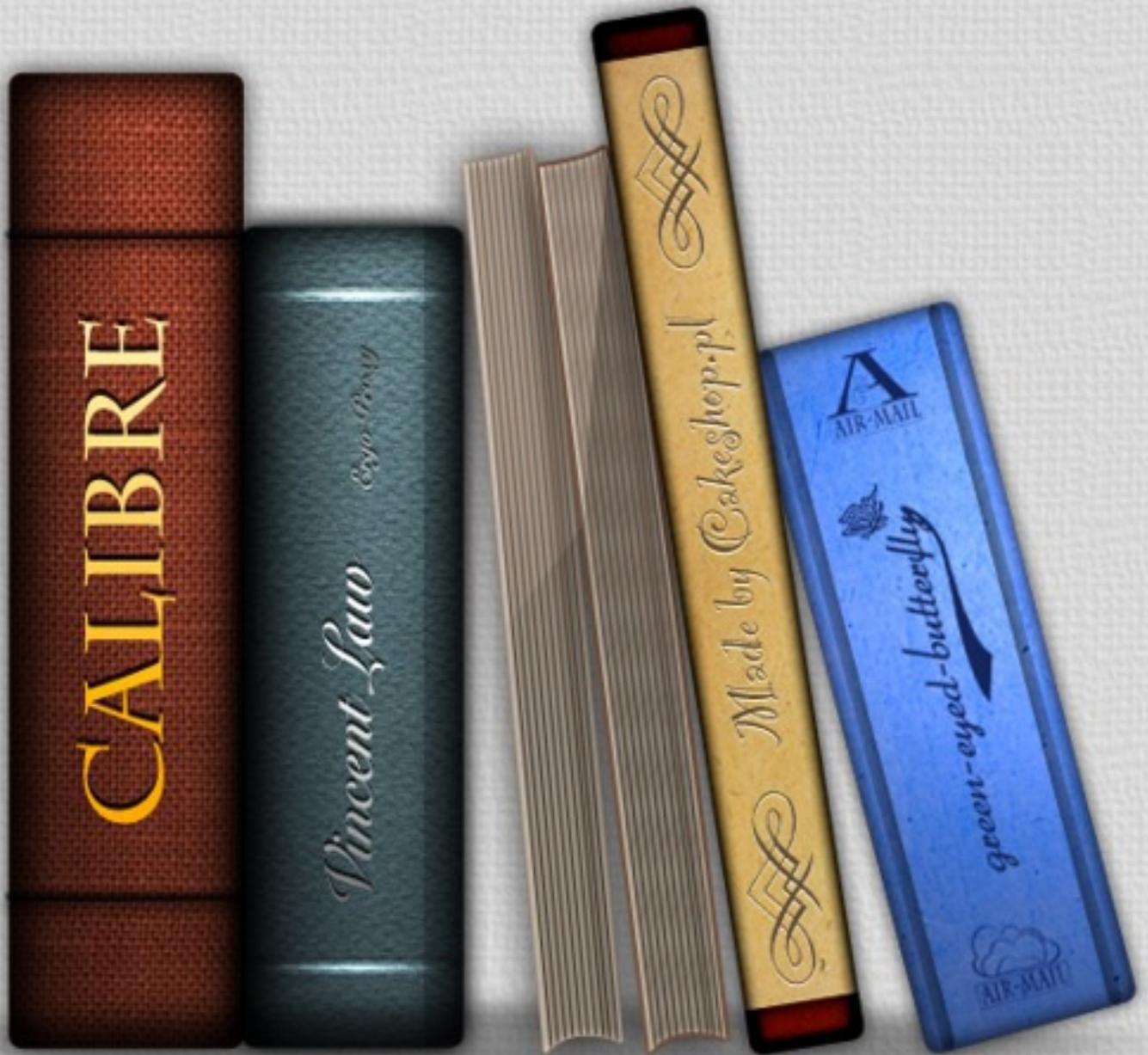


RTA Part 06

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Kaichang's brain was definitely melting. She could feel it.

