

C. J. CHERRYH

VISITOR

A Foreigner Novel



C.J. CHERRYH

THE FOREIGNER UNIVERSE

FOREIGNER
INVADER
INHERITOR

PRECURSOR
DEFENDER
EXPLORER

DESTROYER
PRETENDER
DELIVERER

CONSPIRATOR
DECEIVER
BETRAYER

INTRUDER
PROTECTOR
PEACEMAKER

TRACKER
VISITOR

THE ALLIANCE-UNION UNIVERSE

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THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION OF CJ CHERRYH

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To Jane.

1

The lift slowed and shifted sideways. The indicator above the doors showed their approach to the change-point, the crossover, where the human side of the station met the atevi side and did face-to-face business. A schematic to the right of the door showed a second lift, outbound from the docking bay, destined for the same stop.

That lift bore a very welcome envoy from the Earth below.

On the Earth of the atevi—humans did not predominate. But on the station—it was supposed to be a treaty-set balance.

It had gotten out of balance. And that was only *one* problem he needed to solve in the near future. The *very* near future.

Bren Cameron kept a precautionary grip on the safety bar—not being a citizen of the station, not being familiar with the route, he remained wary of surprises from the lift system. He wore court dress for the occasion, as a lord of the atevi aishidi'tat, which he was. Not that the arriving party would care. But the occasion called for dignity. Respect. For him that meant brocade and lace.

Around him, his atevi bodyguards, black-skinned and golden-eyed, towered a head taller, armed and watchful. Wherever he went, they went, black-uniformed, constantly in contact with atevi authority, who could amplify their small force considerably on short notice.

Banichi and Jago, Tano and Algini—that team of four was the heart of his own household. Two more of the Assassins' Guild attended him on this occasion, one man from the aiji-dowager, who was in charge of the mission; and one from Lord Geigi's bodyguard, as a guide through station systems and a personal gesture of support from Geigi, who had been on duty shift after shift as atevi stationmaster in Central—control of which was supposed to rotate between human and atevi every two shifts, and pass politely between the two authorities.

That rotation had happened like clockwork for years . . . until—God, what was it? Five? Six?—days ago, when outside events hurtled the world toward a meeting they didn't want under the best of circumstances. The alien and extremely dangerous kyo had arrived insystem and were now heading toward the inner solar system, presumably for a visit.

Presumably being the operative word. The kyo were already at war. Not with them, but with someone, and it *was* a concern—on two fronts. They *hoped* it was actually the kyo visiting them and not the unknown Someone. And they had aboard the station five thousand survivors from the other

human station—Reunion—which had run afoul of what was indisputably a kyo attack. The kyo had had second thoughts afterward. They had allowed the evacuation of the survivors and promised peace.

One truly hoped that understanding had held up.

And with news that the kyo were inbound, the Mospheiran-born stationmaster, Mikas Tillington, had gone berserk, locked down the Reunioner sections of the human side of the station, and refused to release control of Central to atevi on their regular rotation. Mikas Tillington had put himself in sole control. Mikas Tillington had determined he was *not* going to turn decision-making over to his atevi allies, not with this emergency bearing down on them, and he had emphatically refused to trust the Reunioners, who had come in as outsiders and a problem to his organized station operations, even to be free to walk the station corridors.

The Reunioners hadn't been treated well by Tillington's administration, and they were now panicked out of all reason.

Well, Tillington could lock the Reunioners into their sections, but not even he had dared lock the atevi shuttle out of dock. And that atevi shuttle had brought up not only Bren Cameron, human translator for Tabini-aiji, head of the atevi government, but also Tabini's grandmother the aiji-dowager, and the aiji's nine-year-old son, with staff and security, who brought the certain word that atevi intended to be in charge of contact with the kyo—and determined that they also would be in charge of the station, given the meltdown of the human-side stationmaster.

Once aboard, Bren, armed with a mandate from the Mospheiran President and the support of two of the four *Phoenix* captains, had walked into Central, ousted Tillington, and shifted control to the atevi control center.

Tillington having refused to negotiate at that point, Bren had locked Tillington in his own apartment under house arrest and set the atevi-side stationmaster, Lord Geigi, on watch and watch with his crew, all this pending the arrival of the shuttle bearing Tillington's replacement.

Also in custody, now, given a rapidly worsening situation in the locked sections, was the self-appointed leader of the Reunioners, one Louis Baynes Braddock, the former Reunion stationmaster, currently the primary troublemaker among the refugees. Braddock was Pilots' Guild, which in the distant past had run the ship. He claimed authority, he had ruled Reunion for over a decade, and, with Reunion lost, he had delusions of taking command here—a command that might never have gained followers, had it not been for Tillington's hate campaign against the Reunioners.

With the kyo approaching and the Reunioners in a state of panic, Braddock had made his move—and landed likewise under arrest.

It was not a good time for a civil war.

And with the four *Phoenix* captains themselves split two and two—two having backed Tillington and two vehemently opposed—it was time for the two powers of Earth to step in and inform the authorities in space what *they* intended to do about that rapidly approaching ship.

Two powers controlled the planet: the aishidi'tat and its leader Tabini-aiji, who owned all but one of the shuttles that kept the station going, and the President of the island of Mospheira, where human had found refuge from the original quarrel that had split colonists from ship-folk—and where they had lived and built for two hundred years, below a dead and mothballed station in orbit, never expecting *Phoenix* would return.

Never expecting *Phoenix* would have created another human station in another species' claimed territory.

Certainly never expecting that a ship from that species would be coming in on *Phoenix*'s trail with a purpose yet to be determined.

Tabini-aiji had sent Bren Cameron up to deal with the impending visitors by whatever means he found necessary. Necessity thus far had included the forceful removal of Tillington from Central, and the arrest of Braddock and his followers.

The President of Mospheira was also moving fast. He had quickly launched Mospheira's only shuttle and sent a replacement for Tillington, a unilateral appointment, with no reference to the Mospheiran legislature.

A good thing, in Bren's opinion. He *needed* help, someone to take the reins of the human-side operation, Mospheiran *and* Reunioner, because the *Phoenix* captains weren't in a position to do it, the atevi authority *shouldn't* do it, and *he* had his hands full with what was coming in on them from outside the solar system.

