

# JOURNEY TO CONSERVATOIRE

## CHAPTER ONE

“It wasn’t my fault!” Suncat wailed, as they made it to the dressing room with the applause still ringing in their ears.

“You began singing in completely the wrong key,” Korynn told her, his shades like gun muzzles levelled squarely between her eyes.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Orville leapt to Suncat’s defence. “We all managed okay.”

“This is why we rehearse,” Korynn maintained. “We have just played two consecutive songs in the same key. The set list was precisely calculated to avoid that.”

“It did take me a couple of bars to work it out.” Kaichang shook her head. “But it’s not the end of the world, Mitwoch. Get off her back.”

“Perhaps I should not bother to prepare for our next concert at all,” Korynn suggested acidly. “Would it be preferable if I simply play in whatever key happens to seem good to me at the time?”

“Korynn, get off it.” Tollain spoke wearily. “It’s done. It was a fluff, but it worked. We’ll do better next time.”

“Assuredly.” The keyboard player subsided reluctantly, but the others heard the promise of even more stringent rehearsals in the cold, flat voice. For Korynn Mitwoch, perfection was more than something to hope for.

“A triumph, Seir Kintarsh, ladies, gentlemen, a triumph!” Gomer came bustling in without knocking, heedless of the fact that Suncat and Verneen were half out of their stage clothes. Kaichang, who had known what was coming, was still fully dressed. Gomer claimed to be entirely indifferent to female human pulchritude, and so far had not shown any sign to the contrary. He barely even glanced.

“It went okay,” Tollain agreed. “Gomer, does the word ‘privacy’ mean anything to you at all?”

“One of your strange human concepts,” Gomer said easily. “Gets in the way of business. Seir Kintarsh, I too have achieved something of a triumph.”

Tollain vigorously scrubbed at his face with a wet flannel, removing the last traces of makeup. “What have you done, Gomer?” he said wearily.

“I,” Gomer said, inflating his chest, “have secured you six more dates. Velliber, Grostak Major, Turmelath, Fillibolge, Wottington’s World and—” He paused for effect. “Jita VI. What do you say to that?”

“You got us Jita?” Verneen was startled. “That’s amazing. They’re very demanding in that system, ’cause it’s so busy. People come through from all over.”

“Gomer.” Tollain turned and confronted the man in the loud suit. “Did we ask you to extend this tour?”

“I admit it, Seir Kintarsh, you did not.” Gomer was unabashed. “My zeal in your interest ran away with me, I freely confess it.”

“In fact, we specifically told you we were ending on Deshelle. Didn’t we?”

Gomer adopted a pleading tone. “But Seir Kintarsh, you may not realise it, but you are riding a stupendous wave of success right now. There is a tide in the affairs of men, and so on. If you quit now to go jetting off on some wild prongbok chase—”

“There’s no ‘if’ about it, Gomer.” The steel beneath the surface was showing. “Well done for all your heroic negotiating, but we have made plans and we are going to follow them. If Jita really want us, they’ll wait.”

Gomer deflated. He raised his hands to the putative heavens beyond the stained plycrete ceiling. “Oh, almighty Essence, was ever a humble businessman so cursed with ungrateful clients? How am I supposed to turn a modest profit when my undeniably talented yet wilful artistes persist in frustrating my every move? Do you see them? Do you see how they break my old heart?”

The members of Gestalt relaxed. This was nothing but performance. Gomer would posture and declaim, but he knew better than many managers who really worked for whom.

Verneen came forward and patted his upraised arm. “Gomer, we’re relying on you,”

she said. "If anyone can get all those venues to hold off for six months, it's you. We promise we'll give them a show they'll never forget."

Gomer looked down into her face, and his hand covered hers paternally. "For you, Sera Halannim," he said, "and for this wicked boy who abuses me so, I shall try." Good humour suddenly restored, he went to the door. "A triumph," he said again, turning in the doorway. "Proud you should be, as I am." He hesitated. "Only don't get lost out there. My career hangs on the thread of your talents. If it should snap—" He made an expressive gesture, and departed.

"Do you suppose Nyronds are all like him?" Orville wondered.

"Who's to say?" Tollain countered, from the depths of his woolly sweater. "He got thrown off their homeship or whatever, from what he tells me, so maybe not."

"What for?"

