

CHAPTER FOUR

Suncat rose out of the stifling darkness into dim, watery yellow light, that waxed and waned from moment to moment. Her head ached and she felt sick.

“Hey,” said a familiar voice. Suncat rolled her head to one side, wished she hadn’t, and saw Orville Torres sitting on a barrel, one of several strewn across the floor of wherever they were.

“Hey,” Suncat managed. “How’s it going so far?”

Orville wagged his downturned hand side to side. “So-so,” he said. “You?”

“I feel like crap,” Suncat said. “Give me a hand?”

Orville got up, came over and helped her to sit up. She had been lying on a hard wooden table, she saw. On another one lay Korynn Mitwoch, hands folded on his chest.

Suncat’s breath caught in her throat. “Is he—” she said, and coughed.

“Nah,” Orville said, “he just doesn’t see any reason to do anything at the moment. Next time they bring us food I’m going to ask for a piano. Whoa, watch it girl.”

Suncat was on the verge of being very painfully sick. Orville held her while she retched, swallowed, breathed deeply and got herself under control. Then he stepped back while she swung her legs off the splintery wood surface and tried to stand up on the packed-earth floor.

“Where are we?” she whispered, having found her footing. The whole room seemed to be swaying like an ancient ship at sea.

“Dunno,” Orville said. “Last thing I remember is being in the Seigneurie, around the spinichord. Then everything went down and when I woke up I was here. They’ve fed us once, but you were still out and I thought best not wake you.”

“Who are...they?”

“Very untalkative strangers,” Orville said. “Wouldn’t answer any of my questions, wouldn’t volunteer any information, when I became insistent they started to take the

food away again and I admit I was a bit hungry by then so I backed down. You'll probably be starving when you get over the collywobbles."

Suncat was already starting to feel more like herself. "What about Tollain and...and Kaichang and Verneen?" she said.

"Dunno," Orville said again. "I've only seen us. If they're here, they must be in another cellar."

"They are not here," Korynn said unexpectedly. He had not moved, and his flat, passionless tones sounded like a voice from the grave.

"How d'you know?" Orville snapped.

"I was not rendered immediately unconscious. The kidnapers came in through the windows, which were shattered by a missile, probably a short-range anti-personnel stun-grade weapon such as a Starstrike or a Vorikesh. Four seconds later a number of the house's security guards entered via the door. The kidnapers only had time to grab the three of us before their window of escape became compromised. Tollain, Kaichang and Verneen are still at liberty, though I suspect Tollain to have become incapacitated by a hypercacodaemic attack triggered by the shock."

He fell silent again.

"We've got to get out of here," Suncat said.

"I've tried," Orville said. "That door's three inches thick if it's a millimetre, the lock's about a hundred years old and kept in good nick and the hinges have been painted so many times there isn't a hope of unscrewing them. We might have some success tunnelling through the floor if we had a laser drill, but I doubt it."

"Well, I can't just sit here," Suncat insisted.

"I'm open to alternative suggestions."

Suncat couldn't think of any, but she was hardly going to let that stop her. "Have you tried shouting?" she said.

"Till my voice nearly gave out completely. Either they're deaf, or the walls here are very thick."

Suncat looked round. Two walls were lined with dusty bottles in racks, one had three

vast barrels—there was a special name for them, but she couldn't remember it—on stands side by side. The other wall was the one with the door, and also boasted a small sink with washing-up things ranged along the back, and a large sideboard, on which stood glasses of various types. The light came from a small battery-powered lantern, clearly on the verge of giving out for good. Above the barrels, a row of narrow slit-like windows, partly covered with some kind of plant growth, let in a grey, powerless daylight. Even if they would open, there was no way out that way.

“All right,” she said. “What do we know?”

“We're stuffed?”

“Apart from that.”

Orville spread his hands. “That's all I got.”

“This is a wine cellar,” Suncat said, “which means it's part of a house belonging to a seigneur or a landholder. It's not very big or very well stocked, so the owner of the house isn't well off. It doesn't have built-in lighting, so it's old. What time is it?”

