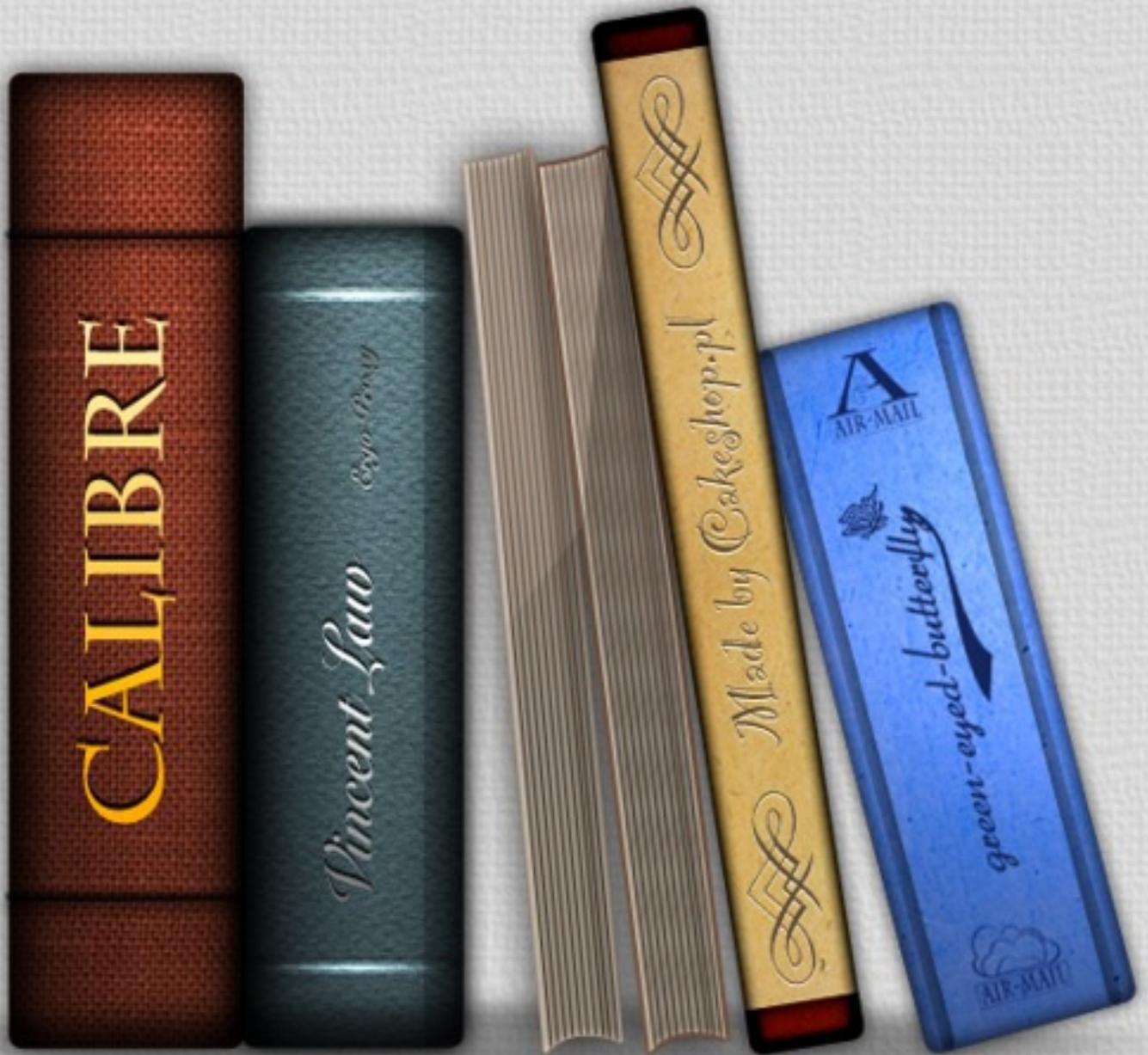


BITB

Jonathan Waite



calibre 1.47.0

THE BOY IN THE BUBBLE

“And on Serucance, preparations are under way for a full programme of events to mark the tenth anniversary of the death of Katreeona Kintarsh, the famous singer and songwriter whose glittering career was tragically cut short when she developed a rare form of hypercacodaemia. Under the terms of Sera Kintarsh’s will, all recordings of her music are to be withdrawn from sale and the masters destroyed ten years after her death, in order, as she put it, to ‘make room for new music.’ Unsurprisingly, the announcement of this provision has caused a run on sales throughout the sector, and shops report that copies are already starting to run low, so if you don’t already have a complete set of Katreeona Kintarsh albums, now would be a good time to fill in the gaps. Sera Kintarsh’s music spanned all genres and appealed to young and old alike—”

Delmar Trodd turned off the radio.

