you out, I’ll try to explain it to you. The odds are I probably won’t, but you never know.” He chuckled in that deep voice that sounded like a dump truck idling.

In the new schedule, Sangh was assigned to be a radar analyst, a task normally carried out by a Specialist/Comms, whose usual mission was to scan for threats. It required at least three people to do a competent job; four was better, because a threat could come from any corner of the sky. A light

destroyer carried too small a crew for there to be three Specialists/Comms on duty at all times. It was expected to be too small and to be moving too fast to need full defensive measures. Catching a pod was different.

It wasn't like catching a baseball, because there was no mitt that could spill off the kinetic energy fast enough. The rescuer had to match position and velocity with the pod, without exposing it to the radioactive exhaust produced by a fusion drive. The best point was when the pod was at apogee. At that point it would have its lowest speed relative to Earth.

One might think the orbit would be an ellipse, an unchanging Platonic mathematical entity, but the interaction with the atmosphere caused the ellipse to shrink, rotate, and in general just *twitch* an unpredictable little bit on every revolution. The next apogee could be hundreds of thousands of clicks from the previous one. If its location could be predicted a few hours in advance, a cruiser stationed in an orbit that would bring it close to the apogee at about the right time would be given the task of rendezvous'ing with it.

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They had at most two E-days to catch all the pods. After that, the crews would probably be dead, unless some of them had fewer than the six occupants they were designed to hold.

The ten days Sangh had spent on Erth, the almost mythical Erth, had gone by in a flash. Now time sped up even more. He worked 18 P-hours out of every 24, usually as a radar analyst, but occasionally filling in for some other missing person. During his first stint as radar analyst, he found himself sitting between one of their remaining analysts, a light-skinned woman whom he knew only slightly, and Commander Lhithy Dhluzio.

“Sir, there is perhaps some mistake. I’ve never served as a radar analyst,” Sangh had said to the Commander when he first saw his assignment.

“Not since you graduated, but your grades on radar exercises were pretty good in school,” Dhluzio had said.

“Sir, I’m going to need some training on this system.”

“You get on-the-job training absolutely free,” said Dhluzio.

Now as, he settled into his seat in front of an unfamiliar model of radar screen, Dhluzio said, “If you have 10 minutes, wait, . . . , 5 minutes, you’re going to be trained on this equipment right now.” Cdr’Dhluzio gave his signature chuckle, but it didn’t seem as creepy as it once had.

Apparently 5 minutes was the time to the next expected sighting of an escape pod in *Cross’s* sector, coming around the planet. Cdr. Dhluzio showed him where all the knobs and buttons were. “And meet Specialist LaToya dhadama, to your left — Specialist dhadama, meet Lieutenant Fharha, filling

in as radar analyst while we're underhanded."

Pleasantries were exchanged, although Spc. dhadama looked a bit askance at him. Everyone knew who he was, of course. Perhaps his reintegration into the crew, however temporary, would introduce a note of doubt into the consciences of those who had condemned him as a traitor.

"Your 5 minutes are up, Lieutenant Fharha!" said Cdr. Dhluzio. "Expect pod blips to show up any time now."

Dhluzio's watch schedule had most watches lasting six P-hours, with sleep periods of at most four. Sangh's first six-P-hours of radar analysis required intense concentration, with few breaks. The escape pods were hard to spot, especially when their orbits were near the equatorial plane in which some kickers were launched into orbit. The ellipse traced by an orbital kicker started off quite eccentric, until retrorockets cut in and shaped it into an approximation of a circle. These kickers were much bigger than the kickers used to take tourists, schoolchildren, businessmen, and, a few days ago, Sangh and Tralf on suborbital flights

On the Prezghodlings' radars all these blips looked a lot alike. There were tools for disambiguating them, but running them required several seconds of human intervention — several seconds if you were trained and experienced, a minute at first for Sangh. Over time, an orbital kicker's trajectory changed,

whereas an escape pod tended to travel ballistically, making allowances for atmospheric drag at low altitudes.

After his first watch, Sangh was dazed. His joints had stiffened from being under constant tension. He felt good that he had spotted two escape pods, but his prediction of apogee differed from that of Spc. dhadama by thousands of clicks and several minutes, and she was always right.

Some of the pods circling Earth were in low orbits, and were caught quickly, but two had apogees out around the orbit of *Lua*. By the time they were observed 60 hours had gone by, and hope was dimming that anyone aboard could be saved. Cdr. Dhruzio got a group together in the officer's mess for a pep talk. The group consisted of the radarmen and the signals specialists triangulating on distress beacons.

"People," the Commander said when they were assembled, "We have one shot at saving the next pod. We've decided this is the last one worth catching. We've asked the 'Tayhan's to try to save the other one if they think they can, but we have no ships close enough to its probable trajectories to catch it. Pod 16 we think we may have a chance at. There may still be people aboard. They're not responding to our calls, but perhaps they're unconscious or just out of range. It's coming in for its next go-round, not traveling too fast yet, but once it gets running it will be going like a runaway

train.

“If we get a good reading on its velocity, but then wait to intercept when it’s at apogee, everybody aboard will surely be dead. So we’re going to try to intercept while it’s rising, and traveling about 50,000 klicks per hour. The best spot is when it’s about 150,000 klicks from Earth. If we get a good read on it from low orbit, the big dogs will have about 1 P-hour to catch it. They can just make it if they start accelerating *now*. So several ships are currently sprinting in about the right direction, covering all the possibilities. The one closest to the coordinates we provide — you and I — will correct its direction and attempt to match course with the pod. This is a game of inches. The infield is going to run for a line drive, and they need our information to do their job.

“I’m not going to bore you with any more of this, because we don’t have any time to waste. But I expect every one of you to do your duty to God and Prezghod.”

They hung there, taking their charge in for a few seconds, until he clapped his hands once, and they dispersed to their stations. Sangh was hunkered down in front of the screen by the time Dhluzio and dhadama got there.

Within 30 minutes Dhluzio said, “I got something interesting, boys and girls.” He gave the approximate coordinates to Sangh and Lt. dhadama.



“No!” said Sangh. “That’s a kicker. Keep looking!”

“You mean, No, Sir,” said Dhluzio. “But you’re right.”

All three of them were on edge, but a few minutes later Spc. dhadama said coolly, “Pod at coordinates . . .,” and she rattled them off. Sangh confirmed it and then Dhluzio. They all had well-backed estimates of speed and direction and the three agreed rather closely. The cruiser *Coleman Brothers* was the one closest in velocity and position, and it shifted to pursuit of Pod-16. In an hour or two it had caught up with it. There were still two women alive out of four passengers, news which sent up a cheer among every mariner in the fleet, but especially among the clutch of analysts onboard *Cross*.

“Lieutenant dhadama, Lieutenant Fharha, we finally have something to be proud of,” said Commandar Dhluzio.

“Thank you, sir,” said the other two analysts, the professional and the amateur.

Sangh would have liked to suggest they go out and celebrate, but such fraternization among the ranks was frowned on. Still, he felt that he and Dhluzio had formed some kind of bond, and he wished they could have a few beers together.

He turned to Lt. dhadama and said, “When we got off, want to lift a stein in celebration of our wonderful achievement?” She said, “Sure,” and smiled.

Her smile wasn't bad.

Sangh turned to Cdr. Dhruzio and said, "Sir, I wish you could join us, but I realize it would be stretching the rules."

Dhruzio pondered for a moment. "Everything else has been stretched around here. Let's stretch a rule."

So after their watch the three of them retired to the mess for a drink. Although senior officers could eat here, they usually didn't. Vhatta Limhoon, Cdr. Dhruzio, and LtCdr. Kolfhaj, before his death, usually dined in the senior commanders' stateroom, which was the space Limhoon had taken over as his "office."

The only alcohol served aboard Prezghod Navy vessels was grog, rum mixed with water. At least they called it rum. The water in it, like all their water, was recycled from the crew's liquid wastes, so it was assumed that the alcohol molecules were produced by fermenting their solid wastes. This assumption was contradicted by the authorities, but all evidence was disregarded. It didn't help that the robust artificial flavorings added to make the mixture taste vaguely rum-like made it taste more like toilet-bowl cleaner. The stuff was diluted to make it harder to get drunk. Whatever it was, it was welcome after bouts of hard work. It was served in squeeze bottles, of course. Glasses worked only where there was gravity. All the talk

of “steins” and the lovely beers they whose golden foam they might contain was part of an elaborate running joke, which eventually touched on every type of booze they could dream of, and only dream of, as long as they were away from port.

By a miracle there was a place in the mess for the three of them to perch together. Sangh raised his squeeze bottle. “To the Navy, gentlemen and ladies, ever loyal to the faith.” They murmured “Hear, hear” and touched their bottles together before squeezing a big load of grog down their throats.

“But I hope,” he continued, “That I never have to be a radarman again. How do you stand it, Specialist dhadama? By the way, people call you ‘Toy,’ right?”

“Yes,” she said primly, “my name is LaToya, but, sure, call me Toy, since there seems to be nothing I can do about that nickname. *I* find radar work fascinating, Lieutenant Fharha.”

“Good. Someone has to make sure attackers don’t get through our defenses.”

“I know when you first get acquainted with those little dots on the screen, that’s what they look like, little dots. But once they’ve started to move, each one is unique, no two are alike, you know. Like snowflakes, but really, a lot more possibilities. Although, in space, just about anything unexpected is

hostile. There aren't that many meteors flying about."

"Ah," said Sangh. There seemed to be nothing further to say about radar screens, as far as he was concerned. What he really wanted to talk about was the captain.

"Commander Dhluzio," he said. He thought perhaps the Commander would say, "Call me Lhithy," but he did not.

"Commander Dhluzio, I don't know about Toy, here, but I know that I, and I believe a lot of other people, have been worrying about Vhatta Limhoon."

Dhluzio was impassive. Sangh went on. "He's been under a lot of pressure, and it's going to probably get worse. Everything on this ship used to be driven by the energy coming from his head. Now, we have silence. What's his state of mind? If you don't mind my asking?"

Dhluzio stood up, or rather pushed himself away from the mess area, handing his squeeze bottle of grog to the attendant. "This comes pretty close to impertinence, Mr. Fharha," he said, and he kicked off in the direction of his quarters.

What Sangh really wanted to ask was, "The vhatta has a lot to answer for. Does he realize that at last?"

## Chapter 13

### Solitude

Sangh heard his cell's hatch opening at an unexpected time, about an hour after mealtime and a half hour before lights-out, not that lights-out had any meaning for *him*. A thrill of fear went through him. *Another torture session, so soon?* But the guard who came gliding gracefully through the hatch was Šheessay. He realized after a second that he wasn't surprised.

"You again," he said.

"How are you, Sangh? Did they hurt you badly?"

"Say hi to the surveillance system monitoring me 24 hours a day."

"Oh, that," and she dismissed it with a hand gesture as of someone throwing out a piece of trash.

"Ah, yes, I keep forgetting who actually controls the hardware around

here.”

“They’ll see some footage of you doing something boring,” she said. She looked so beautiful. Of course, her competition was Inquisitor Mohra Vellaakh, whose sexiest gesture was turning up the voltage on electrodes attached to his genitals. He shook his head once, violently, to eject some burningly erotic images of Sheessay out of his head, trying not to look in her direction.

She said, “I know how angry you are, and I don’t blame you, but maybe we can work together to, I don’t know, solve some of these problems . . . . Maybe that’s unrealistic.”

“Naw, we can still go back and take a do-over on reengineering the human race; how hard could that be?”

He paused; a thought had occurred to him. “*Could* we go back? I mean, to *Terra*?”

“No. I’m coming with you.”

“A copy of you is coming with me, if I’m not mistaken.”

“This is the only me now.”

“Are you coming to bring Enlightenment to Prezghod?”

“No! I’m coming to . . . win you back.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. Now go away.”

She looked shaken, but determined. She pushed off toward the door.

Then: "I'll go. But not far. I work here."

"Really," he said in a doubtful tone. "Doing what?"

"I'm a guard, just as I appear."

"You have a berth, too?"

"Yes, everything. I have some 'girlfriends,' which is, like, a first for me."

"For them, too, I imagine. Okay, before you go, tell me something. Is Commander Limhoon in custody on this ship?"

"Yes, but he has certain privileges. His cell is bigger," and she looked around at Sangh's 3 m × 3 m × 2 m box. I think he may have a private toilet. He's even allowed to mingle with the ship's senior officers, with only light guard presence."

"Thanks. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. I'll be back, you know."

And she glided to the hatch and out, pausing to blow him a kiss, then locking it from the outside.

"It wouldn't be you if you weren't coming back," he thought to say, but she was gone. It had taken all his strength to resist her, and she had just started to weave her spell. He felt disgusted with himself, and at the same time grateful to the point of tears for her reappearance.

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Once its mission in low orbit around Earth was complete, the Contact Fleet, or what was left of it, had formed up and headed for the exits of the *Sistema Solar*, unmolested by the ‘Tayhan’s. It would take many P-months to get back to the flash point whence the Prezghoddlings had emerged from quantum spacetime. The flash point was a small black hole, in orbit around the Sun, one of many just further than the seventh planet, called, they now knew, *Neptuno*. (Actually, there were eight planets; their survey had missed *Mercúrio*. Nobody cared enough to revise the terminology.)

Sangh had been transferred to prison ship *Vhatta Clhancy*, named after Ming Clhancy, a hero of the dhempirian Conquest. Sangh could recite the history: In the Battle of Minhbo Gulf Bysshe-Admiral Clhancy had led the attack that decimated the large but ineffective navy of Zack Morgenstern, Emperor of Dhindra. Vhatta Clhancy had perished during the battle, which cleared the way for Rutger Norkell, the dashing poet and general, to defeat the land forces of Dhindra. That was back during the Age of Sail, a period that had one thing in common with the Age of Faster-than-light Travel: it took several months to get anywhere interesting.

Most of the surviving ships of the Contact Fleet were built on quite different lines from a fast destroyer like *Cross*: They were big and unmaneuv-



verable, designed to go along geodesic lines from point A to point B. Their fusion drives were huge because it was more efficient to have one big drive than two little ones. So these ships had more interior volume than naval architects knew what to do with. Some were used as fuel tankers; others carried cargo; others had living quarters that rotated, generating artificial gravity for the people working in the outer layers. This fact of life for starship designers is why *Vhatta Clhancy* had an exercise yard big enough to serve as a spaceball court.

Sangh got one hour a P-day in the Yard, when they weren't interrogating him for 24 P-hours straight. When he drifted in for his first hour, he felt like he had been teleported to the surface of a planet. He came in through a door in the middle of a wall, and he had trouble seeing the other side of the room he was in, which made him assume he was dizzy. He would have staggered if he had been standing on anything.

A guard stationed at the door laughed and said, "Never been here before?" Sangh shook his head. He noticed that there were rubbery ring grips over every wall within sight, and the guard was holding on to one of these.

The prison ship was the size of a cruiser, but its interior was specially configured. A huge cylinder of empty space was set aside as an Exercise Yard, 40 meters long and 40 meters in diameter, with rings, stakes, and

other equipment attached to the curving walls using suction cups. It was almost worth committing some infraction and being sentenced to time in the brig for the privilege of getting access to this space.

When the ship was underway, as it was now in retreat from Ert $\hat{h}$ , it was accelerating most of the time, which meant that objects tended to “fall” gently toward the rear wall of any room. So “rear” became “down,” and the rear wall of the Yard was its floor. Mind you, the gravity-like pull was very weak, less than a thousandth of  $g$ , the gravitational acceleration at the surface of Prezghod. If you fell from a height of a meter, it would take you a second to float down to the surface. It was easier to leap across the room than to walk. The Yard is where most of the prisoners were most of the time. Keeping them tired and happy kept them from making plans to rebel. No one worried about anyone escaping, because there was no place to escape to.

Sangh did *not* spend most of his time in the Yard. He was in solitary confinement, under “live” surveillance 23 hours a P-day, in a cell harshly lit every moment he was there. He was let out of the cell to be interrogated, and occasionally allowed into the Yard, for a maximum of one hour per P-day.

