

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tollain woke up suddenly, and opened his eyes. Someone was blundering about in the main room. He rolled over and tried to ignore it, but the noises went on, and just as he was about to drift off there would be another thump, or a clatter, or a muffled voice, jerking him back to wakefulness, and little by little awareness of recent events bore in on him and made further slumber impossible.

He gave up. Rolling out of bed, he slipped on his clothes and went to the connecting door, opened it a crack and peered through.

Orville Torres and Korynn Mitwoch, looking tired and travel-worn, were messing about with piles of boxes and bags.

“You’re back!” Tollain cried joyfully; then, looking around, “Where’s Suncat?”

Orville gave him a look. “Don’t you start,” he said. “We had all that from Big Chief Windypops up at the big house earlier tonight. She is still there BUT we have a plan to get her back.”

“And we believe she is in no immediate danger,” Korynn added.

Tollain considered. Food and sleep had smoothed the raw edges of his temper, and his natural buoyancy had to some extent returned.

“Plan sounds good,” he said, perching himself in a chair. “I like plans. Tell me.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it?” Orville said; then, catching Tollain’s look, “Sorry. Okay.”

He gave Tollain a brief account of recent events as he and Korynn had experienced them, and finished by outlining the plan in its basic form. “It won’t survive contact with the enemy,” he said, “but it doesn’t have to. It just needs to be strong enough that we do. All of us,” he added.

“Good,” Tollain said, bouncing to his feet again. “Count me in.”

Orville stared at him.

“Well, you’re going to need me, aren’t you?” Tollain pointed out.

“I’m not going to say it again,” Orville said.

“Yes I am up to it,” Tollain said forcefully. “I had a fairly bad attack when the thing happened, and I wasn’t that well afterwards, but it was mainly not being able to do anything that was sending me round the bend. This is a chance to do...something at least.”

Orville subjected him to a long scrutiny. “All right then,” he said. “Go back to bed.”

“But I want to help,” Tollain protested.

“And you will. In the morning. Well, later in the morning. Right now we’re humping this stuff, which we’ve just fetched from *Bellbird*, up to the Seigneurie, where we will load it into the copter once we’ve told Windyguts what we’re doing. But before we do that last bit we are going to get at least three hours sleep.” Orville grinned. His face was grey and papery, his eyes sore from frequent rubbing. “And since the girls would kill me if I let you join in the humping, I suggest you go back to bed and get some more sleep yourself. That way you’ll be fresh. And now you know we have a plan,” he made a conjuror’s gesture, “you should sleep like a log.”

Tollain saw the wisdom in this. Meekly, he returned to bed, stripped off, lay down again and fell asleep still turning Orville’s plan over in his mind.

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“Morning, ladies,” said Carson cheerfully, backing into the pleasant little room with a loaded tray. He remained quite still, with his back turned, till the sounds from behind him indicated that Kaichang and Verneen had finished making themselves decent; then he turned and put the tray on the bed.

“Good morning, Carson,” Kaichang said enthusiastically, eyeing the appetising contents of the tray.

“Did we disturb you?” Verneen asked, a little timidly.

“If I hadn’t already been up you might have,” Carson answered, “not that it would disturb me none. I just hope you slept enough first.”

“Oh yes,” Verneen said, stretching luxuriously, till the sheet that covered her threatened to abandon its post and she was forced to grab it.

“So what’s the plan?” Kaichang asked, reaching for the food.

“Eat first, plan later,” Carson said firmly. “I’ve seen too many get the cold robbies talkin’ business over food. I will tell you this though,” he said, with a sly glint in his eye. “My youngest, Orman, he was out to Coldsands early this mornin’, on an errand for me, and he happened to be listenin’ behind the hedge when two of Braeden’s boys came by talkin’ fit to bust. Seems they got a prisoner up to the house—well, that we knew, but Orman says something’s happened. See, she was bein’ kept tied up and all, ’cause they were fixin’ to recruit her to the cause. Well, sir, now it seems she’s to be let loose. Guarded, no question, ’case she lights out for the high hills, but otherwise she can roam free about the place and nobody’s to stop her.”

Verneen’s eyes were shining. Kaichang’s were closed.

