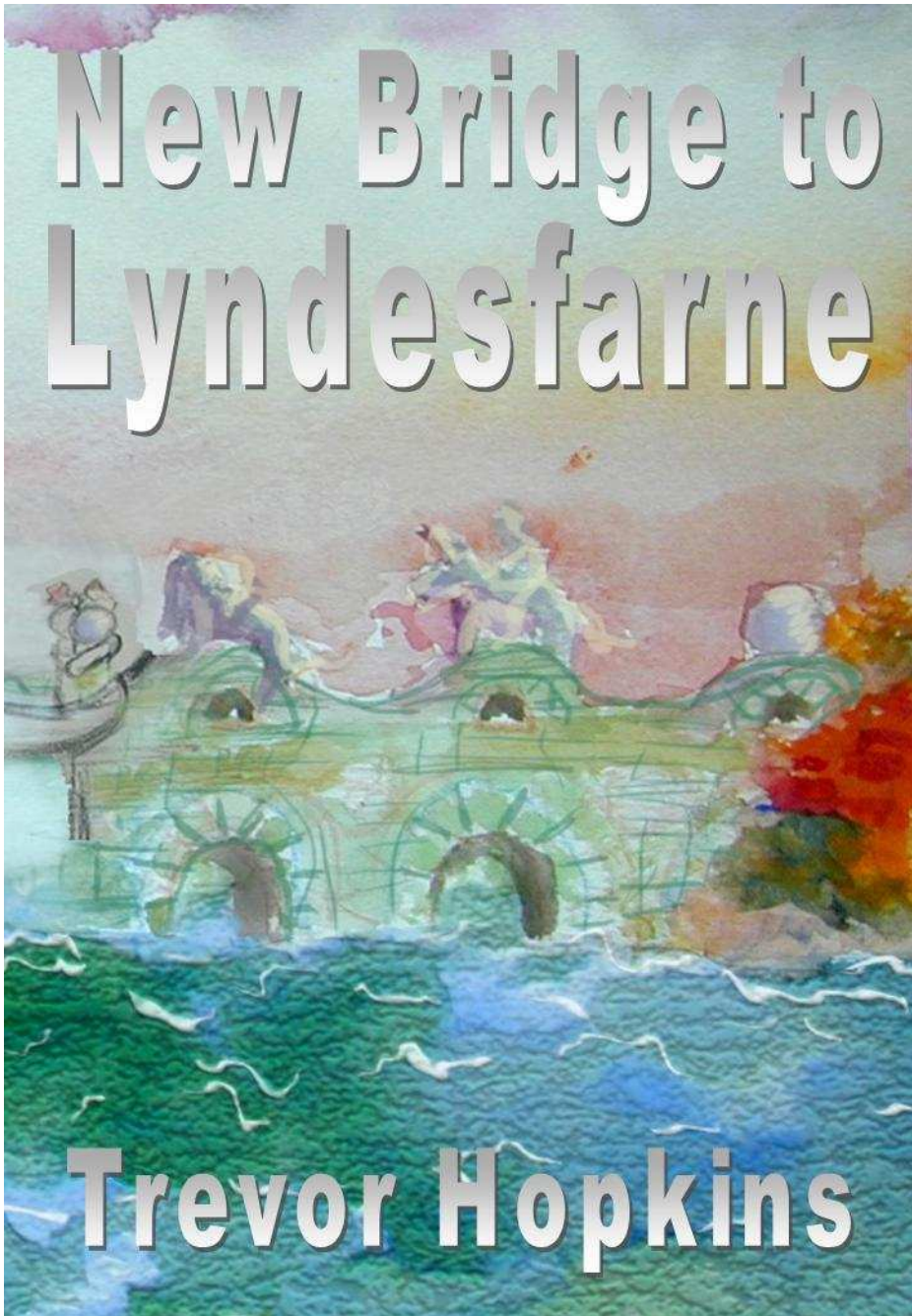


New Bridge to Lyndesfarne



Trevor Hopkins

To Tas and Seb – lights of my life

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

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

Chapter One

The old bridge to Lyndesfarne was an engineering marvel of its time. Unfortunately, its time was now several hundred years in the past. This caused any number of problems, not least of which was the fact that any kind of travel over the bridge almost invariably took ages.

Kevin stood on a windswept hillock, looking towards the ancient stone causeway which strode out to the arches of the bridge. The view across the sea channel was hazy, as always. Even on a bright spring morning, something mysterious about the boundaries of Lyndesfarne meant that it was only vaguely possible to make out features on what Kevin persisted in thinking of as the Island.

At this late morning hour, traffic on the crossing was relatively heavy. A fair number of people on foot, of course, since this was the most reliable way to travel. Wheeled transportation consisted of horse-drawn wagons and caravans of incongruously old-fashioned design, all heavy woodwork and canvas. The low-tech style meant that they could be relied upon to work on either side of the crossing. The bridge itself was only wide enough for a single vehicle, so there was often a queue of impatient horses and people on the causeway.

Motorised or magical transport on the causeway and bridge was rigorously, if discretely, discouraged by the Guardians on either side, but every now and then something slipped through. Even as Kevin watched, a wagon of suspiciously lightweight design heading towards the Island grated to a halt just after the apex of the central arch. All four wheels had suddenly jammed with a screech of iron tyres on stone. Groans and curses from the carters on either side could be heard over the wind, even from this distance.

“What an idiot!” muttered Kevin to himself, “He’s probably using wheel bearings salvaged from a car.”

Simply put, anything but the most basic technology did not work on Lyndesfarne. Anything electrical failed immediately; usually, but not always, it would start working again – sometimes erratically – when returned to the Mainland. Hardened metal alloys softened and bent, clockwork stopped, plastics became brittle and cracked. Kevin had been advised to leave his laptop computer, mobile phone and wristwatch in the boot of his car every time he went to cross to the Island. This was good advice, Kevin thought, and worth paying

attention to. It was all too easy to leave some item in a pocket, only to later discover that it was either broken or functioned erratically.

Once, when Kevin had been studying the massive bulwarks that supported the Lyndesfarne end of the bridge, and making notes in a reporter's notebook, the biro he was using had fractured in his hand as he wrote, leaving ink stains that took a week to remove. These days, he used an old-fashioned lead pencil with an eraser at the end, which always made him feel like he was back at primary school.

After all these months, Kevin was beginning to understand the depth of the centuries-old misinformation campaign about Lyndesfarne. Sure, he had heard of the place, in a vague kind of way, before he had joined the New Bridge team. His first reaction had been, it seemed in hindsight, much like those of his colleagues when he occasionally ran into them in the Manchester office.

"Lyndesfarne? Oh, that's that little island up north somewhere. Hard to get to. Gets cut off by the tide, doesn't it?"

"Supposed to be something mystical about it, isn't there? Full of hippies, or New Age travellers, isn't it?"

"Never been there myself. Sounds kind of dull to me."

"Why do they want a bridge, anyway?"

Lyndesfarne was indeed shown on maps of North East England as a small and uninhabited island. The maps, and indeed the view from the Mainland coast, showed an almost bare island, with just a few windswept trees, many rocky crags and promontories, and large areas of rough grasses and sand-dunes. There was no apparent habitation and no obvious signs of cultivation, just a few suggestions of some shore-side ruins from a bygone age, although it was not immediately clear whether they were fortifications, or religious in origin.

But there was a road, and a causeway, and a bridge. And when you crossed the bridge, you discovered the deception. From the other side, Lyndesfarne was a whole world – a world in which the scientific and engineering laws, those laws which had been so elaborately and expensively drummed into Kevin's head at school and at university, simply did not apply. It was a world as large and complex as Kevin's own, with its own rich and sophisticated way of getting things done; a world with its own history, and cultures, and languages; a world which, for want of a better word, ran on magic.

From Lyndesfarne, the Mainland of Kevin's world appeared as an island. Lyndesfarne maps showed a different, but equally uninspiring representation, and the view from the other end of the causeway was that of a heavily wooded island, with a few rocky outcrops visible amongst the trees. Again, no cultivation and no habitation.

The narrow but deep channel between Island and Mainland formed an effective separation of the two worlds, and the old bridge was really the only way to cross. The sandbanks and quagmires on either side were treacherous, the sea was subject to strong tides and currents, and the weather was unpredictable and violently changeable. Attempting to use an aircraft of any kind was far too dangerous – air traffic control had long since directed aircraft away from the area, treating it as a kind of mini-Bermuda Triangle. Powered boats always failed half-way across, and even sailing was fraught with difficulties. The only real alternative to the bridge was to row a small boat, and this was always at the mercy of the weather.

The last question – why do they want a bridge – was perhaps the most pertinent one, Kevin thought. What could possibly have justified the effort and expense of building a bridge centuries ago? Come to that, what was the justification for the cost of the New Bridge? And who was footing the bill for it, anyway?

He had pondered these questions on many occasions since he had first come to the Island. Part of the answer seemed to be in trade and economics. While most technological artefacts were simply useless in Lyndesfarne, there were a few things in high demand that were readily available on the Mainland. On such item was paper, much to Kevin's surprise when he caught sight of a load of cardboard boxes in a tarpaulin-covered wagon. When he asked, he was told that machine-made paper was of much higher quality than anything available in Lyndesfarne, and seemed to survive well, despite its technological origins.

Kevin had not been able to discover what was traded in the other direction. Since the magic appeared to stop working on crossing the bridge, he found it hard to even begin to imagine what goods from Lyndesfarne could be required on the Mainland.

He sighed and turned to walk back to his car, an aging Volvo. This was one of his few remaining personal possessions, most of which had been handed over to his now-ex wife after his recent divorce. He could have challenged the settlement more vigorously, or hired better legal advice, but frankly he was glad to see the back of the bulk of his possessions that would, he felt, had otherwise weighted him down.

There was a large car park to one side of the road, at the point where the causeway met the shore. This was a windswept area of stone chippings and grass, bordered by low dry-stone walls, with only the most basic of facilities. Most people, it seemed, left their vehicles here and crossed the causeway on foot.

Tanji was waiting by the car. She was his latest guide and interpreter, a recent arrival from the Guild of Directions. She had replaced old Ricard, who, with his perpetual inane grin and dark green clothing, had always put Kevin in mind of a wide-mouthed frog. Tanji, who was petite and fair-haired, was much easier on the eye, although her English was occasionally idiosyncratic, and she sometimes seemed to have a lot on her mind. Still, thought Kevin, I shouldn't complain. I don't speak more than six words of her language and I guess I'm not the best company, either.

"Hi. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"I was becoming a worried person", replied Tanji, primly, "All the cars look the same. I became uncertain that this was the right one."

Kevin opened the boot and shouldered the rucksack that contained his notebooks and a change of clothes. He then separated the remote locking control from the car key fob, and put it in the boot. The remote control would be useless on the Island and, if he took it with him, it might not work on his return. The simple mechanical key would almost certainly survive unscathed. The last thing he wanted was to be locked out of his car in the rainstorms which seemed to happen depressingly frequently whenever he returned from a trip to the Island.

He turned the key in the driver's door, making Tanji jump with the *ker-thunk* of the central locking. Buttoning the front of his bulky oil-skin jacket – zips tended to jam on the Island – he nodded to Tanji.

"Let's go, then," he said.

*

Hello Kithyn.

Only the second week of my new assignment, and I am still finding out so much about my role. The New Bridge project is extremely complicated and very confusing, and so many people want to know about it. Sometimes it seems I am spending all my time translating documents for the Board.

You were quite right to say that the language would come back quickly. I am finding it so much easier to express myself in English, although I am forever asking for explanations of

technical words and phrases. Kevin (my Visitor) is patient with my fumbling attempts at his language, so I have avoided making too much of a fool of myself so far.

I am so glad we met again at the Guild, after all this time. It makes me very pleased that I decided to take up a career again, after such a long break. What a wonderful suggestion of yours to resume our old habit of writing to each other in English. Such good practice!

How are Amiss and the boys?

Keep in touch,

Your old friend Tanji.

Chapter Two

Kevin's first insight into the unusual nature of the New Bridge project was at the Induction and Launch meeting in the Manchester office. He arrived first, as he tended to do, and helped himself to the rather naff coffee from the flasks provided by the caterers. Clutching his plastic cup of cooling coffee, he wandered around the room.

The firm of international architects that had employed Kevin since he left university had offices all over the world. This office, he mused, occupying the third floor of a rather anonymous office block in central Manchester, must be the least prepossessing. The meeting room for the project kick-off had windows that looked out over a blank red-brick wall only ten feet across a narrow alley. Well, he thought, at least we won't be distracted by anyone in the offices across there.

Having been around in the industry for a couple of decades, Kevin was not entirely surprised to recognise several acquaintances as they arrived. Duncan Tweedy, a red-faced and rotund project manager from a firm of civil engineering contractors, greeted Kevin as he entered the room. Tweedledum, as he was known behind his back, was infamous for his hearty manner and loud taste in ties, and Kevin braced himself for the inevitable robust handshake.

"Hello Duncan," said Kevin, discretely flexing his hand after the mauling it had so recently received. "So you're going to be the contractors for this project, are you?"

"Well, actually, old boy, there are two firms in the frame for this one. And I've never heard of the other company before". Tweedledum frowned, and lowered his voice slightly. "Apparently this is a cross-border project, and there are political reasons."

Kevin, who made it a policy never to enquire too deeply into "political reasons", said nothing. Various partners and managers had been drifting into the room, but his attention was distracted at that moment by the two men who had just entered.

Up to that point, the men in the room – and they were all men – could have been assembled from an identikit of the British Professional Male. Hair shaved or clipped short, to disguise encroaching baldness; sober and usually slightly tatty business suits; blue or white shirts, and ties evidently chosen either by wives or in

some failed attempt to communicate individuality and a sense of humour.

The newcomers, therefore, stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. Both men were tall and slender. One had an open, smiling, even boyish face and a full head of blond hair, tied in a neat ponytail. The other was swarthy, with neatly clipped black hair and beard, and looked around as if expecting dastardly plots in every quarter. Both wore what could only be described as robes, in a startling shade of deep green, and carried matching brand-new burgundy leather briefcases.

Spotting the direction of Kevin's stare, Tweedledum swivelled around. "Ah, yes. They'll be the representatives from the Lyndesfarne Board of Construction, I'll wager."

David Macmillan, the Partner responsible for UK Crossings contracts, chose that moment to speak. "I think we're all here, gentlemen, so let's get started."

During the inevitably lengthy and sometimes tedious meeting that followed, Kevin learned a great deal about the project plans, budgets and timescales, and almost nothing about the technical problems being faced. This was not unusual. Partners and managers tended to worry about "the bottom line", and simply assumed that the technicalities could be sorted out. They also tended to take for granted that these technical issues could be solved very quickly. Surprisingly, this was not their assumption today. Which was just as well, as it slowly became clear to an astonished and disbelieving Kevin just how unusual a set of technical challenges he would be facing, and that there would have to be significant extra time allocated in the plan to resolve them.

Architects who became famous, or at least had their names mentioned in the Sunday newspapers, veered towards designing buildings which were high on novelty and visual impact, and low on features such as practicality and maintainability. Words like "carbuncle", "monstrosity" and "eyesore" tended to accompany public reactions to their work, from royalty and Sun readers alike.

Kevin's skills lay elsewhere. He had a knack of suggesting neat and reliable solutions to obscure civil engineering problems. His most recent success was the design of a deep-water sea crossing in New Zealand. High cliffs on one side and low-lying land on the other had made mainstream bridge construction extremely challenging. Unusually hard rock and water too deep for conventional pilings had led to a solution involving a series of huge floating concrete caissons supporting a sloping bridge, with a final

steel cable-stay section including a cunning array of vast hinges to accommodate bridge movement caused by tidal changes in sea level. It had been hailed as a masterpiece, an ingenious piece of modern design. It still gave Kevin a slightly smug feeling whenever he saw it featured in articles in technical journals or trade magazines.

It had however cost him his marriage. On his return from the Antipodes, his wife had announced that she was leaving him, in a fashion which seemed such a huge surprise at the time. She had found someone else, some who would look after her, someone who would be with her all the time. Actually, in the end, Kevin left her, moving himself and a very few possessions out of their house in the suburbs, which seemed the simplest thing to do at the time. With hindsight, thought Kevin, always 20-20, I should have seen it all coming.

Bret, the blond man from the Board of Construction, was to be Kevin's partner from the Lyndesfarne side. He talked knowledgeably and convincingly about design and construction techniques which Kevin did not understand and, frankly, sounded like magic. It soon became clear, though, that Bret was equally flummoxed by Kevin's descriptions of engineering techniques which would be familiar to undergraduates.

Almost immediately, Kevin gained his first insight about the unique nature of the project. He quickly realised that there would in fact have to be two bridges, each constructed according to the different principles and laws of each world, and joined in the middle. But how could the joint be constructed, in a region where neither magic nor engineering was reliable?

During a coffee break, a flabbergasted Kevin was told by Bret that somehow a bridge had already built between the worlds which joined in the middle. He knew he would have to find out more about how it had been achieved.

Most of the talking during the planning meeting was done by David, Tweedledum and the dark-haired man in the green robe, who was introduced as Panit. He was mainly concerned with the commercial aspects: payment schedules, terms and conditions and so forth. Project management seemed beneath him; when pressed, he allowed that he would be appointing someone from "the Board" as "Overseer".

"OK, time out," said Tweedledum, after what seemed like hours of inconclusive discussions, "We'll plan for a plan, then."

Panit also made several pointed remarks about the need for "professional discretion". Kevin was not in the habit of discussing

his work with anyone; most people neither cared nor understood, and those few who did were probably even more boring than he was. Besides, he reflected, who would believe me anyway?

The meeting finished eventually and, in the manner of professional meetings everywhere, was concluded by a summary of action points. Kevin would get a briefing in magic from one of the organisations set up to study Lyndesfarne, and then join Bret to produce a report on “technical compatibility and solutioning”. This was management-speak for “go and look at the old bridge, and then work out how you are going to build the new one”. Kevin made arrangements to meet with Bret, and then the Lyndesfarne contingent left together.

Kevin packed his laptop computer and notebook in his bag, and wandered downstairs to the lobby, already deep in thought. He caught sight of Bret and Panit being ushered by a uniformed chauffeur into the back of a Range Rover with blacked-out windows. Mentally comparing the car to his own rather tatty Volvo, as well as thinking back to the very discreet meeting they had just left, Kevin briefly wondered about where the money behind this project was coming from, and why the Board members wanted so much to stay out of sight.

The next day saw Kevin out of bed ludicrously early and pounding up the motorway towards Newcastle in the Volvo. Newcastle was the nearest major city to Lyndesfarne, and Kevin had a feeling (correctly, as it turned out) that he was going to be spending a lot of time there.

