



Bridge of Stone and Magic

A Novel by

Trevor Hopkins

To Tas and Seb – for always being in my life

This book is a work of fiction. All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

In addition, the magical world of Lyndesfarne described in this book is entirely fictitious, and bears no resemblance to the charming Holy Island of Lindesfarne in North East England.

Chapter One

Life for Kevin and Tanji had fallen into a regular pattern. Not a rut, exactly – the mysterious world of Lyndesfarne was even now far too new and exciting a place for Kevin to be in the slightest bit bored and, although Tanji knew vastly more about his own world than he knew about hers, there was still a great many interesting things for them to do together.

Kevin's introduction to Lyndesfarne – a series of events now quite a few years in the past – had been a slow and, he understood only in hindsight, extremely carefully managed process. Being initiated in the existence of what many might regard as an entirely mythical world was a delicate and protracted business, although the Other World itself was one whose description in myths and legends had a surprisingly consistent character across several continents and thousands of years.

His first exposure to the enchanting strangeness of the Other World was when Kevin had been commissioned as the leading architect for the construction of the New Bridge. This was introduced as a minor civil engineering problem: the design of a bridge between the mainland of North East England and the small island which lay a few hundred metres off the coast. For everything that he had understood hitherto, this was a distinctly backwater area and, even at the time, he wondered why such an elaborate and expensive construction was considered necessary.

It was not long before he had the first inkling of the truth: the stormy straights that lay between the Mainland of England and the island of Lyndesfarne was actually a crossing between his own world and another one; that the apparently deserted island at the far end of the bridge was a placeholder in his world's reality for the universe which contained the other. The same effect was observed from the Other World: his own world seemed to be represented by a tiny and uninhabited island.

The second surprise he had not fully appreciated until he had first visited the island, on the pretext of inspecting the Old Bridge – the original stone bridge built several hundred years ago. The engineering principles and technological solutions that Kevin had long ago studied, and more recently applied in the design of various sophisticated civil engineering structures were simply not applicable

in the Other World. Instead, an alternative set of rules and operating principles were in place, principles that even now Kevin found mostly incomprehensible and were generally referred to as “magic”.

One principle which Kevin did understand was that magic was both pervasive and reliable: with the right gestures – mercifully, incantations did not seem to be necessary – anyone could activate everyday magic as easily as he could operate an electric light switch. While an individual’s skills and innate abilities – coupled with extensive training – was certainly a factor in the invocation of more complex magic, Kevin found to his surprise and delight – and just a little pride, too – that even he had learned to fasten a cloak or turn on the illumination in a room without the slightest difficulty.

Magic seemed to be a property of the universe – indeed, Kevin was later to discover, *both* universes. There was nothing intrinsic in his world which prevented magic from functioning as intended. The reason magic did not, in general, work was that a carefully-designed barrier surrounded the crossing, fitting in the interstices of the passage between the Two Worlds. This interfered to prevent magical devices and artefacts from working when moved from Lyndesfarne. The same magical blockade also acted in the opposite direction, to prevent sophisticated technology from working in the Other World. The barrier was actively and carefully maintained, but occasionally something would slip through: some magical artefact would end up in our world still active – or at least partially so.

It was during the construction of the New Bridge that Kevin had first met Tanji. She was then a Guide in the Guild of Directions – the Lyndesfarne organisation that trained individuals to assist Visitors to the world of Lyndesfarne. Members of this Guild provided help with language and culture, and how to get about in a world where nothing worked as they would have expected.

Tanji was a petite and blonde-haired woman, although she was usually more blonde when on the Lyndesfarne side of the crossing. Kevin was convinced that people from the Other World were definitively as human as he was, but there was some common trait which gave them a certain elfin facial appearance. It was something about the shape of the eyes and the cast of the cheekbones, and a consistent tendency towards slightly pointed ears.

In all probability, none of this would have caused much comment in modern-day England, but most visitors from the Other World – including Tanji herself – used whatever limited shape-changing ability they possessed to adapt themselves to the norms of Kevin home world. In Tanji’s case, this involved a modest darkening of her

hair and the smoothing of the contours of her face. She was still immediately recognisable in either guise, although Kevin quite definitely preferred her true Lyndesfarne appearance.

Since the completion of the New Bridge, Kevin had been more than filling his time with consultancy work, having resigned from the international firm of architects which had employed him for several decades. He had been surprised at the amount of design work he had been offered – he was apparently rather more well-known than he appreciated. Some of the commissions were conventional civil engineering undertakings including a number of bridges in various countries, often with some technical difficulty caused by location and geography.

Other work was specifically around the crossing to Lyndesfarne and relied on his knowledge of both magic and technology; there was more industry based around this crossing than he had at first realised. He had even been offered an honorary chair at his old University, although he was not sure how to react to this offer.

Kevin thought of himself as just an average forty-something bloke, although in truth he was probably less overweight and rather more fit than most British men of his age. It was just a fluke of genetics that he had so far retained all of his dark brown hair and that it had yet to show significant signs of greying. He could perhaps have been mistaken for a man ten years younger – at least, until he opened his mouth. Then, his cautious demeanour and careful manner of speaking declared his true age and upbringing.

In Kevin's own estimation, he was conceivably slightly over-educated, and could perhaps be described by the words 'anorak' or 'geek', depending upon which side of the Atlantic one was currently resident. He had been extensively educated in the better kind of schools and university, and his sharp intelligence and retiring demeanour had meant that he had learned a great deal from a broader experience of the world – indeed, both worlds.

His studies and private ruminations had led Kevin to harbour grave concern about the stability of the crossing, and the politics that inevitably infiltrated every aspect of its governance. The intertwined history of the Two Worlds was something he was still trying to get a handle on. Any number of new friends and acquaintances seemed intent on telling him stories with deep meanings and perhaps ambiguous – even conflicting – motivations.

At one time – hundreds or even thousands of years ago – there had been a great many crossings and pathways between the Two Worlds. A myriad of stories and tales, myths and legends had

attended these ways and the peoples which had used them, many of which persisted to the present day. From the stories of Faerie folk in Ireland to the Spirit Guides of the North American natives, the Elves of Iceland and the troglodytes of Germany, these stories all had their roots in a long history of communications between the worlds.

All of these pathways were now closed, save for the crossing at Lyndesfarne. From all accounts, any amount of drama and excitement, death and heroics had accompanied these closures, and many of the tales he heard spoke of epic actions in those far-off times. It seemed that repercussions of events in the distant past echoed forward to the present day and even now put at risk the fragile tranquillity and perceived peacefulness of the last remaining crossing between the Two Worlds.

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Bret arrived on Kevin's doorstep one Saturday morning in early Spring. His appearance was announced by a brisk knocking at the door of the little flat in South Manchester which Kevin had maintained, and inhabited intermittently, for much of the last decade – ever since, in fact, his wife had chucked him out, declaring herself eternally bored with his company all those years ago.

Kevin had met Bret when they were both working on the design of the New Bridge to Lyndesfarne. The design of the bridge had presented a whole series of unique technical challenges. Because of the barrier, technology could not be relied upon in one world and magic was disabled in the other, and so there was no single technique which could be used for the entire structure.

The solution to this conundrum was to design the bridge in two halves, each supporting only the weight of its own half. The short central section, where neither magic nor engineering was entirely to be trusted, had been filled with a laminate: alternating layers of steel-reinforced concrete and the magical “construction stone” that was widely used in the Other World.

Kevin had been the technical lead for the England part of the New Bridge, while Bret was the lead designer for the Lyndesfarne section. They had met under strange circumstances and had become firm friends, although it was not until much later that Kevin had begun to appreciate the deeper connections that Bret maintained with the Boards and Guilds, the groups that could only be called the Establishment: the interlocking organisations which formed the governance of the crossing on both sides.

Kevin had been slightly startled by the unexpected knock on the door. He peered through the viewer cautiously, saw that it was Bret, then opened the door and beckoned him inside.

“Hi,” Bret said as Kevin closed the door behind him, “Are you busy this weekend?”

As it happened, Kevin had very few plans for that particular weekend, other than enjoying a great deal of Tanji’s company and, perhaps, indulging in one of his other passions, that of cooking. It was still sufficiently early that neither Kevin nor Tanji were dressed; indeed, she was still in bed and he was making her a mug of hot chocolate in his dressing gown.

Bret’s appearance had not changed since Kevin had last seen him. He still wore his blond hair unfashionably long and as usual tied back into a neat ponytail. He had an open and smiling, even boyish, face and was dressed fairly casually in dark brown trousers and a blousy white shirt.

Kevin reached out and shook the other man’s hand warmly.

“How are you?”

“Oh, fine, fine,” Bret replied casually.

“And did you have something specific in mind for this weekend?” Kevin pressed, grinning at the sudden appearance of his friend.

Just then, Tanji appeared in the doorway in Kevin’s spare dressing gown, evidently having heard the unexpected sound of voices. She did not seem particularly pleased to see Bret, and Kevin suspected he knew the reason why this was so.

Bret’s role in the Lyndesfarne Establishment, and his closeness with the Ferryman – the secretive final arbiter of policy and ombudsman of disputes in the management of the crossing – had drawn both Kevin and Tanji into the darker side of the political relationship between the two worlds. This had resulted in Tanji having the terrifying experience of being kidnapped, transported between the Two Worlds in a crate, and held hostage to prevent Kevin and Bret from discovering too much about a kind of a conspiracy which even now none of them truly understood.

True, Bret had been instrumental in tracking down Tanji and he and Kevin had together rescued her from her captors, but even so she retained a certain amount of – well, not distrust, but perhaps *disquiet* – at the unexpected appearance of Bret. Nevertheless, she greeted him civilly, together with a certain degree of nervousness which Kevin thought only he could detect.

Attempting to lighten the situation, Kevin ushered Bret into the kitchen and offered him hot chocolate, the kind he used being the best

approximation that he had been able to locate to the popular hot drink served everywhere in Lyndesfarne. Bret nodded appreciatively, and Kevin poured him a mug, as well as one each for Tanji and himself.

“I would like you to help me,” Bret said directly, after sipping the warming drink, “I would appreciate your insight on a delicate matter.”

Kevin glanced at Tanji, who shrugged.

“I’ll go and get dressed,” she said, without waiting to hear his response.

“Of course I’ll do whatever I can to help,” Kevin replied politely to Bret, “But we’d better take Tanji.”

“I wouldn’t dream of suggesting otherwise,” Bret responded, smiling broadly.

“OK. You drink your chocolate, and I’ll get myself ready.”

Kevin went for a hurried shower and then to pack, throwing a few items into a small rucksack of the kind he had noticed was popular in the Other World. In less than fifteen minutes, the three people regrouped in the hallway of Kevin’s little flat.

“Come on then,” Bret said, “Let’s go. We have to visit a *Cave*.”

“A cave?” Kevin queried.

“*Cave*,” Bret responded, emphasising the francophone pronunciation, “In France.”

Chapter Two

Jean-Luc could see the long line of lights from innumerable candles stretching out in front of him. Each candle was set into its own little arched niche and was flickering intermittently in the gentle drafts always found underground.

Glancing around again, he noticed something strange – no, two things that were strange about the passageway. Firstly, the lights at the far end of the corridor seemed to be somehow enveloped in a dense white mist, or at least they were progressively harder to see. Secondly, the lights at the far end of the tunnel were burning steadily, and did not seem to be flickering at all, compared with the candle right next to him.

The young Frenchman peered cautiously out of the blind alcove in which he hiding. Behind him, the brick-lined arched opening was filled with an immense stack of bottles of champagne, intended to lie undisturbed for years, maturing steadily in the coolness of the cellars.

It was a scene of frantic activity. In the main corridor, teams of porters moved to and fro, some of them carrying heavy bundles or supporting large boxes between them. Others were pushing handcarts and wheelbarrows, all loaded high with goods of all kinds, although it did seem that a substantial number of the transports were loaded down with wooden cases containing champagne bottles.

There seemed to be some kind of guards on duty as well, their stern-faced silence at odds with the shouts and imprecations of the overseers and the harsh oaths of the porters. Looking more closely, he could see what looked very much like a guard-room – no, two guardrooms – at a more well-lit point about half-way along the corridor.

This central point was marked by a stone archway decorated with elaborate carvings, unlike the plain brickwork elsewhere in these caverns. There were guards on both sides on the arch and Jean-Luc could now see that they wore different uniforms – almost as if it was some kind of a border crossing.

Jean-Luc was deep inside the Forbidden Cellars – *Les Caves Interdites* – and he was all too well aware that he would be in very serious trouble if he was discovered. He shrank back into the alcove that formed his hiding-place and watched with one eye the frenzied movements around the grand arch.

He considered himself just an ordinary Champagne worker, like his father before him. He worked in the vineyards during Spring and Summer, pruning and tying the vines at one time of year, and harvesting the ripe grapes in another. This work was by its very nature seasonal and he turned his hand to whatever task was required at that time.

After the harvest, the urgency turned to the pressing and bottling, and it was this work that had given Jean-Luc familiarity of the vast system of underground cellars – laboriously dug into the chalk by hand and lined with brick – whose consistent coolness was essential to the maturing of the bottled Champagne.

By now he knew the layout of the caverns extremely well, and had discovered that certain areas were out-of-bounds. Here and there throughout the network of caves were locked and bolted doors and gates, and grilles formed from a grid of stout wrought-iron bars filled certain tunnels floor-to-ceiling. The bars and posts were deeply embedded in the chalk floor and brickwork ceilings, and seemed immovably stout.

Jean-Luc had explored the boundary of the forbidden area with considerable curiosity. The inaccessible region was bounded on three sides by corridors he knew well, and appeared to occupy an area perhaps one-third of the size of the remainder of the passageways. Nothing could ever be seen through the bars, as the short corridors always faced a blank wall, but occasional mysterious sounds suggested movement and activity just around the corner.

He knew that some workers did sometimes pass through the gates, individuals from a certain cadre who did not mix with the other working men. These labourers were a gruff lot and always kept themselves to themselves, and spoke French with a strong accent which suggested that it was not their mother tongue. Jean-Luc thought he recognised some of these individuals amongst the porters who scurried urgently to and fro, although his hiding place was sufficiently far away that he could not be sure.

Jean-Luc spent every moment he could exploring the boundaries of the Forbidden Cellars, lurking in hidden spots, watching those who passed the iron gates. His patience had been rewarded this very morning, when a small party carrying a collection of wooden boxes had approached the locked entrance that he had been watching assiduously from a prudent distance.

The leader of the group had taken a bunch of keys from his belt and fumbled for a moment, presumably selecting the correct key for this particular lock. The man opened the gate with a creak of

inadequately oiled hinges, held it wide for his cohort to pass through, then looked around carefully before pushing the noisily-complaining gate back into position. The leader, obviously under some pressure, was distracted at the critical moment by some shouted query, and failed to close the gate completely before turning the key in the lock.

Jean-Luc could not contain his curiosity. It was exactly this kind of opportunity that he had been seeking all this time. Waiting as little time as he dared, he darted across the vaulted corridor and slipped through, opening and closing the gate as slowly and quietly as he could, and set off in the direction that the party had taken.

The frenetic activity along the corridor seemed to be reaching some kind of conclusion. The last of the boxes and wagons had been carried through the stone archway and along the corridor on the other side. The bulk of the labourers seemed to remain on the far side, disappearing into the fog or the cross-passages wheeling or carrying their loads.

The guards who were stationed on the nearer side of the stone arch saluted their counterparts, then formed up into a line and marched off, clattering past Jean-Luc's hiding-place and making him shrink back behind the dusty stacks of bottles. By the time Jean-Luc felt he could safely re-emerge from his hiding place, the guards on the far side had also retreated, leaving the archway unguarded, which seemed incongruous after the effort applied hitherto.

It was suddenly quiet and still, the noise and bustle of the porters and guards receding into the distance. There was no movement, no sound, for ten minutes or more, and Jean-Luc began to wonder if he could remember the way back to the gate he had used to enter this zone.

Then, in the stillness, he could just make out the sound of slow footsteps approaching, echoing in the silence. Jean-Luc could just make out a lone figure approaching, emerging from the white mist that still seemed to permeate the corridor on the other side of the stone arch. He was a tall man with a ramrod-straight straight back despite his long white hair and beard. He was clothed in a long green robe and walking with a long staff, the kind that travellers used, although he did not seem to be relying on it for much support.

The man stopped a few paces on the far side of the stone arch, and stood apparently inspecting the archway and the brickwork that surrounded it. After a few moments, he was joined by two other figures, both women and both also tall and wearing the same rich green robes.

The three figures stood in conversation for a long time, their heads bowed together. Jean-Luc could not make out their words, except for one word that was repeated frequently and seemed to invoke strong emotions in all three. Who, or what, Jean-Luc wondered, motionless in his hiding-place, was “Lyndesfarne”?

The threesome stood in a line facing the arch. As one, they lifted their hands, drawing back the voluminous sleeves of their robes, and began gesturing fluidly and with great complexity. Jean-Luc wondered at the complex synchronisation of the movements of the three people. It was all artfully orchestrated, as if some great piece of music was being conducted, some symphony of action which Jean-Luc could neither see nor hear.

Belatedly, Jean-Luc realised that there was something to be sensed. The ground beneath his feet began shaking and the damp brickwork of the wall where he was resting his hand seemed to be becoming warm. There was a dull rumbling which seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. The white fog which permeated the corridor on the far side of the stone arch seemed to get thicker, so that the three figures became more indistinct by the second

As Jean-Luc watched, the movements of the three robed figures seemed to reach some kind of crescendo, or perhaps conclusion. There were some final emphatic gestures and then the figures dropped their hands to their sides. They turned their heads and looked to one another, nodding with a surprisingly prosaic workman’s sense of a good job well done. Without further fuss, the three mysterious people walked backwards a few steps, looking closely at the archway which was now vibrating visibly, then as one they turned on their heels and strode away into the fog.

No sooner had they disappeared when the noise and commotion increased dramatically. Here and there, bricks fell from the lined ceilings of the corridor, and dust seemed to swirl up on every side. There was a rolling crash and a series of bangs, and the stone arch itself seemed to collapse inwards on itself in a way that, later, he would find impossible to explain.

The white fog seemed to thicken and solidify, here and there showing irregular darker marks in grey and brick-red. The rumbling noises suddenly increased in intensity, followed by an explosive thump accompanied by a gust of wind which stirred the dust into a frenzy of movement.

Then there was only settling dust and silence, interrupted by the occasional pop of a champagne bottle exploding – a common enough occurrence at any time when the pressure of the fermenting gases

within overcame a flaw in the glass of the bottle, now exacerbated by the violence Jean-Luc had just witnessed.

He lay still for several long minutes, wondering if there was worse to come. Finally, he screwed up his courage and emerged from his hiding-place, and picked his way through the dust and fallen bricks to the spot where the stone arch had stood. Now, there was just a blank wall of chalk and fragments of broken bricks, as if the ceiling of the section beyond had long ago collapsed. Jean-Luc ran his hand over the unexpectedly smooth surface. He could barely feel the transition from brick to chalk, as if the entire wall had been made together by a single stroke from a giant's sword.

Shaking his head in shock and confusion, he picked his way back along the corridors and returned to the caverns he knew well via the open gate he had used earlier.

Unlike most of his peers, Jean-Luc could both read and write reasonably proficiently, thanks to the influence of his Mother. Maman had been a servant in a nearby Grand Chateau for many years after she was widowed and, with the blessing of her patron, she had taught letters and numbers at a local church school.

As might have been expected, Maman included her son in her own classes, carefully disciplining him just very slightly more than other children in order to demonstrate her lack of school-time favouritism. She was firm but fair, with him as well as the other children, and her lessons had stuck firmly in his head even after all these years.

Latterly, she had returned to work as a ladies maid and was now accompanying her employer on a visit to a distant cousin somewhere in the south of the country. She never spoke to Jean-Luc of the accident that had killed his father, although he understood that some freak stroke of lightening from a blue sky had struck the older man down one summer's day.

That evening, in the quietness of his lodgings and remembering the lessons from Maman, Jean-Luc sat down to compose a letter to send to her. He still had a few precious sheets of parchment in the little wooden box he kept locked and hidden under his bed. Laboriously forming the characters with the quill pen and ink he had been presented with as a school prize by some long-forgotten philanthropic aristocrat, Jean-Luc sat long into the night and wrote a rambling account of the events he had witnessed that day.

Chapter Three

The trip to France went surprisingly smoothly. Bret, Kevin and Tanji were collected at Charles de Gaulle airport by a board-carrying driver with a large and very black diesel Mercedes, who drove the three of them at surprising speed along the well-maintained roads east of Paris. The large car, and its vaguely official appearance, effortlessly persuaded even the most recalcitrant of drivers in the fast lane to pull in as soon as a gap in the slow-moving traffic was available.

The road trip was boring in the extreme. Bret was in the front seat next to the driver – ‘riding shotgun’, as Kevin had heard it described. He and Tanji had been cautioned not to discuss anything unless they were completely alone, and Bret seemed to be too caught up in his own thoughts to engage in very much casual conversation.

Kevin sat next to Tanji in the back of the car. She seemed to be rather tired and subdued after the flight. He took her hand in his own and squeezed it gently in a reassuring kind of way. This had the desired effect of invoking a smile but she too seemed rather distant.

As Tanji dozed fitfully, Kevin stared out of the window in a glazed-over kind of way at the scenery rushing past, his boredom only slightly enlivened by realising that the globular growths of green leaves in the otherwise bare trees were very probably Mistletoe. Kevin recalled dimly that the Druids collected this evergreen parasite for some reason, but could not quite recall what the purpose actually was.

It also occurred to him that the small areas of woodland visible from the main road were probably rather difficult to access without screaming to a halt on a busy highway. But someone must be going to these places, at least occasionally, presumably by some back route. The rusted wreck of an ancient Citroen van wedged into the edge of a coppice he had noticed earlier could not have got there from the road they were currently using.

Almost unexpectedly, their driver pulled off the main road and paid the toll electronically without stopping at the booth. After that, they drove more sedately along country roads, through row after row of well-tended vines, supported on wires tautened across the length of the vineyards, and now just beginning to show green shoots after the winter.

From reading the road signs, Kevin had come to the conclusion that they were heading for Épernay. He knew this was the centre of the Champagne area, where the drink of the same name came from, but wondered why they had come all this way. He could not imagine that Bret had come all this way just to get a few bottles of sparkling plonk.

It came as quite a relief to finally roll up outside the black-painted wrought-iron gates of a grand champagne house. It seemed that they were expected, as the gates opened automatically after a few seconds.

A smartly-dressed young woman came down the steps to meet them. She was attired head-to-foot in fashionably black clothing and was equipped with one of those short-cut hairstyles that ought, Kevin thought, to look boyish, but somehow managed to remain both feminine and very French.

While Kevin eased himself from the car and stretched ungracefully, watching Tanji gradually waking up with mild concern, Bret had leapt fluidly from the vehicle and was already speaking urgently to the Frenchwoman.

Kevin was not entirely surprised to hear Bret speaking French, apparently fluently, or at least much better and faster than himself. His schoolboy French was very poor, being taught, as was the standard of the time, as an academic subject, not as a conversational skill. Kevin found it very hard – nigh impossible – to follow the conversation.

“Can you understand what Bret’s saying?” Kevin asked Tanji urgently.

“Sort-of,” she replied, “My French is very, err, rusty. I’ve not spoken it since I left the Guild school the first time – and that was years ago.”

“So what *is* Bret doing?”

“He seems to be negotiating for a private tour of the cellars.”

Seemingly satisfied, Bret turned back to Kevin and Tanji. He introduced the young woman as Millie, and explained that she was a tourist guide for the champagne company. He also outlined that she had been commissioned to assist Bret and his companions in their exploration of the underground caverns, the *Caves*, below the rather grandiose chateau.

Smiling professionally, and seamlessly switching to accented but understandable English for the benefit of Kevin and Tanji, the guide collected a couple of electric torches and handed one to Bret. She offered the other one to Kevin, who took it unenthusiastically.

Following the thoroughly modern Millie, Kevin and the others were guided through the airy and stylish foyer, decorated with arty advertising posters for the champagne brands promulgated by this company. The guide directed them towards a stairwell in the floor, which led down several wide and steep flights of stairs.

The transition from smooth modern walls painted in a fashionable shade of pale pink to rough stone foundations was both sudden and unexpected. Kevin found the drop in temperature was very noticeable and he was glad he was still wearing his sweater. Tanji stopped a moment to wrap her Lyndesfarne cloak around her shoulders.

Millie, clearly already in automatic tourist guide mode, explained that the cellars felt cool in summer and warm in winter, the temperature inside always hovering around ten degrees Celsius. Apparently, this thermal stability was essential to the proper maturing of the wine.

She also explained that these tunnels had been dug over a period of several centuries specifically to allow the bottled champagne to be stored for years. There were now some eighteen miles of underground cellars, carved from the soft chalk and reinforced in places by brick arches. Kevin wondered idly whether this environment would be familiar and comfortable to people from Lyndesfarne in the olden days.

The four of them spent an interminable time walking the echoing tunnels, which were damp in places after the recent rains where the water had seeped through the porous chalk walls. There were arches and openings everywhere, and many tunnels included tiny arched alcoves at regular intervals which were occupied by dim electric lights. The passageways and tunnels all looked very similar to Kevin, and he imagined it would be rather easy to get lost down here.

Even so, Bret seemed to know where he was going. After a while, he thanked the guide for her help and indicated that he was happy to continue the exploration without further assistance. Millie mouthed a few pleasantries and turned back the way they had come, rapidly disappearing into the gloom with her echoing footsteps receding swiftly into silence.

Both Kevin and Tanji were unsure as to the wisdom of this move. Kevin gripped his electric torch as if his life depended upon it with one hand and kept a firm grasp on Tanji's hand with the other. It suddenly occurred to him that, apart from Millie, he had not seen anyone else in these *Caves* during the entire visit.

Appearing entirely unconcerned, and followed closely by Kevin and Tanji, Bret turned into a short corridor in an area where the provision of lighting was even more sporadic than usual. The passageway ended almost immediately. Even in the half-light, the end of the tunnel looked to Kevin rather different from the surfaces they had been passing hitherto.

The miles of passageways they had already walked were mostly smooth cut chalk, with ancient and in some cases rather corroded brickwork at junctions and occasional areas of reinforced concrete where modern repairs had been made to the antique tunnels.

The end of this particular tunnel was a jumble of chalk and bricks, tightly packed together. The bricks were at odd angles, not laid flat and level, and looked as if they of slightly different manufacture than those used to support the ceiling elsewhere.

It looked to Kevin as if there had been a cave-in, but no attempt had been made to remove the debris. The strangest thing of all was that the surface of the blockage was almost completely smooth, as if chalk and brick had been sliced by some huge sharp blade shortly after the cave-in.

Kevin laid a hand on the surface. He could feel the different textures of the damp chalk and the smoothly polished cut brick, glinting in the torchlight. There was nothing else to feel – no movement, no vibration. He almost expected something, and felt obscurely disappointed not to feel anything. A whisper of recognition ran through his mind.

“What is it?” He asked Bret. He could see that Tanji was also rather interested in this question.

“Well, it was at one time,” Bret began, “A crossing, a passageway to my World.”

Kevin nodded slowly. Tanji seemed surprised, and came up to the odd wall to take a closer look, also running her hand over the oddly-featured surface.

Kevin had already had his suspicions, now confirmed, and turned back to Bret to ask another question.

“No longer working, then?”

Bret nodded.

“But I thought that crossings tended to blow up when they were removed?”

Bret snorted mirthlessly.

“Only when you don’t do it right,” he replied, “Or you have to do it in a hurry.”

Bret explained that this crossing was underneath a populous small town. Extreme care had been taken to avoid any violent event. There was inevitably a certain amount of fracturing of the rocks, hence the debris which had blocked this passageway briefly before the more complete block of solid chalk had replaced the opening to the world of Lyndesfarne as the crossing finally closed.

“All very smoothly done,” Bret concluded, “And almost no-one noticed. Just a few rumbling noises and a tremor or two.”

The site of the crossing, Bret suggested, now formed the north-western edge of a network of tunnels which were used in the manufacture and storage of champagne. Kevin imagined that there were superstitious – or perhaps other, more practical – reasons for not wanting to dig further tunnels into rock which, until recently, had not actually been there.

At Bret’s prompting, Kevin and Tanji explored a large and darkened chamber, set to one side of the strange wall and connected by several doorways and other openings into the corridor. Bret explained that this was once a Guard Room, housing the equivalent of the modern-day Guardians checking on those making the crossing.

“So why are we here, exactly?” Kevin pressed.

Bret was quiet for a long moment. Kevin found himself listening to the occasional drip of water, the only sound to break the silence.

“Well, there are several reasons,” Bret resumed eventually, “One simple one is that I wanted to re-assure myself that this crossing really is closed – is still closed, I should say.”

Kevin was immediately curious.

“You thought that someone might have re-opened it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But surely a new crossing could be anywhere?” Kevin pressed.

“Well, yes, true – but there are some complex reasons why I wanted to look here.”

Bret explained that, in theory, there are some conditions where it was easier to re-establish an old crossing rather than to build an entirely new one, but only if the crossing had been previously carefully closed. Under favourable circumstances, he suggested, it might be possible to re-establish it in less than a year.

“As far as I know,” Bret continued, “This has never been done. There are no official records of any such careful closure.”

“So what’s the problem?” Kevin persisted.

“This letter,” he almost shouted, vehemently waving a parchment at him, “This letter suggests that this crossing was closed in such a way, and this was kept secret.”

He let the hand holding the letter fall to his side in an uncharacteristically dramatic manner.

“And I don’t know who sent the letter, or why!”

Chapter Four

During the design of the New Bridge to Lyndesfarne, Kevin and Bret had spent quite some time exploring various possibilities for the final link, the section of the bridge which spanned the transition between the worlds.

At the time, Kevin had considered the use of a conventional stone arch to join the two sections of the New Bridge that he and Bret had been devising. The construction would have used a semi-circular arch of traditional materials: old-fashioned cut stone blocks and a cement mortar. With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, he knew that this particular idea would always have been a non-starter, since there would be too much movement in the sections of the bridge. Modern design and materials meant that the individual halves were expected to move slightly, literally to sway in the wind, and even this tiny movement would have caused the stonework to crack after a few years, with the risk of catastrophic failure in extreme storms.

Aware of the problem, Kevin certainly did not want the New Bridge to collapse in a storm, and he spent an inordinate amount of time exploring ways in which the inherent problems of using a “pile of rocks” – his favourite term for old-fashioned masonry construction – could be avoided. He investigated the mechanical properties of the locally-quarried stone in some detail. He thought about using alternative adhesives to mortar that blocks together. He even considered ways in which the joining arch could be reinforced with both steel beams (which could not be relied upon on the Lyndesfarne side of the crossing) and magical sprites (which would not work in his world), like a miniature version of the Old Bridge itself.

Eventually, Kevin abandoned the masonry arch approach altogether. Nevertheless, he had been curious, in a low-key professional kind of way, about the stone that was used for the construction of the Old Bridge, and it was therefore unsurprising that he should find himself in a quarry in his own world, not far from the crossing where the New Bridge was to be constructed.

This was in the early days of Kevin’s introduction to the world of Lyndesfarne, and before he had really appreciated very much of the strangeness and sophistication of the Other World. He had only recently been introduced to Bret and had had not yet appreciated his remarkable shapeshifting abilities – his ability to appear male when

he (or should it be she?) wanted. Indeed, this was long before he had met Tanji, and he was still being guided everywhere in the world of Lyndesfarne by old frog-face Ricard, his previous Guide from the Guild of Directions.

Given the intense interest in traditional masonry, perhaps it was not surprising that Kevin was keen to understand more about the process of construction and the materials that would be used. After one of their regular working sessions, when he and Bret were trying to pull the complete design of the New Bridge together, Kevin broached the question of a visit to a local quarry in what Kevin was at that time still thinking of as the Mainland – meaning his own world.

Bret looked thoughtful for a moment.

“I think that could be easily arranged,” he replied, “I’ll make some enquiries.”

Early the following week Kevin received a message on his answering machine from Bret, asking him to meet in the car park by the causeway at eleven o’clock the following morning. The message concluded with a recommendation that he bring a stout pair of boots and a waterproof coat. Kevin never travelled to the Lyndesfarne crossing area without such equipment. From personal experience, he knew that the weather was often inclement and sometimes violently changeable, and in any case he always seemed to end up walking everywhere.

Bret was waiting for him when Kevin arrived, standing quietly in the cover of the nearly deserted car park wearing the long hooded cape that was even now so very popular in the other world.

“Ready for a walk?” Bret asked laconically as Kevin dragged his coat and rucksack out of the boot of the Volvo.

“Sure,” Kevin confirmed, locking the car, “Which way do we go?”

Bret pointed across the car park away from the direction of the old causeway where a narrow gate in the low dry-stone wall appeared to lead to a farmer’s field. It was a direction that Kevin had never explored before, and indeed one which he would never have even considered. Nevertheless, he walked with Bret to the gate, from where he could see the faint marks of a path that led across the field.

“That’s our route,” Bret explained as he eased open the gate, “About an hour’s walk.”

They followed the footpath across several fields and over a low rise, Bret setting a fast pace that Kevin found he was just capable of keeping up with. They clambered over several gates, some of modern tubular galvanised steel, others of a traditional wooden

construction in various states of disrepair. The path joined a wider track obviously more heavily travelled, mostly by heavy farm machinery. Their route passed cultivated fields on one side, and an area of rough ground dotted with gorse and bracken on the other.

They skirted a heavily wooded area making their way steadily uphill, then stopped to catch their breath at a point where the edge of the woodlands curved away from the path. Their wind-swept vantage-point gave them a view out over the coast. Kevin could make out the causeway stretching out across the tidal sandbanks and merging into the bulwarks of the Old Bridge. The three arches of the bridge were plainly visible, but the causeway on the other side disappeared almost immediately into the perpetual haze that occluded the crossing almost all the time.

The far coast of what Kevin still thought of as the Island could barely be made out, and it was impossible to discern any details. Kevin was left, as always, with the impression of a barren and windswept island, devoid of trees or human habitation. The truth of the matter, of course, was obscured by the mist: the Island was just the visible edge of an entire world, a world of wonders and magic, the world that he knew as Lyndesfarne.

Another twenty minutes walking brought the two men to the abandoned quarry itself. Kevin stopped to look around as the track levelled out into what was, at some time in the past, the cutting and finishing area. Ahead of him, and curving around both to left and right, was a cliff face, perhaps fifty feet high, cracked and very broken, and now very mossy and green.

Kevin knew quite a lot about how large blocks of stone were cut and finished in olden times. He had gained a basic understanding from his University education, and had subsequently undertaken a fair amount of research on the subject when the possibility of a masonry arch had been first mooted.

Even so, it was difficult to imagine, for one who had been brought up in an age of powered machinery, how all this work had been undertaken. It had required a vast amount of skilled and intensive labour, and utilized a number of techniques which were all but forgotten today.

Huge blocks had been cut from the quarry face using a combination of two approaches. Firstly, holes were drilled with great labour into the face of the rock to undermine the cliff and allow a block to be separated. From above, the resulting cracks were opened further by hammering in dry wooden wedges which were then dampened so that they expanded slightly, but with considerable force,

eventually enough to separate the stone block from the face of the quarry.

To Kevin's moderately expert eye, the tell-tale signs and marks made by cutting rocks by hand were visible everywhere, as were the signs of transportation. There were holes in the slope leading up the the quarry made to assist in the process of removing whole blocks from the quarry face. Stout poles would have been inserted into these holes, which would have been used as belays for ropes and pulleys that allowed large blocks to be slid down to a level where they could be worked or transported using, in fact, the slope up which he and Bret had just hiked.

All about were the tell-tale irregular mounds of spoil heaps, where chips and off-cuts, and larger blocks which had split or cracked while they were being worked, had been discarded. These piles were now covered in undergrowth and turf, virtually unnoticeable unless one knew what one was looking for.

The cut and shaped blocks would have been lifted using block and tackle, and a derrick of heavy timbers – all long since removed or rotted away, of course – and loaded onto carts drawn by teams of oxen, or perhaps donkeys for smaller loads. These loads were then hauled along the rough track that he and Bret had walked to get here.

“It should be possible to get powered machinery in here,” Kevin mused aloud, staring at the access route.

“What's that?” Bret said, spinning around suddenly, seeming to be unusually startled by the other man's mutterings.

Kevin explained that the track would have to be widened and a proper surface constructed to allow the passage of heavy lorries and the like. Bret nodded his agreement, apparently mollified by the explanation. Kevin spent a further hour or so poking about in the quarry watched, for the most part, by Bret with an amused expression on his face.

“OK, I've seen enough,” he announced finally.

“Fair enough,” Bret responded, shouldering his rucksack ready for the march back.

Kevin walked back along the track, following Bret in companionable silence and thinking about the implications of a masonry arch for the final section of the bridge. He would realise it only much later - when he knew a great deal more about the properties of magic - but he had noticed signs that magical processes had been used to cut and form the blocks of stone.

When he thought about it - in a reflective mood in the quietness of his little flat in South Manchester and long after the New Bridge had

been completed – he could identify all sorts of incongruities. He had noted various anomalies, some oddities in the markings on the rock faces and on the worn and slippery ground surface upon which they had been standing. In particular, there were astonishingly straight cuts in the quarry face, the kind of thing that would be difficult to achieve even with modern powered machinery, let alone the hand tools that would have been available at the time the causeway and the Old Bridge had been constructed.

So, Kevin mused, magic was still possible in this world at the time the Old Bridge, or at least the causeway leading to it, was under construction. So exactly when did the barrier between the worlds, the artefact that prevented magic from working in this world and disabled technology in the other, come into existence? All the evidence suggested that it was about the same time as the completion of the Old Bridge, rather than much earlier as he had previously been led to believe.

Chapter Five

On the return trip, walking back from the site of the underground crossing through the tunnels, Bret was a good deal chattier. It seemed that a weight had been lifted from his mind. Prompted by Kevin, he explained why this old crossing had been built in a cellar.

“Placing crossings underground,” Bret explained, “Was very popular at one time. A large fraction of all crossings were once built in this way.”

Tanji nodded slowly in agreement.

“The advantages are obvious,” he continued, “The only way in or out is through a tunnel, which is easy to guard, and it’s therefore easy to control the passage of people and goods. You’ve less likelihood of getting unexpected visitors that way.”

Bret explained that there was a second important reason. This was that the impact of the climate was considerably reduced, since conditions underground were much more stable. A critical concern with siting a crossing above ground, like the one at Lyndesfarne, was to ensure that the climate was compatible, so that the impact of different weather on each side of the crossing was minimised. Even so, Kevin knew from personal experience that the Lyndesfarne crossing was prone to rapid and extreme changes of weather conditions.

“So why weren’t all crossings built that way?” Kevin pressed.

Bret smiled.

“Well, there are several reasons,” he said, “One is that a great deal of extra effort and more magic is required to, well, let’s say *process* the rocks underground.”

“Why is that?” Kevin asked

Bret was clearly amused by Kevin’s persistent questioning.

“It’s difficult to explain in English,” he replied, “But think of the static, dense rocks as opposed to the fluid of the sea and the air.”

Kevin knew that the crossing to Lyndesfarne was in the shape of a pair of circular saucers pressed together at the rims. The upper dome of the barrier between the worlds rose only a thousand feet or so above the island and the surrounding sea, although it was at least four miles across.

“Surely even a crossing like that at Lyndesfarne has at least half of its volume underground?” Kevin persisted.

“Quite true,” Bret agreed, “So it makes it only twice as hard if the whole shebang is embedded in the rock.”

He also explained that there was additional effort to build the tunnels themselves, although magical means of tunnelling could be used. At least, it had been used before the proscription on the use of magic in this world, and the creation of the barriers at crossings which neutralised both magic and technology.

In addition, it was not possible to know for sure precisely where the crossing would be, once established. Often, it seems, the top of the dome of the crossing was fairly close to ground level. It may even have been above ground in one or two places.

“So, if they got it wrong,” Kevin asked, “It might just have been possible to cross at ground level?”

“Well, it has happened,” Bret agreed, “But not here. All parts of this crossing have always been underground, as it was designed.”

“But that was not enough,” he continued, “It also turns out, although it was not fully appreciated at the time, the underground environment, the variations in the rock strata, reduced the effectiveness of the magic barriers. This certainly did happen here. Frankly, the barrier was full of holes. And various unscrupulous persons attempted and sometimes succeeded in constructing additional tunnels, which bypassed the control of the Guardians.”

Tanji was shocked at this revelation. Her gasp of concern was plainly audible in the quiet corridors. Kevin imagined that she was perfectly well aware of the importance of the barriers, and the importance of keeping the two Worlds apart in their use of technology and magic.

“So it’s like the way the iron and steel in the New Bridge disrupts the barrier at Lyndesfarne?” Kevin said.

“That’s right,” Bret confirmed. “It’s all part of the same problem. Underground crossings became less and less secure with improvements in technology in this world.”

“How so?”

“Well, when all tunnelling was carried out by hand, it would take a team of men many months to build a tunnel. This was easy to spot with minimal local patrols. But, these days, with explosives and tunnelling machines, a couple of people could dig a crossing very quickly.”

“Ah.” Things were beginning to come clear to Kevin.

“This is a major reason why the Lyndesfarne crossing is still there,” Bret concluded, “The hard rocks in the area, together with the natural barrier of the sea, make it much more difficult to dig a tunnel in secret.”

At this point, the party arrived back at the stairs leading up to the foyer. Somehow, it seemed to Kevin, the return walk had taken almost no time at all. Millie was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Bret thanked her profusely, and Kevin added his own thanks as he returned the electric torch.

Their car was waiting outside, and their chauffeur jumped up to open the doors and usher them inside. Bret spoke briefly to the driver, who nodded and set off immediately.

“Where are we going now?” Kevin inquired.

“You’ll see,” Bret replied, mysteriously.

The drive from Épernay over the hills was all rather picturesque, Kevin concluded. They passed through a series of quaint little villages perched on the sides of the hills, each with its own selection of narrow and winding roads and rustic buildings. Leaving the villages behind, they passed through a long stretch of forest, filled with old, mossy trees, fallen down in places. It did not look to Kevin as if the woodland was managed as a source of timber.

Bret, who seemed to have inherited Millie’s role as a tour guide, explained that the vines were planted on the sides of hills, ideally south-west facing, in locations which were both sunny and well-drained. Apparently, the plants were quite fragile and easily damaged; it was considered too windy on the tops of hills and too cold and frosty in winter at the bottom.

“You seem to know a lot about growing grapes.” Kevin noted.

“Just a little – a *soupcou*, as they say,” Bret said, in a manner Kevin was beginning to find slightly irritating.

They entered another region of closely-cultivated vines, which led after a few minutes to an expanse of tilled arable land, planted with what Kevin thought was wheat, sugar beet and oilseed rape. This in turn gave way to the outskirts of a modern town, which their driver deftly navigated before arriving at the gates of another, even more imposing Champagne house.

