



# Death on the New Bridge

**Trevor Hopkins**

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A Novel by

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To Tas and Seb – for a wonderful life together.

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 world of Lyndesfarne described in this book is entirely imaginary, and bears no resemblance to the charming Holy Island of Lindisfarne in North East England.

# Chapter One

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Kevin and Tanji had been invited to the formal opening of the New Bridge between England and Lyndesfarne. They had arrived early, travelling by portal from Tanji's family home where they had once again been staying as guests of her Aunt and Uncle. They were both wearing the hooded capes – so popular in her world – against the windy autumn weather and frequent showers. Kevin was feeling smug that he had remembered, at the first attempt, the magical gesture which closed the fastening of his cloak.

As was conventional in Kevin's own world, the formal ribbon-cutting happened well after the bridge was actually completed, and indeed after it had been carrying traffic for some time. The new crossing had been closed to the normal commercial interchange for a short period, and the honoured guests had made their way from each side either on foot or in one of the horse-drawn wagons which were the only vehicles allowed on the bridge itself.

The brief ceremony passed off without incident although, because of his limited understanding of the language, Kevin could not make out very much of the speeches from various dignitaries and bigwigs. The ritual culminated in the ceremonial cutting of a ribbon which had been deliberately placed in the exact centre of the bridge. This allowed a few photographers on the English side to use their cameras without them being disabled by the technology-suppressing properties of the barrier between the Two Worlds.

Kevin and his colleague Bret were the co-designers of the New Bridge or, more precisely, each were the designer of half of it. The half that was in the mundane world of engineering and technology had been Kevin's responsibility, while the section in the magical world of Lyndesfarne had been allocated to Bret.

The most challenging part of the whole design had been the short section where they now stood – the middle of the bridge where neither technology nor magic was entirely reliable. They had solved this thorny problem by a design where the central portion of the overall structure was largely unstressed, and then closing the gap with a laminate – alternating thin layers of steel-reinforced concrete and the magically enhanced “construction stone” favoured in Lyndesfarne.

Kevin thought ruefully that pictures of this bridge would not be appearing in the usual trade publications, unlike his previous commission, a part-floating bridge in New Zealand which had attracted a certain amount of attention from the specialist press. The low-key and intricate web of secrecy that surrounded what was now the sole remaining crossing to the Other World meant that none of his professional colleagues would ever hear about the interesting technical problems they had had to solve.

Kevin recognised a few of the people in attendance at the ceremony. He had spotted Bret's blond ponytail earlier and, once the formal part of the proceedings had been completed, he and Tanji strolled over to where Bret was standing.

Bret was in his male guise, the one he had adopted for much of the period during the New Bridge's design and construction. Actually biologically female, Bret was a rare and talented shapeshifter capable of donning a – admittedly slightly boyish – male appearance. He claimed that this disguise was helpful in dealing with people from Kevin's world, where the remnants of sexist attitudes would otherwise have made some things more difficult.

Tanji had eschewed any change of form today and looked, in Kevin's extremely biased opinion, radiant. Her blonde hair was drawn up into a clasp at the back of her head, which effectively highlighted the slightly elfin cast to her features – the high cheekbones and the suggestion of pointed ears – that were, Kevin knew, so characteristic of natives to the world of Lyndesfarne.

Bret was present with his husband Eosin who, Kevin had been given to understand, had some role in the maintenance and enhancement of the magical sprites in the barrier which enforced – mostly – the separation of the Two Worlds. The sprites disrupted technological artefacts – everything from plastic biro's to mobile phones – and Kevin had long since learned to leave almost everything behind when he visited. Other sprites disabled magical items, so that the magical amulets and brooches used in Lyndesfarne for so many purposes became just chunky jewellery.

Bret's mother was also in attendance, but as an ordinary member of the crowd. Her role as the Ferryman – a semi-mythical figure with a secret and central role within the Board of Control – was not publicly known. She gave every appearance of a proud mother embracing her son's achievement, although Kevin was aware of the steely glint in her eye that belied her otherwise matronly appearance.

Bret smiled as Kevin approached and shook his hand, each grasping the other man's upper arm in an expression of warmth and

respect. Bret then kissed Tanji on the cheek, bending slightly to embrace her more petite form.

Kevin had not seen Bret for some time, indeed, only on one occasion since the intervention – by the Ferryman herself – which had rescued Kevin from an uncertain future and quite possibly a mindwipe.

“Good to see you both. Been keeping well?” Bret enquired solicitously.

“Very well,” Kevin replied, “If a bit busy.”

Having left the firm of architects who had employed him while the New Bridge was being designed, Kevin had been working hard at establishing an independent consultancy, as well as spending a lot of time with Tanji. Sometimes he felt he had known her for ever, even though in reality it was only a few months.

“Oh, it’s not been *all* work,” Tanji chided, smiling naughtily up at Kevin.

Kevin could feel himself reddening slightly, but recovered quickly.

“Oh, we’ve been travelling widely, too.”

The three people chatted for a few minutes, exchanging news and enquiring after mutual acquaintances.

“Look, I’d better go and circulate some more,” Bret said finally, looking around at the gathering of the great and the good, “See you at the party?”

“Don’t worry,” Kevin replied, grinning in response, “We’ll be there.”

The other part of the opening celebrations was to be a champagne reception that evening, to be held in the ‘Garden of Boundaries’ – the hostel where Kevin had stayed on several occasions during the construction of the New Bridge, and knew as the ‘Walled Garden’.

Kevin had not been entirely comfortable with the idea of attending a formal party, and had had to be vigorously persuaded by Tanji.

“It’ll be fun,” she enthused, practically dragging him towards the front door of his flat in Manchester.

“But what shall I wear?” Kevin worried, “It’s got to be something OK socially and, more important, something that won’t fall apart when we go through the barrier.”

Tanji laughed aloud once again.

“Wear something colourful,” she suggested flirtatiously, “Think peacock!”

The two of them had taken the tram to one of the large shopping arcades in the centre of the city. There, they spent several hours touring gentlemen's outfitters of all descriptions, a process which required, in Kevin's opinion, frequent fortification with café lattes and Danish pastries.

Kevin eventually settled on a linen suit in a pastel shade of mint-green with a pink silk shirt and a tie which he was assured went well with both shirt and suit. He felt compelled to ask a bemused tailor to remove the modern efficient zip in the trousers and replace it with a set of cumbersome bone buttons. Even rather simple machines like zip fasteners tended to fail in Lyndesfarne, and he did not relish the embarrassing prospect of struggling with a jammed fly when caught short.

This was not Kevin's usual style of dress but he found the whole thing somehow a liberating experience.

As promised, the party was a glittering *occasion*, with champagne and other drinks flowing in copious quantities. Kevin was amused to note that the champagne had indeed been imported from France. Apparently, this sparkling wine was particularly popular in many parts of Lyndesfarne, and it was imported in large quantities.

Kevin was not particularly fond of sparking wine, and sipped cautiously at his drink while circulating politely amongst the guests. Tanji was his constant companion, always at his elbow and ready with a smooth translation when necessary. Fortunately, this was not required very often as it turned out, since many of the other guests recognised him, or at least had inquired who he was.

Kevin's role in unmasking the criminals who had attempted to prevent the completion of the New Bridge, and to infiltrate embargoed magic into his own world, was officially not widely known. Kevin himself had been strongly advised to maintain a strict silence. Needless to say, therefore, speculation and rumour were rife, and he had overheard numerous explanations of recent events, none of which were more than three parts in ten true.

Apart from Bret and Bret's husband and parents, Kevin recognised Professor Braxton and some of her colleagues from NISSA. Kevin had visited the Newcastle Institute of Special Sciences and Arts on numerous occasions over the last few years. It was one of the few places where, if you had the right kind of introduction, it was possible to get detailed briefings – and at least some kind of explanation – about the strange world on the other side of the crossing.



In Lyndesfarne, Kevin knew, magic – there was no other reasonable word in English – was used pervasively, while all but the simplest of machines were unknown. They had a sophisticated and reasonably equitable society where everyone, it seemed, had access to magic for comfort, travel and entertainment. Magic was controlled by a complex language of manual gestures, something learned from childhood, and one which Kevin was still struggling to comprehend. Tanji assured him that he was getting better quickly and Kevin felt himself to be more competent in the syntax of gestures than the spoken language.

Peter Brenner, the Project Manager from Kevin's old firm of architects, was talking to Kenneth Nasterton, a Senior Managing Partner from the same company. Nasterton was a crashing bore, who had fortunately kept out of the way during most of the New Bridge project, and Brenner seemed to be fully engaged keeping the old buffer out of mischief. After a slightly shaky start, Kevin had gained a good deal of respect for Peter, especially when he had belatedly discovered that he was also an agent for the Ferryman.

Kevin could also identify the rotund bulk of Duncan Tweedy across the room, flanked as always by several flunkies and bag-carriers. He ducked away quickly, not wishing to be buttonholed by the man. The opportunity of attending a party had apparently had little effect on Tweedledum's sartorial appearance except, he mused, for a tie of more than usually execrable taste.

Apart from the incognito Ferryman, there were several other representatives from the Board of Control, none of whom Kevin knew personally. The Board members, no doubt weighed down with complex matters concerning the governance of the crossing, tended to keep themselves to themselves, and stood quietly at one end of the room.

Kevin recognised several people from the Board of Construction who had participated in the erection of the bridge. He chatted briefly with Craz the Overseer and the instantly-forgettable Quarl. Graeme Greysmith was not there, however. Kevin had quietly recommended to Peter Brenner that the creatively lazy Smudger not be invited, given his all-but-invisible contribution to the work.

Kevin was not someone who drank a great deal, although he enjoyed a glass of wine or a pint of beer on the odd occasion. He could see that Tanji had enjoyed the champagne this evening and was now getting just a little tipsy, and he was very pleased that he had managed to secure a room overnight here in the Walled Garden. He

certainly did not want to drive afterwards, or take a long taxi ride – or even a trip by portal.

The “Garden” was a lot bigger than he had first thought. There were six levels underground, as well as a ground and a small first floor. On previous visits, Kevin had always been placed on the ground floor, in perfectly acceptable if rather ordinary accommodation. When he discovered the rooms underground, he noted that the hostel also had some rather fine suites and he had managed to secure one of these for this evening.

After several hours of socialising and circulating, Kevin and Tanji finally managed to escape from the party. Tanji by now was rather giggly and hung on his arm on the way down to their room. He avoided the lift, since he was not absolutely sure he could remember the gestures required, and they made their way carefully down the stairs to their room.

Giggling, they undressed quickly and practically fell into bed together, being altogether too tired to do anything much before falling into a deep sleep wrapped in each others arms.

## Chapter Two

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Even before he had met Tanji, Kevin had been spellbound by the amazing properties of the world of Lyndesfarne. He had once again expressed his astonishment and fascination with the Other World to her one mid-week evening, over a casual meal in a fashionably back-street Manchester bistro.

The restaurant was not somewhere which he had frequented before he had met Tanji, preferring to either cook for himself or grab a Chinese takeaway. Now he wanted to ensure that Tanji enjoyed her time in his world and he has identified this restaurant, having undertaken a little research on the Internet. They had made several visits over the last few months and it had rapidly become a firm favourite.

Apart from the restaurant, Kevin had taken to showing Tanji parts of his own world that he liked or, in an embarrassingly large number of cases, places that he thought might impress her. For the first time in his life, money was not, really, an objection: he felt he could afford to do anything he took a fancy to. Of course, this was not quite true, but Kevin did have several accounts in which he had amassed considerable savings. He had been living rather modestly, on his own, for several years before he had met Tanji and money had just built up in his bank accounts.

His nest egg had taken a battering when he had left the firm of architects that had employed him during the construction of the New Bridge, but fees and commissions from a fairly eclectic collection of consulting engagements had been coming in steadily for some time.

He had wanted to buy Tanji things – clothes and jewellery and other stereotypically feminine fripperies – but she did not really seem to wish for very much. When browsing in shops on their various trips, she had pointed out a few trinkets from time to time, but even then Kevin suspected that she was just doing it to please him rather than from any particular avaricious desire of her own.

Nevertheless it was clear to him that she did appreciate the effort he was putting in. Over desserts, she expressed a desire to reciprocate in some way and wanted to know what she might do to amuse him.

“Take me places, show me the sights,” Kevin responded enthusiastically.

“What kind of places?” she queried, amused by his somewhat childish enthusiasm. .

“Well, everything,” he said, scrambling for the words to express his request, “Oh, I don’t know – museums and art galleries, zoos and gardens, towns and cities, holiday resorts and nature reserves.”

He paused for a moment.

“I know,” he concluded dramatically, “Show me dragons!”

Tanji looked startled, even alarmed, for a moment. Kevin remembered a truth about Lyndesfarne society. They had lived with dragons for a long time. They were a rare but dangerous creature, now confined to reservations far from human habitation. But even now, people in the Other World preferred to secure their homes against them, living – or at least sleeping – underground wherever possible. There seemed to be something embedded in their psyche which made them instantly wary whenever dragons were mentioned.

Tanji quickly relaxed, much to Kevin’s relief.

“I’ll make some arrangements,” she said, suddenly smiling widely, “It will take some time – a few days, at least.”

“Oh, there’s no rush,” he replied, slightly bewildered at this impetuous suggestion, “Whenever you can sort something out.”

“I’ll enjoy it. Although it will involve a certain amount of travelling,” she added.

Kevin had much more flexibility in his working arrangements now that he was a self-employed consultant to the construction industries on both sides of the crossing.

“I’m sure that’s no problem either,” he replied, “I’ve got nothing particularly pressing just at the moment. But why do we need to travel far?”

Tanji looked pensive for a moment.

“You can’t cage dragons,” she said finally.

She explained that dragons, unlike Nightwings and other smaller flying reptiles, cannot be tamed. They were impossible to keep in cages or zoos, as they tended to injure themselves by beating themselves furiously against the bars of their cage, or whatever it was that imprisoned them. She also made it clear that dragons were also surprisingly fragile, at least in parts. Their skeletons were very light and partially hollow. This was the only way that basic physics – mostly unchanged in the world of Lyndesfarne, Kevin had long assumed – would allow such a large animal to fly. In any case, it seemed inevitable that, if a dragon broke a bone in its wing, the creature would atrophy and die in a matter of days.

It was just less than a week later that Kevin found himself emerging from a portal, having followed a series of signs at the portal junctions marked, according to Tanji's softly-spoken translation, 'dragon canyon'. Emerging from the doorway of the portal building – a low, stout construction of weathered stone which blended into the surrounding countryside – they were met by two men who, it seemed, had been engaged to be their guides on this adventure. Kevin remembered to hold up his hand in greeting in the Lyndesfarne fashion, successfully suppressing his almost automatic reaction to shake the hand of anyone to whom he was newly introduced.

Standing just outside the doorway of the portal, behind the two guides, was one of the magical vehicles that Kevin had experienced before on his trips to the world of Lyndesfarne. There were no wheels or any sign of an engine or other locomotive power. He knew that these strange devices would simply float in the air when instructed using the correct gesture, and move and turn when commanded, although they never travelled faster than about ten miles per hour.

Looking closer, he observed that the transport was a little larger than any he had seen before, with three rows of what looked to Kevin like plumply-stuffed sofas, fronted by oversize footrests with low sides over which it was necessary to step to enter the vehicle. Later, he would discover that the device was articulated – when it moved over rough ground, the various sections would move up and down, as well as turning relative to each other as it negotiated uneven surfaces.

The vehicle was open to the elements, with the – well, "casing" was the word Tanji had used previously in his hearing – already deactivated. It seemed to be loaded with crossbows and a variety of other artefacts which Kevin, for no reason he could have easily articulated, assumed must be magical weapons of some sort. He was also faintly curious about the seats in the vehicle. They were formed from some kind of muddy grey-green material which felt like leather.

"Stop staring," Tanji said, nudging him gently.

The older of the two men, a grizzled veteran whose name Kevin understood to be Simas, began what was obviously a prepared speech about the trip upon which they were about to embark. Tanji, translating the senior guide's words in a sing-song tone, using phrases like "Stay in the vehicle at all times" and "For your own safety" in a way that Kevin found amusingly familiar.

At the end of the diatribe, she added in her own voice that there was an "extra strong casing, with additional protections for safety". Kevin was nearly convinced.

Directed by the assistant guide, a much younger man whose name was Omiz, the two tourists clambered aboard the transport, sitting themselves in the third row of seats and stowing their luggage in a capacious storage area behind their feet. Kevin had not brought very much with him. He had wondered what he should pack for this trip. He knew that delicate electronic items might possibly be permanently damaged and as usual left everything of this nature behind. Even so, almost all of the things he could imagine being useful on, say, a safari in Africa – a camera, a pair of binoculars, even a plastic bottle of water – he suspected would be non-functional in the world of Lyndesfarne.

In the end, he took almost nothing, apart from a few specially-selected items of robust clothing that experience had already taught him would survive the trip through the barrier, packed in his old rucksack. The only things he added were a stout pair of old-fashioned lace-up leather boots, which he was already wearing, and a glass bottle of water with a cork stopper.

There was a further short briefing from the head guide, who had settled himself comfortably in the middle row of seats, presumably so that he could easily twist around to address the paying travellers. The spiel from Simas was smoothly translated in a soft voice by Tanji directly into Kevin's ear.

The small party set off. Omiz sat in the front seat, gesturing in a fluid and relaxed fashion which made it quite clear he was firmly in control of the vehicle.

After ten minutes travel over a rough but well-defined road, they began to descend into a series of rocky canyons and wide ledges, winding this way and that. It became clear to Kevin that the portal was located close to the edge of a plateau. As they travelled, they looked out over astonishing views over the steeply-sloping landscape lit up by the morning sunshine. He was initially slightly worried by the absence of any kind of fence or barrier which might prevent them from careering over the side of the outcroppings which formed their road, but their low speed, together with the way the magical vehicle appeared to be rigidly fixed to the ground, soon reassured him.

Much of the landscape consisted of grey rock outcrops protruding through growths of scrubby bushes. Here and there, entrances to caves were visible, although getting closer would require a scramble over broken rocks. There were a few regions of low but densely-packed trees on the slopes, with grass in other, more level places. Kevin noticed that it was very dry and dusty in most places on the ground, and much of the plant life looked desiccated. There were just

a very few areas where rivulets meandered, clearly identifiable by more lush growths of trees and marshy grasslands.

From the slightly disjointed narrative from the two guides – he did not think it was Tanji’s translation to blame – Kevin came to understand that the vegetation supported herds of goats and a certain species of deer, or perhaps antelope. They were fairly hard to spot, being quite small and nervous animals, who understandably kept themselves under the cover of the trees as much as possible, only venturing out to feed on the grass.

“The fawns are the major source of food for the dragons,” Simas continued, pointing out a nervous hind peering from the undergrowth, “They work together, as a team” – Tanji’s translation faltered for a moment here – “And they can carry off a young kid. They will act in unison to bring down an old or weakened adult.”

“There may be a few wild boar around,” he added, “But they’ll be well-hidden at this time of year.”

Looking back, the guide directed their attention to the broken cliffs and slopes they had just traversed.

“Dragons like to have rocky outcrops and crags for nests and as lookout points,” he explained.

After twenty minutes or so of slow travel, with the magical vehicle twisting and rocking as it accommodated the irregularities of the terrain, Omiz gestured dramatically and they stopped abruptly.

“There!” cried Tanji, pointing into the sky.

Kevin squinted against the sunshine. There, high in the sky, soaring and wheeling in the air, was a flight of perhaps a half-dozen dragons. He judged that they must have wingspans of at least ten feet – perhaps more – and they were lazily circling in the thermal air currents thrown up by the sun warming the rocky outcrops below.

He knew about thermals, those huge invisible columns of warmer air surging into the sky, the tops usually marked out by a fluffy mound of brilliantly white cumulus cloud. In his own world, large birds and gliders used this natural source of energy to avoid exerting their muscles or using motors; here, it seemed that the same approach was used by dragons to avoid flapping too energetically.

In one smooth movement, Simas swung up a flat circular plate mounted on some kind of a pole fixed to the back of the seats he was occupying. The plate appeared to be a mirror of burnished metal but, as the guide gestured at it, the bright metal started to display a magnified image of the dragons in flight.

Kevin watched fascinated, barely breathing, torn between the enlarged image on the magic plate and direct sight of the creatures themselves.

After a while, he whispered to Tanji.

“Could you ask a question for me?”

“Of course,” she replied softly.

“Why is this region so dry?”

Tanji spoke in the Lyndesfarne language, presumably repeating Kevin’s question.

“Dragons don’t like water,” the senior guide explained, once again translated by Tanji, “They like a very dry – but not arid – landscape.”

Simas explained that dragons had particularly good eyesight, which they used to keep their bearings in the air. They therefore disliked being too far from the ground, and they absolutely hated flying into clouds where they were unable to see anything and tended to panic immediately.

It was quite possibly the damp air inside clouds, the guide suggested, where they picked up their fear of water in any form. He further explained that dragons, like cats, very rarely drink water and they are accustomed to getting all of their liquid needs from their food.

The beasts were quite majestic in flight, at least from a distance, and some of them seemed to be drawing closer as they watched.

“Aren’t they magnificent?” he said to Tanji.

“I suppose you’re should be right,” she conceded, “But I confess I can’t easily see them that way.”

“Why not?” he pressed.

She was silent for a few moments.

“It’s all those stories from my childhood,” she answered eventually, “Dragons were always depicted as dangerous vermin, fickle – even evil creatures.”

“Dangerous, I can understand,” he mused, “But why evil?”

He did not get a reply. One of the braver – or perhaps hungrier – of the dragons swooped down to have a closer look at the tourists in the vehicle. He instinctively ducked as the magnificent animals soared overhead. It took every bit of Kevin’s willpower not to cower in the footwell of the vehicle. He could see that Tanji had a similar urge, but she too was steeling herself to sit upright. Out of the corner of his eye, Kevin thought he could detect a certain measure of approval from the guides.



The two tourists spent several engrossing hours watching the great beasts flying and wheeling above their heads, or perched on their nesting areas on the crags high above the canyon floor. Kevin could see their bright intelligent eyes following the party crawling about on the ground below.

As the tourists and their guides finally returned to their starting-point, Kevin found himself wondering just how clever the dragons actually were. Not people-smart, he concluded, but very probably cunning and unpredictable hunters, capable of working together in small packs, and with an innate ability of spotting, and taking immediate advantage of any weaknesses in their prey. No wonder, he thought, they were so feared in this world.

## Chapter Three

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Windows in most buildings in Lyndesfarne were more akin to skylights, set in the ceiling to let in light through the roof. The major difference, as Kevin had found out to his complete astonishment some months before, was that natural light illuminated rooms on *every* level, not just the top floor.

This use of magic – to provide a multiple one-way connection between different points – was apparently a similar but different application of the same principles used in portals. Windows would only send light, not solid objects, in one direction only, while portals effectively joined two remote places with a bidirectional link through which solid objects – both goods and people – could easily pass.

Kevin had forgotten to reset the opacity of the windows the previous evening. He and Tanji had collapsed into bed late last night, perhaps a little more drunk than he realised and certainly having consumed more than he was used to. He thought of himself as a light sleeper – which meant, he always maintained, that he could not sleep with the light on.

Light from the sunrise was just beginning to illuminate the room and the nascent daylight had evidently disturbed his rest. Tanji was still quite soundly asleep, judging by the daintily feminine snores emanating from her side of the bed. Kevin lay quietly for a while, luxuriating in the superbly comfortable bed and enjoying the sensation of Tanji lying alongside. He seemed to have avoided the worst symptoms of a hangover, although he was very thirsty.

Unable to lie still anymore in the half-light, he found his way through the sitting area of the suite to the bathing-room and managed to recall the magical gestures to operate the cold water supply. He drank from cupped hands under the running faucet, and rinsed his face, before making his way back to bed, remembering to operate the opacity magic for the windows on the way. He slid gratefully back under the still-warm covers, feeling himself dozing almost immediately.

He was just falling back to sleep when there was a loud and urgent knocking at the door. Startled, he sprang up and, hastily grabbing a towel from the bathing-room to wrap around his waist, rushing to ensure that Tanji was not awakened by the commotion.

Peering through the crack in the opened door, he was astonished to see Bret standing there, in the male appearance he had adopted at the party the night before. Bret's normally neat and tidy appearance was shockingly absent, with his hair wild and obviously hurriedly pulled back into a ponytail, and his clothes gave every appearance of being just recently thrown on.

"What are you doing here?" Kevin asked, opening the door wider to admit the other man.

Bret cracked a characteristically ironic grin.

"Well, frankly," he began, "I'm checking on you."

He looked around the room from the doorway.

"And Tanji as well," he added meaningfully.

"I'm fine – I mean, we both are," Kevin muttered, "Come in."

He closed the door behind Bret and motioned in the direction of the chairs. The other man turned and sat down, looking directly at Kevin

"We have something of a situation," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Kevin replied as he sat in the adjacent chair, instinctively leaning forward to catch the other man's words.

"We've found someone on the New Bridge – he's dead," Bret announced.

"Dead? How did that happen?"

"Frankly, we don't know."

"Have you checked the security cameras?"

Kevin had specified a high degree of surveillance on the England side of the bridge, with CCTV monitored twenty-four hours a day. He knew that Bret had insisted upon something similar on the Lyndesfarne side, although he was hazy on the details of the magical methods used.

"It was the first thing we did," Bret countered, "The body was found in the exact centre of the bridge."

"But surely the cameras on the other side could still pick up what happened," Kevin protested.

"All that was visible to the cameras, and indeed the Watching Devices," Bret said slowly, "Was the sudden appearance of the body. One moment, nothing; the next, a dark form huddled against the guard rail."

"Oh. So who was he?"

"We're not sure yet," Bret replied, sounding frustrated, "We're still trying to find out."

He paused, then added, "But we're sure he was a native of your world."

Kevin felt confused, probably understandably given the earliness of the hour and the strangeness of the news.

“So what has this dead man to do with me?” he asked finally.

“Well, nothing that I am aware of,” Bret replied, “Although the fact that he appeared in the centre of *our* bridge gives me cause for concern. So I thought it best to check on you.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Kevin said politely.

Bret looked sharply at the other man.

“Of course, now that you’re awake...” he began.

“Go on,” Kevin replied, beginning to suspect what was coming.

“You could help me with this investigation. I’ve come to know just how good you are at asking hard questions.”

Kevin was amused, even flattered, despite the seriousness of the situation. He suspected that Bret knew he would be unable to decline such a direct request.

“What’s going on?” A sleepy voice said from the inner doorway.

Both men looked up, startled.

Tanji must have woken suddenly from a deep sleep, it seemed to Kevin, and she appeared confused and slightly disoriented. Her hair was tousled and she had also wrapped herself in a large towel. She looked, in Kevin’s admittedly biased opinion, utterly gorgeous. He beckoned her over and she sat demurely on the arm of the seat next to him, so that he could put his arm around her waist. Bret rapidly repeated the salient points for her benefit.

“Bret’s twisting my arm to assist,” Kevin interjected, “I think I’d like you to help, too.”

Tanji had clearly woken up completely by this time, and she agreed immediately. The two of them excused themselves from Bret and returned to the inner bedroom. Kevin dressed quickly, now understanding why Bret had looked so dishevelled when he had arrived. Tanji did likewise, and both of them wrapped themselves in their cloaks.

As they stepped outside, Kevin suddenly felt chilly in the cool early morning air, having been so recently wrapped up in a nice warm bed. He appreciated the cloak’s warmth, and instinctively performed the simple gesture which initiated the everyday magic that heated the insides of the garment. It was only when Tanji looked at him askance, and with approval in her eyes, that he realised what he had done – correctly performed a magical gesture without a direct conscious thought.

Following Bret, the two lovers walked hurriedly the few hundred yards from the hostel to the portal building at the Old Bridge causeway entrance. From there, they moved briskly through the portal which linked directly to the corresponding facility a mile or two away, and close to the New Bridge.

As they travelled, Kevin thought amusedly about the period where he had been working on the bridge's construction when, in a misguided attempt to keep him in the dark about the importance of portals, he had been transported everywhere by horse-drawn trap. Nevertheless, he had correctly anticipated the need this evening to travel on foot along the bridge itself. They walked in silence, with the sky lightening steadily towards dawn, although the patchy mist over the straights and coastline still made it feel distinctly spooky.

Ahead, Kevin could see bright lights and several knots of people milling around in the centre of the bridge. Amongst the huddle of people, he thought he could just make out a shape, swathed in heavy cloth, which could have been a body.

As they came closer, a member of one of the groups detached themselves and ran back towards them. Kevin did not recognise the young woman who approached and, as she was swathed in a cloak and hood, it was hard to make out any kind of facial features at all. She spoke rapidly to Bret in the Lyndesfarne language.

"What's she saying?" Kevin whispered to Tanji, who was evidently listening carefully.

"They appear to have found out who he was," she said softly in return, but then added, "But they're still unclear how he died, or how he got here."

As if on cue, Bret turned to Kevin.

"Well, we have some news," he said, "But it all seems rather unsettling, even alarming."

"So what is the situation?" Kevin asked bluntly.

Bret turned to the same rather earnest young woman they had encountered a few moments before. She had removed her hood and had been standing politely to one side, clutching one of the magical communication slates which were, Kevin had discovered on his previous visits, ubiquitous in Lyndesfarne.

"This is Yiselle," Bret said, introducing this woman and naming Kevin and Tanji in turn. Kevin held up his hand in his best facsimile of the greetings he had observed used in Lyndesfarne, and was gratified to note mildly approving expressions from both Bret and Tanji.

“Yiselle, please tell us what you know,” Bret instructed gently, continuing to speak in English presumably for Kevin’s benefit.

The young woman had looked slightly startled to be addressed in this fashion. Nevertheless, she drew a deep breath and clasped her hands together very much as if, it occurred to Kevin, she was about to recite a lesson in a classroom.

“The man found on the bridge was Doctor Andrew Wollack,” she began.

“A doctor?” Kevin interjected.

“Yes,” Yiselle confirmed, “But not a ...”

She hesitated, clearly uncertain of the correct words.

“Medical doctor?” Bret suggested gently.

“Yes,” she confirmed, referring to something written on her slate, “Doctor Wollack was attached to the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London.”

“How do you know this?” Kevin asked.

Yiselle held up a card of laminated plastic. The face of a rather serious-looking young man could just be made out in the irregular lighting. The rest of the card was covered in lettering in various fonts and sizes, although none was particularly easy to read. It was clear that it was the kind of identity card familiar to Kevin – the sort of thing now compulsory in modern organisations of all kinds.

“Where did you find it?”

“It was in his wallet, in his trouser pocket, along with several other cards,” Yiselle answered immediately.

“Credit cards?”

“Yes,” Yiselle confirmed, “Together with a small amount of cash money.”

Many years of reading whodunits and occasionally watching television crime serials gave Kevin the confidence to conclude that robbery was not the motive behind the man’s untimely demise.

“So how did the Doctor die?” Kevin wondered aloud.

Yiselle hesitated, glancing at Bret as if for guidance.

“We’re not *yet* sure,” she said finally, “But we are fairly certain he had been dead for at least two hours by the time we found him.”

“Really? And when was that?”

Yiselle appeared to gain confidence where there were straightforward answers to be given.

“It was a few minutes to midnight,” she said promptly.

“And he just appeared in the centre of the bridge?” Kevin prompted.

Again, Yiselle glanced at Bret, who made no kind of reaction or movement that Kevin could see.

“Well, yes, that’s right,” she agreed, “Of course we sent a couple of Guardians to investigate as soon as we realised that something strange had happened. They got to the body very quickly – it could not have been more than ten minutes from when he was first observed to our Guardians arriving.”

“Which means,” Kevin said slowly, “That our mysterious Doctor must have been killed somewhere else, and then brought here.”

Bret and Yiselle nodded slowly in unison.

“We had only been on the scene for a minute or less when a group of Guardians from the Other World appeared,” Yiselle volunteered.

“And I suppose they had been alerted because of what that had observed on the cameras?”

“I understand so,” she confirmed.

Kevin was silent for a long moment.

“So how did he get here?” he mused, glancing in the direction of the heavily wrapped form not very far away, only later realising that he had spoken aloud. Abruptly, he turned to Bret.

“Can we speak to them?” Kevin asked.

“The Guardians from your world? I expect so,” Bret said, “But why?”

“Because,” the other man responded, “I need to take a very close look at the CCTV records of the appearance of the dead man.”

## Chapter Four

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A few weeks after the narrowly-avoided debacle over the New Bridge and, as it turned out, several months before its formal opening, Kevin received a surprise invitation. The message came completely out of the blue, addressed to Kevin and Tanji, written in English and delivered to Tanji's magic slate.

Kevin had been fascinated by these slates when he had first encountered them. They were typically about the size and weight of a large notebook, and allowed one to write or draw on the matt black surface with what looked like white or coloured chalk. Then, using a sequence of gestures that Kevin had not yet mastered, the markings would fade and the message would be delivered to the recipient after a few minutes. Apparently, these devices had been a part of Lyndesfarne society for centuries and he had noted that few people in that world would travel without a slate carried in some satchel or rucksack, or perhaps a capacious pocket.

Kevin read the chatty note, which extended an invitation for the two of them to dine and stay overnight at Bret's family home in a little less than a week's time. The invitation was signed 'Bret', but Kevin got the distinct impression that the person actually doing the inviting was his Mother.

Tanji seemed dazed, almost overwhelmed, by the summons that had arrived so unexpectedly. Kevin tried his best to re-assure her

"It's just a quiet family dinner, with a few friends," he explained.

"But she's the Ferryman!" Tanji objected, referring to Bret's mother.

"Well, that's true," Kevin said in a placatory manner, "And I admit I didn't know it when I first visited. But everyone will be really friendly, I'm sure."

It turned out that Tanji did not need a great deal more persuading. Kevin came to the conclusion that, although rather nervous, she really did want to meet the near-mythical Ferryman or, more precisely, to meet this august personage under less confrontational circumstances.

Kevin had thought hard about gifts, after the unexpected success of the toy Teddy Bear he had almost accidentally presented on his previous visit. He sought advice from Tanji, wanting to bring something he was sure would be appreciated, without any risk that



the gift would be damaged by the effects of the barrier between the Two Worlds.

After some thought, he had finally procured a very fine magnum of Champagne. Tanji had assured him that this was a drink held in high regard by many people in the world of Lyndesfarne, even though rather few of them knew the otherworldly origin. She also packed a gift, something she had picked up on one of their infrequent shopping trips. It was a leather-bound journal, with an old-fashioned clasp to hold the covers shut, the kind of thing that one might use to record one's most secret and innermost thoughts.

In the afternoon of the appointed day, Tanji and Kevin set off from his flat in Manchester. Kevin drove his aging Volvo sedately, with Tanji dozing in the seat next to him. The road was not particularly busy, and he was able to cruise along with minimal attention on the traffic.

He found himself musing about just how many persons knew about the crossing and the Other World. It could not be very many, he considered, maybe tens of thousands in each world, or perhaps even fewer individuals in his own world. He imagined that the bulk of these people would live clustered around the crossing itself, on both sides.

Even so, he had divined that the Board of Control in Lyndesfarne maintained a network of agents – he was tempted to think of them as 'spies' – in his own world. He wondered whether the converse was true – whether organisations in his own world also had contacts and scouts in the world of Lyndesfarne – or whether the relationship was so one-sided that this was just not possible.

They arrived at the causeway and pulled up in the nearly deserted car park. Kevin stretched over and woke Tanji with a tender kiss, which caused her to stretch and wriggled in a luxurious fashion, at least it seemed to him.

They emerged from the car into the chilly wind. Kevin pulled bags and capes from the back seat, then placing, as had become almost automatic nowadays, his mobile phone, watch, and the remote locking 'flipper' in the boot of the car. He locked the vehicle with the simple mechanical key which would survive unscathed the repeated passage between the worlds.

They set off, each carrying a small rucksack with a few essentials and, in Tanji's case, the ubiquitous slate. On his first visit to Bret's home, Kevin had travelled from the site of the New Bridge construction by horse-drawn trap. This was before he had been exposed to portals, and this method of transport was presumably used

on the grounds that instantaneous transport might prove unsettling for newcomers.

This time, they travelled by portal, something that Kevin was now rapidly becoming accustomed to. Tanji's skill at navigating the portal network meant that it only took a few minutes before they emerged in what Kevin soon recognised as Bret's home town.

"What's this place called?" he asked Tanji, realising that he had never asked this question before.

Tanji spoke a single word with the accents of the Lyndesfarne language, and Kevin repeated it.

"Nantclewd,"

Tanji winced slightly at Kevin's pronunciation, and repeated the word, nodding in faint approval at his second attempt.

It was quite a blustery autumn evening, overcast and already getting quite dark as they made their way to Bret's family home. There was discreet lighting in the streets, on various houses and around the gates of their destination. Kevin recognised the house and directed Tanji along the gravelled path before knocking at the door.

The door was opened by Bret herself, in her true female aspect. As a woman, Bret was tall and slightly blocky about the shoulders, as if she regularly swam long distances, but the curves of her hips and breasts left no doubt of her femininity. Her long blonde hair had been left loose, instead of the neat ponytail she normally adopted, and she wore flowing pale blue robes and soft shoes – slippers, really – in a matching shade.

Kevin had been half-expecting this transformation and he managed, he hoped, to suppress any surprised reactions. He briefly wondered what Tanji's reaction would be, but she seemed entirely unfazed by the change in appearance.

Bret took Tanji by the hands, drawing her into the house, and spoke a few words in the Lyndesfarne language that Kevin thought he recognised as an informal greeting. She leaned forward to embrace the other woman, giving her a peck on the cheek. She then welcomed Kevin with a firm and stereotypically masculine handshake, which bizarrely struck him as entirely at odds with her feminine appearance.

The visitors dumped their bags and hung their capes in a spacious cloakroom by the door, then allowed themselves to be guided through to the main room of the house. It was exactly as Kevin remembered it. A large dining table was set with eight places and placed conveniently close to the door marked out by a large bell hanging alongside it, which led to the kitchen.

At one end of the room, a wide staircase led down, Kevin recalled, to several levels of bedrooms and what were always translated here as “bathing rooms”. At the other end of the main room was an eclectic collection of worn but very comfortable easy chairs and sofas clustered around a large log-burning fireplace.

One wall was almost entirely formed from windows overlooking the gardens to the rear and most of the other walls were set with bookshelves and display cabinets in dark wood. Altogether, Kevin felt, it was a very comfortable and homely place, and he was reassured to see that Tanji visibly relaxed almost immediately.

The two of them were welcomed warmly by Bret’s mother, who was altogether rather less formidable in these domestic surroundings than on the previous encounter.

Bret’s father emerged from the kitchen shortly after their arrival. He was a large man with a hearty laugh, wearing a butcher’s apron, his beard even bushier than before. He kissed Tanji lightly on the cheek, then embraced Kevin rather more heartily than he had expected. An enthusiastic cook himself, Kevin had a good deal of respect for the other man’s culinary abilities, realising that creating balanced and imaginative meals for a large family was an art form all of its own.

The enthusiastic welcome appeared to have a profound effect on Tanji. She seemed to Kevin to be happy, bright-eyed, almost as if she was on the point of tears. He thought he knew why this was so. As he understood it, this kind of family life was very much part of the Lyndesfarne culture, but Tanji has never really known it. She was an only child whose parents had died when she was quite young, and she had no other relatives other than her rather older Aunt and Uncle. Kevin had never quite understood exactly what had happened to Tanji’s family, and he had been too discreet to enquire directly.

Disengaging himself for a moment, Kevin retrieved his rucksack, then presented the bottle of champagne to Bret’s mother with a flourish. This was received with a gratifying display of appreciation, making him feel that he had made the correct choice of gift.

A tray set with wineglasses and bottles, some already opened, stood on a sideboard near the kitchen door. Bret poured generous measures of red wine into two glasses and handed them to Kevin and Tanji. She then swept up her own glass and toasted their arrival.

Eosin, Bret’s husband, joined them. He was a rather quiet man, who had much less command of English than his wife but was, Kevin had been assured, a talented designer of magical sprites. Eosin’s day job was the maintenance of the magic which prevented other magical

items from working when taken to Kevin's world, and the corresponding disablement of sophisticated technology taken to the Other World. Kevin raised his hand in greeting in a rough approximation of the Lyndesfarne style, noting that both Eosin and Tanji did the same.

Bret's father appeared at the kitchen door and rang the bell to summon the household for dinner. Bret and Eosin's children appeared up the stairs. Kevin, in a – for him – unusual feat of memory, recalled that they were named Andhra and Myra. On his last visit, the two girls had rapidly overcome any shyness and quizzed Kevin relentlessly about his world, a process that he had found both amusing and slightly intimidating. The kids clearly recognised Kevin immediately and he predicted – correctly, as it turned out – that he would be subjected to a similar interrogation later on.

There was a short period of confusion while everyone in the room settled themselves at the table. Eventually, things settled down, and Kevin and Tanji were encouraged to tuck in and eat it 'while it's hot'. As on the previous visit, the food was delicious: beautifully cooked and presented, and finely flavoured, although slightly old-fashioned in style, at least to Kevin's way of thinking.

After a few minutes of desultory conversation as the diners turned their attention to their plates, Bret's mother put down her knife and fork, and clinked a wineglass to attract everyone's attention. The talk stopped immediately but, Kevin was pleased to note, there appeared to be no expectation that people should stop eating.

"I want to express just how welcome Kevin and Tanji are," the Ferryman began, sounding unexpectedly formal in the comfortably domestic setting, "I also want to extend an apology to you both, on behalf of the Board of Control, for the upset and discomfort you suffered."

Recent events flashed through Kevin's mind, taking him to the time he had met Tanji, less than a month ago. He remembered their first quiet dinner together, and the purchase of a glass paperweight – one magically enhanced to predict the weather and other things. Then, his inspection of the – still incomplete – New Bridge from a small boat, and being blown to the English coast by a sudden storm. With a sudden private smile, he remembered taking Tanji back to his flat in Manchester, where they had become closer than Kevin had ever imagined possible, and then the astonishing discovery, in the morning, that the paperweight still worked.

Becoming more serious in the thoughts, Kevin remembered taking the discovery to Professor Alan at NISSA, there being

imprisoned and threatened. He and Tanji had escaped through the window, eventually crossing the New Bridge using the flimsy wooden scaffolding which had been put in place to allow the last section to be completed. He thought about the struggle through the rain to the castle and the portal trip to Tanji's family home, where they had had their first encounter with the Ferryman.

It had happened, he considered, all so quickly, and it all seemed like a distant blur now.

"Frankly, Kevin, you have impressed us all," the Ferryman went on, a wry smile playing about her face, "Me, Bret, not to mention others on the Board, all impressed with your intelligence and willingness to ask questions, your capability to stay calm and make hard decisions under pressure."

She stopped for a moment, fixing Kevin with a low-powered version of the steely gaze he knew she could deploy when necessary.

"So," she concluded, "We would like to be able to call on you, from time to time, to help with, shall we say, little problems as they come up."

Kevin was not sure what to say. He strongly suspected that his skills and attitude were being overrated, but felt he could not reasonably refuse such a request.

"Well, I'm not sure what I could do," he answered finally, "But, if you think there's some way I can help, then of course you've only got to ask."

## Chapter Five

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Bret stared blankly at Kevin for a second, then his expression changed to the more characteristic one of wry amusement. He turned on his heel and strode purposefully in the direction of a second knot of people who stood a few yards further over the bridge towards the coast of England. Kevin and Tanji trailed after him, leaving a noticeably relieved Yiselle to return to her cadre.

Unhesitatingly, he attracted the attention of a large man whose back was turned to them by the simple expedient of a polite tap on the shoulder. The owner of the tapped shoulder turned around, scowling. Somehow Kevin imagined this was a permanent feature of this particular expression. Even so, his appearance relaxed a little as he recognised Bret, and the two men nodded to each other in a way which appeared to signify both mutual recognition and slightly wary respect.

“Kevin, this is Eric Graves,” Bret said, introducing the other man in a surprisingly formal way, “Eric is a Sergeant in the Guardians in your world. Eric, Kevin helped to design the New Bridge. And can I also introduce Tanji from the Guild of Directions.”

The man introduced had what Kevin could only describe as an extremely lived-in face. His countenance was criss-crossed with creases and frown marks, and his weather-beaten visage looked reddened by the wind or perhaps just hasty shaving. He was wrapped up in a bulky waterproof jacket coloured dark blue, as far as he could tell in the irregular lighting. This was part of the not-quite-uniform adopted by the Guardians from his own world, Kevin knew, and in this case it was overlain by a tabard in that familiar high-visibility yellow.

Eric swept both Kevin and Tanji with an alertly appraising look.

“So,” he said, “What can I do for you?”

“I understand we don’t now very much about this Doctor...” Kevin hesitated.

“Wollack,” Bret supplied helpfully.

“Doctor Wollack,” Kevin resumed, “But we do know that he just appeared in the middle of the bridge – as if by magic, one might say?”

Bret shot Kevin an amused look and even Eric’s scowling face cracked into a grin.

“Now,” Kevin continued, getting into his stride, “I know there are guards – Guardians – who patrol the Bridge, from both sides. I assume they do this at all times?”

“Of course,” The Sergeant replied promptly, “The Bridge is not normally closed to traffic and is still in use even in the middle of the night. So the Guardians patrol in shifts, around the clock.”

“But, naturally enough, I expect there’s less traffic at night than during the day,” Kevin asked.

Eric nodded.

“And the Guardians are trained and experienced in spotting intruders?”

“Right,” the Sergeant confirmed.

“OK,” Kevin continued, “I also imagine that, in this day and age, there’s lots of remote monitoring of the crossing.”

“Yes, of course there are video surveillance cameras,” Sergeant Graves answered calmly, “Including low-light and infrared cameras with IR lighting projectors. Continuous recording and full-time monitoring, too.”

“And a variety of magical means of observation as well,” Bret interjected.

Kevin nodded.

“I imagined as much,” he said slowly, “And yet none of them saw anything?”

“That’s right,” the Sergeant confirmed, looking perplexed.

“OK,” Kevin said slowly, “Perhaps we can have a look at the video recordings?”

The Sergeant glanced again at Bret, who made no movement that Kevin could spot.

“I don’t see why not,” Graves replied, indicating the direction along the bridge to Kevin’s home world, “Let’s go.”

Following the Sergeant, Bret, Kevin and Tanji made their way along the roadbed. The darkness was somehow emphasised by the modern electric lighting at regular intervals and made eerie by the noise of the waves below them and of the wind in the cables Kevin had himself designed to support this end of the bridge.

The little band entered the low modern building set unobtrusively by the roadside at the end of the massive concrete castings – twice the height of Kevin’s head – which moored the cables that secured the bridge.

The Sergeant guided inside the somehow anonymous building and immediately directed them into a room filled with modern surveillance equipment. A bank of monitors filled one wall, most showing boring views of parts of the bridge and the approaching roadway, occasionally relieved by what was evidently a Guardian on patrol. In front of the screens was a complicated-looking console and two comfortable chairs, both of which were occupied by alert-looking Guardians.

The Guardians on duty, both women, started to scramble to their feet when the Sergeant entered the room – a reaction Kevin found quaintly archaic – but Graves quickly waved them back. They returned to their chores, although they were not entirely able to suppress their curiosity at the strangers accompanying their senior officer.

The Sergeant leaned forward and spoke in a voice just a little too quiet for Kevin to hear. Immediately, one of the Guardians moved her hands competently over her keyboard, and the largest screen in the centre of the bank of monitors flickered into life.

It was apparent that he had asked to review the security recording at the time the body had appeared. As Kevin and the others watched, the unchanging image of the featureless roadbed suddenly changed to show a prone form. The corpse appeared as if a wave had passed over the body, from the feet to the head, like a stage magician's cloak revealing a surprised-looking rabbit. Kevin wasn't sure, but it looked as if the one of the body's arms had moved slightly, as if the cadaver had been kicked or dropped.

"That's all we have?" Bret inquired.

"I'm afraid so," the Sergeant replied.

"OK," Bret continued, "Let's see it again."

They watched the images once more. Afterwards, Kevin was silent, deep in thought, for a long moment, then he turned to Bret.

"How does magical invisibility work?" he asked suddenly.

