

ut of her capacious pocket. Parini. Pyanfar took it and gestured with a move of her jaw back the way Haral had come. Haral went.

And Pyanfar turned back toward the bridge, where Jik sat quietly in his chair, caring not to turn it when she came up on him. She walked back to the fore of the bridge, and stood there looking back. "I want to talk to you. Private." Only Tirun was left with the boards; and she herself was not up to a hand-to-hand with a taller, heavier mahendo'sat, even if he was jump-wobbly too. Fool, she thought. But some courses had to be steered. Even at risk to the ship.

"Come on," she said again. "Jik."

He got to his feet. She walked away, deliberately taking her eyes off him, though it was sure Tirun was alert to sudden moves.

But he came docilely after her, and followed her through the short corridor to the galley. Tirun being Tirun, she would both monitor it all on the intercom and pass the word to all aboard that the galley had just gone offlimits.

She turned when she had gotten as far as the counter and the cabinet with the gfi-cups.

"Captain," Tirun said via com. "Pardon. Goldtooth's group has started shifting out, first one just went. Before AOS on Kesurinan's message. Close, but they're not going to get it. Thought you'd want to know."

"Huh," she said. "Pass that to the crew."

'Aye." The audio cut out. The com stayed live, its telltale still glowing on the wall-unit.

And Jik stood there, just stood, with a slump in his shoulders and a set like stone to his face.

"Sit down," she said, and he did that, on the long bench against the wall, elbows on the table. She got a glass from the cabinet, the flask from her pocket, poured a shot of it and set it in front of him.

"No," he said.

"That's prescriptive. You drink. Hear?"

He took it then, and took a sip and shuddered visibly. Sat there looking nowhere. Thinking of friends, maybe. Of Goldtooth, outbound and not to return for months. Of his ship, so close and himself helpless to reach them.

"Take another," she said. He did, shuddering after that one too, and that shudder did not stop. Liquor spilled out onto his hand, pooled on the table as he set the glass down. He put the hand to his mouth and sucked at the knuckle where it had spilled. His eyes glared at her.

She sat down, opposite him. If Tirun wanted her, there was the alarm. Her own aches could wait. She was prepared to wait. For whatever it took.

It was a long time before he moved at all, and that was to lift the glass and take it all down in one long stinging draught. He shuddered a third time, set the glass down empty and she filled it. Got a crate of the stuff in storage. Pour it all down him if we have to.

"Hao'ashtie-na ma visini-ma'arno shishini-to nes mura'ani hes." Whoever he was talking to, she did not follow it. Something about dark and cold. It was that dialect he spoke with Kesurinan. "Muiri nai, Pyanfar."

"Mishio-ne." I'm sorry.

'Hao. Mishi'sa." -Yes. Sorry. "Neshighot-me pau taiga?" What the hell good is it?

'None. I know that. Species-interest, Jik. I warned you of that. Now you can try to break my neck. It won't get you our access codes. What it will get you is a lot of grief. You don't want it; I don't want it. We're old friends. And you know down that one way's a lot of trouble and no good at all and down the other's a hani whose interests might be a lot the same as yours in the long run." For a while he said nothing. After a while he picked up the glass again and took a tiny sip.

"Merus'an-to he neishima kif, he?"

Something about damned kif, himself, and bargains.

"I want my people safe, Jik."

"You damn fool!" His hand came down on the table, jarring the liquid. "Give me com."

"So you can doublecross me again? No. Not this time. Too many lives here."

While pacifist stsho ran in gibbering terror in the corridors of their station and discovered there were species which could neither be hired nor bribed nor prevented from being predators.

"Humans," she said; "and mahendo'sat. If Tully's right, if Tully's telling the truth, and I think he is-there's one more doublecross in the works. The humans will betray Goldtooth. Hear? And you know and I know Sikkukkut's got to do something here. Your partner's going to push and herd the kif into fighting. He thinks. But in the meanwhile who does the bleeding? They'll herd him right away from mahen space. Right? Where does that leave? Stsho? Tc'a? Goldtooth's defending that. That leaves hani space,-friend. You don't push me right now. My people have got me between them and that, and don't push me, Jik!"

"You-" Jik fell silent a moment, coughed and rested there with his mouth against his hand as if he

had lost his way and his argument. "Merus'an-to he neishima kif. Shai." Bargains and the kif again. Then: I. Or something like that. He spoke mahensi. As if he had forgotten that he was not on his own ship. Or as if, exhausted as he was and wrung out, he lacked the strength to translate. He had that glassy look. Jump healed, but it took it out of a body too. And he had gone into it hurt, in body and spirit.

He was still reasonable. Still the professional, getting what he could get. She counted on that. "I have to go in there to Meetpoint," she said. "I got to get what I can get. I won't doublecross you. Won't do any hurt to the mahendo'sat. I swear that, haur na ahur. But I don't want you against me either. I don't want you trying to get at controls, I don't want you trying to get at my crew. And everything you tell me's going to be a lie. Isn't it? Con the hani again." She fished her pocket and laid the two pills on the table. "You take those when you want 'em. Nothing but sleeping pills. I got enough troubles. You got enough. You're strung. You know it. I want you to go out of here, mind your manners with my crew, get some sleep. That's all you can do. All I can do for you. Like a friend, Jik. But first I want to ask you: have you held out on me? Conned me? You got anything you think I better know? 'Cause we are going in there. And we're going to get blown to a mahen hell if this is a trap. And Sikkukkut just might not go with us, which would be a real shame."

He shoved the glass up against her hand. "You want talk? Take bit."

She had no business taking anything of the sort, straight out of jump, with a ship to handle in what was going on out there. But it was cheaper than argument. She picked up the glass and took a sip that hit her dehydrated throat and nasal passages like fire, and her stomach like an incandescence. She set the glass down and slid it across the table to touch his hand again. He sipped a bit more and blinked. Sweat moistened trails down his face and glistened on black fur; the dusky rim around his eyes was suffused with blood and they watered when he blinked. And after all that liquor on an empty stomach and straight from injuries and jump, he showed no sign of passing out.

"I want stay on bridge," he said. "Py-an-far. Same you don't trust me, this know. All same ask."

"I can't shut you up. I can't have you distracting my crew. I can't risk it. I'm telling you. I can't risk it. You want your ship to survive this? You help me, gods rot you, cooperate."

He lifted his face then, his eyes burning.

