

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"We're back," Carol called, as she and Rob, bag-laden, pushed open the doors and hurried into the hall. Behind them the rain pounded the drive.

"You're wet," Hugh observed, emerging from the drawing room.

"Yes," Carol quoted. "It's raining." She broke off and stared at Hugh. "What happened to you?"

"Your boy Chris has been making some strides," Hugh said, touching the bruises on his face.

"Thank God for the rain. If he hadn't stopped--"

"I'd better see to those," Rob said at once. "There's a first aid box in the kitchen."

"What did you do?" Carol said, almost at the same time. From the way he was holding himself, there were similar bruises all over his body, at very least.

"We were just having a bit of a knockabout," Chris said from the doorway, and Carol switched her stare to him. It was Chris, and yet...not Chris. She was reminded of the first time she had seen him at the airport. This time he was definitely taller, broader, his features more strongly marked, his voice deeper. He was stripped to the waist, his jeans straining at every seam, his feet bare.

"I'm travelling the edge, Caz," he said. "Halfway between human and centaur. It's amazing."

Carol could only stare. The raw allure of the half-horse was there, but in a fully human body.

"I got the strength, the speed, and I think I can do the voice," Chris went on. "Want me to try?"

"No, Chris," Carol said evenly. "I want you to take Hugh outside, change into the unicorn and heal him."

"Unicorn's boring," Chris said offhandedly. "He'll heal naturally."

"Now, Chris," Carol said flatly.

"*Make me*," he said, and suddenly he was the only man in the room, she felt naked in front of him, and for a breath she couldn't think of any reason why that should not be so. With a huge effort she fought her way back to full control.

"Are you still the Chris that loves me?" she demanded. "Because if you are, you'll change back to fully human right now. If you aren't--" Her voice misgave her, and she turned away for a moment. When she looked back, after a heart-freezing moment, it was Chris, her Chris, standing there, looking stricken.

"Caz," he whispered. "I--"

"Heal Hugh," Carol said. "Then we'll talk."

Chris looked at Hugh, paled visibly, and offered his hand. Hugh took it meekly, and suffered himself to be led through the drawing room and out into the rain-drenched garden. Carol, following, went to the French window and watched as the unicorn exploded out of Chris, bowed its head and touched its glowing horn to Hugh's face and body.

"Well," Rob said beside her, "we appear to have encountered a dark side as well."

"I don't think so," Carol said after a moment. "It was bad, but not evil. I think he just let it go to his head. Power does that."

Chris and Hugh came back across the lawn and into the room. Hugh was walking more easily, and the bruises Carol had seen were gone.

"I hope you're not just making excuses," Rob said very quietly. "Right," he said at once in a more normal tone. "Now that that's over, Chris, we've got you some clothes. Nothing special, but they'll cover your current body. I suggest you stay the same size for the time being." If the words carried any meaning apart from the obvious, neither Rob nor Chris acknowledged it.

Carol, thrown for a second by that last quiet aside, stood there unspeaking while Chris took the bags Rob handed him and went upstairs.

"I suppose all the other edges will be similarly, um, blended," Rob said.

"Only we won't know how till we--till he tries," Carol corrected herself, "because we don't know what the other two faces *are*, we only know what they *do*."

"Which is the whole reason for the exercise," Rob finished. "I suppose."

"To discover the inmost nature of each face," Carol said slowly. "Was it me, or did half-centaur Chris seem nastier than centaur Chris?"

"The reason is obvious." Vassily Shirinin got up from the armchair in which he had been sitting, unnoticed, all this time. "The centaur's inmost nature is strongly composed of sensuality. It--he--feels everything intensely; anger, lust, the joy of living. The other side of that coin is increased empathy, causing him to feel what you feel, and from that comes a degree of compassion. When combined with the more rational, less emotional human side, that empathy, that compassion, is diluted. The same anger, the same lust, but more self-centred, more detached." He smiled.

