

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Suncat had spent that morning enlarging on the internal politics of the Patriarchy of Glaarght for the benefit of Braeden. After a slightly sticky moment when she had called them the Confederacy by mistake (and had to invent an entire chapter of history and a bloody, or at any rate ichorous, civil war to account for the slip) it had gone frighteningly well.

After the first hour she had had an inspiration, and Helva-Naktras had announced that sending its voice directly through the human unit was overtaxing both of them, and that henceforth the human unit would relay its words directly in her own voice.

“Good enough,” Braeden had grunted. “I was gettin’ sick of your damned croakin’ anyhow.”

Oo, you charmer, Suncat had thought. You’ll be first against the wall when our invasion fleet arrives. Help, I think I’m going mad.

All ordeals, however, come to an end, and now Suncat was eating lunch under the watchful eye of Shallen, while Braeden discussed strategy with his troops, who had eaten earlier.

It had been a lot easier, simply crossing her eyes slightly and intoning the words in a spacy sort of voice, and by now Braeden had believed in her alien possessor for so long it would take a hell of a lot to make him doubt. It was called the sunk cost fallacy, and guys like Braeden fell for it every time.

Guys like Braeden. Suncat had met them, quite a few of them, in her short life. Bullies, jerks, morons, little tyrants, they were all the same and they never learned. Kaichang was right about them at least; there was nothing to be done with them except avoid them. Whether you did or not, the outcome would be the same; they would try and swagger through life as if they were superbeings, life would casually swat them down a few times, and eventually they would give up and turn into sagging, embittered bullies, jerks and tyrants with a constant sense of grievance against the universe, sitting in bars whining about how it wasn’t fair that a man couldn’t catch a break. And then their sons, if any, viewing the aged parent with

contempt, would swear that it wasn't going to be like that for them, *oh* hell no, and another generation of little Braedens was born. The life cycle was as clear as if she had seen it on a wall chart in biology class.

So why did any woman of sense ever go for them?

And—and this was important—could Braeden, being what he was, actually do what Shallen seemed to think he could?

All Suncat had seen of his revamped Cold December so far had been him, Shallen, and half a dozen likely lads in masks, three of whom she could name. Their discipline was sketchy at best, their training non-existent, their equipment a handful of pop guns and one armed copter, now lost. Shallen had mentioned contacts in the south, but Suncat could hardly believe that. The Southern Coalition had resources, certainly, but their economy had been artificially depressed for centuries to the profit of Broadfields and the north. They could hardly welcome a return to that state of affairs. She caught Shallen's eyes on her, and addressed herself to her food with renewed gusto.

She needed more information. If she were going to stop this thing in its tracks, she needed to know how far it went, who else was involved.

"Shallen," she said tentatively.

"Yes?" The response was quick, almost too quick.

"This is all real, isn't it?" *Oh Goddess, I hate this.*

Shallen nodded soberly. "Yes, sweetie, I'm afraid it is." She had finally come to accept that Suncat had no awareness of the supposed alien's presence within her, and had stopped trying to convince her.

"Then...are you sure that...that you and Braeden can stop it?"

For a moment, Shallen looked doubtful. Then her face cleared. "Yes, Anger, I think so. I really do think we can."

"How?" Suncat burst out. "I mean..." She gestured widely. "With this?"

"This isn't everything, you silly nubbin." Shallen was almost sharp. "This is just the nerve centre. Braeden's got friends everywhere."

Suncat privately doubted that he had friends anywhere, unless drinking buddies counted. “Like where?”

“Oh, Anger,” Shallen said sadly, “you know I can’t tell you that.” She dropped her voice to a whisper (*like that would help*, Suncat thought). “*It* might be listening in.”

“But I thought you said it was on our side.”

“*It says* that, sure,” Shallen said. “But it’s an *alien*. How can you trust something that isn’t even human?”

“Then how can you believe anything it tells you?” Suncat asked reasonably.

“We don’t, necessarily.” Shallen had become guarded, and Suncat cursed inwardly.

“But even if it’s lying to us, that’s useful. It can tell us things without meaning to. That business about the civil war, for instance, that might give us something we can use to create division among the aliens.”

Good luck with that. “So you can’t tell me anything?”