"...and then, with the season more than half over, we took on Eagleheights Rational. Danvert was sooo nervous, 'cause he'd twisted his ankle in the Downsholm match and you know it still wasn't right, and the team leader, you remember the new one I told you about, he still hadn't firmed up the team's strategy, so anyway Danvert came to see me the night before the match and he wanted to know could I think of any way to calm him down and, you know, psych him up for the match, and so—"

Giltrauda Raysling, blonde, petite and bubbly, remembered her school days with vivid clarity, and was only too happy to share her remembrances with the nice lady who had come visiting on a day when she just really didn't feel like doing housework. Unfortunately, if any of those remembrances concerned the group known as Cold December, they lay at the far distant end of a long, long tunnel full of identical or at least indistinguishable games involving some kind of ball, and frustratingly chaste romantic interludes with the boy Danvert. He had been, apparently, the star something-or-other of the team, and had, from what Kaichang could gather, no interests apart from this game, on the one hand, and depriving Giltrauda of her virginity in the shortest possible order, on the other; this latter an interest of which the lady herself remained happily unaware to this day.

Don't get angry. Verneen's words thrummed in Kaichang's memory. *Don't get into arguments.* Chance would be a fine thing.

"—so I said to Danvert, well, put them under your arms if they're cold, and then he said—"

"Mrs Raysling," Kaichang said with an effort. "Cold December. Do you recall anything about that?"

"What? Oh, yes, probably. But I was telling you about the Eagleheights game, or was it the Downsholm one? You'd think I could remember, but my Remmy says I get so meffled sometimes—"

For the Goddess's sake, you infantilised spawn of the patriarchy, you've got a brain, use

it!!! If thought had been audible, Kaichang's mental roar would have been clearly heard three streets away.

The recital went on, and on, and Kaichang found herself wondering if anyone could possibly be as naïve, and as lucky, as Giltrauda had been; for despite Danvert's every increasingly frantic effort to trick her into allowing him some further degree of intimacy, she had left school utterly unravished and promptly married Remblow Raysling, fourteen years older than she. He had been a bank director and therefore extremely well-off before Affiliation, and now worked in the Ministry of Currency and Commerce, doing much the same job but with publicly owned money. So far he did not seem to have got much beyond first base with Giltrauda either; at least, to judge from the neat, toy-free house and Giltrauda's immaculate look, there had been no issue of the union.

Kaichang was thoroughly in favour of marriage, and children, and all that stuff, as long as it did not involve her. There were of course still planets where religious, moral or scientific authorities tried to restrict in some way the kinds of people who could get married. On Rysesh Till, only same-sex marriages were allowed; on Grool, to be legal, a marriage had to consist of two males, two females and one pet animal of a prescribed size and weight. On the Dante Ellipse, partners had to be within two centimetres of the same height, so that when embracing neither would be subject to potentially crippling back strain; on Lower New Ballarat, fitness to marry had to be proven by both partners undergoing gruelling physical and mental trials, culminating in a week spent escaping from the barren, baking desert known as the Whole Lot O' Nothing, with no food or water provided, on the grounds that if they could get through that without eating each other, married life should be a breeze.

These were extremes, of course. The customary restriction on most planets that still had any (a dwindling number) was one of each technical gender, so that procreation would at least be an option, but it was mere custom, not law. In practice, as Kaichang had said to Suncat back on Goliard, there was no reason why anyone could not love, or marry, any body or bodies they wished, as long as all parties understood and consented. And given these facts, Kaichang asked herself, why in all the nine thousand hells of man's imagining would anyone have married Giltrauda?

“Mrs Raysling,” she tried again. “I do have other people to see.”

This was a flat lie; Giltrauda had been the third, after the one who’d been out and the one who had refused to believe Kaichang was not trying to sell her something. But Kaichang was desperate.

Giltrauda was instantly contrite. “Oh, I am sooo sorry, what must you think of me gottling on like this? Now let me see, what was it you wanted to know about?”

“Cold December,” Kaichang said again.

