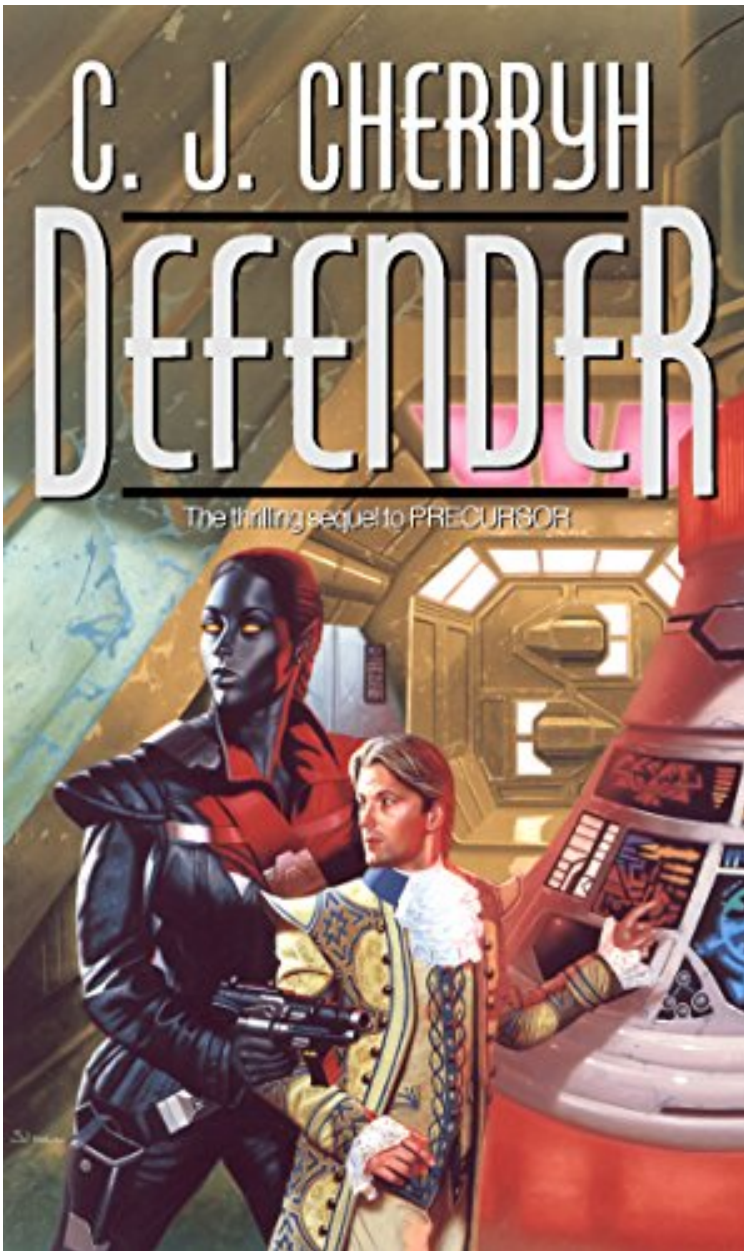


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Defender



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe fifth novel in CherryhsForeigner space opera series, a groundbreakingtale of first contact and its consequencesNearly ten years after the unexpected return of the starship Phoenix, the alien atevi have three functioning space shuttles, and teams of atevi engineers labor in orbit to renovate the space station. But these monumental advances not only add a dangerously powerful third party to an already precarious diplomatic situation, but rouse pro- and anti=s[ace factions in atevi society to incendiary levels. To help negotiate these treacherous diplomatic waters, Tabini-aiji, the powerful head of the atevi's Western

Association, has sent the only human he fully trusts into space: his own paidhi, Bren Cameron. However, the threat of possible invasion by hostile aliens who attacked Phoenix's station in a far-off sector of space hangs over them all. And when one of the senior captains of the Phoenix confesses that this station was not completely destroyed, as had been previously thought, the crew mutinies. How can Bren hope to mediate on a station overcome by a rebellious crew intent on taking the Phoenix on a rescue mission back into hostile alien territory? The long-running *Foreigner* series can also be enjoyed by more casual genre readers in sub-trilogy installments. *Defender* is the fifth *Foreigner* book and the second book of the second sub-trilogy. From the Paperback edition. Extrait

