

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“What, all of us?” Orville demanded.

“Well, no,” Tollain admitted. “For one thing I didn’t know if you’d be back in time, and for another space is kind of limited in there. They usually have a trio, guitar, drums and tin whistle, but the drummer’s well over seventy and only comes out because he thinks he has to and the guitarist would much rather be dancing, so Magellen told us. So I volunteered me, Korynn and Kaichang. They have their own drum kit. Plus there’s a piano in there, and Korynn’s reasonably happy with it—”

“Again, Tollain is exaggerating,” Korynn said.

“You said it was adequate,” Tollain said.

“I said it would be. I will have to spend some time tuning it beforehand.”

“Well, you can do that. Apparently,” Tollain explained, “there’s no decent tuner within forty miles.”

“And they call this a fishing village,” Kaichang murmured.

Tollain made a face at her.

“What about me?” Verneen said.

“I thought you’d prefer to be in the audience. And we don’t want to replace all the old familiar faces. It would look odd. Magellen rang them all up and they’re happy to let us go on with the whistle man this year. It’ll be fun.”

“And suppose one of the Coldsands boys recognises us?” Orville said.

“They’ll be too busy having fun themselves. Work will be the last thing on their minds.” Suddenly the excitement was wiped from Tollain’s face, and his pale eyes surveyed them coldly. “This—if it works—will be my first chance to see Suncat since the night at the Seigneurie when we sang ‘No Poppies.’ If something goes wrong in the next few days, it could well end up being my only chance ever—those boys might be endearing idiots, most of them, but they have lethal weapons and they know how to use them, and Braeden himself is nothing but a dangerous animal.

“Now you did me out of a chance to see her before, and I let you. Not again. This is going to go smoothly and nobody is going to throw any spanners, all right?” The voice, that had been cold and empty as space itself, gained a touch of warmth, and Tollain allowed himself a tiny smile. “After all, we all want the same thing, don’t we? A nice, pleasant evening in the local pub, with music and dancing and good company?”

“You want your head examined is what you want,” Orville said, after a moment. “Anyway, how can I stop you? I’ll be in Downsholm, making sure Braeden the Beast doesn’t get back till it’s good and late.”

“I mean it, though.” Tollain’s face and voice had lost their unnerving inhumanity, but his tone was serious. “No well-meaning efforts to save me from myself.”

“Do you really think you’re the only one who wants to see her again?” Kaichang exclaimed suddenly.

“No,” Tollain said. “Of course not. But I could be just being stupid about it. And if I am...you have to let me.”

“We’ll all be stupid together,” Verneen said. “Won’t we?”

“What about you, Mitwoch?” Orville said. “You going along with this?”

“I will play,” Korynn said simply.

“There,” Tollain said happily. “And now I want to play something. I feel as if I haven’t touched a drumstick in years.”

“You were really all right on that cliff face?” Orville said.

“Yes,” Tollain said. “I had a good night’s sleep and something to eat before I went out. As long as I’m sensible and nothing blows up around me I can do most things.” He seated himself behind his kit, played a brief solo. “Have you seen Carson or the boys?”

“They were already out by the time we got up. Goddess, that man works.” Kaichang spoke with ungrudging admiration. “He lifts twice as much as either of his sons—I’ve seen him do it—and he doesn’t stop till the job’s done. But that’s a farmer for you.”

“I wondered if anyone had shown up expecting a gig last night.”

“No, I don’t think so. We did say we had work to do, so maybe they took us at our word. Are you planning another show?”

“Not till after this dance. Come on, come on, somebody pick a song.”

“You’re the memory man,” Orville said. “You pick.”

“Something rousing,” Kaichang said. “How about ‘Bring You Down’?”

“Okay,” Tollain said. “I start, don’t I?”

He counted in and began a galloping twelve-eight on the toms, and Kaichang adjusted her axe and drove in with a minor chord. Korynn moved unhurriedly to his keyboards and began playing along.

“Who’s singing?” Orville shouted over the racket. “Wait, who’s singing?”

“If you’re asking,” Kaichang shouted back, “you are, you fool!”

