

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wales, Carol reflected at one point, was just as easy to sleep through as England. With the very best will in the world, it was impossible to stay interested in an endless succession of road, roundabout, more road, junction, and still more road. Hugh drove like a machine, untiring, mostly unspeaking. Vassily and Rob tried their best to make light conversation, but eventually fatigue overcame them too, and they dozed, Rob with his head flung back and his mouth open, Vassily curled up with his arms folded. Chris sat with his eyes closed, but whether he was asleep or just thinking was anybody's guess. He had run through his changes, in a field west of Amesbury, almost perfunctorily, and had been taciturn and thoughtful ever since.

As the sky darkened, they turned off the main road and entered a maze of narrow lanes that wound up and down the sides of hills, or maybe they were actually mountains. Carol couldn't tell, but as the tempo of the journey became more varied she began to feel more awake. When Hugh stopped on the brow of a hill, she wound down the window and put her head out, in time to see a couple of sheep sauntering insolently out of the way. There seemed to be a definite sense of "And you are?" in their expressions.

"Sorry about this," Hugh said. "They have more right to be here than we do."

"Don't people run them over?" Rob queried scratchily.

"Try it some time." Hugh's tone was remote, and Carol realised with a shock how tired he must be, and how hard he was fighting to hold that exhaustion at bay. "The kind of vehicle that could flatten a sheep and not be wrecked itself would never risk these roads in the first place. And even if one did, they're all owned by people who have serious clout in these parts." He let in the clutch, and the sheep watched the Alvis pass with lofty indifference.

"Hungry," Chris said.

"Not surprised," Hugh replied. "There'll be food when we get where we're going. If you don't mind, I really need to concentrate."

Silence reigned thereafter. They stopped twice more to allow sheep to stroll out of the road, and once so that Hugh could consult a map. At last, as the moon emerged from a tangle of clouds, they descended a long, winding slope and entered a tiny village of stone cottages; beyond the

single street, a sandy beach sloped down to the sea, and Carol could see boats beached on the sand. The village was quite dark, but as they bumped over a cattlegrid and up a tree-lined drive she saw lights blazing from the windows of a fair-sized house ahead. She stretched her cramped limbs, and felt Chris stir and mumble beside her. Whatever he had been doing the rest of the time, he was definitely asleep now.

The car pulled up in front of the house, and Hugh got out and held open the door for Carol and Chris. She looked up at his face as she got out, and could see the greyness even in the dark. He summoned up a smile. "I'm out of condition," he told her. "In the old days I could have driven you halfway to Vladivostok without stopping."

"Thank you," Carol said, and meant it. The night was cold, and she shivered. She hadn't thought, when they had set off in Chris's wake that morning, that they would be going any further; she had no luggage, no coat even. They had been blindly reacting, as they had all along, fleeing from rather than running to, with no plan and no goal.

"Will we be safe here?" she asked, as they mounted the steps and Rob unlocked the heavy doors. "For a while at least?"

"For a while," Hugh said. "Abergenau's not easy to get to, even in daylight."

Warmth and golden light flooded out on to the threshold, and enfolded them as they stepped in. Carol suddenly realised her own exhaustion, and realised they were all in the same condition.

"The kitchen is this way," Rob said, opening a door. "I told the staff to leave something we could reheat--ah, here." Five plates, covered with metal lids, stood on the worktop. "If somebody could put the kettle on..."

"I'll do it," Carol said.

"The rest of you go through to the other room and sit down," Rob went on. "The beds should be all aired, but we'll have to make shift a bit for clothes and such till I can get our stuff sent up from the Club. Sorry, what?" as Carol spluttered with laughter.

"I'm sorry," she managed, "it just sounded so P G Wodehouse. 'Sent up from the Club.'"

He grinned in spite of himself. "I suppose it did."

"Of course, I don't have any stuff at the Club," Carol said, sobering abruptly. "In fact, I've been wearing the same outfit for--God, nearly a week. I packed a bag when we went to room 3b, and it's probably still sitting in my car."

"Oh my good God," Rob said. "I'm so sorry. I never thought--" He stopped, and his face set. "That's Hugh," he said. "Just because he's used to flitting hither and yon at a moment's notice, he thinks-- Carol, I'm *sorry*."

"Not your fault," Carol said around a yawn. The kettle clicked off, and she hurried to find tea and coffee. "Who wants what?"

"I'll find out," Rob said, "and we'll get you some things. Tomorrow. Promise." He vanished into the next room, to return a moment later. "Hugh's spark out, Chris wants coffee and Shirinin wants tea."

"Typical. Chris can have tea and like it," Carol said, and yawned again. It was beginning to come home to her that she was safe, for the moment at least, warm, not going anywhere and not about to, and her body was starting to shut down. "And tomorrow, hopefully--if we aren't besieged by spies and priests and god knows what--we'll be able to make some real progress at last."

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The following day dawned grey and wet. The rooms were nicely decorated in keeping with the style of the house, the beds comfortable, and Carol lay in bed for some minutes just luxuriating in not having to be anywhere. The disturbing dream of the night before had not recurred.