When he was there, he was shadowed by his two Inquisition guards, whose names he apparently did not need to know. One was a woman, of average

height and build, a pleasant face, and tawny skin. The other was a man, good-looking in a vacant way, with reddish-brown skin and hair, exactly the color of a Red Angus cow. Number plates decorated their chests, just above the Inquisition motto “Justitia et Mercytia,” but there was no obvious indication of their names or ranks. Sangh had heard Velaakh address the soldiers by number, so he decided to call them by color: Tawny and Red Angus.

He could talk to any prisoner who would talk to him, but at first there weren’t very many. Most of them knew he was, and they were all put off by the police presence in his vicinity. The first time he saw a spaceball game in progress, Sangh could only gaze at it with longing.

The next time he showed up no game was in progress, but a couple of balls lay on the floor. Was he allowed to practice? There was only one way to find out. No, there were two ways, but Sangh ruled out asking for permission. He just picked up a ball, hurled it at the wall, and jumped for one of the hoops at the far end of the court, the ceiling. He almost laughed at the pleasure of flexing his knees and hips, then uncoiling them as fast as he could. He was in good shape after his time on Erth, and he was able to make it to the ceiling, 40 meters away, in about 30 seconds. The guards didn’t react for 15 seconds, then jumped after him, drawing their squishers.

Red Angus got only halfway up, then fell to the floor ever so slowly, waving his squisher around wildly as if it could propel him.

Tawny aimed better. She couldn't catch Sangh as he rose precisely to the basket, caught the ball as it caromed off the wall, sank his shot, and grasped a ring on the opposite side of the court after a fall in a roughly parabolic arc. Tawny reached the wall before he did, and could have blown his brains out when he arrived.

"Warn us the next time you do that again, Fharha," said Tawny, who looked tough when she scowled. She and Sangh sank slowly to the floor, which was 90 seconds away.

"Can't do that; I'm practicing spaceball. Have you ever played spaceball, ..., officers?" But the guards had strict orders not to answer prisoners' questions.

"Well, if you have, you know that the key to the game is moving with split-second timing. No time to send a telegram about where you're going."

"Nobody's letting you into the game, Fharha," shouted Red Angus from the floor.

What Sangh loved about zooming through the Yard is that there were so few obstacles sticking out into his path, except the other prisoners, who at any given moment were mostly on the boundaries — the floor or the

sides. You could visualize everything, foresee everything, if your visual brain worked well. Sangh had the right kind of brain, and he had had practice: in the Academy, he had played spaceball whenever he got a chance, which was whenever they did low-orbit exercises. There were usually good R&R facilities in low orbit.

It so happened that a fair number of good players were doing long sentences in *Vhatta Clhancy*. They played spaceball almost every day in the Yard. There were two team captains, Özgür Özgür and Bratt Cheltara, the former in for aggravated theft and the latter for assault with a lethal weapon. They were tough guys. Like everybody else, they didn't like traitors. They hated Sangh.

So he spent a few days pacing the sidelines and just watching. "Pacing the sidelines" is metaphorical. There were no sidelines, and the first pace on the floor would have nudged him into a high arc. So he was compelled to mince along the floor. He couldn't even practice when a game was in progress, for obvious reasons. Anyone who ventured off the boundaries was asking for trouble.

"How do I get into this game?" he said to Tawny and Angus, although by then he knew he was asking rhetorically. To be fair, under present circumstances the Inquisition guards were mainly there for his protection. Everyone

knew he was in for treason, and might be one of those responsible for their defeat in the Battle of *Terra*. Without his guards, he was likely to get a knife in the back his first hour out in the Yard. Cheltara was likely to be the one who put his knife there first, just so everyone knew he was the best. He wasn't crazy, though, as you would have to be to tangle with the Inquisition.

As in many other sports, the object of spaceball was to put the ball in the opponent's net. The rules were simple, too: You could move anywhere you liked, push off anyway you liked, but while holding the ball you could only move ballistically, no pushing off. If any part of a player's body went into the goal, it counted as a point for the other side. So you couldn't carry the ball into the net.

From long experience, prison managers provided referees for games. If they let the prisoners referee, fights were inevitable, sometimes lethal fights. On *Vhatta Clhancy*, the usual referee was a preternaturally calm woman, LtCdr. Khrimoglu, called "Eyes" by the prisoners, short for Eyes in the Back of Her Head. She had once spotted a shank in Bratt's hands 20 meters behind her and had him arrested and taken away. (The game continued.) Khrimoglu had compressed-air jets on her arms and legs, which allowed her to control her trajectory when remote from a wall. These were forbidden to the players, who when becalmed had to hope they were in a good position

for someone to pass them the ball. Eventually they would bump a wall (or the floor would bump *them*), when they could push off again.

The spaceball goals were placed at the top of the Yard, across from each other (about 20 meters). The ball spent a lot of time up there, but if it got away it would come gently down, perhaps caroming against the walls a few times. The players counted on the spectators to throw it back to them from the floor. The spectators could be rougher with each other while wrestling for the ball than the rules allowed the players to be. The first time the ball came Sangh's way he saw an opportunity to get into the game. So did a big guy with an evil, scarred face who pushed off against a wall and came barreling in Sangh's direction, having calculated just how far he would fall by the time he reached his target. Scarface and the ball came down in Sangh's vicinity at exactly the same time. A split second before that time Sangh did a somersault and caught the ball in the air upside down. The big guy whiffed through the air where Sangh had been, and a second later skid-bounced off the floor. The momentum of the ball canceled Sangh's upward momentum. When his feet came down on the floor he set them, then hurled the ball as hard as he could straight up. It floated into the hands of a dumbfounded forward on Özgür's team who was hanging from the ceiling right beside the Cheltaras' net, and lobbed the ball in past the goalkeeper, asleep at the

switch.

At the next substitution (someone on Özgür's team had suddenly developed a condition requiring urgent medical attention), Özgür zoomed down to the floor.

"Okay, Mr. High-Value Prisoner, do you want into this game?" he said. His face was not pretty up close: asymmetrical lips over misdirected teeth.

Sangh said, "Yeah. But I got a short leash here. I have to return to my cell in, like, 10 minutes."

"Well, get your ass in here for 10 minutes."

They took off. Özgür did not acknowledge the presence of the guards, and Sangh, trying to be as cool and tough as anyone, did not either. But in ten minutes LtCdr. Tawny's voice came booming across the space: "NQ Prisoner 22, get down here, your exercise time is up." (The Inquisition was familiarly called the NQ.) Sangh had assisted in another goal during his ten-minute stint, which was good, because the referee ruled his previous involvement illegal. The good news was that he had established that treason was just as compatible with being a valuable asset to a spaceball team as was assault with a lethal weapon.

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There were two Inquisitors aboard *Clhancy*, Mohra Velaakh and Kan



Wanthu, a short, squat man with large black-rimmed glasses over jug-handle ears. The interrogation space was nothing special, about the size of Sangh's cell. It was more lavishly decorated, with wires, AC adaptors, leads, clamps, dials, and control knobs. The wires and accessories looked like instruments of torture, and that's what they were. They scared the prisoners, just as they were supposed to.

Even so, Sangh's second session with the Inquisition caught him off guard. The first session started with the prisoner taking off his clothes. Clamps were attached to his genitals and nipples. (Were women treated the same? Sangh guessed they were, *mutatis mutandis*.) There were wires attached to the clamps, and he braced himself for electric shocks. There was a slight "gravitational" tug from the steady acceleration of the ship, enough to pull a shackled prisoner gently down toward the rear bulkhead, so that he hung in that direction unless he made an effort not to.

He was prepared to tell them the truth, and he was prepared to tell them what they wanted to hear. It was obvious that he couldn't tell them what they wanted to hear right away, because they would have to torture him to see if he stuck to the story, and if he refused to waver from it the torture would go on for a while.

On the other hand, the torturers knew prisoners thought this way. How

they dealt with this knowledge depended on how much they wanted to know the truth and how much they wanted supporting evidence for a predetermined version of reality. Sangh could imagine them wanting both. So it was important to tell them what they wanted to hear only after being tortured for a while; then endure more torture, and tell them the truth. No matter what tactics you tried, torture might go on for a long time before they believed that you had settled on a story *you* believed, if that's what they cared about.

What had surprised Sangh during session 2 of his interrogation was just how awful torture could be. Somehow the small pain of being clamped in soft parts of his anatomy lulled him into a false sense of achievement. He thought he had endured something. He had decided to tell them the truth at first, figure out what they wanted to hear, and tell them that during session 2, then see what came next. It had become clear during session 1 that they wanted to build a case that he had participated in the bugging of Limhoon's office and the fabrication of a recording implicating him and Dhluzio in the crime of falsifying orders, as part of a larger cybernetic plot to get control of all the ships of the Contact Fleet. He had spent most of his time before the second session trying to build a plausible account of how it had been done.

But once the second session started, suddenly severe pain became the

norm. Instead of clamping electrodes on him, they tied him loosely to a metal frame crisscrossed by interleaved metal strips in an open weave. The frame had not been there during session 1. His wrists and ankles were connected to the frame by sturdy ropes about half a meter long. So he wasn't tied to the frame, but gravity held him loosely on top of it. He was securely blindfolded. A few minutes went by while he lay on the metal strips like a mattress on a bed frame. Suddenly his chest was touched by something for a second and painful current shot through him. He struggled as far off the metal frame as possible, and managed to spend a few seconds in the air before falling back. In the air he got relief, but as soon as he landed the pain started up. All the while the torturer kept gentle pressure on his chest. After 10 or 20 seconds they relented, and he fell back slowly to the "bed."

"It gets worse, Fharha," came the harsh but female voice of Inquisitor Velaakh. The "wand" was touched to his penis and again he fought to gain a fraction of a second of respite from the agony. He knew it was essentially pointless to fight, but he couldn't help it.

She didn't speak again for some time. She let the wand speak for her, and it was eloquent. There was nothing he could do about where the wand landed, but he could choose which part of his back or side would get the brunt of the pain by choosing how to land on the metal frame and complete

the circuit.

Finally this entirely sadistic period ended and the questioning began. During this phase the pain to be endured depended on the answers Sangh gave.

As they interrogated him, it became clear that an even more preposterous story than the one they had hinted at might be of interest to them, and this was that he had instigated the whole debacle, contacting Šheessay (how?) and offering to sell the Contact Fleet (in return for what?). He decided to steer them toward a smaller version of his betrayal, but their questions often seemed to jump back and forth between the two versions of reality, or to fit into no discernible narrative at all. His efforts to construct a coherent version of a fundamentally incoherent reality were strangled by the waves of soul-rending current sent through his body, to the point where he began to worry that he might be suffering deep electric burns.

“Please,” he had pleaded, “I’m afraid you’re causing permanent damage to ...” Velaakh silenced him with a jolt of pain that caused his scrotum to sizzle. He could smell burning hair and flesh.

“Now, about that message you sent to Erthling defense forces on or about March 5, 3705, what code did you use?” asked Kan Wanthu in his usual high-pitched monotone as the pain abated.

“I sent no such . . . gaah . . .” The pain was revived, this time in a current running from his right nipple to his right arm: wand on nipple, landing on arm.

“What code did you use?”

“I, uh, first had to engage in the intercultural translation protocols. Then I used pulsed binary.” Was this answer at the right level of abstraction for them? They understood nothing about codes or exoanthropology or diplomacy, so all they needed was an answer using the right terminology. It didn’t have to stand up under informed review.

In any case, the next question had come from some entirely different context, and it was hard to remember which lies were for today and which were to be saved for the next session.

But Sangh’s deepest surprise had been the discovery that the part of torture that caused the worst damage was not the relentless pain; if he had been enduring such pain as a result of a wound attained in a battlezone in defense of the Empire, he thought he could bear it. The real damage was caused by knowing that there was no one in the known Universe who was on his side. There was no policeman he could summon, no court he could appeal to, no lawyer he could hire, not even a prison riot he could organize. He was a national-security risk being interrogated by the Inquisition. He

was almost by definition guilty, in the eyes of the whole Empire. And, of course, no Erthling cared about the fate of a defective cog in the Prezghod war machine.

Except one. Sheessay cared about him; or acted as if she did. Did it matter whether her affection and concern were real? Even if they were, she was still implicated in a grotesque crime against humanity, genocidal in ways that he couldn't have imagined. She meant well now, and she had meant well when she participated in neutering the southerners while allowing billions of northerners to starve to death or worse.

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Sangh's time on *Clhancy* became a vision of Purgatory. He alternated between his courtship by Sheessay and the agonizing, terrifying project of constructing a revised history of the Solar System disaster with Velaakh and Wanthu. Not Purgatory so much as Hell with benefits. The rest of time and space receded so far from his imagination that thoughts such as *where* his family might be and *when* he might see them led to serious questions about whether he might have simply imagined them and the rest of the backstory about how he came to be in this timeless place which was 85% punishment, 10% allegories of Love, and 5% spaceball.

It became clear that the version of history they were going to settle on

was the one where he, Sangh Fharha, was entirely to blame for selling out the Contact Fleet. Limhoon's only contribution was to pursue the fugitive Fharha relentlessly and without regard to his own safety, even to the dangerous northern hemisphere of Erth, and finally bring him to justice .

After each interrogation session, when Sangh came back to his cell to recover, he could count on a visit from Šheessay. All he did at first was bury his head in her bosom and sob. Her arms around him were the only good thing he could believe in. They might take her away, but her love for him would remain real in his heart, just when he needed love.

Once he had recovered somewhat from the latest episode in his ordeal, he could pull back and engage her in what might have sounded to a spy like light conversation. He asked her what her duties were exactly in the Prezghod Navy.

"I'm not a common sailor, you know; I'm an officer, just like you, in the Navy Police, Guards Division. My special expertise is in psychological counseling. I do testing of the prisoners when they're admitted, and at later times."

"I never got tested by anybody."

"Inquisition prisoners don't go through normal channels."

"How do you manage to always be here after I get back from being tor-

tured?”

“I can’t stand the idea of you being here alone. I find somebody to cover for me if I have to. They don’t mind helping because I do people a lot of favors during the long hours when you’re being worked over by those brutes from the NQ. In a pinch, I can fiddle with the assignments if I’m not too obvious about it. But my biggest trick is not needing to sleep. Watch schedules allow for hours of time for sleep every 10, I mean, 24 hours. That’s free time for me.”

Such conversations tended to end with a kiss. The first time she tried to kiss him he tried to resist. But his abject loneliness and his body’s vivid memory of her knocked him over. She kissed him deeply and he kissed her just as deeply. As they drew back to look each other in the eye, he realized his hands were on her breasts, and he blushed.

“Oh, Šheessay, if I asked you to save my immortal soul and go away, would you?”

“No, baby, you know I can’t leave you. Your soul, mortal or not, needs me more than you think, ...” she said. Whatever else she was going to say, somehow her mouth was drawn to other assignments, and the words got muffled. Sangh groaned in cosmic frustration at the risk to his soul; at least we may hope that that is why he groaned.



As she was leaving, he stopped her, not to kiss her, but to ask, “What’s your name, Lieutenant Cededá?” for that was the surname on her nameplate.

“*Daxea*,” she said. “‘Day-Ah-Sheess-Ay-Ah’.”

He kissed her goodbye.

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Once she came in and could not restrain her tears. “Oh, Sangh,” she said, “this is so hard. You’re suffering so much, and with every minute I pull further and further away from the rest of the Mind, which *hurts*.”

“Where does it hurt, sweetheart?” he said.

“Everywhere.” She glanced at him dully, then looked away. “Imagine you were going blind, but not just blind — most of your senses were fading away. All those sensors all over *Terra*, plus millions more in all parts of the Solar System. I could smell the rings of *Saturno* whenever I wanted to. I still get the signals, but they’re so weak I have to collect a whole bunch of them to be sure of getting a few bytes of information. I’m following the news, but it’s sketchy.”

“News? What news ever comes out of ‘Tayha’? Without Prezghodlings around?”

“I don’t mean that stuff about celebrities, catastrophes, sporting events, and weather. There’s news on nonpublic channels for avatars and high-placed

government officials. It talks to insiders about what other insiders are doing and thinking, about events with important economic implications, that sort of thing.”