"Survival, Jik. Is there anything we'd better know? Because we've got two kif out there fighting over everything we've got, and gods rot it, I hate this, Jik, but we got no gods-be choice, Jik!"

His mouth went to a hard line. He picked up the glass and drank half the remainder. Shoved it across to her. "I deal with that damn kif, set up whole damn thing." His hand shook where it rested on the table. "Drink, damn you, I don't drink without drink with."

She picked it up and drank the rest. It hit bottom with the rest and stung her eyes to tears.

"We got make friend this damn kif," he said, all hoarse. "I don't know where Ana go, don't know what he do. We, we got go make good friend this kif. This be job, a? Got go be polite." A tic contorted his face and turned into a dreadful expression. "Pyanfar. You, I, old friend. You, I. How much you pay him, a?"

A chill went up her back and lifted the hair between her shoulderblades. "I won't give you up to him. Not again."

'No." He reached across and stabbed a blunt-clawed finger at her arm. "I mean truth. We got to, we deal with this damn kif. You got to, you give him me, you give him you sister, we got make surround-" His finger moved to describe a half-circle in the spilled liquor. "Maybe Ana damn fool. Maybe human lot trouble. We be con-tin-gency. Con-tin-gency for whole damn Compact. We be inside. Understand?"

"I don't turn you over to him again."

"You do. Yes. I do job. Same my ship. Same we got make deal." His mouth jerked. "Got go bed this damn kif maybe. I do. Long time I work round this bastard." He shoved the glass at her again.

"Fill."

"I'm not drinking with you. I got a-" -ship to run. She swallowed that down before it got out.

"Gods rot. You got to get something real on your stomach." She filled the glass and got up, jerked a packet of soup out of the cabinet and tore the foil, poured it into a cup and shoved it under the brewer. Steam curled up. It smelled of salt and broth, promised comfort to a stomach after the raw assault of the parini. She took a sip

herself and turned around to find him lying head on arms. "Come on," she said. "I'll drink this one with you, turn about. Hear? You take the pills."

He hauled himself off the table and took a sip of the cup. Made a face and offered it back.

One and one. She gave him the next sip. "Just keep going," she said. "I got a sick crewwoman to see about back there." Her stomach roiled. She still tasted the parini and she never wanted to

taste it again in her life. But it was to a point of locking a friend into a cubbyhole of a prison and letting a kif loose as crew to walk the corridors where he liked. That was the way of things. He was right. He was utterly right, and thinking, past all the rest of it.

They might have no choice at all.

"Come on," she said. "While you can walk. Going to put you to bed myself. Pills in the mouth, huh?"

"No." He picked them up and closed his fist on them. "I keep. Maybe need. Now I sleep. Safe, a? With friend."

He gathered himself up from the table. Staggered. And gained his balance again.

She motioned toward the number two corridor. The back way toward the lift, that did not pass through the bridge, past delicate controls.

He cooperated. He went with her quietly, when he had every chance to try something. But that would be stupid, and gain him nothing, in a ship he could not control.

He had also told her nothing, for all his talking.

That in itself said something worrisome.

They went down to the lift; and down to the lower level; and as far as Tully's cabin, far forward. Next to Skkukuk's.

Tully was not there. That meant he was in crew quarters. That did not surprise her.

"Get some sleep," she said.

"A," he said. And parked his wide shoulders against the door frame, leaned there reeking of parini and looking as if he might fall on his face before he reached the bed.

"And don't forget the safety, huh?"

The next door opened. Skkukuk was there, bright-eyed and anxious to serve.

"You don't be fool," Jik said to her. "Friend."

And spun aside into the room and shut the door between them.

She locked it. And turned and looked at Skkukuk. This man is valuable," she said. Kifish logic.

"Dangerous," Skkukuk said.

She walked off and left him there. Took out the pocket-com and used it and not the intercom-stations along the way. "Tirun, we got it all secure down here."

"Kif are pounding each other hard. We got approach contact from Meetpoint. Stsho are being extra polite, we got no trouble if the poor bastards don't Phase on us in mid-dock, I got no confidence I'm talking to the same stsho from minute to minute. Scared. Real scared. I got the feeling kif-com isn't being polite at all. Ships inbound are Ikkhoitr and Khafukkin."

' 'Gods. Wonderful. Sikkukut's chief axe. You could figure."

"You going on break?"

"I'm coming up there." No way to rest. Not till they had an answer. Even if her knees were wobbling under her. She envied Jik the pills. But not the rest of his situation.

Tirun caught her eye as she walked onto the bridge and looked a further worried question at her. Tirun, who looked deathly tired herself. "No change," Tirun said. "Except bad news. Goldtooth's bunch had two chasers on his tail when he went out. Akkhtimakt's got to jump any minute now. Got to. He's getting his tail shot up. Some of those ships may not make it otherside. They got to clear out of here." Pyanfar looked. Everyone was still running for jump. The last of Goldtooth's company was gone. And a flock of stsho, fortunate in being out of range of all disasters and not being tied up dead-V at station. Not a sign of a methane-breather. Anywhere.

No hani was moving. They were caught at dock. And there was not a way in a mahen hell to get out vectored for hani space with the angle and the V Sikkukut's two station-aimed ships had on them. Ikkhoitr and Khafukkin were going to make it in before their own three ships. Kif were going to have control of that dock, and gods help the hani who took exception to it.

"We got one more ship ID: a Faha. Starwind."

"Munur." That was a youngish captain. A very small ship. And a distant cousin of Hilfy's on her mother's side. ' 'Ehrran?"

"Not a sign."

"With Goldtooth or kited out of here home a long time ago. Want to lay odds which?" Exhaustion and nerves added up on her. She shivered, and a great deal of it was depletion. "Yeah. Stay on it." She indicated the direction of the galley and marshaled a steady voice. "Jik's going to rest a bit. He's plenty mad. And crazy-tired. I hope to the gods he takes those pills and settles down, but I don't think he'll do it. Pass out awhile, maybe. Maybe come to with a clearer head. Right now he's real trouble. He's not thinking real clear. Me, I'm not, either. We put his quarters on ops-com when he wakes up. Maybe let him up here, I don't know yet. It's my judgment I don't trust. I'm going to clean up, pass out a few minutes. How are you holding?"

"I'm all right," Tirun said. It was usual sequence: Haral first on the cleanup; Haral first to snatch a little rest, Haral the one whose wits had to be sharpest and reflexes quickest, their switcher; and Haral generally shorted herself on rest-time to pay her sister for it. "'Bout time, though." And before she could leave the chair she was leaning on: "Captain, Chur's wanting a bit of something hot. Geran went to the lowerdecks to fix it."

