

CHAPTER EIGHT

"My God, it's huge," Monica said.

The building known as room 3b was in fact the size of an average manor house, though it possessed only one floor. A single tower protruded from the centre of it, with a lookout post and a bell. Two wings stretched out backwards, making the whole a squared-off C shape; these were largely given over to more stables and to kennels, now fallen into disuse. The whole was completely surrounded by trees. Rob had directed Monica to park within the enclosed area of the C, and had even gone to the lengths of sweeping away such tyre tracks as were visible on the dry ground.

"I'm surprised the college hasn't made more use of it," Carol said. "It has loads of potential as accommodation, or extra tuition rooms, or even as an investment."

"Yes," Rob said. "The thing is, we don't need any of that, and we like it very well as it is."

"Can't say fairer than that," Chris said. "Can we, like, get inside now?"

Inside was a bit of a let-down as far as Carol was concerned; the various rooms had been rendered anonymous by the replacement of furniture with the paraphernalia of teaching, and several were being used as storerooms. Dust hung in a heavy pall under the harsh fluorescent lights. They eventually settled in what seemed to have been used as a common room of sorts, and Rob switched on an ancient cassette recorder.

"Tetrad Project, phase one," he said, apparently for the benefit of the tape. "Subject, Mr Christos Kyriakou."

"What do I have to do?" Chris said.

"Well, change into something maybe?" Monica suggested.

"Gotta be the centaur then," Chris said. "Can't do the wingy thingy in here, and there's nowhere for you to push Caz off of to make me go unicorn." He grinned at Carol's outraged expression.

"I'm kidding, of course."

"Well, one of the things we need to establish is whether the forms come in that set order, or whether you can in fact change into any one of them," Rob said.

"Yeah," Chris said, "only there's a problem. I don't know how to change into any of them."

"I thought this might help," Monica said, holding something out on the palm of her hand. It was a tetrahedron, folded from white cardboard.

"Oh, yes, you used to make those at school," Carol said. "You got hung up on dodecahedrons for a while, and we couldn't move for the things."

"I just like the shapes," Monica said.

"Well, nice thought, but I can't see it helping," Chris said.

"I thought maybe if you could remember any of the markings on the sides, they might have some relation to the different creatures," Monica said, a little uncertainly.

"I only saw it for a minute," Chris protested. "I'm not blooming Stephen Hawking, you know."

"Yes, that is painfully apparent," Rob said in a tone quite different from the one he normally used.

Chris blinked, stared, and finally said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, dear God, the complete soap opera cliché," Rob sneered. "Well, what else can one expect after all, from such a sad little oik."

"Who are you calling--" Chris frowned. "What's an oik?" he said, aside to Carol.

"Just another jumped-up little immigrant," Rob went on, "looking for the easy life in a civilised country. Sponging off his betters. Hoping to marry above his station." He was watching Chris's face closely as he spoke. "You know, maybe we should turn him over to the police. There must be someone who can get that thing out of him so that someone more worthy can—Chris, is it happening?"

"What?" Chris just had time to look confused before the centaur exploded out of him. Carol and Monica, who had sensed what Rob was doing, had prudently stepped back. As it was, one hoof went through a wooden chair, and Chris's head almost caught the light fitting.

"Wow," Monica said.

"You've got some nerve," Chris said to Rob, who had subsided into an armchair.

“Yes, well, the purpose of this experiment is to make sure I never have to do that again. It was most distasteful. And besides, the law of diminishing returns—yes, well. Did you remember anything at all about the process?”

“Yeah, I did. Got a pen?”

Carol produced a ballpoint from her handbag, and Chris grabbed a dusty sheet of paper that was lying on top of a bookshelf and drew quickly. “That goes on one side of your model,” he said to Monica, who seemed to be having trouble breathing.

“Model? What model--” She blinked. “Oh, right, sorry,” she said, taking the paper. “Which way up?”

“That way,” Chris said, taking the paper back and turning it. “I don't know what's on any of the other sides, but this is a start, isn't it?”

“Yes,” Rob said. “Let's not write anything on the actual model for the moment, till we know how the faces stand in relation to each other. Well done, Chris. And Ms Fleming, of course.”

“Call me Monica,” Monica said vaguely, staring at Chris. “Any time.”

