

RETURN TO

ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“So I guess I get to be Speaker for Northshores *and* Coldsands,” Carson Meldrum grumbled. “Like I don’t have enough to do as it is.” He indicated the pile of paperwork at his side.

“Only till they can have an election,” Verneen pointed out reassuringly. “I think Mrs Henning might run. She’d be good.”

“True,” Carson agreed. “Fine woman. I dare say they couldn’t do no better.”

“One more night” had turned into three long days. The police had questioned them all several times. The body of Anson Carthew had been discovered in a drainage ditch out on the meinie house’s land, under a pile of dead leaves that should not have been there. Darben and the others, cleared by Suncat of any serious wrongdoing, were awaiting trial for aiding and abetting in the damage to the Seigneurie, but Derwent had promised that their punishment would be as light as he could make it. And just that day, a police boat had brought ashore a battered, sodden thing which was all that remained of Braeden.

Suncat came in, the comlink in her hand.

“I spoke to the doctors,” she said. “They say Shallen’s starting to respond to treatment. She could be back to her old self in a matter of months.”

“That’s good,” Tollain said. “What about the charges?”

“Well, since Braeden’s not around to stand trial, and Goddess knows there’s no doubt the balance of her mind was disturbed, I think Derwent’s going to try to get them dropped.” Suncat plumped into a chair. “Funny him falling off the cliff stairs that way. He used to go up and down them as if they were an escalator.”

“He was scared,” Verneen said. “Maybe he got careless.”

“People do,” Kaichang said. She was reading a magazine.

“Well, I’m just glad it wasn’t any of us,” Verneen said. “I don’t know how I could stand being in a band with someone who’d killed a person.”

“Don’t you?” Tollain said. “That could be a problem. I have.”

Everyone stared at him.

“I didn’t want to talk about it, ever,” he said, “but if it’s going to be a problem then let’s face it. It was when I was at school, and I’d not long been out of the bubble and everyone was tiptoeing round me afraid I’d catch a cold and wither away. Everyone except this one kid, who thought it was funny that I was so small and delicate-looking. He kept on finding jokes to make about it. I didn’t get angry, I just got tired of it. And one day he had his face right up close to mine, bending down like that—” Tollain demonstrated. “And I just wanted him to go away, and so I pushed at his face with all my strength, which as you know—though at the time I didn’t—is actually quite considerable, and he fell over and by the time he hit the ground he was dead. Apparently there’s a bone or something in the nose which if you catch it at just the right angle in some people can go up into the brain and shut off something or other. And I’d hit the jackpot.

“Well, that triggered a huge attack for me, and it was back into the bubble for six months while I debated with myself whether to die or not, and then months of counselling after that. The trustees moved me to a different planet and a new school, and enrolled me in a bunch of martial arts courses designed to make sure I never did anything like that ever again. And I never have, and I never will.”

Verneen was silent for a moment.

“But that was just an accident,” she burst out. “That was just circumstances. You didn’t mean to kill him.”

“How much of anything is circumstances?” Tollain countered. “How much of Braeden was circumstances? We make our own choices, but we’re acted on by circumstances all the time. I’d been ten feet and a triple wall of plastic away from the nearest human being all my life. Now here was this guy in my face—and his breath stank—and I wanted him to go away and I didn’t really care how, or how far. A good prosecuting counsel could have made a case out of that.”

“Well, I’m glad they didn’t,” Sunecat declared, pulling Tollain down on to her lap.

“Ouch. I keep forgetting how heavy you are.”

“The point is, it’s easy to judge,” Tollain said, snuggling. “We judge Braeden, we judge

the person who might or might not have killed him, but we judge them from our own perspective. We can't know what it's like to be them."

"I knew a man who killed a feller once," Carson said.

"Oh, do we have to?" Verneen wailed.

"Well, seems to me it was you who brung it up," Carson said mildly. "Now this feller—well, you don't want to know what all he did, but he did it more'n once and to a bunch of folks, and he was bringin' his sons up the same vile way. Man who killed him, why he was the family doctor. Called the feller in for a routine immunisation shot, stuffed him full of enough poison to kill a boshier-beast."

"If he did what I think he did," Kaichang said, still without looking up from her magazine, "it was too good for him."

