

# **THE KIF STRIKE BACK**

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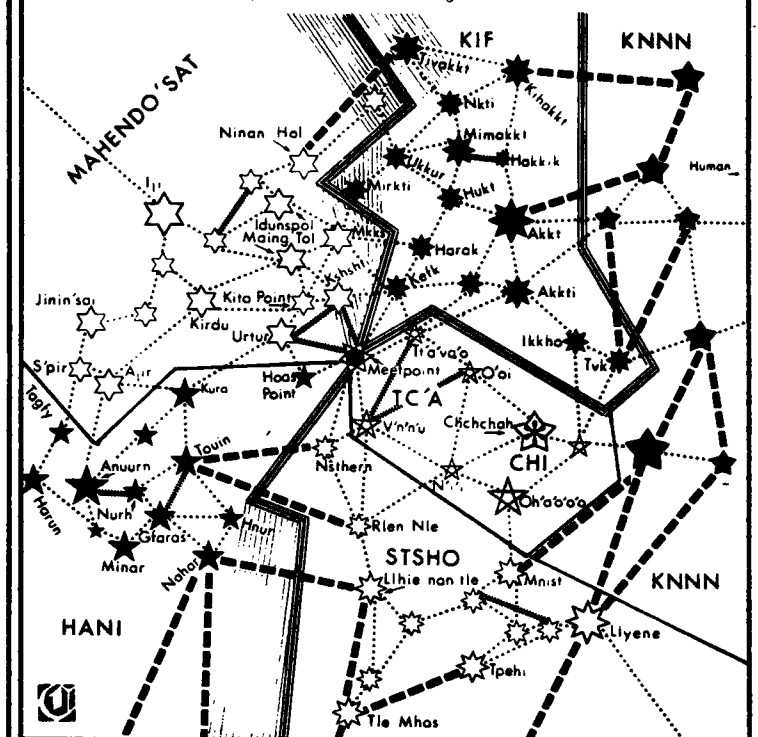
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# MAP OF COMPACT SPACE

Depth of Field = +/- 40 Light Years



## SYMBOLS

- = a homestar
- = a star and/or major station
- = a jump point and/or small trading station

## BORDERS

- = Friendly
- = Interdicted
- = Disputed

## ROUTES

- = routes possible only for Knnn ships
- = routes possible for low-mass ships
- = routes possible for ships carrying mass

NOTE: Stars sometimes appear to be beside each other while depth of field places them far apart. Ship routes are planned to 'climb' or 'descend' as well as to go laterally.



In Our Last Episode. . . \*

A kifish prince named Akkukkak acquired a prize and an unprecedented opportunity: an alien ship and crew fell into his hands—promising him new hunting-grounds for the kif and a new species to prey on. All he had to do was to find out where the ship came from and how powerful the aliens might be.

But the last surviving alien escaped him onto the docks at Meetpoint, and ran onto the hani ship *The Pride of Chanur*.

That was how Pyanfar Chanur met Tully the human; and how the ancient Chanur clan ended up in a fight hani would ordinarily have avoided.

It ended in a full-scale shootout at Gaohn Station in the hani home system, when Akkukkak occupied Gaohn. Chanur clan and a couple of mahendo'sat hunter-captains named Goldtooth and Jik joined forces to defeat the kif.

Akkukkak perished in that battle—or at least made an unwilling exit in the company of a species called the knnn, methane-breathers of bizarre mentality.

Tully went back to human space. Pyanfar Chanur hoped then that there would be trade forthcoming. She anticipated a whole new era of hani prosperity with Chanur clan getting rich.

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\* As told in: *The Pride of Chanur* and *Chanur's Venture*.

But she was quickly betrayed, first by the stsho who owned Meetpoint and who barred her from that critical trading station—and thereby from access to humanity; then by her mahendo'sat partners, who went off and dealt with the humans on their own; and finally by her own kind, because a good many hani clans saw Chanur clan as a threat to their own power and were all too glad to see it impoverished.