“All I can tell you,” Shallen said, “is that there are more of us than the few you see here. We’ve got help, Anger, we can make a real difference. They’ve all been told about the aliens, and when we prove it to them, they’ll be even more committed to the cause. In fact, we’re expecting some gadgets within the week that’ll make things a lot easier.” She glanced around, as though fearful that she had already said too much. “Now finish your meal like a good girl and then go and get some rest. Braeden wants another session at four, and I don’t want you overtiring yourself.”

“Shallen,” Suncat said again, when she had taken her plate to the sink and washed it. It had to be said. “You know I would never betray you, don’t you?”

Shallen, startled, laughed. “I keep telling you, silly,” she said. “I know you. You’ve never told a lie in your life. You wouldn’t even know how. Now go and rest.”

But that wasn’t true, Suncat thought as she climbed the stairs to her room. Had Shallen really forgotten? All those times when Suncat—when *Anger*—had admitted to things she hadn’t done, because Shallen wanted her to? *Yeth, mith, it wath me.* From the very beginning. Did Shallen not remember any of that? That hurt.

Well, but neither had Suncat. She hadn’t even thought of it as lying. She was just

helping a friend. Anything you do to help others is worthy, so she had been taught. This time she had lied to help herself, and that was wrong and needed to be put right. Otherwise—well, she deserved anything that happened to her.

It was at this point in her thoughts that she opened her bedroom door, just as an arrow whizzed in through the open window.

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“That’s it,” Verneen whispered, ducking back down behind the fence as the guard turned their way. “I daren’t risk any more.”

“That is fortunate,” Korynn whispered back, “since I have no more units.”

They had brought three hastily-fledged arrows of a type common in ancient cultures of old Earth, to each of which Korynn had somehow fastened a tiny device about the size of Verneen’s smallest fingernail; big enough for Suncat to see and recognise, small enough—hopefully—to be easily concealed. The first arrow had bounced off the obtrusive kampoulia branch and whizzed into the bushes; the second had struck the wall six inches to the left of the open window that had to be Suncat’s. The masked guard on duty by the garden gate had noticed nothing; Orville was privately of the opinion that a charge of unslaked quassium under his boots might possibly attract his attention, if he happened not to be busy at the time.

“What are we going to do about the other two?” Orville said, as they edged cautiously back on to the road and behind the trunk of the kampoulia tree.

“Nothing we can do,” Verneen said. “Just hope they don’t search the garden. I told you I should have done some practising.”

“And I told *you* we couldn’t spare the time. Or the arrows. Keep moving.”

They were out of sight of the garden and round the angle of the house by now, but they maintained their careful vigilance till they were within arm’s length of the truck.

“So,” Orville said once they were aboard, “modified success. Assuming Suncat can work out what to do.”

“Of course she can,” Verneen said angrily. “She’s not *stupid*.”

“I didn’t mean—”

"I know, you wanted to send a note explaining. You know what that would have meant? *Three* notes. Two of them lying in the garden right now, ready to give the complete game away to anyone who tripped over them." Verneen was actually shaking. "I—I *hate* this," she said. "All of it. Kaichang's right, it all comes down to men being stupid and I'm sick of it. Once this is over I'm leaving."

"Leaving?" Orville was startled.

"I'm not a desperado," Verneen said through her teeth. "I'm not a soldier, I'm not a spy. I play the flute and I live a quiet life. That's who. I. Am. And if being in this band means I have to do this kind of thing—"

"Whoa." Orville belatedly started the truck and began to turn. "Hold on a minute. For one thing, all this is nothing to do with the band. This is politics."

"It's *all* politics," Verneen insisted. "Being in a band *is* politics. *Life* is politics. Suncat got into politics when she talked about Affiliation on stage that time, and that's why all this has happened, that's why we toured offworld and met T-Tollain, that's why I'm having to d-dress up and shoot arrows through w-w-windows and G-Goddess knows what else. And I can't even shoot straight any more and I'm not brave or clever or strong and I *don't like it!*" She was not scared, Orville realised; she was enraged. "It's not what I want in my life. It's not what I'm good at. It's already made me shout and g-give orders and push myself forward and I'm not happy and I'm not comfortable. So, I mean obviously I'll still be with Kaichang, but that's it. I'll see this thing through and I'll do what's got to be done and then, sorry, but I'm out."

"Hey, I'm with you," Orville said. "Me too."

She turned a startled face to him. "You? I thought you loved this kind of thing."

