

# **JTC Part 05**

**Jonathan Waite**

## CHAPTER FIVE

Korynn's first day of intensive rehearsal did not get off to quite the flying start he might have been envisaging.

The band woke after a night of blissful slumber to find that no, it had not been a dream, they were indeed flying in a very comfortably appointed ship which bore no trace of old sock effluvium. One by one, in various states of dress or undress, they wandered out of their rooms and sought breakfast, which the food synthesisers readily provided. It was while they were lingering over the remnants, with Korynn standing by the door waiting, that Verneen picked up the ex-violin and turned it over and over in her hands.

"I wonder how you're supposed to play it?" she said.

"Well, hopefully we'll find out," Suncat said, stretching. "Is there any more tea?"

"Ask Kintarsh," Kaichang said, conscientiously picking up plates. "I mean about the thing, not the tea, there's loads. Yes you have finished, Torres, you've eaten enough for three. He's got the picture."

"I can't see how it would work," Orville said, reluctantly relinquishing his plate.

"Cause if you look at that top bit, it's convex. Your strings would just lie along the fretboard—not that there are any frets, which is a whole other problem—and buzz. I don't think there were strings at all." He got up, took the violin from Verneen and picked up the mysterious stick. "I think it was a percussion thing."

He tapped the stick lightly against the broken case. It made a not unpleasant but hardly musical *tck* sound.

"No, there were definitely strings," Tollain said, getting up and rounding the table.

"Otherwise why tuning pegs?"

"You don't know that's what they were," Orville said. "You're just extrapolating from a guitar. They could have been..." He trailed off.

"Religious," Verneen said. "That's what my parents always said when they didn't understand something. 'It must have been religious.' Or 'it must have had ritual

significance.’ Maybe they’re ritually significant tuning pegs.”

“Maybe this thing was developed by someone who’d seen a guitar or a ukulele but didn’t understand the principle.” Orville took up the idea. “Sort of cargo cult thing. They thought if they made something that looked like a guitar—”

“No, no, no.” Tollain fumbled in his pocket, produced and unfolded the picture, which was starting to look increasingly sad. “It’s a real instrument. It may even be older than a guitar. Give it here.” He spread the picture out on the table, picked up the violin and studied the illustration. “Well, that can’t be right.”

The others crowded round to look as Tollain experimentally took hold of the neck of the violin, put the rounded end of it under his chin and squinted along it. “This is ridiculous,” he complained. “You can’t even see it properly. Give me the stick thing.” He poised the “stick thing” over the shattered upper surface. “How on earth—? No, that must be wrong.”

“Pictures don’t lie,” Kaichang pointed out with a touch of malice.

“Pictures lie all the time,” Tollain retorted. “But this one...I really thought...” He sighed and lowered the instrument. “Maybe it’s just an imaginative reconstruction.”

“I may be able to help,” Korynn said from the doorway.

“How?” Kaichang demanded.

“If you will come to the rehearsal space, I shall explain.”

“This is just a cunning ploy to get us to work,” Orville grumbled.

“I’m game,” Tollain said, and headed for the door, still carrying the violin. The others followed, interested in spite of themselves.

Korynn had indeed constructed, in the cargo bay, a reasonable replica of the set-up at home. A large space in which instruments and microphones had been set up adjoined a smaller room, behind a transparent wall, in which stood the band’s portable sound desk.

“I have linked the desk wirelessly to the ship’s computer,” Korynn said as they trooped in. “Once I have performed the upgrades I mentioned yesterday, we should

have all the recording facilities here that we have on Argenthome.” He crossed to his keyboard stack, switched on a synth, pressed some buttons and then a key. A note sounded over the speakers. “That is the sound which this instrument is supposed to produce, if we accept that hypothesis. You will note that it is not a percussive sound, nor a plucked sound. It has the characteristics of a sound produced by friction, as with the wine glasses, if you remember.”

Orville and Suncat nodded.

“Let me look at the ancillary device,” Korynn said.

“You mean the stick thing?” Kaichang asked innocently. Tollain gave her a look, and passed it over. Korynn examined it briefly.