*“Awake, ye lords of tyranny,  
And rise up from your feather bed,  
We’ll strip you of your finery  
And whip you through the town;*

*The new day is upon you now,  
Your time is gone, your power is fled!  
No more as slaves to you we’ll bow;  
We come to bring you down!*

*You princes who by right of blood  
Have claimed dominion o’er the earth  
Shall crawl and grovel in the mud  
And mourn your tarnished crown;*

*No patents from the olden time,  
No accident of noble birth,  
Shall spare you from the fruits of crime;  
We come to bring you down!*

*We’ll trample down your barricades,  
We’ll overwhelm your horse brigades,  
With picks and mattocks, stones and spades,*

*We'll fight for our desire;*

*We'll sell the symbols of your state,  
The wealth you thought inviolate  
Will purchase food for every plate  
And fuel for every fire!*

*You prelates who have told us oft  
That God ordains the state of man,  
Have held your holy book aloft  
And quelled us with your frown,*

*We now proclaim a higher creed,  
A fairer world, a nobler plan;  
From those who have to those who need—  
We come to bring you down!"*

Verneen launched into a flute solo that soared over the crunching chords of the axe and Korynn's synth. Orville took the time to catch his breath. This was faster than he'd ever known this song performed; it made some versions he'd heard sound like dirges, but it was working, and the pale girl's flute never missed a beat. And suddenly it was his cue again.

*"We are no simple lawless mob  
Who come to pillage and to rob  
But workers here to do a job  
That long has lain undone;*

*And when the job has been fulfilled  
We'll work together and rebuild  
The better world that we have willed  
Where all may live as one....*

*Come out, come out, ye masters all,  
And face the judgment of your peers  
The world that you have held in thrall  
Is turning upside-down;*

*Come out and make your true redress  
For all the black and wasted years*

*In which you ruled in idleness  
Unmindful of the poor's distress  
The laws of God you dared transgress  
The suffering souls you did oppress  
The thievery and knavishness  
That we will force you to confess—  
We come to bring you down!"*

With a crash the song stopped dead. The five of them stood staring at each other, all out of breath, even Korynn.

"Rousing enough for you?" Tollain asked Kaichang.

"It'll do to be going on with," she said. "Bit...um...political, of course."

The barn door opened and Gattis looked in.

"Not surprised you didn't hear the bell," he said. "That was a rouser. Anyhow, lunch is ready if you got the hankering."

"Definitely," Tollain said. "Don't you think?"

"Hear you been playin' up a storm out there," Carson said a little while later, as he passed the gravy. "Don't be surprised if you get one."

"What, after all that rain yesterday?" Orville said.

The Meldrums laughed.

"That were just a taster," Orman said. "We always gets a storm round Wintercome time. A real storm. Should hit today, tomorrow some time."

"We been out makin' sure everything's covered up," Gattis said. "Winds get fierce if it's a bad 'un. Your stuff should be safe in the barn though. That only ever blew away twice, and the first time was our own fault."

"Charming thought," Tollain said, swallowing. "Maybe we should pack everything into its cases."

"Couldn't hurt," Carson agreed. "Nobody in Northshores'll be goin' out these next few nights, certain sure."

"What about Coldsands?" Verneen said.

“Oh, they’ll be havin’ their shindig, don’t you fret none about that.”

“Why would we fret?”

Carson winked. “I went down to buy some fish and talk to Missus Henning this morning. Saw you two come from the beach and go into Magellen’s. Saw you come out too, all three lookin’ pleased as Pannicut’s dog. Don’t take much to work out.”

“And them Coldsands boys,” Gattis put in, “they never could keep their mouths shut.”

“It’s a little worrying,” Tollain says, “when everyone knows our secret plans almost as soon as we come up with them.”

“Welcome to village life, son,” Carson said with a chuckle, retrieving the potatoes before Orman could grab the last three. “But I can tell you there’s one man in the whole of our two meinies who’ll never know a word of ’em till it’s too late, and that man’s name is Braeden Carthew. Rest easy on that score.”

“He prefers talking to listening,” Tollain said.

The old man nodded. “And he’s made himself so by-God unpopular that nobody’d give him the time of day less’n they’d got to. Your secrets are safe as they need to be.”

“Good to know,” Kaichang said. “So you don’t mind us playing in Coldsands?”

“Why in the worlds should I?” Carson said, opening his eyes very wide. “Good music’s good music wherever it’s played. And we all in Northshores, we don’t celebrate Wintercome, we just get through it. Wintermitten, that’s our big night, and if you should chance to be around I know old Laban’d be powerful pleased if you come play for us then. But that’s six weeks away. I guess you’ll be gone.”

