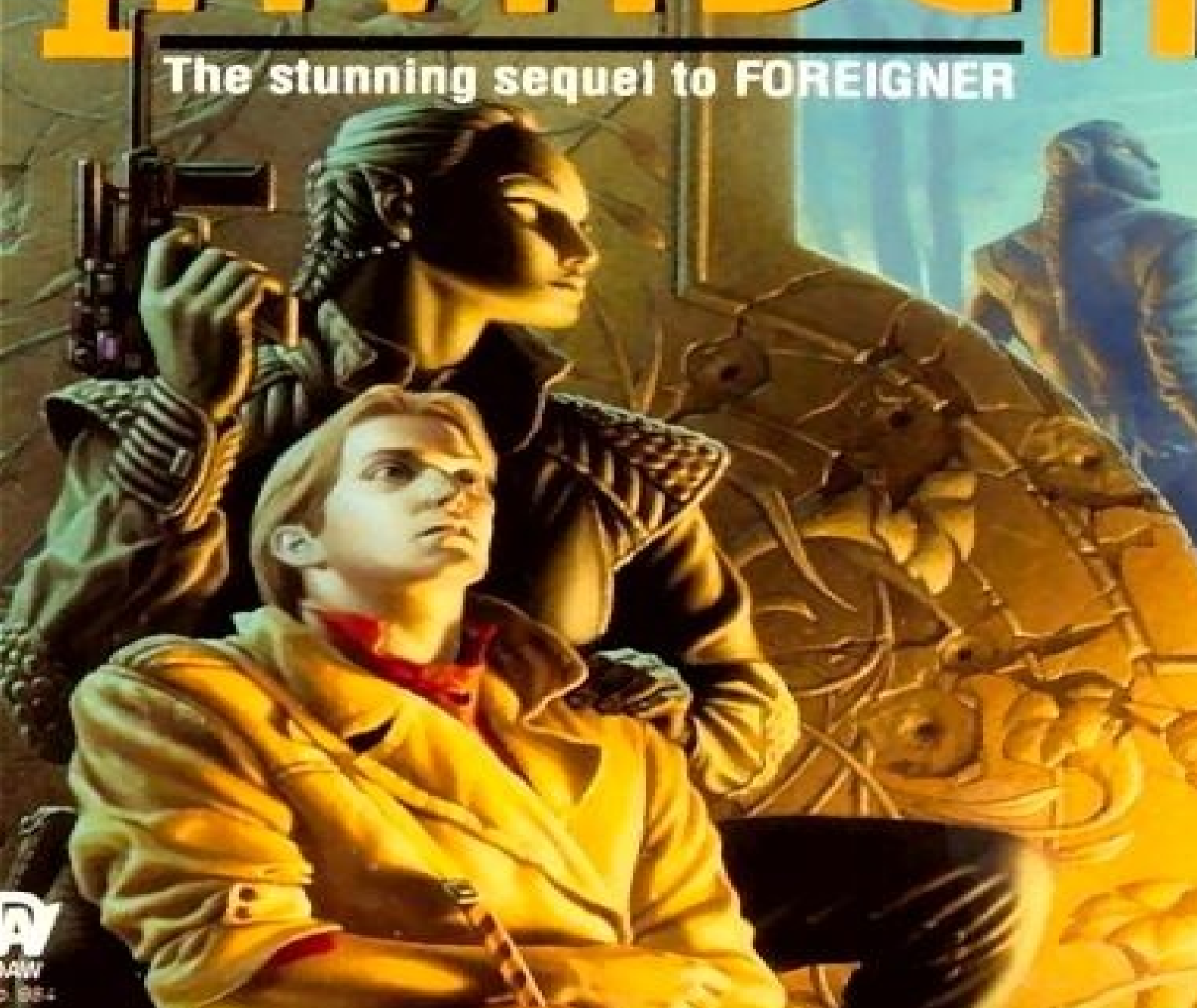


C. J. CHERRYH

INVADER

The stunning sequel to FOREIGNER



INVADER

Caroline J. Cherryh

THE SECOND FOREIGNER SERIES NOVEL

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Dedication: For Jane

CHAPTER 1

THE PLANE had entered the steep bank and descent that heralded a landing at Shejidan. Bren Cameron knew that approach for the north runway in his sleep and with his eyes shut.

Which had been the case. The painkillers had kicked in with a vengeance. He'd been watching the clouds over Mospheira Strait, the last he knew, and the attendants must have rescued his drink, because the glass was gone from the napkin-covered tray.

One arm in a sling and multiple contusions. Surgery.

This morning — he was sure it had been this morning, if he retained any real grasp of time — he'd waked with a Foreign Office staffer, not his mother, not Barb, leaning over his bed and telling him . . . God, he'd lost half of it, something about an urgent meeting, the aiji demanding his immediate presence, a governmental set-to that didn't wait for him to convalesce from the last one, that he thought he'd settled at least enough to wait a few days. Tabini had given him leave, told him go — consult his own doctors.

But the crisis over their heads wouldn't wait, evidently: he'd had no precise details from the staffer regarding the situation on the mainland — not in itself surprising, since the human government on Mospheira and the aiji's association centered at Shejidan didn't talk to each other with that level of frankness regarding internal affairs.

The two governments didn't, as a matter of fact, talk at all without him to translate and mediate. He wasn't sure just how Shejidan had made the request for his presence without him to translate it, but whoever had made the call had evidently made Mospheira believe it was a life-and-death urgency.

"Mr. Cameron, let me put the tray up."

"Thanks." The sling was a first for him. He skied, aggressively, when he got the chance; in his twenty-seven years he'd spent two sessions on crutches. But an arm out of commission was a new experience and a real inconvenience, he'd already discovered, to anything clerical he needed to do.

The tray went up and locked. The attendant helped him with the seat back, extracted the ends of the safety belt from his seat — and would have snapped it for him: being casted from his collarbone to his knuckles and taped about the chest didn't make bending or reaching easier. But at least the cast had left his fingers free, just enough to hold on to things. He managed to take the belt in his own fingers, pull the belt sideways and forward and fasten the buckle himself, before he let it snap back against his chest, small triumph in a day of drugged, dim-witted frustrations.

He wished he hadn't taken the painkiller. He'd had no idea it was as strong as it was. They'd said, if you need it, and he'd thought, after the scramble to get his affairs in the office in order and then to get to the airport, that he'd needed it to take the edge off the pain.

And woke up an hour later in descent over the capital.