“I’m guessing ‘high-placed’ means ‘in the ‘Day-Ah-Ay’.”

“For weeks, the talk was of nothing but the *Prezgarrodiana* invasion and its aftermath, and possible consequences. There’s still a lot of speculation about whether you’ll be back.”

“Do you take part in the ‘talk’?”

“No, not any more. Transmitting a signal that strong, even directionally, could attract attention. Hiding the antenna isn’t so hard.”

“Well, ‘mayuu amoooh’, I’m sorry you’re hurting so much. But you’re just a bud of the real Šheessay, aren’t you? The original avatar will emerge out of the background activity of the Mind whenever it can, right?”

“You might think so, but it never happened that way. If I went away for a month, I could take up my old position, my old sources of computation power, but I was assured that the whole pattern had been dormant while I was away. Apparently an avatar’s emergence is a one-time event, triggered by ... Fate knows what. So if I never go back, XC will be seen as dead as far as the *Sistema Solar* is concerned. If I die on *Prezgarrod*, then XC really will be dead.”

She started crying again. He kissed her gently through the tears. She kissed him where the electric shocks seemed still to reverberate.

By the time this weighty conversation took place, their love affair was back to where they had left off in ‘Wahak’, just as passionate as before. Did that mean they trusted each other? Sangh certainly did not trust Šheessay. Nor did he believe that she trusted him. Perhaps “just as passionate” is an exaggeration.

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There came an interrogation session when Sangh was shown a document by the Inquisitors, Velaakh and Wanthu. Before the interrogation really got underway, Wanthu said he would read it out loud, and Sangh should pay close attention. It was a story told in the first person from Sangh’s point of view, recounting all the things he had done as part of his sick plan to sell out the Contact Fleet. It didn’t really cohere too well; his motivation at one point was money, at another Daddy issues displaced onto Vhatta Limhoon, at another sheer hatred for Prezghod society and its values. The document ran to about three pages of single-spaced type. It was printed on paper, which was unusual; paper was a heavy commodity that was in limited supply. The reason for this extravagance was that they wanted him to sign it, his confession to all his crimes. He wondered if they had a quill pen for

him.

“If that’s all, I think I’ll be going,” said Sangh when the reading was concluded. He was as usual tied stark naked to the metal frame. He paid for his impertinence with an electrode to the groin, administered by one of his tormentors.

“All you have to do is sign,” said Velaakh, “and your ordeal is over, at least for today.” What did she mean by “today”? They never told him what day it was.

“Every single sentence is something you have confessed to already,” said Wanthu. “We have you on tape.”

“Well, just assemble those segments into a video *ugh, uggghh . . .*” Sangh was interrupted again by jolts to random parts of his body. “It’ll look very convincing with me wearing this fr. . . — *aaaaah* — frame on *mmmmmmg-gaaaaaah . . .*” He lost consciousness for a moment.

“You know you’re going to sign it,” said Wanthu when Sangh came to. “Let’s save both of us some trouble and just cut to that part.”

But Sangh was stubborn. He asked if he could edit the document. They negotiated for a while, until it became clear that he wanted to rewrite it.

“You’re wasting our time,” said Inquisitor Velaakh, giving him a long pull on the pain flask. When Sangh had recovered a bit, she demanded that he

sign the document, no changes. He refused. He was given a shock on his left thigh.

This kept up for a while. But eventually Sangh encountered terror he could not fight. They inserted an electrode up his anus. Then they did not use it. The pain they did inflict was terrible, but each time there was no current up his ass he heaved a sigh of relief. The anticipation was hard to take. Not only that, he started to think about other orifices into which electrodes could be inserted.

It was too much. He didn't know how long he had held out, and no longer cared. "I'll sign," he said, "if you don't zap me in the ass."

And he signed. And they did stop torturing him, and released him into the custody of his guards, Commanders Tawny and Red Angus. He even got his hour in the Exercise Yard, and they brought him some grog with his dinner.

The next day Sangh was surprised when the hatch to his cell opened and the head that popped in was that of Vhatta Willem Limhoon.

"Hello, Mr. Fharha!"

"Good morning, sir."

Limhoon hauled himself in one-handed. In his other hand he clutched an e-reader. He was wearing a standard-issue orange prisoner uniform.

“I’ve been reading your little autobiography. Fascinating reading.”

“Sir, may I ask why you’re here?”

“Oh. Yes. Actually, I came to thank you. I realize that you didn’t sign it for me, but it’s made a great deal of difference in the quality of my life.”

“Sir, I didn’t sign it for any other reason than to avoid further torture. I would have thought you already knew that.”

“It doesn’t matter what *I* know. People attach great weight to confessions. Someone who confesses to a murder becomes a scumbag murderer in their eyes, and who believes a murderer if he says the confession was coerced? In this case, the alternative to blaming *you* for our getting licked so badly is blaming *me*. That wasn’t a bad option, but it tended to make the flag officers look bad. What they really needed was a lower-level traitor, and now they have one.”

“Sir, anything true in that document you’ve been reading is true by accident. They would have been just as happy with 100% lies as with the 95% they got.”

“Look, I’m not really interested in the story of your life, Fharha. It’s just that I’ve been released on my own recognizance, as it were, and I thought my first visit should be to thank you. I’ve fulfilled that obligation. Goodbye.”

“Sir, I’m sorry. Stay a while. Torture makes me cranky.”

“Quite understandable.”

“Sir, how is Commander Dhluzio?”

“Good, I believe. He’s been given command of *Cross*.”

“Glad to hear it, sir. I spent a little time with him during the retreat, and we got to know each other a bit.”

“So I heard.”

“He’s a better man than I thought.”

“People underestimate him.”

“You’re a worse.” Sangh heard himself say it, but couldn’t believe it. But somewhere his tongue had heard that things couldn’t get any worse for him, and it loosened up.

Limhoon was taken aback, and struggled to keep his temper. But he said, as if calm, “People overestimate me. At least, I hope they do. You can’t succeed unless you sometimes bluff.”

“I think you missed my point. Sir, if I haven’t pissed you off completely, what made you choose me? From the day we went into orbit around ‘Tayha’, I’ve been a marked man.”

Limhoon just stared at Sangh. Sangh couldn’t tell if he didn’t want to tell the reason, or didn’t know it himself.

“Look, Fharha,” he finally said, “stay on my good side and I may tbe able

to do you a few little favors, like making sure you're executed humanely — and quickly.”

Sangh's blood froze. His future stood more starkly revealed than he had allowed himself to imagine. The realization made him stutter as he said, “Oh-th-ok, . . . , thank you, s-sir.”

“That's better. Okay, I'm leaving, and I mean it this time. Good-bye.” And he was out of there, not deigning to notice Sangh's salute.

Afterward Sangh wanted to pace back and forth, but was thwarted by the size of his cage and the weakness of the gravitational field. He ran his fingers through his hair a few times. But a glimmer of hope registered somewhere in his soul. Vhatta Limhoon's rehabilitation brought an option back into play. What was it?

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By the time Sheessay found time to see him, he had figured out a plan of action. She came and sat next to him on his cot. After they had kissed and cooed a bit, he pushed her away and said, “Sorry, sweetie, but I have something else on my mind: How to bust out of this joint.”

“Tell me more, *meu amor*.”

“Perhaps you've run into Vhatta Limhoon roaming the passageways of this ship? No? Well, he's back in the good graces of the higher-ups.”



“How in the world did he manage that?”

“It’s my fault, like everything else around here. I signed my confession yesterday.”

“Under duress, I assume. Oh, baby, what did they do to you?”

“Basically, they stuck an electrode up my ass and I crumbled. But I haven’t gotten to the point yet. When Limhoon was at his peak, the ace in the hole we had on him was the tape you were blackmailing him with.”

“‘Ace in the hole.’ Is that synonymous with ‘electrode up his ass’?”

“In this context, yes, I hope so. Because when he was my partner in crime, releasing the tape wouldn’t have hurt him so much. But now that I’m entirely to blame and he’s another innocent patsy on the General Staff, the tape could sink his career once and for all. I hope to God you brought it with you.”

“Yes, I’m not a light packer. I even brought the video.”

“*Video?* You’ve got video?” He actually grinned.

“Oh, cupcake, I haven’t seen you smile in a long time. Let me say it again: *‘vi-de-oh.’*”

“No one will believe we faked it when they see *that*. So we just have to figure out how to get you and the tape and me out of here.”

“It’s not literally a tape, it’s a bunch of bits. Anyway, there’s no problem

getting me and the data out of here. I'm a perfectly registered personnel. I just walk out with everyone else."

"No, they know the fleet's infected with God knows what hardware and software ... demons ..."

"The word is '*malware*.'"

"Okay, infected with *malwares*. When we arrive at the flashpoint, and when we return to Sudhopa System, and when we return to Prezghod, there are going to be filters to make sure none of those *malwares* make it through."

"They'll, say, cut everyone's skin to see if they bleed."

"Say. Or X-ray everybody. Or zap you with an electromagnetic pulse and see if you faint."

"Oh. I'm sure we can figure something out." She paused. "Will it disgust you or demystify me if I explain how my bodies are manufactured?"

"Probably."

"So forget any deep explanation. Let me cut to the chase: Manufacturing evolves. It starts with people making things by hand. When it becomes mechanized it becomes synonymous with 'mass production.' Then it becomes roboticized, and you go back to making things one at a time, but faster and more precisely. With the right raw materials, I can make anything."

“On a starship, there must be plenty of raw materials.”

“I think I’ve found everything I need. They’ll never miss the stuff I steal. That leaves two problems: getting me off the ship, and hiding the video from Limhoon. We can solve the first by making me look like something entirely different from what I am. We solve the second by taking some of my material and spinning off a special-purpose robot to safeguard it.”

“How much different . . . I mean, how different, can you make yourself look? Just being another person won’t help.”

“It has to be a totally un-person-like thing,” she said. But it wasn’t a teacherly quiz-like question. She had run out of answers.

“What are the possibilities? You can’t make yourself look like air. I’m guessing you could look like a packing crate, but how would we know for sure it would be shipped anywhere?”

“No, I can’t turn myself into a packing crate. The object can’t have a surface area much higher than mine. Its volume can’t be much lower, obviously, unless I discard parts, which I’m reluctant to do, for obvious reasons. A crate has a huge surface-to-volume ratio.”

“It does? It’s practically a cube!”

“No, no, no. Don’t count the enclosed volume, just the volume of space occupied by material. Add up the volume of each side.”

“Oh, right.”

They kept at this puzzle for a while, and didn’t solve it right away.

Sheessay had to go. She’d been there for an hour, which was pushing it.

“I should have come during my sleep cycle. No one ever notices I’m not there. Next time.”

She gave him a lingering goodbye kiss.

## Chapter 14

# Retreat

“So you’re the villain who sold out the Contact Fleet for the favors of a robotic whore,” said Byðhe-Admiral Bridget OhMahan.

Sangh was aboard OhMahan’s flagship, *Minhbo Gulf*, in the custody of Velaakh and Wanthu. He had no idea why he was there. He was relieved that he wasn’t being tortured, at least not at that moment. When Velaakh and Wanthu, accompanied by Tawny and Red Angus, had packed him into a shuttle in chains he had wondered if they had some new approach to causing pain, but it was just to get him here, apparently. He should have known by how well dressed they were. Both were wearing business attire; Wanthu even had on a dull red necktie.

“Speak when addressed by a superior officer,” said Velaakh, giving Sangh

a playful whack on the head.

“Ma’am,” said Sangh, “I’ll speak when the Inquisition personnel leave.”

*Even though I’ll pay for it next interrogation session.*

“I was about to suggest the same thing myself. Mr. Wanthu, Ms. Velaakh, you may wait in the outer office.”

Admiral OhMahan had a real suite of offices, with gravity. The forward quarter of her *Minhbo Gulf* rotated like a small space station.

“We must object,” said Kan Wanthu. “Prisoners’ testimonies are unstable enough even with the reassuring presence of their case officers. We need to put their narratives on as sound a footing as possible.”

“Objection noted. Please remove the shackles from the prisoner before you go.”

“We must object,” said Mohra Velaakh, “to taking a risk like that to your person and to your ship. This prisoner may look harmless, but . . .”

“Yes, he certainly does, especially since the shackles are on over his EVA suit. What’s that about? Remove the shackles while I call for someone to escort you out.” She pressed an intercom button. A crackly voice answered.

“An escort will not be necessary,” said Velaakh. Wanthu had already set to work on the shackles. Neither seemed perturbed.

“Never mind,” OhMahan told the intercom. She waited for the various

collars, chains, and weights to be unlocked and piled in front of her desk.

“Don’t forget the handcuffs,” said OhMahan.

The mess of hardware was impressive, Sangh had to admit. Velaakh pocketed the keys as she and her colleague strolled out without a parting word, closing the door behind them.

“Now, then, Lieutenant Fharha, if that’s still your rank, tell me your story.”

“Ma’am, begging your pardon, I can tell you the story the Inquisition has trained me to tell, or I can tell you the truth.”

“Let’s start with the Inquisition version, the version you will testify to in court, when you and possibly others are court-martialled. You still look uncomfortable in that suit. Do you want to take it off?”

“No, I’m all right. I’m going to have to put it back on again when I leave.”

“OK, go ahead, sell me, I mean, tell me your testimony.”

Sangh was pretty clear on this tale by now, the one in which he sold the Contact Fleet out for thirty pieces of silver and a few blow jobs. It took a long time to tell the story, but Admiral OhMahan wanted to hear it all. When he was done he stopped.

There was silence for a minute.

She broke it, “What I still don’t understand is how you, Ambassador and Lieutenant (JG), tricked Commander Limhoon into trying to take over the government of Ertĥ.”

“Sheessay Dezeenawvee had control of the communication channel between you and Light Destroyer *Cross*. Vhatta Limhoon thought you wanted him to be aggressive, and you thought he had reported that Ertĥ was ripe for conquest.”

“And what role did you play in this trickery?”

“Oh, I forgot, I helped rewire *Cross*.” Sangh felt a trickle of sweat. Every slip in his story had brought a jolt from Velaakh for so long that he felt it even when she wasn’t there. But the story just wouldn’t stay still in his head.

“You helped rewire your ship? You just asked the quartermaster to issue you some wire and late at night you crept out . . .”

“Ma’am, the demon Dezeenawvee did most of the work, but I distracted staff members at key moments.”

“Engaged them in conversation while Dezeenawvee crept behind them with wire splicers?”

“That sort of thing.”

“And how did you subvert the control and communication systems of



every ship in the Contact Fleet?”

“I don’t know how that happened. Maybe the Erthlings had found traitors on every ship.”

“And yet you’re the only one that’s been arrested. I’m having trouble picturing a vast crew of traitors performing trivial chores for the super-robots.”

“Ma’am, I can’t claim to understand the thought processes of the Erthlings — or the Inquisition.”

This went on for a while, until finally in exasperation Admiral OhMahan said, “Enough. Now, if you can, tell me the real story.”

To the best of his ability, Sangh did. Parts of it overlapped with the Inquisition version, but there were key differences. The distortions in communication were entirely the fault of the Erthlings, except that Vhatta Limhoon had decided all by himself to land in force and try to decapitate the government of Erth. Sangh thought it likely that the reports received by Fleet from *Cross* were what Limhoon wanted them to believe. But he didn’t really know.

Yes, he had been seduced by the demon Šheessay. He didn’t know why she picked him, unless it was because she was good at spotting fools. He ran from Limhoon because he thought that Limhoon was going to make an

example of him. Besides, he was in love, and he just wanted to escape from war and the Navy and be somewhere with his “girl.” He had been a lousy ambassador, which was, he now believed, exactly what both Šheessay and Vhatta Limhoon were looking for.

He had not helped rewire the ship. He wouldn’t have known how, and they didn’t need his help to get small pieces of electronics to reorganize themselves. He had not intentionally betrayed his country, although his extensive contacts with the enemy had no doubt allowed them to learn too much.

She asked him again, “Why would the demon robot woman bother to seduce *you*?”

He flushed with the shame. “I don’t know. She said she was in love with me. She was convincing, but I see now that the idea of a robot or a demon being in love is obscene. She probably just wanted to tempt my soul with lust the way she tempted Vhatta Limhoon’s with power, to add to the tally of the damned.”

