

CHAPTER SIX

"Centaur's don't fly," Rob repeated dogmatically. "They are most emphatically earthbound."

"Maybe someone came along with a crane," Monica suggested, and was glared at for her pains.

"He must have changed again. It's the only possible explanation." Rob began to pace around the empty stable. "I'm beginning to see the logic of this. Typical Greek god sense of humour. All the qualities asked for, but not all at once. I wonder—" He whirled round to face Carol and Monica. "I think I know where he's gone."

"Where?" Carol and Monica said, almost at the same time, and glanced at each other in surprise. Monica deferred to Carol with a slight smile.

"Grimmans Hill," Rob said. "It's the highest point hereabouts. Only we must get there and get him down before anyone else goes up there. To the cars."

They raced to Monica's Fiat. By the time they were in motion, Rob's Cavalier had already reached the gates and was waiting for them with its hazard lights flashing. They convoyed back through the town and past Carol's cottage, whose front wall was now under repair by four men in overalls. One of them waved a trowel cheerfully as the Cavalier went by.

They parked in the small gravelled space at the bottom of Grimmans Hill and got out.

"We must be very careful and move very slowly," Rob said in a low voice. "His senses will be very acute now, and if he's spooked he'll fly away and look for a higher place. That's if I'm right about what he's become."

There was a flash of what looked like light at the top of the hill. Carefully they crept up the slope, trying to blend in and not make any sudden moves, creeping more and more slowly the closer they came to the summit and the impossible thing whose outline became clearer and clearer with every painful inch of ground gained.

"Columbia Tristar," Monica breathed, and Rob looked at her oddly.

"The Pegasus," he said in his driest, most scholarly whisper, "or winged horse, was legendarily associated with lightning, with springs—that would be springs of water, and not bedsprings, just in case you were wondering—and with the nine Muses, whose steed he was, though presumably

not all at the same time. The significance of all these symbols cannot be lost on any reasonably well-educated person.”

“What rhymes with pegasus?” Carol said.

“Are you by any chance feeling inspired?” Rob said.

“I think I would be if I was any good at it,” Carol said.

Rob risked a glance at the shining form standing at guard on the summit of the hill.

“The mythical horse known as Pegasus,” he said,

“Has the usual total of legasus.

But he also has wings

And in line with such things,

Produces, not foalses, but eggasus.”

Monica stifled a snort of laughter, and Carol resisted the urge to thump Rob as she would Chris.

“That's awful,” she said.

“I know,” Rob said. “Try not to look at him for too long. We can't afford to be distracted.”

The pegasus sniffed the air and whickered nervously. They stopped, and froze in place.

“How are we going to get him?” Carol whispered.

“Well, traditionally one should sleep in the temple of Athene and be gifted with a golden bridle,”

Rob said. “However, since Avevale doesn't boast a temple of Athene, I think we might have to employ somewhat more drastic methods.”

“Like what?”

“Carol,” Rob said, and the urgency in his voice made her look him in the eyes. “First of all you have to trust me. I mean none of you any harm, and my firm intention is to keep you all safe, including Chris. Do you believe that?”

“Yes, what—” Carol said.

With a sudden movement, Rob wrenched himself to his feet, dragging her with him by a vice-like grip on the collar of her coat. Before she could protest--

“Take that, Ms Varland!” he shouted, and threw her down the hill.

Helplessly rolling, bouncing, colliding with outcrops of rock, she was sure she felt bones cracking. The pain was unbelievable, and she cried out again and again as she careered down the cruel slope, but at last she landed hard against the stile that led back to the car park and lay there helplessly, unable to move, her breath stabbing her in the side with every ragged inhalation, her mind in turmoil.

She could never recall how long she lay thus. It was very gradually that she became aware of a warmth spreading through her. *Oh great*, she thought, *that'll be internal bleeding then...* But the sensation diffused through her entire body, and as it spread pain vanished, leaving a glorious glow that made her feel almost but not quite drunk. She opened her eyes, and saw the source of the warmth, but she was feeling too good to be shocked.

It wasn't like a horse, not really, not as much as the pegasus had been. There were differences in the shape of the face, and the body was smaller, looked lighter. She remembered reading that they had cloven hooves and a tufted tail, but she couldn't see either from where she was. Besides, just watching the play of golden light along the shining, translucent single horn was too absorbing.

