

THE
RINGS OF POSEIDON

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The Rings of Poseidon

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THE RINGS OF POSEIDON

PRELUDE

The drum beat kept a time which was easy for an oarsman to follow, even one as new to the task as me, and we slipped round the maze of canals at a steady pace. The city is a good walk from the sea but the main channel is wide, straight and deep and the ship made it with no alarms. Once out in open water we shipped our oars, the crew hoisted our sail and the helmsman set a course round the island and across the true ocean, for that was where 'Gate of the Sun' was bound.

I am - was - probably the best smithy and metalworker in the whole of the city, of the country perhaps. There may be the odd one as good as me, I suppose, but none better. I'm not a young man any more and I've worked in metals all my life, and it's thirty summers or more since I began my apprenticeship. Now I flee for my life.

I started the usual way, casting the rough blocks of metal into the blades of swords, for the hands of the more expert

craftsmen, who heated and hammered them into shape, so that the metal took an edge. As I became a more expert craftsman myself I began to specialise in finer work. I set up alone, making lamps for homes and temples, thuribles and containers for incense, carefully hammered into shape and all of them delicately decorated.

In later years I have had time to experiment with other ores, heating them and noting the effects. The ones that melted easily I tried mixing and working. I found some which were too soft for swords but good for jewellery; some I decorated with painted clay and heated again, and others were very tough and took a fine edge. I never had a mate. I lived alone and metals were my life and my hobby - I think that's why I became so skilled.

So how does an established, skilled, respected craftsman like me become a wanted man, hunted in the city and forced to flee for safety across the true ocean? No matter: I slowly, carefully, thoroughly, angrily called down the wrath of the gods upon that corrupt little man and his overweening, usurping, insidious power I had fled to escape. I cursed him to his doom.

All the cursing made me feel a little better, but probably did him no harm at all. Eventually the top of the highest mountain fell from sight, the wind dropped and we got out the oars again.

After the noon break on the sixth day there was a sudden sound. The sea and air shook. The sky began to fill with the smoke of a great volcano far astern and the sea became an uneasy calm. There was a kind of greasy swell, like dirty water when you cool

heated metal in it. Then a great wind came and we drove before it: a hot and fiery wind and the ship sped over the water, hastened by that fierce furnace of a blast. But fast as we travelled we could see a great wave coming towards us even faster. A wave like a great and towering cliff. A wall of water many mastheads high.

I do not know whether the high priest was yet struck down, nor whether my curses had been heeded, but the gods were none too pleased about something!

CHAPTER 1

The woman leaned into the wind, tugging up the zip of her light blue waterproof jacket, and strode angrily across the wet, tussocky grass. A fine rain was swirling in from the sea just beyond the rising hillock ahead of her, wreathing like smoke in the chill breeze, soaking her hair and running down her face and jacket to complete the misery of her anger.

"Racist pig," she thought to herself yet again, "and sexist. Damn it, he only did this to me because I'm a woman and black".

In fact, though Alicia Graham was a tall and intelligent woman of Afro-Caribbean extraction, at that moment she was faced by problems that were essentially Anglo-Saxon. Well, Celtic or pre-Celtic, anyway

Just at the crest of the rise was a hollow bearing the signs of recent digging, and what looked at first sight like a pile of stones. In spite of her state of mind, Alicia couldn't help at least a cursory glance. She saw at once the arrangement of the stones was not random, but the work of human hands and very old. Her obsession with her subject overcame her resentment towards this particular assignment and she looked, felt, absorbed the ever so slight remains.

The wall was made up of almost unshaped stones, matched together in the remnants of a very primitive, almost primeval structure. The digging - 'Can't call that an excavation,' Alicia thought, with a mental sniff of disdain - showed the wall going down into the sand for several feet. She considered this. 'Perhaps,' she reflected, 'the ruin simply silted up with sand blown from the beach. At any rate there's enough wind!' she added as an unspoken thought, tugging unnecessarily at the zip of her Cagoule. Interest had evaporated her anger, at least temporarily, as she applied her mind to the excavation of the site.

Alicia turned from the comparative shelter of the hollow to the crest of the low hill and looked towards the sea. It was an uninviting, cold grey with flecks of white. Across Scapa Flow you could see Mainland through the misty rain. "Not the mainland," she thought. "Just Mainland, the main island of the Orkneys."

It hadn't really been a rough crossing, only miserable, with this chilly, gusty wind and the steadily soaking drizzle. She stood, looking at the sea but with her mind elsewhere, back at the University with Professor Harrington, thinking of her blazing row with him....

"Miss Graham," said the tetchy little man, "you are lucky in the extreme that the department has funds to send you anywhere at all. Our benefactor, if I can call a major company that, has stipulated that one of the investigations supported by them must be in Scotland." With an air of finality he added, "And that's the one I've given you."

Alicia Graham, however, had set her heart on an excavation close to the Jordan/Israel border. Not only would the weather have

been better and the site itself established and interesting, but she had been there before during her post-graduate years and felt sure she would be returning.

The Professor had made his choice of who was to lead the Orkneys team from three doctorate students, on the basis of which one was least likely to create a fuss about an unpopular assignment. His choice was inevitably based on the whole of his prejudices and experiences which, in turn, reflected his background and career as an elderly academic. Possibly Alicia's assessment of him reflected much truth. At any rate, she had worked herself up into a fine rage for this interview and she was not ready to be easily put off.

"There's a matter of my team," she said, "You've given me a fine collection haven't you? A romantic nervous wreck on the rebound from a broken relationship, a cultural refugee who'll try anything to stay away from home a little longer, a pimply pratt who's a double failure and a soccer hooligan to look after the technical side."

"You aren't going near any soccer matches." said Professor Harrington somewhat lamely as she paused to draw breath. He wilted a little before her wrath. Alicia was exaggerating, but there was again an element of truth in what she said now, as there had been in her assessment of her Professor. The latter was beginning to wonder whether he had been mistaken in his choice and underrated Alicia's capacity for fighting back.

The sea hissed on the sandy beach of this part of Hoy and the wind would, no doubt, have blown sand around the dunes, had everything not been soaked by the driving drizzle. She pushed her hair back from her face and realised how wet she had become. This

side of the high island shelved towards the sea and should have been protected from the prevailing westerly wind by the higher western slope. The present sodden wind was from the North East. Alicia faced it reflectively. She had exaggerated the personal deficiencies of her team.

"Let me introduce the members of your team", said the Professor. "This is Gillian Meadows. Miss Meadows has taken a year off from study, but she proposes to rejoin the post-graduate course this year."

"How tactful", thought the tall, fair haired girl, wryly. "What he means is dropped out, messed up my life and tried to end it." It was only her determination to start again where she had left off that kept her from feeling hysterical just coping with meeting these people. "I don't know if I can handle the work," she thought, as she shook hands with the West Indian woman who was going to be in charge of the dig, then added to herself, primly and severely, "Of course you can manage it."

"Miss Meadows wants to specialise in the Bronze Age and later Stone Age. This expedition will be valuable experience for her," said the professor, expanding on his introduction.

"I'm looking forward to this project very much," said Gillian, but she was expressing an enthusiasm she didn't entirely feel. "I hope I can keep my mind on my work now," was the thought pounding through her brain. "I don't know for certain I can cope yet. Still, I've got a month or so to sort myself out yet before we start, and I'm damned well going to try."

Gillian listened to the splatter of rain against the caravan

window with each gust of wind. It wasn't a storm outside: the wind was no more than an unpleasantly stiff breeze and the rain was no more than a heavy drizzle blown on the wind. "But I didn't fancy going out with Alicia," she thought. "Not that she asked."

Two caravans to live in. Well, sleep in. Two of those small portable cabins joined together to make one larger one for meals and a study, plus a store shed. This caravan was comfortable and pleasantly warm. Outside it was falling dark. "I'll get up and make her a drink," she thought, rousing herself from the bunk where she had been lying on top of the covers, relaxing.

Alicia became aware of her dripping hair and soaking trousers. She turned from the beach, still considering the lie of the land, and walked back towards the remains. At the crest of the hill she paused to bend down and scratch at the ground beneath the clumps of long, narrow-bladed grass. "Sandy." she murmured, a picture forming in her mind.

She straightened up, skirted around the digging and strode back towards the little group of caravans, now showing lights. Her anger was gone - not, perhaps, her disappointment with her assignment, but at least the anger which had clouded her judgement earlier. She had formed an opinion and it would be nice to see whether it proved correct.

The caravan door opened and Alicia squelched in.

"Grief Ali, you're soaked. I was just making you some cocoa. I thought you'd be damp but you need spin drying. Here's a towel for your hair."

"Thanks, Gill. I didn't notice how wet I'd got. I was thinking about the lie of the land and...."

"Dry yourself first or we'll have our team leader laid up with pneumonia."

The location is just like Skara Brae", said Alicia as she stripped off her Cagoule, steaming now in the warmth of the caravan. "Right up against the beach of a fairly sheltered bay. This site is a better spot for a settlement really, it's only exposed to the east."

"Do you really think it's another entire underground village?" Gill sounded excited.

"Ah, well... Let's be cautious. Skara Brae is the Pompeii of Northern Europe. The sand blew in sometime about 2000 BC and preserved it complete with stone age furniture. We'd known about sunken houses before it was discovered, but this was a whole group of them linked by underground passageways. All I'm saying so far is that the whole hillock by the beach there could be artificial and the site does include some walling that seems to be Stone Age or early Bronze Age. That and the location being similar."

"What do you mean 'seems to be early Bronze Age'?"

"The same walling techniques were still in use on the surface in Ireland into the seventh or eighth centuries AD so, without anything to go on, all you can say is that this bit of wall must have been built between 2500 BC and 850 AD - that's over 3000 years. Let's say that it's unlikely to be another Skara Brae type village. Unlikely, but not entirely impossible."

"And this", said Professor Harrington, "is Manjit Charanduwa. A classical period graduate who wants to move into post graduate archaeology."

"I answer to Manjy." said the slender Indian girl, making it

sound like 'Mandy'. She was, in point of fact, no more Indian than Alicia was West Indian, for both were born and educated in England. Manjy was a real Asian beauty, though when you looked closely it seemed to be physically more a matter of grace than beauty. She was slim almost to slighthness with waist length, dark brown hair framing an oval face with graceful eyes and a nose just a shade too long.

While Alicia was towelling herself dry, Manjy pored over a difficult letter, chewing the end of her pen as she had habitually done in every exam she could remember sitting.

'Dear Father,' she had written, 'I know that you are much displeased with me because I am working away instead of coming home to meet the young man you wish me to marry. This work is connected with the further degree I wish to take and is valuable experience.'

She stopped. She was thinking in English but writing in Punjabi and it was a difficult letter to start with. It wasn't so much that she objected to her parents arranging a marriage for her, although she did not really like the idea. It was much more that she felt that she would never fit in to a traditional Indian marriage. She hadn't actually said that outright because she didn't want to alienate her parents completely if she could avoid it. She probably couldn't.

"Cocoa," said Gill, interrupting her thoughts by depositing the mug on the table beside her with rather more of 'thump' than she intended.

"Thanks, Gill." She closed the notepad, looked up and grinned more cheerfully than she felt.

"This gentleman is Steve Benderman. He is a qualified mechanic. He'll look after the vehicles and equipment for you as well as doing the cooking and general odd jobs. Mr. Benderman will go with the vehicles and caravans when you go up to the Orkneys. He'll drive the Landrover towing one of the caravans. The other caravan and all the equipment will be taken up by a contractor. The rest of the team can go more comfortably by train."

"He's the one," thought Alicia, shaking hands with him, "I've seen his file. Twelve months for drunkenness, disorderly behaviour, possession of a dangerous weapon and assault at a football match. I expected someone younger."

Steve Benderman was in his mid to late twenties and, though he was well built and fit, he didn't look like a football hooligan. At least, he didn't look to Alicia what she expected one to look like. Perhaps the file was wrong.

"I don't think Benderman would mind me telling you", Professor Harrington had explained to Alicia later, "the term of imprisonment sobered him up considerably and his probation officer wanted him to get away from his former environment as completely as possible."

"Well, the Orkney Islands are well away from Birmingham, I suppose," Alicia had observed, adding rather sourly, "In fact they're well away from practically everything."

"Benderman will take the vehicle ferry to Lowness with the equipment while the rest of you follow to Hoy using the passenger only ferry from Stromness to Linksness." explained the Professor, carefully ignoring Alicia's remark.

There was a knock and the caravan door opened. Steve Benderman entered, accompanied by a chilly gust of wind-driven drizzle.

"Scuse me ladies," he said, "I'd like to turn the hired car around. Bonnet's facing the wind and this drizzle gets everywhere. If the electrics get damp we could have trouble starting in the morning."

Last thing I want is trouble with the vehicles," said Alicia. "I'll get you the keys." She slipped into one of the roomy caravan's three bedrooms.

"Cocoa, Steve?" asked Gill. "I've just been making some for us."

"Not something I usually drink, but this damp is getting everywhere, so I think I will please."

"We don't want damp getting into your electrics so you have trouble starting, do we?" giggled Manjy.

Alicia emerged from her bedroom with the keys. "What about the generator?" she asked. "Isn't that getting soaked?"

"I stuck it under the cabin for now, all snug and dry, but I'll rig up a cover tomorrow. You don't want that chugging away under your feet all day."

"I'll say not," said Gill. "I thought we were to have mains electricity."

"You'll have it eventually for the computer and one or two other things. I'm rigging up an extension from the farm yonder." He indicated vaguely with a thumb.

"Presumably Professor Harrington arranged that?" said Alicia, making it sound like a question.

"Yes. He just told me to contact the farm. He said they would be expecting me to call and run an extension cord from there," said Steve. "You'll still need a generator for some things, though."

"Not that we'll be in much if the weather clears," remarked Alicia, "And we'll have to make a start of some sort even if it doesn't."

"That cocoa hit the spot. Just what I needed tonight."

"I think," said Alicia, "that the generator can go off in about half an hour. We can manage on the gas lights overnight."

Steve nodded. "Well, it would be running for nothing all night." he agreed. "I'll start it up again first thing in the morning."

"And I'll go in search of the local labour that Professor Harrington said he'd arranged," said Alicia. "He told me everything was organised provided I let them know when to start.."

"The other two members of your team," said the Professor, "are Mr Alan Wainwright - you know him from the undergraduate class you've been teaching - and Mr Frank Baxter who will coming on an exchange from the University of Texas at Houston. These two will join you in the Orkneys. They should be there within a day or two of your own arrival."

The Professor closed his file with a snap. "I'll leave you to fill them in on the details. I hope you have a successful dig. If local reports are correct, it looks promising."

After Alicia had gone the professor glanced again at the photographs in his copy of the file before he put it away in the cabinet. "Promising. But it's been promising before," he thought.

The electric light flickered out. Alicia reached up, turned off

the gas light and settled into her sleeping bag. "It looks more promising than I expected," she admitted to herself, as she drifted off to sleep.

Steve left the generator safely tucked up and returned to the second caravan, shutting the night out behind him; Manjy sat up in bed, still struggling with her letter; Gill took two sleeping tablets and the ten pm from King's Cross to Inverness rumbled northwards through the darkness of a wet May night, carrying Messrs. Wainwright and Baxter, who had not yet met.

CHAPTER 2

The sky over Inverness was a overcast but the rain had stopped and it was brighter. It was a still chilly six-fifty in the morning when Frank Baxter dumped his rucksack and a canvas hold-all by the station buffet.

'Opens early,' he muttered. Of course there were quite a few early arrivals from the overnight train and Frank had a shrewd suspicion that there wouldn't be much else open at that time. No doubt most of those hanging around the station would be going on to Thurso as well.

Knowing that another member of the team was travelling up on the same train he looked around, trying to guess which of those still on the station was most likely to be Alan Wainwright. However, with most of their heavier baggage gone with the caravans and equipment, there was nothing to distinguish either of them from any other tourist. He shrugged and turned to order.

"...while in Northern Scotland and the Northern Isles the ridge of high pressure will edge in as the day wears on. The rain is already clearing and the wind should drop gradually, leaving a pleasant day..."

Alicia turned off, not the radio but her attention, as soon as the weather forecast was over, and turned over the day's schedule in her mind as she made coffee. Gill and Manjy were stirring and obviously Steve was up and about because through the open window

she could hear the sound of the generator chugging away.

Her instructions from Professor Harrington were to contact the village shop in Linksness and leave a message with them when she was ready for local workers. So, first to the village to see what local labour the University had organised for her, and to pick up a few supplies. Then down to work. Steve and the girls could measure up the hillock, rope it off and take a few preliminary photographs while she was gone. The other two would be too late for today's ferry, but they'd have to be met tomorrow.

"Coffee's ready, ladies," she called. "Time to be up and doing."

The man with the binoculars watched Steve drive another iron stake into the sandy ground, knot the rope round it and uncoil more rope to reach the next stake. The watcher put away the binoculars and strolled towards the workers.

"You know," remarked Gill, "if Alicia's right about this being all part of the site it is fairly extensive."

"Not much left above the ground though," answered Steve.

"There may never have been much above ground," Gill told him.

"Why's that?"

"The pre-Celtic people of Northern Scotland built houses that were virtually underground."

"How odd," said Steve, picking up another stake and the sledgehammer. "I would think it would be damp, chilly and miserable. Smoky too, I should think."

"At least it would be windproof," said Gill. "Anyway, they

were damp, chilly and miserable times, the Late Stone Age and Early Bronze Age. The people were smallish, few in number and kept out of the way of the Celts when they moved in. That's probably how the legends of fairies started - little people who live in hills and all that."

"I can see how stories like that could get around," Steve agreed, knotting the rope to the last stake. "Hello, a visitor," he added, jerking his head towards the approaching newcomer.

The binoculars were in a case slung over his shoulder. He wore a heavy tweed jacket, a felt hat pulled well down and grey trousers tucked into Wellington boots. He was a tallish man of early middle age, with nothing particularly memorable about him.

"There's usually visitors - well, spectators - at an archeological excavation," said Gill, "but I wouldn't have expected any on Hoy," she added.

"Perhaps he's come to offer his services. Not really dressed for digging though."

The visitor stood for a little while watching Steve as he fiddled with the camera. He said nothing as the latter took the preliminary photographs Alicia wanted, coming somewhat diffidently forward as he finished.

"You'll not be using any motorised equipment?" he asked.

"Absolutely not," answered Gill. "This is an archaeological dig."

The visitor appeared relieved. "There's a nest just over the hillock there I wouldn't want to see disturbed," he said.

"You needn't worry about us. We're a quiet and careful lot and we'll be wrapped up in our own business." Gill was surprised at her own confidence.

"In that case I'll be getting along," said the birdwatcher and walked off.

"Nest?" said Steve.

"Bird's nest, I suppose," answered Gill.

"Bird watcher's paradise, Hoy," said Manjy, who had been listening silently.

"Well, time for a coffee break anyway," said Gill, feeling steadily more confident, "and apart from that we can't really do anything until Ali tells us where she wants us to start."

"Ali's back now." Manjy pointed to the hired car turning into the field by the caravans.

"Right then," said Gill, "Coffee and the boss's orders," and led the others back across the field.

"It's just possible that the houses are intact, so we'll start at the landward side and see if there's any sign of an entrance", Ali told them. "There are three local men coming up this afternoon, so we'll make a start on the real digging when they get here.

"We'll go down about two feet starting from this edge of the hill," she said, pointing to the landward side of an aerial photograph. "We'll move the trench inwards until we strike walls then move sideways along them. If this is a village we'll find an entrance somewhere; if not here then somewhere else."

Steve was looking at the photos carefully, turning them in his hand. "Surprising how much the outlines of old foundations show," he remarked.

"Oh yes. You can even see sometimes where wooden posts were stuck into the ground thousands of years ago," said

Alicia.

"Fascinating," said Steve, as if he meant it.

Frank Baxter strolled along the platform at Thurso with his rucksack over one shoulder and his holdall in his hand. He had intended taking the bus to Scrabster for the ferry to Stromness in Orkney, but he was looking at a coach parked outside the station. A large board leaning against it read 'Free bus to John O'Groats for the Short Crossing Orkney Ferry'.

'John O'Groats?' he thought. 'I've heard of that back home. May as well see it on the way, I guess.' and he boarded the bus.

No such thought crossed the mind of Alan Wainwright. He watched the John O'Groats coach leave and caught the service bus to Scrabster.

The train ride from Inverness had been spectacular at times but the scenery here was rather dull and the landscape was, if not entirely flat, then certainly not mountainous. John O'Groats was disappointing. A large car park and a small harbour with a cafe selling souvenirs and claiming to be the 'northernmost house in Scotland', which it didn't seem to be. Frank eyed a house next to the lighthouse which certainly looked further North.

'Maybe I've got my bearings wrong.' he thought charitably. In fact he was giving a lot more thought to the harbour than to the last house in Scotland. 'Any boat small enough to get into that harbour is on the small side for a ferry,' he thought. He was right.

Alicia, Gill, Manjy and Steve lunched early, so as to be ready for the workers arriving later. The birdwatcher parked his

estate car and walked into a sturdy looking farmhouse, just over the fields from the dig. He took off his boots in the kitchen and walked through into the living room to the phone in stocking feet.

"Robert?" he said. "They've made a start already ... Yes, I'll be keeping an eye on them ... Ring again if they show signs of turning up anything of interest? Naturally, that's the whole point of my being here. Yes, ...'Bye."

"It's a real good thing this is the short crossing," thought Frank. "The back end of this boat's barely an arm's length out of the water. And that may be radar, but there are so many bigger vessels in this stretch of water that I'm half afraid of getting run over. And there doesn't look to be much at Burwick."

In truth there wasn't much at Burwick, apart from the landing stage at which the ferry tied up. There was a not entirely abandoned church and a more modern bus shelter, with a toilet unvisited by Kilroy or any other graffiti artist. And that was about all there was to Burwick. There was a field marked 'NO PARKING - BUSES TURN HERE' Well, yes they did. But only when a ferry unloaded!

Frank watched his rucksack and holdall go into the boot of the bus and stood looking around Burwick. "So this is South Ronaldsay," he thought. "I've seen livlier places in my time."

From South Ronaldsay a causeway built on slabs of anti-submarine concrete led to the next island. Bursay was much the same - undulating and treeless but smaller and slightly more populous. The bus rumbled across yet another causeway onto the island of Mainland, and Frank stared at the grey sea and greying

clouds, both stirred by a chilly wind.

The roll-on roll-off ferry journey was longer but more convenient and more comfortable than the short crossing. Alan Wainwright was able to take his time finishing his coffee and his book in the ship's canteen before he went on deck to watch the rounding of Hoy.

It was hard to say why Stromness felt like a Viking town. Perhaps it was the way the houses clung rather in a Norwegian style to the sides of the steep, though not high, hillside. Possibly it was the architecture of the houses themselves that had a sort of Scandinavian feel to them. In any event, suddenly you found it hard to remember you were still in the Northern Islands of Scotland.

Alan watched the lorries roll off before he wandered along the quayside to the Islands Information Centre.

The Information Office was a newish building on the harbour. The people in it were helpful and friendly, though that was, Alan reflected, their job. Learning that the ferry to Hoy for that day had gone earlier he decided to take in the sights and sounds of Stromness.

Kirkwall, which was a port of call for sizable ships, faced north. The bus rumbled downhill towards the centre of town and stopped in front of the cathedral of St. Magnus. The sandy-red coloured building dominated the square where Frank recovered his holdall and his rucksack.

The town centre was something of a nightmare. It looked like a pedestrian precinct but cars had the right of way. They stopped

anywhere and pulled off without warning. He was not sorry to reach the safety of the bus which called at Skara Brae before it went on to Stromness.

"They drive on the wrong side of the road," he thought, "but you can't even tell which side they're supposed to be driving on most of the time."

"Right, we'll dig from here," said Alicia, "I think we can go down to about three feet up to this point without treating it as part of the dig proper. From here," and she made a sweeping movement of her hands, "I'd like to sift each bucketful of sand with a view to seeing whether there is anything worth keeping and recording."

The tussocky ground was not conducive to easy digging. In fact Gill's shovel, sharp though it was, would barely cut through the roots of the grass. And even when the grass itself was taken out and laid to one side, the soil was sandy and a steep sided trench difficult to make. The soil kept slipping back into the trench. "Throw it further!" said Alicia, a trifle unsympathetically, when Gill mentioned it to her.

The new trench hit the existing one at right angles. Ali had them continue it to form a 'T' shape and extend the old trench as well. She was pleased with the single day's digging, but insisted they didn't rush. Manjit's back felt as if it was breaking. She sifted out several pebbles, a fish bone that might have been a needle, a flake of rust and what Alicia said looked like a bronze arrowhead, also well corroded by time. But the most exciting thing of all was the wall. It was made of the kind of flat stones that could be picked up on the beach. Stones that bore evidence of being smoothed and shaped by

the tide as much as by the hand of man. And yet they were fitted together skilfully, so that a shaped dry-stone wall was not only made, but made secure.

"How on earth did it keep from falling down?" Manjy wanted to know. "You'd think it would collapse as soon as anyone blew, like the little pigs' houses when the wolf huffed and puffed." she said, surprising the Scottish diggers who were unused to the idea of someone who looked Indian but thought (and was) British.

"Well," said one of the local men, "if it's anything like Skara Brae they will have piled dirt and sand on the outside to keep it stable."

"That's right," said Alicia authoritatively, "although there are complete buildings above ground that have lasted thousands of years. There's a chapel in the west of Ireland built the same way with dry-stone walling around 800 AD and that one is still completely weatherproof. Admittedly that's a lot later, but there's been no work of any kind done on it."

"Grief!" said Manjy.

Without adding anything to the conversation, Gill nodded. It had been mentioned in one of her textbooks.

"The Pennines are covered in dry-stone walls too." Alicia continued. "I'm not really sure how they did it, but the walls of the buildings slope in. On the other hand, they don't slope all the way in because they used whalebones to help support the roof and, anyway, there must have been an opening for the smoke. All the houses will have had a fireplace in the centre," she continued.

"Sort of central heating?" said Manjy with a grin.

"Sort of," said Alicia, "Now I think we'll stop. The light's still

good of course, but the whole team isn't here yet and this is the first day's digging."

"Will you and Jamie have a bite to eat with us, Andy?" Alicia asked one of the local men, almost as an afterthought.

"No, thank you kindly," he replied. "I think we'll be off and come back in the morning."

"As you wish," said Alicia, "I'll be seeing you tomorrow then. If Steve doesn't mind putting the soup on and fetching the camera we'll have some photographs of the day's work alongside the meal. Gill, you go and give him a hand with dinner."

As they strode across the rough grass towards the little cluster of caravans, Gill said, "I'm glad to-day's over. I know it's only the first day, but the first day was always going to be the worst for me. Now that it's over I'm sure I'm OK again"

Steve glanced at her, before remarking casually, "One thing prison taught me was to take each day as it comes."

"I do try," said Gill wistfully, "but it hasn't been easy, putting back together a life and building new relationships. Still, like I said, I do try and you're very easy to get on with."

There was a pause as the penny dropped and Gill considered it. "You've spent some time in prison then?" she asked.

"Yes. Seven months inside after time off for good conduct. My Probation Officer thought it would be a good idea if I kept well away from football and the terraces. That's why I'm here."

"Well you aren't likely to find much football here, I shouldn't think," she said. "You'd probably be well away from trouble on Hoy."

"Hoy is well away from just about everything," Steve observed drily. "Only things you can do here is read books, dig holes

in the ground or watch birds."

Gill laughed "According to Manjy, Hoy is a birdwatcher's paradise," she remarked.

"Huh. As far as I'm concerned, bird watchers are just train spotters who don't have a railway line anywhere near," said Steve. "I don't go a bundle on holes in the ground either," he added.

"You don't have to dig them, only see the diggers fed."

Steve only said, "Talking of which, let's get to it - my stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

Frank looked over the wall at the homes built into the ground, and thought he would leave his rucksack and bag near the wall. He dumped his things unceremoniously and wandered over for a closer look.

"They can't have been more than about four feet tall," he said to the only other visitor, a younger man in his early twenties. "Either that or they walked with a permanent stoop."

"It does rather look as if they were small by modern standards," said the other visitor. "But this part of the world is full of stories about 'little people', so I suppose it's not that unreasonable,"

The face of Alan Wainwright bore a few scars of acne on it, but was hardly the 'pimply pratt' Alicia had referred to when she lost her temper with the Professor. He was up from Stromness, a short bus ride away, and thinking about where to spend the night.

The sea was grey. The setting sun was trying to get through the quickly moving clouds and, although the rain had stopped, it was going to be a chilly night. The hotel looked inviting to Frank.

Each of the houses was built from much the same flat

stones you could pick up on the beach, but shaped. Larger, flatter stones were used to form primitive furniture - shelving, a bedding area, a pit for the fire and so on.

"I'd like to get down and measure that doorway." said Frank in a tone which indicated that he might do just that.

"Are you Frank Baxter by any chance?" Alan wondered out loud.

"Yeah. You must be Alan Wainwright," answered Frank, holding out a hand that was more like a paw. "I figured I'd run into you some place along the way."

"I thought I'd see you on the ferry," said Alan shaking it, "but you must have come the other way."

"That's right," answered Frank. "Say, that hotel seems a better place to get acquainted. It's the only place around here with a light on."

"It's the only place around here," Alan said They turned towards the lights and their suggestion of hospitality as the sun went in behind the clouds again.

CHAPTER 3

While Steve waited by the Landrover, the ferry came alongside with practised ease. Frank thought, watching, that the sailor standing in the bows of the ferry with the mooring rope looked a rather seedy young man. He was scruffy with a greasy face in need of a shave and hair that was too long and needed a wash. Even his dark blue sweater had seen better days. However, Frank could not fault his skill as he dropped the rope over the mooring bollard and walked to the stern while his 'boss', the only other sailor aboard, used the engines and the wheel to get the back end alongside.

As the scruffy looking individual dropped another rope over another bollard, the other killed the engines and Frank, seizing his hold-all and backpack, sprang ashore. He was followed more cautiously by Alan who, while finding it straightforward, still looked askance at the water slopping over the step. He was followed by four other youths who had a great deal of baggage with them - rucksacks and tents and so forth - which they fussed about unloading. By the time they reached the top of the steps Frank had introduced himself to Steve.

"This is Alan," he said, "and here are four members of the Orkney Archaeological Society who are coming as volunteers to help with the dig. I don't know much about them, but they're wanting a ride

to the site for themselves and their gear. I said it would be okay."

"Well I suppose I can squeeze them in," said Steve, eyeing the gear, "but it will be a squeeze and there's a lot of stuff to pick up from this ferry already."

The scruffy looking sailor was busy unloading some freshly baked bread that had been warm when it left Stromness, a crate or two of sterilised milk as well as several boxes addressed to the General Store, which went straight into the back of the Landrover.

Steve noticed Frank looking dubiously at the various labels on the boxes and grinned. "All arranged," he said.

"Right," he continued, "stuff your whatnots in behind the boxes and mind the tray of loaves. You'll have to climb in as best you can on top of the bags, because I can only squeeze Frank and Alan in the front."

There was some giggling and much laughter as the four scrambled amongst their belongings. It was so squashed in the front when Alan and Frank had crowded in that Steve could barely drive.

"Do you want me to join the others in the back?" asked Alan.

"It's not far and the road's quiet," said Steve.

"We'll make it okay," added Frank. "I've been further in trucks more loaded than this."

As the Landrover turned into the lower field, they were surprised to find that there was already a tent up by the caravans and by this time two girls in their early twenties had joined the workers at the excavations.

Alicia strolled over to meet the newcomers, glad that the grass was, for a change, dry underfoot. She introduced herself while

they were unloading.

"You must be Frank Baxter," she said holding out her hand.

"Right. And you'll be the boss," answered Frank, taking the proffered hand in his big, hairy fist. "Is it OK. with you if I drop my things off in the caravan space you've got for me, before I make a start on whatever you've got lined up?"

"Of course," said Alicia, "but who on earth are all these? I recognise Alan Wainwright of course, but ... the rest?"

"Ah well, " said Steve, emerging from the driver's seat of the Landrover to unload, "you've got yourself some more volunteer labour."

"Yep," chimed in Frank, "Four members of the Orkneys Archaeological Society."

"Really? Every bit of help is welcome." She glanced across to the digging. "You possibly know the two girls from Kirkwall, then. They're here on holiday. Well, you'd better unload your things and unpack your tent or whatever. You can put it next to the other tent." she turned to Frank. "There's a room for you and for Alan in the caravan on the right. If you wouldn't mind giving Steve a hand with the unloading after you've straightened out your things we can all take a break."

"Sounds fine by me." said Frank amiably, and added to Steve, "I'll be right with you."

The American was only seconds inside the caravan, or so it seemed, before he was out again and helping Steve to unload. Once everything was stored appropriately, they turned their attention briefly to the four volunteers. With continued laughter and more giggling, two more tents were put up alongside the first. Steve

surprised the gigglers, and to some extent Frank as well, by rigging up an extension cable which not only lit up the area between the two caravans, but also provided a light inside each tent.

"It will go off when I turn the main lights off and you won't have any control of it in the tents, but it's light," he told them.

"It's beginning to look like a gold-rush boom town, " said Frank, "but where's this drink or whatever they're going to have when they take a break?"

"I'll get right onto that," said Steve. "You may as well go over, take a look at the holes in the ground and get your orders from Alicia."

Alicia felt as if she were in charge of a dig of some importance, and wouldn't have thanked Steve for his remarks about 'holes in the ground', had she heard. Her own team was complete, in addition to which there was a team of three adults who seemed to know what they were doing, engaged by the university to do the labouring, the two female volunteers who had been on Hoy doing some work of their own prior to turning up at the site and the four who had come over on the ferry with Frank and Alan. There was a prospect of getting more work done and with the general air of business she felt less resentful towards the whole assignment.

"If Gill and Manjy and two of the volunteers continue to look for an entrance - just continue the trench along this wall," she jabbed at an aerial photograph, "Andy with Jamie and Thomas can take two more of the volunteers. If you start by taking a trench across here," she jabbed again at the aerial photo, "we can see whether or not this is the outline of a house. The third team can consist of Frank, Alan

and the other two volunteers. I want to talk first to Frank about the general lie of the land, but the team can continue the trench inwards and see whether or not there is a passageway. We'll have one long session until around six o'clock then stop for food. If we go steadily without rushing we should get a lot done."

Alicia watched with some pleasure as her gang trooped across the field to the dig, and settled down to work according to her directions and according to good archaeological practice.

"Do you want me to dig for a while?" asked Steve. "I've unpacked your computer, the power line from the farm is in place and there's no other work for me in the next hour or so, before I start to get something ready to eat."

"The vehicles have been serviced, have they?" Alicia wanted to know.

"Well they've been checked over. They don't need any servicing. All in order. And the generator," answered Steve.

"Then by all means lend a hand with the digging. Join Gill and Manjy, they're a bit light on men in their team," said Alicia, beckoning to Frank to join her in the cabin.

"Right."

Alicia eyed Frank cautiously. "You're a Doctorate Degree student from the University of Houston?" she asked.

"Sure thing. I've spent the last couple of years on digs involved with Mayan remains and I'm a specialist on their obsession with the calendar and the movements of Mars and Venus. I'm no expert on Bronze Age Britain, I'm only here for the change and the experience. And to see what sort of interest there was in the heavens here, because you cover roughly the same period as the pre-Mayan

era. You're in charge of this one and you're giving the orders," he added, grinning.

Alicia was treating him with some deference nevertheless, and wondered whether she would show the the same deference to another woman or another black. She drew her attention back to the job in hand and showed him the aerial photographs of the site. Frank agreed with her, though he would have accepted her word anyway, for he meant it when he said she was giving the orders. After all, it was to be her report which would pass or fail her degree. She watched him striding cheerfully across the rough grass to join Alan Wainwright.

Alicia stayed behind in the 'office' for a few moments. The computer looked to be hooked up properly, but she didn't bother turning it on yet: time enough when there was something to enter. It crossed her mind that either Steve knew about the subject or his instinct for things mechanical was considerable. The little box of CDs was on the table alongside the machine, so she flipped it open and gave a passing glance. The three programme CDs were back-up copies, for emergency only, but there were plenty of blanks for the data. "I hope we'll have plenty of data to put on them!" she thought, and flipped the lid down.

She picked up the aerial photographs again, but didn't really see them. In fact she was not seeing the Portacabin or the remains turned up so far either, nor was she seeing the other scant furnishings of the cabin. Alicia was thinking of her parents in a Birmingham backstreet and of the various friends and acquaintances she had made and lost along the way through school and university. Many of her friends at school now had dead end jobs or families or

no jobs at all. She couldn't help thinking of the old saying that the further you climb the further you have to fall - and she had climbed a long way from those backstreets. Still, in spite of what she had said to Professor Harrington she felt in charge and confident. When he called in to see how things were going, he would be impressed.

Alicia shook herself from her day dreams, got up from the desk, left the cabin and walked after Frank, who was already watching Jamie and Andy.

"You know," said Jamie in a burst of unusual chattiness, "I think this is a house, but the roof's collapsed. Well, the middle of it. And some of these stones show signs of a fire."

"Do they now?" remarked Frank, staring at the place indicated by Jamie. "It's only the top one. Perhaps it's a chimney."

"It's no' a chimney, there's no' enough soot. They just look a bit burnt is all."

"You're mebbe right," said Frank. "I'd better get Alicia over here before we disturb anything, but it seems to me this room may have been destroyed by fire."

"Aye? Well, that's one canny woman."

Alicia had reached the site by this time and Frank climbed out of the hole to call her.

When she examined the excavation she agreed with Jamie that there was some evidence of burning.

"They seem to have used whalebone to support roofs at Scara Brae, but perhaps the builders here used wood to support the roof," she mused, looking long and hard at the stones.

"There would have been a chimney," she said, "but these stones have been exposed to a short period of heat rather than a

long period of smoke."

She straightened up. "There's been some collapsing of roof stones and there are faint indications that there was a fire. I think the best thing is to expose the roof stones and see the extent of damage, and then dig carefully down and see what's left of what was in the room."

"Seems like you were right Jamie," Frank remarked when Alicia had gone.

"Aye. Maybe so," responded Jamie.

"Keep at it carefully," said Frank "You've every reason to be pleased with the day's work, but we don't want to miss any clue there might be. At least we know that this home wasn't given up voluntarily," he added.

At the end of the day Alicia told the others about this piece of evidence and what it appeared to mean for the history of the village.

"Of course," Alicia told her diggers, "you can't jump to any conclusions from just one building or one set of evidence, but it does look as if this was a village of some size and that life here ended violently. What we don't know yet, of course, is whether that violence was accidental or deliberate and whether, if deliberate, an outside agency of some sort was involved."

"I presume that we're digging at the moment through sand that has blown in through the centuries." Alan remarked.

"I'd expect you to come across charred remains of anything flammable in the roof as the next significant remains," Frank told him by way of answer, with a quick glance at Alicia.

"Grub up!" interrupted Steve, and the group as one person trooped over to where he had been making supper.

There was no shortage of help when it came to serving , but a distinct lack of volunteers to help him wash up.

"Do you want to take your own pictures to-day?" Steve asked Alicia quietly when a rota had been drawn up for the dish-washing. "or do you want me to take them as usual?"

"I'll let you do the close ups," said Alicia, "but I'll come with you when you do and point out what I want taken. I think from now on we'll take pictures as soon as there's anything to record."

Steve nodded his agreement.

Much later Gill walked by herself on the sands, watching the waves break on the beach below the dunes. She thought about the happiness in her life and about the foolishness that had led her to think that all happiness was gone for good. She had been very happy with him, and of course his going had left her life empty and her alone - but had it justified an overdose? Gill had only asked herself this question in the last few months and, when she did, she couldn't escape the fact that it hadn't. Now, in retrospect, she felt a bit of a fool over what she had tried so hard to do.

"Penny for your thoughts," said a voice. It was Steve who had come upon her while she was lost in thought.

"You startled me! I wasn't thinking anything worthwhile. I was just wondering why I ever thought it was worth it."

"Whether what was worth it?"

"Whether it was worth trying to kill myself because my life seemed empty and worthless when he left," answered Gill, after a

pause to think about the question.

"No one's worth that much," remarked Steve. There was a long silence, broken only by the breaking of waves on the beach. Finally he asked her, "Didn't you have any happy memories?"

"Oh yes," said Gill, smiling at her thoughts, "I had lots. We were happy together and it was the happy memories I couldn't take."

"Well you should try not having happy memories to look back on," he said wryly. "When I lay awake in prison I could only think back on fights on the football terraces. Fights aren't exactly restful, happy memories."

"No," admitted Gill. "They aren't are they? I suppose you think I've been a bit of a fool. Most people do." she added.

"I think I've been a bit of a fool," he said, without answering her question one way or the other. There was another silence, then he continued, "Would you go back to him now?"

Gill thought about this for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think there was ever any going back once he'd left me and I wouldn't want him back now." She paused. "No," she added, then said, "And you. Do you want to fight on the football terraces again.?"

Steve laughed. "No chance," he said.

Again there was a silence broken only by the sound of the sea on the shingly beach. Gill broke it by asking, "How did you get involved in the fighting?"

When he didn't answer straight away, Gill wondered whether he was about to 'clam up' on her.

"Drink and the wrong company, I think," he said at last.

"Pardon?"

"I went around with a cousin and his mates. I got into pub

crawling and drinking a lot. I got picked up for fighting a time or two."

Gill wondered whether he was playing down the football violence. "What about football matches?" she asked. "I thought they told you to stay away from football grounds."

"My cousin and one or two of his crowd were pretty nasty characters," said Steve, "but I didn't recognise that at the time."

There was a silence as Steve withdrew into his thoughts again. Gill didn't like to pursue him into such private territory but he continued of his own accord.

"They were part of an organised disruptive element at matches. They used to go to games for no other reason than to cause trouble. I started drinking and going with them, just when there was a clamp down on crowd violence. The prison sentence sobered me up, I can tell you."

"Do the others know about your prison background. I mean, about your record?"

"I neither advertise the fact, nor hide it," said Steve in reply, "but I imagine Alicia knows about it since she's seen my file. I don't think the others do." He paused a moment and then added, "I don't know why I'm talking about it to you. I don't usually mention it at all."

"Perhaps you're talking about it to me because we've both turned over a new leaf," Gill replied.

They began walking along the beach a little in the fading light. "That's true enough, I suppose. Anyway, prison's full of failures with a big opinion of themselves. As far as I can see the real successes aren't caught, are they? The only reason people are found in prison at all is that they've been caught." There was a pause before he added "Like me."

"Successes?"

"Murderers, thieves, swindlers, embezzlers, People who spoil football matches by fighting. If they get away with it, they aren't caught. Prison is not the place to learn from anyone who's done it and got away with it, is it?"

This was a new idea to Gill and she was considering it when she suddenly stumbled over a small rock, and Steve caught her. For a moment or two he held her gently. At length she drew away.

"Are those the lights of a ship?" she asked him unsteadily.

Steve turned toward the gentle swell. "Where?" he asked.

"Over there on the water."