In hani eyes, Pyanfar Chanur had done a heinous thing in bringing aliens to Gaohn: hani had been brought into space by the mahendo'sat and always resented the debt. Mahendo'sat had taken their direct influence off the hani homeworld of Anuurn, but hani never quite trusted them; they liked kif far less, distrusted the stsho, and wished not even to contemplate the knnn—let alone the prospect of non-Compact aliens like humans, all of which Pyanfar Chanur had brought into the very heart of hani civilization.

More, she had grown *foreign*. When a hani lord is defeated in challenge, he dies; but Pyanfar intervened when her son supplanted her husband: she took her husband offworld where no hani male had ever been permitted, and declared him part of *The Pride's* crew. Moreover, Kohan, lord of Chanur, acquiesced in her action, a circumstance which occasioned ribald jokes at Chanur's expense and further damaged Chanur's credit among hani.

So for two years *The Pride of Chanur* and other Chanur ships made small runs and barely kept operating, sinking deeper and deeper into financial ruin.

Constantly Pyanfar renewed her applications for Meetpoint access; but she lacked money for the bribes necessary to deal with the stsho, she had no help from the mahendo'sat, not a whiff of human trade, and there seemed no hope for Chanur's fortunes.

But unexpectedly and for no reason she could fathom, the stsho sent word her application was approved: *The Pride* turned toward Meetpoint with the last large cargo Chanur could scrape together.

Once docked, Pyanfar headed immediately for the offices of Stle stles stlen, stationmaster of Meetpoint, to sign the necessary documents and reinstate her trading license.

She was accosted on dockside by Goldtooth, who dragged her aboard his ship, *Mahijiru*, and brought her face to face with Tully—back in Compact space and at a station which would erupt in xenophobic riot if it knew a human was present.

Now Pyanfar Chanur was a hani of considerable nerve, but this was more than she could bear—until Goldtooth began naming advantages to the deal, like human trade, and money, and alliance—and until a

small quiet alarm started going off in her skull telling her just *who* had gotten those papers cleared, and how fast it all might collapse if she refused Goldtooth's deal.

She took it; and Tully; *and* a packet of papers; and went back to break the news to her crew.

But kif on the station arranged a riot to cover their attempt to snatch Tully from her custody. Goldtooth fled the docks; she and her crew ended up billed for damages—which she charged to the mahendo'sat government, using the papers Goldtooth had left her. Stle stles stlen was mollified—for the moment, so well-disposed, in fact, that this avowed friend of the mahendo'sat gave her one direct warning: *don't trust Goldtooth*.

The kif also approached Pyanfar with two direct offers: one, to *buy* Tully from her and, two, to ally themselves with her against a certain kif who had a bounty on her head.

It was certainly tempting. Money enough to solve their problems. A way out of their dilemma. A possible peace with the kif.

But she turned it down, dumped her precious cargo, and pulled out of Meetpoint as rapidly as she could with Tully aboard—because her credit with Stle stles stlen hung upon a credit authorization from the mahendo'sat—and *that* was only valid if she played her role as Goldtooth's courier. Kif offers or not, she had never dealt with kif and never wished to; Goldtooth, moreover, had her trapped—and Goldtooth had run, heading deep into stsho space with kifish hunters on his tail, *some* of whom were interested in her.

*Then* she learned that getting Tully and his message to the mahen regional capital was only part of it—

A knnn tracked them out of Meetpoint. *That* was no good news. Rumors of what she was carrying had evidently spread to methane-side. Knnn, so alien no one could talk to them, so technologically advanced no one could fight them—existed inside the Compact and outside the law. They might take exception to any move at any moment and kill a ship; and no one would do a thing about it—because no one could talk to them. It was a monumental achievement that the serpentine tc'a had once upon a time gotten the knnn to understand the concept of trade: so nowadays knnn simply contacted a station, rushed onto its methane-dock and deposited whatever they liked, grabbed whatever they wanted and left. This was an improvement over their former behavior, in which they simply looted and left. Or took a ship apart.