That was the best news since the drop. "Huh," she said. "Huh." With a little relaxation in tensed muscles. She shoved off and walked on down the corridor. She wanted food. Wanted a bath. Wanted, gods knew, to be lightyears away from all of this. But they did not have that choice. They could run for it and get out of Meetpoint system while Sikkukkut was busy. But he would find them; and anyone they were attached to. Their world was held hostage. Not mentioning the immediate threat to three hundred thousand gods-be stsho and a handful of hani ships.

A kif could not forget an insult.

No more than a hani forgot harm to her friends.

It was a quiet gathering down in crew quarters, in the central area where they had a microwave, and a little store of instant food: one of those amenities they had installed along with the high-V braces and the AP weapons they had acquired on the black market. A couple of little couches and a table or two in a lounge, and a common-room for sleeping, in which they could have installed partitions, but they had never gotten around to that- never much wanted it, truth be known. A body learned to sleep with cousins trekking in and out, and there was never any urgent reason to change, even in the days when they had had wealth.

Right now, Hilfy thought, it was the best reason of all; a body wanted company in this crisis. Geran came kiting in and out again with two cups of soup, gods only hope she got one into her own stomach on the way topside; Chur was evidently awake and willing to try it eating, which was one heart-lightening event among all the bad news. Haral was sitting on the couch opposite with a bit of jerky in one hand and her mouth full, while she raked her damp mane into order with the other. Her eyes had that distracted, glassy weariness jump left in a body. Tully came out of the common bath with a towel over his shoulders, wearing a pair of Khym's trousers, a rust silk pair which he had had to pin at the waist, but Haral was out of spares and the other pair was going through the laundry. He staggered over to the cabinet and got a cup and poured soupmix and water into it, shoved it in the microwave and sat down to towel his head and beard dry. Pale, old scars stood out on white-skinned shoulders; and pinker, recent ones.

"Akkhtimakt's jumped out," came the bulletin from the bridge. And: "We got a general slow-down on Sikkukkut's side, sure enough, 'cept for two of 'em it looks like Sikkukkut's sending out to keep 'em worried, same as he did with Goldtooth's lot. Looks for good and sure like Sikkukkut's going to stay with us. Thought you'd like to know."

"No surprise," Haral muttered. "Couldn't be that lucky. Couldn't be lucky enough to get help out of Goldtooth. Sikkukkut's going to have this place stripped to the deckplates before he gets back."

"Going to do whatever he wants," Hilfy said, "that's sure."

"Lousy mess."

Tully had lifted his face from the towel and looked at them, yellow hair tousled, eyes showing lines of strain about the edges. Sometimes he seemed too tired even to make the effort of speech. Or to listen for the translator's sputtering whisper giving him its mangled version of things around him. The things hardest to get across were the delicate topics, like: How's Chur-honestly? Or: What do you think Jik will do? And: What are we going to do when the kif move into the station? He seemed to go away at times. At others he seemed desperate to say something of too much difficulty to attempt it.

Things like: My people are going. I talked to them. Even if the message didn't get there. I was that close.

/ didn't betray you.

I swear I didn't try.

The microwave bleeped Finished; and Tully got up and got his soup, with a package of shredded meat and a packet of mahen fuyas, which he and Haral thought edible and everyone else aboard loathed. He offered one of the grain-meat sticks to Haral: she took it and stirred her soup with it, and he settled down with the other packets in his agile fingers, cup in both hands and elbows on his knees, to drink a sip and sigh in profoundest weariness.

"I figure," Hilfy said, to fill the quiet, and to answer questions Tully did not ask, "Goldtooth rendezvoused here with the human fleet. That's why he kited out on us at Kefk. He and Ehrran came in here, he got stuck here, in a standoff with Akkhtimakt. Maybe he got Akkhtimakt pried loose

from the station. He did that much for the stsho. But Ehreran's on her way to Anuurn. Bet."
"Godsrotted well has to be," Haral muttered. "But with Goldtooth in it we got to wonder, don't we?"
' 'Like what happened here?' ' That bothered her. The whole arrangement of things bothered her. The lack of methane-breathers. And Akkhtimakt and Sikkukkut, if they both wanted to be fools, could go on trading that position till the suns all froze. Every few shipboard days, every few ground-bound months, one side could do a turnaround at Urtur or Tt'a'va'o or Kefk or wherever, and come in and strafe the other who had taken possession of Meetpoint. Or Kefk. Or wherever. If ships got to trading positions like that, time-dilation got to stretching lives wider and wider; no in-system passages. No slow-time. Just run and run and run as long as a ship could take it and a body could take the depletion. A merchant ship did its jumps with a lot of slowtime and dock-time in between; and a tradeoff like that could do as much timestretch in a month of their own perception as a trader did in a decade. Before flesh and bone and steel had gone their limits. "Wonder is he didn't come in on Kefk."
"Kefk's got two guardstations. Kefk's got position on him."
Tully stared at them both. He had lost that, probably. But of a sudden the problem had found itself a cold spot in Hilfy's gut. She took a sip of her cup to warm that cold and licked the soup off her mustaches. "Sikkukkut's got something in mind. He's sure not going to sit here."
"There are fools in the universe," Haral said. "What if he isn't? What if he's not sitting still here? What if he's got something else in mind?"
But Goldtooth was out on the Tt'a'va'o vector. Methane-breather territory. Logical choice: the stsho feared the humans like plague. Stsho would deal with Ehreran; they would deal with the kif before they dealt with Goldtooth and his human allies. They would go with the known villains. Stsho had no armaments. No capability for that kind of stress. Stsho would run if they could. Evade it all.
Tc'a and chi and-gods save us- knnn-they're not here, they're always here. Where are they? Knnn aren't afraid of anything. They won't run. Avoid, maybe; run in panic-not the knnn. Ever.
"Methane-breathers," Hilfy said. "Gods rot it, Haral. It's a trap. Sikkukkut's and Goldtooth's both."
Haral's ears flagged and lifted again, and a thinking look got through the exhaustion in Haral's eyes.
"Hilfy." Tully held his cup between his knees and his brow furrowed with worry under its fringe of pale wet hair. "Goldtooth not go Tt'a'va'o."
"You mean you know that?"
"I think. He come-turn, go whhhsss, like Tt'a'va'o Not."
"You mean he faked a jump? Stopped out there in deep space? You think he can do that?"
Tully might or might not have gotten all of that. "Mahe," he said. "Human do."
"Stop a jump short?"
"Same."
"Good gods."
"Makes sense," Haral said. "If they've got the stuff to do that. If they got it from humans- He waits here to fake a run."
"And Ehreran runs for good and real and leaves hani here to catch it when Sikkukkut came through? Gods-be, she's got a treaty with the stsho!"
"Give her credit. What could she do-if Akkhtimakt was here first. Goldtooth wanted Akkhtimakt intact. He's shoving the two kif into a fight, by the gods, that's what he's doing!" Haral rubbed her graying nose and it wrinkled up again. "Let them weaken each other before he throws the humans at them and before the mahen forces come in here. That's what he's up to. Let Jik hang; let Jik keep at least one gods-be kif halfway tame if he can while Goldtooth sets it up so he can take out both kif. That's what the mahendo'sat would really like. Throw the humans at 'em. Let the humans get shot up. That's why he left Jik behind at Kefk."
"No mahen workers left here onstation, I'll bet on that."
"Gods-rotted sure. Goldtooth could have had the word out long before this. Routed everything out of here. Cleared it all out when the stsho broke that treaty."
"Eggs to pearls Goldtooth's left a spotter here."
"No contest."
"It's still insystem," Hilfy said. "It's still in position to get whatever happened here, maybe there's more than one of them, huh? Maybe a couple of spotters, one drifting out slow, going to fire up when it's outside normal pickup, just sneak out of here. And if Goldtooth's out there in the deep and those fool kif that were tailing him jump all the way to Tt'a'va'o-"

