

RETURN TO ARGENTHOME

CHAPTER ONE

Why was she thinking about Shallen?

Suncat rolled over in bed, letting herself circle cautiously around the thought. There were things that needed to be considered, urgent, painful things, but she couldn't face those right now. She called up the image of her childhood friend from the vaults of memory. It was blurred, incomplete; she was hopeless at remembering faces. The voice was easier. High-pitched, excited, urgent; Shallen always had something urgent to do or to say, some plan, some scheme. Usually it would go drastically wrong in some way, after Suncat had finally allowed herself to be persuaded to join in, and she would end up taking the brunt of whatever consequences followed, while Shallen skipped free with that rueful little smile of hers...

But that had not been Suncat, not back then. That had been Angharad Gunhilda Morningsky, before she had found her voice, before she had taken a new name, before she had met Kaichang Belgardis and Verneen Halannim and...

That was bordering on the forbidden area. Suncat skirted back to Shallen, and thought, for the first time in years, of that last phone call.

I've been expecting this...waiting for it...help me...

A hand reached over and waggled its fingers in front of her face.

"Good morning," said a light, amused voice. "I wouldn't have disturbed you, but you're on my hair."

"That's usually my line." Suncat sighed. Obviously the forbidden area had decided to come to her. She shifted her head, and the man next to her freed himself and grinned at her. She smiled back. You couldn't help it.

She had been sleeping—or not—with Tollain Kintarsh for about three months, on and off. They had met on Belleneige, as a result of a bizarre and implausible coincidence that Kaichang still thought the work of some malignant secret agency. Suncat had

been stagnating musically, her natural laziness overwhelming her ambition; Tollain had been on the verge of suicide, though he hadn't let that slip till weeks later. Both of them had been intelligent enough to know what was happening, and wise enough not to try to fight it.

"Are you hungry?" Tollain said.

"What does it mean when you dream of someone you haven't seen in ten years?" Suncat said.

Tollain screwed up his smooth, boyish face and adopted an outrageous accent.

"Among moy people," he proclaimed, "it dew mean that before sundewn an old lady will give yew a fish and ask for sixpence. Or possibly the other way rewnd. That be woy all the maidies on moy planet take a fish to bed every noyght." He dropped the accent. "It was a wonder I got born at all," he finished, and she laughed. "Why do you ask?" Tollain continued, slipping out of bed and stooping for his clothes where they had ended up. "Have you had a vision of your old granny falling downstairs?"

"No, it was just a thought." Suncat watched him dressing. She was not ready to share her whole life with him, not yet. True, he was good-looking if so very small, and he made her laugh, and she had never known a man so attentive or empathic when it came to lovemaking, but there was still so much she didn't know about him.

And then there was the music. Somehow, in the weeks that immediately followed their first meeting, Tollain had effortlessly enfolded Suncat, Kaichang and Verneen into a completely new band, bringing in the bassist Orville Torres, whom they already knew, and synth player Korynn Mitwoch, to whom Kaichang had taken an immediate and unreasoning dislike. It worked—none of them could deny that it worked—but Suncat couldn't understand how Tollain could have known that it would, and she wanted to resent the way he had blithely rearranged all their lives, and made them, unforgivably, better.

Only, somehow, she couldn't.

"Yes," she said belatedly.

"Good," Tollain said. "So am I. Shall I bring it to you?"

"No, I'll come down." Suncat dismissed Shallen from her mind. Just a stupid dream,

she told herself, carrying over into the waking world. Here and now was her habitat of choice. The past was the past, the future non-existent till you made yourself a present of it.

She threw a robe on over her nakedness and followed Tollain downstairs.

*

“What?” Kaichang Belgardis said dangerously.

“I said,” the maddeningly dispassionate voice from the mixing booth said, “‘Kaichang, please try it again.’ Is there a problem with the reception?”

Kaichang threw a glare at the booth that should have melted its way through the soundproof glass and fried Korynn Mitwoch’s brain where he sat. He showed no sign of noticing. Suncat would have said something sympathetic, but she knew Kaichang didn’t want sympathy right now. At a guess, she wanted a literal axe instead of the electronic guitar she was clutching, and five minutes alone in the room with Mitwoch.

