

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"I'm declaring today tetrad-free," Carol said. "No more experiments for the moment. We need to concentrate on defence plans."

"Makes sense to me," Chris said. Wayne had reported that, on obeying a chance whim (twice) to stroll down to the gates and check the padlock, he had encountered a suspicious-looking loiterer both times. Carol recognised the description of one of them.

"The other'll be the American you talked about, Hugh," said Rob.

"How do you know?"

"I had to collect the milk, since Rosie Price couldn't get up to the door. She mentioned an American and a German staying at the pub." He smiled to himself.

"What?" said Chris.

"Oh, nothing."

"Okay, well, good," said Hugh. "That just leaves Don-Jay's bosses, that Sienkiewicz person when he's got his mojo back, and..."

"The Greeks," Allie said. "They're on their way. They got shooters. And your posh friend," she added to Carol.

"Monica?" Carol said. Even through her current (and persistent) state of well-being, a cold current of fear made its presence felt. It never occurred to her to question Allie's information; the perfect trust in which she was held by Dracul and the others was a powerful argument. If these Greeks threatened to kill Monica, what could she do?

"First question, then," Dracul said. "Is there a back way out of here?"

"If you think for one minute I am going to leave Monica--" Carol began hotly.

"For the love of holy Saint Packing and all his bags and baggages, 't is just askin' I am!" Dracul exploded.

"It's a fair question, Carol," Hugh said reasonably. "It makes sense to plan the very last resort first. You have my word that if Ms Fleming can be got, we'll get her. So, Rob? You know the place better than any of us."

"Yes, there's a track from the back yard that leads round the hill and back on to the main road. It's wide enough for the bus, but we'll need to clear the gateway. It hasn't been used in years. And Carol, I won't let Monica be left behind either."

"All right." Carol did see the logic of it. "So we have a way to get out that they don't know about. Good. What else can we do?"

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Father Krebs, having eluded Dower by the simple expedient of lingering over his lunch, was silently lamenting the inadequacies of Welsh cuisine from the standpoint of luxury and hedonism when Eleri the barmaid approached him and informed him that he had a caller. He got up from the table and went out to the lobby.

"You Father Krebs?" said the skinny young man. He wore a T-shirt with RELAX on it in huge letters, faded denim jeans, and open-toed sandals with navy blue socks. His hair was short enough, but unkempt, his face unshaven. Father Krebs rather fancied he detected the typical signs of habitual drug use. He nodded cautiously.

"I'm from the big house," the young man said jerkily. "I don't like what's happening, so I thought I'd come and warn you."

"Warn me?"

"It's him. The bloke you're with. Major CIA, man. They've done a deal." The young man shrugged. He seemed to be in constant motion, bouncing from one foot to the other, his eyes

darting hither and yon. "Me, I think he used the mind control on them. They do that, you know. Rays." He mimed creepy wiggling fingers from above. "You wouldn't know. Vatican conditioning."

This was obvious nonsense, the standard conspiracy theory line. But the rest of it...Father Krebs was not fool enough to doubt that the American would steal a march on him, given the slightest opportunity. If he had somehow made contact and cut a deal with the tetrad's current custodian, then it was up to Father Krebs to circumvent him by any means necessary.

"Tell me more," he said.

*

Dower, for his part, had grown tired of watching the fat priest guzzle and had gone out to get some air. He had to admit the village was kind of pretty, though he would never understand why the Brits hadn't got wise and reorganised their stupid road system. There wasn't a decent Denny's or Big Boy to be seen. He guessed it was a conspiracy of hotel managers. Bed and breakfast. What a joke.

He consciously avoided going near the target area. Best not to arouse suspicion. He thought he had gotten away with it that morning, but if they saw him hanging around they might get spooked. Accordingly, he jogged down to the beach and amused himself by throwing

pebbles into the waves.

"Mister?"

He turned sharply. The woman who had addressed him was African-American--no, African-British, he supposed--and heavily-built, in her forties or fifties he guessed, and was wearing a blue gingham apron over a kaftan of multi-coloured silk, and a turban of the same gorgeous fabric. She sounded out of breath and looked distressed.

