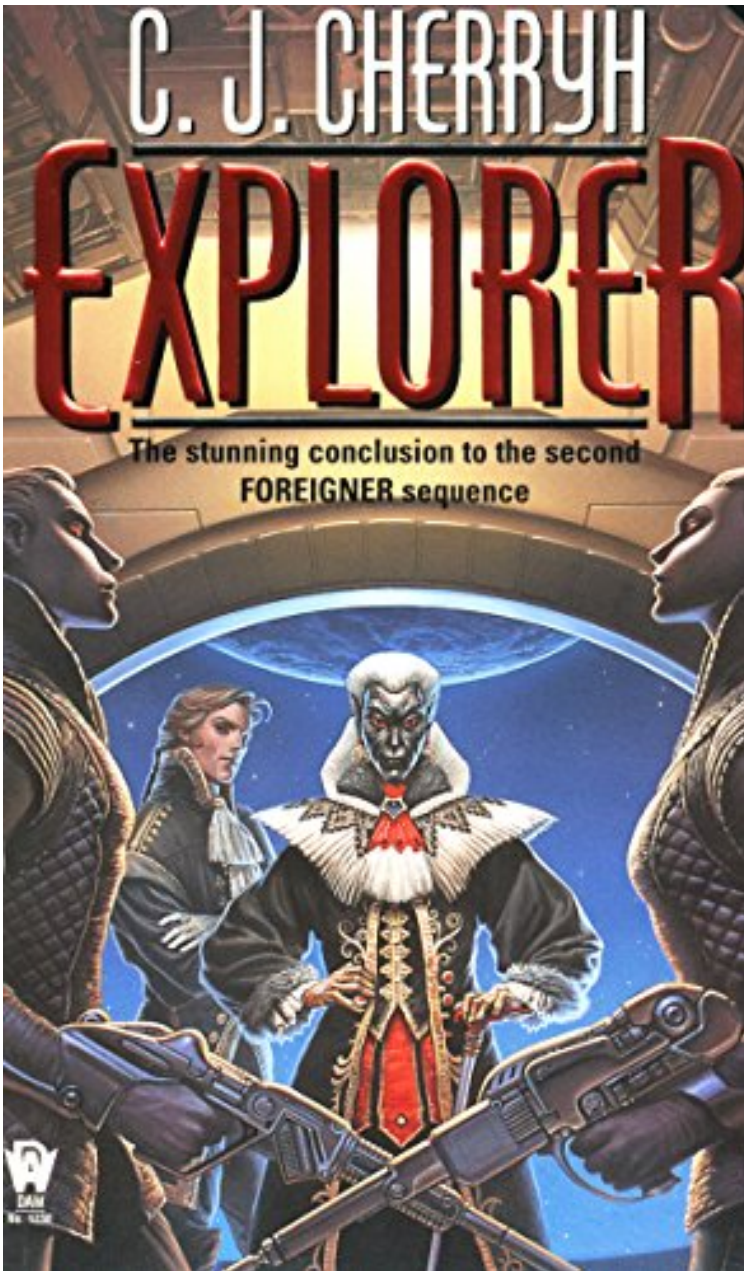


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Explorer



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe sixth novel in CherryhsForeigner space opera series, a groundbreakingtale of first contact and its consequencesIt has been nearly ten years since the starship Phoenix returned to Alpha, the station orbiting the world of the atevi, which had been abandoned following a rift between a faction of the station's inhabitants and the spacers' Pilot's Guild. The unexpected return of the Phoenix has forever changed the lives of both atevi and Mospheirans, for over the ensuing decade, the captains of the Phoenix have

brought both species into space. Their motivation seemed simple: Reunion Station, a human station in another sector of space, had been destroyed by aliens. But on his deathbed, the senior captain of the Phoenix admits that he lied to the crew that Reunion was merely damaged, not destroyed, and many people may have survived. At this disclosure, the crew rebels and forces the Phoenix to undertake a rescue mission to Reunion. Onboard the rescue mission are Bren Cameron, brilliant human paidhi representing the atevi ruler Tabini-aiji, and Tabini's grandmother Ilisidi, a fearsome and ambitious atevi leader with an agenda of her own. Trapped in a distant star system with little fuel left, facing a bellicose alien ship, how can Bren help to avoid interspecies war when the notoriously secretive Pilot's Guild aboard Reunion Station refuse to cooperate, and may have kept the inhabitants of their own station ignorant of their true situation? The long-running *Foreigner* series can also be enjoyed by more casual genre readers in sub-trilogy installments.

Explorer is the 6th *Foreigner* novel, and the 3rd book in the second subtrilogy. From the Paperback edition. Excerpt C. J. CHERRYHEXPLORER A *Foreigner* Novel DAW Titles by C.J. CHERRYH

FOREIGNER

PRECURSOR DEFENDER EXPLORER DESTROYER PRETENDER DELIVERER CONSPIRATOR DECEIVER BETRAYE

ALLIANCE-UNION UNIVERSE REGENESIS DOWN BELOW STATION THE DEEP BEYOND: Serpents Reach | Cuckoos Egg ALLIANCE SPACE: Merchanters Luck | 40,000 in Gehenna AT THE EDGE OF SPACE: Brothers of Earth | Hunter of Worlds THE FADED SUN: Kesrith | Shonjir | Kutath THE CHANUR NOVELS THE CHANUR SAGA: The Pride Of Chanur | Chanurs Venture | The Kif Strike Back CHANURS

ENDGAME: Chanurs Homecoming | Chanurs Legacy THE MORGAINE CYCLE THE MORGAINE SAGA: Gate of Ivrel | Well of Shiuan | Fires of Azeroth EXILES GATE OTHER WORKS THE DREAMING TREE Omnibus: The Tree of Swords and Jewels | The Dreamstone ALTERNATE REALITIES Omnibus: Port

Eternity | Wave Without a Shore | Voyager in Night THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION OF C.J. CHERRYH ANGEL WITH THE SWORD Table of Contents 1 Steam went up as the shower needed Bren's back a moment of blissful content in a voyage neither that blissful nor content. And considering the call he'd just gotten in the middle of his night, he stayed, head against the wall, longer than his habit, eyes shut, letting the steam make a warm, blind cocoon around him, letting the shower run on recycle for uncounted warm minutes. Complex input was suspended, output temporarily unnecessary. But a brain habituated to adrenaline could stand tranquility only so long before worry tunneled its way back. What's Jase want? followed closely by Were not that far from moving and: This could be the big move. Natural, wouldn't it be, if that's what the navigators are doing up there, setting up the final move, that Jase would want to talk now? It's my night. He knew he'd wake me up. Jase could come here. Couldn't be any ship-problem, could it? Nothing mechanical. Mechanical problems surely couldn't be at issue. That was it. Now he'd done it. He'd thought about the ship itself... about the frail bubble of metal and ceramics around his cabin, beyond the shower, beyond the diplomatic enclave of passengers on five-deck. Said ship had already endured, be it centuries ago, one spectacular and notorious navigational failure, stranding the original colonial mission in the great uncharted nowhere of the universe after which everything else had happened: escaping a nearly lethal star, reaching an inhabited planet. The survivors had built Alpha Station, in orbit about that planet and developed a bitter rift between those who wanted to stay in space and serve the ship, and those who wanted to go down to the green planet, take their fortunes and their lives in their hands and cast their lot with the steam-age locals. A whole world of things had happened after that. The Alpha colonists, taking that dive into atmosphere, forever changed themselves, their culture and the native people in a direction no one had predicted. Meanwhile that faction of humans who'd stayed in space had taken the ship and gone searching for their misplaced homeworld. But the fervor for that mission had come aground a second time. They'd ended up building another station in a fuel-rich system. Reunion was its name. And things had gone not so badly for them until a hundred-odd years into that station's existence, an unknown species had taken exception to their poking into other solar neighborhoods and attacked Reunion to make the point. So the ship had come running frantically back to Alpha looking for fuel and help. Which was at least the beginning of reasons why this ship now, with a sizeable delegation of concerned parties from the former Alpha colony and the indigenous government, was headed back out to that remote station ten years late, because things at Alpha hadn't been quite in order to jump to the ship's commands. The captain who'd ordered the mission was dead, Alpha Station was in the hands of the atevi, the native, once steam-age species, who'd taken command of their own destiny and the aiji, the atevi ruler, had sent his grandmother and his heir, among others, to see for themselves what sort of mess the ship-folk had made of their affairs at Reunion. That was the quick version of ship history: a breakdown, a stranding, and local wars wherever they went. Given the ship's run of luck at