"Well I imagine if they're on the water they must be. Oh I see where you mean. Yes I think it's some kind of small boat close in. Perhaps they're fishing."

"And that sweeping light you can see sometimes must be a lighthouse," she said

"I saw one on an island from the ferry. Cava I think it is." There was silence for a moment or two. "Anyway, I ought to be getting back to see to the generator and things," he added, but he didn't actually turn back.

"I think I'll go back with you," said Gill. "It's getting late and chilly." She turned with him and they walked back together towards the lights of the camp.

CHAPTER 4

Steve was off meeting the ferry again when Gill discovered the entrance to the underground village, for village it was they were now certain. Of course, the excitement of the discovery was marred a little by the realisation that the way in was just where they thought it would be, but one house and several feet of passageway had been uncovered.

A larger slab of stone had been used as a lintel over the opening, just as a similar slab had been used where the house joined the passage. Still, as Alicia said, it was nice to know that they were right and Gill was unreasonably excited by the discovery. She and her team threw themselves with renewed vigour coupled with even greater caution than before into the work of uncovering the entranceway. At almost the same time - before Steve was back anyway - some charcoal was discovered in the sand inside the house.

"We'd better get that photographed before you move it," said Alicia, "but I wouldn't be surprised if it was once a timber supporting the roof, or rather the remains of one."

When Frank was told he agreed with her, saying, "Assuming this house is about the same proportions as those at Scara Brae, that's just where I'd expect to find remains of the roof."

Alicia made a non-committal noise which might have been agreement and, since Steve wasn't around, went to fetch the camera from the cabin.

With the photographs taken, Frank took charge of the careful digging and sieving of the sand. Alicia noted in passing that her 'double failure' might lack skills in exams but had a real instinct for the practical work.

It was during this patient trowel and sieve excavating Alan and Frank uncovered the tip of a bone that could be human, and Alicia was privately ecstatic.

"Did she or he just sit there while the place burnt around him or her, or was he or she already dead?" she wondered.

For a time the whole of those involved in the dig stood and watched as Frank and Alan carefully brushed off the sand and Alicia took far more photographs than were necessary. Eventually she tore herself away long enough to get the other teams back to work. Some of the workers needed a lot of persuading that what they were doing was really of some significance.

"You're digging down through sand that's blown in," she told Gill and Manjy, "and sooner or later you're going to strike the level at which these people had their floor. The village was underground, but there had to be a slope down to the entrance. What you do or don't find when you reach that level may well tell us whether some outside agency was involved in the destruction. At least we know that human remains would be found in this soil, if there are any more."

With that Gill's team, rather reluctantly, started digging again. It was fortunate that they did.

Gill watched the Landrover pull into the field and stop near the caravans. She saw Steve emerge to begin unloading, while she rubbed her back with one hand, sighed and gave her attention again to the dig.

Frank straightened up and climbed out of the house "Here, you take over," He said to Alan, continuing to Alicia, "It's my bet that the victim was hiding in the house when some intruder or other came along and killed him or her before the place was burnt down. Mind you, whether I'll ever be able to prove that is another matter entirely."

"You're probably right about the second but you may also be right about the first," said Alicia. "Do you think you'll get much from the exchange?"

"I'm enjoying this dig. I don't know if it's doing me any good careerwise, it's a bit early to say, but it makes a change from the Mayans. Mind you, these people are a bit primitive by comparison."

"Were they more violent, do you think?"

"Violent? I don't know. I don't know how violent these people were, but the Mayans were pretty rough themselves. By our standards at any rate. Human sacrifice, wars, ruthless games in which the losers were killed and so on. This lot probably weren't any worse than the Mayans and pre-Mayans I shouldn't think. Those were violent times."

Alan discovered that there was, like the houses at Scara Brae, a bed area with stone retaining walls about a foot high. This 'bed' seemed to be full of ashes and the position of the bones suggested that the figure had been lying partly on and partly off the bed. Alan thought this favoured violence.

"If a body was dead already he'd be laid out on the bed and

if he wasn't dead he'd be trying to get out, not trying to go to bed." he said.

Alicia had to agree with him but said, "We don't know what happened do we? Let's get on with uncovering the remains as carefully as possible and look for any hard evidence there might be."

Since Steve was around by this time, he took up the camera from where Alicia had just dumped it in the grass and, before anything was moved, the remains were photographed. "I feel like one of those forensic fellas the police use," he said, "You want as much evidence as you can get, I suppose. Shall I fingerprint it? Then he added in a more serious tone, "I've never realised that archeological digs were so serious."

"Oh, we're serious right enough." Alan told him as he and the other workers stepped back out of the way to give him a better field of vision as he photographed remains.

"We're nothing if not thorough." said Alicia.

"I'll give you that one," Steve told her.

While the snapping and the chatting had been going on, Frank had been watching Gill stop her team while she carefully dusted something with a soft brush.

"Look at this!" she called excitedly to Alicia, who tore herself from Alan's excavations and went over to Gill.

"What?" she questioned, peering.

"Looks like more human remains," said Frank.

The two of them stood watching as Gill and her team dusted sand off what looked like heel bones, carefully trowelled away more of the sand and dusted more bones. Feet and ankles were uncovered.

Things were slowed down somewhat by the fact that he or she was lying feet towards the entrance and head outwards, so the skull end of the bones was away from the digging and it was necessary to dig down very carefully through a deep layer of sand.

"He or she must have fallen away from the entrance" speculated Manjy.

"Oh I don't know," said Gill, "he/she may have been pushed."

"Or he may have been dragged there after he was killed, there's nothing to say one way or the other," said Frank looking down from the edge of the trench.

"Well one thing's certain," Gill commented to him. "This is hardly a place to leave a body. This is more or less ground level, so he wasn't buried and they didn't move it or come back for it."

Frank conceded the point. "Yeh," he said, "And it may not even have been male." To Alicia he added, "We'd better get Steve over to take some photographs before we disturb anything and I'm itching to take a closer look."

"Steve's already here," said Steve, who had joined the watchers.

When he had made the photographic record of the find, they returned to uncovering and studying the remains, and it was at this stage that Frank made the discovery.

The ring was made of copper but it seemed to be coated with something which had prevented it from tarnishing or rotting away with verdigris the way that copper tends to do. That the figure had been wearing the ring at the time of its death Frank was in no doubt - a finger bone was still inside it! He was also fairly certain that the

body - if you can call a pile of bones a body - had been wearing an amulet or talisman of some sort on a cord, possibly of hide.

Alicia was as inclined to speculate as anybody else. "I wonder whether he was, or she was, trying to get out of the village," she said, eyeing the remains, "and either didn't make it because he was injured or ran into somebody who was lying in wait."

"Maybe," said Frank, "Or he may have been trying to keep out some third party and got killed for his trouble.

"Since you've got all the photos you want, shall I take the ring and the amulet inside, so that you can examine them in the cabin?" asked Gill.

"Yes, take them in," answered Alicia, " They'd be safer in the office. Anyway it's getting dark and it's looking like rain. In any case, I've worked you all long enough."

Clouds were banking up threateningly to the south west and shutting out the lingering sunset ominously. Gill began the process of picking up the ring and amulet with as little disturbance as possible, while the others downed their tools and turned back across the field towards the camp.

Manjy saw the bird watcher in the distance but paid no particular attention. "Keeping an eye on the nest." she thought in passing. She didn't notice that he had been watching them through his binoculars for some time.

Darkness fell early, but there was no immediate rain. With the aid of the generator chugging quietly under a canvass awning, the whole area was a pool of light and pretty soon the camp broke up. Frank went to sort out a few things and write home, Manjy went

to finish that letter to her father, while most of the rest of the gang including Alan, who seemed to be popular with the younger volunteers, went into one of the caravans, leaving Alicia and Gill in the cabin with Steve, who was finishing the washing up and putting away.

Frank's letters reflected the sort of person he was. His handwriting was large and bold and what he had to say was colourful and good humoured observation. He was more conscious than one might have expected that his travel and career meant considerable time away from home and his widowed mother.

Manjy's letter was slow and painstaking. She wrote in Punjabi, of course, and re-wrote frequently. Saying "No." to one's father is not something which comes easily to a Hindu girl, so she had tried to avoid an outright negative. She had settled instead on a carefully worded appeal for a marriage partner who would accept her career.

Alan got out his guitar for a sing song but, for want of anywhere else to put it, he had crammed a pack of Tarot cards into the guitar case. Somebody wanted to know whether he could tell fortunes with it and the group was off on a different tack.

"What age do you place the village?" Gill asked Alicia. "If the ring is copper it must have been occupied into the bronze age."

"I've said already that this method of construction began quite far back into the stone age and continued as late as the eighth or even ninth centuries AD." Alicia paused. "I'd guess this was built in the later stone age, say two and a half to three thousand years BC and continued in use well into the bronze age, but I'm only guessing. The place could have been used well into the iron age, though I

should think the people themselves must have been too small to have been Celts," and she picked up the amulet to inspect it more closely.

"You know," she continued, "this amulet has a pattern on it which nobody has explained satisfactorily, though it appears very widely on bronze age and later stone age remains."

Gill peered at it. "I've seen it before," she said, "A series of rings linked by lines going across them in the form of a cross."

"But not with a seven point star in the centre. I always thought that was a medieval symbol," added Alicia.

Steve stood listening to them for a moment or two, then picked up the ring.

"Funny how this ring hasn't rusted," he remarked

"Copper and Bronze don't rust," said Gill.

"You know what I mean," Steve told her, laughing. "Anyway it hasn't turned green and rotted."

"No, you're right," Alicia said, "that's puzzled me as well. It appears to be a clear, amber sort of colour, like nicely polished copper."

"It's a fairly small ring," said Steve, holding it up to the light, "It looks as if it would just about fit on my little finger." He placed the ring on his finger before anyone could stop him, had they been so minded, and pushed it down.

CHAPTER 5

I parted the grass carefully to get a better view of the fort or farm or whatever they were building.

'It looks permanent.' I thought.

One of the big people was standing guard about ten or twelve feet away, wearing his helmet and leaning against his spear, which was tipped with that hard new metal they use. I imagined that his sword would be made of the same precious stuff but it was stuck into his belt and I could only see the hilt, the rest being hidden by his cloak. His shield, propped against a nearby rock, was the round wooden sort covered with layers of hide. The kind used by most of his people. I did not think he really expected any trouble, although they don't usually see us - even when they seek us and we are not trying to hide. Whenever we have really sought concealment they have seen nothing at all. I believe they have some kind of tale about us being swallowed up by the ground.

This one was enormous. He must have stood at least five foot four or five. There was another guard nearly as tall, standing further away on the hill and one taking charge of things. This third one had put his helmet down, along with his shield and spear, in the

long, wiry grass. He was directing the men doing the building. They were just piling the stones on top of each other and sticking them together with muddy looking stuff. It was a lot quicker than sorting out exactly which stone to lay and sloping the walls inwards but they had to keep stopping to mix some more of the mud. Moreover, I wasn't sure how safe it was. I mean, what if rain washed it out or a storm blew it out? I wouldn't want to be in the building then!

The one in charge kept pausing to look around. I had the impression that he was concerned about something quite different from the construction, but what it was I couldn't for the life of me guess.

I had no wish to tangle with the big people, but it seemed there was no help for it. I knew of at least two villages on the mainland where they had killed all the people - and now they were spreading onto the islands. There seemed no end to their greed for land. Maybe elsewhere there was room for us to keep out of their way, but not on the islands. I signalled to the others to come forward with their bows. There were just the nine of them I could see and there were seven of us - eight of us including me. I fitted an arrow to my bow, drew it back carefully and waited.

I gave the sign. Arrows flicked silently across the grassy hollow. The one in charge dropped suddenly: before an arrow hit him I'm sure. I fired three arrows in all, but the others in my group only had to let loose two before all the remaining big people were dead. When all was still, we crept out and gathered up our arrows. Of the leader there was no sign. If he'd been hit I couldn't see him. There was no time to wait around looking, we just left quickly, covering our tracks.

Back at the village the others were grimly jubilant but I wasn't. I thought they'd be after us. In their place I would be now. Not that I'd choose to do different, mind, I just don't have the same optimism that the others seem to have.

One of the old women came out. "Your father's dead!" she said. "You'll have to make the great marriage, as he did."

I reflected. I didn't have much choice. My father had been ill for some time and he was a good age too - perhaps even forty. Now the people would look to me. The great marriage was a wedding to the land, represented by one of the priest-girls and would make me king and war chief as well as bridegroom. I didn't have much illusion about how the war would end but I'd no choice about that either.

"First the funeral duties to my father and then the great marriage", I said at length.

I lay with my hands clasped behind my head and stared at the roof without seeing it in the dim light. The fire had burned low and was little more than a collection of red embers and a single, flickering log in the centre of the room. I could see that the patch of sky visible through the smoke-hole in the centre of the roof was already beginning to turn from the black of night to the first early grey of dawn. The bed beneath me was of young heather with a wool blanket thrown over. The blanket was thick enough and the heather young enough that I couldn't feel it sticking through and there was just enough heat left in the embers for me to be comfortably warm as I lay without covers, though I was fully dressed. My few personal possessions were in the shadows of this room with me but I was thinking about the future and my destiny and the destiny of my

people.

I heard the footsteps of two older people in the passageway outside the house and the sound of the skin at the doorway being drawn aside to admit someone, but I did not move until an old woman leaned over me and said, simply, "It is time."

I got up and followed her outside, the second old woman following us.

The sun was just rising above the horizon when the fire was lit. I watched flames curl at the base of the cone and then rush upwards with a shower of sparks as first the dry twigs and then the bigger boughs caught light. By the glow of the fire I could see the faces of some who had come to the chief-making. We were a pitifully small number. There were just the two villages remaining on this island and the village on the high island. I tried to concentrate on the job in hand.

What is there to tell? A priestess invoked the blessing of the goddess on the ceremony, then I had to catch and kill a deer before the sun set that day. Perhaps catching a deer was once a test of real importance when the tribe depended upon their chief to lead them in the hunt for food, but we kept animals ourselves now and, if we did need to supplement that food, we hunted in a group.

Still, a ceremony is a ceremony, so I tracked the symbolic deer, went downwind of it, sneaked close to it, using an uncured hide as a precaution to cover my scent and shot it with the bow I also carried.

The most difficult part was carrying the animal back to the village when I'd killed it. The day was not so very hot, but it was warm enough that I sweated with the exertion of carrying my burden, my

throat was dry, my back ached and my muscles turned to jelly before I returned.

The priestess set the deer to roast after they had taken its blood and sprinkled the homes, the animals and the fields with their blessing. Then they painted me with the symbols of the goddess and tattooed the snake around my wrist and forearm.

By the time they had finished the sun was setting. The fire was stoked up again and the priestess faced me. She said, "I now place this symbol of the rulership on the hand of Bend as he goes to complete the great marriage," and she put my father's ring onto my finger. It was his and I thought it had been buried with him.

Then the priestess surprised me again by taking an amulet from her own neck and raising her arms to the last traces of the setting sun. "Visible symbol of the goddess which sets in the west," she said, "charge this jewel, handed down from one to the other, so that it may become a symbol of our people."

She fastened it about my neck, saying, "One thing only remains to complete the great marriage. Go to your house. A priestess-virgin awaits the moment when you fill her with the life of our people. Go, and the goddess be with you."

I allowed the two older women to lead me back to the entrance of the village and underground along the passage to my own house. I let them hold aside the hide and entered.

"The goddess be with you", one of them said, and the hide fell back into place behind me.

Inside the fire had been built up and its flickering light showed that the bed was occupied. The woman, or rather the girl, was twelve or thirteen summers old at most and was wearing nothing

on her dark skinned body. On her budding breasts had been drawn the symbols of the goddess. Her dark hair framed the dark face and her hands were by her side. It was to her credit that she was not covering herself in any way but awaiting the coming of her lover in the great marriage with as much composure as she could manage.

I unfastened the belt of the woollen, one piece jerkin I was wearing and let it fall onto the floor then I stripped off the jerkin itself and let that fall alongside it. I could see the girl watching me and felt mildly embarrassed as I took off the linen loincloth.

She gazed at my manhood for a moment, then said, "I am ready, my king. Together we serve the great mistress." She paused and then added, her voice a little husky, perhaps with fear, "I am ready for you and may the Goddess be with us."

The fire had burned almost out and daylight streamed through the fire-hole before I rose and went out to meet the rest of the tribe, who were still waiting for me. I looked at the expectant faces and said, "It is completed as the goddess wills." The priestess smiled a little in relief and the tension eased.

"Before we talk of the big people and what to do about them, tell me something," I asked her.

She nodded.

"The ring and the talisman. Where did my father get them?"

"From his father. He inherited them."

I tried again. "But where did they come from?"

"Legend tells that they were brought from far to the south. They were brought by your father's fathers, many generations ago."

I pondered a moment. "Do the legends say whether they

were won in battle or ... or how the bearer came by them?"

"They were sent in safe keeping. Or so the stories run," she said. "I know nothing beyond the stories."

I sighed, though I do not know why. "Now we must decide what to do about the big people", I said.

The priestess nodded.

We could count only twenty-two men between ten and thirty-five. Women who were not nursing and not too old joined the men defending ... Defending what? I don't know. I had nothing against the big people. I would simply stay out of their way but I know it's no good. There are too many of them and they're too hungry for land. They're too hungry for OUR land and in the past they've killed those who stood up to them. I think they're afraid of us because they don't often see us and they sometimes walk right past our villages without seeing them either. It may be a combination of them not being all that observant and our not being all that numerous but, whatever it is, when they get the chance they kill us all. Their stories are of folk who mean malice and misfortune. I think perhaps the priestesses are right; it is our existence we're defending.

Anyway, thirty-seven people, not all of them real fighters, were not enough to meet the big ones in open battle and I couldn't manage more than that. In council with the priestesses I decided that all those too old or too young to fight should go to the village on the high island. I made up my own mind to abandon the two villages on the main island, but in such a manner that the big people would think they had won and got rid of us for good. I didn't think they'd follow us to the high island. I also made up my mind not to tell anyone,

including the priestesses, that I had decided to abandon the main island. This decision was unfortunate when you consider what happened.

I thought the location of one of our villages was more or less known, so we'd use that one. If we attacked the settlement at Holm and left a clear trail for the big people to follow, they would have no choice but to come after us. We could ambush them on the way and make them pay dear for the village I had already decided to give up. They wouldn't know that; they'd think it was a hard won victory. I wanted them to think that a few survivors were running to one of the small islands northwards of the main island.

Those who were not fighting went to the high island as planned and some of the boats were brought back and were hidden a little down the coast. To make abandonment seem more real, dummies made of straw and heather placed inside them. The rest of the boats were concealed conveniently, ready for a hasty departure to the high island. Next some of the tribe hid themselves with bows at the temple of the sun at Brodgar. The stones stand in a circle on gently rising moorland, so there's plenty of cover in amongst the heather. A temple is not really the place for an ambush, but my people use it, though it was there before us, the big ones are afraid of it and don't understand it and it makes a good landmark to make for.

Our attack on their settlement was almost better and more effective than I had hoped. Several of our tribe went into the settlement after dark with straw and heather wrapped around branches and started fires in boats and buildings, then we used our arrows on those who were lit up by the moonlight or the glow from

fires. I don't suppose we even hit, let alone killed many, but there was no shortage of confusion. We left a pretty clear trail but, to make sure there was no mistake, we set fire to a farmhouse. We also attacked a shepherd, scattered his sheep and killed his dog.

To give them time to catch up with us we lit a roaring campfire and rested. We'd brought a bit of peat with us and we threw that into the embers along with some greenery, to make sure there was enough smoke for them to see - I didn't want them to miss the fire!

In spite of all the help we gave them, it was still the afternoon of the next day before they caught up with us enough for me to see them, and then we almost lost them. They really are lacking in tracking skills and seem stupid in battle too. We would beat them easily if they weren't so numerous. We led them steadily towards the ambush I had planned at the Ring of Brodgar, and arrived there about a hour and a half or so before sunset. I stopped the tribe briefly to pay our respects to the Goddess - to the big people it must have looked as if we were giving thanks for a victory - then I led the attackers out of the other side. The big people saw us going and thought it was safe. They marched straight into the ambush waiting for them. I didn't realise how many there were. I knew they were numerous, but there must have been around a hundred men, all fighters with armour and so on. Even though my people were well hidden and gave a good account of themselves there were only two survivors and my little force was depleted.

We waited until nightfall to go back for the dead and took them under cover of darkness. We carried them to the village and laid them in the empty houses, lighting fires they wouldn't feel. We

left some cattle in the byre and put the rest out near the village. I would have lit a fire but it began to rain and the wind got up a bit. The big people camped inside the temple, mounting guards behind the standing stones. It was a miserable night for camping with a thin drizzle soaking everything through and a chilly wind. I thought of the comfortable houses with only the dead in them more than once, but I stuck to my plans.

Morning came and through the infrequent breaks in the cloud it didn't look at all promising. There was a stormy redness, squally rain from time to time and the wind had risen more.

The big people found our village and fell on it with a venom that made a body think they had spent an uncomfortable night. They lost a few more to our arrows before they stormed underground. They cleaned the place out! They brought out everything right down to the heather bedding and the dead bodies. As they piled up the bodies we attacked again and then those chosen to lay a false scent let themselves be seen with the boats - but not so close that the big people could recognise the straw dummies. By now there was a near gale and I rather doubted the wisdom of trying to sail to one of the low islands to the north, even the nearer ones. Still it was too late to change plans.

The rest of our tribe - and only sixteen of them remained - went to the place where we had hidden the boats for the crossing to the high island. The wind was now, if anything, even fiercer and I thought that we perhaps should lie low until it dropped. The small group had survived our battles were terrified of remaining within the vengeful reach of the big ones and wanted to cross to the high island. They were sure our boats would survive a short journey

across sheltered water and, against my better judgement, I gave in to their pleading.

I am sorry to say that I was right and they were wrong. The boats were no more than hides stretched over frames of thin branches. They soon broke up in those seas and those winds and most of my people are not swimmers. The wind screamed at the water and I only stayed afloat because I had a paddle to hold on to. It screamed at the heather and the rocks as I dragged myself, dripping, from the water to shelter under the overhang of a boulder. I was wet through and the overhang presented me with little enough cover from the wind. While it wasn't really cold the force of the gale made it seem so and I was wet in the extreme. The rain was driven horizontal and it even tasted salty, there was so much spray in it.

Miserable as my condition seemed, I was exhausted and I must have dozed for a while. When I woke, which might just as easily have been a fleeting moment or two or a much longer period, the wind had shifted a little and my boulder was not protecting me as much. I crawled to the lee side of it and found not only less wind but more of an overhang and two sheep sheltering. I crawled in behind the sheep and felt a bit warmer as we snuggled up together. Beyond the rock the wind was more than a gale. It tore small bushes up by the roots and flattened the grass; it drove rain and sand before it like a solid wall and a regular little stream ran down the side of the rock. With better shelter and a little warmth I was more comfortable. I scraped a little hollow in the sandy ground for my hip and fell into a fitful sleep.

I woke once with thirst which I quenched from the water streaming down by the rock and again as the sky lightened. I thought

the storm had eased a little, but the wind still howled like a boar in agony, trying to raise the dead from their graves. I thought I would stay in the shelter a bit longer, and must have fallen asleep again.

When the elements had calmed still further and the wind dropped to something like a mere gale, I crawled out from the shelter and began to walk somewhat stiffly along the shore of the high island. I knew there was a village close to the beach on the sheltered side, I had even been there a time or two. I hoped I could find it now.

The waves were still angrier than I had ever seen them, white topped, grey and rasping viciously on the shore. I wondered that I had survived them and thought that few would have done likewise. I walked on. Walked is an inadequate word, suggestive of a stroll on a sunny day. The wind had dropped only slightly and the rain was still a torrent. I struggled, stumbled, fought, staggered, lurched, limped in a near stupor.

At length I came to the village. I almost missed it but for the smoke from only one house and the lowing of some cattle down in the byre.

I was so glad to get underground and away from the storm that I didn't notice at first how empty it was. I just went into the first house and there she was, keeping a fire burning high. The girl who had been my mate in the great marriage. "Come under the blanket and warm up," she said practically, "You must be frozen as well as drenched."

I stripped off my sodden clothes and climbed into the bed with her. She may have sounded practical when she invited me to warm myself, but she was other things too. Afterwards I slept in the dark warmth.

I was woken by the smell of cooking - a stew and some cakes of bread - and realised I was starving. I was part way through the meal before it struck me how quiet the village was. With five or more nursing mothers and several young children it should not have been so silent and still.

"Where are the others?" I asked her.

"Gone." she answered, not, I thought, very helpfully. "I knew you would come here so I waited in the village."

"Gone where?" I wanted to know.

"They saw the fires you started in the big people's settlement. They saw it burn and celebrated your victory. Then they thought it was safe to return."

"But I didn't send for them. What they saw was just a distraction."

"They were distracted," she said with a flat simplicity.

I wondered whether they got back to land before the storm and whether they had survived the elements if they had made it over the water. I was not at all sure of the little ones and the oldest ones.

"When did they leave?" I asked.

"Just before the storm," she said. "I doubt if they landed before the worst of it."

My heart sank. There was little chance that they would have survived. She was practical about it.

"I am young. With luck I can bear several children." she said, "The storm has hurt the homes of the big people more than it has hurt us because they build above ground. We can start afresh here."

I thought about this for a while. Perhaps she was right.

When my hunger was assuaged I went to the entrance of the village. The wind had dropped, but it still gusted. There was sand partly blocking the way and I had to scrape it aside. I knelt there, mostly shielded from the wind looking across the grey and stormy waters, thinking. I could not recall a storm like this nor had I heard my father or anyone else speak of such a wind. There was no going out today even if I had any but the most pressing of reasons - and I no longer seemed to have any reason at all. I turned, rose and walked back underground. She was waiting for me.

"Do we need anything from outside?" I asked her.

"No. We have fuel for several days' fire and food enough for as long or longer."

"Then we'll shelter until the storm ends," I decided.

"I'll build the fire up," she said by way of answer. Outside the weather was still foul - inside we were sheltered and dry.

It was nearly two days later that the wind dropped and the clouds let the sun through. I had no hope that any of my people would have survived the storm but, all the same, I felt I must look. I walked along the seashore - and this time I did walk - but saw nothing. I could see the main island near and clear and I found the wreckage of a boat, probably mine. However, most of the other rubbish thrown up by the waves seemed to be natural. I did not see any sign of any other person, big or little.

When I had gone past the boulder which had been my shelter that first night, I turned back. There wasn't much point in going further.

Something niggled at my mind and I think I felt that all was not right, though I had seen nothing wrong. I smelt the smoke of our

fire before I saw the village. I knew instantly that we had a visitor and I saw from the size of the footprint in the sand I had scraped away that it was one of the big people. I heard the sound of the hard stuff they make their weapons from. The noise came from underground. So he was still there. I couldn't see any others, so there was probably just the one, but he couldn't be allowed to go back and tell others of his discovery.

I could hear someone coming towards the entrance, so I stood to one side. He stopped in the entranceway blinking, stooped over because he was so tall. I didn't give him time to get used to the light again or to recover himself, I chopped down and then stabbed upwards. I cut off his sword hand at the elbow with the first blow and I felt the sword strike home with the second. Then a clump of damp sand hit my face.

A second one emerged with a spear as I brushed the sand from my face and eyes, stabbing wildly at him as I did so. He caught me with his spear and the head broke off, allowing me to reach him with an upward stab of my sword. The two of them staggered away, bleeding and dying. I collapsed on the sand. I did not think they were going to make it to the main island. In fact I saw one of them drop about a hundred yards away.

"Lian!" I called, but she did not answer. "Lian! I've been hit, come and help me." I called again, but she did not come or even answer. From inside came a smell of burning.

CHAPTER 6

Steve tugged the ring off his finger. "Phew!" he said.

"Did we all share a dream?" asked Gill cautiously. "I certainly felt I was watching something real."

Alicia was looking bemused but said nothing.

"It was real," said Steve at length, looking at the ring which he was still holding. "Or, at least, realistic. How long did it last?"

Gill glanced at her watch. "I'm not sure. About twenty minutes I think." She was about to say something else but Steve interrupted her.

"When you say you shared the dream, do you mean that you took part in it?"

"Not exactly. I ... well, stood by on the sidelines, as it were."

"I'm off football images, if you don't mind," said Steve. "But the point is that I felt I was the owner of the ring, Bend, or whatever his name was. I felt it was all happening to me."

"Oh no, I wasn't in the dream exactly" said Gill. "I shared it or I watched it."

"And did you pick up thoughts and impressions?"

"How d'you mean?"

"Well I had the impression that the bloke who killed me was looking for something. Not just looking for the sunken village but

looking for something in it. I just wondered if you picked that up."

"I'm not sure. I don't think so," she said. Then she added, "I could do with a tea or something. It wasn't a shock but it was more than a surprise."

"The kettle's still here, though I could do with the 'or something' I think." He put the ring down on the table in front of Alicia and picked up the kettle to top it up from the water barrel.

As he did there was a splatter of rain against the window of the Portacabin. "Want a drink Ali?" he asked.

Alicia picked up the ring and examined it. "Your story was logical and not all that unlikely. The detail was in keeping with what we know." She was still pensive, turning the ring over and over as if she expected some sort of explanation from it. A rather wet Frank Baxter banged in, carrying a pair of damp jeans.

"My story?" said Steve.

"Well it did seem to be your story. I seemed to be sort of sharing your dream."

"And you were wearing the ring, weren't you?" added Gill. "Ali's right. It did seem to be your story."

"What've I missed?" asked Frank, dumping the jeans over the back of a chair and then sitting down. "I was writing home when I heard the rain. I went outside to try and rescue the jeans I hung out to dry, but I guess I was too late."

There was silence for a moment and the wind splattered more rain against the windows, while it drummed on the cabin roof. "Sounds as if you were," said Steve at length.

"Too late to save the jeans from a soaking, I mean. As to what you missed, I'd say it was an ... experience."

"Experience?"

"It was as if we all shared the same dream," said Gill.

"Dream?"

"I lived through what happened to the fella who had the ring," said Steve. He watched Frank raise his eyebrows, but he made no comment, so Steve continued, "I must have told the story to Ali and Gill at the same time, near as I can make out."

"So tell me his story," said Frank, more to Alicia than Gill. "As you experienced it. We'll worry about the 'how' later, right now I'm interested in the 'what.'" At that moment the kettle boiled and the cabin door opened as Manjy came in.

"I'll just brew up first, then we can all settle down to listen," said Steve as he switched off the kettle.

Alicia told Steve's story just as he had experienced it. "... And I suppose he died shortly after from the spear wound. He could easily have fallen where we found the remains," she finished, glancing at her wrist watch. It had taken about ten minutes in the telling.

"Logical explanation," said Frank, echoing Alicia's first reaction, "It could be for real. I mean, the detail is in line with what we know."

"I think perhaps the ring is storing up memories of a previous owner." Manjy chimed in, "Either that or Steve was that person in a past life."

If Alicia heard her she ignored her, saying to Frank, "It was very interesting but I don't know what we experienced and I don't know how we could verify the details."

"Well now," said Frank slowly, "if there's a hand somewhere about the entrance to the village we'll come across it pretty soon. I guess that would be proof, at least to the three of you anyway."

"And what would be proof to you?" Gill wanted to know.

"Proof of what? The whole thing's pretty incredible," added Alicia.

Frank was cautious still. "I don't know what you experienced, I've only heard you tell me a story," he said. "I don't know what would be proof until I know what you shared."

Manjy tried again. "If the ring was responsible before, try it again. See whether we 'share an experience' as Steve put it."

There was a long silence, broken by an uncomfortable sounding Steve. "She's right. Somebody else has to put on the ring and see what we get."

"Before you get too excited," said Frank, "remember the ring is bronze or at least copper. The owner got it from his father early on in the bronze age. The ring may not have much more of a story to tell anyway."

"Still, someone's got to try, otherwise you'll all think I'm some sort of a nut case."

"We won't," said Gill.

"Well I might think that I am myself," said Steve.

"All right, I'll try it on," said Gill. Before anyone could argue she picked up the ring and put pushed it onto the third finger of her right hand.

CHAPTER 7

I was about five summers old when they sent me to train as a priestess. Five or six, I don't recall now, but I do remember it was a long journey for a child. Well, it was a long journey for anyone. Three weeks or more it took us.

Before I undertook such a venture my mother and father went into the circle of stones and our priestess made an offering. Only when she was satisfied that all was well did she say that I could go and my parents solemnly kissed me goodbye. It's so long ago and so far away that I cannot remember what manner of folk they were. Good, ordinary folk, I suppose. I remember them only dimly as warm and kindly persons who provided my food, warmth and security. I recall them less clearly as individuals and not at all as regards their status in the village.

We set off early and at first we followed the river valley near home uphill, crossing the river when it was no more than a stream and went down the far side of the mountains. That part didn't take long and we were already going down when we camped for the first night.

There was a woman to look after me. She was a comparative stranger, since I hadn't seen her before she arrived at my village a week earlier, but she was a kindly person and treated

me well. She was tall with an air of confidence that was not quite authority. I think she would be in her early twenties, but she might have been younger - after all this time I cannot be sure and, in any event, a child as young as I was then is a poor judge of age. Be that as it may, I became very attached to her and insisted on sleeping with her when we camped, not that she seemed to mind. I think she had an escort of only two or three and another four of our people went with us as well.

We crossed several more streams, going steadily down all the time. We rode for a time alongside a substantial river to our left and camped the second night on its bank. It was a grand camp as far as a small child was concerned. The ponies we were riding and the two pack animals were tied for the night, then three hide covered lean-to shelters were made from cut branches. When the shelters were built, a fire was lit and supper was cooked. I remember noticing that Nerfin, the woman taking care of me, didn't eat the meat, though there was plenty if she had wanted it. It's strange that I should remember a fact like that.

There were mostly paths, though not always. Sometimes there was a track leading to a bigger village and sometimes no path at all and we just seemed to follow a river. Usually we camped near villages and the people were friendly enough, even treating Nerfin and to a lesser extent me, with respect. Once we were invited into a village and Nerfin and I slept in a house, but mostly we camped and Nerfin traded with the villagers for food.

Then we followed another river, on the right hand this time. I had never seen one so big, but remember first that I was a child and second that I was untravelled. There were more villages now

and more people. The land was hilly and grassy. There were tame cattle and sheep everywhere, with guarded pens for them at night. Though I hadn't seen any wolves on my journey, I was old enough to know them as a threat, but too young to realise that they weren't much of a threat in summer, provided they were left alone.

At last we came to a group of houses, wooden and above ground, surrounded by a circular ditch and bank, with entrances at either end. I remember I didn't think the ditch and the bank would do much to stop an intruder and guessed, more or less correctly, that the bank marked a boundary as much as anything. If I hadn't spent three weeks camping I would have been nervous of sleeping in a house built above ground but, as it was, I had no qualms.

There were several girls about my age, all training to be priestesses, as well as some older girls, further along the path of the goddess, and we all had our duties in the house. Of course we had to keep ourselves clean and groomed - we had to look our best for the Goddess - and we had to take turns at keeping the house tidy. Besides that we had weaving and spinning to do, as well as our studies of the stars and the herbs. I soon settled into a comfortable routine, for life was even and regular in the village. I quickly discovered that it was a temple. The actual temple building was the largest one of the group, and there were some twenty-five or so altogether with the various trainees and the active priestesses and the one or two old women. There were no men or boys living in the compound, but it was not forbidden to speak or mix with those outside if we had any spare time.

I think I was probably a good looking child, small with long dark hair and an oval shaped face. It took me quite a time to braid

my hair each morning, combing it out and then putting it in a single broad plait that hung down to my waist. I was certainly a bright child, learning to spin and weave with some dexterity, but also learning about life to an extent far beyond my years. I soon understood why the priestesses must keep their virginity for the fertility rites at Beltane each year. I don't know whether I fully appreciated the finer points which make it an enjoyable experience, but I certainly knew more about the basics than I should have done and, of course, accepted it.

At Beltane, in two or three villages chosen for that year, one of the priestesses and one of the men of that village, chosen by ballot, mated. The prayers to the Goddess were said over the fields and the animals. Afterwards the Beltane fires were lit and the whole village took part in the fertility rites. At the high temple, which was the holiest of places, one of the younger priestesses, a virgin vowed to the Goddess, led the mating and the fertility rites each year.

I saw little of Nerfin after the journey and the first few weeks. The house was ruled over by an older woman and my own particular friend, a dark-looking girl about a year older than me, was called Eyebright after the herb because, as the name suggests, she was a bright eyed little thing. I don't remember her true name after all these years: perhaps I never knew it.

I grew up in the house from a little girl to a young woman. I would have been about twelve when the decision was made to build a new temple. A spot was chosen in the middle of a grassy plain about a day's ride away from the place we had used from time out of mind. The area was farmed, I think, but there was to be a circular ditch with the earth piled up inside, much as the present site but

bigger. There would be two entrances and a circular temple, with a circular veranda with a circle of stones marking the position of the sun's and moon's risings and settings at different times of year, so that we would know exactly when midsummer and midwinter were.

One day, just before the work started, the old woman in charge of the house came up to me and said that the High Priestess required my presence in the temple. When I walked into the temple she was talking to Nerfin so I stood in silence until she had done. She turned her attention to me, studying me carefully. She told me at length, "You have been chosen for the blessing at the start of work on the new temple."

I knew, of course, what this meant and was filled with several conflicting emotions. I realised it was a great honour that the Goddess required me for something so important but I was also more than a little afraid. I said nothing.

"You will be prepared by Nerfin for a ceremony next new moon." Her tone did not allow for dissent, though I would not have argued anyway. I had only eight days to prepare myself. Of course, looked at another way, I had only eight days to worry about the event and my part in it.

We rode to the site just two days before the ceremony. In the middle of the plain, in the hollow of a low hill, was a solitary rock: flattish, about four feet wide by six feet long by three feet high. This was to be the altar for the ceremony: I think it was always intended that it remain in place and become the altar of the temple itself. Certainly that's what happened anyway.

I had a tent nearby and on the eve of the ceremony Nerfin first made me bathe in a stream and then rubbed my skin with herb

oils to make it smell pleasing, then I combed my long hair but let it hang loose. Nerfin painted me with the symbols of the Goddess and led me naked and shivering with fright to the rock. The only concession made to my comfort was a sheepskin covering it and I had to lie on this. The rock was circled by priestesses and other officials, to see that the offering was made as custom demanded. I lay there and waited.

I gave myself to the Goddess and my virgin-blood was the offering. Work could begin on the temple. I do not know to this day who he was, but he was gentle in his taking of me.

After the blessing ritual, work began on the ditch and the bank and I returned to the temple with Nerfin to find myself a fully established priestess. Of course I was still learning - predicting eclipses and so on, the medical effects of herbs and how to find them - but I took up regular duties in the temple.

About six weeks after the ceremony I began being ill: foods which I liked before now made me sick. Looking back I cannot see how any woman could be so naive as not to see the connection, but I was very young then and my monthly cycles had hardly begun. So it was that I failed to recognise the life within me and it was Nerfin that recognised my pregnancy before I did. I think all those at the temple rejoiced with me when I did know, but I was more glad than they when I stopped being ill!

The temple grew and so did I. The soil from the deeper of two circular ditches was thrown up into two banks: the higher inside the ditch, the lower outside. A second ditch was dug inside the bank and the soil used to raise the bank itself even further. In a single summer most of the preliminary work was done. If I have spoken

much of the temple, which I visited only once before my confinement, and little of my pregnancy, it's because everyone has seen plenty of pregnant women! My only claim to fame was that I was unusually young. Once I got over my morning sickness I was very fit and was slowed down only by my own awkward shape in later months.

The temple was started just after the Spring equinox, so my time came in mid-winter, just when the weather was at its coldest. Even with fires burning in our houses, ice sometimes formed on the washing and drinking water. We piled on extra covers and snuggled down within the beds. I was not very big but, fortunately, my daughter took after me and was small too. I was young and fit, a little scared and very unknowing - I was more scared when I knew what to expect. I spent a miserable night with backache and stomach ache, but I did not realise that it was part of labour. The bearing of my child was like ... well, what was it like? Like shitting a lump of rock I suppose. I was wondering how much longer I could put up with cold feet and legs rather than pain and discomfort before it was done.

When Beltane came around I was still nursing, but that did not prevent me from taking part in the fertility rites. Mind, I took part as much from curiosity as from a wish to serve the Goddess again. I wanted my share of what some reckoned to be a pleasure, seeing that my one exploit had been uncomfortable, public and had ended with pregnancy. The chief of the priestesses wondered at my sense of duty, but I rather think Nerfin was wiser. She, however, said nothing.

Later that year I went again to the temple. The ditches and

banks were all dug and already some of the posts were in place. I learned that there would be a circular building providing living accommodation for those who tended the temple itself, which would be an open circular centre to the residential area. There would be just one entrance to the temple. In the building were to be the rooms for living, working and learning, for we already supplied priestesses to most of the bigger villages and even more were to be trained in the future. I took my daughter Gaïn with me for the weather was warm and the distance not great, but I did not stay long.

The second summer after Gaïn was born, when she was about eighteen months old, I went again to the new temple and watched as the work progressed. The old high priestess died about this time and her body was laid out. Before we had decided what to do with her a local chief died too, and it was decided that a new tomb should be built for the two of them, marking the mid-summer sunrise line at the same time. Work on the temple stopped while a mound of suitable size was raised over the graves. I must say I was impressed when I went there for the funeral rites. The chief was buried with a cup of mead for his journey and his two favourite hunting axes. The body of the high priestess was burned before the remains were interred.

There were not the workers to spare for two projects in a single summer, so we went back to spend another winter in the old temple at Durring and to elect a successor to the high priestess.

The old high priestess had been more than forty two when she died, and that itself caused us some problems. She had been in charge so long that many of us had known no other: many of her potential successors were themselves too old. In the end the choice

fell on Nerfin, though there were several her senior.

During the spring Nerfin was much occupied with the question of sacrifice. We no longer sacrificed people as a matter of routine, but the building of a temple was not routine and every temple demands its sacrifice. Generally it was said that a death among those building was a sacrifice and that sufficed. Here we had a big, new temple and no deaths. Nerfin was faced with the decision.

We all travelled to the new temple as it neared completion and I took Gaïn with me. She was walking and getting into everything now, at about two and a half. I had to watch the dark haired, rather silent child the whole time . We camped outside but nearby and waited for mid-summer day. Grass had grown on the hillock which marked the burial place of the old high priestess, and a small pile of stones on its top marked the mid-summer sunrise line. I wondered who had done that. Grass had also grown on the bank round the temple site.

Nerfin had called a final gathering at noon two days before mid-summer and I had no doubt she would tell us the arrangements for a sacrifice at the dedication of the temple. I wanted to settle Gaïn in our tent before we met but she was not around. I looked for her in the camp which was not only soon done but drew a blank. I was only mildly worried, because she was always into something and this was not the first time she had been lost. I wandered into the temple complex and saw her across the other side watching some workmen taking out wooden poles that had been used in the building without being incorporated into the structure. While I watched, one of two men handling a long pole let slip his end. The wood caught Gaïn a glancing blow on the head and she was knocked over.

