

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You saw her?” Kaichang said.

“Reckon we did, miss.” Orman Meldrum, stocky and cherubic, was still obviously enjoying the adventure in retrospect. They were back in the parlour, now even more crowded, especially with the two boys very obviously keeping their dirty dungarees off the good furniture. “Goldy-haired lady, real nice to look at—”

“Now, Orman,” his father said mildly.

“I think you can take it we recognise the description,” Tollain said with a grin. “And she didn’t seem hurt in any way?”

“Nossir,” said Gattis. He was more like his father, already thinning on top and taller than Orman, with more of the care of farm work etched on his face. “She were just talkin’ to the other lassie, the old Seigneur’s daughter who sold the land to them Carthews.”

“Because of course a woman could never be a Seigneur,” Kaichang muttered.

“Some meinies, sure, miss,” Orman volunteered. “Up to Farhavens—”

“Never mind that now,” Kaichang said quickly. “So, we know she’s okay, and if her ears are working she knows we’re here. Good idea, Kintarsh. What’s next?”

“Establish communication,” Tollain said promptly. “Find out the situation. Coordinate our efforts. I volunteer.”

“You?” Orville said, before he could stop himself.

Tollain nodded. “Small,” he said, indicating himself. “Unobtrusive. Can masquerade as overgrown ten-year-old if required. “Scuse me, mister, can I have my ball back?””

Carson laughed. “You don’t sound like no ten-year-old from round here, son,” he said, still chuckling.

“Reckon I could, though,” Verneen said, in a fair approximation of the Northshores twang.

“But you don’t *look* like no ten-year-old, miss,” Orman said, grinning.

“Orman, I won’t tell you but once more and that with the back of my hand,” Carson said. “I’m real sorry, Miss Verneen, he’s at that age.”

“Starts at three and goes on well into the late nineties,” Kaichang said. “Oops, sorry, Carson, I meant to say...umm...late fifties?”

“We could guise her up,” Gattis said, eyeing Verneen thoughtfully. “Send her round there with some tale...”

“What tale?” Orville said.

“Wait a minute,” Tollain said, sounding alarmed. “I’m sure I can get it...”

“Don’t bother,” Kaichang said, smiling. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, Kintarsh, but you have what is undoubtedly the most unmistakable voice in the entire octant. You could no more sound like someone other than yourself than I could...look like you.” She turned to Orville. “You, on the other hand...”

“Wal, gee shucks a’mighty mam, I’m right chickened out that you should say so, yessirree doggies,” Orville said.

“If you dial that back about three thousand per cent you’ll do,” Kaichang said. “Okay, I think I know how we can work this...”

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Shallen had insisted that Suncat be subjected to no more interrogations that day, and Braeden had ungraciously acceded. She was permitted to roam about the house and garden, as long as she remained within sight of one of the masked guards at all times and made no attempt to escape. Suncat had fervently stated that as long as she could not be sure that her mind was not her own, she was most definitely not going anywhere, and that had seemed to satisfy the two.

“So if we see you takin’ a grab at the horizon, we’ll know...our friend...has gone back on his word,” Braeden had said, “and then we’ll know what to do. Right, Shallen?”

“Of course, Braeden,” Shallen had said, avoiding his gaze. “Whatever you say.”

So now Suncat was sitting in the garden where she and Shallen had played a hundred times, looking down on the road that led down to the coastal village where old Henning had taken them out in his boat to see the sea-cats on their island. That was

when she had decided that she wasn't a sea-cat but a Suncat, though the official naming had been much later.

The garden had grown wild. The grass in which she sat had not been cut in years, nor the bushes tended. The single kampoulia tree had grown right across the middle of the lawn, and the tiny pond was choked with slime and leaves. Old Orrin Westermain had loved that garden, Suncat remembered; had tended it every day of his life, rain or shine. How typical of Shallen to have given it not a single thought in all this time.

