

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Coldsands village, the jewel in the crown of the meinie that bore its name, was, it has to be said, rather a jewel in the rough. It was a working village, its main trade being fishing, and the cold climate enticed few visitors, thus rendering the trappings of a holiday resort entirely superfluous. It boasted one shop, a long, wide, low building into whose single floor was crammed almost everything that a fishing family might require, the remainder being supplied by Magellen's, the tavern across the road.

Demelza Henning, a large dark woman whose grey hair was never seen outside its protective snood, had run the shop ever since the previous owner had moved south to tend his arthritis. A fisherman's widow herself, and no stranger to the nets when need had arisen, she knew every soul in the village and the surrounding farms, could tell what time it was by their arrivals and departures, and could recognise the sound of their vehicles as they came down the steep hill and turned left into the small parking area next to the shop. She did not go so far as to confront them, as they entered, with the goods she knew they would be wanting, but it was commonly accepted that she could have, had she wished to show off.

This, however, was a strange vehicle that had come down the hill on this particular rainy morning; and these were strange people that had come into the shop.

"Shirts?" said Demelza, opening her eyes wide. She had no discernible eyebrows.

"Sure, I got plenty...all sizes...how many would you be needin', darlin'?"

"Oh, they're not for us," said the tall girl who seemed to be speaking for the party. Demelza could remember when her hair had been like that, or would have been if she had ever turned it loose. "The boys up at the meinie house are going to be needing them fairly soon. Get your head out of the lobster pot, Kintarsh," she added over her shoulder.

"They're a trial at that age," Demelza remarked comfortably. "Yours, darlin'?"

"Goddess, no," the other said with a shudder.

"That'll be eight shirts, then." Demelza returned to business. "I'll tally up the sizes right now and send 'em up with Mischa this afternoon."

"I expect someone will call in for them," the girl said. "You know who takes what size?"

"Land, sure I do," said Demelza with a broad grin. "I know every one of 'em. Heck, two of 'em are cousins to my own boy Mischa. He wanted to go join 'em up there at the meinie house, but I said no sir, they got plenty knotheads up there already they got no need of one more." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "How come they send you? You ain't from round here, darlin'. I'm guessing you ain't even from this world."

"You're right," the girl said, and winced at a crash from somewhere in the bowels of the shop. "*Will* you lot stop messing about!" she bellowed, and turned back to Demelza with a sweet smile. "I'm so sorry about this," she said. "I can't take them anywhere. No, you're right, we're just visiting, but we like to help out whenever we can, and when we heard about this spot of unpleasantness we thought it would be a kindly act to pitch in."

"What unpleasantness would that be, darlin'?" Demelza asked, keenly interested.

The girl winked. "Best you don't know till after it's happened. Let's just say that boys will be boys. Are those the shirts?"

Demelza understood, her memory at last filling in the gap. That had been a Krakendeeps truck from over to Northshores way. There was certainly no love lost between the Northshores boys and the crowd at the meinie house. This lass must have overheard some devilment being planned, and, lacking the authority as a guest in the house to put a stop to it, had chosen this kind of roundabout way to limit the damage. Demelza watched her examining the shirts one by one; not that there was any need, they were the best that could be had within forty miles, but it was nice to see that she cared.

"They look fine," the girl said, handing over a key card. "Probably be best if you wait till someone comes down from the meinie house. And don't forget to be surprised."

"Should I tell them about you?"

"No, no," the girl said. "I leave it up to you what you say, but keep our names right out of it."

"I don't know your names."

“Mine must have come up on the key card.”

“Land, darlin’,” Demelza said with a chuckle, “I been way too busy to pay that no mind. Now take your tads and get out of here before they wreck my shop.”

Kaichang sighed as Tollain and Verneen approached the counter, laden with prospective purchases.

“Really, Kintarsh?” she said. “A binnacle?”

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It was Braeden Carthew’s invariable practice to spend an hour each morning, rain or shine, drilling his troops on the lawn outside the house. Suncat could not have watched them even had she wished, for her room only gave on the overgrown garden at the side, and her door was locked for the duration so that Darben, or whoever was on duty, could take part; but the sound of it drifted through her window clearly enough as she lay on the bed.

This morning, however, brought a variation in the programme. About ten minutes after the routine had begun, the sound of an engine grew on the air. It sounded like a copter, and Suncat looked out of the window, trying to glimpse it.

The noise grew to a cacophony, and at its peak there was a sudden dull thump, followed by cries of startlement that quickly turned to dismay. The copter appeared round the side of the house, flying low enough that Suncat could see the faces of the two young men in the cockpit. They were total strangers to her, and they seemed vastly amused by something.

As the copter climbed away into the cloudless sky, the voices from the lawn became audible once more.

“Skelch!”

“Get your shirts off, quick!”

“Somebody start a fire!”

