

CHAPTER NINE

“Coldsands?” Derwent said. “Could be. It’s right next to Northshores, and popular feeling is neutral rather than strongly Autonomist, so it would make a handy hideout. And that explains where they got the unregistered copter. I don’t recall coming across the name Carthew...but I know someone who might.”

He pressed a button on his desk. He, Tollain, Kaichang and Verneen were in his office on the third floor of the Seigneurie, right across the building from where workmen were even now repairing the shattered windows and wall of the drawing room. The sound of their machines was still audible, though.

The outer door of the office opened and a tall, thin, elderly man came in.

Verneen’s face lit up. “Carson!” she exclaimed.

“Hello, Miss Verneen, Miss Kaichang,” said Carson Meldrum. “I came as soon’s I heard. This is a shameful thing these folks have done.”

“That it is, Mr Meldrum,” Kaichang said.

“Carson’s our Speaker for Northshores meinie,” Derwent said proudly.

“Really?” Kaichang looked interested. “What happened to ‘leave politics to the politicians’?”

“Guess I saw what kind of thing happens if you do, Miss Kaichang.” Carson was unfazed. “So I put my name up. House of Speakers is almost ready to take over from the Seigneurie. They’re doin’ the formal hand-over early next year.”

“So,” said Derwent, looking straight at Kaichang, “there.”

“I apologise,” Kaichang said seriously. “I wronged you. Now, what can we do about this Coldsands place?”

“Could we send troops?” Tollain said.

“Who’s this?” said Carson Meldrum, apparently noticing Tollain for the first time.

“Your baby brother, Miss Verneen?”

“My name’s Tollain Kintarsh, Seir Meldrum, and I’m quite grown up, thank you.”

Tollain was getting impatient. “Seir Windyridge?”

“Well, we don’t actually have any troops as such,” Derwent said. “There used to be private armies, of course, but since Affiliation—”

“Yes, yes,” Tollain said. “Sorry. What about police?”

“Thin on the ground, and none of ’em armed,” Carson Meldrum said.

“So what you’re basically saying is there’s nothing we can do,” Tollain pursued. “We know where they are, we know they’ve got Suncat and Orville and Korynn, and we just have to sit back and wait while—”

“We wouldn’t want to use troops anyway,” Derwent said loudly. “The first thing the kidnappers would do is kill the hostages.”

“I hope you’re not thinking about—” Tollain began.

“I am trying,” Derwent said, controlling his temper with an effort, “to think about everything. My friends. The planet. The Sagittarians. The political situation. The balance of frodding trade. The weather. And just as a nice change, my own chances of making it as far as the formal handover next year if I mess this up. So please, Seir Kintarsh, don’t lecture me on what I should and should not do. I’ve got this. All right?”

Kaichang grinned at Tollain. “Just saved you from getting mixed up in all that nasty politics there,” she said.

“All right,” said Tollain sullenly. “I’m sorry. We should go away and let you do your job.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Carson Meldrum said unexpectedly. “Go away, I mean. Because I’ve got some ideas, if you’d like to discuss them with me.” He cocked an eye at Derwent. “He won’t want to know,” he added in a stage whisper.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch any of that,” Derwent said, on cue. “Why don’t you all go with Mr Meldrum and have a chat. I’m sure you’ve got lots to catch up on.”

Obediently, Tollain, Kaichang and Verneen trooped after Carson Meldrum as he led them out of the office and into a slightly larger conference room across the landing. The room was panelled in dark wood, in the style seemingly always imposed on

rooms where matters of great import are discussed. Meldrum folded himself into a chair, and the other three sat, stood or perched as suited them and looked at him expectantly.

“Mr Windyridge don’t know the northern meinies,” Meldrum began. “I do. We’re a by-God stubborn breed up there, I’ll tell you that. Northshores, Coldsands, Eagleheights, all put a hefty dose of iron into a man’s soul, and a good baulk of timber ‘tween his ears too, likely.” He grinned. “But we’re a good crowd in the ordinary way. Don’t reckon much to politics and the like, but you can rely on us for fair dealin’ and straight talkin’. Usually.” His face darkened.