Bret looked surprised at the direction of the other man's questioning.

"What do you mean?" he countered, uncertainly.

"Well, I can imagine a couple of ways," Kevin said, waving his hands, "Firstly, the magic could somehow distort the rays, or perhaps just transfer the light straight through a solid object. Like the magic windows."

Beside him, there was a sharp intake of breath from Tanji.

"Or, the magic could work directly on the mind of the witness."



Kevin had known for some time that the world of Lyndesfarne had sophisticated techniques for altering perception. These were used, it seemed, for everything from games and entertainment to the mind-wipes occasionally – he hoped – used to remove memories from the heads of unexpected visitors to the other world.

Bret shook his head slowly.

“Well-observed,” he said eventually, sounding genuinely impressed, “And certainly, techniques for magical invisibility are generally well-known. Both methods are possible – although the first approach is a good deal more complicated. It’s extremely difficult to get it right for a mobile object or, more precisely, an object that is actually moving.”

He paused for a second, perhaps wondering – it seemed to Kevin – just how much to explain at this juncture.

“The magic embedded in the Watchers’ robes is of this kind,” he continued, “It only works really well when the wearer is stationary. Indeed, it is for this very reason that the Watchers are trained to be immobile for long periods.”

Tanji’s sudden stillness, together with the feeling that she was listening extremely closely, gave Kevin the impression that this information was not well-known, even in the world of Lyndesfarne.

Kevin too was intensely curious.

“Surely, being truly invisible only when one is stationary is a considerable disadvantage,” he asked, at a loss for an explanation, “Why bother at all?”

Bret nodded, as if to acknowledge the worth of Kevin’s question.

“It’s a good point,” he replied, “But there’s a significant advantage: it is very effective against all kinds of detection – including hearing – as well as being proof against a wide gamut of magical detection techniques.”

“As long as you stand still?”

Bret nodded again.

“What about the other kind?” Kevin pressed.

It turned out that the second form of invisibility – a glamour working on the mind of any observer – was a simpler magic, and took much less effort and skill to create. Bret explained it remained effective when the user was moving. However, it was much easier to detect, especially with magical means, and there were counter-measures available which would dispel the magical urge to fail to see what was plainly in front of one’s eyes.

“What’s needed to gain this kind of invisibility?” Kevin asked.

“You need to have an object of some kind to contain the numerous sprites that are required,” Bret explained, “But it wouldn’t need to be very big. It’s conventional to arrange it so that this object can be worn about the person – typically, it would be a necklace or amulet.”

“A magic amulet which makes you invisible,” muttered Kevin to himself, “Just like something out of a fairytale.”

He nodded thoughtfully for a moment then turned to the Sergeant.

“Presumably you have already checked that neither technique was used to hide a person approaching from the Lyndesfarne side?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Sergeant Graves replied promptly, “At least as far as we can. We’re pretty certain that no-one approached cloaked – the Guardians are trained to watch out for the partial invisibility generated by a Watcher’s Cloak when the wearer is moving. And we have magical alarms for glamours attempting to cross into your world.”

“But, what about from the England side? Can you detect someone protected by this magic approaching from my world?”

There was a sudden silence in the room.

“Don’t tell me we haven’t thought about this?” Kevin exclaimed, glancing from Bret to Tanji and back again, “We know magic does work in my world, if it can get there without being disabled by the barrier.”

The Sergeant glanced at Bret, who shrugged visibly.

“The alarms don’t work going the other way,” Graves admitted shamefaced.

“Why on Earth not?” Kevin exclaimed loudly, making Tanji jump visibly.

“Because no-one thought they would be needed,” the Sergeant replied, adding, “Although I admit that might seem a little short-sighted now.”

“So,” Kevin persisted, “Would such a magic work even now, on us watching these recordings?”

“Probably,” Bret acknowledged, “Sprites work practically forever. I think we should have another, closer look at those recordings.”

He was silent for a long moment, then turned to Eric Graves.

“Sergeant,” he said slowly and clearly, taking a little notebook from his pocket and scribbling something on it, “I want you to get a message to your opposite number. Use the signals. Can you do that?”

“Yes, at once,” the other man replied.

“Good. The message asks for a certain item to be brought across the bridge. I need you to arrange that it is delivered as quickly as possible.”

“Yessir.”

Sergeant Graves left the room at the double. Bret returned his attention to Kevin and Tanji, ignoring the curious gazes of the two Guardians on duty

“It’ll probably take fifteen minutes or so to bring over the item,” he said mysteriously, rubbing his hands together, “So let’s familiarise ourselves with these recordings in the meantime, shall we ?”

The following minutes dragged, lasting at least two hours each, at least that’s how it seemed to Kevin. The CCTV recordings were no distraction whatsoever, showing unchanging shots of sections of the bridge. They returned again and again to the few frames which showed the apparent materialisation of Andrew Wollack’s body, and debated inconclusively and in minute detail all aspects of its appearance.

After what was no more than the promised time, the Sergeant returned carrying a strange-looking box, which he placed carefully on the console in front of them. It was decorated in an eclectic and brightly-coloured style including several words in the Lyndesfarne language that Kevin did not understand. He was unsure just what the box was made from; at first, he thought it was just tinplated steel – like a biscuit tin – but it soon became clear that it was some kind of ceramic.

The container had a tightly-fitted lid which Bret eased off with considerable effort and great care. The inside of the box appeared to be filled with multi-coloured tissue paper. Nestling in the wrappings was an object, an item of jewellery of some kind, and swirling with the magical sprites that Kevin was all too familiar with. With growing astonishment, he realised that, with Bret’s direction, the Sergeant had deliberately imported a working magical item into this world, through the barrier deliberately designed to prevent such a thing.

“Now,” Bret said with satisfaction, picking up the object and placing it in the centre of the console, “Let’s have another look at those recordings.”

It did not take them very long to replay the recording of the appearance of the deceased Doctor Wollack. Now, however, there was a glimpse of a cloaked figure for a few seconds before the body appeared. The disguised figure appeared to be carrying the body over his shoulder, but was then alarmed by something they could only

speculate about. Whatever his concern, he immediately dropped the corpse in front of him, then hurried onwards, stepping over the body as he did so.

“So you were right!” Bret exclaimed, looking at Kevin approvingly.

They spent the next thirty minutes or so poring over the video recordings from other cameras on the bridge, in some cases stepping through the recording frame by frame.

There were a very few frames show a furtive figure from the back, with a bundle over his shoulder, interspersed with many shots which showed absolutely nothing at all. Whoever the mystery person was, he clearly knew where the cameras were, and appeared to be doing his best to keep out of the line of sight of them. Apart from the insight that the figure was tall and strong, and probably male, there was nothing to identify the individual involved.

“I think,” Kevin said finally, looking directly at Bret, “We need to find out more about this Doctor Wollack.”

“I agree,” The other man responded immediately, “I think it’s high time to make a call at NISSA.”

## Chapter Six

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Another facet of Kevin's desire to learn more about Lyndesfarne was his insistence on continued briefings at the Newcastle Institute for Special Sciences and Arts. NISSA was the only organisation he was aware of, in his own world, where advice and guidance on the Other World could be obtained.

Many months before, Kevin had driven on his own the few tens of miles to NISSA from the Lyndesfarne crossing. He had agreed to meet up with Tanji again in the pub he knew as the "Dragon's Nest" later that evening. The Newcastle University campus was as busy as always and once again he had to park the Volvo some distance away before navigating the paths and alleyways to the imposing building that housed the Institute.

The head of NISSA was now the formidable Doctor Linda Braxton. She had replaced the disgraced Professor Alan Wilmington, who had been removed from his post and not seen since, after a scandal that Kevin had helped to uncover a few months previously.

The same efficient administrative assistant, whose name was declared as Sanjit by a newly-installed nameplate on her desk, looked up when Kevin entered the outer office.

"Hello again," she smiled, "The Professor is expecting you."

Kevin soon discovered from reading the sign on the office door that he should now be saying *Professor Braxton*. Presumably, he mused, promotion to the Head of Department position had a Chair associated with it.

Just at that moment, the inner door opened and a rather serious-looking young man backed out. It seemed to Kevin that the Professor had just completed an interview of some kind. The young man thanked the as-yet invisible occupant profusely, nodded politely to Kevin and Sanjit, then rapidly left the outer office looking both relieved and elated.

Kevin knocked politely on the polished oak door and stuck his head around the opening. Professor Braxton now occupied the office he had previously thought of as Professor Alan's. A very different collection of books and periodicals adorned the shelves. There were numerous bound volumes of journals, most dating back a great many years, and carefully arranged in a manner that suggested a dusty and old-fashioned library.

In line with the Braxton's famously no-nonsense approach, someone had replaced the comfortable leather seats of the Wilmington era with a set of hard plastic stacking chairs. An ergonomically upright office chair on castors was now situated behind the imposing desk – which was unchanged – replacing the rather plush leather item which had been Alan's. There was no computer anywhere in the room, and just a single telephone on one corner of the desk. It seems that the new Professor, Kevin mused, likes to do things the old-fashioned way.

As he entered, Linda Braxton stood and held out her hand over the desk for a brief handshake. Then, following her wave, Kevin sat himself in another of the plastic chairs currently placed on the other side of the desk. It seemed that this briefing was to be given by the formidable Professor herself, rather than delegated to any of the other staff, several of whom Kevin had encountered on his previous visits.

It turned out that this particular tutorial was on the nature of the barrier between the two worlds. Kevin had not specifically requested the topic, but had already learned from experience that the experts often had a good idea of what he should be told about, what he was capable of understanding – or at least held strong opinions on the matter.

“I believe you already know that the *barrier*” – the Professor emphasised the word as she spoke – “is an artificial construction?”

Kevin nodded. He had already understood something to this effect from conversations with Bret a few months ago.

The Professor continued by reminding him that the barrier was in general only effective against man-made items, of both technological and magical origins, and did not interfere with biological processes. In other words, anything living – plant or animal – can pass through the barrier unaffected. Kevin was curious as to why this should be so, and interrupted the Professor to ask the question.

“Well, basically, it's by design,” she responded promptly.

Professor Braxton went on to explain that the processes of life, and the hugely complex interdependencies between different elements meant that it was thought to be too dangerous to try and police living things with magic. Apparently, wood, leather, cotton and other once-living materials also tended to be unaffected.

“In all honesty,” she concluded, “Nobody wants to risk a dead body on the causeway – either human or animal – simply because of a malfunction of the protective magic of the barrier.”

“So what prevents animals not native to one world from escaping into the other?” Kevin asked.

“Well, it can happen,” the Professor admitted, “Certainly, most large animal species are identical in both worlds, ditto plants and insects. This may not have been true at one time, but several thousand years of the existence of crossings in many parts of both worlds have made it so.”

The Professor paused, perhaps pondering what to say next.

“Even so, there are some major species – genera, even,” she eventually continued, “Which exist in only one of the Two Worlds.”

“Like Dolphins?” Kevin interjected, “Or Dragons?”

Professor Braxton smiled.

“Exactly so,” she replied, “For some reason, these animals never made it between the worlds or, at least, in sufficient numbers to establish breeding colonies. Perhaps they did not find the local environment conducive, or maybe the native fauna out-competed them.”

Kevin nodded slowly.

“Anyway, the current edict is to preserve the status quo,” the Professor continued, “And the principal risk is perceived to be deliberate smuggling of animals, or their eggs. It is the job of the Guardians to discourage that, of course.”

“Like the case of the Loch Ness Monster?” Kevin asked.

The Professor looked at him askance for a moment.

“Well, yes,” she replied, “I take it you’ve heard that story then?”

Kevin nodded again.

“In any case, we don’t have a huge problem these days,” she continued, “The seawater around the crossing is too cold for most of the smaller species of plesiosaurs and there appears to be insufficient food in the sea for the larger variants who might tolerate the temperature.”

“But what about Dragons?” Kevin demanded, “Or Nightwings?”

The Professor again smiled briefly, perhaps amused at Kevin’s naivety.

“Well, in the old days,” she explained, “Keeping the Dragons away from the crossing was enforced by the dragon hunters affiliated to the Guardians, or at least employed by them. In those days, the dragons were regarded as dangerous pests and hunted extensively.”

“Besides,” she went on, “Now that large dragons are much rarer and are, as I think you already know, an endangered species, they are all kept in reserves far from habitation.”

“So I understand,” Kevin replied, “But what about the smaller species, Nightwings and so on?”

“Ah, yes,” Braxton replied, “These flying reptiles disliked water – as do Dragons, for that matter – and the sea around the crossing is sufficient to prevent them from entering our world.”

The Professor sat back in her chair.

“Anyway, the barrier is not principally concerned with managing the passage of wild animals,” she said, “It is really there to prevent magical items from the Other World from crossing into this world.”

Again, Kevin already knew this. He also knew that the barrier was occasionally imperfect. Not so long ago, he himself had accidentally imported a paperweight he had bought from a shop near the crossing, which turned out to contain sprites for illumination and a limited form of predicting the future. Somehow its magic had not been disabled by the action of the barrier. This had engendered all sorts of unexpected ramifications, but had also drawn Tanji and himself much closer together – a very fair trade-off, in his opinion.

“If it were not for the effects of the barrier, magical items would work in our world, as they may well have done in ancient times,” the Professor continued, “Although they would still not be able to be made here,”

“Why not?” Kevin asked, instantly fascinated by this new revelation.

Professor Braxton was silent for a moment.

“It’s hard to explain, at least in English,” she admitted eventually, “Although I should confess that I don’t fully understand it myself. But there really are some truly fundamental differences between the Two Worlds, despite the numerous apparent similarities. I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can help you any further on this topic.”

Braxton shook her head.

“In any case,” she resumed, “The barrier needs to be continuously enhanced as new technologies are developed and, rather less frequently, new kinds of magic are invented. The rate of change of technology in our world implies a considerable task keeping the barrier up to date.”

Again, Kevin was already vaguely aware of this. He understood that Bret’s husband Eosin held a key role in the creation of new sprites, something which was a never-ending task – like painting the Forth Bridge.

“But how does the barrier work?” he asked.

The Professor hesitated briefly.

“Well, the barrier is just a region – very narrow, but although not something with precisely defined edges,” she began, “But the



intersection of the Two Worlds provides a natural constraint on the location of the sprites.”

“And there are lots of sprites, tens of thousands of them. Each kind of thing which needs to be suppressed needs a separate sprite inside the barrier.”

“You mean a separate *kind* of sprite?” Kevin interjected.

“No, only one,” The Professor insisted, looking puzzled.

“Just one sprite, for the entire area of the barrier?” Kevin exclaimed.

He had considered this aspect before, and had computed that the total surface area of the great dome of magic which enclosed the Other World must have a surface area of at least forty square miles.

“Yes, that’s right,” Professor Braxton confirmed, “Sprites aren’t actually located in a precise place. The orange or, sometimes, green light that is often associated with their presence is just a side-effect, and doesn’t really show where they are in any sense.”

The Professor screwed up her face in a moment of brief concentration.

“The best way of thinking about them, I believe, is to imagine them everywhere, simultaneously – or at least within their Volume of Effect,” she concluded, again emphasising the last few words.

“So why can’t I see the light from the sprites inside the barrier?” Kevin asked, “I mean, when I’m on the way across the bridge – either bridge – there’s no visible sign of sprites when I get to the very centre. Surely I’m right in the middle of the barrier there?”

“Well, that’s true,” Professor Braxton said, “Again, the explanation is unclear, but we think that the light from the sprites within the barrier travels to the parts of each of the Two Worlds which are, if you like, not there, the volume set aside to make space for the crossing.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin asked, again confused.

“The crossing represents a missing space in our world,” she replied slowly, “And a similar one in the Other World. A volume which ought to contain an island which should be a natural part of this planet. And this volume, it just isn’t there, it’s, well, somewhere else.”

Just at that moment, Sanjit put her head around the office door.

“Doctor Willis is here to see you,” she said, looking at the Professor, “You have an appointment with him.”

“Ah, yes,” she agreed, “Please ask him to wait a few moments.”

She turned back to Kevin.

“Time’s up, I’m afraid.”

Kevin rapidly gathered up his things and thanked Professor Braxton for her time. The strange topology of the crossing and the barrier set him pondering on the implications for both of the Two Worlds, which exercised his thoughts all through the drive back to the crossing and his date with Tanji.

## Chapter Seven

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Kevin looked up at the familiar façade of the NISSA building, which occupied a quiet corner of the campus at the University of Newcastle. He was walking with Tanji towards Bret, who was waiting for them on the steps and displaying that wry smile he so often wore.

Kevin had driven Tanji here in his own car, having retrieved it from the car park at the crossing. Much to his surprise, he had managed to find a car parking space within fifty feet of the front entrance of the Institute.

Bret had managed to get even closer. He had alighted at the front door and was waiting for Kevin and Tanji to join him, having been transported in a chauffeur-driven Range Rover which had followed Kevin's Volvo closely. Both car and driver had apparently been supplied by RDTE.

They entered the building together. Sanjit the ever-efficient administrative assistant was at her customary desk in the outer office. She looked up sharply as the three of them entered the room. She clearly recognised Kevin immediately, while her appraising look rapidly took in Bret and Tanji's characteristically Lyndesfarne appearance – the vaguely chiselled facial features and an elfin cast to the ears.

“Good afternoon,” she said politely to Kevin, with only the merest glance at the appointments book open on her desk, “I didn't realise that you were expected here today.”

“Well, as it happens, I don't have an appointment today,” he replied, smiling faintly to himself, “Nevertheless, we want to talk to Professor Braxton about one Andrew Wollack.”

“Doctor Wollack?” she replied, suddenly looking surprised, “Is he in some kind of trouble?”

Bret stepped forward.

“Andrew Wollack was found dead in the early hours of this morning,” he stated, enunciating particularly clearly, “And we are investigating the circumstances surrounding his demise.”

Bret emphasised his remark with a casual wave of his hand which took in both Kevin and Tanji. Sanjit stared at him for a long moment, then picked up the telephone and pressed a single button. Kevin

could not make out what she said but, moments later, the inner door was opened by the Professor herself.

“Come in, come in,” she urged, ushering them inside.

The three visitors seated themselves in the not-particularly-comfortable plastic chairs reserved for visitors while Braxton settled into the rather more comfy chair on the opposite side of the desk.

“Who are your companions?” Professor Braxton asked directly, having studied the party carefully for a few moments.

“This is Tanji, my Guide and close friend,” Kevin said, with conscious ambiguity.

“Ah,” Professor Braxton responded, then added directly to Tanji “Pleased to meet you.”

Tanji held up her hand in greeting, in the Lyndesfarne style Kevin was beginning to appreciate. The Professor responded immediately and in a fashion which looked, to his untutored eye, entirely authentic.

“And this is Bret,” Kevin added carefully, “With whom I worked on the design for the New Bridge.”

It seemed to Kevin that the Professor had already recognised Bret, although he was not sure whether this was as a person from the world of Lyndesfarne, or more specifically as some one with a position of trust and authority from the Other World.

“So why are you all here?” She asked after a few moments scrutiny.

Bret smoothly took over the conversation.

“As I said to your assistant, we found the body of Andrew Wollack in the early hours of this morning.”

Professor Braxton suddenly looked shocked and horrified.

“Dead?”

Bret nodded slowly.

“How terrible,” the Professor exclaimed, “How did it happen?”

“We don’t know yet,” Bret replied, with a tight smile, “We found him in the centre of the New Bridge in the early hours of this morning. So we need to ask a few questions.”

“Well, of course,” the Professor replied, steeping her fingers and settling back into her chair looking serious.

Bret glanced at Kevin meaningfully.

“So how did young Doctor Wollack come to join NISSA?” Kevin asked, after a few seconds thought.

Professor Braxton sat back in her chair, looking hard at Kevin. Finally, she glanced at Bret.

“Andrew was one of a very small number of people who made it through our rigorous screening procedures,” she replied, sounding slightly evasive.

“So you have difficulties recruiting staff?” he pressed.

The Professor hesitated for a second, again glancing at Bret. As far as Kevin could tell, the other man had not reacted at all.

“Oh, it’s a perennial problem,” she replied eventually, “We get a fair number of applications from, well, freaks and weirdoes of all kinds – people with a completely misguided idea of what Lyndesfarne is all about. We’re never sure how they hear about the Other World – or NISSA for that matter. But in general, we reject all such applications outright. Out of hand, automatically.”

Kevin thought for a moment.

“So, anyone who applies directly to NISSA is very unlikely to be accepted?”

“Exactly so.”

“And therefore Andrew did not apply directly?”

The Professor shook her head.

“No. Our most fruitful channel for applicants comes from the strong sense of family ties. There is a long tradition, here as well as in Lyndesfarne, of certain families being associated with the crossing. And we get a lot of applications from the younger members of these families.”

Professor Braxton smiled sardonically.

“We almost always accept them. They’re invariably hard working and serious-minded. The trouble is that, if we only accepted candidates from the Old Families, we would not have sufficient intake to fill all the places. And, before you ask, Andrew did not come from one of these families either.”

She again glanced at the strangely silent Bret.

“So, to make up the slack, we have to very carefully select from serious candidates from elsewhere,” she continued.

“I see,” Kevin breathed, leaning forward in anticipation.

“We have a number of scouts and trusted contacts in many British universities and one or two elsewhere in the world. They put forward candidates for post-graduate studies – as graduate students – through this route.”

“And the dead man,” Kevin enquired, “He was accepted in this way?”

“Well, yes,” the Professor replied, “But he was accepted as a Research Associate, rather than as a grad student.”

“Ah,” said Kevin, who had spent enough time in and around Universities to understand the difference “Is this commonplace?”

The Professor shook her head.

“This is too, itself also rather unusual. We generally prefer to recruit junior members of our research and academic staff from our own graduate students.”

The Professor paused, apparently caught in a moment of reminiscing.

“I followed this route myself, a few years ago,” she said eventually.

More than a few, Kevin thought a little unkindly, but did not say anything.

Suddenly, Bret leaned forward to ask another direct question.

“Surely there must have been some kind of background checks, some screening processes?”

“Of course,” the Professor replied, looking affronted, “There are all sorts of discreet checks that are always undertaken – as I’m sure you know.”

Bret said nothing, but raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“So, yes, Doctor Wollack was subjected to all the usual checks,” she continued, looking a little peeved.

Bret sat back in his chair impassively, apparently satisfied with the answers.

Kevin glanced at Bret, then asked, “What was he working on?”

“He was just doing some research in our library,” the Professor replied airily.

“We suspected as much,” Bret said, waving what looked like a plastic credit card, “One of the few means of identification we found on the body was a library card – a NISSA library access card.”

Kevin was immediately intrigued.

“You have a library here?” He interjected.

“Of course we do,” Professor Braxton responded promptly, “We have an extensive collection of books and manuscripts on the Two Worlds, some very rare and, in a few cases, thought to be unique.”

She paused briefly, adding, “Do you want to take a look?”

Kevin looked at Bret, who nodded almost imperceptibly. He could see that Tanji was smiling in an indulgently amused fashion.

“I’d love to,” he replied.

Professor Braxton picked up the phone on her desk and pressed a button to connect to her assistant. There was a short pause.

“Sanjit? My visitors wish to see our library. Can you escort them?”

Kevin assumed that there must have been an affirmative from Sanjit, as there was a muted “Thank you” before the Professor replaced the receiver.

A few moments later, there was a knock and the dainty figure of Sanjit appeared at the office door.

Bret and Kevin both stood up, ready to take their leave. Bret pointedly reached over the desk to shake the hand of Professor Braxton.

“Thank you for your time,” he said softly.

“It’s the least I can do,” she replied, sounding genuinely sincere, “If there’s anything I can do, then please do not hesitate to contact me.”

Bret nodded once in acknowledgement, then the three visitors followed Sanjit out of the office. As they walked along the echoing corridor, Kevin mused on what he had just been told. It seemed that surprisingly little was known in NISSA about the dead man.

Suppose, he wondered, one wished to get some kind of spy or agent into NISSA. Everything he had just heard indicated that one could not apply directly as a student – that would almost guarantee immediate disqualification. Unless one was a member of certain families whose loyalty was unquestioned, it would take ages to get to a position with some authority or responsibility

Therefore, he reasoned, the approach taken by the late Doctor Wollack was the quickest route to the heart of NISSA, and indeed to the network of organisations who looked after the relationship between the Two Worlds.

It was also clear that the dead man also had access to, and had indeed actually been using the resources available at NISSA. The implications of all this gradually became clear during the tour of the library.

Kevin had vaguely expected a cool lofty room, filled floor to ceiling with rows of dusty leather-bound books. Instead Sanjit directed them to a modern elevator, where she had to both press a button and swipe a magnetic card before the lift door slid open. She ushered the three visitors inside, pressing the lowest of the line of buttons

It became clear after a few moments that the library was actually a large air-conditioned basement with, Kevin guessed, both temperature and humidity carefully controlled to minimise damage and decay to the old tomes themselves. There was also a surprising degree of physical security, as Sanjit had to swipe her card again before the glass-and-steel door to the room would open.

Inside was the authentic hush of intellectual work progressing at full speed. But instead of the well-groomed individuals in crisp white lab coats that television and films always seemed to portray, or perhaps the fusty old librarian in prim and proper clothes, the room was populated by scruffily dressed postgraduate students and junior academic staff members – it was usually difficult to tell the difference, in Kevin’s experience – most of them working quietly at computers.

Sanjit pointed out the even-more-secure areas at the back of the room where the older and rarer volumes were kept, explaining that old books were very fragile and could be irreparably damaged by even the most careful handling. To make the contents more easily accessible, she continued, a modern computer-based indexing facility had been installed, together with an ongoing programme of image-scanning the pages of the ancient tomes. Such a facility must be hugely expensive, Kevin thought, once again impressed by the amount of money available to the Institute.

“Doctor Wollack spent quite a lot of time down here,” Sanjit said quietly, “Apparently, some of the volumes he was using had not yet been scanned.”

A little later, having returned to ground level and politely thanked Sanjit for her help, the three visitors once again stood outside the NISSA building

“Hmm,” Bret murmured, more-or-less to himself, “I’m not sure how much we have really learned here today.”

“Indeed,” Kevin concurred, “And I’m not sure how much more help I can be.”

The other man shook his head, but more out of confusion rather than disagreement.

“Well, OK,” he answered.

“Fine. We’ll go on to Manchester, then. I take it you’ll be returning to Lyndesfarne?” he added with his usual courteousness.

“Yes,” Bret said, smiling slightly at the other man’s old-fashioned good manners, “There are a number of avenues of investigations I want to follow. I’ll be in touch if anything significant comes up.”

Kevin nodded, then warmly grasped the other man by the hand. Bret turned and walked towards his car and chauffeur. After watching for a few moments, Kevin also wandered off, taking Tanji’s hand in his own. She had been very quiet during the interview with Professor Braxton, he thought.



“So what did you make of all that?” he asked, as soon as Bret was out of earshot.

Tanji thought for a moment, then said, “Well, I don’t think she’s hiding anything and she seems just as confused as the rest of us.”

She paused again, adding, “She didn’t seem very upset, though.”

It was only later that Kevin realised that they had not actually determined exactly what it was that Doctor Wollack was researching in the library.

## Chapter Eight

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Even though Kevin had long since decided to immerse himself in the Other World – its cultures, and languages, and the wonders of its magical technologies – he was not quite prepared for the enthusiasm that Tanji displayed for the enterprise.

After his announcement in the restaurant, she had immediately immersed herself in finding interesting things for him (and herself) to do. Kevin only had to accept a fraction of the suggestions and recommendations that she came up with, and he was able to fill all of his free time and more. These trips, together with his continued series of briefings at NISSA, meant that he was now learning more than he had ever imagined about the world of Lyndesfarne.

In his previous life, Kevin had travelled quite widely, both on foreign holidays (of which his ex-wife had been particularly fond) and as part of his work. He had certainly visited tropical beaches before, in Kenya and around the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

So his first thought, as he and Tanji stepped through the last portal and were struck by the heat and humidity of the resort destination, was of the similarities with exotic holiday locations in his own world. The palm trees and lush foliage fringing white sandy beaches dotted with sunshades and parasols, and nearly-naked sunbathing bodies, all looked entirely familiar. But, as they stood at the beachfront, clutching the light packs they had brought with them and looking out over the blue sea and white sands, Kevin rapidly became startlingly aware of the differences, too.

Out across the sea, he could see a fit-looking young person of indeterminate gender who was standing on what looked at first glance like a surfboard. The sea near the shore was nearly calm – just a suggestion of a chop following the light breeze. Beyond the reef, the waves were larger and he could see the white surf breaking over the exposed rocks and corals.

The board-rider was standing up on the board and moving quickly – much too quickly to be propelled by the moderate swell – and he wondered what the motive power was. He soon discovered that the narrow surfboard was some kind of a cross between wind-surfing and jet-skis – self-stabilising and powered by, well, the only term was water-sprites.

The entire holiday passed in a blur, remaining in Kevin's memory as scenes somehow not quite joined up. He could not even be sure that he could remember the correct sequence of events.

He had several memories of delightful meals in Tanji's company in different bars and restaurants, all of which were open to the sea breezes and sunshine, and inevitably presented a wonderful view – even, he was surprised to discover, when they were several stories down. After some enquiries, he established that the sunshine and the view were provided by the magical windows he was already familiar with, while the air movement was entirely artificial and magical in nature.

The costumes worn on the beach demonstrated even more variety than Kevin was used to. Some holidaymakers preferred flowing robes which covered the entire body – in some cases, the material was so gauzy and diaphanous that it was entirely clear that nothing was being worn underneath. Otherwise, conventional bathing costumes, shorts and trunks, and bikinis were employed. Topless garments for both sexes were apparently considered acceptable and were widely adopted, particularly among the young and lithe.

Tanji, whose normal appearance was blonde and very fair, used her shapeshifting abilities to darken her skin.

“It helps to protect me against the rays of the sun,” she explained when Kevin first tentatively remarked on it.

Tanji preferred gauzy loose fitting trousers tied or gathered at the ankle – Kevin had heard these described as ‘Harem pants’ – and a wide hat, both of which, she informed him, projected magic to prevent sunburn. In between, she alternated between the skimpiest of bikini tops – little more than a narrow strip of brightly-coloured cloth around her breasts, magically forming itself to her body – and, to Kevin's increasing delight and appreciation, nothing at all.

“Shapeshifting again?” he asked while they were preparing to leave their room on the first day.

Kevin had noticed that Tanji's breasts were smaller, firmer, and the nipples and areola seemed darker. He ran his hands over her breasts, delighted to see that they still reacted immediately to his touch.

“Oh yes,” she grinned widely, clearly enjoying his reaction to her changes, “It's nice to go without a top sometimes, but it gets a bit uncomfortable unless I, well, shrink a bit.”

On that occasion, they were delayed in their departure, Kevin continuing his in-depth examination of Tanji's fascinatingly reshaped body.

Later, the two lovers found their way down to the beach. With Tanji's guidance, they selected a palm-thatch parasol in a quiet spot, although devoid of chairs or loungers.

"There's nowhere to sit," Kevin objected.

Tanji smiled, and pulled something from the colourful beach bag she was carrying. It looked like a large piece of brightly-coloured and patterned cloth. She shook it out and made a sequence of gestures with one hand. The cloth immediately formed itself into a sun-lounger. She set it down on the sand, and made a couple of further gestures, one of which Kevin thought he recognised as the sign for 'lock'.

"I wouldn't want it to blow away," she said by way of an explanation, "Or fall down because of a badly-formed gesture."

"Couldn't you make it collapse while someone was sitting in it?" Kevin asked mischievously.

Tanji laughed.

"No, silly," she replied amusedly, "There has to be no weight on it before those gestures will work. And look," she added, "Here's a beach ball!"

Kevin grinned widely as Tanji gestured at a disc of similarly brightly-coloured material and tossed the result in his direction.

One beach sport which Kevin spent several hours watching was referred to as Surf Bubbles, at least according to Tanji's translation. This involved a magic sphere big enough to hold a standing man or woman – there were smaller ones for children. This was an ephemeral magic, the bubble being permeable to air and slightly to water.

The bubble rider would swim out to sea and, when a large wave was approaching, make a gesture so that the sphere popped into existence. If it was done right, the ball would roll along the waves, the occupant running or sliding to remain upright. This involved a great display of expertise – that was the point, Kevin surmised – if done right, one could roll right up the beach. Of course, if the rider got it wrong, they would stumble and fall, at which point the bubble would disappear again, dumping the participant unceremoniously in the sea.

The Surf Bubbles seemed somehow to be projected from an amulet – in this case, a wide bangle worn on the upper arm, close to the shoulder. Kevin was beginning to understand the Lyndesfarne preference for magical items which affect or enclose the entire person to be embedded in closely-fitted jewellery – a bangle, pendant amulet or choker necklace.

Kevin declined the opportunity to try out Surf Bubbles himself, although he was persuaded to have a go at the Lyndesfarne equivalent of snorkelling. The equipment provided by the resort was fascinating. There was a vibrantly-coloured face mask which covered eyes and nose, but more flexible than those he was familiar with. It was apparently made from a partially-transparent version of the self-forming magical material that Tanji had used as a bikini top.

Then there was a separate mouthpiece but it was closed, with no breathing tube. Instead, a collection of green fronds dangled underneath like the beard of a Merman, which collected breathable oxygen from the water. Kevin found himself muttering phrases like “By Neptune’s Beard!” under his breath in mock-irony.

The last item was a pair of flippers. On land, these looked like ordinary, if tightly-fitting, slippers of soft leather (again, brightly-coloured). In the water, translucent extrusions of magic appeared, allowing rapid movement with minimum effort.

Tanji provided a lesson for Kevin with a practice session in the swimming pool, which passed quickly with much splashing and laughing, before trying out the gear in the sea off the beach. The resort had helpfully provided a platform close to the edge of the reef for this very purpose.

With Tanji’s encouragement, it did not take long before Kevin was swimming confidently, occasionally diving down to take a closer look at some aquatic feature that had caught his eye. There were a huge variety of brightly-coloured fishes, so that it was almost like swimming in an aquarium although, to Kevin’s untutored eye, they appeared much the same as he would have found at home. The Neptune’s Beard worked well close to the surface, although one had to hold one’s breath when diving more than a few feet down.

Another of Kevin’s mental snapshots was a day trip on an egregiously anachronistic sailing ship. This was manned – the word was inappropriate, as Kevin soon discovered – by a small but efficient crew under the command of a older woman who looked as if she could give Captain Ahab himself a run for his money in the ‘stern determination’ stakes.

Kevin was struck all over again by the appearance of people in this world. At a first glance, any of the crew members could have been one of the enthusiastic young people with dark skins and dazzlingly white smiles that he had encountered on his trips to the Indian Ocean. But when he looked more closely, they all had the slightly elfin look that marked out natives of this world – the eyes a little narrower, perhaps, and the high cheekbones and a suggestion of

pointed ears. There was no single feature would have stood out in his own world, but the overall effect was subtly alien. There were more women, too; at home, the crew would have been entirely male.

The boat itself was equipped with sails used in the conventional way, as far as Kevin (who was not a sailor) could tell. It also had some kind of auxiliary magical propulsion which, after some questioning, he discovered was the same kind of water sprites that powered the magic surfboards.

Kevin had adopted a Lyndesfarne approach to avoiding sunburn – a wide-brimmed hat magically capable of deflecting rays over the entire body and thereby avoiding heat and sunburn. Sitting together aboard the boat, Tanji explained that the purpose of this trip was to see certain sea creatures. Despite persistent questioning, she would not say exactly what kind of animals they would be visiting, but the grin on her face gave Kevin certain suspicions.

Under the direction of Captain Ahab, the crew efficiently set sail. They cruised for perhaps half an hour over deep water, heading in the direction of a series of small islands, islets and rocky outcrops which in some cases barely cleared the high water mark. As they neared the first of the desert islands, the captain shouted to look out, and crew and visitors alike scrambled to the gunwales.

At first, all that Kevin could see was a humped grey shape in the swell near the hull, water glistening on its skin like the seals and dolphins that he had seen in his own world. The creature suddenly stuck up its head, extending a long neck high out of the water and looking directly at Kevin with bright intelligence in its eyes. The animal squeaked and chattered happily, sounding surprisingly cheerful to Kevin's ears.

“What is it?” Kevin breathed to Tanji.

“Can't you tell?” she replied, completely failing to hide her laughter, “It's a plesiosaur – a Loch Ness Monster!”

She quickly explained that there were no whales and dolphins in the world of Lyndesfarne – something Kevin belatedly recalled he already knew – although there were a wide variety of sharks. Instead, the seas and oceans were populated by plesiosaurs, in a whole range of shapes and sizes.

This particular kind, she explained, grew to no more than fifteen feet from nose to tail, with long necks and tail, and they used all four of their flippers and their tail for propulsion. They were capable of considerable speed and were very agile in the water. They could stick their necks out of the water to take a good look around – they

are air breathers – and were equipped with a considerable array of sharp teeth for catching and eating fish.

“Do you want to swim with him?” Tanji asked.

“What?” Kevin said, shocked, “Aren't they dangerous?”

“No, no,” she replied, sounding amused again, “They're notoriously friendly creatures.”

Not so much *Walking with Beasts*, Kevin mused as he donned his magical snorkelling gear and prepared to jump in, as swimming with Loch Ness Monsters.

Much later, on the trip back to the resort, Tanji explained more about these strange creatures, frequently translating from a booklet she had evidently brought along for this very purpose. As Kevin semi-dozed in the shade, pleasantly exhausted by his swimming, she quietly portrayed more of the lives of these great animals.

Plesiosaurs lay eggs, which they incubate and rear their young in nest, like birds. They have to lay their eggs on land, and many species build nests set on isolated coastlines and islets. They prefer sandy hollows between rocks, just above high water line. They were invariably slow-moving and inelegant on land and very much preferred spots where they could slip in and out of the water easily. The Nessies he had seen like warm, shallow seas, where there are plenty of fish; they used their small heads, sharp teeth and long narrow neck to investigate crannies for food which would otherwise be inaccessible to an animal of its size.

Tanji also explained that there were much larger plesiosaurs elsewhere in the world of Lyndesfarne. Some species had shorter and less flexible necks, and caught larger prey in the open oceans; others ate seals or other smaller plesiosaurs – one species was even a shark-eater. Others ate plant matter at the shoreline; yet others were plankton eaters, like some whales in Kevin own world.

The boat cruise had taken them around several nesting colonies on the islands, their progress being watched by snake-like necks and intelligent eyes following the little boat and its occupants. Numerous babies were also visible.

Like the young of many species, these plesiosaurs were weak and vulnerable just out of the egg. After hatching, younglings were fed fish – partially digested and regurgitated – by their parents for a month or so, before they were capable of accompanying the adults on foraging expeditions. The growing youngsters would swim with its parents for many months or even years as they grew, and the nesting sites were usually shared by members of the same extended family group.

Dozing in the shade, Kevin mused for a few moments on the correct collective noun for a group of plesiosaurs. Was it a school or shoal, or perhaps a pod, like whales? Somehow ‘flock’ or ‘herd’ did not seem right? Finally, it came to him – it was a skirl of Loch Ness Monsters.

Dinner at the resort was fascinating, Kevin found. At home, he would have expected separate tables for each group of guests, allowing for a degree of privacy. By contrast, the hostel dining room was set with a few long tables, much like the refectory at Kevin’s university college, although here there were individual and unexpectedly comfortable chairs, rather than the hard wooden benches that Kevin might have expected.

The dining room was set in a high-roofed building mostly open at the sides and thatched with the ubiquitous woven palm tiles. Even so, he thought he caught a glimpse of those orange sparkles that suggested that the roofing had been magically reinforced or perhaps waterproofed.

Mealtimes were announced by a rendition on a large drum, clearly audible in the bar where people tended to gather ahead of time for an aperitif. As the guests seated themselves, large platters of food were brought out of the kitchens by the waiting staff. It seemed that everyone was expected to help themselves, or each other, to the comestibles and there was much excited chattering.

Dinner was a time for social interaction for everyone, Kevin decided, whether solitary visitors or large family groups. He was quite taken aback by the noise and activity, especially since his understanding of the Lyndesfarne language, although improved – thanks to Tanji – was still rather broken and limited. She helped, of course, fielding some questions and remarks, and rapidly translating others for his benefit.

On the second evening at the refectory dinner, the man sitting opposite Kevin evidently overheard what Tanji was translating for him. He spoke directly to Kevin in an accented but understandable English.

“You are from the Other World, yes?”

Kevin was familiar with this expression referring to his own world, which was apparently a direct transliteration and always seemed to be spoken with implicit Capital Letters.

Getting into the spirit of Lyndesfarne dining, Kevin fell to chatting to the other man. His name was Demaz, and he was apparently a buyer of bulk materials in Kevin’s world: cut rock – slate, marble and granite – as well as cement (in bags) to make the



magical construction stone used extensively in this world. More interestingly, Demaz also imported large polished natural stones, taken from beaches, as well as glass spheres, which were machine made in Kevin's own world, of all sizes from marbles to paperweights.

What was traded the other way was not made clear. Kevin found it was rather nice to be able to converse without language difficulties. Demaz was unfailingly polite and even charming, and Kevin found himself waxing expansively about his role in the design of the New Bridge. This brought an appreciative reaction from the other man who was clearly familiar with the crossing from his business dealings.

Demaz was accompanied by a woman who, at first glance, seemed much younger than him. Uncharacteristically unflatteringly, Kevin's first take was that she was a blonde bimbo, although she was probably older than she looked. Even so, it was clear to him that she habitually put considerable effort into retaining a youthful appearance, and a lot of thought went into selecting her jewellery and clothing. She did not appear to speak any English, and merely nodded politely to Kevin and Tanji before returning to chattering with her daughters across the table.

Demaz was a big man, quite a lot older than Kevin, although still very blocky and powerfully built about the shoulders. His hair was clipped very short, greying and thinning slightly at the front. He had a permanent look of caution about the eyes. He also tended to sit very still, while giving the unnerving impression that he could spring into action at any moment.

Demaz's demeanour put Kevin in mind of an American ex-serviceman he had once encountered on vacation. The military man was now running a weapons store in Las Vegas. Seeking entertainment away from the slot machines and roulette tables, Kevin had hired an automatic weapon and bought fifty rounds of ammunition before trying out the gun in the firing range attached to the store.

He had found it astonishingly difficult to hit the target, but went away with a new-found respect to the old soldier, who had stood right behind him at the firing range and gave every impression that, if Kevin had made any attempt to turn around with a loaded gun in his hand, he would have ended up on the floor clutching various sensitive and suddenly painful parts of his anatomy.

It slowly occurred to Kevin that, for all Demaz's bon viveur and suave sophistication, he was probably a very dangerous man to know.

## Chapter Nine

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Kevin poured two glasses of red wine, a rather powerful Chilean Merlot he had acquired earlier that afternoon from a local supermarket, and handed one to Tanji.

“This one’s a cooking wine,” he said, grinning, “That means I drink it while I’m cooking.”

Tanji, who was sitting at the counter in the tiny kitchen of Kevin’s flat, accepted the wine glass and laughed happily. Kevin raised his own glass in a toast, sipped the wine and murmured reflectively. He then put the glass down at the back of the work surface and returned to the task of preparing tonight’s dinner.

Kevin had lived alone for several years, quietly occupying the four-room flat in a southern suburb of Manchester which had until recently been rather run-down but now, thanks to the ongoing programme of inner-city refurbishment, was well on the road to gentrification. He had regarded the flat more as somewhere to keep his collection of books and to sleep when he happened to be in the area, rather than anywhere he really thought of as “home”.

Over the last few months, since he had met Tanji, Kevin had taken up his old hobby of cooking with considerable enthusiasm. He found it a real pleasure to be able to cook for Tanji when they stayed over in England, and he was delighted that she had already developed firm favourites from his repertoire of dishes.

Tonight, he was preparing her most oft-requested recipe, a kind of thick soup in two parts. He had thought to stop briefly at the supermarket on their way back from the crossing to Lyndesfarne. Now, shopping unpacked, he donned his apron, a traditional butcher’s style with blue and white stripes, and started dragging various cooking implements from the kitchen cupboards.

As Tanji watched, he scooped out a cup of chicken stock from a plastic box he had just extracted from the back of the fridge and poured it into a small saucepan, setting the pan on the gas cooker.

He then set about peeling the tough skin from a butternut squash, which Kevin always likened to trying to scrape the plastic surface from a melamine work top. Having finally managed to remove the last of the hard outer surface, he rapidly de-pipped and diced the softer inner flesh using the largest of the kitchen knives.

“That looked like hard work,” Tanji remarked, having watching him struggle with the vegetable with an amused expression on her face.

“These things always seem to put up a good fight,” he suggested wryly.

He carefully slipped the diced squash into a larger pan with a little butter, and then set it on the gas stove to cook gently, delving into the cupboard to find a suitable lid. He then turned the oven to a low setting, and laid out a few slices of pancetta on a baking tray.

“What do you think of the man on the bridge?” Tanji asked, still watching him potter about the kitchen.

“Frankly, I don’t know what to make of it,” Kevin replied, placing a second baking tray over the thin bacon to keep it flat and slipping it into the oven. He picked up his wine glass again and moved to sit next to Tanji.

“Don’t you think the circumstances are rather odd?” she persisted.

“I do,” he replied, “But there are so many unanswered questions. Is there anything special about the date?”

“Not that I know of,” Tanji said, “Other than the opening of the New Bridge itself.”

Kevin shook his head.

“I also don’t understand why Bret asked me to get involved,” he continued contemplatively, sipping at his wine glass, “It’s not as if I’m a detective or anything. I don’t see what I’ve got to contribute.”

“Well, I’m sure he got good reasons,” she responded, “If only because you’re really superb at asking difficult questions.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Kevin said, modestly shaking his head again, “Although I’ll admit I’m very curious about the fact that the scientist was found in the very centre of the bridge. Someone seems to be trying very hard to hide something, but I can’t imagine what that might be. Or even who he’s trying to hide it from. Although I’m sure we weren’t supposed to catch a glimpse of the killer in the cameras.”

Kevin stood up again and moved around the kitchen, rummaging in a cupboard for the food processor and then turning on the gas under the smaller saucepan containing the chicken stock. By now, the squash had softened nicely, and Kevin slipped the vegetable chunks into the food processor, pureeing them with a little cream and added some freshly-ground black pepper from an electrically-powered grinder.

Tanji winced at the din from the noisy machinery.

“Sorry about that,” Kevin said, smiling apologetically.

He scraped the resulting bright orange goop from the processor into a couple of large soup dishes, forming a dip in the centre with the back of a spoon. He checked the boiling stock, thickening it with some strongly-flavoured grated cheese and a splash more of the cream. He then poured the pale yellow liquid into the bowls, neatly filling the depressions in the mashed squash.

The sole remaining steps were to decorate the soup with slices of pancetta Kevin had previously cooked in the oven, and to slice the crusty brown loaf he had bought from the supermarket along with the cheese and vegetables. Since their dinner was so close to completion, it was inevitable that, just at that moment, there was a ring from the doorbell.

“Someone at the door,” Tanji said, rather superfluously.

Kevin was still engaged with finishing the cooking and looked up at Tanji, very slightly aggravated by the interruption.

“Could you see who’s there?” He asked, “It’s probably just the milkman, wanting to be paid. There’s some cash on the side.”

“OK, no problem,” she replied.

She put down her wine glass and left the room. Kevin could not hear what was happening very well, because of the noise from the extractor fan over the cooker. Even so, he could perceive the front door being opened and a murmur of enquiry. This was followed by a couple of muffled thuds and what sounded like a squeak of surprise from Tanji.

“What’s up, Darling?” Kevin called from the kitchen.

There was no response. Kevin wiped his hands, turned off the cooker and the extractor, and went into the hallway in search of Tanji.

“Tanji? Are you OK?” He called again.

It was suddenly very quiet in the flat. He looked around, then realised to his rising horror that the front door was slightly ajar. He rushed to the door and opened it just in time to see a dark vehicle, a large off-roader of some kind, screech off from outside his door and squeal around the corner at the end of the street.

“Tanji!” he screamed.

He had just enough presence of mind to note the number-plate of the vehicle as it disappeared.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur he had no wish to recall. He returned to the flat, realising almost immediately that there was no point in giving chase, either on foot or in the car. He carefully checked every room in the flat, calling out her name repeatedly, in

the forlorn hope that Tanji was playing some kind of trick or game with him.

