



Bridge at War

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To Tas and Seb – for always being there.

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 fictitious, and bears no resemblance to the charming Holy Island of Lindisfarne in North East England.

Chapter One

“So what are you going to do with the rest of your life?” Bram asked his companions.

Alistair looked quietly contemplative, or perhaps just befuddled for a moment.

“I really have no idea,” he answered eventually, and then added, “But anything’s better than being in the Army.”

The third occupant of the carriage compartment, who had been staring out through the grimy window at the darkened countryside rushing past, turned to face them.

“I want, no, I need to have a purpose, an objective, some proper place in the world,” Tom said, with a surprising amount of passion given the lateness of the hour, “I just want to feel that I was doing something worthwhile.”

Alistair drowsily grunted his approval, already on the verge of sleep. Bram nodded thoughtfully.

The three young men who were travelling together had been friends and comrades in the Army. After the conclusion of hostilities in Germany and Japan, and the end of what people were already calling the Second World War, their military service had been abruptly terminated.

Their demobilisation had been eagerly anticipated but, even so, it had happened with a speed and efficiency that had surprised them all. They had arrived on a troopship at Southampton, the last stage of their journey home after serving in central Europe. All three felt tired and sick after the sea trip, as none of them were particularly good sailors. Their platoon had then been transported by truck to the Aldershot barracks. Tom, who was a northerner by upbringing, was not entirely sure exactly where Aldershot was, and finally concluded that it was just “somewhere in the south of middle England”.

After a short stay in the barracks, with a minimum of military discipline, they had been issued with civilian clothing, travel warrants and their back pay, and then turned loose.

Neither Tom nor Alistair had any very close family. Tom’s parents had died under mysterious circumstances while he was still a child. He had been brought up by his Granny, his mother’s mother, but she too had died during the War. He had been overseas at the time, and was unable to attend the funeral. He nevertheless felt duty-

bound to pay a brief visit to his grandmother's sister, who still lived in the county of Kent, in order to offer his condolences.

Alistair's family lived in the far north of Scotland. His father had died when he was very young. This was said to have been a terrible accident, involving a very grand gentleman during the grouse-shooting season. Alistair's father had been supplementing his income from the smallholding by acting as a beater on a shoot. The full circumstances, according to everything he had heard over the years, were peculiar, even mysterious. After the accident, his mother, utterly overcome by grief and anger, was never in good health again, and had passed away shortly after Alistair joined the Army. He had a letter requesting that he make an appointment with a solicitor in London; something to do with wills and inheritance, he had been informed.

Tom already knew that Bram had family ties in North East England, not far from the Scottish border. Bram had already mentioned that he had some business to attend to in London, although he was vague on the details.

Since all three of them had commitments in or around the capital, they decided to regroup in a few days time. As planned, they had met up in a popular public house just outside King's Cross railway station in London. This particular pub was located partially under the railway bridge arches, with the inner rooms actually formed from the archways themselves.

It was getting dark on that summer's evening, and the weather had been warm and muggy for days. Fortunately, the inside of the pub, especially the back rooms, was relatively cool although rather dark and smoky. It was crowded and very noisy, with the sounds of raucous voices bouncing off the brickwork of the arched ceiling.

Tom, whose compact and wiry frame made him a first choice for this kind of manoeuvre, weaselled his way to the bar where, after a few frustrating minutes of trying to catch her eye, the barmaid disinterestedly pulled three pints of ale. Tom wound his way back through the crowd to his companions, clutching the precious beer tankards to his chest.

Typically, Bram managed to find them a table to themselves in the jam-packed pub. Despite that fact that the entire bar was heaving, a group of travellers drained their pints and stood up just as the three of them were passing, and they were able to slip into the recently-vacated seats almost before anyone else had noticed.

"Lucky Bram!" Tom thought, "How does he always manage to do it?"

Tom took a sip of his beer. It was tepid and flat (which was intentional) and rather thin and sharp in flavour (which it most certainly was not supposed to be). Alistair took a pull from his own pint, and winced visibly.

“Don’t like this beer much,” he moaned, “Are you sure there’s actually any alcohol in it?”

Tom snorted his agreement with the sentiment, then swept up his own pint.

“Well, here’s to the future, lads,” he said, “And preferably a future which does not include the Army.”

Together, they toasted their re-union with the rather inferior beer.

They had planned to take the Edinburgh night train on the East Coast line from King’s Cross, alighting at Berwick-on-Tweed. After sampling a second pint, drunk more out of necessity than enjoyment, Tom thought, they left the hostelry and made their way across the road to the railway station.

Demob pay and travel warrants did not easily stretch to sleeping compartments, so the three companions faced the prospect of a rather cramped overnight trip holed up together. The station was hot and grimy, and they fought their way along the crowded platform struggling to keep together, a feat made more difficult by the steam and smoke billowing from the engines.

Despite the pressing throng, somehow Bram managed to find a compartment in the train which was otherwise unoccupied. He had rushed ahead down the platform, nimbly forcing his way through the crowd, with his pack thrown over his shoulder. He could now be seen waving frantically from the doorway of a coach which, except for the mail coaches, was located immediately behind the engine. Bram’s luck, again, Tom thought as he and Alistair boarded as quickly as their bulky kitbags would allow. They hustled their baggage down the narrow corridor and practically fell through the sliding door.

The train departed just a few moments after they had reached the compartment indicated by Bram. There was a considerable increase in noise from the engine, and the view from the window was immediately obscured by steam. There was a series of jerks which caused all them to stagger for a moment, followed by a cacophony of clatters and thumps as the train made its way over the points to join the main line to the north.

The companions set about making themselves as comfortable as possible on the worn upholstery, using their kit bags as pillows and greatcoats as blankets.

“Well, it may not be much,” Bram said, stretching out along one long seat, “But it’s certainly more comfortable than some of the places we’ve been.”

This was true, thought Tom. The three of them had been through a number of formative experiences together, in turns exhilarating, nauseatingly unpleasant and downright dangerous. He was vaguely looking forward to doing something altogether less stressful.

Their talk turned to what they would do now. Neither Tom nor Alistair had any very well formed plans. Their recent and surprisingly sudden departure from the Armed Services had left them feeling slightly rootless, even homeless.

“Well, if you like, come along with me,” Bram suggested, “I’ll have to show up at home sometime, I rather think, but I’m in no particular hurry to get there. I dare say that I’ll have to turn up to face the music sooner or later, but frankly I’d prefer later.”

Tom thought that Bram felt slightly uneasy, even embarrassed about the disparity of their relative positions, or perhaps he was just acting out of sympathy. He could recall a previous conversation where Bram had described his relationship with his parents as a bit strained.

“They’re all right, I suppose,” Bram had explained at the time, “Mum’s a kind soul, but she does nag a bit sometimes. Dad’s a bit distant, very serious and hard-working. He thinks that I’m a bit of a ne’er-do-well.”

Bram wriggled into a more comfortable position, and stretched out with his hands behind his head.

“After all, we’ve got all the summer ahead of us,” he continued, warming to the topic. “I’m sure we can get jobs on a farm, earn a few bob. It might feel like a holiday after the Army.”

Tom felt a touch uneasy at the prospect.

“Never done a farm job,” he mumbled, “Never been on a farm, actually.”

Alistair, who had been brought up on a smallholding in Sutherland, rejoined pragmatically.

“Oh, farm work’s not difficult,” he explained, rousing himself, “It’s just heavy and sometimes dirty. It’s basic labouring, you know: pick that up, carry it here, put it there.”

“Just like being in the Army then,” Tom quipped.

They all laughed.

“Well, at least there’s no Sergeant Major to shout at you,” Bram countered.

“Ah, but you still have to get up early, though,” Alistair said, although he did not sound particularly worried by the prospect.

“That’s true enough,” Bram said, still grinning widely, “Although I hope the breakfasts will be better.”

This was a factor which weighed fairly heavily on their minds, or possibly just their stomachs. Both during the War itself, as well as immediately afterwards, almost every necessity was rationed. Beer, petrol, meat, even bread was subject to careful control through the ration-book system. Of course, this had led to a thriving, almost omnipresent, black market, and in practice almost anything could be obtained if you had the right contacts and deep pockets. There were also one or two places where additional food might be available beyond the organised black market. It was a racing certainty, Tom thought, that there would be better rations on a farm.

The companions fell silent. Tom could already hear Alistair’s snores over the clickity-clack of the carriage wheels on the track. The rocking motion of the train, together with the relative warmth and comfort, not to mention the few pints of beer, appeared to have made them all feel very drowsy. Tom fell asleep to the soporific sound of the steam train forging its way north.

Chapter Two

Tom sometimes thought back to the strange circumstances when he and Alistair had first met Bram.

It was during that period of the War after the landings on the coast of France, when the Allied forces seemed to be interminably bogged down in Normandy. Tom and Alistair had come ashore in a later wave, once the beachheads had been established, and it was possible to get up the beach without actually being shot at. Once ashore, and deployed to the front line, things began to get altogether much nastier for the troops.

The theatre of operations was rolling countryside with thick hedges separating the fields, known as the bocage. Describing these field boundaries as “hedges”, Tom considered, gave rather the wrong impression. These were not a row of slender twigs at the edge of a suburban garden, but were huge earthen ridges, four or more feet high, with a deep ditch on either side. These earthworks were heavily grown with trees and shrubs, and had probably been in position for several hundred years.

These mighty hedgerows had evolved over the years to stop cows from straying, and to prevent *precious* soil from being washed away in the winter rains. They were a very effective barrier to rapid traversal, on foot, in trucks or even track-laying vehicles. It was impossible to see very far – there could be an enemy platoon or armoured vehicle just behind the next hedge, which might be less than a hundred yards away. It was all very different from the flat and open fields of East Anglia, where he and Alistair (along with thousands of other soldiers) had been training for the invasion.

The unfamiliar terrain was difficult for men and tanks alike. The enemy had deployed some highly-effective ground-based anti-tank weapons, which were capable of firing their rockets through the hedges. Conversely, the enemy’s own tanks were under constant threat from the air. The rate of advance was very slow, and Tom and Alistair often perceived no movement in the position of their unit for days on end.

This stalemate meant that, on both sides, the Infantry was well dug in, and the tanks were carefully hidden under camouflage nets and in hastily-constructed shelters. It appeared to Tom as if no-one seemed quite sure whether it was better to take cover in trenches right

under the tanks, which provided protection from small arms fire, or to keep away from the vast machines, in case they were spotted by one of the enemy's self-propelled rocket launchers.

On this occasion, Tom's unit had dug in for cover during the night in the lee of one of the bocage hedgerows, and well away from the tank divisions. As per standing orders, and because they were on the front line of a battle zone, they had posted guards on watch throughout the night. Since it was summertime, it was really only truly dark for a few hours.

At midnight, Alistair had come to relieve Tom, who had been on watch for the early part of the night. He had spent the last few hours peering out from under a low-hanging camouflage net. It was a warm and clear night, with enough light from the waning moon to be able to see clearly across the adjoining fields.

Alistair was yawning widely, not having got very much sleep for what seemed like forever. Tom greeted his arrival with a casual wave.

"Who's that?" Alistair whispered, looking over Tom's shoulder.

"Where?" Tom responded, spinning around.

Alistair pointed a finger across the field. From their foxhole, they were plainly able to see a man standing alone, not far from another of the hedges and perhaps only fifty yards away.

Tom could not understand how he had missed the figure before. He was quite sure he had not fallen asleep while on guard duty, but the man was in full view, some way from a hedgerow or any kind of cover. It was, Tom thought, as if he had just appeared where he stood.

As they watched, the peculiar figure stood motionless for several moments, and then strolled to a new position, as unconcerned as if he was walking down his local high street. He did not appear to be armed, but he was wearing a regulation Army tin hat. Tom and Alistair could see well enough to be sure that the helmet and uniform he was wearing was exactly the same as theirs.

"He shouldn't be wandering about like that," Alistair commented quietly, "Whoever he is, he's going to be on the receiving end of a right bollocking from the Sarge."

"Too right!" the other man responded.

"But what is he doing out there?" Alistair continued, "Can you see?"

The strange man appeared to be making notes, or perhaps sketches, writing diligently in a little jotter, and quite oblivious to his

surroundings. Even from that distance, it seemed to Tom that there was a very slight glow of light coming from the notebook itself.

Just at that moment, there was a muffled crack of gunfire and a spurt of dust as a bullet hit the ground only yards from the mystery man.

“Sniper!” shouted Tom, cupping his hands to his mouth to make himself heard, “Take cover!”

The stranger looked up, somehow appearing astonished to see Tom and Alistair looking at him, and then belatedly dived for the ground. Just as he did so, a second shot rang out. He cried out, clutching his leg.

“He’s hit!” Alistair cried, “Medic!”

The eccentric man was evidently still alive, and had managed to roll himself into a low ditch to one side of a hedge. There was very little cover, and as soon as he tried to move or stuck his head up, there would be another crack and a puff of dirt as a bullet struck close by.

“We’ve got to get him!” Tom said, “He’s pinned down. He’ll be a dead duck if he stays there for much longer.”

“Right, then,” replied Alistair, shouldering his Tommy gun.

Tom slung his rifle across his back, and the two men set off across the moonlit field, moving as quickly as they could and zigzagging wildly.

They could see the muzzle flashes of the rifle being used by the sniper and hear, rather than see, the whine of the bullets around their ears.

Alistair opened fire with the machine gun while on the run, never a good way to actually hit any target with such a weapon. Even so, it must have been close enough to disturb the sniper’s aim, since his shots became more rapid and less accurate.

The covering fire gave Tom the chance to reach the stranger, lift him up over his shoulder, and make a dash for it. Alistair sent further bursts of fire across the field, and the men raced back. Followed closely by Alistair, Tom finally dived head-first into the deep foxhole from where they had first spotted the figure in the moonlight.

“Are you *OK*?” Tom asked Alistair breathlessly.

Alistair nodded in response, also gasping after their efforts.

The two men turned their attention to the stranger they had just rescued. He was clutching his leg, obviously in pain, and blood was seeping through his fingers in an alarming way. He seemed wild-eyed and delirious, or perhaps just in shock.

“We’ve got to get him medical attention,” Alistair said urgently.

“Come on, then,” Tom responded.

Supporting the wounded man between them, they manoeuvred their burden through the run of trenches and foxholes that along the line of the hedgerow. They kept as low as possible, but Tom expected to hear the whistle of a bullet at any moment. Mercifully, they appeared to be out of the sniper’s line of fire, since there were no further shots.

They had covered a couple of hundred yards when they encountered two stretcher-bearers, who had jogged up in response to their previous call. Tom and Alistair eased the wounded man onto the stretcher while the paramedics expertly tied a tourniquet tightly around the man’s upper leg to staunch the flow of blood. They then picked up the stretcher and whisked the wounded man away.

It turned out that, by incredible good luck, the man they had rescued had been little more than nicked by the sniper’s bullet. The wound had bled profusely, but the shell had entirely missed bones and nerves. The two rescuers would later learn that he had been patched up in a field hospital and sent back, at his own insistence, to the front line after only a few days. They also discovered that he was in fact attached to the same unit as Tom and Alistair, although both men thought it was slightly strange that they had not even glimpsed him during the long weeks of training back in England.

It was a week or so later when the stranger sought out Tom and Alistair, making his way along the line of trenches behind yet another of the *bocage* hedgerows.

“I wanted to thank you for rescuing me,” he said, shaking first Tom and then Alistair’s hands vigorously.

“My name’s Stoker, Bram Stoker.”

“It was nothing really,” Alistair confirmed modestly, as the rescuers introduced themselves in turn.

“But what were you doing out there?” Tom pressed, “You must have known it was dangerous out there.”

“You know, I really don’t know,” Bram replied, shaking his head pitifully, “I think I must have been sleepwalking or something, some kind of temporary madness. But I’m fine now.”

Tom was not entirely convinced by this explanation. He had seen men overcome by the horrors of war, with the stress and dreadfulness of the conflict causing sleeplessness and nightmares. He felt that he himself was, at one time, verging on this state. From personal experience, he knew that battle fatigue led to poor judgements, irascible behaviour and snapping at others for no very good reason.

Sleepwalking around a battlefield, while outlandish enough to denote incipient insanity, was not something he had ever heard of. In any case, Tom never quite forgot that look of shocked surprise on Bram's face when he saw the two men looking directly at him across that moonlit field.

Still, it did seem to Tom that Bram was a lucky man, and certainly one possessed of large amounts of charm. The three young men became close comrades over the next few years, surviving several close shaves as the Allied forces broke out of their beachhead in Normandy, and started their drive across Northern Europe towards Berlin.

Chapter Three

Tom woke early, as was his habit. Despite the infamously enthusiastic wake-up approaches adopted by Sergeant-Majors the world over, he had consistently managed to be awake before the Sarge's noisy morning entrance. Despite the slightly cramped position in the compartment, he had actually slept very well on the train. Not wanting to disturb his companions, he sat and watched the countryside rush past the steamed-up window, all misty in the early morning light. He even caught a glimpse of Durham cathedral and castle looking ethereal in the dawn half-light, as the train passed through the ancient city.

The others were woken by the train's arrival at Berwick station. The noise from other people moving up and down the corridor, and the clatter and jerks of their arrival, served as an effective wake-up call on a par with any Non-Commissioned Officer they had hitherto encountered.

With the practised ease that experience of military service had given them, the three companions pulled themselves and their belongings into order. They decamped onto the platform and followed the crowd to the ticket barrier, where they gave up their travel warrants and tickets. The young men then found a spot clear of the foot traffic on the station forecourt, and held a short conference to decide upon their next steps. The consensus, reached unsurprisingly quickly, was that cups of tea and some breakfast was the highest priority.

"So let's find a café," Alistair said.

"Suits me," Bram agreed.

"Any idea which way we should go?" Tom asked.

"Not really," Bram answered, casting around, "But my guess is that way."

He indicated a street directly across from the station which appeared to go down towards the old town centre. There was a Lyon's Tea Shop on the corner, but by unspoken agreement they all felt that this was rather too grand for a group of young men who had just slept in their clothes on an overnight train.

They continued down the hill towards the town square. On the corner, they spotted a large and slightly rundown café which was reassuringly packed with men who looked as if they had spent their

entire life sleeping in their clothes. Perhaps this was an exaggeration, Tom thought, but we really don't stand out in here.

They entered the emporium, allowing a fair quantity of steam and general fug to escape from the interior. Tom ordered mugs of tea and plates of sausage and fried bread from the brisk matron behind the counter. She looked at the three men severely until Tom produced a handful of silver coins from his pocket, whereupon the suspicious look was immediately replaced by a tight smile which extended her lips but did not seem to reach to her eyes.

Tom handed over a half-crown, and received a few coppers in change. The matron also took their ration-books and clipped a few coupons to represent their breakfast fare. They picked up their plates and mugs and looked for somewhere to sit.

The dining room was crowded, and the only available space was at one end of a large table. The other end was already occupied by a rather dour-looking older man reading a newspaper. He was bulky and solidly built, with the look of a man who had worked the land his entire life, and who would think nothing of picking up a sheep with one hand. Bram enquired politely as to whether he would mind if the young men sat down. This request was acknowledged with a grunt and a wave of a large palm.

The companions were silent for a while, concentrating on the task in hand, that of consuming their breakfast. This activity completed, they returned to the topic of their next steps, where to go and how to go about finding suitable paid employment. After a few minutes, they were interrupted by the taciturn older man clearing his throat.

"I couldn't help but overhear," he began, "Now you boys sound like you need somewhere to go, and it just so happens I'm on the lookout for a few likely lads who aren't afraid of a little hard work. Are you interested?"

Tom and Alistair glanced at each other. Bram spoke for all three of them.

"We most certainly are, sir."

The older man stood up, folding the newspaper and slipping it into the pocket of his worn tweed jacket.

"Well then," he said with what Tom would later learn to be characteristic deliberation, "The name's Smith, John Smith."

Alistair, who was the nearest to the farmer, was already on his feet and extending his hand.

"Alistair McLaughlin," he said.

"A Scot, I take it," the farmer replied.

“Yes, sir. From Sutherland. My folks had a smallholding up there.”

“I see. That explains the accent, then. And you, lad?” he continued, turning to Bram.

“Bram Stoker, sir. I’ve worked a bit with animals.”

The farmer nodded slowly as Bram stepped back and allowed Tom to come forward.

“Thomas Perkins, sir. Not worked on a farm, but willing to be taught, sir,” he said, shaking hands. He noticed that John’s hands felt every bit as large and calloused as they had appeared.

“I see,” the farmer continued, “Well, I dare say you’ll get a chance to learn.”

The older man stood back, hands on hips, surveying the three companions’ empty plates and mugs.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

Farmer John directed the young men to a lorry parked to one side of the square. This was a transport with which they were entirely familiar from their time in the Armed Forces. They had endured many a bumpy ride in France and Germany, and Tom sometimes felt as if he had made the personal acquaintance of every pothole in northern Europe.

The companions clambered under the canvas covers and into the back of the truck, which looked very much like it had seen considerable service in the Army, and more recently used to transport a wide variety of farm produce. They padded themselves with their coats and bags as best they could before the lorry set off with a jerk for the trip to the farm which was to become their home for the next few months.

Their first view of Holme Farm, caught emerging from the canvas-covered lorry, was a cluster of grey stone buildings, all very square and solid – much like the farmer himself, mused Tom – all set around a walled yard. The boundaries of the yard were partially formed from several stone-built barns, one of which was to act as accommodation for the companions throughout that summer. Others, they were later to discover, housed a dairy or provided stabling for horses.

The entire farm was set in a secluded valley between two low hills, with self-evidently well-tended fields bounded by hedges and dry stone walls, and sheltered from the easterly winds by a spinney of mature trees. Just outside the farmhouse itself was a series of stone drinking troughs, fed from a spring still flowing strongly even after the recent hot and dry weather. The overflow was channelled to a

stream they had crossed by a low bridge at the entrance to the farm, a bridge so overgrown with vegetation that it could barely be distinguished from the adjacent hedgerows.

John Smith dismounted from the truck and bellowed.

“Edna! Newcomers!”

At the summons, his wife bustled out. She was a woman who looked as if her normally vigorous and optimistic outlook had taken a huge blow in the recent past. She smiled rather wanly at the three friends. Her husband rapidly explained that he had met these young men evidently looking for work and had engaged them immediately.

“Come in, come in,” she said, smiling a little more widely and directing all of them into the farmhouse.

Once inside, she turned around and took a closer look at their demob suits, which would not have stood out in a city street but were certainly not at all appropriate for working on the land. She disappeared upstairs and returned a few moments later with an armful of clothing which turned out to be much more suitable: stout trousers, boots and loose-fitting striped cotton shirts, all very heavy and well-washed, obviously not new, but of good – if rather homespun – quality.

Edna had also brought down a collection of headgear, and the three young men each picked up a hat apiece. Alistair picked up a floppy brown felt hat with a wide brim, and put it on his head. It made him look uncomfortably like the village yokel, and the other two could not help laughing aloud at his appearance.

“I need to have something to keep the sun off my face,” he explained apologetically, “I burn something dreadful in the summer if I’m not careful.”

Once they had picked out suitable attire, they were shown around the yard and directed to the upper floor to the barn to settle in. It was a lot more comfortable than they might have expected, with real beds and heavy curtains which offered a certain amount of both privacy and warmth. The men changed their clothes rapidly, and stowed their gear neatly in cubby-holes provided for that very purpose.

They returned to the farmhouse and presented their new appearance to the farmer and his wife. The second-hand clothes fitted Bram and Tom well enough, but were a bit loose at the waist and short at the ankle for Alistair. It was clear to all that he needed help to keep his trousers up. John looked at him, and his face broke into an uncharacteristic smile.

“I know what you need,” he said, “Belt, braces and bailing twine.”

Even Edna's sad visage brightened at this quip. Tom suspected that the clothing had originally belonged to someone else at the farm. He was later to discover that the farmer and his wife had lost a son, their only son, in the closing stages of the War. Edna in particular seemed happy to have a few young men around the farm, and could occasionally be caught looking wistfully at the three companions.

Life on the farm soon developed a familiar pattern. The companions woke at sunrise, and completed a collection of morning chores before breakfast. Once fortified with generous quantities of stodgy food, they were directed to the main activities of that day and sent off to carry out their tasks. At first, John would come by to inspect their progress several times a day but, as it became clear that the young men applied themselves diligently to the task at hand, they were often left alone for days at a time.

Much of the farm work was carried out by teams of two or four heavy Shire horses, their hooves huge as dinner plates, or so it seemed to Tom. Both Alistair and Bram declared themselves familiar with working horses, and certainly seemed to be able to handle the beasts to the satisfaction of the farmer. Tom was much less comfortable with the animals, but found his forte in driving and maintaining tractors and other machinery powered by internal combustion engines. The farm owned a couple of pre-war tractors, whose use was limited in these post-War days by fuel rationing. More fuel was slowly becoming available, as farming had priority over non-essential uses, but there was a limit to the amount of work which could be done using such machines.

The really heavy work was undertaken by steam-powered traction engines, provided by a roving band of engineers which had, according to the farmer, turned up year after year. These engines drove the threshing machines which separated the wheat from the chaff. Two of them working at opposite ends of a field were used to drag huge multi-bladed reversible ploughshares through the ground using immense steel hawsers or, later on, the harrowing of the newly broken earth. These immense noisy engines, belching smoke and steam, and the flocks of seagulls following the plough was an impressive sight, Tom considered, as he laboured at the harvesting.

One of their regular early morning tasks was to milk the cows. This was something that Tom had not done before, and was distinctly reticent at first. Even so, he was surprised to find that he had a knack for it, and was usually able to finish milking by hand considerably quicker than the other two.

The work on the farm was long and hard, but almost entirely unstressed. Tom found himself relaxing more and more over the weeks, allowing the movements of his body and the consequent aches in his muscles to ease the mental strains he had barely realised he even had. The horrors of the War slowly faded to a distant memory, and were replaced by a distinctly pleasing feeling of productive work undertaken in the sunshine.

Chapter Four

The three soldiers were confined to barracks – by the weather, rather than as a result of any disciplinary action. It was just after the fall of Berlin, and the re-organisation of post-War Germany was already well under way. Tom, Bram and Alistair were part of a contingent that had remained in the west of the country to assist with security during the re-building.

The winter weather was dreadful, with much snow and wind, and blizzard conditions for days on end. Alistair struggled in through the door, forcing it shut against the weather.

“Blimey!” he exclaimed, “It’s a bit nippy out there.”

Tom and Bram looked up from their make-work tasks – polishing boots and sewing buttons back onto their uniforms. Alistair shrugged himself out of his outdoor clothing, and came to sit on the bottom bunk, close to the stove, and warmed his hands. The dormitory was almost deserted, since most of the troops had already been shipped back to Blighty.

Alistair stared thoughtfully at the coals burning on the stove for several long minutes.

“Hmm. This weather reminds me of a story my Granddad told me years ago, when I was but a nipper,” he said, “It’s a tale of a bizarre journey, to a strange part of the world. You lads want to hear it?”

Tom looked up bright-eyed and sat back on his bunk, eager for any entertainment which would relieve the tedium. Bram looked at Alistair strangely for a moment, but then smiled widely and nodded.

Alistair settled himself on the bunk, making himself comfortable and putting his hands behind his back.

“Granddad had a great fund of colourful stories, which he used to tell to me and my cousins at bedtime. This was one of my favourites. I’m sure he told it to us several times, over the years, and I suspect the details had been a little embellished in later tellings.”

“It seems that my Granddad was quite a traveller in his younger days. Footloose and fancy-free, I suppose a bit of a rogue. He spent many years drifting around different parts of the world. In truth, I suspect he was something of a hired warrior, a mercenary of some sort. I sometimes wondered why he came to our remote part of Scotland.”

“Perhaps he had made a few too many enemies in his travels?” Tom suggested, half-jokingly.

Alistair laughed.

“That’s a thought which had occurred to me,” he said. “Certainly, he kept himself to himself, by all accounts, rarely leaving the farm. He was already well into middle age when he married my Grandmother. I’m told it was quite a scandal at the time, my Granny being so much younger than him.”

Tom wondered if at least part of the scandal was that Alistair’s grandparents were not quite married when she fell pregnant. In deference to Alistair’s feelings, he avoided probing into the salacious details.

“So, what happened to your Granddad?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s dead now,” Alistair replied. “He died quite suddenly, a long time ago, in his bed, with his boots off. Quite an achievement for the old rascal, I reckon.”

Bram and Tom chuckled.

“Anyway, it seems that Granddad was in Siberia,” Alistair continued. “He was part of a company trading in skins: bearskins, horsehides and leather, all tanned hides not made up into clothing. The story goes that the route they used regularly was haunted by robbers and bandits, and so the company employed trail guards. And that’s what Granddad’s job was.”

“The caravan’s starting-point was a trading station at Vanavara, a small market in a desolate part of the country. Their destination was altogether more mysterious. It was many days ride from the trading post, along the Tunguska River, in the hills northwest of Lake Baikal.”

Alistair now had the complete attention of his audience as he continued his tale.

“According to Granddad, this area had quite a reputation for being both impenetrable and dangerous. It was in the middle of immense pine forests, and got lots of snow during much of the year. But there was a road of sorts, well a track really, not easily passable in places, which wended its way into the hills. The path was narrow and winding, with some danger of rock falls and avalanches. It was more-or-less all right by horse and wagon in summer and in winter horse-drawn sledges could be used.”

“In winter, the way was particularly treacherous. There were frequent heavy snowfalls and blizzards, leaving deep snowdrifts which often blocked the route. The thick, dense forest was home to

wolves and bears, and meant it was easy to get lost – and the rocky crags and gorges make sure it was fatal if you did so.”

“Sounds worse than here,” Bram said, looking out of the window at the snow swirling past.

Both Tom and Alistair laughed.

“It was,” Alistair agreed, “All-in-all, a trackless wasteland with no local habitation and no-one living nearby. There were no woodcutters or animal herders, so the forest was heavily overgrown, and the path infrequently used and difficult to follow. Granddad said that the only thing that made the journey possible at all in winter was that there were a few rude shelters along the way, well-hidden and hard to find unless you know where to look. But there was no permanent habitation, no inns. It was a three-day journey, in good weather; in the blizzard season, it could take weeks to get to the pass.”

“So what was the destination?” Tom asked.

Alistair looked contemplative for a few moments before continuing.

“Well, it was a small market – more a village hosting a market rather than a trading post like the one at Vanavara. The only known route to the market was via a narrow ravine, a winding gorge, surrounded on every side by crags and rocky hills.”

“And to get into the gorge, you have to pass the castle. Seen from a distance, the ancient castle appears to be tumbledown and derelict. But in some strange way that Granddad never really made clear, once you got closer, the fortifications were found to actually be in very good condition, with stout gates in good working order and thick stone walls. The castle stood to one side of the path that enters the gorge. In fact, Granddad said, you practically have to walk under its walls to enter the ravine.”

“Was the castle deserted?” Bram asked.

“Or haunted?” added Tom.

Alistair grinned.

“Oh no,” he replied, “The castle itself had a garrison – of sorts. At first glance, it appeared that a company of soldiers had taken temporary shelter in the buildings. But looking more closely, Granddad observed shrewdly, you could see the signs of a long-term habitation. The stabling and tack room was well-organised, there were wagons and sledges under tarpaulins hidden away, and the mess room and kitchen seemed very warm and welcoming.”

There was another thoughtful pause, as if Alistair was comparing his own military experiences with the childhood tale for the first time.

“It also seemed to be surprisingly well-armed,” he said slowly, “Including a few large field guns and a plentiful stock of ammunition.”

“The caravan did not stop at the castle, but pressed on into the ravine. The path wound through the gorge, passing alongside a rushing stream in several places. Granddad described the splash and spray of the rapidly moving water, and the incredible noise, the roar of the rapids, fed by waterfalls on either side.”

“The spray from the stream meant that the path was often wet underfoot, and exceptionally icy and dangerously slippery in winter. You had to walk carefully, testing every step, to avoid catastrophe.”

“Eventually, you reached a tarn – a still pool with barely any movement of the water, except where the lake is fed by small streams and runoff waterfalls. The pool was supposed to have mysterious properties, and Granddad said that they were advised not to linger there, although exactly what those properties might be was never made clear. And strangely, after that, the water in the gorge flowed the other way.”

“After the pool, the gorge seemed eerily familiar, as if you were retracing your steps but not in any way you could articulate. Granddad said that you couldn’t point at a rock or a crag or a tree and say, I’ve seen that before, with any kind of conviction. It was just a feeling, a feeling that was amplified when you first caught sight of the castle on the other side.”

“Another castle?” Tom asked, breath bated.

“Yes, indeed,” Alistair continued, “It seemed identical, but again, in no way which can be easily identified.”

Tom found himself thinking along military lines as he listened to Alistair’s story.

“So, the gorge and streams, they’re all difficult to traverse and naturally defensible,” he said thoughtfully, “And with castles to add extra protection.”

“Well, yes,” Alistair agreed, “It was almost as if the two castles were built at the same time, with an agreement to ensure that they were of equal strength, with the only differences being to accommodate local geography. Then, they were subsequently modified and extended – by adding earthworks for example – in different ways, for different military needs. Just like a pair of semi-detached houses, built to be identical, but reworked extensively and differently by a series of over-enthusiastic tenants.”

Both Bram and Tom smirked at the imagery.

“The other castle also has an informal garrison,” Alistair continued, “They had different uniforms, and spoke a different language. But, even so, the garrison was similar in many ways – it had the same number of men, although Granddad did not report on their armaments.”

“As you move away from the gorge and the castle, the country seems more and more different. The further you go, the more different it appears. My Granddad always said that the strangest thing about this trip was the change in the surroundings once you had made it through the ravine. When you approach the gorge, you had to travel for endless miles over snowy wastes, but it was basically flat. Once through the gorge, you made your way steeply downhill, finally emerging from a pass in the mountains. Granddad described how you could see across the valley to the mountains on the other side.”

“It was almost as if you had been suddenly transported into a much warmer climate. Something like it is here in Germany: snowy and freezing cold in winter, but very warm, even too hot in summer. And the people were different, too – friendly enough, but Granddad said that they spoke a language like no other he had heard. He had little to do when they reached the market, since others in his party would conduct the negotiations for the sale of their wares. Then, they would load up the wagons or sledges again – there was always something to trade on the return trip, but he said that the wagons were never quite as full on the way back. But there was always money, gold – Granddad once told me that he had bought the farm in Sutherland with the money he made from these trips.”

The companions fell silent for a few moments, evidently thinking about the story Alistair had just related. Then Tom spoke up.

“So why did your Granddad stop trading and retire to Scotland?”

“I don’t know,” Alistair responded, “I know that Granddad made several trips. Apparently, on the last visit, the trading party was turned back by the garrison on the other side of the gorge, so that they had to retrace their steps with full wagons. No one knew why they had not been allowed through this time, given that they had been permitted to do so on many previous occasions.”

“I got the impression that there was a certain amount of muttering and speculation among the party. Some people even thought the reason was because of my grandfather’s presence with them. I can’t see how that could have been, though. He never said why people might have thought that.”

Alistair looked lost in thought for a few moments, then continued.

“So, my Granddad’s party left the gorge and made their way back to the Vanavara trading post – a five-day trip with full wagons in poor weather. They stayed there overnight, making plans, I suppose, about what to do next.”

“And then there was another very strange thing. The following morning, there was a tremendous explosion from the direction they had just come! There was an enormous flash of light in the sky and, a few moments later, a huge bang and an immense blast of wind. It knocked Granddad off his feet, he said, and shied the horses something rotten.”

Tom was astonished.

“What happened?” he asked urgently.

“I don’t know. Granddad always said that there was much rumour and speculation, but no one actually had any idea what had happened. There was no explanation given, either at the time or later.”

Alistair explained that his grandfather had later heard that trees had been flattened for miles around, but no one was at all sure what had caused the blast.

“So what happened after that,” Tom pressed.

“Well, the trading party was disbanded, and Granddad was advised to take his earnings and make himself scarce. Again, no one exactly said why, but he did wonder if it had anything to do with the castles and the military garrisons.”

“Was this about the time of the Russian revolution? Before the Great War?” Bram asked, out of the blue.

“Um, I’m not sure,” Alistair answered, “I suppose it was just a few years before.”

Bram nodded sagely, then smiled enigmatically.

“Well, perhaps you’ll find out what it was all about some day,” he suggested.

“Well, maybe,” Alistair countered, “But most certainly not while I’m in the Army.”

Chapter Five

One of the highlights of the companions' sojourn on the farm was a visit to the marketplace in the nearby town of Alnwick. On market day, everyone was up very early, even by farming standards. The three young men staggered bleary-eyed around the farmyard, well before dawn, struggling to make everything ready for the journey. Finally, the last loading of the wagons was completed, and the farm hands were able to partake of a quick breakfast of sweetened porridge and mugs of tea before setting off.

It was a long, slow journey, walking at a snail's pace alongside the farm carts, driving the herd of cattle before them. It was also thirsty labour, toiling up and down the hills on the winding and dusty trails, necessitating frequent drinks from the water flasks they had remembered to bring with them.

"This is hard work," moaned Tom, as he attempted to persuade the cows along the correct route with the aid of a stick he had cut from the hedgerow earlier. The cows seemed in no mood to be rushed, and ambled along at their own pace regardless of Tom's ministrations.

"Don't worry," said Alistair cheerfully, "It'll be easier on the way back. We won't have the cattle, and there'll probably be more space in the wagons, so we can ride in comfort on the return journey."

Tom was not entirely sure that the definition of a "comfortable ride" included sitting in the back of a horse-drawn cart on a country road, but said nothing. Just at that moment, they crested the rise of a hill, and could see the town laid out below them. From their vantage-point, they could also see over to their left the plume of dust put up by another caravan converging on the market.

The market square at Alnwick was not really a square at all, more a linked series of irregular spaces surrounded by ancient stone buildings. Their first task was to herd the cattle to the stock pens which, naturally enough, were located right at one end of the market and close to most of the major routes.

A principal reason for the existence of the Alnwick market at all was the cattle auction. This provided an opportunity for this season's calves to be sold representing, Alistair had told Tom, a significant part of the farm's income. Other animals were also being offered for sale – sheep and lambs from other farms, as well as several runs full

of squealing piglets. There seemed to be plenty of buyers standing around, carefully inspecting the livestock for sale and sucking contemplatively on their pipes and cigarettes.

John the farmer rapidly conducted his business with the auctioneer. Tom formed the opinion that the two men were old acquaintances, or perhaps sparing partners, but their encounter today passed off amicably enough. Once business was completed, there was an opportunity for Tom and the others to depart to explore the town, with an admonishment to meet back at the stock pens by five o'clock that evening.

The centre of the market was the old guild hall, a tall and square building with stone arches providing covered walkways on every side. The different parts of the market were laid out in all directions, and the companions were unsure which way to head.

"Let's go this way," Bram suggested, indicating a large open area crowded with stalls.

Alistair and Tom looked at each other, and shrugged.

"Lead on, then," Tom said.

The market area was not flat, either, but quite uneven and fairly steeply sloping in some places. The stone cobbles were unexpectedly slippery underfoot, especially where the natural side-effects of well-fed animals and ripe – or even over-ripe – vegetables were to be found.

The companions carefully made their way though the narrow passageways between the booths. This area was populated by stalls offering groceries of all kinds. Some presented arrays of locally-grown produce, with fine-looking vegetable specimens on every side. Others offered a medley of fruit, including items clearly imported from overseas such as oranges and bananas, which were an unheard-of luxury in War-time England.

Elsewhere, numerous butchers were offering a wide variety of meats and several fish merchants, each competing with the others to show the most prolific displays of iced fish. And it was so noisy! All the vendors were loudly hawking their wares at the tops of their voices, and Tom could hardly hear himself think. In spite of the delightful profusion of produce on display, the stall holders still appeared to be rigorously checking the ration coupons from the books presented by their customers.

As the companions moved onwards, they encountered a section of the market which housed travellers and tinkers of all kinds. One wizened old man had a treadle-driven grindstone attached to a barrow, which he could use to wheel the contraption around from

place to place. His sing-song voice kept up a constant litany of invitations and imprecations to the passing crowd, of the form “Knives sharpened” and “Sharpen your penknife, Sir?” interspersed with “Thanking you kindly, Ma’am” and “That’ll be no’but a ha’penny”.

Alistair, who prided himself on being able to get an exceptionally keen edge on any sharp instrument, tutted disapprovingly at the offer to sharpen his pocket-knife. He glared at the little tinker, much to Bram’s amusement, and then pushed on ahead.

“Don’t you want him to sharpen your knife?” Tom asked, skipping forward to catch up.

Alistair shook his head, eloquently.

“Over my dead body. A grindstone like that makes far too uneven a cut, too coarse and misshapen. To get a knife really sharp, you need to use a curved whetstone, and with great care and delicacy I’ll have you know. A knife just won’t stay sharp after such a rough treatment, and it takes ages to get a good edge on a blade again.”

Despite Alistair’s misgivings, there were a fair number of people waiting for the services of the knife-sharpener, and they all seemed to be satisfied with the results.

Beyond the stalls of the main square was a tiny fairground, with rides and slides so diminutive as to be only suitable for the smallest of children. The younger offspring were shouting and laughing as they whirled about, watched anxiously by their parents. The older people were also being entertained by jugglers and fire-eaters, and there was much applause at the most spectacular of their antics, not to mention a few coins being tossed into an old felt hat at their feet.

Walking on, the three companions came across one section of the market, in a smaller area almost completely enclosed and cut off from the rest of the bazaar. Most of the surrounding buildings had high blank stone walls, as if they were turned away and did not want to see. It was almost as if, Tom thought, an alleyway between buildings had been widened to be just broad enough for a few tents and stalls on either side.

Tom also noticed something curious about the cobblestones beneath his feet. There were unusually wide gaps between the stones, which were filled with verdant green moss, suggesting that under normal circumstances there was little traffic in this part of the town. The three young men seemed to come across it by happenstance, although Tom later wondered if somehow they had been guided there.

Despite its apparent obscurity, this part of the market was bustling with activity. Stalls draped with colourful awnings lined both sides of the street, and the narrow open space in between so crowded that Tom and the others were jostled almost constantly. The first stand that they passed was offering a huge variety of mysterious potions and medicines, salves and ointments for ailments of all kinds, some of which Tom could not identify, and others where he would have been far too embarrassed to enquire further.

At least two of the stalls were competing in their selection of good-luck charms, which included the familiar lucky white heather and the traditional lucky rabbit's foot. Although not so lucky for the rabbit, thought Tom wryly. There were other trinkets, too, which he had not previously come across; these included an assortment of highly-polished translucent stones purporting to ensure that the bearer would not go astray when walking at night.

A nearby booth was hawking hand-made jewellery. Rings, amulets and necklaces made with large coloured stones and silver filigree were displayed under the watchful eye of the stallholder. As they passed by, Tom overheard the stallholder explaining in a loud voice to a potential customer the various desirable properties of a ring bearing a large blue jewel: many children, wealth and long life seemed to cover the general tenor of his promises.

Towards the end of the row of stalls, there was a small upright tent made of a striped blue material. Tom felt sure that this had to be the pitch of a fortune teller, a guess that was confirmed as the three young men strolled closer. The clairvoyant's skills were advertised, as if it was really necessary, by a weather-beaten sign. Originally, this had been brightly painted, but it now faded to a point of near unintelligibility.

Passing the tent flap, Tom caught sight of the mystic within. She was a tall and surprisingly young-looking woman with elegant, even striking facial features, which were just a little bit too pronounced and angular for real beauty. The woman's dauntingly attractive appearance was emphasised by the application of considerable quantities of dark eye make-up. Tom could practically hear his Granny's voice echoing in his head, "Painted Hussy".

"Do you want to have your fortune told?" Bram asked, out of the blue.

"No, not really," Tom answered immediately.

Alistair looked faintly surprised.

"Why not?" he asked.

“Well, I can’t believe that my future is all that predictable just at the moment,” Tom replied, “And I’m really not that keen anyway.”

“Suit yourself,” Bram said in a disinterested manner.

The three men walked on, leaving the mossy alleyway through a pair of iron gates set into a stone archway, and joining a more well-travelled street. It seemed that they had circled around, and they found themselves heading back towards the guildhall along a wide avenue where it seemed that every other building was an inn or hostelry of some kind.

“Fancy a spot of lunch, boys?” Bram asked, looking up at the sign of the “Crossed Keys”.

Tom and Alistair looked at each other.

“I don’t mind if I do,” Tom said sardonically.

The public bar was crowded with farm hands, all smoking and talking at the tops of their voices. As they entered, they separated almost instinctively. Alistair used his height to signal for drinks over the heads of the drinkers cluttering the bar area. Tom made for the kitchen door, and rapidly negotiated for ploughman’s lunches, while Bram, somehow exercising his luck again, managed to find them a table in the corner.

They had just started tucking into their bread and cheese when Tom noticed the tall and mysterious woman they had seen earlier enter the bar. She wore a floor-length cape in some dark material and carried a tall staff in her right hand. Her flowing robes and long black hair caused heads to turn throughout the room, and the level of conversation dropped noticeably. He was impressed to see that she managed imperiously to ignore her audience completely, and made a bee-line for the companions, arriving uninvited at their table.

It seemed to Tom that there might have been some flash of mutual recognition between the tall woman and Bram, although he could not have been sure.

As one, the three young men politely stood up, drawing back their stools, Alistair tugging off his cap automatically.

“Good afternoon, Ma’am,” he said.

“I am looking for the three Army men,” she said without preamble, “You are they, are you not?”

“We’re not actually in the Army any more, Ma’am,” Alistair responded, “But, yes, we all served in the Infantry during the War and we’ve now been demobilised.”

“Then you are the Army men,” she asserted firmly, “I have a message for you – indeed, I have two messages.”

“Messages? Who from?” Tom asked, disquieted by the direct approach, “We don’t know anyone around here.”

The woman fixed him with a piercing glance, softened by a wry half-smile which somehow emphasised her high cheekbones.

“My messages are not necessarily from a person,” she said enigmatically, “I see many things, not all of them plainly visible to other folk. I am required to tell you something of what I see.”

Tom was intrigued, but did not feel it polite to enquire exactly who or what had required the lady to communicate the messages.

“I see a complex future for you all,” she continued inscrutably, “The three of you will soon go on a long journey, sometimes together, sometimes apart, but always marching in step.”

Bram’s reaction, it seemed to Tom, was rather strange. He appeared to be watching Tom and Alistair closely, and did not seem to be at all surprised by the psychic’s sudden appearance.

“Is that the message?” Tom asked, feeling completely confused.

“It is one of the messages.”

“And what’s the other one?”

“The other message,” she replied, “Will take a little longer to convey.”

Bram took the initiative.

“Let me find you a seat, Ma’am,” he said, “So that you can make yourself comfortable while you deliver your message.”

The curious group still had the attention of almost everyone in the bar. One old sheep-drover, clearly smitten and having overheard Bram’s remarks, immediately stood up and offered his chair to the mystery woman. She nodded regally in thanks, and sat down. Bram and Alistair sank into their own seats.

