

CHAPTER SIX

“Hey, Shallen,” Suncat said, trying to sound casual. “Listen, if this is about that phone call, I’m really sorry—”

Shallen’s brow wrinkled in apparent puzzlement. “Phone call?”

“Only I was in hospital,” Suncat ploughed on desperately. “I’d just been shot, you see.”

Shallen’s face cleared, and she laughed. “Oh, that phone call,” she said. “You silly nubbin, I’d forgotten all about that. Of course I heard all about it later, that silly jape of your brother’s that went so terribly wrong, and I forgave you completely. Anyway, it didn’t matter. Because it was actually the best thing that could have happened to me. Can you imagine? I was so silly and scared, and it was actually nothing to be scared of at all.”

“It wasn’t?” Suncat was lost.

Shallen laughed again, and took her hands. “You don’t understand,” she said, “but you will soon. Put the party poppers away, boys, these are friends.”

“You have an original way of inaugurating a friendship,” Korynn said flatly, as the two masked men reluctantly tucked their weapons into the waistbands of their trousers.

“You two...know each other?” Orville said.

“Oh, we go way back, Anger and me,” Shallen said. “Anger, will you introduce us, or has your mouth stuck like that?”

Suncat closed her mouth with a snap. “Orville Torres, Korynn Mitwoch,” she said, “may I present Shallen Corvina Westermain. Shallen, this is Orville and this is Korynn.”

Shallen regarded them coolly. “Offworlders, I see,” she said. “Well, I’m not surprised. Never mind. Any friend of Anger’s is a friend of mine, wherever they come from, as long as they behave themselves.”

“That’s great,” Orville said. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind showing us to the door—”

Shallen laughed again. “Funny too. I can see why you like him, Anger.” Her glance

rested speculatively on Korynn for a moment; then she turned back to Suncat. “We have got a lot of catching up to do,” she said, “and we will, sweetie, soon, I promise. But right now I’m going to have to leave you to chat amongst yourselves for a while. I’ll be back soon, to take you to see the big snake of the outfit, and then you’ll know what’s going to happen. And then you can tell me all your news, and I’ll tell you mine. I think you’ll be surprised.” She lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers. “*Do wolności.*” She turned and swept out, and the two masked men followed her. The ancient lock of the cellar door rattled as the key turned once more.

Korynn had arranged himself on the table once more. Orville, however, had questions.

“What,” he said, “is going on? Who was that?”

“I told you her name,” Suncat said tiredly.

“All right,” Orville said. “How do you two know each other?”

Suncat perched on a barrel and took a deep breath. “Before Daddy sent me to Miss Ganticold’s on Durdemang, where I met you,” she began, “I went to an ordinary little school in Northshores meinie, where we lived before—” She made a gesture that encompassed the turbulent events of her fifteenth and sixteenth year, when Elyot Segrave Morningsky had gone from being the wealthy yet obscure seigneur of a remote northern meinie to becoming the effective ruler of the planet, with the far more prosperous and demanding meinie of Broadfields to run, and social expectations to fulfil. “I met Shallen there and we became very good friends, no not like that you pervert I was like eleven at the time?”

“Don’t put words into my expression,” Orville protested.

“Well, don’t leave so much space for them. No, we were adventuring kind of friends, only Shallen was always the leader. I was actually quite shy back then, don’t laugh, and she was utterly fearless. She’d get me into the most appalling scrapes—” Suncat broke off, remembering. “But I loved her. As much as I loved anyone.”

“And then something happened,” Orville guessed. “What was it? A boy?”

“No, nor a girl neither, Torres. I don’t know where your mind is, but get it out of there before it catches something. I never thought about any of that till I was already at

Miss Ganticold's. No, this was different." Suncat cast her own mind back over the years. "We both loved books about secret societies who fought for justice and freedom, about the Purple Glove League and the Seven Silent Swords and so on, so we formed our own. We called it Cold December."

"Odd name," Orville commented.

"Think we found it in a book or something. Anyway, we had about fifteen members at one point, which in a school with two hundred pupils wasn't trivial. And just about then the whole thing with Daddy started, and he was away in Broadfields for like weeks at a time, so I was really living for the group." Suncat's face was troubled. "See, the thing was, Cold December had been my idea. It was the first time I'd really taken the lead between the two of us. And for me it was a fun thing. There was this one time we kidnapped a teacher and held her for ransom, for charity, you know? She missed a whole afternoon of lessons. But nobody minded. She said it was the most interesting afternoon she'd had at school in years."