“So, what do you think?” he said, leaning back in his deep, comfortable chair. “Six months? Or should we wait a full year?”

“I don’t see why we need to wait at all,” Rollo Pilger said. “It’s not as if she’s going to come back and complain.”

Aylwin Corbeck stirred uneasily. “There’s public opinion to think about,” he murmured. “When people realise we’ve gone against her wishes, it won’t matter how long we wait.”

“You were the one who made her *wishes* public knowledge,” Pilger spat. “Without consulting us, incidentally.”

Corbeck looked back at him steadily.

The three men in the room were the directors and main stockholders of Melpomene Music, and the room was on the eighteenth floor of Melpomene’s massive headquarters in Noma City on Serucance. They were also, by no coincidence at all, the entire membership of the Board of Trustees of the Kintarsh Foundation, a non-profit organisation set up to handle the great singer’s music after her illness and eventual death.

Trodd got up and strolled to the big window. Far below, the inhabitants of Noma City went about their business. “So what do you suggest, Aylwin?” he said. “Just go along with this madness? Throw away the most lucrative property Melpomene Music has ever owned because of some mad whim of a dead singer?”

“It’s not our property,” Corbeck pointed out. “It’s hers. Her son’s now. And he agrees with his mother.”

Trodd and Pilger laughed. “He’s nine years old!” Pilger said, between chuckles. “He’s got no idea what goes on outside that bubble of his. He barely speaks.”

“He listens,” Corbeck said mildly. “He remembers. And he won’t be in that bubble for ever. Doctor Flaybush was talking about moving him to an ordinary sealed room this year.”

“All this is very nice and so on,” Trodd said. “But we have to deal with reality, Aylwin, not airy supposition and ridiculous deathbed—” He sought for a word, failed to find one. “Melpomene Music *needs* Katreona Kintarsh. We made her famous, we made her rich, we paid for that boy’s very expensive medical care. Don’t you think we deserve something back?”

“We’ve had something back. We’re just as rich as she was. Melpomene is the most successful music publisher in the octant.”

“And we all want it to go on being successful,” Trodd said soothingly, “and for that we need to continue publishing and selling Katreona’s music. Let’s say...three months, then. A three-month moratorium, just to give people time to realise what they’ve lost. Then we put it out that we’ve discovered copies of one or two of the albums that escaped the purge and we think it’s our duty to keep her memory bright, blah blah blah. Within a year we’ll be back to normal. Let’s vote on it.”

He and Pilger raised their hands. Aylwin Corbeck’s hand remained in his lap.

“I won’t be a part of this,” he said.

“Suit yourself,” Trodd said easily, returning to his desk. He pressed a button, and a man in uniform opened the door. “Seir Corbeck is leaving the building,” Trodd said in the same tone. “He’s to speak to no-one, and mind you take his security pass and make sure he has nothing on him that’s company property. We’ll send your

belongings on," he went on to Corbeck, "along with our standard severance package and some documents to sign. Needless to say, if you violate strict confidentiality now or ever, that will be voided, your stock in the company will be forfeit and our lawyers will take you for everything else you have ever owned. I'm sorry it had to come to this, Aylwin, but I'm sure your conscience does you credit." He stuck out his hand.

Corbeck ignored it. "My conscience has kept you out of the bog a time or two," he said evenly. "Let's see how you manage without it."

He allowed himself to be ushered out by the security man.

"Will he make trouble?" Pilger said.

"Not him," Trodd said, sitting down again. "He knows what he signed up for and he'll stick to it. His *conscience* won't let him do anything else." He grinned, his teeth very white. "He'll be hard to replace, but not impossible."

"What about the boy?"

"He's had six different doctors and dozens of nurses. He barely notices when one stops turning up and another appears. In a month he'll have forgotten Aylwin's name."

"Suppose he does make trouble? About the music?"

Trodd suddenly speared Pilger with a sharp look. "Don't you start. He can't. For one thing, he's completely sealed off in that bubble, and completely dependent on us for the care that keeps him alive. We can always...reassign our funding."

Pilger nodded, but his eyes were thoughtful.

"And anyway," Trodd went on, "why should he care?"