"Different reason every time he tells the story. Excessive scruples, cruelty to money, failure to bow three times when walking past a statue..." Tollain's head emerged. "If you want to try for the real story, you're very welcome."

"But he definitely didn't want us to do this," Verneen said.

"Oh, that's just his way," Tollain said airily. "He hates it when I take time off. He just doesn't see why we shouldn't carry on gigging, all the time, bringing in the cash."

"When are we supposed to write the new songs?" Kaichang demanded.

"In our sleep, possibly. Everyone ready to go?"

Everyone was, and so Gestalt trooped out of the dressing room and down the backstage corridor to the stage door. It was quiet now, so presumably the audience had been persuaded to leave.

Or most of them anyway. Tollain opened the stage door, flinched at the cheer that arose from the knot of admirers waiting in the cold, then summoned up a grin and waded out into it. The others followed, clasping outstretched hands, signing autographs, posing for snapshots, saying "Thank you" and "I'm glad you liked it"--all except Korynn, who stalked along obliviously, but this was expected by now and nobody took it amiss. They made it to the van, parked at the kerb, and stood a while

longer, making sure nobody who had stayed behind to see them felt left out.

When the last fan had drifted away, Orville got into the driver's seat and the others piled into the back. Their kit had been carefully packed and stowed in the cargo space by the theatre staff; other bands had their own road crew, but Gestalt preferred to travel light. Korynn spent several minutes checking each case and box to make sure all was well, and finally pronounced himself satisfied. The van began to move.

"What's that?" Tollain said to Kaichang.

Mutely, the dark girl passed him the crumpled note at which she had been staring. STOP LOOKING, it read.

"Someone just handed it to me," she said. "I didn't see who."

"Stop looking?" Tollain echoed. "What for?"

"Well, what else have we been looking for lately?" Suncat said.

"Yes, but who knows?"

"Anyone we've asked," Verneen said. "Anyone they've told."

"Well, but why would anyone want us to stop?" Tollain insisted. "I mean, of all the things people might be looking for, this is surely one of the more harmless—"

"If the writer of the note wished you to know the reason, it would have been in the note," Korynn said. "Therefore, logically, the reason is part of that which you are not intended to find out."

"Impeccably logical and utterly useless," Kaichang retorted. "Like some other things round here."

"Well, I'm not going to stop looking without a very good reason," Tollain said firmly, handing back the note. "Keep that safe, Kaichang. We'll ask Suncat's friend in the police if there are any clues on it. We can pop round after we've checked out the vid."

"He's not my friend!" Suncat protested, as Kaichang tucked the note into her pick pouch. "He arrested me!"

"Yes, but he was very nice about it after we explained," Tollain said. "I'm sure he'd be happy to do us a favour."

“All right,” Verneen said. “Vid studio in the morning, then the police, and then off to Deshelle in the afternoon. We should get there earlyish tomorrow. Time to relax, rehearse a bit—”

“Definitely,” came from Korynn.

“We’re here,” Orville announced, braking the van outside the hotel. “Everyone grab something. Sooner we get in sooner we can crash.”

Moving with well-drilled fluency, the six of them grabbed cases, bags and bundles, loaded them on to two of the big brass trolleys that stood gleaming by the automatic doors, and ferried the kit to the hotel’s secure storage area. They were old hands at this by now, but it was still with a sense of relief that they watched Tollain spin the dial on the room’s molecombo lock, and then followed him across the deserted, night-lit lobby to the lifts.

No, not quite deserted, Orville saw. There was a middle-aged man, wearing a rumpled business suit, sitting slumped in one of the armchairs that were dotted about the lobby, and from somewhere Orville could hear tinny music. He tracked it down to a laden trolley parked outside one of the function rooms; obviously one of the night staff liked to take a radio on his or her appointed rounds. He thought, just as the lift door closed, that he saw the man start to get up from his chair, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Hot showers all round?” Tollain said.

“A suite with a bath would have been nice,” Suncat grumbled.

“It would also have been more expensive,” Kaichang pointed out. “When we’re mega-selling superstars, you can have a bath the size of Lake Tantalla. Till then, we watch the millicrabs. Gomer was right about one thing,” she went on, as the doors opened.

“This junket is going to cost.”

“We’ll manage,” Tollain said. “I’ve worked out the budget for the whole thing. Allowing six months—”

“What about Kortolian rooibos tea?” Kaichang countered.

