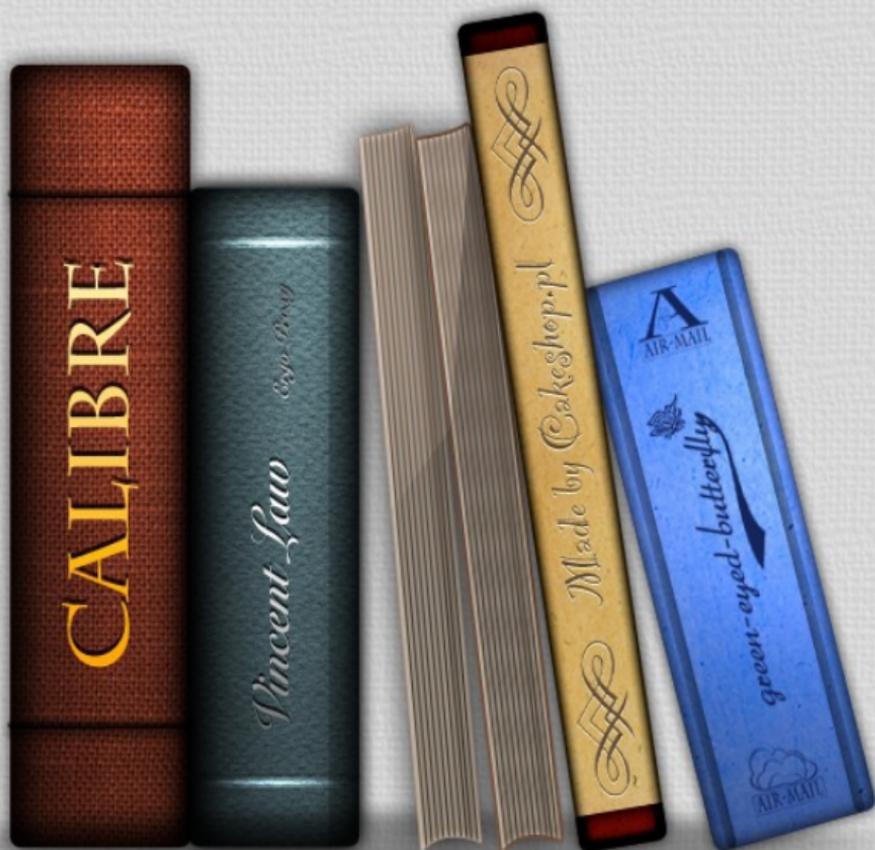


tetradf

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calibre 0.9.19

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Shirinin tried the car a couple more times, then hit the steering wheel and got out again, retrieving his gun as he did so.

"Very clever," he said mildly, "and very quick. I assume your little Scottish friend persuaded--Wayne, was it?--to do his party trick. So, the question becomes simple; which of you shall I kill first? None of you are armed, I believe, and even were you to rush me I could put at least three of you down with ease. Who among you values their life least?"

Carol had been hearing all this as if from a long way off. She felt Monica's arms around her, holding her up, but she could not bear to look. After all this, after everything they had gone through, was this it? Would Chris be ripped out of her life, taken off to be cut up by scientists, or kept in a cage and forced to perform for the rest of his life? She didn't blame the Russian; they were all after the secret, everyone in the world would be if they only knew. Even Hugh, seeing the miracle of Epona, might have thought better of neglecting his duty to the crown. She felt utterly alone, and something huge and painful was growing inside her, something--

"Do you feel it, darling?" Monica whispered.

Carol looked at her uncertainly.

"It's all right," Monica said. "I guessed."

Guessed what?

"Just let it happen," Monica said, and kissed her, before letting go of her and stepping back. Carol staggered a little, caught her balance, took a deep breath and exploded.

The rush was immense, unimaginable. Her whole body sang with it. *So this is what it feels like*, she thought, before her thoughts opened out and expanded to infinity in all directions. She stood tall,

proud, invincible. She moved towards the Russian, seeing him whole for the first time; a good man only partially numbed to evil, driven by fear and guilt and a paradoxical rage for honour. She understood him. She loved him.

Behind her she heard Monica: "God, isn't she beautiful?"

And Rob: "Yes, oh yes she is..."

And in front of her Vassily Shirinin waved his little toy and said "Keep back," in a voice suddenly fraught with uncertainty.

"Why would I do that?" Carol said.

"Don't you want to be closer to me?" She

knew her voice was working its magic on him, entrancing him, binding him to her.

