

Chanur's Homecoming
by CJ Cherryh
(Chanur book #4)

In our last episode...

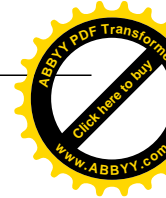
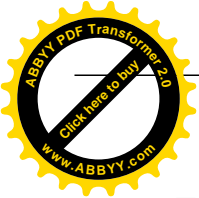
Two years previous, the aggressive kif, natives of Akkht, had a hakkikt, a leader so fearsome he united more than the usual number of kif behind him in a pirate band. This hakkikt, Akkukkak, had seized a ship of a hitherto unknown species, humanity; and acquired ambitions beyond the usual kifish banditry against other species. With a species to prey on which was without the protections of the Compact, he might grow powerful enough to gather the whole kifish species under his influence, sweeping down on the Compact in a wave of conquest unprecedented in history.

But his human prey escaped him. While the hakkikt was docked at Meetpoint starstation, the last surviving prisoner ran to shelter aboard *The Pride of Chanur*, a hani merchant ship captained by one Pyanfar Chanur, who in no wise solicited this refuge.

Still Pyanfar and her crew as a matter of policy refused to surrender the human to Akkukkak's demand. This was a two-fold calamity for the kif: first the loss of the human and all the information he held about his species; and then this defiance from a mere hani merchant—who continued to elude the great hakkikt in a multi-star chase. Akkukkak was suddenly fighting not only for his prey but for his life, for a kif who loses face rapidly loses followers, and becomes the target of other kif with ambitions. Akkukkak was compelled to seek vengeance on a scale sufficient to cover this humiliation; and this humiliation involved an ambition large enough to shake worlds.

He took the unprecedented step of moving on the hani homeworld, seeking first the humiliation and removal of Pyanfar Chanur and all her clan, in what may have been a kifish misapprehension of the importance of any single hani; he was thinking as a kif, and interpreted Pyanfar's moves as aggressive ambition. He also demanded the return of his property. In all these demands he seriously misjudged the hani, for no action he could have taken would have rallied the hani against him more than this intrusion on hani home territory and the demand to surrender a living being who had taken shelter within a hani clan. Hani resisted in a battle at Gaohn station, and they received mahen help in the persons of two hunter captains, known to Pyanfar (mahendo'sat names are not easy for outsiders) as Goldtooth and Jik. This firefight would have been serious enough; but the hostilities disturbed yet another species of the Compact, the methane-breathing knnn, aliens of direst reputation and the highest technology in known space. The knnn, intervening, took Akkukkak away to a fate unguessed. And that settled that. The human Tully went home to his people. Pyanfar Chanur looked forward to a new era of trade and prosperity in which not only Clan Chanur, but all hani-kind would profit from human contact.

She reckoned, unfortunately, without the stsho, whose station at Meetpoint was the hub of all trading routes of the Compact. Total xenophobes, the stsho withdrew Chanur's trading permit. More, Akkukkak had indeed caused a profound disturbance in hani affairs by the manner of his demise. Chanur was forced to defend itself against challenge by hani enemies who took advantage of popular fears of the knnn, and though Lord Kohan Chanur held on, Chanur lost valuable allies whose support in council Pyanfar and other women of the clan very greatly missed.



To add to the difficulties, no one kept their promises. The humans did not return and the mahendo'sat withdrew into isolation.

Two impoverished years later, Pyanfar Chanur was doing all she could to keep The Pride running, and she was not the only Chanur captain in deep trouble.

Then by some unforeseen miracle her papers cleared and she was invited back to Meetpoint to recover her trading license.

She pulled into Meetpoint with the last cargo she could afford to buy, and fell right into the welcoming arms of Goldtooth the mahendo'sat, who handed her a courier packet with the human Tully as a secret passenger and told her to run for her life: the kif were hunting him.

Now among Pyanfar's other troubles, she had defied hani custom. Hani males were traditionally a protected class within hani society, the few who made successful challenge becoming clan lords, ceremonial heads of clans, who in fact had no meaningful authority at all, the real legal and financial power resting with the clanswomen who conducted exterior business. The rest of the males lived and died in rural exile, excluded from all society but their own; and to this pool of males a defeated clan lord must retire, to a short and wretched life among younger, ambitious males practicing their combat skills.

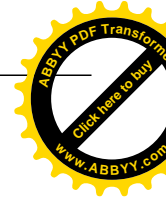
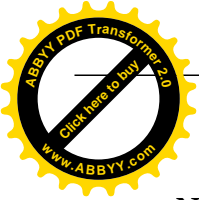
Pyanfar's husband Khym Mahn was defeated by their son Kara, and deposed; but he postponed his exile to help her in her fight against the kif, and became one of the few hani males ever to leave the planetary surface-by interstellar agreement, they were in fact barred from doing so, since they had a reputation for berserker rages dangerous to life and property.

But Pyanfar, faced with the prospect of sending Khym down world again to die, defied treaty and custom and took him aboard The Pride; more, she secured working papers for him by bribing a mahendo'sat official, and listed him as crew. Having traveled and worked with alien males, Pyanfar has begun to see in her own husband traits no hani has ever looked for in a male of her species; she conceived the idea in her heart of hearts that the berserker rages might be due more to upbringing than biology, and yet- and yet she is hani; and to doubt something out of all folk wisdom, something built into all language and custom and tradition, is very difficult, the more so that Khym himself doubts her theories; he is, after all, a product of his culture too, and all the complex of beliefs which encourage him to be a man also foster his aggressive impulses and his doubts about his faculties. It is not, in sum, a comfortable situation for The Pride's crew either, who still cannot figure out whether they ought to treat Khym as a man or try to ignore that handicap and treat him as one of themselves-in which case modesty and custom and language are in the way: female humor and traditional curses involve sons and males; pausing to dress in shipboard emergencies is not practical; ship facilities are not designed to accommodate a man's larger stature; and male thinking is traditionally given to be hasty and imprecise, not the sort of thing anyone wants to rely on in any use of hazardous machinery.

But Khym once-lord of Mann acquired the unprecedented (for a hani) designation of crewman aboard The Pride of Chanur.

The worst happened forthwith: Khym was involved in a riot that heavily damaged Meetpoint station. Pyanfar escaped a second loss of her license only by charging the entire bill to the mahendo'sat, who had given her a credit slip for quite different purposes-to aid her with the transport of the human, Tully.

Unfortunately this riot happened under the disapproving witness of one Rhif Ehrran, an agent of the hani government.



Now Rhif Ehrran had come to Meetpoint on quite different business. So many of the spacing clans of the hani had taken heavy damage at Gaohn that the groundling clans had seized control of the han, the hani senate. Meanwhile the xenophobic stsho, wealthiest species of the Compact, had bribed certain hani politicians, wanting to subvert hani politics from the inside for fear of two other species: first, humans, who had trespassed stsho borders and might do so again; second, the kif, because two of Akkukkak's erstwhile lieutenants, one Akkhtimakt and one Sikkukkut, had risen to declare themselves hakkikktun. These two kif were currently battling it out between themselves, but they had already polarized kifish society into a frighteningly few predatory bands. From a fragmented piratical species, kif had suddenly achieved unity to a degree Akkukkak himself never effected.

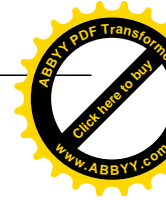
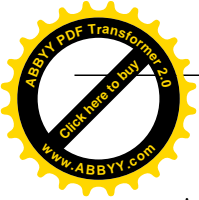
The burning issue, among kif as elsewhere, was humanity; and the persistent rumors held that humanity was the Compact right through methane-breather space, to unite with the mahendo'sat, which meant trouble for the kif. The rumors happened to be true. And the stsho, who, incapable of fighting, had long relied on mahen guards for protection, suddenly suspected they could no longer trust mahendo'sat. Hence the sudden coziness with the groundling hani clans and the flood of stsho money to certain hani pockets. The han had heard rumors too; and heard rumors, moreover, of one hani actively cooperating with the kif-the hani pirate Dur Tahar of Tahar's Moon Rising. That was the ship Rhif Ehrran had gone out there to hunt. But Ehrran was also there on secret business: negotiating with the stsho on behalf of certain of her own political patrons. Certainly Ehrran was interested when Pyanfar Chanur involved herself in a major riot aboard Meetpoint, entangled with both mahen secret agents and a high-ranking kif. So when Pyanfar paid a huge bribe to the stsho stationmaster, Stle sties stlen, and made a hasty departure from Meetpoint with the human Tully aboard, Rhif Ehrran followed, smelling political blood and seeing in this move of Pyanfar's a threat to all she stood for.

Akkhtimakt headed Pyanfar off by occupying Kita Point, strategic gateway to mahen and hani space, forcing all traffic to detour into the Disputed Zones along the kifish/mahen border. With The Pride damaged enroute, Pyanfar had no choice but to go to Kshshti Station in the Zones, seeking repairs and help. Her intended destination was Maing Tol, the mahen regional capital; her aim, to deliver Tully and his message from humanity into the hands of Goldtooth's superiors. But on her arrival at Kshshti, she ran into Rhif Ehrran, the kif Sikkukkut, and the hani trader Ayhar's Prosperity, which had lost its cargo at Meetpoint thanks to her: its captain Banny Ayhar was not pleased.

Rhif Ehrran demanded Tully's surrender to her; and her attempt to take custody of Tully resulted in a dock fight which put Tully and Pyanfar's young niece Hilfy Chanur into the hands of their enemy Sikkukkut. Sikkukkut left, leaving Pyanfar the message that she could recover the hostages at Mkks, a station right on the kifish border. It was too obviously a trap.

In the midst of all this, Goldtooth's partner Jik (whose true mahen name is Keia Nomesteturjai) showed up at Kshshti with his powerful hunter-ship Aja Jin; and sent the hani captain Banny Ayhar on to Maing Tol with the message Pyanfar had brought this far. He supported Pyanfar in her decision to go to Mkks: he went along and somehow argued Rhif Ehrran into joining them.