“Can I get you a drink, Ma’am?” Tom enquired.

“A port and lemon, if you please,” she responded, smiling graciously.

Tom rapidly wormed his way through the crowded bar, purchased the requested refreshment and hurried back. The mystic accepted the drink with another smile and a raised eyebrow, which Tom took to mean that he should sit down and pay attention.

“My second message,” the mysterious lady pronounced, “Might seem to be a story, a childish tale, but you should understand that there are matters of import contained therein.”

Chapter Six

The enigmatic lady settled herself comfortably in her chair and sipped her drink, nodding wordlessly to Bram in thanks. She appeared to be ready to begin, but suddenly turned and glared at the man who had just given up his seat, who was still lurking hopefully nearby. She asked in clipped tones if there was something he wished to communicate to her. The old man reddened immediately, spluttered something unintelligible, then downed the last of his pint and rapidly left the bar.

She returned her full attention to the three young men, leaning forward over the table and speaking in a low voice to avoid being overheard.

“My story is a tale of a group of companions, travellers from England in an age long past, who came to Ireland on a mission of vital importance.”

It became rapidly clear to Tom that the inscrutable lady had originated from the Emerald Isle, or at least had spent a considerable amount of time there. He could hear her accent broadening noticeably as she relaxed into her story, or perhaps it was merely the effect of the port and lemon.

“My tale is set in the island of mystery, many years ago, when all of Ireland was a single country – when, indeed, Ireland was still the gateway to the world of Faerie.”

Tom and Alistair were both immediately spell-bound by her words, leaning forward to make sure they missed nothing. Bram too was listening intently.

“In those days, the journey across the sea to Ireland was perilous in itself, with storms at sea and huge waves. Ships frequently sunk, and a voyage set out in fair weather could still end in excitement, danger and death. But yet people came over the water.”

“If it was so hazardous, then why did people risk the journey?” Tom asked.

“Oh, there were many, many reasons,” she explained, “Most of them entirely mundane – trade, curiosity, people seeking their fortune. But a few, a very few, came to seek knowledge of the world of Faerie or even to gain access to that world.”

“Entering a Faerie world?” Tom gasped disbelievingly.

He was unsure how to react, although the strange lady seemed entirely serious. Alistair seemed struck dumb. Sunk in the gloom of the bar, it was difficult to tell whether Bram had reacted at all.

“That is so,” the mystic replied calmly, “And a few sought it out. Some came from England, others journeyed from further afield, having travelled great distances across the world, with the crossing to Ireland being merely another part of their journey. These selected few had heard of wonderful things from the world of Faerie, strange and exotic, complex and magical, and wished to see them all for themselves.”

The woman paused, presumably, thought Tom, for effect.

“But all was not well. A war – or something like it – was under way between two different factions from the Other World.”

“A war?” Tom parroted.

“Oh yes, I’m afraid so. There were many different peoples from that world – I will not insult their memory by calling them Fairies. Some of those people were friendly and helpful, some much less so.”

“Those from the land of Faerie were of different aspects, different shapes – all human in basic form, but often-times different in their behaviour and appearance to our eyes. There were those who flew, who almost never walked but preferred to transport themselves on ephemeral wings of magic attached to their backs. There were those who could appear and disappear in the blink of an eye, who had mastered the art of invisibility. And there were many others, each with their own traits and characteristics.”

The woman took another sip from her drink, and peered closely at the young men over the top of her glass.

“But all these people, whatever their aspect, were divided into but two factions,” she continued, “The first were those who wished to command the obedience of the common folk of the land, for them to give up a tithe of their produce every year for the support of the Other World. And the second were those whose only desire was to help those same Irish folk, to work alongside them, and to trade peaceably and equitably.”

“The common people – the peasants and workers – were confused and nervous. They could not tell from their aspect whether a Faerie person was from the benign faction or the autocratic one. Some of the Faerie folk were frightening – even sometimes harming – the commoners, while others carried out all kinds of good deeds and merciful acts, often with the aid of powerful magic.”

The companions remained silent while the mystic sipped again at her drink.

“In those days, many different places in Ireland were somehow magically linked with the Faerie world. And those who had power, and the responsibility that has always gone with it, determined that the magic of Faerie must not be allowed to pass unhindered into the land of Eire,” she said, toying with her glass as she spoke, “For, in their view, it was certain to attract the attention of those who would seek power and control, and those who misuse the intention of the magic.”

“Those in authority set about constructing barriers between the world of Faerie and our world, at all of the points of crossing, to restrict the use of magic in Ireland. Or, I should say, the authorities instructed that such barriers should be erected. For this was a long and arduous task, requiring many years of labour, and countless skilled and resourceful people.”

She set her glass back on the table so forcefully that both Tom and Alistair visibly started.

“But, before the task could be completed, there came one who did not seek either knowledge or access to Faerie, but came to conquer the Other World.”

“The squabbling of the two factions had attracted his attention – the existence of the lands of Faerie had not been kept sufficiently secret. The invader had dreams of control, of great power. He desired the use of the supremacy of magic to cement his authority in this world, and to use the might of his armies and force of arms to ensure the cooperation of the Faerie world. The Conqueror was guided by rogues and traitors from the Other World, renegades who did not want their magic taken away by the barriers the rulers had declared it their duty to erect.”

“So how did the Conqueror capture the Faerie kingdom?” Alistair asked, fascinated by the story.

“He didn’t,” the woman replied, “Let me explain what happened. Even in those days, access to the world of Faerie was variable and unpredictable. One pathway was widely used for trade and commerce, with many travellers crossing with goods and returned with much money in silver and gold in their purses. This crossing could only be used under certain weather conditions. When the sun shone from the Faerie lands and lit up the rain in our world, then – and only then – was it safe to cross. Truly, it was necessary to follow the rainbows to reach your goal.”

“And so, now I can say why the group of travellers came, and why they travelled with great speed. They came ahead of the Conqueror, to warn the people of Faerie and their rulers of his

approach. They journeyed in a great hurry, riding hard over difficult roads. They carried much gold and bought horses, paying far too much for them in their haste to reach the pathway while the weather held. And finally, they followed the rainbows and went through to the land of Faerie.”

“Their message brought confusion and disarray amongst the Lords and Ladies of Faerie. Representatives from both factions were contacted, and a meeting – a Faerie Council – was rapidly convened. Those in authority realised that they had scant days to make their decision: whether to defend with military might the routes to the Faerie lands, or to close the crossings. And they were well aware that, if a decision was made to close the paths between the worlds, then it may never be re-opened.”

The mysterious woman paused for a moment. The silence was broken by Tom’s voice in a near-whisper.

“So what happened?”

The teller of tales looked sad for a moment.

“The crossings between Faerie and Ireland were closed, every last one.”

The collective sigh from the young men was clearly audible, even over the noise and bustle of the pub.

“It was quite a dramatic event, my all accounts,” she explained, “There were fires and huge explosions. Strange lights in the skies were reported everywhere.”

The lady from Ireland adopted an extremely sorrowful attitude.

“It is said that some people from Faerie elected to stay in Ireland, continuing to live amongst the common folk and working the land, husbanding their diminishing magic and concealing it from their neighbours, and passing on the remnants from parent to child until it was all gone.”

“So, where were the crossings?” Alistair asked.

“Where these paths were, now no one knows,” she said slowly, “Although, in the west of Ireland, there is a lake – a lake nearly circular in shape, and said by some to be filled with mystery, even now.”

“But who was the Conqueror?” Tom enquired.

Once again, the mystery lady smiled enigmatically.

“History knows him as Oliver Cromwell,” she replied, “Thanks to him, the fantastic world of Faerie is now all but departed from us.”

“Is there nothing left?” Alistair asked in a hushed whisper.

“Oh, there are some ghosts and echoes,” the woman replied, “A few lingering effects of Faerie magic in infrequently-visited places.”

Tom was fascinated.

“What kind of effects?” he asked.

“There are some places where, sometimes, it is possible to perceive strange sights and sounds, where voices speak from the rocks or the air,” the mysterious lady replied, “Or where machines unaccountably fail – electric torches go out, motor vehicles stop unexpectedly and cannot be started. It is said that in the depths of the lake I spoke of earlier can sometimes be seen, or more usually heard, strange phenomena as if there are people somehow beyond the water, trying to get out.”

The extraordinary woman again looked sad for a moment before continuing.

“It’s all a pale shadow of the wonder and mystery that was known knew before,” she concluded.

“I don’t want to sound unappreciative,” Alistair began, “But why are you telling us this tale, magnificent though it is?”

The mystic lady threw her head back and laughed aloud.

“Of course, everything I have said is just a retelling of myths and legends, a bedtime story for tired children. Indeed, my grandmother told me this very tale when I was a girl,” she chuckled, “But sometimes, just sometimes, there is a nugget of truth in such a tale – a truth about history and about consequences, too.”

She took a final lady-like sip from her drink and then moved to stand up. All three young men immediately also stood in a gentlemanly fashion.

“Well, I must now be gone,” she said, smiling benignly at the three of them, “But, who knows? Perhaps we will meet again in another time and place?”

With that, she turned and swept out of the bar, the noise in the room again diminishing noticeably as she passed.

Chapter Seven

The weeks after their visit to the Alnwick market seemed to pass in a flash. There was always work to be finished, but they at least had the satisfaction of seeing the results of their day's labour, of being able to stand back after long hours and see a job well done.

After a few weeks, Edna the farmer's wife gently chided all three of the young men to get their hair cut. She singled out Bram whose unruly hair seemed to grow overnight, much to the annoyance of the unit barber when they were in the army. After a small amount of nagging, all three of them allowed the good lady to trim their hair, returning them to the "short back and sides" cut they had sported during much of their military service.

The culmination of their labour was getting the harvest safely home. Everyone on the farm regularly working late into the evening, in the long twilight, cutting the wheat and bringing in the crops. They all enjoyed the traditional Harvest Festival, with the usual thanks offered in the parish church. There was a more informal celebration as well, with a fete held on the village green. This was followed by very energetic, or at least noisy, festivity in the village pub, involving drinking rather too much beer and probably too much barn dancing as well. During the festivities, Tom noticed that Bram gave the impression of being something of a bystander, which was very unusual since he was normally the life and soul of any party.

Thinking about it later, Tom considered that Bram must have felt a little flat after the celebrations, or maybe he thought that he could not put off the return to his family for much longer. In any event, it was the following morning that he announced his intention to make his long-delayed visit to his parents, and invited Tom and Alistair to join him. The two young men were enthusiastic about making a trip, with Alistair quipping that a change was as good as a rest. They set about gathering up the things they would require for a journey.

"Let's travel light, boys," Bram advised, "No need to carry things we'll not use. We'll only have to carry them back again. And let's not take anything too valuable with us."

Bram specifically advised Alistair to leave his grandfather's watch behind. This was part of the small inheritance he had collected from the solicitor while he was in London, one of a number of things left to him by his mother. Bram did not exactly say why, but

suggested indirectly that the combination of sea air and rough travel might not agree with the delicate workings of an old watch.

Later that morning, the three young men approached John the farmer to make it clear that they had a little business elsewhere to attend to, without being specific on their actual destination. Bram did most of the talking.

“We’ll be away for a night or two at most,” he explained, “You’ll hardly know we’ve been gone. Now that the harvest’s in, I’m sure you can spare us for a few days.”

Bram was at great pains to stress that they all expected to return very soon.

“We’ll leave most of our belongings in the barn,” he suggested, “We’ve got a fair old walk in front of us.”

Without being asked, Edna made up a few bundles for the young men containing, they were to discover later, some bread, cheese and apples from the garden. These they accepted gratefully, and packed them carefully in their knapsacks, along with their water bottles freshly refilled from the spring.

The companions set off shortly after breakfast. After ten minutes walking along the farm road, they took a different way from their usual course down to the village with its congenial public houses. Following Bram closely, the party struck off along a narrow footpath across the fields, finally joining a larger track by means of a stile of worn stone blocks which allowed passage over a well-maintained dry stone wall.

Bram looked around, apparently satisfied.

“This way,” he said, indicating the road to their right, “I knew this path had to be around here somewhere.”

The road was surprisingly shady, with mature trees at intervals and high hedgerows and stone walls on either side. For the most part, it was very difficult to see the surrounding countryside and, when they caught a glimpse through the hedges, there was nothing to see except open fields and the occasional cow. It was almost, Tom mused privately, as if the way had been intended to be secret.

“So what is this road?” Tom asked Bram.

Bram hesitated for a second, then grinned broadly.

“It’s called St. Cuthbert’s Way,” he answered, “Named after a Saint Cuthbert, of course. In olden times, it is said, the way was built to allow pilgrims and travellers to travel to and from the crossing to Lyndesfarne quickly and discreetly. Cuthbert himself is supposed to have come this way many times, passing here and there for the working of his famous miracles. And, long after his death, his body,

or at least his bones, were whisked away along this path by his followers.”

Tom could certainly imagine a small group or even a single individual travelling this way extremely circumspectly, with no one the wiser of their passage.

At one point on their walk, the three companions were overtaken by a man on horseback at the canter, and there were a few travellers coming in the opposite direction. They had to scramble onto the bank a couple of times to stay clear of horse-drawn wagons and caravans. But, for most of the journey, the road was very quiet, with just the singing of the birds in the hedges for company.

Even so, the way was more well-travelled than it looked. Looking down, Tom could see many ruts and tracks in the ground, with footprints in the muddy patches. There was some evidence of recent maintenance as well, with some potholes freshly filled with firmly tamped gravel, and ditches and drainage channels newly cleared of weeds and soil.

The sun was shining as the young men walked over a slight rise and caught their first glimpse of the sea between the trees. As they made their way down the hill, they admired the bright blue of the sea against the grey-blue of the skyline and the near-cloudless sky above. Closer to the shore, they could see a line of white breakers shining brightly in the sunshine, indicating that the tide was a long way out.

“I hadn’t realised that we were so close to the sea here,” Alistair said.

Bram laughed again.

“Still a fair way to go, my friend,” he said, “Quite a few miles. But we should be able to see our destination soon.”

As they rounded a bend in the road, they caught their first sight of Lyndesfarne. The island itself appeared as little more than a mistily blurred region of green and grey, the haze over the isle contrasting strongly with the clear views out to sea in other directions. Tom found it very difficult to make out any kind of features on the island. All he could see was an area of scrubby grass with no signs of habitation, edged by rocks and mudflats.

From their vantage-point, they could make out all three arches of an old masonry bridge, reached by a long causeway constructed in the same weathered stone. There was a suggestion of a similar causeway on the other side, but it was not at all clear whether it was even passable. Somehow, the far causeway seemed to disappear into the haze, even in the bright sunshine.

“Well, that’s our route,” Bram cried, indicating the bridge and causeway, “And the weather still looks fine for our walk.”

There was much shipping passing well out to sea, as well as numerous inshore boats visible to the north and south. Strangely, thought Tom, there were no boats visible in the straights between the island and the mainland, no one fishing or collecting lobster-pots.

The only feature which did seem to be clearly visible on the island was a ruined castle. This appeared to be a little more than a few broken walls and towers which clung to a natural outcrop at the end of a narrow peninsula. The tumbledown nature of the Lyndesfarne castle contrasted the other fortifications Tom could see in several directions.

“Why are there so many castles around here?” Alistair asked suddenly, apparently having been following much the same train of thought as Tom.

“Ah,” Bram replied, “This area was once famous for its brigands and highwaymen, not to mention being frequently invaded from both sea and land. At one time, almost every building of any significance was fortified in some way.”

There were large and impressive castles in a good state of repair dotted along the coast. Tom could see how these would allow a local garrison to repel larger invading forces. Bram pointed out Bamburgh castle to the south, the sunlight glinting on its walls and towers, and the rugged keeps of Haggerston and Scremerston to the north.

As the companions followed the road further down the hillside, the island and the castles were lost to view, obscured by the trees and hedgerows.

“Well, boys,” Bram piped up, “I think we’re coming up on the north road to Edinburgh.”

“So how much further is it then?” Tom asked.

“It’s just five miles to the causeway,” Bram replied.

A few minutes later, they reached the main road, a modern stretch of smooth tar macadam extending as far as the eye could see. There was a fair amount of traffic, mostly heavy lorries, with a few cars and the occasional motorbike.

“Let’s rest here awhile,” Alistair suggested.

Bram shrugged his shoulders, apparently indifferent to the thought. Tom was more enthusiastic, and pointed out a sheltered spot just at the end of the lane, between the hedgerows and shaded by a mature oak tree. He sauntered over, threw down his pack, and subsided gratefully on the grass. The other two joined him almost

immediately, and they started pulling out cigarettes and the water flasks from their baggage.

As Alistair lit his fag and Bram drank deeply from his flask, Tom studied the road junction. He could see no evidence that any car or lorry ever turned down this way; wheeled transport taking this route was horse-drawn. There were no signposts, no houses, no sign of anyone around at all.

Across the road, there was a wider track, not asphalted but obviously used by powered vehicles. As they watched, a lorry appeared in the junction, stopping well back from the main road, being barely visible between the hedges. The companions instinctively shrunk back into their hedgerow hiding place as they watched. The lorry waited for a gap in the traffic – no, realised Tom suddenly, waited until there was no traffic in sight at all – then pulled out and sped away.

After ten minutes to rest their legs, the three companions stood up and made ready to continue their walk. They crossed the main road and walked down the lane where they had seen the truck pull out earlier.

“Is this still St. Cuthbert’s Way?” Tom asked.

“I believe so,” Bram replied, “It’s certainly the main route to Lyndesfarne.”

Tom noticed that the road became asphalted about half a mile after the turning, well out of sight of the main road. They crossed a small bridge, with parapets built surprisingly high, so that it was not easily possible to see over them. Tom got Alistair to hoist him up, to look over the parapet. There was little to see, just a pair of railway tracks sunk into a deep cutting, with heavily overgrown banks on either side.

“It’s just a railway line,” Bram commented, “We probably came this way from London.”

As they walked along, Tom noted that there were only a few houses, all set back from the road, and usually shielded by high hedges. Curiously, Tom peered through the gateways and entrances as they passed. Usually, there was no one about, no sign of anyone at all.

The only resident they saw on the entire walk from the main road was one old man, tending the garden at the front of his house. When Tom spotted him, he was bending slowly in an arthritic kind of way, and wearing what Tom was beginning to suspect was the official old countryman’s uniform of moleskin trousers, ancient waistcoat, a kerchief at the throat and topped with a battered panama hat.

When he saw the three companions, the old man stood up straight, stretching his back, and then touched his hat politely in greeting. The travellers returned his salute, equally politely. Neither party said anything. Looking back, Tom was convinced that the old man watched them carefully until they were out of sight.

A little later, the young men stopped for lunch on a rustic bench under a spreading horse chestnut tree that creaked alarmingly in the light breeze. The conkers had already started falling, and Tom picked up one, fascinated by the cracked green hull and the shiny brown kernel within. He put the conker in his pocket, dimly remembering childhood games he had enjoyed long ago.

Their picnic spot was set on a bend in the road where a small stone bridge crossed a stream. As they ate their bread and cheese, and bit into the small sharp apples they had been given, they watched the traffic passing. There was not a lot of it. A few lorries went by, all of which seemed heavily laden, although it was not obvious what was being transported. Some of the trucks looked ex-army, repainted less military colours. Others were definitely pre-war, while still others appeared to still be in active army service.

Tom and Alistair smoked a cigarette apiece. As the young men relaxed in their sheltered spot, they were passed by a horse-drawn caravan clip-clopping along, heading away from the coast. Tom speculated idly that it would be making its way up the overgrown lane, rather than chancing the main road with its fast-moving motorised traffic.

Their lunch completed, and cigarettes extinguished, the companions walked on. Finally, they crested one last low rise which gave them a vista over the sea coast. The view of the bridge and the causeway was clearer now, although the island itself was still shrouded in mist. As they approached the beach, Tom noted a line of concrete defences, tank traps left over from the War, and probably too big and solid to easily remove or destroy. The whole area must have been very carefully defended, he mused.

Chapter Eight

During that summer working on the farm, Alistair, Bram and Tom put in many long hot hours at their tasks. They were rewarded by three hearty meals a day and a modest wage at the end of the week. In the evening, when the farm work was done and they had eaten their dinner, they did what young men of their background often did when they had no particular commitments of an evening and a little money burning a hole in their pocket. They went to the pub.

The village lay at the end of a winding and often dusty lane down the hill from the farm. There was rarely any traffic on it, especially after dark. This was just as well, given that this was the route they used to make their way back late in the evening after consuming a few pints of the local strong dark ale.

The village boasted two pubs at opposite ends of the High Street. These were located on the major route through the parish – hardly a main road, thought Tom – with the clear intent of intercepting arriving travellers as soon as possible. The comrades faced a tough decision every evening when reaching the end of the lane from the farm: turn right or left. This invariably required a certain amount of discussion and negotiation.

Usually, they would turn left and make their way to the “Black Bull”, which had the advantage of being larger and slightly closer to the farm. This hostelry was frequented by workers and labourers from the surrounding area, and was often very jolly and raucous. There was regularly music and singing around the piano later in the evening, with one or another of the men grinding out an energetic and often suggestive ditty. Always lively and amusing, Tom had considered, but not the best place for a quiet pint after a hard day working on the land.

For a change, it was possible to go to the “Ship and Anchor” at the other end of the village. This pub tended to be frequented by an older, or at least quieter, clientele: quiet men, and a few women, of middle age who looked like they had seen a lot of life and, in some cases, genuinely had the scars to show for it. It was a place to enjoy a quiet chat with one’s companions; the regulars tended to keep themselves to themselves.

One evening, after a strenuous and exhausting day digging ditches, the three companions were sitting in the farm kitchen where

they had just taken their evening meal. Bram appeared distracted, caught up in his own world, so Tom turned to Alistair and asked him if he wanted to go for a drink this evening. Alistair agreed immediately, so Tom interrupted Bram's thoughts and asked Bram if he wanted to accompany them. He appeared to consider for a moment then, coming to a decision, said, "Not tonight, chaps. I'm feeling a bit tired this evening. I think I'll stay here and perhaps make a few jottings."

He waved his notebook to emphasise the point.

"Fair enough," Tom said, turning back to Alistair, "Let's go, then."

The two men picked up their hats and set off. At the road junction, they decided wordlessly that the "Ship" was the choice for the evening. The aches caused by their digging had hardly been eased by the stroll down the hill, and they both felt that a quiet pint or two of muscle relaxant would help them sleep.

The interior of the "Ship" was low-ceilinged and rather dark, and both public bar and lounge were separated into sections by dividers of polished wood and etched glass. The three men made their way into the public bar, which was not particularly crowded and where their rough clothing would not be remarked upon, and the beer was slightly cheaper. The old wooden floor was scarred by the passage of many boots and stained by the spillage of many drinks.

Alistair got in their regular round, and the two men moved to sit in one of the divided sections, sliding their way onto the worn seating nearly as scarred as the floor and placing their glasses on the round wooden table. After drinking deeply from their pints to quench their thirst, the two men started a desultory conversation comparing the ditch-digging work they had been engaged in and various experiences while in the Army. They then fell to recalling some of the strange tales they have been told over the years.

As they chatted, an obviously ex-military man passed by their seats, and then doubled back to interrupt them, having overheard some of their conversation. They were on nodding terms with this old soldier, and had been given to understand from gossip around the bar that he had served with the royal artillery during the War. He was probably in reality only a little older than any of the companions, but looked prematurely aged, with grey hair and pallid skin that suggested, Tom considered, some unpleasant experiences in his past, a view emphasised by the burns and scars on his face and hands.

The old gunner smiled lopsidedly.

“I’ve heard a few things about you lads,” he said in a low hoarse voice which suggested that he was unable to speak any louder.

“What have you heard about us?” Alistair replied, politely but with a distinct undertone of suspicion.

“Well, I’ve heard that you boys have seen a bit of action in the War, and heard some things that few soldiers get to know about.”

Alistair appeared to relax a little.

“That’s true enough,” he allowed, “And I dare say that you’ve been in the thick of it a time or two.”

“Care to join us?” Tom interjected, indicating a seat.

The old gunner pulled up the offered chair and sat down.

“The local gossip has it that you were stationed hereabouts during the War,” Tom continued, repeating something that he had picked up on previous visits to this particular hostelry.

“Ha,” the other man snorted, “It’s no great secret, I suppose. I was based at a shore battery not far from the harbour at Seahouses, aways to the south of that strange island of Lyndesfarne. Smack bang in the middle of nowhere. Now, I don’t know whether you lads know the coastline hereabouts.”

Tom and Alistair shook their heads slowly.

“Ah, well. It’s a lonely part of the world. There are long windswept beaches with uneven sand and dangerous rocks and tiny islets, some barely uncovered even at low tide. In most places, it’s difficult to get a boat up to the beach, although there are a few spots where a skilled pilot can get a craft inshore without damage, at least in good weather. The whole area was the haunt of smugglers and highwaymen in times past. And you can see why – pretty unforgiving and desolate, all round.”

“And because the coastline was so isolated, an astonishing quantity of coastal defences had been erected. The beaches were practically covered in concrete tank traps and barbed wire.”

He sat back contemplatively for a moment.

“You know,” he reflected, “I’ve been out there few months ago, just for a bit of a nosey ‘round. And most of the defences have already been removed. Particularly efficient for the War Ministry, don’t you think?”

The gunner sucked at his teeth for a few seconds, evidently lost in thought. Then he shook his head, and refocused his attention on Tom and Alistair.

“At the start of the War,” he resumed, “We had a standard complement of gunners, a rough and ready crew, led by a crusty old

gunnery Sergeant who had probably been sinking ships with gunfire since before you or I were born.”

“The Sarge soon had us whipped into shape,” the gunner continued, “And a finer gunnery crew you couldn’t wish to find.”

The two companions nodded together, having both experienced the sharp tongue and savage wit of the average Sergeant-Major. The gunner returned to his tale.

“It was the beginning of 1940, when it seemed that a seaborne invasion would be upon us any day, that our little troupe was augmented by a couple of rather quiet young men. They had, well, a slightly strange appearance, although you would be hard-pushed to say exactly what was unusual about them. They both looked as if they were extremely uncomfortable in military uniform and they seemed to be muffled up in greatcoats in all weathers.”

“The young strangers both held the rank of lieutenant,” the older man continued, “So they outranked everyone in the place. They gave their infrequent orders as polite requests to the Sergeant. Amazingly, they were held in grudging respect by the Sarge, who did not usually have a great deal of time for junior officers.”

Both Tom and Alistair grinned wryly, very well aware of the tension frequently found between young commissioned officers and veteran NCOs.

“What did these men do?” Alistair asked, genuinely puzzled.

The gunner sat back in his seat.

“They sat in the magazine and, well, did something to the shells,” he confided.

“What do you mean, did something?” Alistair asked,

“Well, there’s the thing. We never could work out exactly what they did but, whatever it was, they spent ages doing it.”

The gunner looked lost in thought for a few moments, then continued.

“They always looked tired afterwards,” he said slowly, as if this particular observation was one he had not made before, “Drained and shaking with fatigue.”

“But did they have some special tools or equipment?” Alistair inquired.

“Nothing at all. They always arrived and left empty-handed.”

“So how do you know that they had done anything?” Alistair persisted.

“Oh, you could always tell which shells had received their attention,” the old gunner answered, “There seemed to be some kind

of a sparkle inside the brass of the cartridge, but never in the steel of the shell itself.”

“Sparkle?” said Tom and Alistair together.

“Oh yes. It was as if there were tiny orange lights somehow inside the brass. I was sure that they actually moved within the metal, but only when you caught a glance out of the corner of your eye. If you watched them closely, they were always completely stationary.”

The old gunner could see that both Tom and Alistair were itching to find out exactly what was so special about these shells.

“The special shells, they almost never missed,” he said, sitting back in his chair with the air of one who has finally delivered a message.

“So you actually fired them in anger?” Alistair asked, with a slightly morbid fascination.

“Oh yes,” he replied, “Several times.”

The two young men were rapt, and waited rather impatiently for the old gunner to continue.

“Now, at that period, of course we maintained a twenty-four hour watch, with teams of spotters with powerful binoculars scanning the horizon. We also had short wave radio equipment, but usually other intelligence was communicated by field telephone, in order to maintain a radio silence as much as possible.”

The gunner paused for a moment, and the others leant closer so as not to miss anything he said.

“Now, when enemy ships came into view, we were instructed to get the range with the ordinary shells, and only then use the special ones. You lads have seen military service, in the infantry, right?”

Again, Tom and Alistair nodded in unison.

“We were in Germany, at the end,” Alistair said.

“Fair enough. But have you seen long-range guns in action?”

“Not close up,” Tom replied, “But we have been on the receiving end of an artillery barrage a time or two.”

“I dare say that’s true enough. But on this particular night back in 1940, we were the focus of an invasion. We weren’t sure at the time, but it became clear that this action was actually a fairly serious attempt to get an expeditionary force onto a beachhead near here.”

“Oh, it was described as an exploratory raid in the official reports, but it was pretty serious from where I was sitting. Actually, I wasn’t sitting – I was running around like a blue-arsed fly. Our heavy guns were in constant action, and I think we actually used most of those special shells.”

“The noise and the smoke were tremendous,” the old gunner reminisced, “The pounding of those big guns letting off their salvos was deafening, and the stench of cordite in the air was enough to make you retch. But, we made several direct hits on the invading craft and sunk at least half of them.”

“My battery was a prime target for the enemy guns, of course, and we took a direct hit from the German destroyer *Königen Louise*. I later heard that this was almost the last salvo got off by that ship, before she was sunk by gunfire from our defences. At least, that’s what I was told.”

The gunner looked sunken in despondency for a few moments.

“We took a hit in the magazine, which exploded. The Sarge and most of the other men were killed,” he said slowly, “Somehow I was thrown clear by the blast. I thought I was going to die, but after a terrible wait, I was found and taken to a first aid post. I may well be the only survivor from the old battery.”

The gunner again paused, evidently in thought of his old companions now long since deceased. He touched one of the more livid scars on his face broodingly.

“I was invalided out of the army,” he resumed, his gravely voice now even quieter. “I was in recuperation for a couple of years, allowing my scars to heal. It’s only recently that I’ve finally managed to recover my voice, and even now my throat gets sore when I speak for very long.”

The older man stretched, then stood up, leaning forward and leaning on the table to look Alistair and Tom in the eyes.

“I’ve never told this story to anyone before,” he rasped, “But you seemed to me to be lads who’d understand.”

Without another word, he turned and left the pub.

Chapter Nine

Even in these post-War times, it seemed to Tom that there was still a considerable military presence in the vicinity of the crossing to Lyndesfarne. As the three young men walked on towards the island, they passed the entrance to an army base, quite small, as such things went, but still obviously in active service.

The base itself was surrounded by high wire fences, topped with barbed wire. What Tom took to be the main entrance to the camp was sited a few hundred yards from the coast, and guarded by a couple of bored-looking sentries. The companions nodded politely to the men on duty, but did not attempt to engage them in conversation; Tom suspected that chatting to passers-by would earn the soldiers a severe bollocking from their duty officer.

Beyond the fence, there were a slightly ramshackle collection of buildings, all of which looked as if they had been rapidly constructed during the War. There were some low brick buildings with flat roofs, as well as a clutch of those semi-circular constructions Tom knew as Nissen huts, which always struck him as like an oversize sewer pipe embedded half-way into the ground.

As he looked through the fence, Tom could see the usual military activities of painting and cleaning being undertaken. He recalled the important advice to recruits, as conveyed by his very first Sergeant when he had joined up: “If it moves, salute it. If it doesn’t move, paint it.”

Tom found it difficult to imagine what was of such strategic importance around here that demanded a military presence even now. Or perhaps it was just happenstance – just one of the large number of military installations established during the War, and which had so far escaped the notice of the powers that be.

Just beyond the seaward edge of the camp, when the companions could see the point where the causeway reached the coast, there was an open area of grass on their left, partially occupied by a small tented fair. The fairground proper was edged by a low dry-stone wall, beyond which was an open area of rough grazing punctuated by a few sheep.

As well as the tents, there were a handful of horse-drawn caravans, similar to the one which had passed them while they had lunch, with their horses grazing nearby. This contrasted neatly with

the motorised vehicles, mainly ex-army lorries, parked at one edge of the ground.

In one area, there were a few stalls set out, although Tom could not quite make out what was being offered for sale. In another area, stock pens had been constructed from the same stones used for the boundary wall. The trade in livestock was obvious from the handshake and folding money was changing hands between farmers and outdoors types in their work-a-day clothes.

Despite the flapping of canvas and the slightly rickety appearance of some of the tents, it seemed to Tom that there was a feeling of semi-permanence about the whole fairground. Its slightly shabby manifestation made it seem a bit like a miniature version of the fair the companions had attended in Alnwick all those weeks ago. Indeed, Tom was almost sure that he recognised one or two of the faces which turned in their direction as they approached.

A principal function of a fair like this, Tom thought amusedly – quite apart from the buying and selling of course – was to update one's friends and acquaintances of the goings-on of other friends and acquaintances. Certainly, there were several groups of men standing around, gossiping and smoking everything from old-fashioned clay pipes to American cigarettes.

Unexpectedly, Bram excused himself from the other two for a moment and wandered over to one of the groups of smokers. Taken slightly aback, Tom and Alistair stepped over to the low stone wall that intermittently separated the fairground from the road, dropped their packs and drew out water bottles and cigarette packets. They could not hear what was being said, although it seemed that Bram was accepted into the group without question. As they watched, Bram also produced a packet of cigarettes and offered them around.

Tom was intensely curious at this point, since he had never seen Bram smoking and he certainly had always declined the offer of a smoke. A few of the other men accepted the proffered smokes. Bram appeared to be making some kind of enquiry. There was a general nodding of heads and several of the men pointed at a nearby tent.

Both Tom and Alistair were watching intently from their vantage-point. Bram appeared to thank the assembled company and walked the few steps to the indicated booth. There were no signs or marking, as far as Tom could see. The flap of canvas that acted as a door was tied back, and Bram stooped and entered without stopping.

As far as they could tell, Bram was getting some money changed. He had handed over a white five pound note, which was an immense

amount of money and rather more than Tom had ever held in his own hands. In return, Bram received a cloth bag with a drawstring top, which emitted a clearly-audible clink when he concealed it inside his jacket.

Nodding politely in farewell, Bram returned directly to the other two young men.

“What were you doing?” Alistair asked.

“Oh, just getting some change,” Bram replied airily, jingling the money bag inside his coat, “I’ve been meaning to break that banknote for ages.”

“Well, drinks on Bram, then,” Alistair retorted, nudging Tom in the ribs.

They all laughed.

“Right then,” Bram said, “Still a fair way to go, lads. Shall we get on with it?”

They shouldered their packs and set off.

There was more evidence of Wartime installations on the coast itself. A series of immense concrete blocks lined the high-water mark, tank traps to make it hard for an invader to get vehicles ashore from landing craft. The shore was littered with the remains of barbed wire defences: coils of wire supported on rotten-looking wooden cross-pieces. To one side, they could see a squat tower of grey-painted metal latticework conveying the unmistakable aura of military usage. The tower was equipped with various lamps and aerials, and looked like it was still in regular use.

This was the first opportunity for the companions to get a close-up view of the crossing that stretched ahead of them. Tom could now see that it was constructed of vast stone blocks, now weathered and worn in places. There was a bend in the causeway which was clearly visible, but the bridge itself still seemed engulfed in a sea haze, despite the brightness of the day. All around, the salt marshes and sandbanks stretched away, the straights widening rapidly on either side. It seemed to Tom that the crossing had been carefully constructed at the narrowest point between mainland and island.

There was a small stone-built building right at the very entrance of the causeway, with a couple of older men taking their ease outside. One of them stood up straight as the travellers approached, and greeted them cheerily.

“Helloo. So where are you young men off too, then?”

“We’re visiting my parents,” Bram responded for all three of them, “Still got a fair walk ahead of us.”

The older man nodded.

“Well, don’t let me detain you unnecessarily,” he responded cheerfully, “Enjoy your stroll.”

Touching their caps, the companions resumed their walk, watched incuriously by the lounging blokes.

“When was this causeway built?” Tom asked Bram curiously, looking around at the stone blocks that formed the causeway, and then over the side of the low walls that edged the construction.

“I don’t know exactly. But it’s certainly been around for centuries,” Bram replied.

“It must have taken quite a bit of building,”

Bram nodded silently, lost in thought for a moment.

“Originally, I was told, the causeway was little more than a line of stone markers indicating a secure path over the marshes,” he resumed, “It was only safe to cross when the tide was out and, even then, one had to take care not stray from the marked trail. The danger of wandering into a sinkhole when crossing was terrifyingly high. Legend has it that this was the route taken by St. Cuthbert on his travels to and from Lyndesfarne.”

“Anyway, over the years, the stone markers were replaced by larger stone blocks which marked the safe passage. Later still, a local lord ordered the construction of the causeway that you see now. Of course, it’s been maintained and reinforced several times since then. Still rather impressive, though, don’t you think?”

As they crossed, the tide was coming in. They could observe the water flowing over the sands and lapping against the base of the stonework. The tang of the salty air was a tangible presence, and the sounds of the sea and the cries of seagulls riding the air above them lifted their spirits and gave Tom a very real sense of freedom and opportunity.

Movement over the causeway and bridge was brisk, with horse-drawn wagons representing the bulk of the traffic. Tom could not see a single motorised vehicle, although he could see that the causeway was so narrow that it was only with difficulty that two carts could pass in opposite directions. He could also see the ruts worn in the masonry underfoot, suggesting that the causeway had been in regular use for hundreds of years.

One horse-drawn wagon passed them, with five black-and-white border collies lounging insouciantly in the back. The dogs watched the travellers with bright intelligence, causing Tom to think that the five animals were, collectively, easily as smart as any three people.

There was also a fair bit of foot traffic, with some people pushing handcarts and a few others with large packs on their backs. These

porters appeared to be in direct competition with several strings of heavily-laden donkeys. There were also herds of domesticated animals – sheep, cows, even goats – being driven over the causeway. Men and dogs attempted to direct the unruly herds, with much whistling and shouting, and the liberal use of flexible switches of wood freshly cut from the hedgerows.

It would be only later that Tom would realise that, while carts and pack animals were travelling in both directions, the herds of cows and flocks of sheep were in transit only towards Lyndesfarne, and not towards the mainland. He would later indignantly realise that the people here were exporting domestic animals from a post-war Britain where food rationing and shortages were still an everyday fact of life.

Only as they rounded the bend in the causeway did the true scale of the bridge itself become apparent. The bridge consisted of three arches, with a huge central span crossing the deepest part of the straights. The figures on the bridge were dwarfed by the immensity of the arches underneath them.

The main arch seemed incredibly long, at least two hundred feet across and sixty feet high. There were smaller secondary arches on either side, perhaps seventy feet or more. These vast arches were supported on either side by massive buttresses that seemed to pin the bridge immovably into the sands around it. The whole bridge was approached by a long sloping section of the causeway which allowed wheeled vehicles to cross.

The traffic on the bridge was much denser than on the causeway. Tom could see that the bridge was only wide enough for a single wagon at a time, and there was a queue of skittish horses and impatient carters waiting to cross. There was much shouting and swearing, although he did not recognise all of the curses blistering the air.

The three young men edged their way past a cart heading down the slope towards them, and which looked dangerously overloaded, and made their way towards the centre of the bridge..

Tom was fascinated by the whole experience. He stopped dead at the very apex of the central arch, and looked around him. Both coastlines looked hazy, even blurred, by the distance and, strangely, the weather seemed to be quite different when looking towards the island and to the mainland.

“Look at the clouds,” Tom exclaimed, pointing.

Behind them, a clear blue sky with just a few white wisps of high cirrus. Ahead, the sky was grey and overcast, with the suggestion of rain in the air.

“It’s almost as if there’s a line drawn in the sky across the straights,” he continued.

“The weather is notoriously variable hereabouts,” Bram said carelessly, “I think it’s the proximity of the sea, or something.”

Tom was not really listening. He was staring down into the swirling water below the centre of the bridge, nearly hypnotised by the movements of the sea under the bridge.

Tom’s reverie was interrupted by a coarse shout from one of the wagoners.

“Look, we can’t wait here,” Bram said, more urgently, “We’re just getting in the way.”

Reluctantly, Tom allowed himself to be dragged onwards, entering Lyndesfarne for the first time.

Chapter Ten

Tom had found the farm work every bit as heavy as Alistair had predicted, but he was not someone to shirk from hard tasks. Indeed, working on the farm during that hot summer was the perfect antidote to the horrors and perils of the War, as well as the cold and boredom of post-War Berlin.

It seemed that Bram too lived up to his promises, especially his glib statement about being good with animals. There was a smithy in the village, manufacturing the traditional products of rustic ironworks and horseshoes. The smith, a stereotypically large and taciturn man and, Tom was unsurprised to learn, a distant cousin to Farmer John, seemed to have taken a shine to Bram.

The young man frequently volunteered to help out at the smithy, taking it upon himself to lead the working horses down the hill to be re-shod. More often than not, he was somehow able to calm the nervous, even frantic horses while the smith and his apprentice hammered the red-hot horseshoes into the correct shape for the animal's hooves. The re-shoeing of horses was just one of numerous tasks which had to be completed in readiness for the forthcoming harvest. During harvest-time, there would be no time for non-essential activities.

The harvest duly arrived, and Farmer John announced the order of fields for cutting and drying. Inevitably, the three young men worked very hard from dawn to dusk, as did everyone else for miles around.

The bulk of the cutting itself was performed by mechanical harvesting machines, drawn by tractors. Even so, there were a few fields which were too small or, more likely, too steeply-sloping to allow the machines access, and which were still cut by hand scythes.

The cut wheat was gathered by hand, and Tom and the others spent long hours with pitchforks loading horse-drawn wagons. The wheat was separated from the ears by a threshing machine powered by a steam traction engine, with much noise and plumes of smoke and steam. This added to the clouds of dust from the wheat which caught in the throat and got everywhere inside their clothing.

The grain was bagged and loaded with more back-breaking labour onto wagons – sometimes motorised, or perhaps drawn by a team of shire horses – and taken back to the granary at the farm. But there was always more to do in the fields: the stacking of straw to dry in

the sun, loading wagons with sheaves of straw and the building of hayricks.

In this part of the country, it seemed that the old tradition of gleaning was still observed. Once the harvest had been collected from any particular field, it was opened to the gleaners. Typically old women, these people could be seen every day, bent double as they carefully walked the stubble fields, collecting by hand any ears of wheat or barley that had been left behind. It was their right to keep anything that they found. Tom was given to understand that this might mean the difference between survival and starvation for some of the oldest and poorest people hereabouts.

During his occasional break, Tom found himself watching the gleaners. The old women in particular were always dressed in dark clothing and would, he considered, have represented a concise definition of “wizened hags” in any dictionary.

Tom noticed that several of the elderly ladies would periodically stop and perform a strange ritual. At first, he thought that they were merely easing their backs after long hours bent double but, on closer scrutiny, there seemed to be something else going on. Every now and then, one of the women would stand up straight and very still, looking around for a surprisingly long time – long after their companions had returned to their menial task.

One of these women, standing closest to Tom, appeared to be clutching something at her throat with one hand, something that she had kept well hidden beneath her clothing. As he watched, she stretched out her other arm in what looked like an imploring motion, while turning bodily to-and-fro. Seeming satisfied, she tucked whatever-is-was around her neck back into her clothing, and returned to her searching. A few moments later, she stood up – almost triumphantly, Tom thought – clutching a previously-hidden cache of ears of wheat.

Tom would not have given the antics of the weird woman another thought if he had not, just at that moment, noticed certain glances from some of the other gleaners. He was not sure how to interpret their expressions, but it seemed to him to be some strange combination of pity and jealousy.

Tom could see that Bram was interested in this ritual as well, looking on with that faintly amused expression he so often wore and making a few notes in the little book he always carried around with him. Alistair, on the other hand, did not seem to have noticed anything unusual.

Tom and his friends had spent a fair time traipsing the tracks and byways in the area. The fields and lanes were linked by a network of tracks and paths, all deeply rutted, with dry gravel in the ruts and long grass growing between the cart tracks. And there was dust, so much dust in the heat of the day, which made the men appreciate their water bottles and flasks of cold tea, not to mention their evening beer ration.

Apart from the wheat and barley, there were fields planted with other crops. In one area close to a stream that was nearly dried up in this season, there was row after row of cabbages, punctuated with the ever-present fluttering of Cabbage White butterflies. Tom knew that their caterpillars were a huge pest, but he liked to see them anyway. At the farm itself, a secluded area had been set aside as a herb garden, with rosemary planted as a hedge between the garden and the pathway that led to the kitchen door. One stony corner was overgrown with straggly buddleia bushes, around which congregated an incredible number of Red Admiral butterflies.

In the weeks before the main crops were ready for harvesting, the three companions had been put to work on a wide variety of jobs. Tom had grown to appreciate for their peacefulness the twin tasks of digging ditches and cutting hedges. Alistair had speculated aloud that a lot of this work was actually catching up on tasks not done during war-time, because of lack of man-power.

Of course, at this time of year and with little rain for weeks, the ditches were nearly dry, and the task of digging out the accumulated muck of half a decade was relatively straightforward, or at least mostly dry. It seemed that the hedges had got badly overgrown during the last few years, and seemed to have grown several feet both upwards and outwards. The young men were required to use spades, pickaxes and mattocks to dig the ditches, as well as ruthlessly cut away at the undergrowth with sickles and scythes.

Alistair had managed to acquire a whetstone to sharpen the tools. He showed the others how to get a really good edge on the blades, which Tom particularly appreciated; he could see how much easier the work was when one had the right tool for the job, and the tool was beautifully sharp.

All this rural activity was rather familiar to the ex-soldiers. It put Tom in mind of the fields of Normandy where he and Alistair had first met Bram. Even Tom, a townie by upbringing, was beginning to appreciate the scenery, and even began to learn the names of the trees and plants around him. He had grown to love the hedgerows with their scattering of holly and hawthorn, and the single trees that stood

out along the line of the hedges. He particularly enjoyed the sight of the stands of trees on rocky hillocks and outcrops, the dark green of the pines and firs contrasting against the gold of the crops in the fields beyond.

The young men had come across all sorts of unexpected objects in the ditches that they dug and cleared. On one occasion, Tom unearthed what looked like a skeleton. After a few worried moments, he was relieved to discover that it was not human at all, but was that of an unlucky sheep. The poor creature got trapped in the mud and undergrowth one winter some years ago, Tom imagined, and had not been found by the shepherd.

It was another of those long hot days, and the lads were once again digging ditches and pruning the hedgerows. They had been allocated a stretch of hedge that meandered alongside a rutted track which looked that it had once been quite heavily travelled, but now seemed entirely deserted.

Tom was attacking a dense patch of stinging nettles with a sickle, reminded of Alistair's admonishments that such a growth would never have been tolerated on a well-managed farm. Bram was trimming the branches of a hawthorn bush, trying to wrestle it back into something closer to a straight hedge.