The current time was first-shift, a fact completely irrelevant to Bren's sleep-deprived body. The crisis of the moment had determined his schedule ever since he'd come aboard. He was currently operating on three hours of sleep. He'd had tea and toast for a breakfast, issued a few housekeeping orders, cleared small details left from yesterday, slipped into a good coat, and set out, desperately relieved to know that the shuttle was here, and to know that Tillington and his authority was official, and indisputably replaced, not by his hands alone.

More, he knew the replacement. Dr. Virginia Kroger. Gin. Robotics. Systems. And experienced in management. He'd worked with her. So had the captains. So had Geigi. And he was beyond ready to shed the problem of the station's unrest and take on what he was here to do, which was to deal with the incoming ship—to take up where negotiations with the kyo at Reunion had broken off, and lay the groundwork for real communication with the people of that incoming ship, far beyond the handful of words they'd established the last time they'd met. He needed to find out exactly why the kyo were here and what they wanted, beyond their enigmatic pronouncement back at Reunion that they *would* visit.

Most of all he had to bring the negotiation to a point that didn't lead to them joining the kyo's war or seeing the kyo's enemies turn up here. And he had to do it without accidentally triggering a kyo attack on Alpha, the way the kyo had taken out Reunion Station.

The situation with the kyo was delicate and moment to moment already. There was no way to predict when the polite echo, station to kyo ship and back again, of the kyo's last transmission, *Prakuyo come*, would change. If it did, when it did, atevi Central would buzz him, asking him please translate and come up with a response that wouldn't send the entire encounter spiraling out of control.

He needed, badly, to leave all station politics in the hands of sane people, and withdraw to his apartment, get a full night's sleep, and wake with his mind fully focused on the kyo problem.

Please God that Gin could keep the station quiet.

And that he could come up with answers.

• • •

One had to be very, very quiet getting up this morning. Great-grandmother was resting in her private rooms in the apartment. Cajeyri, aged fortunate nine, dressed with the help of two of his bodyguards, while his guest Irene, who had slept apart, dressed with the help of his other two.

It had to be yesterday's clothes for Irene: that was all Irene had brought away when she had escaped the Reunioner sections. But staff would have cleaned her clothes during the night, everything taken in stride. From some source, last night, one of the servants had provided Irene a rather too large sleeping-robe. And his own bodyguards had provided her a proper place to sleep.

Irene's hair, which had been gold, now was not. She had cut it right at the roots, so now it was very short, black, curly, and just showed random gold tips all over, which made, Cajeiri thought, a really pretty effect.

Shortly after nand' Bren had arrived on the station, she had done that to her hair, put on atevi clothes, stolen a key, slipped out of her mother's apartment and gone straight to the ship-folk door guards, speaking only Ragi, which of course they could not in the least understand.

The guards who barred her way might have suspected she was not atevi, but atevi dress was not something humans could easily lay hands on, so it had been clear she was somebody. The guards had had to ask authority, and their going to authority meant that word had gotten to Jase-aiji, who was the third-highest of the ship-aijiin. Nand' Jase had immediately taken Irene in hand and brought her to nand' Bren. The very topmost ship-folk authority, Ogun-aiji, had declined to stop Jase-aiji doing that—because everybody knew that those three human children, who had gone down to Earth to visit the aiji's son, were under the protection of the aishidi'tat.

They had always agreed, Cajeiri and his young associates, that if there was ever any trouble or they felt they were in danger, they should all get to the station maintenance tunnels and go straight over to the atevi half of the station and ask for Lord Geigi. So when the news had spread that the kyo were coming and Tillington-aiji was locking down the Reunioner sections, Bjorn and Artur and Gene had done just that, but that move had only gotten them trapped in the tunnels as *they* locked, so they had been stuck where they were.

But Irene had never gone to the tunnels. The Reunioner stationmaster, Braddock, who was causing all the trouble, had taken up residence in the apartment next to Irene's, and Braddock's people had locked Irene in, trapping her, as he'd also hoped to trap Bjorn and Artur and Gene, so Braddock could hold them to negotiate with in the emergency, all because they were under that special protection.

So Irene, being both brave and clever, had made a second plan. She had kept her atevi clothing that she had worn home from her visit to the world, and once she was sure from what Braddock's people said that nand' Bren was on the station, she had waited until people were asleep, then taken scissors and cut her hair, put on the clothing she had kept, *and* taken her mother's master key, *and* walked right up to the ship-folk guards like a lord of the aishidi'tat.

Then she had told nand' Jase and nand' Bren exactly where Braddock was, and *that* had let nand' Bren and nand' Jase move to capture Braddock and take control of the Reunion sections by way of the tunnels, without anyone getting hurt.

It had been a brave move on Irene's part. If the ship-folk had returned her to her apartment, she would never have gotten away twice, and her mother would have been very angry. But Irene had not lost her nerve, and even if the guards had been sure she could not be atevi caught on the wrong side of those locked doors, she had kept using names like Lord Geigi over and over, and saying that she was under the protection of the aiji in Shejidan—which she was. So even if the guards were absolutely sure she was human, and even if they might not have understood what she was telling them about the aiji in Shejidan, everybody on the station knew Geigi's name, and the guards had certainly known those clothes were not station clothes. Everybody definitely knew three Reunioners had been to the world and back.

So the guards had *had* to ask somebody what to do about Irene.

Now Irene's mother and Braddock were both under arrest. They were locked up for security reasons, but they might get out again someday. And if they did, they probably would find out who had told nand' Jase where to find them. That might make life very unpleasant for Irene.

One could not, would not, let that happen. Not to Irene and not to any of his human associates.

Cajeiri was resolved on that. They would never, ever be in a position where Braddock could threaten them again.

Gene and Artur and Bjorn and Gene's mother had all been found safe, rescued out of the tunnels. Then atevi security had gone in to get Bjorn's parents and Artur's out of the closed sections, because they might be in danger from Braddock's people. They were not safe to be put into Mospheiran residency—because Mospheirans and Reunioners were at odds. There was certainly no place for them among the ship-folk. So all of them were guests on the atevi side now, under Lord Geigi's personal protection. They had spent last night just down the hall, in Lord Geigi's guest quarters. Things were still very desperate in the Reunioner section, and the big section doors were still shut and guarded, but this morning Gene and Artur and Bjorn and their parents would all be waking up safe, to a good breakfast, right down the hall from Great-grandmother's apartment. And they owed Irene thanks for all of it.