important moments, and given a see-me-in-my-office from a friend who also happened to be one of the ships two captains, well, yes, a dedicated planet-dweller, descendant of the Alpha colonists, could feel just a little bit of anxiety about this after-midnight summons. Maybe he shouldn't have stopped to shower. Maybe he should have pulled on a pair of pants and a sweater and gotten straight up there. But there'd been a sense of when-you-can when he'd gotten the summons. It was Jase's watch, so anything Jase wanted to say really was logically said in the middle of the night, granted the breakfast hour would have been far more convenient. Time to dress? he'd asked. Yes, Jase had said. So he'd blundered into the shower half-asleep. And the black-skinned, pastel-clad figures that moved calmly about duties outside the steamed-over shower glass they were fresh from their beds, too, his atevi staff, his protectors, getting his clothes ready. Hence the shower a blast of warm water to elevate his fallen body temperature and call said brain online. He toggled off recycle. The shower circulation, formerly parked on endless loop, sucked up the damp from the air until what blew past was dry and warm as any desert. It stopped, preset, while his past-the-shoulder hair, that dignity of an atevi lord, still retained a residual, workable damp. His servants would have heard the shower enter final cycle. He stepped out into comparatively cold air, and immediately Bindandato whose stature he was about the size of a ten-year-old flung an appropriately child-sized robe about him. Bindanda, broad as well as tall, black-skinned, golden-eyed atevi, in short, and a somewhat plump fellow, very fond of food lapped the belt about him with hands that could break human arms and tied it with a delicacy that required no adjustment. Perfect. The dressing-bench awaited. Bren sat down and let Asicho, the sole female among the servant staff, comb and braid his hair in its requisite pigtail. Lord of the province of the heavens, Tabini-aiji had named him, sending him up from the planet to manage the space program so casually claiming in that action all the power that a newly named lord of the heavens could possibly lay at the aijis feet, a small fact which Bren wasn't sure any of the ships captains had ever quite grasped. It had taken him a little time to figure it and he'd been Tabini's chief translator. But it was perfectly reasonable, in the atevi view of things, to believe that where the aijis representative went, so went the aijis sphere of influence. Therefore sending the lord of the heavens to the limits of explored space expanded the aijis claim of power, absent some strongly dissenting power in his path. There was a space station. So of course there was now a province of the heavens. Had not the aiji sent him there and appointed a lord to rule it? Second point had anyone contested that appointment? Had anyone else attempted to exert authority over the station? The Mospheirans, that island nation of former human colonists, couldn't make up their minds without a committee decision and the ship-folk certainly weren't interested in administering an orbiting province. The ship-folk as well as the Mospheirans had actually seemed glad to have some competent individual, atevi or human, handle it and see that the vending machines stayed full and the air stayed pure. So that claim stuck. There was a province of the heavens. And now that the ship-folk took their starship back to Reunion to deal with matters the ship had left unfinished dangerous ones at that the aiji in Shejidan sent out his emissaries to deal with deep space. Tabini-aiji sent his own grandmother, the aiji-dowager, and he sent his heira minor child both constituting representation of the aijis house itself, to show the flag, so to speak but to make that claim of a more permanent nature, he sent out his lord of the heavens to claim whatever territory seemed available. A man who'd originally hoped to add a few words to the atevi-human lexicon as the sole monument to his life, Bren Cameron had certainly gotten farther than he intended. By various small steps accelerating to a headlong downhill rush, his life hadn't gone as planned. Bren found himself here, wherever here was. He found himself assigned to assert a claim the aiji-dowager would...well, witness or bless or otherwise legitimize...establishing an atevi claim to presence in the universe at large. Most pointedly, he would assert the atevi right to have a major say in the diplomatic outcome of whatever they met, and the dowager would look it all over and nod politely. And he wasn't sure the ship-folk, except Jase, remotely understood what he was doing here. Maybe, Bren said to himself, he ought to be honest about his mission not go on wearing the white ribbon of the neutral paidhiin, the translators. Maybe he should adopt a plain one, black, for a province of empty space. Black, for the Assassins who watched over him. Black, for the lawyers of atevi society, the mediators of last resort. White of the paidhiin was, well, what he hoped to go on doing: translate, mediate, straighten out messes. Lord's title and assignment to the heavens be damned, he planned to come home and ask for his old job back: more extravagantly, someday next year or so he hoped, at lordly leisure, to sit on his porch and watch the sea for three days straight....granted Jase wasn't calling him up there at the moment to give him advance warning that the ship had broken down and stranded the lot of them forever in deep space. Asicho finished the ribbon-arranging. He stood up from the bench. Narani, his white-haired and grandfatherly head of staff, had already laid out the appropriate clothing on the bed, and Jeladi, the man of

all work, assistant to everyone on staff, waited quietly to help him on with the starched, lace-cuffed shirt. The stockings and the trousers, he managed for himself. And the glove-leather, knee-high boots. Nadi, he said then to Jeladi, inviting the assistance. Narani had pressed the lace to knife-edged perfection, and Jeladi moved carefully, so the all-grasping lace failed to snag his pigtail. Asicho, in turn, helped him on with his knee-length day-coat while Jeladi held the pigtail safely aside from its high collar, and Bindanda helped arrange the shirttail. Not so much froth on the shirt sleeves as to make it necessary to put both coat and shirt on together but not quite a one-person operation, as styles had gotten to be. His increased rank had increased the amount of lace which had turned up in baggage: trust Narani. The lord of this household would go out the door, onto executive levels, as if he walked the halls of the Bu-javid in Shejidan. The shirttail went in immaculately. The pigtail survived the collar. His two servants gently tugged the starched lace from under the cuffs, adjusted the prickly fichu, and pronounced him fit to face outsiders. In no sense was a man of rank alone...not for a breath, not an instant. The servants, including Narani, including Bindanda, lined his doorway. The sort of subterranean signals that had permeated the traditional arrangements of his onworld apartments, that they had translated to the space station, had likewise established themselves very efficiently on the ship, in human-built rooms, rooms with a linear arrangement in that abomination to atevi sensibilities pairs. In their section of five-deck, in loose combination with the aiji-dowagers staff in the rooms considerably down the hall, the staff still managed to pass their signals and work their domestic miracles outside the ships communications and outside his own understanding. So it was no surprise to him at all that Banichi and Jago likewise turned up ready to go with him; his security, uniformed in black leather and silver metal, and carrying a fairly discreet array of electronics and armament for this peaceful occasion: a lord didnt leave his quarters without his bodyguards, not on earth, not on the station, and not here in the sealed steel world of the ship, and his bodyguards never gave up their weapons, not even at their lords table or in his bedroom. Asicho will take the security station, Jago said, pro forma. Jago and Banichi were now off that station. Of course Asicho would. In this place with only a handful of staff, they all did double and triple duty, and even Asicho managed, somehow, despite the language barrier, to know a great deal that went on in ships business. But not everything. Not middle-of-the-night summonses from the second captain. Guards they passed in the corridor marked Ilisidis residency her security office, her kitchen, her personal rooms. No more than polite acknowledgment from that quarter attended their passage: but that they were awake and about, the dowagers staff now knew. Ilisidis security, perhaps Cenedi himself, given the unusual nature of this call, would be in constant touch with Asicho not the dowagers idle curiosity. It was Cenedis job, at whatever hour. Two more of Ilisidis young men guarded the section door. Beyond that, at a three-way intersection of the curving corridors, on the Mospheirans collective doorstep (meaning Ginny Kroger and her aides and technicians, their robotics and refueling operations specialists) was the short alcove of the so-named personnel lift. They walked in and Banichi immediately pushed the requisite buttons. The lift this time lifted fairly well straight up, where it stopped and opened its doors onto the bridge with a pressurized wheeze. They exited in that short transverse walkway at the aft end of the bridge. Beyond it, banks of consoles and near a hundred techs and seniors stayed at work by shift half a hundred tightly arranged consoles, the real running of the ship. The walkway aimed at the short corridor on the far side of the bridge, where the executive offices, as well as the captains private cabins and Jases security guards on duty in that corridor were found. If those two were there, Jase was there. On Jases watch, the senior captain, Sabin, was likely snugged at the moment a favorable circumstance, since Sabin had a curious, suspicious nature and wasnt wholly reconciled to atevi wandering through her operations. She was bound to have an opinion on the matter but at the moment it was all Jases show. So they walked straight through, keeping to that designated passage-zone where they werent in the way of the techs not even a couple of towering dark atevi or a human in atevi court dress rated notice from navigators trying to figure where they were. Business proceeded. And the two men, Kaplan and Polano, on a let-down bench at Jases office door, stood up calmly, men as wired-in as Jago and Banichi. No question Jase had known the moment the lift moved. No question Jase, like his bodyguards, was waiting for him. No question Jase had expected Banichi and Jago to come up here with him when he called, and no question Jase knew theyd be armed and wired. Sir. Kaplan opened the office door for him. Jase looked up from his desk and waved him toward a seat, there being no formality between them. And since it was a meeting of intimates, Banichi and Jago automatically lagged to talk to Kaplan and Polano outside, such as they could. Atevi security regularly socialized during their lords personal meetings, if they were of compatible allegiances as Kaplan and Polano indisputably were; so Bren discreetly touched the on-button of his pocket com as he went in, being sure by that means that Asicho, on five-deck, would have a record for

staff review. The door shut. Bren dragged one of the interview chairs around on its track. Sat. Unlike Sabins office, which had a lifetime accumulation of storage cabinets, Jases office was new and barren: a desk, two interview chairs, no books, in all those bookcases and cabinets and only one framed photo, a slightly tilted picture of Jase holding up a spiny, striped fish. It was his most predatory moment on the planet. What would you do with it? Shipmates might ask; and if Jase wanted to unsettle them, he might say, truthfully, horrifying most of them, that they had had it for supper that night, a rather fine supper, too. They shared that memory.

