

tetrad

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TETRAD

by

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“And you will have to tell someone, of course.”

“Tell someone? Oh yeah, that's gonna work. Who'm I gonna tell? Who's gonna believe me?”

“Someone who trusts you, is who. Someone you trust. A friend. You have friends, no? But you must tell one person. You will need help. To keep the secret.”

“What about you? You dumped this thing on me. Why don't you help me?”

“I think you are getting more stupid as you sit there. First, I did not 'dump this on you.' You did that yourself. And second, you moron, I am dying.”

CHAPTER ONE

“Fancy a Greek?” said Monica.

“What?” Carol, lost in her own thoughts, was thrown for a second. Around her, in the cavernous space, harassed people pushed trolleys, impassive men in uniforms drove little trucks, and incomprehensible voices boomed out gnostic prophecies. It was a place to be if you had somewhere to go.

Monica gestured with one perfectly-manicured hand at the restaurant across the concourse. “I don't know about you, but I'm starving,” she said. “What time's his plane coming in?”

Carol looked again at her watch and at the flickering screens overhead, though she already knew. “Hour and ten minutes. Suppose we could. I'm not really hungry though.”

“Well, a coffee and a Danish then,” Monica said. “You still haven't told me anything about this Chris person. I must have all your secrets.” She made grabby hands in the air, and Carol laughed. Monica could always make her laugh. It partly made up for her being thin and pretty and well-dressed, and having hair that was an actual colour, and being able to afford to live in London. Partly.

“We don't have any secrets yet,” she said, when they were seated at a small round table with a mug and a plate each. “I only met him three months ago.”

“When he delivered a bunch of kebabs to the college, yes,” Monica said impatiently. “Obviously one of those Noël Coward moments. What's he like?”

“Well, he's...” Carol summoned up a mental image. “He's about my height, a bit skinny, dark—obviously—with the kind of brown eyes you can get lost in. He was studying art history at the college, but he had to stop when his mum died last year. He's working at the kebab shop for his cousin or something, trying to save up the money to come back to college. Or he was.”

“And then the rich grandfather showed up.”

“Well, wrote him a letter.” Carol frowned. “It's weird that--” She stopped and held up a hand as the speaker system delivered one of its incomprehensible utterances.

“We've got ages yet,” Monica said. “What's weird?”

“His mother never told him about his granddad,” Carol said. “I think she blamed him for his father dying. The granddad, I mean.” She thought a moment. “Chris's mother, blamed Chris's granddad, for Chris's father dying.”

“How did his father die?”

“On a plane, flying back to Greece. There was some kind of mid-air explosion. They put it down to mechanical failure, but I suppose she thought if his father—Chris's granddad, I mean--hadn't summoned him back he wouldn't have been on the plane.” Carol stared

across the bustling concourse, her blue eyes troubled. "And now he's done the same to Chris."

"You do know that Chris got there okay, don't you?" Monica said in tones of mock dread.

"Of course I do," Carol said. "He phoned as soon as he landed. He also phoned to let me know when he was arriving back, remember? And I phoned you and you very kindly offered me a lift from the station and—"

"But you said he sounded strange," Monica persisted. "Maybe there's been a switch. Maybe the person getting off that plane will be...da da *derrrr*....someone else."

"Not funny, Monica," Carol said in a strained voice, and Monica relented at once.

"Sorry sorry sorry, I'm a bitch. It's just so weird, you know? Like something in a book. Handsome Greek boy goes back to homeland to claim vast inheritance."

"I wouldn't have said he was handsome," Carol said judiciously. "And I don't suppose it'll be vast, they're not all shipping millionaires you know. But if it's enough to keep him while he finishes his education it'll be a plus."

"Yeah, 'cause the world's crying out for more art historians," Monica said. "What sort of job's he going to get with that?"

"Dunno," Carol said, "but he won't starve. He's not that kind of guy. If he has to go back to the kebab shop he'll go back to the kebab shop...but he won't have to."

Monica widened her blue eyes. "Touching faith the girl has. And after only three months too."

"I know him," Carol said. "Wait a minute." There was another announcement. "Athens, that's his flight. Come on."

"It's a bit early, isn't it?" Monica protested, but Carol was already halfway down the stairs. Monica gathered up her coat and purse and followed.

The arrivals lounge was full of people and luggage carts. All around Carol and Monica men and women and children were hugging each other, kissing, talking excitedly or just looking into each other's eyes as if they had crossed the realm of death to be together again. Which, in a way, Carol supposed, they had. She thought of Chris's father, and wondered what had gone through his mind in the last seconds of his life. She wondered if-

"Is that him?" Monica said, pointing. Carol looked, and something inside her unclenched, almost painfully. She let out a long breath she hadn't realised she was holding, and began waving, but Chris had already seen her and was pushing his cart towards them.

My God, he looks ill... she thought, and a moment later could not see what had given her the impression. Chris's skin was tanned from his brief spell under the sun, and his body and limbs even seemed to have filled out a little, become less wiry and whippet-like. He smiled when he caught her eye, and the smile was the same one she had fallen in love with. *Maybe handsome is the word after all*, she thought. And yet there hung over him a something, a sort of aura of trouble. Before she could pin it down, he was on her and she was in his arms, and she resolutely put the worry aside. Whatever might have happened to Chris while he was away, it had not affected his abilities as a kisser.

"You gonna introduce me?" he said, once they had separated.

"Nah, you were right, Carol," Monica said, "he's not a bit handsome." She held out her hand to Chris. "Monica Fleming," she said. "I'm your chauffeuse for today, at least as far as Paddington."

"Nice to meet you," said Chris, shaking the offered hand. "Chris Kyriakou. Guess you already know Carol."

"Monica," Carol said, "weren't you going to check out that perfume shop on the concourse?"

"Was I?" Monica looked elaborately innocent; then, in a moment, she relented. "Oh, all right. Ten minutes. And no frightening the trolley dollies."

Most of the first minute passed in a gentler, more relaxed embrace, during which the last of Carol's worries melted away. He was back. He was safe. Everything would be back to normal.

"How was it?" she whispered into his shoulder. "Traumatic?"

"Bit, yeah," he said. "Caz--"

"What?" The tone in his voice instantly put her on edge. He saw it, or felt it, and she knew he did.

“Nothing,” he said. “Only we're gonna have to talk. When we get home.”

“What about?”

“Some things I found out while I was there.”

She pulled away and looked up into his eyes. Yes, the shadow was there, faint but there. “Are we okay, Chris?” she asked, hardly daring to shape the words.

“What?” He was genuinely surprised. “No, 'course we are. That is--” He broke off, suddenly unsure. “As long as you're okay with what I've got to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“Not now,” Chris said urgently. “Look, Caz, it's okay. I haven't gone off you, I still wanna be with you. It's just something—something I found out about my family, okay? I'll tell you when we get home. Quiet, here she comes.” This last was delivered in a stage whisper that carried easily to the ears of the approaching Monica.

“That was never ten minutes,” Carol said.

“I bore easily,” Monica said. “Specially when kids half my age are coming up to me and saying 'can I help you madam?' in that special tone of voice for use on shoplifters and dotty old ladies.”

“Half your age?” Carol repeated.

“My spiritual age, darling,” Monica said. “I've been twenty-nine since I was born, and I plan to stay twenty-nine till well after I die. Are we going yet? I don't know about you, but airports always fill me with the urge to empty out my accounts and jet off to Brunei or somewhere.”

Carol smiled thinly. The contents of her account would possibly get her as far as Luton.

“Excuse me, Mr—ah—Kyriakou?”

The speaker was a man in a dark blue suit—or, no, Carol noticed, the jacket was actually a blazer—with close-cropped sandy hair and a pleasant, freckled face. He was carrying a clipboard, and wore an air of slightly harassed authority.

“Yes?” Chris said, sounding strangely wary.

“I wonder if you'd mind coming with me,” the man said. “There's some slight irregularity about your passport. It won't take a moment.”

“Can I see your identification, please?” said Chris.

“I hope you're not going to give me any trouble about this, sir,” the man said smoothly. “Just come with me and we can get this all sorted out—”

“Not till I see your ID,” Chris said.

“Now listen, sonny--” the man said, his face suddenly a lot less pleasant.

“Would this have anything to do with a delivery of paper towels?” Monica said, from behind the man. “Only that's what's on your clipboard—”

With shocking suddenness, the man made a grab at Chris, who jumped back, attracting the attention of a couple of airport security men.

“All right, then,” the man snarled. “You want it the hard way. Just remember, we tried being nice.” He glanced at the approaching security men and turned to head for the exit, at a casual stroll.

“Everything all right, sir?” said the security man.

“Yes,” Chris said in answer to Monica. “We're going.”

*

“Come in, Father,” said the thin man in the scarlet vestments. Father Krebs bowed and entered the richly appointed study, moving with a grace that belied his bulk.

“Your Eminence sent for me,” he said, bowing his head to kiss the cardinal's ring.

“Had I not, you would not have been here,” Cardinal Orgelli answered, with a little asperity. “Let us waste no time in stating the obvious.”

“Then,” Father Krebs said, “how may my order be of service?”

“There is an artifact,” the Cardinal began, “which the Holy Father seeks.” He moved behind his carved, gilt-encrusted desk and sank into his chair. Father Krebs remained standing. There was no other chair in the room.

“Tell me where and how it is guarded,” Father Krebs said, “and it shall be his.”

“It is not so simple,” the other said, holding up a hand. “We have sought this thing for many centuries, and always it has eluded us, so that till recently we believed it destroyed. Also, other parties are interested. We believe the accursed Erleuchteten have already sent one emissary to retrieve it, and where they go the Americans are never far behind. Others will follow them in turn. We must be first to trace its keeper.”

“When have we failed the Holy Father?”

“Since there has been no need to make use of your order since Alexander VI of blessed memory founded it, your record is excellent. I trust you to maintain this happy position.” The Cardinal leaned closer. “One more thing, Father Krebs. The Holy Father is a very busy man, and it is possible that, amid the hustle and bustle of his work, he may seem not to recall having requested this artifact. On the whole, it would be less embarrassing for all concerned if the matter did not have to be brought to his attention. I hope I make myself clear.”

“Entirely clear, Your Eminence.”

“Very well then.” The Cardinal handed over a bulky envelope. “Go with God, Father.”

Father Krebs bowed again and left the room. The Cardinal found himself contemplating the design on the back of the priest's cassock, illustrating the name that encircled it, which he translated automatically from the Latin: the Knot Of God, or alternatively the Muscle Of God.

Let us pray that this muscle will be equal to the task, he thought. The heathen thing must be secured and kept safe.

*

Donald Joseph Hershberger, who liked to be known as Don-Jay, stopped in his tracks and turned to survey the room. Something had changed. Some detail was out of whack. He needed to know if it was something he'd done, which would inevitably end up causing him trouble, or something he could blame on somebody else.

He eventually tracked it down to a small bronze figurine of a man in eighteenth-century dress, holding a book open at arms' length. The pages of the book were made of a variety of materials: gold leaf, exquisitely thin parchment, woven cotton were just some of them. All three of those pages were standing erect, as was the one made of an unidentified but still gorgeously coloured scarlet feather.

Don-Jay blew on the pages, and even tried pushing them down with one stained finger. They sprang up again.

The gadget was a detector of some kind, he'd heard, but what it was supposed to detect was a mystery to him. It wasn't static charge: the leaves of the electroscope next to it were completely inert. He sighed noisily, making the pages flutter again. This would have to be reported, and that would inevitably mean questions. He made sure that his magazines were safely stowed in the secret place, the one only he knew about, and went to find Doctor Pricklow.

The tall, spare man with the wispy grey hair was feeding Bio-Project Seventy-Four. Don-Jay tried to ignore the noises coming from the tank as Pricklow dropped the gobbets of raw meat into the steaming water.

“Uh...Doctor?” he said. He had to repeat himself twice before Pricklow turned and gazed at him reproachfully over his half-moon glasses. “Okay,” Don-Jay said. “Uh. Here's the thing. I was, uh, in storeroom five, taking inventory, and--”

“You took inventory there, ah, yesterday,” Pricklow said mildly. “And the day before.”

"Yeah, well, security in this place is crap, anything could have happened. Anyway, here's the thing..." Don-Jay hastily explained what he had seen. Halfway through, Pricklow cut him off in mid-babble.

"Four pages, you say? And those four in particular? You're quite sure?" He shook his head as Don-Jay started again. "I'd better, ah, come and see for myself. Which way was it pointing?"

"Which way?" Don-Jay parroted blankly.

"You didn't notice. Never mind. I'll go and look, you get the, ah, van ready. And alert Professor Gefarr. This could be extremely important."

Don-Jay made a rude gesture at Pricklow's retreating back.

*

In a pedestrian precinct in a small town in Oxfordshire, a thin girl was dancing to the beat of a drum.

The girl, Allie, had fire-engine red hair, five rings in one ear, four in the other and one dangling from her eyebrow. One eye was green, the other blue. She had shed her loathsome oversized green anorak and bovver boots to dance, and was revealed in a sleeveless pale blue batik vest and pale green leggings. She looked about fifteen. The dog, a long grey thing of the whippet persuasion, bounded around her as skinny, dark, obsessive Dik beat out an eleven-eight rhythm on his doumbek and several of the watchers tried to clap along.

A little way off, Tilda, plump and beautiful in the Latin way, was braiding a young black girl's hair and threading multicoloured beads on to it, and tiny Rachel Kwok was reading a large red-faced man's palm. Dracul von Ryan's Khaos Koven was earning its living.

Dracul himself, wearing a black leather waistcoat, irredeemably torn jeans and a ratty old grey blanket secured around his shoulders with a Celtic cloak pin, was watching with an avuncular air and tapping his foot in perfect time to the beat. Wayne and Marsha stood nearby, collecting plates at the ready.

As soon as he judged that nobody was watching him, Frankie slipped away from the others and made his way through the crowds till he was far enough way. Once out of sight, he crouched down with his back to a wall, switched on his pocket dictaphone and began to speak in the tense, hushed monotone he had practised for so many months.

"Day Two. This is Frankie--no, Frank Terrell reporting. I am actually undercover with a coven of witches, living on a derelict estate some miles out of town. I..."

He hesitated. Should he go back over the events that had led to his presence here? Would a recap be useful, or redundant? What would his heroes, the great investigative journalists--Smith, Bennett, Kolchak--have done?

Recap. They could always cut it out in the studio. Assuming that it got as far as a studio.

"I first joined this group yesterday, after observing them for some days entertaining crowds of shoppers in the pedestrian precinct. By claiming to be an unemployed, homeless person, I gained their sympathy and--"

He looked up. A middle-aged woman in a floral headscarf was standing over him, surveying him with a faint air of amused disdain.

"Tell your glorious leader," she began.

"Sorry?" Frankie said, affecting an air of impenetrable stupidity and a Liverpudlian accent of which he was particularly proud.

"Stop pretending to be Ukrainian, pin back those impressive lugholes and listen," the woman snapped. "Tell von Ryan (ridiculous name) that there's a job for him and his merry band. I don't expect him to take it now, of course. The pay is non-existent, the risks are considerable, and that's all I'm going to give him for the moment. He'll know when it starts, though, and knowing him he'll find it fun, because he's insane. Look at the company he keeps."

A small flat black head poked out of the woman's duffel coat, and one green eye regarded Frankie with much the same air as the woman. The kitten gave a contemptuous "a-ao."

"Yes, I know, dear, but if he wants to take up with amateur journalists that's his lookout. It's certainly not my job to tell him. Remember what I said, boy." The woman gathered up her shopping bags in one hand, used the other to stroke the kitten's head till it withdrew once more, and stalked off, head high.

Frankie scrambled to his feet, sweating. How had she known? His disguise was perfect: battered trainers, tracksuit bottoms, three layers of tee-shirts, two-day stubble and a week without washing all said Homeless Person as far as he was concerned. The shower

and shave, courtesy of the local swimming bath, had been Dracul's idea, because he'd said Frankie was lowering the tone. How had this woman, whom he'd never seen in his life, seen through him so quickly?

He suddenly noticed his dictaphone was still running. Quickly he rewound it and cranked up the volume all the way. Perhaps something she'd said would give him a clue.

He pressed PLAY.

"DAY TWO. THIS IS FRANKIE--NO, FRANK TERRELL REPORTING. I AM ACTUALLY UNDERCOVER WITH A COVEN OF WITCHES, LI--"

Frankie found STOP, hit it and stuffed the thing into his pocket. He could still feel the vibrations echoing from wall to wall. As he stood frozen there, Dracul came into view and stood looking at him enigmatically for a moment.

"That's an original approach you've got to the job," he said, and went away again.

After a long while, Frankie bestirred himself, retrieved his dictaphone and located the right place on the tape. When he turned the volume up again, Dracul's words came through quite clearly, but of the mysterious woman's voice there was not a trace. Somehow, this did not surprise Frankie nearly as much as he'd thought it would.

"I gather your cover is blown, Mr Terrell," said a quiet, accented voice at his elbow. He turned and looked down into the gently mocking eyes of Rachel Kwok. Frankie had already discovered that it was impossible for him to think of her as just "Rachel" or just "Miss Kwok"; the name was all of a piece, one with her impeccably neat blouse and slacks, her smart shoes, her exquisite face and her truly twisted sense of humour.

"Looks like it," he said gloomily. "What do you think? Do you think I should leave?"

"What does Dracul say?"

"Nothing. I mean, I haven't asked him yet."

"Nor will he," said Rachel Kwok, "and therefore nor may we. The question will be decided by a higher authority."

"Higher authority?" Frankie paled. "Who's that?"

"One day," Rachel Kwok said, "if you remain with us, you will meet him." Her attention switched--that was another thing about her: her attention never wandered or faded, it always switched neatly to the next thing of interest--her attention switched to the clear space, where Dracul was juggling what looked like plush hedgehogs while keeping up a constant line of patter for the onlookers.

Frankie shoved his dictaphone back into his pocket and followed her back to the others.

CHAPTER TWO

“Who was that?” Carol said, as they emerged into the draughty concrete wilderness of the multi-story car park.

“No idea,” Chris said. “But he's the third. I'll tell you about it when we get home.”

“I think I'd prefer now,” Carol said.

“So would I, darling,” Monica added. “That creep frightened me out of my wits. What have you been doing, Chris?”

“Look, it's nothing illegal, all right?” Chris said. “Can we just leave it till we're away from here?”

“He's got a point, actually,” Monica said. “Ah, there it is.”

“All right,” Carol said. “But you're going to tell me exactly what's going on, Chris.”

“Course I will,” Chris said, doing his sincere look. “Promise, babe.”

“Don't call me that,” Carol said absently, making to get into the back seat.

“No, let me,” Chris said, and eased himself into the tiny space. Carol raised her eyebrows, but let him.

“Right,” Monica said. “Station?”

“Um, actually,” Chris said, as Carol closed the door and took hold of the seat belt, “would you mind taking us the whole way? To Avevale, I mean?”

“What?” Carol said, and—

“You don't want much, do you?” Monica said.

“I'll pay for petrol,” Chris added hastily, “and we'll put you up overnight. Only—I don't wanna make too many stops between here and there.”

“This gets more intriguing by the minute,” Monica said. “All right, then. Not as if I had any plans for tonight. But I'll have to phone in work and throw a sickie. Good job it's Friday tomorrow.”

You have got a lot of explaining to do, my laddo, Carol thought.

Monica eased out of the parking space and within minutes they were in a stream of traffic winding its way around the maze of roads that encircled the airport buildings.

“Chris?” Monica said in a surprised voice, and Carol turned to find the back seat apparently vacant.

“Just drive,” his voice emerged from the well beneath. “And face forward.”

Carol, about to explode, suddenly noticed a man standing on the verge scanning the cars, a man in a dark blue blazer with short-cropped sandy hair. She had a sudden urge to duck down into the well herself, but before she could move they had passed him.

“If he saw us, he saw us,” Monica said calmly. “Nothing we can do about it now. Maybe I should get tinted windows.”

“Who was he, Chris?” Carol said.

“Dunno,” Chris said, straightening up as they moved on to the M25 and speeded up. “Could be anyone. Except he wasn't working for the airport.” He sounded resigned. “I'll tell you everything when we get home, okay? I'm not gonna do it now.”

“Why not?”

“I hope you're not thinking of leaving me out of this at this late stage,” Monica said menacingly. “I could drop you by the roadside, you know.”

“No,” Chris said wearily. “Only I don't want you swerving into another car.”

“It's about your granddad, isn't it?” Carol said.

“No, it's about me,” Chris said, “but he's involved. Or he was. Look, just leave it, okay?”

Monica switched on the radio before Carol could answer, and conversation became impossible.

The land behind the old Cavendish house, where the Koven's psychedelic Routemaster had come to rest some months before, sloped gently down to a tiny stream that ran clear and uncluttered through the estate. A few trees and the ruins of a wooden bridge lent a certain something to the scene. It would have looked well in a glossy advertisement for limited edition hand-crafted plates. "A Girl And Her Dog", maybe. Without the ear and eyebrow rings, of course.

Abruptly the dog sniffed the air and barked. Allie's head jerked up, she looked wildly from side to side and then she was running headlong through the grass, back up the slope. The dog bounded after her, barking in five-four.

Round the side of the house she pelted and towards the little campsite by the bus, her breath sobbing in her throat, her anorak whipping around her. She ran in between the tents, leapt a basket of washing, ducked under a line strung between two poles and ran straight into Marsha, who was hanging out the washing. Marsha stood her ground, which was hardly surprising given the weight differential, but the breath went out of her in a great whoof!, and her strong brown arms closed instinctively around Allie, who struggled for a moment and then went limp.

"Bless the Lord, child, where you runnin' to?" Marsha demanded. "You almost made me swallow my clothespegs."

"Sorry," Allie panted. "Gotta tell him...it's coming."

"What's comin', girl?" Marsha swivelled Allie round and looked hard into her green eyes. "What you seen?"

Allie shut her eyes tight and turned away. "Don't make me tell, Marsha," she gasped. "When I tell, I lose it...he has to hear as well."

"Quite right too." Dracul was suddenly there, his cloak swirling. "Marsha, my dear, has anyone ever told you that you are a walking cliché?"

Marsha looked down at her substantial, aproned and shawled body, then raised her floral-turbaned head and looked Dracul straight in the eye.

"Never more than once," she retorted grimly. "And if you don't step out of my washing basket you gonna find out what happen to them that does."

Dracul looked down. "Oh." He moved. "Allie, be so good as to call us together. Everyone should hear this, if it's as important as it looks."

Allie twisted out of Marsha's grip and uttered a shrill two-fingered whistle. One by one the coven responded to the call, gathering round Allie and Dracul. Marsha humphed and moved the basket out of the way in an ostentatious manner. Wayne, as always, was the last to appear, only abandoning his eternal tinkering with the innards of the bus when it was obvious that everyone else was waiting for him.

"Now, Allie," Dracul said gently. "Tell us what it is you see."

Allie closed her eyes again, recapturing the moment, breathing deeply. "Okay," she said. "It's like...there's bad thengs coming. Bad and good, only-- I dunno-- folded, twested around, blended somehow..." She scowled. Trying to wrap words around these things was like trying to put two slices of bread round a whole live duck. "It's two or three defferent things at the same time... and then it changes... ah, I dunno." She shook her head angrily.

"Any visuals, Allie?" Dik suggested.

She frowned again. "Yeah... I think so. Let's see...okay. There's a...a peramed..."

"A what?" Dik looked blank.

"Paramedic?" Wayne suggested, and Tilda trod on his foot.

"Peramed, you fool," Allie said. "Like in Egypt, right? Only it isn't, it's not all there. An' horses. Lots of defferent horses. A cross--no, a crucifex. A guy with an open book held out in front of him. A gun. I dunno," she finished, and opened her eyes again.

Dracul had been writing busily on a memo pad. "Thank you, Allie my dear," he said, and Allie blushed and muttered something. "Right. Circle round. Associations. Dik, you first."

"Pyramids," Dik said thoughtfully. "Sphinx."

"Tutankhamun," Tilda suggested.

"Chariots."

"Rameses."

"Camels."

"Mummies."

"Races."

"Bookie." This last from Dik again, with a grin. "Man with book," he explained.

"Cross country."

"Starting pistol."

"Steeplechase."

"Back on track, people," Dracul called.

"Church."

"Hermit."

"Reading."

"Pages."

"All right, I think that's about all we're going to get." Dracul finished writing and looked up. "Perpend, my lovelies. This list, which you yourselves have made, will be stuck to our totem pole after lunch and you will all be straitly charged to give it as much thought as you can manage the way your brains don't overheat, the object of the game being to make up a theory that makes an atom of sense." He grinned. "It may not be much, but it beats throwin' rocks at bottles. All right, break this up before Marsha brains me with her copper stick. I need to do some thinking as well." He looked around their faces. "Get on with you. Whoever's doing lunch, for pity's sake do it or we'll be here all day."

The circle broke up.

Frankie, who had not taken part in the session, approached Dracul nervously.

"I suppose you'll want me to leave now," he muttered. He hadn't spoken to Dracul since the incident in town.

"Leave?" Dracul said, turning to him. "Why would you suppose that?"

"Well," said Frankie wretchedly, "you know about me now."

"We knew about you before," Dracul said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm on a mission to turn these scribblings into legible scribblings before the trail goes cold."

He vanished into his tent. Frankie turned to find Allie watching him.

"If you're gonna ask me should you leave, I'll say yes," she said at once. "You don't belong here. You don't fet. You fet out there." She waved an arm at the world beyond the trees. Her mismatched eyes, dwelling on his, seemed to soften a little. "Maybe when you're older."

Frankie tried not to smile at this judgment from a mere child maybe three years his junior. "No," he said, "that wasn't it--but thanks for your input."

"Enput," Allie muttered in amused disgust.

"No, what I wanted to know," Frankie said, "was-- well, who's the leader round here?"

"Leader?" Her voice was heavy with scorn. "Who says we need a leader?" *Not me*, Frankie thought, looking at the proud and angry face. "But you're right," Allie continued matter-of-factly. "There is one. The only one mug enough to do the job. Hem." She jerked her head at Dracul's tent.

"But who does he answer to? There was this woman with a cat--"

Allie looked interested. "You met her, did you?" She considered him. "Maybe I was wrong about you. If she thinks you're worth

talkin' to, that counts. But she's no' the leader, and never say that in his hearin'."

"Which is where you are right now, in case you were wondering," came from inside the tent.

Allie's laugh was a cockatoo shriek. She grabbed Frankie's hand in her own, and they ran, laughing, to help Tilda with the vegetables for lunch.

*

By the time they reached the exit for Eltdown on the M3, the sun was starting to get in Monica's eyes, and she turned north with relief. Chris was asleep on the back seat, and Carol was tired and headache-y from the constant noise. Several times she had heard a helicopter above, and, without clearly knowing why, had craned her neck to watch it nervously till it disappeared into the distance.

"Avevale's just a bit beyond," she said.

"Good," Monica said. "I'm going to need petrol before I get much further."

Carol lived in one of several cottages owned by Avevale College. She had started out temping for them, and had accepted the offer of a permanent post just under a year ago; the cottage came with the job, and she had gratefully moved out of her poky bedsit in the centre of Eltdown. Eight months later, Chris had started moving in, and his cousin had immediately co-opted his room above the kebab shop as extra storage for boxes of pittas and carrier bags. She wasn't sure what the college's policy was on live-in lovers. So far, the question had not arisen; Carol was keeping Chris firmly at first base for the moment. She was almost sure he was the one, but not quite completely ready, not yet. He bore the restriction with fortitude.

Monica switched on the headlights as they passed the sign saying Welcome to ELTDOWN Historic Market Town Please Drive Carefully.

"Just head into the centre," Carol said. "Avevale is signposted from there." She pulled out to pass a tractor.

"Urgh," came from the back seat. "Are we there yet?"

"Ten more minutes," Carol said automatically. "How are you feeling?"

"Stiff," Chris said, "and not in a good way."

"You want to stop at the shop?"

"What for?" Chris said blankly.

"Oh, I don't know. Let your family know you're back? Check if there were any messages? Pick up supper?"

"I'll cook properly. You know I hate kebabs. And there won't be any messages, and they probably haven't noticed I was gone. Nah, leave it."

Carol shrugged. "Left at the roundabout," she told Monica.

"It says Avevale the other way."

"I know. We still don't know why."

"Left over from World War Two, maybe," Chris suggested.

"Well, I did hear the college was something really hush-hush in the war. Something to do with intelligence."

"Not like now, then," Chris said.

"You've got your spirits back," Monica commented dryly.

"Well, it'll take 'em a couple of days to trace me down here, and by that time maybe I'll have thought of something. Pull into the passing place up here."

"Why?" said Monica.

"Do as he says," Carol said, and Monica obediently pulled into the side of the road and braked.

"Now look over there," said Carol.

Monica looked, and a little gasp escaped her.

“Couldn't have timed it better,” Chris said, and he and Carol managed an awkward high-five over the top of Carol's seat back.

“That's where we live,” Carol said.

“It's utterly darling,” Monica breathed, “specially now, with all the lights coming on. It looks like something out of an old Rupert annual. Why aren't the streetlights orange?”

“The college made the council keep the white ones. I heard it was so one of the Fellows could read while he was walking home at night. Okay, you can go on now.”

Monica, with one last wistful glance at the view, got back in and started the car again, and they drove down into the little bowl-shaped valley in which the village of Avevale nestled.

Carol's cottage was one of a row of six set back from the road that led into the village. On the other side of the road flowed the Ave, a shallow, swift river about fifteen yards wide, and beyond that was one of the College's playing fields, the rugby goalposts black against the deep blue of the sky.

“All right to leave the car out here?” Monica said as they got out.

“Not much else you can do with it for the moment,” said Carol. “You'll be driving back tomorrow anyway.”

“Actually, I don't think I can,” Monica said.

“Why not?”

“I've been thinking,” Monica went on. “That creepy man knew Chris. He didn't know either of us, but he saw us with Chris, and he saw us later on in my car. Now he might be a moron, of course, but if he isn't then my car is the only lead he's got to Chris.”

Carol shot a glance at Chris, who looked sheepish and mumbled something apologetic.

“And I've been thinking,” Monica went on, “that whoever it is who's after Chris probably has influential friends, and not much in the way of a conscience.”

Chris nodded. “I dunno who they are, but they've got clout. And they're probably not the only ones.”

“So if I drive back to London tomorrow, there's a good chance I'll be pulled over for a non-existent broken tail light, which they will then give me, followed by the discovery of enormous amounts of controlled substances in the boot, and then it's off to the secret government office with the rubber hose and the truth serum. And if it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon not.” Monica kept her poise right up to the end of the sentence, with only the tiniest wobble on the end of the last word.

“She could be right,” Chris said soberly. “Sorry, Monica.”

Carol busied herself with the front door key.

“So I think I'll stay here with you if that's okay,” Monica went on, as they walked into the suddenly warmly lit hall, “and when you've worked out somewhere you can go, I'll come with you.”

“But what about your job, your flat, your—” Carol stopped. She turned to Chris. “Is it really this serious?” she said. “Could Monica be in danger?”