"It not right," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. "Not right, what they do. I come to tell you 'cause I know you do the right thing."

"How do you know who I am?" Dower asked warily.

"This a small village, Mister American. We all know you here, we know what you after. Don't let that man take it to Rome."

Dower was instantly on the alert. "What man. ma'am?"

"He big man, big like me." The woman unself-consciously patted her own belly. "False Roman priest, eunuch of the Whore of Babylon. He come up to the big house just now, say he take the thing, lock it up in the Vat-i-can so nobody can see it." She leaned closer, spitting the words out. "But that a big fat lie. They gonna use it to do the devil's work. You got to

stop them, Mister American." She was pleading with him. "You got to."

Dower had known it. That sneaking, treacherous priest was trying to make an end run around him. Well, that was one bird that wouldn't fly, not with John Dower. He didn't much care about religion himself, though of course he was a regular churchgoer, at least when his schedule allowed it. Catholic, Protestant, Episcopalian, Southern Baptist, it was all the same God, wasn't it? But artifacts of power were a different matter entirely. They belonged in the safe keeping of the United States Government, and that was all there was to it. (Dower regarded himself, for the purposes of this argument, as an extension of the government. After he secured the tetrad, of course, there was always the possibility of assuming a more...central role.)

"Don't you worry about a thing, ma'am," he said soothingly. "I'll take care of everything. Do you know when and where this deal's going down?"

The woman came close and slipped an arm confidingly through his. "I tell you everything," she said.

*

"Stop the car!" General Karolides yelled. "Stop, you fool!"

The driver obediently braked, coming to a stop ten feet from the still figure in the road and the frantically waving woman beside it. On one side of the road was a stand of trees; on the other, open fields stretching away to the horizon, partitioned by low drystone walls.

"See what the trouble is," Karolides directed, and one of the men got out.

"Help us, oh, please help us!" The woman was small and slightly plump, dark-skinned, black-haired. "They--they took him--"

"Took who?" the man said.

The woman stared blankly at him, and then abruptly burst into tears and collapsed into his arms.

"Must I do everything myself?" Karolides muttered, opening his door. "Your pardon, my dear lady," he said, gently disengaging the woman from his subordinate. "If we are to help you, you must tell us exactly what has happened here."

"There--there were men," the woman stammered. "Soldiers. They--they captured us..." She seemed to become aware of the uniforms around her, and shrank back with a cry of terror.

"We are not those men," Karolides said. "Whom did they take?"

"My friend," the woman sobbed, indicating the body in the road. "They took her boyfriend--"

he--oh, it was horrible." She took several deep breaths, swallowed hard. "We were out for a walk and this army truck pulled up alongside us. Men got out--they pointed guns at us, told us come with them--and we were walking back to their truck and he--he *changed*--"

"Changed?" At once Karolides was alert. "How changed?"

"He turned into--into a monster--he fought them--my friend was hurt--and then they overpowered him--and--and--" She clung to Karolides. "They got him almost to the truck--but he got loose and ran away--so fast."

"Where is the truck?"

"It drove away--I think I heard the man say they were going to head him off at the--at the--I do not remember the name of the place. I am sorry. It was a crossroads, I think."

"Which way did it go?"

"That way." The woman pointed back the way Karolides and his men had come. "About--ten--maybe fifteen minutes ago."

Karolides thought for a second. "Fifteen minutes--we could still catch him. These soldiers...were they British?"

The woman swallowed. "I--I think so." She clutched at Karolides' arm. "But my friend--she is hurt--"

"You two," Karolides said crisply, "stay with the women. Take care of them. You others, with me."

"What about me?" said Monica, as one of the other soldiers got out.

Karolides hesitated. "Stay here. My men will shoot you without hesitation if you try to escape. Look after your friend--I assume this is your friend?"

Monica peered through the car window. She drew in a sharp breath. "Yes, that's--that's Carol."

"We will return when we have secured the creature. If you do try to run, you know we shall find you."