“I think we had better go outside,” Carol said, a little sharply.

“I think so too.” Rob picked up the tape recorder and led the way down the corridors, Chris having to duck to get through the doors, and out into the enclosed yard where the car was parked. “I don't suppose you can turn that off, Chris?” he said, resting the machine on an upturned plant pot.

“Turn what off?”

“Your—your body odour,” Carol said. Monica was shaking her head and taking deep breaths.

“I dunno,” Chris said. “What's wrong with it?”

“I don't think deodorant is going to do any good,” Carol said.

“You're emitting some rather potent pheromones,” Rob explained. “They have a profound effect on the opposite sex.”

“Cool!” Chris said, a second before he caught Carol's glare. “I mean, that's awful,” he amended.

"Washing might mitigate the problem for limited periods," Rob suggested, "but I don't think there's any permanent way of solving it."

"Well, never mind that for the moment," Carol said. "Chris, do you think that symbol is going to help you learn to change without getting mad?"

"I think so," Chris said. "Won't help me change back though." He tossed his head and snorted.

"I'm bored. Anybody wanna ride?"

"How do you mean?" Monica said.

"Ladies' choice," Chris said with a grin.

"Will you please both shut up for a moment!" Carol shouted. "Chris, no riding, of any kind. Monica, just..." She stopped and ran her hand over her forehead. "I'm sorry, I know you can't help it with Mr Smelly emitting all over the place, but please try to remember he's my boyfriend, all right?"

"Yes, of course." Monica was instantly contrite. "Sorry. Have you ever considered a threesome? No. Sorry. Bad. I'll shut up."

"You can't control me, you know," Chris said to Carol.

"With the real Chris I wouldn't have to," Carol said, and instantly regretted it.

"Can we get back to the programme as advertised, please?" Rob said. "Oh, bugger, I forgot the, erm, yes. Excuse me." He turned and trotted back into the building.

Chris stretched and scratched his broad chest. "What's next? Oh yeah, the wingy thingy."

"Pegasus," Carol said, "was its name."

"Peggy for short, right? Listen, don't call me Peggy, okay?" Chris grinned.

"What made you change into that last time?" Monica said.

"Guess I was scared. I woke up suddenly on my own, and it was dark and I was shut in."

"Well, maybe we could--"

Monica's words were cut off by the screech of sirens and brakes, seeming to come from all around them. Lights flared in the darkness and a bullhorn voice bellowed "FREEZE!"

This time Carol and Monica were not quite quick enough. Fortunately the suddenly appearing wings only caught them glancing blows, but it was enough to knock them off their feet. Rolling over, Carol saw the winged horse dancing in terror, the great wings sweeping back and forth, preparing to catch the air and fling itself aloft--

"Magic bridle!" a voice yelled, and Rob launched himself on to the bare back of the beast, something in his hands that looped itself around the horse's muzzle and slid between the champing jaws. Almost immediately the pegasus ceased to struggle for flight.

"That's right," Rob said, a little breathlessly. "You know about the magic bridle. It's the only thing that can tame you, isn't it? Bellerophon used it on the original Pegasus, back in ancient Greece. And, of course, Chris, you know that this is not a magic bridle at all, don't you, because I mentioned not having one. But since you're not scared any more, it doesn't matter, does it?"

Chris the pegasus arched his neck to give him a filthy look, but acquiesced, and Rob removed the perfectly ordinary bridle and handed it to Monica.

"What," Carol said, "the *hell*--?"

"They use this yard for open air theatre in the summer," Rob said. "The lights and sound system were already in place. The sirens and so on I recorded off an episode of one of those police shows this afternoon. Effective, don't you think?"

"And you didn't feel some warning might have been appropriate?"

"Ah, but, you see, it was vitally important that you be as scared as Chris was. Otherwise he would have known there was nothing to worry about and he wouldn't have changed."

"You are an evil, evil man," Monica said judiciously.

"Argue with my results," Rob said, sounding to Carol unwarrantably smug. "Now then. Chris, I'm assuming you can't talk in this form, so if you can understand me, stamp your foot twice."

After a long pause, Chris stamped his foot. After an even longer pause, he did it again.