They shared a great many things, not least of which was joint experience in the aijis court, with all that entailed, before Jase had gotten an unwanted captaincy. Good you came, Jase said. Sorry about the midnight hour. But Ive got something for you. Got something. He had niggling second thoughts about the pocket-com, and confessed it. Im wired. Im always sure you are. Jase two-sided the console at a keystroke and gave him a confusing semi-transparent view of a split screen. Bren leaned forward in the chair, arm on the desk edge.

With a better light angle, he figured it out for a view through a helmet-cam on one side and, on the other, a diagram of the walking route among rooms and corridors. His heart went thump. He knew what it was, then. And hed expected this revelation eight moves and eleven months ago. Now they had it? Close to the end of their journey, this showed up? Sabin knows? he asked, regarding the extraction of this particular segment out of the log records. Not exactly, Jase said. There was the timing. There was the non-cooperation of the senior captain. That Jase called him up here to see it, instead of bringing it down to five-deck...he wasnt sure what that meant.

Relations between the two on-board captains had been uneasily cordial since well, since the unfortunate incident at undock, Sabin having insulted the dowager within the first few hours and the dowager having poisoned the captain in retaliation. The two women had gotten along since, wary as fighting fish in a tank. The two captains had gotten along because they had to: the ship regularly had four, and ran now on part of its crew, part of its population, and two of the three surviving captains. And despite his conviction this tape existed and despite the dowagers demands and Jases requests for the senior captain to locate it in log and produce it, Sabin hadnt acknowledged it existed, hadnt cooperated, hadnt acknowledged the situation they suspected lay behind the tape. In short, no, Sabin hadnt helped find it in the last number of months, and now that it had turned up, didnt know Jase had it. And what was the object of their long search?

The mission-tape from the ships last visit, the record none of the crew had seen, the record that Ramirez, the late senior captain, had deliberately held secret from the crew. A man named Jenrette, chief of Ramirezs personal bodyguard, had entered that station and met survivors and those survivors had allegedly refused to be taken off the station. Those survivors included, one suspected, the hierarchy of the old Pilots Guild, an organization whose management had caused the original schism between colonists and crew and managed the contact with aliens whod already taken offense and launched an attack. Not a sterling record. Not a record that inspired confidence. Or love. Captain Ramirez, during that strange port-call, had told his own crew that Reunion was dead...destroyed by the alien attack. Hed refueled off the supposedly dead station, and run back to Alpha, where that lie about Reunions condition had held firm and credible for nearly a decade until Ramirez deathbed confession had blown matters wide. But secrecy hadnt ended with one deathbed revelation. His suspicion of other facts withheld had made this particular tape an item of contention

between Sabin, whod been one of the captains nine years ago, and Jase, Ramirezs appointee, whose assignment to a captaincy had nothing to do with knowledge of ships operations. Jase had been aboard that day theyd found Reunion in ruins, but he hadnt been on the bridge, hed been twenty-odd, junior, and not consulted, far from it. Sabin wouldnt talk about that time at dock; no member of the bridge crews had talked to anyone they could access. Every member of Ramirez personal security team except Jenrette was

dead, killed in a mutiny against Ramirez and Sabin had snatched Jenrette into her security team immediately after Ramirez death, the very day, in fact, that Jase had wanted to ask him questions about this tape. That was the state of relations between the ships captains, Sabin, very senior, and Jase, appointed by the late senior captain, very junior and a lot of data not shared between them. Anything entirely astonishing about the tape? Bren asked. I trust youve reviewed it to the end. The match-up with station plans is my work, Jase muttered,

keying while the tape proceeded. The screen afforded them a helmet-cam view of airless, ravaged halls picked out in portable lights as Jase skipped through the venues, freezing key scenes. For a long stretch, things go pretty much as youd expect to see. Fire damage. Explosion damage. Outwardly, the kind of thing youd expect of a station in ruins. But the boarding team doesnt wander around much. No exploring. Straight on. As if they knew where they were going? Exactly. Jase skipped ahead through the record, and now, in motion, the exploration reached a section that looked far less ravaged. Their entry into the station, which is a long, tedious sequence, was through the hole in the mast; but after they got in, the lift worked on emergency

power, which saved them quite a bit of effort. Piece of luck, eh? Emergency generators back up a lot of functions. Fuel port. Critical accesses. No questions there. Now were in the C corridor, section....about 10.

Notice anything really odd here?The matching map had the numbers. If one could assume the station architecture as similar to the atevi earth stations structure, the investigating crew was on second level near the cargo offices at the moment. Lights were out. Power was down. Helmet lights still picked out walls and closed doors. Intact doors.Its not that badly damaged here, Bren observed.No, its not. A small pause. But we did see part of the station survived. What else do you notice? For Gods sake, Bren...He was entirely puzzled. After a silence, Jase had to prompt him:Theyre walking.God. God. Of course. They were walking. Walking was so ordinary. But hed helped revive a space station. He knew better. Walking, in space, was a carefully managed miracle...and on a station with an altered center of mass? Not easy, was it?He felt like a fool. The stations rotating.As good as put out a neon sign, Jase said. To anyone born in space.A sign to tell more than

the investigating ship. A sign to advise any alien enemies that this station wasnt utterly destroyed. That much beyond any small pocket of light or heat where a handful of surviving tenants might cling to life, as theyd assumed all through this voyage was the casethis huge structure was rotating and managing its damage in ways very suggestive of life, intact systems, and sufficient internal energy to hold itself in trim.Computer couldnt manage this on auto, he said to Jase, could it?Less than likely. A dumb systempossible, I suppose, but I dont believe it. I dont think crew will.But you can see rotation from outside, Bren said, confused. The ship docked, didnt they? How can crew not have seen it?Jase gave him a dark look. Weve never left home.

Were still sitting at dock at Alpha. The atevi worlds below us. Can you prove differently? Can you prove weve ever traveled at all?Once he thought of it, no, he couldnt. There was no view of outside...except what the cameras provided the viewing screens. They underwent periods of inconvenience and strangeness that made it credible they moved, but there was no visual proof that didnt come through the cameras.And had Ramirez somehow ordered a lie fed to those cameras? A simple still image, that crew would take for the stations lifeless hulk, when the truth was moving, lively, self-adjusting?From when? God, from how early in the ships approach had Ramirez faked that output?If Ramirez faked the camera images, he asked Jase, how early did he? Did he come into Reunion system expecting disaster in the first place?Ill tell you that niggling suspicion did occur to me. But long-range optics might have seen there was a problem, way far off. Down below, I assure you, we didnt get an image...we dont, routinely until bridge has time to key it to belowdecks.

Its not often important. Its protocols. And if bridge is busy, if a captains too busy, or off-shift, or in a meeting, we sometimes dont get image for a while. For a long while, in this case. We saw the still image. We saw the team entering the mast.Where its always null-gee.No feed from helmet cam beyond that. This section went straight into the logs black box and nobody belowdecks ever saw it.Anger. No wonder this particular tape had stayed buried for nine years. No wonder the current senior captain had silenced the last living member of the group that had made that tape and challenged the technically untrained junior captain to find the log recordif he could.But the captains all knew, Bren surmised. Sabin was there. She had to know the station wasnt dead. Anybody on the bridge, any of the techs, they had to know, all along, didnt they? That had been a question before they launched on this mission. It loomed darker and darker now, damning all chance of honesty between executive and crew.Its all numbers readout on those screens, Jase said. You get what the station transmits. Or doesnt transmit. Or if it feeds you a lieyoud have that on your screen, wouldnt you? Im not sure that all the ops techs on the bridge knew. Some had to. But its possible some didnt.More and more sinister, Bren thought, wishing that at some time, at any convenient time, the late captain Ramirez had leveled with his atevi allies...and his own crew.Ill imagine, too, Jase went on, that the minute we got into the solar system and got any initial visual inkling there was trouble, bridge showed a succession of still images from then on outin space, you cant always tell live from still. Ill imagine, for charitys sake, that Ramirez ran the whole thing off some archive tape and a still shot and nobody else knew.

