

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As it turned out, Suncat was not called for another interrogation session that day. Braeden and Shallen were kept fully occupied dealing with a series of little incidents which, while unimportant in themselves, took up time and disrupted the routine of the meinie house.

There was the mysterious stranger. Eynon Polwheal swore he had seen someone skulking round the house, ducking into shadows whenever he looked that way, and was so insistent that Braeden organised a thorough search of the house and grounds and established beyond doubt that nobody except those already accounted for was anywhere on the premises. Eynon became mulish and insisted that there had been somebody there, and that he had probably planted a bomb somewhere, and the whole process had to be repeated before he would shut up about it.

Then Feargal Jamis decided that, since it was such a lovely day, he would desert his post at the garden gate and go for a walk. Darben and Droyc eventually found him picking flowers in a fallow field five miles away; he seemed to think that it was vitally important to the war effort that he collect all the right ones, and could not understand why the other two kept trying to stop him. It was only when the consequent argument showed signs of developing into a full-grown fight that he suddenly calmed down and allowed them to lead him back to the meinie house, pausing only for Droyc to reassure the owner of the field that no harm had been intended by the trespass.

And hardly had that been fathomed out before Droyc himself announced that he could hear ticking. Eynon, who was in the room, became excited and repeated his bomb theory, and once again the whole house had to be searched, this time with Droyc in the lead, ears pricked and straining. By the time it was established that nowhere in the building was anything ticking that could not be accounted for, it was time for supper and Braeden was so tired and irritable that even Shallen could do nothing with him. So Darben said, when he brought Suncat her own evening meal. He himself was confused and upset by his fellows' aberrations.

“Suppose it’s the aliens?” he said, sitting on Suncat’s bed, all but wringing his hands. “Suppose they’re gettin’ into our heads, makin’ us do these things?” He turned an agonised face to Suncat. “Suppose they get into *my* head?”

“I’m sure it’s not the aliens, Darben,” Suncat said soothingly. “It’s just that you’ve all been keyed up for a long time. Braeden keeps you on this short leash, always battle-ready but never going in to battle, and that’s bound to tell on a man sooner or later. I’m sure this will all have blown over by tomorrow.”

“Hope so,” Darben said miserably. “Wintercome Dance is on Friday, down to Magellen’s, and I know Yorgen’s hopin’ the Leader’ll let us go, but if this goes on—”

“How can he stop you?” Suncat pointed out reasonably. “He’s not your father, and he’s not paying you. You’re all doing him a massive favour being here.”

“And savin’ the planet, miss,” Darben pointed out, a little stiffly.

“Well, yes, there’s that, of course. But it’s still entirely voluntary. And I don’t think the planet will come to any harm just because you all go to a dance. In fact, you could say that the right to go to dances is part of what you’re defending.” Suncat thought for a moment. “It’s been ages since I’ve been to a dance,” she mused sadly. “I don’t suppose you could...no, it wouldn’t be fair to ask you.”

“Ask me what, miss?”

“No, no, it was a silly idea, just a passing thought. I only wondered if...if there were any way I could go to this dance. I know, I know, I’m a prisoner and all that, but you could stay with me at all times and make sure I didn’t...no, no, I’m being stupid.”

“You mean...” Darben felt his way cautiously around the idea, “you’d like me to take you to the Wintercome Dance?”

The look that came his way from Suncat’s golden eyes would have melted granite.

“Oh, Darben,” she breathed, “if only you could.” Then she smiled sadly and shook her head. “I’m just dreaming,” she said. “Help me finish this, will you? I’m not as hungry as I thought I was.”

Ten minutes later, Darben was once more at his post outside Suncat’s door. In his mind was but one thought: somehow, whatever it took, he was going to smuggle Miss

Anger out to the Wintercome Dance at Magellen's on Friday.

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"When are we going to test level two?" Orville wanted to know, a little later.

"Not yet awhile," Kaichang said. "Level two will blow the lid off level one. We want to get as much mileage out of this as we can. And that means laying off tomorrow. Too much too soon and even Braeden Snotfeatures will get suspicious."

"Good thinking," Tollain agreed. "When's Friday round here?"

"Day after tomorrow," Orville said promptly. "I saw a calendar in the shop. Mrs Henning's got the date circled, so I'll bet she's going to this shindig."

"Okay," Kaichang said. "I made a note of something while I was listening in...let's see...yes, we've already got the name of one of his contacts. The name is Dreblen Koost, in...can't read my own writing here...Saygahtoo meinie."