“I heard you,” Kaichang said. “What was wrong with my performance this time?”

Suncat saw the black circles of Korynn’s shades regarding Kaichang steadily through the glass. The thin lips moved.

“Your entry in bar 156 was an eighth of a second late,” Korynn said.

“It was not!” Kaichang yelled.

“I can show you the recording in graphic form if you wish.” Korynn paused. “Of course, if you prefer, I could adjust the discrepancy myself—”

“No!” Kaichang seethed silently for a moment. “I’ll try it,” she said at last, “again. But this is the last time. And if you muck about with the recording, or with any recording of me, in any way, at any time, I will rip the flesh off your bones, make a xylophone out of them and play “Argenthome And Honour Fair” on them, very badly.”

“You would find such an instrument difficult to tune in any case,” Korynn said, entirely unruffled. “Very well, if that is your wish. From bar 34, please, when you are ready.”

Korynn Mitwoch was a breathtakingly brilliant keyboard player, and one of the most infuriatingly perfectionist producers any of the band had ever seen. Tollain had

originally intended to get a multi-instrumentalist like himself, but having heard Korynn playing his own weird, wild compositions, he had changed his mind. Suncat was still unsure whether it was worth it; Torres had nearly decked the man after the first recording session, and even Tollain had once suggested that his obsessive insistence on the closest possible approach to perfection was sucking the spontaneity out of the songs.

“If you find spontaneity that important,” Korynn had said, in that cold, flat, implacable voice of his, “let us record an album of traffic noise and random conversations. Spontaneity belongs in the act of composition, and in live performances; there it is an asset. The studio recording is where one gets it right. Again, please.”

Suncat didn't agree, but had not been sure enough of herself at that point to say so. Over the next few weeks she had realised that Tollain was actually trying to wear Korynn down, and she thought he might be succeeding. Whether he could complete the process before one of the others either left the band or murdered the man was a question Suncat preferred not to contemplate.

And now she couldn't get “Argenthome And Honour Fair” out of her head. Why had 'Chang picked that tune? It was one she hated, but then she hated all patriotic anthems on principle. Why did she have to make Suncat think of Argenthome now?

*

In the mixing booth beside Korynn, Tollain Kintarsh watched Suncat watching Kaichang as the axe player tore off yet another perfect rendition of her part, and wondered what was wrong.

He was almost sure it wasn't anything he'd done. Almost. His experience, wide in certain areas and chokingly limited in others, had not armed him well for actual day-to-day interaction with a companion, but he had decided to apply the same general principle as in other areas—be kind, be funny, and be honest, in that order—and so far it had worked reasonably well, he thought.

But something was bothering his lady. Outwardly she was as bouncy and bright as ever, most of the time. It was only in those moments when she thought herself

unobserved that the tiny frown appeared, so faint that it had taken him the whole of breakfast to decide that he wasn't imagining it. Something was troubling her, and therefore it troubled him too.

"Kaichang, that was better," Korynn said flatly into his microphone. "Thank you." He said it as if it were a phrase in a language foreign to him. Through the glass, Kaichang made an obscene gesture at him and unlimbered the axe, putting it carefully on its stand.

Of course it was probably none of his, Tollain's, business. They barely knew each other. He was finding out more every day, but that was because there was so very much to find. He knew she was from Argenthome, a recently Affiliated world in the next sector over, and that she came of what used to be called "a good family" on that world, but she had not gone into detail.

"Suncat," Korynn said, "will you please come in here."

Tollain moved away from the door against which he had been leaning to allow Suncat to enter. Gods, she was beautiful. He stood back, luxuriating in the movement and the life of her.

"Verneen will need to record her flute solo now," Korynn said. "I will go to my room for an hour. That should be adequate. Please supervise the mixing."

"Okay," Suncat said easily. Verneen, who found Korynn terrifying, refused to play if he was in her line of sight. They managed on stage by putting her well to the front, but it still affected her performance. Tollain had no idea how they were going to get over that hump, but over it they must get, somehow.

