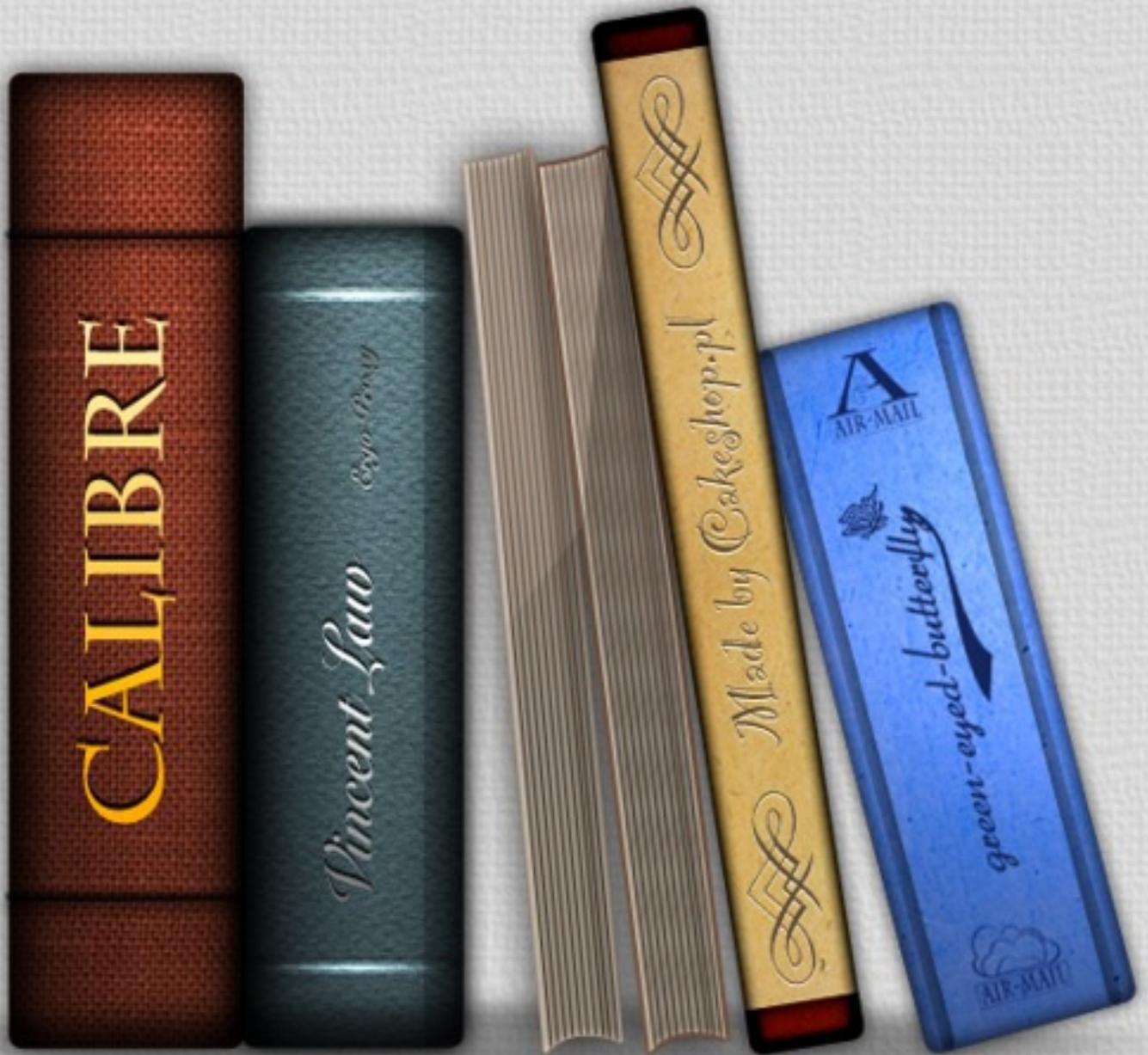


RTA Part 07

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CHAPTER EIGHT

“What do you suppose they’re doing to her up there?” Orville said fretfully.

“Speculation is futile,” Korynn said, once more immobile on his table.

“Froddit, you could at least *pretend* to care a bit,” Orville snapped.

“No,” Korynn said unexpectedly. “I cannot.”

“What?”

