

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Suncat awoke, opened her eyes, and drank in the glorious sunshine.

All right, maybe it wasn't that glorious, but when you've spent the best part of a day with a bag over your head and no prospect of it coming off, you aren't too inclined to be picky. She closed her eyes again, revelling in the luxury of choice, and smiled.

"That's my girl," said Shallen's voice from the door.

Suncat showed no surprise or startlement. She turned her head and looked at the other woman. Shallen was alone in the doorway, smiling down at her.

"You always said you were solar powered," Shallen continued. "I'm sorry about all that business earlier." She came closer, first closing the door and locking it. "It's all right," she whispered. "Braeden's outside reviewing the troops. He loves doing that. It's just you and me."

She was utterly charming, and Suncat ached inside.

"So you can tell me," Shallen went on, "the real truth." She leaned over the bed. "It's a trick, isn't it?"

Suncat froze.

"Oh, come on," Shallen said coaxingly. "This is me, Anger. We've known each other for ever. Did you really think I'd fallen for all that babble about aliens? I admit I had my doubts when you produced that fantastic voice...mmm, it gave me chills...but you can be honest with me. Braeden need never know." She leant closer, every muscle in her face and body expressing cosy confidentiality, friendliness, promise. "You're just stringing him along, aren't you? Oh, come on, be a sport, Anger."

For a long moment Suncat hesitated. This was Shallen, after all...

Yes. This was Shallen. Shallen who'd lied and schemed and gone behind her back to romance Cold December right out from under her. Shallen who could look an adult in the eyes and make them believe the most outrageously implausible story as long as it got her off the hook and someone else on to it, usually Suncat. Shallen, who had been the very reason Suncat had sworn, long ago, on the grave of her mother, never ever to

do...exactly what she was doing now.

From outside the house somewhere came a noise, a distant parade ground bark, and time snapped back into focus.

“What voice?” Suncat said. “I’m sorry, Shallen, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Shallen’s shoulders slumped. “It’s true, then,” she said, almost to herself. “I so hoped...but if this is true, then it really must all be true. Oh, Anger, I really am so sorry.”

“What for?” Suncat said, lifting herself on one elbow.

“Braeden said I had to check,” Shallen said. “He said I should catch you off guard. I told him, I said it was silly, but he insisted. He gets these ideas in his head, and they make him angry. And I knew,” she went on, in what seemed very like a burst of candour, “that you could never lie to me, because, well, I know you, but I couldn’t help hoping...”

“Hoping?” Suncat prompted.

“It’s all so horrible and...and *real*,” Shallen blurted. “I mean, I know it’s real because Braeden explained it to me, but that’s not the same as...” She stopped. “Hearing that—that *thing* speak through you...it brought it home to me. We really are in a war, and we don’t dare stop at anything till we’re truly free.” She straightened up, unconsciously falling into parade rest. “And when Argenthome is purged of the alien blight, then it’ll be time to take the fight to the enemy. We’ll have to get the whole planet on to a war footing, and set out to free the rest of the human race from this—this filthy domination. Braeden’s been making plans for hours. We’re in touch with a bunch of Seigneurssons all across the continent. There are even a couple in the south. It’s going to be horrible...but it’s got to be done. You showed me that.” Shallen looked down at Suncat again. “I was silly, thinking that...that if I talked to you alone you could make it not be true. But you really never could lie to me, could you? Even...even when I really wanted you to.”

She turned away suddenly, unlocked the door with a feverish twist of her hand and was gone. A moment later she put her head back in.

“I forgot to say,” she said. “The boys will bring you lunch in about an hour, and Braeden will want to open negotiations after that. I...I won’t be here, I’m afraid. I can’t stand the thought of you being...” She shook her head and withdrew quickly.

*Oh sweet Goddess, thought Suncat, as the key turned in the lock. What the hell have I done?*

*What I had to do, she thought, to save myself. As frodding usual. Save Suncat and the rest of the worlds can go to hell.*

She had validated Braeden’s delusion, was what she had done. Whether he truly believed the alien story or not, he would now be more firmly convinced than ever of the rightness of his supposed cause. Why not? If he played his cards right, with this—with *her*—in his hands, he could end up Presiding Seigneur. Everyone would believe, once he brought her out to play Helva-Naktras (and wasn’t that a funny joke now, ha ha?) for their benefit. Everyone would follow him.

She couldn’t let that happen.

But if she didn’t, he’d hurt her.

