

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER TWENTY

The storm barged around Northshores for half the night, flinging wind about as if it were going out of style, drenching everything all over again and making the night hideous with thunderclaps; then, quite suddenly, as befitted the day known in these parts as Wintercome, the wind shifted to the north and brought a sudden cold snap that, while it did not freeze the puddles, scattered frost everywhere so that the pallid sun rose upon a world edged with white.

Orville, dragging himself out of bed, paused and looked back at Tollain, still peacefully asleep. He was walking in a new world now, and its language and customs were as yet unknown to him.

He put that problem aside for later and dressed quickly. Orman was in the kitchen when he got downstairs, looking bleary but awake.

“Car’s outside,” he said. “We all got to go see if there’s any storm damage. I just stayed to fix you some breakfast.”

Orville gratefully bolted two slices of toast and a huge mug of tea, thanked Orman kindly and went outside, to find a decently anonymous dark brown Mohan-Dwyer Wayfarer waiting in the yard. There was no sign of a driver, and for a moment Orville wondered whether it had been dropped by copter. He didn’t envy anyone tasked with driving the thing up here last night and then walking back.

He got in, pressed the starter, waved to Orman, looked around him, stopped the car, got out, re-entered the house, emerged a minute later with a folded map and a piece of paper, got back in, started the car again, waved to Orman again, and moved slowly through the gate and out on to the road.

Shaking his head and grinning, Orman went back inside.

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Tollain, waking at his usual time, got up and dressed thoughtfully. He too was in unfamiliar territory, but unlike Orville he had a fair idea of the custom of the country, and he had a feeling his general rule would serve him just as well in this situation as it

had in others.

When he went downstairs, he found Kaichang and Verneen in the kitchen, Kaichang at the stove and Verneen sitting at the table.

“We have got to do something,” Kaichang said.

“And good morning to you,” Tollain replied. “About what?”

“Carson and his boys,” Verneen explained. “We were just talking about it. We invade their house, we let them wait on us, we eat them out of house and home, and so far they haven’t let us do a thing to pay them back.”

“Oh, I agree,” Tollain said. “But what would you suggest? They won’t let us help with the farm work—probably a wise decision in my case—I’m quite sure they’d be affronted if we offered them money, and as far as anything else goes they seem to have everything they want.”

“I know,” Verneen said, “but there must be something.”

“What would Suncat say?”

Kaichang put the back of her hand to her forehead, languishingly. “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” she quoted, in a breathy little voice.

Verneen made as if to throw something. “No she wouldn’t,” she declared. “She’d say that the best possible thing we could do is accept their generosity, show that we appreciate what it means to them and that it means as much to us, and basically just say ‘thank you’ and mean it.”

“That’s what I said,” Kaichang said. “More or less.”

“Well, maybe something will present itself,” Tollain said. “The last thing we want to do is give them something they don’t need that will just upset their lives. Is there any bread left?”

“Just a heel. We were thinking of going shopping later on.”

“That would be good. They can’t object to that.” Tollain took the end of the loaf and began carefully slicing it. “Is the barn still there?”

“Looks to be. We haven’t been over yet.”

"I assume Orville got off all right." Tollain caught the look Kaichang darted at Verneen. "On his journey, I mean," he amended.

"He took the map and my directions, so I guess so," Verneen said. "Korynn went back down to the pub to do some more work on the piano. I don't know what he's doing to it, but I hope it's still a piano when he's finished."

"So, you heard us," Tollain said to Kaichang.

"We couldn't really avoid it. He's loud, that boy." Kaichang looked thoughtful. "I'd never have thought he would be interested."

"In me, you mean?"

"In men."

"I don't think he is. It may just have been a one-time thing." Tollain buttered his bread. "Anyway, it was very nice, and I think we both felt better for it."

"Good." Kaichang fetched an extra mug and poured three teas. "So what shall we do once we've checked the barn?"

"Check the machine. See what's been a-goin' on over to Coldsands way."

"Don't try and do accents," Kaichang said kindly. "You're hopeless."

"I could be doing that now," Verneen said, getting up. "I've finished eating."

"What about your tea?"

"I'll take it with me. There are those little mat thingies. They must drink tea in the parlour sometimes." She took her mug and left the room.

"When do we head down to Magellen's?" Kaichang said.

"As soon as we know Braeden's set off. We can't schlep down those stairs even with just one guitar—they are actually quite steep—so it'll have to be the spare truck and hope. I think if we ask nicely Orman will bring Verneen down when the thing actually starts."

"I'm sure I could manage it," Kaichang sniffed.

