

CHAPTER TEN

Suncat was losing track of time.

This would not normally have been a concern; like her namesake, she preferred to live in the now, and relied on others to remind her of future deadlines or past remembrances. The trouble was, the current now left a great deal to be desired.

She was still tied up on the chair, with the bag over her head. She had not been fed, or allowed to move, and she was both hungry and thirsty, and another bodily need was making itself increasingly objectionable. She had mentioned it a couple of times, but (if there was still anyone in the room) nobody had responded. She assumed that the chair she was on was not one of the good ones. Her stage outfit, on the other hand, was extremely important to her; she had bought it years ago, and she had no idea where to begin to get another.

This was how it would begin, she knew. She would be taken to the brink of starvation, dehydration, and (she glumly completed the rhyme) utter degradation, and held there while Braeden and Shallen tried to twist her mind till she would agree to the absurd fiction about alien mind control. And, she knew, ultimately it would work. It had worked on Shallen, after all, and whatever else the wench might have been she was not weak-willed. Human beings are fallible, and Suncat, whatever else *she* might be, knew herself to be thoroughly human.

At this point, the little thought that had popped into her mind just before she had passed out last time cleared its throat, tapped her on the mental shoulder and made a meaningful face at her. If it was going to happen, it seemed to suggest, now was the time.

She tried, without making any sound, to lubricate her dry throat, and check out her vocal chords. What she was about to try had happened only once before, late at night in the dorm at Miss Ganticold's when she, Kaichang and Verneen had all been slightly tipsy on stolen dwemberry schnapps, and she wasn't honestly sure she could do it sober. Still, it beat waiting silently for her bladder to explode.

She flexed her throat muscles, took a deep breath, and launched into it.

"I AM READY TO SPEAK," she said.

The voice was deep, grating, and entirely unlike anything Shallen would ever have heard coming out of Suncat's mouth before. She hoped to goodness she could keep it up.

There was a scuffle of confused movement. *Aha*, she thought, *there is someone in here.*

"Who said that?" a voice yelled.

"I AM THE CONTROLLER OF THE HUMAN UNIT SUNCAT," Suncat croaked. "I AM READY TO SPEAK."

This was a crucial moment. If the boy in here with her were nervous enough, he might kill her out of hand. *Just as long as he doesn't get blood on the outfit again*, Suncat thought, and realised that she was a little light-headed already.

Then the door was wrenched open, slammed shut, and footsteps pelted off down the passage. Suncat listened. *Sounds as if I'm still in the same room, then*, she thought. *Good to know.*

After a while, the door opened again and heavy booted feet swaggered in. That would be Braeden himself.

"Okay," his voice said, "what's the game?"

Suncat repeated the previous line, as lighter footsteps indicated the arrival of (she hoped) Shallen.

Braeden took the revelation as well as could be expected. "You are, huh?" he said.

"What do you want with us?"

"I WISH TO NEGOTIATE," Suncat said.

"And you would be...one of the two aliens we got down in the cellar?" There was a note in Braeden's voice that warned Suncat. She had heard some distant shouting, and then the sound of an engine, a while back. She took a gamble.

"YOU HAVE NO ALIENS IN YOUR CELLAR," she said flatly.

"Braeden," Shallen said breathlessly. "Braeden, how could she know that?"

"THIS OBFUSCATION DOES NOT IMPEDE MY SENSES," Suncat rumbled. "I PERCEIVE MORE THAN YOU KNOW. I WISH TO NEGOTIATE."

"What for?" Braeden asked.

Suncat thought fast. She hadn't actually prepared this bit. Difficult, when you didn't know what the other fellow was going to say.

"I REQUEST...ASYLUM," she said.

"What??" Braeden laughed. "Fella, whoever you are, you're crazy."

She'd done it. She'd got him. He'd been so startled by the request that he'd unwittingly taken on board the notion that Suncat was actually channelling an alien controller. Who knew, maybe he actually believed the story himself by now. At any rate, he wouldn't question it from now on, unless she blundered badly.

She would just have to make sure not to blunder badly.

