

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a shocked pause.

Then Kaichang said, very quietly, "I'd advise you to think carefully about what you just said."

"I would offer you the same advice, Serina Belgardis," Elyot Segrave Morningsky replied.

"Your son put us through utter hell," Kaichang went on, her voice rising, "because Suncat let out in public that she was for Affiliation. How you could imagine that she would belong to some frodding terrorist group—"

"I *said*," Morningsky overrode her, "'for all that I can prove.' I did *not* say 'for all I know.' I know my daughter, young woman, at least as well as you do. Unfortunately, one public remark is rather slender evidence on which to base a judgment. I know as a fact that she helped to found this rather silly little group while at school, and if I know it, others will. Some things can not be handled by rushing at them like a charging boshier-beast." He sat back and favoured them with a smile that was probably not meant to look as patronising as it did. "I have no political power on this planet any longer, whatever young Windyridge may have told you. My authority over the police and other governmental agencies is no more and no less than that of any other concerned citizen. So instead, I am deputising you two. You strike me as being very formidable women, and your objectives and mine run together, for the moment. I regret that I can confer on you no special powers. All I have to give you," he said, sighing, "are the good wishes of a very poor parent. Find my daughter, and your other friends, and bring her kidnappers to book. That is all I ask." He handed over the paper; Kaichang took it automatically. "Thank you for your time. You will, I hope, forgive me if I do not see you to the door. I have a great deal of work to be done."

Outside, on the street, Kaichang exploded.

"We went to get his help and he frodding well *hires* us! Like frodding *maids*! 'I have a great deal of work.' Frodding arrogant—"

"Kaichang." Verneen said, quite loudly for her. "Stop."

Kaichang glared. "Why?"

"Because you're a wicked, contrary besom and I know exactly what you're doing." Verneen was resolute. Her eyes held fire. "You're talking yourself round to not helping find Suncat just because her father wants us to, and I w-won't have it."

"I was not!" Kaichang protested guiltily. "In any case, what can we do?"

"We can do exactly what we were going to do. Only now we have help." Verneen indicated the paper in Kaichang's hand, which the other girl had been about to throw away. "We can go to all the people on this list, and talk to them about school days, about Cold December, and we can find out who from the original group might have revived the name for this new political thing. Just friends of Suncat's, wanting to talk about what she was like before we knew her. Perfectly normal."

Kaichang stared a moment; then she seized Verneen in a hug that knocked all the breath out of her.

"Never ever leave me," she whispered.

"I won't," Verneen managed. "Um. Air."

"I just get so frodding *angry*," Kaichang said, releasing her.

"And you have good reasons," Verneen said. "He was awfully offhand and offensive. But I think he was just trying to keep on top of it. You could see that he was struggling the whole time, couldn't you?"

"I—I wasn't looking," Kaichang confessed honestly.

"You should look more," Verneen said. "Come on. Let's check in with Tollain and then start finding addresses."

"Why not start now?" Kaichang said. "Who needs Tollain?" Then she frowned. "Sorry. Of course, you're right, he'll want to know."

Verneen gave her a little smile. "That's better. I think we go this way."

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The sound of music greeted them as they approached the door of the suite. Kaichang produced her key card and opened the door and the sound welled out all round them

like a flood.

Tollain stopped playing as they came in. "Hey, you two," he said, eyes alight with enthusiasm. "Listen to this." He pressed some buttons on the synth, changing the voices, and began to play and sing.

*"No, you're not wrong
I've been hiding out here for too long
I should come back and join all the people who've come here for me
Yes, I'm all right
Just got tired of the noise and the light
And I needed to find somewhere quiet where I could just be*

*No, I'm not ill
If I were I could just take a pill
But there's no medication to cure a disease of the soul
Yes, yes I've tried
To get free from this prison inside
But the guards can't be bribed and they just shove me back in the hole*

*There's a wonderful world just outside of my skin
And if I could get out I would love to get in
If I had any choice this is not where I'd choose to stay
And you all want to help me, you've made that quite clear
You'll never desert me, you'll always be here
But sometimes I wish you would all just get out of my way.*

*No, I'm not proud
That I can't be at home in a crowd
I don't like being special, in fact it's a bit of a strain
Yes, I do know
People love me wherever I go
But there's one who just won't be convinced that I'm worth all this pain*

*No, I'm not mad
And it's not that I'm just a bit sad
It just takes so much effort to see you or hear you at all.
Yes, it is hard
When the doors are all bolted and barred
And the windows just give on the endless expanse of the wall.*