“What do you know about Anson and Braeden Carthew?” Kaichang asked.

Carson looked as though he wanted to spit. “Little good,” he said darkly, “and a deal of bad. Anson, he’s just an old bag of wind, used to be local judiciar but couldn’t keep his hands out of other folks’ pockets. Braeden, his boy, he’s worse. Mean kid. Wicked temper. Number of times he’d have been up before his daddy if folks had dared to lay information...well. If they’re behind this, then I’m not one bit surprised. I hope we’ll be able to nail ‘em once for all.”

“Nailing sounds good,” Tollain said, a little thickly, and Carson and Verneen both looked sharply at him. “I’m all right!” he protested, though nobody had spoken. “I’m just...angry. I’ve been angry since last night, and I don’t enjoy it much.”

“That Braeden,” Carson observed, “he got the opposite problem. He likes it.”

“You also haven’t slept or eaten since last night,” Verneen said.

“Neither have you,” Tollain retorted.

“I don’t have a potentially lethal condition of the blood,” she snapped back. “When we’re finished here, you are coming back to the hotel and you are going to eat and sleep if I have to f-force-feed you and knock you out with a c-club.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Kintarsh,” Carson said. “I had no idea you were ailing.”

“It’s nothing,” Tollain said furiously. “Just something I inherited, it makes me stupidly feeble but I can handle it—”

“In the ordinary way,” Kaichang said, “with regular food and rest and a reasonably

normal life. And if we are going to stay in this band with you, you're going to make sure you get those things and not whine about it, or you won't just have Verneen on your case, you'll have me and Suncat as well. Verneen's half out of her mind with worry about you, she's raised her voice several times in my presence this last couple of days and Verneen does not do that, so you frodding well listen when she does. All right?"

Carson Meldrum was laughing, and looked several years younger. "Yes, ma'am," he chuckled. "You better say it, young fellow."

Tollain took a deep breath, let it out slowly. She was right. He hated it, but he knew it. "Yes, ma'am," he echoed.

"Good," Kaichang said. "Now, Mr Meldrum, you were saying?"

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The very last thing Tollain wanted to do was sleep, with eating coming a strong second. Nevertheless, under the watchful gaze of Kaichang and Verneen, he ate the best part of a plate of cold meat and salad, and despite his firm intention of staying awake and worrying, no sooner had his head hit the pillow than he went out like a light and began to breathe deeply and evenly.

Kaichang and Verneen, having satisfied themselves that he was genuinely asleep, left instructions at the front desk that further supplies of food were to be provided in ten hours or when he woke up and tried to leave the hotel, whichever was the sooner; these instructions to be followed to the letter, on pain of immediate Kaichang. They then dressed in the most undistinguished clothes they could find, crept out of the room and shortly were meeting Carson Meldrum on a street corner several blocks away.

"She's none too fancy," he said, indicating the battered vehicle behind him, "but she'll get us there by midnight. Distance ain't so far, but the trail gets a mite hilly up there."

"It'll take as long as it takes," Kaichang said, looking into the large, mostly empty cargo pod. "Verneen, you'd better take the front seat. I'll be fine in here."

"You sure, Miss Kaichang?" Carson rubbed his chin dubiously. "I could maybe scootch over a bit—"

“It would take more than scootching, Mr Meldrum, believe me,” Kaichang said seriously. “Besides, I always travelled this way when I was a child. I’ll be all right.”

She climbed through into the pod, found a couple of sacks, shook the dust out of them and spread them out on the metal floor. Verneen settled herself in the passenger seat, and Carson started the ancient groundtruck and drove away.

Once out of the city, despite its age, the truck showed that it could put on a surprising turn of speed. They passed through fields and woods, towns and isolated villages, each one a *meinie* in its own right; there were *meinies* that consisted simply of a single manor house and its associated farms. Afternoon began to turn into evening as Carson drove on, and Verneen sat staring mutely through the forward window.

“Would you mind talkin’ to me a spell, Miss Verneen?” the old man said at one point. “This old heap don’t have no music player and I get powerful sleepy on these long drives.”