"I AM A FUGITIVE FROM MY OWN KIND," Suncat explained. "I QUESTIONED THE GREAT PLAN AND WAS DECLARED AN OUTCAST. I CAN PROVIDE INFORMATION."

"Information?" Braeden repeated.

"INFORMATION," Suncat confirmed solemnly.

"I don't get it," Shallen said.

By hook or by crook, you will, my girl, Suncat thought, but did not say.

"What kind—" Braeden stopped. "No. Why did you question the what did you call it, the Great Plan?"

"I LIVED AMONG THE HUMANS OF THIS WORLD," Suncat said. Her throat was starting to ache, but she suppressed the pain. "I SAW THEIR PRIDE, THEIR COURAGE AND THEIR STRENGTH. THEY ARE NOT CATTLE TO BE ENSLAVED, AS OTHER HUMANS ARE. MY PEOPLE SHOULD TREAT WITH THEM AS EQUALS."

The trowel was a little large for the job, she thought, but Braeden seemed convinced.

"Sounds like pure reason to me. Your bosses didn't like it?"

"THEY FEAR ALL HUMANS," Suncat said. "THEY—WE CONTROLLED THE HUMANS CALLED SAGITTARIANS FIRST, IN ORDER TO BRING ALL OTHER HUMANS SAFELY UNDER CONTROL." She coughed, unavoidably. "THIS UNIT IS IN DISTRESS. IT IS NOT ADAPTED TO CARRY MY SPEECH TRANSMISSIONS. I HAVE USEFUL INFORMATION TO IMPART. RELEASE THE UNIT AND I WILL—" She coughed again. "I WILL GUARANTEE ITS GOOD BEHAVIOUR."

"Why can't we talk to you in person?" Shallen asked. "If you're hurting Anger—" She stopped speaking, probably shushed by Braeden. "Where are you?" he said roughly.

"MY BODY IS IN THE PLACE YOU CALL BROADFIELDS," Suncat said, not bothering to disguise the weariness in her voice. "I AM CONTROLLING THIS UNIT FROM A DISTANCE. IT IS VERY TAXING FOR ME. THE UNIT WILL FEEL NO DISCOMFORT FROM MY ACTIONS. YOURS, HOWEVER—"

"Untie her!" Shallen said at once. "Braeden, you must!"

This was a dangerous line to take with Braeden, and Suncat silently prayed to Kaichang's Goddess that he would not react badly. He said nothing, and Shallen pressed her point.

"If this alien can give us information that could set Argenthome free—surely that's worth more than just turning one sympathiser?" Suncat heard cloth rustle; she was clutching his arm. "Braeden, you could be the liberator of our planet! Just you, right here and now! Braeden—"

"All right!" He shook her off angrily and walked away a couple of paces. Suncat could imagine the hasty, half-formed thoughts running through his mind. Against all his expectations, the story he had cooked up to fool his minions seemed to be true. If it was, then Shallen was right; this opportunity was worth far more than Suncat as a convert to the cause. If it was not—but he could hardly admit that, now could he? She could have laughed. But she dared not.

"All right," Braeden said. "Get her untied and get that thing off her head. Give her some food and let her sleep. You," he said, as Shallen's fingers began to work on the

knots. "What do we call you?"

"MY DESIGNATION IS HELVA-NAKTRAS," Suncat said, picking a suitably alien-sounding name from the air. "I AM THE ONLY ONE OF MY KIND IN CONTACT WITH THIS UNIT. YOU HAVE MERELY TO SPEAK MY NAME IN ITS PRESENCE AND I WILL RESPOND. I AM VERY DEPLETED NOW. I MUST RECOVER MY MENTAL RESOURCES. CONTACT ME AGAIN WHEN THE UNIT IS RESTORED TO NOMINAL FUNCTION." That was a phrase of Korynn's she'd heard and thought very impressive, whatever it meant. Suncat coughed again as the bag was pulled roughly off her head, taking, she was sure, about three square inches of scalp with it. She blinked, looked up into Shallen's wide eyes like someone awaking from sleep.