I rushed over to where she lay but she was dead. I couldn't see any damage to her beyond a bruise on the side of her head. Not even a cut. When I looked up I saw that Nerfin was amongst those standing round.

"There is a strange but consistent logic in what the Goddess has seen fit to do." she said. "Gaïn was conceived at the start of the temple and died at its completion."

Nobody could argue with that. She gave instruction that Gaïn was to be buried within the boundaries of the temple itself and there was no further talk of a sacrifice.

As the Goddess willed, so it might have been, but that did not prevent the tears when I was eventually alone. Gaïn's death had been so quick and sudden that she could have known nothing about it. I grieved for her as her mother, will of the Goddess or not.

The weather that first winter in the new temple was not cold but I have never seen it wetter, before or since. Every day from autumn solstice to spring solstice it rained some part of the day, usually all of it. It rained at Midwinter, so we burned the log in the hearth and celebrated inside. The ground in the centre of the temple drained reasonably well but it was still sodden most of the time and we didn't even dare step on it for fear of making it uneven when the ground eventually dried.

In March there were high winds and storms, with rain clouds driving before the wind like sheep before wolves. We were not unduly disturbed by the storms but some of the low lying and coastal areas were badly hit. Some places fared so badly that they sent to us for help, thinking that perhaps the Goddess herself was angry with them for some reason. Nerfin decided that she would

undertake the journey in person, taking me with her.

We wore hide cloaks that had been smeared with beeswax and animal fat to make them as weatherproof as possible but we were still soon cold and wet. Low lying land was either covered completely in water with trees and bushes poking up from the stricken areas or wet and marshy with pools of water lying everywhere. By keeping to higher ground we made reasonable progress, but crossing rivers was sometimes an almost impossible problem, and we had to make frequent detours as we made our way south-west.

We arrived at a cluster of tents and lean-to shelters with one or two boats pulled up. Below and beyond an expanse of water marked a river estuary where a fishing village had flourished. It transpired that the tents indicated the survivors, but the weather prevented fishing, water prevented planting crops and most of the animals had drowned. Unless there was a change quickly life could be very desperate for the remainder.

Nerfin felt that drastic steps were called for, and ruled that three sacrifices should be made to the Goddess on the next three mornings. Lots were drawn from among the young men who went out fishing and three more-or-less willing victims were chosen. On the day before the sacrifice the victim was given his choice of whatever the community could offer, then, at supper, he was given a potion of herbs to make him sleep - a sleep from which he did not waken!

The first chose a meal and the people went to great trouble to provide his pleasure. The second chose music when it was his turn and singers were found among the people. The third young man

shocked and surprised everyone by choosing me. Or rather he chose to spend his last hours making love to me. I knew well enough that I had grown very beautiful but I was still flattered, though I did not admit that.

Nerfin was angry with him. She said that was hardly what was meant by his choice in the spending of his last hours. Still, a promise was a promise so she kept her word and as custom demanded I went to him.

The shelter was well placed and heated by a fire in the entrance. I went in and looked at him carefully. He was tall, perhaps as much as five feet, and his hard, outdoor life had made him hard and sinewy. I had already made up my mind to give him a night to remember - though, it must be said, his memory of it would be short indeed. Perhaps better say that I meant him to go to his sacrifice knowing the best a woman had to offer. It seems he had similarly made up his mind that I should enjoy my time with him. I undressed and stood before him. He parted my legs and worshipped at the shrine of the Goddess. When he took me it was such sweet pleasure that I almost forgot his enjoyment and delight, but I put that right times over before he drank the sleeping draught that night. I was sorry to see him sacrificed, a willing victim for the people.

Nerfin ruled that we would wait a week before we undertook any further actions of any sort. In the event we did not have to wait as long as that before the moon changed, the weather broke and the wind dropped. Naturally she received (and took) the credit and we set off back amidst rejoicing.

I was older and wiser this time, and was the first to realise that I was with child again. I had mixed feelings. I had grown used to

having lost Gaïn and living alone in the temple. I rather regarded the new life within me as a distraction I could do without. On the other hand I quite enjoyed being the centre of attention again. Of course I would do as the Goddess willed.

I found that Gaïn's conception, birth, life and death were regarded in some awe, consequently so was the new life, especially as it too had been conceived in the direct service of the Goddess. I too was looked on with some respect. Nerfin had caught some kind of a fever as a result of her journey in adverse weather and in spite of the better summer conditions, was still unwell.

Again my confinement was in the depths of winter. As I knew what to expect I was more afraid of feeling pain this time but again I had an easy time of bearing a small but sturdy daughter. These rooms in the new temple were much less draughty than the old ones and, with the fire banked up and plenty of rushes to lie on, I made myself comfortable with my daughter. At the same time Nerfin, who had not really recovered her old self, was very ill.

Spring came, the weather warmed, Beltane was celebrated with enthusiasm, my daughter flourished and Nerfin died.

The priestesses assembled to elect a new high priestess. There were just four older women left in the temple and they counselled against choosing one of them on account of their age, which made sense indeed. There was then something of a gap. Too many had gone to villages and settled there while the remaining women in the temple were about my age or a little older. I was only in my seventeenth summer, though my word carried more weight than most and I seemed older. At my suggestion the priestesses were summoned from the villages and word was duly sent. We

waited a full month to give them time enough to come before we met to decide.

Those who were trained in the way of the Goddess gathered and we waited the promised month for the further ones. When we finally met in council there were more than sixty of us. I explained the dilemma that beset us. I'm not sure why I spoke instead of one of the others. I was less awed than the others by the size of the gathering, of course, but I don't see why that should have been so. There were others my senior who did not wish to speak to such a crowd. There was some talk but no decision. Many of those from the villages had settled down and did not wish to move now: some even had relationships they did not desire to break up.

Gradually it became clear that the gathering as a whole looked to me for leadership. I was too young to be the high priestess. That office demanded wisdom and intelligence, which I was not sure I possessed in sufficient degree, a certain eloquence which I had to admit I did possess and experience, which I was certain I did not. It would seem the gathering thought otherwise. The other women were impressed by the life and death of my daughter Gaïn, the events at the coast, my second daughter, Faya and my persuasive tongue.

So it was that I came to be elected high priestess and wear the sacred ring at no more than eighteen summers. Why I sent the ring elsewhere ten summers ago is another story and I have not told it before. The ring. What is a ring? A thin hollow circle you slide onto your finger. Precious. I have seen no other one. One of the oldest women took it from Nerfin's body and gave it to me, saying that Nerfin had received it from the last high priestess. Many summers

passed and I often wondered about the thinness and lightness of it. How had the craftsman worked the stone so thin? What stone was it, hard and light like that? As the years went by those who had known Nerfin and the old high priestess died and I did not speak of the ring. Young women came to the service and this ornament was forgotten.

Then one winter day a traveller came by. It was snowing hard and blowing half a gale and he was both cold and lost. It was only human charity to let him rest his horse and offer him food and shelter. I entertained him at the temple as was proper. As we sat and ate and drank he watched the ring closely and asked endless questions about it - how I had come by it, whence it had come and so on. It was clear that he did not believe that I knew nothing of its history and cared less.

It was full dark and I was sleeping when I heard the slightest noise of footsteps and woke to see a shadowy figure take something from my table. "Who's there?" I called, and the figure ran. I heard a door slam. I hurried to the door myself. It was very cold but it had stopped snowing and by the light of the rising moon I saw a trail of footprints leading to the stable. As I stood there I saw the traveller leading out his pony. I don't know why, but as he mounted I bent down and gathered up some snow into a ball and threw it. As he swung up onto the pony, the snow caught him full in the face and he slipped backwards. The pony bolted and he bounced along behind it on the ground.

In the morning, when we found him, I looked through his leather bag and found the ring. I do not know what attraction it had for him, but I resolved to have no more to do with it. I had not meant to kill the traveller. The ring seemed evil somehow.

When Spring softened the weather again I had a copy of the amulet's design carved on a holy stone from the seashore and then put both the ring and the amulet in a leather bag. A woman was going as priestess to a village in the far north. I gave the bag to her and she left with her escort. I gave the ring no further thought, 'till now.

Now I have seen at least forty-five summers. It may be forty-eight or even fifty, I'm not sure. But I have worn the ring and sent it north. This safe amulet on a holy stone I will pass to a successor soon. I have ruled this temple for at least twenty-five summers, and held the office of high priestess longer than anyone else that can be remembered. All of my contemporaries have died and I shall not be sorry now when my time is up. Faya is priestess to a thriving village a week's ride from here, so I see her but little now. She lives with a good man and I have two grandchildren. Probably she will ride over to see me in the Spring if I live 'till then. Still, the will of the Goddess be done, as ever.

CHAPTER 8

"Well?" Steve asked at length, "What did you make of that?"

The question was directed mainly at Frank, who replied carefully, thinking about his words.

"I'd say 'experience' was a good word to describe it. Nice and neutral and non-committal. I thought it was Gill's story not yours though."

"Oh it was. A completely different 'experience' from last time, for me anyway."

"And for me!" echoed a bemused Gill faintly.

"That's because you were wearing the ring not Steve." Manjy was wide eyed with a combination of awe, surprise and a little fear. "I told you it was reincarnation and that the ring was responsible," she continued, "and I'm sure it is, even if I can't tell you how."

"Well the story was interesting and believable, but I can't see how we can prove it or disprove it without digging forever," said Frank. "Even the bit about Gaïn being buried inside a temple is an incredibly long shot. If Gill can give us a lot more detail about the temple we could possibly identify it, but the odds are against it."

Alicia shook herself. "Oh no," she said, "a child of about three with a split skull was dug up at Woodhenge. She'd been buried just inside the entrance. What's more Woodhenge probably did look

more or less as Gill described the temple in her story. The trouble is, Gill may have known all that. She has a degree in the History of Bronze Age Britain. Although this was the Stone Age she'd have known pretty well all the details she gave us in her story."

"Are you suggesting that I made it all up?"

"No, no," said Alicia hastily, "I only meant that evidence in the scientific sense is hard to come by because of your background, not because of the difficulty of archaeological verification, as Frank suggested."

"Funny thing though," said Gill. "I felt the need to explain the concept of 'ring'. Almost as if it was a new idea."

"That's fairly easy to explain. Rings are generally made of metal and this was the Stone Age," said Alicia.

"So where did a metal ring come from in the stone age?" asked Frank. "Oh, and what on earth is a 'holy stone'?"

Alicia said distantly, "The tides smoothing and wearing away pebbles on a shingle beach sometimes make holes in them, if the geological structure of the pebble is right. Not that common but not exactly rare either. By a sort of old medieval joke a stone with a hole in it was a holy stone, though I don't suppose the same pun worked all that time ago. I imagine the words were quite different in whatever language they spoke in stone age England. All the same, pebbles like that were valued as special and were probably strung on a thong as an amulet."

"Anyway," Frank continued, "We know how the ring found its way here. Not in detail of course. We don't know whether the priestess gave it to a village chief or if he just took it, but we know why it went."

"I'm not sure we do." said Gill. "I don't understand why I sent

the ring away after one little incident."

"Explains the source of carving that pattern on stone though," remarked Alicia.

"You don't understand. I really believed the ring was evil and I understood instantly that the traveller was looking for it. Why?" Gill was now sounding rather upset.

"Gill seems to believe her story," said Manjy.

"I don't know what we can do to prove anything about either story, whatever we think the experience was," said Frank.

Steve was very thoughtful. "There is one thing that would help us know how we stood with the first story." he said.

"What's that?" Frank wanted to know.

"Well ... if the first story is correct there's a hand holding a sword somewhere close to the entrance to the village. If it is there I don't suppose it's in a very good condition now, but I shouldn't think the owner came back for it." There was some nervous laughter in response to Steve's attempt to lighten the situation.

"Well, we'll certainly be digging around the entrance," said Alicia , "so if it's there, we'll find it."

"I don't know whether to hope it's there or hope it's not," returned Steve, leaning across the table and studying the ring which Gill had taken off and put down.

"Why's that?"

"If it's not there we'll dismiss our experience as an interesting and colourful dream which will fade in importance as the job in hand progresses. That would be a little sad but easiest on the brain. But what does it mean if we find the hand? What do we make of our experience then?" He paused, then added, "and how much of the rest

of the stories can we accept?"

There was an uncomfortable silence as they all thought over what Steve had said. "You've got a point," said Alicia at length, "What would it mean?"

Frank thought, on reflection, that point was academic. "Let's dig up the arm first and worry about what it means if we do find it.."

Gill voiced something that had been worrying Alicia. "What was a copper ring doing in my story?" she asked them. "If we were back in the stone age, why was there a metal ring . Where and how was it made? How did it get to southern England - the area that's now Wiltshire, if I really dreamed Woodhenge? All we know is why I sent it north." She paused for moment and then added, "And I don't even really know why I did that."

Alicia was going to mention her own doubts about the whole thing when Frank interrupted her.

"Forget the detail we can't check for now and stick to what we can check," he said. "It won't take us long to dig around the entrance. We can do it in a couple of hours." He turned to Steve. "When you chopped off this guy's sword arm, where were you standing?"

"Just a minute," protested Steve, "I didn't cut off anyone's hand."

"You know what I mean. Where were you in the story?"

"Well, as I recall, the bloke was right handed and he hadn't even had time to straighten up after he came out of the village. I'd say the hand would be close to the wall, just to the left of the entrance as you face it."

"OK, we dig there first thing in the morning. We were

probably going to clear that area anyway, if I read the boss correctly."

"Hmm? Oh, yes," said Alicia, who wasn't thinking of herself as the boss just at that moment.

"So, if you don't mind, we'll do that next," said Frank.

"Mind? I don't mind. I'm as curious as you," Alicia said, and laughed a little, as though, perhaps, she didn't find it entirely funny.

Frank yawned and said he would turn in early that night. "I'll put the kettle on for a last drink," said Steve getting up, "but you won't be so early because it's ten thirty already."

"Good grief!" said Alicia, glancing at her watch, "I'd no idea it was so late. Time flies."

There was an air of expectancy and enthusiasm over the camp at breakfast next morning and the local workers arrived early. The ground was still wet after the rain, but the rain itself seemed to have moved on. Just a few clouds still threatened the odd shower. Alan and the local gang wanted to get back to the investigation of 'their house', the crew generally were hopeful of making more finds and Gill, Frank and Manjy all wanted to look for the 'hand' from Steve's story. Steve would have liked to join them from the start but he had various routine jobs to do first. He hurried through checking the vehicles and topping up the generator fuel tank, before he left to meet the ferry.

Alicia split them into four teams again. Alan Wainwright and two of the local men went on excavating the first house, several volunteers were digging along the route of the passageway in search of the next house and Alicia took Manjy and another of the volunteers to help her move and lay out the bones from the entrance to the village.

"You can take charge of those uncovering the passageway once you finish here," said Alicia, "but this job calls for a certain amount of skill."

Frank and Gill both wanted to dig for the hand and, as they clearly weren't going to concentrate on anything else, Alicia let them, though using two of the University specialists together was possibly not the best use of her resources.

Manjy helped move the bones and lay them out on a sheet of plywood, while Gill, Frank and the two girls who had been part of Gill's team the day before stood waiting for them to get out of the way. "Well," said Alicia, "these look like the remains of a small but fully grown adult."

"Is that flake of rust a spearhead?" asked Frank.

Alicia followed the direction of his pointing finger. "It certainly could be," she said, and bent down to pick it up.

"Steve's early," observed Manjy watching the Landrover turn out of the field. "We've only just started and he's off already."

"I expect he's hoping to be back here by the time we find the hand," said Gill.

"If we find it," Frank corrected her. "We aren't sure that it's here to be found at all."

"Whether the hand's here or not, Steve can't hurry the ferry, can he?" said Alicia, scrambling out of the trench. "It's not likely to be early just because he is. Anyway, this does look like a spearhead. Mind you, that in itself doesn't make Steve's story any more or less likely. What it does do is hint at violence in the destruction of the village."

She put the spearhead, if that's what it was, on the board

and added, "Come on you two, we'll move these remains and see if they have anything to tell us."

"OK," Frank told the two volunteers, "Go down another six to twelve inches where the body was and sift carefully for anything - weapons, buttons, buckles, ornaments - absolutely anything." He turned to Gill. "You and I are going to find that hand if it's there to be found," and he sank his spade through the tufty grass and into the sandy soil beneath.

By the time the Landrover turned back into the field there was a small pile of oddments turned up by the volunteers, but Gill and Frank's digging had drawn a complete blank. The latter threw down his shovel and sat at the bottom of the trench, leaning against the side. "I've got to take a break," he said.

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," insisted Gill, "we've even found his sword with an enormous nick in it."

"We didn't find anything. They," and he nodded towards the volunteers, "found the sword, though I'll grant you it's a hell of a nick. Mind you, bronze nicks pretty easy. Anyway, we've dug carefully and we haven't found a thing. You can't even tell what's been dug before in this sandy soil."

"I thought it was all artificial," said Gill. "Hello, what's this?" She bent down. "Nope. Just a pebble. As I was saying, I thought they built all the houses and then threw up enough soil to make an artificial hill so that the entire village was underground."

"That's the way Alicia tells it."

"In that case most of this hill goes back to when the village was first built."

"So?"

"So either the hand in Steve's story is in the entranceway or it will be lying pretty close to the surface."

Frank thought about this for a moment. "That makes a lot of sense. We probably have been digging in the wrong place." He got up slowly, dusting the sand off his jeans. "We're going to have to shift the sand a foot or two into the passageway. I suppose I'll make a start."

By the time Steve had finished his other jobs and had time to spare to cross the field, Frank had taken a break while Gill dug and then taken over again, but there was still no sign of the hand.

"Found it?" Steve as soon as he was within earshot.

Frank emerged from the passageway. "No sign," he said, "I don't think it's there."

"Where exactly was the bloke standing in your story?" asked Gill.

"He'd just come out of the village."

"Show us," she said.

Steve jumped down into the trench and Frank got out of his way as he backed into the passage. The two volunteers watched curiously.

"He came out bent very low like this," Steve said, showing them. "And put his hands on the grass to support himself as he straightened up, like this." Steve put his hand on the ground beside the trench, moving some loose sand piled at the side as he did so.

Gill hit her forehead with the heel of her hand. "We've been digging in the wrong place. It's probably about six inches or so down and underneath the sand we piled up." She started moving the excavated sand.

"I'll give you a hand," said Steve, taking Frank's spade. The latter stood back and watched. "Two in fact, to find one!" Steve continued and Frank laughed.

Steve and Gill shovelled madly. Between them they moved back the loose sand in no time at all and stood back panting. "Right," Steve continued, "which of you experts is going to break the ground?"

Frank broke the turf very gently and knelt down to peel it back while the others watched intently. "Pass me a sieve," he said, and Gill did. The small crowd grew as Alicia's team wandered over.

About three or four feet from the doorway, just beyond the area dug so far and some six or so inches down, Frank began to uncover a bone. There was a fascinated silence as he gradually uncovered more and more of what was obviously a hand and arm. Alicia herself said absolutely nothing as Frank worked, until he had uncovered everything, including the very rusted remnants of an iron sword.

"Right," she said, "Let's get some photographs of this, then we'll break for lunch."

Steve didn't move immediately to deal with lunch. Instead he frowned for a moment looking at the hand, lost in thought and contemplation. The hand was exactly where he had described. That implied but what did it imply? If that bit of his story were "true", what about the rest? And what about Gill's story? He looked across at Gill and caught her eye. She was wondering much the same thing.

As he slowly turned and walked back to the group of caravans, he noticed the bird watcher, watching them through binoculars and wondered why that gentleman wasn't busy watching birds.

Nobody at the dig actually said anything and, as if by agreement, the subject of the find and what it might mean were not raised over lunch. That Steve's story was more or less 'true' nobody doubted any more, but there was enough uncertainty over the meaning that nobody wanted to speak out yet.

"The bits of your story we can check up on seem to be true." remarked Gill to Steve as she helped clear up after lunch.

"Did you doubt it?" he asked.

Gill thought for a moment. "Not really," she said. "Your story had a ring of truth about it even before I experienced mine."

"Your story rang true as well."

"It did for me, and the detail was so vivid that I couldn't have made it up, but there isn't any way I can prove it."

Steve looked her full in the face and their eyes met momentarily. "You don't have to prove anything to me."

"I think that's why I enjoy talking to you, but I was referring to my story," she answered, meeting his gaze straight on.

"So was I just then. I meant that my experience was enough to make me believe yours. It's true more generally as well though."

"Oh."

"Now, you'd better join the others before they start looking for you."

She gave him a quick smile and left across the field.

Alicia got everyone to work again. Since the second house appeared to be intact she put Gill in charge of numbering and stacking the roofing stones as the roof was removed for better access.

"You can cover over the first part of the entrance tunnel again." said Frank, on his hands and knees in the trench. "It's only about four feet to the first house and I can see daylight already."

Alicia scrambled down to look. "You're right," she said. "Do you think the stonework's safe enough to allow us to clear the passage?"

"Seems it. It's not carrying any great weight and the stonework's strengthened by bones across the passage."

Alicia looked more closely. "So it is," she said. "They used whale bones at Scara Brae but these look shorter. More like cattle bones."

"Mebbe I should clear the passage before the sand and soil go back on top, just to be safe." Frank squatted on his heels and turned to Alicia. "What do you make of Steve's story now that we've found the hand?" he asked her.

"The whole thing bothers me," she answered. "It isn't logical that we remember what the ring wants us to. I mean, a ring doesn't have a mind of its own and yet how else could Steve have known the hand was there?"

"All the same, his story checks out with every fact we know - and we know quite a lot."

"But if Steve's story is true, then Gill's is too." Alicia sounded just a little pathetic as she gave an airing to what was really worrying her. "Where did a copper ring come from in the stone age?"

"Well," he answered slowly, "we might get one answer to that if somebody else tried on the ring. Now," he brightened, "would you like me to clear the passage of sand?"

Alicia was glad enough to think of something else for a while.

"If you're volunteering, OK," she said. "I'll find you somebody to sieve the sand before we tip it," and she scrambled out of the trench.

Alicia had set Manjy and the two volunteers on to the job of tracing the route of the passageway but they found it rather dull.

"I've known more interesting ways of spending my time," she told Alicia when she asked how they were getting on. "Incidentally," she added, nodding his head vaguely, "the bird watcher over there with the binoculars seems to be taking an awful lot of interest in what we're doing here."

Alicia looked at the direction of her nod. The 'bird watcher' was still looking at the dig. When he saw Alicia watching him, he turned away and focused his binoculars out to sea. "Probably just curious about us," she said at length, and turned her attention elsewhere.

By the end of the day Frank had cleared the passageway not only as far as the first house but several feet beyond it. The sand had drifted like snow through the openings and further in there were a couple of stretches which were almost clear, enabling Frank to make much quicker progress than either he or Alicia had expected.

While Frank didn't find anything new that afternoon, Alan's team did. Of course, things which would burn had burnt, but there was a lot left. They uncovered the bronze blade of a knife, various household oddments and some pots, one showing signs of having been exposed to heat. When Alicia stopped to look at their handiwork Alan asked her about removing the remains of the human.

"You've cleared up around the remains," she remarked. "I'll get a board and lay out the bones in their present position and see if

they can tell us anything."

It was not as easily done as her words implied. Although a section of the roof had collapsed, the hole was still a bit small for the board to negotiate on the level horizontally, so it proved necessary to number and remove a few stones first. Alicia called Manjy over to help her and while they worked on the remains Alan's gang sorted through the stones from the collapsed roofing section with a view to rebuilding later.

By knocking-off time Alicia was able to view the whole project with some satisfaction. Steve had set up a second generator to feed lights into the passage, a good crop of intact, interesting remains had been found and the early, exploratory diggings not now needed had been filled in. One house had been well excavated, a second was being dug and a third discovered.

A station wagon pulled into the yard beside a farm and the 'bird watcher' strode into the farmhouse. He pulled off his boots in the porch, went in his stocking feet to the telephone and punched in the digits of midlands number. The phone at the other end rang and a man answered.

"Hello Robert ... I believe they've found something significant. I would say it was time to come and see how they're getting on ... Well I can't see how I can tell through binoculars! ... I can't look at their computer file, I don't know the first thing about the damn things. No, you'll have to come up if you're interested ... Right then, I'll be seeing you in a day or two ... Bye for now, then." And he rang off

It had been a pleasant day and it was still a pleasant

evening, so most of the group tramped a couple of miles to the pub. Alicia, Frank and Gill stayed behind in the cabin. They were joined by Manjy and Steve. Manjy was about to bring the computer record up to date. She had just switched the machine on when Gill interrupted.

"Right!" she said, "We can't pretend it didn't happen or that Frank didn't discover a hand today. What do we make of Steve's story now?"

Frank studied his fingernails intently for a moment or two and then said, without looking up, "Steve 'knew' where the hand would be. Did he know because he guessed or because he dreamed it somehow or ..." Frank paused and looked even more absorbed in his fingernails, "... or because he somehow WAS that person?"

"It's a pretty involved guess with no clues that I could see," said Gill. "You must have remembered somehow."

"I dreamed the story but I also dreamed I was the storyteller." said Steve.

"A guess would be stretching it," ruminated Alicia. "I can't see how Steve could possibly have known all that detail by guesswork, so we can more or less rule that out. Either he somehow read memories stored by the ring or, if you believe in reincarnation, he relived a past life."

"That's absurd," said Frank. "There's Gill's story as well. It's a bit of a coincidence, to say the least, if they both had a past life involving the ring."

"The whole thing's absurd."

Frank was impatient. "Mebbe it was the late stone age. There'd be some overlap."

Gill shook her head at him. "No," she said, "I had the distinct

impression the ring was already very old."

Frank was insistent. "You were old at forty," he told her, "It wouldn't take many years for the ring to be very old."

"There's one way to find out," remarked Steve.

"I know. I've been thinking about it." Frank turned to Alicia. "Where's the ring?"

She stood up to open a cabinet drawer. "Here," she said and gave it to him. Frank examined it again. Apart from its good condition there was nothing remarkable at all about it.

"Go on," Gill urged him and he pushed the ring onto the little finger of his hairy hand.

CHAPTER 9

I threw the six half sticks: three flat sides and three curved sides. I needed two curved sides to finish, so I took another drink from the goatskin while Po-atl picked up the sticks.

"Five to finish," he said, and threw them. They all landed curved side up. "A kill," he shouted in excitement, "I throw again."

This time he threw the two I had needed, and moved his counter two holes up the spiral. "Pity I didn't throw three," he remarked as he picked up the sticks.

I glanced towards the skyline at the crest of a long, low hill, where fourteen or fifteen men sweated into sight, hauling and pushing a large, long stone. They were using logs underneath it, to help it move along and two of the men were picking up the logs behind the stone and running round to lay them down in front. That is a wearisome job at the best of times and I suspect it was the nearness of a meal and a rest which kept them going. They would be with us in about ten minutes because, though the hill was gentle, there was enough slope to make the work easy. Well, easier.

"Come on," said Po-atl, "we have time enough to finish."

I threw four curved sides and, as I only needed two of them, I couldn't move up the spiral. I had two counters home and so did Po-atl

so, as we had lost two counters each already, everything depended on the final counter.

I say 'everything' but nothing depended on the outcome of what was, after all, just a game. I mean the counters were just pebbles and the playing area was drawn in the dirt. I was rather bored because we had waited some time for the stone and the sun was now high in the sky. I would be fortunate if I completed my part in the work before sunset. So it was that I threw the stick without much enthusiasm.

"Four curved." I said, and waited for Po-atl to throw.

I looked again at the huge stone, larger now that it was nearer. For the most part those pushing and hauling were men of our tribe. They were two thirds of three villages. The remainder and some of the women were out gathering food, mostly hunting.

I had been told that our ancestors didn't eat meat, or indulge in human sacrifices either, but I couldn't see that myself. I mean, how could they possibly gather enough food without meat?

Several of the team hauling the stone were prisoners taken in war with some other tribe. They were well enough fed, didn't work any harder than our own men and were moderately interested in what they were doing. I'm not sure they would have been so willing if they'd known we intended to sacrifice them at the next eclipse though.

Po-atl threw the sticks. "One!" he shouted and moved his counter one hole up the spiral to take my stone.

"I win," he said triumphantly, throwing the captured pebble -

counter, sorry - and catching it in jubilation.

"You do indeed. Congratulations," I took another drink from the goatskin, passed it over and got up to meet the team with the stone, giving the stew a quick stir as I passed.

There was a wooden post a couple of feet in front of the spot where the stone was going. It wasn't marking the place as such. We used the wooden stake to mark a line used in the reckoning of cycles. That is not my job, so I'm not sure which one. The moon I think. Anyway, it was used by the astronomer in predicting eclipses and we were going to use a stone in its place, because she thought something more durable would be 'better' and would last through the lives of hundreds of astronomers, not just a few. Well, that's the theory anyway.

I walked over to the hole we had dug. The astronomer was very particular about the measurements and, even though we were simply replacing a stake with a stone, she had checked it all. I suppose I would be particular too if my reputation depended on it as hers did. If she made errors the priest might look a fool in front of the villagers, which was not likely to please him at all and, besides his anger, she would look a fool as well as him.

When the men arrived they looked ready for a rest. "Right," I said, "Line it up with the hole and then I've got something ready to eat." I called.

I don't think that stone would have been in line so quickly if they had eaten first!

I dipped my bread in the stew absently, to mop up the juices of the meat. I had put in some of those round roots as well as the usual herbs and the result was pleasing. There is a man I know who actually grows them. Round roots, I mean. He uses an ox-shoulder bone to turn over enough soil to plant seeds, like some villages have started doing with the grasses they use to make bread, and he gets them growing in one convenient place.

When I mentioned this to the priest he said that there were old tales of days before the disaster and flood when our ancestors used to do that sort of thing in a big way. If there is any truth in that it would still be done, surely? The story is probably just an old priest's tale. When the goatskin was passed round I took a good pull before I passed it on.

The sun was hot and we rested after we had eaten. I lay back in the shade of a fruit tree with my hands clasped behind my head and thought about growing the round roots. Well, to be more accurate, the problem of preparing the ground for planting them. I was thinking about the old priest's tale and how you might grow things. I could see that it would be useful to have all of one kind of plant growing in one place and we could do with a lot more of some things too. It seemed to me that the only way to plant enough and still have time to hunt while you waited for your plants to grow was to use an ox to help you break the ground. If you had a sling made of hide and you let the ox pull it, a strong man could hold a pointed log in the sling

and use it to break the ground for the seed. In a way it would be like opening a woman for seed, if you see my analogy in all its detail, but not as much fun as mating though.

I looked at the blueness of the sky through the leaves of the tree and thought that, if this tree was watered in dry weather, it might thrive better and we might get more fruit from it. I thought that I'd try it some day when the goddess moved me.

When the sun had dropped a bit I got to my feet and said, "Right, let's get that stone raised and we're finished for the moment."

My words were received with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, but the gang roused themselves nevertheless and wandered over to the stone. There was no sign of Po-atl but he had probably found someone to play 'Snail up the Snake' with.

We edged the foot of the stone down the sloped side of the hole until it was in place and then used logs too wide to go into the sloped trench. We laid these at right angles to the stone, so that it could be lifted and levered a little at a time into an upright position. When it was upright we filled in the hole around it and the slope as well.

The scheme was my idea and I was quite proud of it. The plan had worked well on six other stones in the circle and it worked well this time too but, before we had finished the filling in, we had visitors. The priest and the astronomer arrived to see how we were getting on.

"Well, well. And how is it going?" asked the priest. Oh he does annoy me sometimes. He is no older than me, but he's so patronising and, even though our jobs are completely different, I'm his equal, aren't I? I don't think he likes the idea of women doing anything non-domestic, which is why he is so caustic towards the astronomer as well. I could see us women doing nothing but having babies, growing food and cooking it if he had his way. Apart from all that, he could see how it was going.

"All right," I said. "We've almost finished."

"I don't see your apprentice." remarked the priest, looking around.

"Po-atl? Well he was around at lunchtime. I haven't had time to notice since."

"Probably playing 'Snail up the Snake' with somebody or other," laughed the astronomer shaking her head.

"It's no laughing matter," said the priest sternly and, I thought, rather sourly. "Itzapec is still remarkably young but Po-atl is supposed to be learning the trade. He has to be fit for the job."

He turned to me. "You've got to do something about him this time." He will keep talking about me as if I'm not there.

"Make him carve games on the stone, spirals and holes for the counters," suggested the astronomer brightly.

The priest glowered at her but I was glad she was not taking it too seriously. As a matter of fact that might be just the thing to cure him once and for all. It would sound like fun and might even be fun for

a while, but I wouldn't mind betting that the fifth or the tenth spiral would sound less of a good idea than the first. I laughed a bit at the thought.

"I'll tell him you want the stone decorated the moment he turns up," I said, and laughed again at the thought of Po-atl's face when he got to the tenth spiral.

"We didn't come here to discuss Po-atl and his silly games," interrupted the priest severely.

I was rather glad he was getting to the point at last. I knew he hadn't come out to discuss Po-atl, though actually he had brought up the subject. I knew that his enquiries about progress were not the reason for his visit either, though that was the only other thing he had mentioned so far.

"No," I replied noncommittally, and waited for him to go on.

"There will be an eclipse next week." he said.

"Yes?" I said and waited.

"It will be almost complete."

The astronomer had worked that out and told him; he hadn't calculated that himself, I knew that.

"Yes?" Oh I can be very unhelpful at times.

"When the villagers panic I will sacrifice the prisoners."

"The prisoners are hardly responsible for the movements of the sun," I told him. He was beginning to irritate me and I couldn't help myself.

"People will naturally think there is a connection between my

sacrifice and the sun's return," he said. "While the whole thing is fresh in their minds I shall tell them we need a full, stone temple, as great as any in the old stories."

I stared at his tortuous thinking and ambition. I looked at the astronomer but her face was impassive. I wondered if she had made a mistake but it wasn't very likely. She possibly guessed my thoughts because she said, "Three of the four cycles meet and complete next week for the first time in nearly three thousand years." I was impressed.

"The first time since.."

"Yes," she said, "The first time since then."

Watching stars bores me. Personally I'd rather sleep in the hours of dark or mate with a nice strong man if I'm in the mood - that's how I got my daughter, but she's another story altogether. Still, I'm glad we're not all the same and I suppose you get used to staying up at night if you're an astronomer. She knots strips of hide to remember where the planets are, same as I do when I'm planning a building except, of course, that she has a lot more to remember. She has strips of hide hanging from two sticks across the whole width of her house. It's like walking into a spider's web, going into her house. She uses the stones and wooden posts to predict things like festivals and seasons as well. That's not very complicated. Both the priest and I can do it. Eclipses? That's another matter entirely.

The priest waited until the astronomer wandered off to check her measurements yet again, hanging around with something unsaid.

There was a look in his eyes that I didn't much like. Mind you, I didn't like the rest of him either.

"Itzapec," he said slowly, making the word sound like a threat, "You have a circle round your finger. It's properly called a ring and you got it from your mother." I glanced at my hand. I don't know what kind of stone or bone it is, but it's a pretty little decoration.

"Yes?"

"I want it."

"It's not for barter."

"I don't want to give you anything for it. It is of no real use. When the eclipse comes around next week and I make my sacrifices I will tell the people that there is something angering the Gods and I must find out what it is. I will discover it is the circle of stone on your finger - your ring, and demand that you give it to me."

The look in his eyes was - was what? Covetous? Evil? Calculating? Greedy? Ruthless? Cunning? It was all of those things and something more that one could not quite put a finger on - or in, perhaps. I resolved that he would not have this thing - this 'ring'.

"Mark well now." He said, "I will have the ring, even if I have to sacrifice you to get it."

So that was why he was so concerned about the progress of my apprentice! Well, warned was warned. I didn't say anything at all, but he was certainly not having it.

The eclipse was total, like the astronomer said, and it came more or

less when she said too. The priest was ready for it. For a couple of days before he went about muttering that the Gods were angry and when the eclipse began he sacrificed the three prisoners like he said and three young men from the village, which was pretty wasteful I thought.

Afterwards he took all the credit for bringing back the sun and got the villagers to promise him a much bigger temple with earthworks and a decorated stone circle. But he also said that the Gods were still angry because something important was being held back from them and he'd have to go into a trance to consult the Gods at full moon. Then he gave me another evil look.

But by the time of the eclipse I was ready too. I didn't say anything, mostly because of my vows, but I had made up my mind I wasn't going to build his damned temple for him. Or be the sacrifice at its completion. Or let him take the ring. I was leaving the village.

I'd been gone nearly a week before I gave any thought to the 'ring'. That something has a name suggests that there are others of the same sort, although I have seen no other. To describe it in more detail I could say that it fits on my finger as a decoration or possibly a symbol of some thing now forgotten. If you could imagine a piece of hide tied round your finger, this was a piece of very thin stone or bone that slipped on like that. I wondered what it was and where my mother acquired it. I had received it from my mother when she died. I had, as I said before, never seen another one but I wasn't surprised the priest

coveted it when I thought about it. Strange that he should know its name, though, and perhaps wanted it for some purpose.

I had traded two of my four oxen for the horse I was riding and some hides. I'd loaded them, along with some food and various other things, including my daughter, onto the remaining two oxen, and set out north.

Strictly speaking the two I kept weren't oxen at all, since there was a male and a female and the male wasn't castrated, but you know what I mean. It sounds as if I rode off at a steady trot but all I could actually manage was a shambling walk and I had to drive the oxen to keep even that up for long. Still, we made steady progress and, after a week, there was no sign of pursuit. I wondered how long it would take the priest to realise I had actually left - not long I supposed - and what he would do about it. He might well get hunters from the village to hunt me down. They had agreed to build his temple readily enough. At any rate I put as much distance as I could between me and the village.

The stories of those who had travelled further afield was that the weather as you left the mountains and crossed the far plain had improved in recent years with less rain, warmer temperatures and much more sun. I didn't know how much credence to give these tales because they were anything but first hand. The teller at best 'knew somebody who heard it from a reliable friend who had heard it from somebody who had actually ...' You understand me?

At first the country was the foothills of the mountains proper

to the south-east of us but as I left them behind the countryside was increasingly flat, with gentle undulations and more trees. I crossed one or two smallish rivers and saw only one village in the first two weeks. Villages didn't worry me much, because two people, both female - one, at eleven, more a child than a woman - were hardly a threat. Groups of hunters I was not so sure about. They might find two women with a horse and two oxen a tempting prey and even if we escaped with our lives, my daughter and I, females from another tribe, were often fair game when it came to mating. It isn't that I have no liking for sex. I like it, but I like to choose my men before I mate.

In point of fact I could have a lot to offer the right group. I could measure out the ground for houses and select stones for them; calculate seasons, raise huge stones in a circle, make pots and, at a pinch, do most of those jobs usually left to women as well. What's more, I could sling a stone as well as most men. I am one of many talents, even if I do say it myself.

The river was rather wide as well as looking rather deep and fast. I studied it and decided to camp and postpone making up my mind about a crossing until the next day, so we looked around for a suitable spot. I am uncertain what made me choose a shallow valley, almost hidden by bushes, but we not only set up camp but did so discreetly. I built the lean-to of hides against an outcrop of rock and tethered the horse and oxen among some scrubby undergrowth. When I had finished the camp was almost invisible. We gathered up a few sticks

but, before I had lit a fire, I heard the sound of a group approaching the river and decided not to strike flint until I'd had a look.

It was a mixed party with, as far as I could see, about eight adult males and six adult females, with a handful of children and no old people at all. I listened to them from the bushes and decided they must be from further towards the direction of the rising sun because, although I understood most of what they were saying, they seemed to have a noticeable accent.

I listened further and gathered that there had been two parties originally. One mixed lot had left their village, probably because it had become too large, but whether they had chosen to leave or been forced out was not clear from what I heard. They may well have been forced, because the men must have been a pretty weedy bunch. When they'd run into a small band of hunters the men in the party had been either killed or driven off and the women given no choice about making up a new group.

The one who was more or less their leader was not a very interesting looking individual as a man, being rather large and unkempt. He was busy throwing out contradictory instructions and orders, and he appeared to have a couple of women too which, considering the imbalance of the party, was not a sensible arrangement. He was not appealing to look at, but my biggest objection to him was that he appeared stupid. His choice of campsite was random and he did little besides shout his orders. I thought that his second in charge looked younger, more presentable and more

intelligent. I thought I could handle being his woman if I could get rid of the leader of the group. I glanced back at my daughter. At eleven she was still more child than woman but she was maturing. Could I make her enough of a woman to attract the attention of the stupid lump who was the present leader of the group? I turned back to watch and listen.

Hunters they may have been, but they obviously knew nothing about being hunted because they were frustratingly unaware of anyone else. I dared not be too obvious because I wanted to get their leader alone and I would not be able to do that if I aroused their suspicions. The question was how to get him on his own.

I darkened Mayapec's eyelids with kohl, which I was rather reluctant to do, since I hadn't much and the chances of meeting a trader out here are almost nil, so I wouldn't be able to acquire any more. Next I reddened her lips with berries. They could have done with being riper but, as they don't keep from one season to the next, I hadn't any old ones left. I made sure there were some left for me, because I would need them later, then braided Mayapec's hair and sat her in plain view of anyone entering our shallow valley, while still close to cover I could use. I hoped it would work because I valued my fingers!

I took my sling and an oxbone knife with a good stabbing edge on it, but I had simply no idea how on earth to get him up the shallow bank to my vantage point. He sat on a fallen tree at the edges of the camp like a largish tangle in humanity's hair and still gave

everyone else his orders. It was then that I had my piece of luck - he went into the bushes to relieve himself. I still had to sling three pebbles to get him to look in the right direction and even then my plan, such as it was, almost fell through because he was such an idle lump. I think he was almost too idle to investigate a woman alone. It certainly wasn't suspicion or caution because once he started towards Mayapec he didn't exercise even ordinary care. He just walked over to her, looked her over, said "Hello woman," and started to pull her clothes up to mate her.

I would rather have given Mayapec a gentler introduction to mating and, anyway, I think she's a bit young to have offspring yet, so she can find herself a man later to live with. One who would give a lot more thought to her pleasure than this lump was doing. Mayapec didn't like his attentions much and I don't blame her, but I waited until he was well into the business before I came out of the bushes and stabbed him. He got himself out of Mayapec and rolled over to reach for his knife, so I stabbed him again.

All in all it was a rather messy but not noisy job. Mayapec and I tidied ourselves up, braided our hair - all the usual things - struck camp, loaded up the animals and went to join the group by the river. I was quite looking forward to the second in command promoting himself to chief and to being his woman. As for the other women in the group, well, I could handle them.

I smiled to myself, flexed my fingers now that they were safe and felt the ring, conscious of it for the first time since leaving my

village. Perhaps I could use it help establish a position of power. At any rate I urged the animals to a shambling walk towards the camp by the river.

CHAPTER 10

The silence which followed Frank's story was broken after several seconds, when Gill commented, "That seems to settle any doubts about the ring's great age and squarely puts the question we've been dodging."