Suncat understood. Skelch was a chemical fertiliser, highly efficacious in the short term and thus very popular at one time among the farmers of the northern meinies, who had no leisure to care about what it did to the soil in subsequent years when

there were bills to be paid right now. Its one other drawback was its persistent and virulent odour, which clung to clothing, and cotton shirts in particular, in a way that no amount of washing could ever diminish, and Suncat had heard of several farmers who had blithely disregarded the carefully-worded instructions printed in large letters on the canister, had ripped it open with a clasp knife and plunged their hands into the fine brown powder, and had lived to regret it. Water, such as the rain coming down right now in a steady drizzle, only intensified the effect.

Someone knocked at the door, and then unlocked and opened it. Darben stood there, bare to the waist and unmasked, and Suncat regarded his well-muscled, light brown torso with appreciation despite the faint but perceptible effluvium of skelch that still clung to him.

“I’d advise you to close your window, Miss Anger,” he said, a little breathlessly.

“What happened, Darben?” Suncat said. “I saw a copter—”

“Couple of Krakendeeps boys paid us a little visit,” Darben said. “Guess they must have found an old can of skelch layin’ round and decided to get rid of it on us. We all gotta scrub. Leader’s burnin’ our shirts on the lawn.”

“Skelch?” Suncat put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, no!”

“Them Krakendeeps boys got a real funny sense of humour,” Darben said aggrievedly.

“One of us is gonna have to go down to Ma Henning’s and rustle up a batch of new shirts. Leader’s ragin’ like a starved rockslith. Gonna have to lock you in again, miss.”

“That’s all right, Darben.” Suncat would have laid a soothing hand on his arm, but that would have involved coming closer. “You go and wash up. I’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, miss,” the boy said, and closed and locked the door again.

Suncat closed the window, and lay back down on the bed again. After a while she began to laugh, very quietly.

*

Orville, who had stayed behind in the cramped recesses of Demelza Henning’s shop with a packet of sandwiches to fortify him, had just finished the last one and quietly folded the waxed paper when he heard the shop bell ring. It had rung many times in

the course of the morning, but he had known it would take some time to expunge the last traces of the potent chemical from skin and hair. Apparently there had been numerous attempts to ban skelch from general use, going back decades, but such attempts had always been stonewalled by the prosperous meinies that had contained the factories where it was made. Only since Affiliation had Derwent and his Council succeeded in pushing the ban through.

He stifled a yawn—he had stayed up most of the night working with Korynn—and tried to make himself even harder to see. Tollain would have been better for this job, but the little man lacked the patience for this part, and Korynn, who had stayed up all night finishing the job after Orville had caved, was asleep.

“Hey, Ma,” said a voice.

“That’s Missus Henning to you, young man,” said Demelza. “What can I do for you?”

“Need some shirts,” the man said.

“Oh?” Demelza said. “And who’s gonna pay for ’em?”

“Put it on the Leader’s tab.”

“Leader, huh? That’d be that Carthew fellow, who’s not even from round here and comes in here bossin’ folks around like he’s the new Seigneur. Relax, son, I got your shirts right here.”

“How’d you know—”

“Never you mind. Just say I got a a-nonymous tip-off. Boy came in from over to Northshores, said he heard some kind of japery was afoot, came to make it right. Your shirts’re covered, son. You want to take ’em now or should I send Mischa?”

“I’ll take ’em now if I may.” The man sounded startled, and Orville wondered if anyone at Coldsands would ever have thought to make reparations for a practical joke on the part of someone in their camp. He doubted it. “Thanks, Ma.”

“Missus Henning,” Demelza said sharply. “You mind now, Yorgen Fassbend, your all-fired Leader might think respect is out o’ date, but he’s got the wrong idea. Here you go. Wear ’em in good health.”

“Thanks,” Yorgen Fassbend said, “Missus Henning.”

“That’s better. Go on, get.”

The bell jangled again, and a moment later Demelza appeared round a rack of small engine parts and grinned down at Orville.

“You can come out now, son,” she said.

“You knew I was here?” Orville said, startled into triteness.

“I can count,” Demelza said, laughing. “Four people come in, don’t matter how much fuss the other three make, I know if one ain’t gone out. You better not have left breadcrumbs on my clean floor neither.” She glanced back at the door as the bell sounded again. “Give Yorgen a couple minutes to get out of sight and then you better go. Where you got to get to? Meldrum’s?”

Orville nodded. “I’m told if I go on to the beach and round the headland to a place called Bracer’s Cove there are stairs up to the road. The truck’ll be waiting there.”

Demelza seemed satisfied. “Carson Meldrum’s a good man, for all he’s from Northshores. That Braeden Carthew’s needed a good whuppin’ all his life, and old Anson never had the guts to do it. I’m not sayin’ I agree with all this Affiliation business, now—I don’t know near enough to make up my own mind—but if Braeden’s against it, that seems a pretty good reason to be for it, if you see what I mean.” She flashed her grin again.