He had a briefing appointment (a “sheep-dip session”, as Tweedledum had put it) with a Professor Wilmington of the Newcastle Institute for Special Sciences and Arts, also known as NISSA. NISSA was nominally attached to the University of Newcastle, and was located on its campus. Despite its innocent-sounding name, this Institute was one of the few accessible organisations whose sole purpose was to study the world of Lyndesfarne.

Kevin arrived late for the meeting, very much in contrast with his characteristic punctuality, having managed to get lost on the University campus and failed to find anyone who could guide him to the right building. Eventually, he discovered more-or-less by accident the imposing edifice that housed the NISSA organisation, and was rapidly directed to Professor Wilmington’s office.

Kevin had vaguely expected that the Professor would sport a stereotypical bow-tie, briar pipe and a tweed jacket with worn leather

elbow patches. In fact, the Professor (“call me Alan”) was a youngish fit-looking man in jeans and T-shirt. He had wild curly black hair and a tanned face with a stubble beard, and looked for all the world like a latter-day romantic Celtic poet.

He also came equipped with a surprisingly down-to-earth attitude, especially given the subject matter. He had an easy manner although, being a University teacher, he sometimes tended towards a somewhat pontificating style. Nevertheless, he usually conveyed information in simple terms, although this left Kevin feeling bemused more often than not.

“Fundamentally,” explained Alan, “We don’t know how or why magic works over there, in much the same way that we don’t really understand why, say, electricity, works here.”

“But we can describe what happens, and how to interact with it. Certainly enough so that you can get around. After all, you don’t have to know much about electricity to turn on the light, do you?”

Kevin spent most of the day with Alan and his colleagues, and had gone away feeling torn: partially that the simple actions and gestures (the Professor disapproved of the word “spell”) he had been taught to make really were no more difficult than flipping a light switch, and partially because he was convinced that he would never be able to make anything work in a world where his engineering skills were worse than useless.

Chapter Three

Kevin and Tanji joined the irregular line of people heading for the causeway. As he frequently did while making this crossing, Kevin thought about the border formalities with a degree of mild amusement. The official procedures were incredibly low-key, and consistent with the official attitude (at least in his world) that Lyndesfarne did not exist. There were no passports, no visas, nothing on paper at all. Still, it was clear that the crossing was thoroughly monitored, and those who crossed were watched with great care.

At the point where the road joined the causeway, there was a low building which Kevin had mistaken, on his first visit, for a Tourist Information office. This disguise was fairly convincingly carried off, both inside and out. The building sported numerous signs displaying the “little I in the box” logo, and inside were ranged racks containing maps and brochures advertising tourist attractions – all of which were located on the Mainland, Kevin had noted.

However, unlike most English tourist information offices, this one was both large and well-staffed. Through one glass door, several people could be seen sat at desks, watching screens or working at computers, and there were several other doors where the glass was opaque or just covered over with posters. There were always people sitting around, apparently waiting for service from the desk staff, or taking hot drinks from the coin-in-the-slot machine. After a few visits, Kevin had begun to realise that these same groups of people sat in this office day after day. They were in fact part of the security organisation which he had heard referred to as the Guardians.

Kevin nudged Tanji, and pointed in the direction of the tourist information office.

“I just need to change some money,” he said, “Do you want to come in?”

“I will wait outside, if you don’t mind,” she replied.

“Suit yourself. I shouldn’t be long.”

Kevin ducked into the building and made his way to the discreet booth tucked away in a corner where it was possible to change English money into the Lyndesfarne currency. He had the usual tussle with the rather sour-faced old dear behind the counter, who would refuse to deal with you, or even comprehend what you were

saying, until you made it quite clear that you knew about the Island, and that you really did understand what you were asking for.

Finally, he handed over a bundle of twenty-pound notes, and received in return a cloth bag which emitted a muffled clunk when he put in on the counter. It sounds just like, Kevin thought, a bag of rather cheaply-made spanners.

Lyndesfarne currency consisted of large thin disks of various sizes, apparently made of a rather dull metal and covered with fine engraving. On the Island, they were invested with a number of magical properties to prevent counterfeiting, as well as the ability for a person to press together many coins of the same denomination, so that a large amount of money had the same size and weight as a single disk.

Here, however, the coins were just inert lumps of inconveniently heavy metal. Kevin stowed them away in the top of his rucksack, on top of his notebook and change of clothes. There were no receipts or any kind of paper trail, which had worried him on his first visit, but his company had been unusually forgiving in the matter of chits for expenses claims.

Returning outside, Kevin saw Tanji talking to one of the causeway Guardians, who was wearing a blue windcheater covered by a tabard of that Day-Glo yellow material made familiar by workmen everywhere. Dodging a wagon, he rejoined Tanji just as the Guardian wandered off.

“What was all that about?” he asked.

“He was telling me about the Watchers. He said there seem to be more and more of them, and they don’t know why. There are all sorts of rumours going around, that they have been frightening the construction workers on both sides, that they disapprove of the new bridge.”

“But why?” exclaimed Kevin.

“He didn’t say. He’s clearly worried, though.”

Kevin had himself seen the Watchers on many occasions, usually while he had been inspecting the New Bridge site. Silent figures in dark robes would emerge from the mist, at a distance too far to make out any features, and often standing on difficult-to-access parts of the surrounding mudflats. The figures would stand motionless for a few minutes, apparently studying the building work, and then disappear as swiftly and silently as they had arrived. In his more paranoid moments, Kevin thought that they were watching him personally, although he considered it more likely that they were interested in the construction of the New Bridge itself.

They walked on along the causeway, passing the signs that seemed expressly designed to attempt to scare off the casual traveller. These announced in large letters: “Dangerous causeway, cross at your own risk”, “Extreme caution advised during adverse weather conditions” and “No motorised transport beyond this point”. Kevin wondered whether it really was that hazardous. After all, some people clearly made the crossing regularly, and Kevin had heard that some travellers lived alternately on either side of the straights. If people apparently disappeared, he reasoned, it was simply because they elected to say on the Island.

They walked on, keeping an eye out for foot traffic, and avoiding the heavily-laden horse-drawn wagons coming in the opposite direction. Looking at the passing traffic, Kevin voiced a question that had been nagging at him for some time – and indeed one where he had already made a few discrete enquiries.

“What’s on those wagons? I mean, what’s being imported to my homeland?”

“Well,” replied Tanji, “Some rare things, a very few magical artefacts are thought to work in your world. Or at least some people require to buy them.”

More questions and answers allowed Kevin to put some flesh on this statement, although he had heard the tale recounted before. It seemed that certain items were thought to be effective on the Mainland. Generally, the more abstract, philosophical or psychological the supposed effect, the more chance it had of being sold. Examples included good-luck charms, health improving talismans and, Kevin was not entirely surprised to discover, potions to enhance sexual abilities and prowess.

Tanji’s face had coloured up while explaining this last point. Kevin did his best to be charming, to avoid embarrassment for Tanji and himself. This seemed to work, as her blush was soon replaced by a tight smile.

They walked on in companionable silence, while Kevin thought over what he had just been told. He was extremely unconvinced by the explanation on exported goods. Building a new bridge, with all the difficulties, effort and cost, he thought, just to import a few spells of dubious effectiveness. After all, the supposed effects of these so-called charms could be a complete fraud, just something to convince the dangerously gullible.

So, why was the old bridge built? There must have been a considerable imperative to make that kind of investment. He could not imagine that the curios, trinkets and artefacts of doubtful magical

abilities would represent more than a tiny percentage of the total volume he knew to be transported over the bridge every day. I don't believe a word of it, Kevin mused, there is quite definitely something more going on here than meets the eye.

There was a steady stream of people crossing the bridge in both directions. Kevin took to people-watching as they walked. After a fair bit of practice over the last couple of years, he thought he had become quite adept at spotting those originating in Lyndesfarne.

Of course, Islander appearance was highly variable, just like on the Mainland: people came in all shapes, sizes and colours. Even so, there was a certain tendency towards weathered or ruddy-faced features, as if they had been spending a lot of time outdoors. Or perhaps too much alcohol, thought Kevin with probably unnecessary cynicism.

The common aspect, though, was what could only be described as a certain elfin appearance, even for tall or well-built individuals. Both men and women tended to have rather sharp features, high cheekbones and at least the suggestion of pointed earlobes.

Clothing was a dead giveaway, too. Kevin's background and upbringing meant that his sense of dress or fashion was strictly blinkered, but even he could see that Islander clothing was varied, complex and sophisticated. There was more use of bright and primary colours, as well as rarely-seen shades such as chocolate brown. Black was seldom worn. Flowing robes were popular for both men and women. Trousers were less often seen, but again worn by both genders. Clothes seem to be made without any kind of stitching or seams, Kevin had noted, and presumably some kind of magical processing and fastening was involved.

On this occasion, Tanji was dressed in a variation of the clothes many Islanders preferred to wear for travelling: belted leather trousers in dark brown, short boots and a long brown cape over a silk aquamarine blouse. Kevin had seen these capes before; they were wonderfully warm and waterproof, and much better than the Mainland hi-tech anorak he had worn on his first visit.

*

Dear Kithyn.

I have just arrived back from the Other World. Just a quick trip to collect my Visitor, and guide him over to the site of the New Bridge.

It is already quite an impressive sight, with the two towers springing up from the water on either side of the straights.

You asked about my Visitor. You are just as curious as ever, I see!

Well, Kevin is really very nice, in a quiet sort of way, although I think there is a deep hurt somewhere inside him. To look at, he is of ordinary height, and a bit skinny. I do not think he eats enough. Does that sound like I want to mother him? He has such gentle blue eyes, and dark hair cut just a little bit too short. At least he's not losing his hair. He dresses a bit badly, too. His clothes seem slightly too big for him, and always in black and white. So dull! Good to hear about Amiss's promotion. He must be very senior by now – does he have a seat on the Outer Board already?

More news later.

Your old friend Tanji.

Chapter Four

Kevin's first trip to Lyndesfarne was memorable, to say the least. He had driven up the main road from the south, in the rain, following the detailed directions he had received from Professor Call-me-Alan. Even with the instructions, he drove past the turning which led to the causeway twice. The junction, when he found it, was marked by a small sign so weathered as to be almost illegible. They really don't want to advertise their presence, do they, thought Kevin.

The road to the Island causeway and bridge seemed at first glance narrow and rarely-travelled, barely wide enough for vehicles to pass easily. This was deceptive, since the oncoming traffic was quite heavy, and Kevin found himself slowing down several times when the windscreen wipers failed to cope with spray from passing cars and lorries. There were a surprising number of large trucks and articulated vehicles on the road, and he wondered vaguely where all the traffic was coming from.

The road passed over several ancient stone bridges, barely wide enough to cope with modern traffic, and covered with moss and lichen. This made them nearly as green as the overgrown hedgerows alongside the road. The highway also included a feature unusual for the English countryside: a footpath along its entire length. It appeared that lots of people went to and from the Island on foot.

There was little habitation along the road. Every now and then, set back into the hedgerows, there would be a stone house, very solid and respectable-looking. There was a slight suggestion, it seemed to Kevin, not of abandonment but rather of infrequent occupation, like a Mediterranean holiday villa in February.

Kevin piloted his car around one last oncoming heavy goods vehicle, and pulled into the causeway car park. There were only a few vehicles parked up, and he selected a spot close to the exit. He recognised Bret, who was wrapped in a cape and sheltering from the damp weather under a tree in the corner of the car park.

Kevin was still not sure what to make of Bret, and he greeted him cautiously with a perfunctory handshake and some mumbled pleasantries. Kevin then drew on his modern Gortex anorak and they set out together along the causeway.

On this occasion, the weather was heavily overcast, with a light drizzle of rain and featureless flat grey skies in every direction. It

was impossible to tell where the sea met the sky. There was almost no wind, and tendrils of mist swirled over the causeway. Only the muffled sound of the sea and the occasional bird cry could be heard. There was little traffic, just a few pedestrians and a single wagon could be made out ahead of them. Dead spooky, thought Kevin.

The two men rounded a curve in the causeway and the arches of the bridge loomed out of the mist in front of them. Kevin slowed, mouth open, to take in the sight of what lay before him.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” said Bret, who seemed to have noted Kevin’s reaction.

Kevin nodded.

“It’s astonishing,” he mouthed almost inaudibly. Bret smiled tightly in response.

Kevin pulled himself together and tried to evaluate the construction professionally. His immediate reaction was that the structure was right on the edge of stone-built bridge technology. He would be hard pushed to design a bridge like this, given the constraints of the materials available, even with the benefits of modern computer aided design techniques. And they built this thing several hundred years ago, he thought, quite astounding.

The bridge consisted of three arches, with a vast central span crossing the deep water of the straights. The main arch seemed impossibly long and high, at least two hundred feet across and perhaps sixty feet in the air. There were smaller secondary arches on either side, perhaps seventy or eighty feet each, spreading the load from the main arch, and terminating in vast stone buttresses that both anchored the bridge and provided the ramps which allowed travellers to cross.

A stone bridge, like a masonry building, Kevin mused, is essentially a machine held up by gravity. Every part must be in compression, otherwise joints between stone blocks simply opened up, mortar or no mortar. Given the size of the Old Bridge, the weight of the central arch must be immense, and all that weight had to be spread evenly by the triple arches and bulwarks. The weight distribution has to be carefully computed, otherwise the arch would either explode or collapse, and the force on any individual block cannot be too high, otherwise the stone simply disintegrated under pressure.

“It’s got to be reinforced in some way!” exclaimed Kevin.

“It is,” replied Bret calmly, “Indeed, it is exactly these reinforcements we are here to study today.”

Bret's voice had an unexpectedly deep and rounded bass tone, which contrasted with his boyish looks. Kevin glanced at Bret and then back at the bridge. As his eye ran along the length of the bridge stretching away from him, he noticed a change in the appearance of the masonry. The dull stonework on the mainland side of the central arch seemed to mutate on the far side, with orange flecks to be found seemingly deep within the solid stones, just visible in the haze and drizzle.

Even from this distance, the flecks gave the impression of continual movement, but only when glimpsed out of the corner of the eye. When Kevin watched directly, the sparks seemed entirely motionless. Like orange fireflies, but somehow inside the rock itself, he thought. After dark, this bridge must light up like a Christmas tree.

Kevin would later discover that the orange sparks were *always* only just visible, even in complete darkness. On the rare days of brilliant sunshine, the motes still appeared just bright enough to be seen.

“What on earth are the sparks in the rock?” Kevin asked.

“Well, they are the reinforcements,” explained Bret, “at least on that side of the bridge.”

“But what are they?”

Bret snorted. “There's no easy way to translate. The word I've heard used is ‘sprites’, although there's nothing actually living in the rock. It's a manifestation of – well, I understand the word you use is ‘magic’.”

The two men approached the foot of the bridge. Rather than crossing, Bret directed Kevin alongside the bulwarks, so that they could look up at the underside of the bridge.

Kevin could see long grooves cut into the stonework, following the line of the arches. There were regular cross-cuts and the grooves had been carefully filled with mortar.

“Ah,” said Kevin, light dawning, “Steel strengthening rods, with cross-pieces. Placed in grooves, and tensioned up as the arch was constructed. Held in place and protected with cement, to prevent rust.”

Bret smiled. “I'm sure you're right. When the bridge was built, I'm told, this was the best technology available.”

“But why didn't you use the same approach on your side?” asked Kevin.

“We couldn't make a material strong enough in tension. The sprites in the rock bind the stones together directly.”

“But why not just use steel reinforcement throughout?” Kevin persisted.

“Because steel’s not effective on that side of the bridge.” continued Bret, “The alloy technology doesn’t work. The steel reverts to soft iron, and that’s neither strong enough nor stiff enough to support the arches.”

Kevin turned and studied the bridge construction again. He could see the reinforcement grooves stretching just beyond the apex of the central arch on the island side, while the orange sprites in the stone petered out just on the Mainland side of the highest point.

“So,” mused Kevin, half to himself, “Two types of reinforcements, mutually incompatible, which overlap for a few feet in the middle. And the weight of the arch is supported equally by the two halves.”

“That’s right,” said Bret, interrupting Kevin’s thoughts, “And our job is to build a much bigger bridge, in two halves, with two different approaches, each of which simply cannot work on the other half.”

“No problem there then,” responded Kevin sarcastically.

Bret looked strangely at him, then caught sight of his half-grin and relaxed.

Actually, Kevin did have the beginnings of an idea on how to make a new bridge work. He knew several techniques of making a half-bridge entirely self-supporting, so that there was very little weight on the centre point. Indeed, he had used just such an approach in the New Zealand crossing, where the largest section of the crossing was supported almost entirely at one end. So, he considered, if Bret can suggest an analogous approach, we can together build something where the central section, where neither magic nor technology are entirely trustworthy, need not be very strong: just enough to support its own weight and that of the traffic.

The two men returned to the foot of the bridge, and started the walk up the slope and onto the nearest arch. As they walked on, Kevin studied the bridge construction. It was fabricated from blocks of hard granite, now lichen-encrusted and worn by the elements. The blocks, he was to discover later, had been quarried locally on both sides of the straights, and then assembled over an elaborate wooden scaffolding. This must have been a heroic effort, Kevin noted, against the weather and environment. Even so, it was still possible to see the very high quality stonework on both causeway and bridge, with stone blocks cut individually to size, to fit together precisely with very little mortar required.

The two men walked on together, making their way up the slope. Kevin noted that the stone flags underfoot had become somewhat rutted and uneven with age and the onslaught of centuries of traffic. Kevin stopped at the centre of the bridge, just where the orange flecks started to become visible within the flags. He leaned over the stone breastworks, and looked down. Far below, the gently swirling water looked deep and murky.

“How deep is the water here?” he asked Bret.

“I don’t know,” replied Bret, “I don’t think anyone has been able to measure it. Certainly, no one’s found an anchor rope long enough to reach the bottom.”

“But surely a sonar depth-finder...” began Kevin.

“It wouldn’t work, right here in the centre of the straights. On this side, your instruments indicate that the channel gets rapidly deeper, with a sharp drop-off just beyond that pier.”

Bret indicated the stonework supporting the central arch on the Mainland side.

“We can make similar measurements over here,” he continued, indicating the other main arch support, “and find a similar profile. But right here, in the middle, neither your techniques nor ours work. For all we know, it might be literally bottomless.”

Chapter Five

As they made their way down the Island side of the old bridge, Kevin noticed that numerous subtle changes were occurring in Tanji's appearance. Her face became less rounded, and her cheekbones more pronounced. Her ears seemed to take on a slightly pointed appearance. Her hair lightened, from the inconspicuous mid-blonde that Kevin was familiar with, to a much lighter and considerably more vibrant shade. She looked all together much more relaxed, and she smiled widely for the first time in his presence.