"So Suncat was right," Verneen said. "They do have friends in the south. That's a southern meinie, though I think Koost must be northern with a name like that."

"Braeden's been trying to arrange a meeting with this Koost, but Koost is playing hard to get. Wants it to be on neutral territory, won't commit to a date."

"Where's neutral?" Tollain asked. "I thought these people were all on the same side."

"Yes, but there's still the old north-south divide to reckon with, and then..." Verneen shrugged. "When you're up against evil mind-controlling aliens, who can you trust?"

"Koost suggested Broadfields," Kaichang said. "Bear in mind this is hearsay, I didn't get the actual conversation. Braeden pointed out that he was a marked man in Broadfields and would be arrested on sight—not sure why he thinks that, but I wasn't in a position to ask. Koost then suggested Downsholm meinie town, which is a bit closer, and Braeden accepted that, and started suggesting dates, at which point Koost clammed up and got off the line. And that's all I have."

"It's plenty," Orville said. "How about this? Someone rings up representing Koost and saying that he will be in Downsholm meinie town at such and such a time on Friday, take it or leave it."

“What about passwords and call signs and such?”

“Ignore all that,” Orville said airily. “I volunteer. I can do a south Argenthome accent as well as anyone. And I know Downsholm because we played there before. I can name the spot, be there to see him arrive—”

“You’re not going to actually talk to him?” Verneen said.

“Not as such,” Orville said. “Just watch, and, well, see what happens.”

“How are we going to ring from here?” Kaichang pointed out. “Carson doesn’t have a phone, remember.”

Korynn, who had been sitting in a corner being furniture as was his wont, stirred. “I have activated a spare channel on Seir Morningsky’s dedicated comlink,” he said, proffering it to Orville. “It is fully anonymised and untraceable by normal means.”

“He won’t like you messing with his things,” Kaichang teased.

“He does not like me anyway,” Korynn said calmly.

“All we need now is the number,” Tollain said, and looked round expectantly.

“Now how in the worlds are we supposed to know that?” Kaichang demanded.

“It’s in your car, boss,” Orville quoted, and shrugged helplessly.

“I know,” Verneen said. She turned on the machine and pressed buttons in turn, listening in to the bugs attached to the shirts. Only silence greeted her ears.

“Sounds as if they’ve all gone to bed,” Kaichang said. “Best wait till tomorrow.”

“No, there’s one channel still open,” Verneen said. She pressed the button and leaned into the microphone to speak.

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Darben, standing on guard outside Miss Anger’s door, suddenly had a disquieting thought.

What was the number of the telephone downstairs? He couldn’t remember it.

The thought nagged, refused to go away. Suppose he needed it at some point?

Suppose there was an emergency? He searched his mind for the elusive string of

digits, but it eluded his every effort. He was usually good with numbers, but he couldn't even remember the first one.

He wasn't supposed to leave his post...

But he needed to know that number. He couldn't stop thinking about it.

He eased open the door and looked in on Suncat. She was asleep on her back, the pale light of Argenthome's moon (a genuine binary partner, not one of your gimcrack artificial jobs cobbled together from snow) limning the contours of her body under the thin sheet. Darben swallowed hard, reflecting that for his own peace of mind no less than for her comfort she ought to have at least three blankets and a quilt over her this time of year, and closed the door again.

Moving with excruciating care, he descended the stairs one at a time and made his way across the hall to the dresser on which the telephone sat. There was enough light coming through the windows to show up the number printed on the dial quite clearly, and he squinted at it, trying to fix it in his mind. It was strange to find himself mumbling it under his breath, because he was usually so good with numbers, but he mumbled it none the less, over and over again. He was still mumbling it as he went back up the stairs, still mumbling it as he resumed his post outside Miss Anger's door...

Some minutes later, Darben awoke from a light doze and looked around guiltily. Nobody else was around. If the Leader had caught him asleep on guard, everyone else would have been awake in short order. He sighed, relieved.

He thought he remembered being very worried about something, but he couldn't recall what it had been. Must have been a dream, he decided, and took some deep breaths and stood more upright. He wouldn't be dozing off again.

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"And that's how you do it," Verneen said, handing Orville a piece of paper with a number on it.

"Give the girl a bag of meeble nuts," Tollain breathed. "Well done you." He moved a little closer and lowered his voice. "Just a flute player, eh?" he murmured.

Verneen blushed and hid behind her hair.

