Prodigal, v2.7.9
Prodigal

*** Chapter 1 (v. v2.7.9)\(^1\) ***

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\(^1\)This is a draft, obviously. Please send comments to airfoyle@gmail.com.
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Liutenant (Junior Grade) Sangh Fharha, Ambassador Extraordinary to Planet 1.2, had barely saluted when his superior, Commander Willem Limhoon, 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 Lhitïy Dhluzio, issued his usual gurgly chuckle. He anchored Limhoon’s left flank, dug into the grip webbing.

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

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

“Sir, no, sir, but…”
“The reason Lieutenant Ghalfie is assigned to accompany you is to provide a hint of menace. You must give the impression to Ms. Dizzynauvee that you’re backed up by powerful forces, forces that you’d rather not unleash.”

Lt. Babraba Ghalfie, the ship’s weapons specialist, had preceded Sangh through the corridors of their spacecraft and into Vhatta Limhoon’s Command Module, and floated beside Sangh in the webbing in front of the symbolic bar that served as Limhoon’s desk. Ghalfie was much bigger than Sangh even before putting on her armor, and carried several obvious and not-so-obvious sidearms. She and Sangh were lighter-skinned than Vhatta Limhoon, whose dark brown complexion was emphasized by his shaven head and gray-streaked beard. Dhluzio’s skin color seemed to borrow tones from his wispy gray remnants of 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 shaven head was like a bullet pointed toward

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

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

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

Once out into the cramped passageways of their ship, they glided when they could, used obstacles to launch themselves when they had to, and sometimes just crawled around people in their way, until they reached the airlock joining them to the alien spacecraft XC-19. The ship Limhoon commanded, HHIS Cross of the Prezghod Imperial Navy, was locked 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, Ghalf, 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. Ghalf and Vhatta Limhoon, who had already popped through into Special Emissary Šheessay Dezeenauvee’s spacecraft before Sangh even got to the lock.

Nevertheless, by the time he caught up, Šheessay was still introducing herself, saying how awestruck she was at Vhatta Limhoon’s priestly regalia, and retailing more of the empty verbiage of which she had proven herself to be a galaxy-class master. Limhoon claimed the most comfortable chair, and slid his tall frame into it. Sangh took the other chair, and Lt. Ghalf, as usual, floated warily 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. Dezeenauvee,” 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. Sangh had taken part in the many drills that had been their main activity for days.

“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 Seckie.”

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

“I’m a Seckie; look,” and before Sangh could confess his ignorance of the matter Šheessay 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 little black bugs crawling over the surface of the blocks, but they scampered away into crevices, away from the light. Two cables had been disconnected when the door was opened, and they groped back and forth as if looking for their sockets.

This dramatic gesture cost Šheessay something; her face was in an unde-
niable 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 had the outline of a square where its threads had been severed, but it slowly faded as they sutured themselves back together. “Precious BeJesus, protect us,” Sangh muttered involuntarily. The hair on his neck stiffened, and it was all he could do to force himself not to panic.

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!” Šheessay did not melt or cringe, although one could see she knew she was supposed to.

Vhatta Limhoon had maintained enough composure to float up slowly as he uttered the malediction against Šheessay, but now he pushed off toward

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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.”

Śheessay Dezeenauvee 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 qlaser. 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, and the portal on the Cross side to be opened and shut again. A new kind of awkward moment, he thought, Brought to you by space travel. Not daring to look toward Śheessay Dezeenauvee, 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 other 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 personnel have cleared the airlock, disengage
from alien vessel YC-19, but maintain pressure in passageway; modify orbit
down 10 klicks.”

Sangh had barely finished dogging the hatch on the foreign 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 cen-
timeters from his chest.

“Lieutenant Sangh Fharha,” she recited, “my orders are to detain you as
a national-security risk. Once I am through, you seal the airlock portal and
remain in the passageway.” The words barely registered. Orders? He did
nothing as she slithered through the other portal.

“Lt. Fharha: We are going to blow the airlock. You better follow me.”
He heard the hatch close behind her. He numbly slid through the portal
and closed it. He was now alone in the passageway. Then the lights started
shutting off. His instinct was to bang on the hatch, demanding an explana-
tion 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 away
from the airlock portal, an inelastic billiard ball caroming toward nothing in

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particular. There was a dull clunk as the explosive bolts were blown and one half of the airlock sphere was detached, freeing Cross from XC-19. Then the last light 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 Dezeenauvee. Lieutenant Dunham: Please proceed without delay to landing craft 1; you are Lieutenant Fharha’s replacement in landing party.” Tweena Dunham was the ship’s exobiologist, a pleasant woman in her late thirties.

Limhoon’s mistaking the name of the ship is easy to explain, and will be explained.

