

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was two hours later.

The bus was parked around the side of the house, where an old stable block held the remains of several disused cars and motorbikes which Wayne had gleefully set about plundering to replenish his depleted mojo bag. Introductions had been performed, and after a frozen moment of astonishment, Rob and Hugh had set to to make the supper stretch to over a dozen people. In this they were ably assisted by the dark woman called Tilda, who arranged her three porcelain dolls--her "children"--carefully on a spare section of worktop before rolling up her sleeves and pitching in. (Rob had made the mistake of talking about them as if they were real, as Tilda did herself, and had earned himself a distinctly old-fashioned look. "They are *dolls*," Tilda had explained pityingly, and Rob had retired in confusion.)

Carol could not explain, even to herself, her inexplicable certainty that these particular strangers were to be trusted. Even the appearance of Don-Jay--"by way of being in protective custody," according to Dracul--had not dented it. She recalled seeing the bus on the motorway, going in the opposite direction, and how she had picked up a good feeling from it even then, but that had nothing to do with it. The only thing she could think was that--unlike the raw desire she felt in the presence of centaur Chris, or the sudden coercive reordering of her mind and senses by Count Sienkiewicz--this felt truly authentic, her own perception and her own choice.

Dracul's unstinting honesty helped. "Think of us," he had said, "as the gentleman come about the trouble. If you don't have any, you can rely on us to make some."

Now, well fed and contented, they all lounged at ease in the large drawing room, where the golden light of the lamps, the deep green velvet curtains and the warmth of the fire kept the dark and cold outside. For the coven, it was clearly unwonted comfort; the thin Scots girl Allie was already asleep, head pillowed on Dracul's knee, while his hand absently stroked her lank fire-engine red locks. For Carol, it reminded her once again of her home in Avevale; there was something of the same feel about this house. Even the distant southing of the sea did not seem out of place.

"So," Dracul said, "you've got a thing of power inside you and a mort of folk after it."

Chris, still a little wary, nodded curtly.

"And our mission, as I see it, and bearin' in mind that we, that is my lads and lasses and I, are free agents, disinterested parties, and wild-eyed rebels from the edge of time, and we don't work for anybody or take any man's shillin', at least not when he's lookin'...what was I saying?"

"Our mission," Frankie prompted him.

"Our what? Oh, that. Yes. Our mission is to help keep the thing inside you, you inside your skin, and your good lady safe and well into the bargain."

"That's about it," Chris said. "Are you up for it?"

"Oh, absolutely, and to hell with Burgundy, and Cabernet Sauvignon and all while we're at it. I'd just be glad to know exactly who and what we're up against."

"Just about everybody, I think," Chris said. "Caz?"

"Well, there's a priest called Father Krebs who wants it for the Vatican," Carol began. "There's a lunatic called Dower from the CIA. A magician called Count Sienkiewicz, from some order in Germany--"

"The Erleuchteten," Dracul put in.

"That's them."

"We've met them before. They deal with demons to get protection and power. Mostly glamour and illusion, but they can be nasty if the mood takes 'em. Who else?"

"There's the people you met, who seem to have the army on their side--"

"We may have put the mockers on that a touch. I fancy it's strictly unofficial the help they were gettin', and you can only cover up so much. Anyway, we have a hostage." Dracul nodded at Don-Jay, who had also succumbed to the effects of food, warmth and exhaustion.

"Have I forgotten anyone?"

"The Greeks," Allie said distinctly, without moving or opening her eyes.

"We haven't seen them," Carol said uneasily.

"No," said Hugh, "but you can count on it that they'll have sent somebody. The thing was liberated from their country after all."

"Yeah, that's true," Chris admitted. "There was a couple of soldiers at the airport in Athens. They didn't come for me then, but they'll have clocked me."

"And at least one of these groups has got our friend Monica," Carol said. "We need her back."

"Well, it could be worse, I suppose. No Australians, no fake Mayans, and Iceland seems to be concentratin' on its own troubles." Dracul grinned. "We can take it that Krebs's brief is to bring the thing back to Rome so they can vanish it like they do with everything else worthwhile. All the others will be after it so they can use it, either for whatever it is or as a panergodyne."

"A what?"

"Universal energy source. Drain the power out of some magical artifacts and you could light half Europe for a decade or two. If you wanted to, that is. Or enslave the world. I'd be inclined to become a tad testy if that were to happen." Dracul's face, which had become sombre, cleared again. "The advantage we have--apart, of course, from the presence of Me--is that they can't all have it, and they all know that. So alliance is out of the question, and we can rely on them to be spendin' some energy tryin' to put each other out of the picture before they even get to us."