"Fortunately, Chris's human side retains its strong affection for Ms Varland. Perhaps that is part of the inmost nature of humanity...the capacity to form intimate bonds."

"A pretty theory, Vassily," Hugh remarked. "Why do I get the idea that human beings are going to come off worst every time as far as you're concerned?"

"That is only natural," Shirinin said. "The human is the only face that has no exceptional abilities. No flight, no healing, no enhanced strength. Humans are...ordinary."

"Only because they're what we're used to," Hugh countered. "What about that rationality you mentioned? The ability to step back from a situation and view it coolly, reason it through without emotional complications getting in the way?"

"An ability that has led to some of the greatest atrocities in the history of creation itself. Perhaps all of them."

"And some of the greatest breakthroughs in the history of science," Hugh said. "Perhaps all of them."

"I disagree," Shirinin maintained. "The ability to deny one's empathy and shut down one's compassion has nothing to do with scientific development."

"Oh, come now," Hugh scoffed. "Animal experimentation, and for that matter experimentation on humans, whatever you may think of the wrongs and rights of it, has given us--"

"EXCUSE ME--thank you," Carol said. "Fascinating as this is, we've got the main point, thank you Vassily. So as Chris learns to balance on each edge, we'll find out a little more about the nature of the faces it connects, which may not be all good. The forms can combine in ways we don't expect."

"Admirably summarised, my dear Ms Varland," Shirinin said.

"Crawler," Hugh muttered.

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Gefarr frightened Pricklow. It was one of the benchmarks he used to assess his own continued rationality. Day of the week correct, check. Prime Minister still a lying scoundrel, check. Gefarr still terrifying, check.

How she could have enough pull with the military to obtain any degree of co-operation was a mystery to Pricklow. The ORC was a tiny private outfit, total personnel three, and the minuscule government funding they received was, he happened to know, the result of a clerical error that had gone uncorrected through four administrations. True, they had at one time enjoyed prime ministerial favour, but the old principle of plausible deniability had resulted in a severing of all public ties despite or perhaps because of the success of the commission with which they had been entrusted. Even the subsequent ousting of the PM in question had not soothed Pricklow's ravaged feelings for that. Hence the "lying scoundrel" thing, which in his view applied to any and all such officials whatever their affiliation.

And yet here they were, being driven back to their headquarters in an army staff car, with a wallet of impressive-looking papers that had been couriered urgently from London to Eltdown, authorising them to enter and search any premises for the purpose of seizing any and all artifacts of ancient technology that might be of interest to Her Majesty's Government, using whatever force they might deem necessary. It was amazing. All they had had to do was get from Avevale to Eltdown--some problem of jurisdictions--and that had been relatively easy once Pricklow had noticed the little bus parked outside the pub. He hadn't realised there was a bus service.

The arrest warrant on Don-Jay, Pricklow thought, was a little extreme, but that was Gefarr for you.

They rolled into the yard adjoining their building, and Pricklow's mouth fell open.

"Pricklow," Gefarr said, her grating voice recalling him to himself. "Assemble whatever equipment you think we will need and assist the troops to load it into the helicopter. Our first priority is location and retrieval of the equipment stolen by Don-Jay. When we have that we can track the artifact and acquire it much more easily this way." She paused. "The feet, Pricklow. You put one in front of and slightly to the side of the other."

"How is this possible?" Pricklow had spent his life sedulously avoiding this sort of thing. Troops. Helicopters. Not his field at all.

"I have connections. A certain...prominent personage...is aware of the nature of this artifact." Gefarr smiled. "He has a family interest, you might say." Her face and voice hardened. "Get moving."

Pricklow, numbly, got moving.

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"I will tell you everything," said Uncle Aris. "Everything that I know, and you will break nothing, yes?"

