

CHAPTER THREE

After a confused interval full of lights and noise, Tollain found himself being helped along by two large men, one gripping either arm. His chest was full of tightly-packed feathers and he couldn't breathe out, which made talking difficult, but he flapped at one of the supportive arms till the owner looked down into his agonised, congested face. There was dust hanging in the air and a ghastly noise coming from somewhere.

"What..." Tollain wheezed. "What...happened?"

"You're all right now, seir," the man said. "We're taking you to safety." There was an odd, metallic timbre to his voice, and the consonants were blurred.

To formulate a suitable response to this was beyond the capacity of Tollain's oxygen-starved brain even if he could have voiced it. He gave up and let the two myrmidons propel him down a flight of stairs and along a blank-walled corridor. The dust was thinner here, but his chest was seized up solid anyway. It was the old trouble.

At a set of double doors two armed guards raised their plasma rifles. One of the two with Tollain said something he couldn't catch, and one of the guards turned aside and unlocked the heavy door. It swung open, and Tollain was half-carried through.

Derwent was already there, with Kaichang and Verneen. Tollain registered them dimly, but could not summon the strength to speak. The two men lowered him into a chair, and turned to Derwent.

"Anyone else?" he said, weariness sharpening the question.

"No sir. Room's clear," said the man who had spoken to Tollain. "Must have been taken."

"I'll have somebody's head for this," Derwent snarled. "Fairbourn Island isn't closed yet."

"Actually, it is, sir," the man said. "It was the first thing that had to go."

"Then I'll reopen it!" Derwent blazed. "Go and make sure there's nobody else. Check the grounds, the surrounding area. Now!"

Kaichang was leaning over Tollain. "Where is it?" she said softly.

He indicated his left trouser pocket, and she drew out the slender inhaler and put it in his hand. He forced air out through the clogging feathers till he coughed hackingly, clamped down on the urge to inhale, put the thing between his lips, pressed the activator and breathed in, tasting the odd sweet acidity of the medicine. He held his breath, counting seconds.

The feathers started to dissolve. He coughed again, more productively now, breathed more freely. One more dose should do it. In a minute.

Kaichang was talking to Derwent, the man's hands raised defensively. Tollain couldn't make out the words—his ears were ringing, he realised, that was half of the ghastly noise—but he recognised the tone all right, and he sympathised with Derwent.

A small, cold hand crept into his, and he looked into Verneen's thin, pale face.

"I think now," she said, her eyes full of unshed tears; and she allowed Tollain to put his arms round her and nestled into his embrace.

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"So," Tollain said, a little while later. "What basically happened was that a bunch of dissidents—Autominists?—"

"Autonomists," Kaichang said.

"Autonomists," Tollain said, "got hold of something like a military helicopter, landed it on the lawn outside the building, fired a missile at the windows, stormed in and grabbed Suncat, Orville and Korynn, and got clean away before you could respond. And now you don't know where they are or what's happening to her—them."

"We will," Derwent insisted. He was perched on the corner of a large desk that dominated half the room they were in. "I've sent to the police in all the surrounding meinies to keep a watch for any unregistered flying vehicles and detain them. The problem is, we haven't long had a planetary police force, and they're all a bit inept."

"What the frod did you have?" Tollain demanded.

"Private security firms," Derwent admitted, "run for profit by lesser meinies.

Cragshorn was about the best here in Broadfields, and they weren't that brilliant, but lots of people would tell you they were better than what we have now."

“You can’t trust the specials like the old-time coppers,” Kaichang remarked.

“Well, I don’t care if they’re a schoolboy on a scooter and an old man on a penny-farthing,” Tollain said flatly. “They’d frodding well better get my friends back alive and safe.”

“Or what?” Kaichang inquired. “What will you do?”

“I’ll sic you on them is what I’ll do.” Tollain was still raw and aching from the asthma attack, and also he was dealing with an emotion foreign to his nature. “I hold you responsible, Seir Windyridge,” he went on, turning back to Derwent. “Somebody knew we were here, and the only way they could know that is if they knew you’d decided at the last moment to invite us.”