“Yes,” he said. “We may theorise that the hair was stretched along the length of it, from here to here. This mechanism at the end is geared so as to maintain it under a degree of tension.” He held out his hand and Tollain passed him the violin. “There would be four strings, stretched between here and here. Yes, Torres, I see your concern...but I would hypothesise that here,” he indicated a point on the top, “there would have been some kind of superstructure to hold the strings clear of the case. You can see where it was secured.”

“The bridge,” Tollain said. “My mother had one. So that’s where it goes.”

“I thought that was for a pickup,” Orville muttered.

“The composition of the strings is problematic,” Korynn continued, “but we have enough data now to model the instrument in virtual space. Once we have successfully done that, we may be in a position to construct our own. I assume that is one of our goals.”

“Well, yes,” Tollain said, “though I still don’t see how you play it.”

Korynn held the instrument as Tollain had done, under his chin. “The superstructure will have a curved profile,” he said, “so that each string presents itself individually.” He poised the stick above it. “One strokes the strings with the bundled hairs, and the resultant friction produces the desired tones. The note can be varied by pressing the strings on this board here.”

“Yes, but how do you know where?” Tollain burst out. “There aren’t any frets!”

“I would imagine one learns,” Korynn said flatly, putting the violin and the stick down.

“Now, since we are all here, may I suggest we spend some time in rehearsing?”

“The whole thing looks ridiculously over-complicated,” Suncat said. “And you’d definitely go cross-eyed trying to see where you were putting your fingers.”

“I don’t know.” Verneen was looking thoughtful. “When you look at some of the crazy things human beings do...”

“What are you thinking?” Kaichang said.

“When Korynn was standing there, holding it...” Verneen shook her head. “I may be remembering something I’ve seen somewhere...it just looked...right.”

“I thought it looked ridiculous,” Kaichang said.

“Thank you, Kaichang,” Korynn said, apparently without irony. “It is not an instrument I could feel comfortable playing.”

“Of course not.” Kaichang grinned. “It doesn’t plug into the wall, like you.”

“As to that,” Korynn said, “once we have modelled it acoustically, it should be no great trouble to develop an electric version. It would then be possible to dispense with this fragile and impractical wooden construction and produce something more durable.”

“Aren’t we running before our horse to market a bit here?” Tollain said, heading off an explosion from Kaichang. “We haven’t even got it working as is yet. And much as I hate to say it, Korynn’s right, we should do some rehearsing while we’re here. Places, people. The violin isn’t going anywhere.”

With only a little show of reluctance, mostly for the sake of form, the band located their instruments and picked out microphones. Korynn went briefly into the adjoining room and ran through a brisk sound check. Then he rejoined the others, and there followed a few minutes of warming up and tension-releasing exercises. Eventually, they began to play.

For the most part they focussed on the songs that were destined for the new album, as yet unnamed: What It Seems, My Turn Now, Changing Lives, I’m Coming Back For

You, and others. Pass The Parcel came in for particular attention, even though, as Orville pointed out, in a studio recording there would be no need for all the showy instrument-swapping.

“We’ll be doing it live afterwards,” Tollain decreed, and they ran through it again. Eventually, Korynn pronounced himself “provisionally satisfied” with the timing, and they broke for lunch.

Over the meal, Suncat seemed uncharacteristically withdrawn. Tollain, sensitive as ever to her moods without always understanding them, watched her and wondered what was coming. Things never stayed buried with Suncat for long. Accordingly, he was not entirely surprised, when they reconvened after lunch, to see her, with an apologetic glance at Korynn, take his place among the keyboards.

“I’ve got a new one,” she announced without preamble. “See what you think.” And with that, she began to play. Her playing was hesitant and unskilled, but her voice was sure enough:

*There's something we're not saying  
A feeling we all share  
We don't want to admit it but we know it's there  
It's like a cloud above our heads  
You can't be unaware  
But we choose to leave it hanging...  
Up in the air.*

*We spend our time pretending  
That everything's the same  
We know that it's a lie, so we share the blame  
'Cause change is big and scary, so  
We let ourselves not care  
And we leave our hearts suspended...  
Up in the air.*

*Up in the air it can never harm us  
Unless we want to breathe  
Up in the air it can never bring us down.  
Up in the air we can ignore it  
And its promise of joy and pain*