“Not necessarily,” Tollain said. “But if we are, we’ll come back. All six of us.”

The others round the table assented.

“Thank you,” Carson said simply. “You’ll find a welcome right here. Who’s for dessert?”

“Why do they celebrate it in Coldsands?” Verneen asked.

“No more fishin’ till spring,” Gattis explained. “Freezer houses are full, folks get to

stay indoors.”

“I’d want to celebrate that,” Kaichang commented.

“Used to be the other seigneurs’d try to get ’em to carry on all year round, grab whatever was out there,” Carson said. “Old Orrin Westermain always set his face dead against that, and he was right. Pure profiteerin’. Fish need time off too.”

“And now?”

“Now we’re Affiliated,” Carson said, “ain’t no seigneur can tell ’em what to do. So they follow their own inclination, which is to give themselves and the fish a break.”

After the meal, Carson and his sons went back to work, and Tollain and the others returned to the barn, tore down their kit and stowed it safely away in the sturdy travel cases in which it had come from *Bellbird*. Kaichang took her guitar over to the farmhouse for the following evening. Orville and Korynn, having packed their own gear, went back to the house while Tollain was still boxing drums and unscrewing metal rods.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to play?” Verneen said, lingering.

“I would love you to play,” Tollain said, coming to stand in front of her, “but we need you in the audience to make contact with Suncat, assuming she gets there. Is that okay?”

Verneen laughed a little. “Usually when someone says that to me they’re looking down, not up.”

“I’m not that much shorter than you,” Tollain protested.

Verneen hugged him suddenly. “Thanks,” she whispered, “for letting me be the one. I know you’d rather it was you.”

“More than anything,” Tollain said, “but dancing needs a good strong beat.”

“Do you remember what Suncat said in that note?”

“Every word,” Tollain replied.

“She said we should try to love each other a bit.”

“Yes.” Tollain’s mouth was dry, and he felt as if the barn were spinning around him.

Verneen put her mouth very close to his ear.

“I’m afraid,” she said.

“What about?”

“I’m afraid it’s going to be a bit more than...a bit. For me anyway.”

She released him, leaving him to stagger and try to find his knees, and darted out of the barn. He leant heavily on the bass drum case, trying to still his whirling thoughts.

*A bit more than...a bit.*

He had already known that *he* felt that way. He just hadn’t expected anyone else to.

This could be a serious problem, or...or maybe not.

He finished his packing mechanically and left the barn, switching off the lights and locking the door. It felt like saying goodbye to something.

Or possibly hello to something else.

The wind seemed to be picking up a little.

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Something that had been subconsciously bothering Suncat for some time suddenly popped into focus.

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t had enough to think about. Braeden, currently putting his men through hell in a surprise spot drill that had so far lasted an hour and a quarter, was going to be away tomorrow afternoon, not expected back till after dark at the earliest. Darben, in the moment before the bellowed summons had forced him to lock her door and leave, had intimated that he was going to smuggle her out of the meinie house and take her to the dance, a task made easier by the fact that at least half the gang seemed to be going whether Braeden consented or not. How Shallen would react to this mass exodus Suncat had no idea; Darben, questioned on the subject, had merely shrugged.

Suncat was not, she knew, a good dancer. In fact the dancing tutor at Miss Ganticold’s had confessed himself at a loss as to how a young serina of such exquisite proportions could possibly possess quite so many left feet. But she enjoyed dancing,

for certain values of the word, and was looking forward to getting out of the meinie house and meeting some other people. At very least it might take her mind off the problem, to which it was prone to return at random intervals when she wasn't inventing alien physiologies or romancing shy young fisher boys, of whether she missed Tollain more than Kaichang and Verneen, or the other way around, and whether whichever was the way she should feel, or the way she shouldn't feel, and whether it mattered, and...layer upon layer upon layer of shoulds and shouldn'ts, all interlocking and overlapping and why wasn't love ever simple?

The fact was, she knew now, she loved them all. They were all different, they all made her feel different, but each feeling was love. She knew at least four of them loved her. The problem, as always, was: could each of those four accept that she loved the other three as well? And if not, how could they possibly carry on?

And at this point, the something that had been bothering her leapt into the spotlight and struck a triumphant pose.

Where was Anson?

The older man who'd spoken to her first, with the fatherly manner and the nice voice. Obviously he had had to go somewhere else, after he had flatly assured her she would not be brainwashed...but why hadn't he been back?