"Okay, let me guess," Orville said. "Shallen got rebellious."

"I wouldn't have minded that so much," Suncat said. "We were good friends, we could fight about things and still like each other. But she got sneaky. She wanted to be leader, so she went around behind my back, she promised people things, told them I'd be leaving soon anyway because of Daddy—which was true, but she could have just waited—and then she called an election and voted me out as leader." There were tears in Suncat's eyes. "I found out later about all the manoeuvring, all the tricks...I just couldn't understand it. I thought she was my friend. She still behaved as if she was."

"Friends don't do that to friends," Orville commented sagely.

"Maybe not," Suncat said, "but at the time I was so desperate not to lose her I...I just let it pass. I let her have the group. I stayed in it, but I let her take over."

"What happened?" Korynn said unexpectedly. It was very quiet in the cellar, and he had not moved, just like before.

"She...she said she wanted the group to be more serious," Suncat said, sniffing. "She got rid of some of them...just threw them out, and brought in other people, people

who weren't even at the school. Boys. They started going to taverns, trying to cadge drinks off grown-ups. Writing on walls, breaking windows. Stupid, nasty things. Shallen loved it, but it was just..."

Suncat looked at Orville. "It was *childish*," she said, "and not in a good way. Shallen and I had always done things that were naughty, way back before we started the group...breaking into places, stealing beer and making ourselves sick, all the things you do when you're young and pushing the limits...but the group were doing them brazenly, like they were proud of it, and Shallen egged them on. They—" Suncat stopped. "I'm sure you can imagine the kind of dirty little tricks they played," she said. "Anyway, before I could get together a plan to put a stop to it, Daddy was awarded Broadfields and the Presiding Seigneurship, and I was yanked out of there and halfway across the country before I knew where I was, and then it was all 'you've got to learn to be a lady' and off to finishing school. Not Miss Ganticold's at first...that was the third or fourth one Daddy tried. I was getting quite rebellious myself by that time."

"I noticed," Orville said with a smile.

"I'm sorry I treated you so badly," Suncat said, smiling back. "I guess I picked up more from Shallen than I realised. Anyway, that was the last I saw of Cold December. Daddy told me in a letter that the headmistress of the school had stepped in and closed it down after one particularly nasty incident, and that Shallen had either been expelled or had dropped out."

"And this phone call?" Orville's voice was uncharacteristically gentle.

"Happened," Suncat said slowly, "just after all that business with Kit, when I was still recuperating from him shooting me. She called me on my personal comlink—I'll never know how she got hold of the number, but she must have been worried about her home phone being tapped. Orville, she was terrified. There were people outside the door, she had been expecting them, they were just about to break in—"

"Steady," Orville said, taking her by the shoulders.

"I'm all right." Suncat shrugged him off. "And then the call cut off, while I was still explaining that I was hooked up to this and that and couldn't exactly pop round."

“She was calling you from, from Northshores?”

“Yes. Just up the road from here. Strongly Autonomist, even then when the tide had turned almost everywhere else. Probably still is. Though there was this one guy...”

Suncat smiled, remembering. “Carson Meldrum. He was the one who—oh, you remember.”

Orville nodded. “I met him, just briefly. Seemed okay.”

“He was.”

“So she called you up, this Shallen called you up to ask for help, and that was the last you saw or heard of her.”

“Yes.” Suncat shivered. “Till just now.”

“It is very clear what has happened.” Once again Korynn Mitwoch sat up, with that eerie clockwork movement, and turned to face them.

“Oh yeah?” Orville said. “Go on then.”

“Northshores meinie’s populace was and remains strongly Autonomist. At the time of your injury, you were seen as a figurehead of the then ascendant Affiliationist movement. Certain individuals known to both of you decided to put pressure on you and therefore on your father to reverse your positions by threatening the life of someone close to you. However, you were incapacitated at the time, and as soon as you had recovered, you left the planet.” His gaunt features flexed in what was apparently intended to be a smile, and returned to their former impassivity. “It is difficult to blackmail a person who is not there to be blackmailed.”

“You’re right,” Suncat said slowly. “I just wanted to get away. I’d hated Kit...but I loved him too. I’d never have hurt him. That he could want to hurt *me*...even kill me...”

“Exactly,” Korynn went on. “So the kidnappers were left with a hostage of no particular value, and one moreover known to them and therefore not lightly to be disposed of. I would speculate that they decided to turn her to their cause, and eventually succeeded. You would not dispute that the group that attacked the Seigneurie was almost certainly actuated by Autonomist motives?”