“Ohhh yes. Well, that was all just a game, you know, just a bit of fun. I wasn’t in it at the beginning.” She furrowed her brow prettily, tapping her temple as she tried to remember. “It was all one girl’s idea, I think. I never liked her much. She was always trying to be friendly with us, but it just wasn’t on, you know? The fish couldn’t see the glass.”

“How do you mean?” Kaichang was so relieved finally to be getting to the point that she sounded positively warm.

“Well,” Giltrauda frowned again, “it was obvious. She was a seigneur’s daughter, and we were just landholder and worker brats. How could we ever be friends? She tried so hard, and I wanted to just shake her sometimes, but of course that wouldn’t have been polite. I wonder what happened to her?”

“You were saying about Cold December,” Kaichang prompted, gently but relentlessly.

“Oh yes. Well after a while this other girl took over the group, and I must say she was much more on our level, though I don’t think I ever knew what her background was, but I assumed it must have been something like ours. With the first girl it had been all quite highbrow, I think, what we did, I never understood it anyway, but this new one made it a lot more fun. We got boys involved—Danvert wouldn’t, he said he was in training and didn’t have time, I think he was jealous—and we used to go out and have larkings all over the meinie. The first girl stood it for a while, but then she just left, I think her da moved away or something.” Giltrauda giggled. “After that we really let rip.”

“How did it end?” Kaichang asked.

“Oh, some prank or other went wrong and a girl got hurt.” Giltrauda was dismissive. “I’d lost interest a bit by that time, I mean you have to grow up sooner or later, don’t you? Anyway, this girl ended up in hospital, and the head, old Miss Curradale, hauled the leaders in and basically shut the whole thing off at the tap. The leader girl and her boyfriend went about breathing threats for a while, but nothing came of it.”

“And that was the last you heard of it?”

“Well, it’s funny you should say that,” Giltrauda said. “I got a note just a while back, now when was it, last year I think. I’m afraid I haven’t got it any more, Remmy made me throw it away, but I can remember it quite well I think...” She did her memory woman act again. “It said that Cold December was being revived, as a serious political movement and did I want to rejoin, and there was a whole lot of stuff about preserving our traditional values and keeping the offworlders in their place and so on, and...and there was a name to contact...Brodie...Bridie...no, Braeden. Braeden Carthew. I remembered him, you see,” she went on, as Kaichang hastily found pencil and paper and wrote the name down, “because he was part of the original group, one of those boys the new girl brought in. I never liked him.” Giltrauda’s expression was utterly candid. “He always struck me as one of those wild boys, the sort who would do anything just to see what would happen. A real old Northshores family, though. His father Anson was very close to the seigneur.”

“Thank you, Mrs Raysling,” Kaichang said. “You’ve been most helpful.”

Giltrauda stood at the door of her picture-perfect little house and waved happily when Kaichang turned to look back from the pavement. Then she went back inside. The dark girl stood and breathed deeply for a moment, looking at the name on the paper in her hand. Then she thrust it into her pocket and set off for the centre of town and the Imperial Hotel.

She found Verneen already there, but no sign of Tollain.

“I haven’t heard from him,” Verneen said, sounding worried. “I hope he’s okay.”

Quickly Kaichang told her what Giltrauda Raysling had said.

“Braeden Carthew,” Verneen said musingly. “I wonder where he is now.”

“Wherever he is,” Kaichang said, “it’s probably where Suncat and the others are. They

had a copter, so—” She spread her hands expressively.

“But he came from Northshores. That’s still Autonomist. Maybe he works from home.” Verneen grimaced. “As it were.”

“That would be convenient, but it’s a bit obvious.”

The door opened, and Tollain came in.

“What the frod happened to you?” Kaichang demanded.

“I had a very interesting morning.” Tollain unconsciously brushed at the dirt and tears in his coat, made to touch his swelling left eye and winced. “Fortunately I got plenty of this sort of thing at school, when they eventually let me out of the bubble, so I learned early on to give a bit back. You should see the other three fellows.”

