Prodigal

*** Chapter 2 (v. v2.7.9)¹ ***

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¹This is a draft, obviously. Please send comments to airfoyle@gmail.com.
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Chapter 2

Ambassadors

“Sangh?”

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

“Sangh?” It was Šheessay Dezeenauvee, he finally realized. It was his third day in the brig, although he had lost track.

“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 *Molho*, 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 ‘Seckies,’ which means ‘blocks.’ The biological ones are called ‘Molyus,’ which means ‘saucers.’”

“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? Who’s descended from animals? Witches?” 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.

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

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

“Sorry, I’m not going to banish myself. I just can’t stand seeing Vhatta
Limhoon get away with his insane plan. Don’t worry, I’ll be discreet.”

“Oh, good, let’s add mutiny to the list of charges against me.”

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

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

“What if I did?”

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

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

“I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again: We’re just a rat in a reactor.”

“Aye sir, when the rat dies, the reactor fries.”

This second voice was Lhithy Dhluzio’s gravelly bass.

“When did you record this?” Sangh demanded.

“Sssh. It was 2000 minutes before you heard about the secret orders from your Admiral OhMahan.”
Limhoon’s recorded voice continued: “It’ll be a miracle if we even survive this filibuster. There’s no way we’re going to get any glory out of it.”

“Glory would be nice, sir. If we’re dead anyway.”

“Look, the only thing Fleet cares about is our life expectancy. If we’re still free when they show up, they’ll assume the Ertfilings 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 Allah, 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?”

“Those 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.

“Lhîthy, 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, Erîh has surrendered to Sathan 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 Erîh orbit, in this tin can? We’re dead. If not, maybe we can . . . .”

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

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

“But you did hear it?”
“Aye, sir.”

“Who else? Marine!”

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

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

Sangh was ordered down into the passageway by the guard, who turned out on this duty cycle to be Marine Corporal Parsimhian. He kept his squisher trained on Sangh as he invited him to head for Vhatta Limhoon’s office space. Limhoon was alone. The marine was asked 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 just piped her voice into this space and the quarantine brig.”

“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 wires and speakers, although when he would have found time to install them is enough to beat Boëthius. I was just asking Mr. Fharha 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 Dezeenauvee trick me.”

“I suppose ‘normal duties’ includes landing on Erťh as our ambassador?”

“Oh no, sir, I know that’s out of the question.”

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

“But we’ve got to send somebody down.”
“Why, sir?” asked Sangh, forgetting his situation for a second. “Has Commandar Kolfhaj’s landing party failed to get traction?”

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

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

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

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

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

“And there the op has stalled,” said Dhluzio.
“For the time being, Commander,” said Limhoon.

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

“Somebody is going to be,” said Vhatta Limhoon. He kicked slowly and rhythmically against the wall behind him, pulsing him against his “desk.” He looked like an animal caged too tight to pace back and forth. “Commandar Dhluzio 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. Cpl. Parsimhian glided in, using the webbing expertly to control his speed and keep the drop on the prisoner. “Corporal Parsighian, return the prisoner to his quarters.”

Parsimhian was about to ask for clarification. No one had any “quarters” on Cross except Vhatta Limhoon himself. But Limhoon spoke first. “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 Parsimhian 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 then he felt his shipmates’ stares. Why if I were really guilty of something? How much worse could I feel? But maybe he was guilty; he had talked to Šheessay about defying his Vhatta. 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 penitent. So he prayed as hard as he could.

*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 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 realized now how hard it had been for Tralf to sneak minutes here and there to stay in contact with him in the brig. Tralf seemed to have less time for sleep than ever, although he...
didn’t say anything about having more duties. He just 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 squeezepackets that were the only 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 as the crew stumbled over them to get to their food. For Sangh, the guard was one more thing to be guilty about.

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 brosya,” 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.

“Arches 100 klicks high.”

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

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

“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 Tayhans solved those problems,” said Sangh.

“Really?”

“I’ve been forbidden to talk about the details, but let’s say I have a reli-
able source. She called them ‘launch loops.’ It would cause an international diplomatic incident if one of our spacecraft hit one.”