"I'll go and get her," he offered.

"Thank you, Tollain." Frod him, could he not even pretend to have some feelings?

Tollain left the booth. Kaichang, tuning her axe, gave him a wan smile as he crossed the studio and went out into the yard. It was a pale purple day over the village of Chen's Fastness, where Tollain had set up his home and makeshift studio four years ago on the very limited proceeds from his last solo album. On black days he estimated that approximately seven people must have bought the thing, all known to him personally. The planet, Goliard, was a sparsely populated Affiliated world known

mainly for its eccentrically designed, exclusively herbivorous and idiotically affectionate animal life, which had been rescued from extinction after the fall of the Empire and which tourists now came from adjacent sectors in their thousands to be photographed cuddling. Tollain supposed it was better than being hunted down, killed, cooked and eaten.

The wildlife of Goliard, however, was not Tollain's problem. His embryonic band, with half a dozen serious gigs behind it and the first album in the works, was already showing signs of acute foetal distress. He heard one of the signs as he went into the main house and walked down the passage to the stairs; Torres, bouncing his damn ball against the wall, over and over again. Torres, who thought Mitwoch was a poser, Tollain a burn-out case and the girls just hobbyists, who was only still here because Suncat had called in favours she hadn't even done for him yet. Tollain wasn't going to think about thinking about what those might be.

He climbed the dark stairs and turned right to knock on Verneen's door, but it was standing open. She was sitting on the edge of her neatly made bed, her hands clasped in her lap, obviously waiting for him, or somebody.

"Hello." Her voice was as colourless as her pale hair. She was in every way the antithesis of Suncat and Kaichang. They embodied colour, life, vibrancy. Verneen seemed to absorb it instead.

"Hello," Tollain said, and rushed on. "Ko—that is, Suncat sent me to say she wants you for your solo."

"He's not there, is he?"

"No, he's gone," Tollain assured her, and she slipped off the bed and picked up her flute case.

"I know this is really awkward," Verneen said quietly, as they descended the stairs again, "and I'm awfully sorry, but I just can't help it."

"I know what you mean," Tollain said. "He gives me the willies too. But he is very good at his job," he added, a little lamely.

"So is a gun," Verneen said with a shudder, as they passed through the accusing sound of the bouncing ball.

“Give him a little longer,” Tollain urged. “Give him a month. If none of you can get on with him then, I promise I’ll find us someone else.”

“Oh no.” They were out in the yard then, standing on the cracked plascrete under the purple sky, and Verneen stopped and turned to face him. “No, you mustn’t do that. He’s right. He’s the right one.”

“But—but if you and Kaichang—”

“Kaichang will come round,” Verneen told him. “She just has to find her own way to it. Then it’ll just be me, and—” She looked away. “I’m just a flute player. There are flute players everywhere.”

“Verneen,” Tollain said. “Listen to me. I would no more think of breaking up you three than—”

“But you are,” Verneen said. “Just by being with Suncat you’ve changed things. Don’t you see that? She’s not just our Suncat any more. She’s partly yours. You couldn’t help it. It just happened. I don’t know what’s going to happen next, or whether...” Her voice trailed away. “But you and she are right,” she went on. “I know that just as I know k-Korynn is right. If anything’s not right it’s me. And I know what to do in that case. I always have.”

There was no hint of conscious manipulation in her voice or in her manner. She was speaking the simple truth as she saw it, making the situation clear for him. Tollain felt a chill, and acting on pure impulse he went to put his arms round her.

“...no,” she whispered, stopping him dead in his tracks. “Not yet. Maybe not ever.” And with that she turned and went into the studio, leaving him standing there, his arms half outspread, the cold gnawing at his heart.

*

“...and I just don’t know what to do,” Suncat finished helplessly.

Kaichang had joined her in the booth as soon as Tollain had closed the door behind him. The dark girl was hunkered down in front of Suncat, holding both her hands and looking up into her face.

“Oh, honey,” she said gently. “Is that all?”

“You always said if some man tried to come between us you’d kill him,” Suncat said.