“You think they were aiming for us specifically?” Kaichang shook her head. “I think it was just opportunistic. They went for anyone who happened to be in the house.”

“We don’t know at the moment what their intentions were. But yes, you’re right. To hold me responsible, I mean.” Derwent was desperately unhappy. “I just wanted to see Suncat and you two. I didn’t even think...I never dreamed...”

“Well, of course you didn’t.” Verneen went to him and put a hand on his arm. “They’d never done anything remotely like this before, had they? How could you possibly know?”

Kaichang looked as though she might have a possible answer, but said nothing.

Tollain too fell silent. Verneen was right. This was no time for recriminations. Once Suncat was safely back with them, then would be time.

“You say you don’t know where they’ve gone,” he said suddenly. “Can you narrow it down at all?”

“Possibly,” Derwent said, relieved. “This is supposed to have been a sort of strategy room in time of war, and as such it should have...certain...facilities...ah!” He found a switch under the lip of the desk and pressed it, and a wall screen came alive behind him with the standard planetary data-net logo, while an illuminated keypad came to life on the surface of the desk. Derwent pressed a sequence of keys, and a map appeared on the screen, mostly red with some blue areas.

“This is a map,” he began somewhat redundantly, “showing all the meinies in the northern third of our continent. This shows the political stance of the leadership; red for Affiliationist, blue for Autonomist. We’ve replaced most of the old Seigneurships with elected assemblies, but left it up to the citizens to decide how they want to go about running them. The Seigneurs are still there, but have no political power now.”

“What about the rest of the continent?” Tollain asked.

“That’s what used to be called the Southern Coalition. We don’t need to worry about them. They’ve always been foursquare for Affiliation.”

“For historical reasons,” Kaichang said, with a touch of malice.

Derwent pressed another key, and several more areas turned blue, while some went grey. “This one shows—as near as we’ve been able to establish, with surveys and what not—the feeling among the actual people. As you can see, more of them are Autonomist, and quite a few don’t care one way or the other.”

“That’s what happens when you impose change from the top down,” Kaichang remarked.

“What we’re imposing,” Derwent retorted, “is the will of the majority. Little thing called democracy. You can’t Affiliate nine-tenths of a planet. Anyway. For obvious reasons we’re concentrating our attention on the blue meinies, because—”

“Blue meinies,” Verneen murmured. The phrase seemed to delight her.

“Because we believe the terrorists are seeking to return the planet to their version of autonomy.” Another keypress produced a scattering of black explosion symbols. “As you can see, these incidents mostly occurred either in the blue meinies themselves, or in red meinies directly bordering on the blue ones. That also supports our hypothesis.”

“Where are we?” Tollain asked.

A red meinie flashed white momentarily. “There are no blue meinies near us,” Derwent continued, “but Broadfields is the centre of planetary government and is therefore a prime target anyway. Or was.” A black symbol appeared right in the centre of the indicated meinie. It was significantly larger than the rest.

“What’s bothering me,” Kaichang said, “is how they got hold of military hardware.”

“It probably wasn’t actual military,” Derwent said. “We haven’t had a major conflict here for fifty years, just little border disputes between single meinies over grazing rights, water, that kind of thing. No, what they had was probably kept by some seigneur to use for hunting purposes.”

“You hunt with a missile launcher?” Tollain said, aghast.

“How sporting,” Kaichang said.

“No, I mean the ’copter. The launcher will have been left over from some conflict or other, probably.”

“What Mister Soft Pedal here is leaving out,” Kaichang said, “is that while it’s true there hasn’t been a major war in fifty years, it’s also true that not one day of those fifty years has gone by in which some tin-pot seigneur wasn’t welling away at some other tin-pot seigneur with anything he happened to have handy. Including all kinds of military surplus nasties. Search any of those little pocket dictators’ houses and I guarantee you’ll find an arsenal that’ll make your head swim.” She grinned at Derwent. “And I don’t suppose you’ve exactly been pushy about demanding that they hand all that stuff over to you?”