The mess bell rang, and all conversation ceased at once so the current group could exit the mess expeditiously. Sangh’s guard messed up the flow, as usual. He barely had time to say goodbye to Muuke and Tralf.

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

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.

2 Ambassadors
“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 Tayhans much better than I. I’ll just make the same mistakes all over again.”

Lt.Cdr. Dhluzio 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 before, 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. Not about the part where I’m
smarter than him, but the appointment part. I should be the ambassador, and he should come with me. Sir.

Limhoon’s face began to purple over with rage. Nothing he couldn’t control, though.

LtCdr. Dhluzio spoke. “Sir, it makes a weird kind of sense. It will get both these troublemakers off the ship. It will shake things up on the ground. And you can throw their asses back into the brig whenever you want.”

*Maybe so, but a planet is a much bigger place than the inside of a light destroyer.* The Vhatta’s wrath might cool down in the time it would take him to pluck Sangh back. His reaction was to shout, “Please, sir! Please, sir!” before the Vhatta thought of reasons why Dhluzio was wrong. He, too, forced himself to stay calm. Perhaps if he mentioned them first Limhoon would argue *in favor* of the idea.

“Sir, the Tayhans know all about my legal troubles. I’m sure Šheessay Dezenauve has told them everything,” 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 Tayhan 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.”

Dhluzio said, “Sir, what if they dig up something really useful? Lists of coordinates of key defensive installations, for instance.”

“The chances of these khoboks finding their own asses are . . . .” He trailed off. “But you’re right. Mr. Fharha, Mr. Ghiller, find me something of real value and I’ll be the first to pin a medal on you.

“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 control it much. 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. Lhitly, redo the appointment papers for two ambassadors.”

“Aye, sir.” Dhluzio pulled out his mobilcom and dialed a number in.

“Sir, what about the charges against me?” 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 be the attaché; let Mr. Fharha cut the ribbons.”

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

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

“So our understanding is so much deeper of Dhitropa, the most godforsaken backwater on Prezghod.”

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

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

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

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

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

“But, sir, ... Aye, aye, sir.”

“Mr. Fharha?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Hang on,” said Vhatta Limhoon. “I had better be absolutely clear about
the security precautions you are to take. Reveal nothing at all about the
name of our planet or star, the size or location of our fleet, or anything
about Cross or any sister spacecraft. If possible, try to extract a little more
information than you just happen to hear, if you can do it without being
obvious.”
Sangh tried to pay attention to all this, but it seemed more or less self-evident, except for the part about revealing the name of the planet, since he was pretty sure he had revealed it to Šheessay already. Besides, what were the Tayhans going to do, look up its address in the galactic phonebook?

“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 Sathan. 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. Dhluzio showed up, pulling a bulky package of clothing, labeled Diplomatic 2 Ambassadors
“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.”

“Watch your mouth, Mr. Ghiller. Diplomacy has its requisites.”

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.”

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

They were landing at the airport of city #1, the largest in the world, located in continent E4. Sangh had been told by Šheessay that the name of this city was “Saonwpowłu,” but everyone preferred to call 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, decks, 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. Most fusion-drive ships had luxurious staterooms by comparison. It was about 125m long. 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 at turns, which meant a low moment arm for the attitude-adjustment thrusters. 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 would be 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 Cross, 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 plenty of dry land, but the land accounted for only 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 1, but which Sangh now thought of as the Paseefeeceuu, since Šheessay had told him its name. Only after a long, almost ballistic fall toward the water would they hit serious air and begin to get some lift, just enough to get them over to Saonwpowlu.

They would be pointing the wrong way to see the Erth’s star rise. In the oldest folk tales on Prezghod, this star was called “Sunn”; it was now called Uusol, Šheessay had said. But it had long been obvious that if Erth was real
that it would have a satellite visible to the naked eye at night. The Book of Genesis 1:16 made it clear: And Allah 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, which looked like bright, fast-moving stars, but nothing as breathtaking as Muun, as the old tales had it, or Aalua, as it was called now. Sangh craned his neck, twisted the forward camera, but Aalua 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 Saonwpowlu airport traffic control. It informed them — in Glish — that the pod was cleared to land. If it can, thought Sangh.