"Yeah, well, you thought wrong." Orville grinned at her, and then had to swerve to avoid another truck. "You're a flute player. I'm a bass player. Know what we have to do? Follow the drummer and not hit any bum notes. We don't have to do flashy solos, we don't have to look fancy, we don't have to play up to the press or throw ourselves about on stage. Follow the drummer, no bum notes. That's it. And for doing just that we get to be in the band. Cushy number, eh?"

"You do do flashy solos," Verneen said, momentarily distracted. "That one on

Burdell's World lasted two and a half minutes."

"Well, you can if you want to, but you don't have to, that's the point," Orville said. "Four strings, no chords. That's it. And that's what life is if you think about it. You follow the drummer and don't hit any bum notes, and just for doing that you get to be in the band. Thing is, sometimes the drummer can take you to some weird places. Especially if he's Tollain. You can find yourself wandering off into any old time signature." He grinned again, this time without taking his eyes off the road. "But sooner or later you find yourself back on solid ground again, and if you've kept up and not lost your bottle, the applause at the end is as much for you as it is for any of them." Now he did steal a glance at her. "And the gig don't last forever. That's the point."

"What are you saying?" Verneen was unwilling to let go of her anger.

"I'm saying don't make any decisions now. See this through like you said, and then see how you feel. If anyone makes any trouble about you wanting to leave, I'll back you up. If you still do. Is that fair?"

"Suncat won't like it," Verneen said.

"It's not her decision. It's yours. I'm absolutely with you that this kind of thing is above and beyond what a musician should be expected to put up with. But..." Orville shrugged, and braked the truck in the yard of Carson's farm. "It's what the drummer's playing at the moment. So let's follow it and try not to hit any bum notes, and see what the crowd thinks at the end. Okay?"

"I saw what you did there," Verneen said, looking at him sidelong. "I'm not stupid either."

"And?" Orville said. "Did it work?"

"I'll let you know," Verneen said, opening her door. "Come on, let's report in."

Inside, they found Tollain and Kaichang on the sofa in the parlour, hunched over a small table, on which was a device resembling a personal comlink that had partially exploded at some point.

"Any luck?" Tollain said.

“Channel C,” Korynn said, and Kaichang turned a switch.

“...to keep saying this and hope you’re getting it,” said Suncat’s voice, a little tinny but thoroughly recognisable. *“You’re all a bunch of idiots, and I love you all madly, and I’m so glad you didn’t bunk off and leave me. So okay, here’s the situation. Braeden Carthew, the guy in charge of this bunch, has told his people that Affiliation is a plot by aliens to take over the galaxy. He’s done something to Shallen, the girl with him who I used to know, brainwashed her or something—I mean really, Kaichang—so that she believes it too, and they were going to do it to me, only I pretended to be an alien myself, sort of, to get out of it, and of course now that’s proved it and Braeden believes it himself, if he didn’t before. They’re going to come for me in a couple of hours to interrogate me some more, and they plan to use me to prove it to lots of other people and start a revolution, and I have no idea how to stop it.”*

Verneen sat down next to Kaichang on the sofa, and Orville perched on the arm beside Tollain. Korynn remained standing.

“I’ll take this down and put it somewhere unobtrusive in the room where they question me. I think it’s where they do all their planning, so that should be most useful. They’re expecting a bunch of technical gubbins sometime soon from somewhere else, though, so if that includes surveillance detectors we’ll be stymied. I’ll keep stalling as long as I can and if I get an idea I’ll just go ahead with it. One thing I was thinking about was asking for some different clothes—maybe you could get involved in that. They’d probably go to the general shop in the village. Fishermen’s woollies and trousers with pockets all the way down. Ugh. Still, what must be.

“Darlings, I love you all and if we all get out of this alive I’m never going to let any of you out of my sight ever again. I just hope we can.”

Verneen’s hand crept into Kaichang’s. Orville noticed, but said nothing.

“Have I said everything? I can’t remember what I said last time. Should have written it down. I still have the pencil, but no paper. Oh. Three of the boys are named Darben, Droyc and Yorgen, they’ll be from the village. I don’t know if that’s useful. Well, I’ll just start again and hope I remember everything. Here’s the situation, then. Braeden Carthew...”

“Does it record?” Tollain asked.

“Automatically,” Korynn answered.

“Good,” Tollain said. “Kaichang, would you leave it on but turn it down?”