"Well, that's as maybe," Carson said.

"Did the doctor get caught?" Tollain said.

"Nope. Signed the death certificate hisself—bad reaction to the immunisation—no examination, no inquiry, sweet as you please. But for the rest of his life—and he lived to 'bout a hunnerd an' twenty—he never once stopped doin' good works. He told me he couldn't bear to live a day without he did somethin' to atone for what he'd done. See, the feller deserved to die, right enough, but it wasn't for this man to kill him. It wasn't for anyone."

"This is a horrible conversation," Verneen said, standing up. "I'm sorry, Carson, but it is. We should be *happy*. Suncat's back, we're all together again, there's not going to be a revolution, Derwent's fixed another date for the concert, Shallen's going to get better and Tollain's met his role model. Everything's *good*. And here we are talking about death."

"I agree," Suncat said, tipping Tollain off her lap and standing up. "If you're all going to talk about 'the evil that men do' I'm going for a walk. I had quite enough of evil facing Braeden in that meinie house."

"I'll come with you," Verneen said.

"It's cold out there," Carson said.

“We’ve got coats,” Suncat replied.

Kaichang, Orville, Tollain and Carson watched them go out into the hall.

“So,” Tollain said softly, “are you ever going to turn that magazine right way up?”

“What?” Kaichang looked at it. “It is right way up!”

“I know,” Tollain said, “but you weren’t reading it.”

“I can’t ever tell them, can I?” Kaichang said. “They’d hate me. They think you’re supposed to just—just *put up* with evil.”

“I wouldn’t mention it if I were you,” Orville said.

“Everyone has secrets,” Tollain said. “I’ve still got loads. Maybe one day, when we’re all old and doddering, being shoved out in our wheelchairs for the hundredth anniversary reunion...maybe then they’ll be ready. But they don’t need to know now.”

“Only spoil things,” Carson agreed.

“I enjoyed it,” Kaichang said, “for about ten seconds after it was...after he died. And then...” She sighed. “You were right, Kintarsh. I just sort of woke up, and the only difference in the world was that I had destroyed something that someone else had made. Something that didn’t belong to me. Something I could never replace, and whether I thought it was a good thing or a bad thing didn’t matter.”

“Do me one favour,” Tollain said. “Don’t start going round thinking this will make you a better person. Trust me, you’re still going to get just as angry, you’ll still hate slimebeasts like Braeden just as much and you’ll still think the worlds would be better without them. And you’ll be right. But you’ll still have to stop yourself doing it again.”

“Doctor Braescar doesn’t have any doubts,” Kaichang said glumly. “According to Derwent he’s going singing about the place. Says his Atti is avenged and all’s right with the world.”

“He didn’t have to do it,” Carson observed.

“And when they told Dillybine Longmoor she just looked at them and said so what?”

“Kaichang,” Tollain said, getting up and going to her. “You can’t undo whatever it was you did, or unfeel the feelings you felt. They’re going to be with you for a long time,

and there are people you love whom you can't tell. That's a given. But there's me, and there's Orville, if you can stand to be near us, and we'll always listen if you want to talk about it. And after a while, I think, it will become just something else that happened. Something in your life among a whole lot of other things, good and bad, wonderful and horrible."

"I hope so," Kaichang said. "Because right now it's all I can think about, and I really don't want to think any more." She got up. "I'm going up to bed."

"Goodnight, Miss Kaichang," Carson said. "I'll stay up a bit longer, make sure the ladies are okay. Still got some bonin' up on Coldsands to do."

Kaichang paused at the foot of the stairs.

"Would..." she began. "Would one of you two mind...just...coming and sitting with me? No funny business, just, you know...company? Since you know anyway?"

"Sure," Orville said.

"Of course," Tollain said. "Which of us would you prefer?"

"Well," Kaichang said, "why don't both of you come, and we'll see how it turns out?"

Orville and Tollain followed her upstairs.

Carson laughed softly to himself. "Guess we will at that," he murmured. Then he picked up a sheet of paper from the pile beside him, settled his reading glasses on his nose and began to read.

*

"And now," announced the amplified voice of Derwent Cathcart Windyridge, "for the first time ever on Argenthome with a full line-up, the Central Theatre Broadfields is proud and privileged to present...on the drums...Tollain KINTARSH!"