“What?” Tollain was thrown. “Why would we want that?”

“Because tomorrow morning Suncat will try it and become so fond of it she can’t go for six months without it, and you, sucker that you are, will need to buy three crates of the stuff at seventy-three crabs the pound, and that’s your careful planning all up the spout.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“She doesn’t,” Suncat said, laughing. “She just made it up.”

“Except for the price,” Kaichang said. “I happen to know that because I rather like it myself, when I can get it. But you see my point, Kintarsh. There’d better be a good big margin of error in your budgeting, because the unexpected always happens.”

“We’ll manage,” Tollain repeated; but his tone was less certain than it had been.

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It had begun with the dance at Magellen’s.

Tollain, Kaichang, Korynn and Verneen had stood in for the regular band when Coldsands meinie’s only pub, on Suncat’s home world of Argenthome, had hosted the annual Wintercome dance, and had made a very favourable impression. As a result of this, the Magellens had made Tollain and Suncat a wedding present of a curious artefact which had been in their attic for many years, and which they believed to be the remains of an antique musical instrument.

Tollain had identified it, from pictures and fragments in his mother’s fabled collection of musical miscellanea, as something called a violin, an instrument lost for not hundreds but thousands of years, now known only as a synthesised sound produced by a keyboard. It belonged to a long-vanished kind of music known as “classical,” which was mentioned in old books up to a certain point in the history of the infamous Last Empire of Humanity, but of which, it seemed, throughout the entire vast body of human knowledge, no examples survived. And yet here was this shattered thing, this pitiful remnant, which Verneen (whose parents and sisters were archaeologists, and who had picked up a great deal by sitting quietly in a corner and listening) firmly pronounced no more than two centuries old, but whose manufacture had been unknown in the human-occupied galaxy for over two millennia.

It was a puzzle. And it had to do with music. So, Tollain had determined to solve it. Their new residence, a gift from the grateful people of Argenthome (more or less), now boasted a well-equipped laboratory, in which Verneen had spent a couple of weeks putting her forensic skills to the test. She had identified the woods as spruce and maple, two trees that had been carried from old Earth to numerous colony worlds during the First and, more commonly, Second Spacings. Peering at samples through various kinds of microscope and comparing them with others whose images were available on the planetary data-net, she had been able to make certain fairly rough predictions about the gravity and atmosphere of the planet on which they had been grown. This, sadly, had not helped as much as the others had hoped, since what it added up to was “habitable by humans,” which, as Orville pointed out, they knew already.

Tollain had written to Mrs Magellen, but all she could tell him was that the thing had been in her family’s possession since her great-grandfather’s day, and he had apparently acquired it “in trade.” From whom, and what for, she could not say; but she had sent a list of some of the planets he had mentioned visiting in his long career as a freelance trader, before finally settling on Argenthome. Korynn had plotted the locations of these worlds and come up with a very tentative, very nebulous, and above all very large, volume of space in which Violinworld (as Suncat had dubbed it) might be located. All the human-occupied planets listed in Tollain’s dog-eared *Gazetteer Of The Worlds Of Man* that fell within that area had been located, marked on Korynn’s holodisplay, looked up, and found to have no known manufacturers of violins or any other unconventional instruments.

Eventually, under pressure from Gomer and Kaichang, Tollain had reluctantly shelved the search, but not before sending a pass-it-on message out to acquaintances on a number of nearby planets, with a picture of the carcass, and the heading “Do You Know What This Is?” With that done, Gestalt had embarked on the current tour, and put the nagging question, as best they could, out of their minds.

And then, a week ago, had come the letter.

“Dear Seir Kintarsh,” it began. “I believe I can identify the object in your picture. I am

the Assistant Curator of the Museum Of Imperial Culture on Messelnek, and among our treasured volumes is an early print edition of the Commentaries of Selukus Vand. Page three hundred and thirteen of the book shows an illustration of a musical evening at the home of this prominent Senator, and two people are playing what the text refers to as “vyolines.” I enclose a copy of the picture, enhanced as far as possible to mitigate the effects of age and damp (sadly our stacks were flooded two years ago and this book was one of the minor casualties). Other instruments of a similar type are also mentioned in the text. If you are interested, our fees for facsimile reproduction are listed in the accompanying leaflet...”

Tollain had indeed been interested, enough to book passage for them all to Messelnek aboard the spaceliner *Refulgent Infanta*, which would be setting out from Deshelle the day after their concert on that planet.