“She’s all right,” she breathed. “I don’t know how, but she’s worked something on them, some sort of scheme. Suncat, you frodding marvel!” Without warning, she lunged forward, letting the covers fall and forcing Verneen to whisk the tray out of her path just in time, took Carson Meldrum’s head in her hands and kissed him full on the lips. “And bless you for telling us,” she breathed huskily.

“Don’t mention it, Miss Kaichang,” Carson said, a little shakily. “You might want to get back under the sheets, though. Ain’t no kind of weather to be frolickin’ around in the altogether, if you follow me.” He gently disengaged himself and went to the door. “I’ll get Orman and Gattis to do some askin’ round,” he said. “See can we find out what the set-up is out there. Ain’t got but hints so far. You ladies come down when you’re good and ready.” He smiled at them, and went out, closing the door carefully behind him.

Verneen let out her breath in a long sigh. “Thank goodness,” she said.

“Thank Suncat’s brains,” Kaichang retorted. “We’ve still got to get her out, but this means we have some time to plan.”

“Good,” Verneen said. “Because that whole storm through the gates, kill everyone in sight, grab Suncat, transform into a rocket plane and zoom off into the stratosphere idea was looking a bit flimsy.”

“You think so?” Kaichang looked concerned. “Which part?”

They laughed a little.

“Do you think Orville and Korynn will be here soon?” Verneen said.

“I’m not holding my breath,” Kaichang said, and held up a hand. “I know, they did go for help and they will probably come back, but we don’t know when and we can’t afford to wait. Never rely on men, love. You can’t, and even if you could...”

“...it wouldn’t be worth it, I know,” Verneen sighed. “Carson’s reliable, though, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I think he is,” Kaichang said after a moment’s thought. She had got off the bed, and was looking unself-consciously out of the window. “Maybe they have to get to that age to learn how. Wish he’d shaved before coming in, though,” she added, rubbing her nose ruefully. “Never could get used to prickles.”

“Tollain’s facial hair will never grow, he says,” Verneen said thoughtfully.

“Then he’ll look like a kid all his life,” Kaichang said, “and fool women into wanting to mother him. Don’t look at me like that, I saw you fussing over him. He’s no different, you know. He’s still a man, with all a man’s weaknesses and idiocies and—and dangers.”

“I don’t think he’d ever willingly hurt anyone,” Verneen said.

“Wait till he loses his temper,” Kaichang counselled. “Wait till he comes storming in with Torres and Mitwoch to rescue his *lady love*.” She sneered the last couple of words. “Then you’ll see.”

Verneen looked down at the tray on her lap. “I suppose you can’t help it,” she said softly. “I feel it a bit myself. He does love her so, and I think she loves him.”

“She loves everybody,” Kaichang retorted. “Her heart’s so huge you have to stand back as far as Darkreach to see it. What can’t I help?”

“Oh, you know.” Verneen seemed to find the grain of the wooden tray fascinating.

“Are you saying I’m jealous?” Kaichang stopped. “I am,” she said, sounding surprised.

“Of course I am. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Because nobody should be,” Verneen said, almost inaudibly.

“No. You’re right. If we were all perfect beings. But we’re not, Goddess, we’re not.”

Kaichang was eyeing the food wistfully, and Verneen saw it.

“Come and eat,” she said. “We can row any time, but this smells too good.”

Kaichang perched back on the bed, and for a while they ate in silence, each casting sidelong glances at the other when the other seemed not to be looking. The food, though cooler than it had been, was good and filling, and for a short while the elephant in the room seemed to have discovered business elsewhere.

“That’s better,” Kaichang said, when both plates were clean. “I can face getting dressed now.” She did so, sniffing tentatively at the garments. “They’ll do another day, as long as the ambassador doesn’t call, but I’ll need to do some washing tomorrow if we’re going to be here any longer.”

Verneen slipped out from under the tray and likewise began to dress.

“But what are we going to do, though?” Kaichang stopped dead, with one arm and her head in her top and the rest still uncovered. “I mean, froddit, it was perfect. We love each other, we love her, she loves us. A perfect tripod. Most stable relationship there is. Why did he have to come in and spoil it? How can we ever make it right again?”

If Verneen could think of an answer, she did not mention it; and Kaichang sighed and resumed dressing.

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“You’ve got something there,” said Tollain.