But for the same reasons, Irene had no mother able to see to her now, because her mother had taken up with Braddock's people. It might be politics that would never change, though sometimes people took positions for safety's sake, and he was sure they would find that out, if that was the case—but he suspected it might go deeper and darker than that, because Irene did not want to see her mother, even if she got out of arrest, and expected her mother did not want to see her, either. Ever.

Cajeiri understood, or tried to, knowing that humans did not have man'chi as atevi had. But they certainly had feelings *like* that feeling, and if Irene said whatever loyalty she had to her mother was gone, he was sure something like man'chi was broken, and might never be able to be fixed.

So it had pained him to see Irene sit there last night in Lord Geigi's apartment, with everybody else happy and relieved to be safe, and everybody sitting in company with their parents. Gene's mother would have taken her in, and Artur's parents might—they had seemed concerned about her. So maybe she should have stayed with other humans. But she had set herself apart, and only tried to be happy.

So he had asked Irene to come with him last night, and she had done that.

There had been one small difficulty in the invitation. He had not asked Great-grandmother before making it. His bodyguard had certainly explained to staff, before they even showed up in Great-grandmother's foyer, but he had not told Great-grandmother personally, because Great-grandmother, mani, had been asleep when they arrived.

Mani was not in the habit of patience with untoward surprises. She was very strict, very proper, and she was not often kind. But he had done justice in bringing Irene home with him, because Irene was how all his guests had been able to escape, and how authorities had been able to catch Braddock.

Besides, mani had said this was his suite, this little set of rooms inside mani's apartment. There was a bedroom and two rooms for his bodyguard, so there was a bed, Veijico's, that Irene had had to herself, while Veijico and Antaro took Jegari's and Lucasi's beds, and Jegari and Lucasi had slept in his room. Staff had helped without any argument—and staff would tell other staff closer to mani that everything had been quite proper in their arrangement, so that mani would not find fault there. He was sure of that.

He would wear his third-best today. He had had mani's staff do all they could for Irene's clothes last night. They were country clothes, and not quite the thing she should have in mani's apartment, but necessity was ahead of fashion: that was what nand' Bren would say. Irene would look proper enough for a country estate, if not the court, and mani would understand that the informality, certainly, was nobody's fault.

Today all sorts of things were going to change. Gin-nandi was coming onto the station, and nand' Bren would have *her* there to take care of all the upset Tillington had caused, so nand' Bren could

concentrate on what he had to do, what all of them had to do, soon, which was to talk to the kyo and make that meeting turn out all right, so the kyo could go away and the world could just go on with no problems.

There was a war elsewhere, involving the kyo. He had seen something like a war, which his father told him was something atevi had not tended to have nor ever wanted to have again. It took very large problems to unite as many clans on one side of something as on the other, which meant a quarrel beyond what even the Assassins' Guild could settle. There had been the War of the Landing, which atevi had fought against humans, and won, but that was a long time ago, and generally, until the whole South had fallen under a bad influence, one just did not see people turning up with mortars and such awful things. The South had brought them from the coastal defense, where they belonged, and so the aishidi'tat had brought others in, and people had begun to forget the rules, and fight for themselves, without the Guild. And terrible things had happened, that still gave him nightmares.

That disturbance was over now, due in no small part to nand' Bren, and now nand' Bren was here to make sure the Earth did not end up involved in somebody else's war.

What the kyo had done at Reunion—he had seen that, too. That was war the way the kyo fought, which was a lot worse than artillery and mortars. He had seen the result, which had not even looked real, it was so terrible. His guests' parents had lived through it. Bjorn had been alive when that had happened, but Bjorn said he only remembered the dark—he had been scared of the dark ever after, though he tried not to admit it. Irene had been a baby when it happened. Gene and Artur were born after. But very many people had died. Thousands. And the kyo had done it.

Because, nand' Bren said, of a misunderstanding. That was a very scary thought. It was hard *not* to have misunderstandings with people who did not speak the same language. The misunderstandings that had caused the War of the Landing were the examples everybody used. And that had killed very many people, before they had thrown the big weapons into the sea.

Well, they just had to make certain that no misunderstanding happened. That was why he and mani had come up here with nand' Bren, because back at Reunion, he and mani had been able to help nand' Bren to talk to nand' Prakuyo, which had helped make peace and get everyone safely off Reunion.

There was a very good chance it would be nand' Prakuyo on that ship out there. But whoever it was they had very quickly arranged to come up here, and now that Tillington was out and Braddock was locked up, that ship out there was going to be mani's concern—the kyo, and the fact the kyo could blow up the space station if they said the wrong thing. So his having an unescorted girl for a guest in his rooms last night was a very minor problem, and mani would probably not distract herself to consider it, on a morning when they were *about* to get a new human stationmaster, and finally get to concentrate on the reason they had come up here in the first place.

He did not want to lay a problem on mani's plate first thing in the morning. That was never a good way to start an explanation.

Maybe he should order breakfast for just him and Irene and his aishid, and not explain anything. Yesterday had been stressful, even if it had had a happy ending, and mani might want to rest.

That also meant he had to keep all the human guests very quiet and not pose even the slightest problem for mani or nand' Bren while they dealt with the kyo. That was *his* job as much as it was Lord Geigi's, and he was trying to do just that: keeping the presence of his guests quiet, so they could both rescue his guests from the Reunioner situation, and not have trouble with the Mospheirans, and keep the kyo peaceful and happy all at once.

It would all work out. It had to.

2

The lift doors opened, exhaling cold fog around the arrivals—a short, bundled figure, Gin Kroger foremost of the five. Gin was first out of her cold suit. She dropped it in the designated place by the lift, and left her escort, walking forward to offer a hand.

“Gin,” Bren said. “Good to see you.” The bow was almost instinctive by now, but he reached out to shake an ice-cold hand. It might have been a hug, except for witnesses and dignity. Their association had been that of fellow travelers, colleagues, allies on two years of voyage and two hellish crises in the middle. “Hot drink and a sit-down?”

“God, yes.” Back in gravity, chilled to the bone, and probably as sleep-deprived as he was, she would want that. There was a small room adjacent, part office, part acclimatization lounge, here at the interface of human-side and atevi-side, in an area mostly used by freight personnel and visiting shuttle crews.