“Welcome to Reims,” Bret announced, pronouncing the place name with panache, much rolling of the R’s and, Kevin suspected, a certain amount of unnecessary throat-clearing noises.

It took only a few minutes for Bret to negotiate his way into the *caves* of this house. This time, there was no guide, and the companions were able to set off alone. At first, Kevin found this

walk through the chilly arched passageways almost indistinguishable from the previous cellar, but he soon found that this was misleading. After a few minutes, they entered an area where the usual tunnels entered a series of much less regular caverns. The interior looked really ancient, with the walls sloping together at the top a hundred feet above their heads.

Kevin stopped suddenly, looking around. He could see some light leaking into the tops of these caves, just enough to illuminate the highest parts. The caverns were approximately conical in shape, with a small circular hole at the point, which was at ground level.

Bret explained that these holes were dug in Roman times, as a source of building materials. They were conical since they were dug from the top down, and gradually widened to avoid going too deep. Blocks of chalk were removed by winch from the opening at the top, and they were linked together by a series of irregular corridors.

The companions explored these caves for several minutes, Kevin and Tanji following Bret closely so as not to get lost. He finally identified another passageway, narrow and irregular in shape. Kevin expected to enter another of the tapering chambers, but the passage was blocked with crushed and fallen chalk. As he drew closer, Kevin could see that the chalk surface had the same smooth finish as the end of the passageway in the Épernay tunnels. Bret ran his hand over the surface again, and then turned away, nodding to himself and apparently satisfied.

“No sign of any disruption,” he said, to no one in particular.

Bret turned back to the others, rubbing his hands together.

“Good,” he exclaimed, “There’s nothing here to suggest that a re-opened crossing is expected here.

The relief in his voice was palpable.

“So this is a second tunnel which at one time lead through to the world of Lyndesfarne,” Kevin asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So, why two tunnels?”

Bret chuckled.

“There weren’t supposed to be two tunnels,” he said, “This one was, in fact, built secretly, as I was describing earlier. It was only discovered after it had been in operation for some time, and was one of the reasons why this crossing was closed.”

“But what was it for?”

Bret once again shook his head in amusement at the persistence of Kevin’s questioning.

“In short,” he replied, “The Champagne trade.”

Bret explained that, in the olden days, bottles and cases of champagne were transported directly to the world of Lyndesfarne through the tunnels and crossing. Apparently, the drink was then and is still now very popular in various parts of the Other World.

Kevin was fascinated. He had heard that the trade was busy, as Britain was a large consumer of French champagne. So, he mused, a huge number of bottles were transported to the UK, but were still relatively expensive in the shops. With a characteristic flash of insight, he realised that most champagne shipped to the UK was actually destined for Lyndesfarne, being transported by lorry to north-east England. From there, it used to be conveyed by wagon to Lyndesfarne over the Old Bridge, and was now whisked by the more efficient transportation he had helped to devise over the New Bridge. From there, onwards transport by goods portal to all parts of the Other World would be provided.

“It still seems a strange thing to do,” Bret mused, half to himself, “To consider re-opening a crossing in this vicinity. Think of the danger of accidental discovery. For example, take those new tunnels they’re digging for the new TGV line from Paris to Strasbourg.”

He stopped suddenly, looking frustrated.

“Of course, they could be digging tunnels anywhere, in the newer Caves or any other excavations anywhere. It could be from the new railway tunnels themselves, although that’s far too obvious a site.”

Bret paused again, as if coming to a conclusion.

“It’s fruitless to try and search every possible location for new tunnels in this world, and frankly I don’t have either the authority or the contacts to do this. So,” he said with an air of finality, “I need to search from the other side.”

“From Lyndesfarne?” Kevin asked.

“Well, from the Other World, certainly,” the other man confirmed.

Kevin was reminded that distances between crossings were not necessarily the same in both worlds. In his own world, the distance from Lyndesfarne to Épernay was only a few hundred miles, but he was beginning to suspect that the distance would be much greater in the other world.

“I’d like you too to accompany me,” Bret said abruptly.

“OK, sure, but why?” Kevin responded.

“Well, I would appreciate your insight,” the other man said, “And you’re very good at asking questions.”

Kevin felt obscurely flattered by this.

“And Tanji?” He asked.

Bret smiled indulgently.

“Well, after certain recent experiences, I feel sure you wouldn’t want to leave her behind, and I’m also sure you’d want a guide over there in any case.”

Chapter Six

The massive wooden scaffolding for what would eventually become the Bridge to Lyndesfarne was still under construction. The scaffolding was a complex framework of huge beams and timbers, their assembly itself a great work of engineering. It was made especially difficult since it was not possible to support the framework in the centre, where the Two Worlds met, since this was the very point where the waters were, quite literally, immeasurably deep. This was all the more impressive in the knowledge that this was strictly a temporary structure, to be removed a few years later when the stonework of the Bridge was complete.

Jean-Luc stopped from his labours for a moment, and considered the events which had brought him to the site of the bridge. He had been fascinated by what he had seen and heard in the Forbidden Caves. The reply to his letter to *Maman* had not been able to shed any light on what had happened, and it had taken a good deal of assiduous work in the public libraries in Reims and Epernay for Jean-Luc to finally learn that Lyndesfarne was a place, an obscure little island off the north-east coast of England, apparently once the home of some secretive sect of monks.

He made all kinds of enquiries locally, making a distinct nuisance of himself in the local marketplaces and taverns in the Champagne region. No-one he found was able, or at least willing, to shed any light on the mysterious events he had witnessed. Nor was there any sign of the working men with the strange accents that he had seen labouring in the tunnels. All he could discover was that the strangers had apparently disappeared on the same day that he had witnessed what he concluded was a deliberate destruction of the passageway. Finally, he had decided that his only chance of discovering more about the mysterious goings-on was to visit this nearly forgotten island.

It had taken Jean-Luc two years to reach the point on the English coastline where the long causeway stretched out to the island known as Lyndesfarne. He had made his way from his home in Epernay, first to Paris and then on to Calais, mostly on foot and occasionally hitching a lift on a farm cart. He had had little money and had therefore found it necessary to break off his journey at frequent intervals, taking casual labouring jobs as he could find them, and

sleeping rough in barns and outhouses when clement weather made it possible or lodging in the cheapest of inns when it was not.

On his arrival in Calais, Jean-Luc found work in the area around the docks, working as a porter loading and unloading the ships, or serving in the bars and taverns in the vicinity. He even managed to pick up a smattering of English from the sailors and crew although, as he would later realise, he had acquired an eclectic vocabulary containing many words the meaning of which his mother would definitely not have approved.

Eventually, he managed to save enough money to pay his way across the English Channel as a passenger in steerage. His arrival in Dover in the damp depths of winter was something of a shock; alone in a strange country with no friends, little money and a limited grasp of the language, it took some time for him to find his feet. However, his travels had given Jean-Luc an ability to form casual acquaintances easily, and it was not long before he was able to acquire a variety of odd jobs to replenish his funds. As spring turned to summer, he resumed his itinerant lifestyle and made his way north, labouring on the land and walking the old back roads much as he had done the previous year in France.

By the time that Jean-Luc reached the crossing to Lyndesfarne, the stone piers to support the arches were already in place and the caissons which had been constructed to keep the waters at bay had been removed. The scaffolding upon which the stonework was to be laid was all but complete, the complex structures of the timbers, skilfully jointed, were being re-enforced by the fitting of the last few of the cross-bracing timbers. At the same time, numerous cranes and derricks were being constructed, using the same approach of cross-braced timbers held together with slotted and pegged joints.

All the noise and bustle and raucous cries were both clearly audible and visible to Jean-Luc from the vantage-point of a low rise close to the end of the causeway. After his seemingly endless journey, he was obscurely relieved to see that there was at least *something* going on at the place associated with the name he had heard so long ago, under such strange circumstances. He had been overwhelmingly dedicated to solving this riddle, displaying a level of commitment to assuage his curiosity which, whenever he considered it, seemed like a noble quest, an adventure from the bedtime stories his *Maman* used to tell him.

Being a resourceful young man, Jean-Luc had gained numerous skills during his peregrinations and he was soon able to find a foreman who was willing to engage him to work on the bridge. He

was hard at work the very next day, toiling to and fro carrying the heavy timbers or hauling on ropes under the instructions of the foremen, or aiding the unloading of the heavy stone blocks from ox-drawn carts. Jean-Luc found it was familiar enough work, and gave his eyes time to watch and his mind an opportunity to cogitate even while his body laboured.

He found a place to stay in a nearby inn - a large and rambling establishment clearly prospering from the presence of so many men working up a thirst during the day, and having the copper to spend on beer to slake that thirst in the evenings. Jean-Luc, who privately preferred to drink his beer heavily watered-down, found himself nursing his pint many an evening, in all of the taverns and public houses in the area, listening to tales and fables of all kinds.

Jean-Luc still struggled with the language, and the many and varied accents of its native speakers, but it slowly became clear that there was more to this bridge than merely linking an insignificant little island to the mainland of Britain. With much diligent listening and a few carefully-chosen questions, he was eventually able to pick up some hints as to the nature of the Lyndesfarne crossing, although much of what he heard seemed either impossible or contradictory.

What was clear was there was a careful demarcation of the labourers quartered on this side of the bridge and the workers on the island. The two groups never met, even when working in the very centre of the middle arch. When blocks of stone needed to be laid, a team from the mainland side under the direction of an Overseer would be directed to undertake the work. When completed, the entire group would leave, to be replaced by a similar team from the other side.

Jean-Luc eventually became regarded as both skilled and trustworthy enough to be included in these parties, and was able to take a closer look at the construction of the other half of the bridge, the part that was out of bounds. On one of these occasions, he had caught sight of the plans held by the Overseers. He could imagine it would be a wondrous construction when completed, a marvel of the modern world.

All this work was undertaken under watchful eyes of the men he had heard called Guardians, silent and armed guards whose very presence made it impossible to slip over to the other side. Jean-Luc had also heard rumours of other, more secretive, Watchers as well: mysterious men in dark robes and hoods who would appear as if by magic in impossible places on the island and the mainland, stand motionlessly for minutes apparently inspecting the work on the

bridge before disappearing again. The Watchers were supposed to see all, although Jean-Luc never caught a definitive sighting of one, although he did occasionally get that curious sense of being watched, as if eyes were burning into the back of his head, but there was never anyone visible when he turned around to look.

The assembly of the arches was a precise and delicate operation, although the masonry itself was monumentally heavy. Each stone block had to be measured and cut exactly at, Jean-Luc had learned, several quarries nearby. This involved many hours of back-breaking labour with saws and chisels and hammers, as well as a variety of other hand tools. The cut blocks were loaded onto wagons and transported on these wooden carts along the rough roads from the quarries and then along the causeway. The wagons were normally pulled by oxen; while an ox was not capable of moving very fast, a team could move up to four tons of cut stone at two miles an hour.

The order in which the blocks were assembled was very important to ensure a manageable level of stress on the wooden scaffolding and on the other blocks already in place, so that it did not collapse. Eventually, of course, the scaffolding would be removed and the arches would become self-supporting. In Roman times, so Jean-Luc had heard it told, the architect of a bridge was made to stand under the main arch when the wooden scaffolding was removed. This was understandably supposed to make sure that the architect did his job well.

The task of adding the cut stone blocks on the mainland side was stupendous. Each building block was winched on hemp ropes with block and tackle, the ropes tightened with winch and ratchet and the use of great labour. The cranes and derricks themselves were fabricated from heavy timbers, carefully jointed and held in place with wooden pegs set in holes which were individually drilled - the same approach which had been used for the scaffolding that currently supported the arches. There were no iron nails used at all in the construction of either derricks or scaffolding. Of course, the tools used by the craftsmen and masons contained a great of iron, but all of the workmen were encouraged to make sure that nothing made of iron was left on the bridge when the work for that day was completed.

As each block was made ready to be lowered into place, mortar would be added by a quick-witted and quick-limbed lad. The mortar itself was made from locally-fired quicklime from lime kilns along the coast, combined with fine sand and water. In earlier times, Jean-Luc had made several visits to a working lime kiln. The kiln was

loaded with chalk quarried nearby, and heated to the high temperatures required using coal imported from Newcastle by ship to Seahouses, which was the closest deepwater seaport.

The mortar also used to hold in place a latticework of wrought iron bars that were, Jean-Luc had been told, intended to reinforce the masonry arches once completed. The stout ironworks stopped at the centre of the bridge. Although he had no way of being sure, there appeared to be no corresponding reinforcement in the other part of the construction.

The approach to bridge construction on the island side was perhaps less laborious than the approach on the mainland, but probably rather more time-consuming. Jean-Luc could only observe the work from a distance but, on the Lyndesfarne side, a strange floating platform had been created which seemed to manoeuvre over the scaffolding supporting the cut blocks from above. Somehow, the flying platform picked up the vast cut stone pieces as if grasped by an invisible giant hand. The stone block, now impossibly supported in mid-air, was moved very slowly - usually, just pushed by hand - over the partially completed masonry.

The precise positioning of each block took hours, as it seemed to hang in the air just above its final position. Mortar was spread over the area where the stone was to be laid then, after a frantic series of gestures by the individual Jean-Luc had heard called the Master Builder, it was finally lowered into place. Over a period of a day or so, as the mortar dried (or perhaps this was just a coincidence), the stonework gradually came alive with a strange kind of light. Somehow, inside the stonework, there were numerous orange sparkles which, when observed directly, would appear stationary, but when glimpsed from the corner of the eye would appear to dance and shimmer as if in constant movement.

All of the building work appeared to Jean-Luc to be causing some disruption to the commercial traffic still carried by boats across the straits to the island. There was a degree of conflict between the builders and the carters, and the ferrymen who operated the small fleet, often breaking out into shouts and abuse, and the occasional scuffle as the different priorities of the various groups generated frictions or antagonised differences of opinion or background.

For much of the time during daylight hours, travellers and Messengers were boarding at the piers, close to the supports for the minor arches now under construction. However, there were few goods being transferred, just a few heavy man-packs; it was simply not possible for animals or vehicles to cross at all. Jean-Luc realised

that there must be some expectation of a considerable increase in traffic between island and mainland. Otherwise, he mused, he could not imagine what the justification could be for the expense and effort of the construction of the bridge.

Chapter Seven

Bret, Kevin and Tanji emerged from the front doors of the grand Champagne house to find their chauffeur waiting for them. Their driver rushed to open the passenger doors to usher them inside the highly-polished Mercedes.

“Back to the airport?” Kevin enquired laconically as they clambered back into the car.

“Well, no,” Bret replied, slightly apologetically, “There are still a few lines of enquiry I want to follow up while we are in the area, and I’ve already booked a place for us to stay tonight.”

Kevin was not quite sure what to anticipate of the accommodation but the first sight of the hotel would definitely have exceeded any expectations he had set. After a drive of no more than ten minutes, the big Mercedes drew up at traffic lights alongside a high stuccoed wall capped with red clay tiles.

As the lights changed, the car turned sharply and swung through a pair of high wrought iron gates that stood open and along a driveway that lead to a well-maintained old building that must have been an extremely Grand Chateau in years past. The house and grounds had clearly been in place for several hundred years. It occurred to Kevin that this was exactly the kind of institution – well-established and centuries old – in which Bret and almost everyone else he had encountered from the Other World felt most comfortable.

The car swept up a wide straight driveway edged by carefully manicured lawns and exquisitely pruned shrubbery, and pulled into a turning circle in front of an extravagantly formed formal entrance. Even before they had managed to get out of the vehicle, someone in a uniform had rushed out and opened the doors of the Mercedes, while a second flunky efficiently whisked away their bags from the boot.

Bret emerged from the car and looked around, suddenly looking both relaxed and urbane – very much the image that Kevin remembered, and quite a contrast to the over-excited state he was exhibiting not half an hour before. He strolled into through the front door and into the lobby, followed by Kevin and Tanji in a state of some confusion. The entrance hall itself was equipped with the obligatory polished stone floor, tinkling fountain and faux marble columns that Kevin thought precisely matched the neighbourhood ambience.

After a very few moments of obsequious attention at the registration desk, Kevin and Tanji were ushered to a rather grand suite on the second floor, all three windows of which overlooked the entrance and driveway. As they approached their rooms, Bret waved at them casually before he was directed along a different corridor and out of sight.

“See you for dinner,” Bret called, “Downstairs, eight o’clock. Don’t be late.”

Kevin and Tanji spent a few moments exploring the rooms – a full examination would take rather longer – when there was a discreet tap on the door. Kevin opened it to admit yet another uniformed bellman with their luggage. He deposited the bags on the stand provided for this purpose, briefly explained the facilities of the room in immaculate English and then departed silently without, Kevin was pleased to note, any obvious attempt to solicit a tip.

Kevin was feeling slightly dishevelled after his unexpected and hurried departure that morning. He came to the conclusion that it would be best to take a shower and said so to Tanji. She, it seemed, had rather more definite ideas on the subject and practically pushed him into the shower cubical, which was more than big enough for two – which was just as well since she followed him in immediately.

They soaped each others bodies, Kevin enjoying the yielding softness of her breasts under his hands. They make love afterwards, facing the mirror, still dripping water, with her glorious breasts resting on a towel over the washbasin, and her reflected self panting and moaning and grinning back at him.

Afterwards, they collapsed on the bed, still damp. Kevin must have fallen deeply asleep almost immediately afterwards. He awoke in the luxurious embrace of the soft mattress and enveloping linen sheets. As he stirred, he became conscious of the sounds of the bath running and Tanji humming contentedly. Rising to his elbows, he could see Tanji wandering around the suite without a stitch of clothing. Through the window, he could see the reddening sun low in the sky.

“Hi, sleepy-head,” she called grinning cheekily.

He was about to reply in kind when the ringing phone made him jump. It was Bret, reminding him to dress for dinner.

At the appointed time – a good deal later than he would normally have taken his evening meal at home – Kevin stood at the suite door, holding it open for Tanji. They were so engrossed in looking at each other that he nearly bumped into Bret who was passing their door.

“That was well-timed,” Kevin said as they made their way downstairs to the dining room.

“Just luck,” Bret replied modestly.

The three were greeted by an immaculately turned-out *Maître d’Hôtel* at the entrance. By unspoken agreement, they declined the opportunity to take an *aperitif* in the bar beforehand, to Kevin’s relief; he was already beginning to feel quite hungry and sincerely hoped that food would soon be forthcoming. The *Maître d’Hôtel* immediately ushered them through to the main restaurant and guided them to their table.

The table itself was circular and set with four places, with crisply-starched napkins and a white linen tablecloth. It was set a little away from the others, in a corner of the high-ceilinged dining room, and partially screened by a large parlour palm and a folding room divider. A pair of slightly obsequious waiters assisted them with the chairs and napkins, and then presented leather-bound menus with a flourish.

Following the conventions of grand French restaurants, Kevin found himself holding a menu which included the prices while Tanji, who was sitting right next to him and being obviously a woman, received a menu without costs. Ever curious, Kevin peeked sideways across the table at Bret’s menu, which was – as he had anticipated – also the version which included the prices. He was privately highly amused – after all, Bret was biologically a woman and a shapeshifter, although today wearing the male appearance he usually adopted here in this world.

The menu itself was impenetrable as far as Kevin was concerned, set in a tiny crabbed typeface, and riddled with complex and archaic French. Feeling confused and slightly foolish, Kevin leant over to Tanji.

“Can you understand any of this?” he asked under his breath.

Tanji shook her head.

“Some of the words,” she replied, “But not enough to tell me what anything will actually taste like.”

“Shall I just order for us all?” Bret interjected, evidently having noticed the discomfort of his dinner companions.

Kevin nodded gratefully, both he and Tanji immediately closing their menus in some relief. He sat back to enjoy the experience, looking around the room at the other diners. Most of the tables were already occupied by guests dressed up in their finest attire, being served what seemed like a never-ending series of dainty dishes by an army of waiters.

In Kevin's admittedly very limited experience, restaurants of this class seemed to employ at least three grades of waiting staff: those who brought the food, those who cleared away the used dishes and those engaged entirely in a supervisory role. The last category, it seemed to him, only engaged with the diners to take the orders and to enquire if everything was satisfactory – the latter inevitably while the diners themselves had their mouths filled with food.

A member of the most senior grade of waiters approached their table. Unhesitatingly, Bret addressed him in apparently fluent French, ordering – as far as Kevin could tell – items from the menu for them all. The waiter nodded approval ingratiatingly while scribbling furiously in his notebook, then scurried off radiating an air of extreme unctuousness.

Bret must have ordered wine and sparkling water for them all as well, as bottles were opened and glasses were filled with polished efficiency by a separate squadron of staff. Given where they were and what they had been doing, Kevin was mildly curious that Bret had not ordered champagne. However, he did not feel he was able to contemplate such questions right at this moment. He suddenly realised that he was ravenously hungry – although not absolutely convinced that he could eat enough to justify the – no doubt – ruinous cost of the meal.

In less than three minutes, a procession of lower-rank waiters returned with the first of what would become a seemingly never-ending stream of tiny but extremely flavoursome dishes. Kevin tucked into the *amusant bouche* that had just been placed in front of him with gusto, eager to appreciate the kind of food that even an enthusiastic and moderately talented amateur cook like himself could not possibly attempt.

Kevin, who was dressed in his usual clothes – black jeans and a dark blue sweater – felt distinctly underdressed for the surroundings. The feeling worried him for quite some minutes, until he realised that it did not seem to be bothering either Bret or Tanji. The waiting staff was not paying the slightest attention either. Finally, he came to the conclusion that, as long as one did not smell too much or upset the other diners, then anyone willing to pay the no doubt exorbitant prices demanded here would be welcomed effusively.

He turned to Bret after the first couple of courses had been presented and consumed, another question already forming itself on his lips.

“Why are we here,” he asked, adding, “Impressive though this place is?”

Bret smiled at Kevin's perspicacity.

"We are to meet someone," he replied, indicating the empty place setting opposite, "Someone who is an old friend of my Mother's."

Bret was referring to the Ferryman, the leader of a secret faction in the interlocking governance that surrounded the crossing between the worlds. The Ferryman was the final arbiter of truth and justice in disputes over control and propriety, and appeared to be a hereditary post, being handed down from father to son, and indeed mother to daughter, over the millennia.

"Someone you knows about your, err, country?" Kevin asked in a hushed voice, leaning forward across the table and trying his best to be discreet.

"That's right," Bret replied, a tight smile crossing his face.

Just then, a well-dressed man approached, escorted by another one of the more senior grade of waiting staff. A tall man in late middle years, Kevin considered, now slightly running to fat, with an exceptionally flamboyant appearance. He wore a light grey linen suit with a tie and shirt in a contrast of pale colours that Kevin felt he could never have worked if he had donned the apparel himself.

He had a mane of grey hair covering his collar and ears, partially hiding his oversized facial features, including a particularly protuberant nose. All in all, a distinctly Gallic appearance, Kevin thought wryly, surprised only at the absence of a strong-smelling cigarette to complete the stereotypical façade.

Bret introduced the new arrival as Jean-Marc and beckoned him to the vacant place at their table.

"*Bonsoir, bonsoir,*" the newcomer boomed, reaching over the table elegantly to shake everyone's hand in turn – even Tanji's. Kevin noted that he made no move to embrace them or even to kiss Tanji's hand, which did not quite fit the characteristics he had imagined from the man's typecast appearance.

Kevin was the last to be introduced, and made some idiomatically polite reply in English. The grey-haired man looked sharply at him and said something to Bret in the language of Lyndesfarne.

"What did he say?" Kevin hissed to Tanji.

"He asked what you were doing here," she responded quietly, speaking almost directly into his ear, "He's just realised that you're not from my World."

Bret answered the Frenchman in English, sounding faintly irritated.

“Kevin is helping me with my enquiries, as is Tanji,” he replied, adding with noticeable emphasis, “I *am* here in an official capacity, you know.”

Jean-Marc deflated, looking slightly less pompous than before.

“Kevin is the designer of the New Bridge,” Bret continued patiently.

“Ah, yes,” the Frenchman said, suddenly smiling, “I have heard of you.”

He spoke in good educated English, with only the slightest hint of a French accent. Kevin nodded self-deprecatingly in response.

“And you may have heard that both Kevin and Tanji,” Bret indicated both of them with a wave of his hand, “Have helped us before with various enquiries?”

The Frenchman nodded slowly, now apparently reminded of their modest reputation.

“And so,” Bret concluded, “I have asked my friends to assist me once again in my present enquiries, which have led up to speak to you.”

“Well, yes, OK,” Jean-Marc stuttered, waving in the general direction of Kevin and Tanji, “But perhaps I should start by telling them some of the background.”

Chapter Eight

Just at that moment, one of the waiters appeared with a couple of fresh glasses, deftly poured both bottled water and red wine for Jean-Marc, topped up everyone else's glass, and then retreated as silently and as efficiently as he had appeared. The Frenchman swept up his wine glass and held it up in a toast, then sipped, looked pensive for a moment and then nodded appreciatively. He returned the glass to the linen tablecloth and leaned forward over the table with a slightly conspiratorial air.

"I am a member of one of -" the Frenchman paused for thought, then said something quietly to Bret in the Lyndesfarne language.

"The Old Families," Tanji interjected before Bret could speak, "That would be the conventional translation."

"Indeed, The Old Families," Jean-Marc nodded agreeably, "So, my family has been associated with the Other World for many generations and my forebears have lived both in the area around the, ah, crossing at Lyndesfarne, as well as in this area."

Jean-Marc looked sideways at Bret.

"Where, once upon a time, there was another crossing," Bret said in measured tones, "Whose entrance was hidden in the Champagne cellars."

"Indeed, just so," the Frenchman said, looking reassured, "As is the responsibility of the Old Families, I keep a close ear to the local gossip, and a watch for strangers and unexplained goings-on, even though the old crossing has been closed for centuries."

Kevin suspected wryly that Jean-Luc rather enjoyed the excuse to spend much of his time sitting in café-bars in sunny town squares and chatting idly with a wide circle of acquaintances. On the other hand, it probably allowed him to hobnob with policeman and burglar alike without fear of raising suspicion as to his true motives.

"This task is one I have undertaken with great stoicism and commitment for decades," the Frenchman went on, sounding more pompous again, "Now, there are many caves in the chalk in this region. It is said that, even thousands of years ago, people would mine the chalk for building materials, forming vast conical caves whose only entrance from ground level was a small circular hole in the very top."

“We were in one of those caves only this afternoon,” Kevin said, as Tanji and Bret nodded in agreement, “It was very impressive.”

“Indeed, quite so,” Jean-Marc said, looking slightly deflated.

“We took the easy way in,” Kevin added, “down the stairs.”

“Ah, yes. It wasn’t always that easy,” Jean-Marc continued, “Many years ago, a new cavern, one apparently unknown, was discovered by a local farmer, a grower of the grapes that are used to make the wines of the region. This farmer was a young man who had just taken over a vineyard from his father. The entrance to the cavern was hidden in a building at the corner of one vineyard, a little outhouse that had been disused for many years.”

Jean-Marc paused to take a sip of his wine, then spoke again.

“The older man had, as is the nature of these things, not been as active in recent years than before, and might easily have abandoned the distant hut to time and decay. The son, exploring his new domain, was more diligent than the father, and discovered an apparently bottomless hole in the floor.”

“The manner of its discovery was very dramatic, I have to say. The hole had been boarded over and it was only found when the young man, a stoutly-built youth, had stepped heavily on the floor, only to find that the old and rotten timbers had crumbled under his feet. It was only his quick wits and powerful arms which saved him. He was able to grab the doorframe just as the floor gave way, and pull himself to safety.”

“I heard of this strange happening through my contacts, and met with the young farmer immediately, in the bar where he was regaling his friends with his lucky escape over a bottle of wine. After interviewing the shaken farmer, I at once volunteered to explore the mysterious opening in the company of two others, all of us being experienced cave explorers.”

Kevin, or perhaps Tanji, must have registered an expression of disbelief on their faces.

“I was more svelte in those days,” Jean-Marc said huffily.

In fact, Kevin was impressed. In a moment of madness, as a student many years before, he had been encouraged to join in a caving expedition. He had been persuaded by an acquaintance, a drinking buddy, who was a keen member of the spelunking society at the University. Kevin could clearly remember abseiling into a darkened hole in the ground – or, more precisely, being lowered under the control of a more experienced caver, the darkness somehow being made more alarming by being fitfully illuminated by head-mounted lanterns. He had found himself terrified by the sense of

being out of control, suspended over a dark drop, and swore he would never do this again.

Jean-Marc was clearly made of sterner stuff, Kevin soon learned.

“Our brave trio,” the Frenchman said, “equipped with the very best pot-holing equipment money could buy, set out the very next morning to the little hut at the bottom of the vineyard. I abseiled down thirty metres or more to the floor, followed moments later by one of my companions. The third remained on the surface, in case of need.”

Jean-Marc smiled broadly at the memories.

“The first time in an unexplored cave is always a magical moment and this one was no exception. There was no sound, not even the dripping of water, other than the movement of ropes and our own breathing. There could have been anything down there, or nothing at all.”

“Of course we were equipped with powerful electric torches which we shone about us, the light glistening on the white chalk walls, and showed us the confines of the cavern. Many of these caves are joined up to conventional wine cellars these days,” Jean-Marc said, nodding to Kevin, “But as we looked around, it seemed as if the cavern had lain untouched for centuries, ever since the last quarrying workers left. There was no indication of any tunnels leading off, and the walls formed a perfect cone above us, with no sign of any collapse, and with just a dim light showing from the very centre where our ropes still hung.”

“The floor was dry, but stepped and irregular in places, some of which still showed the marks of the tools used to cut the blocks, with a pile of rubble directly under the entrance in the roof above. It looked as if all kinds of rubbish had fallen into the cave over the centuries, but the debris was by now just dirt around a pile of broken stones.”

Kevin was listening carefully, as he had learned to do when someone from the Other World - or at least associated with it - told a tale. There seemed to be a tradition of using the traditional spoken story for both information and entertainment, often at the same time.

“We carefully explored the edges of the cave,” Jean-Marc continued, “Where the stonecutters from ancient times had last been working. Perhaps we were hoping to find some valuable remnant, a roman coin or lost treasure. What we actually found was a surprise: a couple of buttons of an old-fashioned design, still with a few rotten threads attached. They looked like they had been torn off someone’s clothing while climbing in the cave itself. At first we thought even

the buttons might fetch a small price, but later we would discover that they were made from Bakelite, and actually could not have been more than twenty years old. Elsewhere in the cavern we found a few paper pages torn from a note book, all blank, nothing written on them that we could make out. In any case, the paper crumbled to dust as soon as we touched it.”

Jean-Marc paused, no doubt for dramatic effect.

“And then there was one other thing, a curious item of jewellery, crude and heavily-made in form, although there was a certain naïve and rustic charm about it.”

Kevin leaned forward, suddenly suspecting the true nature of the item Jean-Marc was describing.

“My companion did not recognise the device, not being from one of the Old Families, but to me it gave the appearance of an amulet of power from the Other World, although it was now of course completely inert.”

Jean-Luc sat back with the air of someone successfully completing a difficult task.

“Obviously, all this is suggestive that someone from your world” - he nodded politely in Bret’s direction - “had been exploring these very caverns, in the company of someone from this side of the crossing.”

Kevin was fascinated by this story, as was Tanji, and their interest must have shown on their faces. Jean-Marc beamed at the approbation.

“But who was it that had explored this cavern before?” Tanji asked, the curiosity burning in her eyes.

“We don’t know,” Bret interjected darkly, “But I personally have my suspicions.”

Bret had clearly heard the Frenchman’s tale before and he leaned forward to prompt Jean-Marc towards a different topic.

“But there has been a more recent incident, has there not?”

Jean-Marc nodded, then picked up his wineglass and once again sampled the very fine red wine in an unhurried fashion.

“Following the traditions of my family,” he resumed, returning the glass to the table, “I maintain a complex network of, shall we say, friends and neighbours who I can trust to tell me all about strangers, especially since I will frequently provide a modest reward to anyone who does report something I can use.”

Kevin could imagine how this could work. An affable man, like Jean-Marc, would have many acquaintances and contacts, men and no doubt women too who would be only too happy to pass on any

tittle-tattle they heard, as a personal favour to him. And if there happened to be a favour in return, or perhaps a little present - a bottle of brandy or a small sum in cash - well, that was all to the good.

“It was just five or six months ago that I received word from the Board of Control, and separately from your Mother” - he nodded once again to Bret - “About some unexplained activity. It was all very vague and uncertain, but somehow implying that there was a plot to attempt to re-open the old crossing. I redoubled my efforts and I started getting reports of some newcomers, a small number of individuals delving into forgotten corners of the landscape and making tentative enquiries about the purchase of land.”

“These strangers hung around for only a few days. My informants said that they claimed to be working for the TGV” - Jean-Marc pronounced the letters in the French fashion, referring to the firm that ran the country’s high-speed rail network - “but a trusted contact of mine in the company denied that anyone was carrying out surveying work in this area.”

Jean-Marc looking frustrated, unusually vexed.

“I myself was never able to catch up with these mysterious strangers,” Jean-Marc resumed, “Despite the most strenuous enquiries, I never discovered where they were staying, and they never appeared in the same place twice. I never even got a hint of a name, and descriptions of their appearance - and even their gender - were worryingly inconsistent.”

“Using my contacts in the TGV, and in other organisations more locally, I did my utmost to find out everything I could about excavations and public building works in this area. But there was nothing, no building activities of any kind officially registered or otherwise known to be underway, anywhere close to the site of the old crossing.”

The Frenchman paused for a moment, apparently deep in thought as if confirming that he had not omitted anything from his account.

“I have of course reported this through the usual channels,” he concluded.

“Indeed,” Bret agreed, “But I thought it was worthwhile for my companions to hear your report first-hand. Thank you for your time this evening.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” the Frenchman said, again sweeping up his wineglass and draining the last few drops, “It is time for me to be on my way. I have a few more calls to make this evening. So, let me wish a good night to you all.”

Jean-Marc stood, reached over the table to shake hands all round, then swept grandly out of the dining room.

Chapter Nine

After the Frenchman had left, Bret sat back in his seat with an air of frustration admixed with several degrees of relief. He looked from Kevin to Tanji and back again.

“So,” he began, “It’s more-or-less as I had understood. There’ve been numerous attempts to build tunnels in this area, secretly, to provide a private route. It’s not unusual; the Guardians have been unearthing tunnels in the vicinity of other crossings for centuries. But there’s no new evidence here or, rather, no evidence of new excavations that we’ve been able to dig up.”

Kevin winced at the series of puns, but the other man seemed to be unaware of the double meanings. Bret shook his head and picked up his wineglass.

“As I was saying earlier,” he continued, “I don’t think there’s any more investigations we can carry out here, and Jean-Marc’s information, while fascinating in itself, doesn’t really take us any further right now.”

Bret swirled the wine around in the bottom of his glass.

“So, we’ll return to England tomorrow. In the meantime, let’s enjoy the last of our wine, or perhaps a little port,” he concluded, glancing over Tanji’s shoulder, “I can see that the cheese trolley is approaching.”

In fact, there were three trolleys, each supporting an artful arrangement of French cheeses, most of which Kevin had never even heard of before, let alone tasted. Each trolley was manned by a separate waiter, and a more senior member of the waiting staff was on hand to guide them through the intricacies of choosing cheese to suit their palate.

Following Bret’s, and the sommelier’s advice, Kevin allowed himself a glass of an aged port. This was not something which he had sampled before, but he found - to his surprise and delight - that it really did complement the veined and pungent cheeses he had permitted himself to be recommended.

The rest of the evening dissolved in a pleasant blur of conversation and cognac, and even Bret’s evident frustration seemed to dissipate. Tanji giggled at his witty remarks and Bret’s stern countenance was softened by laughter and his own collection of amusing anecdotes over the cheese plates and later in the Orangery.

The next morning, Kevin awoke feeling refreshed and alert, much to his surprise, despite the generous nature of the dinner last night. He did not have the slightest hint of a hangover, nor did he feel particularly heavy or bloated. After a few moments reflection, he imagined that this was the effect of a meal that lasted several hours, and where the courses, although numerous, were individually rather tiny.

Tanji was still deeply asleep at his side when there was a light, even diffident, tap on the door. Belatedly remembering that he had ordered room service breakfast late the previous night, Kevin swung himself out of bed and slipped into the luxurious fluffy white dressing gown provided by the hotel. He tiptoed across the deep-pile carpet in his bare feet and opened the door.

Outside the door stood a uniformed waiter who nodded politely then wheeled in a trolley covered with a starched white tablecloth. The flunky reached under the cloth and, with a flourish, lifted up two flaps to convert the trolley into a circular table. He then adjusted the items on the table, augmenting them with fruit and bread and juice and milk and, Kevin was reassured to see, a large pot of coffee, all drawn from compartments - one hot, one cold - set into the ends of the trolley. The waiter drew up two chairs which had been standing against the bedroom walls, then added the final touches, carefully adjusting the single flower in its miniature glass vase and bowing his head before departing swiftly and silently.

Kevin, who had been watching the immensely polished performance with as much awe as he could summon at this time of the morning, was distracted by Tanji just as the door closed. She has apparently wakened while breakfast was being so deftly served and had probably been peeking out from under the bedclothes.

“So,” she purred, “Do you need to work up an appetite?”

Kevin grinned, needing no further encouragement. The two lovers spent the next fifteen minutes energetically entertaining each other in the already dishevelled bed in which they had spent the night.

The coffee and croissants were still tolerably warm by the time they emerged from under the bedcovers. They enjoyed a relaxed and leisurely breakfast, chatting and giggling their way through plates of prepared fruit and bowls of cereal, culminating in Tanji declaring the hot chocolate “not bad” - high praise indeed from a native of the Other World, a world where drinking chocolate was widely served at any time of the day.

Their breakfast was interrupted by a call on the house phone. It was Bret, reminding them that they were to be collected in thirty

minutes time. Kevin swallowed the last of his - by now, noticeably cool - coffee and dived into the bathroom for a shower, leaving Tanji still sitting in her dressing gown finishing the last of her hot chocolate and nibbling on a bread roll spread with a soft blue cheese and drenched with honey.

A few minutes later, Kevin emerged dripping and towelling off vigorously. He dropped his towel uncharacteristically untidily and started to get dressed quickly while Tanji, evidently determined to take things at a more leisurely pace, wandered into the bathroom humming happily to herself. While Tanji was showering, Kevin packed up his bag, which did not take very long at all since he had brought very little with him, and then attempted to read a French newspaper with little success. Shortly afterwards, Tanji emerged from the shower, slipped into her clothes and packed in even less time than Kevin.

The two of them arrived in the hotel foyer to find Bret absent, although he materialised on the stairs no more than thirty seconds afterwards. Bret handled the checkout, using some dark-coloured credit card with heavily-understated branding that Kevin did not recognise. Immediately afterwards, they were collected from the hotel entrance by the same car and driver that had transported them from the airport the previous day.

Bret had returned to his persistent withdrawn mood overnight, it seemed, and sat in the front seat immersed in his own thoughts for the entire journey. He stirred only when they arrived at the concrete maze that was Charles de Gaulle airport, through which they were deftly navigated by their driver, finally depositing them at the departure area. They moved swiftly through the VIP check-in counter - a process so smooth and efficient that Kevin was barely aware of the transfer. Very shortly afterwards, the three travellers were ensconced in a private section of the departure lounge with the morning's second cup of coffee in their hands.

"I've been pondering what to do next," Bret began, "I'm convinced that there's something going on. Yes, I admit we've not found any kind of evidence - recent evidence, at least. But I still have this uneasy feeling that there's more to this than meets the eye."

Bret had clearly been fretting over this for much of the night, Kevin imagined, and the man looked tired and drawn. Bret sipped his coffee and continued.

"So, I want to investigate some more, and I'd like you both to help. It'll mean another trip, this time in the Other World."

Kevin glanced at Tanji, who nodded vigorously and unhesitatingly in response.

“Of course,” he replied earnestly, “So where will we be going?”

Bret’s reply was drowned out by the announcement of their flight over the tannoy, although Tanji nodded in apparent understanding. The next few minutes dissolved in a flurry of locating their bags and finishing their drinks.

The flight back from Paris to Manchester was uneventful - the best thing, in Kevin’s view, which could be said about a flight. There was the usual hanging around for disembarking and passport control, followed by a short taxi ride to Kevin’s Manchester flat, ostensibly to collect his car. In fact, both he and Tanji took the opportunity to refresh the contents of their travel bags. Kevin grabbed a few clean shirts and underwear from the drawer in the bedroom while Tanji, who often stayed over, also found replacement garments in a different drawer.

Soon, Kevin was driving them along the familiar route to the island of Lyndesfarne with Tanji at his side. She chatted away gaily, trying to tempt him with suggestions for their next tourist trip. Her choice of destination apparently decided, she then dozed for the remainder of the trip. Bret sat in the back seat. From what Kevin could glimpse in the rear-view mirror, the other man spent some of the time talking quietly on his mobile phone and making notes in an old-fashioned leather-bound notebook, and the remainder staring out of the window looking pensive and withdrawn.

Finally, they arrived at the Lyndesfarne causeway. Kevin dumped the Volvo in the usual nearly empty and windswept car park. He and Tanji wrapped themselves in Lyndesfarne-style cloaks. Having experienced the variable and often inclement weather in the vicinity of the crossing, Kevin kept a couple of these garments in the boot of the car for himself and Tanji. Bret produced a similar item from his own pack and hefted it across his shoulders.

Today, the weather was reasonably bright, although a stiff breeze across the causeway whipped Bret’s and Tanji’s ponytails around their faces and made them all glad of the warm clothing. The three of them strode briskly across the mile or so of the causeway, less busy now that the New Bridge was carrying the bulk of the commercial traffic.

They stopped for a few moments close to the apex of the Old Bridge, at the centre of the causeway and in the exact spot where the Two Worlds met. Both Bret and Kevin admired the asymmetrical but impressive shape of the New Bridge with a degree of pride as befitted

its principal designers. The two tall towers caught an occasional glint of sunlight from between the clouds, casting into sharp relief the web of steel cables which supported the roadbed on one side, and the triangular magical support sails which performed a similar function on the other. Even here, Bret was silent, withdrawn, and Kevin did not wish to interrupt the other man's musings with what would probably be regarded as naïve or irritating or unanswerable questions.

After a minute or two they resumed their walk, reaching the end of the causeway without further delay, nodded to the Guardians deployed inconspicuously but efficiently around the crossing, then entered the low stone-built building that nestled in the sand-dunes and sea-grass only a few tens of yards from the end of the causeway.

Bret studied the signboard and then took advice in a low voice from Tanji, whose knowledge of the operation of the portal network seemed to be greater even than his own - no doubt part of the Guild of Directions training, Kevin considered. The two of them rapidly decided on a route and Kevin was guided to the stone arch that dominated the far end of the brightly-lit interior. Together, they approached the smooth grey surface which filled the arch, apparently solid and unyielding. They stepped though, Kevin failing to suppress a blink, and emerged immediately into a large airy space filled with bustling people and their luggage traversing to and fro between rows of identical stone archways.