“What happened?” Verneen got up and started fussing around him. “This could have triggered another attack--”

“Well, it hasn’t yet. Let me sit down a minute, and I’ll tell you.” Tollain slumped into a chair while Verneen ran to the bathroom for the regulation first aid kit. “The worst part was the walk back. Remind me not to do that again. That part was my own fault entirely.”

“Well, we’ve all missed lunch,” Kaichang said, noting the time. “I’ll go out and find something in a while. So, oh great warrior, tell us your tale.”

Tollain began to speak, while Verneen tended his eye.

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“Is this some new medical technique I wasn’t previously aware of?” Tollain said, eyeing the gun with a touch of nervousness.

“I am quite sincere,” Doctor Braescar said. “Leave now or I will kill you.”

“May I know why?” Tollain began, but the doctor was already going on.

“I told your principal when he came here last year that I want no part of your disgusting little cabal,” he said. “I may have been a member of a group with a similar name when I was a boy, but I have no truck with political activists of any sort. You may tell your leaders—”

“Doctor Braescar,” Tollain said urgently, “I think we may be misunderstanding each other. I am not involved with the Cold December group in any way. I am trying to find out more about them, because they have—” He swallowed. “They may have been the people who kidnapped someone I care for last night. I very much need your help, if you know anything about them.”

Instantly the doctor became contrite. “Oh, my dear man, I am so terribly sorry.” He glanced down at the gun in his hand and put it away with an expression of distaste. “I jumped to the wrong conclusion. Very bad habit in a medical man. That shows the harm these people can cause even if they’re not blowing things up. They make us over in their detestable image.” He drew a deep, shuddering breath. “I shall tell you anything you need to know.”

“Well,” Tollain said, “who they are and where they come from would be nice.”

The doctor laughed harshly. “I only met one of them,” he said. “Recently, that is. I was at school in Northshores with some of them when I was young, but there was nothing political about the group then. It was just the usual sort of horseplay one expects from young people. I’m afraid I was a bit of a prig. I only joined the group because I had a severe, um, passion for the girl who was leading it at the time. Her name was Angharad.” The doctor’s severe gaze softened at the memory. “She moved away and became a musician, I believe. Probably never knew I existed.”

He became businesslike again. “Anyway. Last year, it was towards the end of Tyrwhitt, I believe, this young lout came muscling into my surgery, during office hours if you please, and offered me the opportunity to rejoin the group. They needed my expertise, he said, because they were going to strike a blow against the corrupt Affiliationists running the Seigneurie and put control of Argenthome’s destiny back in the hands of its people.”

“What did you say?” Tollain asked.

“I’m afraid I told him that I had seen how Argenthome’s people handled its destiny and quite frankly if a bunch of six-foot electric blue ants turned up and offered to take over I could hardly see how they could do a worse job. Then I told him I was not interested, and he sloped off.”

Tollain felt a prickle down the back of his neck. "What happened?" he said.

"I was picking up my daughter from school." The doctor's voice was all but inaudible. "My Atti...she was six. I saw her there, waiting at the railings like a good girl, and I started to cross the road to join her, and at that moment a groundcar came hurtling along the road directly at me. All the safety protocols must have been hacked out." Doctor Braescar stared over Tollain's head, living the moment again. "I'm almost certain they meant only to frighten me...because the car swerved at the last minute. But Atti had seen it, and she ran towards me. Right...into...its path."

Tollain said nothing.

"Needless to say," the man went on, "the driver did not stop, and the car turned out to be stolen and was later found in a devastated condition some miles away. Atti was, of course, quite dead. My only child. My wife was..." He sighed. "But that is hardly relevant. I hope now you can understand my somewhat extreme reaction."

"Doctor, I'm truly sorry," Tollain said. "You can understand, I think, why I need to bring all this up, but I apologise for causing you pain. Do you remember the man's name? The one who called on you?"