Finally, he returned to the living room, sank into the sofa and sat with his head in his hands trying to think what to do. He felt completely helpless in this situation. He knew of no direct way to contact anyone in Lyndesfarne at short notice, and he was reluctant to get in touch with anyone at NISSA after certain recent experiences. It would take many hours for him to make his way to the Lyndesfarne crossing in the car, then walk to Bret's house, which was the only place he could think of to go for help.

Kevin remembered that he had been given some instructions on how to get a communication to people in Lyndesfarne. Apparently, there was a certain telephone number he could call to leave a message. He fumbled in his wallet to locate a slip of paper from one of those little yellow sticky pads, then reached over to the coffee table for his mobile. The number, he noted as he keyed the digits into the phone, seemed to be associated with NISSA or at least Newcastle University, judging by the area code.

The call went through first time and, after a couple of rings, he heard a very terse voice instructing him to speak after the tone, with no notification or indication as to whom or what a message might be directed.

Kevin gave his name and said he wanted to leave a message for Bret, cursing silently that he did not know any more of Bret's name. After a moment's hesitation, he stated that he wanted Bret to contact him urgently, that Tanji had been kidnapped, and then left his telephone numbers.

After hanging up, Kevin wondered if there was anything else he could do. He felt he had to call the local police, but there was not very much he felt he could tell them, other than the circumstances of the abduction and his own personal details. He strongly suspected that trying to explain anything about the curious world of Lyndesfarne would likely get him arrested for wasting police time, if not incarcerated in the funny farm.

After what seemed like an incredibly long wait, two policemen arrived at his door. He invited them in, and tried to explain what had happened as clearly as he could. The constable leading the questioning appeared determined to confuse him by asking questions which seemed to have no bearing on what he was trying to explain. Both coppers looked very strangely at him when he explained that he did not know her surname for sure. Thinking quickly, he recalled

Tanji's patronymic and invented a plausible spelling on-the-fly, which give the impression of satisfying the copper's enquiry.

After making laborious notes and poking around the flat for a while, the policemen left. Kevin made sure that they had transcribed the registration number. He got the distinct impression that the constables thought that he was over-reacting, that Tanji had just left after an emotional argument, a tiff, a "domestic" as he had heard it categorised. He strongly suspected that there would be no serious attempt to investigate the disappearance, and the case would languish in some file or database forever.

After the police had gone, he returned to the kitchen and looked at the butternut squash soup he had so carefully prepared earlier, now sitting congealed and inedible on the kitchen counter. He burst into tears.

Much later, Kevin was woken by a ring on the doorbell. He had fallen asleep on the sofa, having felt too upset and wound up to go to bed. He glanced at his watch – it was nearly three in the morning.

He opened the door cautiously. Bret was at the door, accompanied by a uniformed chauffeur. A Range Rover with blacked-out windows stood at the curb behind them.

Bret looked immensely relieved to see Kevin.

"I want you to come with me, now," he said without preamble.

"Why?" Kevin exclaimed groggily, as he ushered Bret into the house.

"Well, I'm not sure it's safe here," the other man replied urgently, "You do realise that they might not have intended to snatch Tanji, that they might have been after you instead?"

It had not occurred to Kevin that he himself might be in danger, although he was barely able to think at all just at the moment. He went to the bathroom to splash some water on his face and to clean his teeth, then gathered up a few things and stuffed them into his rucksack. It did not take very long, as he had been living a very peripatetic lifestyle recently.

"OK," he said finally, looking forlornly around the little flat, "Let's go."

## Chapter Ten

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The design of the New Bridge to Lyndesfarne had been a tremendous undertaking, and Kevin's personal involvement had been considerable. The professional pressures had only been made worse by the disruption caused by the ultimately unsuccessful attempts to prevent the conclusion of the project.

As the New Bridge moved to completion, Kevin had taken the opportunity to shift in a direction which he imagined would be rather less pressured. He became a consultant – a rather unique one, in fact, with both a sophisticated knowledge of engineering and organisational principles in his own world, together with an increasing understanding of the magic of Lyndesfarne.

The first really major piece of work he was commissioned to undertake was the review of the transportation of goods between the two worlds. Part of his initial research was a 'high-level feasibility study', in the consultant's jargon he found it all too easy to adopt, leading to the production of a solution definition report.

The difference between actually making real stuff deliver on time and the consultants role of 'solution definition', Kevin had concluded, was less about shovelling the shit after it had hit the fan, and much more about shaping the manure into convenient piles, so that they could be thrown at the rotating machinery by the project management.

Kevin's research had led him to arrange a visit to the goods handling facilities which stood a short distance from the end of the causeway leading to the Old Bridge. He stood at the gates of the trans-shipment area, looking through the high wire fences, through which could just be seen a large and modern warehouse building.

The building itself was hardly visible except from this point, although the construction of the warehouse was familiar to him. The technique of metal and block-work cladding over a framework of steel I-beams was a cheap way of providing a large undercover space, provided that the external appearance and the comfort of people housed within was not of great concern.

On this trip, Kevin had been guided by Doctor Willis from NISSA. The Good Doctor's carefully cultivated "Mad Professor" look had not been attenuated since the two men's previous meeting. On this occasion, Willis had removed his stained white lab coat,

which was replaced by a very slightly frayed tweed jacket with, Kevin was amused to note, the mandatory leather patches at the elbows.

The two men had been transported from Newcastle University in a chauffeur-driven car which, he would discover much later, had been supplied by RTDE. During the road trip, the Doctor had maintained his taciturn reserve, alternately staring out of the window, or making cryptic notes in neat and tiny handwriting in a little notebook he kept in his inside pocket.

For some reason, the driver had pulled up outside the fence, rather than continuing to the gate itself. This did not seem to surprise Doctor Willis, who calmly waited for the doors to be opened by the chauffeur.

“We’ve arrived,” the Doctor said unnecessarily, as Kevin inelegantly exited the vehicle.

As he watched, a large articulated truck drew up outside the gates. The boxy bodywork was supported by six axles, indicating that this was an example of the largest class of Heavy Goods Vehicle normally allowed on British roads. It was a thirty-eight tonne (gross weight) lorry of the kind that he had encountered frequently, usually on the bends of the road from the Lyndesfarne crossing to the Great North Road.

The truck barely paused at the gates. Someone in the nondescript workaday clothes that Kevin now recognised as the uniform of the Guardians appeared, swiftly opened the gate and beckoned the driver through, before closing the gate as swiftly afterwards.

The two men made their way on foot the short distance to the gatehouse which stood to one side of the gates through which the lorry had just entered. The gatehouse was not easily seen from the road, being tucked away behind thickly-grown but well-trimmed hedges.

Willis directed Kevin to the pedestrian’s entrance, guiding him inside before speaking briefly and more-or-less inaudibly to the Guardian on duty. There was a short exchange of nods, then Willis was allowed to escort Kevin to the main building. Behind him, Kevin caught sight of the Guardian picking up a telephone.

Inside, the warehouse was in a state of carefully orchestrated chaos. Kevin was shown around by the rather stressed and overweight warehouse manager with loosed tie and rather obvious damp patches at the armpits, introduced only as Dave.



The manager seemed happy enough to chat and answer all of Kevin's questions, to the point where he began to wonder why Doctor Willis had accompanied him at all.

Dave rapidly put a structure around the noise and bustle.

"Goods arriving are unloaded at the docks over there," he explained, "We have six fork-lift trucks, and we run a three-shift system so that they are in use almost around the clock."

He indicated an area filled with steel racking allowing crates and pallets to be stacked to the rafters separated by long rows of fluorescent lighting whose light reflected from the bald patches on Dave's skull. From the HGVs, with their trailers backed up to the open doors, the pallets were being unloaded efficiently, supported by the skilful operation of the fork-lift trucks.

"How long before the goods are shipped over to Lyndesfarne?" Kevin asked.

Dave the manager rubbed his hand over the stubble on his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, it depends," he said after a few moments, "But usually it's gone inside a day – two days tops. Now, take a look over here."

Trailed by Doctor Willis, Kevin followed Dave towards the far wall of the warehouse.

"Down this end," the warehouse manager continued, "We load and unload the wagons for transportation to the Other World."

Kevin watched conventional motorised fork lift trucks placing or removing wooden pallets from anachronistic wooden carts and wagons, each drawn by teams of two horses. The loaded goods were held in place with sheets of oiled canvas and hemp ropes, which would survive the anti-technology magic of the barrier between the Two Worlds, rather than the tough plastic sheeting and nylon ropes that Kevin would have expected in the twenty-first century.

Even so, evidence of modern methods of handling was everywhere. Kevin noticed the slots and openings in the wagons which allowed the tines of the fork lift trucks to load and unload whole crates and pallets quickly.

The horses themselves were entirely unmoved by the roar of the engines and stood placidly, clearly quite familiar with the machines, and the loading and unloading work going on behind them. The wagoners stood by their team, chattering intermittently with the fork lift operators in between providing their animals with nosebags or rubbing down their flanks.

Kevin thought he could now spot the subtle facial features typical of those from the other world, and the wagoners appeared to be an eclectic mix of individuals from both sides of the straights.

Dave pointed out the separate entrance and exit from the compound provided for the horse-drawn wagons. From this vantage-point, Kevin could see a narrow paved road which led behind the "Tourist Information Office" that doubled as the Guardians' guard house, and screened from the car park by a thick growth of thorny trees. The wagons could make their way to the causeway and thence to the Other World almost unobserved by other travellers.

Kevin was briefly tempted to follow one of the departing wagons, just to watch them segue into the other traffic on the crossing. However, the enthusiasm of the manager, not to mention a briefly-glanced frown of disapproval from Doctor Willis, rapidly discouraged him. Instead, he turned about, and followed the other two men back into the cavernous building.

"Down this side," Dave pontificated, wandering on ahead, "We store the goods arriving from Lyndesfarne."

He indicated a second row of steel racking seemingly identical to the one Kevin had inspected earlier, although adorned by a different collection of boxes and containers. Any of them would not have looked out of place anywhere in his world, Kevin mused, as he gazed up at the array of goods.

He was abruptly dragged from his reverie by a horn sounding closely behind him. Both Dave and Doctor Willis neatly stepped out of the way of a fork lift truck, practically dragging Kevin with them, while the operator again beeped cheerily and waved at the visitors.

It was, Kevin concluded, a fairly simple system. Goods arrived by HGV, then unloaded and stored for a day or so, and finally shipped onwards by horse-drawn wagon. In the other direction, the wagons were unloaded, the crates stored for a similarly short period, then the pallets are loaded onto trucks.

All of this was quite a contrast to the approach he discovered when he later visited the corresponding facility on the other side of the crossing. To Kevin's trained eyes, even the construction of the Lyndesfarne transit warehouse was entirely different.

The building was set directly onto the road, not far from the end of the causeway and right next to the portal building that Kevin had already used on trips to the Other World when guided by Tanji. On this trip, too, he was guided by Tanji, who had used her own contacts in the Guild of Directions to gain an introduction.

Inside, the Lyndesfarne transfer point was an astonishingly small space, when compared with the building on the other side. It was enclosed in traditionally-built thick stone walls supporting heavy wooden rafters, in some places held up by internal walls nearly as thick as the exterior ones. The roof itself was simply a layer of thick slate or some similar stone tiles, laid over a stout timber framework held aloft by the rafters.

As they arrived, two people emerged from an interior doorway on the other side of the building. The first was a tiny, almost bird-like woman whose hands were in constant movement as she chattered in a steady stream. As she spoke, she repeatedly bobbed up and down on the balls of her feet, presumably for emphasis, making her waist-length hair braids bounce and jiggle at every movement.

The other was a tall young man with wild dark hair and piercing blue eyes whose every movement appeared to radiate a Zen-like level of calm and equilibrium. The man noticed Kevin and Tanji almost immediately, but waited for ten seconds or more before finding the right moment to draw his companion's attention to the newcomers. The interruption, it seemed to Kevin, consisted of a raised eyebrow, or some comparable non-verbal communication.

As one, the man and woman tuned to face the visitors, raising their hands in the familiar Lyndesfarne salutation. The woman uttered a few words that Kevin was pretty certain he recognised as a greeting before switching to near-flawless English.

"You must be Kevin," she twittered, "You are most welcome. And Tanji, of course. Please do remember me to your Uncle."

Tanji nodded politely and said a few rather formal-sounding words in the Lyndesfarne language.

"I am Lyssa," the woman continued, "And this is my..."

She hesitated.

"Colleague?" the man interjected calmly.

"Colleague Vanise. Please let us show you around."

"Pleased to meet you," Kevin responded, "Thank you for allowing me to interrupt your busy schedule."

The tour of the facilities did not take very long, mainly because the building really was not very big. Lyssa chattered away, bouncing this way and that, only stopping when she could not find quite the right word – always supplied without delay by her taciturn companion.

Much to Kevin's surprise, there was clearly almost no storage of goods – even transiently – on the site itself. Instead, all incoming

packages were shipped out through the goods portal network almost as soon as they arrived by horse-drawn wagon.

He watched open-mouthed as the goods lifted from the pallets on the wagons – the pallets themselves remaining behind – by magic evidently under the direct control of a skilled team of handlers. The levitating cargo moved steadily across the floor as if on some kind of insubstantial conveyor belt before disappearing into the portal with no more than a few seconds delay.

Kevin could see the notice above the portal archway, the lettering which even now he was barely able to make out but which he understood indicated the destination of the goods. The sign changed frequently, rippling into a new configuration before almost every consignment passed through.

Even more astonishingly, the converse was also true – goods which arrived through the portal were loaded onto the wagons with a similar lack of delay.

The smooth coordination and control implied a sophisticated logistics operation, the kind of thing that would, in his own world, require careful organisation and the use of a complex computer system.

Kevin wondered how this “just in time” delivery was supported in the world of Lyndesfarne, and managed to interrupt the guide’s spiel to ask how the transport of goods was organised. Lyssa and Vanise turned to look at each other in that curiously synchronised way that he had noticed before.

He got the strangest sensation that they were communing, collectively trying – and failing – to come up with some way of explaining the principles in a language not designed for expressing magical ideas.

Eventually, Vanise spoke.

“We use the stones,” he said, apparently realising how weak this must have sounded.

“Ah,” Kevin said, thoughtfully.

He had been briefed at NISSA a few months before about magical stones which, when held in the hand, allowed to holder to enter a light trance which had long been used for both communication and entertainment. He even understood that sets of these stones could allow several people to enter a common illusion and play together.

It would not be too much of a stretch, he considered, that such a technology would allow for collaborative thinking and planning, and perhaps also be somehow coupled to the operation of the goods portals themselves.

There was another thing puzzling Kevin. He had noticed on both sides of the crossing that the crates and pallets being unloaded usually contained just one kind of goods, as if they had come from a single source. Similarly, in the warehouse in his own world, the HGV trailers were usually loaded with a single kind of goods, ready, he imagined, to be taken to a more conventional logistics or distribution centre.

Sometimes, very occasionally, pallets would be loaded with mixed goods, as if an assortment of merchandise were to be delivered to a single location in the Other World. Why, Kevin wondered, was this? What was the purpose of the special arrangements? Presumably, he concluded tentatively, it was possible to make a special one-off shipment between the Two Worlds.

## Chapter Eleven

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Kevin must have slept in the car, since he had almost no memory of the drive from Manchester. He struggled awake, finally realising that it was already light. Bret seemed alert, bright-eyed, when he turned his head and saw that the other man was awake.

“We’re nearly there,” he said quietly.

Kevin yawned and stretched as best he could in the confines of the vehicle. He then sat up straight and looked around him. The driver was skilfully piloting the car along a series of narrow country lanes, with thick overgrown hedgerows on each side.

After a few minutes, the car pulled up outside an old but still exceptionally impressive pair of wrought iron gates that hung from stout stone pillars. Some kind of gatehouse stood on one side, and a discreet sign declared: “Cliviger Grange. Private: No Entry”.

Someone stepped out of the little building wearing, Kevin realised belatedly, the not-quite-uniform that characterised the Guardian force. He had seen this style of dress at the causeway so frequently during his numerous visits to the world of Lyndesfarne, and it took a few moments to realise what he was looking at here. The guard saw the Range Rover, waved briefly at the driver and returned to the gatehouse. A few seconds later, the gates swung open on silent motors and the car pulled through.

Looking around, Kevin could see extensive walled grounds, lined with mature trees and thick growths of rhododendrons and laurels which ensured a high degree of privacy. The big car drove quietly along a driveway that ran between carefully-tended lawns on either side. The road was edged with modern concrete kerbstones and surfaced with old but well-maintained tar macadam which seemed to have seen a lot of use over the years.

The main entrance to the impressive old house was approached by the long drive and a turning circle, the latter centred by a flowerbed around an ornate stone fountain. The stonework was worn with age but the carved urns were still flowing with, Kevin imagined, recirculated water propelled by hidden pumps.

A fork in the road just before the turning circle led to a cluster of buildings of similar vintage to the main house, with an arched entrance to a courtyard just visible within. Kevin imagined that these were once stables but were now repurposed as garages. The road had

been extended – more recently, it seemed to Kevin – from the turning circle leading to a series of more modern buildings, one or two stories high with pitched roofs, and executed in brick and stone carefully chosen to be sympathetic to the older structures nearby.

The car drew up outside the imposing stone steps which led up to the main entrance. Cliviger Grange gave the impression of a rather grand old house, dating from the nineteenth century, which had been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, and subsequently very carefully restored to allow its use as modern offices and meeting rooms. The original fabric of the building had clearly remained undamaged, Kevin thought as he blearily inspected the façade. The large masonry blocks around the windows and doors, and at the corners of the building were all intact, and the intervening spaces were filled with aged but recently re-pointed brickwork.

Much of the front facade was festooned with Wisteria and Virginia creeper. He imagined that the Wisteria would be immensely colourful in its season, earlier in the year, but now the deep red foliage of the Virginia creeper put on a vibrant show. Kevin, who had a professional eye for these things, could see that a significant budget was being expended on the maintenance of house and grounds, and suspected that there must be greenhouses and other garden buildings tucked away out of sight somewhere nearby.

Still feeling rather groggy and dishevelled, he struggled from the car.

“What is this place?” he asked Bret.

“It’s called Cliviger Grange,” the other man replied calmly, “And it’s, well, it’s the Headquarters for the Guardians in this world.”

“Ah.”

Kevin had wondered about this. There were always Guardians on duty at the crossing itself, basing themselves in the building sited close to the entrance to the causeway which he had mistaken, on his first encounter, for a Tourist Information Office.

He knew the Guardians were habitually discreet and probably more numerous than he had at first thought. He also knew that they undertook the careful policing of the crossing itself as well as, he had been given to understand, patrolling the coastline in both directions from the crossing.

With these responsibilities and the level of traffic, they must have more facilities available than the ‘Tourist Information Office’. Kevin had long known that this building actually functioned as a guard post, and that it was bigger than it looked, but he realised that there must be other, larger, facilities elsewhere.

Sensing Kevin's contemplative – or perhaps just confused – state, Bret gently guided the other man inside the building, nodding politely to the doorkeeper on the way past. He guided him along the hallway, their footsteps sounding loudly on the polished wooden floor, then up a grand staircase, with the carpet held in place by very old-fashioned brass stair-rods.

At the top of the stairs, Bret turned right, directing Kevin along another corridor before knocking at a door at the end. He paused for a moment outside, apparently to allow Kevin to recover from his temporary state of fugue. He then pushed open the door.

“There are some people here who I'd like you to meet,” Bret said.

Kevin made no immediate response, still feeling just a bit out of it. Finally pulling it together, he snapped into focus, looking directly at the man sitting behind a desk

“Kevin, this is Warden Williamson, head of Cliviger Grange.”

Bret indicated a fit-looking man in his early fifties with greying hair cut short in, Kevin thought later, a distinctly military style.

The older man stood, extending his hand over the desk.

“Call me Derek,” he said in a deep voice tinged with the plummy vowels of a public school education, “Pleased to meet you.”

Kevin muttered something unintelligible in response, and then added more clearly, “Can you help me find Tanji?”

The older man looked thoughtfully at him for a few moments.

“Yes,” he replied finally, “I think we might just be able to. Come this way.”

He ushered Kevin through another door into an adjoining meeting room, followed by Bret. There were several other people already in the room, conversing in low tones. All fell silent as the three men entered.

At one side stood a large and muscular man with the familiar stripes on his arm indicating that he was a Sergeant. He was flanked with three younger people – a man and two women – all also wearing the not-quite-uniform of the Guardians. Kevin thought he might have glimpsed the Sergeant on duty at the crossing, although he could not be sure.

“Sergeant Graves?” the Warden announced his presence in quiet tones, “Can you get everyone together?”

As one, the Sergeant and his colleagues moved over to the meeting room table.

On the other side of the room, Kevin realised with a start, was Tanji's Uncle, whose name he had never quite grasped. The old man was sitting at the conference table, accompanied by a slender youth



who was introduced so quickly that Kevin was not sure he had caught his name correctly, but sounded something like Zarb. The young man was quite obviously a Guide from the Guild of Directions who had assisted his Visitor in travelling in a considerable hurry from the Other World.

Kevin knew that Tanji's Aunt and Uncle were her closest living relatives, and that she had been brought up by them from a very young age, after the mysterious disappearance of her parents. Tanji's Aunt was not in the room. As Kevin came to understand it, she was far too distressed to travel and was being cared for at home by friends.

Kevin walked over to Tanji's Uncle, and took the other man's hands in his own. His knowledge of the Lyndesfarne language could be politely described as rudimentary, and in any case it seemed to have deserted him completely at this time.

"I'm so very sorry," he said in English, "I'll do everything I can to find her."

The older man appeared to understand his words, but replied in the Lyndesfarne language. The young man at his elbow smoothly translated his rather formal speech.

"Thank you for your kind thoughts. I too sincerely believe we will find Tanji very soon."

The Guardians had rapidly drawn up chairs and were now sitting around the table that formed the centrepiece of the room. Warden Williamson took a chair at the head of the table, indicating that Kevin and Bret should take seats opposite Tanji's uncle and his guide.

Kevin's anxieties finally got the better of him.

"Why her?" he blurted out, "And why from my flat?"

The Warden paused for a second, glancing around the room.

"Well, I have to say that we don't know yet," he replied, "So let's start at the beginning."

Looking Kevin directly in the eye, he continued, "Can you think of any reason why Tanji, or you, should be attacked by people in Britain?"

"From my own world?" Kevin answered slowly, "I can't think of anything at all. I'm pretty certain I don't have any enemies – at least, any that I'm aware of."

"So you don't think it's you, personally?" Warden Williamson pressed.

"No," Kevin answered, "No, I don't think so."

The Sergeant of the Guardians that Kevin vaguely recognised gave a report on the actions taken so far. The report was brief and

crisply to the point, but contained nothing that Kevin did not already know of at least strongly suspected.

“We know that Kevin reported a kidnapping to the British police in Manchester,” he continued.

“Ah, well,” Kevin interjected, “I might be wrong, but I got the distinct impression that they weren’t taking me seriously.”

“What do you mean?” Bret asked, leaning forward suddenly.

“I think they considered it a lovers’ tiff, and she simply got a friend to collect her in a car.”

“Hmmm,” the Warden said, “I didn’t think we could count on very much help from the civil forces. Mind you, we do have some high-level contacts, and I’ll make a couple of calls. We might get lucky – the car might be stopped for some other reason by the traffic police, or something.”

Kevin privately thought this was rather unlikely, but made no response.

“And, obviously, we have alerted the Guardians on the ground in both worlds.”

Kevin was confused.

“Do you think they will try to take her Lyndesfarne?” he exclaimed, “Why would they do that?”

“We can’t rule it out,” the Warden responded calmly.

Kevin could not think of a reason either way. He was still struggling with a reason why she had been taken at all.

“The British police will probably want to interview you again,” the Warden said.

Kevin felt uncertain about this.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked.

“Just tell them what you said before.”

“What about questions like, ‘where does she live?’”, Kevin demanded.

“Tell them the truth, near enough,” the Warden answered, smiling very slightly, “That she lives with her Uncle and Aunt on the Island of Lyndesfarne in North East England. Here’s an address.”

The Warden handed over a sheet of paper evidently torn from a notepad with a few lines written on it

“Won’t that be a problem?” Kevin asked, “I mean, won’t they check up?”

“Almost certainly not,” Bret interjected, also smiling slightly smugly, “They will defer the enquiry to the local police force – and we have very good contacts there.”

Kevin nodded. He strongly suspected this was not the first time that such a ruse had been used.

“But we still don’t know why she was taken,” Kevin pressed.

The Warden held up his hands.

“I’m afraid you’re right,” he said gently, “But we have our suspicions. We think it was someone, or some group, wanting to find out more about the world of Lyndesfarne – to gain access or influence some event we just don’t fully understand yet. And, worryingly, we think there’s a connection between Tanji’s kidnapping and the body on the bridge.”

“What?” Kevin exclaimed, “How?”

“We think they’re trying to distract us from the death of Andrew Wollack, by kidnapping you. Or perhaps to prevent you from helping us with our enquiries” – the Warden grimaced at the hackneyed phrase – “Someone heard about your trick with the cameras and panicked.”

“Since we think there’s some link with the dead man,” Bret said, “I suggest we continue our investigation of Doctor Wollack’s background.”

Kevin could not think of anything else to do and it was, he considered, better than sitting around moping.

“OK,” he replied, “So what shall we do?”

Bret looked suddenly resolute.

“We’ll go to London.”

## Chapter Twelve

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Kevin had long thought that the best place to start a tourist guide for London was the centre of Waterloo Bridge. Of course it was not possible to just appear there, even by magic, but this did not prevent him from announcing to Tanji that this would be the 'official' start of the trip.

He had been hugely appreciative of Tanji's enthusiasm for his desire to learn more about the world of Lyndesfarne and had been wanting to reciprocate in some way for her efforts in organising those jaunts in her own world.

Tanji had given him the impression that she had visited the Other World on many occasions, both as a student in the Guild of Directions and later as a Guide, escorting the occasional Visitors to their desired destination. Kevin understood that, usually, Guides for Visitors were natives of the world being visited so perhaps, he mused, she was not quite such a frequent a visitor after all. In any case, Tanji seemed delighted by the prospect of being shown the city.

"It'll be fun," she said, with her characteristic giggle in her voice, "Seeing your world through your eyes."

She paused and then continued more seriously.

"It's one of the things that I like about you. You are not so blinkered to the conventions of your society, the assumptions about the nature of the universe. I like the way you question things, all the time. And I think I would like to see your world that way too."

A convenient opportunity had come up soon enough. It turned out that Kevin had some business in Town – a presentation to give to some senior directors of a company for whom he had been commissioned to perform an initial feasibility study for a bridge. The company represented a consortium of London investors and international businessmen, many of whom were from the small but oil-rich states abutting the coast of the Red Sea.

The proposal was for a crossing over the natural waterway leading to Kilindini Harbour, south of Mombasa Island in Kenya. This was for a bridge as a replacement for the Likoni Ferry over the deep-water channel, as the travel delays increasingly incurred were fast becoming an economic constraint on the fast-growing economy of both that country and several neighbouring sub-Saharan African nations.

There were a number of complicated technical constraints on any solution, including the requirement that ocean-going ships should be capable of passing underneath, since the harbour was much further inland than any plausible site for the bridge itself.

In addition, the land on the island side was rather low-lying, being little more than a delta of sediment built up by the river over the ages, while the mainland was steeply sloping, rapidly rising towards the coastal hills which edged the continental uplands. This disparity in elevation made the selection of the technology for the crossing difficult in itself.

Even worse, the land on the island side was already rather heavily occupied by a series of rough shanty towns. The majority of the inhabitants had dubious legal grounds for their residency, but it would nevertheless take a considerable amount of time and money to evict a large number of people. So, the smallest land area on the island was also an important criterion.

Kevin felt that this was another opportunity for him to display the talent he had for suggesting imaginative and, more importantly, cost-effective solutions to obscure civil engineering problems. He briefly considered a lifting or turning bridge but moving crossing structures, especially of that size, were prone to breakdowns and needed considerable maintenance – something that might be hard to ensure in a country whose general infrastructure was several decades behind the times.

His recommended solution included an S-shaped ramp on the island side, to minimise the area required for vehicular access to the bridge without making any slope very steep – important in a world where the maintenance of vehicle brakes could not always be relied upon.

The main part of the bridge would take advantage of the naturally higher ground: an asymmetric cable stay bridge, with the bulk of the span supported from the mainland side and with cables fixed to the bedrock. A much shorter tower supported the other span, holding up both the bridge over the sea as well as the last part of the access ramp.

This was all unrelated to the Lyndesfarne Bridge project. Rather, it was one of several pieces of interesting and frankly extremely lucrative work that Kevin had managed to acquire after he left the old firm of architects who had employed him since University. As an independent consultant, and with rather more reputation in the

industry than he was at first aware of, Kevin relished the intellectual freedom and flexibility his new circumstances afforded him.

Under other circumstances, Kevin might have travelled to his meeting and back in one day, getting back every late in the evening and sleeping late the following day. On this occasion, however, he had taken the opportunity to travel the day before and stay for a couple of nights in a hotel. Being accompanied by Tanji really did make all the difference.

In the event, the couple travelled in a leisurely fashion from Kevin's little flat in the suburbs, setting off quite late by taxi for the mainline railway station. The train from Manchester Piccadilly to London Euston was uncommonly pleasant, Kevin having indulged in first class tickets for the journey. Tanji's reaction to rail travel was fascinating to Kevin. She appeared to be particularly relaxed – much more so than he was used to. In addition, and something to Kevin's surprise, she insisted on sitting with her back to the direction of travel.

"I prefer trains to travelling by car," she explained when prompted by Kevin.

"Why?" he asked,

"Well, there's always the slight sensation of being out of control, of careering along far too fast."

She held up her hand to forestall Kevin's protestations.

"Yes, I know it's really quite safe," she continued, "And I'm sure you're a very careful driver, but I find it easier to ignore the sensation of rapid movement in a train."

Kevin suspected this was a reaction to the uniquely Lyndesfarne approach to travel, with instantaneous transport between two points using portals – although with absolutely no sense of speed – coupled with the insistence that land vehicles, even magical ones, travel no faster than traditional horse-drawn transport.

Euston station was bustling as always when they arrived. Kevin led Tanji up the platform ramp and across the concourse to the entrance to the London underground, keeping a close lookout for those wheeled bags that seemed to have a life of their own and were likely to clip you on the ankle at the slightest lack of attention.

Tanji was evidently familiar with the process of buying tickets, or at least unfazed by the necessity. After a short trip on the Underground trains, they emerged at Embankment tube station. Arm in arm, they walked along the Victoria embankment to Waterloo Bridge and up the steps to the bridge itself. From there, at that time of the year, it was a pleasant, if slightly breezy walk along the bridge

to the very middle of the crossing. They stood on the pavement at the centre of the bridge, where a plaque thoughtfully provided for the guidance of tourists allowed Kevin to be sure about the information he was, proudly and a little embarrassingly, imparting to Tanji.

A little way upriver on the north bank were the familiar landmarks of the Houses of Parliament and the tower of Big Ben, the seat of the UK's central administration, deliberately built in a carefully archaic style to transfer the impression of stability and longevity from building to government.

On the opposite bank, the great wheel of the London Eye loomed over the entire area. Kevin pointed out to Tanji that, like the wheel of a bicycle, the spokes did not hold up the wheel. Rather, the stretch and flex of the spokes meant that much of the weight of the rim of the wheel was hung from the axle; indeed the entire structure was under tension, the spokes being far too thin to be much good in compression.

The explanation left Tanji's face momentarily tightened up with concentration at, Kevin hoped, the effort to see the construction of modern artefacts through the eyes of a physical scientist and engineer. Or perhaps it was complete confusion; Kevin did not really mind either way, as long as she was amused by his prattle.

Continuing the rotating tour downriver, Kevin pointed out the South Bank complex: the National Theatre, the Tate Modern art gallery, and the headquarters of various international computer and petrochemical companies. All these buildings were rendered in the towers, monoliths and piled-box shapes of the 1960's poured concrete vernacular, now looking rather stained and water-worn.

By contrast, the more modern glass towers of the Gherkin – more properly, the Swiss Re Building – and the towers of Canary Wharf were clearly visible in the distance downriver.

“There's so much above ground,” Tanji remarked, half to herself, “So many tall buildings.”

“Well, most of these buildings will have basements,” Kevin replied, “But most people prefer to live or work where they can see outside, and get at least some natural light.”

“Ah, I see. No windows,” she nodded, “I mean, no magical windows.”

Further around the circle, Kevin pointed out the vast dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, standing proud and alone above the surrounding rooftops. This building was another astonishing achievement, he knew, and one which had advanced the reputation of Sir Christopher Wren, the foremost architect of his time. The great dome itself was

so heavy that there was a risk that its weight would collapse outwards the supporting walls.

Normally, this risk would be averted by supporting the walls on the outside by buttresses or smaller constructions. The innovation that Wren had introduced, to give that famously free-standing dome look, was to embed thick steel cables around the entire circumference of the walls, tensioning the cables to take the weight of the roof.

In front of the Cathedral, water-front buildings that Kevin could identify included Devonshire House, home of the Inland Revenue, and the mysterious building occupied, by reputation at least, by one of the more secretive of government military intelligence organisations. Even so, he was personally inclined to the view that the phrase “military intelligence” was itself an oxymoron.

After the opening gambit on the bridge, the rest of the morning tour was a huge success. The couple took in several stereotypically tourist activities, including an open-topped bus ride, a walk along the Thames Embankment and a short trip in a rattling black London taxicab. After a light lunch in a quiet brasserie, Kevin left Tanji to stroll the streets and parks of the city, while he made haste back to South Bank.

The official business that Kevin had really travelled for consisted of a two-hour meeting in the afternoon, in the head office buildings of an international construction firm not very far from Waterloo Bridge. His presentation was attended by senior managers from the construction company, a junior Foreign Office official and a representative from the Kenyan Embassy as well as several medium-ranking dignitaries from assorted surrounding countries.

Kevin presented the simplest possible view of the shape of the bridge and the reasons why, and was listened to with a mixture of undisguised boredom, polite interest and calculated – even mercenary – understanding. It was not always easy to judge the tenor of such formal meetings, Kevin had learned from long experience, but he got the distinct impression that his technical recommendations for the crossing would be accepted.

Indeed, he felt that all that was now at stake was the cost of the new bridge and, more importantly, which combination of international mineral mining cartels and world banking institutions would be providing the funding.

Flushed with success, Kevin met Tanji as arranged and retired to a hotel on the Strand. That evening, they enjoyed a luxurious and, Kevin was surprised to note, astonishingly expensive meal in the Grill restaurant attached to the hotel. Tanji also surprised Kevin by



admitting to a taste for Champagne, gladly accepting a glass from the waiter as an aperitif and quietly but firmly suggesting that he order a whole bottle with their meal.

By the end of the evening, Tanji was quite giggly and Kevin needed to support her while they made their way upstairs to their room. Once inside, she collapsed on the bed before he could even turn on the lights, giggling more loudly now that they were alone. Smiling widely in the near-darkness, Kevin threw off his clothes and joined her.

The following day was quiet, as neither Kevin nor Tanji had any pressing engagements. They arose late, ate breakfast in their room later still and packed their few belongings before checking out. The day was fine and bright, and Kevin suggested that they walk the mile or two back to Euston station rather than take a taxi or the Underground. Tanji agreed immediately, and they set off, Kevin once again collapsing into tour-guide mode.

Tanji was by turns impressed by the buildings of University College London, wowed by the wrought-iron gates and railings of the British Museum and charmed by the unexpected peacefulness of Sloane Square. All in all, Kevin thought, as they made their way along the platform to board their return train, a successful trip to Town.

## Chapter Thirteen

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It is a long way down the A1 and M1 from the turning for Lyndesfarne to the city of London, but the big car kept up a fast clip for most of the journey, with a minimum of traffic hold-ups. They stopped briefly in a service station allowing the driver – a different one than had driven them from Manchester – to refuel the car, while Bret and Kevin stretched their legs.

“Stretching their legs” was of course a euphemism. Kevin was in fact bursting for a pee. He and Bret both made a bee-line for the toilets. Without hesitation, Bret strode towards the Gents, followed closely by Kevin. Bret chose to use a cubicle, while Kevin stood at a urinal. After relieving himself, he washed and dried his hands, Bret joining him after a few moments but declining to catch his eye. Kevin wondered again about the social conventions in a world where a biological woman could, without either surprise or disapproval, successfully masquerade as a man.

On the way out, Kevin bought healthy snacks and caffeinated drinks in cans from the shop, while Bret purchased salted crisps and bottled water. Back in the car, the food tasted of nothing much in his mouth; the supposedly healthy low-fat snacks containing nuts and cereals actually included, he discovered when he looked more closely at the labels, very large amounts of sugar. I should not really worry, Kevin thought to himself gloomily, I am surprised I can eat anything at all.

During the latter part of the journey, Kevin dozed in the back seat, later coming to realise that Bret must have done much the same. He must have more deeply asleep than he realised, and came to with a jerk to find the other man talking into his mobile phone. They were already, he slowly came to realise as he peered through the windows, now in stop-start traffic in central London, making their way along the North side of the Thames Embankment.

To the eye of an architect and civil engineer, the Embankment was an impressive product of Victorian engineering, not to mention a prodigious amount of physical labour from Irish Navvies. Before the embankments were built, the river had been wider and shallower, with sandbanks and beaches on either side. Indeed, the road called “The Strand”, now a busy thoroughfare several hundred yards from the bank and packed with shops and hotels, was once at the edge of

the river Kevin knew that the world “strand” was an old word for “beach”, meaning the place where boats were pulled out of the water – or stranded – for painting or repairs.

Kevin mused on the alterations this city had seen over the last few hundred years – a phenomenal rate of change in any case, and especially when compared with the near-static society and physical infrastructure in the Other World. Although perhaps the conspicuous Good Works – not to mention the militaristic empire-building – of the Victorian era were the most obvious example, the London of a few centuries ago was unrecognisable now.

The late afternoon traffic seemed to ease up, and it was only a few minutes later that their Range Rover drew up outside the imposing Art Deco façade of University College London. Bret and Kevin leapt from the car, and walked briskly up the steps to the main entrance.

In his professional life, Kevin had grown used to the ritual of the receptionist and the temporary visitors’ access card. He had forgotten that British University buildings, even in the centres of major cities, eschewed almost any attempt at physical security. He was therefore mildly surprised that access to the offices and laboratories at UCL was as unfettered as the semi-rural campus sites such as the one where NISSA was located.

“Where are we going?” Kevin asked anxiously.

“Second floor,” Bret replied ambiguously, indicating the stairs.

Kevin hurried to keep up with the other man as they rushed up two flights. A sign at the top of the steps announced “UCL School of Epidemiology”. Well, Kevin considered, that explains why we are here, adding mentally that it seemed as if Bret had visited this place before.

“We’re here to visit Doctor Wollack’s Ph.D supervisor,” he explained, tapping the sign with a forefinger.

Kevin followed Bret along a long narrow corridor, barely adequately lit by fluorescent tubes overhead and with a series of closed office doors on either side. The other man was evidently following the increasing numbers on the doors to left and right. The two of them finally stopped outside number 2.124. Bret knocked on the steel-framed wooden fire door.

“Come in,” a cheerful voice sounded.

Bret pushed the door open and entered, followed closely by Kevin. Inside, the jovial voice must have emanated from the large man wearing black jeans and a dark green sweatshirt hunched over a computer on the desk. The figure’s jolly nature was evident from his friendly – if slightly pasty – features, framed and partially concealed

by dark hair and a wispy beard. He looked as if he did not move around very much if he could avoid it, and was rather younger than Kevin might have expected.

“Doctor Williams?” Bret enquired.

“That’s me,” the young man replied, with barely a trace of a Welsh accent, “Call me Huw. How can I help?”

It occurred to Kevin that Huw could pass for a junior member of the Taffia – that spuriously identified group of Welsh nationals making their way in contemporary London society.

“Bret,” Bret said, extending a hand that the other man clasped briefly without leaving his seat, “And this is Kevin.”

“We’re here to talk to you about Andrew Wollack,” Bret continued.

“Sure. What about him? He’s not my student any more, you know.”

Bret nodded sadly.

“Andrew Wollack was found dead, on the New Lyndesfarne Bridge, two nights ago,” he said.

Huw Williams was obviously unaware that Doctor Wollack was dead. The shocked and saddened look in his face was completely in contrast with his previous good-natured expression.

“Dead?” he asked in a shaky voice, “How did it happen?”

“Well, we’re not entirely sure yet,” Bret replied, “There are several aspects which remain unexplained. And we are investigating the incident.”

Huw nodded in understanding.

“So we need to know some things about the late Doctor Wollack, Bret pressed gently.

“Sure. Of course. Whatever you want.”

The young Welshman seemed eager to help in any way he could, and Kevin could not imagine the man dissembling even if he wanted to.

“So tell us about Andrew,” Bret pressed, “What was he like as a person?”

“Well, I didn’t know him very well, really,” Huw answered immediately, “He came to me with a reputation of being very diligent and hard-working, perhaps a bit withdrawn, but one who would persevere on a topic until he had achieved a complete understanding.”

Bret and Kevin nodded together.

“He has – had – an excellent first degree, from the School here at UCL, and his undergraduate tutors spoke highly of him. So I took

him on as a research student, one where I would have no trouble with the supervision.”

Kevin wondered if this was a coded way of saying that Huw wanted a student who would largely look after himself, so that his supervisor could concentrate on his own interests.

“And so he completed a Ph.D thesis?” Bret queried.

“That’s right, just last year” Huw answered, adding as if by rote, “Disease Vector Identification from Stochastic Computer Analysis of Historical Data. The first successful Ph.D with me as a supervisor.”

Kevin knew what most of the words meant individually, but was not at all sure what the implication of the thesis title really was.

“I’m not a specialist,” he asked, “So can you tell us in simple terms what his dissertation was about?”

“Well,” Huw looked doubtful, “Basically, if you can get enough data – accurate data, which is challenging in itself from historical sources – you can get a computer model to identify the origin of an epidemic, and the paths the disease used to spread.”

Kevin thought about this, and wondered about what interest this rather abstruse subject could have to the groups in control of the crossing. As he cogitated, the young academic looked thoughtful for a moment, glancing repeatedly at Bret through narrowed eyes. Kevin suspected that Huw Williams had finally recognised Bret for who – or at least what – he was.

“I think you should talk to Angela,” Huw suggested finally, “She was the one who suggested that Andrew get in touch with your friends at the University of Newcastle.”

Kevin was pretty sure that this was a euphemism for NISSA.

“Is she likely to be in the building at the moment?” Bret enquired.

“Probably,” Huw agreed, “Let me see if I can get hold of her right now.”

Rather than picking up the phone as Kevin has anticipated, he reached for the computer keyboard and typed a few words at high speed into a small window on the screen.

There was a pause, and more words – in a font too small for Kevin to read – appeared. Huw typed rapidly again, then turned back to Bret and Kevin.

“She’s on her way over,” he said, looking sadly back at Bret.

He shook his head and added, “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

Uncharacteristically, Bret leaned over and patted the man on the shoulder.

“It’s not your fault.”

Twenty seconds or so later, there was a knock at the office door. Without waiting for a response, the door was pushed open and an energetic woman in her early thirties, Kevin judged, entered the room. She was casually dressed in tight-fitting but somehow anonymous-looking blue jeans and a cream fleecy top unadorned by logos or makers insignia. Her dark hair was held back neatly by some kind of hairclip in a no-nonsense style which Kevin read as “too busy to do more than the bare minimum with my hair”.

She too obviously recognised Bret, or at least his origins, and she held up a hand in greeting in the fashion that Kevin now knew all too well was widely used in the world of Lyndesfarne.

“Angela Newman,” she said, then spoke a few words to Bret and Kevin in the Lyndesfarne language, words which Kevin thought he recognised as a familiar salutation, coupled with an expression of sadness.

Bret answered in English, nevertheless speaking in the slightly sing-song tone which Kevin associated with speech in the Other World.

“Bret,” he said, “And this is my friend Kevin.”

“What’s going on at the crossing?” she asked urgently, looking from one man to the other.

The woman subsided into a chair in the corner of Huw’s office, holding her head in her hands.

“I hear that there is some kind of a crisis at the Bridge,” she said, sounding distinctly worried, “And then I’ve heard that my cousin Yiselle has been taken seriously ill. And no-one will tell me what’s going on.”

“Peace, sister,” Bret said in an uncharacteristically formal tone.

It soon emerged that Angela was a cousin of a Guardian, the young woman Kevin and Bret had met on the bridge just after Andrew Wollack’s body had been discovered. Both of them expressed their sympathies, but Bret explained that the ongoing investigation prevented further explanation at this time.

“So what are you doing here?” she asked, looking from Bret to Kevin and back again.

Bret explained gently that the deceased man was Andrew Wollack, the young researcher that she had been instrumental in introducing to NISSA. Angela looked shocked; it was clear that she had not heard who it was that had been found on the New Bridge.

“Kevin and I are investigating,” Bret said, “And of course we are trying to find out more about Andrew.”

Angela nodded in understanding.

“Well, there’s not very much I can tell you,” she answered, “I met Andrew just a couple of times, looked at his academic record – he was a very bright young man, you know – and asked around the campus about his attitudes and open-mindedness. And then I made an appointment for him at NISSA.”

Bret spent another half-hour with questions and answers with Huw and Angela, although all that emerged was a reiteration of the observation that the young Doctor Wollack was introverted, both brilliant and hard-working, and seemed entirely honest and trustworthy. There seemed to be nothing unusual or out of the ordinary; indeed, Andrew Wollack’s life seemed to be commonplace to the point of boredom.

“Thank you very much for your time,” Bret said finally to Huw and Angela, “I really can’t tell you just how much I appreciate it. And, if something should occur to you, please get in touch.”

Kevin added his thanks. The two men had just left Huw’s office and were walking down the long corridor when Bret’s mobile phone rang. He stopped and answered it, clearly listening intently to the caller although his own remarks were limited to monosyllabic interrogatives such as “When?” and “Where?”. He returned the phone to his pocket and turned to Kevin, looking unusually pensive.

“That was Warden Williamson,” Bret said, “He’s just received a report from the police that a car was found abandoned. It was a Range Rover, one of the fleet run from Cliviger Grange.”

He hesitated, looking Kevin directly in the eye.

“He believes that it was the car used to kidnap Tanji.”

“Driver? Passengers?” Kevin asked anxiously, “Did they find anyone?”

Bret shook his head.

“There was no one around when the police arrived.”

“So how did it get there?” Kevin demanded.

“We don’t know for sure,” Bret responded, “The car’s supposed to be in the garages at the Grange. It looks like someone broke in, stole the key, opened the garage from the inside, took the car, and closed the door again.”

“So it was an inside job?” Kevin wondered.

“Perhaps,” Bret agreed, “No one had thought to check an official car leaving the grounds at the gatehouse. We didn’t even know the vehicle was missing until we got a call from the police.”

“Are there any other vehicles missing?” Kevin asked, speaking slowly and clearly.

“No. We checked. Twice,” Bret confirmed, “Everything else is accounted for.”

Kevin nodded.

“Why steal a car from the Grange in order to perform a snatch in Manchester?” Kevin wondered aloud, speaking half to himself.

Bret was silent for a moment.

“The obvious conclusion,” he said slowly, as if unwilling to countenance the possibility, “Is that it was someone – some people – associated with the Grange, or at least someone who knows about Lyndesfarne and the crossing. And, probably from my world, too.”

Kevin agreed: it was clear to him that a group from the Other World performed the kidnapping, someone with few contacts in this world, but who certainly knew about the Guardians at Cliviger Grange.

“Where was the car found?” he asked.

Bret mentioned the name of a major road and a minor town in the Midlands. The road was familiar enough to Kevin and he felt sure he had driven it often enough in his peregrinations around the nation. There was something he recognised about the town, too, but he could not put his finger in just what it was that was ringing some vague internal bell.

Kevin shook his head, irritated that something important was eluding his conscious mind.

“I think we should go and have a look for ourselves,” he said to Bret.

“I agree. We should be on our way,” the other man replied grimly, setting off along the corridor towards the stairs.