“Good. Now, when you changed this time, did a symbol appear in your mind's eye? Twice for yes, once for no.”

Two stamps.

“Will you be able to remember it when you return to human form?”

Three stamps, and another dirty look.

“I think that means 'how the hell should I know?’” Carol translated.

“Fair point. Well, we'll just have to take the chance. We—whoa!”

Chris, with Rob still perched on his back, had folded his wings and was walking sedately across the yard. In one corner stood a bucket of sand, a few cigarette butts indicating the purpose for which it was used. Chris lifted his foot and delicately tipped it over.

“He's gorgeous, isn't he?” Monica whispered to Carol. “I think I want to paint him. Or sculpt him or something.”

“I didn't know you could paint.”

“I can't. That's the thing.”

“Mm.” Carol was finding it easier now to cope with the insistent demands of inspiration that Chris seemed to engender in this form. Every shape seemed to have its—well, not exactly its downside, but its dangerous side for the people around it. As the pegasus, he would never go unnoticed.

Chris spread the spilled sand out to form a flat surface, and began making precise, delicate movements with the very tip of his hoof.

“He's drawing the symbol, look.” Monica darted forward, ballpoint in hand, and quickly copied the drawing in the sand on to the piece of paper on which Chris had drawn the first one. When she had it, she quickly folded the paper and held it out to Carol. “Take it,” she said. “Quickly, please. Before I draw all over it—thanks.”

Chris scuffed out the drawing, and then looked back over his shoulder at Rob again, this time pleadingly. Rob slipped off his back, and the winged horse visibly relaxed.

"Two down," Rob said, "two to go."

"I hope you're not thinking of pushing me down any more hills," Carol said.

"No, no," Rob said. "Besides, I don't think that would work twice. Just wait here a moment, would you?"

He turned and went back into the building. Chris was watching them nervously from the other side of the yard, looking as if at any moment he might take off.

"What do you suppose he's gone to get?" Monica said.

"A gun? I don't know," Carol said. "I can't see how he's going to convince Chris that he'd willingly hurt one of us, not after last time. It's not like he's a real horse, or whatever, it's still his brain in there."

"This is so far beyond weird I—I've just given up," Monica admitted. "Two days ago I thought I had the world sorted out. You know, what could happen and what couldn't. I didn't know anything, did I?"

"I think most of the world's still the same," Carol said. "It's just our bit that's gone peculiar."

"Hello?"

They looked up.

"Oh my God," Carol breathed.

Mr Robert Mallinson, otherwise known as John Dower of the United States Secret Service, drew up outside the Man At Arms in Avevale, got out of his car and walked up to the doors.

"We'm closed, look," said the hairy face that appeared in the chain-length gap in the doorway in answer to his knock.

Mallinson flashed his identification.

"Where'd yer get that then?" the face demanded. "Costume shop in Eltdown?"

Mallinson drew his Knappertsbusch KV15 with the specially filed hammer lock and poked it at the approximate centre of the tangle of hair and beard.

“I didn't get this in no stinking costume shop,” he said coolly. “Now let me in and get everyone in the building together in one room. I am on the business of the United States government, relating to a matter of national security, and if you get in my way I will shoot you.”

The door shut in his face. Mallinson waited for the occupant to undo the chain and open the door. After a couple of minutes it dawned on him that this was not in fact going to happen.

He levelled his gun at the keyhole, and hesitated. The last six times he had tried shooting at a lock he had only succeeded in jamming it solidly. Besides, the Secretary had asked him to exercise restraint.

He stamped back to his car, got in, reclined the seat as far back as it would go and settled himself for slumber. Years of training had produced in him the ability to sleep instantly in any position or environment, and wake instantly when the situation called for it.

Unfortunately, it had done nothing for the intervening period.

Dower snapped awake as something hit his side window with a loud clunk.

“STOP THAT BLOODY SNORIN' AND LET US GET SOME SLEEP!” came a stentorian yell from an upstairs window.

Dower hesitated, and his hand hovered over the button marked “Rocket Launcher”...but the Secretary had spoken, and Dower's conditioning in that area went even deeper than the sleep training. Wordlessly he put the car in gear, turned round, and set off back toward Eltdown, where he recalled seeing a Travel Inn.