"Which is?" asked Alicia.

"What," said Gill slowly and clearly, "was a metal ring doing in the stone age. Not in the transition to the bronze age. Not 'nearly' the bronze age, but far back. Well before anything else metal was known."

"You know," said Alicia, "For a couple of years now I've been worrying about that transition to the bronze age, not that it's entirely relevant."

"Yeah?" Frank prompted her.

"Well, Bronze is mostly ninety per cent copper and ten percent tin to help it keep an edge better," said Alicia.

"So?"

"There has to have been a long period when copper was used on its own. before anyone started experimenting with alloys," said Alicia.

Gill couldn't see what Alicia was driving at. "Perhaps there was some overlap," she said.

Steve, on the other hand, saw the point straight away. "So some stone age bloke thought 'I'll melt some of this rock and some of that rock and use the stuff I get from it to make a sword'?" he asked.

"Exactly," said Alicia. "Of course there would be overlap - there are still a few stone age peoples around today. What I meant is that there isn't room in the accepted chronology of human history for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of copper age.

"But," protested Gill, "I didn't know what the ring was made of or, at least, the person I was in the stone age didn't know." She turned to Frank. "And I'll bet you didn't know either."

"No. Nor I did," said Frank. "Whoever it was telling the story."

"You were a woman," said Steve, rather obviously.

"Quite a ruthless one," added Gill, equally obviously.

"Survival of the fittest," remarked Alicia, "They were pretty ruthless times."

"Ah!" protested Gill, "but you'd expect a woman to care what happened to her offspring, wouldn't you? That woman more or less allowed her own daughter to be raped."

"Without condoning rape to-day, I don't think she saw it that way at all," said Alicia. "What she did was use her daughter's sexuality to bait a trap for everybody's good as she saw it, and for her own ambitions too."

"The end justifies the means?" asked Gill, almost derisively. "Anyway you're dodging the really mystifying question."

Alicia sighed. "That's the one question mark which puts everything in all the stories in doubt. Chronology tells us for certain that the ring could not possibly have been handed down from the past." She paused, looking both puzzled and frustrated.

"All right," she continued, "Where did it come from and how did it get where it was? What do you think Frank?"

Apart from his one confused remark, Frank hadn't said anything and looked lost in thought. His answer, when it came, suggested that he had been reflecting rather than listening.

"I said, 'What do you think, Frank?'"

"It's the Mayan problem only more so," he answered obscurely.

"What do you mean?" asked Alicia.

"If you stargaze without instruments you've got to do it hundreds, perhaps thousands of years to get the longer cycles right and even eclipses come only once or twice in a lifetime. To-day we live much longer but we still need to travel long distances to observe them with any regularity. Predicting them requires a high degree of accuracy, especially if you think the sun revolves round the earth and don't realise an eclipse of the sun is caused by the moon."

"I've read that the Mayans spent a lot of time and effort on time and calendars," said Alicia.

"The Mayans didn't just spend a lot of time on time, they were obsessed by it. They could reckon the length of a solar year accurate to within an error of one day in six thousand years. That's more accurate than anyone else until this century. They could work out the length of a Venus year to within .08 of a day. They had a calendar year of 260 days divided into 10 months and in cycles of 20 years - that's more than eighteen thousand day and month combinations. They didn't, as far as we know, have any instruments to help them nor, as far as we know, did they have 'hours' or other subdivisions of the day. Remember too that we're talking about people

who didn't invent the wheel and only just about reached the end of the stone age. But they did have a nought."

"A nought?" queried Steve, listening and thinking rather than talking.

"The Romans didn't have any concept of place in columns of numbers," explained Manjy. "If you wanted to add, say, three hundred and forty three, five hundred and fifty, forty and nine hundred and thirty eight, you couldn't put them under each other because you'd have a sum like this." and she wrote on the back of an envelope:

CCCXLIII

DL

XL

CMXXXIII

"So you see," she added, "when the Indians or the Arabs or whoever it was invented nine digits and a nought and the concept of place, it was a big step forward."

"You can say that again," remarked Frank.

"And the Mayans had that concept as well?" Alicia mused.

"Yeah, though they counted in twenties, so they had nineteen digits and a nought."

"They were really sold on measuring time, weren't they?" said Steve thoughtfully.

"You wouldn't believe how sold," Frank continued. "They went to the trouble of working out cycles going back four ... hundred ... million ... years. They carved calendars on the sides of pyramids and when some enterprising archaeologist stripped one of them off there was another pyramid of calendars underneath. And another under that."

"They were totally obsessed with time," said Gill. "I wonder why?"

"But the folks in my story knew a lot about the cyclic nature of time too."

"Cyclic?" queried Steve, still listening and thinking.

"Well I guess I should have said 'measurement of time' rather than time itself. The Mayans measured time because they believed everything that took place had happened before and that by detailing the past they could predict the future."

"Astrology?" asked Alicia.

"Yes and no," Frank answered. "Like the priest in my story. It wasn't just astrology, though that came into it. There were three other things in my story that put me in mind of the Mayans. The woman in my story twice mentioned losing a finger if anything happened to her daughter. The Maya had a custom which involved burying an adult finger with a child. Coincidentally, so did a lot of tribes of American Indians and now we have a similar custom mentioned in this story."

"Now that is odd," said Alicia, "Was this story set in central America do you think?"

"I wondered that, but I don't think so. It was warm but not hot and I seemed to be in the foothills of much older mountains."

Frank thought about it. "If it was the Americas at all it was somewhere like the southern Appalachians, but it felt closer to the sea than that. Where the terrain is right the climate is wrong. I'd say it was Europe somewhere. Maybe France."

Steve was thinking about a book he had read in the prison library. Gill was thinking about something else.

"The storyteller said that there was more sun and less rain

further ... I think she meant 'further north'. What sort of weather had there been?" she asked.

"Funny you should ask. I think there had been a long period of cold, overcast weather. Not a long period as in several months, I'm talking about several centuries. Time out of mind."

"I was wondering how far we'd gone. Could this have been the end of the ice age?"

"I don't think so," said Frank, "I think we're talking about heavily overcast weather, not ice."

"It would have to be a slow warming to be the end of the ice age, I think." commented Alicia. "The glaciers came as far south as Southern Britain at their height, but they began to recede about twelve or fourteen thousand years ago."

"As a matter of interest," said Steve, "why wasn't there a warmer area in western Europe where the Gulf Stream warmed the land?"

"I've never really thought about it," Alicia frowned. "I suppose there is some explanation but, now you point it out, you'd expect the pattern of average temperatures to be the same then as now. Lower, not different"

"But they weren't, were they?" said Steve, "You could reasonably infer that the Gulf Stream didn't warm western Europe because the Gulf Stream was diverted by an area of land that existed then and doesn't exist now."

There was a longish silence broken by Frank. "It would have to be a pretty large chunk of land to deflect ocean currents."

Alicia changed the subject, just as Steve was beginning to be really interested in hearing Frank's further thoughts. "You said there a

couple of other things in the story which put you in mind of the Mayans," she said, "What were they?"

"Names" said Frank, "Names were one thing. I'm not sure what the woman herself was called, I rather think she had the same name as the daughter."

"No. The mother was Itzapec the daughter was Mayapec," Alicia corrected.

" Anyway," Frank continued, "Po-atl sounds Central American, though it's more Aztec or Toltec than Mayan, but Itzapec is definitely Mayan. Chichin Itza was a huge Mayan centre with substantial remains to-day and PEC is a typically Mayan ending. And I hardly need mention Mayapec."

"We have enough anomalies already," observed Alicia with a sigh. "First there's a metal ring far back in the stone age, and we haven't even started to tackle that one. Second, there are memories of a time when agriculture was widespread, we didn't eat meat and didn't have human sacrifice. Thirdly there are Central American names in Europe, fourthly there's a trade in Kohl at least three thousand years BC and last of all there's Steve's question about the Gulf Stream. It's not part of the story but it's certainly an anomaly. That's a lot of problems, and yet the stories tend to 'hang together' with what we know in so many areas."

She pushed back her hair in a gesture that might have indicated either frustration or concentration.

"I think the other thing which put me in mind of the Mayans is possibly as important," said Frank. "These people couldn't write and kept records of their reckonings with knots in cord. Both are true of the early Mayans and the Incas. The later Mayans had a sort of

hieroglyphic writing which they used to record calendar dates, and some possibly early documents have been preserved in museums. Apart from those records and some sacred documents destroyed by the priests with the Conquistadors, they seem not to have been used for much."

"It's perhaps no coincidence that the Mayan features came in the Mayan expert's story," said Alicia. "However, you may not have known that spirals carved in stone have presented European archaeologists with one of their biggest puzzles. Your story came up with a silly but plausible explanation of the source of them. Carving spirals was almost a habit and your story does explain where they came from. It's almost silly enough to be true."

"I didn't know anything about spirals, but I must say the whole experience is a lot more uncanny and unsettling than I expected. I see what Gill meant by not having deliberately invented anything. I'll tell you something else we should have guessed from Steve."

"What's that?" asked Gill.

"Something you kinda hinted at too, but I should've guessed. When you sit in on someone else's story, dream or whatever you call it, you get their story and that's all. I know things not included in the story. Like the weather further north - I think it was north she mentioned and the fact she ... I was wearing the amulet affair, but more as a personal ornament than anything. Steve could answer my questions from the point of view of the storyteller. Well I could do the same."

"I think I could too," agreed Gill.

"You know," said Manjy, "I think you all have past lives

connected with the ring. You know things the people know but beyond the ring's experience."

"Too much of a coincidence to have three people at once connected with the ring," Alicia almost.

"I'll bet all five of us are connected with the ring," persisted Manjy. "Maybe even Alan as well."

Alicia was dismissive "That's an even bigger coincidence," she said. "I've heard of psychometry - reading the past of an object psychically, though I've always been sceptical before. I've heard stories of Tom Lethbridge dowsing for archeological answers with a pendulum and being right when more traditional colleagues were wrong, much to their annoyance. All the same, both are a lot easier to take than a belief in this all being a case of reincarnation."

"I wouldn't like to say whether psychometry or reincarnation is more likely", said Frank, "We ought to sleep on it before we decide but I must say, even though Alicia has logic on her side, I sure felt as if I was the woman in my story."

"You don't need to be the same sex in each incarnation," observed Manjy.

"It doesn't matter what sex you are when it comes to psychometry," argued Alicia.

"I think Frank's right. We should sleep on it," said Gill. "Perhaps if the rest of us try it on, someone will dream up an answer to the problem of a metal ring," she added.

Alicia yawned. "Mm. Maybe so," she said. "But nobody else is experimenting tonight."

She picked up the ring and stood up as the sound of the revellers returning from the pub drifted through the camp. She had the

cabinet drawer open as the Alan entered the cabin.

"Can I have a quick word, Alicia?" he asked, and continued as she nodded, "Coming back from the pub to-night I saw your bird watcher watching the camp again."

"Bird watcher?" said Gill, "There was a bird watcher the first morning, before we started the dig proper."

"Oh, he's been seen around the dig a lot," Alan said.

"It may be nothing," said Alicia, "but I think we'll be more careful about locking up the place and on security generally."

"Do you want me to leave the generator on all night?" asked Steve.

"I think that would be going too far." answered Alicia. "I'll just be more security conscious is all for the moment. It's probably nothing."

"Just thought you'd like to know," said Alan and he left to join the volunteers again.

Alicia put the ring with some other exhibits in the cabinet. As an afterthought she crossed back to the desk, took up the box of computer disks and put it into one of drawers of the filing cabinet as well. She closed the drawers firmly, locked the whole cabinet and stuffed the key into her jeans pocket, commenting, "I think the risk is more imagined than real, but we can play safe by locking the cabinet and locking the cabin."

"I don't think would be thieves can count on anyone driving a fast getaway car on Hoy," remarked Steve.

Alicia looked startled for a moment and then laughed. "No," she said, "You couldn't drive far, but we'll just play safe."

CHAPTER 11

When Steve went to turn on the generator next morning, he had his waterproof on and the hood up to keep off a steady downpour. The ground squelched beneath his feet and water gathered in the hollows of the tarpaulin sheltering the generator.

Alicia knew there was no hope of any outside work when she woke to the drumming of rain on the caravan roof. She could, of course, find plenty of work to do herself and she could usefully employ several of the university team, but the volunteer labour represented something of a problem because there wasn't much to do on Hoy in the rain. Correction. There wasn't anything to do on Hoy in the rain.

Alicia needn't have worried too much, in the short term anyway. After breakfast most of the volunteers seemed to be more than happy to settle down with Trivial Pursuits and the radio, while Frank, Alan and Manjy helped Alicia with the cataloguing of finds and Gill went with Steve to meet the ferry.

Alicia was mildly surprised when Gill announced that she was going to meet the ferry and was that okay but, as Steve showed no surprise, Alicia assumed that he had already agreed and didn't give the matter much further thought. She had already turned her attention elsewhere before the Landrover oozed carefully out of the field and onto the road.

Manjy was one of those people for whom computers seemed to jump through hoops. Alicia, of course, had used them extensively before and Gill too was reasonably conversant with them as a tool, but Manjy was a natural. Alicia was thinking about her doctorate and the need to be exact about everything, so she was happy to let Manjy handle the computer and simply direct the recording of data and locations.

In the Landrover the windscreen wipers slapped steadily as it rained equally steadily. Gill shook her wet hair and flicked it aside with her hands.

"So we slept on it," she said, "Now what do you think? Is it reincarnation or psychometry?"

"Hmm," replied Steve. "I can't quite make up my mind, but I certainly felt that I was that person. On the other hand I have to say that Alicia's right about the chances of three people connected with the ring coming together at any one time. Even if you believe in reincarnation in the first place," he added.

"And you don't?"

"I don't know. Before the last few days I hadn't given much thought to death and what might happen after it. Since the business with the ring and my story ... Well." He left the sentence unfinished. The engine rumbled, the road wheels splashed and the wipers still slapped rhythmically.

"I was almost jealous of the girl in your story," said Gill. "It was just as if she was real."

"I know what you mean on both counts. However, I don't think the storyteller was doing anything other than following a ritual. I

don't think there was anything personal in it."

"Making love to someone's pretty personal," Gill objected.

"You're the expert in the bronze age, of course, but I didn't feel that there was much commitment other than a religious one. Until the end maybe, and even then it was more 'survival of the group' than a personal commitment. Anyway, I felt you were untouchable as the priestess." He paused. "I could understand that bloke wanting you on his last night on earth. If I had to go too, I think that's what I'd choose ..."

"To make love to someone?" she asked.

"To make love to you," he answered.

"Oh well ..." she said, carefully not looking at him to cover her confusion. "It's not actually necessary to wait until your last night on earth. Not in this incarnation, anyway."

Steve considered this. He thought it was probably an invitation, though this wasn't exactly the time or place. He both admired and desired Gill but he didn't want to get his face slapped. Nor did he want her to feel rejected by what amounted to a refusal, especially as he didn't feel like refusing.

"Well," he said, picking his words with some precision, "the girl you seem so worried about isn't around in this incarnation and there isn't anyone else, so I'm ... shall we say ... available."

"Pull over a minute." Gill suggested. "I may have been untouchable in that story, but I'm not untouchable here and now."

Steve stopped the Landrover in a gateway at the crest of a low hill overlooking the sea. There was no traffic, nobody about and no sound but the rain on the roof. Since there was little wind it ran almost silently down the windscreen, now that they had stopped.

"We have a few minutes to spare. We're early for the ferry, but not that early," he said, and put an arm round her, drawing her nearer.

"I didn't mean pull over and screw me right now," she said, possibly hiding her self-consciousness in bluntness and uncertainty behind a need to make a fresh start. "Tempting though that might be as an idea. I mean, I know we haven't got much time and, although this is a quiet spot, it's still a bit public for me." She really did feel a growing attachment to the reformed hooligan.

"In this incarnation," she added, "I'm quite a shy girl."

But she wasn't too shy to respond to Steve's kiss.

"What did you do for a living, before all the trouble?" Gill asked when the passion had eased a little. She felt an urgent need to know more about him.

"I was a mechanic in my father's garage," he said. "I trained as a cook when I left school, but I went into the garage when I couldn't find work."

"Man of many parts."

"Some of them not very useful to society," Steve commented.

"But some of them very useful to me." said Gill with a grin. She leaned against him listening to the rain. "I wish we'd met before ..."
" She was going to say 'before I met Tony' but stopped.

"Before I got into trouble on the terraces?"

"No. I don't think that matters to me. It isn't the real you." She paused. "Why didn't you go back to you father's garage?"

She was expecting him to make some remark about getting away from trouble. Instead he said, "My father died while I was inside

and my mother sold the business. Then she died as well. A lot can happen in seven months, as I discovered. It all left me well off but jobless, which is not a desirable state of affairs for an ex-con."

There was a touch of bitterness in his voice warning Gill not to press him any further. Instead she kissed him again.

Manjy was entering information which referred to various spots which Frank was marking on a detailed plan of the excavations.

"I think I've figured out a way we can tell if it's reincarnation or psychometry," she said to Frank, looking up.

"Oh yeah," he responded, "What's that?"

Alicia stopped what she was doing and listened too as Manjy explained. "The ring would be the centre of psychometry," she said, "so let some of the volunteers unconnected with the group from the university try it on. If they don't experience anything, I'll put it on."

"Well if two of the volunteers don't experience anything and you do, I'll try it on as well." said Alicia.

"You're on. I'll just go and get two of the volunteers." Manjy almost ran out.

"What the hell's that all about?" demanded Alan.

"Well," said Frank. "There's so much to it that I don't know where to begin."

"For a start, what ring are you talking about?"

"The one we dug up," Frank told him. "Either psychometry or something like it is causing people who try on the ring to 'experience' events from the past of the ring. Steve, Gill and me, we've all had a sort of waking dream that the others shared."

"Manjy seems to think it's reincarnation not psychometry."

Alan said.

"She seems pretty convinced," Frank agreed.

"She believes in reincarnation anyway. That's a head start on us," Alicia told him.

"You really going to try the ring?" Frank asked.

"If Manjy gets a story from it I more or less promised."

"I have a gut feeling you both will," said Frank. "Logic says you're right about it being some kind of psychometry, but I feel she's right."

"This could be interesting," said Alan. "I think I'll join you this afternoon."

"If the ring is important, then perhaps the amulet will prove to be important in some way as well," said Frank.

The cabin door opened and Manjy came back in, followed by the two female volunteers. "Hey, what did you want us for?" asked the taller, more talkative one.

"Didn't Manjy explain, Carol?" asked Alicia.

"Not a word."

"Ah! Well, we'd like you both to do something silly, safe and simple for us." She turned to the cabinet and took the ring out of the drawer where she had put it for safekeeping.

"We'd like you to try this ring on as part of an experiment." Carol took the ring and examined it.

"Go on," Alicia urged her, "It won't bite you. It's the ring we found two days ago. We're trying to see what we can find out about the ring and its owner."

Carol still hesitated for a moment before she put it on, trying her little finger first and, when she found it very loose, transferring it to

her third finger. Manjy, Frank and Alicia all waited, half expecting another story: it was with the greatest difficulty that she kept up the pretence of an experiment on the size of the ring.

"Of course we could do this much more scientifically back at the University," said Alicia, "but we were too curious to wait, which finger did you put on? Oh yes. Third finger, right hand. Was it tight?"

"A bit. It needed to be about a size bigger really." Carol replied.

"OK." said Alicia, trying to sound businesslike as Carol tugged it off, "Give it to Peggy to try. She's a bit smaller than you."

The smaller girl took the ring and slipped it on. Again there was no response and again Alicia had to keep up the pretend experiment. "How is it?" she asked.

"A good fit. Could be just a little too large."

"Let's compare your hands," said Alicia, holding their hands up against each other, "If one of you's just a shade too big and one of you's just a shade too small, we have a good idea of the size of the original owner. Games like this aren't entirely without a point you know. Well, thanks a lot ladies."

"Mind if we get back to Trivial Pursuit?" asked Carol.

"Nope I don't mind, you get back. We've done for now," Alicia told her, "Thanks." She waited until the other two had closed the door behind them.

"I'll strangle you." she said to Manjy, and Frank laughed.

"Well she's made her point," said Frank. "If psychometry was the answer you'd expect the girls to get some response."

"She's made half of her point. She has to put the ring on and get a response to convince me."

"I don't think we ought to do that without Steve and Gill," said Manjy, "because they had the rest of the story of the ring and it doesn't seem fair to leave them out now."

"I guess we can wait a bit," admitted Frank.

Alicia glanced at her watch. "They'll be back any time now if the ferry was on time." she said. "Well have lunch earlyish in case the weather fines up." She looked out briefly at the steady rain. "If it doesn't clear up, Manjy can try the ring this afternoon." As she spoke she looked out and watched the Landrover as it squelched back into the field.

The ferry had brought in some mail as well as the usual fresh supplies and developed photographs and the letters were shared out. Frank's two had US. stamps; Manjy's was not in English; Gill's was from her parents, Steve didn't have one at all and Alicia had two - an official looking one with a typewritten address and the University frank stamped on it, and one from home. She opened and read the university one first.

"Professor Harrington's coming up to see how we're getting on with the dig," she said, putting the letter on the table. "I hope the weather clears up so he finds us busy."

"Does he say when he's coming?" asked Steve.

"Not exactly, but it's soon."

"Well it's not to-day," said Steve, "because there isn't another ferry 'till tomorrow. So let's finish trying on the ring to-day in case he wants to take it away with him."

"Why should he want to do that?" asked Alicia.

Steve, who had begun to open some cheese for sandwiches,

stopped and thought about it. "I don't know why I said that. For a moment I just sort of 'knew' he would. Well, might. For security perhaps. He might want to take all the small valuable finds."

"Curious," said Alicia, but didn't elaborate. "Well, we'll get on with lunch, then Manjy can try the ring."

"And don't forget your promise. If I do get a reaction from the ring, you're next Alicia."

"I haven't forgotten."

"I'll help Steve with lunch. I can't wait to continue the story," said Gill and opened the packets of soup mix.

After the lunch Trivial Pursuit was resumed and seemed to absorb all those not taken up with the ring, and so it was that the six of them were left to themselves without effort on their part.

"Right," said Manjy. "The other half of my proof. Carol and Peggy didn't get any reaction this morning, but I will. Let's have the ring."

"You're very sure of yourself," observed Alicia, handing it to her.

"I am," said Manjy, "and maybe we'll get the answer to the question of where it came from." She put it on the first finger of her long, thin hand.

CHAPTER 12

Everything was black. So black that the blackness was almost solid. Not just a total absence of light, but a darkness as if there had never been light in the world. I couldn't see my hand when I held it up, but it felt as if I still had one.

I didn't think the fall had knocked me out, even for a short time, just winded me. I moved my left arm and flexed my left wrist and fingers. Apart from a stinging where I had apparantly scraped my hand against something, they seemed to be all right. I did the same with the right and they seemed unharmed as well. I made no move from where I was, but I tested each leg in turn and satisfied myself that nothing was broken, then thought about my predicament.

We had been playing ball against a sort of natural cliff face, near my grandmother's home. The sun had begun to sink towards setting, so we had not been up from rest long and it was still very hot. Too hot to be playing ball, I suppose. Anyway, my sister and I had been using a ball made of real sap which came by boat from the far continent years ago before the island was destroyed. I had taken it from my father's possessions when he wasn't looking, so when it disappeared amongst the rocks, I had to find it and while I was looking I heard their voices in the hot air. There were three men.

"That's her house over there," one of them said.

"Right," said the one who seemed to be giving the orders. "If she's not there we look for it and take it away with us. We only kill her if she's there and resists."

"Are we going in now?" asked the third.

"Get your breath back and have a drink of water," said the one in charge, "You might have to run if anyone sees you."

They sat down by some rocks in the shade of a carob tree.

I wriggled out of the rocks, taking care to stay out of sight of the intruders and went to warn my grandmother, for there was no house but hers and no one else around the men might mean.

When I slipped into the two roomed hut, she was getting a meal ready. She listened as I told her of the men.

"I don't know what they want but they're here for something," I said.

"The ring. They've come for the ring. Well they will not have it."

I had heard her speak of rings, though I think there are now few left in the world and hers is the only one I have never even seen. From a shelf she took a wooden box about two hands square and one hand deep, better made than any other I had seen.

"Give this to your mother," she said. "Tell her to guard it well."

I took the box from her.

"You're a good boy, but don't get caught," she said.

The sun would still be sharp and bright on the mountains. Trees grow on flatter land but the heights themselves are rocky and bare, with no trees and just a few scrubby bushes, thorns and the odd cactus plant. They are rugged and sharp with deep, dark chasms and ravines cutting through the ranges, where the sun only penetrates briefly at the height of the day. It's not that the mountains are so high - the highest ones are only just high enough to have snow on them in the less hot time of year - but they are lonely, rough, arid and rocky, watered only by the occasional river. Mind you, where there is water and the land is flatter, things grow. Our group of houses is built into a very steep hillside by a small lake where chirrimoyas thrive and I love the fruit of the chirrimoya tree.

The mountains slope down to the sea in places, ending in rocks and cliffs that jut and tumble out into the water, which is usually a patch of vivid blue, about as far as you can walk from our house before it gets too hot to walk.

My sister was still near the house and I wondered whether the men were within sight of it as well. Standing well back in the shadows I called her. I had the beginnings of an idea. I opened the box. In it was my grandmother's ring and some kind of necklace. It looked as if there had once been other rings in the box, which supported my grandmother's story which I'll come to later. Itza came up in answer to my call.

"I thought you went into the rocks to look for the ball. You left me alone out there and it's not fair."

I answered in a lowish voice. "There are three bad men out there want to steal from grandma. I want you to take some things straight to mummy for safekeeping. Straight there, you understand?"

She nodded.

"Now I'm going to try and make them follow me away from the house."

I took the ring and the necklace from the wooden box and gave them to Itza. She put them in her pocket.

I looked out into the sunlight but, although I couldn't see the men, I knew more or less where they were because I could see the tree beneath which they rested.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

Itza nodded again and I strode off in the general direction of the men. I was level with them but more than an arrow's shot away before they noticed the box.

"Hey! That looks like the ring box," cried the one in charge and he yelled, "What are you carrying in that box?"

"None of your business," I shouted back, and began to run.

With shouts and general noise the other two leapt to their feet and they all chased after me.

At first I followed a track and the ground, though stony and rising steeply uphill, was even. I panted and sweated but they were gaining on me, so I turned off amongst the tumbled rocks, weaving

and dodging. I did lose one of the men, but the other two were still with me and one was closer than before. I saw the dark opening of a narrow cave ahead and dived in.

"Where is the little brat? We can't have lost him," I heard one of them say.

"Probably hiding in a cave or behind a rock. He can't have gone far."

I edged further back into the shadows. The cave was narrow and dark but showed no signs of ending yet, so I inched still deeper, feeling my way into the obscurity offered by the narrow cleft. Then with a sharp crack I fell amid a shower of dirt and pebbles into the blackness.

The cave was utterly black. I felt carefully all round to make sure there was something to lean back on, then moved into a sitting position. I won't say I was all that comfortable, but I felt better than I did before. The air was warm and dry and, though it was still, it seemed wholesome enough to breathe, which was just as well seeing as I had no choice. There wasn't a sound: not the running of water, nor the dripping of water; not the stirring of air or the wings of a bat. It was as if all my senses except that of touch had been suspended by my fall.

Perhaps they had. Perhaps I was already dead and this was the afterlife. This didn't seem to be much of a fun way to spend time after death. I could see why a person might want another body! On the whole I concluded that I probably wasn't dead yet. On the other

hand, my position looked pretty serious.

From underneath and around me I amassed a small pile of gravel and pebbles. The first pebble I threw landed a couple of feet in front of me, I heard it chink. The next small stone I threw a bit further - and nothing. There was silence and I was about to throw another when there came a faint rattle beyond and far below me. It shook me to discover there was a big drop just alongside the spot where I had been lying and I used the remainder of my pebbles establishing that I seemed to be high up on the side of a very substantial cavern.

Outside Itza should have reached my mother and she might be searching for me, or at least wondering where I was. Against that, the three men would still be looking for me and I didn't fancy my chances if they found me first.

The family would sit outside to eat just before sunset and afterwards grandmother would probably tell her story of how I come with a warning. Like as not she would go on yet again about remembering when her grandmother had told her she had come across the shorter crossing from the island itself before it was destroyed, to settle somewhere west of here. Well, if she was still alive she would.

My grandmother's story didn't take much telling and it's probably true - well, more or less true - because it was lacking in obvious embellishments.

Apparently my great great grandmother was a priestess and in those far off days, before the rock from the sky, priestesses didn't

usually marry. The idea of priests and priestesses living in the villages came after the flood when, I suppose, people had to do more than one job.

Anyway, they - and don't ask me who 'they' are because my grandmother doesn't seem to know - had built a temple on the coast near a port and town on an estuary. A temple is a place where there are lots of priests and priestesses and an estuary is just where a proper river flows into the sea. I can't really imagine what a port is and I don't think my grandmother can either. I know it has something to do with unloading bigger boats. I've only ever seen the ones they catch fish in and they pull those up onto the beach to unload them. I suppose those in my grandmother's story must have been bigger.

There was a big day coming up when several cycles all came to an end together, and all of the priests and priestesses prepared for it. Then this day a huge rock crashed out of the sky and into the ocean somewhere beyond the island. It set off mountains of fire and great columns of smoke. Three of the younger priestesses including my great great grandmother ran away to get a better view from a cliff where some mountains jutted out into the sea and you could see the top of the sacred mountain on a clear day. They were high up looking at the fire and smoke when a huge wave struck the temple and the town and the boats.

The wave must have been pretty big, because it completely washed away the temple and the town and most of the people. My great great grandmother was upset. The three of them were on their

way down to see if there were any survivors when they met three men on their way to higher ground. They were the only survivors from a boat which had been coming to the port at the time of the big wave. The boat itself had been wrecked, most of the people aboard killed and most of the goods lost, but one of the men was carrying a wooden box he had saved.

According to my grandmother they camped for three days among some rocks with makeshift shelters and not much food, while they searched unsuccessfully for survivors. They decided they would have to search further afield and for that they would have to split up. The women were priestesses, one of the men was a priest, one was an engineer and the third was a young man who had just started training as a priest. They talked over the whole situation and finally it was decided that they would have to make two groups of three. One group would cross the narrow stretch of water to the big land while the other group would move along the coast of this land. They would look for survivors, individuals living alone, explorers and traders who had gone inland and so on. They decided they would have to try and preserve knowledge and re-establish the old ways. They also agreed that they would have to mate themselves and encourage large families if they had to, since nobody knew then how complete or extensive the disaster was.

Then the priest opened his little wooden box. In it were six rings and a talisman to contain their strength. He had been bringing them by boat with five other priests who were to rule the six temples

of Poseidon. Things had changed now and he gave the rings, one each, to the six survivors. The priest also had his ritual dagger with a polished bronze blade and a hilt worked into the shape of a wyvern's foot.

My great great grandmother had been given one of the rings and, for some reason, she also had the little box with the talisman in it to look after. The priest took his dagger, one of the priestesses and the young trainee with him and set off to the big land. My grandmother came eastwards along the coast. She had taught her daughter astronomy and her granddaughter - that's my grandmother - had learnt the trade too and she taught my father who was teaching my older sister.

The blackness of the cave was no blacker and no less black than the moment after my fall. It was unchanging. The silence was complete as before. If the men were still searching for me or even my family had begun looking for me, I couldn't hear them. Of course, unless they saw the men they wouldn't even know where to look. I thought I had probably fallen through into this cave just about where the rock was, which would explain why I had fallen about twice my own height without hurting myself much.

Since it was clear nobody would come I climbed up onto the rock, which was pretty tricky in the darkness, because I could only do it by feel. I could just reach the roof and, feeling around, I thought I could feel the hole I had fallen through and imagined that the

darkness was perhaps a little less intense here. However, I still couldn't see and, what was worse, I couldn't reach anything to get hold of so, frustrated, I had to get down.

I wasn't sure which way I was facing or how big the rock, and I was, not surprisingly, unsteady. I grabbed at part of the roof for support. As I grabbed, pieces came away in my hands. I rolled sideways in a shower of a small rocks, pebbles and dirt. I fell a bit awkwardly with my feet first. I felt a sudden shock in my ankle, which gave way, and I fell sideways again, this time into nothingness. Black nothingness.

CHAPTER 13

Steve, Gill and Frank had sat through their stories as if hypnotised but it was as though Manjy was sleep walking. As her story reached its climax she first stood up and then stood unsteadily on her chair, feeling at nothing and acting out events as if in a trance. When it came to the fall she mimed protecting herself from the rubble falling from above, and she did indeed fall - and heavily too - onto the floor.

Alicia jumped up. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Manjy opened her eyes and blinked. "Boy, that was real!" she answered, and frowned before asking Alicia, "What did you say?"

"I asked if you were all right. Well, are you?"

Manjy raised herself up to a kneeling position. "I think so." She got up slowly. "Apart from being a bit sore here and there where I fell, I think I'm all right."

Gill said, "You're going to have some biggish bruises by tomorrow, but I've got some arnica in the caravan."

"Oh I think bruises are all I'll have. It was more the shock of the fall than anything."

"Still, the arnica will cut down on the bruising." she started to rise. "Shall I get it?"

"Later."

"I'll make a cup of tea," said Steve, "that's supposed to be

good for shock," and he went to see to it as Manjy sat shakily down again.

"Did the fall kill her?" Frank asked her as he and Gill both sat.

"Him," she answered. "It was a boy of about ten and yes, the fall did kill him. I don't think they even found the hole in the floor of the cave, never mind the body."

Alicia turned towards them. "You may be all right but I'm not sure about me," she said and sat down heavily. "You're the first one of us not to have actually possessed the ring in your story, which does sort of clinch the reincarnation argument, but the story itself hints at a much higher civilisation destroyed by floods or volcanic eruption or things from the sky.

"I did possess the ring for a short time I suppose," said Manjy.

"Yes, but if this was any sort of psychometry the ring wouldn't 'know' anything about your death, if you'll pardon the expression. You'd have been your sister or your grandmother or something, and yet reincarnation's absurd."

"Not to me it isn't," answered Manjy, slightly offended.

"All right," corrected Alicia, "I mean 'hard for me to accept', possibly because I haven't had much contact with the concept."

"I don't find it hard to accept, though," Alan remarked.

"After my experience with life of the priestess I don't find the idea quite so strange," Gill added.

"But the whole story's so far fetched. It's like Eric von Daniken or Noah's Ark or Atlantis," Alicia persisted.

The story said a rock from the sky," interrupted Frank, "and

there's nothing unnatural about a huge meteor. I can even see one starting volcanic eruptions or floods, depending on where it landed."

"All right, I grant it could happen," admitted Alicia, "but the odds are against it."

"Huge odds against winning the national lottery or the euro-millions," Steve pointed out, "But someone wins each week."

"Where on earth did you find mugs like that? It won't cure Manjy, it'll kill her," Alicia said, stifling a laugh. "It's nearly as big as she is."

Manjy, who was recovering her composure somewhat, giggled.

"I've been thinking," Frank observed into the silence that followed. "The boy in Manjy's story mentioned that the disaster happened on a major day in their calendar. I don't know whether the boy actually knew what the cycles were or whether he was just repeating what his grandmother said, but if several cycles zeroed together there could have been the Moon, Venus, the Earth and the Sun in conjunction."

"What do you mean?" asked Steve. "In line?"

"If these people calculated like the Mayans did, yes. More or less, anyway."

"I don't see the significance of that," commented Gill.

"Well," said Frank, "You'd have one hell of a gravitational pull for a start. Just right for pulling down a large lump of space waste, if there was such a thing passing at the time."

"If a lump of rock crashed onto a fault line I suppose there might be a large scale volcanic eruption," remarked Alicia. She turned to Manjy and asked, "Where do you think you were? Greece?"

"Somewhere hot enough to develop the idea of a siesta," answered Manjy. "Mountainous and fairly dry but not far from the coast."

Alicia thought aloud. "That would fit Greece, most of the Eastern Mediterranean, parts of North Africa and the south of Spain." she said. "Now the ring moved from southern Britain to the Northern Isles. It probably moved to Britain from northern France. The question is, where did it come from to reach there? Frank's story could have been set in the foothills of the Alps."

"Or the foothills of the Pyrenees." said Alan. "That's a more natural northward movement towards the channel. There are some Stone Age remains in the right places and there are suitable mountains not far away in Spain."

"And if there had been a large island in the Atlantic off the coast of southern Spain it might have been enough to change the course of the gulf stream," added Steve.

"I still like Greece and the volcanic eruption which destroyed Thera." answered Alicia.

"You said yourself that there was no room in the conventional chronology for a copper age. If Thera is right there certainly isn't room for it. The more civilised areas of Europe were already beginning to use iron and we wouldn't even be back to the beginning of the bronze age in the more remote parts," said Gill.

"Anyway," said Frank, "Wasn't Thera about 1200 BC? We're way back before that," he looked around at them for a moment, then continued, "Steve's story must have been around 2000 BC or earlier and Gill's was before that. My story was about four thousand BC, maybe before that, so Manjy's could be as early as four and a half or

five thousand. Maybe even earlier."

"Perhaps Alicia was one of the original survivors of the flood or meteor or whatever," said Gill, "or even the bloke who made the ring. We'd know the whole story if you tried the ring. Well, we might."

"There's another thing about my story," said Manjy.

"What's that?" asked Alicia. "Or dare I ask?"

"Three men were after the ring. In Steve's story it was just a feeling he had. In Gill's story she reacted absurdly to a small incident where a traveller tried to steal the ring. On the face of it what she did was unreasonable but an intuitive woman felt an urge to deal drastically with the ring."

"In Frank's story the woman actually ran away herself because the priest wanted the ring and in my story three men wanted it and I died misleading them. It's as if somebody wants that ring and keeps coming back for it throughout history. And the ring doesn't want to be found."

There was silence for a moment while they all mulled over what Manjy had said. "That's supposing a lot," said Alicia at length.

"I wonder if our bird watcher is after the ring," remarked Gill and there was a stunned completeness about the pause that brought.

"He's probably just a bird watcher," said Frank. "There's no point in getting paranoid about it."

Manjy was thinking about her story. "Maybe our bird watcher's a reincarnation of one of the men in my story."

"Not very likely," said Alicia. "The odds are against the whole series of events. Perhaps it's all some kind of group hallucination. After all, there are hints about a higher civilization which had reached the bronze age, only to be thrown back by a natural catastrophe to

another three thousand years or more of the stone age."

"We might know if it's true though, if you just put the ring on," Gill urged.

The rain had almost stopped as Alicia looked out. "All right," she said at length. "It's too wet to do much yet so I'll agree to try the ring if you'll all do a late shift on the diggings after tea if the weather goes on improving."

The others nodded as Alicia picked up the ring and looked at it before putting it firmly on the third finger of her left hand, so that it looked like a wedding ring.

CHAPTER 14

It was a strange feeling, not being able to move. I could see and hear and I was aware. The drug hadn't affected my senses, but muscles were frozen. My reflexes also seemed only partly affected. I had no trouble breathing and I could blink, but my vision was limited by what I could see from where I was lying. I couldn't move my head at all, even when the marble slab beneath me felt hard and hurt the back of my skull.

I knew, of course, that I was going to die. I knew well enough that was what happened to a sacrifice. The irony of the situation did not escape me - I really did disapprove of human sacrifice before I knew I was going to suffer that fate myself. I think everyone knew that sacrifice had been introduced and become more common in recent years but, until I was sworn into the temple as a novice training for initiation I hadn't realised how widespread and commonplace the ritual slaughter of humans had become.

I was about ten years old when I entered the temple and became a virgin in the service of Poseidon. My parents brought me to the great gates of the temple of service but were allowed no further. My father was a craftsman, a worker in metals. If he had given money or land to the temple they might have given him the time of day. Even then I'm not sure they would have let him in. As it was, to have his

daughter enter was a great honour.

I don't think I knew at all what I was promising when I took the oath. Loyalty to the cult; obedience to the high priest as representative of the God Poseidon; to remain a virgin and so on. I didn't even know then what a virgin was.

Training was uninspiring. Much of what was the duty of the girls and women was no more than housekeeping. The older ones muttered that it had not always been so when they thought no one in authority was listening. I gathered that things had once been much more equal and that all had changed in the lifetime of this one high priest. When we did spend some time in religious studies I had more than once objected to the regular throwing of children into the fire-lake of Mount Atlas and I asked why every ceremony for every high festival seemed to need its young woman; every ship or building its young man. I should not have questioned or argued.

By the time I was fifteen or so I began to feel that the whole thing was getting seriously out of hand and a light of wanton fanaticism was beginning to gleam in the eyes of the priesthood. I said as much on a number of occasions. Unfortunately.

I knew, as an initiate with more than five years in the service of the God, that all the cycles were going to be complete on the same day at the same time, even the red one and the slow one. We were told, though everybody knew anyway, that the completion of the old age would usher in a new age. The priests had been building a new temple on the centre island, to be dedicated to their god Poseidon on completion of the cycles. A boat would take six priests to rule six other new temples. The first two were over the short crossing, two more were somewhere the other way, across the true ocean, and the

remaining two were on the island itself, I know nothing of where.

The high priest summoned me. A young priest came to the door of my room and told me, curtly, to follow him. His face wore a kind of sneer. I don't know whether it was an expression he couldn't help or one which reflected his nature, but I didn't like it at all. He led me along tiled hallways, plain at first and then delicately decorated and very beautiful. The windows of the room were filled with a fine tracery that looked like stone, with enough open areas to let the light stream in; the walls were tiled lower down and patterned in relief higher up and the ornate carved roof was gilded in orichalcum. The whole effect was of a richness more fitting to a room in the royal palace than a room in a temple. The furnishings were mainly a number of couches around the walls and a chair. All had feet and arms carved from the same dark wood.

The sneering young priest snapped, "Wait," and swept out of the room without looking back and I stood alone, looking around. I remember thinking it was a beautiful room - I wish I could say the same about the cult.

The high priest was a little man. He moved soundlessly in white robes and a truly evil aura. I could feel the coldness and heartlessness run over me like a physical chill. This was the first time I had seen him close to and found him a reasonably pleasant looking man of early middle age with very piercing eyes and a immovability of purpose that left me chilled to the core.

"Ah. I have heard reports about you Chimú. I hear that you feel there are too many human sacrifices." I didn't answer. "There will be many major rituals for the ending of the cycles and I don't entirely like the idea of any discordant voices spreading the idea that the

celebrations are too costly." He seemed a little tetchy in his manner.

I had said nothing about costs. Indeed, I knew nothing about costs. The high priest continued, "No indeed. I don't want to hear insinuations that too many lives are given to our god. One way of being sure that such ideas are not widespread is to give him those who spread such sedition. To die for Poseidon is a great honour, you know. So prepare your soul. We will prepare your body when the time comes."

He turned and glided soundlessly from the room, dragging his cold, cold aura after him.

So that was to be my fate. I had to admit there was a logic to his reasoning. If he rid himself of his more outspoken opponents at the coming festival he would be more secure, at least in the short term.