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Fortunately, Allah smiled on them and they came down safely, right where they aimed, Rocket Landing Area B of city #1’s airport, whose actual designation was the “Airoporto Eentairconchinentaal dje Saonwpowlu.”

2 Ambassadors
As soon as the landing thrusters shut off, the hatches opened automatically, stairs unfolded, and Tralf and Sangh got out. Or so they intended, but all their reflexes were off. They had forgotten that gravity made it necessary to stand up, not just push off, and each of them struggled like a drunk with an overcoat. Sangh stood wobbily in the hatchway, then tried turning around and coming down the short stairway as if descending a ladder, as they had trained to do. He missed the first stair and slid bumpy down, landing on his knees. He rolled out of Tralf’s way. Tralf started laughing hysterically, but Sangh had ripped his helmet off and could barely hear the guffaws coming through the fishbowl still on Tralf’s head. He lay looking up at the scarred heat shield and smoking thrusters, then rolled over and managed to stand up before inhaling. By then Tralf was at the bottom of the stairlet, on his ass rather than his knees, taking his helmet off.

Standard procedure for landing on unfamiliar planets required that they run chemical-assay kits and remain within 10 meters of the landing craft before removing anything, but how could Erth be unfamiliar? They were so greedy for lungfuls of native air, they didn’t mind the lingering fumes. Under the chemical stink of their escape pod, the air tasted like home. The day was overcast, but it seemed like the most beautiful day since the Creation. Sangh and Tralf blinked back the dimmed sunshine and started to laugh.
with delight. For a couple of minutes they could do little else but laugh or babble helplessly.

“Wow, look at those trees!”

“Was the sky this big back on Prezghod?”

“Lord, if I die now, I will die happy!”

They didn’t hear a golf-cart-sized vehicle until it was right behind them. They turned unsteadily, ready to greet whoever was driving it, their first Ertfiling, but there was no driver.

“It’s remotely controlled,” said Tralf, cautiously approaching it.

“No, sirs,” said the vehicle, “I am a robot; no remote control is normally required.”

“BeJesus,” said Tralf, crossing himself.

Sangh was a bit forewarned by his experience with Šheessay Dezeenauvee. “The local term is Seckie,” he said. “I believe Allah will protect us from its mischief for the duration of a ride to the terminal.”

“It’s a robot, and I remember the Bible stories about robots from school.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Ghiller, you are correct. I am a robot, not a Seque. All I do is give people rides. Do you want a ride to the main terminal? Or somewhere else? My instructions are to bring you to the main terminal, where President Travers awaits you.”

2 Ambassadors
“Oh come on, Tralf, let’s have faith in Allah and go for a ride.”

“Help me out of this suit first. I want to look like a diplomat.”

As they struggled to get out of their gear, Sangh had time to think about
the tiny prison he had escaped, and the huge exercise yard they were both
now in. The space they could move freely in seemed so vast that it hardly
seemed possible that Vhatta Limhoon could ever reach down and pluck them
back.

They tossed the suits into the escape pod, and climbed, steadier now,
into the golf cart. It toodled off. Sangh took his last glance at the escape
pod, disposable and now ruined, as they rounded the corner of the nearest
building.

It took only two minutes to drive around the tarmac of the airport to the
main terminal, one wing of which was decorated with bunting and balloons.
In the front a reviewing stand had been set up as if a parade were expected,
but the only parade was a detachment of Prezghod marines. A group of
dignitaries stood on the dais. A huge crowd of citizens waited in front of it,
behind rope barriers placed to give Sangh and Tralf’s vehicle a clear path.
The first people to greet them as they descended unsteadily from the robot
car were Lieutenant Commander Kolfhaj and one of the academics in his
group, Bewinda Wharbut, the historian.
“Greetings, Ambassadors,” said Kolfhaj impassively.

“Ambassador and traitor,” said Bewinda. “What a range of talent you have, Sangh Fharha. And what are your true colors, Mr. Ghiller?”

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

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

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

“Welcome, welcome to Terra!” he said. “I am Frank Powers, Chief Administrative Assistant to President Ronaldo Travers, President of the Solar System. I will let you confer with your colleagues, and then we invite you to join us on the dais.” He bowed, and returned to the reviewing stand.