She resolved to ask Shallen, or somebody, as soon as possible.

Braeden was still shouting at his troops, on the lawn out of sight. Suncat listened, but could only manage to pick out a few terms of abuse. He seemed quite incoherent. Suncat could imagine him, pacing back and forth, spittle flying from his lips; see the boys exchanging worried glances whenever his back was turned.

The shot brought her heart leaping into her mouth.

What the inveterate frod had he done?

She sat down on the bed, thinking about the boys in turn...Darben, Droyc, Yorgen, Eynon, Feargal, and the other one whose name she didn't know yet...which of them had it been? If even one of them had been killed because of what she had done— Someone knocked on the door, the key turned in the lock and Shallen walked in.

“Just to let you know, sweetie,” she said without preamble, “no fatalities. Braeden just decided to underline his point by firing over the boys’ heads. Frankly I think he’s losing it. I mean I love him and all, but he’s just not up to the job, is he?”

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Suncat whispered conspiratorially. “Besides, who else is there?”

Shallen stared at her. “Oh, come on, Anger,” she said. “Me, of course. I already do all the planning and co-ordinating around here. I’m the one with all the connections. This is just the next step.”

“But you’ve got no combat experience.”

“Neither has he,” Shallen laughed. “Just taking pot shots at little furry animals and beating up people who can’t fight back. I’m sure I can be a better leader than he is.”

“That sounds familiar,” Suncat said dryly.

“Oh, Anger,” Shallen said reproachfully, “are you *still* sulking about that? I explained it all, don’t you remember? How sorry I was, how it all got out of hand. I’ve changed since then, I’m a grown-up now. Anyway, I just came to let you know Braeden didn’t kill anyone, and—”

“Shallen,” Suncat said, “what happened to Anson?”

“Anson?” Shallen’s eyes remained fixed on hers.

“He spoke to me when I first arrived here.”

“Oh, you mean *Anson*,” Shallen said. “I thought you said Anton. No, Anson hasn’t been around for a while. He had to go back to Northshores. Meinie business.”

“Okay,” Suncat said casually. “I just wondered.”

“I must fly back down and soothe the ruffled feathers before he starts in on the furniture,” Shallen said. “Someone’ll be up in a little while to let you out if you need to...whatever.” She smiled that rueful little smile. “You can’t blame Braeden for being a bit heavy-handed. I mean we are both going to be away tomorrow, so you’ll be—”

“Both of you?” Suncat echoed.

“Yes, I’m going with him. This fellow K— This fellow we’re going to see,” she went on

almost smoothly, “he’s a bit unreliable, and Braeden wants me along as sort of insurance. So you’d better be good,” she said, wagging a finger at Suncat. “No inviting boys round for wild parties. You should have enough here to be going on with anyway.”

“What, Braeden’s friends?” Suncat said, sounding alarmed. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, they’re not all like him,” Shallen said. “Some of them are nice enough, but a bit tame. Anyway, I must go. See you later, Anger.” She wiggled her fingers, went out and locked the door again.

Suncat rummaged under her pillow, located the little knot of hair with the bug attached, and spoke into it.

“Oi, you lot. Listen. I don’t know if you’re responsible for Braeden getting called away tomorrow, but you need to know this...”

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At the Meldrum farm, Tollain and the others passed the afternoon fretfully. The machine on the low table in the parlour was off limits, the instruments in the barn packed away. Korynn had gone via the back way to Coldsands, to put in some work on Magellen’s ancient piano. The house was already spotless, the lunch dishes washed and put away; there was nothing to do but wait, and watch the trees that bordered the farmlands shifting in the gathering wind.

Carson’s father’s torung still stood against the wall in front of the cabinet in which it had rested for so long. Kaichang dusted it, tuned it again quite unnecessarily, but would not play it.

“Oh, for a holoset,” Orville mourned.

“Nothing like that on Argenthome,” Kaichang said. “At least, not out here in the wilds. They make their own entertainment in these parts.”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” Orville muttered.

“Torres!” Kaichang was elaborately aghast. “What can you mean?”

“You know frodding well what I mean,” Orville snapped. “Don’t worry, I know better than to even think about it. I’m going out for a walk.”

The door slammed behind him.

“Temper,” Kaichang remarked. “And thus we see the archetypical male ego—”

“Put a sock in it, Kaichang,” Verneen said equably.