He hoped Shejidan had gotten its signals straight, and that somebody besides the airport officials knew what time he was coming in. Flights between Mospheira and the mainland, several a day, only carried freight on their regular schedule. This small, forward, windowed compartment, which most times served for fragile medical freight, acquired, on any flight he was aboard, two part-time flight attendants, two seats, a wine list and a microwave. It constituted the only passenger service between Mospheira and the mainland for the only passenger who regularly made trips between Mospheira and the mainland: himself, Bren Cameron, the paidhi-aiji.

The very closely guarded paidhi-aiji, not only the official translator, but the arbiter of technological research and development; and the mediator, regularly, between the atevi capital at Shejidan and the island enclave of human colonists on Mospheira.

Wheels down.

The clouds that had made a smooth gray carpet outside the window became a total, blind environment as the plane glided into the cloud deck.

Water splattered the window. The plane bounced in mild buffeting.

Unexpectedly rotten weather. Lightning whitened the wing. The attendants had mentioned rain moving in at Shejidan. But they hadn't said thunderstorm. He hoped the aiji had a car waiting for him. He hoped there wouldn't be a hike of any distance.

Rain streaked the windows, a heavy gray moil of cloud cutting off all view. He'd arrived in Malguri, far across the continent, on a day like this — what? a week or so ago. It seemed an incredibly long time. The whole world had changed in that week.

Changed in the whole balance of atevi power and threat — by the appearance of a single human ship that was now orbiting the planet. Atevi might reasonably suspect that this human ship came welcome. Atevi might easily have that misapprehension — after a hundred and seventy-eight years of silence from the heavens.

It had also been a hundred seventy-eight years of stranded, ground-bound humans on Mospheira making their own decisions and arranging their own accommodations with the earth of the atevi. Humans had been well satisfied — until this ship appeared, not only confounding individual humans whose lives had been calm, predictable, and prosperous in their isolation — but suddenly giving atevi two human presences to deal with, when they'd only in the most recent years reached a thoroughly peaceful accommodation with the humans on the island off their shores.

So, one could imagine that the aiji in Shejidan, lord of the Western Association, quite reasonably wanted to know what was in those transmissions that now flowed between that ship and the earth station on Mospheira.

The paidhi wanted to know that answer himself. Something in the last twenty-four hours had changed in the urgency of his presence here — but he had no special brief from the President or State Department to provide those answers, not one damned bit of instruction at least that he'd been conscious enough to remember. He did have a firsthand and still fresh understanding that if things went badly and relations between humans and atevi blew up, this side of the strait would not be a safe

place for a human to be: humans and atevi had already fought one bloody war over mistaken intentions. He didn't know if he could single-handedly prevent another; but there was always, — constantly inherent in the paidhi's job, the knowledge that if the future of humankind on Mospheira and in this end of the universe wasn't in his power to direct — it was damned sure within his power to screw up.

One fracture in the essential Western Association — one essential leader like the aiji of Shejidan losing position.

One damned fool human with a radio transmitter or one atevi hothead with a hunting rifle — and of the latter, there were entirely too many available on the mainland for his own peace of mind: guns meant food on the table out in the countryside. Atevi youngsters learned to shoot when human kids were learning to ride bikes — and some atevi got damned good at it. Some atevi became licensed professionals, in a society where assassination was a regular legal recourse.

And if Tabini-aiji lost his grip on the Western Association, and if that started fragmenting, everything came undone. Atevi had provinces, but they didn't have borders. Atevi couldn't understand lines on maps by anything logical or reasonable except an approximation of where the householders on that line happened to side on various and reasonable grounds affecting their area, their culture, their scattered loyalties to other associations with nothing in the world to *do* with geography.

In more than that respect, it wasn't a human society in the world beyond the island of Mospheira, and if the established atevi authority went down, after nearly two hundred years of building an industrial complex and an interlinked power structure uniting hundreds of small atevi associations —

— it would be his personal fault.

The plane broke through the cloud deck, rain making trails on the window, crooked patterns that fractured the outward view of a city skyline with no tall buildings, a few smokestacks. Tiled roofs, organized by auspicious geometries atevi eyes understood, marched up and down the rain-veiled hills.

The wing dipped, the slats extended as they passed near the vast governmental complex that was his destination: the Bu-javid, the aiji's residence, dominating the highest hill on the edge of Shejidan, a hill footed by hotels and hostels of every class, a little glimmer of — God — audacious neon in die gray haze.

Witness atevi democracy in plain evidence, in those hotels. In the regular audiences and in emergency matters, petitioners lodged there, ordinary people seeking personal audience with the ruler of the greatest association in the world.

In their seasons of legislative duty, lawmakers of the elected hasdrawad occupied the same hotel rooms, with their security and their staffs. Even a handful of the tashrid, those newly ennobled who lacked ancestral arrangements within the Bu-javid itself, found lodging for themselves and their staff in those pay-by-the-night rooms at the foot of the hill, shoulder to shoulder with shopkeepers, bricklayers, numerologists and television news crews.

With the long-absent emergency hanging literally over the world, the hotels down there were crammed right now and service in the restaurants was, bet on it, in collapse. The legislative

committees would all be in session. The hasdrawad and the tashrid would be in full cry. Unseasonal petitioners would barter the doors of the aiji's numerous secretaries, seeking exception for immediate audience for whatever special, threatened interests they represented. Technical experts, fanatic number-counters and crackpot theorists would be jostling each other in the halls of the Bu-javid — because in atevi thinking, all the universe was describable in numbers; numbers were felicitous or no felicitous: numbers blessed or doomed a project, and there were a thousand different systems for reckoning the significant numbers in a matter — all of them backed by absolute, wild-eyed believers

God help the process of intelligent decisions.

The runway was close now. He watched the warehouses and factories of Shejidan glide under the wing: factory-tops, at the last, rain-pocked puddles on their asphalt and gravel, a drowned view of ventilation fans and a company logo outlined in gravel. He'd never seen Aqidan Pipe & Fittings from file ground. But it, along with the spire of Western Mining and Industry and the roof of Patanandi Aerospace, was the reassuring landmark of all his homecomings to this side of the strait.

Curious notion, that Shejidan had become a refuge.

He hadn't even seen his mother this trip to Mospheira. She hadn't come to the hospital. He'd phoned her when he'd gotten in — he'd gotten time for three phone calls in his hospital room before they knocked him halfway out with painkillers and ran him off for tests. He distinctly remembered he'd phoned her, spoken with her, told her where he was, said he'd be in surgery in the morning. He'd told her, playing down the matter, that she didn't need to come, she could call the hospital for a report when he came to. But he'd honestly and secretly hoped she'd come, maybe show a little maternal concern.