*There are wonderful people just waiting their chance
To welcome me into the great human dance
And they can't understand why I'm still sitting still in my chair.
But the chasm between is infinity deep
And the dream of my freedom just troubles my sleep.
So sometimes I can't help but wish there were nobody there.*

*I say No, I say Yes,
But the feeling behind them you never will guess
It is here, it is real,
And you never could handle the truth of the way that I feel...*

*No, I won't leave,
That's a promise that you can believe.
I have too much to do and to say to give up on the game.
Yes, I love you.
Of all things you must know that that's true
But I dare not deny I have negative thoughts all the same.*

*It's a wonderful life that I still long to share
And I still hope for that, I still dream, I still care,
And the brightest, most beautiful part of my dreaming is you.
I will always have days when I wish I could die
That's the curse on my heart I can never deny
But I'm thankful each day for the friendship that carries me through,
And I'm thankful each day that not all of my wishes come true."*

He finished on a quiet, subdominant chord, and looked over at them.

"Well," Kaichang said neutrally. "I'm glad you've not been sitting here moping." The implied accusation was clear.

"It's a bit dark," Verneen said. "And it would sound better with Orville singing it."

"I know," Tollain said. He bounced off the stool he was sitting on and came over to them. "Any news?"

"Now he's finished showing off, he wants to know," Kaichang remarked.

"Yes," Verneen said, and in few words she told Tollain what they had learned.

"I don't believe it," he said at once, when she had finished. "Suncat would never get herself mixed up in politics. She'd have more sense, even back then."

"Yes, that's what we thought," Verneen was beginning diplomatically, but Kaichang overrode her.

"Oh. So you think it's not sensible to be involved in politics?"

"Well, not for everyone." Tollain was already on the defensive. "Someone has to do it, I suppose. But most of us have more important things to do."

"Ah. So you're happy for other people to make political decisions on your behalf."

"Of course I am."

"Suppose your planet declares war on another one? Are you happy about that?"

"No, of course I wouldn't be."

"Congratulations. You've just made a political decision." Kaichang's smile was the smile of a predator.

"But they wouldn't. And anyway, that's not a political decision, that's just common sense. Any sane person would be against war."

"Really?" Kaichang affected to consider the statement. "So only mad people are in favour of war?"

"Well...put that way round..." Tollain roused himself. "Yes. You're trying to trick me. Yes, I think only mad people would want war."

"So presumably only mad people ever fight wars."

"Well, some people don't get a choice. If there's a war on, they have to fight."

"So if I understand you correctly," Kaichang said, "the only people fighting in any given war would be mad people, who'd do it irrationally, or pacifists, who wouldn't do it properly if at all. How do wars ever get won, I wonder?"

"I don't know!" Tollain said testily. "I'm a musician, not a politician. I told you. I've got better things to do."

"We've *all* got better things to do," Verneen said, her voice cracking in its urgency, "right now. Kaichang, *please*."

Kaichang looked at her, and thought better of the retort she had been about to make.

“This isn’t over, Kintarsh,” she said. Tollain looked mulish, but said nothing.

“Now,” Verneen said, “while you were talking I’ve been copying these names and addresses on to three sheets of paper, grouped by closeness on the map. We’ll do it more quickly if we split up. There are nine of them, which works out nicely.” She passed one sheet to Tollain and another to Kaichang. “All these people, when they were at school here on Argenthome, were in this group Cold December with Suncat. It was just a joke group, a pretend secret society. We need to find out more about it, about anyone else who was in it.”

“But play it down,” Kaichang said warningly. “It’s nothing serious. The news reports don’t say anything about a kidnapping, just an attack on the Seigneurie. We’re just friends of Suncat looking to find out more about her past.”

“For a surprise party,” Verneen suggested.

“I hate surprise parties,” Kaichang grumbled.

“But Suncat loves them,” Verneen said. “So we’re putting on a surprise party for her, with a Cold December theme. What’s a December anyway?”

“It was the name of a month on old Earth,” Tollain said. “It crops up in song lyrics. Apparently it was a long long time from May to December. I guess the orbit was very eccentric back then.”

“Okay,” Kaichang said. “Let’s do this.”

“Kaichang,” Verneen said, “don’t get angry and don’t get into arguments. Tollain, stay focussed and don’t get sidetracked. And don’t overtire yourself.”

“I’m fine now,” Tollain protested.