She lay back and closed her eyes. If only it could still be then, and not now. She, just simple Angharad, with no thought for anything except friendship and play; Shallen, simply a good friend and companion in imagined adventure; old Orrin still alive, clucking disparagingly as he pruned the rigatoni or whatever it was called; the sun, the sea, the garden, and no hint of Cold December or Broadfields or Affiliation or the Truesingers or Tollain frodding Kintarsh and all his complications...

Because even if, even if she could somehow resolve the almighty tangle she'd woven here...even if she could prevent Braeden Carthew igniting a planetwide jihad against non-existent alien conkers with hypnotic powers...even if she could stay alive through all that and somehow get back to her own life...Tollain would still be there. Tollain, the weird little child-faced goblin with whom she was terribly afraid she had already fallen very gravely in love. Tollain, who offered her himself and all his kingdom and asked so little in return, only everything she had. Tollain, who was so insufferably perky and bouncy in the mornings when all she wanted to do was sleep...

"I ain't comin' back an' you can't make me!"

Suncat woke with a start. The air had chilled, and the sun was behind the house so that now she lay in deep shadow. The next second, something unexpectedly heavy, not to mention bony, had landed across her midriff.

She raised her head, and looked into a pair of terrified dark green eyes in an indescribably dirty face. The child's hair was gathered up under a battered forage cap, but a few platinum wisps had escaped.

"Hide me," the girl begged. "Hide me, kind lady, he's comin'!"

Suncat's guard, for some reason absent from his post, came puffing round the side of

the house, his gun out.

“Hey!” he panted. “You’re trespassin’!”

The tall figure in the duster and wide-brimmed hat stopped at the edge of the lawn and tipped the brim momentarily. There was a scarf round the lower half of his face.

“I’m right sorry about that, sir,” he said, “and as soon as I have retrieved my little baby cousin there we’ll be vacatin’ your premises toot sweet. Come on, Tinkie.”

Tinkie, if that was her name, shook her head and tried to burrow into Suncat. “I ain’t comin’!” she screeched.

“Ma’am,” the stranger said, “I’d take it as a kindness if you’d reach me that there fugitive from justice.”

“Why?” Suncat said. “What’s she done?”

“I ain’t done nothin’!” Tinkie averred.

“Why, ma’am, she ran away,” the stranger said.

“He’s a monster!” Tinkie yelled.

“Indeed I am not,” the stranger said. “I’m your own cousin Dermot, just come over from Farhavens to stay for a spell while my jaw heals, and just ‘cause I’m charged to wear this muffler to keep the cold air from it, she thinks I’m some alien monster or I don’t know what.”

“You are!” Tinkie pounced. “You’re a alien monster!”

“Parently it’s all the talk round these parts,” cousin Dermot went on. “Reckon she must a’ picked it up over to school or wherever. Now I don’t want no trouble, ma’am and sir, but this here is my cousin and I’m bidden to fetch her home.”

Suncat looked at the guard, as anonymous behind his mask as the stranger in his muffler.

“Take her and go,” the guard said, bluster masking nervousness. *They’re really not cut out for this*, Suncat thought, *despite all Braeden’s pseudo-military messing about.*

The stranger strode forward, plucked Tinkie up by one skinny arm and hoisted her over his shoulder. “Thank you kindly, ma’am and sir,” he said, and strode back the

way he had come, climbing easily over the garden fence and on to the road. Tinkie's outraged screams died away.

"What's been happening here?" Shallen and Braeden appeared at a run. The guard explained, skating not quite lightly enough over the part where he hadn't arrived till halfway through, and while Braeden was reaming him out about that, Shallen fussed around Suncat.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she said, several times.

"Yes, yes," Suncat kept saying. "Shallen," she said, putting her hand on the other's arm, "are they—do people round here know about this? About the—aliens?"

"Well, we haven't exactly been advertising," Shallen said, "but people do talk, you know. Things get around. Why?"

