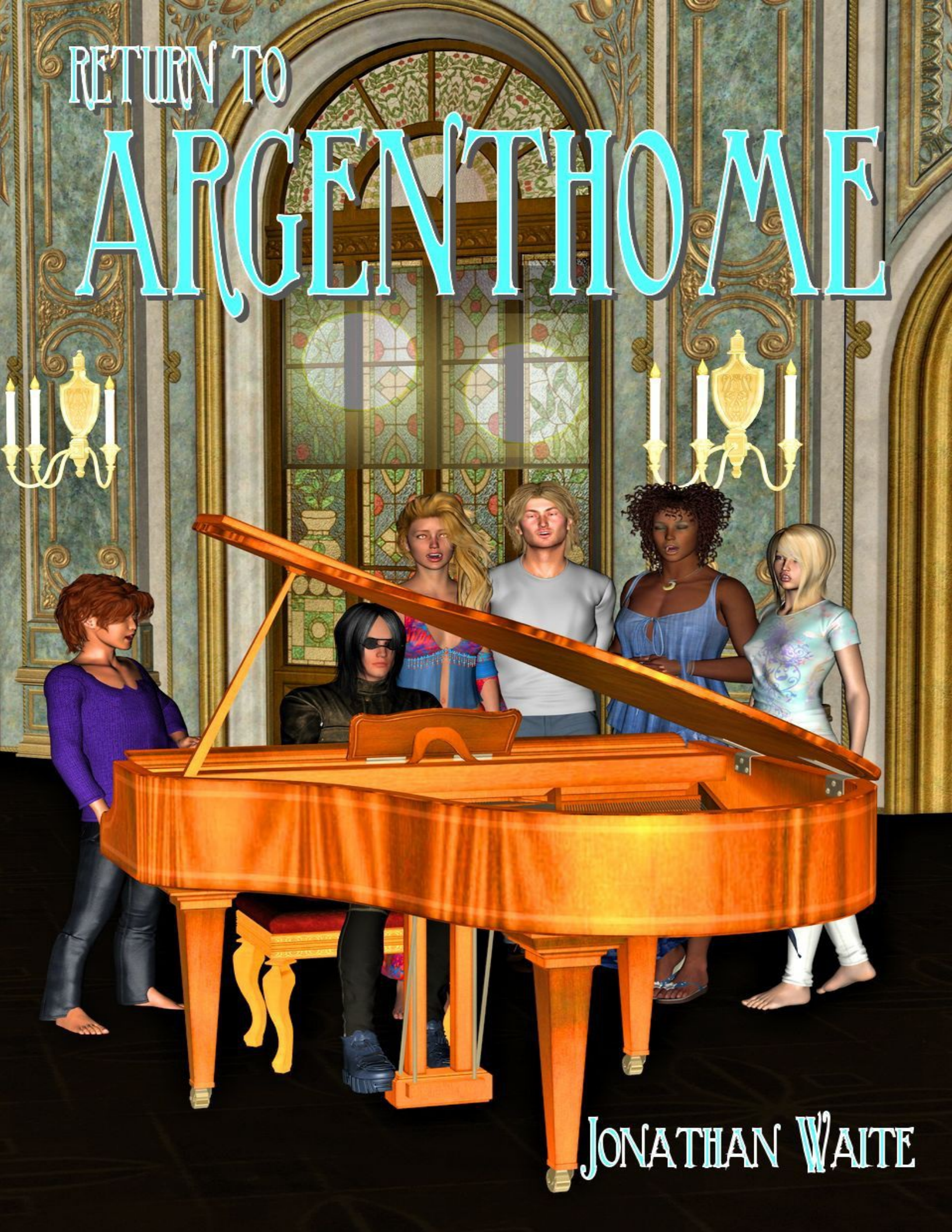


RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Despite the comfortable bed, Suncat slept badly that night. Almost as soon as the sun had risen, she got up, put on once again the increasingly sorry-looking pink and blue outfit that she was definitely going to have to replace—she had seen no women around Coldsands other than Shallen, and while they were roughly of a size that was one step Suncat was not prepared to take—wound her hair up around the pencil for the sake of artistic verisimilitude and all that sort of thing, and opened the door of her room.