## Chapter Fourteen

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After the comfort break at the service station, Bret sat quietly for many minutes, evidently deep in thought while the big car made its way swiftly back onto the motorway. Kevin too was in no mood to make inconsequential small talk and stared blankly out of the window at the cars and buildings flashing past.

Finally, Bret cleared his throat and turned to the other man.

“You know, there’s one aspect of this whole affair which is really worrying me.”

“What’s that?”

“That the good Doctor Wollack was an *epidemiologist*,” he replied, “One who specialises in the distribution and control of disease in human populations.”

“But why is that aspect of special concern?” Kevin asked, puzzled.

Bret looked intensely frustrated for a moment, then relaxed and began to explain.

“Well,” he said slowly, “It’s all bound up with control of the crossing and, in particular, what must not be allowed to travel between the Worlds.”

“Well, I’m aware that the Guardians keep careful track of everyone who travels over the crossing,” Kevin responded.

“It’s not just people,” Bret said animatedly, “It’s also the technology, the engineering products of your world that we are worried about.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Kevin said, meaning that he was sure that he did not understand.

“Take your powered machinery,” Bret gestured at the vehicle within which they were travelling, “In my world, cars and lorries are seen as dirty transport.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“But on the other hand,” he continued, “Those machines – together with your construction machinery – would make it easier and cheaper to construct new homes in the Other World.”

“But why is that an issue?” Kevin persisted.

“Well, it means that new houses are rare – so that homes will usually have been in the same family for generations,” Bret explained, “And of course portal transport means that it is practical to

travel long distances for work, or other reasons, and still be home in time for dinner.”

Bret paused briefly, perhaps in exasperation.

“We have worked very hard to ensure that all equipment of that kind is completely disabled in Lyndesfarne. That’s what my husband Eosin does all day – augment the anti-technology defences in the Barrier between the Two Worlds.”

“But I still don’t see why this is a problem?”

Bret smiled in what seemed to Kevin a very slightly condescending manner.

“Hmmm. Let me take another example,” he suggested, “Telephones and especially mobile phones.”

“What’s the problem with phones?”

Bret explained at some length. Kevin came to understand that the Boards in Lyndesfarne like the formality and relative slowness of written communications, as it tended to encourage measured responses to misunderstandings and insults, and therefore a polite and ordered society. More interestingly, it seemed to Kevin, the rate at which letters were delivered was sufficiently slow to prevent an epidemic of panic – or at least slow it down – under circumstances of major incident or disaster.

“So all kinds of radio communication devices are specifically checked and disabled by the sprites in the barrier,” Bret concluded.

“I’m confused here,” Kevin said, “Surely it is possible to use magical means to transmit voices over long distances. In fact, I know it’s possible. The hostel, the Walled Garden, where I’ve stayed – there was a gesture I could make to speak to the people at reception.”

“Well, that true,” Bret confirmed, “But the magic you refer to is rarely used, and in any case is really only used over ranges you could shout if you had to.”

“So it could work over long distances, but that’s not allowed?”

Bret nodded silently.

Kevin thought about this. People in the world of Lyndesfarne were allowed to have near-instantaneous personal transport, but not instantaneous voice communications.

“So the permitted use of magic is carefully controlled too,” he asked, “Even in your world?”

“It is,” Bret confirmed.

Kevin considered this carefully. So, he mused, the existence of instantaneous transport portals, available to anyone, together with a low availability of housing led to a high level of social cohesion of families over three – or even more – generations. Similarly,

encouraging letter-writing for everyday interactions was also a tool – a social engineering device, even – to permit frequent communications for keep friends and family close, but slow enough to prevent panic in extreme situations. From the viewpoint he had just inferred, it was apparent that technical – or at least magical – stability was regarded by those in positions of authority as a key to social stability.

“So,” Kevin said slowly, “Use of magic is controlled to minimise change in the world of Lyndesfarne?”

“Yes, that’s right enough,” Bret confirmed, “And, as you have already discovered, some people in positions of power regard this stability as something to be protected at any cost.”

He stirred uncomfortably in his seat.

“All kinds of recent engineering developments and new technologies, the sorts of things that have transformed life in many parts of your world beyond recognition – these are all banned. Even though, in many ways, your scientific instruments have vastly more capabilities, more precision than anything we can achieve with magic.”

Kevin thought about the laser distance measuring devices used in surveying. These were immensely accurate, he knew, and very easy to use, and relied on at least two technologies – lasers and microprocessors – which were unheard-of fifty years ago.

“And even that kind of thinking,” Bret concluded, shaking his head, “Is itself an example of cultural pollution.”

The other man seemed anxious, Kevin thought, is if wanting to impart some vital information but not quite sure how to go about it..

“But the other thing we have always worried about,” Bret resumed, “Is animals and creatures of all kinds escaping from one world, or even being transported deliberately...”

“Like the Loch Ness Monster?” Kevin interrupted, having heard the true story from Tanji and her Uncle some months ago.

“Yes, just like that,” Bret continued, “And dragons, too. It’s no surprise, then, that stories of strange and impossible creatures are commonplace in your world.”

Kevin thought about this. He knew that, over the years, there had been reports of creatures much like Nessie from all over his world in centuries past, and this made a lot of sense now that he knew that creatures like that really did exist.

“So wild animals have frequently escaped from your world to ours?” Kevin asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” Bret confirmed, “And of course in the other direction, too. But what concerns me right now is the smaller creatures that travel uncontrolled between the worlds, indeed, creatures too small to be easily seen – what you would describe as *microscopic*.”

Kevin was intrigued. The barrier did not interfere with living creatures, by design. He could have so easily missed the implication that germs – bacteria and so on – must move between the worlds very frequently, as would all kinds of smaller creature.

“It seems that the crossings between our Two Worlds,” Bret continued sadly, “Have caused untold suffering and misery for many people.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin asked.

“Diseases, and plagues,” the other man responded, “Travelling from one world to another. Plagues of locusts, flying leaf-shredders, eating everything in their path, in both worlds. And then there was the Bubonic plague, the infamous Black Death, spreading unchecked in London and Newcastle – and also in Ireland – carried by fleas on rats, hidden in cargoes which crossed between the worlds. Similar contagious plagues occurred in China, and in various parts of central Europe, too.”

Bret looked dismayed.

“The risk of diseases travelling over the crossings was one of the reasons why several crossings were closed in the past,” he admitted. “Of course, this potential path for infections was not understood when portals were first being constructed. Indeed, it was scientific discoveries in your world that first alerted us to the risks of microbes and bacteria.”

Kevin was confused.

“Surely you knew about optical magnification?”

Bret shook his head slowly.

“Not really. These discoveries were the result of the use of machines – optical instruments such as the microscope and, more importantly, the precision machinery for cutting and polishing glass lenses, together with the discoveries of van Leeuwenhoek.”

“It had simply never occurred to anyone in my world before then to use magic to magnify anything that small,” he concluded slightly sheepishly, “After all, what was the point?”

Kevin smiled ruefully. He had hitherto assumed that technological developments – or their analogies – were and always had been more advanced in the Other World. It came as something

of a surprise to understand that progress was sometimes made in his world, ahead of magical capabilities.

“Once it was realised that there was something important,” Bret continued, “Magicians rapidly devised a way of viewing really small objects based on an inverse, I suppose, of the techniques we have had for a long time – you may already be aware of these – to see things clearly at a distance.”

“But it was already too late. We now strongly suspect that, over the millennia, all kinds of microscopic flora and fauna have made their way in both directions: bacteria, the seeds and spores of plants, plankton in the seas, the eggs of fish and similar creatures, and so on.”

Bret paused for breath. Kevin sat quietly, wondering what revelations might follow.

“The effect of this,” he resumed, “Is that, by now, the Two Worlds are completely intertwined at the biological level. With a very few exceptions – a few of the larger animal and bird species – animals and plants are identical everywhere.”

Bret was silently thoughtful for another long moment. Kevin thought about what he had just heard. He had certainly realised that his own world and that of Lyndesfarne were very similar in so many ways, but he had completely failed to realise that this was not a coincidence. The reason the Two Worlds were so similar was that the existence of numerous crossings in ages past had *made* them similar.

“And all this, I suppose,” Bret resumed, “leads me to my point. While the risk of cultural pollution of our society is well-contained by the magic of the barrier, there is another less-publicised reason – even amongst those of us closest to the Board of Control – why we like to keep the number of people crossing the bridge to a minimum.”

Kevin thought he knew what was coming, but kept quiet, waiting for Bret to explain further.

“Neither world can afford another plague, another uncontrolled pandemic. So, to keep the risk of epidemics as small as possible, we watch carefully for this kind of thing.”

Bret looked uncharacteristically solemn.

“There are now magical means of detection, so we think we can identify sources of contagion and so on, and of course the Guardians look out for the more obvious cases. But I guess the thing we are really worried about is that someone, somewhere will attempt to use such an infection as a weapon.”

Kevin was aghast, horrified.

“You can’t be serious?” he exclaimed.

“I am,” Bret said with utter calm, “And it is the kind of thing that gives me sleepless nights.”

## Chapter Fifteen

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Bret and Kevin had not even got as far as the stairwell when Bret's phone rang again. He reached for it casually, anticipating – Kevin imagined – a further update on the vehicle that had just been located.

“Yes?” Bret said into the phone, then stopped dead, Kevin almost colliding with him in the narrow corridor.

“Yes,” he said again, and then, “I understand.”

Bret turned to face Kevin, looking at him in a bizarre way that the other man had never seen before.

“What was that?”

“That,” Bret said slowly, “Was a man who claims to be holding Tanji.”

“What?” Kevin practically shrieked, “What did he say?”

“He instructed me – us – to go to Jaireby.”

“In Lyndesfarne?”

“Well, not Lyndesfarne proper,” Bret corrected, “But definitely in my world. Do you know it?”

Kevin was flabbergasted. This was the place that he and Tanji had visited – on vacation – not six months before.

“I've been there,” he replied, “But exactly what did he say?”

“He said, if you want to see Tanji alive, then come to Jaireby in” – he glanced at his watch – “a little more than five hours time.”

He glared at the phone as if the device itself was responsible for this deadline.

“And then he gave an address,” he continued, “And then hung up.”

Kevin was not sure how to react, with worry and anger in turn running through his mind. Then he was struck by a realisation.

“So she's on her way to Lyndesfarne,” he said through clenched teeth, “In fact, she's probably already there.”

Bret nodded his agreement.

“And,” Kevin added grimly, “I think I know how she got there.”

Bret froze, seemingly astonished.

“What?” he demanded anxiously.

“They've put her,” Kevin enunciated slowly, angrily, “In a crate.”

“What?” Bret was aghast, “How do you know that?”

“It’s just occurred to me,” the other man replied, “The place where the car was found, it was close to one of the country’s biggest logistics and distribution centres – a huge warehouse operation – with goods and materials going in and out on a regular basis.”

He paused.

“And I bet they send stuff to the crossing all the time.”

Bret stood immobile for a long moment, eyes wide, staring at Kevin. Then he lunged for his mobile phone, pressing buttons urgently.

Someone answered after a few seconds, someone in the Guardian organisation, Kevin imagined, and Bret started issuing a stream of instructions to intercept and open every crate big enough to hold a body on its way to Lyndesfarne.

Kevin watched the other man dejectedly.

“It won’t do any good, you know,” he said sadly, “They won’t be so stupid as to issue a demand like that without Tanji already delivered.”

“You’re probably right,” Bret agreed, “But it’s best to be doubly sure. In any case, if we’re to get to Lyndesfarne by that time, we’ll have to get a move on.”

“Right,” Kevin agreed.

The two men hurried down the steps, Bret once again speaking into his mobile phone to summon car and driver.

The traffic was busy in Central London although, thinking back, it did seem to Kevin that they were invariably lucky with the traffic lights, always passing them just before they changed to red. Perhaps it was just the skilled driver, but even the well-known permanent traffic jams on the North Circular and at the infamous Hanger Lane Gyrotory System seemed to melt away and it was not long before the big car was blasting its way north on the M1.

The driver kept the car to a steady speed, faster than Kevin would normally have driven himself and certainly well in excess of the speed limit. Whether it was just by luck, or some other factor, they were delayed neither by traffic police or slow-moving vehicles and they arrived at the crossing faster than Kevin would have thought possible.

In the entire four hour drive, they stopped only once to refuel, take a comfort break, and to select more junk food at the service station. They discussed the message from the kidnappers again and again, Kevin desperately trying to squeeze more information, more meaning from the few words that Bret had reported spoken. Having



exhausted that line of enquiry, the two men moved on to plan their actions when they arrived.

“We’ll collect a squad of Guardians at the crossing,” Bret stated flatly.

“They did not say ‘come alone’,” Kevin noted, “So they must be very confident that we can’t rescue Tanji by force. So is there any point in taking more people?”

“Yes, to guard you!” Bret said urgently, “I’m still very concerned for your safety, and I’m not yet certain that this whole business isn’t just a ploy to grab you.”

Kevin remained unconvinced, but was touched by Bret’s concern for his wellbeing.

Pre-warned by one of Bret numerous mobile phone calls, three Guardians – two women and a man – were waiting for them as they left the causeway. Bret greeted them in the Lyndesfarne language and Kevin had the presence of mind to hold up his hand and speak his name in the Lyndesfarne style.

Expertly guided by Bret, the little group made their way through the portal network to the tropical seaside city that Kevin and Tanji had visited before. They rarely had to wait more than a minute or two for a portal connection to change. Kevin now appreciated enough about the complexity of transport in the Other World to realise just how an impressive a feat it was to arrive a matter of twenty minutes later.

“This looks familiar,” Kevin muttered half to himself as they emerged from the portal building.

“You have been here before, then?” Bret asked.

“Oh yes,” Kevin replied, momentarily distracted by the memory of the trip with Tanji.

“Hmm,” Bret pondered aloud, “So do you suppose that the kidnappers knew that you had been here before?”

Kevin slowly realised, with the hairs standing up on the back of his neck, that he and Tanji must have been under some kind of surveillance for a considerable time.

The place that the kidnappers, whoever they were, had designated was on the promenade, outside a large display window that was, Bret re-assured him, just ordinary glass and allowed light through in either direction. Kevin was sure he had passed this very shop in the company of Tanji on at least one occasion.

They had arrived with ten minutes to spare, according to Bret’s timepiece, a surprisingly large object he carried in the rucksack he had collected when he arrived in this world. Both he and Kevin had

left their personal collection of technological gismos – mobile phone, watch and so on – with the driver.

The two men stood around on the pavement, waiting until the appointed time arrived. The Guardians they had brought with them had spread out and were trying to look casual – with some success. They seemed to Kevin to be quite practiced at this, and no one appeared to be paying them any attention.

As the prearranged time approached, Kevin looked anxiously up and down the street. There were a few passers-by at this late afternoon hour, but no one who could be mistaken for Tanji, unless shapeshifter capabilities were even more extreme than he thought.

Frustrated, he turned to face the Department store window display. This was a room set, a bedroom with artfully arranged bedclothes and soft furnishings, together with a dressing table with a mirror over it. All nice enough, Kevin mused, but he did not want to be reminded of romantic bedroom settings just at the moment.

Kevin turned back to the street, again scanning the occasional pedestrians for anyone who might have been approaching them. From the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement in the window behind him. Tanji had appeared in the mirror.

“It’s window magic,” Bret exclaimed, “She can’t see us or hear us!”

Kevin could see her head and upper body, caught in the action of sitting herself comfortably in an easy chair. She was not restrained in any way that he could recognise. Behind her, he could see a wall painted or papered in a mid-brown colour and, to one side, some kind of clock. Several of the magic lights that Kevin was now familiar with provided plenty of illumination. Otherwise, the room seemed to be featureless – deliberately so, he suspected, to give as little away as possible.

“Come on!” Bret cried.

He dashed into the shop, followed closely by the Guardians and a startled Kevin. In common with Department stores in his own world, Kevin noted that the shop had an exceedingly confusing internal layout, but after a few panicky moments they finally got to the window with the display they had seen from the outside.

Tanji was still visible in the mirror, even when Kevin lifted it from the wall. It was surprisingly heavy, but the image did not so much as flicker as he held it close to his face, studying every detail.

As he watched, Tanji shifted her position, bringing her feet up to rest on some padded stool. Her feet were bare, her legs clad in the soft leather trousers she so often wore. In this position, her feet must

have been close to the glass of the window on her side. Stuck to the sole of her left foot, there was a paper label with a little plastic wrapping film still adhering to it. The label was printed with a barcode and a series of numbers, and the film was now decomposed badly having been, he realised, through the magical barrier at the crossing.

In a flash of inspiration, he realised that Tanji must have known it was there, and that she also must have realised what the matt black panels in her prison were for. Somehow, she had managed to keep the barcode label concealed from her captors, and was spending as much time as possible with her feet close to the glass.

Kevin put down the mirror as quickly as he could, grabbed the notebook and pencil he always carried in his bag and hastily scribbled down the numbers on the label.

He had reacted just in time. The image faded, and the mirror returned to the ordinary reflective surface he had first noticed. He let out a great sigh, mainly in relief that Tanji appeared to be alive and in good health.

“Did you see it?” he demanded of Bret.

“See what?” the other man asked, sounding perturbed.

“The label! The bar code,” Kevin reiterated, practically shouting at the other man, “On the sole of her foot.”

Bret looked confused. Kevin hurriedly explained that the bar code uniquely identified a certain type of goods, and that it might give some clue as to where Tanji might be.

Just at that moment, a shop assistant hurried up, understandably rather concerned about the disruption to the display by a loud group of rowdies. Bret and one of the Guardians smoothly intercepted him. Part-way through the conversation, Bret turned to Kevin and said, “Put the mirror back on the wall, please.” He complied, wondering just what was being said.

The assistant retired looking somewhat mollified, pausing only to tug straight the bedspread which had become rumpled by the mad dash through the store. Bret turned back to Kevin.

“Hmm,” he said thoughtfully, “That was strange.”

“What?”

“The shop assistant,” Bret explained, “He said that the window display has been in place for nearly a month. And they used a mirror that had been around for longer than that.”

He paused, then added, “Someone must have been planning this for a long time.”

## Chapter Sixteen

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The long and boring trip back to the Lyndesfarne crossing gave Kevin far too much time to dwell on that trip to Jaireby. After the trip to London to present his initial ideas on the Kilindini Harbour Bridge, he had found himself working increasingly hard on this and a number of other projects. Tanji too was absent for days at a time, honouring her commitments to the Lyndesfarne Guild of Directions of which she remained an active member.

Even so, they still managed to find the time to spend long nights in each other's company, and to take longer breaks on a frequent basis. Kevin was more than happy to allow Tanji to make travel arrangements whenever she felt it pleasing. Emboldened, perhaps, by the success of the dragon safari, she in turn suggested that the two of them take a short holiday to a city in a tropical part of the world of Lyndesfarne.

So it was that, one Friday afternoon, having abandoned Kevin's car in an autumnal and windswept car park in North East England, the lovers found themselves not two hours later emerging from a major portal terminus into the warmth of a late tropical afternoon. The city of Jaireby was built following the curve of the bay of the same name. The doors of the portal building opened on a wide boulevard, flanked on one side by shops and restaurants, and on the other by the sea itself.

This promenade featured palm trees at intervals, as well as areas of neatly-clipped grass and flower beds which gave the impression that much care and attention was lavished on them. The esplanade was paved with stone slabs and cobbles in intricate patterns, and was without the tarmac roadway for motorised transport that Kevin would have expected to find in a similar location in his own world.

Tanji led him directly across the street to the sea's edge where elegant railings painted in green and gold protected a drop of perhaps eight feet, punctuated at intervals by stone steps which led down to the sandy beach.

"Like it?" she asked.

"Wonderful," he replied, squeezing her hand.

The beach too was thronging without ludicrous overcrowding. There were kiosks and cafes at intervals, some of which looked extremely temporary. Children – and indeed adults – of all ages were

splashing about in the surf or playing a variety of beach games, only some of which looked familiar to Kevin.

They stood watching the scene below for a few minutes, enjoying the warm sea-breeze on their faces. There were a few puffy white clouds on the horizon out to sea, but otherwise a uniformly clear blue sky arched above their heads. On the beach itself, Kevin recognised the magic sunshades, parasols and hats he had seen before on a previous vacation. Further out to sea, a dozen or more pleasure craft – Gin Palaces, as Kevin’s grandma would have said – were moored to strategically-placed buoys, and he caught a glimpse of many more boats clustered around the marina at the end of the bay.

Tanji took his hand and they walked together along the front. There were quite a few people about, although it was by no means crowded. Some were taking refreshments in the pavement cafes, others strolling or chatting to acquaintance, and yet others were listening to music played by buskers. Almost everybody was on foot, except for a few light horse-drawn vehicles which seemed to him to be more for amusement – perhaps just entertaining the tourists. All-in-all, it was lively and friendly, a genuinely stress-free atmosphere, and Kevin could feel himself relaxing instinctively.

On the landward side of the promenade, there were a long series of shop fronts housing a wide variety of shops and bars and restaurants, all of which seemed familiar to Kevin. The buildings were low constructions, one or two stories only – at least above ground – finished in white-painted stucco, or other pastel shades, and roofed in what appeared to be a heavy ceramic tile in a surprising shade of brick red. Kevin suspected – correctly, as it turned out - that most of these buildings would have numerous underground levels. He marvelled at the magical engineering that must have been deployed to build confidently that far underground, even here where most floors would be well below sea level.

“Well,” Tanji said, grinning wickedly, “First things first. Our hostel is just here” – she indicated a building to their right – “And maybe we should check in and perhaps freshen up?”

Kevin agreed readily. He correctly judged that Tanji had something else on her mind. After the briefest of check-in formalities, the two tourists found themselves in a modestly-sized but beautifully decorated room, dominated by a huge bed of delightful softness.

Tanji closed the door behind them, and dropped her satchel to the floor. Kevin had barely time to catch a breath before her urgent fingers were undoing the buttons and buckles of his clothing, and her

own. She kissed him passionately, before guiding his lips downwards towards her hard nipples already emerging from her opened blouse.

By the time they emerged again, night had fallen in that sudden way invariably experienced in the tropics. At this hour, people were everywhere. Tanji directed Kevin, who was still feeling just a little dazed after the energetic performance she had just put him through, to a pavement café just a few steps away from the hostel entrance. A waiter bustled up; Tanji ordered two mugs of the hot chocolate drink that was so popular in this world.

The two lovers sat close in the café, savouring the stimulating drinks and watching the passers-by. Casually glancing upwards at the stars, Kevin was astonished to note some of them were, against all reason, moving about. At first, he wondered if they must be the fireflies he had heard about, but had never experienced in either world. But as he watched, one of the mobile stars swooped closer, resolving into a figure, a person, hanging in the air.

Kevin could not at first believe his eyes and it took him several minutes to realise that the moving lights he could see in the sky were in fact people, flying. They were propelled by wings of some kind, furnished from magic alone and emerging, as far as he could tell, from harnesses on their backs. The wings themselves were nearly invisible, with just the occasional glitter of orange and green which indicated the presence of magical sprites.

Kevin pointed out the moving lights to Tanji.

“Oh, yes,” she said calmly, “Flyers. Although you might prefer the old-fashioned term, Faeries.”

“So what do they do?” he asked, still fascinated.

Tanji laughed at his naivety.

“Well, nowadays, it’s just for fun,” she answered, grinning widely, “Although, once upon a time, magic wings were an important mode of transport.”

Kevin could imagine the reaction of someone from his world to the flying figures. He could certainly see how wild and contradictory tales of Faeries could have come about in times past, with a scene like this witnessed by bemused travellers from an earlier age.

He and Tanji finished their drinks, and then strolled further along the promenade under the palm trees. There were lots of people about, singly or couples or larger groups, walking, chatting, flirting in the warm tropical evening.

Kevin took the opportunity to take a closer look at the Department stores and shop fronts which lined the street. All-in-all, the store

windows offered a fabulous display of goods, which Kevin automatically started to categorise into two kinds: things he thought he recognised and understood, and those that, frankly, he did not.

One display whose purpose he comprehended quickly was for furniture: couches and chairs of conventional, if rather traditional design. In the window next door, he viewed doubtfully a display of what he initially took to be rather chunky and plain jewellery – bangles, armbands and necklaces – before he finally realised that these were magical artefacts. Looking more closely, he could see that their capabilities were described by discreet posters (which he could not read) and by moving images (which he found largely incomprehensible).

After strolling a little further along the boulevard, Kevin noted that there seemed to be there were portals everywhere, seemingly to be found every few hundred yards. They were usually set into buildings at street level, or sometimes into smaller constructions of their own. In every instance, he noticed, the entrances were wide, but always fitted with a pair of stout doors which stood open in a fashion that suggested that they were rarely closed but, if it were deemed necessary, they could be shut and securely fastened in a few moments even without the aid of magic.

In any case, there were people coming and going all the time. Tanji explained that these were level five portal; these single-connection portals were always connected to exactly one place, almost always a portal terminus for the local area. This contrasted with the long-distance portals – the ones they had mostly used in getting here, as on previous trips – where the connection switched periodically between one of half-a-dozen different endpoints every ten minutes or so.

Many of the newly-arrived travellers doffed their capes as they emerged and folded them into an incredibly small volume, it seemed to Kevin, before stowing them in packs and bags. He guessed that it was warmer here than many places from which the travellers had departed. Finally, and realising that this question might be just a little late, he asked Tanji, “Just where, in this world, are we?”

Her reaction, perhaps predictably, was a mixture of amusement at his naivety and satisfaction that, despite being placed in a world which was, until recently, entirely foreign to him, Kevin was still capable of asking perspicacious questions.

The two tourists sat on a bench overlooking the sea, now illuminated by both moonlight and the streetlights from the promenade. Tanji took out her slate and chalk, and gestured at the

surface for a while, adding a few strokes in a way that was a complete mystery to Kevin. Eventually, she turned the magic slate to face him.

Tanji's geographical sketch, aided by a certain amount of magic, he suspected, showed the city of Jaireby sited at the southern tip of the large peninsula that was the country of Lyndesfarne. The bay was set into the south coast and was, she explained, once an important port. There was less sea traffic these days, apparently, but both bay and city were still a very popular resort and tourist destinations.

Kevin had already observed that there were only a very few tall slender buildings, spires really, built – according to Tanji – as observation points and attractions, rather than any practical use as accommodation. Looking up into the night sky, Kevin felt as if his mouth ought to be hanging open in amazement at the lights and glowing displays from the towers.

“What are they?” Kevin asked in an awed whisper.

Tanji laughed.

“Well, they can be all sorts of things,” she replied, “Some are just public amusements, some are advertisements. This one” – she indicated the lights adorning the entire height of a slender tower in the direction they were heading – “is a famous restaurant and bar. I've booked us a place for this evening's eight o'clock sitting.”

“You have?” Kevin exclaimed, “Wonderful!”

The trip up the tower was mesmerizing. Kevin had experienced the Lyndesfarne version of lifts before, but only ones which went down. They had entered an open cage – more a cuboid box with floor and ceiling of a hard transparent substance that did not feel like glass. At a gesture from Tanji, the doors – also constructed from the same warm transparent substance – slid closed.

As they ascended, they were treated to a spectacular view over the city beneath them. The streetlights and the coloured signs looked both romantic and ethereal.

At the top of the tower, they entered the bar, where Tanji ordered for both of them. After a few minutes, the barkeeper presented each of them with what looked like a broken wineglass – just the stem and base, with the goblet missing. The drink itself was a mixture of virulent colours, held in a sphere of insubstantial magic presumably, Kevin thought, projected by a sprite in the glass base. The ball appeared to be rolling, spinning randomly in different directions, but somehow failing to mix the coloured ingredients within.

“How am I supposed to drink this?” he asked Tanji, having bemusedly watched the coloured swirls for several long moments.



“Like you would drink anything else, silly,” Tanji replied, giggling unashamedly at Kevin’s confusion.

Kevin gingerly lifted the stem, bringing the wildly gyrating globe to his lips. As he tilted, an alarmingly large portion of the drink ended up in his mouth, the remainder forming a smaller sphere, still unmixed and swirling as energetically as before.

“Umm,” Kevin gulped, the slightly sticky mixture rapidly warming his throat, “Are you sure this stuff isn’t poisonous?”

Tanji giggled again, putting her hand demurely in front of her mouth. She then elegantly demonstrated the sipping, sucking action which seemed to be required to partake of the confection without embarrassment or incident.

“So what are these things called?” Kevin asked.

Tanji said something in the Lyndesfarne language, then paused for a moment.

“I think the translation,” she said thoughtfully, twirling her own glassless stem around and around, “Would be ‘Rolling Stones’.”

Actually, they were fairly easy to drink, as Kevin found after a few more experiments – although taking only a small amount was trickier than it looked. Amazingly, the contents never seemed to spill and the globe got smaller and smaller after each sip. Tanji demonstrated the approved way to take the last, marble-sized, mouthful with a single sucking, popping movement.

Kevin was hugely amused and, as it turned out, rather more inebriated than he realised.

“That was fun!” he laughed, swallowing the last drop, “Let’s have another one.”

The rest of the evening passed in a pleasant blur. Kevin was witty, or at least Tanji laughed a lot; food was served by efficient and friendly staff, and once eaten the remnants were removed almost immediately.

The view from the window – which was just transparent glass, no magic apparently involved – was spectacularly romantic, an effect magnified when they took a short stroll on the open balcony on the level above the restaurant after dinner. The sea breeze – much cooler now – was both refreshing and slightly sobering.

Kevin swung Tanji around to face him, drawing her close and kissing her firmly on the lips.

“I love you,” he affirmed, “Even if those Rolling Stones did try to knock me sideways!”

“I love you too,” she said, “Let’s go to bed.”

Laughing, Tanji guided him to the lift, the short walk to the portal and the even shorter walk to their hostel room.

## Chapter Seventeen

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Bret and Kevin stood in the street outside the Department store where they had just seen Tanji in the mirror.

“What was that all about?” Kevin demanded, feeling angry and confused.

“Well, for a start, we know Tanji’s OK now,” Bret replied, apparently trying to retain some modicum of calm.

“Are you sure it wasn’t some kind of a recording?” Kevin wanted to know.

Bret shook his head.

“I don’t think so. You saw the clock on the wall? It was showing current time.”

Kevin was aware of the magical clocks and timepieces which were a commonplace in all of the parts of Lyndesfarne he had visited, although he had never worked out how to read them. Somehow, the hands and numbers never seemed to align with the time he had been told.

“Surely they could just set it arbitrarily, just to fool us?” he asked, “It could have been yesterday. Or earlier today, even.”

Again, Bret shook his head.

“Magical clocks don’t use, well, clockwork like they do in your world,” he explained patiently, “They always show the right time, and it’s extremely difficult to fix them so they show anything different.”

Kevin was puzzled.

“Surely she must be fairly close. If the clock showed the right time, at least we know she is in the same time zone.”

It was Bret’s turn to look puzzled. Then an expression of slow realisation spread over his features.

“Oh, we don’t have them here,” he said, with just a trace of his characteristic wryness.

“What?”

“All clocks and calendars here display the same time, based on a magical reference set up thousands of years ago,” he explained, “So the time and date are always the same everywhere.”

Kevin realised in a flash of inspiration where he was probably going wrong trying to interpret the magical timepieces: he was failing to understand about time-zones, and probably confusing the symbols for times and dates to boot. That really should have been part of the

NISSA briefing, he thought irately, although he would eventually appreciate that no-one had expected him to spend very much time in the world of Lyndesfarne.

“So, she could be anywhere?” Kevin asked.

“Yes, in this world,” the other man confirmed.

Bret paused as if interrupted in some fashion that Kevin could not determine, then dragged his bag from his shoulder. Reaching inside, he pulled out his magic slate. The surface was displaying a couple of lines of text, writ large and in the language of Lyndesfarne that, even after all this time, Kevin had barely the sketchiest idea of how to decode.

“It seems I have a message,” Bret said, gesturing rapidly at the slate. His face darkened as he read the contents.

“It’s addressed to you,” he said angrily, turning the surface towards Kevin.

“Come to the Walled Garden,” the message read, in clear handwritten English, “Room 21, at midday tomorrow.”

“Where’s it come from?” Kevin demanded, “Who sent it?”

Bret turned the slate back to face him, again gesturing at the surface. He muttered something unintelligible that sounded to Kevin suspiciously like a swearword, then lowered the slate.

“I don’t know you sent it,” he said in low voice, “The slate says that I sent it myself, which clearly I didn’t.”

He paused then added thoughtfully, “Unless someone’s been using my slate while I’ve been in your world.”

Kevin was unsure how to react to this suggestion.

“So what do we do now?” Bret wondered aloud.

“We’ve got to get back to England,” Kevin replied urgently.

“Why?” Bret responded, “Surely you want to go to stay in this world, now that we know for sure that Tanji is here.”

“Well, the temptation is very strong,” Kevin agreed, “But I think we have time to find out about that barcode. I’ve got the strangest feeling that it’s important, that Tanji was telling us something vital. So I need to know what it means and, to do that, I need to get to a telephone.”

Bret blinked at him.

“Let’s get going, then,” he said.

The trip in the return direction was less smooth and more time-consuming, with Kevin fuming impatiently every time they had to wait for a portal to return to the correct destination. Finally, to his relief – and Bret’s too, he suspected – they arrived at the portal terminus by the crossing to Kevin’s world.

The two men undertook the usual brisk walk across the causeway. Kevin barely glancing at the change in the scenery in a manner he would have considered impossibly blasé only a few months before. At the other side of the crossing, Kevin hurried straight over to the building which stood next to the point where the causeway met the coast. This building was fitted out in the guise of a Tourist Information Office but was, in reality, the local base for the Guardians.

Kevin marched inside and up to the reception counter, trailed by Bret.

“I need to use a phone, urgently,” he said without preamble, slightly out of breath.

The middle-aged female Guardian behind the desk looked perplexed for a moment, turning from Kevin to Bret and back again, before wordlessly pushing the phone across the counter.

Kevin found the next few minutes intensely frustrating, trying to remember the precise name of the distribution centre he had visited earlier in the year, while in the middle of a tussle with an operative of the telephone directory services company whose command of English was not all that he could have wished for.

Finally, he got through to the office of the company. Dave, the manager that Kevin had met on his visit, was not available, but the junior staff member answering the telephone said that she would take a message and get her boss to call back as soon as possible. In the absence of any other alternative, Kevin gave her his mobile phone number.

While Kevin was faffing about talking to the distribution centre, Bret had managed to locate a second phone and had summoned their car and driver. Kevin assumed that this had been to facilitate the return his and Kevin’s things, the technological accessories – mobile phone, watch, laptop computer and so on – upon which so much of modern life in this world depended.

Kevin turned to Bret after completing his inconclusive telephone call.

“I think we’ve got to go back to NISSA,” he insisted, “It’s not very far, after all, and we can easily get there and back in time to make the appointment with the kidnappers.”

“Well,” Bret began, “Let’s not be hasty. We don’t want to antagonise them by being late...”

“Look,” Kevin interrupted, turning on the other man, “They’re not trying to get anything from us. It’s just a distraction, a delaying

tactic. Tanji will be safe enough if we just turn up at the next meeting.”

Bret nodded, slightly taken aback at the sudden outburst from the normally mild-mannered Kevin.

“I agree. But it’s too late to go to NISSA now,” Bret insisted, “Everyone will have gone home.”

Kevin had lost track of time. They seemed to have been travelling back and forth between the worlds, and up and down the country for days. He sagged, suddenly feeling very tired.

“Come on,” Bret said kindly, “We’ll stay overnight at Cliviger Grange.”

A weary Kevin was guided to another of the fleet of cars maintained by RDTE. He was whisked the short distance to the Grange along narrow country lanes bordered on either side by overgrown hedgerows.

Just as they arrived, Kevin’s mobile phone rang. It was Dave, the duty manager.

“I’ve been trying to reach you,” he said, “But I kept getting the number unobtainable tone.”

Kevin realised that the mobile phone network coverage was probably very patchy in this rural outback.

“Sorry,” he replied, “Thanks for getting back to me. Look, I have a small favour to ask of you.”

“Sure,” the other man replied, sounding faintly surprised, “How can I help?”

Without going into details, Kevin explained that he was assisting in an investigation.

“So,” he continued, “I’ve come across this barcode, and I wondered if you could help me in finding out what product it is associated with.”

Dave the manager sounded slightly dubious.

“Well, OK,” he replied, “If you think it would help. What’s the number?”

Kevin reeled off a string of digits which the other man repeated as he wrote them down.

“Call me back,” Kevin insisted, “When you have anything. Any time, day or night.”

Having extracted the reassurances he was seeking, Kevin rang off. He looked at Bret, who had been listening silently during this exchange.

“I think it’s important,” Kevin reiterated, sounding slightly petulant even to his own ears.

Bret mumbled something non-committal which left Kevin feeling only slightly mollified.

After a short and inconclusive briefing with Warden Williamson, he and Bret took their dinner in an open-plan area which looked to Kevin very much like a military mess-hall. Not much conversation passed between the two men, each sunk in their own thoughts and concerns.

Finally, Bret guided the other man to one of the newer buildings, which appeared to be a barracks of some kind, and directed him to a little bedroom. Kevin performed the minimum of ablutions before collapsing into the narrow bed, falling asleep almost immediately in the deep stupor of the truly exhausted.

At some indeterminate dark hour, he was woken by the insistent ringing of his mobile phone.

“Hello?” he murmured, fumbling the handset, hardly awake.

It was Dave, the manager from the distribution centre.

“Sorry to have woken you,” he began, correctly interpreting Kevin’s groggy mode of speech, “But you did say it was urgent.”

“It is,” the other man replied, rapidly coming to a much more alert state, “Have you found out what the barcode is for?”

“I have. That code was used for one of many large consignments of green beans, which were shipped to most branches of several large supermarket chains.”

“I see,” Kevin replied, suddenly feeling despondent. There was no way they could investigate every supermarket in the country.

“Where were the beans from?” he asked.

“On the label, they’re marked: ‘Country of Origin: Kenya’,” Dave answered, adding in a more conspiratorial tone, “But, actually, the beans are imported from the Other World, from an area known as...”

The last word was pronounced as a slur of complex syllables but, even in his half-awake state, Kevin recognised it as the region where he and Tanji had vacationed not so very long ago, the place where they had taken that glorious beach holiday together.

## Chapter Eighteen

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To his great relief, Kevin had thoroughly enjoyed his return visit to Tanji's Aunt and Uncle. The location was the scene of so many threats and misunderstandings on the previous occasion, and the trip had undoubtedly laid certain ghosts to rest.

Kevin and Tanji drove from Kevin's little flat in Manchester where the two of them had been staying since the New Bridge incident, staying away from Lyndesfarne as much as possible and waiting for the furore to die down a little.

He parked the Volvo in the windswept area which doubled as a car park and camp site, and the two of them walked hand-in-hand over the causeway to the Old Bridge, the scene of so many recent new experiences for both of them. Now that the New Bridge was in regular use, the Guardians quietly encouraged private travellers, on foot as well as in horse-drawn vehicles, to use the older crossing, leaving the newer one for the organised mass-transportation of goods.

The spring weather was unusually fine and clear, although very windy, and the two lovers stopped for a time at the centre of the Old Bridge.

This particular spot had for a long time exerted a particular fascination for Kevin. On this occasion afforded them a splendid view of the New Bridge further along the straights. There was quite a chop in the sea, with the wind whipping up white horses on the tops of the swell. From the vantage-point at the very centre of the crossing, Kevin could just make out a line, a discontinuity in the sea. Somehow, the movement of the wind and the waves was slightly different in the two worlds, giving rise to subtly different motions of the sea, which could just be made out.

He never seen anything like this before, in all of his passages across the straights, and he immediately pointed it out to Tanji,

"You're right!" she replied, sounding as amazed as Kevin, "I've heard of this effect, but I've never seen it myself. We must be particularly lucky today."

Kevin nodded silently; he had never quite had the reality of the crossing between the Two Worlds brought home to him quite so forcefully.

They resumed their stroll. When they reached the other side of the causeway, Tanji suggested that they stop for some lunch in the



“Walled Garden”, whose menu offered a wide selection of warming and hearty food – just what they needed after their appetites had been stimulated by a walk in the brisk weather.

After lunch, their route to the local portal building took them past the magical curio shop where Kevin had purchased that fateful paperweight all those months ago.

“Shall we take a peek?” he asked Tanji, “Maybe we can find something you’d like?”

“Sure,” she replied, “Let’s go look.”

This time, he found he could understand just a little more of the language – or at least enough to work out the prices. These were surprisingly expensive, if he had got the exchange rate correct. Of course, he still had to pester Tanji frequently to interpret the names and descriptions, and even she struggled at times to translate some of the magical concepts into English.

In the end, they spent half an hour or so browsing, but finally left empty-handed, Kevin being unable to select anything he particularly wanted, or that Tanji had expressed a desire for. After the shopping, the two lovers walked on the short distance to the portal building before taking a series of portals in the skilfully managed fashion that Tanji so effortlessly displayed. A short time later, they finally arriving in the quiet town – really more of a large village, Kevin considered – of Rhythlen where Tanji’s family lived.

He already knew that Tanji now lived with her Uncle and Aunt, although he had not yet found out what had happened to her parents, now understood to be dead – although there was a strong implication that there was both a secret and very slightly embarrassing truth lurking hereabouts.

Tanji walked up to the front door and opened it without either hesitation or knocking. They dropped their packs beside the door before they hung up their cloaks tidily in the cloakroom area undoubtedly provided for this very purpose.

“This way,” she said, guiding her lover gently by the elbow.

They were welcomed by her uncle and aunt, who standing together in the large room which doubled as a dining and sitting room, in the style Kevin had seen elsewhere in this world. The phrases of greeting seemed to be in a very ceremonial mode of speech, at least as far as Kevin could judge from the translation provided by Tanji. He responded as graciously as he knew how, which seemed to be adequate.

After the greeting, Tanji’s aunt said something much less formal and Tanji practically flew across the room to embrace the older

woman. Her uncle, too, suffered a hug and a peck on the cheek with much good grace. After the embraces, her aunt said something else which seemed to require several expansive waves of her arms.

Tanji turned to Kevin.

“My aunt suggests that we make ourselves at home, and that I should give you a tour, to remind you of the layout of the place,” she translated, adding, “We’ll join Aunt and Uncle for dinner in a short while.”

Again guiding him gently by the arm, they left the room, leaving behind a smiling aunt and, Kevin was stunned to note, a self-satisfied looking uncle. They donned their cloaks and stepped outside to have a look at the grounds, although Kevin found the physical layout of the place all very familiar.

He made his re-acquaintance with the caged Nightwing which had given him such a shock on his previous visit. The miniature dragon slumbered quietly on its perch, barely waking from its sleep to regard Kevin with one hooded yellow eye. Kevin remembered that these creatures were night hunters, kept domestically to keep down the vermin. He decided to leave the dozing reptile to its own devices.

On their way back into the house, Tanji suggested that they collect their bags before making their way downstairs. Kevin recalled the Lyndesfarne preference for underground living, or at least providing secure rooms for sleeping. He had long ago concluded that this was an instinctive reaction to the dangers from real dragons – the larger cousins of the sleeping Nightwing outside.

Tanji had her own room here – in reality, a small suite of rooms: a spacious bedroom, a bathing-room and a sitting room-cum-study. Kevin had never been inside her rooms before, or indeed was entirely sure of exactly where they were located. On this occasion, however, Tanji led him straight there, opening the door and ushering him inside.

“Tonight,” she said in a definite tone with just the trace of smugness, “You’ll sleep here with me.”

Kevin drew the woman, the light of his life, close to him.

“Kiss me,” he demanded.

She complied, pressing him down on the bed with the passion of her embrace.

A little later, Kevin had a chance to study the room. Tanji was dozing, curled on his shoulder, at least temporarily sated. There was a considerable collection of books neatly arranged in a shelf, including a collection in English, most of which Kevin had never seen before.

There was a small wardrobe whose contents he had not yet seen, and a rather old-fashioned looking dressing table cluttered with the kinds of feminine accoutrements that a man of his generation would barely recognise. All in all, it was a very feminine room and one which gave every impression of having matured over the years with its habitual occupant.

Over the next few months, Tanji and Kevin would stay in this suite quite frequently, Tanji understandably feeling extremely relaxed and unstressed here. Kevin too would come to feel welcomed and very much at home here, more so than anywhere else in the world of Lyndesfarne.

On that first evening when Kevin was introduced properly, he was served with a rather wonderful dinner, washed down with a very fine red wine. The conversations over the table were light and inconsequential, as befitting the appreciation of an enticing and carefully cooked menu.

After dinner, they moved to more comfortable seating around the fire and the conversation became more serious. It became very clear to Kevin that (a) her Aunt and Uncle were entirely aware of how close Tanji and Kevin had become, and (b) that they knew almost nothing about Kevin and were therefore just a little bit concerned for their favourite niece.

He felt that there was just the slightest suspicion that Tanji might somehow be being led astray by Kevin: a viewpoint that he found both heart-warming for the level of concern that the older generation were capable, and simultaneously faintly irritating by the implication that Tanji was a woman who did not really know her own mind.

As a response, Kevin gave a brief précis of his life and works, most of which Tanji evidently already knew. In any case, this potted history was translated by Tanji for her uncle's benefit. Kevin knew that the old man understood more English than he generally admitted, but also realised that his understanding might be somewhat erratic.

All three of the listeners asked questions during this light grilling, Tanji's aunt and uncle both relying heavily on Tanji's skills at interpretation. Kevin attempted to answer these enquiries as directly and honestly as he could. Both aunt and uncle seemed to warm to him, an impression which was confirmed when, after dinner, Tanji's uncle left the room briefly and returned clutching a rather dusty bottle.

Cradling the bottle carefully, the older man made it clear that this was a bottle of fine brandy – an aged bottle of French Armagnac, in fact – imported long ago from Kevin's own world. He further

explained, through Tanji's translations, that this vintage was now nearly fifty years old, and perhaps Kevin would like to try some?

Kevin was astute enough to understand just how important this gesture was. Tanji's uncle had just offered to open a cherished possession, a rare and practically irreplaceable treasure, especially to share with the near-stranger who had caught the eye of his favourite niece.

Kevin looked the old man straight in the eye and said formally, "Sir, I would be delighted to sample this excellent vintage with you, to offer a toast to the ladies."

A sharply indrawn breath and a radiant smile from both Tanji and her aunt and, after a rapid translation, a slow nod of approval from her uncle, told Kevin that he caught the right tenor.

Kevin was shown the label on the bottle, taking great care – almost reverential – in the handling of the precious item as he inspected the provenance. Tanji's uncle undertook the careful removal of the foil, wax and cork, undertaking each step with due caution and great deliberation.

Meanwhile, Tanji's aunt stepped into the kitchen and re-appeared carrying a tray loaded with, Kevin was delighted to note, four glasses – large traditional balloons of a fineness he had rarely experienced. Tanji's uncle poured a surprisingly generous measure into each one, and her aunt passed two balloons to Kevin and Tanji, who were sitting together on the sofa.

There was then a period of much swirling and sniffing of the precious amber fluid, before waiting for a sip and an approving nod from the older man. As he nodded, he said something Kevin did not understand, again in that formal tone of voice.

Tanji's eyes widened and she spluttered briefly before her Guild training reasserted itself.

"A toast," she translated breathlessly, "To welcome you, as if as a future son-in-law."

She turned to him, their eyes shining. Kevin and Tanji softly clinked their glasses together.

## Chapter Nineteen

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Kevin slept but fitfully after being awoken by the phone. He lay awake for a long time, plagued by the thought that there should be something else he could be doing, to help release Tanji, or at least shed some light on just what was going on. When he did finally fall asleep, his slumbers were disturbed several times by dark and formless dreams. Waking and dressing in the gloomy half-light of an autumnal morning, things looked no better until he remembered the call from Dave.

Kevin joined Bret for a breakfast that seemed to consist solely of strong coffee, Kevin attempting to counteract the effects of his restless night. It was nevertheless ineffective in restoring him to a functional human being. Bret looked pale and drained too, and Kevin suspected that the other man had not slept well, either. The two men practically stumbled out through the main entrance of the Grange, where their car and driver waited patiently. They were driven to NISSA in silence, neither of them finding the energy for either small talk or a recap of the current situation.