“Commander Kolfhaj, sir!” said Sangh, coming to attention and saluting. He assumed Tralf was doing likewise. “Can you tell me what to expect when talking to these Ertflings?”

“Not much to report, I’m afraid, Mr. Fharha. I have made contact with the President, but after that initial contact we have remained at Firebase Limhoon, which is about three klicks from here. Until this morning, when we were advised by Vhatta Limhoon to bring a detachment of marines here. I’m not sure how Lieutenant Wharbut wound up here.”
“Sir, how would you describe the President?”

“‘Nonconfrontational’ would be about the only term that comes to mind.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Sangh. “Why don’t you . . . and Ms. Wharbut join us on the dais?”

The band was playing a bland march, which one might infer was the national anthem of Erth. Kolfhaj and Wharbut had been toughened by working against gravity for a few days, but Sangh and Tralf struggled going up the steps to the platform. They had to use the railing to pull themselves, and were huffing by the time they had gone five steps, even though they didn’t have to deal with the clumsy spacesuits any more. But the crowd’s applause buoyed them. Tralf waved and the crowd roared and whistled their approval. Sangh waved, too, as did Bewinda. 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 to assume this was President Travairs. 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, as if every member wanted to hear what Sangh had to say. What he had practiced,
with Tralf’s help, was a sentence in Tayhanu: “We come in peace, seeking our ancestors,” He hoped they had gotten it right. 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 presented the president with the scroll that Vhatta Limhoon and Commander Dhluzio had prepared, which purported to be direct from Poph Phillippa 6, 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.

There was a long round of handshaking. Sangh took this opportunity to ask Kolfhaj, “Where are the security personnel? Aren’t they the people whose hands you don’t shake?”

“And where are the TV cameras?” asked Tralf. Kolfhaj could answer neither question.

“If you’re seeking your ancestors, I’m not likely to be one,” the handsome man said. “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.”
The whole conversation would have been mutually unintelligible, but Mr. Pauwers, now standing at the president’s elbow, was just as fluent in Glish as Šheessay Dezeenaavée. He translated Sangh’s words into Tayhanu, and translated the president’s words into Glish, as they were spoken. Sangh’s smile dimmed momentarily. Not a Molyu, couldn’t be.

President Travairs’s handshake lasted a long time, which would have allowed a multitude of photographers to take many shots apiece of the historic meeting, assuming they were present but hard to spot.

It was hard not to like President Travairs. His firm grip and chiseled face went well with the grin he kept flashing. His skin was the color of autumn leaves, after they’ve lain on the ground for a week or two.

But when Powers extended his hand, Sangh could not bring himself to shake it. “I believe, Mr. President, that this man is a robot,” said Sangh in Glish, not thinking until Frâhnk 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 Sathan, “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). He was embarrassed all over again that he had fallen for Šheess’s tricks, which Vhatta Limhoon had suspected from the start.

But Pauwers apparently translated Sangh’s accusation faithfully, because
Travers just said, “Frank a robot? Oh no, he’s a *Seque.*” Again this sharp distinction — *Robots are machines powered by demons; what the size or shape of the demon is doesn’t matter, they’re all the same.* Some of the terrifying sizes and disgusting shapes he could still remember from theology classes, along with plenty of terrifying stories involving machines brought to life by demons. Robot or Seckie, he would not shake the thing’s hand.

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. Sangh had plenty of time to look around, until his attention was caught by the simultaneously huge and spindly towers rising from the south side of the airport (they had landed in the north). They were presumably the termini of launch loops. The nearer tower was used for hurling vehicles up, the further for bringing them down. Each rose into the sky like a thread, vanishing at a height where it was too thin to be perceptible. 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.

“Cool,” said Tralf.

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 Fràhnk Pauwers 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 Molyu 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.

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 Pauwers, the President, Kolfhaj, and a Presidential aide. In the back semicircle, facing the
first group, were Sangh, Tralf, a Prezghod marine, and Bewinda. Good — a marine cushion between us and her.

Dr. Bewinda Wharbut was a slender woman with skin the grayish color of old soyba bark and a round flat face that Sangh had grown used to in their months together. She did not look too happy. Her eyes kept going to 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 taken aback. “Bewinda, I can explain. But not now. We have a robot on board who can hear everything we say.”