Nobody was about. She suspected the adorable Braeden would have preferred to lock her in, but that Shallen had overruled him. The girl evidently knew exactly how far she could go with that one. Suncat wondered if she could make it as far as the road before anyone noticed. Not that she had any intention of trying.

As she opened the back door and stepped out into the garden, a figure in a mask who had been standing by the gate turned and saw her.

“Mornin’, miss,” he said.

“Good morning,” Suncat said, as cheerfully as she could. “Have they made you stand out here in the cold all night?”

“No, miss.” He could hardly have been seventeen last birthday. He held his gun like someone who saw one once in a bad holodrama. His eyes, through the gap in his woollen mask, were frank, none too bright, and a little afraid of her. Suncat suppressed a wave of sadness. She had made her own poxy bed, and if she couldn’t sleep soundly in it, that was her own lookout.

“Droyc was out here till oh dark, an’ then I come out,” he explained. “I’ll be goin’ in come breakfast time, and Yorgen’ll take over from me. Leader, Mister Carthew, he worked it all out so none of us got to stay on guard too long.”

“I’m just going to walk about a bit, if that’s okay,” Suncat said. “I’ll go in when you do.”

“Surely, miss,” the boy said.

Suncat made a show of circumnavigating the garden, ducking under the overgrown kampoulia branch whenever necessary. He watched her for the first few minutes, till he was satisfied that if she were to try and make a run for it he could catch her, and then his attention wandered; she could see it happening, shooting occasional glances at him from under her lashes.

She managed to drop the little ball of paper by the fence without him noticing, and wandered casually back towards the house. Ducking under the branch again, she suddenly uttered a sharp cry and dropped to one knee.

The young guard came hurrying over. "What's wrong, miss?"

"Something stung me," Suncat said.

"Must a' been a zimbug," the boy said. "Funny, though...this time o' year they should all be dead." He peered at her ankle. "Nothin' to see...then there wun't be. Them stings is so tiny."

"I think I'd like to go in now, if you don't mind," Suncat said, a little faintly.

"Surely, miss," said the boy, as a window opened upstairs and Shallen's head popped out. She was apparently naked, at least to the waist. That would be the room she shared with the fragrant Braeden, then.

"Anger!" she cried. "What are you doing out there?"

"I couldn't sleep," Suncat said, accepting the boy's supporting arm. "Something stung me, I'm coming in."

"You shouldn't go out alone," Shallen scolded. "What if...you know..."

"I'm not alone," Suncat said. "I have this gallant young man with me...what's your name?"

"Darben, miss," the boy said.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Darben." Suncat contrived to shake Darben's free hand, once he had tucked his gun into his waistband.

Braeden's head and naked shoulders shot out of the window, and Shallen went *oof* as he elbowed her aside. "Did you just give the prisoner your name, soldier?" he barked.

“Uh...yessir.”

“Mister, you are on report!” Braeden snapped. “I should kick your sorry behind so far out of this man’s army you’d forget how to fight for breath. Report for disciplinary action after breakfast. You, get in here. Flaunting your flesh—” This last was evidently to Shallen. The window slammed.

“We won’t mention Droyc or Yorgen,” Suncat murmured.

“Thank you kindly, miss,” Darben said, going very red.

As he helped her hobble back to the house, Suncat used the part of her mind that was not keeping up the well-practised imitation of pain that had saved her so often from the real thing to devise intricate and fiendish things to do to Braeden Carthew, if by some miracle she ever got the chance.

Kaichang would help. She was good at planning that sort of thing. And when Suncat lost her nerve, as she knew she would, Kaichang would carry the thing through.

She wished she could believe she would see Kaichang again.

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“I got it,” Verneen reported.