*

The picture was beautiful.

It was a coloured pencil drawing, stiff in its coating of sterile plastic. The borders were blank white, and out of them coalesced at the centre the image of a woman's head. She had been drawn from behind, half turning to speak to someone over her shoulder. Glossy dark hair fell down her back, and her eyes were hazel in the picture, but Tollain knew their colour had constantly changed with her mood and the

moment. Her jawline was strong, her head well-shaped, and a quizzical lift of one eyebrow and an amused quirk at the corner of her mouth brought her personality as vividly into the bubble with him as if he had actually met her.

She had been a big woman, he knew, tall, well-muscled and strong-boned, though towards the end the substance had leached out of those bones and the strength had deserted the muscles. He had seen later pictures of her, sagging and dumpy, then bleached, skeletal and weary, aged beyond her years; but her eyes had never lost their wicked humour, and her spirit had never failed her. The onset of the disease had been shockingly swift. It was a miracle she had managed to carry him to term at all, let alone birth him alive.

But this was how he loved to think of her, as she appeared in concert recordings at the height of her career, her unsurpassed mezzo voice filling a stadium with no need of amplification. She had thrown her whole soul into her music; and “thrown” was the word. With joy, with abandon, with utter contempt for any limitations the universe might put in her way, she had blazed her way to the top of her profession.

And then she had kissed a sick man, and in that one impulsive act had thrown it all away.

Tollain himself was old for his years, they said. Pugnacious? No, precocious, that was it. He read avidly, and at nine and seven-eighths could already handle just about any book they could find for him. He had long ago decided to be a musician like his mother, and he knew that would not change. Doctor Flaybush said he would be out of the bubble within a year, a year and a half at most; his system would be strong enough by then to breathe ordinary air, touch unsterilised surfaces, walk and run and jump like ordinary people. He couldn't wait. He was tired of seeing life through a semi-transparent triple-walled plastic shield; tired of a world that was twenty feet square and seven feet high.

In the meantime he played keyboard, guitar and drums, when he felt strong enough, and read books on music theory, composition and arrangement. His favourite, of course, was his mother's; *From Your Head To Their Ears*, by Katreona Kintarsh, Doctor of Music. Sometimes he felt she had written it just for him. He had it by heart.

Someone came into the room outside the bubble. A nurse hurried over. Tollain quickly slipped the picture underneath his pillow, but otherwise paid no attention. There were always comings and goings, deliveries of medication, specialists checking up that their recommendations were being followed, shift changes. He knew he was important because of his mother. He was impatient to get out and show the world he was important because of him.

He glanced up again. The nurse had something in her hand, a package of some kind. She was running it through the autoclave, going through all the sterilisation procedures that meant it was going to be introduced into the bubble. It must be for him. A little bubble of excitement formed in his chest. He didn't get many presents these days. Unless you counted his life, which all things considered was a pretty big one.

"Tollain?" the nurse said, her voice coming over the speaker slightly filtered. He could almost draw a graph of which frequencies were being boosted, which damped. "Your Uncle Aylwin sends his apologies. He's had to go away for a while, and he probably won't be able to see you again till after you leave the bubble. But he sent you this." She approached the air lock, cardboard box in hand. Tollain bounced off the bed and almost ran to his side of the lock. "Now don't overexcite yourself," the nurse scolded, but she was smiling. "You know what might happen."

"I haven't had an attack in weeks," Tollain said. He hated his voice. He would never be a singer like his mother; this weedy, reedy treble would never do, and even once his voice had broken...well, there was a reason they called it "breaking." He seldom spoke, and never sang.

"All the more reason to try to keep that record going, hmm?" the nurse said, opening the outer hatch beside the air lock door and placing the package on the shelf. Purple light played over it as the air lock ran its own decontamination procedure.

"What's wrong with Uncle Aylwin?" he said.

"Now how in the worlds should I know?" she countered, still smiling. "I only have one patient, and it's not him." The light turned green. "There you go. I hope it's something nice."

Tollain pressed the button to open the inner hatch and eagerly grabbed the package, now cleansed inside and out of anything that could threaten the precarious balance of his damaged metabolism. The nurse looked on for a moment, then turned back as someone else came in.

Tollain tore the corner of the lid, and it began to dissolve. He quickly carried it to the outflow vent, thumbed the boost switch and let the air current carry away the molecular fluff; it couldn't hurt him, but it didn't do to make mess. He frowned as he looked into the box and saw that Uncle Aylwin had sent him another copy of his mother's book. The man knew perfectly well that Tollain already had one. Why would he give him another?

