

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'm going mad, aren't I?" Chris said in a small voice.

"If you are, then we all are," Carol said. It was meant to sound reassuring, but it came out wrong.

"You mean this is really me? This is what you see?" Chris turned his upper body round and looked back along his flanks.

"This is you at the moment," Rob said.

"I'll kill him," Chris muttered.

"Who?"

"Granddad," Chris said. "Cept I can't, 'cause he's already dead. He could have warned me."

"He didn't know," Carol said. "How could he?"

They stood in silence for a moment. The wind rustled the trees along the verge.

"Well," Chris said at last, "I can understand the story about my ancestor doing all that raping and killing and that. I mean, why not? If he wasn't ready for this—for feeling like this..."

"You weren't ready either," Rob said, "and you managed to restrain yourself."

"I'm getting cold," Carol said.

"I could warm you up," Chris said, and immediately swore at himself. "Sorry, Caz, I didn't mean—"

"We need to make plans," Rob said. "You can't be seen like that. How long does it last? No, of course, sorry, you don't know. Let me think, let me think."

Carol looked at Chris. Actually, his face didn't look so bad, now she was getting used to it. There was something...exciting in the changes. They made him look alien, yet still human enough to--

Stop it, she told herself. "Wait a moment," she said. "How could he have raped anyone? I mean, a horse's, um, equipment is huge. It would kill anyone he tried to--"

"Traditionally," Rob said, "they were furnished with both human and equine organs. And I believe the same applies to Chris."

Carol finally looked at the area he was trying to indicate without in any way pointing at it.

"Oh."

"Some form of loincloth, I think," Rob said. "As soon as possible."

"Sorry," Chris said, managing to sound quite cheerful about the whole thing.

"One thing is certain," Rob went on, "we can't stand here all night. We've been lucky so far, but we don't want to draw attention to ourselves, do we?"

"Well, I can't go back to the house." Chris looked around. "Maybe I could just hop into one of those fields."

"I think Mr Tysoe would prefer it if we asked permission before grazing our livestock on his land," Rob said. "Hmm. The ideal solution would be to get you to the stables up at the College, before the sun comes up and the lads start seeing to the horses."

"They can't see me," Chris said quickly.

"Oh, I think I can work something out in that direction. Jilt's always using odd bits of the outbuildings to store his secret inventions. The problem is getting you there."

"No problem," Chris said. "Which direction?"

"Well, back through town and out along the north road. You know where the College is, Chris, you deliver there often enough."

"Yeah." Chris grinned. "Hey, this would be a new slant on kebab delivery. Pony Express." He reared up suddenly and uttered a piercing half-whinny, half-whoop that made Carol shriek and jump back.

"I thought you were trying to be inconspicuous," Rob said calmly.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am. Sorry. I just can't keep it in sometimes. I wish you could feel this, Caz, you got no idea what it's like."

"Chris," Carol said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "You follow Rob's car back to the college, after he's dropped me off, you go where he tells you, and you keep quiet. If you don't I'll—I'll kill you, all right?"

"You could make sure I kept quiet," Chris suggested.

"How?"

"Come with me."

"What?"

Chris patted his own broad back.

"Oh, no," Carol said. "No way. You don't even--"

"*Come on,*" Chris said, and those overtones were in his voice again, so strong, and Carol's senses blurred for a moment. When she came to, she was sitting astride Chris's back, and Rob was looking stunned and wiping his hands.

"Did you do that?" she demanded.

"I just said--"

"Can--" Carol stopped and breathed deeply for a moment, which didn't help; there was an oddly enticing musky scent all around her, and it wasn't calming her down in the slightest. "Can centaurs," she said, bracing herself to say the word they had all been ignoring, "hypnotise people?"

"Evidently they can," Rob said. "I'll have to look at some books, obviously."

"Well, don't do it again," she said, and for good measure she thumped Chris on the back.

"That tickles," he said. "Sorry, babes. I didn't know I was doing anything."

"Well—don't call me that—you were, and it's invasive and I don't want you doing it again, so just—just get a grip, will you?"

"I could say the same to you," Chris said. "This might get bumpy."