*And we only have to promise  
That we'll never look up again...*

*The home of lost commitments  
Of promises deferred  
The refuge of every injudicious word  
The dumping ground of broken hopes  
Not yet beyond repair  
Unless we let them fade away...  
Up in the air.*

*Up in the air they can never harm us  
Unless we want to breathe  
Up in the air they can never bring us down.  
Up in the air we can ignore them  
And the treasure we might have found  
And we only have to keep our eyes  
Focussed firmly on the ground...*

*And so we make a solemn pact  
To keep on keeping on  
Till one day we'll look up and it will all be gone  
But maybe if we take a chance  
Take the risk and take the dare  
We may find that it's worth trying  
That it's not as bad as dying  
And on that day we'll all be flying...  
Up in the air.  
Up in the air.  
Up in the air!*

She finished with a slightly dodgy flourish and looked defiantly around at them. There was a somewhat embarrassed pause.

“It—it’s a good song,” Tollain began tentatively.

“Kintarsh, you’re an idiot.” Kaichang spoke without heat, almost a little uncertain herself. “The song—though it is good—is not the point. Is it, love?”

“Not the whole point, no,” Suncat said, summoning up the ghost of a smile, which

faded as she looked from one face to another. "You all know what I'm talking about. We made each other a promise last year. We went through a lot together, we almost lost each other. I thought..." She rallied desperately. "I thought that would do it. Bring us together, properly. But we're all just carrying on as normal, just the way we were on Goliard."

"Not quite, surely," Tollain said; but even as he spoke he doubted.

"It's me, isn't it?" Orville said, coming forward. "I'm the weak link as usual. I'm sorry, love. I just don't do the touchy-feely stuff, not properly." He seemed about to say something else, but Suncat smiled at him.

"Bless you, Orville, it's not you," she said. "I know you, remember? I know you've been doing your best. It's not really any one of us, I think."

"Yes. It is."

It was Kaichang who had spoken, but for a moment nobody realised it, so unlike her normal manner had been the almost inaudible whisper. She was sitting on her stool, bent over her axe, talking to the floor.

"It's me," the dark girl went on. "I'm the one blocking. And Mitwoch, but he can't help it, I think. I could. I could help it. I just—" She looked up, hollow-eyed, at Suncat. "I can't stand sharing you," she confessed, and Tollain started guiltily to hear his own sentiment from another's lips. "I can't get my head round it. With Verneen, sure, that's how we started, that's fine, but with a bunch of—"

"Of men," Orville said softly.

Kaichang nodded, and was about to say something more when a chime sounded, twice.

"Incoming messages," Verneen interpreted, and with one accord Tollain, Orville and she moved to the door. Suncat went rather to Kaichang, and took her in her arms.

"I will get there," Kaichang said, fiercely through impending tears. "I will. It's just so hard."

"I know you will, my love." Suncat kissed her. "Take all the time you need. I was just being selfish. Wanting everything my way."

“Don’t we all,” Kaichang said, smiling lopsidedly.

When they got to the flight deck Tollain had retrieved the messages.

“Two. Both tight-beam, text-only, rerouted here from Deshelle,” he said. “One from your friend in the police, Suncat. ‘Regret no identifying traces on note. Your request carried out in full. Now we’re even.’”

“Not a surprise,” Orville commented.

“And one from the Museum on Messelnek,” Tollain went on. “Apparently they’ve had an incident of vandalism. Somebody broke into the building a couple of nights ago and burned a book.”

“The one that picture was from?” Verneen said.

Tollain nodded. “Burned to ashes. Just that one as well, so the intent was unmistakable.”

There was a short silence.

“This is where I say are we going home then, and you say no,” Orville said.

“Give the man a bag of meeble nuts,” Tollain said. “The Museum apparently has quite an extensive collection of books and artefacts relating to this Selukus Vand, and they’ve invited us to have a poke through and see what we can find while they source another copy of the *Commentaries*. The Assistant Curator says he’s got a line on one somewhere in the Parsifal sector. So, Verneen,” he turned to her, “you’ll be in charge of the poking-through. I’ve suggested that they might like us to do a gig for them—benefit sort of thing, museums are always hard up—but it’ll take a day or two for a reply to get here.”

Verneen glowed quietly.