He opened it, and looked at the title page, opposite a reproduction of the same picture of her. Her name was very lightly marked, the page crimped slightly where a thumbnail had pressed into the paper. The bubble of excitement, which had almost popped, grew slightly. There was a message, in their old code. And if it needed an entire book, it must be a long one.

The nurse was talking to Uncle Delmar. She had muted the speaker, so Tollain couldn't hear what they were saying, but she seemed agitated. He turned his attention back to the book, thumbing through, looking for a word with that tiny crimp underneath it.

He found the first one quite quickly.

Danger.

*

"What if he sues?"

Marlock Frange, the newest and youngest member of the Board of Trustees, was being difficult.

"He can't," Pilger said impatiently. He lacked Trodd's facility for seeming tolerant. If he'd had his way, that old fool Corbeck would have been out years ago. "He's not of age for another five years, more. By that time it'll be old business."

"Serucance is trying for Affiliation," Frange persisted. "I've talked to people—Goetzee,

Nalgham, Arukosh. They're all scared headless. Have you read those Accords? Trust me, business on this planet is going to turn inside out. Personal fortunes will be gutted, the stock market will collapse. Once let anyone get wind that we're selling something we've no right to own—"

"We do own it," Pilger said. "We paid for it, we own it, we don't have to do anything with it we don't want to do."

"But—but Sera Kintarsh's will—"

"You're not up to this, sonny boy, are you?" Pilger said. "I told Trodd, but he wouldn't listen."

"Of course I am," Frange blurted, seeing his handsome stipend and benefits package about to vanish before he had even got used to having them. "I just think we should be careful."

"We're always careful," Pilger said. "We were careful when we manoeuvred ourselves on to the Board. We were careful when we acquired a controlling interest in Melpomene. We were careful when we—" He stopped suddenly. "We were careful all down the line," he continued, in a different tone. "And a key feature of our carefulness was knowing who we could trust. So my question for you, Seir Frange, is this. Are you someone we can trust?"

Frange's hesitation was minimal.

"Sure," he muttered. "Sure I am."

Pilger appeared to relax. "Good then," he said genially. "The ceremonial bonfire's in two weeks. Trodd and I will both be officiating—we'll each throw a copy of one of her albums into the flames. You won't have to do that, but you'd better be there, in Corbeck's place. Call it your initiation ceremony." He smiled without warmth. "Now go and make the arrangements. All recordings and other data to be wiped from the system, but get a clean copy of everything and put it somewhere safe."

Frange turned and went to the door.

"What about the boy?" he said. "Will he be there too?"

"Of course," Pilger snapped. "He'll be there representing his sainted mother's

interests, making sure her instructions are followed.” He smiled again. “Always assuming he doesn’t die in the meantime.”

*

The bubble was full of people in sterile suits, clustered round the agonised figure on the bed. Tollain’s pale green eyes were open, staring blankly into infinity, and his back was arched in a spasm of pain.

“This is the worst attack I’ve ever seen,” Doctor Flaybush grunted, his words muffled by his mask.

“He was only saying the other day he hadn’t had one in weeks,” said one of the nurses.

“Aye, well, that’s hubris for you,” the doctor said. He glanced round at the other faces, most of whom were registering incomprehension. “Overconfidence,” he translated. “Getting cocky. You can’t get cocky with hypercac.”

“Doctor,” said Marlock Frange, “what exactly is hypercac?”

“You don’t know?” Flaybush was startled. “What the devil are you doing in here then?”

“Seir Frange is from the Board of Trustees of the Kintarsh Foundation,” the nurse explained. “Here as an observer.”

One of the other nurses muttered something about dead weight, and was ignored.

“Hypercacodaemia,” Flaybush said. “Who would like to try and explain to our bold observer here?”

“In its standard form,” the first nurse said, “it’s a mutated form of a virus from old Earth. It used to be something we could just shrug off, but somehow once we got out into space its genetic code went a bit haywire. Now it attacks white blood cells, and mutates them into carriers of some really vile toxins. It’s fortunately very rare, but it’s highly contagious and a hundred per cent fatal.”

“So how did the boy get it?” Frange said.