“No, I suppose they must have been.”

“Serina Westerman is clearly a member of this group with some status, as witness her relative freedom of movement.” Korynn spread his long hands. “The conclusion is clear. Your abduction was not, as I at first thought, merely a random event. The group hopes to turn you likewise and use you for the same purpose as before, to bring about the restoration of autonomy and Seigneurs’ rights under the old pseudo-baronial system.”

“They couldn’t possibly think that would work,” Suncat protested.

“We shall see.” Korynn abruptly lost interest in the conversation and returned to his corpse impersonation.

“Well, it won’t,” Suncat declared. “These aren’t the dark ages any more. Argenthome’s a free planet and I’m a free woman, froddit, and I won’t be turned.”

Orville was troubled. “They could use drugs and brainwashing techniques on you,” he said. “Human beings have been quite malleable in the past. I think Doctor Goggles there might have a point.”

“Well, we’ll just have to get out of here.” Suncat got off her barrel and began to pace. “But I can’t believe they managed to bamboozle Shallen. She’s too smart. She’d have cottoned on to their tricks and found a way round them.” She turned back to Orville. “I bet she’s bluffing them, just playing along. She’ll help us if I ask her.”

“You think?”

“I’m sure of it,” Suncat lied. “I knew her longer than they have.”

“And she led you up the garden path good and proper.”

“Exactly! If she can do that to me, she can do it to them.”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant,” Orville muttered.

“There must be another way out of this cellar,” Suncat said with sudden urgency.

“Help me look, Orville. Korynn...oh just lie there.”

“Very well,” came from the motionless figure.

They searched the walls and moved barrels, but nothing came to light. The floor was thickly coated in dust, and Suncat looked around for a broom, but found none.

“Don’t they ever clean these places?” she grumbled.

“The dust on the bottles is a reliable indicator of their age and undisturbed condition,” Korynn intoned. “To agitate the ambient particles would compromise that reliability.”

“That’d be a no, then,” Orville said sardonically.

“Well, maybe there’s something behind one of the racks,” Suncat suggested.

“Good luck with that. They’re bolted to the wall.”

“Oh frod, so they are too.” Suncat sat back down on the barrel dejectedly.

“Don’t give up.” Orville changed his tack abruptly. “We may not be able to get out of this room, but they won’t keep us in here indefinitely. Your friend said something about taking us to meet a big snake—”

“*The* big snake. It’s a figure of speech here,” Suncat explained. “It means the leader, the boss, the VIP. I don’t know if she meant all of us or just me, but I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“I know you will.” Orville bent forward and hugged her briefly. She hugged back, with unintentional force. “If anyone can get us out, it’s you,” he said, over her shoulder.

“Just stay strong.”

“Always,” she whispered.

The door rattled.

Shallen came in, flanked as ever by the two masked men. She smiled at Suncat.

“Don’t look so dumpish, Anger,” she said. “It’s not so bad. As long as you don’t make trouble, you’ll be free in a twinkle. Come on, it’s time you met us all.”

“How can you let us go once we’ve seen your faces?” It was Orville who spoke.

“Silly boy.” Shallen was amused. “Once we’ve finished our faces will be on billboards all over the planet. We’ll be heroes. The only question you’ll be asked is why didn’t you get our autographs when you had the chance.”

“Oh, of course,” Orville agreed with mock solemnity. “I forgot about that.”

“Can Orville and Korynn come too?” Suncat said, standing up. “Only I’d feel safer with

them beside me.”

“Mmm. ‘Fraid not, sweetie. They’re offworlders.” Shallen spoke as if explaining to a child. “We may have to work on that a little. You really have been getting into bad company, you know.” She spoke over her shoulder to the two in masks. “Make sure they don’t try anything. Come along, Anger.”

The masked men produced their weapons and covered Orville and Korynn (who looked about as likely to try anything as the marble effigy of Denzil Wortham Keeningspire in Broadfields Necropolis, Suncat thought) while the two women left the room. Then they followed them out, and one of them locked the door with care and put the old brass key into his trousers pocket, where it made a distinctive bulge.

Suncat followed Shallen up a flight of bare plycrete steps to the ground floor of the house. Two more masked locals stood on either side of the wooden staircase that led up to the upper levels. Off to the left was an open plan living area, shockingly bare and uncared-for; to the right a narrow passage presumably led to the kitchens.