Orville got to his feet. “Thank you, Mrs Henning,” he said, and hesitated.

“Somethin’ on your mind?” Demelza said.

“Did your husband run a boat?”

Demelza laughed again. “Land, boy, everyone in this town runs a boat.” She gestured around at the shelves and racks of boat-related paraphernalia around them.

“And did he ever take kids out to—to see the sea-cats?”

“Only the ones he specially liked,” Demelza said. “And you be sure and remember me to Miss Angharad when you get her out of there. Now get, before somebody else comes in. I got a business to run.”

Orville left the shop and descended the three shallow steps to the beach, wondering if everyone in the meinie knew what was going on.

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When he reached the top of the cliff and found the truck waiting, with Gattis Meldrum at the wheel, he was purple in the face, soaked through and sweating profusely.

Gattis waited while he heaved himself into the passenger seat, and then swung the truck round and headed back towards Northshores.

“Somebody,” Orville said after a lengthy period of wheezing, “needs to talk to people round here about the actual meaning of the word ‘stairs.’”

“Tad steep for you?” Gattis said sympathetically.

“Vertical,” Orville said, “is a tad steep, yes.”

“Rope still there? Sometimes when we get weather the rings work loose.”

“The rope,” Orville said, “was there.”

“Good,” Gattis said. “Might’ve been a tad hard without it.”

Orville confined himself to breathing for the remainder of the journey.

He had recovered his composure by the time they reached the farm, and he and Gattis donned the rubber boots that the boy had thoughtfully brought with him and squelched across the yard through the rain.

In the parlour, having removed the boots and sundry outer garments, Orville found the others clustered round Korynn’s machine, which had grown some extra bits, notably a microphone and a control box with two rows of nine buttons.

“You’re back,” Tollain said. “Did you have a nice walk?”

Orville gave him a look.

“I prefer not to discuss it,” he said frostily. “Is it all set up?”

“They’ve all got their shirts on,” Verneen said, “and we’ve worked out who’s who and labelled the buttons.”

“Which I’m sure Mitwoch will regard as cheating,” Kaichang added.

“And we were just about to try out level one,” Tollain said.

“Don’t forget to turn down the speaker,” Orville said.

“It won’t be loud enough to register.”

“No, but you don’t want extraneous noises getting in.”

“Good point.” Tollain twiddled a knob. “Okay, Verneen, you’re up.”

“Which one is it?” Verneen said, sitting forward.

“That one.” Tollain indicated a button. Verneen pressed it, and spoke into the microphone.

“You have an itch in the small of your back,” she said.

*

Outside the room where Miss Anger lay waiting for her next session with the Leader, Yorgen Fassbend stood patiently on guard.

He was not averse to the job, but nor was he over keen on it. It was just another duty. He knew that numphhead Darben Crossmith had a stupid crush on Miss Anger, just like he’d had a crush on five or six other girls that Yorgen knew of, but as far as he, Yorgen, was concerned, she wasn’t that much. Pretty, if you liked them that way, but no staying power. Yorgen much preferred—or, to be honest, would much prefer, for his relations with women had to this point been cordial but unexciting—Yorgen would much prefer someone like Jayda Gurdane, down in the village. Now there was a girl you’d know if you were holding her.

Something tickled his back. He shook himself irritably. Damned new shirts, always took a while to break in.

Friday night would be the Wintercome dance at Magellen’s, and he hoped the Leader would give him leave to go. He’d said he was thinking about it. Jayda would be there for certain sure, and she didn’t have a partner of her own, so if Yorgen was there he—
The tickle had become a full-blown itch. Yorgen swore under his breath and tried to reach it. If Ma Henning had done something with these shirts he’d get the old scallion back, so help him. Her with her airs and her “Missus Henning if you please.” Like his family weren’t as good as hers, just ’cause she was running the store and had no need to take the boat out no more. And thinking her son was too good to join them up here at the meinie house, when the truth was Mischa Henning was too much of a

pantywaist to—

He couldn't reach it with either hand. He strained and stretched, and the itch itched abominably. It was driving him crazy. Anyone coming up the stairs would have had something to say, seeing him with one arm twisted up behind his back and the other over his shoulder. He could touch fingers, but somehow he just could not reach the damn-blasted itch.

A thought occurred to him, and he stopped straining and rubbed his back up against the door frame. Still he got no relief. He groaned aloud, a sound which delighted those listening fifteen miles away.

Another thought struck him. Could he? The Leader had been fairly firm on the subject. No conversing with the prisoner except when necessary.

Well, damn it, this *was* necessary. Otherwise he would have to desert his post and go find a bath brush or something.