All seats were filled. There was a little murmur of expectation. Then a bell sounded. Utter silence descended. A camera changed focus. That was the only sound now, lamplight momentarily gilding an imprudent lens. That stroke of the bell called for meditation. Next would come a statement from the head of house Tabini, in this case. Bren had read the program somewhat before he entered a shadow too deep for humans to read. And whatever the aiji had to say, the gathered lords would parse it for every detail. It was important an address that could, if it went wrong, break the union of lords apart. It always could. Any chance word, gone amiss, could break the Association at any time and in this context, bets were doubled. Tabini had made deals with human authorities, sent atevi to work on the space station, admitting a flood of new technologies. Hed had to, for a whole host of economic and practical reasons that sliced right across the ordinary order of politics, throwing conservatives into alliance with the most liberal of western powers. Hed had to reach across traditional lines, across ethnical lines across associational lines. And so the agreement with humans widened, policy deliberately blind to the causes of the last world war, dancing across the shards of old resentments, skipping over divides of opinion that had once swum with blood. Most of all, the crisis in the heavens and the need to secure a voice in that resolution had shoved the whole economy into a hellishly scary rush, a fever pitch run that no one at first had thought would last more than a month. No longer than three years. Then no longer than six. As yet there was no slowdown, no cooldown, no pause for breath and no meeting of the associated lords until this. The silence after that bell was so absolute that breathing itself seemed a disturbance...and in that silence, of all things, someone dropped a program, a crack of parchment on stone that set a twitch if not a killing reflex into every hair-triggered, Guild-trained nerve in the chamber. Every Guild member had to skip a heartbeat. Every lord present had to make a conscious decision not to dive below the benches. But it was only the next aiji, their someday ruler, diving almost to the edge of the flower-decked sarcophagus to rescue that wayward, unseemly folio. In his haste it escaped his fingers on his retreat. Twice. Bren winced. Three times. The boy had it. Scrambled back to his place in the standing line. Cajeyri, Tabini's and Damiris son, the hope of the Association, Tatischeigis grand-nephew was the height and weight of the average human teenager but not, by any means, average, human, or teenaged. Cajeyri tried God knew he tried, but somehow his feet found obstacles, his hands lost their grip on perfectly ordinary objects, and when Cajeyri would swear to all gods most fortunate that he was standing still, everyone else called it fidgeting. Now of all times...in front of the whole assembled Association, the lords of the aishiditat, this was no time for boys to be boys, or for a child to be whatever he might be. Cajeyri was invisible in the first row again. Silence hung all about him. The dignity of the highest houses settled on his young shoulders. Tabini, Tatischeiginow Ilisidi, in whose care the young unfortunate attended the ceremony were all in question in that behavior. Fosterage was the rule of the great houses, once a child of rank left the cradle. Tatischeigi, the maternal uncle, had had a go at applying courtly polish, in the rural, rigid politics of the Atageini stronghold in the central west. Now Ilisidi had him: in her district, modernist meant someone who installed a flush toilet in a thousand-year-old stronghold. God help the boy. A second bell. Solemnity recovered. This was the second point, fragile second, unfortunate second: atevi lived by numbers, died by the numbers. Two of anything presumed there would be a third. There must be a third. The very note, echoing in the stone recesses of the place, on this occasion, gathered up the tension in the air and prepared to braid it into a cord...if the third bell, please God, would only ring without unfortunate omen. Cajeyri held himself absolutely still. Two would ring ominously even in an atevi six-year-olds brain. Two always meant pay attention: another will follow. Bren had been to Malguri himself. In a way, he wished he could go back there, have another try of his own at a life a human wasn't regularly admitted even to see. In a certain measure he so envied the boy that chance. Ilisidi had her hands full. He did know that. The boy, thus far, with the best intentions, had destroyed two historic porcelains, set off a major security alarm, and ridden a startled mecheita across newly-poured cement in Tatischeigis formal garden. Finally, unbearably, with the least shifting of bodies in anticipation, Tabini, head of house, foremost of the Ragi atevi, aiji of the whole aishiditat, moved out of the row to the single lighted lamp that sat before