"Sh-Shallen? What is it? My throat—" She choked, and bent forward as if she was going to be sick. Shallen took her in her arms.

"It's all right, Anger," she said. "It's all going to be all right." She sounded so relieved and joyful that Suncat felt a little bit of a pang of conscience. She squashed it without mercy.

"But I—I don't know what happened," she said piteously. "I was here, and then—and then something came over me, and—"

Her chin was seized suddenly by powerful fingers, and her head twisted round so that she looked up into the almost-handsome face of Braeden Carthew. He must have charmed a lot of girls with that face, she thought, maintaining her wide-eyed, uncomprehending stare. Braeden obviously prided himself on his ability to stare into someone's face and determine if they were lying; many men did. Few actually possessed any such ability, and Braeden was not one of the few.

"She's tellin' the truth," he said shortly, almost flinging her chin away. "Get her out of here. At least while she's sleepin' that thing can't be spyin' on us."

"Thing?" Suncat was walking a monofilament tightrope in neutronium diving boots, she knew. One false move would be the end. "What thing? Shallen, I told you—"

"Ssh, ssh," Shallen said, helping her to rise at last from the damned chair. "Time enough for that later. You need to squeeze the orange, my girl, and right now. And

then we'll find you some food and a decent bed. You don't know it," she said, glancing over her shoulder at Braeden, "but you could be just the secret weapon we need to end this secret war."

And how will mighty warrior chief Braeden take to that? Suncat wondered, as she allowed her head to droop gratefully on to Shallen's shoulder. She didn't dare look back at him, but she would have bet he was glowering. Once the "war" was over, the "aliens" repelled, and Argenthome once more under the grubby collective thumb of the Seigneurs, he would be nobody again; just a minor Seigneursson from somewhere way up north. The war was treating Braeden Carthew very nicely indeed. The peace would be less accommodating.

Another problem for another time, Suncat decided, nuzzling into Shallen's throat. She really was damnably tired, and her "orange" was the size of a watermelon and swelling perceptibly. But froddit, she'd won this round.

She let herself be guided down the passage to the bathroom.

Later, as she was sinking into sleep, the alien name she had picked out of the air unravelled itself in her mind. *Hell of an actress*. She stifled a giggle, and hoped to the Goddess it was true.

To get through this alive, she would need to be all that and more.

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Orville Torres would have died rather than admit it, but he was actually quite impressed by Korynn Mitwoch.

The man in the dark glasses piloted the copter with as sure and precise a hand as if it had been the sound desk back on Goliard. They glided through the sky, using the anti-grav assist to avoid the jagged tops of mountains, and descended to a more comfortable level when the terrain became smoother.

There was no need for speech, which suited Orville fine just then. He closed his eyes and sat back as best he could; and as he relaxed, his mind started to work on an idea. He was a slow songwriter, painstaking and perfectionist, and the entire lyric did not emerge till some weeks later, but the gist was already in his mind as the copter found the main road towards Broadfields and began to follow it.

*Soaring away, I can't forget that I left you behind me
And I know if you were me and I was you
You'd tear the world apart to find me
Girl, you see I had no choice
But I hope you can hear my voice
'Cause I'm gonna make it right somehow
Hear me now, hear me now, hear me now....*

*From the ends of the earth, from the depths of the sea
From the furthest reaches of the galaxy
'Cross the mountains of fire, through the rivers of ice
I will dare any trial, I will pay any price
To the heart of the sun, to the last dying star
Ain't no journey too long, ain't no distance too far
Till the end of my days, till my candle burns through
I'm coming back for you—
I'm coming back for you!*

*Girl, you know my love is true, no question about it
And you know if I was you and you were me
You wouldn't see a reason to doubt it
Right now I got to get away
So I'll live to fight another day
And that day will dawn before too long
So hold on, so hold on, so hold on....*

*From the ends of the earth, from the depths of the sea
From the furthest reaches of the galaxy
'Cross the mountains of fire, through the rivers of ice
I will dare any trial, I will pay any price
To the heart of the sun, to the last dying star*

*Ain't no journey too long, ain't no distance too far
Till the end of my days, till my candle burns through
I'm coming back for you—
I'm coming back!*

*Coming back from the war, coming back from the dead,
Coming back with the pain of the blood that was shed,
Coming back from the night, coming back from the dark,
Coming back with the fire that we lit from a spark,
Coming back from the harvest, coming back from the field,
Coming back with the courage that never will yield,
Coming back from the storm, coming back from the sea,
Coming back to the place where it's just you and me....*

From the ends—

“Torres.” The toneless voice broke in on his musings, and he realised he had been mumbling fragments of lyric under his breath, trying out phrasings.