Haral's ears lifted. The exhaustion melted from her eyes and replaced itself with a hard, hard look. "Keep going."

"Goldtooth might wait for news. Before his turnaround. If he makes one. He may have put more than one or two spotters on the outside of this system. He's used up all his credit with Sikkukkut himself, he's out there in the dark with the humans, with the tc'a that Jik was working with, he's got some credit with the han, maybe some with the knnn. What if he decided there wasn't any choice and he just lets the kif fight it out?"

"Maybe that's the safest thing we could all do."

"But--"

"I'm listening."

"But-you know the mahendo'sat are going to save their own hides. Ehreran's left him. We can't speak for the han. We got kif going to go head-on against each other with the humans on their backside. If both of them get busy, if the mahendo'sat hit them in the back-neither Akkhtimakt nor Sikkukkut can stand for that chance. They're in a mess. They can't leave the mahendo'sat armed at their backs. They're kif, and Goldtooth's going to attack and they know it. My gods, we got one kif making a threat against Anuurn. What's Akkhtimakt going to threaten, huh? Or is he just going to turn around and send a ship apiece at every mahen world and station?"

Haral's ears were all but flat. She was still listening.

"Ask Skkukuk," Tully said suddenly.

"Ask him what?" Hilfy asked.

"He kif. Ask what kif do."

"He's not on Sikkukkut's level. If he'd outthought him, we'd have Skkukuk to worry about."

"Kif mind. Lot dark. / go ask."

"Man's got a point," Haral said. "But no way we talk to the kif. Better we talk to the captain. Py-an-far, you understand me, Tully?"

"You think I'm right?"

"I been in space forty some years, kid, I never been real close to kif on their terms. You have. And you speak main-kifish. Which I still don't, not real well. But I've had a look at our passenger, 'bout enough to get an idea or two. And between the mahendo'sat and that kif, I'm real anxious. We got that other bomb aboard. And sorry as I am for him, he scares me worse'n Skkukuk."

"Jik," Hilfy murmured. And took another sip that failed to warm her gut.

"He's got a lot on him," Haral said, "and much as we owe him and he owes us-first, he's hurting; second, he's been hurt, by the kif and by his own partner and by us on top of it all; and thirdly, he's mahendo'sat and seeing his whole species in danger, and maybe he's got more information than we've gotten out of him. What's he going to do?"

The cold got worse. For one uneasy moment Hilfy could not even look at Tully. For one uneasy moment he was like Jik, alien and full of strange motives and unpredictabilities.

And she was female and he was not, with all the craziness on that score. No place for him to be sitting. Listening to us. Gods, what if he was only waiting, all this time? He's alien. Isn't he? Same as Jik. And we've been through so gods-be much-and I don't know what's in his mind right now. My friend. My- She gave a mental shiver, looked at the time. "Gods," she said, "we better get topside. Tirun--"

"Yeah," Haral said. And: "You want me to talk to the captain?"

"She listens to you more than me."

"Hey," Haral said. And fixed her with a lazy, flat-eared stare. Reprimand for that small remark.

Hilfy dipped her ears.

"Kif," Tully said.

"No," Haral said. "We let that son sleep. You stay here. Rest. Understand. You go down that hall to talk to that kif, I'll skin you. Hear?"

"I understand," Tully said. His mouth had that set it got in unhappiness. "Not right, Haral. I sit here."

"Argues," Haral said. "Huh."

"He wasn't juniormost on his ship," Hilfy said. "I know that. He's not a kid, Haral."

"Who is, on this ship? Tully. You want to come? Talk to the captain?"

He had a few bites left. He made it one, drank the cup dry and got to his feet, still trying to swallow what he had.

"How's it going?" Pyanfar asked quietly, leaning shower-damp and exhausted over Tirun's chairback. Khym had come back to his post, far from skilled enough to relieve Tirun, but there, at least for support. Tirun looked back at her with flagging ears and a desperate weariness. Tirun had not had a chance at the showers. That was evident.

"No answers yet," Tirun said. "Na Jik's asleep, I think. Stopped stirring around down there after I heard the safety-web go." She tilted an ear generally downships and down below. "We got our routine instructions, I just fed it into auto. All the kif are on schedule, Sikkukkut's pair's in final just now and the stsho're sweating it."

"Huhhhh." Pyanfar had an eye on the scan from her vantage; ships proceeding sedately on course. No one out there had done anything definitive. And she leaned closer to Tirun's ear, her elbow on the chairback. "Get out of here, huh? I'll take it."

"Haral'll be here." The voice came out hoarse. "You want to go catch a bite? I c'n take a little longer, 'm not doing anything but sit."

