

# Prodigal

\*\*\* Chapter 3 (v. 2.8.3) \*\*\*

Supplementary material (recent changes, spreadsheet of all characters, etc.) at:

<http://cs-www.cs.yale.edu/homes/dvm/gnhwg/>.

Current versions of all chapters so far may be found at:

<http://cs-www.cs.yale.edu/homes/dvm/gnhwg/current/>.

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## Synopsis of chapters 1 and 2

1. “Home?”: Her Holiness’s Ship *Cross*, representing the Empire of Prezghod, goes into orbit around Earth, and is met by a spacecraft named *XC19*. Its sole crewmember is a woman named Šheessay Dezeenawvee, who creates endless bureaucratic problems to solve before *Cross* will be al-

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\*This is a draft, obviously. Please send comments to [airfoyle@gmail.com](mailto:airfoyle@gmail.com)

lowed to land. Sangh, caught between Šheessay and Vhatta Limhoon, flubs the negotiation, and is imprisoned on a charge of treason by Limhoon, when Šheessay is revealed to be a sophisticated robot, a “*Seque*,” to whom Sangh has given a blood sample. Because of the Empire’s historical clash with secularists using robots, the people of Prezghod have been taught that robots and computer networks are inherently demonic. Limhoon orders a landing and seizes a small chunk of territory near the Earth’s capital city, *São Paulo*.

2. “Ambassadors”: Šheessay blackmails Limhoon by revealing that she has recorded him fabricating orders that allow him to exceed his authority and intervene in Earth’s affairs if conditions allow it. Sangh gets Limhoon to reappoint him ambassador and allow him to descend to the planet’s surface. Limhoon reluctantly agrees, but sends Tralf Ghillier, Sangh’s best friend, along as co-ambassador. They land at the *São Paulo* airport, where they are greeted by the President of the Solar System. Sangh and Tralf are joined by Lieutenant Commander Kolfhaj, who commands the first landing party, and by Bewinda Wharbut, a historian in Kolfhaj’s group. She resents Sangh and distrusts the *Seques*. A motorcade takes them all to the Presidential Palace. It is morning, on a Friday.

## 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 Šheessaywere fleeing Vhatta Limhoon, who, as if in Sangh's worst nightmare, had landed on Erth, 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 scarer 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 Sheessay 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 Sheessay.

"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 Seckies wouldn't hurt Molyees, Sangh."

"She's not a Seckie."

Sheessay 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 what somebody's color scheme had aged to. "Is anybody home?" shouted Sheessay.

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 *Sheessay*. “You are going to get to ride the kicker.”

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

*Sheessay* 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. Sheessay 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 Sheessay, 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 Sheessay.

“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 Embaixador 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. Sheessay 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 Sheessay 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. . . .

TO BE CONTINUED