I stood for a minute alone in the room, then two armed men - they looked like soldiers but only priests were allowed in the temple - entered behind me, seized me by the arms and without a word, led me away. We went back along the passageway, but turned left and went down a spiral staircase. It was too narrow for my guards to walk alongside me, so they walked one in front one behind down the steps. There were no windows but the way was lit by small lamps in niches, copper lamps with tiny wicks burning the oil of some vegetable or fat of some animal. The passage was plain but it was clean and dry. The room they left me in was windowless but it too was clean and dry.

Except that the door was locked and there were no windows it was a reasonable room. The bed was comfortable, the food and drink were good, and there was a table and a chair. I had what I needed in life, except the prospect of life itself.

In times past the old priest kings and priestess queens had ruled the island firmly but moderately for eons. The sun's disc had been worshipped as a symbol of light and Mother Earth had been worshipped as a symbol of fertility. The only blood spilled in the name of the goddess was the virgin blood of fertility ceremonies to encourage crops to grow and animals to breed. But I was not destined to be mated in such a ceremony of love and hope. In my case my still beating heart was shortly to be torn from me - and I was supposed to be grateful for the honour.

It occurred to me that, although I couldn't move to prevent it, I might well feel the moment of sacrifice. I was aware of everything; I could see and hear and feel. I was thirsty and chilly on this stone slab with no clothes on and no source of warmth. I was also a little embarrassed, but there was nothing I could do about of any of these things.

The hall was large and circular. I couldn't see that from here either, of course, but I had watched it being built, so I knew it was a large building supported by two circles of pillars.

There was a flourish of wind instruments and the procession began its approach. The floor must have been marked with some sort of mosaic pattern of lines because the procession moved around at the edge of my sight like an elaborate dance. I wished I could see what was going on. I wished I could move and ease the pain in my skull.

I don't know whether it was the pain in my head or the wishing, but there was a firm 'click' and I was looking down on myself and the proceedings. We'd used drugs to produce out-of-the-body experiences and I'd tried it many times before but this was the first

time I'd been able to get out unaided. Or perhaps it was the drug this time too.

I was right about the mosaic and the appearance of a ritual dance. There were seven enormous concentric circles on the floor, with four lines leading to the centre circle, in which were seven young women to be sacrificed. One of the women was me, of course: I wondered what had qualified the other six for this 'honour'. The outline of the temple floor was like a map of the city really, with black mosaic paths representing the canals on a turquoise green mosaic floor. Though my body lay below me, I viewed the whole business with a sort of detached interest at this stage.

The procession wound round the outer circle and left behind a circle of those dedicated to become priestesses holding lighted candles. The elaborate ritual group went up one of the paths to the second circle, where they left behind a circle of young men, thurifers with incense burners to swing, and little boys to hold the incense. The smoke and scent of copal rose in the air and filled the temple.

Those who were left behind to form the third circle held banners on spears, each with a design similar to the mosaic on the floor, which seemed again to be a representation of the layout of canals in the city. In the fourth circle stood six priests and in the fifth stood stone altars with burning charcoal but no incense. Past these the high priest went alone to the sixth circle and up to the seventh. There he turned and faced those who watched and waited.

He was that same tetchy little man with greying hair, a dull, cold and evil aura and a manner that now seemed brusque to the point of arrogance, which it may well have been. He stepped onto the higher level of the seventh circle, turned and spoke in ringing,

vibrating, powerful tones.

"As the cycles of the skies comes to an end and a new age begins, so a new age dawns here below. We will sweep away the cobwebs of the old, the decrepit, the weak and bring in the new, the fresh, the strong. It will be an age of our god, Poseidon, with rituals of power. The days of the Goddess brought life and enabled us to grow and mature, but those days are done now. We will sweep away the old with glory, vitality and strength."

What he really meant was cruelty, ruthlessness and arrogant thoughtlessness - all the coldness of spirit I had felt in his aura - but I was hardly in a position to say so.

"I place a ring on each of the victims."

He went around the six in turn with a carved wooden box from which he took a plain ring and laid it on the chest of each young woman. When it came to me he placed a much more elaborate ring between my breasts, his face expressionless but his eyes smiling evilly. He put the carved box on a small, round, marble altar at the exact middle of the temple and took a talisman from an identical box already there. He positioned the talisman with the seventh ring - on me!

He ordered in ringing tones, "Each one of you will take your ring when you ascend to power and rule your territory from your temple. I will rule you six from this temple with this seventh ring and this talisman, which I will wear when the sixth ring is adopted. Ux-at!!"

At his word of command a priest stepped forward and went to the head of the nearest woman. He produced a metal dagger with bronze blade polished to a deadly sharpness and a gold hilt in the shape of a monstrous scaly leg with evil claws which he placed on her

stomach, while he took up from beside the stone slab on which the victim lay, a mask of beaten metal in the shape of a sea monster. He put on the mask and then took up the dagger and held it aloft.

He said, "In the name of the god Poseidon I dedicate this ring to the service of power and the rule of the people," and with the dagger sliced downwards a long cut close to her left breast and then cut left and tore back the flesh.

I felt his sacrificial victim scream a silent scream of pain and horror as he reached in and took her beating heart. The heart he flung onto one of the altars and sickening smoke arose. His arms still bloody he took up the ring, brought it to the high priest and put it in the box which had been picked up from the altar and was held out to him. Then Ux-atl returned to his place on the fourth circle.

The ritual was repeated exactly, six times in all, by each priest in turn. The high priest closed the box, picked up the talisman and put it back in its box on the altar.

"Go to the ship and sail to take up your positions. Rule in the name of Poseidon and in accordance with my instructions. Tagg-Andes!"

One of the priests stepped forward to the altar and stood before the box. The high priest, who was still facing the other way, continued, "It will be a glorious day when all six temples rule the empire and word of Poseidon rules all,"

He did not see Tagg-Andes take the talisman from its box and put it with the rings. Nobody saw but me and I wondered why. Tagg-Andes was not an ambitious man, he was too old. Perhaps therein lay a clue. Perhaps he was old enough to remember the old order and oppose the new. In any event he led the five other priests

along the mosaic path from the temple, while the high priest waited until they had gone.

The high priest turned towards me and put on a mask, similar to the ones worn by the other priests but more elaborate and studded with stones. It was an impressive sight, with circles of people, the smoke and scent of incense rising - I was not impressed because the heavy hand of death was imminent but I was more appalled by the words of the high priest and the kind of world he planned.

It may have been thinking about the imminence of my death that did it, but there was another firm 'click' and I was back in my body again. I could see the high priest in his mask; I couldn't see his face but I could see his eyes, glittering with the fire of fanaticism and I shall never forget those eyes if I live for a million cycles of our sun. But I will never see even a single cycle of our sun. Death awaits me soon. The last thing I will see is those eyes - cold, ruthless, evil and with an icy light: an unconsuming, all consuming fire. Those eyes, glittering. Those eyes. Eyes.

CHAPTER 15

To say that Alicia 'went white' with shock is inappropriate, considering her colour, but she was certainly shaken and she sounded faint.

"I suppose with human sacrifice so common it was inevitable that one of us would end up with first hand experience," she said, "but all the same I didn't expect it to be me."

"Where do you think you were?" asked Frank.

Alicia hesitated. "The country was known as Atl-Andes," she said. Now that isn't saying anything about where it was, or when either. All I can say is that they called it Atl-Andes."

"Atlantis?" asked Steve.

"I prefer not to face that question for the moment."

"It was the Bronze Age," remarked Gill, "no doubt about that."

"I'm well aware that it was three or four thousand years before the usually accepted date for the development of bronze but I prefer not to face that problem for the moment either," said Alicia.

"That high priest sounded a complete fascist," observed Gill.

"He was. In the real sense of the word. I don't think there's much doubt about it. All his talk about 'strength' and 'power' meant his own power, and lots of human sacrifice to support it, especially anyone who opposed him."

"You mean he chose those who opposed him?" asked Alan.

"Anyone who stood in his way was likely to be first in line for the altar, yes. It wasn't so much sacrifice as ritual murder of his opposition."

"How did he get away with it?" asked Steve.

"I'm not sure. Atl-Andes was fairly religious and peaceful. I don't think the sacrifice of human beings was known before that generation, that high priest, even. I don't think people even killed or ate animals either, but he thought that was a sign of weakness." Alicia paused and looked out of the window.

"It's drying up a bit outside so let's get a short session at the dig and talk about this whole thing later. I'm worried about Professor Harrington coming."

"Before we go and I forget," said Gill, "did I remember correctly the priest saying the amulet was a protection against the rings?"

"He did say that, though I'm not sure what he meant."

"The rings must have had powers," said Alan, "and the amulet was some sort of protection against them. You're sure you don't know what powers the rings were supposed to have had?"

"I don't know anything about the rings," said Alicia. "I don't know anything about the powers - real or imaginary."

"You'd better try the ring and see if we find out," said Steve, half joking.

"Not now," said Alicia. "In the first place, I haven't sorted out what Alicia believes from what Chimú believed. Secondly, you promised a work session and I'm holding you all to it."

Steve roused himself and went out of the cabin to root out

the volunteer gang. The rain had stopped and the weather was what the makers of cheap cameras seem to call 'cloudy-bright', with a watery sun trying to break through. It was still damp underfoot but everything was drying.

As he crossed the field to start the second generator, Steve was thinking about the full story of the ring from its making to its losing and its finding. He couldn't believe that it ever had 'powers': such things belonged to tales of fantasy and adventure. A story like that owed more to dungeons and dragons: to elves, dwarves, wizards or even hobbits, than to reality or archaeology. That the high priest who had had the ring made was interested in power himself, Steve didn't doubt, but he thought that the ring was probably only a symbol.

'Mind you,' he thought while he was checking and starting the generator, 'five, probably six, people with past lives connected with the ring together at one time and in one place is a bit of coincidence. If it's not a coincidence, that is an awful lot of power.'

The story was, of course, very incomplete. The six rings had started their journey from Atl-Andes (and that might have been Atlantis - the jury was 'out' on the subject) before the meteor, or whatever it was, and had been taken to North Africa or Southern Spain. Since then there had been about seven to ten thousand years of people and lives. Steve thought Manjy's story was probably set in Southern Spain and she had said the ring had landed not too far away.

'That would be in keeping with Frank's tale starting in the Northern foothills of the Pyrenees,' Steve thought idly, wishing he knew more about the movements of people in prehistoric Europe. He had no idea how the ring crossed Spain, but it had two or three thousand years to do it. The journey from Northern France to

Southern England was a short one and could be easily explained, and Gill accounted for part of the ring's northward journey. There were so many unanswered questions that he gave up trying to think it thing out logically as the diggers assembled.

The paid labourers were missing because there was no way to get in touch with them at short notice, but the rest of the team were willing workers and got on with excavating the site. Frank took all of the sand out of the tunnel as far as the third house while Manjy and one of the volunteers sifted it. Numbering and removal of roofing stones of the third house began as a preliminary to excavating it, removal of sand from the second house continued and more of the connecting passage was uncovered.

When Steve had almost finished getting the evening meal ready, Gill strolled back to the Portacabin to help him. She walked in, carefully closed the door that he had left open and went almost secretively to the window.

"Coast is clear," she said, more to herself than to Steve. "They're all still working on the dig."

He watched in silence while she switched the computer on and it booted up. She keyed the programme directory and selected one of the data disks. Steve watched her without comment as from the main menu she moved to the record of items found. She turned up the record of the talisman. It read "Neck ornament, amulet or talisman. Appears to be metal with accidental or deliberate coating which has aided preservation - see also 001073 and 001075 found at same location."

Still without comment Steve watched her delete the entry and flip to 001075. The record was "Small piece of rusted iron,

possibly a spear or arrowhead - see also 001073 and 001074 found at same location." Gill tapped a couple of keys to "amend entry" and deleted the words "- see also 001074 found at same location." She struck another key to renumber the remaining entries after the record deleted, so that the correction was no longer visible, and exited from the programme. She switched off the machine and crossed to the cabinet where the finds were.

Gill didn't explain herself and Steve still said nothing, as she opened one of the drawers and took out the amulet.

"Look," she said as she pocketed the amulet, "I don't know why I'm doing this, so don't bother asking, but I'd rather this amulet was misplaced for a day or two and went back into circulation later. I'm going to put it in my room."

She looked hastily and furtively out of the window to make sure they were still alone and then hurried across to her room. This was certainly a puzzling development, apparently in Gill's psychic deviousness, but also in the behaviour she had shown up to this point.

She was gone only a moment before she was back. "I promise I'll return it twenty-four hours after the professor arrives." she said rather breathlessly. "In the meantime, don't tell anyone it's on my wardrobe shelf."

"What is?" asked Steve and busied himself with supper, thinking how much Gill had changed and grown in confidence in the last few days, since remembering her past life as a priestess. Gill helped him with the meal, thinking in passing that she was growing more trusting of her own psychic abilities by the day. Among other things, those psychic tendencies suggested she could depend on Steve.

"I'm going to try and calculate the date on our present calendar when those cycles would have zeroed," said Frank to Alicia after supper was cleared away.

"Well I think I'll get on with my diary of the digging in case my professor comes tomorrow. I don't want to be caught unawares."

"You do that thing. Where's Manjy?"

"Writing home, I think. At least she received some post this morning."

"You going to mention the ring in your reports?"

"I shall leave everything except the finding of the ring out of my archaeological report, but I think we ought to each write our stories down somewhere before we forget them."

"Yeah, that could turn out a smart move." he agreed, and got up to go to his room. Alicia wondered briefly where Gill and Steve were before settling down to write up her report.

In her room Manjy was reading a letter rather than writing. To her surprise her grandmother had sided with her. According to her father she had suggested finding a prospective husband who would take account of her career.

This would have been nothing out of the ordinary in a European family, but it was unusually perceptive for an Asian woman who spoke almost no English. At any rate, her grandmother had persuaded her father more effectively than Manjy herself could have done and a compromise looked possible. She picked up her pen to write.

In what was left of the fading light, Gill walked

companionably on the beach with Steve.

"What do you make of it all?" she asked, feeling more relaxed than she had for a long time.

"While I was a guest of her majesty I read a book from the prison library by a German bloke called Otto Muck. He invented the snorkel that allowed U-Boats to breathe under water during the war. Clever scientist was Otto Muck, with a lot of inventions to his name. Well, he had the idea that a whole set of seemingly unrelated events and problems could be related and explained if there was a major land mass which sank beneath the Atlantic in a volcanic disaster triggered by an enormous meteor about ten thousand years ago.

First problem was that the warm waters of the Gulf Stream couldn't have run in their present course during the ice age or the glaciers wouldn't have come as far south in western Europe as they did in eastern America. But the glaciers were an even distance south in both."

"Oh, so that's what your question to Frank was about. I did wonder." said Gill. "Let's sit down here for a while," she added, testing the grass of a sand dune to see it was dry.

"Where does the meteor come in?"

"Somewhere in the Atlantic, at its deepest part on a fault line just off Charleston, South Carolina," he answered, putting an arm round her shoulders. "For complicated reasons of physics which he argues convincingly, he claims that a roughly oval shaped collection of craters running into the sea there are the debris of a huge meteor or small asteroid breaking up. The main impact would have been out to sea - just on the line of weakness. The resulting eruption would have been large enough to allow molten rock out in huge quantities,

perhaps large enough quantities to allow a considerable island to sink. Right about where the Azores are. He reckons that they were once high mountains - and one of them was probably the original Mount Atlas."

"That would more or less tie in with Plato's story of the destruction of Atlantis," admitted Gill.

"It would tie in with the Mayan obsession with the cyclic nature of time as well. The eruption probably took place when several cycles zeroed and Otto Muck gives an exact date, though I can't remember what it is," said Steve.

"It might also explain the name of the ocean," remarked Gill thoughtfully, adding, "Nobody seems to have done that satisfactorily. 'Atl' is the Aztec and Mayan word for water. The mountain range in South America is the 'Andes'. Alicia said the country she came from was called Atl-Andes. That's awfully like 'Atlantic' and has the same root as 'Atlas'. Atlantic is a name around in ancient times and, in classical mythology, Atlas was the giant who held the sky on his shoulders."

"Atl-Andes," Steve ruminated, exploring the sound of the words as he rolled them around, "The 'Mountains in the Water'."

"High mountains on a low lying island must have looked like that from a distance," mused Gill. "Perhaps Atlas was a very high mountain. It might have looked to the first people as if it was holding up the sky."

She leaned her head on Steve's shoulder and looked out to sea. "This is a pretty low lying group of islands, isn't it?" she remarked. When Steve didn't say anything she continued. "I almost didn't come you know. I wasn't sure I could face up to it but I simply steeled myself

and got on with it." Steve kissed her.

"Well I'm glad you did. But, as I've said before, I don't know why you ever thought he was worth killing yourself over."

"I'm over it all now. If you come back to my room to-night I'll show you how completely I'm over it."

"Is that a serious invitation?"

"Of course it is."

"Then I'm going to take you up on it."

Gill snuggled even closer to him and he slipped his hand under her sweater to stroke her breast through the cotton of her T-shirt as he kissed her again.

Gill and Steve wandered into the cabin later, interrupting Alicia, who had almost finished anyway. Steve was putting on the kettle when the door opened and Frank came in, looking triumphant.

"You look like the cat that got the cream," observed Gill.

"I kind of feel that way too," he answered "The real trouble was in changing from their calendar to ours, so as to come up with a date we can recognise."

"Whose calendar?" Alicia wanted to know as she packed her papers away and turned off the computer. "Oh yes, the Mayans. But what date?"

"The date when all cycles zeroed and, according to your story, the new age was supposed to begin, you were sacrificed and the rock crashed from the sky."

"The last bit, about the rock, was in Manjy's story not mine," said Alicia, "but I follow what you're getting at. So what was the date?"

"In our calendar, 5th June 8498 BC."

"That's precise," said Gill.

"The Mayans were very precise people with an obsession for detail - at least where dates were concerned. My calculator's still red hot with turning their date into one we can recognise."

"Still, I'm impressed."

"I don't remember exactly, but that sounds like the date Otto Muck gives for the destruction of Atlantis," said Steve, and everybody looked at him. "As I said, I'm not certain about the date, but he mentions a time. 13.00 hours."

Frank held up a piece of paper on which he had written '5th June 8498 BC at 13.00 hours.'

At first nobody spoke, then Gill said, "I'm even more impressed."

"You know," mused Alicia, "that's just about the date Plato gives for the destruction of Atlantis too, though he's much more vague, of course." She stood up. "Oh well, time for bed I think. I want things to go right when the professor comes."

"OK, I'll just tidy up before I put the generator to bed," said Steve, and started to clear the mugs away. Gill came over to him.

"I'll just tidy up before you put me to bed," she whispered, "the invitation still stands."

"Don't worry, I'm putting the generator to bed, not sleeping with it," he said. "I'll be with you less than two minutes after the electric lights go out."

Quite what he expected when he went to Gill's room Steve wasn't sure. She might have tucked herself up or changed into something more seductive, taken a sleeping pill out of habit or even changed her mind, but he was just a little surprised at what he did find.

Gill was sitting on her bunk. She had taken a leather thong off the carved wooden pendant he had occasionally seen her wearing and was threading the amulet onto it.

"The light from the gas lamp isn't very good," she said, "but I'll be finished in a minute."

"What on earth are you doing? No. I can see what you're doing. What I really meant to ask is 'why?'"

"I'm not sure," replied Gill, tying the cord and putting it over her head, "but I'm absolutely convinced I'm going to need to wear it in the next few days. I suppose you think I'm being silly."

"Don't be so defensive. In the first place you may be a bit psychic - that feeling could turn out to be something important and, even it doesn't, if it makes you feel easier to have that thing ready to wear, well okay. Mind you, I shouldn't let Alicia see you with it."

"That is extremely good advice, but not really needed. I thought she might have remembered and realised that both the amulet and the computer record had gone. She just forgot about it or something, I looked at her papers."

Gill took off the amulet, stood up and put it away in the locker she referred as a wardrobe.

"I don't know whether 'amulet' is the right word." said Steve. "I thought an amulet was a general good luck charm. This may have been specially made in connection with the ring, in which case it ought to be ... called a ... talisman ..."

With Gill's arms around his neck Steve found it hard to concentrate on other things. She had let down her hair down and it smelled faintly of flowers, so he gave up on the amulet or talisman or whatever it was and concentrated on Gill.

She was more striking in her looks, with violet-blue eyes, long lashes and mouth a shade wide, than actually beautiful, but the combination of the low lamplight, his love and her nakedness made her seem very lovely to him. She clung to him and responded to pleasure she once thought she had lost for ever.

When she later fell asleep in Steve's arms it was the first time in two years she hadn't needed a sleeping pill.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning was sunny and promised to be warm, even hot, later. The camp woke early to get about its business, with Alicia anxious to see things started and to create a good impression on her professor when he arrived. If she knew that Gill had spent the night with Steve, she didn't say anything, but Gill was more content with life than she'd felt for a long time and was raring to go. The local men turned up early, anxious to make up for time lost through the rain. It was a happy and cheerful crowd that crossed the field to the dig.

Steve checked over the vehicles and washed away all traces of the rain of the previous twenty four hours. Then he filled the water tanks and checked the calor gas bottles before he drove down to meet the ferry.

As there wasn't much to pick up at the ferry, Steve had taken the car rather than the Landrover. He was waiting on the hard, leaning against the bonnet in his shirt sleeves sunning himself, when the boat came alongside and tied up with the usual practised ease. Professor Harrington landed first because he left his bags to the crew and about a dozen passengers came up the steps after him.

There were four climbers with their gear, probably come to tackle the 'Old Man of Hoy', and a couple of other tourists who had, to

judge from their equipment, come for the fishing. The rest were a sprinkling of local people who had been visiting or shopping. There wasn't a lot for the camp that day besides the professor's bags, and they didn't amount to much of a load.

"Good morning Benderman. Just put my bags in the boot will you," he said to Steve, addressing him like a chauffeur or a taxi driver, as he held the car door open.

Steve was cheerful and friendly as he recovered the professor's bags from the top of the steps and put them in the car boot with a couple of boxes the ferry had brought. True enough the old man's brusqueness irritated him a little, but he didn't have to put up with the old coot for long, so it didn't seem to matter as he slammed the boot. He even hummed a tune to himself as he walked round to the driver's side and climbed in.

"Did you have a good journey, professor?" he asked as he started up.

"I flew. Changed at Aberdeen. There was rather a lot of rain, otherwise reasonable. How long will it take us to reach the dig?"

"Oh, about fifteen minutes or so. I've never actually timed it but it doesn't take long."

"Have you had much of a problem with the weather?" asked the academic.

There was something condescending about the older man's manner which, coupled with his brusqueness, set Steve's teeth on edge and made him dislike the man, though not with any exact reason.

"We lost most of yesterday to the rain you mentioned," Steve told him, "and the ground was wet, but it dried out overnight and it

never even slowed down the Landrover."

"Good, good," said the professor and lapsed into silence. Steve drove on, feeling that he ought to say something but, not being very strong on small talk, he couldn't think of much to say.

"Quite a view from the crest of this hill," he remarked. "I know the hill itself isn't much but the island slopes away this side."

"I imagine that you'd get a better view from the higher ground to the west."

"Possibly, but the higher land is lonely and wild." He searched for something else to say. "According to the map there's a stone circle near the Rackwick road."

I know. I went when I was here in the spring."

Steve sighed with relief as they reached the dig. "Here we are," he said unnecessarily, and turned into the field.

Professor Harrington was more than impressed with the progress of the dig. He glanced over the camp and then left Steve to see to lunch while he walked over the field to the excavations. He took an overall look at the site and talked to the local men who were finishing off work on the first house. He spoke with with the volunteers and seemed to be trying to get an impartial overall view of the project, before turning to any details.

Gill, Manjy and the girls from Kirkwall were now well down into the second house. Alan, with two more volunteers, was numbering and stacking the roof stones from the third house, while Frank and the remaining helper had dug along the route of the passage way to the fourth house, uncovering the roof.

The professor could see at once that the site was substantial

but thought that Alicia's interpretation - a more cautious version of Steve's story, though she didn't mention her less than orthodox sources - was more fanciful than the evidence warranted. All the same, he didn't contradict her.

Over a sandwich lunch Alicia asked Professor Harrington, "Are you planning to sleep here in the camp?"

"I don't think I will be staying long," he said, "but I will stay at the hotel in Linksness. I will take the car overnight for transportation."

You can use my room if you like," said Steve, "because I can always put some bedding in the Landrover."

Gill, who was standing behind the professor at the time, caught Steve's eye and grinned.

"Most kind." said the academic. "but I won't inconvenience you. I'll only be staying one night or possibly two at the most."

"Up to you," said Steve, "Excuse me a moment, I have to change a Calor gas bottle." and he left the cabin.

After the others had gone back with Frank temporarily in charge, Alicia started to go through the paperwork and the finds

"As I told you," said Alicia, "we uncovered the remains of two people. More or less complete skeletons. Alan and company found the skeleton of a young female among the ruins of house number one. Gill's team found the other, a skeleton of a small adult male uncovered just outside the entrance to the village while they were looking for the way in. I've got some photographs here."

Alicia opened a wallet of prints and selected several that related to the find. Her professor studied one or two and then began to

unfold Frank's plan of the excavations. Alicia leaned over towards the map.

"Now the skeleton we found here," and she indicated the spot, "was wearing a ring. Copper as far as we could tell, but coated with something to prevent it losing its newness we think. At least it still shone like new."

The academic's eyes glittered and Steve thought there was a noticeable coldness in his voice as he snapped "Show me."

Perhaps it was only an archaeologist's enthusiasm, because Alicia didn't seem to detect anything unusual as she opened the cabinet and took out the ring.

Professor Harrington examined the ring carefully for a minute before saying, "What a remarkable state of preservation it's in. This ring is a thing of beauty and power."

He was almost oblivious of the two other people in the room as he gazed at the ring with a growing glitter in his eyes.

"This ought to go back to the university for security," he said at length. "I don't know how much intrinsic value it has, but the value that comes from age is considerable."

He held up the ring in what Steve thought was near triumph and stood up. "You wouldn't want to lose it."

Steve half turned and saw Alicia, still seated, glance up at the professor who was holding the ring up to the light to examine it further. Then, to Steve's surprise, she fainted!

Professor Harrington looked both surprised, concerned and rather helpless. "Oh dear," he said. "Whatever caused that?"

Steve knelt to take a closer look. "I don't know," he said, "but

perhaps you'd better fetch Gill ... Miss Meadows."

"Yes. Yes indeed," said the Professor and exited hastily, his demeanour suggesting either relief to be doing something or relief just to be passing responsibility to someone else.

"Probably the former," thought Steve as Alicia stirred.

Steve had helped her first into a sitting position on the floor and then onto a chair. There was a small lump on the side of her head where she had struck something, possibly a corner of the desk, but there didn't appear to be anything else amiss. At this point a worried Gill rushed into the cabin followed a few moments later by the Professor and Frank.

Gill insisted on taking Alicia's pulse and fetching a thermometer to take her temperature, while Steve made some tea and gave her a mug of it, strong and sweet. Alicia seemed to recover rapidly and started to make light of what the others found worrying.

"I'm all right," she insisted when the Professor suggested they call the doctor. "I've been in perfect health up to now and it's just down to worrying about everything going all right for my doctorate."

Professor Harrington was doubtful. "You need have no worries with regard to your project. Everything is going splendidly with the dig. However, I wish you'd see a doctor to make sure all is equally well with your health."

Alicia was insistent that all was now well, but she did agree to rest for a while in her room, and went with Gill to the caravan. Frank said he would take charge temporarily and left with the Professor. They set out across the field discussing how many houses there would be altogether in the Scad Head settlement.

"If the passage bends back towards the sea," said Frank,

"there would be room for another six on top of what we've uncovered so far."

"There might be an animal stall back there," said the Professor. "You haven't come across one yet, but I think they must have had one."

As they went out of earshot, Steve poured himself some tea rather than waste the rest of what he had brewed for Alicia. He was just about to drink it when Gill came in.

"Strewth I need a cup of tea," she said, and helped herself to Steve's. She took a sip and added: "What was Alicia doing just before she fainted?"

"Showing the Professor some pictures of the skeleton with the ring," said Steve. "They're still out."

He collected together the photos and put them back in the wallet.

"What's the ring doing out?" asked Gill.

"The Professor was looking at it."

"Before or after looking at the pictures?"

Steve wondered where the inquisition was leading. "After," he said.

"Hmm. And what was Alicia doing while the Professor looked at the ring?"

"Looking at the Professor."

"And she fainted. Just like that?"

"Wham," said Steve. "Just like that."

Gill paused, part puzzled, part pensive, all her newly-found psychic faculties alert and tingling. "How did the Professor seem?"

"Pleased. He seemed to think the ring was a valuable find or,

at least, an important one. He wants to take it back to the University for safe keeping."

"Does he now! I remember you predicting that he would. Oh well, I'd better get back to work."

She turned to go, but stopped at the door and said cryptically, "It may prove just as well I have the amulet, but don't mention it to anyone." With that she left.

The excavation stopped work late and the Professor did not stay to eat, saying he would find a room and eat at the hotel in Linksness. He was adamant and left with the car. Alicia came out of her room for the meal and, apart from her quietness and a lack of appetite, seemed none the worse for having fainted.

"We're still making good progress," Frank reported to her, "but nothing spectacular and no new sign of habitation." Alicia only nodded.

"I gather Professor Harrington wants to take the ring back to Warwick," said Manjy. "I think Alan ought to try it while we have the chance."

"Well, he's the only one connected with the University team who hasn't tried it yet." Frank agreed.

"Shall I fetch him?" asked Gill.

Alicia nodded again, so she went to fetch him. She returned shortly followed by Alan, with Carol, one of the volunteers, in tow.

"What's this all about?" Alan asked.

"Professor Harrington wants to take the ring back to the University with him," said Steve. "You'll have to try it to-night or not at all."

"Does he?" said Alan. "Well, I suppose I may as well give it a go." He sat himself down at the table. "It's okay if Carol stays?" he asked.

Everybody looked at Alicia, but she just shrugged.

"Stay for what," asked Carol.

"If it goes as we expect you'll know the answer in a minute," Gill answered, and she had to be content with that reply.

Manjy, Gill and Alicia already sat at the table. Carol joined them and Steve stood watching, tea towel in hand.

"All right," said Alan and Gill handed him the ring. He studied it much as the others had done, but there was little to see. It was too tight for his third finger, though his hands were slim for a man and rather long, so he slipped it on his little finger.

CHAPTER 17

I am - was - probably the best smithy and metalworker in the whole of Atl-Andes. There may be the odd one as good as me, I suppose, but none better. I'm not a young man any more and I've worked in metals all my life, and it's thirty summers or more since I began my apprenticeship.

I started the usual way, casting the rough blocks of metal into the blades of swords, for the hands of the more expert craftsmen, who heated and hammered them into shape, so that the metal took an edge. I began in this way because my master worked for the priest-kings and their army, though the work was neither urgent nor heavy. There had been long years of peace and the army was not large. There was settlement both on the near continent and across the true ocean and settlers had clashed with those tribes which hunted where they settled, but nothing serious.

As I became a more expert craftsman myself I began to specialise in finer work. I set up alone, making lamps for homes and temples, thuribles and containers for incense, carefully hammered into shape and delicately decorated. I even made ornate mountings for the crystals the priests have on their staffs and jewellery of every kind.

In later years I have had time to experiment with other rocks, heating them and noting the effects. The ones that melted easily I

tried mixing and working. I found some which were too soft for swords but good for jewellery; some I decorated with painted clay or oricalcum and heated and others were very tough and took a fine edge. I never had a mate. I lived alone and metals were my life and my hobby - I think that's why I became so skilled.

So how does an established, skilled, respected craftsman like me become a wanted man, hunted in the city and forced to flee for safety across the true ocean? Well, I'll tell you.

The first time I met the man who was eventually going to be high priest, he came to me for a knife. He wanted an elaborate and ornamental dagger and he wanted me to make it for him. There was no reason why I should hesitate, but I didn't like it. I was rich enough to have refused any commission I didn't wish to take, but there was no reason to refuse that I could explain to you. I put my misgivings down to an unreasoning dislike of the task caused by an unworthy dislike of the man.

He wanted a bronze blade about one and a half hands long, with a point and a good cutting edge - straightforward - any fool could have made him that, but the hilt was to be of gold in the shape of a wyvern's foot, leg and claws. It was not a pretty thing and I didn't see why he needed it, but I made it. I crafted every scale of the leg and the talons reached out to grip the bronze blade. Deadly and beautifully made, though not itself beautiful, as I said before. There's no way you can call an interpretation of a monster 'beautiful', however skilfully it may be executed. He was pleased with it too, which may be a pity, as you will understand in good time.

Like most people I heard the talk that they were sacrificing humans but, unlike most, I noticed signs that other changes were

taking place. I knew there were more weapons of all sorts being made and that many more smiths were being used to supply the growing needs of the priests and their army. More swords, daggers, spears and helmets were being made. Only a much larger army could need so many weapons. More knives were being made too. It seemed that every priest needed one. The old priest-king was ailing, but I don't think that was the cause of the changes I saw and brooded over.

Now don't get the idea that I saw straight away that the new man had ambitions. I wakened but slowly to what was happening and I'm not a natural agitator or thinker. I was uneasy with the rumours and unhappy with the growth of the army and the number of weapons, but that's all.

When I got a big commission to prepare seven rings, seven masks, seven wyvern's foot daggers and a talisman, I was satisfied with the tribute to my skill that the task implied, and gave little thought as to what the work itself meant. Well, not at first I didn't.

The masks were straightforward enough, though I wasn't at all sure I liked the final design. My first drawings were not ... not what? Not 'fierce' enough was what 'they' said. It took four attempts and 'their' own artistry before I had an acceptable design to work on.

It was commission ordered by the priests - the high priest even - but secular intermediaries had approached me and were still my contacts. It was pretended that the work was intended for an anonymous customer but I knew well enough that my clients were priests.

Anyway, the resulting design was not so much fierce as evil. I first hammered the metal and then shaped the monstrous features, overlaid them with colour and finally baked the result. Those masks

were for priests right enough, and I knew what they intended to do when they wore them. I made the knives next. Beautifully made but filthy weapons. I was not proud of the work.

Lastly I turned to the rings and the talisman. In the first place I had to forge the rings and talisman from a single casting of ore - and they gave the ore to me. This was a little unusual, but it was their commission. In the second place, I had to make them at certain configurations of the stars. That too was unusual, but by no means unheard of when items are made for sacred use. And then my contact told me that the high priest himself would stand over me and take the rings for consecration before I coated them and fired them again. The same with the talisman. I was not surprised. I had always thought it was a priestly commission that I undertook.

When the appointed time came, the high priest entered my forge. I was surprised and yet not surprised to see the same little man that I had seen before when I made the wyvern's foot knife for him. I told you he was ambitious, and his success in gaining power could explain a lot. It could explain the rumours for one thing.

He threw incense on the charcoal before I forged the rings, so that the air itself was pungent and heavy; he added something to the water I used to cool them, making it spicy and scented; he produced something dark and earthy to dip them in after I had cooled them in water. Finally he drew shapes and patterns in the air over the completed rings, so that a draft finished the cooling.

One of the rings was to have a stone. I made the setting from a description, without having seen the stone itself. When I did, you could have floored me. It was the crystal of the priest-kings and I couldn't see how he had been able to get his hands on it while the old

king lived. It hung - or was supposed to hang - on a thong around the neck of the ruler. Well, here it was!

After he had consecrated each ring I coated and fired them in the usual manner - and he sat there until they were cool enough to carry away with him. By the time he left the forge the first light of dawn was already breaking, the stars were fading and you could no longer see the glow at the distant mountain top.

It seemed like the next day when there came a knocking at the door, though it was not much later the same morning. I went yawning and rubbing my eyes to answer it, pulled back the bolt and opened up to see who wanted my services so urgently. Sunlight streamed in and I blinked in the glare, but I recognised the caller - an old priest called Tagg-Andes. He fussed about a repair to a knife. It was an old thing coming loose at the hilt and wasn't really worth repairing. It wasn't until I had heated up the charcoal in the forge that I realised he hadn't really come about the knife.

"The high priest came to you with a job of work he wished you to do?" asked the old man.

"Yes."

"He asked you to make seven rings and a talisman?"

"Among other things."

"And he had a stone he wished you to set in one of the rings?"

"He did."

"Did you see the stone?"

I didn't say anything for a while, then I said cautiously, "I saw a large crystal. Almost too large to set, but I managed. It wasn't easy."

A lot of craftsmen would have failed."

The old priest nodded slowly and sighed. "That man has overstepped himself and will have to be stopped." He paused, then added, "You know, of course, that he would not let anyone see the crystal and live."

I did see that, though it hadn't occurred to me before. I gave him his knife and shrugged.

"I've had a satisfactory life. If he kills me now it will not be as long as I expected, but it's been satisfactory."

Tagg-Andes shook his head. "You must escape and fight," he said. "I wouldn't wish to see your life blood flowing to further his ends. Leave now and find yourself work in one of the settlements."

He picked up the dagger and left, shutting the door behind him.

I thought hard about it, not taking much time. Tagg-Andes was right. I passed into the living area behind the forge. I bundled up a change of clothes and the ready gold and oricalcum I had, along with a few tools. I put on a cloak and went back into my workshop. There I buckled on a sword, stuck a dagger in my belt and left, looking with caution from the door before I went out into the street.

There were a few people in the street but nobody paying any attention to my forge. The street itself was four strides wide and laid with flat stones and lined here with little craft workshops like mine, one floor high, made of mud and straw baked in the sun and whitened with a wash of lime. The roofs were slanted brownish clay tiles.

I walked quickly down the street, still thinking hard. The island was more than twenty days hard ride in length and more than

ten days ride in breadth. The northern end of it was mountainous and desolate and it might be possible to hide there. There must be the wherewithal to build a shelter, but whether food was to be had I doubted. Over most of the island there were farms and villages, along with two more substantial towns and several temples. If I were to stay anywhere on the island, other than in the remotest mountains, I would be easy prey to a determined search.

What I must do was seek a boat leaving that same day: but to stow away, seek passage or volunteer as one of the crew? Boats were always seeking crew and sailors seemed a close bunch. A master of ship might have little heed for priests.

I turned at the end of the street and went over the bridge across the second canal - four circular canals divided the city, you recall, and the trade docks were along the second canal. I went towards them, watching the pinnacles of the palaces and temples on the inner rings of the city as if for the first time. It might be the last time I looked upon them!

There were two ships in. One was unloading grain and looked likely to stay here in Cercenes for days. The other, 'Gate of the Sun' she was called, looked to be making ready to sail. I thought I would try my luck with her master.

The drum beat kept a time which was easy for an oarsman to follow, and we slipped round the maze of canals in little time. The city is a good walk from the sea but the main channel is wide, straight and deep. Once out in open water we shipped our oars, the crew hoisted our sail and the helmsman set a course round the island and across the true ocean, for that was where 'Gate of the Sun' was bound. Atlas,

the nearer of the two great volcanoes, was in full sight, his wreath of smoke clearly visible in a cloudless sky. I could almost believe the old children's tale that Atlas was a giant. The mountain really did look to be supporting the sky, though I knew it wasn't true. Perhaps our ancestors had believed it.

After two or three days sailing you could see nothing but the top of Atlas reaching the far skyline, like a smoking finger. I thought about the new high priest. It was all too clear that he planned to rule with six henchmen. It was also clear that he didn't entirely trust them, hence the talisman. I did not see how Tagg-Andes or anyone else could stop him. I slowly, carefully, thoroughly, angrily called down the wrath of the gods upon him. I cursed him to his doom.

All the cursing made me feel a little better, but probably did him no harm at all. Eventually the top of Atlas fell from sight, the wind dropped and we got out the oars again.

After the noon break on the sixth day there was a sudden sound. The sea and air shook. The sky began to fill with the smoke of a great volcano and the sea became an uneasy calm. There was a kind of greasy swell, like dirty water when you cool heated metal in it. Then a great wind came and we drove before it: a hot and fiery wind. The ship sped over the water, hastened by that fierce furnace of a wind, but we could see a great wave coming towards us. A wave like a great and towering cliff. A wall of water many mastheads high.

I do not know whether the high priest was yet struck down, nor whether my curses had been heeded, but the gods were none too pleased about something!

CHAPTER 18

"Well," said Carol, "I never had any experience of that sort when I tried it on. What was it and why did he?"

"It's a long story," said Alicia. "I'm not sure I know where to begin."

It was Manjy who began the story. "It seems as if all of those connected with the university part of this dig have lived past lives which involved the ring," she said. "When one of us puts the ring on, like Alan did, he or she experiences a past life involving the ring."

"And you all had experiences like that?"

"Yes," Alicia said. "Steve, Gill, Frank and Manjy all had stories. So did I."

"Well, not admitting that I believe any of it, what is the story of the ring?" asked Carol.

"It would probably be best if each person told their own story," said Alicia. "Steve, you start."

"I was the bloke whose bones you dug up over there," began Steve, and told a summary of his story.

"Whose story came next?"

"Mine," said Gill, "I was a priestess, possibly at Woodhenge from some of the events." She went on to give Carol the main points of her tale - Gain, Faya, and a passing mention of the ring and why

she sent it north.

Each of the other three added a potted version of their own story, until the story of the ring was as complete as they knew it.

"Reincarnation is difficult philosophical concept for most Europeans," Alan remarked.

"And most Americans," added Frank. "Not to mention rocks from the sky, Atl-Andes, which sounds like Atlantis thinly disguised, metal rings in the stone age and so on."

"I don't have too much of a problem with reincarnation," said Alan, "and Alicia will vouch for some off beat ideas I have about the usually accepted timescale of prehistory."

Alicia nodded. "It was Alan that set me off thinking about the chronology of prehistory and where a copper age might fit in. Mind you," she added to Alan, "if you'd kept your ideas out of exam papers you might have done better."

"I'm not so steeped in traditional archaeological ideas as you," said Steve. "I don't find the concepts so hard to take. In fact, most of the ideas flow on from one another if you accept the first one."

"One thing strikes me about all your stories," observed Carol. "In each one somebody came close to getting the ring. I'd watch it if I were you."

"I intend to lock this ring away very carefully," said Alicia, getting up and putting the ring securely in a filing cabinet which she locked and checked before putting the keys into her jeans pocket.

"There's a bunch of things we haven't managed to figure out," said Frank, "Most of all we can't explain the coincidence of a group of people with past lives involving the ring - if that's what they are - being in one place at one time. For instance, why did I come on

an exchange to this particular dig?"

"Even allowing for interests which would make the thing more likely, there seems to be more than coincidence at work," answered Alan. "I mean take Alicia. Her past life experiences might make her more interested in archaeology in this incarnation, but it would still need something more than coincidence to get together a team of people connected with the ring. It seems as if there is a plan or something."

"But what plan?" asked Frank, voicing the thoughts of all of them. "And, more to the point, whose plan?"