“Who needs a facsimile when you can look at the original?” he had said. “And anyway, they might have other stuff there. We know these things were around in Imperial times, after all.”

“What about *our* stuff?” Orville had pointed out.

“It’ll be safe enough aboard *Bellbird* till we come back,” Tollain had said airily.

“Why do we all have to go?” Kaichang had demanded.

“I need you all.” Tollain had ticked off points on his fingers. “Suncat, because I can’t live without her. You, in case we get attacked. Verneen, because she’s the only sensible person among us. Korynn, in case something needs fixing, and Orville because he’d be miserable all on his own. Besides, we might have to whip up a quick gig and it’s easier with all of us there.”

“Then why not take *Bellbird*?” Verneen had said, and Korynn had answered while Tollain was still hesitating.

“Messelnek is fifty-three light years away. *Bellbird* has not been performing to specifications for some time, and has missed three of its last five regular servicings. Short journeys such as those involved in this tour—”

He had got no further, and the argument that followed had been unprofitable on all

sides. It had ended with Tollain promising to look for a new ship, or new to them at any rate, but standing firm on the need for all six of them to travel to Messelnek, on the morning after the final concert on Deshelle.

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Tollain and the others sat in a darkened room and watched a clown dance.

She was a pretty clown (“too pretty,” Tollain had muttered), with green hair and particoloured make-up that glowed softly in the blackness of the studio. She danced well, with expressive movements of the arms, hands and face, pantomiming the emotions of the song, while Tollain’s light, self-mocking tenor sang over the PA:

*No, I’m not mad,*

*And it’s not that I’m “just a bit sad,”*

*It just takes so much effort to hear you or see you at all...*

Under his voice, Korynn picked out the chords using a harpsichord voice (another lost instrument, but presumably akin to the similar-sounding spinichord) and played a quaint and quirky counter-melody in a voice labelled “bassoon.” Verneen had been very taken with the sound, and wondered if there were any of those to be found on Violinworld as well.

“It seems likely,” Korynn had said. “Perhaps it is akin to the saxophone.”

Verneen, who was still in the process of coming to grips with that instrument, had looked dubious.

The clown scuttled forward on tiptoes, mimed nearly falling into an imaginary chasm and leapt back balletically to the chair that was the only clearly lit object in the room beyond the glass. Shadowy figures off to one side, picked out in ambiguous streaks and blots of fluorescent paint, made gestures that were clearly meant to be encouraging, but looked anything but.

“Nice concept,” Orville commented. “Fits.”

Tollain shook his head fretfully. “I think it’s a bit too pat. Too obvious.”

“This is the album-buying public we’re aiming at,” Kaichang argued. “Anything that isn’t obvious will just go over their heads.”

Tollain glowered at her in the semi-darkness. He was firmly of the opinion that the average member of the album-buying public was no less intelligent than he was, and appreciated subtlety and depth in her entertainment. The commercial failure of three complex, cerebral and demanding solo albums had not dispelled this belief.

The music was coming to an end. Something bright emerged from the shadowy crowd, arced through the air and landed in the clown's hands; a bouquet of fluorescent pink roses. She looked at them, buried her nose in the blossoms, smiled heart-rendingly and dropped a curtsey which neatly coincided with the last, questioning chord of the song.

"And cut," the director said. A moment later lights came on in the studio; half a dozen figures began struggling out of their black bodysuits, and the clown, breathless but happy, pulled off the green wig and handed the bouquet to a woman in shirtsleeves, tight trousers and headphones. Someone switched on the lights in the booth as well, and everyone blinked in the sudden glare. "What do you think?" the director said.

"Great," Orville said enthusiastically. Suncat, Verneen and Kaichang nodded.

"It's okay," Tollain conceded. "You'll intercut it with us performing from last night, yes?"

"That's the plan." The director was a heavy-set man with straggling grey hair. "I'll send you final cut for approval before we release it."

"Don't worry about it," Tollain said. "We're going to be out of touch for a while. I trust you."

"Sure?" The director was obviously not used to such easy-going artists. "Okay, if you say so. Thanks."

"Gomer'll sort out the details. Now, if you'll excuse us..."

Outside, he became fretful again.

"We need to be doing our own vids. At least coming up with our own concepts."