“I know,” Kaichang said. “That’s what you say when you’re in love. You mean it at the time, but that’s because you never know what it’s going to be like. Anyway, he isn’t trying to come between us, is he?”

“No, but he’s doing it anyway,” Suncat said, unconsciously echoing Verneen. “I can feel it. I—I want him in my life, ‘Chang. I don’t want to lose you or Verneen, I just want him as well.” She gulped and looked into Kaichang’s dark eyes. “Am I horribly greedy?”

“Of course you are,” Kaichang said with a smile. “It’s what makes you you. But you’ll never lose us, Suncat, you have to know that. Not unless you really want to. I know your planet is stuck in the Middle Ages, or was, but look around you. It’s the Sagittarian Age out there. There’s nothing to stop you loving who you want, or as many as you want.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Suncat said. “Or him.”

“And you won’t,” Kaichang said. “It might be—” She stopped as the studio door opened and Verneen entered. “We’ll talk about it,” she said, rising to her feet. “All of us. But you don’t need to worry, sweetie. I won’t kill him.” She thought about it. “Today.” She smiled, and Suncat smiled back tentatively. “Now go be a producer before His Snottiness comes back. I need to pee.”

“H-hello?” Verneen’s voice came over the speakers. “I’m—I’m ready.”

Kaichang left the booth, paused to hug Verneen quickly, and went out. Suncat took several deep breaths, tried to focus her mind on the matter at hand. “Okay,” she said. “Flute solo, ‘Prohibited Zone.’ How much lead-in do you want?”

“Two songs?” It was an old joke, and Suncat smiled. “Just the chorus before, please.”

Suncat addressed herself to the controls. The desk was old, and inclined to be temperamental, but she seemed to have a way with it that even Korynn coldly acknowledged; it performed perfectly, and as the chorus rose to the modulation Verneen took a breath, closed her eyes and began playing.

This was when the pale girl came alive, when all her camouflage dropped away and

she shone. Suncat loved to watch her, had been known to miss her cue because the spectacle of Verneen lost in the music was so breathtaking. But now there was a shadow on her soul that even this vision could not drive away entirely.

“That wasn’t right,” Verneen said suddenly, and Suncat stopped the recording.

“It sounded great to me,” she said.

“I played a wrong note,” Verneen insisted. “Flat when it should have been natural. He’ll notice, and I’ll have to redo it anyway. Let me try again, please.”

Suncat restarted the music from the same point, and as the flute sounded again her thoughts returned to the problem of Tollain.

This whole idea was a mistake. She could see that as clearly as the light glinting off Verneen’s flute as it dipped and rose in her hands. The Truesingers were a band. They knew each other, there was chemistry, they responded well to each other and between them could do anything they needed to. Tollain was brilliant, yes, nobody was disputing that—there wasn’t an instrument Suncat had heard of that he couldn’t play at least competently, and as a composer he was nothing short of a genius—but that was the whole point. He was sufficient unto himself, completely self-contained. And then there was the unfathomable Mitwoch...

Torres was all right, though. Suncat had known Orville Torres since her schooldays, when he had taken a summer job at the extremely authoritarian finishing school from which she had been doing her level best to be expelled, and had eventually contributed to her success. He was a good bass player and singer, and a friend to all three of them. Suncat could feel the strain she was putting on that friendship by pressuring him to stay around, though.

“That was great,” she called, though of course she had only been half-listening.

“Do you really think so?” Verneen was anxious. “What if he doesn’t like it?”

“He will,” Suncat said, thinking *If he doesn’t want me to feed him this desk he’d better.*

“Do you want to try anything else?”

“No...no.” The response was too quick. “I’ll go. Thank you, Suncat.”

“Hey.” Suncat got up, went out of the booth and opened her arms to Verneen. She

could feel the tautness of the thin body in her arms, the trembling. “Do you want me to—”

The door opened behind her and Kaichang came in with a rush. In her hand was the handset of the house comlink. Tollain refused to carry a personal link himself (“it always rings when you don’t want it to and never when you do”) and had asked everyone else to leave theirs, switched off, in an earthenware bowl in the dining room.