"Just maybe ..." said Alicia, and hesitated. "I'm not going to say anything yet, but I might know - not who is doing the planning or how it's being done or what he, she, it or they want us to do about it - but at least why."

She clearly wasn't going to say anything more that night, so the group broke up, Alicia locking the Portacabin firmly behind them.

"I'll leave the keys on the caravan table so you don't have to disturb everyone when you get things started tomorrow," Alicia told Steve as he went to turn the generator off. She glanced knowingly at Gill. "No sense in everybody waking at the crack of dawn."

Steve gave them all time to light the gas lamps before he turned off the generator, plunging the camp into darkness, and went to join Gill in her room.

There were only three street lamps in Linksness and two of them were out at this time of night. Towns and cities in Britain and the developed world generally tend to have street lights blazing all night, supplemented by the lights of shops, blocks of flats, late sleepers and

early risers, so that a large town lights up the distant sky and is never itself truly dark. Even dark corners are only relatively dark and whether darkness is perceived as a threat, a cloak for crime, a licence for lovers or simply an inconvenience it is usually incomplete in cities. The average Briton or American would, no doubt, find the darkness of a dark and rainy night in one of the world's unlit places very formidable. However, this was not the darkness facing the Professor when he left the hotel in Linksness that night.

Actually, to a city dweller like Professor Harrington, it did look totally dark outside when he first looked out of his bedroom window. He flicked the curtain back into place, telephoned the bird watcher and then dressed quietly. He pulled on a thick sweater, picked up his briefcase, switched out the main light and exited softly into the hallway, leaving the small bedside light switched on.

The car park was partially lit by the one street light still on, lighting the junction of the island's 'main' road and the road down to the ferry. However, the glow filtered through the branches of some trees and round the end of the hotel building. This left most of the car park in shadow, but a starry sky gave off much more light than anyone would have expected and the moon, not yet risen but already lightening the sky, helped. As a result the professor found his way to the car and unlocked it easily. The sudden noise of the starter motor sounded incredibly loud in the silence of the night on Hoy, but seemed to have attracted no attention. Nobody came to a window and no bedroom lights came on.

'Obviously,' he thought, 'the people of Hoy must be sound sleepers.'

He eased the car into gear, slid out of the car park and

turned south towards the site of the dig.

There was no traffic. In fact there were no signs of life. The camp was in darkness as the Professor drove past and turned down a short track to a farm. He pulled up beside the bird watcher's station wagon and stepped out of the car as a porch light snapped on. A man came out, followed by a woman shrugging on a jacket against the cool night air.

"Is it wise for you to go out at night Juliana, now that you're pregnant?" asked Professor Harrington.

"Why on earth shouldn't a woman go out at night, just because she's preg ... How on earth did you know that? I haven't even told Ian yet."

"Never mind. I have plans for that baby, so take care of yourself."

Ian frowned but said nothing as the Professor continued, "Now you're up and about you may as well come with us. I am going to post the ring to myself in Warwick. I shall leave it with the other rings and reincarnate as your offspring. That way I can establish the new order while I'm still young, instead of being already an old man."

He held the rear door of the car open for the woman.

When Ian had settled into the front seat beside the professor, he backed the car out of the yard, turned it around and drove back down the lane onto the main road. Alongside the field where the camp was located, Professor Harrington stopped the car, doused the lights and slipped out. He reached back into the car for his briefcase and took out the University's spare set of keys to the cabin and caravans. He searched through it again and pulled out a silk- wrapped bundle, then he turned to leave.

He paused a moment. "Get into the driver's seat and wait for me. I may need to leave in a hurry," he whispered, and closed the car door quietly behind him.

The night was still and cool, the sea was breaking only very gently on the beach with a soothing and almost inaudible hiss and the moon had now risen - a waning crescent on the eastern horizon. The Professor experienced no difficulty in finding his way through the open gate and across the field to the camp. He walked round the back to avoid going near the tents and went round the end of the Portacabin to the door. The door was, of course, locked. He fumbled briefly with the keys before he went in and closed the door silently behind him.

Why Alicia woke up and couldn't sleep she didn't know. It might have been a noise of some kind but, if so, it wasn't repeated as she listened intently. No, it was more a matter of lying awake and 'knowing' - though she wasn't at all sure about 'knowing' what. When she looked out of her window and saw a shadowy figure cross the field towards the back of the cabin, she wasn't all that surprised or even scared. She got up out of bed and reached for her dressing gown then changed her mind, pulled off her night-dress and dressed quickly in sweater and jeans. The door of her room she left ajar for quietness, but the caravan door shut with much more of a 'click' than she intended as she crossed the soft grass in her bare feet.

The click woke Gill. It was only a slight noise in her room, but this was only the second night without sleeping pills - and she had been taking them for two years. The light of the rising moon fell on Steve's face, relaxed in sleep, and she hardly liked to wake him. But wake him she did. "Steve!" she hissed in a loud whisper. "Steve!"

"Ugh?" he responded sleepily. "What is it?"

"I don't know, but I heard something." They listened carefully and heard the faint bang of the Portacabin door.

"That's someone trying to be quiet," said Steve and, much more wide awake now, he got out of bed and pulled on his jeans. When he quietly opened Gill's door he could see the door to Alicia's room still ajar.

He drew back into Gill's room and said in a loud whisper, "Alicia's door is open, but I'm not sure I ought to go waltzing in there to see if she's awake."

"All right," said Gill, emerging naked from the covers, "I'll get dressed."

The flashlight beam wandered over the table and picked out the filing cabinet. It snapped off and the Professor moved across the cabin by moonlight. The light snapped on again to peer at the lock for a moment and again to peer inside the drawer as he took out the ring and stuck it on his finger. He turned, the drawer still open.

Alicia entered. "Hello Professor." Her voice was low but clear. "I was expecting you to come back for the ring."

"Were you," he said coldly. "Why."

"It would be impossible to forget those eyes in a thousand lifetimes."

"Eyes?"

"You were the high priest. Your eyes were the last thing I saw."

"Where?"

"Atl-Andes. I've known since this afternoon. Your expression when you saw the ring was enough."

"Ah," he said, nodding, "Now I understand. That would account for your little fainting episode."

"What did you intend to try and do with it?"

"I spent more than a hundred lifetimes searching for the rings. As an Egyptian priest, a Phoenician sea captain, two or three prehistoric chieftains, the governor of a Roman province, a Moorish pirate. I have lived as an eccentric Renaissance Gentleman with nothing better to spend money on than archaeology. I found this in Egypt." He produced the silk-wrapped bundle and unwrapped it to reveal a dagger. The blade was bronze, polished to deadly sharpness and the hilt was shaped like a monstrous scaly leg with evil claws. "Perhaps you recognise it. The rings, the ritual knives and so on, they're all safely hidden a few seconds in the future, and they'll stay there waiting for me to start the new age. And I'm almost ready."

His laugh was hollow and empty and evil. "I spent a lifetime as a wealthy Victorian, looking for this ring and for the talisman. I had begun to think they were lost, but I just need the talisman now. So far this dig doesn't seem to have turned it up, but it might yet."

"What did you intend to do now?" asked Alicia again.

"I was going to take the ring and post it to myself at the University. I don't want it going to some museum. I intend to use the rings to recover the crystal from Atl-Andes."

"Atl-Andes is a myth to most people and deep beneath ocean, lava and volcanic waste now. What is lost there is beyond recovery."

"I said I would recover it. I could do the most extra-ordinary things if they were called for."

"I suppose you're going to come back as a squid or

something."

"Sneering won't help you."

"And now that I've stopped you, what do you intend to do?" asked Alicia.

"You haven't stopped me, just caused a little change of plans. When you disappear at the same time as the ring people will assume a connection. We shall have to go for a drive."

He held up his hand with the ring on, fingers splayed. Alicia followed his hand with her eyes. "You were once my slave - now you are my slave again," he said, vibrating the words in the air around him. "To the car."

Alicia turned and, as one in a trance, began to walk in front of him back around the end of the cabin and across the field to the car.

"Get in," said the professor, opening the rear door, and Alicia climbed in silently. "She won't give you any trouble," he added to Juliana, and shut the door. He let himself into the front passenger seat himself.

"Slight change of plan," he said. "Drive to the stone circle on the Rackwick road."

"Who's she?" asked Ian, indicating Alicia.

"My student in charge of the dig. You must have seen her before."

"It's dark!"

"By a strange coincidence she was a sacrifice at the original dedication ceremony of the rings. In Atlantis. She actually remembered me, so I had to bring her along."

"Once a sacrifice..." said Juliana, rather nastily.

"Quite," agreed the professor.

A glance told Gill that Alicia's room was empty. "Quick, the Portacabin," she said to Steve in a loud whisper.

"Keys," said Steve, "She said she'd leave them on the table." In the moonlight they were instantly visible. "If she went to the cabin she wasn't expecting to get in." The two of them headed for the Portacabin to check there first. "I wonder if she dressed," said Gill, hesitating. "I'll go back and check." Gill turned back while Steve went on into the empty cabin. He looked around by the light of the rising moon and saw the filing cabinet drawer open. He looked inside the drawer, pulling it further open and straining his eyes in a vain attempt to see its contents. There simply wasn't enough light. He glanced across to the calor gas stove and saw the matches. It took three matches to be certain, but he was satisfied that the ring had gone. Turning abruptly he glanced around the cabin and then started for the door.

It looked to Gill as if Alicia had dressed hurriedly and gone out with bare feet, since her socks and trainers were still by her bunk and her night-dress was lying half off it. She glanced out of the window. Two figures were just outside the field and one was closing the gate.

Gill recognised the foremost of the two figures as Alicia by her build, but there was something odd about the way she moved. In the dim light there was no sign of any weapon, but she felt certain all the same that her boss was not going voluntarily. She dashed out of the caravan and met Steve coming out of the cabin.

"There's a couple of people just leaving the field," she said in a loud whisper, "and I think one of them's Alicia."

"Let's have a look," muttered Steve, and ran towards the gate. A distant car door slammed and an engine started.

Steve turned and ran back in the direction of the caravans. "If we're going to follow them it's going to have to be in the Landrover." he said to Gill between breaths as she caught up with him.

She answered, "You get the Landrover started and turned round while I go back for that amulet." and started to run back to the caravan before Steve could argue.

The lights of a car snapped on and the beams of its headlights lit up the road.

"Jawohl mein Kommendant!" he muttered to himself as he climbed into the vehicle "Anything you say." though he didn't really mind so much and was impatient with curiosity himself.

He held the heater plugs on for a few seconds to make sure the vehicle started easily. He didn't want to rouse the rest of the camp if he could help it. The engine fired first time and he turned it towards the gate, driving slowly by the light of the moon until Gill jumped in. Rather to his surprise the rear passenger door opened as well as the front one and a still dressing Manjy was bundled in by Alan who ran to the gate and opened it, before climbing in the back himself at the same time as Gill scrambled into the front next to Steve. He drove out onto the road with the doors still swinging shut and Manjy tucking a blouse into her jeans.

"I must have woken Manjy the first time I went back and I met Alan coming out of the other caravan just now," said Gill. "What woke you?"

"I wasn't asleep. I was reading," said Alan.

By the time the Landrover turned onto the road, there was no

sign of the car.

"They went in the direction of Linksness," remarked Steve.

"Can you follow on just side lights?" Gill asked.

"I think there's enough light. I'll try." answered Steve. He had driven the road daily going to the ferry, so he did know it reasonably well and there was a moderate light too. They rumbled on at around twenty-five miles an hour for nearly ten minutes without seeing anything, driving past the turning to Rackwick and on into Linksness. Steve stopped alongside the turn down to the landing stage.

"They won't have driven to the ferry, because it doesn't arrive 'till mid morning." said Steve. "Where to next?"

"I'll try the hotel car park," said Gill, opening the door and jumping down.

She ran the short distance to the hotel and disappeared into the darkness at the side. Steve presumed she was looking for the car the professor had taken that afternoon, but couldn't see why she needed to know.

Less than two minutes later she ran back into view and panted up to the Landrover. "Gone," she said as she scrambled in.

"If the car's gone I presume the Professor has gone as well," said Steve.

"I'd bet anything that's who was with Alicia, and I think I know why." Gill said. "The question is where?"

CHAPTER 19

Inside the circle of rough, ancient and uneven stones was an altar stone.

"Lie there!" commanded the professor in a voice that brooked no argument.

Alicia obeyed and he put down the briefcase. He opened it as he said "In Medieval or Renaissance times, when Christianity dominated, it was enough to use a consecrated host to achieve power. However, in these days of weakened belief I need something a little stronger.

"You'd better both robe up," he added to the other two, taking a folded garment from the briefcase.

The garment turned out to be a full length, grey, one piece, hooded robe, rather like a cassock, which he pulled over his head and tied round his waist with a rope of twisted material. He picked out of the briefcase the beautifully carved dagger and continued to Alicia.

"Very fortunate for me that you interfered when you did, my dear. I'm going to send both the ring and the dagger a few seconds into the future and come back for them later, in another incarnation. For that I shall need a great deal of power and your death is going to provide it. You recognise the knife. It took one of your previous lives as well."

He turned to the other two, who were pulling on similar robes. "I will need you both as well," he added, and told them, "Stand one at each end of the altar."

They took their places.

"I will retrieve the other things and leave everything here for you to watch over while you wait for me."

From his briefcase the professor took a jar of incense, a thurible and charcoal. "Light this, Juliana, and when it's burning, charge the circle," he said.

The charcoal had been soaked in a saltpetre solution and dried and, when Juliana struck a match and touched the flame to it, there was a sparking and sputtering as it lit. She swung the thurible until the charcoal glowed, then held the censor out while Ian spooned incense onto the smouldering coals. She walked solemnly round the circle, sending the scented smoke spiralling into the still air. When she had completed her circle she resumed her place at Alicia's feet.

In Linksness, Steve suddenly backed the Landrover into the ferry turning and set off back towards the camp.

"Where are we going," Gill demanded.

"I think I know where he's taken Alicia?"

"Where?"

"Do you remember one of the local men talking about a stone circle just off the Rackwick road?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, I mentioned it to him yesterday and he seemed to know all about it. I don't see why he's gone there, but I'll bet that's where he is."

Although the others couldn't see her in the dark, Gill's face

showed an expression of dawning comprehension. She sounded excited, as she said, "You're right, I'm sure of it. And I think I know why."

"I'm glad somebody knows something," Alan remarked, frustrated that both were being obscure,

The Landrover swerved right onto the much bumpier road and bounced about as Steve drove far too fast on just his sidelights.

"I don't have the map here," he said, "but it's two or three miles of straight road to the circle. That's somewhere off to the right about a couple of hundred metres from the road."

"We'd better start watching carefully soon, then," said Gill. "We don't want them to see us coming if we can help it."

"I will start with a banishing ritual," said the professor. "I don't want any other influences interfering with the operation."

He went to the east of the circle, where he was joined by the woman. He drew a pentacle in the air and she censured his handiwork with the thurible. The professor moved to the south of the circle.

The banishing ritual took time, but the atmosphere of the circle had changed. Before it had been quite neutral - just a cluster of old stones which was mildly interesting if one was interested in such things. Now there was a 'deadness' that even the untrained and non-psychic person could have felt.

"That's better," said the professor, "Now to the real business." He unwrapped the knife again and laid it on Alicia's stomach.

Ian spooned more incense onto the glowing charcoal in Juliana's thurible and then they took their places at Alicia's head and

feet again.

"I think that's the professor in the cloak," whispered Gill, her breath coming in gasps, "and that's Ali lying on the rock."

"What on earth is she playing at?" wondered Steve.

"She can't help it. I think she's somehow in his power."

"I'll soon stop him," said Steve, and straightened up. Before anyone could hold him back, he stepped into the moonlight. "It would be rather a shame to destroy that beautiful ring," he said.

"It would not only be a shame but, as far as you're concerned, it would be impossible." said the professor and added, turning Steve's own words around arrogantly, "You really can't stop me," and he held up his hand to display the ring, fingers splayed. "You will stand there and witness," he said. "When I have finished, you will kill me and for all I care you can be blamed for both deaths. With your record you'll certainly have some explaining to do." Steve froze as if rooted to the spot.

"I can always come back in a future incarnation. I'll make sure the ring and this dagger don't have to wait too long for me. Of course, lesser people sometimes wait a long time for their next incarnation and they don't really remember much about their past. I do. I've learned to control the time between incarnations to my own ends, so I'll be back and there's nothing you can do about it."

Alan put his mouth close to Gill's ear and whispered, "There's obviously a great deal of power in that ring and I don't see how we can stop him. It's a pity we haven't got the talisman from my story."

"We have," Gill whispered back. "And I'm wearing it."

Alan stared at her in awe. "Well I'm damned," he muttered.

"No you aren't, but I hope he is," said Gill, swallowing hard as she stood up. She drew herself to her full height in the shadows. She fingered the talisman and hoped she and Alan were right about its powers.

"You may have controlled your lives and you may have power over the other two but you can't stop me," said Gill, stepping out of the shadows and standing in the moonlight inside the circle. "You will have to pay the full price of your actions in this and every other life, and you can start in your next incarnation."

"Like ... Benderman," and he spat the word out, "you likewise cannot stop me," snarled the little man raising his hand as before. "And as for paying the price of my actions, I have overcome that weakness."

"When we found the ring we also found the talisman to control it, and I'm wearing it. You have no power over me. What's more," she went on, "you haven't 'overcome' the price of your actions - your obsession has merely postponed payment of your 'karmic' debt - and it's about to become seriously overdue!"

She stepped across the soft, wiry moorland grass up to the altar stone in the centre of the circle, faced the professor across the stone and stood, impressive with her hair blowing in the slight wind.

The little man raised his arm and held up his hand, fingers splayed to display the ring. "Another witness," he sneered.

Gill held up both arms in a 'v' shape and acted with the authority of lifetimes as a priestess. She was also speaking and acting for some one or some thing beyond her comprehension: she was speaking words and thinking thoughts she did not entirely understand.

"To the ends of time and the ends of the Universe I say, you damn yourself, and again I say 'you damn yourself'. You will pay for your actions."

To Steve and Alicia she said in a clear ringing tone, "I free you from the power of the ring."

Steve and Alicia blinked and the latter sat up on the altar stone. Alan and Manjy ran into the circle. Alan made a grab at the bird watcher while the woman Juliana retreated into the shadows with the thurible. Steve rushed towards the professor, but he was collapsing, his face twisted into paroxysms of rage. By the time Steve reached him, he had fallen onto the grassy floor of the ring.

"Probably a heart attack." he said, feeling for his pulse "And I can't find a pulse. I think he's dead."

Steve jumped to his feet and ran to help Alan. The latter had been thrown clear by Ian, who was now running with the woman to reach the station wagon.

"They've got too big a start on us," Steve said as the car doors slammed.

"Leave them," said Alan, getting up "They can't go far. This is an island."

He picked up the thurible, which Juliana had dropped in her haste, and brought it back to the altar stone, swinging it slightly so that the smoke rose. He put it in the stone with the little jar of incense.

"What's in the briefcase?" asked Gill.

By the light of the moon and helped by the flashlight Alicia held, Steve tipped the contents of the briefcase onto the altar stone and they all crowded round.

"A pack of Tarot cards," he remarked, opening the pack and

rippling through them.

"The Waite-Rider version," Alan observed. "Traditional but classy."

"Another dagger," Steve continued.

"Plainer and much more modern." said Alan

"More charcoal. Several containers of what looks like incense." He took the cap off one and sniffed at it. "Incense?"

Alan took it from him and sniffed too. "Rather heady." he said, "I'd say there was a lot of musk in that one." Manjy looked at him, seeing another side to him entirely and Gill was surprised as well.

Steve continued rummaging. "A couple of books. Direct the light down here Alicia. 'The Book of Thoth' by Alistaire Crowley," he read, "'The Golden Dawn' by Israel Regardie.' Light reading for an adept of many incarnations. I should think they couldn't teach him much, but they aren't what I'd expect a professor of archeology to carry around with him.

There'd be a lot about in The Golden Dawn' to indirectly help in the organisation of a modern occult group," remarked Alan.

"What shall we do with the Professor?" Steve asked.

"Leave him here," said Gill, "If we take everything but him, he'll be found here and it will look like natural causes."

"Can we get away with not reporting all this?" asked Alan.

"They'd never believe the truth," said Steve. "With my record especially, they'd think we were hiding something and send in the heavies. I'm for keeping out of it."

"What about the bird watcher and the woman," said Alicia. Now that she was starting to recover she was beginning to apply her mind more logically to problems. "And we'd have to tell Frank," she

added.

"Tell him," said Steve, "but don't tell the police. Let them come to us. They can question us all they like but there's nothing to connect us with the professor and the other two are not going to come forward: they've more to hide than us. Besides," he added, "The bloke died of natural causes."

"**Supernatural** causes," said Gill, "but I think I agree with Steve. Now let's get away from here before we're noticed. Leave the incense and the burner and the plain knife after you've cleaned off any finger prints, but take the other things, especially the ring and the knife from Atl-Andes. Let's be quick about it. It'll be daylight soon."

Indeed the summer sky was already beginning to lighten a little.

Alicia nodded. Steve picked up the dagger and recovered the ring first and put them both in the briefcase, stuffed back the things which he had emptied onto the rock, and picked up the case. Gill wiped the items left behind, except for the incense spoon, which they hadn't touched, using the edge of her T-Shirt.

Steve used a paper hanky to hold the knife and put it carefully in the professor's hand. "I don't think they'll bother to fingerprint these things because death was from natural causes and there won't be anybody else around. All the same, it would look odd if they did and everything was clean," he said.

Then, leaving the jar of incense, the burner and the spoon on the altar rock, he led the way back to the Landrover.

"I suppose you didn't recognise the other two, and what do we do about the car?" asked Alicia.

"The bloke was our bird watcher," said Alan, "but I've never

seen the woman before. I wonder who she was? We can't do anything about the car."

The five of them crowded into the Landrover. Steve started it up, turned on the light, turned it round and they started back.

"It'll make a nice change to see where I'm driving," said Steve, and added "That was an impressive performance, Gill."

"I was impressed with it too," said Gill, "I suddenly knew that the same man was Professor, Victorian archaeologist, Renaissance gentleman, Celtic soldier in your story, traveller in mine, prehistoric priest, thief, high priest in both Alicia's and Alan's stories and goodness knows how many other unpleasant people. I knew he must be stopped and must pay for his actions. I don't know how or why I knew though."

Manjy had been silent since they left the dig. Now she spoke. "The nameless ones who see the rules obeyed must have gathered together a group of those they thought were suitable to curb the professor and force on him the rules of karma."

That was the sort of remark one can't comment on easily. Alicia, though, was not so sure the man was beaten.

"How do we know what his soul will do next?" she said. "We need to find the other rings and render them harmless."

"She's right," said Gill.

"Sleep on it," said Steve, and drove into the field by the camp.

Steve was yawning and looked a bit bleary-eyed as Alicia came in for breakfast next morning, rubbing her eyes. Of Gill and Manjy there was

no sign yet and both Alan and Carol looked decidedly short on sleep too. Only Frank was his well-rested, lively self.

"Morning, boss," said Steve, yawning again.

"Morning," Alicia answered, also yawning.

"Hey, you two look as if you haven't slept," observed a rather sprightly Frank. "Surely the prospect of another visit from the Prof's not that bad?"

"We had a visit last night, that's why we look tired," said Alicia in a low voice, "I don't expect him today, but don't mention that to the others. I'll explain it all to you after breakfast."

"In fact we'll need a full council of war," said Steve.

"Okay. If you say so," Frank told Alicia. "Want me to go on with excavating the passageway?"

"Yes. We'll start with two teams at first while we chat and add a third team later. There's no particular rush and we're making steady progress."

Alicia tried to sound businesslike and actually felt a bit less tired once she had eaten.

Gill and Manjy came in twenty minutes late for breakfast but didn't look nearly as bad as might have been expected. The local men arrived and, with the volunteer labour, got down to work straight away. The University group plus Frank gathered in the Portacabin.

"Okay," said Frank, "Now will somebody fill me in - please." Alicia told him the story of events the previous night. "Thanks for waking me," he remarked.

"There wasn't time," responded Gill, "It all happened so quickly. The question is, what happens next?"

Frank thought it over for a moment and then said, "If I was

those two I'd drop the professor's car off back on the Rackwick road. There were two of them. All they had to do was wait until they saw the coast was clear, then drive back with two vehicles. They could dump the car and be home long before anyone else was up and around."

"Good thinking," said Steve. "I bet that's what they did."

"I wonder who they were," murmured Alicia, thinking out loud rather than asking a question.

Again Frank thought about it before answering. "The bird watcher's been around the dig a fair bit. I bet one of the locals knows the guy. Everyone seems to know everyone else on Hoy."

"I could ask at the Post Office when I go to meet the ferry," said Steve. "They'd probably know."

"Right," said Alicia. "Now. About the professor. We don't know anything. If the police don't show up by 11.30 when Steve gets back from the ferry, he can drive to Linksness and go to the hotel. When they find he's missing and the car's gone, the police will start looking. Okay.?"

"Sure," said Frank, and the others nodded in agreement.

"Now we come to the sixty thousand whatever question. Questions. Firstly what do we do about this ring and the talisman? Secondly, where would the professor be likely to have hidden the other five or six rings and whatever else he salvaged?"

"He said he'd hidden them all 'a few seconds in the future'," answered Gill. "The question is how did he do it?"

"No. That's the third question," said Alicia. "We still have to answer the question 'Where?'"

Steve got up. "While you're discussing that particular needle in a potentially worldwide haystack, I've got work to do. I'll talk to

Jamie or one of the others before I meet the ferry," he said, and went out, closing the door behind him. Glancing at the blue sky he thought that it looked like being another very pleasant day. He strolled over the field towards the dig. As he walked it occurred to him that nobody had answered question one either.

"Where's the briefcase?" asked Frank.

"I've got it in my room," answered Gill, "I'll go and get it." She got up and left the cabin.

"That's a thought," remarked Alicia. "We looked at it last night, but only by a combination of moonlight and torchlight."

"There may well not be any sort of clue at all. Then again there may be," said Frank. Gill re-entered the cabin carrying the briefcase.

"Here you are." She dumped it down on the table. Frank upended it and then checked the side pockets.

"Here are most of the things you mentioned, including the ring," he said, placing the knife from Alan's story and the ring to one side. "Two books, like you said. There're some papers here you didn't mention. We'll have to look through these later. Some plastic jars - incense you said. Tarot card. A Torch. An airline ticket from Aberdeen to Kirkwall Hello. The stub of an airline to Jerez wherever that is. Some photographs ... Roman remains somewhere. An archaeological magazine. I suppose we'd best go through it later but it's probably just reading matter for the plane trip. That's about it. You knew him better than anyone here, Alicia. Anything here strike you as a clue?"

Alicia said gravely, "I thought I knew him reasonably well. It turns out I didn't know him at all. Clues. He wasn't married and seemed wrapped up in his work. He holidayed in Spain quite a bit. He

may even have had a house or something there. Not on the Costas though. I remember he made some pretty derogatory remarks about the big resorts more than once. I don't that's a clue though. Probably not."

"Jerez?" asked Frank, "Isn't that Spain? It's a ticket for an airline called Aviaco for a flight from Stanstead to Jerez."

"Hereh," said Allan, giving it the Spanish pronunciation, "It's southern Spain where the sherry comes from. It's inland, away from the big resorts, I think. It's probably only leftover from a holiday though."

Frank thought they ought to get to work. "We'd better give some thought to what to do with the ring and amulet while we're working and see if Steve comes up with anything about those other two."

"You all start work," said Alicia. "I'm going to read through these papers in search of inspiration. You take charge for the moment, Frank."

"Okay by me," said Frank, and they all got up to leave. Alicia started with the bundle of papers.

Steve walked up to where the local men were carefully sifting through sand near the floor of the second house.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "I just wondered whether you know that bird watcher bloke is that keeps hanging around? I think he's afraid we'll disturb some nest of other."

"Oh aye. I know who you mean, though I don't rightly know a name," said Andy, looking up, "He's an off-comer with plenty of money. He rented Doug MacDonald's place from the start of April to the end of September. Doug has a farm with an old farm house on it.

You must know it, you have the power line for the computer from there."

"Oh," said Steve and nodded.

"Doug did it up a year or two ago and started renting it out to holidaymakers. The man didn't seem to do much bird watching before you all came though. He seemed more interested in yon stone circle the professor was speaking about yesterday."

One of the others had stopped work and was listening. "Comes to that, where is Professor Harrington?" the man asked, glancing at his watch. "I thought he said he'd be back first thing this morning."

"Probably just sightseeing or something," said Steve. "Alicia's having kittens in there about everything being just right." He nodded vaguely towards the camp. "Anyway, I best be on my way, before I run foul of the boss."

"Aye?" Andy smiled and the men settled back to their work, while Steve walked back across the field enjoying the sunshine.

As he drove out of the field Steve saw the rest of the crowd leaving the cabin and waved to Gill.

CHAPTER 20

Steve parked the Landrover on the hard and walked across to the post office. He glanced at his watch. He was easily half an hour early for the ferry. There were few people waiting yet, but it was a very pleasant morning. He opened the door of the post office, holding the door for an elderly lady just leaving.

"Goodbye, Mrs McCloud." the assistant called. She turned to Steve.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"First I want a couple of packets of mints. Then I'll need a book of stamps - ten first class."

He offered her a five pound note and she counted out the change.

"Lastly I want some information, but I don't know who to ask," he said.

"I might know. It depends what you want."

"That farm of Doug MacDonald's that he rents out to holidaymakers. Do you know it?"

"Aye."

"I wanted to know the name of the couple who rented it this year."

"Well, I think it was rented in connection with the archeological excavation you're working on yourself. I'd have thought

you knew. I've seen the name on letters though, when I've sorted the post. Davies. A Mr and Mrs Ian Davies. The letters had a Warwick postmark, wherever Warwick is. England somewhere. Why don't you just drive up and ask your questions direct to them?"

I might just do that too," said Steve. "Thank you for your trouble."

"No trouble," she said, smiling.

"Bye."

"Goodbye just now."

Steve was a little taken aback by what he had learned. When he had connected up the power line it was to a farmhouse, yes, but he had assumed the woman he spoke to was a local. She must have been the one they saw in the stone circle. The one, it would seem, from Warwick.

The ferry was in sight and Steve watched it come alongside, doing each phase of the manoeuvre exactly as every other time. 'It's like an army drill,' he thought. 'I suppose that, if they do the same thing every time, it means they're practising for bad weather in the winter.'

Steve collected the various items addressed to the dig, including the photographs Alicia wanted and a letter addressed to Manjy.

As he climbed into the Landrover he thought he might as well go to the hotel while he was in Linksness.

"It'll save another trip in later." he said to himself and started the vehicle.

At the 'T' junction he turned right, away from the dig, and drove less than fifty yards to the hotel. He parked the vehicle and walked in. There was nobody at reception, but a man came straight

away when he rang.

"I wondered if Professor Harrington was around. I'm from the excavations down the road. He hasn't turned up and I wondered if he was having problems with the car."

"No. He's not about and the car's gone."

"Oh well, probably gone sightseeing on the way then. I don't blame him."

The man hesitated. "We're just a little worried," he said, "Mr Harrington must have gone out before daylight, since his bedside lamp was still on. Besides, he hasn't been to breakfast."

"I don't know him well enough to know whether that's normal," said Steve, "but, if he doesn't show up by dinner time, could you ring the police and ask them to keep an eye out for him. He may have run out of petrol or broken down somewhere."

"I will certainly do that," said the man. Steve turned to go. "Goodbye, sir."

"Bye," said Steve, and went out.

When Steve got back to the dig things looked to be going well. He could see figures working all over the site, though he couldn't see Alicia. He unloaded and then went into the cabin to fix dinner. At the computer Manjy was entering more data. Alicia looked up from the late professor's papers.

"Hello Steve," she said, and went on reading.

At dinner everyone was full of themselves. An archeological dig is very pleasant in nice surroundings on a sunny day.

"Listen," said Alicia to the assembled team, "It's getting too

warm to work hard for a couple of hours and we've made good progress with the excavation so far. Take a couple of hour's break, go swimming or sunbathing or whatever, relax. We'll have a sandwich about four and another session of work from about five to seven."

She turned to Jamie and the paid workers. "You can go for today on full pay. I'll take responsibility for the early finish."

"We'll have another short council of war outside," said Alicia to Frank. "Let's clear up first but you make sure neither Manjy nor Alan slip away. I'll catch Gill and Steve."

Frank nodded.

"Right," said Alicia when they were all comfortably settled on the grass. "First, the professor. Steve. Did you go to the hotel?"

Steve explained his conversation with the man at the hotel reception. "I doubt if they'll discover the body today," he said. "Somebody might find it by accident but I doubt it. Personally I think they'll start looking tomorrow and find the body about noon."

"OK. Second thing. Did you find out anything about those other two?"

"A Mr and Mrs Ian Davies from Warwick. The Post Office thought the professor arranged for them to rent the farm we have our power line from. I'll wander over later today on some pretext and see the lie of the land."

"Right. Third thing. The briefcase. For the moment I'll look after it. There's nothing to identify it as belonging to the professor. Next thing is the ring."

"Let's say it was stolen," said Frank " We can report the theft and get rid of it safely at leisure. If it goes to the university anyone so

minded could get hold of it."

"We'll have the 'busies' all over the dig if we report it stolen. The briefcase won't be safe and neither will I," said Steve.

"You have a point," said Alicia.

Frank suggested an alternative. "Okay," he said, "Tell them Professor Harrington took it and ask for it back."

"That sounds better."

"Right," said Alicia again. "Now the professor's papers. There's a couple of rituals there. I'm no occultist, but I think one of them relates to sending the objects into the future. Sounds fantastic and I can't believe it works."

"He did it, didn't he?" asked Manjy.

"So he claimed."

"Can I see them?" asked Alan. "I'd like to read through them later."

"I didn't know you were into that sort of thing," said Alicia.

"And the big question?" asked Frank.

"Yes," said Alicia, "Where did he hide the other rings? The photographs are of Roman remains at a place called Boloña in southern Spain. They the remains of a roman town called Bella Claudia. No great difficulty in identifying them - it's written on the back of some of the photographs themselves. What's more they are taken over a number of years. The years are on the back of the ones he wrote on. They were probably in the briefcase because there's a magazine article about the excavations. Unfortunately it's in French. My French isn't very good but I recognize a few names and there's a photograph."

"Are you suggesting that's where he hid the other rings?"

asked Frank.

"No. Not yet anyway. There was one letter addressed to him among his papers. I've put that on top of the filing cabinet with the airline tickets because I don't want anything in the briefcase which would relate to the Professor."

"The letter is from an 'abogado' - a sort of Spanish solicitor. It's in English and confirms purchase of a house in southern Spain at..." Alicia glanced at her notebook, "Vejer de la Frontera, wherever that is. I know it's southern Spain because the post code is Cadiz and that's the south."

"We need a map of Spain," said Frank. "You've a load of maps Steve."

"Can't help you there, I'm afraid," said Steve, "There's dozens of maps in my room. But not of Spain. I could tell the woman from the Post Office where Warwick is though, if that's any help!" He ducked as Alicia threw the notepad at him.

"I think we'll leave it for the moment," said Alicia. "It's too hot to think it all out now and anyway there's other lines of enquiry to follow up." She got to her feet. "Let's enjoy the afternoon like the rest of them."

The others got up from the grass, dusting themselves off. Steve said he would wander over to the farm they had the power line from and Gill wanted to go with him. Manjy went to reread her letter and write home yet again. Alicia and Frank both fancied a swim and Alan went off to join the volunteers.

"Do you think the rings are in Spain?" Gill asked Steve, as he led the way to the edge of the field following the cable. It was suspended from

the Portacabin roof to a tree at the edge of the field, where it went over the hedge.

"It's a long way round by the road," he explained, and then thought about Gill's question. "Manjy's story must have been somewhere that way but he's turned up in France and southern England as well. And according to what he said, he's turned up in Egypt as well. Why not somewhere like the pyramids. Through here." he led the way through a gap in the hedge.

"But he'd want somewhere reasonably accessible in medieval times."

"That part of Spain wouldn't be very accessible. Wasn't there a longish period of Arab control?"

"I think so, but he said he was a Moor in one of his incarnations."

"Well ...," Steve sounded doubtful. "... Spain wasn't very friendly to the English for several centuries. And then there was the civil war. A bit dodgy, I would have thought. And decidedly dangerous to carry out an occult ritual during the Spanish Inquisition. Over here."

They had crossed a small second field and Steve now climbed over a gate.

"Anyway," he said, "the rings could be in five different places or have been moved five times to places which were suitable at the time."

Gill followed him over the gate. They were in a small farmyard. The cable came over the roof of a barn and down to the woodwork of a door which was closed but not locked, where it went inside. The wire was plugged into a socket just behind the door. The barn was dim and dusty but empty. Steve shut the door again.

"The house looks shut up," said Gill.

"They're obviously out," Steve responded. "It was a woman who was here when I set up the cable. I just thought she was local. Still, the house does look a bit shut up."

"It feels as if they've gone altogether. Look, all the windows are closed on a day like today."

"Well, you were right about the amulet. Perhaps you're right about this. There's nothing for them to stay for, I suppose. If they came by car perhaps they took the vehicle ferry from Lowness. I wouldn't have seen them leave this morning."

"There's no sign of the Professor's car. They probably took it back like Frank suggested."

"Well," said Steve, "I don't think there's anything for us here." He tried the door. It was locked. They walked all round the house and tried the front door too, but that was locked. Nobody answered their knocking and there was no one about.

"Let's wander down to the beach and enjoy the rest of the afternoon," he said at length.

Gill objected. "I'm enjoying the afternoon anyway. Not that I mind going down to the beach or anywhere you want go."

"We can get down to the beach over this field," said Steve, and took her by the hand.

"I think I must be a very dependant person," said Gill. "I seem to need somebody loving me all the time."

"I'm not sure that's true. You need to love a lot and of course you want someone to respond to you, but that's not the same thing really."

The field petered out in sand dunes. Standing there they

could see Alicia and Frank and some of the others splashing about, but once they sat down they were not only out sight but they couldn't hear them either.

"Do you need to love, Steve?" asked Gill.

"Not in general, I think I'm probably quite self contained." He paused. "But I do need to love you," he whispered. "I want to make you happy."

"Well," she said slowly. "You've managed to make me feel a woman again. But I missed your attentions last night. I want you right now instead." and she started unfastening her jeans.

"That," whispered Steve, "is good enough for me".

Manjy took her letter and her notepad to the dunes overlooking the beach and she too could hear the faint sounds of the swimmers. She sat down with the letter open in front of her, but she was not even looking at it. She was miles away and deep in thought.

Her father was unreasonable only in twentieth century European terms. He wouldn't have been considered so in nineteenth century England or twentieth century India. She had been born and brought up in Britain. So had he for that matter, but she was more 'British' than he was, whatever that meant.

One thing was clear, however. Unless she was prepared to cut herself off totally from her family she would have to compromise. The right husband would satisfy her father's cultural ties while letting her follow her career and bring up any children to fit in with the society they would live in. The 'right' husband would have to be a well educated professional who was also born and educated in Britain. Were she to demand such a partner in the right way she might get the

man she wanted. What's more, she would have the unexpected support of her grandmother.

Manjy lay back in the sunshine and wrote the letter carefully in her head. She decided that two letters were called for. One to her father, the other to her grandmother. Things looked a lot better than they had at the start of the dig and she fell asleep smiling.

Steve was just putting away the last plates and thinking about an egg and cheese salad for supper when he saw the police constable cycle across the field. The others were all across at the excavations and there was no way for him to avoid the man. Steve was still very uneasy around the police and they were not planning to tell the whole truth. He would have rather had someone else tell the lies.

There was no help for it. He went out to meet the policeman. "Hello," he said.

"Evening sir. Constable Breck. Are you in charge?"

"No, I'm just the maintenance man cum cook. You want Ms. Graham. I'll go get her if you like."

"If you would please. A couple of sightseers at the stone circle found a body and there's reason to believe it was Professor Harrington. He was connected with this excavation, or so I believe."

"A body!" Steve was surprised that it had been discovered so quickly and he accidentally struck the right note.

"That's right. And a car that belonged to these excavations. We think the man was Professor Harrington. Do you know him?"

"Yes. He was the man who organised the University end of the operations. He was here yesterday. I'll go across and get Ms. Graham for you, unless you'd like to come across with me."

"I believe I will. I'll leave my bike here and walk across with you." He leaned his cycle against the Portacabin and strolled with Steve, unhurriedly with a big even stride. "Did you know Professor Harrington?"

"Not very well," said Steve. "I'd met him a couple of times so I knew who he was but I can't pretend to have known him well."

"I see. What was he doing on Hoy?"

"Just a routine visit to make sure all was well. He was overall supervisor of three projects. I think it was three. Several anyway."

"I see." The manner suggested small talk and the constable was taking no notes, but Steve suspected he was mentally storing away the information for future reference.

"Here we are," said Steve. "That's Alicia Graham over there." He pointed. "I'll get her for you."

"Ali!" he called as he approached. She was inside the second house, but looked up when he called. "The police constable would like a word with you." Alicia climbed out of the house and walked over, dusting herself off.

"Excuse me, but I've got to start supper," said Steve. Although interested, he was more concerned to extricate himself, and left them to talk.

"How can I help you?" Alicia asked the policeman.

"Well ma'am. Two tourists at the stone circle over to Rackwick came across a parked car belonging to this excavation and a body. We think the body may be that of Professor Harrington."

"A body!" Alicia's words were exactly the same as Steve's, but her surprise was more pretended. Afro-Caribbeans generally treat the law with caution because it tends to treat them with suspicion, but

Alicia was better educated than most and this was Hoy not Hackney.

She had certainly come across rude and suspicious policemen in the backstreets of Birmingham, where the police went about in twos or drove by in 'panda' cars. This, on the other hand, was a large, friendly man with the slow Islands accent and trousers still in cycle clips.

"The professor did drive off in the car last night and when he didn't turn up this morning I had Mr. Benderman call at the hotel. Mr. Benderman was told that the Professor had gone out somewhere in the car. I thought he was just sightseeing. Was the body in the car?"

"No ma'am. If it had been we would have been more certain of the identity. Could you identify the body for us?"

"I suppose so. Oh dear. What did he die of?"

"We don't know for certain until after an autopsy, but it looks like natural causes."

"Do you want me to come now?"

"The body is in the church hall in Linksness. If you were to come along right away, we could send the body for autopsy in Kirkwall this evening. A helicopter will fly over and pick it up."

"I see. Well we haven't the car, of course, and I've never driven the Landrover. It's a lot bigger than a car but on these quiet roads I should be all right. All right, I'll come along now."

Alicia left Frank in charge and walked over to the cabin to get the keys from Steve.

"I'm just going in to give some information to the police. I'll be back shortly and I'll fill you all in then," she said.

"Right you are," said Steve. "Why don't you stick your bike in the back and hitch a lift with Ms. Graham?" He suggested to the

constable.

"Do you know I think I will," he said, and opened up the rear door to fit the bike inside.

