

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Uncle Aris was evidently playing the rôle of the old antiquarian bookseller to the hilt, from his brocaded skullcap and velvet smoking jacket to his down-at-heel bedroom slippers. He shuffled out from behind his counter in the dim depths of his dingy shop to greet Chris with a beaming smile and the others with cautious old-world courtesy.

"Any friend of Christos is welcome here," he proclaimed, fixing them each in turn with a beady eye, "if friends you truly be. I am thinking right now the boy is needing all the friends he can get, no?"

Carol, Rob and Shirinin introduced themselves; Hugh bowed and greeted the old man in what was presumably his native tongue, addressing him as "Basileus." This obviously pleased him greatly. He chuckled and responded at length in the same language.

"Your friend, he knows the old ways," he told Chris. "This will help. We go to my room now."

Behind the shop was a warm, cluttered sitting room lit by several shaded lamps and the glow of a well-banked coal fire. Uncle Aris appropriated the big armchair whose velvet cover showed signs of having been a little too close to that fire for a very long time; the others sat or perched on a vast leather settee of considerable age. A portly black and white cat regarded them beadily from a rag rug in between the two, then curled up and went back to sleep.

"So," the old man began, once he had bustled around supplying them all with tea from a huge galvanised pot, "the boy he has the tetrad inside, yes. This is very good. My grandfather is telling his grandfather, many times, power must be faced without fear. Hide it away, pretend it does not be, this is to put off the problem to another time, to other people maybe less knowing. And see, right he was. What do you know? You know nothing!" He chuckled again. "Forgive, please. How could you know? You are of this time, of this place. You know cars, and computers, and guns."

Hugh and Shirinin both shifted uncomfortably.

"So, what have you done?" Uncle Aris asked abruptly.

"Well, we've been practising the changes--" Carol began.

"We?" Chris said.

"We've been watching Chris practise the changes," Carol rephrased, "and trying to learn more about them. Monica--" She stopped. "My friend Monica drew out the symbols on the tetrad for us, but we don't know what they mean--"

"Aha," Uncle Aris said. "First thing you must know. The symbols are nothing, they are a what do you say, a cribbing sheet. You must learn to make the changes without the symbols."

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

"Did you know the symbols the first time?"

"Well no, but--"

"Then you know they are not necessary. Helps, that is all. You must learn to change without them, yes. You know the words?"

Chris recited them in a sing-song voice. "Study each face. Travel each edge. Conquer each corner. Know thus the centre."

"What you think that means, hm?"

"Learn about the different shapes. Change from one to the other. Uh--" Chris stopped, confused.

Uncle Aris looked smug. "You see. You know nothing. You must think geometrical. More Greek."

"Geometrical?" Chris echoed blankly.

"Edges are places where faces meet. Points of similarity. Corners are opposite of faces. Dark side. You must learn inmost nature of centaur, of pegasos, of unicorn, and of human being too, yes. Learn where they differ and where they are alike. Learn the dark side of each and how to deal with. Then you will learn to know the one at the centre, who are you." Uncle Aris beamed, and just at that moment a bell tinkled from the shop.

"Should have set CLOSED sign," the old man grumbled, getting creakily to his feet. "Please be waiting here."

As he went through into the shop, Shirinin, with a finger to his lips, moved noiselessly to the doorway and peered after him.

"Ordinary customer," he reported in a low voice. "Local, I think." He paused. "Known to the old man."

"Who would know we're here?" Carol asked apprehensively.

"Anyone who is aware of my friend Hugh's very distinctive car," Shirinin said reprovingly. "I have told you many times, Hugh, that these are no longer the seventies. The last thing a spy needs in these times is a trademark."

"I'm not a spy any more," Hugh said automatically.

"For the purposes of this--what shall we call it? Caper?--you are," the Russian argued.

"What's the inmost nature of a centaur?" Chris said. "How'm I supposed to learn that?"

"By being one?" Hugh suggested.

"I've been a human being all my life and I haven't learned anything about that," Chris protested.

"Then now is the time to start, yes?" said Uncle Aris, popping his head through the curtain as Shirinin swiftly faded back to his previous position. "And you should leave here please. That was Mister Hadjipateras from the cafe, I know him well, but I too have seen the films and I do not wish my shop destroyed by some hooligan with a rocket launcher. There will be people after you, and they will not play the games."

"We know," Carol said. "There was this priest--"

"Yes, Rome will want it, no question. Also the Erleuchteten in Germany will have sent an agent, and the Americans too. Not all will be so accommodating as your SVR and your MI whichever." The beady eye danced once more from Hugh to Shirinin. "And there will be others. Freelance groups--the tetrad is like a neighbour practising his trumpet at three o'clock in the morning, you understand? Everybody hears it. So go, go, get out of my shop and go somewhere it does not matter what gets blown up."