Dower glared at him. The old guy had been outside his crummy shop waiting when Dower screeched to a halt outside, had insisted on opening the door and ushering the American inside, had not given him a moment to go into his prepared spiel ("There's two ways this could go, grampa...") and had even handed him a goddam cup of tea. Not that Dower was planning on drinking it.

"If you do break," the old guy went on, "your embassy will fix. I have cousin Konstantin in your State Department, very senior. Anything you break, including maybe body parts, your government will pay to replace. So we are all friends now, yes?"

"Friends," Dower repeated, his tone neutral. America didn't have friends. Enemies, yes, and allies, who were enemies who didn't know it yet. Not friends. Dower was the same.

"Artifact you seek is called tetrad," Uncle Aris went on. "Is very old, yes? My family has guarded it for generations. Kept it safe. We still do."

"Have you got it?"

Aris laughed. "No. You know who has it."

"The boy who came to see you."

"Very confused, yes. Did not want. But no choice. Tetrad is within him." The old man sipped his own tea. "Tetrad is power. Great power. Tetrad is enlightenment. But only for one. You kill this young man, take it from him, still only for one. You break it apart to find out what it is, you will

find only stone. Look into it with your clever lights, just stone. Touch it with the flesh, it becomes part of you, and then you have real big problem, yes."

"Where did the boy go?" Dower was hardly listening. Information gained without torture was worthless, a bunch of lies for sure.

"I do not know. Far away, I told him. I do not want such trouble in my shop, I said. I should have known you would come anyway."

"Damn right," Dower said absently. Maybe if he broke a finger or two...

"Remember my cousin Konstantin." The old man was not being smug, not gloating, merely pointing out a fact. "Many people have sought this tetrad. Capodistria, he wanted it. Mavromichalis, they killed him to get it, found he did not have. The Great Powers, they wanted. Othon, Andreas, they both tried to get. My family held firm. Got Andreas exiled when he went too far. Now George's boy, he want very much. But he will not get it, no, and neither will you, Mister John Dower."

"How do you know my name?" Dower snapped.

"Knowledge is what I do." The old guy spread his hands, indicating the shop in general. "Why do you not look for your own tetrad? Were many, once. Some great holy man in your country shall have had. Shall have lost. Probably shot by your cowboys. Maybe it rolled down the rivers to the sea. You send down divers, yes?" The old guy laughed. "Look for little sandstone pyramid, so big," his hands made the shape, "on bottom of ocean. Find that one. This one belong to Greeks. Real Greeks, not German immigrants put in charge by Britain and France and Russia."

This all meant nothing to Dower, but he memorised it anyway. If by chance there was another one of these things on American soil, that would be a bonus.

He could not help wondering, though. Great power and enlightenment, but only for one.

Why not him?

He could handle great power. He knew he could. And with that power he could correct the mistakes of the past, restore America to greatness. What would a bunch of long-haired liberal pinko scientists do with it anyway? Destroy it for sure. It was Dower's duty as a public-spirited

American to prevent that, to put this thing to use for the good of his country, and therefore the world.

One of Dower's foster mothers had read him *The Lord Of The Rings* when he was young. Even then he had known it for the lying liberal propaganda it was. If you didn't use power, someone else would use it on you. That was how things worked.

He smiled at the old man, and deliberately dropped his tea cup. It smashed on the floor.

"Send the bill to your cousin Konstantin," he said, and left.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Chris had not come down after an hour, so Carol went to find him. Hugh and Vassily were still arguing the toss over a wide range of subjects from the moral imperative in Western philosophy to the economic entanglements of post-Soviet Russia, Rob was cooking something for lunch.

She missed Monica. The thought struck her unawares. She decided to go down to the village when the rain let up and call her. If it was safe for Vassily to phone the Club, it would be safe for Carol to phone her friend.

Chris was sitting on his unmade bed, the bags Rob had given him untouched on the floor beside his feet. His head was bowed, and he didn't look up when she knocked and went in.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"For a monster?" The response came in a raw voice. He had been crying,

"Chris, you're not a monster."