At length she got up, showered in the huge bathroom, put on her clothes, looked in on Chris just to be sure (yes, he was there, sound asleep) and went downstairs to find Rob making breakfast and Hugh doing Tai Chi outside, on a verandah she hadn't noticed last night which gave on a spacious lawn bordered with flower beds and high hedges.

"Morning," Rob said cheerfully. "I gather you slept well."

"Oh yes," Carol said.

"Good," Rob said, "because I owe you a sincere apology. This whole ridiculous chase has been my fault. I was so fascinated by the whole thing I didn't stop to think--"

"It was worth it, Rob." Carol was firm. "If we hadn't gone back to London we'd never have met Uncle Aris. I think he really helped." She smiled. "And if you hadn't taken us to room 3b we'd never have got to know Hugh and never gone back to London. See, it all worked out for the best."

"It's very good of you to say so, but I still need to make up for it. When we've eaten I'll take you to the nearest proper town and get you and Chris some clothes and some basic essentials. Vassily's down in the village phoning Pikestaff to get some stuff sent up for Hugh and me."

"This place doesn't have a phone?"

"There's one in the office, but he thought it best to do it from somewhere else, and he's probably right. How do you like your eggs?"

Chris wandered down while Carol and Rob were eating, and Hugh joined them five minutes later.

"I was doing some thinking last night," Chris said, when plates were empty and he and Carol were washing up. "About travelling the edges."

"Mm," Carol said encouragingly.

"What me and the centaur have in common--it's what makes me a bloke, right? He's good for fighting, shagging, showing off, all that. I change into him when I get angry or randy."

"Sounds about right," Carol said neutrally.

"So I figure, if I can try to change slowly, focus on the feelings that come through at that moment, I can get a clearer idea of exactly what those feelings are, maybe use them instead of the diagram to trigger the change. I mean, those feelings are part of me as well, right?"

"I'd imagine so." Carol dried the last plate and stacked it in the rack above the sink.

"The funny thing is..." Chris emptied the bowl, picked the food remnants out of the drainer and dropped them into the bin. "When I go through the whole cycle it feels like I'm going in the same direction all the time? Me to centaur to wingy thingy to unicorn--there's never a feeling like I'm going back, you know?"

"That must be what Uncle Aris meant you to realise," Carol said. "Each form leads naturally to the rest, including from the unicorn to you."

"But if that's true," Chris said, "how do I know I'm the real me?"

"That's the point, isn't it? The real you is all of them. This form is just the one I happen to be in love with."

"Ready in five minutes?" Rob said, putting his head round the kitchen door.

"What's up?" Chris said.

"We need some clothes and things," Carol said. "Rob's going to take me."

"What about me?"

"You," Carol said, "can do what you talked about and travel the human-centaur edge. It'll be easier without me around."

"Not as much fun though," Chris grumbled.

"Stay focussed." Carol hugged him briefly. "We won't be long."

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Father Krebs, having abandoned the notion of overpowering the driver (who was after all quite innocent), waited till the car stopped at a large service station just outside Peterborough, and extricated himself from the boot while the man was inside, presumably getting food. He himself was starting to get hungry; fortunately Dower had not bothered to search him, and his money belt was secure under his shirt. A quick trip to the public toilets and several cups of coffee and sweet pastries later, the inner man was satisfied (and his sinful urge for asceticism thoroughly mortified) and he was able to plan.

Having lost Dower, he had no way of knowing where his quarry had gone. He knew Dower had been following an Alvis with three men and two girls in it, but that was all. The American would have made sure to send him in the wrong direction, and there were after all so many of those. Father Krebs took out his phone and checked, but the tracker on Dower's car was no longer registering. He must have found and removed it.

Father Krebs, having no other options, folded his hands, closed his eyes, composed himself and prayed for guidance.

"...in Wales."

"Seriously?"

"I told you she was mad..."

Father Krebs opened his eyes. The two girls had simply walked past his table, deep in conversation about something, but the words had penetrated his awareness in a way he had learned to recognise. He crossed himself and offered up thanks.

He needed a ride into Peterborough. There he could get funds, a vehicle, and perhaps some more precise guidance. God had done His part; the rest was up to him.

He took out his phone again and dialled a number.

*

The bus stood and steamed quietly in the layby, while Wayne peered anxiously at the engine by the light of an ancient torch. MOT tests and services were a distant memory, the vehicle had done enough miles to get to Venus and back several times, and even the shaman's mojo could only do so much to nurse the ancient engine along.

Don-Jay had seriously considered, several times since he had woken up, asking to be dropped off. These people were seriously creeping him out. The little guy in the white coat was okay--Dik, his name was, and Don-Jay recognised a fellow psychonaut even if he himself had never achieved more than a nauseous headache from smoking cabbage leaves dipped in vodka--but the Scottish guy and the Irish chick, or whatever they were, the other chick with the dolls and the gigantic spade broad, there was a serious vibe going on there, and he didn't like it. Even the obvious token mundane seemed to be more in tune with them than Don-Jay could imagine ever being. He watched them, laughing and chatting as doll chick passed out bowls of some kind of stew from a real live goddam cauldron simmering over a portable stove. The whole hippy-dippy gypsy trip. He was amazed he hadn't seen a guitar anywhere on the bus.