He might have been the only captain on the bridge during the investigation: you just dont budge from quarters until you get the all-clear, and it didnt come for us belowdecks for hours. Maybe he didnt tell anybody but his own techs. Maybe the other captains got his still image and they didnt leave their executive meeting to find out. I can construct a dozen scenarios that might have applied. But Ill tell you Im not happy with anything I can imagine. The more I think about it, Im sure Sabin had to know.You docked at the station, for Gods sake.Tethered. Simple guides for fueling. Were not the space shuttle.Not the space shuttle.

Not providing passenger video on the approach. Not providing a cushy pressurized and heated tube link.Entry through the null-g mast, where even a trained eye couldnt easily detect a lie.Theres another tape, Bren said, on that surmise. Theres got to be some log record where the station contacted Phoenix and gave

Ramirez the order not to let the crew know there was anybody alive. You know, I'd like to think that was where the orders originated, Jase said calmly. And I earnestly tried to find a record to prove that theory. But I couldn't. My level of skill, I'm afraid. Took me eleven months to break this much out. I know a lot more now than I did about the data system. But you get into specific records by having keys. I've cracked a few of them. Not all. Not the policy level. Not the level where Guild orders might be stored. And the senior captain isn't about to give them up and I'm not about to ask. You can't erase a log entry, can you? You'd think. But at this point we've rebuilt a lot of the ship's original systems, over the centuries, and I'm not sure that's the truth any longer. At my level of expertise, no. Not possible. If there's a key that allows that it rests higher than I can reach. Maybe it sits in some file back on old Earth, that launched us. Maybe Sabin has it. I don't. Jase was Ramirez's appointment, and Sabin hadn't approved his having the post. And the crew, the general, non-bridge crew who'd all but mutinied to get them launched on this rescue mission if they saw this tape, they were going to be far faster on the uptake than a groundling ambassador. There was a reasonable case to be made that the Pilots Guild itself, in charge of Reunion Station, was behind all the trouble and all the lies and all the deception. There was a reasonable, even a natural case to be made that the alien hostility that had wrecked the station was directly the Guild's fault, and not Ramirez's. But believing the old Guild was the sole culpable agency required suspending a lot of possibilities, because the station wasn't mobile. The station wasn't gadding about space poking into other people's solar systems. And the ship's executive hadn't talked. Hadn't breached the official lie that Reunion Station was dead. Nine years without talking? Nine years for that many people on the bridge to keep a secret from their friends and relations among the crew? Mospheirans never could have done it, Bren thought. Then: atevi... possibly. And ship-folk. He watched Jase watch the tape, thinking that all the years he'd known Jase hadn't gotten him through all the layers of Jase's reticence. Even with friendship. Even with shared experience. In some ways ship-folk were as alien to Mospheirans as a Mospheiran could imagine. And the ease of lies in this sealed steel world of the ship... They continually heard reports that told them where they were. They imagined stars and space. They imagined progress through the universe. The ship docked with a station mast, and went null-g. The ship would have been perfectly normal, null-g, even while the station wasn't. Surviving relatives could have been just the other side of the hull, and crew might not have known. A very, very different set of perceptions, from certain consoles on the bridge, to those that weren't involved with that reality. While certain other techs, deep in the inner circles of the ship's operations, kept secrets until told otherwise. Policy. Policy, policy. The Pilots Guild had once run this ship. It was a good question how much it still ran the upper decks. Did the ship work with the old Guild? For the old Guild? Or for itself, these days? The Pilots Guild hadn't actually consisted of pilots for centuries. Supposedly they'd gone station-side at Reunion, and let the ship's captains go their way, under their authority in name, if not in fact. Jase touched a button. Sound came up, the ordinary hoarse whisper of a man's exerted breathing. Almost there, sir, a voice said. They know where they're going, Jase said. They never ask. They're about to pass a working airlock. They know in advance certain of the lifts are going to work. There's no mystery about this, not to them. They're representing Ramirez and they're going in to meet with the station authority. And that is Jenrette we're hearing. The one with the helmet cam. Affirmative. Sabin's man now. Sabin's sympathy for a man decades in Ramirez service, a man too senior to be on a despised junior captain's staff? For Jenrette, with, maybe, a whole raft of executive secrets on his conscience, a much more comfortable assignment, that with Sabin. Presumably, Jase said, Sabin thoroughly debriefed him by now, even the things he wouldn't want to say. So I assume she knows as much out of Jenrette as her imagination prompts her to ask and his sense of the situation lets him answer. Presumably, once we raised the possibility this tape existed, Sabin immediately reviewed it and questioned Jenrette. What else she may have gotten out of Jenrette, I wish I did know. She's going to know I came up here. She's going to ask why. True. Jase picked up a disk from off his desk and gave it to him, tape being in most instances a figure of speech on this ship. This is a copy. Your copy. Consider I was aboard when we docked at Reunion. I was belowdecks being lied to like all the rest. I remember how it was. I remember the announcements that we were going in. I remember the solemn announcement that we were going back to Alpha to find out if the rest of the colonists we'd scattered out here had survived with the implication things were going to change and we were going to patch everything and find a friendly port and then prepare against the possibility of alien invasion at Alpha. Right along with crew, I got behind that promise. I was young. I'd had a peculiar course of study, and I understood I was going to be useful in that approach. I had a notion that was the reason I existed at all; and all during that voyage I bore down on my studies: French and Latin and Chinese and history, a lot of history. Yolanda and I were all impressed, because Ramirez was so incredibly wise as to have had us going down that path in the first place.

Wise....bullshit. Im thirty years old. Im relatively sure I am. Tell me: why was he so incredibly ahead of the game? Thirty years. A human who lived among atevi, to whom numbers were as basic as breathing, twitched to numbers. He immediately dived after that lure, wondering. Attentive. But answerless. What have you found out? he asked Jase. I dont know what Ive found out. I wanted you to come up here in human territory, where Im not thinking like atevi. Where its a lot easier for me to remember what happened, because, dammit, I should have been asking questions. Thirty years old. Thats question number one. Ramirez had me born out of Taylors Legacy, and picked me a mother whos now found it convenient not to have been on this voyage, for reasons I can fairly well understand are personal preference, or maybe a desire to live to an old age. Or maybe to avoid questions Id ask when we got closer to our destination, who knows? Maybe it was Sabins order. I know Ramirez had me studying French and Latin and Chinese, he said, since humans might have drifted apart from us over the last several centuries. So I was created to contact Mospheirans, before Ramirez had any idea Mospheirans existed...because he was a student of history and he did know that a few centuries of separation can make vocabulary and meanings drift, and we might not understand each other.

Isnt that brilliant? Thats what he told me when we headed back to Alpha. Its factually true at least about linguistic drift. But I dont buy the prescience. Nor do I. And maybe I was created to contact humans maybe to contact atevi, too, because Ramirez did, of course, know there was a native species. Contacting them had been at issue before Phoenix left Alpha two hundred years ago. Bet that humans were likely to go down to the planet and learn their language and change fairly radically. All true. I was born for all those reasons, lets suppose, twenty years before aliens showed up and hit Reunion Station. But thats assuming what later became useful was useful twenty years earlier, isnt it? Why? Why do you suppose Ramirez was thinking about going back to Alpha for the first time in two hundred years? Guild orders? Guild orders that didnt have any foreknowledge that there was going to be any alien attack? It doesnt make sense. It doesnt. I dont know whats behind any of this. Id like to know why Ramirez really wanted me born. There was a lot of pain

behind Jases quiet statement. The part about remembering human things better up here in human territory Bren well understood that. The curiosity about his own birth a man without natural parentage could well ask. Jase was born out of genetic deepfreeze, the Legacy, the stored genetic material of the original crew. Of no living father, and maybe not even of the woman he called mother. That was one personally disturbing matter. But the intersection of Jases birth with Guild intent and Ramirezs intent, coupled with an education suiting him for nothing practical in ordinary terms: those were scary, scary questions. Ive always thought it was a reasonable precaution, your peculiar education, Bren said, if Ramirez always meant to come

back to us. Always meant to come back, Jase echoed him. So figure: Im thirty years old, give or take the games travel does with time. My years are mostly on this ship, so hell with figuring planetary terms: I think my answer is on this ship, the same way my life has been on this ship, and I know when Ramirez ordered me born. But then Im up against another wall. I dont know how long he planned it. I dont know why he planned it, and I dont know what was the triggering event, but at some point, clearly, my existence was going to be useful to him. Twenty-some years later, the aliens show up. And did that change my purpose or satisfy it? For any human born why was I conceived was an interesting question, to which the answer might be as simple and human and serendipitous as we didnt plan on it. But for Jase, Jase being definitely planned, his genetic code extracted from the frozen genetic legacy of dead heroes the first crew, the legendary Taylors crew, whod saved the ship from sure destruction in a radiation hell if there was a god-among-mortals, Jase was born with that cachet. Hed had done everything possible since to duck the job, but he was born disconnected from modern ship families and he was born of a dead hero...maybe of Taylor himself, the legendary