"I know." Monica got out of the car and ran to the motionless Carol.

"Please find him quickly," the other woman begged.

"We will." Karolides swung himself back into the car. "Drive, you idiot. Every second counts."

The car roared into life, swung round in a perfect three-point turn and raced away, leaving two soldiers behind to guard Monica, Carol and the other woman.

"How was she hurt?" Monica said, kneeling beside the body.

"I do not--it all happened so fast," the woman said. "I just saw her fall and--" She suddenly glanced into the trees and screamed. "He has come back!"

The two soldiers whipped round, drawing their guns, and stared wildly into the trees.

Carol quickly got up, placing a swift finger across Monica's lips, while the other woman produced what looked like a powder compact. As the soldiers turned round again, she quickly blew across it, sending a cloud of powder into each of their faces.

"Run!" she said urgently. "That way!"

Carol and Monica took to their heels, running down the road towards Abergenu. After twenty paces Monica risked a look back. The men were following, but slowly, weaving from side to side and shaking their heads. As she watched, they sank to their knees and measured their length on the road.

"It worked!" Carol was ecstatic. "Tilda, you were amazing!" She hugged the other woman, then hugged Monica too.

"Darling," Monica said carefully, "I know something really clever just happened, but I'm not sure exactly what. Can you explain, or should I just gibber quietly in a corner?"

"We rescued you, that's what!" Carol looked back down the road, where Wayne and Dracul were dragging the soldiers into the trees. "This is Tilda, she's a--what was it?"

"Kitchen witch," Tilda said.

"And thanks to her those soldiers are now searching hundreds of square miles of empty countryside for a non-existent army truck and a Chris who's back at the house safe and sound."

"It was an almighty gamble, darling," Monica said.

"I know, I know, but it paid off!" She took Monica's hand. "Come on, you have to come and meet the others, we've got so much to tell you."

Monica allowed herself to be towed along, smiling bemusedly while Carol prattled on. Tilda watched her, and discreetly withdrew a few feet.

*

Back at the house, general jubilation reigned. Dik and Marsha reported their successes, Wayne and Dracul appeared with a plastic bag containing two Hellenic Army uniforms (which Tilda promptly put into the washing machine) and Chris greeted Monica with an enthusiasm which, Carol reflected, would have seriously bothered her just a few days

before. She wondered vaguely why it didn't, but she was feeling too good to spend too much time wondering.

Was that it, then? Was one night of (admittedly fabulous) sex enough to purge her of the jealousy virus for good? It seemed too simple, but if that was the answer she wasn't going to complain.

Rachel Kwok and Allie were still working on their plan to foil Pricklow and Gefarr. Frankie and Rob were clearing the back gate, and Hugh had quietly moved the Alvis round the house so as to allow for a swift exit. Don-Jay was nowhere to be seen.

"You do seem to have picked up some colourful friends, darling," Monica remarked. "And do I detect a slight hint of a consummation devoutly to be wished?"

Carol nodded. "Last night," she said. "Honestly, I don't know why I waited so long. I wanted it to be special, you know? But I should have known...whenever and however it happened, it was bound to be special."

"And was he human at the time?" Monica inquired in a low thrilling voice.

Carol laughed. "Of course he was. At least..." She pretended to think about it. "The first four or five times--"

"Carol!" Monica feigned shock. Or was it feigning? Carol wasn't sure. She'd always assumed Monica's world-weary sophistication was genuine, but then she'd always assumed Monica had lost her virginity several years earlier than Carol herself, an assumption now conclusively disproved.

"Does it bother you?" Carol said seriously.

"What? No!" Monica protested. "That is..." She hesitated. "Something is bothering me, a bit."

"What is it?"

"You've...changed. A lot. You were this mousy, uptight little thing, and now..." Monica mimed a sort of exuberance. "You're all out and proud and it's lovely, but I'm...I'm not sure where it leaves me."

"Monica," Carol said, "you'll always be my best friend. You know that."

"But I don't know whether I can fit in with this crowd." Monica gestured around at the coven.