The copter was more sluggish with the extra cargo on board, but Derwent had made sure it was refuelled and in proper working order before he had allowed them to set out, still in full dark. Tollain perched on a tall box immediately behind the two seats in which Orville and Korynn sat. He had wanted to drive, but as Orville had pointed out, his feet only just reached the pedals, so he had instead insisted that Orville sing him the song he had begun to write on the way to Broadfields.

“It’s a good strong lyric,” he said. “Do you think maybe it could do with—” He stopped. “No,” he said, half to himself. “Back seat songwriting. It’s my besetting sin. Sorry.”

“No, tell me,” said Orville, obscurely irked both at the abortive question and its lack of

fulfilment.

“Well,” Tollain said, “I was thinking maybe another half verse after the bridge? Something like, um—

*Girl, I've let you down before,
But I won't be doing that no more.
Just give me a chance and you'll see
We'll be free, we'll be free, we'll be free...*

From the ends of the earth—

...er, and so on,” he finished, with a slight laugh. “Just a suggestion.”

Orville fumed inwardly. The words had sounded odd in Tollain’s somewhat unearthly tenor, but they worked. The little man had completely absorbed Orville’s style and added a perfect enhancement to his song, one that would fit in seamlessly and did in fact make it better. There was no way he could refuse. The damned song wanted it.

“Thanks,” he said gruffly. “Should I write it down?”

“No need,” Tollain said. “I’ll remember it till we get where we’re going. *Where are we going, by the way?*”

“Carson Meldrum’s place in Northshores,” Orville said. “It’ll mean making a considerable dog-leg so we don’t attract attention by flying over Coldsands, but that’s okay. Derwent thought it would be best to rendezvous with ‘Chang and Verneen first, see if they want to be part of this.” *And see if they’ve already got Suncat out while we were faffing around,* he thought but did not say.

“Good idea,” Tollain said. “We can do more as a group than we can separately.”

Can we? Orville thought. *Are we even a group without Suncat?*

His outburst at the Seigneurie had shaken him badly. He knew he resented Tollain for—as he couldn’t help but see it—cutting him out, even though he knew perfectly well that Suncat had never looked at him the way he had seen her look at the little man. But the depth of feeling that had been stirred up, when he had been sufficiently exhausted and raw-nerved that his usual censors had deserted their post, had

appalled him.

Also—not being stupid—he had caught the implication Derwent, equally harassed and unguarded, had thrown back at him, and the idea that it might be true was not one he found comforting. Had he, after all, been the unwitting catalyst that had blown all those other bands to pieces? Had it really, after all, been unwitting?

He knew about self-sabotage. He'd known musoes who couldn't handle success and went to enormous lengths to prevent it ever coming near them. Was this just his particularly messy and selfish way of doing that? It was almost funny. He had sneered at the rest of the band, calling them dysfunctional, and lo! ben Torres' name led all the rest.

"I am about to divert from the direct route," Korynn announced, cutting into his thoughts not a moment too soon.

"All right," Orville said gruffly, and turned to find Tollain's green eyes fixed on his face. Verneen had green eyes, but hers were dark, the only really dark thing about her; Tollain's were the true, almost luminescent cat-green, shining in the semi-darkness of the cockpit, and something was behind them from which Orville's nature wanted desperately to shy away.

"I wouldn't have wished this for the world, you know," the gentle voice said, and Orville ached to be able to turn that penetrating gaze aside with a joke or a barbed remark. But all his wit seemed to have deserted him. "If I had known how you felt about her," Tollain went on, industriously rubbing in the salt, "I'd have asked her first if I was intruding. But she never said, you see."

"She wouldn't," Orville said with an effort. "There was never anything serious between us. I never thought..." *I never thought there could be. I thought she was unapproachable. Out of my league. Preferred girls anyway.* "No, mate," Orville said, "you're all right. I wish you both the best."

"What about you, though?" Tollain's eyes seemed impossibly to be getting bigger as they stared into Orville's. Inside, he cringed.

"I can take care of myself." That at least was true. Hey, maybe he could leave the band *before* he made it implode. That would be a change, a new milestone in his life. He

could tell himself “No, I will not destroy anyone’s career today.” Little by little he might even break the habit.