A little further down the lane, Alistair was digging out a ditch. His spade struck something solid and, expecting another tree root, he began to dig around it. Muttering a curse, Alistair struck again. Rather than the thud of a root, the blow created a sharper sound, tinkling against the metal of the spade – something, not metallic, but almost as if it was some kind of pottery or perhaps glass.

He looked up. He could see Bram and Tom further up the road, working at their own sections of the overgrown hedgerow. The object he had just found was quite large, and he thought it might be an old stoneware bottle. Placing aside his spade, Alistair knelt down and used his hands to loosen his find from the dried mud.

“Hey, lads,” he shouted, “I’ve found something.”

Tom and Bram laid down their tools and converged on his position.

The object was a square flat box. At first glance it looked as if it was made of metal, but it soon became clear it was some kind of glazed earthenware. The container had at one time been brightly-coloured, with pictures and some sort of writing, but it was now far too faded to be able to make out anything.

“What is it?” Tom asked.

“It’s some kind of a pottery box,” Alistair replied, “Let me see if I can open it.”

He took out his pocket-knife and using the blade to scrape the dirt from the crease under the lid. After a few moments, he was able to find a point to ease the tip of the sharp knife into the joint and to prise the lid up by a fraction. He slid the blade further around, repeatedly levering up the top until it came free with an audible squeak.

The three young men peered inside. The box contained what Tom thought might have been tissue paper, now long since decomposed to dust. Alistair put his fingers inside, stirring the dust and pulled out a small pendant, which he held up to the light.

The ornament was contained within a metal setting, which might have been silver, but was now very tarnished and damaged. The setting still held a flat trapezoidal stone, polished on both sides and with curious markings upon both surfaces. It was clearly intended to have been hung around the neck by a cord, although the string seemed to have rotted away to nothing along with the wrapping.

“Do you think it’s valuable?” Alistair asked, as he turned the strange pendant over and over in his hands.

“I doubt it,” Bram responded, “Doesn’t look like gold or diamonds to me!”

They all laughed at this quip.

“So what should I do with it?” Alistair pressed, as Tom stepped closer to take a look.

“Well, if I were you,” Bram suggested, “I’d hang onto it – finder’s keepers, loser’s weepers, and all that.”

“I’ll clean it up later on, then,” Alistair concluded, returning the pendant to its container, and putting both into the pack that had contained his lunch.

As they returned to their tasks, Tom had the nagging feeling that Bram somehow recognised the ornament, or at least knew more about it than he was letting on.

Chapter Eleven

It was late in the afternoon when the three companions found themselves walking into a small village on the Lyndesfarne side of the causeway. They were all feeling rather tired and footsore after their long hike. Bram looked around, suddenly smiling and then skipping forward with renewed energy.

“Well, lads,” he exclaimed, “We’ve arrived. I recognise this place. In fact,” – he indicated a prominent sign on a building a short distance ahead – “There’s the old ‘Nest’. A pub we could stay at tonight, if you like.”

The prospect of a convivial hostelry with decent beer and warm beds definitely appealed to Tom. Alistair appeared to have the same initial reaction, but then asked Bram a question.

“I thought we were going to get to your family house this evening.”

“Well, yeah, we could carry on,” Bram agreed, “But it’s a good couple of hours walking from here, and it would be dark by then. Besides, I for one could murder a pint right now.”

This seemed to meet with unanimous approval from the thirsty young men.

“Or we could stay in the coaching inn – the ‘Walled Garden’ – just up the road,” Bram continued, “But the beer’s better here. Right tasty it is, or at least it was when I was last hereabouts.”

“OK,” said Tom, glancing at Alistair and answering before he could make any more objections, “The pub it is then.”

Even as they got closer, Tom could not make out the words on the pub signboard. The picture on the sign clearly showed a large and unruly nest of twigs in a leafless tree. The lettering was impossible to read, and seemed to be written in some angular script Tom had not seen before.

“That’s peculiar writing on the sign,” Tom said to Bram, “I can’t read it. What does it say?”

“They write strangely here,” Bram replied apologetically, “Almost like a different language.”

Bram pushed open the thick wooden door, and the other two followed him inside. He moved swiftly over to the bar, which was almost deserted at this early hour, and looked approvingly up and

down at the bottles and pumps arranged in front of him. The other two joined him, dumping their packs on the floor.

The barmaid was a young woman who looked very much as if the word “buxom” had been invented especially for her. Seeing the travellers arrival, she smiled in a friendly way which emphasised her peculiarly prominent cheekbones. Guessing correctly that they were visitors, she addressed them in English.

“So what’ll it be, lads?”

Bram turned to his companions, smiling enigmatically.

“Want to try the local bitter?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks mate.”

The barmaid pulled the pints expertly, her muscular arms working the beer engine smoothly. She placed the glasses in a neat row on the bar to allow the ale to settle, and then topped them up one by one.

“Drinks on me, lads,” Bram said, pulling out the cloth bag he had acquired at the crossing and passing over some coins to the girl. The three men eagerly grasped their beer glasses, and raised them to each other.

“Cheers.”

“Here’s mud in your eye.”

They drank deeply. The beer was a fairly conventional hopped ale, pleasantly full-bodied, Tom considered, but surprisingly light in colour. It was quite different from the dark ales they had drunk in the pubs in the village, on their regular outings from the farm. And it was certainly very much better than the ditchwater they had consumed in that station pub in London.

After a certain amount of savouring and smacking of lips, the three companions took their beers and packs, and moved to sit by the fire. It was already getting cooler in the evenings, and a log fire was burning low in the huge fireplace. Together with the reassuring thickness of the stone walls, this gave a wonderful sense of warmth and security, with the flickering flame illuminating a large supply of split logs drying on the hearth.

They put their glasses on a round wooden table, clearly showing the scars of long use. Tom and Alistair sat on a long high-backed settle in one corner of the room, upholstered in scuffed leather, which felt strange to the touch and had odd patterning embossed into the surface. Bram sat himself on a hard wooden chair opposite.

“Cheers, mates,” Tom offered the toast, “Here’s to a prosperous future.”

At this point, they were approached by an older woman who was self-evidently the pub landlady. She was a large and matronly lady, obviously the mother of the buxom lass who had served their pints, and firmly in control of all goings-on in her inn.

“Well, my dears. Strangers in these parts, are we?” she addressed them directly.

Tom and Alistair nodded vigorously, sitting up straight and trying, as Tom’s Granny might have put it, to look intelligent.

“We are, Ma’am,” Alistair responded politely, speaking for all of them, “On the march, and just passing through.”

The landlady appeared to take pity on the three rather quiet young men.

“Well, you will be wanting accommodation for tonight, then?” she asked.

Tom and Alistair nodded in unison.

“Yes, please, Ma’am.”

“There’s a quiet room in the basement which might suit you boys,” she continued, “Not large, but the beds are comfortable enough, I promise you.”

“That would be wonderful, Ma’am,” Bram interjected, “And I’ll arrange payment for us all in the morning.”

The landlady half-turned to go, then stopped and returned her attention to the travellers.

“And will you lads also be wanting a spot to eat?”

Tom was certainly feeling famished after their long trek, and nodded appreciatively. He was joined by the others.

“My stomach thinks my throat’s been cut,” Alistair answered cheerfully.

“I dare say you could all do with a bit more meat on your bones,” the landlady said, smiling, “There’s a Pot Luck dinner in the kitchen. I’ll get you some brought over directly.”

Filled plates and wood-handled cutlery were delivered by the barmaid a few minutes later. Dinner turned out to be a meaty casserole with dumplings and root vegetables, well flavoured with herbs, although Tom was not sure exactly what the meat actually was. The stew was hot and tasty, and served with piles of boiled potatoes dressed with herbs and lashings of butter – an unaccustomed luxury in wartime Britain, Tom knew.

The three men cleaned their plates rapidly, focussing on their food with that concentrated heads-down attitude of young people who never quite got enough to eat. Once they were replete, the three of

them pushed back their plates, sat back in their chairs and looked around at the bar.

The rest of the large bar-room was furnished with worn wooden stools and tables, with a stone flag floor scattered with sawdust. The walls were decorated with faded prints and horse brasses. What light there was came from lamps clustered around the bar and set on a few of the tables. The hostelry had been filling up while they had been eating, and most of the other tables were now occupied.

By their appearance, most of the regulars were old countrymen, judging by their ruddy complexion and rough clothing. There were quite a few younger men, and rather more young women than Tom would have expected. The young people wore brightly-coloured shirts and blouses, and tightly-fitting trousers regardless of gender. Even so, it was not all that dissimilar to the crowds in the village pubs they had frequented over the summer.

Stretching, Tom looked up over the fireplace. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright, squinting into the gloom.

“What the hell is that?” he almost shouted. Bram and Alistair followed the direction of his gaze.

High up on the wall was a large stuffed head, mounted on a dark wooden board and taking pride of place over the fireplace. The head was at least eighteen inches from snout to neck. The mouth, almost a beak, seemed to be filled with vicious-looking teeth, like those of the crocodile that Tom had seen in a zoo as a child. It was hairless, as far as he could see, and had no visible ears. Eyes, obviously of glass, had been added by the taxidermist. He had no way of confirming the accuracy of the representation but, if it was correct, then the creature’s eyes were large, yellow and reptilian. It was completely unlike anything he had ever seen before

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Alistair said in an awed whisper, confirming Tom’s view.

“You young fellas seem impressed,” a voice said behind them.

As one, they turned to face the speaker, who had seen them looking at the stuffed head, and probably overheard something of the conversation. He was a grizzled, wiry old man who, despite his evident age and weather-beaten appearance, somehow had a slight suggestion of an elfin appearance in the shape of his eyes and ears, as well as the contours of his cheekbones.

“There’s quite a tale behind that old bitch,” he said, draining the last of his beer and then puffing on his ancient clay pipe, “You lads interested in hearing it?”

Tom and Alistair looked at each other.

“Yes please,” they said enthusiastically.

Guessing at the price of the tale, Tom offered to buy the old man a pint. He accepted with alacrity, grinning toothily. Before Tom could move, Bram deftly intercepted the request, gesticulating energetically at the landlady, and then going over to collect the beer and pay. Bram placed the glass on their table, a clear invitation for the old man to pull over his chair to join them. The older man drank deeply and appreciatively from the newly-delivered pint, then knocked out the embers from his pipe into the stone ashtray and started refilling it from a pouch taken from his pocket.

“The name’s Ged,” the old boy began, stuffing tobacco into his pipe dexterously, “Folks hereabouts call me Old Ged, though I’m not as ancient as some people would have you believe. I’ve been, well, I guess you would call me a gamekeeper. And a hunter too, from time to time. I’ve hunted all sorted of game over the years. But this wily old bat” – he indicated the mounted head over the fireplace – “nearly did me in just a year or two ago.”

“So, what is that creature?” Alistair pressed.

“That, my boy,” old Ged replied, “Is a dragon.”

Chapter Twelve

“We’d had trouble with dragons for many a year, when I was a boy,” Old Ged began, clearly settling into his stride, and leaving Tom with the distinct impression that he had told this tale before.

“When I was much younger, we worked hard at keeping them away from inhabited places. This took the form of regular hunts, which is pretty intensive work – not to say exciting at times – together with good management of farms, so that there’s nothing to tempt the beasts into areas where people live.”

“So, as I grew up,” the older man continued, “The dragons were contained and mostly content, living on their natural diet of deer and the occasional wild boar. There’s a huge area of uncultivated land, mostly forested and quite mountainous, to the north of here. It’s home to many deer and only travelled by a few loners and woodcutters. So, people mostly avoided the dragons, and the dragons reciprocated the arrangement.”

“Now, during the war over there” – Ged indicated vaguely in the direction of the bridge – “things got more difficult. The dragons came back.”

“Difficult?” Alistair asked, looking puzzled, “Why would the War affect the dragons?”

“Ah, there’s the thing,” Ged replied, “It turns out that simply no one had thought of it. The war and its preparations meant that folks were naturally rather distracted by the necessity of protecting the bridge and causeway over to England. They drafted in numerous men to assist, including many from the ranks of the dragon hunters. Basically, the regular hunts and culls just stopped. So, the dragons proliferated wildly.”

The old man leant forward, sipping at his drink and watching the younger men over the rim of the glass.

“Now, a dragon will grow from an egg to maturity in maybe five years. So, we have a new generation of youngsters who have not tangled with men, and who have acquired no fear of humans. It was getting crowded in their forests, so they started spreading down to the lowlands, and discovered that there was easy-to-catch prey – like cows – aplenty.”

“The war had another unexpected effect,” the hunter continued, “Wartime restrictions meant that the import of animals and animal

products from your country was reduced. Traditionally, farming livestock in this area is avoided, since it tends to attract the dragons. Even so, people hereabouts were forced to keep sheep, cattle and the like, with the inevitable consequences.”

“But what are Dragons like?” Tom pressed, his eyes ablaze.

“Ah, now then. They come in many different sizes and very different temperaments. Some are actually domesticated, although I’m not convinced that they’re ever really tame – just prepared to put up with humans in exchange for a good meal every day.”

“Domesticated dragons?” Alistair asked in amazement, “Isn’t that a bit dangerous?”

“Well, they’re a lot smaller than her, you’ll be pleased to hear,” the old hunter grinned, again indicating the stuffed head with his thumb. “People keep them to bring down rabbits or pigeons for the pot. They’re very good at that – did you enjoy your rabbit stew earlier?”

“It was very good,” Alistair nodded, “I’ve not eaten coney for ages.”

Tom was not sure he had ever eaten rabbit before, stewed or otherwise, but the pub dinner was certainly much better than most of the food he got in the Army.

“Then there’s the Nightwings,” the old man continued, “Smaller still, and kept to keep down the vermin – rats and the like. Folks let them out at night, and they mostly feed themselves, except in the worst of weathers.”

He paused.

“But the true dragons, the big ones, are of a very different mettle.”

The old hunter drank deeply from his pint and then settled back in his chair, toying with his pipe.

“Now, your basic dragon is shaped a bit like a bird. It’s got two wings, two legs, and a long tail coming to a point. The head, well, you can see for yourself, them teeth in its snout are every bit as vicious as they look. The wings are just leathery skin stretched tight over its bones. Most species have hooks on their wings which they use like bats to manoeuvre on the ground, or in trees or on rocky cliffs.”

“Them hooks are sharp too; one caught me here years ago,” the hunter said, indicating a faded scar on his cheek now almost covered by his greying stubble beard, “And they’ve got vicious claws on their feet, wicked talons to catch and hold their prey.”

“Your biggest dragons have a wingspan of maybe ten feet, which is more than big enough when one flies over your head. They’re not

able to carry a full-grown cow, or a sheep, or a man. But they will carry off babies, or young animals. You'll certainly want to be securely indoors or, better still, underground when they're flying around outside."

Tom had already noted the very solid construction of the inn building, and was definitely feeling grateful for the stout stone walls and heavy slate roof that surrounded him.

"The big dragons, they're sociable creatures," Old Ged continued, "They'll hunt in small groups, maybe half a dozen, usually led by an old matriarch who'll be the mam or grammam of most of the group. Working together, they'll often be able to bring down a larger animal, then tear off a haunch and carry it away."

"Why don't they just eat where they kill?" Tom asked.

"Ah, well, they feed their young," Ged replied.

"Like birds?" Tom persisted.

"Yes, like birds," the old man confirmed, "And, like birds, they lay their eggs in a nest, usually in an old tree, or sometimes in hollows on rocky crags. They'll lay a clutch of two or maybe three eggs, each maybe nine inches on a side. The females guard them ferociously, and hunt nearly every day to feed the hatchlings."

"Do they really breathe fire?" Alistair asked in a hushed whisper.

"Ha, that old wives tale," the hunter laughed, "No, they don't. Mind you, some of them, one of the nastier kinds, they can spit a fair old distance. If it gets you in the eye, it sure burns like hell, and can even blind you permanent-like. Fortunately, acid-spitters are quite rare, especially these days."

Alistair dipped his head in agreement with this sentiment.

"Now, you'll understand that having dragons in the neighbourhood is bad news. And my job is to hunt them down, or at least it used to be."

The old hunter sounded slightly wistful at this point, staring into the middle distance for a few moments, then shook his head.

"So now, I'll wager, you young fellas will want to know how to hunt dragons."

Both Tom and Alistair were enthralled, with a look like small boys in a sweet shop. Even Bram, who had hitherto sat quietly in his seat, appeared to be taking some interest in the tale.

"Dragons are almost impossible to hit when they are flying," the old man resumed, "Whatever you try – arrows, spears, fireballs. They're both swift and agile in flight, surprisingly so given their size, and firing at them just annoys them. But they're much more vulnerable on the ground, and much more jumpy, too."

Tom was curious as to why such a fearsome animal would feel nervous, and asked this of the hunter. Ged puffed on his pipe for a moment, regarding Tom closely.

“Well, dragons are not invulnerable. I’ve heard tales of a dragon who tried to take a kill away from a pack of wolves, and very much came off second-best. They’re quite slow to take off, because of their bulk, and the time taken to sort out their wings. But two good beats of those wings and they’re gone, and you’ll never get them.”

“So how do you get them?” Tom inquired.

“Simple. You’ve got to keep them on the ground. So we need a trap. We set up stout nets suspended high up in the forest canopy, weighted with heavy stones, and tied with long ropes to tree-stumps and really big pegs driven into the ground. And of course, we need bait.”

“So what’s bait for a dragon?” Alistair asked.

The old man laughed.

“Dragons love the taste of pork. They go wild when they smell a pig. They’ll go for young wild boar if they can, but the parents fight back, so it’s not something they can have very often. So we use a piglet.”

Ged puffed on his pipe again, reflectively, and continued.

“It also means that pig-keeping is a particularly difficult and potentially dangerous activity hereabouts.”

“Anyway, your trap and bait is set up in the trees, but not too far under the boughs, since dragons don’t like to be under cover. They like open sky above their heads, or to be up in the trees themselves. So, you set your trap and wait. And wait. If you’re lucky, a dragon will land and take the bait.”

The hunter paused to drink, the three young men waiting breathlessly for him to continue.

“And then the fun begins. You *drop* the net sharpish-like. A typical dragon panics at this point, and attempts to take off. The weighted net impedes its wings, and the ropes tied to the trees prevent it from getting very far from the ground.”

“Your mates use arrows and spears to disable the dragon as quickly as possible. Winch crossbows are a favourite weapon of mine, since they’re able to pierce the tough hide and, if you’re lucky, pinion its wings. Once it can’t fly, it’s finished, and you use fireballs and other weapons to finish off the beast as quickly as possible.”

Ged paused again for more liquid refreshment.

“Well, that’s how it’s supposed to work. Now, that one there,” he said, indicating the stuffed head over the fireplace, “That one was a

wily old mother. Very cautious, she was, and still had one wing outside when the net was dropped.”

The old man looked very satisfied at the coordinated intake of breath from his audience.

“She nearly got away. Luckily, my first shot from my trusty old crossbow caught her in the wing-joint of her free wing. That stopped her – or at least I thought she couldn’t move far. She was still thrashing and snapping at the men surrounding her, when she recognised me, I reckon, and suddenly lurched forward and caught me here.”

The hunter put down his pint and pipe, and rolled up the sleeve of his left arm.

“Gave me this mark, she did,” he said, showing them a livid scar on the outside of his left forearm. The three companions winced at the sight.

“I was caught by a wing-claw when holding my bow at the ready, trying to get a clear shot to finish her off.”

The others would see that his arm was still stiff with scar tissue, and that he was finding it difficult to make a full range of movements with his elbow.

“It’s going to take a few more months to get my arm working properly again.”

“What happens to dead dragons?” Alistair persisted.

“Well then, another good question.”

The old man again looked up at the creature over the fireplace.

“The heads are often stuffed and mounted, especially when they have put up a good fight. When I was your age, I wondered why the old folks did that, but now I know the reason – it’s to give old men something to talk about.”

Ged laughed to himself, seeming to find his own humour irresistible.

“The meat is very strongly flavoured, and usually regarded as inedible. It’s fed to dogs, perhaps, where there’s nothing better available. As for the skins, well, dragon hide is difficult to tan, but very hard-wearing. It’s too stiff for clothing, but is sometimes used for certain pieces of furniture, things that’ll get a lot of wear over the years.”

The old man leaned forward again, looking at Tom and Alistair in turn.

“That bench you’re sitting on, that seat’s covered with dragon hide. In fact, it’s the hide of the same old bitch whose head is nailed up there.”

At this point, the old man leaned back in his chair, toying with his beer. His pipe had gone out, unnoticed, during the telling. Tom and Alistair turned to each other at the conclusion of the hunter's tale, mouths agog, while Bram simply sat back, a wry smile playing about his lips.

Old Ged drained the last of his pint.

"Well, me young fellas," he said, "That's me talked out. Thanks for the drink."

With that, the old man stood up, stretched his injured arm, and then walked off in the direction of the front door.

Chapter Thirteen

After the departure of Old Ged the hunter, the companions enjoyed much animated discussions on the topic of dragons, made more discursive and rather louder by the effects of the second and third pint of the light-coloured ale. They were all feeling sleepy after their long walk, plus of course the effect of the strong beer. By this time, it was getting quite late, and it seemed that most of the regulars had consumed their ration and made their way home.

Tom sipped the last of his pint and then stretched, leaning back on the settle and trying – unsuccessfully, as it turned out – to suppress a yawn.

“Feeling tired, boys?” Bram enquired.

There was a general muttering of assent.

“All right then, I’ll go and find out where we’re billeted tonight.”

Tom watched as Bram moved over to the bar and spoke to the landlady. After a few moments of conversation, the matron pointed in the direction of a doorway at the back of the room. She passed an old-fashioned lamp over the bar, already lit. Carefully carrying the lantern, Bram made his way back to where the other two were waiting.

“Well, come on, then,” he instructed.

Alistair drained his glass and stood up, followed immediately by Tom. Evidently following the landlady’s instructions, Bram directed them to a room downstairs, a small room with three narrow beds. Their bedroom was at the end of a corridor, which was cool and dark.

Tom was glad of the illumination from the lamp carried by Bram, which seemed to be curiously lacking any flickering caused by their movement. It looks like an oil lamp, Tom thought, but he was not sure how it was controlled. It was almost as if Bram was waving at it to make it brighter or dimmer, and Tom wondered sleepily how using gestures could have such an effect.

They entered the room, and Tom made a bee-line for the bed in the furthest corner of the room. He groggily untied and removed his boots and rolled onto the bed, falling asleep almost instantly.

Later in the night, Tom awoke, curled up on the bed and still wearing all of his clothes. There was a short period of confused alarm while he worked out where he was and how he had got there. Opening his eyes, he blearily caught sight of Bram writing in his

notebook. Bram was dressed only in his shirt, and looked like he had just sat up on the edge of his bed.

Tom froze, trying not to move and to keep his breathing as soft and even as possible. He wondered what was going on. He knew that Bram carried this leather-bound jotter with him everywhere he went; it was never out of his sight. During the years of the War, he had frequently seen Bram writing in his notebook, and had even glimpsed some of the pages, which seemed to contain assorted notes, doodles and even poems.

The mysterious oil lamp was still burning, set very low, and most of the room was in near-darkness. It seemed to Tom almost as if the notebook was somehow itself faintly glowing in the darkness. Bram was apparently writing with his pencil, not on the pages but on the inside of the back cover. The letters appeared strangely in white against the dark leather, almost as if he was writing in luminescent chalk. The characters themselves were strangely shaped and looked, as far as Tom could tell, just like the script he had seen on the signboard outside.

Bram waved his hand, and the lettering faded instantly. He then shut the book with a soft slap and slipped it under his pillow. Looking around, it seemed to Tom, slightly shiftily, Bram then got back into bed, slipping under the covers and appearing to fall asleep immediately. Tom tried to keep watch for a while, but found himself drifting off within a few minutes.

Tom awoke feeling very refreshed and with no evidence of a hangover, much later than was habitual for him. Life on the farm, not to mention the Army, had conditioned him to rise very early. He wondered briefly whether he had dreamed what he had witnessed in the middle of the night. After a few minutes indecision, he concluded that he was not sure, and finally put the whole matter out of his mind.

The others had already arisen, so Tom leapt from his bed, washed rapidly using the old-fashioned bowl and pitcher of water that had been provided, and emerged to a hearty pub breakfast, served with the familiar accompaniment of hot, sweet milky tea.

The three young men set off soon after breakfast, with just a few minutes required to sort their belongings. As promised, Bram negotiated with the landlady and paid for their accommodation and meals. It was not until much later that Tom realised that no one asked to see their ration-books.

“Well, lads, let’s be on our way,” Bram exclaimed encouragingly, “We can be there in time for lunch. Three hours, no more.”

“I didn’t think this island was that big!” Tom wondered aloud.

Bram snorted in amusement.

“Oh, it’s bigger than it looks, you know,” he replied. “Things often are around here.”

They set off down the road but, before they had gone more than two dozen steps, Tom stopped and turned to look back at the pub sign. Inspiration striking, he drew closer to the other two and asked, “Do you think that’s a Dragon’s Nest, then?”

“You know, I think it probably is,” Bram responded, barely able to keep the laugh out of his voice.

The weather had started misty and cool, feeling distinctly autumnal in the morning, but the sun soon burst through and burnt off the mist. It was very pleasant walking along in the autumn sunshine in companionable silence, following a dusty track through a heavily wooded area. The road wended its way steadily uphill, passing in and out of the shade of the trees. They could see occasional rocky outcrops and crags emerging from the greenery on either side. The road did not seem to be very well-travelled, quite unlike the one to the causeway on the other side of the bridge.

After about an hour’s stroll, the road emerged in more open farmland, and they continued between well-tended fields separated by low hedges. Tom could see that many of the crops had already been taken in and, in most cases, the fields already ploughed over, while a very few others were still waiting for harvesting.

Even so, he could see no movement, other than the occasional flutter of bird life in the hedgerows, birds that Alistair cheerfully identified in a familiar fashion. There was a noisy rookery in a stand of tall trees, a line of majestic Elms striding across the landscape. But there were no livestock visible, no people. They pressed on with the sun on their faces, pulling down their hats to shade their eyes, and taking an occasional drink from the water bottles they had refilled at the pub. It slowly occurred to Tom that, in the entire three hour walk, they had not seen a single living soul.

“Aha, here’s our village,” Bram announced, as they breasted a low rise. The companions could see a hamlet set in a valley in the rolling countryside, screened on all sides by mature trees and hedges. The tiny village comprised perhaps a dozen houses, no more, loosely clustered around a stream which had originally, Tom imagined, provided water for the occupants. It was clear that both buildings and gardens were well-maintained, with privacy assured by high stone walls decorated by climbing or creeping plants that Tom did not recognise.

Through the occasional openings in the walls, the companions could sometimes spot people working in their gardens. From one, smoke was rising from a bonfire where someone was presumably getting rid of dead leaves and other garden detritus.

“And there’s my parents’ house,” he continued, as the three companions drew closer to the centre of the hamlet.

Bram’s family home was a single-story building of relatively modest size, surrounded by fair-sized grounds which included a stable and coach-house, as well as other outbuildings of less easily determinable function. Following Bram, the companions made their way through the open gate and along the wide path of raked gravel that led to a small open area between the buildings which was paved with smooth cobblestones. Despite the fact that Bram had apparently been absent from home for many years, he did not hesitate in the slightest. He marched straight towards a passageway between the main house and the stable block.

“Here we are,” he said, “Let’s go in.”

Bram pushed open a door which led to a kitchen. As he entered, an older woman Tom correctly guessed was Bram’s mother turned and greeted him, her face lighting up at his arrival. The woman had the same unruly hair as Bram, thick and dark and curly. She was evidently extremely pleased to see Bram, rushing over to embrace her son warmly and murmuring something that Tom could not quite hear.

At that moment, a man whom Tom immediately took to be Bram’s father entered the room through an inner doorway.

He was a large man, powerfully built with a full dark beard only lightly streaked with grey and an untamed shock of black hair frosted at the temples. Seeing his son, the older man grinned widely in a slightly lop-sided and ironic way. Tom thought he recognised that expression – it was one he had observed on Bram’s face on a regular basis.

Seeing the other two in the doorway, Bram’s father beckoned them further into the room.

“Brought some friends, then?” he said laconically to his son.

Bram nodded, grinning in a mirror image of his father.

Bram’s mother and father did not seem particularly surprised at the arrival of their errant son in the company of his presumably disreputable companions, Tom considered; it was almost as if they were expected.

“Let me introduce you to my father,” Bram said, proceeding to present each of the companions to his father in turn, in a rather formal fashion.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Alistair said, offering his hand.

The older man grasped the proffered palm and shook it warmly. It seemed to Tom that Bram’s father was not quite as stiff as Bram had made out. Then it was Tom’s turn to be introduced.

“Good to make your acquaintance, Mr. Stoker,” he said politely and also offering his hand.

At this last remark, the older man turned and looked quizzically at his son, raising an eyebrow. Bram shrugged his shoulders in response.

“Oh, we don’t stand on ceremony hereabouts,” his father said, turning back to Tom, “Please call me Briz.”

“Briz,” Tom said, correcting himself, as the older man grasped his hand.

Briz turned to face all three of the younger men.

“Well, I’m pleased to finally meet you both. Bram does write to his mother from time to time, although not quite as frequently as she might like.”

Bram contrived to look slightly sheepish at this remark,

“Nevertheless, I have heard a little about each of you, and I am hoping to learn more,” Briz continued, “So, please, make yourselves at home – my house is your house for as long as you wish.”

Bram, who was still standing very close to his mother, interjected to introduce her to Tom and Alistair. Her name turned out to be Yellez. She immediately set about organising the young men, directing them to chairs in the kitchen – “to keep you from cluttering the place up” – and offering them hot drinks.

“I’m so very pleased to meet you both,” she chattered as she set about the process of boiling the kettle and making the tea, “You’ve arrived at just the right time. I’m hoping we can take lunch outside today, as this may be the last opportunity this summer.”

“I’m sure lunch will be wonderful,” Alistair responded politely.

“Bram had in fact let me know that you were coming,” Yellez continued, beaming, “So I’ve taken the precaution of getting in some extra provisions. I know just how hungry you young men can be.”

The two men thanked her in a heartfelt manner as they drank their tea.

Briz rejoined the conversation.

“I need to talk to Bram for a few minutes, with my brother,” he said, “There are some things which have come up while he been away which I need to discuss with them both.”

Tom could see Bram nodding behind his father’s back, and both he and Alistair took the hint and nodded their agreement.

“Good. So,” he continued, turning around to face Bram, “Why don’t you find your sister, and get her to show our guests around?”

“Of course,” Bram responded promptly, “I’ll be right back.”

He stepped out through the outer door. True to his word, he returned only a few seconds later followed immediately by a rather striking young woman.

“Gentlemen, this is Yise, my sister,” Bram announced, proceeding to introduce the two companions, who had both politely stood up with much scraping of chairs as she entered the room.

“Hello,” she said brightly, “So you’re to get the guided tour, then?”

“So it appears,” Tom replied.

“OK. Let’s go then,” she retorted, then turned and set off briskly back out through the door she had just entered.

“See you shortly,” Bram called cheerfully, as the two men set off through the kitchen door, hurrying to catch up with the young woman.

Yise and Bram were clearly brother and sister, even though she was blonde in contrast to Bram’s dark colouring. Her long hair had the same unruly nature, even when tied back into a ponytail. She appeared capable and athletic, and was wearing a loose white blouse and close-fitting leather trows and boots, so that she resembled the land girls whose propaganda pictures Tom had frequently seen in the newspapers.

Tom thought he detected a suggestion of a strong, untamed nature behind Yise’s demure appearance, and she seemed somehow slightly elfin in appearance. Perhaps, he mused, it was those high cheekbones and a slightest suggestion of pointed ears which made the siblings look so similar. Even so, it seemed to him that that Bram’s facial features were more pronounced than he remembered.

Alistair seemed tongue-tied in the presence of the young woman, seemingly ready to blush if she so much as glanced in his direction. Yise appeared unaware of this, and chattered away gaily, pointing out the pathways and describing the layout of the estate. Tom found himself smiling and nodding in response, or making polite appreciative comments in order to keep some kind of a conversation going.

The pathway skirted a considerable expanse of well-trimmed lawns, which led down to several fenced-off paddocks for horses. To the side of the main house was a large vegetable garden. Alistair visibly relaxed when he saw the carefully-tilled plots of land, with

cleared spaces where some crops had already been pulled, and others with late summer vegetables still growing. There was a very decent area of potatoes, some already dug up, and with a fork stuck in the ground to mark the place from which the spuds were currently being lifted. Alistair looked around with evident interest at the plantings and produce, relieved to be in comfortable surroundings.

Between the vegetable plots and the kitchen, there was a large and slightly overgrown herb garden. This was stocked with a wild profusion of plants, many of which were clearly known to Alistair, and even Tom could recognise mint, lavender and rosemary. Even so, some were unfamiliar. Alistair gently fingered the leaves of a herb that looked a little like sage, but smelt of some kind of rather tart fruit.

“I’m afraid I don’t recognise this one,” Alistair said to Yise, finally plucking up the courage to ask a question, “What’s it called?”

“I don’t know,” she said, smiling directly at him, “At least, I’m not sure of its name in English.”

Alistair appeared to be about to ask another question but, before he could open his mouth, a bell rang out, sounding distantly but clearly across the grounds.

“Time for lunch,” said Yise, “Let’s go back”.

Chapter Fourteen

Tom had been brought up by his Granny after his parents had died quite young. He had spent his formative years in an urban area of Tyneside called Long Benton.

The area was tessellated with terraced houses and cobbled streets – row after row of tiny houses built to accommodate the workforce for the heavy industry so typical of the age: collieries, iron foundries and so on. These dark satanic mills did at least provide employment and income for many, even in the impoverished days of the Twenties and Thirties. Besides, there were at some open areas, parks and common land where it was possible to walk freely, as well as centres of active social life, focussed on the working man's clubs and public houses.

Outwardly, Tom's Granny was a rather fierce old woman, proud and independent, although physically tiny and rather frail. She had been herself widowed quite young, when her only daughter was but a child. Nevertheless, within this rather gruff exterior, there really did beat the proverbial heart of gold. As far as he knew, Tom was almost her only living relative, and the old woman seemed to make it her life's work to bring up the youngster.

Tom knew that his grandmother had taken him in as a young orphan, despite having almost nothing herself. For many years, she made a living taking in washing. It did seem to Tom, however, that Granny was in receipt of occasional sums of money, gifts whose source he had never really established. From time to time, small envelopes and packages would arrive in the post. They were never the same size or colour, but there was some characteristic commonality that he could not quite put his finger on.

Whatever the source of the windfalls, Tom was sure that the sums involved were fairly modest, but they were enough to ensure that they were a little better off than their neighbours. Certainly, he never had to go hungry, and the money also allowed for an extended education of a kind. He was at least capable of the Three R's, and was able to stay on at school for an extra year, at a time when his friends were already seeking labouring jobs, or queuing up for mining work down the pits.

From Granny herself, he had learnt the virtues of hard work, honesty, thrift and, perhaps most importantly, self-deprecation under

almost all circumstances. It was certainly true that some combination of natural personality and the circumstances of his birth meant that Tom was a rather quiet and introspective individual, one who was likely to form his own opinions on any topic rather than being led by his acquaintances.

Tom also developed an early interest in motor vehicles and engines from a man named George. He was an old friend of the family, it seemed, although following the convention of the time, Tom had been taught to refer to the other man as “Uncle George”. With hindsight, George was really quite a young man, although it seemed to a pre-pubescent Tom that he was nearly as ancient as Granny. He had prematurely grey hair and bookish spectacles, and seemed to be perpetually clothed in greasy overalls.

Tom would spend long hours in the building which was at one time a corner shop, but had been converted into a garage and workshop, watching and listening carefully as Uncle George worked on all kinds of oily machinery. The older man would talk incessantly while he worked, and did not really seem to expect any kind of response. Most of his remarks concerned the defects of the engine he was currently repairing, quietly pointing out the points of wear on a bearing, or the effects of a leaking gasket.

In time, as Tom showed himself to be reliable, George began to delegate small tasks for the young man to undertake: washing the dirty oil from engine components using a splash of petrol from a tin can or, later, dismantling and cleaning the delicate springs and valves of a carburettor.

By time he was fifteen, Tom knew a great deal about engines and motor cars in general. On leaving school, he was instructed by Granny that he would be working with his “Uncle”, as a sort of apprentice. Tom was happy enough to comply. George himself never mentioned this arrangement, but seemed unsurprised by Tom’s regular appearance. Needless to say, the modest income from this employment went directly to Granny, although Tom did receive an increased weekly allowance – “pocket money” – from the old lady.

It was with Uncle George that he first learned to drive. One afternoon, the old mechanic had quietly directed Tom into the driver’s seat of an ancient Hillman he had been working on for weeks, and suggested that he ‘start her up’.

Tom had of course been watching closely when he had accompanied George on test drives or on trips into neighbouring areas to collect spare parts. Even so, he made a complete hash of his first attempt to set off, the venerable car bucking and jerking wildly

as he fumbled with the clutch. Nevertheless, he was a quick study, and it was not long before he was driving everywhere, at first on errands with George sitting peaceably in the passenger seat and later, and with growing confidence, on his own.

Tom had vaguely expected that he would at some time take up an apprenticeship in the motoring or allied trades, but the War intervened. With typical Army inefficiency, the recruitment organisation ignored Tom's evident enthusiasm and ability with vehicles and machinery, and had placed him in a standard infantry regiment, where he had minimal opportunity to use his skills.

Granny had died, quite suddenly, some time after Tom had joined the army. Tom knew that she was never really strong, and suspected that it was force of willpower which had kept her alive for as long as it had.

He only learned about her death in a letter from George, which had arrived torn and stained, and seemed to have received the attentions of the official censor on at least two separate occasions. By the time he had received the letter, Tom was in France battling his way towards Berlin, and the funeral had already taken place. There was no way he could have attended even if the letter had arrived swiftly, given the urgencies of the invasion and the advance into Germany.

Before he had been called up, Tom had once again quizzed Granny about his parents. For many years, she had adroitly side-stepped his boyish questions about his parents. On this last occasion, however, it seemed he had reached a point where she presumably felt he was old enough to both understand and to cope with the sense of loss.

Granny had sat Tom down with a cup of tea in the parlour, then sat facing him with an expression which seemed to combine a deep sadness with a sudden inner resolution.

"Well, now that you are – barely – old enough to understand what I have to say," She began, "I suppose it is my duty to tell you everything. But I do confess that I don't understand everything that happened, nor do I expect you to."

"What do you mean?"

"Shhh. Don't interrupt. This is hard enough for me as it is."

The old woman sat silently for a moment.

"Your mother Elizabeth – Lizzie – was a wonderful girl, pretty and vivacious. A good girl, always ready to help her old Mum when I was busy with the washing."

Tom could not help but feel a lump in his throat whenever he heard his mother's name spoken aloud. The tale also seemed to be affecting Granny. He could see the glint of a tear in her eye – something that he had never seen before.

“Lizzie always had plenty of admirers, local boys, but no one she was serious about. I think she thought that none of them were good enough for her. I began to think she would become an Old Maid, spending her years looking after me rather than making her own life.”

“Then she met Brad – Bradley Perkins. He was someone she had met while visiting the summer market – a travelling fair which had set up on the common.”

Granny pursed her lips.

“I have to admit that, at first, I had my suspicions about young Brad. He always seemed rather flippant, never quite answering any of my questions directly, although I have to say that he always treated me with the highest regard. Even so, I was sure he was a rogue, just trifling with your Mothers affection.”

Tom was listening intently, drinking in the story.

“After a few weeks,” the old woman continued, “The fair moved on, and I fully expected never to see Brad again. But Lizzie was convinced that he would be back soon. I feared that she would be heartbroken, losing the first man she had ever really loved. So you can imagine my surprise when, just a few days later, Brad turned up on my doorstep, asking for Lizzie.”

“Their courtship lasted nearly two years. Brad travelled a lot, and he would go away for days or weeks at a time. But they wrote letters to each other while they were apart, all the time. I can still see her radiant smile when the postman called.”

“I was soon forced to the conclusion that he was quite serious in his interest in her,” she continued, “I can still remember clearly the day that Brad proposed to Lizzie, here in this very room, dropping to his knee and asking for her hand. Of course she said yes immediately.”

“He presented her with a beautiful engagement ring – something he said had been in his family for generations. The dear boy even took the precaution of asking me about Lizzie – as if I had any real say in the matter!”

The old woman stopped suddenly, with a sob in her voice. The tears were running down Granny's face, as if her pent-up emotions were finally being released by telling her grandson about his past.

Finally, she dried her eyes with a handkerchief, and went on.

“I always felt that Brad had some secret, something in his background. Oh, I knew he was an adventurer, a traveller, but he did seem to have money. He also had a large number of relatives, all from the north, who turned up in force for the wedding and the celebration afterwards. The newlyweds even managed a honeymoon away, staying with some of Brad’s relatives up north – I never knew exactly were.”

Granny paused again, shaking her head slowly.

“Anyway, after the hoo-hah of the wedding had died down, things couldn’t have been better for Lizzie. A generous gift from some distant relative of your father allowed them to set up home in a street not far from the common where they had met. I would visit regularly, and she would come here, too. She always seemed so happy, smiling and singing aloud – she had a wonderful voice.”

“The years passed, and you were born. Lizzie seemed complete, content in her role as wife and mother. I was rather looking forward to having a brood of grandchildren around my feet.”

Granny looked wistfully at Tom for a moment.

“You were always a good child, you know. Never really poorly, slept through the night from an early age.”

“Then, one evening five years or so after the wedding, Lizzie came to see me unexpectedly. You were toddling, no more, and tired by the time you arrived. Your mother was holding you close, as if she never wanted to let you go.”

“‘Ma,’ she said hurriedly, ‘I’m going away, with Brad. I don’t know when I’ll be coming back. I want you to look after Thomas’ – she always called you that – ‘until I return. It’s very important. Please don’t ask questions, because otherwise I will just have to lie to you. Really, it’s better that you don’t know.’”

“And with that, she thrust you into my arms. That was the last time I ever saw her.”

Despite Granny’s earlier admonishment, Tom could not help blurting out.

“So they could still be alive?”

Granny smiled wanly.

“I don’t think so. It must have been something dangerous, too dangerous to take you along as a babe. I feel sure that, if she was still alive, she would have returned for you. I can’t imagine any mother’s instinct letting her not return to her child if she could – and my Lizzie was always the perfect mother.”

“There’s one further thing,” Granny said, after a reflective pause, “I think I know more, or at least I knew more at one time. And now

somehow I can't bring it to mind even though it's on the tip of my tongue."

She shook here head, as if to clear cobwebs from her mind.

"That's all I can tell you, I'm afraid."

Chapter Fifteen

It was indeed a wonderful lunch, taken outside overlooking the lawns and garden. It was served on a long table placed in an area of stone flags, and set around with well-worn but surprisingly comfortable chairs and benches. The whole setting was sheltered from the winds and shaded on one side by a couple of mature trees, and on the other by the house itself.

The table was covered with a large chequered tablecloth and set with, Tom counted, eleven place settings in slightly mismatched crockery and cutlery. In fact, it was barely possible to see the tablecloth at all, covered as it was by a plentiful spread of comestibles. There were platters of salads and vegetables, and large bowls of boiled potatoes. Evidently much of the produce had come from the gardens they had just been inspecting. There were also several varieties of hard cheeses, at least one of which Tom had never come across before, together with a large bowl of apples and pears.

Bram emerged carefully carrying a large jug of a light-coloured beer, evidently from a cool cellar somewhere under the house. This he then poured into glasses for all of the adults present, and topped it up with ginger beer from a stoneware bottle. This concoction was not a drink that Tom had tried before, but he found it enormously refreshing in the heat of the day.

Briz sharpened a large knife on a whetstone of curious design in a brisk fashion which brought a nod of approval from Alistair. The older man then deftly carved and served fine slices of boiled ham, the thick creamy-white fat contrasting with the pink meat on the plate laid before Tom. At the other end of the table, loaves of freshly-baked bread were being cut into slices equally adroitly by Yellez. Seeing Tom and Alistair waiting politely, she gestured with the bread knife encouragingly.

“Oh, please don’t wait on ceremony,” she admonished the young men, “Do help yourself. Tuck in!”

Tom needed no further encouragement. He helped himself to potatoes and passed the bowl on to Alistair, before tackling the dazzling array of pickles and mustards before him.

Once he had got a few mouthfuls of food inside him, Tom turned his attention to the other people at the table to whom he had been briefly introduced just as lunch was served.

On the opposite side of the table, there were three children who he understood to be Bram's cousins. The two younger ones, a girl of about nine years and a boy he judged to be seven, were sitting between Yellez and another woman who had been introduced as Preda, the children's mother. She wore a rather harassed expression and Tom initially imagined that looking after three children might have caused that demeanour. Actually, the children seemed quite well-behaved and Tom began to wonder if there was some other, deeper reason for the woman's malaise.

The oldest child, another girl aged about twelve, sat on the other side of her mother and next to her father, Briz's brother. He had been introduced as Hamet, and was clearly much the younger sibling, although Tom found it difficult to be sure how much younger he actually was. He was also darkly-bearded, but the facial growth was much more well-trimmed than that of his brother. In contrast to the older man's relaxed attitude, Hamet seemed forever on the verge of fidgeting and shifting awkwardly in his seat.

Tom, who did not customarily ascribe negative characteristics to people he had only just met, and indeed prided himself on his ability to get along with just about anyone, disliked him immediately.

It seemed to Tom that Briz had deliberately gathered his son and his brother at the head of the table, with the objective of spending some part of the meal conversing directly with them. Tom could not overhear very much, but it seemed to him that they were speaking another language, one he did not know, but which seemed somehow familiar to him.

After lunch, everyone pushed back their chairs and sat around the table for a few minutes, feeling too full to move comfortably – “digesting”, as Tom's granny would have said. Bram had returned to his conversation with his father and uncle, and Yellez and Preda were also speaking quietly to each other. Tom and Alistair sat in companionable silence while the children chattered amongst themselves.

Eventually, Bram, Briz and Hamet got up and excused themselves, Bram remembering to thank his mother effusively for the meal. They then wandered off in the direction of one of the more obscure outbuildings. Tom and Alistair followed the lead, being equally fulsome in their thanks, and politely volunteered to assist with the clearing away. Together with the children, the two young men helped to tidy the table, each making several trips to-and-fro returning plates and glasses to the kitchen table. Unexpectedly,

Tom's offer to help further with the washing up and drying was waved away by Bram's mother.

Tom and Alistair stood in the sunshine outside the kitchen door, enjoying their smokes. Suddenly, Bram rejoined them, presumably having left the older men to their deliberations. Wondering what to do next, Tom asked Bram if there is anything else he could do to assist around the estates while he was staying. Alistair clearly also wanted to fill his time productively.

"Well, since you've had lots of practice at farm work recently," Bram responded, smiling, "I dare say a little more would not do any harm. I'll enquire of my father."

Bram disappeared around the corner again for a few moments. On his return, he suggested that Tom could help by lifting potatoes in the vegetable garden.

