

CHAPTER TWELVE

Life at the Club With A Nail In It settled, over the next couple of days, into something almost like a routine. Monica insisted on returning to her flat and her job, on the grounds that the leisured lifestyle was a little too wearing. "I love you dearly, darling," she said, "but a girl has to have some time to relax, and you're both safe here, aren't you?"

"But what about you?" Carol said. "That freaky priest knows you, and so does Vassily. I mean--"

"Please," said Shirinin. "You need not concern yourself on my account." Somehow he and they had drifted into a sort of companionship; he was as loth to leave the Club, and report his failure to his superiors, as they were to leave it and encounter whomever else might be on their trail. Today he had joined them for breakfast.

"Carol has a point, though," said Hugh. "People in my line of work do tend to such pastimes as kidnapping, torture and blackmail. If you were taken on your way home and we got a note saying 'hand over the tetrad or your friend will die,' accompanied by maybe an ear or a finger--"

"Then you'll know what to do, won't you?" Monica said. "And whatever you decide will be fine with me. I'm not letting this thing Chris has take control of my life. There has to be someone carrying on as normal in the face of all this weirdness. This is the moment I was born for."

"Um," Rob Fayne said.

"Are you bunking off as well?" Chris said.

"Oh good heavens no."

"I'm glad to hear it." Chris heaved himself up from the table. "I'm gonna go practise. See you, Monica."

In the silence that followed his departure, Monica looked down at her empty plate.

"Don't pay any attention," Carol said quickly. "He'll get over it."

"He's getting bored," Rob said unexpectedly. "He's controlling the changes perfectly now, but we haven't managed to come up with anything else to try. Also, none of his forms are madly keen on being cooped up."

"Well, we can hardly help that," Carol retorted. "So what else can we do? Study each face, the words said. We're doing that."

"Really? When he becomes the centaur you--well, find it hard to concentrate. The pegasus distracts us all with inspirations, and the unicorn with its beauty. And if it comes to that, how much studying have you done on Chris himself?"

"I know Chris," Carol protested.

"Do you?" Monica said unexpectedly. "Darling, have you actually looked at him since he got back? Because he's not a bit like you described him. Little skinny guy, you said. About your height. He's got at least six inches on you, and he's built like--" She laughed suddenly. "I was going to say a Greek god, wasn't I?"

"His human form is changing, then," Rob said, "becoming closer to the ideal. The other forms are changing as well as he gets used to inhabiting them. I'd say the study of the faces has barely begun."

"It might never end," Shirinin offered. "You are treating the inscription as a shopping list--first get this, then get that. Bring back the successfully studied faces, then go out to travel the edges, and so on. Perhaps the tasks are to be considered as one task in many parts. Perhaps they cannot be completed and ticked off--yes?--in that piecemeal fashion."

There was a short silence.

"Sorry, when did you find out about the inscription?" Rob said in a strained voice.

"You have not made any secret of it," Shirinin replied. "But in any case, a similar inscription was discovered in the nineteen-seventies in a mountain cave in Kyrgyzstan. I told you the tetrad was Russian in origin."

"And there's one in a temple in Hokkien, and one in an abandoned city in northern Peru, and one in the backwoods of the Northwestern Territories, and probably there were many more at one time," Hugh said. "I've been doing some research. The library here has a number of volumes that never got on to the Internet. Most of the other tetrads seem to have been lost over the millennia, but that there were others--and that they worked broadly the same way--is beyond dispute. This one is most definitely the Greek model, Vassily." He smiled disarmingly. "Sorry."

Shirinin matched him smile for smile. "You can hardly blame me for trying a long shot. But my suggestion was made in all seriousness and out of a desire to help," he went on, turning back to

the others. "The tetrad is a whole thing. You must treat it as such if you wish to unlock its mystery."

"All right," Carol said. "Fair enough. How?"

"Well," Shirinin said judicially, "for one thing, you seem to be spending so much time fighting the effects each face has on you that it must make it very much harder to think creatively and constructively about the matter in hand. Perhaps you should consider letting those effects run their course."

"That's easy for you to say," Carol blurted, and reddened furiously.

"Yes, it is." Shirinin got up. "Harder to do. But if you wish to know all the faces of your friend, to know them truly, then a good place to start is by not looking away." He half turned, then turned back. "You know, I am glad that it is not only a Russian thing. Each culture, after all, has its mythical beasts, and folklorists identify them as metaphoric symbols for aspects of the human psyche and think they are being so clever." He paused. "Why are we so sure there were no clever people before us?"

