

Chapter Twenty-Six

Found Out

‘You stupid, ignorant irresponsible young man.’

It was about twenty-four hours since the plane had touched down at Heathrow, and about twenty since Nshila had escaped from an airport beset by baggage-handler strikes, eco-demonstrators and anti-terrorist precautions. She had reached her flat in the late evening, been enthusiastically greeted by Rasputin and fallen exhausted into bed. The next day had been satisfactory, all the events of her absence having been dealt with correctly, and sometimes brilliantly, by Gillian and Peter. It was not the same when Fred Mbwele responded to her summons and knocked on the door at 6.30pm.

It took only fifteen minutes to get Fred started on the true story. She had the advantage of having seen him in the fire. It only needed the word ‘pie’ to tell Fred that she knew something, which meant that she might know more. How much more? When must he tell the truth, and when was it safe to lie?

He was no match for her, often making mention of people and things that invited new questions. He spoke of Abigail Fordcombe, and was asked why she had felt able to contact him. Why were they on such terms that she could ask him to act as a waiter? Fred had to admit that he had met her on Leeds station. What was he doing there? Nshila also remembered showing him how to use The Companion, and felt that Fred had probably been unable to resist a trial. She asked him about it, and Fred was scared of telling an outright lie. She was also aware that very few people – even honest ones – remember every detail of a story when asked to relate it. She felt quite safe in saying, ‘You have not told me everything yet – have you? What about the bits you left out?’

Rasputin made it worse. He sat all the time on the radiator where the powder had been split, and glared at Fred without blinking.

So Nshila got the whole story, and gave judgement in the words

‘You stupid, ignorant, irresponsible young man.’

She stared at him for a moment, making a big effort to control her temper. Then she said, ‘I need a little time to think about this – what you’ve done and how to deal with you. Go out now and get me an Indian take-away from that place in Aldgate High Street, and two bottles of red wine. Get something for yourself, too – birdseed, maybe, and get a birdcage from that pet shop on the corner. You may be facing four weeks as a parrot, with Rasputin to watch you. Here’s some money.’

Walking up Fenchurch Street, Fred’s youthful optimism began to return. ‘She can’t be all that angry with me,’ he reasoned, ‘if she plans for us to eat and drink together. She’s cooling down already. I’m sure she would hate the idea of a gutless unimaginative apprentice who sticks to the rules all the time. That’s not how she operates herself. All that stuff about bird seed has got to be a joke. She’s not going to turn me into a parrot.’ Passing Aldgate Pump, he thought, ‘I don’t even think she has the skill to turn me into a parrot. I’ve never heard her talk about transformation. I don’t think it’s her scene at all.’ He returned to Eastcheap with Nshila’s Indian take-away, and the two bottles of wine, but no bird seed and no bird cage. Instead he had a monstrous spicy pizza for himself and a six-pack of their favourite lager and very little change.

The reception was not what he expected. Nshila had used the time to alter her image and create an intimidating environment. She was dressed all over in black and sat in a high-backed carver chair that looked almost like a throne. She had fixed the lighting so that she was largely in shadow, while bright light shone on a low cushion a few feet in front of her.

‘Put the food in the oven and sit there.’

Without quite knowing why, Fred did so. Later, he tried to comfort himself by rationalising his behaviour. ‘I stood no chance in direct confrontation,’ he told himself. ‘And it was true that I had fouled up. She had a right to tear strips off me.’ He found it more difficult to admit that her appearance and attitude and demeanor made him afraid. He knew she was unpredictable, and there was a chance that he had gone too far in ignoring her instructions. She

might – just might – be intending some serious harm. He had never seen her like this before and he felt psychologically overpowered.

When he sat on the cushion it was worse. He could see her only dimly against the unlit background. Her ebony skin colour and black clothing made it hard to pick out her form. But he could see the whites of her eyes and the flash of scarlet fingernails when she moved her hands. Sometimes she seemed to be unnaturally tall. He could tell when she moved, but what those movements were, and what she was doing, were impossible to pick out. He himself was isolated in a circle of bright light.

‘Look into my eyes.’

‘Keep looking.’

‘Sit still.’