“It’s Gomer,” Kaichang said.

“And he wants to talk to me because...?”

That was yet another thing. Tollain’s agent, or manager, or whatever he was. Suncat found him loud, overly familiar and abrasive. He apparently claimed to be a Nyronde, affected garishly coloured suits and spoke in an all but incomprehensible accent. Still, Tollain maintained that he was a good manager, or agent, and a friend likewise, which was more than anyone would say for Korynn Mitwoch.

Kaichang shrugged.

“He’s got us a concert in two weeks’ time,” she said.

“Two weeks?” It was short notice, but they could probably pull something together.

“Sure. Where?”

“Argenthome,” Kaichang said, and all Suncat’s misgivings, so precariously held at bay, crashed down on her with pulverising force.

I’ve been waiting for this...expecting it...help me...

“Oh, goody,” Suncat said miserably.

CHAPTER TWO

Tollain, of course, had been all over the idea.

“Great,” he’d said. “I’d love to see your home. What’s the weather like? Should we make time to sightsee? Will you let your family know?” His enthusiasm was heartbreaking. Suncat had played up to it as best she could, but she had seen that he had noticed that her heart wasn’t in it, and was both relieved and disappointed that he hadn’t asked her why.

So now, as Tollain’s little ship *Bellbird* descended slowly on to one of the landing pads of Argenthome’s renovated and expanded spaceport, Suncat sat and stared through the forward viewport and tried not to wonder if she would ever manage to get away again.

“Swanky,” Orville Torres commented approvingly. “Bet they don’t allow pad-running here any more.”

“I wouldn’t like to try,” Kaichang said.

“I would.”

“Yes, well, you’re a lunatic.”

“No need,” Verneen said. “Here come the steps.”

They waited while the automated reception truck located *Bellbird*’s hatch and adjusted to the optimum height, and then trooped self-consciously into it, Orville casting one yearning glance down at the shimmering, baking surface of the landing pad.

“Gomer says he’s booked us all into the...” Tollain consulted a sheet of paper. “The Argenthome Imperial Hotel. Is that good?”

The Truesingers looked at each other, recalling the last time they had stayed there.

“It’s the best on the planet,” Suncat said wearily.

“But you don’t like it?” Tollain said. “Say the word and I’ll get him to change it. Where would be better?”

“No. No. It’s fine,” Suncat said, thinking *Oh Goddess, if only he would be just a little bit not perfect...*

“Okay then. I’ll get the personal things carted over there. We can leave the kit in the ship till tomorrow.”

“Is that wise?” Korynn said.

“Look at this place,” Tollain said. “I bet security’s up to snuff. And what thief would look twice at my *Bellbird*?” He watched fondly as the little ship was scooped up in tender hydraulic claws and borne carefully away to the docking cradles.

The truck deposited them at an arrival gate, and the formalities of interstellar travel were duly completed. As they passed out on to the main concourse a man in uniform hailed them.

“Um...” he said, reading a paper. “Gestlat?”

“Close enough,” Tollain said. “How can we help?”

The man saluted. “Presiding Seigneur *pro tem* presents his compliments and asks if you’d do him the honour of dining at the Seigneurie with him tonight.”

Suncat blinked. “Not...”

“Still a Seigneur then?” Kaichang said.

“*Pro tem*, miss,” the man replied smartly. “Democratic government’s in the process of being established, but it’s taking time.”

“Nearly two years?”

“Argenthome’s a big planet, miss.”

“We’d be delighted to accept,” Tollain said, “wouldn’t we?” He looked around at the five people behind him.

Suncat opened her mouth to demur, but Kaichang got there first.

“Oh yes,” she said. “I definitely want a word with Mister Derwent Cathcart Windyridge.”

So that’s that decided, then, thought Suncat, and wished with all her heart that she was back on *Bellbird* and going home, to Goliard.

*

Her nature was not one that could be squashed for long, though, and by the time the groundcar called for them she was feeling much better.