Korynn sat up. “Torres, I will say this once and once only, and I ask that you repeat it to no living soul. I wear these spectacles because, although my eyes function perfectly, ordinary light and colour are unbearably painful to me and must be muted if I am to function as a normal person. Similarly, I speak in this manner because, although I am familiar with every aspect of the language we use, the act of forming sentences, or deciphering the speech of others, is exhausting and painful, especially when the subject pertains to...emotional responses. You have heard me play. I hope you will not deny that I possess the capacity for emotional self-expression. I simply cannot do it with words. I cannot ‘pretend to care,’ as you put it. That does not mean that I do not.”

Realisation dawned on Orville. “But it’s a recognised condition, they have ways of helping—” he began.

“I grew up on a planet where no such help was available,” Korynn said. “I found my own ways. I let the music...speak for me. I am now too accustomed to my own coping strategies to abandon them for others which may not be effective in my case.”

“Gods, I’m sorry, man,” Orville said. “I never thought—”

“You will be of most help to me if you do not,” Korynn said. “I can deal with the attitudes of those around me as they are now. I am accustomed to them. I could not be sure of continuing to be able to do so if they changed. And now, if you would, please be quiet for a while. I am trying to transpose Sunecat’s new song into a more effective mode than the one in which we were playing, and I cannot do that and listen to you at the same time.”

He lay back down and crossed his arms. Now Orville looked closely, he could see that the long fingers of each hand were moving very slightly, finding invisible keys.

Transposing. In his head. Of course.

Orville sat back down on the edge of the other table, stared at the door, and worried about Suncat.

*

“I was actually grief-stricken,” Shallen said. “I cried all night when you left, after we had that fight.”

Suncat looked at her, unconvinced.

“I knew, in my head, that you weren’t leaving because of me,” Shallen went on. “I knew it was because your father was moving into Broadfields and you had to go too. But it still felt wrong.”

“Well, what you did to me felt kind of wrong too, you know,” Suncat pointed out.

“I know,” Shallen said. “It was, and it was so silly too. I just wanted to be in charge. I didn’t have the remotest idea what to do once I got there. So I let Braeden have his head, and he just went wild. Oh, Anger—I mean Suncat, sorry—you have no idea how wild it was.” She grinned.

“I think I heard about some of it,” Suncat said carefully.

“And then silly little Dillybine got Braeden mad, and the whole thing came to a shuddering halt.” Shallen shook her head. “It was probably about played out by then anyway. It was never going to last, Ang—Suncat, you do see that, don’t you? It was just a silly game.”

“Dillybine?” Suncat remembered Dillybine Longmoor, a stocky girl with dark red hair, good in a fight but oh so lonely underneath. At least that was how she had seemed. Shallen waved her hand. “All a long time ago,” she said, making whatever had happened to Dillybine go away. “Anyway, I broke up with Braeden, left school, worked on the land for a season or two like you do, then moved out to Broadfields to find a real job. Well, I couldn’t hang around, could I? Not with people still talking about what had happened as if I’d been responsible.”

But you were! Suncat did not shout. *You gave them permission to run wild and flout authority! How could you not know they'd go too far in the end?*

“So you went to Broadfields,” she said, “and then what happened?”

“Well, *you* happened, of course,” Shallen said. “You and your little group and that silly business with Kit, and then your father abdicating in favour of that Windyridge boy, who obviously wasn’t up to it, since his first act was to bring the aliens in. Of course I didn’t think much about that at the time, I had my little place and my job in a shop. I was *busy*.” Shallen smiled with the bright condescension of those who will never understand how music could ever be a real job.

“And then they came for me.”

“Who?”

“Braeden and two of his friends.” Shallen smiled. “I was so scared, because Braeden does have a bit of a temper and I really hadn’t liked the way he looked the night I broke up with him...and that was when I called you.” For a moment she looked small and lost. “I really didn’t have any other true friends left, you see.”

Then she brightened. “But it was all just me being silly. Braeden brought me back here and looked after me for a while and explained everything to me about the aliens. And as soon as I’d proved to him that I understood, he let me loose and I’ve been helping him ever since. Poor nubbin, he really doesn’t have much in the way of brain.”

She sat back. “But enough about me,” she said. “Let’s talk about you for a while. You and your two ‘friends.’” Suncat could hear the quotes. Shallen looked round the locked room as if they might be overheard, then leant forward again.