At Mkks, Sikkukkut returned Hilfy and Tully in a negotiated settlement. He also gave Pyanfar a gift of kifish esteem-a slave named Skkukuk.



And all they had agreed to do in return was to cross into kifish territory and help Sikkukkut take Kefk station, the main kifish link to Meetpoint, in an act of outright piracy. Jik agreed, to Pyanfar's consternation. Moreover, Rhif Ehrran did, after listening to Jik's persuasion.

They made the jump and they succeeded. Their ships occupied Kefk kifish-fashion, by superior bluff and with very little damage.

Goldtooth showed up then, furious with his partner Jik, for Goldtooth had been lying silent just off Kefk monitoring the situation. He had been off a time fighting Akkhtimakt, trying to open the way for a human fleet now enroute to Compact space, and now Jik had made a deal which would effectively bring Sikkukkut into alliance with the mahendo'sat against Akkhtimakt, emphatically not the situation Goldtooth was working toward. Humans were headed into Compact space in great number, and Goldtooth's whole plan for human-mahen alliance now was jeopardized by the taking of Kefk and its delivery to Sikkukkut, who consequently would bring the kif into unity under one hakkikt much faster than Goldtooth's plans called for.

Pyanfar meanwhile received a second gift of esteem from Sikkukkut, the person of her old enemy Dur Tahar the pirate, who had been a respectable hani merchant captain before she opposed Pyanfar at Gaohn and accidentally ended up in alliance with the kif, her reputation ruined. Now a prisoner of Sikkukkut, captured along with Akkhtimakt's partisans on the station, Tahar had reached the nadir of her fortunes and begged Pyanfar to intercede with the kif for the lives of her cousins still in Sikkukkut's hands.

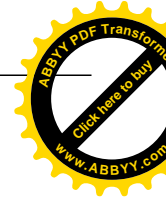
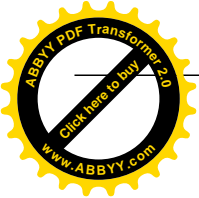
Tahar. Pyanfar refused, having nothing but disgust for Ehrran's secret police methods and police state mentality. Tahar would go home to hani justice, but aboard The Pride of Chanur. It was a direct slap at Ehrran and a threat to her prestige; and a countermove against her patrons' ambitions. It served notice that Chanur, instead of bowing to political force, was going to exercise the ancient authority of a clan to take its own prisoners and administer its own justice before turning the offender over to the han. This effectively meant that Rhif Ehrran's superiors and political allies could not touch Tahar without dealing with Chanur as a head-of-cause in open council, and without bringing the whole* foreign policy issue into debate in the han with Chanur as the chief spokeswoman for the opposition, precisely the situation Chanur's enemies did not want.

Then, while Pyanfar went to negotiate with Sikkukkut, Goldtooth secretly met with Ehrran. And some unknown agency started a riot on the docks, which set Akkhtimakt's hitherto cowed partisans on the station to attacking Sikkukkut's forces. Pyanfar and the Tahar crew, whose freedom she had just negotiated from Sikkukkut, were caught in the middle of the firefight, as Goldtooth and Rhif Ehrran both took advantage of the confusion to break dock and run for Meetpoint- together.

The slave Skkukuk saved Pyanfar's life in the riot, to her profound distress at the debt. But Jik, also attempting Pyanfar's rescue from the firefight, fell into the hands of Sikkukkut, who had some new and hard questions to ask of Jik regarding Goldtooth, mahen ambitions, and the whereabouts and course of human ships.

Chapter One

The Pride's small galley table was awash in data printout, paperfaxes ringed and splotched with brown gfi-stains, arrowed, circled, crossed out, and noted in red and green ink till they were beyond cryptic. The red pen made another notation and another snaking arrow;



and the bronze-pelted hani fist that held it flexed claws out and in again in profoundest frustration. Pyanfar Chanur sat in this sanctuary gnawing her mustaches and drinking cup after cup of lukewarm gfi amid her scribbles on the nav and log records.

Pyanfar was not her usual meticulous self-rough blue spacer-breeches instead of the bright red silk she favored, and not a single one of the bracelets and other gold jewelry she usually wore, just the handful of spacer rings up the sweep of her tuft-tipped ears. Her best pair of red silk breeches had gone for rags, perished of the same calamity which had stiffened her joints, left several knots on her maned skull, and made small puncture wounds all over her red-brown hide. Her niece's deft fingers had tweezed out the metal splinters down in sickbay, with the help of the magnetic scanner, and patched the worst cuts with plasm and sticking-plaster. Haral, her second-in-command, had suffered the same, and limped about her duties on the bridge, running printouts and sitting watch in her turn, while the rest of the crew was in scarcely better shape, hides patched, manes and beards singed, with bandages here and there about their persons. That had been a memorable fight on the docks, indeed a memorable fracas; but Pyanfar could have recalled it with more pleasure if it had come to better success.

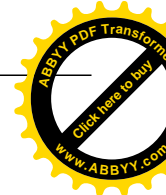
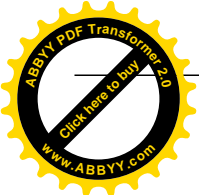
Scratch-scratch. Another note went down on the well-worn starchart. She studied it and restudied it, gnawed her mustaches and refigured, though all but the finest decimal exactitudes of current star-distances were in her memory. There were surely answers in that map; and she racked her wits to find them, to discover what the opposition planned and what her allies (treacherous though they be) might be figuring to do, and to juggle all the variables at once. The answer was there, patently there, in the possibilities of that starmap and in the self-interests of eight separate and polylogical species.

Knowing all the options, all those self-interests, and all the capabilities of the ships involved, a hani merchant might conceivably manage to think of something clever. She needed something clever. Desperately.

She sat at Kefk, inside kifish space where no hani of right mind would ever consent to be, allied to kif no hani in her right mind would ever trust; she sat in the same space station with nervous methane-breathers (tc'a and chi) who had lately been raided (reprimanded? attacked? congratulated?) by an intruding knnn ship, which had carried off a tc'a vessel. Gods knew what was in the tc'a's multipartite minds; the chi had no minds that any oxy breather had ever proved; and as for the knnn, no one had any least idea what they were up to. Wherever those black hair-snarls on thin black legs intruded their influence (and the power of their strange ships), things bent. Fast. But the knnn had withdrawn and Kefk occupied itself with its own affairs, like repair of its fire-ravaged docks and placating its new master, the hakkikt Sikkukkut, whose ships now numbered thirty-two (the count was rising). It occupied itself with the hani pirate Dur Tahar, lately at liberty by the hakkikt's grace; with the mahen hunter-ship Aja Jin, lately outside the hakkikt's good graces, and still at dock, sitting beside The Pride and not daring send a compromising query across the dockside communication lines. Kefk had a great deal to worry about, not least of which was the missing hunter-ship Mahijiru and its captain, one Ana Ismehanan-min, aka Goldtooth, and the hani ship that had run with him.

Along with major structural damage, a breached sector, fire, disruption of the lifesupport systems, the remnants of a revolution and other nagging difficulties.

Another flurry of figures and pen-corrections. There was, number one, the mahendo'sat territory to reckon with: a wide sprawl of stars into which at least one message had gone and might have gotten through, knnn and the gods willing. Banny Ayhar would have done



her best to get it through, as much as any merchant captain could do: she might have lived to get it to Maing Tol, if the knnn had not stopped her or if the kif had not been laying for her. The mahendo'sat, tall black-furred primates with enough double-turning motives involved to baffle a tc'a's multipartite brain (but antagonism toward their neighbors the kif was always high among them), might have made a move if that message had gotten through. Down the line via Kshshti and out to Mkks might be a good course of action for the mahendo'sat to take, if they hoped to forestall any kifish breakout along that border; but Meetpoint station or Kita Point, critical to all trade routes, was most likely the object of any major push from the mahendo'sat. That effort would have to come via Kshshti if Kita was still blocked; while Kefk, in kifish territory, was not a likely route for them. Not impossible, given the current state of borders in the Compact, just less than likely. Also reckoning mahendo'sat moves, it was very likely there were one or more mahen hunter-ships escorting the human ships; and they were coming in toward Meetpoint from Tt'a'va'o and tc'a/chi space.

With human ships and human captains; still another set of motives and self-interests, on gods-knew-what orders from their own authorities. (Or lack of them—who knew what human minds were like?)

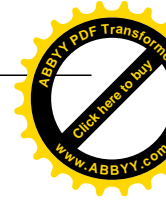
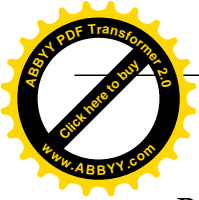
Further complication: kifish forces under the rival hakkikt Akkhtimakt had likely moved in to take the mahen/tc'a station at Kshshti. That might stand off any mahen flanking move to Meetpoint, if Akkhtimakt's forces still controlled Kita as well. Akkhtimakt might have Kita, Urtur, Kshshti, or all three, and advance from any or all of those points against Meetpoint and/or Kefk itself, if the report Goldtooth had brought was true and the stsho had been fools enough to invite Akkhtimakt in as hired help.

There was, lure to Akkhtimakt, his greatest enemy Sikkukkut, sitting here at Kefk gathering to his control every ship that came into port. And revenge was always high on any list of kifish motives. Pukkukta, they called it. Advance retaliation was better than revenge after the fact. Having an enemy know his calamity before he died was best of all. Yet another move of the pen, another arrow, lurid green: one could not exclude interference from the methane-breathers, whose motives no oxy breather could guess. And, certainly not to be forgotten, there were the stsho who owned Meetpoint, congenitally noncombatant, but hiring alien, aggressive help right and left and forming reckless associations.