"I will kill you," Shirinin sobbed. His face was shiny with sweat. He could not hold the gun steady.

"No, you won't," Carol said gently, and took the gun from his grasp. It shrivelled and melted into a tiny pile of slag, but there was no heat; just the irresistible force that was part of her nature now. "Nobody dies today."

She took him in her arms, and he melted against her. "You will be my first," she whispered, and put forth her power.

Shirinin straightened up. His arms slowly floated away from his sides, his head tilted back to gaze at the sky, and as his flesh solidified into living wood and his skin and clothes melted into silver bark and leaves, she heard his thought for the first and last time: *Thank you...*

"What the ever-lovin' bejasmus are you?" Dracul breathed, and Carol laughed inside to hear him, for once, utterly confounded.

"Just a dryad," she said, smiling over her shoulder at him.

"You killed him," Rob said.

"No indeed," she answered. "He is alive

and well. Now he will know the long thoughts and slow emotions of the trees. What to you seem like years will be days to him. The sudden explosion of spring, the warm bounty of summer, the poignancy of autumn and the sleep of winter. He will live long after you are all dead."

"Not planted there he won't," Rob said. "He's blocking the gateway."

"Then you must transplant him," she said. "And take care with him. He is precious." She turned to Monica. "How did you know? I didn't."

"Darling, it was obvious," Monica said.

"As soon as I saw you the day after...after you spent the night with Chris, I fell completely in love with you. I've known you for decades and that's never happened before. There had to be a reason, and Occam's razor did the rest."

Carol thought back. It was easy now. *Yes, of course.* "I never kissed you before, did I? No wonder you were upset."

"All that wasted time," Monica said with a grin. "And it's completely unsexy. It's just love."

"*Agape,*" Rob said. "The pure love the

Greeks talked about."

"But Chris didn't change--not in himself--when he got the tetrad," Carol protested.

"Didn't he?" Rob said. "I saw him many times when he brought kebabs to the College. A greasy little delivery boy who pretended to be Cockney and wiped his nose on his sleeve when he thought nobody was looking. Whose greatest ambition was to be like a television gangster, who studied art history because his mother wanted him to."

"But..." Carol began.

"Dear Carol," Monica said fondly. "Of course you didn't see it. You were in

love with him already."

"You saw it within him before any of the rest of us did," Rob said. "The tetrad brought it out."

"Excuse me," Dracul said loudly, "but can we skip this bit? I hate the mushy stuff."

Carol smiled at him, and forgave him. *You have got it coming to you in a big way, my laddo. I'd like to be there to see.* "All right," she said. "Monica, shall we try and go straight to the end? See if what worked before will work again?"

Monica sat down on the lush grass, and Carol lay down beside her with her head

in Monica's lap and breathed deeply, contentedly. *All's well.*

The explosion this time was like coming home had been; the familiar joy of her own body, her own mind. She sat up, smiled at Monica, at them all.

"Let's get Chris out of that car and get home," she said.

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"I've phoned Uncle Aris," Chris said. "He's coming down."

It was early evening in Carol's cottage, which was currently feeling a little crowded, but not in a bad way. The entire coven was there, along with Hugh

and Rob, and Monica of course. Chris and Carol were in the kitchen, laying stuffed vine leaves out on big plates.

"Are you sure he's up to the travelling?" Carol asked.

"He says so. I think he's made of like piano wire and bloody-mindedness." Chris grinned. "He was over the moon when I told him. Apparently nobody who ever had the tetrad before lasted long enough to pass it on to someone else. Or if they did, their line died out. It doesn't make you immortal, apparently. He was very definite on that."

"I'm glad he was," Carol said. "I'd hate

to have to find out for myself." A thought occurred to her. "Did you ask him about conquering the corners? We haven't done that yet."

"He said Rachel Kwok was probably right, in which case that could be an ongoing job."

"Avoiding extreme emotion?"

"Mastering it. You can't avoid it, sometimes you need it. He said it takes even smart people their whole lives." Chris took a deep breath. "Anyway, he wants to see you again, and me I guess, and he says he quite fancies Avevale from what I've told him about it. He

might retire down here."

"Monica's already given up her job. Says she's sure the College can find her some work." Carol looked at Chris.

"You don't mind?"

"Why should I mind?" he said. "You love me, I love you, she loves you, and I--"

"Go on," Carol said, feigning an ominous tone.

"Nah, we're past all that, aren't we? Sure, I love her, but it's that aggapy thing Rob talked about. It'll be great having her here."

"Just as long as it's just us," Carol said.