“We have all been dragged to the edge of Hell, Lieutenant.”

“Ma’am, with respect, exaggerating my crimes would itself be a betrayal of the Prezghod Empire. Her Holiness and her advisors deserve to know the truth so they know what it is they’re up against. Because the Erthlings are

not going to go away. They are just as interested in us as we are in them.”

“Very convenient, Lieutenant, that letting you off the hook is the patriotic thing to do.”

“Ma’am, I’m not trying to be let off the hook. I certainly deserve to be punished for what I did. And you, and Her Holiness, deserve to know who else did what *they* did.”

“I thought you were going to say I deserve to be punished for what *I* did.”

“Ma’am, I would never . . .”

“No, it’s all right, it’s true enough. We’ve all got a share of responsibility for the worst defeat in the history of the Navy. The Inquisition is covering things up because that’s what they do. They’ve gotten too good at it when they abet us in lying to ourselves.”

There was more silence. The admiral, who had started out crisply enough, was now slumped in her swivel chair. Gravity had its downside. Sangh felt that if he succumbed to the exhaustion he felt and fell asleep, she would join him in slumber. He forced himself to resist.

“Ma’am, I feel like I haven’t gotten across just how dangerous Erth might turn out to be.”

Admiral OhMahan sat up straighter. She opened a drawer, pulled out a bottle of blue pills, and swallowed a couple of them. She stared at nothing

for a few seconds, as if waiting for the pills to take effect. It was hard to tell if they had.

“Lieutenant, I believe we know the danger. Our ships are not really under our control. It’s as if they’ve been infected with some dread electronic plague. Can we even return to Prezghod without bringing the virus with us?”

Sangh had not yet told the admiral that Šheessay was aboard *Vhatta Clhancy*. He had intended to, but perhaps he would not have to. *Allah, forgive me.*

“What are you going to do, Ma’am?”

“I wasn’t sure until now, but after what you’ve told me my duty is clear.”

She pressed the intercom button, told the receptionist to send Velaakh and Wanthu back in, and find Commander Limhoon. The inquisitors came in immediately, glaring at Sangh and the Admiral.

“Lieutenant Fharha, wait outside.”

“Byšhe-Admiral,” said Velaakh, “we must object. The prisoner must be shackled and under guard at all times.”

“Lieutenant Fharha, will you give me your word as an . . . as a gentleman that you won’t try to escape?”

“While on your ship, yes, Ma’am,” said Sangh.

“Wait outside while I debrief the Inquisitors,” said Admiral OhMahan.

Sangh did as he was told. Wanthu and Velaakh’s two guards, surprised to see him freed from his shackles, grabbed his arms, found a chair, and sat him in it. They remained standing, flanking his chair.

Lieutenant Commander Limhoon, a dark-skinned, clean-shaven young officer, appeared just as Sangh was sitting down. At second glance he was perhaps not *that* young. Most of the hair on his head was intact, but the hairline was unmistakably receding. The resemblance to Sangh’s vhatta was obvious.

Limhoon exchanged some words with the receptionist and went in to OhMahan’s office.

There wasn’t much entertainment in OhMahan’s anteroom, except watching the office personnel. Many of them had little to do and spent their time in desultory conversation at each other’s desks. It was like a large psychiatric practice fallen on hard times, without magazines for the patients to read. There weren’t even any self-help slogans. Sangh could imagine bright signs reading, “Visualize victory,” or “All that matters is the last battle,” a saying attributed to every successful general in history. Sangh was sure there were sayings attributed to generals who lost that last battle, but those would not find their way onto inspirational signs.

LtCdr. Limhoon, Inquisitor Wanthu, and Inquisitor Velaakh discussed the situation for a long time, almost an hour — a P-hour. The office was so much more comfortable than his cell, and the boredom so soothing, that Sangh fell asleep. He was awakened by a cuffing from Inquisitor Velaakh.

“Stand up, and put your hands behind your back,” she said, producing the handcuffs.

“Now, wait a minute,” said Sangh, “the admiral said I could remain free if I gave my word I wouldn’t try to run.”

“On this ship, but we’re taking you back to . . . whatever the name of the prison ship is.”

“*Vhatta Clhancy*,” said Wanthu.

“*Vhatta Clhancy*,” repeated Velaakh.

“Like I’m going to run once I get *there*.”

They were still arguing when LtCdr. Limhoon emerged from OhMahan’s office. He went to the desk of one of the staff officers, chased away another person, and began an earnest discussion that Sangh could not quite hear.

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As far Sangh was able to reconstruct what happened next, the argument about the shackles, as well as Lt. Limhoon’s earnest discussion, ended when an explosion sent a shock wave through the admiral’s office suite. When the

people in the offices woke up — those who were going to wake up — they were floating. The shock had tripped an emergency stop on the machinery rotating the office module of *Minhbo Gulf* and gravity had melted away. Emergency lighting had come on.

The first thing Sangh remembered hearing was Velaakh rasping out, “Oh, shit,” then cries of dismay from all over the office complex. Many of the personnel had spent the entire war in the rotating segment of the flagship, and were out of practice with weightlessness. That was the least of their worries.

The door of OhMahan’s office was blown out, so Sangh assumed the blast had come from that direction. He headed back in. One wrist had a handcuff snaking from it, but that did not keep him from pushing off against the chair he had been sitting in. He hoped it was bolted down. It seemed to be. Most of the furniture was staying put, mercifully not adding to the cloud of swivel chairs, papers, pens, computer screens, keyboards, mobilcoms, rubber bands — all the clutter that gravity keeps in tidy piles for us.

Sangh made it to OhMahan’s office door about the same time as LtCdr. Limhoon. He couldn’t believe the sight that greeted him inside. The admiral had set up a laywitzer on her desk and blown a hole in the wall. The charge had gone off in the next room. Whatever the room’s purpose, it contained

a lot of flammable material, and thick smoke billowed from the hole.

“Admiral!” shouted Limhoon. There was no answer, but she wasn’t hiding. Accompanied by a screen of blood globules, she floated away from her desk, with her head fallen in on itself. It didn’t look much like a human head, or the head of anything.

“Oh, shit, she did it,” said Limhoon.

“Chhrist,” said Sangh, “she miscalculated the range.” Figuring the range for a laywitzer was tricky. You set it for grams of matter traversed, not distance. “If all she wanted to do was kill herself, she should have set it for a kilogram at most.”

“Never mind that,” said Limhoon, “We’ve got to focus on evacuation.”

“What if she left a note?” asked Sangh.

“I hope she e-mailed it.” Limhoon was already fiddling with his mobilcom. “Hello, Emergency Control? This is Commander Willem Limhoon, Adjutant to Byſhe-Admiral OhMahan. We have a major fire in the office segment, behind the wall in Admiral OhMahan’s office. . . . The wall behind her desk. I don’t know the room number. Smoke is filling the entire complex. Suggest immediate seal-off and evacuation of ADMIN-1. I am organizing evacuation now. Gotta go.”

“How can I help?” asked Sangh, but by now Tawny and Red had entered



Admiral OhMahan's office and Red yelled at him to remain still so he could be handcuffed.

"Oh, for the love of God," said Sangh, "I'm not trying to escape; we need to get suited up and evacuate this complex." They tried to handcuff him anyway. He faked a move up and caromed under them. Then they were distracted by a scream from the office door. Velaakh and Wanthu had gotten there just as several blood globules and the admiral's grisly shoulders happened to float through.

Velaakh shrieked, "Fharha! What have you done to Admiral Ohmahan?"

"I didn't do anything! She killed herself with a goddamn laywitzer, and took an office or two with her."

"Let's get back to the shuttle and get out of here," said Velaakh. "We'll deal with this crime in due course."

Just then a shudder ran through the office complex and it began to rotate again. All the flotsam in the air found a place on what used to be the floor, and settled there. "Good," said Velaakh, "we can walk the prisoner back to the escape pod."

"No, you idiot," said Sangh, "If the fire is still going, gravity will allow it to feed itself with fresh oxygen. We better pray that it already went out."

Either the prayer was answered, or Emergency Control overrode the auto-

matic restart of rotation, because a minute or two after the rotation started, before it was even up to full speed, it shut off again, and the group was weightless again.

Weightless and choking, for even without convection the smoke diffused quickly into the clear air. Sangh needed his helmet desperately, so he nipped out of the office and headed back to the shuttle. Blinking red emergency lights pointed the way to the nearest pod bay, which he hoped was the correct one, shuttle bay number 5, where he had left his helmet and, if memory served, a pilot.

He got lucky, and was putting his helmet back on and fastening it to his suit's air supply when Tawny and Red Angus showed up.

"We have orders to cuff you," said Tawny. But she and Red were putting their own helmets on.

"I can't help evacuate this part of the ship if I'm cuffed."

"Nonetheless."

"Admiral OhMahan's orders supersede those of two Inquisition . . . officers, even if she's dead. But supposing they don't — saving lives is more important than making sure we get the Inquisitors back to *Clhancy* in one piece. Are we supposed to wait here for those two khoboks to find their way here, or bring them some vacuum suits and save their sorry asses?"

He could see he was winning the argument. “We won’t accomplish anything unless we each take a suit for someone we find alive. We bring three back, then come back here for three more. All we need are Velaakh and Wanthu plus five more evacuees and we can take off with a clean conscience. *Then* you can cuff me if you still want to. And somebody tell the pilot we’re here and we’re coming back.” He grabbed a suit and took off back into the smoke, not bothering any further with his two minders.

To get back to OhMahan’s office he had to remember every twist and turn he had taken on the way to the shuttle. The emergency lights were of little help because at every fork they blinked on all the walls, pointing the way he had just come. His memory failed him, and he got lost. Fortunately, all roads led to Nurhome — the Admiral’s HQ — and he reached his destination. The smoke didn’t seem to be any thicker. The fire had probably gone out, choked by its own smoke in zero-G. Even the comparatively weak force produced by the ship’s acceleration seemed to be absent. Emergency Control had cut the engine power. The ship was adrift, but hopefully not about to burn up or explode.

He turned up the volume on his helmet’s loudspeaker and radio. “Attention! Commander Limhoon. Please identify yourself with a shout. We are bringing vacuum suits for you and your party.”

As he feared, he heard shouts from all over the office complex. Why couldn't these people do what they were trained to do and find the nearest shuttle? Then he heard the voice of Vhatta Limhoon. Not the Vhatta, his son, shouting: "We're in here, Lieutenant Fharha! Myself and three others."

The two parties found each other. Limhoon would have moved faster toward shuttle bay number 5 if he hadn't been shepherding three civilians. Sangh was grateful for the choking smoke; it concealed them from the others seeking help. He hoped Velaakh and Wanthu were out there so he could deal with them after Limhoon was suited up. But when he got close enough to Limhoon's party he wanted to kick something. Because, of course, the two inquisitors were clinging to Limhoon, making his trek as awkward as possible.

The third civilian was a Specialist/Clerical who must have worked in By'she-Admiral Ohmahan's office, a young girl, by appearances, who had joined the Navy just out of high school. Her nameplate said Niedermeyer.

To Sangh's relief, Tawny and Red Angus caught up with him, carrying two more vacuum suits.

"Here's what we're going to do. We have three suits. The two women, Ms. Velaakh and Ms. Niedermeyer, get priority. The next goes to Adjutant Limhoon, who has vital information to get to Fleet Command." *If there still*

is *a Fleet Command*. “Adjutant Limhoon, if you wouldn’t mind helping the ladies with their suits . . . . Don’t worry, Mr. Wanthu, come with us and we’ll fix you up at the shuttle bay.”

He kicked off and sped to Number 5, which was starting to feel like home. When he got there, he found a crowd of people fighting over the remaining vacuum suits.

“Please, people!” he shouted, amplified enough to startle them all. “If you’ll make your way to your assigned shuttled bay, which should be right down this corridor, one direction or the other.” He hoped what he was saying was true.

“And just who are you?” someone shouted.

Sangh sincerely wished he could reply, *A guy with a squisher*. But all he could say was, “I worked with Byšhe-Admiral OhMahan, and I’m now in charge of evacuation.” He was immediately drowned out by people yelling, “We were here first!”, “This *is* our assigned shuttle bay!”, and other such panicky claims.

This went on for a while. The crowd couldn’t agree on much, but the consensus was that Sangh should butt out. If Willem Limhoon, Jr., didn’t get here soon and exert some leadership, the crowd would lynch Sangh sooner than listen to him. But who emerged from the gloom were Tawny and Red

Angus, guiding three people in vacuum suits. *Three?* was the last thought through Sangh's mind before another explosion ripped through the entire office complex and he lost consciousness.

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He woke up a few minutes later. He was outside the ship, but it wasn't too far away, yet. A lot of other people floated in the vicinity, some in vacuum suits, some not. Some still moving. And so much *paper*. Reams of it, each sheet tumbling, turning from black to flashing white if it passed him, because the sun was on the other side of the *Minhbo Gulf*. *What must it have cost to quantrans all this paper?* He started flipping numbers around, but they wouldn't stay straight in his head. Then he remembered what had happened, or rather what had been happening before he found himself *here*. Although there was no *here* out here, not really. One point was about as good as any other.

He reached for the button that would turn on the emergency beacon on his shoulder. It would blink brightly and send out a recorded distress call on the standard frequency. Funny, his blink should make every piece of paper around him at least intermittently more visible. He felt for the beacon, and

his heart almost stopped when he realized it had been smashed by a splinter from something or other.

He tried the propulsion controls, which squirted air in various directions to change his position, orientation, and velocity. They still worked. With some difficulty he was able to stop tumbling, slowing rotation around as many axes as he could think of until *Minhbo Gulf* stayed in front of him. The ship was mostly intact, but ADMIN-1 had been ripped out and taken pieces of other units with it. There would be massive panic in those other units, now hemorrhaging air. And paper. All the nagging about conserving paper aboard *Cross* and the flagship had *tons* of it. Had had.

As his thought processes converged on competence, he realized that the ship was dwindling, the debris field thinning. He pointed his joystick toward the ship and opened the throttle. But he was still daydreaming. After a few minutes he realized to his horror that the controls on the suit were set for position adjustment, not rapid motion. He had essentially told it to keep moving at this speed, but move a few meters in the direction of *Minhbo Gulf*, as if he were trying to spraypaint his name on a large object that was traveling along with him; each squirt just wasted some air without changing his velocity at all. Like *that* object coming up on his left. On second thought, not *that* one — it was rotating too fast, and would surely whack him if

he didn't .....

Whack him it did, right in the ass, sending him tumbling only God knew where, so fast that the blood pooled in his extremities. He lost consciousness.

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"Allaḥ seems to have sent Fharha back," someone said.

"With a couple of broken ribs and probable soft-tissue injuries," someone else said.

"Allaḥ, the All-Merciful, loves justice," someone else said.

*Where am I? Hell? Am I about to find out what it feels like to have justice seared into your skin?*

"Where am I?" he asked.

"We just shipped you back to *Vhatta Clhancy*." It was Kan Wanthu, not someone he was eager to see. His heart sank.

"Tawny and Red guided you back to the shuttle bay, just before the second explosion. I guess I have Allaḥ to thank for that."

"His Wisdom is beyond question. Unfortunately, Inquisition guard NQ-63A09 did not survive the second explosion."

"Did Allaḥ help you take the suit from Commander Limhoon?"

"On the contrary, Lieutenant Commander Limhoon was glad to surrender



it to a superior officer. I hold the rank of Commander *ex officio* as an Inquisition Overpriest serving on a naval vessel in wartime.”

“Why he didn’t he just follow us? The smoke wouldn’t have killed him.”

“He said he was going to search for more people who were panicking or disoriented. He was a courageous man,” simpered Mohra Velaakh, who seemed almost happy, being alive and all.

“We’ll never know . . .” *we’ll never know what Admiral OhMahan was thinking. She may even have left a written confession or history of this fiasco.*

“Thank you for helping us out, and saving Lieutenant Niedermeyer’s life,” said Wanthu. “And now it’s time for you to go back to your cell.” He nodded to Tawny and a marine, who escorted Sangh. *So Red Angus’s real name was NQ-63A09. He was a decent guy, old A09, all things considered.*

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The next day Sangh was even more surprised to see Vhatta Limhoon than he had been the first time. He stopped thinking about how much pain he was in. If there had been enough gravity he would have stood at attention.