"He's a very odd kind of spy," Monica said after he had gone.

"Odd is normal in our game," Hugh said. "You should meet some of the Americans I've had to deal with."

"Ooh, stories." Monica laughed. "Don't tell me. You'd have to kill me."

"I wouldn't," Hugh said. "But someone would."

"And on that note, darlings," Monica said, getting up, "I must be off. I'll ring you tonight, Carol. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I'd better go check on Chris," Carol said.

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Three weary, footsore travellers, having trudged the length of Avevale's three main streets, trudged back again along convergent courses which coincided at the door of the Man At Arms. Don-Jay held the door open for Pricklow and Gefarr, pulled out their chairs for them, ordered and paid for their drinks (barley water for Pricklow, kahlua and grenadine for Gefarr, water for

himself) and carried the tray to the table. Only when he had set it down did Gefarr give him leave to struggle out of the heave backpack and sit down on a wooden stool.

"That was dispiriting." Pricklow spoke for them all.

"The artifact has moved on, that is all," Gefarr said flatly. "We will follow it. Don-Jay, you will locate suitable transport. We can retrieve the rest of the equipment on the way."

"I'm gonna need some--" Don-Jay began.

"Pricklow," Gefarr said, and Pricklow hastily fumbled in his inside pocket and produced an ancient shovel purse. *Well, whaddya know*, thought Don-Jay as the older man opened it and rummaged inside. *Actual decimal currency. Quite a bundle, too. Helloooo, Doctor Moneybags.*

"Receipts," Gefarr said as Don-Jay pocketed a sheaf of notes. "And exact change, of course." As if he'd be so crass as to skim off the bottom when they knew he had it. No, this would be a case of finding the right moment and exercising the skills of his youth. A sudden stumble, a bit of the old legerdemain, and--

"And you are still sitting here why?" Gefarr said, and Don-Jay put down his untasted, tepid tap water and got to his feet again. He was halfway to the door when she spoke again.

"The rucksack."

"Can't I leave it here?" Don-Jay whined.

"Certainly, if you will be responsible for full reimbursement when it goes missing. Do you imagine that Doctor Pricklow and I have nothing better to do than sit here guarding the baggage while you saunter around the countryside?"

Wordlessly Don-Jay stalked back and resumed his burden. It nearly tipped him flat on his back.

It was only when he was standing outside the pub that it occurred to him to wonder how many car hire firms a one-horse village like this might rate.

The answer, as he was shortly to find out, was none.

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"That," said John Dower conversationally, "was just your pinky finger. Now stop lying to me. You know I want to help you, right?"

The figure lashed securely to the rustic picnic bench nodded frantically.

"Sure." Dower kept his tone light, easy. "But see, I can't help you unless you help me. Now I'm looking for a young man, kinda dark, maybe Greek, and two girls who were with him. Not three. Not one. Two. You keep telling me what you think I want to hear and I'm just gonna go on breaking fingers. I don't enjoy it. It's my duty. You see that, don't you..." He glanced yet again at the name badge. "Yasmin?"

The girl nodded again.

"These people are terrorists. Suicide bombers. They could be out to blow up your queen. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

A shake of the head.

"So you're gonna tell me what kind of vehicle they left in, which direction, and who they were with. Aren't you?"

Half an hour later, Dower got back into his car. It had not been as satisfying a session as he would have liked. The girl's accent had got worse as the pain levels increased, and she hadn't observed anything much at all. Goddammit, what kind of training did these people get? Any busboy in any diner at any run-down truck stop in the States would have known the car, make, model, license plate, colour, and had detailed physical descriptions of all the suspects ready to reel off at the first hint of torture. Even the so-called security guards had been useless, hardly delayed him at all.

Brits. Dower snorted disgustedly and gunned the engine. At least he had a little to go on. The car was an Alvis, and that combined with the description of one of the other men in the group gave him a name. Hugh Sacristan. Dower grinned as he tore out of the service station and on to the motorway at ninety. Dude had snubbed him one time at an Embassy shindig. Blown him off as if he was some kind of redneck asshole.

One thing in which John Dower fervently believed was payback.

A few minutes later, Father Krebs followed in Dower's wake, at a more sedate pace.

You could always rely on the Americans. They did so relish their network. And it so seldom occurred to them to take elementary precautions like--for instance--checking their vehicles for GPS trackers.

With God's will, Father Krebs had just saved himself a great deal of effort.