the sarcophagus. Tabini, tall shadow, took a slender straw, took light from one lamp and lit one of two others. Two lamps lit. Jago, armed and informed, nudged Bren's hand with the back of hers. Pay attention. Be on your guard. Banichi, on his other side, didn't move. Every bodyguard in the whole chamber must be thinking the same, prepared for anything. It was in all the machimi, the history-plays: in the feudal age, in Malguris age, the time of bright banners and heraldry, assemblies thus invited had been murdered wholesale, slaughtered by hidden archers. Whole tables of diners had fallen ill at once. Ladies had perished in poisoned baths name the death: someone had delivered it. Hearts beat, atevi, and in one case, human, with utter trepidation. Tabini, damn him, knew it. The third bell had not yet rung. And Tabini turned, in that terrible, unprecedented interval. I speak, Tabini declared, in that resonant, still-young voice, between the second and the third bell. We live...between the second and the third bell of our associated lives. We live...on the edge of decision and chance. We live...between expectation and fulfillment. Between the second and the third bell of our collective existence, I am Valasis son, I am Valasis heir...I am Valasis successor. After the hasdrawad and the tashrid, the bicameral legislature, had determined for the second time that Ilisidi would not be aiji, they had appointed Tabini to head the aishiditat. And the whole assembly, caught between the bells and the lights, heard felicitous, redeeming threes. Every atevi nerve rang as a human could only intellectually comprehend not feel, gut-deep: felicitous one, then the two strokes of we live. Then I speak, disastrous two felicitous three of we live. And now no resolution of the first cahi, the first proposal, at all, but the infelicitous two of I am. A human brain could short-circuit keeping up with the bracketing structures, but Bren swore he felt it in his own nerves: and he felt his knees go weak when Tabini gave the assembly that third, redemptive I am. The whole audience held its breath, angry as they must be at this tactic. That, in this audience, didn't matter. They were caught up, snared, and couldn't move. Darent move. Felt the aishiditat threatened and were drawn, unwillingly, to hope that it, and their lives, continued. I speak as your appointed guide into time to come, Tabini said. And delivered the next third stroke, that painfully wound-up, merciful third: I speak for the unity of the assembly of us all. We do not forget, Tabini continued, as nerve and flesh all but liquified in relief and bodyguards stood down from red alert. Tabini swept on, in possession of all attention. Thank God no program dropped. Breathing itself was at a minimum. Tabini's oratory was all fortunate threes now, rapid, hammering into nerves still resounding to two strokes of the bell, still waiting for the resolution of their universe. We do not break our strong connections with all that Valasi-aiji built. We do not abrogate our traditions. The more knowledge we acquire, the more we rationally comprehend the universe, the more we control our own destiny. Sensitive spot: the number-counters who so powerfully ruled the traditional world had long discounted the numbers of the heavens, meaning they had deliberately, scornfully dismissed the work of astronomers, who had failed to foresee the Landing. But the modern-day Astronomer Emeritus, a genius of his age, brandished numbers that confounded the number-counter those mathematicians who claimed to guide the less talented to understand the balance of the universe. The newly respectable Astronomer Emeritus was Tabini's. And with Tabini's blessing, the Astronomer Emeritus worked to understand the stars and make reliable paths through the heavens. The numbers flowing down from the heavens now ran a starship and promised to connect atevi to a rational universe that also accounted for humans. To a universe, what was more, that brought them a second foreign species. That this new species happened to be hostile well, well, but the soaring optimism of good numbers insisted the difficulties could be overcome, irresistibly so. Atevi relied on a rational universe. Humans on the island enclave of Mospheira had faith in miracles. Humans on the starship over their heads had more faith in a second armed starship and a planetful of allies, in a universe otherwise sparse with life. But atevi being an independent lot, fiercely so, and hating worse than poison to be handed a fait accompli involving someone else's numbers, had politely declined to make too strong a point that a human species that had misplaced its own home planet was not infallible. In the main atevi were impressed by what they saw going on in the heavens what, at least, the dedicated and the suspicious alike, armed with binoculars, could make out as going on in the heavens. It was at least a personal enough contact with the presence up there to make it a national obsession, and binoculars and telescopes enjoyed a vogue at garden parties and secret meetings. The latter since a last die-hard cadre of the traditionalists wanted their world back the way Tabini had inherited it, sans telescopes, sans autographed roof tiles sans the frantic push of atevi interests skyward. But the majority even of the conservatives had dropped the traditionalist fight over the very concept of Air Traffic Control: they'd lost that argument, long since, and scrambled to get aerospace industry in their own districts. Yet did the builders of such facilities properly consider the numbers? They derived them from new-fangled computers, to the contempt of the die-hard traditionalists and the dedicated counters. Dared one trust them? The more numbers we gain, Tabini was