The church was at the far end of the village and the hall was next to it. The body lay on a table with a sheet over it. Alicia parked the Landrover and both she and the policeman walked into the hall and over to the body. The constable turned back the sheet, revealing the face and head of the Professor. The hooded robe had gone, leaving the wool sweater. Had the police taken the robe? Alicia thought not, but decided against any remark about his dress.

"That's Professor Harrington," said Alicia. "Where did you say you found him?"

"The stone circle at Rackwick."

"He must have gone there out of interest. He spoke of it yesterday,"

"He seems to have gone there very early today."

"Perhaps he was watching the sunrise or something. You know, like druids," said Alicia.

"Was he involved in things like that, ma'am?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, but I've never heard any stories to that effect. An archaeologist would be interested in solstice sunrises and such things, though, and it is still June. The solstice is not long gone."

The policeman had not mentioned the robes or the other

equipment, like the thurible or dagger. Perhaps the other two had taken them to avoid further questions. Alicia knew that any hint she knew of them would imply that she had seen the Professor after he left the site the previous night, so she carefully said nothing.

"By the way," she added as the constable covered the body and they turned to go, "He took a ring from the excavations last night for safekeeping and further study. I don't think it had much cash value but it was very interesting in terms of the site. It was something we dug up and I wouldn't want to lose it. Can I get it from his things?"

"We'll go to his hotel room and see if it's there," said constable Breck, without saying whether he'd return it or not.

At the hotel they were let into the professor's room. His toilet bag was out on the bedside table and a suit and raincoat were hanging up on coat hangers on a hook behind the door, but there was nothing much else to be seen. The small suitcase contained nothing unexpected. She would have liked to search properly but she was supposed to be looking for a ring, so there was little excuse to look for papers or letters.

"I wonder if the ring is in his suit. He was wearing that last night." She tried the jacket pockets and felt a small book, like a diary or an address book. As the policeman looked behind the bedside table to see if the ring had fallen there, Alicia transferred the book to her own back pocket.

"Nope. Not there," she said and patted the raincoat pockets noisily.

"I don't think it's in this room, ma'am. You're quite certain he took it?"

"Several people were there at the time. I'll ask them and make sure I'm not mistaken," she said. "I'd better get back to the excavations."

"And I'd better get along too. I have to phone and arrange the autopsy."

They locked the door behind them and returned the key. Alicia contained her curiosity about the book while the constable took his bike from the back of Landrover. Then she said, "Goodbye," clambered in and drove back to the camp.

By the time Alicia got back to the camp, supper was in progress, with most of the diggers sitting outside with it. The air was still mild and though the sun had sunk behind the higher side of the island it had not properly set and it was still day.

It wasn't until after the meal that Alicia had chance to look at the book she had sneaked out of the Professor's suit. Frank took the gang off to the pub over the fields leaving Alicia, Steve, Gill, Manjy, Alan and Carol sitting in the grass outside the cabin.

"How did it go?" Steve asked.

"I think it went all right." She continued, "I mentioned the professor taking the ring and we had a look for it in his room. While the policeman wasn't looking I found this." and she produced a pocket diary.

"What is it?" asked Alan.

"This is the first look I've had myself," said Alicia. "It's a small diary ... with a lot of addresses in the back ... He's written in the phases of the moon ... and some other astrological references I don't understand. I just recognise the symbols."

She flipped through the diary. "A lodge he belonged to meets every other Monday ... He's made three trips to Spain already this year."

"Perhaps he went to gloat," Steve remarked.

Alicia ignored him. She muttered, "Let's look at the addresses." Then she said more loudly, "The address section includes Ian and Juliana Davies with a Warwick address ... and a lodge phone number - The Order of the Morning Light ... the address of the solicitor in Spain ... another address in Vejer de la Frontera ... the phone number of a hotel in Vejer ... This needs a lot of thinking about."

"I wonder if the rings were hidden somewhere in southern Spain. He seems very interested in it," said Manjy

"I've thought of something else to worry everybody," said Alan.

"What's that?" asked Steve.

"He was going to carry out a ritual in front of the bird watcher and the woman. Right?" Several heads nodded. "That means he didn't mind them seeing the ritual. Right?"

"So far," Steve agreed and the others nodded again.

"That was either because they already knew it or they couldn't do it. If it was the last, no problem. If it was the first and they know where the other rings are, we could still be in trouble."

"Oh dear," said Gill.

"'Oh dear' is right if he's right," said Steve, frowning.

Alicia was half listening as she turned the pages of the diary. "The lodge seems to have met on the first Monday of most months," she said. "He was off to Spain again the week after the next lodge meeting."

"Did he have a dig going on there?" asked Manjy.

"No, but he had a house," answered Alicia. "And he went to Boloña three times this year."

"He'd have stayed away from where the rings were hidden, surely," said Frank. "So as not to draw attention to the place."

"He didn't feel threatened," objected Gill. "He was arrogant and absolutely sure of himself. Steve may be right about gloating or he might have wanted to keep tabs on developments there, just to protect his interests. Anyway, I'm beginning to get a feeling."

"Can I have a look at those photographs of the Roman ruins again?" asked Manjy.

"They're lying on my bunk in my room," said Alicia. "Go and help yourself."

Manjy got up and went into the caravan. She emerged a moment later with the wallet of photographs. She flopped down again and Gill moved closer so that she could see as well.

"We've all looked at those and they don't really tell us anything we want to know," said Alicia.

"Well," said Manjy, "These are photographs of the ruins of Bella Claudia and we all agree they might signify nothing more than a mere professional interest in archaeological excavations. Several photographs have writing on the back of them, but one has an arrow and a circle on the front as well. Does this photograph," and she held it up, "mean anything more than a coincidence?"

"Of course it does," said Gill. "What you mean is 'Does it mean that's where he hid the rings?'"

Alicia was thoughtful. "We ought to go to Bella Claudia and investigate properly," she said. "I can't really leave the dig until September. I've too much at stake."

"Steve said, "I could afford it. I'm not short of funds since my mother died, but I don't think the busies would let me go out of the country. I'm here on parole for this job. I can't leave until September either."

"I could go, I suppose," said Gill, "but the money might be a problem."

Manjy remarked that she had enough money, though she wasn't at all sure her family would approve of spending it in that way.

Alan said slowly, "I'm not sure how much it would involve, but I've got some cash. Besides," he pointed out, "Both Manjy and I free to leave the dig any time. We're both volunteers."

"Gill really needs to go if I can't," said Alicia. "She was the one with training and power. She might be able to do the ritual."

"Tell you what," said Steve, "I'll give Gill the money to go with Manjy and Alan. How about that? And if Manjy and Alan are short I'll make it up." Gill stared at him open mouthed.

"You're talking about five hundred pounds or so from here," she said.

"I know," said Steve. "I'm a big softy."

"God, I'll make it up to you," she told him.

"You can think of it as the first instalment of sharing everything."

"Is that a proposal?"

"Yes," said Steve.

"Then the answer's 'Yes'."

She kissed Steve and Alicia said, "It rather sounds as if congratulations are in order."

"I think so," said Steve, "but I did say I would make up the shortfall if Alan and Manjy went too. How about it."

"I do speak reasonable Spanish," said Alan, "I did it to 'A' Level."

Manjy was thinking about arranged marriages. Even though the arrangements looked a lot more acceptable now, this trip to Spain might be her only chance to spread her wings alone. Her family wouldn't approve of her going with Alan as well as Gill, but she wasn't about to mention it.

"Okay." she said.

"I imagine there will be a bank in Stromness where I can sort out the money and a travel agent's where we can book," Steve remarked

"Sure to be," said Frank.

"Then if the boss thinks it's okay, we can all four of us go over on the ferry tomorrow."

"I suppose so," said Alicia. "But I think we should all sleep on it. There is a coincidence which suggests that the needle might be somewhere in those remains. That's still a pretty big haystack and there's more than just a chance we're wrong. It could all turn out to be a very expensive mistake."

Some of the enthusiasm of the group ebbed away, but Gill said, "I'm convinced that's where the rings are hidden. I feel it."

For the second time that day Steve said, "That's good enough for me."

CHAPTER 21

Later that night, when Gill and Steve were on their own, Gill pursued the subject of his rather public proposal.

"Did you really mean it?" she asked.

"The money?" he asked, knowing full well what she was referring to, "Of course I meant it. I can't go to Spain myself and I couldn't do much good there without you anyway."

"Well I am touched you trust me with the fare like that, but I meant the proposal."

"Why? Are you having second thoughts about accepting?"

"Look," she said, earnestly and not very logically, "You made a remark about sharing. It was me that took it as a proposal. With everybody listening it's just possible you felt trapped into agreeing."

"If I'd asked you when we were alone and making love, you might have doubted that I meant it afterwards. I wouldn't have asked you yet if you weren't about to go away for a while." He paused, "I'll ask you again - and notice I did say again. I know we haven't known each other for long but we've both turned over a new page in our lives and I like the person you've chosen to become, very much. Will you marry me, Gill?"

There was a silence in the darkness as she snuggled even closer. She had also, without conscious choice, become very psychic. Changes in her make up might have been triggered by her

experiences of past lives, but they told her that Steve was someone on whom she could depend. She knew that she was still demanding sexually and emotionally, but that Steve could meet her needs. She was also aware that Steve trusted her growing psychism more than she did herself.

"Yes, " she whispered, "I like the inner strength of the person you've chosen to be as well. I really think we can build a new life together."

For a while they were too busy to talk.

Later they gave some thought as to how the bookings might all be done.

"If I ask the bank in Stromness to clear my cheque by phone with my bank in Brum, and then we get a travel agent to book everything and clear my cheque with the bank in Stromness, we ought to be able to arrange it all on the spot. You could fly to London and from there to southern Spain. The travel agent can arrange car hire so that you can get around. All you need is cash for food, accommodation and petrol."

"I've never driven in Spain."

"Always a first time."

"Do you think Manjy and Alan can drive?" asked Gill.

"I've no idea really. I should say it's possible but we'll have to ask them in the morning."

"It could be useful to have several drivers," said Gill. "It's going to take us the best part of a day to Heathrow from here, isn't it?" she continued, thinking out loud. "Couldn't we take an extra day and go by train to save some money? I wonder if we could get a night flight to Spain or will we have to wait until the next day?"

"It might be a good idea to fly from Kirkwall. The professor said he'd flown from Aberdeen to Kirkwall. You could get a flight from there to Heathrow.

"Is time so important?" asked Gill. "I don't want to waste 'our' money."

Steve considered this. "I don't know," he said, "The bird watcher and his wife left Hoy by car today in a hurry. If they caught the ferry to Mainland straight away and from Stromness to Scrabster **and** they took turns at driving they could be in Warwick by early afternoon tomorrow. They might just have wanted to make a getaway but, with the booking of their house made through the University and the exact travel time fixed by the ferry, they couldn't, as you might say, 'escape without trace', if the police started asking questions. We don't know that they'll try and get the rings back, but we don't know that they won't either and it would explain their rush. I think you should all fly to be on the safe side."

"Besides," he went on, "rail and ferry fares aren't that much cheaper than air fares. Air's less than double the cost of sea and rail and, on top of fares, you'd have other expenses like accommodation and tube fares, so I'm probably not wasting our money on your holiday!"

"You really have chosen to be a kind and generous person."

"It's easy to be generous to you," he said, and they made love again.

The four of them left the Landrover parked on the hard and went back with the ferry to Stromness. The business at the bank and the travel agent was done, though it took time. There were no flights available

on the Stanstead to Jerez route the professor had used, but the agent found them three seats from Heathrow to Jerez, changing at Madrid.

"That's better really," Gill observed. "The plane from Aberdeen is to Heathrow, so we'll only have to change terminals not airports."

Gill, Manjy and Alan caught the bus to Kirkwall while Steve looked and asked around for some way back to Hoy without having to wait for the ferry next morning. He persuaded a fishing boat to drop him off for a 'consideration', picked up the Landrover and arrived back at the dig in time to make supper.

When Gill, Manjy and Alan walked out of the plane and onto the steps at Jerez, walking into the heat was almost like walking into something solid.

"God it's hot," said Gill, as they walked across the Tarmac
"I'm going to get a hat and some sun screen p.d.q."

"P.d.q?" asked Manjy.

"Pretty damn quick!"

"Oh."

Kirkwall had been pleasant though rather overcast when they left. Aberdeen had been windier but sunny. London had been mild but overcast with drizzly rain. It had all been a whirl of impressions. The sheer size of Heathrow had been hidden by them only having used terminals 4 and 3, but the people! The overwhelming impression was of how busy it was. By contrast, Madrid, when they changed planes there, didn't seem much different in size but lacked the rush.

The passengers had to walk down steps to a bus which

drove them to the terminal, and the terminal itself seemed as large as terminal three at Heathrow. It probably was. There just wasn't the capacity of the other terminals, just another smaller one for internal flights.

Because they'd flown Iberia, the three of them already had boarding passes for the internal flight, so they didn't need to hurry or find a check-in. They had an hour and a half to follow the green line on the floor to the national flights terminal.

From Madrid to Jerez was under fifty minutes from take-off to landing. The crew were friendly and the plane full but the hostesses didn't seem to speak much English.

The second thing that Manjy, Gill and Alan noticed was the relative smallness of the terminal building at Jerez. They collected their bags from the conveyor belt, wandered through an empty customs check and went out into the main hall to see a man holding a piece of card with 'LA SENORITA MEADOWS' on it.

They went over to him and Alan introduced them. His Spanish proved its worth as the man spoke almost no English. Gill and Manjy produced their driving licences and passports and Gill signed the papers.

"It's due back by 9.00 am a week tomorrow," Alan translated.

"Ask him where we could stay the night," suggested Manjy, "It's already turned five."

"I saw a tourist information desk in the main hall," said Alan. "I'll ask there."

Gill paid the man for the petrol, tipped him and said 'Gracias' which was nearly half her Spanish vocabulary. He left all smiles and indecipherable good wishes as Alan returned with an array of maps

and a list of hotels.

"Right," he said, "We could go into the city and stay at a hotel there. I've got a list. Jerez sounds an interesting place but I think we ought to put business first and look round later if there's time."

"So what do you suggest?" asked Gill.

"The girl at the information desk suggested driving to Medina Sidonia and spending the night there. She said there's a roadside restaurant just outside the town with a reputation for good, cheap food.."

"Sounds okay to me," said Gill, "What do you think, Manjy?" Without waiting for a reply, she went on. "We need to buy a knife to use in the ritual, if we do one. A straight bladed one, like a stiletto or a Medieval dagger. Perhaps we could get that in Medina as well."

By this time their belongings were loaded into the car.

"Are you driving first or shall I?" Gill asked Alan and Manjy.

"I'd rather navigate," said Alan.

"I think I'd rather start on a quiet road where there's no traffic," answered Manjy.

"So would I," said Gill, somewhat ruefully, "although they say it's easier to start off in traffic, because you've less of a tendency to drive on the wrong side of the road with other vehicles around. Let's see if it's true!"

"At the main road turn left." said Alan. "Go about four kilometres and turn left again. Signpost for Algeciras." The little car slipped smoothly into the right hand lane and Gill suddenly realised how easy it was going to be, and relaxed a little.

Where she needed to turn left, Gill was almost caught out by the lane pattern. She had to slip off to the right and make a short loop

to cross the road at right angles.

"Neat, but unexpected," she muttered, waiting for a gap in the traffic.

"Two kilometres and left again," said Alan. "What you're doing is taking a short cut from the Seville-Jerez road to the Jerez-Algeciras road without having to go into Jerez."

Gill duly turned left again. The road crossed a motorway and went through attractive, undulating country for somewhat less than twenty miles. It was a quiet, well surfaced road.

When Gill commented on the lack of traffic, Alan said, "You've got to remember that Spain has a much smaller population than Britain but more than twice as much space. Outside the big cities it's an under populated country."

The countryside was starting to get hillier and straddling the top of a higher hill were the white buildings with red roofs of a small town, dominated by a striking church and the ruins of a castle.

"Medina Sidonia," said Alan. "If we turn off to the right somewhere here we can get up into the town."

"Look out for the turning," said Gill.

Lower down the hillside it was a fairly modern town, small - more like a very big village - with some building going on, but higher up the hill it was very old with streets narrower than you would have thought possible in the age of the car. There was just about room to squeeze the car into a space between two others in a street off the main square. Gill was sweating profusely by the time she'd finished.

"Well done," said Alan, "I didn't think there was room to squeeze in."

"Well I'll tell you one thing for nothing," remarked Manjy.

"She can squeeze out again before I take over."

Gill, on the other hand, was feeling very satisfied with her first attempt at driving on the continent.

"Right," she said, "Let's go to that hotel we saw round the corner. We can worry about food when we've got rooms."

The Volvo estate edged slowly down the gangway and into the car deck in the depths of the car ferry. Once in place the four people got out, Ian locked up and they walked through the fire door and upstairs to the passenger deck.

"I need a drink," said the second woman, and marched into the bar, followed by Ian, Juliana and another man.

Where Juliana was a very ordinary, though attractive woman in her 30s, the second woman was ... well, striking. For a start she was tall for a woman. In that she was rather like Gill, but there the similarity ended. The woman's hair was a vivid red which might have been its natural colour when she was younger. About forty-five or a well preserved fiftyish, she carried herself confidently and, to judge from the way in which she ordered the drinks, was arrogant.

"Thanks Stella," said Ian, taking his and Juliana's.

"Here you are, Cornelius," said Stella to the fourth member of the party. He nodded and took the drink without saying anything. He too was tall: a big man, with a balding head and trimmed beard.

"I still think we should have gone on the Cherbourg route," said Ian, just making conversation.

"We went into that before," Stella answered as if confronted and challenged. "There's no hurry. We cross to Calais, spend the

night there and tomorrow we take turns at driving until we cross the border at San Sebastian. We can overnight tomorrow night in northern Spain somewhere. Three days to get there without hurrying. Juliana needs her rest in her condition."

"Come on, I'm only a couple of months pregnant yet."

Stella addressed Cornelius. "You have the letter Robert left in the safe with details of the location?" He nodded. "I can perform the necessary ritual, but I will need you all to help. To recover the rings requires nothing like the power needed to send them out of time in the first place."

"You're sure you can do it?" asked Ian.

"Of course."

There were only three people missing from the dig, but it seemed like many more, perhaps because Steve was affected by the absence of Gill. At any rate, when Steve, after dinner that evening, produced a bottle of wine he had brought back from Stromness, Frank and Alicia cheered up considerably.

"I'm supposed to stay off alcohol," he said, "but that mainly means beer. I don't think I'm likely to start a fight after one glass of wine."

Frank grinned. "Well, if you start getting feisty, don't pick on me," he said.

"Not too much risk," Steve answered, also smiling a little. He raised his glass. "To the success of Gill, Manjy and Alan in recovering the rings," he said.

"To Gill, Manjy and Alan," they repeated.

CHAPTER 22

"There's the sign to Boloña. Turn right here," said Alan, glancing at the map again.

Manjy, who was taking a turn driving, slowed the car and turned right. They had been barely two hours on the road: at first only a country lane through farm land and then the main Cadiz-Algeciras road, level and fairly straight. Latterly there were high hills all around, some with towns or villages clinging to them.

"I notice there's both a hotel and a filling station at the turn-off." said Gill from the back adding, "Are hotels called 'hostales' in Spanish?"

"Only the cheaper ones," Alan said cryptically, and went on to explain that the main difference, apart from price, was to do with whether they offered dining facilities. "Full dining and they're 'hoteles'," he said. "Less than full, down to no restaurant at all, and they're 'hostales'."

The minor road, rather less than two cars wide, wound steadily, but not steeply, up towards a ridge between two rugged mountains. Rocks lay tumbled below high crags, as if shaken loose by some past earthquake.

At the crest of the ridge they could see a sandy beach stretching golden and empty below them, the vivid blue of the Atlantic

and, beyond the sea, the hazy outline of distant mountains.

"That must be north Africa," said Alan, consulting the map. "Morocco, I think. And the ruins are somewhere to the right, close to the beach."

Manjy drove quite slowly, though there were few other cars or people and not many buildings either. There were about a dozen vehicles in the car park. The road led alongside the ruins, which were clearly extensive and firmly behind a wire fence. There was a path down to the beach with two or three restaurant-bars. However, the way from the car park was closed to vehicles by a barrier and a sign which read 'Prohibida a Pasar'.

"Entrance is free. Guided tour each hour," said Alan, translating the sign by the entrance.

"The next trip is just over quarter of an hour," Manjy said, glancing at her watch.

"Let's walk down to the beach while we're waiting," said Alan. "I could murder an ice cream," he added.

"The chain-link fence is just along the front and dividing it from the car park," observed Gill.

"Yes. It looks like an ordinary three strand wire fence dividing it from the fields further over," Alan agreed.

"I still want to look as closely as we dare without attracting attention and study the route we'd have to take in the dark. I don't want to break a leg on some unexpected obstacle," said Gill.

They were all archaeologists and such ruins were interesting in a general sense, as well as being a hiding place for the rings. They could see a number of columns still standing, and the walls of buildings were several feet high. Roads and squares were paved.

Clearly this wasn't just a villa: no holes in the ground with a bit of mosaic - it was a whole town.

There were only three other people in the tour, but the guide didn't seem to mind the smallness of the group and his English was reasonable. He explained that systematic excavations had occurred only recently and that there was still a lot they didn't know. The ruins were of a town called 'Bella Claudia' but probably originally called 'Baella' and, seemingly, entirely built up round the making of a sauce highly prized in Rome. The main ingredient was tuna fish caught here and the sauce itself was made at a factory just outside the walls, which he would show them later. The town had had a Forum (a sort of 'town hall'), three temples, the workshops and homes of various artisans, paved streets and walls. Water had been brought down from a spring on one of the mountains by aqueduct, most of which remained, and a drainage system, which also was largely intact, emptied into the sea. It was all very impressive.

At 'three temples' Gill pricked up her ears. One temple was to Mercury, one to Vesta and one to Neptune.

"Let's see," said Manjy, "Vesta was the goddess of hearth and home. Neptune was god of the sea."

"I imagine he'd have been popular with fishermen," observed Alan.

"Wait a minute," said Gill. "Wasn't Neptune the same god as Poseidon? Manjy, you're the classics specialist."

"Neptune is the Roman name for a god the Greeks called Poseidon, yes - effectively they're the same person," said Manjy, "I bet that's the hiding place," she paused for a moment. "And that's a somehow 'stirring' ruin still, with those broad steps up to raised

remains. It must have been even more imposing when it was complete.

"Well, let's finish the tour," said Gill.

The guide explained that archaeologists had discovered a cemetery on the nearer hillside, about a mile away, and were working there. He seemed to imply that more work should be done on the factory, which he showed them next.

"You tend to think of a 'factory' as something that didn't exist before the industrial revolution," Alan remarked, "but this was big. It must have occupied more than an acre."

There were great stone mixing and cooking bowls with a heating system and arrangements for filling containers. The whole thing was vast and must have employed a lot of people. The remains were reasonably well preserved, with the greater part of the walls and most of the pillars supporting the roof remaining, though the roof itself had gone and the level of the sandy soil around had risen over the years.

"Some of the pillars are Roman style," said the guide, "but some appear to be older. They are Phoenician style."

Language problems made it impossible for them to be certain whether part of the factory was much older or whether it was just that the styles varied.

"Perhaps it predated the Romans," said Gill. "They may have just taken it over and extended it."

After the tour the three of them went for a coffee in the middle one of the three cafes. The choice was arbitrary, there being no way of deciding between them. "I think I'll have something longer and colder," said Alan, and ordered a beer and two coffees. They sat

outside, under the shade of a straw veranda and looked at the beach and the sea. It was a quiet and restful scene, the sun was getting hotter and there seemed no hurry to do anything.

"We may as well eat here and then sleep somewhere," said Gill. "It looks as if we can get into the ruins quite easily after dark."

"You're going to try the ritual?" asked Frank.

Gill did not answer directly. "Manjy, have you got that photograph with you?" she asked.

"In the car."

"So are the papers relating to the ritual. We'll get them later. If the arrow on the photograph points to a spot in the ruins of the temple of Neptune I'll read through the ritual again with a view to trying it tonight."

She paused while the waiter brought the drinks and Alan told him they had decided to eat. The man was not much older than them and very friendly. He told them the restaurant was busier at weekends and in July and August, when cities like Seville were too hot for comfort. Right now they were able to order at leisure and have their meal brought to their table quickly.

"This wall runs east-west," said Gill, "and there are a couple of trees here. If we go round to the north side of the wall there should be some shade. I'll get the papers and the photographs. I want to get my bearings."

"With the natural or the supernatural?" asked Alan.

"Both," replied Gill seriously.

"I'll go to the car for you," said Manjy. "I need the loo, so I've got to wander around and look for one anyway."

"Round the side of the cafe where we had dinner," said Alan.

He and Gill flopped down in the shade and Manjy joined them later. The Spanish habit of having a siesta seemed eminently sensible.

Gill re-read the papers concerning the ritual for the umpteenth time and was at last beginning to understand them. The scientific side of her from this incarnation didn't really accept the ideas, but other, deeper chords from other lives were struck. She began to understand exactly what she must do, though believing it was another matter.

The first part of the ritual must be done standing, since it involved moving about. There were images to visualise - she wondered whether she would be able to do that sufficiently well. Her assistants in the ritual would need to visualise as well and she wondered whether they could do it.

"At least archaeologists spend a lot of their time trying to picture what something or other must have looked like in its original state," she thought. "Maybe that will help."

The latter part involved crossing into the astral. Since that meant leaving her physical body she would need to lie down.

"I wonder if I'll be able to project," she thought to herself. "It will be a real let down if I can't!"

She looked at the papers yet again. "I start with the banishing ritual of the pentagram."

She reached for her note book and her biro from her bag to make notes of the sequence.

"Well that's easy enough, drawing pentagrams in the air. Then I follow the paths as indicated by the ritual, past the guardians as shown on the Tarot cards. That's okay, but this is all early

medieval: you'd expect something earlier. Oh well. Then you throw incense appropriate to Binah - what the hell's Binah?...the great all mother; the sea. Aha. Appropriate to Poseidon. Then you lie down and project. To do that I'll wear the talisman as protection in case anything nasty fancies my body while I'm out of it."

Alan sat up rubbing his eyes and saw Gill reading, but by now she was resolved and ready. "I think it's 'go' for tonight," she said.

"We may as well enjoy the rest of the day," Alan said, "We won't be able to start work 'till late, because the Spanish keep very late hours."

"I'm missing Steve," Gill told him. "I fancy a swim and a sunbathe, but I'd much rather be sunbathing with him."

Manjy woke up and shook herself. "Did you bring your swimming things with you?" Gill asked her.

"Yes," she said, thinking that a 'nice' girl from her community didn't wander around the beach half dressed. 'Dammit, I'm going to be unconventional for once,' she thought, and all three of them went to get their things from the car.

There were no changing facilities but the beach was almost empty. So Alan and Gill both risked changing in public. Manjy disappeared into the toilet at the cafe and came out in her swimsuit. Nobody seemed to notice. The water was pleasantly warm and the slope of the beach gentle, but there was no sign of any life guard, so they took no risks.

They towelled themselves dry, rubbed on more sunscreen and lay down to sunbathe a while.

"I want to walk back a little way on that road and study the lie of the land," said Gill.

"All right," said Manjy, "Let's all go soon. We have quite a few hours to kill. Do you think we ought to book in at that hotel you saw?"

"I don't know," answered Gill doubtfully. "We might have trouble sneaking out again to visit the ruins. Then, if we're successful we could be carrying things to which we wouldn't want to draw attention. We don't want anyone asking awkward questions, do we?"

Manjy saw the point. "Yes," she said, "I can see that. Perhaps we should just sleep in the car tonight.

"It's around six already," said Gill. "If we look over the route into the ruin, then top up the tank at the filling station on the main road and have a meal somewhere it will be nine or later. There won't be a lot of time to do more than have a nap before we go into action."

They agreed to roughly Gill's plan for the evening.

The Sierra swung into the main square at Salamanca and stopped in front of an elegant and expensive hotel. Juliana was feeling a little off colour, Ian had been driving again and Cornelius was as silent as he usually was. Stella had the same air of aloof and ruthless authority which she had already shown.

"I don't care about getting any further for now," said Stella. "We have no reason to suppose that those people from the dig have got the time, money or inclination to come to Spain for the rings and the other things. They probably don't even know there's anything else to recover.

"Why you two couldn't have grabbed his briefcase before you ran off I can't think," she added, not for the first time. "As it is we'll have to go to all the trouble of recovering his belongings. Not to

mention the ring. And the talisman."

"It was the talisman that caught us off guard," said Juliana.

"That's no excuse," Stella answered impatiently.

"It caught the Professor off guard as well," objected Ian.

"He'd grown too old," answered Stella, "If we can recover the remaining ring and the talisman we can establish the new order without waiting for him."

"He wouldn't like that," protested Juliana. " And I shouldn't be surprised if he's left some sort of guardian lurking with the rings."

"He doesn't scare me," sneered Stella, "He can't invent a Guardian I couldn't handle," and she led the way into the hotel.

The grass was rough and the ground uneven, but there were no actual obstacles until they came to the fence. There would be almost no moon tonight, just the last of the waning moon very late and close to dawn. There was some light from the stars but, although Manjy was carrying a torch, they had decided to forgo any light except in emergency and it was dark.

Alan stepped through the fence between the top and middle wire and held the wire up for Manjy and Gill.

"Thanks," whispered Gill as she stepped through.

"Now, look out for the city walls," whispered Alan, "They're less than a metre high here and no more than about two metres from the fence."

"Ouch," muttered Manjy. "I've found them."

"Okay," Alan told her. "I've found them too. Now get down from the wall and walk very carefully to the edge of the first building - about ten or twelve feet more - and jump down two foot six to the

pavement. You'll fall if you miss it."

The three of them felt their way to the edge of the pavement and jumped down safely, Gill's bag making a slight 'clinking' noise as she landed.

"Okay. Now about twenty feet to the platform of the temple, two steps up to the base and another six or so steps from the base to the ruins of the temple itself," whispered Alan.

In the middle of the ruin was a stone block which may or may not have been an altar - probably it was only a part of the collapsed roof - but at any rate a handy focal point and one whose long sides faced roughly north-south.

Gill put her bag on the floor and placed on the stone the plain dagger they had bought in Medina Sidonia, an ash tray they had 'borrowed' from the hotel there to use as a makeshift incense burner, the roll of charcoal blocks from the professor's briefcase and the four different jars of incense from the same source, along with the tarot cards and the papers. To them she added Manjy's torch and, from her own pockets, a long length of wool wound into a small ball and some matches.

"I hope that's everything," she said softly, taking the talisman from her pocket and putting it round her neck. "I feel as if I should be wearing a robe or something," she whispered, "but I'll have to make do with sweater and jeans."

"I thought witches danced around naked," Manjy whispered back.

"It's warm, but not warm enough for prancing about in the altogether," she answered. "Anyway, we're not witches. Well, not in the medieval sense anyway and this is essentially a medieval ritual."

She swallowed hard, braced herself, whispered, "All right, let's begin," and lit the charcoal in the ash tray.

Alan and Manjy watched Gill as she first unwound the wool in a rough circle of about five metres diameter around them and then tied the ends of the wool. She sprinkled a little incense from the first jar onto the glowing charcoal before taking the dagger to the eastern edge of the circle.

Facing the east, she drew a pentagram - a five point star drawn with a continuous line - in the air with the dagger and pointed the dagger at the centre, where she whispered something, too quietly for Alan and Manjy to make it out. The three of them 'saw' the pentagram flickering blue - not a physical light: real, but not quite of this consciousness.

Gill dragged the knife through the still air to the south of the circle and drew a similar pentagram there. Again she whispered something and again the three imagined they could see it.

As Gill went to the west of the circle and again drew a pentagram in the air, they thought they could see the wool itself glowing where she had traced with the knife. Next she went to the north and repeated the action there and then completed the circle by returning to the east before returning to her 'altar'. She put down the knife and raised her hands in a 'V'.

"Around us flame the pentagrams and circle: Now that we are protected we seek the assistance of the powers and guardians of the paths of the inner self that we will tread." It seemed that the air glowed more than ever.

Hands still raised, Gill faced her stone. As she stood Manjy and Alan saw - with their minds rather than their eyes, but genuinely

and involuntarily - the figure of a naked woman inside a great laurel wreath; an image from the last of the tarot trumps. The figure seemed to beckon, Gill lowered her arms and they passed through the wreath, the gateway to the path, and everything appeared as if bathed in a flood of violet light throwing the ruins into a brilliance seen only in the mind. Gill sprinkled incense from the second jar onto the charcoal and the air was filled with a sharp, cutting smell and their minds seemed more conscious of other realities while physical reality ebbed. There seemed no incongruity when an elephant trumpeted from the purple haze, stopped to gaze at them, flicked its mighty ears and then stomped away into the mist.

There appeared to be three paths before them. Gill took the middle path and the violet light faded. Beside the path there was a pool at which the image of temperance - a tall woman in grey robes, filling a chalice from a pitcher - established itself from surrounding uncertainty. They seemed to pause long enough to drink a sip of cold water offered to them before they passed on into a glowing orange light. Gill again sprinkled incense on the charcoal and the air became heavy with a rich and opulent scent. A room began to emerge from their collective imagination. Manjy dimly realised that the collective experience, which would normally be obtained only in a lifetime of study and visualisation, was the result of drawing upon many lifetimes.

The room had six doors, including the one behind them by which they had entered, and the three became aware of a king seated on a golden throne, at the centre of the room. He pointed to the door just left of straight ahead. Gill took the door he indicated and led them onto the path. The orange glow was left behind. This time there were three guardians of the path: a man and woman - the lovers of the tarot

pack - and a shadowy figure looming behind them. The two people broke their absorption in each other long enough to welcome them as three passing travellers.

Thus it was they arrived at Binah. The air was a sombre dark blue and, except that it seemed to shut out the stars, it appeared much like the reality around the ruin. An older woman materialised in the mist, nodded in greeting and faded.

Gill lay down on the longer stone; Manjy and Alan stood at her head and feet. Gill fingered the talisman and Manjy opened the last jar of incense ready.

The astral is another, non-physical dimension. It is not time, and time seems hardly to apply. Distances are irrelevant: the sleeper entering the astral world accidentally travels what would appear to be great distances to follow concerns or ambitions, but they are concerns not distances. He or she who enters deliberately suspends time and space and he or she who enters regularly has awareness of intruders and interlopers.

Gill gathered herself mentally to leave the safety and sanity of her body, Manjy heaped incense on the charcoal until the air reeked with a bitter, acrid scent which stripped the soul bare, and with an audible 'click' Gill passed into the astral.

CHAPTER 23

The 'click' was barely audible on the physical levels of reality, but it was an enormous noise which rippled and reverberated around the astral like the ripples on a pond. Yet, as time and distance have no meaning on that plane of reality, it was heard everywhere and at once by those concerned to hear it, whether they knew that concern or not.

In a hotel in Salamanca, Stella woke suddenly and completely. She knew at once that some one had entered the astral to recover the rings. She knew that the things left by the Professor had a physical reality and that they had a physical location at which she must be to grasp them.

On the other hand, it was quite possible for her to be at that location on the astral instantly. Even if the rings were physically beyond her reach, she could interfere to stop anyone else from reaching them.

Steve turned in his sleep, disturbed by a sound he did not hear and would anyway not have understood. He was concerned only that Gill needed him and dreamed of rushing to her aid, her knight in shining armour.

The noise woke something else. Something stirred. The Professor-Priest had left such hate and malice that it had an independent reality: not much intelligence perhaps, but you do not

need intelligence to defend in hatred what was gathered in evil. The guardian stirred into wakefulness.

Gill found herself in a rough and rocky landscape, not unlike the physical reality above and to the left and not so far from the ruins of Bella Claudia at Boloña. A blue light bathed an empty landscape. She stood behind a rock, gazing at an overhanging cliff with a crack or shallow cave. There was a stake hammered into the ground outside the crack in the mountainside and a chain led from it to the cave.

Gill 'knew' the rings were close, but the guardian was a new thought. She wondered what it was and how she might get past it. All seemed still. There was another, slightly nearer, tumbled pile of rocks and Gill began to walk quietly towards them.

The air around her shook and trembled as the guardian emerged from the cave, first a scaly foot and talons, then two feet, a wicked evil head, a scaly body and two folded wings. As Gill watched, it unfurled its wings, stretched up its body and its head and looked around. Every scale was hardened hate: the talons were unmitigated evil: the head and eyes a challenge from unbridled ambition. Gill dived for cover among the rocks.

Its breath was like that of a dragon from the stories of the past, except there was no fire, for there are no bodies on the astral to feel that fire. Instead, the fiery breath that hurled towards Gill was the heat and flame of pure, pure malice, so long pent up that it would burn to nothingness a soul, like a dragon in a story book of old would burn its prey.

Gill cowered behind the rocks, Stella laughed in evil triumph - and into this fairy tale there rode her shining knight. Steve.

Gill's first thought was that he looked rather ridiculous in armour, her second thought was that he would not get anywhere near the wyvern with a lance and her third thought was, 'Oh God! He's going to get himself killed.'

The wyvern turned and directed a visible current of malice and ill-will towards him. His shield protected him from the worst of the blast of hate, but he was knocked from his 'horse' and scrambled amongst the rocks. Stella laughed again.

"What we need," thought Gill, "is a mirror to turn back that malice on itself. The strange thought came to her unbidden and immediately Steve emerged from behind the rocks, looking like Perseus, but holding a huge, round mirror like a shield.

The wyvern roared hatred - not its own, of course, but that of the professor-priest - and again streamed out a blast of malice. Steve held up his mirror and turned that malice back upon itself. The wyvern staggered before all the stream of hate and evil. It screamed with rage. From among the rocks a stone emerged from nowhere, flew towards Steve and crashed into the mirror, shattering it in a thousand pieces.

The wyvern retreated for a moment to the overhanging rock and seemed to shrink a little. Then Gill saw Stella materialise a bow from out of nowhere and aim an arrow at Steve.

"Look out!" she yelled.

Steve glanced up in time and dived back amongst the rocks. Then Gill had to duck down herself as an arrow flew close by.

"Two can play at that game," she thought, and imagined Steve with a bow. He leapt up and fired at Stella. Halfway across the roughly open ground the arrow dematerialised. The woman moved

around a little to get a better shot at Gill who moved in turn. Gill thought she too needed a bow.

"If both Steve and I can fire at the same time her attention might be split," she thought. And then it struck her. There were no limits but her imagination. "One of those anti-tank rockets should do nicely."

Obedient to the picture in her mind, a soldier-Steve found himself with a rocket, and fired.

The astral explosion was ... satisfactory. It could not harm Stella physically but it certainly caught her by surprise and blasted away the rocks. The wyvern saw her and, though weakened, still raged.

It poured one more torrent of ill-will; another withering blast of malice and hate that caught the woman open and exposed. As flesh would be burnt from bones in a fairy tale, so the blast stripped bare a soul, tore a personality apart, burned up ambition, laid lust to rest and gored greed so that none remained. That entire personality was ... nothingness.

"The mirror again," thought Gill and the Perseus-Steve emerged again from the rocks holding a mirror. The wyvern, weaker now, sent one more blast of hate towards the approaching figure but the mirror was too much for it. The stream of evil was reflected back, the wyvern shrank and shrivelled and at length it was destroyed by nothing more nor less than its own evil.

Gill walked from her hiding place towards the cave, but Steve was already carrying towards her a wooden chest.

"Here's what you came for," he said.

"Quickly, before all the evil on the astral is aroused,"

answered Gill. "Put the box down here and then return safely to your sleep."

Steve put the chest down, kissed her and vanished. With an audible 'click' she returned to her physical body.

Beside Gill's prone body there materialised a wooden chest about two-feet-six by one-foot-six high by two feet deep. It was heavy and Manjy needed Alan's help to lift it onto the alter stone, while Gill scrambled to her feet. When Gill looked, the chest was, perhaps surprisingly, not locked, but it was Alan stopped her opening it.

"Later," he said. "Finish the ritual first."

"That's good advice," said a deep rich voice, and the older woman they had seen earlier seemed to solidify from the dark blue mist around them. "The evil ones are gathering. All the mindless creations of eons of ill will have a life of their own. What you have been doing has attracted them. You had best go."

Gill turned without turning and moved without moving so that they passed back along the path of Lovers. The lovers waved in a desultory greeting and the dark shadow settled on the path behind them, blocking it completely to any who came after.

Gill opened up a door and they entered the flood of amber light, closing the door behind them. The throne was empty as they went out by an opposite door, onto the path of Temperance. No entity was to be seen as they walked towards the purple glow. In the mist itself they heard a distant elephant trumpeting, but saw nothing, so they took the final path. No figure of any sort was to be seen there either. The great laurel wreath was a gate through which they stepped

to reality.

The sky was lightening and all three realised that they must waste no time. Gill repeated the banishing ritual with which the whole affair had started and then walked round the inside of the circle of wool with the talisman, saying,

"Go. You are dismissed, but be ready to come when you are called."

Neither Alan nor Manjy even wondered to whom she spoke. Then she broke the wool and wound it up.

"Let's have a look inside the chest," said Manjy.

"I'm itching to have a look myself," said Gill.

Manjy undid the clasps and pushed back the lid. Inside were six masks, hideous but beautifully made in hammered and enamelled copper or bronze, inlaid with gold; five wyvern's foot sacrificial knives - no doubt the ones from Alan's story, and the five rings.

"What are we going to do with all this stuff?" asked Manjy. "It's too heavy to carry far or fast and we won't get it through customs at the airport."

"Let's leave the masks here. It will really set the archaeologists working on this site a problem to solve and the masks have no power of their own. We can manage the knives and rings okay, so we can take those with us."

The knives and rings went into Gill's bag, along with the jars of incense and the ash tray-burner. Alan stuffed in the papers and the Tarot pack, whilst Manjy put the masks carefully back into the chest, shut the lid and fastened the clasps.

"Leave the chest right where it is," Gill suggested and picked

up the bag.

"I'd like to be around when it's found," said Alan.

"You will be if we don't get a move on," Gill answered, and the three began to retrace their steps to leave the ruin, before the growing light of day made an unseen getaway impossible.

In Salamanca Ian talked low and urgently with Cornelius as they tried to cope with Stella. "It's like a bad trip on drugs," said Ian.

"Almost."

"Did she say what she was doing on the astral?" Ian asked.

"Presumably she heard something."

Cornelius nodded.

"It must have concerned the rings. She must have thought they were in danger somehow."

"She did."

Ian was frustrated by Cornelius's silences and monosyllabic answers, though his English was clear and almost unaccented and his understanding near perfect.

"We'll have to get to Boloña and find out for ourselves what's going on," he said. "There's no time to waste. We'll have to leave as soon as we've had breakfast. I'll wake Julie."

Cornelius nodded.

On Hoy, Steve stirred and rubbed his eyes. "What a crazy dream," he thought out loud but with no Gill to hear. "Wait 'till I tell Gill. She'll probably think I'm going potty."

He glanced at his watch and turned over. 'Ten more minutes and I'll be up to start breakfast,' he thought.

