

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*“...Eialero, eialero,  
The more I do learn, the less I do know,  
Eialero, eialero,  
There’s always one more mile to go.  
There’s always one more mile to go.”*

Kaichang finished singing, and played the final chord to a scattering of applause.

“Thank you,” she said. “That was a really old one, and I’m not usually the one who sings it, so thank you very much. Now...” She sighted across at Corwyn Chiatso, who hoisted his glass of fruit juice to her and held up one finger. “We’ve got time for one more before the dancing starts again, so we’re going to do...” Tollain held out a torn-off sheet of paper, and she took it. “One Tollain just wrote while I was singing the last two, apparently,” she said with a grimace. “He does this all the time. It’s very annoying. Let me just...” She scanned the sheet briefly and passed it to Korynn. “Okay. I don’t know what it’s called yet, because he hasn’t written a title on there, but here goes anyway.”

She strummed a chord, adjusted an errant string, and began to play.

*“It’s nearly midnight but the sun is shining,  
I can feel the heat upon my skin.  
I don’t know how or why it happened  
But it happened the moment that you walked in.  
The room is crowded but I just can’t see it,  
Because my eyes are blinded by your light.  
And all I want to do is bathe in the radiance  
And if I burn myself, well that’s all right.*

*Lady of the sun,  
I don’t know what I’ve done  
To deserve you.  
Lady of the day,  
I’d give my life away  
Just to serve you...*

*You quicken life in all my secret places,  
You are the sunshine that makes things grow.  
You are the reason and the source of my living,  
And how you do it, well I just don't know.  
You bring the rain up from the deepest oceans,  
You send the winds that take it to the earth.  
You made a world for me to live and love in,  
What kind of service is such a blessing worth?*

*Lady of the sun,  
I don't know what I've done  
To deserve you.  
Lady of the day,  
I'd give my life away  
Just to serve you..."*

Darben leaned close to Suncat as the sound of a flute from somewhere in the bar joined the guitar, the rippling piano and the gentle drums.

"She could be singin' about you," he whispered.

"I think she is," Suncat whispered back. It was time for some truth. "I hate to tell you this, Darben, but those are my friends up there. The guy on drums is my boyfriend."

Darben absorbed this silently for a moment, and Suncat waited, every nerve on edge. Then he laughed quietly.

"Guess I knew there had to be someone," he said. "You don't need to worry none, Miss Anger. We done told you, we're not all like the Leader. I've done all I ever had in mind to do with you. I'm real happy right now."

Suncat, saddened by the return to formality, made to speak, but Darben touched her arm and pointed with his eyes to the stage. Verneen had joined Kaichang, her flute in her hand, and they sang the last verse together.

*"And when the day is done you'll come to see me,  
Descend in glory to the bed of night.  
And I will worship you with burning kisses  
Until the moment when you rise and take flight.  
I am the earth and you the sun that sustains me.  
How cold and lifeless I would be without you.*

*And yet I dare to hope that there in the night-time  
I'll hear you say that maybe you need me too...*

*Lady of the sun,  
I don't know what I've done  
To deserve you.  
Lady of the day,  
I'd give my life away  
Just to serve you...*

*Lady of the sun,  
I don't know what I've done  
To deserve you.  
Lady of the day,  
I'd give my life away  
Just to serve you..."*

Kaichang and Verneen held out their hands towards Suncat. She hesitated a moment, leaned over and kissed Darben, as thoroughly and warmly as she had ever kissed anyone, as applause broke out around them.

"Thank you," she said, looking deeply into his stunned eyes, and got up and went over to the band, where she embraced and kissed first Kaichang, then Verneen. She bent down and hugged Korynn where he sat at the piano, and then reached over the cymbals to clasp Tollain's hand.

"All right," Corwyn said, applauding as he returned from the bar. "That was absolutely fantastic. I'm told, by the way, on fairly good authority that these people go by the name of Gestalt when they're at home, and they'll be releasing an album real soon now. I'd watch out for it if I were you. Now, I heard a rumour somewhere that this was a dance, so let's get the place moving, shall we? This one's called Round The House And Mind The Dresser. One, two, three, four..."

He began to play at once, and Kaichang and Tollain had to jump in hurriedly. Suncat and Verneen returned to the table where Darben and Feargal were still sitting, and sat down as couples took the floor and began throwing each other about.

"Not sure if this is dancing or some kind of martial art," Verneen said.

“You came back,” Darben said. He still seemed dazed.

“Of course I did,” Suncat said. “We’re going back to the meinie house when all this is over, aren’t we? Or were you all just going to sneak off?”

“But...won’t you be goin’ with your friends?”