He turned and knocked at the door.

*

Suncat heard the knock, and wondered what it portended.

"Yes?" she called, sounding sleepy.

The door opened, and one of the guards put his head in. They had burned the masks along with the shirts, much to their relief, so Darben had said when he had brought her lunch. "Powerful stuffy they were," he'd said, "and 'sides, everybody round here knows who all we are anyhow. Leader'll get some better ones soon, he says, for when we go on the attack."

"Uh—Miss Anger?" the guard said uncertainly.

"Is it time for my session yet?" Suncat said.

"Uh—no, Miss Anger," the guard said. "I was just wonderin'—see, I got this itch on my back and I can't seem to get at it."

"You want me to scratch your back?"

"If you wouldn't mind, miss, I'd be real grateful."

“Of course,” Suncat said. “Come in and close the door.”

The guard complied readily.

“Sit down,” Suncat said, patting the bed beside her. The guard hesitated, and she patted it again. “It’s all right, I won’t bite.”

The guard refrained from pointing out, as Suncat would have done in his place, that that was what they all said. He sat down, and Suncat lifted the tail of his shirt and put her hand inside.

*

“It’s working,” Kaichang said jubilantly. “Go on.”

“I have to leave at least thirty seconds,” Verneen said. “That’s what Korynn told me.”

“It’s been twice that.”

“No it hasn’t. Sssh.”

The disturbance in the fabric of the shirt caused a rustling noise. Verneen, counting silently under her breath, turned the volume down again, pressed the button and spoke into the microphone.

“Miss Anger’s touch feels good. Miss Anger’s touch makes the itch disappear.”

She released the button.

“Two at once?” Tollain queried.

“He said as long as I keep it simple.”

“Well, level one seems to be a howling success,” Orville remarked. He had taken the opportunity to change into dry clothes, and was feeling better for tea and a late but satisfying lunch.

“So far, and with one subject only. We still have to try it on the others.” Tollain lifted a hand as Verneen looked at him. She repeated her performance.

“The itch has gone,” she said. “You are quite comfortable now.”

“Maybe we could get them to—” Orville began.

“We can’t *get* them to do anything,” Tollain said sharply. “This isn’t mind control, thank frod. Just subliminal suggestions, made a little more effective by Korynn’s sonic

wizardry. The best we can do is create temporary illusions, like an itch in the back. The rest is up to the victim. With luck, they'll extrapolate from the suggestions themselves and—" He gestured non-committally. "Whatever. Kaichang has some ideas for things we can try. But it's no good expecting this to be the answer to everything. It's just a beginning."

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At the first brush of Miss Anger's fingertips against his back, Yorgen's itch had blissfully vanished away as if it had never been. He had never known anyone as good at scratching a man's back as she was. Still he allowed her to go on. He was enjoying the sensation, and anyway, he could guard her as well in here as out there.

"How's that?" Miss Anger said.

"Feels amazing," Yorgen said. Despite himself, he was warming to Miss Anger—the prisoner, he told himself, but the correction lacked conviction. Braeden was a stuffed shirt anyhow. All orders and duty and speak-when-you're-spoke-to. He got to talk to Miss Anger every day. Why shouldn't anyone else? Why shouldn't Yorgen?

Now she was rubbing his shoulders, finding knots of tension he hadn't even noticed were there, and every touch was heaven. Yorgen relaxed happily. Come to think of it, when it came Friday, he would just say the hell with it and go see Jayda at the dance. What could Braeden do to him anyhow? Shout at him, was all, and Yorgen had been shouted at by better men than any Northshores blowhard. Weren't like this was any real army. Just a stupid game. Just a stupid game of soldiers, a waste of time...

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Suncat decided enough was enough. One didn't want to go too far on what was obviously a trial run.

"I think you'd better get back to your post, soldier," she said, abandoning her attentions to the young man's back. She had seen the little device, fastened to the collar of the shirt with Mitwoch's circuit bonder, looking just like the button on the other side unless you looked really closely.

He got up, looking disappointed but resigned.

“Guess you’re right, Miss Anger,” he said. “Thanks, anyhow.”

“Why don’t you call me Suncat?” said Suncat. “Just when we’re alone. It would make me feel so much better.”

The guard started to shake his head, and then stopped.

“Well,” he said slowly, “I guess I could at that, Miss Ang—Miss Suncat.”

“Just Suncat,” she urged.

“Suncat,” he echoed. “Sure, I can do that.”

“That’s nice,” Suncat said happily. “Now go and be alert on the landing. I wouldn’t want you to get into trouble.”

“No, Mi—Suncat,” the guard agreed. “I mean, sure, Suncat.”

He went outside and closed the door. Suncat lay back down on the bed. “You wonderful, wonderful people,” she breathed, just loud enough for the bug in her hair.

“You did it. Now we can really get started.”