"You're a shapeshifter!" he exclaimed.

He had heard a little about this talent from the NISSA professor, and even seen the before and after effect on one occasion, but he had never himself experienced the transformation actually in progress.

She laughed. "Of course! Here, many people are."

Tanji explained that a large number of Islanders have some shape-shifting ability. It was something that younger people tended to experiment with, changing their features as a fashion statement, or to amuse their friends, or just for a special party. Practically everyone could make minor cosmetic changes: the shape of their face, the colour of their eyes: the kids revelled in it. There were even cosmetic shifting products which enhanced specific changes, so that you really could buy bigger, brighter, bluer eyes in a bottle.

"I used to change my hair and eye colour every day, when I was studying at the College. And some people used to compete to see how grotesque they could make their faces," she explained.

"But how can you ever recognise each other, if you can change your appearance so radically?" asked Kevin.

"Well, it is only possible to change so much. Besides, you get a kind of feeling that you recognise someone, even if they look quite different. In any case, it is considered polite to let others know who you are, otherwise it can all be very embarrassing."

Older people, explained Tanji, tended not to bother so much with changing their shape and usually left their appearance alone. Kevin, who was not someone who went for much in the way of cosmetics and personal beauty, and indeed never had been, had much sympathy for this approach.

People crossing to the Mainland were advised to use any shapeshifter talent they had to make themselves less conspicuous. Of

course, they had to make any changes before they left the Island, since they could not change while away from Lyndesfarne, and they would be forced to remain in that form until they returned.

A very few individuals could make much larger changes in their appearance, in much the same way that some people could perform physical contortions impossible for everyone else. A trained and talented shapeshifter, Tanji observed, could alter almost any aspect of their appearance, adding or removing inches in height, and changing their bulk and weight, as well as modifying skin colour and facial hair. But even such unusual talents rarely made alterations to their apparent gender, and it was considered very hard to make a great change in apparent age.

As they arrived at the end of the causeway, Tanji pointed in the direction of the walled field that Kevin thought of as the car park.

“I have a vehicle here. Shall we use it?”

Kevin had seen Islander vehicles before, but only from a distance. In all his previous visits, he had never used any of the transports he had often seen parked up here.

“Sure. I’ve never been in one of these things. How do they work?”

“Um, I don’t think I can easily explain. I don’t know how to translate the words.”

Tanji’s personal transport consisted of a flattened translucent ovoid, virtually indistinguishable from the dozen or so other similarly shaped bubbles sitting in the field. Tanji guided him over to a particularly smoky grey bubble and made a complex gesture he could not follow. The colour faded, and the interior was revealed. It looked something like a two-seat sofa in dark red leather, with attached oversized footrests, which struck Kevin as rather incongruous standing in a slightly damp field. He strode over to feel the leather seating, and promptly walked into something he could not see.

“Ow! What’s that?” he asked, slightly peevisly, rubbing his bruised knee.

“Oh, sorry. The, er, casing’s still on. I think that’s the word in English. Wait a moment, there. Now, sit down and keep still, and we will go together.”

Kevin tried again, and this time he was able to climb onto the seating and sit down. Tanji make a gesture, and they were suddenly enclosed in a barely-visible bubble. Kevin sensed immediately that he was being sheltered from the wind, and it rapidly became noticeably warmer.

He reached out gingerly, and rapped his knuckles on the casing.

“So how do I get out?” he asked.

“Use this gesture.”

Tanji illustrated a lift-and-twist gesture that looked to Kevin like she was operating a rather large and old-fashioned (but definitely invisible) door handle.

“But don’t try it while we are moving,” she continued. “I really wouldn’t want you to fall out.”

She smiled gleefully, and Kevin suddenly caught his breath, as if seeing her for the first time. He smiled back and then looked away, feeling inexplicably shy for a moment.

Tanji turned her attention to the vehicle. She began to make a series of complex movements. The sofa lifted a few inches from the ground and swivelled round, and then began to move slowly towards the exit. She seemed to be concentrating on piloting the transport, which left Kevin free to look around.

Judging by the “car park”, several different kinds of transports were available. Many were larger and more squared-off, but with the same kind of grey bubble surrounding them. Dotted between the large bubbles were shapes which looked like motorbikes draped in dull silver sheets. He assumed that the latter were some kind of one-person transports.

On previous visits with old frog-face, Kevin had either walked to the New Bridge site, or more usually had ridden in an old-fashioned horse-drawn trap. He had noticed that horse-drawn transport was at least faster than travelling on foot, and would work equally well on either side of the bridge.

In his occasional paranoid moments, Kevin had noted that a mounted rider was probably the best way of tracking down a runaway visitor on either side of the bridge, and a light horse-drawn trap was nearly as effective. Not that anyone could have done a runner anyway, he thought, since the old bridge is always crowded with travellers. And where else would one go?

The new bridge site was about a mile and a half from the old bridge. For obvious reasons, the builders of the old bridge had selected the narrowest point for the crossing, and the straights widened rapidly on either side. Of course, modern bridge-building allowed for much longer crossings, and Kevin (accompanied by Bret, Ricard and others from both the Mainland and Island) had spent a couple of months inspecting and surveying prospective sites before selecting this one.

At the New Bridge site, the straights were much wider, and the surrounding mudflats and marshes narrower. On each side, a support tower had been constructed in a shallow part of the sea. On the Mainland side, a conventional (at least from Kevin's viewpoint) approach of steel-reinforced poured concrete has been used. For a long time, there had been cranes and barges full of concrete and steel clustered around the tower base as it grew steadily from the sea.

Kevin looked on as Tanji brought the transport through the site gate and up to the location where the approach road supports were still being constructed. As she manoeuvred the vehicle carefully around the clutter of debris that always seemed to be found on building sites, Kevin watched the building work progressing.

He had seen the same approach for the construction of the Island-side support tower a year back. Vast pale-grey building blocks were delivered on floating platforms, each marked individually in a spidery script Kevin could not read. The blocks were incredibly easy to move; they were nudged by hand from the delivery platform to the base of the tower as if they were made of expanded polystyrene filled with Helium. They literally floated in the air to the height of the tower, guided by a light rope, where they were grabbed by a construction worker on the scaffolding and placed very carefully, being finally edged into position. At a gesture from the worker, the weight of the block increased dramatically, settling into place with a soft *crump*. Then, over a period of perhaps two hours, the joints between the blocks faded, as well as the markings, and the material amalgamated into a single solid mass.

Kevin looked up, and noticed that one of the Watchers had appeared on a low headland a few hundred yards away. Unusually close, he thought. The Watchers did indeed seem to be increasing their mysterious activity as the New Bridge came closer to completion. The Watchers, mused Kevin, must have some kind of organisation behind them. Are they some kind of government audit group, or maybe a branch of the Secret Police? As he watched, the Watcher disappeared, using the simple expedient of walking down the far side of the headland and out of his line of sight.

Tanji brought the transport to a halt, and it settled to the ground. Kevin made the gesture he had been taught earlier, getting it right first time, to his considerable private satisfaction. The surrounding bubble dissipated rapidly, and he stepped out.

"I'm going to be busy for some time," he said to Tanji, "But I probably don't need to talk to anybody. Do you want to stay here?"

“Ok,” she replied, “I’ve some correspondence I can catch up with. Call me if you want any help.”

“Sure thing.”

Kevin set off, working his way over the site area carefully and making copious notes in his reporters’ notebook using a soft pencil. He would write them all up as a more formal report on his laptop computer when he got back to the Mainland. As so often happened, as he worked the hours just flew by, and it came as a surprise when the construction workers started wrapping up for the day.

He made his way back to the transport, and found Tanji sitting on the sofa and rapidly writing on what looked like a hand-held wood-framed slate.

“Hi. What are you up to?”

“I was just writing a few letters to old friends and colleagues. I just need to get this one sent.”

He had heard about these magical writing slates. As he watched, Tanji jotted a few words at the bottom of the slate, and then make a sequence of gestures over the frame. Kevin could see that she was writing in English but, before he could take in more than a few words, the writing faded.

“Just a chatty note to an old friend,” she explained.

Kevin climbed back onto the sofa, and they set off again. He had previously asked Tanji to made arrangements for them to stay overnight on the island, so she guided them to “The Walled Garden”, which she insisted as describing as a hostel, rather than a hotel. He had stayed here before, and had found it really rather comfortable, in a low-key kind of way. It was not really a hotel in the style of the large anonymous buildings found all over the Mainland. Suits me, thought Kevin, it’s rather like staying in a small and well-run private hotel.

*

Hello again, Kithyn.

I am now at the site of the New Bridge. My Visitor is working somewhere nearby, so I have a few minutes to write a reply to you.

I am coming to the opinion that Visitor Kevin is really quite clever. Clever Kev? For a Mainlander, he seems to be quick at picking up spells. I know it’s a simple thing, but he got the Open Sealed Door gesture right at the first attempt. You will know

that children often find this one tricky – and perhaps just as well!
I would not want anyone falling out while in motion.

The Watchers seem to be very active. I really do not know what they are looking for. They do seem to be making everyone uneasy. Are the rumours true?

I had to laugh at Kevin this morning. I had used my shape shifting ability to make a very few minor changes to fit into the other world, as we have been taught. I reversed the changes when we returned, and he saw me doing it. He was so surprised! I am all over again struck by the differences between the worlds. I do not think I could ever live over there.

Kevin has come back now, so I better close. Thank you again for all your support over the last few months.

Your friend Tanji.

Chapter Six

Kevin walked with Bret down the slope, as they continued their inspection of the Old Bridge. Kevin was completely fascinated by the bridge's construction. It seemed to be in astonishingly good condition, given its age, with very little sign of damage or even past repair work.

The two men reached the point where the bridge joined the causeway. Here, it was possible to follow a narrow walkway alongside the bridge supports, which led under the nearest arch in much the same way as on the Mainland side.

Bret pointed in the direction of the walkway.

“Shall we take a look under the arch on this side?”

Kevin nodded. “Yes, Okay.”

The two men made their way carefully along the damp stone, with Kevin carefully watching where he put his feet on the wet and slippery surface. The orange flecks were confusing with their continual suggestion of movement on the edge of vision. I really don't want to fall in here, he thought, it looks bloody nasty.

They reached a wider section that stretched the width of the bridge. Kevin relaxed, and looked up at the arch stretching above him. He noticed a couple of small areas under the bridge where the sparks seemed to be missing.

“What's happened here?” he asked, indicating the fleck-free regions.

“In the past,” answered Bret, “the arches were fitted with traps and mines, with the ability to destroy portions of the bridge. For military reasons, obviously.”

Bret explained that, in centuries past, there had been attempts by various rulers, in fits of pride or madness, to mount an invasion over the bridge. Apparently, this had happened twice from the Mainland, and once from Lyndesfarne. These attacks had been doomed to failure: there was a huge advantage to the defenders, since they would have full use of their technology or magic, depending, while the attackers would be limited to edged weapons in soft metals.

In spite of this natural advantage, past rulers in both worlds had demanded that the bridge was mined, so that a more determined attack could be thwarted by destroying the only effective route in and out of Lyndesfarne.

“The mines were removed years ago,” concluded Bret. “There are similar repairs on the other side, although I guess you didn’t notice them.”

After a few more minutes inspecting the stonework and construction techniques, the two men edged their way back to the main causeway.

“Shall we complete the crossing now?” asked Bret.

“Yes, yes, OK,” said Kevin, in a slightly distracted fashion, reluctant to tear himself away.

“There’s someone I need you to meet. And you’ll be able to have another look on the way back.”

They walked along the causeway which, as on the Mainland side, was slightly curved at a point part-way between bridge and shore. Kevin noticed that the stone blocks of the causeway here were very similar to those on the Mainland side.

“Why are there no sprites in these stones?” he asked Bret.

“There’s no need. The natural rock here is quite strong enough, and the weight of the blocks is sufficient to ensure that they do not move, even in the worst of the weather.”

Kevin could well believe that. The stone blocks were, if anything, even larger on this side. All in all, he thought, a very impressive piece of engineering.

There was more immediate evidence of human presence on the Lyndesfarne side of the causeway. There were several buildings, including a couple which looked very much like warehouses, as well as some kind of more formal customs and immigration arrangements. They did not seem to be stopping anyone, though, and the two men were casually waved through without even slowing their pace.

Kevin had not noticed these substantial buildings from the Mainland side, and he wondered how he could have missed them. He turned, to take in the view back to his world. He could barely make out the coastline at all, though the haze and mist. So I should not be surprised that I could not see these buildings, he considered, but somehow the thought still made him feel slightly uneasy.

Kevin also wondered whether there was anything like warehouses or distribution centres on the Mainland side. He was later to find out that there were such things, but that they were kept more discreet. A little way back from the causeway, and not far from the car park where he had deposited his car, there was a large area fenced off and marked “Disused Military Target Area – Keep Out”. He suspected that the suggestion of unexploded bombs was more effective at

ensuring privacy for the commercial operations than the high fence and barbed wire.

Bret directed him towards an entrance in a shop front marked with a large sign with brown letters on a cream background. For all the briefings from Professor Alan, Kevin realised with a start that he could not read a thing. Both the words and the letters themselves were unintelligible – the letters were all highly angular, with slightly bent strokes in unlikely places.

“Let’s get indoors. You’re probably feeling chilly.”

Kevin did indeed feel cold, as if his Gortex jacket was somehow no longer insulating him from the elements. Of course, he thought, mentally kicking himself, it really is not working properly. If I am to come here often, I’ll need to do something about my wardrobe.

They make their way inside the shop, which evidently was some kind of café. It was fairly crowded, but Bret indicated an unoccupied table in one corner.

“Take a seat. I’ll get something to warm you up.”

Bret went to the counter, and spoke quietly to the server. He returned almost immediately carrying two tall slender mugs.

“Hot chocolate,” he said to Kevin, “I think you will like this.”

Over the steaming mugs, the contents of which Kevin did indeed enjoy, Bret outlined how he thought they should work together. For the most part, they would form their own design teams using people from Bret’s organisations, which he translated as the Board of Construction, and from Kevin’s company, thereby keeping a minimum level of contact between the worlds. Both Bret and Kevin would designate a deputy, but in general it would just be the two of them who would carry out joint surveying and design activities.

The manner of Bret’s words led Kevin to believe that this was not really Bret’s opinion, but a dictum laid down by the authorities. Not really a problem, Kevin considered, and consistent with the low-key and deceptive approach that appeared to be maintained on both sides.

Bret also explained that all documents would have to be translated. Kevin would use the services of NISSA, while Bret would prevail upon the Guild of Directions for translations. They would need to convey both the originals and the translations, so that they could be checked in case of any confusion. Couriers would be arranged to ferry paper prints between the design teams.

Kevin, used to instantaneous electronic communications and computer-aided design, thought this all sounded amazingly primitive, and said so.

Bret snorted, then grinned wryly.

“I do understand. If I was designing something under more normal circumstances, there wouldn’t be a piece of paper anywhere.”

Bret said he had been selected for this role at least partially because he did speak English, which was relatively rare in Lyndesfarne. Apparently, he had been brought up not very far from the bridge, and he had crossed over to Kevin’s world as a child on many occasions in the company of various relatives.

“In some ways, it’s this bridge that caused me to take up, well, I suppose you would call it civil engineering,” he explained. “I was fascinated as a child, both with the idea of another world over there, as well as the nature of the crossing. This led me to read more about bridges, and so to study construction techniques.”

Bret had also briefly studied Mainland engineering principles, but confessed that he had not been very successful in understanding them.

“So, we need to work together, using our understanding of the principles of each world. Do you think you can manage that?”

Kevin raised his mug in salute.

“Yes, yes, I can. It’s entirely doable. So, here’s to our new bridge.”

Bret raised his own mug in a matching salute, and they toasted the project in hot chocolate.

Warmed and refreshed, Kevin and Bret left the café and headed back towards the causeway. Again, they were waved though the border control point.

“Do they ever stop anyone?” asked Kevin.

“The Guardians? I’ve never seen them prevent anyone from crossing, in either direction.”

“You’ve got them on your side as well, of course, although they are much more discreet,” continued Bret, “I suppose that governments always want to feel they have some measure of control on borders and boundaries.”

They walked on, then Bret slowed and directed Kevin towards a slender man in green waterproofs, who appeared to be waiting for them a short way along the causeway. The stranger was of medium height, with short-clipped dark hair, almost non-existent eyebrows and the slightly angular facial features that Kevin would later come to associate with the natives of Lyndesfarne.

“Here’s the person you need to meet,” said Bret, “Kevin, this is Ricard.”

Instinctively, Kevin held out his hand to Ricard, expecting the usual rather stiff and formal handshake between newly-introduced

professional colleagues. There was a pause, just long enough for Kevin to realise that something was amiss, before Ricard recovered himself and grasped Kevin's hand in a way that made it clear that shaking hands was not something he was particularly used to.

"Ricard is from the Guild of Directions," explained Bret.

"Yes, indeed," said Ricard, smiling broadly in a manner that made it clear he was trying to recover from an embarrassing situation.

"The Guild of Directions provides guides and mentors for new visitors to Lyndesfarne. The Board thought it best if you were provided with some assistance to find your way about, and to act as a translator. So I'm here to help."

"Very kind, very thoughtful," Kevin replied, doing his best to put Ricard at ease, "Pleased to meet you."

The three men continued back to the bridge, where Kevin spent several fascinating hours in close inspection of the arches construction and both kinds of reinforcements. Ricard waited stoically in the drizzle, grinning inanely whenever he saw Kevin glance in his direction, while Bret seemed almost amused at Kevin's enthusiasm as he clambered up and down, checking closely and even feeling the stonework.

Eventually, Kevin felt he had done enough. He made an appointment to meet with Bret in a few days time, for a longer inspection visit and to arrange a schedule for site survey work for the new bridge. In what would turn out to become a familiar pattern, he would meet Ricard in the Mainland car park, and be guided to wherever he needed to go on the Island. Bret then set off to return to the island side, and Kevin and Ricard made their way back along the causeway to the Mainland.

Chapter Seven

That evening, Kevin politely asked Tanji if she would care to accompany him to the local public house for dinner. She looked startled for a moment, so that Kevin thought for a second that he had committed some clumsy social gaffe. But the look went as quickly as it had come and, allowing herself a small smile, she accepted his invitation.

