

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Back in the parlour of Carson's farm, the other members of Gestalt listened intently.

"What's that rustling noise?" Tollain demanded.

"I do not know," Korynn said. He had come back some minutes later, and Tollain had not pursued his incautious question.

"Wait," Kaichang said, holding up her hand.

"Suncat," said the voice of Morningsky. *"My dear girl..."*

"He used her alien name," said another voice. *"Braeden, he used her alien name."*

"Alien name?" Morningsky was openly scornful. *"What nonsense is this?"*

*"I'm afraid it's true, Daddy,"* Suncat said. *"We've all been made the victims of a terrible—a—a terrible—"* She faltered, broke off, then resumed in a different tone. *"A terrible practical joke, Daddy,"* she said, in a voice that sounded almost but not quite like her own. *"If you'll excuse me, I will explain to my friends exactly how foolish they have been."*

There were noises of movement, and more of the strange rustling, and then a voice that had to be Braeden's. *"What in the hell is goin' on?"* he demanded. *"Why're you lyin' to him?"*

Kaichang rolled her eyes, and Verneen stifled something that was between a giggle and a gasp.

*"This is Helva-Naktras speaking now,"* Suncat said, in her spacy voice. *"Imperative compromised nature this unit not revealed to other controlled units. Would result in my termination and the failure of your mission. Likewise no aggressive action to be undertaken against controlled units till—till—"*

"Come on, girl," Kaichang whispered.

*"Till direct conflict initiated,"* Suncat continued. *"Human unit in extreme emotional distress. Interfering with speech relay. You will now allow her to converse with other controlled units so that I can rectify discrepancies."*

*"What's it sayin'?" Braeden's voice was querulous. "I don't get this."*

*"I'll explain it to you, darling." Shallen had obviously caught up. "Anger, go talk to your father. Go on."*

*"Helva-Naktras?" Verneen repeated. "Really?"*

*"How stupid are these people?" Kaichang wondered aloud.*

*"They're scared," Orville said bluntly. "Scared can look a lot like stupid."*

*"It's in her hair," Tollain said suddenly, snapping his fingers. "She's hidden it in her hair."*

*"Ah," Korynn said, with equal suddenness. Startled at the uncharacteristic interjection, they looked at him. "That may have been unwise," he continued, looking, as far as Korynn Mitwoch could look, a little embarrassed.*

*"Why?" Tollain asked.*

*"Ssh," Kaichang said.*

*"Daddy, I've only got a few moments," Suncat said urgently, over the speaker. "They think we're all being controlled by aliens and that the one controlling me is on their side. I think I've persuaded them to let you go, but you must please go."*

*"But—but my dear Suncat—" Morningsky was lost for words, his tone for once not smooth as polished stone but almost hoarse.*

*"Oh Goddess," Kaichang said. "Don't do it, Suncat...don't do it..."*

*"Go to Carson Meldrum's farm," Suncat said. "It's in Northshores, I'm not sure where but anyone will direct you."*

*"She did it," Kaichang moaned.*

*"Kaichang and Verneen and all the band are there, and we're going to find a way to stop this, but you must give us a clear field, Daddy. It's not just this place, there are others all over and we need to find out where they are—" Suncat broke off. "Understood," she said in the spacy voice. "This unit will continue surveillance. Return to central control and resume operations as planned."*

*"What? Er. Oh. Ah. I, um—" Morningsky, without a prepared response, floundered.*

*“Understood,”* said Derwent quickly, in a fair approximation of the voice. *“These units will return. Come along, sir,”* he said in a low voice. *“Back to the car. We’ll, ah, be returning to Broadfields,”* he added more loudly.

*“Congratulations,”* said Braeden’s voice as the door closed again. *“You performed pretty well. Of course I knew what you were doin’. I was just makin’ sure you were on your toes.”*

*“I do not possess toes,”* Suncat said spacily. *“May this unit resume its interrupted rest period now?”*

*“Well—”* Braeden grunted as though someone had kicked him in the shin. *“Yeah, yeah. Sure. Go. Session at, uh, half five light.”*

*“Understood,”* Suncat droned, and then the rustling began again as she presumably began to climb the stairs.