The last of the pain faded away, and she could move again. She rolled over, and saw Rob and Monica watching nervously from a short distance away. Rob was holding a handkerchief to his forehead, and part of it was stained red.

“I am so sorry, Carol,” Rob began. “It was a monstrous risk, but the logic seemed sound.”

“Logic my foot,” Monica retorted. “It was a pure guess.”

“There had to be four faces,” Rob explained. “Assuming one was Chris himself, the centaur and the pegasus two and three, that left one more. The only quality not covered was 'healing in peace,' since I assumed the wisdom referred to was by way of being the moral of the story. Each change was triggered by an emotional state—anger in the case of the centaur, fear for the pegasus.” He took a deep breath. “This was where the guesswork came in. I assumed, from the tale of Chris's ancestor, that the transformations were following a set order, and that the last one

would be triggered by—by pity, or compassion, or something of the sort. So I had to hurt someone in order to make it necessary for him to heal that person.”

“What happened to you?” Carol asked.

“I didn't dodge fast enough,” Rob said. “I was very lucky, though. He could have crushed my head like a grape.”

“No, he couldn't,” Carol said. “Not this one. You got exactly what you deserved and no more.” She got up and tried to approach the unicorn, but it backed away, shaking its head, the point of the horn weaving in an infinity-sign pattern just inches from her chest.

“What's the matter?” she said.

“Oh, Carol darling, come on,” Monica said. “Unicorn?”

“I take it you have at some point—er—done the deed,” Rob said, and Carol nodded. It had been unpleasant, uncomfortable and soon over, her first and--so far--last time, and she couldn't even remember the boy's name. She had resolved that with Chris it would be different. “Unicorns can traditionally only be approached by virgins.”

“Great,” Carol said. “Where are we going to find a virgin round here?”

Timidly, Monica raised her hand. At once, the unicorn turned and trotted towards her.

“Oh, you are kidding me,” Carol said. “You?”

“I talk a good game,” Monica said coolly. “You have to if you want to be accepted. I just prefer to wait till I've found someone I care about.” She caressed the unicorn's face. “Like you, maybe, when you're back in your own admittedly short but quite passable body.”

“Hands off, he's mine,” Carol said.

“I'm glad to hear it,” Monica said with a grin. “So, not put off by any of this then?”

Carol hadn't thought about it, and wasn't going to now. “How can we get him to change back?” she asked Rob.

“There must be another emotional trigger,” Rob said. “Unfortunately, I have no idea what it might be. Anger, fear, compassion...”

"How did the ancestor change back?" Monica said.

"By being shot," Carol said. "Which is not an acceptable plan."

"No," Rob said. "But then, we are not eighteenth-century Greek peasants."

"You don't think of the Greeks as having an eighteenth century, do you?" Monica remarked. "I mean, while we were all strutting around in brocade jackets and powdered wigs playing the harpsichord and so on, what were they doing? Just...waiting for us to show up?"

"It's good to know our educational system is still unsurpassed in the world," Rob said wearily.

"Um," Carol said. "Unicorn. Can we focus, please?"

"I know," Monica said unexpectedly. She sat down on the grass and crossed her legs. "Come on, boy," she said, patting her lap. "Come on. This is what you want, isn't it?"

The unicorn, stepping delicately with its cloven hooves, crossed to her, knelt down and laid its head in her lap. Slowly its one visible eye closed. Carol felt a sting of jealousy which she tried to suppress.

"Human is what he's supposed to be," Monica explained, stroking its mane. "It's a back to normal thing. All the other changes are responses to extreme situations. So I'm guessing the emotional trigger for this change must be..."

"Contentment." Rob almost snapped his fingers, and then thought better of it. "I believe you could be right, Monica."

"Great," Carol said, trying not to sound as bitter as she felt.

"Nothing sexual about it at all, darling," Monica said, keeping her voice low and soothing. "Just a bit of rest after a lot of excitement. All the passion spent. Um, as it were."

"I'm starting to wish I had stayed in the stable," Carol muttered.

"It might have made things easier," Rob said, and— "Look."