“I—I’m not much of a talker,” Verneen said.

“Don’t have to be sparklin’ repartee,” Carson said with a grin. “Ask me questions. Tell me about yourself maybe. Just to keep me alert.”

So, as the truck passed into Downsholm *meinie*, Verneen learned that Carson had been married twice, that both his wives had died, one of old age, the other in a rockfall while chasing a strayed goat; that he had three daughters and two sons, all of whom he loved dearly, and that the youngest daughter had gone offworld to study lithology at the University on Endelli, while the two elder girls were happily married and one was a doctor; that his sons stayed home and helped on the farm as boys should do, but the younger had his eye on a holding of his own one day.

Verneen was about to ask another question, but Carson held up his hand.

“Listen,” he said.

Above the noise of the truck’s elderly engine, they could both hear it. Verneen craned her neck and peered out of the window, but the copter was travelling either too high or too fast to be seen in the gathering twilight.

“If that’s them comin’ back for more,” Carson said grimly, “I reckon they’ll find a warm

welcome waitin' for 'em." And he switched on the forward lights and gunned the engine as they encountered the first of the hills that gave Eagleheights meinie its name.

"Should be to Coldsands in another three, four hours," he said. "My boys'll meet us there. If a bunch of those folks are off doin' mischief in their copter, so much the better, but if not—" He chuckled. "Reckon we can still take 'em."

"I thought Northshores was all for autonomy," Verneen ventured.

"Sure we are," Carson said easily. "Not that I got any problem with offworlders, as I hope you'll bear witness, Miss Verneen, but way we see it, if a world can't take care of its own problems then it ain't fit to survive. This whole Affiliation thing, why, it's just a whole bunch o' worlds that can't solve their own problems trying to solve each other's. No way that makes a patch o' sense in any man's cornfield."

Verneen said nothing.

"But," Carson continued, as the road sloped upward more steeply, "if the people of this planet want to try to mow their neighbours' lawns with their own busted mower, then that by God is what shall happen. Ain't no call for a bunch of no-good malcontents to go stravaigin' around creatin' mayhem and treating my friends with less than courtesy. That's what I think, anyhow, and I have twenty good Northshores boys waitin' for us who are of like mind."

Verneen considered for a time.

"Have you thought," she said, "that maybe it's more like a man who can make good pots and a man who can make good pans? I mean, why should the potter have to make rotten pans for himself when he can give the tinker a pot and get a good pan back?"

"Oh, we get the trade side of things," Carson said, negotiating a hairpin bend with an unrailed drop on one side; it was too dark to see how far down it went, but her imagination filled in the gap quite adequately. "That's no problem. It's just all these new laws we don't see the need of. I mean, these Sagittarians come in here saying "no more wars"...what business is it of theirs?" He glanced at her. "Don't it seem kind of insulting? Suppose some stranger were to come barging into your home, tell you not

to spit on the floor? Even if the thought hadn't ever once crossed your mind...wouldn't you want to? Just to show 'em?"

"I can see how it could seem that way," Verneen said truthfully. "Don't you think, though, that if you did, all you'd end up with would be a dirty floor...and that maybe if you hadn't spat on it, the stranger might have brought some good news?"

"Good news don't come with a price on it," Carson said. "If other planets want our goods or our money, that's one thing, but I don't see it's any business of theirs whether we fight wars or keep slaves, or have secrets or whatever."

"Don't you?" Verneen said. "Suppose you did keep slaves, and they made your goods, and you sold them to another planet...would you mind if they knew the goods were made by slave labour?"

Carson glanced at her again, this time in surprise. "Wouldn't make a secret out of it," he said at last. "But I wouldn't buy slave-made goods myself. Anyway, that's besides the point, we don't have slaves here. The point is...why make a law forbidding people to do something they don't do anyway? Doesn't that infringe on a man's dignity as well as his freedom?"

"Does any law infringe a person's freedom?"

