

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"We are not stupid, you know," Father Krebs said casually. "We are both experienced operatives in our field, as I know are you, Mr Sacristan, and you, Comrade Shirinin. Would you have been fooled by such transparent techniques?"

"Possibly," Hugh said, adding with an apologetic glance at Dracul, "on an off day."

"Of course we knew that you were aware of our pursuit. Setting us up

against each other was an obvious tactic. So we compared notes."

Everyone was gathered in a small group a little way off the track. The bus and the Alvis stood nearby.

"Mister Dower and I have come to an arrangement," the priest went on. "The tetrad will be placed into secure storage in America, with access rights granted to the Papal representative in that country. I am sure he has reservations about this plan, as do I, but for the moment that is unimportant."

"Sorry," Dracul said to Carol.

"Sometimes we don't pull it off."

"We shall now play a little game," said Father Krebs. "My friend Mister Dower will shoot each of you in turn till the person who is harbouring the tetrad gives himself up. If he should be one of those shot, that will simply make my task easier, since I gather the thing is easily extracted from the body after death. We will then shoot the rest of you and leave. Understand, please, there is no way any of you are leaving this spot alive. I am talking now to my fellow intelligence operatives, who may be tempted to try something creative. Mister Dower can

spray the immediate vicinity with enough bullets to reduce each of you to a fine red mist before you can do anything at all."

"Call yourself a priest," Marsha spat.

"Please make no mistake," Krebs said. "I am utterly revolted by this which I must do, and I shall do many months of penance for it. However, that does not alter my intention. The tetrad is a blasphemous pagan engine of sorcery which must be brought under proper control. I sin in order to do God's work."

"Let me remove that burden from your

conscience, Father," said a new voice. Count Sienkiewicz was standing by the back gate of the house, surrounded by Karolides and his Greeks, all of whom had their weapons trained on Krebs and Dower. Carol thought he looked tired, his face grey and drawn, but he was clearly still in command. "Drop your gun, Mister Dower." Dower, looking disgusted, did so. "Thank you for those primitive little booby-traps," the magician went on, addressing Dracul. "They kept me occupied for almost fifteen seconds. Fortunately, I was not

alone. Now. You will give the tetrad to me," he said, returning his attention to Krebs and Dower, "or I will kill first you, and then the rest of these people."

Carol had a brief fantasy of each of them in turn putting a hand up and saying "I've got the tetrad." It wouldn't help, of course.

It was broken by the sensation of something being pushed into her hand. She looked at it. A creased note, in Chris's handwriting. WHEN I SPEAK, CLOSE YOUR EYES. PASS IT ON. She quickly folded it again and passed it

to the person on her other side.

The Greek General was shaking his head, trying to say something.

Sienkiewicz spoke in a low tone to him, and his face eventually cleared. Carol felt a little better. His whammy was obviously losing its wham.

Dower chose that moment to try to make a grab for his gun, and one of the soldiers shot him in the leg. He fell to one knee with a hoarse cry.

"Excuse me," Chris said loudly. Carol closed her eyes.

There was a peculiar sound.

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John Dower watched in cold terror as his leg, the one the Commie had shot, withered and rotted away, the flesh falling off the bone. It was true, then, what he'd always suspected; the Commies had zombie-making bullets. They were turning him into a fucking Commie zombie. He grabbed desperately for his gun again, but it slithered away across the ground and hissed at him when he tried to pick it up.

There was a huge shadow on the ground, but he dared not look up. The rot was spreading up his leg. He had one chance; amputation. He desperately wrenched his knife out of its sheath and began sawing through the flesh of his own leg.

Father Krebs, oblivious to the spectacle of Dower trying to saw off his leg with a ballpoint pen, felt a churning in his gut. He felt sick. He opened his mouth, leaned forward and vomited, but instead of semi-digested food, what came out was golden light. It pooled around his feet, and began to dissipate into the air almost immediately. He understood at

once; he was losing his virtue. All the goodness in his soul, at last revolted beyond endurance by the monstrous acts he had allowed himself to perform, was leaving him for ever, leaving him nothing but a creature of evil, a blight on the earth. God looked down on him from on high, and saw nothing of Himself in the priest. Father Krebs whimpered, and began grasping at handfuls of the golden light, trying to stuff it back into himself, even as it vanished between his fingers.