While the han-gods, the hani senate was up to its nose in politics as usual, and Rhif Ehrran was on her way to Meetpoint with evidence enough to outlaw Chanur once and for all. The Pride of Chanur sat at a kifish dock six to seven jumps from homestar, no matter which way she figured it. Six or seven jumps was a long way, a very long way, measured in stress on ship and on body; and gods knew what would follow on her heels, if she did what she would gladly do now and broke dock at Kefk and ran for their lives, withdrawing herself like a good law-abiding hani from all the affairs of kif and mahendo'sat and multifarious aliens.

But the trouble would surely follow her home; she knew beyond a doubt that it would. She had involved herself in the affairs of kifish hakkiktun and she had acquired their notice. She had made herself a name in kifish eyes. She had gotten sfik, face. And that meant that kif would never let her alone so long as she lived.

Her uneasy partner Sikkukkut an'nikktukktin would never forget her; certainly (gods forbid he should replace Sikkukkut in power) her personal enemy Akkhtimakt would not.



Pyanfar scribbled, flicked her ears, and the rings of forty years of voyages chimed in her hearing. A pearl swung from her right ear, a Llyene pearl from the oceans of the stsho homeworld; she still wore that gift, regardless of the perfidy of the giver, who was Goldtooth, friend, traitor, flatterer and tenfold liar. Curse him to his own deepest hell.

Goldtooth was bound for Meetpoint with Rhif Ehrran, beyond a doubt he was, the conniving bastard. He was dealing with the stsho and anyone else who offered his species an advantage, and he was betting opposite to the alliance his own partner Jik had made-to which maneuver Sikkukkut took strongest and understandable exception.

Another scribble.

A quick movement caught her eye, a black blot speeding across the floor, sinuous, small, fast.

She leapt to her feet. "Haral!" she yelled, while paper cascaded off the table and the black thing paused for one beady-eyed stare before it skittered on, faster than her limping dive to stop it.

Haral appeared, hobbling in by the short bridge-galley corridor, and did a fast skip and wince as it dived between her feet and vanished.

Pyanfar snatched up a handful of jumbled papers. "Fry that thing!"

"Sorry, captain. We're setting traps-"

"Traps be bothered, they're breeding, I swear they are! Get Skkukuk on it, they're his by-the-gods dinner. Let him find 'em. Gods-be mess. Vermin!" The hair stood up on her shoulders and she stared at her first officer in bleakest despair. No one in the crew was up to more orders, more duty, or more trouble.

"The things might get into something vital," Pyanfar said. Common sense, covering absolute revulsion. "Gods, get 'em out!"

"Aye," Haral said, in a voice as thin and hoarse as hers. And Haral limped away, to get their own private kif to ferret his dinner out of The Pride's nooks and crannies before something else went wrong. That took a guard, to watch Skkukuk; and gods curse the luck that had set the things free on the ship in the first place. She had heard the story, inspected the burned patch on The Pride's outer airlock seal. And she blessed Tirun Araun's quick hand that had gotten that door shut-vermin and all.

Gods knew how those black slinking pests had gotten up from lowerdeck.

Climbed the liftshaft? The airducts?

The thought of a myriad little slinking black bodies loping along the airshafts and into lifesupport lifted the hairs at her nape.

What were the gods-be things eating?

She scooped up a last couple of papers with a wince and a grimace and sat down again.

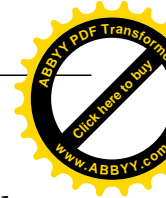
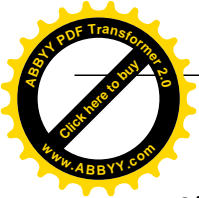
Rested both elbows on the table and rested her aching head in her hands.

She saw within her mind a dark kifish hall; sodium-light; and a table surrounded by insect-legged chairs-her partner Jik sitting there with one of Sikkukkut's minions holding a gun to his head, and that bastard Sikkukkut starting to ask closer and closer questions.

She had not had a way to help him. She had been lucky to get her own crew out of there alive; and to keep herself and her ship as free as it was, under kifish guns at a kifish dock.

Send another appeal to Sikkukkut to ask for Jik's release? Sikkukkut's patience with her was already frayed. Perhaps it was personal cowardice not to send another message.

Perhaps it was prudence and saving what could be saved, not to push Sikkukkut into some demonstration of his power-at Jik's expense. Kifish heads adorned the stanchions of



Sikkukkut's ship-ramp. That image haunted her rest and her sleep. A moment's off-guard imagining set Jik's head there beside the others.

She opened her eyes abruptly when that vision hit, focusing instead on the maps and charts and printout, where the answer had to lie, where she was convinced it was, if she could cudgel her aching skull and battered brain just a little farther through the maze. Jik had left them another legacy: a coded microfiche which even Soje Kesurinan, in command of Aja Jin, might not know existed. And The Pride's computers had been running on that, trying to break that code, ever since they had gotten back to the ship and had a chance to feed it in.

"Again," said Sikkukkut an'niktukktin, hakkikt and mekt-hakkikt, lately provincial boss and currently rival for ultimate authority among his kind; while Jik, Keia Nomesteturjai, kif-hunter, captain, and what other rank among mahendo'sat this kifish pirate would earnestly like to know-focused his eyes with difficulty and managed a twisted grin. That tended to confuse hell out of the kif, who knew facial expressions were a second and well-developed language especially among mahendo'sat, and who had never quite learned to interpret all their nuances.

"Again," said Sikkukkut, "Keia, my old friend. Where are the human ships? Doing what? Intending what?"

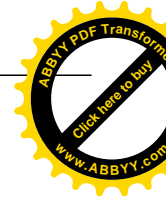
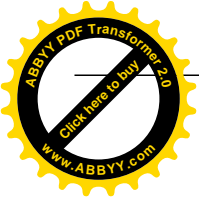
"I've told you," Jik said. He said it in mahensi, being perverse. Sikkukkut understood that language, though many of his listening subordinates, standing about their table in this dim, sodium-lit hall, were not as educated. Sikkukkut, on the other hand, had a good many talents.

Interrogation was one of those. Sikkukkut had performed that office in the service of Akkukak, of unlamented memory. All these questions, each pacing and each shift of mood Sikkukkut displayed, were calculated. It was, at the moment, the soft touch. Have a smoke, my old friend. Sit and talk with me. But now the frown was back, a slight drawing-down of Sikkukkut's long black snout. Hooded and inscrutable he sat, on his insect-legged chair, in the baleful light of the sodium-lamps, while Jik smoked and stared at him eye to eye. There were numerous guards about the shadowed edges of the hall, always the sycophants and the guards. In a little time the order would come to take him back to lowerdecks; and they would try the harder course again. Constant shifting of strategy, the hard approach and the soft, Sikkukkut usually the latter. Usually.

Jik kept himself mentally distant from all these changes, observed the shifts and absorbed the punishment with a professional detachment which was Sikkukkut's (surely, Jik reckoned) intention to crack. And he looked Sikkukkut in his red-rimmed eyes with the sure feeling that the kif was analyzing his every twitch and blink, looking for a telling reaction.

"Come now, Keia. You know my disposition, how patient I am, of my kind. I know that you had ample time to consult with your partner before the shooting started. We've been over these questions. They grow wearisome. Can we not resolve them?"

"My partner," Jik said, silken-slurred: Sikkukkut afforded him liquor, and he pinched out a dead smokestick and took a sip from the small round footed cup, and drew a long, long breath. Pleasures were few enough. He took what he could get. "I tell you, hakkikt, I wish / knew what my partner's up to. God, you think I'd have been out on that dock if I'd known what he was about to do?" He fumbled after his next smoke and his fingers were numb. Doubtless the drink was drugged. But there were enough of them to put the drug into him



another way, so he took his medicine dosed in very fine liquor and quietly gathered his internal forces. He was deep-conditioned, immune to ordinary efforts in that regard: he knew how to self-hypnotize, and he was already focused on a series of mantras and mandalas into which he had coded what he knew, down paths of dialectic and image no kif could walk without error. He smiled blandly, in secret and bleak amusement that Sikkukkut's methods had incidentally eased the aches and the pains of previous sessions. His thoughts swayed and wove, moved in and out of focus. The docks and fire. His crew. Aja Jin. Friends and allied ships were just down the dock and as good as lightyears away. "Let me tell you, mekt-hakkikt, I know Ana's style. Think like a mahendo'sat who knows kif, hakkikt. If he'd asked you for leave to operate on his own you'd never have given it." "Therefore he wrecks Kefk's docks."

Jik shrugged and drew in a puff, blinked and stared at the kif beneath heavy lids. "Well, but independence is Ana's way. I've known him for years. He's damn stubborn. He thinks he sees a way and he takes it. Agreements to this side and that- sure, he's working the mahen side. And maybe the human side too. Most of all he's gathering assets-" (Careful, Keia, the brain's fogged; stay to the narrow, the back-doubling path and lead us all round again.) Jik drew in smoke and let it out again in a shaky exhalation. "He'll negotiate with you. Eventually. But think like a mahendo'sat. He has to get something in hand to negotiate with, something to offer you, hakkikt, to demonstrate his worth."

"Like Meetpoint? You weigh upon my credulity, Keia." Silk, silk and soothing-soft. "Try again."

"Not Meetpoint. But some matter of substance he can come to you with. I think he means to come back to talk. But he will bring something."

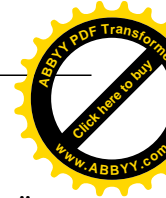
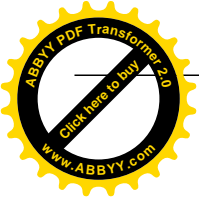
Sikkukkut's snout twitched in a dry sniffing, kifish laughter, which came for many reasons, not all of which were civilized. "Like a million human ships and a great number of guns?"