“Now, shall we go back down and pick up the rehearsal again?” Tollain said.

As the others left, he touched Suncat’s arm.

“It’s not just Kaichang, you know,” he said. “We just need some time.”

“I know,” Suncat said. Her cool hand covered his, and her golden eyes met his green ones. “Be patient with my impatience,” she whispered, and she was gone.

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Messelnek's spaceport was a bustling, cheerfully elderly place, its original Imperial lines now almost obscured by meant-to-be temporary additions and extensions. The Warpster touched down under its own control, through a sky heavy with threatening clouds, and within half an hour Gestalt were riding an ancient and creaky travelator into the arrivals lounge.

"I didn't think any of these things still existed," Suncat remarked. "People can walk."

"Messelnek's old Imperial heritage," Orville said. "Ostentation for its own sake."

"Why can't they ever spell these signs right?" Tollain demanded grumpily. The others followed his gaze and saw an elderly man holding up a sign that read KING TRASH. They tried, more or less successfully, to conceal their sniggers as Tollain stepped off the rolling path and approached the man.

"Are you from the Museum?" he said.

"Yes, seir," the man said. "Eldo Karpenick, Deputy Assistant Curator. We have a car out front. Follow me please."

"It's Kintarsh, actually," Tollain said, as he and the others fell into step behind the man, who did not seem to have heard.

The car was old, but serviceable and almost large enough for six passengers. Verneen solved the problem by taking the seat next to the driver, Karpenick, and engaging him in conversation as he piloted them out of the spaceport complex and on to what evidently passed, on Messelnek, for a major road. The first drops of rain splatted on the windscreen as he completed the turn.

It seemed that this planet had been something of an Imperial showpiece, the kind of world that featured in propaganda vidcasts about how wonderful life was under the Empire's dominion, and so much of the ugliness that elsewhere betokened Imperial domination had here been proscribed. Here, workers had been decently fed and housed, had even enjoyed certain very limited freedoms, and the strip-mining, intensive agriculture and industrialisation so common on other Empire worlds had never marred the natural beauty of Messelnek.

“And all thanks to the first Imperial Governor,” Karpenick enthused. “Of course, he had his own reasons—he lived here, after all—but even so, we have cause to honour his name.”

“Which was?” Verneen prompted.

Karpenick opened his eyes very wide, as lightning flashed somewhere off to their left. “Why, Selukus Vand, of course.” And thunder mockingly underlined the name.

The Museum of Imperial Culture was a large, rambling building set on a low hill in its own grounds. Under the leaden sky it looked prison-like and forbidding, the yellow lights in a few of its windows only serving to emphasise the menacing black bulk of it. Suncat shivered as the car, headlights blazing, wound up the long drive.

Orville leaned over and whispered, “Werewolf.”

“Werewolf?” Suncat echoed.

Orville assumed another character and pointed. “There.”

“What?” Suncat was joining in.

“There wolf,” Orville chanted, and pointed ahead. “There castle.”

“Knock it off, you two,” Kaichang said.

The car passed through an archway and into a glass-roofed courtyard, cacophonous with the drumming of the rain. Everyone disembarked and hurried up a flight of steps and through a large double door which Karpenick opened and closed behind them. The noise died down to a dull roar.

“Welcome,” Karpenick said, “to the Museum. The Assistant Curator is waiting for you in his office. This way.”

He led Tollain and the others up a flight of stairs with ornately carved banisters and a somewhat threadbare carpet, and along a corridor lined with glass-fronted exhibit cases. Verneen showed a disposition to linger, and Orville made it his business to keep her moving. Karpenick knocked at a door labelled PRIVATE, and on hearing a response opened it and ushered them all into a large, dusty office in which a man who might have been his elder brother, rising from an armchair, advanced to meet them with hand outstretched.

“Seir—” he began.

“Kintarsh,” Tollain said quickly, taking the proffered hand, and introduced the others.

“I am Myrick Apple,” said the man. “It was I who wrote to you. Welcome to the Museum of Imperial—”

“I’ve already done that,” said Karpenick, a little testily.

Apple drew himself up. “You exceeded your authority, Eldo,” he said coldly. “As Assistant Curator, it was my duty—”

“Then you should have been at the door,” Karpenick countered. “One can hardly welcome a visitor to a place they are already in.”