Gin was exempt from customs, being what she was . . . although her last transmission had mentioned not knowing where to send her baggage. Tillington still occupied the official stationmaster apartment.

But Gin would manage. Gin knew the station inside and out. And she had the authority to move walls. Literally.

She was no bit changed since she and Bren had last parted company: an average-looking woman, gray hair clipped short, wisping out of order, thanks to the static of the hooded cold suit. Makeup wasn't Gin's style, either. Her usual kit was a stretch tee and pants that might be plaid or floral, but today—today, on assumption of office—it was a brown suit and a travel-rumpled blue blouse.

The lounge afforded an instant tea dispenser, a box of tissues—noses tended to run, in the change of atmosphere—a round table, and moderately soft chairs for gravity-stressed bodies. Chained to the side counter, next to the tea service and water tap, lay a thick, well-worn manual of freight requirements, shipper and customs contact numbers, with a list of major station rules and regulations on the cover.

Gin merited a pass on those. She'd written no few of them.

They owned this little room for the moment: Bren's bodyguard had the door, proof against any chance intrusion. Gin's staff was handling the logistics of her move. Gin had asked for a conference with him on arrival, a fast one, nothing conspicuous, and this room was the most convenient.

Bren started to draw the tea himself, but Tano, of his bodyguard, silently took over, and delivered two utilitarian cups to the table.

“Good trip, considering?” Bren asked.

“Smooth, compared to the goings-on here,” Gin said. “Are we secure to talk?”

“Secure,” Bren said, “as long as Geigi’s holding Central. And he is.”

“I’ve read the Central log up to the point you transmitted it.” Gin took a careful sip of tea, cradling the warm cup. “Tillington’s created us a real mess, hasn’t he?”

“With no small help from Braddock. It’s going to take time and trustworthy change to straighten out.”

“It’s my impression,” Gin said, “that Tillington’s senior techs in Central may be reliable. I’m not so sure about his administrative staff. My own staff will be shadowing the lot of them, and not just to come up to speed on procedures. Two of my team are intelligence. If we find sabotage, we’ll deal with it. Expeditiously. We can manage more shuttle seats on the next downbound if we have to.”

“Good.” Bren nodded. “I’m fairly sure of Mr. Okana’s character. I don’t have as much experience of the other man, Brown. On the other hand, there was a general sense of relief in the room when Tillington was arrested and your appointment announced. Control of Central has been an ongoing issue in one form and another ever since the news about the kyo went public and the panic broke out in the Reunioner sections. Tillington exhausted his crew, mentally as well as physically, but they’ve had a full cycle and more to recover. They should be ready to take over, now they’ve got a sane individual in charge. Still, Geigi will keep Central in his hands until you officially request the handoff. His staff has been working double shifts since he took control. Necessary, considering the Tillington problem, and they’ll hold on, no worries. But they’ll be very glad to hand off.”

“I appreciate that. Sincerely. I’m going to unpack, get my staff situated. First off, I’m going to talk to Ogun. He and I aren’t strangers, and he called me, en route. He wants order restored. We’re in complete agreement on that. He *has* asked that I keep the section doors shut.”

“Under present circumstances,” Bren said, “it’s a good idea. But understand—the conditions in the Reunioner sections are not comfortable. Some of the apartments, as I understand, are more like cubicles, with temp paneling, not even real walls, no water tap, no secure storage, just a fold-up cot to sit and sleep on. And two or three roommates not necessarily of your choice. Bath is shared by sixteen apartments and food service is four or five kitchen counters to serve an entire section. The situation can’t go on. Maybe we can’t improve the living conditions right off, but we can give these people news, some hope that ‘better’ is coming. We can improve the food, hell, that at least. And *com* service needs to be restored, once we’re sure Braddock sympathizers aren’t using it to coordinate disruption. If we *don’t* restore it, we’re going to have *more* Braddock sympathizers. The Reunioners are afraid, and not just scared that the kyo might blow up the station without any reason. The kyo’s arrival was the trigger, but not the core of the problem. Ten years of surviving on rationing after the kyo blew her out of Reunion, then we come along with brochures advertising the good life. Freedom. Abundance. And they arrive to a second-class citizen reception from Tillington here at Alpha. They’ve *no* reason to trust us. Not now. Tillington’s done a *lot* of damage. The Reunioners aren’t sure they won’t be handed over to the kyo on demand. That’s crazy. I don’t think that’s remotely what the kyo want. But rumors don’t have to be rational.”

“Agreed,” Gin said, and drank a gulp of tea. “Tillington’s definitely on the list to ship out, and that’s going to be on the next shuttle, if there’s room. I expect there will be others going with him. My staff will be reviewing, auditing, and interviewing, but I’ll compose the final list. *We’ll* rout out and eliminate the problems in the human sector. *You* concentrate on the kyo, Bren. You just deal with the

problem and trust me to manage this.”

~~“I have every confidence in you. Needless to say, you’ll have my backing, as well as the aiji-dowager’s and Geigi’s. Anything you need that we can supply, you’ve got.”~~

She dipped her chin, sipped the tea. “I understand you have custody of the three kids plus one. And their parents.”

“Their parents minus one,” Bren said. “The girl’s mother is in custody, along with Braddock and his aides. Captains’ Council wants to keep it that way until there’s time to consider the cases.”

“Are they under charges?” Gin asked.

“From both sides. They’re in atevi custody at the moment for endangering the kids who were under the aiji’s personal protection. Irene’s escape, her testimony regarding Braddock’s attempts to control the kids, gave Ilisidi the absolute freedom to go in and rescue them in her grandson’s name, and to arrest Braddock and his aides without involving the Mospheirans.”

Gin gave a quick nod, complete understanding of the tangled politics involved . . . and the reason it wouldn’t be good, at the moment, to have Braddock sitting in Mospheiran or ship-folk custody.

“On the human side, Braddock’s open to charges of threatening station integrity,” Bren continued. “insurrection and attempted kidnapping, under Mospheiran law, which is enough for a start on keeping him and his staff confined, but I assure you the atevi charges are quite as severe. Irene’s mother is being held primarily as a material witness at the moment. Ship security thinks she may have heard things of interest in Braddock’s prosecution if the ship-folk get their hands on him, which is a whole other nest of troubles. Right now the dowager isn’t interested in prosecuting her, but she’s not handing her daughter back into her custody, either. For my part, I don’t know what duress may have been involved with the woman, or whether she may come under charges herself from one party or another, but one thing I can’t forget. When she was arrested with the others, with her child missing for hours, and as atevi enforcement and ship-folk were hauling her and Braddock away—there was no point at which she protested her daughter was missing or asked where her daughter was. *That* bothers me. To this hour, it bothers me. I’d wanted to give the woman a chance for Irene’s sake, but at this point, I don’t know.”