Kaichang turned a wheel and Suncat’s voice faded to a barely audible squeaking.

“It’ll be different every time,” she said. “It takes her ages to memorise anything.”

“Okay,” Tollain said. “So, there are two rogue arrows floating about with bugs on them—”

Korynn produced a small control box from his pocket, flipped back a cover to reveal three switches, and pressed two of them.

“Not any more,” he said.

“Did you just blow them up?” Orville demanded.

“No. I merely induced a strong current across two vulnerable points which simultaneously discharged the power cell and melted the circuitry. Nothing will have been noticeable outside the unit. It should also have detached the units from the arrows, which will reduce the risk of detection.”

“Good job,” Tollain said admiringly. “Where did you learn to do that?”

The lenses looked at him for a moment; then Korynn replaced the cover and returned the control box to his pocket.

“And that,” Orville remarked as Korynn closed the door behind him, “would be a firm ‘mind your own business’ for Seir Kintarsh.”

“Military,” Kaichang pronounced. “He’ll have done covert ops work.”

“When?” Tollain demanded. “He’s no older than we are.”

“There are planets where you get recruited at the age of seven,” Kaichang said. “Or there used to be. A bright kid with a penchant for electronics would be a goddess-send to a terrorist cell.”

“Oh, not frodding politics again,” Tollain groaned.

Kaichang tensed, and Verneen’s hand tightened just a fraction on hers. The pale girl’s eyes met Tollain’s, and he looked away.

“All right,” he said, with an effort. “So. A trip to Coldsands village, then, to find out what we can and see if we can infiltrate this shop. I wonder if they deliver?”

“We didn’t see any evidence of a car or a truck at the farm,” Verneen put in. “So maybe. That road’s quite steep. You wouldn’t want to be making regular trips up and down it on foot.”

“You’d have to be fit,” Orville agreed.

“Okay, then, that’s a possibility. Then there are those three names. If they’ve got family, we could—wait a second.” Tollain listened. “Turn it up, quick.”

Kaichang turned the wheel again.

“—going on,” Suncat was saying. “There’s a car outside, it just arrived a moment ago, I can’t see it from here because it’s in the yard but I heard its engine, it’s not—”

They all gathered round the tiny speaker.

“There’s someone at the door,” Suncat went on. “Knocking, very loud. I don’t know if they’re going to—yes, I think so. I’m just going out on to the landing, I won’t be able to talk but you can listen.” There was the sound of a door opening, and Suncat’s voice again but clearly directed to another person nearby.

“What’s going on, Darben?”

“Don’t know, miss.” A male voice, young, hesitant. *“Guess somebody wants in.”*

A door opening, this one further away, and a distant voice, too faint to decipher, suddenly overridden by a much stronger voice, a familiar one to all but Tollain.

“My name is Elyot Segrave Morningsky. You may have heard of me. With me is Mr Derwent Cathcart Windyridge, the Presiding Seigneur of this planet. I would like to see Mr Braeden Carthew, and I would like to see my daughter. Please bring them here, immediately, or I warn you—”

Tollain leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head.

“That’s torn it,” he remarked.

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Suncat dodged back into the room, ignoring Darben’s startled glance, and leant

against the door, breathing hard.

Trust Daddy to mess things up, just when they had started to seem to be going her way at last. He would blow her little fairy tale completely out of the water. Not to mention furnishing a hostage far tastier than she herself. And Derwent too. What the frod was *he* thinking?

About doing what he was told, of course. He always had, from the very start. Wishy-washy Derwent, anybody's for a clear and unambiguous instruction. She could imagine the interview, her father mercilessly pounding at Derwent's resistance for, oh, say two or three seconds before the younger man caved in and told him everything. She abruptly remembered the tiny device clasped in her hand. Opening her fingers, she spoke into it.

"They're probably going to call me down in a moment or two...I'll take you with me, but I honestly don't know what's going to happen now. Hang in there."

She cast about herself for a hiding place, considered and hastily rejected one or two, and eventually attached the thing to a hank of her hair, using the small adhesive blob by which it had been fastened to the arrow, and wound the hair up tight around it with her trusty pencil. It would be impossible to drop it casually anywhere from there, but she imagined that the interrogation would now be postponed anyway. As she was finishing, Darben knocked on the door and opened it.

"Beg pardon, miss...they'd like to see you downstairs now."