They walked quickly and silently the short distance between the hostel where they were staying and the pub, both of them wrapped up warmly against the chilly night breeze. Kevin had been to this inn before a few times with old frog-face Ricard. He had been told that the pub's name in translation was "The Squirrel's Nest", and the sign outside did indeed show a nest of twigs in a leafless tree. Mind you, if the nest in the tree was to scale, Kevin thought, they had some damn big squirrels around here somewhere.

They reached the doorway of the pub, where a stout wooden door stood open. They loosened their outer clothing as they entered, pushing open the inner door. Inside, the scene was familiar to anyone who had been to an English country pub. The same themes were used here as on the Mainland, giving a deliberately "olde worlde" feel. A log fire was burning in the huge fireplace, giving a wonderful sense of warmth and security, with a large supply of split logs drying on the hearth.

A large cat, black with one white boot, had curled up in front of the fire, looking for all the world, thought Kevin, as if it owned the place. As the two of them entered, the cat woke up suddenly, stretched, and then mewed surprisingly loudly. The cat prowled up and down, rubbing itself against Kevin's ankles as if checking them over, and then returned to its place by the fire.

The bar was well-stocked with bottles and hand-pumps for the beer. Although Kevin could not read the words, he recognised a couple of the labels on the pumps. This one, he knew, dispensed something with an astonishing resemblance to Australian lager, while that one provided a very decent strong dry cider – a drink which, as Kevin had already discovered, was for some reason also very popular in the Mainland pubs close to the causeway.

The rest of the large bar-room was furnished with rough wood chairs, stools and tables, with a stone flag floor and (Kevin suspected)

artificially-distressed dark wood beams holding up the uneven ceiling. The lighting was patchy, low-level and erratic, and the beams and walls were decorated with an eclectic collection of horse brasses, faded prints and miscellaneous ancient rural machinery. Kevin felt more comfortable here than anywhere else he had been in Lyndesfarne.

The barkeeper, who had appeared apparently in response to the cat's cries, was a man for whom the term "mine host" had been invented. He appeared to be a superannuated version of an Essex wide boy, with rather pointed facial features, a widow's peak and unfashionably bushy sideburns. He even spoke good English, with a noticeably "sarf Lun'un" accent. Kevin suspected he had spent many years in various parts of England, although the details had never become clear.

Kevin ordered for both of them and, while waiting for the drinks to be served, looked around at the reproductions of old maps and engravings that sporadically decorated the walls. The island that represented his world was shown to be larger than on the modern maps he had seen. He noticed that the site of the old bridge was marked with two short causeways or jetties, and what he took to be a ferry route between them.

That there was a ferry crossing long before the bridge was no surprise to Kevin. After all, boats and ferries were the only available way of crossing open water before large-scale bridge-building became possible. However, the pre-existent ferry had never been mentioned in any of the discussions and briefings Kevin had sat through.

He carried the drinks over to the table where Tanji was waiting, and asked her about the old ferry crossing.

"Well, there is a story you might like to hear," she said, thoughtfully, twisting her wineglass by its stem. "It is known as 'The Legend of the Ferryman', if I have the translation right. That's him over there."

She pointed at a faded print on the wall. The picture showed a tall man in voluminous oiled leather waterproofs, with a hood drawn up over his head. He a grizzled beard and what looked like a well-chewed long-stemmed pipe emerged from within it.

Kevin immediately realised two things. First, he had seen variations of this figure in pictures and motifs all over this part of Lyndesfarne. He was always engaged in various obsolete transportation activities – rowing, sailing, or guiding walkers across

the sand dunes. Second, none of the pictures had ever shown the man's eyes.

"Before the Old Bridge, and indeed before the causeway" Tanji began, "the crossing was perilous in the extreme. The sands were treacherous, the currents and tides, hazardous, the weather, unpredictable."

Not much change there, then, thought Kevin, but said nothing. He took a sip from his beer, and waited for her to continue.

"To cross, you had to walk the sands in single file to the ferry, following closely the person in front so as not to get separated. Then you and your companions had to row across the open water. The Ferryman was your guide – he steered the boat, held the lantern, and directed you along the safe path over the mudflats. He was never known to row himself. There are many Ferryman stories: all concerned with heroic adventures, great deeds of rescue, and the saving of many lives under strange and desperate circumstances."

Tanji was speaking in a low voice, as if slightly worried by what she was saying. Kevin had to lean forward across the small pub table to catch her words, so that his head was just a few inches from hers. Out of the corner of his eye, Kevin saw Mine Host behind the bar flashing the pair of them a strange look, but he ignored it, and kept his attention on the woman next to him. He could feel the warmth of her body now, as they were so close. The faint scent from her hair was enough to make him catch his breath.

"The strange thing is," she continued, "is that the Ferryman is thought to have existed as long as the Other World was known – I mean, your homeland, of course."

Kevin muttered something self-deprecatingly and toyed with his beer glass.

"He is a heroic character, but his name has never been heard. He appears to have lived for hundreds of years, maybe even thousands of years. Perhaps he was in fact many people, like a Guild of some sort, or maybe a traditional role being handed down from father to son?" This seemed a rational and suitably medieval historical explanation to Kevin, but Tanji seemed just a little uncertain.

He could see the rest of the history without having to be told. Over the years, the paths over the sands had been first marked and then built up with stones brought from either side. Eventually, larger blocks had been quarried, transported by some combination of ox-cart and prodigious human effort, and set deep in the sands to form the causeways, the ends of the causeways forming jetties for the

ferry, which could even now still be seen as part of the supports for the old bridge.

Belatedly, Kevin realised that he had noted the steps and bollards of the ferry jetties when he was inspecting the bridge and causeway, but it had not occurred to him that these were much older than the bridge itself.

With the causeways in place, the intrepid traveller could travel between the worlds with much reduced risk and, in fair weather, without even getting his boots wet. Presumably, the Ferryman, whoever he was, encouraged the construction of the pathway and later the causeway, since it reduced the risk both to himself and to the travellers he was guiding.

Later still, of course, the causeways were the routes over which the still larger stone blocks that formed the old bridge were transported.

“So,” he asked, “What happened to the Ferryman when the bridge was built?”

*

Hello again Kithyn.

Kevin surprised me this evening. He asked me out for dinner! In a pub! I have not been in a pub for years or for that matter out for dinner with a man. The whole idea was quite a shock. I was not sure at first whether to accept, but I thought that Kevin would be company of a sort, I suppose, in a quiet sort of a way. And it would certainly be better than spending an evening alone in a hostel room.

Tonight I told Kevin the Legend of the Ferryman. Is that the correct translation, do you think? It seemed so strange to tell this familiar tale in English. It is so much a part of the history of the Guild, and yet speaking it aloud with my limited translation skills made me hear the story as if for the first time.

Then Kevin asked me a question I could not answer; what happened to the Ferryman after the construction of the bridge? I have never heard any explanation! Not have I found any

mention of what happened in my history books. What do you think?

I spent all evening in that pub, with Kevin, having dinner and drinking just a little bit too much wine. (He drank beer – so like a man!) I enjoyed the food, too, although it was nothing like home cooking.

Kevin was really rather charming, and I found his anecdotes highly amusing. He told me about some of the places he had been in his world, too. It really is such a strange and wonderful place.

Kevin was so witty and entertaining, and much better company than I would have thought. But I still sense there is some deep sadness in him – I would like to find out more about him, I think.

So good to hear that the boys are doing well, and growing so quickly too. This is the nature of teenagers, I think.

It is late at night now, so I will close here.

With very best wishes from your old friend Tanji.

Chapter Eight

Kevin had made his way back to the Mainland in a daze, guided over the causeway by Ricard. His head was swirling with thoughts and ideas on how to solve the engineering problems he was now just beginning to grasp. He made his way through the non-existent border formalities as enforced, for want of a better word, by the Mainland Guardians. He then half-heartedly waved farewell to Ricard, being at some subconscious level aware that he did not want either to confuse or embarrass the man by offering to shake his hand again.

He tracked down his car in the car park, climbed into the Volvo and made his way back to his flat on complete autopilot. The journey, which in reality must have taken several hours, seemed to pass in a flash. He parked up, managing to find a spot only a few steps from his residence, and got out. He felt uncomfortable and ached in several places; belatedly, he realised that he had probably not moved more than minimal amounts while driving the car, so that after his energetic morning walking the old bridge and causeways, all his joints had stiffened.

On arriving at his flat, he dumped his coat and baggage unceremoniously just inside the door, then dug out his laptop computer from its bag and slumped at his desk. He looked around at the room, collecting his thoughts.

Kevin owned a small mid-terrace ground floor flat in a South Manchester neighbourhood which until fairly recently had been very run down and even unsafe after dark, but was now well down the road towards gentrification. The building had been extensively refurbished by an energetic and reasonably imaginative developer, and now boasted a total of four rooms. The kitchen was small and well-equipped, but with a level of cleanliness and tidiness that suggested either obsessive housekeeping or, more accurately in Kevin's case, an occasional and erratic approach to home cooking. The small but well-equipped bathroom was similarly uncluttered and the bedroom was just large enough for a double bed and a couple of wardrobes.

The living room was indeed where Kevin really lived. More of a study than a lounge, it had a large and comfortable sofa, a decent-sized desk set into the bay window, and a couple of occasional tables undecorated except for reading lamps. Apart from the window and

door areas, the walls were entirely covered with bookcases, purchased in flat-pack form and now filled with an eclectic mixture of textbooks, technical journals, reference works, classic novels, crime thrillers and whodunits, collected over many years and ordered carefully on the shelves.

After a few moments staring into space, Kevin opened the lid of the computer and started making himself notes. He knew he would have to work these up into a more formal report for his management eventually. For now, though, he jotted down his thoughts and impressions, trying to get as much as possible written down while it was still fresh in his mind, together with the inferences he had drawn almost without conscious effort during the long drive back.

Firstly, Kevin reviewed and summarised what he knew of the design specifications for the New Bridge. It was to be wide enough for a single line of vehicles to pass in either direction, with space for a footpath on either side of the carriageway. The obvious conclusion was that the planners still expected many people to cross on foot, although the extra width would remove the bottleneck which wheeled vehicles suffered on the old bridge.

There was no need for central barriers, implying that they were not expecting high-speed traffic of any kind. There were no rail tracks or anything other than a smooth surface across the entire road deck. There was a requirement for railings on each side, running the entire length of the bridge. These were specified to be unusually high and strong, and therefore heavy, adding the weight and cost of the project. They did make it, Kevin realised, effectively impossible to get off the bridge by any means except at the ends.

Curiously, one of the concerns expressed during the meeting was that steel would be a major construction material for the New Bridge. Kevin had proposed that a conventional approach of steel and steel reinforced concrete should be used for the Mainland side. This caused a lot of debate, but he had insisted that the use of any other material would be hugely more expensive. He had found this all rather strange, especially given Bret's remarks earlier about this material not being useful for reinforcement on the Island side of the Old Bridge.

He got up and paced the flat, suddenly feeling incredibly hungry. He realised that he had not eaten anything today apart from a snack breakfast on the road, and the hot chocolate on Lyndesfarne. Time to eat, Kevin thought, collecting his coat from the heap beside the door, and setting off down the street to the take-away Chinese restaurant on the corner.

On entering the shop, he was greeted from behind the counter in a familiar fashion by a teenage girl of obviously Chinese genetic background. She had a Manchester accent so thick that even Kevin, who had been resident in this area since he was a student, found it hard to interpret her words. This girl seemed to be behind the counter on all of Kevin's irregular visits. Her parents, who worked almost unseen in the kitchen beyond, were first generation immigrants and, he suspected, uncomfortable speaking English. Kevin wondered what it would be like for a person visiting this country from Lyndesfarne, for whom not only the language and culture would be entirely alien, but also the functional behaviour of even the most mundane of everyday items around them.

He shook his head, and then studied the menu attached to the wall. The Chinese girl looked on disinterestedly, working hard on perfecting the "cool" pose affected by teenagers everywhere. Kevin made his choice, and ordered and paid for his food. The girl scurried off to convey his order; the sudden increase in cooking noises and the tantalising smells emerging from the kitchen confirmed its receipt.

After the usual few minutes hanging around, a Chinese man Kevin knew to be the girl's father emerged clutching a plastic carrier bag containing several cartons already showing signs of leakage. Kevin took the bag, nodded his thanks to the chef, and walked rapidly back to his flat. He poured his sweet-and-sour chicken and rice into a bowl and attacked it ravenously with a fork – he had never bothered learning how to use chopsticks – before returning to his desk.

One of the more alarming pieces of information that Bret had conveyed during the morning's conversations was that the Old Bridge had collapsed while it was being built. The implication was that the design had been finally got right by trial and error. Short of sabotage, which Kevin discounted immediately, the only other possibility was that the two worlds had moved relative to each other. This seemed unlikely, he thought, and the intermediate zone was obviously stable. The Old Bridge had now been in position for several hundred years, and showed no signs of movement or cracking. Nor did it show any signs of being repaired after any such damage; Kevin had carefully checked for this during his earlier inspection of the bridge.

The thought of trial and error design was anathema to Kevin, and indeed to any reasonable modern engineering approach. There would have to be a huge investment in time and money in the New Bridge, and it really did have to be right first time. As a matter of course, he would use computer modelling during the design of the bridge, or at

least his half of it. This was the conventional approach for bridges of all sorts in Kevin's world.

He got up and stretched, suddenly feeling very tired, and wandered into the kitchen for a drink. The strongly flavoured Chinese food had made him thirsty, and he opened and drank from a bottle of mineral water from the fridge. In his by-now near somnambulant state, he wondered dimly how the complexities of bridge design would be handled on Lyndesfarne. Did they have anything like computers, he thought, or could they solve hard problems in some other way?

"I'll worry about that tomorrow," he said to himself.

Over the next few weeks, Kevin wrestled repeatedly with this and many other issues in the bridge design. He spent a considerable amount of time with Bret, as the two of them converged on a joint design for the project.

They had already concluded that in effect two bridges were required. On the Mainland side, the solution already envisaged by Kevin would be a cable-stay bridge, consisting of a single steel reinforced concrete support tower with steel-reinforced concrete roadbed, and with high tensile steel support cables. Bret proposed a superficially similar approach, with a tower and roadway, although Kevin was completely confused about the "tension distribution sails" that Bret described to him.

The key problem that Kevin and Bret were trying to solve was how to link the technological and magical sections of the New Bridge and indeed develop a complete design for the bridge as a whole. They were under instruction to keep the true nature of the project from the bulk of the design teams on either side, and so this particular part of the solution they were forced to tackle almost unaided. As far as the rest of the teams were concerned, the bridge design for the opposite side was a mirror image of the one they were responsible for completing.

To join the two parts, Bret and Kevin considered building a physical model of the New Bridge, to ensure that it would work as they hoped. Ironically, the only place that such a model could actually behave correctly was right in the centre of the Old Bridge. To be realistic, it would have to be a very large construction, extending out of the overlap zone into the areas where the rules of just one world applied. It would therefore have to be many feet across. Kevin was not absolutely sure that the Old Bridge could stand the weight of such a model; Bret agreed and they reluctantly dropped the idea.

For the join, they had considered two kinds of approaches. The first was distinctly low-tech: use traditional building materials and architectures for the overlap zone, building the joining section in stone or even wood. Kevin's engineering sensibilities were appalled at the thought of a primitive stone arch featuring in his solution. Besides, it would mean that the flat road bed which was supposed to aid the smooth flow of traffic would be disrupted. The use of wood was also fraught with difficulties. It needed a lot of maintenance, and the bracing structures which would be required would be awkward, even cumbersome, to construct.

The other approach involved the use of a laminate – a multi-layer sandwich of thin layers of materials from either world. There would need to be alternating layers of steel reinforced concrete and the self-amalgamating building material from Lyndesfarne. When Bret first started describing this material, Kevin was fascinated. He had asked what the material was, and Bret had answered with a polysyllabic word he completely failed to catch. Apparently, the phrase was translated as “Construction Stone”. It could be made almost weightless when manufactured, for ease of transport, but was quite weak in this state. When required, however, it could be transmuted irreversibly to a heavier and much stronger form, as well as seamlessly amalgamating with itself.

Kevin suggested that the layers would be constructed over a wooden scaffolding framework, with the layer of concrete first. He was fairly certain that the concrete would retain its shape even under the rules of Lyndesfarne, even if it was not very strong, and it would support the construction stone if it failed to amalgamate properly. Once both materials had reverted to their final state, almost any variation of the strength of the materials could be compensated for across the overlap zone.

As a matter of course, Kevin performed extensive simulations of the New Bridge, using the computers in the Manchester office. To do this, he had to engage the help of several of his colleagues in order to build the complex software models. These computer-based models accurately predicted the stresses and deformations under both normal and abnormal load conditions, including high winds and unusual traffic densities.

Privately, Kevin also carried out some simulations based on his best understanding of the Lyndesfarne view of physics and the properties of materials. He discovered that there appeared to be a coherent set of physical rules which operated in Lyndesfarne which were for some reason just different from those of the world where

Kevin originated. He did this behind-the-scenes programming work – “skunk-works” was the phrase that he had heard used to describe this kind of activity – using his own laptop and only in the evenings. After all, he remarked to himself, I don’t have much else to do.

There was no need in the plan for him to worry about the Lyndesfarne part of the bridge. The results of obviously detailed calculations were made available to him by Bret and the Island design team, but he could not explain how these calculations had been carried out. He told no-one about his own computer models, not even Bret. It also allowed him to imagine that he had discovered something about the Lyndesfarne world that was not known about already.

Based on these two simulations, Kevin had finally built a model of the intermediate area – the zone where the rules of neither world were entirely to be relied upon, but where it seemed there was a smooth transition from the rules of one universe to the other. Although this simulated description was not as detailed as the other two computer models, it did allow him to speculate on what would happen in the overlap, and give him a high degree of confidence in the solution he and Bret were proposing.

Chapter Nine

The previous night, Kevin and Tanji had returned from the pub slightly tipsy and arm in arm. Kevin was sure that she had given him a peck on the cheek before they went their separate ways to their rooms. Perhaps I just imagined it, he thought, although I did sleep unusually well, and I definitely feel really good this morning.

Kevin was waiting in the reception area of the hostel. From previous experience he knew that, although some of the hostel staff did speak a little English, it was usually better to have a translator nearby in case of any difficulty. He grinned to himself at the thought of Tanji. She appeared after only a few minutes wait, and rewarded his patience with a bright smile.

“Sleep well?” he asked.

“Very well, yes.” she answered, looking at him thoughtfully for a moment.

“Great. Me too. Let’s go, shall we?”

Kevin was able to pay for the accommodation without incident, carefully counting out the Lyndesfarne money he had changed yesterday. He was not entirely confident with the special properties of the currency, and cautiously left the coins loose in the bag he had received them in. Even though he had paid for drinks and dinner last night, he was pleased to find that he still had a few of the large coins left.