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About that blood sample: It was, Sangh seemed to recall, during his second, or perhaps his third session as Ambassador Extraordinary from the Prezghod Empire, about the time he began to realize that he was going to be ground to frustrated powder between Special Emissary Šheessay Dez-eenauvee and Vhatta Willem Limhoon.
His first encounter with Emissary Dezeenauvee 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 a long journey, the longest in recorded history. They had started from their home planet, Prezghod, many subjective months ago, survived the quantum leap that got them (most of them) to a piece of spacetime, near their destination, that physics had seemingly ruled off limits, and finally to the inner planets of the star system that seemed the best candidate to shelter their ancestral home, the almost mythical Erth.

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

His companion in the airlock was Lt. Babraba Ghalfe, who, if she was nervous, 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 was stroking the Grishklo, but whether out of nerves or eagerness Sangh couldn’t tell.

As the ship’s only exoanthropologist and chief diplomat, Sangh was naturally the one chosen by Vhatta Limhoon 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, sterile — and cold — sphere of the airlock. Psalm 9 came to mind:

*When my enemies turned back,*

*they stumbled and perished before thee*

*For thou has maintained my just cause.*

There was a good chance the aliens on the other side of the airlock hatch weren’t enemies or aliens at all, that the planet they were orbiting was indeed Erth. The alien they had been talking to *sounded* human. But there was something faintly ersatz about her. For one thing, instead of going through the usual protocol for establishing contact with alien races — exchanging the first fifty prime numbers in binary and the like — she had transmitted an audio signal: “Attention, alien vessel! Welcome to the Solar System!”, in perfectly accented Glish. How had she learned that? Even weirder was the
shape of her spacecraft: sleek, pointy, even equipped with fins, for crying out loud! It was a child’s conception of what a spaceship should look like. Or an insectoid alien’s perhaps. The voice, which sounded so homey, could easily be the mimicry of some dangerous horde of locusts, but nobody on the ship 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 come 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 exhaled and inhaled, and Babraba and her arsenal followed 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 was distracting for half a second, but their attention was grabbed by Šheessay’s beckoning gestures. Sangh glided with a fair amount of grace down to the big armchair, grasped its arms, and somersaulted into it. He held onto the arms to avoid floating off. The chair gently gripped his ass, and he could almost relax back into the cushions. Babraba preferred to float, ready to push off in any direction, by expertly gripping the back of the other armchair between her boots.

Sangh’s fears of glorious death as the first casualty of an interstellar war, or of being infected by alien parasites, were relieved. But his troubles were just beginning. For as he sat gaping at the apparently human woman across the table, he was reminded of every bureaucrat that had sanded a corner off his soul. The woman greeted him with a smile and said “Welcome to the sovereign Republic of Terra!” and that was the last time she smiled. Her face adopted a neutral expression. Her thin, straight hair did nothing to improve the shape of her head. Her skin was the color of wet sand. She wore a severely cut business suit, but at least it included a skirt. He had not seen a girl in a skirt since the Fleet had departed Sudhopa so many months ago.

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

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

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

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Cross, light destroyer, D class, was the tip of a heavy spear, the Contact Fleet of Operation Motherland, an expedition to find Erth, the planet the people of Prezghod had supposedly come from. Of course Cross wasn’t literally the tip of anything. Given Newtonian dynamics and the 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 at the same
time, 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 Bysh-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 been wounded, lost a foot, when a lucky shot from their last gun had hit the torpedo room.

Tralf looked around for people listening in. and said, “The Battle of Mattho,” he began.

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

“I remember. 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 was fighting its battle, the rest of Limhoon’s squadron was chewing up the other rebel ships. Total surprise. Right? I mean, total. Really! 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 . . . .”

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“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?

“After the battle, Limhoon was a big hero. But after the war, suddenly it was considered, like, politically necessary to be nice to the Dhassishis. 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 Gulf of Minhbo.”

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

“I’m just sinjing na kru, 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 receiving his orders, 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

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to do our duty and more. Thank you and God bless you all.”

At the time, most of the personnel on the ship were less sanguine than Vhatta Limhoon. They all feared that his interpretation of “seize the initiative” could get them all 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 Dezeenauvee gave him reason to rejoice that they were not going to be destroyed, subverted, or infested with insectoid parasites.

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. Dhluzio, who handed him off to various specialists, such as Muuke v’n Durhaa, the electronics expert, who had tried and failed to decode the FM transmissions from the surface of Planet 1.2.

Šheessay accepted their refusal to list the personnel of the entire ship, but after noting with satisfaction the list they provided of everyone in the landing party, she said, “So we’re going to need blood and tissue samples from those people.”