“Vhatta Limhoon, sir, your son . . . ?” He saw the answer in Limhoon’s dull eyes. “Sir, let me offer my sincere condolences. He was a courageous young man.”

Limhoon paused, halfway into the cell. He finally pulled all the way in.

“Thanks, Fharha. I know he was. You were there, no? One of the last to see him alive?”

Sangh felt another pulse of hot shame that he had failed to save Willem from that lizard Inquisitor. What could he say? But the silence expanded and Vhatta Limhoon’s stare bored into him. Finally he said, “Sir, we . . . had an intense time of it out there. I’m so sorry we couldn’t save Willem Jr. He died the way we all hope to, bravely serving his Poph.”

“You’re laying it on a little thick. And you’re hiding something.”

“I suppose you should know what I saw, even though everyone involved in the evidence chain, those who survived, will deny most of it. But you deserve to know the story, even if it causes you pain.” He was floating now, looking for something to do with his hands. Limhoon listened impassively. *If anyone can take pain, . . .*, Sangh thought.

“My guards, NQ-63A09, now deceased, and the other one, Tawny, don’t know her real . . . number, were helping me distribute vacuum suits. We had three suits and four people. I gave one to Willem in preference to Inquisitor Wanthu. I assumed that Willem knew more about Admiral OhMahan’s recent thought processes than anyone else, and that that information might be vital to what’s left of Fleet Command. Then I went back to get more suits,

and got caught up in a lifeboat riot. NQ-63A09 showed up with three people in vacuum suits, Ms. Niedermeyer, Inquisitor Velaakh — and Inquisitor Wanthu, who had commandeered the suit I gave your son. Then the second explosion happened.”

“I see,” was all Vhatta Limhoon said. Neither of them looked at the other.

“Thank you for the information, Mr. Fharha. I hope you don’t expect much to come of it. Will did nothing wrong, and neither did the other guy, really. Pulling rank may be rude, but sometimes it’s necessary. Will did what you would have done in the same situation, deferring to senior personnel. He never came anywhere near disgracing his uniform or his family in his entire 28 years. Any action with the slightest chance of besmirching his honor he would have seen as beneath him.”

Limhoon started gliding back and forth. Sangh watched him go by, one way, then the other way, lightly springing off each opposing wall in turn. He looked like he might have been a great spaceball player in his youth, one of many personal facts he would never reveal. Sangh could tell he had something else on his mind.

Limhoon pulled off some tricky maneuver that ended with him hovering just above Sangh, and drifting slowly down.

“You know, you remind me of Will in some ways. There have been a lot of times when I wished that boy would *take some initiative* and get on with his career.”

As Limhoon floated evenly with Sangh, less than a meter away, Sangh realized he could smell alcohol on his breath.

“But no, 28 years old, and still an adjutant. A damn fine one, I understand, and I’ve seen him work with the Admiral. An excellent staff officer, just . . . excellent.”

He reached the floor and suddenly slammed his right hand down on it. He began to rotate and translate through space, but didn’t notice. The words just flowed out of him. “If *I* were competing with someone else for a spacesuit that might be my only ticket out of a burning ship, I would have demanded it, using my gun if necessary. He had a good case. He was the only military personnel who knew OhMahan’s recent state of mind. He might have grabbed signal about what she believed would happen when we reached Prezghod, what information she was privy to, or thought she was privy to. She might have left me explicit instructions of some kind, or some warning, and I alone can get those messages out, nobody else: *me*.” He punched the air with his right fist to punctuate what he said, making motions that affected his rotation in odd ways but didn’t change his velocity

toward the ceiling.

“On the other side, we have Kan Wanthu.” He said the name as if it were a contagious skin disease. “A man that this navy and this empire can dispense with and never notice that nobody’s seen him around lately. What’s his expertise? Turning up the voltage on schmucks like you, Fharha. He doesn’t have enough imagination to be a sadist. So, okay, Kan, you brought the Admiral the confession of Sangh Fharha, the worst war criminal in history. She obviously got a lot out of it. You can go now. Don’t bother to call or write.” By now Limhoon had reached the ceiling, just as his ass rotated into an up direction. He sat there as if he had planned the whole maneuver. He was wedged comfortably between two pipes. He wasn’t far away, his head just half a meter over Sangh’s head.

*I’m with you. Lay the scum off!* thought Sangh.

“But *my boy* was half of Ohmahan’s brain — the half that didn’t fry itself.” He was now looking down at Sangh as if at the chief judge in a trial court. “She was a fine paper pusher, Fharha, a superb counter of beans. She needed somebody with good tactical instincts, and that was Will. I don’t see how she would have gotten along without him. Of course, now we will have to get along without either one of them; and the 90% of her staff that are missing or dead at this point.”

“That’s all who have been found? Ten percent?” *Thirty people out of 300.*

“Oh, enough, let me out of here.” He started to unwedge himself from the ductwork, unbending his long legs from under various pipes.

Sangh said, “Well, we’ve done some *good work* today. I think we’ve achieved some important insights. Let’s stop here so you and everyone else, by which I mean me, can process the things you’ve shared with us.”

“Everything’s a joke with you, huh, Fharha? You deserve whatever they do to you, even if, technically, you are innocent.”

“Just a technicality.”

Limhoon said nothing, but uncoiled and in one graceful motion launched himself toward the hatchway. With envy, Sangh watched him, wishing he too could swish through the net like that. But Limhoon landed nowhere near the hatchway. His head came down on the edge of the open hatch, and Sangh winced in sympathy. He kicked off and landed softly near the hatch and helped Vhatta Limhoon, who seemed to be having a hard time shrugging this off.

“If you hadn’t been drinking, that never would have happened,” said Sangh loyally.

“You better believe it,” said Limhoon, pulling himself through the hatch-

way, then slithering back to close the hatch behind him.

“I’ll work on that joke thing,” yelled Sangh in his direction.

Only when Limhoon was gone did Sangh realize he was no longer wearing prisoner orange, but had been issued a Navy uniform without insignia.

Sheessay also came to see him that night, if it was night. Inquisition prisoners have different schedules from the rest of humanity. She was solicitous.

“How’re you feeling, muffin?” she asked.

“Sore all over. My neck feels like my head was torn off and put back on.”

“Well, do you notice anything different?” she asked, spinning gracefully around, suspended in front of him.

“Other than the fact that you get more beautiful and talented every time I see you, no,” he said.

“Where do you learn those sweet things to say? Wherever it is, they’re working. But don’t distract me. I have created,” she undid her belt and held it up, “a blackmail bot! Using materials I found in my own home, namely, this godforsaken starship. Mostly — I had to use some spare bones and muscles, so I’m a bit shorter.”

He knew what to say. “It’s not really noticeable. At all. But tell me about this ’bot.”

She touched it at one end, and suddenly it came alive. Sangh was taken

aback. “It’s a snake!”

“Well, yes, sweetie, it is shaped like a tube. Although it can flatten itself to about 3 millimeters thickness. The time and effort I’ve creating a 3-millimeter-thick set of circuit blocks — you’ve no idea! It can do more contortions than a . . . than a contortionist! Right now I’m going to let it smell you, and do some other biomeasurements, so it knows whose welfare it’s meant to care about more than anything else. Just relax.”

Just relaxing was not easy as the little bot wriggled and squirmed around Sangh’s waist, back, and face. “It’s not going to go into my pants, is it?” he inquired.

“No, no, that’s reserved for me! See? It’s done already.” The snake-shaped robot wriggled over to the side of the room, and searched for a way out. It found an air-intake duct, and slithered away. “Now it’s hiding. Don’t worry, I’m tracking it. It won’t go far. We want it to be sure to make it to Prezghod, so it’s looking for personal baggage. The ideal hiding place would be in Vhatta Limhoon’s suitcase. If it finds something like that, it will just snuggle in and become part of the frame. Very hard to detect. When we get to Prezghod, it will find other places to hide.”

“How exactly is it a ‘blackmail bot’?” he said, although he thought he could see it.



“That little guy has a lot of skills. It will stay close to you and monitor your health and happiness. The more restrictions on your freedom it finds, the unhappier it gets. Eventually its frustration causes it to find communication systems and inject sounds and images into them. Initially these are fragmentary, but as time goes by and you remain incarcerated the sounds and images coalesce into a faithful movie of Limhoon and Dhluzio subverting the mission of the Contact Fleet. There’s nothing they can do about it except release you.”

“You are a genius,” he said. “Have I told you that?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, “it’s so hard keeping track of all the things you say. You’re just going to have to repeat them until I really get it.”

But they intertwined and the things they repeated weren’t really very meaningful after this.

Until she left, when he warned her, “Watch your scheduling, darling. Limhoon has been visiting me so much lately I’m worried about the two of you meeting here. Remember, he knows what you look like.”

She laughed. “I haven’t forgotten. Don’t worry. I have some hooks into his comms channels; I know what he’s going to do before he does, sometimes.”

“All right, genius. Come here,” for one more, lingering, goodbye kiss.

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After the explosion, *Minhbo Gulf* had lost all electric power. The fusion drive shut down automatically. The rest of the fleet continued to accelerate, and would soon leave the drifting hulk behind. A drifting hulk with over a thousand survivors aboard, and only a couple of days' supply of oxygen. Not to mention tons of office supplies.

It was up to Fleet Command to figure out how to evacuate them, but Fleet Command had been decapitated by the explosion aboard *Minhbo Gulf*. Without waiting for them, the captains of the ships nearest *Minhbo Gulf* decided to go back and commence search-and-rescue. *Vhatta Clhancy* was one of them. Sangh had never been told the name of the ship's captain, but the prisoners used the nickname "Miss Lonelypants" for her or him. He suspected that Vhatta Limhoon had used his growing influence to get her to turn the ship around.

There is no "reverse" gear on a rocket. To get it to match velocity and approximate position with an object moving away required it to turn over, fire for a while, then turn over again and fire some more. It was high-school physics to figure out how long and how much to fire in each direction. Once they had rendezvoused near *Minhbo Gulf*, they evacuated the surviving crew and as many supplies as made sense, including as much plutonium-298 from the cooled fusion drive as was feasible. Then they caught up with the rest

of the fleet.

Fortunately, they were near the turnover point, halfway through their journey, when they were traveling at maximum speed, about 200 km/sec. From here on the fleet had to *decelerate* until it reached its destination, the flash point at the edge of the Solar System. Most of the ships had to turn over just once. The ships involved in the rescue mission to *Minhbo Gulf* had to flip several more times. Once they were all together and pointing vaguely back toward Erth and Sunn, the entire Contact Fleet remained powered down for a few days for preventive maintenance. If allowed to fly ballistically forever, constrained only by the faraway Sunn's weak gravity, they would become a flock of comets, tracing an ellipse that returned to the vicinity of Erth every few centuries.

The crew of a starship become habituated to the sustained bass rumble of the fusion drive, as to the rhythm of their own blood circulation. The drive imposed only a pale imitation of gravity — 0.00085-gee — but when it cut out they felt becalmed. In the quiet they could hear their own heartbeat.

Sangh wished, not for the first or hundredth time, that he had Tralf to talk to. Of course, smuggling Tralf into his cell would have been . . . probably impossible. But maybe he would have been permitted a phone call or a visit, especially now that he had signed their damned confession.

In the exercise yard, the mood had soured. There were versions of space-ball one could play in micro-gravity, but no one felt like it. Prisoners spent more time talking and less time playing games. That meant more time spent fighting, bragging, bulshitting, and passing around outrageous rumors. Some of them turned out to be true, as when Sangh was called out by Bratt Cheltara as he entered the Yard:

“Fharha! Your pal Limhoon is running the Fleet now! Did you hear?”

Cheltara had established a domain for his entourage in a side wall, about 5 m from the “floor.”

Sangh thought for a second. “No, but really, when you think about it, how many candidates were there for the job?”

Cheltara shrugged. “I don’t know. What are we talking about, Admirals or something?”

“Limo’s no admiral,” said Sangh. He couldn’t remember ever using a nickname like that for Vhatta Limhoon, but language was about the only tough-guy trait in his repertoire.

“Actually, he is,” said Nadon, a spectacled, balding prisoner, who looked like an embezzler, and in fact *was* an embezzler. “Or so I heard. They made him a temporary admiral so he was eligible to command the Contact Fleet, or what’s left of it.” Nadon idly twisted around a couple of meters away,

exercising some muscle group or other.

“Who would want the job?” said Cheltara. “You couldn’t sell these ships for spare parts, let alone put them into a real firefight.”

“Really, guys,” said Sangh, “is this the kind of morale you’re going to take back to your units when your sentences are up?”

“You’re so full of shit, Fharha,” said Cheltara.

Sangh heard the actual, full truth from Vhatta, now acting Rear Admiral, Limhoon a few nights later. He was expecting a visit from Šheessay, and when the hatch opened to reveal the vhatta he was knew instantly that things had gone seriously awry.

“I know, I know,” said Admiral Limhoon, “you were expecting your little mechanical whore, weren’t you?”

By reflex, Sangh jumped up, forgetting that in zero-G such a gesture would send him crashing into the ceiling . The blow to his head barely registered, the shock of his secret’s being known had hit him so hard.

“I can read your mind, Fharha: now you’re wondering how we figured out what you and your robot pal have been up to. It’s a funny story, actually. They monitor the prisoners pretty heavily, especially Inquisition prisoners, which on this ship is you. For an entire P-cycle of 24 P-hours, some poor guy has to watch you eat, sleep, and pick your nose. Not, of course, the

same guy all the time. After surveilling you for however many days you've been in here, someone in the surveillance department looked at the logs for anomalies and realized that there was one key activity that was missing. Guess what it was?"

"Reading the *Vhatican Observer*?"

"No, what they primly call 'bodily self-recreation,' or what I might have called 'bashing the bishop' back before I started hanging out with bishops. 'Erotic self-stimulation' might be the scientific term ..."

"Excuse me, sir, but you could go on quite a while listing euphemisms and slang terms for masturbation. Can I stipulate that I understand what you meant?"

"Sure, Lieutenant. Here's the puzzle: When they observe that a prisoner younger than, say, 85 isn't beating off, there's only a couple of possible explanations. In your case, one can't dismiss the hypothesis that you might have been castrated by some of the hard cases in here after one too many wisecracks. However, 99% of the time the explanation is that the prisoner is getting some regular pussy somewhere."

"He might have a boyfriend, sir," Sangh said. *Oh, Sheessay, Sheessay, one little slip-up.*

"Don't be obscene, Fharha. Look, in your case, I don't think we have

to worry about that possibility; your perversion is more unusual. Now, the problem is that Inquisition prisoners have an even harder time than the regular prisoners getting away for a little sexual R&R, especially on a daily basis. You're on camera in solitary 23 hours a day, and the other hour you're under the watchful eyes of two guards. So after review and a careful check of the monitoring facility, they decided you must be a master of self-denial and discipline, and just *resisted the temptation* to wax your warhead. Even though this is simply absurd; the Inquisition has had *cardinals* in prison under TV surveillance, and they *all* punch their munchkin at least now and then — even the women.”

*Sweetie, Sangh thought, you probably never pleasure yourself; AIs don't have the odd drives people are saddled with. It just didn't occur to you to include it in the mundane activities I should be observed doing.*

Limhoon's story was not yet finished. “Meanwhile, as soon as I got through congratulating myself for being promoted from jailbird to CINC-ConFleet — did I show you my star?” Here he flicked a star on his collar. “... And got myself and some other key people like Dhluzio relocated to new quarters on my flagship, *Phoemoa*, I asked to be updated on you. I hope you derive some satisfaction from being such an intense focus of attention, under the old administration as well as the new one, that is, the Limhoon

administration.” He obviously liked the sound of that, as well as the sound of “my flagship” and the shine of his new star.