"Oh, no reason." Suncat was vague. "I think I'd like to go in now."

Shallen accompanied her up to the room that had become hers, and watched her as she lay down again on the bed. The expression on her face was compounded of a number of emotions, not all of which Suncat could identify. After a long moment, she smiled, went out and closed the door.

After a long, tense time of waiting, Suncat extracted the small ball of paper from its hiding place and carefully unravelled it. It was in Kaichang's firm round hand.

Suncat -

We're all here and ready to try and get you out, but we need to know what's happening so we don't mess it up and make things worse. If you can find something to write with, use the other side of this paper, then screw it up again and drop it over the fence next time you're outside. We'll find it.

We don't have the ghost of a plan, so if you've got any ideas, jump right in, okay?

Love,

It was signed by all five of them, and underneath, in a shaky but still legible hand, was the name Carson Meldrum.

Suncat closed her eyes very tightly against the hot tears. They were all here. All of

them, with their love and their need and their issues, and they wanted her back and it hurt so much. Kaichang, Verneen, Tollain, Orville, even Mitwoch...none of them would understand how stupid she'd been, how badly she'd messed things up. This wasn't a botched album or a missed concert. And Carson...

She got a firm grip on herself, breathed deeply and dried her eyes. Then she hid the paper under her pillow, opened the door and looked out.

"I say," she said to the inevitable guard. "Would you by any chance have a chopstick?"

"A what?" the guard said, startled.

"A chopstick," Suncat said. "It's a wooden stick about yea long. For my hair," she explained, lifting the mass of it. "I want it off my neck."

"I don't think we got any," the guard said uncertainly. Suncat would have bet on it; Argenthome's cultural paradigm was so profoundly insular that it would never even occur to most of the inhabitants that one could eat with anything other than a knife and fork, or else fingers. "I could maybe find you a pencil, miss," he offered.

Suncat sighed. "I suppose that would do," she said, "as long as it's got a good point on it."

"I'll sharpen it for you myself, miss," the guard said eagerly, and clumped down the stairs, pleased that the incomprehensible request had resolved into something he could do.

Suncat relaxed a little. That had been the easy part. Writing the letter would be harder.

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Back at Carson's farm, Orville stripped off the duster and unwrapped his face, while Verneen ran for the bathroom to wash hers.

"Went like a dream," he said. "So now we wait."

"I don't suppose they'll let her out again today," Kaichang said, from the depths of an armchair. "It'll be tomorrow before we hear. Still," she stretched luxuriously, "we make progress."

"I hope so," Orville said sombrely.

“Well,” Tollain said, in a bracing tone, “I know a really good way of passing the time.”

“You just want an excuse to play the torung again,” Kaichang said.

“No, I was thinking we could adjourn to the barn again and have a bit of a mess about,” Tollain said. “I mean, if you all felt up to it.”

“I could play,” Korynn announced.

“Sure, why not?” said Orville.

“I’m in,” Verneen said, coming back freshly scrubbed.

“All right,” Kaichang said, feigning annoyance. “Someone get me out of this chair, I think it has long-term designs on me.” She put out her hands and waggled her fingers peremptorily, and Verneen and Orville took a hand each and heaved.

“Can we come listen?” Orman said, glancing at Gattis.

“I’m sure these good folks don’t need you clutterin’ up the place,” Carson began.

“No, we’d be glad of an audience,” Tollain said. “We’ve not done that many gigs as a band, it’s all useful.”

“How about you, Carson?” Verneen asked.

The old man hesitated. “Naw, I got the farm accounts to do, and bein’ Speaker means you get a ton of homework,” he said. “Sides, somebody got to fix supper in an hour or two.”

“And anyway,” Kaichang said gently, “it’s always Suncat you really come to hear.”

“I can’t help that, Miss Kaichang,” Carson said. “It’s just her voice.”

“We know,” she answered him. “We love her too.”