Suncat was frantically casting her mind back. She had played in the gardens outside this house, as she had told Orville, but had rarely been inside it; her parents tended to visit Coldsands in the summer months, when the weather was fine, and old Westermain had been precious about kids jumping about on his good furniture. There was little enough of that left, she noted.

“Up here, Anger,” Shallen called back from halfway up the stairs. Suncat obediently passed between the two silent guardians and mounted the stairs behind the other girl. Watery sunlight illumined the landing at the top from a large window at either end. Shallen opened a door and stood there holding it.

Trying not to be terrified, Suncat passed within.

Three men, standing by the windows of the large, airy bedroom, stood arrested in the act of turning to regard her.

“Here she is,” Shallen said brightly behind her. “I told you.”

“Miss Morningsky,” said the man in the centre of the small group. “Welcome. Please, sit down.”

“No thank you,” Suncat said composedly. “I may as well tell you that you’re wasting

your time.”

The man, who was middle-aged and well-spoken, inclined his head. “If that is so,” he said, “it is our time to waste. But I do not think it is so. Miss Morningsky, you have spoken out against Autonomism.”

“Once,” Suncat put in.

The man nodded again. “I believe that you were mistaken to do so. I think that we may be able to convince you to change your opinion. I hope you will be honest enough to allow us that opportunity.”

“You’re not going to brainwash me,” Suncat said. “I warn you—”

The man smiled, or seemed to; with his back to the window, his face was in shadow, but Suncat could hear the smile in his voice. “Brainwashing and such techniques are for people whose aim is to convince their victims of a lie. We have no need of them. I am personally quite certain that once our position has been explained to you, you will see the justice of it.”

“As I said,” Suncat repeated, “you’re wasting your time. And mine.”

“That,” the man said, “I truly regret. Our cause, however, is urgent and enforces upon us methods at which, in a less critical endeavour, we should balk. Once you share our commitment, though, I am certain you will forgive us our somewhat peremptory actions.”

“What about my friends?” Suncat said. “My offworlder friends?”

The man on the left, younger and tousle-haired, snorted, but the spokesman quieted him with a gesture. “They will not be harmed. We have no quarrel with any offworlder. Indeed, we have no interest in them. They will be allowed to leave this planet in peace, as will your other friends.”

“So long as they go quietly,” put in the man on the left.

“Indeed.” The spokesman inclined his head once more. “We are a peaceful movement, and it is not in our interest to pick quarrels when all we want is for Argenthome to be left alone. But if we are attacked, we will defend ourselves. Advise your friends accordingly, Miss Morningsky.”

“I won’t be responsible for their behaviour,” Suncat said.

“We would not ask you to. Nor will we punish you if they act against us. But we would not have it said that we did not issue fair warning.” The speaker drew himself up.

“And now we will leave you to talk with Miss Westermain. One of us will be outside the door in case of need, but you may be assured of absolute privacy.”

“Wait,” Suncat said, as the three men walked towards the door. “Do I get a turn now?”

“Of course,” said the spokesman.

“Well, first, my name’s Suncat,” said Suncat. “Just Suncat. Serina Suncat if you want to be respectful. I don’t go by Miss Morningsky, or Anger, any more. I haven’t for years. I don’t have any pull with the Presiding Seigneur, and nor does my father, so you can forget any idea that changing my mind will make any difference to the government of this planet. Even if you could change my mind, which you can’t. You’ll never persuade me that offworlders are the enemy, or that things were better in the old days—I was here in the old days and they were crap. Things are already much better for ordinary people than they were back then, and they’ll go on getting better. You wait. Your day’s gone, and good riddance. The Seigneurs don’t get to be little tin gods any more. Argenthome is Affiliated, and it’s going to stay Affiliated, and your kind will die out, probably still moaning about how you don’t get the respect you think you deserve. And then we’ll truly be free, for the first time. Free of you.”

There was a short silence. Then Shallen spoke from behind her.

“I said all that. Well, some of it.” She came round to stand beside the spokesman. “I can’t believe I was so silly. You won’t either, when you know the truth.

“It’s all right, Anson. I’ll take it from here.” Her words were to the older man, but her gaze was on the younger, and at least one question in Suncat’s mind found a possible answer.

The older man, Anson, nodded, and he and his companions left the room and closed the door behind them. Suncat heard the key turn in the lock.

“Okay, sweetie,” Shallen said. “Let’s talk.”