"They might pool their resources temporarily," Shirinin suggested.

"Indeed they might, Comrade, and that would be almost as good. Nobody's at his best when he's got one eye on the fellow next to him, feelin' beholden, plottin' betrayal and waitin' to be betrayed himself. To that end I suggest that once all participants have arrived I send out my lads and lasses to spread a little creative disinformation." Again the grin. "We're good at that."

"I'm going to say it again," said Rob, "because you weren't here the first time. This place is not equipped to withstand a siege."

"Well, of course not," Dracul said. "But we can keep them out for long enough, I think. Do those gates at the bottom close?"

"Yes," Rob said. "There's a padlock and chain."

"Ideal. Wayne, be a darlin' and go lock them. Now," Dracul leaned forward as the bearded man left the room. "This thing of power. If it's not a rude question, what is it?"

"It's a tetrad," Chris said after a moment.

"A tetrad," Dracul marvelled. "Well well well. Fancy that. A tetrad, you say? Indeed to goodness, as they say in these parts. I never thought I'd see one of them in my own lifetime now." He paused.

"What the hell's a tetrad?"

"It's probably easier if I show you," Chris said, getting up. "You might want to step back."

"Er, Chris," Carol said nervously. "Don't you think it might be better if you do it out--"

The centaur exploded into the room.

"--side?"

Almost immediately the air grew heavy with centaur musk. Allie opened her eyes and sat up very straight, Tilda took a deep breath and leant forward, Rachel Kwok quietly left the room, and Marsha burst into loud laughter.

"My, you a sight for sore eyes, boy," she guffawed.

"Dik?" Dracul said. "Is there something you'd like us to know?"

"Nothing that's any of your business, Dracul," said Dik, without taking his eyes off Chris.

Rob Fayne leaned towards him. "Hands off, you cheeky cat, I saw him first," he said. Hugh glanced at him quizzically. "I've been meaning to tell you, Hugh," Rob said, "for a spy, you have really rotten gaydar."

"So," Dracul said loudly, "it does party tricks. Very impressive. How is it on find the lady?"

Chris and Carol explained, between them (after Chris had changed back, to the vociferous disappointment of the ladies of the coven) the functions of the tetrad, the gnomonic instructions, and what they had learned so far.

"The edge effects seem to be far more intense than the straight transformations," Rob commented. "Which makes sense if they happen on a different quantum energy level. But that would imply that the corners are going to be more intense still, and if Uncle Aris is right that they represent the dark sides..."

"Then your man here's got his work cut out for him," Dracul finished.

"You've still got three edges to travel, am I right?"

"All the non-human ones," Carol said. "Centaur/pegasus, pegasus/unicorn and unicorn/centaur."

"That should be fun. We need to do some tabulatin'. Where's Rachel when we need her?"

"Here, Dracul." Somehow the little Asian woman had come back without anyone noticing. "I would be grateful if the young man would refrain from transforming again without warning. It was...embarrassing."

"Sorry," Chris mumbled.

"So, we have four basic forms, which we can relate to various attributes." Rachel Kwok produced her tablet and began tapping at the screen. "The human as opposed to the others clearly represents rationality, the brain, the intellect, which is linked in some systems to the element of fire. I would favour this attribution since the pegasus is far more suited to air, to breath, inspiration and spirit. The centaur equally clearly represents the body and earth, which leaves the unicorn water, the blood. Brain, body, breath and blood; fire, earth, air and water. So far so good.

"The edges, where two faces meet, represent the synthesis of two elements. Fire adds intensity, as you, Mr Fayne, have noted. It ignites the earth/body element, inflames the air/breath, and infuses with heat the blood/water. It reduces the control of the operator--that would be you, Mr Kyriakou."

"Don't feel much like an operator," Chris remarked. "More like the patient."

"We may then theorise that each element will add its own quality to the others along the faces where they meet. Water will add responsiveness and motility to earth and air, will blend empathy and compassion with the--excuse me--the vigour of the centaur and the creativity of the pegasus. Air and earth together will combine the two last-named characteristics. We may assume that such manifestations will be broadly hippiform, though the exact mythological correspondences remain to be seen." She shook her head. "That is all I have for you at the moment. Though we may assume that the "centre"--the ideal form to which the tetrad is designed to lead us--will embody all four characteristics in balance." She blinked. "Which implies that humans do not."