"Braeden Carthew," the doctor said at once. "He comes from Northshores, as did we all, and he was still living there last year, I believe. He certainly had no permanent base in Broadfields. He had a woman with him when he called on me, though she did not come into the office. I believe it was she who took over the running of the group after Miss Angharad left, though I had dropped out before that happened. Her name," the doctor said, "was Shallen Westermain, though she rarely used the surname. Does that help?"

"I certainly hope it will," Tollain said, getting up and shaking the doctor's hand vigorously. "Thank you so much, doctor. If we humanly can, we'll get these people for you."

"Thank you," the doctor said, and watched as Tollain bounced buoyantly out of his office, almost colliding with the nurse in the doorway. She turned to watch him go.

"Whatever you gave him," she said, "I want a regular prescription."

Tollain was in high good humour as he set off towards the last address on his list.

Two names. He was doing well. He struck down a side street that would bring him more quickly to his destination. He had no idea what the time was, but it couldn't take that long, and he was feeling fine.

He was aware, after a while, of footsteps behind him, but he thought nothing of it till the large gentleman with the big stick thing stepped out in front of him, and the two pairs of feet behind him stopped when he did and spread out to block his escape.

"Ullo, sonny," said the gentleman in front of him.

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"They were obviously watching the doctor's house, or else they followed me from Firsbone's," Tollain finished. "They thought three would be enough."

"They nearly were," Verneen said, eyeing the bruising just beginning to come out down his entire left side. "You could have had cracked ribs and everything."

"Ah, one of the side effects of mother's little present," Tollain said. "My bones are small, but they mass the same as they would if I were normal size. They don't break that easily."

"You," Verneen said firmly, "were lucky."

"So why wasn't I followed?" Kaichang exclaimed. "I could have done with a bit of exercise after all that sitting still and listening."

"They took one look at you and decided you were above their pay grade," Tollain guessed.

"Oh come on, I'm not Princess Colossica of whatever it is," Kaichang protested.

"The Opaline Necropolis," Verneen put in quietly. There had been a series of illustrated stories they had all three enjoyed while at finishing school.

"Just because I'm a little above average height and keep myself fit—"

"And project an aura of constant rage that extends for a hundred yards around you..."

"Oh damn, I forgot about that." Kaichang snapped her fingers in mock irritation.

"Anyway," Tollain said, "Kaichang got one name, I got two, how did you do?"

The pale girl smiled behind the curtain of her hair.

“Well. The first house on my list belonged to somebody quite different who told me that Terrisan Probard had moved out of Broadfields completely last year after somebody set fire to her car. I wondered about that.”

“Wonder no more,” Tollain said grimly.

“I had more luck with Worris Kalefield. He told me the name of the girl who ended up in hospital—she turned out to be the last one on my list, and the best of all. Dillybine Longmoor.”

“And you found her?”

Verneen nodded. “She walks with two sticks and has to sleep sitting up, but she’s very much alive and very keen to help. She told me what they did to her, apparently because she wouldn’t…”

“It’s usually because they wouldn’t,” Kaichang said grimly. The closer humanity came to ultimate enlightenment the sooner they seemed to fall away from it, back into the old errors and patterns of habit. A persistent re-offender was the idea that men had some kind of natural right to the undivided attention, lifelong affection and intimate company of women, simply because nature seemed to have designed one bit of one to go into another bit of the other. From this primeval error depended all the wrongs done by men to women, from tacit discrimination to—rarely these days but never rarely enough—horrific violence. Kaichang suspected that an act of this kind, committed now, would be sufficient grounds for permanent and irrevocable UnAffiliation; when the Sagittarians said “There shall be no more slaves,” they meant it.

“And she also told me,” Verneen went on, “that this Braeden person’s father, Anson Carthew, when the old Seigneur died about five years ago, bought out the lordless meinie of Coldsands and became its seigneur by default, even though he was only a landholder and the Seigneurie for some reason wouldn’t give him the rank. And Dillybine remembers, among other things, that in among the goods and chattels included in the sale was a twenty-year-old hunting copter, and various arms and armaments left over from inter-meinie wars, including a missile launcher.” She pushed her hair back behind her ears and grinned at them. “What do you think about that?”