“Then stay that way. We’ll meet back here for lunch—we should just catch the last ten minutes before they shut, I think, if we don’t dawdle. I’ll go first, because my three are the furthest away. If we leave separately we won’t attract attention. All right?” The pale girl flashed her fugitive smile at the others, took her paper and slipped out of the room.

Kaichang and Tollain looked at one another.

“That girl is seriously scary when she gets going,” Tollain commented.

“Tell me about it,” Kaichang agreed.

“Truce?”

“Truce. But I meant what I said, mister. You have some seriously frodded-up ideas in that head of yours, and they need straightening out. When we’ve got Suncat back.”

“You’re welcome to try,” Tollain said.

He watched Kaichang leave, frowning. Just because she had a bee in her bonnet about politics didn’t mean everyone had to. Politics was just people arguing about stuff that didn’t matter. Wars...he snorted. Wars weren’t politics. And anyway, the Sagittarians had stopped war.

He looked back at the synth. It was a nice one. Pity it was only hired, but he couldn’t justify buying it when *Bellbird* was already full to bursting with kit. Perhaps he could find it cheap on Auction Stop or somewhere when they got back to Goliard. There ought to be enough in the kitty, whatever Gomer might say.

He looked at the paper in his hand. Verneen had not only written down the names and addresses, she had drawn a rough map and provided bus route numbers. Tollain remembered that she and Kaichang had lived with Suncat for a few years, in one of the apartments in the Seigneurie itself, when her father had been running the planet. So she presumably knew the territory.

Time was wasting. He switched off the synth, crossed to the rack by the door and put on a light coat, because despite his protestations he still was not feeling quite up to snuff, and went out.

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A short groundbus ride took him to the first address on his list. Emayla Firsbone lived in quite a good neighbourhood, from the look of it, and her house was well-kept and smart. Tollain walked up the short path between tiny raised flower beds, and rang the doorbell.

“Who is it?” a querulous voice said from the speaker grille beneath the button.

“A friend of S—” Tollain caught himself. “Of Angharad Morningsky. I’d like to speak to

Emayla Firsbone, if I may.”

The speaker buzzed, and the door clicked open. Tollain pushed it the rest of the way and went into a dimly-lit hall.

“In here,” the voice called from a doorway to the left. Tollain pushed the door open and looked into a comfortably furnished but somewhat down-at-heel sitting room, in which an old man with wispy grey hair and a prominent lower lip sat hunched in a powered wheelchair before an unlit fire. He looked up and saw Tollain.

“Good gods, boy,” he said in startlement, “where’s the rest of you?”

“This is the only size I come in, sir,” Tollain answered cheerfully. He had grown used to such comments; they no longer stung him. He was smaller than the average human, practically child-sized. It was just a fact.

“Hmp,” the old man said. “Well, you won’t find Emayla here. She’s out at work, where all decent folk should be at this hour.” His eyes, pale hazel, looked the implied question.

“I’m a musician, sir,” Tollain said. “My work is generally in the evenings.”

“Hmp,” the old man said again. “Excuse me, blasted hiccups. Always when she gives me darnel grains for *hmp* breakfast I get the blasted *hmp* hiccups. I tell her time and again. Does she listen? Hmp. No. Since you’re here you could get me a *hmp* glass of water. Kitchen’s next door down *hmp* on the right. Emayla forgot to *hmp* charge this thing’s blasted *hmp* battery last night. Can’t move an inch.”

“Certainly, sir,” Tollain said. He located the kitchen, wondering if the old man was always so candid with strangers in his house, and after some moments found glasses.

“Thank *hmp* you, my boy,” said the man, when he returned with a brimming glass.

“You might *hmp* want to turn your back. I’m told *hmp* this isn’t pretty.”

Tollain turned and studied a photograph on a pale wood bureau, while noises suggestive of broken plumbing came from the vicinity of the fireplace. The photograph—two-dimensional—showed a pretty if somewhat vapid-looking dark-haired girl with rather startling violet eyes, looking up to her right and pointing as if at something interesting in the sky. She looked to be about ten.

Behind him, the old man breathed deeply. "Aaah, that's better," he said, and Tollain turned back to take the empty glass as the man wiped his chin. "Messy, but effective. Now then. What's your name, boy?"

Tollain gave it.