"That much we knew," Dracul said dryly. "Thank you, Rachel my love. I think it's healthy sometimes to be reminded that humans are neither the norm to which all other creatures aspire, nor entirely separate from all the rest of creation; we're part of what we should be, and part of the rest of what we should be is all around us in nature. God, somebody slap me or get me a beer or something before I turn into Jonathan Livingston Seagull. It's true, though, isn't it," he went on, after a moment, "we've given our brains too much importance, too much freedom, and the result is all around us. Unrestrained by the limitations of the body, the instinct of the spirit or the whatever you call it of compassion, the brain doesn't see any reason why it shouldn't do whatever it wants to the planet, to other people, to itself. And it

drugs and subverts the other aspects to keep itself in control. Our brains have given us cheap food and drink and drugs and sex, have given us endless rationalisations for the horrors we visit on those less fortunate to anaesthetise our compassion, have replaced our spiritual yearnings with video games and what have you--"

Rachel Kwok got up, walked over to him and slapped him ringingly across the face. He stopped speaking and looked up at her in bewilderment.

"You did ask," she reminded him.

"Beat me to it," Allie said sleepily.

"So if it's this universal panacea," Hugh said, "and I'm not saying it isn't--why is there only one of it?"

"There may have been many more," Shirinin said. "We know of single tetrads in other countries, but maybe they were once as common as dirt. Perhaps..." His voice trailed away.

"Perhaps?" Carol prompted.

Shirinin laughed. "Perhaps, I was about to say, in ancient times humanity's natural state was that ideal integrated being of which your Miss Kwok spoke. And then, one day, we discovered how to control and tame our inconvenient desires and feelings and our unruly creative impulses and elevate mere intellect above all, and these little sandstone pyramids were the prisons we made for our other selves. Perhaps the few that survived belonged to the handful of people who wished to keep the option of going back...and the rest were smashed

and obliterated by those who yearned to be free from conscience, compassion, and imagination."

There was a long, thoughtful silence.

Hugh shrugged. "Russian," he said, indicating Shirinin, and there was a general laugh in which Shirinin joined.

"He started it," he said, nodding at Dracul.

"I think it's time we changed the subject," Rob said unexpectedly. "I'm very glad you're all here, and I know we're all just waiting for the enemy--enemies--to turn up, but I for one am starting to feel a bit burned out on all this. I've been trying to keep up and stay positive and focussed, but--"

"Understandable," Dracul said. "From what you've told me, you've all been thinking about nothing else for days. Leave it with us for a while. Rachel will crunch her numbers, and Allie will doubtless be on the astral alert as soon as she's caught up on her sleep--"

Allie took hold of his hand and bit his little finger.

"So, perhaps we should provide some references." Dracul seemed not to have noticed the bite. "We've had a few adventures, this crowd and me. There was the time--"

He embarked on a tale whose implausibility was only matched by the gusto with which he told it, with the others chiming in more and more, mostly to point out Dracul's own part in the action. From there the evening gradually turned into a storytelling session; Hugh had a yarn or two of his own, as did Shirinin, and while Rob could not match them for high adventure, he dredged up some funny stories from his

university days. Carol was aware that they were laying themselves out to entertain her and Chris, and for her part she was content, for the moment, to be entertained.

At about midnight, Rob realised guiltily that he had not made any rooms ready for the newcomers. Dracul waved his protests aside, saying that they were used to sleeping in the bus, at which point several of the coven shouted him down, and Tilda and Rob went to locate bed linen and appropriate rooms. One by one the coven members retired, till only Don-Jay was left.

"Can we trust you, or do I have to lock you in your room?" Hugh asked bluntly.

"I wouldn't trust me if I were you," Don-Jay said, surprising himself a little. "But I won't give you any trouble." *Not right now. Not when it's me against all of you.*

"I'll take that as your parole, then," said Hugh. "Rob?"

"Upstairs, turn right, fourth door down," Rob said. "Bathroom's next door on the right. There are spare toothbrushes and soap in the cupboard, towels on the rail. I'll come up with you."

"And tomorrow you can tell us about your bosses and what they're likely to do next," Hugh said.

"Sure," Don-Jay said readily.

"Goodnight, then," said Rob to the others, and he and Don-Jay went to the door. Once there, Don-Jay turned.

