

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Suncat, dry of eye but still sick of heart, watched as Braeden and Shallen drove away, along the road that led, eventually, to Broadfields. She had begun to feel less helpless when she had had her idea and the others had put it to such good effect. Now the feeling was back, only more powerful.

How could she do anything? Braeden, damn him, had sussed her out to a nicety. She would no more risk his wrath falling on Shallen, even on what was left of Shallen, than she would put her hand into a fire.

She had done her best to instil a spirit of rebellion among the troops, and maybe the subliminal suggestions (her idea, she told herself angrily) had helped. They would go to the dance whatever happened. She couldn't see any way this could end well. If she pretended to be ill... No, Darben would just go without her. And Braeden would come back and find the house empty, and probably beat Shallen to a pulp just on general principles before he even started on her. *Before I do any of that.*

There was nothing she could do to stop it. *Some things, she remembered, are more easily started than stopped.* A line from one of the old two-d films she and Orville had found in the stacks of the library at Miss Ganticold's. A passion they had shared, watching the things over and over again whenever she could sneak out of the dormitory and meet him in the darkened theatre. She could still remember the feel of his hand in hers.

Well, she thought, since there's nothing I can do to stop it, might as well see it through. She went to the door and opened it. Darben was standing outside.

"Did you get them?" she said in a low voice, even though nobody was around to hear.

"Sure," Darben said. His foot nudged a flat brown package out from behind him and over the threshold into her room. Her foot moved it the rest of the way. "I'll come for you 'bout half of five dark. You be ready now. We won't have time to waste."

"Who else is going?"

"All of us 'cept Timmon. He don't dance much, so he volunteered to stay here 'case

the Leader phones through.” Timmon, that was the missing name.

“That was nice of him.”

“We told him, if the Leader finds out, say he didn’t know nothin’ about this.”

Suncat doubted if that would stop Braeden taking it out on Timmon as well, but said nothing. “I’ll be ready.”

“Okay.” Darben grinned hugely. “It’s gonna be a good one this year. They got—” He stopped, still grinning. “Well, you’ll find out. See you later...Anger.”

Suncat smiled at him, closed the door and picked up the package. She carefully untied the string with which it was bound up, and tore off the paper.

The dress was dark green, woven on a jacquard loom and figured with a pattern of roses, scoop-necked and with what looked like a full circle skirt, cut just below the knee. There were two petticoats and a pair of shoes to match, flat-heeled for dancing in. It was lovely, and Suncat knew just by looking that it would fit her perfectly. It must have cost Darben a fortune. She would have to pay him back for it. Assuming she ever got the chance.

She put the dress on the wooden hanger provided, hung it on the back of the door and looked at it.

Worth dying for?

Well, if you’re going to die anyway, why not?

She opened the door again.

“I’m going to take a bath,” she said.

“Thought of that too,” Darben said, picking up a bag from the floor and handing it to her. She opened it. Scented soap, shampoo, even a body scrubber. “Hope the smells are all right,” Darben went on. “I didn’t know what all kinds you favoured, so I— whoa!”

Suncat kissed him on the cheek, and then on the lips. “You,” she whispered, her eyes prickling, “are a darling. Thank you.”

Then she darted down the passage towards the bathroom, bag in hand.

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Knowing from which direction the enemy is going to approach is a great boon when planning strategy. When the truck pulled into the parking area outside Downsholm town, Orville was waiting, well concealed behind the public toilets.

Braeden and Shallen got out. Braeden was talking vehemently, and Shallen, who had been driving, was silent, practically cringing. Orville's stomach turned over, and he mentally sat on his hands.

Shallen turned and hurried towards the loos, while Braeden waited, leaning against the truck, pantomiming impatience. Orville ducked hastily round the back of the building and waited.

After about two minutes, he heard Braeden yell across the car park.

"Hey! You gonna be all day in there?"

A few seconds later Shallen ran out and rejoined him, apologising as she ran. He grabbed her arm and dragged her towards the gate that gave on the main square. Orville waited till they were out of sight, and then cautiously approached the truck. Pad-running was not the only skill he had picked up in the course of his misspent youth. When he moved away, some five minutes later, a couple of highly significant engine parts were in the pocket of his jacket, and his fingers, somewhat burned, were wrapped in his handkerchief.