"Am."

"No you're not. You just got a bit...above yourself, that's all."

"That guy is a trained killer," Chris said. "He was holding back, we were just trying out the new body. I could have killed him, Caz, and there's no way short of shooting me he could have stopped me. And I wanted to. Just for a moment like, I wanted to see what it would feel like."

"It's natural, Chris. You are a bloke after all."

"When I was the centaur I never wanted to do nothing like that. On the edge...it was like the brakes were off, you know?"

"Human beings have evolved differently. Vassily was saying--"

"I know. I was on the landing. I heard." Chris looked up at last. "I don't want to be on that edge again, Caz. And yet I do. How fucked up is that?"

"I think we've learned all we can from that one," Carol said. "Try one of the others next."

"Suppose they're as bad? Suppose human/pegasus is nasty as well?"

"Only one way to find out," Carol said, forcing a brightness she did not feel into her voice.

"You want me to try it?" Chris shook his head. "Not with you around."

"Chris, the pegasus does two things. It flies, and it gives people inspiration. What could be nasty about that?"

"I read this comic once..."

"Comics are comics. This is a novel. Entirely different."

"I thought you were gonna say 'this is real life.'" Chris managed a ghost of a grin. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. If something goes wrong, the door's right behind me."

"All right. I'll try. It might not be as easy. Centaur's closer to human than the wi--" He broke off and laughed. "Than the pegasus."

"You've known its name all along, haven't you?"

"Wingy thingy sounded more fun. Okay, here goes."

Chris closed his eyes and concentrated. Carol watched.

She never noticed when the wings appeared. They were just there, not substantial and muscular like the wings of the flying horse, but translucent and radiant with inner light. Chris's features changed, not coarser now but finer, his limbs and body more slender. He breathed in deeply. Carol found herself holding her own breath, rapt in wonder.

"God." Chris's voice was different too, thrilling through her mind, awakening impulses and feelings a world away from the raw lust of the centaur. "This is incredible. Carol, are you there?"

"Yes," she croaked, and let out her breath in a whoosh. The whole room looked different, bathed in an unearthly light. She found herself fascinated by the colours of the carpet, the weave of the curtains. So much depth, so much ingenuity, so much...love. As for the view from the window, it was too ineffable even to look at.

"What am I?"

"A..." She didn't want to say it. "An angel?"

"No."

"A pagan angel, then. A muse. Apollo. I don't know, Chris, I..." There was a wrongness on the very edges of things, and Carol realised it was her. She wasn't strong enough to bear all this beauty. It was going to burn her. "Change back, Chris. Please."

He did, immediately. The light dimmed and was gone, the room was just a room again, and for a moment Carol almost broke under the weight of loss.

"That..." Too many words flooded to her lips, and she found herself wanting to speak just for the sake of speaking, to spill out nonsense syllables, to let her paralalia somehow express the insights that had overwhelmed her.

"Are you all right?" Chris demanded, getting up and taking hold of her arms. She let herself sag into his embrace.

"Fine. More than fine. That was...powerful. Almost too much. In another second it would have been."

"More powerful than the pegasus itself? Yes, of course it would be." He was thinking it out for himself. "The human side would accentuate the gift, not weaken it. Humans have imagination, and we've never felt the need to control it. Enhanced imagination plus rational mind..." He laughed. "Hark at me."

"How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted. Hungry. Wanna do it again."

"Not just yet," Carol said. "Food first. Rob was doing something with noodles downstairs."

"Caz..." Chris said. "Could we just lie here together for a minute?"

She looked at him, at his tough boy's face that had just a little while ago been the face of a god. She saw the fear, the wonder, the need in him.

She lay down on the bed, and pulled him into her arms, and there they lay, not speaking, till Rob called them for lunch.

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"Wales?" Dracul repeated. "Ah no, not Wales. I hate bloody Wales. Let's go to Rotherham instead."