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As Don-Jay set off in search of transport, a sudden gust of wind sent a curl of dead leaves scudding across the street and into a narrow side alley. Moments later, a figure emerged from the alley; tall, erect, and aquiline of feature, swathed in a black cloak which swirled open in the sudden wind to reveal a flash of indigo lining. He sniffed, tasting the air; then he set off in Don-Jay's wake.

And, eighty-six miles away, on the hard shoulder of the M4, where a stocky, bearded man in leathers was wrestling with the engine of a decrepit, gaudily painted Routemaster bus, Dracul von Ryan jerked awake in his seat on the top deck, and uttered a sulphurous Gaelic oath.

"Wayne!" he bellowed, swinging from pole to pole towards the stairs. "Get this crate moving!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Carol drifted awake to a blissful glow permeating her entire body. She was nestled under Chris's arm, spooned against him under the covers in her room at the Club With A Nail In It, and there was not a trace of guilt or remorse in her.

She had gone to find Chris with no intention of doing anything differently. She had watched him changing from form to form--he was varying the sequence, human to pegasus, unicorn to centaur, centaur to human, and back--and they had talked, as usual, round and round, saying nothing that had not been said a hundred times--and gradually Shirinin's words had eased themselves into the back of her mind, had made themselves comfortable, had begun to seem like simple common sense. And so she had followed his advice. It had been so simple, so right, and so...

What the HELL?

Carol sat bolt upright in bed. She was alone--of course. It had been a dream. At least the last part was. *Thank God.*

There was no way--no way in hell--she was going to let her first time with Chris be with--that. Whatever the strange Russian spy might have said. She had held him, Chris, at arm's length for over three months--not, actually, when she considered it soberly in the cold light of morning, that much of an achievement--and while she wasn't going to be all Miss Priss and wait-till-we're-married about it, she wanted it to be...special. Something to remember for them both. Not something some mythical Greek beast seduced her into with his hypno voice and his...

Carol bounced out of bed and splashed cold water on her face several times from the basin on the sideboard. This was a nice room. Not home, of course, but homey in lots of little ways. She could see how someone could become quite comfortable living at one's club--she tried the phrase over on her tongue, and sneered at her reflection in the mirror.

But of course they couldn't stay. Not for very much longer. They would have to leave, somehow without attracting Shirinin's attention, and find somewhere safe to finish this, this whatever it was. Somewhere out of the way, far from people. She considered as she dressed quickly, thinking in passing that she was going to need a change of clothes and a launderette very soon. Monica had had the right idea, getting back to her real life. A wave of homesickness for her cottage in Avevale washed over her, and her eyes blurred.

Someone knocked on the door, and Hugh's voice said, "Carol? Are you decent?"

"Yes," Carol called, turning over possible destinations in her head. Scotland? Siberia? The North Pole? At any rate, it would be a long time before she saw her little home again. Pushing the misery deep down inside her, she went to open the door.

"We've got a problem," Hugh said without preamble.

Of course we have. "What's happened?"

"Chris has gone walkabout."

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"Last night," Shirinin said. "And I give you my word of honour that I had nothing to do with it. Now please put me down."

Carol relaxed the pressure on his windpipe, but did not release him. "What happened?"

"I was feeling a little restless, so I sat up in the lounge here reading for a while. As you can see, the lobby is perfectly visible from the lounge, and at about one-eighteen in the morning young Mister Kyriakou went out."

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"You didn't follow him?"

"An hour's head start, I think was the phrase." Shirinin smiled annoyingly. "While that would not be a problem in the case of a car journey, following one person on foot around London at night..." He spread his hands.

"Well, at least he was human," Rob said.

"And he's learned to control the changes," Hugh added.

"That's not the point!" Carol shouted. "He could be anywhere!"

"Keep it down, please," Pikestaff called from behind the bar, and Carol reddened furiously and subsided.

"However," Shirinin said, "I did take a small liberty with the letter of our agreement, one for which I think you will now thank me nicely, yes?" He displayed his smartphone. On it a small white dot blinked its way across a gridded map.

Carol glared at him.

"Thank you nicely, Vassily," Hugh said. "When we find him, you'll take it off, won't you? Otherwise I'll set Ms Varland on you again."

"Of course," Shirinin said.

"What was he thinking?" Carol wailed, earning another old-fashioned look from Pikestaff.

"I would imagine 'let me out' about covers it," Rob said, as they headed for the door. "We need to get out of the city, Hugh, before this happens again."

"Agreed," Hugh said shortly. "Hold hard a sec." He trotted down the steps and subjected the Alvis to a thorough-going inspection, lifting the bonnet, squinting under the chassis and

sweeping the entire vehicle with some kind of hand-held gadget, possibly his own smartphone. Shirinin gazed elaborately into the middle distance and hummed a little tune while this was going on. Carol, for her part, tried not to dance up and down with impatience. He could be anywhere, and they only had his word that he could control the changes...