He'd phoned his brother Toby, too, long distance to the northern seacoast where Toby and his wife lived. Toby had said he was sure he was all right, he was very glad he'd turned up back on the job under the present conditions — which the paidhi couldn't, of course, discuss with his family, so they didn't discuss it; and that had been that.

He'd called Barb last: he'd known beyond any doubt that Barb would come to the hospital, but Barb hadn't answered her phone. He'd left a message on the system: Hi, Barb, don't believe the news reports, I'm all right. Hope to see you while I'm here.

But it had been just a Departmental staffer leaning over his bed when he woke, saying, How are you feeling, Mr. Cameron?

And: We really hope you're up to this

Thanks, he'd said.

What else could you say? Thanks for the flowers?

Wheels touched, squeaked on wet pavement. He stared out through water-streaked windows at an ash-colored sky, a rainy concrete vista of taxiways, terminal, a functional, blockish architecture, that could, if he didn't know better, be the corresponding international airport on Mospheira.

A team from National Security had taken charge of his computer while he was down-timed on a hospital gurney; State Department experts and the NSA had probably walked all through his files, from his personal letters to his notes for his speeches and his dictionary notes, but they'd had to rush. He'd expected, even knowing his recall would be soon, at least one day to lie in the sun.

But something having hit crisis level, when the security team had picked him up at the hospital emergency desk to take him to his office, they'd handed his computer back to him and given him thirty minutes in his office on the way to the airport — thirty whole minutes, on the systemic remnant of anesthetic and painkillers, to access the files he expected to need, load in the new security overlay codes, and dispose of a request from the President's secretary for a briefing the President apparently wasn't going to get. Meanwhile he'd sent his personal Seeker through the system with all flags flying to get what it could — whatever his staff, the Foreign Office, the State Department and his various correspondents had sent to him.

In the rush, he didn't even know what files he'd actually gotten, what he might have gotten if he'd argued vigorously with the State Department censors, or what in the main DB might have changed. They'd had an uncommonly narrow window of authorization for their plane to enter atevi airspace, itself an indicator of increased tensions: they'd driven like hell getting to the airport, bumped all Mospheiran local aircraft out of schedule, as it was, and when he'd just gotten served a fruit juice and they'd reached altitude, where he planned to work for his hour in the air, he'd dropped off to sleep watching the clouds.

He'd thought — just rest his eyes. Just shut out the sunlight, such a fierce lot of sunlight, above the clouds. He wasn't sure even now the damned painkiller was out of his system. Things floated. His thoughts skittered about at random, no idea what he was facing, no solid memory what the man from the Department had told him.

The plane made the relatively short taxi not to the regular debarkation point but to the blind, windowless end of the passenger terminal. He managed to get unbelted, and as the plane shut down its engines, cast an expectant look at the attendants for help with his stowed luggage, and gathered himself up carefully out of the seat.

One attendant pulled his luggage from the stowage by the galley. He defended his computer as his own problem, despite the other attendant's reach to help him with that. "The coat, please," he said, and turned his back for help to get it on — one slightly edge-of-season coat he'd had in reserve in Mospheira, atevi-style, many-buttoned and knee-length. He got the one arm in the sleeve, accepted the other onto his immobile shoulder — the damned coat tended to slide, and if it were Mospheira, in summer, he wouldn't bother; but this was Shejidan and a gentleman absolutely wore a coat in public.

A gentleman absolutely took care to have his braid neatly done, too, with the included ribbons indicative of his status and his lineage; but the atevi public would have to forgive him: he'd had no one but the orderly at the hospital to put his hair in the requisite braid. He'd intended to protect it from the seat-rest during the flight, but after his unintended nap, he didn't know what condition it was in. He bowed his head now and managed one-handed to pull it from under the coat collar without losing the coat off his shoulder, felt an unwelcome wisp of flyaway by his cheek and tried to tuck it in.

Then he picked up his computer, eased the strap onto his good shoulder and made his unhurried way forward, an embarrassingly disreputable figure, he feared, by court standards.

But he'd gotten here, he hoped *with* the files he needed to work with, and he hoped to get to the Bu-javid without undue delay and without public notice. If everyone who was supposed to communicate had communicated and if the aiji hadn't been in nonstop meetings, he should have a car waiting as soon as they moved the ladder up. It thundered, sounding right overhead, and the paidhi prayed that he at least had a car waiting.

He had to remember, too, that he was now leaving the venue where seats and tables and doorways fit people his size: the stairs out there had a higher rise, and he was, lacking the use of one hand, feeling chill and rather petulantly fragile at the moment.

"Thank you," he said to the attendants who opened the aircraft door. The staircase was moving up — *not* the canopied portable, much less the covered walk: it bumped into contact, rocking the plane, and one attendant set his luggage out on the rainy landing at the top of a shaky, rain-wet, metal ladder.

No car. It wasn't going well. Everything had the feeling of haste exceeding planning. Wind-driven mist whipped through the open doorway, and he was ready to go back where it was dry, when a van with the airport security logo whisked from around the nose and braked just short of an epic puddle, so abrupt an arrival his security-conscious nerves had twitched, his whole body poised to fling himself backward.

"Take care, sir. The steps are higher."

"I know. I know, thank you, though. Good flight. Thank you so much. Thank the crew." He raised a shoulder to keep the computer strap in place and felt a sudden, perilous challenge of balance as he ventured out onto the stairs into the wind-borne spatter of rain. He grabbed the rail, shoulder still canted, struggling not to let the computer strap slip off.

The van's side door opened. An armed atevi, a brisk dark giant in the silver-studded black of Bu-javid security and the aiji's personal guard, exited the van and raced up the steps, making the stairs rattle and shake under atevi muscle.

"Nadi Bren!" a woman's voice hailed him, and a bleak day brightened.

"Jago!"

"I'll take that, nadi Bren. Give me your hand." Two steps below him, Jago stood eye to eye with him. She seized the computer strap on his shoulder, took it from him in relentless courtesy and captured his chilled white hand in her large black one, competency, solidity in a thunderous, wind-blown world. He had no doubt at all Jago could catch him if he slipped — no doubt that she could carry him down the steps in one arm if she had to.

And on his tottery, rain-blasted way down the ladder, he was not at all surprised, having encountered Jago, to see Banichi exit the van more slowly to welcome them.

He was glad it was them. God, he was relieved —

He was so relieved he had a dizzy spell, forgot the scale of the next step, and if Jago hadn't had an instant and solid grip under his good arm he'd have gone down for sure.

"Careful," she said, hauling him back to balance. "Careful, Bren-ji, the steps are slick."

Slick. Lightning flashed overhead, whitening out detail, glancing off the puddle. He reached the bottom rubber-legged as Banichi stepped out of the way for him and for Jago, who helped him into the van and climbed in after.