Navigator. Point one. Point two: being disconnected from modern families, he was naturally up for grabs. Ramirez had appropriated him, no other word for it appropriated him and dictated his life, not quite father, never that available. No emotional attachment nothing close, at least, except a boys human need to attach to something. Ramirez created Jase to mediate with the colonists the ship had left at Alpha? And with the possibility of atevi involvement? Brilliant thinking. Except this tape, this lie, and the fact he hadnt trusted his own heir with the truth of survivors abandoned at Reunion until he was on his deathbed. Magnificent planning, that was. Up to that point, the crew had thought all they had to do was tuck in at Alpha and build defenses in a very remote chance of unfriendly visitors turning up on their track. They hadnt thought their remote cousins and occasionally closer relatives had been left alive. Theyd mourned their dead and gone on and adjusted to a new reality. Then theyd heard what Ramirez said on his deathbed. The crew, when it heard the station was still alive, had downright mutinied and demanded to go back; atevi allies had thought about it and decided to back that request, for fear of aliens tracking humans from Reunion to their own world. And

Mospheirans had insisted on joining the mission, to get human records cleared from Reunion for exactly the same reasons. A remarkable three-way alliance had leapt into action on what they thought was a rescue mission or at best a critical mop-up of dangerous loose ends of information left behind. Find out the situation, shut down anything still left, and get out, destroying any record that could lead an alien enemy back to the atevi homeworld. Now, one move away from their destination, Jase was saying they'd better rethink Ramirez's whole path of action? Someone who lived by numbers should have been looking at the equation that was Jase Graham's life a long, long time back. I'm listening, Bren said, chagrined. What does add up? What do you think the truth is? Earliest, Jase said somberly, earliest I remember, I was supposed to view tapes and learn languages. Yolanda and I, he amended his account: Yolanda Mercheson, sister in event, but not in genetics. Likewise one of Taylor's Children, Yolanda had been his partner his lover, in a match that hadn't worked out. Now she was back at the atevi station doing what a paidhi did: translate and mediate with atevi authorities, and try to keep the three-way alliance stable. Understand, I'm not complaining about my abnormal childhood, Jase said. But grant I wasn't stupid. God, no, it wasn't remotely my heritage to be stupid. I did know I was abnormal, and I did wonder. Most of all I wondered why everybody else studied things you could put a name to on the ship they were going to be engineers, or techs, or nav, or bio; and they got together by tens and twenties and made ball teams, that sort of thing. I just had Yolanda. And she had me. And we didn't know what we could call what we did. But we studied what we were supposed to, because the Old Man said so, because our mothers said so. Because the seniors on the ship expected it of us, and they thought we were doing the right thing, even if our peers thought we were strange. One couldn't imagine such a life. He'd had his own oddball passion to see the rest of the world. To understand the exotic lands of the atevi. But it had been his own passion that had led him to the University and a career in the Foreign Office. Jase had been assigned an ambition. Issued one, like a uniform. And was ruled from above, by Ramirez's decisions. That was, Bren thought, fairly horrific. So, Jase said, Here I was, doing what was interesting enough, but peculiar I mean, Yolanda and I could speak Chinese to each other, but no one else, and we hadn't a clue why. And the next minute of our lives, something went way wrong. The last mission was going as usual: we were at a star, looking around, making notes, taking our usual survey, as if we were going to carry out our mission and find some trace of old Earth big chance that was, and we all knew it, but it was what we were supposed to do, so we did it. Then, bang. Alarm sounded. Everything was secrecy and we were ordered to quarters, headed home to the station via a point where we had a minor, uninhabited base. That fast. Total change of direction. Total change of plans. I heard senior crew talking about it when I was going to quarters, but no one talked to me. Ramirez certainly didn't call me personally and explain. But you know how it is, now, when the ship moves. You travel and you stop and refigure, and while you're inertial, you hear all the theories floating the corridors if you just keep your ears open. Ramirez didn't talk to me. Rarely did. My mother didn't know any more than anybody else. The same with Yolanda and her contacts.

But rumor was, on that voyage, that we'd seen something that wasn't confined to the planet we were observing. An alien ship. So we were running hard, getting out of that place and going back to report to Reunion. Via an indirect route. That was the idea. Jase was quiet a moment. On the desk, the tape played on, four men walking through corridors mostly dark, but not as ruined as one might think. Talk was, in the lower corridors, the ship had acted hostile. But no one knew details. And when we got to Reunion, against something definitely wasn't right. Information didn't come down to the corridors when it should. We were confined to quarters. That part's normal on an exit. You know. But we moved closer, still without information. And linked up with the station. And took on fuel. And during that process we were shown the view outside, the station damage, while Ramirez broke the news we'd seen aliens and now they'd hit the station and killed everybody. And he said all we could do was go back to Alpha colony, where we thought there might be support we needed, and resources...oh, give or take a couple of hundred years of neglect. So we went.

Ramirez called me and Yolanda in privately during the voyage, and he talked to us about how people changed into nations and accents turned into languages in a couple of centuries. Yolanda and I being the only ones who'd studied any other language and who really knew on an operational level on a mindset level how that sort of thing worked, we were critical to what was coming. And wasn't it marvelous and lucky we existed? We didn't know what to say. We didn't ask him, So how did you know in advance you'd need us?

That was our best chance to ask why we existed, and we were so overwhelmed with finally having a practical purpose we didn't ask that question. Didn't even ask each other, until I guess, between us, the time for questions passed. And after that I don't know: maybe I was scared of the answer. Maybe I was just too focused on the future to question the past. And you think now? Bren asked. What is the truth? My innermost

guess, Jase said, my middle-of-the-watch-and-cant-sleep guess used to be that hed had us born because there always was some secret plan to go back to Alpha, some scheme either the Guild had cooked up, or something he meant to do secretly in a breach with the Guild. I was sure he intended for us somehow to figure those cross-cultural differences he foresaw. Ramirez studied history. He knew about cultures outside ship-culture. He created paidhiin without ever having seen one. Without ever knowing atevi had gotten in charge of the situation back at Alpha he was prepared. You used to think that. And now? He had us born and set to the course he wanted long before aliens were in the picture. That tends to exclude them as a cause so far as I know. So maybe he was thinking about Alpha. Second he shoved me into a captaincy I begged him not to give me and tried to get rid of. And he wouldnt give it to Yolanda, who wanted to be on this ship. She got left behind on this trip, and I got ripped away from the world I wanted more than anything, to be on a ship I cant run. Ramirez wasnt crazy and he wasnt arbitrarily cruel. But it seemed unfair. And you know when somethings not damn fair, it does make you mad. And you dont think straight. You ask why, but you constantly ask the wrong why, and you dont go back to first questions. And ever since wed gone back to Alpha and the atevi seemed our only hope, Yolanda and I had forgotten all about the whys we used to ask. We had a job to do. Dealing with outsiders was work Yolanda flat hated, and work I really took to, really took to and both situations were just as distracting. I was lucky enough to draw the atevi side. Yolanda had humans trying to use her to get at each other. So the two of us grew apart. And then Ramirez had the gall to give me the captaincy, for Gods sake, permanent ship assignment, at the same time he used Yolanda secretly to do translation, bound to the planet, keeping major secrets from me. It wasnt fair. And? So on this voyage, maybe Ive gotten some mental distance, enough to deaden the emotional charge in that situation. I think about Ramirez frozen down there in storage and I think about what I should have asked him. Questions I wish Id asked Yolanda, to the point, that she might not have thought to tell me before we left. What she might have assumed I knew. And at the same time, I was after this tape. Without the right keys. Denied the right keys, by Ramirez and by Sabin, both. Is that somehow to the good of us all? So in that mood of executive curiosity, and during that search, Ive dug into everything I could get, things that arent a restricted record. Like what files Ramirez got out of the Archive what books he read. History. Earths history. Thats no surprise. Ancient, recent, didnt matter to him. He studied the world he was trying to find, as if somehow the coordinates were going to occur to him, as if somewhere in the Archive, the actual location might be buried or some necessary navigational cue. Never was going to happen. Never? We lost the signposts. The stellar signposts that should have been a clear marker for us. If you cant see the noisiest stars in space, either somethings between you and them, or youre way far from where you thought you were, so far lost that finding old Earths not even possible. No, its never been possible, beyond the original accident. Thats not what the ship told my ancestors. The great search. Along with a lot of other myths. But without an elaborate arrangement of fuel depots and far more ships, by what the navigators say, it wasnt ever going to happen, and somehow the Guild never got around to building other ships or arranging any fueling stations. Whatever their reason, we cant reach a point of vantage without traveling a lot farther than may be prudent, counting everything thats happened, and we dont know what direction to start looking. Take it from me, that never was really the reason we left Alpha. I think you know that by now. I know the ships current story. Jase was silent a beat or two. Fair enough. The ship wanted to take the colony out of Alpha, set up in deeper space, and the colonists my ancestors wouldnt go for it. Is that still true? The Guild was for setting up further out in space. Building a place that would be just human, and just spacefaring. We werent supposed to live on a planet. Werent supposed to contaminate ourselves with what wasnt human. Small choice atevi ever got about being contaminated. The Guild. The Guilds decisions. The Guild split over Alpha. The faction that prevailed didnt want your ancestors going down to the nice green, inhabited planet. No. And once it happened, even the solar system was too close for comfort. They were diametrically opposed to atevi contact not so much to protect the atevi culture, though that was a consideration; but to protect our own. From us. Us. Which us? We were so few. The universe is so big. Its an article of faith that original Earth exists somewhere but from the Guild viewpoint, were the sole true custodians of the Archive, the guardians of human culture. Your ancestors wanted to dive into an alien gravity well and give it all up. Thats not all there was in the decision. You know I agree with you. But Guild leadership was obsessed with establishing a secure base where only human ideas had currency. It was a human idea to go down to the planet. But not a solely human idea that came back. In that they were right, werent they? Does it matter? To them it matters. Its still going to matter. When they couldnt control Alpha, they took the ship and left. To preserve their purity. And as soon as Guild leadership found a likely spot, they built again, not near a planet this time, not near any attractive,