“Yeah, probably,” Chris said. “Look, I didn't know she was going to be bringing you,” he went on. “I thought you'd come on the tube or something. And I didn't think they'd clock me so quick at the airport. I gave them the slip at Athens, or I thought I did.”

“Actually, you know what?” Monica said. “I think I'll park the car somewhere else and walk back, if that's okay. No sense leading them to this house, after all.”

“There's a free car park in the market square,” Carol said. “Be careful.”

“And stick to the lighted paths,” Chris called after her.

“Okay,” Carol said, when the sound of the car engine had faded away. “No more prevaricating. Tell me.”

“It's not as easy as that,” Chris said, a little mulishly. “I gotta lead up to it. And I could murder a tea.”

“Fine,” Carol said. “Come into the kitchen, Maud, and start your leading up while I put the kettle on.”

Chris followed her into the kitchen, just as the phone rang.

“Don't answer it,” he whispered urgently, but Carol was already taking the handset down from the wall.

“Hello?” she said. “Yes...oh, hello Mr Fayne...yes, fine, how are you? Oh, glad to hear it...no, I'll be in tomorrow as usual. Sure, no problem. See you then. That,” she said, hanging up, “was Mr Fayne from college.”

“Are you sure?” Chris said darkly. “Maybe he wasn't alone.”

“You said it would take them two days to trace you.” Carol turned on the tap and filled the filter jug.

“I could be wrong.”

“Then the sooner you start talking the sooner I'll know whether or not to chuck you out on the street,” Carol said sweetly.

“Well—” Chris began, and broke off as someone knocked at the door, in a peculiar four-one-three pattern.

“It's Monica,” Carol said, going to open it. “That's the knock we used at school. Everything okay?” she said, as Monica darted in.

“Small towns are creepy after dark,” Monica said breathlessly. “I ran all the way back. What have I missed?”

“Nothing,” Carol said pointedly.

“Well, there keep being interruptions,” Chris defended himself.

Carol reached down and unplugged the phone wire. She went and filled the kettle from the jug, emptied the tea pot and put two bags into it, and switched on the kettle.

“Talk,” she said.

*

A nondescript man in a grey suit, carrying a raincoat over one arm, emerged from the gangway leading to flight 292 from Washington and walked past the smiling stewardesses without acknowledging them. At Customs he flashed a badge: the officer produced a small black suitcase from under the counter and offered it to him. He took it unsmilingly, nodded and walked away.

Outside a thin rain had started to fall, but the man made no move to don his raincoat. He waited, impassively, like a statue or someone impersonating one, till a sandy-haired man in a dark blue jacket approached him.

“Mr Forbes? Your car is waiting.”

“Thank God,” the man said, with no trace of emotion. “I thought I would have to walk.”

The sandy-haired man nodded, and led the way to a black saloon parked in the set-down zone. The man he had called Forbes got in on the driver's side, and the sandy-haired man hesitated, then went round to the other side and likewise got in.

“What happened?” said the man, as he set off.

“He had two others with him, Agent Dower,” the sandy-haired man said. “One of them saw my clipboard and alerted him. I got the car number, though.” He passed over a slip of paper, which Dower put into his jacket pocket.

“So they made you?” he said.

“Well, I, er--”

They were in the tunnel now, driving in the leftmost lane under the orange glare of the lights. Dower's right hand left the steering wheel, dipped into his pocket, came out again and slid across his lap. There was a sound like a sneeze, and the sandy-haired man gasped and folded forwards.

“Sorry,” Dower said with grim humour, pressing a button on the dashboard.

All the lights in the tunnel went out. In a series of economical movements, Dower released the passenger's seat belt, leaned across and opened the door, and pushed the body out, without deviating by a foot from his course. When the lights began to flicker on again, he was already five miles away, and the body had already been run over by dozens of other cars in the darkness and was completely unrecognisable. Should the bullet come to the attention of any reasonably efficient ballistics department, it would be linked to his gun, and there any attempt at investigation would come to a sudden end.

The British Government knew better than to interfere with John Dower when he was on a case.

CHAPTER THREE

You know (Chris began) that my family's quite old, right? I mean, Kyriakou isn't our original name, just one we adopted a couple of centuries ago. Granddad had documents going right back to prehistoric times or thereabouts. We go all the way back. And we may never have been flashy rich, but we've never been poor. The investments Granddad made over to me...well, anyway.

So I flew out there last week, after I got his letter, and his driver picked me up from Athens airport and drove me out to his estate. He was standing there waiting for me, looking like Charlton Heston or somebody, but as soon as he moved I could tell he wasn't well.

"Christos," he said, and started coughing so hard he literally wet himself. A couple of blokes in white coats ran up and helped him up the path and into the house, and I went after them. It was good to get into the shade, but I didn't like the sound of that cough. Made me want to cough myself, you know?

One of the blokes in white coats headed me off at the door of his room, and showed me where I was gonna be staying. My bags were already there, so I unpacked a bit and had a lie down. It was too hot to do much, and I was knackered from the flight. Next time I saw granddad he was lying on a couch propped up on pillows, and looking a bit better, though his voice was rough. There was a stony-faced Greek woman hanging about, and I gathered she was some kind of nurse. I thought she was doing the rosary, but it turns out they're worry beads. Got you a set and all, they're in my bag. Anyway, he asked me about myself, what I'd done, what I was planning to do, and I told him. When I got to talking about you he went quiet, and I could tell he wasn't happy.

"Is it 'cause she's English?" I said. "Is it 'cause Mum was English?"

He took a long time answering me.

"Your mother was a fine woman," he said, "but Andreas should not have left Greece. He should have stayed here, maybe found a nice girl, carried on the family traditions. It is that he went to study in England, that was the problem."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Seems to me the problem was when you made him come back."

"I had no choice about that. Just as I had no choice with you."

"Oh, well, nice to feel wanted," I said.

"Do not be an idiot, boy," he said, and that started him coughing again, but just a bit. He got his breath back and went on. "I did not make the airplane blow up. But it was necessary that Andreas come here, to receive his inheritance. Since he did not, I have had to wait for you to be of age—and for your mother to pass on."

"Yeah, and that's another thing," I said. "Mum could have done with a bit of that. It wasn't easy for her, bringing me up on benefits and handouts from cousin Spiros."

"I helped her many times," he said, "but it was necessary to do it without her knowing, or she would have rejected the help. She was angry, and I understand that. Check her bank statements for payments from the Adriatic Orphans Trust if you do not believe me."

Well, that made me feel a bit less hostile towards him, 'cause I'd seen those payments myself and wondered about them. I was still a bit wary, though. I mean, whatever the ins and outs of it, he was still responsible for me never having known my dad. He'd made me miss out on so much.

I had to leave him then, 'cause he couldn't do too much at a go. The nurse chased me out, and I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the place. It's huge, Carol, I tell you. I'm thinking of keeping it on—we could go for holidays and that. That's if you still—well, anyway, I'm getting to it.

That evening he sent for me again. I hadn't seen him at supper, so he must have had it in his room. He looked a bit better, though it could have been the light. Different nurse, same worry beads.

"I have to tell you about your inheritance," he said, and for the next half hour we went through all the paperwork about the money and so on, till he started to look tired and the nurse came and started poking him about. He waved her away. "I must do this now," he said. "It has waited too long. I have waited too long." He leaned over the side of the couch and picked up an old tin box, it looked like something from the war or thereabouts.

“This,” he said, and then he stopped and just breathed for a bit, “this has been handed down in our family for more than two thousands of years. We keep it safe. We tell no-one about it.”

“That box?” I said.

“Not the box, you imbecile, the box is what I put it in when the last container was destroyed. The Nazis were here looking for this thing, they killed my father to find it, but I kept it safe because he had already handed it over to me.” He raised himself up on one elbow. “This is the most important thing you will ever do, Christos, you must swear on your life to do it.”

“Why, what is it?” I said.

“It is...a relic,” he said.

“What, like the fingerbone of Saint Peter or something?”

“Older. Much older.” He looked at me for a long time, and then reached over and opened the box.

I don't know what I was expecting, but not what I saw. It was a little lump of stone, shaped like a pyramid but with only three sides—tetrahedron, yeah, that's it. Sandstone, it looked like, all crumbly, and there were markings on the sides. It sat there, in the box, on a pile of old papers, looking like something a kid might knock up in art class.

“That?” I said, and reached out to touch it. He knocked my hand away.

“It is important,” he said, and started coughing again.

“Well, why don't you put it in a bank or something if it's that valuable?” I said, and waited for him to get his breath back.

“Because it must stay here,” he said at last. “And so must you. This girl you like, you will send for her to come and live here. If she loves you, she will come. If not, you can find another girl.”

Look, there's no use you blowing your top at me, I'm just telling you what he said. And I said no way.

“I live in England now,” I said, “and if I've gotta look after this thing, I can do it just as well there as here.” And I picked the thing up. Or at least I tried to.

It was weird. At first I thought I'd missed it, and then I thought it had crumbled into dust as soon as I touched it, and before I could start to feel bad about that I saw there wasn't any dust, or anything at all. It had just vanished. Granddad was coughing and yelling at me, the nurse was screaming at me, and I was sitting there looking at nothing. And then I passed out.

When I woke up—I had some weird dreams, but I can't remember them—I was back in my room, on the bed, and he was sitting in a wheelchair staring at me. The nurse was by the door, obviously itching to wheel him back to bed.

“So, it has not killed you yet,” he said. “Good. That means I can do it myself.”

“What happened?” I said.

“You were stupid, is what happened. You touched the tetrad, and now it is in you.”

“In me? What do you mean, in me? It vanished.” I started to sit up, but I was feeling a bit peculiar, and I fell back again.

“I mean it is inside you. Part of you. Seven generations we have kept it safe and none of us has touched it. But you, you idiot, you have to meddle and poke. And now you must live with it.”

“Can't you get it out again?”

“Not till you die. Which will be soon. Then I will have to find someone else to carry on the keeping of it.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. I was starting to get worried. “How do you mean, I'm gonna die?”

“You will die because you do not know how to control it.”

“Well, then tell me how.”

He went red, and I thought he was gonna keel over. “Do you ever listen?” he shouted. “I am telling you, seven generations we have kept it safe. No-one has touched it in seven generations. How am I going to know what to do when some young moron touches it?”

“Oh, great,” I said. “I’m poisoned.”

“I have no sympathy for you,” said my granddad. “You brought it on yourself.”

“All right,” I said. “What do you know about it?”

“Not to touch it,” he snapped.

“Look, are you gonna help at all, or do you just wanna sit there and gloat?”

He thought about it, and made a few faces. I tried to feel if there was something inside me, but apart from that odd feeling all the time I couldn't find anything unusual.

“All right,” he said. “Much as I would like to sit and gloat, I suppose it would be easier to help you to survive, and maybe have a son to pass the tetrad on to, than to find another family I trust to guard the thing. Listen. This is all I know.

“The tetrad is a thing of power. It was a gift from the gods—or one of the gods anyway, I do not know which—to my first ancestor. It was to give power in war, healing in peace, potency to the loins, fleetness to the foot and wisdom to the heart.”

“Like a lucky charm or something,” I said. Then I saw his face and decided to shut up.

“But, like all such gifts, there is a price,” he went on, “and that is that the gift must be mastered, or it will destroy its owner and seek a better. Once absorbed, it lives in the body, and its power must be used. If it is not, it builds up and burns out the body from within.”

“Lovely,” I said. I had an image of me burning up from within.

“But the power can only be controlled by knowledge. You must learn all that the tetrad can do. Here, there is an old writing that was passed down with it.” He fumbled in his pocket and took out a scrap of paper from one of those little spiral-bound note pads. I didn't say anything.

“Study each face. Travel each edge. Conquer each corner. Know thus the centre.”

“That's it?” I said. “That's all the ancient wisdom that came with this thing?”

“You were expecting maybe a manual?” he said.

“But what does it mean?” I said, and saw the look on his face again. “All right, so you don't know. Fine. Terrific. I don't even have a clue how to use this power.” Not that I even believed him--not really--but I believed he believed it, if you know what I mean. And the thing had vanished in front of my eyes.

“My great-great-great-grandfather was the last man who tried,” he said.

“What happened?”

“I only know the bones of it. They said he went mad, raped a girl in the village, killed or wounded five men who tried to stop him, escaped before they could catch him, then came back after dark and brought one of the men back to life. Or healed his wounds, or something. But they only found that out after he was dead, because another man put a bullet into him. His younger brother cut the tetrad from his body before he was buried, and no-one has touched it with bare hand ever since. Till now.”

“You've got to get it out of me!” I yelled. “They can do all kinds of surgery now—”

“It is not like that,” he said. I think he was starting to realise how I was feeling, 'cause he sounded like he cared, a bit. “It is not a lump inside your body now. It is everywhere in you. When you die it will reform, as something that can be removed. But not till then.”

“How could you keep something like this secret?”

“That is another thing,” he said. “We kept it secret by not using it. There were many who knew of it, many who wanted it for themselves, or for their countries. But they did not know where it was, because it was simply a lump of stone. Now that it is awake, they will know, and they will want it even more. You will have to be very careful.

“And you will have to tell someone, of course--”

“I think that's quite enough,” Monica said, and Chris and Carol both looked up at her tone.

“What?” said Chris.

“You frighten me to death,” Monica said, “you drag me all the way down here, you make me park my car miles away and run all the

way back, and all for some—some stupid *joke*?”

“It's not a joke,” Chris protested. “You saw the guy at the airport—”

“Oh, yes, and who is he? One of your idiotic friends? God, Carol, what kind of sick moron are you living with?” Monica was shouting now.

“Monica—” Carol began.

“It's the truth,” Chris said desperately.

“Don't talk to me,” Monica said, furiously gathering up her bag. “I am going to call the police and have you arrested for this, Mr Kyriopodopolos or whatever your name is. Carol, I'm sorry, but you need to get away from this bastard before he does something like this to you.” She finally found her mobile and stabbed at the buttons.

“Don't call the police.” Chris stood up.

“Oh, yes, and how are you going to stop me?”

“Monica, please--” Carol said.

“I'm warning you,” Chris said.

“You lay one finger on me, mate,” Monica said, “and you'll never see the light of day again. Hello?”

And then, suddenly, the room was full of noise and chaos.

*

Father Krebs accepted his electronic keycard from the man behind the desk, and crossed the lobby to the lifts. The hotel was one of the finest in London, the suite that had been reserved for him one of its most opulent. His order required nothing less. Behind him, a bellboy who was too well bred ever to perspire pushed a trolley piled high with Father Krebs' luggage.

The lift ascended smoothly to the requested floor, and priest and bellboy passed along the corridor to its end. The bellboy took the card from Father Krebs, opened the door with some small ceremony, and wheeled the trolley into a room large enough to stage a fair-sized musical dance number and furnished in almost Oriental splendour. Father Krebs tipped him, blessed him, and waited till the door had closed again behind him before falling to his knees, hands clasped in prayer.

“Oh Lord,” he whispered, “Thou knowest that my only desire is to forsake the pleasures of the flesh in Thy service. Accept this mortification of my desire, help me to forswear the sin of pride in my righteousness, and grant me Thy forgiveness. Amen.”

He got to his feet, picked up the phone, dialled room service, and ordered a rare Chateaubriand steak with everything and two bottles of a rather muscular Burgundy. Then he pressed 9 for an outside line and dialled a number in South Kensington.

“Hello? Ah, yes. I wonder could I perhaps speak to Sister Eleanor. My name is Krebs, Father Krebs. Yes, thank you.” He waited. “Sister Eleanor? Yes. I believe you were notified of my arrival. I shall need to consult you urgently tomorrow on a spiritual matter. Yes, if Sister Margaret could be present as well that would be ideal. Shall we say ten-thirty? Very well. Thank you, Sister. Go with God.”

He put down the phone, lay down on the gigantic four-poster bed, and began to meditate. After a few moments, regular guttural snores filled the room.

*

"So," Dracul said. It was late evening, and Frankie was still hanging out on his own, unwilling to join the others round the fire. "I gather you met a lady with a cat."

"Yes," Frankie admitted.

"Is there any possibility at all that she might have given you some sort of message for me?"

Frankie had completely forgotten about it. "Yes, she did," he said, and relayed the message as best he could remember. "It didn't record on my machine," he explained. "That's what I was trying to find when I--"

"When you trumpeted your secret identity to the world," Dracul said with a grin. "As your namesake used to say, Frankie boy, relax. We rumbled you as soon as you arrived. That's one of the very few things we're good at."

"Then why didn't you--you know--throw me out?"

"And why in the wide world should we do that?" Dracul said. "We have no secrets. Well, no, that's not true, we have plenty of secrets, but I guarantee you'll grow old and grey in this company before you wrinkle out a one of them. Besides, you balance us out nicely--we were a trifle heavy on the distaff side. Eight is a good infinity-shaped number." He clapped Frankie on the shoulder. "Now, it's a good bet this mysterious job you forgot to tell me about ties in with Allie's vision, so it does. I don't suppose you left out anything, like maybe a local habitation or a name or something useful like that?"

Frankie shook his head, and returned to what was bothering him. "But I still don't know whether I *should* stay," he said. "What would you--"

Dracul's brow abruptly darkened. "Look, I'm not bloody Gandalf, all right?" he snapped. "Nor am I Dumbledore, Paul Daniels or Obi-Wan Kenobi. Do not come to me for advice, for I will say whatever happens to enter my head, and if it gets you into trouble that's your lookout. You want to follow us around with a notebook, fine. You want to sod off, fine. You want to break the habit of a lifetime and do something useful with your life, bloody marvellous. But whatever you do, don't do it because you think I've told you to. I have enough trouble with the rest of this bunch of eejits lookin' at me every time a decision needs makin'. Make this one for yourself."

He stalked away. Frankie stood, irresolute, for a moment, then slowly moved towards the firelit circle. Allie and Marsha moved to make space for him, and he sat down on the hard ground. Tilda passed him a bowl of soup and a plate of bread.

"He does that to everybody," she said. "One day he may believe it himself."

She smiled, and Frankie relaxed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Carol found herself knocked to one side by something big, caught her head on the corner of the dresser and saw pretty lights for a second or two. Something was screaming, something besides Monica, and she thought Chris was fighting with something but it was hard to see. Then there was a rush of movement, a crash and a sudden draught of cold air, and the room was as empty as it had just a second ago been full. Monica was lying in a dead faint, the front window was smashed out into the street, and Chris was gone.

Carol lay there for several seconds, her mind trying to find some purchase on the suddenly slippery ground of reality. Something had happened, something had definitely happened, but she couldn't quite seem to get a firm grip on it. Maybe if she stayed lying down and didn't do anything things would settle into some kind of sensible order.

"Ms Varland?" said a voice from the window—no, from the hole where the window had been. "Ms Varland? Carol? Are you all right?"

"Mr Fayne?" Carol struggled to her feet. The man at the hole was big and broadly built, with small, friendly eyes and a full, neatly pointed beard. He was wearing a burgundy towelling robe, with what looked like pyjamas underneath.

"My God, Carol, what happened?" said Mr Fayne, as she made her way unsteadily towards him.

"I don't really know," Carol said vaguely. "I, I, I--" The sound of her saying "I, I, I" suddenly seemed very funny to her, so she had to laugh, and then the laughing was even funnier, and the room started to tilt over and--

"Carol." Mr Fayne's voice was sharp, and his grip on her arms was almost painful. Carol stopped laughing with a huge effort. "Perhaps you'd better let me in."

"You could just use the window," Carol said.

"I regret I'm insufficiently trousered for that sort of thing," said Mr Fayne. "Please?"

Carol steadied herself, and went into the hall to open the front door. When she led Mr Fayne back into the living room, Monica was stirring and making small whimpering noises. Mr Fayne bent over her a moment and felt her pulse.

“I think she'll be fine, but we should probably get her to A & E just in case. The nearest one's Eltdown.”

“What?” Carol said. Things were starting to tilt again, and she sat down on something. Mr Fayne looked up, and hurried over to her.

“Ah yes. That'll be an interesting lump in the morning. That's two for A & E, then. Can you remember anything about what happened?”

“I—it was Chris,” Carol said. “Look, Mr Fayne, please, no hospitals. I mean--”

“You and your friend both need to be looked at by a doctor,” Mr Fayne said firmly, “and sooner rather than later. And please call me Rob, we're not on duty now. As for this Chris—that would be your boyfriend, I presume—we can't do anything for him till he comes back.”

Carol wished her head would stop aching. It made it so hard to think, and it was important to think very very clearly just now. Chris had told her, had told Monica. Maybe just one more person wouldn't hurt.

“Carol?” Monica said weakly from the floor. “Did whatever just happened happen?”

“No,” Carol said, as firmly as she could manage.

“Oh, good,” Monica said, and closed her eyes again.

“I'll tell you what I'll do,” said Rob, in a considering tone of voice. “I'll send Doctor van Joost down from the college in the morning, along with Joe Pikestaff and a couple of the groundsmen to put a temporary fix in here. We'll keep this in the family, as it were. Only before I can do that,” he went on, fixing her with a penetrating gaze, “I'll need to know exactly what's going on. Otherwise it'll be the hospital, and I imagine I'll have to call in the police as well to find this Chris of yours. Assault, criminal damage, who knows what else —”

“No,” Carol said. “Please don't. All right. I'll tell you as much as I can.”

“That's all I ask. I promise to laugh in all the right places. Can you show me what's where in the kitchen?”

Carol took a deep breath and began to recount what Chris had just been telling her and Monica. It seemed to take far longer than it had before, and she wasn't sure she had got everything in the right order, but Rob asked no questions, and his attentive expression was something steady to hold on to in an increasingly vertiginous world.

“And then—and then Monica interrupted, and they started arguing, and Chris was getting more and more agitated, and...”

“I'm sorry about that, darling,” Monica said. She had groped her way to a chair and turned it upright, and was now sitting in it nursing a cup of hot sweet tea that Rob had insisted on making for them both. “I was angry, but I wasn't really calling the police. I just wanted to call his bluff.”

“I think you did,” Carol said.

“And then what happened, Carol?” Rob prompted gently.

“That's just it, I don't know. I hit my head, and Monica was screaming, and then something blew the window in, and—“

“Out. The glass is all on the outside. I think that was Chris making his getaway. You didn't see anything?”

Carol tried to make sense of her memories, through the pounding ache in her head. Finally she shook her head. “I can't remember,” she said hopelessly.

“Well, don't look at me, darling,” Monica said. “I was out of it. I don't even remember screaming, though I admit my throat feels like two miles of extremely poor quality road.”

Rob sat back. “Well, never mind. Luckily for you the college is responsible for maintaining these cottages, so you shouldn't have to worry about the cost of repairs. The Bursar will sort something out as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the best thing you two can do is go to bed and get some sleep. Doctor van Joost will be here about nine-thirty. And if you remember anything at all, you've got my number.”

“But what about Chris?” Carol said.

“What about him?” Rob countered. “He could be anywhere, and neither of you are in any fit state to go looking. Since you don't want the police involved...”

They say he went mad...raped a girl in the village...killed five men ran through Carol's mind. She thought of Chris, somewhere out there in the dark, in God knew what kind of trouble.

“No, we've got to find him,” she said. “Mr Fayne—I mean Rob—will you help us?”

“Us?” Monica echoed. “You speak for yourself, darling. Me, I'm going to take the nice man's advice and try to forget this whole day ever happened.”

“All right, me then,” Carol said, though every fibre in her ached to do the same.

“I'll have to get dressed,” Rob said.

“Hurry, please.”

“Oh, I will.” Rob bent down and looked at a particular spot on the carpet. “I'm particularly intrigued by the possibilities suggested by this.”

Carol looked where he was looking, at the dark patch where a vase of flowers had spilled, and the large and unmistakable print of a horse's hoof on the carpet next to it.

“What do you think it means, Rob?” she said, fifteen minutes later.

They were going, as slowly as possible, back along the road leading out of Avevale, as being the most likely path for Chris to have followed. Rob's ancient Cavalier was roomy enough, but the engine tended to make alarming noises on corners and going up hills.

“Well, I don't think he was hiding a horse in his back pocket, for one thing,” said Rob.

“Maybe it was just the ball of his foot, and it just looked like a hoof.” Carol was clutching at straws and knew it.

“One moment there were just the three of you in the room. Next minute there was something in there with you, something like a horse. What does that suggest?”

“I don't know,” Carol said.

“Well, it suggests to me that there may be something in that story he told you about the tetrad. What was it supposed to confer again?”

“Er...power in war, healing in peace, fleetness of foot and wisdom in the heart.” She didn't feel comfortable mentioning the other thing.

“The perfect gift for the man who has everything,” Rob said. “I admire his ancestors' self-restraint. I wonder how it--”

“Look out!” Carol screamed.

Rob stamped on the brake, and the Cavalier pulled up, with a scream almost as loud as Carol's, less than a foot from the humped, huddled shape in the road.

“It's him!” Carol fumbled with the unfamiliar door and finally, after what seemed like hours, wrenched herself free of the car and stumbled into the road. Rob was already standing in the headlights' beam, looking down.

“Oh my God,” Carol moaned. “Don't just stand there, help him—”

“I'm not sure I can,” Rob said in an odd voice.

“The—the horse must have fallen on him...”

“Then where's its head?”

The words pushed Carol right through horror and out the other side. For the first time she saw clearly what she was looking at.

It was Chris, though his facial features were subtly exaggerated and coarsened. At least, it was Chris from just below the navel up.

The rest of him appeared to be a medium-sized chestnut stallion—well, she was assuming stallion, to be fair, but horse, certainly. She suddenly realised that the big, rough something that had pushed her into the dresser must have been his suddenly appearing hindquarters. There was no sign of injury, and as she watched he frowned, opened his eyes and blinked in the light.

“Caz?” he said, and his voice was deeper, with overtones that sent sweet shivers through her. He smiled, though it looked more like a leer.

“Mr Kyriakou, I presume,” Rob said, with only a slight tremor in his voice. “My name's Robin Fayne. We haven't met--”

There was a complicated movement, and Chris was on his feet—his hooves, rather—and backing away. “Who's he?” he growled, and Carol was suddenly very aware of how much taller he was now.

“He's my boss,” she said. “He doesn't work for anyone. Except the College, I mean.”

“I give you my word I mean you no harm,” said Rob. “Quite the contrary.”

Chris relaxed a little.

“Has this happened before?” Rob went on.

Chris shook his head. The movement was disturbingly equine, and his hair—his mane?--flapped around his face. “Is—is Monica all right?” he asked.

“She's fine,” Carol said, a little tartly. “I am too, thanks for asking.”

“Actually, Carol might have concussion,” Rob said. “She hit her head quite hard. She wouldn't let me take her to the hospital.”

“Sorry, babes,” Chris whispered, and he hung his head.

“Don't call me that,” Carol said. “Oh, Chris, what are we going to do?”

“I dunno. I don't even know if I'm gonna stay this way.”

“What happened? I mean, did you do it--”

“Deliberately? Nah, 'course not. Only Monica was pushing me, and I was getting madder and madder, and—and then there was like this bubble, inside me, getting bigger and bigger, and I couldn't hold it in, and then it sort of exploded out of me.”

“Was it painful?”

Chris stared at her. “Painful?” he repeated. “No. No, it was--” He glanced uneasily at Rob. “I don't remember,” he said. “But then I felt...I dunno...you ever done coke?”

Now it was Carol's turn to stare. “What do you think?” she said icily.

“Well I dunno, do I? Anyway, neither have I, but it felt a bit like I thought that would. I felt massive strong, and like nothing could stop me...and like nothing mattered, you know? But inside it was still me, still scared about all this. I had to get away.”

“You did. Right through my front wall.”

“Oh my God. Look, I'm sorry, all right? But the thing is...” Chris screwed up his face. “The thing is, it still feels like that. Like...I'm looking at you right now, and I want you so bad I can't stand it, and it's taking me all my time to remember--”

“Chris!” Carol protested. Rob cleared his throat.

“--that I'm not supposed to just grab you and like get on with it, you know?”

“That would follow, actually,” Rob said.

“What?”

“Well, in the stories about—er—well—people like you, they were portrayed as being far more, um—in touch with their animal passions than, er—“

“What d'you mean, people like me?” Chris literally bridled.

“Oh my God,” Carol said. “You don't know.”

“Have you not looked at yourself?” Rob said.

“Well, I haven't brushed my hair lately, if that's what you mean.” Chris looked down at his body for the first time, and there was a long pause.

*

After the meal, the others dispersed to their tents, except for Wayne, who was still wrestling with some part of the bus's innards. Frankie thought about doing the same, and then thought better of it and went to find Dik.

The thin man was sitting in front of his tent, grinding something in a mortar. He was wearing headphones, and the irritating *tss-tss-tss* of the music was audible a clear five yards away. He looked up as Frankie approached, flicked an eyebrow at him and stopped the tape.

"What's the music?" Frankie said, glad of an opening.

"Michael Nyman," Dick said. "Fuels the magic a treat."

"Listen," Frankie said, "can I ask you something?"

"I don't usually charge for that." Dick tipped most of the contents of the mortar into a small plastic bag, and used the rest to fill a small carved pipe.

"I asked Dracul if I should leave, right? Because of what I am and so on." Frankie sat down, and repeated the conversation. Dick listened, pipe and lighter in hand. "So what do you think?" Frankie finished. "Do you think I should leave?"

Dick looked at him. "Five pounds of flax, man," he said. "I mean, what kind of answer do you want?" He cupped his hands to light the pipe.

"I'm confused," Frankie said, shifting his bottom. There was a pebble or something digging into him. "Dracul says nothing, Rachel Kwok talks about higher authorities, Allie doesn't believe in authority at all but wants me out, and you quote Zen or something at me. None of it helps."

"Here," Dick said, offering the pipe. "Try some of this."

"No thanks," Frankie said automatically. "Oh, all right," he added.

Two hours later, Frankie burst into Dracul's tent to announce that he had sorted it all out, that he had found the higher authority he had been looking for, and that this pebble had told him to go to Venezuela, get a sex change operation and become a prostitute. He then marched out of the tent whistling Colonel Bogey, tripped over a guy rope and passed out cold. Dracul and Tilda looked at each other, reached the same conclusion, laughed and returned to what they had been doing.

*

“Hello? Is that you, John? This line is terrible. I dunno, you spend billions of dollars on satellite communications and fibre optic networks, and--

“Yes, John, it's me. I called because--

“No, it's not late where I am. You never could work out those time zones, could you, John?

“Well, okay, it's the end of the day, but listen, John, I'm a little concerned about the body count.

“Yes, John, but you've killed six people already, and four of them were on our side.

“I don't care how incompetent they were, culling is not an appropriate procedure in the Secret Service. No, not even in the Agency. Well, okay, that one time, but it's generally regarded as a no-no.

“John, you haven't even located the artifact, and six people are dead, people with families, people--

“No. No. No, John, leave their families alone. Leave—I tell you, John, we'll take care of their families, okay? You have more important things to worry about. Find that artifact. The future security of the United States depends on it.

“Okay. And, ah, John, try to kill fewer people, all right? Maybe keep it down to one or two a day. There's a limit to what I can swing with the British Government, you know?

“I know they don't have a prison that can hold you, but see, John, if it gets to that stage it's just going to get messy. Now play nice, and I'll have another medal for you when you get home.