Banichi brought up the rear, swung up and in and slammed the door, sealing out the rain and the thunder. Like Jago, black leather and silver studs, black skin, black hair, gold eyes, Banichi fell into the available door-side seat, saving his leg from flexing, Bren didn't fail to note, as he settled next to the far window.

"Go," Jago said to the driver.

"My luggage," Bren protested as the van jerked into motion.

"Tano will bring it. There's a second van."

Tano was another familiar name, a man he was exceedingly glad to know was alive.

"Algini?" he asked, meaning Tano's partner.

"Malguri Hospital," Banichi said. "How *are* you, Bren-ji?"

Far better than he'd thought. People were alive that he'd feared dead.

But other people, good people, had died for mistaken, stupid reasons.

"Is there word —" His voice cracked as he leaned back against the seat. "Is there word from Malguri? From Djinana? Are they all right?"

"One can inquire," Jago said.

He hadn't remotely realized he was so shaky. Maybe it was the sudden feeling of safety. Maybe it was the haste he'd been in back on Mospheira to gather everything he needed. His mind wandered back into the web of atevi proprieties, lost in the mindset that didn't allow Banichi or Jago the simple opportunity to inquire about —

Atevi didn't have friends. God, God, wipe the word from his mind. Twenty-four hours across the straits and he was thinking in Mosphei', making psychological slips like that, a dim-witted slide toward what was human, when he was no longer in human territory.

The van swerved around a corner, and they all leaned. It was summer in Shejidan, but they seemed to have the heater on, all the same, because the clammy chill was gone. He leaned his head back on the seat, blinked his stinging eyes and asked, as the straightening of the course rolled his head toward Banichi, "Are we taking the subway out, or what?"

"Yes," Banichi told him.

Banichi hadn't come up the ramp after him.

"The leg, Banichi?"

"No detriment, nand' paidhi. I assure you."

To his efficiency, Banichi meant. Back on mainland soil and he'd assigned Jago a diplomatically touchy inter-staff inquiry and insulted Banichi's judgment and competency. He didn't know how he could improve on it.

"Ignore my stupid questions," he said. "Drugs. Just got out of hospital. I took a painkiller. I shouldn't have."

"How did the surgery go?" Jago asked.

He tried to remember. "I forgot to ask," he admitted, and didn't know why he hadn't, except that in some convoluted, drug-hazed fashion he'd taken for granted he was going to have a shoulder that worked. He hoped so.

Hell, it felt as if he'd picked up where he'd left his life yesterday — was it yesterday? — and everything about Mospheira was a passing dream. It felt good, it felt *safe* to be back with these two. He wasn't tracking outstandingly well on anything at the moment, except that between these two individuals he felt he could handle anything.

If these two were here, he knew that Tabini, none other, had sent them.

The van's tires made a wet sound on the airport pavement. He let his eyes shut. He could let down his propriety with these two, who'd lived intimately with him, who'd cared for him when he was far less than self-possessed — and he'd know even blind that he was in Shejidan, not Mospheira. He knew by the smells of rain-wet leather and the warmth of atevi bodies, the slight scent that attended them, which might be perfume, or might be natural — it was an odd thing that he'd never quite questioned but it was pleasant and familiar, in the way old rooms and accustomed places were comfortable to find.

The van nosed down an incline, and he blinked a look at his surroundings, knowing where they were before he used his eyes: the ramp down into the utilitarian concrete of the restricted underground terminal. The aiji used it — the aiji and others whose safety and privacy the government wanted to guarantee.

He'd discovered a comfortable position in which to sit, good shoulder against the van wall. He truly, truly didn't want to move right now.

"I trust," he said, shutting his eyes again, "that there'll be a chance for me to rest, nadiin. I really, really hope to rest a while before I have to think or do anything truly critical."

Jago's fingers brushed his shoulder. "Bren-ji, we can carry you to the car if you wish."

The van braked to a halt. "No," he said, and remembering that these two afforded themselves no weakness and rarely a sign of pain, he opened his eyes and tried to drag himself back to the gray concrete and echoing world. "I'll manage, thank you, nadiin, but, please, let's just wait for my luggage. I have every confidence in Tano. But it's only a single case. It has my medical records."

"We've orders, nadi," Banichi said.

Tabini's orders. No question. No dawdling even in a secure area. Possibly there had been some filing of Intent against his life, but most likely it was simply Tabini's desire to have the paidhi in place, under a guard he trusted, and to have one more ragged-edged problem off his mind.

Banichi opened the door and stepped down to the pavement, Jago got out after, taking the computer, and Bren edged across the seat and stepped down with less assurance, into their competent and watchful care.

The subway had its own peculiar atmosphere: oil, cold concrete and echoes of machinery and voices — like any station in the city system, like any in the continent-spanning rail that linked to the city subway; a connection which argued there could be a small risk of some security breach, he supposed, but no one came into this station without a security clearance, not the baggage handlers, not the workmen: cars didn't stop here.

Which meant there was no burning reason now, in his unregarded and probably uninformed opinion, that the paidhi couldn't stand about for half a minute and wait for his luggage — but considering the wobble in his knees and the disorientation that came buzzing through his brain with the white noise of the echoing space, he let himself be moved along the trackside at Banichi's best limping pace.

A pair of Bu-javid guards, standing outside on the platform, opened the door of the car — seemingly freight-carrier — that waited for them. They were guards he didn't know, but clearly Banichi did, sufficiently that Banichi sent Jago into the car for no more than a cursory look before letting Bren inside.

It was residential-style furnishing inside the car, false windows inside curtained in red velvet. It was the aiji's own traveling salon, plush appointments, the whole affair in muted reds and beige, a complete galley, soft chairs — Bren let himself down in one that wouldn't swallow him in its cushions, and Jago, setting the computer down, went immediately to open the galley, asking him did he want fruit juice?

"Tea, nadi, if you please." He still felt chilled, and his ears had felt stuffed with wool since the change in altitude. Tea sounded good. Alkaloids that atevi metabolisms didn't mind at all in ordinary doses were especially common in herbal teas and concentrated in some atevi liquor, a fact he'd proved the hard way: but Banichi's junior partner wouldn't make mistakes like that with her charge. He shut his eyes in complete confidence and only opened them when Jago gently announced the tea was ready, the train was about to couple the car on, and would he care for a cup now?

He would. He took the offered cup in his hand, as Banichi, having made it aboard, shut the outside door and went on talking to someone, doubtless official, on his pocket-corn.

Jago cradled her cup against the gentle bump as the coupling engaged. "We're a three-car train," Jago said, settling opposite him.