saying to the assembled lords, the more I myself appreciate Valasis work. Not, Tabini added, before certain die-hard conservatives burst a blood vessel, that I would argue less with my father, but certainly that I would listen more. His time was too soon to know everything: but in his wisdom he laid a foundation for the aishiditat that would assure a strong leadership...and now I know that he saw change coming. Now I know that he prepared for it. Now I know that my father was a wise man. Oh, that was clever: generational authority was a tenet of the conservatives...while the aijis increasing power over their lives as a central authority was a continual sore point. Now Tabini equated one with the other, wound the cord of their own argument around a strong young fist, and yanked. Count your fingers when dealing with Tabini. His enemies and his allies both said that. My father warned me, Tabini said. He saw us growing reliant on advances that we would never have the chance to make for ourselves. But because these inventions, like all real things, come of true numbers, he saw that they use the natural universe, he saw that they were good, he saw that if we did invent them they would be much the same. He had, however, every intent of shaping what came to us into our own design, he had every intent of maintaining sovereignty. Another sore point. And because it follows from every previous invention he clearly had every intent of going into space. The cadence dragged them right into it...and marched on, leaving the fiercest opponents to mull over a very strong point: if not that aim, what aim? In the new numbers, our economy runs white-hot. We have no hunger, we have no feuds, we have no want of employment for the clans. We mine, we build, we distribute, and we have no scarcity anywhere. Thanks to our vantage from orbit we rescue a forest from blight. We warn a village on the coast to put up the storm shutters. We cure diseases we once thought hopeless. In the new numbers we send and speak and travel from one end to the other of every association, without wires or roads that blight the world. In the new numbers, we draw power from the suns free light without smoke to obscure the sky. Never let us forget what is kabiu, or break the rhythm of the seasons, or of the wild things, or of our own bodies. Let us never forget how to build a fire, light a candle, or use our hands to spin thread. Let no single village forget how to weave cloth, shape a pot, or hunt its own food. If a machine made a pot, it serves for a while. But if hands made it, it is kabiu, and fit to pass to our children. This was the true understanding I learned from Valasi. This is what I now give to my son. This is what he will in his day give to his son. This observance of true value is what keeps kabiu. This is the source of things unseen. This quality, this fitness remains so long as we have the keen sense of what is real. And in a hundred thousand pots, one is kabiu. We can heal the sick, warn against weather, and supply common pots to every village in the world. But let us teach our children to make what is kabiu, and to recognize what is kabiu, and to value what is kabiu. This is the unity of one. This is the aishiditat. This is our heritage. A bell rang. Tabini lit the third lamp in utter stillness. The whole universe seemed to start again. A camera changed focus. Feet shifted. Breath came in and out. Tabini turned, faced the assembly and lifted his arms. Go. Observe silence for this one day on the matters under debate. Meet with me tomorrow. Silence on matters under debate. Tabini had just put all the burning issues in that category. He destined the whole damned basket of snakes for debate tomorrow when the paidhi, who worked on all these issues, had to be at the shuttle site within the hour. Tabini having put every issue under legislative seal no one could talk. The doors at the rear opened, admitting the brighter light of the corridor outside, rendering all of them, human and atevi, old and young, easterner and westerner, as shadows. With the opening of those doors the smell of flowers overwhelmed the slight petroleum scent of atevi bodies. The hush now was overwhelming. The outward movement, beginning at the back, proceeded, and row after row, kept going, participants likely wondering what they dared say or think. Dared he stop for a word with Tabini? It seemed chancy to Bren even to turn his head and look toward the aijis household. He had a side view of Ilisidi and uncle Tatiseigi waiting in starchy silence. The outward movement reached the next to last row, the outflow proceeding with dispatch. At least there'd been no gunshots outside. Their own row took its turn and moved out. Bren followed Jago out, and Banichi followed him, the three of them, felicitous three, a unity differently destined than the crowd outside. The sarcophagus, the arcane secrets of death and the atevi dealing with it, was at his back. Light was in the hall. The recession suddenly felt to him like an escape toward life, toward a wholly different world, fleeing questions of eternity and mortality and Tabini's motives down here... Tabini didn't consult him, didn't invite him to the most important legislative session in a decade well and good. There was no call for hurt feelings. He had urgent jobs he had to do, up in orbit, and Tabini was probably wise not to embroil the paidhi-aiji in regional contentions. He and his bodyguard went out those guarded doors among the flowers, into the outward flow of the elite and the powerful of the aishiditat, everyone on their way to the two lifts. There was talk, now, and there were guarded looks, brooding looks, satisfied looks one could practically know the province by the expression. He