“Oh, god, the President's woken up. I'll have to go and increase his medication. Remember what I said, John. Play nice. They think we're their allies. Let's not jeopardise that, huh?

“Jeopardise. It means—ah, never mind. Call me when you have the artifact. 'Bye, John.’”

CHAPTER FIVE

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

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

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

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

"I'll kill him," Chris muttered.

"Who?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm getting cold," Carol said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How?"

"Come with me."

"What?"

Chris patted his own broad back.

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

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

"Did you do that?" she demanded.

"I just said--"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about?"

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

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

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

*

Frankie's first conscious thought was *Oh my God, I want to die.*

A naked lady suddenly leaned over him and kissed his forehead, and he decided that perhaps it was too soon to leap to such extravagant conclusions.

"Are you feeling better?" It was Tilda, the soft contralto with just a hint of Spanish intonation around the "you". Frankie's conscience rolled up its sleeves and spat on its hands, and he panicked and sat up so fast he nearly nudded her. "Sh, sh, it's all right," she said. "You don't have to run away. Besides, you will disturb the children." She indicated a huddle of bedding on the other side of the tent, and Frankie forced himself to quietness.

"What about Dracul?" he said. "I thought--"

Tilda smiled, but there was steel in her voice. "I do not belong to him," she said, "or anybody. I choose who I let to sleep in my bed. And before you make another mistake, Mr. Terrell, you slept the whole time, and I slept over here." She laughed, breaking the tension. "I like tents. There is no nonsense about beds and couches. There is over here, and over there. No difference."

Frankie's conscience, disappointed, turned over and went back to sleep. "So you brought me in here after..." He stopped, remembering as he saw her grin.

"I do not think you would be very successful in Venezuela, Mr. Terrell," she said.

Frankie made a disappointed face, and Tilda laughed again. He found he was enjoying being with her. "What time is it?" he said.

"Morning," Tilda said, as if this were a complete answer. "There was much talk last night, and most of us are still asleep. Now Rachel is doing the scrying. To find what it is we must do she is using the dark mirror. Me, I do not need to do the scrying. I can feel it. I cannot say where, or whether we must protect it or destroy it, but it is a powerful thing and it is here, in this country."

Frankie couldn't think of anything to say. Tilda hugged him briefly, and then got up and began to dress.

"So," Frankie said, falling back on the question that still plagued him, "what do you think? Should I stay or should I go?"

Tilda, half in and half out of an ancient Iron Maiden T-shirt, regarded him oddly. "Why do you always ask these questions? Should I this, should I that, who is in charge. If these things bother you, why do you think of them? And if they do not bother you--" She pulled the shirt all the way on and spread her hands, laughing. "Why do you think of them?"

"You think it's funny," Frankie said accusingly.

"No," Tilda said, still laughing. "I do not think. I know." She composed herself and looked penitent. "Now me, I would not go around taking opinion polls. Me, I would say: here I am. When it is time to leave, I will leave. Till then, it is nice here, I will stay. Simple, yes?"

She laughed again, and this time Frankie laughed with her. "Now, let me brush your hair. You look like one of those dogs."

She began rooting around for her kit. Frankie swivelled to keep her in sight. "But it isn't that simple," he said. "According to Rachel Kwok, there's this higher authority who's supposed to be deciding the matter, but I can't find out who it is. Do you know?"

"Have you seen a mirror?" Tilda said, obviously not paying attention. Frankie sighed, poked around till he found the small square mirror and handed it over. Then he repeated his question.

"I think you will have seen this person already," Tilda said, brushing. "Sit still."

"What here?" It is hard to be scared when a beautiful woman is brushing your hair for you, but Frankie managed it. "In the camp? You mean he's--she's--one of the group?"

Tilda, behind him, considered. "At the moment," she said, "certainly." Frankie caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror, which she had tossed on to the blankets, and to his surprise saw that she was smiling.

*

"Ms Varland?"

Carol opened her eyes groggily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about him?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rob was waiting at the gates.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I hope so," Monica said fervently.

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

"He's not there," Monica said.

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

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

"Oh, that's just not fair," said Rob.

Don-Jay, piloting the group's ancient Ford Transit minibus down the M5, was voicing similar sentiments, if only under his breath.

Doctor Pricklow, in the seat beside him, seemed to be asleep, but sometimes with Pricklow it was hard to tell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Pricklow."

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

"Anybody hungry?" he said.

“Just drive,” Gefarr growled.

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

“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. She felt very strange. Ideas seemed to be bubbling up from somewhere inside her, not just poetry but pictures, music, ways in which she could streamline and improve the filing system at the College. It was quite hard to concentrate. She looked away, and the noise lessened somewhat.

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.

*

"Ouch!"

Frankie swore silently and sucked his finger. It was bleeding freely. No-one had told him buses had sharp edges.

"Hang on," he called to Wayne. "Back in a tick."

Wayne grunted something probably indecipherable, and Frankie wormed out from under the bus and went back to the luggage piles. Dracul had suggested that he might like to help Wayne get the bus into driveable condition, so that when they had some hint of where they were going, they could perhaps get there. Frankie took this as a sign that he was at least provisionally part of the team.

Ah, there it was. Frankie had remembered seeing the leather drawstring bag with the burning wheel painted on it in flaking enamel earlier on. He had asked Wayne about it, and the big man had mumbled "Medicine bag. Goes with me." It certainly made sense to have some sort of first aid kit, and this was the first sign of such a thing Frankie had seen.

Frankie opened the medicine bag and stopped dead. Whatever it was, it almost certainly didn't comply with EC regulations regarding first aid kits. There was a spark plug, a lump of cotton wool soaked in used engine oil, a couple of bits of half-melted chrome fairing, and several other items Frankie couldn't identify. He stared at the collection in dumb confusion, only half aware of the gradual cessation of the sounds of tinkering. He was still staring when two hands like vices closed round his wrists and pulled him round to look into a face knotted with anger.

"Explain," Wayne ground out.

"I-- I--" Frankie shut his eyes and waited for the worst. "I was looking for a plaster for my fingers sorry."

"Plaster?" Wayne sounded puzzled. "Why the hell would you be looking for a plaster in a--" He stopped suddenly, and a moment later Frankie got his wrists back. "--medicine bag," Wayne said in a different tone of voice. Frankie cautiously opened his eyes, and saw that Wayne was silently laughing.

"Sorry," he said when he finally got his breath back. "My fault. It's not that kind of medicine bag. Which bits did you touch?" Frankie showed him, and he put them to one side and closed the bag again. As he did this he talked under his breath, almost inaudibly. Frankie strained to listen but could only make out a couple of words, and on reflection he decided he didn't believe those.

"Should have explained when you mentioned it," Wayne said. "Never mind. Plasters are over here. Only got blue ones."

"So, erm..." Frankie couldn't leave it alone. "What kind of a medicine bag is it? Medicine for the bike?"

"Not quite." Wayne located a box and extracted a packet of assorted dressings and an almost-clean rag. Frankie waited while Wayne wiped his finger and covered the wound with the plaster.

"I was at this festival," Wayne said as they walked back to the bus, "and someone spiked my drink." Frankie returned to his post underneath, and Wayne opened the bonnet and started fiddling around inside. "I was drifting. Local chapter'd chucked me out--cruelty to the bike. Bought a can from a bloke on a stall. Put it down outside the bog. Picked it up again and drank it off. Does anything move down there when I do this?"

"No," Frankie called.

"Good." There was a pause. "I knew what had happened," Wayne went on, "but I couldn't do anything about it. I mean couldn't. So I just went with it. Wandered off somewhere away from the crowds, and I--" He paused, and there were ratchet-spanner noises. "I saw some things, and I heard some things, and I said some things. And then, suddenly, I was stone cold straight and sitting on the ground surrounded by a bunch of bikes. Any oil coming out?"

"Not any more," Frankie said.

"You can get out from under then." Wayne helped him up. "For a long time I didn't know what to make of it. I'd made some fairly drastic promises, but I didn't know if they were real or not. Bugged me for years." He passed Frankie the rag to wipe his hands on. "Then I ran into Dracul and Dik at a biker rally. They used to hang round bikers a lot. They put me on to some books. Native American stuff. I read 'em. I did some thinking. Then I went out and started collecting for my first medicine bag. Did you bandage up the exhaust?"

"Yes," Frankie said. "That was when I cut myself."

"Oh. Okay. Should be ready, then."

"So..." Frankie could almost see what Wayne was implying, and wasn't sure he wanted to. "So what you're saying is that you went on some kind of vision-quest, without knowing it...and your totem spirit is--"

"I'm not saying anything," Wayne said abruptly, "and neither should you." He chuckled. "But I'm more in touch with what I worship than anyone else in this group."

"And does that make you the true leader?" Frankie said.

There was a short silence. "What?" said Wayne, very quietly.

Frankie took his courage in both hands. "Various sources," he said, in his best journalist voice, "whose identity I am not at liberty to divulge, have given me to understand that Dracul is not the sole authority in this group, specifically with regard to the question of whether I should stay or leave."

"Cobblers," Wayne said. "Dracul's the only leader this bunch would tolerate. Me, I never lead anything on principle."

There was somehow no doubting him. "So," Frankie said, thinking I sound like a bloody parrot, "do you think--purely as an ordinary person-- that I should stay or go?"

"I think you should go," Wayne said.

Disappointment crashed down on Frankie, and he realised that he had been hoping for the opposite answer, that he wanted very much to be with the Koven.

"Cause if you stay," Wayne went on, "you'll get bloody lonely here on your tod."

It took a moment to realise what he meant. The relief was almost as big a shock as the disappointment had been. "You mean--"

"What else would I bloody mean?" Wayne said exasperatedly. "Look, the bus is ready and everyone's waiting. Go and tell His Nibs we can move off any time." He climbed into the cab, and Frankie turned to go.

"Hang on," Wayne said. Frankie waited. "Thanks," Wayne grunted at last.

"What for?"

"I don't get to talk about it much. Sometimes it helps." Wayne turned the key. There was a churning sound, and silence. "Funny," Wayne said, turning it back. "Should be all right. OI!!!"

Dracul came loping over. "Problem?"

"All fixed up. Won't go. Needs a push."

Dracul bent down close to the radiator grille and said something Frankie couldn't catch. The engine roared into life.

"You might let me turn the key first," Wayne said plaintively.

"I thought you had," Dracul said, grinning.

*

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 Grimmans 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 Grimmans 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 Tempers--"

"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 forgot.”

“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 Grimmans 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.

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’re 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 Grimman's 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. Which 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.

*

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.

“This is bad,” said Rob. “This is very very bad.”

“We know that,” said Carol.

“We can't carry on here.” Rob was pacing frantically. “My wonderful super secret hideout, blown inside a day. Where else can we go?” He stopped. “I wish you would stop doing that, Chris, it's very distracting.”

Chris morphed back into his human form and grinned. “Sorry, boss. Gotta make sure I can do it at a moment's notice, right?”

“You might want to consider that every time you use the power it might be registering on some detector somewhere.”

“Oops.”

“Not that that matters,” Rob went on. “If one of them knows where we are, they all will. We could try leaving the country...but they've probably got all the ports covered already. Disguises. Maybe we could...” He looked down at himself. “Yeah, right. How am I going to disguise this?”

“We could paint you gold and call you a Laughing Buddha,” Monica suggested.

Rob rounded on her. “If you've got nothing helpful to say, Ms Fleming—“

“I think it's the best suggestion so far,” said a voice. Carol jumped, Monica shrieked, Rob turned round again so fast he almost overbalanced, and Chris morphed into the centaur.

“Sorry to be the second one to surprise you like that, ladies,” said the man who had spoken, stepping into the light, “but I thought I'd better step in before Rob here started handing out the cyanide capsules.”

“Paul!” Rob exploded. “What the hell are you doing here?” Belatedly, and through her shock, Carol recognised Paul Harding, one of the College tutors. What was his subject again? As Rob performed the introduction for the benefit of Chris and Monica, she realised she had never actually known.

“Watching,” said Paul. “It's been most interesting...but I really think you need my help if you plan to take this any further.”

“Your help?” Rob went ashen pale. “Oh no, Paul, you can't.”

“What is it?” Carol demanded.

“Want me to kill him for you?” growled Chris.

“That would be most unwise,” said Paul. “What Rob has not told you, ladies and gentleman, mainly because I swore him to secrecy, is that Paul Harding isn't actually my name, and that I work—on a part-time basis—for British Intelligence. And yes, I have been briefed on the artifact and directed to seize it for Her Majesty's Government if at all possible. But since that isn't possible,” he went on, raising his voice slightly as Chris took two paces towards him, “I feel my main duty is to keep the said artifact from falling into the hands of anyone else.”

“Did you get rid of the fat priest?” Monica asked.

“I did. You can thank me later. He is in fact quite a dangerous man if you give him time to sort himself out. His name is Heinrich Krebs, and he is a member of a secret order inside the Vatican whose remit is to find evidence of the survival of certain pagan beliefs—or even worse, evidence that might lend credence to those beliefs—and destroy it. But he's not the most dangerous enemy you have to face here.”

“He knows where we are, though,” Rob said.

“Not any more, at least I hope not. It'll take him a while to recover his memory of this evening, and by the time he does we'll have found you somewhere else to hide.”

“I'm open to suggestions,” said Rob, “since mine failed so spectacularly.”

“Well, if you will have winged horses doing vertical takeoffs late at night.”

“Can we trust you?” Carol said bluntly. “I mean, sorry, but after tonight I'm a bit reluctant to take anything at face value. How do we know you are who you say you are?”

“What do you want?” said Paul good-humouredly. “A badge that says I AM A SPY? I could give you a phone number to ring that would confirm everything I say, except that--”

“--then you'd have to kill me,” Carol broke in. “I know the joke.”

“You can trust him, Carol,” said Rob slowly. “I do. Besides, he's a member of my club.”

“He's a *what?*” Carol wondered for one mad moment if she had fallen through a time warp.

“Actually, that's a point,” said Paul. “How about the club?”

“It's in London. Getting in could be tricky.”

“Easier than getting through Heathrow in a false beard. Believe me, I've tried.”

“What club is this?” Carol demanded. “I didn't think they still existed.”

“Ah, well, you don't move in the circles, do you, darling,” said Monica. “I dated a waiter at the Junior Greys once. Awfully nice boy. Very polite.”

“This is not the usual kind of club,” said Paul. “For one thing, it's not men only. I think we could keep you safe there, if we can get you there in the first place.”

“But we'll have to set off right away,” said Rob, yawning. “Oh, God. What time is it?” He looked at his watch. “Nearly two. I honestly don't think I'm going to be fit to drive, Paul.”

“Well, don't look at me,” said Chris, morphing hastily back to human. “I can't carry all of you in any—whoops.” He suddenly went cross-eyed and folded at the knees. Carol rushed to catch him and was just too late.

“What happened? Chris, what happened?”

“I was half expecting this,” Rob said, waving Carol away and helping Chris back to his feet. “Using the power will be a drain on your body's energy. Was anyone watching how many times he changed? No? Oh well.”

“Sorry, boss,” Chris mumbled. His face was the colour of old newspaper. “Should have listened to you.”

“Well, that's all right, I'll take you,” said Paul. “Both your cars'll be marked by now anyway. I'll go and get mine and we'll set off straight away while no-one's watching.”

“How many more people are going to end up knowing about this?” Carol demanded. “It's supposed to be a secret, you know, or had you all forgotten?”

“Well, you have to admit, as McGuffins go, compared to say a CD or a microfilm yours is a little showy,” said Paul.

“M not a McGuffin,” Chris said with as much force as he could muster.

“More of a Guffinides,” said Monica. “Sorry,” she added.

They made their way outside again, Rob and Monica supporting Chris, and Paul vanished into the shadows with uncanny suddenness.

“How does he do that?” Carol demanded, looking wildly around.

“I wish I knew,” Rob said.

“I wish I had a torch,” Carol muttered, scanning the shadows for masked henchmen.

“If there were anyone else around, he wouldn't have left us alone.”

“Rob, are you sure we can trust him? I mean, absolutely sure?” Monica adjusted Chris's arm on her shoulders. He stirred and mumbled something.

“Well, I don't think we have much choice, but even if we did I'd still say yes. He's gone against his bosses a few times when he didn't like what he was being told to do.”

“And he's still working for them?”

“Occasionally. On a part-time basis, like he said.” The purring of an engine drew nearer, and a sleek, old-fashioned car came into view, Paul at the wheel. Carol's spirits sank as she looked at it.

“Hop in,” said Paul cheerfully.

“Does this thing actually go?” Carol said.

“Bite your tongue, darling,” said Monica. “It’s an Alvis Speed 25. Charlesworth body, right?”

“How do you—oh, of course. You dated a motor mechanic once.”

“Classic car restorer, please,” Monica said. “Very keen on his work.”

“You do know it’ll need to do more than twenty-five on the motorway, don’t you?”

“I don’t think you’ll have any reason to complain,” said Paul.

“Well, I’m putting laughing boy in the back,” said Monica. “I suppose you know he weighs a ton.”

“Sorry,” said Chris.

Eventually, Rob, Chris and Carol were installed in the back, and Monica sat beside Paul in front. Paul handed her a floral headscarf and a pair of sunglasses, and once she was wearing them even Carol had to admit that she looked quite un-Monica-like.

“I don’t know how you all are at sleeping in cars,” Paul said as he started the engine again, “but I’d try if I were you.”

Chris was already snoring. Carol rested her head on his shoulder and her arm across his chest, closed her eyes and tried to ignore the fact that they were in a moving vehicle. *Just as long as it keeps moving...* she thought, and that was the last she remembered before sleep sucked her down like a big black vacuum cleaner.

She woke to a stiff neck and a taste in her mouth like the bottom of someone’s rugby boot.

“Welcome back, babes,” said Chris. Rob stirred and groaned.

“Don’t call me that,” Carol croaked. “Where are we?”

“Fleet service area,” said Paul. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I need breakfast.”

Carol’s stomach seconded the motion with an audible rumble.

“We seem to have got clean away,” Paul said, as they settled themselves round a table with their trays. Chris seemed to have ordered two full breakfasts. “I think—barring surprises on the way into town—we should make the club by lunchtime.”

“That car has quite a respectable turn of speed, actually,” Monica said. She looked as irritatingly fresh as she always did in the mornings. “I was surprised.”

“White-knuckled is the phrase,” said Paul. “I’ll be inspecting the dashboard for finger gouges later.”

“How are you feeling, Chris?” Carol said.

“Hungry,” Chris said with his mouth full. “And--” He swallowed. “Kind of itchy. Like I want to change.”

“Well, for God’s sake don’t,” said Monica. “At least till we’re safe.”

“Safe,” Carol echoed. She couldn’t imagine what being safe felt like.

“I’m not stupid, you know,” Chris said.

“Seriously, though,” said Paul, “if it becomes a real problem, let me know so I can stop. I don’t want a sudden horse in my back seat. I just had the upholstery redone.”

“It had better not become a real problem,” Rob said darkly. He had not spoken since waking up.

“Look, I know what I’m doing, all right?” Chris said hotly.

Before Carol realised what she was doing, she had edged her seat away from him. The look he turned on her struck an acidic pang of guilt to her heart. The fact that Monica had done exactly the same on his other side was no consolation.

“You wanna leave me here and go home, is that it?” Chris said, all his anger quenched in a flash. “I told you it was gonna be dangerous. Thought you didn’t mind that.”

“I don’t,” Carol said emphatically, causing a family of four at another table to look round curiously. “I’m not scared of you, Chris.”

“You're scared of the things, though, aren't you? The centaur and the others--”

“Oh, don't be a drama queen, darling,” said Monica. “We were just giving you space. You may be able to do it when you want to now, but that's not the same as having it under control.”

“I'm not scared of you,” Carol repeated, “not in any of your forms. I mean that, Chris.”

“There are worse things to be scared of,” said Rob, almost inaudibly.

“What do you mean?” said Carol.

“He means the people chasing us,” said Paul. “And he's right. They can be quite frightening.” He turned to Rob. “If this is getting a bit too rich for your blood, old chap, you could always go back. I expect there's a taxi service somewhere near that would get you to a train.”

“I've been thinking about it,” Rob said, still in a low voice. “I don't want to desert you, Carol, or any of you, but I'm not at all sure how much use I can be, if—if it comes to a fight, or...” His voice tailed off.

“If it comes to a fight, Rob dear, hardly any of us are going to be any use,” said Monica. “But that's not what we need you for.”

“You're the brains of the outfit,” said Chris.

“You're the proof that we're not all on drugs and imagining it,” Carol said.

Rob summoned up a smile from somewhere. “Suppose I'd better stay, then,” he said.

“That's more like it,” said Paul. “And now, if everyone's finished, I think we should get moving again. It's nearly nine o'clock, and Krebs and whoever else has traced you to Avevale will shortly be aware that we've moved out.”

Chris paid the bill, and they piled into the Alvis again. Carol had to admit she was impressed with the car's turn of speed, and the seats were comfortable despite the squeeze.

At junction one Paul turned southwards, past Kempton Park racecourse. Carol lost her sense of direction almost immediately, as he threaded the Alvis through side streets and unsignposted turnings.

“Where is this club anyway, darling?” Monica asked curiously.

“Not in St. James' or Pall Mall, if that's what you were thinking,” said Paul. “Its founders preferred a less high-profile location.”

“It's as old as the first gentlemen's clubs, though,” Rob added, “or near enough. Founded in seventeen hundred and twenty something by Sir Joshua Elt and his friends.”

“Elt?” Carol perked up. “He was from round our way, wasn't he? Elt as in Eltdown?”

“That's the chap,” said Hugh. “Interesting fellow. Explorer of some kind.”

“Are we nearly there yet?” said Chris.

“Ten more minutes,” said Paul. “Why?”

“Cause there's a car been tailing us since five minutes after we left the service place.”

“Really?”

“Big silver Audi,” Chris recited the number. “Tinted screen.”

“Vassily Shirinin,” Paul said. “Ex-KGB, now SVR. That helicopter must have spotted us when we joined the motorway. Ah, I'm glad they've sent him.”

“You mean the Russians are after this thing too?” Carol wailed.

“Everyone is going to be 'after this thing,’” Paul said. “And it may not be my place to say it, but that isn't a very nice way to talk about your boyfriend.”

He turned left, quite suddenly and without indicating, into a narrow side street that opened out into a square with a railinged patch of grass at the centre. Paul drove round it and parked in a handy space just in front of the building whose frontage occupied the whole of the side of the square opposite the entrance. Stone steps led up to a heavy set of double doors, beside which a small, discreet brass

plate presumably bore the name of the establishment.

“Get inside, everyone,” said Paul as the Audi pulled up alongside. Carol, Chris and Rob scrambled to get out; Monica was already up the steps as a thin man with receding grey hair and a scar across his forehead slid out of the Audi and levelled a gun at them.

“Nobody is to move,” he said, in an unaccented, passionless voice.

*

“When did you last have it serviced?” said the man, fanning away the smoke.

“Serviced?” Pricklow repeated vaguely. “Ah, I'm afraid I, um, can't help you there. We leave all those matters in the hands of our colleague here.”

As of five seconds ago, you treacherous bastard, thought Don-Jay savagely, as the man turned to him.

“I don't have the exact date on me,” he said. “Listen, can you repair it or not?”

“I'm sorry, sir,” said the man, “but just looking at it I can tell it's going to have to go to a garage.”

“That is quite out of the question,” said Professor Gefarr icily. “It is imperative that we get to Avevale as soon as possible. Please do what you can.”

“Madam, there is nothing I can do,” the man said wearily, “except arrange for a tow to the nearest garage. You can go with the vehicle or you can stay here. Either way, if you want anything done to the vehicle you will have to pay for it, and also for the tow. May I suggest,” he added, “that you might like to consider some breakdown cover. The AA or the RAC--”

“This is absurd,” Gefarr snapped.

Don-Jay left them to it and walked down the road a little way to escape the smell of burning. After a while he picked up a piece of cardboard from the verge, took a marker pen from his pocket and began to letter AVEVALE on it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Vassily,” said Paul. “How nice to see you again.”

“Hugh Sacristan,” said the man with the gun. “I am afraid this is not a social call.”

“The gun is a bit of a giveaway.”

“I believe that your friends have something that belongs to us.”

“Us?”

“I could take him,” Chris muttered to Carol. “If I changed--”

“Don't you dare,” Carol said forcefully.

“Come on, Vassily,” said Hugh Sacristan. “What is it that these young people are supposed to have stolen?”

Shirinin hesitated. “It has been described to me as a small pyramid of stone.”

Hugh laughed. “A Russian pyramid?”

“It is a historical artifact of great value to the Russian people,” Shirinin snapped. “I am ordered to recover it, or if this is not possible, to take the thief to our Consulate for questioning.”

“Well, you're not going to do either, I'm afraid,” said Hugh easily. He glanced round at the group huddled on the steps. “They may not have gone inside as I suggested, but you will notice they are on the steps of the Club.”

“If they are wise, they will return to the pavement,” said Shirinin.

“Or what? You'll shoot them?”

“I will shoot you,” Shirinin said. The gun never wavered. “You are not on the steps of the Club. If, however, the thief will come forward--”

“What kind of club is this?” Carol whispered.

Hugh laughed. “Forget it, Vassily. You won't do any such thing. Come in with us and have a drink, for goodness' sake. You aren't going to get whatever it is you're after by gunning down civilians, or fellow members, and you know it.”

Shirinin held the pose for a long moment—and then he slipped the safety catch on the gun and slid it into what must have been a shoulder holster, and smiled. “You cannot blame me for trying,” he said.

“These aren't the old days any more, old comrade,” said Hugh. “Do find somewhere else to park before you come in, though. You're blocking the Queen's highway there.” He got out of the car, locked it carefully and joined the others on the steps as the Audi moved smoothly away.

“Next time I tell you to do something,” he said, and Carol realised with a shock that he was angry, “you had damn well better do it. You could all have been killed.”

“But--”

“Don't underestimate the danger you're in. Shirinin won't act against you as long as you're within the bounds of the Club, but as soon as you leave—and we'll have to eventually—you'll be fair game again and he will not hesitate. If he does, they'll send someone else who won't. They may do that anyway, if he doesn't get results. And most of the people who are after you won't even recognise the Club as neutral territory.”

“I'm sorry,” said Carol, Chris and Rob simultaneously.

“Good. Now get inside.”

Rob opened the big double doors, and they trooped in. Carol had intended to read the brass plate, but by the time she remembered it they were in a large, dark vestibule and Hugh was talking to a small balding man in a uniform with brass buttons.

“Go straight ahead into the bar,” said Hugh over his shoulder. “Pikestaff will bring you the book to sign in a moment.”

The bar was a long room dotted with round tables and chairs, and the lighting was considerably better. Three big windows on the wall opposite the door admitted some daylight, and the rest was supplied by imitation gas mantles along the other walls. Rob saw them all to seats.

“What are you drinking?” he said. Carol opted for orange juice, Monica white wine, and Chris shook his head. Rob shrugged and went to the bar. Carol's gaze, following him, was drawn to something hanging on the central beam that spanned the room, and she got up and went towards it. It was a small glass case, of the sort that might be used to display a stuffed fish or other trophy, but inside was nothing but a wedge-shaped lump of metal about nine inches long, pitted and blackened with age, and a small card underneath that said simply “The Nail.”

“Excuse me, miss,” said a voice. It was the little man in the uniform, proffering a huge old book, open, with a tortoiseshell fountain pen lying along the spine. Carol took the pen and signed her name on the first blank line.

“Thank you, miss--” The little man read the name upside down. “Miss Varland. Your drink is on the table beside you.”

Carol thanked him absently. He followed her gaze, which had drifted back to the Nail.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “It takes everyone that way the first time.”

“What sort of nail is it?” she asked.

“Ancient Roman,” he said, straight-faced. “Palestinian in origin, or so we're told. If you desire anything else, miss, just ask at the bar. Lunch will be served in thirty minutes or thereabouts.”

“I do recommend the food here,” said Rob from a seat across the table, “though it might spoil you for motorway service stations. We can relax here for a little while.”

“Actually,” said Chris, “I think I need to be somewhere private. Somewhere with space?”

“Are you going to change again?” Carol said.

"That's the thing," Chris said. "I don't want to, but it's getting kind of difficult."

"I thought it took this huge mental effort," Monica said.

"It did, but then I spent all that time practising, and now it's like trying not to think of a blue rabbit. I keep seeing the symbols in my head, like."

"So that's the next hurdle," Rob said with the suspicion of a sigh. "Well, the Club has a yard out the back which is reasonably private...but anyone staying in the back rooms can look out and see whatever's going on."

"Well, they're just going to have to not look," Carol said, as the image of Chris consumed from within flashed across her mind again.

"Compared to what some of them have seen, this is very small beer," Hugh Sacristan said, sitting down next to Rob. "Right, I've spoken to Vassily, called in a couple of favours, and he'll give us an hour's head start whenever we decide to leave."

"Why?" Chris said bluntly.

Hugh frowned. "Well, for one thing, because that way he can assess the quality of our other pursuers and hopefully insert several spokes into their wheels. And, of course, for friendship's sake. People like us have always had far more in common with each other than we have with our employers."

Carol thought about that. It made sense, and was even reassuring in some obscure way. She looked across at Shirinin, standing at the bar; he smiled and toasted her with his glass.

Rob was less satisfied. "What about loyalty?"

Hugh snorted. "To whom? The Queen, God bless her? A bunch of self-seeking time-servers in Westminster and Whitehall? The ordinary people of Britain, who if they knew half of what we do would demand our immediate arrest? Or some Rupert Brooke ideal of croquet on the lawn and is there honey still for tea? Loyalty's just an excuse for doing something any sane person would know was unconscionable. I've hidden behind it in my time. So has Vassily. And we know just what it's worth."

"So what do you do it for?" Chris persisted.

"This," Hugh said, gesturing widely. "The tiny circle of people I know, who would be seriously harmed if I failed to do my duty. My family, my home, the things that matter to me. And make no mistake, if helping you puts this Club, or Avevale, or my family, in serious jeopardy, I will without hesitation throw you to the wolves and smile while I do it." He smiled illustratively. "But I doubt that will happen."

"Caz," Chris said. "I really need--"

"Which way's the yard?" Carol demanded.

"Down the passage, door straight ahead," Rob said, glaring at Hugh.

"Come with me, babes?"

"Don't call me that." Carol took a deep breath. "All right."

She looked, almost reflexively, at Monica, but Monica's head was lolling, her eyes were closed, and her breathing indicated sound sleep. Carol tried not to feel gleeful as she followed Chris down the passage and through the door to the yard.

"Okay," Chris said, when they reached the rough centre of the cobbled square. "I need to work on staying in control in the different forms. So I need you to be here when I go centaur."

Carol swallowed. "Just--be here?"

"Well," Chris blushed, "if it looks like I'm resisting okay, you could, er, you know..."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have Monica?" Carol could have kicked herself. *Issues? Me? Only a few...thousand...*

"God, no," Chris said, and Carol's emotions flip-flopped again.

"Go on, then," she said, and watched as Centaur Chris exploded out of human Chris. It was getting easier to watch.