“One can hardly welcome a visitor to a place in which one is merely a functionary. Eldo, Eldo, you forget your place.” Apple wagged a finger.

“My place,” Karpenick said, “is to represent you on those occasions when you are not present. As in this case. The proper function of a welcome—”

“How long do you suppose they’ve been married?” Orville whispered to Verneen.

“Thirty-six years, Seir Torres,” Apple said, and Orville went beet red. “But this is none of your concern. Welcome, then, to *my office*,” he added, with a vicious glare at Karpenick. “And may I begin by saying both how gratified we are at your visit, and how sorry we are that the object thereof has been so villainously frustrated. I have secured another copy of the volume in question, but it will not be here for another three days. In the meantime, may we offer you the hospitality of our guest quarters, and unlimited access to what we like to call the Selukus Vand collection. It occupies the entirety of our third floor, as befits the historical stature of the man, and will afford you much interest, I think.”

“Well, thank you, Seir Apple,” Tollain said, “but we’re mainly interested in the provenance of this instrument.”

“Governor Vand was a great patron of all the arts,” Apple stated, “and I have no doubt that you will find other relevant material for study.” He went to a small table on which stood a row of decanters. “Would you care for some wine, or perhaps something stronger?”

Tollain had become aware of Verneen's eyes fixed imploringly on his. "Not for me, thank you," he said, "but my friends might like some. And we would be happy to study your collection till the book arrives."

"Ecstatic," Kaichang muttered.

"I will, however," Tollain went on, "regretfully decline your offer of accommodation. I fear the levels of dust here—" He coughed, not too theatrically. "I am prone to breathing problems, you see, so it would be far healthier for me to sleep on our ship."

"In that case," Suncat said firmly, "if Seir Karpenick would be so kind as to drive us back tonight, we will all sleep on the ship and return tomorrow in our own vehicle."

"I understand," Apple said at once. "Dust, I fear, is a natural concomitant of museums, and since we are but few to tend the building..." He took out a handkerchief and flapped it ineffectually at the back of the armchair in which he had been sitting. "Just Eldo and myself, and Sera Mulge who comes in three days a week, bless her," he said fondly through the dense cloud that had arisen. "If there were only a little more *money*...do you know, I verily believe," he added, with the air of one who advances a revolutionary new hypothesis, "I verily believe that that would solve many of our problems."

"And yet," Karpenick said, "when it comes to the matter of actually *asking* for—"

"My dear Eldo," Apple said tartly, "it is a matter of—"

The very loud and explosive clearing of a throat caught everyone by surprise, even Verneen, who had uttered it.

"Excuse me," she said, "but I wonder if we might see the collection now?"

As they followed Apple and Karpenick up the stairs, Verneen drew close to Tollain.

"Do you think we could give them some money?" she said. "I hate to see antiquities this neglected."

"You'll need to clear it with Kaichang," Tollain said, "but I'm all for it. Especially if we find what we're looking for."

On the next landing, Karpenick flung open another set of double doors, and Apple

flicked switches. A blaze of light illumined a long room that clearly ran the entire length of the building. Cases ran in four rows down to the far wall, and doors led off to other rooms on the right.

“Very impressive,” Tollain said, and as if in answer the lights flickered and dimmed for a moment.

“The storm,” Apple said, raising his voice over the thunder. “Eldo, go and make sure your torch is well supplied with batteries, and then go and start the backup generator.” Karpenick nodded brusquely and departed.

Tollain raised his voice likewise. “What we’re looking for is—” He felt a light touch on his arm, and stopped.

“Seir Apple,” Verneen said, “would you tell us about Selukus Vand, please?”

She knew her man. Apple beamed and expanded.

“The latter days of the Comorrian dynasty,” he began, “were, in the opinion of many scholars, the peak of the early Imperial culture. There was comparative peace, coupled with reasonable prosperity. The decadence of the later dynasties had not yet entirely set in, the lamentable falling-off of the Imperial bloodlines had yet to show itself. Pantolycus IV, the last Comorrian Emperor, known as “the Enlightened” during his reign, presided over what might aptly be termed a Golden Age. He it was who appointed a young and talented military commander of the line of Vand to the Senate, and oversaw his rise to pre-eminence.