still didnt know what he thought. He didnt know whether what hed been dragged down here to do had simply evaporated, and Tabini wasnt talking or whether his mere appearance in the ceremony was enough to accomplish some purpose, and Tabini wasnt talking. He could damned well bet there'd be conferences among allies who had been here. There'd be frantic opinion-seeking among the news services. He desperately wanted to avoid the newspeople, and they'd be swarming thick in the halls above. He was due to be off the planet inside an hour now, and that, at the moment, seemed a very good idea. They reached the lift, waited, in the murmurous silence of the hall. Did you see the offering from Keishan? one lord asked another indignantly. Bren personally had not, nor wished to look, in this hazardous precinct where looks said it all. He had no idea which among the cloyingly perfumed flowers belonged to Keishan, but Keishan's neighbors clearly did, and were somehow disturbed by the placement, or the size, or the color, or a hundred other declarations someone could find improper. This way, Bren-ji. Banichi rarely pulled court rank to do his job, but they were late as it was, and with an out-thrust arm and a judicious eye, Banichi shunted him ahead of village nobility. Jago quickly blocked the lift door for him, and to Bren's dismay and relief, gave them the entire lift car to themselves. Rude, to the lesser lords. Justifiable, but rude. Bren didnt know what to say but when Assassins Guild security indicated their charge should move, a wise man moved, and heaved a shaken little sigh of deep appreciation in the little time they rode by themselves. Is there a problem? he asked them. But immediately as he said it the door opened onto another wall of flowers on the main floorflowers, and lenses, and news service reporters who spotted a high source and meant to have it at any cost. What does the paidhis office have to say, nand paidhi? was the loudest question, along with, Is there a crisis, nandi? I am apprized of none, he answered, his only safe answer. Im bound back to the station on the scheduled flight. He was relieved to let his security whisk him along to another bank of lifts. The door shut. No particular difficulty, Banichi answered the prior question. The lift rose up, let them out. They walked down a short hall in the restricted residency of the Bujavid and took yet one more lift, this one securitied and keyed, down again. Down and down to the rocky core of this hill which was the Bujavid, the governmental nerve center, the seat of legislative authority, the state venues and the residence of the aiji and the highest lords...and the place of tombs. It should be a quiet ride, nadi-ji, Jago said on the way down. He very much hoped so. Tabini never did tell me why Im here, he said. Its a puzzle, Banichi said. And what puzzled Banichi decidedly puzzled most people. And gave him no better information. The lift let them out in an echoing vault of concrete and living rock, a large, heavily guarded hall, a mostly vacant walk toward the Bujavids internal freight and passenger train stationhuge spaces, cut into the high hill, with guarded accesses for the trains. Forklifts carried cargo to and fro. Security offices were constantly busy. Everything here was scrutinizedeverything examined. A red-curtained train waited at the sidingtheirs, beyond a doubt, one of the short, well-appointed specials that sometimes had tagged them on to a long-range train, sometimes ran them straight to the airport. It was the latter, this time, and Bren made a quick check of his wristwatch as they walked. Were just a little late, Banichi said. No worry, nadi. No worry. I need a copy of Tabini's speech, nadiin-ji. As soon as possible, Jago assured him, and he hoped that would happen before he was in the air. Absolutely no copies had been leaked, not even to intimates and staff, and he remained marginally uncertain whether Tabini, damn him, might have ad-libbed the whole thing. Tabini was capable of it, completely capable, but it was important enough he thought not. He himself wanted a re-read before the tone cooled in his memory, and neither he nor staff could take time now to secure one by ordinary channels. They approached the red-curtained carTabini's private car, on loan to him...and he recognized the operations car that went next. It was arguably the tightest security on the rails. Banichi quickened his pace, entered the passenger car first to check out the situation there, then came back to signal him and Jago to come inside. A guard just inside surrendered a computer case, the computer, to Banichi, and Bren breathed a sigh of relief as Banichi handed it to him. The man was Tabini's, known to them. The car next door likely held the rest of that team. All of that was Banichi's concern. Bren took his precious computerthe computer hed not expected to have to leave anywhere he wasnt, and had. Hed rather leave a newborn child on a railway track than have it out of his hands for five minutesbut if he trusted any staff as allied to him, it was logically Tabini's. Not that Tabini wouldnt spy on himexcruciating to contemplate certain of the computer's files in Tabini's hands, but at least there would be no hostile use of them. The red velvet bench seat at the rear of the car, beyond the bar, was his usual spot. He sat down on the bench seat, holding the computer in both arms. He felt violated, telling himself the while there was absolutely no reason to worry about Tabini's men getting into it, swearing to himself he was going to take off his personal files on the next trip. The dark red shutters and velvet curtains at his elbow concealed bulletproofing. The body armor chafed under the dress coat and