Count Sienkiewicz watched the German priest frantically stuffing his face with rank grass with some amusement. He had no idea what had overtaken the two

spies, but he seemed to be immune. He turned to Karolides to order him to shoot them, and found himself looking into the face of a demon.

"Marchosias," he whispered.

"Yes," the demon whispered back. "The first of my kind to be bound to your service. I *am* going to enjoy this."

Count Sienkiewicz glimpsed, in the moment before darkness swallowed him whole, the outline in the sky of a gigantic horse, and just had time to wonder which Prince or Duke of Hell had come in that form before he could do nothing

but scream.

General Karolides saw a little fat man with an outlandish hairstyle, wearing what looked like an opera singer's idea of military uniform, emerge from the crowd of people and strut towards him, smiling unpleasantly.

"You see, Grigori," he said, in an implausible Mittel-European accent, "if you had become an actor like your mother and I wanted, you would never have got into this mess."

General Karolides, his face distorted by

panic, broke and ran, with his men following in his wake, presumably driven by their own demons.

\*

"You can open your eyes now," Chris said, and Carol did so.

"What happened?" she said.

Sienkiewicz, Krebs and Dower were all writhing on the ground and moaning; the Greeks had vanished.

"I think your man there conquered a corner," Dracul said. "He conjured the Night-Mare."

"The word 'nightmare' doesn't have anything to do with horses," Rob objected.

"Call it a kelpie then," Dracul said, "or any one of a hundred other names. Are we debatin' semantics or makin' tracks?"

They quickly piled back into the vehicles and set off once again.

"*Was* that a corner?" Carol asked Chris.

"No, pegasus/centaur edge," he answered. "The non-human edges are harder to get to from human, but I was ready to try anything."

"You're pretty wonderful, Chris Kyriakou," she said softly.

"You're just saying that 'cause I have superpowers."

"Really not," Carol said, and lifted her face to his.

"What did I say?" Dracul called, and a moment later the lovers' ears were assaulted by the noise of an alto sax playing "Strangers In The Night" very, very badly.

\*

Don-Jay was feeling acutely miserable.

The feeling that he had something very important to do, something which he couldn't quite remember but which depended utterly on them all still being in the house, was now overwhelming him. He could feel it getting worse the further away they got.

Eventually he got up and went back to where Allie was sitting, playing with a bunch of blank pieces of cardboard.

"Whit d'you want?" she said, without looking up.

"I--" Don-Jay started again. "I think I

need help."

"I think I need a mellion pounds. Not gonnae happen either."

"You helped me before."

"I told you not to talk about that," she said very quietly.

"I think Professor Gefarr has some kind of hold on me," Don-Jay said earnestly.

"What you did before--it broke the trance. I couldn't remember till now. But maybe..." He sat down beside her, ignoring her disgusted sniff. "I thought maybe...if you did it again..."

"You lookin' for a new gob under your chen?" She looked at him for the first time. "Aye, well, maybe I can help at that. Close your eyes."

Don-Jay obediently closed his eyes, and Allie sighted carefully, then hit him quite hard on the back of the head.

"Ouch!" Don-Jay opened his eyes, and blinked. "What did you--" He realised in mid-protest that the miserable feeling was indeed gone. "How did you--?"

"Worked, didn't it?" Allie was smug. "Dinnae ask daft questions, then."

"I thought you said Dracul told you you were too violent," Don-Jay said, nursing his head.

"Aye, well, me," Allie said, "I think I'm just violent enough. Now piss off and let me get on, will ya?"

Don-Jay got up and returned to his seat.

\*

"Here you go," said the driver. "If you're sure." The signpost pointing down the narrow turning said ABERGENAU.