"I liked that one," Suncat protested. "At least it was better than the one for 'Tell You A Story.'" She shivered. "Why it needed three dozen live moose I'll never know."

"Which way is the police station from here?" Tollain said. Verneen, ready with a street

map, indicated a direction, and they set off.

The young policeman of Suncat's acquaintance proved more than helpful.

"Leave it with me, serina," he said, taking the note in a pair of tweezers. "Where are you off to now? Deshelle? Well, we won't have anything much before tomorrow, it takes that long to run the tests, but I'll com anything we find to you there. Where will you be staying?" He wrote down the hotel's name on an official pad. "Yes, that's fine. We should certainly be able to tell who's handled it, apart from you obviously...your biometrics are on file? Yes, I know yours are, serina, but your friends...?"

A somewhat tense few minutes followed, during which the fragile entente between musicians and law enforcement came close to wobbling more than once, but eventually Tollain and Suncat smoothed things over, and, on the firm guarantee that all data gathered would be stored locally, would be used only for these tests and would be permanently deleted as soon as the tests had been concluded, Kaichang submitted, along with the others, to having her fingerprints taken and a DNA sample collected. There was another odd moment, when it was discovered that Korynn possessed no discernible fingerprints, but after a brief whispered colloquy with a senior officer, the young policeman hurried on to Verneen and made no further mention of the matter.

"Great," Kaichang muttered, on the steps outside. "Now I'm in the system."

"You heard him promise to delete the data," Tollain said.

"Oh yes," Kaichang retorted. "I'm sure he'll get right on that."

"What was that about your fingers?" Orville asked Korynn, and got a basilisk stare from the black lenses for his pains.

"An...accident," Korynn said at last. "When I was younger."

"A mechanical rice-picking machine, no doubt," Tollain said briskly. "Come on, people, we're dawdling. I want to be on the way."

"Oh look," Suncat said suddenly. "A music shop."

Five heads turned as if on strings to follow her pointing finger.

Jerrik Alkendo, the proprietor of Alkendo's Fine Musical Instruments, was more than happy to receive a visit from the band who had performed so splendidly at the Parradine Gardens the previous night. Even the time-honoured phrase that strikes a chill into the heart of every member of his profession—"no, it's fine, we're just looking"—failed to dent his bonhomie. Such performers were bound to try out an instrument or two, and the standard of their playing would be the best advertisement for the shop he could possibly devise. He signed unobtrusively to one of his three sons, who flitted behind the counter and rummaged in a drawer.

Kaichang and Orville gravitated towards the rows of guitars and axes mounted along the left wall. Korynn glided between the ranks of keyboard instruments. Tollain looked at the gleaming drum kits, then moved to where bongoes and congas stood in line. Verneen, glancing every so often at her chrono, stayed by the counter, while Suncat just wandered.

Orville picked up a banjo, studied it for a moment, tested the skin for tautness, struck a chord, then began a jaunty picking rhythm in two-four. An unspoken signal passed between them all. Tollain picked the rhythm up on a pair of deep-throated congas, and Kaichang shrugged, plugged in a bass and joined in. Softly, the three of them began to sing, alternating the overlapping lines.

*It's a game – just the sort of game a devil might devise  
It's a race – competing every time the music dies  
It's a test – will you be the one who finds the hidden prize  
It's a trial – or see some other player dangle it before your eyes?*

Korynn joined in with organ stabs on the off beats.

*Pass it on – never stopping, that's how the game is run  
Pass it round – never knowing when the music will be done  
Pass it up – when it starts again you know you're not the one  
Pass the parcel.*

Suncat replaced Korynn at the keyboard; Kaichang handed the bass to Orville, who laid down the banjo, and herself picked up a bouzouki. Tollain stayed with the congas.

*It's like life – when you help yourself you also help a friend*

*It's like death – knowing always that the game has got to end  
It's like chance – peel it carefully or you can rip and rend  
It's like fate – but remember that whatever's torn will never mend*

*Pass the time – waiting patiently until it comes to you  
Pass the word – sitting watching when it's all that you can do  
Pass the buck – when the music stops, time's up, your part is through  
Pass the parcel.*

They were all singing now except Korynn, male and female doubled in octaves, still in the same hushed tone. Verneen had been drawn in, replacing Tollain on the congas; Suncat had found some paper with which to produce unwrapping noises at the end of the chorus. Korynn, at another keyboard, played a counter-melody to the simple tune. Passers-by, drawn in by the music, were watching and listening as they went into the bridge.