“Not till we’ve finished with Braeden,” Suncat said grimly. “I want words with that man. But that’s tomorrow,” she went on quickly. “We still have tonight to enjoy ourselves.”

Darben thought about it. “Well, yeah, I was gonna sneak off like you said,” he admitted. “But if you’re gonna face the Le—if you’re gonna face Braeden, then I sure as hell can.”

“Me too,” Feargal said stoutly.

“I’ll tell the others,” Darben said. “I don’t guess any of ’em will like the idea of leaving you to deal with him on your own.”

“I could, you know,” Suncat said.

“Sure you could,” Darben agreed, getting up, “but we got us some ground to make up. Can I get you another cider while I’m spreadin’ the news?”

“That would be lovely,” Suncat said.

Verneen looked at her, at Feargal, at Darben’s disappearing back.

“Some people,” she remarked, “would have got themselves kidnapped by real bastards.”

“Braeden’s enough of a bastard for all of them,” Suncat said. “And I don’t think there are that many real bastards in the worlds. Just people who lead and people who follow.”

“Well, maybe you’re right,” Verneen conceded, “but I wouldn’t try and convince Kaichang of that.” The dance ended, and Corwyn announced another. “Hey, I think I know this one,” Verneen said. She stood up. “Um...I don’t know your name...”

“Feargal Jamis, miss,” said Feargal.

“Would you care to dance this one with me?”

“Sure,” said Feargal. “but...aren’t you a waitress or somethin’?”

Verneen laughed, and put her hand on her hip. “I just quit, darlin’,” she said. “You dancin’ or talkin’?”

“I’m dancin’,” Feargal said enthusiastically, and took her offered hand.

Suncat sat back and watched as Feargal and Verneen jigged and twirled with all the rest. It wasn’t over yet, by any means. Braeden would return, and would need to be finally disposed of, or he would just hurt somebody else. There were real bastards in the world, people who could deal out nothing but hurt, and maybe it wasn’t their fault that they were that way, but they had free will and the capacity to choose, and sometimes you had to realise that they chose to give in to their natures rather than trying to change them.

But most people, she thought, were like Darben and Feargal, Yorgen and Eynon. They followed, and they followed, and sooner or later they followed someone the wrong way, but they just needed a little prompting to find their own better natures again.

She wished she hadn’t had to lie so much.

Darben came back with a glass for her and one for himself.

“See Feargal’s found himself a partner,” he said. “She’s one of your friends too, right?”

Suncat nodded.

“I figured,” Darben said. “Accent was too good.”

“How too good?”

“For her to talk that way she’d have had to been raised right here in Coldsands. An’ if she had of been, I’d have known her.”

He smiled, and Suncat laughed, and it was good.

When the clock over the bar showed two dark, Corwyn Chiatso brought the proceedings to a close. The band played “Argenthome And Honour Fair,” and there was a general returning of glasses to the bar as exhausted, happy, slightly wobbly people began to leave.

“That was good,” Corwyn said judicially as Kaichang received her guitar case from Mrs

Magellen. “We should do it again some time. How are you fixed for Springcome next year?”

“We don’t know,” Tollain said, “but if you want us we’ll come.”

“Well, I don’t want to upset Denzil and Ambrose,” Corwyn said, “but you picked up the music really quickly, and you play well. Maybe you don’t need to be quite so fancy when it’s just for dancing...” He mimed a complicated drum riff. “Folks just need a good steady beat.”

“Well, I hope I gave them that at least,” Tollain said. “The twiddly bits come free. You were great, by the way.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Corwyn put his hand on his breast and bowed.

“And I meant it about those guest tracks.”

“I’ll be here if you need me. Well, not *here* as such, unlike some musoes I’ve known I don’t actually live in bars, but I’ll give you my address.” Corwyn wrote rapidly on a scrap of paper and handed it to Tollain. “I wish you and your lovely ladies—and Fred, of course—every success.”

“And I wish you happiness and good fishing.”

“After Springcome,” Corwyn said. He picked up his bag, waved to them all and turned to go.

“Of all the improbable things,” Tollain said softly, watching him disappearing through the door. “Meeting him here.”

“Would you have wanted him in the band?” Kaichang asked.

“I’d have felt like an ant asking a sheepdog to carry a peanut for him,” Tollain said.

“He was too big for any one band. He was in six at the same time once, you know.”

“Afraid of the competition?”

“You bet,” Tollain said fervently.

“And suppose one day you end up like him? Living on a nowhere planet, playing whistle for people who have no idea who you are?”

“When that time comes,” Tollain said, “I hope I do. But it’s not yet.” He looked

around. "Where's Suncat?"