“Sorry.” He struggled upright in his seat. “Was it bothering you?”

“No. But I am about to land.” There was a pause. Orville squinted down through the transparent bubble of the cockpit, but could see nothing.

“If it takes that long,” Korynn said unexpectedly, “Suncat might not be too impressed with the quality of the rescue.” He flexed his lips in an imitation of a smile.

“Don’t care whether she’s impressed or not,” Orville muttered. “Just want her back.”

“I concur.” The copter was now descending towards a flat surface, its lights illuminating blowing grass, and men and women with torches and guns were surrounding it, aiming their weapons in the rough general direction of where it had just been. Orville tried shouting, but his words were drowned out by the noise of the engine.

Korynn produced his little recorder and plugged it into a socket on the copter’s

dashboard, using a connecting lead he pulled from one pocket of his jacket. *How did he know which one he'd get?* Orville thought, and then clutched his head as Korynn's amplified voice thundered from speakers somewhere below.

"THIS IS KORYNN MITWOCH AND ORVILLE TORRES. WE MUST SPEAK TO SEIGNEUR DERWENT CATHCART WINDYRIDGE ON A MATTER OF EXTREME URGENCY. PLEASE DO NOT DETAIN US. THIS IS KORYNN—"

As Orville realised they had landed on the lawn outside the Seigneurie, he caught sight of the familiar form of Derwent, striding through the ring of armed guards. Who, he now noticed, were not wearing any sort of uniform, and seemed somewhat unfamiliar with their weaponry.

"Yes, yes, all right," he shouted as Korynn cut the engine, "we've heard it. The whole meinie's heard it. Nobody's going to shoot you, unless they were trying to sleep. Get out of that thing and—where's Suncat?"

The last question fell into a sudden silence as the rotors de-rezzed, and Orville hesitated.

"We left her behind," Korynn said, "reasoning that—"

He got no further.

"Left her behind?" Derwent echoed faintly. "You left her behind?"

"We didn't have a choice," Orville began hotly.

"You had no choice," Derwent said. "Oh well, that's all right then. You frodding witless waste of frodding space!" he shouted suddenly. "Both of you! What good are you? What is the use of you? How dare you come back here without Suncat! How dare you come back here at all!" He had completely lost it, Orville saw, with one tiny clinical part of his mind; tears were leaking from his eyes, and flecks of spit were flying.

"Why? Why did you bother? Why didn't you just stay put?"

"Well, we did have some idea of coming back and getting help," Orville shot back.

"Help?" Derwent's laugh was wild. "Oh, well, I'm afraid you're out of luck. The only possible help left at lunchtime, to go and rescue you."

"Kaichang and Verneen?" Korynn said, and both men turned to stare at him. "It seems

reasonable,” he went on placidly. “If these are the forces you have protecting a major public building that has already been attacked—I intend no offence—the probability of your being able to muster a sufficiently powerful rescue force seems slight. Kaichang and Verneen have a personal stake and are quite capable—”

Orville sank his head into his hand. “Great. So all we’ve done is swapped two for two.” He rounded on Derwent. “And you let them go?” he snapped.

“At least they care about someone besides their own wretched selves,” Derwent snarled. “Tollain would have gone as well, only he was too ill—”

“Too ill,” Orville repeated sarcastically. “Oh yes, very convenient. Hypercac, I suppose. He’s no more got hypercac than I have.” He was full of helpless rage, full to bursting. It had to go somewhere. “Shall I tell you something about Seir Tollain Kintarsh, mate? He’s nothing. He’s just a sad little dilettante everyone called a genius, who burned out almost as soon as he started. This whole band is nothing but a stunt to try and revive his dead career. Gather five decent but dysfunctional musoes around him and hope the ashes somehow catch fire again. Well, it ain’t going to happen.”