*“And now Great Big High And Mighty is coming here,”* Kaichang muttered. *“Oh rapture.”*

*“At long last,”* Tollain said, *“I get to meet Suncat’s father.”*

*“I wish you joy of him,”* Kaichang said acidly.

*“What—”* Tollain was interrupted by a peculiar series of noises coming from the speaker. Suncat seemed to be struggling with something.

*“I feared that would happen,”* Korynn remarked as the squeaks and ouches acquired a distinctly annoyed tone.

*“What the immediate frod is this frodding stuff? Ow!”*

*“What did you fasten the bug to the arrow with, Mitwoch?”* Kaichang inquired.

*“Circuit bonder,”* Korynn replied at once. *“It was the only thing I had to hand that would do the job. It...appears to have matured.”*

*“How’s she going to get it out of her hair?”*

The increasingly angry noises from the speaker were made no less acrimonious by having to be conveyed in a whisper. *“I’ll get you for this, Mitwoch,”* Suncat promised.

*“I’ll—ouch! Froddit!!”*

“Extreme heat destroys the bond,” Korynn said, “but would of course also decommission the unit. Otherwise the bonded hair must be removed. I am sorry. I did not plan for this eventuality.”

Orville looked at Verneen. She looked back enigmatically.

“Well, there’s no way we can tell her,” Tollain said, as the noises subsided to a furious muttering. “She’ll just have to leave it there. Shame, but that’s what happens. I would turn it down for a while if I were you, Kaichang.”

“Wouldn’t have happened if *Daddy* hadn’t barged in,” Kaichang muttered.

“What have you got against him anyway? I mean, apart from the obvious.”

“He’s high-handed, autocratic, dictatorial, bossy...”

“Not at all the gentle, submissive soul you’d expect to find running a planet,” Verneen remarked.

“All right,” Tollain said. “I get the picture. So now we have him to deal with as well. Okay. Back to the plan.”

“You don’t seriously suppose the plan will survive contact with His Mightiness, do you?” Kaichang said. “Five minutes after he gets here—”

“Kaichang,” Tollain said. “What’s the matter?”

Kaichang stared at him.

“I know you don’t like me,” Tollain went on, “and you don’t like Mitwoch and you think the band is a bad idea. I know you didn’t want to come back here, and you don’t like the social set-up here and you particularly don’t like Suncat’s father. And I know you’re off your head with worry about Suncat and how we’re going to get her back and stop this Braeden fellow, and you’re worried about Verneen as well because she’s so far out of her comfort zone she can’t even see it any more. (Sorry, Verneen.) Now,” he said, leaning forward and fixing her with a keen stare, “why in the worlds are you being so cranky?”

He stared at her, completely straight-faced, for ten full seconds, while she stared back, nonplussed. Then Kaichang began to laugh.

“When you put it that way,” she said, “I can’t possibly imagine. But you’re wrong,

little man, on at least three counts.”

“Which ones?” Tollain said, smiling.

“I’ll let you work that out for yourself. But you’ll see I’m right about King Elyot the First.”

“We’ll see about that,” Tollain said. “Right. How late does this shop stay open?”

“Have to ask Carson,” Orville said. “He and the lads are out somewhere working. He said we could use the truck if we needed to.”

“That truck is going to be recognised if we rely on it,” Kaichang said.

“But it’s all we’ve got,” Tollain pointed out.

“Not necessarily,” said a voice from the doorway.

Tollain turned, and saw a middle-aged man, his hair thinning now but still the same honey-gold as Suncat’s, his face aquiline and sharp-boned, his eyes grey. Behind him Derwent Cathcart Windyridge peered over his shoulder.

“Seir Morningsky,” Tollain said, turning to him. “It’s an honour to meet you, seir.”

“Seir Kintarsh, I presume.” Morningsky smiled down at him and shook his hand cordially. “The honour is mine.”

“If you don’t mind our asking,” Kaichang said, “how long have you been here?”

“Oh, quite long enough.” Morningsky advanced into the room, followed by Derwent.

“How are you, Serina Belgardis?”

“Very well, thank you for asking,” Kaichang said.