Derwent floundered. “It—ah—was felt that such a measure was rather exceeding the, ah—”

“Exactly.” Kaichang’s grin vanished. “By Seigneur Morningsky, no doubt, among others.”

“No, actually,” Derwent said. “He told me to stop shilly-shallying and confiscate the lot.”

“Really?” Kaichang was genuinely surprised. “What did you say?”

“I...I stood up to him. I told him that would create ill feeling and prejudice the progress of making Argenthome fit for full Affiliation.” Derwent grimaced, remembering. “He looked at me for a long time, and eventually he said ‘Well, if you won’t, you won’t. But remember this.’ And he walked off.”

“Great,” Kaichang said sarcastically. “I’m so glad you didn’t create any ill feeling. I’m

sorry,” she added hastily, as Derwent opened his mouth. “I’m a bitch, ask anyone. And I’m worried about Suncat.”

“And I,” Derwent said, “have been skulking around down here long enough. I have to go and face the Council and the press, confirm I’m still alive. As if *that* mattered.” He looked at Tollain. “You can stay in here till Seir Kintarsh is fit to move, and then a couple of the lads will take you back to the hotel. I’m sorry about the concert. I was looking forward to it.”

“What about Suncat and the others?” Tollain said desperately.

“We’re doing all we can. I’ll keep you posted; when something develops you’ll be the first to know after me. Oh, and we’ll cover you for the hotel bill—I’m assuming you’ll want to stay till this is over, one way or another. I know musicians don’t make much. I used to manage a band, you know. Just don’t trash the room.” Derwent tried a grin. It didn’t quite come off.

“We won’t,” Kaichang said. “Don’t trash the planet.”

“If I can avoid it,” Derwent said, “I will.”

“I’m really fit to move now, you know,” Tollain said, when the door had closed.

“Not yet you’re not,” Verneen said, with something almost like firmness. “I took your pulse while we were hugging. You’re racing like a stoat in overdrive. You need another half hour at least, or it’ll just take twice as long.”

“And you got your medical qualifications where again?”

“My aunt had hypercac,” Verneen said composedly. “There weren’t any doctors where we were at the time, except field medics who could deal with burns or broken limbs but were flummoxed by anything more exotic. I learned very quickly.” She lowered her gaze.

“I wish my father—” Kaichang began.

“No you don’t,” Verneen said, very quietly yet somehow loud enough to override her. “You don’t wish that on anyone. Tollain only got it by proxy, as it were, so he doesn’t present the full range. Believe me, you don’t.”

“All right then,” Tollain said. “In half an hour’s time, when Doctor Halannim

pronounces me mobile, what are we going to do?"

"Go back to the hotel and wait to hear...?" Verneen's voice trailed off. "Oh no," she said. "No, you can't possibly mean—"

"I'm not sitting around waiting," Kaichang said. "We may only be musicians, but we've got arms, legs and brains. We can find things out that maybe Derwent's trainee police can't. And I know exactly who to start with."

"Daddy?" Tollain said.

"Got it in one," Kaichang agreed.

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Elyot Segrave Morningsky, Seigneur Emeritus, now lived quietly in a fairly modest town house not far from the Seigneurie, and one of the guards was happy to impart this information in response to a general enquiry from Kaichang, while being quite firm that his orders were to take them to the Imperial Hotel and leave them there. Tollain, while seethingly impatient to be about some positive action or other, deferred to Kaichang and Verneen and consented to stay behind, while they, who knew the territory, went to sound out Suncat's father.

"You are not fully recovered yet," Verneen had said, in that same uncharacteristically firm tone. "A triggered attack can lead to serious damage if you overdo it even a day later—the spontaneous ones aren't so bad. When did you last have one of those?"

"Last year some time," Tollain admitted. "But I feel fine."

"Good. Stay feeling fine, and stay here. We'll be back as quickly as we can." She bent down and kissed his forehead. "We need you. Don't be silly."

And she followed Kaichang out, a tiny solar yacht escorting a dreadnought.

