

Prodigal

Chapters 1 and 2 (v. 2.8.6)

¹ ***

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

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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.¹ 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-

¹You 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, whatta¹ 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 Lhithy Dhuzio, 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.*

¹[Translator: Unfamiliar words may be looked up in the glossary, appendix C. For help pronouncing weird-looking words, see appendices A and B.]

“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. Dhuzio’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. Dhluizio, 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 com-

manded, 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 Sheessay Dezeenawvee's spacecraft before Sangh even got to the lock.

Nevertheless, by the time he caught up, Sheessay 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 Sheessay 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 Cristh our Savior, begone, demons, and spare us from your computational mischief!” He thought Sheessay 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.

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 Earth.

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 Earth. 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 Ertĥ. 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.”

Cross, light destroyer, E class, was the tip of a heavy spear, the Contact Fleet of Operation Motherland, an expedition to find Ertĥ, 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 Byše-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. Dhluizio, 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 spaceball 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, Sheessay 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.

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 Sheessay 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.

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, Tayhanu 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 ‘Tayhanu’ 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 P̄hoematic P̄harming 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 ‘*Seques*,’ which means ‘blocks.’ The biological ones are called ‘*Molhes*,’ 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 Sheessay. 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 Allaḥ, for the love of BeJesus!"

"Sssh!" said Šheessay.

"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 Dhluizio 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. Dhluizio.

“Thanks, Commander Dhluizio, 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. Dhluizio. “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 Dhluizio.

“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 Dhluizio 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.

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. Dhluizio 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. Dhluizio 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.”

Dhluizio 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 Dhluizio 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.” Dhluizio 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 Ertflings to let that person get moving,” said Dhluizio.

“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 Morffin 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 Dhluizio.

“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 . . . Seckies — 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 Sheessay 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 Paseefecu, 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 Ertĥ'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 Ertĥ was real it would have a satellite visible to the naked eye at night. The Book of Genesis 1:16 made it clear: *And Allaĥ 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 Saonpow-lu airport traffic control. It informed them — in Glish — that the pod was cleared to land. *If it can*, thought Sangh.

“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 Tayhans. 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 Ertĥ, 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 Dhluizio 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 ‘Moalyie’ — 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 Tayhans 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 ‘Moalyie’ 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 Ertlings 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 Tayhans 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.

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.¹ 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 his

¹Italics are also used for emphasis, of course, and for poems, prayers, Sangh’s internal dialogue, and for the names of ships.

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 “Glock-ish” in chapter ?? 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^h).² 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

²In 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> ³	<i>Example</i>
àh	ɑ:	ah	w <u>a</u> ter
çh	tʃ	tS	<u>ch</u> ain
ğh	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	ɹ	W	<u>w</u> here
zh	ʒ	Z	az <u>u</u> re

Table A.1: Special *xh* pairs, with IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) and SAMPA equivalents, and an example of a similar sound in English

the combinations shown in table A.1.

A few more observations:

- 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 “Allaĥ” and “Erthĥ”, 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: γ (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.

³Speech Assessment Methods Phonetic Alphabet, a subset of IPA using only ASCII characters.

Appendix B

The Sounds of Terrano Words and Names

Terrano is close to being present-day Brazilian Portuguese, for reasons that are explained in the text. It sounds the same. This is a brief summary of how to pronounce it.

The vowels of Terrano are typical for European languages; English being the odd man out. In Terrano, as in most European languages, “a” sounds like “ah” in English, “i” sounds like “ee,” and “e” sounds like “eh.”¹ A Terrano idiosyncrasy is that “o” is pronounced like a long “u” at the end of words.

¹Something called the Great Vowel Shift happened in England just before Shakespeare’s time to change it from the standard pattern.

The word *Terrano* itself is an example. The definite article takes two forms, “a” (feminine) and “o” (masculine), the latter pronounced “oo.”

The only really odd thing about Terrano is the use of a tilde over a vowel, as in “*cão*,” meaning “dog.” The vowel pair “ao” would ordinarily be pronounced “ow”; the tilde nasalizes so it sounds like someone from Brooklyn screaming “ow” very quietly. By coincidence, Glish has similar resources; the sequence “nw” indicates that the previous vowel is nasalized. So the *Terranos* hear the Glish name “Sathanw” as “*Satão*,” even though the vowels being nasalized are not quite the same. (Neither planet’s people can pronounce the other’s language correctly.)