The short walk from the front entrance of the hostel to what Kevin thought of as the car park, took them past a series of small shops. He had passed these shops before, but had never felt inclined to go in. Today, however, he stopped in front of a particular window, his eye caught by a display of glass objects.

Tanji had continued on ahead, but now turned and was watching Kevin with an expression of mild amusement. She walked back to where he was standing.

“Do you want to take a look?” she asked.

“Yes, why not? Although, to be honest, I don’t even know what I’m looking at.”

Tanji pushed open the door, and they entered together. A discrete chime sounded, but Kevin could not determine the source. Inside, the shop was larger than it appeared, and was filled floor to ceiling with, as rapidly became clear to Kevin, trinkets and curios.

Tanji greeted the shopkeeper, a tiny dark-haired girl who had appeared behind the counter presumably in response to the chimes. Kevin mumbled the few words he had been told meant “good morning”, and was immediately flummoxed by a rapid stream of syllables. Tanji smoothly intercepted the conversation, and Kevin gratefully stepped away to take a closer look at the bits and pieces on offer.

The confusing array of *objet d’art* were tastefully laid out on what appeared to be glass shelves, though a tap from Kevin’s exploratory fingernail suggested a material more akin to a hard plastic. The items were brightly lit, although there was no apparent source of light. Kevin was by now quite familiar with source-less lighting which he had encountered on his previous visits to Lyndesfarne; he now knew it was the mirrors on the walls that were emitting the light, as well as reflecting the view from the front.

Kevin spent ten minutes browsing assisted by Tanji, who had joined him after completing her chat with the shop assistant. He finally picked up what appeared to be a heavy glass paperweight which he discovered, after a short exchange with the shopkeeper mediated by Tanji, to be magically enhanced to predict the weather. She showed him the small icons, clearly visible inside the glass, which would change depending on tomorrow’s weather conditions, as well as repeating the gesture (by now long-practiced by Kevin) to make the device light up from within.

Kevin was completely enchanted with the ornament. He had not hitherto bothered much with mementoes, but this seemed as good a time as any to make a change. Besides, he thought, it will be useful over here, and so what if it will not work on the Mainland – the weathermen rarely get it right at home. But it does look rather good, and it would make an interesting talking point on my desk.

With Tanji’s help, he paid for the paperweight, which was then carefully wrapped in what appeared to be cushioned tissue paper, and then in a colourful tapestry bag. He stuffed the bag carefully in the top of his rucksack, padding it with odd items of laundry from his overnight stay. He nodded politely to the assistant as Tanji thanked her, and the two of them set off for the new bridge site.

Kevin’s purpose today, and indeed the principal reason for his trip to Lyndesfarne on this occasion, was to inspect the centre of the bridge, where the two worlds met. This was a key part of the whole project and one where, despite the best effort of the design teams, there was a considerable amount of uncertainty about the outcome.

The two halves of the New Bridge were by now almost complete. On the Mainland side, the massive tension cables supporting the road deck were already in place, firmly anchored in tons of concrete and set into the bedrock. On the Island side, too, the road deck was already mostly in place, but here the supports were only just visible, being made from nothing solid at all and appearing as shimmering translucent sheets forming giant triangular sails caught between tower and roadway.

This morning, the weather was fair and bright, with just a light breeze blowing from the direction of the Mainland. Kevin's plan was to walk the Island-side bridge first, checking the roadbed and the arrangements for construction of the cross-over joint, and then go on to inspect the underside by boat.

Kevin stood and viewed the bridge, and then looked around at the near-cloudless sky and calm blue sea. He waved to the site foreman, who he knew by sight, and requested Tanji to ask the man if he could re-arrange the afternoon's boat trip for this morning. The foreman's answer was lengthy, but Tanji translated his words rapidly, indicating the weather looked good, the boat was available and that they should be at the construction dock in thirty minutes time.

Kevin's new plan was to take a short boat trip to the centre of the bridge, perform a visual check and then return to the starting-point at the construction docks. He was aware of the incredibly changeable weather, both by reputation and from first-hand experience, but the clear sky persuaded him that this would be a good time for the trip.

A little later, he and Tanji arrived at the small harbour which had been constructed to facilitate the bridge-building work. Since they would be travelling into the zone where magic failed, all of the sophisticated craft tied up here would be useless. They made their way to the smallest and most primitive boat at the dock, which was built from wood in a traditional fashion. The boat was crewed by four oarsmen, dressed in the now-familiar capes, under the captaincy of a grizzled coxswain that looked like he was auditioning for a bit-part in a skull-and-crossbones movie.

It was a swift trip out, with powerful strokes of the oars making short work of the distance to the bridge. Tanji sat in the bow, again writing on her magic slate, with Kevin sitting behind her. They arrived under the centre of the bridge and, at a short command, the rowers shipped their oars. Kevin stood, already looking up at the gap in the bridge, thirty feet or more above his head, and started rapid scribbling in his notebook, completely lost in his own thoughts and concerns.

Tanji noticed the coxswain standing in the stern, smoking a pipe and doing a fair impersonation of the picture of the Ferryman she and Kevin had seen the previous evening. The wind picked up suddenly, and veered around, making the boat rock violently. Both Kevin and the coxswain stumbled and grabbed the gunwales for support.

Tanji pointed and shouted out in a way that made them all turn to look.

“Look at that!” she shouted again, repeating herself in English for Kevin’s benefit.

Heading towards them at an impossible speed was a wall of cloud, dark and swirling violently in a terrifying fashion, filling the full width of the straights from coast to coast and completely blotting out the sky.

For all his piratical appearance, the coxswain reacted quickly and efficiently. The crew needed little urging to take up their oars, and the boat turned around to head back to Lyndesfarne. The wind swung around further and got a lot stronger, while the sea picked up a considerable chop, making the boat rock alarmingly and threatening to capsize them. The temperature had dropped dramatically, and increasingly heavy squally rain was making it difficult to see more than a few yards.

Kevin and Tanji held tightly to the gunwales, unsure of what to do. Tanji’s slate, which had been resting on the seat next to her, had fallen and was now at risk of being tossed over the side by the violent movement of the boat. Kevin loosened his grip with one hand, stuffed his notebook into the pocket of his waterproof, and then grabbed the slate just before it disappeared overboard.

Tanji mouthed something that looked like “thanks”, but the noise of the wind and rain made it impossible to hear what she had actually said. Kevin grasped the slate between his knees, braced his feet and clung on as tight as he could with both hands. Now I really know the true meaning of the expression “white knuckle ride”, he thought grimly.

With what sounded suspiciously like a swearword, the coxswain bellowed at his labouring crew and then hauled the tiller over. The boat swung about, now running ahead of the storm and away from the Lyndesfarne shore. The waves no longer threatened to capsize the craft, but the wind and waves drove them forward at such a speed that gave them no opportunity to turn back.

Kevin could see that they were now headed for the Mainland construction dock. It was the only possible place to go where they could be safe. Further shouted commands from the coxswain and

prodigious efforts from all of the crew finally navigated them into the slight shelter of the dock, and towards the quay. Somehow, their cries for assistance were heard through the roaring of the wind, and several men from the shore braved the elements to secure the boat, and then assist the crew and passengers into the cover of a nearby temporary office building.

Once through the door, both Kevin and Tanji immediately collapsed onto seats, shaking with cold and shock. The oarsmen, exhausted after their exertions, could barely stand either, and even the coxswain appeared somewhat shaken. The wind was causing the flimsy structure of the building to rattle in an alarming manner, and the raindrops bounced off the windows seemingly in an effort to punch their way through.

After a few moments to catch his breath and his thoughts, Kevin looked around at the people in the room. There were half a dozen construction workers inside, several of whom were dripping wet having just assisted the boat party. Kevin noticed that they were all getting strange looks from some of the construction crew members. He suddenly realised that this should not be surprising by this. The construction work was handled separately for each half of the bridge, and deliberate and careful plans were made to keep the Island and Mainland teams of building workers apart.

Tanji's presence in particular seemed to be unnerving some people. She had had no opportunity during the sudden arrival of the storm to change her appearance, and her unshapeshifted form was disconcertingly far from conventional on the Mainland. Additionally, both coxswain and crew were attracting attention but more, Kevin thought, from their dress than from their physical form.

Despite feeling that he would never be able to move his hands and feet again, Kevin stood and moved over to talk to the construction crew. His conventional appearance and educated British English accent had the immediate effect of de-stressing the situation, and he was able to explain briefly about the inspection work he was undertaking, and the sudden and unexpected arrival of the storm.

The atmosphere in the office improved markedly. The construction workers bustled around, offering hot drinks, warm towels and the use of the changing rooms to get dried off. Tanji accepted the offer of towels immediately, and was enthusiastically directed by several of the construction workers to the shower room.

Kevin managed to intercept her for long enough to ask her to find out what the boat crew wanted to do. Tanji detoured and spoke at some length to the coxswain, before returning to Kevin. She

informed him that the crew would prefer to wait out the storm here, then inspect their boat and, if it was still sound, return to Lyndesfarne directly. Without waiting for further discussion, she clutched her towel and ducked into the showers.

Kevin explained the position to the construction crew, and then waited patiently for Tanji to emerge. She did so, after a surprisingly short interval and smiled at Kevin, who took this as a cue to move to use the facilities himself. In the cramped shower room, he was able to get warmed up and get his clothes mostly dry, but he had no opportunity to get really comfortable. Still feeling damp and sticky, he returned to the office area to find Tanji completing the translation of an exchange between the construction and boat crews.

Spotting Kevin's return, Tanji nodded to the crews and walked over. Acting on impulse, Kevin asked her whether she would like to go somewhere more comfortable to get really warm and thoroughly dry.

"Where do you have in mind?" she asked.

"Well, I'm conscious that your appearance is quite, umm, well, distinctive and might attract a certain amount of attention over here. So, why not let me drive you to my place, and you can bathe and relax as much as you like. And we can come back in the morning."

Tanji thought for a moment, and then smiled in a cheeky, perhaps even mischievous manner.

"Yes, why not? The crew seem to be comfortable enough here. But how are we going to get to your residence?"

"I'll go and get the car," Kevin replied, out of an immediate gentlemanly impulse, and then mentally steeling himself for a lengthy walk in the rain.

As it turned out, he need not have worried. The storm seemed to have dissipated nearly as quickly as it had appeared, and Tanji quickly agreed that a brisk walk in the rapidly easing rain would be preferable to spending much more time cooped up in this overcrowded office. After further short exchanges with the coxswain (by Tanji) and the construction crew (by Kevin), they gathered their belongings and set out together.

*

Good morning, Kithyn.

What a lovely morning! I'm sitting in the sunshine, in a boat almost exactly between our world and the Other World. I can see

the entire length of the new bridge from here, and an incredible sight it is, too.

I was wondering if it would be possible for us to meet again soon. Wouldn't it be fun to chat in person, rather than sending messages all the time? You could tell me more about your family, and I can ask you what you think of Kevin. I would appreciate your feelings and advice.

I would also like to thank you for your offer of help. I am not sure how or when I would ever need to take up your offer, but rest assured that, if I am ever in a difficult situation, I will certainly prevail upon you for assistance.

As always, very best wishes from your old friend Tanji.

Chapter Ten

A couple of weeks after Kevin's first visit to Lyndesfarne, a second planning meeting was convened, again in the Manchester office. This one was billed as an Outline Design Review meeting. Kevin mentally translated this as "Tell the management something about the technical solution, so that they could (a) pretend to understand it, and (b) moan about the cost".

The planning meeting was held in the same office building in Manchester, but this time in a slightly larger conference room, and one with a view over the street. The room was light and airy, and the spring sunlight was flooding in through the windows which lined one entire side of the room. Kevin thought it would be such a shame to draw the blinds on a day like this, although of course knowing that in reality he would be spending most of the day in semi-darkness simply to allow the slides they would be projecting to be visible.

Tweedledum was present, representing the contractors who would build the Mainland part of the bridge. He had buttonholed Kevin the second he had entered the room.

"So, do you think we can build this bridge, then?" boomed Tweedledum in his usual hearty manner.

Kevin toyed with winding him up at this point by suggested insuperable technical difficulties but, since Tweedledum had no detectable sense of humour, he concluded that a simple and honest answer would save much aggravation later.

"Yes, very probably." Kevin replied. "There are a couple of tricky issues still to be sorted out, and we will need a lot of computer simulation time, but, yes, I think we can put together something that won't fall down in a hurry."

The session was run by David Macmillan, the Partner who had also organised the kick-off meeting. He clapped his hands for attention, and the attendees gradually settled themselves around the conference table that largely filled the meeting room.

Tweedledum's own considerable personal presence was bolstered by a couple of his cohorts and bag-carriers, who sat silently but attentively through the entire meeting, making copious notes. Kevin failed to catch their names when they were introduced, and frankly considered it no great loss.

To Tweedledum's left was Kenneth Nasterton, a Senior Managing Partner from Kevin's firm. Kenneth introduced the meeting, and said a few words that were probably meant to be inspirational and convey leadership, but in fact were some of the most tedious platitudes that Kevin (who had considerable experience in sitting through tedious platitudes) had ever heard. Kenneth's speech was delivered in a barely audible mumble, apparently addressed to the tabletop rather than any the people actually present, and accompanied by continual fiddling with what Kevin suspected to be an old school tie. He entirely expected that Kenneth would not remain in the meeting for very long. Kevin was therefore not in the least bit surprised when the Senior Partner excused himself only a few minutes later, pleading another appointment, and leaving behind a waft of expensive but old-fashioned aftershave.

Kenneth also left behind two of his subordinates, who were to be responsible for the costing and pricing activities on the new bridge project. The bean counters had clearly been carefully briefed before the meeting not to take their usual nit-picking attitude, and Kevin noticed that they were forced to swallow back some objection on several occasions, and looked almost green at some of the more expensive aspects of the proposals with which they were presented.

David introduced Peter Brenner, who was to be the Project Manager for the design work to be done by Kevin's company. Since Kevin knew that, in practice, the design work would almost entirely be performed by himself, this seemed overkill, but at least Kevin knew who to contact to sort out the administrivia that a project like this would inevitably entail. Brenner was known in the company as a bit of a worrier, and tended to over-plan everything in microscopic detail.

On the Lyndesfarne side, there were fewer delegates. Bret was present, and dressed in a way much less likely to attract comment on the Mainland. Today, he was wearing a chunky brown woollen roll-neck sweater, and what looked like grey canvas trousers. His long blond hair was as always neatly bound up in a ponytail, and he was still toting around the burgundy leather briefcase.

Bret introduced the new Project Manager from the Lyndesfarne Board of Construction. Kevin did not quite catch his name during the introductions, and wrote "Quarl?" in his notebook. Whatever his name was, he was an easily forgettable man, with thinning hair which could only be described as mousey, and he looked extremely uncomfortable in a conventional business suit and tie.

Bret also introduced the ‘Overseer’ from the Board, who would be responsible for organising the building of the Island side of the bridge. The Overseer, who was introduced as Craz, was a big man with broad shoulders and remarkably large hands, and sported a deep tan and a luxuriant black moustache which made him look like a larger-than-life version of Mario the Plumber. He had eschewed any attempt to fit in with Mainland dress codes, and looked most relaxed in worn leather trousers, a blousy shirt in a startling shade of canary yellow, and had what Kevin now recognised as a typical Lyndesfarne cape tossed over the back of his chair.

Panit, the manager with the manifestly paranoid behaviour who had attended the first meeting, was missing, although no explanation for his absence was offered.

Kevin noted with a mixture of amused tolerance and resigned indignation that there were as always more managers than workers on the team. The “more Chiefs than Indians” approach was a natural corollary of collective responsibility in the modern world, which was also known as “sharing the blame when things went wrong”. Which they always did, eventually.

The first action of the meeting was to confirm the appointment of technical deputies for both Bret and Kevin. Kevin’s deputy, he was dismayed to hear, was to be Graeme Greysmith, who was notoriously inefficient and lazy. Greysmith could be relied upon to complete a particular task only if one checked on his progress every thirty minutes or so. An electric cattle-prod, considered Kevin, would be a useful additional incentive.

The presence of Smudger, as Greysmith was nicknamed, on a project usually indicated that there was more budget for personnel available than work actually required, and that he could at least be relied upon to record chargeable hours regularly. Actual useful work associated with those hours would be negligibly small.

Greysmith’s nickname, Kevin had heard, had come about from his early days in the company. Graeme was often observed still at his desk when the last person left in the evening, and was still there, with creased suit and darkly unshaven chin, when the early birds arrived the next day. This gave him a spurious reputation in management circles for diligence beyond the call of duty. Kevin suspected that Smudger slept under his desk and found other ways of entertaining himself during notionally working hours.

Smudger was uncharacteristically silent during today’s meeting. Kevin strongly suspected – correctly, as it turned out – that Smudger would be almost entirely absent from the Lyndesfarne bridge project,

except for meetings with senior management, when he would strive to give the appearance that the achievements of others could not have been completed without his vital contributions. And of course, thought Kevin wryly, to carefully ensure that no blame attaches to him in the inevitable event of things not quite going according to plan.

A deputy for Bret was also introduced. He was a rather nervous and frail-looking young man called Farmill. He was much shorter than Kevin, who was himself not particularly large, and completely overshadowed by the likes of Tweedledum and Overseer Craz. Although evidently highly enthusiastic, Farmill seemed under-qualified, or perhaps just inexperienced, for the role expected of him. He also did not speak particularly good English, and was forever asking Bret to translate words and phrases for him.

There was also the little matter of the confirmation of the appointment of interpreters for the project. For Kevin's firm, Professor Alan and his organisation from NISSA would be used. This must have been a done deal, thought Kevin, since the Professor was absent from the meeting. For the Lyndesfarne, the only woman in the room was introduced. She was called Aneil, and was the official interpreter from the Guild of Directions. She was a tall, taciturn figure in dark clothes in a typical Lyndesfarne style, and had shoulder-length brown hair and piercing grey eyes that always seemed unsmilingly alert.

At last, Kevin found himself standing in front of the meeting. Over the last few weeks, he had written up his outline design proposal as a large and formal document, which he thoroughly expected no-one in the management team to have read carefully, or indeed at all. He had delivered a good draft for translation by NISSA several days ago, and had confirmed that this transcript had been received by the Board on Lyndesfarne. He had informally checked with Bret that the translation had indeed been provided, and that Bret was happy with the quality.