In the few years since he had first been introduced to Lyndesfarne, Kevin had taken an understandably keen interest in the operation of the portal network, as a system. This was partially because he discovered he could comprehend more of the complex schedules and timetables which were used, as opposed to the magical point-to-point transport itself, whose functioning he found utterly opaque.

The portals themselves seamlessly linked two distant places in this world - the smaller version of the vast connection between the Two Worlds known as crossings. But the portals did not link two places *all the time*. This, Kevin now realised, would have been hopelessly cumbersome and inefficient. Rather, each portal was connected five, six or more different remote places, the connections changing according to a regular schedule every ten minutes or so. This meant that, to travel between two arbitrary places, it was necessary to take a series of portal transits, perhaps having to wait as much as an hour before the portal was finally connected to the next point on your itinerary.

The transits between portals were undertaken within termini, which housed many portals within the same building and that Kevin always found strikingly analogous to a Swiss railway station, except that the informational signs and the occasional public announcement were even more unintelligible. A considerable degree of skill was required to select the most efficient route for a particular journey, one which minimised the time spent hanging around, and which would depend both on the destination one desired as well as the time at which one set off.

The party emerged from the final portal after an uneventful and unrushed thirty-minute transit. Kevin was feeling, as he often did, slightly disoriented, more from the effects of a sudden arrival rather than anything to do with the transit itself which was as remarkably unremarkable as anything operated by magic could be. Tanji stretched up and kissed him on the cheek, then took his arm companionably and guided him gently towards the open doorway of the portal building.

All portals, even those “Level Five” devices at the edge of the intricately-connected network, were enclosed in some kind of structure. Most were in nearly identical building stoutly constructed of either carefully-jointed masonry - for the older edifices - or the magical building material Kevin knew as “construction stone”. Apparently, this was nothing to do with the operation of the portal itself, but more as a convenience to travellers who might have just arrived from a very different climate or season and therefore needed time to adjust their clothing and/or attitude. Privately, he also suspected there was another reason, since these buildings were always very strongly constructed, but he was unsure whether this was to do with the need for military defence or as protection against the depredations of the larger species of dragons.

Kevin stepped past the solid timbers of the portal building doors - noticing the faint orange sparkle within the wood that indicated the presence of magical reinforcements - and walked blinking into the sunshine outside. Then the realisation struck him: he recognised exactly where they were.

Chapter Ten

Kevin had once again allowed himself to indulge in a short trip both recommended and guided by Tanji. He thoroughly enjoyed these explorations of the Other World, appreciating the way she was perfectly content to organise everything down to the smallest detail, so that all he to do was tag along and be amused. The absence of any kind of pressure meant that he was able to relax and feel content with life in general and Tanji's very personal attentions in particular.

As on many previous trips, Kevin found himself completely unable to interpret the signboards that marked out the next destinations for each of the portals and so felt rather helpless as Tanji worked out a suitable route. Apparently making her mind up, she took his hand to walk quickly from the portal through which they had just arrived to another one fifty yards or so down the terminus corridor.

There was also a surprisingly lengthy and faintly tedious wait for around twenty minutes in one of the terminals: not because of any technical failure, Tanji assured him, but just one of those peculiarities of portal travel is that even the most efficient route would sometimes encompass an irritating delay. Even so, the entire trip had taken rather less than two hours. This was pretty impressive, Kevin acknowledged, especially since Tanji assured him that they were literally on the other side of the world, in the southern hemisphere at a latitude rather closer to the equator than the one they had left in Northern England.

Kevin was struck by the change in weather as they stepped through the portal building exit; having left from Lyndesfarne in the damp chill of early spring, they had arrived in the sultry warmth and bright sunshine of autumn.

"Do you speak the language here?" Kevin asked, suddenly worried that she would be out of her depth.

She laughed lightly, squeezing his hand.

"Well, yes, of course," she replied reassuringly, "But they have a different accent, so it is sometime a little difficult to understand."

Kevin was later to learn that there were relatively few different languages in the world of Lyndesfarne, one of the effects, he imagined, of instantaneous transport being available to everybody over thousands of years. In general, practically everybody spoke the

common tongue - the language Tanji habitually used - although she told him that many people spoke another language at home - an old language, a “kitchen language” mostly kept alive as part of a domestic tradition.

Kevin came to understand that the role of interpreter was itself a relatively unusual one in Tanji’s world, although of course an essential skill for a member of the Guild of Directions and one who travelled regularly to the Other World, the strange and even dangerous world that he called home.

Their local guide on this trip was a burly looking man, bearded and barrel-chested, and with hands like plates of meat. Despite this, his face was marked by the elfin features that seemed characteristic of people all over the world of Lyndesfarne, features which at one time Kevin could only have imagined being associated with tall, fair and willowy individuals. By contrast, their guide was stocky, dark-haired and ruddy-faced, as if he had spent a great deal of time working in the sun. He did not appear to speak any English - few people in this world did, of course, unless they were somehow connected with the management and operation of the crossing.

Tanji introduced herself in the conventional way, and prompted Kevin to do the same. She turned and faced the bearded man, who was watching her and Kevin with a carefully neutral expression on his face, held up her right hand and spoke her name aloud. In response, the other man spoke his name, at least Kevin assumed. He was by now familiar with this custom but, even so, he did not catch the rapid stream of syllables that the guide uttered, distracted as he was by a desire to echo the formality correctly and suppress his near instinctive attempt to shake hands

“What’s his name?” Kevin hissed to Tanji in an embarrassed fashion, bending forward slightly to whisper in her ear.

“Call him Horth”, she answered, pecking him on the cheek either for emphasis or perhaps just to cover up their whispering.

Tanji then conducted several rapid-fire exchanges with Horth which concluded in a grunted expression from the guide that Kevin took to mean “well, come on then”. Tanji threaded her arm through the crook in Kevin’s elbow and urged him forward.

The stocky man directed them to a waiting transport, a kind familiar to Kevin from previous trips. The vehicle resembled nothing so much as a pair of overstuffed sofas covered in bottle green leather, set one behind the other and facing in the same direction. The seats were joined by some articulated mechanism, under a thin floor, that Kevin had never quite understood, but which allowed the front and

rear seats to twist and turn independently when cornering or traversing rough ground.

The two travellers clambered aboard, seated themselves comfortably in the back seats. Their guide stepped into the driver's seat, then said something Kevin did not understand.

"Two hours," Tanji translated, using the sing-song intonation she adopted when she was interpreting the words of others, then added in her own voice, "Better make ourselves comfortable, then."

"Is there no closer portal?" Kevin wondered aloud.

"I don't know," she replied, "Let me ask."

The answer, it seemed, was no. According to Tanji's translation of Horth's remarks, this area was some kind of a reserve for wildlife, although she was unspecific about exactly what kind. After a deft series of gestures from Horth, their vehicle moved placidly away from the small village which contained the portal building at a speed which Kevin judged to be no more than ten or twelve miles per hour. He had already learned that the authorities in this world discouraged vehicles which could travel much faster than a horse, although it was unclear to Kevin if the reason for this was public safety on the roads or public control of individual mobility.

Kevin sat back and took in the view. They were progressing sedately along a dusty road whose surface had the smooth hard finish of almost all roads that he had come across in this world. The road ran across a cultivated plain, a patchwork of well-managed farmland with fields separated by laid and trimmed hedges. It looked like there had been no rain for weeks, and the lush greenness in the fields contrasted with the dusty road, and clearly indicated the presence of irrigation devices of some sort.

Ahead of them was a range of low hills, their boundary marked by a steep escarpment striding arrow-straight across the landscape and disappearing into the haze on either side. Over the course of the next twenty minutes, the steep incline grew steadily closer and the tilled fields gave way to patches of woodland. Their way followed a zigzag route up the face of the escarpment, with long steady slopes punctuated with hairpin bends. The road itself was interspersed with occasional level spots which, in Kevin's own world, would once have been places where the carters would stop to rest their horses and, he suspected, would at one time have performed the same purpose here. By contrast, their present vehicle neither slowed nor hesitated for either bends or the steep sections, but ploughed on relentlessly at the same speed as before.

Very different scenery greeted them once they crested the edge of the scarp. It was a broad sweep of dusty grassland with no visible sign of cultivation, and very few trees; the few that were about looked stunted and windswept, huddled in the occasional depression as if hiding from intruders. The appearance of the countryside struck Kevin as a cross between the Derbyshire Dales and the South Downs.

The open grasslands appeared to be used for grazing - for sheep, Kevin imagined - and were broken by occasional dry-stone walls, themselves a grey-brown colour that merged imperceptibly into the rest of the landscape. It would be difficult to remain undetected in this area, he thought, unless you were specifically attempting to do so. Any feature not a dusty grey-green would stand out like a sore thumb.

In spite of the sunshine and dryness, it felt cool in the wind that blew over the open vehicle, and Kevin was glad of the warm hooded cloak he had brought with him. It was a Lyndesfarne style he found himself adopting with increasing regularity; indeed, it was one of several little things - things he would once have found totally alien - which he now enjoyed, even found welcomingly familiar.

After a little questioning, it became clear to Kevin that this was a preservation, not of something natural - endangered wildlife or rare plants - but of an ancient way of life. It was a working museum, although a little larger than his normal expectation of a museum; more a working farm or series of farms, preserved as if at some time in the previous century, or perhaps the one before that.

They headed along the road - now more a track, Kevin thought, its previously smooth surface now replaced by packed gravel interspersed with weeds whose principal function appeared to be to prevent the stones from washing away in occasional rainstorms. As they rounded one of the low hills, Horth turned to them and said something that Kevin did not understand, then pointed ahead. The dusty green pasture was dotted with white spots, clearly animals of some kind, although they did not look like sheep or goats or even deer, although they seemed to share some of the characteristics of each.

Horth stopped their vehicle at the closest point on the road, allowing the passengers to get a better look. Whatever the animals were, they looked unusual to Kevin. They had a pair of horns mounted close together, sticking straight out from their foreheads rather than being curved back towards their necks like those of the sheep and goats with which Kevin was reasonably familiar. They had smooth white pelts, and were bigger than Kevin would have

expected - almost the size of a small pony. Some of the animals had only one horn, making them look even more strange and, indeed, strangely familiar to Kevin.

“What are these animals?” he asked Tanji.

“They’re a kind of goat,” she answered immediately.

Kevin looked again.

“They don’t look like any kind of goat I’ve seen before,” he remarked.

Tanji giggled.

“They *are* different, aren’t they?” she replied with a laugh in her voice, “I thought you’d be interested.”

Kevin looked cautiously at the dangerous looking horns on the nearest of the creatures, now alternately cropping the short grass and looking around warily for other males to challenge, should they dare to encroach on his territory.

“So what have they got on their heads?” he asked.

“The males grow those long straight horns every year, to challenge other males for the right to impregnate the females,” she replied, sounding as if she had just consulted a guidebook, “They often fight - as you can see, some of them lose one of their horns as the result of losing a challenge.”

Tanji grinned widely again, then added, “You might know them as Unicorns.”

Kevin laughed. Of course, another mythical, magical beast, found to be a perfectly ordinary animal native to the World of Lyndesfarne.

“So, do you need to be a virgin to catch a Unicorn, then?”

It was Tanji’s turn to laugh aloud.

“They can sometimes be difficult to round up, especially in the mating season, and they always tend to shy away if approached too closely. The herding is traditionally done by young women, not necessarily virgins,” she added, grinning cheekily, “That’s not actually an essential part of the specification.”

Kevin and Tanji spent much of the day touring the area, spotting other groups of the animals, sometimes being guided by the patient movement of non-necessarily-virginal women in long skirts, cloaks and broad hats to protect them from the elements.

Towards the end of the day, on their way back towards the portal building from which they had emerged, their guide took a detour to what was apparently once a lookout beacon, a high point on the edge of the escarpment they had climbed earlier. Kevin and Tanji emerged from the vehicle to have a good look, and to stretch their legs. On one side, over the face of the escarpment, they overlooked a

patchwork of fields separated with hedges and the occasional wooden copse; on the other side, all that was visible was the undulating dusty grazing lands. All they could see, standing out against the uniform colouration of the upper plain, was the red leather - or some similar material - of another Lyndesfarne world transport and, standing inside it, a figure who seemed to glow blue in the sunlight.

As the other vehicle drew closer and stopped, Kevin was astonished to find that he recognised the individual who stood within. It was Tweedledum - proper name, Duncan Tweedy - another native of Kevin's own world who had been the lead representative of the firm of contractors employed to build the New Bridge. Tweedledum was wearing a Hawaiian shirt in a particularly virulent shade of blue, dotted with the representation of palm trees in a lighter shade. The shirt was set off by long baggy shorts, the official uniform of the British Tourist overseas, worn just below the knee, socks (black, inevitably) which would not have looked out of place with a three-piece business suit and polished leather shoes, and thick-soled sandals firmly affixed to his feet with a multitude of straps and buckles.

Kevin had always found Tweedledum to be a boorish buffoon, impervious to criticism or even advice, and one who liked to surround himself with hangers-on, bag-carriers and yes-men, presumably in order to boost his own self-esteem. Despite his overbearing personal presence, Tweedledum had struck Kevin as particularly ineffective in practice, and had felt that the New Bridge was completed nearly on schedule in spite of Tweedledum's management style, rather than because of it.

The other man had clearly recognised Kevin immediately, and strode forward with his hand held out while uttering a booming greeting. Kevin responded automatically, subjecting himself to a bone-crushing handshake. It was a gesture which would have been familiar enough in an office building in Manchester, but which here seemed curiously foreign, even alien to him here and now.

"Kevin, old boy," Tweedledum thundered, "What brings you over here?"

"Just being a tourist," Kevin replied, indicating his cloak and staff and rucksack, items which would - he appreciated this only later - made him look much more like a resident of this world.

"Tourist?" the other man interjected, "Looks like you've gone native to me."

Kevin let that one slide without comment. Tweedledum glanced over at Tanji, who was conversing in a low voice with Horth on the

other side of their vehicle. She seemed to Kevin to be immersed in her own conversation, and not at all deliberately ignoring the other man. Tweedledum smirked and nodded to Kevin, running a finger over the side of his nose before glancing again at Tanji. Kevin, who had never before considered there was anything in the least underhand or furtive about his relationship with Tanji, felt obscurely offended by the other man's responses.

Fortunately, Kevin did not have to wait long to extricate himself from this unexpected and unwelcome company. He exchanged a few inconsequential pleasantries, then answered a fairly direct question about what work he was currently undertaking. Tweedledum seemed to relax when it became clear that Kevin's current professional commitments had little or nothing to do with the world of Lyndesfarne, and seemed happy enough to excuse Kevin after the polite minimum of time.

As Kevin set off with Tanji in their own vehicle, he found himself wondering about Tweedledum's presence. He had not realised the other man was this familiar with this World; it certainly not something he had even hinted at during the construction of the New Bridge. So what else, Kevin wondered, had been concealed while the bridge was being constructed?

Chapter Eleven

“We’ve been here before,” Kevin exclaimed to Tanji, stopping dead in his tracks and looking around.

“Of course,” she confirmed gently, taking him by the arm again, “I thought you realised that.”

Kevin still struggled with many aspects of the language of Lyndesfarne, especially when the names of places and people were uttered quickly. He belatedly realised that he recognised the name of this place; it was the area where he and Tanji had toured all those months ago. Mentally, he had tagged it Unicorn Fields.

Bret, who had wandered on ahead, suddenly stopped and then called out and waved to a cloaked figure who stood to one side of the road looking out towards the escarpment. The figure turned and approached, pulling the hood of his cloak from his head. Kevin could see it was Eosin, who he knew to be Bret’s husband. He had never seen the two of them together when Bret was adopting his masculine appearance. Husband and wife hugged each warmly, then kissed. Kevin noticed that no-one seemed to be in the least bit concerned about two apparent males embracing in this fashion.

Disengaging from their welcome, Eosin and Bret spoke animatedly for a minute or so, then turned to the others. Tanji had also recognised Bret’s husband, and held up her hand in greeting, a warm smile on her face. Kevin followed suit, smiling equally widely.

Kevin knew that Eosin’s command of English was shaky, although much better, even now, than his own grasp of the language of Lyndesfarne. He took care to ensure that he spoke slowly and clearly for the other man’s benefit, even though it made him feel like the stereotypical arrogant monolingual English tourist in a foreign land.

“Hello, Eosin,” he said carefully, “Nice to see you again.”

The man raised his hand in response, then said something idiomatically friendly to Tanji that meant, in Kevin’s limited understanding, something like “peaceful welcome”.

“What are you doing here?” Kevin asked.

Bret interjected with an answer.

“I asked Eosin to join us because I wanted the help of someone familiar with the, umm, magic used around crossings.”

Kevin nodded in understanding. He already knew that Eosin was a magic worker whose principal role was to continually enhance the protections in the barrier around the Lyndesfarne crossing. He understood that this was a demanding role, given that new artefacts and technologies were being invented in both worlds all the time, and it was something of an arms race to keep ahead of the innovators in each.

“But I thought Eosin spent a lot of time at home with your children?” Tanji said softly, apparently wondering aloud.

“The children are fine,” Eosin said, looking confused and turning to Bret for help.

“The kids are with my parents,” Bret interjected, “I needed Eosin here. I want someone I can trust on this. And there are not many people, even in Lyndesfarne, who are really aware of your world - for most people, it’s all just myths and legends.”

Bret hesitated for a second, then leant forward conspiratorially.

“Besides,” he added in a low voice that only Kevin and Tanji could hear, “Eosin has re-discovered a way of detecting the magic used to create a crossing. He’s been working on it at home, and he thinks he’s got it all, err, documented.”

“That should help a lot,” Kevin commented.

Bret looked worried.

“Frankly, I hope it turns up nothing at all,” he replied, “But I have a sneaking suspicion that we’ll find something.”

Bret turned and looked about, with the air of someone resolved to a course of action.

“Well, let’s get on with it,” he said.

The party set off, walking along the main road that Kevin and Tanji had taken on their previous visit. Kevin wondered why Bret, who was normally incredibly well-organised, had not ordered some kind of transport for them. The reason soon became apparent. After only a few hundred yards, Bret guided them off the road along a rough and overgrown track, which wended its way between high hedgerows. Almost any vehicle - magical or otherwise - larger than a bike would have had difficulty navigating the dense foliage.

Kevin realised the trail might once have been wider and more widely travelled. It seemed to him that the hedges had been trimmed back on the other sides, probably by farmers keen to avoid too much encroachment of their fields, but allowed to grow more or less unchecked over the track. Similarly, the trees that lined many parts of the way seemed to grow together forming an arch. It was quiet, and cool, and surprisingly dark under the shade of the trees; travellers

on this route, Kevin imagined, might have been able to pass practically unnoticed through the countryside.

After perhaps an hour's walk, the way opened out into a clearing, almost circular in shape, filled with grass that looked surprisingly well-trimmed - although conceivably by animals, Kevin thought - and the space was lined by trees and undergrowth. Looking up, he could see the face of the escarpment looming over them and he thought he could identify the high point, the beacon, where he and Tanji had stopped to admire the view.

The glade seemed to exude an almost palpable sense of quiet and peacefulness, and somehow Kevin felt safe, secure and relaxed, in sharp contrast to his confusion and nervous tension of only a few moments before. Enough of a contrast, in fact, to draw attention to the feeling.

"What is it about this place," he asked Tanji quietly, "That makes me feel so relaxed?"

Tanji looked at him sharply for a moment, then frowned in concentration.

"I'm not sure," she replied eventually, "I didn't think there were any of these places left."

"What places?" Kevin demanded.

"It's an old magic," she replied, "One which is not permitted any more. A magic which alters the emotional state of mind of anyone who encounters it. One which gives a sense of well-being and security."

She paused, then added.

"I'm told that, in the olden days, this magic was used close to a crossing to trap unwary travellers, to make them unable to conceal their true purpose."

Kevin had noticed in the past that there was something serene and peaceful about the Lyndesfarne crossing, something that seemed able to disengage parts of the higher brain function, to reduce feelings of stress and worry. Were there some vestiges of a similar magic still to be found thereabouts, he wondered. He held Tanji close for a moment, revelling in the purely animal feelings of warmth and security. Then he came around, somehow waking up suddenly, and realised Bret and Eosin had moved ahead without them.

He and Tanji hurried to catch up. The rest of the party had come to a halt at some worn and mossy rocks more or less in the centre of the clearing.

"Let's stop here and rest for a while," Bret said, looking around.

Kevin was relieved to hear this suggestion. It seemed that they had been walking slightly uphill more or less continuously since they left the portal building, and he was feeling just a little tired. Eosin, who had carried a larger than usual pack on his back all the way up the hill, produced a picnic lunch which Kevin, for one, found extremely welcome. Once again, he marvelled at the preparation of the food and drink, especially the “magic Clingfilm”, the indestructible wrapping made, he suspected, entirely from magic which resisted any attempt to tear but which disappeared entirely and immediately when the correct gesture was used.

While he was eating, Kevin sat on one of the mossy boulders next to Tanji, re-assured by the pressure of her presence, her weight against his thigh. Bret and Eosin seemed to be engaged in a private conversation on the next rock, and Tanji seemed content to enjoy both sustenance and scenery in companionable silence. Kevin looked around idly as he munched. There seemed to be some movement at the top of the escarpment, although he could not make out a great deal of detail.

“What’s that up there?” he asked Tanji.

“Hmm, what’s what?” she answered vaguely.

“Up there,” Kevin said, pointing.

“I can’t see anything.”

In truth, Kevin could not see anything either, now, although he would have sworn that there were figures there a moment ago. Perhaps he had imagined it, or maybe it was just some tourists admiring the view, much as he had done all those months ago.

“It’s nothing, then,” he said.

They resumed their hike and it did not seem so long before they reached the foot of the escarpment. The trail terminated in an open area punctuated with scrubby trees and thorny bushes, an area too level to be entirely natural. The industrial archaeologist in Kevin’s training kicked in, making it possible for him to spot a few telltale signs of where buildings of wood and masonry might once have stood in this glade. In one place, there was a mossy rock with suspiciously rectangular edges and which even now was dripping with water from a spring, and was probably once a horse trough. There, a pile of stones half-buried in brambles and creepers, probably represented the fireplace of some large building, perhaps an inn or a barracks.

Neither Bret nor Eosin displayed any interest in the relics of past human occupation, and strode on towards the face of the escarpment at the far side of the clearing. Kevin and Tanji hurried after them,

doglegging around a clump of undergrowth. On the other side, it seemed that the cliff had collapsed long ago, but left a fissure framed by the bushes which was, Kevin was soon to realise, just wide enough to allow them entrance.

Large caves did not form naturally in chalk, Kevin knew - the rock was too soft and weak for natural erosion to stand a chance against the force of gravity - and he realised that, for all its tumbledown appearance, the entrance in front of them was almost certainly man-made.

Bret clearly knew exactly where he was going and the others tagged along after him, Tanji almost scampering to keep up with his rapid and purposeful stride.

“What is this place?” Kevin hissed to Tanji as they hurried forward.

“I’m not sure,” she replied breathlessly, “But I suspect it was once the other end of the crossing from the tunnels of Epernay.”

The actual entrance had at one time been, Kevin suspected rather larger but collapses and weathering had narrowed it over the years. Loose rocks made the ground very uneven and treacherous. They picked their way carefully over the rubble and stepped inside.

Inside, the cave opened out into a single tunnel. Its ceiling was of irregular height, but always well clear of even Bret’s head, and the floor was astonishingly flat and smooth enough to have facilitated the easy movement of both men and wheeled vehicles.

As Kevin stood blinking in the entrance, Bret and Eosin each produced a globe from inside their rucksacks. With a gesture from each man, the globes lit up, their overlapping pools of light clearly illuminating the passageway ahead. Tanji too produced a similar device, also lighting it with a gesture. She took his hand in her own free hand, in a fashion which felt was slightly childlike, if extremely reassuring under the circumstances.

Bret made a second gesture, one which suggested the releasing of a small bird held in the hand. His globe floated upwards and then moved over his head, moving with him as he stepped forward. Eosin and Tanji chose to keep hold of their magic lanterns, all of which were glowing in a way not so dissimilar to the fateful paperweight that Kevin had purchased just after he had first met Tanji.

The cave formed a series of straight and flat sections joined by sharp corners. There were occasional branches and side tunnels here and there, but these seemed to be short dead-ends or perhaps even rooms, although it was unclear what they might have been used for. The walls were damp-looking milky chalk streaked with darker

markings. There were places where reinforcements had been applied using both mundane building materials - although not as extensively as the brickwork in the Champagne *Caves* they had visited - and, very occasionally, the glittering orange sparkle of magical sprites were faintly visible within the walls and overhead.

After the third turning, the bright daylight from the cave's entrance was barely detectible to Kevin when he looked behind. Other than the light that came from the globes the others had produced, the tunnel and its offshoots were dark and quiet, somehow enigmatically inscrutable about the purpose and history.

"Here we are," Bret said suddenly, after they had been walking for some minutes.

He gestured again, and the globular lamp darted forward. In the cool light, Kevin could make out a blockage in the tunnel ahead. It appeared to fill the passageway in front of them and had the same appearance as the wall in France, with both red bricks and off-white chalk apparently sheared apart as if by a giant cheese wire.

There were dark openings - doorways, Kevin imagined - on either side of the blocked archway. Bret peered into each of these with expressing a great deal of interest, then returned his attention to the wall in front of them. He turned to Eosin and nodded. Unhesitatingly, Eosin walked up to the closure and started making a complex series of gestures.

"What's he doing?" Kevin whispered to Tanji.

"I'm not sure," she replied, looking intently at the movements being made by the other man, "It's too complex for me to follow."

After a minute or so, Eosin turned to Bret and said something in the language of Lyndesfarne.

"Crossing magic," Tanji translated for Kevin's benefit, "There's been some activity recently, it seems."

Kevin was fascinated. He took the glowing globe from Tanji's hand and moved forward to more closely inspect the closed archway in front of them. He ran his hand over its smooth, almost polished surface. It was cool to the touch and he found it nearly impossible to see or feel any kind of discontinuity where the bricks stopped and the chalk started.

As he did so, there was a movement behind them, a momentary variation in the dim daylight reflected along the walls. The four of them turned as one, each startled by the unexpected interruption. Eosin called out something in the Lyndesfarne language that Kevin did not immediately grasp - somewhere between a greeting and an alert, he thought.

There was a sound of footsteps emerging from the darkness.

Chapter Twelve

The crowd roared. The heavy ball looped around and under the goalkeeper, who dived desperately for it with arms outstretched. He missed and the ball crashed into the back of the netting. The observer behind the net raised his flag and the whistle blew.

Kevin had seldom seen huge crowds in the world of Lyndesfarne but this one was large enough to make him slightly nervous. It had something of the atmosphere of a football match in his own world, the same sense of competitive purpose at one remove, the same feeling of supporting us and deriding them. It all seemed fairly good-natured, nevertheless, and supporters were sporting the colours of the rival teams and waving flags and banners with considerable enthusiasm.

Tanji tried to explain the rules of the game, which seemed to Kevin to be some cross between netball and ice hockey, with the additional feature that the game was all played in mid-air. There were two teams of six players, each equipped with the flying devices Kevin thought of as Faerie Wings. A thin pack was attached to each player's back with strong straps, from whence emerged insubstantial wings flickering with the orange and green sprites of active magic.

Kevin could not tell how motion was controlled, but the players certainly seemed adept at it, flitting to and fro with astonishing rapidity. The team members darted about chasing the ball, seeming able to accelerate and stop almost instantaneously, as well as hover or even fly backwards. Kevin knew that some bugs, like Dragonflies, could perform these kinds of manoeuvres and could easily see how, in times past, someone from his world observing such a scene would easily be bemused into thinking that Faeries could indeed fly like insects.

The noisy supporters were arrayed in banked stands surrounding a large circle of dry sand. Mounted at opposite sides were two circular goals, known as "Dragon's mouths" according to Tanji's translation, each about ten feet across and held on poles around thirty feet from the ground. Each had a net of flexible wire or rope - Kevin was not sure which - that deformed in the breeze or when the ball hit it, but did not sag like football netting would have done.

The ball itself was quite solid and heavy, according to Tanji, and a lot of force was required to get it to speed up or change direction. It

was magically enhanced so that it did not quite float; it would eventually fall to the ground but much more slowly than an object of its size and weight would normally do. In play, competitors were not allowed to catch or hold the ball in any way, but were required to strike it with palm or fist, in the same style as volleyball. The surface of the ball was padded and dimpled, giving it a quilted effect. This meant that it would curve dramatically because of air resistance if a degree of spin was imparted, much like the seam of a cricket ball allows movement in the air to confuse the opposing batsman.

The defeated goalkeeper had retrieved the ball from the net and tossed it casually to a team-mate positioned near the centre of the circular pitch. The players lined up on each side, or at least hung in formations which were no doubt the result of long and careful analysis in the changing rooms and endless pre-match practice. The whistle blew again and the leader of the team who had just ceded a goal pounded the ball in the direction of his team-mate who had darted forward as soon as play had resumed. An opposing player moved swiftly to intercept the pass, missing by inches on this occasion. All of the players made great displays of skill and athleticism and sportsmanship, passing the ball from one team member to another who was closer to the opposing goal while pressed by skilful interceptions and tackles from the other team.

The referee's whistle sounded and play stopped again. There had been a minor mid-air collision. Tanji had earlier explained that any kind of body contact was a foul - Kevin imagined this was to prevent any behaviour which was conceivably dangerous. To assist in the refereeing, the players' clothing would light up magically in the event of any contact. As punishment for such a foul, both team members were taken off for a period which depended on the force of the impact. Tanji explained that this prevented any argument as to who was at fault and meant that everyone strived to avoid collisions at all times.

The game itself was policed entirely from the sidelines. The official referee sat in an enclosed box and was assisted by a team of observers or linesmen deployed around the circumference and behind each of the goals. The referee's task was made easier by several magical aids. As well as the illuminated telltales for body contact, the ball was enhanced to hoot and flash if it was held for more than a fraction of a second when in play, but somehow this reaction was suppressed after the referee's whistle had been blown.

A dome of transparent and invisible magic covered the entire pitch, which prevented the ball from leaving the field of play. A

clearance from the goal mouth would leave the ball in play, but it would rebound unpredictably from the enclosing magic, apparently to discourage deliberate attempts to bounce the ball when making a pass.

This afternoon's sporting event had been something of a surprise. Tanji had encouraged Kevin to accompany her to this particular match. He had acceded immediately, always keen to learn more about the Other World. She had revealed herself to be a fan of one team whose colours were pale blue and white - Tanji had trouble translating the team's name, finally plumping for "Team Blue Dragon" - while the opposing team in orange and black were apparently named something like "The Stinging Wasps." It was only after the game had been underway for half an hour, and Kevin had wondered aloud about the number and enthusiasm of the fans that Tanji told him that this was the final match of the season, the winners to become the year's champions.

Kevin found himself entering into the spirit of the occasion and cheering unrestrainedly for his team - having adopted Tanji's preference as his own, of course. Their team had just equalised with, if Kevin understood the time and score display correctly, just a few minutes of playing time left. The displays, which seemed to Kevin to be larger versions of the magical blackboards that he and Bret had used when they had been working on the design of the New Bridge, showed the score and the time left to place, as well as complex diagrams with arrows and movements which were supposed to clarify the play on the field - if this was the right word.

Despite Tanji's explanations, many of the activities remained opaque to Kevin. Even so, he had enjoyed it immensely. The atmosphere was electric, with every feint and move cheered or jeered from the terraces and every shot at goal was accompanied by a vast roar. Their team won in the end, with a last-minute goal where the ball curved and twisted so impressively unpredictably that no-one - neither players nor fans - could be sure it would enter the Dragon's Mouth. Kevin shouted and applauded along with the rest of the crowd in their part of the stadium, hugging Tanji who waved her pennant energetically and cheered as loudly as he did.

After the match, they made their way out of the stadium, moving slowly in a crush of people, and with Kevin holding Tanji's hand tightly, not wanting to get separated.

"What is this game called?" he asked, between being jostled by over-enthusiastic fans.

Tanji hesitated, as she often did when an idiomatic interpretation did not come to mind.

“I’m not sure how to translate it properly,” she said finally, “But it literally means ‘Flying Ball’.”

Chapter Thirteen

The darkness seemed to envelop everything and Kevin found it completely impossible to make out any single thing clearly. With slow footsteps, a figure emerged from the gloom into the pool of light formed by the globes, followed by another, and another. Each figure was wrapped in the dark capes that were ubiquitous in this world and with their hoods pulled over their faces in a successful attempt to disguise their identity.

It was clear that the figures were keeping their distance from each of the others, spacing themselves carefully to prevent any attempt to escape. Each appeared to be carrying some kind of knobbed stick with a menace that made it clear that it was some kind of weapon, even if Kevin had not seen these devices before.

The newcomers stood passively for a long moment, as if awaiting instructions. Kevin was frozen, startled into motionless, and both Eosin and Bret seemed entirely unsure what to do. Kevin was just coming to the conclusion that the silent strangers must be either Guardians or some kind of local police when they were joined by a new figure, one whose girth and gait seemed curiously familiar to him. The latest figure was also wrapped in a cloak and was carefully hooded.

“Are they Guardians?” Kevin hissed to Bret.

“No,” he replied, speaking quietly out of the side of his mouth, “I don’t know who they are. Best to play along for the time being.”

One of the figures barked a command that Kevin failed to understand. It was then repeated in English.

“You three stay where you are,”

Both Bret and Eosin held up both hands in front of themselves, palms facing the newcomers in what was evidently a gesture of submission. Kevin looked around. Tanji, who had been standing right next to him just before the strangers had arrived, had completely disappeared. He swung his head wildly to and fro, but there was no sign of her whereabouts. Finally, he caught Bret’s eye, who was standing stoically with his hands out. He gave no obvious reaction although he might have fractionally raised an eyebrow in response to Kevin’s evident alarm. He realised that there must be something afoot here, and managed to get his panic under control. The police, or whoever they were, did not seem to react; perhaps, he considered

as his heart rate began to settle down, they had taken his obvious fear as a reaction to their arrival.

One of the mystery figures produced a dark rod from under his robe. It was about nine inches long and perhaps half an inch in diameter. The figure grabbed Bret's unresisting arm and jabbed one end of the shaft to the inside of his wrist. The rod flared with the orange sparkles which indicated powerful active magic. The other end of the bar was pressed to Bret's other wrist, producing a similar flare.

Another figure took the glowing lamp from Kevin's hand and applied a similar rod to his wrists. There was no pain, no sensation more than a light tap, but he was suddenly and securely shackled. The bar allowed for a certain degree of movement of hands and arms but he found that he could not separate his wrists from the restraint. They were, he realized belatedly, some kind of magical handcuffs.

Now shackled, the three men were led back along the tunnel, still trailed by Bret's floating globe, until they emerged blinking into the daylight. With a few shoves - not particularly hard - and vigorous finger-pointing, they were directed back down the track the short distance to the open space where they had enjoyed their lunch earlier. Some kind of machine stood on the grass of the clearing next to the mossy stones, being guarded by another caped and hooded figure.

The glade seemed as calm and quiet as before, and the strange device looked quite out of place. It has a bulbous nose at what Kevin took to be the front, which was apparently fabricated from numerous pieces of flat glass giving it the appearance of a grossly-magnified insectile eye. Within, he could glimpse two rows of seats large enough for three people each. The vehicle seemed far too big to have driven along the narrow track that they had walked earlier.

Bret, Eosin and Kevin were guided to a large cage at the rear of the vehicle, the bars of which also sparkled with reinforcing magical sprites. The three men were pushed firmly inside and the gate closed and fastened with a brief gesture. Apart from the bars, the inside of the cage was not an uncomfortable place to travel, Kevin noted, with padded bench seating on either side.

Their captors packed themselves into the seating at the front of the vehicle, all the while taking care to ensure that their faces were obscured by the hooded capes. One of them said something which Kevin understood as "sit down, now", an interpretation which must have been broadly correct judging by the way both Bret and Eosin scrambled for their seats. This was just in time, as the craft suddenly hummed and lurched, and then sprung into the air.

Under other circumstances, Kevin would have enjoyed the trip. As far as he could tell, some kind of translucent wings had emerged from under the floor. The wings had sparkled a magical green and gold, lying motionless for a moment, then burst into impossibly fast movement. After the initial takeoff, the flight was smooth and astonishingly quiet, especially compared with the occasional flight in a helicopter that he had previously experienced. The buzzing noise from the wings was barely audible over the wind noise rushing over the bug-eyed canopy.

“What’s going on?” Kevin said to Bret, raising his voice over the sound of the rushing wind, but the other man just shook his head and raised a shushing finger to his lips.

Kevin felt there was nothing to do but sit in silence, and found himself fretting inconclusively about what had happened to Tanji and what was going to happen to Bret, Eosin and himself. He hoped that Tanji had found a means of evading their captors, although he was unsure exactly how she had achieved this. Some way of making herself invisible, he supposed, some magic that he was not aware of, and something sufficiently unusual or powerful that it had evaded detection. Indeed, he realised belatedly, perhaps the reason that Bret’s direction was to play along was to give Tanji a chance to get away from the mysterious group which had captured them.

As for their own situation, Bret did not seem worried or even unduly surprised by the turn of events, and Eosin also seemed calm and collected. The two of them sat side by side with stoical expressions on their faces. It was almost, Kevin wondered, as if Bret was expecting something of this nature, that he had been deliberately trying to provoke a reaction. In any case, they seemed to be being treated surprisingly well, although he was completely unclear about exactly what they had done wrong, or even whether the group who had detained them were really the official police, or crossing Guardians, or representatives from some other enforcement organisation. Apart from the obvious wrist restraints, they had not been mistreated in any way. Were arrests always this courteous in the world of Lyndesfarne, Kevin wondered, or was there a specific reason for this behaviour?

The flight went on and on. Although Kevin had no way of measuring the time, it seemed that at least forty minutes had passed. Towards the end, he was beginning to feel distinctly cold, despite the protection of the vehicle’s canopy and his wonderfully warm Lyndesfarne cape. The boredom and the chill were making him drowsy and it was all he could do to avoid falling asleep in his seat.

Bret and Eosin too seemed to be dozing, leaning against each other for warmth and support.

Part of the reason for the length of the flight, it seemed to Kevin, was that the flyer was not travelling either particularly high or very fast, and certainly lower and slower than the helicopters Kevin had occasionally chartered to inspect some major building works while they were underway. It seemed to him that the same prohibition about rapid vehicular travel seemed to apply in the air as it did on the ground. Besides, they were not travelling in a straight line, either, as if the pilot was skirting some unseen obstacle or trying to evade detection.

It was with some relief that Kevin realised that their vehicle was beginning to lose height and looked as if it was about to land. Ten minutes later, they were on the ground, a sudden heart-stopping vertical drop which felt as if they were about to crash into the ground, but decelerated smoothly just at the point of landing. The green and gold wings stilled, then snapped out of existence as if they had never been.

Kevin looked around with great curiosity. Their destination was a rocky beach bounded on one side by a cliff, towering walls of white chalk which stretched a hundred feet or more over their heads. On either side, the coastline swept away in smooth curves reaching to chalk headlands which sheltered the bay. The cliffs themselves and the air all around were alive with seabirds, squawking colonies of gulls of kinds which would not have been unfamiliar anywhere in Kevin's own world.

The beach itself was evidently some kind of a building site. It seemed that there was a harbour under construction, made from great blocks of what Kevin thought was an unusually white variety of the magical "construction stone" widely used in this world. The vast blocks levitated, just hung in the air, presumably by the same kind of magic that had been used when the New Bridge was constructed, and moving quietly and almost imperceptibly slowly down the beach each under the guidance of two or three people wrapped in traditional cloaks.

The source of the stone blocks appeared to be a cave mouth not far from the point where they had landed. One of their captors unlocked the cage that had confined the three captives to the rear of the flying vehicle, then directed them wordlessly up the beach in the direction of the cave. As Kevin drew closer, he could see that it was not a cave but a tunnel, and one which was also under construction.

Still wearing their wrist restraints, Kevin, Bret and Eosin walked inside, guarded front and rear by the mysterious hooded men who still carried their weapons conspicuously and in a way that suggested that they knew how to use them if necessary. Within was all noise and bustle and commotion as hundreds of people laboured unrelentingly. The tunnel was brightly lit by numerous globes of light which floated in the air or adhered to the ceiling.

No-one paid much attention to the three captives as they filed past, but remained concentrated on their tasks. Kevin understood that using magic required a degree of focus to the exclusion of the real world. It was clear that, here, almost every activity was being performed by magic, which must have represented a considerable investment in time and effort.

At one point along their route, a side tunnel was being excavated. Inside the as-yet shallow opening, two people stood side by side making expansive gestures which looked like some weird cross between someone using a hammer and miming taking a bite with the fingers. Even so, it was clearly effective as lumps of chalk the size of a child's head were being nibbled off from the rock face, leaving a smooth cut surface behind.

As they were cut, the chunks of chalk fell almost to the floor, where they were caught by a translucent skein that flickered orange that Kevin assumed was a smaller version of the levitating magic being used outside. The line of rocks on its invisible conveyor belt led down the corridor where a huddle of people received them. As Kevin watched, a lump of chalk hanging in the air disintegrated into dust, with a minimum of noise and fuss. With practised gestures from two of the workers, the dust was magically directed to settle on and become part of a block of construction stone which was itself being constructed.

Kevin knew that chalk did not make a particularly good engineering material, being so soft and porous, but here it was being magically transmuted into a material which most closely resembled concrete, although he could not even begin to guess as the processes involved. In this particular case, the team of magicians were assembling smaller curved blocks which looked as if they would form part of the lining of the tunnel, to prevent collapses and the ingress of water.

It occurred to Kevin that the vast bulk of the construction work was being undertaken inside the tunnel itself, even though it was crowded and noisy. He was forced to the conclusion that this was to keep the work unobserved as much as possible. The evident secrecy,

together with his observation that it was the same strata of chalk being excavated here as was found in the cave where they had been captured, led Kevin to suspect that another route through the old crossing, still un-reopened, was now being built from this site. Indeed, he wondered wryly, if a closer inspection of the numerous civil engineering works in his world in the region of Rheims and Epernay would reveal similar tunnels.

Chapter Fourteen

Tanji seemed to be in a particularly ebullient mood this afternoon, bouncing around the little suite of rooms that she sometimes shared with Kevin. They were staying at the home of her Uncle and Aunt, a quiet older couple who had adopted Tanji while she was still a babe in arms, after the sudden and unexplained disappearance of her parents.

They were presently alone in the house. Tanji's Uncle, a serious-minded man with short-clipped grey hair, was still at his workplace. His role had been described, according to Tanji's translation, as a Senior Convener in the Guild of Transportation. This organisation was apparently responsible for the operation and maintenance of the complex network of magical portals that webbed the entire world of Lyndesfarne, although exactly what her Uncle actually did at work had so far evaded his comprehension.