They had planned on arriving as early as they thought they could get away with, perhaps hoping to be able to intercept the staff before they were entirely embroiled in their day-to-day activities, as well as missing the worst of the city centre traffic. As it happened, this was only partially effective as they were delayed in traffic more than they had hoped. Certainly, there were many people about in the NISSA building by the time they arrived. The two men were guided upstairs and shown into Professor Braxton's office by the same efficient young woman who had been the previous incumbent's administrative assistant.

Professor Braxton welcomed them, appearing only slightly surprised at their appearance at this early hour.

"Coffee?" she asked kindly, looking at the two men's general state and indicating the seats in front of her desk.

"Please," Kevin replied wearily. Bret declined the offer of a drink.

"Sanjit," the Professor addressed her assistant who was still standing at the door, "Could you possibly rustle up a cup of coffee for our guest?"

"Just one, Professor?" she replied brightly.

“That will be fine, thank you.”

“Right away, Professor.”

Professor Braxton seated herself behind the desk and looked from Bret to Kevin and back again.

“I take it you’re still looking into the unfortunate death of young Andrew Wollack?”

Bret nodded.

“We are,” he said, “But there’s been an additional complication.”

Kevin interjected.

“My, um, friend Tanji has been snatched, kidnapped,” he explained, “We don’t know why, but we believe there’s a connection between that and the death of Andrew Wollack.”

The Professor looked puzzled.

“I can’t see what the link is,” she responded eventually, “Apart from the obvious connections with the Other World.”

Kevin explained that Tanji had been taken from his flat in this world a couple of days ago, and that they had received a message from the kidnappers – although he did not go into any details.

“I suspect,” Kevin concluded, “That Tanji’s been taken to distract us – well, me, anyway – from the investigation. But we’re trying to make progress regardless.”

Professor Braxton seemed rather shocked by the suggestion that a kidnapping could be used for so heartless a purpose, but rapidly indicated that she would do whatever she could to help.

Bret took over the conversation.

“We know that poor Doctor Wollack was an epidemiologist,” he said quickly, “But we need to find out more about exactly what Andrew was doing and why he was doing it.”

“Of course,” the Professor replied, “But what exactly do you want to know?”

Bret frowned briefly.

“Has there ever been an epidemiologist attached to NISSA before?” he asked.

“No,” Professor Braxton replied, looking puzzled.

“So why now?”

“Well, it was just a suggestion for post-doctoral study.”

Kevin already knew something of the realities of academic life: that there was a need to continuously discover (or invent) new things. He was also aware that researchers were forever casting about for new research topics, to improve their chances in the never-ending competition for limited resources – funds and skilled people – to improve their standing in their little communities.

The Professor quickly explained that an epidemiological study of the interactions of the Two Worlds had been on a long list of topics for NISSA to investigate for ages. It was simply a convenient conjunction of Andrew's availability, having just graduated from UCL, and funding being available that kick-started research in this area.

"If you want more details of the research work itself," the Professor concluded, "Then you'll have to ask Andrew's supervisor."

"And who's that?" Kevin wanted to know.

"Wendy Rossiter," she replied, "As I recall, you've met her, at one of you briefings here. I'll call her now."

The Professor picked up the desk telephone handset and punched a short sequence of numbers – an internal number, Kevin assumed.

"Wendy? Could you join me in my office for a few moments? As soon as possible. Thank you."

She replaced the receiver.

"She's on her way."

There was a brisk knock at the door and Sanjit entered carrying a tray of coffee implements: a hot cafeteria, cold fresh milk in a jug, a bowl of sugar, and a cup and saucer that Kevin was immediately sure was kept for special guests.

"Just here, please," Professor Braxton said, indicating the desk just in front of Kevin. He helped himself, then sat quietly for a moment sipping his coffee.

There was a light tap at the door, which opened slightly and Ms. Rossiter's head appeared in the opening. Wendy Rossiter was a tiny woman whose movements always put Kevin in mind of a small bird. She had spiky short-clipped grey hair and habitually dressed in black, offset only by a pair of large silver earrings, of which she apparently had a considerable collection.

Both Bret and Kevin stood up politely, and Linda beckoned her colleague into the room.

"You remember Kevin, of course," the Professor said.

Kevin was treated to the briefest of handshakes.

"And this is Bret."

Ms. Rossiter held up her hand in greeting, clearly having recognised Bret's origins from his appearance and clothing.

Professor Braxton indicated another chair and Ms. Rossiter sat daintily. Bret and Kevin returned to their seats.

Bret spoke up.

"Ms. Rossiter, we need to understand more about what Andrew was doing."

“Well,” she began, glancing at the Professor, who nodded almost imperceptibly, “We’ve been aware that the crossings throughout the Two Worlds must, at one time or another, have permitted the transfer of microbes and disease.”

“Obviously,” Bret interjected.

“But what we don’t know,” she continued, “Is how often this has happened, or what the impacts actually were on the societies at the time.”

Kevin nodded in understanding.

“So, Andrew was studying historical records, from this world – and some of those from Lyndesfarne, too – of epidemics and plagues, and then cross-referencing their spread and contagion with the locations of crossings and the periods when they were in use.”

“Any conclusions?” Bret asked.

“Not yet,” Ms. Rossiter replied, then looked away quickly as she realised what she had just said. After a few moments, she returned her attention to the two men, a hint of moisture around her eyes. She took a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her face.

“He was performing statistical correlations, using computer simulations,” she continued, regaining her composure, “I had not heard any definite conclusions, although he was certainly working very hard.”

“Can we see where Andrew was working?” Bret asked.

“And his computer, too,” Kevin added.

Again, Ms. Rossiter glanced at the Professor before answering.

“Of course. Let me show you.”

After politely taking their leave of Professor Braxton, Ms. Rossiter guided the two men along a couple of corridors before opened the door on a darkened room. She reached inside to operate the light switch before pushing the door wide open.

Kevin and Bret made their way inside, followed by Ms. Rossiter. It was an open-plan office space clearly occupied by several research associates and students. The windows were covered by closed blinds which Ms. Rossiter declined to open. The room contains half a dozen desks, each with their own workstations. Most of the computer screens were surrounded by a clutter of printed paper, notepads and rather grubby coffee mugs, together with the remnants of takeaway fast food obviously consumed late at night. Kevin was unsurprised to find it unoccupied that this early hour.

“This is Andrew’s desk,” Ms. Rossiter said, indicating an unusually tidy workplace. Apart from the computer equipment, the only things on the desktop were a jam-jar containing a selection of



pencils and cheap biros, a scrupulously clean mug and a hard-bound A4 notebook.

Kevin pounced on Andrew's notebook and opened it. The book was nearly filled with neat annotations, to-do lists, sketches and tables – evidently the notes of a tidy-minded and conscientious person with a lot of things to remember. All of the entries were dated and typically no more than half a page – sometimes only a few lines – had been added on each working day.

To his disappointment, the last entry and indeed the preceding few pages contained nothing which, at a first glance, seemed to indicate anything out of the ordinary. After a minute or two, he gave up and tossed the book back onto the desk.

In the absence of anything else, Kevin turned his attention to the computer. Judging by the network cable protruding from the back and disappearing under the floor tiles, the machine was part of the University's managed network. Kevin had some experience with corporately-managed computer nets, particularly the systems deployed by the firm of architects that had employed him during the design of the New Bridge.

"What's the format for user names here?" he asked Ms. Rossiter, after a few moments thought.

"Eight characters, first part of surname and one initial," she replied promptly.

Kevin typed "wollacka" into the login screen. The thought flashed through his mind that this word sounded like some obscure Antipodean slang term for money, or something. He shook his head.

"And passwords?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know what his password is," Ms. Rossiter replied.

"No, no," Kevin said, "I mean, what are the rules for allowable passwords."

"I'm not sure," she responded, "Let me check."

She stepped to a nearby desk and logged into another terminal. There was a few minutes of silence, punctuated only by the tap-tapping of typing on the keyboard.

"Here we are," Ms Rossiter said eventually, evidently reading aloud from something on the screen, "Strong password rules, 'unguessable' passwords, with mixed letters and numbers, and no dictionary words. Oh, and they have to be changed every three months."

Acting on a hunch, Kevin again picked up the notebook. Turing the pages rapidly, he flicked back to the page dated with the previous

quarter-day. To his considerable satisfaction, he spotted a string of nonsense characters jotted in one corner, with a casual circle around it.

“Got it!” he exclaimed.

Both Bret and Ms. Rossiter seemed taken aback by Kevin’s sudden outburst.

“The password,” he explained, “Wollack had written it in his notebook.”

“He’s not supposed to do that,” Ms. Rossiter muttered, “It says so, in the rules.”

Kevin nodded absently in agreement as he turned his attention back to the computer. He knew that the disadvantage of frequent password changes was that they were hard to remember, and it was very tempting to just jot them down somewhere.

By this time, of course, the login screen had timed out, and it was necessary for Kevin to re-type Andrew’s user name into the workstation. He followed this with the password carefully transcribed from the page in front of him.

After what seemed like a heart-stoppingly long pause, which in reality probably lasted no more than a couple of seconds, the screen changed to indicate that the login process was proceeding. A minute or two later, the arcane activities deemed necessary by the system’s designers had completed and Kevin was able to inspect the contents of Andrew’s file store.

Like the written notebook, the organisation of files on Doctor Wollack’s computer was tidy and logically arranged. Kevin undertook several hours of concentrated work on Andrew’s computer, watched stoically by Bret. He began by carefully reading the younger man’s notes – both on the machine and in the notebook – as well as studying an incomplete draft of an academic paper he had evidently been in the process of preparing.

On the way, Kevin encountered a considerable amount of unfamiliar jargon and numerous analysis programs he had never come across before. He was forced to undertake some impromptu research on the Internet, the search engines once again proving their worth as a vehicle for instant – if superficial – erudition on almost any topic.

Once it was clear what Kevin was up to, Ms. Rossiter took her leave, claiming that she was overdue for a lecture. Kevin nodded vaguely, his head swimming with the material he was studying. Meanwhile, Bret got an update by phone from Guardians at the

Grange, although there was no further news on either Tanji's captors or the dead man.

Eventually, Kevin thought he had understood Doctor Wollack's thesis, and set about explaining it to Bret. Firstly, it appeared that Andrew had been studying a great deal of the history of the Lyndesfarne world. He had established beyond reasonable doubt that there was a statistical correlation between particular crossings being in place, and the epicentre of certain epidemics, in both worlds.

One thing that Kevin had learned, many years ago – on one of the few things that had stuck from an interminable series of university lectures on Statistics – was that correlation does not necessarily imply causality; that is, it was not necessarily that one thing occurring at *the same time* as another did not imply that one thing *causes* another.

The classic example, he knew, was that you could probably find a correlation between increased sales of ice cream and the incidence of sunburn. Of course, this does not imply that ice cream causes sunburn: rather it is just that they both happen in the summertime. It *is the increased* sunshine which is the causal factor.

Andrew clearly understood this, too. He had been trying to establish a plausible causal mechanism. He had considered and discarded numerous hypotheses, until finally there was just one that was objectively supported by the facts. Kevin got the distinct impression that the late Doctor Wollack was more than a little unsettled by these deductions.

Historically, the common factor was a high level of reported activity by ultra-conservatives: a faction, group or whatever, pathologically opposed to continued transactions between the Two Worlds. Whenever this group was active, people in both worlds got diseases and died in their thousands. This naturally led to considerable pressure on the authorities – the *Boards* of Control on both sides – to close crossings to protect 'us' from the 'dirty' ones over there.

Kevin looked seriously at Bret.

"You and I both know, from recent personal experience, that there is a faction, here and now, who are opposed to the Lyndesfarne crossing. And that they are actively seeking to close it."

Bret's eyes widened as he realised what Kevin was suggesting.

"They might be planning to try something like this again!"

## Chapter Twenty

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As he and Bret travelled, Kevin's thoughts went back to happier times, when he and Tanji had dined at home with Bret and her family at their home in the world of Lyndesfarne. He had been made very welcome indeed, fed a splendid dinner cooked unaided, as far as he could tell, by Bret's father and toasted with an excellent red wine by the Ferryman herself.

Only later did he realise that this might have been the moment when everything changed: when he became recognised as a part of the establishment of the Other World – of the Two Worlds, even – although he had not consciously understood it at the time. But now, he realised, he was entrenched, an accepted member of what was an exceptionally exclusive club.

After dinner, Bret's father had waved away any suggestion that Kevin should help with clearing away. The older man seemed happy enough to potter around, taking the empty plates and dishes back into the kitchen and tidying away the remaining accoutrements from the dining table. One of these days, Kevin thought to himself, I will get a chance to see inside a Lyndesfarne kitchen.

Tanji and Kevin were encouraged by Bret to take up their wineglasses and move sedately – 'waddle' was the word which came unbidden to Kevin's mind – to more comfortable seating by the fire. The extravagant meal and the plentiful wine had made Kevin quite drowsy, although he was awake enough to notice that he was not the only one feeling slightly sleepy. He felt able only to make vaguely desultory comments on the delights of the food and wine, and on the style and ambiance of the surroundings.

Eosin excused himself at this point and escorted the children downstairs for, Kevin imagined, some domestic bedtime ritual. The kids seemed happy enough to oblige, after the obligatory "mad half hour" effect, chasing each other around the large room until, suddenly, they seemed so tired that they could hardly keep their eyes open.

Kevin and the others talked long into the night. Tanji seemed content to sit close to Kevin on a sofa to one side of the fire, her eyes bright and clearly taking in everything that was said.

Eosin returned later on, glancing at Bret and nodding almost imperceptibly, which Kevin took to be parental code for "children

quiet, in bed and nearly asleep”. He slipped quietly into an easy chair almost hidden in shadow, set well back to one side of the fireplace, swept up his wineglass and offered a silent toast to Bret.

Bret’s mother, joined a little later by her husband after completing, Kevin imagined, his kitchen duties, sat in a second sofa opposite Kevin and Tanji. Both Bret and her mother appeared to have a fund of stories and tales, with just the suggestion, Kevin would realise afterwards, that the fables were carefully selected as a message with an oblique point to be made.

The conversation had flagged a little immediately after dinner, but soon perked up as they settled themselves.

“It occurred to me,” the Ferryman began, addressing Kevin directly, “That you might be interested in how a crossing comes into being.”

This was one topic where Kevin had long had a fascination, and said so immediately. Bret’s Mother sat back in her chair with the air, it suddenly struck Kevin, of someone about to tell a tale to a group of tired kindergarten children. She sipped at her wine glass thoughtfully for a moment.

“A World Crossing,” she said eventually, “Is a constructed artefact, as much a work of – well, engineering, you might say – as a bridge or building.”

Kevin nodded, already entranced.

“So, opening a crossing is a lengthy and complicated process, requiring great skills and a considerable amount of diligent work by many people,” the Ferryman said, “Although I’m not absolutely sure that anyone really remembers exactly how it is done any more.”

The Ferryman paused, staring into space for a moment.

“Anyway,” she continued, “The first part of that process is to open up a small portal – a circle connecting this world with yours – only a few inches across. This allows the constructors to see where they are in the other world.”

“Not much of a view through a hole that big,” Kevin muttered.

The Ferryman looked amused.

“Even though it is small, it’s still possible to send through various magical viewing devices and artefacts.”

“You can use magic in my world?” Kevin asked, momentarily confused.

The Ferryman nodded her head.

“Of course there is no problem with using magic, since no barrier has been constructed at this stage.”

“Ah,” Kevin exclaimed softly, feeling slightly foolish. He had forgotten that the barrier preventing the transit of magic and technology between the two worlds was a separate construct, much more recently established and very actively maintained.

“So,” Bret’s mother continued, “A small amount of movement in the location of these spy-holes is possible – corresponding to a certain amount of movement of the eventual position of the crossing.”

“So that’s how the location is decided?” Kevin asked.

“Well, partially,” the Ferryman agreed, “But in general, we need to create lots of these openings, in order to determine the ground level, to make sure that the surface at both sides will align, for example.”

Kevin nodded in understanding, as he felt he could comprehend this. He had certainly found, in his own more mundane engineering undertakings, that selecting a site for a large bridge was heavily dependent on matching the geological features on both sides.

“This is important since, to properly determine the location for a crossing,” she continued, “We need a lot of assessment: to make sure the weather and climate is broadly compatible, to ensure consistent geographical and geological features, and so on, to make sure some basic criteria have been met.”

“What kind of criteria?” Kevin wanted to know.

Bret’s mother snorted in amusement.

“Well, for example, that there is dry land on both sides,” she answered, “Not in the middle of some ocean – although this has been tried with fairly unfortunate effects.”

So that’s what’s behind the Bermuda Triangle, then, Kevin mused, but said nothing.

“So, a sampling process,” the Ferryman emphasised, “Many spots are obviously incompatible immediately, and we would simply try somewhere else. But in other cases, a considerable amount of surveying work is undertaken only to finally discover something at a late stage that means the location will not do. And so the selection of the final site is always the result of years of assessments and evaluations.”

She paused, perhaps wondering what to say next.

“After an initial survey with magical devices,” she resumed, “And if a particular location looks sufficiently promising, another much larger portal would be opened, this one big enough for people to go through. The volunteers sent through are human surveyors, instructed to carry out assessments which are hard to perform remotely. These assessors had to make sure the proposed site is well

away from centres of population, for example, and to address concerns like security and the control of access – important since a crossing will be many leagues in circumference.”

She hesitated again.

“This was always potentially dangerous and risky work, since inter-world portals are unstable and can move unexpectedly or snap out of existence in an instant because of a single tiny magical misstep. But, if the reports from the on-the-ground team are favourable, then a final decision is made to go ahead. The portal is widened progressively and folded back on itself to form a dome, two domes really” – she illustrated this effect with movements of her hands – “shaped like a pair of shallow saucers set together at their edges. This configuration is highly stable – mainly because there is so much energy bound up in the structure – and will last forever.”

The Ferryman sat back in her chair and took a sip of her wine.

“There’s an old story about crossings and their creation,” she said thoughtfully, “That you might like to hear. A story which I certainly heard many times as a child and which you might find interesting.”

Kevin nodded again.

“Well, this was one of the very earliest crossings, opened many thousands of years ago. It was not the first, but so early in the history that it was probably established before it was realised that all crossings from our world end up in yours.”

The Ferryman smiled wryly, looking for a moment very much like her daughter Bret.

“At that time, several other countries already had crossings, and the local emperors and minor kings in the area badly wanted one too. They wanted to partake of the trade, and the associated wealth, that an opening to the Other World would provide.”

Not so much an Arms Race, Kevin though grimly, as Trans-World Crossing envy.

“So,” she continued wryly, “There was a certain amount of pressure from the rulers of the region on the magical engineers and crossing-builders, to complete the crossing in the minimum possible time. Certainly, they cut corners and generally used much less care and attention than was really advisable.”

The Ferryman again sipped her wine.

“Now, I need to tell you something about the physical setting of this particular crossing,” she resumed, “In our world, it was at the edge of a tropical sea. Inland from the coast was an arid landscape, semi-desert, not really farmed and altogether quite of out the way. The reasoning at the time was that proximity to the sea would allow

fish and other produce to be exported, as well as providing convenient transport for goods by boat – there were no transport portals in those days.”

She paused briefly, perhaps considering the best phrasing for the story, then continued.

“In your world, the place of the crossing was in a high hot desert, also scrubland, not heavily populated, with just a few poor semi-nomadic tribespeople eeking out a living herding sheep and goats.”

Bret’s mother again brought the wineglass to her lips, although Kevin was not entirely sure she was doing more than just tasting the contents of the glass.

“Surveying of the site had gone ahead more-or-less as I described, and the time had come to decide whether the site proposed was entirely suitable. The committee of sages and advisors who were to make a recommendation to the rulers met in a grand convocation – an earlier incarnation of the Boards, I suppose, although perhaps less sophisticated then.”

“One man objected to the proposed location. He was named Noaz and he was one of the, well, chief architects of the crossing, you might say. From all accounts, he had a reputation in some quarters for caution and good judgment, a characteristic that some others interpreted as indecision and resistance to change.”

“According to the tale I heard, Noaz was convinced that the full crossing, once opened, would intersect the sea in our world and allow water to rush through the crossing and flood the desert.”

Bret’s mother paused for dramatic effect, clearly signalling to Kevin that this was a tale often told in this household.

“The others involved with the crossing design did not agree with Noaz.”

Kevin nodded sagely. He had had personal experience of offering balanced and professional technical advice on the placement of large-scale works of civil engineering – only to have that advice discarded, even derided, by others simply because it did not align with the pre-conceived ideas of those who thought they were in charge.

“Their disagreements were vigorous and prolonged, and ultimately rather violent,” Bret’s mother continued, “Eventually, Noaz was banished, exiled to your world.”

This remark provoked a sharp intake of breath from Tanji. Kevin could see that she looked shocked, even horrified by the prospect. The Ferryman had noticed her reaction too.



“Noaz was not permitted back though a temporary opening between the two worlds,” she emphasized, “Before it was deliberately closed.”

Tanji looked wide-eyed, waiting for the Ferryman to continue.

“Years passed, and preparations were made to open the full crossing. I should stress again that this was a colossal undertaking, requiring the preparation of a vast array of magic – a lifetime’s work for tens, even hundreds, of skilled artisans and magical craftsmen.”

Kevin struggled with this concept. He was familiar with the idea of engineering projects taking decades to complete – the amount of material that had to be transported and emplaced to make a dam or a canal or a motorway would require vast expenditure of labour. But a work of this magnitude which did not, in any way he could recognise, produce a physical result – this he found difficult to come to terms with.

“With no choice in the matter,” Bret’s mother continued, “Noaz settled in your world and took up farming in the fertile valleys below the high desert. He married a local woman, started a family and sired numerous children, became a grandfather, even. But in all this time, he kept a weather eye on the desert. He listened to travellers and shepherds; he even walked alone up there from time to time.”

Kevin was intrigued.

“From his own observations, and his gentle interrogations of itinerants, Noaz identified the unmistakable signs that his old colleagues were still determined to open a crossing. He had heard reports of strange lights in the desert, of glowing objects hanging in the air. He had even glimpsed such things himself on his walks.”

“Noaz’s sagacity and caution re-asserted itself as he realised the risk to his family. Using what personal wealth he had drawn about himself during his years of exile, he set about building a boat – in an area many miles from the sea – big enough for his extended family and their livestock.”

Kevin froze, just beginning to realise just what he was hearing.

“Noaz had to bear incredulity and scorn from his neighbours,” the Ferryman continued, “From those who refused to listen to his words of warning. I guess he was thought of as a strange old man – one who had appeared as if from nowhere decades before. And one who seemed to have amassed a small fortune in indecent haste.”

“As it turned out, Noaz’s boat was completed just in time. The crossing was indeed opened and, as he had predicted, the sea swept through. This must have been an inundation for which the term “raging torrent” would have been entirely appropriate. There was an

immense flood, with storm clouds and dark skies caused by dust and water being thrown into the air as the cool sea water hit the desiccated rocks and sands of the desert.”

Again, the Ferryman paused to take a sip from her wineglass.

“Fortunately, the boat proved sound and Noaz’s family survived some days in their lifeboat. We can only hope that at least some of their doubting neighbours must have survived, although undoubtedly many, many people lost their lives.”

“The portal engineers in our World must have realised their error very rapidly, and moved to close the crossing again,” she continued, “Although this must have been a difficult and dangerous task – to get close to a whirlpool in the sea a league or more across, in a wooden sailing ship, and then invoke the intricate magic which would have closed the new crossing. It must have taken many attempts – and it is told that many lost their lives – before the closure magic was finally completed.”

She sighed gently, then continued.

“Anyway, the water eventually subsided and Noaz set up a new community at the edge of the area washed by the displaced sea. The salt from the sea water would have made the land sterile for many years.”

“You’ve just told me the story of Noah’s Ark, haven’t you?” Kevin asked.

Bret’s mother nodded.

“That’s right,” she confirmed, “So much of the mythology of your world, and ours, is bound up with the mingled history of the Two Worlds crossings. And a great deal of this history is now regarded as legend, or children’s stories and the like.”

She shook her head.

“In any case,” she said sadly, “It was a salutary warning to the rulers and magical technicians of the time: that more care must be taken in positioning such constructions to avoid the huge waste of effort in creating such a crossing. And the story has served its purpose as a caution over the millenia: such a physical disaster has not happened since, at least on the scale I’ve just described.”

## Chapter Twenty One

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Before leaving the NISSA building, Bret and Kevin dropped in to thank Professor Braxton, but were apologetically informed by Sanjit that the Professor was teaching and should not be interrupted. Ms. Rossiter was also nowhere to be found. Kevin asked Sanjit if she would pass on their thanks for the assistance to their investigation.

Bret reached for his mobile and phoned their driver, who was already waiting by the time the two men reached the steps at the entrance. They clambered into the back of the car and set off. The relatively short distance from Newcastle-on-Tyne to the Lyndesfarne crossing would usually have been completed in thirty minutes or so. On this afternoon, for some reason, traffic jams on the Old North Road delayed them so much that both men had got visibly worried.

Finally, and with no time to spare, their car screeched to a halt at the causeway entrance and the two men leapt out, once again remembering to leave their mobile phones and other electronic devices with the driver before embarking on the crossing itself. This would previously have been a two-mile walk with no easy way of moving more quickly, since the causeway to the Old Bridge would have been packed with queues of horse-drawn wagons. Now, however, that the commercial traffic was carried by the New Bridge, more rapid movement was possible.

Bret had phoned ahead from the car and was able to commandeer a light horse-drawn trap and driver from the duty Guardians. It was exactly this kind of vehicle, Kevin remembered, that had transported him around the Lyndesfarne end of the New Bridge while it was still under construction.

The driver cracked his whip and the buggy set off at a fast trot across the causeway towards the Old Bridge, the few pedestrians warned of their approach both by the clatter of the hooves and the ringing of a large brass hand-bell. Kevin hung on nervously to the wooden rails as the trap bounced over the cobblestones, but at least they were able to complete the crossing in less than half the time it would have taken to walk.

The trap stopped outside the building that Kevin knew was the base for the Guardians on this side of the crossing. The two men leapt down and Bret thanked their driver before turning to address a group of men and women who were standing expectantly nearby.

Kevin had become quite adept at recognising the not-quite-uniform of the Guardians in both worlds. They had apparently been requested by Bret using his mobile phone, and the message somehow communicated to the Other World. How this was done, Kevin did not know, but he assumed that there must be some form of signalling across the straights – using flags, perhaps, or maybe flashing lights – which could be undertaken using both magical and mechanical devices.

It was then just a short walk to their destination. According to the message on Bret's slate, the meeting was to be in the hostel Kevin knew as the Walled Garden, which was only a few hundred yards from the Lyndesfarne end of the causeway.

To his surprise, Kevin was greeted effusively by name by the duty receptionist the moment he came through the door. He had stayed in this hostel many times during the construction of the New Bridge, but did not realise he was so easily recognised. Part of the mystery was solved immediately when the receptionist explained, in accented but readily understandable English, that a room had been reserved in Kevin's name.

The receptionist was a rather prissy-looking little man of middle years dressed in the uniform of the hostel. He had dark hair tied neatly in a ponytail which emphasised the high cheekbones and slightly pointed ears which distinguished natives of this world. He became increasingly and visibly alarmed by the urgency in Kevin's voice, not to mention the stern appearance of Bret's face, and immediately directed the two men downstairs, followed by the squad of Guardians.

The room door opened immediately to Kevin's gesture. He was alarmed to discover that it was the very room that he had shared with Tanji on the evening of the formal opening of the New Bridge. To his way of thinking, this once again emphasised, as if it were really necessary, that he and Tanji had been carefully watched – *stalked* was probably the most appropriate word – for months.

The hostel room was a large and well-appointed suite with one of those quaintly-named bathing rooms attached. There was no one inside, and no evidence of any recent occupation. Indeed, Kevin thought it was as neatly arranged as if housekeeping had left only a few moments ago.

After a few fruitless moments opening cupboard doors and looking under the bed, Kevin stood wondering what they should do now. At that moment, a faint chime emerged from Bret's satchel

emitted, Kevin assumed, by the magical timepiece the other man had shown him earlier.

“Look!” Bret exclaimed.

Kevin spun around, directed by Bret’s pointing finger. The mirror over the dressing table showed Tanji, in the same chair in the same featureless room they had seen earlier. She glanced to one side, then stood up energetically and waved at the “glass” on her side. She had obviously just been told that Kevin could see her, and he could see her lips move but could not make out any words.

She stood still for a few moments, a rather wan smile playing about her lips then, without warning, she calmly removed her blouse and let it fall to the floor behind her. Kevin could see her breasts, shrunken and hardened with darkened nipples just like, he realised in a flash, when they were on that beach holiday. She stood quietly, chin held high; suddenly she smiled more widely, her eyes flashing.

“She’s telling us where she is!” Kevin exclaimed.

“What do you mean?” Bret demanded.

“I’ve only ever seen her like that in one place,” Kevin explained rapidly, “On holiday.”

In the mirror, Tanji paraded around wearing only her leather trousers, still smiling – not a patch on her usual grin, but enough for Kevin to recognise it for what it was. Images flashed through his mind – beach volleyball *in* the late afternoons, swimming and diving during the day, and – the thought struck him like a flash of lightning – that fascinating excursion where he had seen all of those long green beans for sale.

With only a touch of embarrassment, Kevin rapidly explained to Bret about the beach holiday he and Tanji had taken earlier in the year, and her expressed preference for topless beach games.

Bret got the point immediately.

“So you think she’s trying to tell us that she’s being held somewhere in the area you visited on vacation?”

Kevin nodded vigorously. Bret looked thoughtful for a few moments, then nodded slowly.

“You know, I think you may be right.”

The image in the mirror faded. Bret motioned to two of the Guardians, who unhesitatingly tore the mirror from the wall and carried it out of the room for, Kevin imagined, some kind of magical analysis.

The vandalism had obviously been spotted by the hostel receptionist, who came bustling into the room a few moments later, looking very hot under the collar. He strode up to Bret and spoke

rapidly and rather angrily in the Lyndesfarne language. Bret calmly took him on one side, responding equally rapidly and speaking much too fast for Kevin to follow. Even so, he got the impression that Bret was explaining the circumstances and why it had been necessary to remove the mirror.

The receptionist glanced at Kevin a time or two while the other man was speaking, looking increasingly worried. Now much mollified, Bret brought the little man to where Kevin stood. Looking Kevin directly in the eye, Bret reported quietly that the mirror, which had been just ordinary glass, had been broken by an occupant of that room some weeks ago.

“Some weeks ago?” Kevin practically squeaked, “Before I stayed here with Tanji?”

Bret nodded, eyes locked on Kevin’s own.

“So what happened?” Kevin demanded.

The hostel receptionist looked flustered. He spoke in the Lyndesfarne language, relying on Bret to translate the gist for the other man’s benefit. Apparently, the client had admitted the accident and offered to pay for the damage. The hostel used its usual contractors to install a replacement a few days later, although the receptionist said that he did not recognise the two people who actually turned up to fit the piece.

Kevin was still livid.

“So how did Tanji and I get this particular room?” he wanted to know.

The receptionist looked uncertain and Bret fluently translated the other man’s question.

“That’s simple,” the prissy little man replied in English, “It’s the best room in the house.”

Bret started slightly then reached for his rucksack. There was another message on his slate. He turned the upper surface to face Kevin.

“You are being so very well-behaved,” the message read, “I’m pleased, even impressed. You will hear from us again soon.”

Kevin stared at the message silently for a long moment.

“Hmmm. So, how do the kidnappers know that we were viewing Tanji in the magic mirrors?” he asked finally.

Bret glanced at the other man, looking surprised.

“Well, perhaps they don’t,” he replied, “They might be just assuming that we made the appointment.”

Kevin shook his head.

“No. They must be some way of keeping track of us,” he asserted, “This is all too organised to leave something like that to chance.”

Bret looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“So they could be using some magical means to keep track of us,” he said, “Which means a Finder.”

“What’s a Finder?”

Bret hesitated.

“It’s, well, a magical way to determining the location of a person or object,” he said eventually, “Also known as a Locator.”

“So why haven’t you tried to use a Finder to locate Tanji?” Kevin asked urgently in a low voice.

“We have,” Bret responded promptly, “And it didn’t work. We assumed that she must be in your world, where a Finder is useless.”

He paused for a moment, then looked around the room. Kevin and Bret were by now alone in the suite, the remaining Guardians having quietly dispersed.

“But there are ways to mislead such devices,” Bret added in a low voice.

“So you think we are being tracked by a Finder?” Kevin reiterated, “At least in this world.”

Bret nodded.

It was Kevin’s turn to narrow his eyes.

“I think we should be suspicious of any electronic devices we habitually carry about with us,” he said carefully, “They might have a bug of some kind.”

“It would only work in your world,” Bret replied, “But, yes, you’re probably right. But we should worry about being tracked in this world first.”

“But what can we do?” Kevin demanded, “Is there some kind of magical counter-measure?”

Bret grinned wryly at the other man’s perceptiveness.

“Yes, but it’s quite rare, and very carefully controlled by the Boards,” he answered, “I’ll try and locate one. I’ll write to my Mother immediately.”

Kevin imagined that the Ferryman would almost certainly have enough clout to engineer the release of such proscribed magic. Bret scribbled rapidly on his slate and then sent his message with a practiced gesture.

“There,” *he* said with a slightly self-satisfied air, “That should be enough to get some help.”

In the absence of anything else obviously useful to do, Bret made further enquiries of the hostel staff, although without significant results. No-one could recall anything about the guest who had broken the original mirror, other than he had stayed just one night and paid for the breakage without quibbling.

About forty minutes later, a sealed package arrived, delivered by a tall slender woman wearing a hooded robe and carrying a long staff. Kevin recognised her as a member of the Guild of Messengers. Silently, she took a large packet from her bag and placed it on a table in the hostel foyer. Bret was required to make a complex series of gestures over the envelope before he was allowed to pick it up. The Messenger watched quietly, then nodded and quickly turned on her heel to depart. She had uttered no word for the entire duration of her delivery.

Bret unpacked the parcel quickly, finally holding up a couple of copper-coloured amulets of a complex design which writhed and sparkled with the coloured lights which denoted magic within.

“This is a passive magic,” Bret explained, “Once started, it doesn’t need any further gestures. It will make us appear as if we are still here” – he pointed at the floor – “until, well, the end of time, or at least as long as we wear these.”

He gestured for a few seconds, then thrust one of the amulets at Kevin before sliding the other over his left wrist and up onto his upper arm. Kevin followed suit. He had never been a great one for jewellery of any kind, and so found the sensation of the amulet on his upper arm both unusual and faintly unnerving.

“So, can we get to our beach holiday location now?” Kevin asked urgently.

“Yes,” Bret replied, picking up his rucksack, “Follow me.”



## Chapter Twenty Two

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The Beach Hotel where Kevin had stayed with Tanji for two ecstatically wonderful weeks clearly prided itself on the quality and upkeep of its facilities. For Kevin, every day was a new experience, a new wonder – often without setting foot outside the resort grounds at all.

The hotel buildings were all low, solid-looking constructions, arranged around a central open area, with well-maintained gardens and shrubbery either side of the path and steps which led down to the beach. The grounds abounded in wildlife: plants, birds, butterflies – all of which looked vaguely familiar to Kevin, and certainly nothing which would have been out of place on a tropical shore at home. There were coconut palm trees everywhere, their tall trunks featuring the characteristic unexpected twists and turns formed as they grew towards the best light.

Early in the morning towards the end of their vacation, the two lovers took a walk on the beach. It was already warm and sunny as they strolled along hand-in-hand, enjoying the sounds of the sea and the light sea-breeze.

Kevin wore a pair of baggy but brightly-coloured shorts, much as he would have done on the beach at home, together with sandals and sunglasses. He was bare-headed and bare-chested, and already getting to be quite tanned, although he was careful to avoid getting burned. The fine weather and appetising food, and the fact he was getting more exercise than usual – in several dynamic ways, he thought with a wry smirk – meant that he was noticeably bulking up around shoulders and thighs.

Tanji wore a pair of the flowing and insubstantial trousers she so often favoured, together with the magical sunhat that protected her fair complexion. Between waist and hairline she wore nothing at all, to Kevin's unreserved delight, although once again she had taken the precaution of reducing the size of her breasts to minimise discomfort during exercise.

Some movement in the litter of driftwood marking the high-tide line up ahead caught Kevin's attention.

“What's that?” he exclaimed, pointing out the erratic rocking motions of a large piece of worm-eaten timber.

As he watched, a grey-brown object perhaps a foot across edged its way around the baulk. It was a few shades darker than the pale sands underfoot and of such an irregular shape that it might have been mistaken for a rock if it had not been so plainly moving.

Tanji grinned characteristically widely.

“It’s a Beachcomber,” she said, “Have you not seen them around here already?”

“No,” Kevin replied, although he belatedly realised that he had previously noticed that the beach was always littered with scattered rocks which never quite seemed to be in the same place two days running.

Tanji explained that Beachcombers were magical devices for cleaning beaches of flotsam and jetsam. Seaweed and other organic debris was ingested and then digested, and the resulting material was used to enrich the soil further inland.

“So it’s like a Lawn Bug?” Kevin said, remembering the insect-like device which he had seen cutting the grass on one of his trips to this world in the company of Bret.

“That’s right,” she exclaimed cheerfully.

Well, that certainly helps to explain the luxuriant growth in the gardens and vegetable plots everywhere along this shoreline, Kevin thought.

They walked on, determined to explore the entire length of the beach before returning to the hotel for a light breakfast. At the end of the beach, tall cliffs and crags came down to the water’s edge, leading back to the higher ground which formed the bay in which the hotel was situated.

The tall trees at the top of the ridge featured an erratic collection of nests, home to what Kevin had originally thought to be large birds, but actually turned out to be a small species of fish-eating dragon.

There were several of the creatures flying overhead, soaring in the wind blowing from the sea. As they watched, one folded its wings and dove for the water, spearing through the sea’s surface with barely a splash and emerging a few seconds later clutching a wriggling silver fish.

Kevin had noted the fish-hunting flying reptiles – just a little larger than the Nightwings he had seen at Tanji’s home – earlier in the holiday. No one had paid them undue attention and he had concluded that they were not a risk to humans, and indeed they could be seen nesting in treetops along the heavily wooded ridges that ran parallel to the beach in numerous places.

Earlier in the week, Tanji had guided him on an excursion which started with a visit to the nearby town. With his architect's eyes, Kevin had found the entire trip absolutely fascinating. Some stalls and shops were thatched with the coconut palm tiles that Kevin would have found commonplace in the corresponding parts of his own world.

Nevertheless, most buildings here were rather heavily built and set low to the ground. Practically every construction was equipped with wide verandas and wide doors open to the breezes. Even so, the buildings were all stoutly constructed, with solid doors and heavy roofs, as well as shutters for all the windows. It was clear to Kevin that, as elsewhere in the world of Lyndesfarne, people very much preferred to sleep in stout buildings or, better still, underground. A short discussion with Tanji revealed that, here, few buildings had any basements or lower floors.

"Do they have dragons here?" Kevin asked Tanji suddenly, his train of thought emerging as a question.

Patiently, a smiling Tanji explained that this area was far too hot for the large dragons that used to live in the area around the causeway – and that they had seen on their safari – as well as being too close to the sea.

"So why are all the houses built so strongly?"

Tanji's face suddenly looked much more serious.

"In the old days, dragons like the ones we saw were not the only dangerous animal," she explained, "There's another, smaller flying reptile that hunts in large packs."

She hesitated, then continued.

"I'm not absolutely sure how to translate the word, but perhaps 'Raptors' would be appropriate."

Kevin suppressed a gasp.

"They're now extremely rare, but they can travel great distances in a short time," she continued, "Raptors have not been seen in this area for a generation or more, but people have long memories."

Always the conservative viewpoint, Kevin mused, the focus on risks and dangers from the past.

One of several differences which struck him as they walked along was that the whole local environment was rather more well-finished than many places he had seen in his own world – in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for example. Here, there were well-metalled roads and paths, with neat borders planted with flowers and trees, even well away from the areas around the hotel – the parts he would have characterised as 'touristy'.

Tanji strolled with Kevin – something that felt extremely easy and comfortable here – to a nearby portal, one he could now recognise as a short-distance transport. The two of them soon emerged in a resolutely agricultural area, and they set off walking along roads between well-tended fields supporting a wide variety of crops, only some of which Kevin recognised. There were just a couple of large buildings visible, and the occasional isolated farmstead

“Why have a portal here?” Kevin asked Tanji, looking back along the road at the small building from which they had just emerged.

“Well, to bring people out here to work,” she replied promptly, “Both in the fields and the warehouses.”

Kevin looked around. The fieldworkers had a much broader range of skin tones than he would have expected at home. Everyone seemed cheerful enough and adept at using, he had begun to note, a variety of magical devices, often rather small, to assist with the farming. He could see that much of the weeding and ploughing – all the really back-breaking jobs – were relieved by a plethora of aids.

Farm transport seemed to be an eclectic mixture of wood-wheeled carts and wagons, drawn by horses, or bullocks or even by hand, and the magic floating platforms controlled by gestures which Kevin had seen many times during the construction of the New Bridge.

“Why not use floaters for everything?” Kevin asked, his insatiable curiosity getting the better of him once again.

“Well, they’re expensive, for one thing,” Tanji replied patiently, “And they need a flat-ish space to set down to load and unload – and that space is not always available.”

Kevin nodded. He could see that the wheels of carts could run along the rows of plants easily enough.

“And, I suppose, it’s just traditional,” she concluded.

Kevin was distracted at that moment by what could only be described as magic wells. These comprised of low circular walls of the construction stone so widely used in this world. According to Tanji, these wells could be simply placed on the ground and started with a gesture. After a short delay, water would start to flow, but whether it was drawn from deep underground, or precipitated from atmosphere, or by some other means, Tanji was at a loss to explain. A further advantage was that, when the irrigation was completed, the water flow could be stopped with a second gesture and the well wall could be picked up and placed elsewhere.

The combination of plenty of fresh water, natural compost and fertiliser from the Beachcombers, and daily sunshine must make this area immensely fertile, Kevin considered. He was aware that the desire experienced in many parts of his own world for fresh fruit and vegetables in all seasons, and he was finally beginning to realise that this demand was at least partially satisfied by imports from the world of Lyndesfarne.

They stopped at a farm market – a mixture of stalls shaded by coconut matting and tiles, as well as tents made from the same self-erecting magic material that Kevin had encountered on the beach. One of the few fruits and vegetables on display that he recognised were long thin green beans. Most of the others looked utterly eccentric, especially the large fruit which seemed to be a cross between a pine cone and a grapefruit.

Kevin wondered again at the anachronistic mixture of ancient and futuristic, an impression he had got everywhere he had been in this world. But it all worked, he considered, and worked well enough to have been largely unchanged for decades, even centuries.

He knew that the introduction of what even now he persisted in thinking of as new magical technology happened infrequently. Additionally, both ordinary non-magical devices and everyday items – clothes, for example – were routinely enhanced by magic and therefore had a more-or-less indefinite lifespan.

All this had led to a society which was largely fair and stable, at least by comparison with his own world, and indeed consciously conservative and resistant to change. This led, Kevin supposed, to the preference for living in extended family groups, with houses and property held collectively by the family, handed down, maintained, and occasionally extended from generation to generation.

The society was not entirely equitable, of course: some families held more wealth and property than others, or wielded more power – via the Boards, for example – than others. Even so, no one was really poor, even in this tropical region, with evidence of the same pattern of large family groups and an absence of street urchins, beggars or cripples.

This seemed to have led to stable population numbers, which had not changed significantly in generations. This contrasted markedly, Kevin mused, with the explosive growth of population in most parts of his own world over the last couple of hundred years – even now only just beginning to taper off.

## Chapter Twenty Three

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“Where are we going?” Kevin asked, as he followed Bret out of the Walled Garden and down the road towards the portal terminus.

“To the beach,” Bret replied shortly.

Kevin had already guessed that.

“But we don’t really know where Tanji is,” he insisted as they jogged down the street.

“But we might be able to find out,” the other man replied, “And I think that Tanji is smart enough to give us a lot of information – perhaps even more than she realised herself.”

He paused, then added, “But let’s double-check, shall we?”

Bret stopped and pulled a magic writing slate from his rucksack, the one he habitually carried, Kevin recalled, like so many of the natives of this world. Seeing it, Kevin was once again struck by a blast of despair; he remembered the way that Tanji used to write to her friends all the time when they first met, and now he feared that he would never see her again.

“Now,” Bret began, gently pulling Kevin back to the here-and-now, “You visited the warehouse in this world near the crossing, didn’t you?”

Kevin nodded miserably.

“And do you recall the name of the person you showed you around?”

Kevin thought hard. Remembering people’s names was not one of his strong points, and he struggled with the recollection for a moment or two.

“There were two of them,” he replied slowly, than added as the memory finally struck, “They were called Vanise and Lyssa.”

“Hmm,” Bret nodded, already making complex gestures over his slate in order to, Kevin presumed, communicate with the warehouse staff.

“OK, I’ll write to them,” he said after a few moments, “We want to find out whether there was a single direct delivery recently.”

He scribbled a few sentences on the surface of the slate. Even now, Kevin could not make out very much of the alphabet and syntax of the written language, despite a fair degree of effort from himself and tutoring from Tanji.

“That should do,” Bret concluded, again gesturing over the slate until the writing faded before their eyes, “So come on.”

Together, the two of them entered the portal building. Guided by Bret, they undertook a series of transfers following a route which, Kevin considered, was almost certainly different from the one he had taken with Tanji, although he could not be completely sure.

The two men emerged from another portal building on the sea front, adjoining the beach hotel where Kevin had stayed with Tanji all those months ago. He recognised the setting in a blast of nostalgia and a sudden aching reminder of the loss of Tanji. Pulling himself together, he marched straight across the wide boulevard from the portal building to the railings which separated the roadway from the beach.

The two men then undertook what Kevin would later consider to be a classic piece of detective work, at least as far as he could judge as an amateur but enthusiastic reader of detective novels and whodunits.

Kevin leant against the railings, surveying the scene. In front of him, he could see what were evidently holidaymakers strolling to and fro, enjoying the promenade. Similarly, in the other direction, he observed numerous sun-seekers taking their ease on the beach, many of them wearing, as was the custom in many parts of this world, little or nothing by way of bathing costumes.

“The way I see it,” Bret said, ticking off the points on his fingers, “We’ve got two important clues. Firstly, the bar code which you so insightfully noticed on Tanji’s foot.”

“Which clearly was originally attached to a package of some kind of bean that was part of a shipment exported from this world,” Kevin added, nodding vigorously.

“Right,” Bret confirmed, “Together with Tanji’s appearance during the second contact.”

“Exactly,” the other man agreed.

Bret paused, clearly not quite sure how to approach the topic on his mind.

“About the change in Tanji’s, err, shape,” he began, “Are you quite sure there is no doubt, no ambiguity in your mind?”

“Oh no,” Kevin responded immediately, “I’m quite sure. I wasn’t even aware that Tanji could change her body like that until the day we arrived here, and it’s definitely the only time I’ve ever seen her perform that trick.”

Kevin was feeling very fidgety and wanting to be doing something – anything – rather than just standing here.

“Do you imagine that she’ll be in the hostel?” He asked, waving in the direction of the familiar building just across the road.

“Somehow, I doubt it,” the other man responded, “But there’s no harm in asking, is there?”

Seemingly suddenly energised, Bret strode rapidly in the direction the other man had just indicated, leaving Kevin scampering along behind. Bret strode unhesitatingly into the hostel and accosted the receptionist who jumped up from behind his desk. There was much shaking of heads and muttered conversation, then Bret turned away apparently thanking the man for his help.

“She’s not here,” Bret said to Kevin, “I’ve been assured that no-one’s been staying here for long enough to be Tanji or her captors.”

The two men made their way out onto the street. Bret suddenly stopped dead in the roadway, then again reached for the slate in his rucksack. He gestured briefly at it, and Kevin could see writing appear on the black surface, though he could not read a word.