*In the real world you may never know what lies beneath the wrappings  
In the real world you could just end up with paper, tape and trappings  
But you're doing what you can to help the great work carry on  
And you know it will continue when you're gone...*

Tollain, picking up the discarded banjo, played a solo as the rest of the band continued swapping instruments. This was obviously not the space in which they had previously practised this routine, so some of the transitions were a bit rushed and a couple of times someone came in a moment late, but on the whole it worked, and Korynn, submitting for once to spontaneity, made no attempt to correct the mistakes, but carried on playing stolidly.

*It's a game – but it's also what we're all supposed to do  
It's a race – it's the human race, it's us and them and you  
It's a test – to preserve the old and still embrace the new  
It's a trial – can we comprehend the universe we're passing through*

*Pass the flame – flame of knowledge down the centuries it's burned  
Pass the cup – cup of wisdom how to use what we have learned  
Pass the coin – your inheritance enriched by what you've earned  
Pass the rod – just remember it will never be returned  
And pass the parcel  
Pass the parcel*

*Pass the parcel*

*Pass the parcel.*

Jerrick Alkendo clapped heartily. “Bravo!” he cried. “Bravo! That, gentlebeings,” he added, turning to the crowd of onlookers, “was the famous Gestalt, who have chosen entirely by chance to grace our humble establishment with a visit.” Somehow his tone managed to suggest weeks of top-level negotiations, contracts and prearrangement. “Some of you may have seen them last night at the Parradine Gardens,” he went on, “where I’m told they played up a storm. May I now ask you of your kind indulgence to give them a great big hand?”

The crowd clapped politely. Many of them had not heard the whole song, and the roughness of the performance had not been lost on them, but it had been good enough to brighten an otherwise dull afternoon.

“Did you get it?” Alkendo said out of the side of his mouth to his son.

The young man nodded. “Bit of noise, but we can clean that up.”

“Good.” Alkendo beamed for the benefit of the onlookers, who were now, as he had hoped, starting to look at the merchandise. “Add it to the really secret file. This band is going to be big. I feel it in my water.”

“Thank you,” Tollain said, approaching him. “We rather needed that.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine, Seir...Kintarsh, isn’t it?” Alkendo’s beam faded a little as Suncat rather shamefacedly proffered a handful of torn and crumpled sheets of paper. “Ah, our incoming packing notes for the day, ha ha, to be sure.”

“Sorry,” Suncat said in a small voice.

“Don’t give it another thought, my dear, they should never have been left out in the first place. I’m sure my boy Alrun can reconstruct them. Now, is there anything I can help you with? Those congas, perhaps?”

“They are nice,” Tollain said, “but we don’t have an awful lot of space at the moment.”

“We can arrange shipping within a twenty-light-year radius,” Alkendo said grandly.

“At a trifling cost of one arm and one leg,” Kaichang murmured almost too quietly to

be heard.

“I’ll think about it and be in touch,” Tollain promised. “They really do have a very nice tone. If you don’t mind, though, Seir Alkendo, there is something you may be able to help us with.”

“I am at your service,” Alkendo said, bowing.

“Do you have anything,” Tollain began, and hesitated, “anything that’s odd?”

“Odd?”

“Not in the usual run of instruments. Something you’ve maybe not seen before, something that doesn’t fit into any of these groups.” Tollain gestured around the store. “Even if it’s damaged, or you don’t know how to play it. Anything.”

Alkendo gestured to another of his sons and muttered a few words. The boy nodded and sped off towards the back of the shop.

“We used to have quite a sizeable second-hand section,” Alkendo explained, “less so now, of course, more money around, people aren’t forced to sell...but there were a couple of items that we simply couldn’t shift at all. Couldn’t tell what they were, you see. After a while we just put them in a box and wrote ’em off. Medrik’s just looking out the box.”

“We may be able to help with that,” Tollain offered. “My mother had a large collection of musical oddities, and Verneen here has unearthed a few.”

“My parents did,” Verneen amended, ducking her head in the old gesture. Now she wore her hair in a ponytail it no longer had the effect of veiling her face, but she still did it on occasion.

“Ah, here he comes.” The boy was returning, carrying a largish cardboard box.