He spotted Shallen without difficulty, standing under the awning of a bookshop where she could get a good view of the entire square. Braeden was nowhere to be seen at first, but then Orville saw him emerge from a bakery, eating something wrapped in paper. It was five minutes to three light.

Braeden finished the pastry, discarded the wrapper neatly in a bin (*okay, so he's not a litter bug*, thought Orville) and went and sat on the central bench facing the fountain. Next to him sat a small, neatly dressed man of middle age, reading a magazine with a picture of a young woman on the cover. Orville watched as Braeden leaned over, as if his attention had been caught by something in the magazine, and spoke to the man. As he did so, a well-built woman sitting on a nearby bench suddenly looked up. She

rose to her feet, put her head back, pointed at Braeden, opened her mouth wide and uttered an ear-splitting scream that seemed to go on for ever.

Heads turned all around them. Braeden started. The middle-aged man dropped his magazine and bolted. Shallen started across the square towards Braeden, just as a hefty man in overalls fixed on him and did exactly the same as the woman.

Shallen broke into a run, but Braeden was already running. The screams seemed to fill the air. They passed close by Orville, and he turned his back just in time.

“Is it them?” he heard Shallen say. “Braeden, is it them?”

“Who else, you dumb whore?” Braeden grunted. “Get to the truck!”

Orville strolled after them, and watched them scramble into the vehicle. The engine made whizzing noises, but refused to engage. At that point, three figures appeared at the exit to the main road, blocking the way. Orville could see them slowly raise their arms and point, could hear the weird skirling screams.

Shallen and Braeden piled out of the useless truck and bolted back across the car park, again passing within a couple of yards of Orville. Shallen was terrified, whimpering and crying, and Orville wished there could have been a way to spare her this. Braeden deserved it, but she didn't, not really. He was saving his breath for running.

The man in overalls and the woman were advancing slowly towards them, still pointing but no longer screaming. When they turned round and looked back, the three newcomers were half way across the car park, also advancing, between them and the truck. Everyone else in the square was looking at the two fugitives.

“Damn place is infested!” he heard Braeden gasp.

Another scream, right on cue, from off to Orville's left. Braeden grabbed Shallen and ran towards a side street. Orville had spent an hour with a street map and the members of the Three Meinies Amateur Operatic Society, plotting exactly how the two of them would be herded. As far as possible, he knew exactly which ways they would go, and where they would be bound to end up. The singers had been intrigued at the idea of a live role-playing game, it not being a pastime that had ever taken hold

on Argenthome, and very grateful for the generous donation Orville had made to support future productions.

Of course, the whole thing was horribly dangerous. At any moment, Braeden might break and attack someone, or decide that he was better off without a companion and kill the girl. Orville doubted it, though. The man was too much of a coward to attack a superior force, and too much of an egotist to deprive himself of the chance to punish her afterwards. He tried to quell his misgivings, and strolled into the bakery.

“Hello,” he said. “Bit of a rumpus going on out there, by the look of it. Do you by any chance still make those little dalimer cakes with the ollacum icing?”

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The shopping trip to Northshores town had taken longer than Kaichang had envisaged, and then there had been lunch, so it was rather more than an hour after Suncat’s conversation with Darben that Tollain, Kaichang and Verneen set off for Coldsands. Kaichang had still wanted to try the cliff stairs, but Verneen (who had immediately vetoed the suggestion that she should stay behind and come with Orman) overruled her, so they drove down past the meinie house. Tollain noted that the usual guard on the gate was not in place.

Mrs Henning was glad to see them again, and this time Tollain refrained from horseplay among the stock. She noticed Kaichang’s guitar case and grinned.

“Old Jarlo was sayin’ he had some new musicians comin’ in,” he said, “and I noticed Carson noticin’ your boys the other day. You better be good, mind.”

“We’ll do the best we can, Mrs Henning,” Kaichang said.

“Can’t nobody ask no more,” the woman said placidly.

Tollain and Verneen bought ice creams, despite the weather, and went outside and sat on the low stone wall to eat them. Kaichang went into Magellen’s, and came out a few minutes later.

“Moron Kitwonk hadn’t eaten since yesterday,” she said shortly. “Wondering why he was having trouble working. I got Mrs Magellen to make him something and made him promise to stop and eat it.”