“Which one is it?” she whispered.

“Which one is what?” Suncat whispered back, fighting the urge to giggle.

“You know what I mean,” Shallen said impatiently. “Is it the scruffy one, or that sleek thing with the horrible glasses?”

“What? You mean—” Suncat did laugh now, full-throatedly. “You’re asking me which one of them is my *boyfriend*?”

“No, silly.” Shallen was clearly in deadly earnest. “I’m asking which one of them is your

controller.”

*

Time passed in the ancient cellar. Orville wished there were something useful he could suddenly remember having had with him all the time, like they did in other books. Korynn might have been asleep, but for the energetic tapping of his long, thin fingers.

If he went and stood behind the door, Orville thought, the guards wouldn't see him when they came in with the food. They might come further into the room, and then he could slip out and maybe even lock them in.

And then he'd be alone and unarmed in a house full of enemies, miles from anywhere. Not ideal. Besides, the door opened flat against the wall. All they'd have to do would be to put pressure on it and—

No.

But he hated just sitting here.

He looked around at the room for what felt like the thousandth time. Two tables, one with added Mitwoch. Three huge barrels. Two long wine racks, bolted to the wall. One sideboard, its cargo of glasses now restored. Half a dozen smaller barrels, free-standing. One bass player. One neurohet keyboardist. And a fair amount of probably indifferent bad wine.

They could get drunk.

Mitwoch probably didn't drink.

He could get drunk.

Which would achieve precisely nothing.

If only we had a holocaust cloak, he thought wearily.

*

“Braeden explained it all to me,” Shallen said brightly. “The aliens control people. That's how they take over. They have agents who look like us, and they have some kind of power over our minds.”

Suncat sat, stunned.

“My controller was masquerading as the woman who ran the shop where I worked. It was so obvious once Braeden pointed it out.”

“Shallen...”

“And once we’d killed her, my mind got so much clearer. You have to kill them, you see.”

“Shallen,” Suncat said, “when Braeden explained this to you, were you...restrained in any way?”

Shallen laughed. “Well, of course, you silly nubbin, I had to be. She was beaming her orders into my brain, trying to make me escape. I had to be tied up, or who knows what she might have made me do?”

“And presumably they had to...not feed you or let you sleep for a while, to weaken the alien’s power over you?”

“Now how did you know that...” Shallen stopped and laughed again. “Oh, of course. Your controller’s reading my mind and prompting you. That’s clever. Maybe I should tell the boys to kill them both.”

She was quite calm about it, quite matter-of-fact. Suncat went cold all over.

“Yes, it took Braeden quite a while to get me to the point where I could see how I’d been manipulated,” Shallen went on. “He was so patient, and he knew I was suffering, but you know it had to be done, Anger.”

“Suncat,” Suncat reminded her.

“Yes. No, I don’t think I will call you that. That’s your alien name. When you’ve come through and are free of your controllers you’ll realise that. It’s a symbol of your enslavement, Anger.” Shallen got up and began to stroll about the room. “Yes, it’s very hard, and sometimes painful, but you know you brought it on yourself, Anger, turning against your own family and your own world like that.”

“Shallen,” Suncat said desperately. She got up and faced the other girl. “Listen to me very, very carefully. There are no aliens, there are no controllers. All that’s happened is that we’ve had to change some of the laws that were keeping people poor and

desperate and letting a few fat cats live like kings. My name is Suncat and those two men down there are as human as you or I and—”

She knew what was going to happen a second before it did, but there was no way to stop it. The door burst open, and three masked men stormed in, grabbed Suncat and slammed her back down on to her chair. The younger man from earlier followed them in and took Shallen’s chin roughly in his hand, lifting her face for his scrutiny.

“You all right?” he demanded.

“Yes, Braeden,” Shallen said. “I don’t think she got to me. But I think you should start the treatment right away.” She sounded genuinely scared. Suncat conceived in that moment a fierce and implacable hatred for Braeden.

“Who makes the decisions here?” Braeden snapped.

“You do, of course, darling,” Shallen said, lowering her eyes. “I was only making a suggestion.”

“Yeah, well,” Braeden said grudgingly, “this time’s a good one. Put her out, boys. We’ll start right now.”

Shallen looked down at Suncat. “Poor Anger. But you’ll thank us, when it’s over. You really will.”

Suncat felt a coldness against the back of her neck, heard a hissing, and was gone.