Tanji's Aunt chose not to go out to work, but preferred to invest her time and energy at home. Right now, she would undoubtedly be outside, tending to the animals or working the large kitchen garden that provided a substantial fraction of their fresh food. She maintained a sizeable stable of horses and a menagerie of other animals: creatures familiar to Kevin such as cats and dogs, as well as ones which he had never seen before he had first come to this world.

He remembered his alarm at his first encounter with a Nightwing a year or two ago, in a cage attached to the stable block. The creature was actually a small and nocturnal species of dragon, and was widely domesticated in this world - at least as much as, say, cats could be described as domesticated. Usually, Nightwings would be released from their cages at night to feed; they were reputed to be a prodigious hunter of rats and mice and similar vermin, which of course were always a problem around barns and stables.

Tanji had arranged some entertainment this evening, although was still unclear exactly what she had in mind. She was dressing with rather more care than usual. She had eschewed her standard garb of leather trousers in brown or black, topped with a loose-fitting and frequently colourful blouse. Instead, she had adopted a flowing full-length dress with loose sleeves, gathered at a point well above her waist in a way which emphasised her breasts - which hardly needed doing, in Kevin's opinion, since the frock was cut low at the front

and displayed a good deal of what he had once been taught to describe as *décolletage*. The display of toned flesh was emphasised by her decision to brush out her blonde hair and allow it to hang loose, rather than being constrained into the familiar ponytail that she so often sported.

Having been warned ahead of time, Kevin had brought with him the garments which he thought of as his “Lyndesfarne Party” clothes. These consisted of pale green linen suit and a contrasting shirt in pale pink, with a silk tie in a slightly darker shade. These clothes had actually been purchased in his own world, although he had insisted upon a few minor technical modifications to make them safe to wear in the world of Lyndesfarne; in particular, the replacement of the trouser zip with old-fashioned buttons.

“Ready to go?” Tanji asked brightly.

Kevin had in fact been ready to go for some time, but politely declined to mention this fact.

“All set,” he replied, smiling, “But where are we going?”

“To the Circus,” she replied, grinning widely, “Come along, you’ll see.”

They swiftly donned their cloaks and set off, arm in arm, in the gathering evening for the short walk to the nearest transport portal.

Perhaps twenty minutes later, they emerged from the heavy doors of a portal building in a city centre Kevin did not recognise. They turned onto a broad boulevard set at intervals with carefully pruned trees. In the warmth of this early evening, there seemed to be a great many people about. None seemed to be in a particular hurry, just chatting or strolling or window shopping, or maybe just admiring their reflections in the glass shop fronts.

At the end of the boulevard, set on a small square or plaza with an ornate fountain splashing in its centre, there was a grand entrance to what seemed like a rather small building. A large number of people, mostly in couples, were making their way up a wide sweep of stone steps, and Tanji guided Kevin in the direction of the entrance.

Kevin, who was by now much more familiar with the traditions of Lyndesfarne architecture, was not surprised to discover that the building was indeed much larger on the inside, not because of any magical TARDIS-like effect, but simply because the vast majority of the enclosed space was in fact underground. This was one of the quirks of civil construction in this world, and an understandable reaction, Kevin considered, to occasionally sharing living space with large flying creatures, dragons large enough to tear off a flimsily-

constructed roof and make off with any tasty humans it happened to find inside.

The two lovers entered the foyer, which was thronging with people who seemed as carefully and as elaborately dressed as Tanji. Despite his - by his own standards - gaudy dress, Kevin felt distinctly dowdy by comparison. Some of the ladies wore intricate costumes which looked as if they came from another age, with elaborate skirts of what might have been crinoline. They were accompanied by gentlemen in highly decorated coats with white ruffs at neck and cuff.

Other women wore dresses of brightly-coloured diaphanous materials, or fabrics which could easily have been of spun gold, which moved as if they were standing in a modest breeze, despite the warmth and stillness of the evening. Kevin suspected that more than a little careful magical enhancement had been applied to the dresses, especially in the cases where they were cut in such a revealing fashion that the only way they could have stayed in place was by the use of magic.

Tanji produced two tickets, large pieces of thick card covered in ornate writing of which Kevin could make out only a very little, and scintillating with greenish-silver sprites, a magic which, Kevin supposed, guaranteed the genuineness and integrity of the ticket. As far as he could see, there was no-one checking their tickets and he was forced to conclude that there was some magical mechanism which allowed access to ticket holders while denying passage to everyone else.

Just as they arrived, a bell sounded, just once.

“Just in time,” Tanji said in Kevin’s ear, “Better go straight in.”

She guided him to the left, down a long recurved passageway with flights of steps at intervals. After descending four or five levels, Tanji directed him through a wide doorway and they emerged into a grand auditorium. The place resembled an ornate and traditional theatre that Kevin might have expected, featuring a vast expanse of red flock wallpaper, relieved by a remarkable amount of carved gilt. Even so, the fig-leaved cherubs that he might have expected were absent, replaced by whorled abstractions that seemed to lead the eye ever onwards.

“Welcome to the Circus,” Tanji said, guiding him to their designated seats.

Kevin sat where she indicated and looked around. He was not sure what to expect, although much of what was happening initially seemed familiar from visits to theatres in his own world. There were three tiers of seating, the upper ones steeply raked to provide an

unobscured view of the stage. The top level - "The Gods", Kevin had heard it described - was already well below ground level, and the lowest part - the Stalls and the Orchestra pit - was sunk perhaps a hundred feet or more into the ground. Kevin and Tanji were on the central level, the Grand Circle, with seats a little towards the rear. Not the best seats in the house, Kevin considered, but very good indeed, and he wondered how Tanji had been able to acquire them.

By now, most people had already got themselves seated and there were just a few latecomers, like themselves, still making their way to their places. There was much excited chatter, with some people evidently divided into cliques and factions. There was a slight feeling, he thought, that people came here to be seen by their peers and rivals as much as to see whatever entertainments were to be provided.

There was a sudden sense of expectation as the house lights fell and all conversation stopped almost immediately. The music struck up and the curtains swung open, and Kevin was subjected to the full blast of the performance in all its glory.

Later, Kevin described the event to himself as "a musical theatre spectacular", unconsciously using the kind of language he would expect to see in an advertisement hoarding on the London Underground. The stage was brightly lit and filled, almost continually, with actors and singers in outrageously flamboyant costumes, even by the standards of the audience. The opera was more Gilbert and Sullivan, or perhaps Andrew Lloyd Weber, rather than Wagner, even though it was sung through, without conventional dialogue.

With his limited understanding of both language and culture, Kevin found himself entirely bemused by the plot and unable even to get an inkling as to the storyline. He resorted to asking Tanji for a précis of the plot during the first interval.

"Well, it's a classic," she explained, "A story of how three generations of a famous family grew from poverty - even slavery - to wealth and power, through bravery and determination, and a good helping of luck, too."

Despite the initial familiarity of the theatre setting, Kevin soon realised that the subtle art of magic was used nearly everywhere. Listening to the music and singing, he became convinced that there was some magical amplification in place. He doubted whether unaided human voices would have been so easily able to fill such a large space, or whether the relatively small number of instruments in the orchestra pit would have been sufficient either.

The rear of the stage was formed by a flat and unbroken backdrop upon which images representing the current scene were projected by some means that Kevin could not determine. The quality of the projections was astonishingly high and very difficult to tell that the scene shown was anything other than totally real, other than the fact that it would change in an eye-blink to some completely other and totally convincing representation.

The impressive operatic performance was interspersed with athletic displays of dance set to energetic high-tempo music. As far as Kevin could tell, these interludes were allegorical of battles or epic and heroic deeds. Some of the dance movements must have been magically assisted, as the performers attempted several jumps and flips which would have been quite impossible without some intervention.

Kevin was able to study the performance in some detail as the theatre provided what he considered to be the equivalent of magical opera glasses. These were magnifying plates, fixed to the back of the chair in the next row, and appeared to be smaller version of the devices he and Tanji had employed when watching dragons.

One thing that Kevin wondered about, once he had stopped being quite so overcome by the spectacle of the entire event, was how the actors were getting on and off the stage. He was of course familiar with the use of the wings at either side of the stage, and how a skilled actor could appear on the stage in an instant with the audience being only vaguely aware of the manner of their arrival. But here, the performers would sometimes appear in the centre of the stage in what seemed to an impossible fashion.

During the second of the two lengthy intervals, Kevin asked Tanji about the sudden appearances on-stage. Were people somehow made invisible until the dramatically-correct moment to appear, he asked.

Tanji grinned at him. She had procured them a glass each of a nicely-chilled white wine and a small bowl of tasty - although wholly unidentifiable - snacks he immediately mentally classified as "spicy nibbles". She sipped at her wine and thought for a few seconds.

"It's not really invisibility," she replied eventually, "But I'm not sure how to explain."

She sipped again, musing.

"The back of the stage," she continued, "is a kind of projection. Like in the cinema."

"I can see that," Kevin replied, "By the way the different scenes change so rapidly."

“But the images aren’t projected *onto* anything. They just hang in mid-air and conceal everything behind them. But you can walk right through, so you just appear in the middle of the stage.”

She sipped again, then added: “It’s a really old kind of magic, the ability to hide what is really there behind a façade of pretence. Technically, it’s called a *glamour*.”

Kevin had heard this word. Intrigued, he wondered about the provenance of a kind of magic old enough to have a distinguishable name in English.

Chapter Fifteen

Dumbly following the directions of the armed men, Bret, Eosin and Kevin filed into another side tunnel. This one was apparently complete and in everyday use. It was a large open space, brightly lit by half a dozen globes fixed to the ceiling which made the chalky-white walls shine glossily. The walls were unadorned apart from a notice-board, although some kind of shelving in dark wood covered part of the wall at the far end. The floor covered with some dark non-reflective substance that looked like bitumen, and was already scuffed and discoloured by the passage of a great many dusty boots.

The room seem to be set up as a meeting room, with rows of hard-looking wooden chairs facing a raised dais in the centre of one wall. The dais itself was occupied by several people who stood around a large table and appeared to be deep in quiet conversation, which stopped suddenly as they entered. It was difficult to be sure exactly what they were doing, since their faces were hooded and it was impossible to make out any kind of facial feature.

Their captors led Bret, Eosin and Kevin to the open space between the dais and first of the rows of chairs. One of the guards closed the door behind them, considerably reducing the noise from the work going on outside, although it was still clear that there was plenty of activity out there.

The blocky man who appeared to be the leader of the group that had abducted the trio stepped up on the dais and spoke inaudibly to the group of people that stood there. In contrast to his slightly swaggering gait earlier, the group leader now seemed to move with a degree of deference which was identifiable even under the concealing swathes of the cloak. After a minute or two of debate terminated by what looked like nods and motions of approval, the blocky man turned on the dais to face Kevin and the others, suddenly looking more certain of his actions. He put his hands on his hips and said some instruction in the Lyndesfarne language, then repeated the words in rather pompous-sounding English, presumably for Kevin's benefit.

“Welcome to Unicorn crossing.”

Kevin was certain he recognised the voice, and his guess was confirmed when the speaker drew back his concealing hood and revealed his face for the first time.

“Duncan!” Kevin exclaimed, unable to prevent the exclamation.

The ruddy face of Duncan Tweedy - known privately in Kevin’s professional circles as Tweedledum - scowled at him. Tweedledum had been the project manager for the firm of contractors which had built the England side of the New Bridge. At that time, Kevin suspected that Tweedy had known more about the world of Lyndesfarne than he let on, or at least he had more recently discovered - as Kevin himself had - more about the Other World. Even so, he was certainly unaware that Tweedledum could speak the language - something that Kevin was embarrassed to admit had escaped him despite Tanji’s careful tuition. He was astonished to discover that the other man seemed to be in a position of some authority - although evidently not at the top of the pecking order - in whatever shadowy group had abducted them.

Bret too had clearly recognised Tweedy, having encountered him in numerous interminable planning meetings in both of the Two Worlds. To be best of Kevin’s knowledge, Eosin had never met the project manager, but Bret seemed to whisper a brief explanation as Tweedledum strode to the edge of the dais and looked down on them.

“Why am I not surprised to find you lot skulking around, sticking your nose in?” Tweedledum continued in English, “Our little team of bridge architects, together again. Some people really cannot take a hint and realise when they’re not wanted.”

He glared at Bret briefly, then turned his attention to Eosin

“And Eosin, husband to the architect and son-in-law to the Ferryman. Another nuisance.”

Eosin looked a little confused at this, and Bret whispered a few words of explanation in his ear.

“And Kevin, all alone. Fallen out with your lady friend?” Tweedledum added nastily.

Kevin practically bit his tongue avoiding any answer to this jibe. He knew he could not suggest that Tanji had been with them when they were captured, but he could still feel himself rising to the bait.

“Why have you brought us here?” Bret demanded, covering Kevin’s distress.

“Indeed, a good question. Always good questions from you, it seems,” Tweedledum replied, “And the answer is, I need one of you to take a message for me.”

“What message?” Bret rejoined, “And who to?”

Tweedy stood up straight and lifted his chin, and put his hands behind his back under the cloak. This had the effect of emphasising his paunch, making him look like a heavily pregnant schoolteacher. Kevin knew that Tweedy very much liked the sound of his own voice and tended to pontificate on any topic he fancied given half a chance, regardless of whether he knew anything about the subject or not.

“You will already have guessed that we are re-opening the old crossing,” he began, “We have hidden works here and in France to create new tunnels, and the crossing itself will be re-activated very soon. We realise that we cannot hide this forever. So, we are proposing a deal.”

“What deal?” Bret asked coldly.

While Tweedledum was speaking so far, the three people on the dais had stood quietly. Now, they moved slowly to the side of the platform and stood for a moment as a group watching Tweedy’s oration. In their robes, with their faces deeply hooded, it was impossible to make out who they were, or even to be sure whether they were men or women. As one, the group stepped off the platform and moved towards the back of the room, walking quietly on the slightly resilient floor covering, presumably, Kevin imagined, to reduce the impact of Tweedledum’s hectoring tones on their ability of engage in much more important discussions.

“Before I answer that,” Tweedy said with a sardonic smile, “Perhaps I can draw your attention to these?”

He pointed to some objects on the table, a handful of what looked like chunky pieces of jewellery. With a start, Kevin suddenly realised that they were amulets, looking worryingly like the one which had been used to deliver the self-inflicted mind wipe that destroyed Demaz’s memory in the dragon’s cave.

Bret and Eosin had also realised what the objects were. Bret swallowed visibly.

“Go on,” he said with chilly calm.

“We intend to make our crossing more, shall we say, accessible to the general public,” Tweedledum said, “So here’s the deal. You manage your crossing in your own way, and leave us alone. We’ll run our own crossing as we see fit although frankly, we find the prohibitions against the mixing of magic and machinery to be ludicrously outdated.”

“No!” Bret said with a sharp intake of breath.

“Oh, I think you’ll agree,” Tweedledum went on, “Otherwise, we’ll force the closure the Lyndesfarne crossing whether you want it or not!”

Both Bret and Eosin gasped audibly.

“How?” Kevin asked, with what he would later realise was a touching degree of naivety.

Tweedledum snorted derisively.

“You’ve got the emergency closure code!” Bret breathed softly, but not so quietly that Tweedledum failed to hear what he said.

“Very good, very good,” he sneered, “Well guessed, again.”

“But that’ll kill hundreds of people, perhaps thousands!” Bret protested.

“Yes, it probably would,” the other man replied, “But those lives would be on your own head, your own conscience, wouldn’t they? To keep them safe, all you have to do is agree to our very reasonable proposal. The sensible thing all around, don’t you think?”

Tweedldum swung around and leaned forward, staring directly at Kevin.

“So, to convey our very sensible proposal, I need you to take a message to the Board of Control,” he growled, “And to the Ferryman. You’ve heard the deal. I’m sure you can describe its outlines to the bosses.”

“Why me?” Kevin protested, “I’m a stranger here. I barely know my way around.”

“All for the best, dear boy,” Tweedy said airily, “You won’t be tempted to try any tricks. Especially since you won’t have much time to get to the Ferryman and her cronies, and then get back here with the reply. After all, I’m sure you wouldn’t want anything to happen to your friends, now would you?”

“What do you mean?” Kevin said, aghast.

“You know what these are?” Tweedledum said, tapping the table.

Kevin nodded dumbly.

“So, if you convey this message for me, then I’ll spare your friends the attention of these little beauties.”

He indicated the amulets again, which looked somehow menacing, frightening, despite their outwardly innocent appearance.

“You bastard!” Kevin shouted, lunging forward in an uncharacteristic display of rage. This was neither particularly helpful nor effective, he would immediately learn; he had barely taken a couple of steps before two of the guards had grabbed his by the shoulders and forced him to the ground.

Kevin struggled ineffectually for a few moments against the bodies that held him to the floor, then lay quietly. A new thought had just occurred to him: the noises from the tunnel had diminished outside the closed door had diminished, fallen silent, as if something

or someone was stopping the frantic activities that had been progressing only a few minutes before.

“So, are you going to take my message to the Ferryman?” Tweedledum boomed.

At that moment, the door opened quietly and a series of figures, also wearing hooded cloaks filed into the room. Tweedledum barely glanced in their direction until the leading figure cast off the hood and said calmly, “Perhaps you would prefer to convey your message in person?”

Kevin was dumbstruck, frozen for a long moment. The speaker was the familiar figure of the Ferryman, the final arbiter of the governance organisations that surrounded the Lyndesfarne crossing, as well as Bret’s mother. He could not imagine how she had managed to arrive so quickly in this section and out-of-the-way location.

The hooded figures that had followed the Ferryman into the room reacted suddenly and swiftly in a professionally choreographed movement. They drew a collection of menacing black objects from under their robes which looked like heavy truncheons, although Kevin had little doubt that they were magical weapons, even though he did not have a clue about how they functioned. The newcomers surrounded and disarmed the group of guards who had abducted Kevin, Bret and Eosin, and two more leapt onto the dais and grabbed Tweedledum before he could move more than a couple of steps.

The group of people who had occupied the dais before their arrival had reacted more quickly, it seemed. Bret gave an inarticulate cry, pointing towards the far end of the room where the quiet figures had congregated. Kevin span around just in time to see the conspirators apparently stepping through the bookshelves and disappearing. He realised that the bookshelves must have been some kind of illusion - a *glamour*, Kevin had heard it described - which concealed something of importance. In this case, the hooded figures had stepped into an active portal which had promptly deactivated as soon as they had stepped through, presumably as part of a carefully planned emergency escape route.

Even so, it seemed that the bookcase, or at least the wall, was real enough now. Bret had darted down the room to try and intercept the hooded conspirators, even though he was still shackled at the wrists. He reached the portal seconds after the last figure had disappeared, colliding with the shelving and bouncing off with a cry of alarm and pain.

Eosin, who had hurried down the room right behind him, and was now bent over the fallen figure, clearly urgently enquiring whether Bret was all right and looking more concerned now than he had done during the entire abduction ordeal. To Kevin's relief, Bret sat up a few moments later, and was helped to his feet by Eosin.

"Too late," he said, shaking his head and looking extremely frustrated, "They got away again."

Chapter Sixteen

“To be sure, the Emerald Isle is a place of magic and mystery,” the Navvy said, slurring his words only slightly as he sipped at the pint of dark ale Jean-Luc had just bought him.

The man he knew only as Mick was supposed to be the finest Irish storyteller working on the bridge. The gossips said that he was a second generation Navvy - short for Navigator, meaning one who built the “navigations” or canals that criss-crossed the English countryside, and that now transported coal and wool and pig-iron for mills and factories of Manchester and Rochdale. Mick and his father before him had laboured across the length and breadth of northern England, working hard during the day, drinking hard during the evenings and sending most of the remaining money to his extended family back in Ireland.

Jean-Luc had spent several evenings sitting in a loose circle around the fire in the tavern snug, spellbound by the tales being spun by the famous raconteur. Mick had a vast fund of stories of the Faerie folk, told always as the literal truth, stories which Jean-Luc would have been regarded as utterly fantastic had he not witnessed the extraordinary events in the *Caves* back in France. He had become firmly convinced that there was some connection between the events he witnessed, the bridge at Lyndesfarne and the Faerie tales he had heard in the local pubs and the mess halls that had, he had discovered, sprung up around the site of the bridge under construction.

“Tell us a tale, Mick,” a man Jean-Luc knew only slightly had said, his green eyes bright and reflecting the firelight in the dimly-lit room.

“Well I don’t know if I can rightly remember one,” Mick had responded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully and glancing meaningfully at the near-empty beer glass that stood at his elbow.

“I’ll get you a pint,” Jean-Luc had volunteered, standing up abruptly and making his way to the tiny bar in the corner of the crowded room. A short negotiation with the grey-haired crone who manned the beer-pumps - and indeed ruled the Public House with a rod of iron - produced a tankard of the dark ale Mick preferred, which the Frenchman carried carefully over to the thirsty Irishman. Even the dour landlady seemed to appreciate Mick’s stories, Jean-Luc had noticed, leaning on the bar and listening carefully as the man spoke,

occasionally shaking her head at some of the more outlandish suggestions.

With a fresh pint of beer before him, Mick suddenly seemed reanimated. He swept up the drink and took a long enthusiastic pull, smacking his lips appreciatively. He replaced the pint pot on the table, sat back in his seat and drew a gnarled pipe and a leather pouch of tobacco from a pocket of his waistcoat.

“Let’s see, then,” he murmured, filling his pipe methodically, “What tale would be a just reward for a tankard of ale bought and paid for by a Frenchie?”

Mick pondered for a long moment, again rubbing his palm against the growth of stubble on his chin.

“For some reason known only to the Wee Folk, Ireland used to contain more of the passages to the World of Faerie than anywhere in the world,” the Irishman began with an expansive wave of the hand, “Perhaps it was to do with the relative seclusion of a small, damp, green island isolated in the storm-swept wastes of the North Atlantic. For all I know, maybe it was linked to the aspects of the constellations or the movements of the Celestial Spheres.”

Jean-Luc had heard all sorts of alternative suggestions for the prevalence of Faerie stories set in Ireland, more than a few of them from Mick’s own mouth. His favourite explanation had to do with the occupation of most of the British Isles by the Romans - something he had learned a little about from Maman’s schooling. The Mediterranean invaders had failed to subdue the areas now known as Scotland and Wales, and had not forged any permanent sway over Ireland.

“’Tis true, though,” Mick continued, “There are many places in Ireland which are difficult to get to, even now, cut off from the world by mountains or bogs or rocky coastlines, save for a single easily watched road or path, or perhaps a navigable river or lake. Them Faerie folk sure like their privacy and, when they engage in their own affairs, they’re sure to use enchanted meeting places well away from the places of men.”

The Navvy paused and supped deeply from the drink Jean-Luc had procured.

“One such Faerie ring was said to be hidden away, deep in the heart of Connemara. It was a place said to be watched always and discreetly guarded, although by what or who no-one could rightly say. It was a place that even the most determined adventurer found impossible to approach.”

“Without fail, a traveller would be warned away, the result of a chance encounter with a friendly stranger smoking a pipe, or an old woman gathering heather, or somesuch. Always, they would be advised to turn around, to find another path. If they ignored the warnings, the unfortunate traveller would return days later, dazed and confused, penniless or blinded, and endlessly spouting crazy, impossible tales. Or, sometimes, he would not return at all.”

There was a silence in the room, broken only by the crackling of the fire in the grate. Mick drank again, then continued his tale.

“It seems there was a young man, a bravo of the Kealy clan, who publicly declared that he would uncover the truth. His reasons were all too predictable: the brother of a local maid at whom he had set his cap had apparently disappeared somewhere nearby the Faerie’s realm. In an attempt to win the lady’s heart, the headstrong youth would, he proclaimed loudly, evade the mysterious guardians and return the brother to his family or at least discover his fate.”

“Despite his headstrong bravado, the young Kealy was skilled and, perhaps, wise beyond his years. He set off from the village of Letterfrack in the heart of Connemara with the grudging approval of the elders and the tearful smiles of the maiden. He avoided the main roads, and the paths and tracks made by previous travellers or perhaps just by itinerant sheep. Instead he made his way, day after day, due west, guided only by the sun and the stars on the rare occasions that they were visible.”

“The young man struggled over trackless wastes, forcing his way through tracts of stunted and lichen-covered trees, and over sucking bogs where a single miss-step would find him sunk over his head. With immense caution, he managed to avoid the wolves and bears that in this age still inhabited the forests and mountain-sides of Connemara.”

As on previous occasions, Jean-Luc noticed that the storyteller’s voice had changed during his oration. There was a sing-song quality to Mick’s speech, as if he was repeating tales he had learned by rote a long time ago, and his pronounced Irish accent had all but disappeared. His English sounded strange, in a way that Jean-Luc at the time found difficult to comprehend. Much later, he would realise what this curious quality was: the pure diction of a foreigner who had been carefully taught to speak a language which was not his mother tongue.

“It had been nearly a week with neither sight nor sound of another human being,” Mick continued, “And our young Kealy had begun to think about turning back. Then, quite suddenly, he found himself in

an ancient forest with trees that were taller and straighter than those he had encountered hitherto, and some were of a kind he had never seen before. The sunlight seemed somehow different, too, the light more clear, making the shadows deeper and sharper.”

“Following his nose, and the guidance of the sun and stars, the young man made his way between the trees down the gently sloping hillside. Eventually, the traveller came across a vast clearing, near circular in shape and hundreds of yards across, set in a bowl in the hills, with verdant forests ascending on every side. In the centre of the glade was a circle of stones: a dozen pairs of vast monoliths, each pair bridged by a lintel nearly as large as the supporting blocks.”

“The brave Kealy watched carefully from the cover of the forest edge. The area around the standing stones was populated by people who at first sight seemed to be human although, on closer observation, he could see the narrow faces and pointed ears that were the mark of Faerie-kind.”

“There was much hustle and bustle around the circle of stones, and it was not for some time that the young Kealy realised that the Faerie folk - for surely that was their kind - were arriving and departing the glade by stepping through the openings, disappearing and appearing with as little concern as if they were striding through the doorway of a barn. Others were flying in and out of the glade on glittering Faerie wings that emerged fluttering from their shoulders while they flew but disappeared instantly when they alighted.”

“There was plenty of more mundane traffic, too: trains of pack-mules under the control of loud-mouthed trail masters, as well as mounted and foot travellers of all kinds and descriptions. The ground-based traffic was entering and leaving the clearing using a well-marked and well-worn trail to the south of where the Kealy was hidden. Curious, he looked around carefully; there were no other trails that left the clearing, as far as he could see.”

The storyteller paused again, talking the opportunity to whet his whistle while the audience waited breathlessly, then resumed.

“It soon became clear to our hero that the edges of the clearing were patrolled at irregular intervals by serious-faced and heavily-armed guards, and the Kealy brave-heart had to duck back into the undergrowth pretty sharpish on several occasions. He decided to make his way around the edge of the clearing towards the southern trail. Eventually, he succeeded in reaching the point where the road met the clearing, and secluded himself in thick undergrowth nearby, at a point where he could observe all the comings and goings along the path.”

“From his hiding-place, he could observe the mule trains and wagons that entered and left the glade at frequent intervals. The Kealy found himself familiar with the many of the goods that were being transported to and fro: sacks of root vegetables and cages of live birds and packages of rare and exotic spices, judging by the tantalising aromas that hung on the air. But some of the wagons seemed to contain goods which he could not so easily identify: bundles and baskets which gave no clue as to their contents.”

“The young Kealy watched bemused for an hour or more, until his attention was caught by a wagon which seemed to contain just one oversized enclosed wicker basket of surprisingly robust construction. As the wagon drew closer, he could make out a figure inside; the basket was some kind of mobile gaol. Then, with a start, he realised that the man inside the basket was the missing brother.”

There was a soft gasp around the fireside. Mick took the opportunity to once again refresh himself from his rapidly-emptying glass.

“The prison wagon drew up to one side of the trail, at a point close to a knot of armed men who gave every impression of being guards. The prisoner, who understandably seemed to be despondent about his circumstances judging by the sag of his shoulders, was given food and water by one of the guards, then left alone.”

“Our adventurous Kealy pondered long and hard what to do, from the relative safety of his hiding-place. Eventually, he decided on a direct approach, balancing the risk of discovery of his hiding-place against interception when making any dramatic move. He elected to remain hidden and waited silently until darkness fell. Then he edged his way closer to the wagon and forced open the fastenings of the basketwork prison using his trusty dagger. He tugged open the gate and dragged the half-asleep prisoner from the enclosure. The Kealy half-walked, half-carried the brother towards the darkest part of the woods. They had almost reached the safety of the forest’s edge when there was a loud bang and dazzling flash, and the two men instantly collapsed unconscious.”

Mick stopped again to drink from his glass. The fire was by now burning low, and the stillness of the audience broken only by the crackling of the embers.

“It must have been much later when the bravo awoke. He shook his head to dispel the feeling of a long deep sleep. It was all quiet and still in the pre-dawn light, and he and his still-sleeping companion were almost completely hidden by thick foliage where they had fallen. He sat up and looked around. There seemed to be

no-one about, no guards, no travellers; even the standing stones seemed to have become invisible in the wispy mist that filled the clearing.”

“After a few moments thought, our hero came to the conclusion that he had been dazed by some kind of firework, but had been sufficiently concealed that he and his companion had, by luck, evaded any searchers. The Kealy quietly awakened the brother, and the two men hastened away as quickly and quietly as their groggy state allowed.”

“Following the sun and the stars to the east, the Kealy retraced his steps accompanied by his companion, forcing his way through the marches and the twisted woodlands he remembered, although somehow the passage seemed easier on the return journey.”

“Along the way, over their evening camps, the future brother-in-law told the brave Kealy his tale: that he had resolutely followed the barely-marked trail that rumour suggested would lead to the Faerie ring, politely but firmly declining any advice to turn back from his declared objective from the strangers he chanced to encounter. Shortly after these encounters, somehow he had become lost and ended up wandering the trails and pathways for many a week. The paths and trails seemed to be confusing, the landmarks never quite the same each time he passed them.”

“But the brother had remained resolute. Without warning, he had been set upon by several heavily-armed men, who had relieved him of his knives before bundling him into the wickerwork prison, although had not attempted to remove either his pack or his purse of coins. He had been bundled into the wickerwork gaol and carried to the Faerie Ring, where he had been seen by the Kealy from his hiding-place.”

“After a week’s travel, they two men reached familiar territory and the old road to Letterfrack. Half a day’s march, in high spirits, brought them to the village itself. Arm-in-arm with the brother of his loved one, the Kealy walked to the house of the maid. The Kealy followed the brother inside, who announced his return in a loud voice. The two young adventurers were astonished to find inside a sprightly Matriarch in widow’s black sitting down to take tea with a brood of grown-up children sat all around her and a brace of grandchildren at her knee.”

“‘The missing Kealy!’ the widow cried, ‘After forty years, he returns. And doesn’t look a day older, neither.’ She collapsed in a dead faint. Both brother and rescuer took a long look around the room, belatedly recognising other friends and acquaintances and relations: an older sister now toothless and doddering, and a younger

brother now paunchy and sporting a greying beard. All were people who were young and lithe a few short weeks ago, and were now aged and wrinkled. The shock must have instantly addled their brains; the Kealy and the brother turned as one and ran away alternately screaming and howling like dogs, never to be seen again.”

There was a sudden silence, then low murmurs ran around the room as the audience responded to the conclusion of the tale. One or two of the older men nodded their heads, whether at the veracity of the story they had heard related or the moral fate of reckless young men attempting the boundaries of Faerie, Jean-Luc could not tell.

The Irishman finished the last of his ale and smacked his lips appreciatively.

“Well, my friends,” Mick said expansively, his accent suddenly returning to its normal lilt, “’Tis a fine night, but I needs my beauty sleep, to be sure. I’ll be seeing you on the causeway on the morrow, right enough.”

So saying, he stood and walked without the slightest trace of a drunken stagger to the doorway and the cool darkness of the night beyond.

One by one, the other men finished their drinks and left in twos and threes to return to their lodgings, leaving Jean-Luc staring into the flames of the fire and thinking. If the young Kealy and the brother had turned mad, their minds totally addled and undone at the instant of their return to Letterfrack, the Frenchman wondered, who exactly was it who had been able to record their deeds and adventures in such detail?

Chapter Seventeen

It was all over in a matter of moments. The force which had just arrived with the Ferryman - Guardians, Kevin assumed - speedily disarmed the group which had abducted them. The erstwhile captors, now themselves captives, were shackled using similar devices to the ones that Kevin, Bret and Eosin still wore, although one of the Guardians retrieved a device - some kind of magical key - from one of the guards which instantly disabled the shackles that bound their wrists.

The new prisoners were revealed as three men and a woman when their hoods were pulled back, none of whom were familiar to Kevin and were, so it seemed, similarly unknown to Bret or his mother. After a short conversation between the leader of the Guardians and the Ferryman, they were quickly bundled away, no doubt for some close questioning. Tweedledum had been similarly shackled and was now sitting in one of the rows of chairs which lined the briefing room. Two Guardians stood either side of Tweedy, who looked around in a kind of belligerent daze after the sudden change of circumstances, frequently scowling in the direction of the hidden portal that his compatriots had used to escape.

At the far end of the room, several people had gathered, facing the wall and bookcases where the vanished portal had been located. They were intent in concentration, gesturing at both the wall and at a variety of small devices held in their hands. Kevin thought that they must be some kind of magical technicians, trying to find out more information about the portal and its concealing *glamour*. As far as he could tell from their frustrated movements, they did not seem to be making much progress.

Now released from his wrist restraints and supported by Eosin, Bret limped over to the Ferryman and said something quietly in the Lyndesfarne language that Kevin was unable to catch, but appeared to be an apology of some kind. The Ferryman put her hand on her son's shoulder, a reassuring gesture which fell some way short of a full embrace but seemed to accept that he had done his best under what Kevin could only describe as very difficult circumstances. The Ferryman spoke briefly to Eosin, who nodded soundlessly, then she beckoned to Kevin, who was still having the magical handcuffs removed by one of the Guardians.

“Are you OK?” She asked seriously.

“Yes,” he replied, “I’m fine.”

“Once again you seem to have been in the thick of things,” she continued, “And once again I need to apologise to you for putting you in danger.”

“I was asked to come,” Kevin said simply, “I accepted. There’s no need to apologise. Besides I’m still very confused about what’s been going on.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” The Ferryman said, “Right now, I’ve got a lot to do to sort things out here.”

Kevin could see the sense in this and politely stepped back, leaving the Ferryman to issue a stream of instructions to the Guardians, more of whom seemed to be entering then leaving the room. Indeed, this room seemed to have become the *de facto* gathering point for the more senior members of that force, probably because of its convenient location within the tunnel. The Ferryman was surrounded on the dais by half a dozen or more robed figures, all with their hoods thrown back to reveal older faces framed by grey hair, and the grim and serious look of those in a position of responsibility who job it was to prevent and contain this kind of incident.

Kevin imagined that the entire tunnel complex was now being explored by contingents from the Guardians - and presumably other police forces too - and that all those he had seen labouring at magical tasks on his arrival would be taken away for questioning. He had a suspicion that many of those questioned would say that they were simply employees, retained for a day or a week to complete some specific and specialized task before being released, and never really understanding the illegal nature of what they had been asked to undertake.

But there was one thing that Kevin could get a direct answer to, right now. He strode over and confronted Tweedledum, who was still sitting on one of the briefing room chairs.

“Why?” Kevin asked the other man, “What was in it for you?”

Tweedy scowled in response.

“I needed the money,” he growled, “They needed someone with contacts in civil engineering. Now go ahead and gloat somewhere else, and just leave me alone.”

Kevin suspected this was not the only reason. Tweedledum had clearly relished the feeling of power he had been able to exert within the conspiracy, judging by the attitude he had been unable to hide

when he was threatening Kevin and the others only a few minutes before.

He realised he would get nothing more out of Duncan Tweedy, He looked around and saw Bret, who was looking at the amulets which still lay on the table. As Kevin approached, Bret picked one up gingerly and inspected it closely, handling it in the way Kevin would have associated with an unexploded bomb. The bulky jewel, suspended from a cord of what looked like plaited leather strips, glinted malevolently, with green sprites moving just visibly inside the gem.

Bret turned to Kevin.

“Where do they get these things from?” he asked softly, more rhetorically than in a genuine attempt to solicit an answer, “They’re supposed to be restricted, impossible to obtain outside the most senior governance circles.”

Kevin was not sure how to answer him, but a reply did not seem to be expected in any case, which was just as well, since he was distracted for the best of reasons.

“Kevin!” a familiar and very welcome voice sounded behind him.

He spun around. Tanji had just entered the room, accompanied by two younger members of the Guardians, both female.

“Tanji!” Kevin called back, intensely relieved.

Tanji rushed up to him and threw her arms around him, holding him tightly.

“Oh, I was afraid I would never see you again,” she said, tears welling uncontrollably in her eyes.

She kissed his face, his lips, again and again, perhaps trying to reassure herself that Kevin was no apparition, but rather the real flesh-and-blood. She seemed too emotional to talk, and Kevin was more than content simply to hold her close, trying to provide support at the primitive, almost animal level, that she seemed to need at this moment.

Around them, people were still coming and going in the briefing room. As he held Tanji close, Kevin noticed the arrival, over the next five minutes or so, of an even larger number of senior figures, including at least one that Kevin actually recognised. The sombre-faced leaders seemed determined, or so it seemed to Kevin, not to be seen to be treating this incident with anything less than total seriousness.

The Ferryman clapped her hands for attention and said a short clear instruction in the Lyndesfarne language which Kevin understood to mean something like “please be seated.”

Kevin took Tanji by the arm and guided her wordlessly to a couple of chairs in the second row. All around them, there was a degree of scraping and clattering as the people in the room arranged themselves on the chairs. A few still stood, some with the alert posture of armed guards, their eyes continuously roving around the room but most people's attention was already fixed on the front of the room.

Tanji seemed to be sufficiently reassured that she could begin to pay attention to what was going on around them, although she still clung to Kevin as if her life depended upon it.

Four people remained standing on the dais together with the Ferryman. One of them came forward, her head twisting this way and that until the remaining sporadic chatter in the room died away. She was a tall and slender woman with short-clipped steel-grey hair who was, Tanji informed him by whispering in his ear, the leader of the Guardians in this world. Tanji, who had trained for years as a Guide and interpreter at the Guild of Directions, seemed unable to prevent herself from translating the older woman's words, speaking softly directly into Kevin's ear.

The chief Guardian spoke in a strong voice, so clearly that Kevin might have been able to pick up the gist of what she was saying, even without Tanji's translation. Her briefing was on the topic of the portal which had existed briefly at the far end of the very room they still occupied. As Kevin had surmised earlier, there was little specific information to be had; it was a special kind of one-shot portal, with a direct link to another place in this world, and appeared to be part of a large private portal network. This network, she explained to the hushed attendees, was illegal, operated outside of the control of the Guilds and Boards established for millennia to oversee this kind of transportation. It was one whose existence has been suspected for decades, if not longer, but never before now proven.

The Ferryman thanked the Guardian leader in a formal tone of voice and then turned to a second figure on the platform. This man was the one Kevin had recognised earlier. He was Warden Derek Williamson from Cliviger Grange which was, Kevin knew from previous experience, both the headquarters and the training centre for the Guardian force in his own world.

The Ferryman said something to Williamson in the language of Lyndesfarne, who replied briefly in the same way. He then strode to the front of the dais, clasped his hands behind his back and addressed the assembly in a distinctly military style. He chose to speak in English, in his characteristic plummy Public School voice, although

his tone was low and serious. In one or two places around the room, there was the sibilant hiss of translations being whispered in official ears, in the way that he had so often experienced from Tanji.

Williamson's briefing was also short and to the point. He explained that, in cooperation with the official authorities in France, he and his colleagues had investigated all of the tunnels being constructed on and around the new TGV route through the Champagne region. After such a thorough search, it was unlikely that anything could be hidden and, indeed, they had found a secret tunnelling project not far from the railway line and heading directly into the circle where the old crossing had once been. Finally, as some kind of reassurance, Williamson said that the official authorities had been given to understand that the hidden excavations work was part of a plot to smuggle illegal immigrants around Europe.

After Warden Williamson had finished speaking, there were several questions from the floor, none of which, nor their answers, seemed to add a great deal to the message already communicated. A hubbub of conversation broke around around the room, with some people twisting in their seats to speak to someone in the next row, and others getting up and walking around to join groups elsewhere in the room. The handful of people on the dais also seemed to go into a huddle, the group being joined briefly by others from the assembly, or by Guardians who were even now still leaving the room on mysterious errands, or arriving with news.

Kevin sat dumbly for a few moments, unsure what - if anything - was expected of him now. Then he turned to Tanji, who was sitting close to him, holding his hand, and asked the question which had been vexing him since the moment of their abduction.

"What happened to you, in the other tunnels?" he asked.

Tanji smiled up at him. Bret, who was sitting just on the other side of Tanji and next to Eosin, turned his head at the question.

"That's a story I've been asked about several time today," she replied, "Everyone seems to want to know what happened."

She paused, then spoke again.

"Think back to the time the four of us were approaching the tunnels along that old lane."

Chapter Eighteen

“You remember when we were in that glade,” Tanji said, addressing Kevin, “Just before we reached the entrance to the tunnel?”

Kevin looked dazed and confused for a moment, then realised what she was talking about. He nodded. Bret was already listening intently to what Tanji had to say.

“Well, it seems that wasn’t the only still-functioning piece of old magic that had been left around,” she continued, “There were two pieces of magic in that tunnel - maybe more, for all I know. Proscribed magic, I think - I’m certain no-one uses these kinds of enchantments any more.”

“But what was this magic?” Bret asked, leaning forward and speaking before Kevin could even draw breath.

Tanji looked slightly smug.

“Did you notice the side rooms at the end of the tunnel?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” Bret replied, looking puzzled, “But there wasn’t anything interesting in them.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed, “How hard did you look?”

“I don’t remember,” Bret answered slowly, “I was much more interested in the blocked archway, the old crossing point.”

“Exactly,” she said, “A suite of rooms, some quite large, and the end of a mysterious tunnel - and you weren’t really interested. I’m certain there was an old Distracter in operation there.”

“Of course!” Bret exclaimed, so loudly that Kevin half-expected the man to slap himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand, “I should have been on the lookout for such things. Especially after the mood-altering magic in the clearing in the woods.”

“So, when Tweedledum’s men arrived, you just stepped into one of those rooms, and no-one noticed you?” Kevin asked Tanji.

“Not exactly,” she replied, “I think I must have stepped back a few paces when I heard them coming, but that’s not what kept me hidden. Such magic is not proof against any kind of determined search.”

“Then what did happen?” Kevin demanded.