“Make me.”

“If you two have something you want to discuss in private,” Tollain said, “don’t mind me. I’ll take my male ego for a walk as well, I think.”

“Should we?” Verneen said, when the door had closed behind Tollain in turn.

“I don’t see why not,” Kaichang said. “It’d be better than sitting around moping.”

Hand in hand, they climbed the stairs.

A few minutes later, Suncat’s voice whispered from the speaker of the machine.

*“Oi, you lot. Listen...”*

Orville strode along the road that curved round the farm, buffeted by gusts of wind, hardly aware of where he was going. All of a sudden, all his anger had boiled up out of nowhere and made him unfit company for anyone. He needed to be alone to master it, to stuff it back down into the seething crucible of his soul and sit on the lid till it stopped jumping.

He was not of the Braeden type, that imagines himself entitled to the intimacy of any other human being. He did crave it, though; craved it most grievously. Suncat was his lodestar, and even to be kept at arm’s length by her was better than nights of unrestrained passion with anyone else; but Suncat was not here, had been not here for what felt like weeks, and in a little over twenty-four hours, if everything went according to plan, everyone else would be seeing her...everyone except him.

And he’d volunteered for the job, that was the stupid part. He’d actually *volunteered* to be the one who drove forty-odd miles to meet the enemy and delay him so that Tollain and Verneen and Kaichang and even frodding Mitwoch could be in the same room as the woman he adored, could see her, speak to her, maybe even touch her...

“Head case,” he growled at the wind and the trees and the unresponsive road.

“Frodding head case, that’s what I am! Broken in the brain! *Frodding mad!!!*”

He beat at his own head with his fists as he strode along, shouting obscenities that were whipped away a moment later, screaming inarticulately all his loss and his pain and his helplessness and his rage.

He was not aware of the figure sitting on the low stone wall ahead of him till they were almost face to face. Then he suddenly stopped, took a pace backwards and gaped.

*"Your future, your future,"* Tollain sang above the wind, *"I will tell to you, Your future you often have asked me."*

"Your eyes aren't black," Orville said, hardly even knowing what he was saying. "How the frod did you get here so fast?"

"I came straight," Tollain said. "You've gone round in a great half-circle."

"Yeah, story of my life," Orville muttered. "Circles, half circles, ever decreasing frodding circles...look, I'm not fit to be around right now, so just push off and let me deal with this, all right?"

"I can't," Tollain said.

"Why not?"

*"Your true love will die by your own right hand, And Crazy Man Orville will cursed be,"* sang Tollain.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Suncat needs all of us," Tollain said. "That means we need each other."

"I'll do my bit."

"You won't if you wander off a cliff edge or into the path of a speeding truck." Tollain held out his hand. "And the frame of mind you're in, you just might think that was a good idea."

"What d'you know about my frame of mind?" Orville's anger was finding a focus other than himself. It felt better. He ignored the hand.

"I know you don't need any extraneous ravens with eyes black as coal," Tollain said.

"You carry them around with you, everywhere. Always whispering in your ear—"

“Shut up!”

“Only we don’t have time for that now,” Tollain said.

“Seems to me all we’ve got is time,” Orville snarled. “Wait for this, wait for that, not yet, hold off, don’t rescue me I’ve got to stop a war—”

“Now we come to it,” Tollain said.

“What the frod does she think she’s doing, trying to be some kind of hero? Just ‘cause she got kidnapped by loonies, now she wants to cure ‘em? Why are we not smashing our way into that place, smashing anyone who tries to stop us, grabbing her and getting the frod off this frodding planet?” Orville was screaming by now.

“Because that’s not the way she wants it.” Tollain’s voice effortlessly overrode his.

“And if we aren’t doing it the way she wants it...what right do we have to do it at all?”

“I’ve got a right! *Me!* I’ve got rights!!” Orville shouted. “I knew her before she ever met any of you! I knew her when she was just a stupid girl in a stupid school trying to get out. I helped her back then.”

“And that makes her yours?”

“NO!!” Orville’s voice was cracking. “But it means I—” He didn’t know what it meant.

“It means—” He didn’t know how to finish the sentence. “It’s got to mean something,” he finished, tears at last starting to come. He lurched forward, and Tollain, sitting on the wall, took him into his arms and held him.