"Neither am I. Get. I'll hold the boards." She shoved off from the chair back and paused half a heartbeat considering her husband, who had never looked away from the screen in all this time. Covering, while she distracted Tirun, though the board was audio-alarmed, and her own eye had automatically held on that screen the minute Tirun looked her way. Tirun had known where she was looking-experience, decades of it. Bridge rules. But Khym covered. That was bridge rules too. She gave Khym's chairback a pat, approval, with a little unwinding of something at her gut. Closer and closer to reliable. On the standard of the best crew going. An impulse came to her; she unclipped one of her earrings.

"Hey," she said, and leaned next to him where her breath stirred the inner tuftings of his ear. "Huh," he said, as if it were some intimacy.

"Hold still. Don't flinch." She nipped right through the edge of his ear. "Owwh!" he grunted, and did flinch, turning half about in indignation and then-perhaps he thought it was some bizarre test of his concentration-jerked his gaze right back to the boards.

She slipped the ring right into the wound and clipped it. "Uhhhn," he said, and felt of what she had done. Never looked around.

"Good." She patted his shoulder, remembered then that he had once upon a time reacted with temper over that gesture of shoulder-patting. But maybe it felt different somehow. He did not object. And she went off to her own station, sat down and brought in the scan images and the com. Sikkukkut was still on course. Ikkhoitr and its partner were docking ahead of them, and The Pride was on a course right down lane-center, neat and precise.

They were going to have some specific docking instructions very soon. The Pride and Aja Jin and Moon Rising were about to put themselves where the kit could get at them.

And where Sikkukkut could make demands of them. Jik, for instance. Jik, for a very large instance. Or even Tully. Or Dur Tahar. All of which items Sikkukkut might want back. She sat and gnawed her mustaches, wishing she dared talk back and forth with Dur Tahar over there, who assuredly knew something about kifish mentality. But absolute com silence seemed the best policy at the moment. Gods knew she wanted no questions out of Aja Jin, where Kesurinan still followed her orders. And did not ask, as Kesurinan might well have asked: How is my captain? Is he recovered? Why do I have no instructions from him?

Kesurinan believed she knew the answers to all these things, perhaps. And stayed patient. So far. But on that dockside Kesurinan was bound to ask questions that needed direct lies. And inventive ones.

Goldtooth, gods curse you, what have you set up here?

Made an agreement with someone, have you?

Or have we got something else lurking out there, outsystem, that we're going to find out about when our wavefront gets to them and they get themselves run up to attack speed?

Gods, gods, this is no situation to be in. What's Sikkukkut doing? Is that son really depending on us, for godssakes? Are we the backup he thinks he has?

Fool, Sikkukkut. Can a kifmind be that tangled, to trust us now?

Or are you no fool at all?

Com beeped. "Py," Khym said, and cut it in from his board.

"I got it." It was station, talking to them in effusive jabber. A stsho told them that they could, if they wished, have any free berth, but suggested numbers twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Which the lord captain of Ikkhoitr had suggested, praise to the hakkikt.

"Affirm," she said, and with a flattening of her ears: "Praise to the hakkikt."

"No real choice, do we?" Khym asked.

"Life and not. We got that."

"What are we going to do?" There was the faintest note of despair there. A man asking his wife for reassurance. Tell me there's something you can do. Tell me it's not that bad, not that hopeless. A man lived within the small borders of his estate-never tell a man a thing: never worry him with problems he had no capacity to deal with. And no power. Old habits, Khym, gods rot it, grow up! No. It's crew talking to captain. That's all. Get off him, Pyanfar.

"Feathered if I know what we're going to do," she muttered. No mercy, Khym. "Got an idea?"

"He's going to ask for Jik."

"I'm afraid he is."

'What are we going to do?'

"I'll make something up."

Nothing to do but watch it unfold. Obey instructions, take the berth.

You got it, husband. There isn't an answer. I haven't got a miracle to pull off. I don't know what in a mahen hell we're going to do and most of all I don't know how we're going to get out of here.

Thank gods Ehrran's headed home to warn the han. Even if she goes for Chanur in the process.

Better the clan goes down than the whole world. Better a whole lot of things than that.

But, gods, Ehrran's a fool. What's a fool going to tell them? What's a fool going to persuade those fools to do? Gods, give her good sense just once and I'll go religious, I swear I will. I'll reform. I'll- Haral startled her, settling ghostlike into place beside her.

"Captain," Haral said. "What we got?"

She turned the chair half-about, saw Tirun out of her place and Tully and Hilfy settling into theirs, ghostlike silent under the noise of operating systems. "We got our docking instructions. Give Tirun time to get herself down to quarters. We can brake a little late. Meetpoint sure as rain isn't going to file any protest on us for violations." She swung the chair about again and punched in com. Two veteran crewwomen in their places arid two novices. But it was a routine docking, whatever else was proceeding. "Geran," she said. "Five minutes."

"I'm on my way," Geran answered back from somewhere.

"Captain," Haral said, "Hilfy's got this idea-"

"Tahar acknowledges receipt on docking instructions," Hilfy said. "They're on our lead."

"-Akkhtimakt's just lost any reason he had for restraint," Haral said. "He's losing. Mahendo'sat aren't dealing with him. He's gone off toward Urtur; there's two moves he could make. One's us. One's the mahendo'sat. Things could get ugly. Real ugly. That's what we been thinking."

"Huhhhn." Another body hit the cushions, hard. She heard the click of restraints. Geran was in. Heard a wild high chittering coming down the corridor, which was a kif in full career, headed for his station and trying to tell them to wait for him: a shove of The Pride's, mains would send him smashing back into the lift door with the same force as if he had fallen off a building roof.

"We hear you," she said over general com. "You got time, Skkukuk."

And thought about the web of jump-corridors around Meetpoint and where they led.

Gods know what's already been launched at us. "Mahendo'sat aren't going to sit still for it," she said. "It's not their style."

"If they push back," Haral said, "it's going to shove that bastard right into hani space. We figure there's a push coming here. Cap'n, Tully says human ships can drop out of hype in deep space. Do a turn. Says he thinks the mahendo'sat can do it too."

She shot Haral a look. It was a knnn maneuver, that stop-and-turn. Or tc'a. "Friends turning up in odd places."

"From here, cap'n, it's a real pocket out Kura-way."

It was: hani space was an appendix of reachable space, right on the mahendo'sat underbelly, near the mahen homestar. But the accesses in that direction were few and defensible.