"She had to go," Verneen said. "Her ride was leaving. She said she loves you, but she has to be in at the finish and she knows you understand."

Tollain's face twisted up for a moment, and he looked as if he might scream, or burst into tears. Then, with a huge effort, he took control of himself and forced a smile.

"I do," he said. "I wish to all the gods I didn't, but I do. Back to Carson's, then."

"Back to Carson's," Kaichang agreed, a little too quietly. "One more night."

"One more night won't kill us," Tollain agreed.

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Back at Carson's, they found Orville, sitting at the kitchen table staring at an empty glass. Beside it were two smallish cardboard boxes.

"Before you say anything," he said as they came in, "I have not overindulged. I am not intoxicated. But I needed something, and Mr Meldrum was kind enough to oblige. There are your cakes, by the way."

"What happened?" Kaichang said.

"I put on a little show," Orville said. "I organised a little game of hide and seek, with Braeden and Shallen as the unwilling participants. Or do I mean unwitting? I probably mean both. Odd how much difference a single pen stroke can make. Like missing the tightrope by an inch. It may not seem much, but boy, what a difference."

"Stop maundering and tell us what happened," Kaichang commanded.

Orville shook his head. "Sorry. Reporting as ordered, O captain, my captain." He gave them a reasonably coherent account of his day's doings in Downsholm, ending with a word-for-word repeat of everything he had said to Shallen and then to Braeden. "And if you were to ask me," he went on, "whether I would rather have been sitting in a nice warm pub, playing my bass and watching Suncat trip over other people's feet, I can tell you without the slightest fear of contradiction that I would. So there."

Verneen was looking aghast.

"You took an enormous risk, Orville," she said.

“I know I did,” Orville said, focussing on her. “I am fully alive to that fact. I think I can say without fear of contradic—no, I’ve done that bit—anyway, I think I can say that there is no single fact to which I am at this moment more fully alive. Hence the artificial stimulant.”

“Well, I think you did the best you could,” Tollain said warmly, “and in any case, it’s done now. Want to hear how our evening went?”

“Not really,” Orville said, rising with the ponderous dignity of one who is aware that he is not quite sure of his balance. “I’m sure it was absolutely splendid and you all had a lot of fun and didn’t destroy anyone’s sanity at all. And now, having delivered my report, I am going to bed.”

He left the kitchen, and they heard him ascending the stairs. He only missed one.

“Now, if you’d let me kill the man,” Kaichang said conversationally, “I would have been fine afterwards.”

“Well, he’ll be fine in the morning,” Tollain said, “and nobody’s dead. Which to me makes it a good day.” He went through to the parlour. “Oh, there’s a message on the comlink. It’s from Seir Morningsky.”

Kaichang, Verneen and Korynn joined him in the parlour, and he turned up the volume and played the message.

*“Good evening,”* said the well-known voice. *“I’m sure I don’t know where you can all be—working hard in the furtherance of our mutual interests, I hope—but I just received a call from Mr Windyridge. He was somewhat excited. It appears a young lady, one Shallen Westermain, arrived at the Seigneurie about half an hour ago and insisted upon seeing him personally. When refused she became quite distressed, and so Windyridge, hearing the disturbance, came out and vouched for her personally. She has given us a complete account of the actions of the group we know as Cold December, including three acts of wilful murder in which she was personally involved, though one of them may actually have been vehicular manslaughter. The victims were Atalanti Braescar, a child of six, Travilla Garway, a shopkeeper in Broadfields, and Anson Carthew, a prominent citizen of Northshores. Miss Westermain admitted to being an accessory in the second of these and to complicity in all three. She then submitted herself for*

*medical treatment and is currently under observation at Broadfields General Hospital.*

*“On the basis of these and other charges made by Miss Westermain, Mr Windyridge has tonight issued a warrant for the immediate arrest of Braeden Carthew, also of Northshores. An investigative team will be leaving in the morning for Coldsands meinie to interview Mr Carthew, who was last seen, I believe, in Downsholm meinie participating in some kind of sporting event. I do hope you will give the officers your complete co-operation and not attempt to frustrate or pre-empt them in the performance of their duty, as that would necessitate my pulling all kinds of strings to pull which I am no longer technically entitled. As offworld guests, you will understand that any interference on your part in the internal affairs of our planet would be viewed with grave concern by the government.*

*“Well now, let me see, I think that’s everything. I am of course most gratified that this unfortunate affair has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Let me finish by expressing the hope that you have all had a pleasant holiday and that you will tell me all about it on your return to Broadfields. I get so little news these days. Good night to you.”*

Kaichang’s face was several shades darker than usual as she fought for speech. Verneen put a restraining hand on her arm.