“Then you’ll have gathered the situation,” Tollain said. “We have a listening bug in the house. Unfortunately, it’s glued to Suncat’s hair at the moment, and we can’t see how to get it off. We’re planning to visit the general store in Coldsands village and see if we can get some more information that way, and also maybe set up another communication channel with Suncat. That’s as far as we’ve got at the moment. We know where she is, we know she’s not being harmed, and we know she doesn’t want to be rescued unless we can also stop the revolution or whatever it’s going to be.”

“Right,” Kaichang said. “And now Mister Morningsky will tell you what’s *actually* going

to happen.”

“No, Serina Belgardis, I will not,” Morningsky said. “Contrary to the opinion of some here, I do not rush into a situation and start issuing orders with neither the authority to do so nor the knowledge to do so wisely. As yet I only know half the situation, if that. Besides, my daughter requested that I give you a—what was it?—a ‘clear field.’” He spread his hands. “I am at your command, Seir Kintarsh. Should you wish anything for the furtherance of your ideas...say, another anonymous-looking vehicle to drive past the meinie house in Coldsands without attracting undue notice...I shall do my humble best to assist you.”

“You can do that?” Tollain said.

“I have a dedicated personal comlink,” Morningsky said, holding it up, “with which I can contact my old friend Laban Roper Krakendeeps. He has a positive fleet of vehicles of all kinds—what he does with them all I cannot possibly imagine—and will be happy to place one or more at our disposal—I do beg your pardon, Serina Belgardis, I should of course have said *your* disposal. Would that be of any use?”

“Definitely,” Tollain said. “Thank you, Seir Morningsky.”

“Not at all,” Morningsky said. He tossed the comlink to Derwent, who took it outside. Kaichang snorted audibly. “And now,” Morningsky went on, “not in any way representing a *quid pro quo* but purely so that I can be more effective as an assistant, would you mind acquainting me with the other half of the situation? I am aware that the meinie house at Coldsands is in the possession of a pro-Autonomist group who seem to be labouring under a singular delusion.” He perched on the edge of one of the armchairs. “Tell me the rest.”

They told him the rest, as far as they knew it, and he listened gravely, interrupting only with pertinent questions, most of which they were unable to answer.

“So as I understand it,” he said at length, “my daughter, in order to save herself from torture, has inadvertently corroborated a story which was originally invented by this man Carthew, thus placing him in a very neat dilemma. Even if he does not himself believe the story, he is obliged to act as if he did, and dare not expose her fraud for fear of exposing his own.” He chuckled. “I always knew she must have inherited my

brains.”

*Your luck, more like,* Tollain thought, and was surprised Kaichang had not said it aloud.

“Even if he could,” Orville pointed out, “this girl Shallen believes it so strongly herself she’d just think he’d been taken over too.”

“That is always a problem with creating zealots,” Morningsky remarked. “Their zeal inevitably outstrips one’s own in the end. I wonder, are the rest of his gang likewise brainwashed, or simply following of their own volition?”

“I think it may be just Shallen,” Orville said. “I didn’t see much of the guards, but they seemed just normal grunt types to me, not zealots. Probably just in it for the excitement, and taking all the weird stuff with a pinch of salt. Nobody knows anything about aliens on this world.”

“True,” Morningsky admitted. “A fact I hope young Mr Windyridge will take steps to remedy in due course. Where has he gone with my comlink?”

As if on cue, Derwent reappeared. “On its way, sir,” he reported, a little breathlessly.

“What were you doing?” Morningsky inquired acidly. “Debating the selection of colours?”

“No, sir. They were all more or less the same colour as I recall.” Derwent frowned as he called up a mental image. “A sort of matt finish sandy brown, or maybe biscuit colour—”

Morningsky closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Never mind,” he said. “What took you so long?”

“There’s a bit of a crowd outside,” Derwent said.

“A crowd?” Verneen looked up, startled.

“I was just comin’ to tell you,” Carson said, entering the room behind Derwent. “Oh, hey, Mr Windyridge, Mr Morningsky. I didn’t know you were here.”

“What’s going on?” Orville demanded.