"Now, that is possible, hakkikt." Jik blinked and narrowed his focus still tighter on what he had resolved to say, never on what he was hiding. Find the threads of the story and stay to them, walk the narrow path, while the drug and the alcohol and the stimulants in the smoke flowed through his veins. "That is remotely possible; but the advantage would be too onesided for the humans. What good to mahendo'sat, to exchange one powerful neighbor for another of unknown potential?"

"Unknown, is it?"

"You speak excellent mahensi. Far better than I speak your language. Mechanical translators are hardly a substitute for living and fluent brains. The best human translator we know can ask for a cup of water and say he wants trade. Now, what does that tell us about human motives, human government, human minds, a? Friend, they say. You say friend, I say friend. Do we mean the same thing? What do humans mean with that word? Assuredly Ana doesn't know; and I much doubt he means to upend the Compact as long as he doesn't know." Jik held up a blunt-clawed forefinger, to maintain attention to a point.

"Goldtooth, our esteemed Ana, takes orders. He also interprets them freely. This is the danger in him. The Personage who sent us both knows this. Therefore he sent me to restrain Ana from his excesses. I have failed in this. But I know Ana's limits. I am saying this to you, and you speak such excellent mahensi; but I don't know whether you know the meaning of this word limits in the way we do. It implies the edge of Ana's personal assumptions. Ana still obeys the Personage at Maing Tol. As I do. And I tell you that negotiation with you is in the Personage's interest and human ships running freely through Compact is not in those interests. Therefore I make alliance with



you, as I would have made it simultaneously with Akkhtimakt if he were not the fool he is." This pleased Sikkukkut, perhaps. The dark eyes flickered. Sikkukkut picked up his cup and the thin tongue exited the v-form gap of his outer teeth and lapped delicately at the petroleum-smelling contents. "I have known mahen fools," Sikkukkut said.

"Don't number Ana among them."

"Or yourself?"

"I hope not to be."

"I have a notion what you might have been doing out on that dockside, Keia, my friend. Ana Ismehanan-min wanted confusion behind which to depart. And someone fired the shot that touched off the riot."

"Rhif Ehrran."

"The hani? Come now, Keia. Hani gave no orders to the mahendo'sat."

"It's not certain that they take them either, your pardon, hakkikt. Myself, I look for a fool to do a fool's work; and Ehrran is the greatest fool I know."

"Ehrran isn't sitting here at this moment."

Jik drew in a long breath of smoke and let it go again. "It did give her the diversion she needed. And indeed, she isn't sitting here at this moment. At cost to me, to Chanur-in fact, hakkikt, expensive as it may be to her in the long run, in the short, it served her very well. And what my partner is thinking of in her regard I wish I could tell you. I wish I knew. I think he has use for that hani he took with him, use he couldn't get out of Chanur-Chanur being no fool."

"Perhaps he has made use of all the hani. Perhaps he has secured his retreat from among us, and that is all he hoped to do-might that not be, Keia? I only wonder what you are doing here."

"Perhaps he only followed her because he saw no way to stop her."

"His ship has armaments," Sikkukkut said dryly. "He was close behind her before her ship reached velocity."

"I mean within his intentions he had no way to stop her."

"And those intentions are?"

Jik spread his hands. "I keep my agreements, hakkikt. And if he has abrogated our partnership-" It was his best argument, his most desperate. His brain fuzzed and the drug meandered through his veins with the force of a tidal bore. "If he has cast me off, hakkikt, I still keep my agreements with you. That's my job to do; and if I fare better than he does, then that will prove to my Personage which agreement is the better to keep."

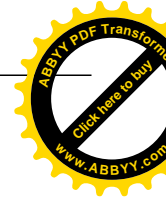
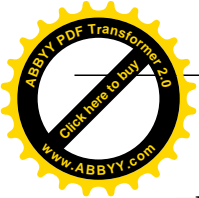
"Mahen mentality."

"I tell you: it's very like sfik. Give me status and I'll outweigh him with the Personage at Maing Tol. It's that simple. It's not unknown that the mahendo'sat conclude conflicting treaties. And if my course looks wiser than Ana's, mine will be honored and his will be set aside. If both of us look like fools, our Personage will lean on other agencies- nor can either of us know if our Personage is not concluding a third treaty with the stsho. If all fail him, he will fall and another Personage's agents will be to deal with. The mahendo'sat is easy to predict and reasonable to deal with. It will always go for its greatest advantage."

"Kk-kk-t. And will this Personage of yours stir forth in action or wait for events?"

"Outcome from the subordinates is always the deciding factor."

"Where has Ismehanan-min gone? Where is this human fleet? What agreements has he made with the methane-breathers? What of your own?"



They returned to old questions, the same questions, bringing the interview in its usual circle. "Again, mekt-hakkikt, I don't know. They may aim at Meetpoint. It's not impossible the humans might come here. And I don't know of any agreement with the knnn. I asked the tc'a to come here to assure that there was no panic on methane-side-"

"Why did the knnn take your tc'a?"

"I don't know. Who knows the knnn? Who can make an agreement with them-"

"Except the tc'a. Except the tc'a, Keia. Tell me what dealings you have had with them."

"God help me, none." He held up a protesting hand. "I never deal with knnn." And carefully, with his sense in rags from drugs and drink: "That's Ana's department."

"You wish to alarm me."

"Hakkikt, I am alarmed. I don't know whether Ana is in control of it, or whether the knnn are doing something independent."

"In control of it."

It did sound stupid. Jik blinked slowly and took another drag at the smoke. "I mean maybe he's in consultation with them." The hakkikt feared the methane-breathers. Their irrationality, their technology, their vapors and tempers or whatever it was that sent them into frenzies, made the methane-folk a force no one sane wanted to stir up. "Or they approached him." That was enough to send the wind up Sikkukkut's back. "I don't know, hakkikt. I swear. God witness. I don't know. I did send a message to Maing Tol. So did Goldtooth. What was in his packet I don't know."

"What was in yours?"

Jik shrugged. "My deal with you. My urging they accept this treaty. I tell you, hakkikt, I'd urge you-all respect, hakkikt, you let me go back to my ship. I have a personal interest in seeing this agreement of ours flourish. It'll make me a very powerful man at home."

Give the kif something he understood, an ambition within kifish comprehension.

"You're attempting to use psychology on me," Sikkukkut said.

"Of course I am. It also happens to be true."

"What happened to friendship! You know I know words like this. I am not stupid, Keia; I can study up on a concept without having the-internal circuitry to process it. Friendship means that you work in concert with Ismehanan-min. Loyalty means that you might become a martyr-I learned that word of ker Pyanfar. An appalling concept. But there it was in the mahen dictionary. I was curious. Martyr. Martyrdom. The whole of mahen history teems with martyrs. You place value on them. Like the hani. Have you wish to become one, Keia?"

Jik lifted his brows. "Martyr is another word for fool."

"I found no such cross-reference. Tell me: Keia: I want to know this: where do the knnn fit into Ismehanan-min's

arrangements? What arrangements has he made with the stsho?"

"He would betray them."

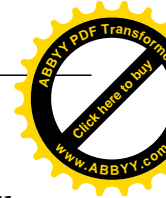
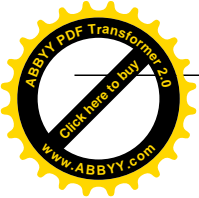
"And your opinion of them?"

"They would betray us."

"They have. Stle sties stlen is a deadly creature. For a grass-eating stsho. Is he dealing with this person?"

"I don't know. No. Yes." God help him, the drug was fuzzing up his mind again. For a panicked instant he lost all the threads and got them back again, remembering his story.

"But not at depth. Ana doesn't trust the stsho. It's mutual. Of course. The humans will come to Meetpoint- eventually. I think they'll come there. And Stle stles stlen will Phase



when gtst sees it. No sts-stsho can withstand that kind of blow to gtst reputation. Ana will take advantage of the confusion and seize the station. If he can."

"And Akkhtimakt will allow this."

"Ana will have to anticipate him there. Perhaps-perhaps, hakkikt, Ana moved so quickly because he knows something of Akkhtimakt's intentions. That there was no more time-in Ana's estimation."

"And why would he go with the hani?"

"Look for advantage." That questioning made him nervous. It was a new tack; he tried to think his way through it and in desperation went back to old answers. "I think-think he hopes to use Rhif Ehrran to get into Meetpoint itself without having stsho techs Phase and bring the systems down. Now you doubt this. I well know. But stsho react badly to surprises; from kif, they expect threats. Even from hani. But mahen threats unbalance them. They're unaccustomed. Ehrran has a treaty with them. That's all I can guess about it. She's a key. That's all. A fool and a key."

"To do what?"

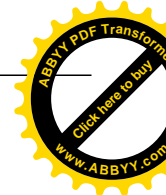
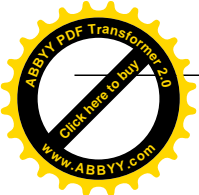
"Hakkikt, I'm not privy to his plans."

Upon that, they were back to old matters. He sat and smoked while Sikkukkut thought that reply over once more, hunched faceless within the hooded robe, on his insect chair, the silver emblem of his pryncedom among kif shining on his breast stained with sodium-glow. Now and again from the shadows about them came the rustling of other robes, the restless stirring of subordinates who waited on their prince's pleasure.

In a moment Sikkukkut would negligently lift his hand and those waiting about the room would close in, to bear their prisoner back downship and belowdecks to a different sort of questioning, now that he was sufficiently muddled and drugged. Jik did not let himself doubt that. He did not let himself hope that his argument might sway the hakkikt; least of all did he hope that his hani allies on The Pride of Chanur and his own crew back on Aja Jin would effect a rescue. That was the core of his defense here among the kif, the hard center to his resistance that let him sit here so placidly taking his smokestick down to a stub and watching heavy-lidded while Sikkukkut an'nikktukktin meditated what next to do to him; it was the center of all secrets he held, that he counted himself already dead, from which position it was possible to be quite patient with all manner of misery, since, dead, he was enjoying a degree of sensation and occasional pleasant interlude no one dead had a right to. Even when the pain was extreme, it was better than not feeling anything at all. Ever.