Gefarr and Pricklow dismounted with difficulty.

"You wouldn't happen to know the way back to the main road from here, would you?" the driver asked.

"You looking for the main road?" A man had pulled up in an antique-looking car. There were two other men and a girl in the back. "Just turn round and follow us."

"Right you are," the driver said.

"Thanks, squire."

Gefarr was already trudging down the lane. Pricklow followed her as the truck embarked on the lengthy process of turning round.

They walked into the village without speaking. Pricklow slowed his steps hopefully as they drew level with the pub, but Gefarr affected not to notice and stumped steadily on.

"Don-Jay will have opened the gates," she said shortly, "and immobilised everyone in the house. I gave him precise instructions."

"Suppose he failed?" Pricklow suggested.

"Have you found your career progress enhanced by this needlessly negative

attitude, Doctor Pricklow?"

They saw the gates, standing open, and made their way up the drive.

"It looks deserted," Pricklow commented.

"There is a light on in one of the rooms," Gefarr pointed out flatly.

The front door was likewise open.

Gefarr marched in as if she owned the place, and Pricklow followed her into the lighted room.

He saw a room full of decidedly unimmobilised strangers, unless you

counted the one with a nasty bullet wound in his leg, which was being tended by a fat man in a cassock. Five armed men in uniform were standing around a chair in which another man was securely bound and gagged with a piece of cloth apparently torn from a cloak. One of them was clearly in the act of repeatedly hitting him about the face. All of them were staring at the newcomers.

"Which of you has the tetrad?" Gefarr inquired loudly.

Pricklow put his hand over his eyes.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"Avevale," Carol said with satisfaction as the bus crested the hill. It was late, and the street lights were already on down in the valley.

"Good to be back," Chris agreed.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Hey, I said so, didn't I?" They had agreed, at the inevitable refuelling stop, that Carol would be dropped off at her

house, and the bus would then follow the Alvis on to room 3b, so that Chris could work through the changes and try to find out more about the edges and corners. Carol had promised faithfully to come up first thing in the morning.

"I know," Carol said. "It just seems...off. After last night, I mean."

"We're gonna have plenty more last nights," Chris promised.

"Not on this bus, you're not." Dracul rang the bell loudly as the bus came to a stop. "Anybody who is Carol Varland,

change here."

"Thank you," Carol said to Dracul as she passed him. "For everything. I mean it."

"Ah, 't was nothin', my lovely," Dracul said. "Anyway, you're not rid of us yet. Your man Rob wants us around in case the bad guys come lookin'."

"So do I," Carol said.

She got off the bus, and watched it till it turned up the hill towards the College. Then she fumbled in her pocket for her door key. The front of her house, as far as she could see by the street light,

looked as good as, well, old; the workmen she'd last seen waving to her as they drove past had done a fantastic job blending the old and new work. She unlocked the door, switched on the hall light and went in.

The house was cold, so the first thing she did was turn on the gas fire in the living room and check the boiler. There was hot water in the tap, though it spluttered a little when she first turned it on. She went from room to room turning on lights, making sure everything was where it should be. Then she sat down on her bed and cried quietly for a little

while.

So much had changed. And yet this, her home, was still the same, still welcoming, still her safe place. She would get up in a moment and make herself a cup of tea, and she would know where everything was, and she would switch on the telly and all her favourite programmes would still be there, and when she got tired there would be her own little bed waiting for her. She considered a hot water bottle, and decided yes, why not. One more night of being just Carol Varland, the secretary,

the ordinary person. No magic, no chases, no hairsbreadth escapes from death.

The doorbell rang. Carol went to answer it and found Monica on the doorstep, her car outside.

"Did you forget me?" she said.

"No, come on in," Carol said. "I was just going to make tea."

Monica took in the tearstained face.

"Are you okay?"

"Just relief, I think," Carol told her.

"That it's all still here, you know?"