living world where people could escape by a low-tech dive to a living world, oh, no, not twice. They built Reunion out where everyone would be under their orders, always, totally, dependent on them and their orders. And the Guild leaders got off the ship. And established their rule over Reunion. And then then I'm guessing here I think after they'd built up their population a while, after they'd educated the population the way they wanted, they might try to terraform a moderately liveable planet, and keep it only human. I think the Guild couldn't find Earth. So they were going to create Earth. Mindboggling. You're kidding. Give them some credit. They weren't going to do it to the Atevi planet. Give them that much virtue, that they were looking for somewhere they could claim for themselves. You keep saying they, they, they. Aboard ship, the term was we. Crew. Family. And it hadn't been we at very critical points. The ship, I take it, held a different view in the proceedings. The ship is the ship. The Pilots Guild went ashore and became something aside from the ship's executive. The Guild began to run station business. It became station business. It had done that from way back at Alpha. So, yes, there was a schism between the ship's executive and the Guild. At least there was an increasing division of interests. And we, meaning the ship, weren't as interested in Reunion? We had relations on Reunion. We refueled there. They mined fuel for us. It was all interconnected. You know there's an emotional connection. But no, we weren't Reunion. We were Phoenix. We'd never stopped being Phoenix.

And we never trusted the way the station was run. We just couldn't do anything about it. That was the universe as he'd speculated it existed. Populations achieved self-interest, and wider interests cooled. Only the ship had stayed footloose, traveling. Capable of change. And ominously so, of meddling in new things. So, Bren said, the ship created Reunion, and used it, and thought of it as home away from home. And the ship never came back to Alpha. But still reserved that notion for itself. Reunion we knew was safe. We were loyal to Reunion. Was Ramirez? Jase might not have anticipated that question. He blinked. He keyed. The image on the screen froze. Good question, Jase said. Useful question. Was Ramirez loyal? He created us. Me and Yolanda. Back to that same pathway. And you were what? I think, Jase said slowly, and this is a difficult thought I have this niggling suspicion, sometimes, that, the same way I suspect the Guild had its notion of defining humanity, Ramirez meant me and Yolanda to out-human the rest of the Guild. Filtering the human

Archive through our perceptions. Being able to challenge their concepts. We were learning Latin and Chinese. The ship was still working for the Guild, cataloging planets, investigating likely ones, ones that met their criteria. Purely scientific, they said. Increasing the human database. For what? For what logical purpose were we going about, that had the station devoting so much energy to our energy needs? But not for us to ask, I suppose. There was always fuel. We'd dock, we'd go. We'd explore and refuel. That routine was my whole world. You don't question the world until the plumbing fails, isn't that what you said once? And now? Now that the plumbing's really failed? I don't believe pure scientific curiosity had anything to do with it.

I'm sure the Guild sent us where we went, or they wouldn't have gone on refueling us. Maybe they simply wanted to have us gone as long as possible, to keep our influence out of the station. Maybe they wanted the unification, the symbol, of us as the focus of community effort, the pressure valve. The reason for sacrifice. And they could control us. Fueling was always the sword over our heads. And while all that was going on,

I'm sure we were gathering information that would eventually be useful, investigating other solar systems, and fuel sources. But Ramirez I have this tenuous theory didn't ever mention his two linguists to the Guild, not that I ever was aware. And I wonder did he mean to create what he was looking for? He knew about

diversity, which wasn't quite the Guild's insistence of everyone walking in step. He didn't know the lost languages, but he knew he couldn't create a new Earth on a ship where everybody is cousins and brothers and sisters, and living the same lives and doing the same jobs. He couldn't do it on a space station the Guild's running. But he could do it if he ever found a place where he could get supply that the Guild didn't control, and where he could establish an orbiting base that wouldn't hold fueling as a sword over his head. He had the genetic storage. He had the Archive. Fantastic as it is on a human level I think he was hoping to find a place where he could build another station and ultimately set down an unregulated colony. A green planet. Another green planet. One without a population. I think, in that, Ramirez and the Guild were after the same thing. Not

to have a population, if it could support humans? Bren, my friend, what educated ship-folk know about planetary biology fits in a life support tank. I know I don't know as much as I should. But let me tell you, I do know the British monarchs and the Alexandrine Empire. I know Darwin and Eberly and Teiler. Yolanda knows German history and Bantu. I'm really keen on the Shang Dynasty. Hell, were diversity incorporated.

Were culture in a plastic pack. I suspect going back to Alpha wasn't Ramirez's real plan. He had every opportunity to do that. No. I think Ramirez's ideas were pure Guild humans only. Ramirez wanted the Guild's plan but he didn't want current Guild leadership in charge of it. He intended to run his version of it. And

poking around in various solar systems, looking for life-supporting planets to drop us on, I think he got more than he bargained for. Angry aliens. Their planet, is my guess. At least something they owned and cared about. Theyd probably been watching us for a while. They showed hostile and we made a feint off to another destination. But when we got home, home had already been hit. So they knew damned well what they were hitting. They knew us, knew where wed come from, and we didnt know them not even know which of various systems had been the trigger for the attack. But I think, whoever hit us, they very well knew the neighborhood weve only been parked in for a couple of hundred years. Seems very likely, Bren said. Based on all you say. So back to our question why do I exist? Hell if I know. But Ramirez was up to something that blew up on him and took out the Guilds home base, whether it was his idea or the Guilds. It was a thorough catastrophe. What bothers me in all of this is where Sabin fits. And what kind of politics went on between her and Captain Ogun, when he stayed behind at Alpha and sent her to manage a rescue neither of them thinks is likely? Youd think shed at least give up her antagonism toward me. But she wont as if she thinks Im still following Ramirezs agenda. Might you be? Not that I know. What could you do against her? I dont know. Until I know what I was for I dont know what she thinks I might do. Not that many choices, are there? There still may be choices. Likewhos running this ship on the way back to Alpha...if anyones alive. Guild getting in charge of the ship was a very, very grim scenario. Not one theyd actively considered, in the bright lights of Alpha Station and the full steam ahead of their own planning. But a year later, out in the vast dark of the universe and closer and closer to Reunion, it did prompt a sober reflection on people, on old loyalties, on their prospects. If they got there and there was no fuel, they had that covered in Gin and her robots. If they got there and found a still-potent Guild in charge and Sabin much too sympathetic toward them Theyd want the ship, wouldnt they? Oh, damned right, theyd want it, Jase said. You think Sabin seriously might lean their way? Give up her own authority? I dont read her that way. Or if she became part of theirs, Jase said, and drew a breath. At the start of this voyage I had some doubts about her. But this last year, this voyage I dont know what she thinks. A last year of being de facto senior captain. Of working with Ramirezs unwanted appointee. Of having a section of her ship in atevi and Mospheiran control, an arrangement not to her liking. If the Guild didnt like contamination, what did Sabin think? Have you seen any shift in her opinions? I cant read her. I do think whatever went on between Ramirez and the Guild, shes on a completely different agenda. And keeping me out of the log thats said something, too, hasnt it? She never was on Ramirezs side. Always the contrary vote. Always outvoted. And Ogun put her in charge here. Why, Bren? Why in hell did he do that? Admittedly putting her where she didnt have to deal with an entire nation of atevi and diverse politics on the planet. Aboard a ship thats dead set on its mission a crew thats going to be pretty hard to argue with if it gets this tape in hand, among other points. You talk about the Guild possibly taking over. But thats not the way the crew feels about past decisions, if I have it right. A two-edged sword. If Ramirez was against the Guild, if blame for this goes against him, I was born part of it. And thats the critical detail I dont know. I dont know when it could blow up and I dont know whats going to be the issue. Youve got the tape. You could release it. You could take your position from that. And that could blow wider than I intend. Stranded is a hot enough word with Mospheirans, but let me tell you, abandoning survivors at Reunion that nearly fried the interface. And things dont make sense. The way the lie was constructed, right from the start of the ship coming into Reunion, how do you read that? I cant answer it. Plain logic: Ramirez stopped the situation, froze the tape until he knew what hed do. Until hed made up what his story was. Ramirez didnt know what hed find going back to Alpha. He knew things might not be optimum. As they werent. Ten years getting refueled was a miracle, as was. If the crew had known, they still couldnt change things, but theyd have sweated and fretted harder. And crew can understand that. Thats logic. But its not emotion. Thereve been too many lies, Bren. The depth of deception in this one event has too many layers. Tamuns mutiny was only one manifestation of the poison of lies thats run on this ship. Theres only one layer in this lie. Ramirez needed the crew to take orders without division of opinion. And if the crew hadnt ever found out there were survivors? Would he ever have told the truth? Hed had the ship fueled. Priority. Hed had the ship fueled. Were going where he prepared this ship to go. Thats a fact, isnt it? I think he sweated the situation he knew hed left. The fact is, he told us for all those years we were the last human outpost, there at Alpha. The last hope for humanity. The sole planet for atevi. That we were all preparing a planetary defense. That we were building another starship for a counterstrike, if we had to. Then we get the facts. And this crews wild enthusiasm for this venture ran out in the first month of this voyage, far from civilization. Now were down to grim determination and the very real likelihood were going to find the station dead after all this effort. Things aboard are quiet. They will be quiet, until theres some result. But if I take this to the crew Youre a captain.