CHAPTER NINE

“You know what's got to happen now,” Rob said, standing pale but resolute on the sloping roof of room 3b, with one hand clutching the frame of the bell tower. “Don't you, Chris?”

“Oh my God,” Carol moaned. “Come down, Rob, please come down.”

“You have to turn into the unicorn,” Rob said. “We only know one way to trigger that change. You know I'm not going to hurt Carol or Monica, at least not intentionally—do stand a little

further that way, please, ladies—so this is the only option.” His foot slipped a little on the smooth slates, and he grabbed the frame with his other hand as well. “It’s not a long enough fall to kill me, I think. I have to admit, though, that I’m not looking forward to it...so it would be a great help if you could work out how to change anyway.”

The pegasus whickered and shook its head. Carol clutched at Monica.

“He’ll have a rope around him,” Monica said uneasily.

“No he won’t,” Carol whispered.

“Of course, it’s possible that self-inflicted hurt won’t trigger the change anyway,” Rob went on, the shake in his voice coming through despite his best efforts. “We don’t know. In which case this that I’m doing will be for nothing, and Carol and Monica will have to find another way to do it. You might want to think about that for a moment, Chris.”

The pegasus unfolded its wings and beat the air, rising a little off its front feet.

“But the way I see it--” Rob slipped again, and saved himself with a desperate grab at the tower.

“The way I see it, there isn’t much of a choice. You have to learn how to master this power. So we have to understand the changes, and the only way to do that without serious bodily harm is for you to learn how to trigger them at will. We have two diagrams. We need two more. Try to make the change, Chris. Imagine what will happen when I fall. Try and do it with an imagined injury, a future pain, rather than a real one in the present.” He glanced down, and swallowed.

“Please.”

“Can a horse do that?” Carol whispered.

“None of the ones I’ve ever dealt with could,” Monica whispered back. “No imagination, any of them.”

“Well, here goes,” Rob said, and let go of the bell tower. Almost at once his feet began to slip, carrying him closer and closer to the edge. He fell backwards on to the slates, scrabbling with hands and feet, but nothing helped. His foot hit the ancient guttering, and it gave way. Carol stifled a scream as he slipped over the edge—

A flash of white, a thump, a desperate beating of wings and a hearty “Oh, you *stupid*—” and Chris and Rob were gone, borne away into the night sky.

“He caught him,” Monica said numbly.

“It was the logical thing to do,” Carol said, in the same tone.

“What do we do now?”

“That will depend.”

“On what?”

“On whether there's any drink in this place,” Carol said with an air of resolution.

“But—”

“Look,” Carol said wearily, “I love Chris and I'm going to see him through this, but I've just had enough, all right? He and Rob can take care of themselves, so they can damn well take care of each other for a while. I'm taking the night off and I'm getting rat-arsed, and if I can't do it here I'll do it at home.”

“Fair enough,” Monica said. She rummaged in her handbag and produced a slim silver flask.

“This do for starters?”

“So,” said Rob, a trifle breathlessly, “what was that all about?”

Chris the pegasus pawed the ground with one hoof.

“You know that was just about the dimmest thing you could have done, don't you?”

They were once more on the bare, scrubby top of Grimmans Hill. A few stars peered myopically through the cloud cover at them.

“Carol will be worried sick, and anyone could have seen us, and--” Rob clutched his forehead dramatically. “All right, I can see why you did it, an ounce of prevention and all that, but couldn't you just for once have thought about what I was trying to do and—and worked with me a little?”

Chris snorted and shook his mane.

“So what do I have to do to get you to change into the unicorn?” Rob said, looking round and lowering his voice absurdly on the last word as he remembered where they were. “Actually go around hurting people? Carry a cook's knife under my jacket? Rob the Ripper of Avevale strikes again? Is it going to come to that?”

Chris whinnied indignantly. Then he stopped, assumed what even on a horse's face was clearly a thoughtful expression, and abruptly morphed back into the centaur.

“I was fed up not being able to get a word in edgeways,” he said. “Do you always talk this much?”

“Not usually to horses,” Rob said, with some relief. “Well, it's good to know you can actually do that. So the diagram was the secret after all?”