“It bothers *me*,” Gin said. “How are the kids now? How are the parents taking their new situation?”

“Everybody’s been housed on the atevi side—they’re all guests in Geigi’s apartment, and they’re glad, I think, to be safe, out of the Reunioner sections, and well-fed, though naturally they have concerns. Their kids’ attachment to the young gentleman makes them all a special case among the Reunioners *and* on the Mospheiran side, and it’s possible Braddock’s not the only one wanting to take hostages, especially now that Braddock’s set the possibility in everyone’s mind.”

“What a mess. Those kids have made a breakthrough in atevi and human relations, and that idiot turns it sour.”

“True. On the other hand, the mess got that idiot into custody, *and* makes an important point. Right now and forever, the kids are under the aiji’s protection, and under atevi law, that includes their relatives and associates, so far as the kids choose to maintain the association from their end. Which is convenient. I don’t *want* the parents to go back to the Reunioner sections. It’s not safe, political pressure is inevitable, and frankly, and above all else, *I* can’t afford the worry right now. I need my head free to deal with the kyo. Where they are right now, they become Geigi and Ilisidi’s problem. I haven’t asked them their preferences, because if they run counter, I’m not going to listen.”

“Works for me. What about their stuff? I understand looting and theft are still a problem in the Reunioner sections.”

There *had* been that problem on the voyage, dealt with as best they could. House survivors in a

damaged station for years, and need began to trump ownership in more than a few instances. Whether it was a problem that would persist once they assumed something like normal lives was something for future authority to sort out.

“Geigi’s hard-locked their apartments, and Ilisidi will consider the aishidi’tat’s credibility involved, should anything happen to them or their belongings.”

“Excellent. —Regarding the Reunioners in general, the President is taking the position that the new meds mean the Reunioners can successfully acclimate to the planet, and that means they can integrate into Mospheira. He says you back the idea, therefore the aishidi’tat will back it.”

“I do back it. I think Tabini will. Likewise, I think, the captains; it gets the problem off their deck. With the situation we have now, it’s the *only* solution that’s going to work. Trying to expand the station to accommodate them is not going to erase the differences between Reunioners and Mospheirans. Living on a planet—is its own logic.”

“Logistically—”

“A slow, slow process. I know.”

“Maybe not as slow as you think. We could use the petal sails. Not for passengers. But for cargo.”

Petal sails—like those that had brought the first Mospheirans down to Earth. *Jase* had made his first, terrifying trip down by parachute. Likely *Jase* still had nightmares. But the technology was so old, so primitive. Chutes had failed—lost people, lost supplies, landed in the sea and sunk. The hazard was legendary, a scar on the Mospheiran psyche.

But using landers to bring down *cargo*, and reserving the shuttles for people . . .

“We *know* weather now,” he said. “The old landers were tin cans dropping blind, but as I understand it, Geigi targeted his chutes, dropping his relay stations.”

“He crashed one,” Gin said, “what I hear, pretty spectacularly. The others landed soft enough.”

“Might not have lost that one, if he’d been able to work directly with the Mospheiran side of the station.”

Gin shrugged, a side-tip of her head, and took another sip. “I think we can do it.”

Geigi had had no *paidhi* to translate between him and humans, during their absence on the Reunion mission. When the coup that unseated Tabini and grounded the shuttles severed him from his own government, Geigi had immediately secured communication with Mospheira’s university linguistics department, which was, itself, tightly connected to the Mospheiran State Department, which talked directly to the Mospheiran President.

For two years, Geigi had told the University scholars what he wanted—from Tillington, ironically enough, on the other side of the station wall, then had to wait for an answer relayed down to the ground and up again. Geigi had traded materials he had stockpiled for the *atevi* starship to get cooperation from the station, and had set up, via satellites aloft and his petal-sail landers on Earth, a communications network that had kept data coming in from the mainland and from space.

Geigi’s landers weren’t the desperate, cobbled-together efforts of the early settlers. Geigi had had the benefit of advanced robotics design. His landers had had the ability to move and defend themselves on the ground, and to collect data in their immediate areas. They’d also scared hell out of the districts where they’d set up shop.

Use *that* tech for dropping Reunioner baggage? Cut the timeframe in half with no special construction? *Hell*, yes.

“Certainly sounds possible,” he said. Shipping and cargo were not, these days, his problem. He didn’t think about such things routinely. But, God—

“Absolutely possible. We can carry passenger modules on every flight, and carry fragile cargo

down in baggage, our object being to take *people* down, just people, no heirloom china, no wardrobe.

Relief hit, hard and welcome. Sometimes you had to shut down politics and talk to the engineers. *Every* flight reducing the political pressure up here. And Mospheira was about to bring another shuttle online, and start construction on a third. They *might* get to the long-promised flight a week. Currently it was short of that. Considerably short, with mechanicals, and docking delays, and delays for inspection and maintenance.

But did they truly dare restrict the flow of cargo? Two years of Murini's shutdown of the space program had left them continually running to catch up. Everything, every plan had been thrown off course. Of course, bleeding away the jobless population of the station, the need for cargo going up would ease proportionally.

How long *would* it take? The largest passenger module could handle fifty-one people in relative comfort. More, if packed tightly. Infants . . . God, babies. His felt the tension returning. Pregnant women. Infants. Women who had bred with abandon on the return flight, free at last, or so they believed, of the restrictions of the past ten years, and destined for peace and plenty. They'd extracted 4,043 individuals from Reunion. Released 4,149 to Alpha. How many were there now?

He shut that thought down, concentrating on the purity of numbers. Figuring forty-three hundred total by the time the last flight . . . round figure: eighty-five flights.

Eighty-five.

"We'll need *all* the shuttles . . ." Gin's voice provided welcome relief from a sudden wave of panic.

"The aiji has already agreed to allow the Reunioners to land on atevi shuttles."

"But not to settle in atevi territory."

"That, no."