Equal to Sabin, on your watch. You have the authority to decide the course of this ship, the same as she does. I'm a captain who knows less about the operation of this ship than the average maintenance grunt. I'm a damn linguist, Bren! That's what I am. That's all I am, and I'm not even competent at that. You are competent. What you can do is always invisible to you. From outside perspective...you don't have to sit a technical post.

You can command the techs. You can say, go here, or go there. That's all the captains do, that I've ever observed. And what do I do when we come charging in to Reunion and I haven't any of the Guild computer keys? As surviving ship's executive, Bren said in Ragi, might one not say the keys weren't passed? Jase stared at him. Outright stared. Maybe took an internal moment to translate that twice. But Jase had been in Shejidan, and knew the atevi court, and the use of daggers and plots. The paidhi-aiji was steeped in that culture. And at a pinch, could more than think in Ragi. The full range of alternatives, Bren said, again in Ragi. And in Mosphei: A question. Merely a question. Too much unknown, Jase said in Ragi. And in ship-speak: And I'm human, and I'm holding a bomb, in this record. And I respect Sabin. I do respect her. I didn't start this voyage that way, but I do. Granted. Not incompatible considerations. Maybe Jase needed a dose of

Ragi. Maybe he added, not subtracted, possibilities and solutions. But it remained an uncomfortable situation. You respected Ramirez, Bren reminded him, in Ragi. And by all you say, nadi, who knows? Maybe he was about to execute the plan you used to think he had. He released the Archive to the planet. He wasn't that worried about contamination. Or he'd reconciled himself to us. Maybe he really did refuel the ship as a defense. He planned for another starship...but that's going to be atevi-run. The aijis help could provide him his widest ambitions. A developed planet, all those resources. Maybe he wasn't, in his own plan, going back until he'd prepared a base that wouldn't fall under Guild control. Worth considering, at least. Jase steeped his hands, thinking, and thinking. He deployed me, and Yolanda. Yet put you back in space, but not her. It's a damned circle, Bren. Everything runs in a circle. He wasn't getting any younger. The Tamun blow-up took his health. He didn't plan, perhaps, to be overheard in what he told you. About the Great Lie? Betraying the Guild? I'm betting, though, Bren said, that at least by then, the other captains knew what had happened back at Reunion. It would have been irresponsible of him to know there was a Guild authority surviving out here in that critical situation, and not to tell those who'd succeed him. He was dying and told you the biggest secret aboard to make you equal to them. And maybe he wanted to know, for one thing, how you'd take it.

And whether you forgave him. Emotional answers. Not logical ones. The man was dying. At that point, maybe emotional answers mattered. Wanting me to make the decision? Me, but not Yolanda? Damn it all! And Ogun. And Sabin. It would be their decision, too, when he was out of the picture. I'd be the deciding vote. Damn him! If they split. As they didn't. Most days I forgive him. I suppose I forgive him. I suppose we're doing the right thing in coming out here. And if we show up and the Guild does what's ultimately sensible, and boards the ship, and take orders, so many things will become moot. But by all I know about what happened in the past I don't think that's highly likely. I never thought it was all that likely, where the Guild is concerned. If they'd wanted to leave Reunion, they'd have left, wouldn't they? But they've had nine years now to get worse or for better. If they're stronger and more recalcitrant, we may have decisions to make. Sabin's going to decide those issues. That's the fact I can't change. Crew may decide, Bren said. And you have that tape. I'll confess, Jase said, I've had it for the last month. Not surprising you'd think about it before showing it to me. I'm out of time for thinking. I had to show it to you. We're coming up on the last move. Last move. Before Reunion. This next one I really think will put us there. A small inner shiver. You know, I never get used to this I think business. Space is lumpy, Jase said. All that. But I still don't like to hear I guess from the navigators. Or from your partner in this mess? Some things you can't figure with a computer. Jase, we'll make it. We do what we'll do when we get there. It's all we can do at the moment, but we just plot alternate positions, if it doesn't work. Same as I suppose your navigators do. Which is why I think you called me here. Jase gave a wry, one-sided smile. Started the tape moving again. On the screen, the exploration reached a corner. The fact is, Jase said, the one reconciling fact, in all the Old Man planned, is that he wanted me in some kind of authority over my own destiny. More than that, I think he'd be happy you're here. And honored that the dowager is here, with all she represents. I think you're right. Contamination no longer frightened him. He'd reconciled himself to the blended civilization he'd found. I think, all his old Guild notions to the contrary, he'd found the universe a far more dangerous place than he'd ever imagined, and before he died, he'd learned to take allies where he could get them. Yolanda kept her standoffishness from local culture. I didn't. I fell far more deeply not just into downworld culture, but into atevi culture, and the one thing that both infuriates me and encourages me is that Ramirez appointed me to succeed him. Me. My view of the universe. My atevi-contaminated, impure view of the universe humans have to live in. It's not a degree of