“Okay,” Orville said. “Well, I’m not going to try and call him now. The morning will do. In fact, mid-morning would probably be better. Add urgency. Do we know what this Koost was supposed to be talking to Braeden about?”

“Supplying equipment, I think,” Kaichang said. “Not weapons. Possibly electronics gear. Some of the southern meinies were actually owned by armaments dealers in the north. They sited their factories and warehouses there because labour was cheap.”

“Possibly bug detectors, then,” Orville added. “A meeting to be prevented, I think.”

“And on that note,” Tollain said, “time we emulated the good old boys of Cold December and got some sleep ourselves, I think. It’s been a full day. Tomorrow, we lay off the subliminals, Orville phones Braeden and makes an appointment for Friday, and...” He paused, thoughtfully.

“What?” Orville said.

“I wonder who does the music at this bash?” Tollain said softly.

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The following day dawned grey and clammy over the meinie house at Coldsands, but the rain held off for the moment. Everyone was nervous, casting speculative glances at each other, waiting for something unexpected to happen. At ten light Yorgen called for Suncat to attend another interrogation session, Braeden having shelved the morning drill temporarily, and Suncat resigned herself to some more exposition on the mythical aliens, their strengths and weaknesses; though with what she had given him already, she reflected sourly, Braeden could almost certainly have bested them quite handily if they had only been real.

This time, however, he wanted to know not about the aliens themselves, but their human catspaws; who in the government was being directly controlled, and who was merely going along for the ride, or had been suborned with promise of gain. This was far trickier terrain. Suncat had never paid too much attention to the members of the Council of Seigneurs even when her father had been running it, and there had undoubtedly been changes in the intervening period. She did the best she could,

laying stress on the cell structure of the aliens' subversion force and Helva-Naktras's consequent ignorance of the activities of its fellows, but she was trying to make real bricks now, not phantom ones, and the absence of straw was, she felt sure, bound to tell eventually.

So she was quite relieved when Shallen put her head round the door and summoned Braeden to the telephone, and when he went, leaving her alone in the room, she crept to the door and listened.

"Hello?" Braeden had a good loud voice, which someone had once described as the essential attribute of a leader. "What? Password? I don't have to give no password, you know who—what? Oh, all right, it's *do wolności*. Who is—what d'you mean, changed? How come you get to change—look, this is Braeden Carthew, the Leader, got that? You know who the hell I am, you called me here. Who? Koost? Why can't he talk himself?"

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"He is not here," Orville said into the comlink. His accent, presumably, was good enough. "I speak for him. You wished to arrange a meeting. Please be quiet, Mister Carthew, and listen very carefully." He hesitated, and added, "I will say this only once.

"Mister Koost will be sitting on the central bench facing the ornamental fountain in the main square of Downsholm meinie town at three light precisely tomorrow afternoon. He will be holding a magazine with a picture of a young woman on the cover. You will approach him and give the correct password, which is 'There will be rain in Northshores tomorrow.' He will reply 'Good for the crops.' You will then have one hour in which to make your arrangements. At the end of that hour Mister Koost will get up and leave and you will not attempt to follow him. If you do not appear, Mister Koost will wait the hour and then leave, and no further contact will be accepted from your group. All previous arrangements will be voided. The same will happen if these conditions are violated in any way.

"Have you understood the conditions as I have outlined them? Good. And I would advise you, Mister Carthew, on a personal note, to look to the security of your organisation. Unlike you, we do not regard this matter as a game, or a weekend

entertainment. We are in a serious business, Mister Carthew, and we prefer that our clients take it seriously. Good day.”

He ended the call with a decisive jab at the comlink.

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Suncat moved away from the door. There was no need to press an ear to the panels as Braeden let himself go at some length on the subject of officious underlings, suspicious foreigners and the general unpleasantness of the conversation he had just had. She could even hear Shallen trying to calm him down, without notable success. When he threw open the door and glared at her, Suncat was back in her chair, looking as she had when he had left her.

“Take her back to her room,” he snarled. “I’m sick of the sight of her. And I’m sick of the sight of you,” he added, turning on Shallen with venom in his tone. “Calm down, Braeden, it’s all right, Braeden.’ Well, it ain’t all right, got that? Now I got to go to Downsholm tomorrow, with the Krakendeeps boys just waitin’ to start somethin’ and my men losin’ their minds and—and *you* tell me to calm down!” He uttered a wordless growl and stalked off.