"And why don't you," he continued, indicating Alistair, "Go and help my sister with the horses?"

"The stables are over there, aren't they?" Alistair responded, rather enthusiastically.

Bram nodded, and the other man set off at a brisk march, watched by the other two. Bram shook his head amusedly, and then turned to Tom.

"Let's get you sorted out, then," he said, "Come on."

Bram led Tom back towards the kitchen garden, on the way ducking into another one of the outbuildings and returning with several heavy jute sacks. It was clear to Tom that his task was to unearth the potatoes, using the fork he had noticed earlier, and fill the gunny sacks so that the root crop could be stored for the winter.

Later that evening, the three companions and Bram's father gathered around a fire in a snug little room the purpose of which Tom could not quite make out, although it did contain a couple of bookshelves overflowing with volumes of all kinds. Dinner had been served indoors this time. Yellez seemed determined to feed them up single-handedly although, to be fair, several hours of heavy work in the garden had certainly given Tom a considerable appetite.

Before dinner, Tom and Alistair had been given a tour of the house itself by Bram, and shown where they would be sleeping. The building had two lower floors, underground, where bedrooms and what was rather quaintly described as "bathing-rooms" were located. The building was actually quite a lot bigger than Tom had originally thought and there seemed to be an astonishing number of rooms in the lower levels.

Having started the day with a long walk and a strenuous afternoon in the garden, and now fed very well on two consecutive mealtimes, Tom felt very much at ease with the world. This was a feeling rapidly enhanced as Bram poured pints of a dark ale, rather stronger than the pale ale they had enjoyed at lunchtime, from a large jug and handed a glass to each man in the room. The flames of the fire danced and crackled, successfully driving away the chill of the late summer evening. Oil lamps standing on opposite ends of a large table set to one side of the room glowed brightly, adding to their sense of well-being.

Bram settled himself in his high-backed chair and sipped his drink. He caught his father's eye, who nodded once, and then he looked directly at first Alistair and then Tom.

"Now I think it's time for some explanations," Bram started.

Tom and Alistair looked at each other, but said nothing.

"So first, I have to admit to you that I've got you here under false pretences – at least slightly," Bram continued, giving them a flash of his ironic smile, "And you've probably already noticed that there's something a bit different about this place."

Alistair exhaled noisily.

"I knew as much," he exclaimed, "I was beginning to think it was just me."

"So why are we here, really?" Tom asked.

"Well, I'm ready to explain everything," Bram replied, "I've asked my father to tell you some of the history. But before that, there are some important things you need to hear."

Tom had, in fact, been thinking a great deal while wielding a fork in the kitchen garden during the afternoon. He felt sure that some revelation was coming. He sat back, took a long pull from his beer, and waited for Bram to continue.

"The first thing you need to understand is that you're now no longer in England. In fact, you're not even in the same world. On the way here, we all crossed into a different, well, let's say plane of existence."

Alistair looked agog, confused.

"When did that happen?" Alistair exclaimed.

"It's the bridge, isn't it?" Tom asked, inspiration striking.

Bram's father chuckled softly to himself at this observation, and his son allowed himself another wry smile.

"You're quite right – well observed," Bram replied, sounding only slightly surprised, "The exact centre of the bridge is in fact the point where we crossed from your world into this one."

“I thought there was something strange about that place,” Tom muttered, half to himself, “There’s something uncanny about the movements of the water.”

Bram and his father nodded in unison.

“What is this world?” Tom pressed.

“Well, it has many names, but this area is known as Lyndesfarne,” Bram said, pronouncing the place name with an emphasis Tom had not heard before, “So perhaps its best if you think of it simply as the World of Lyndesfarne.”

“But surely Lyndesfarne is just an island, and not a very big one at that,” Alistair objected, “On the way here, I could quite definitely see the sea all the way around”.

“It’s a bit complicated,” Bram replied, “Seen from your world, Lyndesfarne does indeed appear as an island. But, seen from Lyndesfarne, your world also appears as an island.”

Strange as it sounded, this somehow made sense to Tom. There was something strange, some kind of discontinuity around this area, with its locus at the centre of the bridge.

“So is this place, this world is some kind of a secret?” Alistair pressed.

“Yes, you could say that,” Bram responded, once again displaying his characteristic wry grin, “Certainly this world has some very, um, *unusual* aspects.”

Bram paused to sip his beer and then continued.

“In your world, you use machines of all kinds, for all sorts of purposes. Your machines are a great source of wealth and comfort for all, rich man and worker alike.”

Both Tom and Alistair nodded bemusedly, unsure what exactly Bram was trying to tell them.

“Here,” Bram continued, “We don’t use machines, except for the most mundane of purposes. We use a different approach – one which I suspect you’ll regard as magic.”

“What do you mean – magic?” Tom interjected.

Bram smiled.

“It’s hard to think of a better word, in your language,” he explained in a reasonable tone of voice, “It’s just, well, how things here work.”

“What kinds of things are operated by magic?” Alistair enquired, clearly struggling with the concept.

“Everything around you, pretty much,” Bram replied.

He cast around the room for a moment, as if for inspiration, before his eyes alighted on the fire in front of him.

“Well, take this fire here,” he suggested, pointing to the blazing logs.

Tom looked at the fire. The burning wood looked completely normal, the flames dancing steadily and the blackened ends of the logs smouldering.

Seeing Tom’s bemused look, Bram explained.

“In this house, we like the traditional appearance of a wood-burning fire,” he said, “But this fire has been, shall we say, magically enhanced. It burns normally, but never needs a log putting on it.”

Tom was intrigued.

“So how is the magic controlled,” he asked.

“Is there some kind of spell or incantation?” Alistair added.

Bram laughed aloud.

“No, no,” he replied, “It’s more subtle than that.”

He explained at some length that there was a language of hand movements, gestures and manual techniques, used exclusively for controlling magical devices and artefacts.

“Let me show you,” he continued, “Watch this.”

Bram made a subtle movement in the air with his hand, a motion that looked to Tom as if he was pressing down an invisible sprung handle. Behind him, the oil lamps suddenly dimmed to near nothingness, leaving the flickering fire as the only source of light in the room.

In the sudden silence, Tom could clearly hear Alistair’s indrawn breath of surprise. He suspected he had probably reacted in the same way.

“Wow,” he breathed.

Bram reversed the gesture, and the lamps returned to their previous state. Tom noticed that Bram made the application of magic look natural, everyday and commonplace, as if it were as simple as operating an electric light switch.

He also thought he had seen these movements before, and he suddenly realised where. Bram had been using these very same gestures to control the lamp in the pub only last night.

“So why don’t you have machines?” Alistair pressed.

Bram seemed unsurprised by this question.

“Well, it just that some things in your world – in general, machines – don’t work here,” Bram explained, “Anything complicated from your world simply refuses to function over here and sometimes it won’t work when you take it back again.”

“That’s why I made sure you left your Grandfather’s watch back at the farm,” he continued, “It would not work here and there is a risk

that, if you brought it over and then back again, it might not work again.”

“So the world here breaks machines permanently?” Alistair asked.

“Not usually. It’s just that some rather delicate things – like an old watch – can occasionally be damaged beyond repair.”

Tom had been collecting his thoughts.

“So,” he said, “Complicated machinery doesn’t work here in Lyndesfarne, so you have to use this ‘magic’. And I suppose we use machinery since magic doesn’t work.”

Bram smiled brightly.

“That’s exactly right,” he replied, “Your world is quite different to ours. But there’s a long history – millennia, if you remember what that means – of contact between the Two Worlds.”

At that moment, Tom had his first inkling there was something huge here, some vast and mysterious secret – and something he himself might just want to be a part of.

“So, I suggest that you listen closely to what my Father has to say,” Bram concluded, glancing meaningfully at the older man.

With that, he sat back in his chair, stretching out his feet towards the fire. As one, all three young men turned their attention to Briz.

Chapter Sixteen

Briz had sat silently as his son had explained a few basic facts about the World of Lyndesfarne. Now, he shifted in his seat, keeping his eyes fixed on the two newcomers.

“My tale is all about secrets, and the things that have to be done to protect those secrets,” he began, “But there are two rather important things I must do before I can tell you more.”

The older man paused, sipping at his ale.

“First, I must offer you my sincerest thanks. I’m deeply indebted to you for saving Bram’s life, although I’ll be the first to agree that he was probably doing something foolish to get himself into that situation in the first place.”

Bram pulled a face which his father must have seen but did not deign to dignify it with a reaction. Both Tom and Alistair modestly muttered something both self-deprecating and nearly inaudible.

“You have shown yourselves to be true companions and warriors,” he continued, “Brave and resourceful when it really counts. You have my gratitude, and I would like to show that gratitude in certain, rather concrete ways. I’ll come back to that point later, if I may.”

The two young men both looked puzzled for a moment, but politely declined to interrupt Briz’s address.

“The second thing I must do is to ask of you a promise,” he resumed, adopting a strangely formal tone of voice, “You must swear a solemn oath that whatever you have heard, and are going to hear, about this world you will not disclose to anyone.”

Both Tom and Alistair nodded vigorously.

“No, you must say it, aloud,” Briz pressed.

“Err, yes, if you insist,” Tom responded, “I swear I will never tell anyone about the world of Lyndesfarne.”

Tom got the strangest of feelings at that moment, a chill running down the back of his neck and a distinct impression that there was someone looking over his shoulder. It would not be until much later that he would realise that this was a compulsion magic – one of a very small number of psychological spells that actually did seem to work in the other world as well as this one.

Alistair parroted the same words and, judging by his sudden stiffness, Tom suspected that the other man had been struck by the same restrictive magic.

“Very well, then,” Briz said, suddenly looking much more comfortable and relaxed, “There is a long history – indeed, many centuries – of contact between your world and Lyndesfarne. The history is multifaceted, full of complex and occasionally turbulent relationships. Through it all, the existence of this world has led to a whole variety of myths and legends in your world. It’s just the same in ours, I might add.”

“So most people here don’t know about our world either?” Tom asked, stunned into interrupting the old man. He had vaguely expected that only the residents of his own world would be protected from this secret.

Briz chuckled, again sounding just like his son.

“That’s right,” he said, “In much the same way that you have stories about magical beings with mysterious powers, in our world there are stories about impressive and powerful *mechanisms*, made of iron and steel, which simply cannot operate here.”

Briz took a sip from his beer, and continued.

“These are of course derided as stories suitable only for a child’s bedtime, and most of them present a wildly inaccurate picture, but they are quite definitely both widespread and based on, well, I suppose, folk memories of contact with your world.”

Tom could understand how true stories of a magical world – overheard, misunderstood, or just grown long in the telling – would lead to the kinds of stories he had listened to as a child or, later, read for himself. His Granny had not been a great one for reading him to sleep, but she would occasionally relent with a short tale.

He was more intrigued by a different aspect.

“Why is this kept a secret?” He asked Briz directly.

“That’s a very good question,” the older man replied, “Well, frankly, rather unfortunate things tend to happen when it is not.”

Briz sighed, glancing at his son.

“At one time,” he resumed, “There were a large number of pathways and crossings between your world and ours. In those days, communication between different parts of your world was much more difficult and so secrecy was not thought to be much of a problem. At the time, it was generally considered that the crossings, which have always been sited in out-of-the-way places, were so obscure that no one would be interested.”

Briz sipped his beer, smiling ruefully.

“We were wrong, as it turned out. Many of the tales were told and retold again and again, and the knowledge, or at least rumour, of our world spread much further and faster than anyone had expected.”

Briz paused, possibly for effect. Tom got the impression that this was a story that the older man had told on many previous occasions. Nevertheless, he could not but help get caught up in the drama of the tale.

“Of course it was not helped by the noise and excitement kicked up by, shall we say, various disagreements between factions from this world,” Briz continued, “And the stories certainly communicated a dramatic picture of conflict and confusion.”

Tom had been listening carefully during the narration and a metaphorical glimmer of mental light presented itself.

“The Irish lady in the pub in Alnwick,” he murmured.

Briz raised a quizzical eyebrow, again glancing at his son.

“Yes, Bram informed me about your encounter with the Irishwoman,” he responded, “It was quite fortuitous, I think. From what I was told, most of what you heard was quite true, albeit presented in a rather abstruse way.”

This remark was met with frowns and confused silence from both of the young men.

“Centuries ago,” Briz continued, “There were several crossings from our world to Ireland, from very different parts of our world.”

Both Tom and Alistair looked even more confused. Bram must have spotted this and interjected.

“Your world and ours are not always linked in the same way,” he said, leaning forward in his chair, “Crossings which are only a few miles apart in Lyndesfarne may emerge on opposite sides of the earth. And vice versa.”

“Quite right,” Briz agreed, “And so Ireland became a battleground for differing factions from very different parts of our world. The tensions and excitements of the times gave rise to plenty of disaffected individuals willing to take all kinds of risks to try and gain an advantage. And it was through one of these agents that the existence of our world, and the crossings to it, came to the attention of one Oliver Cromwell.”

Tom had heard of Cromwell, probably because his younger self was in fact paying attention in at least some of the history lessons in school. Conversely, it seemed that Alistair was completely in the dark.

Briz clearly sensed Alistair’s ignorance of this particular historic episode.

“Well, there’s no particularly pressing need for me to go into details just now,” he continued, “There’s been a great deal of analysis of the reasons why Cromwell put so much effort into a military campaign in Ireland, rather than consolidating his hold on England. Just take it from me that, in Cromwell’s England at the time, there were those who regarded the Irish as collaborators with the deposed English monarchy.”

Alistair nodded, presumably – Tom thought – having experienced at second-hand some of the treatment meted out to collaborators from his recent military adventures in France and Germany.

“And Cromwell himself subscribed to this view, at least in public. Although I believe that, in the privacy of his own head, he treated the invasion of Ireland as an opportunity to seize control of one or more of the crossings to gain him an advantage.”

Tom thought he understood. It was becoming clear to him that there was more behind this historical episode that he had learned at school.

“To be honest,” Briz continued, “Cromwell was probably both proud and borderline insane, and most certainly power-crazy. In any case, we had very little warning of his approach to that area of southern Ireland which happened to contain a concentration of crossings to our world.”

Briz paused thoughtfully, taking a pull of his beer.

“It was a brave and resourceful man,” he resumed, “Bromath by name, who brought the bad news of Cromwell’s approach, and the even worse news that he had somehow gained intelligence of the crossings. Bromath was a member of an organisation – a clan, really – who kept an eye on one of the crossings. You see, the Guardians *per se* did not exist at that time – indeed, it was these events that prompted the creation of a unified group to protect the pathways between the two worlds.”

“Anyway, the situation was chaotic in the extreme. Cromwell’s army marched so fast that there was little time to decide what action should be taken. And, of course, those who represented the interests of different authorities and power groups fuffed and dithered, squabbled with each other, and generally just could not agree what to do.”

Briz shrugged, slightly theatrically, it seemed to Tom, then continued.

“So, when a decision was finally made – that all of the crossings had to be removed – there was almost no time left. The closures had

to be done very quickly and consequently rather spectacularly – even explosively.”

“Explosively,” Tom echoed, “What do you mean?”

Briz grimaced.

“Tearing the two worlds apart is a very destructive thing to do,” he answered, “Unless it’s done slowly and carefully, the result tends to be on the unpredictable side. Suffice it to say that one of the events was sufficiently powerful to blow a hole in the ground so large that there is now a decent-sized lake at that very spot.”

Tom was reminded of the nuclear bombs detonated by the Americans at the end of the War at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the devastation that had been reported in the newspapers afterwards.

“It must have been terrible,” he said.

“It was,” Briz replied flatly, “People died, despite the desperate evacuation efforts. Not many, but there were casualties.”

Tom also thought about the tale told by the Irish mystic. The explanations presented by Briz covered most of the strange aspects of the story, although there were one or two gaps. The one that really stood out in his mind was the suggestion that, at one time, magic had indeed worked in his world, and that it had later been stopped. He resolved to consider this further later.

“And now, finally,” Briz said, once again sighing heavily, “I can come to the reason you are here, the reason that this young scallywag here,” – he indicated Bram with a wave of his hand – “Has persuaded you to join us here today is because, well, because I want to recruit you.”

Alistair started.

“Recruit?” he asked, “To do what?”

Tom had another characteristic flash of insight.

“You’re the Guardians, aren’t you?” he interjected, “Or at least associated with them in some way.”

Briz seemed unsurprised at Tom’s observations, although Bram was slightly amused that his approach had been so transparent to Tom.

“Join the Guardians?” Alistair asked, just beating Tom to the question “So what will it entail?”

Briz smiled widely.

“Well, these days, the Guardians are an overlapping group of organisations, split between the two worlds. There are many roles available to young men such as yourselves. To start with, however, you’ll have to attend a training course – think of it as Basic Training, if you like. It’ll be based in your world, although, by convention,

some of the teaching will be done in the our world. Of course, this means that you will also have to learn the language of Lyndesfarne,”

“About this language,” Alistair piped up, “Somehow it seems familiar to me, but I don’t know why.”

Briz seemed puzzled. He looked quizzically at his son.

“I think I have an explanation,” Bram said promptly, “You’ll remember recounting your Grandfather’s tale to us? I strongly suspect that he was associated with yet another one of the pathways between the worlds. So, you may have heard the language spoken as a child.”

Alistair looked stunned for a few moments, evidently mulling over what he had just heard.

“So, I suspect that he was there in Russia when the Siberian passage was removed. I think he witnessed the closure of the crossing – fortunately at a safe distance.”

“So, it was also closed urgently?” Alistair asked.

“Well, yes,” Bram replied, “I don’t know all the details but, as I understand it, there was an assessment of the political situation in Russia, and in Agrea – that’s the part of our world reached through the crossing – and a decision was made to dismantle that pathway. They expected a careful closure, but something went very wrong. The resulting explosion is what your Grandfather must have seen.”

Alistair nodded slowly, appearing to agree with the hypothesis

“So, you see,” Briz took up, “At one time, there were quite a number of crossings between the worlds. And now, there is only one – the one you used to get here. So, this crossing is really special, really precious, and I want you two to help us look after it.”

Briz paused, looking directly at each of the young men in turn.

“So, what do you say? Will you join up?”

Tom and Alistair looked at each other.

“I’ll do it,” Tom said, with a degree of certitude that surprised even himself.

Alistair hesitated for only a second.

“Count me in,” he responded, also sounding enthused.

“Wonderful! Well, congratulations and welcome to our newest recruits,” Briz said warmly, lifting his tankard in salute. Tom noticed that Briz and Bram exchanged a glance at that moment, and was almost certain that Briz gave his son a nod of approval.

Their discussions continued late into the evening. Briz spoke more on the duties and responsibilities of the Guardians and elaborated on the history of the other crossings between the worlds. Bram was delegated to fetch more beer from the cellar, which meant

that the subsequent talk became rather less formal and a good deal more animated.

Much later, Bram's mother bustled in with a tray of mugs of hot chocolate, glancing at her husband and her son in such a way to make it plain that these were bedtime drinks, clearly hinting that it was time for them all to go to bed.

Chapter Seventeen

The next few days passed in a whirl of activity. The very morning after their discussions with Bram's father, arrangements were made to enrol both Tom and Alistair in what Bram rather obscurely called Guardian School. Tom was not entirely sure exactly how those understandings had been reached, but seemed to involve Bram's father writing several letters, one of which was given to Tom and Alistair to deliver by hand when they reached the School. The letter was written on old-fashioned heavy paper, folded into a packet and sealed with red wax. It was addressed in a careful hand, as if the writer was not entirely comfortable with writing in English.

They were returned to the causeway later that morning by light horse-drawn trap, driven by Hamet, Bram's uncle. The trip took about forty minutes, following exactly the route they had walked the previous day. Their driver sat hunched over the reins throughout the trip, morosely answering their occasional questions in muttered monosyllables.

Alistair seemed to be fascinated by the Lyndesfarne countryside, even though they had seen exactly the same stretches yesterday. He repeatedly pointed out subtle factors in the surrounding fields that suggested to him differences in the way farming was carried out here in Lyndesfarne. These differences were completely invisible to Tom, although Bram seemed happy to engage in a detailed discussion.

They dismounted from their transport, thanked Bram's uncle politely and set off walking across the causeway. A gusty wind was blowing the spray from the sea over the low walls that edged the roadbed and seagulls glided on the wind, screaming fitfully over their heads.

As they approached the arches of the bridge, Tom and Alistair marvelled again at the curiously motionless lights in the stones of the bridge, clearly visible in the weak morning sunlight.

"So this is magic, is it?" Alistair asked Bram, running his hand over the gently glowing masonry.

"Yes, of course," Bram replied blithely.

"So what are they, really?" Alistair pressed, apparently trying to watch the sparks from the corner of his eyes.

Bram laughed.

“Let’s call them sprites,” he suggested, “You’ll learn more about them, I feel sure, but think of them as a way of holding an intention, a desire for action, which is then carried out forever.”

Both Tom and Alistair digested this in silence for a few minutes as they walked on. When they reached the mainland end of the causeway, Bram interrupted their thoughts and pointed out a few of the men which could again be seen hanging around.

“Let me introduce you to a couple of people,” he suggested, “Several of these blokes are in fact members of the Guardians, and you may very well find yourself working with them in the future.”

Tom and Alistair shook the hands of several men, one of whom Tom recognised as the man who had guided Bram to the money-changer the day before yesterday. Many of the introductions passed in a whorl of names that Tom failed to catch. However, he did remember that the name of the man he recognised was Fred, who seemed to be a particularly affable chap not very much older than himself. They were also introduced to Arden, an older man with a slightly stand-offish attitude. Once out of earshot, Bram explained that Arden was one of the Duty Wardens, and therefore relatively senior, and that he had a reputation for unswerving, even over-zealous, dedication to duty.

Using his contacts amongst the Guardians, Bram managed to cadge a lift for them on a lorry back to the main road. The three young men clambered on top of the tarpaulin that covered the back of the truck and tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible. The load, whatever it was, was lumpy and irregular, and seemed to shift slightly when they moved. As they bounced their way along the narrow road, Tom reflected that this was only just better than walking.

All that remained of their journey was the walk up the hill, along the hidden lane that Bram has described as St. Cuthbert’s Way, and then the footpath across the fields that returned them to the farm.

Over the next few days, the three young men sorted and packed their belongings back into their kitbags, as well as completing a few outstanding tasks around the farm. While they were packing, Alistair wondered aloud what he should do with his Granddad’s watch.

“Well, you’ll understand why you don’t want to take it to Lyndesfarne,” Bram advised, “But if I were you, I’d hang onto it for the time being. You’ll be over here most of the time, and I would be very surprised if the School did not have some secure place to store things like that.”

On their day of departure, the companions took their leave from the farmer and his wife. John and Edna seemed rather sorry to see them go, but appeared to understand that, in this day and age, they could not expect young men to stay forever on a farm in an out-of-the-way part of the country. The slightly tearful farewell felt a little to Tom like the time he had left his home with Granny after he was called up to join the Army.

The young men were collected by a lorry driven by a rather taciturn driver. They tossed their baggage into the back of what looked like an ordinary army truck with camouflage paintwork. Nevertheless, the number plates and the absence of decals made it clear that this was a civilian vehicle, although probably army surplus. It was certainly very familiar to Tom; indeed, “a right pain in the backside” was his considered opinion.

The lorry set off down the lane towards the village. At the familiar junction, the lorry stopped and the driver sounded the horn. Bram got up suddenly, grabbed his kitbag and threw it out.

“I’ll be leaving you here,” he said, to their great surprise and confusion.

“What? Why?” Alistair managed to stutter.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get to the School just fine,” Bram replied, “I’ll be in touch from time to time, and I promise we’ll meet again very soon. It’s just that I’ve got a number of other things I absolutely must do, and this may be the last opportunity for me to do them.”

With that, he hopped over the tailboard and out of the lorry. There was a bang on the side of the truck and it set off with a jerk. Their last view was of Bram standing in the roadway, clutching his kitbag, and waving and grinning broadly.

Tom felt slightly strange at their abrupt and unexpected separation. The three companions had spent so much time in each other’s company that it was unnerving to suddenly be without one of their group. Several times, Tom found himself turning to ask Bram a question, only to realise belatedly that he was not there. Bram had been the focus of their enquiries and questions, especially of late, and Tom realised that he had only recognised this fact after Bram had left them.

After a few minutes, the lorry stopped again, this time to collect a couple of other people who were waiting at a petrol filling station in a small village. The newcomers were two rather quiet and shy young men that Tom at first took to be brothers but in fact turned out to be cousins. Stan and Charlie seemed nervous about the company and

reluctant to engage in much conversation, although Tom was not sure whether this was ordinary shyness or from some deeper concern.

Sat in the back of the lorry, Tom could not see very much except for an interminable sequence of country lanes bordered by hedgerows. The weather had turned overcast, becoming a grey autumnal day, and it had started raining off-and-on. The journey seemed to drag on, and Tom began to wonder whether their transport was taking the most direct route to their destination.

At one point, the road ran alongside a high and well-maintained stone wall, with mature trees and thick growths of rhododendrons visible on the other side. Shortly afterwards, the lorry drew up at a gatehouse, obviously the entry to some grand residence. The entrance itself was surrounded by wrought iron fences and an impressive double gate, all neatly painted in black and gold. The driver sounded the horn and a man dressed in a dark blue uniform appeared, waved briefly at the driver, and then proceeded to push open the gates. As they drove through, Tom caught sight of a discreet sign at the side of the gates which read “Cliviger Grange. RTDE. Keep out.” Reserve Defence Training Establishment, thought Tom, a name like that could mean almost anything.

Life at Cliviger Grange, Tom thought later, felt like reverting to a familiar routine, counter-pointed by the astonishing – indeed, magical really was the only word, he considered – nature of the material they were being taught. Even so, on their arrival, it all felt very confused and rushed, and it was only later that he began to build up an accurate mental picture of the environment and regime.

On their arrival, they were greeted by a cheerful little man in a rather informal blue uniform, who was clutching a clipboard and who introduced himself as Arnie.

“You’ll be Thomas Perkins and Alistair McLaughlin, yes?” he asked cheerily.

“That’s right,” Tom answered, handing over the letter of introduction he had been given, “I’m Perkins.”

“Good to meet you, Tom, Alistair.”

Arnie took the proffered letter and clipped it to his board, then shook the hands of the two young men in turn. Glancing around, Tom noticed that Stan and Charlie were being greeted by a different official, a rather prim-looking woman with mousey hair tucked under a uniform hat that seemed very slightly too big for her head.

“Well, come on then,” Arnie insisted, “Grab your stuff and I’ll show you around.”

He briefly guided the new arrivals through the grounds, rattling on at machine-gun speed about the function of each of the buildings. They passed to one side of a rather grand old residence now almost completely covered in Wisteria and Virginia creeper. Their destination was a long low building constructed of bricks painted a rather sickly pale blue colour, which gave the impression of being part of a military hospital thrown up during the recent hostilities.

“In here,” Arnie said, holding a door open for them.

The two young men were shown the room they would be occupying. Tom was not surprised, and actually rather pleased to be sharing a room with Alistair once again. After Bram’s unexpected departure, he felt that it could be rather lonely here if he lost Alistair was well.

“Just leave your stuff here for now,” Arnie suggested, “They’ll be plenty of time to get settled in later on.”

They were instructed to join an “Induction Session” in Lecture Room 3 with the rest of the new intake. This room was on the ground floor of the House, the old building Tom had noticed earlier, which he had taken to be the original Cliviger Grange.

The lecture room was large and rather stark room, with rows of hard seats and functional wooden desks, and a raised dais in front of a pair of large blackboards. Looking around, Tom could see Stan and Charlie, whom he recognised from the lorry, and perhaps a dozen other people – not all of them men – that he did not recognise.

After a few minutes waiting, and a certain amount of shuffling and fidgeting, a man who Tom took to be a senior officer swept into the room. The officer was trailed by several others, including Duty Warden Arden and, to Tom’s surprise, the Guardian who had been introduced as Fred at the crossing. Both Tom and Alistair automatically stood to attention, following their military training, as did several of the others.

The officer was a tall, fit man in his late forties with greying hair cut short-back-and-sides, regulation-style, and who wore the uniform of the Guardians with a military dash. He stood front-and-centre on the raised platform with his fists on his hips, and smiled wryly.

“Sit down, sit down everyone,” he said calmly, gesturing with his hands.

Tom and the others subsided into their seats.

“Well, good morning and welcome to RDTE, and indeed welcome to the Guardians,” the officer continued, striding up and down the stage as he spoke, “My name’s Markham, and not so long ago I was a Major in His Majesty’s Armed Forces. Now, however,

I'm the Warden in charge of this Establishment, and it is my duty and my privilege to ensure that you learn everything you need to know for your chosen role in protecting the Lyndesfarne crossing."

Despite his military title, the Major stressed that the Guardians are a civilian organisation, like a police force.

"I can tell that some of you have seen military service," he said, looking pointedly at those who had leapt to attention on his entrance.

"And those skills will be useful, but you are here to learn – and learn much more than the Army ever taught anyone. I hope you're all looking forward to that. Here, we recognise that personality and personal skills are much more important. You will learn to know and identify frequent travellers, to spot strangers and suspicious behaviour, and to recognise the signs of attempted smuggling."

Looking back, Tom found that the Major's introduction more-or-less right. There was a certain amount of military-style discipline, and it was just a little bit like being back in the Army. Even so, it was certainly not as brutal a regime as, say, basic training, with its square bashing, spit-and-polish and spud peeling. Instructions were always couched in polite terms, but it was clear that they were intended to be followed immediately. The biggest difference, in Tom's view, and the one he found most unusual by comparison with the military, was that the students were actively encouraged to think for themselves and even to ask difficult questions of the teaching staff.

Chapter Eighteen

The curriculum at Cliviger Grange was eclectic, to say the least. The classes and other instructional sessions were undoubtedly carefully thought out and often elaborately organised, although it still gave Tom the slight impression of being changeable at a moment's notice, on a whim. At least the sessions were interestingly varied or, more precisely, mused Tom, widely variable in the amount of interest they provoked.

There were several lessons each week on Lyndesfarne history and culture. There were also sessions which were described as "Properties of Matter". This, Tom concluded, was a euphemism for extensive briefings on the properties of magic and how to use it. There were seemingly endless drills on the forms of gestures and controls, and rather little analysis on the wider social impact of the use of magic.

Tom found the classroom learning of gestures rather unsatisfactory, since nothing actually happened. The learning by rote reminded him uncomfortably of being back at school. Even so, he understood that there would be an opportunity to visit Lyndesfarne to try out what they had learned, so he persevered and became at least tolerably competent.

Another series of classes with a regular place in the timetable attempted to instil the rudiments of the Lyndesfarne alphabet, and the spoken and written language. Alistair seemed to find learning the language easy – almost as if he was being reminded of something he already knew, Tom speculated – or perhaps he was just naturally gifted at languages. Tom, on the other hand, found the language lessons the hardest part of the entire curriculum. Nevertheless, he persisted, and made slow but steady progress, although he suspected he would never achieve the easy confidence that came so naturally to Alistair.

Because of his rapidly increasing fluency, at least in part, Alistair was told that he was being marked down as a candidate for the Guides. They had already learned that another pair of organisations existed, in Lyndesfarne and England, to provide guides and interpreters for VIPs from the Other World. In Lyndesfarne, this group was known as the Guild of Directions, at least in translation;

on this side, the official title was the Travellers Guidance Group or TGG, but was frequently shortened to “The Guides”.

There were also a number of training exercises which seemed to Tom to be much more military in nature. These included long marches around the local area, undertaken at a fair pace and carrying light packs. Tom suspected that at least part of the reason for all the yomping was to familiarise them with the surroundings, so that they had an intimate knowledge of the local topography. The actual marching he took entirely in his stride, having retained a high level of strength and fitness thanks to his years in the army. This had been recently topped up by several months of farm labouring – and farmhouse mealtimes – which had bulked up the musculature of his shoulders and arms considerably.

In spite of the Major’s protestations about the Guardians being the equivalent of a civilian police force, there were several lessons of unashamedly military training. Tom particularly enjoyed the classes in unarmed combat, given by a lithe and energetic little man known only as Mister Giles, who must have had a military background in what Tom assumed to be one of the commando regiments. After a few sessions spent being thrown about by Giles and his new comrades, and throwing some of them in turn, Tom felt he was gaining a degree of confidence in tackling any shady character who tried to hit him.

Traditionally, Guardians were not armed – like British policemen, Tom thought. During wartime, they had been issued with side-arms, although these were not now standard-issue. Even so, more powerful weaponry, including rifles and machine guns, were available if needed; apparently these were stored securely in the armoury, part of the guard building near to the causeway entrance. The trainee Guardians therefore needed to be familiar with modern armaments, and so weapons’ training was mandatory.

Practice sessions with rifles and handguns were really just a refresher course for those who had been in the Armed Forces. From his previous experiences, it seemed that Tom had sharp eyes, and he had been a particularly good shot with a rifle in the Army.

“You could be better, son,” his weapons instruction Sergeant used to say, “But you rush your shots.”

Even so, he was by far the best shot in the intake at the Grange, and his marksmanship had brought him restrained praise from the gunnery instructors.

Though busy, the class schedules at the Grange nevertheless gave ample opportunity to get to know the other members of their intake at

RDTE. One person it was difficult to miss was a statuesque woman who gave her name only as Sophia, and was almost Amazonian in her height and strength. She was dark-haired and dark-skinned, an exotic appearance which clashed with her markedly Glaswegian accent. Apparently, she was originally of Italian extraction, although her family had lived in the Gorbals since she was a child, and she had lost both a husband and a baby in the War. Tom wondered if this mission was a way of coping with the grief and loss; the immersive nature of her new responsibilities being quite different from her previous life.

Another new acquaintance in the classes was a petite and bubbly woman with blonde hair cut unfashionably short, who was introduced as Marjorie. Despite her cheerful demeanour, it soon became clear to Tom that Marjorie had an incredibly sharp and incisive mind which he found just a little bit intimidating.

He also made the acquaintance of a little dark man called Ifor who sported a van dyke beard and moustache, and who Tom had no difficulty in identifying as Welsh. Ifor was chatty and approachable, and soon established himself at the centre of the trainees' social circle.

There were also the two young men that he had already met in the truck. Stanley (Stan) and Charles (Charlie) were cousins who were excused the language lessons, or rather attended different and more advanced lessons elsewhere. They both looked like they were still teenagers, surely far too young to have seen active service in the War.

From Stan and Charlie, Tom learned that there were families on this side of the straights who had had connections with Lyndesfarne for generations. It was traditional for young people – both men and women – to gain a role somewhere in the overlapping organisations protecting the crossing or engaging in trade with Lyndesfarne. Sometimes this was a job for life; in other cases, the young people would return to their homes after a few years, or settle down with family and farming in later life.

In any case, these families encouraged the youngsters of each generation to speak the Lyndesfarne language at home, and arranged for occasional visits to the Other World as a family outing. Indeed, Stan admitted shyly, some families even arranged exchange visits for their children, so that the kids stayed for some weeks or even months in homes on opposite sides of the crossing.

The full-times classes combined with occasional social interludes meant that the months at the Grange just flew by. Autumn turned to winter, and the cold weather and frequent storms made the causeway

wet and slippery, and the crossing much more difficult and dangerous.

One of the most interesting parts of their training during that winter, Tom considered later, happened when the students started accompanying Guardians on their day-to-day duties. Based on a roster whose working Tom could never fathom out, individual students would be directed to join a Watch at the crossing. As on a ship, there were three watches of eight hours, so that the causeway would always be guarded day and night.

On his first real watch at the crossing, Tom was paired with Fred, one of the younger Guardians he had briefly met on his first return trip to Lyndesfarne all those months ago. The two men took up a position just outside the single-story hut which was used as a guard post. This building was deceptive in size, Tom considered. It was set back into the stunted trees which edged the open area next to the causeway, with only one short wall clearly visible from the road. It also featured, he was later to discover, several basements each much larger than the floor area of the building above-ground.

It was a bright winter's day, bitterly cold, although with almost no wind. Tom was muffled up in his greatcoat with the collar turned up, and with hat, scarf and gloves all warmed by the stove inside the guard post. They stood outside in a fashion which suggested that the two men had simply chosen to enjoy their cigarettes in the crisp winter weather, and watch the world go by.

One aspect of the role of Trainee Guardian was getting to know the wagoners and carters who travelled the causeway on a regular basis and, equally importantly, allowing the carters to get to know him. Tom knew that part of the purpose of the Guardians was to prevent smuggling, and the wagoners knew that they were being watched. The carters formed their own little society and were considered to be mostly honest, although a few had been suspected to taking bribes to transport contraband, at least according to Fred.

In this cold weather, their duty roster scheduled two hours on duty, followed by one half-hour off-duty to get warm again. By the end of their outdoor interlude, Tom was heartily glad to get back indoors and wrap himself around a mug of hot soup.

A little later on that day, Tom was once again stood outside with Fred, watching the wagoners and their horses carefully traversing the slippery causeway. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement and swivelled around to see a figure, clad in a dark robe and hood, appear over a rise in the ground only a few hundred yards away. The mysterious outline paused for a moment, apparently

looking this way and that, and then turned and disappeared silently behind the hummock.

“Who the hell was that?” Tom exclaimed.

“One of the Watchers,” Fred replied evenly, “I surmise that you've not been told about them yet.”

“No, no I haven't,” Tom said, struggling to get over his astonishment.

“Well, you'll probably be briefed about this, but let me explain anyway,” the other man began.

“You should understand that the Guardians are not the only organisation which is entrusted with protecting the crossing and the bridge. Our job is to be seen, so that those who know about the crossing can see a visible police force and can feel protected. We also discourage the most blatant, or perhaps just the most stupid, attempts at smuggling.”

“But there is also a more secret – or at least secretive – organisation known as the Watchers. They are rarely seen, and no one knows who they really are. They keep a watch on the area and those passing through it, whether they use the roads or not.”

“So there are Watchers on Lyndesfarne as well,” Tom asked.

“There are. Over there, they are supposed to be able to deploy some considerable magic to help their surveillance. On this side, they have a reputation for skills in woodcraft. I've heard tell of a Watcher who was stood on a bare rock outcrop just down the coast from here, and coincidentally approached by two different groups of Guardians. By the time the two parties met on the hilltop, the Watcher has disappeared, and no one had seen him leave.”

“So why do they look like monks?” Tom persisted.

“Well, at one time, they were monks,” Fred admitted, “In times past, the real role of the Monks thought to live on the Holy Island of Lyndesfarne was that of the Watchers. They also safeguarded the old route to Lyndesfarne, even now known as St. Cuthbert's Way.”

“Nowadays, I suspect that the Watcher clothing – the robes with the cowl – is just traditional,” Fred concluded, “So that people know what they are.”

It occurred to Tom that the Watcher he had just seen had been deliberately showing himself. He suggested this to Fred, who nodded sagely in response.

“So if they're so secret,” Tom pressed, “Then why do they show themselves anyway?”

“Good question,” Fred answered thoughtfully, “I think it’s because they want people to understand that they are being watched, all the time.”

“Having said that,” he continued, “We sometimes get information – tip-offs, really – from the Watchers through a number of channels. They’re almost always good, certainly to the point where, if we get such a message, we hop right to it.”

Chapter Nineteen

One aspect of the Guardian's responsibilities that was drummed into Tom and Alistair very early was the approach to dealing with unexpected visitors. Tourists occasionally turned up, even in these post-War days, usually walking or on bicycles, or occasionally being transported by cars or motorbikes. The Guardians' first task was to find out if the visitors already knew exactly what they would find – to discover if the travellers already knew the secret of the crossing to Lyndesfarne.

If not, their briefings has made it clear that they should gently discourage the travellers from going any further, by pointing that this was a small island, with little to see and nowhere to stay. The script the trainee Guardians had been taught stressed the dangerous (even fatal) tides and currents, that the island could be cut off and that people had been washed off the causeway by waves. The causeway and bridge were supposed to be unstable, and unsuitable for motorised transport.

All of this was of course a complete fabrication, but was effective surprisingly often, especially when they pointed out that the dangers were so great that the watchmen were permanently posted here. The signs and warnings on the entrance to the causeway itself certainly helped, as did the metal and concrete barriers which appeared partially to block the causeway entrance, leaving an opening just wide enough to permit horse-drawn traffic.

The Guardians needed to be careful that some stranger did not slip through without the informal and friendly chat that protocol demanded. On quiet days, this was easy enough to do, but could be rather more difficult when there was much traffic on the causeway and bridge. Even so, they were under instructions never ultimately to prevent anyone from crossing. If someone ignored all of the warnings given, then they must let them cross over. There seemed to be an unspoken suggestion that there was some other way of dealing with any problems that might arise, although Tom had no idea what that might be.

In these circumstances, it was usual to pass a message to the Guardians at the other end of the causeway, although it took quite some time for Tom to understand how such messages were passed. Similarly, the Guardians on the England side did occasionally get

early warnings from their counterparts on the Lyndesfarne side that a person was crossing who was apparently not familiar with the world they were entering.

Again, Tom's class at Cliviger Grange had been carefully briefed on how to deal with stray visitors from the Other World. As always, they were to be unfailingly polite and friendly. People who arrived from Lyndesfarne were often confused and disoriented, and a widely-used technique was to gently suggest that the visitor looked unwell and should perhaps return to the "Mainland" and seek medical advice. All this was conducted in the Lyndesfarne language, of course.

It was clear that they should never ultimately prevent, merely discourage, a traveller from continuing, unless there were clear signs of malicious intent or smuggling. To prevent the latter, it was also necessary to intercept every traveller, to ensure those who were supposed to cross did in fact adhere to the rules. There was no customs duty, but there was a lengthy list of proscribed goods.

Tom and the others had been briefed about the import/export aspects, and were expected to be always on the lookout for forbidden cargo. All goods had to be specifically approved by the Board of Control. There was a system of licences and bills-of-lading used by the wagoners, and it was always a useful opening gambit to ask to check the paperwork.

Animals and plants not also native to the Other World were prohibited, and Tom now understood that this included the dragons and Nightwings he had heard about on his first visit to Lyndesfarne. More surprisingly, eggs of any kind were wholly banned, even from England to Lyndesfarne, which forced Tom to conclude that some kinds of birds which were commonplace in his own world did not exist in the Other World.

It was also against the rules to import magical items into his home world although, informally, this was regarded as not so very important since the effectiveness would be removed by the special properties of the barrier between the worlds. There were a few rather curious exceptions to these rules, so that certain classes of potions and charms could be exported, although it was unclear whether these really retained their efficacy on the England side of the crossing. Conversely, the import of mechanical or engineering items were carefully regulated, and only a very few simple machines could be taken across to Lyndesfarne.

In spite of the amount of traffic crossing between the two worlds, there were still periods when there was nobody about. During these

interludes, Fred entertained Tom with tales of his experiences. One story that stuck in Tom's memory concerned a certain drunken carter. It seemed that there was an old wagoner, who lived in Lyndesfarne but often stayed late on the England side, and drank his dinner in one or another of the numerous public houses in the villages in the area. Then, three sheets to the wind, he would try and return to Lyndesfarne. Fortunately, his old horse knew the way home, and the old sot could frequently be found singing loudly in several languages as he crossed the causeway or, later on, snoring nearly as loudly while the horse patiently plodded on.

Eventually, it seemed that his horse got too old to work, and was put out to pasture. The carter managed to procure a new horse, a fine strong animal with a certain amount of spirit which needed to be kept in check. For the first few weeks, the old man was careful to avoid falling asleep on his way home, and appeared to be making some attempt to training the new horse to find its way around. Of course, the inevitable happened eventually: the drunkard consumed too much ale, got pissed as a newt, fell asleep on the way home, and the new horse found its way to its previous owners. The old man thus had the unpleasant experience of waking up in a strange stable yard, many miles from his home, in the middle of the night.

Fred told this tale with a certain amount of relish, and Tom found himself laughing along with the story. Even so, it was clear to Tom that dealing with occasional drunks was another aspect of the everyday responsibilities of the Guardians.

As the winter drew on, Tom found himself spending more and more time on active duty at the causeway. The weather became worse and worse, with ice and snow on the bridge, and storms and high winds driving the waves crashing over the causeway. The heavy weather made it seem barely light even in the middle of the day, as well as making it much more dangerous to cross between the worlds.

One stormy afternoon, already nearly dark, and with the waves lashing at the ancient stonework, Tom was astonished to see a lone traveller emerging from the gloom. There had been no other traffic on the bridge for some hours, the wagoners having sensibly decided that it was far too hazardous to cross.

"Who's that?" he enquired of Fred, who was once again acting as a kind of mentor.

"Ah, yes," Fred replied, "He'll be one of the Messengers."

Further questions and answers allowed Tom to discover a little more. The Official Messengers were part of those paired organisations, the Guild of Directions and the Travellers Guidance

Group. They were specifically charged with the delivery of letters, written on paper and sealed with wax, which was regarded as the only reliable and secure way of getting communications between the two worlds. The services of the Messengers were used by the higher echelons of the various organisations that made up the governance of the crossing for communications that absolutely must not be delayed or intercepted.

The Messengers dressed in different ways, often rather nondescript, but usually included a cloak and a knapsack of some kind. Nevertheless, they were always recognisable to the trained eye, mainly because of the trademark staff, a full-size walking stick with an intricate carving in the handle. Messengers could commandeer transport, such as a car and driver, from the Guardian base at the point where the causeway met the coast.

Fred made it clear to Tom that, as a group, the Messengers were considered remote and standoff-ish. He also said that the Guardians had been specifically instructed not to interfere with the passage of a Messenger, and indeed to do everything in their power to prevent others from delaying their movements.

“They have *carte blanche*,” Fred explained, with a slight note of irritation in his voice, “They can do whatever they have to in order to get their messages through.”

Chapter Twenty

Guardians were normally based in their own world – the world from which they had been recruited. It had been explained to Tom that this was to ensure an easy familiarity with machines of all kinds, and weapons, as well as all the other characteristics of the world that would be commonplace to one born there. Even so, a key part of the training for new Guardians at Cliviger Grange was the periodic visits to Lyndesfarne to practice gestures and observe the effects of magic at first hand.

The first of these visits occurred on a rather blustery day towards the end of November. Tom and Alistair boarded another one of the fleet of ex-army lorries operated by RDTE, expertly setting about the task of making themselves as comfortable as possible with knapsacks and coats. The two companions were in the company of four other trainees, including Sophia the Amazonian Glaswegian and little Ifor from Wales. Stan and Charlie completed the group.

They were driven to the causeway using, Tom now knew, one of several back-roads routes from the Grange, following country lanes and avoiding main roads. It was rare to see any other traffic on the roads during their drives to and from the causeway area.

On this trip, their officer in charge was one Sergeant Brasham. Despite his name, he was a rather retiring, even diffident man, quite unlike the loud-mouthed NCOs that both Tom and Alistair had experienced in the Army. The Sarge sat in the back of the lorry with the rest of the group, but did not join in the rather sporadic chat.