“He didn’t,” Flaybush said. “His mother did. She was touring a hospice somewhere in the southern desert on Flaris Minor, talking to the patients, and before anyone could

stop her she put her arms round one and kissed him. It's assumed that was the moment she caught it, because the symptoms started to show within hours. She was carrying him at the time." As he spoke, his hands were moving with practised fluency, regulating the flow of various drugs into the patient's IV feed. Gradually, the boy's spasms were easing, his locked joints starting to relax. His complexion was still grey, and his breathing a tortured rasp that filled the crowded space, but several of the medical people were starting to show signs of relief.

"If the patient had hypercac, why wasn't he in isolation?" Frange said.

"Don't ask me, I wasn't there," Flaybush said, without looking up.

The nurse hesitated, glancing at the doctor. "My guess would be that they didn't know he had it," she said. "He did—he died of it—but I believe his symptoms didn't start to show till after Sera Kintarsh had been diagnosed. That can happen sometimes. All we know is that before Flaris Minor she was perfectly healthy, and after that she had hypercac."

"I think we're winning," Flaybush said. "Stay focussed, everybody. Torval, get me another PN7A, now."

"Sera Kintarsh died giving birth to Tollain," the nurse said, as a doctor brushed past her, "and it was a near thing they saved him. He's not carrying the virus himself now, but he was critically damaged, and had to undergo several operations and have his blood replaced again and again. But he was a determined little scrap and he wouldn't give up. If his mother had been anyone else—"

"I should like to think," Flaybush said with a touch of asperity, "that any mother's child would have merited the same amount of effort." He took the proffered ampoule and plugged it into the appropriate feed line.

"Yes, well, so would I, doctor," the nurse said demurely. "Watch the VY5 levels."

Flaybush glanced down and quickly adjusted a control. "Thank you, nurse," he said.

"Well spotted. We'll monitor for another half hour, but I think he's out of immediate danger. So, Seir Frange, if you would like to leave us to do our jobs—"

"Should he be clutching that book?" Frange said. He sounded a little faint.

"It would have been very dangerous to try to remove it," the nurse said. "Come on, I'll

get you some tea. They can manage without me now.”

Frange suffered her to lead him into the air lock. The rest of the crowd round the bed relaxed a little more.

Divested of their sterile suits, Frange and the nurse, whose name was Elka Hanif, sat in an untidy little chair-lined room littered with used cups and papers, and cradled mugs of strong tea in their hands. Frange shivered, though the atmosphere in the bubble had not been cold.

“So,” Elka said conversationally, “you’ve replaced Seir Corbeck.”

“At short notice, yes,” Frange said, grateful for something else to talk about. “He had, erm, health problems, I believe. Had to retire quite quickly.” He prayed she wasn’t going to ask him what sort of health problems.

She didn’t. “Seir Corbeck is a good man,” she said. “He spent a lot of time with Tollain. Some people aren’t comfortable with the set-up, the sterilisation and all, but he never made a peep. I think he was good for the boy. I hope he’ll stay in touch.”

“I’m sure he’ll try,” Frange said.

“At least he took an interest,” Elka went on. “The other two barely bother to remember he exists at all. The only time I’ve seen Seir Trodd at all was when he came down to try and get Seir Corbeck’s present back.”

“Seir Trodd’s a busy man,” Frange said automatically. “What?”

“Seir Corbeck sent Tollain a present,” Elka said patiently. “That book. I guess it was to console him for not being able to come and visit. It was just this morning. I’d hardly given it to the boy when in barges Seir Trodd, shouting and carrying on and demanding I go in there and get it back. I told him, I said, there’s no use your bullying me, I take orders from Doctor Flaybush, not you.”

“Why was he...?” Frange’s voice tailed off. He was thinking.

“How in the worlds would I know? I told him, I said, it’s not contaminated, it’s not explosive, it’s been checked and double-checked and it won’t harm a hair on the boy’s head, and that means it’s all right for him to have as far as I’m concerned. Oh, you should have heard the language.”

“Perhaps I should.” Frange was hardly paying attention to what he was saying, let alone Elka.

The door opened and doctors and nurses began to come in, shaking their heads and taking deep breaths. Among them was Flaybush.

“You still here, Seir Frange?” he said. “The boy’s quite stable, I assure you. Assuming nothing else untoward happens he should be fighting fit for his junket in two weeks.”

Frange struggled to assemble his composure. “That’s good news, doctor,” he said.

“Thank you.” He swallowed. “Would it be possible for me to see the boy again...when he’s awake, I mean?”

“Well, he’s awake now, but I wouldn’t advise it just yet,” Flaybush said. “He begins to recover almost immediately, but he’s weak as a kitten for a while afterwards. You could come the day after tomorrow, if the Board can spare you.”