It was mid-morning. Gestalt had got up early, woken by Tollain as usual, had invaded the farm kitchen and made breakfast for everyone over the steadily dwindling objections of Carson and his sons, and Orville and Verneen had taken the truck to the general shop in Northshores town to replenish Carson’s depleted store cupboards. When he had seen what they had brought back, Carson had wondered aloud if they were planning to ride out a siege. They had detoured via Coldsands on the way back, and while Orville, in his duster and scarf, had pretended to have engine trouble about half a mile from the meinie house, Verneen had crept up to the fence, unseen by the inattentive guard, and retrieved the little ball of paper.

“What’s it say?” Tollain demanded.

“I didn’t look,” Verneen said with dignity, putting it carefully on the kitchen table.

“She wouldn’t even let me.” Orville sounded aggrieved.

“This way we all find out together,” Verneen explained, smoothing out the paper.

“Okay, here goes.”

She began to read.

My darlings (Suncat had written),

DON'T whatever you do try to rescue me. I've been HORRIBLY STUPID and made everything a million times worse. They now believe there really ARE aliens and they're going to start a WAR. I was only thinking of myself AS USUAL and I've messed everything up. I HAVE to try and sort it out. I don't know how but I CAN'T just leave it and swan off. I hope you understand that. I think you will.

Tollain, I REALLY love you but I love Kaichang and Verneen too, AND Orville. I can't be just yours, or just any one person's. So maybe it's better if I'm nobody's. I WISH I could say come and get me—B is QUITE mad and will probably kill me in the morning, plus I've been wearing the same clothes for what feels like MONTHS—but you see I can't. Try to love each other a bit. Even Korynn—he doesn't mean to be scary, he just is.

If I can work the miracle and get out of this alive I hope I'll see you again one day. In the meantime it would be safest if you all just go home and carry on without me. Kaichang can sing my parts perfectly well if she PUSHES.

The last few lines were written spiral fashion around the edges of the paper:

I'm running out of space here. Take care, my loves, and make brilliant music. Thank you for bringing me home—it would have been nice if it hadn't all gone wrong. Tell Daddy I love him in spite of everything Love SUNCAT.

Verneen stopped reading and looked up.

“That's all,” she said. “It's definitely her handwriting.”

Tollain looked around the room.

“I take it we're all agreed,” he said. His tone was light as ever, but his eyes were deadly serious.

Orville nodded. So did Kaichang.

“You mean we're going to go ahead anyway,” Verneen said.

“Well, yes,” Orville said.

“Now just hold on a second,” Carson Meldrum said. “You people know I’m as fond of Miss Suncat as anyone—as any of you,” he added, and hesitated, a little surprised at himself. “But if what she says is right—”

“Then we’re just going to have to stop the war as well,” Tollain said simply.

“And just how in the hell are you goin’ to do that?”

Tollain shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “We’ll think of something.”

“You’re musicians,” Carson insisted. “You ain’t never held a gun in your hands in your life, have you boy?”

“No, and I don’t plan to,” Tollain retorted. “I don’t know much about war, Seir Meldrum, you’re right there, but one thing I do know is that starting it is a damn silly way to stop it. Anyway, Suncat says herself she’s got no idea how to do it, so the field is wide open.”

Kaichang put a hand on Carson’s arm. “We won’t let this happen to your planet,” she said. “Trust us.”

“I trust you to do your best, Miss Kaichang,” the old man said. “I just don’t know if you can.”

“Nobody ever does,” Tollain said briskly, “the first time. Right, what have we got?”

The question startled everyone.

“Come on,” Tollain said. “We can all play music and write songs, that’s a given.

Kaichang, you’re good at unarmed combat of some sort, aren’t you?”

“Several sorts,” Kaichang said comfortably.

“Orville?”

“I’ve been beaten up a lot,” Orville said. “Does that count?”

“That’s three of us, then,” Tollain said.

“I’ve done some archery,” Verneen offered. “Target shooting, but I was quite good.”

“Okay. Korynn?”

“I do not fight,” Korynn stated flatly.

“No, but you can make pretty much anything we need in the way of microphones and

sound gear. We brought a bunch of kit from *Bellbird*. And you know about all that sonic stuff we talked about earlier. So, if we were to, say, ask you for a radio mic small enough to go unnoticed and long-range enough to send a signal here from Coldsands —”

“That would be entirely feasible,” Korynn said.