“Seems your performance yesterday attracted some attention,” Carson said, “and folks have been stoppin’ by to see was there goin’ to be another. Gattis and Orman

got back from work ahead of me and they've been ravin' about it all over the place."  
"Oh, wonderful," Tollain grumbled. "As if we've got time to put on a show for anyone who—"

"Derwent," Kaichang said, standing up, "get out there and tell them we'll be setting up in ten minutes, starting in maybe thirty." She looked at Tollain, as the door closed behind the Presiding Seigneur, pro tem. "Of course we've got time," she said firmly. "We're a band. It's what we do. Right now there's nothing else we *can* do. We've got no ideas, no immediate plan, so we might as well do what we do best. We can use Seir Krakendeeps's truck tomorrow, if that's all right." She glanced at Morningsky, who nodded. "Out there are—about how many, Carson?"

"Fifty, maybe sixty," Carson said. "Mostly farm boys and girls and their partners, but there's a few from the town and a couple from the meinie house. Reckon there'll be more tomorrow."

"And all those people," Kaichang said, "could help. If we need them."

"I'm not raising an army!" Tollain was aghast at the mere thought.

"Of course you're not," Verneen said. "You're just a singer in a rock and roll band." She frowned, moved her lips silently for a moment, then shook her head and returned to the subject. "But Kaichang's right. The most useful thing we can do right now is spread some goodwill. And if that means playing some more...then I'm up for it."

"Me too," Orville said. "Come on. You're not going to tell me you don't feel like making music?"

Tollain stared back at him for a moment. Then he bounced to his feet, making Morningsky flinch.

"Course I do," he said. "I just didn't think I ought to. Right, are we all in then?"

He glanced at Korynn, the only one who had not spoken. Korynn nodded.

"Then let's go," Tollain said. "Seir Morningsky, will you come and join us?"

"I should like that," Morningsky said. "I fear I seldom heard my daughter sing in her professional capacity. Perhaps now I should devote some time to culture."

Tollain grinned up at him. “Oh, we’re not culture, seir,” he said. “We’re fun. Related concept, but slightly different.”

“I shall bear it in mind,” Morningsky said solemnly.

As the band emerged into the yard and headed for the barn a ragged cheer went up from the onlookers. Kaichang, with a practised eye, estimated that Carson had been out by a factor of about thirty per cent; that or the crowd had grown since he had come in. She heard various personal redactions of the band’s name being called, and somebody shouted “Save Miss Suncat!”

“We will,” she called back, unable to place the speaker. “But right now we’ve got some music to make!”

More cheering, growing louder as Orville and Derwent pulled open the barn doors and they saw the throng already inside.

\*

Suncat had abandoned her attempts to pry the bug out of her hair. Whatever glue Korynn had used to fix it to the arrow, still sticky when she had pried it off, seemed to have chosen exactly the wrong moment to set solid. Of course there was no way he could have known what she was going to do with the thing; he had probably intended that she stick it to a wall or something, out of sight.

Well, it was stuck now all right. Which meant that listening in on the strategy sessions was out. Even if she could cut off the hank of hair to which it was attached (and *My haaaair!!* screamed her childish vanity) it would be far harder to conceal that anywhere. It was academic anyway. She’d got away with the pencil; a pair of scissors would be harder to wangle.

When Darben apologetically knocked to summon her to the delayed interrogation session, she had just time to wind up her hair around the thing and secure it with the pencil. All through the hours that followed, as she improvised freely on the subject of the military preparedness of the Patriarchy of Glaarght, she was aware of it, sitting there relaying her waffle to the others. She resisted several temptations to put in little jokes that only they would get.

It was just as Braeden was winding up, having satisfied himself of the answers he had

already decided he would get, that, once again, a little thought knocked politely at the back door of Suncat's mind. She kept it waiting while she "woke" from her "trance" and allowed the attentive Darben to escort her upstairs. She held it in check while she lay down on the bed, feigning weariness, and smiled feebly as Darben closed the door. She waited a little longer, as though her brainwaves might trip some astral alarm if she thought too loudly. Then she let the idea in, turned it round and about and looked at it from all angles.

It seemed good.

She pulled the pencil out of her hair, unwound the bug and pulled it down as close to her mouth as possible. Then, very quietly and quickly, she began to speak.