“A couple of items?” Kaichang repeated, as he set it down on top of a nearby piano.

“Well, a few,” Alkendo said.

“I can help you with this one.” Tollain picked it up. “That’s a guiro. You play it with a stick. Er...lend me a pen, somebody.” Wordlessly Alkendo proffered his own pen, and Tollain stroked it up and down the notches in the large hollow gourd. “Any kind of

stick will do, see? It's a percussion instrument. Would have gone nicely with that song we did. I'd say you could get ten or fifteen crabs for that easily. And this is the same sort of thing," he added, picking up a wooden frog with dorsal spines and a hole through the middle. "The stick should be in there."

"We lost it," Alkendo admitted.

"Find something to fit and that should go for maybe seven or eight."

"And that," Kaichang said, picking up a rectangular metal object, "is an ammo clip from a Hammond Warthain GZ92. You won't get much of a tune out of that."

"Oh, I don't know," Tollain said.

"What's this?" Verneen had picked up another of the odd items. It was made of some kind of ceramic, painted with black enamel, now somewhat chipped, and was oval, tapering to a sharp point at the narrow end. From one side, at the wider end, protruded a rounded excrescence. It looked like nothing so much as a gun itself, or rather a mock-up of one. Seven holes dotted one face, and there was another opposite.

"Cover the holes on the top and blow into the sticky-out bit," Tollain suggested.

Verneen did so, and a pure rounded tone emerged. She stopped blowing, and her face lit up. "It's lovely!" she exclaimed.

"That's an ocarina," Tollain said, "though, at the risk of being quoted out of context, I've never seen one as big as that before."

"Ooh," Verneen breathed. "Can I have it?"

"With our compliments," Alkendo said handsomely. "Is that everything?"

"One more," Tollain said, taking out a long, thin piece of wood. It was round in cross-section, curving sharply at either end, and from both ends hung scraps of something that looked like hair.

"We couldn't get any sound out of that at all," Medrik Alkendo volunteered.

"What kind of fibre is that?" Tollain's tone was abstracted.

"Looks like it could be horse hair," Kaichang said.

Tollain pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it and looked at the blurred picture. A slow grin spread over his face.

“We’ll take this,” he said, folding the picture and putting it away, “and the ocarina, for fifty crabs. And I’ll put a deposit on those congas, too. Half okay?”

“Th-that would be quite, er, satisfactory.” Alkendro was taken aback. He took Tollain’s keycard as if in a daze. “B-but what is it?”

“It’s the other half of a puzzle,” Tollain said triumphantly. “Which we are going to solve. We’ll tell you all about it when we come back. But now, I’m afraid, we really do have to go.” He gestured towards the counter, and Alkendro came a little to himself and processed the payment quickly.

“Thank you very much,” Tollain said, taking his hand and pressing it warmly. “You really have been very helpful. Oh, one more thing...” He leaned across the counter. “Don’t let the bootleg go too cheaply. We do have a living to make.”

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“You passed the note?” said the voice from the shadows.

The thin girl nodded eagerly. The lamp above the corner table was out of action, and here at the back of the cafe there was little ambient light.

“Good.” There was a rustling sound. It might have been someone sitting back comfortably, satisfied. “That should keep them up to the mark.”

The girl frowned. “You want them to go on looking?”

“My dear young woman, of course I do.” The voice was testy. “How would you react to a note like that? Would you just take it as a directive from heaven and return to your ordinary life with no questions asked?” There was a pause, a sense of scrutiny.

“Maybe you would. Young people these days are so unenterprising. No wonder, I suppose, with everything done for them. In my day...”

“So what now?” the girl broke in.

“Now?” A ghost of a chuckle. “Now you take this...” A disposable keycard skittered across the table. “You pay it into your account and you return to your ordinary life with no questions asked. As for Gestalt...” Another pause. “Well, that really is none of

your affair, is it?"

"They won't...get hurt, will they?"

"I think it exceedingly possible that they might," the voice said, suddenly sharp. "The secret they are hunting for guards itself very shrewdly and jealously. But as I just said, that is none of your affair. You have accepted money from me to pass them a note, and you have done so. That ends your involvement. Now please leave me."

The girl peered searchingly into the shadows for a moment; then she got up.

"You didn't even ask my name," she said, with apparent inconsequence.

"Nor you mine," said the voice. "Not that I would have given it. Good day to you."