"Can't you come with us, uncle?" Chris said.

"What for? All I can tell I have told. You must do the work now, yes?"

"But how?" Chris almost shouted.

"If I could tell you that," Uncle Aris said, "I would be you. *Mé genoito*." He started bustling around them and making shooing gestures as they began getting to their feet, and before Carol could gather her senses they were outside on the pavement and the door slammed behind them. As she looked back, the sign in the window flipped from OPEN to CLOSED.

"Charming," Rob said.

"I don't blame him," Hugh said. "Some of the people we might come up against are...less than polite. There's this one American..." He grimaced. "A real loose cannon, and he gets away with it because there are elements in the government who think they're living in a Don Siegel movie. His name's John Dower, and he's just the type they might send."

"And the priest we met, he'd be from Rome," Carol put in.

"One of their more secret secret orders. Probably the Dorus Dei. The--what?"

"Exactly what I was going to say," Rob spluttered. "You're not telling me there's actual an order of priests called Dorus--?"

"Dorus Dei. Translates as the Knot, or the Muscle, of God. Enforcers mostly, not priests as such, though they carry the appropriate titles and perks. If I may continue...the Erleuchteten, on the other hand, are one of a number of groups descended from the old Bavarian Illuminati, about which a great deal of rubbish has been written--they're ritual magicians and such, fanatically anti-religious. Whoever they send will probably wait till all the others have played their hand and then sweep in and pick over whatever's left of us."

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Don-Jay, returning to the Man At Arms empty-handed, found his way blocked by a tall figure in a black cloak.

"Hey, one side, bub," he began.

"You want to talk to me," said the man in the cloak.

"I--I mean, uh, yeah, sure," Don-Jay said.

"You want to tell me what you are looking for."

"Jeez, mister, I would if I knew."

"You want to tell me everything you know about your mission."

Don-Jay spilled the beans. It was really satisfying to tell this guy every detail of the last few days, a really good feeling. He couldn't remember ever feeling this good. The guy asked about the statuette of the man with the book, and Don-Jay described it in such detail that even he was surprised, or would have been if he hadn't been feeling so very, very good.

"Now you want to go away," the man said. "Very far away."

Don-Jay turned, without a second thought, and set off back up the hill with a spring in his step. The backpack seemed as light as air, and he felt he could walk for ever. He wondered if he could walk to America and get on a space shuttle. That would be good. He could kill the pilot and set the controls for deep space and just keep going. Far away. Very far away. That would be best of all. But for now he would just walk. Walking was good.

The man in the cloak, whose name was Count Sienkiewicz, watched him go with some amusement. He had fathomed Don-Jay within the first second of their brief acquaintance, and the man would be far better off away from his two odious associates. More to the point, his removal from the equation would render them largely irrelevant, at least for the time being. He had no desire to sully his aura by confronting them as well. The thing had been moved again. Very well. He would locate it, possess it, and return to his native land in triumph to begin preparation for the great new dawn of Erleuchterung.

Nothing could stop him. Unless...

He stifled the treacherous thought and slipped back into the alley. There was an errant gust of wind, and he was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Alvis sped along the motorway, leaving London and its environs far behind.

"Where are we going to go?" Carol said.

"Somewhere less populated," Hugh answered shortly from the wheel. "Uncle Aris was right. The more people around us, the easier it will be for Dower or somebody to force us to give ourselves up. I know a place."

"Abergenau?" Rob said, and Hugh nodded. "The College has a house and some land on the west coast of Wales," Rob explained to the others. "Mostly mountains and sheep, and the nearest village is forty miles away along horrible roads, but that's ideal for our purposes. I'll phone ahead when we stop for petrol."

"Won't they be able to track us?" Chris said. "You know, GPS and that?"

"Good point," Hugh said. "If you have phones, prepare to ditch them now. You too, Vassily."

"Perhaps I should have stayed behind," Shirinin grumbled, taking out his smartphone and regarding it ruefully. A moment later it was spinning through the air to land in a puddle on the verge.

"Don't look at me," Carol said. "I've never had one."

"I got rid of mine in Athens airport," Chris said.

"I think I left mine at home," Rob said, after a desultory search of his pockets.

"Typical," Hugh snorted. "You live in Avevale for a couple of years and the twenty-first century becomes just something that happened to other people."

"And this is a bad thing be...cause...?" Rob said.

"Never mind."

"What about other things?" Chris said. "I read somewhere the government could track you by the metal strips on the money in your pocket, or the chip in your credit card, or something."

"Myth," Hugh said succinctly. "This government has neither the technology, the manpower nor the will to establish that kind of surveillance. They prefer to rely on cameras and such. And, of course, on people believing that Big Brother is all-powerful."