“It’s a reply from Vanise and Lyssa,” Bret announced, running his fingers along the lines of text as he translated for Kevin’s benefit, “They confirm that a large sealed crate was transferred from your world. Unusually, it used express delivery and point-to-point routing to be delivered, for personal collection, at a goods warehouse in this area.”

He paused, looking at Kevin who was listening intently, then continued.

“After that, they have no information, other than this was the only sealed crate big enough that was handled recently.”

“Do they tell us exactly where the warehouse is?” Kevin asked excitedly.

“Unfortunately, no,” Bret replied, “Oh, there’s a reference number, but Vanise and Lyssa are not sure exactly where it is physically, although it’s definitely around here somewhere.”

Kevin’s shoulders sagged.

“Look, there can’t be that many warehouses around here,” Bret added, “And at least we have some confirmation that Tanji is in the vicinity.”

“They must have opened the crate while still in the warehouse,” Kevin said, suddenly looking more positive, “So that Tanji could pick up the bar code.”

“True enough,” Bret said, “So what next?”

“We follow the beans,” the other man answered smartly.

Kevin had recalled that, not very far from here, there was a market where all sorts of produce was bought and sold. He had



visited when he and Tanji had been tourists, and he thought he could remember how to get there by portal.

Kevin led Bret to the entrance he was certain he remembered from before, explaining to the other man about the visit he and Tanji had made. Bret glanced up at the notations above the portal and agreed that it looked plausible. A few moments later, the two men were in an agricultural area which, to his immense relief, looked entirely familiar to Kevin.

“This way,” he said to Bret, pointing a finger.

Ten minutes brisk walking along the dusty road brought them to the market Kevin remembered. As before the market was thronging with noise and life. They made their way around until they found a grower with a handcart laden with slender green beans in what must have been intense negotiation with a rather stout and pompous-looking man in a flowing robe.

As they approached, some kind of agreement seemed to have been reached. Some of the magic coins which Kevin had seen before were handed over, rather begrudgingly, and checked carefully by the farmer.

Apparently satisfied, the farmer grasped the handles of his handcart and tipped it up. The beans slid off the cart onto what Kevin at first thought would have been the ground, but in fact they were deftly caught – not a bean was missed – by some form of transport magic which was barely visible even in the bright sunshine.

The hill of beans slid away on the levitation platform, guided by the pompous man with an occasional irritable flicking gesture, and moving slowly and unevenly to avoid the pedestrians. The farmer watched him go, then slipped the coins he had received into an old-fashioned leather purse held on a string around his neck,

“Let me talk to him,” Bret suggested, “Stay here.”

Bret strode over and accosted the grower, who seemed happy enough to talk at length now that he had off-loaded his crop. He grew increasingly animated and chatty, waving his hands around, obviously warming to the subject at hand. Kevin waited patiently in the relative coolness of the coconut thatch that shaded a nearby stall until Bret returned.

“That was very useful,” he said with a wry smile that Kevin had begun to wonder if he would ever see again.

Bret explained that beans, and other fruit and vegetables, were often sold to professional buyers, who worked for an intermediary organisation who prepared and packed the goods, and then arranged for them to be shipped out.

“Come on,” Bret exclaimed, “Let’s catch up with him.”

They set off through the crowds, Kevin panicking for a moment until he caught sight of the buyer’s bulk ahead. He need not have worried; it turned out that following the pompous man was particularly straightforward. Once clear of the market and the little village which contained it, their quarry walked at a steady pace along the road for about half a mile, his apparent destination being a large low building with the same blocky reinforced construction as other places in the area.

Bret and Kevin trailed along behind at a discreet distance, strolling with an affected attempt at casualness as if they were a couple of tourists.

The buyer arrived at his destination and disappeared inside the building, trailed by the floating cargo pallet.

“Let’s wait here,” Bret suggested, “I’d rather not tackle the buyer – he looks like hard work to me.”

Kevin nodded in agreement. The two men watched the building, again pretending to be casual tourists admiring the rural scenery. They did not have long to wait. A few minutes later, the pompous-looking man re-appeared in the doorway, now no longer tailed by a floating heap of vegetables, and set off in the opposite direction towards the portal Kevin and Bret had used to get here.

The two men waited until he was out of sight, then strode purposefully to the entrance, which stood open. Looking inside, Kevin was sure that this was definitely the place described by the farmer in the market. The cool interior seemed dark after the brightness of the sunshine. Down one side, rows of workers sat behind benches preparing and packing produce, their nimble fingers and alarmingly large knives making short work of any recalcitrant vegetables.

Rather than the tidiness and attention to detail of Vanise and Lyssa, the staff at this warehouse seemed relaxed and laid back – indeed, mused Kevin, so far laid back as to be practically horizontal. Perhaps this was only the case when the proprietor, or buyer, or whoever the pompous man was, was not actually in the building. The floor, in particular, did not seem to have been swept very thoroughly, or very recently, and pieces of paper, vegetable scraps and other less-identifiable items were littered around in many places.

Even so, consignments were flowing smoothly into, and occasionally out of, the operational goods portal set into the wall opposite from the team of packers. It was extremely similar to the one Kevin had seen before in this world, and clearly under the

competent control of two men who were alternately gesturing calmly and chatting to one another.

While some of the arriving goods were being shepherded onto horse-drawn wagons, or even the occasional hand-cart, most used the same floating magical pallets that Kevin had seen before. As he watched, a floating pallet of plastic packaging trays – the same kind that were being used to package the vegetables – arrived through the portal and was delivered to the vegetable workers.

While Kevin stopped at the doorway surveying the busy scene, Bret strode further into the building and spoke to one of the people operating the portal. After a few minutes conversation, Bret beckoned Kevin over.

“I think you need to hear this,” he said, although it turned out that Bret meant it only figuratively, since he smoothly translated the warehouseman’s words for Kevin’s benefit.

Through Bret, the portal operator confirmed that there had been some unusual – even suspicious activity. A few days ago, a large crate arrived, to be collected. It was man-handled and then opened on the premises by a group of rather large men, rather than being removed intact by the magical transports that would normally be used to collect an express-delivery package.

“They wouldn’t let the portal workers watch,” Bret translated, “And forced everyone to leave the building.”

Bret lowered his voice.

“Frankly,” he whispered, “I think he was scared. Anyway, when he came back, everyone had left, with just the crate left behind.”

“Can we see the package?” Kevin asked, and Bret translated.

The warehouseman pointed at a large wooden box in one corner which appeared to have been crudely levered open, and which was, worryingly, about the size and shape of a coffin. At first, it seemed that there was no evidence that it had even contained anything: just plain wood inside and out.

Bret and Kevin knelt and examined it closely, Kevin eventually locating a few threads adhering to the rough edges which might have come from some kind of blanket. He held them up for inspection.

Bret grimaced.

“Well, at least we know that she was reasonably comfortable – and hopefully unconscious – during most of his confinement,” he said.

Kevin was fuming.

“What happened to the men who came here?” He wondered aloud, the anger apparent in the tone of his voice, “Any idea where they might have gone?”

Bret translated his words. The warehouse worker glanced slightly nervously at Kevin, who nodded and smiled encouragingly. Emboldened, the worker beckoned them to follow further into the darkened recesses of the building. He pulled open a back door and pointed across the fields where, in the far distance, some kind of low building could just be made out.

## Chapter Twenty Four

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It took a disappointingly long time for Bret to organise a car and driver to take Kevin and himself to University College London. Apparently, the vehicles were in short supply just at the moment; Kevin would only later be informed that this was because one of the fleet had been stolen by Tanji's kidnappers.

While Bret worried over the logistics, Kevin wandered dejectedly along the gravel paths that ran around the edge of the well-tended lawns of Cliviger Grange. At the railings at the far end of the grounds he stopped, looking out over a short drop to carefully-cultivated fields and rolling hills in the distance.

Under other circumstances, he realised, he would have appreciated the beauty of the carefully-chosen location for the Grange, and marvelled at the insight and skill of the original landscape gardeners all those years ago. But all he could think of, right now, was the loss of Tanji and his current inability to do something – anything – about it.

Shaking his head, he turned to continue his circuit of the lawn. Unexpectedly, he came across a set of grotesque heads, apparently carved from stone and embedded in the grass. The four carvings were partially concealed by shrubberies and made from grey stone, now badly worn and lichenous, the same material as had been used for the original walls and buildings.

If Kevin had come across these statues a year or two ago, he would have dismissed them as depicting some mythical heraldic beast – a Griffin, perhaps, or some unspecified gargoyle. But from what he now knew, and after his too-close-for-comfort experiences on safari recently, the heads looked very much like those of dragons.

He hurried closer, crossing the slightly damp grass and squatting to inspect the carvings. He ran his hand over the worn stonework, marvelling at the artistry of the depiction. It was immediately obvious that the artist was familiar with their subject. The level of anatomical detail was profound, and the unknown sculptor must have studied the original creature very closely.

Kevin looked up suddenly, startled by the crunch of a footstep on the gravel of the path behind him. It was Bret, who had jogged across the lawn to catch up with him. Kevin suddenly realised just how far he had wandered from the Grange itself.

“Bret!” he cried, “Is there any news?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid,” the other man replied dourly, “But our car’s ready – finally. So come on.”

Bret set off along the gravel path. Kevin fell silent, trailing along after the other man. Bret stopped and turned, watching the dejected-looking Kevin closely for a few moments.

“There’s a story behind those carvings,” he said, breaking into the other man’s despondent thoughts, “Would you like to hear it?”

Kevin looked up, nodding. The two men fell into step along the pathway.

“Well,” Bret began, “These carvings were erected centuries ago, to commemorate a gallant crew who tracked down a flight of dragons who had managed to fly undetected – or nearly so – through the barrier and over the straights.”

Kevin nodded, obscurely pleased that he had correctly identified the creature so carefully depicted.

“Now this in itself was very unusual,” Bret continued, “Dragons are perennially uneasy about the sea, and will not usually fly over any large bodies of water. There are various stories of how the Dragons had been persuaded to overcome their dread. Some say that the beasts were just ravenous, distracted as their hunger overcame their fear of the water.”

He paused, looking askance at Kevin for a moment.

“Other tales suggest that the creatures were driven across from my world, although exactly how, or why, remains a mystery. Probably just some mischief and mayhem – although, if that is true, it must have been quite a lot of trouble for the perpetrators to arrange.”

He stopped again, looking obscurely puzzled for a moment.

“Dragons are now an endangered species,” Bret continued, “As I think you already know.”

Kevin nodded again.

“But not so long ago, they were regarded as dangerous vermin. In general, these large species were left alone as long as they stayed in remote regions, but would have to be trapped and killed if they strayed into populated areas.”

“In Lyndesfarne,” Bret explained, “A well-trained cadre – a Guild of Dragon-hunters, if you like – existed to deal with this kind of threat. Nowadays, these men and women have been redeployed to ensure that the dragons are protected, and that they do not leave their reservations.”

Kevin guessed that the weather-beaten men who had acted as safari guides for their tour were the modern-day representatives of this particular profession.

“Anyway,” the other man continued, “The arrival of dragons in this world caused considerable disruption and panic – more from the human activities fleeing from the area than the depredations of the animals themselves. But there was nothing, and no-one, in your world equipped to tackle this problem.”

“So this had never happened before?” Kevin asked, “No dragons in this world?”

“As far as we know, no,” Bret confirmed, adding in a slightly conspiratorial tone, “Although there have been similar incidents since.”

Kevin let this pass, by now more interested – in spite of himself – in the story of the stone dragon heads.

“The dragon hunters used, as a matter of course, magical – or at least magically-enhanced – weapons and devices in their trade; the kind of weaponry which was, quite deliberately, not available in your world.”

“Despite this handicap,” Bret continued, “A brave group of Guardians from this world was rapidly assembled, and based themselves in one of those castles not far from here, one of those you’ve probably noticed dotted along the coastline hereabouts.”

Kevin wondered silently which of the rambling piles of stone he had indeed noted was the one, but Bret was not forthcoming.

“They were soon assisted by a very few of the professional dragon-hunters who could be co-opted across the straights at short notice. Under-equipped and inexperienced, they nonetheless tracked down the dragons – five of them, according to the stories I’ve heard – in short order.”

“So this all happened around here, then?” Kevin asked.

“Yes, indeed,” Bret replied, “Dragons tend not to travel far if they don’t have to – they get contented and lazy quick enough. In any case, the impromptu dragon-hunters managed to kill them, at great risk and considerable personal bravery, and were roundly feted afterwards for their courage.”

“Surely the dragons were seen by lots of people?” Kevin wanted to know, “So how was it all kept secret?”

“Of course people saw them,” Bret agreed, “But this was a long time ago, and the observers were generally the underprivileged and inarticulate, those likely to believe in all kinds of myths and stories: devils and faeries, angels and demons.”

Kevin supposed that medieval attitudes would have allowed all sorts of fantastical goings-on to be regarded as essentially just everyday paranormal phenomena, and therefore not really investigated in any serious way. He did wonder wryly about the obvious comparison with today's attitude to reports of UFOs.

"In any case, the authorities wanted to express their gratitude to the local heros, many of whom had never even seen a dragon before, let alone killed one," Bret resumed, "Traditionally, in Lyndesfarne, dragon hunters are presented with the stuffed heads of their first kill."

"But those aren't stuffed heads," Kevin retorted, adding more thoughtfully, "Are they?"

Bret shook his head.

"No. They wanted to present them with taxidermy heads but it was concluded that even real – albeit stuffed – animals would have been too much of a risky exposure. So they commissioned carved stone heads instead."

This made some kind of sense to Kevin, being very familiar with monumental effigies of fantastic creatures on all kinds of public and private buildings.

"So why were they buried?" he asked.

"Well, we just don't know for sure," Bret said, "Perhaps it was just paranoia – a fear that even these representations might be too easily recognised."

"All right, this all seems very reasonable," Kevin replied thoughtfully, obscurely cheered by the tale, "So why dig them up again?"

Bret smiled wryly.

"Frankly, the location of the stone carvings had been forgotten," he replied, "It was a complete accident that they were rediscovered at all."

Bret explained that, during the excavations to put in the foundations for one of the new blocks now erected in the grounds of Cliviger Grange, the workers had unearthed one of the heads. Work had stopped immediately, and more careful archaeological explorations were instigated. Three more heads were found after further extensive digging around the site.

"Legend says that there were originally five heads, but the last one seems to have completely disappeared," Bret said, "Where it is now, no-one appears to know. And there was insufficient time to complete a full investigation – the pressure to resume the buildings work forced them to abandon the exploratory diggings."



Kevin knew from his own experience that considerable delays to the construction of a building could be caused to archaeological finds, and he was aware that some less reputable contractors habitually covered up such a find just to keep the works on schedule.

“In any case,” Bret concluded, “The four heads which were recovered were re-sited in the lawns where you see them now, just as a historical curiosity for students and visitors alike.”

## Chapter Twenty Five

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The area at the back of the warehouse building appeared to be a plantation of large and vaguely cactus-like plants, with sharp thorns on the leaves and strange tree-like blooms projecting six or eight feet into the air. Kevin was not absolutely sure what the plant was, but he strongly suspected it might be Sisal – which he knew was cultivated extensively for raw materials for packaging and building materials.

In the direction that had been indicated, there was a low building set some way away from the village and warehouse. The two men made their way towards it bending uncomfortably close to the ground, crouched down as much as possible. Together, they scrambled along the rows of the spiky planks, occasionally cutting through the rows as a convenient gap in the plantings presented itself.

By this time it was getting very dark, because of the short twilight period always found in near-equatorial regions. Kevin, who was brought up in more temperate latitudes, found the sudden transition to darkness quite a surprise. There was some fitful illumination from various sources, including some dim lights – presumably magical – inside the building itself which could just be seen through the – obviously non-magical – windows. The sky was clear, and bright stars and a waning moon also provided enough light so that they could avoid the sharp-leaved plants.

The two men paused for a moment, hidden behind a particularly large clump. Bret drew his slate from his bag, and started writing furiously on it. Kevin felt he dare not interrupt his flow to ask to whom he was sending the messages. A faint light was emitted from the surface of the magical device, enough to allow Bret to be able to see what he was writing. A few moments later, he used a couple of sweeping, almost violent gestures to send the communications on their way.

After twenty or so more uncomfortable minutes, the two men found themselves lurking in the undergrowth outside the building within which Kevin and Bret strongly suspect that Tanji was being held. It was of a single-story construction, with wide double doors front and centre, and several windows to each side, all of which stood open to catch the cool evening breeze.

When he had been on holiday in this region with Tanji, he had noticed that even the smallest and meanest of dwellings had clearly

had a good deal of care and attention lavished on them – woodwork freshly painted, floors swept and windows recently cleaned, and with flowers and plants for decoration set out in pots and vases.

Even in the near-darkness, Kevin could see that this farmstead was really rather shabby. There was patchy paintwork on both woodwork and walls, and the stucco itself was falling off in a number of places. It was roofed with what appeared to be ceramic tiles, but several were cracked or missing altogether.

It was altogether the most run-down building Kevin had ever seen in the world of Lyndesfarne. In a world where most places gave the feeling of having been carefully used and looked after for several hundred years, he considered, this building gave the distinct impression of indifferent maintenance and very infrequent occupation.

There were a couple of large men – Kevin could not but help use the words “goons” in the privacy of his own head – on the dusty veranda. Even so, the building was not very seriously guarded – altogether very slack, at least by the standards Kevin would have expected from Hollywood movies.

As Bret and Kevin watched, a third man appeared on the veranda from inside the building. He gave the distinct impression of being in charge, Kevin thought, judging by the way the two goons stood up straighter. The new arrival said a few words, inaudible at the distance to the watchers, then wandered back indoors.

“Who’s that?” Kevin whispered to Bret.

“I don’t know,” the other man replied, “But he sure looks like he’s in charge.”

Although he could not be sure, Kevin had the distinct impression that he recognised the boss man, but he could not bring his identity to mind.

“Do you think this is the right place?” Kevin whispered.

Bret caught his eye and nodded.

“There are too many men hanging around,” he replied, equally quietly, “Apparently doing nothing. It’s suspicious.”

Kevin nodded.

“So how are we going to find Tanji?”

“Well, it’s not a very big building,” Bret answered softly, “And we know how big the room she’s being held in.”

“So?” Kevin was puzzled.

“So, her room’s certain to have an outside wall,” Bret continued, looking smug, “And it didn’t have a window that we could see.”

Kevin thought back. Every time that Tanji had appeared in a window, the room had been lit by the artificial – and magical – lighting he had almost become familiar with.

“You’re right,” he agreed, suddenly getting the point, “So the room can’t be at the front – there are too many real windows and doorways – or on this side, either.”

“Right,” Bret said, “So let’s make our way around the back.”

Moving as quietly as he could, Kevin followed Bret, forcing his way through the vegetation, gaining in the process a number of cuts and scratches which would, he suspected, be irritatingly painful later on, but he was happy to ignore just now. They finished up hidden behind a low wall, just a few yards from the rear of the ramshackle building, with yet more of the spiky bushes on either side.

“This looks likely,” Kevin whispered, pointing at a wide blank space in the middle of the back wall. Bret nodded. Kevin was suddenly very tense, realising that Tanji was, in all probability, only a few yards away.

“How are we going to get her out?” He asked Bret.

The other man grinned suddenly, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

“I have some magic which will assist,” he replied.

“Ah!”

“But it’s a one-shot,” Bret continued more soberly, “And it’s bound to make a lot of noise.”

He pulled what looked like a piece of chunky jewellery from inside his shirt. It was a pendant of dull blue stone, with a few rather worn-looking carvings on the surface Kevin could see. Kevin must have suddenly looked very worried.

“So this is what we have to do,” Bret continued, not very reassuringly, “So listen carefully.”

Kevin could not suppress a very visible gulp.

“I’m going to make a hole in the wall,” Bret said quietly, looking serious, “I want you to grab Tanji and run, that way” – he indicated the direction back towards the warehouse – “and take the portal out of here.”

Kevin nodded.

“But where should we go?”

“Anywhere,” Bret replied, “Run as fast as you can; don’t look back; don’t wait for me.”

He clasped Kevin’s hand suddenly.

“I’ve got a few more items which will slow down any pursuit,” he added with a toothy grin, “Once you’ve got your bearings, make your way to my parents’ house and tell them what’s happened.”

“OK,” Kevin murmured, feeling suddenly very much out of his league.

“And, take my slate,” Bret added.

“But I don’t know how to use it!” Kevin exclaimed, louder than he intended.

“Shh!” The other man whispered, “No, but Tanji will. Give it to her. She’ll be able to get word to the Boards, and to my mother. I’ll join you at my house as soon as I can.”

Kevin nodded his understanding.

“Let’s go!”

Together, the two men leapt over the wall and rushed up to the building. Bret gestured feverishly with one hand at the pendant held at arms length in the other. There was a soft *crump*, rather than the bang that Kevin was expecting, and a section of the wall shaped like an arch suddenly collapsed, the solid brick and plaster turned to fine dust.

“Go!” Bret shouted.

Kevin ducked inside. The magical lights were still on, but vision in the room was obscured by dust and smoke. Tanji had jumped up from the bed where she had been laying. She was fully dressed, including her boots, perhaps trusting she might have to leave at a moment’s notice.

“I knew you’d come!” she cried joyfully, launching herself at him.

Kevin kissed her urgently, then set her down carefully and grabbed her hand.

“We’ve got to run,” he said urgently, “Come on!”

Together they rushed from the room through the hole Bret’s magic had created and set off in the direction he had indicated previously. Behind them, the sound of the door to the cell being slammed open indicated the entrance of the henchmen they had been observing earlier.

Kevin did not hesitate. He dashed in the direction Bret had indicated. Behind them came the sounds of pursuit – the crash of heavy men forcing their way through the sisal plantation. Kevin ran as hard as he could, quietly giving mental thanks to the personal circumstances that had led him to work out on a regular basis.

Bret’s advice – “don’t look back” – echoed in his mind and he put every ounce of concentration into moving as quickly as possible

through the obstructions formed by the plantation. Shouts and screams from behind them confirmed that they were still being followed by at least one of the goons Kevin had identified earlier, although the noises also suggested that they were being hampered by the thorny plantings

Kevin crashed through the back door of the warehouse, followed immediately by Tanji – the very exit that he and Bret had departed through less than an hour before. Followed by the astonished eyes of several workers, the two fugitives headed for the portal that he had noted on his earlier visit.

Hand in hand, Kevin and Tanji dashed into the portal archway. At the moment of transition, Kevin perceived that they were still being followed by at least some of their pursuers. They emerged from the portal at considerable speed. They ran full-tilt across the portal junction dodging floating pallets of goods of every size and description. They made their way speedily down one of the long corridors, typical of such stations, with portal archways spaced on each side.

There was still a trail of noises of complaint behind them.

“Come on!” Tanji urged, tugging at Kevin’s hand.

Suddenly, their pursuers seemed to be gaining – perhaps he and Tanji were beginning to tire – and Kevin redoubled his exertions. Tanji indicated an arch ahead of them.

“That one,” she shouted.

She dashed through the archway, setting off what sounded to Kevin suspiciously like a warning hooter. Kevin followed closely, suddenly finding it incredibly difficult to move, like trying to run up a very steep hill. As if he had reached the top of the incline, he suddenly toppled forward and found himself sprawled on the floor next to Tanji.

Their pursuers were nowhere to be seen, and goods pallets were beginning to move through the portal sedately in both directions, their handlers politely ignoring the flustered travellers still sprawled on the floor.

“What happened?” Kevin asked Tanji, still breathless after his exertion.

“We just made it through the portal before it switched destination,” she replied, also trying to catch her breath.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you certainly don’t want to be half-way though when the destination changes,” Tanji explained, “Half of you would end up in one place, and half in another.”

Kevin suppressed the revulsion which had been the result of the sudden mental image.

“I can understand that,” he replied earnestly.

“So, the portals are designed to progressively discourage travellers from entering for a few seconds just before the switch,” she explained, “It gets harder and harder to enter, and finally impossible. Those guys, whoever they were, must have bounced off the entrance just before it switched, or were sent somewhere else entirely.”

She stood up, tugging urgently at Kevin’s arm to make him move.

“We’d better get going, before they find an alternative route,” she said.

It took quite some time to get to Bret’s family home. As far as Kevin could tell, they followed a roundabout route, keeping moving even if the portal taken does not really get closer to their destination. They were trying, it seemed to Kevin, to select portals whose destinations were about to change, presumably to throw off anyone still attempting to follow them.

They stopped only twice, once so that Tanji could write on the slate Bret had pressed into his hands. She was clearly sending messages, all written in the Lyndesfarne tongue: the meaning or recipients Kevin could not begin to decipher. They also paused for a second brief moment outside a shop selling women’s clothing in one of the near-indistinguishable portal termini they were passing through.

“Have you got any money?” Tanji demanded.

“Of course,” Kevin responded, wondering what was going on, “Here, take this.”

He extracted from his rucksack a stack of Lyndesfarne coins representing, he realised later, quite a lot of money for walking-around cash. In the fashion of coinage in this magical world, the coins were all pressed together to form a package which was no larger or heavier than a single coin of the same denomination.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the currency from his outstretched hand.

She disappeared into the shop’s changing room, watched nervously by Kevin, clutching the first blouse and trousers that looked as if they might fit her. In Kevin’s limited experience of standing outside changing rooms in ladies’ clothes shops, Tanji performed an exceptionally rapid change and re-appeared wearing the new garments in a matter of seconds, it seemed.

“This’ll do,” she said, glancing momentarily in a mirror – a mirror that Kevin belatedly realised did not reverse left and right, but showed Tanji and himself exactly as others would see them.

The image showed himself looking tired, worn and distinctly dishevelled. Tanji, on the other hand, looked rested and bright-eyed, full of life and energy. She had survived the ordeal of her imprisonment much better than he had expected and indeed, he considered, better than he would have done himself.

Tanji nodded at her image, then marched over to the counter to pay for the clothing. A few moments later they were on the move again, walking swiftly towards yet another portal that Tanji had identified.

“What was that all about,” Kevin hissed as they marched along..

“I wanted to change my appearance,” she replied, “Besides, I’ve been wearing the same clothes for days.”

She hesitated, then added, “I’m also just a bit concerned about tracing magic – the kind of thing that might have been hidden in my clothes.”

Finally, they arrived at a small portal terminus building that Kevin was certain he recognised.

“We’re here, aren’t we?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tanji replied, looking immensely relieved, “Thank goodness.”

She gripped his hand harder, as if she never wanted to let him go. It was but a short walk to Bret’s family house from the portal terminus. They were both even more relieved when, in answer to their urgent knocking, the front door was opened almost immediately by Bret himself.



## Chapter Twenty Six

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Kevin fell in at the door, practically hugging Bret both for physical support and in relief at his evident survival. After a long moment, Bret gently disengaged himself, then briefly embraced Tanji while uttering a few ritual-sounding words that Kevin did not understand, but would later come to understand were a formal expression of thanks for survival under dangerous conditions.

Bret ushered both of them inside with alacrity.

“What took you so long?” he asked, smiling widely but also looking distinctly relieved.

Kevin and Tanji looked at each other.

“We took the long way round,” Tanji volunteered, suddenly smiling in relief, “I wanted to be sure that we weren’t being followed.”

“Successfully, I feel sure,” Bret replied, glancing left and right through the door before closing it firmly.

The new arrivals were immediately ushered through to meet the Ferryman who was seated by the fire in the spacious living room both Kevin and Tanji had enjoyed before. She stood up as they entered the room and walked forward, arms reaching towards them and then clasping them both warmly by the hand.

She ushered them to the homely and comfortable seating by the fire. Kevin suddenly realised that he felt cold, no doubt a side-effect of his sudden transition from the tropics to the temperate climate of this region of Lyndesfarne. Tanji too seemed to be feeling chilly and huddled close to Kevin, perhaps for warmth or just for the comfort of his presence.

Bret’s father, his normally jovial and bearded face looking unusually troubled, emerged from the kitchen – his permanent abode, as far as Kevin could tell – and offered them hot drinks, food and wine, all of which Kevin accepted with extreme gratitude. The older man bustled backwards and forwards, serving first the drinks and, shortly afterwards, a delightful selection of hearty sandwiches, each generously filled with cold meats and cheese and salad and pickles.

Kevin found that he was extremely hungry and thirsty, suddenly realising that he had not eaten anything all day. Tanji also gratefully accepted a glass of the wine although she did not seem to be

particularly hungry. Perhaps, he thought, she had lost her appetite during her forced confinement.

Both Bret and his mother remained silent until Kevin and Tanji managed to get a few mouthfuls of food and drink inside them. Even so, they were clearly bursting with questions and were soon unable to contain themselves any longer. It very quickly became evident that they wanted to know what has transpired since the two lovers had sped from their pursuers.

The two of them, but particularly Tanji, explained at some length the sequence of events. For some reason, she felt a need to talk and talk; perhaps, Kevin felt, this was a side-effect of her recent isolation. In any case all of the description of her imprisonment – which was uniformly dull and boring – and much of the account of the much more exciting escape was related by Tanji herself.

The Ferryman sat impassibly during the account, although her son occasionally interjected with questions for clarification from time to time. Bret repeatedly asked Tanji for details about her captors, but she was not really able to tell them very much.

“I never got a clear view of anyone,” she explained, “And no-one ever came into the room where I was being held. Even the food was delivered through a slot.”

“What did they sound like?” Kevin asked suddenly.

“I don’t really know,” she replied with a shake of the head, “I didn’t hear any conversations, other than a few barked instructions from the other side of the door.”

More questions from Bret and answers from Tanji failed to elucidate any further pertinent information, although Kevin was vaguely horrified by her veiled description of the primitive washing and ablutions facilities, upon which she did not particularly want to dwell.

The talk then turned to the kidnapping itself, although Tanji could not remember very much of this either. Apparently, she had been grabbed as soon as she had opened the door of Kevin’s flat; a cloth was pressed over her nose and mouth, and she could not remember any more until she arrived in the warehouse in the other world.

“I’m sorry I’m not being much help,” Tanji said after several minutes.

“No, no, that’s not true,” Kevin answered, as the others made suitably demurring sounds.

“But I take it you guessed the location,” she added, suddenly smiling widely at Kevin.

“Oh, yes,” Kevin grinned in return, “Those messages of yours were successfully conveyed all right.”

The Ferryman leaned forward suddenly.

“It was indeed very clever,” she asked, looking directly at Tanji, “But how did you think of it?”

“I don’t really know,” Tanji admitted, “I was half-awake, groggy, barely able to stand and being supported on either side. I just saw that label lying on the floor, and stepped on it when I was being dragged out of that horrid crate. Then I lost consciousness again – some kind of sleeping drug, I think.”

She shook her head, perhaps trying to dislodge some unpleasant memories.

“Somehow it remained stuck to the sole of my foot,” she continued, “I wasn’t wearing any shoes when I was grabbed. When I woke up – in that poky little room – it was already sticky and decomposing from having been through the barrier. That’s how I knew which World I was in. The label had entirely dissolved by the time the window was opened again. So I had to think of some other way of hinting to you where I was.”

“It was brilliant, quite brilliant,” Kevin reiterated, leaning over the table to kiss Tanji.

Encouraged by Bret’s father, the company returned their attention to the food in front of them. While they were eating, Bret spoke in quiet tones, telling them about what had happened since they fled the scene of Tanji’s imprisonment.

“After the two of you ran back towards the warehouse,” he began, “I started shouting to attract the attention of the guards before setting off in a different direction, tangential to the one you took. After a few dozen paces, I dived for the cover of the thick foliage, relying on my watcher’s cloak to become invisible.”

Kevin nodded sagely over his ham sandwich. The properties of Watchers’ cloaks, and even their existence, were not very widely known about, even in this World. As far as he could tell, the Guild and Guardians did their best to keep these things to themselves. He would later find himself wondering at length on Bret’s statement, as he realised the mystery man who dumped the body on the bridge was also using such a cloak.

“Anyway,” Bret continued, “From such cover provided by my cloak and the local vegetation, I was able to deploy a variety of additional bangs and flashes to distract the men who were supposed to on guard – using up most of my small stock of such devices.”

“Which reminds me,” he continued, turning to the Ferryman, “I’ll need to requisition some more, err...”

He reverted to the Lyndesfarne language and uttered a series of complex words which Kevin assumed must be some fairly technical descriptions of the magical item he wanted to be replaced.

“We’ll sort that out tomorrow,” his Mother replied in English, smiling indulgently.

Bret continued his account of events. The bulk of the group of kidnappers – a bunch of heavily-muscled and dangerous-looking people that Kevin thought entirely deserved the description of henchmen – had followed him into the fields and spread out to search for him.

“They did not find me – although it was close a time or two,” he explained, “But two of the guards insisted in following you, despite my best efforts.”

“We gave them the slip at the second portal,” Tanji reiterated, slightly extremely smugly.

She explained briefly about the trick with the protective field at the portal entrance that she and Kevin had navigated at the last moment. Bret nodded, obviously appreciating both the skill and the humour of the situation.

“Anyway,” Bret resumed, “After twenty minutes or so, they guards gave up their search and returned to the house where Tanji had been detained. The man we both saw” – he nodded at Kevin – “the one who appeared to be very much in charge, directed the group to pack up their gear and depart in short order. I last saw them moving at a fast march along the road in the opposite direction to the warehouse.”

“There’s another portal not far along that road,” Kevin interjected, “I think that’s the one that Tanji and I used when we visited the area.”

Tanji nodded in agreement.

“So they probably departed by that route,” Bret concluded, “They could be anywhere by now.”

The company sat in thoughtful silence for a few moments, Kevin taking the opportunity to help himself to another of the excellent sandwiches.

“You know,” he said, “I feel sure that I know that man – the leader – from somewhere, but I just can’t put my finger on where I’ve seen him before.”

Bret looked at him strangely for a few moments.

“I know what you mean,” he said slowly, “But I’m at a loss, too. Let me know if you recall anything.”

Kevin nodded, then asked, “So what did you do after the heavies left?”

“Not much,” Bret responded promptly, “I stayed hidden just in case any of the kidnapers had been left behind, and kept a watch on the house.”

“Was there anyone there?” Kevin asked.

“As it turned out, no,” Bret replied, “They had long gone by the time a contingent of the local police and Guardians arrived. They had been alerted by the messages I sent before we broke Tanji from her prison.”

Kevin nodded his understanding. He had not been quite sure who Bret had been sending messages to before the breakout.

“So, once I was sure who they were, I made myself known to the Guardians,” Bret continued, “Made a report, and then came back here by the most direct route, as quickly as I could.”

The food and drink, not to mention the warmth of the room and the feeling of security, had made both Kevin and Tanji feel very drowsy. Tanji, in particular, was visibly fading, her head by now resting on Kevin’s shoulder.

“I think it’s time we let these two get some rest,” the Ferryman said kindly, ostensibly addressing her remarks to Bret, “Perhaps you can help me with these reports for a while?”

Bret and his mother moved to the large dining table where Kevin had enjoyed several mealtimes as a guest in the past. The table was now littered with papers, which Kevin imagined to be reports of various kinds, although he had no easy way – short of getting Tanji to interpret for him – of finding out their exact contents.

“You’re quite safe here,” the Ferryman said, now addressing Kevin and Tanji directly, “So go and get some sleep and we’ll resume in the morning.”

She seated herself at the head of the table and picked up a sheaf of papers for close scrutiny.

Smiling indulgently, Bret guided the two lovers downstairs to a guest bedroom on a lower floor, the very same one they had occupied when they had visited on the previous visit.

“Sleep well,” he advised, “I suspect we’ll all be having a busy day tomorrow.”

He closed the door behind him.

Once alone, Kevin and Tanji did something they had not ever done before. Without uttering a word, Kevin filled the bathtub with warm water, adding a measure of the bath salts that had been thoughtfully provided by their hosts. Tanji slipped out of her clothes

with a minimum of fuss and slid into the steaming scented water. Kevin rapidly followed suit, stepping into the water at the other end of the tub. They sat together in the bath for a long while enjoying a long soak, neither of them speaking very much and neither more than two-thirds awake, intermittently soaping each other in a luxurious fashion. Afterwards, they helped to towel each other dry.

“Let’s go to bed,” Kevin whispered.

Tanji nodded and took him by the hand.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

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After their bath, Kevin and Tanji slipped under the sheets. He felt initially restless, wanting only to hold Tanji close, holding her like he never wanted to be apart from her again. They moved together, making love slowly and in a reassuringly leisurely fashion. It was a wonderfully familiar sensation, one that Kevin had begun to think he would never be able to feel that relaxed every again.

Inevitably, they both fell asleep afterwards, holding each other as close as they could manage. Kevin's slumber was unbroken and dreamless, as far as he could remember. He was awakened very early, feeling enormously rested, by the first light of dawn entering the room; once again, he had forgotten to darken the magical windows before falling asleep.

Kevin lay awake for a long time, his hands behind his head on the feather pillow, listening to Tanji's soft and regular breathing next to him. He thought back to the time they had first met, when she was his official Guide, helping him – as an inexperienced Visitor – find his way around the country of Lyndesfarne during the construction of the New Bridge.

He smiled to himself, shaking his head gently in the semi-darkness. He had found himself thinking about the very first time the two of them have made the crossing from his own world to this one. Tanji's shapeshifting ability had taken him unawares and he had been shaken to discover the possibilities of this magic.

Later she had explained that this was something entirely commonplace in this world, that most people could make some conscious change of appearance. It was something that teenagers tended to experiment with – as with clothes and makeup in his own world.

Kevin's thoughts drifted onwards, remembering that other occasion when Bret had shown him the more radical changes that she was able to make – to take on the form and characteristics of a man at will. With the benefit of hindsight, it seemed impossible that he had known her for quite some time before he had realised that she was in reality a woman. Apparently, this was a rare gift – few people could manage such an extreme change of appearance.

Suddenly alert, Kevin sat bolt upright, struck with a flash of inspiration and insight. He shook Tanji awake urgently.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded, sitting up and blinking groggily at him.

“Nothing’s wrong,” he replied, almost shouting in his enthusiasm, “Quite the opposite. But I need to find Bret or his Mother right away.”

Kevin sprang from the bed, followed much more reluctantly by Tanji. The two of them quickly drew on bedroom robes – warm soft oversized garments very much like the dressing-gowns Kevin knew from home, although he could not quite identify the material from which they were made. He then yanked open the bedroom door and hurried upstairs to the main room.

Bret and the Ferryman were still seated at the dining table where Kevin had last seen them, still in the same clothes, and giving the distinct impression that they had not been to bed at all. The table in front of them was littered with papers, maps, slates and other devices whose purpose he could not fathom.

“Demaz!” he yelled, “It was Demaz, at Tanji’s prison.”

“What do you mean?” Bret demanded, rising to his feet.

“The man I said I recognised,” Kevin spluttered, “The one in charge at Tanji’s prison – you remember?”

Bret looked puzzled.

“I remember what you said,” he replied, “But who is he?”

Kevin glanced at Tanji, who had staggered up the stairs after him and was now looking as startled as the rest of them.

“You remember Demaz,” he said to her urgently, “The man we met at the, err, that beach holiday place, whatever it was called.”

Tanji blinked at him, then turned to Bret and uttered a stream of syllables which Kevin belatedly recognised as Demaz’s full name in the Lyndesfarne language, together with the name of the resort location he had visited in her company all those months ago.

As one, Bret and the Ferryman turned to look at each other. There was a pause, a beat, where no-one moved or spoke. Then pandemonium broke out. The Ferryman stood suddenly and strode over to the door and opened it, shouting loudly for some unseen assistants.

A handful of Guardians entered, looking very much as if they had just been roused from sleep, but they rapidly became more alert when they saw the determined expression on the Ferryman’s face. She started issuing rapid-fire instructions, pointing at first one and then another of the troupe. Shortly afterwards, several of the Guardians left the room at that near-run that Kevin understood was usually described in military parlance as “at the double”.



Meanwhile, Bret had grabbed a slate from the clutter on the table, and started scribbling furiously. Kevin and Tanji looked on, both shocked and amazed at the reaction that had ensued. Bret looked up at them, simultaneously gesturing to send the third of the messages he had just written.

“This name is known to us,” he said grimly.

“I think I should have guessed that, from your reaction,” Kevin replied, “But just who is he?”

“As far as we know,” Bret replied, still focussing most of his attention on the slate in front of him, “He’s a, well, perhaps the word is mercenary, a soldier of fortune. But, we know he has connections with a certain dissident group – a loose and shadowy organisation which appears to endorse the forcible closure of the links between the Two Worlds.”

Kevin was flabbergasted. Tanji, too, seemed at a loss for words. The Ferryman waved them closer, indicating that they should sit themselves in chairs around the large table.

“I think that this news confirms our suspicions,” she began, “We were already beginning to conclude that kidnapping Tanji was a ruse, a gambit – and we think it was to distract us, to prevent us from finding out something about the death of Doctor Wollack.”

The Ferryman paused, looking preternaturally stern and serious.

“The question now,” she resumed, “Is whether they have succeeded.”

Kevin was dumbstruck for another long moment. He had been so focussed on rescuing Tanji that he had lost sight of the ongoing investigation into the death on the new bridge.

“But they weren’t expecting us!” he burst out, “They were surprised, surely?”

The Ferryman looked even grimmer.

“Well, maybe, or maybe not,” she replied, “From what Bret’s already told us, it seems they were ready to move out at a moment’s notice. And we’ve lost track of them – although I have instigated a high-level alert – and I’ve just added Demaz to that call. So maybe we’ll hear something from that.”

She sat back.

“But frankly I doubt it; whoever is behind all this – and I doubt that Demaz is the brains of the operation – has been very clever so far and may still be ahead of us.”

“So what can we do?” Kevin asked despairingly, sounding rather whiney even to his own ears.

Bret's mother looked at him surprisingly tolerantly under the circumstances.

"For some reason, it seems you are the key to all this. Our adversary appears to be afraid that some insight of yours may foil his plans. Hence this elaborate plot to keep you distracted."

"Whatever have I done?" Kevin muttered, holding his head in his hands.

The Ferryman snorted.

"Well, spotting the near-invisible person on the bridge, for a start," she said shortly, "That must have rattled them, whoever they are. But they must have been aware of your potential of disruption for quite some time before that, judging by the effort they've put into giving you the run-around over that last few days."

Kevin looked up, still feeling at a loss.

"So, we need to help you, to support you in unravelling this tangle," she continued, "And we need to keep you – and Tanji, of course – safe while you undertake it."

Kevin felt entirely helpless, uncertain, at a complete loss. The pressure of expectation on him was so very high, and there was nothing in any part of his professional or personal experience which gave him any grounds for confidence.

The Ferryman evidently noticed his mental anguish.

"Now, we may well find out more about what Demaz has been up to," she said, looking resolute and picking up a sheaf of papers from the table-top.

"In the meantime, there's another piece of intelligence which has arrived while you were sleeping. In fact, several related items – all of which I think you should know about."

In spite of himself, Kevin sat up and paid attention. The funk which had enveloped him seemed to dissipate somewhat as he focussed on the news that Bret's mother had to impart.

"Firstly, I have received a post-mortem report on the death of Andrew Wollack," she began, "It appears that he died from a cracked skull."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Tanji, and Kevin's attention snapped back. The Ferryman raised her eyebrows briefly, then continued.

"The blow was probably intended only to knock him out. But Andrew was a rather frail person, it seems, and he died a little later, probably without regaining consciousness."

"So why was his body being transported to the bridge?" Kevin wondered aloud, half to himself.

“It wasn’t deliberate, I think,” The Ferryman replied, “Whoever it was, they probably thought he was still alive and indeed he may well have been while he was being carried over the causeway.”

She nodded in the Bret’s direction.

“We think they had intended to transport him to Lyndesfarne, probably for questioning. They needed to understand what he had discovered, and to whom he had communicated this information. Later he would probably have been subjected to a mind-wipe before returning to your world – although being made to forget so much of his life might have damaged him, mentally – even turned him into a vegetable.”

Kevin was suddenly reminded that he had nearly been subjected to one himself, only a few months before, and it might have been carried though if it was not for the intervention of the Ferryman herself. The thought that he might have been forcibly made to forget about Lyndesfarne and – more importantly – Tanji gave him the shivers. Moreover, he had not previously appreciated the risk to his mental integrity – his very sanity – that had been threatened by this procedure.

He shook his head to clear his mind of these dismal thoughts.

“So why was his body left in the centre of the bridge?” he asked the Ferryman.

“Well,” she replied, “It’s clear that someone had managed to smuggle a Watcher’s cloak into your world which concealed their movements effectively. But, its magic was disrupted by the effects of the barrier, which coincides with the exact centre of the New Bridge.”

Kevin was of course well aware of this, having carefully designed the bridge – in conjunction with Bret – to ensure that the short section which spanned the barrier used technologies which could be relied upon to work correctly in this region.

“Our best guess is that the slight failure of the magical clothing – which was presumably sensed by whoever it was – caused them to panic, and they simply dumped the body and ran.”

The ferryman glanced meaningfully at her son.

“In any case, there’s something more important that you should know,” Bret said, “Andrew Wollack was infected by a pathogen. Something virulent – so virulent that the young woman we met on the bridge, and indeed several of her colleagues in the Guardian forces, appear to have been infected by the same bug.”

Kevin leaned forward on the table.

“Is she OK?” he wanted to know.

“She’s now in intensive care, in an isolation ward,” Bret replied, “As are her comrades.”

“And they’re in your world,” the Ferryman added

“Why?” Kevin demanded, confused.

“Simply because there are better medical facilities, at least for this kind of disease, on your side of the crossing.”

“But what about us?” Tanji asked suddenly, “Kevin, and Bret, and me. We were all on the bridge together when the body was there.”

The Ferryman smiled reassuringly.

“We’re pretty sure there’s no threat to you,” she replied, “We think the Guardians were infected when they tried to administer first aid, to resuscitate the stricken man.”

Neither Kevin nor Tanji could quite suppress a sigh of relief at this reassurance.

“So what is this pathogen?” Kevin asked.

“It’s a mutant virus, a version of influenza,” the Ferryman answered, “Our people are working on a vaccination, both here and in your world.”

Once again, Kevin was confused.

“But people don’t die of influenza!” he asserted.

Both Tanji and Bret shook their heads.

“Not true, unfortunately,” Bret said sadly, “Even these days, the old and the weak are at risk – that’s why you have winter flu jabs for vulnerable groups at home.”

“But that’s just a few people,” Kevin insisted, “Not an epidemic killing millions.”

“True,” Bret agreed, “But that’s only a difference of degree.”

“Well, OK,” Kevin conceded, “But it still doesn’t happen very often, to many people.”

“But it has in the past,” Bret went on, “When European explorers first visited remote tropical islands, in your world’s history, the indigenous population was decimated. And there have been flu epidemics in the Twentieth Century, too.”

At this moment, breakfast was served by Bret’s father. He was perhaps aware that he was not expected to contribute to the solving of this mystery, but nevertheless concerned for the welfare of those whose lot it had become. Unsurprisingly, neither Kevin nor Tanji were particularly hungry but were persuaded to chew on a slice of bread and butter, mainly to prevent Bret’s father from being too visibly disappointed.

The breakfast menu also included juice – some blend of fruits that Kevin could not identify but was invigoratingly tangy – and mugs of the stimulating hot chocolate drink which was so popular in this world.

As he ate and drank, Kevin cogitated on the information he had heard. Clearly, there appeared to be some kind of threat from an artificially-induced epidemic, and the unfortunate Andrew had somehow suspected this, or at least that he was discovering something important.

A realisation slowly dawned on Kevin.

“Do you think,” he began through a mouthful of bread and butter, “That Wollack had accidentally – or even deliberately – infected himself and that he was trying to contact the Lyndesfarne authorities, to warn people of the dangers he had discovered?”

Bret and his mother turned to look at each other.

“It’s quite possible,” Bret replied after a long and thoughtful pause, “Perhaps this was why he was intercepted, kidnapped, on his way to the crossing. And perhaps why he was being smuggled back to Lyndesfarne across the New Bridge.”

“So, then, motives for his kidnapping,” Kevin said, nodding and ticking off the items on his fingers, “Andrew Wollack was grabbed and killed because he had – firstly – proved statistically that there had been trans-world epidemics in the past.”

“That’s something which was generally accepted by many of us,” Bret interjected, “But it has to be said that his work showed unequivocally that it was true.”