"I just wanna say...thank you," he said. "You've treated me better than my bosses would have treated you."

"That's what makes us the good guys," Hugh said.

*And that's why you'll lose, asshole,* thought Don-Jay, but he kept the sincere expression on his face till he was safely in his allotted room and away from Rob's unblushingly suspicious scrutiny.

"Think he'll try anything?" Hugh asked Shirinin.

"Of course," the Russian said lightly, "but not tonight. He'll wait till his employers turn up."

"Okay then. Chris, Carol, go to bed. Vassily and I will stay up for a while."

Carol was happy to go along with this. She followed Chris up the stairs, along the landing and to the door of his room.

"Aren't you the other way?" Chris said.

"Yes," Carol said. She took Chris's hand. "But not tonight."

"You mean--"

"We might not get another chance," Carol whispered. "These people play for keeps. By tomorrow night you or I could be dead, or..."

"Carol," Chris said, momentarily appalled by the seriousness in her voice and her eyes.

"So I think I rather want to be with you tonight," Carol said. "If that's okay with you, I mean."

Chris's face was all the answer she needed. He put his arms around her, and for a moment they held each other without speaking.

Then they went into Chris's room and the door closed behind them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Carol woke to a knocking on the door, shredding her dream and blowing it away before she could recall it. She took a deep breath. It felt good.

She opened her eyes slowly. She was in Chris's room. Chris wasn't.

"Caz?" Ah. That was where he was. On the other side of the door.

Carol stretched and mumbled, wanting just a few more...days...of feeling like this before she had to get up and start coping with everything again.

"Yes?" she called sleepily.

"You gotta come down," Chris said. "You're gonna want to hear this."

He didn't sound panicked, so maybe it wasn't a disaster. Carol rolled out of bed, feeling deliciously languorous and decadent. The sun was high in the sky, to judge from the light coming through the window.

He'd let her sleep in. Bless him. She washed her face, slipped into her clothes and opened the door. Chris was there, and she took the opportunity for a hug and kiss.

"What's going on?"

"Don-Jay's been filling us in on his bosses, and Marsha's gonna make a phone call." He sounded almost gleeful about it. Carol followed him downstairs, past the door to the drawing room and into the little office. The glow didn't seem to be going away. Carol was okay with that.

*Maybe the tetrad makes sex better as well.*

Dracul, Marsha and Hugh were there. Dracul's grey blanket, the one he usually wore round his shoulders in lieu of a shirt, was draped over the phone. Carol's eyes skidded away from the sight of Dracul's naked torso. *Dear God, what happened to him?* she thought.

"That should be enough," he was saying. "Okay, Marsha, off you go."

Marsha picked up the phone, and looked away while Hugh dialled a number. Carol heard the faint ringing tone, but couldn't make out the response.

"Good morning," Marsha said, in an accent so impeccably cut-glass and British Carol almost looked round to see who else was speaking.

"I wish to speak to Mr Abercrombie, please. My name is Beatrice Weyelengo, and my husband is President of the Democratic Republic of Nakutsi."

*Where?*

"No, you will not have heard of us, as my husband only issued the Declaration of Independence last week. You should update your files more frequently." Dracul frowned, and Marsha nodded imperceptibly.

"But that is none of my concern. I wish to discuss our order for three hundred Chinook helicopters and crews. Yes. I will hold."

Carol noticed suddenly, in a corner, Rachel Kwok, typing industriously into a laptop. The woman seemed to be able to be invisible at will.

"Ah, good morning, Mr Abercrombie." The cut-glass accent had just a hint of the exotic in the way Marsha stressed the words. "Beatrice Weyelengo from Nakutsi here. Ah, you have the file. Good. My husband asked me to expedite the order before he left for Geneva, but I have recently come into possession of some disturbing information, and I wanted to check and confirm it with you.

"Yes, one of my bright boys reported to me today that your Chinook helicopters are frankly not all they are cracked up to be. There was an incident yesterday in Wales in which one of them crashed on to a public highway, causing much disruption. Had you heard? You might wish to check the local papers. Frankly, Mr Abercrombie, these machines are going to be no use to us for putting down the incursions of the vile Matatse raiders if they cannot even get out of your country without--

"An unscheduled operation? Oh dear. I was under the impression that the British armed forces were famed for their discipline. I fear we will require full information as to the nature of the mechanical failure, or whatever it was, and of the dereliction of the crew, before we can proceed with the order. You understand, the security of our oil fields is paramount at this critical time, and perhaps we should consider going to the Americans, or maybe--

"Please do not distress yourself, Mr Abercrombie. Simply courier the relevant documentation to me at the Hyatt Regency in Portman

Square, and I am sure all will be well." A little steel edged the cut glass. "Today would be good. Thank you for your time, Mr Abercrombie. Good day."