“There we go.” Tollain spread his hands.

“How would we get it in there?” Orville demanded.

Tollain mimed shooting a bow. “Twang?” he said.

“And suppose they’ve got stuff to detect bugs?” Kaichang said.

“From what you’ve told me, it really doesn’t sound like that sort of outfit.” Tollain got up from the table and began to pace. “If Sunecat’s worried about a war, then there must be others out there, people this Braeden hopes to bring in on his side—the people they’ve been co-ordinating, like Sunecat’s father said—but right here and now it’s just them, and they’re not much more than a gang of thugs with some guns. Later they’ll have all that, the tech and the money and the manpower, but not yet. So this is the time. If we’re ever going to derail this, now is the moment. Right?”

“Do you really think we can?” Verneen said.

“As I said,” Tollain answered, “I don’t know. Is that a problem?”

“It’s something we ought to think about,” she said, “don’t you think?”

Tollain looked at her. “Can we afford to?”

“How can we afford not to?” Verneen was aghast. “We can’t just stumble into something like this—”

“Fine,” Tollain said, suddenly angry. “Let’s sit down and think very clearly about all the reasons why it can’t possibly work. And then let’s do as Sunecat says and go home, because we’re obviously not up to the job. Let’s be logical and rational and forget everything that’s important about this, and leave her to do all the work on her own. I’m going to the barn.”

The door slammed behind him.

“Little man in a great big temper,” Kaichang remarked. “What the frod did you say to him, love?”

Verneen was shaking, her eyes already full. “I—I just thought we ought to th-think about wh-wh-whether—” she began.

“Oh, you were talking *sense* to him,” Kaichang said, in an oh-I-see sort of tone. “My darling, sense doesn’t work on men. They can’t wrap their tiny brains around it. At least,” she glanced uncomfortably at Carson, “not till they get much older. That’s why they get angry.”

“Don’t mind me, Miss Kaichang,” Carson said with a grin. “You just go ahead and speak your mind.”

“But Verneen,” Kaichang went on gently, “this is not one of those times when sense is what we need. This is exactly the time for men to do what they do best, and sense only gets in the way. We’ll need it later, but right now I’m with Kintarsh. We’ve got to try.” She came round the table to gather Verneen in a hug. “You’re right, of course. Just not right now.”

Verneen looked up into her face and managed a smile. “Okay,” she said, only a little damply. “Will you calm him down or should I?”

Kaichang cocked her head. Through the open window there drifted the sound of furious drumming. “Let him calm himself down,” she said. “Let’s talk about this arrow-borne bug idea, see what we’re going to need. Mittwoch?”

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In the barn, hammering out a relentless eleven-eight on toms and cymbals, Tollain seethed.

He was not exactly sure what, in point of fact, he was seething about. The fact remained that there was serious seething to be done about something, and he was the man for the job. It was something to do with Suncat, and her being missing, and Kaichang and Verneen, and Orville, and wars and politics keeping on getting in the way of the important things in life, and...

...and the fact that Suncat was perfectly right, of course. She could never belong to

him. She could never belong to anyone. Nobody did. He knew that. It went without saying.

So why did she think she needed to say it? And to everyone like that?

He knew he loved her. He had known it since they had first met, and parts of his life that had been waving around loose for twenty years had suddenly met and connected with the one thing for which they had been designed. He needed her in his life, somehow. She made the music flow for him as it had never flowed before, needing no contrivance, no technical wizardry to make it interesting. It wasn't that she inspired him; it wasn't that direct. It was more that, now she was here, half his brain that had always been distracted because something was missing was now satisfied and on the job.

And yet, of course, now, she was *not* here. And his mind, as well as his heart, missed her all over again.

Tollain had no illusions about himself. In a litter full of runts he would still be the runt. He was small, permanently arrested at an immature stage of development, his body ravaged by someone else's disease. In all his life he might gain another inch or so in height, but some things would never function properly, as they did for other men. There were ways to compensate for that, of course, and with the conscientious diligence that was (had he but known it) the hallmark of his nature he had absorbed them all and become highly accomplished in multiple techniques; but the one great central lack remained, and he could hardly avoid the thought that it must make some difference. Sooner or later any long-term companion must find him wanting, and then...well, nothing good came of that.