"Why Rotherham?" Frankie queried.

"There's a great jazz club in Rotherham."

"That's Rotterdam," Wayne called from the cab.

They had passed the night in the layby and resumed their journey at first light. The problem with the engine seemed to have resolved itself for the moment.

"Ach, it's right you are," Dracul called back. "We ran into this woodwork teacher up north a few years back," he told Frankie. "My gods, he had some stories. Anyway. Wales it must be, so Wales it is, I suppose. Anyone found singing, especially in tune, will be dropped off on the nearest habitable island with a pistol and one bullet. Hymns as usual excepted, Marsha. Rachel, Dik, keep trying to narrow it down."

Dik and Rachel Kwok looked up from the pile of miscellaneous kit from Don-Jay's backpack and nodded briefly.

"And if you can narrow it down to somewhere other than bloody Wales I'll take it kindly," Dracul muttered.

"What's his beef with Wales?" Don-Jay asked Frankie, who was sitting in the seat in front of him.

"No idea," Frankie answered. "Could be anything, or nothing. One thing I've learned about Dracul is that you never know which way he's going to jump. Often he doesn't know himself."

Don-Jay had mostly tuned out after "No idea," but nodded intelligently anyway.

"He's a chaos magician," Frankie went on, "which as far as I can tell means he pretty much has to be insane. The fewer the rules, the greater the responsibility. When there's nothing to stop you, you have to be in control the whole time. Something like that anyway."

"Insane, but in control? That doesn't make sense."

"Welcome to Dracul's world. Actually, it's not that weird. Look at paranoid schizophrenics. They often have to be in control the whole time, because of what the voices tell them or whatever. Dracul's like that, only the only voice he has is his own."

"Sounds like a nutjob."

"You'd think, but he's done some amazing things. We've done amazing things thanks to him. Even me." Frankie looked down at his feet. "I'm nothing. Not magical, not a fighter, not even that bright...but you wouldn't believe half of what I've seen. What I've done."

Don-Jay's mind was racing as he began to listen with his full attention. He knew enough not to doubt that there was truth in what Frankie was saying. That explained the creepy vibe he kept picking up on. Dracul was taking all the diverse magics of his people, Allie's erratic psychism, Dik's chemical wizardry, Wayne's way with machines, Tilda's earth wisdom, even Marsha's Christianity, and welding them all into an esoteric task force under his own iron control.

This was almost better than the artifact. He could learn so much from these people. For a moment he allowed his imagination to run wild, pictured himself master of all magic, wielding real power for once. He'd make Pricklow and Gefarr crawl in the dirt at his feet. He'd make himself rich. He'd...

"Wait a second. If you got all this power, why aren't you..." Don-Jay waved his hand vaguely, and Frankie smiled.

"Rich? Famous? Ruling the world?" Frankie smiled. "I wondered that myself. Dracul says--well, he says a lot of stuff, but this is the important bit. Give me a moment, I have to get it right." He thought for a minute. "People think of power as a one-sided thing. You have it, you can do anything with it, it doesn't matter what. Dracul says that's because they don't actually look at how power works in the world. There has to be a circuit for the power to flow. It isn't just about what you can do with it, it's about what it's supposed to do. If you just try and use it without taking

account of that, then either it doesn't work, or it sends the whole system out of kilter and bad things happen. Explosions, blackouts. You're a technician, you know what I'm talking about."

The disturbing thing was, Don-Jay did. The analogy was making sense to him, too much sense, It didn't go well with his dreams of absolute power, revenge and piles of cash. If you couldn't use power for that, what good was it?

"Say we took over the country," Frankie said. "I think they could, you know, if they wanted to. First thing that would happen is armed resistance, lots of people dying and getting hurt, and all that would be our responsibility. Then the rest of the world powers would weigh in, because they'd see us as a threat. More fighting, more death, more magic needed to sort it all out. Meanwhile the country would be ruined, we'd lose everything we'd thought to gain, and we'd probably end up dead anyway."