And Suncat, throughout her whole life, had never once managed to come to terms with the idea of pain. Discomfort, like hunger or a full bladder or whatever, she could cope with, but pain—her mind just whited out at the mere thought of it. She would do anything to avoid pain. She had worked hard, as she passed through her turbulent teens, to make sure that simple fact remained a secret, one even Shallen hadn’t known. Playing it cool when the other girl proudly exhibited her skinned knees and bruises, talking tough, hiding the impulse to cringe and cry...she’d got very good at counterfeiting bravery, even on those rare occasions when she did get hurt.

*Even then, her treacherous thoughts whispered, you were a liar, a deceiver, just as much as Shallen. Even then.*

And now her deceitfulness would probably plunge the planet into civil war. At very least.

Suncat felt the hot sick bitterness welling up inside her, and could not hold it back any longer. She rolled over, on the bed in the sunlit room, and sobbed her heart out.

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Orville woke with a start, feeling stiff and slightly queasy, as Korynn brought the copter down in an empty field. People were standing around the landing area, and he had a moment of *deja vu*, but these people weren't armed.

"Are we here?" Tollain, irritatingly, seemed to have survived the dreadful, dragging journey without a single twinge.

"I certainly hope so," Korynn said dryly. "I have done enough flying for one day."

"Tollain!" Verneen was standing on the outskirts of the rough circle of people, jumping up and down and waving. Kaichang was standing behind her, looking cool and disinterested, and next to her was Carson Meldrum, whom Orville had met briefly on his previous visit. Tollain was already out of the copter and running towards the little group, and Orville watched glumly as Verneen seized him in a fierce hug. *Frod him, does he want them all?*

He got out and joined Korynn beside the copter as the little group approached, Verneen holding Tollain's hand in what seemed to Orville, in his current mood, like an excessively proprietary manner. But then she let go of Tollain and rushed to hug Orville in exactly the same way, although this time the height differential was reversed.

"I have to do it for Kaichang as well," she said into his chest, "because she won't. But we're both really glad you came back."

Orville wasn't so sure about that, but he wasn't going to argue with a free hug. What with one thing and another, he was feeling a sore need for some reassurance right now.

"Torres," Kaichang said neutrally, when Verneen had released him. "I gather you're here to save the day."

"We're here to help," Orville said. "However we can."

"But you have a plan," Kaichang insisted. "Derwent mentioned it when he told the Seigneur you were coming. I'm all agog." She widened her eyes and parodied a rapt expression.

“Bear in mind,” Orville said, “that this is the kind of plan you come up with at one dark when you’ve just flown for several hours on no food and very little sleep.”

“Most people,” Kaichang observed to the air, “prefer to save the feeble excuses till after they’ve told the plan.”

“You got something better, I suppose?” Orville challenged her.

“No, we haven’t,” Verneen said urgently. She had stopped short of hugging Korynn, but was plainly torn between her terror of him and gladness that he was here. Now she turned on Orville and Kaichang. “Can you two please not fight for maybe five minutes? This is a rotten situation and we need each other. Please?”

Orville looked at her, marvelling. The phrase “wouldn’t say boo to a goose” had often passed through his mind when contemplating Verneen Halannim. Now, somehow, she seemed to have blossomed into something that at times almost resembled confidence. He wondered what had caused that.

“Okay,” he said. “Sorry. Sorry, ’Chang.”

“Let’s go inside,” Carson suggested. “It’s cold out here, and I reckon there’s some lunch left over in case you boys are hungry.” He looked around. “Where’s Mister Kintarsh gone?”

In the sudden silence they all heard the sound of music drifting from the house.

Kaichang turned a stricken look on Carson. “I’m so sorry,” she blurted, and turned and ran towards the door. The others followed at a more measured pace.

When they arrived in the parlour they found Kaichang facing off against a white-faced Tollain. The torung was back where it had been left, but there could be no doubt what had happened.

“I’m sorry,” he was saying. “I came in because it was cold and I saw it, and it’s beautiful and I just had to—”

“You just had to walk into someone else’s house and grab the first frodding musical instrument you see without so much as a by-your-leave?” Kaichang demanded. “If you’d been hungry, would you have taken his food? If you’d got no cash on you—”

“No!” Tollain said hotly. “No, of course I wouldn’t.”

“No, because those things don’t matter to you,” Kaichang sneered. “But show you a guitar or a keyboard or a—a torung or whatever and all your moral fibre flies out of the window. They must have had a hell of a time with you in music shops.”