"Settlement is going to be a hot issue on Mospheira," Gin said. "The damned Heritage Party is going to squawk. Loudly. Lot of history there."

"Just what *is* the political temperature down there? I haven't been able to ask the President his situation. *Can* he push this through?"

"Mixed. He's already claiming, in principle, that the Reunioners come under Mospheiran law, which makes them a Mospheiran responsibility and subject to Mospheiran decisions. There'll be those who don't like it, on both sides of the shuttle run, but no one down there, *no one*, is remotely interested in the Pilots' Guild gaining an independent foothold anywhere in the system."

"No argument there . . . from anyone other than Braddock."

"The President plans to start the relocation process by decree, an emergency declaration. He'll make it soon, let it play second to the headlines of the kyo visit, which is going to dominate the news every step of the way. I suggested, in my last communication with him, that we land Cajeyri's three young *associates* first, along with their parents and relations, and not just to satisfy Tabini-aiji. This business with Tillington and Braddock is *going* to go public, no way not. Those kids are innocents, pawns in the affairs of three governments. They're bright, they're charming, and they'll play well to the cameras. Getting them down first puts *their* faces instead of Braddock's on the Reunioner presence. It'll remind Mospheirans they're dealing with people needing a home, not Pilots' Guild plotting a government takeover." A slight smile. Another sip. "Even better for Mospheiran consumption would be an image of Braddock being carted off in cuffs. Tastefully, of course."

The engineer wasn't damned bad at politics. She never had been.

"So," she said, "the first Reunioner landings will be a minor issue. Kyo will be the big news, and *you* get to explain that."

"Happily. By comparison. I hope."

“I’m asking the question—just for my personal consumption, mind: I promise I’ll never quote you—~~Are you that confident we’re going to come out of this encounter all right?~~”

“Hell, no,” Bren said, on a humorless laugh.

“How are you reading this approach?”

“I can’t. It’s exactly what the kyo did at Reunion—but slower, at greater distance, with more communication. I’ll tell you frankly what worries me more than any question of whether or not the kyo want real estate. We both know the kyo are at war, which is a fact we’ve deliberately kept need-to-know. The last thing we want to do is get entangled in the kyo’s military problems. We don’t know for certain where their enemies lie—or who’s winning, or even why they’re at war. It’s possible they’re looking for an outpost or even a refuge, and we *don’t* want either in this solar system.”

“Understood. Agreed. But your estimate is that they’re here to talk? That that’s Prakuyo out there? Are you optimistic?”

They’d used to share a brandy on occasion, aboard the ship, when Gin had had her quarters down the corridor from the dowager’s door, and his; and in dealing with Gin on that voyage, he’d been able to maintain a sense of what was human. At least, Mospheiran human. They had been able to share jokes, share frustrations and worries, of which there had been no shortage, in two years of voyaging, half of it in eerie isolation, in the depths of the ship; and half of it in a ship overflowing with unscreened passengers.

Gin had been there, waiting for word, when they’d dealt with the kyo the first time. She’d shared those hours with the rest of the ship, the fear of the kyo changing their minds and attacking, the fear they’d have to choose who to save and who to leave to die. If they hadn’t raided station stores and gotten those supplies aboard, there’d have been no way to save the majority of the people. They could have saved a few hundred . . . at most.

Dark hours, those.

Gin wasn’t asking for reassurance, or promises now. She was asking, *Bren, what’s your best guess* and he answered with a frankness he wouldn’t give to many.

“My optimism,” he said, “centers on the fact they chose to talk at Reunion, that they *initiated* communication from the moment we came into range. They *chose* to talk. Why they chose to attack the station that first time remains a mystery, one I’d *very* much like to solve before meeting with them, but when Ramirez left a damaged but still inhabited station behind, completely at their mercy, the kyo chose to leave it alone. I believe they chose to sit and watch, waiting to see whether the ship would return, and with what reinforcements. I’m encouraged that, after four years of silence, they chose to send over a shuttle rather than blow the place to hell. I’m not totally clear on what they were doing or what prompted it: an attempt at communication, maybe; or a team trying to investigate. And when the station blew up that shuttle, after another *retaliatory* strike—if in fact it was their action—they still chose to leave the station operational, and sit back and wait for six more years, until we showed up. Then they *still* chose one more try at communication before attacking. It doesn’t explain the waiting. It doesn’t explain a lot of things. My experience says not to imagine I know the answer. My experience says we’re not dealing with our language, our concepts, our culture, our laws, or our instincts. But the little history we have with them shows an inclination to talk. That’s what they *seem* to be doing in their approach. I take that as encouraging. I hope for it—since there’s damn-all we can do if they start shooting. —And that’s about the total of the wisdom I have.”

Gin just looked at him for a moment, then: “You can do this,” she said quietly. “I have every confidence, Bren. Just trust me for the human situation and don’t worry about it.”

“I do.”

“You’re frowning.”

“God, Gin . . .”

“Trust me.”

“Just—I’m sorry for what I’m handing over to you. I had no desire to lay hands on the Reunioner question at all when I came up here. Now I have a tall stack of china, as my atevi associates would say, on a very weak table. And I’m afraid I set it all up for you to sort out, for good or ill, with no great amount of forethought.”

“I at least recognize the serving pieces,” Gin said. “And you acted when and as you had to act, with nobody getting hurt. Your getting Tillington out of Central and getting Braddock contained solved a huge problem. I’m truly grateful for that little assist. I also have the Central log, and while I’m sure Tillington’s spun the record seven ways from Sunday, he *couldn’t* doctor what happened when he shut the section doors on fifteen minutes’ notice. We had injuries, we had people seriously affected in one way and another, while people with serious and valid fears regarding that incoming ship were locked in place like fish in a net, waiting for slaughter. It’s no wonder there were riots. And thanks to his extremely vocal campaign to settle the Reunioners at Maudit, we have a situation with the Captains’ Council *and* the terms of the atevi treaty that we’re not even going to mention until a proper moment. Overall, it’s not going to look good for Mr. Tillington’s management skills. Whether or not he’s actually done anything illegal is another matter. But the President will have more than enough cause to put him under wraps and keep him there for a long time to come.”

“I hope so.”

“I have another question for you.”

“Ask.”

“I’m wondering whether to tell the Reunioners about the prospect of landing at this point. I’m hoping you have a better sense of their temperature right now than I do.”