“I hope you aren’t thinking of leaving.” Froddit, was the little squirt telepathic, or was he just totally transparent? “Suncat would be devastated...and you know, the band wouldn’t work without you,” he added, and for a wonder it really sounded like an afterthought.

“Look,” Orville said, as forcefully as he could given the circumstances, “let’s get her back from these lunatics first, and then see where we are, okay?” He couldn’t leave before that anyway.

“Of course.” Tollain looked away, and Orville breathed out thankfully.

Of course, some people were okay with all that touchy-feely stuff. They could talk about their feelings till hell fetched them. Orville had been in a couple of bands like that, all wanting to be close and to bond and that. Well, he’d put his foot down about that. He was there to play music, and that was it. He just wasn’t wired for all that. Baring the soul and so forth.

And, when the bonding had turned sour and the bands that had wanted to be so close-knit had shattered in vicious arguments and backbiting, he had stood back and smirked, his point—apparently—proved. But if it was really he who had caused the meltdowns—maybe by that very act of refusing to share...

He looked miserably out of the window, where the first touches of dawn were starting to show. It was going to be a very long ride.

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“Okay,” Carson said, coming into the parlour. “I got some news.”

Verneen looked up from her book, and Kaichang turned from the window. It had been a very long morning. They had offered to help out in various capacities around the place, but Carson and his sons and other workers had been polite but firm. They knew what they were doing and how they wanted to do it, and it was easier to do it themselves than show a couple of strangers how. Kaichang, despite having grown up on what might charitably be called a kind of farm, had not pushed the point.

“Spoke to old Hamman, the woman who delivers the feed round here, and she’s been

talking to some of the hands who've worked up to Coldsands lately," Carson said, sitting down on the faded settee. "Seems the Carthews have been puttin' it about that all this Affiliation business's an alien plot to take over the galaxy."

Kaichang, caught off guard, spluttered with sudden laughter. "It's a *what?*" she managed.

"Just tellin' you," Carson said calmly. "They figure as how aliens are usin' mind control to alter folks' opinions, make 'em submit to all these Accords so we won't have no defence when the invasion fleet arrives, nor no independent economy to mobilise for makin' military hardware. They got this process they use to free folks from the alien influence, and it sound to me pretty much like what you might do to a prisoner of war. Anson don't know nothin' about that, Hamman says, he thinks they just use sweet reason and it all comes clear, but from what she says it sounds like just Braeden's cup of tea if you see what I mean."

"Torture," Kaichang said flatly.

"Call it that," Carson said. "Call it en-hanced interrogation. Ain't right whatever label you slap on it."

Verneen looked up, catching Kaichang's eye. The dark girl looked away, but not before a spasm of terror had passed through Verneen's slender frame. *She'll kill him. She'll kill him and I...I don't honestly see a good reason not to let her.*

I hope I find one.

"Could this Hamman tell you anything about the security up at Coldsands?" Kaichang asked.

"No, but she told me somethin' you might find a tad more interestin'," Carson replied. "Seems Hamman was visitin' with old Laban Roper Krakendeeps, him as used to be Seigneur of Northshores, last night when he got a call on the telephone from that Mister Windyridge—he called ol' Laban 'cause I never had one of them things in this house these sixty year and don't see no call to start now. Well, sir, Mister Windyridge was lettin' Laban know as a courtesy, and Laban asked Hamman to pass it on to me, that your friends are on their way up here right now in the copter they nabbed yesterday from Coldsands, and they're loaded up with hardware and they got

a plan.”

“Hardware?” Kaichang repeated.

“Guns?” Verneen was alarmed.

“Naw, just stuff from your spaceship, Mister Windyridge said. He didn’t tell ol’ Laban what the plan was, but he did advise them to meet up with you here first, since he knew you’d both be here. They’re going way the hell round by Cloudshiels and Farhavens so as not to tip off our buddies over to Coldsands, but they should be here this afternoon, he says.”

“That’s fantastic!” Verneen said.

“More waiting,” Kaichang grumbled.

“They have a plan,” Verneen pointed out. “That’s, erm—” She counted on her fingers, muttering under her breath. “Approximately one plan more than we’ve got. I don’t mind waiting.” She cast a glance into the corner of the room. It was not the first time she had looked in that direction, and Carson saw her looking and looked the same way.