She had been dreading returning to the Imperial, where she, Verneen and Kaichang had spent a terrible week after Suncat's father had apparently disowned her and barred her from the family home. (*And how stupid was I, she thought, to think he would do that over a political disagreement?*) But the hotel, like so much else in Broadfields, had been extensively renovated, and none of the associations remained to trouble her. And after all, she realised, there is something about one's own atmosphere, one's own gravity. She found herself feeling more comfortable, gradually relaxing in spite of herself. Tollain saw it and his own tension began to ease.

Of course, as Kaichang pointed out, they had brought no posh frocks, so they had to make do. She decided on a long dark skirt, blouse, waistcoat and jacket in shades of muted purple, and looked quite respectable if you ignored the tear on one shoulder of the jacket. Verneen opted to stay as she was, in white shirt and slacks, and simply shrugged on a dark green cardigan. Suncat, after agonising for as long as possible, slipped on one of her stage outfits, a tunic and harem pants in pink and blue. Kaichang had done a very good job on the tunic; you could barely see where the blaster bolt had gone through.

"You're going to freeze," Tollain remarked.

"I'm hot-blooded," Suncat said airily, and was rewarded by seeing Tollain blush to the roots of his hair. He had dressed warmly, in chunky woollen sweater and trousers; Orville refused point-blank to change, and Korynn simply didn't. His invariable white safari suit did look reasonably smart anyway, Suncat thought. As for the rest of them, well, Derwent would just have to be understanding.

The groundcar, which was roomy, quite adequately heated and driven by another affable, uniformed man, took them the two miles or so to the hill on which the Seigneurie still stood. The sun was setting, and the autumn was well advanced; leaves skittered away from the car's path, flickering in the lights like tiny red and orange flames.

“They should have pulled this dump down by now,” Kaichang grumbled as the car ascended the long, winding drive.

“And put what in its place?” Korynn queried. “A car park?”

“Something useful,” Kaichang snapped.

“No, there’s history here,” Tollain said.

“Remind me to tell you about it one day,” Kaichang said acidly.

Suncat said nothing. She rather liked the imposing old pile. The skyline of Broadfields wouldn’t have been the same without it.

The driver opened the doors for them, and they climbed the broad front steps. Derwent was waiting in the doorway, looking much the same as he always had, big, ungainly and puppyish. Nearly two years had not altered him much, though he was certainly better dressed than when they had last seen him.

“Hey, girls,” he said. “Beg pardon, I mean ladies and gentlemen. Come on in.”

“Derwent, hey,” Suncat said, and gave him a peck on the cheek. “How’s it going?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re all inside. You must be frozen in that get-up.”

“It’s really not that cold,” Suncat protested.

Over their dinner, which was sumptuous and skilfully prepared, Kaichang went on the attack. Ignoring the horrified glances from Verneen and Suncat, she laid into Derwent with a vengeance.

“I know how it goes,” she declared. “‘Oh, we can’t rush these things, have to do it in easy stages.’ ‘The people aren’t ready, you know, Kurkaan-Zesh wasn’t built in a day.’ I’ve heard all the excuses. And meanwhile, you sit here guzzling and drinking and getting kow-towed to by all the servants—”

“Actually, there aren’t any servants,” Derwent said mildly. “The driver and the guys who served the meal are friends of mine doing me a favour. I actually cooked all this myself.”

Suncat dropped her fork. Verneen hurriedly swallowed. “You cooked this?” she said.

“Impressive,” Orville said grudgingly.

"I never knew you could cook," Suncat said.

"You never tried to find out," Derwent said lightly. "To get back to the question, though... You're right, Kaichang, it is taking longer than I'm happy with, though the Sagittarians," he added pointedly, "seem entirely satisfied with our progress. At least, we're still Affiliated. I check every day."

"Then why is it taking so long?" Kaichang countered.

"There's resistance," Derwent said, putting down his spoon and wiping his mouth with his napkin. Suncat was amused to see that he did it exactly the same way her father always did. All those childhood visits to Broadfields meinie had not been wasted. "Oh, not bombings and such—our people aren't that bad—just minor acts of civil disobedience mostly. Autonomism didn't just go away when your father resigned, you know, Suncat. It was the will of the majority, but the trouble with being in the majority—"

"Is that minorities are more dangerous," Suncat agreed, looking at Kaichang.