“That would be fine,” Frange said, putting his mug into Elka’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you, doctor. And thank you, Sera Hanif.”

Elka smiled. “My pleasure. You looked a bit done up. He takes some people that way, the first time.”

“He’s so...alone. And yet never private.”

“We have to be privy to all the secrets of his life,” Flaybush said, firmly guiding Frange to the door, “so that we can care for him properly. Now if you will excuse us, Seir Frange, my people have been very busy for several hours and now we want our tea. I’ll send a full report through when I have some idea what triggered this attack. Good day to you.”

Outside in the corridor, Frange leaned against the wall. Before his eyes floated the image of a tiny human being, back arched and teeth clenched as every cell in his body tried to kill him, resisting with strength that came from who knew where. And clutched in his rigid arms, a book. A book that had come from Aylwin Corbeck.

Back in his pokey flat on the west bank of the river—the flat he and Polenn were hoping to exchange, now he had moved up in the world, for something slightly bigger, with walls made of actual bricks—Frange had a complete collection of the recordings

of Katreona Kintarsh. She had been his inspiration, his consolation, his support, his lifeline. Her song “Hairsbreadth” had been playing that night in the restaurant, when Polenn had proposed to him and he had nearly fallen off his chair. It was their song, but she had been more than a singer to him. She had been a friend.

He straightened up, patted ineffectually at his back in case of plaster dust, and walked down towards the lifts. Something inside him had altered, though he wasn’t entirely aware of it yet. But he could see sides forming; on the one hand Delmar Trodd and Rollo Pilger; on the other, a dead woman he had idolised, and a sickly, stunted only child, with the face of a prematurely aged angel in hell, pale green eyes that reflected light like a cat’s, and a book clutched to his bosom.

If he did what he almost but not quite thought he might do, Polenn would never forgive him. He’d probably throw him out, or just walk out and leave him, in the pokey flat that he would never now escape.

He pressed the wrong button twice, and toured every floor in the hospital, before he finally made it to the ground and the exit. He was nearly home before he realised that he had already made the decision, back there in the bubble.

*

Tollain looked at the anxious man in the sterile suit.

“Seir Frange,” he said.

“Seri Kintarsh,” Frange said, “or should I call you Tollain?”

“Most people seem to,” Tollain said. He was sitting, propped up on pillows, on his bed, with a blood monitor strapped round his right arm and an IV feed going into his left.

“You had a bad attack a couple of days ago,” Frange said.

“Did Doctor Flaybush tell you?”

“I was here. Doctor Flaybush called the Board and they sent me over. I replaced Seir Corbeck on the Board after he—” Frange coughed. Something had stuck in his throat.

“After he had to retire so suddenly.”

Tollain knew what had happened. It had all been in the book, in the crimps under

selected words or letters. The Board were planning to violate the terms of his mother's will, the terms under which they held guardianship of the rights and properties that were now, effectively, his. They had all the money they could ever need and still they were unwilling to give up the means of making more. He could not understand them.

"Tollain," Frange said, swallowing.

"Still here," Tollain said. "Is there a problem, Seir Frange?"

Frange struggled for a long moment, and then gave up.

"No," he said. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"That's what I thought," Tollain said, with a slight sigh. "I'm okay. Getting stronger all the time."

"That's—that's good," Frange said. He got up abruptly. "That's very good."

"Before you go," Tollain said, when he was at the air lock door.

"Yes?" The man was terrified.

"My mother was a great lady, wasn't she?"

Frange relaxed a little. "She was...incomparable," he said, and Tollain could hear the truth in his voice.

"She made all sorts of friends," Tollain went on. "I was wondering if I could invite some of them to the burning. Would you know if the Trust archives have their addresses?"

"I'm sure they do." Relief was coming off the man like a miasma. Tollain could feel it.

"Would you like me to sort out some of them?"

"Yes, please." Tollain said. "And perhaps a bit of information about each of them. Just so I don't make any mistakes."

"I'll do it as soon as I get back," Frange promised.

"Thank you, Seir Frange." Tollain leaned back and closed his eyes. He heard the lock cycle, and cracked one eye open to make sure the man was truly gone.

Yes, his mother had made all sorts of friends. He was going to need some of them.