“Local time?” Orville looked at his watch. “About, erm, nine light. Why they can't start the light and dark cycles at one—”

“Because the sun rises at different times,” Suncat said impatiently. “Okay. The sun *isn't* shining through those windows, which could mean one of a number of things but probably just means lousy weather. So, we've been scrobbled by someone who either is, or knows quite well, the seigneur of a very small and cash-poor meinie, or a very down-at-heel landholder. Probably the first. Landholders as a class only arose a few hundred years ago, and this cellar's older. How am I doing?”

“I'm impressed,” Orville said.

“I have additional information,” came from the still figure on the table.

“Yes?” Suncat said.

“And do you think you could manage to move a bit?” Orville put in. “You're giving me the willies.”

Korynn sat up and swung his legs down in one disconcertingly swift movement, and the round black lenses that concealed his eyes regarded them gnomically.

“The air, underneath the surface effluvia of dust and old wine, carries a distinctly saline aroma,” he said, “which may indicate a coastal location. The foliage around the window suggests a plant that thrives in cold climates.” He stopped.

“That’s it?” Orville said.

“No, it helps,” Suncat said slowly. “In fact, I think I know where we are.” She turned to look up at the windows. “Outside there is a garden where I’ve played a hundred times. Beyond it, there’s a road that slopes down to a little fishing village where old Henning used to take us out in his boat whenever we were minded, to see the sea-cats on their island. This—I’d put money on it—this is Coldsands meinie, and this house belongs—or belonged—to Orrin Stanhope Westermain, Seigneur of Coldsands.”

“Great. Where does it get us?”

“Nowhere,” Suncat confessed. “If we got free and there was transport I could probably get us back to Broadfields...but we’re no nearer getting free.”

“Any chance this Westermain might be on our side?”

“He was old when I knew him. He must be dead by now.” Suncat wrapped her arms around herself. She was still wearing only the flimsy stage outfit she had put on to go to dinner with Derwent, just last night, and the cellar was chilly.

“Well, breakfast’s due any minute, I should think,” Orville said. “Now we know something they don’t know we know, that might be useful.”

“I hope so,” Suncat said. She was cold, and, yes, hungry, and she wanted someone or something, very badly. She couldn’t tell if it was Tollain, or Kaichang, or Verneen, or even Derwent, but something—someone—was missing for the first time in a long while and it was throwing her off balance.

She wasn’t the clingy, dependent type, frod it, all big eyes and lispy little voice. She’d never needed to seem that helpless. But now...now it looked as if she was, and that hurt, and what hurt most of all was the stupid fact that she was looking round for someone to lean on. She shook herself irritably. This was ridiculous.

That had always been Shallen’s technique. “Oh dear, I need a big thtwong man to

take care wof me!” And it had always worked. Suncat had lost count of the boys her friend had bamboozled into doing her bidding, right up to the point where they were almost done, and then slipped out of their grasp with that rueful little smile and claimed the prize that was their rightful reward. Suncat had never understood it. She always thought the best way was to deal honestly with people. It had been the cause of their one really big fight.

“So,” she said aloud, “what’s the food like in this place?”

“I’d give it a four, maybe four and a half,” Orville said. “Nothing special, but there’s enough of it. When it gets here.”

And then...then she had met Kaichang and Verneen, and had learned that some men didn’t deal honestly either, and that the ones who did were sometimes worse...but by then she couldn’t deal any other way. It would have been a betrayal of herself. And always, always she had stayed strong, always the strong one. Which was why this hurt so much.

She grew angry; with herself, with whomever had done this to her, and to her friends. There would be a reckoning.

But not yet.

Abruptly the door lock rattled, as a key turned in it from outside, and the door (yes, at least three inches thick) creaked open, grating on the earth floor as it dug its well-worn grooves a little deeper. The hinges might be impossible to unscrew, but they were starting to sag.