"Well," he said, and she tried not to shiver too obviously, "here we are, then."

"Yes," she said.

"So far so good."

"Yes."

"Once I've got this one under control, the others should be a doddle."

"Mmh."

"I just need to not get spooked when I'm the wingy thingy--"

"Pegasus," Carol said with an effort.

"And get used to being around non-virgins when I'm the unicorn."

Carol was trying hard to think, and she thought there must be something more to the unicorn, but it was like trying to sculpt treacle. She knew she was supposed to be resisting him, keeping a cool head, but it was getting harder to remember why over the excessive volume of deliciously wanton feelings that were battering at her self-control.

"Caz?" Chris said.

"What?" The word came out in a sort of gasp.

"I don't think I can..."

"What?" It was easier than trying to understand the words. The yard was as hot and humid as a South American rain forest, her mind had turned into treacle and dribbled out of her ears, her defences were all washed away on a warm dark tide, and all she could see was him. There had been something they were trying to do, but she couldn't remember what it was. It didn't matter.

"Caz," he said, *"I want you."*

As she swayed thankfully towards him at last, there was a loud bang behind her, and suddenly Centaur Chris was replaced by Pegasus Chris and the shock practically swept her legs from under her. For a moment, she hated Rob Fayne, smiling from the doorway with a torn paper bag in his hand.

Pegasus Chris whickered uneasily and fluffed out his feathers, but stood his ground.

"Sorry I startled you," Rob said, "but some things are a bit too exciting even for this lot."

Carol, composing curses on his name in dactylic hexameters, did not respond. In a little while, she knew, she would be grateful to him, but not yet.

*

Father Krebs was paying his bill at the Man At Arms, his bags on the floor at his side. He had retrieved as much as he could of his memory of the previous night, and come to the conclusion that his quarry was off and running. He would ask his chaplain to impose a suitable penance for his failure later. For now, the imperative was to get in pursuit.

He was still unclear as to who had put him down. Without thinking hard, he could list maybe a dozen active agents who had mastered that particular hold. The trouble was that he knew where each and every one of them was. Except maybe...

No. Not that one. Surely even they would not be so insane...

"What's this?" the hairy bartender said, looking at the piece of plastic in his huge hand.

"American Express," Father Krebs said.

"Maybe in America," the giant said, "or London. Not here. Cash."

Father Krebs sighed, retrieved his card and delved into his wallet for English money.

That was when he heard the car draw up outside and some extra sense sent a chill up his spine. Only one individual among the many he had encountered in his long and varied career had ever induced in him a sensation akin to fear.

"Keep the change," he said to the hairy bartender, flinging a handful of notes across the bar, and abandoning his belongings, made his

way through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

The bartender, staring after him, felt something cold and metallic pushing against his jugular vein.

"Okay, buddy boy," John Dower said steadily, "let's try this just once more."

Sadly, Father Krebs was already speeding along the Eltdown road five minutes later, and so denied himself the delicious sight of the mad American being physically thrown out of the pub.

"Never come here again!" shouted the bartender, and slammed the door in his face.

Dower seethed. Surely just one tiny rocket...

But no.

He picked himself up, dusted himself down, retrieved his gun and got back into the car.

If that was the way they wanted to play it, he was game.

On the road out of town, unwittingly following in Father Krebs's wake, he passed three weary, footsore pedestrians, the youngest struggling under the weight of an overloaded rucksack, and took some meagre pleasure in driving them into the verge, but his heart wasn't in it.

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.

*

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.

*

"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.

*

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."

*

"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?"

*

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."

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."

*

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 Erleuchtung.

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 because...?" 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.*

*

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 round!"

"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' piss that y'are."

*

"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.

*

Another service station. Hugh filled the Alvis's tank while Rob located a public phone and made his calls. Chris and Carol sat together on the back seat, the unspoken words between them filling the available space like an invisible air bag.

"I'm sorry," Chris said at last.

"What about?" Carol said.

"Telling Uncle Aris. Not telling you I was gonna. Needing to talk to someone else."

"No problem," Carol said lightly.

"No, really. It's not that I think you don't understand or any of that. It's..."

"I'm too close?"

"Yeah," Chris said gratefully. "And he did help. Sort of."

"You have to discover your inmost nature," Carol said.

"There's only one thing I know right now about my inmost nature," Chris said, "and it's true whatever body I'm wearing." He leaned closer. "I love you, Carol Varland."

"Well," Carol said faintly, "I think that's a good start." He did have really nice eyes.

"Road food," said Shirinin's voice from behind Chris. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

Chris turned and grabbed the paper bags and cups, from which appetising smells were rising. Carol's stomach quickly exercised its veto, and she smiled at the Russian. "Thank you, Vassily," she said.

"Okay," said Rob, getting into the front passenger seat. "They'll have everything at Abergenu ready for us by the time we arrive, which will be quite late tonight. Hugh's taking a fairly long-winded route for obvious reasons."

"Too cheap to pay the toll on the M6," Shirinin commented, as Hugh resumed his seat. "The British Secret Service, always at the mercy of its accountants. I'm sorry, 007, the car has been repossessed, would you like the bicycle or the perambulator?"

"Who says Russians have no sense of humour?" Hugh said. "I'm putting the top up. It looks like rain."

He operated a control on the dash, and with a series of metallic clunks a segmented carapace emerged from the back of the car and closed over their heads. "Spoils the classic look a bit, but it keeps out most things, including bullets. I got the idea from that Batman film. You were saying, Vassily?"

"Thank God for the independently wealthy British spy," Shirinin muttered. "Drive on, bloated capitalist scum."

"I'm gonna need to stop and change soon," Chris said as the car eased into motion.

"You couldn't have said that sooner?" Rob said.

"Nowhere here private enough."

"We'll be in open country fairly soon," Hugh said. "I'll find a place."

*

Father Krebs drew up outside the Club With A Nail In It with a sigh of relief. He had spent an hour going up and down the main road, navigating the roundabout at one end and the one way system at the other, looking for a side road that had eluded him time and time again. There was Dower's car, parked halfway round the square trying to look nonchalant. Presumably Dower himself was inside, breaking fingers or something. This was the obvious place; all the other buildings round the small square were either private residences or discreet offices.

The priest got out of his car and walked up to the steps of the club. Just as he was about to set foot on the bottom step, he hesitated. Would it not be better to check out the outside first?

He was just turning away when something struck the back of his head with sickening force and the world went away.

When pain brought consciousness back to Father Krebs, he found himself lying in the boot of a car, travelling at speed. From the

traffic noises around him he guessed he was on a main road, possibly a motorway, though he would not put it past John Dower to take Oxford Street in the rush hour at ninety. So, the mad American had got the drop on him, as he would doubtless put it, and was taking him somewhere to...well, what? Interrogate him? Kill him? Drop him off on the hard shoulder? He doubted even Dower knew. The American had honed his instincts to razor keenness, and had promptly abandoned conscious thought as too slow and inefficient. He reacted instantly, rather than taking time to plan. The method had its virtues. It was not Father Krebs's.

He consulted his watch. Three-twelve. In the afternoon, presumably. He had been out for less than half an hour. He did not seem to be bound or gagged, though shouting would hardly help his situation right now. He squirmed around till he was facing into the car. Most people, locked in a car boot, would concentrate on trying to open the door, a futile endeavour usually. Father Krebs reached up, forced his fingers between the parcel shelf and the back seat, and worked them along till he located the buttons that tilted the back of the seat forward. Not for the first time, he wished for long, slender, delicate hands like Cardinal Agnelli's. This hurt.

Cautiously, counting on the traffic noise to mask the sound, the priest eased the seat back off its pins and down, just enough to give him a view of the back of the driver's head. If he could just slide into the back seat and get his gun out, he could--

Father Krebs's estimation of John Dower went up a notch. The man driving was a complete stranger.

Dower had dumped him in someone else's car.

*

Meanwhile, the object of Father Krebs's unwilling admiration was skulking around the back of the Club With A Nail In It. He had considered going in, but something about the place gave him the willies. It was probably full of stuck-up, toffee-nosed Brits who would look down their noses and say "What ho, a Colonial johnnie, what?" and tut at him if he tried to break their fingers. He didn't need that right now.

Anyway, the Alvis wasn't here any more. Satellite tracking had it heading westwards on the M4, probably back to Avevale. He could have just stayed put and waited. Not that John Dower had any objection to wasted effort--indeed, he scarcely had any concept of it--but time was, as ever, of the essence.

At least he had got rid of the German priest. Dower knew of the Dorus Dei, and knew them to be occasional allies in the struggle against the forces of godlessness and socialism. He also knew them to be foreigners, and hence untrustworthy. The Vatican had no business sending its own agents out to retrieve this thing, whatever it was. Goddammit, what did they think America was for?

He returned to the pavement and advanced on the steps of the Club, and then changed his mind again. Follow the Alvis, that was the ticket. The thing was bound to be with Sacristan. The guy had all the luck. Damn Brits.

His phone rang. He looked at it, then punched to accept the call.

"Dower here. Yessir? Not as of yet, sir. I've had some local difficulties.

"If you would just let me do my job, sir--

"No sir. No, I don't believe so, sir.

"Permission to speak freely, sir.

"Because America is no longer held in respect, sir, in the international community, and the reason for that is that we've gone soft, sir. The enemies of freedom walk the streets openly laughing at us, sir. There is an urgent need for prompt, decisive and above all conclusive action on our part to bring the rest of the world to heel.

"I absolutely believe we should, sir.

"Well, that is because there has been a tragic mistake, sir, possibly as a result of subversion and fraud at the--

"No sir. No, sir, that is not my intention.

"I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States, sir.

"No sir, I would not wish for that to happen, sir.

"Sir, yes sir. (However long it fuckin' well takes.) No, sir, I was clearing my throat, sir. Yes sir. Thank you, sir. God bless America."

He hung up the phone, then returned to his car. He had some time to make up.

*

Don-Jay was starting to flag. The desire to be far away (very far away) was still strong on him, but he was aware that his feet hurt and the backpack had become heavy again. He had reached a main road of some kind, had walked along it for an hour or two and then had succumbed to temptation and hitched a lift to the nearest motorway. Now he was standing on the hard shoulder with his thumb out, but so far nobody was biting.

He knew what had happened now. Someone, the creepy guy in the cloak, had put a powerful compulsion on him. Don-Jay didn't mind that so much, since the compulsion was to do exactly what he wanted most in the world to do (and, yes, he was aware that that was because of the compulsion, but that really didn't matter) but the guy could have built in some rest stops.

Sooner or later, he was dismally aware, he would have to crawl back to Pricklow and Gefarr. He had not enough imagination to envisage himself as anything other than their hanger-on and lackey. They tolerated his querulous inefficiency and idleness, and he occupied a position no other technician with an ounce of self-respect would take. It was a perfect contract, born of necessity and sustained by mutual loathing, and just as he had no alternative, neither did they.

But for now, he could not even face the thought of going back. So he stood, and waved his thumb, and was miserable.

And by and by something stopped. *Oh great. Hippies*, Don-Jay thought, just as he would have thought *Oh great, a family*, or *Oh great, two old people*, or *Oh great, Anne Hathaway*. Don-Jay was entirely egalitarian in his antipathies. Still, a ride was a ride. He slouched towards the psychedelic double-decker bus without giving it or its occupants a further thought.

"And why, Allie my love," Dracul inquired, "are we pickin' up this particular waif or as it might be stray?"

"I dunno," Allie replied irritably. "It feels..." She waved a skinny hand. "Wrong in the right way."

"That's good enough for me. Top of the mid-afternoon to you, sir," he said to Don-Jay, who had by now swung himself on to the platform, "and where is it a fine gentleman such as yourself would be after headin'?"

"Anywhere you're going is fine," Don-Jay said shortly. "Can I take this thing off?"

"You can fling it into the bushes if you like," Dracul said expansively. "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat, or you could if we had one, but I wouldn't go callin' anyone a bastard if I were you."

Don-Jay shrugged out of the backpack, shoved it into the luggage space, and sat down with a feeling not unlike relief.

A minute later, in spite of Dracul's best efforts to engage him in conversation, he was asleep.

*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wales, Carol reflected at one point, was just as easy to sleep through as England. With the very best will in the world, it was impossible to stay interested in an endless succession of road, roundabout, more road, junction, and still more road. Hugh drove like a machine, untiring, mostly unspeaking. Vassily and Rob tried their best to make light conversation, but eventually fatigue overcame them too, and they dozed, Rob with his head flung back and his mouth open, Vassily curled up with his arms folded. Chris sat with his eyes closed, but whether he was asleep or just thinking was anybody's guess. He had run through his changes, in a field west of Amesbury, almost perfunctorily, and had been taciturn and thoughtful ever since.

As the sky darkened, they turned off the main road and entered a maze of narrow lanes that wound up and down the sides of hills, or maybe they were actually mountains. Carol couldn't tell, but as the tempo of the journey became more varied she began to feel more awake. When Hugh stopped on the brow of a hill, she wound down the window and put her head out, in time to see a couple of sheep sauntering insolently out of the way. There seemed to be a definite sense of "And you are?" in their expressions.

"Sorry about this," Hugh said. "They have more right to be here than we do."

"Don't people run them over?" Rob queried scratchily.

"Try it some time." Hugh's tone was remote, and Carol realised with a shock how tired he must be, and how hard he was fighting to hold that exhaustion at bay. "The kind of vehicle that could flatten a sheep and not be wrecked itself would never risk these roads in the first place. And even if one did, they're all owned by people who have serious clout in these parts." He let in the clutch, and the sheep watched the Alvis pass with lofty indifference.

"Hungry," Chris said.

"Not surprised," Hugh replied. "There'll be food when we get where we're going. If you don't mind, I really need to concentrate."

Silence reigned thereafter. They stopped twice more to allow sheep to stroll out of the road, and once so that Hugh could consult a map. At last, as the moon emerged from a tangle of clouds, they descended a long, winding slope and entered a tiny village of stone cottages; beyond the single street, a sandy beach sloped down to the sea, and Carol could see boats beached on the sand. The village was quite dark, but as they bumped over a cattlegrid and up a tree-lined drive she saw lights blazing from the windows of a fair-sized house ahead. She stretched her cramped limbs, and felt Chris stir and mumble beside her. Whatever he had been doing the rest of the time, he was definitely asleep now.

The car pulled up in front of the house, and Hugh got out and held open the door for Carol and Chris. She looked up at his face as she got out, and could see the greyness even in the dark. He summoned up a smile. "I'm out of condition," he told her. "In the old days I could have driven you halfway to Vladivostok without stopping."

"Thank you," Carol said, and meant it. The night was cold, and she shivered. She hadn't thought, when they had set off in Chris's wake that morning, that they would be going any further; she had no luggage, no coat even. They had been blindly reacting, as they had all along, fleeing from rather than running to, with no plan and no goal.

"Will we be safe here?" she asked, as they mounted the steps and Rob unlocked the heavy doors. "For a while at least?"

"For a while," Hugh said. "Abergenau's not easy to get to, even in daylight."

Warmth and golden light flooded out on to the threshold, and enfolded them as they stepped in. Carol suddenly realised her own exhaustion, and realised they were all in the same condition.

"The kitchen is this way," Rob said, opening a door. "I told the staff to leave something we could reheat--ah, here." Five plates, covered with metal lids, stood on the worktop. "If somebody could put the kettle on..."

"I'll do it," Carol said.

"The rest of you go through to the other room and sit down," Rob went on. "The beds should be all aired, but we'll have to make shift a bit for clothes and such till I can get our stuff sent up from the Club. Sorry, what?" as Carol spluttered with laughter.

"I'm sorry," she managed, "it just sounded so P G Wodehouse. 'Sent up from the Club.'"

He grinned in spite of himself. "I suppose it did."

"Of course, I don't have any stuff at the Club," Carol said, sobering abruptly. "In fact, I've been wearing the same outfit for--God, nearly a week. I packed a bag when we went to room 3b, and it's probably still sitting in my car."

"Oh my good God," Rob said. "I'm so sorry. I never thought--" He stopped, and his face set. "That's Hugh," he said. "Just because he's used to flitting hither and yon at a moment's notice, he thinks-- Carol, I'm *sorry*."

"Not your fault," Carol said around a yawn. The kettle clicked off, and she hurried to find tea and coffee. "Who wants what?"

"I'll find out," Rob said, "and we'll get you some things. Tomorrow. Promise." He vanished into the next room, to return a moment later. "Hugh's spark out, Chris wants coffee and Shirinin wants tea."

"Typical. Chris can have tea and like it," Carol said, and yawned again. It was beginning to come home to her that she was safe, for the moment at least, warm, not going anywhere and not about to, and her body was starting to shut down. "And tomorrow, hopefully--if we aren't besieged by spies and priests and god knows what--we'll be able to make some real progress at last."

*

The following day dawned grey and wet. The rooms were nicely decorated in keeping with the style of the house, the beds comfortable, and Carol lay in bed for some minutes just luxuriating in not having to be anywhere. The disturbing dream of the night before had not recurred.

At length she got up, showered in the huge bathroom, put on her clothes, looked in on Chris just to be sure (yes, he was there, sound asleep) and went downstairs to find Rob making breakfast and Hugh doing Tai Chi outside, on a verandah she hadn't noticed last night which gave on a spacious lawn bordered with flower beds and high hedges.

"Morning," Rob said cheerfully. "I gather you slept well."

"Oh yes," Carol said.

"Good," Rob said, "because I owe you a sincere apology. This whole ridiculous chase has been my fault. I was so fascinated by the whole thing I didn't stop to think--"

"It was worth it, Rob." Carol was firm. "If we hadn't gone back to London we'd never have met Uncle Aris. I think he really helped." She smiled. "And if you hadn't taken us to room 3b we'd never have got to know Hugh and never gone back to London. See, it all worked out for the best."

"It's very good of you to say so, but I still need to make up for it. When we've eaten I'll take you to the nearest proper town and get you and Chris some clothes and some basic essentials. Vassily's down in the village phoning Pikestaff to get some stuff sent up for Hugh and me."

"This place doesn't have a phone?"

"There's one in the office, but he thought it best to do it from somewhere else, and he's probably right. How do you like your eggs?"

Chris wandered down while Carol and Rob were eating, and Hugh joined them five minutes later.

"I was doing some thinking last night," Chris said, when plates were empty and he and Carol were washing up. "About travelling the edges."

"Mm," Carol said encouragingly.

"What me and the centaur have in common--it's what makes me a bloke, right? He's good for fighting, shagging, showing off, all that. I change into him when I get angry or randy."

"Sounds about right," Carol said neutrally.

"So I figure, if I can try to change slowly, focus on the feelings that come through at that moment, I can get a clearer idea of exactly what those feelings are, maybe use them instead of the diagram to trigger the change. I mean, those feelings are part of me as well, right?"

"I'd imagine so." Carol dried the last plate and stacked it in the rack above the sink.

"The funny thing is..." Chris emptied the bowl, picked the food remnants out of the drainer and dropped them into the bin. "When I go through the whole cycle it feels like I'm going in the same direction all the time? Me to centaur to wingy thingy to unicorn--there's never a feeling like I'm going back, you know?"

"That must be what Uncle Aris meant you to realise," Carol said. "Each form leads naturally to the next, including from the unicorn to you."

"But if that's true," Chris said, "how do I know I'm the real me?"

"That's the point, isn't it? The real you is all of them. This form is just the one I happen to be in love with."

"Ready in five minutes?" Rob said, putting his head round the kitchen door.

"What's up?" Chris said.

"We need some clothes and things," Carol said. "Rob's going to take me."

"What about me?"

"You," Carol said, "can do what you talked about and travel the human-centaur edge. It'll be easier without me around."

"Not as much fun though," Chris grumbled.

"Stay focussed." Carol hugged him briefly. "We won't be long."

*

Father Krebs, having abandoned the notion of overpowering the driver (who was after all quite innocent), waited till the car stopped at a large service station just outside Peterborough, and extricated himself from the boot while the man was inside, presumably getting food. He himself was starting to get hungry; fortunately Dower had not bothered to search him, and his money belt was secure under his shirt. A quick trip to the public toilets and several cups of coffee and sweet pastries later, the inner man was satisfied (and his sinful urge for asceticism thoroughly mortified) and he was able to plan.

Having lost Dower, he had no way of knowing where his quarry had gone. He knew Dower had been following an Alvis with three

men and two girls in it, but that was all. The American would have made sure to send him in the wrong direction, and there were after all so many of those. Father Krebs took out his phone and checked, but the tracker on Dower's car was no longer registering. He must have found and removed it.

Father Krebs, having no other options, folded his hands, closed his eyes, composed himself and prayed for guidance.

"...in Wales."

"Seriously?"

"I told you she was mad..."

Father Krebs opened his eyes. The two girls had simply walked past his table, deep in conversation about something, but the words had penetrated his awareness in a way he had learned to recognise. He crossed himself and offered up thanks.

He needed a ride into Peterborough. There he could get funds, a vehicle, and perhaps some more precise guidance. God had done His part; the rest was up to him.

He took out his phone again and dialled a number.

*

The bus stood and steamed quietly in the layby, while Wayne peered anxiously at the engine by the light of an ancient torch. MOT tests and services were a distant memory, the vehicle had done enough miles to get to Venus and back several times, and even the shaman's mojo could only do so much to nurse the ancient engine along.

Don-Jay had seriously considered, several times since he had woken up, asking to be dropped off. These people were seriously creeping him out. The little guy in the white coat was okay--Dik, his name was, and Don-Jay recognised a fellow psychonaut even if he himself had never achieved more than a nauseous headache from smoking cabbage leaves dipped in vodka--but the Scottish guy and the Irish chick, or whatever they were, the other chick with the dolls and the gigantic spade broad, there was a serious vibe going on there, and he didn't like it. Even the obvious token mundane seemed to be more in tune with them than Don-Jay could imagine ever being. He watched them, laughing and chatting as doll chick passed out bowls of some kind of stew from a real live goddam cauldron simmering over a portable stove. The whole hippy-dippy gypsy trip. He was amazed he hadn't seen a guitar anywhere on the bus.

"I don't allow 'em," said the Scottish guy, as if he'd spoken. "It's a demarcation thing. The other lot don't do magic and we don't sing in public. But that's not important right now." He put down his bowl, got up and came over to Don-Jay. "You've not said two words since you came aboard, you've turned up your aristocratic nose at Tilda's excellent vegetable broth, which is a broth of a broth so it is, and you persist in not being with us despite the fact that we were kind enough to give you a lift. I can tell you that we don't generally do the whole hitch-hiker thing, on account of I have a general antipathy toward freaks and weirdoes. I agreed to pick you up at the request of my girl Allie there, who seemed to think you were important. Would you be after knowin' why now?"

"Hey, no offence, man," Don-Jay said, unnerved by the piercing scrutiny of the guy's green eyes. "I'm just not into the whole tree-hugging thing, you know?"

"Tree-hugging? Don't blame you. Bark on your shirt, splinters like as not, and the tree don't even call you afterwards. It's a mug's game. So what's yours?"

"Look," Don-Jay said, looking away desperately, "I don't have to tell you nothing--"

"No," the guy said, "you don't. Ms Kwok?"

Don-Jay was startled--he'd forgotten about the little Asian broad. She was the worst of all. "Donald Joseph Hershberger," she said, in a voice like a bell. "Preferred soubriquet Don-Jay. Age forty-three, though he pretends to be younger. Employed since nineteen-eighty-eight as a technician by the Orthodox Research Consortium, a private organisation formed in the middle nineteen-eighties with the aim of locating and exploiting technologies based on the sciences commonly known as 'occult.' No significant qualifications. Virgin."

"You got no right--" Don-Jay began.

"Absolutely correct, me bucko," the other guy said in a cold, level voice, "and yet I do it anyway. Bear that in mind. Now, apart from all of the above, and the obvious fact that you've had a powerful whammy dumped on you quite recently, I don't know anything about you that makes it worth my while to put up with your stinking weaselly presence on my bus. I'm not after wastin' decent magic on you when intimidation works just as well. I will, however, tell you that if you call me Scottish in that pointy little head of yours just one more time I will turn you into a flatworm, mince you up and feed you to your own great-granddaddy in the hope that next time round

you'll know better. Am I getting through?"

"Five by five," Don-Jay said hastily, and for the second time that day he spilled his guts. The little he knew seemed even less this time round. The Sco-- The Irish guy, Dracul, listened carefully.

"Is that it, Allie?" he said when Don-Jay had stumbled to a halt. "What you've had us chasin'?"

"Aye, that's it," the skinny punk chick called back. *Okay, if he's Irish, she must be Scottish. I hope.*

"And the fellow in the cloak. Even I noticed when he turned up. Erleuchteten?"

"You bet. Probably Sienkiewicz. He's the only Ipsissimus still on his feet."

"Whatever this is we're after, we can't let them get it. They'd be insufferable for months. Not to mention the whole remaking the world in their image thing. It's that powerful?"

"If they can drain the juice out of it, there'll be nothing they cannae do. We're talkin' god power."

"Of course we are," Dracul muttered. "You wouldn't happen to know what kind--? No, of course not, forget I asked. All right, my fine gentleman, you're off the hook for the moment, but we'll be after lettin' our Rachel have a play with some of the toys in that very heavy backpack of yours. From what you say, some of 'em might help us track this thing down. I don't know exactly why we want it, but want it we does, precious."

"To keep it out of the hands of anyone else," Rachel Kwok put in, as Wayne brought the backpack and dumped it on the ground in front of her.

"Because we're so much wiser and better than all them other buggers. Right. Slipped my mind for a moment." Dracul grinned evilly. "Well, now, Don-Jay me boy, it looks as if you'll be with us for a while yet. Which should suit you down to the ground, since we're after the same thing you are."

"Listen," Don-Jay gabbled, "I don't give a good goddam about this thing, whatever it is--"

"Maybe not," Dracul said, "but imagine the faces of the other two if you bring it back in triumph when they've failed. You'd be the man of the hour. King of the lab. The world would be your oyster, right?"

Actually, Don-Jay could picture the scene all too clearly. Gefarr would snatch the thing out of his hands, turn and walk away, and Pricklow would shrug and make a face, pretending to be sympathetic--*sorry, but you know her, what can I do--*and follow her, leaving Don-Jay to get back to sweeping the lab. It was, after all, all he was fit for.

But if he could fathom its secrets on his own...

He quite liked the idea of remaking the world in his image. He had lots of ideas. And who were these guys, anyway? Bunch of hippies. He'd bamboozle them easy. "All right," he said. "I'm in."

"Glad to hear it," Dracul said. "Well, actually not, since I find you personally revoltin', but we need you, so it's all good. Now for pity's sake come and have some of Tilda's gunk before she bursts into tears."

Don-Jay, seeing no choice for the moment, allowed himself to be led into the circle round the stove.

The stew really was very good.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"We're back," Carol called, as she and Rob, bag-laden, pushed open the doors and hurried into the hall. Behind them the rain pounded the drive.

"You're wet," Hugh observed, emerging from the drawing room.

"Yes," Carol quoted. "It's raining." She broke off and stared at Hugh. "What happened to you?"

"Your boy Chris has been making some strides," Hugh said, touching the bruises on his face. "Thank God for the rain. If he hadn't stopped--"

"I'd better see to those," Rob said at once. "There's a first aid box in the kitchen."

"What did you do?" Carol said, almost at the same time. From the way he was holding himself, there were similar bruises all over his body, at very least.

"We were just having a bit of a knockabout," Chris said from the doorway, and Carol switched her stare to him. It was Chris, and yet...not Chris. She was reminded of the first time she had seen him at the airport. This time he was definitely taller, broader, his features more strongly marked, his voice deeper. He was stripped to the waist, his jeans straining at every seam, his feet bare.

"I'm travelling the edge, Caz," he said. "Halfway between human and centaur. It's amazing."

Carol could only stare. The raw allure of the half-horse was there, but in a fully human body.

"I got the strength, the speed, and I think I can do the voice," Chris went on. "Want me to try?"

"No, Chris," Carol said evenly. "I want you to take Hugh outside, change into the unicorn and heal him."

"Unicorn's boring," Chris said offhandedly. "He'll heal naturally."

"Now, Chris," Carol said flatly.

"*Make me*," he said, and suddenly he was the only man in the room, she felt naked in front of him, and for a breath she couldn't think of any reason why that should not be so. With a huge effort she fought her way back to full control.

"Are you still the Chris that loves me?" she demanded. "Because if you are, you'll change back to fully human right now. If you aren't--" Her voice misgave her, and she turned away for a moment. When she looked back, after a heart-freezing moment, it was Chris, her Chris, standing there, looking stricken.

"Caz," he whispered. "I--"

"Heal Hugh," Carol said. "Then we'll talk."

Chris looked at Hugh, paled visibly, and offered his hand. Hugh took it meekly, and suffered himself to be led through the drawing room and out into the rain-drenched garden. Carol, following, went to the French window and watched as the unicorn exploded out of Chris, bowed its head and touched its glowing horn to Hugh's face and body.

"Well," Rob said beside her, "we appear to have encountered a dark side as well."

"I don't think so," Carol said after a moment. "It was bad, but not evil. I think he just let it go to his head. Power does that."

Chris and Hugh came back across the lawn and into the room. Hugh was walking more easily, and the bruises Carol had seen were gone.

"I hope you're not just making excuses," Rob said very quietly. "Right," he said at once in a more normal tone. "Now that that's over, Chris, we've got you some clothes. Nothing special, but they'll cover your current body. I suggest you stay the same size for the time being." If the words carried any meaning apart from the obvious, neither Rob nor Chris acknowledged it.

Carol, thrown for a second by that last quiet aside, stood there unspeaking while Chris took the bags Rob handed him and went upstairs.

"I suppose all the other edges will be similarly, um, blended," Rob said.

"Only we won't know how till we--till he tries," Carol corrected herself, "because we don't know what the other two faces *are*, we only know what they *do*."

"Which is the whole reason for the exercise," Rob finished. "I suppose."

"To discover the inmost nature of each face," Carol said slowly. "Was it me, or did half-centaur Chris seem nastier than centaur Chris?"

"The reason is obvious." Vassily Shirinin got up from the armchair in which he had been sitting, unnoticed, all this time. "The centaur's inmost nature is strongly composed of sensuality. It--he--feels everything intensely; anger, lust, the joy of living. The other side of that coin is increased empathy, causing him to feel what you feel, and from that comes a degree of compassion. When combined with the more rational, less emotional human side, that empathy, that compassion, is diluted. The same anger, the same lust, but more self-centred, more detached." He smiled. "Fortunately, Chris's human side retains its strong affection for Ms Varland. Perhaps that is part

of the inmost nature of humanity...the capacity to form intimate bonds."

"A pretty theory, Vassily," Hugh remarked. "Why do I get the idea that human beings are going to come off worst every time as far as you're concerned?"

"That is only natural," Shirinin said. "The human is the only face that has no exceptional abilities. No flight, no healing, no enhanced strength. Humans are...ordinary."

"Only because they're what we're used to," Hugh countered. "What about that rationality you mentioned? The ability to step back from a situation and view it coolly, reason it through without emotional complications getting in the way?"

"An ability that has led to some of the greatest atrocities in the history of creation itself. Perhaps all of them."