"Yeah," she said, thinking of that geometry, which thought suddenly shaped itself into coherent form, in full light. "Yeah. It might work. If they can do that kind of thing. But that'd mean those human ships aren't freighters in any sense of the word- wouldn't it? What's a ship with holds need with that kind of rig, huh?"

"Sure seems like not. And a strike coming in here rams it right down hani throats. Again."

"It does that, too. If they can do that." Another and worse thought. "If mahendo'sat can pull this- wouldn't be the first time they had some new rig they didn't tell us about. Wouldn't be the first time the kif turned up with it too. Before we did. Praise to the mahendo'sat. More gods-be careful of what their allies learn than what gets to their enemies."

Gods, don't let Ehrran be a fool.

Then, down the boards: "Priority," Geran said. "Priority, we got a shift going on, we got a vector change on some of Sikkukkut's lot. That's Noikkhru and Shuffikkt-"

It came up on the monitor, part of the image changing color again as kifish ships finished their braking and began to slew off on new headings.

Headings at angles to Sikkukkut's.

Chapter Six

Color-shifts multiplied on the scan.

"Gods," Pyanfar muttered, and put in the general take-hold. Alarm rang up and down the corridors. In case. "Message to our partners: hold steady, keep course; Khym, advisement to Chur: Take precautions, we got kif moving gods know where. Tirun, feed scan down to Jik's monitor; tell him we're all right, we're still on course, we just got something going here."

Acknowledgments came back.

"Captain," Haral said, "Hilfy's got this idea-

"Tahar acknowledges," Hilfy said. "They're on our lead. Aye-we got that, Aja Jin. Thanks-

"-Akkhtimakt's got bad troubles," Haral said. "I think we got 'em too."

She waited. Waited till she heard Tirun report all personnel accounted for; Tirun had made it onto the bridge. A last safety snicked into place.

They were secure for running. If they had to.

On the screens the flares continued as the doppler receipt sorted it out and got information tried again.

And one and another of Sikkukkut's ships flaring green and going into maneuvers.

Not all on the same vector. They were headed out like thistledown scattering from a pod.

Everywhere.

In every direction open to them, mahen space and hani and stsho and tc'a.

"They go," Jik exclaimed over the open com. And something else profane in mahensi. He was monitoring the situation, down there in his sealed cabin. "Damn, they go, they go-

To every star within reach. To strafe every station and every system where there might be a hostile presence.

"Priority, priority," Hilfy said, overriding something Geran was saying: "'Harukk-com says: Pride of Chanur, proceed on course."

"They go hit ever' damn target in Compact," Jik cried. There was the sound of explosion. Or of a mahen fist hitting something. "Damn! Let me out!"

"She was right," Haral muttered. "Gods-be right. They're going to do it anyhow and we got kif every which way. Captain, they're going to push Akkhtimakt right down that open corridor, to Anuurn, captain, by the gods they are."

"We got problems," Pyanfar muttered.

While a stream of mahen profanity warred with Chur's insistent question on the com.

"Kkkkt." From a forgotten source behind them.

And station was ahead. Meetpoint, with three hundred thousand stsho and a handful of hani citizens. With kif closing in on them with declared intent to dock.

"Transmit:" Pyanfar said. "The Pride of Chanur to all hani on station: prepare to assist in docking for incoming ships. Join us. This is your greatest hope of immediate safety."

Offer a hani an overlord, a master, a foreign hegemony-

They would spit in Sikkukkut's face. And die for it. That, beyond doubt.

But if they heard the reservation in that message, if they keyed on the nuances of safe-shelter-in-storm and all the baggage that went with it-even if the kif did, it was no more than kif expected, even if it was something no kif dared say: until we find a better.

"Repeat?" Hilfy queried.

"Repeat."

"Still braking," Geran said.

And the brightness on the amber lines that was their own position crept closer and closer to their own brake-point for station approach.

"Harun's Industry; responds," Hilfy said, "quote: We take your offer enthusiastically."

It took awhile, for ships to reduce V.

It took awhile for outbound kifish ships to go their way, leaping out into the dark, toward Hoas Point and Urtur System, toward Kshshti and Kefk and Tt'a'va'o and V'n'n'u and Nsthen. Seven ships, to follow right down Akkhtimakt's tail in a second strike after the first one; and right down the throats of Goldtooth and humans and mahendo'sat and whoever else might be coming in if they could find them.

It was, Pyanfar reckoned bleakly, both ruthless and effective.

"Kkkkt," was Skkukuk's comment. "Kkkkt."

"Kkkt," said Skkukuk. "He is challenging you all. Kkkkt. But his throat is unprotected. You are here. He thinks to daunt you. Surprise him, hakt'."

She spun her chair about to face the kif who sat at the aft of the bridge. And there was not a hair on her unbristled. "What has he in mind for us?"

"You are part of his sfik. You increase him. Kkkkt. His move is very good. He has penned you all

in with his main force. Any attempt to exit toward your territories of resource are blocked first by his enemy and then by his own ships, whose capacities you do not know. It is a fine move, hakt'. But I have faith in you."

"Faith."

"Inappropriate word? Sgotkkis."

"Call it faith." She laid her ears back and stared at her private curse with coldest, clearest threat. "Since you don't have an idea in a mahen hell what I'm likely to do about it. But / am still here. And my resources have not diminished."

"Kkkkt, kkkt, skthot skku-nak'haktu."

Your slave, captain.

"Captain," Hilfy said. "Communication from Harukk. Quote: You have made a proposal to hani ships. You will gather these captains for my inspection on-station. End message."

Second move. It's going too fast. 0 gods.

"Acknowledge," she said, cold as routine. While they slogged their way at a sedate pace through a system laced with kif, toward a station which was going to be under kifish occupation.

"Sikkukkut's going into dock. Cocky son's going to bring that ship in."

If Goldtooth and the humans have stopped short and the kif pass them by in hyperspace, we could get hit here.

Hilfy and Haral have got it figured. All of us do.

If Akkhtimakt's set up to dive in here again—an attack could be poised at system's edge right now. Or already inbound. Not saying whether the kif are onto that trick of stopping a jump. They could well have it. Maybe and maybe. It's not saying all their ships can do it.

"Transmit," she said. "Honor to the hakkikt: beware system edges. I fear more than spotters."

"Done," Hilfy said.

We help the bastard we're with. While we're with him.

We take whatever they want to do. And maintain our options. Ehrran's lost all hers. We got hani on that station and gods know how many fluttering stsho. Keep a cool head, Pyanfar Chanur. It's by the gods all the chance you've got.