Rob got back into his car, with a last mistrustful glance at Chris and Carol, and as he moved off Chris followed, at a slow trot which gradually turned into a canter. Carol locked her arms around his human waist and held on tight. With stately slowness they processed through the village, past the Man At Arms and round the corner by the pump. A man was walking carefully down the hill towards them; as they drew level he turned to stare.

"Nothing here," Chris said to him in that voice, and he blinked and turned away.

"All right," Carol said through her teeth. "Only when it's absolutely necessary, yes?"

"Absolutely," Chris said cheerfully, and even in his normal voice the vibrations from his chest cavity coursed through her and did things to her that she was never going to tell him about. If he didn't know anyway, of course.

The College stood in extensive grounds just outside the village, past the little church of Without Saint Paul. Rob turned into the drive, and Chris followed, leaping lightly over the cattle grid. Carol's breath went out of her as he landed, and she tried desperately to recover it without breathing in more of his scent. *Centaur pheromones*, she thought dizzily, *bottle them and make a fortune...*

The stable block was round the side of the main building. Rob stopped the car, got out and helped Carol down from Chris. For some reason her knees wouldn't support her, and he had to half-carry her over to the car and open the passenger door. She sat on the seat, taking in huge gulps of the cool, blessedly unscented night air, barely aware of Chris and Rob talking in low voices, of a door being opened and, a few moments later, shut and padlocked.

"That's it," Rob said. "He'll be safe till I come back to check on him. And now I think I had better get you home. Unless--"

"No," Carol said with an effort. Bits of her that she'd thought evolution had taken care of long ago were wondering very loudly where the interesting smells had gone, and the urge to follow Chris into the stall was almost a physical thing. "Got to get home. Monica..."

"I was going to suggest that you might want to sleep somewhere with fewer large and gaping holes in it," said Rob, "but yes, you're probably right. And tomorrow," he went on, helping her to swivel into the car, "when Heidi has given you both the once-over, we must come back here and confer." He shut the door on her.

"I'm sorry to have dragged you into this," Carol said, when he was once more in the driving seat.

"Oh, don't apologise," Rob said cheerfully. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world." He sobered abruptly. "But Chris is right, you know."

"What about?"

“If this is known to exist—if it can be located now that it's active—powerful people are going to be interested in it. You could both be in very real danger. You'll need help.”

“Probably,” Carol said. Reaction was starting to set in, and black weariness was dragging at her. “I can't think about that now. I can't think about anything, except that maybe it's all just a really strange nightmare.”

“Let's get you home,” Rob said, and started the engine.

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“Ms Varland?”

Carol opened her eyes groggily.

“Sorry, darling, she just barged in,” said Monica's voice. “Frightened the life out of me.”

A tall blonde woman in a white coat was bending over her, smiling in a practiced manner. Carol, fighting her way up from the tar pit of sleep, realised that she was lying on her own bed, fully clothed, and that the sun was well over the horizon.. Monica was standing by the door, also dressed, looking pale and unhappy but otherwise all right.

“Look into the light, please,” said the blonde woman, whom Carol finally identified as Doctor Heidi van Joost. She was attached to the College in some arcane way, and ran its small infirmary with a far from infirm hand.

“I'm not even awake yet,” Carol protested angrily. “Wait a minute, will you?”

“I am very busy,” said Doctor van Joost. “I do this as a favour to Rob. If you prefer it, I will go back to the College and get on with my work.”

“No, please,” Carol said. “I'm sorry, you just startled me. Please do go on.”

The examination was quick and businesslike, and when it was done Doctor van Joost nodded curtly to both of them, turned and walked out.

“Do we assume we're all right, then?” Monica said.

“I guess we have to,” Carol said. “I suppose if anything needed to be done she would have done it. How are you feeling?”

"Confused," Monica said. "Did you find Chris?"

"Oh my God, Chris!" Carol jumped up from the bed and started jamming her shoes on her feet.

"What about him?"

"Um--" Carol cast an indecisive glance at Monica, and decided that it was too late to start worrying about what to tell her now. "I'll explain on the way. I need you to get your car. I've got to ring Rob."