In the absence of a readable document, the real communication occurred by means of a presentation, written using Kevin's laptop computer, and now projected onto a screen behind him. As usual, Kevin had thought it best to use plenty of colours, animated graphics and other flashy presentational gimmicks, to keep the audience awake, while keeping the actual technical content as simple as possible. One of his regular gripes was that the solution to a complex engineering problem costing many millions of pounds was supposed by the management to be expressible in ten slides or less, without

loss of accuracy or completeness. Why don't they put at least some effort into getting a grip on the real solution, he mused dispiritedly, instead of spending all their time engaged in internecine management warfare?

The presentation introduced the salient features of the new bridge solution in kindergarten language, indicating that there would be essentially two different half-bridges joined in the middle. Kevin reprised the technology of cable-stay bridge construction, and outlined the remaining difficulties with the choice of site to ensure nearly equal crossing lengths in each world, and the tricky issue of joining the two sections.

In several previous working sessions, the two men had worked up some presentational material for Bret to speak to, using Kevin's computer skills, since they knew that this management pitch would be delivered on this side of the straights. Bret now took over, outlining in fluent but still confusing English how the Lyndesfarne section of the bridge would be constructed. There were very few questions. It seemed that the meeting was willing to accept the solution approach and the implied costs for design and build without significant challenges, for the first time in Kevin's entire working experience.

The final formal item on the meeting agenda was the plan. The Project Managers from both organisations made presentations on the planning approach, which were predictably tedious. Kevin only just resisted the temptation to mutter "Zer Secret Planz" under his breath in the style of a SPECTRE agent.

The plans were derived from a draft version of the design documents from Bret and Kevin, and both of them found it necessary to point out minor corrections and omissions where the thinking on the technical approach had moved on. The man whose name Kevin had failed to catch spoke first. His presentation style was hasty and breathless, as if he was in a tremendous rush to complete the material as quickly as possible. He was followed by Peter Brenner, whose easy and laconic style could not have been more different. Peter went into a considerable amount of detail, at great length; even so, his part of the presentation was concluded surprisingly rapidly.

The meeting wound down in near-record time. Nevertheless, Kevin felt he was missing something important, though he could not quite put his finger on what it was. The management types appeared to have held prior private meetings to determine the best working practices. It had become clear that an important factor was keeping the number of people who knew about the bridge to Lyndesfarne to a

minimum. Kevin could understand the desire for secrecy, given the centuries-old misinformation campaign, but why was it necessary for so few people from inside his company, or indeed from either side, to know about the proposed construction of the new bridge?

Chapter Eleven

In Kevin's experience, previous road trips from Lyndesfarne to Manchester had fallen into two categories. Either it had apparently taken no time at all, which happened when he had some interesting technical problem to think about and the traffic had been light, or it had seemed interminably long and boring. Normally, Kevin would have driven non-stop, except perhaps to fill the car with overpriced petrol from a service station or grab a take-away coffee from a "Costa-Bomba" outlet. And one other function, perhaps; "take a comfort break" was the code phrase used in his professional meetings to indicate that the internal pressures on the male bladder were becoming unbearable.

This time, with Tanji in the car, he felt like a tourist guide in his own country. He found himself chatting lightly and fluently about the world, answering Tanji's questions. Her questions varied from the naïve to the penetrating, and sometimes he was hard pushed to distinguish between the two.

As they drove along, Tanji asked about the electricity pylons they could see striding across the landscape. It was clear that she did not really understand what they were for. Kevin explained about centralised power generation and the grid distribution network that eventually delivered electricity to every home in the land. Waxing lyrical about an engineering topic, as he sometimes did, he explained how the construction of the National Grid was a technological marvel. It had been completed as the result of heroic efforts to get pylons erected in some of the most inhospitable parts of the country, and sometimes in the face of terrible weather conditions.

Kevin had long suspected that few people even in this world understood anything about the wonders and complexities that surrounded them, the chains of cause and effect, the intricate web of interactions that linked, for example, the natural world with its unpredictable behaviour, and the engineering of buildings and the protection and comforts they offered. So many people were inured by familiarity, and Tanji's questions had a way of bringing the complexity and excitement of his world into sharp relief.

Kevin also noticed that Tanji was a very nervous passenger. She seemed unused to the idea of high-speed travel. After a while, once it had become clear to her that she was not in any immediate danger of

a collision, she stopped flinching every time a vehicle appeared travelling in the opposite direction. It was Kevin's attempt to distract her that had led to his "history of technology guide" chatter.

After less than an hour's driving, the excitement and danger of the morning suddenly seemed very far away to Kevin, and equally suddenly he started feeling hungry.

"Do you fancy a bite of lunch?" he asked Tanji.

Tanji smiled widely.

"Feeling hungry, are you?" she responded, "I suppose I'm not surprised after this morning's adventure. And, yes, now that you mention it, I'm famished too."

The weather had brightened considerably since the sudden storm, although it was still a little breezy. Kevin drove off the motorway at random, joining the older road that led back towards the coast. They chanced upon a inn, nestled up against the hillside and overlooking a small bay. The bay included a small harbour with a quay which looked almost assertively picturesque, with boats tied up and bobbing on the tide, and the quay itself decorated with lobster pots. The sun glistened on the white paintwork of the old pub building and it looked enormously attractive as a place to stop.

The pub restaurant was small and low-ceilinged, and already nearly full of diners. Kevin was worried for a short while that they would not be able to find a place. Fortunately, in spite of the breeze, they were able to sit at a table outside, sheltered by an old stone wall and a heavily overgrown hedge. The sun warmed them both, and they could watch the sea in the tiny harbour below. Tanji seemed to like the ambience, and she relaxed visibly.

They both ordered and enjoyed some nicely-cooked fish that was delightfully fresh and finely flavoured. This was, as Kevin explained, not because it had been caught somewhere nearby but because many people associated seaside restaurants with fresh fish and ordered it from the menu frequently. So, the management were able to source plentiful and high-quality supplies at reasonable prices.

The restaurant garden was quiet and secluded, and there were few others there – just a small number of elderly couples evidently enjoying a quiet luncheon with their friends in the sunshine. Kevin was rapidly convinced that none of the people present were watching them, or indeed paying them even the slightest bit of attention.

As they were about to leave the fish restaurant, Kevin signalled for the bill, and produced a credit card to pay for it. This was a concept which appeared to intrigue Tanji. She watched fascinated as the waiter swiped the card and produced a chit for Kevin to sign.

While they continued their drive south, Kevin tried to explain to Tanji about Electronic Funds Transfer. He outlined how financial accounts were maintained by computers in banks, and that it was possible to authorise payment by the possession of the card and a signature.

“But couldn’t anyone just write your name?” asked Tanji,

“Well, they’re supposed to check the shape of your signature,” he replied, “but fraud is certainly possible. Besides, these days, the old cards are being replaced by PIN cards, where you have to remember a special number.”

Tanji looked confused at this, and Kevin explained further. This evolved into a more discursive exploration about the use of computers, which did not appear to be helping her understanding very much. Now I know, thought Kevin, how Professor Alan must feel.

After a while, Tanji fell quiet, and Kevin noticed that she was dozing. He was also feeling very relaxed and was driving very sedately, trying not to wake Tanji with sudden movements. He felt like he was playing hooky, taking a vacation and enjoying life when he should be working for a living. Then he remembered the long hours he had put in during numerous evenings and weekends, and suddenly felt much less guilty.

The rest of the four-hour journey seemed to fly by, and it seemed no time at all before Kevin drew the Volvo up onto the private parking spot just outside his flat. Tanji was still sleeping, and he sat for a moment looking at her before gently nudging her awake. She yawned and stretched, cat-like, and then looked around while Kevin got out of the car and opened the front door.

She gathered her bag and followed him through the door.

“You live here on your own?” she asked.

“Yes, just me,” he replied, “It’s very small, but quite enough for me.”

He guided her down the short corridor, and into the living room. She still looked a little mussed from her nap in the car

“Do you want to freshen up, take a shower, maybe?” he asked.

“Mmm. Yes, please.”

Kevin presented Tanji with a couple of large warm fluffy white towels, taken from the airing cupboard, together with a spare dressing gown. Then, he led her to the bathroom, where he briefly demonstrated the use of the shower before politely retiring.

Twenty minutes later, Tanji emerged from the bathroom to find Kevin in the kitchen. She was wearing his dressing gown, which was much too big for her, and her hair was pulled up in a towel, which

made her normally elfin features even more pronounced. Of course, thought Kevin, she did not have a chance to change her appearance before we left Lyndesfarne.

Kevin opened a bottle of a rather fine red Amarone that he had picked up somewhere, and was in fact the sole contents of the wine rack, and poured some into a couple of glasses. He handed one to Tanji, and swirled around and then sniffed the wine in other glass.

“Try this. I think you’ll like it.”

He pulled out a kitchen stool, taking her hand and offering her the seat. She sat, then sipped from the glass.

“Very nice,” she sighed. “Thank you.”

Despite the fact that his kitchen looked unused, Kevin was actually quite a capable *Chef de Cuisine*. It was just that, living on his own, he rarely had an opportunity to cook for anyone and, in any case, spent a considerable amount of time working away from home. Cooking was a skill he had picked up as a student, partially as a cheaper alternative to frequenting fast food outlets, and partially as a way of finding an excuse to spend time with members of the opposite sex. His cooking skills had been intermittently polished and honed over the subsequent couple of decades, and he was now able to be entirely relaxed and chatty while juggling the various cooking processes.

While Tanji was in the shower, Kevin had gone into the kitchen, donned his apron, and undertaken a short but determined rummage in the deepfreeze. He had pulled out a couple of skinless chicken breasts, which he set in a bowl of cold water under a running tap to thaw. He had also managed to find bags of new potatoes and pre-washed mixed green salad in the fridge which looked passable. He had put the potatoes in a pan to boil, and poured the salad into a large bowl he had acquired on a holiday in Tuscany.

While waiting for the spuds to boil, he had set out mats and napkins, cutlery, glasses and plates on the counter top for the two of them. He had then selected peppercorns, herbs and spices from the rack, and poured generous measures into a pestle and mortar to make a Cajun-style coating for the chicken.

“You seem to know what you are doing,” remarked Tanji, as she sipped the red wine and watched Kevin moving purposefully around the kitchen.

“Well, yes, thank you. You know, I’ve always maintained that cooking is an ideal activity for men,” he replied, flashing her a quirky smile.

“For men? How so?”

“Well, I find it’s really therapeutic to come home after a long hard day at work,” he continued, “And be able to take out your frustrations on an onion using a very large kitchen knife.”

He wielded the aforementioned article. Tanji grinned widely.

“Besides,” Kevin continued more expansively, while ticking off the points on his fingers, “In the kitchen, you can play with fire, use any number of sharp knives, and employ all the gadgets you can think of. And then when you’ve finished, with a bit of luck, you can eat the result. Obviously for men!” he concluded triumphantly.

Tanji laughed aloud, and the two of them toasted each other with the rich red wine.

“I’m thinking of taking a shower myself. Only be a few minutes. Are you OK to wait here?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. Don’t rush for me.”

Of course, Kevin did shower and change at top speed. When he returned to the kitchen, he found Tanji staring into space, leaning on the kitchen top and twirling the wineglass in her fingers. Acting on impulse, he moved close behind her, put both hands on her hips and kissed her lightly on the neck. He felt her press against him, prolonging the contact, then turned and returned his kiss, running her tongue over his lips in a way that made him tingle. They held each other for a long moment before separating, smiling at each other with a mixture of warmth and embarrassment.

“Shall I cook your dinner?” he asked.

“Yes please,” she replied, “I think you should keep your strength up.”

Kevin needed no more prompting. He drained the chicken and deftly sliced the fillets into thin *goujons*, then coated them in the peppery mixture he had prepared earlier.

He put a frying pan on the gas cooker to heat, adding just a splash of vegetable oil. Once it was hot, he threw the encrusted chicken breasts into the oil to sizzle. While the poultry was cooking, he vigorously combined Dijon mustard, oil and lemon juice to form a salad dressing, and tossed the salad in the bowl. Finally, he arranged the blackened chicken pieces, new potatoes and salad on a couple of plates, even remembering to add a slice of lemon as a garnish.

“Taa-daa,” he exclaimed, delivering the plates to the settings he had arranged earlier. “Dinner is served.”

She kissed him.

“It looks wonderful.”

Over dinner, Tanji chattered about her past life, Kevin being content to sit and listen. He learned that she had been married, once,

but this was now all over. She had been away from the Guild for a long time – over five years – trying unsuccessfully to start a family. Her ex-husband who, it appeared, had worked for the Board of Construction was very keen to have children, and Kevin got the impression that it was the stress of being unable to get pregnant that had at least partially caused the break-up of the relationship. Now that they were separated, she was back at work and trying to rebuild her life.

After dinner, Kevin suggested that they abandon the kitchen and the dirty dishes for later. Taking their wineglasses with them, they moved to the lounge-cum-study that was the main room in the flat. Slightly at a loss for something to talk about, Kevin suggested that she might like to look at his computer models for the New Bridge.

They sat together at the desk while Kevin booted up the laptop. It rapidly became clear to him that Tanji did not really understand the model, or even the idea of a computer. Even so, she seemed spellbound by the images of both sides of the bridge and the detailed descriptions of the joining section between the two worlds.

“It’s fascinating,” she breathed. “So clever.”

She drew his hands away from the keyboard.

“Take me to your bed,” she whispered.

Chapter Twelve

After his memorable first visit to the Island, Kevin attended several further briefings with Professor Alan Wilmington at NISSA. These orientation sessions were always one-on-one, and highly intensive. Kevin knew that Tweedledum and his colleagues were getting separate tutorials, while Smudger just used them as another opportunity for creative skiving.

On this occasion, Kevin had left home early, driven north, and arrived in good time on the Newcastle University campus. He had been told that parking was always difficult, but found that a space had been reserved for him right next to the NISSA entrance.

As he parked up, he looked over at the NISSA building. It did not have the normal signs of aging and the distinctively run-down look of typical British University buildings. Rather, the building was old, but built in a style that suggested that little expense had been spared to give the impression that no expense had been spared. It had been carefully maintained over the last hundred years or so, and showed obvious evidence of recent refurbishment. Clearly, thought Kevin, funding was always available to support this rather specialist academic endeavour.

He entered the building and, as he had been previously directed, followed the signs up the wide staircase to the Departmental Secretary's office. The secretary was a pretty young woman whose ancestors probably originated from some part of the Indian subcontinent, but whose fashionable clothes and makeup marked her out as a woman determined to make the most of the modern world. As well as being in administrative control of NISSA, she also appeared to double as Professor Alan's personal assistant. She looked up as Kevin stuck his head around the outer door, and smiled in a friendly fashion.

"Go right in." she said in a crisp accent. "The Professor is expecting you."

Kevin mumbled some conventional response, and peered through the crack in the inner door. The Professor's office was high-ceilinged and airy, with a large window overlooking one of the greener areas of the University campus. The walls were lined with bookcases, themselves filled with bound journals, file boxes, periodicals and, here and there, even some books.

The centrepiece of the office was a large desk, covered with the clutter typical of offices everywhere. Several phones, a computer and printer and numerous piles of paper adorned the surface in what Kevin imagined to be an arrangement carefully devised to facilitate the memory of the habitual user. The Professor was seated behind his desk, concentrating on a thick sheaf of no-doubt recently printed material, and annotating it with an expensive-looking fountain pen.

Kevin knocked on the door and pushed it further open. The Professor looked up and, smiling widely, jumped from his seat while extending his hand in greeting.

“Come in, come in. Good to see you again.” he enthused, shaking Kevin’s hand and directing him to one of several rather comfortable-looking chairs. Once he had settled, the Professor enquired whether Kevin was clear about the purpose of these sessions.

“We try to tailor the material we present to the needs of our clients,” said Alan, by way of an introduction, “So if there’s any specific topic you would like to know more about, then please let me know.”

“Thanks,” Kevin replied, “But right now, I don’t know what I need to know!”

The Professor smiled understandingly.

“Let me set out an agenda for you,” he suggested. “You’ve already had a short intro to the concept and practice of Lyndesfarne magic, and you’ve seen it in action, yes?”

“That’s right,” responded Kevin.

“So, I suggest that you study the Lyndesfarne language, at least some phrases and useful words, and then perhaps a few practical hints and tips which will probably help you get around. We can leave a discussion of other topics, such as the properties of magic, and the culture and politics for another time. Does that sound OK to you?”

Kevin nodded.

“Very well. This morning, then, I’ll introduce you to a little of the language.”

Even though they were on their own, the Professor almost immediately adopted a tone and style that suggested he was addressing a whole lecture theatre. Kevin sat attentively, while the Professor strode about his office, waving his hands and apparently addressing the bookcases.

“In some ways, the language is the easiest thing to learn about Lyndesfarne,” said Alan, clearly getting into his stride. “It’s an entirely human construct, and we don’t always have to tussle with the

special properties of the environment there. By which I mean magic, of course.”

“So it is possible to learn the language?”

“Oh, yes. It’s a complex written and spoken language, but the two forms are at least fairly close to each other. With some effort, you could get reasonably fluent in a year or two. And it really is no harder to learn than, say, Mandarin or even English, I suppose. Do you speak any other languages?”

Kevin shook his head in an embarrassed fashion. He was not one of the world’s natural linguists, and thought dispiritedly that learning a language was probably harder than walking to the Moon.

“What’s the Lyndesfarne word for ‘Magic’?” he asked.

Professor Alan stopped his pacing, and spun on his heel to face Kevin.

“Ha! And that brings us the hard part of the language, in that there are numerous words which are very hard to translate, since they refer to concepts that we simply don’t have here.”

The Professor resumed his measured stride to and fro, and also resumed his pontificating style.

“The words that are in common use,” he continued, “seem to be employed in contexts where you would probably say ‘engineering’ or perhaps ‘technology’. But there is a word, which is only used in fiction and mythology, which means ‘magic’, in the sense of unexplainable physical effects under the control of a talented individual. Curiously, it seems they use that word to describe some aspects of the physics and technology of our world.”

Professor Alan also made an attempt to explain the characteristics of the written language. Apparently, this used a different alphabet, with twenty-nine characters. Some of the characters were similar in pronunciation to letters in English, but many were associated with sounds indistinguishably different from each other, at least to Kevin’s ears. The letters themselves had angular shapes, with few similarities to the alphabet with which Kevin was familiar, at least judging from the glyphs that Alan scribbled on the whiteboard.

“The Lyndesfarne language,” the Professor elucidated, “Appears to have an etymology shared with some languages in this world. There’s some similarity with Welsh, for example, and even more with Cornish Gaelic.”

“It’s also worth stressing that the Lyndesfarne language is not the only language in common use on the other side. Just as it is here, there are different countries, and a considerable number of languages, dialects and accents are employed.”