“I backed into the side room. There was a short tunnel section before it opened out. It was dark” - Kevin remembered that Tanji had

just handed him her magic light globe to inspect the closed crossing archway - “and I must have instinctively used a ‘Reveal’ gesture to show active places. I was looking for, well, I guess you would say, a light switch.”

Kevin was listening intently, as was Bret.

“What I actually found was a hidey-hole, a secret room. I stumbled upon a concealed opening in the side of the tunnel. The outline suddenly became visible following my gesture. I used a standard ‘Open’ command, and I was able to just slip inside and close and lock the door behind me before Tweedy’s henchmen reached the rest of you. That hidden room must have been there since the crossing was open, and I must have hit exactly the right spot for my gesture, entirely by accident.”

Magic, Kevin knew, was a kind of step change in the state of the world. A magical mechanism - he had been discouraged more than once from using the word “spell” - once activated, kept going forever, unless it was specifically turned off again. This of course meant that magic was highly reliable and, for example, the reinforcing sprites in the Old Bridge had been working continuously for centuries. So it was entirely possible that the magical concealment might have remained undiscovered forever.

“It wasn’t entire dark inside,” Tanji continued, “Some faint lights appeared just after I used the ‘Lock’ gesture. I hoped desperately they weren’t visible outside. I guess they weren’t.”

Bret and Kevin together shook their heads in silence. Tanji resumed her story.

“I could hear through the door something of what was happening. I tried to be as quiet as I could. If I could hear what was happening to you, then they could have heard me, too. I stayed still, afraid to make any movement. Eventually, I could hear you being taken away, and then it all went very quiet.”

“I was all alone, in hiding. I decided to stay were I was for as long as I could to avoid the risk of detection. Judging by what I had heard, I didn’t want to be dragged away too.”

“They didn’t treat us too badly,” Kevin muttered, but got the impression that Tanji was not really listening.

“It had been utterly quiet for a long time, and I was getting cold and stiff. I guessed I could simply re-open the concealed door, but I thought perhaps there was some other way out. I tried my slate, to write a message, but nothing happened when I gestured ‘Send’.”

Eosin said something in a murmur. Tanji nodded, while Bret translated for Kevin’s benefit.

“A Suppressor, still working,” Bret whispered to Kevin, “Like the one at the Lyndesfarne crossing. I knew Eosin had detected something like that just before those goons arrived.”

“I decided to explore the hidden room,” Tanji resumed, “Which was bigger than I at first realised - although I soon wished that I hadn’t. Where I was standing by the door, it was quite narrow, but it soon opened out into a larger area with a high domed ceiling. There were mouldy tables and chairs, set with plates and mugs, all covered in dust and spiders’ webs. There was a fireplace, a range which was still hung with pots and pans.”

“It sounds like it was once some kind of a mess room, a ready room for the Guardians at the crossing,” Bret contended.

Tanji nodded.

“I’m sure you’re right. But it turned out that I wasn’t the first to have discovered the secret room, whatever it was for. Some others had, a long time ago. And they were still there, more or less. In the far corner of the room, there were three skeletons.”

She shivered at the memory. Kevin gasped in sympathy and took her hand in his own. Tanji smiled wanly, looking up at him for emotional support. He tried to imagine what it must have been like for her, hiding in the darkness and encountering such horrors.

“I’m sure I screamed and ran away in a panic,” she continued quietly, “I couldn’t think clearly. I was terrified that there was no way out, that the same fate awaited me. But eventually I got a grip on myself and realised that they were long-dead, and I wasn’t going to be able to help them that way.”

Tanji was silent for a moment, a haunted look on her face.

“I could not but help having another look,” she said, “I couldn’t bring myself to touch them, but they had some fascination. The bodies were sprawled in a corner, piled up awkwardly, still wrapped in rotten and decayed clothes that looked fifty years out of date. It was such a strange combination. I didn’t at the time realise what it was but, now that I’ve had a chance to think about it, one of the dead people wore a hooded cloak, while the other two wore jackets in the style of the Other World.”

“It was too scary for me. I had to get out. I ran back to the door in a panic, frantically making ‘Unlock’ and ‘Open’ gestures. I had that horrible sinking feeling that it would not open, that I would be trapped here forever. At the third attempt - my hands must have been shaking too much - the door opened, and I dived through.”

Tanji paused again, her eyes wide as she relived the experience.

“The hidden opening closed silently behind me,” she continued eventually, “When I picked myself up and turned around, there was no sign of the doorway. I wasn’t very interested in trying to get back in, anyway.”

Kevin could entirely understand that. He squeezed her hand sympathetically.

“It was very dark in the tunnels,” Tanji went on, “Just a little gloomy daylight working its way down the corridor from the entrance. I remembered that the floor was smooth and flat, and I was fairly certain, once I had calmed down a bit, that I could find my way out. Even so, I picked my way along carefully, feeling the floor and walls with my hands so often that I was practically crawling.”

Kevin could feel the roughness of Tanji’s fingers where her hands had been marked by the rocks and dirt.

“It got easier as it got lighter,” she said, “Finally I made it to the cave entrance. I hid as carefully as I could, in case there was still someone lurking. But I couldn’t see anyone, so after ten minutes holding my breath and trying not to make any noise, I made a run for it.”

Kevin knew that Tanji kept herself fit, and was probably able to make the entire length of the trail back to the main road at the run, especially if she was understandably very frightened.

“Before I knew it, I was at the portal building. Only then did I think of trying my slate again. I worked immediately, to my relief. I scribbled off a message to the Ferryman, and similar messages to everyone I could think of, including people at the Guild of Directions and a couple of the Guardians. I felt safer now that there were people around. I sagged onto a seat in the portal building. I must have looked in a bad way, since someone came up to me and asked if I was OK.”

“Shock,” Kevin said. Bret nodded.

“It was not long afterwards than reply messages started to arrive, and shortly after than a squad of Guardians, including one I knew personally from the crossing. I explained what had happened, as best I could.”

Tanji stopped and looked around.

“Then I was whisked away in the company of the Guardians,” she said, “I’m not sure I can remember exactly what happened or where it was. I guess I wasn’t paying very much attention.”

Kevin imagined it was some secret secure location used by the Guardians in this world.

“Then I had to explain it all again to your mother” - Tanji clearly meant the Ferryman, judging by the way she glanced at Bret and then across the room - “I’ve already asked her to send someone to have a closer look at the secret room, and the dead people.”

Kevin had not been paying very much attention to what was going on elsewhere in the room. Rather, he had been concentrating on what Tanji was telling him. So, it was something of a surprise when the Ferryman clapped her hands and said something loudly that Kevin did not immediately understand. She immediately repeated in English, presumably for his benefit.

“Could I have everyone’s attention, please?”

Chapter Nineteen

Tanji, Bret and Eosin turned as one to face the Ferryman, with Kevin only a second behind. The other people in the room did the same, and a sudden hush fell over the gathering. The Ferryman appeared to have been in deep discussion with two younger people - a man and a woman - while studying some things that had been placed on the table beside her. She picked at the objects with finger and thumb, an expression of mild distaste on her face, then stood up straight and swept her gaze over the audience. She spoke clearly and slowly in the language of Lyndesfarne and, despite her recent ordeal, Tanji once again started to interpret for Kevin benefit almost automatically.

“It appears that today we have solved an old family mystery,” Tanji whispered a translation in Kevin’s ear, “Although we may well have uncovered a deeper mystery instead.”

The Ferryman visibly took a deep breath and then continued.

“For those who have not heard the story, it seems that, in the year of” - Tanji hesitated a second, then added - “that would be 1952, I think, three young men disappeared in unexplained circumstances, never to be seen or heard of again. Let me tell you something about these three young men.”

“One was named Alistair, who joined the Guardians after the Second Great War in the Other World. Although a foreigner, this man travelled widely in our world and the other, and met a young woman named Yise, who he married. This young man was my father.”

There was a collective gasp around the room. Kevin was entirely astounded, even though he had heard something of this story before, and Tanji seemed to be equally dumbfounded. Bret and Eosin were holding hands for mutual support. Alistair and Yise were, Kevin already knew, Bret’s maternal grandfather and grandmother.

“I never really knew him,” the Ferryman continued, according to Tanji’s translation, “He disappeared when I was but a babe in arms. My mother never forgot him, and never gave up hope that she might find out what happened. But now I strongly believe, and with sound evidence to show it, that one of the bodies that our brave young Guide has discovered this day was that of Alistair.”

Tanji coloured slightly at being mentioned in these terms, but did not hesitate in her translation for a second.

“When Alistair disappeared, he was in the company of two others. One was a native of this world, by name of Bram, Yise’s brother and my uncle. A brave and resourceful man, one who had also travelled widely in both worlds. The third was their friend and trusted companion, another native of the Other World, a quick-witted and dexterous man called Tom.”

Kevin had previously heard both the Ferryman herself and her daughter Bret speak about the time the three companions had left in the middle of the night on some unnamed and mysterious errand, something thought to be urgent, but not perceived as particularly dangerous, and had simply failed to return despite a promise to be back by morning. At the time, he had sensed Bret’s sadness and latent frustration at the lack of information, at simply not knowing what had become of his grandfather all those years ago.

“How do I know all this, you may be asking yourself,” the Ferryman asked rhetorically, Tanji once again whispering a translation in his ear.

Kevin was indeed asking himself this; not because he thought it was untrue, but more because he wanted to know how the Ferryman - usually a cautious and conservative individual, he thought - could be so sure of the facts.

The Ferryman looked stern-faced. She picked up an object from the table and held it up for inspection. It was, as far as Kevin could see, a book of some kind, bound in very mouldy-looking brown leather.

“This book tells us much. It is Bram’s notebook and, err,” - Tanji’s translation faltered again - “his magic slate. As far as we can tell, all three were killed quickly, by some kind of magical weapon.”

Tanji had difficulty with the translation of this last phrase, it seemed to Kevin, although he was unsure whether this because of there being no words in English to name any kind of magical weapon, or Tanji’s personal disgust at the whole notion.

“The bodies were dumped in the room where they were found,” the Ferryman continued, “Whoever it was, it must have happened very hurriedly, perhaps even in a panic. It seems there was no attempt to search the bodies. Otherwise, such incriminating evidence” - she waved the book again - “would have been removed or destroyed.”

By now, there were murmurs of sympathy and even alarm from the various groups and individuals in the room. Clearly, many people

here had heard something of the history. Some seemed unsure how to react, while others were aghast, perhaps wondering what new revelations were to follow.

“What we don’t yet know,” the Ferryman said, again sweeping the room with her eyes, “Is who committed this crime, although I feel sure a more detailed analysis of Bram’s book, and Tom’s notebook, too” - she indicated one of the other objects still on the table - “may furnish a few clues. What is entirely clear from even a cursory glance is *why* the young men were killed.”

The muttering and murmuring around the room stopped at once, and everyone’s attention refocused on the stern-looking woman at the table.

“It seems that Bram kept copious notes about his investigation, one which he and the others had been undertaking. Perhaps we should all hear the last entry in his notes.”

Kevin vaguely expected the Ferryman to read aloud from the book but, instead, she gestured economically with her right hand at the worn and discoloured book held in her left. The voice of what sounded to Kevin like that of a confident-sounding man suddenly filled the room. He sounded slightly breathless, as if he had just run a distance uphill, and spoke rapidly in the Lyndesfarne language.

“Now at the end of the tunnel,” Tanji translated as the voice of Bram sounded out over the hush in the room, “I’ve activated the amulet that the Ferryman gave me and it’s showing something.”

While Bram’s voice carried on speaking, the present Ferryman held up another object which had been on the table and held it aloft. It looked like an item of jewellery, some kind of chunky necklace of dull polished stones.

“There’s definitely been some recent crossing magic,” Bram’s voice went on, “Nothing overt, nothing that changes the properties of the interfaces but somebody had been probing around - and very recently, too.”

“I knew it!” Eosin cried directly to Kevin, in English, then added something incomprehensibly rapid to Bret in the language of the Other World.

There was a sound in the background, from the same magical recording that had captured Bram’s voice, followed by a call incongruously in English, presumably from either Tom or Alistair.

“Over here!”

There was a further series of obscure and incomprehensible noises.

“Someone’s coming!” Bram’s voice said distinctly, also in English. There was a snap, as if the notebook cover had been closed hurriedly, and then nothing more.

The discussions around the room suddenly swelled as everyone present speculated on the importance of what they had just heard. Bret was talking animatedly to Eosin and Tanji seemed to be following their discussion closely. Kevin’s own thoughts were in turmoil. He realised that these were men who had, by all accounts, survived numerous adventures and mishaps during the War in Europe, only to be killed in secret and their bodies concealed in a supposedly peaceful part of this world.

The mutterings suddenly coalesced into a babble of questions from first this group and then that faction, clearly distinguishable, Kevin thought, by their body language and the way they huddled together as if for mutual support. There were answers from the Ferryman, and Bret, and several others who appeared to have positions of responsibility somewhere in the interlocking organisations that surrounded the crossing between the two worlds.

Tanji could barely keep up with the translations and, after a while, she gave up even the attempt to do so. She did manage to précis some of the interchanges, explaining that there were a lot more handwritten written notes, from Bram and from Tom, which described how the two men had tracked down first one informant and then another, over a period of many months, and in many parts of both worlds.

Finally, they felt that they had enough information, so the collected their old friend and companion Alistair for what was do doubt supposed to be one last adventure before settling down. They had taken the magic amulet - Tanji was unable to make clear exactly how they had acquired this item - and followed the trail of information which led them to the tunnel that was once part of a crossing. There, Tanji reflected sadly, to meet with a sudden and untimely end.

The Ferryman slapped the table as her side with the palm of her hand. At the sound, the discussions and question ceased. She drew herself upright and spoke very slowly and formally, so that Tanji had no difficulty in translating the words.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it seems we are opposed, as many of us have suspected for a long time. There is an organisation ranged against us, a hidden organisation that wishes to implement its own pathways to the Other World, outside of the jurisdiction of the Combined Boards and the governance of the Guilds. An organisation

without a name that would introduce unfettered magic into the Other World, and powerful engineering technologies into our own. An organisation that has been working against us for generations, perhaps centuries. And an organisation that has killed and injured our friends and relatives many a time.”

She paused for dramatic effect, then thundered.

“This organisation must be stopped.”

Chapter Twenty

“Wheee!” shrieked Tanji, darting ahead of Kevin and spraying him head to foot with foamy seawater.

Kevin grinned maniacally, crouched lower over his own surfboard and repeated the gesture for more speed. The board lurched forward, nearly tossing him into the ocean, but he managed to catch his balance and get back on Tanji’s tail. She glanced back, saw him gaining and swerved from side to side, casting up great fantails of water as she made the curves.

Kevin dodged and weaved, seeking an opportunity to pass her, but she was in the end too fast for him. She scooted up on the beach and hopped neatly off the board only a second or two before Kevin slid to a halt alongside her.

“That was fun!” he enthused, picking her up in a hug and swinging her around.

“You’re really getting the hang of this, aren’t you?” she replied, once disentangled.

Kevin modestly acceded that this might be so. He was not a naturally sporty or athletic person, he would have been the first to admit, and he had had reservations about attempting this particular pursuit. But it was easier than it looked, he had discovered, and he felt he was becoming, if not skilled, then at least competent enough to enjoy it.

The best description of the sport, Kevin had decided, was something like waterskiing, but without the tow rope or indeed the boat. The two of them had spent much of the last six days attempting to master this particular activity, apparent known as Water-boarding. His first attempts had thrown him into the warm aquamarine water of the lagoon time and again, much to everyone’s amusement. Tanji had taken a tumble or two as well, although with her natural poise and balance she seemed to pick it up more quickly.

They had been practicing for several hours each morning before the sun got too hot for them. Towards midday, they would stop for a light lunch in the shade, enjoying mixed salads and cooling drinks and barbecued fish. After that, they would walk back to their little apartment, actually one of numerous individual huts built on stilts (mostly straight) over the lagoon and connected by a pathway of sun-bleached timbers. There, they would shower together, soaping and

caressing each others bodies, before tumbling into bed with kisses and more passionate embraces.

Their afternoon siesta, sleeping out the heat of the day in their cool and shady room, left them refreshed for the evening's entertainments. After sunset, which fell with equatorial suddenness at the same time every day, they would dress for a semi-formal dinner in the hotel dining room. The dress code, as far as Kevin could tell, required only the wearing of clothes, any clothes; this was by contrast to daytime here, where anything at all - including nothing at all - seemed to be considered entirely acceptable.

Dinner was served in a large covered area, open to the cooling night breezes at the sides. The guests assembled around the large companionable tables that were the fashion in this world. The etiquette was to engage one's dinner companions, different every night, in light conversation. Most of the chat went straight over Kevin's head - his grasp of the language of Lyndesfarne was still shaky at best - and he sometimes felt just a little left out. But the dinners were accompanied with much laughter and food, and a modest amount of wine, and he found it impossible not to enter into the spirit of the occasion.

After dinner, the hotel would provide some kind of entertainments: dancers in various styles as well as acrobats and jugglers. Kevin was not at all surprised to discover that there were no magical acts, no acts of sleight-of-hand or prestidigitation. Here, he considered, what would be the point?

After the floor show, the house band would play dance music. Kevin was encouraged to dance or, more precisely, given no opportunity to decline Tanji's importunateness. The dancing - or at least writhing rhythmically - was something he undertook with more energy than skill, although Tanji seemed to appreciate his efforts and no-one seemed to notice or care about his performance. In any case, there seemed to be no standard format and people moved in a startling variety of styles. The stately steps of couples and groups contrasted with the vigorous and athletic movements of the young and fit, or perhaps slightly over-imbibed, all to the very same music.

Kevin and Tanji enjoyed the party atmosphere until one or the other started to tire. Kevin certainly found that the faintly pleasing muscular ache in his thighs - mostly due to the water-boarding - meant that he slept particularly well, even after the siesta in the early afternoon. They would leave the dance floor together and take a cooling walk hand-in-hand along shady paths back to their apartment.

Many parts of the gardens and walkways were well-lit after dark by a variety of magical light sources, but some sections were very badly illuminated with only a few sparks which seemed to move and flash at random. Kevin had initially assumed that they were some kind of sprite - those magical sparks that indicated the presence of powerful influences. It was only after the second evening that he realised that they were live fireflies and that this was the reason why the lighting was kept so very low.

By daylight, Kevin pointed out to Tanji on their way to a late breakfast, the hotel grounds were crawling with other wildlife. One more obvious form was that of monitor lizards, which Kevin suspected could also be found in similar places in his own world. He had not realised that these creatures could swim; here, they could frequently be seen nosing around the pontoons and pilings which supported the walkways to the apartments over the lagoon. He had been assured that they were harmless, but was distinctly nervous when they were around.

The vegetation seemed to Kevin to be nearly as alarming as the animals. At one point on their walk to the restaurant they passed a near-vertical rock face with the roots of several trees running over its surface. The insistent roots had clearly forced their way into any cracks or fissures that they could find and was in the process, in an interminably patient vegetable kind of way, of turning the entire outcrop into soil.

The tropical island upon which they were holidaying, apart from the central hotel buildings and the apartments over the lagoon, was apparently unoccupied by any people, although there seemed to be plenty of monkeys about. From the veranda of their apartment, they could look down through the gaps in the decking and see brightly-coloured fish nosing around the sand and corals.

Looking up at the high forested centre of the island they could see any number of brilliant birds flying, and there was something else, too. It was only on the third day that Kevin realised that they were a small species of dragon, or something like it. They were fish-eaters, diving repeatedly into the water to catch fish with their claws before flying off, fish still wriggling, to their lairs. These fish-dragons built their nests in high trees at the very top of the island mountain, and every tree along the skyline seemed to house at least three pairs of these creatures whose calls were plainly audible in the stillness of the mornings.

Their week-long trip to this tropical island paradise was soon to end - far too soon, Kevin considered. Over dinner on their last night,

their conversation fell to a comparison of their trips to, Kevin would be the first to agree, some of the more exotic parts of both worlds. In a completely unserious way, the two of them debated the plus and minus points of the places they had been, and how each could be improved by the addition of capabilities from the other.

They agreed that there were many points of similarity in the Two Worlds, but they chose to take opposing viewpoints as to why this was so. Tanji was convinced that the similarities were the result of deliberate copying. Travellers from one world would take home with them the best ideas and re-create them. Kevin was not so sure. Surely, he reasoned, relatively few people even knew about the Other World and fewer regularly travelled between the worlds. It was more like, he maintained, that human nature meant that broadly the same things would appeal to people in each world, and would occur separately.

“I know that there are plenty of places like this in your world,” Tanji asserted, “But hotels are a relatively recent invention here. We don’t have to stay anywhere overnight - portal travel means you could always just go home.”

Kevin knew this was true. He resolved to persuade Tanji to accompany him to a resort in his own world, to see how she would react to a luxurious retreat without the benefit of magic, and how much difference the travelling actually made.

The venue Kevin selected, after not very much consideration, was a landmark hotel just off the coast of the Red Sea. The travel of course required the usual tedium of international flights - Tanji was in the possession of a perfectly functional British passport, and Kevin did not want to ask how she had come to acquire it.

On their arrival, stepping out of the chauffeured limousine that had been provided, the hotel was, as he had expected, ludicrously expensive - and ludicrously over-the-top too, in his slightly cynical opinion. However, he wanted to see what Tanji’s reaction was.

As it turned out, and to his entire satisfaction, she loved it. She was fascinated by the gadgets and gimmickry, revelled in the lavish décor and the subservient service, and the astonishing variety of the cuisine offered at all times of the day and night.

Some of the most unusual meals were served in the underwater restaurant - actually a restaurant underground, but with a sea view both above and below the water. The sub aqua effect was enhanced by massive aquaria, well-stocked fish tanks so large that Kevin imagined that they would require cleaning by a member of the hotel staff in scuba gear.

Kevin had booked dinner for the evening of their arrival. The restaurant was entered by a submarine ride - actually a Disneyland-style Virtual Reality presentation. Tanji was amused by the attitude of the waiting staff when they ordered a fresh seafood platter - *Fruits de la Mère*. When this arrived, it was an impressive collection of crustaceans and shellfish on a bed of cracked ice. Rather than tackling the dismantling of crabs claws and king prawns themselves, as Kevin had anticipated, liveried waiting staff wearing white gloves skilfully separated the meat from the shells and presented the prepared morsels for their plates.

The following day, Kevin and Tanji tried waterskiing, under the instruction of a patient and professionally sympathetic coach. They both got very wet and laughed a lot, but they finally managed to stay upright on the skis for an appreciable time. Kevin wondered if perhaps some of the balancing skills he had honed during their previous stay had helped him learn more quickly.

In the afternoon, they took a private trip on an archaic wooden boat - or, at least, one which looked suitably ancient but, Kevin became sure, was actually well-equipped with modern navigational instruments and powerful engines. The trip took them from a landing stage at the edge of the lagoon, the water warm and green in stark contrast to the cool blue depths on the other side of the reef. Their craft plodded along the coastline finally anchoring off a tiny island surrounded by the obligatory white sands and coral reefs.

Aided by the crew, which outnumbered the passengers three-to-one, they waded ashore. While the crew set about preparing a barbecue picnic, Kevin and Tanji swam from the edge of the beach and watched the fish and the occasional turtle placidly swimming about. Tanji seemed relaxed, as happy as Kevin had ever seen her.

“Could you live here?” he asked suddenly, “I mean, in this world. Not that I’m actually asking you to, of course.”

She looked at him strangely for a minute, a tense silence that seemed to stretch on and on, then smiled warmly enough for Kevin to feel obscurely comforted.

“A world without magic?” she said, “A world totally without any of the familiar mechanisms and devices which I grew up with?”

She thought for another long moment.

“Yes,” she concluded, “Yes, I could.”

Kevin was relieved. He was not sure he could manage to live always in her world, much as he enjoyed his frequent visits. He knew it was just too different for him to easily cope with. Somehow, in her world, everything was simultaneously the same and completely

different, and he felt sure he would constantly feel like an infant, an invalid: lost, helpless, always requiring help and assistance.

Chapter Twenty One

Kevin would later remember, looking back on this period, that the following few months were hectic in the extreme. He had been effectively co-opted onto a task force attempting to carry out the Ferryman's direction to identify that shadowy group that had been working for generations against the status quo. Under the executive command of the Ferryman, every available person seemed to have been drafted in to investigate even the most tenuous lead or to re-explore avenues which had not been considered in decades.

It was a period of intense and dedicated activity. Kevin found himself neglecting his everyday professional responsibilities and his consultancy work for days, even weeks at a time. The Board of Control, together with the other Boards and Guilds whose complex web of influence and governance had for so long infiltrated the crossing between the worlds, mobilised everyone they could identify. Agents of one description or another were sent all over the world, as far as Kevin could see - indeed, all over both worlds - inspecting the sites of crossings now closed and trying to follow up on clues about the mysterious organisation. He strongly suspected he did not even know about most of the investigations and enquiries that the Ferryman had instigated.

The investigations that Kevin was asked to undertake were all in his own world, presumably on the grounds that his familiarity would be an advantage. He was always accompanied by Tanji, which was of course exactly what he would have wished in any case. However, she had been fairly intensively briefed over several hours by Eosin and two others who were also engaged with the maintenance of the barrier magic. The discussion was held entire in the language of Lyndesfarne and was, Tanji explained later, extremely technical and included magical concepts and descriptions which defied reasonable translation.

However, she assured him that she felt sufficiently well equipped to be able to spot any tell-tale signs of magic leaking from the Other World through a crossing that was not quite closed, but remained in what Kevin understood to be some in-between state. She also said that Eosin had also taught her some esoteric magical technique which actually did work in Kevin's world, simply because no-one had thought to add an inhibitor to the Barrier between the worlds.

It was not unusual to encounter anonymous and often rather mysterious individuals when returning to brief the Ferryman on the findings of the most recent mission, and then to receive instruction on their next task. These meetings usually happened in the Ferryman's house and it seemed to Kevin that there must be people coming and going at all hours.

One person who Kevin was surprised to see was Kithyn, a woman who was an old school friend of Tanji's and who had been tricked into tracking her movements, and therefore Kevin, during the construction of the New Bridge. Although the motivation for the plotters Amiss and Ricard had apparently been one of personal gain, Kevin had more recently wondered how much of this interference was intended to delay or disrupt the completion of the project, especially since their discovery that Tweedledum - who had been in a position of considerable responsibility during the construction work - had secretly been an agent for the organisation opposing them.

Kithyn nodded rather stiffly to Tanji and Kevin, looking distinctly embarrassed, and moved to pass them in the corridor which led to the front door. Tanji was not going to let this happen, it seemed. She rushed over and took her erstwhile friend by the hand, effectively preventing her from leaving. The two women, one petite with her blonde hair in a ponytail, the other tall and big-boned with her dark hair cascading over her shoulders, spent many minutes in private conversation. Kevin could not hear what was being said, but from the body language the women displayed and the tears that were discreetly dried afterwards, it seemed the two women had managed to restore their long friendship.

Their first investigation Kevin and Tanji undertook together required a trip to Ireland. He already knew that, for some reason no-one had yet understood, this country had been a favourite spot for crossings between the Two Worlds. Perhaps it was some unimaginable quirk of the magic used to construct crossings, or it could have been the degree of remoteness and isolation implicit in a small island on the edge of a continent, or even simply that the climate - mild and damp and windy - was favoured by the crossing-builders, perhaps because the blustery and unpredictable local weather tended to disguise any cross-world impact of a mismatch in current conditions.

This unexplained preference had earned the island a reputation for mystery and magic, and engendered any number of myths and legends about strange peoples and wonderful creatures that were still in circulation to this day. Personally, Kevin had no doubt that many

of the stories of pixies and leprechauns and Faerie Folk were based on real experiences, stories which had grown in the telling while losing a degree of accuracy in the process. In any case, the last of the crossings to the Emerald Isle were supposedly closed more than five hundred years ago, so old wives' tales were unlikely to be a reliable guide.

So it was that Kevin found himself on an early morning flight from Manchester airport to Cork with Tanji at his side. It was a short and rather noisy flight on a small and propeller-driven aircraft that seemed more like a bus with wings tacked on as an afterthought. After the short and extremely relaxed immigration procedures, Kevin collected a worn-looking hire car which was apparently what had been reserved on their behalf, and certainly suited their cover story that he and Tanji were English tourists travelling on a tight budget.

Their itinerary took in several of the more remote spots in south and west Ireland, places both wild and beautiful, no doubt, featuring views across unspoilt forests and flat boglands to ranges of low mountains in the distance. Even so, Kevin realised that passage to these places would have been difficult without the benefits of modern transportation, and indeed potentially dangerous, given the possibility of getting lost in the mist and being sucked into a bog.

Their first destination was a secluded lake, the previous location of a crossing the closure of which had been the subject of one of Bret's innumerable tales. This location was one where Kevin did not really expect to find anything, since he had been given to understand that the crossing here had been closed quickly and explosively. Indeed, the lake in front of them was almost perfectly circular when seen from the air, and he knew that the current edges of the lake marked almost precisely the barrier between the Two Worlds, the hole in the ground resulting from the explosion becoming rapidly filled with rain and water from diverted streams.

Kevin stopped the car in several places as directed by Tanji, who continually referred both to a conventional detailed map of the area as well as a set of notes in her own handwriting which, although written in English, contained so much private and obscure shorthand that he found it completely impenetrable. At each place, they took a short walk, or sometimes a much longer one, the longest of which was a forty-minute hike to a high vantage-point on the edge of a cliff that fell away to the lake waters below.

From their view-point, Kevin would hear the wind whispering across the lake surface, barely rippling the water. A light mist decorated the heather-covered hillsides and partially obscuring the

blue-grey mountains in the distance, a cold damp mist that made him feel very glad of the warm and waterproof jacket he had remembered to bring, not to mention the stout hiking boots he had worn on the plane.

At each of the places they stopped, always close to the very shore of the lake, sometimes with the waters practically lapping at their toes, Tanji would clutch the pendant that Eosin had given her in her left hand, and essay a series of complex gestures with her right, her face creased with concentration. In each case, she would then shake her head and Kevin's unspoken question. There was, it seems, no magic now remaining around this long-closed crossing.

Chapter Twenty Two

Jean-Luc's sojourn working on the bridge to Lyndesfarne lasted for a great many months which soon stretched into his second year. The great arches slowly took shape, with the carved blocks of masonry carefully fitted together and strengthened by a web of stout wrought iron bars artfully slotted into grooves and holes cut in the stonework itself.

During this time, Jean-Luc found himself living rather quietly, only infrequently visiting the public houses and drinking dens, more to listen to the stories rather than consume the ale or cider. His behaviour stood out compared with the hard-working, hard-drinking labourers which made up the bulk of the workforce, and often themselves came from other parts of Britain or from Ireland. The rough migrant workforce toiled extraordinarily diligently, hard men who priding themselves on the number of tons of earth they could load into wheelbarrows and hand-carts each day using nothing more sophisticated than hand-held shovels.

The bulk of these movements of earth and rough stone were part of a plan to make improvements to the road - presently little more than a rough farm track, which led away from the causeway towards the old Roman road, which in turn stretched from Newcastle and London in the south to Edinburgh in the North. The workers assembled stout dry-stone walls along the newly widened roadway, dug the foundations for smaller bridges that forded streams and stretched across little gullies along the route, dig ditches and drainage channels to keep the way free from water from the not-infrequent storms and winter snow-melt, and broke up thousands of tons of rocks using hammers and pickaxes into sharp-edged fragments which were packed down to form the hardwearing surface of the road itself.

Jean-Luc found himself spending as much time as he could with a quieter group, the craftsmen who precisely cut the stone blocks which would form the arches and roadway of the great bridge itself. The masonry was cut with band-saws, the iron blade held taut in a complex frame of wood and twisted leather, and pulled to and fro by two men. The final shaping was done with an iron chisel struck repeatedly by a wooden mallet, the thudding noise often being the first thing he heard when he approached the lip of the quarry where most of the cutting and shaping took place.

Jean-Luc's quiet and unassuming demeanour, and his sobriety and diligence, slowly earned him a degree of respect amongst the tightly-knit community of masons, most of whom were local men unlike the migrants who did most of the heavy and unskilled work. The craftsman's work appealed to Jean-Luc, and seemed to him to be straightforward enough, so he diffidently approached the lead mason and asked if he could take on some of the stone-cutting, even though he was already much older than any normal apprentice.

It was to Jean-Luc's good fortune that there was a distinct shortage of skilled masons available at that time. Indeed, the stone blocks could not be cut and shaped quickly enough to keep up with the rate at which they could be transported and fitted. The younger man's industrious nature, not to mention his skills with tools of all kinds, prompted the foreman to offer Jean-Luc a trial - "Just for a month, mind you" - which he gladly accepted. In fact, the Frenchman soon developed a level of proficiency in the stonemason's arts which would - he would later understand - normally have taken a five year or longer apprenticeship to acquire.

The community of the masons also had their own tales and legends - from "over the water," they would say, nodding in the direction of the bridge - and these stories were often told over the tapping of hammers on chisels or the rasp of a stone-saw. Jean-Luc listened to these tales as he worked and noted that there seemed to be many common themes, even though they often contradicted one another in almost every detail. He bided his own counsel, rarely commenting on a tale or asking a question, even though he tried hard to commit each one to memory.

It was one of the older and quieter workmen, a local man he knew only as Harold, who suggested to Jean-Luc that he attend a barn-dance to be held in the nearby village of Fenwick. Jean-Luc was initially reticent, still feeling that he was a stranger, almost an outcast, in this society. The older man gently encouraged Jean-Luc to reconsider, perhaps rather sympathetic to the lonely young man's circumstances. There would be people coming from miles around, Harold explained, there would be music and dancing, and that there would be many young people in attendance, including his own son and the youngest of his daughters.

The barn-dance was indeed held in a communal barn which stood on the edge of the common land close to the centre of the village, and not far from other essentials as the church, the vicarage and the most popular of the public houses. The barn was currently empty and had been carefully swept out, awaiting the start of the harvest when it

would be filled with cut and dried hay for winter forage, and straw for bedding for the animals in the colder months. A stage had been set up at one end of the space. Actually it was just an old barn door set over some cut-off barrels, intact and full versions of which could be found at the other end of the building where an impromptu bar had been created. Someone had spent some time in putting up long strings of bunting which criss-crossed the roof-beams above and which gave the whole venue a cheerfully festive appearance.

It was a warm summer evening, a month or so after the summer solstice, and the double doors of the barn were wide open to admit the soft night breeze. Rough tables had been set around outside the doors, and a few inside, and lamps and candles, as yet unlit, were already in place for when darkness fell, a time still several hours away. A hearty supper was being prepared, judging by the delicious aromas of cooking that were wafting around, and which included the roasting over charcoals of a whole pig on a spit. The roast and other meats would be accompanied, Jean-Luc correctly surmised, by masses of simply prepared but very fresh vegetables, together with an astonishing quantity of boiled new potatoes.

When Jean-Luc arrived, feeling thoroughly scrubbed and somewhat overdressed, a small band was already warming up on the stage, while the bar was already surrounded by large farmers with large voices and large beer tankards in their hands. The band members were also locals, he would soon discover, and their musical performance was best characterised by energy and enthusiasm, rather than anything resembling technical competence.

Jean-Luc had taken some care over his appearance, having retrieved and very carefully laundered his best shirt and trousers from the bottom of the pack he had brought all the way from France. The tightly-fitting black trousers and the blousy white shirt of fine cotton that he had donned were in complete contrast to the home-spun shirts and woollen trousers worn by the other young men.

Heads turned and the volume of conversation fell when Jean-Luc appeared at the barn door, but soon resumed at a slightly higher volume. Some of it, he knew for a certainty, was gossip aimed at the mysterious Frenchie who had appeared so suddenly in their midst. Harold the stonemason waved Jean-Luc over and introduced him to his family. His wife was a quiet mousy woman with an instantly forgettable appearance, who had little to say and who deferred to her husband in every respect.

After bowing politely to the goodwife, Jean-Luc was introduced to Harold's son John, who was already apprenticed to the local

blacksmith. He was a big lad, already towering over his father, and equipped with the gentle and essentially placid disposition that meant that everyone was his friend. In John's case, that friendship was immediate cemented when Jean-Luc, at a loss as to how to open a conversation, explained that the first part of his name also meant "John" in his native tongue, and that they were therefore more closely related, perhaps even brothers.

Finally Jean-Luc was introduced to the daughter of the family. She was pink and plump and blonde, and seemed to be sheltering between the bulk of her brother and her mother. Momentarily flustered by the proximity of a member of the opposite sex, Jean-Luc gallantly offered to dance with the young woman, whose name he missed at the introduction and would never learn. She murmured something indistinct which might have been "perhaps later", looking rather giggly and nervous, and indicated that she would prefer to stay by her mother's side.

Jean-Luc would not, as it turned out, have the opportunity. In the company of his new friend John, he was soon surrounded by people, most from the younger rather than the older generation, who were curious to know more about "that Frenchie". He answered a great many questions to the best of his ability, sometimes pressed to the edge of his competence with the language, but nevertheless with good humour and a degree of wit he had not known he possessed.

Several of the more forward girls made their interest in the young Frenchman discreetly known, even under the watchful eyes of parents and grandparents. They were clearly attracted by his slender litheness and quick wit which contrasted with the taciturn and heavy-set farmers' sons which made up the bulk of the young male population hereabouts. Jean-Luc maintained his aloof pose, preferring to avoid the attention of the adult chaperones who carefully watched the goings-on in the fashion that Jean-Luc was entirely familiar with from similar rural events in the villages back home in France.

As Jean-Luc chatted, he had a sudden sense of being watched from across the room. He spun around suddenly and caught the eye of a pretty dark-haired girl who swiftly turned away when he looked in her direction, accompanied by a certain amount of giggling from the four or five girls who clustered together on the far side of the barn. He immediately spoke to John and asked who was the beautiful raven-haired lass. John seemed confused for a moment, presumably at the concept of a girl who he had probably known since they were both toddlers being described as either "beautiful" or "raven-haired".

Jean-Luc begged an introduction and trailed across the room after John's lumbering gait. Her name, as it turned out, was Milly - a short form of Millicent - and she was the daughter of a local family, a pillar of the farming community. Her family had been in this area for generations, and her mother was a stalwart of the local village. He rapidly learned that Milly was the youngest of three sisters and widely regarded as the most sensible of the three. The older girls were already married, and one was already a mother-to-be, a prospect that she apparently regarded with a mixture of morbid fascination and excitement.

Demurely, Milly asked about his family, back in France. Jean-Luc explained that his father had died in some kind of freak Act of God, struck down by lightning from a clear sky as he worked in the fields, an accident which had happened while he was little more than a babe in arms. He related how, on becoming a young widow, his mother had at first taught in the local dame school, providing a church-charity basic education for those too poor to be in receipt anything better. After many years, *Maman* had apprenticed him to the Grand *Maison*, the makers of the finest Champagne vintages, and returned to domestic service in the great house where she herself had first been employed after her leaving her parents home.

Milly and her friends listened with careful interest but all seemed uncertain on how to continue the conversation. To fill a silence, Jean-Luc explained about the growing of grapes for the making of wine - a drink mostly reserved for the upper classes in this time and place - on the dry hillsides in his native lands. Recalling a story often related in the fields, he recounted how the best vines seemed to thrive on the most desiccated of fields and how their roots were reputed to go down to Hell.

This tale seemed to appeal to the young farmers - and future farmers' wives - and especially to Milly, who regarded Jean-Luc with rapt and wide-eyed attention. Taking the not-so-subtle hint, he executed an exquisite formal bow, as he had been carefully taught by *Maman* all those years ago, and asked if the charming *Mademoiselle* would care to dance. To the astonishment of her friends, she assented to become his partner in the next of the formal and highly structured dances which were the fashion of the time. This could have been an embarrassing disaster, of course, but Jean-Luc had been watching carefully earlier in the evening, and by now he had a very good idea of the steps and movements required.

The gossips would later say she was swept off her feet by the dashing Frenchman, how her young head was turned by a Devil-may-

care attitude and foreign ways. This way not actually true; in reality, she was immediately attracted to the serious-minded and capable young man. Despite the differences in their backgrounds and his outwardly dashing appearance, Jean-Luc's essentially staid nature shone through. He would, she considered privately, when back at home and dressing for bed, make good husband material.

Chapter Twenty Three

Kevin and Tanji were dinner guests this evening. They arrived at the front door of Bret's house, the large and rambling family home she shared with her mother and father as well as her own husband and children, and other members of the family.

Bret opened the door moments after Kevin had knocked. She had relaxed into her natural, female appearance this evening, with her blonde hair loosened from its usual neat ponytail and allowed to flow down her back. She wore a loose dress in a shimmering pale blue, cut and shaped in a way which subtly amplified her female curves. This was something which had rather disturbed Kevin on first realisation, that the man he had worked so closely with in the design of the New Bridge was actually a woman, and one who could make sufficiently large changes in her appearance - at least while in the world of Lyndesfarne - that he had not even thought to question it.

"Welcome, welcome," she said, "Come in."

She ushered them both inside, helping them to remove their travelling cloaks and packs and guiding them into the main living room. This was a large and homely room, with an expansive dining table set with numerous chairs at one end, and an array of comfortable sofas and easy chairs clustered around a log fire at the other. The table was already set for dinner and tantalising smells were emerging from the kitchen door.

Kevin and Tanji had been to this house several times over the last few months, but never for more than an hour or two at a time. These had been brief businesslike meetings with the Ferryman in the room she used as an office, or around the dining table - littered with maps and papers rather than the array of cutlery and crockery and table-linen it now featured. Eosin and the Ferryman were already present, warming themselves by the fire. Both looked tired and drawn, as if they had not been getting enough sleep. They greeted the newcomers warmly and chatted inconsequentially for a few moments, until the doorbell rang again and further guests arrived.

The new arrivals were Bret's older sister and her husband, who Kevin had met before, and a tall young man that Kevin finally realised must be Gred, their son. The last time he had met the youth, he had been a gangling boy with the permanent sulky attitude of

teenage boys everywhere. Now, he had grown quickly, already much taller than his mother and probably likely to grow still more.

Bret's father had prepared a feast for guests and family in the traditional wholesome style that he had perfected from long practice. The bearded man wearing an butcher's apron emerged from the kitchen briefly, waved and spoke a friendly greeting to Kevin and Tanji, and then rang a large bell which hung by the door. Two girls appeared after a few moments - Myra and Andhra, Kevin's memory supplied unprompted - up the stairs from the sleeping areas on the lower levels. The girls had both grown since he had seen them last and Andhra, the older and rather tomboyish girl, was now verging on her teenage years.

Everyone settled around the table while Bret's father brought dish after dish from the kitchen in a gastronomic performance he suspected the older man thoroughly enjoyed. No-one hesitated in filling their plates and tucking in while Bret uncorked a bottle of wine and filled glasses around the table. Kevin understood that this style of cooking was commonplace in this world, although he had yet to meet anyone who appeared to be significantly overweight, unlike the examples of - in some cases, life-threatening - obesity that were all too common in his own country.