“Pretty as a picture, ain’t she?” he said, smiling. “Belonged to my daddy. He used to play like an angel, but nor me nor any o’ my get ever had the touch. You want I should fetch her out?”

Verneen nodded mutely, and Carson got up, went to the cobwebbed corner and opened the glass-fronted display case. With excruciating care he lifted out the heavy object that stood inside and offered it to Verneen, who shook her head and indicated Kaichang.

“I was trying not to know it was there,” Kaichang said. “It’s beautiful. This would be worth hundreds of credits anywhere.”

“To me it’s worth my daddy, and that’s more,” Carson said. “But if you were to feel like playin’ it, Miss Kaichang, he and I would both deem it an honour.”

“I don’t even know if I can,” Kaichang admitted. “I’ve only seen one like this once before. They used to be called harp guitars, till someone coined the name ‘torung’ and it stuck for some reason.” She tested the strings, six bass, six standard guitar and

twelve harp, and began tuning. "I do know how to tune it though. Something like this should be played, Carson."

"I could never be as good as my daddy," Carson said uncomfortably.

"Then don't be. Be as good as yourself. Playing is an essential part of taking care of these things." She ran her fingers lightly over the wood. "It aches to be touched. These strings have been missing human fingers for so long. At least it hasn't dried out or warped, that's a miracle." She tuned the last of the harp strings. "There. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Miss Kaichang, I am truly sure." Carson sat down again. "May I stay?"

"Good Goddess, man, it's your house and your torung, of course you can stay!" Kaichang said, laughing. She looked at Verneen. "What shall I try?"

"There's this," Verneen offered timidly, pulling a piece of paper from her pocket. "I wrote it...um...was it really only yesterday morning we were going around interviewing Suncat's old schoolmates? Well, I had the idea, so I stopped in a park and just jotted it down."

"And she springs it on me now. You see what I have to cope with, Carson." Kaichang unfolded the paper and scanned it. "Full chords and melody line though. Okay, we'll give it a try." She sat down, adjusted her position, tried a few chords and scales. The tone of the instrument, deep and rich and heady, swelled in the room, and Carson Meldrum looked round as though he had felt someone nearby.

"Yes, seems doable," Kaichang said. "All right, Serina Halannim, when you're ready."

She began to pick out a chord pattern, accenting the down beats with the bass strings. Verneen closed her eyes, took a deep breath and began to sing.

"I watch you sleeping.

I would make your dreams come true

But I don't know how.

You seem so peaceful.

Should I spend this night with you?

Do the rules allow?

*I was always shy,
Never learned the reason why
We do what we do;
Somehow sometimes we get through,
And the time passes us by...*

*An autumn morning.
Brittle leaves beneath my shoe,
Parted from the bough.
Winter is coming
And the sky no longer blue
Keeps its solemn vow.*

*Will it snow or rain?
Will the summer come again?
And the birds that flew
Find the nests that once they knew?
Do they somehow still remain?"*

Verneen nodded, and Kaichang, tentatively at first, touched the harp strings, playing a gentle solo over the chords of the verse. It was a simple, unaffected melody that Verneen had written, and yet there was intricacy there, under the surface. She wound it up and caught Verneen's eye, and the pale girl began to sing again.

*"You're almost waking,
I feel your body stir anew
As I kiss your brow.
And in the doorway
Wonder, did you feel me too?
Is it my turn now?"*

Carson drew a deep breath. "That was just beautiful, ladies," he said. "I don't reckon my daddy could have done no better. And that is a lovely song, Miss Verneen."

“She doesn’t write often,” Kaichang said, “but when she does...”

Verneen ducked her head so that her hair swung forward and veiled her face. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Do you want to put this back in the case?” Kaichang said.

“Not just yet,” Carson replied. “Who knows, maybe I’ll give it a try again some time.”

A hoarse yell and the rattling din of a large and lustily belaboured triangle made them all jump.

“That’ll be lunchtime,” Carson said. “Best keep your strength up, you two. Come on.”

Kaichang paused in the doorway, Verneen behind her.

“Who was that about?” she said.

“Oh,” Verneen said, shrugging, “nobody.”

Kaichang stood aside; but she was frowning as she followed Verneen out.