"You won't have to. They'll be going their own way as soon as this is over. They're just helping." Carol gathered Monica into her arms. "You know I'll always love you best," she said, and kissed Monica lightly on the lips.

The response was immediate. Monica sprang away as if galvanised, wiped her mouth with the back of one hand, and glared at Carol through sudden tears.

"What did you have to do that for?" she said, and ran from the room, nearly knocking Wayne sideways.

Carol gazed after her, hurt and bewildered. What had she done? She was only being friendly. Hadn't they always...?

No, they hadn't. Hugs, yes, but Monica had always been the initiator. Kisses, no, never. One didn't. Carol remembered seeing two little girls walking side by side down the street one day. One had tried to hold the other's hand, and the other had pulled away, saying "Are you a lesbian?" They couldn't have been more than eight. Indoctrination started early these days. Touching, kissing, was hardly regarded as appropriate even between family members, let alone close friends.

And why not, then? she thought. What was wrong with it? It wasn't sexual. She had no desire, no interest in sex with anyone but Chris. (Sex with Chris, on the other hand, was an interest she intended to pursue as often, and for as long, as life and time allowed.) So, she, Carol, had become a little more outgoing lately. There were lots of possible reasons for that. The prospect of imminent death concentrates the mind wonderfully. Who had said that? It

didn't matter; it was true. People who had been in extreme danger always came away changed. Carol had simply changed for the better, had subconsciously resolved--or something--to make more of herself and her time on this earth. To show the love she bore her friends, in a thoroughly innocent, unsexy, pre-watershed way. Why should it upset Monica so?

Could it be because, in the end, for Monica it was all about dominance and Carol was starting to become dominant? Was Monica really that desperately insecure?

No. She shook her head. It couldn't be that. They were friends, good friends. Monica was just upset. She had after all been in captivity for several days; that was bound to be traumatic. She had simply overreacted, that was all. If Carol explained, everything would be all right.

Carol went to find her.

*

General Karolides raked the two semi-naked, miserable figures tied to their trees with a scathing glare.

"You imbeciles," he snarled. "I set you to guard three women, one of them wounded--"

"She was not wounded, General," said one.

"She was just pretending, General," said the other.

"Well, yes, I know that now!" Karolides shouted. "We have spent all afternoon getting lost in this godforsaken country looking for things that are not here, and now you have lost me my hostage. You should both be shot."

He drew his handgun, pointed it at first one, then the other, and finally holstered it again with a sound of disgust.

"Unfortunately, I need you." He gestured to his other men. "Untie them. Give them spare uniforms. We shall go straight on to the village and take them by force. If any of you--any of you--give me the slightest excuse I shall shoot you out of hand. Failure," he said grimly, "will count as an excuse."

The soldiers hastened to obey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Monica was sitting on the steps outside, coincidentally almost exactly where Don-Jay had sat earlier, hugging herself; she really wasn't dressed for a Welsh afternoon in autumn, but the chill breeze wasn't the only reason for her hunched posture. Carol closed the doors behind her.

"Monica," she said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not a lesbian, Carol," Monica said tightly.

"Neither am I. I didn't mean--"

"I'm not bisexual either. Just because I've never had a boy doesn't mean I'm--I'm fair game for you to--experiment with."

"I wasn't experimenting!" The old Carol would have been horrified, angry, defensive. This Carol sensed the hurt behind the words, and the thought behind the hurt, and her heart ached for her friend. "Monica, I didn't mean anything sexual by it."

"There are boundaries, Carol."

"I'm sorry," Carol said again. "I don't know what else I can say. I was just so happy to see you. I missed you so much--not in that way--just as my friend."

Monica finally looked up. "It's just--you're so different."

"I don't *feel* different," Carol said uncertainly. "Not--in myself, not that different. I'm still the same person I always was. God, Monica, sex doesn't make that much of a difference." But hadn't she just been thinking that it had?

"It's not just that. It's more. You're--"

"What? I'm what?"

"You're stronger than I am," Monica confessed. "I'm just not used to that." There was a crooked smile in her voice. "I think I'm a bit jealous."