“Plus, sir, we have reason to believe the vehicle itself is some kind of robot,” pointed out the marine, whose name Sangh did not know.

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

“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.” These words were translated by Frâhnk, as if the fact that he was a Seckie was irrelevant. Perhaps they were used to being spoken of as if they weren’t there. Bewinda made a “grump” sound but said no more. The
car started moving, with none of a gasoline engine’s sound or vibration.

“Electric,” said Tralf, to no one in particular.

Their limousine was followed by two or three smaller cars, presumably carrying members of the press. Once out of the airport, the little caravan passed through quiet, rural terrain. Actually, it looked more like a park, with 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.

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

“Oh, shut up,” said Bewinda, “Better to be a celebrity in Hell.”

“Mr. President,” said Sangh, anxious not to give offense, “We don’t have those trees on Prezghod. As you know, the colonists could take only so many species on our little Ark, and those weren’t selected.”

“Aren’t they beautiful? They’re called ayuucalipto. They’re not just pretty, but they play a vital role in the economy of this region.”

“What’s that, sir?”

The President paused and turned to his aide. “Me ažhudje, Fràhnk.”

Pauwers begrudged them a smile and said, “We could begin with the wood, sir. But there are many medically and industrially important oils
derived from the leaves. For instance, . . . ”

“That’s all right, Fràhnk! Let’s not bore our ambassadors to death and cause an international incident. Not when we’ve got so much pretty scenery to look at.”

“Yes,” 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 huge! Is it irrigated somehow?”

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

“There are places in this great nation of ours that are arid as can be,” 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, Fràhnk.”

Fràhnk paused. “These things take time, of course. We’re planting trees and irrigating around the edges of the Amazon desert, pushing its borders inward a bit, if you get my drift.”

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. The marine at Sangh’s side
gripped his weapon tighter, but it soon became clear that they were going slow 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, it was — President Travairs claimed kingship over the entire star system.

He was relieved that he had managed to squelch Bewinda’s hissy fit, but he quickly forgot all about it in his childlike excitement that all this should be taking place, for real, in a planet so far from home. He tried to focus on observations of military significance, but there weren’t any. He smiled and waved.

Then he noticed a small toy-sized helicopter hovering just outside his door, just out of reach of anyone who might try to grab it. It didn’t take long to spot others, arranged in a sparse swarm around the limo. They were too small to be carrying anything but some kind of camera. Boy, would the National Investigator love to have some of those, he thought. He burst out laughing when he realized what kind of TV-news helicopter Kolfhaj had shot down, but quickly suppressed it and tried to act dignified.

“You’re going to have to explain that joke,” said Tralf.

“Later.”
At some point the buildings began to get taller, and confetti began to rain upon their motorcade. The tiny helicopters blew the confetti down and around in complex eddies. Sangh waved at the people, and they all cheered. He waved some more, until his arm grew tired.

He would have loved at this point to have had a nice shower. It didn’t even need to be hot; just falling water would do. His second priority was to analyze the tactical situation with LtCdr. Kolfhaj. They were surrounded, both here on the surface and up in orbit, but no shots had been fired. The Tayhans seemed to love them. Everyone on the planet had, Sangh imagined, been alerted to the presence of “aliens” in their midst by the news-and-indoctrination channels, but nothing was being done about them. This was astounding. It fit no wargaming situation 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 had ways of defending themselves that were beyond the Prezghodlings’ comprehension. Both possibilities were unnerving.

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 surrounded by fountains. Even though
Travairs 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. There was nothing comparable on Prezghod outside the Paphal Palatso in Nurhome.

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. The press contingent was inside the barriers, and many of them held up their hands — perhaps there were cameras surgically implanted in them?

Sang looked up in the blue-gray sky, as if he could see Cross far overhead. His way home led through that keyhole, beside which Vhatta Limhoon crouched. *I’m in the biggest prison cell in the universe, and I’ve dragged my best friend in with me.* He stopped waving and joined Tralf and President Travairs as they led their entourage up the broad steps of what must be the Presidential Palace.