“What’s he doing with that piano?” Tollain asked. “Putting fins on it, or fitting an interstellar drive?”

“No, just tinkering. Improving the action, re-somethinging the strings, I don’t know. If it isn’t the best upright piano on the planet by the time he’s done, it won’t be because he didn’t try.”

“I think he’s just as worried as we are,” Verneen said. “This is just how he shows it.” Kaichang considered. Then she shrugged. “Well, he’ll have to leave it as is now,” she said, “because I want to go in and suss the place out, start soundchecking. As soon as you two have finished covering yourselves with glop.”

Tollain and Verneen reflexively looked down at themselves, and at the same moment a large blob of ice cream landed on Tollain’s pristine shirt front.

“You made me do that,” he said accusingly.

“The cry of the male down the ages,” Kaichang taunted. “Look what you made me do.”

Verneen got up, looked at her half-eaten ice cream, and inserted it deftly into the top of Kaichang’s blouse.

“Look what you made *me* do,” she said, as Kaichang yelped and tried to get it out. The frozen confection slid inexorably down through the blouse, out at the bottom, and landed on the pavement.

“You minx!” Kaichang yelled, half laughing.

“Now you’ll both need clean tops,” Verneen said brightly. “I’ll go talk to Mrs Henning, shall I?”

Tollain used his handkerchief to pick up the remains of the ice cream and looked about for a litter bin.

“Over there,” Kaichang said, “outside the pub. That girl is getting above herself.”

“She is rather, isn’t she?” Tollain said approvingly. Kaichang darted a sharp glance at him, but he was already trotting across the road to deposit the dripping bundle.

They changed in the back of the truck into the clean shirts that Verneen had bought,

and then went into Magellen's, where most of the floor of the big main bar had been cleared, with just a few tables and chairs round the walls. Korynn was sitting at a table in a corner, stolidly eating sausages and chips; Jarlo Magellen was behind the bar.

"Hey, friends," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

"Not right now, thanks," Tollain said. "How's the piano?"

Jarlo looked over at it. "Well, sir," he said, "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't of heard it with my own ears. Thirty years I've had that piano and never once got a tone out of it like it's got now. I'd say you could put that piano on a stage in Broadfields itself and nobody'd turn a hair."

Tollain tried a few notes. "I see what you mean," he said.

"No wonder," said the landlord's wife, coming out from the kitchen with a steaming dish of sponge pudding swimming in custard. "All night and all morning that boy was workin' on it. Took it clean to pieces, near enough, I thought we'd have to cancel the dance on account the floor was all over piano." She put the dish down beside Korynn's plate. "Now you finish that up, mind," she told him.

"Thank you," Korynn said. It was difficult at the best of times to tell what state he was in, but Tollain could see a more than usually greyish tinge to his face.

"Good work, Korynn," he said softly.

"Thank you, Tollain," Korynn said.

"All right," Kaichang said, clapping her hands. "Drum kit's over here, so I assume we cluster round it. Where can I put my case?"

"I'll put it in back if you like," Jarlo said, as Kaichang extracted her guitar.

This done, Tollain played an A on the piano and Kaichang began tuning.

"You playin' too, darlin'?" Mrs Magellen asked Verneen.

"Well, I—" Verneen broke off, looked down at the case in her hand. "Oh look," she said in tones of surprise. "I seem to have brought my flute."

Tollain glanced round. "I thought you were going to be in the audience," he said.

“Just for a couple of dances,” Verneen pleaded.

“Oh, all right. As long as the man who plays the tin whistle doesn’t mind,” Tollain said.

“He won’t,” said a voice from the doorway.

The man who had spoken was small and slight, with curly hair cut short and blue eyes in a face much used to laughter. He came forward, smiling.

“Hello,” he said. “You’d be the new guys. Call me Corwyn. How’s it going?”

Tollain had frozen in his seat.

“You’re not from round here, are you?” Kaichang said.

“No, no, I’m an offworlder,” Corwyn said easily, “but I’ve lived here so long I’m frequently mistaken for a native. I’d like to meet him some day,” he added in a thoughtful tone.

“Corwyn?” Tollain said. “Corwyn Chiatso?”

Corwyn looked surprised. “Yeah, that’s me. Have we met?”