"And some of the greatest breakthroughs in the history of science," Hugh said. "Perhaps all of them."

"I disagree," Shirinin maintained. "The ability to deny one's empathy and shut down one's compassion has nothing to do with scientific development."

"Oh, come now," Hugh scoffed. "Animal experimentation, and for that matter experimentation on humans, whatever you may think of the wrongs and rights of it, has given us--"

"EXCUSE ME--thank you," Carol said. "Fascinating as this is, we've got the main point, thank you Vassily. So as Chris learns to balance on each edge, we'll find out a little more about the nature of the faces it connects, which may not be all good. The forms can combine in ways we don't expect."

"Admirably summarised, my dear Ms Varland," Shirinin said.

"Crawler," Hugh muttered.

*

Gefarr frightened Pricklow. It was one of the benchmarks he used to assess his own continued rationality. Day of the week correct, check. Prime Minister still a lying scoundrel, check. Gefarr still terrifying, check.

How she could have enough pull with the military to obtain any degree of co-operation was a mystery to Pricklow. The ORC was a tiny private outfit, total personnel three, and the minuscule government funding they received was, he happened to know, the result of a clerical error that had gone uncorrected through four administrations. True, they had at one time enjoyed prime ministerial favour, but the old principle of plausible deniability had resulted in a severing of all public ties despite or perhaps because of the success of the commission with which they had been entrusted. Even the subsequent ousting of the PM in question had not soothed Pricklow's ravaged feelings for that. Hence the "lying scoundrel" thing, which in his view applied to any and all such officials whatever their affiliation.

And yet here they were, being driven back to their headquarters in an army staff car, with a wallet of impressive-looking papers that had been couriered urgently from London to Eltdown, authorising them to enter and search any premises for the purpose of seizing any and all artifacts of ancient technology that might be of interest to Her Majesty's Government, using whatever force they might deem necessary. It was amazing. All they had had to do was get from Avevale to Eltdown--some problem of jurisdictions--and that had been relatively easy once Pricklow had noticed the little bus parked outside the pub. He hadn't realised there was a bus service.

The arrest warrant on Don-Jay, Pricklow thought, was a little extreme, but that was Gefarr for you.

They rolled into the yard adjoining their building, and Pricklow's mouth fell open.

"Pricklow," Gefarr said, her grating voice recalling him to himself. "Assemble whatever equipment you think we will need and assist the troops to load it into the helicopter. Our first priority is location and retrieval of the equipment stolen by Don-Jay. When we have that we can track the artifact and acquire it much more easily this way." She paused. "The feet, Pricklow. You put one in front of and slightly to the side of the other."

"How is this possible?" Pricklow had spent his life sedulously avoiding this sort of thing. Troops. Helicopters. Not his field at all.

"I have connections. A certain...prominent personage...is aware of the nature of this artifact." Gefarr smiled. "He has a family interest, you might say." Her face and voice hardened. "Get moving."

Pricklow, numbly, got moving.

*

"I will tell you everything," said Uncle Aris. "Everything that I know, and you will break nothing, yes?"

Dower glared at him. The old guy had been outside his crummy shop waiting when Dower screeched to a halt outside, had insisted on opening the door and ushering the American inside, had not given him a moment to go into his prepared spiel ("There's two ways this could go, grampa...") and had even handed him a goddam cup of tea. Not that Dower was planning on drinking it.

"If you do break," the old guy went on, "your embassy will fix. I have cousin Konstantin in your State Department, very senior. Anything you break, including maybe body parts, your government will pay to replace. So we are all friends now, yes?"

"Friends," Dower repeated, his tone neutral. America didn't have friends. Enemies, yes, and allies, who were enemies who didn't know it yet. Not friends. Dower was the same.

"Artifact you seek is called tetrad," Uncle Aris went on. "Is very old, yes? My family has guarded it for generations. Kept it safe. We still do."

"Have you got it?"

Aris laughed. "No. You know who has it."

"The boy who came to see you."

"Very confused, yes. Did not want. But no choice. Tetrad is within him." The old man sipped his own tea. "Tetrad is power. Great power. Tetrad is enlightenment. But only for one. You kill this young man, take it from him, still only for one. You break it apart to find out what it is, you will find only stone. Look into it with your clever lights, just stone. Touch it with the flesh, it becomes part of you, and then you have real big problem, yes."

"Where did the boy go?" Dower was hardly listening. Information gained without torture was worthless, a bunch of lies for sure.

"I do not know. Far away, I told him. I do not want such trouble in my shop, I said. I should have known you would come anyway."

"Damn right," Dower said absently. Maybe if he broke a finger or two...

"Remember my cousin Konstantin." The old man was not being smug, not gloating, merely pointing out a fact. "Many people have sought this tetrad. Capodistria, he wanted it. Mavromichalis, they killed him to get it, found he did not have. The Great Powers, they wanted. Othon, Andreas, they both tried to get. My family held firm. Got Andreas exiled when he went too far. Now George's boy, he want very much. But he will not get it, no, and neither will you, Mister John Dower."

"How do you know my name?" Dower snapped. He had no clue about any of the other names the old guy had rattled off, but he assumed they were Greek.

"Knowledge is what I do." The old guy spread his hands, indicating the shop in general. "Why do you not look for your own tetrad? Were many, once. Some great holy man in your country shall have had. Shall have lost. Probably shot by your cowboys. Maybe it rolled down the rivers to the sea. You send down divers, yes?" The old guy laughed. "Look for little sandstone pyramid, so big," his hands made the shape, "on bottom of ocean. Find that one. This one belong to Greeks. Real Greeks, not German immigrants put in charge by Britain and France and Russia."

This all meant nothing to Dower, but he memorised it anyway. If by chance there was another one of these things on American soil, that would be a bonus.

He could not help wondering, though. Great power and enlightenment, but only for one.

Why not him?

He could handle great power. He knew he could. And with that power he could correct the mistakes of the past, restore America to greatness. What would a bunch of long-haired liberal pinko scientists do with it anyway? Destroy it for sure. It was Dower's duty as a public-spirited American to prevent that, to put this thing to use for the good of his country, and therefore the world.

One of Dower's foster mothers had read him *The Lord Of The Rings* when he was young. Even then he had known it for the lying liberal propaganda it was. If you didn't use power, someone else would use it on you. That was how things worked.

He smiled at the old man, and deliberately dropped his tea cup. It smashed on the floor, tea soaking into the carpet.

"Send the bill to your cousin Konstantin," he said, and left.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Chris had not come down after an hour, so Carol went to find him. Hugh and Vassily were still arguing the toss over a wide range of subjects from the moral imperative in Western philosophy to the economic entanglements of post-Soviet Russia, and Rob was cooking something for lunch.

She missed Monica. The thought struck her unawares. She decided to go down to the village when the rain let up and call her. If it was safe for Vassily to phone the Club, it would be safe for Carol to phone her friend.

Chris was sitting on his unmade bed, the bags Rob had given him untouched on the floor beside his feet. His head was bowed, and he didn't look up when she knocked and went in.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"For a monster?" The response came in a raw voice. He had been crying.

"Chris, you're not a monster."

"Am."

"No you're not. You just got a bit...above yourself, that's all."

"That guy is a trained killer," Chris said. "He was holding back, we were just trying out the new body. I could have killed him, Caz, and there's no way short of shooting me he could have stopped me. And I wanted to. Just for a moment like, I wanted to see how it would feel."

"It's natural, Chris. You are a bloke after all."

"When I was the centaur I never wanted to do nothing like that. On the edge...it was like the brakes were off, you know?"

"Human beings have evolved differently. Vassily was saying--"

"I know. I was on the landing. I heard." Chris looked up at last. "I don't want to be on that edge again, Caz. And yet I do. How fucked up is that?"

"I think we've learned all we can from that one," Carol said. "Try one of the others next."

"Suppose they're as bad? Suppose human/pegasus is nasty as well?"

"Only one way to find out," Carol said, forcing a brightness she did not feel into her voice.

"You want me to try it?" Chris shook his head. "Not with you around."

"Chris, the pegasus does two things. It flies, and it gives people inspiration. What could be nasty about that?"

"I read this comic once..."

"Comics are comics. This is a novel. Entirely different."

"I thought you were gonna say 'this is real life.'" Chris managed a ghost of a grin. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. If something goes wrong, the door's right behind me."

"All right. I'll try. It might not be as easy. Centaur's closer to human than the wi--" He broke off and laughed. "Than the pegasus."

"You've known its name all along, haven't you?"

"Wingy thingy sounded more fun. Okay, here goes."

Chris closed his eyes and concentrated. Carol watched.

She never noticed when the wings appeared. They were just there, not substantial and muscular like the wings of the flying horse, but translucent and radiant with inner light. Chris's features changed, not coarser now but finer, his limbs and body more slender. He breathed in deeply. Carol found herself holding her own breath, rapt in wonder.

"God." Chris's voice was different too, thrilling through her mind, awakening impulses and feelings a world away from the raw lust of the centaur. "This is incredible. Carol, are you there?"

"Yes," she croaked, and let out her breath in a whoosh. The whole room looked different, bathed in an unearthly light. She found herself fascinated by the colours of the carpet, the weave of the curtains. So much depth, so much ingenuity, so much...love. As for the view from the window, it was too ineffable even to look at.

"What am I?"

"A..." She didn't want to say it. "An angel?"

"No."

"A pagan angel, then. A muse. Apollo. I don't know, Chris, I..." There was a wrongness on the very edges of things, and Carol realised it was her. She wasn't strong enough to bear all this beauty. It was going to burn her. "Change back, Chris. Please."

He did, immediately. The light dimmed and was gone, the room was just a room again, and for a moment Carol almost broke under the weight of loss.

"That..." Too many words flooded to her lips, and she found herself wanting to speak just for the sake of speaking, to spill out nonsense syllables, to let her paralalia somehow express the insights that had overwhelmed her.

"Are you all right?" Chris demanded, getting up and taking hold of her arms. She let herself sag into his embrace.

"Fine. More than fine. That was...powerful. Almost too much. In another second it would have been."

"More powerful than the pegasus itself? Yes, of course it would be." He was thinking it out for himself. "The human side would accentuate the gift, not weaken it. Humans have imagination, and we've never felt the need to control it. Enhanced imagination plus rational mind..." He laughed. "Hark at me."

"How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted. Hungry. Wanna do it again."

"Not just yet," Carol said. "Food first. Rob was doing something with noodles downstairs."

"Caz..." Chris said. "Could we just lie here together for a minute?"

She looked at him, at his tough boy's face that had just a little while ago been the face of a god. She saw the fear, the wonder, the need in him.

She lay down on the bed, and pulled him into her arms, and there they lay, not speaking, till Rob called them for lunch.

*

"Wales?" Dracul repeated. "Ah no, not Wales. I hate bloody Wales. Let's go to Rotherham instead."

"Why Rotherham?" Frankie queried.

"There's a great jazz club in Rotherham."

"That's Rotterdam," Wayne called from the cab.

They had passed the night in the layby and resumed their journey at first light. The problem with the engine seemed to have resolved itself for the moment.

"Ach, it's right you are," Dracul called back. "We ran into this woodwork teacher up north a few years back," he told Frankie. "My gods, he had some stories. Anyway. Wales it must be, so Wales it is, I suppose. Anyone found singing, especially in tune, will be dropped off on the nearest habitable island with a pistol and one bullet. Hymns as usual excepted, Marsha. Rachel, Dik, keep trying to narrow it down."

Dik and Rachel Kwok looked up from the pile of miscellaneous kit from Don-Jay's backpack and nodded briefly.

"And if you can narrow it down to somewhere other than bloody Wales I'll take it kindly," Dracul muttered.

"What's his beef with Wales?" Don-Jay asked Frankie, who was sitting in the seat in front of him.

"No idea," Frankie answered. "Could be anything, or nothing. One thing I've learned about Dracul is that you never know which way he's going to jump. Often he doesn't know himself."

Don-Jay had mostly tuned out after "No idea," but nodded intelligently anyway.

"He's a chaos magician," Frankie went on, "which as far as I can tell means he pretty much has to be insane. The fewer the rules, the greater the responsibility. When there's nothing to stop you, you have to be in control the whole time. Something like that anyway."

"Insane, but in control? That doesn't make sense."

"Welcome to Dracul's world. Actually, it's not that weird. Look at paranoid schizophrenics. They often have to be in control the whole time, because of what the voices tell them or whatever. Dracul's like that, only the only voice he has is his own."

"Sounds like a nutjob."

"You'd think, but he's done some amazing things. We've done amazing things thanks to him. Even me." Frankie looked down at his feet. "I'm nothing. Not magical, not a fighter, not even that bright...but you wouldn't believe half of what I've seen. What I've done."

Don-Jay's mind was racing as he began to listen with his full attention. He knew enough not to doubt that there was truth in what Frankie was saying. That explained the creepy vibe he kept picking up on. Dracul was taking all the diverse magics of his people, Allie's erratic psychism, Dik's chemical wizardry, Wayne's way with machines, Tilda's earth wisdom, even Marsha's Christianity, and welding them all into an esoteric task force under his own iron control.

This was almost better than the artifact. He could learn so much from these people. For a moment he allowed his imagination to run wild, pictured himself master of all magic, wielding real power for once. He'd make Pricklow and Gefarr crawl in the dirt at his feet. He'd make himself rich. He'd...

"Wait a second. If you got all this power, why aren't you..." Don-Jay waved his hand vaguely, and Frankie smiled.

"Rich? Famous? Ruling the world?" Frankie smiled. "I wondered that myself. Dracul says--well, he says a lot of stuff, but this is the important bit. Give me a moment, I have to get it right." He thought for a minute. "People think of power as a one-sided thing. You have it, you can do anything with it, it doesn't matter what. Dracul says that's because they don't actually look at how power works in the world. There has to be a circuit for the power to flow. It isn't just about what you can do with it, it's about what it's supposed to do. If you just try and use it without taking account of that, then either it doesn't work, or it sends the whole system out of kilter and bad things happen. Explosions, blackouts. You're a technician, you know what I'm talking about."

The disturbing thing was, Don-Jay did. The analogy was making sense to him, too much sense, It didn't go well with his dreams of absolute power, revenge and piles of cash. If you couldn't use power for that, what good was it?

"Say we took over the country," Frankie said. "I think they could, you know, if they wanted to. First thing that would happen is armed resistance, lots of people dying and getting hurt, and all that would be our responsibility. Then the rest of the world powers would weigh in, because they'd see us as a threat. More fighting, more death, more magic needed to sort it all out. Meanwhile the country would be ruined, we'd lose everything we'd thought to gain, and we'd probably end up dead anyway."

Don-Jay tried to marshal objections, but he couldn't think of any. That was how it would go. So what was the point? If you couldn't use power to make a nice life for yourself, why have it?

"Having power and having a good life are completely different things," Frankie said. "You can have a great life with no power at all. Many people do. Power is to be used for what it needs to be used for."

That was where it all fell down for Don-Jay. He simply could not imagine having a good life without power, wealth, the chance to get back at people who had hurt him. Still, it would do no good to argue. Frankie was obviously convinced. Good for him. All the more for Don-Jay.

"I guess you're right," he temporised. "You've sure given me a lot to think about."

Frankie nodded, and got up.

"Maybe some day you'll think about it," he said, not unkindly, and went back towards the stairs.

*

"That was delicious," Chris said. "Thanks."

"Not at all," Rob said.

"Um...sorry, but I think I need to go back to bed," Chris said. "I'm feeling really wiped."

"Are you all right?" Carol said.

"Yeah, I think..." Chris stifled a yawn. "Being on the edges took it out of me a bit."

"Makes sense," said Hugh.

"How?" That was Rob.

"The tetrad wants to settle on one face out of the four. Travelling the edge will take continual effort. Like balancing on a wall."

Carol hadn't thought of it that way, but Hugh was right, it did make sense. "Want me to come with you?"

"No, 's okay. You got the afternoon off, babes."

"Don't--" She caught his grin and stopped. "All right. Maybe I'll go for a walk." She glanced at the window; the rain had stopped, and a watery sun was dodging in and out of clouds.

"Why not?" Chris said. He looked around at their faces; Carol, Rob, Hugh and Shirinin. "Thanks, everybody. I never meant--" He stopped, embarrassed, and mumbled something inaudible.

"Edges?" Hugh inquired after he had gone, with just the merest emphasis on the plural.

"He tried human/pegasus, while we were upstairs."

"Really? How did that go?"

"It was..." She found, rather to her surprise, that she didn't want to talk about it. "It was...difficult to explain. Very...intense."

"Well, I can vouch for the human/centaur experience being intense. I take it this time there were no bruises."

"No," Carol said shortly. "I'm going to go and change. Thank you, Rob, you're a great cook."

"I try." Rob blushed.

Carol fled.

Up in her room, she selected underwear, a blouse and a pair of slacks, then went to the bathroom and showered again. The feeling of clean clothes on a clean body was a pleasure she'd almost forgotten. She slipped on her shoes, went downstairs and paused outside the drawing room.

"Want some company?" Shirinin said, from behind her. He must have been in the kitchen. She really wished he wouldn't keep popping up like that.

"No thanks," she said. "I don't seem to have been on my own for ages. I could do with some time to think."

"Watch your back," he said, seriously. "Rob may think he has finally found you a safe place, but that will not last."

"Gosh, thanks for that. I feel so much better."

"Just be...aware," the Russian said. "And enjoy your walk."

Carol closed the outer doors behind her and set off down the drive. The trees, the lawns, looked freshly washed after the rain, and there were birds. She took several deep breaths. The air was clear, clean. She reached the gates and headed down the hill into Abergenu. Rob had driven through it with her that morning, but she hadn't really been paying attention.

Snug-looking stone-built cottages clustered either side of the street. Some had window boxes. There was one shop, a general store and post office combined. Just beyond it a narrow lane led down to the beach, bare and deserted in the pale grey light of afternoon. The boats were gone, presumably out at sea. She would have liked to see it in the summer. She imagined, briefly, her and Chris in bathing costumes, frolicking in the waves.

"Excuse me," said a voice behind her. It didn't sound Welsh, or familiar. Carol turned, to see a tall man with aquiline features and very pale eyes, in a black cloak lined with...with dark purple, and underneath it a black polo neck sweater and jeans.

"My name is Count Sienkiewicz," the man said. "You want to talk to me."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, Carol realised that that was exactly what she did want to do, more than anything in the world. It seemed exactly right to talk to this stranger, to tell him the whole story. And yet...there was something wrong. She saw Chris in her mind's eye, half-pegasus as he had been that morning, and heard his voice: *Who's this then? What's he want?*

"No," she said with an effort. "I don't think I do. Thanks anyway."

Count Sienkiewicz frowned. "You are mistaken," he said. "You want very much to tell me everything."

Oh, yes, she really did. She could feel the words bubbling up inside her.

But...it wasn't hers to tell. She couldn't. This man, this wonderful, beautiful man who wanted to let her tell him everything, wasn't part of the group.

Chris wouldn't like it. And that was what mattered. More than her own desires, in that moment. A treacherous part of her sneered *Is that really how your life is going to be? Putting yourself second? Letting the man make the choices for you? Standing back and saying "yes dear" like some fifties cliché?*

"No," she said again, and it was like cutting her own arm. "Please don't."

The man was definitely concerned now. "You do not want to resist me," he said. God, his voice was like warm milk, so soothing, so right. Why had she met Chris first? If only...

"Yes," Carol lied, as if wading through boiling lava. "I do. Go away."

"You do not want me to go away." Oh God, why wouldn't he stop? She really didn't want him to go away. He was all she wanted, all she needed. She knew that beyond all question. If she just gave in and told him, shared the dreadful secret, would it really be so bad? Maybe she could go away with him, let him talk to her in that voice for the rest of her life, tell her what she needed to think and believe and do. That would be sweet.

But...

I don't love him.

The inner voice was so quiet, so still, almost completely drowned by the shrieking of her whole being that she should, just once, do what she really, really wanted...but Carol had got used, over the past few days, to recognising and ignoring desires she knew were not really hers.

She loved Chris. This man wasn't Chris.

But he was perfect. He was a god. She knew that if he told her she loved him, she would. If he just found the right words, she would fall open before him like a well-loved book. She stood, shaking with desire, waiting for him to find the right words.

And then suddenly, with a rush of noise, the man wasn't standing in front of her any more. He was lying on the ground several yards away, his cloak torn from his shoulders, and blood oozing from a gash on his forehead. Chris the centaur was standing over him, breathing hard, with one large hoof on his chest.

"Say the word, Caz," he growled.

"How...how did you...?" Carol stammered.

"It was weird," Chris said. "I just suddenly remembered, from when I was being half pegasus, that I'd had a really bad feeling that you were going to be in trouble, and that this was the time. So here I am. So, can I flatten this guy for you?"

Carol's thoughts were starting to turn back into their normal shape, like dials lining up. This man had just casually reached in and twisted them to his own liking. Carol hated him for that. But...

"No, Chris," she said. "I don't want you to kill him. But don't let him talk to you."

Shirinin and Hugh were coming up at a run. "Who's this then?" Hugh said.

"His name's Count Sienkiewicz," Carol said. "I think he's some kind of magician."

"Is he now?" Chris said.

"Rob's going to be really upset," Hugh remarked. "Another hideout blown."

"Let us by all means not tell him," Shirinin said.

He got down beside the inert body and began searching it. Around Sienkiewicz's neck were several pendants of strange design, which Shirinin removed and handed to Hugh. In the pockets of his jeans were a number of slips of thick paper with symbols and diagrams written on them in various coloured inks, and two pouches containing miscellaneous items; the Russian removed these likewise. The papers tore easily, and the pouches succumbed to Hugh's pocketknife.

"I suggest we consign these items to the waves," he said to Hugh. "They probably act as foci for his powers, and he will be markedly weaker without them."

Hugh nodded wordlessly, and they jogged off down the lane to the sea. Chris and Carol watched as they went in opposite directions as far as they could and then threw their burdens as far out as their arms could propel them.

"I hope that's weakened him enough," Carol said. "Chris, it was terrible. He made me--made me want to help him."

"Well, he's not the only one who can do that," Chris said. "Cover your ears, Caz."

Carol obediently put her fingers into her ears and watched as Chris shook the unconscious Sienkiewicz till he stirred and mumbled, then spoke low and fiercely directly into his ear. She couldn't hear the words, but she could feel the power. She looked away, at the grey ocean.

He was speaking to her now, and he was human again. She removed her fingers from her ears. Shirinin and Hugh were on their way back, empty-handed.

"He'll sleep for a bit now, then I expect he'll be out of here as fast as he can," Chris said. "I told him if he stayed here he'd die. If I see him again, he will."

"Well done," Shirinin said. "I must admit I would have killed him right away, but then I am a godless Commie, after all. Your way is almost certainly better."

"Yes it is," Hugh said. "Are you ready to come back to the house, Carol?"

"I'm ready to lock the gates behind me, board up the doors and windows and never come out no more," Carol said fervently. "That was well beyond creepy and into obscene."

"We need some help against this kind of adversary," Shirinin said as they started back up the hill. "I don't know about you, Hugh, but my magic is flimsy at best."

"I don't know who, though," Hugh said worriedly.

The rest of the walk back to the house was conducted in an uneasy silence.

About half an hour later, the man called Count Sienkiewicz stirred, sat up, felt about him with increasing dismay, and finally staggered to his feet and began to run, his stained and torn cloak flapping behind him, out of the village.

Even as he fled, though, he resolved that this would not be the end of it. That creature had done the unforgivable, had placed a compulsion upon him. Upon *him*. It would die. They all would die.

But he was going to need some help.

*

Father Krebs sped westwards in a rented Hyundai. He was uneasily aware that Wales, as such, was quite a large area to search.

The local house of his order had been more than co-operative. He had ample funds again, and had been well fed and entertained during his brief stay. He felt once more in command of things. And he felt sure that the hated John Dower had not even his slender lead to go on.

Father Krebs had privately determined to add revenge to the catalogue of sins he would produce for his next confession. Dower would suffer.

And it was just as he was formulating this exceedingly pleasant thought that he caught sight of Dower's car on the road ahead of him.

He gaped, rubbed his eyes and checked the number plate. It was definitely the car he had last seen parked near the Club With A Nail In It.

A moment's thought brought realisation, and anger at his own stupidity. The American would be using satellite imagery. He almost certainly had a clearer idea of the location of the tetrad than Father Krebs did. What he was still doing this close to London, when a whole night had passed, was a mystery to the priest, but it certainly altered the situation.

Father Krebs gunned the engine, changed lanes and drew level with Dower. He caught the American's attention by nearly driving into him, and when the angry blue eyes met his, he signalled to Dower to pull over. It was a gamble, and it paid off. Dower slid to a stop on the hard shoulder and put his hazard lights on. Father Krebs did likewise.

"Hello, John," Father Krebs said cheerfully. "How nice to see you again."

Dower opened his window halfway. "Father," he said neutrally.

"I'm so sorry I did not get a chance to speak with you at our last meeting," the priest went on. "Things just ran away with me. You know how it is."

Dower did not reply.

"I confess I am surprised to find you not making better use of your lead," Father Krebs said. "I hope you have not suffered any setback."

Dower finally stirred himself to speak. "Just making sure the thing's staying put this time," he said. "I just spent the best part of a week chasing it up and down this pisshole of a country."

"You have its location pinpointed, then."

"Close enough," Dower agreed warily.

Father Krebs considered his next words carefully. Dower needed careful handling.

"Have you considered that we might be in a position to help each other?" he said, trying to get just a tiny pinch of desperation into his voice.

He had struck just the right note. Dower smiled lazily, and fell into the trap.

"Way I see it," he said, "you don't have that much to trade. I know what it is, where it is, and what to do when I get it. What have you got?"

"Ah," said Father Krebs, "but how do you know your information is accurate?"

That shot hit home. Dower frowned momentarily. "I trust my sources," he said.

"But corroboration is always helpful, is it not?"

Dower looked blank.

"I could tell you if what they told you is true," Father Krebs explained patiently. "That would help you."

"Yeah," Dower admitted uncertainly.

"So," Father Krebs said, "what have you been told?"

*

"Helicopter," Allie said, squinting up at the sky.

"There's a thing now," Dracul said.

"No," Allie said. "Helicopter."

"What about it?" Wayne said testily. They had turned off the main road and he was finding the going difficult.

"Look for a sign for--" Tilda was trying to navigate, and was having her own difficulty with the names. "L, L, A, N--"

"It's no good spelling it!" Wayne's dyslexia was a sore point. He half turned to berate Tilda. "Just tell me when to--"

"Helicopter!" Allie yelled. "Ye bloody scunners, *helicopter!*"

"It's coming straight at us!" Frankie yelled.

Wayne executed a textbook emergency stop as the camouflage-painted helicopter slowly descended on to the road in front of them, its rotors whipping the hedges on either side. Sheep that had been grazing peacefully in the fields beyond ambled petulantly away, baaing.

"It's a bloody Chinook," Wayne exclaimed as the hatch in front of them opened and the muzzle of a machine gun surveyed them.

"Don-Jay," crackled an amplified voice. "Get out of the vehicle and step away from it. Bring the stolen equipment if you still have it."

Don-Jay swallowed. "That's my boss," he said to Frankie. "Oh well. It was nice while it lasted."

"You don't have to go, you know," Frankie said.

"Um." Dracul cleared his throat. "Frankie my love, while as you know I am now and have ever been a confirmed anarchist and opponent of the Man in all his forms, I should perhaps point out that this particular form of the Man is pointing a nasty-lookin' gun at my personal self, a situation which--"

"Shame on you, Dracul," Marsha said.

"Now, Marsha--"

"Shame," Tilda echoed, and she and Marsha set up a chant.

"All right! All right," Dracul said. "I'll see what I can do. But remember, you brought this on yourselves."

"Don-Jay," said the voice again. "You have twenty seconds to give yourself up."

"I better go," Don-Jay said. "I don't want you to get into trouble."

"T is a sentiment that does you credit, my bucko, and causes me to consider revisin' my estimate of you," Dracul said. "But this kind of trouble is our own personal briar patch. You sit tight." He hefted the backpack, now once more full, and stepped out on to the platform.

"Croeso yr Gymru, or something!" he cried. "Welcome to the fair and mystical land of me fathers. For while my birth and accent may proclaim me a son of Hibernia, or possibly Hyboria, in spirit I claim sanctuary in the mists and mountains of this very land of Wales. My soul is kin to these green hills, these verdant valleys. My heart yearns after these sheep, though not in any questionable way and I'd like to make that quite clear. Was it not one of the greatest of Welsh poets who said:

To begin at the beginning;

where the wild, wind-winnowed, well-wooded wastelands

wind down to the white-crested waters of the whale-road

and wayne can you get off your arse and do something

in the dim distant darkling of the dying day..."

"I'm doin' it, I'm *doin'* it," Wayne muttered, fumbling with the drawstrings of his medicine bag.

"When the cool, green, cruel green, drool-green sea

drags relentlessly at the sandy Sunday-service skirts of the shoreline

and I can't go on like this all night you know--"

"Don-Jay," said the voice. "Step out now or these men will--"

The voice died, the lazily turning rotors suddenly stopped dead, and cries of consternation issued from the bowels of the 'copter. Beyond it an angry hooting betokened the presence of another vehicle. Dracul grinned, dropped the backpack on the road and swung back on board.

"Reverse, if you can find it, I think, Wayne," he said, and the bus began to back away up the road.

"What did you do?" Don-Jay said faintly.

"Wayne has a positive gift for makin' things not work," Dracul said easily. "They'll be a while sortin' out why their electrics have gone dead and their gears all jammed, and in the meantime we can go another way. Rachel my love, would you be an angel and check Mister Don-Jay for the electronic trackin' thingy which I am morally certain is lurkin' somewhere on his person?"

"Yes, Dracul," said Rachel Kwok, producing from her pocket an ordinary plastic ruler which she waved around Don-Jay as if she were a member of airport security and he a suspicious-looking passenger.

"But why did you give them the backpack?" Don-Jay said.

"A little life lesson for you, young Jedi," Dracul said. "When facing off a more powerful antagonist with nothin' but a stone-cold bluff, always yield something. It soothes their ego and may give you a breathin' space. Besides, the thing was clutterin' up my bus, and were you really that keen to go on humpin' it around the countryside?"

"It is sewn into the hem of his shirt, Dracul," Rachel Kwok reported. "Should I remove it?"

"Lose the entire shirt," Dracul ordered. "Dik, you're about the right size and musical taste. Time to sacrifice one of your shirts to the cause. Come on, Don-Jay me boy, off with it."

Don-Jay, in a daze, pulled off his shirt and felt along the hem. There it was, a small round lump. The insane old bat had had him bugged for months, maybe years; if one of his shirts had one, it was a sure bet the other two did. He watched as Tilda took the shirt and flung it into the hedge, and accepted with a nod the faded "2112" sweater Dik handed him, in the same dreamlike state.

As he did so, the bus reached a crossroads, and Wayne, not without some relief, selected a forward gear and took them down another road.

Meanwhile, back at the helicopter, there were now three cars, a tractor and a supermarket lorry, all getting their money's worth out of their horns.

A sweating technician emerged from the innards of the machine.

"It's no go, skipper," he reported.