"I don't think anyone saw us," said Alan as they reached the car.

Manjy unlocked the doors and Gill scrambled in the back. "You drive Alan," she said.

Alan headed the car back along the winding side road towards the main highway. "Where to?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Gill. "I feel too drained to think straight yet."

"I'll go to Vejer de la Frontera," Alan decided. I fancy going up the hill to take a better look at it, and there's an advert on the main road for a good hotel. We can rest there during the day, get up and have an evening out, then sleep the night there."

"Sounds like a great idea," said Gill and yawned. "Mind you," she added, "I could sleep anywhere."

"We can drive to Jerez tomorrow and spend the night there. We don't have to fly back until the day after," he continued.

"Sounds great," said Manjy.

The road up to Vejer de la Frontera from the main road was very steep, it twisted and wound up the almost sheer hillside like something from the Alps and it was none too wide but, when Alan parked at the top, the view was stupendous. There was a small car park and view point rather like a seaside promenade. Facing the 'promenade' were several shops and a restaurant-cafe-bar. Above the view point a narrow road led back and up towards a church and a castle, which looked to be not so much a ruin as part of the houses. From the view point you could gaze out across a land more hilly than around Medina Sidonia and gaze down upon the steep sloping drop to a river and the

main road below.

After a few moments looking at the view they crossed the road to the cafe. Alan ordered coffee and churros for them all, and they sat down.

"What's churros?" asked Gill, still yawning.

"Sort of crisp fried pancaky things. The Spanish often eat them for breakfast or a snack. You'll probably like them. I like them dipped in chocolate."

"Sounds fattening," said Manjy.

"Indigestible as well, I should think," said Alan, "but I still like them."

"Everything I like is either fattening, immoral or illegal," remarked Gill. "The castle here looks Moorish." she added, changing the subject entirely.

"This part of Andalusia is a mass of walled towns on hills with a castle at the top like this one," Alan said, "And the names: This is Vejer de la Frontera but it's Jerez de la Frontera too. There Chiclana de la Frontera just down the road and Arcos de la Frontera just beyond Medina.

The 'de la Frontera' bit refers to the frontier between Moslem Spain and Christian Spain. There are literally hundreds of place name like that, created by a frontier that moved around for several hundred years."

"I remember that Charles Martel defeated the Moslem attempt to spread into France," commented Manjy.

"True," agreed Alan. "That was somewhere in the late ninth century. El Cid recaptured Toledo from the Moors in 1057 - that's nearly two hundred years later. Granada was the last Moorish

stronghold to fall, and that was not until 1492. The re-conquest went on for centuries."

"These churros are really good," said Gill, bringing them back to the here and now. "I didn't realise how hungry I was."

Manjy was nibbling cautiously. "Mmn. Not bad if you like fried cardboard," she said, "I think I'll try them dipped in Chocolate." and she dunked hers in Alan's steaming glass. For a time the talking gave way to eating and a second strong, milky coffee.

As the waiter brought the second cups of coffee he asked Manjy, "¿Es Española?".

She looked desperately at Alan. "He asked if you're Spanish," he said.

Manjy did look rather Spanish with her long black hair tied loosely back, her dark and quite Spanish eyes and her jeans and T-shirt. Alan explained that no, she wasn't. She was English and actually she didn't even speak Spanish. He didn't add that Manjy was already bilingual, because the explanations involved talking about minority ethnic communities in England and he didn't feel quite up to doing that in Spanish.

The waiter said that she certainly ought to be Spanish. He said, "Momentito!" - just a moment - and disappeared behind the bar. He returned with a phrase book which, he explained, some English tourist had left behind, and gave it to Manjy, who was surprised and touched when Alan explained.

Alan took the opportunity to ask about the hotel. The waiter told them it was just around the corner from where they were at that moment. Manjy studied the phrase book, the three finished their churros and their coffee, paid their bill and left.

The hotel was a converted monastery and seemed to retain some of the peace and calm of its former use. It wasn't cheap, but it had rooms free and didn't mind at all their wanting to sleep almost immediately - the concept of siesta was well-established.

Driving around Spain you can take the toll motorways and make fast progress if you're so minded and at one point, entering Madrid from the north-west, the road is fourteen lanes wide, where traffic crosses and merges. Ian was driving far too fast. Stella still sat vacantly in the back of the car - alive but mindless.

"I really think she should see a doctor," said Juliana. "She's eaten nothing for breakfast and nothing for dinner. I think she's dying."

"She's had some kind of bad experience on the astral, that's all," answered Ian. "We need to get to Boloña quickly, then we can see to Stella. If she hasn't already snapped out of it by then. Don't you agree Cornelius?"

Cornelius nodded.

"I'll just look out for a filling station before we head on south," Ian added.

CHAPTER 24

Alicia eased herself out of the fourth house and walked over to where Frank and his team were carefully replacing the numbered roof stones of house number two.

"How's it going?" she asked.

Actually the question was largely rhetorical. She could see that it was obviously going well because they'd almost finished.

"What?" boomed a voice from the inside. "I can't hear you down here."

"It's okay," yelled one of the volunteers, "Alicia just asked how it was going."

Frank's head appeared in the chimney-hole. Looking his usual cheerful self he replied, "Well we've done what you can see, which is most of it, and what you can't see is the bit still to do."

Alicia laughed. "Ask a stupid question," she said.

"Seriously though," said Frank, "I think we're going to be finished by lunch time and once everybody is safely out you can begin to throw sand back on top and replace the turf. The weather's not looking too good and it would be nice to finish before it rains. Anyway, I'd like to see for real what it was like in bad weather."

"Knowing British weather, I should think you'll have plenty of chance!" said Alicia.

"How's number four going?"

"Alan's sieving every grain of sand."

"Early days yet."

"After all the finds in number three we don't want to miss a thing. It does seem as if the people walked out of the village with what they could carry and nothing more," Alicia commented.

"You heard Steve's story," said Frank, "The evidence backs it up."

"Yes," said Alicia soberly. "Talking of Steve and the story, I wonder how the adventurers are getting on in Spain."

"They're due back in Kirkwall tomorrow," said Frank. "We'll just have to be patient 'till then. Well, I must crack the whip and get them back to work," he added, and his head disappeared back into the hole.

Just at that moment Alicia saw Steve waving, Constable Breck beside him. She began to walk towards them, meeting the policeman in mid-field, while Steve went back into the cabin.

"Good day, ma'am," said the soft spoken constable.

"Hello," replied Alicia. "What can I do for you."

"I've had the report on Mr. Harrington. It seems the autopsy showed nothing but the heart attack, so they're arranging for the body to go straight back to Birmingham. I called to say that you can pick up the car any time you like. It's in Linksness."

"I'll get Steve, Mr. Benderman, to drive me over this afternoon and pick it up then. You'll send the Professor's personal belongings back with the body?"

"I should think so, though I haven't any information about a family."

"I'm afraid I can't be any help at all in that direction," said Alicia.

She wondered whether to ask about the ring or whether to say nothing and let well alone. She decided on the latter course, and asked, "Will you stay for some lunch?"

"Thank you. That's most hospitable of you, but I'm expected home for lunch today. I'll have to ride along just now, but I thought I'd let you know straight away."

The policeman mounted his bike and cycled towards the gate, leaving with a wave. Alicia breathed a sigh of relief - she had had no doubts that the death had been natural causes, but there had still been room for awkward questions. She glanced at her watch and decided there was just time enough to go back to the excavations for a few minutes.

"The flight is early tomorrow morning," said Manjy, "so we will be in a bit of a rush. If we took the car back to the airport today we would have much more time."

"I suppose we could drop it off, come back to Jerez to the hotel and go to the airport in a taxi," admitted Alan. "I want to have

time to look round the town a little. It looks an interesting place."

"It would save a rush in the morning," Gill agreed. "Let's do that." She got up to go.

"Not so hasty," said Alan, "it's twelve fifteen now. The office will be shut by the time we get there. We may as well wait until it opens at four o'clock. There's no rush. Let's have something to eat. I noticed umbrellas and tables in the square with the fountains."

The red estate fairly flew along the road near Medina, speeding far above the limit and ignoring the 'no overtaking' signs and road markers as no Spanish driver would have done. The accident rate is high in Spain and Spanish drivers have their faults, but ignoring a 'no overtaking' sign on a country road is not usually one of them. Too many roads wind round totally blind bends with sheer drops to the sea or a river below, for drivers not to take warnings seriously. Instead Spanish cars tend to hang onto the tail of the vehicle in front, driving dangerously close, until there is a suitable spot to overtake. This kind of 'tailgating' has its own potential dangers, of course, but they are lesser ones than risky overtaking.

The bend itself was not that steep and the drop to the river not that far, but the road dipped as well. Overtaking the tractor on a fairly good road like that was not so great a risk. Even ignoring the 'no overtaking' sign was not all that risky - but there was an element of danger. The gravel truck only hit the car a glancing blow: the road was three cars wide and the accident only occurred at all because two of

the vehicles were wide commercial ones.

If the car had been travelling less fast it would not have spun out of control, as it did. But it was moving fast. Far above the speed limit. It hit the edge of the road sideways on and turned completely over as it left the road. It smashed sideways into a tree - the jolt broke Stella's neck - and came to rest at a drunken angle in a field.

The tractor driver drove on and called the police from a roadside bar a couple of miles away. The police took a look at the wreckage and called an ambulance and a rescue truck.

Stella had died instantly from the jolt as the car impacted the tree but, surprisingly, the others escaped any serious injury. Ian simply opened the door and stepped out. Cornelius had to squeeze out, helped by Ian. It was impossible for Ian and Cornelius to free Juliana and Stella was dead.

The whole top of the car had to be sawn away and before the resuers could reach Juliana and, even then, she had to be cut free. However, when she was finally pulled out of the wreckage she showed no sign of injury, beyond a crushed leg which was broken in several places and general cuts and bruises.

Both Ian and the ambulance crew were afraid that there might have been internal injuries, especially as she seemed to have been so crushed and trapped. In the end, Ian went with her to hospital.

Cornelius went with the police to Medina Sidonia.

Gill thought that the rings and knives would be less obvious if they

were spread around all three suitcases. It was possible that the baggage would be x-rayed and, while a couple of knives might be overlooked as souvenirs, five together was another matter. "Put two in your case, Alan and one in yours, Manjy."

"We need a taxi for 7.30 am," said the latter, opening her case.

"We'll never be able to get anything to eat in the hotel at that time," Alan warned.

"There was a cafe in the terminal," said Gill, "We can get breakfast there."

The taxi to the airport took a split second to arrive when called by phone next morning, and the whole day was then a whirl of mixed impressions the reverse of those they remembered coming to Spain - Jerez, Madrid, Heathrow terminals 3 and 4, Aberdeen and Kirkwall.

In Spain one has to have, as part of a car insurance certificate, a 'bail bond'. That is to say that any driver involved in any accident where there is damage to a third party or injury to a person, is arrested until the case is investigated by an examining magistrate. Unless one has a 'bail bond' as a part of one's insurance, or a large cash bond is put up, the party - apparently innocent or not - stays in jail until the enquiry is over. Most modern UK insurance is valid for European Union countries, so-called 'green cards' are becoming less automatic than they once were. Fortunately Cornelius had one. Even more fortunately

it listed Spain as a valid country and therefore included the bail bond.

When he eventually left the police station at Medina Sidonia, Cornelius was minus the car. It was undrivable anyway. Moreover, he couldn't hire another because he had left behind all his documentation, including his driver's licence, impounded by the police. It wasn't that officialdom was picking on him, it is simply how things work in Spain.

Cornelius himself, however, was relatively free. It had been necessary to give a local address, so he had booked by phone into a hotel in the town, but he did not have to stay there. After taking all the luggage to the place he hired a taxi and had it drive him to twenty or so miles to the hospital to consult Ian. He could hire a car.

It was raining in Kirkwall when Gill and the others landed. When they crossed the Tarmac to the terminal building they were surprised to see Steve.

"Ali let me bring the car across," he explained. "It was raining and there was nothing else to do. Did you get the rings?"

Gill kissed him first, then said, "Talk about jet lag! I'm completely disorientated by all this flying. I hope you're going to help me down to earth."

"Did you get them?" repeated Steve.

"Yes. They're in our bags, so your money's well spent."

"Our money," he corrected.

"Our money," she agreed, and kissed him again.

As they walked out to the car he said, "You know, I had the craziest dream the other night."

"I know," said Gill, "but it wasn't exactly a dream. I'll tell you what happened later, and then you can tell me how your dream fitted in."

"How was Spain?" Steve asked the other two as they climbed into the car.

"I enjoyed practising my Spanish," said Alan. "It was interesting but tiring."

"Besides the work," said Manjy, "I had a pleasant and intriguing few days. I'm glad I went and grateful to you Steve for helping with the money."

"'You're welcome', as Frank would say," said Steve, imitating his American accent.

After the meal that night, when the volunteers had gone, Alicia sat herself at the table in a businesslike way.

"Can you all come here for a moment," she said "I want us to tackle the last remaining question."

"What's that?" asked Frank. He had been about to get up to leave but settled himself back down.

"The question is, 'What do we do with the rings now?'," answered Alicia

"Couldn't we just bury them somewhere?" asked Alan.

"No," Alicia replied. "They might be found sometime. That

wouldn't be enough to keep them safe for all time."

"Could Gill do the same ritual again in reverse?" Manjy wondered out loud.

"Ask her," said Alicia.

"Well ... I think I could, but there are some problems."

"Such as," Manjy wanted to know.

"The first problem is that the professor-priest could easily get them back in some future lifetime if he knew where to look. Or anyone else with wrongful intentions, and I suppose there are plenty of those. The second problem is what sort of a guardian I could leave. He must have been consumed by malice to leave a guardian like that one - and I don't even hate him!"

"For the first problem, you hide them somewhere unlikely," said Frank.

"Where's unlikely?" asked Gill. "Don't think I haven't considered the point. It's got to be quiet enough for me to do the ritual, so he could perform it too. Then where wouldn't he think of? In one of the houses here? He'd think of that. A stone circle somewhere? Some other prehistoric or historic monument? I rather think that an occult expert could probably find something on the astral wherever you hid it."

Alicia was thoughtful. "The professor said he was going to send the ring a few seconds forward in time," she said.

"It wasn't so much forward in time as out of time," corrected Gill.

"I know," said Alicia, "but couldn't you actually send the rings back in time, so that they would get further and further off. Eventually they might be impossibly far off."

"I don't know," admitted Gill. "I'll read the notes carefully and see if there's any clue as to how I might do it. The question is still where."

"Ah," said Alicia, "The question presupposes that we need to be able to find the place again. But that's not actually true."

Manjy almost jumped up. She saw at once the implications of this. "What you mean is, just go somewhere in the middle of nowhere and do the ritual with nothing to mark the place at all?"

"Right," said Alicia. "We won't be able to find the spot again, but we won't need to. The point is, nobody else will be able to find it either."

"We could certainly try that," said Gill, "but I'm still worried about leaving the rings unguarded."

Steve had been hovering in the background with a tea towel still in his hands. "Since you can't out hate an evil person, can't you out love them?" he asked.

Everybody stopped short at that. "How d'you mean?" asked Gill.

"Well," said Steve, "if you leave a guardian which will stop an ill intentioned searcher with a stream of good thoughts, the rings would be safe. You've nothing to fear from anyone whose intentions are for the general good, have you?"

Gill thought about this. "No-o-o," she said cautiously. "I suppose a stream of good thoughts and constructive vibrations might stop an evil soul as much as malicious ones. But I think I'd need you all to help, if it's even possible. I need to think about it all."

"You mean we'd all have to follow you?" asked Frank.

"I told you last night," said Gill, "The ritual took us along the paths of the Tree of Life. That was an uncanny enough experience, but I went onto the astral alone. This time you'd all need to come with me."

"I'm not sure I believe in it," said Frank.

"I don't think that really matters, so long as you don't actively reject it," Gill told him. Frank didn't look very convinced.

"Look," said Alicia, taking charge again, "Three questions: Firstly, can Gill send the rings backwards in time? Secondly, where do we do the ritual? And thirdly, can Gill conjure up a 'good' guardian, as opposed to an evil one?"

"'Conjure up' is hardly the right expression," said Gill, "but I take your point. With regard to the question, the more I think about it, the more possible I think it might be. As to the first question, I'd have to look into that, but I think that's possible too. What we need to do is this: you all discuss question two while I go away and think about one and three."

She got up. "Come on Steve," she said.

Steve had more-or-less finished putting things away, so he hung up the tea towel and followed her to the door. She turned back a

moment. "Here's another thought. Alicia's been through a series of lives too and she was a priestess long before me. I think there may well be enormous power amongst us."

She turned again and went out, followed by Steve. "I've done enough searching on my own for now," she said, "I've got the beginnings of an idea I want to talk about." And she closed the door behind her.

"Right. Where?" asked Alicia briskly.

"Get a map of Hoy and pick a place to start from and we walk to the middle of nowhere from there," suggested Frank.

Alicia reached for a map from the top drawer of the filing cabinet, opened it up and spread it out.

"How about taking the Landrover to the end of the Rackwick road and turning left along this track," said Alicia. "The track just peters out, but we can stop somewhere along here and just walk."

"I think one place is as good as another," said Manjy.

"If it's night we could strike a boggy patch of moor," Alan pointed out.

"Tomorrow's Sunday. If the weather's good we can go for picnic in the afternoon and pick a spot for the ritual later. If the weather isn't kind to us, I'll get Steve to drive off alone tomorrow and pick a general area," said Alicia. "He can make sure it's okay, and nobody else will know in advance where we're going. We'll pick the exact spot together on the spur of the moment"

"Sounds fine to me," said Frank. "What say we go out and

enjoy what's left of the day?"

They all got up to go except Alicia. "I'll see you later," she said.

Frank nodded and they drifted out. Alicia locked the cabinet again and pocketed the key before returning to her diary of the dig.

Steve was sitting back on the bunk in Gill's room and Gill was lying down with her head in Steve's lap, the late professor's papers scattered around, mostly on her stomach.

"I think I see how it might be done," she said at length. "What worries me is the power we need. Perhaps if you made love to me there might be enough power at the climax."

"With everyone watching? I don't think I fancy that."

"Well if they all did too ..."

"I don't think Alicia or Manjy would thank you for suggesting an orgy. No I don't think that's a runner either."

Steve couldn't tell how far Gill was joking when she said, "I can't really see how to get the strength for the guardian otherwise."

"Well," he said, "you did say there may be enormous power between us."

Gill gathered the papers together. "Let's go for a walk along the beach while I give it some more thought," she said, struggling to a sitting position and then reaching to the floor with her feet. "I think I need to drop the subject altogether for a while," she added.

"If you want to think about something else for a few minutes,

when do you have in mind for a wedding?"

"In some ways I feel married to you already," answered Gill.
"I feel as if I've known and loved you in other lives than this."

"Perhaps you have."

"Interesting idea," she said speculatively. "Anyway, about our wedding. I'd like it to be soon," she continued, "But it will have to wait until this expedition's over in seven week's time, I think." She paused then said, "I'd rather like to go back to southern Spain for a honeymoon."

"Then the honeymoon will have to wait 'till my parole's up at the end of September," he said getting to his feet and adding as an afterthought, "But the wedding needn't wait that long." With that they went out.

The sea was placid and, though there were still scattered clouds around, the sunset was a deep pink and getting redder all the time.

"You mentioned Alicia having been a priestess," remarked Steve.

"Yes?"

"I wonder what we all were in past lives other than the one connected with ring. Frank was quite a character in his story and Manjy was a sort of sacrifice besides Alicia."

"You mean," said Gill, "that we're all of us souls that have many lives of service?"

"Well, I was just wondering. Perhaps there's the power

between us."

"Maybe," said Gill, thinking of a book called 'Windows of the Mind' that she had read once. "Given time we could possibly find out, but time is something we don't really have."

They wandered along the beach with the sky turning redder, promising good weather the next day.

CHAPTER 25

Cornelius sat back from the hotel breakfast table. "It's a damn nuisance not having the car," he said, "Apart from the inconvenience of hiring another and having just the one driver, we've lost several days as well."

"Not to mention losing Stella," said Ian, despondently. "And the injuries to Juliana. The doctor says her leg was so crushed that she may never walk properly. At least, I think that's what he says. His English isn't much better than my Spanish."

"We can manage without her. Stella is a loss, but we can manage without her as well."

"I wouldn't have said it to her face," said Ian, "but she was so personally ambitious that she was difficult to work with."

"It wasn't her ambition. We're all ambitious but she was always certain that she knew best. One would have needed that amulet to control her."

Ian thought that Cornelius had possibly wanted that for himself.

The big man continued, "I don't suppose there's much risk of your archaeologists beating us to the rings."

"We can't be too sure of that," Ian said morosely.

He looked around at the small hotel in Medina Sidonia in which Gill, Alan and Manjy had stayed just a few days previously.

"Stella obviously thought there was something urgent on the astral."

"On further reflection, I don't believe it was anything to do with the rings," said Cornelius. "There was no way she could have got like she was from a clash with your archaeologists."

"You wouldn't think so," agreed Ian. "Anyway, I ought to visit Juliana again today," he added.

"It will have to wait until we have finished our business at Boloña."

"Can't we go round via the hospital?"

"Oh ... very well." Cornelius was irritated and not in the best of moods. "But hurry up," he grumbled.

Sunday breakfast at the dig on Hoy was quite a different affair, as can easily be imagined. When the eating was done, there was some striking of tents as the group of volunteers from the Orkneys Archaeological Society packed up to go home. They all seemed to have things to do and had already stayed a week longer than they planned, so Steve was driving them down to the ferry later. The two girls from Kirkwall decided they ought to leave as well. Six bodies less around the site made it appear less busy and, with the tents gone, the camp already looked a lot smaller.

"Lovely day for it, whatever 'it' turns out to be," Frank said. to Alicia.

"Still sceptical?" she asked.

"You betcha."

"Don't you want to take part?"

"Well," said Frank, "I'll go along with it all right, but I don't know that I believe all this junk."

Manjy joined them on the steps. "I found all this 'Tree of Life' business hard to take. I think it belongs to medieval Europe and I certainly don't," she said.

"I think it may be a lot older than that," said Alicia, "Even biblical reference to 'the Tree of Knowledge' could refer to a primitive version of the same thing, though I admit it was all written down in the middle ages. Still I take your point. The Bible is as Western as the Tree of Life, I suppose."

"Yes," said Frank, "but Manjy has a head start." he turned his attention to her. "You already believed in the idea of reincarnation." Manjy nodded and Frank got to his feet. "Well, as I said earlier, this is a nice day for it," he said again. "I think I'll see how Steve is getting on."

"Poor Frank," said Manjy when he'd gone. "He doesn't want to believe."

"He's not the only one," said Alicia, yawning. "I was all safe inside my little scientific world when along came the ring and bugged it all up. And your beliefs didn't help."

"Don't you believe either?" asked Manjy.

"Oh something happened right enough. There's no argument about it. No argument that the professor was after the ring for some ... evil purpose. No argument that somehow or other I was that other woman who was sacrificed. I only said I didn't want to believe reincarnation was the answer."

At that moment they were interrupted by Frank, who

announced that everything was ready and all six people piled into the Landrover.

Manjy noticed that Alicia was very quiet as they turned onto the Rackwick road, and shuddered a little as they passed the stone circle, but neither woman said anything.

Rackwick was just a hamlet. They turned left onto a track, paved but potholed at first, then just gravel. At the crest of a low hill Alicia said, "Okay. Stop somewhere here. There's a pleasant sea view."

Steve pulled off to the side of the track and they all piled out again. Alicia and Manjy were both still in T-shirt and jeans but Gill had dressed up for the occasion and wore a skirt and blouse. She even went so far as to indulge herself with lipstick and eye make-up and somehow, with her height and longish blonde hair and violet blue eyes a shade too close together, looked ... perhaps ancient was the word. Un-English, certainly. Manjy had tied back her long black hair and somehow contrived to look serene. The three men were all neat but casual.

Besides the picnic food there were various other things in the Landrover. The professor's briefcase for example, now containing six rings and six sacrificial knives, there was a folding table to use as an altar and sweaters for the cool of evening and a ceramic ashtray to use as an incense burner.

For the moment, though, it was warm and sunny with a pleasant view: just right for a picnic. Leaving the other things for later, they went in search of a suitable place, and found it in a little dip, sheltered from the slight breeze and from the view of any person passing on the track. There they lazed around, ate, talked, got up and went for a walk, admired the view and lazed around some more.

Cornelius stayed in the car and fidgeted while Ian went into the hospital to visit Juliana. When he came out they drove onto the same Cadiz-Algeciras Road that Gill, Manjy and Alan had taken, and headed for Boloña.

There is just the one dead end lane to the beach and the ruin, so they took it and pulled into the same car park where the three archaeologists had parked. Cornelius, of course, knew exactly where to look for the rings and exactly what ritual to use. Because of this the two of them went to eat rather than worrying about locations.

Come nightfall, Cornelius and Ian went to more or less the same spot as Gill, Alan and Manjy had done and followed much the same ritual as they had as well.

When it was falling sunset on Hoy, Steve fetched the folding table from the Landrover. "Where d'you want it?" he asked Alicia.

"Find somewhere level in the middle of the hollow," she answered.

Steve found an almost flat area of rock protruding, only an inch or two through the coarse grass, and put the table there. Alicia put a white cloth over it and Gill put the makeshift incense burner and the jars on it, along with some matches, the dagger they had bought in Spain, the Tarot cards and the ball of wool. Next to the table she placed the professor's briefcase containing the six rings and the six wyvern's foot sacrificial knives.

The beginning of the ritual was not unlike the one Gill carried out in the ruins of Bella Claudia, other than that there were more of them. Gill lit the charcoal and Alicia sprinkled onto the glowing coals a

little of the incense from the first jar as they all stood round the table. Next Manjy a the wool, but the air still seemed to glow a little.

Alicia, Gill and Manjy raised their arms and they sensed rather than saw the presence of the entities guarding the circle at the cardinal points. A windswept figure in purple robes standing in the east; another in red robes, holding a fiery sword at the south and standing before a sun-drenched desert; a third in blue standing on a wave-washed rock in the west, they almost 'felt' the spray; the last in russet standing in the north before a field of corn. Elemental guardians as well as cardinal.

"It is time to tread the paths of the Tree," whispered Gill and once again the woman beckoned them through the laurel wreath gate. Even Frank was drawn through the mighty wreath and felt the air turn violet. They saw the elephant, heard it trumpet. Alicia sprinkled incense from the second jar and the same sharp but not unpleasant scent filled the air around them.

'The kind of smell that takes you by the scruff of the soul and shakes you gently into a different kind of wakefulness,' thought Frank.

Now it was Alicia who led them along a path through gently rolling countryside, past the figure with the pitcher of water and the goblet. They all stopped as Alicia took the proffered goblet, drank and passed it onto Gill. She drank and passed it on to Manjy and so on down the line. The personification of the Tarot trump 'Temperance' took back the goblet and inclined her head solemnly as they passed on, into the amber glow ahead.

Alicia sprinkled incense on the coals and smoke wreathed up. At the same time a mist wreathed around the area of their minds lit by the orange glow. A room with many doors solidified out of the mist

and a king sat on a throne. He pointed to the door straight ahead and this time spoke.

"You need the way of Kether, the creator of all things manifest. Go by the path of the high priestess and reach the source of all that is. Thus you can send what you carry, before all manifestation to be unmanifest," he said.

"He's talking in riddles," thought Frank, but he heard the words and saw the golden king. He did not think that there was nothing there.

"What he means," thought Gill, exchanging meanings and images with Frank, "is send the rings back before creation. Back to the beginning of time"

Cornelius and Ian followed the route through the paths of the tree of life which Gill, Alan and Manjy had followed before them. Most of the path was the same as that followed by the band of souls on Hoy. They did not, of course, see each other, because the tree of life is entirely subjective. To share Alicia's tree they must have been with her. And they weren't. The astral is a different reality too, but it is objective. Once on the astral they would be able to reach the travellers and the rings.

Cornelius and Ian entered the astral from Binah. A different place where places are not separated by distance. A different time where time is always the same.

This time it was Manjy who led the way, out through the door the king had indicated and onto a narrow path through the bleakest wilderness and up through soaring mountains. At length they came to a deep

chasm. So deep the bottom was lost from sight. At the other end of a narrow rope bridge were two stone pillars and by them sat the high priestess, impassive, upon a rock. She was dressed in a long white dress and blue cloak, with a crescent moon at her brow for a headdress and rolled up on her knee was a scroll. She beckoned them across the bridge and they went, each with his or her own particular fears, temptations, stresses, doubts, desires, loves and faiths. The bridge was long and narrow and the void below them bottomless. A chilly wind from the imagined mountains stirred the images before them but they reached the safety of the other side.

"You have crossed the great abyss that divides Kether from the rest of the creative force," said the great High Priestess, unsmiling but in a tone which suggested approval and support. "Few choose to take so direct a route. Pass my friends and seek to uncreate the evil that you would destroy."

They filed past the Tarot High Priestess and onward towards a glowing whiteness ahead. The glow grew brighter until they stepped into a room so brilliantly lit that they could see almost nothing. An ancient king sat upon a white throne, grizzled white and bearded. He did not turn towards them and said only, "Pass through this place, and do what you must."

It was necessary for all six of them to lie down in the grass. They did this, feet facing outwards, heads inwards, holding hands. "We are going to enter the astral world," said Gill softly. "Close your eyes, relax and we will go together."

There were eight simultaneous 'clicks' and six personalities moved into the completely non-physical.

CHAPTER 26

The place in which they found themselves was an empty wilderness of rocky mountains, rising from a small grassy valley. All six of them had 'passed over' to the astral.

"What you see," said Alicia, "is only an image of reality so that human eyes can relate to it. These mountains," she waved an arm around, "are not really there, but the feelings expressed by the idea of 'mountain' and 'emptiness' exist."

"What we must do," said Manjy, "is create a 'thought-form'."

Gill interrupted, "Thoughts can be intense enough to have an existence, however fleeting, independent of the thinker. A 'thought-form' is a deliberately created thought, intended to have a more permanent and independent existence. If we think together of the same image we can create it."

"What we must do is create a thought-form to be the guardian and to act as channel for the power of the creative force." said Manjy. "Form a circle."

A circle was formed.

"Now," said Gill, "I will make my guardian look like something simple and understandable. I will try and imagine a twenty foot high bear. Visualise the eyes and ears, Build up an image of a face which is benign, like a teddy bear. Make it more in appearance as a friendly

grizzly. Feel the love of humankind in a gentle giant and and give the eyes humour and intellegence. See the body, the arms and long, long claws with no purpose but defending the goodness of the race. See it standing, gentle, holding the briefcase with the rings and knives.

The six souls working together imagined that they thought of the giant bear, and there it was on the astral. They filled it with the love which souls can feel towards humanity when they have evolved through many, many lives. And then they let it channel all the creative force of the universe that manifests itself through Kether.

To Alicia the bear said, "A sacrificial victim when the power of the rings was born, you have lived and loved many lives: in Egypt, Ancient Greece and as vestal virgin in Rome, as shaman in Africa, as a Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church ... many lives of service you have lived and already earned your oneness with the creative spark had you not undertaken this last great task.

The bear turned to Manjy. "You too had already earned Nirvana when you accepted this last great challenge. A sacrifice of sorts in a cave in Spain, a sacrifice in Aztec America, a Christian missionary killed in Japan and an Indian guru. Serenity and peace in this life await you now, and unity with godhead when you shed this body.

"I'm sorry that you had to see such sorrow," said the bear to Gill, "but a means had to be found to delay you, so that you could join this expedition. Now you will be free to enjoy your peace with the young man you love, and you will be all women and he will be all men, for you have loved this man before."

"The night of his death he spent with you when you were priestess, he the victim, and the day of his death he spent with you

when he was chieftain, you a priestess-victim. The world will be a better place for your love."

"You almost lost what you had gained in many lives," the bear told Steve, "Now you have found your mate again, do not lose her."

To Frank it said, "You too have evolved through many lives. You do not fully believe, but the good you do does not depend on belief."

"You forged the rings," the bear told Alan, "but you did not create the evil that they did. It was not your curse that destroyed Atlantis, the earthquake, fire and flood were natural enough consequences of that vast meteor. However, it was your curse that brought to notice the evil of the rings. Now, many lifetimes later you are present at the destruction of the power of those rings."

Alicia said, "Now it is the will of us all that the rings go back before time itself began, so that they cease to exist and even the thought is gone."

The bear said simply, "I am the creation of those who destroyed the evil and the servant of the souls before me. I go at your command."

Gill said, "Before you go, a question."

"Ask."

"What will become of the professor-priest?"

"He will shortly be born again to begin his many lifetimes paying off that vast karmic debt. He will be Juliana's child, as was his wish before he died, but it will not be as he expected then."

The huge bear which they had created picked up the briefcase, now seeming insignificantly small, and turned to lumber off.

It stopped and turned just his head, saying, "Others follow you on the astral. Take care on your return and stop for nothing."

It pointed behind and to their left. Then, while they watched, it turned again and lumbered away.

"He goes backwards in time," said Alicia, and they watched him disappearing in the distance. Once again the place was an empty valley, surrounded by soaring mountains. A wilderness where nothing stirred.

"Look," said Gill. "What the bear was pointing at," and they turned.

Far away two figures hurried across the wilderness, trying to catch the lumbering, fading bear. Cornelius and Ian ran across the empty landscape, split by the chasm which was sometimes narrower, sometimes wider but always there.

"Stop," shouted the maddened, ambition crazed Cornelius. "Stop, I command you."

The bear began to de-materialise, though Cornelius was still the wrong side of the chasm. "I will have those rings," he shouted hollowly, and, with the same lack of any prudence which had crashed the car, took a running jump to cross the abyss at a narrow point.

His scream of hopeless emptiness as he fell filled all the wilderness and seemed to last for ever. For a long time nothing moved, then Ian turned and walked away.

"It is time to return to Kether," said Alicia.

With one accord they too turned and, with six distinct but simultaneous 'clicks,' they returned to their bodies.

CHAPTER 27

As six pairs of eyes opened they loosed hands, stretched and scrambled to their feet. Nobody said anything, not even Frank. Gill thought he looked subdued. They gathered in a rough circle facing inwards again and slowly the brilliant whiteness around them seemed to grow until, once more, they could hardly see. This time it was Alicia who turned without turning and moved without moving, and they all put the brilliance and glow behind them, to tread again the rocky path among those barren mountains, downwards to the abyss and the rope bridge across it.

The High Priestess stood beside the bridge. "You have done what you came to do," she said to Alicia. "The way back to earthly reality is clear and easy, and the memory of what you have achieved in time will fade in time."

The bridge was no less fearsome a second time, but no more fearsome either, and they crossed it without problem. Alan went first, then Frank and Steve, followed by Gill and Manjy, with Alicia at the rear and it felt as if some kind of blessing went with them, though none was spoken.

The tree of life consists of paths between the Sephiroth, or aspects of the Creative forces of the universe; aspects of God. When they entered the 'room' that was the Sephira 'Tiphereth' the travellers

found it empty. There was still a golden glow, but, as when Gill had led the way back before, no king.

The Sephiroth are not places, they are 'aspects', but the human mind must have symbols with which it can identify, so there was likewise no being on the path to Yesod and none of them even heard an elephant trumpet, much less saw anything in the violet mist. There was nothing on the final path and they came through the laurel wreath, back to reality.

As the first time, the ritual ended as it started, with the banishing ritual. When it was done, Gill and Manjy broke the wool and all of them relaxed a little, like actors after the final curtain of a play.

"So it's all over and the rings are gone," Alicia remarked.

"There's still the amulet," said Gill. "Without the rings it has no real purpose. We can produce that as a part of the excavation. Just erase all mention of the ring from the computer and change the references to it in your diary to 'amulet'."

"I take your point," said Alicia. "That does sound reasonable, I suppose. Nobody but me sees the diary anyway, so nobody will know."

"I don't understand," said Frank, "All that 'tree of life' stuff is subjective and the astral part is non-physical. I can't see where the rings went. It's like a conjuring trick."

"They appeared at Boloña like that, but in reverse," said Manjy.

"I don't know what the secret is either," said Alicia, "but the Professor said it needed a lot of power to send them out of time."

"Talking of time," said Steve, "It's time we were going back."

"Can you find your way?" Gill asked.

"There's enough light from the moon to see everything and the road leads nowhere but home," he answered.

"Seems odd that those rings have been sought so long and attracted power and evil," said Frank, "yet we gave them away as if they were nothing."

"Do you regret that?" asked Manjy.

"Not at all. There was nothing else to do."

"The rings were evil and commissioned from the very start with an evil intent. They could only have been used for evil purposes," Alan observed.

"I'm glad you see it that way," said Manjy.

Day was beginning to break as they packed up and loaded the Landrover. The fine weather seemed to have passed and it was spotting with rain as they clambered in. The moon had disappeared behind the clouds by the time Steve had turned the vehicle around and he was forced to drive carefully on the tracks. By the time he reached the road it was raining harder but getting light and by the time they arrived at the camp, there was a steady downpour.

Steve brewed cocoa all round and broke open another box of biscuits, while Gill cut wedges of bread and jam. They sat about the cabin for this impromptu meal while the steady rain beat down, still thinking much but saying little.

When the local men reported for work, Alicia saw no point or possibility in work that day, there was just too much rain, so she sent them home. This enabled the rest of the team to catch up on some sleep.

As she said, archaeologically speaking, they had actually

done very well. The entrance had been found, the passage cleared, the damaged house excavated completely, the second house taken apart, excavated and reconstructed and the third and fourth houses uncovered. By the time the dig was finished for the season at least the third house would have been reconstructed and a fifth one excavated.

The autumn would be spent in analysis of the finds and the writing up of Alicia's thesis. All mention of the ring would, of course, have gone but there would still be the talisman and that strange pattern to record. The team would probably break up once this year's dig was over, but the caravans and cabin would stay for further excavation of the site next year. Although there were still some weeks to go, Alicia couldn't escape the feeling that the real work was done.

Gill listened to the beating of the rain on the caravan roof and lay in Steve's arms.

"I am all women and you are all men," she said, thinking back to the words they had heard the night before. "That's a rather strange idea, but I do sort of feel like all women at once when I give myself to you, like I did in this place once before. I want to love you totally and completely."

"And I want to love you just as completely, like I did in another place in another life," answered Steve. Gill felt comfortable and fell asleep smiling.

Frank was listening to the rain as well, and thinking that at least in the Yucatan peninsula the rain was warm and that was quite a good reason to stick to the Mayas in future.

Manjy wasn't listening to the rain at all, she was thinking that a compromise with her family now looked probable. Neither Alan nor Alicia heard rain, because they were already both asleep.

EPILOGUE

"Congratulations," Steve said, shaking Alicia's hand. "We all knew you'd make it, of course," he added with a rather wicked grin. "Doctor Alicia Graham! How does it feel to be so intellectual and so eminent?"

"Not much different than I felt before really," Alicia told him good humouredly. It was true she didn't feel much different, but there are relatively few Afro-Caribbeans in academia and she considered that she ought to do some trailblazing.

"What next?" asked Gill.

"The University found itself with a gap in the staff of the department when Professor Harrington died unexpectedly," answered Alicia, "They offered me a post if I undertook to go back and finish the excavations at Linksness."

"You agreed?" asked Gill.

"Absolutely," replied Alicia. "You don't get many second chances of a post in academic life." She didn't add, 'especially when you're a woman and black', but she thought it.

"You don't get many second chances of anything in life, especially happiness," said Gill. "I should know."

"You seem happy enough now," Alicia observed.

"We are. Very," said Steve.

"Yes. I'm sorry I couldn't get to the wedding, but I couldn't change the date of the viva voce part of my degree. I wish I'd been

able to make it."

"It was really rather a quiet affair," said Gill. "It was important to me that Steve and I should commit ourselves ..."

"First day of the rest of our lives, and all that," Steve added.

"... but all the usual trappings weren't that important."

"Did any of the others make it?" Alicia wanted to know.

"Well Frank had gone back to America, of course, but Alan came and so did Manjy and her fiancée. Her husband now."

"Talking of which," said Alicia, "Or should that be 'whom'? Here they are."

Manjy had come through the door with a tall man of Indian extraction aged about thirty. She was wearing a smart, dark blue cocktail dress. The skirt was knee length and it was the first time Gill had seen her wear anything other than 'T' shirt and jeans. Apart from her wedding three weeks before, when she had worn a Sari.

Manjy spotted them and headed in their direction, husband in tow.

"Hello Alicia," she said, shaking her hand "and congratulations."

"Thank you. This, I take it, is your husband."

"This is Pratap," Manjy said, and the tall man shook hands with Alicia as well. "Pratap is a doctor in Nottingham," she said.

Alicia had often been at the receiving end of both deliberate and unintentional prejudice and was trying to be careful not cause offence. "Congratulations to you both as well. I hope you're going to be happy together." She wanted ask whether they had met before the wedding, but didn't like to.

"Neither of us like to upset families by rejecting our

community totally, but I think we are fortunate," said Manjy. "We both have our careers but we both respect each other as well. I'm very fond of Pratap already."

"Last time I saw you, you were wearing a Sari," Gill remarked.

"And the time before that, you were wearing an ankle length dress," retorted Manjy.

"Touché," said Gill, laughing.

"You wear what's appropriate," said Manjy, more seriously. "I haven't abandoned my family or my culture. I'd still wear a Sari where it seems appropriate."

"And jeans when it's cold," said Pratap. "She only wears short skirts when the weather is warm, and that's nothing at all to do with me," he added.

They all laughed.

"You know that Alan got a job up in the Orkneys?" asked Steve.

"Yes," said Alicia, "I wrote a reference for him."

"I'd no idea that he'd taken up with one of the volunteers," said Gill. "You could have knocked me down with a proverbial when he told us."

"I think he'll be made available for part of the time next Summer," Alicia said, "and his wife - Carol she's called - will be free as well." In the silence that followed she added, "And what will you do now?"

"I've got my post-grad place at York," said Gill. Steve has a job with a transport firm up their. Motor engineering."

"I don't know how permanent that is," Steve commented.

"You never know. I might go to University myself. It's never too late to learn, is it?"

"Well, I had better circulate a bit among the other guests. Can I leave you four to help yourself to food and a drink," said Alicia. "I'm making coffee shortly."

"I'm glad it's somebody else for a change," said Steve, and ducked to avoid Alicia's playful punch.

Somewhere else in the Midlands a nurse handed Juliana a little bundle and she smiled. Ian was there and her wheelchair was next to the bed.

"She's really a rather sweet little thing, isn't she," said the nurse to the doctor, indicating the baby. "You'd never know she had brain damage."

"The accident to the mother, possibly. Though there was no sign of any damage to her. I believe she was quite severely crushed," said the Malaysian doctor, thinking to herself that this soul must have quite a karmic debt from somewhere.

* * *

Mike Crowson is an adept of the Western Mystery Tradition. The occult in this novel is accurate. He offers free and unconditional help to anyone in genuine psychic or occult trouble, through his website:

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