“Not exactly,” Chris said. “It's the key to a whole lot of things—feelings, and smells, and sounds, that just say “centaur” to me, and I have to hold them all in my head at the same time. It's harder in the pegasus form, though. I think its brain is like more horsey, you know? Not so clever. The unicorn's smarter.”

“Or would be if we could get at it,” Rob grumbled.

“Actually, I think I can help you there,” Chris said, turning away for a moment.

Rob never even saw the punch coming.

“Anyone who says teachers don't drink,” Monica proclaimed, “is a bloody liar.” She pulled a dusty bottle out of a cupboard and flourished it triumphantly.

“How do you know?” Carol said. She had had more than half of the surprisingly potent contents of Monica's flask, and was feeling much better for it, though a small part of her was being unpleasant about how bad she was going to feel in the morning.

“Well,” Monica said, wrestling with the screw top, “Why d'you think they call it Teachers' whisky?”

Carol stifled a giggle, and accepted the bottle when it was passed over. Not whisky, but some kind of vodka. She took a long swallow, and wondered why people always said it was tasteless.

“No, seriously,” Monica said. “Seriously. I dated this teacher once. Well, a few times. Well, he was a teaching assistant really...but he took me to this party, my God. You have never seen so many people get so drunk so quickly. And these are the people who have responsibility,” she paused, checking back over the word, “who have responsibility for the education of the young.”

“Well,” Carol said, passing the bottle back, “they don't drink while they're educating, though, do they? I mean, that's probably why they do it so much when they're not.”

“Not what?”

“Not educating. I mean teaching.”

“D'you s'pose Rob drinks?”

“Not to excesses—to excess. I've never known him intoxicated while he was on the job.”

“Ah, but could you tell?” Monica leaned forward, and after a couple of tries managed to get her elbow balanced on her knee to point a finger at Carol. “He might have been concealing it.”

“What, you mean like you are now?” Carol said, trying valiantly not to giggle again.

“I am concealing nothing,” Monica stated. “I am completely honest about the fact that I am quite pissed. Not completely, you understand. Just moderately.” She squinted at Carol. “You, on the other hand, are completely legless.”

“Well, you're not as used to it as I am,” Carol said.

Monica frowned. “That didn't make sense. Whish proves my point.”

“What're we going to do if Chris comes back?”

“You're not s'posed to be thinking about that,” Monica said, wagging a finger in her general direction. “This is us being independent and not getting caught up in all this nonsense 'bout Greek mytho—” She burped, and passed the bottle back at last. “—logical beasties.”

“Sorry.” Carol swigged, and passed the bottle back again. “Didn't mean for you to get caught up in it. Really.”

“Not your fault,” Monica said generously. “I exonerate you completely. 'S Chris's fault. Shouldn' have done it. Bad Chris, no biscuit.” She snorted with laughter, and Carol joined in. It was good to laugh.

What was less good was the voice from the shadows that said “Good evening.”

Father Krebs had lost some little time ferrying two incapably drunk teenagers to within a discreet distance of their respective homes, but by a stroke of luck he had seen the white shape erupting into the air from the depths of the wood, and had spent only a second debating whether to pursue it to its destination or track back to its origin, before opting for the latter course. It was faster than he was on foot and more manoeuvrable than he was in the car. The place it had come from, however, wasn't going anywhere and might hold some clues. He had a good eye for distance, and finding the building had presented no problems, particularly when he got near enough to hear the laughter.

“Who are you?” one of the two young women said, standing up a little precariously.

“I beg you, do not be alarmed,” Father Krebs said, emerging into the light. “I am a priest.”

“Are you with,” the other girl said, “the College?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Father Krebs said smoothly, having no idea what she was talking about, but willing to use whatever presented itself. “And I am certain that this is not an appropriate way for you two to behave on College property.”

They stared at him for a moment, and then collapsed in gales of laughter again. Finally the shorter of the two girls steadied herself and walked carefully towards him.

“In the first place,” she said, fixing him with a slightly unfocussed eye, “if you were with the College, I'd know, because I am the College secreteckery. In the third place, you can' be with the College, because the College is a secular inst—institi—place. An' in the second place—”

“Fourth place,” the other girl put in.