"I don't allow 'em," said the Scottish guy, as if he'd spoken. "It's a demarcation thing. The other lot don't do magic and we don't sing. But that's not important right now." He put down his bowl, got up and came over to Don-Jay. "You've not said two words since you came aboard, you've turned up your aristocratic nose at Tilda's excellent vegetable broth, which is a broth of a broth so it is, and you persist in not being with us despite the fact that we were kind enough to give you a lift. I can tell you that we don't generally do the whole hitch-hiker thing, on account of I have a

general antipathy toward freaks and weirdoes. I agreed to pick you up at the request of my girl Allie there, who seemed to think you were important. Would you be after knowin' why now?"

"Hey, no offence, man," Don-Jay said, unnerved by the piercing scrutiny of the guy's green eyes. "I'm just not into the whole tree-hugging thing, you know?"

"Tree-hugging? Don't blame you. Bark on your shirt, splinters like as not, and the tree don't even call you afterwards. It's a mug's game. So what's yours?"

"Look," Don-Jay said, looking away desperately, "I don't have to tell you nothing--"

"No," the guy said, "you don't. Ms Kwok?"

Don-Jay was startled--he'd forgotten about the little Asian broad. She was the worst of all.

"Donald Joseph Hershberger," she said, in a voice like a bell. "Preferred soubriquet Don-Jay. Age forty-three, though he pretends to be younger. Employed since nineteen-eighty-eight as a technician by the Orthodox Research Consortium, a private organisation formed in the middle nineteen-eighties with the aim of locating and exploiting technologies based on the sciences commonly known as 'occult.' No significant qualifications. Virgin."

"You got no right--" Don-Jay began.

"Absolutely correct, me bucko," the other guy said in a cold, level voice, "and yet I do it anyway. Bear that in mind. Now, apart from all of the above, and the obvious fact that you've had a powerful whammy dumped on you quite recently, I don't know anything about you that makes it worth my while to put up with your stinking weaselly presence on my bus. I'm not after wastin' decent magic on you when intimidation works just as well. I will, however, tell you that if you call me Scottish in that pointy little head of yours just one more time I will turn you into a flatworm, mince you up and feed you to your own great-granddaddy in the hope that next time round you'll know better. Am I getting through?"

"Five by five," Don-Jay said hastily, and for the second time that day he spilled his guts. The little he knew seemed even less this time round. The Sco-- The Irish guy, Dracul, listened carefully.

"Is that it, Allie?" he said when Don-Jay had stumbled to a halt. "What you've had us chasin'?"

"Aye, that's it," the skinny punk chick called back. *Okay, if he's Irish, she must be Scottish. I hope.*

"And the fellow in the cloak. Even I noticed when he turned up. Erleuchteten?"

"You bet. Probably Sienkiewicz. He's the only Ipsissimus still on his feet."

"Whatever this is we're after, we can't let them get it. They'd be insufferable for months. Not to mention the whole remaking the world in their image thing. It's that powerful?"

"If they can drain the juice out of it, there'll be nothing they cannae do. We're talkin' god power."

"Of course we are," Dracul muttered. "You wouldn't happen to know what kind--? No, of course not, forget I asked. All right, my fine gentleman, you're off the hook for the moment, but we'll be after lettin' our Rachel have a play with some of the toys in that very heavy backpack of yours. From what you say, some of 'em might help us track this thing down. I don't know exactly why we want it, but want it we does, precious."

"To keep it out of the hands of anyone else," Rachel Kwok put in, as Wayne brought the backpack and dumped it on the ground in front of her.

"Because we're so much wiser and better than all them other buggers. Right. Slipped my mind for a moment." Dracul grinned evilly. "Well, now, Don-Jay me boy, it looks as if you'll be with us for a while yet. Which should suit you down to the ground, since we're after the same thing you are."

"Listen," Don-Jay gabbled, "I don't give a good goddam about this thing, whatever it is--"

"Maybe not," Dracul said, "but imagine the faces of the other two if you bring it back in triumph when they've failed. You'd be the man of the hour. King of the lab. The world would be your oyster, right?"

Actually, Don-Jay could picture the scene all too clearly. Gefarr would snatch the thing out of his hands, turn and walk away, and Pricklow would shrug and make a face, pretending to be sympathetic--*sorry, but you know her, what can I do*--and follow her, leaving Don-Jay to get back to sweeping the lab. It was, after all, all he was fit for.

But if he could fathom its secrets on his own...

He quite liked the idea of remaking the world in his image. He had lots of ideas. And who were these guys, anyway? Bunch of hippies. He'd bamboozle them easy. "All right," he said. "I'm in."

"Glad to hear it," Dracul said. "Well, actually not, since I find you personally revoltin', but we need you, so it's all good. Now for pity's sake come and have some of Tilda's gunk before she bursts into tears."

Don-Jay, seeing no choice for the moment, allowed himself to be led into the circle round the stove.

The stew really was very good.