He switched from eleven-eight to four-four, using a complicated series of fills to keep the beat going while he shifted stresses and juggled downbeats.

Could he share her with Kaichang and Verneen? With Orville? With Korynn, if it came to that?

He *liked* them all, certainly. He knew that to them he was an unknown quantity, maybe an intruder into something that had been settled. He understood Korynn's driven nature, Orville's uncertain bravado, Verneen's shyness, Kaichang's bluster; or

he thought he might, given more time. There was too much of a person to understand completely in one lifetime; the great thing was to try, and keep trying.

But to share his love with them...

This was uncertain territory. In the galaxy at large, relatively few governments or religions bothered trying to tell people who they could or could not love, mainly because they tended to go ahead and do it anyway. Even the Last Empire, as far as Tollain knew, had been fairly liberal on this one point. The galaxy at large was, of course, a big place, and “relatively few” could add up to quite a large number; Argenthome had been one such till quite recently, and people like the unspeakable Kit, Suncat’s brother, had been keen to try to roll things back. Tollain had been fascinated to hear about Carson’s daughter and her wife; he suspected there had been some talk about that when it had happened.

But that wasn’t even the problem. It was Tollain himself.

He realised that somewhere along the line he had stopped hammering the drums. He was now maintaining a steady two-four on kick, snare and hi-hat, barely brushing the skin of the snare. The anger had gone. He had come to the source of what had made him angry and found it—of course—within himself.

He wanted Suncat back. But even if they succeeded...if they managed to get her back...it would not, could not be as it had been before. She had changed the rules in one line of that scribbled note. That would have to be faced. And he didn’t know if he could do that.

Is that a problem?

His own words came back to him freighted with irony. Of course it *was* a problem. He shook inside with fear at the trial ahead. If he muffed it—if he put one foot wrong—he could end up smashing the band to pieces, at very least. And he knew, with everything that lay inside him, that the band was right.

And Verneen had been right. It did matter that they had never done anything like this before. They did need to think about it. She had been right, and he had snapped and snarled at her because he was scared himself.

He brought the rhythm to an end with a neat fill and a shimmering roll on the ride

cymbal. It was time to go back in and apologise. He had known it, of course. He'd just had to get there his own way first.

He got off the stool, put the sticks back neatly in their pouch and left the barn, switching the lights off behind him. For some reason he expected it to be dark outside, but the sun was nearly at its zenith, a pale silver disc in a white sky, as he crossed the yard.

He was completely unprepared for what he found.

Carson was watching Korynn, who had covered the kitchen table with an antistatic cloth and was doing something intricate with lots of very small objects, assisted by Kaichang, who was being unusually quiet and attentive, and not seeming to mind much.

"Miss Verneen's over to the workshop with Gattis and Orman," Carson said, "makin' a bow and some arrows."

"Since we unaccountably failed to pack any," Kaichang put in with a smile that took away any possible sting.

"They can't speak to the quality of the wood, but Miss Verneen says what they've got should do," Carson went on. "Bein' as how you won't be doin' any championship tournaments."

"Orville's gone over to Coldsands to see if they leave any windows open," Kaichang said. "Seems unlikely, but you never know."

Tollain leaned against the door frame, all but overcome with joy. He was not a believer in any god; if he believed in anything, it was in a principle that pervaded the universe, above and beyond any human agency and in defiance of all the cruel and ineluctable laws of nature, which he called "kindness." Now here it was. What he lacked had been supplied; his weakness had been overcome by a greater strength not his own. In this moment, he truly loved these people, and he knew that he always would.

"And if you ever upset Verneen like that again, Kintarsh," Kaichang added absently, passing a delicate tool to Korynn, "I'll rip out your liver and use it as a football."

Tollain laughed. "If I do, I'll hand it to you myself," he said. "And don't worry about

the window. I know someone in that house who always leaves one open, and so does Orville if he thinks about it...and so do you.”

Kaichang suddenly looked as though she would like to kick herself.