After about twenty minutes of bumpy driving, they arrived at the crossing and disembarked close to the guard post. Tom dumped his stuff on one of the low stone walls that edged the causeway, then stretched and looked around. The ancient arches of the bridge were lit by the watery sunshine, and the sea was whipped into a fair chop by the wind. He could see stormy-looking clouds in the distance, which looked like they were headed this way.

The tiny fair and market was quiet, almost deserted, although one or two figures could be seen moving around, purposefully checking that the guy-ropes of the tents were firmly fixed. Tom nodded politely to the Guardians on duty, one of whom he recognised from his earlier watches as a trainee.

The Sergeant cleared his throat.

“Right then, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “Let’s see if we can pick up the pace and make it across before the weather breaks, shall we?”

They donned their greatcoats and took up their packs, and set off at a brisk march along the causeway. There was a fair bit of other traffic on the crossing this morning, also hurrying to stay ahead of the weather. They pressed on, dodging the wagons and staying clear of the horses. Tom noticed that Sophia had no difficulty in keeping up, easily matching her stride to that of the men.

As he had done on his first journey, Tom stopped at the very apex of the bridge, and looked over the parapets and into the deep waters below. Spellbound, he watched the swirling movement of the current for a few seconds, before hurrying to catch up with the others.

They just managed to get across the causeway and bridge before the storm arrived, much as predicted. The wind picked up and the sky got noticeably darker alarmingly quickly. As the rain began to fall heavily, the party hurried into a large barn-like building built of large stone blocks. This was set to one side of the road and marked with a sign which Tom could now translate as “Onwards Transport”.

Tom was also fascinated to learn that, in the Lyndesfarne language, the words for “transport” and “portal” were actually the same. He found this most intriguing. Surely, he mused, there must be other kinds of transportation in common use in the Other World. Still, he supposed, these portals must be very important.

Tom and the others had received several briefings about portals in classes. To the untrained eye, most of these entrances looked like a low, wide archway which had been walled up; the stonework inside the arch appeared to be a blank masonry wall but, when the transport was operating, was curiously soft and yielding.

Although portals almost always appeared as an archway, with a curved top which formed a semicircle, Tom was interested to learn that in fact there was a second arch, upside-down and usually concealed under the level of the floor. Apparently, this design was a compromise; the ideal configuration for an entrance was a complete circle, but this was thought to be rather an awkward shape for people to negotiate.

Inside the building, there were several portal archways set into the stonework of the walls. As Tom watched, someone appeared through one of the portals, and moved slowly and casually towards the building exit. He also became aware of a gentle ticking noise. They had been told in classes that the ticking was caused by the portal

operation, although it was not clear exactly why it should make any sound at all.

The group of travellers were directed by Sergeant Brasham to one particular portal.

“Now, I’d like you to keep all together here,” Mr. Brasham said calmly.

As they had been instructed during the classroom sessions, the little group formed up in pairs, with the Sergeant at the rear. Then, at a word of command, they marched towards the indicated portal. Although the pairs were not actually holding hands, the crocodile column made Tom feel just a little like being back at primary school.

Each portal was marked by a sign above the archway, each displayed several lines which Tom surmised were the names of destinations reachable using this entrance. As they started to move, the top line of the sign changed to read “First School of Guardians”, according to Tom’s translation. Moving in synchronisation, the line of people marched forward into the grey mist of the portal and were gone.

They emerged inside another building, rather similar to the one they had left only a second before. Tom had felt nothing, at least nothing physical, although he felt disoriented by the sense of suddenly being elsewhere. Glancing around, he could see that some of the others were also looking slightly shaken, although Sophia was manifestly unfazed by the whole experience.

Encouraged by the Sergeant, the group managed to pull themselves together. They exited through a set of double doors standing open to one side of the portal through which they had just emerged. They turned left and marched along a road through woodland thickly grown with pine trees for a few minutes before arriving at the First Lyndesfarne Guardian School.

The School was formed from a collection of low buildings set in a large clearing in the woods. These were of a rather nondescript stone built construction; at a casual glance, Tom considered, they could have been a cluster of miscellaneous farm buildings. Every one of them had conventional sloping roofs with some kind of dark panels inset into the slate tiles.

The purpose of several of the buildings was entirely unclear to Tom, although there was one which appeared to be a stables and another which was configured as garages for wagons. A curious feature, which occurred to Tom rather slowly, was that, although there were plenty of doors, none of the buildings seemed to have any windows.

The grounds surrounding the school buildings were a gently undulating area of close-cropped grass, with the occasional large rock or cluster of trimmed bushes breaking up the view. There were no walls or fences preventing anyone from approaching the structures, although Tom suspected that there was some kind of a magical barrier in place. Looking closely, he noticed a pale line on the ground, looking a little like the white markings on the turf of a football field, but imbued with the orange sparkles that he now recognised as the side-effect of powerful magic.

The visitors entered what was evidently the main building. Much to Tom's surprise, the large room was light and airy, despite the absence of windows. The ceiling was open to the rafters, and Tom could see that the dark panels he had noted earlier were in fact skylights.

The newcomers were briefly welcomed by a representative from the Lyndesfarne Guardians. Tom was still a little unclear how the system of ranks worked in the Guardians, but he mentally translated the title of the speaker as "Warden". She had a rather stern appearance and steel-grey hair, cut unfashionably short. It appeared that Warden Acris held a position corresponding to that of Major Markham. She spoke slowly and carefully in the Lyndesfarne language, clearly attempting to ensure that no one had any difficulty in understanding her.

The Warden's address did not seem to contain a great deal of substance. While she was speaking, Tom found himself looking around idly. He noticed an archway nearly hidden away in the wall of an alcove, and found himself wondering where the other end of that particular portal was located.

The address from the Warden began a hectic few days. The group were assigned to dormitories underground, and Tom once again found himself sharing a room with Alistair. They had been briefed about the Lyndesfarne preference for underground living, but it still came as a surprise to Tom to find himself making his way down several flights of stairs to locate his accommodation.

He had vaguely expected the underground rooms to be dark and rather dank, but they were in fact both warm and well-lit. Much of this pleasant feeling was accounted for by some kind of magic overhead lighting, which by some means conveyed sunlight to every floor. Tom realised that he had misunderstood the purpose of the skylights in the roof; not only did they let light into the main room upstairs, but also into rooms located deep underground.

Once settled in, the group were shown around the facilities at the School, in a way reminiscent of his first few hours at Cliviger Grange. The tour passed in a blur, with rather little of the layout becoming detectably retained in Tom's mind. He did note that the kitchens and mess were located on the top floor, something his stomach was to thank him for later on.

In some ways, the classes at Guardian School were entirely familiar, Tom felt. The classroom sessions of magic practice, for example, mimicked closely those they had received earlier, with the only exception that something actually happened. All this was at the level, Tom suspected, of teaching a child how to open a door or operate a light switch; the sort of thing that young children usually picked up without any kind of formal lesson at all.

Chapter Twenty One

As the winter weather cleared away into spring, Tom and the others were required to spend more time outside. There were always chores to do, organised by a roster pinned weekly to the messroom notice board. These menial tasks fitted in between the practical and classroom training sessions, although they were not particularly onerous and compared favourably, in Tom's view, with the work he had undertaken on the farm the previous year.

One morning, he was part of a duty party working outside the front of Cliviger Grange, tidying away the detritus of winter. The sun was shining, and there was a distinct sense of spring bursting forth in the air. He paused in his activity, and stood up straight, stretching his back while looking around at the house and grounds.

The main building itself was constructed from heavy blocks of local stone. At one time, it appeared, it had been a grand house for some moneyed member of the local landed gentry. The front of the old house was an imposing frontage with a south facing aspect, broken by numerous large windows allowing plenty of light deep into the interior.

The main entrance was approached by a flight of stone steps at the centre of the front façade. At one time, this must have been an imposing, even majestic doorway, but the stairs were now rather worn, and in fact seldom used since it was rather slippery in all but the driest of weathers. Staff and regular visitors were encouraged to use one or other of the side entrances, including one which Tom was convinced was originally designed specifically for gardeners and other muddy outdoor staff.

In front of the house, there was a gravel driveway formed into a circle around a well-tilled flowerbed surrounding a central stone fountain, now dry. The bed was filled with regimented rows of spring-flowering plants. Tom wondered if the water would flow in the fountain later in the year.

The original house had been augmented by a stable block off to the east, with a courtyard entered through an archway and protected from the winds by many trees and hedges. Perhaps, Tom mused, the trees also prevented the stables from being visible and spoiling the sweeping appearance of the main house.

It seemed that most of the stables were now used as garages; at least, Tom had not encountered any of the unmistakable, not to mention pungent, side-effects of horses on the premises. The garages now accommodated a considerable number of lorries, all ex-army surplus, and a small fleet of cars. The rooms over the old stables were permanently occupied by a staff of drivers and mechanics.

Tom, who was good with machinery, had previously spent some time chatting to the mechanics over mugs of tea. His previous experiences with the upkeep of motor vehicles as an adolescent had allowed him to slip easily into a bantering conversation with the maintenance personnel. Unsurprisingly, he had discovered that several of the younger men had been in the armed forces during the War while Edgar, their grizzled foreman, whose stern appearance belied his basically friendly manner, looked as if he had seen service in the previous global conflict.

Normally, when chores were to be done, Major Markham and the other senior staff members would patrol the grounds, offering advice and encouragement according to some internal performance scale that Tom had not yet quite fathomed. Tom had observed – from a distance, thankfully – that if a task was not being performed adequately, the Major had quite a repertoire of sharp comments and disapproving looks to make his view clear. So far, Tom had managed to avoid being on the receiving end of one of these quietly-delivered reprimands.

On this particular morning, there was no one to be seen. Feeling a little like he was skiving, Tom put down his broom and wandered over to the stable block with the intent of cadging a cuppa. On entering the usually crowded room used as an office and mess for the garage staff, he was welcomed warmly by Edgar, who was sitting on his own reading the sports page of a newspaper.

“Help yourself to a brew,” he said, waving casually in the direction of a teapot warming on the hearth.

Tom found a mug and poured himself hot milky tea, adding two spoons of sugar from the bowl on the table. He then pulled out a chair and sat down, sipping the hot drink.

It appeared that the fleet of vehicles was in daily use, ferrying members of the Guardians to and fro. Tom had supposed that the causeway itself was the usual destination for most trips, and he now made some casual remark to that effect.

Edgar laughed aloud, causing the younger man to look up from his tea.

“Oh, we get all over,” the foreman responded dryly, “You’d be surprised at the places we get to drive.”

“Really?” Tom responded, genuinely confused, “Such as?”

“Oh, no doubt you’ll be briefed on other locations sometime,” he suggested vaguely.

More than that he was not to be drawn into saying, it seemed.

Just at that moment, two of the ubiquitous army trucks pulled up into the yard, one of which was spluttering loudly and emitting a cloud of oily smoke.

The driver of the stricken lorry jumped out, coughing from the dense fumes which had worked their way into the cab.

“Looks like that one’s blown a gasket,” Tom remarked.

Edgar grimaced.

“You’re right there, lad,” he replied, pursing his lips speculatively as he considered the activities necessary to repair the vehicle, “And they only just managed to nurse it back to base too, I’ll wager.”

Edgar jumped up and bustled outside to engage in an urgent conference with the driver of the incapacitated lorry, who Tom knew as Oliver, and one of the men who had just emerged from the garages. There was a short interval with much waving of hands and a fair amount of scratching of heads then, decisions apparently made, Edgar came back into the office already spouting instructions.

Tom could see that he was probably only going to be in the way right now. He finished his tea and rinsed out the tin mug under the tap which was located just outside the door. As he stood outside, his eye ran along the well-trimmed beech hedge separating the stables from the more formal gardens which had, he presumed, been laid out when the House was originally constructed.

Through an opening in the hedge, he became aware of a narrow path he had not previously noticed. The pathway extended from behind the stable block in a direction he had never explored. Intrigued, Tom made his way along the trail, which wending its way between a rather overgrown clump of rhododendrons and a morass of brambles, the branches of the trees overhead adding to the effect of a tunnel. The passageway was obviously rather infrequently travelled, with leaves and other organic detritus littered everywhere, and blackberry runners extending across the weed-infested gravel of the path itself.

After a minute or so, the winding passage opened out into a more well-tended area of lawn on Tom’s left, surrounded by mature trees. Stone statues and urns decorated the garden here and there, looking a little worn and lichenous from a century of weathering.

In contrast, there were a series of newer buildings on the other side. There was a row of Nissen huts – temporary accommodation erected during wartime, made from corrugated iron, tin-plated to discourage rust, and painted in olive drab camouflage colours. The ironwork was curved into an arch over a steel framework set on concrete footings, giving a strong impression of oversize sewer pipes sunk half-way into the ground. These buildings were cheap and rapidly erected but rather ugly. Tom suspected that they would be around for decades, despite their professed temporary nature.

Further to his right, Tom could see more substantial buildings, possibly pre-war or perhaps built during the war itself. These were brick-built single-storey buildings with flat roofs, patterned like a line of capital-H letters. Tom thought that the blocks resembled a wartime military hospital, especially as they were painted a rather insipid colour he knew as ‘eggshell blue’.

Tom realised that he was aware of the existence of these buildings, which he understood were used as barracks for qualified Guardians, and indeed housed a small infirmary, although he had not appreciated that they could be reached so easily from the stables. The pathway ran behind the barracks buildings and curved away from the H-block at the end of the row.

Tom strolled along, still unobserved as far as he knew. He rounded a corner and came upon an old walled garden constructed from crumbling grey stones. Entering the private grounds through an archway, he could see lines of pruned and trained fruit trees, ancient in appearance, with green moss standing out on the grey-brown bark of the branches. The trees were now beginning to show blossoms in the spring sunshine.

On his left, a row of greenhouses and sheds for garden equipment had been more recently constructed in a ‘lean-to’ style against the wall. The gardens looked well-tended, with no sign of fallen leaves or last year’s rotten fruit; clearly, someone regularly tidied the garden, although Tom could not recall whether it appeared on the duty roster.

There was only one other way out of the garden, through a matching archway set in the wall opposite. At one time, it appeared, the fourth wall also had an arched entrance, but that appeared to have been walled up long ago.

Tom followed the gravel path directly across the garden. On the far side, he discovered the remains of a tennis court, now heavily overgrown. The wire-mesh fence which once prevented lost balls had long since removed, but the metal fence supports were still visible in the area, in places, poking through the undergrowth. Lining

the far side of the tennis court was a line of trees marking the boundary of the grounds, with high and thick hedges through which he could occasionally catch a glimpse of the farm-land beyond.

The track he had been following petered out at the tennis court. Presumably, Tom thought, the path had been laid to access the courts, and never had extended any further. It was all very quiet and peaceful, with only the faintest of country sounds, at the edge of hearing.

He turned, about to retrace his steps. Just at that moment, he observed two people talking, their heads close together, and almost completely obscured by foliage. He could see them both looking around, as if checking that they were unobserved. Their movements were furtive, even – there was no other word for it – *skulking*.

To his amazement, Tom recognised one of the men as Major Markham from his uniform. But who was the other person? Tom thought he recognised him, but could not remember where from. Belatedly, he realised that he was experiencing that phenomenon where one readily identified people when they were in a location where they were expected, but failed to recognise them at all in an unfamiliar environment. The other man was Bram's uncle, Hamet.

There was a noise from the other side of the tennis court, a sharp crack as if someone had trodden on a stick blown down by the winter storms. Tom started, thinking for a moment that he had made the sound himself. The two men looked around anxiously, then appeared to be ready to move off back in the directions of the Grange.

Tom decided, for reasons he could not quite put a finger on, that he did not want to be caught watching – if only because he should have been working on his chores, and he did not want to be on the receiving end of one of the Major's looks.

He turned tail and ran, as quickly and as quietly as he could. His ability to move rapidly through narrow spaces certainly came to the fore. He was sure that he could have been heard by Hamet and Markham, as well as whoever – or whatever – was lurking on the other side of the courts, but there was no sign of close pursuit. In a matter of minutes, he was back past the stables and had picked up his broom as if nothing had happened.

Chapter Twenty Two

One of the most interesting parts of the first training trip to Lyndesfarne was a visit to a communications tower on the far side of the crossing. Tom, Alistair and the others had already had an opportunity to inspect the corresponding facility on the England coast, during one of their trainee sessions with the Guardians, and Tom was fascinated by the differences between the two sides.

The earlier trip had been low-key: just another visit to one of the anonymous quasi-military (and very often ex-military) installations along the coast to north and south of the crossing. This was one of their many trips as a group to the crossing itself, which were an apparently essential part of their education.

On this occasion, the entire intake had been transported in trucks and, unusually, had been led by Major Markham himself. Tom had not had very much contact with the Major and had indeed been making a conscious effort to keep his head down around the Grange. The entire group had debarked close to the causeway entrance and had marched in twos along a well-used pathway along the coast. After a few minutes, the trainees were instructed to draw up in ranks, and were addressed by the Major himself.

Markham explained that contact between the Guardians in the two Worlds was maintained by light semaphore, similar to the Aldis lamps used for communications between ships at sea. Guardians on both sides would send up a flag as an alert that a message was to be delivered; in an emergency or at night time, a flare would be used. The signal stations were always manned and a three-man team would scramble. One team member used binoculars to see the light flashes and shout out the corresponding symbol, a second would act as a scribe to write down the message, and the lamp operation would be performed by a third.

Messages were coded as a sequence of long and short flashes not unlike Morse code, although there were different sequences for the letters in the English and Lyndesfarne alphabets. There was also a “Q-code”, using a special character to indicate the start of a code, then two other letters to give the meaning. Given that there were fifty-five characters to choose from – twenty-six in the alphabet Tom had been taught as a child and twenty-nine in the Lyndesfarne equivalent – the number of meanings that could be conveyed by a

two-letter code was huge. Of course, it was sometimes necessary to send a verbatim plain-text message in either language, or encrypted messages where even the language used could not be determined.

Following another instruction, the group marched onwards again, further along the coast, until the squat tower of the semaphore station came into view. The communication post was a square of grey-painted steel latticework located on the shore to one side of the causeway. Even from this range, Tom could see that, half-way up, there was a platform with a steel railing for the operations team which could be reached by steel stairs from the ground. He could even see that the spotter's binoculars were firmly fixed to a stand attached to the tower, for stability and ease of use in windy weather.

The troop drew up again, and the Major addressed them. He pointed out the light housing itself, fixed to the very top of the tower. It was a bulky cylinder painted the same grey colour as the rest of the structure. Shutters on the lamp were operated by mechanical linkages from the platform below. Markham explained that the tube itself contained a powerful electric arc lamp, plus a series of glass lenses and mirrors to produce an intense narrow beam of light which could be seen day or night, and was intended to cut through even the densest fog.

The tower was also used as a general look-out post, since it gave an excellent view across the straights in almost all weather conditions. It also sprouted a magnificent collection of radio aerials, used for short-wave communication, both within Britain and abroad, including links with Cliviger Grange. Apparently, the barrier between the worlds prevented the passage of radio waves, in much the same way that light was blurred and distorted by its mysterious properties.

The trainees were instructed to divide into groups of two for a tour of the tower itself. Tom found himself paired with Ifor, about half-way along the waiting line. Major Markham himself climbed the ladder first, then shouted for the first pair to ascend. Charlie and Sophia, who happened to be first in line, moved quickly up the narrow staircase, which looked to Tom more like a companion-way on a ship than part of a building.

The others stood waiting patiently in line for their opportunity to climb the latter to the upper level. The operations platform was presently unmanned. The crew who would normally have been on duty had decamped to the base of the tower, where a secondary observation point was located. Low walls of thick stone blocks

provided some protection from the elements for the crew, one of whom was patiently scanning the shore opposite with binoculars.

When it came to Tom's turn, he scampered rapidly up the steps, easily outpaced even the lightly-built Ifor. At the top, he could see that there was not a great deal of space on the platform, and he could understand why they had been paired up for this exercise. The Major pointed out the various features and pieces of equipment with military efficiency, and then asked if there were any questions. Both Tom and Ifor declined, and they were dismissed quickly.

They dull-grey steel tower looked as if it had been there for a long time, although Tom wondered if this was illusory. Surely, he mused, it had been constructed much more recently than the causeway, perhaps during the war years. Even so, around the concrete foundations, rough grasses were now growing, and Hawthorn and other bushes had taken root in sheltered spots in the vicinity. Tom guessed that the cover story for this installation was that it was just a navigation light to guide boats safely to harbour. He wondered how many of the other lighthouses around this part of the coastline were actually more than they seemed.

After breakfast on the second day of their visit, the party followed Sergeant Brasham back to the portal terminus, and through the same portal they had used the day before. Emerging from the building adjacent to the causeway, they followed the Sergeant along a rough track just above the shoreline. Tom had been thinking about the steel tower as they marched along.

The Lyndesfarne tower was a very different kind of edifice than the one of the English coast. It was a circular construction of heavy stone blocks which seemed as ancient as the bridge itself. Again, it had a platform about half-way up, reached by an internal spiral staircase, and with a stone parapet surrounding a conical central spire culminating in a globe. The source of light was mystifying: despite its globular shape, the projector at the apex of the tower emitted a narrow beam of light directly at the tower across the water.

Once again, the trainees visited the operations platform in pairs. In this tower, the platform was slightly larger, and there was room for the Sergeant and two trainees as well as the regular crew. When it was Tom's turn to climb the tower, he was treated to a demonstration of the operation of the signalling system, given by a trio of people who seemed to operate in total silence, except for a few softly-spoken instructions and the sing-song of the received characters called out as the message arrived. The threesome moved fluidly to transcribe and

respond to the message that flashed out from across the straights. Impressive discipline, Tom considered privately.

The controls to activate the lamp were operated (as always, mused Tom) by gestures made on the platform. Viewing the signal from the far side was assisted by what was described as a “viewing plate”, a flat disc fixed to a stand whose surface gave the appearance of burnished metal. Normally, the plate seemed to be opaque, but a magnified image of the tower opposite appeared on the surface when invoked by a gesture.

The way in which the incoming message was captured was fascinating. As each character was called out by the observer, the scribe made the corresponding mark on the surface of a slate tablet. These magical slates were in widespread use in Lyndesfarne, Tom understood, and they had been briefed on them during one of the classroom sessions. This was, however, the first time he had actually witnessed one in action.

As he watched, the message was completed, and the scribe made a fluid series of gestures over the surface of the tablet. The writing faded instantly, Tom understood that the transcribed message was now on its way to its recipient, using a magic he did not yet understand.

Tom was spellbound by the workings of the Lyndesfarne tower, especially since the tower here seemed much older than the one in his own world. He wondered how these paired signalling towers had been established, and how long ago that had happened.

In the absence for Major Markham, Tom felt less inhibited about finding out more when the opportunity arose. Once everyone had inspected the tower and returned to ground level, he was the first with a question when Brasham invited them.

“How long had the towers been in place?”

“Centuries,” the Sergeant answered directly, “There’ve been means of rapid communication across the straights for a long time. In the olden days, they used to use semaphore flags during the day, and they could light a beacon at night as a warning. And there’s a warning bell, which can be rung to sound an alarm.”

Indeed, the bell itself was still clearly in place on the tower behind them, although Tom could not quite recall whether there had been one on the opposite side. Perhaps a modern electric siren was fitted instead.

“But the tower over there” – Tom indicated the coast opposite – “Surely that cannot be more than a few decades old?”

“True enough,” the Sergeant replied, “There used to be a stone tower on our side of the crossing as well.”

“What happened to it, Sarge?”

“It blew up, under what are still unexplained circumstances, back in the Thirties. You can still see the stones of the foundations close to the new tower.”

Tom realised that the low walls that had sheltered the tower crew were in fact the remains of the old tower. The Sergeant’s reply had raised more questions than it had answered. He remained intensely curious and he wondered if there was still some untold history here.

Chapter Twenty Three

Tom had just embarked on his first tour of duty after passing out from RDTE. He was leaning on one of the low stone walls that edged the causeway, and desultorily watching the passing traffic. The so-called spring shower that has passed over earlier this morning had now cleared. Somehow, he mused, showers at this time of year always seem to be rather heavier than one expected. Now, it was still chilly and windy, but at least he could see buds forming on the stunted bushes and hedgerows in the vicinity, and could sense that summer was finally on its way.

He felt he had got the measure of the Reserve Defence Training Establishment, after the graduation event a scant few weeks ago. After twenty-four weeks at Cliviger Grange, he was beginning to get a certain restless feeling, wondering if that day would ever come.

In the event, the passing-out ceremony itself was rather low-key and something of an anticlimax. It seemed that the intake at the Grange was never very large, and on this occasion only a few dozen men and women actually graduated. Each of them was presented with a thin pass-book and a folded slip of paper. The latter was written on one side in English and on the other in the Lyndesfarne language, which conveyed to anyone who cared to read it that the holder was entitled to certain responsibilities and privileges, couched in the vaguest possible language, as a probationary member of the Guardians.

There was precious little evidence of an audience from the outside world at the ceremony. No one seemed to have any friends or relatives in attendance, with the unsurprising exception of Stan and Charlie. The families of the two cousins had turned out in force, including an aged but still formidable figure that Tom suspected was their grandmother.

With much noise and enthusiasm, and a certain amount of manifest pride, the extended family cheered their junior members, and applauded politely at the presentation to all of the other newly-minted members of the Guardian corps.

Tom felt like another milestone in his life had been completed. His old friend Alistair was now assigned to the Guides where, as had been predicted, his growing language skills would be a considerable asset. Alistair had explained that this would involve a further series

of instruction sessions with much practical work and on-the-job training, attached to a mentor who it seemed would act much like the old-fashioned idea of a master to an apprentice. It would also involve a lot of travelling, in both worlds.

“I won’t be in the same place two nights running,” Alistair had quipped.

“Just like being in the Army, again!” Tom had rejoined.

The two of them had both promised to keep in touch, although neither of the young men were people to whom the writing of letters would come very naturally. Even so, they thoroughly expected to meet up again in the summer, as both of them had taken up Bram’s out-of-the-blue invitation to return to his parents’ house on the first weekend in July. The letters from Bram, written on the same heavy paper that had been used for their introduction to Guardian school, were becoming increasingly familiar, as they had all remained in occasional contact over the last few months.

The two men shook hands warmly, and then Alistair went to cadge a lift to the crossing to meet with his Guide Master.

One facet of the Guardian’s job which had not been part of the formal training, but was blindingly obvious in hindsight, was the dealings with the British police.

The local policemen were well known to the Guardians. The neighbourhood coppers would turn up at the causeway from time to time, usually riding a bicycle. On one of Tom’s probationary watches at the crossing, Fred – once again acting as his mentor – took the precaution of introducing him to one of the local bobbies. He was an amiable old buffer who had been in these parts of many years, who rejoiced in the name of Percival Nelson.

It was clear that the old bobby was at least somewhat aware of the special nature of the crossing. As long as it was apparent that matters in the region were all under control, the policeman tended to leave well alone, although it was unclear to Tom whether this was simply laziness or a mark of professional courtesy.

As Tom watched the afternoon travellers, Constable Nelson appeared around the bend in the road leading to the crossing, riding very steadily on a black-painted sit-up-and-beg bicycle that was probably nearly as old as he was. Even so, the bright chrome-work of the wheels and handlebars was as good as new, and Tom suspected that the old boy probably polished the machine every day.

The bobby braked to a stop, which took very little effort, and leaned his bike carefully against the wall of the stone building that served as a guard post. He stretched his back then, nodding affably to

Tom, wandered over to join a couple of the more senior Guardians on duty.

Constable Nelson seemed slightly more agitated than usual, and appeared to be keen to impart some urgent intelligence, or perhaps just fresh gossip, to the gathered audience. In any case, after a few minutes chewing the fat with the varied Guardians, the copper remounted his ancient bicycle, and cycled away at a velocity that, Tom considered, was only just fast enough for him to be able to balance upright.

Tom's shift came to an end in the early afternoon, which came as something of a relief after the early start in what seemed like the middle of the night. As he was sometimes able to do, he cadged a lift in the back of one of the supply trucks returning to the Grange, rather than awaiting the official transport, which always seemed to entail handing around for rather longer than necessary.

The driver, a jobs-worth type, insisted that Tom could not ride in the cab, being "contrary to the regulations", and he was forced to make himself as comfortable as possible in the back, in amongst the miscellaneous cartons and boxes being taken to the Establishment.

Tom found that he was bracing himself to ameliorate the effects of the bumpy ride, while staring idly out of the back of the lorry. He was just musing about the copper and his comical old bike when he caught a flash of polished metal in the trees at the side of the road.

Barely pausing to consider the consequences, Tom banged loudly on the bulkhead between him and the driver.

"Stop!" he shouted.

To Tom's relief, the driver slewed to a halt almost immediately, hurling luggage and passenger around. Tom jumped out and ran around to the front of the lorry, where the driver had wound down his window.

"What's going on?" he asked, sounding peeved at the interruption to the normal routine.

"There's something in the woods back there," Tom shouted, "I'll have a look!"

Tom ran back to the point where he thought he had spotted the metalwork in the hedgerow. Behind him, he could hear the crunch and whine of the truck being reversed, with evident bad grace, by the irate driver.

"Here, look!" Tom shouted again, as the truck pulled alongside him.

It was Constable Nelson's bicycle, which looked like it had been hurriedly concealed under a couple of fallen branches. Tom pulled

away the obscuring foliage, and tugged at the bike handlebars, trying to free it from the undergrowth. To his mounting horror, he found that the reason the bicycle was difficult to move was that the body of the policeman was weighting it down.

“Here, give me a hand,” Tom called to the driver, “I think the copper’s dead!”

Tom was familiar with enough bodies from his wartime experiences to be able to quickly tell that the policeman was quite dead, and that he had been shot fairly recently and at short range, too.

Tom and the driver looked at each other, then sprinted for the truck.

“We’ve got to get back to the guard post, and get some assistance” Tom gasped, clambering into the passenger seat.

The driver grunted his assent, quickly starting the engine and turning in the road with a screech of tyres and a spray of gravel, which contrasted sharply with his previously sedate style of driving.

The return trip to the causeway took about a third of the time, Tom judged, than the outbound section. He hung on for grim death as the lorry bounced and rattled on the road, the driver wrestling expertly with the wheel in an attempt to shave a few seconds of their arrival time.

Tom jumped out of the lorry and sprinted over to Fred, who was chatting to the on-duty Guardians who had just taken over the watch.

“Constable Nelson’s dead!” he gasped, interrupting one of Fred’s familiar anecdotes, “He’s been shot!”

Despite the usually rather relaxed attitude affected by the Guardians, the serious mettle of the corps was now demonstrated by the way the men jumped-to at the news. Both on-duty members and those who had just stood down swung into action without hesitation. Sergeant Brasham, who was the Duty officer, directed the deployment, somehow managing the trick of making himself heard across the bustle without apparently raising his voice.

Fred was instructed to form a party to go back and collect the body, and investigate the scene of the incident. He had a hurried conversation with the lorry driver to ascertain the exact location of the body and bicycle. A few moments later, a small convoy of trucks roared away, including the truck Tom had ridden in himself. He assumed that the driver had volunteered to direct them himself.

Tom had been briefed on standard alert procedures, which was that, when anything unusual was reported, the Guardians should enter a higher state of vigilance which, in these post-war days, still involved small arms being broken out from the secure storage below

the guard building. He and Ifor had been given the job of distributing weapons from the Armoury. The two men wrestled a case of rifles up the stairs before returning as quickly as they could, staggering under the weight of the ammunition boxes.

Other groups had been directed to communicate with the Lyndesfarne Guardians, hurrying off to the signals tower to send an urgent message. Tom knew that they must already know something was going on, since the sound of the alarm siren would have easily carried across the straights in this weather.

Suddenly, there was a roar of engines from the road as three men on motorbikes appeared at speed. One of the Guardians on duty, a man that Tom did not know by name, was standing in the road, waved his arm to stop the machines. The motorcyclists ignored him, and the Guardian was forced to dive to one side as the bikers rushed through the barrier which would have stopped other motorised transport and hurtled along the causeway towards the bridge.

The riders were dressed as tourists, motorcycle enthusiasts of the kind who occasionally appeared at the crossing, and who were usually successfully discouraged from crossing. They were riding bikes which had probably seen military service. All three of the bikes had panniers on either side of the rear wheel, and the riders each wore a heavy rucksack.

“They have explosives!” the Guardian shouted as he picked himself up from the verge.

He had spotted something bulky protruding from the heavily-laden panniers – something they would later discover to be the detonators for the charges.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. Hearing the cry, Tom spun around, with one of the rifles from the armoury already in his hands. The ammo box was on the ground just a few steps away. Diving forward, Tom grabbed a magazine and loaded the rifle with a practiced action. With barely a moment to aim, Tom loosed off a shot at the men, understanding that there were only a few seconds before the riders would get to the bend in the causeway and thereby be partially shielded by the stone parapets.

Tom’s shot had hit the leading cyclist in the shoulder. He jerked, losing his grip on the machine and fell off, his motorbike crashing to the cobbles with its engine racing. The second rider, following close behind, collided with the fallen machine and was propelled over the handlebars. The third rider, who had been lagging a little behind the other two, attempted to swerve around the carnage. He lost control,

skidding his machine along the stones of the parapet with a shower of sparks and a scream of tortured metal.

Tom fired again, and a third time. The shots became a fusillade as Ifor and a couple of other Guardians had armed themselves with rifles from the case. The three men on the causeway returned fire with pistols, seeking cover behind their overturned motorbikes. The Guardians took up positions to either side of the causeway entrance, ducking down below the stone walls as bullets ricocheted over their heads. One of the injured men could be seen struggling with the panniers.

“Shoot him!” the Sergeant shouted, “Don’t let them blow up the causeway!”

Guardian reinforcements emerged from the guard post, some carrying Tommy-guns. The men on the causeway were overwhelmed, cut down by machine-gun fire.

The incident debrief was worryingly inconclusive. With all three of the attackers dead, there was little that could be discovered about the origin and motivation for the attack.

The men were identified eventually, presumably, Tom thought, with some assistance from the regular British authorities, but there was nothing unusual in their backgrounds. As far as could be determined, none of the dead men had any connection with Lyndesfarne or the crossing at all. It seemed to be some kind of a sleeper cell, but their affiliation was entirely unclear. Tom got the distinct impression that extensive investigations were being undertaken, but he heard nothing about who or what was really behind the assault.

The motorbikes had been reported stolen in the last six months, in various parts of the North East of England, and never recovered. The weaponry and explosives were German in origin – but this meant nothing, since extensive looting during the War had meant that many guns originally issued to the German military were now circulating on the Black Market.

Tom was publicly congratulated by Major Markham in a short ceremony back at Cliviger Grange some weeks later, as well as recommended for a commendation – he would be “mentioned in dispatches” in the formal reports sent to the Boards of Control in both worlds.

Afterwards, Sergeant Brasham had a more private word with Tom.

“It was only your alarm that saved the day,” he said quietly, “If the motorcyclists had appeared without warning, we would never

have been able to stop them in time. And they could have blown up the bridge. Well done – you’ve the makings of a fine Guardian, young man.”

Fred also sought Tom out afterwards, and spoke about Constable Nelson.

“The poor copper must have just happened on the three attackers on the road,” Fred suggested sadly, “Just bad luck. Percy was a nosy old bastard. I suppose that’s an essential trait in a good copper, but probably did for him in the end.”

Tom nodded in agreement.

“He probably stopped the motorcyclists, and asked what was in the panniers,” the older man continued, “And got shot for his pains, to silence him.”

Fred’s conclusion was that the motorcyclists must have hidden the dead man and his bicycle when they heard the lorry approaching, intending to wait until they thought the coast was clear.

“But their plans were further upset when you spotted the dead man in the undergrowth,” he continued, “And they were probably already rapidly approaching the causeway when you got back there. They knew that their only chance was to break through before we could deploy properly.”

“But what were they trying to achieve?” Tom asked.

“I’m guessing, of course,” Fred concluded, “It was more than just an attempt to blow up the causeway. It could always be rebuilt, after all. No, the real reason was to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the Guardians – to provoke a reaction so that the Boards would insist that the crossing was closed.”

Chapter Twenty Four

As well as guarding the causeway and bridge, another regular Guardian's duty was patrolling the coast to both north and south of the crossing. On this occasion, in the springtime a few months before his graduation, Tom was once again in the role of trainee and apprentice, with Fred as the master. The two men were both dressed in the rather nondescript clothing that passed for a uniform for the Guardians and which, Tom imagined, had been carefully designed to be obvious to those in the know while simultaneously appearing wholly unremarkable to the general populace.

The two men had set off from the guard post at the causeway an hour or so before, and were now taking a break from their patrol. They stood looking out to sea, enjoying their cigarettes and watching the breakers crashing on the rocks at the foot of the cliffs below. To the south, the rugged coastline was dotted with many islets, some only visible at low tide, abutting cliffs which rose forty feet above the sea. Both islands and cliffs provided roosting spaces for thousands of seabirds whose cries could be heard over the rumble of the waves.

Away from the straights, the weather was much less overcast, and they could clearly see the white-painted stonework of the old lighthouse standing out against the grey-blue of the skyline. Tom knew that this whole area was notoriously dangerous for shipping, with treacherous winds and tides, and hidden rocks and razor-sharp reefs just below the surface.

Fred took a last drag from his cigarette and flicked the butt into the sea below. He turned to Tom.

"You see that lighthouse tower out there?" he asked, indicating the direction with a jerk of his head.

Tom nodded in response.

"And have you heard that tale about Grace Darling?"

Tom did vaguely remember hearing the story; perhaps it was something he had read in a book at school.

"Um, yes," he replied, "A daring rescue. Grace and her father rowing out to rescue the crew of a stricken ship. Didn't they come from that lighthouse?"

Fred snorted derisively.

"Ha. That's the story that was put about. The truth, on the other hand, is rather trickier."

Tom was immediately ensnared.

“So what really happened?” he asked breathlessly.

Fred took a second hand-rolled cigarette from a battered Woodbine tin in his pocket and lit it, clearly in the mood for storytelling.

“Well, it was true that it was a wild and stormy night,” he began, “And that a ship called the *Forfarshire* got into serious trouble off the coast not very far from here.”

Fred paused and took a drag from his roll-up, probably for dramatic effect.

“But the rescuers didn’t come from that lighthouse. In fact, they didn’t come from this world at all.”

Tom could not help sucking in his breath in surprise.

“You have to remember that this was in the early days of steam-powered shipping,” Fred continued, “And, for some reason, the ship’s engine failed. At the time, it was reported that the breakdown was because of a lack of maintenance of the boiler.”

“But that wasn’t the real reason, was it?” Tom responded, insight striking.

“No, of course not,” Fred grunted, “The ship passed too close to the island and suddenly lost power, because of the effect of the barrier between the worlds.”

“So, who were the rescuers?” Tom asked, “And where did they come from?”

The older man’s face twisted into a wry grin.

“The rescuers were called Graz and Farrar. They were part of the Lyndesfarne Guardian force, keeping watch along the coastline, much as we are doing today. Oh, and they were actually both female.”

“Women?” exclaimed Tom, “But how could one of them be mistaken for a man?”

“For one reason or another, before they crossed out of Lyndesfarne, Farrar decided to shape-shift. By good fortune, she was one of those rare people with a natural talent for radically changing their shape.”

Tom did not know very much about shapeshifting. It was not something that had featured extensively in the classrooms at Cliviger Grange. There had been a suggestion that people from Lyndesfarne could subtly alter their appearance, but he was astounded to learn just how much some people could change.

“So Lyndesfarne people can change from being a man to a woman?” he asked.

Fred shook his head.

“Only a very few people can change that much. And, in any case, they don’t actually change from man to woman – or the other way around, for that matter. It’s cosmetic, that’s all.”

Tom nodded slowly, having just been presented with a great deal to think about.

“Anyway,” the other man continued, “Somehow, Graz and Farrar spotted the ship in trouble, and bravely, or perhaps foolishly, rowed out in a small boat – the only one they could locate at short notice – from the Lyndesfarne coast.”

Fred paused, again smiling wryly.

“Well, of course, they didn’t really row – at least, not all of the way. Their boat was equipped with, well, let’s call them sea-sprites.”

“Sea-sprites?”

“They’re a magical means of propulsion for boats and ships of all sizes. Not sure I can really explain how they work, though.”

The older man shrugged, then returned to his tale.

“The story you’ve heard before says that Graz and Farrar rescued nine people from the wreck. That’s true enough, but the two women knew that they could not return to Lyndesfarne without risking exposing the secret of the Two Worlds. So they were forced to take the rescued crew to the lighthouse – that one there – which was, very strangely, unmanned at that time.”

“Unmanned?” Tom parroted, again surprised by the turn of events.

“Yes. Another part of the mystery which has never been cleared up,” Fred confirmed, “There was supposed to be a lighthouse keeper and a small staff, but they had vanished without trace.”

The older man paused for a moment, staring out to sea in the direction of the lighthouse.

“At the time, there was some suggestion that the Forfarshire had approached the barrier deliberately, perhaps hoping to make their way into the World of Lyndesfarne without using the official crossing, perhaps even without being observed.”

The older man shook his head, then continued.

“You have to get a long, long off the shipping lanes before you encounter the barrier. And the reefs are already pretty hazardous before you get that far. Perhaps the captain was bribed or coerced in some way, but nothing of the sort was ever proven.”

Fred coughed, or perhaps laughed briefly.

“Indeed, the ship’s owners were prosecuted for negligence after the event, and fined a considerable amount. Ironically, a side-effect

of the rescue from Lyndesfarne was improved standards of inspection and seaworthiness for steam-powered vessels in this world.”

“But what happened to Graz and Farrar?” Tom pressed.

The other man looked at him strangely for a moment, then continued.

“Funny you should ask.”

Fred explained that a rapidly manufactured cover story held it that ‘Grace’ and her ‘Father’ were local people, employed to look after the lighthouse. A family background was fabricated, which made it look as if ‘Grace’ lived with her parents in the lighthouse, as well as an extended family – siblings, grandparents and the like – living on the mainland.

“And I suppose,” *Tom* interjected, “That their new identities were chosen to sound at least a little like their real names?”

Fred nodded.

“I was told that they expected that it would all be a five-day wonder, that it would all blow over very quickly. But somehow, the story came to the attention of the newspapers, and there was an explosion of interest. Apart from reports in the national press, the two Lyndesfarne Guardians were subjected to a ludicrous number of interviews, which in turn led to numerous eulogies, many of them fanciful in the extreme.”

Fred turned back to face the sea.

“And then there were the pictures,” he continued, “Paintings and engravings, again generally executed with more imagination than attention to the actual events of the day.”

“The girls tried to let it be known that they preferred their privacy, but it was no use. For some reason, the furore was kept up long after one might normally have expected the public interest to have waned. Not to mention the newspaper reporters and journalists, who seemed unable to leave them alone.”

“The two women also seemed to attract more than their fair share of crankier types – spiritualists, mediums, occultists – some of them, well, nutty than a fruit cake, as I’ve heard it told.”

“But why did they get all this attention?” Tom pressed.

“Well, that’s the puzzle.” Fred replied, “It’s almost as if someone wanted them to be continuously in the spotlight of the public eye. Certainly, they found it impossible to quietly disappear, and return home.”

“So, Graz and Farrar were forced to maintain an assumed role for the rest of their lives, just to protect the secret of Lyndesfarne?” Tom asked.

“That’s right,” the older man confirmed.

Tom wondered what it would be like, to be trapped in a foreign world and, even worse, in an alien body shape. He shook his head sadly. A different thought then occurred to him.

“Surely there have been other occasions when boats have tried to make their way to Lyndesfarne?”

“Well, you’d have thought so, wouldn’t you?” Fred replied, smiling tightly.

“It seems that attempts to cross like this almost never happen. It’s certainly been tried a few times in the past – like the story I’ve just told you. But it’s always ended badly. These days, frankly, it’s regarded as suicidal. No-one’s attempted it in years, not even the Germans during the War.”

The older man paused, once again for dramatic effect.

“They, of course, tried a different approach.”

Tom, who was just beginning to think he was getting some kind of understanding of the history behind this, was stunned. Fred had clearly spotted Tom’s reaction.

“And there’s another tale, which will have to wait for another day.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Tom was on furlough. He had been given forty-eight hours free time, to do as he wished. The trouble was that he was not sure what to do with the time. He felt no particular desire to return to his home town. As an orphan, he felt that there was nothing for him there.

There was also no opportunity to catch up with either Bram or Alistair. Bram seemed to be busy with errands of his own, although the infrequent letters Tom had received did not make it clear what he was really doing. Alistair seemed to be enjoying his new role in the Guides. Again, Tom only heard from him occasionally. Tom promised himself that he would write more often, and tell his old friends what was happening in the Guardians. He had described the motorcycle attack in some detail, although he had modestly downplayed his own role in the sequence of events.

After some reflection, he decided to take a trip to Lyndesfarne, and stop over at the pub that he had visited with Bram and Alistair on his very first visit all those months ago.

It was a bright spring morning as Tom cadged a lift to the crossing from the Grange, and started his walk across the causeway. He paused only briefly at the money-changer's tent to convert the folded paper of a ten shilling note into a small purse of the metal discs which were used as money in Lyndesfarne.

The weather was uncommonly clear, with much of the near-perpetual haze that usually enveloped the area apparently dissipated into the ether. It was still chill and windy, as it almost always was, with the plangent cries of the seagulls audible over the roar and rumble of the waves on the shoreline.

On the crossing itself, the traffic was already heavy, with long queues of wagons waiting on both sides of the bridge. The causeway had been built to be wide enough for wagons to pass, but the bridge itself had been constructed only wide enough for a single line of carts.

A normal part of the Guardian's role was to police this part of the crossing. Despite the best efforts of the duty watch, there was much shouting, cussing and swearing from the carters in numerous languages, several of which Tom did not understand.

Tom recognised most of the Guardians on duty and stopped for a few moments to chat. Even so, the crossing was so full of activity

that Tom rapidly decided that it was best if he did not distract his colleagues for long with inconsequential small talk. He also decided against stopping on the bridge to look into the waters, as he had done so often before, again because there was just too much traffic. Instead, he marched onwards, deftly dodging the irritable horses and the slow-moving wagons.

Tom had decided to do something he had not done before, but had been on his mind for some time. He left the road at the point where the causeway met the Lyndesfarne coast, and set off walking towards the castle, the sole feature usually visible from the other side of the crossing.

He hiked along the coastline, following a track paved with worn stone slabs. At one point, where the coast formed a low headland, Tom struck out from the pathway and walked out to the point to take in the view over the sea. He was amazed by just how little of his world he could make out across just a mile or so of rocky outcrops and sandbanks. To all appearances, his home world was apparently a wooded island, with no obvious habitation and few signs that people had ever been there. Little detail could be made out, and even those few details had rapidly become entirely indistinct as he had walked further along the coast.

Pressing on along the track, Tom could see the castle on its promontory that he had noticed on his very first journey from Holme Farm to Lyndesfarne. The fortifications were in much better condition than it appeared from the other side of the straights, he considered, as he walked up the sloping roadway to the main gate. There was no one around, and he was able to go in and explore without hindrance.