Tollain turned to face Carson Meldrum. “I’m sorry, Seir Meldrum,” he said. “I was rude and selfish. Please accept my apologies.”

“I don’t see there’s been any harm done,” the old man said mildly. “You said she wanted to be played, Miss Kaichang. I know why you got riled, and thank you for your consideration, but I reckon we can let this one slide.”

“She’s a she?” Tollain looked again at the instrument, leaning demurely against the wall. “Of course she is. Does she have a name?”

“Well,” Carson said, “never rightly saw the need of one. Not like she’ll come when I call.” And he grinned.

“For him,” Kaichang said darkly, “she might. I heard what you were doing,” she added to Tollain. “You’ve practised on one of these.”

“My mother had quite the collection of instruments,” Tollain said. “I had to sell most of it for—for various reasons, but I learned how to play some of them.”

“All of them,” Kaichang mouthed silently for Carson’s benefit.

“Medical bills?” Verneen guessed.

“And financing the albums,” Tollain added. “It kind of broke my heart. Especially when they bombed and I got nothing back.” He took a deep breath. “Anyway, that’s not what we’re here for. Thank you for your kindness, Seir Meldrum. May we sit down?”

They disposed themselves in chairs and sofa, except for Korynn who remained silently standing. Everyone looked expectantly at Orville.

“Well,” he began. “Korynn and me, we thought...well, we’re none of us fighters. Except maybe you,” he said to Kaichang. “So we thought, what can we do? And what we do is music.”

“I have some experience,” Korynn said, “with the use of transsonic vibrations to create emotional states, to incapacitate or even kill.”

Verneen cast an anguished glance at Tollain, who spoke up at once.

“No killing,” he said. “Not unless the only alternative is us dying. We don’t do that.”

“I had hoped you would say that,” Korynn went on, “as I find the concept personally distasteful.” His right hand started to play rippling repeated patterns on an invisible keyboard. Orville, watching, had seen him do it before and had thought he was just practising, hearing the music in his head; now it occurred to him that it might actually be a source of comfort to the man, a familiar and known thing in a world of uncertainty. “However, we surmised that even without using lethal frequencies we might induce a profound effect on the adversary—”

“And get yourselves shot,” Kaichang broke in. “That’s the plan, is it? Frighten the natives with loud music?” She threw up her hands. “What did I tell you?” she said to Verneen.

“With all due respect, Mister Mitwoch,” Carson Meldrum said, “you may be plenty smart, but you don’t know the territory. Folks round here, they ain’t gonna be spooked by your music and all. First sign of trouble, they’ll start shootin’, and they’ll know where to aim.”

There was a short, rather crestfallen silence.

Then Tollain bounced up. “Okay,” he said, “we need another plan. Any ideas?”

Kaichang looked at Verneen.

“Robot plane time?” she said.

There was another short silence.

“In that case,” Tollain said, “I don’t have a plan, but I have an idea. Seir Meldrum, do you have a place we can set up to record in? Doesn’t have to be fancy, just somewhere we can put down a quick’n’dirty scratch track.”

“Sure,” Carson said doubtfully, “but it won’t be too soundproof.”

“For this it won’t have to be,” Tollain assured him, and briefly outlined his idea.

“I like it,” Kaichang said.

“Yeah,” Orville agreed.

“Only one problem,” Carson said. “Like I was tellin’ Miss Verneen last night, my truck

don't have none."

"I think I can help you there," Korynn said, producing a screwdriver from one of his pockets.

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All in all, the first interrogation session had not gone too badly.

Helva-Naktras had appeared on command, and had talked on and off for two whole hours; after she had run out of self-pity, Suncat had spent the remainder of the time before lunch exercising her throat muscles, and was now fairly sure she could produce the alien for at least two hours at a time without undue ill effects.

It emerged that Helva-Naktras, in its natural form a protoplasmic globule encased in a hard spiky shell about the size and shape of a horse chestnut, was a member of the Patriarchy of Glaarght, a race possessed of formidable telepathic powers from a small planet in the Chevalier sector. On their home world they employed non-sentient ape-like creatures to carry them from place to place and see to their comfort, but due to a sudden epidemic their beasts of burden had all but died out, and it was imperative that they be replaced. When, due to the tireless efforts of their few remaining steeds, the Patriarchy had ventured into space and encountered the teeming hordes of humanity, their thoughts had turned from mere survival to domination. The Last Empire, while it existed, had been too tough a nut to crack, but in its eventual dissolution, the Glaarghts had seen their chance.