*

Extract from page two of a letter sent by Tollain Kintarsh to Hyden Rannsecker:

Dear Colonel Rannsecker,

...I know you were a great friend of my late mother, and also of my honerary uncle Aylwin Corbeck, who has ofen spoken of your time together in the service. He used to tell me that, though now retired, you still maintane your contacts in the Unit and have ocasionally been called in to consult on various tricky situations.

Colonel, I am in a tricky situation. I will explane what I have been told is happening by Uncle Aylwin, and what I would like you to do for me if you can. Please destroy this page when you have read it though as I would not like you to get into any trouble...

Extract from page two of a letter sent by Tollain Kintarsh to Auweia Krissling:

Dear Aunt Auweia,

...My mother writes in her diaries, which I have ofen reread, how much fun you and she used to have disgising yourselves as diferent people and sneaking into places. She said you went on to make a good career out of this talent, and that if everybody had their own you would be loded down with medals.

I wonder if you would consider using those talents to help her one more time?...

Extract from page two of a letter sent by Tollain Kintarsh to Marlock Frange:

Dear Seir Frange.

...I know what Seir Trodd and Seir Pilger are planing to do. I know you know too, and I do not think you are hapy about it. Well, I have a plan of my own, which will insure my mother's wishes are respected. If you will come in on it with me, I promise you will not get into any trouble, and I will make sure you stay on the Bord...

*

"No more qualms?" said Delmar Trodd.

"None, seir," said Frange.

"That's splendid." Trodd was all avuncular geniality. He waved Frange to a seat and went to pour drinks. Pilger, already seated, eyed him sourly.

“I mean, it’s for the boy’s benefit as well,” Trodd said over his shoulder, dropping ice into glasses. “After all, without the regular income from the continued sale of Kintarsh recordings, it would be very hard to justify continuing to fund his very expensive medical care and education. Though I don’t suppose it would be much good explaining that to him.” He laughed, handing a glass to Pilger and another to Frange. “He’s barely aware of what’s going on around him,” Frange said. “He’s bright enough, of course, but...withdrawn. He likes to read and make music. Leave him alone to do that and he’ll be fine.”

“Well, after the ceremony he can be alone for the rest of his life if he likes,” Pilger said. “We won’t want him hanging around. I’ve been exploring some options for after we start selling again.”

“Oh really?” Trodd said. “Do tell.”

“Well,” Pilger said, leaning forward, “now we’ve got rid of Corbeck, maybe it’s time to bring up the idea of *new* Kintarsh recordings again.”

Frange blinked. “What?”

“It’s been done before.” Pilger was a little defensive. “Resample the voice, make new combinations of pitches and syllables, put a backing behind it. We can get any old hack to write us songs in the proper style. We release them as newly discovered early recordings, before she’d made it big.”

Trodd rubbed his nose, but his eyes were keenly interested. “It’s technically fraud, Rollo,” he said, in a tell-me-more sort of tone.

“Who’d know? We *own* Katreeona Kintarsh. We can afford the best sound engineers in the octant. They could make it utterly detection-proof.”

“What do you think, Frange?” Trodd said, eyeing the younger man shrewdly.

“You’re talking about forging Katreeona Kintarsh recordings?” Frange said.

“Well, it would only be making new patterns out of raw material we already own,” Pilger said. “The completists would lap ’em up. We could keep Katreeona Kintarsh on top of the sales charts for another twenty years.”

“Any...objections?” Trodd asked Frange.

Frange smiled, and silently toasted Trodd and Pilger. They followed suit, and the atmosphere became a lot more relaxed.

*

It was chilly in the car park outside Melpomene Music's headquarters, but a considerable crowd had gathered. Behind Trodd and Pilger, a pile of miscellaneous flammable stuff was surmounted by a large pram, overflowing with boxed albums on disc, tape and data crystal. The bonfire's construction had been supervised by a skinny man with a shock of ginger hair, a drooping moustache and blue-tinted glasses, who stood a little way off.

Frange stood off to one side, holding a flaming torch and looking faintly ridiculous. Among the crowd were a scattering of journalists and photographers. Dominating the scene was a large truck which held a smaller version of Tollain's bubble, from which Tollain looked impassively down on the proceedings. The sun had just set, and the sky still held a trace of its glory.

"Ah—hello? Could I have your attention, please?" Trodd said, tapping the microphone in front of him. "Hello, good evening to you all, and welcome. My name is Delmar Trodd, and I am chairman of the Board of Trustees which administers the Kintarsh Foundation. We've come here to mark the tenth anniversary of the sad passing of the late and very much lamented Katreona Kintarsh—" A muted cheer.