"Tano's made it on," Banichi said as he came up and joined them. "Station security wouldn't let him in this car. I did point out he's in the same service, little that penetrates the minds in charge."

Bren didn't worry that much about his luggage at the moment. Climbing up the high step to the car had waked up the pain in his shoulder.

But after half a cup of tea, and with the train approaching the terminal in the Bu-javid's lower levels, he recovered a wistful hope of homecoming, his own bed — if security afforded him that favor.

"Do you think, nadiin, that I'll possibly have my garden apartment back?"

"No," Banichi said. "I fear not. I'll inquire. But it's a fine view of the mountains, where you're going."

"The mountains." He was dismayed. "The upper floor? — Or a hotel?"

"A very fine accommodation. A staunch partisan has made you her personal guest, openly preferring the aiji's apartment for the session."

A staunch partisan. Tabini-aiji's staunch partisan. Tabini's apartment.

The train began braking. Jago extended her hand for the cup.

Damiri?

Tabini's hitherto clandestine lover? Of the Atigeini opposition?

My God. Damiri had declared herself. Her relatives were going to riot in the streets.

And a *human* for Tabini's next-door neighbor, even temporarily, lodged in an area of the Bu-javid on the highest and most ancient lords of the Association attained?

A human didn't belong there. Not there — and certainly not in a noble and respectable lady's private quarters. There was bound to be gossip. Coarse jokes. Detriment to the lady and the lady's family, whose regional association had openly opposed Tabini's policies from the day of his accession as aiji major.

Slipping indeed. He must have let his dismay reach his face: Banichi said, as the brakes squealed, "Tabini wants you alive at any cost, nand' paidhi. Things are very delicate. The lady has made her wager on Tabini, and on Tabini's resourcefulness, with the dice still falling."

Baji-naji. Fortune and chance, twin powers of atevi belief, intervenors in the rigid tyranny of number.

The car came to rest.

The doors opened. Banichi was easily on his feet, offering a hand. Bren moved more slowly, promising himself that in just a little while he could have a bed, a place to lie still and let his head quizzing.

Jago gathered up his computer. "I'll manage it, Bren-ji. Take care for yourself. Please don't fall."

"I assure you," he murmured, and followed Banichi's lead to the door, down again, off the steps, into what he assumed was tight security — at least as tight as afforded no chance of meetings.

"Bren Cameron," a voice echoed out, a female voice, sharp, human and angry.

"*Deana?*" Deana Hanks didn't belong in the equation. She'd been out of communication, the fogged brain added back in; he'd asked that her authorizations be pulled by the Foreign Office, and he'd assumed — *assumed* she'd gone home. His successor had *no* legitimate business on the mainland.

Had she?

Things had moved too fast today and she was late for the airport. Mad, he was sure. Technically she should have met him at the airport, giving the plane just enough time to fuel and take on cargo, and be airborne inside an hour.

All of which was at the rear of his mind as he extended a friendly left hand, glad she was all right. "This is a surprise. Thank you for the backup."

"Thank you, hell!"

One didn't take a hostile tone around atevi. Guards' hands twitched toward pockets, inside coats, both her security, and his.

"Hata-mai," he said quickly, *It's all right*, and lapsed back into the atevi language. "Deana, nadi, may we be a little softer, please? I'm sure the plane will wait for you."

"Softer, is it?" She was a dark-haired woman, pale-skinned, flushed about the face most times that he ever dealt with her. She wore an atevi-style coat and had her hair in the court braid, the same as he did. Her atevi escort made an anxious wall behind her. "Softer? Is the government caving in to blackmail now? Is this the best answer they could come up with? They deliver ultimatums and we jump?"

"Nadi, if you please —"

"I'll the hell speak Mosphei', thank you. I want a report. I want to know where you were, I want to know what you were doing, I want to know who you were talking to and what you reported to whom, and I'll talk in the office, this afternoon."

It must be the pain pill. He wasn't tracking that well. Maybe he'd personally affronted the woman — not hard, considering Deana's temper, but he was determined she be on that outbound plane. Two humans weren't ever supposed to be this side of the strait at the same time. "We can settle this by fax. I'll brief you. But you've got a flight to catch."

"Oh, of course, of *course* I have. — I haven't any recall order, Mr. Cameron. Of course, without communications, there's damned little I do hear but court gossip. — And threats against this office. I want written orders. I take it you brought them with you."

"I — don't think they've ever been required."

"Nadi Bren," Jago said. "Please. Let's be moving."

"You *take* orders, nadi," Hanks snapped. "This is a matter inside our office, no local concern."

"Ms. Hanks." She'd insulted Jago. That was the last straw. "You're not talking to building security, if you haven't noticed the braid. ~~And if you want an order, you've got an order.~~ You're relieved of duty, your codes are invalid, your presence is no longer required. Get on that plane."

"Get me an order from Mospheira. I don't take it from you. And I've received *nothing* from Foreign Affairs except the advisement you were going back to Mospheira on a medical."

"Well, clearly I'm back."

"Not officially, Mr. Cameron. Not to me."

"I suggest, nadiin," Banichi said, moving between, and addressing Hanks' guards, "that you take this woman out of Bren-paidhi's way or face administrative procedures. Or mine. You *are* in error, nadiin. don't make more of it — I advise you."

There was threat in the air. All of a sudden Bren sensed resistance from Hanks' escort, aggression from Banichi — who surely had authority. He felt his heart speed, which the pain pill didn't want to have happen.

But Hanks' escort moved to take her out of his path —

He didn't know how it happened — suddenly he had a maneuvering wall of atevi between him and the world, and no one even hit him, as far as he realized, but he felt a painful jolt as he stumbled against the concrete station wall. He cradled his casted arm out of the way as an ateva overshadowed him and seized his good arm.

He ducked to the side, to the limit he could, caught sight of Hanks and her guards. "You," he yelled out, "be on that plane, Ms. Hanks. You're entirely out of line!"

"Show me the order from the Department."

"I'll show you an arrest warrant, next thing *you* see."

"Bren-ji," Jago said, and with an inexorable grip on his arm, hurried him toward the lift, as he heard angry atevi voices behind them, Banichi ordering Hanks' guards to get her back to her residency and *not* to the airport.

Which countermanded *his* orders, ominous note; Banichi derived his authority and his instructions from Tabini; and Banichi was in no good mood as he overtook them at the lift door. They went inside. Banichi followed them in and pushed the lift button to take them up.

"Banichi-ji," Bren said. "I fear I aggravated the situation. Not to excuse it, but she believes she was slighted in the Department sending me here without notice to her. That was the gist of it."