Besides, he was mahendo'sat, and curiosity was second nature to him: he was still picking up information, skilled as Sikkukkut was. He had learned, for instance, that Aja Jin, The Pride of Chanur, and Tahar's Moon Rising were all at dock and all seemed free: that was very pleasant news. That Pyanfar Chanur was at hand to lend her experience to his own second in command was very good news; that Pyanfar still had credit enough with Sikkukkut to keep Dur Tahar's throat uncut was excellent news as well, and if there was still enough hani left under Tahar's red-brown hide, the pirate would adhere to her old enemy like burr to fur: hani paid their debts, if nothing else; and Tahar owed Chanur enough to Stick to hell and back.

All of this he had learned in these sessions, as he knew that the human Tully was indeed safe aboard The Pride of Chanur, so Sikkukkut evidently valued Pyanfar more than he wanted the human to question and for other purposes, which was a mighty great deal of



value for any kif to put on a non-kif. This was a double-edged benefit, of course: knowing kifish mindset, value-as-ally could turn with amazing swiftness to high-status-target. Friend in a kif's doubletoothed mouth had no overtones of loyalty or self-sacrifice at all, was in fact nearly the opposite. Ally-of-convenience, rather. Potential rival, rather. Or poor fool.

The hani knew these things; and he knew well that his second in command knew. So they would both keep one finger to the wind; and he hoped that heads would stay cool if, as seemed possible and even likely, portions of himself turned up as decoration on Sikkukkut's ship-ramp. He loathed stupidity, himself; he had sinned in that regard or he would not be here. But he truly abhorred the thought that he might singlehandedly serve as trigger to the undoing of the Compact. That was the one thing even a dead man could fear, the legacy he might leave the living for generations to come. That thought was the crack in his defense: Sikkukkut, being kif, taking no thought to posterity, was not capable of reaching that chink without a strong hint.

It was very easy for species to misunderstand each other, particularly when it came to abstracts.

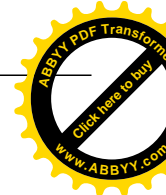
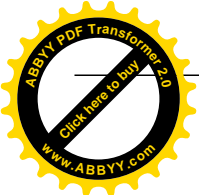
It was possible, for instance, that he and Pyanfar had persistently misinterpreted Sikkukkut's lack of metaphysics as a lack of emotional abstracts and irrational desires. He had come to know the kif with unwanted intimacy, and now suspected Sikkukkut of a kifish sentimentality, a preference for intimate targets for his most personal satisfaction, while Akkhtimakt was less personal in his mayhem, and more catholic in his attacks. Akkhtimakt operates with the fist, Sikkukkut was wont to say, and I with the knife.

It was kifish poesy; it was also a profound statement of styles which might, if a mahendo'sat were well-educated in kifish mentality, say more than its surface content, and delve into those deep things language barriered away from translation between species. He smoked the butt down to the last possible remnant, and carefully pinched it out instead of stubbing it, spacer's affectation. Fire never hurt if one's moves were definite and one's mind was set firmly on the extinguishing and not on the fire. Spacer's affectation, because when the fingers could bear it comfortably, it was safe to put away. He dropped the butt into the side of the pouch reserved for that and laid the pouch on the table. They never let him keep it. The pouch, with the liquor and Sikkukkut's good humor, was delivered only in this room. So he let it lie, and met Sikkukkut's eyes with lazy amusement.

Perhaps he perplexed the hakkikt with his attitude, a coolness between defiance and alliance and certainly not the behavior of a kif; perhaps that was what kept his head off the spikes outside. Sikkukkut gazed at him a moment in what seemed interest, then lifted his hand as he had done before, and signaled his removal.

"There it goes," someone cried down the hall, and footsteps went thundering past Chur Anify's door, disturbing her convalescence. "Kk-kk-kt, something else called out, and that brought Chur's eyes open and set a little quicker pulse into her heart, so that needles jumped on the machine to which she was bound by a large skein of tubes, indicating an increase in pulse rate; in response to that, a flood of nutrients and appropriate chemicals came back into her bloodstream, automatically supplied.

Living bound to a machine-extension which thought it knew best what a body ought to feel was bad enough; lying there while riot went on in the corridor was another thing, and Chur edged her way off the bed, carefully (the spring extensions on the skein of tubings made it possible for her to teach the bathroom and saved her some indignities). In this



case she gripped the various tubes in one fist to keep the extension from jerking painfully at the needles and padded over to the bureau where she had her gun, hearing the kifish clicking going on out there. Her head spun and her heart raced and the gods-cursed machine flooded her veins with sedative when it sensed her elevated pulse, but she made it to the door and pushed the button with the knuckle of her gun-hand.

The door shot open. She slumped lazy-like against the wall and stared at a kif who turned up directly opposite her and her pistol; then her eyes went strange-focussed and her mind went here and there again, so that she had difficulty recalling where she was or why there should be a kif in The Pride's corridor looking as horrified as a kif could look (not extremely) and why the peripheries of her vision informed her there were her cousins and a human standing there in shock and in company with this kif. It was a great deal to ask of a drugged hani brain, but the kif had its hands up and she was not crazed enough to go firing off a gun in a ship's corridor without knowing why.

And while her brain was sorting through that crazy sequence, something small and black ran right over her foot on its way into her room. "Hyaa!" she yelled in revulsion, and the kif dived for the wall beside her as she swung to keep a bead not on the thing but on the kif. A hurtling mass of her friends overtook her from behind-not to help her, to her vast bewilderment: they grabbed her and the gun, while the kif flinched and pasted himself tight to the wall, making himself the smallest possible target.

"Chur," her sister Geran was pleading with her, and she supposed that it was Geran prying the gun loose from her fingers: she was dizzy and her vision fuzzed. She heard her cousin Tirun's voice, and human jabber, which was her friend Tully; and she dazedly let herself be dragged one step and another into the room, someone else taking the skein of tubes. A bell was going off: the infernal machine was telling off on her, that she was stressed.

"Gods rot it," she cried, remembering. "There's something in here." And then she remembered that she had seen little black things before, on the bridge, and could not remember whether they were hallucinations or not, or whether her sister took her seriously. It was embarrassing to see hallucinations. And the cursed machine kept pouring sedative into her, so that they were going to leave her alone in here and drugged, with whatever-it-was: she did not want that either.

"Look under the bed," Geran said, while Geran was putting her back into it, and she could not remember where the gun had gotten to, which was against ship's rules, which was against all the regulations, to lose track of a firearm; and there was a kif trying to crawl under her bed. A sweat broke out on her, cold on her ears and nose and fingertips.

"Where's my gun?" she asked hazily, trying to sit up again; and "There it is!" someone shouted from the floor.

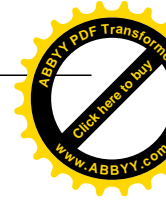
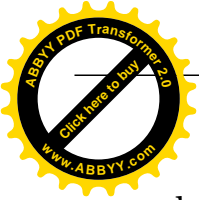
"My gods," Chur murmured, and her sister put her flat on her back again. She blinked, blinked again in the crazed notion that there was a kif on his hands and knees at her bedside and people were trying to get her hallucination out from under her bed.

"Sorry," Geran said fervently. "Stay down. We've got it."

"You're crazy," Chur said. "You're stark crazy, all of you." Because none of it made sense. But something let out a squeal under her bed, and something bumped against the secure-held braces, and there was an ammonia smell to the room which was no illusion, but a kif's real presence.

"He got," said Tully's voice, and he loomed up by her bedside. "Chur, you all right?"

"Sure," Chur said. She remembered at least where she was now, tied to a machine in na Khyrn's cabin because she was, since the kif had shot her on a dock at Kshshti, too sick to



be down in crew quarters; and Goldtooth had given them this fine medical equipment when he had met them here at Kefk, which was before the docks blew up in a firefight and she had been holding the bridge singlehanded when the little black things started coming and going like a nasty slinking nightmare. There was a kif aboard, his name was Skkukuk, he was a slave and a gift from the hakkikt and he stood there with his black snout atwitch and his Dinner clutched in both bony hands as he stared at her. She curled her lip and laid her cars back, head scantily lifted. "Out!"

The kif hissed and clicked and retreated in profound offense, teeth bared, and Chur bared hers, coming up on her free elbow.

"Easy," Geran said, pushing her back; and Tirun chased the kif on out, Haral's sister Tirun, big enough to make a kif think twice about any argument, and owing that slight limp to a kifish gun some years back: Chur felt herself safe if Geran was by her and Tirun was between her and the kif. She looked up at Tully's gold-bearded face and blinked placidly. "Gods-be kif," Geran said. "Readout jumping like crazy- Tully, here, get this gun out of here."

"No," Chur said. "Drawer. Put it back in the drawer, Tully."

"Out of here," Geran said.

"Gods rot," Chur yelled, "drawer!" Living around Tully, a body got to thinking in pidgin and half-sentences. And the voice came out cracked. Tully hesitated, looking at Geran. An even larger figure showed up in the doorway, filling it. Khym Mahn, male and tall and wide: "What's the trouble?"

"No trouble," Geran said. "Come on, close that door, everyone out before another of the gods-be things gets in. Who's watching the godsforsaken kif?"

"Put the gun in the drawer," Chur said firmly. "Tully."

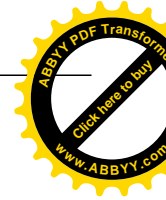
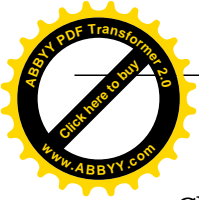
"You leave it there," Geran said, getting up, as Khym vanished. She stood looking down a moment, while Tully did as he was told. Then the two of them stood there, her sister, her human friend; if there was ever truly such a thing as friendship between species. And the gods-be kif down the hall-Was that thing a friend, and did they have it running loose on the ship now? Had the captain authorized that?