"Dulce Domum," Monica said. "I know exactly what you mean, darling. I felt the same when I got back to my flat. Till General Plug-ugly and his boys showed up."

"He wasn't that ugly," Carol said.

"He wasn't threatening you."

"Anyway," Carol said, "let's not talk about him tonight. Let's pretend none of the past week has happened and just be us, can we?"

Monica smiled beatifically. "I can't imagine anything I'd like better, darling.

Now, what about this tea?"

They sat side by side on the sofa, and watched television, and talked about inconsequential things, friends they had known at school and never seen since, cars, politics, ancient Roman history, home repairs and the price of romanesco cauliflower. Gradually the flow of words dried up, and a warm silence took its place, as pervasive as the hiss of the gas fire, as comforting as the mellow light; and the world shrank to the compass of one room, two people. Even Chris would have been an intruder in

this suddenly sacred space.

"You know," Monica said quietly.

Carol rolled her head to look at her friend.

"When you kissed me," Monica went on.

"I said I was--"

Monica put a finger against Carol's lips.

"You know why I was so upset?"

"You said--"

"I enjoyed it," Monica whispered. "I wanted it."

Carol stared at her.

"No, not that," Monica said, smiling.

"It's still true, what I said."

"Okay," Carol said slowly.

"Not that," Monica said. "Just this."

She let her head rest on Carol's shoulder. "Just this," she sighed.

Carol reached up and stroked her friend's hair. Monica sighed again and settled her head more comfortably.

*Yes, Carol thought. Just this.*

\*

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Mm?" Carol opened her eyes. Sunlight was coming in through a gap in the curtains. "What time is it?"

"Ten past ten," Monica said. "I had the Best. Night's sleep of my life."

"We...we went to sleep? On the..." Carol sat up. She ought to be stiff and cranky and aching. She wasn't. "All night?"

"All night, darling. I'd have made you breakfast, only I'm rubbish at it." Monica leaned down and kissed Carol's forehead. "But I'll happily eat it if you make it."

"But--Chris!" Carol blurted.

"Relax. Rob phoned half an hour ago. Chris is still asleep and likely to stay that way. We've got time."

"All right." Carol stretched and yawned.

"Let me get washed and changed."

After a somewhat catch-as-catch-can breakfast, all Carol's food being (understandably) a week old, Carol and Monica drove up to the College and round the main buildings, along the drive that led into the Pretendwood. Room 3b looked exactly the same as it had.

Monica parked in exactly the same place in the yard, and Rob came out to meet them.

"Good morning, good morning, good morning," he said. "You'll be pleased to know..." He stopped, taking in the sight of Carol and Monica.

"What is it?" Carol said. "Have we grown another head?"

"No, no. Nothing. Come along. Chris has been asking for you." He ushered them forward, and Carol and Monica, arms casually twined about each other's

waists, strolled into the building.

"Caz?" Chris came out of one of the classrooms and Carol disengaged herself from Monica to run to his arms. Monica took the opportunity to buttonhole Rob.

"I think I may know something you don't know about the tetrad," she said in a low voice.

"I think I may have guessed," Rob said.

"Let's talk."

"You okay, babes?" Chris said, when they felt like talking.

"I'm fine," Carol said. "I spent all last night spark out on the sofa, but I don't feel any the worse for it. You?"

Chris shrugged. "Okay. You didn't tell me not to call you babes."

"I'm not insecure any more," Carol said.

"Any thoughts about the other two edges?"

"Unicorn/centaur and pegasus/unicorn?"

Chris shook his head. "I could try for one now if you like."

"Give me a moment with you as you," Carol said, laughing. "Where's everyone

else?" This was to Rob, who had just knocked on the door and come in.

"Hugh's back at the college, being Paul Harding, and presumably explaining to the Senior Tutor where he's been for the past week. Dracul's lot are still on their bus. I don't know where the Russian is."

"Okay," Carol said. "Let's try for another edge, then."

"Any preference?" Chris said.