It was the first time Carol had seen a change happening. There was no sound, no flash or shimmer or anything. It was, indeed, rather like a bubble expanding and bursting; Chris seemed

to grow out of the unicorn shape into his own, and suddenly there he was, lying in Monica's lap in the clothes he had been wearing the previous night.

He blinked, looked up, looked over at Carol and jumped to his feet, blushing furiously.

"It's all right, Chris," Carol said quickly, though she felt far from all right about it. "Just keep calm."

"Welcome back, Mr Kyriakou," said Rob.

"Well, I'm glad that's all settled," said Monica, getting up. "And now, before I kill and eat one of you, I want some food."

None of them remembered noticing, till much later, a series of flashes of light emanating from behind a nearby hedge.

Kieran Wilding, aged fifteen, shaking with excitement, checked yet again that his camera phone was working. He couldn't believe his luck. Something was bound to go wrong.

He had been cycling along the lane that ran around the bottom of Grimms Hill when he had spotted the cars parked on the gravel. As far as Kieran was concerned, there was only one reason why anyone in their right mind would go up Grimms Hill, and so he had parked his bicycle out of sight behind a tree and set off up the hill to catch them at it. He had barely had time to dodge out of sight himself when the woman had fallen down the hill (Kieran wondered if that made her what his auntie called a fallen woman) and he had crept back through the hedge while she was lying there, looking all mucky and bruised and broken and honestly not that sexy, even to Kieran.

The unicorn had been a total bonus. He wasn't sure how they had done it. Maybe it was CGI. (Kieran's knowledge of CGI was limited to the fact that they did it with computers; as far as he was aware, the orcs and trolls and so on in Lord Of The Rings had been present on the field with the other actors.) It had certainly looked like CGI, not quite real, not quite there. And when it had changed into a little dark guy lying in the lap of the posh bit, well, that had been magic.

Kieran waited, in hiding, till the two blokes and the two women had got into their cars and driven off. Then, only then, he let himself look at the pictures on the tiny screen of his phone.

It was there. It had come out.

Sarah Tysoe liked unicorns. She would do anything for a look at those pictures. *Anything.*

Kieran's heart was light as he got on his bike and pedalled off homeward.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Back in Carol's cottage, Chris cooked them all a late breakfast and they ate heartily. Carol felt a lot better about things with bacon, eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms inside her. Monica, who had never had to diet in her life, demanded seconds.

"Right," Rob said, when all the plates had been cleared away and a second pot of tea stood half empty on the cork mat on the table. The window frame and the brickwork around it had been replaced and boarded up, and Joe Pikestaff and his lads had gone in search of glass to fit it. "I think we now know all that the tetrad can do, at least for the moment. The question remains, what do we do about it."

"Nothing," Carol said. "Chris just has to learn not to get excited about anything. As long as he doesn't get angry, or scared, or—or have to heal someone, he won't change, will he?"

"Industrial quantities of Prozac, then," Monica said. "And a nice padded cell, perhaps."

"It won't work," Rob said. "I'm sorry, Carol, but aren't you forgetting what his grandfather said? The power has to be used, or it will burn him up from the inside."

"I can't go through all that again," Chris said. "I mean, it was fun, but I don't want you having to run around after me all the time."

"Fun?" Carol echoed. "Fun for you, maybe, matey. I was scared shitless the whole time."

"Sorry," Chris said.

"Obviously," Rob said, "what you have to do is learn to control the power. I think those instructions your grandfather gave you will prove quite useful."

"Did he say anything else?" Carol said. "You never finished the story."

"Not a lot," Chris said. "He went downhill quite fast after that. He told me I had to tell someone, to help me keep the secret, and I said why not him, and he said he was dying. I don't think he'd admitted it before, not out loud. Or maybe he was just waiting for me to take the thing, and now I'd got it he was ready to go."

"He told me some of the people who'd been after it. Apparently several Popes tried to get it, and so did the Knight Templars--"

"Knights Templar," Rob said with a faint wince.

"--and of course there was Hitler. He was the last. I don't get how they knew about it, but apparently some geezer wrote about it in some ancient book or whatever. And there were some guys from America in the nineteenth century wanted it. Granddad was starting to think maybe it was gonna be forgotten about and we could take it easy." Chris pulled a face. "And then I came along."

"Hasn't anyone tried to destroy it?" Monica said.