"Nadi," Banichi said, still hot. "I will report that interpretation to those who can judge."

He'd never seen Banichi this angry, not even under fire, and he wasn't inspired to continue on the subject. It wanted extensive phone calls to straighten this one out — one hoped before the plane received orders to clear atevi airspace. Hanks had been, even on a second and third thought, entirely

out of line back there. He couldn't read what was afoot — except that Hanks belonged on that outbound plane, and that, ~~slow-witted as he might be thanks to the painkiller, he wasn't taking undue offense.~~

It wasn't a friendship. He and Hanks had never liked each other, not in university, not in the Foreign Office, not in the halls of the Department. Their candidacies for the office had had different political supporters. He'd won; he'd become Wilson-paidhi's designated successor. She'd ended up as alternate being far less fluent — she'd had the political patronage in the executive of the Depart merit, but he'd had her on technicalities and nuances of the language in ways the selection process couldn't ignore, no matter Hanks' friends in high places.

But that she met him, clearly in breach of the Treaty, and threw a public tantrum — God, he didn't know what insanity had gotten into the woman. It shook him.

Probably she'd been blindsided as he'd been — one branch of the State Department moving faster than Shawn Tyers in the Foreign Affairs branch could get hold of the paidhi-successor through the phone system, possibly this afternoon.

Or, equally a possibility during any crisis between atevi and humans or atevi and atevi, the phone system might be shut down between Mospheira and the mainland. An hours-long phone blackout was certainly no excuse for Hanks' outburst; it was precisely when the paidhi was most supposed to use his head. He hadn't *liked* Hanks, but he'd never considered her a total fool.

The arm ached from the jolt he'd taken against the wall. He wasn't up to physical or mental confrontations today. Banichi had apparently reacted in temper, a first; Hanks had blown up; and, what was more, Hanks' security had been set personally in the wrong, publicly embarrassed and outranked. You didn't do that to atevi loyal to you. You didn't put them in that position.

An atevi internal crisis, which he greatly feared could be the occasion of his precipitate recall — some shake-up ricocheting through atevi government — was no time to fine-tune his successor's grasp of protocols, especially when she went so far as to attack *him* in public and launch her security against his, who, on loan from Tabini himself, far outranked her middling-rank guards. This performance deserved a report and a strong warning.

More immediately, he needed to get on the phone to Tabini *and* Mospheira and get Hanks out of here. They could assuredly hold the plane for Hanks. There was no more important cargo Mospheiran Air carried than the paidhi and the paidhi-successor in transit, and it could sit there until they got Hanks aboard.

Two phone calls necessitated, Hanks and a security glitch, inside a minute of debarking; God, he had much rather go to the apartment he knew, his comfortable little affair on the lower tier of the building. It had a bed he was used to and servants he could deal with —

And a garden door, which had, in the paidhi's suddenly critical and controversial rise to prominence in atevi society, become an egregious security hazard.

That fact came through to him with particular force as the lift cranked to a halt and he saw *the* floor indicator saying, not 1, the public level, but 3, the tightest security not only in the Bu-javid but

anywhere on the mainland.

THE ATIGEINI residence certainly lacked, in Bren's estimation, the charm of his single room on the lower garden court — but one couldn't apply a word like charm to a palace.

There was a staff of, Jago informed him, setting down his computer beside the reception room door, fifty. Fifty servants to keep the place in order.

Grand baroque, maybe. Extravagance, definitely.

Gilt and silver wash on the cabinets and tables.

Priceless murals. Gilded carvings. He only wanted a bed. A place, a closet, a couch to sit on, anywhere to let his arm stop aching.

"Nadiin," a woman said, bowing, as she met them in the foyer, "nand' paidhi. My name is Saidin, chief of staff. Welcome."

"Nand' Saidin," Bren murmured, and reflexively returned the bow, stiff arm and all. She was clearly a woman of dignity and proper decorum, even gifted on the sudden with a human guest. "I regret very much disarranging the staff. Thank you so much for your courtesy."

"Our lady is pleased to provide you comfort, nand' paidhi. Would you care to see the arrangement of the premises?"

Banichi frowned and looked to him for opinion — but one could hardly, under the circumstances of being offered a palace, decline the honor.

"I'd be delighted, nand' Saidin. Thank you."

"Please do us the honor," Saidin murmured, and walked ahead of him, Banichi and Jago close behind. Saidin was middle-aged, slender — her coat was beige brocade, her slippers matching, in the very latest fashion; her braid was a simple affair, incorporating pink and green ribbons in the heraldic style of centuries of service to aristocracy. She was of that class of servants, clearly, born, not hired, to the lifelong duty of a particular house to which she was possibly, though unofficially, related. He knew the type — the sort of woman, he thought, who deserved both respect for her position and understanding for her passionate devotion to the premises.

"This is the outer section, nand' paidhi, which serves all the formal functions, with the state dining room, the reception salon, the post-of-guard, which has been modernized___The inner rooms are the master bedrooms, each with bath. The bedrooms all give out onto a circular salon surrounding the private dining hall ..."

Hand-loomed carpets and needlework drapes. The paidhi was never, in the interests of his job, a cultural illiterate, and the areas of his brain that didn't at the moment have all they could handle in etiquette, security and the animal instincts of balance, were respectfully absorbing all the nuances of

regional and period design around him. Mospheira imported handmade as well as synthetic fabrics, some very expensive, but Mospheira had seen this kind of work only once, a single sample in a glass case in the War Museum.

And in this apartment, far more extravagant than Tabini's own, one walked on such carpets. In the reception salon next to the entry, one looked out clear glass windows past priceless draperies, intricately figured in muted gold, to the same view that Tabini's apartment enjoyed next door: the tiled roofs of the historic Old City spread out below the hill, the blue range of the Bergid — scantily visible on this stormy evening, beneath gray and burdened clouds. Wind, rain-laden, breathed through the apartment from open windows and hidden vents alike. He'd transited climates as well as provinces, begun to feel summer was decidedly over, and, now, felt as if he'd skipped across months and come in on another spring, another world, a situation months, not days, removed.

The paidhi was a little giddy. Doing surprisingly well, considering. He wasn't sorry to have the tour. He'd grown not merely security conscious but security obsessive in recent days. He wanted to know the lay of the place, and whether there were outside doors, and whether a footfall echoing from one direction was surely a servant and from the other potentially an intruder.

"Are there other outside doors?" he asked. "Even scullery exits?"

"All external exits are to the foyer," Banichi said. "Very secure."

"There have been extensive revisions in the early part of this century," Saidin said. "You'll notice, however, that the stone and the wood matches exactly. Lord Sarosi did personal research to locate the old quarry, which presently supplies stone for other restorations within the Bu-javid, including the new west portico..."