“Why? You didn’t mention that before, did you? Did I miss it?” He
riffled through his notes. Instead of answering, 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. “A thousand years? Doesn’t seem . . . Hey, not so hard!” he said to Furball’s ears, which were all he could see. He could feel

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her claws digging into his arm as she purred.

“Furball!” said Šheessay, 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 carom off the ceiling and back into his chair.

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

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

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

“Of course, but the point I was trying to make . . .” As she spoke, Šheessay herself did a nice bounce off the viewscreen to pick up Sangh’s notes, which
had gone flying when he did and were now floating a few meters above her head. On the way down to her chair her skirt was blown upward by air resistance and he blushed deeply when she caught him looking at her pretty legs. She landed in her chair and continued her train of thought: “... was that getting blood and tissue samples was a minor request that could even be fun to carry out.”

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

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Sangh’s cell was roughly hexagonal in cross section. If the deck was the floor, the ceiling was the remaining half of the airlock, a hemisphere bulging 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 fell. So far the air was still flowing.

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

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opened the hatch a bit. The top of a head, and 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 Cristñ!”

“Tralf?”

“What did you do, man!”

“I didn’t do anything! Well, I gave Šheessay Dezeenauvee 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.”

“Whether I’m guilty of something or not, I’m pretty sure the vhatta doesn’t mean to freeze me to death. If he wanted me dead, I’d be dead already. He’ll be pretty pissed off if what he’s got is a frozen corpse instead of someone for the Inquisition to interrogate.”

“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 strictly way too destructive and unpredictable. The guns allowed on a ship fired very soft bullets, which could not 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. 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 for nature calls, 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 my exposure was long enough for little robots to be inserted into my bloodstream? Or maybe at some point Šheessay 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 Erťh. Right?”

“Yeah, I did get a peek.”

“It’s Erťh, right?”

“They call it Tayha now.”

“Cool. Look, I’m really sorry, but my watch is starting. I gotta lock you out again.”

“Wait one second. Tell me, have you heard anything about what happened to the landing party?”
“Just that they made it to the ground safely. Everybody’s celebrating. Sorry about that. But don’t worry, I won’t forget you’re out here.”

And Sangh was alone again in the cold.

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So he settled into a routine, or perhaps a nightmare. He was alone, in solitary confinement. The hatch was opened to deliver food and take it away. When he needed the sanitary facilities he banged on the hatch a few times, and eventually the marine guarding him opened it and escorted him to the nearest toilet, squisher drawn. The problem was that the marine wasn’t always stationed at just the right point in the passageway to hear him. He or she 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 for a while 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 save him from frostbite. He had no screen or window to show him the stars or Ertfő. When the hatch was closed, all he had to look at in the dim light was

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the ominous bulge of the former airlock, looking like it meant to crush him against the hull of the ship.

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 “being a threat to national security” was worse. Fleshing out the details of his indictment was the job of the Inquisition, and very few people investigated 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 Erťā, 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

1 Home?
be preferable if the Tayhans finally 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 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 Dezeenauvee the woman in the business suit?”

“Didn’t I tell you that her name is just the way you pronounce those
letters? And that’s not really a ‘Y.’”

“I don’t think you did.”

“Look, after the hyphen there are two characters. Those are ancient versions of ‘1’ and ‘9’, right?”

“If you say so.”

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


“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 Dezeenauvee.’ 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 system, 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, and even a Glish channel! On that channel, 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 Dhotuubruu, 3761.”

“Dhotuubruu being which month out of how many? How close is the nearest solstice?”

“That they didn’t tell me, but they didn’t need to, buddy. All you need to know is the tilt of the planet’s axis and which direction it’s orbiting. They’re just past the spring equinox in the southern hemisphere.”

*My mind is disintegrating,* thought Sangh.

Two P-days after Sangh’s arrest, the rumor circulated that Kolfhaj had shot down a Tayhan TV-news helicopter. No one really believed it. Tralf conveyed every such rumor to Sangh, with great relish. 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.”
“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 Tayhans, but they are staying cool.”

Sangh wanted to wail, *Why is he picking on me?*, but didn’t.

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 Allah: Do not put me in the wrong!

> Let me know why you oppose me.

But instead of Allah he pictured Vhatta Limhoon. He had been warned that the vhatta threw subordinates to the wolves to distract from his own faults, but he couldn’t help feeling that he had been picked for a reason. If he could think of it, perhaps it would help him get out of this mess. No reason came to him, and he pretty much gave himself up to bitterness and cold.
Sometimes he might have been dreaming.

He was home from the Academy during the fall harvest, 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 had sold Mr. Weehmanty the combine; what hurt was having had to sell the old man the land two years before, when their farm failed and Dad had taken the job selling farm machinery.

Sangh had killed the combine engine and gone 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 Urhuu, 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.”

“Allah 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’m 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 the accords?

“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.