“What?” Tollain said faintly. “I mean...no, no we haven’t. I mean, not till now.” He got off the piano stool and came closer. “I had no idea...”

“You’re starting to freak me out, man,” Corwyn said.

“You were one of my idols,” Tollain said.

“That explains the stiffness and the smell of incense,” Corwyn said. He sounded slightly nervous, slightly suspicious and just a little bit pleased. “You’ve actually heard of me?”

“This man,” Tollain said, recovering a little of his self-possession and turning to the others, “is only one of the greatest multi-instrumentalists never to make it big in this galaxy. He put out gods know how many albums, and now you either find them in triple-sealed and guarded glass cases in private mansions, or turning up in second-hand places for next to nothing, and most people have never heard his name. He was one of my idols, a role model. He’s why I can’t be content with just one instrument.”

“Okay, now I’m embarrassed,” Corwyn Chiatso said, laughing.

“And at the height of his career,” Kaichang said, “he turned his back on it all and just disappeared. Yes?”

“They had me touring gas giants, man,” Corwyn said. “I just couldn’t take the pressure.”

“And you came here?” Verneen said.

“Well, eventually. I like it here. Nobody bothers me, I get to make music when I want to, and I actually kind of enjoy fishing.” Corwyn smiled. “So who are you?”

They gave their names.

“Kintarsh?” Corwyn said. “Your mother was—”

“Yes, that Kintarsh,” Tollain said. “I know, you worked with her.”

“Phenomenal lady,” Corwyn said reminiscently, “on her good days, anyway.” He looked more closely at Tollain. “You look a bit like her.”

“On my good days,” Tollain said.

Corwyn Chiatso nodded. “I used to look a bit like me on my good days. So,” he went on, “is this the part where you tell me you’re a big shot musician now and I should come and join your band so I can be a big star?”

“What? No!” Tollain was startled. “You’ve found a way of life that makes you happy. It’s not for me to mess with that.”

“Oh,” Corwyn said. “Shame. I might have said yes.”

“But,” Tollain said, “I *am* a musician, and I *am* in a band, and if we were to come back here some time and ask you maybe to record a guest track or two...?”

“Sounds good,” Corwyn said, standing up. “Okay, shall we do some soundchecking before people start coming in?”

“I was going to mention it,” Kaichang said.

There was no PA, not that it would have been necessary. Whoever had built the pub had paid attention to the acoustics of the main bar. The sound of her guitar, even played quietly, reached all the way across the room.

“And we’re not gonna be playing quietly,” Corwyn pointed out. “How are you on local

dance tunes?”

“Well, I lived in Broadfields for a while and we played for dances in Northshores and places,” Kaichang said.

“Good thing I brought some music with me then,” Corwyn said, opening his bag and taking out a sheaf of papers and a silver whistle. “Have a run through some of those and I’ll jump in as and when.”

“I don’t know any of these,” Kaichang said after a moment.

“They’re simple enough. Let’s try one.”

Kaichang scanned the chords, which were indeed simple, and began to play. Corwyn listened for a while.

“Not bad,” he said, “but perhaps I should have mentioned we usually double the tempo on that one.”

“Double it!?”

“They like to leap about a bit here in Coldsands. You won’t find this kind of thing at your posh dances.” Corwyn grinned.

“Let’s have a look,” Tollain said, peering over Kaichang’s shoulder. “Yes, that looks doable. Seventy to a hundred and forty. Follow me.”

He set up the rhythm on the drums, and Kaichang followed. After a few bars Corwyn put his whistle to his lips and joined in with the melody.

“See? No problem,” he said when they had finished. “If in doubt, just follow the drummer.”

“And try not to play any bum notes,” Verneen said, half to herself. Corwyn glanced at her and smiled.

“So is this your band?” he said to Tollain.

“This is the band I’m in,” Tollain agreed, “or most of it anyway. Korynn over there plays piano.”

Korynn, who had finished eating, stood up and carried his dishes towards the bar.

“Hmm, Corwyn, Korynn, that could be a bit confusing,” Corwyn said. “Tell you what,

I'll call you Fred and you can call me Charlie."

Korynn stopped and gave him a long look, then carried on without speaking.

"He's the quiet one, I'm guessing," Corwyn said.