The shorter girl rounded on her, and almost fell over. “Monica, please. I am tryin' to presen' my arguments in a logical an' orderly an' logical manner.” She swivelled back to Father Krebs. “An' in the sixth place, I have to tell you that if you do not move out of my way this very moment, there is a strong possibility that I am going to throw up all over y—”

The warning came just a second too late. Father Krebs jumped back as a torrent of mostly liquid vomit cascaded all over his jacket and the cassock underneath. The taller girl got up, grabbed her companion's hand, and half dragged her past him and out of the room.

Uttering a most uncanonical phrase in his native tongue, Father Krebs made to follow, and found himself unable to proceed, due to the arm round his neck and the hand twisting his own arm up behind his back.

"I, on the other hand," said a steely voice in his ear, "am with the College, and I would very much like to know what you are doing trespassing on College property."

Stumbling, falling, picking themselves up again as the alcohol burned itself painfully out of their systems, Carol and Monica made it out of room 3b and into the trees.

"Who was that?" Monica gasped.

"I dunno," Carol panted. "Keep running."

"But—"

"He must be one of those people after the thing." Carol leaned against a tree, fighting for breath.

"Otherwise why would he be here?"

"Ask me another."

"Sorry, I think I'm gonna be sick again."

"You really don't drink much normally, do you?"

"Hardly ever." Carol retched, but nothing came up. "Ooh God, I need a drink."

"Sorry, I left it behind."

"I meant water."

"Maybe if we go back--"

"I am not going near that place till I know that man has gone."

“Carol?” said a voice, this one familiar. The girls looked around wildly, and saw Rob leading Chris the unicorn through the trees. “What on earth are you doing out here?”

Slowly consciousness returned to Father Krebs. He was lying on his bed at the Man At Arms, fully clothed in his cassock, jacket and shoes. For some reason they seemed to be encrusted with vomit.

Gingerly he explored his memory. He remembered seeing the photographs the boy Kieran had taken, of what certainly looked like a unicorn, with a man and two young women. He remembered getting rid of the boy and his intended amour, fairly drunk and thoroughly terrorised, and then seeing something white in the sky as he returned to his car. Beyond that, things started to get a little difficult.

One thing was certain. He had encountered opposition. They were, metaphorically at least, shooting at him, and if that young Canadian fellow he had met at the Toronto conference in '92 was to be believed, that meant he was doing something right. He was certainly in the right place. What he needed now was more information; on the thing, whatever it was, that he was looking for, on the nature and number of his antagonists, on whatever it was that had happened tonight that for some reason he could not remember. Clean clothes would be nice as well.

He touched his neck. There would be a bruise there tomorrow. A snatch of his Order training returned to him, a hold that could be used to induce unconsciousness by applying pressure to a nerve cluster at the base of the brain. If prolonged it could have an adverse effect on short-term memory. Very popular with some intelligence agencies.

He got up, wincing at the pain in his neck, locked the door on the inside, and started to undress.

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Carol felt a familiar golden warmth coursing through her, and all her nausea and pain melted into nothing. She looked into the infinite depths of the eyes of the unicorn, and felt ashamed.

“Sorry,” she said. “You didn't have to do that.”

“Hey, what about me?” Monica said.

“Are you in pain?”

"No, but I will be in the morning."

"Self-inflicted," said Rob sanctimoniously. "And how you two could think of getting plastered at a time like this is beyond me."

"Oh really?" said Monica. "Well, then, I suppose you won't be needing me for anything. I'll just be off home."

"Um--" Rob frantically back-pedalled. "Well, er, perhaps I was a little hasty in rushing to judgment, of course you have both been under a great deal of stress, and quite frankly if you could see your way clear to, er--"

The unicorn was already walking towards Monica. At the gentle touch of its horn on her forehead she closed her eyes and smiled blissfully. "See," she said, "he understands. Come on, then, Chris."

She sat down on the damp ground, and the unicorn knelt and laid its head in her lap. Carol waited for the brief stab of jealousy, and was surprised when it didn't come. Somehow, in this short time, Monica had become one of them, part of the relationship.

The dark eyes closed, the beast took two long slow deep breaths, and then became Chris in his own shape.

"Hello again," he said. "Sorry about going off like that. But I got all the diagrams now."

"Well, I just hope you weren't seen," Rob said.

"Actually, I think he was," said Carol.