Tollain set up a rhythm.

"On the bass guitar...Orville TORRES!"

Orville joined in with a syncopated pattern.

"On the keyboards...Korynn MITWOCH!"

Spare piano chords picked out the accents.

“On axe and guitar...Kaichang BELGARDIS!”

Kaichang obliged with an intricate riff on the high frets.

“On the flute...Verneen HALANNIM!”

Verneen’s flute counterpointed the bass pattern in reverse.

“And on vocals and whatever’s left over...you remember her...your own, your very own...Suncat...ANGHARAD...MORNINGSKY!!!”

Spotlights picked out the golden figure in the green dress, as her incomparable voice wove a pattern of wordless notes around the repeated patterns of the other instruments.

“And sounding terminally overexcited, Derwent Cathcart Windyridge on announcements,” she said, when the improvised piece had wound to its end. “Hey everyone, we’re Gestalt, running a couple of weeks late according to our original schedule but very glad to be here. I hope none of you had trouble getting your tickets reassigned.” An amorphous but enthusiastic noise arose from the audience. “Good. I think. Well, as Derwent said, you probably remember me. I used to be a Truesinger—now I’m a fake one—” A ripple of laughter. “All done with mirrors, folks. Anyway, now I’m in this fabby new band, with my girls Kaichang and Verneen and these three wonderful guys, and we’re going to do our best to knock your socks off!” Her voice rose to a shout on the last words, and the audience responded with applause.

Suncat glanced back at Tollain and nodded, and the band launched into the first song on the set list. Suncat fluffed up her hair, struck a rock-chick pose and sailed into battle.

*“You ask me questions
But you don’t listen to the answers.
You tell me time and time again
that you know I’m lyin’.
I get so tired
Of goin’ through the same old dances.
So if I give you what you want to hear
Maybe you’ll stop tryin’....”*

*I wanna tell you a story,
I'm gonna spin you a tale.
I'm gonna weave it out of whole cloth, baby,
'Cause the truth's gotten oh so stale;
I'll tell you a story
And I'll make it real good
And then maybe you'll treat me
Like you know you should.*

*My mother told me
That honesty was fundamental,
That if I would always tell the truth
My life would be just fine;
But now I know that
She was just bein' sentimental
'Cause if you try to speak the truth these days
It's trouble all down the line;*

*Nobody wants to hear it,
They'd rather believe the lies.
Nobody wants to see it,
They'd rather close their eyes.
They know everything they want to know
And their knowledge was bought with pain,
So the very last thing they want to do
Is to ever have to think again...*

*I wanna tell you a story,
Full of excitement and thrills,
You won't listen to the plain truth
You can't stand to swallow those bitter pills;
You'll love my story
Oh yeah you'll have a ball
And then maybe you will find
As you turn it over in your mind
That my story was the plain old truth after all!"*

Derwent resumed his seat in the front row, next to Elyot Segrave Morningsky.

“Happy now?” said the older man.

“Oh yes, sir,” Derwent said.

“Oh good,” Morningsky said, sounding relieved. “I was afraid you might want to make a career out of it. You do have a day job, after all.”

The concert proceeded. Gestalt played new songs and old ones; the Truesingers sang “Time Hangs Heavy” and “Makes No Never Mind”; Korynn brought out a long tray of wine glasses and he and Orville played while Suncat sang “What It Seems,” with Tollain providing backing on the drums.

Up in the further seats, Corwyn Chiatso nudged Demelza Henning.

“Worth the trip?” he said.

Mrs Henning nodded, her chin in her hand. “So this is what she been doin’ all this time,” she said. “I knew she’d find her way one day.”

Tollain came out from behind the drum kit as Orville went into the wings and returned with a bulky instrument that seemed to be sprouting strings in all directions.

“This,” he said, accepting it, “was very generously given to us by a dear friend who can’t be with us tonight due to work commitments. It’s called a torung, or a harp guitar sometimes, and it’s a really amazing instrument. Verneen and I are going to do a song she wrote. It’s called ‘My Turn Now.’”

The old man on Derwent’s other side snorted.

“Work commitments,” he said. “Like that would keep me away.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to tell them?” Derwent said.