"With a hardshell case on your back? You haven't seen them. Still, it would simplify matters." Tollain broke off at a sudden squeak from the parlour. Quickly Kaichang

moved the frying pan off the heat and they went through to see a stricken Verneen sitting in front of the machine.

“Listen to this,” she said, and pressed a button.

“Oi, you lot. Listen,” said Suncat’s voice. “I don’t know if you’re responsible for Braeden getting called away tomorrow, but you need to know this. He’s not going to be alone. Shallen’s going with him. Good in one way, of course, because as far as I can tell all the boys are planning to skive off to this dance tonight and this’ll make it easier, but if you were planning to waylay him in some lonely alley and bop him on the head or something, you’ve got two potential boppees, not one. Is anybody listening? Knock once for yes, twice for no. Are you there, Aunt Gunhilda?”

“Oh,” Kaichang said.

“When did that come in?” Tollain said.

“Last night, just after we went upstairs and you and Orville went out.”

“And none of us thought to check,” Kaichang said bitterly.

“We were so busy not doing anything with the subliminals we never thought,” Verneen said.

“Would this be a time when having personal comlinks might be a good idea?”

Kaichang asked Tollain.

“Yes,” Tollain admitted. “You’re right. The ban is hereby rescinded, not that it does us any good now.”

“Still,” Verneen said, “Orville’s fairly bright, and he’s got a good head start. He’ll probably work it out.”

Kaichang nodded. “For a man, he’s reasonably capable. I’m sure he won’t have any trouble.”

They looked worriedly at each other.

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Driving rain sluiced the windscreen of the car as Orville peered out at the signpost.

Four roads met at a central island on which, surrounded by scrubby bushes, it stood,

its four arms clearly carved with their message. The left arm said BEARFORD 1 ½. The right said BEARFORD 2. The one pointing ahead—he had got out and checked—said BEARFORD 2 ¾. The one pointing back the way he had come said BEARFORD 4.

He stared at the map. He could cover five meinies, including Bearford, with his thumb. The roads were a tiny knot he could barely even make out. The clouds had covered the sun since before he had turned off the Farhavens road, and he had no idea which way was north or even which way he was going. For all he knew he had already passed through Bearford, and no sign for Downsholm had been visible.

“Should have stayed in bed,” he muttered. “Oh well. Eeny, meinie, miny...”

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Suncat was woken early by Feargal, bringing breakfast and the news that Braeden wanted to see her as soon as she had finished. She ate quickly, wondering what it was about this time, and just had time to grab the bug and tuck it into her hair again.

She was not long left in doubt.

“Now listen,” Braeden said, jabbing a finger at her across the table. Shallen stood behind him, one hand on his shoulder, smiling reassuringly. Braeden himself looked rumpled and blotchy, as though he had not slept well, and the finger he jabbed had a slight, a very slight tremor in it.

“Yes?” Suncat said.

“I’m talkin’ to you now, not the thing inside you,” Braeden said. “My girl and me, we gotta go pay a little visit today. Won’t be back till after five dark. Now my girl tells me that you’re on our side, you hate these things as much as I do, you want our world freed. And my girl knows better than to lie to me. Hell, by now she ought to. So. That right?”

“I want Argenthome to be free, yes,” Suncat said.

“Good,” Braeden said. “So I’m placin’ you—” Again the finger jab. “—on your honour. My boys’ll be in charge, got that? Anything they ask you to do, you do it right quick, don’t make ’em start tellin’.”

“Anything?” Suncat said, her tone utterly neutral. Braeden looked nonplussed for a

moment, and Shallen leant down and whispered in his ear.

“I will of course,” he said, “be placin’ my boys on their honour too. You have my word that their conduct toward you will reflect the highest standards of decency and good taste.”

As if you even knew the meaning of the words, Suncat thought, inclining her head gravely.

“But like I say,” Braeden went on, “I will be demandin’ a similar undertakin’ from you. And just to make things a little clearer,” he said, leaning forward, “if I find out when I come home that anythin’ out of the common’s taken place, I will take it out on my boys, for lettin’ me down. I will take it out good an’ hard on you, for breakin’ your word. But before I do any of that—”

His voice was a steely growl, almost but not quite a whisper.

“Before I do any of that,” he said, “I will take it out *real* good an’ hard on my girl here. ‘Cause she has vouched for your good conduct, and like I say, by now she ought to know better than to lie to me.”

Suncat’s gaze flicked upward. Shallen, frozen-faced, gave a tiny nod.

“Do we understand each other?” Braeden said.

Ohhhh yes. “Yes,” Suncat said.