Here’s what you need to know about consonant patterns in Terrano²:

- Before “i” and unstressed “e” (the latter typically at the end of a word), “t” is pronounced “ch” and “d” is pronounced “j.” So *norte* (“north”) is pronounced “norche.” (The Prezghodlings write this “nor`chee.”) The short word “de” (“of”) is pronounced “jee.”
- In the middle of a word, “r” is pronounced like English “r,” with a slight roll to it. However, at the beginning or end of a word, or when doubled it sounds completely different; it becomes a breathy “h.” “*Rosa*” (“rose”) sounds like “Hozah” as pronounced by a Slav, or “Chozah” if it were

²See <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/portuguese.htm>

a Yiddish word, but not so guttural. The Terrano word for “horror” is spelled “*horror*,” but pronounced more like “oh-OH,” with the fake “hs” here being very breathy.

- “S” is pronounced like “z,” in the middle of a word. At the beginning or end, or when doubled, it’s always pronounced “s.”
- “C” is pronounced like “k” when it occurs before “a” or “o,” like “ss” when before “e” or “i”. If there’s a cedilla under it (“ç”), it’s pronounced “ss” even before “a” or “o.”
- “G” is hard before “a” and “o,” soft before “e” and “i.” To make a hard “g” before “e” or “i” you put a “u” after it, as in “*guerra*” (“war”).
- “H” is always silent alone. The pair “ch” is pronounced like English “sh.” For “lh” and “nh” see “l” and “n,” below.
- “J” is pronounced “zh” (or “zh” in Glish).
- “L” is pronounced as in English, except that “lh” is like an “l” followed by a “yuh” sound. So “*Molhe*” is pronounced roughly like “mole-ye”; Glish speakers write this as “⟨Moalye⟩.”
- “M” is like English M except at the end of a word, when it is heard only as a nasalization of the vowel before it. “*Bom*” (good) is pronounced

“Bo,” with the “o” through the nose.

- “N” has the twists of both “l” and “m”: mostly English-like, except before “h” and at the end of a word or syllable. The pair “nh” is like an “n” followed by a “y(uh).” The word for “road” is “*caminho*,” pronounced “<cameenyu>.” “*Baton*” (baton) is pronounced “expTHbatonw,” with accent on the second syllable. In this word we’ve made use of the “nw” device mentioned above that in Glish indicates that the “o” is nasalized, neither the “n” nor the “w” being itself pronounced. The diminutive suffix is “*inha/inho*.” Here the “n” does double duty: it nasalizes the “i” and turns the “h” into a “y.” So “*casinha*” (little house) is pronounced “<cazeenwya>.”
- “Q” is always followed by “u,” as in English, but before “e” and “i,” “qu” is pronounced like “k” (the “u” is silent, as it were).
- The letters “k” and “w” do not occur in the Terrano alphabet.
- All other consonants sound close enough to their English cognates to treat them the same.

Names beginning with “J” often give English speakers trouble, and here the habitual way we pronounce Spanish names like “José” and “Jorge” gets in the way of pronouncing the cognate Portuguese names. A Brazilian named

“Jorge” (“George”) should not be addressed as “Horhay,” but as “Zhorzhee,” with the stress on the first syllable. Similarly for “José,” which should be pronounced “Zho-zeh,” with stress on the second syllable; but we have trouble putting stress on an “eh” sound, so we settle (cf. “café”) for “Zho-zay.” At least this is better than “Ho-zay.”

The name that perplexes English speakers the most is “João,” which corresponds to “Juan” or “John.” The “j” is easy: it’s just that “zh” sound again. The first “o” is a lightly stressed syllable. Which leaves an “ão.” Just say “ow” through your nose. It’s tricky, but even “zho-ow” will impress a Brazilian. Usually the closest people come is “joe” followed by the sound of their mouth being thrown open, something like “joe-aaaah.” Yikes.

Here are all the diacritical marks and what they mean:

- “ã,” “õe”: An “ow” or “oy,” nasalized to the max. (Many words ending in “ión” in Spanish have cognates ending in “ão” in Portuguese, such as “*camión/caminhão*” (truck), “*situación/situação*” (situation). Similarly for Spanish “ones” and Portuguese “ões,” as in “*camiones/expTEcaminhões*” (trucks).)
- The acute accent “´” *always* means to put stress on the vowel that it marks.

- The grave accent “`” is placed above an “a” to avoid having to write “aa.” For example, “to” is written “a.” “To the” is the contraction “ao” = “a” + “o” for the masculine form “o” of “the.” The feminine form is “a,” and the contraction meaning “to the” might be written “aa”; but it’s written “â” instead. It’s pronounced just like “a.”

[circumflex]

Appendix C

Glossary of Glish and Terrano words

C.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.

brosya: 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.)

klick: Military slang meaning “kilometer.”¹

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.

¹[Translator: This term is actually American military slang. It seemed like a better translation of the Prezghod military-slang word for “kilometer” than a phnetic rendering, which might look like “kwim.”]

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 Terrano *novirtual*

C.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: \mathbb{T} .