The rest passed in increasing haze — the salon, the solarium, the bedrooms, the dining area. The staff all women, so far as he saw, appeared and vanished discreetly, opened doors and closed them as the head of staff silently directed, turned on lights and turned them off again, whisked imaginary dust off a sideboard and straightened a tasseled damask runner — forty-nine additional and mostly invisible servants, a propitious number, Bren was sure, to remain, safeguarding the historic family premises and maintaining decorum in the face of human presence.

And everything spoke of a mathematical calculation underlying the decor — the eye learned to pick it out, down to the color and number of the dried flowers in the frequent and towering bouquets.

Every measure of the place was surely propitious for the lady's family, down to the circular *baji-naji* figure centered in the beautifully appointed formal dining area: Fortune and Chance, chaos in the center of the rigid number-governed design of the rooms.

The room began to spin about that center, and the paidhi, in his private, pain-edged haze, suddenly hoped to not faint on the antique carpet. He was by now only and exclusively interested in the guest bedchamber, and the bed they said would be his, next on the tour —

He walked in, behind the gracious madam Saidin, into a room of immense proportions, with silver satin bedclothes, gold coverlet, gilt bedstead supported by gilt heraldic beasts — a bed wide enough for him and half the Mospheiran Foreign Office. The modern coverlet, Saidin said, exactly duplicated

one of the fifty-eighth century, which had been on the bed when the last family occupant of the bedchamber, a fifty-ninth century lord, had met an untimely and probably messy end.

The family had declined to use it thereafter, but the numbers of the place had been altered to remove the infelicitous influences — two bluewood cabinets of precisely calculated dimensions were the addition that, the paidhi could be sure, guaranteed the harmony of the occupant. The chief of staff would be delighted to provide the figures, should the paidhi desire.

Six guest bedrooms, besides his own, each with its private bath; halls with doubtless felicitous arrangements of furnishings. He had no desire to question Atigeini judgment, and every desire to stay and prove the bed unhaunted, but the gentle majordomo was clearly proud of the next rooms, which she called, in her soft voice, "The most charming area of the house, lady Damiri's private residence," which she was sure the paidhi would find congenial to his work. Lady Damiri had, as an unprecedented favor, opened even her personal library and sitting rooms to her human guest — and he didn't find the will to deny Saidin, who might well have, in that stiff back and formal demeanor, concerns that a human guest would cast gnawed bones on the carpets and leave germs on the china.

Clearly he was going to be an inconvenience to the staff, genteel servants of a very highborn lady. And he wanted to begin with a good impression — knowing reports would be passed and that gossip would make the rounds if only inside the Atigeini family, in itself a security concern Banichi hadn't mentioned, but surely took into account. The last thing he wanted to do for his own safety was to alienate the staff.

So it was through silver-washed doors to the absent lady's private sitting rooms, a library with floor to ceiling shelves, a very fine book collection with an emphasis, he saw, on horticulture; and then, across the hall, a small, tile-floored solarium with a view of, again, the city and the mountains. Beautifully carved, windowed doors opened onto a balcony about which Banichi and Jago didn't look at all pleased — a balcony designed, Bren was sure, long before high-powered rifles had entered the repertoire of the Assassins' Guild.

Such thoughts swam leisurely through the paidhi's wavering brain, along with a sharp longing for his comfortable, quiet little garden apartment, and a fevered consideration of the lady of the apartment with her library of books on flowers — but, sadly, not a garden accessible to her —

He should recommend his lower-level garden to Damiri. She afforded him her hospitality. He could show her a charming place in the lower halls she'd likely never visited in her rich and security-insulated life.

In that thought the paidhi was growing entirely fuzzy-minded, and he really had rather sit down than go on to tour the breakfast room. He was certain, all credit to Banichi and Jago, that he had the very best and most secure guest room for himself. He was completely satisfied with the historic bed. He thought the library and the private solarium delightful. He couldn't bear a detailed tour of the other wonders he was sure abounded, which on another day he might have a keen interest as well as the fortitude to see.

There was a chair at the door of the solarium. He sat down in it with his heart pounding and mentally measured the distance back to the bedroom. He wasn't sure he could make it.

"Nadi Bren?" Jago asked as their guide hesitated.

"A fine chair," he breathed, and patted its brocade arm. "A very fine chair. Very comfortable. I'll be very pleased to work in this room. Please — convey my profound thanks to lady Damiri for allowing me this very kind — this very — extraordinary hospitality. I very much regret her inconvenience. But I can't —" He wasn't doing well with words at the moment. "I can't — manage any formality tonight. Please convey to Tabini-aiji my intention — to be in my office tomorrow. It's just that, tonight — I'd like my computer. And my bed. And a phone."

"We're both to stay here, nadi," Banichi said. "In these apartments. Guarding you. We'll carry your messages." They all towered above him, a black wall of efficiency and implacable hospitality that seemed to cut off the daylight. "Tano will occupy the security station and the small suite at the front door. He's already moving in — he has arrived with your suitcase. Your belongings will be in the drawers. Algini will join him in the security station, as soon as he's back from the hospital — we estimate, within a day or two."

"Not serious, I hope ..."

"Cuts and contusions. Perfectly fine."

"I'm very glad." His head was going around. He rested his chin on his fist, elbow on the arm of the chair, to fix a center of rotation in the environment, somewhere around Jago's figure. "I was very glad — very glad you came to the airport. Thank you. I wouldn't —" — wouldn't have trusted, was the expression that leaped to mind. He wasn't censoring quickly enough. He'd made himself a maze of syntax. "— wouldn't have had such confidence in strangers."

Damn, he wasn't sure how that parsed, either. He might just have insulted Saidin and the whole staff. He couldn't remember the front end of his own sentence.

"No difficulty at all," Banichi said. "Jago and I will establish ourselves in the red and the blue rooms, nearest your own, if that's agreeable."

"Of course." He didn't know how Banichi stayed on his feet: Banichi was walking wounded himself, limping slightly all through their tour about the apartment, but Banichi went on functioning, because that was the kind of man Banichi was, while the paidhi —

"Nadi Bren?"

The room went quite around. And around. He shut his eyes a second, until it stopped, and he drew a shaky breath. "Nadiin," he said, determined to settle some details — what was going on, and why the extraordinary security, "is there anything else you can tell me about my situation? Is there a threat, a difficulty, a matter under debate?"

"All three," Jago said.

"Regarding the ship over our heads?"

"Among other small matters," Banichi said. "I regret, Tabini-aiji *must* see you as soon as possible, nand' paid-hi. I know you'd rather be in bed, but these are our orders. I'll explain your exhaustion and

your inconvenience, and perhaps he'll come here."