“Good,” Braeden said, sitting back. “I’m glad we had this little talk. I like to put all my cards on the table and keep everythin’ straight. I’m a straight kind of man, Miss Morningsky, as you’ll find when you get to know me a little better. A plain man. I speak the truth as I see it and I always do what I say I’m gonna do.”

“Oh, I can see there’s nothing fancy about you, Mr Carthew,” Suncat said.

Braeden favoured her with his narrow-eyed stare. She looked back insouciantly.

“Good then,” he said, getting up. Shallen, unprepared, took a pace backwards.

“There’ll be no interrogation today, but dependin’ on what happens I may be callin’ on you to speak to some friends of mine soon. I expect full co-operation, from you and from your controller.” He turned, pushing Shallen aside, and left the room, slamming the door. A few moments later they heard him outside, shouting for his

troops to assemble.

“I know,” Shallen said, before Suncat could speak. “I know.”

“Why do you put up with it?” Suncat burst out. “This isn’t you. This isn’t the Shallen I knew. She would never let herself get beaten up by a—a—”

“I don’t enjoy it,” Shallen said, with a touch of asperity.

“Then why?”

“Because of the *aliens*,” Shallen said, as if it were obvious. “He’s the only one fighting them. He protects me. I...I *have* to stay with him to be safe from them.”

Suncat started to speak, then stopped.

Of course she believed that. He had driven it deep into her mind. He had made her utterly dependent on him. She might talk big about taking over as leader, but she never would. The delusion Braeden had implanted in her—that Suncat had reinforced with her own play-acting—made sure of that.

Shallen Westerman, as Suncat had known her, no longer existed. The outward semblance was there, the personality, the memories...but something inside wasn’t there any more. She still had her cleverness, her plausibility, the appearance of confidence, but it was a sham. And maybe nothing could ever bring her back.

Braeden Carthew had murdered her. As surely as he had murdered the woman in the shop, Shallen’s employer, and who knew how many more. As surely as he would kill Suncat, too, once she ceased to be of use to him.

Suncat felt sick. She got up and put her arms round Shallen, and the other girl did not resist.

“I’ll help you,” she said. “I’ll find a way. We’ll get rid of the aliens without Braeden, and then you’ll be free.”

Shallen pulled away, her eyes searching Suncat’s face.

“But how will I ever know?” she whispered. “You could just be saying that because it’s making you. Trying to drive a wedge between us. Trying to—”

She shook her head, and Suncat could see the mask sliding back into place, the frozen

image of the old Shallen hiding the terrified girl within.

“I’d better take you back to your room, Anger,” Shallen said, in almost her normal voice. “We’ll be setting off in a couple of hours. Is there anything I can get you? Something to read, maybe?”

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Kaichang looked up as the sound of a door being closed and locked came over the speaker.

“That thing,” she said, “dies. Any objections?”

“Not from me,” Tollain said. “I assume you mean Braeden.”

“Who else?”

Verneen’s face showed agony.

“I wish there was another way,” she said.

“There isn’t,” Kaichang said flatly. “It dies or I die. No arguments.”

“You might have to get in line behind Suncat,” Tollain said.

Kaichang stared at him. “Do you honestly think I’d let *her* soil her hands on him?” she said. “She’s not going to get the chance.”

“There’s also the point that murder is kind of a crime,” Tollain said.

“This isn’t murder. This is pest control.”

“The authorities will see it differently. They’ll want to punish him in their own way.”

Kaichang got up. She went over to where Tollain was sitting, picked him up out of his chair and held him in mid-air so that they were face to face.

“What part of ‘no arguments’ did I not make clear enough for you?” she said.

Tollain looked away.

“I just want to make sure you’re aware of all the consequences,” he said.

“I’m not stupid,” Kaichang said, letting him down gently. “I’m not going to barge in and shoot him, even if I had a gun. It’ll need to be done carefully. But it needs to be done.”

"I don't know how you can even talk about it like that," Verneen said.

"He's got to be stopped," Kaichang said, turning back to face her. "You do see that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Verneen snapped, tears starting from her eyes. "But there are lots of ways to stop him. You just want to kill him because he makes you angry. And that's the wrong reason."

"The wrong reason?" Kaichang echoed. "What the fuck is the right reason?"

"There isn't one," Verneen sobbed, and bolted for the stairs.

"She's right, you know," Tollain said.

"I thought you were on my side."

"Oh, I agree with you. I'll gladly hold him down for you. But it's for the same reason as you. He's a man who hurts women, and that makes me angry. The thing is, anger isn't reason enough to murder. It's a selfish reason, just like killing someone for money."

"Even if the anger is for others who've been hurt?"