She put the receiver down, and exhaled tempestuously. "Hoo, that voice hard work. Marsha needs a drink of water." She grinned and sashayed out of the room.

"But you're not at the Hyatt Regency," Carol said.

"No, but the point was to get *him* looking at the information," Hugh said. "Apparently Don-Jay's bosses have, or had till now, some clandestine pull with the military, which enabled them to commandeer a Chinook to pursue their errant employee. This should queer their pitch for a while at least."

"What happened to it?"

"Wayne," Dracul said briefly. "All right, Rachel my love, erase the lot and cover your tracks. Mrs Weyelengo can return to limbo where she doubtless belongs."

"I am already doing it, Dracul," Rachel Kwok said, without heat.

"Is there anything your people can't do?" Carol asked Dracul.

"More than you can possibly imagine," he said, reclaiming his blanket. "We can't kill people, or bring anyone back from the dead, and we can't make anyone fall in love with you, so don't ask. Not that you have anythin' to worry about in that direction, my lovely." He grinned at her, and Carol blushed. "I'm thinkin' somebody had a good night."

"Yes, well," Hugh said quickly, "now that that's sorted, I think we could all do with a cup of tea. And Carol will be wanting breakfast."

"I'll do it," Chris said.

"I'll give you a hand," Carol said.

"That's them for the morning, then," Dracul remarked. "Can we at least rescue the teapot?"

\*

"They said, ah, no," Pricklow reported as Gefarr emerged from her office.

They had been ferried back from Wales to their headquarters the previous night by a monosyllabic corporal in a hastily requisitioned jeep, and the staff car that had delivered them before had been already gone when they arrived. Neither of them had spoken to each other throughout the journey, and they had parted almost immediately, Pricklow to his lonely, shabby bedsit and a cold half-can of baked beans, Gefarr, presumably, to wherever she lived.

The first order of business this morning had, of course, been the resumption of the pursuit, Gefarr being a great believer in getting straight back on the horse. The horse, however, was no longer cooperating. "Her Majesty's, ah, Government can not see its way clear to allocating any further resources to this organisation. In fact, they may be considering calling for an audit of our funding."

"Myopic wretches," Gefarr muttered. "They will regret their folly."

"Not the giant robot again," Pricklow said pleadingly. The giant robot was a pet project of Gefarr's, and physically it was fine, but she had yet to find the sweet spot between giving it approximately the brains of a toaster and making it so intelligent that it was prone to sitting down suddenly on the ground and asking what was the point of it all.

"No," Gefarr said reluctantly. "Machinery is useless against a technoshaman. No, we need to adopt a more subtle approach."

She went back into her office, and, greatly daring, Pricklow followed her. The room partook of Gefarr's nature; essentially clean and tidy, it nevertheless looked rumpled, slept-in, dingy. A gap between two filing cabinets formed a makeshift alcove, and here stood a plinth with something on it swathed in a black cloth. Gefarr carefully removed the cloth, and Pricklow stared as she folded it neatly and put it on the cabinet to the left.

She sensed his bafflement. "I took a full-body cast from him a year ago. I told him it was for a new type of body armour. Now leave me alone. I must concentrate."

Pricklow, dismissed, edged to the door. When he looked back, she was facing the life-size bust of Don-Jay, and it looked to Pricklow as if her pale eyes were actually glowing with a hellish inner radiance.

The last thing he heard as he fled was her voice, low-pitched, insistent:

"Don-Jay...Don-Jay...Don-Jay..."

\*

Don-Jay, sitting in the drawing room, nearly dropped his teacup as a chill swept over him.

He had felt it before. How had he forgotten?

*Don-Jay...Don-Jay...Don-Jay...*

He managed to get the cup on to the table in front of him on the second try, and got up unsteadily.

"Need some fresh air," he mumbled, and headed for the door.

*Don-Jay...you must listen to me...listen, Don-Jay...*

"No," he groaned desperately, staggering down the hall, wrenching open the outer door. The stone steps jiggled and yawed crazily in front of him.