As he entered, Tom noted that the heavy iron portcullis and the stout wooden gates both seemed to be in good condition. The walls and towers themselves looked worn and mossy, but not actually in imminent danger of falling down. He explored for an hour or so, climbed up the steps and walked the length of the walls as far as could be reached reasonably easily.

A couple of the towers had doorways set into them at ground level. All of the doors seemed to be locked shut, and were quite possibly magically sealed. Certainly, they did not respond to the standard gestures for “open” and “show seal” in any way that Tom could spot.

Feeling slightly frustrated, he explored a couple of entrances that stood open. He took one steep stone staircase down below the main tower, but found to his disappointment that it led to a dead end, with

no doorways or apparent way through. While exploring the cellars, Tom did notice that a few parts of the masonry foundations appeared to be reinforced with the same orange sprites that had also been used in the construction of the bridge. He wondered idly if this meant that the castle and the causeway had been built at the same time.

Finally bored with exploring the castle, Tom found his way back through the entrance, and continued his walk further around the promontory that the castle sat upon.

He stood for a few minutes on a raised headland, watching the waves crashing on the rocks below. Looking out to sea, Tom could see a small number of other islands, most of which appeared to be little more than bare rocks, although one of them appeared to have a grassy plateau sheltered by a few gnarled and windswept trees. He could see no signs of nautical navigation lights, which was quite different from the view from the coast in his own world, where several lighthouses and numerous buoys marked out the safe channels for shipping.

Continuing his perambulations, Tom came across a pleasantly sheltered spot for lunch. He sat in the bright spring sunshine, protected from the ever-present wind by the castle walls and the natural formations which formed its foundations. His meal consisted of a few slices of bread and cheese, taken from his pack, and previously sponged from the mess at Cliviger Grange, together with the remnants of a packet of biscuits.

After eating, Tom lay back, warmed by the sun and drawing his greatcoat around him, and dozed for what seemed like just a few minutes. Judging by the movement of the sun, however, he decided that he had probably slept for a couple of hours. He lay in the sunshine for a few more minutes enjoying a cigarette, before gathering his things together and returning them to his pack.

Tom completed the loop around the end of the castle promontory, before rejoining the path which would take him back to the settlement at the point of crossing between the two worlds. There were sheep grazing in the fields on either side, together with what appeared to be some newly-established pigsties set a little way back from the sea, surrounded by what seemed to him to be a rather flimsy fence. One good push, he thought, and it would probably collapse like a house of cards.

The sun was getting low in the sky when Tom finally approached the little settlement which served the needs of the Lyndesfarne end of the crossing whose name, Tom suddenly realised, he did not actually know.

The majority of the buildings in the village were private houses, usually with substantial gardens and often set well back behind high stone walls and arched gateways.

There were a couple of shops huddled together in the main street. The general store sold conventional foodstuffs, while the other seemed to offer an astonishing range of artefacts, most of which Tom had no idea as to the intended function. There was also an outlet which he would normally have thought of as a tea-shop, although it principally served hot chocolate, which was apparently very popular here in Lyndesfarne.

The portal building, which Tom and his cohort had used on several recent occasions, was situated closer to the causeway itself. Alongside it could be found several stone-built warehouses with, as Tom understood it, direct access to their own network of portals for the transportation of goods.

Tom also passed the village hostel, with its sign proclaiming “The Garden of Boundaries”, which he remembered Bram mentioning on their first visit to Lyndesfarne.

After his wanderings around the settlement, it was easy enough to track down the public house that stood a short way back from the Lyndesfarne side of the crossing. Tom stood outside the pub looking back down the main street in the direction of the causeway. It occurred to him that there was no part of the village which was visible at all from the England side. From his own world, he mused, you would never know that this settlement was here.

He turned back to the pub entrance and went inside.

Chapter Twenty Six

So many of the things that had confused Tom during his first visit to the Lyndesfarne public house were now entirely self-apparent. The pub sign, for example, he could now read without difficulty. The words translated literally – in his head – as “Nest of Dragons” and the picture showed a fair representation, he had been given to understand, of the kind of assembly certain smaller kinds of dragons would build to hatch their brood.

Inside, the bar was reassuringly unchanged. The fireplace, with the stuffed dragon’s head above it still holding pride of place, burnt brightly. The same landlady and her full-figured daughter managed the place with their combination of quiet hospitality and no-nonsense efficiency. Tom briefly spoke to the matron in the Lyndesfarne language, and arranged for overnight accommodation, hot food and, most importantly, beer.

The buxom barmaid expertly pulled, topped up and handed over a pint glass of the same strong dark ale he had sampled the last time he was here. Picking up his glass, Tom found a small table not far from the fireplace, and sat himself down in an upright but surprisingly comfortable chair. He leaned back, warming his feet and sampled the beer, wondering reflectively whether the beer glasses were a bit smaller here.

After a few minutes, the landlady appeared with his dinner. This consisted of slices of roast lamb, a mound of boiled potatoes, and a large dollop of mashed carrot and swede, all smothered in delightfully thick and tasty gravy. He ate quickly and exceedingly appreciatively, washing the food down with the full-flavoured beer. Helpfully, he took his empty plate and glass back to the bar and, while he was there, ordered another pint.

It was rather quiet and just a little lonely sitting on his own in the pub. There were only a few other patrons, clearly regulars, sitting and talking together close to the bar. He was therefore rather gratified to see Old Ged, the dragon hunter that he had encountered that last time he had visited the Dragons’ Nest, entering the bar. Tom caught the newcomer’s eye; with evident recognition, the older man immediately came over and spoke in English.

“I remember you,” Ged said directly, observing Tom closely, “You were in here last year, in the autumn.”

“I was,” he replied, impressed by the old man’s powers of recollection.

The dragon hunter grunted, running his hand over the stubble on his chin.

“Mind if I join you?” he said at last.

“Please do,” Tom replied, glad of the company, “Can I get you a pint?”

Ged nodded curtly, a half-smile on his seamed face. Tom went over to the bar, and ordered and paid for the drink. As he did so, he looked back at the older man, who was gazing up at the dragon’s head over the fireplace ruminatively.

Tom brought the fresh glass back and presented it to the other man. Ged drank deeply, smacking his lips in appreciation. He put his drink on the table and then sat back, pulling his tobacco pouch out of his pocket and started filling his pipe, all the while watching Tom carefully.

“Well, then, young man,” he asked, “What are you a-doing here?”

Tom explained that he had come over from England on leave, and had dropped in, for old time’s sake, to enjoy a pint or two before making his way back to the Grange.

“And you’re in the Guardians now?” Ged enquired, sounding as if he already knew the answer to this query.

The younger man nodded, guessing that the dragon-hunter had spotted the clothing he wore was the not-quite-uniform of the England contingent of that organisation.

“So what happened to those mates of yours?” the old man pressed, “Seemed real close, you did.”

“Well, Alistair,” he began, adding, “He’s the tall one” when he spotted the puzzled look on Ged’s face, “He’s signed up with the Guides. Seems to be all over the place, in both worlds.”

Ged nodded.

“Well, that’s the way of the Guides,” he replied, “At the beck and call of the Guild, never quite sure where your Visitors will need to go next. And the other fella?”

“That’s Bram. His family lives around here, or at least not so far away,” Tom answered, “He seems to have a mission of his own, too.”

The two men fell silent for a few moments. Tom wondered what to say next.

“How’s your arm?” he asked, inspiration striking.

He had just remembered that Ged had been injured in a dragon hunt by the very creature whose head now decorated the fireplace.

The older man extended and flexed his left arm.

“Still a bit stiff, but I’m getting a lot of use out of it,” he answered, “More-or-less back to normal.”

“So you’ll soon be out after the dragons again?”

“We-ell, I’m not so sure,” he said dourly, “Seems like I’m not wanted these days.”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked, intrigued.

Old Ged explained that, a few weeks ago, he had heard that there was a new group being formed to go after Dragons.

“They didn’t want me in the squad. They said I was too old!” he exclaimed, obviously disgruntled.

Curious, and a bit miffed, Ged said that he had followed the new group on one occasion.

“I know the lie of the land, and the places where the dragons like to have their nests,” he explained, “Mind you, some of the folk in the new group knew the land nearly as well as I do. I had to be very careful so that they didn’t spot me.”

Tom noticed that the older man’s story-telling was a lot more fragmented and hesitant this time out. It was clear that Ged’s previous tale of dragon-hunting was well-practiced, but Tom got the strong impression that this account was something that Ged had not told to many people.

“Now here’s the strangest thing,” the old man continued, leaning forward in a conspiratorial manner, “I saw them capturing dragons alive, and being exceptionally careful to avoid injuring them!”

“Really?” Tom exclaimed, recalling Ged’s manifest view that dragons are vermin and need to be kept down.

“Yeah. They were going out their way to ensure that they were unharmed.”

The old hunter grinned ruefully.

“I’ve not had much experience in catching Dragons without killing them,” Ged said, “It was quite interesting, how they went about it.”

Seeing Tom’s unfeigned interest, he continued.

“Well, they used a piglet as bait, just like I would. When the dragon was on the ground, they employed weighted ropes and nets to keep it there. Once the creature couldn’t move very far, they hit it with some kind of sleeping magic I’d not seen before, which made the beasts collapse after a few minutes.”

The old man stopped his narrative, frowning.

“Well, I suppose it was magic,” he said slowly, “But there was certainly a strange sweet smell in the air, even from a distance. Made me feel drowsy for a moment.”

Tom, who was familiar with the effects of chloroform as an anaesthetic, said nothing, but he did begin to wonder if someone had been smuggling proscribed chemicals into Lyndesfarne.

“So how did they keep the dragons after they had caught them?” he asked, after a few moments contemplation during which both men took a long pull from their drinks.

“Ah. Well, once securely asleep, they man-handled the creatures into cages. Dragons aren’t particularly heavy for their size but, unconscious, they’re awkward to move – wings, neck and tail need to be lifted together. They used enclosures of thick timbers, re-enforced with a load of magic. I could clearly see the sparkle of the...”

Ged used the word from the Lyndesfarne language whose best translation, Tom understood, was “sprites”. He paused again, running his hand over his stubble beard, obviously deep in thought.

“I’d guess that transportation was their biggest problem,” he said at last, “They couldn’t use the public portals, not if they wanted to maintain any kind of secrecy about their undertaking. And they’d have to avoid roads, too.”

“So how did they shift the cages?” Tom asked, now getting increasingly perplexed.

“Well, they had cross-country transport using a mixture of specially-built wagons and heavy-duty floaters. They clearly wanted to keep out of sight, since they were travelling at night only. And, the wagons and floaters were pulled by people. I’m pretty certain that horses would have been far too skittish. For fairly obvious reasons, in my experience, horses don’t like dragons!”

It had become clear to Tom that the capturing of several dragons was a considerable undertaking, with a great many people involved one way or another.

“How many dragons have they captured?” he asked, urgently.

“I saw them acquire two,” Old Ged replied, “And they already had three others in cages. But they could have more, for all I know.”

“Why did you stop following them?” Tom pressed.

Ged looked slightly embarrassed at this point, the rueful half-smile returning to his face.

“Well, I didn’t,” he said flatly, “For some reason, they’d become suspicious that they were being followed, and I had to pull back to avoid being detected. And then they gave me the slip!”

“How?” Tom demanded.

“I’m not quite sure how,” the older man replied, rather defensively, “I can’t believe that they’re that much better woodsmen

than I am. In fact," he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially, "Maybe they've got access to some hidden secret portal."

"So you don't know where they've gone?" the younger man pressed.

"No I don't. I've tried telling the Guardians here, but they don't seem to be interested."

Tom glanced at the older man, raising an eyebrow quizzically.

"Well, sure I've got a bit of a reputation as a wild talker, someone with a tendency to shoot my mouth off," Ged said huffily, "But there really is something strange about that dragon-hunting party."

"I think you're right."

Tom was inclined to believe the old man. He already assumed that portals which were not part of the public network did in fact exist. He strongly suspected that the portal archway he had glimpsed in the Guardian Training camp he had visited was not for everyday use.

Even, so, the proposition that some private portal was available to the mysterious captors of wild dragons was extremely suspicious, Tom considered. Either Ged was just a little insane, or perhaps just paranoid; otherwise, since portals require a lot of time and skill to construct, Tom was forced to the conclusion that the dragon hunters had powerful allies somewhere in the interlinked network of governance that existed in the world of Lyndesfarne.

"Anyhow," Ged said, interrupting the younger man's thoughts, "I've got things to do. And I'd better go and get on with them. See you again, and thanks for the drink."

The old dragon hunter drained his pint, and stood up.

"Goodbye," Tom said, but the other man had already set off across the pub, rapidly disappearing into the night through the front door.

After Ged had left, Tom thoughtfully finished his second pint, again returning the empty glasses to the bar. He then made his way downstairs, finding his way to a tiny box room, barely large enough for the single bed. He slipped into bed, but found himself laying awake for some time, wondering about what he had heard. He felt that something was going on, something mysterious and important, and resolved to do something about it the very next morning.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Tom slept fitfully, with the dragon-hunter's tale reverberating around his head. After tossing and turning for what seemed like ages, he arose early, washed and dressed quickly, then climbed the stairs to the quiet gloom of the bar. Overnight it had somehow acquired that slight smell of stale beer which always seemed to pervade public houses by morning light.

Tom found the landlady already awake, moving silently and efficiently around the rooms in the morning half-light, tidying away the detritus of the night before. He politely declined the offer of a cooked breakfast, gratefully accepting the alternative offer of a slice of toasted bread with lashings of butter and a steaming mug of tea.

Refreshed by his morning intake of caffeine, Tom bade his farewell to the landlady and set off at a brisk march to the causeway. The crossing was nearly deserted. This early in the morning, there were rather few people about, with just a single carter rather blearily guiding his horse across the causeway in the chill of a hazy spring morning.

Tom soon arrived at the guard post, where he was greeted by Ifor, who immediately recognised his old comrade from Cliviger Grange.

"Is Fred around?" Tom enquired urgently, "Isn't he on duty today?"

"Hmm," the little Welshman said, stroking his goatee reflectively, "He's definitely on duty. Not sure where he's got to right now, though. Try the signals tower."

Tom wanted to talk to someone informally, to get some idea of whether he was worrying unreasonably or if there was some grain of genuine concern to be found in his paranoia. He was extremely gratified that he was rapidly able to intercept the older Guardian, who was returning along the coastal path from the tower.

"What do you know about dragons?" Tom asked.

Fred snorted.

"A fair bit," he responded, "Nasty verminous creatures. Aren't any around here though."

The older man looked sharply at Tom.

"Have you been listening to tales?" he added shrewdly.

Tom nodded.

"Yes, from a man named Ged."

“The old Dragon-hunter?” Fred pressed.

“Yes, that’s the man. Do you know him?”

Fred laughed aloud.

“Oh yes. He’s an veteran teller of tall tales. I’m not sure you necessarily want to believe everything he tells you.”

“Well, I know what you mean,” Tom agreed, “I’ve certainly heard his anecdotes in the past. And it sounded all very well-practiced, if you know what I mean.”

Tom paused, not sure how to continue.

“Even so, I think you should hear this story.”

“Why?” Fred asked, his curiosity clearly piqued.

“I’m not sure. But I got the strong impression that this wasn’t a practiced tale.”

“Okay, I’ll bite.”

Tom rapidly related Ged’s account of following the mysterious dragon-hunters, and their approach to capturing and imprisoning dragons unharmed.

When he explained about the untraceable disappearance of the hunting party, Fred looked at Tom askance for a moment.

“You sure about this?” he asked.

“Well, no,” Tom answered, so honestly that it surprised both Fred and himself, “But I’ve been awake half the night worrying about it.”

Fred looked thoughtful.

“Hmm,” he said finally, “Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts. And this does have that ring of truth about it.”

Suddenly full of resolution, the older man set off at a cracking pace along the path back towards the guard post. Taken unawares, Tom found himself stumbling along the same track, trying to catch up with the disappearing form of his senior colleague. By the time that he arrived, Fred was already shouting commands, and Guardians were scurrying in every direction.

“What’s the urgency?” Tom gasped.

“Look, dragons are at their most active in the early morning,” Fred shouted, “Now get that pump started!”

Bottling up further questions for later, Tom sprinted away in the direction of the guard post to find the keys and starting handle for the pump engine. The machinery itself was concealed behind a thicket that was little more than a thickening of the hedges that flanked the road.

Moving at the double to the pump, Tom was joined by Ifor. The two men unrolled the hosepipes as quickly as possible, running the longest of them down to the beach and across the sands to the slightly

deeper channel where a little river drained into the sea, just as they had been drilled in exercises. Tom's boots sank into the marshy shoreline, the cold salt water filling his boots and making him curse under his breath.

The two men dumped the end of the pipe with its heavy filter into the deeper water, then they hurried back to the machine. Ifor, now joined by a couple of other Guardians, started connecting the hoses to the flanges emerging from the housings, while other pipes were rolled out towards the causeway. This left Tom to turn his attention to the power plant itself.

The pump engine was a pre-war installation, heavy and notoriously temperamental, or at least responded badly to inexperienced handling. Starting the machine was an exercise in itself. First, Tom had to unlock the wire-mesh door which prevented unauthorised tampering, and turn on several switches which allowed the ignition system to function. It was essential to open the petrol valve and prime the fuel supply, carefully and smoothly operating the hand pump to ensure that there were no airlocks in the fuel lines. Tom then set the choke lever fully open and used the crank handle to turn the engine over slowly a couple of times.

Then, and only then, Tom knew, it was possible to spin the starting handle hard and, if all the preparations had been done perfectly, the engine would burst into life, spewing blue fumes and the stench of unburned petrol into the air. As soon as the engine fired, Tom knew it was necessary to close the choke almost – but not quite – entirely allowing the engine to run for a couple of minutes to warm up before the choke could be closed completely.

With the details of the modus operandi rattling though his mind, Tom focussed as single-mindedly as he could on the correct starting procedure. Just as the engine fired, and he struggled with the choke lever, he could hear a series of cries, audible even over the roar of the engine. He looked up, glancing instinctively over the causeway. There seemed to be no traffic on the bridge, although the usual haze made it difficult to make out any kind of detail.

As Tom watched, a series of black dots appeared in the air over the crossing. To be visible at this range, he wondered, they must be huge. His military experience led to his first thought, that they were some kind of aircraft, but their speed and strange motions were all wrong.

Suddenly, a cry went up, seemingly evoked simultaneously from several throats.

“Dragons!”

Realisation striking, Tom set the throttle on the engine, and tugged on the levers which engaged the pump itself. The hoses lurched and bucked as they filled with water, while Tom fine-tuned the throttle settings so that the water pressure approached the working value.

According to the local scuttlebutt, the pump had been stripped out of a scrapped fire boat a decade or so before. Even so, the venerable pump was capable of throwing streams of sea water several hundred feet into the air. The jets were so powerful that it required two men on each nozzle to guide the flow of water.

Tom ran to join the other Guardians, who were clustering at the guard post.

“Why are they flying this way?” Fred shouted, “Dragons hate water!”

“Look there!” someone called.

There seemed to be something approaching on the causeway itself, a herd of some kind of animal.

“There’s pigs on the bridge!” The same voice sounded.

Tom could see, breasting the arch of the bridge, several dozen or more pigs of all sizes, heading down the causeway in a seemingly unstoppable rush. He did not know that pigs could move that fast.

It occurred to Tom that the approach of the dragons had spooked the livestock in the farm he had noticed the day before. He felt sure that the dragons flying overhead caused the animals to panic and push their way out of the rather flimsy enclosure.

But that observation begged another question: even with all that was going on, Tom found a moment to wonder why the animals had chosen to run in the direction which leads to the causeway and, indeed, why the pigsties had been so recently erected so close to the crossing.

“The dragons can smell the pigs!” The voice, Tom now realised, was Ifor’s.

“So that’s what they are following,” Fred responded.

Details of the briefings on dragons bubbled to the forefront of Tom’s mind. He recalled that dragons have a good sense of smell, and they can sense their favourite prey at a considerable distance. They also have good eyesight, and used sight to hunt at short range. However, their hearing was rather poor, and it was clear that they were undeterred by the sounds of people shouting, or the noise of the pump engine.

The sight of the usually docile animals rushing headlong was quite a scary sight, and the Guardians seemed momentarily unable to move.

Fred, who had taken charge automatically, started shouting out orders.

“You three, barricade the causeway! And man those hoses! Move!”

At his instruction, the three men indicated started tugging on a length of stout iron railing and sliding it across the causeway entrance. Tom knew that this barrier had been carefully constructed to appear, at a casual glance, to be just a fixed part of the balustrade, but could be rapidly moved to close the crossing.

Several of the Guardians were directing rifle and machine gun fire at the dragons, which did not seem to be particularly effective. Tom recalled Ged’s observation that dragons were difficult to hit when flying, because of their characteristically unpredictable movements.

“Shoot at the pigs!” he shouted, insight striking, “Stop them from crossing.”

Several of the Guardians close to the crossing heard his shouts, and aimed their rifles along the causeway. There was a fusillade of shots, and several pigs at the front of the herd collapsed only fifty feet from the end of the crossing. Some of the animals behind tried to jump over their fallen brethren, while others seemed to stop, suddenly more afraid of what was waiting at the end of the causeway than the dragons flying overhead.

“Is that pump ready?” Fred shouted to Tom.

“Yes, Sir!” he responded smartly.

“Water cannon crews ready!” the older man yelled, “Wait for my command. Gotta get them close enough to be afraid of the water.”

There was a chorus of affirmative cries from the crews to either side.

The flying dragons appeared to slow as they approached the pigs milling around. Perhaps, Tom thought, they were also becoming aware of the men not far away, and the water below them. The leading dragons began to circle the stricken beasts.

More men and women began to arrive, running up from the fenced camp Tom had once mistaken for an Army base. Some of the reinforcements rushed to assist the teams supporting the heavy pipes and nozzles, while others unlimbered firearms and took aim at the animals on the bridge and in the sky.

“Water cannon, fire!” Fred shouted.

With a roar, the powerful jets from four nozzles sprang out and converged on the flying reptiles. The animals panicked; as one, they veered away, striving to distance themselves from the streams of water.

“Don’t let them get to land this side!” Fred instructed.

The cannon crews redoubled their efforts, straining against the force of the jets to direct their flows. Tom noticed that the dragons in flight still managed to avoid most of the water jets, but they would scream in panic when splashes fell on their wings. The Guardians armed with rifles also opened fire, adding to the noise and confusion, although not, Tom would consider later, with much effect on the flying lizards.

Eventually, the dragons were forced back to Lyndesfarne, flying close to the causeway as if it were some kind of lifeline from the terrifying water below them. The pack was last seen disappearing into the perpetual haze at the far end of the crossing.

In the aftermath, the only conclusion that could be drawn was that there was some kind of a plot to introduce lots of dragons simultaneously into England.

There was a debriefing session back at the Grange, where Major Markham rather formally congratulated the ranks for their swift and efficient reaction to the unexpected threat. He hinted obliquely at a “piece of timely intelligence”, but did not publicly single out Tom as the source of that information.

The Major then turned over the remainder of the session to Fred, who explained to the group that, if the dragons had crossed, and managed to establish themselves, they would certainly have caused havoc across the countryside. It would have been hard to cover up, since the press in England could not avoid reporting the presence of large flying reptiles, and it would probably have forced the closure of the crossing. This was, Fred reported, very likely to have been the objective of the plan.

The dragons themselves seem to have disappeared.

“Quite probably, they’ve died by now. To be honest,” Fred explained, “They could not have held in those dragons in cages for very long.”

“Why not?” Tom asked, confused.

Fred’s answer was a little disjointed, but Tom managed to pick up that dragons rapidly fall ill when caged or enclosed. They tended to damage themselves against the restraints or bars – despite their fearsome appearance, dragons are actually quite fragile and delicately constructed, so that they are light enough to fly.

Apparently, investigations by the Guardian force in Lyndesfarne and, Tom suspected, also by the secretive Watcher organisation were unable to turn up any clues as to the identity of the conspirators, despite their best efforts. He learned later that Old Ged the dragon-hunter was questioned closely, but he did not recognise very many of the other hunters. Even those he did recognise, the Lyndesfarne Guardians were not able to track down, itself a very worrying state of affairs.

Fred's last words to the group were chilling.

"There's still a war going on out there, my lads and lasses," he said sombrely, "And we're going to be in the front line for a while yet."

Chapter Twenty Eight

It had become clear to Tom that all of the trainees Guardian were based at the Reserve Defence Training Establishment. The months of his induction training were mostly undertaken here, apart from a few short duty periods at the crossing itself. Cliviger Grange was also used as a reserve base for qualified Guardians, as a backup to the fenced-in base close to the causeway which Tom had mistaken for an Army camp on his first visit.

Although not formally confined to the Grange at all times, the winter weather was sufficiently inclement that there was little incentive for the trainees to venture out to one of the local pubs. This was a particularly nasty winter evening in February, with freezing fog being blown off the sea making even the few steps from the accommodation blocks to the main building unpleasantly cold and damp.

A small group had gathered in the large room used as a mess by the off-duty trainees. Tom had arrived late, having been brought back to the Grange in the back of a lorry after one of their short orientation sessions at the crossing itself. At least he had returned in time to get something to eat, he thought, although the food was past its best by the time he had got to it.

After bolting his food, Tom joined the others from his intake group, who were sitting around a rather meagre fire and engaging in desultory conversation. The room was not actually particularly cold, but the damp and chill seemed to be permeating the room. This added to the general feeling of slight despondency, Tom felt. Ifor had made mugs of cocoa for the company, but even this had done little to dispel the rather gloomy atmosphere.

In general, the NCOs in charge of the new recruits did not socialise, but various staff members and even officers seemed to be in the habit of dropping into the mess on odd occasions. Fred, who Tom now understood to have some kind of informal training role in the organisation, put his head around the door. Observing the uncharacteristically silent company, he entered the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

“Gloomy old night, isn’t it,” he remarked cheerily, pulling up another chair and joining the group clustering around the fire, “Puts me in mind of another night, not so long ago.”

Tom perked up at these words, as did the others. Several of the company had heard Fred's stories before, and the most of the rest had heard them related second- or even third-hand.

"So you'd be interested in hearing a tale?" Fred asked, rather rhetorically.

He had apparently sensed the mood, and seemed happy enough to be the centre of attention. Tom nodded enthusiastically, and was joined by several others.

"Now, perhaps not all of you will have heard this one, not even you two," he began.

He indicated the cousins Charlie and Stan with a nod of his head. There was already a perceptible lightening of the mood in the room.

"This was back in the winter at the beginning of 1941," he continued, "When much of the country had been bombed during the blitz and there was an expectation of an invasion at any time."

Fred leaned back in his chair, accepting a mug of cocoa from Ifor and thanking him with a nod of the head before continuing.

"A commando force landed by night on the mainland from a German submarine – a U-boat, as they were called. The sub had managed to evade the destroyer patrols in the North Sea, slipping across from the Baltic Sea and the submarine pens of Hamburg."

The room was hushed, all of them hanging on Fred's every word. Only the soft crackle of the fire and the noise of the wind outside broke the silence.

"We discovered later that the task force had landed as three separate squads of six men each, using inflatable boats, at three different points. We found their boats not very well hidden along the coast away to the south of the crossing."

The other man continued with what sounded like a well-practised narrative, but Tom wondered if this was more to do with Fred's abilities as a teller of tales, rather than because it was a story he had told many times before.

"I know that you're becoming familiar with the lie of the land thereabouts," he began.

"Those rocks are dreadful!" Tom interjected, "They must have been taking a terrible risk."

Fred nodded slowly.

"That's true enough," he said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin, "They landed at high water, at the dead of night, using rubber boats and many men to fend off the reefs as they made their way inshore. They also managed to evade our shore patrols and regroup somewhere – we never found out exactly where."

“There must have been a pressing reason to land like that,” Tom insisted, “What were they trying to achieve?”

“Well, obviously they planned a stealthy attack on the Guardians on our side of the causeway,” Fred responded, “But it never became clear what the objective of the raid actually was. They could not have expected to hold the causeway for very long, so they must have been expecting reinforcements.”

“But from where?” Ifor asked suddenly, having drawn up a chair for himself and sat down silently while Fred was speaking.

“No-one seems to know,” the old Guardian answered.

“But could they not have been planning to blow up the bridge?” the little Welshman pressed.

“I don’t think so. No explosives were ever found.”

“So what actually happened?” Ifor asked, evidently speaking for them all.

Fred settled back, and continued with his tale-telling.

“Now, at that time, there was an unprecedented level of cooperation between the Guardians and the regular military. In some instances, some of my colleagues would join a patrol of the coast. Anyway, one of the indications we had was the discovery, by one of these combined patrols, of broken German radio equipment on the beach.”

“How did they know that it was German?” Sophia asked, characteristically bluntly.

“Well, the markings on the dials were not in English, for one thing,” Fred responded amusedly, “But it was the presence of a dead radio operator which really gave the game away.”

There was a collective sigh in the room at this piece of intelligence.

“In those days, we were all well-drilled in uniform recognition,” the older man continued, “And, as far as they could tell, the soldier had lost his footing and fallen from the cliff-side path.”

Tom had patrolled some of these cliff-top paths himself, and he knew how treacherous the whole area could be. The edge of the cliff was often difficult to see, and had had first-hand experience of sliding precariously on the loose stones and slippery grass. He could certainly imagine that it would be all too easy to slip and fall, especially in poor weather, and even more so when carrying a heavy pack.

“Unfortunately,” Fred continued, “The discovery of the dead soldier wasn’t soon enough. When they found him, it was just

beginning to get light. By that time they must have been ashore for hours.”

The older man explained that the surprise discovery in the first glow of the false dawn caused the patrol to set off at full tilt for the nearest point with a field telephone, which was a couple of miles away. It was almost too late: by the time the call came into the command post, the base was already under attack. Tom already knew that the command post was within the fenced encampment near the causeway, and would have to be neutralised if a military force intended to capture the causeway.

Fred was silent for a few moments, then continued.

“It was probably just as well,” he said slowly, “That we had in fact received a tip-off from the Watchers. It was vague in the extreme, even by the usual standards of their intelligence. There was nothing specific – just a generalised warning that some kind of an attack was imminent.”

He paused again.

“But it was enough for us to be on the alert. We had posted additional guards and patrols, and everyone on duty had been persuaded of the need for extra vigilance.”

In the event, it was explained, the alarm was raised almost simultaneously by the telephone call from the shore patrol and by a cry, followed almost immediately by a shot, from the perimeter guards. Some brave but unsung hero on patrol managed to get a warning shot off just before he was garrotted.

“You have to imagine a night much like this, with the Guardians struggling out in the dire weather to face who-knows-what.”

Fred stopped his account to look around the group of listeners, meeting the eyes of each of them in turn as if trying to judge their reaction under this kind of extreme circumstances.

“As it turned out, the attackers were heavily outnumbered and, without the element of complete surprise, they were quickly routed. There was an intense fire-fight in almost complete darkness. For some reason, the searchlights failed and other lighting was erratic. Half of the attackers were killed, and the rest injured to a greater or lesser extent. Three Guardians were killed, including the luckless guard who raised the alarm, as well as the – then – Warden.”

“Is that when Major Markham took over?” Tom asked.

“Er, well, no,” Fred explained, “We had a couple of temporary Wardens for a while. The Major’s only been in post for a year or so.”

“So where are the PoWs now?” Ifor inquired. The Welshman had clearly been following the tale with great attention.

“Good question. Frankly, I don’t know, and I don’t much care. They were, I’m sure, just professional soldiers doing their job. But, more importantly, the invaders clearly knew their target, and how to get to it. They certainly knew not to attempt a sea crossing directly to the Other World. And all this must have been based on some intelligence. Who knows how that was gathered?”

Tom and the others joined in the general shaking of heads at this revelation.

“So we were forced to the conclusion,” Fre continued, “That the German High Command – perhaps even Hitler himself – was aware of the existence of the crossing and the Other World. In the immediate aftermath, there was some pressure – as there so often is, it seems – to have the crossing closed immediately.”

He paused again, taking a deep breath to steady himself.

“But it does seem as if luck was on our side. It would have been much worse if the invaders had not had so much difficulty with their weapons.”

“Difficulties?” Ifor interjected, “What do you mean?”

Fred chuckled.

“Almost all of their machine guns jammed or misfired after a few bursts, for some reason. Most mysterious.”

These remarks provoked a reprise of some earlier thoughts in Tom’s mind. He had already been having his suspicions that Lyndesfarne magic can – sometimes – work in the other world. He was beginning to wonder if there are exceptions, or perhaps there are ways of getting magical artefacts out of Lyndesfarne and into England so that they still work.

“Mercifully, I suppose the outcome was fortuitous,” Fred continued, interrupting Tom’s ruminations.

“What do you mean?” the younger man asked.

“Well, think of the High Command’s perception of events. They get a single radio message that the landing itself was successful. And then there’s nothing at all – no messages, and no communications from their other sources – agents and so on – at least none that we’ve identified. As far as we understand, the mission was deemed a failure.

“What was your part in this story?” Ifor asked.

“Ah. Well funny you should ask.”

Fred stood up slowly and slipped off his jacket, hanging it neatly over the back of his chair. He then unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it

open to reveal a puckered scar just below his ribs on the left side of his torso.

Tom had seen enough battlefield injuries to realise what had happened.

“You were shot,” he said.

“Right enough, lad,” the older man replied laconically, “Picked up a bullet during the fire-fight. Wasn’t sure whether I’d make it for a while.”

Fred refastened his shirt.

“I still have my rounds to complete,” he explained apologetically, as he slipped out of the mess.

It was quiet in the room after Fred left – just a low buzz of conversation around the fire from the trainees discussing the story they had just heard. Tom was not engaged in the conversations, somehow letting the chat pass in one ear and out the other, as his Granny would probably have said. Eventually, the others grew quiet and went off to bed, leaving Tom in the room alone, still sitting by the dying embers of the fire.

Tom was left wondering about the objectives of the attack and, more interestingly, anything similar happened on the other side. He wondered if the attackers had anticipated some kind of reinforcements from the other side of the crossing. This would certainly make sense. Otherwise, it was just a suicide mission with no real objective. The invaders would need magical support whatever the aim: to force the crossing closed, they would need magical forces to be effective against the no-doubt determined efforts from both sides. Similarly, to hold the crossing open for their own use, they would need defences against whatever technology or magic the Guardians could deploy against them.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Following the dragon's attack on the bridge, the Guardians on both sides of the straights were at a higher state of alert for weeks afterwards. Patrols were doubled, additional – but still very discrete – checks were carried out on newcomers, and exhortations for extra vigilance were a daily occurrence.

Nevertheless there were no further incidents, no indications of any kind that anything unusual was happening and, more worryingly, no further leads as to the origin of the perpetrators of the attack. There were almost no tips from the Watchers, too, from either side – another disconcerting observation. Eventually the alert status was downgraded to normal, despite the slight feeling, Tom thought, of a calm before the storm.

The weeks flew by, dealing with what seemed to Tom a never-ending series of small emergencies and amusing incidents which, he had come to understand, formed a normal part of the Guardians' everyday existence. He had undertaken several tours of duty, including a variety of coastal patrols, as well as further exchange visits with the Lyndesfarne training centre.

Although he was only vaguely aware of the process, Tom was gaining a considerable amount of experience in the minutiae of his new role. It was almost a surprise when his probationary period was completed, and he was formally accepted into the ranks, promoted to the position of Junior Guardian (Third Class).

The rank and its rather idiosyncratic-sounding title amused Tom. Its quirky nature was the result of a direct translation from the language of Lyndesfarne, Tom understood, although that did not stop a certain number of humorous remarks being exchanged in the barracks at the Grange.

July arrive quicker than he had expected, and Tom had accumulated a fair amount of leave. He had applied for permission to take an extended absence of nearly a week, back in April, and it came as rather a surprise to receive a handwritten note from Major Markham confirming his approval of Tom's vacation plans.

He had continued his rather sporadic exchange of correspondence with Bram and Alistair, even though his notes had tended to devolve into trivia and the minutiae of everyday life. He had sensed a certain amount of excited anticipation in their reunion from Alistair's

missives, although he got a slight feeling that it was not only the prospect of meeting up with his old comrades that formed Alistair's motivation.

The appointed day finally arrived, and Tom woke early. After a few moments collecting his wits in the morning half-light, he bounced out of bed, caught up with an unexpected sense of freedom. He packed up his knapsack, dragging a few essentials out of the locker, expecting to be away for no more than a week. Even so, his military training and, more importantly, recent military experience, led him to pack essentials and no more, making it easy to carry. Tom considered that he could probably survive indefinitely with the things he was carrying on his back.

On this trip, he had the time to stop at the centre of the bridge. This was something that had fascinated Tom since the very first time he had encountered the crossing so many months ago. He stood for what seemed like hours studying the swirling waters below the centre of the bridge. As he watched, he idly wondered if the movement of the sea were entirely natural. The motion seemed to be disturbingly erratic, flowing first this way and then that. Finally, he shook his head, and continued his way along the causeway.

Tom had expected to walk alone to Bram's place but, as he reached the end of the causeway, he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Private Perkins! Attention!"

Tom immediately stopped and swung around, his right arm already automatically raised to a salute as military training re-asserted itself. As he realised what he was doing, a weird expression mixing distaste and surprise at his own reactions suffused his features, until he recognised Alistair, who was just stepping out of the little café.

"I've been waiting for you," the other man said, striding towards Tom with a wide grin plastered across his face.

Tom was genuinely pleased to see Alistair. The two men shook hands warmly, grasping the other man's upper arm firmly for long moments.

"Good to see you, old man," Alistair said, still with a wide smile playing about his lips.

"Likewise, I'm sure," Tom responded, feeling himself grinning in response.

Tom had assumed that he would walk to Bram's family home alone, and had resigned himself to a lengthy march. But, when he remarked on his pleasure of having a companion on the journey, Alistair just looked at him strangely for a moment.

“Why don’t we just take a portal?” he asked, pointedly.

This idea had simply not occurred to Tom but, once it had been suggested, he immediately thought it was a splendid notion. It would certainly save time, as well as being something of an adventure. He felt like he was a child again.

In contrast, Alistair seemed to be entirely blasé about the whole thing.

“You’ve been using the portals a lot then, have you?” Tom asked.

“Oh yes,” the other man replied, “Been all over the place. These portals take a bit of getting used to, but once you’ve got the hang of it, they’re easy enough.”

Alistair guided Tom to the Public Transportation building at the end of the causeway, which adjoined the café where he had been waiting. This was a modest stone-build building with a high roof and with an arched doorway at the front, where large double doors stood open. Tom studied the doors as the two men passed though. They were heavy and ponderous, and looked as if they were not shut very often but were strong and tough enough to withstand a siege when they were.

A single portal archway stood in the opposite wall. This was as large as the doorway that the men had just used to enter the building, but looked as if it had been blocked up some years ago. The stones within the arch were carefully fitted together, but looked as if the blocks were of a different material to that used to construct the arch itself.

As Tom watched, a figure appeared through the archway, looking for all the world like a ghost emerging from a wall. The spooky manifestation was belied by the unconcerned appearance of the traveller himself, who nodded politely to the two men, and walked past them towards the main door.

There were a couple of signboards set over the archway, displaying destinations and times in the angular Lyndesfarne script. Alistair studied the signs for a few moments.

“We’re in luck,” he said, “This portal will be connected to a local level four terminus in a few minutes, and it’s just one more step to get to the closest portal to Bram’s house.”

“How do you know all this?” Tom asked.

“I’ve been studying the timetable,” Alistair replied, flashing a grin, “That’s how I filled the time waiting for you to arrive.”

“Oh,” Tom said, with faint irony, “Glad to hear that you’ve been making good use of your life.”

Alistair watched the signboards intently for a further minute. Tom could see that the legends were changing periodically, although he did not really follow the details. Finally, Alistair seemed satisfied.

“Okay then, let’s go,” he said, grasping the other man lightly by the upper arm, “Straight through.”

They walked swiftly up to the archway and stepped through. Tom somehow always expected some kind of sensation, so it was quite possible that the little twist he felt in his stomach was entirely caused by his own imagination.

The terminus itself was a larger space with perhaps a dozen portal archways arranged along the walls. In contrast with the building at the causeway, this room was bustling with activity. Keeping close together, the two men dodged across the room, making their way to a second archway that Alistair had pointed out.

“Come on then,” Alistair called, breaking into a jog.

Side-by-side, the two young men dashed through the archway in front of them. As they passed through, Tom felt a slight resistance, as if some invisible fluid was slowing their movements, without actually stopping them. They popped out of the other side, stumbling slightly as the resistance disappeared.

“That was close!” Alistair exclaimed.

“What happened?” His companion asked, slightly breathlessly.

Alistair laughed. Tom thought that he had become noticeably more outgoing since the two of them had last met.

“Oh, nothing really,” Alistair explained, “We were just a little late in getting to that last portal. You could probably feel the barriers tugging at you as we went through.”

“So that’s what it was,” Tom replied.

As they left the portal building, which seemed to be a clone of the one they had entered by the causeway, Alistair explained about the safety barriers that all portals had. Apparently, portals connected two different points, but not all the time; to provide a larger selection of routes, portal connections were switched every few minutes. For safety, barriers would automatically engage shortly before the connection changed, to prevent anything from entering while the switch-over actually occurred.

“After all,” Alistair concluded, “You wouldn’t want half of you arriving in one place and the other half appearing somewhere else.”

The two men stood outside the door, looking around.

“Which way now?” Tom asked, completely failing to recognise where they were.

“This way,” Alistair said without hesitation, indicating to their left.

They shouldered their packs and set off.

As they walked along, it seemed to Tom that Alistair had something on his mind. He appeared distracted, staring into the middle distance, in a way entirely at odds with his cheery manner earlier on.

“Is there something bothering you?” Tom asked, after watching his companion in silence for a few minutes.

“Well, yes,” he confessed, “There is something worrying me. And, it might be tied up with what you’ve told me in your letters about the dragons at the crossing.”

“So what is it?” Tom pressed.

As they talked, Tom slowly became aware of the inner turmoil in his companion. On the surface, the other man was more jovial and outgoing than he had been before. But, inside, the old Alistair remained, with his rather diffident demeanour.

While they walked, disjointedly at first, but then with growing conviction, Alistair told Tom a story.

Chapter Thirty

Tom soon got his bearings, recognising the route they were following from their first trip to Lyndesfarne the previous year in the company of Bram. The road was empty, the weather was fine, if a bit breezy, and Alistair seemed to be in the mood to talk. Tom was content enough to allow him to chatter on, enjoying the relaxed moments after the recent hectic times on duty.

“My life has turned out to be every bit as itinerant as I thought it was going to be, all those months ago,” he began, “Although I still haven’t seen very much of the Other World.”

“Why is that?” Tom asked.

Alistair explained at length that the twin organisations known collectively as the Guides – the Guild of Directions in Lyndesfarne and the Travellers Guidance Group – almost invariably recruited members from their own worlds.

The theory was that natives of a world made better guides since their instincts and common sense – the things learned at one’s mother’s knee, Tom thought ruefully – corresponded to the nature of that world. So, they would instinctively react in a way appropriate to the prevailing circumstances. He had heard that this practice had saved lives in the past: in an urgent situation, a person born in England had moved automatically to operate levers and switches when someone from Lyndesfarne would have tried some emergency magical gesture.

Alistair went on to explain that, under more normal circumstances, a Guides’ duties included the organisation of travel and accommodation, as well as assistance with customs and practice in the unfamiliar society, so as to prevent the traveller from Lyndesfarne from seeming too obviously foreign.

The role also demanded skills in translation, and Alistair explained that he had received additional lessons in interpretation since he had left the Grange.

“Where did you get those?” Tom asked, surprised at the admission.

Alistair explained that he had spent quite a time at the Lyndesfarne equivalent of Cliviger Grange, the “College for Guardians” – as Tom could now translate it for himself – that the two young men and their classmates had visited before.

“As you’ll remember, they’ve got quite a place there,” Alistair went on, “And I was astonished by the way the buildings were bigger on the inside.”

Tom did remember. He too had been struck at the time by the way the Lyndesfarne buildings were dug underground, and with sleeping quarters on the lower floors. He had also been impressed by the magical skylights, which let natural light into every level. He understood that underground living was now more-or-less traditional, although the tradition had come about because of the depredations of dangerous flying creatures, like the dragons he had experienced at first-hand. The style of construction meant that there was plenty of space, and he had seen that there were lots of specialised classrooms within the facilities.

“So I have been practicing my language skills,” Alistair continued, “As well as the specialist set of capabilities to become an interpreter.”

“Find it easy, do you?” Tom enquired.

“Actually, it’s rather hard,” Alistair replied, “You have to learn to shut off your normal thought processes, and just translate the intent of the words as soon as you hear them. You don’t have time to think about what is being said. It’s taken me ages to get the knack of it, but now I’m not too bad.”

The other man shook his head at Alistair’s modesty. He had heard from other sources that the other man’s command of the language was astonishing for one exposed for the first time.

“So where have you been travelling?” Tom pressed.

“Well, I’ve been working as an understudy to my Master Guide. And we have been travelling all over the country with our Visitors.”

It had become clear to Tom that Alistair used the word “Visitor” specifically to refer to the person from one world who was being escorted around the other.

“I’ve been to Edinburgh repeatedly, for example,” he continued, “And I have been making frequent trips down to London – travelling first class on the overnight sleeper, I’ll have you know.”

Tom was amused by this observation – it was a far cry indeed from that first train trip north last year, bunking down under their greatcoats on the seats of a third-class compartment.

“So, going up in the world, then?” he quipped.

“Ha, ha,” Alistair responded ironically, “You know as well as I do that these Visitors are usually VIPs, and therefore nothing is too good for them. Of course, the Visitor is the boss, and we have to taken them where they want to go. Although you do sometimes have to

firmly offer them advice that their proposed trip simply isn't practical."

Alistair paused for a moment, as if struck by a sudden observation.

"You know, there's a surprising variation in the Visitors I have been accompanying," he said slowly, "Some have been, I suspect, rather frequent travellers to our world. In fact, I'd wager that they probably don't really need a Guide at all. I'd have supposed that they get to use our services simply because their rank or position demands that they should."

Alistair paused for a moment, clearly collecting his thoughts.

"Others, well, I have to wonder if they know anything about our world at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, some of them take to wandering around with open-mouthed astonishment or, perhaps worse, being somehow unable to come to terms with the absence of magic. One or two of them have got really upset – to the point of insanity, sometimes. The advice I've been given is to get the Visitor home as quickly as possible when this happens."

Alistair again fell silent, leaving Tom to digest what he had just been told.

"I'm worried about one of my Visitors," Alistair piped up again.

"What do you mean," Tom wondered aloud, "Did he go barmy on you?"

"No, no, nothing like that," the other man replied, "It's just that, with all of the strange goings-on at the causeway you've been telling me about, I keep wondering if there's some connection."

Alistair seemed to be rather worried about something. Finally, he stopped Tom in the road and spoke directly to him.

"The identity of the Visitors and their itinerary is supposed to be kept a secret. So you'll have to promise not to breathe a word of this to anyone, not even Bram. Okay?"