"Right," Monica said. "Back in two shakes."

On the drive up to the College, Carol acquainted Monica with the events of the night. When she got to her first sight of the transformed Chris, Monica shivered.

"I've been trying to tell myself all night that it was just some sort of weird hallucination, probably brought on by starvation. You do realise neither of us has eaten anything since that Danish pastry at the airport?"

"I haven't had time to be hungry," Carol said. "But you did see him?"

"Yes, I saw it," Monica said. "Wish I could say I hadn't, but I did."

"I'll make us breakfast as soon as I've checked on Chris," Carol said. "Promise."

"I'll hold you to that," said Monica half-seriously.

Rob was waiting at the gates.

"I haven't been in to see him," he said. "Apparently there was some noise in the night, or so I heard from the people whose rooms back on to the stable block. They assumed it was one of the horses, of course. Good morning, Ms Fleming."

"Good morning," Monica said. "Um—do I know you?"

"Robin Fayne. We met last night. I teach here at the College. Philosophy. Just drive right round, I'll follow on foot."

"You're sure he couldn't have got out?" Carol said.

“The walls are eight-inch breeze block, the doors are solid wood with steel furniture, and the padlock the biggest I could find. If he'd broken out of any of that, there would have been a lot more than just 'some noise.’”

Monica drove round to the stable block, following the direction indicated, and parked the car outside the padlocked doors.

“Maybe he'll have changed back,” Carol said hopefully, as Rob jogged into view behind them.

“I hope so,” Monica said fervently.

Rob made something of a production out of locating the key and unlocking the padlock. With a theatrical flourish he opened the stable doors and stood aside.

“He's not there,” Monica said.

“What?” Rob darted inside and stood looking wildly around, as if Chris might be hiding under an errant blade of straw.

Carol caught his wildly roving eye and pointed upward, to where a gaping hole in the tiled roof was letting in grey morning light.

“Oh, that's just not fair,” said Rob.

Don-Jay, piloting the group's ancient Ford Transit minibus down the M5, was voicing similar sentiments, if only under his breath. Doctor Pricklow, in the seat beside him, seemed to be asleep, but sometimes with Pricklow it was hard to tell.

Most of the passenger space was taken up with equipment, mostly there because there had been never been anywhere else to store it and no time, or so it seemed, to unload it before Professor Gefarr had emerged from the main laboratory wrestling with her coat and insisting they set off at once. She sat now, eternally squat, rumped and grey-haired, balanced half on the seat and half on a tunnelling electron microscope which had long since ceased to tunnel, her snub nose buried in a crumbling old book in which she occasionally made a note in ball point pen. Pricklow had observed once that there were only two copies of the book in existence, and received in return one of Gefarr's dreaded basilisk stares.

"What is it we're looking for, anyway?" Don-Jay ventured.

"In your case, the exit for Avevale," Pricklow said without opening his eyes. "Don't, ah, miss it, will you?"

"So am I a member of this team or am I just the driver?" Don-Jay hadn't meant to say it out loud, he'd only meant to think it, but it had come out all the same.

"You need not be either," came Gefarr's grating voice from the rear. "If you find the work too burdensome--"

"Uh, no," Don-Jay said. "Not at all. Happy to serve in whatever capacity. Yessir."

"It's, ah, an ancient artifact," Pricklow said, taking pity as Don-Jay had known he would, the wuss. "References to it cropped up in an early copy of Manilius of Ostia, and various mystical groups have sought it throughout the ages. That statue was built in the, ah, seventeenth century, theoretically to detect its awakening, but it never worked. Till now, that is."

"What does it do?" Don-Jay ventured. "This artifact?"

"Well, ah, it's a source of great power, that much is certain," Pricklow replied. "As for its precise function--"

"Pricklow."

All she has to do is say his frickin' name, Don-Jay thought as Pricklow fell silent. Total wuss.

"Anybody hungry?" he said.

"Just drive," Gefarr growled.

Don-Jay had the satisfaction of hearing a little gurgle from the vicinity of Pricklow's third waistcoat button. It took his mind off his own hunger. For a while.