*You cannot resist me, Don-Jay...you must obey me...*

"I don't wanna," he whined. "I'm free of you now."

*You will never be free, Don-Jay...I control you...*

"No..."

*Don-Jay...do not resist...tell me where you are, Don-Jay...*

"I won't...I won't..." He felt his knees giving way, felt rough stone at his back.

*You will tell me, Don-Jay...you cannot resist...*

"I..."

*Tell me, Don-Jay...tell me...*

"A...Abergenau..." He hated this, hated it with all his being, but his hate was powerless against it. "It's in Wales...big house by the sea..."

*Listen, Don-Jay...I will tell you what you must do...*

"I won't do it..."

*You will..*

"I won't..."

*YOU WILL.*

The pain was beyond belief, beyond imagining, scraping at his every nerve end. Don-Jay wanted nothing more than for it to stop. He was blind with it, blind to everything but a lurid image in his mind's eye, the image of his tormentrix, his mistress, his owner, reciting over and over again the instructions he desperately tried to reject and could not.

A sudden unfamiliar sensation, cutting off his breathing, sent the image skidding away, the instructions fading into indistinguishable baffle. Don-Jay's vision returned, and he found himself looking into two angry eyes, one green, one blue, barely two inches from his own. As his mind belatedly kicked in and he realised what was happening to him, Allie broke the kiss and drew back.

"I'd have gi'en you a skelp," she said, "but you werenae gonna notice any more pain under all that. 'Sides, himself's always tellin' me I'm too violent." She leaned in close again. "Tell any bugger," she whispered, "and I'll *cut* you." She straightened up, and Don-Jay realised he was sitting slumped on the steps of the house. "Oh, an' by the way," she said, at the doors, "brush your teeth once in a while. Your breath stinks."

She went back in. Don-Jay sat still for a while, taking stock. He seemed to be all present and correct. He wasn't sure what had just

happened, but at least part of it seemed to have been good. The last he recalled he'd been in the drawing room...

He got to his feet and started up the steps, feeling a little better. That Fayne guy had said something about a toothbrush last night, and he was fairly sure he remembered how you did it.

\*

Pricklow, alerted by the crash, skidded to a halt in the doorway of Gefarr's office. She was on the floor, pinioned by the heavy plinth and surrounded by fragments of plaster.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" she said after a moment. "Get this thing off me."

Pricklow hastened to lift the plinth off her, but she brushed aside his offer of assistance and struggled to her feet unaided.

"Something went wrong?" Pricklow inquired mildly.

"There was interference," Gefarr snapped, "but the message went through satisfactorily at least once. He will do as instructed."

"Do you have one of those for me?" Pricklow said.

Gefarr almost smiled. "Don't be stupid, Pricklow," she said. "I would never need to overcome your will. You have, after all, none to speak of."

"Ah," Pricklow said miserably. "Yes, that would make sense."

"Get a map of Wales and locate Abergenu," Gefarr ordered, "while I find us some transport."

"How?" Pricklow demanded.

"Leave that to me."

\*

Meanwhile, in the bar of the Ty Pwll pub in Abergenu, the talk (in Welsh, naturally) was all of the two strangers who had arrived late the previous night in separate cars, and on learning that there was but one room to be had, had insisted on sharing it. They seemed like an odd couple, but the people of Abergenu were perfectly in tune with the twentieth century (the fact that it was now the twenty-first century had not eluded them, but they preferred to take these things in easy stages) and if two men felt that way about each other, it was none of their business (though Eleri the barmaid felt called upon to remark that the handsome American might have chosen a more good-looking partner).

John Dower and Father Krebs, understanding nothing of these exchanges and caring less, had spent their evening in delicate attempts to gather information while at the same time preventing each other from doing so. They learned very little, as a consequence; but the existence of the large house at the end of the village was a little too noticeable a fact to remain concealed indefinitely, as was the fact that the stout iron gates, normally left open, had within the last twenty-four hours been secured with an equally stout padlock and chain. The following morning, accordingly, each of the agents, in turn, took occasion to stroll up to the gates and exchange a cheerful nod with the heavily-built, Biblically-bearded individual in the leather jacket who just happened to be strolling down to the gates at the same moment each time.

Each one resolved, privately, to return that night, after dark, and effect an entry. With any luck (they thought) the tetrad, with or without its human host, would be safely on its way to Washington/the Vatican (delete as applicable) within twenty-four hours.