Fred could feel some force tampering with his mind. Was he being hypnotised? Was this how a rabbit felt when it was paralysed by the sight of a stoat? She spoke six words in a language unknown to Fred and then seemed to be crooning softly in a slow, sinister manner. Fred felt his limbs freezing up till he was unable to move. In both legs and feet he experienced vicious muscle cramp of the type that sometimes afflicts humans in the night. It was very painful. The usual human response is to move the afflicted limbs as much as possible, even getting out of bed to stand on the floor and hope that changes of position and temperature will cause the spasm to pass. Fred couldn't stir. Would it pass? When it happens naturally, there is a time limit – the muscles gradually relax and the pain passes. The mind knows what will happen and finds reassurance. This was not natural. It was happening because she willed it. The muscles would only relax when her will relaxed. Fred had a moment of panic.

Rasputin jumped off a chair and stalked between them to examine an empty food bowl. Nshila's concentration wavered and Fred felt a lessening of the pain. Good. The muscles were unfreezing. No – she had recovered. The pain returned. Worse than before, as if she was trying to make up for the momentary lapse.

It seemed to go on for ages, but the clock had moved on just five minutes. And then the pain was gone – not gradually as happens

with muscle cramp, but suddenly as if somebody had thrown a switch. Fred was sweating all over. His shirt was damp and he was trembling and shivering. His legs felt weak. He thrust them out in front of him and allowed his body to fall back over the cushion so that he was arched over it. Then he sat up again. Nshila turned the lights on. The other-worldly atmosphere was gone. She was still a smart impressive woman, but she was smiling at him and there was no threat in the air. He could see a small tear in her skirt – presumably due to a fit of anger from Rasputin.

‘Feed the cat, Fred, and then come back and make yourself comfortable. Don’t worry. Nothing more is going to happen. Just don’t forget the experience.’

Nothing was said. Nshila left the events to point the lesson. Instead, she took Fred through his activities while she had been away and helped him to recognise his mistakes.

‘Don’t ever attempt witchcraft for personal pleasure, Fred. There is always danger, and there are always side-effects. You set The Companion on Reverend Clutton for no better reason than revenge. You were lucky nothing went wrong. I must check some of the obvious points.’

‘Does anybody know what you did? Does Abigail know, for instance, or Peter or Gillian?’

‘No. They know I came to the flat, but I’m sure they believed what I said about borrowing a book.’

‘Did anybody see you entering or leaving the potting shed, or did you leave anything behind?’

‘No.’

‘Did Clutton catch even a glimpse of you? Since you could see him, he must have been able to see you.’

‘No. I’m sure he never did. He was far too concerned with his own troubles to notice anything at all distant. If I had been beside him, he would have known, but I was at least a hundred yards away.’

‘That’s good news. Now for your attempt on the Prince. I can understand that you wanted to be helpful, and I can understand that the opportunity seemed to be heaven-sent. I don’t condemn you,

for intelligent rule-breaking. After all, I have broken rules happily enough myself. But your effort was truly extreme. I never told you to have a go at the Prince. I am not yet even bound to the contract, and I could still refuse it. Do you understand?’

‘Yes. I’ve got that.’

‘Now, there are times when we want it known that witchcraft has been or will be practised – usually in order to create fear. There are other times when we want it to leave no trace, so that observers treat what has happened as an accident. Your efforts left five people in hospital. There must have been some sort of investigation, and if that turned up the fact that a casual substitute waiter had left early, then people would be looking for him. They would get your name from Abigail. Do you know what happened?’

‘Yes, I do. Abigail told me when she rang up to thank me for my help. The caterers were successful in hushing it up and avoiding an official enquiry. They cooked up a story about the jug of cream on that table being filled from a batch that was past its sell-by date. They worked very hard to pacify the sufferers and made some un-refusable offers of compensation – like catering free for a private dinner party in the home. They got away with it.’

‘You have a lot to be grateful for, Fred. Last point, can you tell me where you made your biggest mistake?’

‘Leaving the pie behind to be found. That must be it. I should have made sure nobody except the Prince could eat it. I could hardly have walked out with it, but I could have accidentally dropped it on the floor and put my foot in it. I can’t understand why I forgot to go back for it.’