Two men appeared, wearing woollen masks that revealed only their eyes. One carried a big wooden tray with three plates on it. The other held a sidearm which he constantly twitched to point at first one of them, then another. Korynn remained sitting where he was, as immobile as a statue. Orville backed away from the unoccupied table. Suncat advanced on the two men, and the muzzle of the gun focussed its blind gaze on her.

“Good morning,” she said. “I wonder if you’d be so kind—”

“Get back or we take the food away,” the man with the gun snapped. His accent clinched it; this was definitely Coldsands meinie.

“All right,” Suncat said, retreating with her hands raised. “Only I would like to get a message to Seigneur Westermain, if that’s possible. My name is—is Angharad Morningsky. He’ll remember me.”

“Ain’t none n’more.” The other man spoke, his words muffled by the mask, as he placed the tray carefully on the table. “Went to’s reward five year aback.”

“Hold your rattle,” the one with the gun snapped, gesturing his companion backwards toward the door. “Make that do till the night,” he said. “Wun’t be n’more till then.”

The food looked and smelled appetising enough to Suncat; the dark, strong bread of the north with Cloudshiels sausages and buttered shalimar beans. There were three mugs of fisherman’s tea as well. Orville grabbed a plate and a mug and fell to; Suncat took one of each to Korynn first.

“Thank you, Suncat,” he said. Was it her imagination, or did it sound as if he actually meant it this time?

They ate purposefully, without haste, and in silence. When they had finished, Orville took the tray and put it in front of the door. After a while, the door opened, and the same two men (as far as could be told) collected the tray and locked them in once more.

“You didn’t mention the piano,” Suncat said.

“They didn’t seem in a very receptive frame of mind,” Orville answered.

Abruptly (he seemed to do everything abruptly, Suncat thought irritably) Korynn got up, walked over to the sideboard, collected a number of balloon glasses and filled them to varying depths with water to which he added a drop or two of detergent. He placed them carefully in order along the nearest table, one continuous row in front and groups of two and three behind. Then he dipped his finger in the slightly frothy water and stroked it across the rims of several glasses in succession, producing a sequence of ascending tones, achingly sweet.

“Will this do?” he said.

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Half an hour later, Suncat and Orville had learned how to produce notes from the

impromptu instrument, which had grown three extra octaves, and they had run through several familiar tunes. It was strange how music always helped, Suncat thought. Simply the ability to play notes, produce harmonies, somehow eased the heart.

Korynn and Orville had settled on a repeated pattern of chords in twelve-eight, slippery and vertiginous, Orville occasionally tapping the glasses gently with a pen to underline the rhythm. Softly at first, Suncat began humming a melody over the pattern; the humming became nonsense syllables, and gradually words began to emerge and take form, and the players modified their pattern to form verses, a chorus, a bridge. This was how Suncat loved to work; not crafting, but gardening, growing a song from seed.

After about half a dozen passes, this was what eventually emerged.

“Mmmmmm....

Sometimes it's not so bad

Sometimes you can get through a day without

Remembering what you had

And how it all slipped from view and all about the

Time when you thought you knew

Time and a word that made you feel so agile

What was a girl to do?

When all of the games you played just left me fragile

I see you standing there amid your displays

Clinging to fragments of your past future days

No-one can save you now, you're lost in the haze

Of dreams....

When everything is what it seems.

Now it's a different age

Now we all see the sails upon the ocean

Black as a father's rage

*A fury that keens and wails her dark devotion
Even the blackness pales
Even the score with magic as a player
Time to rewrite the tales
Time to reclaim the badge of the relay*

*I see you falling, going down on your knees,
Ravaged and broken by your own foul disease,
Choking and striving as you fight to release
Your screams....
When everything is what it seems.*

Ah...

Never coming home never coming home never coming never never never

Ah...

*Thought you were so smart thought you had it made thought you had it did you did you
did you*

Ah...

*Should have seen it coming shoulda seen it coming shoulda seen it shoulda shoulda
shoulda*

Ah...