The Sagittarian scheme had been a stroke of genius, Helva-Naktras admitted, the eerie alien voice even managing to convey a shade of rueful admiration. Enslave a chosen few humans, give them access to the old Imperial communications network, and let them preach a gospel of peace and freedom which would allow the Patriarchy to move in unthreatened. Profound cowards (Suncat could sympathise), the Glaarghts lived in dread of any kind of violence. Once, long ago in their history, they had conceived the idea that their small, nutlike forms would be safer inside the bodies of their steeds; unfortunately, the bold experimenters discovered too late that no matter how complete their control over the minds of the ape-creatures, they could not command them to stop digesting.

Braeden listened impassively to this preposterous rigmarole as Suncat, somewhat appalled at her own facility, spun it out. He sat, his chin on his fist, like a statue carved in some slightly cheap-looking stone. When at rest his face was handsome enough; it was only when, as it were, he inhabited it, that the inner ugliness of his nature shone through. Suncat, behind her mask of alien-controlled vacuity, wondered what in the worlds Shallen had ever seen in him.

“So when we find you,” he’d said suddenly, “we could just swallow you and that’d be it?”

Suncat had explained that after this disastrous attempt, the Glaarghts had selectively bred themselves for extra long spikes and a toxic shell. Eating them would be extremely inadvisable, but stepping on them would be entirely sufficient, as long as one’s soles were extremely thick and hard.

Braeden had swung his extravagantly booted feet up on to the table beside him and grinned. “Reckon we got that covered,” he had said.

And then Shallen had come storming in and insisted that that was enough for one day, Anger needed rest, and had more or less dragged Suncat (who was in the middle of her where-am-I-what-happened routine) out of the room, and indeed out of the house, into what had turned into a chilly but pleasant afternoon. They walked around the front yard, watched warily by two hulking farm boys in the inevitable masks.

“Are you all right?” she kept saying, peering anxiously into Suncat’s eyes. “Did it hurt you?”

“Look, Shallen,” Suncat said at last, “I have to take your word for it what happens when I go like that. It’s never happened to me before I was here, that I can remember anyway. But the only feeling I ever get from it is a sore throat. I promise you that’s all.”

Shallen shivered, from more than the cold. “Th-that’s even creepier, in a way,” she whispered. “That you feel nothing...and all the while that horrible thing is inside your mind, slithering about, changing things...”

Suncat had felt a trifle uneasy herself, hearing it put like that. Still, she could hardly change the story now; nothing would be more calculated to arouse suspicion. She had

embarked upon an uphill path of deception, and the further along it she went the narrower and more precarious it became...and the further would be the fall if she lost her balance.

“It’s so hard for me to believe,” she said carefully, looking around her at the flat, desolate-looking landscape, the endless empty overcast sky. “It’s odd...you tell me about these aliens, and I know you’re not lying, but something keeps...getting in the way.”

“That’s it.” Shallen had turned to her again, eyes enormous. “That’s the alien, stopping you believing. Oh, Anger...”

A sudden noise caused her to break off. A battered old groundtruck was careering along the road that bordered the farm, its radio blaring a thundering rock beat through the open windows. As it came nearer, they could see that it was occupied by two farmhands in dungarees, joyously and raucously singing along to the song.

*“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!”*

The truck dwindled into the distance, leaving Suncat gaping. She had recognised the voices, the soaring axe, the stabbing synth chords, even the drum pattern, but not the song. It had to be new. Which could only mean one thing.

“Stupid urks,” Shallen said crossly. “I suppose they think they have a right to blast their horrible noise all over the place. Well, Braeden will put a stop to that when they get called up to fight the aliens.”

Suncat nodded absently, but she hardly heard. She was still grappling with the one indisputable fact. They were here, Orville, Korynn and the others, and they had sent

her a message as clear as skywriting. They were going to come and try to rescue her. It was just a pity she wasn't going to be able to go.

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At the same moment as the truck disappeared around a bend in the road, several hundred miles further south, another vehicle left the purlieux of Broadfields meinie, heading north.

It was being driven by a white-faced Derwent Cathcart Windyridge, keenly aware that he was absent from his post at what showed every sign of developing into a time of crisis, but so thoroughly intimidated that he could no more have refused the job than dance naked on the steps of the Seigneurie.

The man beside him sat grimly silent, staring at the road ahead, his jaw set and his blue eyes beneath their shaggy brows ice-cold and unwavering. Behind them, a single thought dominated his mental landscape like a pyramid.

Elyot Segrave Morningsky was going to get his daughter back.