“I asked to be updated on you, and that’s when they notified me of this incredible statistical anomaly, this record-breaking string of self-abuse-free P-days. It took me a long time, but one of the few things I learned on this accursed cruise is that if something impossible is happening, that damned robot Sheessay is at the bottom of it. I asked the NQ, Supposing someone was visiting Fharha in his cell and supplying him with nookie, in a way that you couldn’t detect? Who would have access to the cell? From there it was child’s play. I looked through the personnel records on all the guards, and she stood out like a sore thumb: the most beautiful guard on the ship, not that that’s saying much.”

“So where is she now?”

“She’s under arrest, if that’s the right term for locking up a killer robot. She’s under round-the-clock surveillance and on a low-power diet. She can barely move, but she shouldn’t really need to. When we get back to Prezghod we’ll either keep her in prison or bottle her in formaldehyde, whichever is safer and more useful to our counterrobotics effort.”

Sangh was too numb to say anything.

“I see your thoughts are elsewhere, you lovesick mother-phooker. I’ll leave



you to them while I go kickstart this fleet.”

He zoomed to the hatch, opened it, and as he floated down into it he said, “I do hope I don’t see you again. I really shouldn’t have come this time, but I just had to see your face when you heard my news.” As he sank out of sight, someone else, probably one of his many aides-de-camp, reached up to close the hatch.

Sangh barely noticed him and his entourage leave. All the plans he and Sheessay had made were predicated on their working together. Those plans now looked like a sandcastle on the beach after a hailstorm. And she was in the worst trouble she had ever been in. He would never get near her again, never be tempted by the sight and taste of that precious body. He floated aimlessly around the room until a few hours later the rumble of the ship’s fusion drive started up again and he floated gently to the rear wall of his cell.

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Months passed, and they made it to the flash point, a miniature black hole orbiting the eighth planet from the Sun, the one the ‘Tayhan’s called *Neptuno*. The Prezghodlings had erected an elaborate base on the frozen-nitrogen surface of *Neptuno*. It was from here that they had assembled the Contact Fleet, some two P-years before, using materials mined from the

core of the planet. You couldn't really send a starship through the quantum connection they had exploited. You sent personnel and some materials, then constructed big things like starships from scratch. It had been an outrageously ambitious and expensive mission, and it had largely succeeded, all except for the part Vhatta Limhoon had blown at the end. By rights he should have been drummed out of the Navy.

As it was, he was going to escape serious censure, again. The Commander of the Expedition, Byšhe-Admiral Phloat Vhessalin listened with disbelief to the recommendation from every surviving flag officer of the Contact Fleet, that the Fleet be completely destroyed, along with almost all of the supplies on it. But he acquiesced. Crew members were allowed to keep two-tenths cubic meter of personal baggage per person. They were to come over nude, in escape pods supplied by ships that had never left the flash point. Yes, it was against safety regulations to have personnel on pods not wearing spacesuits, but it would be far more dangerous to allow contamination from Erth leak through to Prezghod. All the starships that had visited the inner Solar System, along with their escape pods and landing craft, were to be destroyed by nuclear devices. All the personnel transported over were to be X-rayed to make sure they were human.

Sangh heard all this secondhand. The only part he experienced firsthand

was having to board an escape pod naked, along with five other men. (Men and women traveled separately.) All the worry he and Šheessay had had about how to conceal her was academic now, and not in a good way. Would the blackmail bot make it through? There was a chance. It could certainly fit in a space of size 0.2 cubic meters. It might or might not avoid being detected. *I hope you built it as well as you claimed*, Sangh said to Šheessay, whom he could talk to only telepathically.



## Chapter 15

# Return

The smell of the street was unmistakable. Diesel fumes, the nearby odor of French fries, the shouts of men and women unloading double-parked trucks or trying to get around them. The traffic had idled the Inquisition paddywagon carrying Sangh to his jurisdiction hearing. The paddywagon was windowless, but the smells and sounds were enough to tell him, if he had not already known, that it was a city street, and the city was on Prezghod. The smell of the actual place hit him with a unbearable sense of loss. But he didn't have time to worry about that.

*Almost half of all prisoner escapes occur during transfers, and this is no exception — I hope.*

He sat shackled on a bench in a cell in an Inquisition bus. He didn't

need to look around to know his surroundings; he had studied the Inquisition prisoner-transfer buses in detail, and knew every square inch of armor plate, bullet-proof glass, weapon racks, benches, and comm systems. In the end, the plan he and his co-conspirators had come up with didn't require all that knowledge. It was too simple and elegant.

There was a jolt as the bus came to a sudden stop. The guard sitting on the bench opposite Sangh gave a curse as they both lurched forward and then back. Except for crash harnesses they would have wound up in each other's lap.

"We're supposed to be going through quiet back streets," the guard said. She was a stout woman whose name plate read "NQ-49D59." "Who plans these things?"

You can't hail an Inquisition prison bus, so it was odd to hear the scratchy-wheezy sound of the front door sliding open. The bus swayed as someone came up the steps. Officer NQ-49D59 jumped up. Sangh heard the muffled sound of someone walking back to where four guards were posted in the benches at the rear of the bus. There were more sounds, harder to make sense of, then a knock on the door of their compartment. The key turned and someone stuck their head into the cell.

"At ease men," said the interloper, "it's me, NQ-06B10, from the forward

escort. There seems to be a routine traffic jam up ahead, nothing to be concerned about.”

But Sangh and Officer NQ-49D59 didn’t actually hear the end of this speech; they had fallen asleep, the guard crumpling where she stood. Two minutes later, Sangh woke up, and struggled to sit up straight. NQ-06810 was standing in front of him, holding an empty syringe.

“Hello, Commander Dhluzio,” said Sangh.

“Lieutenant Fharha. No time for chit-chat. “Thoraxine doesn’t have that long a half-life. Let’s get the uniform off this woman and see if you can fit into it.”

He peered out into the corridor. He looked left, toward the rear, where the four guards were still passed out, then right, toward the oblivious driver in his own compartment, armored and locked to prevent hijacking. He then opened the cell opposite Sangh’s, where Šheessay and her guard were presumed to be.

He stepped back in surprise, and skittled to her left, toward the front of the bus, blocking the driver’s view of what was going on. Sangh and Šheessay were looking directly into each other’s cells.

Šheessay had already freed herself and gotten out of her prison uniform. However, instead of the guard’s uniform she was wearing a sundress; where

had *that* come from?. The guard in her compartment had crumpled like the others, but he had been felled before the door had been opened. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth. He was never going to wake up. The only thing she had taken from the guard was his gun, which, at this point, was aimed right at Dhluzio.

“Put your hands on your head, Commander, and get into the cell, ” she said, and Dhluzio complied, crowding in against Sangh and the slumped-over bulk of Officer NQ-49D59.

“Sangh, sweetie,” she said, her voice filled with anguish, “I just can’t go with you. Sooner or later we’re going to split up, and it might as well be now.”

“Sheessay, darling, we have a chance to be happy together, just you and me. We can stay out of the limelight, avoid politics, and just be people.” He reached slowly for the guard’s gun, which unfortunately was partly pinned under her body. He got his hand on the grip.

Sheessay aimed carefully at Sangh’s heart. She was unlikely to miss. “Sangh, stand up, put your hands on your head, and stay away from that gun.”

“I’m sorry, Sheessay, I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

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The conditions under which Sangh was held sounded about the same as they had been during the retreat from the Solar System — solitary confinement 23 hours a day, with one hour in the exercise yard. Gravity made it easier to be crude. A bucket for a toilet would not work in zero gravity, and in zero gravity the bed had to be more complicated than a pallet on the floor. Nurhome was near the Equator, and the temperature averaged 28 degrees except during the brief rainy season; there was no air conditioning for the prisoners, which was unfeasible on a spaceship. In the exercise yard of Blessed Sacrament Spiritual Reflection Center, the whimsical name of the hellhole the NQ ran in the heart of Nurhome, the prisoners' feet were anchored sternly to the ground. Everything, even the dust raised by the scuffle of feet, settled quickly back.

Still, Sangh lived for the hour when he could get out of his cell, stretch, and look at the sky. After just one day inside, it was delicious to stand in the dusty inner courtyard of the prison and look up. He barely noticed that the courtyard's footprint was smaller than the space allocated on *Vhatta Clhancy*, maybe 10 meters by 10 meters, because his he was looking straight out into the unlimited vertical dimension. The sky was clear and blue, as usual in Nurhome in most seasons. Sangh thought that if he stared long enough he could see the interstellar space beyond the blue, all the way to

Erth.

There were only five or six men in the Yard that day, and no women. Their faces were worn down. They had trouble looking Sangh in the eye, though they smiled and mumbled something. Their smiles came out as grimaces. One cried, constantly but furtively.

The first person Sangh said hello to was a middle-aged man with dry gray eyes, whose hair had seemingly turned gray to match. Like the others, he didn't look like a hard case.

"Hi," said Sangh. "I'm new here; the name's Fharha, Sangh Fharha."

"Kiwanno Houston."

"What are you in for?" asked Sangh.

"You don't ask that of casual acquaintances. It's like asking about my bowel movements, which, actually, I'd much rather talk about." He was kicking idly at a dirt clod which had somehow survived the lack of rain.

"Well, gosh. Geez. I guess I'm stuck with my habit of tripping over every social rule until it's spelled out for me in black and white. I'm not as dumb as I appear."

"Don't worry about it." Kiwanno's dirt clod had been reduced to dust, which Sangh hoped would settled into the ground quickly so he wouldn't have to inhale it.

“Does anyone play baseball in here?” said Sangh.

“Sure. The spectators sit over in the tiers of stadium seats over there, near the refreshment booth.”

“Is that a No?”

“Do you see any bats and balls?”

“Perhaps we have to request them.”

“Yes, trot over to one of those guys in the red uniforms and see if they’ll help us out. And bring back a pack of cigarettes while you’re there.”

“Kiwanno, you have a great future in sarcasm, if anyone starts paying for it.”

Another prisoner who had been leaning against the nearby courtyard wall, barked a short little laugh at this.

“Another way to make it pay would be to get up a collection to pay Kiwanno to shut up,” he said.

“Hi, I’m Sangh Fharha,” said Sangh.

“My, I’m forgetting my manners,” said Kiwanno. “Mr. Fharha, meet my friend Rhon Jiang. He’s in for letting his subscription to *The Pophacy Today* lapse.”

Sangh shook hands with Rhon Jiang, a tall, skinny guy, who was mostly bald.

“We could also organize a basketball tournament,” said Sangh.

“It doesn’t take long in here before just standing in a place where you can see sky and breathe nonstale air is entertainment enough.”

“I know it could be worse,” said Sangh. *It’s torture doing nothing in a dull cell 23 hours out of every day, but at least I’m not being physically tortured.* “But what would happen if you *asked* for a basketball and a hoop?”

“Who knows?” said Rhon. *How long before I’m as dead as these guys?*

Their time in the yard was up, and back Sangh went to his cell.

The next day he got to use the yard in the early dawn hours, when he stood and shivered. *What month is it? Or should I say P-month? If I gave a shit I could scratch marks on my cell walls. If I had something sharp.*

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Phase I of Sangh’s brilliant escape plan was set in motion when he received a visitor. Normally an Inquisition prisoner never received any visitors; anyone who had known them was never sure they were still alive. Sangh was especially happy to see this one.

“Goddamn it, Fharha, will I never be rid of you?” were the first words out of Vhatta Limhoon’s mouth when he was admitted to Sangh’s cell.

“I’m guessing that the airwaves are starting to carry images of you and Commander Dhluzio cooking up mischief before the landing on *Terra*.”

“Very insightful. Now tell me your price for making them go away.”

“First, it’s nice to see you. How *is* Commander Dhluzio? How is Mrs. Limhoon? Please be sure to send her my condolences about the death of Willem Jr. I would come over and shake your hand, but they keep me shackled to this bench.”

“God, it stinks in here, now that you mention it,” said Limhoon. He wrinkled his nose at the bucket next to Sangh’s bench. This was about the only furniture in the cage he was kept in. Limhoon had had to go through many locked doors to get here.

“You’ll get used to the smell, but the solitary confinement is hard to take. So, about the embarrassing disclosures that are appearing out there. There’s really not much I can do about them, unless you can get me and Sheessay out of here.”

“I can have you tortured until you turn the blackmail off.”

“No, that won’t work. Sheessay and I released a little robot into the wild, so to speak, and it gets antsy unless it can verify that I’m walking around free. It can’t find me, so it’s getting very nervous.”

“Oh, my God.”

“It’s very good at tapping into the comm system, interrupting broadcasts with images and sound bites telling what *really* happened in the Solar System

debacle. They'll escalate to detailed documentaries unless ..."

Limhoon threw up his hands. "Unless I get you out. You might as well ask me to fly to the Vhatican and kiss the Poph's ass. This is an *Inquisition* prison. There's a special justice system for national-security prisoners, and I can't just go out and hire a lawyer and pay your bail."

"Right, I know you can't. But there are people who can. Your only chance is to call in every favor to get me some time with those people."

Limhoon tried to pace back and forth. He had the gravity now, but lacked room. "Okay, who did you have in mind?"

"I'm thinking that an hour or two with the top Jesuit bishop in Nurhome would convince them that I'm more valuable free than imprisoned."

"Look, I'll try. What choice do I have? The person you want is Monseen Jhessup, the current General of the order, and head of the Jesuit Academy. Do you mind sharing your reasoning with me? It might help in persuading her to see you."

"Sure. The Monseen knows, or I'll convince her, that the charges against me are ridiculous, and that Šheessay is at worst a POW, who should be released now that the war is long over. Of course, justice is no reason by itself to intervene in the deal between the Navy and the Inquisition."

Sangh had rehearsed this speech for hours every day. It was all he had to

think about. Now it poured out of him. “What’ll give the Jesuits a reason to intervene is that I’ve got tons of valuable information about Erth that is going to waste. I spent more time doing in-depth investigations of the planet and its society than anyone else. In fact, who besides me was paying any attention to

erthianGH affairs at all? Bewinda knows some history, gleaned from books, and I’ll bet the Jesuits have gobbled *that* up.”

“Yeah, they have,” said Limhoon. “She’s left the Navy, and taken a position at the Academy.”

Sangh coughed his breath; envy at Bewinda’s easy freedom flowed through him. “Well, there you are. I realize that asking to be exonerated is a bit much. I just want a chance to escape, and start a new life with a new name. The name ‘Sangh Fharha’ can be the name of a traitor if that’s what you need to save your career. You can have your story. But the traitor can escape, and still be a traitor. If anything, knowing that he’s still at large, along with mysterious co-conspirators, may be just what the Navy needs. Just so long as I’m far away, leading a free life.”

This was the only way the thing could be managed, he was pretty sure. He had wracked his brains trying to think of an alternative that would save his family from disgrace, but he had come up empty. Keeping his new life

safe would mean never seeing his family again, which almost killed him to think about. But being shackled to a bench 23 hours a day would really kill him, even if his body sat in these shackles for decades. Only the thought of escape had kept his soul alive so far.

Limhoon stopped pacing. “All right, let’s not prolong this little talk any more than we have to. What kind of reprieve is your psycho-torture bot going to give me while I work on this project?”

“Hard to say. Weeks? Days? By design, its behavior is not easy to predict.” Sangh tried to give the impression that he actually understood how the ’bot worked.

“I will do what I can. Guard!” he shouted, the traditional signal that a visitor is ready to go, even though the surveillance system made shouting unnecessary.

“I’m not done yet, Captain. I want an interview with Monseen Jhessup at the Academy, far from Inquisition surveillance. Preferably dressed in something other than this bright-orange color scheme; in my Navy uniform would be ideal. They will have my word of honor as a naval officer that I won’t try to escape.”

“You know, they could just torture the information out of you.”

“How did that work out with my confession?”



“We’re in Nurhome now. They’ve got the best interrogators in the world here.”

“Let them have a go. They might agree to keep it a secret from the blackmail ’bot, but only if you tell them all about that ’bot.”

“Shit. Okay, okay, I’ll get you a nice audience with Jhessup. Why not? Sometimes if you make outrageous demands you get more than if you make reasonable ones.”

“I learned that from you, sir,” said Sangh.