*

Orville stood in the wine cellar, regarding the door. He seemed to be thinking. Then, suddenly, he began to sing, snapping his fingers on the off beats.

“There ain’t no fairy tale called ‘The Adventures Of Prince Charming,’

A fact which no-one seems to find especially alarming,

But talk these days can drive a prince to quietly facepalming,

’Cos we’re never the ones the story is about.”

Soft jazz brushes sneaked in under the next verse. Orville began to sashay about the room.

“When Sleeping Beauty pricked her finger, to her consternation,

*The kingdom spent a hundred years in suspended animation,
And who am I? I'm just the guy who pruned the vegetation,
No, we're never the ones the story is about."*

He was openly camping it up now, tossing his head and pouting.

"People say

That princes have it all their own way.

But if you

Think it through

We close the recital, we cue the end title, and that's really all that we do..."

An upright bass joined the drums, and a saxophone began to play.

"When Snow White ate the apple with the deadly poison in it

The dwarves preserved her body 'cos they couldn't bear to bin it

And I was just a pair of lips dragged in at the last minute

No, we're never the ones the story is about."

The rest of the unseen horn section came crashing in and the sax went wild as Orville threw himself into a frenzied apache dance. At its height, in the authentic manner, he collapsed on the dusty floor in a sudden echoing silence.

Orville lay still as the bass crept back in and the finger-snapping was taken up by the otherwise motionless Korynn.

"You've been told

Princesses are just goods to be sold.

That's a shame.

All the same,

They get all the cheers and the sympathy tears and nobody remembers my name..."

Orville jumped to his feet and resumed his strutting and posturing as the band came back in full voice.

"Ask anyone about Snow White, or Belle or Cinderella,

*A brave and good and noble girl gets married to some fella,
And after that, for all you know, I'm buried in the cellar..."*

He looked around at the room, and arched an eyebrow.

"No, we're never the ones the story is about;

"We're never the ones the story is—

The struggle for fame and glory is—

We're never the ones the story is about!"

His head fell forward, his arms shot out, and the entire room went black for a moment. Then the light returned, and Orville looked straight at her.

"It'll never play in Peoria, you know," he said, and Suncat woke up suddenly.

Darkness confused and frightened her for a moment, driving out the fragments of the dream; then she realised that something opaque and all-enveloping had been put over her head. Part of the "treatment," she supposed. Sensory deprivation, drugs, disorientation, hunger and sleeplessness...she wondered what else they had up their sleeves.

Kaichang always got very irate when she found someone talking about people being "brainwashed" by reading official news channels, or watching holovision.

Brainwashing, she said, was a specific set of extreme techniques used to compel an individual to adopt certain beliefs or perform certain actions. It was difficult, and dangerous, and there was no way you could do it just with words or pictures. She often went on to satirise the speaker: "Oh my Goddess, even though I am obviously right about everything, these people, who I have to admit are almost as intelligent as I am, for some bizarre reason don't agree with me! Some evil force must have warped their minds!" Suncat avoided mentioning pots and kettles on these occasions.

Well, now it was going to happen to her, and wicked as she was, she didn't see any practical way of saving herself. Someone had tied her quite efficiently to the chair she was in, and with the bag, or whatever, over her head, she didn't even know if she was in the same room she had been doped in. Sooner or later they would come in and start on her, feeding her all the guff about alien mind control, and reinforcing it with

whatever devices the charming Braeden could come up with. It had obviously worked on Shallen. It would undoubtedly work on her.

She considered claiming a sudden conversion to the truth, and decided against it. Shallen's delusion, lovingly crafted by the vile Braeden, had an answer for that.

Unless they had already killed Orville and Korynn...

That thought galvanised her, and she began to jerk her body violently, trying to upset the chair. Immediately she became aware that at least one other person was in the room with her, because there was a muffled curse from somewhere behind her and the chair was seized by unseen hands and held down.

"Anger?" Shallen's voice. "Anger, try to fight it. We're your friends, we're here to help you—"

"Suncat!" Suncat sobbed helplessly. "My name is Suncat, you frodding mad bitch! Let me go! Let—me—go!!"

"It's no good," said a voice. "We'll have to put her out again."

"Should I tell the boys to deal with those two downstairs?" another voice said.

"Oh yes!" Shallen agreed with enthusiasm, but Braeden's voice overrode her.