"What small matters? *What* matters? I haven't had any news since I left."

"The hasdrawad and the tashrid. The ship. Nand' Deana."

The hasdrawad and the tashrid he could guess. They were in emergency session. He'd understood he could postpone his speech to them by at least the term of his illness. The ship. That was a given. He knew that was why his presence and his ability to translate was so vital to the aiji. Touchy, the Foreign Office had said of the course of events with it. But —

"The aiji has not held audience with this Hanks person," Jago said. "He has not regarded this substitution as legitimate."

"But," Banichi said, "certain individuals have indeed approached Hanks-paidhi. Tabini wishes to talk to you about this situation as soon as possible. Within the *hour*, if you can possibly manage it."

He'd thought he hadn't the strength to get up. He'd thought he'd no reserves left.

But the thought of Hanks occupying his office, holding meetings, as Banichi hinted, with God-knew-whom on her own, making her own accommodations on questions he'd resisted, resisting what he'd already settled — in the middle of *this* crisis —

It *wasn't* a phone-call solution. He needed to know what had happened between Hanks and Tabini before he dropped angry phone calls to Mospheira into the mix.

"I absolutely need to talk to Tabini," he said. "Now. I'll go there." The room might still be going around, but he had a sudden sense of what he had to focus on.

Like the apparition in the heavens — which put the entire Treaty in doubt.

Like a woman who'd consistently scored low on culture and psychology, who'd survived the academic committee winnowing process and gotten an appointment as paidhi-designate solely because she had high-ranking, narrow-interest support in the State Department — and a high-level finagle, he was sure of it, had landed her in a damned bad situation for novices.

"I'll advise the aiji," Banichi said.

TABINI'S APARTMENT, literally next door and centermost of the seven historic residences on this floor, was no strange territory: a young paidhi and an equally young aiji, both of them suddenly appointed to office with the demise of Tabini's father and the abrupt resignation of Wilson-paidhi — in private, where no politics intervened, he and Tabini laughed and held discussions far more easily than certain powers on either side of the strait might like to think. They were both sports enthusiasts — he skied and Tabini hunted; both single men in high-stress jobs — but he had Barb and Tabini had Damiri for refuge, and they compared notes.

They'd met in Tabini's apartment times uncounted. Scant days ago they'd been on vacation together, hunting in the hills at Tabini's country house at Taiben — where, in technical contravention of Treaty law, which forbade a human on the mainland carrying any sort of weapon under any excuse, Tabini had been teaching him target shooting. In the evenings they'd sat on the hearth ledge in that rural and peaceful house, looking forward to tomorrow and exchanging grandiose hopes for the future of human-atevi relations: a joint space program; trade city contact between their species, from the modest beginning of student computer exchanges —

Now, with their respective armed security drinking tea and socializing quietly in the foyer, the two of them took to the small salon aside from the entry of Tabini's residence — not a room he'd been in before, but Tabini had taken one look at him and ordered the little salon opened, so that, Tabini had said, the paidhi needn't walk another step.

It was a cozy chamber needing only a single servant, slight, bookish Eidi, who was probably a licensed assassin and undoubtedly senior security, himself — Bren had always suspected so — to pour tea and serve the traditional bittersweet wafers.

"Thank you for coming," Tabini said, protocols aside, and in the same moment Damiri herself turned up in the doorway.

"Nand' paidhi," Damiri said, offering a hand, and Bren began to struggle back to his feet, the very least of courtesy he owed his hostess and Tabini's official guest.

"No, no, please, stay seated, nand' paidhi. I'm so pleased you accepted my invitation. Has Saidin made you comfortable?"

"Quite, nai-ma. Thank you ever so much. I'm overwhelmed at such courtesy."

"An honor," she said, offering her hand, and taking it, he stayed entirely on his guard — at social disadvantage, of course, because he hadn't gotten up; which left her free to be gracious. The lady whom Tabini approved — the atevi expression — was neither ingenue nor scatterwit, and *she* defined the meeting, *she* spoke for herself, and not coincidentally for the Atigeini, whose consent or lack of it in the hospitality he had not a clue.

"I hope to be minimal bother to your gracious staff, daja-ma. It's an extraordinary courtesy you've extended to the paidhi's office." He was very careful about that word "office," *not* attributing the

hospitality to anything personal, an instinctively diplomatic distinction which seemed to touch the lady's fancy.

"The aiji's guest is my guest," she said, and made a little bow to him, to Tabini, and left with some quiet word to Eidi.

"Assure her, please," Bren said. "I'm utterly in awe of the apartment. I swear to be careful."

"She's very curious about you," Tabini said, giving no cue whatsoever how much Damiri had just tried Tabini's patience, or added opposition support to his questions, or acted in any wise by his consent. "Quite in touch with her staff, I warn you. But only from curiosity."

Possibly a signal of the situation. Certainly a warning. "Then I hope they report well of me."

"I've no doubts. Is it chill for you? A front moved through this afternoon. One could easily light the heater."

"No. Not at all. It's quite pleasant. Thank you, aiji-ma."

"Is there pain?"

"Some. Fever. I think that's normal."

"I'm very glad to see you safe, nadi. How glad you cannot imagine."

"I should have stayed in Shejidan, aiji-ma. I'd no idea anything was in imminent motion. I earnestly wish you'd told me. I'd have stayed and talked to the hasdrawad immediately."

"I wanted you treated by your own doctors. That demanded I send you to the island. But I was extremely anxious, nadi. I swear I was anxious until I heard your plane was safely in our airspace."

"Aiji-ma." He was somewhat surprised, even touched by Tabini's expression of personal concern — and held himself mentally and emotionally still on his guard, not least because he was glad to *be back* and had to put the brakes on that warm little human reaction that answered *no* questions whatsoever that bore on atevi motivation.

Like — whether the Western Association was holding firm around Tabini.

Like whether all hell was continuing to break loose in the eastern regions of the Association, provinces where Tabini was most politically vulnerable. There'd been bombs dropping there as late as two days ago, to which he could personally attest — bombs that had killed men he knew. He didn't know to this hour how that set-to had come out, or whether the provincial lords, reacting to a strong move by Tabini and a shift of certain lords to Tabini's side, had taken a wait-see as he hoped had happened.

The side-switching could include the Atigeini, but he had no information whether or not lady Damiri had courted assassination by her own family for siding openly with Tabini, whom her association had at first opposed and then only coolly supported; and whether her family supported her in lodging a human guest in rooms hallowed in Atigeini history — when, for all he knew, his broken shoulder

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