Tom readily confirmed his agreement.

"As I said before, usually I only escort visitors on our side of the crossing," Alistair continued, "So it came as something a surprise when I was asked to go and collect a Visitor from a somewhere other than the end of the causeway. And even more of a surprise when I learned that I was to perform this task on my own."

"Not accompanied by your Master?"

“Exactly. It was very strange,” Alistair explained, ““You know the way to the House of Briz?’ my Master asked me, and of course I responded ‘Yes, indeed’. So, I was sent there on my own.”

“Taking the route we’re on right now?” Tom asked.

“That’s right.”

“Well, that explains how you know the way so well.”

“Ah, well,” Alistair stammered, looking slightly embarrassed, “That wasn’t the first time I had made my way to Bram’s house unaccompanied.”

Tom looked sharply at his friend, but said nothing.

“Anyway, when I arrived, I found Yise and her mother there, but both Bram and Briz were absent, their whereabouts unknown as far as I could determine. The ladies made me very welcome” – Alistair blushed more deeply – “which was just as well, since I had a long wait.”

Alistair smiled to himself, seemingly momentarily unaware of Tom’s presence.

“Eventually I was called in. My Visitor was called Tarm – I had received a short briefing on him previously. Apparently he is a senior member of the Board of Control, and therefore the most ‘V’ of VIPs.”

Tom had heard something of the Board from the lessons at Cliviger Grange. This organisation was in overall control of the crossing from the Lyndesfarne side, and was the authority to which the Guardians in the Other World reported. The Board was also the government in charge of the Guild of Directions – the Lyndesfarne equivalent to the Guides – and the mysterious organisation known as the Watchers.

Apparently there was a similar organisation, usually also referred to as The Board, on the England side. The Guardians and the Guides were ultimately responsible to the Board in his own world.

Tom had not managed to work out the relationships between the two Boards, or indeed the interactions (if any) between the governance of the crossing and the formal British government in Westminster and Whitehall. He felt sure that there must be some official channels, judging by the aftermath of the motorcycle attack on the crossing, but suspected that they must be extremely low-key.

“Anyway,” continued Alistair, “Tarm appeared to be deep in conversation with Hamet.”

“Bram’s Uncle?”

“Yes. Bit of a shifty character, that one, I thought.”

Tom murmured his agreement with this sentiment.

“Anyway, it seemed that their discussions had just about wrapped up, and I was able to escort Tarm to the crossing. As we crossed the bridge and formally entered England, he called me over and asked if I knew the public house known as the Crossed Keys in Alnwick? You remember the one?”

Tom did indeed remember the Crossed Keys. This was the pub where they had that strange encounter with the Irish mystic before they had ever set foot in Lyndesfarne.

“Tarm seemed to be unsettled, nervous, even,” Alistair went on, “Although I could not imagine why. I had been told that he had Visited our world on several other occasions, and certainly had no problem with door handles and electric light switches.”

Alistair shook his head.

“We went on to Alnwick by car. I had previously arranged to borrow one from Cliviger Grange, and elected to drive myself, rather than drag one of the duty drivers out for a long wait. Tarm instructed me to drop him outside the pub and then wait in the car. While I was parking, I saw a person arriving. I wasn’t sure, but could have sworn it was the Warden from RDTE.”

“What, Major Markham?”

“Yes, him,” he replied, “In mufti.”

Alistair explained that he barely recognised Markham in civilian clothes, and for a while was not even sure it really was the Warden from Cliviger Grange.

“So what was the Major doing there?” Tom demanded.

“Sure beats me,” Alistair answered.

“In any case, I waited outside as I had been instructed to do. Many of our Visitors are conducting business thought to be too secret for our ears and so hanging around is just part of the job.”

“Another thing we both learned in the Army, then,” Tom quipped.

“You’re right there,” Alistair laughed, then continued his story.

“So, I escorted Tarm back across the causeway without incident, and sent him on his way through the portal. The really worrying thing is, since then, Tarm has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Tom echoed.

“Yes,” Alistair confirmed, “The day after I’d driven him over to Alnwick. Apparently, people in the Board are running around like headless chickens. They think he’s been kidnapped, although there’s been no word from any captors, no ransom demand. And the Guardians are on high alert.”

“Really?” Tom exclaimed, rather surprised, “There’s been nothing in our briefings.”

He had expected that some mention of this important development in the daily shift update meetings which started each on-duty period.

“But why would anyone want to kidnap him?” Tom asked.

As he spoke, the two men crested the slight rise that Tom remembered presaged their arrival at Bram’s house.

“Ah,” Alistair cried, ignoring the other man’s question, “Here we are at last!”

Chapter Thirty One

Alistair seemed delighted to be arriving at Bram's family house, putting Tom in mind of a puppy eager to please.

Their boots crunched over the gravel as they entered the gate and looked around. The flower-beds and kitchen garden looked well-watered, Tom thought, despite the warm weather and recent lack of rain. The grass had recently been mowed, and the hedging recently trimmed. All-in-all, he mused, a fair amount of work had been expended in maintenance of house and grounds, his experiences of farm labour last year having taught him just how much effort was involved.

At that moment, Yise appeared from the stable block, dressed in riding clothes and leading a well-groomed horse. Seeing the two young men arriving, she called out and waved vigorously to attract their attention. They strolled briskly over to her.

Bram's sister was clearly very pleased to see them, Alistair in particular. She embraced him warmly, followed by a kiss on the cheek, standing on the tips of her toes to reach her target area. Alistair reddened noticeably. It was obvious to Tom from the way that she looked at him that this was rather more than a mere acquaintanceship.

"Wonderful to see you again, Al," she said, her eyes gleaming.

Alistair took both her hands in his own and they looked into each other's eyes for a long moment.

"You remember my friend Tom, don't you?" he said eventually, pulling away from her slightly, and then putting his arm around her waist in a distinctly proprietary fashion.

"Yes, of course," she replied, smiling rather more shyly at Tom.

The horse, which had been waiting patiently during all this, chose this moment to nuzzle Yise. She broke away, giggling.

"Bram and my father are waiting for you inside," she said, "I need to exercise my horse. Now you boys run along, and I'll see you at lunch."

Looking directly at Alistair, Yise then added a phrase in the Lyndesfarne language which Tom took a few moments to understand. When he did, he reddened – it was an idiomatic phrase, an endearment with an undertone of slightly predatory and distinctly sexual intent. He supposed that, since they had been speaking only

English, Yise had assumed that Tom's understanding of the other language was limited.

The young woman swung herself expertly into the saddle, her riding clock billowing out as she did so. The horse skipped sideways, eager to be off. She settled herself quickly and nudged the beast to a fast walk, turning to wave briefly at the two men.

Tom turned to Alistair, who was still watching Yise's retreating form riding the horse towards the gates where a second mounted figure had appeared. The rider wore the not-quite-uniform of a Lyndesfarne Guardian, and appeared to be waiting to escort Yise on her morning canter.

"You've been visiting here without me," Tom said in a tone of mock admonishment.

Alistair grinned in an embarrassed manner.

"Well, yes," he stammered, "I've been coming here fairly regularly."

"No wonder you knew the way so well. And you didn't mention it in your letters."

"Well, it was not the kind of thing I was very comfortable writing about. Besides, I wasn't sure until recently how serious she was."

"If you ask me," Tom smirked, thumping his friend playfully on the shoulder, "You've got nothing to worry about."

Guided by Alistair, the two men made their way into the house. They found Bram and his father sitting in the comfortable room that Briz seemed to use as an office, or perhaps a study. The two men sat either side of the large table, which was illuminated by several of the magical lanterns commonplace in Lyndesfarne.

They were poring, heads together, over a large sheet of paper which, as he drew closer, he could see was a map of the area. As they watched, Briz stabbed a forefinger on a location before making a spreading movement with his fingers, a gesture Tom knew meant "make larger" or, perhaps, "expand". Obediently, the image on the map rippled and redrew itself to show an enlarged representation of the area he had just pointed at.

At the sound of Tom's boots scuffing the stone flags, Briz and Bram looked up, only just registering the presence of the newcomers. Both father and son looked tired and careworn, very much less upbeat and carefree than their normal ironic selves, and Bram looked even more burdened and exhausted than any time Tom had seen him in the Army, even under the most extreme of battlefield circumstances.

Briz beckoned them in.

"You made it then," Bram said, wearily, "Come and sit down."

He stood up and grasped each of them warmly by the hand, drawing them into the room. The two young men made themselves comfortable in chairs by the unlit fireplace. Almost as an afterthought, Bram made another casual gesture at the magic map, causing it to roll itself neatly at one end of the table.

“Let me get you some refreshments,” he suggested as he made to step out of the room, nearly collided with Yellez coming the other way.

Tom and Alistair moved to stand up politely, but she waved them down again, smiling.

“I was just going to make some chocolate,” Bram said to his mother.

“Oh, I can do that,” she replied cheerfully, “You boys sit and catch up with your news.”

Tom and Alistair spent quite some time reprising much of the news they have already communicated in their letters. Yellez soon returned with the hot chocolate, handing it out in silence as Alistair talked about his assignment to the Guides.

Soon it was Tom’s turn. Briz, in particular, seemed very interested to hear at first-hand some of Tom’s experiences. Both he and Bram listened carefully as Tom told them about the motorcycle attack and what he had learned of the subsequent investigations.

As Tom brought his retelling to a close, Alistair stood up unexpectedly.

“I need to step outside for a few moments,” he said quickly, “Don’t wait for me. Tom’s already told me about the dragons, so I won’t miss anything.”

Briz said nothing, but nodded his head gently with a characteristically wry smile playing about his lips.

After Alistair had left the room, Tom repeated the tale of his chance meeting with Old Ged and the subsequent – thwarted – attempt to entice a flight of dragons across the causeway. Again, Briz listened closely, occasionally interrupting with questions and clarifications of his own. Bram sat quietly throughout, apparently following the story, but not

“It was a very clever plan,” Briz said when he had finished, “Dragons are terrified of water, even when they are flying. They never fly very high, anyway – they like to smell the landscape below them, as well as see it. I’ve heard of them panicking at the sight of a not-very-wide river. The smell of the pigs must have driven them to the point of insanity, especially since they were probably starving.”

At that moment, Yise appeared in the doorway of her father's study followed, a few seconds later, by Alistair.

"I'm back," she said, looking flushed and excited. Tom was not sure whether this was as a result of an exhilarating ride on horseback, or whether there was some other reason.

Briz looked from his daughter to Alistair and back again.

"I take it you've already caught up with Yise?" he said to Alistair.

"Yes, sir," he replied promptly, "She was just going out riding as we arrived."

"And now she's back, evidently in one piece, and with nothing to report, I take it?"

Yise shook her head slowly. Bram appeared to be hiding a smirk behind his hand.

"Which means that it must be nearly lunchtime."

Briz stood up slowly and stretched his back.

"Oh, there must be just time to walk the gardens, I think," Yise said archly, turning her head to look sideways at Alistair. The young man reddened perceptibly.

Briz smiled warmly and nodded his assent.

Alistair and Yise walked together around the pathways, trailed by the other two men. Tom was beginning to feel just a little like a gooseberry.

"Do you think those two are..." Tom hesitated, unsure how to continue.

"Almost certainly," Bram replied cheerfully, glancing at the other man, "Don't worry – Yise certainly knows her own mind, and there's nothing that you or I – or even my parents – could have said or done which would have changed anything."

"Well, they certainly look well together," Tom continued, watching the young woman pointing out herbs and bushes to Alistair, never moving more than a few inches away from him at any time.

A bell rang out from the house behind them. Yise and Alistair affected not to have heard the sound.

"Time to go in," Bram said, raising his voice, "Lunchtime!"

Lunch was served in the kitchen, around the huge wooden table which filled the centre of the room. It was a rather more subdued affair than on the previous occasion Tom had lunched there, even though Yellez and her sister-in-law produced another fine example of farmhouse cooking.

Alistair and Yise sat close together at one end of the table, talking quietly between themselves. Bram and Briz sat at the other end, conversing quietly between themselves. Tom, sitting between Bram

and Alistair, found himself slightly shut out of the conversations and at a bit of a loose end.

He glanced around the table. Briz's sister-in-law, who Tom eventually remembered was called Preda, seemed even more morose and depressed than on their last visit. She sat with her shoulders hunched, picking at her food and answering in monosyllables when spoken to. Her children also seemed to have caught the same mood, sitting quietly and showing none of the lively sparkiness that they had shown on Tom previous visit.

Taking advantage of a lull in their discussions, Tom interrupted Bram to ask quietly about Preda.

"Her husband Hamet has disappeared," Bram replied equally quietly, "No-one seems to know where he has gone. We're not sure whether he has been abducted or gone off for obscure reasons of his own."

"What does Preda think?" Tom rejoined.

Bram explained that Yellez has questioned Hamet's wife closely. She had been told that he had been distracted for some time. Preda felt sure that something unusual was going on, but he had not told her anything.

"Usually, Hamet never stands up to his wife," Bram continued, "Completely henpecked, really. But unusually, on this occasion, the more she pestered and nagged, the more determined he seemed to be to tell her nothing, and to push her away."

Chapter Thirty Two

After lunch, the four men returned to Briz's study, where the older man practically collapsed into a chair. He waved at the others to take seats.

"We've been out and about a fair bit recently," Bram said, with what Tom took to be laconic understatement.

"I think you always get around rather a lot," Tom remarked shrewdly.

Bram laughed out loud, and even his father's face cracked into a sardonic smile.

"Well, it is part of my job," he retorted.

"And what, exactly, is your job?" Tom asked, quite genuinely interested. He had speculated on this very topic more than once over the last few months, and he had certainly entertained a few suspicions of his own.

"To explain that, you first need to understand what my Dad's position actually is," Bram replied, looking at his father.

Briz nodded.

"I am a full member of the Board of Control, and I have a seat on one of the outer Boards concerned with the management of the Guardians."

"So you're in charge of the Guardians?" Alistair asked.

"No, no, nothing like that," Briz laughed, "Normally, I act in an advisory role, collating reports from our agents and other visitors to your world. I give advice to the Inner Board, when they ask for it – and sometimes when they don't."

"Like a spymaster?" Alistair pressed.

Briz snorted.

"A bit over-dramatic, but probably not too far from the truth."

"And now I can explain my role," Bram interjected, "Put simply, I'm one of my father's agents."

Tom was not entirely surprised by this, and he also got the strong impression that this was not shocking news to Alistair either.

"So that's what you were doing in our world during the War, then?" Tom asked.

Bram glanced at his father, who raised an eyebrow.

"That's right," he replied, "My father, and the Boards themselves, wanted first-hand reports on the progress of the War, so that they

could decide on a course of action concerning the crossing. I was merely one of, I strongly suspect, many such agents in your world during the conflict.”

“Is that what you were doing, writing in that little notebook of yours?” Tom wondered aloud, “Writing reports?”

“Yes,” Bram replied, suddenly looking a little uncomfortable, “And I would later arrange for my reports to be communicated back to my father.”

“Yes, I get reports all the time,” Briz said quickly, “Delivered by the Messengers, sometimes, or using the slates.”

Tom again wondered about Bram’s notebook. He had learned a great deal about the properties of magic over the last few months, during his training classes back at Cliviger Grange. Now, he was struck by the similarity between Bram’s notebook and the magical writing slates widely used in the world of Lyndesfarne.

Even so, he had been told continually that no magic now worked in his world, and no complex technology would work in the Other World. Apparently, this was because of the properties of the barrier between the worlds, which disabled magical items crossing from Lyndesfarne, as well as causing all kinds of sophisticated machinery to fail immediately.

Tom did not believe it. He suspected that there was a secret method of evading the effects of the barrier, some way in which otherwise proscribed items could be moved between the worlds without damage. Things like Bram’s notebook, and perhaps other items, too.

He wondered about invisibility, a magical capability usually embedded in an item of jewellery – typically a brooch or bracelet. Maybe Bram had been equipped with such an accessory, given the way that Bram had appeared right in front of them on their first acquaintance in that moonlit Normandy field.

Even so, he could not think of a reason why the magic should have suddenly failed, and it had certainly put Bram’s life in danger, so it was unlikely that he had switched – or gestured – it off just at that moment. Conceivably Bram had just been unlucky, but even Bram’s luck, which had served him so well on many occasions – if only to get a seat in a pub – might itself be enhanced magically.

“We should talk about Hamet,” Bram gently prompted his father.

“Yes, yes, we should,” Briz returned, “Although I confess that I’ve run out of ideas of what to do about that situation.”

He paused thoughtfully for a few moments, staring into the middle distance and rubbing his chin ruminatively.

“Hamet had gone out riding, something he does not do very often these days,” Briz said, “Although he was once a reasonably accomplished horseman. He borrowed one of my daughter’s horses and set out, proposing to ride one of the local tracks. When he was late in returning, we initially assumed he had simply got lost.”

“I’ve ridden those trails with Yise,” Alistair interjected, “They’re pretty well marked, and it’s hard to imagine going astray. A child could follow them.”

“That’s right,” Briz agreed, “So we began to think he had had some kind of an accident, a fall in the woods – he was out of practice with horses, after all. When he did not return on time, Preda, his wife, got increasingly worried, although she does tend to fret a little bit too much. Once we finally concluded that Hamet really had gone missing, we contacted the local police, as well as the Guardians and various parts of the Board.”

“What’s Hamet’s role?” Tom interjected, “Does he work for the Board of Control as well?”

“He has a more minor role in the boards,” Briz replied, “In a group that liaises with the organisations which handle portals and transport here in Lyndesfarne.”

“A search of the local area, by the Guardians and other civil forces, found nothing,” Briz continued, “But while the search was going on, someone found Hamet’s horse wandering nearby, seemingly intent on making its own way back to the stables.”

“Was the horse all right?” Alistair enquired.

Briz nodded, smiling wryly at the younger man’s expression of concern for the dumb animal or more likely, Tom thought, for the feelings of the horse’s owner.

“On this news, we redoubled the search efforts, although we still could not find the man himself. However, we detected signs of a struggle in the woods.”

Briz sighed deeply.

“There’s a disused building on the trail, which was at one time the works of a timber company. It’s now in a very decrepit state of repair.”

“Yise pointed out the old lumber mill when we were riding,” Alistair said, “It’s little more than a few stone walls and mounds of rotting timber, all heavily overgrown. It’s almost invisible in the woods.”

“That’s right,” Briz confirmed, “Even so, at one time, the building contained a goods portal, used to transport the cut timber to other parts of our world. Of course this was shut down a long time ago.”

But, when we investigated more closely, there was a suggestion – no more – that this portal had been used recently, and it is just possible that whoever abducted Hamet had somehow re-instated the portal, albeit briefly, to whisk him away.”

“You know, I’ve heard stories recently that suggested that hidden portals were being used elsewhere,” Tom said.

Briz sat up suddenly and Bram gave Tom a strange look.

“What do you mean?” Briz said sharply.

“Remember Old Ged, in the Dragon’s Nest?”

The other men nodded.

“When I ran into him the second time, when he warned me about dragons being captured, he said he had lost the dragon hunters he was trailing, that they just seemed to disappear. He said he thought they might have used a hidden portal of some kind.”

“You never told me that bit of the story,” Bram said reprovingly.

“Well, he wasn’t certain,” Tom responded apologetically, “And he did seem slightly embarrassed even to be suggesting such a thing.”

“It wouldn’t be entirely impossible,” Briz said slowly, “Our world is littered with disused portals. It’s not uncommon to see the characteristic shape of their arches in ruins, or even in buildings in regular use.”

“So what does it take to re-open a portal?” Alistair asked.

“Well, it’s a substantial undertaking, required the same amount of effort and time as the original,” Briz said, adding as an afterthought, “Although the exertion can be considerably reduced if you can use the detailed records from its construction.”

“Why is that?” Alistair pressed.

“Oh, it’s just because it is much easier to repeat the precise sequence of steps without having to discover the, well, alignments and tensions for yourself.”

Tom knew that the words just used by Briz were the English translations of some basic steps in the construction of magical items of all kinds.

“But those records are supposed to be kept safely in the Board of Transportation,” Briz continued.

Tom thought for a moment, then asked a little diffidently, “Would Hamet have had access to these portal records?”

Bram and Briz glanced at each other, suddenly looking worried.

“Perhaps,” Briz conceded slowly, “But who would want such information? And, more importantly, what would induce my brother to give it to them?”

“Father,” Bram piped up, “You know those reports that some quasi-military group is being assembled in secret?”

Briz looked irritated.

“Of course I know about them,” he muttered, “But there’s nothing to substantiate these rumours. Official accounts have of course been circulated to the Guardians on both sides, but there’s been no corroboration.”

“True enough,” his son agreed, “But they could be the same group as the dragon-hunters Ged told us about, or at least organised and commanded by the same conspiracy. And, it would be exactly that kind of group who might want access to a private portal network.”

There was a sudden silence while Briz glowered in the direction of the fireplace.

“What’s going on?” he erupted eventually, “This could be much bigger than I thought. Not just the maniac scheming of a few madmen. And this is not the only recent disappearance of a member of the Boards.”

“Like Tarm, you mean?” Alistair asked.

“Yes,” Briz replied, looking sharply at the younger man, “What do you know about that?”

Tom looked meaningfully at Alistair.

“Well,” Alistair began, “I was a Guide for Tarm recently. But I’m not supposed to speak of what I see or hear when assisting a Visitor.”

Briz looked thoughtful for a moment, then said quietly, “I think, on this occasion, you would do more good if you were to put aside your oath of secrecy.”

“Well, OK,” Alistair said, equally quietly. “Well, I was assigned to guide Tarm a few weeks ago. It was my first assignment without my Guide Master. And I came here, to this house to collect him.”

“Here?” Bram and Briz echoed in unison.

“Well, yes,” Alistair said, taken aback, “It wasn’t a secret. Yise and her mother knew I was here.”

“Yes, well,” muttered Briz, “But you’re always hanging around this house, for some reason.”

Bram smirked at Alistair, who blushed astonishingly deeply.

“Even so, I didn’t realise that you were here in an official capacity.”

“Well, I was,” Alistair insisted, “When I arrived, Tarm was in conference with Hamet. I waited around for ages then, when they had finished, I guided Tarm over to the Other World.”

Alistair then repeated what he had already confided to Tom, about Tarm's meeting with Major Markham in the pub in Alnwick.

Tom himself piped up at this point. He told the assembled company, to their increasing interest and concern, about the meeting he had inadvertently seen between Markham and Hamet, in the hidden garden at Cliviger Grange.

At the conclusion of his story, there was a silence, as everyone digested the importance of the information just imparted. Briz stood up and paced the room impatiently.

“So, what do we know?” He said rhetorically, “We know of a meeting between Tarm and Markham in England, and Tarm has disappeared subsequently. We know of a meeting between Hamet and Markham, also in the other world, and Hamet has also disappeared. And we also know that Tarm and Hamet met here.”

He was still and silent for a few seconds.

“Well,” Briz said finally, rubbing his hands together, “It seems to me that our next action is obvious: we need to talk to Warden Markham, as soon as possible.”

Chapter Thirty Three

After a few moments' further contemplation, Briz delegated Bram to travel to Cliviger Grange to interview Major Markham. Tom and Alistair looked at each other, then immediately volunteered to accompany him and Bram, after exchanging a meaningful glance with his father, accepted their offer.

"Be careful, son," Briz chided, as the three young men stood up to leave the room.

"Don't worry," Bram replied blithely, "I'm always careful."

Tom and Alistair grabbed their baggage, which they had dumped neatly close to the door they had entered earlier. Bram swept a long cloak from a peg nearby and swung it expertly over his shoulders, fastening the front with a large brooch and a near-instinctive gesture. He selected a long staff from a rack which appeared to contain an eclectic collection of walking sticks, canes and hiking poles, and then pulled a small bag onto his back.

He looked, as Tom remarked aloud, very much like a member of the Messengers.

Bram grinned broadly in response.

"It's a disguise," he said bluntly, "And, as it happens, I am actually an honorary member of the Messengers. Besides, it should discourage anyone from delaying us unnecessarily."

They set off through the front door into the blustery summer weather. The three of them walking as one once again was eerily familiar to Tom, as they had spent so much time in each other's company over the last few years. But they were not so carefree, he considered, and the party was rather less jolly than any of their previous trips together.

They returned to the causeway by the route Tom and Alistair had used earlier that day. It was necessary to wait for the correct portal connections for a short period, during which they sat in uncharacteristic silence, each of the young men seemingly sunk in their own thoughts.

Once their transfer was complete, they marched straight out of the portal building to the causeway entrance where, as usual, several members of the Lyndesfarne Guardian forces were carefully watching the passing travellers. Tom recognised a few of the faces, but he could not bring any names to mind.

Without hesitation, Bram strode over to the nearest Guardian, who was leaning on the stone wall in the studiously casual fashion encouraged by their training. Seeing Bram's staff of office, the Guardian stood up straight, clearly alarmed that he was being approached by one of the notoriously aloof Messengers.

Speaking in the Lyndesfarne language, Bram asked about current alerts and unexpected activities, with Tom and Alistair listening intently to the answers. After a few minutes, it became clear that there was really nothing unanticipated going on at the moment, and the Guardian looked even more confused after his light grilling by the three young men.

Bram turned to the other two.

"I think we should just press on," he said, "I don't want to advertise our presence unnecessarily."

Tom and Alistair nodded wordlessly, and they strode off along the causeway. The wind, which had been merely blustery inland, was much stronger here. A layer of grey cloud covered the straights and coastline as far as Tom could see, but mercifully there was no immediate sign of rain. The communications tower was all but invisible, its dull paintwork barely distinguishable against the skyline.

They walked on with their heads bent, the cries of the seagulls nearly drowned by the sound of the wind in their ears. They were all very glad to get to the relative shelter of the Guard building and the stunted trees that dotted the coastline. Tom spotted Ifor, who was on duty, and asked if there was anything unusual going on. Ifor nodded at Alistair, who he obviously recognised immediately. He then looked askance at Bram, who was standing quietly a little to one side, his face almost hidden under the hood of his cape.

Turning back to Tom, Ifor made it clear that there was no indication of anything amiss.

"All quiet, isn't it?" the Welshman said cheerfully.

Tom had gained a slight reputation as someone whose presence sometimes presaged some crisis. He supposed that this was not entirely surprising in the light of recent events, given his involvement in the motorcycle attack as well as the incident with the dragons.

Tom's old mentor Fred was also on duty and the older man came hurrying up as soon as he saw that Tom was asking questions.

"Something going on, lad?" he asked, looking Tom in the eye.

"Not really," Tom replied, "I'm just helping Bram with an investigation."

He nodded in the direction of the hooded figure. Fred turned just as Bram drew back his hood and said, "Hello, old friend."

“Bram, you rascal,” the other man replied, “I didn’t know you’d joined the Messengers.”

Bram laughed.

“Well, you know I like to get around.”

Fred joined in the laughter.

“So what’s this investigation?” he asked.

“Well, you’ve heard about the disappearance of my uncle Hamet?”

Fred nodded. Both he and the other Guardians clustered around were listening intently.

“And have you heard about a member of the Board known as Tarm?” Bram continued.

“Yes, I do recall something from the daily briefings,” Fred replied, “Didn’t he disappear recently, too?”

“Correct. And we have reason to believe that these occurrences are connected. We’ve got to talk to Warden Markham as soon as possible,” Bram said insistently, adding, “Is he here?”

“Not seen him,” Fred said, suddenly looking seriously alarmed. He looked around at the cluster of Guardians, who were shaking their heads and muttering negative-sounding mumbles.

“Fine. On to the Grange, then,” Bram said, pulling his hood back over his head, “Keep your eyes open, won’t you?”

Tom suggested that they use Bram’s Messenger privileges to commandeer transport. There was a staff car from the Reserve Defence Training Establishment parked up close to the causeway entrance, the young driver now leaning on the bonnet smoking and watching the excited group of Guardians with mild interest.

As Bram and his companions approached, he threw aside his fag and stood to attention.

“I’m sorry, but we need to take your car,” Bram said gently.

The other man’s eyes swivelled back and forth, belatedly recognising both Tom and Alistair as recent graduates from RDTE, but unsure of the reasons why they were accompanying a supposedly unapproachable Messenger.

Tom was on nodding terms with the driver, whose name, he recalled, was Oliver and who was one of the staff from the garages at the Grange. Tom held out his hand for the car keys.

“I’ll drive,” he said, holding out his hand.

Finally coming to a decision, Oliver dug into his pockets and handed over the key.

“Please look after the car,” he begged, “Otherwise Edgar will have my guts for garters.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful,” Tom replied.

Tom had used his acquaintance with Edgar the garage foreman to borrow a vehicle from time to time, to practice his driving skills. On the first occasion, Edgar himself accompanied him, presumably to make sure that he did in fact know how to drive. Fortunately, Tom had had the basics of vehicle control instilled into him by his Uncle George, and Edgar was soon convinced that the young man was not likely to recklessly damage any of his precious trucks and cars.

Bram and Alistair clambered into the passenger seats while Tom slid behind the wheel and operated the electric starter. The car fired immediately, a testament to the careful maintenance lavished on the vehicle by Edgar and his crew. As they left, the Guardians on duty were noticeably more alert and tense, conversing tersely with each other as they moved purposefully around the area.

They drove past the tiny, not-quite-permanent fair that occupied a walled area close to the causeway, where Bram had exchanged money on their first visit. The market appeared nearly deserted, with tent-flaps closed against the wind. The shutters and doors of the brightly-painted caravans were bolted shut, with their tethered horses standing patiently nearby, sheltering as best they could under the trees.

The road took them past the fenced-off area used as a local support point for the Guardians manning the causeway and patrolling the coastline. Again, it seemed close to deserted, with just a lone sentry at the guard post. The wind was whipping at the trees and rattling the wire fencing.

“Looks like there’s a storm coming,” Alistair commented.

“Very probably,” Tom agreed, “Let’s get to the Grange as quickly as possible.”

Tom knew several routes between the causeway and the Grange, having travelled all of them on numerous occasions. None of them seemed particularly quicker than any other. He understood from discussions overhead in the garages that the drivers each had favourite routes, and argued vociferously on the supposed merits of their preferred directions.

Tom piloted the car skilfully along his preferred route. They made good time along the narrow lanes, arriving after fifteen minutes or so at the wrought iron gates of RDTE. They were waved through by the sentry, tyres crunching on the gravel drive, and parked – or, thought Tom, more like abandoned – directly in front of the main entrance to the Grange.

The three men swiftly made their way up the worn stone steps to the entrance and through the imposing double doors. They marched along the broad corridors and up the sweeping stair case of the grand old house, with Bram's cape sweeping over the polished wooden floors, finally arriving at the Warden's office. They knocked on the door.

"Come."

Bram pushed open the door. Duty Warden Arden was sitting at the desk, poring over some papers with a fountain pen in his hand and acting, as it seemed he often did, as adjutant to the Major.

"Ah," Bram stammered, momentarily taken aback at Arden's presence, "I was expected to find Warden Markham."

"The Major is not at Cliviger Grange," Arden replied primly, setting down his pen and shuffling the stack of paper in front of him.

"Do you know where he is?" Tom asked, adding, "It's really urgent, sir."

Arden looked coldly at the three young men, clearly irritated by their interruption to his vital administrative tasks.

"He's just set off to the crossing," he said eventually, "He received a phone call, perhaps ten minutes ago, saying that he was needed elsewhere."

"Did he say where?" Tom interjected.

"He did not," Arden replied, "He merely said that he could be away for a day or two, and that I should run things in his absence."

Tom and Alistair glanced at each other. Has Markham disappeared, too, Tom wondered, or was there some other reason for his sudden departure?

Bram drew himself up straight, holding onto his staff firmly. The movement seemed to draw Arden's attention to his Messenger appearance.

"I need you to get a telephone message to the crossing guard post immediately," Bram said, speaking with an astonishing authority that Tom and Alistair had never heard before, "Tell them to intercept Major Markham, and get them to inform him that I have an urgent message from Board Member Briz, one that I must deliver in person."

Arden must have recognised Bram for who he was just at that moment, as his whole attitude changed abruptly.

"Right away," he said ingratiatingly, reaching for the telephone.

Chapter Thirty Four

It was the evening before the graduation ceremony at Cliviger Grange. This was the point at which Tom, Alistair and the others in their intake would cease to be trainees at the Reserve Defence Training Establishment, and become probationary members of the Guardian forces.

There had been something of a celebratory atmosphere in the mess-room that evening. The meal time had been unusually noisy, with much loud conversation and the comparing of notes. Much of the conversation was discussing what their new postings were going to be. The official list had appeared on the notice board earlier that day, and the group of trainees had flocked around to find out what the official recommendations for their future was going to be.

It seemed that their destinations would be many and varied, and Tom wondered how easy it would be to keep in touch over the coming months and years.

Alistair already knew that he would be joining the Guides, and would therefore be embarking on an extremely itinerant way of life. Tom, along with Ifor and some of the others, would be attached to the mainstream Guardian forces at the causeway. This would mean shortly moving to another part of the brick-built barracks blocks at the Grange.

Other members of their intake would soon be going their separate ways, too. Stan and Charlie, whose innate skill with the language of Lyndesfarne had gained a head start from their childhood exposure with their extended family, would be joining the Guild of Directions, moving over to live in Lyndesfarne for the foreseeable future. In their case, however, they were to train as interpreters, working within the Guild itself to translate documents of all kinds.

Tom had wondered about this role. Stan had rather diffidently explained that, while there were a fair number of people who were fluent in both languages, for certain politically-sensitive documents, or those with a highly technical content, it was vital to provide an authorised translation in order to avoid embarrassing or even dangerous misunderstandings.

Sophia, whose rather direct personality and considerable physical presence had drawn her to the attention of the Warden. She was also to be attached to the Guardians. Tom was given to understand that it

was considered to be advantageous to have both men and women on duty at the crossing, given the very occasional necessity to carry out close body searches on suspected smugglers. Tom rather suspected that Sophia would be in her element with her devil-may-care attitude, not to mention the confidence she had gained during the hand-to-hand combat training undertaken by Mister Giles.

Marjorie, who usually managed to conceal an exceptionally astute and slightly intimidatingly quick mind behind the façade of bubbly cheerfulness, would be retained at the Grange for ‘additional instruction’. This, Tom understood, was a euphemism for her induction into one of the unnamed intelligence-gathering organisations whose existence had not quite been fully admitted during their briefing sessions.

She would be joining a select group occupying a set of quiet offices on the top floor of the old house, poring over reports, and producing summaries and recommendations for those in charge. Tom suspected Marjorie’s job was probably a supporting role for the responsibility he had earlier discovered Bram’s father Briz maintained.

Later that evening, Tom and Alistair were in the sleeping quarters they had shared throughout their months as trainees. They were, rummaging through their lockers, sorting through the odds and ends that seemed to have accumulated like mushrooms in the darkness.

Tom had decided that the easiest way to manage the transfer from one set of barracks to the other was to pack all of his belongings into his kitbag. This was, he considered easier than making several trips, and in any case he did not actually have a great deal of stuff.

Alistair had a more difficult task. Although the Travellers’ Guidance Group was based in Cliviger Grange, he would not have a permanent domicile in the buildings. Guides used the Visitor’s dormitories from time to time, but the only private space that Alistair would have was a tiny locker in a dingy and infrequently-visited basement of the old house.

Alistair picked up his Grandfather’s pocket-watch, and stood holding it thoughtfully for a few moments, turning it over and over in his hands. Finally, he turned to Tom.

“Could you do me a favour?” he asked.

“Of course. What can I do for you?”

He held up the watch by its chain.

“Could you look after this for me?” he said carefully, “I think it’s quite valuable and, more importantly, it’s the only thing I have left from the old man.”

“Well, of course,” Tom agreed, “But why leave it with me?”

“I’ll be travelling a lot over the next few months,” Alistair replied, “In and out of Lyndesfarne. I’m certain that this old watch is far too delicate to risk taking through the barrier to Lyndesfarne, especially if I’m going to be whizzing back and forth like a blue-arsed fly. So I want to leave it somewhere safe, and I don’t want it mouldering in a locker I may not get to attend very frequently.”

Tom grinned then nodded his agreement. Alistair handed over the watch, and the other man carefully wrapped the watch in a scrap of cloth, carefully packing it away amongst his own things in his rucksack.

Alistair returned to his rummaging. At the back of the cupboard, he located the strange pendant he had found while digging ditches around Holme Farm the previous summer, still contained in the flat box made of that curious material he had originally mistaken for metal.

He had carefully cleaned both box and pendant one rainy evening at the farm, brushing away the decomposed tissue paper that had originally protected the ornament. Although he had been unable to remove the tarnish on the metal setting, the stone itself had succumbed to copious quantities of what Tom’s Granny would have referred to as ‘elbow grease’, and now shone with what seemed to be a faint inner green glow in all but the brightest of conditions.

Alistair opened the stoneware container and pulled out the pendant, holding it up for Tom’s inspection by the length of bailing twine he had threaded through the setting’s fixing loop.

“Remember this?” he asked.

Tom reached over and cupped the ornament in the palm of his hand. It felt cool against his skin. The stone glowed gently, shadowed from the fading sunlight which slanted through the window behind him. He squinted closer, peering at the curious markings now clearly visible on the surface of the stone. Even with his new-found understanding of the language of Lyndesfarne, he still could not fathom any kind of meaning from the engravings.

After a few moments study, he concluded that, although the markings were some kind of writing, it was one he did not understand. He remained uncertain whether the language was from some foreign part of his own world, or conceivably from some other part of the world of Lyndesfarne.

“It’s rather a beautiful thing,” he said softly to Alistair, releasing his gentle hold on the artefact.

“Isn’t it?” the other man replied, “Quite something to find in a ditch.”

Tom nodded his agreement, then returned to his delving in the recesses of his own storage compartments.

Alistair seemed unsure of what to do with the pedant he had found all those months ago. He looked at Tom askance then, appearing to come to a decision, he rewrapped the ornament carefully and slipped it back into its curiously-finished ceramic box.

Alistair interrupted Tom’s housekeeping, clearing his throat discreetly.

The other man looked up, already smiling wryly at the question he anticipated from Alistair.

“Could you look after this as well?”

“Of course. I’d be delighted,” he said, rather formally.

He took the stone box and packed it carefully in his bag, nestling close to the old watch.

Later, long after Tom had moved into his new barracks – he was now sharing a tiny dormitory with Ifor – and Alistair had departed on his peregrinations, Tom once again pulled out the mysterious stoneware box. He opened it, meticulously extracted the pendant from its wrapping of tissue paper, and dangled it once again from his fingers. He wondered idly if there was any connection between the ornament and the strange antics of the old gleaners in the fields he had watched so assiduously the previous summer.

Chapter Thirty Five

The three companions left the Warden's office with Arden speaking quietly but urgently into the telephone behind them. They set off in haste along the corridor, their boots and Bram's staff squeaking in unison on the polished floorboards.

As they turned the corner which led to the stairs to the ground floor, they suddenly encountered Brasham, the surprisingly quietly-spoken Sergeant that had previously guided Tom and Alistair on their first trip to the Lyndesfarne School for Guardians, when they were still trainees.

The Sergeant seemed intent on his own business, his mind somewhere far away, but he stepped automatically to one side to let the other men through. They walked quickly past, but just then Brasham's attention snapped back to the here-and-now.

"You there!" he called out, "What are you up to?"

The three companions stopped immediately and turned around as one. Brasham evidently recognised both Tom and Alistair immediately, having been in charge of them both on more than one occasion. His eyes widened as his glance took in Bram, rapidly identifying the cloak and staff as that of a Messenger.

"I know you, don't I?" He said, after a closer look at Bram's face, "And I know your father, too."

Bram looked startled for a moment, then looked again, studying the other man through narrowed eyes.

"It's Brasham," he said finally, holding up a hand in greeting.

It seemed to Tom that Bram had just used a subtly different pronunciation of the other man's name.

"So what are you doing, wandering the halls of Cliviger Grange?"

Bram flourished that wry grin of his.

"My father's asked us" – he indicated Tom and Alistair with a sweep of his hand – "to track down Warden Markham, and to ask him a few questions."

Brasham raised an eyebrow.

"Do you, now?" he said laconically, "He's not in his office, then?"

Bram shook his head.

"As it happens," the Sergeant continued, "I've been keeping an eye on the Major myself, just recently."

The Sergeant's face twisted into a sardonic smile that Tom had never seen before. He was beginning to wonder if Brasham could give Bram a run for his money in the ironic expressions department.

"And what is it that you want to ask him about?" Sergeant Brasham asked quietly.

"Well, it seems that my friends here have come by some information," Bram replied, also lowering his voice, "It concerns the recent disappearance of my Uncle Hamet."

"Go on."

Bram and Brasham had moved closer together, so that they were now face to face, with only a few inches between them. It seemed to Tom that there was some kind of hidden communication going on, something he could not interpret from where he stood.

"For example, we know that Markham had a meeting with Hamet, here in the Grange – well, in the grounds, to be precise."

"Hmm. And how exactly do you know this?"

Bram pointed a finger to one side. As one, the two men swivelled to face Tom.

This seemed to be his cue to speak about the time he had skived off from his chores, and wandered along the quiet pathways through the grounds to the walled garden and old tennis court tucked away at the rear of the house. He explained how he had seen Hamet and Markham in conversation, but had not been able to overhear what they had been saying.

"Aha! So it was you," Brasham exclaimed, "I had wondered who the hidden bystander was. You must have heard me step on a twig – quite deliberately, I have to add. I wanted to flush you out, but you managed to move so quickly through the undergrowth that I lost you almost immediately."

"Sorry about that," Tom said apologetically, "But I wasn't supposed to be in that part of the grounds at all."

"I understand that," the Sergeant replied gently, "Mind you, you certainly have a way of moving quickly and quietly, young man. Really rather impressive."

He looked askance at Bram.

"Perhaps we can find some better use for his talents in the future?"

Bram nodded slowly, not taking his eyes off Tom for a long moment. Then he turned back to Brasham.

"I can see we've got your attention," he said, "And there's more."

Bram briefly retold the story where Tarm and the mufti-clad Markham had met in the Pub. He reminded the Sergeant about

Tarm's position in the Board of Control – although Tom suspected that he did not, strictly speaking, need to – as well as the fact that the Board Member had also recently disappeared mysteriously. He did not mention Alistair's role in this at all, although Brasham did look quizzically in his direction a couple of times. Tom imagined that Bram was not keen to have Alistair's breach of the Guides' rules too widely known.

After Bram had finished, Brasham stood silently for a few moments.

“Well, well, well,” he breathed eventually.

He put his head on one side.

“I've had my suspicions about Markham for some time, but I've not been able to find anything untoward. But there are a few questions about his military service record – there appear to be some gaps and inconsistencies, as if some attempt has been made to cover something up.”

“What do you mean?” Bram asked, suddenly sounding more urgent.

“The official records say that the Major was in France and Germany for the entire War. But there are irregularities – some documents we've managed to unearth suggest that he was briefly seconded elsewhere.”

“Where?”

“Back to Blighty,” the Sergeant said, “And only for a few weeks, mind you. We believe he was attached to the military training camp at Long Benton.”

The unexpected use of the place name made Tom jump.

“What? Near Newcastle?” He interjected.

“That's right,” Brasham agreed, “Do you know it?”

“I used to live near there,” Tom replied, “And I did my basic training in that camp.”

“But why would anyone want to hide the fact that they attended a recruitment centre?” Bram asked.

“I don't know,” Brasham responded, “But Major Markham's record of conspicuous gallantry only really starts after he returned – we think – from this side trip.”

“Perhaps it wasn't the place per se,” Tom interrupted, speaking slowly, “Perhaps it was just a convenient location close to where we are now.”

Bram and Brasham looked at each other, the realisation forming that Markham had visited a place very close to Lyndesfarne, and then tried to cover up the fact.

“You’ll still be looking for the Major, won’t you?” The Sergeant asked, beginning to look a little anxious.

“We certainly will,” Bram replied, “I dare say you’ll be wanting to talk to him, too.”

Brasham nodded, then turned and hurried off, calling out that he needed “to make a report to my superiors.”

“You seem to be well-known around here,” Tom noted, wondering who Brasham’s superiors actually were. Was the softly-spoken Sergeant actually an agent of the Watchers, he thought?

He was not allowed the time to think this thought through, as Bram cried out, “Come on, lads!” and set off at a brisk march, hurrying back towards the front entrance where they had dumped the car.

“Are we going back to the crossing?” Alistair asked.

“I can’t think of anywhere else to go,” Bram confirmed angrily, “Arden reported that Markham was headed that way, but we can’t be sure he was telling the truth.”

Bram, Tom thought, was obviously feeling extremely frustrated.

“This would be so much easier at home,” Bram blurted finally, clearly irritated at their lack of progress in locating the errant Major.

“Why’s that?” Tom asked, more from a sense of continuing a conversation rather than an expectation of anything useful.

“Oh, I’d use a Locator, of course,” Bram replied flippantly.

“And what’s that?” Tom enquired, now confused.

“They’re also called Finders,” Bram replied, “It’s a magical way of determining the location of the object or person you are looking for. A powerful magic, most often embedded in a ring, brooch or necklace.”

Alistair piped up.

“That pendant I dug up last year,” he said to Tom, “When we were digging ditches. Do you still have it?”

“Yes, of course. It’s in my locker. Why do you ask?”

“Because,” he said slowly, “I think it might be a Finder, or at least used to be one. And it might just still work.”

Bram stopped dead, the other two nearly running into him. He turned to Alistair.

“What makes you think something like that would work in this world?” he demanded.

“Oh, Bram,” Tom interjected, “Let’s not pretend that it’s impossible for magic to work here – whatever the official line is. I’ve seen the back cover of your notebook, glowing in the dark, sending reports on the War back to your father.”

Bram had the good grace to look rather sheepish at this point, but he remained resolutely silent, neither confirming nor denying Tom's suspicions. Tom imagined that the concerted campaign of misinformation and propaganda on this topic over many years would not so easily be reversed.

Alistair, on the other hand, looked irrepressibly smug, as if a fair number of things which he had known about for ages were finally becoming understood by Tom.

"Tom's right," Alistair said to Bram, "And I'll bet that you were using some kind of invisibility magic, a Concealer, when we first chanced upon you out on that moonlit field in Normandy – although why it suddenly stopped working I have no idea."

"Let's not go into that right now," Bram said, still not quite meeting Alistair's eyes, "So, do you think you have got a working Locator, then?"

"I do," the other man responded, still grinning broadly.

"I'll go and get it," Tom volunteered.

"OK," Bram said, "Meet us by the car. As quick as you can."

"Right."

Tom reversed direction and set off at a run, making his way down the back stairs of the Grange and along the paths to the barracks block. As he ran, he wondered just what magic would work in this world, and how it was decided what was to be permitted. He thought again about the story by the Gunner in the pub – clearly, blatantly adding magical sprites to artillery shells must have received some kind of official blessing.

Chapter Thirty Six

Tom was getting distinctly worried about the situation. It seemed that there really was some serious threat hidden just below the surface of current events, a menace where the motorcyclists and the dragons were just the tip of an iceberg.