“Naw,” said Carson Meldrum. “Only embarrass ’em, like as not. ’Sides, we already said our fare-thee-wells back to the farm. No sense doin’ it again.” He lifted a hand as Verneen began to sing, and Derwent subsided.

Orville finished the first set with “I’m Coming Back For You,” and the band changed out of their stage kit and went out to the bar to meet such of the audience as they could in fifteen minutes. Suncat spotted Darben and Yorgen lurking behind a pillar and went over to greet them.

“How are the others doing?” she said.

“Pretty much okay, Miss Suncat,” Yorgen said. “We were just lucky we weren’t in the copter that night. They know they got less’n what they deserved.”

“If I could have got you all off I would,” Suncat said. “What do you think of the music?”

Darben scratched his head. “Well, it ain’t rightly my kind of music,” he said. “I like me some good old dancin’ tunes, like your friends played down at Magellen’s. All these words kind of skun past me. But you sing real good,” he added hastily.

“Well, maybe we’ll play at Magellen’s again some time,” Suncat said. “I’d like that.”

“Then I’ll be so bold,” Darben said, “as to ask you for a dance, Miss Ang—I mean, Miss Suncat.”

“And I’ll say yes,” Suncat promised, and blew him a kiss as the five-minute bell rang.

When Gestalt bounced back on to the stage five minutes later, the mood of the audience was less excited, but more welcoming. The second half was much like the first, with solo spots interspersed between the band numbers. Orville sang “Bring You Down”; Kaichang sang “The Shadowed Path” a capella; she and Korynn performed a duet for piano and axe whose sheer intensity left everyone stunned for a full second before the applause began; and, in response to “a request from the audience” and with an apology that they had neglected to ask the management of the theatre to provide space for dancing, Gestalt played “Round The House And Mind The Dresser,” at which Darben and Yorgen stood up and whooped, and then made their way into the aisle and danced anyway, much to the amusement of those of the audience who were out of harm’s way.

Finally, Suncat took the centre microphone again.

“We’re nearly finished,” she said. “You’ve been a wonderful audience, and we’ve had a great time up here. I just want to say a few things before we do our last number. It’s been an interesting couple of weeks we’ve had here, and there are parts of them that we wouldn’t want to repeat, but there have also been some really good times. We’ve all learned things about each other, and we’ve become closer as a result, and that’s

something that will never change. So I know you'll be happy to hear that just before we came on tonight I asked Tollain Kintarsh over there if he would marry me, here on Argenthome where I was born, and he said yes."

She waited for the cheers to die down. "Yes, that's more or less what I said. Not that I wouldn't happily marry all these people up here, but a girl shouldn't be too greedy. So we'll be staying on for the wedding, and maybe we'll play a few more concerts if people want us—" More cheers. "And I want you to know that Argenthome will always have a very special place in all our hearts. And now I think my father would like to say a few words, so if you'll bear with us, please welcome Mister Elyot Segrave Morningsky."

The audience clapped politely as Morningsky climbed the steps on to the stage.

"I will not keep you long," he said into the microphone, "but some important things remain to be said. These young people, as you may or may not be aware, have performed a service to our planet whose value is beyond all reckoning, and at the same time have done me a favour it would take more than a lifetime to repay. I ask you, then, to join with me in offering them the most heartfelt thanks."

The crowd cheered and clapped, and Morningsky turned and bowed deeply to the band, his hand on his heart. Kaichang and Verneen exchanged glances, and Verneen moistened her finger and traced a 1 on the air between them.

"There is little enough that we can offer them in recompense," Morningsky went on. "I doubt very much, given their phenomenal talent and skill, that they will ever be in serious want of money, and the merely ceremonial honours it is in our planet's gift to bestow would mean little to them. Nevertheless, some reward is indicated. Mr Windyridge and I will be putting our minds to work on this problem over the coming weeks. At very least, we should be able to come up with something in the nature of a wedding present.

"And now, before I leave the stage and allow the concert to continue, there is only one thing left to do—" Morningsky abruptly turned and seized his daughter in a fierce bear hug. She gasped, and then hugged him back with equal fierceness; and if they said anything to each other, there amidst the cheering, nobody heard it but they

themselves.