“Sadly, as so often happens in the Empire’s long history, these liberal policies bred discontent among the more authoritarian of the nobility, and Pantolycus himself died without issue under what might be called ‘mysterious circumstances,’ and was succeeded by a distant cousin, the first of the Deneelian line, Zimpraxos I. He was, I may say,” Apple coughed, “a very different kettle of fish.

“Under Zimpraxos, the Empire became more oppressive, more expansionist. He delighted in warfare, and looked to emulate his conquering ancestors such as Tharkassus VII and Bolentes the Blood-Drinker. At home, he pillaged the treasury to finance grandiose and ultimately futile building projects and riotous entertainments for himself and his cronies. And no-one was more popular at his table than Selukus

Vand.

“The young commander had proved himself an adroit politician, and survived not only the dynastic upheaval but also the frequent purges whereby Zimpraxos attempted to rid himself of enemies both real and imagined. He seemed, though, almost to respect Vand, and many times sought his advice on matters of state. Sometimes he even followed it.”

A bogus snore from Orville turned into an unconvincing cough as Suncat elbowed him in the ribs.

“This could not last, however, and disagreements grew and festered between Vand and the Emperor. At last he was dismissed the Court, and retired to this planet of Messelnek, of which he had always taken especial care, where he remained, shunning public life, till his death some eighty years later. He corresponded widely and wrote many books, on a variety of subjects from military strategy to pastoral poetry, and seems indeed to have been something of a polymath.”

“If I have two parrots and you give me three...” Kaichang murmured.

“But enough of my dry scholarship,” Apple said, and seemed disappointed to hear no cries of “no, no.” He gestured widely at the room before them. “Ladies and gentlemen, Selukus Vand.” He ushered the visitors in. “And now I must go and see what is keeping Eldo. Excuse me.”

From the tone of his announcement, one might almost have expected the man himself to have appeared, sauntering among the remnants of his life. Tollain wandered from case to case, studying holopics of Vand at various stages of his life, items of personal adornment, weaponry and utensils, scale models of his estates, recreations of various battles on land and in space in which the younger Vand had distinguished himself. One entire row of cases was given over to original manuscripts, books and letters, all written in the spiky and all but illegible Imperial script that had been the fashion in Vand’s lifetime.

“You know what’s missing here?” he said aloud.

“A decent incinerator?” Kaichang said acidly.

“Bite your tongue,” Verneen said. “This stuff is priceless.”

“There’s nothing here,” Tollain said, “even vaguely relating to music.”

“There are other rooms,” Suncat pointed out.

They looked at the other rooms. One was devoted to Selukus Vand’s family and genealogy, another to placing him in his historical context, another to a timeline of his notable achievements. The last room they came to—

“Goddess,” Suncat breathed.

“Gruesome,” Kaichang observed.

The room was roped off, and a sign beside the doorway said sternly NO ENTRY. They were looking into what appeared to be a comfortably furnished sitting room, warmly if dimly lit by a single small table lamp with an ornate lampshade made of many layers, patterned with cut-out moons and stars. Beside the table on which it stood, a skeleton, still held together by parchment-like skin and clad in a purple dressing gown and tasselled brocade cap, sat in an armchair rather like the ones in Myrick Apple’s office, apparently reading with great enjoyment (to judge from its expression) a small leather-bound book.

“Selukus Vand himself,” said Apple’s voice from behind them. “It was his will that he be embalmed and displayed thus, for those who wished to look upon him.”

“Creepy,” Suncat said. “Hey, everyone, come and look at my rotten old dead body, it’ll be fun.”

“Unfortunately,” Apple said, a little censoriously, “this provision of his will was not carried out till some fifty years after his death. Otherwise,” he allowed himself a small official joke, “he would be in better state to receive you.”

“Did he specify the setting as well?” Verneen wanted to know.

“In every detail,” Apple said. “This was part of the reason for the delay. The various items of furniture had been claimed and removed by acquisitive friends, relations and sycophants, and had to be recovered at considerable expense.”

“But it’s all authentic?” Verneen pressed. “Nothing replaced?”