"Nah. It's stayed in the family all this time, and I guess they thought of it as a sacred trust or something. Should be easy enough to destroy, I mean it looks like it would crumble to dust if you touched it too hard."

"I think you might be surprised," Rob said.

"So anyway," Chris went on, "after that he didn't say much of anything. On the third day after—you know—the nurse called me to his room, and he was just lying there. I went up to the side of the bed, and he took hold of my hand, and sort of smiled, and said 'I am sorry,' and that was about it. After that it was just signing papers and that—this little guy came out of the woodwork, turned out to be the family lawyer, he explained things to me about the house and the accounts and so on—and then I came away. Still with this odd feeling in my gut, and wondering what the hell was going to happen, but I knew I had to get back here and talk to Caz about it."

"What were the instructions again?" Monica asked.

Carol repeated them. "Study each face. Travel each edge. Conquer each corner. Know thus the centre."

"Sounds like gobbledegook to me," Chris said. "Anyway, I can't. It's inside me."

"It's obviously a metaphor," Rob said. "The faces—well, they must be the different creatures you become."

"A tetrahedron has four faces," Carol objected. "There were only three creatures."

"He's the fourth, you idiot," Monica said.

"Oh god, yes, sorry."

"I'm the first, you mean," Chris said. "And don't call my girlfriend an idiot."

"Yes, this is a very important point," Rob said. "You, Chris, are no different from the centaur and the other—um—beasts. You are merely a face, an aspect of the being that is you. Which is true of all of us, of course, but the tetrad puts it into perspective, as it were. The object is to know the centre, the whole being. *Gnothi seauton*, as the Greeks used to say."

"Weren't they on Doctor Who?" said Monica.

"It means 'know thyself,'" said Rob. "And that's what the instructions are all about. A step by step learning procedure to enable you to master the power of the tetrad, which—I believe—is inherent in all of us, in one form or another, but dormant till it is awakened."

"Hang on a minute," said Chris. "I thought this was just my family's problem."

"Obviously all the other groups who have tried to get hold of the device believe differently," said Rob. "Now then. 'Study each face.' That's clear enough. You must spend enough time in each form to learn how to control yourself while you—um—occupy it. You have to learn not to be driven by the nature of the form, as you were this time, but to be yourself in all the forms, as far as you can."

"How'm I gonna do that?" Chris demanded.

"He is a bit noticeable when he changes," Carol said.

"I've thought about that," Rob said. "We'll put him in room 3b." The others looked variously blank. "That's just what we call it," he went on. "Some obscure literary allusion, I think. It's a hunting lodge that the previous owners built in the Pretendwood. We can--"

"Excuse me?" Monica said. "Sorry, I'm new here. The who?"

Rob sighed. "Shortly after the end of the Stuarts' reign there was a legend that the Young Pretender had hidden in an oak tree from the pursuing English, and owners of oak trees all up and down the country claimed the honour for themselves. Not to be outdone, the then owner of the house put the story about that the Scots prince had slept in *every single* tree in his woodland, and named it the Pretender's Wood in honour of the alleged occasion. Two factors militated against his claim: one, that it would have taken young Charlie several years to have completed the task, and two, that the woods in question were mostly beech and alder. The name was duly contracted to Pretendwood in the common usage, and so it remains. Any more questions?"

"No thank you," Monica said.

"Room 3b is occasionally used by members of the college staff looking for seclusion to carry out some research or write a paper or something. I checked this morning, and booked it for eight weeks, which is the maximum possible time. Now I will need to produce some sort of finished work at the end of that time, so I won't be able to be with you every moment, but it should be possible to keep young Chris fairly secret there, as long as he doesn't do too much flying."

"But what about me?" Carol said. "I can't be left out of this. I can't just carry on with my life knowing Chris is--"

"And you can't let me go," Monica said. "I know too much."

"This is getting out of order," Chris said. "Granddad told me tell one person, not a small army. Caz, you got a job to go to, it's bad enough I can't do mine. You too, Monica. We haven't got the money to just bunk off work and--"

"Oh, right, so I have to go back to work while you bunk off." Carol appealed to Rob. "Tell him. There's no way I can do a day's work when I'll be worrying about him the whole time. It could have a terrible effect on my health."