Suncat “woke up.” “W-what? Shallen? But B-braeden was here—”

Shallen rushed to her. “Ssh, ssh, sweetie, it’s all right, he’s gone,” she said soothingly. “The session’s over. I’ll take you back upstairs. He’s probably gone out to kill something. He finds it relaxing.”

“I felt—” Suncat stumbled and leaned heavily on Shallen. “Was there...shouting?”

“Yes, I’m afraid there was,” Shallen said a little grimly. “The silly nubbin took offence at something he heard on the telephone. I did warn him that those people were a bit above his level when it came to security, but he seldom listens to me. He prefers talking to listening. Sad but true.” She pushed open Suncat’s door, nodding to Yorgen who was on guard. “Now you just relax and get comfy, and I’ll be along in a minute and brush your hair.”

“My hair?” It took a huge effort for Suncat not to clutch at it protectively.

Shallen nodded. “Member how I always used to brush it for you in the old days? And

your daddy used to say the roots went straight into your brain? If I give it a proper brush you won't need to keep it wrapped round that ratty old pencil. I don't know where you picked that up from." She helped Suncat on to the bed and went to the door. "I won't be a minute," she said, wiggling her fingers.

As soon as the door closed Suncat was rooting through her hair, finding the clump to which the bug had welded itself. She pulled as many strands loose as she could, narrowing it down to just a dozen or so, and then took hold of the thing and began to pull.

The pain was almost unbearable, and her mind threatened to white out, but she held on desperately, gritting her teeth and clenching every muscle with the effort of holding back the shriek that so wanted, so needed, to come out. Strand by strand the lock came loose, and Suncat imagined herself with a bald patch where no hair could ever grow again, but still she pulled. At last, with one final wrench, the hair came free, and Suncat examined it in her palm, looking for traces of bloody scalp and almost disappointed to find none.

"You owe me for this," she hissed into the bug, and stowed it away under her pillow just as Shallen came in with a big smile and a hairbrush.

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"Dreblen Koost?" said Morningsky's voice over the comlink. *"Oh yes, we know about Mr Koost. A very slippery customer. He has holdings all over the south. When we Affiliated, he went into hiding. I tell you frankly, Mr Torres, were it not for personal considerations, we would be far more interested in nabbing Koost than this hole-and-corner gang of yours."*

"Yeah, well," Orville said, "personal considerations are what we're doing this for, so you can nab Koost on your own time."

"And we are very grateful," Morningsky assured him, *"not least for the budget saving. Our law enforcement agencies do have this annoying fixation about getting paid for their services. So you wish a vehicle in which to drive to Downsholm tomorrow?"*

"Tomorrow morning, yeah."

"I will speak to Krakendeeps. Some of his conveyances are outwardly respectable enough, if not exactly new. One will be with you later tonight."

"All right, thanks," Orville said.

"I don't suppose you would care to share the thinking behind your plan with me?"

"Not at this time," Orville said. *We're getting Braeden out of the way so Suncat can bunk off to the local hop* might, he felt, seem a touch frivolous under the circumstances, especially out of the general context of their activities. "Thanks a lot, Seir Morningsky."

"Not at all," came the response. *"Any service I can perform in the cause."*

Orville made his adieux and ended the call.

"All fixed," he reported. "I'll have a car by tonight. How do I get to Downsholm from here anyway? I've only been once before and I was asleep."

"I thought you were driving," Kaichang said.

"Some men can multi-task," Orville retorted, straight-faced. "No, that night it was you and old Wendyhouse doing the driving. I'd driven the night before, remember?"

"Well, anyway," Kaichang said, "if I remember rightly, it's about thirty-five miles south-east as the twitterpate flies, but about forty-six by road. You head down as if you're going back to Broadfields, and—oh frod."

"What?"

"You can't go that way, it takes you straight past Coldsands. You'll have to go the longer way, we need a map, we need Carson." Kaichang looked around.

"He's out in the fields," Verneen said. "Anyway, panic ye not, you don't need him. You just need me."

"You've got a map?"

"I've got a map," Verneen confirmed, holding it up, "and I've been working it out while you've been talking. Look, Orville. You start here, this is us, and you head towards Farhavens—yes?—and then you take this road here, well, I assume it's a road, though it might just be a track, down through this pass into Ravenscraig

meinie.” Orville was frowning, but he nodded. “The road then takes you into this cluster of teeny weeny meinies—”

“You spent this whole time getting ready to say that, didn’t you?” Kaichang observed.