“Thank you,” Morningsky said, addressing the band; and then he turned back, squeezing Suncat’s hand once more before letting it go, and trotted down the steps and back to his seat.

“Well,” Suncat said, reclaiming the microphone, “that was my father. And in case you were wondering, I’m not one bit sorry.” Laughter. “All right, time for what will have to be our very last song tonight. I’m sure we’ll see you again soon, though. So, from Tollain, Orville, Korynn, Kaichang, Verneen and me, thank you very much, good night, and this is ‘Changing Lives.’”

Kaichang started a simple rhythm on the axe, and Tollain accented it with soft cymbal touches, as Suncat started to sing.

*“Getting through the day
Wishing there was a better way
It's so easy to forget
All the things you haven't done yet
Sometimes you need to be surprised
Sometimes you need to have the veil torn from your eyes...”*

*Changing lives
Can be so frightening
Changing worlds
Can get the best of you
Changing times
They go by so quickly
The only way to survive
Is if you're changing too.*

*Fighting for your life
Balancing on the blade of a knife
Feeling lost at sea
Trying to find out what you should be
When the ground gives way right under your feet
Take a breath and be amazed, the air is oh so sweet...*

*Changing lives
Can be so frightening*

*Changing worlds
Can get the best of you
Changing times
They go by so quickly
The only way to survive
Is if you're changing too."*

Suddenly Tollain, Orville and Kaichang changed the tempo and the rhythm to a fast five-four, and Verneen, who had stood silent so far, added a scurrying tune on the flute.

*"See, the day is dawning,
Clouds spell out a warning
This could be the morning
You've been waiting for.
Underneath your window
Can you hear the grass grow
Can you feel the wind blow
Just outside your door?"*

*Listen to the birds sing
Hear the word that they bring
Nature is awaking
Just to tell the news;
Far across the skyline
You can see the sunshine
Spelling out a new sign
Time for you to choose.*

*No more fear and heartache
Chances there you must take
Make the choice for love's sake
Even though it's strange;
Turn and face a new fate
Quick before it's too late
Step into your own state
Join the dance of change."*

Kaichang, Verneen, Tollain and Orville had stopped playing and joined in the last verse, adding complex harmonies, and now all five of them sang the harmonised tune

without words. Then, with a crash, they launched into an instrumental combining the first and second tunes, rhythms crossing and recrossing in seemingly endless permutations, axe and flute taking first one part, then the other. The music rose to a crashing climax, and as the echoes died away, flipping the axe over her shoulder to lie down her back, Kaichang picked up the torung and began a gentle, rocking rhythm.

Suncat's voice, when she began again, was just as gentle.

*"Now, as you answer the call,
As you let yourself fall,
You are one with it all.
Soon, you will float down the stream
And awake from your dream.
Things are not what they seem..."*

Again, other voices joined hers in harmony, and Korynn provided a glockenspiel to ornament the torung pattern.

*"You, who were born of a star,
As you're crossing the bar
Glimpse its light from afar.
Life is a game that we play
Just as night follows day;
Never throw it away."*

The music swelled into the final chorus.

*"Changing lives
Are no longer frightening.
Changing worlds
Are home now to you.
Changing times
Go by so quickly
But you know just what to do
To hold on to what is true
And you know you'll see it through
Because you're changing too.
Changing lives...
Changing lives...
Changing lives..."*

The applause was rapturous, and Suncat could make out some people out there standing up. She smiled, and as Kaichang and Verneen came forward she reached out and pulled them close. Orville and Korynn joined them, and Kaichang put her free arm round Orville while Verneen, no longer afraid, put *her* free arm round Korynn. Suncat's spirit soared. Her doubts were gone. They were a band, and more than just a band. They were a family, united in love.

And as Tollain crawled between people's legs and stood up grinning in front of them, and the applause redoubled, a lone spotlight suddenly picked out a figure standing right at the back of the hall between two white-clad doctors, and Suncat knew who she was even before her eyes picked out the face. Even as drawn and haggard as it was, you could never mistake her for anyone else.

Shallen Westerman, looking straight down into her eyes, smiled that old, rueful little smile, and put her clenched fists over her heart as she bowed. *Sorry, Anger.*

Then she raised her hand, wiggled the fingers, and blew Suncat a kiss.