Kevin for one was extremely grateful for the meal. He had undertaken so much travel recently, much of it by air. He felt as he had not eaten properly in days, having long ago come to the conclusion that the food served on aircraft was rarely palatable and frequently tasted as if it had been assembled by some secret industrial process entirely from plastic. He expressed his genuine thanks to Bret's father rather effusively, whose bearded face immediately split into a wide grin at the extravagant compliments he was being paid.

The conversation over the dinner table stayed away - quite deliberately, Kevin imagined - from topics of any real import. The children bantered amongst themselves and entertained the adults with apparently random remarks which seemed to veer unpredictably from intelligent insight to touching naivety.

The final course, of cheeses and prepared fresh fruits, was finished in no great hurry. Afterwards, the children were directed to assist Bret's father in clearing away the remnants of the meal - something achieved with only the necessary minimum amount of adolescent moaning - while the remaining adults carried their refilled wineglasses and settled themselves in the more comfortable seating around the fireplace.

Away from the ears of the children, the talk turned to more serious matters. Bret asked about the most recent of the trips that Kevin and Tanji had undertaken. It was an investigation in South America, adopting their now-familiar pose as tourists travelling on a modest budget. They had flown into Lima and undertaken various excursions before they were ready to visit the real objective of their tour. They had visited Machu Picchu, the so-called “Lost City of the Incas”. The final part of the trip was on a rattling and ancient train followed by a fairly steep walk to the entrance to the old city.

According to the Ferryman’s briefing, this too had once been the site of a crossing between the Two Worlds, one which had been closed without undue incident when its discovery by the Spanish Conquistadors was thought to be unavoidable. Ironically, the Spanish never did find this city during their peregrinations, although they passed sufficiently close on several occasions that it was only a matter of luck that they did not stumble upon it. The two lovers spend all day exploring the ruins, Kevin taking numerous photographs of Tanji in front of various relics, while Tanji discreetly applied whatever magic Eosin had provided for her. The results were uniformly negative; there was no indication of any what Kevin imagined as magical leakage detectable at all.

Bret too reported on her most recent trips. She had revisited the previous sites of several crossings in various places in Germany, as well as a visit to Iceland. She had also investigated different kinds of intelligence, leads which put Bret and many others on the trails of individuals who might know something. For all concerned, the conclusion was that it was all desperately frustrating. They continually seemed to be on the verge of a major breakthrough, at least at the time, but they were somehow thwarted at the final hurdle. They made no sustained progress, every step forward followed by two steps back. It was only much later on that Kevin would suspect that they were being played, that it was all an orchestrated plot to keep them nervous and unsettled.

The Ferryman nodded sagely as she listened to first Kevin and Tanji, and then Bret recounting their most recent failures. When Bret fell silent, she stared into the fire for a long moment, her wineglass forgotten in her hand.

“It is much as I have already concluded,” she said in a sad, soft voice, “We cannot trace back to the roots of the organisation. They seem to be able to move against us so easily, and it is only by good fortune we have uncovered their plots, discovered their plans. We have to keep on being lucky; they only need to be lucky once.”

She paused, swirling the last drops of the wine around in the glass.

“We cannot guarantee the level of security that the governments of our world insist upon,” she resumed, “And the governments of yours too. We need to know what to do, to understand the risk and balance that against the advantages.”

She sipped her wine.

“We must call an Emergency Convocation,” the Ferryman concluded wearily, “To bring together in session all of the Boards and Guilds from the Two Worlds.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Jean-Luc sat quietly, concentrating on the masonry block he was working on. In its entirety, the quarry was not a quiet place, with the thud of mallet against chisel competing with the rasp of the stonecutter's saws. Even so, he found that the noises tended to blur together after a while and that it was quite easy to sink into a state of virtuous contemplation even while his hands worked steadily on the block of stone in front of him.

"Good morning to you, Frenchman," a voice said, jolting Jean-Luc out of his reverie, almost making him drop his tools in surprise.

He swung around and looked up at another of the stonecutters who had apparently paused in his labours and chosen to stop nearby. The other man sat down on a cracked and misshapen block that had been abandoned, but was still too heavy to be easily moved to the spoil heaps, and carefully placed the heavy canvas bag that contained his tools on the ground by his feet.

"Good morning," Jean-Luc rejoined, nodding politely.

"You do good work," the man said, adding, "For a newcomer."

The old mason spoke in a precise, measured way suggesting that he intended every single word to be taken seriously. Jean-Luc knew the mason only as John, one of several experienced and taciturn stonecutters who worked steadily and kept themselves to themselves. He could not recall ever having heard the older man ever speak more than a monosyllable in his hearing.

Jean-Luc was not quite sure how to react to the compliment, if that was what it was. He nodded politely, but said nothing.

"There's magic in these stones, old magic," the older man said, dropping his voice and forming his words even more carefully than before.

Jean-Luc, who's English was learned as an adult and found it to be occasionally limited or incorrect, wondered if he was somehow misunderstanding the man's words.

"How so, sir?" he asked respectfully, "I've never seen any magic in rocks - just lots of hard work."

The other man chuckled at Jean-Luc's attempt at a joke.

"It is true enough, boy," he replied, "But it was not always so. Once, there was enchantment in the very fabric of the virgin rock and even now I keep an eye out for magic hidden in the stones I cut."

“I would be very interested to see something like that,” Jean-Luc replied cautiously, “But how would I know a magical stone if I saw one?”

Again, the older man chuckled.

“Oh, you would know, well enough,” he replied, “And you have already seen the sprites, at least from afar.”

Jean-Luc was confused.

“Where?” he demanded, “Where will I have seen this magic?”

“Why, in the bridge,” John said, as if speaking to a child, “Have you not noticed them in the stones in the further arches?”

Jean-Luc had of course studied closely the entire structure of the bridge, at least as far as he could. He had not able to get close to the further part of the structure, which would have required avoiding the watchful eyes of a group of men he had learned to called the Guardians and whose task, it seemed was to police who was, and was not, allowed to cross from one shore to the other. Certainly, he did not want to risk his livelihood - and perhaps worse - by getting caught trying to sneak beyond the permitted areas.

Even so, he realised he knew what the old man was talking about. As with his part of the bridge, carefully-shaped masonry blocks were being laid over a wooden framework on the far side arches, fixed in place with mortar which seemed identical to the materials he was familiar with. The laying of the masonry blocks did seem to take longer than he might have expected, as if some extra care was being taken for reasons he did not understand. As each stone was lowered into place, some senior worker would stand over it, staring at it as if trying to see into the rock itself - at least this was the impression that Jean-Luc gleaned from distant observations. This man - or sometimes a woman, to Jean-Luc’s surprise - would then wave his or her hands at the block. Always the same movement were used, as far as he could tell, and they gave the impression that they were *instructing* the stone itself to do something, but exactly what he could not guess.

In any case, over the course of the next few days as the mortar dried - or perhaps this was just a coincidence - strange and very faint ghostly illuminations would appear in the newly-laid stones. These specks of light were very hard to see and, strangely, did not seem to be any more visible at night, even when the moon was new.

He had asked about the illuminations on previous occasions. if he got an answer at all, he was told that it was just some reinforcing they add to the mortar, some extract of the tiny sea creatures that sometimes made the ocean surface glow on the darkest nights.

Everybody seemed uncomfortable talking about it and he eventually stopped asking, although he did record his own questions and thoughts on the topic in his private journal.

“You mean the lights in the arches?” Jean-Luc asked the older man.

“Yes, that’s the magic of the stones,” old John confirmed, “Sprites, they’re called. They say that, at one time, thousands of years ago, all rocks had this magic - or at least many of them did. Then the magic died - slowly faded away. Maybe it was worn out, all used up. So now they’re having to put it back by hand, block by individual block, but only over there.”

He gestured in the direction of the island.

“They say that that the magic does not exist, not any more, on this side of the water,” he continued sadly, “But I do sometimes wonder whether that is really true.”

Jean-Luc thought deeply about these remarks. It was, he would realise later, the first overt reference to the existence of something called “magic” that was, he was forced to presume, somehow depended upon in the construction of the bridge. He also supposed that, nowadays at least, the use of this “magic” was only possible on the far side of the straights.

The older man brightened visibly as he spoke again.

“I believe it is sometimes possible to find a piece of rock that still contains the old magic,” he said ruminatively, “I look out for them, every day, and I watch carefully as I carve and cut the stones.”

“Have you found one?” Jean-Luc asked, fascinated by this possibility.

“No, not a one, not yet, but I keep searching every day,” the old man replied, “But I do know it is possible.”

Jean-Luc must have looked puzzled, or perhaps disbelieving, as the other man went on to explain almost immediately.

“My grandfather found a stone,” he said, “One that glowed from within, like those which now form part of the bridge our friends across the water are working on. A stone emitting a faint and ethereal glow, an orange light that seemed to move within the very rock itself.”

Jean-Luc gasped, his mallet and chisel falling from his hands unregarded.

“The stone was old and moss-covered,” the old man went on, “Long concealed in the undergrowth. It was obviously partially cut and dressed a long time ago, but then abandoned incomplete or cracked, broken beyond use or repair. My grandfather said his

acquaintances amongst the masons said it was bad luck and would not touch it, but Granddad had different ideas. Ignoring the uttering of his colleagues, he carried the stone away and used it in the foundations of the fireplace, a key part of the house he was building and where it would carry much of the weight of the chimney.”

“When the house was complete, the magic stone itself was almost completely hidden, with just a corner of it visible behind the old wooden settle that sat between chimney-breast and wall. I remember that, as a boy, a tiny child barely able to walk, I crawled under the seat and found the magic stone, its dim light attracting me irresistibly. I told my father who took me on one side and, in a very serious voice I can remember to this day, explained that this was a great secret and that I should never tell anyone. I promised to hold a secret, a promise I have kept to this very day.”

“I am honoured,” Jean-Luc said formally, “But why tell me, now?”

“Oh, I think you will understand,” John the mason replied, “Listen well to the rest of my tale. Years later, when I was nearly full-grown and already apprenticed to my fathers and grandfather’s trade, a great storm blew up, as they do from time to time hereabouts. Roofs were torn off houses for miles around, and my neighbour’s chimney collapsed, barely missing his wife and children covering under the kitchen table. But my grandfather’s house - it is now my house - was almost untouched - just a few missing slates and loose shutters. It was a miracle, they said, some luck in the placement of the building and the shelter of the trees, perhaps.”

“But Granddad maintained it was not luck, that he, and he alone, witnessed the magic of the stone in action. Imagine an old man, part-crippled and sitting in the cold and darkened house while I and my father and others struggled against the elements, trying to secure beast and barn against the wild wind and the driving rain. Granddad swore that the stone blazed with a blue fire as the worst of the storm raged overhead, filling the cold fireplace with its glow and lighting the entire room. He said that as the roof beams creaked and the very masonry of the chimney itself swayed, the blue light seemed to brace the structure, keeping it safe.”

“Now, the house is mine, my Grandfather long since departed, God rest his soul, and my father too. The stone is still there, but it glows no longer. Perhaps its magic was exhausted during the great storm, perhaps it grows old like all things. I do not know. But I am sure there is still magic abroad, a magic I do not understand but am sure is as real that that chisel you just blunted.”

Jean-Luc thanked the old man politely for his story, who nodded and grunted in return. He stood, stretching his back, then carefully picked up the stout bag which contained the tools of his trade. John the mason never spoke of this story again, as far as Jean-Luc knew, and the old man returned to his taciturn ways, barely acknowledging the Frenchman as they passed on the paths.

Jean-Luc wondered privately if the old man was mistaken, a speculation he dutifully recorded in his private journal later that evening. He conjectured that what the mason was referring to was an old stone, a stone which had once actually been used in a building in ages past, a stone which, even if his Grandfather had found it in a quarry, had been transported there rather than being recently hewn from the quarry face. It was possible, he mused, that the old stone was taken as a template, to make a replacement for a stone worn or broken, and then forgotten by the masons.

Chapter Twenty Five

It was, Kevin supposed, inevitably the case that even the most urgent meeting could not be organised overnight. It was three full days later before the Grand Convocation of the Boards of the Two Worlds was finally called to order.

It was, admittedly, a glittering affair; by far the largest and most prestigious event that Kevin had ever attended, in either world. There were representatives from a long list of organisations, the existence of many of which Kevin had not even suspected. Tanji had her work cut out explaining to him who all these people were and what were their roles within the numerous administrative departments.

There were representatives from a ridiculous variety of trade and transportation organisations, including the Guild of Transportation itself - responsible for the portals that provided all long-distance transport in this world. Of course, most people who used the portals on a daily basis were unaware of the Other World, so these delegates must have been sent by a fairly discreet corner of that Guild. The Guild members themselves were a trio of solemn-faced women clad in traditional Lyndesfarne robes - in common with most of the delegates present - although in uncharacteristically sober shades of grey and russet.

Less discreet were the delegates from the Waggoner's Association representing the men and women who, historically, drove the horse-drawn carts to and fro over the Old Bridge and had now extended their responsibilities to include the more modern hybrid transportation that Kevin had helped devise for the New Bridge. Many of them eschewed the standard robes for stout working trousers and jackets in serviceable leather. They also seemed to arrive equipped with bags of food and bottles of what Kevin strongly suspected were alcoholic beverages, and were also accompanied by a faint nasal suggestion of horse.

A tightly interlocked cabal of Travellers and Traders were represented by a noisy and colourful group of people who sat together and did not hesitate to heckle or question anyone who spoke. The women tended towards brightly-coloured long dresses and extravagantly large earrings, while the men were split between conventional robes and the kind of wear that would not have looked out of place in any market in Northern England. Together, they

represented the astonishingly diverse array of different goods and services which were bought and sold across the causeway, some of which Kevin could not understand at all, and at least one of which caused Tanji to blush furiously.

Another organisation common to the entire world of Lyndesfarne, and not just the bits associated with the crossing itself, was the Guild of Magic. This august body was responsible for the management of magic generally, the regulation and approval of new magical technologies and the maintenance the proscriptions decreed long ago. The Guild of Magic members sat close to the lesser delegates from the Board of Control itself - the more important people, including the Ferryman, had seats elsewhere - or perhaps it was the other way around.

The majority of the Guild and Board members clearly felt themselves to be important people and exuded a degree of self-righteousness and even pomposity in their manner. Mercifully, others appeared to have a more self-deprecating manner, thoroughly down-to-earth much like the Ferryman herself. Kevin found himself wondering that those who really did have an exceptional degree of responsibility, and the concomitant power, would sometimes not need to boast about it.

Scattered here and there were a few people who were unaligned to any of the Boards and Guilds, who Tanji politely described as radicals and sceptics, “wild ducks”, in the parlance that Kevin might have used in his professional circles. One or two might have justified the description “wild-eyed lunatics”, although Kevin would later glean - through Tanji’s efforts at translation - many of these free thinkers would offer germane and insightful contributions to the debate.

The delegates and representatives proper were attended by a vast army of assistants: guides and interpreters, secretaries and note-takers, as well as an array of errand-runners, bag-carriers and general hangers-on of all descriptions. Kevin was amused to note that some of the council members seemed unable to function without at least half a dozen flunkies continually rushing about in frantic activity, while others were able to conduct their business with an air of serene calm, and with just one quiet companion who never moved from their side.

The venue for the Convocation was a vast auditorium which was part of a facility not far from the crossing in the world of Lyndesfarne. The entire site was the equivalent, Kevin believed, to the headquarters of the Guardians in his own world, at Cliviger

Grange. The Palace of the Convocation - Tanji's slightly quaint rendition of the Lyndesfarne name for the building - was built underground, as most structures over a certain size tended to be in this world, and entered through a small and heavily-ornamented structure at ground level.

Inside, the meeting hall was immense, larger than the theatre he had attended with Tanji months ago. It was much less ornate, almost minimalist in its approach, although without the brutalist poured-concrete effects that at least some equivalent buildings in his own world might have featured. The walls were in fact finished in places with wood panelling and in other areas with what looked like carpet, for reasons Kevin assumed must have had something to do with the acoustic properties of the enormous room.

Under a high and gently-curved ceiling lit in that mysterious and magical way Kevin had never quite understood, rows of surprisingly comfortable seats formed an arc - perhaps a quarter of a circle - and steeply raked so that everyone's view was unobstructed. Each seat was equipped with its own lectern, a surface big enough for a notebook or one of those magical slates that were apparently widely used for communication in this world. Wide flights of steps at intervals allowed easy access and, unlike theatres in this world and Kevin's own, it was possible to reach one's designated place without disturbing others in the process.

At the focus of the arc of seating, a curved stage or dais was established. A few of the most senior members of the Board of Control - including the Ferryman - sat behind a long table set to one side of the stage. The remainder of the dais was empty, although Kevin would soon learn that it would be intermittently occupied by speakers, singly or in small groups, who would argue - variously rationally and vociferously - for one course of action or another.

Perhaps as an antidote to the political factions on every side, the Ferryman had gathered around her a group of advisors and experts whose judgement she could trust, or at least to which she would give serious attention. This group of wild ducks included Bret, which seemed reasonable enough to him, as well as Tanji and himself.

Kevin was worried about this last inclusion. He did not regard himself as an expert on anything associated with the crossing. Rather, he was a mere technical advisor on a straightforward construction task, a civil engineering problem which, although complex in certain technological ways, was mostly a standard problem. On the other hand, he mused, Bret had valued his insight, as a stranger and complete novice at magic, in the various

investigations they had undertaken together. Perhaps, he concluded, that he too was one of those independently-minded free thinkers after all.

There did seem to be a fair amount of gossip and finger-pointing in his direction, although no-one was openly hostile and several complete strangers approached him, introduced themselves - sometimes through an interpreter - and asked his opinion on this topic or that. In general, he had no pre-formed opinion and so did his best to express all sides of the argument before giving what he hoped was a balanced view. To his relief, this seemed to be acceptable and his questioners usually retired apparently satisfied with his response.

In this company, the Ferryman was not the sole arbiter of the course of action, although the exact balance of power and responsibility between her and the representatives in the hall never became entirely clear to Kevin. However, it did become clear to him that decisions - especially one of this enormity - would not be rushed. He had perhaps expected a long day, with a consensus finally emerging late in the evening, but he was wrong. As six o'clock approached, the Ferryman - acting, it seemed, as chairman of the Convocation's moderation panel - announced that today's session was closed and that they would resume in the morning.

After questioning Tanji, who did not know but was able to make some enquiries, what also became clear was that policy and action were to be decided by vote but, for a question of this magnitude, a simple majority was not enough. Rather, a two-thirds majority was required to reach a conclusion, with no abstentions - everyone was required to commit themselves to a view - and the Convocation would continue in session until a decision was reached, regardless of how long that took. There was an initial vote taken in the afternoon of that first day, although no-one seemed to expect that a resolution would be arrived at. In the event, a great many people appeared to abstain, perhaps genuinely undecided or maybe still trying to determine the political ebb and flow between the various groups and factions.

Life as a Convocation attendee soon fell into a regular pattern for Kevin and Tanji. As he would have expected, the bulk of the proceedings were carried out in the language of Lyndesfarne. Speaker after speaker addressed the delegates from the dais, following some arcane and carefully-managed schedule which seemed to form some kind of balance between the factions and the organisations being represented.

Even Tanji's skilled translation tended to falter when trying to follow the convoluted and often very technical points being made by the delegates. Also, attempting to interpret the words of endless speakers was understandably exhausting for Tanji and, after a few days, she began to look tired and drawn. She complained of a persistent sore throat and Kevin noticed that she began to fall asleep early but then wake in the night and be unable to get back to sleep, or fell into some kind of a dream-like state where she muttered phrases in many languages, some of which Kevin recognised from the previous day's proceedings.

Once Kevin realised what was causing her the discomfort, he begged her to cease the near-simultaneous translation that she had been trained to do, and instead just provide a précis of those points which were sufficiently non-technical that he stood some chance of understanding. To his relief, this removed the pressure from Tanji and she soon returned to her usual ebullient self.

The days dragged on and on. The two lovers went home every day after the sessions closed - a twenty-minute trip on foot and by portal - and stayed in Tanji's little suite of room at her Uncle and Aunt's house. Her Uncle, although engaged at the Guild of Transportation, was not senior enough to attend the Convocation himself, and Kevin spent an hour or so each evening over dinner relating the salient points of each day's session for his edification.

In truth, Kevin found many of the Convocation sessions boring, although he felt compelled - from a sense of duty, he supposed - to attend all of the sessions, even though the subject matter was often arcane in the extreme. Even so, one speaker on the fourth day caught his attention and Tanji too pricked up her ears.

"You'll want to follow this," she whispered to Kevin, before lapsing into the sing-song tone of voice which indicated that she was translating from the language of Lyndesfarne.

The woman on the stage was short and motherly in appearance, an impression enhanced by her straight silver-grey hair cut sensibly short, although there was a strong suggestion that her locks were once much longer and very blonde. For several minutes, she spoke emotively about the ever-present and now increasing risks, even threats, to the relations and children of the Old Families, with special reference to those in Kevin's world.

"For untold generations," she went on, "Our peoples have made marriages and alliances across the Two Worlds. These have been successful, or mostly so, in the majority of cases; stable long-term

relationships bringing up well-balanced and capable children, wise in the ways of the world.”

“We have all heard stories, from our friends, our companions, even our own relatives, how loved ones felt threatened by opponents of the status quo, so threatened that they felt forced to go into hiding, in some cases cutting themselves off so completely from their family that they were never to see their own children again.”

“Many of you will have heard,” she went on, “The tale of a young man from the Other World, called Tom, who disappeared in the company of two other men nearly sixty years ago, and whose whereabouts were unknown until the Ferryman’s daughter and her companions discovered their bodies in recent days.”

The woman on the stage clearly knew where Tanji and Kevin were sitting, judging by the way she waved an arm in their direction. Many people turned to look, craning their heads to see the mysterious stranger who had so critically influenced recent events. Kevin was faintly embarrassed by all the attention. He knew that he had not intended to disrupt or change anyone’s way of life, in this world or his own. But, somehow, events had transpired that had forced him to action, to a position where his decisions - however inadvertent - were pivotal in current events.

“Even Tom, who was carefully brought up without knowledge of this world somehow found his own destiny, and was eventually re-introduced to the secret world, that secret that we here all share.”

She paused, sweeping the auditorium with her eyes.

“But I too have a secret,” she resumed, “One which I am here to share with you this afternoon. Tom’s parents were also my parents.”

The noise in the room, which had hitherto been the silence of those listening politely, suddenly broke into a chorus of amazement and disbelief. The susurrations eventually subsided slowly, and she was able to resume.

“Tom was my brother. He was born in the Other World, his mother a native of that land and his father a Visitor from this world. Even when he was but a tiny child, the parents felt themselves threatened, by whom I do not know, and felt forced to change their names and go into hiding far away from the crossing at Lyndesfarne, and away from any suggestion of an association with the Other World. There, in quiet and safe anonymity, Tom parents brought up two other children, both girls: myself and my younger sister.”

“These recent political revelations, while obviously important, for me have a much more personal relevance. I never knew my brother, and my brother never knew his parents, not really. And can you

imagine what it must have been like, for parents of two daughters, to know that they also had a son, a boy that they could never see again?"

The woman on the stage was crying now.

"And so I ask you all to consider," she said to the Convocation with tears streaming down her face, "Was the separation of my family worth it, in order to preserve the secrets of the Other World?"

Chapter Twenty Six

After his first attempt at dancing with Milly at the barn dance, Jean-Luc made a serious attempt to monopolise her attentions for the rest of the night. He did not appreciate it at the time, of course, but this was quite definitely the intention of the young woman as well. The two young people spent much of the evening in conversation, somehow unable to tear their attention away from one another, all under the watchful eyes of parents and her older sisters, and indeed a good fraction of the older part of the community, who recognised the opportunity for a new topic for gossip when they saw one.

So it was no surprise to anyone, therefore, when Jean-Luc appeared on the doorstep of Milly's parents' home a few evenings later, clearly carefully washed and dressed in his second-best clothes, and asked for an interview with her father. It was not long afterwards that, two evenings a week, Jean-Luc could be seen walking out with the local girl. Her family initially appeared to be, understandably, suspicious of this stranger, a foreigner with a strange accent and peculiar manners, but were soon won over. The following year, the banns were read and the forthcoming wedding planned.

During this period, Jean-Luc continued his work on the bridge, gradually becoming a trusted member of the local stonemason's community. The work was steady and the money was more than adequate to cover his limited needs, especially since he had almost completely stopped his - already infrequent - visits to taverns and public houses to listen to tall tales. Encouraged by his fiancée, he saved his pennies for when they would be married.

Slowly, the great arches of the bridge took shape, leaping gracefully over the water supported by the heavy buttresses that consumed nearly as much cut stone as the rest of the structure. Eventually, work moved from the arches themselves to finishing touches such as laying the cobbles for the roadbed, and carefully cutting and fitting capping stones for the walls that would prevent men and horses from falling from the bridge into the sea.

In due course, the bridge was declared complete and a grand opening ceremony was held, attended by various local dignitaries as well as a considerable contingent of what were variously described by the rougher elements amongst the workers as "toffs" and "bigwigs". Of course, mere stonemasons like Jean-Luc were not

close the actual ribbon-cutting ceremony itself, but the tented fete that had been set out on the grassed area close to the causeway's end dispensed meat and beer to all comers, resulting in a celebratory atmosphere that most would remember for many a year - although in many cases filtered through the pain of a handover the following morning.

The opening ceremony itself he carefully recorded in his diary, and he also included some of the highlights in his next letter. He had continued his habit of writing to *Maman* as frequently as he could manage, transcribing and translating from his journal snippets of the ceremony and the fair afterwards.

It seemed however that the Fates decreed that she would not read this particular missive. A short and formal letter from the majordomo at the grand house where she worked told him of the death of *Maman* after a short illness described as "the flux" and informing him that she had bequeathed to him a tidy sum of money now being held in trust in a bank nearby. Jean-Luc was immensely saddened by the news, made worse by the realisation that he could not even attend the funeral, as there was no way he could afford either the time or money for the trip.

After the bridge was opened, the migrant workers began to leave in droves; indeed, many had already departed for newly industrial regions in Newcastle and places further south, no doubt soon to be employed in the construction of railways lines and cotton mills. Jean-Luc too began to wonder what he should do. There was still stone-cutting to be completed in the quarry, for the finishing touches to buildings and minor bridges in the vicinity, but soon the work would begin to dry up.

Even before their nuptials, Milly began to express an interest in France and in particular the Champagne region, perhaps tantalised by Jean-Luc's description of sweeping vineyards warming in the sunshine. After their marriage, she waxed lyrical about the prospect, a proposal which Jean-Luc was already beginning to take seriously, being minded to indulge his young wife.

The proposition of leaving the area and travelling to France received fewer objections from her parents than Jean-Luc might have expected. It was not very much later that, after packing a surprising number of baskets and cases, Milly bade a tearful goodbye to her parents and sisters before clambering into a wagon to start the long journey. The return trip was much swifter and more comfortable than the one he made on his way to England half a decade before. This time, he was able to afford carriage fares and inn lodgings for much

of the journey and was able to make private arrangements with carters for the remainder.

There was no particular problem of travel at this time, after the overthrow of the Emperor Napoleon and his exile to Elba, and outside of the major cities things were only mildly more confused than they would otherwise have been. Their journey was tedious but otherwise unremarkable, with no more than the expected number of inspections - which were in any case little more than naked solicitations for bribes.

The young couple were able to settle down in Epernay with remarkably little difficulty. They were able to rent modest lodgings in the outskirts of the town. Milly took her wifely duties very seriously, to Jean-Luc's great pleasure, and she soon set about learning the language in the determined fashion Jean-Luc had learned she would adopt when she felt it was the right thing to do. Very soon her knowledge of French was verging on being better than Jean-Luc's English, at least as far as everyday interactions were concerned. He imagined that practice every day in the markets and shops, passing the time with the tradesmen and the other womenfolk.

Jean-Luc sought work immediately, and he expected that he would return to labouring in the vineyards as he had done so in previous years. By a stroke of luck, a chance remark with a passer-by prompted him to approach a Champagne house, combining as he did both a knowledge of the English language with an understanding of how the vintages was made. At this time, the market for these fine wines in England was expanding rapidly, and he was able to assist the English buyers in their own language.

This more responsible job brought in more money than he had ever expected to be able to earn meant that he was able to keep his new wife in a style at least as good as her hardworking father had been able to. The savings and *Maman's* modest bequest permitted him, after discussions with Milly and on taking advice from his acquaintances, to buy a plot of land, a vineyard holding that allowed him to grow his own grapes for sale to the grand houses. It turned out that his choice had been astute and his grapes were often judged to be of the finest quality and commanded premium prices, allowing him to expand his holdings in later years.

As Jean-Luc and Milly settled into a quiet family life, his wife gently discouraged his interest in what he had witnessed in the Caves in France and what he had heard and seen at the Lyndesfarne Bridge. She quietly attempted to persuade him that it was all the product of an overheated and overactive youthful imagination. Recognising the

determination in his young wife, Jean-Luc never argued about it, and any such ideas soon dropped out of their everyday conversation.

For some reason, Jean-Luc and Milly had not started a family, despite all the usual expectations and performances of a newlywed couple. After a certain amount of worry on this score, Jean-Luc finally summoned up the courage to broach the subject, in a delicate conversation with his wife in the middle of the night.

“It will happen,” Milly said with reassuring confidence, “My mother did not have children for nearly three years after her marriage, but then she produced three daughters, one after another. I’m sure it will be the same for us.”

Jean-Luc was comforted and, perhaps entirely by coincidence, his own family started to appear almost immediately afterwards. His wife gave birth to a fine son the following year, followed in due course by a second boy and a daughter. The children were happy and healthy, growing up in a loving and generally bi-lingual household. Their father’s increasingly responsible position at the Champagne house and the cultivation of his own grapes left him with plenty of work to do, but with both time and inclination to pamper his wife and to treat his children on occasion.

Unbeknownst to Jean-Luc, Milly too kept her secrets over the decades. She genuinely loved her husband, although their meeting had not entirely been left to chance and her parents were much less wary of the stranger in their midst than he might have imagined. Her family had been resident in the area around Lyndesfarne for generations and had long been privy to at least some of the secrets of the crossing for ages. There was a tight network of these Old Families in the region around the crossing, in both worlds, and they kept a watchful eye on newcomers of all kinds.

Jean-Luc had been under more careful observation than he knew, and, while he was not considered to be a serious risk, it was agreed that steps should be taken to divert the curious young man. Plans and options were considered, and the approach of distracting the newcomer with one of the Old Families’ younger daughters seemed to be the lowest risk. Falling in love and the engagement to be married were of course just steps along the way, and the bride could be relied upon to guide her new husband away from the area around the Lyndesfarne crossing.

A move back to Epernay, well away from Lyndesfarne was to be desired, where another clan of the Old Families could provide a degree of surveillance. But this was not something that could be rushed, especially since Jean-Luc’s no-doubt formidable *Maman*

would want to know more. Time and patience was enough to avoid this obstacle, fortunately, and a few hints would help the young couple along the way.

Jean-Luc frequently smiled indulgently at his wife's gossiping friends, pleased that she found a degree of social integration despite her initial lack of understanding of the language. He never once imagined that this was all a ploy, to keep him under the eye of first one and then another of the Old Families in this country, to make sure the secrets of the Other World remained closed to him.

Chapter Twenty Seven

A very few of the addresses at the Grand Convocation were immediately understandable to Kevin. One such speaker was a late arrival, a heavy-set man who hurried in puffing and looking unusually agitated. It was Jean-Marc, who Kevin had met in that grand restaurant in the company of Bret and Tanji all those long months ago.

When the Frenchman arrived during a break in the proceedings, Kevin and Tanji were standing near one of the entrances at the lower level, right at the foot of the stage from which appeals and addresses were being made. They were talking to Bret, who had been absent a great deal recently, apparently engaged in a series of mysterious errands whose purpose was carefully not described and upon whose instruction was equally carefully unspecified.

As he passed them in the walkway, the Frenchman evidently recognised Bret immediately and waved a brief greeting to him. Jean-Marc then frowned in the direction of Kevin and Tanji as if could not quite place where he had met them before. He obviously did not have time to consider this further, as he scuttled up the short flight of steps onto the stage and hurried over to the Ferryman. She turned and raised a hand in greeting, beckoning him over to the long table where she and the other moderators sat.

Just at that moment, a bell sounded to mark the resumption of the afternoon session after the break. Kevin and Tanji made their way back to their designated places which were set well back in the steeply ranked seating. They settled themselves, and Kevin opened a fresh page in the old-fashioned bound notebook he had been using to capture whatever insights were available to his comprehension through the twin fogs of language translation and detailed technical magical descriptions.

The delegates waited with varying degrees of patience for the next speaker to be announced, as they had done on numerous previous occasions over the last days. Unusually, on this occasion, there was a long delay while Jean-Marc and the Ferryman spoke quietly, their voices obviously outside whatever magical influence usually made sounds on the stage audible throughout the vast hall. Other members of the panel on the stage joined in, swivelling in their seats or getting

up and moving to stand behind the Ferryman to engage in the discussion.

After ten minutes or so, the delegates began to get restless, clearly wondering what was going on. Whispering and muttering erupted in patches all over the auditorium.

“Do you know what’s happening?” Kevin asked Tanji.

“No,” she replied, “I don’t think anyone does. But what’s that Jean-Marc has produced from his pocket?”

Kevin squinted at the stage, but could not make out what the object was.

Finally, Jean-Marc was ready to address the Grand Convocation, and was announced by full name and title, in the language of Lyndesfarne. He stood forward on the stage, framed by the spotlights whose source Kevin had been unable to determine and shaking his leonine hair away from his collar. He was dressed in the typically Gallic style that Kevin had noted when they had last met, although he looked less urbane than before, with a distinct air of both stress and embarrassment.

He cleared his throat, the cough clearly audible throughout the auditorium thanks to whatever subtle and magical means of amplification was being employed. He held up something in his hand, something brown and rectangular. Kevin peered at the stage, squinting to try and make out what the man was holding.

“Look here,” Tanji said quietly from beside him.

She had deftly manipulated the magnifying plate that stood in front of her, then pointed with her finger to the image. Kevin could now easily see that Jean-Luc was holding a book, an old-fashioned leather-bound tome which looked rather the worse for wear, quite probably because it really was as old as its appearance suggested.

Jean-Marc spoke in English, slowly but entirely understandable by Kevin. There was a whisper of translation from around the room. Clearly, not everyone was as comfortable with English as Bret and Tanji, a fact which made Kevin feel marginally less embarrassed by his inability to comprehend more than the most basic expressions in the language of Lyndesfarne.

“I need to make an apology to you all,” he began, “On behalf of my family.”

Before he could continue, the whispering became a full-scale roar as speculation on the meaning of Jean-Marc’s blunt statement spread around the Convocation. The Ferryman banged what looked to Kevin like an old-fashioned gavel, the kind he would have expected to see in a court of law, and the hubbub began to die down.

“There have been rumours,” he continued finally, “About a letter, an account of the closure of the old crossing at Epernay. An account that had fuelled suggestions that the crossing was closed in such a way that it could be easily re-opened.”

He paused, no doubt for the dramatic effect Jean-Marc so often desired.

“So I must explain to you all where these rumours, and the letter, came from,” he continued, “And then you will understand why I must proffer my most profound apologies.”

Again, the hubbub - which had never quite ceased even while Jean-marc was speaking - rose up like the buzzing of angry bees. The Ferryman rapped the gavel again, twice, then glared around the hall until the noises died away.

“I am of the Old Families,” Jean-Marc resumed finally, “The families who have been the custodians of the secrets of the Epernay crossing for centuries. I myself can trace my ancestors back to the time when that crossing was open, and indeed to that unfortunate period when it was closed. Some of you will know that I have dedicated my life to protecting the secret of the old crossing, working tirelessly to detect and circumvent any threat of discovery.”

Kevin wondered just how hard the work actually was. He had formed the view that, while Jean-Marc had perhaps been energetic in years past, he now tended towards being fat and lazy in his middle years.

“Through my Mother’s family, I can trace my ancestors back for centuries,” Jean-Marc said with a trace of pride, “In particular, there is a direct line of descent from one Jean-Luc, who worked in the vineyards of Champagne at the time when the crossing at Epernay was closed. Jean-Luc’s wife was a scion of one of the Old Families, one of the quiet family groups which, in later years, kept the secret of the old crossing safe for generations; the families who kept a low profile, living quietly and, as is the tradition carefully passing on the secret to the more trustworthy of their offspring.”

Jean-Marc looked suddenly shame-faced at these words, but then seemed to pull himself together to continue.

“My forebear Jean-Luc has a history I have only today learned from my *Maman*,” he went on, “He was an eye-witness to the closure of the old crossing at Epernay. He actually watched the agents - all three of them - and recorded with an untutored eye the movements and gestures this trio used before the closure event itself.”

There was instant uproar in the vast hall, everyone seeming to speak at once. Kevin could make out the repetition of several words, one of which was “three”.

“What’s going on?” he asked Tanji urgently, “What’s the importance of three people?”

“It only takes one person to close a crossing,” Tanji reminded him, “If it is closed irreversibly. So, if several people were engaged, then it is proof positive that the crossing could be re-opened.”

The Ferryman banged her gavel, which had little effect, then banged it much harder twice more. The noise ebbed, the Ferryman turning her head to stare reprovingly at the inevitable hold-outs until they too shut up.

“Despite his humble origins, Jean-Luc discovered more of the secrets of the crossing and of the Other World. After the closure at Epernay, he made his way to the Lyndesfarne crossing where he actually worked as a mason on the construction of the Bridge - the original Lyndesfarne Bridge - for several years. He learned much about our world, I regret to inform you.”

He paused again, scanning the rows of delegates in the hall.

“My mother was on the death-bed, I am afraid to say,” Jean-Marc added sadly, “And the reason I am late in my arrival here is that I was summoned to her bedside before she died. It was she who wrote the letter anonymously to the Ferryman and she enclosed another letter, the one written by Jean-Luc to his own mother after he had witnessed the closure of the crossing, the one that makes it clear the status of the old crossing.”

“That must have been the letter that Bret showed us!” Tanji squeaked.

Kevin nodded. He could not have made himself heard over the howls of the delegates that surrounded him.

“There is more,” Jean-Marc shouted.

The Ferryman waved at him to wait until the delegates had resumed their composure and settled in their seats.

“Jean-Luc kept a diary, a journal of his thoughts and observations, and the letters to and from his mother, a book that not even his own wife was aware of. This volume he handed on to his sons, and so the book passed down the years, without much attention, and with no thought in anyone’s mind to read it. It was only my mother, recalling the dusty book that her own mother had given her, who read it closely and finally realised its importance. So, on behalf of my family, I must offer my most abject apologies for keeping this secret from the Board of Control and this Convocation for so long.”

He paused, eyes on the ground.

“Now, I have turned over the diary to the Board, to do with as they will. I have read much of it, and it documents many observations - from an outsider - on this world and the crossings. I am afraid that my own mother has long considered me a dilettante, a wastrel, and not sufficiently reliable to be the recipient of this particular secret. But now she is dead, and the responsibility cannot pass to me. Again, I am so sorry.”

Jean-Marc bent his head again, as if in supplication, then scurried off the stage and down the steps that led to the exit.

The debates in various quarters of the auditorium started up again in earnest, many people evidently entirely uninhibited about expressing their views of their confusion. Neither Kevin nor Tanji could make out very much of what was being discussed, and Kevin was beginning to feel distinctly disoriented by the cacophony. Then, much to his surprise, he heard his own name - his full name, one which he almost never used - as well as that of Tanji, being called out over the magical tannoy system, the sound cutting through the racket of voices.

“Kevin, and Tanji, if you please,” repeated the clear voice of the Ferryman, “Come down to the stage.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“History tells us that the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was very fond of champagne,” Bret began, with what Kevin felt was a familiar air of settling down to tell a tale.

“It was partially his influence that gave the Champagne region around Reims” - Bret pronounced the name with much rolling of the R’s - “and Epernay came to have so much prestige in the wine trade.”

Kevin sat back, recognising the cue. Tanji also relaxed, seating herself comfortably on her side next to him on the sofa with her legs tucked up. They were seated in the Orangery at the grand hotel in Reims, comfortably replete after the extensive, not to say expansive, dinner. Tiny cups of *Café Express* and delicate *Petit Fours* sat as yet untouched in front of them, and each of them clutched a large balloon containing a generous measure of a very fine Armagnac.

The Orangery was cool and dimly-lit at this late hour, and they were the only occupants. They had been almost the last to leave the dining room, and it seemed that most of the other patrons had retired to bed. The waiting staff, discreet and patient as ever, were out of sight, although Kevin was sure that a single ring of the tiny bell that stood on the table next to the coffee would bring an immediate response.

“He also introduced the noble art and practice of *Sabrage*,” Bret continued, sounding distinctly ironic.

“What’s that?” Kevin asked, genuinely confused.

Bret smiled.

“Well, some people would say that it’s a waste of good Champagne,” he replied, “Although, to be fair, if it’s done properly you hardly spill a drop.”

“Yes, but what is it?” Kevin pressed.

Bret’s smile widened.

“It’s a method of opening Champagne bottles invented by Napoleon and his cronies,” he explained, “Basically, it’s a way of opening a bottle using a sabre.”

“You mean a sword?”

“Well, it needs to be a fairly heavy sword, and the curved sabres carried by cavalry in that era were more-or-less perfect. And, no, you don’t try and cut off the top with a sweeping cut,” he added to forestall Kevin’s objection, “The technique is to slide the sabre along

the bottle from the base to the cork. The blade catches the rim that secures the wire retainer and cracks the glass. If done properly, the bottle neck containing the cork *should* break off cleanly and allow the wine to be poured.

“And if you do it wrong?”

“You’ve got a mixture of splintered glass and foaming wine under pressure in your lap,” Bret replied.

“Yuk.”

“Quite. Napoleon liked his Champagne. Well, that’s what the history books say,” he continued, lowering his voice conspiratorially, “But there was another reason that the Emperor was so interested in this part of the world.”

Bret’s armchair was no more than a few feet from the sofa occupied by Kevin and Tanji, but still Kevin strained to hear the other man’s voice.

“It seems that Napoleon had heard rumours of the crossing to the Other World. How this happened no-one knows, although it is thought that, under his despotic rule, many people were keen to curry favour. However it happened, the myths were enough to gain his ear. Curious, Napoleon gave instructions to send out spies and informers, with almost no success, but unfortunately just enough to keep the Emperor’s interest.”

Bret swirled the brandy around in its glass and sipped appreciatively. Tanji leant forward and took the smallest on the delicate *Petit Fours*, popping it into her mouth much to Kevin’s amazement. He was personally convinced he would not be able to eat another thing for at least a week.