"Wait a tick," Rob said. "How did you know what was going to happen when you got centaur/pegasus? You passed us

that note. You must have known it was going to be hairy."

"I was following like a hunch," Chris said. "You know, I just got a feeling it might be worth a try."

"Like you got a feeling I was in trouble with Sienkiewicz," Carol said.

Rob nodded absently. "Well, have you got any hunches about the other two then? I fancy some warning if I'm about to be sent doolally tap."

Chris thought for a minute. "I think pegasus/unicorn might be the safest. And

I think we ought to try it outside."

"Lead on, then," Rob said.

\*

"They're coming out," Dik reported, and the coven clustered round the windows of the bus to watch.

"What's doing?" Dracul said.

"I think they're going to try another change," Frankie said.

"Gods preserve us," Dracul muttered.

"All right."

He swung out of the bus and loped

towards the small group in the middle of the yard.

"Do we get a health and safety warnin', or are you just going to set him off without regard to life or limb?" he demanded.

"Set me off?" Chris repeated. "I'm not a firework, you know."

"No, fireworks are occasionally harmless," Dracul retorted.

"All right, consider yourselves warned," Rob said. "This should be fairly safe, but if you're worried, don't look."

"Thank yez kindly, sir," Dracul said, touching his forelock. "All right, people," he shouted, heading back to the bus. "Sticky tape on the windows, mattresses against the walls, and nobody forget your gas mask."

"Clown," Rob muttered, and took out his pocket recorder. "Subject, Chris Kyriakou. Tetrad phenomenon, test--" He frowned. "I've lost count. The next one. All right, Chris, off you go."

"Off you go," Chris echoed. "I'm a racehorse now."

"That could be useful," Monica

remarked. "Might be some money in it."

Chris concentrated, and a new form exploded out of him.

This horse was not white but a deep, deep red, and huge. It stood there, being a horse.

"Anticlimactic," said Rob. "Erm, the subject has transformed into a large, er, red, er, horse. Nothing else seems to be happening, no unusual, er, psychological effects."

"Well, I suppose one of the forms had to be an ordinary horse," Carol said.

Something was tickling the back of her neck, and she brushed at it.

"Is it me, or is it getting warmer?" said Monica.

"Yes, the sun's come out," Rob said, looking up. "In fact--"

Carol looked up. The sky, which had been grey, was a brilliant blue, and a warm breeze was blowing from somewhere, scented with pine and other smells she couldn't identify. The thing brushed the back of her neck again, and she reached up and took hold of it.

It was an apple.

"I didn't know there was an apple tree here," she said.

"There isn't," said Rob in a strangled tone.

Carol suddenly became aware that the yard was knee deep in fresh green grass, and small bushes and young trees were sprouting all around them. The breeze blew again, and she breathed in deeply. Definitely pine, and...what was that other smell?

"Excuse me." It was Tilda, from the bus.

"May I please try one?"

Carol picked the apple and handed it to her. She sniffed it, looked at it, bit into it. "Beautiful," she said, swallowing.

"Well, this is interesting, so it is," Dracul said. "You've conjured Epona."

"Epona isn't Greek," Rob said.

"She's a goddess, you eejit, she's everywhere. Just 'cause your professors don't have her written down somewhere. Call her Demeter if it makes you happier."

"More to the point, she's a she," Monica

said, straightening up. "This horse is definitely not a she."

"Well, what the hell do I know?" Dracul said. "Epona is as Epona does. Get him to change back and see if it all turns into dead leaves or whatever."

Chris exploded out of the horse. The sudden vegetation did not vanish. Tilda squealed with delight and began picking apples, hoisting up her skirt to form a makeshift bag.

"Abundance," Dracul said. "I rest my case."

Carol grabbed an apple and bit into it. It was crisp and sweet with just a hint of tartness.

"Blackberries over here," Dracul said.

"And this stuff looks like barley." He went off to investigate further.

"Well, that wasn't too bad, was it?"

Chris said, looking around with interest.