"We're getting docking instructions," Hilfy murmured finally. They turned up on screen, where kifish ships were already well toward touch with station.

And from Chur, plaintively over com:

"What in a mahen hell's going on?"

"Easy," Geran said. "It's all all right."

"Got crew falling on their noses tired," Pyanfar muttered. "Haral, keep it steady, standard dock. Tirun, get yourself below, take the rest of your break."

"Aye," Tirun said. Old spacer. And falling-down tired. A belt snicked. Tirun went away in silence, to food, sleep, anything she could get.

"Jik's requesting to be out," Khym said. So that voice had vanished off com. Khym had silenced him. A mahen hunter captain, locked in a lowerdecks cabin and probably trying to think how to shortcircuit the latch or take the door apart.

"Jik," she said, cutting in on that blinking light on her com section. "We're all right.

F'godssakes, be patient, get some rest, we've got our hands full, you got our scan image. We're moving in on dock and that's all that's going on for a while."

"Pyanfar." The voice was calm, quiet, reasoning. "/ understand. I make problem, a? You got protect you crew. I make 'pology. I lot embarrass', Pyanfar. Long time with kif make me crazy. Now I got time think—I know what you do. We be long time ally. We befriends, Pyanfar. Same interest. You unlock door, a?"

"I tell you there's nothing you can do up here. You got awhile to rest, Jik. Take it. You may need it."

"Pyanfar." Thump. Impact of a hand near the pickup. Hard. So much for patience. "You in damn deep water. Hear? Deep water!'"

"We got another expression." She flattened her ears, lifted them again. "Told you. After we dock. We got enough troubles, friend. I want your advice, but I got enough to deal with right now."

"It be war," Jik said, and sent a chill up her back. War was a groundling word. "Fool hani! The ships go, they go ever' damn place, not got stop, not got stop!"

"F'godssake, this is open space! This is the Compact, we're not talking about some backwater land-quarrel!"

'No. No hanis. New kind thing. Not with rule. We talk 'bout make fight all kif, all hani, all mahendo'sat, make ally, make strike here, strike there. This new kind word. Not like clan and clan. Not like go council. Here we got no council. War, Pyanfar, all devils in hell got no word this thing I see."

Colder and colder.

"I see it too. So what are the mahendo'sat going to do about it? What have they done about it? Play games with the kif til we got 'em all at each others' throats? Shove Akkhtimakt off toward hani space? My world? How'm I supposed to be worried about you and yours, rot your conniving hide, when you doublecrossed my whole species! You doublecrossed the stsho, f'godssakes, and that takes fast dealing! You double-crossed the tc'a, gods help us, you doublecrossed them and the chi and maybe the knnn!"

"We got humans. We got humans, Pyanfar. Same got hunter-ships, got way shove these bastard back from out hani territory, you got listen, Pyanfar. Pyanfar, I got timetable!" Her finger was on the cutoff, claw half-extruded. She retracted it.

"Do you? Way I hear, you got something else too. Like a fancy new maneuver your ships do, just like humans." Silence from belowdecks then. Profound silence. Then: "Open this door, Pyanfar."

"At dock."

"Soshethi-sa! Soshethi-ma hase mafeu!"

Thump.

She cut him off. Looked Haral's way. Haral studiously lowered her ears. "Not too happy," Haral said. "Timetable. What's he mean?"

"By the gods I bet there's one. At our expense. Mahen gifts. 'Got a present for you.' Jik, turning up at Kshshti. Us, miraculously getting our papers cleared so we could turn up back here."

"I'd sure like to know what was in that packet Banny took on, I tell you that."

"Eggs to pearls that Jik slipped something into it. Goldtooth's version, I got a copy on. The stuff that didn't take a translator to dupe, at least. Which won't be the sensitive stuff. But anything might be helpful. Downgrade the nav functions: we'll run that packet of his with the decoder."

"I'll start it," Hilfy said. "My four."

She keyed the access up and sent the packet over, while The Pride started freeing up computer space.

Jik had held out on Sikkukkut. And on her. It was certain that he had. He had been dead silent on that gibe about mahen ship capabilities.

The archive in question blinked into Hilfy's reach.

And they slipped closer and closer to dock.

"Might have some lurker outsystem," Hilfy said. "I've been thinking about that. Might have a strike here most any time."

"Cheerful," Geran said. That sounded almost normal, crew bickering and muttering from station to station.

"Station's on," Hilfy said. "Docking calc."

"That's got it," Haral said, and sucked them into nav. "Auto?"

"Might as well. Nothing problematical here." Pyanfar sat and gnawed her mustaches, gnawed a hangnail on her third finger. Spat. "Hilfy: send to all hani at dock, hani-language, quote: The Pride of Chanur to all hani at dock: we are coming in at berths 27, 28, 29 consecutive. Salutations to all allies: by hearth and blood we take your parole to assure your security. Industry, salutations to your captain in Ruharun's name: we share an ancestor. Let's keep it quiet, shall we? End."

"Got that," Hilfy said.

Haral gave her a look steady and sober, ears back-canted. "Think the kif read poetry?"

"Gods, I hope not."

Five decades ago. Dayschool and literature. When she had ten times rather be at her math. Stand and recite, Pyanfar.

"I hope to the gods this younger generation does."

On a winter's eve came Ruharan to her gates beneath black flight of birds in snowy court. White scarf flutters in the wind, red feather the fletch of arrows standing still in posts about the yard and the holy shrine where stands among a hundred enemies her own lord, no prisoner but of her enemies foremost seeming.

But Ruharun knew her husband a man with woman's wit and woman's staunchness.

So she cast down her bow and spilled out the arrows, on blood-spattered snow cast down defense, bowed her head to enemies and to fortune. . . .

"Industry answers," Hilfy said. "Quote: We got that. 27, 28, 29. We have another kinswoman here in Munur Faha. Greetings from her. We are at your orders."

"Gods look on them." Pyanfar drew a large breath. Message received, covered and tossed back again

under kifish noses. Munur Faha of Starwind was kin to Chanur. But not to Harun. Harun had no ties of any kind.

And Faha had a bloodfeud with Tahar of Moon Rising.

A small chill went down her back. It was response to her own coded hail. It was just as likely subtle warning and question, singling out Faha for salutations: strange company you keep, Pyanfar Chanur, a mahen hunter, a kifish prince, and a pirate. The Faha-Tahar feud was famous and bitter.