“Napoleon was frustrated,” Bret resumed, “Something he was not used to. He found the time to investigate in person, an intent disguised by his genuine taste for the finest Champagne and his interest in the techniques used to produce the wine. He and his followers patronised the Grand Houses, investigated the vineyards and inspected the cellars. It seemed that no secret would for long be hidden from his searches.”

Kevin sipped at his own brandy while Bret continued.

“We had for a long time many allies and agents in the Houses. Our spies reported that the Emperor was - perhaps understandably - fascinated by the presence of another whole world, a secret world, one over which a megalomaniac like him would wish to exert a degree of control, perhaps even attempt a conquest. He would naturally find irresistible even the suggestion of such a possibility.”

Kevin found a moment to reflect that Bret was such an accomplished teller of tales, and wondered whether there was some cultural aspect of the Other World which encouraged such behaviour, or was it just that Bret himself found comfortable. He could not tell. He sat back with his brandy glass in his hand and listened carefully to what Bret had to say.

“Of course an Emperor does not ever travel alone, but was always accompanied by a large cohort, a small army of staff and servants and general hangers-on, and which of course included a considerable contingent of officers and guards. The presence of large numbers of inquisitive individuals inevitably made the operations of the crossing difficult to hide, so when Napoleon was in town all but the most critical of traffic between the Two Worlds was stopped.”

Bret again swirled the bandy in his glass and studied the fingers of the amber fluid as they ran down the sides of the glass.

“For long periods, the export of Champagne effectively ceased, which had the effect of making much more of the wine available in this world as the Houses strove to minimise their losses. So, for example, more of this wine was shipped to the British Isles, despite the ongoing animosity between the British government and Napoleonic France. The wine became very popular in your country, and indeed it remains so today.”

Bret paused while Tanji again took one of the tiny *Petit Fours* from the plate on the table.

“At the time, many people in my world expected that the Emperor’s interest would wane after a time. After all, he did have all of the complexities of a fractious empire and external enemies to worry about. All they would have to do was to keep a low profile and wait it out.”

Bret shook his head sadly before continuing.

“Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of dithering and indecisiveness amongst those charged with the governance of the crossing. One aspect agreed early was that, in the event of a decision to close the crossing, the action taken when Napoleon and his cohort was not in the vicinity, since they did not want to take the risk of discovery even at that late stage.”

Bret took another sip from his brandy glass.

“When Napoleon had left after his third visit, there was a collective sign of relief. Many hoped that the Emperor would not return, that he would be distracted by more pressing events in his current demesnes, his wars and conquests, that he would forget about these strange and still-unverified myths and rumours. But it was not

to be. The news came that Napoleon was to return and, after long and heated debate long into the night, the decision was made. The crossing would be closed.”

Bret put his brandy glass down on the table and leaned forward earnestly.

“A critical debate was the manner in which the cross was to be closed,” he said softly, “All crossings can be closed very quickly, almost in a heartbeat; this is an integral part of the design of the crossing magic. But this kind of emergency closure is explosive, enormously destructive and, in caves underneath a populated area, such an explosion would undoubtedly collapse buildings for miles around and quite possible kill or injure many people. It was decided at an early stage that such an emergency closure was neither necessary nor appropriate.”

Tanji was motionless, clearly listening intently. Kevin felt like his ears were sticking up in order not to miss a word.

“Even so, there was a further choice to be made about the manner of the closure. A passage between the Two Worlds can be closed disruptively, but not explosively, in such a way that they cannot ever be used again. Or, it can be closed in a manner such that it can relatively easily be re-opened. The last approach is a great deal more complex and requires a great deal of subtlety and skill in the deployment of the necessary magic. Indeed, it cannot be done by a single person; it would require the skills of at least three experts working very closely together.”

“By contrast, the emergency closure procedure can be done very quickly, by anybody who knows the secret - but rather simple - gestures required. Clearly, this is a secret limited to a few of the more senior Guardians at a crossing. But even so, there is no special skill or knowledge of magic is needed to invoke the magic.”

Bret leaned forward and lowered his voice even more.

“Now, the official records from the time make it clear that the second process - closure in a way that did not cause huge disruption but nevertheless prevented it from ever being re-opened - was the one officially sanctioned. A Senior Convenor - from the organisation which was the forerunner of the Board of Control - was dispatched to carry out this direction, to close the crossing as quickly as possible, before Napoleon and his cohort arrived, and to do so in a fashion that prohibited it from ever being re-opened.”

Bret took an unsealed envelope from inside his shirt, opened it and unfolded several sheets of paper. As far as Kevin could tell, they

were modern Photostat copies of pages of some old letter, one filled with crabbed and spidery handwriting.

“Now I am being led to believe that this instruction was disobeyed,” Bret said, indicating the unfolded sheets, “This letter contains a detailed description - in an authentically archaic written form of English, I might add - of the fact that three people invoked the closure of the crossing, as well as a detailed description of the gestures used. The account was clearly transcribed by someone who did not know what they were witnessing, but it is obvious even to the most cursory glance that the number and complexity of the motions meant that the crossing was closed in a way that meant it was intended to be reopened.”

Bret paused again.

“And it has presumably been that way for several centuries.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Kevin turned and stared at Tanji.

“What do they want with us?” he asked.

Tanji shook her head, then stood up and took him by the hand. Together, they made their way down the steps between the seating in the auditorium. As they moved, heads turned to look at them. Kevin was perhaps glad that he could hear little and understand none of the remarks being made. Tanji held her head up, glancing neither to left nor right and pointedly ignoring the gossip, and Kevin did his best to emulate her stance. The two lovers walked at a steady pace, being especially careful to avoid tripping - which would have been hugely embarrassing - until they reached the lowest level. They turned and walked along the open space in front of the stage - now clearly visible to everyone in the hall - and up the steps so recently used by Jean-Marc.

Once on the stage, Kevin automatically held up his right hand in the style of greeting he had learned to use in this world. The Ferryman had different ideas, however; she stood up and hurried around the long table where she and the other moderators sat, and intercepted Kevin and Tanji before they were more than five steps across the dais. She warmly embraced Kevin, who had not been expecting such a move but, after freezing for a startled moment, he was able to respond similarly. She then repeated the gesture for Tanji’s benefit. A clearer demonstration of the important woman’s personal trust would be hard to imagine, Kevin realised.

“Wait here a moment,” she said softly.

The Ferryman returned to the long table to collect the book that Jean-Marc had presented to her, then returned to the bemused-looking couple. She gently guided Kevin and Tanji to the centre of the stage, under the magic spotlights, the place where countless speakers had addressed the Convocation.

“For those of you who do not know,” she said, in careful English, “This is Kevin, of the Other World, the architect of the New Bridge at Lyndesfarne. A man whose insight and bravery has led to the solution of several mysteries. And a personal friend of mine.”

Applause broke out around the auditorium, politely enthusiastic in many quarters and noticeably less so in a few others. Kevin nodded courteously, not entirely sure how to react to the plaudits.

“And Tanji, of the Guild of Directions,” the Ferryman went on, “Kevin’s personal Guide and friend. One who has suffered rather too many ordeals at the hands of our enemies. And also a good friend of mine.”

The applause resumed, no less energetically for Tanji as it was for Kevin. At that moment Bret appeared in the wings and was waved over by the Ferryman.

“As independent but interested observers,” she said, addressing the whole auditorium, “I wish to ask that Kevin and Tanji undertake a study of the Jean-Luc’s diary, supervised by my daughter Bret and two others from the moderation panel. Please indicate your approval, or otherwise, in the usual way.”

She then spoke again, in the same formal tone but in the language of Lyndesfarne. Kevin suspected she was repeating her words so that everyone clearly understood the request, although he was not paying very much attention to what was said just at the moment. Rather, he was worrying about the sudden request that had been made of him, and whether he would be able to carry out the commission adequately.

“Why me?” he hissed to Bret, as the Ferryman shepherded them all back towards the edge of the stage, “I’m not a trained linguist!”

“I know you’re not,” Bret replied gently, “But you are a native speaker of English, and you do know something of this world, having learned about it relatively recently. So perhaps you are the perfect person to provide a view about what Jean-Luc wrote, and whether he understood what he saw - or whether he was just making it up.”

They were ushered into a side room, small only by comparison with the vast hall outside and decorated in a cool professional way that Kevin half-recognised - a style appropriate to a working environment, with conference-room fixtures and fittings intended to ensure that the room was not a distraction to important thoughts. It was also brightly-lit, with sunlight entering from one of those magic windows that had so confused Kevin on his first acquaintance, as well as the apparently source-less magical lighting which was so widely used in this world.

The vote had clearly been in their favour - the Ferryman never seemed in any doubt on the outcome - and they were soon joined by two others, a man and a woman both with grey ponytails, that Kevin recognised from the panel on the stage. The newcomers introduced themselves in the usual Lyndesfarne fashion, by holding up their right hand in a greeting and speaking their name. The woman was

called Yrrene and the man Keel. Kevin instinctively responded in the same way.

Keel had Jean-Luc's book in his hand, which he formally presented to Kevin. He took the book, looked at the worn brown cover for a few seconds, then sank into a chair, putting the book on the wide table that filled the centre of the room. He put his head in his hands, resting his elbows on the table.

"How are we going to make this work?" he wondered aloud, half to himself.

"That is up to you," said the woman in a friendly voice, "We are here to see that you get any help that you need, and that any conclusions you draw are based on all the evidence available."

The man nodded in agreement, although his countenance looked altogether sterner.

"OK," Kevin sighed, sitting up straight and pulling the book towards him, "I'll just start by just having a look to see if I can make out anything. Give me a few minutes."

Yrrene nodded gravely and sat in the chair opposite him. Keel put his hands behind his back and moved to the window, appearing to study the view in a show of apparent indifference. Bret apparently decided there was little he could do to help, and slipped out of the room on errands of his own after a few minutes. Tanji sat on the next chair, perhaps unsure of how to help, but re-assured by the way that Kevin held her hand as he studied the mysterious volume.

Kevin read through the book quickly, cover to cover. It was more a notebook than a diary, as it did not have entries for every day, but Jean-Luc had written pages of notes and thoughts when something of interest occurred. As it turned out, it was only a small volume and the writing was not so hard to decipher once he had gained a little practice. Given its provenance, he was unsurprised to find it full of an archaic style of writing and with an occasionally jarring choice of words.

The opening section was a description of the closure of the crossing, convincingly written from an eyewitness perspective. Amazingly, it seemed that the man had somehow managed to hide inside the caves while all others were encouraged to leave, by luck alone as far as Kevin could tell. There, Jean-Luc had seen something amazing, something he barely understood but seemed determined to learn more. Much of the rest of the volume consisted of the reproduction of numerous stories, apparently heard from a range of casual acquaintances and bar-room associates, together with some

impressively shrewd notes and speculations upon their accuracy and interpretation.

After gaining an initial impression, Kevin read the journal again, much more slowly, scribbling page after page of notes in his own notebook. He discussed the detail of the content with Tanji, and with Yrrene, for hour after hour. Even Keel thawed sufficiently to admit to a degree of interest, and started to ask astute questions from his post by the window. They worked long into the night, Kevin bent over the table. Tanji barely left his side, except to bring him a plate of sandwiches and, at various times, to present him with fresh mugs of the hot chocolate that he had learned to enjoy.

Kevin was astonished when he looked up and saw that the window was almost completely dark. There was just a red tinge in the sky where the sun had set and a few lights from the other buildings of the complex. He realised he was exhausted, and was duly guided home by Tanji in a daze, his head swirling with trying to understand what Jean-Luc had actually seen, filtered through his lack of understanding of the Other World and the complexities of the old-fashioned language. He ate and drank, something - he could not later recollect what it was - and fell asleep almost immediately afterwards.

In the morning, Kevin woke suddenly, very early, with Tanji by his side in the bed they so often shared, with much of his confusion somehow gone. His subconscious mind clearly had been working overtime during the night and he felt he had an inkling of what to report, the nub of the matter as he saw it.

After a hurried breakfast, Kevin and Tanji made a rapid return to the Convocation, finding Keel and Bret already waiting for them in the conference room and Yrrene arriving seconds after them. Bret was keen to review the description of the three people who closed the crossing and the gestures they used. He, together with Yrrene and Keel, studied these passages carefully and cross-referenced by Bret against ancient Board records of the individual who was instructed to perform the closure.

It became very apparent that none of them were the person who was supposed to undertake the act - who was described as a short and rather stout woman - nor did they use the form as instructed by the Board of Control. Somehow, three quite different people had substituted for the one, and nobody had been any the wiser at the time.

Finally, Kevin felt adequately prepared to address the Convocation, Bret having subtly communicated that time was of the essence. And so it was that he and Tanji were thrust, quite literally,

into the spotlight on the stage, explaining to the Convocation the content of the diary that Jean-Marc had produced, the book whose secret even his own mother was reluctant to pass on to him.

Kevin himself was to speak, with Tanji at his side, while Keel and Yrrene stood together just a little way off. He summarised the contents of the book in a few minutes, dwelling on Jean-Luc's description of the closure of the crossing, and bluntly confirming that it had been closed in such a way that it could be re-opened relatively easily.

Yrrene and Keel nodded vigorously to confirm their agreement and Keel interjected with a few words which Kevin did not understand but which seemed very technical in nature.

"Even then," Kevin continued, "It seems we were beset by traitors. The people who closed the crossing were not the persons officially delegated by the proper authorities. Even at this critical moment we were betrayed, and we did not know, until yesterday, that we had been."

The noise in the auditorium erupted and the Ferryman was forced to bang her gavel once again.

"So, in summary," Kevin resumed, "Jean-Luc was a clever man and, unusually, more than a little educated by the standards of his day. Out of curiosity, or perhaps luck, he witnessed an important event, and a strangeness which became an overwhelming passion for him. It was something which he managed to keep secret from almost everyone, including most of his descendants."

"Jean-Luc became a collector of stories, managing from them to infer a great deal about the Other World - this world, I mean - truths that he convincingly described and carefully analysed. Fortunately, he was a benign person, only interested in the stories and legends for their own sake. But imagine what could have happened if this book had fallen into the hands of a megalomaniac - a Hitler or a Napoleon?"

Again, the conversations and arguments across the great hall rose to a crescendo which was not immediately silenced by the gavel. Kevin could think of nothing more to say, and turned and rapidly walked off the stage, Tanji practically running to keep up with him.

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The decision-making processes of a Grand Convocation simply would not be rushed, it seemed. Tanji told Kevin a tale about one famous Convocation, centuries ago, which spent over five years in deliberation before it made a decision, and even then, the decision

arrived was quite wrong and a major disaster ensued. Kevin sincerely hoped that this Convocation would move more swiftly to a decision and that the conclusion would be the correct one this time.

Kevin was later very unsure what, if anything, his address had made to the outcome of the Convocation. His was not the last address, not by a long way, and the appeals and imprecations from the stage continued unabated for many days afterwards. But, one afternoon, it seemed that everyone who wanted to speak had spoken - the rules allowed only one visit to the podium for each person, regardless of how important or influential they thought they were.

According to Tanji's explanation, the Ferryman called three times for speakers, anyone who still wanted their voice to be heard. There was no response, the great hall silent as her request rang out. There was a pause while the panel of moderators on the stage reviewed the list of speakers and attendees on their slates, confirming in quiet voices that no-one remained to address the Grand Convocation.

The Ferryman called for another vote, one which might mean the formal conclusion of the meeting, a vote for or against the closure of the Lyndesfarne crossing. Strictly speaking, it was not binding, Tanji explained to Kevin, but no Ferryman has gone against the two-thirds majority vote in centuries.

A hush filled the great hall as flickering signs on the wall behind the stage showed the results of the voting as the delegates indicated their view. Kevin could make out the numerals showing the counts which made it entirely obvious that the delegates were coming down strongly in favour of one outcome, but he was frustrated that he could not decipher which of the options was being so overwhelmingly recommended.

Finally, a loud gong sounded, meaning that everyone's vote had been recorded and no-one had abstained. The Ferryman studied the results gravely, then turned to spoke a simple sentence in a loud voice. Tanji translated automatically for Kevin, speaking in that sing-song voice and sounding as if she did not quite believe what she was saying.

“The last crossing between the Two Worlds must be closed.”

Chapter Thirty

The New Bridge to Lyndesfarne, in Kevin's entirely biased opinion, was one of the most impressive and certainly the most unusual engineering construction he had been involved with in his long career. The most novel aspect, of course, was that it spanned not just the straits between island and mainland, but also two different worlds, quite possibly - Kevin had been forced to consider - in different universes.

The entire structure could not have been built using any technology that Kevin was aware of, since half of the bridge was actually in the Other World where, by careful design, any technology significantly more advanced than jointed wood or masonry would not function. Kevin and Bret - with their teams of designers - had been forced to construct what was effectively two half-bridges, each using robust technology - or magic, which was nearly the same thing - from their own world.

On the England side, Kevin had devised an elegant steel-reinforced concrete tower, supporting high-tensile steel cables which in turn held up the roadway. The cables were tethered by a massive concrete construction which was itself anchored to the bedrock on the shore. The smooth curve of the roadbed, arching gently out from the shoreline and bisected by the slender support tower, presented an impressive sight, an elegant working example of engineering forces in balance.

On the Lyndesfarne side, Kevin was much less clear how things worked, although the general shape of the bridge was the same. As far as he knew, the supporting tower was built from blocks of magically-enhanced construction stone, blocks which melded together a few hours after they had been laid. The roadway was constructed of the same material, or something very similar. The support for the roadbed was entirely magical; huge triangular fans of what looked from a distance like translucent sheets or sails linking road and tower. From close by - on the bridge itself, for example - the magical supports were entirely invisible, and there appeared to be nothing at all holding up the impossibly slender structure.

Kevin had often visited the New Bridge after it was opened, and not just to admire his own handiwork. On this occasion, he was inspecting the warehousing arrangements for goods exported between

the two Worlds, and exploring the possibility of further improvements that he could suggest. This was as the result of a task Kevin had undertaken shortly after the plan for the New Bridge was complete: the design of the mechanisms for the transport of goods. The original and unimaginative approach, planned before he got involved, was simply to replicate the mode of transportation on the Old Bridge: the use of heavy wagons of wood and wrought iron drawn by horses.

Quite apart from the anachronistic appearance of horse-drawn carts on a high-tech steel and concrete bridge, Kevin felt that there must be a better solution. Horse and cart transport was not very fast, and the relatively small carts had to be loaded and unloaded at each side. Even with fork lift trucks (on the England side) and magical assistance in Lyndesfarne, this took up a fair amount of time.

Of course, any technological solution could not work all the way across, just as a magical approach would be useless for half the journey. Kevin's insight was that there was no particular reason why the same approach had to be used all the way across the bridge. If trans-shipment could be made swift and easy in the centre of the bridge, two different solutions could be used on either side.

In a surprisingly short time, the entire New Bridge had been retro-fitted for the new transport. On the England side, a railway line had been laid, which was used by custom-built low trucks, each just big enough to support two standard wooden pallets standing on a bed of steel rollers. A short train of these trucks was pushed or pulled across half of the bridge by a battery-powered engine adapted from the tow trucks used in airports. Two sets of rails were provided, to allow transport in each direction, together with a complex set of points and switches allow trucks, once emptied to be moved to the other line and reloaded.

Kevin had correctly concluded that the steel rails could not extend into the transit region, the short distance - perhaps no more than ten feet - where neither magic nor technology were totally reliable. At the edge of the region, the rail tracks stopped. There, the pallets were man-handled off the rollers on the trucks and slid onto a set of greased rollers fixed in the centre of the bridge. These rollers were manufactured using the lowest level of technology Kevin could think of: wrought iron axles supporting hard oak cylinders set in a framework of wood and iron. On this bed of rollers, pallets could be rapidly slid from the mechanical to magical transport, or vice versa.

The Lyndesfarne transport itself was something that Kevin could not help but think of as a magical conveyor belt. Once slid off the

wooden rollers, the pallets were supported by an insubstantial strip of magic, glittering brightly with the swirling orange sprites that marked the presence of powerful enchantments. Brief gestures from the operators sent the pallets on their way without further guidance until they reached the far end of the bridge. Pallets arriving in the opposite direction - it turned out that very similar low-tech pallets were in widespread use in both worlds - and loaded onto recently emptied trucks for the journey to the warehouse in Kevin's world, a process which now worked with a commendably high degree of speed and efficiency.

The warehouses on the England side of the crossing were in the centre of a compound that adjoined the New Bridge. The compound was surrounded by a high chain-link fence with two gates: one used by the trucks and one where the twin railway lines exited to cross the bridge. The warehouse buildings themselves were built with the standard industrial construction technique: a frame of steel girders roofed with epoxy-coated corrugated steel sheets. The sides were clad with thin walls of machine-cut stone chosen to keep the visual impact of the buildings to a minimum.

Inside the main warehouse, fork-lifts were in continuous operation loading pallets onto the railway wagons and unloading others. Some merchandise was immediately reloaded onto Heavy Goods Vehicles for transport, while other goods were not loaded directly onto trucks but needed to be stored until a complete consignment was ready. One end of this warehouse was dense with high racking storing a wild assortment of goods. Other buildings were used for long-term storage, for goods which did not need to be transported immediately. At the time, Kevin was surprised to note that this included large quantities of some very fine champagnes, although he would later come to realise just why this was so.

Kevin's eventual suggestion for improvement was to extend both inbound and outbound railway tracks further into the main warehouse, terminating closer to the loading bays for the heavy trucks. This also allowed fork lifts to be deployed on both sides of railway wagons, thus allowing a further reduction of the time taken to load and unload.

There were always HGVs moving along the short spur to and from the New Bridge, which joined the old Lyndesfarne road and itself linked to the main north-south highway a few miles away. The old road somehow looked narrower and more winding than it actually was and probably had been, Kevin considered, deliberately designed that way. But all this had been established long ago, before the

advent of motorised transport, to give the impression of a meandering back road which went nowhere in particular.

Kevin's next port of call was the warehouse on the Lyndesfarne side of the New Bridge. He could have taken up the offer of a ride in the cab of one of the electric tractors used to propel the rain of carriages. Instead, he elected to walk since it was such a pleasant day. Even so, he knew that the weather in the vicinity of the crossing was notoriously variable, liable to change unexpectedly. This was because the two sides of the crossings were actually in different worlds, subject to different weather systems, and the atmospheric turmoil that this created.

There was a footway running the length of the New Bridge for the use of pedestrians, although those in the know were encouraged to use the Old Bridge which lay on the more direct route. In principle, anyone was free to cross to the Other World, although the Guardians stationed at both old and new bridges were careful to discreetly discourage the passage of those who might be confused or upset by what they found on the other side.

Although the sun was high, the light sea breeze was cool. Kevin found it pleasant enough striding along carrying the little rucksack that contained his few essentials including a waterproof jacket in case the weather took a turn for the worse. He was passed by the rumbling trains every few minutes, the near-silence of the electric motors punctuated by the squeal of the wheels on the rails.

The very centre of the New Bridge was sixty feet above the waves. Kevin stopped at the transit section where the complex transfer machinery was installed. A shelter of wood and tile had been erected around this area to keep of the worst of the weather - which could be pretty horrendous, he knew - although the walkway remained open to the elements. The workmen nodded politely, but otherwise left him alone, returning to their task of man-handling the pallets.

From this vantage-point, it was almost impossible to see either end of the bridge, even in this fine clear weather. The supporting cables and roadway disappeared into the haze in either direction. It was eerie, and Kevin shivered slightly despite that warmth of the day. There was a sense of being all alone out here, with just the sea and the wind and the seagulls for company.

Below the sea was relatively calm, so Kevin was able to observe a strange effect in the water's surface. It was almost as if a line was drawn across the sea, a near-continuous streak of white foam and bubbles separating two regions which were, he could discern, a very

slightly different shade of blue. He had heard about this phenomenon. It was a visible representation of the boundary itself, where the seas from the different worlds came into contact. Normally, wind and tide and waves mixed the waters so thoroughly that nothing was apparent but today was sufficiently clear and calm that the slight differences in currents in the Two Worlds was enough to leave a visible trace.

The line of disturbed water bisected the triple arches of the Old Bridge, discernible in the distance. The dark stone of the causeways on either side was partially visible, the far ends soon disappearing into the haze. Walking figures and the occasional horse-drawn wagon could be seen making the crossing, as Kevin had himself done so many times in the past.

Kevin stood watching the traffic on the Old Bridge for ten minutes, his solitude if anything enhanced by the rumble and clank of pallets being moved about just behind his back. The waves splashed below, the seagulls screamed and both worlds seemed impossibly far away. Here, in the very centre, he considered, one was not properly a part of either world, but cut off, floating, somewhere in between.

Kevin shook his head and re-shouldered his rucksack, then set off for the Lyndesfarne shore. Nominally, he had intended to check out the warehouse on the other side as well, although he had not really expected to be able to suggest any improvements there. As he approached the low stone-built building that formed the transit point between cargo portal network and the crossing, he recognised with growing happiness the figure that was waiting outside.

He was delighted to see Tanji, who had arrived early, and his earlier funk in the centre of the bridge was already forgotten. It had almost slipped his mind that they were scheduled to go on another of the tourist visits that Tanji took such delight in arranging for his entertainment.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

He smiled warmly, somehow relieved to be back in at least one of the real worlds.

“Yes,” he said.

She took his hand and they walked away from the warehouse and towards the passenger portal building entrance.

Chapter Thirty One

There was absolute silence in the room after the Ferryman had spoken. Even though he had instigated - albeit somewhat involuntarily - some part of this train of events, Kevin had the obscure urge to make some kind of appeal. But he knew, in reality, that there was no point; it was clear that a majority were convinced and that this was the end. There was no appeal to higher authority, no place to discuss the issue further, and too much of a majority to make any kind of resistance anything other than futile.

There was a sudden buzz of conversation all around the room; everyone seemed to be talking at once, suddenly very animated. Kevin could make out very little and, given his extremely limited language skills, could understand practically nothing.

“What’s being said?” he asked Tanji, who had clearly been listening intently.

“It’s so very difficult to summarise,” she answered softly with a wry smile, “Although it seems that many people are not very surprised, although almost everybody is saddened and disappointed. Most are saying that this is a turn of events that had been seriously considered, if only hypothetically - at least, up until now.”

She listened again, turned her head this way and that so as to pick up fragments of conversation from all around. Kevin waited as patiently as he could, frustrated by his inability to understand anything of the undoubtedly strongly-held views he could hear. Nearby, a large and loudly-spoken man in a deep blue robe started pontificating. Such was his manner and voice that several people nearby turned to listen to his views.

Tanji turned back to Kevin and spoke quietly in his ear.

“The increasing sophistication of the Other World,” she began, adopting that tell-tale sing-song intonation that meant that she was translating from the language of Lyndesfarne, “Not to mention the number of people in it, has been thought to be an increasing risk for a long time. The common knowledge of the existence of our world would instil a sense of fear and panic for much of the populace of the Other World. They would demand action, protection, and our representatives in the seats of government of that world would not be able to deflect this clamour.”

There was a murmur of approval from the man's listeners. Kevin wondered who he was, concluding that he must be some big-wig in the Board of Control.

"In this world, too," the big man went on, "The fear of the different, the stranger will for many people provoke a similar reaction. They will perceive a threat, a terror of being overwhelmed by the teeming billions of the Other World, despite the manifest advantages of our magic."

The man in blue seemed to be catching the common sentiment, speaking - it seemed to Kevin - with the practiced ease of the long-term politician. More people seemed to be paying attention to his words, ceasing their own discussions and forming an enlarging circle around the big man.

"Indeed, if the existence of that art called magic came to the attention of the organisations and companies in the Other World, they would regard it as an opportunity to extend the reach of their science, to make devices and products currently outside their reach, and therefore make money and consolidate their positions of power. This would be amplified if their cunning machines and powerful technologies could be employed to study the intricacies of our devices. The secrets of Lyndesfarne would not last long under such intense scrutiny."

Again, these points seemed to meet the approval of the listeners.

"That's why there was such a majority for the closure," Tanji added in her own voice.

The large man in blue spoke again.

"Of course, there will be those who will lose out, those who will be impoverished by the decision," she continued in her sing-song tone, "But we must protect ourselves, each of us in our own worlds."

Kevin knew that the group or organisation - maybe there was more than one - that was trying to open its own crossing away from the authority of the Board of Control, was not really the first such threat. Indeed, he had become aware, from numerous tales and discussions, that the final crossing to Lyndesfarne has been under increasing threat over the last hundred years or so: attempts to wrest control away from the Board, or to force its closure through a variety of stratagems.

There was a loud bong, as if a vast gong had been struck, just once, by a short but extremely muscular assistant, although Kevin could see no sign of either. Just magic, he imagined. The reverberating tones echoed around the meeting chamber, and at once

an anticipatory and slightly anxious silence fell. Even the pompous man in the blue robe shut up immediately.

The gong was the cue for a series of further announcements from the Ferryman. Again, her voice rang out across the huge hall, subtly amplified by magic, and again Tanji's translation was whispered into his ear.

"The crossing closure will be three days from now, at noon," she announced, "All trade will cease with immediate effect."

This last point caused a furore in the room as, Kevin understood, a major purpose of the crossing was for commerce.

"Those whose livelihood is affected will be compensated," the Ferryman thundered, "And I do advise those who have goods in the warehouses to remove them as soon as possible."

There was another moment of confused muttering.

"Everyone is to return to their own world, without exception," the Ferryman went on.

Again there was an outcry from the floor.

"This is the decree," she said in a steely voice, "Those who have interests in the Other World have just under three days to get your affairs in order."

The noise in the room was incredible. It seemed to Kevin that plans were being made, options debated and contingencies previously discussed were being revived and put into operation. He just stood there, unable to think coherently, to plan, to do anything. The din and commotion in the room seemed to swirl around him, not touching him, events now taking their own course for him and everyone else. Tanji too seemed to be in a daze, standing close to him, her hands enclosed by his own.

After an indeterminate time, Bret managed to track down Kevin. He stood close, presumably to make himself heard over the noise in the room.

"I suppose this was inevitable," Kevin said without preamble, "I'm really so very sorry."

Bret nodded.

"It was not your responsibility," he said, "That duty is mine, and many others. But thank you for your concern."

Bret grasped the other man by the upper arm.

"My duties will lead me elsewhere over the next few days," he went on, "I'm afraid I am unlikely to be able to be with you. Besides, Tanji will, I feel sure, wish to accompany you in these last days."

Bret looked directly into Kevin's eyes.

“It has been a pleasure and a privilege working with you. I thank you again for everything you have done, for me, and my family, and this entire world. Sincerely, I wish you well in the future, whatever that may bring.”

Unexpectedly, Bret leaned forward and embraced him, planting a kiss on his cheek, an action which seemed distinctly and slightly disconcertingly feminine, despite the male appearance Bret still wore. The co-designer of the New Bridge, and Kevin’s friend and mentor, stepped back and said something formal-sounding to Tanji. She responded in kind, both holding up their right hands in the Lyndesfarne way that was used as both a greeting and a farewell. Bret then turned on his heel and disappeared into the crowd. Kevin realised, with an unexpected tear in his eye, that he would very probably never see Bret again

Kevin turned to Tanji.

“What are we going to do?” he asked very seriously.

She stood on tip-toe and kissed him full on the lips, then pulled back to look him straight in the eye.

“The instructions are clear: we will have to part, and very soon,” she said gravely, “So we will have to make our plans accordingly.”

Kevin nodded, suddenly feeling desperately sad.

*

The next few days - Kevin’s last in the Other World - were a whirlwind of activity. He did not want to leave this world until the last possible moment, so he and Tanji were almost inseparable; they spent every minute together, asleep or awake, except for a couple of brief trips - in her own world, of course - she felt compelled to make alone, one to visit her Aunt and Uncle, and another who’s purpose was unclear to Kevin.

They did make just one trip to Kevin’s world, right at the end, to the little flat in Manchester which he still called home, to collect Tanji’s belongings so as to be able to return them to her world. In fact, there were precious few things, and little of any real value. Even so, Kevin insisted that every item - Tanji’s few cosmetic items, toiletries, clothes and odd pieces of inexpensive jewellery - was carefully packed into a couple of rucksacks.

They spent that night in Kevin’s bed, holding each other close, making love repeatedly, almost out of a sense of desperation. He did not actually sleep very well, waking several times in the night in the panicky realisation that this was the last time that they would lay together here.

In the morning, after a early start and a light breakfast, Kevin persuaded Tanji to go for a short walk in a large and unfrequented municipal park that the council maintained not far from the flat. Under the trees and in the watery morning sunlight, Kevin took an endless stream of photographs of Tanji using an inexpensive digital camera he had acquired recently. They would be something to remember her by, he considered, in future years.

When he came to review the snaps later, he could see that there was a common feature in Tanji's expression, whether she was laughing or smiling or feeling sad. The look - a certain tightness of the skin around the eyes, perhaps - communicated a persistent sense of wistful loneliness, the anticipation of a loss, one which had not yet happened but was nevertheless inevitable.

Kevin drove Tanji back to the Lyndesfarne crossing in near silence, unsure of what to say to each other. Their conversation was stilted and superficial, concentrating on niceties and nondescript comments on unimportant topics. There were, perhaps, in some state of denial, somehow not yet emotionally ready to accept the fact of their impending separation.

The traffic on the approach roads were unusually heavy, with a larger than normal number of HGVs ploughing their way along the narrow road, presumably rushing to transport goods already transferred between the worlds away from the area before the closure. The heavy transport turned off towards the warehouses at the New Bridge, allowing Kevin to navigate the last mile or so with relative ease.

He pulled the Volvo into the damp field that did duty as a car park. Unusually it was filled to capacity with private cars of all shapes and sizes, new and creakingly ancient, and there were quite a few taxis and minibuses from local companies too. All these vehicles seemed to be disgorging individuals or family groups, everyone weighed down with packs and belongings.

The exodus had evidently begun almost immediately after the Ferryman's pronouncement and, even now, the crossing was extremely busy. The cries of the carters and the pedestrians were superficially as shrill and as argumentative as always, but somehow it now seemed subdued, as if a great sadness hung in the air over the bridges.

A few of the larger groups had managed to negotiate with the carters that still plied their trade on the Old Bridge to hire a wagon and horses for a trip over the causeway with their worldly wealth. Kevin saw one wagon transporting what must have been three

generations of the same family: grandmother sat upright on the front bench wedged between the driver and the father, while the wife and at least three children tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible wedged between suitcases and bundles in the back.

The departures did not go unobserved. Apart from the ever-present Guardians, a row of people stood at the end of the causeway, individuals and small groups, waving and crying with handkerchiefs at their faces. It occurred to Kevin that they would not be the only couple who would very soon be forced to separate from their loved one.

Chapter Thirty Two

“So, this emergency closing process,” Kevin asked, “If it’s so dangerous, why is it even a possibility? Surely no-one would ever invoke something that could injure or kill so many innocent bystanders?”

Bret smiled at the other man’s question, displaying his characteristic tendency to ask pointed questions which got to the heart of the matter under discussion. He remained silent for a few moments, looking around aimlessly as if trying to decide on the best way of answering Kevin’s query.

The restaurant was now apparently completely deserted, and all of the other diners had retired to their rooms or been driven home. All of the tables were already reset with fresh linens and crockery by the silent and efficient waiting staff, ready for breakfast in the morning. They were still sat in the Orangery which now exuded a delightful sense of stillness and peacefulness, although it was just beginning to get a little cool. Tanji had consumed a surprising number of the tiny delicious *petit-fours* and was now nestling against Kevin’s shoulder looking extremely sated and seemingly content to take a passive part in the conversation.

Bret brought his attention back to Kevin.

“There is a time and a place for such extreme measures, but only when the threat to the greater good is judged to overcome the loss of life. I can’t say I would relish having to make such a decision,” he added, looking uncharacteristically grim, “Although I suppose I could do, if I really had to make that call.”

Kevin must have looked dubious, since Bret went on immediately.

“There was an example,” he said seriously, “About a hundred years ago, were a crossing had to be closed very quickly. At the time, this was the oldest crossing still in existence - not the very earliest one, of course, since many of the very earliest crossings had been instantiated in places which, with hindsight, were not ideal, and had been closed millennia before.”

“What was wrong with those crossings?” Kevin asked curiously.

Bret sighed.

“Well, firstly, those early crossings were huge - twenty miles or more across. This made them very difficult to police, to make sure

that only those authorised were able to pass between the Two Worlds.”

Kevin nodded. He could imagine that trying to manage a border which was seventy miles or more long with nothing more sophisticated than men on horseback would have been a near-impossible task, unless a huge number of Guardians were dedicated to the assignment.

“Indeed, in some cases,” Bret went on, “People stumbled across the border without even realising that they had done so. And this of course gave rise to all sorts of tall tales and stories which have passed into myth and folklore - in both this world and my own. So it was this problem that led to one of the few advances in the, um, magical technology used was in reducing the size of a crossing to just a few miles. So, our own crossing was one of the last to be made, and is just about as small as it is considered possible to construct reliably.”

Bret paused, swirling the last of the Armagnac around in the fine glass balloon he held cupped in one hand.

“The other problem with early crossings,” he continued, “Was of course the issue of weather patterns and climate. Frankly, in those early days, they did not know what they were doing, and there were many mistakes. In those days, making the crossing was fraught with dangers, and you were liable to find yourself caught up in an sandstorm or blizzard or flood with minimal warning.”

Kevin nodded. He had thought about the difficulties of trying to identify places in to different worlds where the climate was compatible, and where the weather could be relied upon to be broadly similar. He realised that this could never be perfect, and that even minor variations between the Two Worlds would give rise to unpredictable and dangerously variable conditions.

“Anyway, back to this other crossing I mentioned,” Bret said, looking serious, “In this world, it was set in Siberia, hidden in a forested wilderness, a wild and inhospitable area covered with pine trees, and almost entirely uninhabited. The virgin woodlands were broken only by occasional trails made by fur trappers and gold prospectors and, unfortunately, the occasional gang of bandits. The region was bitterly cold for much of the year and there were long harsh winters punctuated by blizzards which could last for days. And in the short summer, the rough tracks were often washed out by floods caused by snow-melt or by the torrential rainfall of a summer downpour. The whole region was so inhospitable that it was actually easier to travel in winter when the streams and rivers were frozen, and the land under a permanent snow cover. Even so, travellers to

and from the crossing could expect a long walk on snowshoes - weeks and weeks of travel on foot - or, only slightly faster, by horse-drawn sledges and, in later years, by dog sleighs.”

Kevin thought this all sounded horrible, especially compared with the ease of crossing at Lyndesfarne and even more so once the causeway and bridge were in place. At Lyndesfarne, you might get windswept, and dampened by rain and sea-spray, but the whole crossing could be completed safely in half-an-hour or so, in all but the very worst of the weather.

“From my world,” Bret continued, “It was a very different picture. The site of the crossing was in a high valley in a range of mountains, so that the altitude meant that this side of the crossing was locked in a nearly perpetual winter. To get to the high valley from the populous valleys and the vast fertile plains dotted by trading cities and markets meant a long trek through the foothills and lower passes, almost continuously uphill. The wind always blew out of this valley, cold air rolling down the mountainside and bringing the breath of winter even to towns and settlements scores of leagues away.”

Kevin shivered again at the thought.

“So, all-in-all, the Tunguska crossing was a trial, a test of endurance and fortitude for the hardy traveller. From this world, after days or weeks of struggling against snow and cold, you had a relatively easy downhill walk which rapidly got warmer. In the other direction, you had a stiff climb on foot - at least five thousand feet - followed by that long slog through the frozen forest.”

“The relative inaccessibility was the main reason that this crossing had remained in place, unthreatened. Even so, the crossing itself, at the end of the high valley, was guarded at both ends by a pair of fortifications, each originally built as high-walled stone castles and intermittently re-built over the millennia as advances in the weapons technology in each world demanded. And of course there were large contingents of Guardians stationed permanently at each side. So, the authorities were content enough that all these precautions seemed enough to ensure the continued security of the hidden crossing.”

Kevin knew from long experience that Bret’s story-telling ability was polished and calm through much practice, and he could see how the other man’s body language relaxed more and more as he got into the tale.

“The range of mountains marked the natural border between two nations and so naturally the crossing was close to this boundary. These two nations had been, well, at best suspicious rivals and

occasionally at war with each other for centuries and, even at this time, diplomatic relations between them remained strained.”

Bret’s wry expression suggested to Kevin that he was probably understating the degree of disharmony between the rival countries.

“Agrea, the country across the mountains from the high valley,” Bret resumed, “Was jealous of the possession of the crossing. At least, it was for those few in positions of power and responsibility who actually knew about it.”

In the same way as in his own world, Kevin understood that few people knew about the crossing at Lyndesfarne. While the day-to-day administration of the crossing was in the hands of dedicated governance organisations, notably the Board of Control, he had the strong impression that the secret of the Other World was known in the upper echelons of Whitehall and Westminster.

“Similarly, the leaders of Quilovia,” Bret went on, “Were proud of their stewardship of the crossing which, despite its relative obscurity and infrequent usage, brought both wealth and prestige to their country. This wealth and the leisure it allowed meant that the country had long since been a centre of culture and learning, a land of bohemian cities and a place where artists and musicians, writers and actors, anyone with talent and creativity, could be sure of a welcome and the patronage of rich merchants.”

Bret again swirled the bandy glass and took another sip.

“At the time I am describing, there was a coup in Agrea,” he resumed, “A bloodless takeover of power by a Junta, the generals in the army having become frustrated with the Council of Elders that had hitherto formed the ruling body. The ensuing period of military rule led to an increase in the size of the army and a great many more people under arms.”

Bret shook his head sadly.

“The trouble with standing armies,” he went on, “Is that you have to find something to do with them. Otherwise, they sit around, eat too much, get bored, and you have a problem on your hands. So, the Junta decided to use their military might to wrest control of the Tunguska crossing from their neighbours. The agents and scouts knew many secret paths and passes across the mountains, and plans were drawn up to invade Quilovia by stealth.”

“Of course, the government in Quilovia had not been idle, and had kept a very suspicious eye on the political changes in Agrea through their networks of spies and diplomats. So they are aware that there was an impending threat to their borders and consequently sent their own scouts to watch the mountain passes. Of course, the people

of Quilovia knew their own mountains very well and so the attempt to cross from Agrea was detected, the secret paths not being quite as secret as was thought.”

Kevin was listening intently, barely remembering to sample the very fine brandy from his own glass.

“The thing that the generals of Quilovia failed to realise, however, was exactly how large the forces that were making their way across the mountains or indeed, what their exact objective was. The military leaders in Agrea used astonishing amounts of magic in their advance, both hiding their forces with vast swathes of invisibility magic, as well as using magical means to widen the passes and erect bridges over the crevasses and the deep cuttings made by rivers. All of this must have been planned for years - even decades - in advance, well before the military coup. Indeed, it was widely suspected that the reason for the coup was because the hawkish generals wanted to advance their plans for invasion of Agrea, while the more cautious civil authorities were hesitant or even opposed to a military campaign.”

The storyteller paused for a few moments, perhaps deciding how to proceed with his tale.