"What the frod is wrong with those people?" Kaichang demanded. "Can't they see that it's for their own good?"

"How very fortunate they are that you're here to tell them so," Derwent remarked.

"Very proprietorial of you." He grinned at Kaichang's outraged expression, and hurried on. "Anyway, these 'freedom fighters' are rather more organised than we'd like, and there's one group in particular who seem to be co-ordinating all the others."

"What kind of idiots would resist this?" Suncat demanded, ignoring Tollain's startled glance. "What, do they think the entire galaxy's just going to say 'sorry we bothered you' and tiptoe quietly away?"

"That's exactly what they think," Kaichang said. "And they're right, of course. The Sagittarians will revoke the Affiliation, and then no Affiliated world will trade with Argenthome. And since all the old agreements with other UnAffiliated planets were dissolved by the act of Affiliation—"

"We'll be truly alone," Derwent said grimly. "Which of course is what they want. To answer your first question, Suncat, they mostly come from the seigneur class. Diehard old autocrats who resent not being allowed to horsewhip their tenants, disaffected

sons and daughters who were looking forward to being special, that kind of thing. There are a few among the wealthier landholders, of course, who don't see why things should change just when they're sitting pretty. Their supporters come from everywhere."

"Why?" It was Verneen. "How can they believe this is right?"

"Oh, they paint a very stirring picture." Derwent was sardonic. "You might recognise it, Suncat. Plucky little Argenthome, standing alone against a creeping tide of alien vermin. The spirit that established our colony two and a half millennia ago, the purity of our ideals and our blood, the courage and nobility that enables our poor to put up with having no food and living in insanitary hovels while the seigneurs dine off gold plates and sleep in Cleftrocks linen sheets. We must all pull together and tighten our belts and one day there'll be pie for everybody. At least you know the damned aliens aren't getting it either." He glanced at Kaichang.

"Yes, it rings a faint bell," Suncat agreed dryly. "How *is* Daddy?"

Derwent looked uncomfortable. "What makes you think I would know?"

"He doesn't call you?" Suncat inquired.

"Every damn day," Derwent admitted. "Just to see how it's going, he says."

"And offer a few suggestions?" Kaichang put in sweetly.

"He tries," Derwent said. "I don't take him up on them."

"Are you sure?"

Abruptly Derwent was angry. "I'm very sorry things aren't moving fast enough for your ladyship," he snapped. "If you think there's anything to enjoy in being Presiding Seigneur you should frodding well try it. I'll get the abdication papers drawn up tomorrow and hand you the whole stinking mess. This was supposed to be a reunion of old friends and an excuse not to have to think about my frodding job for an hour or two, or that's what I thought."

"And you were quite right," said Tollain firmly. "Kaichang, please. Politics is bad enough when you have to think about it, but at the dinner table it's just not on. You'll have plenty of time to talk about it tomorrow if you really have to." He smiled,

softening the edge of his words. "Please. I want to know more about Suncat's father, the man, not the politician. I'd really like to meet him."

Suncat watched Kaichang as she reluctantly subsided. That was Tollain for you. He loathed anything to do with politics—anything serious, really. He just wanted to make his music and be left alone, and he would do the bare minimum of practical stuff required to make that happen. Suncat could understand; often felt that way herself, when Kaichang was banging on about the plight of some exploited workers on a mining colony five systems away. If there was nothing she could do, she'd rather not know.

And yet Kaichang was right too. She'd learned that two years ago, living in just the kind of insanitary hovel Derwent had mentioned, when it seemed that they had lost everything. Politics was important. You couldn't just ignore it. Well, you could, of course, but you shouldn't, not completely. If you did, the people who didn't ignore it got to make the decisions, and they could easily be the wrong people.