And Tully, when questioned, avowed that humans were late getting back to Compact space because their ships had been stopped. *Someone*

was conducting piracy against human ships in human space, and kif was the automatic assumption. The message and the mission seemed to have to do with a mahen determination to push through a regular, patrollable route that would bring humans to Compact space—and incidentally right *past* their old enemies the kif. All this made sense, and Pyanfar was averse to nothing that bothered the kif.

But Tully handed her his own suspicions—that it was not kif which had raided them: it was knnn, and humans had fired on knnn ships.

Pyanfar was horrified.

If Tully was right, they had a potential knnn target aboard their ship. They were carrying a message which involved knnn affairs, either one of which was about as welcome as a ticking bomb. If the knnn moved on them they were flatly done for. Moreover, the kif who was hunting them had seized the route that led most directly to the mahen capital and they had to reroute to the border station of Kshshti—far from a safe place to have a prize like Tully, a place close to kif territory and frequented by the methane breathers.

As if they needed more trouble, they had picked up another pursuer. A hani government ship captained by one Rhif Ehrran was out hunting a hani renegade named Tahar. This Tahar had sided with the kif at the battle of Gaohn, and was a well-known outlaw, said to be operating as a pirate in the vicinity of Kefk and Meetpoint. But *The Pride of Chanur* turned up under Rhif Ehrran's nose, trafficking with mahendo'sat and kif—and this policewoman of the *han* diverted herself from one quarry to another potential traitor. Rhif Ehrran's political patrons would be far happier to see the demise of Chanur than that of a mere pirate already powerless in hani affairs. So priorities were revised. Rhif Ehrran learned, probably from Stle stles stlen, that Chanur had Tully aboard—and that Chanur was in the employ of a foreign government; and Rhif Ehrran saw a chance to ruin Chanur once for all.

Ehrran commandeered assistance: Banny Ayhar of *Ayhar's Prosperity* was compelled to dump her cargo and come along as Ehrran's ally—as they headed off in the only direction now open to travel.

Pyanfar barely reached Kshshti alive: *The Pride*, long running without needed repairs, broke down under the stress of the jump and limped into Kshshti to discover a welcoming committee in port: Rhif Ehrran, Banny Ayhar—and the same kif who had tried to buy Tully back at Meetpoint.

Now, this kif's name was Sikkukkut an'niktukktin, once a vassal of Pyanfar's old enemy Akkukkak. Akkukkak in fact had had *two* lieutenants: Akkhtimakt and Sikkukkut; and the two of them were currently

contending for primacy among kif. Akkhtimakt was the one they had evaded on their way to Kshshti; Akkhtimakt had imposed the blockade not only to stop traffic, but to forestall his rival Sikkukkut—and lo! into Sikkukkut's reach came the whole mahendo'sat plan to outmaneuver the kif . . . in the person of Pyanfar Chanur and Tully.

The mahendo'sat authorities at Kshshti knew what Sikkukkut was up to, and they were anxious to get *The Pride* out of there at any cost. They broke *The Pride's* old engine pack off the rear and began to install a new one, effectively rebuilding the ship, but as *The Pride* sat immobile in the last stages of repairs, kifish raiders kidnapped Tully and, by accident, Pyanfar's young niece Hilfy Chanur, gravely wounding Pyanfar's cousin Chur Anify.

Whoever began the fracas, Akkhtimakt's agents or Sikkukkut's, it was undisputably Sikkukkut's ship *Harukk* which sped out of Kshshti with Tully and Hilfy aboard, with *The Pride* dockbound and helpless.

Moreover, the methane-breathing tc'a delivered Pyanfar an ambiguous warning of multiple factions and connivance among kif; of danger to themselves, and of knnn involvement in the whole question.

At this depth of despair another ship pulled into Kshshti: the mahen hunter ship *Aja Jin*, commanded by none other than Keia Nomes-teturjai—*Jik*, to his friends; partner to Goldtooth; agent of the mahen government and armed with enough authorizations to coerce even Rhif Ehrran.