Carol relaxed as the car sped on. It was pleasant to feel that somebody else was making the decisions. Since their hurried exit from the airport, she had become very much aware that this kind of thing--spies and chases and mystical quests--was not her forte. Rob, and then Hugh, had come in and taken over, and on the whole she was happy about that. She looked sidelong at Chris. He still looked worried. Then he caught her eye and grinned.

"Not what you had in mind for when I got back, eh?" he said.

"Not really, no." Carol sighed. "There doesn't seem to have been time to think."

"I know. Sorry, ba--Caz." The grin returned. "See, I'm learning."

"I really do want to go home, though," Carol said seriously. "The last time I saw my house the front wall was missing. I don't even know if I'm getting paid, or if they've written me off."

"You're getting paid," Rob said. "I signed you up to help me with my research project in room 3b."

"But we're not there."

"Trust me, nobody ever checks on room 3b. Anyway, I mentioned when I booked it that this project might involve some travel. Research, you know. I can call the Bursar if you like and just confirm when we stop."

"I wish you would," Carol said fervently.

"Consider it done." Rob glanced at Chris. "How are you doing, young man? Do you need to, er--" He mimed a rearing horse, and Carol tried not to laugh.

"M okay for the moment, thanks," Chris said. "Still too close to London."

For some reason Carol's eye was caught by an ancient, multicoloured double-decker bus in the other carriageway. *Bunch of old hippies*, she thought, obscurely pleased that such survivals were still to be seen. *As long as there are still hippies there may yet be hope.*

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Wayne nearly swerved into the adjoining lane as Allie let out a screech.

"What the steam--!" he ejaculated.

"It just passed us!" the girl yelled. "Goin' that way! Turn roond!"

"We're on a motorway, you dozy bint," Wayne growled. "Turning round could get a touch bumpy."

"No turning round," Dracul said firmly. "And Wayne, if you could keep to your bit of the road I'd take it as a kindness. Where's the nearest junction? Rachel?"

The tiny Asian girl consulted her tablet. "Nineteen miles, Dracul."

"Ach, we'll never catch it," Allie moaned.

"We don't have to catch it, child, we just have to be going in the same direction. Wayne--"

"I know. Next junction, go west."

"Might be quicker carrying on east and meeting them coming the other way," Dik offered.

"Yes, but it gets damp that way, and my passport won't cover all of you through Siberia. Not to fret, Allie my lovely, we can't lose 'em while we have you. Just keep your psychical eye out."

"I'll punch your psychical eye out one o' these days."

"What was that, me darlin'?"

"Nothing," Allie muttered.

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"Long streak o' pess that y'are."

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"Don-Jay is taking his, ah, time," Pricklow observed.

Gefarr said nothing.

"Should I, ummm...?"

"No." Unwillingly Gefarr roused herself to speak. "He would have been back by now. Either he has been intercepted or he has escaped. Either way I can track him." She delved into a pocket of her lab coat and produced a smartphone.

"You have him, ah, bugged?"

"Both of you," Gefarr said, smiling her lizard smile. "How do you think I know when Don-Jay is masturbating in the storeroom, or when you--"

"I wasn't aware that you did." Pricklow spoke hastily.

"You should have guessed it. You must know me by now." Gefarr launched an app and pecked at the screen with one stubby finger. "He appears to be halfway to Eltdown. Moving on foot."

"That does seem somewhat, ah, incongruous," Pricklow commented.

"Unheard-of is the phrase. Don-Jay despises physical movement of any sort, unless it originates from the right wrist and terminates in the--" Gefarr broke off. "He is clearly under duress of some sort. And either inhibited from speaking, or travelling alone, since the constant whining would by now have rendered any companion homicidal."

"True." Pricklow appeared to be contemplating something unappealing yet horribly compelling. "So, ah, what would be our next move?"

"Well," Gefarr said, smiling again, "neither of us is legally qualified to drive in this country, and while it would not concern me were you to attempt it, your pathetically inadequate distance vision would represent an unacceptable risk to my life. Our driver is five miles away and gaining, with more than half of our ready cash and half our equipment, the rest of which is even further away. I have enough money for two more of these drinks, which you will get for me. You have ninety-four pounds and eighty-seven pence in your purse, which you will use to obtain for us two rooms for one night, and then you will telephone our contact in Whitehall and obtain further funds and the use of a military vehicle. Reverse the charges. Is that sufficiently clear for you?"

"Er, yes," said Pricklow, gazing at her in wonder and admiration.

"In the morning," Gefarr continued, "we will retrieve the equipment from Don-Jay, take a further bearing on the location and vector of the artifact, and continue with the mission."

"And, ah, Don-Jay himself?"

Gefarr's shrug conveyed a world of indifference.

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