While they were hanging around waiting for the portal connection, he thought back to happier times, on his first visit to Bram's house. This was the time he was recruited into the Guardians, and he recalled with fondness the warm welcome they had received as strangers and the telling of tales around the fire late into the night.

He especially recalled the discussions following on from the tale they had heard about Alistair's grandfather. Briz had returned to this particular topic over their second drink.

"Bram already told you a little about the truth behind that story," he said, "That the explosion he witnessed was the result of a crossing being closed in a hurry."

All three young men nodded.

"Well, I did a little digging in my library earlier on" – he indicated the shelves of books lining the walls – "and I found an account of the circumstances which led up to the closure."

He tapped a book which lay on the table beside him, next to his glass of beer.

"I'll tell you something of it, if you want."

Tom and Alistair both indicated eagerly and wordlessly that they would very much like to hear more. Briz grinned wryly at their enthusiasm.

"The part of our world which was reached through the crossing in Siberia is called Agrea, as I mentioned before. Now, there has been a certain amount of tension with some groups in this country in the past, and never more so than at the time of the incident of which I speak."

The older man took a long pull at his beer, then continued.

"This was a time of turmoil in your world, the beginnings of a socialist revolution leading to the formation of the Soviet Union – an impact which has reverberated around your world for decades, and contributed to the War which you have so recently experienced at first-hand."

He paused thoughtfully, then added, “An influence which, I rather think, will continue for some decades yet. At least, that’s the best available prediction.”

This remark made Tom thoughtful. He wondered whether there were magical ways of predicting the future and how effective that could possibly be.

“Anyway,” Briz continued, interrupting Tom’s thoughts, “The existence of the crossing between Siberia and Agrea became caught up in this local political disagreement. It was an increasingly partisan situation, and this extended to those whose responsibility it was to guard the crossing.”

“You mean the Guardians?” Tom asked.

Briz paused, perhaps weighing up how best to proceed.

“Not quite,” he replied slowly, “The concept of an independent force with specific responsibility for the pathway between the worlds was not as well-established then as it is now. The Guardians, nowadays, are supposed to eschew all political concerns in the world of their origin, and dedicate themselves solely to the protection of the Lyndesfarne crossing.”

Briz paused again, looking directly at Alistair and Tom in turn,

“This is, in fact, part of the oath of allegiance you’ll be asked to sign up to, as part of your induction.”

Tom nodded. This made much sense as a general policy, and he certainly felt that there was not a great deal in his own life which would be inhibited by such a declaration.

Sipping at his pint, Briz returned to his theme.

“Some of the guards sided with the Bolsheviks, while others who knew of the existence of our world remained loyal to the Imperial throne. The Bolsheviks thought they could get support in our world to help with their struggle.”

“Why did they think that?” Alistair asked curiously.

“It appears that they were working on the – mistaken – assumption that the governments in our world had achieved some socialist ideal.”

Tom and Alistair must have looked confused, as Briz expounded further.

“In our world, in most countries, control is centralised, typically run by committees – like the Board of Control which is responsible for the Lyndesfarne crossing. Historically, we have maintained a relatively equitable society, at least, by comparison with the rural serfs and peasants commonplace in Russia at that time. No huge

wealth, and little extreme poverty, and these days a fair number of free transport services, too.”

Alistair sat back, perhaps struggling to take in all of what was being said.

“But all this is based on philanthropic and autocratic, rather than socialist, principles,” Briz went on, getting louder as he spoke, “Our governments are not democratic, not elected, and there’s no assertion that all men – and women – are in any way equal. A place for everyone, and everyone in their place, is the motto.”

Briz thumped the table to emphasise his viewpoint. Both Tom and Alistair were a little taken aback by this unanticipated onslaught. Briz must have realised he was beginning to sound rather bellicose, as he quickly changed tack.

“Anyway, the Imperialists perceived the appeal to our world as a threat,” he continued, rather more calmly, “Although they really had very little to worry about.”

The older man picked up his beer glass again, then continued his tale.

“The general opinion over here – at least, in those organisations which were aware of the existence of your world – was that the Agrea crossing should be closed, and soon. There were just too many things which were unknown and numerous hazy predictions of disastrous interactions. Of course, the path between the worlds would be removed in a controlled way, with the minimum of disruption to both sides.”

“But that didn’t happen, did it,” Alistair asked.

“That’s right enough,” the older man replied, “The problem was that the authorities in Agrea wanted to maintain the crossing, so as to be able to continue influencing events in your world – even though they did not particularly agree with the politics of the Bolsheviks – or the Imperialists either, for that matter.”

Briz paused for a moment, cogitating on his next point.

“There were, well, economic advantages, too,” he said eventually, “The goods imported from your world made a noticeable contribution to the economy of Agrea, which helped make it, at the time, one of the most prosperous parts of our world.”

Tom was curious.

“So, this crossing here – the one we’ve just used,” he asked, “Its principal purpose is trade as well, is it?”

Briz chuckled softly.

“Put simply, yes,” he replied, “Although few people in Lyndesfarne, and even fewer in your country, appreciate it, the fact is

that the trade across the causeway benefits both sides. Perhaps more so in this world, but goods and money flow both ways.”

“So both England and Lyndesfarne are richer because of the crossing?” Tom asked again.

“Yes. That’s why it’s worth looking after it properly,” Briz confirmed, looking directly into Tom’s eyes, “And that’s what your job is going to be, of course.”

“So exactly how was the Siberian crossing closed?” Alistair enquired, clearly anxious to hear the rest of the story.

Briz settled back into his chair.

“As you can imagine, this was a time of heightened tension in international relationships. There was a fair amount of frantic diplomacy between the Agreans and representatives from the other crossings. The negotiations got increasingly bogged down, and there was much petty bickering and obstructionism.”

Briz glanced at his son, then continued.

“A faction – a cabal, perhaps – of organisations from various parts of our world including, it has to be said, people from Lyndesfarne itself, decided that direct action was the only possible way forward. A military party crossed over to your world, using the Lyndesfarne crossing, and made their way to Russia. They attacked the crossing, supported by some renegade Imperialists, with the intent of holding it for long enough to engineer a controlled shutdown.”

Briz stared at the fire for a few moments, then said quietly, “Somehow it all went terribly wrong. The crossing guards were forewarned of the attack, and put up much more resistance than was anticipated.”

All of the young men had first-hand experience of military planning, and what happened when the plans didn’t work out.

“In suicidal desperation, someone – from the invaders, it’s thought – managed to operate what I suppose should be termed the ‘emergency destruct’ magic. And that’s what caused the explosion.”

Both Tom and Alistair let out an involuntary gasp. Bram shook his head sadly.

“The devastation in Agrea was of mammoth proportions,” Briz continued, “Since the crossing was sited relatively high up in the mountains, the explosion set off avalanches. A huge wall of rock and snow swept down the valley – the pass your Granddad described which led to inhabited areas – and swept away whole settlements.”

“The destruction in Siberia was nearly as bad. Trees were flattened for miles around, and the blast was heard or felt over a huge area. Miraculously, there was relatively little loss of life, although

most of those who did die were the guards on both sides, those whose job it was to prevent such an outcome.”

“So my Granddad had a lucky escape, then,” Alistair commented.

“I would say so,” Briz confirmed, “Of course, the political dispute had been going on for some time. I believe that was the reason your Grandfather’s group was turned back on their last trip.”

The older man sat quietly for a moment, then refreshed himself from his glass.

“What happened after that is a matter of speculation,” he resumed, “I rather suspect that the trail guards – including your Grandfather – were paid off with extra money, offered as compensation for their losses. This was probably the source of the wealth that bought your farm in Scotland. Mind you, it was almost certainly made clear that there the secret of the Siberian crossing was to be maintained, even though it had evidently been closed permanently.”

“So crossings can never be re-opened?” Tom asked, out of the blue.

Briz smiled, shaking his head.

“The construction of a path between the worlds is an immense undertaking, requiring a huge amount of skilled effort. All this would have to be repeated to re-open a crossing.”

“So, this was a big change for Agrea, then?”

“Yes.”

“What’s Agrea like now?” Tom pressed.

Briz shook his head.

“It’s a bit of a backwater, to be honest. It never really recovered from the loss of their crossing, not to mention the disruption caused by the explosion and avalanches.”

“But, at this time, there were other crossings elsewhere in the world?”

“Yes,” Briz confirmed, “But they’ve all been quietly closed over the years.”

Much later, Tom thought about the events he had learned about that evening. Perhaps there were people in Agrea with long memories and a grudge against Lyndesfarne – now the only extant crossing – who might want some kind of revenge or retaliation for what could be regarded as an act of war. Could such a shadowy group, he wondered, have been behind the recent attacks on the Lyndesfarne crossing?

Chapter Thirty Seven

Tom crashed through the door of the little dormitory he shared with Ifor, panting. He fumbled in his pocket for his locker key, then tore open the door. He rummaging vigorously until he finally pulled out the little box Alistair had dug up when they had been working on the farm what seemed half a lifetime away.

Moving more cautiously now, he eased the lid from the stoneware box and lifted out the pendant, separating it carefully from the tufts of cotton wool in which it had nestled. The stone shone faintly in the dim light of the room, swinging gently on the twine that he held firmly in his fingers.

Tom wondered what gestures would be necessary to get the magic to work. He thought about the old women he had observed gleaning in the fields, the unexplained actions and movements he had witnessed the previous year. Since then, he had of course been tutored in the language of Lyndesfarne magical gestures and now he thought he recognised the commands she had used. Suddenly confident with this new-found knowledge, Tom slipped the string over his neck and held the pendant itself in his hand, while he tried to remember the precise sequence of movements the old woman had made.

As far as he understood, the approach was to bring as clear an image of the person one wished to locate to mind then use the hand gestures to activate the sprite contained within.

He concentrated on an image of Markham – his short grey hair, the military bearing and the Major's uniform with the medal ribbons. He made the gestures, but nothing seemed to happen. He tried again, with the same negative response.

He knew there was no point in attempting to locate Tarm – he had no idea what the man looked like. He was determined to try again, and managed to bring Hamet to mind, remembering his trimmed dark beard and his nervous and fidgety manner. Tom gestured furiously.

The other man's location came to Tom's awareness as clearly as if someone had shouted across the room.

“He's in a caravan, at the crossing.”

Tom caught up, panting hard, with Bram and Alistair as they were remonstrating with Edgar from the garages. The old mechanic was – perhaps justifiably – unhappy with the unexpected requisition of his

vehicle, especially without one of his own drivers behind the wheel. His objections became more muted when he appreciated that it was Tom who would be driving.

“We need to get to the crossing, fast,” Tom gasped to Bram and Alistair, “Get in!”

He thrust the pendant into Alistair’s hands, and the three men struggled into the car.

“I tried it – and it works!” Tom shrieked urgently, over the noise of the electric starter, “Hamet’s at the crossing, hiding in one of those wooden caravans by the fair. Can’t find Markham, though.”

Bram turned to Alistair.

“Let me have a go,” he said calmly.

Alistair passed over the pendant without a word. Bram held the ornament in front of him, frowning with concentration.

“Nothing on Markham. Let me try Hamet” – he gestured again – “Yes, my Uncle’s at the crossing, just as you said, clear as day.”

“What about Tarm?” Alistair pressed.

“I don’t know the man,” Bram replied, “Never met him, no idea what he looks like.”

“Here, let me have a try.”

Bram handed over the pendant as Tom fought the car along the narrow lanes.

“You’ve got to bring an image of Tarm to mind, and concentrate hard,” Bram explained, “And then this gesture, and thus, and thus. You see?”

Bram’s hands moved fluidly through the same sequence of movements that Tom had used earlier. Alistair copied the gestures as best he could, a feat made more difficult by the bouncing of the car over the uncertain road surfaces.

“No, nothing,” Alistair said, his face screwed up in an agony of concentration, “Let me try again.”

He made several further attempts, but to no avail.

Bram sat thoughtfully for a few moments, his hand rubbing his chin in a way which could have been a parody of his father’s habit.

“The pendant’s unlikely to be able to find people in the other world,” he said eventually, “So we can assume that both Tarm and Markham have crossed over to the Other World. I think we’ll have to split our forces.”

“What do you mean?” Alistair asked, raising his voice of the noise of the rain, which had just started. Tom switched on the windscreen wipers, their operation adding to the noise level inside the

car without, Tom considered grimly, doing very much for the visibility.

“Right,” Bram said, seeming to come to some kind of a decision, “Let’s not alarm everyone unnecessarily. We’ll use a softly-softly approach.”

“Whatever you think best,” Alistair responded. Tom nodded, being too busy avoiding bouncing the car off the hedgerows to manage a fuller response.

“Tom can recognise Hamet – certainly well enough for a Finder to pick him out anyway,” Bram continued, speaking to Alistair, “So he can quietly nose around the fairground on this side. You know both Markham and Tarm, and I know Markham, so we’ll take the pendant and go over to Lyndesfarne, and see if we can pick up their trail there.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alistair enthused. Tom nodded again, suspecting that part of the reason he was staying in this world was his lack of flexibility in the Lyndesfarne language.

“Good. Now, Tom, just slow down a bit before we get to the causeway,” Bram advised, “I don’t want to give the game away by arriving in a mad panic. So let’s take it easy – calm and collected, think before we speak, yes?”

Tom slowed a little, then asked Bram, “What do you want me to do when I find Hamet?”

Bram laughed.

“Good question. Just keep an eye on him. Find out what he’s up to, who he’s talking to, that sort of thing.”

A few minutes later, Tom drove the car quietly up towards the causeway and drew up next to the guard house. The three men got out, seemingly unhurried.

“I’ll catch up with you lads later on, then,” Tom said to the other two, just a little bit louder than necessary.

“Right enough,” Bram responded, with just the suspicion of a wink. He lifted his hood against the rain and. He and Alistair set off at a brisk clip along the causeway itself, waving politely to the Guardians on duty.

Tom strolled to the Guard house and went inside. As he had expected, Oliver the driver was sat there, drinking from a steaming mug of tea. The other man looked up as Tom entered smiling.

“Brought your car back,” Tom said, “Still in one piece, too.”

He handed over the car keys to profuse thanks from Oliver.

Tom sauntered out of the Guard post, nodding casually to one or two of his acquaintances amongst the Guardians. He strolled back

along the road away from the causeway, turning up the collar on his coat to prevent rainwater from running down the back of his neck. When he was out of sight of the Guard post, he speeded up and entered the fairground through one of the gateways in the dry stone walls.

At first glance, the market appeared to be abandoned, tent canvas flapping damply in the gusty wind. Tom soon became aware of quiet voices, as well as the clink of crockery and other domestic sounds, emanating from many of the tents. People were, Tom surmised, sensibly taking cover from the approaching storm, and making themselves as comfortable as possible while waiting.

Tom took cover under a convenient awning and stood in the lee of a stretch of taut canvas perhaps put in place to act as a windbreak. This at least gave a little shelter from the rain and wind, as well as from prying eyes. He watched the small group of horse-drawn caravans that the Finder had clearly indicated as Hamet's location.

There were three caravans, two drawn up side-by-side, and a third standing slightly apart. Tom noticed that there were only two horses picketed nearby, and wondered if that meant that one would be unoccupied. If so, he considered, that would seem the best bet to look for Hamet.

After a few minutes, Tom had spotted slight movements on the springs of two of the vehicles, the ones drawn up together, suggesting that someone was moving about inside. From one, he could see a flicker of light, perhaps as the occupant lit a lamp against the encroaching gloom. The third wagon was, by contrast, still and quiet, and Tom was beginning to give consideration to getting a little nearer for a closer inspection.

There was a cry of alarm from the direction of the causeway, followed closely by the screech of the emergency siren. From his vantage point, Tom could just make out a stream of Guardians appearing from the guard building, gesticulating wildly to one another and struggling with their clothing. He could not hear anything, their shouts and cries being drowned out by the wind and rain.

A man appeared suddenly. Tom thought he must have been hidden underneath the caravan, in some secret compartment. Tom could not tell who it was and he was unsure whether it was Hamet.

The mystery man clambered inelegantly over the dry stone wall at the rear of the fairground. Tom could see him sliding on the stones made slippery with rainwater. He made the far side then, visibly pulling his clothing tightly around himself, he started forcing his way

carefully through the thicket of stunted trees and gorse bushes that stood between the wall and the coastline beyond. He could be making as much noise as he likes, Tom thought, no one will be able to hear him in this weather.

Tom wondered what to do. Should he assume that the mystery man was in fact Hamet, and follow him, at a discreet distance of course? Or was the mystery man performing some task unrelated to the disappearance of Hamet and the others? Or perhaps he was even a deliberate Red Herring, designed to put any putative Watcher off the scent?

What finally made up Tom's mind, in the end, was the knowledge that the communications tower, the site of a previous attack on the integrity of the crossing, stood on the coast in exactly the direction the man was heading.

Checking the fastening of his coat, Tom set off across the waterlogged fairground, moving as quickly as he could. He reached the point where the other man had climbed the wall and scaled it quickly, slipping at the top and sliding inelegantly down the other side.

The other man had disappeared, but Tom judged the direction of his travel as best he could and set off. The gorse tugged at his trousers and the low-hanging branches, and he stifled several yelps as thorns found their marks in his legs.

A minute or two of painful progress later, he could just make out movements in the bushes ahead. Forcing himself to keep going, he paced the man ahead until he reached the edge of the undergrowth. The stranger stopped and appeared to look around, presumably trying to get his bearings.

Tom stopped some way behind him, just able to see his silhouette against the lights of the opposite shore and the causeway. Finally, the other man made up his mind and set off to the left, making, Tom thought, for the tower.

Tom crept through the bushes and peered out. There was some kind of a fire-fight occurring on the coast opposite, converging on the point where the causeway met the coast. He could see the flashes of what looked like explosions and streaks of light which looked, he thought, like fireballs. Sounds of the battle could just be heard over the roar of the wind.

On this side of the crossing, there were no signs of a fight but he could just make out his colleagues scurrying about, taking up defensive positions around the causeway. It seemed that everyone's attention was on the display from the opposite shore.

Were the armed insurgents across the straights the same group who had been capturing dragons for the earlier attack, the group that Old Ged had followed, and indeed the one that Briz had alluded to earlier on?

Tom wondered if the timing was a coincidence, or was this a diversionary attack, designed to distract the Guardians on both sides? Certainly, if one wanted to sneak up to the communications towers unobserved, this would be a perfect time to do so.

By now, the rain was coming down “like stair rods”, as Tom’s Granny would have said. The water was not particularly cold, but the drops were so heavy and so close together that it was like standing underneath a continuous stream of water. He was drenched.

Tom set off along the coast, keeping low, and heading towards the tower, trying to keep the mystery man in sight. At the foot of the steel ladder, the stranger stopped and pulled something from his arm, under his clothing. A bracelet, Tom thought, no, an amulet, which glowed a familiar faint orange. It was, Tom realised with a chill that had nothing to do with the rain running down his neck, some kind of a magical weapon smuggled from the Other World.

The other man shinned nimbly up the ladder. The team of Guardians who were manning the communications tower also had their eyes on the conflict raging on the opposite shore. They did not perceive the man until he had already reached the platform. Before they could move, he had discharged the magical weapon several times in quick succession and the Guardians slumped. One collapsed against the railing, then toppled over the side.

Tom quickly crept closer to the man who had fallen to the ground. Kneeling, he searched through the leather satchels and pouches that were still firmly attached to his belt. Finally, he found what he was looking for – a Very pistol, a device for firing a coloured flare high into the air. He fumbled with the cartridges until he found a red one, for emergencies. He loaded the gun, then stood upright, holding the pistol with both hands in the approved manner, and squeezed the trigger.

The flare was clearly visible even in this awful weather. Tom glanced along the coast and could see alert Guardians heading towards him. He dropped the flare pistol and sprinted for the ladder, all pretence of stealth now abandoned.

The man on the platform fired the magical weapon twice at Tom, but he was quick enough to get to the ladder and the shots arced against the steel underside of the platform. Tom shinned up the steps,

and stopped at the top, keeping his head just below the level of the floor.

The mystery man was struggling with some grey-painted steel box which was firmly attached to the main structure of the tower. The box was locked shut, but the other man was fumbling with a complex key, giving Tom the strong impression that he was not familiar with mechanical locks. The strongbox yielded, and the other man pulled the door wide, allowing Tom a glimpse of a orange-glowing object inside.

Seizing the opportunity, Tom leapt from the stairs. The mystery man tried to deploy the same magical weapon he had used earlier, but the shot went wide, and Tom grabbed at the amulet he held. This close, he could see that it was in fact Hamet, his eyes wild and manic in the twin glows of the battle opposite and the magical object inside the strongbox.

Tom banged the man's hand against the steel balustrade, and the amulet flew from his grasp, disappearing over the side and into the bushes below. Hamet seemed suddenly possessed with the strength of a demon and forced Tom back against the railing, now trying to get both hands around his throat. In the confined space, Tom's boot was trapped by the body of one of his fallen comrades, and he toppled backwards.

He hit the ground and knew only blackness.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Tom dreamt of his parents. It was a strange dream, sharp and lucid, with none of the twisted surrealism and random jumps of location of the other dreams he had experienced – almost as if it was a real memory which had somehow been suppressed until now.

He had never really known his mother and father. His Granny had told him that they disappeared under mysterious circumstances when he was very young and, until now, he had no clear recollection of how they looked or sounded. In his childish way, he had imagined endless ways in which his parents were involved in some exciting adventure, and how they would return to him in a glorious triumph some day.

Even so, he was convinced that the man and woman who appeared in the vision were indeed his parents, at a time when he himself was still a boy – perhaps eight or nine years old, judging by their relative heights. They called each other Lizzie and Brad – names he knew from Granny. The old lady herself also featured in the dream, and Lizzie called her “Ma” just as he had somehow expected.

The two of them arrived at the front door in the middle of a rainstorm. Granny was evidently hugely surprised to see them, but obviously delighted, too, and ushered them inside immediately.

His mother was dressed as he had always imagined her – a floral summer dress which reached to her ankles, under which stout sensible shoes could just be glimpsed. His father wore trousers of soft leather – he would later distinctly remember feeling them when he was hugging his Dad – and a flamboyant brightly-coloured shirt of canary yellow. Both wore long capes over their shoulders, each with a hood to keep off the worst of the weather. Brad swung off his cloak adroitly once inside, shaking off the rainwater and hung it on the peg just inside the door before helping his wife with hers.

In the dream, Tom had no hesitation in embracing both mother and father. Ma held close for long moments and, when he was finally released, he was immediately swung up in the air by his father. In his vision, he was laughing and crying, and calling out, again and again, “Ma and Dad, home at last!”

He distinctly remembered seeing Granny looking at the three of them with tears in her eyes.

Brad and Lizzie were offered tea by Granny, which they immediately accepted. They were ushered into the front room with young Tom while Granny bustled off to put the kettle on. As they settled, Lizzie asked her son a seemingly endless series of questions – what he liked to eat, how he was doing at school, what games he liked to play – all questions, it seemed to the adult Tom, that a less-absent mother would know without asking. After what seemed like ages to a child, Granny entered the room carrying a tray of tea things, and the relentless questions ceased abruptly.

Tom always had been a quiet child. Around adults, he tended to sit and listen, and had already found that he learned more – and understood more – than perhaps the adults realised, even at a relatively young age. His mother seemed to want to hold him close and never let him go, although Tom knew with the clarity of his dreaming vision that she would be leaving all too soon. His childish self sat between his parents on the old sofa in the parlour at Granny’s while the grown-ups talked. They seemed to almost forget about him – perhaps they just thought him to be asleep.

The adults sipped their tea and talked about what had been going on.

“We really should apologise to you, Ma’am,” Brad began.

“We so very sorry, Ma,” Lizzie continued, “I’m sure you’ve been worried sick about us. I can see you’ve been doing a wonderful job with young Thomas here – I feel so sad, so guilty at having to leave him here with you.”

“So what’s really going on, then?” Granny asked, rather sharply, it seemed to Tom.

“We’re in real danger, Ma,” Lizzie replied, looking directly into her mother’s eyes, “We’re in hiding, in fear of our lives.”

The older woman sat back in apparent shock. Then, recovering somewhat, she demanded to know from whom they were concealing themselves.

“I can’t tell you, Ma. It’s all to do with Brad’s work, and his family. We’ve found out a secret, an important secret, and now an enemy is out for revenge. There’s a long history behind all this, but if I were to tell you it would only put you in danger too.”

“It’s all my fault, I’m afraid,” Brad said, sighing. “I made a mistake – I got too close to someone dangerous. But there’s nothing I can do about the situation right now.”

He shrugged his shoulders apologetically, then continued.

“We should not really be here at all, but we had to warn you. We can’t risk taking Thomas with us, although I’d really like to. We will

have to keep moving, hiding, and that's no life for a child. So, we need you to keep your eye on Thomas. Don't tell him about all this – the less he knows, the less chance there is he can let on accidentally. And, you need to look out for strangers in the area.”

Brad and his wife exchanged glances for a moment, then he continued.

“There's one other person we think you can trust – George Wilson.”

There was a pause for a moment, before Granny responded.

“Oily George? The mechanic? From down the street? The one who's been looking out for Thomas sometimes?”

“Yes, that's him,” Brad replied, “If you get worried, or suspicious, talk to George. He doesn't know much, but he will be able to get a message to us – or at least to someone who can help. And don't hesitate or delay – if there's anything worrying you, we'll be able to help more if you let us know in good time.”

The message seemed to be getting through to Granny – that this was a fleeting visit, one that might not be repeated.

“When will we see you again?” she asked, pensively.

Tom's mother looked so very sad.

“I don't know – we're not sure when it would be safe. I can't let people follow me here and threaten Thomas. It's not secure for any of us.”

There was another pause. It seemed to Tom that all of the grown-ups were struggling with what to say.

“We will be able to send you money, for Thomas, from time to time,” Lizzie said, ruffling Tom's hair fondly.

Brad nodded in agreement.

“I'll make sure of it,” he said, “Through my contacts. The money will arrive in the post from time to time, as much as we can afford. There won't be any way of tracing the mail, but try not to spend it too obviously, please. Just use it to give Thomas the best you can.”

Granny leaned forward, taking her daughter's hands in her own, and said with tears once again welling in her eyes, “You can rely on me, Lizzie. Now go, and look out for yourselves. Thomas will be fine here with me.”

The end of the dream was perhaps the strangest part of all. His father drew something from his pocket. It looked like some kind of glass globe, a little larger than even the biggest of the glass marbles Tom played with, and seemed to glow slightly from within.

“Hold out your hand, Thomas. This is for you.”

“What is it, Dad?”

“It’s a present, of sorts. Don’t worry about it, son,” his father had responded, “Just do as you’re told. There’s a good boy.”

Brad placed the marble on Tom’s palm, and then laid a hand on his forehead. His father then made a rapid series of gestures in the air, too fast for Tom to follow. The marble seemed to soften in his hand and melt into his palm, and he dreamed nothing more.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Tom opened his eyes, blinking slowly, to see his friend Bram looking gravely at him. Seeing him stir, the other man's unaccustomed expression of worry was swiftly replaced by the familiar wry half-grin.

"Welcome back," Bram said, "We were just a little bit worried about you for a while there."

"Where am I?" Tom asked weakly.

"You're safe. You're at Cliviger Grange, in the Infirmary."

The Infirmary, Tom vaguely recalled, was in one of the H-block buildings at the back of the stables. So nothing wrong with my memory, he thought, attempting to chuckle at himself for the weak attempt at humour. The slight movement was painful in several places. His head seemed to ache immeasurably.

Seeing him wince, Bram spoke gently.

"Careful there. You've had a nasty bang on the noggin. You've also managed to break a leg and you do have a rather splendid collection of cuts and bruises."

"What happened?"

"You took quite a fall," Bram answered.

"Oh yes, I remember," Tom replied, "I thought I was a goner for a moment there."

"You were lucky. Your fall was broken by the bushes at the base of the tower."

It all came flooding back to Tom – wrestling with Hamet on the tower platform, tripping on the fallen body, and a fall into darkness.

"Hamet," he started, foolishly try to sit up, "And Markham...".

"Relax," Bram interrupted, easing him back onto the bed, "They've been taken care of."

As Tom lay back, Bram explained something of what had happened.

"First of all, my Uncle's dead."

"Dead," exclaimed Tom, "How?"

"I'm afraid to say that he was shot by the Guardians – your colleagues," Bram said sadly, "They saw you fall from the platform as they rushed up, alerted by your flare. They thought he was trying to sabotage the communications equipment, and shouted at him to stop. He ignored them, to his cost, I'm afraid."

Bram paused for a moment, shaking his head.

“Anyway,” he continued, “Hamet fell from the tower to his death, having been hit by a fusillade of shots.”

Tom was not feeling at his best, naturally enough, and something that Bram had said finally caught up inside his head.

“So what was Hamet doing up on the tower?” he asked.

Bram leaned forward, taking on a slightly conspiratorial air.

“This isn’t part of the official report,” he said softly, “But Hamet’s real objective was to get at the emergency destruct magic.”

“The what?” Tom blurted.

Bram sighed.

“Well, you’ve probably already realised by now that crossings occasionally have to be closed quickly, because of some emergency. And that there must be some, err, magic to trigger the closure.”

Tom must have murmured something, as Bram continued his explanation.

“So that’s what was in the locked box at the tower. Hamet was trying to destroy the crossing, the last crossing to Lyndesfarne.”

Tom could not suppress a gasp of surprise which rapidly turned into a painful groan.

“Of course, not just anybody can trigger that magic,” Bram continued, “There are all sorts of safeguards, not least of which is the fact that the closure must be triggered *simultaneously* on both sides of the crossing.”

“Tarm and Markham...” Tom managed to say.

“Yes, that’s right,” Bram replied quietly, “But later...”

Despite his obvious interest in what Bram was saying, Tom was rapidly getting very tired. His head was beginning to throb unbearably, and he could hardly keep his eyes open. A nurse came in and gently reminded Bram that it was time to leave.

“Don’t worry,” he said as he got up, “You concentrate on getting better. I’ll be back soon.”

Tom slept, dozed and slept again. When he did finally surface properly, he felt like he must have slept a long time. He allowed himself to be assisted by the nursing staff in the Infirmary, helped with all the little things that he could not currently do for himself, waiting for Bram to deliver on his promise to return. He had so many unanswered questions, and he was practically bursting with impatience by the time that a grinning Bram finally returned to his bedside.

“You’re looking better,” Bram said cheerily, “The doctors tell me that there’s no chance of you dying on us any time soon.”

“That’s a relief,” Tom smirked in response, “You’ll be stuck with me for a while yet, then?”

Bram chuckled, pulling up a seat at Tom’s bedside.

“So, you have – again – been instrumental in foiling a plot that threatens the crossing. You’re beginning to make a habit of this, you know,” Bram said wryly.

“Well, do you really want me to make sure it doesn’t happen again?” Tom asked cheekily.

Bram snorted in response.

“Let’s not go that far,” he agreed, “So I imagine you’ll be wanting to know what been going on.”

“Yes, please!”

“Right, then. I’ve already told you that you prevented my Uncle Hamet from closing the crossing. My father’s furious about this – a traitor in the family and so on. He’s leaving no stone unturned in tracking down those responsible.”

“So, was there someone at the Lyndesfarne tower?” Tom demanded, “Who was it?”

“Well, by the time that the Guardians had beaten back the attack – which we believe to be the same group who were spotted by our friend Ged hunting dragons – there was no one at the other tower. The communications operators had been knocked out, and they didn’t see anyone. There was clear evidence that someone had been tampering with the emergency magic, but we don’t know – yet – exactly who was at the other tower.”

“What about the Major?” Tom asked, “And Tarm?”

“Markham has been removed from his post,” Bram answered primly, “There are just too many unanswered questions, and we’re convinced that he’s implicated in this plot. So he currently detained somewhere secure and several people are asking him lots of hard questions. We’ll find out what he was up to, don’t you worry.”

Bram paused, in a way that Tom was beginning to recognise as presaging a shock announcement.

“The role of Warden at Cliviger Grange has been taken by your old mentor Fred,” he said, grinning broadly.

This did indeed come as something of a surprise to Tom.

“I’d have thought that Duty Warden Arden would get the job,” he remarked, trying not to let his surprise show.

He understood that Arden was the most senior person remaining, and knew that he had been acting as the Major’s adjutant for some time.

“Some people want a fresh new approach, one that is less rigid, perhaps a little less military, more a peace-time police force,” Bram explained, “Besides Arden was too closely associated with the Major, in many people’s minds – although personally I’m convinced that the Duty Warden was just doing his job.”

Tom nodded his agreement.

“So what’s Arden doing?”

“Same as always,” Bram responded brightly, “What he does best – dealing with all the paperwork.”

“Ah. Someone’s got to do it, I suppose,” Tom agreed.

“And as for Board Member Tarm,” Bram continued, “He is also being questioned by our friends in Lyndesfarne. We think he was the ringleader, the top dog. We believe that he was instrumental in gathering together the para-military force, the group that first set about capturing dragons, and then staged the diversionary attack on the crossing.”

“What happened there?” Tom pressed. He had not had the time to do more than glance across the straights at the fire-fight.

“There was very little warning – although my father had managed to get a higher level of alert instigated. Fortunately, the attack was designed to distract, with maximum noise and light, rather to kill anybody. Oh, there were a few casualties – walking wounded, mostly – but the only people actually killed were the comms operator who fell from the tower, and my Uncle, of course.”

“The other Guardians are OK?” Tom asked, pleasantly surprised.

“Oh, yes,” Bram replied, “The, well, magic amulet just knocked them out. It was pure bad luck that he toppled from the platform and broke his neck.”

Tom looked despondent for a moment. He realised that it was only the fortuitous fall of the Guardian which allowed him to alert the others, but he now knew that this was at the cost of the man’s life.

“Tarm was also instrumental in persuading my errant Uncle into stealing portal information from his section of the Board of Control,” Bram continued, “We’re not quite sure what incentives he offered Hamet, but they must have been considerable – especially since it would have meant that he would have been stuck in this world for ever.”

“Perhaps he just wanted to get away from his wife?” Tom suggested, slightly flippantly.

Bram snorted, but looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Many a true word spoken in jest, as they say,” he muttered, “But I suppose we’ll never know the true reason.”

“But why were Tarm and the others trying to close the crossing?”

“Good question, as always,” Bram replied, “And there’s some history here.”

He paused, presumably thinking on the best way to continue.

“Now, the Board of Control is supposed to represent all of the nations of our world – at least, the important ones – not just Lyndesfarne itself, in the management of the crossing.”

“Ah,” Tom exclaimed, light dawning, “Let me guess. Tarm is a representative from Agrea, right?”

Bram nodded, with that wry grin playing about his lips again.

“Very good,” he said, “We think he is part of a faction who wants revenge on us – on the Board, and Lyndesfarne – for the closure of the Siberian crossing. As you can imagine, the diplomatic situation is rather tense at the moment, and Agrea is disclaiming any responsibility – the work of a lone patriot, rather than an officially-sanctioned act, is the official line.”

Bram shook his head again, suggesting, it seemed to Tom, that he did not believe a word of it.

“The Board are understandably very unhappy about him putting misplaced patriotism ahead of the welfare of the crossing,” Bram continued, “He has been formally removed from his post, and formally charged. He may just get sent back to Agrea, of course, but I’m not sure that will necessarily be a good thing from his point of view.”

Tom wondered what would happen to a failed agent whose government was denying accountability for his actions. He concluded that it was probably better not to know.

“Anyway,” Bram said, standing up, “I really should be elsewhere.”

Bam left eventually, but not before Tom had extracted a promise that he would return with more news very soon.

During his recuperation, Tom was visited by friends and colleagues from Cliviger Grange. Fred, whose appearance had not changed appreciably despite his recent elevation in rank, came to see him that afternoon. He drew up a chair and sat down by the bed.

“Well, lad,” he said kindly, “It looks like you’re building up quite a collection of awards and commendations. I shall have to look out for you, won’t I?”

“Thank you, sir,” Tom said.

“No ‘sir’, I think. Fred will be fine,” the other man interjected, “You’ve done a good job here. I like a lad who keeps his wits about him under pressure.”

He smiled, then continued, “Your task now I to get well, as soon as possible. We’ve an urgent need for a man of your calibre, and I’ve got several interesting posts I’d like you to consider.”

Tom tried to lean forward, but Fred intervened.

“No. Get well first, then worry about the future.”

His cohort from the Guardian School arrived, bearing the traditional gifts of flowers and fruit for the convalescent. Ifor and Marjorie chattered on with hardly a break, wanting to know the smallest details. Tom told them everything he could remember, although held back on some of his speculations – like Brasham’s real role, for example.

Stan and Charlie were more reserved, as always, but sat wide-eyed as he explained about tracking down Hamet with the aid of magic which had probably been buried for decades. Sophia interjected with characteristically blunt questions occasionally, and nodded approvingly at Tom’s description of events.

One of the happier moments of his convalescence was a visit from Alistair. He was accompanied, to Tom’s complete lack of surprise, by Yise. They sat together, holding hands, and told him that they were planning a wedding, in the spring, and that they wanted Tom to be the best man. Tom accepted, with tears in his eyes, and he grasped his old friend’s hand as warmly as he could manage before accepting a kiss on the cheek from Yise.

Alistair then held up the pendant which, to Tom’s surprise, was still glowing with the subtle green of the sprite within.

“Bram and I didn’t even get to the bridge before the battle started,” he explained, “Then we saw your flare from the tower, and guessed – correctly, as it turned out – what was being attempted.”

He smiled at his fiancée.

“Which is just as well,” he continued, “Yise tells me if I had taken it to Lyndesfarne, I would not have been able to bring it back through the barrier. So this” – he twirled the necklace thoughtfully – “is still one of the few working magical artefacts in this world.”

Yise took it from his fingers.

“Look here,” she said to Tom, pointing out the strange characters on the stone, “Agrean writing. This pendant’s probably been in this world for years – probably hidden by some refugee cut off from the Other World when the Siberian crossing was closed.”

“If it’s Agrean,” Tom asked, “How come my gestures worked?”

Yise laughed.

“It’s very simple. There’s much more similarity in the language of magical gestures than there is in the written or spoken languages,”

she explained, “So you can still use magic in foreign lands, even if you can’t speak to anyone.”

Tom resolved to learn more about the Other World, everything he could. It seemed like a place where anything could happen.

Chapter Forty

With the resilience of youth and a fair display of will-power, it was not long before Tom was up and out of bed. He never had been a great one for lying around at the best of times and very much preferred to be doing something, anything, instead.

With his leg in plaster, he found it a bit trying hobbling about with the aid of crutches, and found himself sitting around in the recuperation wing or, quite often during the late summer, on one of the benches set on the lawns outside.

The ache in his head eased rapidly, although the rest of his body pained him on occasion. His legs and lower arms had been badly scratched where the gorse and hawthorn thorns had pierced his clothing, but these wounds healed rapidly. The one constant irritation was the itching of his skin inside the plaster cast on his leg, in places he just could not reach.

He continued to receive a stream of visitors which ameliorated the feelings of boredom and uselessness that his enforced inaction had brought on.

One visitor he had been expecting was Sergeant Brasham. The Sergeant strolled casually across the lawns one afternoon and enquired politely about his health. After several fairly stilted and platitudinous exchanges, Brasham knelt down and spoke quietly.

"I know you've got your suspicions about me, about my other work," he began, "And I also know you've been discreet about our conversations so far."

Tom nodded.

"I would very much like to encourage you to keep that particular piece of intelligence under your hat, as it were. As with any, shall we say, unusual private speculations that you might have."

"I do understand," Tom replied carefully, "And I think you can rely on my discretion."

Brasham looked at him for a long moment, then nodded sagely.

"Good, good," he murmured, "So, get well soon."

With that, the Sergeant blithely strode off the way he had come.

Briz also visited him on several occasions, once accompanied by Yellez. Bram's mother was effusive in her praise for Tom, and repeatedly emphasised her desire to welcome him once again as a guest in her house.

“After all,” she explained in a motherly fashion, “You’ll need to get your strength up, and I remember how much you enjoyed mealtimes when you first visited.”

Tom was genuinely heartened by this invitation and expressed his thanks profusely, promising to take up her kind invitation as soon as he was reasonably mobile again.

Even old Ged, the dragon-hunter he had encountered in the Dragon’s Nest, turned up one morning. There was no mistaking the jaunty stride of the old man as he approached from the direction of the stables having, Tom presumed, begged a lift from the causeway in some car or truck.

“Ged,” Tom welcomed the hunter, “What brings you over this side of the crossing.”

“Oh, I’ve some errands here at the School,” the other man replied slightly evasively, indicated the buildings behind him, “And I’ve heard tell of your escapades.”

Tom wondered if there was more to the old man than met the eye. He later learned that one of the innovations Fred proposed to introduce into the curriculum at the Grange was classes on dragons and how to repel them. Despite the misgivings he had earlier expressed to Tom, Fred apparently felt comfortable in asking Ged to teach what he knew about the dangerous beasts.

One visitor he did not expect, and indeed did not even speak to, was the mysterious Irish lady that he and his companions had encountered in that market in Alnwick last year. He had been sitting outside, dozing in the autumn sunshine, when she emerged from the clumps of rhododendrons and laurels that encircled the lawns.

The mystic stood leaning on her staff with an appearance, Tom could now see, very much like one of the Messengers. He saw her looking at him rather sternly, and he returned the stare. Having gained his full attention, she smiled regally and nodded once in what Tom took to be approval, then stepped back into the bushes and disappeared.

Tom had been thinking about that strange dream he had experienced while he was unconscious. He had begun to wonder if perhaps his memory of the incident had been suppressed by some magical means, and he was increasingly determined to find out what happened to his parents in 1927 or whenever it was.

He had mentioned something about dreaming about his parents to Bram and Briz, in one of several de-briefing sessions at the Grange. Father and son had listened silently to what Tom had to say, Bram

glancing meaningfully at his father when they heard about the melting glass marble.

“Well,” Briz said when Tom had finished, “It does sound like something we might do to protect the innocent, but I don’t know what happened, exactly. Before my watch, as it were.”

Bram looked as if he was about to say something, but Briz continued quickly.

“However, I’m prepared to look into it or, more precisely, get young Bram here to look into it. Start in the library at home,” he said, now addressing his son, “And work from there.”

Bram was his frequent companion during this period, delivering near-daily reports on what had happened to Tarm and Markham. On one occasion, he explained that there had been considerable investigation into the Major’s background.

Apparently, Markham had been marked out early in his career as an able young Army officer and was soon seconded, under some obscure arrangements Bram could not quite explain, into the Guardian organisation in the early Nineteen Thirties. He had remained in this role until just before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, which had probably seemed suitably heroic at the time.

The then-Captain Markham had attained a supposedly distinguished military service during the conflict itself, although a closer investigation – as far as it was possible from the occasionally confused reports from that time – suggested that he had been involved in very little actual fighting.

“So the upshot of all this,” Bram concluded, “Was that the Boards were prepared to put Markham in a position of trust.”

“Was there no doubt?” Tom asked.

“It seems not,” Bram replied sadly, “His exemplary record from before the War, together with being a decorated war hero, meant that he was beyond suspicion.”

A few days later, Bram returned to the hospital wing at the Grange.

“There’s another piece of news which I feel I must give you,” Bram said, rather solemnly, “Although, to be frank, I’m not sure how you’ll take it. But, please be calm.”

Needless to say, with an introduction like that, Tom was already on tenterhooks. He resolved to keep a composed appearance, whatever bombshell the other man was about to drop.

“The first thing you need to know was that Brad – your father – was from Lyndesfarne.”

Tom considered this thoughtfully for a few moments.

“I’d wondered about that, after my dream,” he replied eventually, “So it was actually true?”

“It was,” Bram confirmed, “And, he was an agent for the Board of Control.”

“Like you?” Tom asked bluntly.

Bram nodded.

“And, like you, with access to magic which really does work in this world?”

Bram froze, seeming unable to look Tom in the eye for a moment. It occurred to Tom that there was something magical going on here – that the other man could not this question even if he wanted to.

“I can’t answer that,” he said quietly.

He shook his head uncomfortably.

“Anyway,” Bram resumed, after a moment to recover, “It turned out that Brad was a distant relative of mine, a third cousin once removed, or something.”

Tom gasped.

“So we’re related too?”

“Yes,” Bram confirmed, “In an exceedingly distant way. Not that this is unusual. The same families have been preoccupied by looking after the crossing for generations.”

“Well,” Tom said slowly, “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, *cousin*.”

He extended his hand. Bram grasped his outstretched palm, his wry smile extending itself over his face. Tom grinned back.

“So, tell me more, cousin,” he said.

Bram nodded.

“It seems that your father met your mother during one of his extended stays in your world,” Bram resumed, “And we know that they married and you are the result.”

He paused for a moment, looking suddenly sombre.

“But there was a reason that Brad had been spending so much time in the vicinity of Long Benton. And it turns out that this had to do with our friend Markham.”

Tom gasped.

“What?” he cried, “But that was years ago!”

“Right enough. Markham’s been playing a double game for a long time.”

Bram explained that the Boards in Lyndesfarne had discovered that Agrea was placing agents in the Armed Forces in Britain, at the time when it was becoming clear to almost all observers that some kind of military conflict in Europe was inevitable. The military base

on the common at Long Benton was a particular target, as it had been – correctly – predicted that it would act as a recruitment centre in the event of hostilities.

“So, Brad was finding out more about this,” Bram went on, “And, later, Lizzie too. But somehow they got too close and were discovered. And that’s why they had to go on the run.”

“And they left me with Granny,” Tom breathed.

“I’m afraid so,” the other man replied, “It must have seemed like the safest thing to do. And, let’s face it, it worked – no one seems to have recognised your connection to all this.”

“Is that why Markham was worried about me?” Tom asked.

“Perhaps,” Bram conceded, “But he could not have been sure of your identity. After all, your surname – the one you have grown up with – is that of your Grandma. It’s not that uncommon, after all.”

“But you know what happened to my parents?” Tom asked anxiously.

Bram shook his head sadly.

“We don’t,” he said softly, “It’s a complete mystery. They just seemed to have vanished. They’ve made no contact with anyone that I’ve been able to track down. Of course, that might have been sensible, in their position – trust no one, perhaps emigrate to a far part of the world and avoid anything to do with magic, as least as far as possible.”

“What do you mean, as far as possible?”

Bram shrugged.

“If they’re still alive, they must have been hidden from Finders,” he said quietly.

“Finders?” Tom exclaimed. This aspect has not occurred to him.

Bram reached into his pocket and drew out the pendant that Alistair had found hidden in the ditch.

“I talked with Alistair,” he said, “Explained something of the position. He wants you to have this.”

“What for?”

“If they’re alive, then they will still be magically hidden. But we’re going to spread the word that the Agrea plot has been rumbled, that Markham is in custody. If Brad and Lizzie have any contacts with my world, they’ll hear eventually, and may risk removing the magic which hides them. So, keep it with you, wear it around your neck always. Think of your mother sometimes – you remember the gestures?”

Bram paused. Tom nodded slowly.

“It’s just possible you will just be able to see your parents again.”

The End

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