"O gods," Chur murmured, too tired and too sick for thoughts like loose kif, and for uncharitable thoughts toward Tully, who had done his unarmed best to save all their hides more than once. But it was in her heart now that she would not see home again, and that this was her last voyage, and she wanted to go home more than anything, back to Anuurn and Chanur and to have this little selfish time with things she knew and loved, familiar things, uncomplicated by aliens and strangeness-wanted to be young again, and to have more time, and to remember what it was to have her life all in front of her and not behind. Wanted, gods help her, to see even her home up in the hills, which was purest stupidity: she and Geran had walked out of there and come down to Chanur when they were kids as young as Hilfy, because a young fool of a new lord had gotten himself in power up there over their sept of clan Chanur, and she and her sister had pulled up roots and left for Chanur's main-sept estate with no more than the clothes on their backs.

And their pride. They had come with that intact. The two of them.

"Never looked back," she said, thinking Geran at least might understand. "Gods be, odd things were what we were looking for when we came down the hills, wasn't that it?"

Geran made a desperate motion at Tully that meant get out, quietly, and Tully went, not without a pat at Chur's blanketed leg.



Chur lay there and blinked, embarrassed at herself. She looked like something dead. She knew that. She and Geran had once looked a great deal alike, red-blond of mane and beard and with a sleekness and slimness that was the hillwoman legacy in their sept; not like their cousins Haral and Tirun Araun or their cousin Pyanfar either, who had downland Chanur's height and strength, but never their highlands beauty, their agility, their fleetness of foot. Now Geran's shoulders slumped in exhaustion, her coat was dull, her eyes unutterably weary; and Chur had seen mirrors. Her bones hurt when she lay on them. The sheets were changed daily: Geran saw to that, because she shed and shed, till the skin appeared in patches, all dull pink and horrid through her fur. That was her worst personal suffering, not the pain, not the dread of dying: it was her vanity the machine robbed her of, and her dignity; and watching Geran watch her deteriorate was worst of all.

"Sorry," Chur said. "Gods-be machine keeps pouring sedative into me. I don't always make sense."

Rotten way to die, she thought to herself, drugged out of my mind. Scaring Geran. What kind of way is that?

"Unhook me from this thing."

"You said you'd leave it be," Geran said. "For me. You told the captain you'd leave it be. Do we need to worry about you?"

"Asked, didn't I?" The voice came hoarse. The episode had exhausted her. Or it was the sedative. "We letting that gods-be kif loose now?"

"Khym's got an eye on him."

"Uhhn." There was a time that would have sounded crazy. Men did not deal with outsiders, did not take responsibility, did not have any weight of decision on their shoulders, on their berserk-prone brains. But nothing in the world was the same as it had been when she was a girl. "We left home to find strange things," Chur said, bewildered that she ended up trusting a man's good sense and an alien human's good will, a hillwoman like her. "Found 'em, didn't we?" But she saw that pained drawing about Geran's mustaches, the quivering flick of Geran's ears, well-ringed with voyages. She saw how drained Geran was, how her maundering grieved Geran, had a sure instinct that if Geran had one load on her shoulders, she had just put another there, almost unbearable for her sister. "Hey," she said, "I was pretty steady on my feet. Machine helps. Think I'll make it. Hear?"

Geran took that in and the slump left her shoulders and the grief left her eyes so earnestly and so trustingly it hurt.

Gods, Chur thought, now I've done it, I've promised her, haven't I?

Stupid to promise. Now I have to. I'll lose. It'll hurt, gods rot it. I'll die somewhere in jump, O gods, that's an awful way, to go out there, in the dark between the stars, all naked.

"Not easy," Chur murmured, heading down to sleep. "Easier to go out, Gery. But I'll get back up there, b'gods. Don't you let the captain assign me out. Hear?"

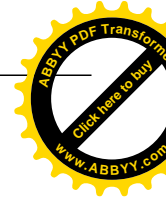
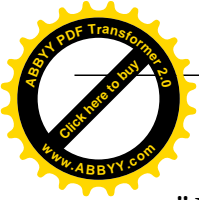
"Chair's waiting."

"You want to fill me in, treat me like I was crew?" It was hard to stay interested in life, with the sedatives drawing a curtain between herself and the universe. She remembered her promise and fought to keep it. "What f'godssakes is going on out there?"

"Same as before. We're sitting at dock waiting for that gods-rotted kif to make up his mind to go left or right, and so far nothing's worse."

"Or better."

"Or better. Except they're still talking. And the hakkikt's still real polite."



"Jik hasn't cracked."

"Hasn't cracked. Gods help him."

"How long are we going to sit here?"

"Wish we all knew. Captain's figuring like mad, Haral's laying in six, seven courses into comp. We may get home yet."

"Doublecross the kif? They'd hunt us." Her voice grew thick. "Meetpoint's the only way out of here. That's where we've got to go."

Geran said nothing. The threads grew vague, but they always came to the same point. Goldtooth had left them and his partner in the lurch and run for Meetpoint, and Tully's folk were headed into the Compact in numbers, all of which meant that a very tired hani who wanted the universe to be what it had been in her youth was doomed to see things turned upside down, doomed to see Chanur allied with kif, with a species that ate little black things and behaved badly on docksides, and did other things an honest hani preferred not to think about.

Gods-rotted luck, she thought; and thought again about the hills of home, and the sins of her youth, one of which she had left with its father; but it was only a gods-be boy, and not a marriage anyhow, and she had never written back to the man, who was no happier at getting a son than she was at birthing one (a daughter would have done him some good in his landless station), but his sisters would treat the boy all right. Rest of the family never had known much about it, except Geran knew, of course; and it was before she had joined The Pride. The kid would have come of age and gone off to Hermitage years ago; and probably died, the way surplus males died. Waste. Ugly waste.

Wish I'd known my son.

Maybe I could find him. If his father's still alive. If he's like na Khym, if- Maybe, maybe if I could've talked to him he'd have sense like na Khym.

Never asked that man-never much talked to him. Never occurred to me to talk to him. Isn't that funny? Now I'd wonder what he was thinking. I'd think he was thinking. I'd find me a man and make love to him and gods, I'd ask him what he was thinking and he'd-

-I'd probably confuse him all to a mahen hell, I would; aren't many men like Khym Mahn, gods-rotted nice fellow, wished I'd known him 'fore the captain got him. If he was ever for anybody but her. If a clan lord like him could've ever looked at an exile like me. I'd like to've loved a man like him. I'd have got me a daughter off him, I would've.

But what's the captain got of him? Gods-rotted son like Kara Mahn and a gods-forsaken whelp of a daughter like Tahy, no help there, gods fry 'em both, no sense, no ears to listen, no respect--doublecrossing gods-be cheats.

Want to find me a man. Not a pretty one. A smart one. Man I can sit and talk with.

If I ever get home.

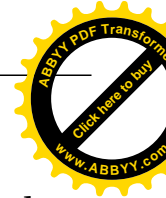
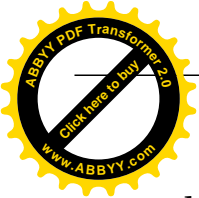
She pursed her lips and spat.

"You all right?"

"Sure, I'm sleeping, get out of here. I'm trying to get my rest. What in the gods' name are those black things?"

"Don't ask. We don't."

The lift opened belowdecks, and Hilfy Chanur, coming back onshift, stepped back hastily as the doors whisked back and gave her Skkukuk all unexpected, Skkukuk clutching a squealing cageful of nasty black shapes, which apparition sent her ears flat; but Tirun and Tully were escorting the kif, which got Hilfy's ears back up again and laid the fur back



down between her shoulderblades. She stepped aside in distaste to let the kif out and stood there staring as the door waited to her hold on the call button.

"We think we got 'em." Tirun said.

"They got," Tully said, amplifying his broken pidgin with a gesture topside. "Eat fil-ter. Lousy mess."

"Good gods, what filter?"

"Airfilter in number one," Tirun said. "Sent particles all over the system: we're going to have to do a washdown on the number two and the main."

"Make electric," Tully said.

"We made it real uncomfortable in that airshaft," Tirun said.

"Kkkkt," Skkukuk said, "these are Akkhtish life. They are adaptive. Very tough."

The creatures started fighting at the sound of his voice. He whacked the cage with his open hand and the Dinner subsided into squeals.

"Gods," Hilfy said with a shudder of disgust.

"Two of them are about to litter," Tirun said. "Watch these gods-forsaken things. They're born fighting."

"Tough," Skkukuk said conversationally, and hit the Dinner's cage again, when the squeals sharpened. There was quiet, except for a hiss. "Kkkt. Excuse me." He clutched the cage to him and headed off down the hall with the Dinner in his arms, happy as ever a kif could be.

Hilfy's lip lifted; an involuntary shiver went through her as Tirun turned and went to keep an eye on the kif. Tully stayed, and set a hand on her shoulder, squeezed hard.

Tully knew. He had been with her in the hands of the kif, this same Sikkukkut who was their present ally; who sent them this slavish atrocity Skkukuk to haunt the corridors and leave his ammonia-stink everywhere in the air, a smell which brought back memories- A second time Tully squeezed her shoulder with his clawless fingers. Hilfy turned and looked at him, looking up a bit; but he was not so tall, her Tully, that she could not look him in the eyes this close. Those eyes were blue and usually puzzled, but in this moment there was worry there. Two voyages and what they had been through together had taught her to read the nuances of his expressions.

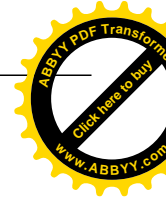
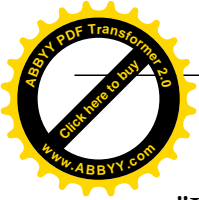
"He's not bad kif," Tully said.

That was so incredible an opinion from him she blinked and could not believe she had heard it.