Pyanfar still had the message packet destined for Maing Tol—but Sikkukkut's parting message indicated if she wanted to see Hilfy and Tully alive she must come instead to Mkks—even deeper into the border zone, where kif were predominant.

Jik called a conference of captains and handed the packet to Banny Ayhar with orders to get it to Maing Tol; and thrust upon Rhif Ehrran a set of authorizations that won her cooperation as well.

So one message has sped toward Maing Tol; Hilfy and Tully are held hostage on the kifish border; Goldtooth is among the missing and one more dockside has been wrecked.

They move each as they must. And *The Pride* leaves Kshshti, headed deliberately into a kifish trap.



# 1

*The Pride* came in, dropping suddenly into here and now; and Pyanfar Chanur reached for controls, half-dazed yet.

*Where?* she thought, with one wild panicked notion that the drive could have betrayed them and they might be nowhere at all. There were new routines to remember. There were new parameters, new systems—

*No. Go on comp, fool, let the autos take her—*

“Location,” she said past jaws gone dry as dust.

“We’re in the range,” Tirun said.

The first dump came, phasing them into the interface out again; and *The Pride of Chanur* hauled herself back to realspace with authority.

“We’re alive,” Khym said.

And that surprised them all.

“Chur?” Geran asked.

“Here,” a voice said from in-ship com, faint and slurred. “I’m here, all right. We made it, huh?”

Second dump: *The Pride* shed more of the speed the gravity drop had lent her.

And kept going, while the red numbers reeled on the board, a passage-speed that flicked astronomical measures past like local trivialities.

“Just passed third mark,” Haral said.

“Huh,” said Pyanfar.

“Beacon alarm.”

"No response." Pyanfar's eye was on the scan image Mkks' robot beacon sent them, positions of everything in Mkks system. Beacon protested their velocity. "Get me that line, gods rot it, can we do it?—*where's that line? Wake up!*"

The line flashed into the monitor, red and dangerous, showing them a course that broke every navigation code in the Compact.

Alarms flashed: the siren howled. Pyanfar laid back her ears and reached frantically to controls as Haral synched moves with her to get the numbers ripped loose from scancomp and embedded in nav-. She keyed a confirmation, one press of a button. Alarms died, and *The Pride* kept going, hellbent on the line—

("We're on, we're on, we're on!" Tirun breathed—)

—sending a C-charged jumpship on a course straight to Mkks station, a maneuver two stars wide, betting everything they had that Mkks beacon would be accurate. They were racing the lightspeed wavefront of their own arrival, the message which that jumprange beacon back there sent to Mkks—chased that moment down the timeline as fast as any ship could dare, with enough energy bound up in their mass to make one great flare if anything Mkks beacon had not reported should turn up in their path—a nova in miniature, a briefly flaring sun.

Pyanfar let the controls go, flexed aching hands and reached in null G drift for the foil packet she had clamped to the chair arm. It escaped her claws and she snagged it back, bit a hole in it and drank the contents down in several convulsive gulps, shuddering at the taste and the impact on her stomach. It was necessary: the body shed hair, shed skin, depleted its minerals and moisture. Shortly blood sugar would surge and plummet, and she had to be past that point when *The Pride's* course reached critical again.

There was no hope now of steering. They were going too fast to skew off to any influence but the star's, and that pull was plotted into their course. She wiped her mane back and rubbed an itch on her nose that had been there since Kshshti.

"Mkks nine minutes Light," Haral said.

Nine minutes til Mkks station got the news of their arrival; mahendo'sat authority would take a few minutes more realizing they had not made that critical third velocity dump. In the meanwhile *The Pride* was shortening the nine minute reply interval. In much less than eighteen minutes, they would run into the outgoing communications wavefront of a frantic station.

That was time as starships saw it: but someone had to call the kif on com; someone had physically to push buttons and get to kif authority,

while in each running stride of kifish feet down a corridor an inbound jumpship traveled a planetary diameter.

"Send," she said to Khym. "*The Pride of Chanur* inbound to Mkks: requesting shiplist and dock assignment. We want berths clear on either side of us. We have cargo hazard. Send."