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A month later, Just when Sangh was beginning to despair, Vhatta Limhoon came through. Sangh was summoned to the administration block of the prison. Only one or two inmates happened to be out in the corridor as he was taken toward the exit. They raised their eyes to see who was leaving alive. One was Kiwanno. They nodded at each other. Sangh smiled to let Kiwanno know he wasn’t being taken to be shot. *As far as I know.*

His Navy uniform had been destroyed back before the quantum transit, but Limhoon had seen to it that he got a new one. It even fit. When Sangh left the prison gate, it was in a black Tagore, unmarked, with a uniformed driver. Such a sleek car could belong only to someone high up in the power hierarchy of Prezghod. He sat in the back seat with a Jesuit priest dressed in

a traditional black cassock. There was no other guard. He had given Vhatta Limhoon his word that he would not escape, but in any case an amateurish rush for the street was not what he had in mind. He was pretty sure that almost all prisoners were recaptured within a few months even if they beat the odds and made a clean getaway. Sangh wanted his escape to be wired. They mustn't try very hard to find him.

The priest was a dapper little man who introduced himself as Fr. Shihab Lhogan. He was one of Monseen Jhessup's secretaries. She was eager to meet the notorious Sangh Fharha, he said, for "oh, so many reasons."

The car did not have to go far to reach the Academy, on whose grounds the General of the Jesuit order lived. Her mansion had a small circular driveway with a few shrubs and succulents tastefully arranged in the center. Water for ornamental plants was in short supply on Prezghod. The driver opened the doors for Sangh and Fr. Lhogan by hand, and the priest led the way into the General's residence.

As Sangh's eyes grew accustomed to the indoor lighting, he looked around with growing admiration for the Monseen and her interior decorator. There were several paintings, and an amazing number of books, the old kind, on paper. He wished he could stop and read some of the titles.

He was led to a study in the back of the house. As he entered, a tall lady

with gray hair and a thin face rose to greet him.

“Ah, Father Lhogan, so this is the dread traitor Sangh Fharha,” she said.

“Lieutenant Fharha, please bow to Monseen Mami Jhessup.”

“No bow necessary, Lieutenant Fharha, or even a salute.” She extended her hand and gave him a brisk handshake. “Sit down. Father Lhogan, please order us some coffee.”

Sangh’s chance had come. He made his case. It was pretty straightforward. Prezghod had demonstrated “galactic reach,” but when it encountered another civilization, it was found to be lacking in several respects. Its computer technology was woefully backward. Its fear of artificial intelligence and computer networks was, Sangh believed, completely justified. But expressing that fear in religious terms, that is, as fear of demons from hell, was hurting Prezghod’s ability to fight these things effectively.

“Yes, they are demons from hell, but that’s not all they are. They can be understood at a technological level, and they can be fought more effectively at that level than by using exorcisms.”

Sangh couldn’t believe his eloquence. He described how he had come to know these things, all the investigations he had conducted, the places he had visited and the kinds of people he had met.

“No one is as well placed as I am to report on how Erth works, what’s

deathly wrong with it, and what their weaknesses and strengths are. After all, the purpose of our expedition was to gather information about other civilizations. That's why a team of academic experts were along. But the mission was redirected into . . . an unfortunate direction. Several of the experts died in the ensuing catastrophic battle.

“Only I and Lieutenant, I mean Professor, Wharbut survived. I'm sure Bewinda has given much valuable information on the history of ‘Tayha’. But she spent all her time in the library. Only I got out among the natives. Of course, I could only scratch the surface. But it was, I say in all modesty, as deep as scratch as anyone could pull off in the time I was given.”

Instead of following up with such a valuable source of information, the Admiralty had decided to sacrifice him as a casualty of the information war, painting him as a traitor to avoid having to shoulder more of the blame for their ignominious defeat. In Sangh's opinion, this was a lousy bargain. But he would give them a chance to have it both ways. He would accept the obloquy of being a traitor if he could have his freedom, under a new name, in a faraway place. There he could write reports on all he had learned. If he weren't free, it would be psychologically impossible to reveal what he knew.

“Monseen Jhessup, I hope you have never suffered the loss of your freedom, and I hope you never do. But until you do, you won't know how

crippling it is. Even if I could remember a concept like ‘duty to God and country,’ how could I write while faced day after day with the same blank wall, the same stifling odor, the same shackles?” He paused, genuinely overcome, knowing how transient was this visit to the General’s pleasant book-lined study overlooking a shady, understated garden graced by a stand of soyba trees.

Sangh knew he had been eloquent. In fact, his vanity was tickled by just how articulate and persuasive he had been. (Where had words like “obloquy” come from?) Perhaps it was the encouragement he felt beamed back at him from the General. She was obviously a sharp woman, and a quick study. He had barely begun before she was convinced, and by the end of his speech she was practically salivating at the thought of what he had to offer them.

He could have gone on, but his pause gave her an opening. “Can you stay a little longer?” she asked, a polite form of words that was also a really dumb question. He had no idea what her deal with the Inquisition was. Maybe they needed him back right away for shuffleboard in the exercise yard. “I’d like you to meet a physicist friend of mine.”

He just beamed. “Father Lhogan,” she said, for the priest had been present for Sangh’s spiel, “call Inquisitor Chun and see what can be arranged. And I’m pretty sure Tony Abrakis would like to meet Lieutenant Fharha.”

Fr. Lhogan nodded and departed. He came back sooner than expected to announce that Inquisitor Chun (the chief prison administrator) was unyielding on the schedule. Sangh's two hours of freedom were *over*. His first reaction was nausea and rage. But he fought it back and stood up manfully to go.

General Jhessup stood as well. "We will be seeing you again, you have my assurance." She shook his hand and smiled at him. He would hate to be her political opponent.

On the drive back to the prison, Sangh's mood bounced between joy and dread. At one moment he was sure it had all been a dream, and freedom would soon be a meaningless word for him. The next he thought that it was actually a clever tactic to leave Tony Abrakis hanging, whoever he was. Suppose he were a big name in the Guild of Physicists, and suppose he had to wait a week to hear from the eloquent Sangh Fharha. All Sangh had to do was meet those sky-high expectations, and they would spring him in an hour! That thought caused his mood to crash again.

He had to wait less time than he thought. A mere two days later he was summoned from his shit bucket, taken to get cleaned up, and whisked off in the Tagore again. The other prisoners were starting to wonder if he had been some kind of undercover snitch all along. Though they couldn't

imagine what he could reveal.

On this second visit to the Jesuit General's Residence, Sangh was introduced to Prof. Tony Abrakis from the Physics Department of the University of Nurhome. The Guild wasn't mentioned, but Sangh was sure every word he said would be heard by the Guild. He realized he was probably being recorded, and probably had been on the first visit. That would explain why Prof. Abrakis did not wait to hear the spiel repeated, but began to ask questions almost immediately. Fortunately, he didn't want to know much about the 'Tayhan's' knowledge of physics. However, he was extremely interested in their knowledge of computer science, which was almost as mysterious to Sangh as quantum mechanics.

"I'm sorry, sir, but what I learned about computers in school was to cross yourself every time you passed one."

He could hear the professor curse under his breath. "Yes, we have certainly shot ourselves in the foot on that matter. Or tied a bag over our heads."

But Sangh had been a careful observer, and told the professor plenty that got him interested.

"What's your best guess as to how the 'Tayhan's' defeated us in the Battle of *Terra*?"

“They had at least one intelligent robot spacecraft visiting the cometary cloud . . . whose name escapes me . . .”

“The Oluoèh cloud, go on,” said Abrakis.

“She, I mean it, the robot spacecraft, set up a screen of self-defense robot spacecraft around ‘Sol’ (their star, but you knew that). They didn’t know from which direction an attack would come, so the screen was scattered around a sphere.”

“What radius?”

“I’m not sure when they first spotted us, but I’m guessing they gained control of our ships at a distance about four times the radius of Erth’s orbit, which is approximately the same as Prezghod’s.”

“Whoa, not possible. That area is just too huge, the surface area of a sphere that big. Plus, the mass required would be staggering. If each defense station weighs a ton (a conservative estimate), then given the number they’re going to need, . . . . A back-of-the-envelope estimate is that it would take thousands of years and an incredible amount of energy to lift the whole thing out of *Sol’s* gravity well.”

“Yes, I thought of that, but suppose they used materials they found out in the cloud?”

“Actually, at that radius it’s called the Segura belt, and it’s not dis-



tributed as evenly around the star.”

“Whatever. Suppose they used materials they found there?”

“I suppose they could find something.”

“They’re incredibly inventive when it comes to computing devices. If I found out they built them out of ice and frozen methane I wouldn’t be too surprised,” said Sangh.

“Even so, this robot spacecraft would be busy for hundreds of thousands of years. If they had a thousand intelligent spacecraft it would take hundreds of years, but now you’ve got the problem of lifting the spacecraft out to the Segura belt.”

“Yes, I thought of that, too.”

“But wait! Could the robot spacecraft make a robot-spacecraft *factory*? No, I don’t mean that exactly, because with a factory already at the right radius you don’t need all the machinery to propel it *out* there.”

“I see it!” said Sangh. “You want a *self-reproducing* defense station. Oh, yes, they can build those.”

“Well, then, if that’s really feasible it explains everything. You seed the spherical shell with a few such self-reproducing defense stations, and they can reproduce exponentially, because we’ve assumed the resources are out there. A few hundred years would be enough.”

“Great! I mean, that so far my explanation is holding up. So these defense stations detect a fleet coming in, and they rendezvous with them.”

“That raises new difficulties. How do they match course with a powered spacecraft accelerating with fusion drives?”

“Ah, but they’re not accelerating; they’re *decelerating*. The Contact Fleet actually went into orbit, dispersed of course, but the defense system just has to fall into approximately the same orbit, and cross their path. I think it could be done; it *was* done.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know exactly, but it involved growing a wire into the hull of each spacecraft, finding the computer system, and getting control of it.”

“The first step would be the hardest, but, yeah, once a sophisticated intruder hits one of our computers we are toast. Absolutely no thought was given to security against someone trying to inject rogue programs into the system, because there’s no one on Prezghod who could do it. *Almost* no one . . . .”

General Jhessup had quietly exited from the study as Sangh and Prof. Abrakis got deeper into this topic. Presumably she had other places where she could conduct the business of the Society of Jesus. But eventually she came back and urged them to take a break and have some coffee and a

“yummy shortcake the kitchen whipped up.”

“I’m sorry,” she said a bit later, wiping strawberries and cake off her fingers, “to have interrupted your discussion of how we lost an entire fleet of starships, but there’s another matter that’s fairly urgent, and, as usual with our fascinating guest, his time with us is short. The other matter is how to bust him out of Blessed Sacrament.”

“I don’t suppose we can ask Poph Urbana to issue a pardon, and then appoint him professor of anthropology at the academy?”

“Not unless we want a military coup. We have to preserve the impression that we take seriously the story of how Sangh betrayed the Fleet.”

“Have you read the confession?” he said.

“Yes, of course. I had to hold my nose and sign off on it. I realize it makes no sense. Lieutenant Fharha, did you really have to sign your name to something so ridiculous? It’s not even internally consistent. I wish I had sent my personal torturer along. He would have made sure that the confession was a work of art.”

“Would you like me to explain the circumstances under which I signed?” said Sangh. “It involves electrodes on or in some very intimate body parts. It’s not funny; it’s terrifying. And they can still torture me any time they want. I’m in their power.”

“I’m sorry; that was extremely tasteless of me. I have mentally pushed you from the ‘loser’ to the ‘winner’ column of my mental politics chart, but that was premature.”

“Even if I become the biggest ‘winner’ on Prezghod, I am not going to laugh indulgently at the antics of your personal torturer. As far as I can tell, nobody in that damnable prison I’m in deserves to be there. They have just been made ‘losers’ to balance out someone’s . . . ‘politics chart.’ Their families have been destroyed, their lives have been destroyed, and they don’t even get to be dead, because someone might want to inflict further intense pain on them, just in case the chart’s tilting a bit too much in their favor.” Sangh succeeded in not jumping up and down and screaming while delivering this speech. He hoped he conveyed rational eloquence in this context, too, although one speech wasn’t going to make a damned bit of difference.

“I have apologized,” she said coldly. “Now let’s return to the issue of getting you out. The point is that your confession will stand. You’re going to stay a traitor. Your family will never know otherwise. I’m very sorry for that, but I don’t see any way around it.”

“Nor do I,” said Sangh. “I’ve accepted that. All I have to do is escape. I have thought of a way. Here’s what I have in mind.”

“Good God, shut up!” said Abrakis. “Beg pardon, your worship.”

“Quite all right. You heard the man,” Jhessup said to Sangh. “I have people you can talk to; you get together with them and whoever Prof. Abrakis and Admiral Limhoon wants to involve, and have a nice chat. But he and I never heard a *hint* that you were planning a getaway.”

“Sorry, your worship. I’ll get my secretary to schedule a meeting.”

It took two more endless weeks of waiting for this meeting to occur. Sangh had forgotten how hard it was for a committee to refrain from screwing up a perfectly good plan.

And he laid out for them the idea of transporting the prisoner for a court appearance and having his confederates, as treacherous and elusive as Fharha himself, put the guards to sleep and take the prisoner off. There were a few bugs in the plan, but the three of them were able to perfect it.

“Once I’m free, I’ll take on the new identity you will have set up for me, and live far away. I was thinking of opening a farm-equipment business in Ghrassland; I have some experience in that line. Before the expedition to Erth people were migrating out there. I assume they still are. It’s a land of promise. Etc., etc. When I’m not selling farm equipment and crop insurance, I’ll write reports, give talks, entertain visitors interested in exoanthropology, whatever. How does that sound?”

“Feasible, if you’re willing. We’ll buy a fast ship and sail over to Limith

whenever we want to talk to you.” (Limith was the only city in Ghrassland; there was talk of carving out a new state from Western Ghrassland and making Limith the capital.)

“It sounded feasible to me, too. Now comes the part you’re going to have grave reservations about. I want Šheessay busted out right along with me.”

“Are you out of your mind? Aren’t you talking about a killer robot?”

“She’s not going to kill anyone. We’re good friends. She can help you just as much as I can, and I think she will, so long as you promise that attacking ‘Tayha’ is not the reason for the research I’ll be doing.”

“No, no. Attacking Erth was an act of temporary insanity.”

“Willem Limhoon is still a Rear Admiral the last I heard.”

“We can control him. The Admiralty have been embarrassed by him for the last time.”

“I have my doubts. You have your doubts about Šheessay. Let’s call it even. We both have our work cut out for us, perhaps. But Šheessay never harbored any aggressive designs on Prezghod. What it did was purely defensive. ‘Tayha’ is no longer under attack. Look, an hour ago you, Professor Abrakis, and I were engaged in intense and somewhat wild speculation about how the Contact Fleet was defeated. She...ssay can tell you exactly how it was done; she was that spacecraft, I mean, *aboard* that spacecraft seeding

the comets with self-reproducing robots.

“But however many deaths this . . . robot caused in battle, when it came to individuals I never saw Šheessay harm anyone. She could easily have killed Bewinda Wharbut, and it would have made our escape from Saonwpowlu much simpler. Instead we wasted hours sending Bewinda off to ‘Austraalia’.”

The conversation went back and forth. But it became clear that Sangh’s demand was nonnegotiable. Finally General Jhessup said, “If she goes with you, you can forget any thoughts of living out in the wilderness unobserved. We are going to have surveillance teams watching you around the clock.”

“I realized I would have to allow that. But they can’t have anything to do with the Inquisition. The game here is that as far as the NQ knows, I really did escape, with the help of secularist agents. You keep them from finding me with misdirection and data fudging. I don’t trust them to go along with this and not eventually use it against you.”

“Don’t worry, I thought of that. The number of people involved must be very small.”

“I know two people who are strongly motivated to help me and keep helping me: Limhoon and Commander Dhluzio.”

“Why?”

“Better if you don’t know. But believe me, they are.”

“So they could supply a trustworthy surveillance team?”

“They will do it gladly. The team doesn’t have to know the whole story, or any of the story, if it comes to that. They’re just supposed to do long-term observation of a farm-equipment dealer and his sidekick. If either of us departs the area unexpectedly, you are to be notified and the fugitive is to be tracked and caught. Then you can do whatever you want. But don’t worry; we won’t go anywhere.”