"Do you have to talk like the Boy's Own Paper, Crowden?" his captain said wearily. "What d'you mean, it's no go?"

"The electrics are all fused solid, and without them we can't start her up. Also, there seem to be iron filings in the gear box." Crowden swallowed. "Instead of gears."

"How the hell could that have happened?" The captain turned a worried face to his passengers. "Could it be this thing we're after?"

Professor Gefarr shook her heavy head. "Elementary techno-shamanism," she said.

"The, ah, Nazis experimented briefly with such things in the war," Pricklow put in. "Though interestingly enough, the project was headed by an expatriate Briton, a Professor..." He frowned.

"Professor Denzil Grahame-Lynne," Gefarr supplied. "The army at least used to install safeguards against such interference. Presumably they have been abolished by some ministerial idiot who saw no reason for them."

"I'll get on to HQ and organise a crane," the captain said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Only way we're going to shift this pile of scrap. Great advertisement for the modern armed forces, I don't think."

"Grahame-Lynne?" Crowden repeated. "You mean as in..."

"Yes, all right, sergeant," the captain snapped. "Get back in there and salvage something."

"And we will need another vehicle," Gefarr said. "It is imperative we continue the pursuit."

"I'll see what I can do. Though considering what it's going to cost to mend this one, I think you might find that a bit of a long shot. The bean counters tend to get edgy if you don't manage to make one chopper last at least a week." The captain snorted as one of his men retrieved the backpack. "Anyway, you've got your bag of tricks back, so I'd call that mission accomplished. Now if you'll excuse me, I think my sergeant needs my assistance."

Gefarr sighed. "Pricklow," she said, "this is your fault."

"I'm sorry," Pricklow said humbly.

"I should have terminated Don-Jay years ago but for your insistence on keeping him."

"My apologies."

Somewhere deep inside Pricklow, a little voice was screaming unspeakable obscenities. But that was perfectly normal. He was used to it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The occupants of the house at Abergenu spent the rest of the day in subdued manner. Carol's encounter (which it had not, after all, been possible to conceal from Rob) had cast a pall over them all. Nobody felt inclined to suggest any more experiments with the tetrad. Chris was dozing over a book in the drawing room, and from somewhere in the bowels of the house the sound of ping and pong indicated the presence of the two spies, sublimating international tensions through the medium of competitive sport. Rob and Carol were pottering aimlessly in the kitchen, wiping things that did not need wiping, not speaking.

Suddenly Carol started and stared into space. Monica's face was there in her mind's eye, as clearly as if she were standing there.

"I meant to call Monica," she exclaimed involuntarily.

"What?" Rob was equally startled.

"It went out of my head." *Or was pushed. Along with everything else.* "I should give her a call."

"Use the phone in the office," Rob said greyly. "Might as well. No point trying to keep this thing a secret. I think Chris's grandfather was right. It's too dangerous to use."

"Rob, you know that's not true. You heard Uncle Aris. That's just putting the problem off, evading responsibility. And in any case, the only way to deactivate it now is to kill Chris, and if you try that you'll have me to deal with. No, I'll go down to the village again. I'll be safe this time. Sienkiewicz is gone, and none of the others are here yet. Stop wallowing in self-abnegation and start thinking about supper."

Her brisk tone seemed to revive him a little. He started poking about in cupboards and the huge American-style fridge-freezer. Carol put on a coat and a red tam o'shanter, let herself out and walked down the drive again in the gloaming. The boats were back on the shore, and a few people were about; she was surprised to notice that one of the anonymous-looking houses actually seemed to be some sort of hostelry. She'd thought the Welsh didn't believe in pubs.

The old-fashioned phone box was clean and unvandalised; one lone graffito, much faded, said PLAID CYMRU. Carol closed the door and picked up the receiver. There was the usual brief moment of panic as she searched for change in insufficient light, and then she dialled Monica's number and heard the ringing tone.

"Monica Fleming, beep if you're sexy," said Monica's voice.

"Hello?" Carol was disgusted at the shakiness of her own voice.

"Carol?" Monica said, her voice rising almost an octave. "Oh my God, Carol, where are you?"

"Safer if I don't say. Are you all right?"

"Perfectly, darling, only worried sick about you. I went back to the Club yesterday, no, day before, and they said you'd all gone, left without warning. The little man was terribly miffed. No forwarding address, no note, nothing."

"Things got a bit hectic."

"More than they were before?" Monica laughed, and Carol almost burst into tears. "Is Chris okay?"

"Chris is fine. For the moment. We've made some progress."

"Tell me where you are and I'll come and join you. I should never have left, darling. I was a rat and a coward."

"No, you were right. It's been..." Carol swallowed. "You're much better off out of it. I miss you horribly, but I've got to be strong and--" Carol broke off. Something subliminal had impinged on her awareness. "Monica, is there someone there with you?"

Monica's laugh was almost perfect. "I wish. No, just me on my lonesome, watching sci-fi on the telly and drinking wine. Sad lady personified. Come on, Carol, where are you? I want to meet up. I'm sure it'll be safe."

"Monica, I have to go. My money's running out. Stay put and think of me. I'll call you again." Carol hung up before Monica could speak again. She really wanted to cry now. Was there no part of her life that was safe from this horror?

There had been someone there. She had heard a man cough. It wasn't the television. Monica had one, but she never watched science fiction unless forced to, usually by Carol. That had been a clue.

And she was helpless. Stuck here in the back of beyond. Nothing she could do. Nothing anybody could do, except wait for whichever set of nasties, out of the seemingly infinite numbers, got to them first.

The phone in the phone box rang, shockingly, harshly.

And Carol shoved open the door and ran, sobbing, all the way back to the house.

*

"No answer, General," said the uniformed man, replacing Monica's phone in its cradle.

"I apologise, Ms Fleming." General Grigori Karolides of the Second Hellenic Army Corps, craggy-faced and dark-skinned, with a voice like brushed velvet and just a hint of an accent, smiled. "You performed your part to perfection. Sadly, the same can not be said for you." He turned to one of the other five soldiers in the room, drew his handgun and fired. There was a sound like a sneeze, and the man gave at the knees and fell to the floor, a neat hole in his forehead just above the left eye, blood pooling from a presumably much larger hole in the back.

"And thus," Karolides went on calmly, "we find our patience rewarded. Were you able to trace the call?"

Another soldier looked up from a laptop. "We have narrowed it down to North Wales, General."

"North Wales," Karolides repeated. "Well, that is something at least. Get rid of that--" indicating the body "--and bring the car round. We shall take Ms Fleming with us. She will provide us with leverage." Two soldiers picked up their late colleague and manhandled him out of the room, checking first to ensure the corridor outside was deserted.

Monica glared at him. "And the blood on my carpet? Which is Axminster, in case you were wondering."

Karolides smiled back blandly. "I do not care, Ms Fleming. You see, there are weightier matters at stake here than your Axminster carpet. This irresponsible young man, this Chris Kyriakou, has stolen something of great value from my country, something which belongs to the Greek people, and we have come here to get it back. And you will help us."

"Why should I help you? And where do you get off invading our country anyway?"

"Invading?" the general echoed. "Why, Ms Fleming, whatever do you mean? I am merely visiting your country, with a small retinue of staff, to assess and evaluate certain new developments in tactical weaponry. A perfectly innocent little outing, which also enables me to indulge my passion for your English fish and chips." His smile vanished. "Do not force me to utter clichés like some alien from your television sci-fi. If you do not help us, I shall treat you as I did my unfortunate subordinate there. It is really that simple." He extracted a cigar from a slim metal case, lit it with care and blew smoke at the ceiling. "We may have come late to the party, but we shall leave with the greatest prize."

He nodded to the fifth soldier, who stepped forward and swiftly administered an injection into Monica's neck. Her eyes widened, and then she went limp in her chair as the smoke detector in the ceiling triggered the fire alarms throughout the building.

Karolides bent close and studied her. "So it does work that fast," he remarked. "I never believed those movies. All right. Let us go."

The man with the laptop closed it and put it under his arm, while Karolides and the other soldier picked the inert girl up and half-carried her out of the flat to join the grumbling, milling crowds on the stairs.

In the confusion, nobody saw them leave.

*

"I wish you'd answered it," Hugh said ruefully.

"I was *scared*," Carol repeated. She was sitting by the fire in the drawing room of Abergenu House, with a blanket around her, shivering and clutching the mug of sweet tea Rob had made her, and she still felt frozen. "Do you actually get that? I don't have ice water in my veins like you do. I'm not a secret agent."

"If I only had my phone I could try to find out who it might be," Vassily said.

"Who cares?" Carol said bitterly. "It's just everything. This is my life now. This *fucking* tetrad has got into my job and my home and my friends and my life and everything and--and I just want it to stop, all right?"

"Caz, I'm sorry--" Chris began.

"No, no," Carol said. "I don't mean it, Chris, *I'm* sorry. I'm not thinking straight. I'm just so worried about Monica, and you, and me, and I--I can't even--I--I can't--"

"Caz," said Chris, and his voice was different. She turned to look at him.

There was a star on his brow, and his hair was purest white. That was all she really had time to notice before she met his eyes and fell into them.

It was bliss. Pure, timeless ecstasy, in the literal sense. All her fear, her anger, her guilt, were gently taken out of her hands, turned round and given back to her, so that she could see them for what they truly were, aspects of her love, her courage, her loyalty. Clarity came to her like a lover and melted into her being. She could see now the energy she had squandered in merely feeling bad about feeling bad about feeling bad, an endless recursion of waste. Nothing concrete had changed--the situation was as it was--but she could face it now, see it for what it was, something outside herself. For the first time in her life she truly knew in her heart that the universe did not revolve around her, and the joy of it was beyond words.

She also knew that this state of being must end, that she would lose, for a span, this clarity and certainty, and while that was a sadness, it was also acceptable. Nobody could remain like this indefinitely and still be part of the world. She took two deep breaths, letting them out slowly, and turned away from Chris.

He changed back. Carol turned back to him, met his eyes--ordinary, dark, beautiful human eyes--and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

Hugh had sagged into a chair. Vassily was still standing, but weeping openly, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Rob, standing in the doorway, came forward wordlessly and hugged a somewhat startled Chris.

"Thanks," he said, sounding near to tears himself. "I was feeling so--"

"Uh, no problem, mate," Chris said. "Um. You can let go now."

"So that's the human/unicorn edge," Hugh said shakenly. "Quite an experience."

"I just thought it might help," Chris said.

"Help?" It was Vassily Shirinin. He laughed. It sounded wrong somehow, out of kilter. "Do you know that you could make a fortune as a cult leader? People would give you their entire worldly wealth for just one glimpse of what--" He stopped, and made a visible effort to regain his self-possession. "I don't know if I can ever forgive you for what you showed me just now," he said. "I will try. But it will be hard."

"Sorry," Chris said, bewildered.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned it's all good," Carol said. She felt more in control now than she had for days. "Whoever's got Monica, they had plenty of time to trace the call, so they'll be on the way here, and they'll probably bring her along to try to coerce us into handing Chris over. That'll give us a chance to get her back. And if you think about it, the more different people are here trying to get to us, the more likely they are to get in each other's way."

"Um, Carol," Rob said. "I see your point and that's great and all, but this place isn't built for a siege and we aren't exactly soldiers."

"We don't have to be," Carol said. "We can handle anything human that comes against us without resorting to force. Chris will help us find ways. And as for the magic stuff--"

There was a knock on the outer doors. Everyone jumped except Carol, who went briskly out into the hall and opened up.

"Yes?" she said.

"Bob-a-job, miss?" said Dracul von Ryan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was two hours later.

The bus was parked around the side of the house, where an old stable block held the remains of several disused cars and motorbikes which Wayne had gleefully set about plundering to replenish his depleted mojo bag. Introductions had been performed, and after a frozen moment of astonishment, Rob and Hugh had set to to make the supper stretch to over a dozen people. In this they were ably assisted by the dark woman called Tilda, who arranged her three porcelain dolls--her "children"--carefully on a spare section of worktop before rolling up her sleeves and pitching in. (Rob had made the mistake of talking about them as if they were real, as Tilda did herself, and had earned himself a distinctly old-fashioned look. "They are *dolls*," Tilda had explained pityingly, and Rob had retired in confusion.)

Carol could not explain, even to herself, her inexplicable certainty that these particular strangers were to be trusted. Even the appearance of Don-Jay--"by way of being in protective custody," according to Dracul--had not dented it. She recalled seeing the bus on the motorway, going in the opposite direction, and how she had picked up a good feeling from it even then, but that had nothing to do with it. The only thing she could think was that--unlike the raw desire she felt in the presence of centaur Chris, or the sudden coercive reordering of her mind and senses by Count Sienkiewicz--this felt truly authentic, her own perception and her own choice.

Dracul's unstinting honesty helped. "Think of us," he had said, "as the gentleman come about the trouble. If you don't have any, you can rely on us to make some."

Now, well fed and contented, they all lounged at ease in the large drawing room, where the golden light of the lamps, the deep green velvet curtains and the warmth of the fire kept the dark and cold outside. For the coven, it was clearly unwonted comfort; the thin Scots girl Allie was already asleep, head pillowed on Dracul's knee, while his hand absently stroked her lank fire-engine red locks. For Carol, it reminded her once again of her home in Avevale; there was something of the same feel about this house. Even the distant southing of the sea did not seem out of place.

"So," Dracul said, "you've got a thing of power inside you and a mort of folk after it."

Chris, still a little wary, nodded curtly.

"And our mission, as I see it, and bearin' in mind that we, that is my lads and lasses and I, are free agents, disinterested parties, and wild-eyed rebels from the edge of time, and we don't work for anybody or take any man's shillin', at least not when he's lookin'...what was I saying?"

"Our mission," Frankie prompted him.

"Our what? Oh, that. Yes. Our mission is to help keep the thing inside you, you inside your skin, and your good lady safe and well into the bargain."

"That's about it," Chris said. "Are you up for it?"

"Oh, absolutely, and to hell with Burgundy, and Cabernet Sauvignon and all while we're at it. I'd just be glad to know exactly who and what we're up against."

"Just about everybody, I think," Chris said. "Caz?"

"Well, there's a priest called Father Krebs who wants it for the Vatican," Carol began. "There's a lunatic called Dower from the CIA. A magician called Count Sienkiewicz, from some order in Germany--"

"The Erleuchteten," Dracul put in.

"That's them."

"We've met them before. They deal with demons to get protection and power. Mostly glamour and illusion, but they can be nasty if the mood takes 'em. Who else?"

"There's the people you met, who seem to have the army on their side--"

"We may have put the mockers on that a touch. I fancy it's strictly unofficial the help they were gettin', and you can only cover up so much. Anyway, we have a hostage." Dracul nodded at Don-Jay, who had also succumbed to the effects of food, warmth and exhaustion.

"Have I forgotten anyone?"

"The Greeks," Allie said distinctly, without moving or opening her eyes.

"We haven't seen them," Carol said uneasily.

"No," said Hugh, "but you can count on it that they'll have sent somebody. The thing was liberated from their country after all."

"Yeah, that's true," Chris admitted. "There was a couple of soldiers at the airport in Athens. They didn't come for me then, but they'll have clocked me."

"And at least one of these groups has got our friend Monica," Carol said. "We need her back."

"Well, it could be worse, I suppose. No Australians, no fake Mayans, and Iceland seems to be concentratin' on its own troubles." Dracul grinned. "We can take it that Krebs's brief is to bring the thing back to Rome so they can vanish it like they do with everything else worthwhile. All the others will be after it so they can use it, either for whatever it is or as a panergodyne."

"A what?"

"Universal energy source. Drain the power out of some magical artifacts and you could light half Europe for a decade or two. If you wanted to, that is. Or enslave the world. I'd be inclined to become a tad testy if that were to happen." Dracul's face, which had become sombre, cleared again. "The advantage we have--apart, of course, from the presence of Me--is that they can't all have it, and they all know that. So alliance is out of the question, and we can rely on them to be spendin' some energy tryin' to put each other out of the picture before they even get to us."

"They might pool their resources temporarily," Shirinin suggested.

"Indeed they might, Comrade, and that would be almost as good. Nobody's at his best when he's got one eye on the fellow next to him, feelin' beholden, plottin' betrayal and waitin' to be betrayed himself. To that end I suggest that once all participants have arrived I send out my lads and lasses to spread a little creative disinformation." Again the grin. "We're good at that."

"I'm going to say it again," said Rob, "because you weren't here the first time. This place is not equipped to withstand a siege."

"Well, of course not," Dracul said. "But we can keep them out for long enough, I think. Do those gates at the bottom close?"

"Yes," Rob said. "There's a padlock and chain."

"Ideal. Wayne, be a darlin' and go lock them. Now," Dracul leaned forward as the bearded man left the room. "This thing of power. If it's not a rude question, what is it?"

"It's a tetrad," Chris said after a moment.

"A tetrad," Dracul marvelled. "Well well well. Fancy that. A tetrad, you say? Indeed to goodness, as they say in these parts. I never thought I'd see one of them in my own lifetime now." He paused. "What the hell's a tetrad?"

"It's probably easier if I show you," Chris said, getting up. "You might want to step back."

"Er, Chris," Carol said nervously. "Don't you think it might be better if you do it out--"

The centaur exploded into the room.

"--side?"

Almost immediately the air grew heavy with centaur musk. Allie opened her eyes and sat up very straight, Tilda took a deep breath and leant forward, Rachel Kwok quietly left the room, and Marsha burst into loud laughter.

"My, you a sight for sore eyes, boy," she guffawed.

"Dik?" Dracul said. "Is there something you'd like us to know?"

"Nothing that's any of your business, Dracul," said Dik, without taking his eyes off Chris.

Rob Fayne leaned towards him. "Hands off, you cheeky cat, I saw him first," he said. Hugh glanced at him quizzically. "I've been meaning to tell you, Hugh," Rob said, "for a spy, you have really rotten gaydar."

"So," Dracul said loudly, "it does party tricks. Very impressive. How is it on find the lady?"

Chris and Carol explained, between them (after Chris had changed back, to the vociferous disappointment of the ladies of the coven) the functions of the tetrad, the gnomonic instructions, and what they had learned so far.

"The edge effects seem to be far more intense than the straight transformations," Rob commented. "Which makes sense if they happen on a different quantum energy level. But that would imply that the corners are going to be more intense still, and if Uncle Aris is right that they represent the dark sides..."

"Then your man here's got his work cut out for him," Dracul finished. "You've still got three edges to travel, am I right?"

"All the non-human ones," Carol said. "Centaur/pegasus, pegasus/unicorn and unicorn/centaur."

"That should be fun. We need to do some tabulatin'. Where's Rachel when we need her?"

"Here, Dracul." Somehow the little Asian woman had come back without anyone noticing. "I would be grateful if the young man would refrain from transforming again without warning. It was...embarrassing."

"Sorry," Chris mumbled.

"So, we have four basic forms, which we can relate to various attributes." Rachel Kwok produced her tablet and began tapping at the screen. "The human as opposed to the others clearly represents rationality, the brain, the intellect, which is linked in some systems to the element of fire. I would favour this attribution since the pegasus is far more suited to air, to breath, inspiration and spirit. The centaur equally clearly represents the body and earth, which leaves the unicorn water, the blood. Brain, body, breath and blood; fire, earth, air and water. So far so good.

"The edges, where two faces meet, represent the synthesis of two elements. Fire adds intensity, as you, Mr Fayne, have noted. It ignites the earth/body element, inflames the air/breath, and infuses with heat the blood/water. It reduces the control of the operator--that would be you, Mr Kyriakou."

"Don't feel much like an operator," Chris remarked. "More like the patient."

"We may then theorise that each element will add its own quality to the others along the faces where they meet. Water will add responsiveness and motility to earth and air, will blend empathy and compassion with the--excuse me--the vigour of the centaur and the creativity of the pegasus. Air and earth together will combine the two last-named characteristics. We may assume that such manifestations will be broadly hippiform, though the exact mythological correspondences remain to be seen." She shook her head. "That is all I have for you at the moment. Though we may assume that the "centre"--the ideal form to which the tetrad is designed to lead us--will embody all four characteristics in balance." She blinked. "Which implies that humans do not."

"That much we knew," Dracul said dryly. "Thank you, Rachel my love. I think it's healthy sometimes to be reminded that humans are neither the norm to which all other creatures aspire, nor entirely separate from all the rest of creation; we're part of what we should be, and part of the rest of what we should be is all around us in nature. God, somebody slap me or get me a beer or something before I turn into Jonathan Livingston Seagull. It's true, though, isn't it," he went on, after a moment, "we've given our brains too much importance, too much freedom, and the result is all around us. Unrestrained by the limitations of the body, the instinct of the spirit or the whatever you call it of compassion, the brain doesn't see any reason why it shouldn't do whatever it wants to the planet, to other people, to itself. And it drugs and subverts the other aspects to keep itself in control. Our brains have given us cheap food and drink and drugs and sex, have given us endless rationalisations for the horrors we visit on those less fortunate to anaesthetise our compassion, have replaced our spiritual yearnings with video games and what have you--"

Rachel Kwok got up, walked over to him and slapped him ringingly across the face. He stopped speaking and looked up at her in bewilderment.

"You did ask," she reminded him.

"Beat me to it," Allie said sleepily.

"So if it's this universal panacea," Hugh said, "and I'm not saying it isn't--why is there only one of it?"

"There may have been many more," Shirinin said. "We know of single tetrads in other countries, but maybe they were once as common as dirt. Perhaps..." His voice trailed away.

"Perhaps?" Carol prompted.

Shirinin laughed. "Perhaps, I was about to say, in ancient times humanity's natural state was that ideal integrated being of which your Miss Kwok spoke. And then, one day, we discovered how to control and tame our inconvenient desires and feelings and our unruly creative impulses and elevate mere intellect above all, and these little sandstone pyramids were the prisons we made for our other selves. Perhaps the few that survived belonged to the handful of people who wished to keep the option of going back...and the rest were smashed and obliterated by those who yearned to be free from conscience, compassion, and imagination."

There was a long, thoughtful silence.

Hugh shrugged. "Russian," he said, indicating Shirinin, and there was a general laugh in which Shirinin joined.

"He started it," he said, nodding at Dracul.

"I think it's time we changed the subject," Rob said unexpectedly. "I'm very glad you're all here, and I know we're all just waiting for the enemy--enemies--to turn up, but I for one am starting to feel a bit burned out on all this. I've been trying to keep up and stay positive and focussed, but--"

"Understandable," Dracul said. "From what you've told me, you've all been thinking about nothing else for days. Leave it with us for a while. Rachel will crunch her numbers, and Allie will doubtless be on the astral alert as soon as she's caught up on her sleep--"

Allie took hold of his hand and bit his little finger.

"So, perhaps we should provide some references." Dracul seemed not to have noticed the bite. "We've had a few adventures, this crowd and me. There was the time--"

He embarked on a tale whose implausibility was only matched by the gusto with which he told it, with the others chiming in more and more, mostly to point out Dracul's own part in the action. From there the evening gradually turned into a storytelling session; Hugh had a yarn or two of his own, as did Shirinin, and while Rob could not match them for high adventure, he dredged up some funny stories from his university days. Carol was aware that they were laying themselves out to entertain her and Chris, and for her part she was content, for the moment, to be entertained.

At about midnight, Rob realised guiltily that he had not made any rooms ready for the newcomers. Dracul waved his protests aside, saying that they were used to sleeping in the bus, at which point several of the coven shouted him down, and Tilda and Rob went to locate bed linen and appropriate rooms. One by one the coven members retired, till only Don-Jay was left.

"Can we trust you, or do I have to lock you in your room?" Hugh asked bluntly.

"I wouldn't trust me if I were you," Don-Jay said, surprising himself a little. "But I won't give you any trouble." *Not right now. Not when it's me against all of you.*

"I'll take that as your parole, then," said Hugh. "Rob?"

"Upstairs, turn right, fourth door down," Rob said. "Bathroom's next door on the right. There are spare toothbrushes and soap in the cupboard, towels on the rail. I'll come up with you."

"And tomorrow you can tell us about your bosses and what they're likely to do next," Hugh said.

"Sure," Don-Jay said readily.

"Goodnight, then," said Rob to the others, and he and Don-Jay went to the door. Once there, Don-Jay turned.

"I just wanna say...thank you," he said. "You've treated me better than my bosses would have treated you."

"That's what makes us the good guys," Hugh said.

And that's why you'll lose, asshole, thought Don-Jay, but he kept the sincere expression on his face till he was safely in his allotted room and away from Rob's unblushingly suspicious scrutiny.

"Think he'll try anything?" Hugh asked Shirinin.

"Of course," the Russian said lightly, "but not tonight. He'll wait till his employers turn up."

"Okay then. Chris, Carol, go to bed. Vassily and I will stay up for a while."

Carol was happy to go along with this. She followed Chris up the stairs, along the landing and to the door of his room.

"Aren't you the other way?" Chris said.

"Yes," Carol said. She took Chris's hand. "But not tonight."

"You mean--"

"We might not get another chance," Carol whispered. "These people play for keeps. By tomorrow night you or I could be dead, or..."

"Carol," Chris said, momentarily appalled by the seriousness in her voice and her eyes.

"So I think I rather want to be with you tonight," Carol said. "If that's okay with you, I mean."

Chris's face was all the answer she needed. He put his arms around her, and for a moment they held each other without speaking.

Then they went into Chris's room and the door closed behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Carol woke to a knocking on the door, shredding her dream and blowing it away before she could recall it. She took a deep breath. It felt good.

She opened her eyes slowly. She was in Chris's room. Chris wasn't.

"Caz?" Ah. That was where he was. On the other side of the door. Carol stretched and mumbled, wanting just a few more...days...of feeling like this before she had to get up and start coping with everything again.

"Yes?" she called sleepily.

"You gotta come down," Chris said. "You're gonna want to hear this."

He didn't sound panicked, so maybe it wasn't a disaster. Carol rolled out of bed, feeling deliciously languorous and decadent. The sun was high in the sky, to judge from the light coming through the window. He'd let her sleep in. Bless him. She washed her face, slipped into her clothes and opened the door. Chris was there, and she took the opportunity for a hug and kiss.

"What's going on?"

"Don-Jay's been filling us in on his bosses, and Marsha's gonna make a phone call." He sounded almost gleeful about it. Carol followed him downstairs, past the door to the drawing room and into the little office. The glow didn't seem to be going away. Carol was okay with that. *Maybe the tetrad makes sex better as well.*

Dracul, Marsha and Hugh were there. Dracul's grey blanket, the one he usually wore round his shoulders in lieu of a shirt, was draped over the phone. Carol's eyes skidded away from the sight of Dracul's naked torso. *Dear God, what happened to him?* she thought.

"That should be enough," he was saying. "Okay, Marsha, off you go."

Marsha picked up the phone, and looked away while Hugh dialled a number. Carol heard the faint ringing tone, but couldn't make out the response.

"Good morning," Marsha said, in an accent so impeccably cut-glass and British Carol almost looked round to see who else was speaking. "I wish to speak to Mr Abercrombie, please. My name is Beatrice Weyelengo, and my husband is President of the Democratic Republic of Nakutsi."

Where?

"No, you will not have heard of us, as my husband only issued the Declaration of Independence last week. You should update your files more frequently." Dracul frowned, and Marsha nodded imperceptibly. "But that is none of my concern. I wish to discuss our

order for three hundred Chinook helicopters and crews. Yes. I will hold."

Carol noticed suddenly, in a corner, Rachel Kwok, typing industriously into a laptop. The woman seemed to be able to be invisible at will.

"Ah, good morning, Mr Abercrombie." The cut-glass accent had just a hint of the exotic in the way Marsha stressed the words. "Beatrice Weyelengo from Nakutsi here. Ah, you have the file. Good. My husband asked me to expedite the order before he left for Geneva, but I have recently come into possession of some disturbing information, and I wanted to check and confirm it with you.

"Yes, one of my bright boys reported to me today that your Chinook helicopters are frankly not all they are cracked up to be. There was an incident yesterday in Wales in which one of them crashed on to a public highway, causing much disruption. Had you heard? You might wish to check the local papers. Frankly, Mr Abercrombie, these machines are going to be no use to us for putting down the incursions of the vile Matatse raiders if they cannot even get out of your country without--

"An unscheduled operation? Oh dear. I was under the impression that the British armed forces were famed for their discipline. I fear we will require full information as to the nature of the mechanical failure, or whatever it was, and of the dereliction of the crew, before we can proceed with the order. You understand, the security of our oil fields is paramount at this critical time, and perhaps we should consider going to the Americans, or maybe--

"Please do not distress yourself, Mr Abercrombie. Simply courier the relevant documentation to me at the Hyatt Regency in Portman Square, and I am sure all will be well." A little steel edged the cut glass. "Today would be good. Thank you for your time, Mr Abercrombie. Good day."

She put the receiver down, and exhaled tempestuously. "Hoo, that voice hard work. Marsha need a drink of water." She grinned and sashayed out of the room.

"But you're not at the Hyatt Regency," Carol said.

"No, but the point was to get *him* looking at the information," Hugh said. "Apparently Don-Jay's bosses have, or had till now, some clandestine pull with the military, which enabled them to commandeer a Chinook to pursue their errant employee. This should queer their pitch for a while at least."

"What happened to it?"

"Wayne," Dracul said briefly. "All right, Rachel my love, erase the lot and cover your tracks. Mrs Weyelengo can return to limbo where she doubtless belongs."

"I am already doing it, Dracul," Rachel Kwok said, without heat.

"Is there anything your people can't do?" Carol asked Dracul.

"More than you can possibly imagine," he said, reclaiming his blanket. "We can't kill people, or bring anyone back from the dead, and we can't make anyone fall in love with you, so don't ask. Not that you have anythin' to worry about in that direction, my lovely." He grinned at her, and Carol blushed. "I'm thinkin' somebody had a good night."

"Yes, well," Hugh said quickly, "now that that's sorted, I think we could all do with a cup of tea. And Carol will be wanting breakfast."

"I'll do it," Chris said.

"I'll give you a hand," Carol said.

"That's them for the morning, then," Dracul remarked. "Can we at least rescue the teapot?"

*

"They said, ah, no," Pricklow reported as Gefarr emerged from her office.

They had been ferried back from Wales to their headquarters the previous night by a monosyllabic corporal in a hastily requisitioned jeep, and the staff car that had delivered them before had been already gone when they arrived. Neither of them had spoken to each other throughout the journey, and they had parted almost immediately, Pricklow to his lonely, shabby bedsit and a cold half-can of baked beans, Gefarr, presumably, to wherever she lived.

The first order of business this morning had, of course, been the resumption of the pursuit, Gefarr being a great believer in getting straight back on the horse. The horse, however, was no longer co-operating. "Her Majesty's, ah, Government can not see its way

clear to allocating any further resources to this organisation. In fact, they may be considering calling for an audit of our funding."

"Myopic wretches," Gefarr muttered. "They will regret their folly."

"Not the giant robot again," Pricklow said pleadingly. The giant robot was a pet project of Gefarr's, and physically it was fine, but she had yet to find the sweet spot between giving it approximately the brains of a toaster and making it so intelligent that it was prone to sitting down suddenly on the ground and asking what was the point of it all.