“As soon as the invading forces were detected,” Bret said at length, “The Guardians at the crossing started turning back all travellers attempting to cross, advising them to return to their own world and to get clear of the area as quickly as they could. This is, to this day, standard practice if a large-scale military threat to a crossing is suspected.”

This remark confirmed something that Kevin had long suspected, that there were careful plans for all sorts of contingencies surrounding the Lyndesfarne crossing.

“Once the true scale of the invasion was determined,” the other man went on, “It was soon appreciated that this was an army much too large to merely seize and control the crossing. The generals of Quilovia and the Guardians of the crossing soon realised there must be a second objective: an invasion of the Other World - your world - and one which, they belatedly learned, would be supported by novel magics, ones which might not be disabled by the barrier which prevents the passage of proscribed technologies between the Two Worlds.”

“No military might which could be assembled by the Quilovians could hope to deflect this army from its objective. At this dark hour, a hero emerged, one Yisella. She was the leader of the Guardians at the crossing, and a brave and resourceful woman. Understanding the

threat from the invading army, she dismissed her forces, instructing them to disperse as quickly as they could. She sent runners to her opposite number, with advice to similarly retreat. She then used her magical skills to give the impression that the fortifications were still defended, and waited until the vanguard of the army was almost upon the castle, then invoked the secret emergency magic.”

Kevin gasped, as did Tanji. Kevin had thought Tanji was asleep, but she had evidently been listening as closely as he had been.

“In your world, the explosion flattened trees for miles around, and was heard from hundreds of miles away. And in my world, there were similar scenes of destruction, the entire valley being buried in boulders and broken rocks blown from the mountaintops. Yisella herself perished in the resulting devastation, but she succeeded in her objective: the explosion entrapped and killed almost all of the armies of Agrea. So, she protected both the inhabitants of your world and those of Quilovia - but at a cost. There was a huge loss of life, I’m afraid to say, with thousands of soldiers killed.”

“Still, she managed to minimise the deaths, being able to warn enough people to get clear, to save themselves. All other Guardians in your world escaped with their lives, as did all but a handful in mine. The few who were lost were caught up in an avalanche triggered by the explosion.”

Bret was silent for a moment.

“So,” he pronounced, “there is sometimes a need for decisive action at short notice, made by the man - or indeed woman - on the spot. And yes, such an action will result in fatalities. History, as always, is the judge of one’s actions. We regard Yisella as a hero, a patriot, someone who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect her country and, quite possibly, your entire world. Of course, the last part can never be known for sure, but perhaps you have grounds to be grateful for her bravery.”

Bret swallowed the last of the brandy from the balloon glass he still held in his hand.

“Time for bed, I think,” he said.

Chapter Thirty Three

“So this is it?” Kevin asked pensively.

Tanji nodded and smiled rather wanly in return, looking up at him. They stood face to face, noses practically pressed together and holding each others hands tightly. He was desperate for any kind of physical contact with the woman who was, in all honesty, the love of his life, despite the public nature of the place where they stood.

Kevin constantly held Tanji close, ignoring the chill wind and the drizzle that enveloped them both, and looked around briefly. They were standing at the side of the road on the England side of the crossing, just at the point where the causeway met the shore. The road and the causeway were packed with - well, Kevin considered that the word must be refugees - passing in both directions.

There were few of the horse-drawn wagons that he might have expected under normal circumstances, transporting travellers and their goods. Instead almost everybody was on foot, walking quickly, a few carrying heavy packs and rucksacks, although most had little or nothing by way of baggage. Many of the travellers, Kevin suspected, had left their final crossing to the last possible moment, to spend a last few moments, as they had, with friends and loved ones they would never see again.

The road leading inland was also dense with travellers, again mostly on foot. The press of people were being directed by a larger than usual number of the Guardian force, clearly identifiable by the nearly-uniform they wore, topped with the High-Visibility vests in bright yellow which were mandatory, in Kevin’s world, for any role which involved directing traffic.

Kevin turned his attention back to Tanji.

“And will I never see this face again?” he said, gently taking her chin in his hand.

“You will not, my love,” she replied softly, her face inches from his own.

Kevin knew for a certainty that this would be true. The tears welled in his eyes as he considered once again the prospect of a life without Tanji.

“I will think of you, always,” he went on earnestly, meaning every word of it quite literally, “Every day. Wishing you were there by my side.”

Over the years since he had first met Tanji - a meeting that took place not far from this very spot - the two of them had embarked upon so many adventures and enjoyed so many wonderful experiences together, although some of them had not exactly been planned. In her company, he had travelled far and wide in each of the Two Worlds and had seen things he would simply not have believed possible. He had shared every waking thought and dozing dream with her, enjoyed her most intimate company on many an occasion, revelled in the sensation of waking up next to her, feeling her body, her warmth next to him in their bed.

“I will miss all this, so very much.” she replied, “I will miss you. And I will love you forever.”

She kissed him full on the lips, then firmed her grip on his hands and stood back.

“I have to go,” she said simply.

Kevin nodded dumbly. He held her hands for a long moment, then released her, dropping his hands to his sides despondently. She stooped to pick up her pack, which she swung onto her back over the characteristic hooded cloak. She turned to go, took a few steps, then turned back to blow a last kiss to Kevin.

She pulled herself together with a visible show of resolution, then set off for the causeway proper, soon merging with the other traffic joining the causeway. The last thing he saw, through tear-blurred eyes, was Tanji’s blonde pony-tail disappearing into the distance, her stride matching those of numerous other refugees. He watched her go until she was completely out of sight, indistinguishable amongst the other travellers even before her figure was concealed by the twin grey blankets of the increasingly heavy rain and the mysterious blurring caused by the crossing itself.

Still Kevin waited, watching people of all shapes and sizes passing to and fro. He saw no-one he recognised - not that he expected to - but he felt marginally less miserable. Almost everyone in the stream of refugees, passing in either direction, wore an expression of irredeemable depression and gloom. He watched until the pedestrian traffic subsided to a mere trickle, just a few stragglers hurrying to complete their crossing before it was no longer possible.

Finally, he turned and made his way back to the Volvo, which was one of the few remaining cars in the windswept field that served as a car park. He drove slowly and carefully, peering through the rain-speckled windscreen, careful to avoid the numerous pedestrians and occasional horse-drawn wagon making their way along the road. Once he reached the main road, he turned left and drove on perhaps

five miles, then turned right onto a minor road, a twisting lane that made it way up a ridge that overlooked the sea. Kevin had been advised to keep clear of the crossing, in case of accidents at the point of closure. Nevertheless, his inevitable curiosity to know exactly what would happen had caused him to be directed to this hillside in the vicinity of what he understood was once known as St. Cuthbert's Way.

The location of this particular hillside had been recommended to him by Tanji, although where she had got the information from was not totally clear. It was obvious that others had received the same advice: there were cars and other vehicles lined up along the lanes, parked in such a way that made passage difficult but not impossible. Kevin found a spot to dump the Volvo, pulled a pair of modern high-tech binoculars from the back seat together with a warm and heavy hooded cloak in the Lyndesfarne style, and wandered over to the vantage-point that had been recommended.

There were others doing much the same, many individuals and a few small groups, more than he would have expected, and all of them finding a place to stand along the dry stone wall that afforded an unrestricted view of the entire island of Lyndesfarne. No-one seemed to be feeling sociable; everyone kept their distance, maintained their privacy. A dour feeling settled over Kevin, like being at a funeral or a wake.

For a long time, nothing happened. The drizzle faded away and the wind dropped, and the sun even began to appear around the edges of the clouds on the horizon. Both towers of the New Bridge shone in the watery sunlight, the roadway itself seeming impossibly thin from this distance. The nearer part of the causeway and the Old Bridge itself became visible, although the far shore was as indistinct as ever, hidden under the mysterious haze that concealed all but the vaguest of outlines.

Without warning, sounds and, astonishingly, even movements started to be perceivable from the island. Some people around Kevin gasped and screamed, their alarm and distress audible even over the rumbling crunching noise. The ground itself heaved and buckled slowly, even majestically, huge unstoppable movements that were clearly visible even from this distance. It was like an earthquake, or like some vast beast struggling titanically against massive chains and restraints, a monstrous creature facing fearsome enemies while attempting to escape from a cavern deep underground.

The whole island was suddenly enveloped with what looked like dust or, perhaps more likely, thick clouds suddenly formed in the

damp atmosphere from thousands of tons of water thrown into the air from the sea all around the island. The mist swirled and twisted violently, shot through with green and orange flecks, those luminous sprites that marked the presence of powerful magic. This maelstrom was accompanied by an eye-warping warp in the air, somehow distorting everything Kevin could see, but only those parts observed from the corner of the eye.

Eventually the rumbling and groaning ceased, and the mist began to clear, the water, or dust or whatever it was either settling to the ground or blown out to sea in great drifting sheets of whiteness. There was a collective sigh from the spectators as a new panorama was unveiled by the retreating clouds. Kevin could see, for the first time in his experience, the entire island of Lyndesfarne.

He swept the scene with his binoculars, traversing what was now truly an island. He could clearly see the sea all around, now a green-blue shot with white flecks of foam. The castle still stood on its promontory, its stark bulk contrasting with the flat and featureless dunes and scrubby grass. Smooth sand flats now lay between the island and mainland, which seemed closer together than before, and now peppered as if by a giant hand with grey rocks.

Kevin studied the regions previous occupied by the bridges. The Old Bridge had completely disappeared, its masonry sucked into the twisted vortex, although the line of the causeway could just be observed as a row of broken stones on the sand. The New Bridge had also vanished with not even any wreckage to be seen, although he could just make out a broken stump in the waves that was the remains of one of the support towers. The sand flats and the tiny island, the broken masonry and the complete disappearance of his bridge, brought home to Kevin the awful truth, that the last crossing to the Other World was now truly closed, forever.

Kevin stood for a long while after all sound and movement had stopped, shivering occasionally, even though the wind was not particularly cold. Finally, he returned to his car, now standing all alone along the edge of the lane. He unlocked the vehicle and climbed in, having carefully laid his Lyndesfarne cloak - almost the only item he had retained from the Other World - on the back seat.

He started the car in a daze and drove, slowly and carefully, back to Manchester on automatic pilot, barely conscious of the traffic and the road signs around him. Finally, he arrived at the little flat, the private space he had so often shared with Tanji. He dumped his bag and cloak by the door, then collapsed on the bed and wept like a baby.

Chapter Thirty Four

Kevin and Tanji were enjoying a late breakfast in the kitchen at the home of her Aunt and Uncle. Tanji was dressed in a loose and flowing robe of a subtly patterned and silky green material, the kind that she preferred to wear when not travelling. Kevin was already dressed in his everyday clothes, or at least the clothes he tended to wear when he did not have to go to a professional appointment. Besides, he found that blue jeans with metal fastenings and a traditional leather buckled belt seemed to survive the trip to the world of Lyndesfarne and back without mishap or disaster - unlike, for example, trousers fitted with modern zip fasteners, which tended to jam or separate embarrassingly at the most inappropriate moments.

The two lovers had enormously enjoyed the show at the theatre the previous night, and had returned home late after a supper in a nearby eatery. They had slept - or, at least, stayed in bed - late the following morning, then emerged feeling well rested to bathe. Tanji had prepared a breakfast of honeyed fruit and crusty bread accompanied - inevitably, as Kevin had long ago discovered - with the mugs of hot chocolate which were so popular in this world.

Kevin knew that Tanji's Aunt and Uncle were light sleepers and early risers. He imagined that, at this late hour, her Uncle was already attending his responsibilities in some obscure part of the upper echelons of the Guild of Transportation, while her Aunt was probably outside in the grounds, tending to one or another of the animals which made up the little menagerie.

Kevin had just tucked in to a second slice of the deliciously warm bread that Tanji had provided when, to his entire surprise, her Uncle appeared at the doorway. The older man drew up a chair across the kitchen table and sat down with a serious expression on his face. Kevin said the words that, in the Lyndesfarne language, were a semi-formal greeting equivalent to "good morning" and the other man responded in kind. He then said something to Tanji that Kevin did not understand, which Tanji then translated for his benefit.

"There is something I need to tell you about," she said, adopting the tell-tale sing-song tone which indicated she was interpreting someone else's words, "If you could spare me the time."

"Yes, of course," Kevin replied promptly.

Kevin knew that, while her Uncle did have a reasonable understanding of English, he did not usually feel comfortable expressing himself in that language and therefore he usually relied on Tanji to interpret for him.

“I want to tell you about my wife’s younger brother,” the older man began, “He was, indeed, much younger than me also, and a brave and resourceful man. He joined the Guardians at an early age, was moderately conspicuous in his service for many years and was rapidly promoted to -” Tanji’s translation faltered here for a second - “err, Captain. He met a young woman, also a member of the Guardian force, who was by all accounts impressed by his dash and spirit. And shortly, she fell pregnant, quite unexpectedly.”

This was something of a surprise to Kevin as well. Early in his relationship with Tanji, she had explained carefully about the magical birth control that was available to all that wanted it. It was supposed to be 100% reliable, she had said. At the time, Kevin had suspected there was a deeper reason behind this. People in this world were recommended to have a limited number of children; this was all part of the subtle pressure for stability and uniformity that was officially encouraged by the governments and institutions in Lyndesfarne.

“The two young people got married, as they had already been planning all along. In due course, their child, Tanji” - he indicated her with a wave of his hand - “arrived, a pretty and healthy baby girl. As soon as possible afterwards, both mother and father returned to their duties, organising their shifts so that one or the other could look after their daughter while the other policed the crossing. Occasionally, this was not possible, as they would be rostered together, and it was necessary for them to make arrangements to look after the young girl among their extended families.”

Kevin had understood from previous conversations that this was not unusual in this world, where people tended to have their few children relatively young, and rely on grandparents and older family members to mind the children.

“It was during one of these occasional schedule clashes that some disaster befell them. It was a time when all available Guardians were summoned in response to some vague alert, a piece of dubious intelligence that seemed to have no definite source. Both of them simply disappeared, never to be seen again.”

The older man paused, looking thoughtfully and sympathetically at Tanji.

“All this Tanji has already heard,” he said, “And now you have heard it too.”

Kevin glanced at Tanji who nodded in agreement, looking sad at this no-doubt familiar story.

“But there is a further part to this tale,” her Uncle continued, “One that I have kept for many years, speaking of it to no-one.”

Tanji’s head swung around to stare at her Uncle, even as her mouth translated almost automatically the older man’s words for Kevin’s benefit. She said something in the Lyndesfarne language that Kevin thought meant “Why?”

The old man held up his hand placatingly.

“I was instructed not to tell you, not until you were grown up, not until you would be in a position to appreciate the importance of the truth.”

Tanji was translating her Uncle’s words even as he answered her own question.

“Your parents were more than just ordinary Guardians,” he went on, “They were Defenders, members of a secret elite force, a unit trained to deal with violent attacks that threaten the crossing from this world or the other, a military group prepared to respond with deadly force if necessary.”

The older man paused, looking seriously at Tanji.

“And it was in this secret role that they met their fate.”

“So what really happened to them?” she asked, this time in English.

“As you know,” the older man answered, “The Guardians patrol the shores on either side, as well as the causeways themselves.”

Kevin nodded in understanding. He had occasionally encountered men and women apparently merely walking the coastal paths while he was surveying candidate sites for the New Bridge. For those in the know, it was easy enough to spot the Guardians. There was a certain alertness in their face and bearing, and their clothing, while definitely not a uniform, tended towards a degree of similarity which was only obvious if one knew what to look for.

“Some of the Guardians on patrol at any time will be Defenders, as a matter of course,” he continued, “And a higher proportion when a serious military threat is suspected. This was the reason why both your father and mother were on duty that fateful night.”

Tanji let out a gasp.

“It seemed that some trained force of commandos, from the Other World, had rowed across the straights in the middle of the night, braving the uncertainty of the sea crossing. They were equipped with simple edged weapons which could be relied upon to work even in this world. It was, by all accounts, a clever and coordinated attack,

intended to establish a beachhead at the causeway, later to be reinforced by dissenters from both worlds, perhaps even wrest control of the crossing from the proper authorities.”

Kevin to was listening intently to the translation so expertly conveyed by Tanji, fascinated by the hints of a darker underside to the crossing between the Two Worlds.

“The anonymous tip-off, the details of which were never made clear,” Tanji’s Uncle went on, “Had put more of the Guardians on alert. But there are miles of coastline and only a limited number of people to keep watch. Your parents were in the group who chanced upon the invading force. It was an ugly fight, the Defenders being heavily outnumbered at first, although reinforcements arrived within in minutes. The advantage of magical weapons was limited by the ability to manoeuvre on the slippery rocks at the water’s edge. Tanji’s parents acquitted themselves bravely, but both died. Your father was cut down from behind trying to save your mother from another of the attackers.”

Tanji Uncle was silent for a moment, apparently in deep cogitation.

“Who was behind the attack, no-one seems to know, even now,” the older man continued, shaking his head sadly, “Unfortunately, this kind of thing is rather more common than any of us would like.”

Kevin now more clearly understood why the Guardians were as cautious and as alert as was so evidently the case. Their job was not a sinecure, although it might feature long periods of tediously routine activities, even boredom, but with the real possibility of genuine excitement, perhaps to the point of being life-threatening.

The older man opened a drawer in the kitchen table and brought out a large envelope of stiff paper, browned and stained by the years, and handed it to Tanji with a curiously formal motion. Kevin could see that some kind of address or note was handwritten on the front, something that he could not at first read but he finally realised that it was Tanji’s full and formal name. With tears in her eyes, Tanji turned the envelope over and broke the old-fashioned red wax seal, her fingers shaking so much that she nearly dropped the letter on the table.

She slid out an ornately decorated sheet of paper and read it carefully, the tears running down her cheeks.

“It is a commendation, issued posthumously, to my mother,” she said simply, “An award for bravery signed by the Grand Convener of the Board of Control himself, and with his official seal attached.”

She took a second sheet, similarly decorated, from the envelope.

“And there is another, for my father,” she continued, her voice catching in her throat.

“Your parents were heroes,” Tanji’s uncle said, “Secret heroes, ones whose bravery could not be publicly acknowledged, now or ever, but nevertheless ones to whom the Boards are forever grateful. I salute them.”

Kevin bowed his head in dumb respect. Tanji was lost in tears, holding her face in her hands. Kevin took a handkerchief - an old-fashioned one - from his pocket and unfolded it.

“Are you OK?” Kevin asked urgently, dabbing at Tanji’s eyes with the white cloth.

She nodded, her eyes reddened.

“I’m so sorry to hear about your parents,” he went on sympathetically.

“It was a long time ago,” she replied, “And I am glad to know more about what happened. And I suppose I can understand why it was necessary to keep all this from me for so many years.”

The older man held up a hand to Tanji and spoke a few words which she did not immediately interpret. She spoke in response directly to her Uncle, then turned to face Kevin.

“My Uncle says that these next words are for my ears, but that I should translate them for you anyway,” she said, wiping her eyes again and looking distinctly puzzled.

“Your Aunt and I, we are old,” the man said, “And our needs are few. We expect to live our few remaining years in this house, quietly enjoying the fruits of our garden, and the sunshine and snow each in its season.”

Kevin thought that this was not such a bad proposition, and frankly suspected that the old man was exaggerating both his age and his frailty to make his point clear.

“Of course, we have no children of our own, and we have looked after you as our own daughter. And I know that you have responded in turn, fulfilling all of the trusts and obligations as a daughter should.”

“I have appreciated your generosity, your love, so very much,” Tanji replied, still speaking in English, then spoke in the language of Lyndesfarne in what seemed to Kevin to be a very formal address.

“You have been a good and dutiful niece,” her Uncle acknowledged with a nod of his head, “But now, you must decide what you will do with the rest of your life. I do strongly urge you not to waste it running around after your Aunt and your aged Uncle, indulging their whims and aiding their pastimes. You must live your

own life, enjoy your own future, with whomever it is who will make you happy.”

With that pronouncement, Tanji’s Uncle stood up from the table, turned on his heel and left through the kitchen door.

Kevin turned to Tanji, who seemed to be on the verge of tears again. He took her gently and held her in his arms. After a few moments shaking, she looked up at him, sniffing back the tears.

“I want to be with you,” she breathed, “Always and forever.”

Chapter Thirty Five

The months and years which followed the closure of the last crossing to Lyndesfarne were a time of considerable change for Kevin. He sold his little flat in South Manchester, getting a surprisingly good price for it considering its diminutive dimensions. He used the resulting capital, and some of his not inconsiderable savings, to put down a substantial deposit on a large and rambling farm perhaps twenty or so miles from the site of the now defunct Lyndesfarne crossing.

The old farm was a collection of grey stone-built buildings, etched here and there by lichen although generally in a reasonable state of repair. It was set in a slight valley offering a little shelter from the prevailing winds, with views over the low hills towards the east. It was just possible to catch sight of the sea in the far distance on particularly clear days.

Kevin felt comfortable that he would be able to cover the mortgage payments and the local taxes from the proceeds of his continuing consultancy work. He found that there was a regular demand for his services in the civil engineering industry, even in the absence of his rather specialist – and now entirely redundant – experience of the world of Lyndesfarne.

Kevin also found that he had a fair amount of spare time, much of which he spent restoring and improving the farm buildings in a comfortable and welcoming – even homely – fashion. It was all very different from the cool modern format he had adopted in the Manchester flat; indeed, it was a style that he thought would have appealed to Tanji.

With some professional help, and a fair bit of heavy machinery, Kevin had a large area around the house and buildings landscaped and planted as a garden with a large patio area at the rear. The perimeter he had set with hedges and fences and shrubberies, both for privacy as well as to act as a windbreak – at least, they would be properly performing those functions when the plants had fully established themselves.

Other works Kevin undertook around the grounds included renovating the main barn, repurposing it as a large garage and equipping a section as a workshop, with a stout bench and a wide variety of tools. He also refurbished the stables, although he did not

acquire any animals except for a semi-feral cat which seemed to have adopted him, rather than the other way around, although the creature would never come indoors. Yet other outbuildings he renovated as a workshop and tool shed, and he erected a small greenhouse in a sunny spot not far from the main house.

Kevin found himself undertaking more gardening than he expected, and enjoying it more than he expected, too. He spent many hours in the lighter months of the year pottering around the gardens in a state of increasing tranquillity and relaxation. He even came into possession of one of those combination tools known as a “Gardener’s Friend” presumably because, in addition to having numerous sharp instruments for pruning the foliage, it also included both a corkscrew and a bottle-opener.

Kevin also acquired a new car, another Volvo, quiet and spaciouly comfortable without being unnecessarily flashy and with discreet four-wheel-drive to cope with slippery road conditions in the winter months. He paid a contractor to establish a block-paved area for vehicles at the front of the garages, although his lone car looked a bit forlorn on the wide expanse of paving.

The extensive refurbishment – which had already cost a significant amount of money – continued inside the house. Kevin established a study downstairs, with the books and journals from his old library, and furnished it with a large desk and several comfortable chairs set around the original fireplace. He equipped the study as a professional office, including a discreet but powerful laptop computer and all of the technological accoutrements necessary for him to be able to do most of his work without leaving home. He also obtained the fastest internet connectivity that could be acquired in this remote spot.

Elsewhere in the house, Kevin installed a couple of Scandinavian-styled wood-burning stoves in the spacious living area formed from what had at one time been the smaller barn and the stables. This heat source was backed up by a modern automatic and highly efficient central heating system, so that he did not always have to attend to the supply of logs in person - a fact important to him since he still expected to be away from home for professional reasons for many days at a time.

His architect training and his own natural inclinations led Kevin to apply special attention to tedious items such as loft insulation and thermally-efficient glazing. The arched doorway which had one time allowed the passage of farm wagons was now filled with double-

glazed french windows looking out over the patio and which let in a great deal of sunlight and warmth in almost all seasons.

Kevin had applied everything he had learned about architecture and interior design to the main suite of rooms on the ground floor. This area was open plan, split over two levels - by necessity, given the original separation of farmhouse and adjacent barn. He had knocked through the wall between the two buildings and decorated the resulting space in a spare yet comfortable style. It had hardwood floors decorated with thick rugs, a generous dining table and chairs in the corner next to the kitchen, and soft leather sofas and easy chairs in brighter and more vibrant colours that he might hitherto have chosen.

Upstairs - the stairwell required a degree of caution to navigate in order to avoid low beams in a couple of places - the space was divided into several bedrooms, two of which had adjoining bathrooms and another one of which was now re-equipped as a small gym. In all of the bedrooms he made sure there were plenty of cupboards and other storage spaces, even though his own clothes filled barely a fraction of the volume available.

Kevin also carried on the comfortably rustic theme in the kitchen, where he had installed an oil-fired Aga oven which contributed significantly to the warmth and comfort of the entire house. The kitchen was indeed the old farmhouse kitchen - the biggest room in the original building - and now equipped with numerous modern units and appliances, the latter carefully concealed behind oak doors. He had laid the floor with brown stone flags and placed a large and exceptionally solid wooden table in the centre of the room, surrounded with too many matching wood chairs with soft seat cushions.

Off the main kitchen, Kevin had included a separate larder with ranked shelves and an old-fashioned black slate top to keep food cool and fresh. This was not the only food storage and was in fact augmented by a large modern fridge and freezer combination positioned in the main kitchen so that the heat from the refrigeration did not unnecessarily warm the larder. He also equipped a separate laundry room, with machines for washing and drying, with easy access to a paved area to hang out clothes to dry.

He regarded the newly-fitted kitchen as a place to be creative, rather than a space for drudgery, and he found himself using it more than he had expected. He planned and cooked recipes he imagined Tanji would enjoy almost every day, even though the food he prepared was only for himself.

In actual fact, Kevin was making a careful and completely conscious effort to reproduce the homely and comfortable ambience he had experienced in both Bret's family home, and at Tanji's Aunt and Uncle. He thought about Tanji a lot, asking her – or at least an internal mental model of her – whether she would prefer this item or that, this position or that layout, several times a day.

During this time, he occasionally wondered if he was being watched, monitored discreetly by some remnant of the interlocking organisation which had run the crossing between the Worlds for so many millennia. There were occasional hints of movements in his grounds late at night, noises which might have been caused by a fox or a badger. Sometimes, there was the suggestion of a shadow in the street or a car following behind him when, in the course of his professional responsibilities, he visited a place he had not been before. But there was nothing concrete, and it could all have been put down to his own overactive imagination or even just mild paranoia.

He supposed that any such monitoring would be to detect any case of a lapse of the secrecy he had promised when he had left the world of Lyndesfarne. He had no hesitation in giving such a promise. After all, there was no-one he would want to communicate with, in any case, and he strongly suspected that any attempt to sell a story to even the most sensationalist newspaper would result in him becoming a laughing-stock. Even the faintest suggestions of surveillance seemed to disappear after a year or so and Kevin soon relaxed, surrounding himself with a sense of calm privacy.

During these years, Kevin lived quietly, distracting himself with both his work – which continued to be both technically challenging and moderately lucrative – and with his projects to renovate house and grounds. He committed great care and attention to every little detail. Frankly, he wanted it to be perfect, to be somewhere that the ghost of Tanji – and he himself – could feel at peace.

In truth, he missed her terribly. Her image was constantly in his mind, the sound of her voice always in his dreams. He fervently wished that somehow he could undo the separation of the Two Worlds for a moment, and bring her back. But he knew - he had been repeatedly told by Bret and Eosin and the Ferryman - that this was impossible, that once the last crossing was closed, any attempt to open a new path between Worlds would join a different and randomly-selected parallel universe, selected from countless possibilities. In short, it could not possibly happen.

Chapter Thirty Six

I fear that I am not long for this world. The physicians assure me that I shall live for months, maybe years, but I feel in my bones this will be the last time I am able to write in this journal. Even now, my eyes are strained to see my own words, and my hand struggles to form the letters with my quill pen. I sense I may soon not be able to rise easily from my bed in the mornings, and this summer - nearly autumn already, will be my last.

Many years have passed since I first wrote in this book, following the direction of dear *Maman*, God rest her soul. She read that letter, the one I wrote describing my discoveries in the Champagne tunnels. She immediately wrote back to me, enclosing my original letter and demanding many more details, things I was not sure at the time I could remember. We wrote to each other many times over the decades. Her letters sometimes took years to find me, travelling as I was across the countryside first of France and then of England. Miraculously, they all found me eventually, as far as I know. I have them all, still, in the folder which is formed by the back cover of this book.

In her letters to me, *Mamans* instructions were clear: to write everything that you have seen or heard or been told, in as much detail as I could remember, about the mysterious land of Faerie. These instructions I have followed carefully. My letters to *Maman* and her replies I have transcribed carefully in these pages, and translated into English to the best of my abilities. In between, I have made notes on other aspects of my life, for my own amusement and, it now seems to me, for the edification of my progeny. So, perhaps this book is a diary, a history of my life, and it may be that is the way I should present it, when the time comes.

Now, I prefer to write in English, my adopted tongue. Somehow, the words in French do not seem to come as easily as they once did. Perhaps it is just old age, but I do not seem to be able to shape my thoughts into words as I used to, or perhaps it is that my thoughts follow the same paths that I cannot find new words to express them.

I have lived a long and productive life, I believe, living out my allotted three-score years-and-ten, and I hope my Maker - when I join Him in the near future - will approve of my thoughts and words and deeds. I have worked hard all my life and brought up a family who

are uniformly a credit to God and society. I myself have led a nearly blameless existence, helping friends and neighbours when they needed it, and giving more than the bare minimum to church and charity and beggar. I have saved money where I could, and now I want for little, save for those things that money cannot buy.

I will soon leave behind my beloved wife Milly who is even now determined that I should want for no comfort or aid. I am attended frequently by my fine sons and dutiful daughters, now all grown up and with families of their own. My family have been spared the worst of death and disease and disfigurement, and are as healthy as anyone could expect. My life has been a blessing.

My one vice, if it is a sin at all, has been my continued fascination with the Faerie world, a secret I have held to myself across the decades, not disclosed to family or friend or priest. I have even hidden my absorption from my dearest Milly although why I feel it necessary to conceal my interests I am not entirely sure.

I find myself reflecting on what I have learned, over the years, about a world so different, and yet so similar, to our own. I do not, in my heart of hearts, believe that the denizens of the Faerie world are evil demons, nor are they angels of light. I sincerely believe that they are people, men and women like us, making their way in the world, although I suspect the parish priest might not agree with me, were we ever to discuss the subject. No, as God's children, the people of the land of Faerie all have the capacity for both good and evil, and it is the will of each of them, as it is for ourselves to shine in the light or languish in the darkness.

Elsewhere in these pages, I have written as *Maman* directed. I have transcribed the tales and stories I heard when working on the Lyndesfarne bridge, as well as my own observations in the *Caves* of Champagne and on the site of the bridge of stone and magic itself. I have even described, in as much detail as I can remember, the exact movements of hands and arms that those mysterious monks used to conjure the explosion which collapsed the tunnels. Perhaps all these things are important, perhaps everything is trivial and insignificant. I cannot know.

As it was, *Maman* was convinced that the Faerie world was real enough and was genuinely accessible, but only to those trusted with the secret knowledge. I myself was never one of the inner circle and could only look upon the wonders at their most fleeting.

But my interest must have been noticed, perhaps by the Faerie folk themselves. I had a strange visitor some months ago. He was a tall thin man, in the later part of his middle years, wearing a long old-

fashioned cloak, carrying a pack and supporting himself on a stout staff. At least, he walked with the staff, although I did not get the impression that he really needed its support. He looked like a traveller, a wanderer, one who walks the highways and byways of the world, and perhaps the Faerie world too, on errands no-one must know and nobody can guess.

The traveller also seemed somehow familiar, although I could not place my finger on what or who he was. Perhaps he was someone I had glimpsed while working on the stone bridge all those years ago. In any case, the stranger did not claim any kind of acquaintanceship. I got the strangest feeling that this man was actually a Visitor from the world of Faerie, despite the fact that he displayed none of the characteristics I had heard tell marked out the Faerie folk - no pointed ears, no direct and inescapable gaze, no pointed chin and high cheekbones.

The tall stranger had accosted me, calling out as I potted in my garden during a fine spring day. He leaned on his staff and eyed me strangely, so that I came across to the garden gate where he waited. He then spoke to me in English, in a rambling whisper that seemed disjointed and incoherent but, as I listened, his cryptic remarks began to make some kind of sense.

It seemed that somehow he knew about this book, my secret journal, the volume whose existence I had hidden from everybody. He did not want to see it himself, but he seemed to be suggesting that it was important that I should keep it safe. He said that there was a destiny attached to this volume. It would be not in my children's time, nor in my children's children, but there would come a time when this very book would be of vital importance. Finally, he asked me what I wished for the book after my death, into whose hands this volume will fall.

At the time, I did not know. The outlandish stranger bid me think on it as he took his leave. Now, I have decided. I will leave this book with my eldest son. He is trustworthy but perhaps just a little unimaginative. I shall not instruct him to read the book, nor shall I forbid him from reading it. Rather, I shall say nothing, trusting that he will not take it upon himself to pour over the crabbed handwriting in his aged father's old notebook.

I shall give my eldest son a different instruction, that this book should handed down to his own eldest son on his thirtieth birthday. Apparently, the young man wants to travel, to go to England, to see the world, to explore places beyond the village where he grew up. Perhaps I am somewhat to blame for this wanderlust, encouraging the

child with tales of my life there, which now seems a whole lifetime ago. But he has a great curiosity, one which will, I am sure, lead him sooner or later to read his grandfather's book.

I shall encourage his father to let the boy travel. Perhaps he will return, perhaps he will stay. I cannot say, and do not want to insist either way. The young man has a destiny, I sense, a destiny that he or his own children will bring about. I wish them well.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Kevin stood on a low rise looking over the shallow tidal flats that led, now, to what was truly the tiny island of Lyndesfarne. The tremendous blast that resulted from the closure of the crossing had reduced the Old Bridge and its connecting causeways to rubble, quantities of which were still visible in surprising places around the area. However, the bulk of the shattered stonework had not travelled so far, and blocks large and small now marked out a path that could, with care, be walked at low tide.

The New Bridge had suffered even more, and the deceptively slender reinforced concrete tower which had supported the roadway on the mainland side had been reduced to a broken stump, now barely visible at high tide. Much of the metal and concrete that had formed the bridge itself had been sucked into the maelstrom triggered by the closure of the crossing, never to be seen again. The supporting tower on the Lyndesfarne side was of course invisible, since that structure was now not part of this world at all.

The vast concrete slabs on the coast which had formed the cable stays which had supported the New Bridge were still in place, although the tangled remains of the cables themselves had been removed in an orchestrated clean-up operation which had been both discreet and efficient. The fissured concrete surface was already becoming weathered and overgrown with moss and rough grasses, and soon, Kevin judged, they would be easily mistaken for natural rock formations.

The maelstrom had also severely damaged the plantings and landscaping which had been newly placed just after the main part of the New Bridge had been completed. Large numbers of trees and bushes had been uprooted or shredded by the hurricane force winds. A few years later, however, and the undergrowth was beginning to re-establish itself, forming a less regimented and much more wild-looking forest.

Elsewhere, the landscape looked as it had done for centuries: dry stone walls separating fields of green grass where sheep grazed peacefully. A tranquil scene and one, Kevin knew, which was almost entirely man-made. A series of low hillocks surrounding a depression on one hillside, for example, marked a long-disused quarry, probably the source for much of the stone that had been used

to make the walls to restrain the sheep. The hillocks themselves were spoil heaps, fragments and off-cuts of rock from the quarry that had been discarded and now buried in the thin soil which supported the grass that the sheep ate.

The grasslands too were a deliberate human construction, with encroaching heather being rigorously burned on a yearly basis. Any saplings that dared to set down roots would inevitably be cropped by the hungry sheep; without the sheep, the entire area would revert to scrubby woodlands. It was all part of the “countryside as machine for making food” viewpoint which would be natural enough to the farming community, although anathema to well-meaning but naïve townies.

Kevin had often visited the site of the crossing to the Other World, tramping the coastline to north and south, or watching out over the straights – at once eerily familiar yet disconcertingly different in so many details – from this or that vantage point.

One stopping-point on his walks to the south was a derelict concrete bunker which had once housed large naval guns. It was a construction from the Second World War, no doubt, intended to protect the coastline of Britain from invasion - and the island of Lyndesfarne, too. Only parts of the fortifications were intact, and Kevin wondered what had happened to destroy the remainder. The steel reinforced concrete was eighteen inches or more thick, but sections had been blown apart - from the inside, as far as Kevin could tell.

He never met anyone on the footpaths and trails as he walked, although they seemed to be well-travelled, judging by the trampled grass and the occasional boot-print. At least, that had been true until six months ago, or so; now the pathways seemed more overgrown with little evidence to suggest that anyone ever passed this way.

He had also explored the island itself, although there was little enough to see. On several occasions, he carefully checked the local tide tables then moved as quickly as he could along the roughly marked path over the mudflats. At low time and in dry weather, this was an easy enough walk although, on one occasion, on the way back he had been hit by a sudden squally shower. With the rain stinging his eyes, it was difficult to follow the stone markers, and he realised he could easily have wandered away from the safe passage and would perhaps have been in grave danger.

There was not a great deal to survey on the island other than the ruined castle squatting on its promontory. Kevin had explored the ruins on several visits, and knew that the castle that now stood on this

naturally defensible position by the sea was much smaller and a lot more decrepit than the edifice that had stood in the same spot when the crossing was open.

Kevin was unclear whether the castle was actually this broken down before the explosion, but he had seen that several huge stone blocks had been dislodged fairly recently. Not that it made much difference; the lichen-covered stonework that now lay partially hidden by the grass and heather could have been there for a year or a century. There was no evidence of recent human occupation, and the birds and other wildlife that had made the broken walls and ruined towers their home were rarely disturbed by any visitors.

Elsewhere the rocks and shoals that dotted the waters all around the island provided resting-places for seals and a vast profusion of seabirds. The treacherous waters still kept even the most fervent fisherman and dinghy sailors at bay, and the whole area was still one large no-go area for shipping of all kinds. On the other hand, Kevin considered, this physical isolation added to the immense sense of peace and privacy that the whole area seemed to exude.

On this occasion, Kevin had already decided against attempting the crossing. The tide tables suggested that the sea was already fast encroaching on the sands. He might easily make it to the island if he started right now but he would have a long and rather chilly wait until well after dark until the tide had withdrawn far enough for him to return.

Instead, he had once again visited the site of the New Bridge to inspect the rapidly-healing damage that had been inflicted by the closure of the crossing. The tar-macadam roadway which had been laid to allow heavy trucks to reach the warehouses at the new crossing point had been torn up and the way itself was now little more than a muddy farm track.

The debris from the warehouse buildings themselves, whose flimsy construction had been devastated by the explosion, had been carefully removed. There was little more than the occasional concrete fence post in the undergrowth to mark the locations of the secure compounds where loading and unloading had once been undertaken. There was little enough to see, and Kevin was convinced that in a very few years it would be nearly impossible to tell that anything out of the ordinary had been located here.

After a few hours exploring, and finding little of note, Kevin made his way back by tramping the barely distinguishable pathway along the coast, eventually reaching the point where once the old causeway had once reached the coast. The sun was getting low in the

sky and the wind was whipping across the sands, now mostly covered by the encroaching tide.

After watching the seagulls riding the wind, wheeling and diving, for a few minutes, Kevin turned and walked back along the roadway, past the so-called Tourist Information Office which had acted as a guard post for the Guardians. It was now an empty shell, its windows blown out and the roof ripped off by the force of the explosion. The building was slightly more derelict than the unaided destructive force had left it. Any debris, anything incriminating that might have hinted at the existence of the Other World had been carefully removed.

Kevin understood there had once been a basement - perhaps more than one - for storage under the guardhouse. On previous visits, he had explored the ruins carefully but even his trained architect's eye had been able to detect no sign of any structure below ground. Perhaps, he considered, he had been mistaken in his understanding or maybe the clean-up operation had been even more thorough than he imagined.

Kevin picked his way over the broken road surface that had formed the access to the causeway then made his way, windswept and a little tired, to his car. He had left the new Volvo in the same walled car park that he had used so many times during his visits when the crossing was open, when he was engaged in the creation of the New Bridge.

There were no other cars in the field, but a slender woman with long mousey hair - not quite light enough to be blonde - blowing loose stood next to his vehicle, dressed in a long cape which blew in the wind, a style which - if he didn't know better - he would have thought worn by a person from the Other World. She had her back to him and was apparently surveying the field and pastures dotted with sheep. A large and heavy-looking rucksack sat at her feet.

The mysterious woman turned, saw Kevin hurrying towards her, then waved and called something that he did not catch over the noise of the wind. As he drew closer, he realised that he did not recognise her at all; she was quite unlike any woman he had ever seen before. Even so, there was something about her, something so desperately attractive, something below the surface which seemed achingly familiar.

"Kevin, my love," she said, smiling, "You haven't changed a bit."

He took both her hands and looking deeply into her eyes, taking in Tanji's new, unchangeable appearance.

"Has it been long enough?" he asked her.

She smiled, her face shaping itself so differently from the Tanji of old, but somehow still recognisably hers.

“It is, my love,” she said gently, “Perhaps it has been for six months or more. I felt I should err on the side of caution. But here I am, now.”

They kissed passionately, Kevin experiencing for the first time a sensation at once so similar and so different from the experiences lodged so carefully in his memory. Disengaging, he stood back to take another look at the love of his life.

“It worked, then,” he said eventually.

“It did, my love,” she replied as gently as before.

Tanji’s voice was different, too, as was everything about her - just as she had planned all those years ago. To the casual observer - or even to a carefully trained observer, like the erstwhile Guardians - the woman standing in front of him was not Tanji.

On the eve of the closure of the last crossing, she had used her contacts, through her old friend Kithyn - a woman who definitely owed Tanji a favour or two - she had managed to acquire some extreme shape-changing magic through what sounded to Kevin like black-market sources. The dodgy magic had given her the appearance of someone else - no, the actual body structure of someone else. It had irrevocably changed every part of her.

In her new guise, and still feeling groggy with the physical after-effects, Tanji had struggled over the crossing just before the closure, hidden in plain sight amongst the confusion of other refugees and travellers desperately making their way home. She had taken her place in the society of England, remaining as invisible as anyone could in the melting-pot of everyday life, and taking care to stay away from the remnants of the Guardians and the other organisations that had controlled the crossing between the Two Worlds.

Where she was, not even Kevin knew - or even if she had successfully made it to his world before the crossing was explosively dismantled. He had taken the fact that she had made it to this world as an article of faith, just as he assured himself that she had remained undetected.

Now, years later, so few people knew anything about the vanished Other World, and perhaps even fewer cared in the slightest. Tanji had finally felt it safe to return to the site of the crossing, the one place in their shared history that Kevin visited on a regular basis, and where eventually she would surely encounter him.

Kevin again took Tanji’s hands in his own.

“Let’s go home,” he said.

The End

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