“Just how big is the world of Lyndesfarne?” asked Kevin.

“As far as we can tell, it is almost exactly the same size as our Earth. But the geography is quite different. But all this is a huge topic, you know, and more suitable for another day.”

Kevin was already beginning to feel overwhelmed by all the new information presented to him, and even more so by the prospect of huge areas where he would have to re-learn so much.

The Professor then cheered him up considerably.

“Fortunately,” he said, “You probably don’t have to learn very much of the language.”

Kevin’s sense of relief was almost palpable. Professor Alan explained that, fairly frequently, guides would be made available to assist the newcomer. The guides were usually provided by an organisation from the other side, as a service to guests.

“So who provides guides here?” asked Kevin.

“We do. We’ll provide services for visitors, when asked.” the Professor responded. “I’m given to understand that you will be getting a Guide to assist you during your working visits. Is that correct?”

“Yes, I’ve met him. Ricard, from the Guild of Directions,” Kevin responded.

The Professor nodded sagely.

“I don’t know the man, but I’m sure he’ll be entirely professional. Even so, it’s only polite to learn at least a few expressions.”

After much effort, and a fair amount of frustration on both parts, Kevin finally managed to learn a few words and phrases (“thank you”, “excuse me”, “good morning” and so on) and repeat them to Professor Alan’s satisfaction.

“Well, let’s take a break there, and get some lunch,” Alan suggested.

Kevin nodded his agreement.

“Afterwards, I’ve asked my colleague Doctor Braxton to offer you some practical tips which I’d strongly recommend you to follow.”

Doctor Linda Braxton was a large woman, who had a somewhat matronly appearance coupled with a distinct no-nonsense attitude. She wore a pleated knee-length skirt and stout sensible shoes which allowed her to stride about in an extremely determined fashion, and made Kevin think slightly uncomfortably about Scotsmen and kilts.

“The key thing to remember,” Doctor Braxton explained, “is that almost everything you take for granted as the product of a

technological society like ours will not work reliably in Lyndesfarne. So, let's start with the basics."

Doctor Braxton outlined in direct terms some very sensible recommendations for visitors to the Island. Clothing and shoes, she explained, should be made of natural materials: silk or wool, cotton or leather. Plastics for all kinds, including nylon, were simply not suitable.

"And don't forget underwear," she stressed, "Remember that all-cotton undergarments will probably survive OK."

Kevin, who had already had the uncomfortable experience of the high-tech material of his waterproof jacket failing to work as expected, had a visual image of his underpants falling apart on him and shuddered.

The Doctor also recommended that he carry a leather rucksack for his things, and get hold of an oiled leather waterproof coat or, better still, acquire one of the capes which were widely used on the Island.

She pointed out that, if he should stay overnight in Lyndesfarne, even simple personal hygiene activities such as cleaning his teeth or shaving would be a problem.

"Your best bet is an old-fashioned toothbrush, wood and bristle," she explained. "If you can manage without shaving, well, that simplifies things; otherwise, a traditional cut-throat razor will usually stay sharp for long enough to be useful."

Apparently, toothpaste and other toiletries were usually provided in hostels, and it was probably safest to use those. Kevin decided he did not want to have to deal with leaking toothpaste on his clean shirts.

Doctor Braxton also took the precaution of reminding him about leaving electrical and electronic items behind.

"It's ever so easy to do," she reiterated. "Some everyday item, a watch or mobile phone, overlooked in a pocket somewhere. Sometimes, they never do work properly again, so do try to remember."

Kevin left the afternoon session feeling confused. He could understand how cultural and language differences could come about, given the historical separation of the two worlds. But what he could not get to grips with was the observation that very simple machines (like wheels) clearly worked on the Island, while more complex systems (like computers) failed immediately. Similarly, simple chemical systems (like plastics) degraded quickly but, on the other hand, those almost unimaginably complex biochemical systems

which formed living things, including his own body, appeared to be unaffected.

There was something inconsistent here, he thought. The things that are unaffected and the things which fail, although reasonable at first sight, are actually inconsistent, even contradictory. But am I really the first person to have this insight?

Chapter Thirteen

Kevin found himself becoming wonderfully awake in his own bed, with the warm and soft body of Tanji pressed against him. He moved carefully, gently, trying not to wake her too early by wriggling.

He lay on his side, thinking about last night. After a rather tentative start, with both of them unsure how to please the other, Tanji turned out to be surprisingly energetic and very enthusiastic. Her demands and needs, and his responses to them, drove him to levels of excitement beyond anything he had experienced before.

He thought about her lithe body, moving above him in the dim light leaking through the curtains from the streetlights, her petite but perfectly formed breasts bouncing as she drove herself down upon him, taking his full length inside her again and again.

He found himself becoming aroused, the reaction suddenly amplified as Tanji stirred against him, still apparently sleepy, but definitely not entirely unaware of his presence. He felt himself harden, stiffening against the smooth curves of her buttocks. She evidently felt it too, moving against him more strongly, and emitting a soft moan as the tip of his cock pressed against the cleft between her legs. She used her hand to guide him inside her once again, moving first gently and then much more vigorously until they both tensed and cried out almost simultaneously.

“Good morning,” he whispered into her ear after a few moments, “Did you sleep well?”

“Very well, but I enjoyed waking up more,” she replied with a giggle.

They lay together for a few minutes, not speaking, before Kevin, feeling energised and bursting with vim and vigour, bounced out of bed.

“Why don’t you relax there for a while? I’m going to take a shower.”

A few minutes later, Tanji joined Kevin in the shower, much to his surprise. He enjoyed the sensation of soaping her shoulders, then running his hands down her back and over the curvature of her arse. He found himself deliberately squeezing past, ostensibly to reach the soap or shampoo, enjoying the feeling of the smooth dampness of her flesh against his. This was quite definitely conscious behaviour on

Kevin's part and there was, he strongly suspected, a similar motivation from Tanji.

He stepped out of the shower, leaving Tanji to complete her ablutions. He towelled himself dry, then wrapped the towel around his waist, more out of habit rather than any particular sense of modesty. Tanji followed him a few moments later. He caught sight of her elfin features reflected in the bathroom mirror, a view that instantly took his breath away. He moved to stand behind her, pressing his body warmly against her. She looked up at him, smiling widely, and he smiled back, rubbing his chin over her cheek. He was understandably surprised and rather disappointed when she pulled away suddenly.

"You need to shave. You're a bit, well, prickly."

Kevin ran a hand over his own chin, feeling several days' growth of stubble there.

"You're right," he laughed, "I'll shave immediately. I don't want your gorgeous face to get scratched!"

Leaving Tanji in the bathroom, he wandered out to find his rucksack, which he had dumped by the door on their arrival the previous evening. The backpack was quite full and, needless to say, he discovered that the wash bag containing his shaving equipment was right at the bottom. He ended up dumping what seemed like most of the rest of the contents on the corner of his desk.

Clutching the wash bag, he returned to the bathroom where he gently ejected Tanji, now swathed in a fresh towel he had previously pulled out of a cupboard. He always felt slightly nervous about other people being around when shaving, even someone who was close as Tanji. This was probably something to do with having a sharp implement close to his neck, and the risk of having his elbow jogged at an inopportune moment. Having closed the door, he set about the familiar task of wet-shaving, using that shaving cream from the Body Shop that Kevin always thought both looked and smelt like uPVA woodworking adhesive.

He had just picked up the razor and was about to apply it to his face when he heard a startled yelp from Tanji. Fearing the worst – all sorts of accidents caused by unfamiliarity with Mainland artefacts flashed through his mind – he dropped the razor in the sink and rushed out of the bathroom. Tanji was standing by his desk, quite naked with the towel in a heap at her feet. She was holding something that Kevin could not immediately make out, and had a look of complete astonishment on her face.

"What happened? Are you OK?" Kevin cried frantically.

“Look at this,” she replied distractedly.

She held up her hand, which he could now see contained the glass paperweight he had purchased in the curio shop.

“I rather liked the paperweight you bought yesterday, and was wondering what it would look like on your desk,” she said, “So I unwrapped it. I’d hoped you wouldn’t mind – I wanted to surprise you.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” Kevin said reassuringly, “But what’s the problem? Is it damaged?”

“No, no, it’s fine. But look at it now.”

Tanji moved her other hand in a simple motion Kevin recognised. The paperweight immediately lit up, glowing brightly in the dimly-lit room.

“I used the ‘make light’ gesture. It was just force of habit,” she said, “I didn’t even think about it. And it worked!”

Kevin reached out and made another gesticulation, one of the few he was confident he could remember. The light from the ornament dimmed quickly.

“Bloody hell,” he swore under his breath.

He made the appropriate ‘on’ and ‘off’ gestures several times repeatedly, the paperweight responding immediately to each one. He looked up into Tanji’s gaze.

“Is everything else working as well?”

“Let’s find out,” she responded.

Tanji put the still-luminous paperweight on the desk, and scooped up her towel, rapidly wrapping it around herself. There was then a mad escapade as the two towel-clad people hopped about the flat, urgently hunting for magical artefacts and trying them out.

After a short search, Tanji located her pack, which she had also left by the door on her arrival. She pulled out her magic slate that she had been using so frequently, and started making gestures. Judging by the increase in emphasis of the movements and the frustration plainly visible in her body language, Kevin could tell that it was not functioning.

Meanwhile, Kevin had picked up the bag containing the few Lyndesfarne coins he had not managed to spend. He emptied the contents onto the desk, and picked up a couple of the featureless flat disks. The magical markings which normally appeared below the surface of the metal when the coins were on the Island were absent, and he judged that the magic must be broken, or just missing. Just to be sure, he pressed two of the coins together with two fingers while making the gesture which was supposed to collapse them into a

single disc. Nothing happened. This was one of the gestures that he was less than totally confident in his ability to perform correctly. He turned to Tanji.

“Am I doing this one right?”

Tanji came over and repeated the actions, without success.

“It’s not functioning. It’s just the paperweight that works.”

“Can you shape shift?” Kevin asked her urgently.

“I don’t know. Let me try.”

Tanji stepped away and stiffened slightly, a look of concentration appearing on her face. Kevin could not help but think how attractive it made her look. She caught him looking at her, and smiled and looked down in a slightly embarrassed way that Kevin thought was charming but entirely at odds with the facts that she was (a) in his flat and (b) wearing only a towel.

“Nothing. I can’t change my appearance at all,” she said at last, still smiling wryly.

Kevin went back to the paperweight, still glowing gently on the desk. He could clearly see the markings inside the glass that indicated the weather predictions for the next twenty-four hours. He was almost certain that the icons had changed since he first looked at them only a few minutes before.

“How does this work?” he asked Tanji.

“Well, it’s a bit complicated,” she replied, “But basically it just knows the future.”

“What?” Kevin exclaimed.

Tanji looked up sharply at his tone of voice. Kevin had tacitly assumed that the device functioned in the same way that a modern barometer worked – by measuring changes in atmospheric pressure and knowing that, for example, rapidly dropping air pressure meant that stormy conditions were likely.

“You mean it’s prescient?”

“Well, yes, in a limited kind of way. But with something as hard to change as tomorrow’s weather, it’s very reliable.”

Kevin was astonished. This was an aspect of Lyndesfarne magic that was entirely new to him. He was certain he would have remembered if this capability had been mentioned in one of those NISSA briefing sessions. Why is it, he mused bitterly, that I am not being told so many important things.

He picked up the magic paperweight.

“OK. So why does this thing work here and everything else magical doesn’t?” he asked Tanji.

“I don’t know, really. It certainly shouldn’t work. And I’ve never heard of anything like this before.”

“Hmmm. I wonder. Let me think for a moment.”

By now, Kevin was getting rather worried. He had already discovered that the natural rules – the physics, if you like – appeared to be the same in the two worlds. Gravity, the biochemistry of living creatures, light and sound all appeared to be identical. However, it seemed that there were certain additional magical properties which only seemed to work on the Island. Now he knew that at least some magic also worked here.

Was there some deliberate policy, Kevin mused, of not informing him about some facets of the magic world of Lyndesfarne? Were some characteristics only communicated on a “need to know” basis, like the existence of reliable predictions? And, most importantly, was Tanji part of some kind of conspiracy to prevent him from discovering just what was going on?

Chapter Fourteen

During the years he had been working on the Lyndesfarne Bridge, Kevin would usually return to the Mainland after each day at work, sometimes making the crossing of the old bridge several times on consecutive days. More often than not, he would drive to and stay in some faceless and frankly boring hotel nearby on the Mainland side. He seemed to be encouraged to do this by Ricard who, as he indicated in various subtle ways, always seemed happier when Kevin went back to his own world in the evening.

Kevin had found himself spending quite a lot of time on the new bridge project, with site inspections, meetings, surveying work and so on. This was a much more hands-on role than was usual for him, but was essential since he represented the principal point of contact between the two teams. Nevertheless, he had enjoyed the opportunity of getting out and about. Almost anything, he thought, was better than returning to that lonely little flat he rented in South Manchester.

Even so, sometimes he would stay over in Lyndesfarne, usually in the hostel near to the bridge site he knew as “The Walled Garden”. This was a two-storey building, which looked like it had been built at around the same time as the old bridge, and initially appeared to have space for no more than a dozen guest rooms. Kevin had been curious about this on his early visits, since there seemed to be more people eating breakfast than could possibly stay there. He later discovered that there were more rooms in the basement, but had never stayed in one.

There was indeed a substantial garden attached to the hostel, surrounded by a wall, and some of the guest rooms looked out over the well-kept lawn and borders. Kevin suspected that the courtyard had at one time been a stable yard, with some of the rooms now occupied by guests originally being coach houses and accommodations for horses.

The high stone walls also made the garden feel very private and secluded, and it was pleasantly sheltered by trees and rambling plants during the summer months. The centre of the courtyard was a small lawn, so carefully tended that it looked not so much mown as manicured, and contained a centrepiece which had first appeared to Kevin to be a sundial, but was in fact a timepiece that showed the time by the sun at any time of the day or night.

Stone paths and garden seating completed the appearance of peace and tranquillity. The only obvious way in or out of the courtyard was through the main body of the hostel, as the original archway entrance at the side had been walled up at some time in the distant past. All very safe and secure, Kevin had thought on his first visit.

Nevertheless, Kevin had noticed that there often seemed to be people in the courtyard, even late at night or first thing in the morning. However, they never seemed to disturb the feeling of tranquillity, and they never seemed to stay very long either.

Kevin always enjoyed staying in a garden suite, since the pastoral view from his room tended to put him in a relaxed frame of mind. The inside of the garden rooms echoed the natural theme outside. The walls were a pale green, the bed and other furnishings were in a dark wood, and the floor was finished with what looked, and felt, like terracotta tiles. A floral rug, matching bedcover and several pictures depicting countryside views completed the rural décor.

The areas where useful effects could be magically activated using common gestures were marked by discreet embossed symbols on the walls, floor and furniture, in what Kevin now believed to be the typical Lyndesfarne style. Active areas near the door and the bed indicated lighting controls, while another symbol on the wall marked the place which allowed the heating to be increased or decreased. Yet another marker on the surface of the bedside table made it possible to speak to the staff at reception, although Kevin usually preferred to walk the short distance to make his occasional requests in person.

There were more symbols in both bedroom and bathroom, many of which Kevin did not recognise, and therefore refrained from experimenting with. The windows were real, made from a transparent material that closely resembled glass, actually opened – something of a rarity in Lyndesfarne, apparently – and could be darkened to opacity using up and down gestures near a mark on the right-hand side of the window frame. Kevin usually preferred to leave the window only partially blacked-out, so that he was awakened naturally by the sunrise.

During his time visiting Lyndesfarne, Kevin had formed the suspicion that relatively few local people actually stayed in hostels or similar accommodation. As he had heard it, the nature of the Island transportation system and the use of their so-called “portals” meant that most people working at a distance from their residence could travel back home. It was simply easier for them to return home than

to arrange alternative accommodation. He had also been given to understand that it was rare in Lyndesfarne society for people to be separated for long periods, which perhaps lead to a stronger sense of the importance of family groups and friends than in his home world.

Kevin found himself lying three-quarters awake one night, with an incoherent mixture of his troubled (or perhaps just non-existent) personal life and assorted technical work problems running around in his head. After tossing and turning for what felt like hours, he finally sat up and made the simple gesture which caused the lighting to come on. He got out of bed, and peered through the window into the garden. It was bright moonlight outside, and he could see that the wind was so light that it was causing almost no movement of the treetops. It's probably the light that has woken me up, he considered, I really must remember to opaque the windows more often.

Kevin was by now completely wide awake, and cast about for something to do. Glancing again though the window, he decided to take a stroll. He dressed quickly, donning dark jeans and sweater, and one of the Lyndesfarne-style capes he had taken to wearing while on the Island. He made his way quietly out of his room, locking the door with a hand-print and gesture that had become almost second nature by now, and made his way along the corridor to the front entrance.

Kevin had long realised that this particular hostel was frequented by visitors from the Mainland. As far as he knew, it was the closest place to stay to the crossing, and he had occasionally overhead conversations in English between the guests. Generally, they employed particularly attentive staff, but there was no-one in the hostel lobby this evening, so he was able to leave the building apparently unobserved.

There were few other pedestrians out that late at night, he noticed, as he followed the by now familiar route down to the old bridge. It was an unusually clear night, with almost none of the usual haze over the straights which made it difficult to see the other world. The moonlight augmented the street lighting, casting an uneven illumination over the street and the surrounding darkened buildings.

As Kevin walked along the road leading to the Old Bridge, he could see the causeway and the humped roadway, illuminated by the old-fashioned oil-burning lamps that were placed on poles every twenty feet or so for the entire length of the crossing. As far as he could see, there was absolutely no-one on the crossing at all. This was of itself extremely unusual, as even in the dead of night, he had

been told, there was always some late-night walker or weary horse making their way across.

As Kevin got closer, his eye was caught by much brighter lights underneath the bridge. There appeared to be several boats in the water on both sides, under each of the two lesser arches, and tied up to the main arch supports. It was difficult to see at the distance, but it looked like some kind of maintenance work was being undertaken. There were many people working, moving about in the boats urgently and with something of a furtive air.

On the near side, which Kevin could see most easily, the workers were all dressed in dark robes and hoods. Despite the seeming urgency, there was almost no noise; just the occasional groan of loaded machines, and the lap and splash of the sea against the boats. Kevin wondered what they were doing. They seemed to have removed some blocks of stone from the base of the arches, and he thought that something was being rebuilt inside the bridge supports themselves.