"We like it that way," Kaichang said.

"I was in a band once where three of us were called Chris," Corwyn said. "I thought of changing my own name to make it unanimous, but they said that would just be silly. Okay, let's try another one."

By the time customers started straggling in, they had managed to run through most of the tunes Corwyn had brought with him, and they were comfortable with each other. Indeed, to Tollain, it felt as if he had known the man for years. Some people just had that gift.

Corwyn waited till there were enough people to make it worthwhile, and then stepped up and spoke.

"Hey, all," he said. "Welcome to the Wintercome Dance. You all know me, but you won't know the folks behind me, who've very kindly agreed to fill in for Denzil and Ambrose this year. On the drums, Mister Tollain Kintarsh, on the guitar Miss Kaichang Belgardis, and on the piano, which has been specially tuned for the occasion, Mister Fred Mitwoch. So, let's kick the whole thing off with one you all know, the Fish Market Stomp."

He counted them in, and they began to play. Several couples at once got up and began to dance, and Tollain saw what he meant about "leaping about a bit." Coldsands dancing was energetic, almost athletic, and it was a wonder nobody collided with anybody else. It was certainly fun to watch, though, from a safe distance.

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"It's time, Anger," said Darben's voice through the door.

Suncat checked herself over in the mirror over the dresser, was satisfied, and went to open the door. If further confirmation had been needed, Darben's expression was more than enough.

“How are we doing this?” she said.

“Well, since Leader and his girl ain’t back yet, turns out we just sashay out the front door,” Darben said. “Anger, I just gotta say...you look fantastic.”

“Thank you,” Suncat said. “I should warn you, though, I’m an absolutely hopeless dancer.”

Darben laughed. “Me too,” he said. “Mostly I just want to go to get out of this place. And see friends too. You don’t need to be concerned about no dancin’ if you don’t want to.”

Suncat sighed happily, and took his arm. She had put all thought of what might happen in the future out of her mind. The Patriarchy of Glaarght could go to hell, and so could Braeden Carthew. The now was what counted, and the now was sailing down the stairs of the meinie house in a beautiful frock with a handsome young man on her arm.

The night was cool but not unpleasantly cold; there would be no frost tonight. Yorgen, Feargal, Eynon and Droyc, all—like Darben—freshly washed and shaved and with hair plastered down with water, were all waiting outside in a rather nice-looking white groundcar. Droyc was driving.

“Borrowed it for the occasion,” Darben said. “Usually gets hired out for weddin’s and such. I made sure the boys got spruced up an’ all.”

“I could have walked,” Suncat protested. “It’s just down there.”

“Not on your life,” Darben said fervently. “Tonight we do things in style.”

Suncat got in on the passenger side, and Darben squeezed into the back, and Droyc put the car into motion.

“We been talkin’ and talkin’,” he said, as he turned down the steep incline towards the village, “and we got us a theory, Miss Anger.”

“What’s that?” Suncat said.

“We startin’ to think there ain’t no aliens nohow,” Droyc said coolly.

“No aliens?” Suncat repeated.

“Leader can be real convincin’ when he wants to be,” Yorgen put in from the back, “and he can get you to agree to any damn thing, but when you start in to thinkin’ about it, you start in to askin’ questions.”

“An’ these aliens,” Droyc said, “they just don’t ring true. I mean, if they can do all like what Leader says, how come they ain’t never grabbed him? He got a mind like ever’body else. Not quite as strong as some, folks say. How come he gets to be the only one what ain’t never been controlled?”

“I never thought of that,” Suncat said wonderingly. “Oh look, we’re here.”

“I’m goin’ down to the end an’ turn around,” Droyc said. “No sense you havin’ to cross the road in your pretty dress. Deliver you right to the door.”

There was music already coming from the lighted doorway of Magellen’s as they all got out of the car and Suncat smoothed down her skirt. Darben offered his arm, and the others fell in around them like an honour guard. Suncat mounted the stairs, and went through the door as Yorgen and Eynon held it open and the sound reached out to pull her in.

For a moment, all she could see were leaping bodies in a haze of warmth and perspiration. The tune was a rollicking estampie, guitar, drums and low whistle, with a piano providing accents in the bass.

Then, through a momentary gap in the whirl of the dance, she caught Tollain’s eye.