"It's nothing to be jealous of," Carol said gently. "I have been through quite a bit, besides the sex that is."

"Tell me." Monica straightened up at last and patted the step beside her. Carol sat down on the indicated spot, and began to talk. She covered everything that had happened since Monica had left them at the Club. At about the halfway point, by common consent, they got up and went back into the drawing room, where the others were still chatting. Rob had made some more tea, and the room was pleasantly warm. As they sat down on the sofa, there was a gravel spatter of rain on the windows, and Hugh and Marsha got up to draw the curtains and put the lights on.

"...and so last night I was really scared, and so I sort of invited myself into Chris's room, and

we..." Carol stopped, not for her own embarrassment but for Monica's. "Well, anyway," she said.

Monica's eyes were like saucers. "Darling, I apologise. My God, I'd never have stood it. Especially the creepy magician. He really just told you what to do and you wanted to do it?"

"Wanted it like fury, till Chris came along. I don't know how I held out as long as I did, except that I'd had practice resisting--you know, the centaur effect."

Monica repeated the phrase in the tones of a television commercial, and they laughed together.

"He'll be back, you know," Carol said, sobering. "They'll all be back. Him, Father Krebs, Dower, those Greeks, and two loony scientists called believe it or not Pricklow and Gefarr. Probably all at once, probably with guns. And while I know Dracul and his gang are great at playing fancy pranks, I honestly don't think they'd be much good in a fight."

The last sentence unfortunately fell into an unexpected lull in the general conversation. Carol stopped, looking stricken.

Then Dracul, toasting her with an imaginary glass, called out "Too bloody right!" and the rest of the coven laughed.

"So we'll have to run for it," Carol went on. "Chris needs more time to finish the quest."

"I'm with you, darling. Not that General Karolides wasn't impeccably polite to me, but I'd as soon not repeat the experience. And the others sound..." She shuddered delicately. "Less polite. Where do we run?"

Carol had been thinking about this. She was definite. "Back to Avevale. On my own home ground, with Hugh and Rob and this lot--and you--I can take on the Greeks, the Medes and Persians, the CIA and the Pope all in one go, before breakfast."

"And the creepy magician?"

Carol gestured at empty space. "My name is Carol Varland," she proclaimed. "You want very much to go to the lavatory." She paused. "In Singapore."

Monica laughed.

*

"My name is Count Sienkiewicz," said the man in the cloak. "You want to help me."

"Of course, sir." General Karolides saluted smartly.

"You want to place your men under my orders. The tetrad is mine."

"Absolutely." The General frowned, blinked. "But--"

"You do not want to doubt."

The frown cleared. "I do not want to doubt."

Count Sienkiewicz stifled an oath in his native tongue. Many of the sigils and talismans he had lost on his disastrous last attempt had been irreplaceable, his power without them barely a fraction of what it had been. Without constant reinforcement his control over the General would slip. It was important, from a magical point of view, that the scales be balanced promptly, that the indignities visited on his person be repaid in full and with interest; otherwise the forces he commanded by sheer force of will would sense his weakness and seize their chance. At best he would be a magus without power, a mere shadow of his former self, at worst a dribbling husk, his mind and soul ripped from his body to shriek for ever in the profoundest pits of hell.

He was still troubled by the strength of the girl's resistance. She was, after all, a mere mortal, untouched by true power. She should have been helpless before him, wax in his hands. Above all she should not have been able to summon help. That the help might have come of its own accord was a thought foreign to Sienkiewicz's nature; in his universe there was command and obedience, supplication and response, sometimes fair but never

spontaneous. If the centaur had come, the girl must have summoned it, and without his knowledge.

The plain fact was that what with one thing and another, he could not rely on his magic for this. Temporal power was needed, the kind of power that rode on the back of a bullet, or preferably several hundred. The General's men would storm the big house, kill all within, and he, Sienkiewicz, would take the tetrad from the cooling body of whomever actually had it--his information was still incomplete in that area--and then command the troops to turn their weapons on each other. It would be viewed as a terrorist atrocity, or something of the kind. Very sad. Nothing, though, compared to the joyous Erleuchtung to come.