“Best not to disturb them too much, in my opinion, though you’ll soon be in a better position to judge. They’ve had so much bad they won’t believe good. In their view, they’ve been lied to by just about everyone. Trust, in anyone, in any promises, is nonexistent.”

“And the section doors? Senior Captain Ogun insists we keep them shut.”

“Much as I regret what Tillington did, both to feed the resentment and to trigger the explosion, I tend to agree. The Reunioners have been pushed to the limit. Support for Braddock is grounded in their lack of options, not respect. We need to get information flowing—their com’s been shut down even for news—and rumors are our greatest enemy. Let them know what’s actually happening. Open up the private channels, at least a certain number of hours a day. Let them contact their friends and relatives. Assure them those four kids and their families are all right—the kids are available if you need to talk to them. Which leads to another issue of distrust, this one of our own doing. We interrupted all the door locks inside those sections to get in there to get the kids . . . we called it a malfunction. It kept masses of people out of the corridors. Kept people from getting hurt. Injuries were minor. And the system is fixed now. All the locks are back to normal. But the amount of unease it left in people’s minds, even with the malfunction story—I worry about that. A part of me thinks we need to explain it in full. The other part wonders how people will react, knowing they can so easily become prisoners in their own homes.”

“My problem, Bren. Good to know, but let me deal with it. —What’s the kyo time frame? How much time before they get here?”

“Unchanged in their approach,” Bren said. “Their messaging began with pings. Then, right after we came aboard, they shifted to voice and began requesting the dowager and the young gentleman and

myself. We advised them we're here and kept that message cycling. Yesterday a voice that sounded like Prakuyo indicated they want to talk. I told them come in, and that invitation and their response, *Prakuyo come*, have been cycling back and forth ever since. That's the limit of the exchange. We're expecting them to arrive in three days, last calculation at their current rate of approach. But that's subject to change and the kyo's intention. And we don't know whether they'll dock or expect to link with *Phoenix*, which is currently standing off from the station under Captain Riggins' command. He's a new man. I don't know him, but Ogun appointed him and I assume he'll take Ogun's orders."

"The shuttle picked up the kyo transmission and played it for me. Scary feeling, being out there in that speck of a shuttle, knowing that ship was bearing down on us. Gives you a whole new sense of perspective in the universe. And makes you sympathize with the Reunioners. You say *sounded like Prakuyo*. Straight answer again, Bren. Are we sure it's the same kyo?"

"Straight answer, I'm *not* wholly sure. We don't know even if Prakuyo is a name, or a title. Whoever's in charge, they know our names, they know enough to communicate as if they *are* the ship we dealt with. Prakuyo an Tep, or someone claiming to be him, requested a meeting. I invited him to come aboard. And the Prakuyo voice accepted it."

She cast him a wry glance. "Let's hope it *is* him, then."

He winced. "Gut instinct said it was, and gut instinct extended the invitation."

"So far, your gut's been pretty smart. I trust it. Final question: what's your sense of what they'll be looking for? What's their interest in being here—if it's not warlike?"

"If they aren't here to establish a base, I can only speculate. They'll wonder what sort of resources we have, whether we have a large presence in space—which we don't—whether we're armed—which we aren't—and whether we pose a threat to them, which we also don't. We hope we live too far apart to be a threat or even a relevant fact to each other, even in trade—but what they call too far may differ from our concept. All I can say is, so far, so good. I *am* encouraged. Let me stress that. But I have to be careful of the other possibilities, and I can't say they won't exist."

"Fair enough."

"There's something else, something I'm going to try and clarify before this meeting, and not just because it's important to understanding the kyo. It's also one of the keys to the unrest between the Mospheirans and Reunioners. Tillington has led the Mospheirans to blame the Reunioners for attracting the kyo's attention and getting blown up."

"Blowing up the kyo envoy's ship will do that."

"True, but that was four years *after* the first attack. Among the ship's crew, which you know as well as I do, there's a suspicion that Braddock himself did something to touch off the kyo the first time. They believe he must have *done* something to bring an attack down on Reunion. To this day there's no substantiation for that. Braddock being Pilots' Guild doesn't make him popular with the ship, but we still don't know, as an issue of pure fact, what the trigger was."

"Ramirez was sticking his nose where it didn't belong. He got caught snooping, and tried to run away. He tried to run a diversionary route, but the kyo didn't bite. Instead, they traced *Phoenix's* backtrail and took a shot at what they found. When the station failed to respond in kind, they backed off to watch what might happen next."

"That's certainly what we've pieced together from the few records Ramirez left accessible, but the question remains: did the kyo know about Reunion *before* Ramirez triggered that response? Had they been watching, possibly for decades, until he intruded just a bit too close for comfort? *Did* they follow the ship's backtrail? Or did they already know where Reunion was and just decide to go in? Did they truly attack without warning, or did they signal first? It'd be useful to *have* that information out of

Braddock, but there's no way we can trust anything he'd tell us. We know now that those flashing lights are their way of initiating contact. We know from his log that they flashed lights at Ramirez, and he ignored them and ran. We know that four years later, at Reunion, they flashed first and Braddock blew up their envoy's ship."

"Now they're signaling us. Here."

"I have a notion it's a similar situation. There's been a lot of heat on Sabin for leading the kyo here, but *Ramirez*' backtrail was there—ten, twelve years ago."

"You're suggesting they followed Ramirez here?" Gin said. "That they've watched *us* for years as well? Watched the space program develop? The station come alive?"

"I'm saying it's possible."

A moment to take that in, then: "Optics," Gin said. "E-M signatures. Once you know *where* to search, there are ways to search, without being spotted yourself."

"*Phoenix* spotted the kyo this time *before* they started to signal. They've got the instruments, but how'd they know where to look?"

"I suspect the ship-folk have been watching their own backtrail since we left Reunion. My suspicion is that they spotted the ship on entry."

A moment of silent consideration, then Bren ventured: "Or maybe when it started to move."

"That *is* a possibility," Gin said somberly. "Distances. Distances we're not used to figuring. We don't know where the kyo star is. Even if we did know where to look, it could be so far away we could be seeing it as it was fifty, a hundred or more years ago. For them to be checking up on us since we got back from Reunion—they'd have to get within the solar system, for anything current. What we're watching could be a ship that's *been* out there for a year. Maybe a lot longer. But they're talking to us the way we exchanged messages at Reunion . . . which means a ship from Reunion has to have come here sometime in the last year to pass that information on. It *might* be Prakuyo. It might not be."