“Well, a bit,” Verneen said, blushing a little but smiling at the same time. “The roads get a bit confusing here, but follow signs for Bearford meinie and you should be okay—and then it’s a straight run from Bearford into Downsholm on the main road.”

“Maybe I should set off now just to be on the safe side,” Orville said.

“You can’t,” Kaichang pointed out. “No car.”

“Well, as soon as it gets here then.”

“Stop worrying,” Verneen told him. “That’s my job. I’ll write it all down for you, and the guy isn’t supposed to be there till three light. If you set off straight after breakfast you’ll be fine. You’ll have time to find the bakery where they did those heavenly little dalimer cakes with the ollacum icing and pick us up a box.”

“If I can, I will,” Orville said, sketching a salute.

“I wish we could do something with this.” Kaichang indicated Korynn’s lash-up. “I mean it’s just sitting there, tempting me.”

“No more interference today,” Verneen said. “Anything out of the ordinary and Braeden could still cancel the trip, and that would frod everything up.”

“I know.” Kaichang sat on her hands, looking agonised.

“Come out to the barn,” Orville suggested. “I’ve got to wait as well, no reason we can’t occupy ourselves doing what we do best.”

“Me too?” Verneen said, getting up.

“If you want,” Orville said. “Tollain and Mitwoch are still off doing whatever they’re doing, but we don’t need them.”

“Their loss,” Kaichang agreed. “What are they doing anyway?”

Orville shrugged. “Dunno. They took the truck, I know that because it’s not there now, but they went before I was awake.”

They went out to the barn, under a heavy grey sky that promised more rain soon.

Orville plugged in his bass and Kaichang her axe, and for a while there was tuning. Verneen got out her flute and fiddled with it.

“What shall we try?” she said. “Oh, I know. Doesn’t need drums, doesn’t need keyboard. ‘Suspicious Girl.’”

Orville looked round. “Not—” He hummed a few bars. “That’s not one of yours, is it?”

“No, that’s all the work of the great Anon,” Verneen said. “We used to cover it in the old days.”

“She means the old days of last year,” Kaichang put in, “when we were a band in our own right.”

“I thought I knew it,” Orville said, “only I know it as ‘Suspicious Man.’”

“Well, we obviously couldn’t sing it that way,” Kaichang said.

“We could now,” Verneen said. “Orville’s a man.”

Orville debated several ripostes to this and decided against all of them.

“Would that be okay?” he asked.

“Sure,” Verneen said. “Suncat usually takes lead on that one anyway.”

“Key?”

“One of the usual suspects,” Kaichang said. “Anyway, I don’t know what you’re worrying about, you can sing any key she can.”

“Yes, but the bass—”

“D,” Verneen said, taking pity.

They spent some minutes warming up, and then Kaichang launched into the chord sequence, Verneen played the melody, and Orville began to sing.

*“The dust motes in the dried up fountain
Have formed into a pattern I recall.
The clouds are making shapes I find familiar;
There has to be a meaning to it all.
And as I try to map the madness
A sparrow sings the tune I wrote last year:
A more suspicious man might think*

*there was something going on
around here.*

*Last time I told you I was leaving
To try to find the truth behind my lies
You quoted me a dream that I'd forgotten
And the answer to my quest was in your eyes.
Now every time I read the tealeaves
The Morse code message shows up all too clear:
A more suspicious man might think
there was something going on
around here.*

*A more suspicious man might wonder
why the last time we had thunder
the lightning burned your name into a tree:
a more suspicious man might question
the insidious suggestion
that there's something between you and me...*

*There isn't very much to go on
The evidence is tenuous, it's true
And I've no reason for suspecting
The universe is in on this with you.
But still I think I'll stay the winter
And test the omens out again next year:
And maybe then I'll know for certain
if there's something going on
around here.
I'll stay right here,
Till the meaning is clear."*

Kaichang brought the song to an end, and Orville suddenly registered that Tollain and Korynn were standing just inside the doors. Tollain applauded.

"That was good," he said. "An oldie but goodie. We should keep that one."

"Where have you been?" Kaichang demanded, putting her axe on its stand.

"Ah, I thought you might be wondering," Tollain said. "Korynn and I have been to Coldsands."

“What!”

“Relax. We tried your back way—I don’t know why you made such a fuss about those stairs, we skipped up and down them like little lambs in spring—”

“Tollain exaggerates,” Korynn said as Orville spluttered.

“—and we had a long chat with Jarlo Magellen, proprietor of the local hostelry,” Tollain said. He grinned. “We’re playing the Wintercome Dance.”