importance I ever wanted, Ill tell you. But the thought that Ramirez meant to do it, that he actually approved what I amis what gives me the courage to get out of bed and go on duty. Jase pressed a button and skipped ahead, to a point where the helmet-cam view reached a sealed pressure door. In rapid motion they locked through, and then...Then the record ended. Stopped. Thats it? Bren asked. Thats it, Jase said. Thats all we have. Its absolutely not regulation that the tape stops like that. Its very much against regulations. And maybe Sabin knows what happened next and maybe she doesnt, but certainly, based on that tape, you and I dont. And thats the other reason I wanted to talk to you. Youre the diplomat. My outrageous instinct says have the inevitable confrontation with Sabin about this tape right now, before we get to Reunion Station. Tell her what I know, what I suspect, all the structure of tissue and moonbeams. If its going to blow up, let it blow and lets talk about the ships great secret, and Ramirezs crazy ideas, and settle it before we have another crisis on us. Let me add a fact to keep between you and me. Weve run with a little excess of fuel, ships rule. Enough fuel reserve to get out to a place we know if things arent optimum or if the Guild tries to take us. If Sabins disposed to do itshe can get us away from Reunion. The name of the place is Gamma. And youre rightI can order that, if Sabin is in some way incapacitated. There are resources there. It would take us years, but wed get home that way. On the other course, if we do go into Reunion, and dock, and open the hatchby then were dealing with somebody else, with Sabin involved, with people shell know and I wontwho are going to outright outnumber us. Not to mention the crew may be in a very foul mood, once the truth starts coming out. As it still may. If they start talking to remote cousins and the stray mourned-for-dead uncle, all sorts of truth is going to come out, this time. Youre the number two captain, Bren reiterated. You decide what to do. You always had the authority to go after that log record. A little more questionable extension of authority, I suppose, that you show it to me. More, to show it to the crew. But by Ramirezs decision and Oguns concurring vote, you are the number two captain. So Id think you do have that authority to break this secret wide openif you choose. Its your watch. Isnt it? Clearly my watch. And the burning question still remainswhat else do we do with it? When you show it to me, you clearly know youre showing it to my security. And the dowagers. I might have given you special privacy. You didnt ask it. You keep secrets. So does the dowager. Secrets again? Thats the eternal question on this ship, isnt it? Tell Ginny Kroger, Bren said. Shes tied into our information. Its hard to keep her apart from anything. And her staff circulates on three-deck. And if they know crews not far. Youre right. Everywhere we turn, theres another question how wide to take this, and it all runs in a circle...once you tell one other individual, it all leads eventually to the crew. You understand my problem, Jase said. And telling Gin Kroger, whos next to telling you, eventually leaves everyone on the ship but the crew knowing whats in this tape, which has got to be another psychological statement, so far as the crews concerned, doesnt it? Pride. Trust. And how do we admit, this late in the game, that Ramirez lied to them twice? Im just beginning to figure out how long Ramirez lied to me. Secrets, Bren said, never, ever served Phoenix well. But letting them out just before making port is going to be difficult. So here we aretrying to shut Reunion Station down and keep the aliens from tracking us back to Alpha? Thats a secret, isnt itand one were not going to confess to the Guild on first meeting. Secrets are our whole existence. Maybe some of them have to be kept. Even inside. I have scraps of facts that lead under closed doors. And what do we do? Fling wide all the doors? Open just one, thinking we can limit the damage? Restrict images during docking again, and hope that crew wont think to ask until this has all worked and theyre too happy to lynch their officers? We dont even know for an assured fact, Bren said, that Sabin herself has a clue whats on this tape. Shes got Jenrette to ask. Maybe shes never asked Jenrette. Or maybe Jenrette didnt tell her everything. She knows theres a question. Yes, shes seen this tape, no matter when she saw it. She knows, by now. And knowing all she knows, knowing that Ive been after this tape, shes kept it to herself, letting me hunt for itand ultimately letting you and me go into a situation on arrival without the information, if I didnt get it. I think that, and I get very angry. And then I reason, Jase said quietly, not looking at him, that she hasnt failed to tell me yet. Not yet. And I keep waiting, day by day, for a briefing on what happened at Reunionand on a dozen things I dont even know to ask. And it doesnt come, Bren said. And it hasnt come. And were running out of time. And youre mad about that. And getting madder. Its that emotional cloud again. Youre not sure youre thinking straight about it? Im not sure Im thinking straight about anything. A check on the thought processes is useful. So after a suitable time of sweating it aloneon the eve of our last ship-moveI asked you in on it...knowing...knowing, unless she does exactly what Ramirez did and freezes the station image...crew will see it, first glance. They havent thought to ask. No ones thought to ask. But if its laid in front of them, they wont take five minutes to figure it out. Its been nine years. Station could have repaired themselves. Wouldnt they? Deep breath. True. And the natural expectation would be, yes, just

expect any survivors would have gotten rotation established, on a fairly high priority, to assure there is someone alive and healthy to meet us. So we might get through that. But not once information starts flowing, between stationers and us. Then we'll get the questions and I have a dire suspicion there's more to it than we know. You're likely right. I think crew could swallow the worst suspicions if it's on a soaring expectation of success. But having lived down in the lower decks, as, mind, none of the other captains have done. I think if we let the rest of the crew find out in the middle of a crisis that they were lied to like this, they'll blow, and this time God knows. God knows whether mutiny is a possibility, but it's happened once, and we don't forget that. Sabin not overly concerned for crew opinion never has been. So here I sit, thinking yes, no, go this way, go that way. I've put myself in a position, digging this out, an uncomfortable one, but I've found it. And now I have to sit on it or let it loose. Either a decision. No question. Third choice. Do I confront Sabin? Truth is a fair start for a complex operation. Truth at least between two captains of the same ship. So you think it's a good idea to ask her? I'm sure truth may precipitate certain things. I'm sure of that, too. But do you advise me to do it? The idea has a certain merit. And certain downsides. Are you going to do it? I want you in on it. I'm less sure that's a good idea. My presence is provocative. Distracting from the issue. To the good. I want you there. I want Banichi and Jago there. Bren was dismayed. A threat? A reminder to us humans we need to settle this quickly and not bring our unguarded tempers to our atevi guests or, for that matter, to the Mospheirans. I want all I've got on my side, environment, plain environment, not verbal argument. Sabin absorbs facts. She doesn't listen to arguments worth a damn. What she sees in a confrontation, that impresses her. If she sees the two of them, she'll know the scale of it. She'll know there's no secrecy possible there. Period. It was, in certain particulars, a fair assessment of the senior captain. So, Bren asked, when do you want me? Now. It's four in the morning. Enthusiasm for the truth aside, is she going to be happier being waked up in the middle of her night? Sleep-cycle, Jase reminded him. We have sleep-cycles. Only you planetary types have nights. You run a ship, you get odd hours. And her cycles closing out pretty soon. A moderately urgent technical consultation. I think that's the way to put it... a step short of an operational emergency. That'll get her on deck. If I say I just want to talk theory at this hour she'll tell me go to hell. And if I bother her in her duty hours she'll be on edge from the start and anxious to get back to schedule. This is an emergency. I'd at least offer tea, Bren said dryly. I don't think she'll stay for breakfast. Tea it is. Jase punched buttons and sent away the schematic. The tape started over. Jase punched another button, this one on his collar. C1. Captain Sabin to my office at earliest convenience, technical consultation. Wake her. Yes, sir, the answer came from the desk unit. That fast. He'd agreed. They were in it. 2. Banichi-ji, Bren said under his breath, sitting in the office chair, and using the pocket com while there was still time, please advise security everything's under control and proceeding well. Advise the atevi establishment, that was, and under control was tolerably true. He sat in Jase's office waiting for Sabin to show up on a small hour of the morning, on a minor emergency call, waiting for all else that might fall out and the second worst situation he could think of was that Cenedi might have waked the dowager to advise his ultimate authority what was going on upstairs. The second worst. The very worst thing he could think of, outside of a complete malfunction of the ship's engines, was the dowager deciding to come up here in person to have morning tea and reason with Sabin. Tea was not a word of fortunate history, under those circumstances. Kaplan, however, had indeed come into Jase's office just for that purpose, to make tea... a nominally Mospheiran herbal item, one of those light mass planetary amenities that the ship's crew had taken to as passionately as they took to fruit sugar. Polano and Banichi and Jago made a living wall of security outside... that sense of presence Jase deemed a very good idea. Sabin had gotten the message from C1, and hadn't objected to Jase's office as the venue. She might, Bren thought, have breakable objects in her own. It was a level of not-quite-critical summons that meant she could take a decent amount of time responding. She might even stop for breakfast, if only to try Jase's patience, but they made strong tea, all the same. It was pushing five hundred hours, not too far off first shifts ordinary waking. Bren's pocket com beeped. So did Jase's desk unit. She's here, was the general advisement. Heads up. A few beats later the door opened and Sabin walked in. She was a thin, past-sixties woman with close-clipped gray hair, uniform sweater and uniform coat. She didn't walk into a room: she invaded it. She gave an habitual scowl to their security, who folded in after her. Their security, then her security, two men, Collins and Adams, intent on coming inside if the rest were bent on it. Bren stood up, a courtesy. Jase poured a cup of tea and set it on his desk edge. She didn't take it. She didn't sit down. Nature of the emergency. I trust there is an emergency. A fairly major one, Jase said. The tape, captain. The tape. And I'm not about to let Mr. Cameron go out of here seeing what he's seen without hearing your side of this. What in hell have you done? *Revue de presse* "A third intelligent species makes its appearance in this sixth superior

installment in Cherryh's much praised Foreigner series. As with previous volumes in this intense series, detailed character development, highly charged dialogue and an eye for subtle differences in cultural preconceptions are of central importance, although Cherryh also manages some fine action scenes. This is serious space opera at its very best by one of the leading SF writers in the field today." Publishers Weekly (starred review)"[A] standout among Cherryh's generally excellent stories about human-alien relations." Booklist"Cherryh superbly crafts complex intrigues and alien races possessed of integrity, as well as a sense of otherness." Library Journal"Filled with a complex and layered society, with enough alien intrigue to keep you awake half the night, Explorer is so finely and densely wrought that you may end up dreaming of sable-skinned giants with gold eyes, and the silver spun delicacy of interstellar politics." SF Site"This sixth adventure opens things up and adds some new and intriguing plot elements. It's always great fun to see how Cherryh manages to get us to our destination, and this one's no exception." Science Fiction Chronicle"Excellent characterization, intense political tension, and truly unique alien races make the [Foreigner] series an essential component in any science fiction collection." Voya