"I hope at least one of you is listening. Get this down. I've had an idea..."

In the empty parlour of the farmhouse, her voice whispered urgently into Korynn's patient recorder, which had already dutifully stored twenty minutes of curses, ouching and threats and two hours of highly coloured fiction about a non-existent alien species. The idea took its place behind them in the line and waited for its turn to be heard.

\*

Meanwhile, in the barn, the air was thick with sweat and steam and loud with whoops and cheering as Gestalt (minus one) recovered from an energetic performance of "Witch of the Westmoreland." Kaichang, eyes shining, stepped forward to the microphone again as Orville stepped back.

"Thank you," she said. "You've been a wonderful—if unexpected—audience, and we've had a lot of fun. We're drawing to an end now, because you have homes to go to and work in the morning, and we've got a job to do as well, but we hope you've enjoyed this as much as we have.

"I'd like to sing you one of Suncat's songs now, quite an old one but one we haven't done in a while. Verneen?" She mouthed the title, and the pale girl nodded quickly and took up her flute. Kaichang adjusted her axe and began to play, and then to sing; and the others listened.

*"When you're lying all alone and lonely,*

*Listening to the beating of your heart  
And all the nightly noises,  
You may hear your soul complain  
"Day will never come again,  
I'm so tired of all this pain!"  
Do not shudder, do not blindly start,  
Tell yourself it's nothing, say you're only,  
Only hearing voices.*

*On a sunny day when you go walking  
And the darkness takes you unawares  
While all the world rejoices,  
Something deep inside may say  
"This will only last a day  
Till life steals it all away."  
Banish all these pointless phantom cares,  
Tell yourself it's just your dark side talking,  
You're just hearing voices.*

*Nothing lasts, the poets tell us truly,  
Everything must end and that's no lie.  
But never let it get you down unduly;  
Someday it may yet seem rich to die.  
Life is not forever, you must leave it,  
Sometimes with your dreams still unfulfilled,  
But do the best you can as you conceive it,  
Just because the house will fall  
That's no reason why you shouldn't build...  
And build...  
And build...*

*Everyone has darkness deep inside them  
Waiting just to drown them in despair,  
And mock them for their choices.  
Each of us, a child of light,  
Has her own dark war to fight  
Against the demons and the night.  
Keep your passions bright for all to share,  
Face your fears and let no shadows hide them;  
You were just hearing voices."*

Kaichang fell silent, and the axe's voice died away on a shimmering major chord.

The applause was not rapturous—it was not the right kind of song for this crowd—but they understood the feeling behind it, and it felt right.

As it died away, Elyot Segrave Morningsky got up from his seat on the floor, which he had taken regardless of the state of his trousers, and approached the makeshift stage.

“May I?” he said to Kaichang, and she, wonderingly, gave way to him.

“People of Northshores,” he said into the microphone, and at the sound of his well-known voice a hush fell instantly. “You all know who I am, I think, or at any rate who I used to be.” He smiled, and there was a tiny murmur of laughter. “My days of ascendancy are over, and I do not regret that one jot. Yet I would ask you, not as a man of power, but more proudly as a fellow citizen and a father, to bear with me while I say a few words. I will not keep you long, I promise.

“Your meinie is justly known for its proud and defiant spirit of independence, which no thinking person can fail to admire. You value your freedom highly, which no son or daughter of Argenthome can fail to respect. You hold to the traditional values of service and personal responsibility, which no sentient being can fail to honour. Change, though, is inevitable, and the wise citizen embraces such change where it benefits us all, and resists it only when it threatens our freedom. We have undergone a great change, you and I. I believe it to be a beneficial change. There are those among our fellows, though, who would oppose that change for reasons of their own gain. I hope—indeed, I trust—that all of you will see the folly of that opposition, and help to frustrate those who would return our world to an ancient enslavement.

“My young friends here, who have generously undertaken to entertain us here tonight, are engaged upon a perilous mission which will help to further that noble cause. Should they ask for your assistance, I humbly request that you give it, as freely as you may; not simply because the life of my daughter, who should have been here singing tonight, hangs in the balance at this moment, but because the very fate of our world may also be in jeopardy. And now,” he glanced sideways at Kaichang, Orville, Korynn and Verneen, “I wonder if I may make one more request, and ask our friends and yourselves to join me in our planetary anthem.”