Apple drew himself up. “Nothing,” he said. “We were most particular.”

“What are you thinking, love?” Suncat said.

“Well,” said Verneen, in her this-is-going-to-take-a-bit-of-explaining voice. “We’re here because of a musical instrument, right? But there’s nothing at all here to do with music. Did that never strike you as odd?” she asked, turning to Apple. “Such a cultured man, and nothing musical to be found among his possessions?”

“He was very fond of music,” Apple said, “that much is known. It was the Emperor, Zimpraxos, who took an unreasoning dislike to the particular kind of music Vand preferred. Indeed, he went so far as to institute a galaxy-wide purge of it. Vand had no choice but to co-operate.”

“A purge of music?” Tollain said faintly.

“Steady, Kintarsh,” Kaichang said.

“The entire Imperial Armed Forces were enlisted,” Apple said. “They travelled to every planet in the Empire—which is to say, at that point, every human-occupied world in the galaxy—and went from community to community, from house to house, seizing and destroying instruments, books, recordings, anything that related to this particular form of music. Anyone who resisted was killed; any community in which the purge could not be completed was destroyed utterly. It was nothing more nor less than a war on music.”

“Like the Puritans on old Earth,” Verneen murmured, “smashing religious images. Only with typical Last Empire efficiency.”

“Why?” Tollain burst out. “What the frod could there be in music that—”

“It is believed,” Apple said, “that the Emperor found it difficult to understand. Too intellectual for him. He once proposed the eradication of all words longer than three syllables.”

“What stopped him?” Orville said.

“Vand pointed out that ‘eradication’ had five. It made the Emperor laugh. If he could be induced to laugh at something, it usually dispelled his bad temper.”

“Verneen, you were saying?” Suncat said.

“Well,” Verneen said again. “I’m Vand, okay? I’m an incredibly powerful Imperial Senator, what ho, and I like this music, but the only guy in the universe more powerful than me is wiping it out. What do I do?”

“You kill him,” Kaichang said promptly.

“No I don’t,” Verneen said. “One-track mind, that’s you, Kaichang. I can’t kill him, because I’m surrounded by his mates and they’ll know it was me. I can’t change his mind, and I can’t take on his whole army. What do I do?”

“You make a secret stash,” Tollain guessed.

Verneen put her finger on her nose. “Only I don’t just bury a bunch of recordings,” she said. “I’m Imperial. I think big. To keep an entire school of music alive...it takes a planet.”

“And that planet,” Korynn said, startling them all yet again, “is where our violin came from.”

“It’s got to be,” Verneen said. “He must have taken over a whole planet and designed it to keep this musical tradition alive. The Empire went through a phase of creating replicas of old Earth, using aggressive terraforming, planetary manipulation, cultural surgery on a huge scale, with their culture of course as the dominant one.”

“It is seldom remarked,” Apple said, in a feeble effort to recover the conversational initiative, “how much our current galactic cultural matrix actually owes to the Empire we so despise. It is popularly supposed, for instance, that the very language we speak —”

“It would have to be very secret,” Tollain pointed out, overriding Apple. “If it came out during his lifetime...”

“Or during Zimpraxos’s,” Verneen agreed. “But of course the longer you keep a secret the easier it becomes, because people die. By the time Vand himself died it’s possible nobody then alive in the Empire had ever known about it.”

“So it could still be out there,” Tollain said. “If it was there two hundred years ago—”

“Which we know it was,” Verneen said.

“Excuse me,” Apple said, a little plaintively. “What are you talking about?”

Verneen went to him and took his arm. “We’re talking about Selukus Vand’s real legacy,” she said. “A planet, a whole planet, somewhere out there, that he dedicated to the preservation of the music he loved. A planet where they’re still making—or were at least till recently—musical instruments that nobody else in the galaxy has seen for thousands of years. A cultural gold mine, inspired and informed by the genius of the man you’re celebrating in this museum. He must have left a clue somewhere as to its whereabouts. It’ll be here if it’s anywhere. Will you help us find it?”

The old man’s eyes were shining. His voice was husky. “Help you find it?” he breathed. “My dear young lady, I would give my life—”

It was at this point, interrupting what was doubtless going to be a rather fine sentiment, that all the lights went out, and somebody screamed.