Would have put it right woulda put it right you woulda done it woulda woulda woulda

Time to rewind the thread

Time to return in triumph as a hero

Man with the horns is dead

Theseus won, the Minotaur a zero

Now when your heart is high

Now is the time you need to be much calmer

Drama is drawing nigh

One more demise to feed the die-o-rama

*I see you lying there with pain in your eyes
Helpless and fearful as a part of you dies
You beat the monster but you can't analyse
The themes....*

When everything is what it seems."

"What the frog was that all about?" Orville demanded.

"Don't know yet," Suncat said breathlessly.

Korynn was regarding her fixedly.

"Bridge needs some work," Orville went on.

"I know. It'll get it. Look, can I help you?" Those two black discs were drilling into her.

"Would it be...appropriate...if I asked you to record that song?" Korynn asked. He was hesitant, something Suncat had never seen in him before. Perversely, it irritated her even more than his usual arrogant assurance.

"What? Yes, of course, as soon as we get somewhere where we can."

"Why not here?" He reached into one of the pockets of his jacket and pulled out a portable recorder. It was so very much him, the gesture, the incongruence of the surroundings, the whole—Korynn-ness—of it, that all Suncat's irritation left her suddenly and she laughed.

"Why not?" she said. "Why not indeed?"

They ran through it again, without changing a note or a word, and the little silver box on the table sucked it all up. Korynn and Orville were getting slicker with the glasses, and Suncat could see this becoming a part of the act before too long. At least it kept their minds off what was going to happen...and of course now her mind was back on it, because she'd thought of it.

If they couldn't escape, presumably there would be ransom demands...maybe financial, maybe political. If financial, Tollain would pay, of course. He would mortgage everything he owned to find the money. She knew that, just as she knew that that would be a disaster, would end for ever the chance of there being anything

between them. She could never stand to be so beholden to someone else, especially a man...to see the looks Kaichang would dart at her when she thought Suncat wasn't looking. Owned. Bought and paid for. *No*.

Maybe her father would pay. That would be a little easier. Her debt to him was old business, unrepayable but unavoidable anyway; this would add little to it. Still horrible, but not so bad.

"Thank you, Suncat," Korynn said again, collecting the recorder and stowing it away, and this time there was no possible mistake; he genuinely meant it. She smiled at him, meaning it herself for the first time.

Suppose the demands were political, though? Suppose they told Derwent he had to repudiate the Affiliation, restore the Seigneurs, bring back the old ways or they would...oh Goddess, no, that would be even more insupportable. But he would never do it, she told herself. Old friendship was one thing, but he held a far greater responsibility now. He would hold firm.

Wouldn't he?

Oh, he must. He'd grown so much. He wasn't sappy old Derwent who would do anything for her any more. That horrible time when she'd nearly lost herself had changed him too, made him harder. And he was Presiding Seigneur now. He had more to think about than friendship, or...whatever.

"You okay?" Orville was close beside her now, his voice pitched low, concerned. She tossed her hair back and grinned. It was almost perfect.

"Sure," she said. "It'll take more than this to throw me. Plus, new song." She wanted to sing it again; no, *it* wanted her to sing it. New songs were like puppies, or toddlers, they wanted all your attention, all the time. She denied it. It was real now, it could take care of itself for a while.

If Derwent caved, she'd never forgive him.

If he didn't...she'd never get the chance.

Everything in her revolted. There was another way. There was always another way. They would find it. Orville was, or had been, notoriously good with his hands, Korynn was presumably a brain of some kind, and she...she was Suncat, for *frod's* sake.

Omnicompetent wicked girl. She drew herself up.

And at that precise moment the door rattled.

“Hullo, what’s this?” Orville said. “Can’t be dinner time already.”

“Elevenses?” Suncat suggested, wishing there’d been some warning, or at least time to work out a plan.

The door opened, and the two masked men entered, both armed this time. They surveyed the room quickly, and took up station on either side of the door as someone else came through it.

Years had changed her, of course, but the damn rueful little smile was still exactly the same.

“Hey, Anger,” said Shallen. “It’s been a while.”