"All clear. Hop in, everyone," Hugh said, and within minutes the Alvis was nosing into traffic on the main road.

"He seems to have stopped in the Bayswater area," Shirinin reported. He blinked. "Oh. Moscow Road. How symbolic."

"Easy then," Hugh said. "Vauxhall, then up around Hyde Park. Shouldn't take us more than half an hour."

"When were you last in London, my friend?" Shirinin said. "Hyde Park is never easy. In the middle of the morning rush hour?" He snorted.

"I can't understand it," Carol muttered. "Why would he go to Bayswater at one in the morning?"

"We'll ask him," Rob said, and squeezed her hand in what was evidently meant to be a comforting gesture.

It was well over an hour before they finally reached Moscow Road. Hugh manoeuvred the car down a side street and into a parking space Carol would have sworn was too small, and propped a plastic card under the windscreen wiper. "That should deter any marauding traffic wardens," he remarked. "Shall we continue on foot?"

They eventually found Chris in a Greek delicatessen, conducting an animated conversation with a balding man who turned out to be the proprietor.

"Oh, hi, babes," he said, seeing Carol. The ensuing explosion was only averted by Hugh's warning touch on Carol's shoulder.

"Hello, snookums," she said sweetly. "Fancy meeting you here. You might tell a girl where you're going."

"You were asleep," Chris protested. "At least, I assumed you were," he continued hastily. "I didn't know. I wasn't--"

"Yes, all right," Hugh said, cutting off the flow. "Why did you bunk off like that, Chris? I mean, I'm sure we'd all like to know."

"I was going stir crazy in there, man, you don't know," Chris explained. "I needed to get out and think. So I hopped a night bus and came up here. I got family round these parts. My uncle Aris."

A flicker of memory stirred in Carol's mind. "Has a bookshop," she ventured. "You told me it was in Paddington."

"Paddington's just up the road," Rob pointed out gently.

"So I pitched up here and knocked on his door--he's up all hours, he's like ninety--and he let me in and we talked a bit." Chris looked defiant. "I told him."

"Was that wise?" Hugh said, in his silkiest voice.

"Don't care," Chris said. "I had to talk to someone who--" He broke off, looking stricken.

"Someone who would understand?" Shirinin said. "Someone from your own cultural background? That makes perfect sense. None of us are Greek. How could we imagine--"

"How did he react?" Carol asked. She was damn sure not letting Chris off the hook for this one, but now was not the time.

"Took it in his stride," Chris said. "He's read a shitload of old occult stuff and religion and that, and he's got an open mind. You wanna come see him? It's just round the corner." He took a deep breath. "I think he could help us."

There was a pause.

"Fair enough," Hugh said. "If Carol's happy with that."

"Why not?" Carol said. "Since Chris has forced the issue."

"Sorry, Caz," Chris said humbly.

"Don't mention it. Which way is this place?"

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The psychedelic Routemaster bowled merrily down the M5, but nobody inside was singing.

Dracul von Ryan crouched over the small table that had replaced the two front seats on the left lower deck and pushed an unruly lock of black hair out of his eyes, which were green.

"Which way, Allie?" he said urgently.

"Ach, I dunno." The skinny orange-haired girl frowned, and stirred the cards around with a stained forefinger. Every card was blank. "West it was at first, but now I'm gettin' somethin' stronger from the east. One is the child o' the other."

"Child?"

"Caused by. Inspired. Don't push."

"You mean, one happened as a result of the other?" Dracul's usual stage Irish brogue had all but disappeared.

"If you're gonnae start tellin' me what I mean--" Allie's temper flared, and a nearby mug, fortunately empty, fell over.

"Sorry, sorry. I yield to the mistress of the art. Carry on skryin'!"

"Which way?" Wayne called from the cab.

"We're not sure yet," Dracul called back.

"Get sure in five minutes if I were you," was the response. "Otherwise it could all get a bit quantum."

Dracul turned to the other occupants of the bus. "Anybody? West or east?"

Tilda, brown and pretty, looked up from her dolls. "East."

Dik flipped a coin, covered it, peeked, looked up. "East."

Rachel Kwok pressed three buttons on her calculator. "I concur."

Marsha said nothing. She was praying.

"What are we looking for?" Frankie Terrell asked.

"Trouble, Frankie me boy," Dracul said. "As per usual."