The General was frowning and mumbling again. Sienkiewicz composed himself and set to work.

*

"You're not the usual run of hitch-hiker," said the driver.

Pricklow, knees jammed against the dashboard, uncomfortably aware of the driver's proximity on one side and Gefarr's remarkably bony elbow on the other, said nothing.

"Prisoner fans, then, are you?" the driver went on chattily. "Off to Portmeirion? 'Cause I'd

take you all the way if I could, see. My mum loved that show. Had all the gear and all. Always wanted to see the place for real, you know? See if it was as nice as it looked. 'Course they never are, though, are they? No, they use camera angles and that." He made "camera angles" sound like a dirty trick. "I was up to that Summer Wine place last year, up there in Yorkshire, and it's all bits of different towns, did you know that?"

"I can't honestly say that I, ah, did," Pricklow said. He had seen a television once, in 1975. He hadn't liked it.

"Fun, though, all that Prisoner stuff," the driver said. He made a peculiar gesture from the forehead. "'Be seeing you.' I liked that. 'Cause if you're canny, see, you can do it this way..." He repeated the gesture, the fingers slightly wider apart and the downward arc more obvious, and grinned. "And then it looks like, you know, you're calling him a--" He didn't say the word. Presumably he expected them to know it. "But if he asks, you can always say you were doing the other thing, you know? Not that I would of course. If I call someone-- that--then I mean it, don't I?"

"Does the radio function in this vehicle?" Gefarr said.

"Sorry, I'm sure," the driver said, and maintained an injured silence for almost five miles.

I am in hell, Pricklow thought, and Satan is sitting beside me. I only wish I could decide

on which side.

*

"Ready for the off?" Chris asked.

"No sense in waiting around," Carol said. Dracul had had the coven laying what he called "IMDs" around the gates and the front of the house, just to slow down any frontal attack. Everything was ready for a swift and discreet departure; the bus was loaded, everything packed, the exit was cleared. Rob had spoken to the mysterious "staff" (of whom Carol had seen neither hide nor hair throughout their brief stay) warning them to keep clear till any fallout from the visitors' presence had run its course. Allie and Rachel Kwok had abandoned without regret their battle strategy for dealing with Pricklow and Gefarr, which seemed to be based on the principle of arguing with each other till the enemy died of old age. Don-Jay had put up a token protest at the idea of leaving, saying there was something he had to do, but had eventually seen the virtue of the opposing argument, mainly because Dracul had threatened to leave him behind, alone, to face whatever came.

"Maybe we'll come back here some time," Chris said. "It's a nice place."

Carol could not but agree. Still, her home was calling, and she could no longer ignore the call. She seemed to be feeling everything a lot more intensely, for some reason; her love for

Chris (well, naturally) and her friendship for Monica and for Rob, her sense of belonging to a specific place and time, all her ordinary sensations seemed magnified. *Crises*, she thought, *make everything sharper, clearer, more immediate.*

"Let's go," she said, and followed Chris out through the back door and into the yard. Monica was in the Alvis with Hugh, Rob and Vassily; she and Chris boarded the bus and found adjacent seats. Don-Jay was sitting slumped in a seat on his own.

"No canoodling up the front there," Dracul called. Chris blew a raspberry. "Or that," Dracul added.

"Next stop, Avevale," Carol said, as Wayne piloted the bus through the gate in the wake of the Alvis. The track was bumpy, much rutted, and obviously not designed for heavy traffic, and Chris and Carol were thrown together several times.

Abruptly Wayne slammed on the brake.

"Holy Mother of Invention, what is it now?" Dracul muttered. He went to the platform and peered out. Carol followed.

The Alvis was also not moving. It was easy to see why. The assault rifle was a dead giveaway.

"You will please step out of the vehicles, all of you," Father Krebs called. "My friend

Mister Dower is very anxious to shoot somebody, and I do not think he is overly concerned as to whom."

The silence was broken, as Carol had known it would be, by Dracul.

"Marsha, Dik," he said wearily, "you're fired."