

Prodigal

*** Chapter 3 (second half) (v. 2.8.5) ¹ ***

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¹This is a draft, obviously. Please send comments to airfoyle@gmail.com

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Chapter 3

Flight (second half)

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 Naval 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 he 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 ‘Moalyie’ 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* Sheessay 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 Allāh 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.

Sheessay 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 Seckies 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. Vhatta 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 'Moalyie',

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 Seckies 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 *gugl*?"

"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 Sheessay 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 Sheessay, 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 chest — 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 Tayhanu time system, but he was tired.

“Twenty minutes to three Babylonian.” The Tayhans 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.