Don-Jay tried to marshal objections, but he couldn't think of any. That was how it would go. So what was the point? If you couldn't use power to make a nice life for yourself, why have it?

"Having power and having a good life are completely different things," Frankie said. "You can have a great life with no power at all. Many people do. Power is to be used for what it needs to be used for."

That was where it all fell down for Don-Jay. He simply could not imagine having a good life without power, wealth, the chance to get back at people who had hurt him. Still, it would do no good to argue. Frankie was obviously convinced. Good for him. All the more for Don-Jay.

"I guess you're right," he temporised. "You've sure given me a lot to think about."

Frankie nodded, and got up.

"Maybe some day you'll think about it," he said, not unkindly, and went back towards the stairs.

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"That was delicious," Chris said. "Thanks."

"Not at all," Rob said.

"Um...sorry, but I think I need to go back to bed," Chris said. "I'm feeling really wiped."

"Are you all right?" Carol said.

"Yeah, I think..." Chris stifled a yawn. "Being on the edges took it out of me a bit."

"Makes sense," said Hugh.

"How?" That was Rob.

"The tetrad wants to settle on one face out of the four. Travelling the edge will take continual effort. Like balancing on a wall."

Carol hadn't thought of it that way, but Hugh was right, it did make sense. "Want me to come with you?"

"No, 's okay. You got the afternoon off, babes."

"Don't--" She caught his grin and stopped. "All right. Maybe I'll go for a walk." She glanced at the window; the rain had stopped, and a watery sun was dodging in and out of clouds.

"Why not?" Chris said. He looked around at their faces; Carol, Rob, Hugh and Shirinin. "Thanks, everybody. I never meant--" He stopped, embarrassed, and mumbled something inaudible.

"Edges?" Hugh inquired after he had gone, with just the merest emphasis on the plural.

"He tried human/pegasus, while we were upstairs."

"Really? How did that go?"

"It was..." She found, rather to her surprise, that she didn't want to talk about it. "It was...difficult to explain. Very...intense."

"Well, I can vouch for the human/centaur experience being intense. I take it this time there were no bruises."

"No," Carol said shortly. "I'm going to go and change. Thank you, Rob, you're a great cook."

"I try." Rob blushed.

Carol fled.

Up in her room, she selected underwear, a blouse and a pair of slacks, then went to the bathroom and showered again. The feeling of clean clothes on a clean body was a pleasure she'd almost forgotten. She slipped on her shoes, went downstairs and paused outside the drawing room.

"Want some company?" Shirinin said, from behind her. He must have been in the kitchen. She really wished he wouldn't keep popping up like that.

"No thanks," she said. "I don't seem to have been on my own for ages. I could do with some time to think."

"Watch your back," he said, seriously. "Rob may think he has finally found you a safe place, but that will not last."

"Gosh, thanks for that. I feel so much better."

"Just be...aware," the Russian said. "And enjoy your walk."

Carol closed the outer doors behind her and set off down the drive. The trees, the lawns, looked freshly washed after the rain, and there were birds. She took several deep breaths. The air was clear, clean. She reached the gates and headed down the hill into Abergenu. Rob had driven through it with her that morning, but she hadn't really been paying attention.

Snug-looking stone-built cottages clustered either side of the street. Some had window boxes. There was one shop, a general store and post office combined. Just beyond it a narrow lane led down to the beach, bare and deserted in the pale grey light of afternoon. The boats were gone, presumably out at sea. She would have liked to see it in the summer. She imagined, briefly, her and Chris in bathing costumes, frolicking in the waves.

"Excuse me," said a voice behind her. It didn't sound Welsh, or familiar. Carol turned, to see a tall man with aquiline features and very pale eyes, in a black cloak lined with...with dark purple, and underneath it a black polo neck sweater and jeans.

"My name is Count Sienkiewicz," the man said. "You want to talk to me."