“Don’t say it,” she said. “Don’t say any of it. It doesn’t matter.”

“Did you,” Kaichang managed at last, “did you in all that torrent of guff hear anything that sounded even remotely like ‘thank you’?”

Verneen considered. “No,” she said, “he didn’t actually say it. But he will.”

“Bet you he doesn’t.”

“Bet you he does.”

“You’re on. What’s the bet?”

“Yes, look, this is all very interesting,” Tollain put in exasperatedly, “and he’s a bad rude man and we’ll not send him a flower basket, but what about letting Suncat know about this? I mean, suppose it’s a dawn swoop?”

“You want to go and tell her now?” Kaichang said.

"I definitely want to go and tell her now."

Verneen pursed her lips. "You'd probably find they're all in bed," she said.

"And then I say 'that's what I'm afraid of,' and everyone laughs, ho ho," Tollain said.

"Seriously. We have to let her know."

"And seriously, we can't," Kaichang said. "Not till the morning. We don't know what that will do to that clutch of assorted yahoos she's mixed up with."

"They're nice," Verneen retorted. "I spoke to some of them."

"Danced with one of them too, you shameless hussy," Kaichang retorted. "I saw you."

"Just the one. He was looking lonely, and you were busy, and—"

"All right!" Tollain said loudly. "So we don't know what warning Suncat about the police will do to the boys in the house. Do we know what the police actually turning up unannounced will do to them?"

"I'm not disturbin' you folks, am I?"

It was Carson Meldrum, in his nightshirt. At once all three of them started to make apologetic noises, but he waved them aside.

"Just so long's nobody's hurt or gettin' that way. Only I'd take it kindly if you'd keep it down just a tad. It's a big house but not that big, if you get me."

"We'll be quiet," Kaichang said. "In fact we were on our way to bed, *weren't we?*" The last two words were delivered in Tollain's direction with positive menace.

"Oh, all right," Tollain grumbled. "Hold on, where's Korynn?"

"Mitwoch? Oh, he's probably gone already." Kaichang imitated a robot. "I. must. achieve. seven. point. five. three. four. hours. of. sleep. or. I. will. malfunction."

"Well, maybe," Carson said. "But he must have gone up before I came down." He settled himself comfortably in an armchair. "So, 'fore you all go off to bed, mind tellin' me what's the news?"

\*

A single sharp tap.

Suncat woke suddenly. It was a clear night, with a chill in the air, but her window was open as usual. Something had tapped. She got out of bed, went to the door and opened it. The landing was empty, all the boys peacefully asleep. Guard duty, like all the other duties, had been quietly abolished.

Suncat closed the door and went to the window.

Korynn Mitwoch was standing in the garden looking up at her. She managed to stifle the startled cry—those damned glasses made his face look like a skull—and smiled.

“Suncat,” he said. “Can you come down?”

“I’ll be right there,” she said, and looked around for something to wear. There was only the party frock and its petticoats; she had regretfully abandoned the pink and blue stage outfit as beyond saving. She shrugged, slipped the frock on over her head and tightened the cincture round her middle, and went downstairs with her shoes in her hand.

Korynn was waiting in the shade of the kampoulia tree.

“Is something wrong?” Suncat said. “I’m sorry I had to bunk off like that, but I told Verneen—”

“That is understood,” Korynn said flatly. “However, it is necessary that you should know certain things. Tollain and Kaichang would not stop arguing about whether to tell you now or in the morning, so I decided to obviate the problem.”

“Tell me what?” Suncat said.

Korynn ran through a bullet point list of the content of Elyot Segrave Morningsky’s message.

“So Shallen’s going to be okay?” she said. “He got her out? Oh, that wonderful man.”

“You might feel it appropriate to tell him so,” Korynn said.

“I will,” Suncat said. “Thank you so much for coming to tell me, Korynn.”

“I merely wanted to stop the argument,” Korynn said. “Raised voices bother me.”

“Does it bother you when people kiss you?”

“I do not know,” Korynn said. “It seldom happens.”

“Well, brace for impact,” Suncat said, and put her arms around him.

To a certain extent it was like hugging and kissing a lamp-post, but he did not resist or show any sign of discomfort. She gazed into the blank black discs of his glasses and smiled.

“It’s going to be very different from now on in this band,” she said. “I hope you’re up for it.”

He looked back at her, enigmatically.

“I shall try to be,” he said. “You had better go in. You have goose pimples.”

He released himself, gently enough, and turned and walked away without another word. Suncat watched him go, and then, as if she had just registered his last words, shivered and went back inside.