bound like a corset, and he longed to be rid of it...but not yet. Not yet. Fruit juice? Jago asked. Yes, Jago-ji.

His throat was dry. He thought he looked ridiculous holding to the computer as he was, and persuaded himself to turn it loose and set it on the seat beside him. He looked at his watch, trying to re-situate himself in the outside schedule, in his senselessly interrupted agenda aloft. There was Geigi, among others.

Jase Captain Jase Graham, who so badly wanted to take this trip. Four minutes behind schedule, not his staff's fault. It took an unpredictable time to end a speech, move people through narrow halls, to wait for lifts.

The shuttle might wait a little for him. It had some leeway. It didn't like to use it. The train began to move.

Banichi, communications still in hand, had rechecked the situation with the pair who had handled the baggage. The baggage is already aboard the shuttle, Banichi said. That wouldn't delay them. They're advised were on our way. Moving the baggage was a risk. They didn't like to advertise their movements. With chaos

inside the Bujavid, it was particularly risky. As for missing the flight Bren imagined to himself having to return to the Bujavid, to dodge news questions for days until the next shuttle that was a political risk he chose not to run. Escape, on schedule, seemed to raise the fewest questions leaving everyone only with the original

question. Why? Why bring him down to the planet in the first place, hold a social meeting, a memorial, and dismiss him? Reprinted from *Defender* by C.J. Cherryh by permission of New American Library, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 2002, C.J. Cherryh. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof,

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