Tollain, left to his own devices, did what he always did. He took refuge in music. There was a chord sequence that had been nagging at him since the damnable ringing in his ears had faded, and he wished for an instrument, any instrument, to try it out on. It was not quite true, as some jokingly claimed, that he could get a tune out of any common household object, and certainly nothing in the sleek, anonymous room presented any helpful possibilities.

He picked up the telephone. Argenthome was, in the standard parlance, a Tech level three world; there was a data-net, but it ran in parallel with older systems which most people still preferred to use for mundane day-to-day business like talking over distance. Telephones here were sound-only, used wires, and even had mechanical rotary dials, a quaintness that would at any other time have charmed him.

He dialled zero, and presently the receptionist on the front desk answered.

“This is Tollain Kintarsh, in room—um—5419,” Tollain said. “Could you give me the number of a good musical instrument shop, please?”

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“Serina Belgardis,” said Elyot Segrave Morningsky, smiling. “And—I’m so sorry...”

“Verneen,” said Verneen, in a low voice.

“Verneen Halannim, of course, do forgive me,” Morningsky went on smoothly. “This is a pleasure. Though I wish it could have been under better circumstances. Come in, please.”

He was wearing a long blue dressing gown over his shirt and trousers, and bedroom slippers, Kaichang noted; the complete Elderly Gentleman In Retirement. He ushered them in and gestured for them to precede him into a small drawing room on the left of the hall. There was an impression of neglect about the house in general, but this room was fully alive and functioning almost as an office; a desk by the window was strewn with papers, and the walls were hung with holopics representing a life spent in constant activity.

“May I offer you some tea?” he was saying, waving them to two chairs set facing into the room, on either side of the fireplace.

“No thank you,” Kaichang said. “You know why we’re here.”

“My daughter has been kidnapped,” Morningsky said in a neutral tone, “and you are wondering if I am behind it.” He smiled at Kaichang’s startled reaction. “Please don’t deny that the thought crossed your mind. I know how you think of me, Serina Belgardis, and I do not blame you in the slightest.”

“Good to know,” Kaichang said. “So. Are you?”

“No,” Morningsky said. “Had I been, the operation would have been far more efficiently planned and executed. As it is, I am almost certain in my own mind that it was a hopeless botch, got up on the spur of the moment by a gang of hotheads with no vestige of brain between them, and that my daughter was merely unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Would you have any idea,” Kaichang said carefully, “about the particular gang of hotheads involved?”

“Has young Windyridge not told you anything? Never mind, I see he has not. An able young man in the ordinary way, but distressingly backward in his ideas.” Morningsky turned the desk chair to face them and sat down on it. “Serina Belgardis, despite what I know you imagine about me, I have never had anything less than the best interests of this planet at heart, and I am capable of changing my mind. Affiliation is, I see now, the way forward for Argenthome, and I have no sympathy whatsoever with any moron or maniac who would try to keep our world prisoned in the toils of the past. Believe me when I say that it is not only for personal reasons that I will do anything in my power to help to bring these criminals to justice.” He leaned forward. “I will tell you everything I know that might be useful. Quite frankly, ladies, I trust you rather more than I trust our current law enforcement agency.”

He turned back to the desk a moment and picked up a sheet of paper.

“Have either of you ever heard the phrase ‘Cold December’?”

Kaichang and Verneen shook their heads.

“Neither had I, till recently,” the old man said. “It began, as far as I can gather, as a school joke, many years ago, in Northshores meinie. More recently, the group was revived by some of its old members, as a focus for Autonomist sentiment. The idea being, presumably, that Argenthome can weather even the cruellest winter alone. I have reason to believe that Cold December is acting as a central clearing house and co-ordinating authority for these acts of social dissent, and that therefore they may know something about whichever group has abducted my daughter.”

“Then why haven’t you gone to the police with this?” Verneen burst out.

Morningsky looked at them soberly.

“Because,” he said, “my daughter was one of the original members of Cold December...and for all I can prove, she could still be.”