“More importantly,” Kevin continued, “Andrew had shown that at least one, and probably more than one of these epidemics had been caused deliberately.”

“And, finally,” Bret concluded the other man’s train of thought, “He had identified the signs that another one was about to start, or perhaps was already in progress.”

“Exactly. So,” Kevin said slowly, “This was the kind of thing that an intelligent and studious researcher might turn up. Such a diligent student would want to report this to someone at NISSA, and the obvious person would be his academic supervisor, Wendy Rossiter.”

Bret and his mother nodded slowly in unison.

“There was no-one else he could talk to,” Kevin continued, “No friends, no other academic contacts – at least as far as we know. And neither Wollack nor Rossiter mentioned the findings to Professor Braxton – again, as far as we know – and they certainly should have

done so. We think Rossiter must have communicated with someone else,”

“But who?” Kevin wanted to know.

“I don’t know. But let’s go and find out, shall we,” Bret suggested, stepping towards the cloakroom by the front door and reaching for his staff and robe.

## Chapter Twenty Eight

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Tanji rolled over on the bed to look directly at Kevin. She was gloriously naked, the curve of her body and the colour of her skin amplified by the bright morning sunlight streaming in through the window. Kevin too was naked, lying on top of the covers, lying back against the pillows and headboard with his arms behind his head and a satisfied expression on his face.

“It’s such a lovely morning,” Tanji announced, “Let’s have a picnic.”

Kevin agreed immediately, although he not entirely sure what this might entail in this world. In the event, the picnic turned out to be a simple day trip starting from Tanji’s Aunt and Uncle’s place, where they had been staying.

By the time the lovers had emerged from the bedroom and made their way upstairs to the living area, Tanji’s Uncle had long since departed for his workplace. Kevin knew that Tanji’s uncle took his role very seriously and he suspected that the older man had probably left for his office at least three hours earlier.

Apparently, Tanji’s aunt was already outside, busy around the gardens and grounds, feeding and caring for the menagerie of animals that she kept as pets. The pride of her collection was the miniature dragon, a flying reptile called a Nightwing, which had caused Kevin such alarm on his first visit. Indeed, she now had a breeding pair of the creatures, and Tanji had told him that she was planning on selling on the fledglings. Kevin now understood that they were not particularly rare creatures and that, traditionally, these animals were kept on farms and smallholdings to keep down rats and other vermin.

Kevin felt just a tiny bit guilty for his lie-abed antics, since he himself had a backlog of work to complete. However, he rapidly decided that he was enjoying the break in the world of Lyndesfarne, and the company of Tanji, far too much to worry about it now.

Having showered and dressed, he relaxed at the kitchen table with the morning sunlight streaming through the windows and allowed himself to be fed breakfast by a sated and smug-looking Tanji. She pottered around the kitchen wearing a loose and flowing robe of such diaphanous material that Kevin thought he could very nearly see every curve of her body.

He was sat at the large wooden table on one of the straight-backed chairs with wooden seats, although he found that they were rather more comfortable – distinctly soft, even – than he might have expected.

The food Tanji served for breakfast was simple but delicious. The meal started with a fruit salad, which appeared to contain at least two kinds of fruit that Kevin could not identify, served with yoghurt and a crumbled waxy substance which Kevin finally identified as honeycomb.

This was followed by freshly-baked bread, hot and crusty, taken from an oven made from what looked like blackened cast iron but did not seem to be at all hot on the outside. Kevin could not work out exactly how it was heated, but assumed it must be some magical process judging from the way that, when Tanji gestured fluidly in the direction of the stove, the heat from the open oven immediately ceased.

The bread was served with butter, stored in a dish on the table which somehow kept the contents cool, a fruit preserve which seemed to consist almost entirely of actual fruit, as well as being quite sharply flavoured with ginger, and a hard cheese which Kevin, perhaps expecting bland processed offerings, found unexpectedly tasty.

The food was inevitably washed down with a large mug of the hot chocolate drink which was so popular in this world, rather than the tea or coffee that Kevin might have expected at home.

After breakfast, Tanji assembled a picnic, rapidly pulling various provisions from a small room off the kitchen which Kevin was forced to label a larder, but seemed to be much cooler inside than he might have expected on this warm summer's morning. After a few moments cogitation, he was forced to conclude that there must be some magic at work here, something which kept things cool when required, perhaps similar to the other magic which heated the cooker and cooled the butter.

Tanji then slipped out into the gardens, still in her see-through robe and carrying a woven basket of old-fashioned design. She returned after a few minutes, the basket apparently full of various produce. She tossed the freshly-gathered salad into the sink. Water flowed at the flash of a gesture, filling the bowl in a few seconds.

“I like food fresh,” Kevin commented mischievously, “I hope you ran back.”

Tanji was momentarily confused. He grinned widely and put her out of her misery.



“It’s a joke, my love. As if the few minutes since you gathered it really made a difference.”

Tanji smiled widely in response, seeming to Kevin as if she had just been lit up by the sun.

“Oh, you silly,” she said, “Such a tease.”

She blew him a kiss, then returned to her preparation work. As Kevin watched, Tanji cut slices from the loaf she had removed from the oven earlier. These she spread with butter and added a generous layer of a soft green cheese, then added the lettuce leaves and sliced tomatoes which she had collected from the gardens earlier.

Kevin was amused to note Tanji’s use of the Lyndesfarne-style sandwich wrapping for the food she was preparing. He had encountered this magic before. The light and very strong film which wrapped the food seemed to keep it cool and fresh for an astonishingly long time. He had long suspected that this “magic Clingfilm” had no physical components at all, just magic, since it could not be opened by ripping or tearing. It could, however, be removed by use of a simple gesture – one which he had long memorised, realising that the alternative was the threat of starvation.

As Kevin watched, the sandwiches and other comestibles she had prepared were instantaneously wrapped in the impermeable transparent membrane following a gesture from Tanji, a complex one that he found hard to follow. She then pulled from the larder several bottles which Kevin assumed contained some kind of drinks, although he was not immediately sure whether the bottles contained beer, wine, water, or indeed some other beverage.

“Come on then, help me find a bag for this stuff,” she insisted, “There should be one out there somewhere” – waving in the direction of the cloakroom by the front door – “and stick it all in the bag while I get dressed.”

Following Tanji’s directions to the letter, Kevin was able to track down a rucksack from a cupboard by the stairs. It was only very slightly larger than the shoulder-bag that she would normally have carried for her usual accoutrements. He quickly transferred the comestibles, in the impermeable wrapping, and the bottles into the bag, as well as a number of items which frankly he did not recognise that Tanji had placed on the kitchen table.

Tanji returned to the kitchen in a surprisingly short time wearing the kind of clothing Kevin was familiar with, the garments she habitually wore for travelling.

“All packed then?” she asked, smiling.

Kevin nodded.

“Great!”

Tanji picked up the bag, but Kevin immediately volunteered to carry it. She handed it over to him with a smile. Even after he had finished packing everything, it seemed surprisingly light. Tanji collected her own bag containing her everyday items, including the magical slate that she used, like so many others in this world, to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances.

“Come on, then,” she said with a grin, “The day’s not going to wait for us.”

She swept her cloak over her shoulders, shouldered her little pack and set off, tugging a wide-brimmed hat over her blonde hair. Kevin tried to follow her closely, although he was struggling with his cloak and hat, and still trying to get his own bag comfortably placed over his shoulders. They travelled rapidly though the portal network, which was still quite a mystery to Kevin. He found this mode of travel extremely disorienting and he kept close to Tanji feeling if they were separated, he might never find his way out.

They emerged from the usual low stone portal building in a location which, in Kevin’s untutored opinion, thoroughly deserved the epithet ‘idyllic’. From the portal, Tanji glanced briefly at a board which displayed a large-scale map of the area, then directed him along a narrow path paved with heavy and irregular stones. The trail skirted a low-lying wooded area which looked like it might flood in winter although it was completely dry in this season. On the other side of the path, Kevin could look across a meadow of tall grasses, now brown and dry in the summer heat, to a wall of high grey crags.

After a minute or two walking, they rounded a bend which afforded their first view of the lake itself. The still and tranquil waters looked refreshingly cool in the warmth of the late morning, shaded in places by trees which came right down to the waters edge. Elsewhere, the water sparkled with sunlight reflected from tiny ripples caused by the faintest of breezes.

The lakeside was garlanded by a sculpted curving shoreline, alternating rocky headlands and tiny bays, usually with a little sandy beech edging the waters. From their vantage point, Kevin could see a number of spots which looked both sheltered from wind and secluded from prying eyes.

As they got closer, Kevin noticed that thick growths of trees and shrubberies separated tiny plots of mown grass with curved approaches which would, he began to appreciate, allow these little groves almost complete privacy. Indeed, he mused, it was almost as

if the plantings had been deliberately arranged to make the gardens so secluded.

Low voices and occasional laughter indicated that some of these out-of-the-way spots were already taken. Following Tanji, who seemed to know where she was going, Kevin walked further around the lakeside, sticking closely to the path.

“This one,” Tanji said, indicating a fork in the trail.

“Are you sure?” Kevin replied, “How can you tell?”

“I booked it,” she explained simply, “For our picnic.”

“You planned that far ahead?” Kevin gasped.

“I knew we would be staying with my Aunt and Uncle – that’s been arranged for weeks – and the weather prediction for this area is always reliable.”

Kevin shook his head, amazed – as he had been often before – by Tanji’s resourcefulness and ability to plan ahead.

The fork led them along an even narrower passage which weaved its way between tall hedges of evergreens and laurels. The path soon opened out into a glade, very similar to those Kevin had noticed earlier on distant parts of the lakeside. The centre was an area of grass that was – now that Kevin was close enough to look closely – clearly carefully tended and mowed frequently.

The lawn was warm and dry in the sunshine, and shielded by a few mature trees growing at the edge furthest from the water. On either side, and beyond the tall trees, dense hedges prevented easy access. Tanji stood for a moment in the middle of the grassy area, evidently surveying the spot, then reached for Kevin with both hands. She drew him towards her and kissed him firmly.

“This,” she said in a definite tone, “Will do nicely.”

She lowered her bag to the turf; Kevin did likewise and the two of them started unpacking.

From the top of her bag, Tanji removed a couple of large blankets, which she then spread over the lawn. She then reached into the bag that Kevin had been carrying and pulled out a small flat package, about the size of a thick paperback book. She gestured at the package, which immediately expanded, unfolded repeatedly in a fashion which looked to Kevin as completely impossible, and formed a colourful windbreak. A further gesture from Tanji anchored it to the ground with its back to the narrow passageway they had used to enter the grove.

“For extra privacy,” she explained, grinning suggestively at Kevin.

In a similar way, Tanji unpacked a sunshade, two large beach towels, a picnic blanket and a multi-coloured mattress which automatically filled with air as he watched. All of this taken from the shoulder bags that he and Tanji had been carrying, whose small size and apparent lightness would have seemed miraculous to anyone unfamiliar with Lyndesfarne magic.

Having set up their little camp, Tanji turned and looked directly at Kevin.

“Fancy a dip?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” he replied immediately. He felt quite hot after the walk from the portal.

She started slipping out of her clothes in the astonishingly uninhibited way that Tanji had grown up with and Kevin – after a slightly slow start – had learned to emulate. He was, for a few moments, worried that he had not packed a swimming costume, having been unaware that there would be any opportunity for swimming, but it rapidly became clear that neither had Tanji and skinny-dipping was exactly what she had in mind. Grinning widely, the two lovers scampered hand-in-hand down to the little beach – sandy and strewn with occasional large flat rocks – that edged the lake.

After a few minutes swimming, or at least splashing about – Kevin was not a very strong swimmer – in the cool waters of the lake, they emerged dripping water on the warm sand. They towelled each other dry, enjoying the touch of each others hands on their bodies. Tanji reached up and kissed Kevin passionately, holding his buttocks in a way that drove him wild with excitement. They made love energetically under the shade of the umbrella and sheltered by the windbreak. Then, their passion slaked and clinging to each other, they collapsed onto the mattress.

It only seemed like a few seconds later that Kevin woke up, although he must have been more asleep than he realised. Tanji was sitting cross-legged a few feet away on the picnic blanket spread on the grass, still quite naked except for a large sun-hat. She was delving in the bags they had brought with them for the wrapped foodstuffs she had prepared earlier, and humming softly to herself.

“Hi, sleepy-head,” she said, seeing that he was awake, “Fancy some lunch?”

Kevin realised that he was now ravenously hungry, and nodded eagerly. Smiling indulgently, Tanji poured some wine into a couple of goblets, adding a splash of chilled water from a second bottle. She handed one glass to him, then raised her own glass.

“I love you,” she said softly.

“I love you too,” Kevin responded, clinking his glass against hers.

Together, they sampled the drink, which Kevin thought was particularly refreshing in the heat of the day. Tanji spread out the rest of the sandwiches and fruit they had brought, and Kevin tucked in with a will. The two lovers sat close together on the blanket, not talking much, just enjoying the peacefulness of the location and each others’ company.

The food and warmth, not to mention the wine, made Kevin sleepy again. He lay back on the blanket with his hands behind his head. Tanji stretched out next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. He fond the smell of her warm skin and the perfume of her hair were utterly delightful. Kevin pulled his hat down over his face and promptly fell asleep.

When they woke again, the sun was already beginning to sink towards the horizon and it was getting just a little bit cooler, at least in comparison to the heat earlier in the day. They packed up quickly, Tanji showing Kevin the magical gestures which collapsed the furniture and stowing the neatly folded items back into the rucksack.

They strolled along the paths heading back to the portal, Tanji again humming softly and tunelessly under her breath and looking, Kevin thought, utterly radiant. He thought he could understand how she must be feeling. All in all, he considered, it was the most delightful day he had ever spent in Lyndesfarne and – quite possibly – the most relaxed he had ever felt in his entire life.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

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“Wait one moment!”

The instruction came from the Ferryman herself. Bret stopped immediately, turning to face his mother, the other two following suit a fraction of a second later.

“You need to be careful out there,” she instructed sternly, looking directly at her son.

“Yes, Mother,” Bret replied formally.

“I am not going to permit you – any of you,” she added, taking in Tanji and Bret with one sweep of her eyes, “to put yourselves at risk. You *will* travel with assistance from the Guardians.”

Bret again nodded his agreement while smiling characteristically wryly at the concern being so maternally expressed. Kevin was also amused, although there was a slight undercurrent, he thought, of real risk and an equally worrying suggestion of a slightly cavalier attitude to that peril.

In any case, the Ferryman’s instruction was followed to the letter, at least as it seemed to Kevin. A group from the squad of Guardians currently stationed at the Ferryman’s residence appeared at the doorway in response to some unseen signal. Bret spoke to the escort – two men and a woman – in a voice too low for Kevin to hear, then turned and said in a tone ringing with steely determination, “Let’s get going, then.”

The Guardians escorted Bret, Tanji and Kevin to the portal building and through the transportation network to the crossing with a minimum of fuss and a complete absence of incident. The group hiked over the causeway and old bridge at a fast pace, a cool morning breeze in their faces. Bret seemed in a sombre mood and strode ahead as if anxious to face whatever perils lay in his future. The Guardians were silent and professionally wary; there was no chatter or unnecessary sound.

Kevin and Tanji strode hand-in-hand, occasionally breaking into a half-jog as they struggled to keep up with the pace set by Bret. On the way towards the bridge, Kevin thought he could detect a certain amount of concentration, even tension, emanating from Tanji. Belatedly, he realised what she was doing: using her shapeshifting abilities to darken her hair and make subtle changes to the contours of her face, forming an appearance which, although familiar to Kevin,

would probably conform more closely to average appearance in the other world.

Bret was already in his male guise, as he had been for all of the last few days. He had made no further changes as far as Kevin could perceive. Bret's current form would be regarded as only slightly outlandish in his own world and, Kevin suspected, he had entirely forgotten about his own appearance.

At the point where the causeway met the Northumberland coast, the party was met by the old Sergeant from Cliviger Grange that Kevin had already met, two other younger Guardians – unknown to Kevin, but both clearly acquainted with Bret – and two drivers, for the identical pair of black Range Rovers from the fleet managed by RDTE.

Sergeant Graves nodded curtly at his colleagues from the Other World, then urged Tanji and Kevin into the back of one of the cars. A driver and one of the younger Guardians piled into the front seats, and there was a slamming of doors all round. Kevin glanced through the window in time to see Bret and Sergeant Graves scrambling into the other vehicle.

The doors were barely closed before both big cars shot forward, a spray of gravel pinging against the polished paintwork. They drove alarmingly quickly along the narrow and overgrown lane which led from the crossing in Kevin's own world. The drivers really picked up the pace once they reached the Great North Road: with headlights ablaze, the convoy of anonymous but vaguely official-looking vehicles subtly encouraged other motorists to pull into the slow lane at the earliest opportunity.

A short time later, they pulled off the main road and found their way to the University of Newcastle campus astonishingly quickly, it seemed to Kevin, following a route he did not recognise at all. The big cars swung into the kerb right in front of the NISSA building, both vehicles coming to a stop partially on the pavement itself. There were a few confused moments of car doors being opened and slammed shut, then Kevin found himself jogging up the familiar entrance steps following Bret and the Guardians, and just a few steps behind Tanji.

The group must have clearly announced their arrival by their heavy tread on the old stairs and in the corridor outside the administrative office. Nevertheless Sergeant Graves opened the door on a surprised-looking Sanjit and the squad moved inside in a fashion which Kevin – an inveterate reader of action novels and whodunits –

would probably have described as military in nature, or at least the kind of manoeuvre practiced by police forces.

Apart from the administrative assistant at her desk – probably reading her emails, Kevin imagined – the office was empty and unthreatening. Bret strode over to the desk where Sanjit was sitting, followed closely by Kevin and Tanji, still hand-in-hand – Kevin felt that he did not want her to be more than a few inches away at any time.

Sanjit glanced from Bret to Kevin and back again with increasing alarm.

“Good morning,” Kevin said politely, “Is Professor Braxton in yet?”

“Yes, she has just arrived,” Sanjit replied nervously, clearly unsure of what exactly was going on, “Is she expecting you?”

“I don’t think so,” Kevin said, glancing at a silent and stoic Bret, “But perhaps she’ll be good enough to see us at short notice?”

Just at that moment, Professor Braxton opened the inner door herself. The older woman took in the scene with one sweep of her eyes: the bulky old Sergeant who stood by the outer door with an air of apparent casualness, and the young people whose garb screamed “Guardian” to those in the know.

Bret, looking bleak, turned to face Braxton.

“Ah, Professor” he said, “We need to talk to you urgently.”

Braxton stared hard at him for a long moment and then opened the door to its fullest extent.

“You’d better come in.”

Sergeant Graves moved quickly to stand by the window in the Professor’s office, a blocky silent figure with his hands behind his back. Kevin and Tanji took the seats indicated by the Professor, but Bret declined, preferring to pace the room, suddenly looking more agitated than Kevin had ever seen him before.

“We need to confirm something with you,” Bret began, momentarily ceasing his pacing and looking directly at the Professor, “What did Wendy Rossiter tell you about the results of the research being done by Andrew Wollack?”

“Nothing. Or, rather, that there were no definitive results just yet,” she replied, looking puzzled.

“But that’s not quite true,” Kevin interjected, “I’ve looked closely at Andrew’s notebooks and computer files. It seems that he was on the verge of confirming a hypothesis – one with potentially far-reaching consequences, and certainly one that he should have discussed with his supervisor.”



“And,” Bret took over again, “We would have expected that his supervisor – as a responsible person – would have brought the matter to your attention.”

“Well, Wendy definitely did not mention anything to me,” Professor Braxton replied, looking distinctly put out, “I got the impression that Andrew had settled in for a long stint of research and that nothing would be publishable for a year or more.”

Kevin was aware that the publication of research, in papers and journal reports, was the lifeblood of university departments. The general rule was not so much “publish and be damned” and “*don’t* publish, and be sacked” – or at least not promoted. But he did also wonder in what publications papers on the world of Lyndesfarne would appear. Glancing at the rows of fusty leather-clad tomes that lined the Professor’s office, he suspected that Braxton probably already had the full set of journals bound in hardback.

Tanji, who had clearly been following the exchanges, piped up, addressing Kevin.

“Why didn’t you ask these questions when you before?” she wanted to know.

“Well, in all honesty,” Kevin explained gently, “I was distracted – distraught, driven practically insane – by your disappearance, your kidnapping. So I wasn’t thinking straight. Sorry.”

Tanji squeezed his hand supportively.

“So what is this vital discovery?” the Professor burst out, “This supposedly critical insight from Doctor Wollack?”

Kevin looked to Bret for guidance.

“Hmm,” the other man replied after a few moments, “I don’t think I’m prepared to tell you. Although it might be vital to the future of the crossing – perhaps even the end to all contact between the Two Worlds.”

The Professor looked shocked at, Kevin assumed, the suggestion that the crossing might have to be closed. He added sourly in the privacy of his own mind that she would probably be out of a job if that were to happen.

“So we’d better talk to Rossiter directly, if that’s OK with you?” Bret continued.

“But didn’t you know?” the Professor said, again looking slightly surprised, “She’s not here. She asked for urgent leave to attend a family matter of some kind.”

Bret stopped dead, glanced at Kevin, then walked up to Professor Braxton’s desk and leant forward over it.

“Did she say what, or where?” he demanded.

“Well, no,” the Professor replied, sitting back in her chair, “I didn’t think to enquire.”

“Why not?” Bret pressed.

“I didn’t think it was important,” she reiterated, “Wendy explained it was urgent, a one-off. She’s not in the habit of abandoning her post on a whim, so I assumed it must have been extremely serious and I simply let her go.”

Professor Braxton paused in thought.

“Although,” she added slowly, “She did take a break at short notice, for a week or more, a year or so ago.”

“When was this?” Kevin asked.

“I’m *not* sure. Sometime last summer, I think.”

It might be just coincidence, Kevin thought, but that would coincide with his discovery of attempts to prevent the completion of the New Bridge.

“So, when did Rossiter leave?” Bret demanded.

“It was almost immediately after you were here the last time,” the Professor replied, nodding in Kevin’s direction.

She seemed genuinely unaware of the coincidence until now, Kevin considered, probably just the oversight of a busy professional with many things on her mind.

“And you’re sure you don’t know where she’s gone?” Bret pressed.

“I’ve really no idea. But, she did seem rather distracted,” the Professor replied, suddenly sounding tired, “She muttered something about visiting her family – that’s her father’s family, in the Other World.”

Bret froze and then reached for his mobile phone, but the taciturn old Sergeant was already ahead of him. He was already speaking into some modern communication device – probably, Kevin thought, some sort of two-way radio with a direct connection to the guard post at the crossing.

“She’s definitely crossed over,” Sergeant Graves reported after a couple of minutes of terse enquiries and impatient waiting while Kevin and the Professor looked on.

Bret nodded grimly at the news.

“We’ll have to back to the Other World,” he said.

Kevin shook his head in disgust and frustration. He reflected that it seemed that he had crossed between the Two Worlds more times in the last few days than he had done during the entire construction of the New Bridge.

## Chapter Thirty

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It was much later, well into the quieter part of the evening, and even some of the adult members of Bret's family had already gone to bed. Just Bret and her mother remained at the fireside with Kevin and Tanji.

Their first visit together to Bret's family home had been such a relaxed event, one which would be long remembered and frequently referred to in future years. One incident which stuck in Kevin's mind began when Bret picked up one of the magical picture-frames that he had seen before and gestured at it for a few moments. She then turned to show Kevin the image on its face.

"This is a place in your world," she said, handing the framed picture to Kevin for inspection.

The image showed a series of high mountain ranges, sun-baked and weathered, fronted by a region of scrubland dotted with rough grasses and creosote bushes. Occasional patches of thorn-bushes marked out dry gullies, worn by the very occasional heavy rain to which the area would be subjected. There would be trails and high passes in the mountains, Kevin imagined, which would have been used by wagon trains in times past.

He had only seen this kind of country in cowboy films and westerns. Even so, the images in the picture frame, together with his own imagination invoked by Bret's words were enough to form a clear picture in his mind's eye.

Bret sipped contemplatively at her wine glass then sat back comfortably to spin them another tale.

"Nowadays, this region is a semi-desert, dusty and infertile," she began, "Oh, there are a few natural springs in the low hills, and fewer still concealed by rocky outcrops in the passes. And there is still water, good water, underground where Artesian wells can draw it out."

She paused, taking another sip, then continued.

"This area is mostly uninhabited and indeed mostly inaccessible – the trails are passable only with difficulty, even with four-wheel drive vehicles."

She drew a deep breath, almost a sigh.

"In ancient times," she resumed, "This area was occupied by a group of Native American tribes, a region now represented by the

American South West – West Texas and New Mexico – as well as Mexico itself. They lived peacefully enough in this region for thousands of years, and then suddenly disappeared about 1600 years ago.”

Kevin was unsure where this story was going, but the combination of the good meal, the excellent wine and the warm fireside meant that he was happy enough to just sit and listen to Bret.

“These tribes left behind a few artefacts, and some carvings on rocks remain in sheltered places. Scholars and research workers in your world have identified these archaeological remains. The peoples had lived a Stone Age life: working stone for arrowheads and basic tools as well as woven blankets, clothes and baskets, and simple pottery for cooking and storage.”

“But that’s about all that is known for sure about these tribes,” she continued, adding tantalisingly, “At least in your world.”

Kevin’s ears pricked up at this point.

“But you know something more, do you?”

Bret nodded, smiling wryly.

“We do,” she confirmed, “For a start, we know that the country was much wetter then.”

She retrieved the picture frame and waved it in Kevin’s direction.

“As you can see, it is now an arid semi-desert, barely able to support a few cows or buffalo. Then, it was quite different. The region was a vast system of shallow lakes teeming with life, with fish, turtles, and so on in the water and abundant plant life around the margins. In the reed beds, insects and the birds that fed on them could be trapped, while in the higher parts, deer – or perhaps antelopes – could be tracked down by hunters skilled with bow and arrow. A paradise, perhaps – and certainly one that had remained unchanged for thousands of years.”

Kevin was surprisingly alert, given the lateness of the hour.

“So what happened in 400AD?” he asked.

Bret looked sad.

“It’s another rather shameful part of the history of the Two Worlds,” she admitted, “This region was the site of a battle, a war for the control of a crossing between the Worlds.”

“One faction – let’s call them the Empire-builders – in an act of blatant imperialism, wanted to colonise this rich and fertile area in your world. This faction planned to drive out or, if necessary, kill the peaceful natives, who would have been helpless against the weapons and magic that would be ranged against them. The Empire-builders

would be virtually unopposed, and the aborigines were likely to be wiped out, extinct within a generation.”

It was quiet in the room as Kevin cogitated, just the gentle crackling of the logs in the fireplace.

“All this would have come to pass,” Bret resumed, “If it were not for the aid, covert at first, of the second faction, which I shall call the Resistance. At first the Resistance attempted to advise the indigenous peoples, appearing as spirits and demigods from time to time to warn them of the impending invasion, casting their warnings as news of battles in another plane. The natives were awed and fearful, helpless; their only option was to run away, to abandon the fertile lakesides for the uncertainties of the arid mountains and the desert beyond.”

“In time, the Resistance offered more direct assistance and the tribes in your world were split asunder. Some brave – or perhaps foolhardy – souls decided to stay in your world and to run away from the invasion. These few became the founders of the tribes which made up, in time, the Apache Nation.”

Kevin was listening most intently now. The Ferryman looked on impassively, an unreadable expression on her face, while Tanji seemed almost asleep, curled cat-like on the sofa with her head on Kevin’s shoulder. Bret took another sip of her wine, then continued with the tale.

“The other, larger, group accepted an offer from the Resistance faction to cross to the Other World and were spirited away, so to speak, through the crossing – under the very noses of the Empire-builders. This was a major undertaking – moving thousands – perhaps tens of thousands of strangers, primitives, between the worlds in small enough groups that they did not arouse suspicion.”

She paused again, staring at the dancing flames for a long moment.

“It couldn’t last. The involvement of the Resistance faction was supposed to be a secret, but the Empire-builders found out what was going on and moved swiftly to stop the flow of refugees. How they found out was never made clear, but the action of a traitor has long been suspected.”

“Continuing to feel a moral obligation to help the indigenous peoples, the Resistance were forced to take more direct action, although always trying to avoid war or active military involvement. This would have been a poor strategy against an aggressive and much more powerful neighbouring state.”

“The Resistance faction was increasingly supported by a number of – in some cases, rather reluctant – allies in our world. Some groups of nations altogether more powerful even than the Empire-builders began to indicate their displeasure at the threatened genocide, while others were frankly fearful of the dangers from a strengthened and aggressive bloc.”

“The Empire-builders never actually declared war, in the end, and the world powers interceded, supporting the Resistance in attempting to negotiate a peaceful settlement. However, while the negotiations were going on, renegade actions within the Resistance faction wrested the, well, Keys of Control for the crossing from the local crossing guards. With this powerful magic, they were able to sabotage the crossing.”

Kevin gasped, as did Tanji, showing that she had not been quite as asleep as he had supposed.

“No!” he breathed.

Bret nodded slowly.

“The crossing was explosively destroyed. The explosion blew up an entire mountain and, more importantly, disrupted the basin which formed the north-east edge of the system of lakes. The water drained away, rapidly drying out and depositing sand and mud over a vast low-lying area.”

“The waters of the lakes, although not brackish, certainly contained a high concentration of dissolved minerals. These salts were deposited along with the silt, and later formed the astonishing brilliant white sand dunes now known as the White Sands National Monument.”

Kevin had heard of this, in a vague way, and he also knew that this natural phenomenon was inside the boundaries of the world’s largest military installation – the White Sands Missile Range of the United States of America. Perhaps he should not be surprised, he mused silently, that a most unusual geological formation should have been formed by a less than entirely natural event.

“For a long time – many, many generations – the lost ancestors of the Apache peoples in my World were able to keep some contact with their relations in your world,” Bret continued, “Using temporary portals and other magical items constructed during the building of the now-destroyed crossing.”

“This really only stopped when Europeans – first the Spanish and later the Anglo settlers – started appearing in the region. There were just too many rumours and – well, you would say leaks, these days – to risk discovery, and the descendants of the immigrants reluctantly

abandoned even the most cursory of contacts with their long-lost relatives.”

Kevin thought about this. He could easily imagine a nomadic tribespeople maintaining their oral tradition – spirit guides and ancestral presences from another world – for a thousand years. This would be especially straightforward in the presence of tangible demonstrations of such communications mediated, no doubt, by Shamans and spiritual leaders, their secrets handed down from father to son, master to apprentice, over the generations.

“You have to have some sympathy with the fate of the American Natives who were cast out of their Eden – an idyllic and tranquil oasis by all accounts – and forced to be nomads and wanderers for evermore.”

Kevin had to agree. This story certainly explained the war-like nature of the Indian tribes that resisted the Spanish conquistadors and later the Anglo settlers and cowboys for so long. Their folk memories of threats and invasion from a far distant place would have made them wary – even verging on paranoid – of the motives of strangers.

Kevin also wondered about some of the other stories he had heard about the region. The fabled golden city of El Dorado, for example, rumours of which had travelled everywhere and made a vast impact, even distortions of the history of his world.

When the Spaniards came to the Americas, their colonisation efforts must have been a disaster for the native inhabitants. But for the Conquistadors themselves, the principal motivation was the search for gold. What they found was indeed an even worse disaster: they found lots and lots of gold, and took most of it back to Spain. The Spanish thought they were importing wealth, but they were wrong – they were merely importing money, which caused rampant inflation, famine and immense distress in the populace. The political fallout reduced Spain’s power and influence in Europe dramatically. Was it, Kevin wondered, a particularly exquisite punishment – being doomed as a nation to a second-rate position of power, by being given a surfeit of exactly what they were looking for.

Bret and her mother were silent for a long moment. Tanji appeared to be close to sleep again.

“Still, one good thing which did come out of all this madness,” the ferryman herself spoke suddenly, speaking softly against the silence.

“What’s that?” Kevin asked in a whisper.

“It was a sea-change in the politics in this World, leading to the separation of the control of the crossings – all of them – from national governments. It led to the establishment of the Board of Control and the hierarchy of subsidiary Boards and Guilds as separate entities, not answerable to any individual nation or state, and with its own internal system of checks and balances.”

She paused, looking from Kevin to Bret and back again.

“It is a fine tradition which has served us exceptionally well all this time.”



## Chapter Thirty One

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“Before you go rushing off,” the Professor interjected, “There might be something – or at least someone – who could help you.”

Both Bret and Kevin paused at the door before turning back to face Braxton, who was still sitting at her desk, and looked to Kevin as if she had just been holding her head in her hands.

“And who is that?” Bret inquired coolly.

“It’s Wendy’s mother,” she replied, “Patricia Rossiter.”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“Her mother was apparently abandoned by Wendy’s father,” she explained, rather sadly, “When she was very young, after some kind of a row.”

The Professor paused, then continued.

“I have to say it seems to have left both Wendy and her mother with a negative and distrustful view of men in general. But Patricia might have some idea where to find Wendy,” Braxton concluded, “And she lives not very far from the crossing.”

Despite the directions provided by the Professor, Kevin suspected that he would have had great difficulties in tracking down their destination. The Sergeant had listened carefully, then held a quiet conference with the two drivers upon their return to the vehicles. After nods all round, the party clambered into the cars and set off confidently. Local knowledge, Kevin mused, so very useful.

The older Ms. Rossiter lived in an old stone cottage set back in the trees on one of the numerous winding lanes in the area of the crossing. The tiny cottage was of a very traditional construction, with stout stone block-work and weighty lintels over miniscule windows and a low doorway. The roof was formed from heavy slate tiles, now mossy, and a plethora of crooked chimney-stacks emerged from the rooftops.

Looking at the building from the kerbside, Kevin was reminded that one of the more obscure meanings of the word “thousand”: it was included in the Oxford English Dictionary as a builder’s term for twelve hundred slates which, in his opinion, informed everyone of everything one needed to know about both the nature of traditional building materials and Olde English craftsmanship.

The Rossiter abode nestled in an overgrown garden. As Kevin followed Bret along the pathway towards the front door, he noticed

that the garden was obviously carefully tended in some areas with rows of plants – a profusion of flowers, herbs and vegetables – whilst other parts seemed to be completely neglected, at least to the eye of someone with two brown thumbs. Indeed, the rambling estate looked to Kevin more like the traditional idea of a witch’s cottage than anything he had seen in a very long time.

Bret seemed entirely unperturbed and unhesitatingly knocked loudly on the front door. There was a lengthy pause, and Kevin was convinced that the other man would be required to knock again. Suddenly, there was a noise from the other side of the door, someone tugging hard on the handle. The door appeared to be jammed, or at least very stiff. Bret leant heavily on the door frame, and it opened suddenly with a loud creak.

A grey-haired woman stood framed in the doorway. She looked around shrewdly at the group assembled on her doorstep.

“So sorry about that,” she said without preamble, “No one ever uses the front door.”

“Ms. *Rossiter*?” *Bret* enquired politely.

She nodded, looking from Bret to Kevin to Tanji, and then down the path to Sergeant Graves and his little troupe. The similarity to her daughter was striking, it seemed to Kevin. She was petite and slender, standing straight in spite of her years. Her hair was much longer than her daughters, and worn loose and flowing. Kevin suspected that she was not as old as he might have expected, and that she must therefore have become pregnant with her daughter at a very young age.

The older woman looked closely at Bret.

“You’re not really a man, are you?” she asked pointedly.

Bret snorted with characteristic wryness.

“You’re quite right, Madam,” he responded, “I’m ...”

At this point, Bret rattled off a stream of syllables which Kevin recognised as Bret’s full name, one which – to his chagrin – he had never quite managed to memorise.

Her face darkened immediately.

“You’re from the Other World, I take it,” she said coolly, “I don’t think I want to talk to you.”

She moved sharply to shut the door. Kevin leapt forward, instinctively trying to prevent the door being slammed against them.

“No, no,” he cried anxiously, “Please help us.”

When he thought about this incident later, Kevin considered that there must have been something about his appeal – his sincerity, perhaps, or his commitment, or maybe just the fact that he was self-

evidently a native of this world. Whatever it was, the older woman relented, albeit somewhat reluctantly, and pushed the door all the way open on its stiff hinges, inviting them into the cottage.

Bret signalled to the Sergeant and his colleagues to remain outside, then followed Tanji and Kevin along a hallway panelled in dark wood and into a room which Kevin instinctively labelled “parlour”. This was the kind of room he was familiar with from his grandparents’ house, when he was a child: an old-fashioned formal room, all chintz upholstery and polished wood arranged around a polished cast-iron fireplace. Every flat surface in the room was decorated by an assortment of knick-knacks – no doubt all very collectable items these days – all carefully dusted and undoubtedly treasured. The whole room gave the impression of being cared for by someone who was particularly house-proud but attempted it on a really limited budget.

Rossiter senior settled herself in what was evidently her usual easy chair in front of the fire and looked up at the newcomers.

“So, who are you people, and what do you want with me?” she asked directly.

“Well, it’s not so much you that we’d like to talk to,” Kevin began, “As your daughter.”

“Wendy’s not here,” she said simply, turning her head from one to another.

Bret apparently took this a cue to seat himself in a chair whose worn fabric was mostly, but not quite totally disguised by a carefully laundered antimacassar and a clutch of hand-embroidered cushions. Kevin and Tanji sat down together on the sofa, hand in hand, inseparable as always.

“I’m Kevin,” he said to introduce himself, “I’m an architect from Manchester, and I helped to design the New Bridge, together with Bret.”

“The New Bridge,” the older woman echoed, “I’ve seen it. Not been across it yet, but it certainly looks astonishing. However did you get the two halves to join together?”

Kevin smiled and shook his head at the perspicacity of the older woman. He thought for a moment about describing the way the two independent sections had been designed to move together in the wind, despite the amazing differences between the engineering principles he had employed and the magic methods use by Bret. He could have spoken at length about the use of laminated section in the centre, fabricated with alternate layers of steel-reinforced concrete and magical ‘construction stone’.

“It was very difficult,” he answered finally.

“I’m sure it was,” she said with a slight smile.

“Anyway, this is my friend Tanji,” Kevin continued, changing the subject.

Tanji was as usual quietly fading into the background. Kevin had noticed this trait in Tanji. In private, or even amongst strangers, she was outgoing and uninhibited. But when in the company of people she knew well, she would remain still and silent, rarely asking a question or joining in the conversation. Perhaps it was her training as a Guide and interpreter, he mused, or maybe something to do with perceived authority.

“Pleased to meet you,” Tanji said politely, holding up her hand in that style of greeting which marked her out as a native of the other world.

Rossiter senior looked at the way Tanji sat close to Kevin, the way she looked at him when she thought no-one was looking. She smiled at the lovers in spite of herself.

“When did you last hear from your daughter?” Tanji asked the older woman.

“It was just a couple of days ago,” she answered, “Wendy was on her way to the crossing, but came to see me, as she often does. She usually turns up every week or so, just to make sure I’m OK, I suppose. She let’s me have some money, sometimes, and gives me little presents every now and then. She’s very good to her old mum.”

The older woman paused again, a smile on her face.

“So how did she seem, Wendy, on her last visit?” Bret wanted to know.

She looked askance at the question.

“Well, now that you mention it,” she answered, “She seemed distracted, even anxious. She only stayed a few minutes, and she said it might be quite a while before she could visit again.”

She paused again, looking thoughtful.

“Usually, she’d stop for a cup of tea, at least, and a chat. She often tells me about what she’s been doing, what’s going on at the University.”

She turned slightly in her chair.

“Come to think of it, she may well have mentioned you,” she pointed at Kevin, “Didn’t you get taught by Wendy?”

“I did, ma’am,” Kevin confirmed, “I had several briefing sessions from her at NISSA last year.”

She nodded in apparent comprehension.

“So,” Bret interjected, “Can you tell us where she’s travelled to, recently, in the Other World?”

Patricia Rossiter shook her head slowly.

“Well, no, not really,” she replied, “In fact, I don’t think she’s been to Lyndesfarne in months.”

Bret nodded sagely.

“And did she say why she was making the crossing to Lyndesfarne in such a hurry?” He asked.

“She didn’t,” Patricia Rossiter said slowly, “But I’m fairly certain I know what she’s up to. I think she’s going to see her father.”

## Chapter Thirty Two

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Patricia Rossiter sat silent for a few moments before apparently coming to some kind of a conclusion.

“There’s something I’d like you to understand,” she began, with the air of one about to make a confession, “I’ve told no one this truth, and I would appreciate it if you would keep it to yourselves.”

“I think you can trust to our discretion,” Kevin replied formally.

“Many years ago, I met a man – a Visitor from your world,” she said, nodding at Bret, “A very charming and handsome young man, tall and strong, and full of tales of adventures and derring-do.”

She shook her head at her own naivety, as it seemed to Kevin.

“I was very young at the time,” she continued, “Barely more than a child, but headstrong and sure of myself. I didn’t know much about the Other World, although I was vaguely aware of its existence. And I suppose I wasn’t aware of so many other things too.”

“So how did you know of my World?” Bret pressed, gently turning the conversation away from topics which the older woman might have found uncomfortable.

“I’m a scion of the Old Families,” she said simply.

Bret nodded in understanding, and Tanji seemed to comprehend too.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin interjected, “But I don’t know what that means.”

Rossiter looked from Bret to Tanji in confusion.

“Some families have been involved with the crossing to Lyndesfarne for generations,” Bret explained for Kevin’s benefit.

“Ah,” he replied, “The families from which NISSA recruits so many of its students.”

“Well, yes,” Bret said, looked unusually shifty, “Although, strictly speaking, the Old Families are those whose distant ancestors – or at least most of them – came from the Other World.”

This made a lot of sense to Kevin. He could certainly imagine that the members of a number of powerful bodies in the world of Lyndesfarne – the Board of Control, for example – would rest more easily if they knew that they could rely upon certain people with old allegiances in this world. On the other hand, he mused, perhaps this was misleading. Surely, after a few generations, such immigrants

might have more loyalty to their adopted world than to their original one.

“This man,” Patricia Rossiter began again, “We, well, we spent a long summer together. I ran away from home, set up house with him in a small cottage – not very far from here – which was more a semi-converted barn, really.”

She sighed sadly.

“We were, I thought, in love. Certainly, I was completely infatuated and I was convinced he was in love with me.”

A certain inevitability about this story was growing in Kevin’s mind. She would not have been the first young woman to have been led astray, as his Grandma might have put it, by a faithless young man.

“It turned out, I was quite wrong,” she continued, “By the autumn, I realised I was pregnant. When I tried to talk to him about it, he at first denied the possibility. When I persevered, got angry, shouted - then he simply abandoned me, disappearing back into your world where he thought I could not follow him.”

“I was lost – no idea what was to become of me. My parents – both from the Old Families, as I said – would have nothing to do with me. They had of course warned me about this man, refused me permission to see him, shouted at me when I snuck away to be with him. Their attitude was the main reason why I ran away in the first place.”

“My other acquaintances from my childhood shunned me for having been wild and feckless and, to be honest, I had refused to listen to their advice either and deliberately withdrawn from them when I set up house.”

The older woman paused again, looking sadly at Kevin and Tanji, who were sitting together hand-in-hand.

“In the end, a kind friend – you don’t need to know who she is – was prepared to help me,” she continued, “She found me a place to live, a warm home to bring my daughter back to, after she was born.”

“I’ve lived quietly in this cottage ever since. I brought up my daughter more-or-less alone – I was determined I would not make any more mistakes and I certainly did not want to be forced to give away my baby.”

She raised her chin and looked around the room as if challenging any of them to question her decision.

“I resolved to learn more about the Other World, to learn more about the father of my child, to track him down and confront him. To do so would be very difficult, I would soon discover, as my position

was all too well-known locally, and at first nobody was prepared to talk to me.”

She scowled suddenly, perhaps remembering the local gossips unfavourably.

“With a lot of perseverance, I managed to gain the trust of one or two people, although that was in large part through the influence of my saviour, the one who helped me in my hour of need, and brought me shelter, and hope, and friendship.”

“Let me guess,” Bret said suddenly, “A tall slender woman of middle years, grey-haired but with an erect bearing, always wore a hooded robe and stout boots, carried a rucksack and walked with the aid of a long staff.”

“How do you know that?” Rossiter asked in amazement.

“I strongly suspect,” Bret said slowly, “That she was my grandmother.”

There was a gasp from Tanji. Kevin, who was less surprised, squeezed her hand in reassurance. The older woman looked as if she would burst into tears at any moment.

“Her name was Yise,” Bret continued, speaking softly, “She was a Messenger, in the old days. In her youth, she met a young man from this world, after the War. They got married, had children – one of whom was my mother.”

The unspoken message, it seemed to Kevin, was that not all cross-world romances fell apart. He had also noted that, while Bret had mentioned Yise’s relationship with his mother, he omitted to mention that his mother was in fact the mythical Ferryman.

“Years would go by,” Rossiter began in a small voice, “Between visits from Yise. Her last appearance was nearly a decade ago.”

“She’s dead, I’m afraid,” Bret announced gently.

“How did it happen?”

“Just old age,” he replied, “She was in her eighties. She just got tired and frail, and one morning she didn’t get up from her bed.”

There was a strained silence in the room. Bret spoke over the hush.

“I remember as a child hearing about Grandmother’s adventures. Never from her directly, mind, but from my mother and aunt, and other family members. They were just bedtime stories or, in later years, tales around the fireside on long winter evenings.”

He paused, evidently lost in the past for a moment.

“But I remember one tale,” Bret continued, “Of Grandmother encountering a crying girl, sitting by the roadside – the road leading



down to the causeway – and watching the travellers, always waiting to see someone – some mystery man she would never find.”

“That was me,” The older woman said, “I couldn’t think of what to do, and I was hoping against hope that my man would come back to me.”

“Did you ever track him down?” Tanji asked quietly, “The errant boyfriend?”

“No,” she replied simply, “Oh, I thought about it a lot, and I probably talked about it all the time, as I learned the language and studied the mysteries of Lyndesfarne. I even made trips across the Bridge, explored a little in that World.”

“I suppose that’s why Wendy became interested in Lyndesfarne, too?” Kevin enquired.

“Oh, yes. As a child she was fascinated. She was often my only companion. We used to practise the language together. When she got older, we would travel together to various places. To be honest, she probably understands the languages and cultures more than I do. As a child, too, I promised her that one day we would find her father – she used to ask about that all the time. Eventually, when she got older, I told her the whole story.”

“And what was her reaction?” Bret asked.

“She was incensed, furious,” Patricia Rossiter replied, “She swore to be that she would track down her father, make him come back, to make amends.”

There was another silence as the visitors took in the import of what they had just heard.

“We have to ask,” Kevin muttered, feeling distinctly embarrassed, “Who was your boyfriend?”

Rossiter shook her head.

“I think,” Bret said gently, “That we really, really need to know the name of Wendy’s father. It is very important, for us all.”

The older woman hesitated for a long moment. Kevin dared not even breathe, and he sensed Tanji and Bret had much the same reaction.

“His name,” Patricia Rossiter answered finally, “Was Demaz.”

## Chapter Thirty Three

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There was a moment of silent confusion, Kevin looking from Bret to Patricia Rossiter and back again.

“Ms. Rossiter,” Bret said very formally, “We sincerely believe that Wendy is in great danger.”

“In danger?” Rossiter senior replied, clearly extremely agitated, “How? Why? What’s going on?”

“It’s Demaz,” Bret replied, “I think Wendy has got in contact with him, and is somehow mixed up in some great conspiracy.”

“Him? But what’s he doing that’s so dangerous?” the older woman demanded, leaning forward.

“He kidnapped Tanji,” Kevin interjected angrily, leaping to his feet and waving frantically in her direction and forcing her back into her seat, “Bret and I risked our lives to rescue her. Is that dangerous enough for you?”

Bret took a deep breath, signalling energetically at Kevin to simmer down. Realising that he was not, in point of fact, actually helping very much, Kevin subsided into his seat, whereupon Tanji moved closer to reassure him.

“Demaz appears to be linked to a group, some secret organisation,” Bret resumed, “Who we believe are trying to force the closure of the Lyndesfarne crossing.”

“What?”