"Well, um, yes," Rob said. "Shame on you, Chris."

"What we gonna live on then?" Chris demanded.

"I thought you had recently come into a moderately large amount of money?"

Carol and Monica exploded with laughter at the expression on Chris's face.

"All right, so I forgot," he said. "I'm not used to it yet."

"I think he's embarrassed," Monica said.

"Too bloody right I am. I can't be turning into the centaur with two of you there. And anyway, if there's people around when I turn into the winged thingy I'll just fly off."

"All the more reason to have them around. You have to learn not to." Rob was quietly firm. "It's no good, Chris. You can't exclude them from this process. We'll have to work something out regarding accommodation and food and so on, but it will be both necessary and beneficial to have Carol and Monica with us."

"What about your teaching duties?" Carol said.

"Scutella will take them on. He has a refreshing approach to the topic that always endears him to the students. No, I'm afraid I have to be involved in this. I'm sorry, but that's quite non-negotiable." Rob smiled. "We'll move in tonight. I know where I can lay hands on a couple of airbeds. I suggest you bring your own bedlinen."

"All right," Chris said, "what about the rest of this thing, then? Travel the corners and conquer the borders or whatever?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," Rob said. "I hope to work it out in due course. In the meantime, I would say you have quite enough on your plate as it is."

"Only just got home," Chris grumbled. "I was looking forward to getting back to normal."

"That'll teach you to touch crumbly pyramids," Monica said.

"I'll tell the neighbours we're going away while the house is fixed," Carol said. "I can tell them it was rising damp or something. They'll be too busy worrying about their own walls to wonder where we've gone."

“And pestering the Bursar to send a surveyor round, no doubt,” Rob said, getting up with some effort. “Ah well, into each life a little rain, et cetera. I must go and make the arrangements. Try not to turn into anything before we get to room 3b, will you, Chris?”

“Do my best,” Chris said. “Anyway, I've gotta get to the bank before I go into hiding. Sign some more papers. We can't start living off my inheritance if I can't get at it.”

“Eminently practical,” Rob said. “Very well then. I'll see you all at the college gates around nine o'clock tonight.”

Father Krebs hummed snatches of opera as he drove the hired Jaguar along the twisty country lanes. He was used to the disorganised, inefficient English road network: he had spent several years here, at a students' hall of residence in London, the very one he had visited last night. He called up the image of Sister Eleanor in his mind's eye, as he had last seen her, waving goodbye from the steps. An image of her from somewhat earlier took its place, and he shook his head. There was a time for these things, and he could not afford the distraction on these absurd roads. He topped the hill and drove on down into the valley, murmuring “hoiyotoho” under his breath. Sister Mary Margaret had been able to narrow the location down to this broad area, but no further, despite repeated encouragement. This village, Avevale, would do as a starting point. There was a tavern with accommodation there, or so his informant in Eltdown had stated, though with much additional material on the general theme of how “bloody queer” they were in Avevale. Father Krebs had been able to establish that by “queer” the man did not mean homosexual, but no more than that. He put it down to English rural parochialism and prejudice. Ah, there it was: the Man At Arms. He drove through the high wooden gate and parked the Jaguar neatly in one of the half dozen spaces behind the building, took out his suitcase—the rest of his luggage was in storage back in London—and walked around to the front door, or rather doors. There were two, marked Public and Saloon. Father Krebs had no idea what form of segregation was in force here, or into which category he might fall, so he picked a door at random and went in.

The barman, a huge frowning fellow covered with coarse black hair and bursting out of a black T-shirt whose motto had faded almost completely, heard him out while apparently pulling four pints at once, handed him a key, jerked his thumb at the stairs and said something that Father Krebs rightly assumed was "Second on the right." The room thus attained was small, and the bulb in the overhead light could be no more than forty watts, but the effect was pleasant enough, and the bed nicely springy. He unpacked his case, washed his face and hands in the small basin, and said a brief prayer. Then he went downstairs again, where he had the best dinner the pub could provide (a surprisingly competent beef Wellington with boiled potatoes, carrots and broccoli), drank three pints of what purported to be a locally brewed ale (a little hoppy for Father Krebs' taste, but respectably strong) and listened to the conversations going on around him.