Tears streaming down her face, Suncat Morningsky drew her friends, her lovers, her husband-to-be, close around her, and let the last of her sorrow fly free.

FIN

EPILOGUE

“It’s huge,” Verneen said.

“Massive,” Tollain agreed.

“And you can see right through it,” Suncat said.

“Are you sure about this?” Tollain looked up from the holopics at Derwent, who was sitting at his desk in the Seigneurie.

“Whose was it?” Kaichang asked.

“It was commissioned and built,” said Elyot Segrave Morningsky, “as a summer home by a prominent business man, one Dreblen Koost. You may recall the name. Sadly, before he could occupy it, he suffered a highly unfortunate series of reverses—”

“Like being arrested for unlawful arms trafficking and conspiracy to overthrow the government,” Orville suggested.

“Indeed.” Morningsky looked pained. “And his assets, over and above the amount deemed by our Sagittarian friends to be sufficient for him to lead a normal if unassuming life, were seized by the government and became public property. I should add, since I know Serina Belgardis is going to mention it, that an exhaustive investigation has found no evidence that the house, the grounds, or any part or appurtenance whatever of the estate was paid for using monies derived from any unethical commerce or transaction. Mr Koost did have a number of legitimate business interests as well, and no doubt he wished his little pleasure dome to be, ah, how can one put it...”

“Squeaky clean?” Suncat suggested brightly.

“Where is it again?” Orville said.

“Riversmeet meinie,” Derwent said. “A little bit south of here. Some lovely countryside round there, and the climate’s nice and temperate most of the year.”

“You just get a lot of snow in the winter,” Suncat said. “Presumably he planned for that.”

"I gather the house is quite easy to keep warm, despite all the glass," Derwent said.

"And you just want to give it to us?" Kaichang was sceptical.

"Well, it's no use to anyone else," Morningsky said, "and the cost of pulling it down would be quite ruinous. I think you'd be doing the planet a very great favour by putting it to some good use."

Kaichang looked doubtful.

Suncat was enraptured. She turned to Morningsky. "It's the best wedding present ever," she declared. "Thank you, Daddy."

"Serina Belgardis?" Morningsky said, and Suncat turned to Kaichang.

"Oh, you know I can never resist you when you look like that," the dark girl said. "Go on then. There'll be a catch though. There always is."

"We'll never fill all that space," Tollain said. "I mean, I know my house is too small for six of us, but this..."

"We might," Verneen said, looking up from a piece of paper. "I've been doing some rough planning while you were talking..."

"What do you think?" Orville asked Korynn.

"I will go where the group goes," the man in shades replied.

"Me too, mate," Orville said. "I think it could take us to some very interesting places."

"Oh, there was one other thing," Derwent said, rummaging down behind his desk.

"Another present, sort of. I gather they didn't know how to wrap it, but they thought you might be interested." He produced a peculiar-looking object made of wood and passed it over the desk. Tollain took it and examined it closely.

"What the frod is that?" Kaichang said.

"Mrs Magellen," Derwent said, "told me they've had it in their attic for years. She thinks it was some kind of musical instrument, and she's fairly sure it had strings once."

Tollain ran his finger around one of the f-shaped holes in the top of the object. "A kind of ukulele, perhaps?"

“Her husband thinks it was called a violin.”

“Why would anyone make an instrument to mimic a keyboard voice?” Korynn said.

“No, there were real violins before there were keyboards,” Tollain said. “My mother’s collection had a couple of tuning pegs just like these here, and something called a bridge which this one doesn’t seem to have. Violins were part of a thing called an orchestra, that modern keyboards were made to simulate.”

“Next you’ll be telling us there really was such an instrument as a yoboe,” Orville said.

“May I look?” Verneen said timidly. Tollain handed her the violin, and she looked closely at it from all angles.

“This was made in the last couple of hundred years,” she said at last. “Give me a decent forensic lab and I could tell you where the wood came from.”

“I thought orchestras died out before the Empire,” Tollain said.

“So did I,” Verneen said calmly. “I can only tell you what I know. Up to at least two hundred years ago, someone, somewhere, was making violins.”

“Maybe they still are,” Suncat said.

Tollain looked down at Verneen’s plan.

“Whereabouts would you put this lab of yours?” he said.