*That* would confuse them: a ship behaving like vane malfunction and talking like cargo emergency. Eight point nine minutes to get that message to station. Fifteen point something by the time station could so much as reply if they were instantaneous. *Someone* had to turn a chair, ask a supervisor, report the message. She heard Khym send it out—*gods*, a male voice from a hani ship: that alone would confound station central. They would not have heard its like before—would be checking their doppler-receivers for potential malfunction, doubting the truth while it hurtled down on them, even techs accustomed to *C-* fractional thinking—

"Send again: Message to *Harukk*, Sikkukkut commanding. We have an appointment. We've come to keep it. We'll see you on the docks."

(Someone deciding to relay that to the kif; kifish feet racing to locate the commander: another moment to decide to undock or sit tight—An instant's consideration and a planetary diameter flicked by.)

Ten minutes to launch a ship like *Harukk* if they ripped her loose from dock without preamble: forty more to get her sufficient range from mass to pulse the fields up. *Harukk* had a star to fight for its velocity, and that star was *helping* them come in.

Another half-minute down.

At this dizzying rate, inside this time-packet, there was a curious sense of slow-motion, of insulation from kif and threats.

And a sense of helplessness. There *were* things the kif could do. And there *was* time for those things—like pressing a trigger, or cutting a defenseless throat—

The dizziness hit; the concentrate had reached her bloodstream.

"You sick, Khym?"

"No." A small and strangled voice. It was not the first time.

"Chur?"

"Still with you, captain."

"Tirun: got a realtime check?"

"483 hours in transit, by the beacon."

"That's 20 minutes to final dump," Haral said.

On schedule, on mark. They had worked it all out at Kshshti, before they undertook this lunacy; worked it out the hard way, in the hours before undock, and in the long hard push that sent *The Pride* out to a

jump by-the-gods deep in the gravity well and brought her in gods-rotted deep in this one, in a maneuver a hunter-crew would stick at and no merchanter ever ought to try.

They were hani, all: red-gold maned and bearded, red-gold hides. All of them but one had gold rings aplenty up the sweep of their tuft-tipped ears, gold that meant experience, voyages and ventures from home at Anuurn to Idunspol, Meetpoint, Maing Tol and Kura; Jininsai and Urtur; strange ports, foreign trade, dice-throws and wide bets. But no voyage like this one. Mkks was no hani port. Not a place where any honest freighter would care to go. And no honest merchanter had that outsized engine pack they carried; or that ration of vane to mass.

Pyanfar said nothing. She uncapped the safety switch on what few armaments *The Pride* had, and broke another law.

"Eighteen to final dump," Haral said.

"Call coming—Tirun—Tirun—which one?" Khym's voice betrayed strain and panic, inexperienced as he was at that board. Disoriented as well as jump-sick, it was well possible. But the switch got made and the station's voice came through, dopplered out into sanity.

Mahen voice. "*Confirm dump, confirm dump—*"

"Repeat previous message. Tell them we want that shiplist. Fast."

There were codes they might have used to get cooperation from the mahendo'sat. There was no way to use them. The kif had ears too.

So they went at it the hard way, and Mkks station began to panic, dopplered message overlaying message, continuing a few seconds yet in the initial assumption: that they had a ship incoming dead at them in helpless malfunction.

By now their own message would be flashing to the kif, who would not be so naive.

The kif might—*might*—at this stage get a ship out to run; but she had not read Sikkukkut an'nikktukktin as that breed of kif.

Not with prisoners in his hands.

It was a hall somewhere within the upper reaches of the ship docked gods-knew where. Hilfy Chanur knew the shipname now. It was *Harukk*.

And she knew the kif seated before her, among other kif. His name was Sikkukkut. He sat as a dark-robed lump on an insect-chair, among its black, bent legs. Sodium-glow relieved the murk close in, casting harsh shadow and orange-pink light. Incense curled from black globes set about the room and mingled with ammonia-stench. She could not so much as rub her offended nose. Her hands were linked with cords