By the end of the third pint he was none the wiser as to the reason for his presence here. He had learned that the village football team had suffered a three-nil defeat against Eltdown Wanderers, due (so he gathered) to blatant favouritism on the part of the referee. Someone had apparently had some sort of catastrophe befall their house, and three of the men in the bar had been well paid for repairing it. A professor at some sort of college nearby had exploded something in one of the stable buildings and blown the roof off. And behind him a teenage boy was trying to persuade a slightly older girl to go round the back of the pub with him. The reward on offer seemed to be a look at some photographs, the nature of which the boy was desperately trying to keep secret. Unfortunately, this diminished their buying power considerably.

"Aw, go on, Sal," he said, for about the fifteenth time.

"Well tell me what they're of, and then I'll know if I wanna look or not," the girl said reasonably.

"F I tell you you'll think I'm mental," the boy said sullenly. "Gotta show you. But you gotta promise to go round the back wi' me first."

"Kieran," the girl said, "you're mental anyway." She considered. "Get me a vodka'n'orange," she said, "and maybe that'll put me in the mood."

Father Krebs, who was finding the negotiations quite amusing, felt an elbow in his lower back, and turned to find a grimy five-pound note being flourished under his nose.

"Here, dad," the boy said, "get us a vodka'n'orange. Anna Scotch."

“Are you not a little young to be drinking alcohol?” Father Krebs said mildly.

“Am not,” the boy protested. “M over eighteen. I'n't I, Sal?”

“Oh yeah,” the girl said in a bored voice. “He gets that all the time.”

“Then why do you not go and get it yourself?”

“Cos I'm busy, right?” the boy snapped.

“I believe I would be getting us all into trouble if I were to do as you wish,” Father Krebs said.

“Aw, piss off then,” said the boy disgustedly. “Was only askin'.”

“Well,” the girl said, getting up languidly, “I'm off. See you tomorrow, Kieran.”

“S a unicorn, all right?” the boy blurted desperately. “I got pictures of a actual unicorn. Up on Grimms Hill. Took 'em last night.” He waved his mobile phone feebly. “Unicorn.”

“Oh, grow up, Kieran,” said the girl, and laughed cruelly.

“If the young lady would care to wait,” Father Krebs said, “I think I know a way in which I could get you both what you wish.” He smiled. “If I might have a look at these photographs as well.”

At the same moment, Rob was waiting outside the school gates. Everything had gone smoothly, room 3b was secured for the next eight weeks, and he had even done a token hour of work on an article he was preparing for a Festschrift honouring the Regius Professor of Philosophy at St. Christopher's College, Oxford, his old tutor, who was retiring in six months. Admittedly he had only written two paragraphs, but that was understandable in the circumstances.

“Evening, Rob,” said a voice out of the darkness, and Rob jumped three feet.

“Paul,” he said. “What are you doing out here at this time of night?”

“Just taking the air.” Paul Harding, dark and lean with very pale blue eyes, seemed to materialise from the shadows. He could move as silently as a cat—indeed, more silently than any of the cats Rob had known, all of whom tended to sound like elephants stampeding down the stairs and were also liable to knock over fragile ornaments—and frequently went unnoticed while standing in plain sight. “What about you?”

"Oh, er," Rob floundered for a moment, "the same, of course. Actually I was on my way back to, er, back home."

"I'll walk with you. I wanted to pick up that book you offered to lend me."

"Um, no, actually I'm waiting for a lift. Um. A young lady."

"Really?" Paul's eyes glittered in the dark. "I thought you were looking furtive. Is it that time of year again already? Honestly, Rob, if I were Bertie Wooster you'd be that friend of his who's always falling in love with unsuitable women."

"Bingo Little," Rob said absently. "It really isn't like that, honestly, Paul. We're just, erm, friends."

"Say no more," Paul said. "I shall leave you to your platonic tryst. But if you could bring the book in tomorrow that would be great."

"I will," Rob promised, and waited till he was sure Paul Harding had gone before letting out his breath in a huge sigh. As if on cue, headlights rounded the turn and Monica's Fiat approached and drew up in front of him. The passenger door opened, Rob got in, and the car passed through the gates and off along the track that led to the Pretendwood and room 3b.

In the darkness, Paul Harding silently watched it go.