“Someone – we’re not sure who – killed a member of the staff at NISSA, a young man who was being directed by your daughter. The dead man’s body turns up in the middle of the bridge – *our* bridge – and, when we start and investigate, Demaz – or some of his goons – snatch Tanji here in the middle of the night.”

It occurred to Kevin that, despite his earlier admonitions, Bret was getting quite steamed up too.

“The dead man turns out to be a microbial epidemiologist,” Bret went on, “And we suspect he had found out that someone – possibly Demaz, or at least people associated with him – has created some kind of disease which could kill thousands – perhaps millions – of people.”

Bret took another deep breath.

“And Wendy,” he concluded, “Your daughter, she appears to be on her way to meet with this man.”

At the end of this diatribe, Patricia Rossiter looked aghast, sitting back speechless in her chair with an expression of utter horror on her face.

Kevin, now feeling a little calmer, leant forward and asked in a quiet voice, "Has she contacted her father before?"

"She's tried to," she replied, "Many times when she was younger. But I'd thought she'd always been unsuccessful."

Rossiter senior looked very serious, deep in thought.

"I'm not sure," she said after a while, "But I think they have in fact been in contact, had some kind of communication."

Kevin could not be sure, but he got the impression that the communication was through the medium of the magic slates that had so confused him on first acquaintance, and that Wendy and Demaz had been corresponding for weeks, perhaps months.

"But I don't think they've met," Patricia Rossiter continued, "Or at least I didn't. Now I'm not just sure..." She tailed off.

"So you think that Wendy has managed to track down her father somehow?" Bret interjected, also having regained some of his equilibrium.

The older woman nodded in response. Bret looked seriously at her.

"So, now she's headed off into the Other World to confront the man? And probably knowing rather little about him," he continued, "Perhaps even having been fed untruths?"

Patricia Rossiter sat stock-still for a few minutes, apparently digesting all she had been told. Abruptly, she turned to Kevin, who was still leaning forward earnestly in his seat.

"Please find my daughter," she begged, a sudden note of pleading in her voice.

"We will, I promise," Kevin promised, "But you will have to help us too."

Bret interjected.

"We want to help," he said earnestly, "Is there anything that Wendy might have said, even a throwaway comment or gossipy remark, which might give us some idea of where she is?"

He paused then added, "Perhaps a mention of somewhere, anywhere, where she has been recently?"

"Well, there was something," she replied slowly, "Wendy did go somewhere. She said for a break – just to relax, or at least be distracted for awhile. I thought it was good – I thought she needed to get away. She was looking tired and careworn."

She paused, and then added, "She went to..."

Patricia Rossiter then said a word which Kevin thought he recognised, in the way he so often did when a Lyndesfarne name was mentioned in his hearing: the impression that he was not entirely sure that he had heard correctly but, at the same time, a visceral feeling that he *ought* to remember what it meant.

It was very clear that Tanji recognised it too, judging by the way she reacted when Rossiter senior had spoken. After a few seconds frantic thought, Kevin realised that it was the place in the world of Lyndesfarne that he and Tanji had visited as dragon-watching tourists.

Bret said something to Tanji in, unusually, the language of Lyndesfarne, the words coming too fast for Kevin to follow. Tanji answered immediately in the affirmative, as far as Kevin could tell. He then turned to Kevin.

“You’ve been there,” he demanded, “Do you remember what it was like?”

“Well, yes,” Kevin replied immediately, although he realised he sounded very slightly unconvincing even to his own ears. He took a deep breath and tried to assemble his recollections into some kind of coherent expression.

“It’s a desert, or nearly so,” he began, “An area of dry canyons, low brush and some wooded areas. Apparently the dragons like it, because it is...”

“Dragons?” Bret interjected.

“Yes.” Kevin had assumed that Bret knew this was a reserve for the flying lizards he had become so fascinated with.

“Tanji and I visited there, to watch the dragons,” he explained.

“So people rarely go there?” the other man demanded.

“I guess so,” Kevin replied, glancing at Tanji, who nodded vigorously.

“So it would be a good place to hide?” Bret added slowly, eyes narrowed.

Before Kevin could answer, Tanji said, “There are caves all over the place. Often in places that would be difficult to access.”

Bret nodded.

“So we might just be able to track down Demaz – and Wendy,” he added, turning to acknowledge Rossiter senior in a reassuring way.

A few frantic minutes later, Kevin, Bret and Tanji were in the back seat of the chauffeur-driven Range Rover, travelling at a very fair speed along the narrow hedged lanes towards the crossing, and followed closely by Sergeant Graves and the other Guardians in the second car.

They had rapidly said their goodbyes to Patricia Rossiter, Kevin repeating his assurances that they would do everything possible to track down her daughter. As they sped towards the causeway, he ruminated that, while he had not particularly warmed to Wendy Rossiter during their brief acquaintance at NISSA, even so, it seemed he had committed them to a course of action he would never have anticipated.

Bret sat in the front seat, next to the driver, and spoke into his mobile phone – something he had been doing more-or-less continuously since they had left Patricia Rossiter’s cottage. He gave the impression of being urgent and animated, but spoke in such a low voice that Kevin could not hear what was being said.

Eventually, Bret put his mobile phone back in his pocket and twisted in his seat to address Kevin and Tanji.

“Time is of the essence,” he said earnestly, looking from one to the other, “Wendy’s definitely crossed over to the Other World, using the Old Bridge. No-one paid very much attention at the time and there’s no trace of where she might have gone after that.”

Tanji stirred uncomfortably.

“Have you considered using a...” she hesitated, then used a phrase in the Lyndesfarne language that Kevin did not recognise.

“A Finder?” Bret said, looking thoughtful, “Well, as it happens, my friends in the Guardians on the other side did try that a few moments ago.”

“And?” she pressed.

Bret smiled and shrugged.

“The results appear to be vague and confusing,” he said, “Perhaps she is using some magic which is obfuscating her location or, more likely, no-one knows enough about her, about her appearance, to make the Finder work properly.”

He paused, then continued slowly.

“So, all we can do is to follow the suggestion from Wendy’s mother and explore the Dragon Country. Once we’re there, we can try out a Finder – I’ve already asked for one to be released to me. I should be able to collect it when we get over the crossing.”

Bret paused, again looking deadly serious, then returned his attention to the back seat passengers.

“It’s vital that we track down Demaz, and find out what he knows,” he said, “I have a feeling that Demaz is a key link – perhaps our only chance of finding out what is really going on, and whoever is behind it.”

## Chapter Thirty Four

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Tanji seemed determined to show Kevin even more of the world of Lyndesfarne, especially after their highly enjoyable visits to the beach resort – Kevin could never quite recall its name – and to the tropical city of Jaireby. Emboldened by these successes, Tanji suggested that they take a week-long break in the Other World, this time proposing a horse-riding tour – pony trekking, as Kevin had heard it called.

Kevin would soon discover that Tanji was an able horsewoman, fluid and well-seated in the saddle. He was entirely unsurprised by this revelation, as he had long suspected that horses were still more commonplace in this world than in his own, or at least familiar to those who's careers depended on working with Visitors from the other world. He himself, on the other hand, had never been on a horse before, but had expressed himself willing to learn, albeit with a certain degree of trepidation.

Together, the two lovers travelled through the portal network, once again guided expertly by Tanji. From the last portal building, their destination was just a short walk along a dusty trail carrying their shoulder bags – people in this world always seemed to be able to travel lighter than those at home. They finally ended up at a ranch located in what Kevin fondly imagined was called the high chaparral, although he was not exactly sure what the words really meant.

They entered at the compound gate and looked around at the buildings being warmed by the bright morning sunshine. The stables and barns, not to mention the accommodation for people, were extremely tidy and, he would shortly discover, well-equipped. It was a set up which he immediately classified as a Dude Ranch, based more from what he had seen in films than any direct experience of his own.

He followed Tanji into the low ranch building through a doorway marked by a sign which read, if Kevin's very limited understanding of the Lyndesfarne language was correct, read "Reception". They were greeted by the receptionist, who was standing behind a desk of rustic design, with a mellifluous – and to Kevin, entirely unintelligible – stream of words. Tanji answered with equally rapid speech, although Kevin caught a few words, including his own name. Check-in took only a few moments, during which the receptionist

gestured at the desk, and both Kevin and Tanji were required to press their right hands onto a slate surface embedded in the desk top. This process was entirely familiar to Kevin, who had stayed in the “Walled Garden” hostel frequently both during and after the construction of the New Bridge.

Formalities completed, Kevin and Tanji were introduced to a deeply-tanned and energetic little man called Riz who, surprisingly, spoke a little English. Kevin found it difficult to determine the other man’s age; he could have been anything between thirty and fifty-five.

Riz took them on a whirlwind guided tour of the stables, showing them the tack and introducing them to the horses they would be riding later on. Kevin knew almost nothing about horses, and the beasts looked impossibly big, as always. He nervously backed away when his animal was led from its stall. Tanji and Riz encouraged him into the saddle and soon Kevin was plodding around in a circle, feeling just a little foolish. The horse was being held by a long rein by Riz who also pointed out the errors in his posture and technique. Some of his more complicated remarks had to be rendered in the Lyndesfarne language and translated by Tanji, inevitably with a twist of her own.

“He says you should sit more forward in the saddle,” she suggested, adding wryly, “And arch your back a little – like you do when you’re with me.”

He had gained a little confidence by the time they stopped for a break and some refreshments. He realised he had managed a whole hour in the saddle without having been thrown to the ground.

As the days went on, Tanji assured him repeatedly that he was learning quickly, although the muscles in his backside were already beginning to fundamentally disagree with her in this regard. He persevered, however, and was extremely pleased, only a few days later, to be able to manage a short gallop without feeling totally out of control or likely to fall off at any moment.

His abilities on horseback continued to improve quickly, he was told. Everyone seemed sufficiently confident, towards the end of their vacation, to allow Tanji to propose a two-day ride to see the small wild dragons which populated this area of arid, semi-desert scrubland.

“We won’t be riding fast, or even very far, really,” she assured him, “But there are some things I’d like to show you which cannot easily be reached in any other way.”

They set off on their trek early in the morning, while it was still cool. Kevin and Tanji had both packed a few personal belongings in

their saddlebags. Kevin had taken almost nothing except for a few toiletries and a change of underwear, while Tanji seemed intent on including the magic communication slate she seemed to carry with her everywhere in this world.

They were assisted in the journey by two trail guides, one of whom was Riz himself. The other was a taciturn older guy named Vritz, stereotypically terse and grizzled in appearance, although Kevin would later discover that he opened up after a bottle of cider or two around the campfire.

The two guides were mounted astride rather bigger and stronger horses, it seemed to Kevin, than himself and Tanji, and therefore appeared capable of carrying more baggage. Vritz also led a packhorse loaded with a surprisingly large amount of material, although Kevin would later find that, although bulky, many of the items were really very light in weight.

All of the party carried water bottles, conscientiously filled from the tap provided back at the ranch. The two travellers were carefully drilled by the guides about the importance of rationing their water supply. It seemed they did not want to lose any tourists on this trip – must be too much paperwork, Kevin assumed ironically.

As the party rode out, Riz explained in slightly fractured English something about the local fauna. He was assisted by Vritz, who spoke no English but appeared to know a great deal more about the wildlife. Even Tanji, who had been trained as an interpreter, found it difficult to translate some of the descriptions the grizzled guide used. Presumably, Kevin mused, Vritz was making use of complex technical words not in everyday circulation.

There was inevitably a certain amount of confused repetition, but Kevin gradually came to understand that the creatures that lived in this part of the world had to be hardy enough to survive extremes of temperatures, as well as being able to find moisture in out-of-the-way places – or be capable of doing without it.

They stuck to well-worn trails across the semi-desert, picking their way through dried up thorn-bushes and passing the occasional giant cactus. In this area, the ground was mostly flat, with occasional rocky gullies which cut deeply into the land and where they had to take care when crossing. For some of the deeper and most broken ravines, they were required to dismount and lead their horses in single file.

Their first destination was a range of craggy hills which the guides pointed out to them in the distance. This was the region frequently by a kind of small flying reptile, whose name appeared at



first to be difficult to translate, but Tanji and Riz finally settled on “Desert Hawk”. Vritz explained that these little dragons are capable of spotting and catching desert rats, mice and similar creatures from miles away. They would also feed on snakes and lizards – indeed anything alive and wriggling which was light enough for them to be able to fly away with.

The trekking party stopped at a vantage point overlooking a low dry valley and perhaps half a mile or so from the line of the cliffs. They dismounted from their horses, Kevin for one feeling the benefit of stretching his legs after their morning ride. Tanji had correctly recognised that her lover was entirely captivated by dragons and would relish the opportunity to witness another, rather less fearsome, species.

Vritz set up one of the magic magnifying plates Kevin had experienced before, but this time mounted on a kind of wooden tripod which had somehow been folded up in the baggage carried by the packhorse.

Alternating between using the “magic binoculars” and his unaided eyes, they watched an impressive flying display, the Hawks whirling and squawking madly both in flight and in their nests. These creatures lived in family groups of perhaps a dozen or even twenty, roosting amongst rocky and inaccessible crags, just like their larger cousins. They had a huge range, flying – soaring, really, on the thermals created by the strong sunshine on darker rocks – and travelling long distances to hunt down their prey.

As Kevin and Tanji watched the Hawks, engrossed in the continuing aerial display, Riz handed each of them a packed lunch – inevitably contained in that magic wrapping that had so confused Kevin on first encounter. They also drank very sparingly from their water flasks, to the visible approval of Vritz.

After an hour or so, the party reluctantly departed. Kevin eased himself back into the saddle, realising that a few days ago he would never have imagined he would be able to embark on another ride with little more than a few twinges in his thighs.

Their afternoon ride took them into canyon country. This was a confusing maze of passes, which seemed to Kevin to have no distinguishing features whatsoever. Nevertheless, they were directed unerringly to the intended destination, a feat which considerably impressed Kevin who was convinced that, left alone, he would never be able to find his way back.

After a few hours riding, most of it at walking pace or slower, the party stopped at another viewpoint, this time overlooking a shallow

canyon. There was a river at the bottom although Kevin noted that, in this season, there was barely a trickle in its bed.

Tanji drew up alongside him.

“Vritz says we’ll be pitching camp just over there.”

She pointed out a wide flat spot sheltered by high rocks on one side and by a couple of trees on another, and with an obvious route down to the river to allow, Kevin assumed, the horses to drink their fill.

“That’s not very far,” Kevin noted.

“Of course, we could take a longer ride,” she suggested teasingly, “But I expect you’ll be glad to stop this evening as it is!”

She patted his thigh playfully.

“I look forward to you rubbing it better later,” he suggested, grinning hugely in return.

As they arrived at the indicated spot, Kevin realised that people must have camped here before, at least judging by the fire-pit marked with a ring of stones and dotted with the blackened remains of logs.

Riz and Vritz rapidly erected their overnight camp, assisted rather ineffectually by Kevin and Tanji. The two guides produced from their saddlebags, and the packhorse’s load, the magical tents and beds and other furniture that Kevin had experienced on the beach holiday for the first time only a few months before, once again all contained in an astonishingly small volume. Here they were used, perhaps a little more authentically, to set up a camp in an area which seemed to Kevin to be more or less the genuine article when it came to untamed wildernesses.

As they set up camp, it became rapidly dark and it began to cool quickly. Vritz produced logs and kindling from the little wooded area, looking to Kevin as if the fuel had been prepared on a previous visit. The guide started the fire with a carefree magical gesture. The blaze caught immediately, and it was not long before they were all sat comfortably around the campfire.

Vritz, assisted by Riz, rapidly prepared a meal whose origins Kevin could not quite identify. The appetizing aroma from the cook-pot, together with the considerable appetite he had worked up during the ride, meant that he attacked the food with gusto as soon as it was presented. Vritz also produced a number of chilled bottles of what Kevin had assumed would be beer, but was in fact a kind of still cider. He enjoyed this enormously once he had got over the surprising taste.

After their meal, they sat talking around the campfire for a while, finishing the last of the cider, while Riz tended to the horses. Vritz

seemed willing to answer the almost inexhaustible supply of questions that Kevin came up with and Tanji interpreted.

“Does it ever get wet around here?” he inquired.

Tanji translated his question and the short response from the trail guide.

“Every year, for about four days,” came the answer, “It rains continuously.”

During the ride, Kevin had noticed the deep runnels and water-worn rocks, which suggested that short-lived streams would appear during the wet season. That’s an awful lot of rain in one go, he mused.

“So why don’t the bigger dragons live in these parts?”

Again, Tanji translated his question and listened carefully to the answer, delivered at length from the trail guide.

“There are two reasons,” she replied eventually, “The first is that the kind of animals that large dragons like to eat are not often found in this area. There are no deer, or antelope or pigs – wild boar, perhaps I should say – in these parts.”

She paused, listening to more rapid explanation in the Lyndesfarne language.

“The other reason is to do with the rainfall,” she continued, “These little critters don’t like the damp any more than their larger cousins, but they can hide themselves in crevasses and caves when it rains.”

He could have asked many more questions, but began to feel himself overcome with sleep. Making excuses on his behalf, Tanji gently guided him to their tent and into their sleeping bag.

Kevin slept like a log and awoke early, feeling refreshed and only a little sore in a few places. Tanji too appeared to have slept well, although Kevin noted she had herself fallen asleep before delivering the promised massage.

With little fuss, and a considerable amount of quiet competence, Riz and Vritz served the yawning tourists a light breakfast washed down with mugs of hot chocolate. Kevin and Tanji lingered over their drinks while the two men packed up the camp, everything collapsing and disappearing into the baggage in a fashion which, as always, Kevin could only wryly label as “magic”.

Their morning ride took them to yet another vantage point, this one on the edge of the plateau of the high desert. From where they stood, they could look out over a range of lower hills rolling down towards a rugged coastline in the very far distance. It was, Kevin

recognised, another spot which would have been nearly impossible to get to by any form of transport short of flying, except on horseback.

They dismounted, and Kevin and Tanji walked hand-in-hand to the very edge of the plateau. From there, they looked down at the distant coast. It must have been ten or more miles away, although plainly visible thanks to the clear air of the region. There was a wide strip of flat sandy desert between the foothills and the sea itself. Cut into the coastline was a large bay, almost closed on the seaward side, but extending several miles inland, and almost perfectly circular in shape. It was a most unusual – indeed, entirely *unnatural* – formation.

Kevin speculated on what geological mechanisms could possibly have resulted in a circular bite into the coastline: an explosive volcanic eruption, perhaps? While he was studying the strange-looking cove, a gradual realisation crept over him. He realised that he was overlooking the site of that ill-fated crossing, the one that Noah – or Noaz, however his name was pronounced – had feared.

“This is Noah’s crossing, isn’t it?” he asked Tanji.

She nodded.

“I looked it up,” she confessed, “It wasn’t terribly hard to identify from the records at the Guild, given what I heard at Bret’s place.”

Kevin looked on, suddenly gloomy as the reality of the tale he had been told came in upon him.

“It’s not the only one, you know,” she said sadly, “Huge round shapes in the landscape are all over this world – and yours, too.”

“Mine?” Kevin started.

“Oh, yes,” she replied, “There’s a circular lake in Ireland, for example, which was the site of a crossing closed a few hundred years ago. It’s still thought to have something mysterious about it, even now.”

“Ah.”

“I just wanted to see this one for myself. We really have done some stupid things in the past, you know,” Tanji added sadly, “Mucking around with crossings.”

## Chapter Thirty Five

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It seemed to Kevin that a small army was assembling at the point where the causeway met the coast on the Lyndesfarne side of the crossing. Men and women in Guardian uniforms – from both sides – were scurrying to and fro, and the air was thick with urgent instructions.

The party had disembarked from the cars on the other side, Kevin reluctantly handing over the few items of electronic equipment which might be damaged by the barrier between the Two Worlds. To his chagrin, he noticed that Bret appeared to have no such qualms, tossing his mobile phone to the driver without a moment's hesitation.

When they arrived, having jogged most of the way over the causeway, Kevin found himself very slightly out of breath and feeling rather embarrassed by his lack of fitness, as both Bret and Tanji seemed to be suffering no effects from their hasty crossing.

Warden Williamson was very much in evidence, deep in urgent conversation with a serious-looking man that Kevin did not recognise. The other man was wearing the dark green robes which Kevin strongly suspected indicated some senior rank in one of the Boards or Guilds responsible for the governance of the crossing, although he could not quite work out exactly the significance.

As Kevin caught his breath, the Warden completed his discussions and, nodding seriously to his companion, turned and made his way towards the new arrivals. Seeing his opportunity, Bret strode over to intercept the robed figure, politely acknowledging Williamson as they passed.

The Warden greeted Kevin and Tanji grimly, and recognized Sergeant Graves with a wave of the hand that was not quite a military salute.

“Well,” he said, “This is a pretty pickle we find ourselves in.”

“What's going on?” Kevin asked, glancing around at the barely contained turmoil around them. Tanji had moved to stand close to him and he instinctively took her hand in his own.

“We're a bit busy here,” the Warden replied, his plummy accent adding an extra degree of earnestness to his studied understatement, “Thanks to your intelligence, we've tracked down some of Demaz's associates and persuaded them to talk.”

Kevin looked askance at this remark, and Tanji barely stifled a gasp.

“Oh, it didn’t take much,” the Warden went on, “It appears that the full extent of Demaz’s plans was not made clear to his men, and they’re being very cooperative now that they realise just what was being planned.”

“What do you mean?” Tanji demanded.

“His men didn’t know that his objective was to spread a potentially deadly disease across both worlds,” Williamson replied, “What we don’t know is how much Demaz himself knows, and who he’s working for. So we need to track him down pronto.”

“We’ve got an idea where to go,” Kevin asserted, squeezing Tanji’s hand.

Williamson cocked his head, clearly encouraging him to continue. Kevin quickly told him about what they had learned from Patricia Rossiter.

“Well, it’s an interesting theory,” the Warden mused when Kevin had finished.

“You don’t believe it?” Kevin said, immediately downcast.

“No, no, it’s entirely plausible,” Williamson said, attempting to reassure him, “It’s just that Demaz is a man who gets about a fair bit, and we have all sorts of leads and ideas as to where he might be.”

Kevin found this less than convincing.

“Look, let me talk to my colleagues and determine what the actions are,” the Warden concluded, then quickly turned and strode off. Kevin turned to watch him go.

Further along the road inland, Bret was evidently engaged in a heated exchange the robed figure he had accosted earlier, along with several other people who Kevin did not recognise but who clearly had positions of responsibility. The Warden joined this group, the circle immediately widening to admit him. The discussions got more energetic and intense, with much waving of hands; there did not appear to be any kind of consensus emerging.

Suddenly, a young blonde woman hurried up, evidently a native of the Other World and dressed in the uniform of the Lyndesfarne Guardians. She stood rather nervously just outside the circle, waiting to be noticed. After a few seconds, there was a pause, allowing her to hand Bret a small package and beat a hasty retreat.

Her appearance struck Kevin as remarkably similar to Yiselle, the young Guardian who had been struck down by the pestilence that Andrew Wollack had discovered and who was even now only just out of danger in hospital.

After a few more moments, Bret appeared to be dismissed. He spoke in a low voice to Sergeant Graves, who saluted quickly and set off at a brisk pace towards the knot of people Bret had just left.

“Right then,” Bret said with a sudden exhalation, “Let’s go.”

Kevin felt distinctly nervous and exposed when Bret made it clear that it would be just the three of them – including Tanji – who would be making their way to the dragon country portal.

“Why are we going on our own?” he demanded.

“Well,” Bret replied, “We’re not the only people who have been making enquiries about Demaz and his colleagues.”

“So I’ve heard,” Kevin responded grimly.

Bret nodded.

“It seems that no-one seems to want to take the speculations of a lonely old woman too seriously. In fact, they think we’re wasting our time, and they don’t want to waste anyone else’s. I was only just able to follow this trail myself after quite an argument – I was almost instructed to go somewhere else.”

Bret paused, suddenly looking more resolute.

“So, for now, we are, indeed, on our own,” he concluded, “But I think we may be able to pick up allies on the way.”

Still firmly holding Tanji’s hand, Kevin followed Bret into the nearby portal terminus building.

When they emerged from the portal network, the reduced party were greeted by two men who, to Kevin’s relief, he recognised immediately. One was Simas, the grizzled veteran who had guided himself and Tanji on a dragon safari not so long ago, who was accompanied by Omiz, his junior sidekick.

Bret greeted the two guides in the Lyndesfarne language, raising his hand in the familiar way. The two guides looked altogether more determined than when Kevin had encountered them last. They clearly already understood that there was something more at stake than just a guided tour for the tourists.

Looking around, Kevin belatedly recognised where they were – the speed of portal travel still left him dazed and disoriented. Bret opened the package he had been presented with earlier, and took three curious objects from inside. They looked like wide bracelets made from some kind of ceramic material, a pale off-white like old bones. He gestured fluidly over each one, the artefacts in turn becoming alive with the sparkles of green light which indicated active magic. Bret handed one to Tanji and passed a second to Kevin.

“Put it on your wrist,” he instructed.

“What is it?” Kevin demanded.

“It’s a, well, *glamour*,” Bret replied, “Magical. It will disguise our features in case we are being observed from a distance.”

“Ah.”

Kevin had wondered how they were going to be able to sneak up on Demaz – assuming he was indeed in the vicinity – since it was obvious that their appearance was well-known to him. He slipped the device over his left wrist, where it seemed to contract slightly to prevent it from falling off. Like the amulet he still wore on his upper arm, it felt warm to the touch, although Kevin could not quite decide whether that was just his imagination.

Meanwhile, both Omiz and Simas were speaking to Bret in the Lyndesfarne language, with Tanji almost automatically interpreting for Kevin’s benefit.

“I think I know where should look first,” Simas suggested in a laconic tone evident even through Tanji’s voice.

Bret’s interest was apparent without the need for translation.

“There’s a disturbance, it seems,” Omiz said, “In the flight of the dragons.”

Through Tanji’s translation, Kevin understood that Omiz believed that someone had hidden themselves in a cave in the rocky hillside underneath a crag habitually occupied by a large flight of the creatures. Omiz – and presumably Simas too – considered that the intruders had expected to use the dragons to warn them of any approaching visitor, not realising that their own presence would change the dragon’s behaviour – especially the way they would fly around their usual roost – in a way which would be obvious to seasoned dragon-watchers.

Bret nodded thoughtfully for a moment.

“It might just be Demaz,” he finally said to Kevin, “So let’s go and have a look.”

Directed by the guides, they piled into one of the articulated vehicles that Kevin and Tanji had used on their previous visit to the area, which was waiting nearby. They set off with a jerk before Tanji had gained her seat, and Kevin found her sitting half in his lap for a few confused seconds.

“We need to get as close as we can without attracting notice,” Simas stated flatly, Tanji again interpreting his words with only a moment’s delay.

“How are we going to do that?” Kevin wondered aloud.



“Oh, that’s easy,” Tanji said in English, suddenly grinning, and waving at Bret to attract his attention, “We just have to act like tourists.”

“Good thinking,” Bret smiled in response, “So let’s see if we can take a slightly roundabout route.”

He turned to the grizzled veteran, presumably repeating Tanji’s words for Simas’ benefit.

“So, what would you normally do at this point?” Tanji again translating his words, “Which way would you go with a load of foreigners?”

Simas grinned toothily.

“That particular crag would be the third on one of our usual routes,” came the reply.

“Have you been that way recently?”

Simas rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful.

“No. For some reason, that area’s not been on our itinerary for weeks.”

Kevin found the next hour or so incredibly frustrating. To allay any suspicion, the party moved slowly following an indirect route and stopping at observation points along the way, much as they had done on Kevin and Tanji’s first visit. The guides deployed the magical viewing plate, ostensibly to watch the flight of the dragons, although actually scanning the hillside for any sign of movement, or even an entrance. Kevin thought he could identify a dark opening in the rocks, but could not be sure even when using the full magnifying power of the viewer.

Omiz pointed out the flight of the dragons, indicating – through Tanji’s translation – the way their movements indicated something amiss in the vicinity. It may have been just Tanji’s struggle with specialist technical words, but Kevin could not really make out exactly what was so different. As far as he was concerned, they looked just the same as they did when they had toured before.

The party waited for as short a time as they dared at each intermediate spot, but it still seemed to Kevin like an age before they pulled up on the nearest reasonably flat piece of ground close to the crag. It was quiet, with no sign of people anywhere; just the soft sign of the ever-present wind and the occasional rustle of unseen creatures moving about the business.

They got out of the vehicle, Omiz moving at an authentically slow pace to remove and erect the stand for the viewing plate, while Kevin and Tanji pointed theatrically at the roosting dragons near the top of the rock formation. As planned, Bret and Kevin clambered from the

vehicle and strolled about apparently aimlessly, as if stretching their legs or perhaps seeking an unobtrusive spot to take a pee.

Kevin could just make out a dark opening, and Bret nodded slowly to him. Feigning an interest in a non-existent feature ten yards or so to the left of the cave entrance, the two men scrambled up the hillside, making their way between the boulders and taking care to avoid the occasional prickly cactus.

At the same time, Omiz moved quietly, picking his way carefully towards the other side of the entrance, while Simas and Tanji waited by the vehicle, still striving to move and act as casually disinterested tourists. They reached the level of the opening, and Bret and Kevin edged their way along towards the cave entrance and peered cautiously inside.

The cavern was larger than it looked from the outside and quite dark, especially by comparison with the bright sunshine of the desert. Some kind of field camp was set up inside, with bags and equipment of indiscernible purpose dotted about. A fire burned in one corner; Kevin assumed it must be magical, since it seemed to be emitting light and heat, but no smoke or fumes. A couple of the magical lamps cast an uneven light over the rough walls and sandy floor.

Set right at the back were a couple of flimsy-looking camp beds, closely resembled the seaside furniture that Kevin had encountered on vacation with Tanji, although here finished in some drab colour rather than the bright patterns found on the beach.

Demaz was in earnest conversation with Wendy, sitting face-to-face on the camp beds. There was some kind of a debate going on, although Kevin could not make out any words. Both father and daughter looked very tired, worn-out, as if they had not been sleeping very well. Both looked dusty, even grimy, and had clearly not had much opportunity to wash recently.

Demaz jumped up when he noticed Bret and Kevin in the cave entrance. His eyes widened as the glamour cast by the bracelets the two men still wore became ineffective at their close range.

“You!” Demaz shouted.

Wendy too looked shocked, although there might have been a faint expression of relief on her face, too.

“Come out, now,” Bret instructed calmly, pleadingly, “It’s all over. There’s nowhere to go from here.”

Demaz swept up some object from the top of the rucksack which appeared to Kevin to be some kind of necklace or amulet, the surface roiling with the green and orange sprites which indicated the presence of active magic. The density of the moving lights gave Kevin the

distinct impression that this was the most powerful – or at least the most complex – magical object he had ever encountered.

“Stay where you are,” Bret shouted.

Demaz ignored them. He frantically executed a complex series of gestures with his right hand in the direction of the amulet held in his left.

“No!” screamed Bret.

He made a desperate dash towards the gesticulating man. But, before he had made more than two steps, Demaz had pressed the amulet to his temple. He jerked spastically, taking a soundless gasp of air, and then collapsed motionless to the dirt floor.

## Chapter Thirty Six

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The fire flickered lower, although Kevin suspected this was a deliberate – and magical – effect rather than anything to do with the exhaustion of the fuel. Tanji was by now snoring gently on his shoulder and he was beginning to wonder if this was the moment when he should gently guide her to their bed.

Bret and her Mother sat quietly, motionless, gazing at their two guests; everyone else had long since retired to their bedrooms. Kevin got the impression that there was just one more tale they wanted to tell this evening.

“A spot more to drink?” Bret enquired softly.

Kevin smiled and nodded, then held out his glass. Bret splashed just a little more of the particularly pleasant red wine into it. Settling back contentedly on the sofa, Kevin made sure that Tanji’s head and shoulders were comfortable on his lap.

Bret too sat back easily in her chair, her wineglass cupped in one hand.

“The traditional occupation of certain families – to preserve the secrets of the Two Worlds – is one which has persisted down the ages,” she resumed, “And my own family” – she nodded at her mother – “has been involved in one way or another for countless generations.”

Bret paused to sip at her glass, then resumed.

“So, here’s a story I’ve heard many times over the years, one that involves my grandparents – my mother’s mother – and I’m sure she’ll correct me if I get any aspect wrong.”

The Ferryman smiled at this last, raising her glass in silent salute.

“My tale is set nearly sixty years ago, shortly after that period in your world’s history known as the Second World War. It concerns my grandmother’s brother – Bram – who was quite a rogue and an adventurer at that time. He became famous for numerous exploits – many of which I heard as bedtime stories as a child.”

Bret paused, looking wistful for a moment.

“Anyway, during the World War, Bram managed to get himself sent to your world – indeed, to several battle zones – to report on the progress of the War at first hand, disguised as a British soldier.”

“So he was a spy?” Kevin asked, breathlessly.

Bret laughed aloud, joined by her mother.

“We’d prefer to think of him as a journalist, an intrepid reporter from an interested neutral party,” Bret replied, with a hint of irony in his voice, “Although there were some threats from various quarters to the security of the crossing itself. So, the Boards and Guilds found themselves very loosely allied to the official British government, in a very low-key kind of way. Out of necessity, the Board of Control at the time found it necessary to intervene, to protect our interests, although I don’t think I should go into these just now.”

Kevin smirked. He had an inkling of the kind of political machinations that might well have been undertaken by both sides in such an arrangement.

“So,” Bret continued, “During his time in the army, my Great-Uncle Bram met and befriended two young men from your world, called Tom and Alasdair. The three of them got into all sorts of scrapes during the War – so many stories there!”

She shrugged, seeming caught up in her own memories of bedtime stories.

“Another time, maybe,” she continued eventually, “When it was all over and they had left the Army, the three young men travelled together for a while in North East England.”

“Uh-huh,” Kevin murmured just a little sleepily, already beginning to wonder what was to come.

“It seems that Bram had some plans for his companions,” Bret narrated in a measured voice, “First, he gently introduced them to the reality of our World and the technologies – magic, you might say – that are commonplace here.”

Kevin had begun to suspect that there was a well-established and carefully-managed process of discovery, allowing an individual to slowly come to terms with the reality of the Other World. They must have had considerable practice over the years, he mused; indeed, he realised that he himself must have been subjected to some variant of this process, intended to minimise the culture shock, the potentially catastrophic impact on the sanity of a newbie.

“Through Bram’s influence, they were inducted into the Guardians, in your world,” Bret said, “They underwent the basic training that was then, and indeed still is, required of recruits into that organisation.”

Kevin had also wondered about recruitment into the Guardians. It seemed that a great deal of caution was used, understandably enough, and he supposed that networks of recommendations would be used, much like that which was evidently used for students and staff members at NISSA.

Bret sipped again at her wine, then resumed.

“The same training is required in order to join certain related groups,” she added, “Such as the Guides.”

Kevin perked up.

“Who are the Guides?” he asked.

Bret smiled.

“They’re the equivalent of the Guild of Directions, in your world,” she replied, “Helping Visitors from this world to find their way around in yours.”

Kevin nodded. It sounded like just another example of the, he imagined, deliberate symmetry of governance organisations in the Two Worlds.

“Anyway,” Bret resumed, “Alistair was also introduced to Yise, Bram’s younger sister. In the way of these things, the two young people fell in love and got married.”

Bret was silent for a moment, staring at the fire.

“So, back in the early nineteen-fifties, things seemed to have settled down. Alistair and Yise had wed, and she was pregnant - with my mother, of course,” Bret added, nodding at the Ferryman still sitting quietly in her chair, “Tom had settled into his role in the Guardian force – already a Corporal and with excellent prospects to progress further. He was reputed to be a hit with the local ladies, although still found time to visit his friend Alasdair and his new wife.”

Bret sipped her wine again.

“Even Bram – wild Bram, lucky Bram – seemed to have conquered his wanderlust and appeared to be on the verge of settling down. He had been walking out with a local girl and the prospect of another wedding seemed to be looming.”

“Then all of a sudden, something unexpected happened. One wild evening, Bram and Tom turned up at Alasdair and Yise’s house, excited by something he seemed to find difficult to communicate. The three men talked well into the night - some half-baked theories about a despot, a mystery group, and threats to the crossing and the Two Worlds.”

“It seems that Yise had gone to bed early, tired and heavily pregnant, leaving the men to their talk. Much later, she said that she had been woken by Alasdair with much insistent shaking, to tell her that there was something he had to do, and with a promise to be back in the morning.”

Bret paused dramatically.

“But, in the morning, Alasdair, and Bram and Tom, were still absent, and they were never seen again - alive or dead.”

Bret’s mother shifted in her seat.

“I never knew my father,” the Ferryman said sadly, “All this happened before I was born. My mother - Yise - never forgot her husband, and she would never accept she would not see him again, or her brother. After they disappeared, she travelled extensively in both worlds, usually in the guise of a Messenger, searching for them.”

She stared into the fire for a moment, then continued.

“Sometimes she would take me with her, especially as I got older. When we travelled, she talked all the time - stories and theories and explanations, some of which sounded far-fetched to me, even at the time. Even now, I’m not sure whether she was convinced he was still alive or whether she just wanted to find out what happened to him. As far as I know, she never achieved either aim.”

She paused again, looked downcast.

“When she died, her last words were, ‘find out what happened to Alasdair and Bram, for me’,” she continued sadly, “I’ve not been able to fulfil that last request. We still have no idea what happened to three courageous and resourceful young men who had survived a war, and were definitely no strangers to dangerous adventures.”

The Ferryman and her daughter were silent for a few moments, then Bret took up the tale.

“And then there was Tom’s family. We know his mother was from your world, born and brought up in a suburb of Newcastle. It seems that Tom’s father was from our World, although we’ve never been entirely sure exactly who he was. In any case, he appears to have married Tom’s mother, set up house together, then the two of them disappeared in mysterious circumstances. Tom was brought up an orphan, by his grandmother, in the period before the War.”

“So, it seems that it is a perilous existence for those who life is connected to the crossing and the Two Worlds. People have died – indeed, continue to do so – in mysterious circumstances.”

Bret looked directly into Kevin’s eyes.

“Something’s going on, even now,” she said bluntly, “And we still don’t know what it is.”

Tanji stirred slightly in Kevin’s lap. He looked down and realised that her eyes were open, that she had been awake for some time, listening quietly to Bret’s words. He could see tears forming in her eyes, and he moved to comfort her as best he could.

In the silence of the darkened room, Kevin once again wondered what happened to Tanji’s parents all those years ago. Perhaps it was

something similar? He had discreetly refrained from quizzing her on this topic, sensing some deep emotion, but he still hoped that she would one day tell him about it, unprompted.

The Ferryman herself yawned and stretched in an uninhibited fashion which surprised Kevin, even in his near somnambulant state.

“Now I think it’s time for all of us to get a little sleep.”



## Chapter Thirty Seven

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With a cry, Wendy Rossiter leapt toward the prostrate figure lying on the ground. Bret too had leapt forward, reaching Demaz a few seconds after Wendy. She huddled over her father lying prone on the floor, weeping copiously. Before Kevin could get any closer, she had pulled him up, close to her chest, and was keening something to him.

“Don’t leave me now,” she whispered again and again, rocking the unmoving man in her arms like a baby, “Not after all this time.”

Bret knelt next to Wendy, and gently disentangled her from the body. She curled into a ball, weeping inconsolably, clearly unable to feel Bret’s comforting touch or hear his reassuring words.

“He’s gone, Wendy,” he said quietly, “Let him go.”

As Kevin got closer, he could see no sign of harm on Demaz’s body – no wound, no bleeding, no mark of any kind. The man lay still, breathing deeply and steadily, as if he was asleep.

“What happened?” Kevin demanded, “He’s not dead, is he?”

“No, he’s not dead,” Bret confirmed sadly, checking over the big man’s body with an increasing sense of resignation, “But he might as well be. He invoked a self-inflicted mind-wipe. It must have removed a huge portion of his memories – years, perhaps decades, judging by the power of the magic he just used – and probably much of his personality, too. Every that has made him unique over the years. So, effectively, a suicide.”

Kevin was aghast. He could not imagine a circumstance or a cause which would compel him to take his own life – or at least a substantial portion of it – in such a way.

Their raised voices must have been clearly audible outside the cave. They were almost immediately joined by Omiz, who rushed in expecting, Kevin imagined, some kind of violence, then stopped, panting hard, when he saw what was happening. Realising what the impression from the outside must have been like, Kevin rushed to the cave mouth and looked down. He could see Tanji looking agitated and being forcibly prevented by Simas from clambering up the rocky hillside herself.

Kevin waved animatedly to re-assure her that he was unharmed, then beckoned her up. Before she had taken more than two steps, he was joined at the entrance by Omiz, who cupped his hands to his mouth and called out something in the Lyndesfarne language which

Kevin did not understand. Tanji shouted something in response, then returned to their transport. She reached inside and pulled out Bret's familiar rucksack and, with the briefest of afterthoughts, her own backpack. As Kevin watched, she slung both bags over her shoulders and then scrambled her way rather awkwardly up the steep boulder-strewn slope to the cave entrance.

Together the two men reached down to pull Tanji up the last few steps into the cave. She thanked them, slightly out of breath after the climb, then dropped her own rucksack to the cave floor. She looked around, slowly taking in the scene, and spotted Bret still attempting to minister to Demaz. She approached the fallen man and wordlessly handed over Bret's bag.

"What happened?" She asked Kevin quietly, backing away cautiously.

Kevin briefly described what he had just witnessed. Her eyes widened as she took in exactly what had happened to Demaz and she realised why Wendy was so distraught. She looked over at the stricken man, evidence of sympathy in her every reaction despite what had happened to her personally over the last few days. Shaking her head sadly, Tanji moved to try to comfort Wendy, who was still lamenting volubly, putting her arms around the other woman's shoulders.

Meanwhile, Bret reached into the satchel he had just been presented with and took out his writing slate. As Kevin watched, the other man scribbled something and then gestured fluidly at the slate, then began another message and yet a third.

As Bret scribbled away, evidently concentrating on the messages he was sending, Demaz began to move, his eyelids fluttering, as if he was waking up after a long sleep. Through her tears, Wendy saw the big man moving. She shrugged off Tanji's consoling embrace and crawled over to him. Demaz struggled against the torpor induced by the magic and blinked again, his eyes finally focussing on Wendy's face.

"Why have you cut your hair?" he said to her, "and what have you done with your face?"

Wendy looked bemused, her lack of comprehension clear to Demaz even in his awakening state. His eyes darted around the cave with increasing alarm, taking in the now-unfamiliar location and the group of strangers that surrounded him

"You're not Pat," he exclaimed, trying to sit up and looking around even more urgently, "Who are you? And what have you done with Pat?"

It was frighteningly clear to Kevin that Demaz had regressed to a state of mind from several decades past and that he was now getting increasingly confused and agitated. Bret beckoned over Omiz, who had clearly been expecting some difficulties under these circumstances and immediately assisted Bret in reassuring, and gently restraining, the big man.

“Kevin,” Bret addressed him urgently over Demaz’s shoulder, “Could you and Tanji go and keep a lookout from the cave entrance? I’ve sent for, well, back-up, you might say, and I need you to let them know exactly where we are.”

The two lovers hastened to the entrance. Kevin stood with legs apart in what he would later think of a comically heroic pose, shading his eyes with his hand. He scanned the horizon as far as it could be seen, concentrating his efforts in the direction where he believed the portal they had arrived though lay.

“There!” Tanji cried, “Fliers.”

Following Tanji’s outstretched finger, Kevin could just make out some dark shapes moving in the sky, through the desert haze. The two of them waved energetically, and the shapes rapidly enlarged and descended towards the rocky crags which enveloped the cave.

It was a troupe of Guardians, flying in on what could only be described as faerie wings – the kind that had so fascinated him on the vacation trip all that time ago. Kevin had not realised that there would be more practical uses of this magic. He would later be told by Tanji that there was a certain amount of risk to this, given the presence of dragons. Perhaps for this reason, the flyers seemed to be armed with some kind of magical weapons Kevin had no desire to understand and the dragons wisely kept their distance from the fracas a few hundred feet below their nesting site.

The fliers were joined, a few seconds later, by a second group of flyers who had appeared from a completely different direction – presumably the direction of the second-closest portal. The two groups of new arrivals furred their wings with swift precise gestures – the magic apparently disappearing into the thin packs they had strapped to their backs – and made their way quietly and professionally into the cave.

By the time Kevin and Tanji had returned to the cave, Bret and Omiz had managed to calm Ms. Rossiter enough for her to be able to speak coherently. Wendy’s story was simple enough: she had understood more than she had admitted about the importance of Kevin’s investigation of the death of Andrew Wollack at NISSA. This information, together with her previous communications with

Demaz, had allowed her to put two-and-two together. She had again communicated with Demaz, saying that she had important information about Bret and Kevin's investigation, but that she would only impart this in person.

They were interrupted by the arrival of the Ferryman herself, who had apparently declined the use of a flyer, but had been driven to the location from the nearest portal in another of the magical vehicles used earlier by Kevin and Tanji. Bret went straight over to the older woman and embraced her, his mother returning the hug affectionately.

Disentangling herself, the Ferryman beckoned to Kevin. He and Bret were both told off, at some length, for approaching a man known to be a dangerous fugitive with little by way of backup. It was, Kevin thought, the kind of anger from a loved one tempered with relief that the recipient of the bollocking was alive and unharmed by the experience. Talking-to completed, the Ferryman then took Bret on one side for, Kevin imagined, a more complete de-briefing.

The Guardians soon escorted Demaz and Wendy from the cave, taken away for questioning, Kevin imagined, but with no real expectation that any answers would be forthcoming. It was clear that Demaz was just a mercenary – a force for hire – and may not even have understood what it was that he was being asked to do. In Kevin's view, he did seem to be committed to the cause, but it seemed it was now impossible to find out who his paymasters were.

There was another arrival with a flutter of faerie wings, this time marking the arrival of the same taciturn female Messenger who had delivered the magical protection earlier. She wordlessly held out a large box, again made of that mysterious ceramic material, with the lid already open. Kevin and Tanji removed the amulets and bracelets they still wore, and placed them in the receptacle. The Messenger closed the lid, made a few gestures presumably to seal it against tampering, and whisked it away in less than a minute.

The squads of Guardians worked their way steadily around the cave, presumably looking for further clues, Kevin felt he was now just getting in the way. He and Tanji went outside and sat quietly together on a rocky ledge just outside the cave entrance.

Kevin wondered yet again about the intertwined history of the Two Worlds. He was aware of some of the influences throughout his own world, and not just in the areas influenced by the European traditions. The myths and legends that he had grown up with, and those of other cultures, hinted at huge, complex linkages between events in his world and the other, which made no sense without

knowing of the existence of the other world - an existence the knowledge of which had been carefully restricted over the millennia.

And throughout that time, there had been numerous near disasters, sometimes averted in the nick of time - often with true heroics - or even real catastrophes, events that had devastating effects in one or both worlds.

That circular lake in Ireland, Kevin mused, which was formed when a crossing had snapped out of existence in a moment. Now, of course, the site was softened by water and time, and could no doubt be mistaken for a natural feature of the landscape. The events that led up to Noah's Flood, which must have been at least six thousand years in the past, the Diaspora of the Apache Nation sixteen hundred years ago, and the creation of that mysterious Irish lake only a few hundred years before. These things had been happening forever.

How many places in the Worlds, he wondered, were there these circular features, miles across, indicating where an explosive closure of a crossing had happened? The human cost must be huge, even though attempts were always made to site crossings in out-of-the-way places. People must have died, he estimated, in their thousands.

Even aside from the disasters of epic proportions, people's lives - and minds - were still at risk: every day, it seemed. There were just too many stories of people disappearing in mysterious circumstances; whether dead, or just as good as, after a massive mind-wipe. Indeed, in Tanji's case, close family members - her parents - had apparently vanished, never to be seen again. Despite clear evidence of huge effort from the authorities - the Boards and Guilds, and the Watchers, and even the Ferryman - it seemed impossible to prevent such happenings.

"It's just too dangerous," Kevin said, louder than he intended.

"What?" Tanji exclaimed, starting slightly at the vigour of Kevin's exclamation.

"What if Demaz is right?" he replied, "Maybe, just maybe, it is time to close the last crossing."

## The End

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