He wasn't used to figuring time the way spacers did. He'd had conversations with Jase about looking back into time and racing forward into it, how optics and communication were limited by the speed of light, but ships weren't—how everybody stared into the past when they looked at the sky, looking at stars dead of old age long before *Phoenix* had ever flown. Jase's reality could turn his mind inside out. But he couldn't waste time now speculating into such things. He hadn't time. There *were* certainties within his reach. There had been, somewhere out there, in a time definitely relevant to them, one venture of the ship that hadn't gone well, another that had gone somewhat better when they'd met a kyo ship at Reunion, and a kyo ship now was coming toward them. So it was above all likely that, despite the vastness of the universe and the trickiness of space and time, they had a cause and effect on their hands. Two motes in all that space had bumped into one another, and become involved, and had to figure each other out.

"Whoever they are," he said, "however long they've been out there, whether they've known about us for a hundred years—they turned up at Reunion, and evidently they *are* going to engage with us in very few days. Maybe they tracked Ramirez a dozen years ago, maybe they followed us home, maybe we're a question they now find it important to answer. And we're not an easy answer. We're two species, one of which isn't native to the planet. Ramirez was nosing about where they didn't want him, but even *we* don't know what he was up to, and he took that secret to the grave—so to speak. If they have to come close just to look at us, they *don't* know the fine details of who we are. And if looking at the stars is looking at the past, they can't know the detail of what's going on beyond *us*. Can they?"

"They can't," Gin said. "That would be true. Unless they've been there, they don't know."

So, unless they'd gone and looked, for all the kyo knew, Earth and Reunion might only be the tip of

the iceberg. For all they knew, there was a vast human and atevi empire out there.

It echoed conversations he'd had with Gin and Jase on the voyage home, idle conversations at the time. So many conversations. So many strange things. So few solid answers.

He'd not liked to think too much into the strangeness, while it was going on around him. Now . . . was a distraction.

"Why they do anything at all is still a wide-open question. But I'll be trying to get a face-to-face meeting even if it's not Prakuyo. I know that's a risk, but so is carrying on a conversation in echoes. Every clue to their mental process matters. I'm lost in the technical business. But talking—if it's Prakuyo, I have a notion where to start. If I have to start with somebody new—I still know where to start."

"You've got my backing," Gin said. "Anything you need."

Bren sat back in the chair, increasingly relaxed in her presence and feeling a lessening of the shakes that came from a cold lift car and far too little sleep. For days. "I asked for Kate to come, but am I glad it's you? Yes. There's nobody better. You were *there*, you know what the Reunioners have been through, what they've come from—and you know something about the kyo."

"Not nearly as much as you know."

"Better than anybody else Mospheira could send. You may not have dealt with Prakuyo, but you were there for the decisions."

"Maybe. But out of touch with everything for way too long." Sip of tea, nearly the last. "It's been frustrating. The lot of us got home—sent down soonest they could organize a shuttle flight. Decommissioned with honors. Extended leave. Our pick. A reward, they called it. Company headhunters lost no time. Great pay. No damn power to intervene up here. I've been worried about the Reunioner problem, but once I left the station, I've had no information and less input. Tillington's reports were all 'everything's fine.' Kate took the initiative nine months ago and tried to communicate with Ogun. She got a long formal answer that said absolutely nothing. Then Kate and I wrote to the President and laid out our concerns, our *opinion* of what needed to be done." Gin took down the last of the tea, then a deep breath. "Maybe we were a little impolitic. We got a 'We're doing the best we can.' And: 'We share your concerns.' Form letters, damn it all, from some harried secretary to a Presidential aide. Last I knew, Kate was still fighting the good fight. You—you had your problems on the other side of the straits. I just settled into my high-paying industry job and tried to do some good there, waiting for a chance to get transferred back up here. All I got was—'Transport is limited, no options, wait for the Mospheiran program to fly.' I did propose landing the Reunioners, in our letter to the President, and I proposed it to anyone else I thought might have some influence in the situation. I proposed the option I gave you, regarding the parachutes. The answer was, 'There's no decision yet.' Every bit of funding was poured into the Mospheiran shuttle program, and the companies involved weren't turning loose of their finance and *their* prospect of commercial shuttle traffic, hell, no, no interest at all in any cargo landing on anything *but* the shuttle. —I'll tell you, Bren, you put this in my hands, give me a good cooperation with Lord Geigi, and cooperation from the captains—"

"From Jase and Sabin, guaranteed. Ogun—promise to get the Reunioners off the station and out of his concern and you may be able to sign him on."

"I'm going from here to Ogun. Directly. I've dealt with him before. I can promise him a solution. I can also inform the President that five thousand Reunioners delivered in small groups make fewer ripples than five thousand up here, destabilizing the treaty with Tabini-aiji. I hate to say trust me. But trust me."

"You've got it," Bren said.

“You just keep the kyo happy.”

“Two, three days,” Bren said, “until we’re fully engaged with the kyo. After that—we go as long as it takes. And I can’t predict how long that will be.”

“Whatever you need,” Gin said.

“Just give me peace—on the human side of the station. Solid support from human Central. Geigi has a standing agreement to notify me immediately, at any hour, of any change whatsoever in that ship, or the message.”

“You’ve got the same from me. At any hour. If they wobble in the least, I’ll be *in* Central and talking to you.”

“Appreciated. Understand, granted the kyo will dock, atevi will be the sole agency dealing with them. If we meet face-to-face on this deck, we do it in an area atevi will manage. Best interface, original interface—there seem to be useful points of similarity between kyo and atevi, concepts in common . . .”

Gin waved a hand. “I swear to you I’ll be content if I can just find concepts in common on the human side of this station. I leave the kyo and the linguistic technicalities to you. But working with Lord Geigi . . . I do look forward to that.”

Geigi and Gin. Two of a kind. Straight-forward, get-the-job-done. Tinkerers.

“If you’d been here when Geigi was setting up his landers, God only knew what they’d have done. They’d probably have *walked* to Shejidan.”

“He did that design himself. Didn’t he?”

“Help from the workers and techs, the Archive and the University, but, yes. He did.”

Gin’s eyes fairly sparkled. That was Gin. Pure and not-so-simple.

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