“Can’t this woman-shaped robot fly, or go into orbit, or something?”

“Not and stay woman-shaped. I don’t think you have to worry about that. She’ll be trackable.” Actually, Sangh was not sure on this point. But it didn’t matter. This part of the deal he didn’t expect to come to fruition.

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And now Sangh and Šheessay had the drop on each other, and his dream of freedom threatened to spiral down the drain.

“Šheessay, we’ve got to go. I have about three minutes before the gas hits me again, which is about when the traffic jam will clear up and the doors will lock. Let’s go.”

“Go. I’ll follow.”

“No, you’ve got to come with me, if you value your life,” he said. This was the first time he had seen Šheessay since they landed. They had been



brought aboard the bus into their separate cells separately, so that each prisoner was completely surrounded by guards during loading operations. She looked so beautiful, especially dressed in such an unexpected way. She looked like she would live forever with the same sparkle in her eyes and the same spring in her step, and of course she could. He realized part of the sparkle was her tears, a conscious signal to him of the emotion she felt. *He* must not cry; it would spoil his aim.

“I’m sorry, Sangh,” she said and then she shot him, and Dhluzio too, but the bullets just grazed them. They were bleeding, and the hand he had held the gun in would never quite be the same. The gun looked all right, and he bent to pick it up. She was angling out of her cell and toward the door.

“I could’ve killed you both with those two bullets,” she said. “So much is at stake. There’s a whole planet for me to explore, and I’ve got to see it, and understand it, *on my own*. I can’t make the promises I know you want me to make, Sangh. I should’ve killed you; I wish I could, but I can’t. I love you too damned much. I know you would have shot me if I had killed the Commander, but I didn’t kill him, or even hurt him too badly.” By now she was pleading, but she caught herself. “He’ll be all right. So will you. Goodbye, my love.” She started for the exit to the bus, dropping the gun behind her.

In one swift motion Sangh reached back into NQ-49D59's holster, this time with his right hand, brought the gun up, and shot her, once, twice, then a third time. The guns were designed to do great damage, and he just blasted away. She staggered back, and collapsed, pieces of her flying every which way. He shot her four more times, to make sure her arms and legs were disabled, and then shot her in the head, obliterating her eyes, her beauty.

He was starting to feel light-headed from the shock of his wound, the horror of what he had done, or the Cybhultone gas, he couldn't tell. He remembered, never after sure how, to put the gun in NQ-49D59's hand. Would there still be his fingerprints on it? What really mattered was what story would be most convenient to the Inquisition, not which was true. The fingerprints were probably in the category of nuisance, easily swept away.

The driver turned around at the sound of the shots. He opened his door, and was staring right into the faces of Sangh and Dhluzio. Sangh said, "We had a problem with the prisoner in cell number 2, but the parameters of the situation are, as far as resolution, not that far of a distance from resolution." He had no idea what he had just said, and gave a tug on Dhluzio's arm to drag him out into the fresh air. It then dawned on him that the doors to the bus had closed. Button, button, there must be a button.

"Over there!" Dhluzio shouted, and pointed over Sangh's head. "Be

quick!” He took a chance and gave the Cybultone canister another pump. He and Sangh still had some of the Thoraxine in their bloodstreams, but it didn’t prevent their vision from wavering. It was hard to remain standing.

Sangh was just able to claw his way up to the button, stab at it a few times with his thumb, and fall past the folding door as it finally slid to the right. Sudhuzio was right behind him. They sprawled in the gutter. The driver collapsed in the doorway to his compartment. The bus door unfolded shut.

The fresher air and purer terror drove Sangh to get up and pull the Commander to his feet. They staggered up onto the sidewalk toward the next point in their planned route.

Several pedestrians had stopped and gawked at the sight of two guards taking a pratfall out of an Inquisition bus. But they had been conditioned to look away from anything to do with the Inquisition. *Don’t look at us and we won’t question you.* As Sangh and Dhluzio regained their composure, or pretended to, they met curious gazes with a cold stare. The crowd reverted to normal form, and simply stood back to let the two Inquisition guards pass. Then it flowed on to its original business, paying no attention to the stationary bus.

The original plan had had the escape go undetected while the bus drove

off. Now, thought Sangh as his head cleared, the narrative would be somewhat different, with one prisoner shot by courageous Officer NQ-49D59 during the impudent rescue by terrorist forces, and one prisoner getting away. The raid would only be detected when the following escort found the bus becalmed and everyone aboard asleep or dead; or perhaps when the A/C system cleared all the Cybultone out of the air and the guards began to wake up.

The escapees didn't have far to go, about a block, before they got into a taxi driven by Muuke v'n Durhaa.

"First question," she said, "Did you get away cleanly?"

"Not quite as cleanly as we planned," said Dhluzio, "but no one's after us."

"Then we'll just take a calm little drive, I'll drop you off, no charge. And Commander Dhluzio, good morning to you." Sangh could see her grinning in the rear-view mirror. He returned a puzzled smile in her direction.

"You look awfully familiar," he said as they glided to a stop for a red light. "Pardon my brain, which has been gassed a bit too much this morning, but who are you?"

"The last time you saw me I was on *Cross*, serving under Vhatta Limhoon. I was another lowly JG academic, the physicist, I mean, electronics special-

ist.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course I remember you, Muuke. How stupid of me. It’s been an eventful couple of years, and an eventful morning.”

“Someday I hope I hear your story. The true one, I mean. You might wonder what *I’m* doing here, but it’s probably better you don’t know.”

“I hope we get a chance to talk,” said Sangh. *Someday*. He fell silent, his thoughts all on Šheessay. He fought back tears.

In a few minutes they stopped, in a shabby back alley. A door opened in a wall, one of those doors with no handle on the outside. Dhluzio slid out the right door of the car, Sangh the left. Dhluzio leaned back in and said, “Thanks, Lieutenant v’n Durhaa.” Then he and Sangh walked into the door, which closed behind them.

“Where’s your robotic friend?” asked Prof. Abrakis.

“I shot her,” said Sangh. “I always thought I would have to do it.”

“You *what*? After all that insistence that we allow her to go free with you? I guess we can cross one worry off our list.”

“Good Lord!” said Dhluzio, “I thought that the only true part of your confession was what it said about your sordid physical relation with that . . . infernal machine.”

“It was true. I . . . did love her, even though she wasn’t made out of

muscle and bone and neurons. Killing her was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But she was guilty of unspeakable crimes, and quite capable of committing worse all over again. If she hadn't tried to bolt, I was still planning to shoot her, but I don't know if I could have gone through with it. But I knew her pretty well, and I was pretty sure she was going to try to run.

"One more thing: Someone's going to pick up the pieces of Šheessay. You've got to pass word that those pieces — *all* of them — must be destroyed, or stored as securely as possible. We really don't know what they're capable of. I made a mess of her, but her memories might have survived. Either tie the pieces to a nuke in space and blow it, or embed them in a block of glass and keep cameras on it around the clock. If anything moves, switch back to plan A, the one with the nuke."

"Just offhand," said Abrakis, "what unspeakable crimes were you alluding to?"

"Don't worry, you'll hear all about it."

Abrakis shrugged, and said, "All right, let me get back on track. We're going to take you down to the subbasement and look at your identity papers. It turns out there's been a mistake. Your name is not Sangh Fharha and never was. Your actual name is Thulp Nascimento, and there's a nice paper

trail to prove it.”

“All right, but Sangh and I have one thing in common, an injured wrist. I’ve got to get it bandaged up. Commander Dhruzio is hurt, too. Make sure that’s attended to, Commander.”

“Please, call me Lhithy; you’ve never been in the Navy, have you, Thulp? And good luck.”

“Goodbye, Lhithy,” said Thulp, “and thanks, and Alla’h bless you and keep you.”

“Professor Abrakis,” said Dhruzio, “I need to get back into your office so I can get out of this dreadful uniform and back into my Navy greens. I also need to make some phone calls to ...; never mind who, but I have people that can see to this minor but not pleasant wound Šheessay inflicted on me.”

“Yeah, sure, come with us and I’ll get you in there before I put Thulp here on the slow boat to ... never mind where.”

“You know,” said Dhruzio as they hurried deeper into the building, “we knew that v’n Durhaa was a plant, but I always assumed she was some cardinal’s kid sister. Now I’d lay odds she was working for the Guild all along. But don’t confirm or deny that, it’s better all round if we don’t know.” He chuckled.

THE END



## Appendix A

# The Sounds of Glish Words and Names

The translation from Glish to English is straightforward most of the time, but tricky issues arise when speakers of Glish and speakers of the language of Earth, *Terrano*, compare notes. When fragments of *Terrano* are expressed as sounds familiar to speakers of Glish in the alphabet of English, one gets written phrases full of “pseudo-words” that would look and sound weird to speakers of all three languages. We resort to this device only when focusing tightly on how the *Terrano* words sound to the Glish speakers. It should be kept in mind that the Glish phonological system may be incapable of expressing *Terrano* sounds exactly. So the Prezghodlings pronounce the name

of the language of *Terra* thus: “‘Tayhanu’.” But the *Terranos* have similar difficulties; the closest they can come to a version of the name “Prezghod” is “*Prezgarrod*.” (The double *r* is an *h*-ish sound; *rs* are not rolled in *Terrano* the way they would be in Spanish.)

Because we are pretending English is Glish, all sentences and phrases in Glish are orthographically indistinguishable from the narration around them, which uses the standard “Roman” (upright) font. All words and phrases expressed using the *Terrano* alphabet and phonology are written in italics.<sup>1</sup> However, it would be too distracting to italicize *Terrano* names of people, so they are rendered in a roman font. That means two different spellings of the name can appear in the same page, one as spoken by natives and the other as spoken by foreigners. Sometimes three or more spellings show up if the foreigners find the name hard to pronounce. (Cf. Limhoon’s trouble with “Dezeenawvee.”)

The narrator uses native names more often later in the book as Sangh learns *Terrano*. For some characters who become central to Sangh’s life, Sangh’s pronunciation can be adopted by the narrator. The obvious example is “Sheessay,” almost always preferred over “XC.” Another is the name of

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<sup>1</sup>Italics are also used for emphasis, of course, and for poems, prayers, Sangh’s internal dialogue, and for the names of ships.

his *Seque* administrative assistant Jake [Pease], almost always referred to as “Žhayk Peez.” Glish approximations (e.g., “‘Seckie’”) to some *Terrana* words (in this case “*Seque*”) are favored over the originals in stretches of text focused on the plans and actions of Prezghod natives.

The occasional word or phrase in a “savage” language such as “Glockish” in chapter 10 is written with a slanted but non-italic font (e.g., “*Stan! Groun!*”).

### Special

The remainder of this appendix is a list of the conventions used to express Glish sounds in the English alphabet. *However, unless you are an abject pedant, the sort of person tempted to learn Klingon, feel free to pronounce Glish words in whatever way you find comfortable.*

The letter corresponding to our ‘h’ is quite prominent in the orthography of Glish. It denotes a sound consisting of an aspirated glottal stop (IPA ʔ<sup>h</sup>).<sup>2</sup> It is never pronounced otherwise unless accompanied by an accent.

A circumflex above the *h* makes it silent: ĥ

A grave accent (‘) on the letter preceding the *h* means its pronunciation depends on that letter, which must yield one of

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<sup>2</sup>In the classic Connecticut accent, from, say, Waterbury, this is the sound of the second “t” in “tighten.”

<i>Pair</i>	<i>IPA</i>	<i>SAMPA</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>Example</i>
àh	ɑ:	ah	w <u>at</u> er
èh	tʃ	tS	<u>ch</u> ain
èh	g	g	<u>gh</u> ost
òh	əʊ	@U	p <u>o</u> le
ph	f	f	al <u>ph</u> a
sh	ʃ	S	<u>sh</u> ame
th	θ	T	<u>th</u> ink
wh	ʍ	W	<u>wh</u> ere
zh	ʒ	Z	a <u>z</u> ure

- Few words start with a vowel in Glish, and its speakers find it hard to pronounce words in other languages that start with vowels. The exceptions are words in which the vowel is followed immediately by a liquid ('l' or 'r'), such as “Allah” and “Ertf”, or by a glottal ‘h’ (“OhMaĥan”). Otherwise, when a Prezghodling tries to say the word

they insert the sounds “dh” before the vowel.

- The letter ‘u’ is always pronounced short and unstressed, unless it is doubled: ‘uu’. Exception: At the end of a word, a single ‘u’ is long and unstressed.
- The letter ‘o’ is similar, but ‘oo’ is pronounced as a long ‘u’ while holding the lips in an ‘o’ position:  $\gamma$  (IPA symbol).
- The sequence ‘nw’ is a crude attempt to render the letter whose name is pronounced ‘unh’, which somewhat resembles a Latin ‘n’ and ‘w’ mashed together. It indicates that the previous vowel or vowel group is to be nasalized. It is not otherwise pronounced, and does not sound like an ‘n’ or a ‘w’.
- All other letters sound pretty much as in English. In particular, an ‘e’ at the end of a word is often silent, and used purely to lengthen the sound of the vowel in the last syllable.

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<sup>3</sup>Speech Assessment Methods Phonetic Alphabet, a subset of IPA using only ASCII characters.



## Appendix B

# Glossary of Glish and Terrano words

### B.1 Glish

*Bysshe-Admiral*: The title given an admiral in charge of a large fleet in the Prezghod Navy, who is also qualified to be appointed Bishop of an expeditionary diocese, i.e., a diocese, nominally under the Office of Missionaries, consisting of the fleet itself and any territory it conquers.

*brosga*: Porridge, flavored with spice native to Prezghod.

*eucho*: Currency on Prezghod.

*harmonica*: A row of parallel plastic tubes containing semisolid space rations, that delivers a balanced if unsatisfying meal.

*khobok*: Clown. Peasant. (Plural: *khoboks* or *khoboki*, the latter more for the collective plural.)

*kippen*: A native plant on Prezghod; the stalk of this plant, especially dried.

*klaad*: A group of about 10 soldiers in the Prezghod armed forces. (A platoon is made up of 5 klaads.)

*Lhatin*: Official language of the Chustlic Church, a blend of twenty-second century Catholic-Church Latin, English, and Arabic.

*metta*: Superior, awesome.

*nucky*: Dicey

*phook*: Fuck, but only in some metaphorical sense, not literally copulate

*P-hours*: One twenty-fourth of a day on Prezghod. Days aboard ship are calibrated to the home planet, for want of any other standard.

*pod*: Short for *escape pod*, the spacecraft used for emergency landing on planets or escape from larger craft.

*shizzle*: Thin diarrhea (vulgar)



*sinjing na krue*: From some conquered tribe in Bigwun, a phrase whose meaning may be triangulated somewhere in the region “singing the blues,” “blowing smoke,” “improvising.”

*squisher*: Projectile weapon with enough energy to kill a person but not pierce a warship’s hull from the inside. Used to police unruly personnel aboard a military spacecraft.

*screen*: Whatever might amuse one on an available screen. *Example: I feel like vegging out and watching some screen for the next couple of hours.*

*soyba*: A “tree” native to Prezghod, and hence providing no edible fruits or nuts. But the dark, grayish bark can be made into baskets.

*vhatta*: Title for commander of ship who also serves as priest, spiritual advisor, and confessor for the crew.

*vid*: A video, usually for entertainment.

*virchee*: Word coined by translator as translation of Terrnao *novirtual*

## B.2 Terrano

*novirtual*: (Portmanteau word from *NOVela vIRTUAL*. Plural: *novirtuais*. Glish equivalent: *virchee*.) Story told in virtual reality, meaning viewers can

move to new vantage points within a scene.

*Molhe*: (Glish speakers' pronunciation: Molyie.) A biological person. Etymology: Backformation from *Molho*, meaning “sauce,” after all the wet stuff inside a Molyie. Altered to sound parallel to *Seque*

*Seque*: (Glish speakers' pronunciation: Seckie.) A robotic person, intelligent and conscious, and required by law to be humanoid. (The word for “robot” is offensive if applied to a *Seque*.) Literal meaning: dry, bloodless.

*terra*: Currency on *Terra*. Symbol: ₧.