"Kintarsh, Kintarsh. Not from round here, are you boy?" The old man stuck out his hand, and Tollain took it, feeling the gnarled lumps of arthritis under the taut skin. "Eldridge Firsbone," the man said. "I'm Emayla's father, for what that's worth. So, you're a friend of the Morningsky girl, eh? There's posh now. Emayla was all flash and fireworks to be included in her little coterie, I can tell you. Bit old for you, I'd have thought."

"I'm twenty-four, sir," Tollain said. "I'm small because I was sickly as a child. I just never grew."

"Ah, forgive me," said Eldridge Firsbone. "Always making assumptions. Sprottly, were you? Sorry to hear that. Well, what can I do for you? Emayla won't be home till tonight. Nurse, you know, well, someone has to be. Though I hope she takes care of her patients better than she does her old man." He twiddled the throttle of his unresponsive chair in illustration of filial neglect.

"Well," Tollain began, and embarked on the hastily constructed pretext. As soon as he got to the name "Cold December," though, Firsbone interrupted him.

"Don't mention that name to my daughter," he said sharply. "Good thing you saw me first. Yes, Emayla was in it for a while, but she got thrown out of it, and it was all the tragedy in the world for a long time."

"S-- Angharad threw her out?"

"Oh, no no. Wasn't her. One of the others." Firsbone frowned. "What I recall, the Morningsky girl started out in charge of it, and then this other bit sort of squeezed her out and took over, and one of the first things she did was throw out anyone she didn't like. One of those butter-wouldn't-melt bullies, if you ask me. After that Emayla didn't talk to any of 'em. Surprised the Morningsky girl stood for it at the time." His old face relaxed. "But it was just a nonsense, if you want my opinion. Just a schoolgirl game. When they all left it died completely. I don't suppose you fancy a cup of tea?"

Half an hour later, Tollain had made them both tea and sandwiches, washed up the crockery, gone into the attic and located an extension lead, and plugged in the chair's battery.

"You're a good boy, Tollain," Firsbone enthused. "I'll tell Emayla you called, though I won't mention the Cold December thing if you don't mind. It would only upset her. I know she'd want to send hellos to the Morningsky girl though. She always liked her. It was that other one. Thanks for the tea and the *hmp* sandwiches. Oh, no—"

Tollain fled. But he fetched another glass of water first.

His next port of call was a ten-minute bus ride away. It was while getting the ticket that he noticed that his personal key card was almost completely empty; the deposit on the hired synth had made a big hole in it. Oh well. He would simply have to walk to the last place and then back. Sitting on the bus, he tried himself over. Not too bad. He would be fine.

The second house was much larger, standing in its own garden, but in a sad state of decay. A tarnished brass plate on the gatepost said BRAESCAR. Tollain walked up the gravel drive, dodging the weeds that were creeping across it from the untended garden on either side.

There was no doorbell. He knocked on the door, and waited.

After a long pause, during which the slight wind turned noticeably colder, the door was opened and a suspicious face peered out of darkness.

"Yes?" said the face.

"Good morning," Tollain said. "I wonder if you can help me. I'm looking for Sherven Braescar."

"Wait," said the face, and the door closed again. Tollain waited, humming the new song to himself.

"Come in," said the face, and the door opened wide to reveal the rest of a middle-aged woman in a dark uniform of some sort. *Doesn't anyone on this planet light their halls?* Tollain thought as he followed the dark back through a dark space towards a geometric shape of dim grey light.

“Come in, come in,” a deep masculine voice called in response to the servant’s timid knock. She stood aside, and Tollain walked into what was unmistakably the office of a professional medic of some sort. He stopped, controlled the urge to walk right out again, and summoned a smile as he advanced on the harassed, bulky young man behind the desk.

“What can I do for—” Sherven Braescar looked up, and his pale eyes kindled with interest. “Oh dear me, that is interesting. I’m so sorry. Do sit down. How can I help you?”

Tollain was used to this from doctors. “I have inherited hypercacodaemia, doctor, but that’s not what I came to see you about. It’s actually a personal matter.”

“Most of the things people come to see me about are,” the doctor said, smiling broadly. “This is not a medical visit, though, if I understand you correctly. Very well. What can I do for you?”

“I believe you used to know Angharad Morningsky,” Tollain began, and plunged on at once despite a sudden alarming shift in the doctor’s expression. “I wondered what you could tell me about a group by the name of Cold December—”

He got no further. Doctor Braescar had removed a gun from his desk drawer and was pointing it squarely at his head. His expression was cold and hard as a barren planet.

“Leave my surgery at once,” he said, “or I will shoot you dead.”