"He's kif," Tully said. "Same I be human. Same you hani. He be little kif, try do what captain want."

She would not have heard it from anyone else. She had her mouth open when Tully said it. But this was a man who had been twice in their hands; and seen his friends die; and killed one of them himself to save him from Sikkukkut: more, he had been there with her in that kifish prison, and if Tully was saying such an outrageous thing it might have any number of meanings, but emptyheaded and over-generous it was not. She stared at him trying to figure out if he had missed his words in hani: the translator they had rigged up to their com sputtered helpless static at his belt, constant undertone when he spoke his thickly accented hani or pidgin. Maybe he was trying to communicate some crazy human philosophy that failed to come through.

"Little kif," Tully said again. She had lived among kif long enough to know what he meant by that, that kif were nothing without status, and that kif of low status were everyone's victims.



"If he was a big kif," she said, "he'd kill us fast."

"No," Tully said. "Captain be Pyanfar. He want be big, she got be big."

"Loyalty, huh?"

"Like me," Tully said. "He one."

"You mean he's alone."

"He want be hani."

She spat. It was too much. "You might be." And not many hani in space and certainly none on homeworld would be that generous, only a maudlin and lonely young woman a long way from her own kind. "Not a kif. Ever."

"True," Tully admitted, twisting back on his own argument in that maddening way he had of getting behind a body and leaving them facing the wrong way. He held up a finger. "He kif, he same time got no friend with kif, he be little kif. They kill him, yes. He want not be kill. He lot time wrong, think we do big good to him. You watch, Hil-fy: crew be good with him, he be happy, he got face up, he be brave with us, he talk. But we don't tell truth to him, huh? What good truth? Say him, 'kif, you enemy', he got no friend, got no ship, got no hakkikt. He don't be hani, he die."

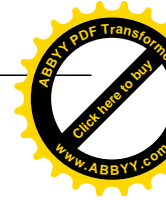
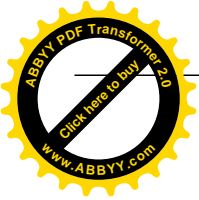
"I can't be sorry for him. He wouldn't understand it. He's kif, gods rot him. And I'd as soon kill him on sight."

"You don't kill same like you be kif." He patted her arm and looked earnestly at her, from the far side of a language barrier the translator never crossed. "He makes a mistake," the translator said as he changed into his own language for words he did not have. "He's lost. He thinks we like him more now. We ask him go die for help us, he go. True, he will go. And we hate him. He doesn't know this. He's kif. He can't understand why we hate him."

"Well, let's not confuse him," Hilfy snarled, and turned and stopped the lift door which had started to close on auto when she let go the button. It recoiled, held for another wait. She looked back at Tully, who looked back, aggrieved and silent. She knew his shorthand speech better than anyone else aboard: ship's com officer, linguist, translator, she had helped set up his translation system and help break through to him

when they first met him. And what he was saying now made more sense than she wanted it to—that a kif, cold-blooded tormentor and killer that it was, was also a helpless innocent in their hands. If a kif saw another kif in his way, he killed; his changes of loyalty were frequent but sincere and self-serving. And if the captain's subordinates treated him better, it was because the captain had accorded him more status: it was all a kif could think, it was all a kif knew how to imagine. Pyanfar let Skkukuk loose more often, Pyanfar cared to feed him, the crew was civil to him: his place in the universe was therefore improving. Gods help them, the kif became conversational with them. Two and more centuries of contact and the kif had never let slip any casual detail about their homeworld, which no one visited but kif; and here Skkukuk, bragging on his nasty little vermin as Akkhtish and adaptive, hinted at more of kifish life and kifish values than kif had said about themselves in all of history.

And what would a man know about anything? was her gut reaction, staring into Tully's eyes. She did not think of Skkukuk as male, gods knew; hardly thought of Jik or Goldtooth as anything but female and rational, despite the male pronouns which were ordinary in pidgin and otherwise in hani: but Tully was definitely male to her, and stood there saying crazy things about an enemy, talking to her about self-restraint, which was a female kind of thought, or Pyanfar was right and males had a lot of hidden female about them: it was an embarrassing estimation. But the sense that it made also reached somewhere inside



and found a sore spot, that Tully had found some kind of peace with the thing that had happened to them among the kif, where a sane, technically educated woman failed. Because he's older, Hilfy thought. She had always thought of him as near her own age: and suddenly she thought that he must be, of his kind, old as Khym, whose years had burned the tempers out of him and given him self-control and lost him his lordship over Mahn. Suddenly she suspected that she had always been wrong about Tully, that he was wiser than a young man could possibly be, and cooler-headed: and there was something still he had not been able to tell her. There was something still bottled up in him, she could almost read it, but it was too alien an expectation; or too simple. She could not guess it. The lift door hit her in the shoulder again and gave up, and she reached out and gently touched Tully's face with the pads of her fingers.

"If you were hani," she said, "we'd-" But she did not say that. It sounded too foolish; and hurt too much, without an answer that resulted in anything but both of them being fools. Laughable fools.

"Friend," he said in a small voice, and touched her face. While the lift door hit her again, on shorter and shorter reminder. "Friend, Hilfy." With a peculiar stress in his voice, and a break, as it would do when he was grieved. There were things he did not commit to the translator. More and more he tried to speak hani. And to be hani. And he grew sadder and more wistful when he would look at her and say a thing like that, making fools of them both.

Gods, Hilfy Chanur, she thought, what can you do? When did you go crazy? When did he? When we were alone and we were all we had, with kif all about? I want him.

If he's older than me, why doesn't he have an answer for this?

Then an alarm went off. For a moment she thought she had tripped it by holding the door, and Pyanfar was going to skin her.

"Priority, priority. We've got a courier at the lock," Haral's voice said then from com, from every speaker in the hall. "All secure below. Hilfy, Tirun, arm and stand by: looks like you're the welcoming committee, captain's compliments, and she's staying topside.

Protocols. You get that?"

"I got it," Hilfy said.

Lock up the kif, that meant. Fast.

"Tully," she said, and motioned to the lift. Panic had started a slow, hysteric beat in her heart; habit kept her face calm as she stepped aside and held the door with her arm for Tully.

I could help, that look of his said; I could be down here, I want to be here. I want to help you-

It was not the kif's feelings he had so laboriously described: you make him part of the crew, you let him believe it, you don't know how cruel you are to let him believe you.

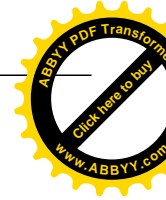
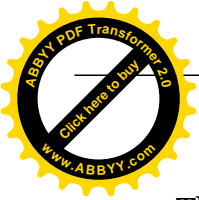
He'd go out and die for you, Hilfy Chanur. Because he believes you.

No. It was not true of the kif. It was what he felt in himself.

"Up," she said. "Bridge. Haral needs you. I got enough down here."

And, gods, why put it that way? She saw the pain she caused.

He went into the lift, and turned and pushed the Close, so that the door jarred her obstructing arm and she drew it back in confusion. She opened her mouth to say something like you can't help in this, which was no better than she had already said; but the door closed between their faces, and left her speechless and harried in recalling that it was an emergency Haral had just sent her on-kif, and trouble, and gods knew what.



The whole situation could be unraveling. Jik might have talked, might have spilled something; it might be the beginning of the attack they had feared; it might be anything, and gods help her, she had just fouled it up with Tully and there was no time, no time, never time to straighten it out between them.

Gods, gods, gods, I hurt him. I never wanted to hurt him, we can all die here and I can't get past that gods-be translator.

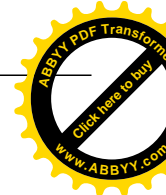
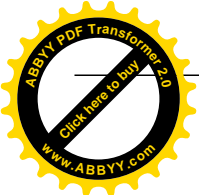
Why is it all so complicated?

Chapter Two

It was not a situation Pyanfar enjoyed, sitting on the bridge and watching on the vid as a pair of armed kif headed toward her airlock. They wore no suits, only the hooded black robes universal with their kind. That meant the kif put some reliance on the jury-patches and the repressurization of this zone of the dock, more than she herself would have liked to put on it-kifish repair crews had been thumping and welding away out there, motes on vid, getting a patch on those areas the decompression had weakened.

So finally the hakkikt seemed to have settled accounts with the rebels inside his camp to the extent that now he could send a message to the friends of the mahen and hani traitors who had made such a large hole in his newly-acquired space station, who had disturbed the tc'a into riot on their side of the station, and incidentally sent over five hundred unsuspecting kif out into space on the wind of that decompression.