Carson frowned. "Seems to me it's got to..." He thought a moment, while the truck descended a steep gradient. "See, this is how I see it," he said after a while. "There's the rules you make up when you're just startin' out as a community, and they make sense for you 'cause you're involved in the makin', or your daddy or your granddaddy was. But then you get to be part of a bigger community, and the laws get made further away, by people you never heard of who never met you, and after a time they start makin' laws just for the hell of it. And that can't be a good thing."

"I'm sure they don't make laws just for the hell of it," Verneen said.

"Yes they do," came in a sleepy baritone roar from the back.

"See, Miss Kaichang agrees with me," Carson said with a grin.

"No I don't," the voice from the cargo pod retorted.

Verneen matched Carson's grin with a sidelong one of her own.

“Why d’you think they made these Accords, then?” Carson said. “What gives them the right to tell us how to handle our affairs?”

They were now through the worst of the Eagleheights ranges, and descending on to a flat plain that stretched to the horizon. It was full dark, and cloudy, and there was nothing to see, but Verneen thought that they must soon come within sight of the sea.

“Well, I suppose the fact that we’ve made such an almighty mess of it up to now,” she said. “Not you, Carson, obviously, and not here, but...” She turned and looked out of the window at a verge of tussocky grass whipping by. “Way back in the past,” she said, “there used to be this idea that as the human race went on they would just keep growing smarter and wiser and more enlightened, till they became worthy to rule the universe or whatever. Well, it hasn’t happened. My parents are archaeologists, so I know a little bit about long history, and what seems to happen is that we get so far, and then the ones at the back who haven’t got quite far enough get control and everything gets reset. When the First Spacing happened, we thought this was it, we’d outgrow our differences once we were in space, but there was still fighting, there was still cruelty and greed...just having more space didn’t do it for us. And then came the Empire. Eight hundred years after it fell there are still planets out there recovering from the scars it left. Have you ever...” She shook her head. “No, you wouldn’t have.”

“What?”

“There’s a planet called Oisenfeld...” Verneen shook her head again. “Doesn’t matter. The thing is, the habits and patterns of thought that keep dragging us back are hard-wired into us. They’re in our bodies as well as in our minds, in the mechanisms that drive our blood around. You take that small community you talked about. They’ll start out discussing everything communally, yes, and then after a while they’ll get tired of that and one person will be picked to make all the decisions.”

“Usually a man,” issued from the darkness behind.

Verneen was unfazed. “And after a while, because he’s making all the decisions, he’ll decide he needs a slightly bigger house than anyone else, and slightly better food than anyone else, and everyone has to call him Leader or something. And little by

little his friends will start getting the bigger houses and the better food, and people he doesn't like will have to do with less. And after a few years that'll just be the way it's always been. And so it goes."

Carson drove in silence for a while.

"I see what you're sayin', Miss Verneen," he said eventually, "and I'm not sayin' I don't agree...but what's wrong with that, if it's how we want to do things?"

"Because it never stops there," Verneen said. "It can roll along for generations like that, with nobody quite unhappy enough to do anything about it...but sooner or later, it starts to get worse, and the end result is always the same; something like the Empire. Human beings treated like beasts, the few with the power sliding inevitably into madness and excess while the society that sustains them goes to hell."

"So these Sagittarians," Carson said, "they decided to take it on themselves to stop the wheel right at the start. To enforce good sense on the rest of the galaxy whether they wanted it or not."

"I suppose so," Verneen said.

"Okay," Carson said. "So what is the actual difference between that...and Anson and Braeden Carthew decidin' to take it on themselves to enforce Autonomism on this planet whether we want it or not?"

"I don't know," Verneen admitted.

Kaichang appeared between them suddenly, resting her folded arms on the back of the seat and her chin on her arms.

"The Sagittarians don't enforce anything," she pointed out.

"Reckon they don't," Carson agreed. "But your Mr Windyridge sure does."

"He says he's enforcing the will of the majority," Verneen said.

"Which is great. Except some of us aren't in the majority." Lights appeared in the road ahead, and Carson braked. "That'll be my boys," he said. "You ladies stay in here a minute. I'll go see how the land lies."