*How does it go?* Tollain mouthed to Verneen.

*It's an old tune,* she mouthed back. *You'll pick it up.*

"Could I have an A, please," Morningsky said to Kaichang, and she obliged.

*"For Argenthome, and honour fair,  
All peril would we gladly dare.  
Not merely that we might survive;  
Beneath our sun let freedom thrive.  
For good or ill, our world we share  
For Argenthome and honour fair."*

It was indeed an old tune, and had graced a thousand anthems of one sort or another in its long life. The band had it within three lines. Morningsky had a good, light baritone voice, with just a slight tendency to droop if unaccompanied; but he rectified the problem as soon as the bass and keyboard came in.

*"For Argenthome, and honour bright,  
We boldly stand for truth and right.  
Though strangers with their cunning lies  
Pervert the ancient verities,  
Yet we shall bring their crimes to light  
For Argenthome and honour bright."*

As with all anthems, few of the audience knew more than the first verse, but they did their best, some humming or la-ing, some doggedly belting out what they remembered and making up the rest.

*"For Argenthome, and honour clear,  
We shall not falter, flinch nor fear.  
Our courage brought us to this place  
Across the depths of unknown space.  
Our promised land, we claim it here,  
For Argenthome, and honour clear."*

One more, Orville signed to Tollain, who was keeping a martial beat on the snare.

*"From home and kin when sundered far,  
On alien soil, 'neath alien star,  
Remember then, and praise in song  
The world that birthed and made you strong."*

*And high the banner blithely bear  
For Argenthome and honour fair!"*

They finished on a long held chord, and Kaichang ornamented it with some flashy runs on the axe. Now the audience were cheering wildly, waving, whistling, stamping their feet where possible, and Morningsky, stepping aside, gestured widely at the band, ceding to them the plaudits.

Verneen and Kaichang looked at each other.

*He's good.*

*Of course he is. Now bow nicely and let's get these people out of here. I'm bushed.*

Gattis and Orman surfaced from the crowd and, with exhortation and gesture, succeeded in starting the crowd flowing toward the doors. Derwent stood by them, and made a point of speaking to any who seemed to want to speak to him. At last the band and the two politicians stood alone in the barn that still seemed to be vibrating to that last long held chord.

"You were amazing," Derwent said. He had held his poise while talking to the departing audience, but now he seemed breathless, flushed and years younger.

"We'd have been better with Suncat," Verneen said.

"We *will* be better with Suncat," Kaichang corrected firmly.

"What did you think, sir?" Derwent asked Morningsky, who seemed lost in thought.

"Eh?" Morningsky smiled. "Oh yes. Very interesting. Great...fun, in fact. And quite fascinating, culturally speaking." He inclined his head to Tollain, who grinned back. "I fear I was a poor substitute for my daughter. I have not sung in many years, except occasionally in the bath."

"That's a shame," Kaichang said, surprising herself. "You should sing more."

"So Suncat has told me," Morningsky said with a sigh, "many times."

"Excuse me," said Carson, who had just arrived, and seemed to have run.

"What is it, Carson?" Verneen said, closing her flute case.

"I just come from the parlour," the old man said, leaning against the door while he

got his breath back. "I think Miss Suncat got somethin' to say to you."

"We heard quite a lot of it," Orville remarked dryly.

"No, no, she weren't cussin' nor nothin'," Carson said. "This is somethin' you're gonna want to hear."

Morningsky sighed. "I fear Mr Windyridge and I must take our leave," he said. "I will stay with Seigneur Krakendeeps till this is over, but young Derwent does have a planet to run." He handed Kaichang his comlink. "You can reach me on this," he said, "at any time. You understand? Any. Time. Goodnight, all. Thank you, Mr Meldrum, for your hospitality. Goodnight."

As he and Derwent climbed into their car, the others followed Carson across the yard and into the warm, lighted farmhouse. Korynn went straight to his machine and pressed and turned things, and before too long Suncat's urgent whisper was issuing from the speaker.

*"I hope at least one of you is listening. Get this down. I've had an idea..."*