At your orders, smooth and silky. It was kifish subservience, never hani; it was humor, bleak and black and thoroughly spacer. Let's play the game, hani. You and your odd friends. Let's see where it leads.

It took a mental shift, gods help her, to think hani-fashion again, and to know the motives of her own kind. Like crossing a gulf she had been on the other side of so long that hani were as strange as the stsho.

"Reply: See you on my deck immediately."

Grapples took. The Pride's G-sense shifted, readjusted itself. Other connections clanged and thumped into seal. They were not the first ship in. Ikkhoitr and Chakkuf crews were already on the docks. Harukk was in final. But no kif came to help non-kif ships dock. Pointedly, they handled their own and no others. They were Industry crewwomen risking their necks out there on the other side of that wall.

"I've got business," Pyanfar said, and unclipped the safeties.

"Aye," Haral said. "Routine shutdowns, captain. Go."

She got out of the chair and saw worried looks come her way. Tully's pale face was thin-lipped and large about the eyes, the way it got in Situations.

Thinking, O gods, yes, that this might be the end of his own journey, on a station where the kif had won everything that he had set out to take; and where humans were still a question of interest to Sikkukut an'niktukktin. He had reason to worry. The same as Jik did.

Queries were coming in, com from Moon Rising as it docked, operational chatter. Aja Jin was a minute away from touch.

Still playing the game, Kesurinan trusting that her captain was consenting to this long silence.

"Stay to stations," she said to all and sundry. "Khym, monitor lowerdecks."

"You going down there with him?" He looked at her with his ears down, the one with its brand new ring.

She flattened her own. He turned around again without a word. "Tirun's down there," she said to his back and Tully's face and Skkukuk's earnest attention.

/ would go, hakt', that kifish stare said. Tear the throat out of this mahendo'sat, I would, most eagerly, mekt'hakt'.

"Huh." She made sure of the gun in her pocket and walked on out, wobbly in the knees and still with the sensation that G was shifting. She felt down in her pocket, remembering a packet of concentrates, and drank it in the lift, downbound.

The salty flood hit her stomach and gave it some comfort. Panic killed an appetite. Even when panic had gotten to be a lifestyle and a body was straight out of jump. She ate because the body said so. And tried not to think about the aftertaste.

Or the ships around them, or the situation out there on the docks.

Jik was on the bed, lying back with his head on his arms. He propped himself up as the door opened, his small ears flat, a scowl on his face.

" 'Bout time."

"I'm here to talk with you." She walked in and let the door close behind her. His ears flicked and he gathered himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, with a careful hitch at his kilt.

"You been listening to ops?"

"A." Stupid question. But an opening one. He drew a large breath. "You do damn fine job, Pyanfar. We sit at station, same like stsho. We got kif go blow Compact to hell. Now what do?'"

"What do you want? Run out of here? I got hani ships here, I got ten thousand kif on their way to Urtur, right where you wanted 'em, gods rot you."

"Listen me. Better you listen me now."

"Down the Kura corridor. Isn't that the idea?"

"He be kif, not make connection you with these hani. They got be smart, save neck all themselves- Better you do own business. You don't panic, Pyanfar. Don't think like damn groundling! Don't risk you life save these hani. You get them killed, you make damn mess!"

She laid her ears back. "I got kifish ships headed at my homeworld, Jik. What am I supposed to do,

huh? Ignore that?"

"Same me." Muscles stood out on Jik's shoulders, his fists clenched. "You let kif make you plan for you? They shove, you go predict-able direction? Damn stupid, damn stupid, Pyanfar! You lock me up, take kif advice now? You let be pushed where this bastard want?'"

"And where does that leave my world, huh? I got one world, Jik. I got one place where there's enough of my species to survive. Hani men don't go to space, they're all on Anuurn. What in a mahen hell am I supposed to do, play your side and lose my whole species? They got us, Jik, they got us cornered, don't talk to me about casualties, don't talk to me about any world and any lot of lives being equal, they're not. We're talking about my whole by the gods species, Jik, and if I had to blow every hani out there and three hundred thousand stsho to do something about it, I'd do it, and throw the mahendo'sat onto the pile while it burned, by the gods I would!"

The whites showed at the corners of his eyes. Ears were still back, the hands still clenched.

"Why you here?"

"Because," she said, "two freighters and a hunter can't stop it. Because there's a chance I can turn Sikkukkut to do what I can't. Now you tell me about timetables. You tell me about it, Jik, and you tell me all of it, your ship caps included!"

He sat silent a moment. "You got trust."

"Trust. In a mahen hell, Jik. Tell me the truth. I'm out of trust."

"I got interests I protect."

"No." She walked closer, held up a forefinger and kept the claw sheathed with greatest restraint.

"This time you trust me. This time you give me everything you've got. You tell me. Everything."

"Pyanfar. Kif going to take you 'board Harukk. They try question me, I don't talk. My gover'ment, they make fix-" He tapped the side of his head. "I can't talk. Can't be force'. You whole 'nother deal. They shred you fast. Know ever'thing. They know you got me 'board, a? Know you got chance make me talk. Maybe they give me to you for same reason- they can't, maybe Pyanfar can do, a? Maybe block don't work when you ask, I tell you ever'thing like damn fool."

"Can you tell me? Can what they did to you, can what your Personage did to you-make you lie to me, even when you don't want to?"

A visible shiver came over him. Hands jerked. "I ask not do."

"Jik-you got to trust me. However they messed you up. Jik, if it kills you, I got to ask. What timetable?"

The tremor went through all his limbs. He hugged his arms against himself as if the room had gone freezing. And stared her in the eyes. "Fourteen," he said past chattering teeth. "Eighteen.

Twenty. Twenty-four-First. Seventh." Another spasm. "This month. Next. Next. We g-got maneuver-make jump coordinate with same."

"You mean your moves are aimed at certain points at certain dates?"

"Where got th-threat. Don't fight. Move back. Make 'nother jump-point on focus date."

"So that somewhere, tracking the kif, your hunters are going to coincide and home in on them."

"Co-in-cide. A." He made a gesture with shaking hands. "More complicate', Pyanfar. We push. We pull. We make kif fight kif. We make kif go toward Urtur, toward Kita."

"Toward Anuurn!"

"Got-got help go there. Back side. We not betray you, Pyanfar!"

Her legs went weak. She sank down where she was, on her haunches, looking up at a shaken mahendo'sat on t