"Even so. You're not really thinking about them, you're thinking about how they make you feel." Tollain got up. "You're thinking about how good you'll feel when you look down at his dead body, how much cleaner the world will feel to you once he's gone. I feel the same. But Verneen's right. You won't feel good, the world will still be the same, and you'll have to answer to the authorities just as if he had been—been someone like Carson. And that won't feel fair to you. But it is."

"How do you claim to know all this?" Kaichang demanded. "You've never killed anyone in your life."

Tollain looked up at her, and this time it was Kaichang who looked away.

"I just know," he said softly.

Kaichang went over to the machine. Suncat was crying. She was not one of those people who always cry prettily. The noises coming from the speaker were grotesque and ugly.

"Listen to that," she said. "And then tell me I'm wrong."

“All right,” Tollain said. “If you’ll go upstairs and listen to Verneen right now, and then tell me there’s a difference.”

They stared at each other.

“All right,” Kaichang said at last. “If you can stand to let him live, so can I. But that’s not to say I won’t take the chance if I get it.”

“Fair enough,” Tollain said. “Now go and talk to Verneen. I’ll stay down here.”

“With that?” Kaichang indicated the speaker.

“It’s as close as I can get.”

Kaichang went to the stairs.

“You’ll tell me one day?” she said.

“One day,” Tollain said. “Maybe.”

Kaichang nodded, and went on up.

Tollain sat down in front of the machine, and listened to Suncat weeping.

When Kaichang and Verneen came down again, some while later, the weeping had stopped, but Tollain was still sitting there. Verneen was pale but composed; Kaichang had clearly been crying herself, but her voice was steady now.

“Do you think she’ll still go to the dance?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Tollain said. “At least some of the boys will be going, we know that. So if Braeden gets back before they do, there’ll be trouble anyway. Whether she goes or not, he’s bound to blame her.”

“So we need to make sure he doesn’t get back.”

“Except there’s nothing we can do,” Tollain said bleakly. “Orville’s out of communication, and—”

A musical tone suddenly sounded in the room. The three of them looked around in surprise.

“It’s Seir Morningsky’s comlink,” Verneen said.

“What does *he* want?” Kaichang demanded rhetorically.

“And where the frod is it?” Tollain added.

After a somewhat frantic minute or two, they eventually found it down behind one of the sofa cushions, and Tollain pressed to answer.

“Hello?” he said.

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“Hello,” said Orville. “I’m here.”

“*How—*” Tollain broke off, and Orville smiled to himself.

“When I was using that thing to call Braeden the Bastard I made a note of the number,” he said. “Sometimes the brain works. Anyway, I’m in Downsholm. Frod of a journey, but the last bit was okay. What’s been happening?”

He listened while Tollain ran through the morning’s events.

“So he’s basically going to beat everyone up, including his alleged girlfriend, if anything happens he doesn’t like?” he said.

“Yes,” said Kaichang’s voice, “*and she’s going to be with him there, so watch out.*”

“I don’t think Koost would like that.”

“*Koost wouldn’t know. He’ll put her somewhere out of sight to watch. Koost probably doesn’t know her from Deucalion’s pet dromedary, so there’s no real risk for Braeden.*”

“Oh, there is,” Orville said. “Believe me, there is.”

There was the sound of a brief tussle, and then Verneen spoke.

“*Orville,*” she said, “*don’t do anything to hurt them. Either of them.*”

“*We’ve had this out here,*” Tollain said in the background. “*No violence if we can avoid it...but...*” The comlink changed hands again, and Tollain’s voice got louder. “*We need them kept there all night if possible.*”

“*All night!*” Orville glanced round at the peaceful main square of Downsholm town. Nobody seemed to have noticed his involuntary yelp. “Are you completely insane?”

“*Well, actually—*”

“Never mind. Look, I can frod up their vehicle which will delay them for a couple of

hours, but all night? How the frog am I supposed to do that?"

"You'll think of something," Tollain said encouragingly.

"No, I will not think of something. Nobody could think of something. There—" Orville stopped. Looked around at the peaceful scene again. Began to grin.

"What is it?"

"I've just thought of something."

"Told you."

"Shut up you. It's risky, and it'll take preparation, and probably every millicrab on my keycard, but I think I can do it."

"Well, you've got time. They haven't even set off yet."

"I'll need all of that. Talk to you later."

He ended the call, extracted his keycard and left the public phone booth. The storm had passed over Downsholm before he had arrived, and it was now a blustery but otherwise pleasant day. Across the street stood the Memorial Theatre, where they had played on their previous visit. Outside a placard announced the forthcoming opening night of the Three Meinies Amateur Operatic Society's rendition of *The Filibusters of Farhavens*. Orville crossed the road briskly and went in, wondering if the manager of the theatre still remembered him.