Sikkukkut had a very legitimate grievance; even a hani had to admit as much. Though the kif that had gone on that unscheduled spacewalk were many of them Sikkukkut's enemies, a good many had been partisans of his, and while no kif had ever been observed to grieve over the demise of any other kif, and while the incident might even have contributed to stopping the rebellion, still it had embarrassed him-and embarrassing a kifish leader was a very serious matter. It was not an accustomed feeling, to have a sense of wrong on her side when she was dealing with the kif; and to know, the while those black-robed figures cycled through the lock, that The Pride was not in a position, nose to a wrecked dock and outnumbered ten to one in ships and multiple thousands to one in personnel, to negotiate anything at all, not regarding what this mass of ships chose to do, not regarding their own position within the kifish power structure, not even regarding (heir safety or their lives. So bluff was still the game, status and protocols, which was why she was sitting up here gnawing her mustaches and having her crew meet with an armed delegation that neither they nor she had power to negotiate with. She tried to use kifish manners, which kif understood, and she hoped to the gods the kif did understand the gesture she was making, which meant that Pyanfar Chanur had just abandoned her inclination to meet the hakkikt's messengers on hani protocols, with hani courtesies: now she withdrew to a remoteness which to a kif (she hoped) signaled not fear (a frightened kif would show up to placate the offended party, and thrust himself right into the presence of his potential enemy to try to patch it up) but rather signaled that the captain of this hani freighter turned hunter-ship considered herself risen in the hakkikt's favor, to the extent that she intended henceforth to receive her messages through subordinates. She sensed that self-promotion was the way things worked with kif: she sensed it by experience, and kifish manners, and Skkukuk's inside-out advice: their own much-bewildered kifish crewman alternately shrank and flourished in every breeze of her tempers, crushed by a moment's



reprimand, bright-eyed and energetic on her next moment's better humor; and jealous and paranoid in his constant suspicions the crew would undermine him-as he tried to undermine them, of course, but less zealously of late, as if he had finally gotten it through his narrow kifish skull that that was not the way things worked on a hani ship; or that the crew was too firmly in the captain's favor to dislodge; or perhaps the crew's own increasing courtesy with him had sent his mind racing on a new stratagem down some path thoroughly mistaken and thoroughly kif: it was enough to give a sane hani a headache. But Skkukuk had shown her a vital thing: that a kif took all the ground he could get at every hour of every day, and if he made a mistake and got a reprimand, he did not, as a hani would do, cherish a grudge for that reprimand: where a hani would burn with shame and throw sanity and self-preservation to the winds, and where a hani who chastised another hani knew that she was asking for bloodfeud to the second and third generation, involving both clans and affiliate clans to the eighth degree, a kif just accepted a slap in the face with the same unflappable sense of self-preservation that would make him go for his own leader's throat the moment that leader looked vulnerable, at the very moment a reasonable hani might stand by her leader most loyally. Pyanfar had puzzled this out. In a total wrench of logic she could even understand that kif being dead as they were to any altruistic impulse, had to move to completely different tides, and the most urgent of those tides seemed to be the drive to inch their way up in status at every breath if they could get away with it.

It was a good question whether Sikkukut understood hani half that well, despite his fluency; and upon that thought a logical gulf opened before her, whether a kif could ever truly understand the pride of the lowliest hani hill woman, who would spend the last drop of blood she had settling accounts both of debt and bloodfeud with anyone at all, headwoman or beggar; the kif had not the internal reflexes to feel what a hani felt; and how, good gods, could a hani know the compulsion that drove a kif, lacking whatever-it-was which was as natural to kif as breathing.

Gods help us, if I had enough credit with him to get Jik loose-if anyone did-if I could crack that gods-be code of Jik's, over there in comp, if I knew what Jik was holding out against Sikkukut, what kind of craziness he passed me at Mkks-is it his will and testament? Something for his Personage? Some gods-cursed plan of attack?

Goldtooth's plan of action?

What do the kif want down there, why come in person, why not use the com?

While the kif arrived in their fire-scarred airlock and prepared to deal with her niece and her cousin, both of whom had gotten scars before this at kifish hands.

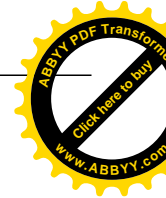
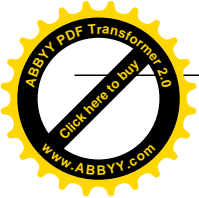
Don't foul it, Hilfy, don't give way-Gods, I should have called her up and sent-Geran? With Chur shot and Geran in the mood she's in?

-not Haral, I need her.

Not a place for the menfolk down there either. Hilfy's all right, she's stable, she'll carry it off all right- she knows the kif, knows them well as anyone-knows how to hold herself- O gods, why'd I ever let her and Chur go off the ship at Kshshti? It was my fault, my fault and she'll never be the same-

-isn't the same, no one's ever the same; I'm not, the ship isn't, Chur isn't, none of us are, and I brought us here, every gods-be step along the way-

Haral cycled the lock and two unescorted kif walked into The Pride's, lowerdeck; while Geran powered the airlock camera about, tracking them, and Khym and Tully hovered over separate monitors. Haral kept cycling her own checks, keeping an eye to the whole



godsforsaken dockside, screen after screen at Haral's station shifting images so that they were never blinder than they had to be.

No way they were going to be caught in distraction, even if, gods forbid, the kif tossed a grenade through the lock.

"Record," Pyanfar said. "Aye," Geran said, and flicked a switch, beginning to log the whole business into The Pride's records. Then:

"Those are rifles," Geran muttered.

The kif carried heavy weapons, besides the sidearms. The dim light and poor camera pickup had obscured those black weapons against the black, unornamented robes. But the rifles were slung at the shoulder, not carried in the hand. That much was encouraging.

"Polite," Pyanfar said through her teeth, while below, from the spy-eye:

"Hunter Pyanfar," one kif said as he met The Pride's welcoming committee.

"Tirun Araun." Tirun identified herself-scarred old spacer with gray dusting her nose and streaking her red-gold mane. She had a way of holding herself that seemed both diffident about the gun she held (surely civilized beings ought not to hold guns on each other) and very likely to use it in the next twitch (there was not the least compunction or doubt in her eyes). "/ trust you've come from the hakkikt," Tirun said. "Praise to him"-without the least flicker, kifish courtesy.

"Praise to him," the kif said. "A message to your captain." It took a cylinder from its belt, with never an objection to the leveled guns or Hilfy's flattened ears. "The hakkikt says: the docks are secure. The matter is urgent. I say: we will stand here and wait for the Chanur captain."

Tirun reached out and took the cylinder. And delayed one lazy moment in a gesture that could not have been wasted, especially on a kif. "Be courteous, Hilfy."

With fine timing, with a little flattening of the ears that might be respect and might be something else again, ambiguous even to hani eyes-Tirun delivered her signal to Hilfy and turned with authority and walked off, at a pace both deliberate and fast enough.

While Hilfy stood there with the gun in her fist and two kif to watch.

Steady, kid. For the gods' sakes, Tirun's done it right, don't wobble.

No one said a thing on the bridge. It remained very, very quiet until the lift worked, back down the corridor from the center of the bridge. Then Pyanfar got out of her chair and went to wait for Tirun, who came down the corridor at a much faster clip than she had used below. While at the boards, Haral and Geran kept to business, monitoring everything round about the ship and inside it and everything coming from station.

"Captain," Tirun said by way of courtesy, and handed over the cylinder.

The cap stuck when she pulled at it. For one awful moment Pyanfar thought of explosives; or deadly gas. "Wait here," she said, left Tirun standing on the bridge, and stepped outside into the corridor, pushing the door switch to close it between them.

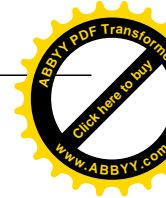
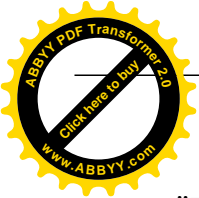
She hooked a claw into the seal then and gnawed her lip and pulled the cap. Nothing blew. Nothing came out. It was a message, a bit of gray paper.

The door shot open again in the same instant, which was Tirun; and Tirun stood there aggrieved in the tail of her eye while she fished the paper out and read it.

Hunter Pyanfar: you have made requests. I will give you my response aboard my ship at 1500, expecting that you will come with ranking personnel of allied ships.

"Captain?" Tirun said.

She passed the letter over and cast a second look up at the chrono in the bridge display: 1436.



"It's a trap," Tirun said.

On the bridge even Haral had taken one quick look around.

"Invitation from the kif," Pyanfar said. "Ranking personnel of allied ships. On his deck. Fast."

"My gods," Khym exclaimed.

"Unfortunately," Pyanfar said, and thought of Hilfy down there in the corridor with two kif alone. "Unfortunately we haven't got a real choice. Get Tahar and get Kesurinan. I'm not taking any of you—"

Mouths opened.

"It's a trap," Khym said, his deep voice quivering with outrage. "Py, Tirun's right, listen to her."

"Not taking any of you," she said carefully, "except our friend the kif. Get to it, Geran, get our friends out there."

"That dock," Geran said.

"We got worse risks than a leaky dock, cousin; one of 'em's being late and one of them's missing a signal with that kif. I'm going down there, I want Tahar and Kesurinan just the way the kif asked, and about the time I clear the lock down there I want The Pride powered up and held that way till I get back again. Make the point with 'em we still got teeth, hear? And that my crew's on full alert."

"Aye," Haral muttered, far from happy.

Neither was Pyanfar happy. She went and pulled one of their APs out of the locker by the bridge exit and headed back down the corridor, with the heavy sidearm and its belt in hand.

Not to the lowerdeck straightway.

First came a stop in her own quarters, for a fast exchange: for a bit of glitter, because appearances counted, a psychological weapon as essential as the gun at her side.

Sikkukkut meant to move now. In some regard.

She clenched her jaw and started cataloging things, fast, things that wanted doing. In case she had just said goodbye to her crew and her husband.

Gods, Khym had just stood there and took an answer for an answer. Her heart did a little painful thump of pride when she realized belatedly what that had cost him: he was not the gentle ignorant she had married, not the feckless man who had walked out on the docks at Meetpoint and run straight into a kifish trap. If she died today at kifish hands he would not act the male; would not rush out there like a lunatic to take the kif on hand to hand—he had grown a lot on this voyage, had Khym, when he was no longer a boy and no longer young at all. He had finally found out what lay outside his limits and what the universe was like—had found friends, b'gods, female friends and one who was even male, friends which she suddenly realized in grief that Khym had never had in all his adult life, excepting her and his other wives, and I them but scarcely: clan-lord, shielded from all contact with the world by his wives and his sisters and his daughters, he had finally come out into the real world to find out what it was, and he was not just her Khym anymore; or even Khym lord Mahn; he was something more than that, suddenly, long after he should have gone to die in Hermitage, outworn and useless—he grew up and became what he always could have been; discovered the universe full of honest folk and scoundrels of all genders, and learned how to win respect, how to ignore the barbs and become ship-youngest and work his way out of a second youth, with utterly different rules. That was more change than most women had the fortitude to take in their lives; but by the gods he

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