He got out. Verneen turned to look at Kaichang, who was smiling.

"I love it when you talk politics," the dark girl said, and leaned in for a long kiss. "Why

do you never do it with me?”

“Cause we always agree on everything,” Verneen said, a little breathlessly. “You prefer an argument.” Her eyes became troubled, and she glanced at the road outside, where uncertain shapes were milling around in the glare of the lights. “Do you think Suncat’s all right?”

“She’s got to be,” Kaichang said. “It’s non-negotiable.”

Carson opened the driver’s door again.

“Come meet the boys,” he said. “There’s been a development.”

“What is it?” Kaichang demanded.

“Seems the whole place is teemin’ like an overturned zimbug mound,” the old man said. “My boy Gattis, he says two guys came bustin’ out of there, took the copter and lit out for the big blue like hell itself was after ’em. They weren’t locals neither. You could hear Braeden yellin’ clear to Northshores town hall, he says.” He chuckled.

“Sorry I missed it.”

“Just two guys?” Kaichang’s face had hardened. “Description?”

“Both middlin’ tall, he says, long hair. One of ’em had little round dark glasses, he was all buttoned up, Gattis says. The other—”

“They left her.” The loathing in Kaichang’s voice was like acid. “They saved their miserable male skins and they left her there.”

“They went to get help,” Verneen countered urgently.

“Oh yes,” Kaichang sneered. “After they’ve had a good meal and a nice long sleep, washed and shaved and made themselves presentable, maybe had breakfast, a nice walk in the park, then they’ll toddle along to frodding Windyridge, and they’ll talk together the way men do and nod wisely and agree over lunch that it was all very sad but there was really nothing they could do—”

It was hard, in the cramped cab and at such a peculiar angle, to get the required force for a really good slap, but Verneen managed it. Kaichang gaped at her in shock.

“Kaichang Belgardis, you are not being fair,” Verneen hissed. “And I’m really sorry, but I’m very tired and quite hungry and I cannot stand you in this mood right now. So if

you can't say anything helpful, just *shut the f-frod up.*"

To Carson's obvious horror, two tears gathered in Kaichang's dark eyes and rolled slowly down her flushed cheeks. Her lower lip trembled.

"Orville and Korynn have gone to get help," Verneen said, more gently but still with that edge, "and if I know Orville and how he feels about Suncat, if this planet can't raise an army he'll make one himself out of—out of mud or something, and it'll sweep everything before it. Now I don't know about you, but I am like a limp dishrag at the moment, I've been talking for so long my voice has got croaky and I couldn't manage a daring midnight raid right now if all our lives depended on it. Could you?"

Kaichang took a deep breath, sniffed and swallowed. "Probably not," she said quietly, "though I'd try anyway and probably get us all shot. You're right. I'm sorry." She looked over at Carson. "I'm sorry, Mr Meldrum. I have this problem with men."

"Plenty around who deserve it," Carson said equably. "Okay then, change of plan. We'll go back to my holding, get you two fed and rested, and think out a new strategy in the morning. Way I see it, they won't want to lose their last prisoner so soon after the other two. And while they'll be expectin' them to come back loaded for grunyip, they won't be expectin' us. So I reckon we got time."

"All right," Kaichang said. "I dozed a bit in the back, buh Veneeh—" The yawn nearly split her face. "But Verneen hasn't had a wink since—Goddess, is it the night before last?"

"Just about," Verneen said, turning away to yawn discreetly herself.

"Not another word," Carson said, climbing back into the truck. "My place is no more'n fifteen minutes from here. Gattis'll go ahead and get a room ready—place is too big anyhow since Leena died, but we keep it warm. There's just the one big bed, but I reckon you'll both be snug as bugs in there."

Verneen smiled at him. "Thank you," she whispered. "For remembering."

"I'm not such a by-God old fossil as all that," Carson said. "I told you my two eldest girls were married. The middle one, Kayna, the doctor, she brings her wife down for Sunday supper every midmonth regular. They use that room too." He grinned, and started the engine again. "Hold tight, Miss Kaichang. Won't be much longer 'fore you

can sleep.”