"And to implement the provisions of her will, with which I'm sure you're all familiar. It was Sera Kintarsh's firm belief that music belongs to the living present, not to the dead past, and that her recordings should consequently be withdrawn from sale after her death to allow new young talents to develop and take her place. I may tell you we had some difficulty persuading her to allow us to continue bringing her work to new admirers for even as much as ten years. But now that time is past, and we must bow to her wishes.

"Atop this bonfire, in that pram, is Melpomene's entire remaining stock of albums by Katreona Kintarsh. In a moment our colleague here, Marlock Frange, will set light to the pyre, and all those recordings will be destroyed. Melpomene Music assures me that they have erased all their master recordings. Now this does not mean that you must destroy your own copies...but we would ask, as a courtesy to this great lady,

that you refrain from making further copies and offering them for sale. Such an act would be deeply disrespectful to Sera Kintarsh's memory, and Melpomene, which retains all rights originally agreed by contract, would be compelled to prosecute anyone who infringed those rights. And now—"

"Seir Trodd," said Tollain's amplified voice.

Trodd looked up, startled. "Tollain Kintarsh, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "Yes, Tollain?"

"I wonder if you would mind if I were to play a recording of one of my mother's songs while you're doing this?" Tollain said hesitantly. "It's one of my particular favourites."

Trodd briefly conferred with Pilger. "I see no objection," he said heartily.

"Thank you," said Tollain, and went to a small music centre at the back of the bubble. A moment later, the introduction to "Refiner's Fire," from Katreeona Kintarsh's last album, issued from the speakers that were mounted on either side of the truck, and the crowd fell silent as the dead woman began to sing.

"Good choice," Trodd mouthed ironically to Pilger, and then he nodded to Frange, who stepped forward and set light to the pyre. It caught almost at once, and flames licked up towards the pram.

Trodd and Pilger each produced a boxed disc from their jacket pocket, and held it up as the photographers clicked away. They turned, poised to throw the boxes ceremoniously into the flames.

"We *own* Katreeona Kintarsh," said an amplified voice.

Trodd and Pilger whipped round, almost in unison.

"I've been exploring some options for after we start selling again," the voice continued.

"Oh really?" This voice was recognisably Trodd's. "Do tell."

"*New* Kintarsh recordings." The crowd was staring at the truck now. "We can get any old hack to write us songs. We could keep Katreeona Kintarsh on top of the sales charts for another twenty years. Another two-two-twenty years. We *own* Katreeona Kintarsh. We *own* Katreeona Kintarsh. We *own*— We *own*— We-We-We *own*

Katreeona Kintarsh.”

“I’ve been doing some remixing,” Tollain said, as the music swelled again. “I’m not very good yet. The original recording is with the police. Seir Trodd, Seir Pilger...you’re fired.”

And it was at this point that the bonfire exploded.

It was not a big bang, by any standard, and very little debris flew outwards; but the pram leapt high into the air, scattering its contents over the surrounding area. Trodd and Pilger, caught by surprise, fell over, and a burning piece of wood caught Trodd across the head. The crowd, backing hastily away from the few flaming fragments, found themselves pelted with albums instead.

“Anyone who can catch one can keep it,” Tollain called out. “Nobody owns Katreeona Kintarsh. Nobody owns her music. And nobody is going to make any more profit from her or from it. Seir Marlock Frange will be assuming direct control over the Kintarsh Foundation, pending the appointment of a new Board which I will select. And my mother’s last wishes will be followed, to the letter and the spirit.” He was breathing hard, holding himself upright with difficulty, but the pale green eyes in his haggard face were bright with more than reflected firelight. “No further copies of her recordings will be sold. Any that still exist will be given away, as I’m giving away what was in that pram. If you want to make copies and give them away, by all means do. But buy new music as well. Living artists need your support. My mother doesn’t, and neither do these parasites.”

There were police cars around the outskirts of the crowd now, and three uniformed officers made their way to where Pilger and the stunned Trodd were still sprawled on the ground.

And beyond the police cars, in the gathering shadows, Colonel Hyden Rannsecker (retired), late explosives expert of the Serucance Planetary Light Armoured Taskforce, nodded approvingly, got into his groundcar and drove off...

A middle-aged lady in masculine attire dropped a ginger fright wig, a false moustache and a pair of blue glasses into a rubbish bin and strolled away to find a bus...

And Aylwin Corbeck smiled, pulled up his coat collar and ambled away. The boy in the

bubble would do all right.