‘Good. That’s enough, now.’

Fred opened the door and was almost through it before he remembered the magical discs. He hesitated and tuned back. He had come clean about his more dangerous adventures. It was a good moment to clear the slate completely.

‘Nshila, while I was in here looking for the powder something very weird happened to me.’

‘I think I’ve heard enough craziness. Have I got to put up with more?’

‘This was not something of my doing. It was quite innocent.’

‘Go on.’

‘You had left a pile of clear round discs in an ashtray. I wondered what they were and I picked one up. It was in my hand while I went into your kitchen to get a beer out of your fridge. As I opened the door, it fell out of my hand onto the floor, and it had changed. It was not transparent any more. It was opaque, and dark red in colour. And it melted. It was amazing. I was standing there with the bottle of beer in my hand, staring at this disc, and then it dissolved in front of my eyes. There was a pool of water for an instant and then it evaporated. Nothing else happened, as far as I could see. Do you know what it was?’

‘Sit down and wait.’

Nshila took a large file from a bookshelf, sat back in her chair and leafed through it. Fred sat quietly, but felt the pressure building up as five minutes extended to ten, and then fifteen. At intervals he made impatient noises; every time she responded with ‘keep quiet’ gestures. Finally, she spoke. Fred sensed that she had been disturbed by what she had read.

‘Those discs were sent to me by a god – I didn’t know at the time what they were or what I would have to do with them. They didn’t seem to connect with anything I knew. I thought I had better do nothing till some message came – which explains why I left them out so carelessly.’

‘What are they, then? Tell me, please.’

‘In this file I have copied and pasted passages from the oldest known texts on witchcraft and magic. When you told me how your disc behaved, it rang a bell for me. I have read about these things, and been told more, but I have never actually seen one or handled one. In my mind I had formed an image about what they might look like, but that image turns out to be quite wrong. That’s why I have never recognized them till now. They are not African in origin, though they are known and used there. They come from Northern Germany and the Baltic States and Scandinavia. I imagined them as being made out of wood – like a section through a branch of a tree. When I was given these I just thought, “Computer discs” and

my mind ran along that track. Fred, what was uppermost in your mind when this happened?’

‘That’s easy. I was thinking of a cold lager as a reward for a job well done. I was visualising the toggle coming off the can and imagining the feel of the liquid as I swallowed half the can in one go.’

‘Yes, that fits. These are finding discs. Their oldest known use was to seek out a victim in his hiding place. Witchcraft was often independent of physical contact and once the rituals had been performed the victim died anyway. But there were some cases when the predator wanted to be present at the end and the victim hoped to escape by hiding. A finding disc like this allowed the practitioner to follow a trail and uncover the victim. It never failed. If his enemy had one of these the victim was helpless.’

‘That’s a very different situation from uncovering a beer in your fridge.’

‘It is. But the tools of our trade are flexible, and maybe the principles operating here were similar. You wanted a beer and the image of the can was clear in your mind. The disc picked up that image and led you to the thing you sought. It probably changed colour gradually as you moved to the kitchen. You didn’t notice, because you knew where the beer was and you didn’t need to be led to it.’

‘That’s pretty useful. No more looking for things like insurance certificates and railway tickets and business cards that you can’t find.’

‘Useful, Fred, Yes. But don’t let thoughts of trivial uses drive the nastiness from your mind. Just imagine a victim shivering in his dark, damp hiding place, and knowing that the disc was bringing his killer nearer and nearer.’

She turned back to the file and read more.

‘There’s worse yet. It seems that if the user had sufficient mental power, the victim could not only be found by the disk, but killed by it. The moment his last defense was stripped away, the disc dissolved and the life force in the victim dissolved too. No blood – no wounds – no screaming. Just the instant shutting down of all

physical activity. This is nasty stuff.’

‘Yes. But none of that makes the things evil in themselves, does it? The world is full of things that can be used for good or bad purposes. And you’re not going to make evil use of these discs, are you?’

‘No, I’m not. I know now why I was given these discs, and why I didn’t recognise them. My purpose, I promise you, is wholly beneficial. You and I are going to take these discs and have a little treasure hunt out in the country, Fred. This last chapter of your adventures has been useful.’