Derwent was painting Tollain a word picture of Elyot Segrave Morningsky, displaying a gift for observation that Suncat hadn't seen in him before. Korynn, who had continued eating stolidly through the entire argument, was now sitting perfectly still like a switched-off robot, waiting for something he cared about to happen. Orville was listening, his wine glass in hand, nodding as if he remembered, which, she realised, he probably did; he had met her father on one tempestuous occasion, after all. Verneen and Kaichang were talking among themselves in low voices.

Derwent was right. This should have been a joyful occasion. She had been ready for it to be, but Kaichang, whose idea it had been, had spoiled it. The task was to rescue it.

"Let's sing something," she said, and heads turned to look at her in surprise. "Well, that's what we came to do, isn't it?" Suncat went on. "I'm even dressed for the occasion."

"What did you have in mind, love?" Tollain said.

"No Poppies," Suncat said promptly.

"Bit sombre, isn't it?" Orville said.

"Good to start with," Tollain said judiciously. "We can always take it up a bit from

there.”

“Is there a keyboard instrument in this building?” Korynn asked Derwent, who flinched at the tone of the query but rallied.

“There’s a spinichord in the drawing room,” he said. “I was going to suggest we adjourned there, if everyone’s finished.”

“Sounds good,” Kaichang said. “Give us an A, somebody.”

Orville produced a pitch pipe and blew, and Kaichang and Verneen hummed experimentally, getting their notes. Then Suncat began to sing.

“Plant no poppies

Where I lie.

Let there be no celebration

Of the moment when I die.

Let no bands play

Marching songs,

There’s a place for music

But this is not where it belongs...”

Kaichang and Verneen joined in above and below, and Orville supplied a baritone drone as they all got up from the table. His voice was rough, but his range considerable.

“Plant no poppies

In the field

Where they sent us out to fight and die

Our fates already sealed.

Let no wisdom

Adorn our grave,

There are wise men somewhere

But this is not how they behave...”

The drawing room was as cavernous as the dining room, and the spinichord was in the far corner. Moving with the deliberation of a slow march, they crossed the deep but faded carpet, Tollain now adding his clear tenor to the melody.

“Let no flags fly

At half-mast

For the future is what matters now

And we are in the past

Make no speeches

About our deeds

There’s a world in anguish

And we have nothing that it needs...”

Korynn came in on the bridge, the bright, brittle notes of the spinichord lending an edge to the simple tune as they clustered round.

“You will remember us for ever

You say that every time

As you send another generation

To commit the same damn crime

You honour us, you glorify

The example that we set

But if this is how you remember us

We wish you would forget...”

Five voices blended in harmony. Derwent’s eyes were very bright.

“Plant no poppies

Any more.

Spend the time and spend the money

To put an end to war.

*Reach out boldly
To your foes
Try to tell them all the simple truth
That each one of us knows:
There is nothing
Great or fine
About throwing human lives away
To hold some battle line;
So when we heroes
All are dead,
Plant no poppies--
Plant no poppies--
Plant no poppies--
Why not sow
The seeds of peace instead!"*

The spinichord rounded off the tune as their voices held the final note. The echoes died away.

Derwent exhaled a long breath. "Who wrote that?" he said. His voice was shaky.

"That's an old one," Kaichang said carelessly.

"She did," Suncat said, smiling at the dark girl.

"You should do it tomorrow night," Derwent said.

"Maybe," Tollain said. "All right, since we're here, let's do another one."

"Tattercoats'?" Verneen suggested.

"You always liked that one, Derwent," Suncat said.

"How does it go?" Tollain said.

"You'll pick it up," Kaichang said, tapping Korynn on the shoulder. "One side,

Mitwoch, it's my turn."

Korynn obediently got up and Kaichang took his place on the stool.

"It's interesting, though," Tollain said, as she was flexing her fingers and settling herself. "You can't write a song against war without using war music, or so it seems. War rhythms, war chords. That one's no different." He frowned. "What would be great is to write a war song to a dance rhythm."

"Then you'd have a war dance," Orville said.

"Oy!" Suncat called them to order. "You singing or talking?"

"Is there a difference?" Tollain countered.

"You're asking *her*?" Derwent said in mock incredulity.

The singers came to order. Kaichang played the first chord of the song.

And the windows blew in.