"No," Gefarr said reluctantly. "Machinery is useless against a technoshaman. No, we need to adopt a more subtle approach."

She went back into her office, and, greatly daring, Pricklow followed her. The room partook of Gefarr's nature; essentially clean and tidy, it nevertheless looked rumpled, slept-in, dingy. A gap between two filing cabinets formed a makeshift alcove, and here stood a plinth with something on it swathed in a black cloth. Gefarr carefully removed the cloth, and Pricklow stared as she folded it neatly and put it on the cabinet to the left.

She sensed his bafflement. "I took a full-body cast from him a year ago. I told him it was for a new type of body armour. Now leave me alone. I must concentrate."

Pricklow, dismissed, edged to the door. When he looked back, she was facing the life-size bust of Don-Jay, and it looked to Pricklow as if her pale eyes were actually glowing with a hellish inner radiance.

The last thing he heard as he fled was her voice, low-pitched, insistent:

"Don-Jay...Don-Jay...Don-Jay..."

*

Don-Jay, sitting in the drawing room, nearly dropped his teacup as a chill swept over him.

He had felt it before. How had he forgotten?

Don-Jay...Don-Jay...Don-Jay...

He managed to get the cup on to the table in front of him on the second try, and got up unsteadily.

"Need some fresh air," he mumbled, and headed for the door.

Don-Jay...you must listen to me...listen, Don-Jay...

"No," he groaned desperately, staggering down the hall, wrenching open the outer door. The stone steps jiggled and yawed crazily in front of him.

You cannot resist me, Don-Jay...you must obey me...

"I don't wanna," he whined. "I'm free of you now."

You will never be free, Don-Jay...I control you...

"No..."

Don-Jay...do not resist...tell me where you are, Don-Jay...

"I won't...I won't..." He felt his knees giving way, felt rough stone at his back.

You will tell me, Don-Jay...you cannot resist...

"I..."

Tell me, Don-Jay...tell me...

"A...Abergenau..." He hated this, hated it with all his being, but his hate was powerless against it. "It's in Wales...big house by the sea..."

Listen, Don-Jay...I will tell you what you must do...

"I won't do it..."

You will.

"I won't..."

YOU WILL.

The pain was beyond belief, beyond imagining, scraping at his every nerve end. Don-Jay wanted nothing more than for it to stop. He was blind with it, blind to everything but a lurid image in his mind's eye, the image of his tormentrix, his mistress, his owner, reciting over and over again the instructions he desperately tried to reject and could not.

A sudden unfamiliar sensation, cutting off his breathing, sent the image skidding away, the instructions fading into indistinguishable baffle. Don-Jay's vision returned, and he found himself looking into two angry eyes, one green, one blue, barely two inches from his own. As his mind belatedly kicked in and he realised what was happening to him, Allie broke the kiss and drew back.

"I'd have gi'en you a skelp," she said, "but you werenae gonna notice any more pain under all that. 'Sides, himself's always tellin' me I'm too violent." She leaned in close again. "Tell any bugger," she whispered, "and I'll *cut* you." She straightened up, and Don-Jay realised he was sitting slumped on the steps of the house. "Oh, an' by the way," she said, at the doors, "brush your teeth once in a while. Your breath stinks."

She went back in. Don-Jay sat still for a while, taking stock. He seemed to be all present and correct. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but at least part of it seemed to have been good. The last he recalled he'd been in the drawing room...

He got to his feet and started up the steps, feeling a little better. That Fayne guy had said something about a toothbrush last night, and he was fairly sure he remembered how you did it.

*

Pricklow, alerted by the crash, skidded to a halt in the doorway of Gefarr's office. She was on the floor, pinioned by the heavy plinth and surrounded by fragments of plaster.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" she said after a moment. "Get this thing off me."

Pricklow hastened to lift the plinth off her, but she brushed aside his offer of assistance and struggled to her feet unaided.

"Something went wrong?" Pricklow inquired mildly.

"There was interference," Gefarr snapped, "but the message went through satisfactorily at least once. He will do as instructed."

"Do you have one of those for me?" Pricklow said.

Gefarr almost smiled. "Don't be stupid, Pricklow," she said. "I would never need to overcome your will. You have, after all, none to speak of."

"Ah," Pricklow said miserably. "Yes, that would make sense."

"Get a map of Wales and locate Abergenu, " Gefarr ordered, "while I find us some transport."

"How?" Pricklow demanded.

"Leave that to me."

*

Meanwhile, in the bar of the Ty Pwll pub in Abergenu, the talk (in Welsh, naturally) was all of the two strangers who had arrived late the previous night in separate cars, and on learning that there was but one room to be had, had insisted on sharing it. They seemed like an odd couple, but the people of Abergenu were perfectly in tune with the twentieth century (the fact that it was now the twenty-first century had not eluded them, but they preferred to take these things in easy stages) and if two men felt that way about each other, it was none of their business (though Eleri the barmaid felt called upon to remark that the handsome American might have chosen a more good-looking partner).

John Dower and Father Krebs, understanding nothing of these exchanges and caring less, had spent their evening in delicate attempts to gather information while at the same time preventing each other from doing so. They learned very little, as a consequence; but the existence of the large house at the end of the village was a little too noticeable a fact to remain concealed indefinitely, as was the fact that the stout iron gates, normally left open, had within the last twenty-four hours been secured with an equally stout padlock and chain. The following morning, accordingly, each of the agents, in turn, took occasion to stroll up to the gates and exchange a cheerful

nod with the heavily-built, Biblically-bearded individual in the leather jacket who just happened to be strolling down to the gates at the same moment each time.

Each one resolved, privately, to return that night, after dark, and effect an entry. With any luck (they thought) the tetrad, with or without its human host, would be safely on its way to Washington/the Vatican (delete as applicable) within twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"I'm declaring today tetrad-free," Carol said. "No more experiments for the moment. We need to concentrate on defence plans."

"Makes sense to me," Chris said. Wayne had reported that, on obeying a chance whim (twice) to stroll down to the gates and check the padlock, he had encountered a suspicious-looking loiterer both times. Carol recognised the description of one of them.

"The other'll be the American you talked about, Hugh," said Rob.

"How do you know?"

"I had to collect the milk, since Rosie Price couldn't get up to the door. She mentioned an American and a German staying at the pub." He smiled to himself.

"What?" said Chris.

"Oh, nothing."

"Okay, well, good," said Hugh. "That just leaves Don-Jay's bosses, that Sienkiewicz person when he's got his mojo back, and..."

"The Greeks," Allie said. "They're on their way. They got shooters. And your posh friend," she added to Carol.

"Monica?" Carol said. Even through her current (and persistent) state of well-being, a cold current of fear made its presence felt. It never occurred to her to question Allie's information; the perfect trust in which she was held by Dracul and the others was a powerful argument. If these Greeks threatened to kill Monica, what could she do?

"First question, then," Dracul said. "Is there a back way out of here?"

"If you think for one minute I am going to leave Monica--" Carol began hotly.

"For the love of holy Saint Packing and all his bags and baggages, 't is just askin' I am!" Dracul exploded.

"It's a fair question, Carol," Hugh said reasonably. "It makes sense to plan the very last resort first. You have my word that if Ms Fleming can be got, we'll get her. So, Rob? You know the place better than any of us."

"Yes, there's a track from the back yard that leads round the hill and back on to the main road. It's wide enough for the bus, but we'll need to clear the gateway. It hasn't been used in years. And Carol, I won't let Monica be left behind either."

"All right." Carol did see the logic of it. "So we have a way to get out that they don't know about. Good. What else can we do?"

*

Father Krebs, having eluded Dower by the simple expedient of lingering over his lunch, was silently lamenting the inadequacies of Welsh cuisine from the standpoint of luxury and hedonism when Eleri the barmaid approached him and informed him that he had a caller. He got up from the table and went out to the lobby.

"You Father Krebs?" said the skinny young man. He wore a T-shirt with RELAX on it in huge letters, faded denim jeans, and open-toed sandals with navy blue socks. His hair was short enough, but unkempt, his face unshaven. Father Krebs rather fancied he detected the typical signs of habitual drug use. He nodded cautiously.

"I'm from the big house," the young man said jerkily. "I don't like what's happening, so I thought I'd come and warn you."

"Warn me?"

"It's him. The bloke you're with. Major CIA, man. They've done a deal." The young man shrugged. He seemed to be in constant motion, bouncing from one foot to the other, his eyes darting hither and yon. "Me, I think he used the mind control on them. They do that, you know. Rays." He mimed creepy wiggling fingers from above. "You wouldn't know. Vatican conditioning."

This was obvious nonsense, the standard conspiracy theory line. But the rest of it...Father Krebs was not fool enough to doubt that the American would steal a march on him, given the slightest opportunity. If he had somehow made contact and cut a deal with the tetrad's current custodian, then it was up to Father Krebs to circumvent him by any means necessary.

"Tell me more," he said.

*

Dower, for his part, had grown tired of watching the fat priest guzzle and had gone out to get some air. He had to admit the village was kind of pretty, though he would never understand why the Brits hadn't got wise and reorganised their stupid road system. There wasn't a decent Denny's or Big Boy to be seen. He guessed it was a conspiracy of hotel managers. Bed and breakfast. What a joke.

He consciously avoided going near the target area. Best not to arouse suspicion. He thought he had gotten away with it that morning, but if they saw him hanging around they might get spooked. Accordingly, he jogged down to the beach and amused himself by throwing pebbles into the waves.

"Mister?"

He turned sharply. The woman who had addressed him was African-American--no, African-British, he supposed--and heavily-built, in her forties or fifties he guessed, and was wearing a blue gingham apron over a kaftan of multi-coloured silk, and a turban of the same gorgeous fabric. She sounded out of breath and looked distressed.

"It not right," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. "Not right, what they do. I come to tell you 'cause I know you do the right thing."

"How do you know who I am?" Dower asked warily.

"This a small village, Mister American. We all know you here, we know what you after. Don't let that man take it to Rome."

Dower was instantly on the alert. "What man. ma'am?"

"He big man, big like me." The woman unself-consciously patted her own belly. "False Roman priest, eunuch of the Whore of Babylon. He come up to the big house just now, say he take the thing, lock it up in the Vat-i-can so nobody can see it." She leaned closer, spitting the words out. "But that a big fat lie. They gonna use it to do the devil's work. You got to stop them, Mister American." She was pleading with him. "You got to."

Dower had known it. That sneaking, treacherous priest was trying to make an end run around him. Well, that was one bird that wouldn't fly, not with John Dower. He didn't much care about religion himself, though of course he was a regular churchgoer, at least when his schedule allowed it. Catholic, Protestant, Episcopalian, Southern Baptist, it was all the same God, wasn't it? But artifacts of power were a different matter entirely. They belonged in the safe keeping of the United States Government, and that was all there was to it. (Dower regarded himself, for the purposes of this argument, as an extension of the government. After he secured the tetrad, of course, there was always the possibility of assuming a more...central role.)

"Don't you worry about a thing, ma'am," he said soothingly. "I'll take care of everything. Do you know when and where this deal's going down?"

The woman came close and slipped an arm confidingly through his. "I tell you everything," she said.

*

"Stop the car!" General Karolides yelled. "Stop, you fool!"

The driver obediently braked, coming to a stop ten feet from the still figure in the road and the frantically waving woman beside it. On one side of the road was a stand of trees; on the other, open fields stretching away to the horizon, partitioned by low drystone walls.

"See what the trouble is," Karolides directed, and one of the men got out.

"Help us, oh, please help us!" The woman was small and slightly plump, dark-skinned, black-haired. "They--they took him--"

"Took who?" the man said.

The woman stared blankly at him, and then abruptly burst into tears and collapsed into his arms.

"Must I do everything myself?" Karolides muttered, opening his door. "Your pardon, my dear lady," he said, gently disengaging the woman from his subordinate. "If we are to help you, you must tell us exactly what has happened here."

"There--there were men," the woman stammered. "Soldiers. They--they captured us..." She seemed to become aware of the uniforms around her, and shrank back with a cry of terror.

"We are not those men," Karolides said. "Whom did they take?"

"My friend," the woman sobbed, indicating the body in the road. "They took her boyfriend--he--oh, it was horrible." She took several deep breaths, swallowed hard. "We were out for a walk and this army truck pulled up alongside us. Men got out--they pointed guns at us, told us come with them--and we were walking back to their truck and he--he *changed*--"

"Changed?" At once Karolides was alert. "How changed?"

"He turned into--into a monster--he fought them--my friend was hurt--and then they overpowered him--and--and--" She clung to Karolides. "They got him almost to the truck--but he got loose and ran away--so fast."

"Where is the truck?"

"It drove away--I think I heard the man say they were going to head him off at the--at the--I do not remember the name of the place. I am sorry. It was a crossroads, I think."

"Which way did it go?"

"That way." The woman pointed back the way Karolides and his men had come. "About--ten--maybe fifteen minutes ago."

Karolides thought for a second. "Fifteen minutes--we could still catch him. These soldiers...were they British?"

The woman swallowed. "I--I think so." She clutched at Karolides' arm. "But my friend--she is hurt--"

"You two," Karolides said crisply, "stay with the women. Take care of them. You others, with me."

"What about me?" said Monica, as one of the other soldiers got out.

Karolides hesitated. "Stay here. My men will shoot you without hesitation if you try to escape. Look after your friend--I assume this is your friend?"

Monica peered through the car window. She drew in a sharp breath. "Yes, that's--that's Carol."

"We will return when we have secured the creature. If you do try to run, you know we shall find you."

"I know." Monica got out of the car and ran to the motionless Carol.

"Please find him quickly," the other woman begged.

"We will." Karolides swung himself back into the car. "Drive, you idiot. Every second counts."

The car roared into life, swung round in a perfect three-point turn and raced away, leaving two soldiers behind to guard Monica, Carol and the other woman.

"How was she hurt?" Monica said, kneeling beside the body.

"I do not--it all happened so fast," the woman said. "I just saw her fall and--" She suddenly glanced into the trees and screamed. "He has come back!"

The two soldiers whipped round, drawing their guns, and stared wildly into the trees.

Carol quickly got up, placing a swift finger across Monica's lips, while the other woman produced what looked like a powder compact. As the soldiers turned round again, she quickly blew across it, sending a cloud of powder into each of their faces.

"Run!" she said urgently. "That way!"

Carol and Monica took to their heels, running down the road towards Abergenu. After twenty paces Monica risked a look back. The men were following, but slowly, weaving from side to side and shaking their heads. As she watched, they sank to their knees and measured their length on the road.

"It worked!" Carol was ecstatic. "Tilda, you were amazing!" She hugged the other woman, then hugged Monica too.

"Darling," Monica said carefully, "I know something really clever just happened, but I'm not sure exactly what. Can you explain, or should I just gibber quietly in a corner?"

"We rescued you, that's what!" Carol looked back down the road, where Wayne and Dracul were dragging the soldiers into the trees. "This is Tilda, she's a--what was it?"

"Kitchen witch," Tilda said.

"And thanks to her those soldiers are now searching hundreds of square miles of empty countryside for a non-existent army truck and a Chris who's back at the house safe and sound."

"It was an almighty gamble, darling," Monica said.

"I know, I know, but it paid off!" She took Monica's hand. "Come on, you have to come and meet the others, we've got so much to tell you."

Monica allowed herself to be towed along, smiling bemusedly while Carol prattled on. Tilda watched her, and discreetly withdrew a few feet.

*

Back at the house, general jubilation reigned. Dik and Marsha reported their successes, Wayne and Dracul appeared with a plastic bag containing two Hellenic Army uniforms (which Tilda promptly put into the washing machine) and Chris greeted Monica with an enthusiasm which, Carol reflected, would have seriously bothered her just a few days before. She wondered vaguely why it didn't, but she was feeling too good to spend too much time wondering.

Was that it, then? Was one night of (admittedly fabulous) sex enough to purge her of the jealousy virus for good? It seemed too simple, but if that was the answer she wasn't going to complain.

Rachel Kwok and Allie were still working on their plan to foil Pricklow and Gefarr. Frankie and Rob were clearing the back gate, and Hugh had quietly moved the Alvis round the house so as to allow for a swift exit. Don-Jay was nowhere to be seen.

"You do seem to have picked up some colourful friends, darling," Monica remarked. "And do I detect a slight hint of a consummation devoutly to be wished?"

Carol nodded. "Last night," she said. "Honestly, I don't know why I waited so long. I wanted it to be special, you know? But I should have known...whenever and however it happened, it was bound to be special."

"And was he human at the time?" Monica inquired in a low thrilling voice.

Carol laughed. "Of course he was. At least..." She pretended to think about it. "The first four or five times--"

"Carol!" Monica feigned shock. Or was it feigning? Carol wasn't sure. She'd always assumed Monica's world-weary sophistication was genuine, but then she'd always assumed Monica had lost her virginity several years earlier than Carol herself, an assumption now conclusively disproved.

"Does it bother you?" Carol said seriously.

"What? No!" Monica protested. "That is..." She hesitated. "Something is bothering me, a bit."

"What is it?"

"You've...changed. A lot. You were this mousy, uptight little thing, and now..." Monica mimed a sort of exuberance. "You're all out and proud and it's lovely, but I'm...I'm not sure where it leaves me."

"Monica," Carol said, "you'll always be my best friend. You know that."

"But I don't know whether I can fit in with this crowd." Monica gestured around at the coven.

"You won't have to. They'll be going their own way as soon as this is over. They're just helping." Carol gathered Monica into her arms. "You know I'll always love you best," she said, and kissed Monica lightly on the lips.

The response was immediate. Monica sprang away as if galvanised, wiped her mouth with the back of one hand, and glared at Carol through sudden tears.

"What did you have to do that for?" she said, and ran from the room, nearly knocking Wayne sideways.

Carol gazed after her, hurt and bewildered. What had she done? She was only being friendly. Hadn't they always...?

No, they hadn't. Hugs, yes, but Monica had always been the initiator. Kisses, no, never. One didn't. Carol remembered seeing two little girls walking side by side down the street one day. One had tried to hold the other's hand, and the other had pulled away, saying "Are you a lesbian?" They couldn't have been more than eight. Indoctrination started early these days. Touching, kissing, was hardly regarded as appropriate even between family members, let alone close friends.

And why not, then? she thought. What was wrong with it? It wasn't sexual. She had no desire, no interest in sex with anyone but Chris. (Sex with Chris, on the other hand, was an interest she intended to pursue as often, and for as long, as life and time allowed.) So, she, Carol, had become a little more outgoing lately. There were lots of possible reasons for that. The prospect of imminent death concentrates the mind wonderfully. Who had said that? It didn't matter; it was true. People who had been in extreme danger always came away changed. Carol had simply changed for the better, had subconsciously resolved--or something--to make more of herself and her time on this earth. To show the love she bore her friends, in a thoroughly innocent, unsexy, pre-watershed way. Why should it upset Monica so?

Could it be because, in the end, for Monica it was all about dominance and Carol was starting to become dominant? Was Monica really that desperately insecure?

No. She shook her head. It couldn't be that. They were friends, good friends. Monica was just upset. She had after all been in captivity for several days; that was bound to be traumatic. She had simply overreacted, that was all. If Carol explained, everything would be all right.

Carol went to find her.

*

General Karolides raked the two semi-naked, miserable figures tied to their trees with a scathing glare.

"You imbeciles," he snarled. "I set you to guard three women, one of them wounded--"

"She was not wounded, General," said one.

"She was just pretending, General," said the other.

"Well, yes, I know that now!" Karolides shouted. "We have spent all afternoon getting lost in this godforsaken country looking for things that are not here, and now you have lost me my hostage. You should both be shot."

He drew his handgun, pointed it at first one, then the other, and finally holstered it again with a sound of disgust.

"Unfortunately, I need you." He gestured to his other men. "Untie them. Give them spare uniforms. We shall go straight on to the village and take them by force. If any of you--any of you--give me the slightest excuse I shall shoot you out of hand. Failure," he said grimly, "will count as an excuse."

The soldiers hastened to obey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Monica was sitting on the steps outside, coincidentally almost exactly where Don-Jay had sat earlier, hugging herself; she really wasn't dressed for a Welsh afternoon in autumn, but the chill breeze wasn't the only reason for her hunched posture. Carol closed the doors behind her.

"Monica," she said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not a lesbian, Carol," Monica said tightly.

"Neither am I. I didn't mean--"

"I'm not bisexual either. Just because I've never had a boy doesn't mean I'm--I'm fair game for you to--experiment with."

"I wasn't experimenting!" The old Carol would have been horrified, angry, defensive. This Carol sensed the hurt behind the words, and the thought behind the hurt, and her heart ached for her friend. "Monica, I didn't mean anything sexual by it."

"There are boundaries, Carol."

"I'm sorry," Carol said again. "I don't know what else I can say. I was just so happy to see you. I missed you so much--not in that way--just as my friend."

Monica finally looked up. "It's just--you're so different."

"I don't *feel* different," Carol said uncertainly. "Not--in myself, not that different. I'm still the same person I always was. God, Monica, sex doesn't make that much of a difference." But hadn't she just been thinking that it had?

"It's not just that. It's more. You're--"

"What? I'm what?"

"You're stronger than I am," Monica confessed. "I'm just not used to that." There was a crooked smile in her voice. "I think I'm a bit jealous."

"It's nothing to be jealous of," Carol said gently. "I have been through quite a bit, besides the sex that is."

"Tell me." Monica straightened up at last and patted the step beside her. Carol sat down on the indicated spot, and began to talk. She covered everything that had happened since Monica had left them at the Club. At about the halfway point, by common consent, they got up and went back into the drawing room, where the others were still chatting. Rob had made some more tea, and the room was pleasantly warm. As they sat down on the sofa, there was a gravel spatter of rain on the windows, and Hugh and Marsha got up to draw the curtains and put the lights on.

"...and so last night I was really scared, and so I sort of invited myself into Chris's room, and we..." Carol stopped, not for her own embarrassment but for Monica's. "Well, anyway," she said.

Monica's eyes were like saucers. "Darling, I apologise. My God, I'd never have stood it. Especially the creepy magician. He really just told you what to do and you wanted to do it?"

"Wanted it like fury, till Chris came along. I don't know how I held out as long as I did, except that I'd had practice resisting--you know, the centaur effect."

Monica repeated the phrase in the tones of a television commercial, and they laughed together.

"He'll be back, you know," Carol said, sobering. "They'll all be back. Him, Father Krebs, Dower, those Greeks, and two loony scientists called believe it or not Pricklow and Gefarr. Probably all at once, probably with guns. And while I know Dracul and his gang are great at playing fancy pranks, I honestly don't think they'd be much good in a fight."

The last sentence unfortunately fell into an unexpected lull in the general conversation. Carol stopped, looking stricken.

Then Dracul, toasting her with an imaginary glass, called out "Too bloody right!" and the rest of the coven laughed.

"So we'll have to run for it," Carol went on. "Chris needs more time to finish the quest."

"I'm with you, darling. Not that General Karolides wasn't impeccably polite to me, but I'd as soon not repeat the experience. And the others sound..." She shuddered delicately. "Less polite. Where do we run?"

Carol had been thinking about this. She was definite. "Back to Avevale. On my own home ground, with Hugh and Rob and this lot--and you--I can take on the Greeks, the Medes and Persians, the CIA and the Pope all in one go, before breakfast."

"And the creepy magician?"

Carol gestured at empty space. "My name is Carol Varland," she proclaimed. "You want very much to go to the lavatory." She paused. "In Singapore."

Monica laughed.

*

"My name is Count Sienkiewicz," said the man in the cloak. "You want to help me."

"Of course, sir." General Karolides saluted smartly.

"You want to place your men under my orders. The tetrad is mine."

"Absolutely." The General frowned, blinked. "But--"

"You do not want to doubt."

The frown cleared. "I do not want to doubt."

Count Sienkiewicz stifled an oath in his native tongue. Many of the sigils and talismans he had lost on his disastrous last attempt had been irreplaceable, his power without them barely a fraction of what it had been. Without constant reinforcement his control over the General would slip. It was important, from a magical point of view, that the scales be balanced promptly, that the indignities visited on his person be repaid in full and with interest; otherwise the forces he commanded by sheer force of will would sense his weakness and seize their chance. At best he would be a magus without power, a mere shadow of his former self, at worst a dribbling husk, his mind and soul ripped from his body to shriek for ever in the profoundest pits of hell.

He was still troubled by the strength of the girl's resistance. She was, after all, a mere mortal, untouched by true power. She should have been helpless before him, wax in his hands. Above all she should not have been able to summon help. That the help might have come of its own accord was a thought foreign to Sienkiewicz's nature; in his universe there was command and obedience, supplication and response, sometimes fair but never spontaneous. If the centaur had come, the girl must have summoned it, and without his knowledge.

The plain fact was that what with one thing and another, he could not rely on his magic for this. Temporal power was needed, the kind of power that rode on the back of a bullet, or preferably several hundred. The General's men would storm the big house, kill all within, and he, Sienkiewicz, would take the tetrad from the cooling body of whomever actually had it--his information was still incomplete in that area--and then command the troops to turn their weapons on each other. It would be viewed as a terrorist atrocity, or something of the kind. Very sad. Nothing, though, compared to the joyous Erleuchtung to come.

The General was frowning and mumbling again. Sienkiewicz composed himself and set to work.

*

"You're not the usual run of hitch-hiker," said the driver.

Pricklow, knees jammed against the dashboard, uncomfortably aware of the driver's proximity on one side and Gefarr's remarkably bony elbow on the other, said nothing.

"Prisoner fans, then, are you?" the driver went on chattily. "Off to Portmeirion? 'Cause I'd take you all the way if I could, see. My mum loved that show. Had all the gear and all. Always wanted to see the place for real, you know? See if it was as nice as it looked. 'Course they never are, though, are they? No, they use camera angles and that." He made "camera angles" sound like a dirty trick. "I was up to that Summer Wine place last year, up there in Yorkshire, and it's all bits of different towns, did you know that?"

"I can't honestly say that I, ah, did," Pricklow said. He had seen a television once, in 1975. He hadn't liked it.

"Fun, though, all that Prisoner stuff," the driver said. He made a peculiar gesture from the forehead. "Be seeing you.' I liked that. 'Cause if you're canny, see, you can do it this way..." He repeated the gesture, the fingers slightly wider apart and the downward arc more obvious, and grinned. "And then it looks like, you know, you're calling him a--" He didn't say the word. Presumably he expected them to know it. "But if he asks, you can always say you were doing the other thing, you know? Not that I would of course. If I call someone--that--then I mean it, don't I?"

"Does the radio function in this vehicle?" Gefarr said.

"Sorry, I'm sure," the driver said, and maintained an injured silence for almost five miles.

I am in hell, Pricklow thought, and Satan is sitting beside me. I only wish I could decide on which side.

*

"Ready for the off?" Chris asked.

"No sense in waiting around," Carol said. Dracul had had the coven laying what he called "IMDs" around the gates and the front of the house, just to slow down any frontal attack. Everything was ready for a swift and discreet departure; the bus was loaded, everything packed, the exit was cleared. Rob had spoken to the mysterious "staff" (of whom Carol had seen neither hide nor hair throughout their brief stay) warning them to keep clear till any fallout from the visitors' presence had run its course. Allie and Rachel Kwok had abandoned without regret their battle strategy for dealing with Pricklow and Gefarr, which seemed to be based on the principle of arguing with each other till the enemy died of old age. Don-Jay had put up a token protest at the idea of leaving, saying there was something he had to do, but had eventually seen the virtue of the opposing argument, mainly because Dracul had threatened to leave him behind, alone, to face whatever came.

"Maybe we'll come back here some time," Chris said. "It's a nice place."

Carol could not but agree. Still, her home was calling, and she could no longer ignore the call. She seemed to be feeling everything a lot more intensely, for some reason; her love for Chris (well, naturally) and her friendship for Monica and for Rob, her sense of belonging to a specific place and time, all her ordinary sensations seemed magnified. *Crises*, she thought, *make everything sharper, clearer, more immediate*.

"Let's go," she said, and followed Chris out through the back door and into the yard. Monica was in the Alvis with Hugh, Rob and Vassily; she and Chris boarded the bus and found adjacent seats. Don-Jay was sitting slumped in a seat on his own.

"No canoodling up the front there," Dracul called. Chris blew a raspberry. "Or that," Dracul added.

"Next stop, Avevale," Carol said, as Wayne piloted the bus through the gate in the wake of the Alvis. The track was bumpy, much rutted, and obviously not designed for heavy traffic, and Chris and Carol were thrown together several times.

Abruptly Wayne slammed on the brake.

"Holy Mother of Invention, what is it now?" Dracul muttered. He went to the platform and peered out. Carol followed.

The Alvis was also not moving. It was easy to see why. The assault rifle was a dead giveaway.

"You will please step out of the vehicles, all of you," Father Krebs called. "My friend Mister Dower is very anxious to shoot somebody, and I do not think he is overly concerned as to whom."

The silence was broken, as Carol had known it would be, by Dracul.

"Marsha, Dik," he said wearily, "you're fired."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"We are not stupid, you know," Father Krebs said casually. "We are both experienced operatives in our field, as I know are you, Mr Sacristan, and you, Comrade Shirinin. Would you have been fooled by such transparent techniques?"

"Possibly," Hugh said, adding with an apologetic glance at Dracul, "on an off day."

"Of course we knew that you were aware of our pursuit. Setting us up against each other was an obvious tactic. So we compared notes."

Everyone was gathered in a small group a little way off the track. The bus and the Alvis stood nearby.

"Mister Dower and I have come to an arrangement," the priest went on. "The tetrad will be placed into secure storage in America, with access rights granted to the Papal representative in that country. I am sure he has reservations about this plan, as do I, but for the moment that is unimportant."

"Sorry," Dracul said to Carol. "Sometimes we don't pull it off."

"We shall now play a little game," said Father Krebs. "My friend Mister Dower will shoot each of you in turn till the person who is harbouring the tetrad gives himself up. If he should be one of those shot, that will simply make my task easier, since I gather the thing is easily extracted from the body after death. We will then shoot the rest of you and leave. Understand, please, there is no way any of you are leaving this spot alive. I am talking now to my fellow intelligence operatives, who may be tempted to try something creative. Mister Dower can spray the immediate vicinity with enough bullets to reduce each of you to a fine red mist before you can do anything at all."

"Call yourself a priest," Marsha spat.

"Please make no mistake," Krebs said. "I am utterly revolted by this which I must do, and I shall do many months of penance for it. However, that does not alter my intention. The tetrad is a blasphemous pagan engine of sorcery which must be brought under proper control. I sin in order to do God's work."

"Let me remove that burden from your conscience, Father," said a new voice. Count Sienkiewicz was standing by the back gate of the house, surrounded by Karolides and his Greeks, all of whom had their weapons trained on Krebs and Dower. Carol thought he

looked tired, his face grey and drawn, but he was clearly still in command. "Drop your gun, Mister Dower." Dower, looking disgusted, did so. "Thank you for those primitive little booby-traps," the magician went on, addressing Dracul. "They kept me occupied for almost fifteen seconds. Fortunately, I was not alone. Now. You will give the tetrad to me," he said, returning his attention to Krebs and Dower, "or I will kill first you, and then the rest of these people."