“Suncat is not dysfunctional!” Derwent yelled.

“Oh, come on,” Orville yelled back. “They all are. She’s too idle to work at anything, ‘Chang’s too hung up on politics and rage and Verneen’s just hardly there. And then you’ve got this one, who—”

The raptor-like speed with which Korynn’s head snapped round to transfix him with those jet black lenses was perhaps the only thing that could have jerked Orville out of his rant. He caught his breath and went on, a little lamely.

“Who doesn’t need a band anyway,” he said. “Take it from me, this performance—if it had happened—would have been the last anyway. Gestalt was always bound to end in tears, just like all the others. If—”

“All what others?” Derwent said suddenly. He too seemed to have calmed down a little, and to be somewhat shamefaced at having so completely lost his rag in front of the guards, most of whom were pretending to be scenery.

“Every single frodding band I’ve ever been in,” Orville said, feeling weariness hit him between the shoulder blades like a wrecking ball. “Every one of them broke up within

three months. Fights, betrayals, artistic differences. You name it. I don't know why I even bothered with this one. Except that it was for Suncat."

"Every single band you've ever been in broke up within three months of you joining them?" Derwent repeated.

Orville nodded silently. "And yes, I know, it's me," he said. "I'm the worst of the lot."

"Well, I'm glad you know that at least—"

"I just have this supernatural gift for picking doomed bands," Orville sighed.

Derwent looked at him for a moment as if he had sprouted a second nose, and then shook his head. "What's done is done and can't be mended," he said. "I'll get someone to take you back to the hotel. You'll need rest at least. Tomorrow we'll talk about another plan." He turned away and spoke rapidly to one of the less scenery-like of the guards, who nodded and trotted into the house.

"Wait a minute," Orville said. "Look, I'm sorry. Really. What actually happened with Kaichang and Verneen? In fact, what happened after we got scrobbled?"

Derwent quickly ran through a summary of recent events from his point of view, ending by detailing what he knew—and what he had taken care not to know—concerning Carson Meldrum and his plans. "I'm as sure as I can be," he said, "that he won't let them come to any harm. He's an old man, but he's lived and fought up in Northshores all his life, and you don't come out of that still green. Besides, he's got a large and supportive family." He took a deep breath. "I'm the one who should apologise. Of course you were right to take the chance when it offered. Plus you've dealt them a fairly decisive blow—I imagine it'll take them a while to rustle up another copter." He tried a smile. "Well done."

"It was all him," Orville said, indicating Korynn. "He had the idea, he flew the copter—I was just along for the ride."

Korynn shook his sleek black head. "You provided the motivation," he said. "I am glad to be out of that cellar...but it would not have occurred to me to try to escape had I been alone."

I am the Cat who walks by himself, and all places are alike to me. The line floated to the top of Orville's consciousness. He watched Korynn retrieving his recorder from the

copter. It was true. If he had been captured on his own, he would have sat there in captivity, entirely self-sufficient, till the house fell down around him. *And then probably just got up and walked away*, Orville thought.

Derwent looked at Korynn oddly for a moment, then turned as the woman he had spoken to came back. "Jyllen tells me a car's waiting for you. I'll see you tomorrow, first thing, all right?" And without waiting for an answer, Derwent turned on his heel and walked back into the Seigneurie.

As the guard, Jyllen, led them round the side of the building to the forecourt, Korynn moved closer to Orville.

"Tollain does in fact suffer from an inherited form of hypercacaemia," he said. "The case was quite well publicised, due to his mother's high public profile—"

"I know," Orville said miserably. "I shouldn't have said it."

"It is something people do when they are angry," Korynn said. "I do not understand it, but then I do not have to." They got into the back of the car, and it began to move.

"You might consider, however," Korynn went on, "not repeating it in Tollain's presence."

"I won't even repeat it in *my* presence," Orville muttered.