"Uh, I don't think that would be the best idea. It might bring reprisals in force, and we're not set up to withstand a siege here. No, leave them for the time being. When this one cracks she'll name her controller, and then we can act. Just dope her again for the moment. We'll get the equipment set up for the next stage now we knowwww..."

The last word faded with her consciousness as the hissing cold touched her again. But she took into the darkness with her the seed of a thought.

*

Orville jerked awake.

"Weird dream," he muttered, massaging his face and feeling stubble. "You'd think they'd let us clean up a bit."

"I imagine our appearance is not high on their list of priorities," Korynn said.

“Oh, hello,” Orville said. “Back with us?”

“I have completed the transposition and stored it,” Korynn said. “Thank you for being patient. Now.” He slid off the table and walked over to the sideboard. “If you will help me to move this?”

“Move the sideboard?” Orville echoed. “Why?”

“I could formulate an explanation, but I believe time is limited. Over there.”

They quickly transferred the glasses to one of the tables and manoeuvred the sideboard to a position about ten feet in front of the door. Korynn then picked up his table, showing surprising strength, and balanced it on the sideboard so that its top formed a long diagonal ramp.

“Torres, bring one of the barrels,” he said, and Orville began to smile.

When the door rattled, they were standing either side of the impromptu ramp with one of the free-standing barrels poised at the top, held in place by one hand. The timing had been amazing, Orville thought; his arm hadn’t even had time to go numb.

The door opened, and they let go.

The barrel rolled down the ramp with an incredible noise and smashed into the man with the tray. Crockery and food went everywhere, and the other man’s gun went flying from his hand as the tray-bearer cannoned into him. Korynn darted over and scooped it up, and Orville landed heavily on top of the tray-bearer and wrenched his weapon out of his waistband.

“Ouch!” the man protested. “That hurt!”

“Get the key,” Korynn rapped, and Orville did so, along with the guards’ masks. The barrel had survived its journey, amazingly, and was at rest against the opposite wall; they rolled it back into the cellar at speed while the two guards were still struggling to their feet, and closed and locked the door while they were coping with its sudden reappearance in their lives.

“Very neat,” Orville said admiringly. “What now?”

“We leave the house as unobtrusively as possible and rejoin Tollain and the others,” Korynn said flatly.

“But Suncat—”

“The only thing we can do for Suncat now is to avoid recapture and get help,” Korynn said. “I can only assume, since we have not already been discovered, that no other guards are within earshot, but this situation will not continue. We had best take advantage of the fact and find our way back to Broadfields.”

They crept up the stairs, trying not to be aware of the shouts and thumping coming from behind them, presumably on the principle that if they were not aware of it nobody else would be. The ground floor of the house was indeed untenanted, and the reason became clear very soon; outside, on the small lawn in front of the house, a round half dozen masked figures were being drilled by a squat man with a bullet head in a sort of uniform. Their breath clouded in the chilly air, and a couple of them looked distinctly blue under their masks. Beside them—

“Can you fly that copter?” Orville whispered.

“I do not know yet,” Korynn said. “There is a chance. I have flown air vehicles before. Should we make the attempt?”

“Well, I don’t have a local bus timetable on me,” Orville pointed out. “But you got the hang of Tollain’s desk in three seconds flat, so I reckon it’s worth a try. Come on.”

They crept back through the house, and found a back door leading out to a summer kitchen; nobody was around. Evidently the gang put their faith in the impregnability of the cellar.

Shortly thereafter, the group of Cold Decemberists heard a rapid volley of shots proceeding from somewhere in the back of the house. They set off at once to investigate, leaving two of their number to guard the copter: once inside, as Orville had planned, they were distracted by the vocal and percussion obbligato from the cellar. Meanwhile, coming swiftly and stealthily round the outside of the house, Korynn and Orville crept up on the two nervous guards, overpowered them inexpertly but effectively, and climbed aboard the copter.

Korynn cast a swift glance over the controls.

“Yes,” he said, and at once began to press buttons and push pedals.

The engine started; the force-blades rezzed up and began to turn; and by the time

masked guards began pouring out of the house, the copter was already in the air and climbing, out of range of any weapons they tried firing at it.

Orville glanced back at the old house, standing lonely in its garden.

“Stay strong, Suncat,” he muttered. “We’re coming back.”