“It means you hurt,” he said softly. “It means you hurt more than any man ever hurt before. Just like every other man who ever loved since old Earth began to spin. You know, none better, how far beyond you she is, how far beyond any breathing soul. And so you hurt, because you know you’ll never, ever be good enough to kiss the toe of her shoe. And so do I, about me. And so, I imagine, do Verneen and Kaichang. And she...feels *exactly the same*...about us. That’s the brilliant stupidity of love, the trick everyone sees through till it’s played on them. It’s new every time.”

Orville sobbed wordlessly into Tollain’s shoulder.

“Listen,” Tollain said. “Listen to me, Orville Torres. We’re going to get her back. This thing tomorrow is just the first step. We’re going to get her back, and then we’ll be

whole again. Only it can't be like it was. All dancing around the thing we don't want to talk about, being polite and not telling each other how we feel. We need to be able to do that, because that's all that music is. It's feeling. We—"

Orville suddenly reared back in his arms, and a second later his mouth had closed over Tollain's. Tollain stiffened for an instant, and then relaxed into the kiss.

"What," Orville said, some seconds later, "does a bloke have to do to get you to shut up talking?"

Tollain simply looked into his eyes.

"I don't do this," Orville said. "All this. Touchy-feely stuff. It's not my thing, all right? But yes, Tollain frodding Kintarsh, if you really, really want me to say it, I love you. And I love the girls as well, not that they care. I thought you were a burned-out has-been, and maybe you still are, but that doesn't matter. I love you. I love them. I love Suncat. That's why I'm doing the stupid thing and passing up the chance to see her. I know we're gonna get her back. I know it won't be like it was. But whatever it turns out to be, I want it. If it frodding kills me, I want it. There. Now you know."

Tollain still said nothing, and for a frozen second fear gripped Orville by the throat. Then the little man smiled.

"I love you too, you idiot," he said. "Now let's get back before we get blown away."

He slid off the wall and held out his hand once again, and this time Orville took it.

As they walked back along the road, round the great half circle, the sound of thunder augmented the rushing of the wind, and flickers far away in the gathering dusk heralded the onset of the storm; but the crucible of Orville's soul was quiescent, all his anger not spent but transmuted for the moment into a nobler element, and he was at peace.

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The storm hit Coldsands first. The light over the sea took on a hellish glow beneath black masses of cloud, and lightning split the sky, closely followed by thunder. Darben brought Suncat her supper and suggested she close the window.

"You'll get drenched else, Miss Anger," he said.

“Why don’t you call me Suncat, Darben?” Suncat said.

“Oh, I couldn’t do that, Miss Anger,” Darben said, shaking his head rapidly.

“But you’re taking me to the dance tomorrow night,” Suncat said, “assuming it’s still on.”

“Take more’n this to shut down Wintercome Dance, Miss Anger,” Darben said proudly. “Sides, this’ll be all spent out come tomorrow, leastways the lighntnin’ part. Just the rain’ll move on inland, and then we’ll be fine.”

“So,” Suncat said, lowering her gaze as she toyed idly with her food, “are you going to be so formal all the time?” She looked up under her lashes and caught his eye.

“I could maybe just call you Anger,” Darben offered.

“That would be fine,” Suncat said. “In fact you could start now.”

“Best not, Miss Anger.” Darben was apologetic. “Might could be I’d slip up and the Leader would hear.”

“Maybe when he’s gone, then,” Suncat suggested.

“Okay, Miss Anger,” Darben said. “I better go stand outside. Sometimes he checks up on us, you know? And right now he’s like a rockslith with a chafin’ crest.”

“Of course,” Suncat said. “Thank you, Darben.”

Darben grinned, mouthed *Tomorrow night* silently, and made the age-old gesture of affirmation. Then he went out and closed the door.

Suncat went to the window and looked out. The light was all but gone, except for the ever more frequent bolts of lightning striding towards the house. The wind was howling like a banshee through the trees, buffeting the house almost in time with the strokes of thunder. Reluctantly she closed the window. Darben was right; when the rain came, it would blow right in. Besides, she would need to sleep.

Down in the garden, dark and insubstantial as a shadow in the deeper shade of the kampoulia, Korynn Mitwoch watched as the window closed and the heavy curtains slid across it, cutting off the last of its light. He stood for a moment longer; then, as silently as thirty-eight bars of solid rests, he moved away from the meinie house,

heading for Northshores and Meldrum's farm.