"I don't fancy starting a commune. Or a cult."

"God, no," Chris said with a shudder.

"But we can't just go back to being normal, Caz. This power has got to be used. It can't just be hidden away. We do that, we're as bad as grandad."

"We can do little things," Carol said.

"Heal little hurts, give inspiration where it's needed, let people feel there's still wonder in the world."

"Do you think they'll come after us again? Dower and the rest?"

"Hugh says Dower's been recalled in

disgrace. Father Krebs too. Seems it got out on the internet that a top CIA agent and a highly-placed Catholic priest had been junketing around the British countryside chasing what turned out to be an obvious hoax."

Carol thought she detected the hand of Rachel Kwok in that. "What about Pricklow and Gefarr?"

"Dunno. Not worried about them, though. They never even got near us."

"Don-Jay?"

"Gave him some cash to get to London. He says he's gonna make a new start, but I don't think he believed it any more than

I did. It'll take more than us to blow him out of his rut. He'll be back with them inside a month." Chris paused. "You want a bigger plate for those?"

Carol looked down at her overflowing plate. "Oh, God, I lost track. That's enough, isn't it?"

"Keep some back for seconds," Chris said, putting the rest of the little bundles into a bowl. "Here we go, then."

They carried the plates through to the living room, and the multitudes fell on them with cries of delight.

"We think we'll be movin' on in the morning," Dracul said. "This place is a bit quiet for us."

"There's a psychic fair in Salisbury we want to get to," said Frankie.

"I hate bloody psychic fairs," Dik grumbled.

"Nevertheless, Dik my boy, there's cash to be made," Dracul said. "Diesel doesn't grow on trees, you know. Unless you could arrange that?" he said to Carol.

"I don't think so," Carol said, laughing.

"Thank you," Tilda said, taking both of Chris's hands in hers.

"What for?" he said. "The apples?"

"Among other things," she said, smiling

at him.

One by one, Rob, Hugh and the coven made their farewells and left. Allie was the last to go. In the doorway she turned, and smiled, quickly, as though it hurt.

"It gets really interestin' from here on," she said, and ran.

"I'll do the dishes," Monica said, and went into the kitchen.

"What did she mean by that?" Carol wondered, as she and Chris sat down on the sofa.

"Well," Chris said, "there are these things called dishes, see, and after

you've eaten off them--"

Carol hit him. "I meant Allie."

"Well," Chris said again, "for one thing you got your own journey just beginning, and it's obviously different from mine.

We've only seen one of your other faces. Two more to go." He brightened.

"Maybe one of 'em's a mermaid. I could quite fancy you as a mermaid."

"How about a harpy?" Carol suggested.

"Or a gorgon?"

"Mr McGee," Chris quoted. "Don't make me angry."

"You wouldn't like me when I'm angry,"

they chorused, and laughed.

"Well, I'm certainly never gonna make you angry," Chris said.

Carol looked fondly into his eyes. *Brown eyes you could get lost in*, she thought.

"Don't bet on it, my laddo," she said.

"Don't you bet on it."

"Hey, we've still got one more edge to try," Chris said suddenly. "Wanna have a go?"

"I'm game if you are," Carol said. "But outside, please."

They went out of the back door, past Monica with her hands in the sink, and into Carol's tiny garden.

"What's this one?"

"Unicorn/centaur," Chris said. "Stand back a bit."

He concentrated, and changed. Carol stared.

"Should he have that many legs?"

Monica said, behind her. She was drying her hands on a tea towel.

Carol counted. "Eight," she said. "So that's Norse mythology added to the mix. And are those scales on his back?"

Chris snorted and stamped his hoof. It seemed to Carol that the earth under her feet trembled just a little.

"I think he wants to go somewhere," she said. "What's he waiting for?"

Monica laughed. "Us, silly," she said. "Go on. You first."

Carol approached Chris cautiously, and he knelt so that she could mount. Monica climbed on behind, and the great horse stood up. Carol could feel the muscles beneath her moving as he adjusted his stance.

"So what happens now--"

The last word was stretched into a scream as Chris leapt, all eight hooves spurning the ground. It was not flight; there were no wings, no sensation of lift, just a single powerful leap that punched the air out of their lungs, but the countryside beneath them went skidding away as if someone had pulled a magician's tablecloth from under their feet. Suddenly they were high over the land, and Monica's delighted laughter and Carol's whoop were sucked from their lips and sent spinning in the slipstream.

Horse and riders vanished into the blue

of the night, and the echo of a sonic boom broke over Avevale.

THE END