The five of them left the farmhouse and walked over to the empty barn, followed by the two boys. Orville and Kaichang pulled open the doors and switched on the lights, and there, where the straw and miscellaneous rubbish had been swept clear, were the instruments, where they had been set up for the rough recording earlier that day of “I’m Coming Back For You.”

For the next two hours Tollain at least was happy. The absence of Suncat still gnawed at him like a missing limb, but he was with his first love and, for the moment, that

was enough. Kaichang, Korynn and Verneen played with gusto and intensity; Orville with the traditional I'm-not-with-these-people air of the dedicated bass player, but nonetheless competently. They ran through a selection of old standards, culled from Tollain's encyclopedic memory and imparted by him to the others as practice pieces back on Goliard; Portsmouth, Merlin, Ethelion, Thomas the Rhymer. Interspersed with these were locally remembered songs from the Truesingers' repertoire; Tattercoats, Westron Witch, Joan. And, of course, there were a sprinkling of Gestalt's own songs, Fellswooping, Sister Awaken, and Blues For Elfrida.

Gattis and Orman were enraptured. They clapped enthusiastically after every number, and sometimes in the middle if one of the band did something particularly showy or funny. Tollain in particular took pleasure in adding a certain amount of clowning to his performance, especially when he came forward from behind his drums and sang the lead.

As they rounded off the final song, the sound of the triangle being struck came to all their ears.

"One more?" Kaichang said to Tollain, unlimbering her axe.

"What did you have in mind?" he said.

"Just follow," she answered, closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

*"Dark, dark is the shadowed path,*

*Cold, cold is the wind.*

*Tell me truly if you can*

*How have I sinned?"*

Her dark, rich voice rang out, laden with raw passion, flexing the harmony like the very voice of the blues.

*"Long, long is the lonely road,*

*Deep, deep is the snow.*

*Tell me, if you love me true,*

*How far must I go?"*

The others (all but Korynn, who never sang) joined in with vocal harmonies, laying their instruments aside. Kaichang sang on, her eyes still tightly closed, pulling the words from deep within herself.

*“Far, far is the distant day,*

*Cruel, cruel is the night.*

*Tell me, while my eyes still see,*

*Shall I reach your light?”*

Her hand made a lifting gesture, and they followed her up a whole tone.

*“Cold, cold is my sundered heart*

*Dark, dark is the moon.*

*Tell me, oh my only love,*

*Shall I find you soon?”*

There was a moment’s silence, and then Gattis and Orman began to applaud.

“Not the most upbeat closing number ever,” Tollain said to Kaichang, “but exactly right.” He took her hand and squeezed it.

“Thanks,” she said, a little huskily.

“All right, people,” Tollain said, “now you’ve worked up an appetite, let’s switch everything off and go eat. And I want volunteers for washing up at very least.”

Gattis and Orman at once protested that there weren’t no call for that, but Tollain overruled them, shooing everyone to the doors with effortless command.

Orman, outside under a cold sky already sprinkled with stars, drew close to Kaichang.

“That was a moment of rare beauty, Miss Kaichang,” he said in a low voice.

Kaichang looked at him in surprise. “Thank you,” she said.

Orman hesitated. “We just, Gattis and me, we just wanted you to know, Miss Kaichang,” he said, “anything we can do. Anything. We’ll do it.”

Gattis, watching from behind him, nodded vigorously.

“Well, thank you,” Kaichang said, adding, “You must be very fond of Suncat.”

“Oh, not for her, Miss Kaichang,” Gattis said quickly. “No, ma’am.”

“We don’t know her,” Orman said.

“We know you,” Gattis said, “and we know you’re hurtin’.”

“And that there,” Orman added, “is a thing that surely cries out to be made right.”

Kaichang was momentarily lost for words.

“So you just remember,” Gattis said. “Anything. You just ask.”

Kaichang went into the warmth of the farmhouse, feeling oddly reassured.