"I could feed the world." Then he went a peculiar colour and grabbed Carol for support. "Maybe one garden at a time," he added faintly. "Can I have an apple before she pinches the lot?"

"The effect seems to cover a circle with a radius of about fifty feet from where you were standing," Dracul reported, coming back. "I fancy any seed that's ever been dropped on the ground suddenly gets the call to germinate. Looks as though it was still spreading outwards." He looked at Chris. "I reckon you'll need a stopwatch on you when you try this again. The power isn't limitless."

"Tell me about it," Chris said, though he already seemed to be reviving.

"It is good soil, Dracul," Tilda reported. She was on her haunches, one hand

holding the ends of her apple-heavy skirt, the other running crumbly black earth between her fingers.

"It used to be tarmac," Rob said a little faintly. "I wonder how I shall explain this to the College authorities?"

"Olive tree," Dracul said from a little way off. "That'll need a greenhouse at very least."

Olives, that had been the other smell. *How Greek*, Carol thought. "It is beautiful," she said, looking around her at the transformed yard. "I think the College just acquired another kitchen

garden."

"I think we'll let you rest up a bit before we try the final edge, Chris," Rob said.

"No argument here," Chris said. He disengaged himself from Carol and wandered a little way off.

"Ach, I'm a fool," Dracul said. "Rachel Kwok said something to me last night and can I remember it?" He thumped his own forehead. "I'll get her."

"I am here, Dracul," said Rachel Kwok, making everyone jump. Carol was absolutely certain there had been nobody

standing there a minute ago. "Mr Kyriakou, you should consider that each face is an area, and each edge is a line. The corners have no dimensionality."

"That was it," Dracul said. "I couldn't remember it because I didn't understand a word of it." He seemed pleased with himself, or rather, more so than usual.

"What do you mean, Ms Kwok?" Rob asked.

"The corners represent extremes," the woman said. "They may not be actual forms, but rather qualities in each form

which you should be aware of and control. The power of this tetrad is linked to emotional responses. Perhaps extreme negative emotions?"

"Anger, maybe?" Carol suggested. "It was anger that triggered the first change of all. Fear? Greed?"

"Extreme emotion plus supernatural power usually equals trouble," Dracul said. "That is why I am the placid, even-tempered and generally saintly soul that I am."

"And I am Empress Wu," said Rachel

Kwok, so deadpan it took Carol nearly a minute to realise it had been a joke.

"So what's an extreme emotion common to centaurs, unicorns and pegasi but not humans?" Monica queried.

"Ask a horse," Dracul suggested. "It doesn't have to be exclusive, though. Just something that would be more dangerous to them than to us."

"What do you think, Chris?" Rob looked round. "Where is he?"

At almost the same moment, the floor fell away from Carol, and she uttered a

cry and reached out blindly for Monica. The other girl flew to her side and caught her as she fell. "What is it?" Monica demanded.

"Chris..." was all Carol could say.

"I'm sorry, Ms Varland." The ringing voice of Vassily Shirinin echoed through the yard. "I apologise also to Ms Fleming, to Mr Fayne, and to my dear friend Hugh, who I see is not here." The Russian was standing at the gate of the yard, Chris's inert body under one arm, and a gun in his hand. "If you should see him, please remind him that a

gentleman's agreement only goes so far, and in the end we all have our jobs to do."

"I thought you were a decent sort, Vassily," Rob said.

"A less 'decent sort' would have taken his chance long before this, I think you will agree," Shirinin said. "If it helps, you may console yourselves with the thought that at very least, the food shortages which have plagued my country for over a century will now be ended at last, thanks to your little friend

here. Oh. If you try to follow me I will kill him. Please know that."

He hoisted Chris up over one shoulder and dumped him into the back seat of a silver Audi saloon parked just outside the gate. Keeping his gun trained on the group, he walked round the car, and in one swift movement got in, tossed the gun on to the passenger seat and started the engine.

Or tried to.

"The game isn't over yet, my Russian friend," said Dracul von Ryan quietly.