Carol had a brief fantasy of each of them in turn putting a hand up and saying "I've got the tetrad." It wouldn't help, of course.

It was broken by the sensation of something being pushed into her hand. She looked at it. A creased note, in Chris's handwriting. WHEN I SPEAK, CLOSE YOUR EYES. PASS IT ON. She quickly folded it again and passed it to the person on her other side.

The Greek General was shaking his head, trying to say something. Sienkiewicz spoke in a low tone to him, and his face eventually cleared. Carol felt a little better. His whammy was obviously losing its wham.

Dower chose that moment to try to make a grab for his gun, and one of the soldiers shot him in the leg. He fell to one knee with a hoarse cry.

"Excuse me," Chris said loudly. Carol closed her eyes.

There was a peculiar sound.

*

John Dower watched in cold terror as his leg, the one the Commie had shot, withered and rotted away, the flesh falling off the bone. It was true, then, what he'd always suspected; the Commies had zombie-making bullets. They were turning him into a fucking Commie zombie. He grabbed desperately for his gun again, but it slithered away across the ground and hissed at him when he tried to pick it up. There was a huge shadow on the ground, but he dared not look up. The rot was spreading up his leg. He had one chance; amputation. He desperately wrenched his knife out of its sheath and began sawing through the flesh of his own leg.

Father Krebs, oblivious to the spectacle of Dower trying to saw off his leg with a ballpoint pen, felt a churning in his gut. He felt sick. He opened his mouth, leaned forward and vomited, but instead of semi-digested food, what came out was golden light. It pooled around his feet, and began to dissipate into the air almost immediately. He understood at once; he was losing his virtue. All the goodness in his soul, at last revolted beyond endurance by the monstrous acts he had allowed himself to perform, was leaving him for ever, leaving him nothing but a creature of evil, a blight on the earth. God looked down on him from on high, and saw nothing of Himself in the priest. Father Krebs whimpered, and began grasping at handfuls of the golden light, trying to stuff it back into himself, even as it vanished between his fingers.

Count Sienkiewicz watched the German priest frantically stuffing his face with rank grass with some amusement. He had no idea what had overtaken the two spies, but he seemed to be immune. He turned to Karolides to order him to shoot them, and found himself looking into the face of a demon.

"Marchosias," he whispered.

"Yes," the demon whispered back. "The first of my kind to be bound to your service. I *am* going to enjoy this."

Count Sienkiewicz glimpsed, in the moment before darkness swallowed him whole, the outline in the sky of a gigantic horse, and just had time to wonder which Prince or Duke of Hell had come in that form before he could do nothing but scream.

General Karolides saw a little fat man with an outlandish hairstyle, wearing what looked like an opera singer's idea of military uniform, emerge from the crowd of people and strut towards him, smiling unpleasantly.

"You see, Grigori," he said, in an implausible Mittel-European accent, "if you had become an actor like your mother and I wanted, you would never have got into this mess."

General Karolides, his face distorted by panic, broke and ran, with his men following in his wake, presumably driven by their own demons.

*

"You can open your eyes now," Chris said, and Carol did so.

"What happened?" she said. Sienkiewicz, Krebs and Dower were all writhing on the ground and moaning; the Greeks had vanished.

"I think your man there conquered a corner," Dracul said. "He conjured the Night-Mare."

"The word 'nightmare' doesn't have anything to do with horses," Rob objected.

"Call it a kelpie then," Dracul said, "or any one of a hundred other names. Are we debatin' semantics or makin' tracks?"

They quickly piled back into the vehicles and set off once again.

"Was that a corner?" Carol asked Chris.

"No, pegasus/centaur edge," he answered. "The non-human edges are harder to get to from human, but I was ready to try anything."

"You're pretty wonderful, Chris Kyriakou," she said softly.

"You're just saying that 'cause I have superpowers."

"Really not," Carol said, and lifted her face to his.

"What did I say?" Dracul called, and a moment later the lovers' ears were assaulted by the noise of an alto sax playing "Strangers In The Night" very, very badly.

*

Don-Jay was feeling acutely miserable. The feeling that he had something very important to do, something which he couldn't quite remember but which depended utterly on them all still being in the house, was now overwhelming him. He could feel it getting worse the further away they got.

Eventually he got up and went back to where Allie was sitting, playing with a bunch of blank pieces of cardboard.

"Whit d'you want?" she said, without looking up.

"I--" Don-Jay started again. "I think I need help."

"I think I need a mellion pounds. Not gonnae happen either."

"You helped me before."

"I told you not to talk about that," she said very quietly.

"I think Professor Gefarr has some kind of hold on me," Don-Jay said earnestly. "What you did before--it broke the trance. I couldn't remember till now. But maybe..." He sat down beside her, ignoring her disgusted sniff. "I thought maybe...if you did it again..."

"You lookin' for a new gob under your chen?" She looked at him for the first time. "Aye, well, maybe I can help at that. Close your eyes."

Don-Jay obediently closed his eyes, and Allie sighted carefully, then hit him quite hard on the back of the head.

"Ouch!" Don-Jay opened his eyes, and blinked. "What did you--" He realised in mid-protest that the miserable feeling was indeed gone. "How did you--?"

"Worked, didn't it?" Allie was smug. "Dinnae ask daft questions, then."

"I thought you said Dracul told you you were too violent," Don-Jay said, nursing his head.

"Aye, well, me," Allie said, "I think I'm just violent enough. Now piss off and let me get on, will ya?"

Don-Jay got up and returned to his seat.

*

"Here you go," said the driver. "If you're sure." The signpost pointing down the narrow turning said ABERGENAU.

Gefarr and Pricklow dismounted with difficulty.

"You wouldn't happen to know the way back to the main road from here, would you?" the driver asked.

"You looking for the main road?" A man had pulled up in an antique-looking car. There were two other men and a girl in the back. "Just turn round and follow us."

"Right you are," the driver said. "Thanks, squire."

Gefarr was already trudging down the lane. Pricklow followed her as the truck embarked on the lengthy process of turning round.

They walked into the village without speaking. Pricklow slowed his steps hopefully as they drew level with the pub, but Gefarr affected not to notice and stumped steadily on.

"Don-Jay will have opened the gates," she said shortly, "and immobilised everyone in the house. I gave him precise instructions."

"Suppose he failed?" Pricklow suggested.

"Have you found your career progress enhanced by this needlessly negative attitude, Doctor Pricklow?"

They saw the gates, standing open, and made their way up the drive.

"It looks deserted," Pricklow commented.

"There is a light on in one of the rooms," Gefarr pointed out flatly.

The front door was likewise open. Gefarr marched in as if she owned the place, and Pricklow followed her into the lighted room.

He saw a room full of decidedly unimmobilised strangers, unless you counted the one with a nasty bullet wound in his leg, which was being tended by a fat man in a cassock. Five armed men in uniform were standing around a chair in which another man was securely bound and gagged with a piece of cloth apparently torn from a cloak. One of them was clearly in the act of repeatedly hitting him about the face. All were frozen in place, staring at the newcomers.

"Which of you has the tetrad?" Gefarr inquired loudly.

Pricklow put his hand over his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"Avevale," Carol said with satisfaction as the bus crested the hill. It was late, and the street lights were already on down in the valley.

"Good to be back," Chris agreed.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Hey, I said so, didn't I?" They had agreed, at the inevitable refuelling stop, that Carol would be dropped off at her house, and the bus would then follow the Alvis on to room 3b, so that Chris could work through the changes and try to find out more about the edges and corners. Carol had promised faithfully to come up first thing in the morning.

"I know," Carol said. "It just seems...off. After last night, I mean."

"We're gonna have plenty more last nights," Chris promised.

"Not on this bus, you're not." Dracul rang the bell loudly as the bus came to a stop. "Anybody who is Carol Varland, change here."

"Thank you," Carol said to Dracul as she passed him. "For everything. I mean it."

"Ah, 't was nothin', my lovely," Dracul said. "Anyway, you're not rid of us yet. Your man Rob wants us around in case the bad guys come lookin'."

"So do I," Carol said.

She got off the bus, and watched it till it turned up the hill towards the College. Then she fumbled in her pocket for her door key. The front of her house, as far as she could see by the street light, looked as good as, well, old; the workmen she'd last seen waving to her as they drove past had done a fantastic job blending the old and new work. She unlocked the door, switched on the hall light and went in.

The house was cold, so the first thing she did was turn on the gas fire in the living room and check the boiler. There was hot water in the tap, though it spluttered a little when she first turned it on. She went from room to room turning on lights, making sure everything was where it should be. Then she sat down on her bed and cried quietly for a little while.

So much had changed. And yet this, her home, was still the same, still welcoming, still her safe place. She would get up in a moment and make herself a cup of tea, and she would know where everything was, and she would switch on the telly and all her favourite programmes would still be there, and when she got tired there would be her own little bed waiting for her. She considered a hot water

bottle, and decided yes, why not. One more night of being just Carol Varland, the secretary, the ordinary person. No magic, no chases, no hairsbreadth escapes from death.

The doorbell rang. Carol went to answer it and found Monica on the doorstep, her car outside.

"Did you forget me?" she said.

"No, come on in," Carol said. "I was just going to make tea."

Monica took in the tearstained face. "Are you okay?"

"Just relief, I think," Carol told her. "That it's all still here, you know?"

"Dulce Domum," Monica said. "I know exactly what you mean, darling. I felt the same when I got back to my flat. Till General Plug-ugly and his boys showed up."

"He wasn't that ugly," Carol said.

"He wasn't threatening you."

"Anyway," Carol said, "let's not talk about him tonight. Let's pretend none of the past week has happened and just be us, can we?"

Monica smiled beatifically. "I can't imagine anything I'd like better, darling. Now, what about this tea?"

They sat side by side on the sofa, and watched television, and talked about inconsequential things, friends they had known at school and never seen since, cars, politics, ancient Roman history, home repairs and the price of romanesco cauliflower. Gradually the flow of words dried up, and a warm silence took its place, as pervasive as the hiss of the gas fire, as comforting as the mellow light; and the world shrank to the compass of one room, two people. Even Chris would have been an intruder in this suddenly sacred space.

"You know," Monica said quietly.

Carol rolled her head to look at her friend.

"When you kissed me," Monica went on.

"I said I was--"

Monica put a finger against Carol's lips.

"You know why I was so upset?"

"You said--"

"I enjoyed it," Monica whispered. "I wanted it."

Carol stared at her.

"No, not that," Monica said, smiling. "It's still true, what I said."

"Okay," Carol said slowly.

"Not that," Monica said. "Just this."

She let her head rest on Carol's shoulder. "Just this," she sighed.

Carol reached up and stroked her friend's hair. Monica sighed again and settled her head more comfortably.

Yes, Carol thought. *Just this.*

*

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Mm?" Carol opened her eyes. Sunlight was coming in through a gap in the curtains. "What time is it?"

"Ten past ten," Monica said. "I had the. Best. Night's sleep of my life."

"We...we went to sleep? On the..." Carol sat up. She ought to be stiff and cranky and aching. She wasn't. "All night?"

"All night, darling. I'd have made you breakfast, only I'm rubbish at it." Monica leaned down and kissed Carol's forehead. "But I'll happily eat it if you make it."

"But--Chris!" Carol blurted.

"Relax. Rob phoned half an hour ago. Chris is still asleep and likely to stay that way. We've got time."

"All right." Carol stretched and yawned. "Let me get washed and changed."

After a somewhat catch-as-catch-can breakfast, all Carol's food being (understandably) a week old. Carol and Monica drove up to the College and round the main buildings, along the drive that led into the Pretendwood. Room 3b looked exactly the same as it had. Monica parked in exactly the same place in the yard, and Rob came out to meet them.

"Good morning, good morning, good morning," he said. "You'll be pleased to know..." He stopped, taking in the sight of Carol and Monica.

"What is it?" Carol said. "Have we grown another head?"

"No, no. Nothing. Come along. Chris has been asking for you." He ushered them forward, and Carol and Monica, arms casually twined about each other's waists, strolled into the building.

"Caz?" Chris came out of one of the classrooms and Carol disengaged herself from Monica to run to his arms. Monica took the opportunity to buttonhole Rob,

"I think I may know something you don't know about the tetrad," she said in a low voice.

"I think I may have guessed," Rob said. "Let's talk."

"You okay, babes?" Chris said, when they felt like talking.

"I'm fine," Carol said. "I spent all last night spark out on the sofa, but I don't feel any the worse for it. You?"

Chris shrugged. "Okay. You didn't tell me not to call you babes."

"I'm not insecure any more," Carol said. "Any thoughts about the other two edges?"

"Unicorn/centaur and pegasus/unicorn?" Chris shook his head. "I could try for one now if you like."

"Give me a moment with you as you," Carol said, laughing. "Where's everyone else?" This was to Rob, who had just knocked on the door and come in.

"Hugh's back at the college, being Paul Harding, and presumably explaining to the Senior Tutor where he's been for the past week. Dracul's lot are still on their bus. I don't know where the Russian is."

"Okay," Carol said. "Let's try for another edge, then."

"Any preference?" Chris said.

"Wait a tick," Rob said. "How did you know what was going to happen when you got centaur/pegasus? You passed us that note. You must have known it was going to be hairy."

"I was following like a hunch," Chris said. "You know, I just got a feeling it might be worth a try."

"Like you got a feeling I was in trouble with Sienkiewicz," Carol said.

Rob nodded absently. "Well, have you got any hunches about the other two then? I fancy some warning if I'm about to be sent doolally tap."

Chris thought for a minute. "I think pegasus/unicorn might be the safest. And I think we ought to try it outside."

"Lead on, then," Rob said.

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"They're coming out," Dik reported, and the coven clustered round the windows of the bus to watch.

"What's doing?" Dracul said.

"I think they're going to try another change," Frankie said.

"Gods preserve us," Dracul muttered. "All right."

He swung out of the bus and loped towards the small group in the middle of the yard.

"Do we get a health and safety warnin', or are you just going to set him off without regard to life or limb?" he demanded.

"Set me off?" Chris repeated. "I'm not a firework, you know."

"No, fireworks are occasionally harmless," Dracul retorted.

"All right, consider yourselves warned," Rob said. "This should be fairly safe, but if you're worried, don't look."

"Thank yez kindly, sir," Dracul said, touching his forelock. "All right, people," he shouted, heading back to the bus. "Sticky tape on the windows, mattresses against the walls, and nobody forget your gas mask."

"Clown," Rob muttered, and took out his pocket recorder. "Subject, Chris Kyriakou. Tetrad phenomenon, test--" He frowned. "I've lost count. The next one. All right, Chris, off you go."

"Off you go," Chris echoed. "I'm a racehorse now."

"That could be useful," Monica remarked. "Might be some money in it."

Chris concentrated, and a new form exploded out of him.

This horse was not white but a deep, deep red, and huge. It stood there, being a horse.

"Anticlimactic," said Rob. "Erm, the subject has transformed into a large, er, red, er, horse. Nothing else seems to be happening, no unusual, er, psychological effects."

"Well, I suppose one of the forms had to be an ordinary horse," Carol said. Something was tickling the back of her neck, and she brushed at it.

"Is it me, or is it getting warmer?" said Monica.

"Yes, the sun's come out," Rob said, looking up. "In fact--"

Carol looked up. The sky, which had been grey, was a brilliant blue, and a warm breeze was blowing from somewhere, scented with pine and other smells she couldn't identify. The thing brushed the back of her neck again, and she reached up and took hold of it.

It was an apple.

"I didn't know there was an apple tree here," she said.

"There isn't," said Rob in a strangled tone.

Carol suddenly became aware that the yard was knee deep in fresh green grass, and small bushes and young trees were sprouting all around them. The breeze blew again, and she breathed in deeply. Definitely pine, and...what was that other smell?

"Excuse me." It was Tilda, from the bus. "May I please try one?"

Carol picked the apple and handed it to her. She sniffed it, looked at it, bit into it. "Beautiful," she said, swallowing.

"Well, this is interesting, so it is," Dracul said. "You've conjured Epona."

"Epona isn't Greek," Rob said.

"She's a goddess, you eejit, she's everywhere. Just 'cause your professors don't have her written down somewhere. Call her Demeter if it makes you happier."

"More to the point, she's a she," Monica said, straightening up. "This horse is definitely not a she."

"Well, what the hell do I know?" Dracul said. "Epona is as Epona does. Get him to change back and see if it all turns into dead leaves or whatever."

Chris exploded out of the horse. The sudden vegetation did not vanish. Tilda squealed with delight and began picking apples, hoisting up her skirt to form a makeshift bag.

"Abundance," Dracul said. "I rest my case."

Carol grabbed an apple and bit into it. It was crisp and sweet with just a hint of tartness.

"Blackberries over here," Dracul said. "And this stuff looks like barley." He went off to investigate further.

"Well, that wasn't too bad, was it?" Chris said, looking around with interest. "I could feed the world." Then he went a peculiar colour and grabbed Carol for support. "Maybe one garden at a time," he added faintly. "Can I have an apple before she pinches the lot?"

"The effect seems to cover a circle with a radius of about fifty feet from where you were standing," Dracul reported, coming back. "Looks like any seed that's been dropped on the ground suddenly gets the call to germinate. Looks as though it was still spreading outwards." He looked at Chris. "I reckon you'll need a stopwatch on you when you try this again. The power isn't limitless."

"Tell me about it," Chris said, though he already seemed to be reviving.

"It is good soil, Dracul," Tilda reported. She was on her haunches, one hand holding the ends of her apple-heavy skirt, the other running crumbly black earth between her fingers.

"It used to be tarmac," Rob said a little faintly. "I wonder how I shall explain this to the College authorities?"

"Olive tree," Dracul said from a little way off. "That'll need a greenhouse at very least."

Olives, that had been the other smell. *How Greek*, Carol thought. "It is beautiful," she said, looking around her at the transformed yard. "I think the College just acquired another kitchen garden."

"I think we'll let you rest up a bit before we try the final edge, Chris," Rob said.

"No argument here," Chris said. He disengaged himself from Carol and wandered a little way off.

"Ach, I'm a fool," Dracul said. "Rachel Kwok said something to me last night and can I remember it?" He thumped his own forehead. "I'll get her."

"I am here, Dracul," said Rachel Kwok, making everyone jump. Carol was absolutely certain there had been nobody standing there a minute ago. "Mr Kyriakou, you should consider that each face is an area, and each edge is a line. The corners have no dimensionality."

"That was it," Dracul said. "I couldn't remember it because I didn't understand a word of it." He seemed pleased with himself, or rather, more so than usual.

"What do you mean, Ms Kwok?" Rob asked.

"The corners represent extremes," the woman said. "They may not be actual forms, but rather qualities in each form which you should be aware of and control. The power of this tetrad is linked to emotional responses. Perhaps extreme negative emotions?"

"Anger, maybe?" Carol suggested. "It was anger that triggered the first change of all. Fear? Greed?"

"Extreme emotion plus supernatural power usually equals trouble," Dracul said. "That is why I am the placid, even-tempered and generally saintly soul that I am."

"And I am Empress Wu," said Rachel Kwok, so deadpan it took Carol nearly a minute to realise it had been a joke.

"So what's an extreme emotion common to centaurs, unicorns and pegasi but not humans?" Monica queried.

"Ask a horse," Dracul suggested. "It doesn't have to be exclusive, though. Just something that would be more dangerous to them than to us."

"What do you think, Chris?" Rob looked round. "Where is he?"

At almost the same moment, the floor fell away from Carol, and she uttered a cry and reached out blindly for Monica. The other girl flew to her side and caught her as she fell. "What is it?" Monica demanded.

"Chris..." was all Carol could say.

"I'm sorry, Ms Varland." The ringing voice of Vassily Shirinin echoed through the yard. "I apologise also to Ms Fleming, to Mr

Fayne, and to my dear friend Hugh, who I see is not here." The Russian was standing at the gate of the yard, Chris's inert body under one arm, and a gun in his hand. "If you should see him, please remind him that a gentleman's agreement only goes so far, and in the end we all have our jobs to do."

"I thought you were a decent sort, Vassily," Rob said.

"A less 'decent sort' would have taken his chance long before this, I think you will agree," Shirinin said. "If it helps, you may console yourselves with the thought that at very least, the food shortages which have plagued my country for over a century will now be ended at last, thanks to your little friend here. Oh. If you try to follow me I will kill him. Please know that."

He hoisted Chris up over one shoulder and dumped him into the back seat of a silver Audi saloon parked just outside the gate. Keeping his gun trained on the group, he walked round the car, and in one swift movement got in, tossed the gun on to the passenger seat and started the engine.

Or tried to.

"The game isn't over yet, my Russian friend," said Dracul von Ryan quietly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Shirinin tried the car a couple more times, then hit the steering wheel and got out again, retrieving his gun as he did so.

"Very clever," he said mildly, "and very quick. I assume your little Scottish friend persuaded-- Wayne, was it?--to do his party trick. So, the question becomes simple; which of you shall I kill first? None of you are armed, I believe, and even were you to rush me I could put at least three of you down with ease. Who among you values their life least?"

Carol had been hearing all this as if from a long way off. She felt Monica's arms around her, holding her up, but she could not bear to look. After all this, after everything they had gone through, was this it? Would Chris be ripped out of her life, taken off to be cut up by scientists, or kept in a cage and forced to perform for the rest of his life? She didn't blame the Russian; they were all after the secret, everyone in the world would be if they only knew. Even Hugh, seeing the miracle of Epona, might have thought better of neglecting his duty to the crown. She felt utterly alone, and something huge and painful was growing inside her, something--

"Do you feel it, darling?" Monica whispered.

Carol looked at her uncertainly.

"It's all right," Monica said. "I guessed."

Guessed what?

"Just let it happen," Monica said, and kissed her, before letting go of her and stepping back. Carol staggered a little, caught her balance, took a deep breath and exploded.

The rush was immense, unimaginable. Her whole body sang with it. *So this is what it feels like*, she thought, before her thoughts opened out and expanded to infinity in all directions. She stood tall, proud, invincible. She moved towards the Russian, seeing him whole for the first time; a good man only partially numbed to evil, driven by fear and guilt and a paradoxical rage for honour. She understood him. She loved him.

Behind her she heard Monica: "God, isn't she beautiful?"

And Rob: "Yes, oh yes she is..."

And in front of her Vassily Shirinin waved his little toy and said "Keep back," in a voice suddenly fraught with uncertainty.

"Why would I do that?" Carol said. "Don't you want to be closer to me?" She knew her voice was working its magic on him, enthralling him, binding him to her.

"I will kill you," Shirinin sobbed. His face was shiny with sweat. He could not hold the gun steady.

"No, you won't," Carol said gently, and took the gun from his grasp. It shrivelled and melted into a tiny pile of slag, but there was no heat; just the irresistible force that was part of her nature now. "Nobody dies today."

She took him in her arms, and he melted against her. "You will be my first," she whispered, and put forth her power.

Shirinin straightened up. His arms slowly floated away from his sides, his head tilted back to gaze at the sky, and as his flesh solidified into living wood and his skin and clothes melted into silver bark and leaves, she heard his thought for the first and last time: *Thank you...*

"What the ever-lovin' bejusus are you?" Dracul breathed, and Carol laughed inside to hear him, for once, utterly confounded.

"Just a dryad," she said, smiling over her shoulder at him.

"You killed him," Rob said.

"No indeed," she answered. "He is alive and well. Now he will know the long thoughts and slow emotions of the trees. What to you seem like years will be days to him. The sudden explosion of spring, the warm bounty of summer, the poignancy of autumn and the sleep of winter. He will live long after you are all dead."

"Not planted there he won't," Rob said. "He's blocking the gateway."

"Then you must transplant him," she said. "And take care with him. He is precious." She turned to Monica. "How did you know? I didn't."

"Darling, it was obvious," Monica said. "As soon as I saw you the day after...after you spent the night with Chris, I fell completely in love with you. I've known you for decades and that's never happened before. There had to be a reason, and Occam's razor did the rest."

Carol thought back. It was easy now. *Yes, of course.* "I never kissed you before, did I? No wonder you were upset."

"All that wasted time," Monica said with a grin. "And it's completely unsexy. It's just love."

"*Agape*," Rob said. "The pure love the Greeks talked about."

"But Chris didn't change--not in himself--when he got the tetrad," Carol protested.

"Didn't he?" Rob said. "I saw him many times when he brought kebabs to the College. A greasy little delivery boy who pretended to be Cockney and wiped his nose on his sleeve when he thought nobody was looking. Whose greatest ambition was to be like a television gangster, who studied art history because his mother wanted him to."

"But..." Carol began.

"Dear Carol," Monica said fondly. "Of course you didn't see it. You were in love with him already."

"You saw it within him before any of the rest of us did," Rob said. "The tetrad brought it out."

"Excuse me," Dracul said loudly, "but can we skip this bit? I hate the mushy stuff."

Carol smiled at him, and forgave him. *You have got it coming to you in a big way, my laddo. I'd like to be there to see.* "All right," she said. "Monica, shall we try and go straight to the end? See if what worked before will work again?"

Monica sat down on the lush grass, and Carol lay down beside her with her head in Monica's lap and breathed deeply, contentedly. *All's well.*

The explosion this time was like coming home had been; the familiar joy of her own body, her own mind. She sat up, smiled at Monica, at them all.

"Let's get Chris out of that car and get home," she said.

*

"I've phoned Uncle Aris," Chris said. "He's coming down."

It was early evening in Carol's cottage, which was currently feeling a little crowded, but not in a bad way. The entire coven was there, along with Hugh and Rob, and Monica of course. Chris and Carol were in the kitchen, laying stuffed vine leaves out on big plates.

"Are you sure he's up to the travelling?" Carol asked.

"He says so. I think he's made of like piano wire and bloody-mindedness." Chris grinned. "He was over the moon when I told him. Apparently nobody who ever had the tetrad before lasted long enough to pass it on to someone else. Or if they did, their line died out."

It doesn't make you immortal, apparently. He was very definite on that."

"I'm glad he was," Carol said. "I'd hate to have to find out for myself." A thought occurred to her. "Did you ask him about conquering the corners? We haven't done that yet."

"He said Rachel Kwok was probably right, in which case that could be an ongoing job."

"Avoiding extreme emotion?"

"Mastering it. You can't avoid it, sometimes you need it. He said it takes even smart people their whole lives." Chris took a deep breath. "Anyway, he wants to see you again, and me I guess, and he says he quite fancies Avevale from what I've told him about it. He might retire down here."

"Monica's already given up her job. Says she's sure the College can find her some work." Carol looked at Chris. "You don't mind?"

"Why should I mind?" he said. "You love me, I love you, she loves you, and I--"

"Go on," Carol said, feigning an ominous tone.

"Nah, we're past all that, aren't we? Sure, I love her, but it's that aggapy thing Rob talked about. It'll be great having her here."

"Just as long as it's just us," Carol said. "I don't fancy starting a commune. Or a cult."

"God, no," Chris said with a shudder. "But we can't just go back to being normal, Caz. This power has got to be used. It can't just be hidden away. We do that, we're as bad as grandad."

"We can do little things," Carol said. "Heal little hurts, give inspiration where it's needed, let people feel there's still wonder in the world."

"Do you think they'll come after us again? Dower and the rest?"

"Hugh says Dower's been recalled in disgrace. Father Krebs too. Seems it got out on the internet that a top CIA agent and a highly-placed Catholic priest had been junketing around the British countryside chasing what turned out to be an obvious hoax."

Carol thought she detected the hand of Rachel Kwok in that. "What about Pricklow and Gefarr?"

"Dunno. Not worried about them, though. They never even got near us."

"Don-Jay?"

"Gave him some cash to get to London. He says he's gonna make a new start, but I don't think he believed it any more than I did. It'll take more than us to blow him out of his rut. He'll be back with them inside a month." Chris paused. "You want a bigger plate for those?"

Carol looked down at her overflowing plate. "Oh, God, I lost track. That's enough, isn't it?"

"Keep some back for seconds," Chris said, putting the rest of the little bundles into a bowl. "Here we go, then."

They carried the plates through to the living room, and the multitudes fell on them with cries of delight.

"We think we'll be movin' on in the morning," Dracul said. "This place is a bit quiet for us."

"There's a psychic fair in Salisbury we want to get to," said Frankie.

"I hate bloody psychic fairs," Dik grumbled.

"Nevertheless, Dik my boy, there's cash to be made," Dracul said. "Diesel doesn't grow on trees, you know. Unless you could arrange that?" he said to Carol.

"I don't think so," Carol said, laughing.

"Thank you," Tilda said, taking both of Chris's hands in hers.

"What for?" he said. "The apples?"

"Among other things," she said, smiling at him.

One by one, Rob, Hugh and the coven made their farewells and left. Allie was the last to go. In the doorway she turned, and smiled,

quickly, as though it hurt.

"It gets really interestin' from here on," she said, and ran.

"I'll do the dishes," Monica said, and went into the kitchen.

"What did she mean by that?" Carol wondered, as she and Chris sat down on the sofa.

"Well," Chris said, "there are these things called dishes, see, and after you've eaten off them--"

Carol hit him. "I meant Allie."

"Well," Chris said again, "for one thing you got your own journey just beginning, and it's obviously different from mine. We've only seen one of your other faces. Two more to go." He brightened. "Maybe one of 'em's a mermaid. I could quite fancy you as a mermaid."

"How about a harpy?" Carol suggested. "Or a gorgon?"

"Mr McGee," Chris quoted. "Don't make me angry."

"You wouldn't like me when I'm angry," they chorused, and laughed.

"Well, I'm certainly never gonna make you angry," Chris said.

Carol looked fondly into his eyes. *Brown eyes you could get lost in*, she thought.

"Don't bet on it, my laddo," she said. "Don't you bet on it."

"Hey, we've still got one more edge to try," Chris said suddenly. "Wanna have a go?"

"I'm game if you are," Carol said. "But outside, please."

They went out of the back door, past Monica with her hands in the sink, and into Carol's tiny garden.

"What's this one?"

"Unicorn/centaur," Chris said. "Stand back a bit."

He concentrated, and changed. Carol stared.

"Should he have that many legs?" Monica said, behind her. She was drying her hands on a tea towel.

Carol counted. "Eight," she said. "So that's Norse mythology added to the mix. And are those scales on his back?"

Chris snorted and stamped his hoof. It seemed to Carol that the earth under her feet trembled just a little.

"I think he wants to go somewhere," she said. "What's he waiting for?"

Monica laughed. "Us, silly," she said. "Go on. You first."

Carol approached Chris cautiously, and he knelt so that she could mount. Monica climbed on behind, and the great horse stood up.

Carol could feel the muscles beneath her moving as he adjusted his stance.

"So what happens now--"

The last word was stretched into a scream as Chris leapt, all eight hooves spurning the ground. It was not flight; there were no wings, no sensation of lift, just a single powerful leap that punched the air out of their lungs, but the countryside beneath them went skidding away as if someone had pulled a magician's tablecloth from under their feet. Suddenly they were high over the land, and Monica's delighted laughter and Carol's whoop were sucked from their lips and sent spinning in the slipstream.

Horse and riders vanished into the blue of the night, and the echo of a sonic boom broke over Avevale.

THE END