Just as Kevin was moving further forward to try and get a better look at the engineering works on the bridge, he heard the slap of hurried footsteps behind him. He turned around, in time to see a breathless and flustered-looking Ricard rushing to catch him up. Ricard looked very worried, even frightened; Kevin thought that he must be overreacting somehow.

“I’ve been worried about you,” gasped Ricard, “You could have got lost, or fallen and hurt yourself.”

He urged Kevin away from the bridge, doing something he had never willingly done before: he actually laid hands on Kevin as he tried to turn him away.

Kevin wanted to ask what was being done, what urgent work was being carried out, at the Old Bridge, but he never got an opportunity. In contrast to his normal rather taciturn self, Ricard kept up a constant stream of bright and meaningless chatter on the general theme of “getting lost, risk from thieves and bandits, broken limbs” and so on, and Kevin could not find a way to interrupt him. Ricard shepherded him – Kevin thought the word was entirely apposite – directly back to the hostel, practically scampering alongside in his haste to return him to his proper place.

Back in his room, Kevin lay awake for some time, thinking about what he had just seen and experienced. There was something going on here, something he was not supposed to find out about, and Ricard’s bizarre behaviour was the least of it. He began to wonder about the chamber he had been asked to introduce in the base of the

support tower on the Mainland side of the new bridge. Was there some hidden purpose for this room? And was there was a similar opening in the tower on the Island side?

After a restless night, Kevin was not at his best when he got up the following morning. The unanswered questions and the unprecedented manner of Ricard's approach to rounding him up, had nagged at him for hours before he fell asleep, and he had been awaked early by bright sunlight through his window.

After breakfast, Kevin ran into Ricard in the hostel lobby. The other man looked grey with exhaustion and his usual grin was absent. Compared with Ricard, Kevin thought, I'm the brightest of sparks this morning. He looks positively dreadful, as if he's not slept at all.

A few days later, Ricard announced that he was going to be replaced. He did not volunteer any explanation, and Kevin decided that it was not politic to pursue the matter. Still, he thought, old Ricard doesn't look very happy about it.

Chapter Fifteen

Should I trust her, Kevin thought. Am I just being paranoid? Is there really any kind of conspiracy? He was not sure how to find out, but thought he could get some idea by asking about the Guild.

He looked over at Tanji, who was now inspecting his collection of books on the other side of the room. In the dim lighting Kevin preferred in his living room, Tanji's luminous hair and elfin features stood out as if a spotlight was trained on her.

"Tanji? Can you tell me about this Guild you work for?"

"Of course," she replied immediately, "What do you want to know?"

"Well, I'm not sure. What does the name really mean, for instance?"

"Hmm. It's usually translated as the Guild of Directions, although I don't think that is particularly good English. Perhaps Visitor Escort Bureau might be a more idiomatic version."

"And what do they do, exactly?" Kevin pressed.

"Our purpose is simply to provide support and guidance to visitors from your world. Many visitors find Lyndesfarne a very confusing place, and we are here to help."

This last remark rang a chord with Kevin. His early visits to the Island, even after the briefings from NISSA and help from Ricard and Bret, had been disorienting and full of sights he had found incomprehensible.

"But does everyone get a personal guide?" he asked.

Tanji laughed. "No, of course not. That would not be possible. But we do try and provide a guide for every Visitor who asks for one."

"Well, I didn't ask for a guide, but I still got Ricard, and now you. How come?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know. But surely someone from your firm asked on your behalf. Or maybe the Board of Construction?"

Kevin could accept this, although he made a mental note to check with his company's Human Resources division. Not that he would actually trust the morons in Human Remains to actually answer his questions correctly, mentally adding some remarks about the

complete absence of their party organisation capabilities, even in beer manufactories.

“So, can anyone from here go over to Lyndesfarne?”

“Well, yes, I think so. I’m sure the Guardians would stop anyone known to be a criminal or a troublemaker, but lots of people cross every day. In both directions.”

Tanji’s manner had become slightly stiff under the onslaught of Kevin’s questioning, but he still got the impression that this was more from confusion rather than a desire to hide anything.

“So, if I wanted to cross over to Lyndesfarne, wander around on my own, explore a little – you know, be a tourist – would I be allowed to do that?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, sounding shocked, “Why? Do you want to?”

It was Kevin’s turn to laugh. “No, not really. I was just wondering if you had any special instructions about me.”

This time, Tanji looked more confused than shocked.

“Special instructions? I don’t know what you mean.”

Kevin told her about the night he went wandering around on his own, and Ricard’s reaction, although he chose not to mention what he had seen going on at the bridge.

“Well, I have no instructions to prevent you from doing anything,” she said, sounding rather huffy. “I have only just returned to the Guild after a long absence – you must remember that I told you about that.”

“I have been away for nearly five years, and you are the first Visitor I have guided since I returned,” she continued, “I am just doing my job. You don’t want to send me away, do you?”

This last question sounded incredibly plaintive, and Kevin smiled to make it clear that this was the last thing he wanted.

“So, what are you going to do?” she asked.

Kevin thought about it for a moment.

“I need a coffee,” he replied.

Still wearing the towel, Kevin made his way through to the kitchen, trailed by Tanji.

“Do you like coffee?” he asked her.

She nodded.

“With milk?”

“Yes, please.”

Vaguely relieved to be doing something entirely normal, Kevin ground coffee beans and fired up the coffee maker, then warmed some milk in a pan to make big mugs of café latte for them both.

They sat at the kitchen table in silence for a few minutes, sipping their hot coffee, each apparently intent on their own thoughts. Finally, Kevin broke the silence.

“Do you know what stops magic from working here? At least, normally,” Kevin asked Tanji.

“No, I don’t,” she replied, “It just doesn’t. I don’t understand how this could have happened.”

“But you told me once that some magical objects did work here, in this world, certain talismans and potions. Surely this is just another example of one of those things?”

“Well, no,” she replied immediately, “Those good-luck charms and so on are very weak magic – about as weak as you can get. But that paperweight is a reliable predictor, *and* an everlasting light source. That’s a completely different class of magic – *two* different classes. Much more powerful. And that’s why I was so shocked when I realised the thing was actually working.”

“Perhaps we should go back to Lyndesfarne, even back to that shop,” Kevin suggested. “We could buy some more things, then bring them back here and see if they work too.”

Tanji shook her head.

“What would that prove? And what would we do if we did find more things that worked?”

“Yes, I guess you’re right. I for one want some kind of explanation.”

“Me, too.”

Kevin was one of those people who did not function well on an empty stomach. The shocks of the morning, not to mention the exertions overnight, meant that he was now beginning to feel very hungry.

“Let me make you some breakfast. Fancy some eggs?”

Tanji smiled.

“OK. I’ll go and get dressed.”

He looked down, suddenly realising that he was still wearing only a towel.

“Good thought. Perhaps I should dress too.”

Kevin dug jeans, shirt and underwear out of a cupboard and dressed rapidly, while Tanji disappeared into the bathroom. By the time she re-appeared in the kitchen, he had made toast, scrambled some eggs in another pan, and thrown the debris of last night’s dinner into the dishwasher. She watched him whizzing about the kitchen for a few moments, until he noticed her in the doorway and motioned her

to sit down. He put plates of scrambled egg on toast on the table in front of her and topped up the coffee mugs.

“Bon Appetit,” he said cheerily.

“Looks wonderful. Thank you.”

They both tucked into the food with gusto, while Kevin mentally chewed over the situation. He wanted to talk to someone from his own world, rather than from Lyndesfarne, about this inexplicable phenomenon. The candidate list for such a discussion was naturally rather small, and the conclusion was obvious.

“Look, why don’t we visit NISSA?” he asked Tanji.

“NISSA? That’s one of your organisations teaching visitors about my world, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. It’s more-or-less on our way back to Lyndesfarne. I’m assuming you’d like me to take you back today, yes?”

“Please,” she confirmed, adding “I’ll need to get some clean clothes fairly soon.”

“Fair enough. We’ll see if we can get to talk to Professor Wilmington, or one of his colleagues. They’re the people who’ve been briefing me,” he explained, “And I can’t think of anyone closer who might be able to shed some light.”

“Yes, OK. I can’t think of anything better.”

With a decision made, it seemed like only a few minutes before they were ready to leave. Kevin bustled about, rapidly tidying up his flat and set the dishwasher going. He then emptied and repacked his rucksack, carefully re-wrapping the paperweight and placing it in the top of the bag. Meanwhile, Tanji had gathered her stuff, and went to stand by the front door. Smiling at the thought that she was ready to leave before him, he collected together bag and outdoor clothing, and guided Tanji out through the door.

Kevin locked up the flat, and bundled all their stuff into the Volvo ready for the drive back north. It was another fine day, as correctly predicted by the paperweight, and he was rather looking forward to the drive. On starting the car, however, he realised that the tank was almost empty. He drove around the corner and stopped at a local petrol station to refuel.

“What are we doing here?” Tanji asked.

“The car needs petrol,” he answered.

“Ah. Of course. I should have realised that.”

Kevin got out to fill the tank with fuel, and to arrange the transfer of the usual small fortune to the petroleum company using his credit card. He was feeling much better now that he had got a plan of action, and he got back into the car trying, and failing, to set the

words “We’re off to See the Professor, The Wonderful Professor of NISSA” to the tune from “The Wizard of Oz”. This did have the success of making Tanji laugh out loud, and went quite some way to easing the last of the stiffness that had developed between them after their discovery concerning the paperweight.

Chapter Sixteen

Kevin had not often travelled very far into the world of Lyndesfarne. Most of his work had centred around technical issues on the construction sites on both sides of the straights, and most of the logistics had been dealt with by others. In particular, Peter Brenner, the Project Manager from Kevin's firm appointed at the Outline Design Review meeting, had been hugely effective – although often annoyingly pernickety – in orchestrating the planning and organisational aspects.

Nevertheless it was not possible, in Kevin's considerable professional experience, to avoid all management meetings. On a small number of occasions, it had been deemed necessary for him to attend a progress meeting with the Board of Construction. These were held in a nearby town with a name that Kevin initially failed to catch, but turned out to be something like Landberrrs.

Kevin, along with Bret, had been invited to the first of these catch-up sessions. The invitation had made it very clear that attendance for both of them was mandatory. Ricard, who was to guide the two other men to the meeting, explained that Landberrrs was the closest major centre to the bridge site.

"There's no portal close by," said Ricard, "In any case, it is just as quick to travel overland. I've arranged for transport for us all."

Kevin did not fully understand about portals, but knew from a NISSA briefing that they were part of the transport system on the Island. He wondered why there was no portal close to the bridge. Perhaps portals were rare, he mused, or was this some kind of a security measure to make it more difficult for the casual traveller to gain access to all of Lyndesfarne. Certainly, it seemed that something similar was in place on the Mainland side; in the absence of a car, a visitor from the Island was faced with a lengthy walk before they could get to a railway station.

Today's transport consisted of a horse-drawn trap, driven by a rather scruffy-looking man Kevin did not recognise. He clambered aboard, accompanied by Bret and Ricard, and they set off at a decent clip. It was a bright sunny day, and Kevin considered it rather pleasant trotting along and enjoying the view.

The Board of Construction building was in a setting which bore a considerable resemblance to a modern hi-tech business park in

Kevin's world. This consisted of half-a-dozen low buildings, rather smart and probably recently built, separated by wide areas of grass and trees. There were also areas which Kevin thought of as car parks, although today there were rather sparsely populated with the large grey bubbles he understood to be some kind of vehicle. It felt incredibly anachronistic drawing up outside such an obviously modern building in a horse-drawn trap.

He also had some rather negative thoughts about Bret and Panit's transport to and from the kick-off meeting in Manchester. The horse and cart, and its disreputable-looking driver, he thought ruefully, was no match for the chauffeur-driven Range Rover they had enjoyed on their visit to Kevin's home world.

Kevin took a professional interest in the Board of Construction office architecture. As they arrived, his first impression was of a low building of surprisingly modest size, no more than two stories high and topped with a conventional peaked roof. The striking feature was that most of the outside walls and parts of the roof were covered with large panels of some kind, appearing completely opaque, coloured a slightly glossy black, and looking much like the glass cladding on a modern skyscraper in any Mainland city.

He turned to Bret.

"What are the black panels?" he asked.

"Ah. Well I guess you would call them windows," replied Bret, "They let light into the building."

"Of course," murmured Kevin, feeling slightly foolish at having asked such an obvious question.

He allowed himself to be guided through the entrance. He observed to his surprise that most of the floor area of the building appeared to be taken up with a large reception desk, waiting and seating areas, and what appeared to be an auditorium, much like the foyer of an office building at home. In the absence of anywhere else, he expected that the meeting would be held in the lecture hall, and began to move towards the entrance doors. After a few steps, however, he sensed that Bret and Ricard had moved in a different direction. Seeing Kevin's uncertainty, Bret pointed to a brightly-lit recess to one side of the reception desk.

"We'll take the lift."

"Where are we going?" Kevin asked, his confusion now complete.

"Down," replied Bret, "Our meeting room is on the thirteenth floor."

Bret guided Kevin into the recess. Ricard made a couple of simple gestures near the embossed area Kevin now recognised as ubiquitous here in Lyndesfarne and, without apparent movement, the doorway they had entered suddenly became covered in a translucent panel. The lift gave the gentlest of jerks, and started descending at a fair rate. Kevin rapidly surmised that the actual building did indeed extend downwards, and that it had many levels deep underground.

“How does this work?” Kevin inquired, as the lift moved quietly downwards with a barely perceptible movement.

Before Bret could answer, the lift came to a halt, and the translucent panel disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

“I’m not sure I can explain very well.” Bret said uncertainly. “But, it uses a variation of the, ah, lifting magic that is also used to transport heavy items.”

Kevin and Bret, accompanied by Ricard, exited the lift and walked the few steps to the meeting room. While they were waiting for the rest of the participants to arrive, Bret sketched a little more about Lyndesfarne building construction.

“In the distant past, many people here lived in caves and diggings. For, well, several reasons, it was traditional – and thought to be safer, too. I suppose that, at one time, these were natural holes, but folks have been widening and extending their excavations for thousands of years.”

“But surely they must have been rather cold and damp?” inquired Kevin.

“Well, I imagine that they may have been, ages ago,” replied Bret, “But dry-lining and deep drainage techniques have been widely used for a long time. More recently, we have used some, well, magic methods for rapid excavation, too.”

He explained that, even now, a considerable number of the Islanders had a preference for underground living. Even buildings build above ground in the style familiar to Kevin would have at least one and usually two levels of basements, and many more traditional families would locate their bedrooms at the deepest level. Kevin speculated whether this predilection had led to rumours about the people from Lyndesfarne, and myths about cave-dwelling goblins, hobbits and so on.

“Wasn’t it dark in the caves, in the olden days?” he asked.

Bret smiled.

“Not really. We’ve had smokeless fire for heating and lighting for a long time. And of course, these days we’ve got windows, too.”

Bret indicated the large area of what Kevin had assumed was glass lining one wall of the room. It appeared to be a picture window that looked out over the shrubbery surrounding the building which Kevin had noticed on the way in. The sunshine was bright, and he could see the leaves moving in the slight breeze. It had seemed all so natural, even mundane, to Kevin that he had not consciously noticed it until now.

“But we’re underground!” he exclaimed.

Bret could hardly keep the amusement out of his voice.

“Oh yes.”

Kevin stood and walked over to the window. Even with his nose pressed up against the glass, or whatever the substance was, the image was perfect. He was even able to feel the warmth of the sunlight against his skin.

“Windows like this are a standard feature of modern architecture here,” Bret explained patiently. “Light from outside is passed to many windows on the inside.”

Bret explained that only light was passed through the window, and in only one direction. Nothing physical could get through in either direction, and no one could see in, which meant that they were very secure. They could not be easily broken or forced open, and it was not possible to climb in or out of a window, even in an emergency.

Bret also made it clear that the windows were quite different from the portals used for transport.

“Portals are point to point,” he explained, “Everything that enters comes out at the other side. Windows are one to many. Light enters in one place, and is relayed to multiple other places. So as you can see, the outside view is available to everyone.”

While Bret had been talking, the room had been filling up with people. Panit had turned up, and had staked his claim to the seat opposite the door, where he had a clear view of who was arriving. Kevin had not yet discovered his true role, and it turned out that little additional information was forthcoming during this meeting. Panit said almost nothing, but his dark eyes darted around suspiciously during the entire session.

Quarl the anonymous-looking manager from the Board of Construction and Craz the Overseer had both turned up. Quarl was as forgettable as ever, and Craz was unchanged from the previous encounter, apart from the substitution of a lime green shirt.

Both Smudger and Tweedledum were notable by their absence. Kevin would have been astonished if the creatively lazy Smudger had

emerged, but was a little disappointed by Tweedledum's non-appearance. But both had sent formal notes of apology, and Kevin had no easy way to find out more.

The purpose of the meeting was a progress report on the site selection and planning activities. The session was introduced by Peter Brenner, the Project Manager from Kevin's company. He surprised Kevin, but apparently no-one else, by speaking fluently in the Lyndesfarne language, before repeating himself in English, presumably for Kevin's benefit. This was the first time in Kevin's experience that someone from his own world, outside the confines of NISSA, had demonstrated fluency in the language. I suppose I always knew it was possible, mused Kevin, and there must be many people who can communicate readily on the Island. He supposed that Peter's (slightly nitpicking) organisational efficiency, together with his grasp of the Islander's language, was the reason he was selected for this management role.

Kevin sat between Bret and Aneil, the interpreter. Despite Aneil's official role, more often than not it was Bret who provided Kevin with translations when they were needed. Fortunately, the presentations had been made available on paper in both the Lyndesfarne language and English, so Kevin was able to follow the thrust of the discussions by reading the English version of the material.

The presentation on the progress of site selection and solution design was a collaborative work between Kevin and Bret, to be presented by Bret. The two men had worked together on the substance of the presentation in a small room in the hostel where Kevin sometimes stayed. They had written in English on some kind of large slate blackboard using what looked like ordinary white chalk. When they had completed each section, Bret had made a gesture and the chalk marks had faded completely, ready for the next bit.

When they had finished, Bret had astonished Kevin by folding up the slate as if it was made of newspaper, so that it fitted easily into his bag. In the meeting, Bret now unfolded the blackboard, and placed it on an easel that had been conveniently provided. Kevin recognised the layout and diagrams, but somehow (yes, it must be magic, thought Kevin resignedly) the words on the blackboard had become translated into the Lyndesfarne script.

There was a considerable amount of discussion following this presentation, much of it in turns contradictory, inadequately considered and overtly opinionated. The issue at hand was to draw up a short list of promising sites for the New Bridge which should be

investigated further. Of course, the bridge would only actually be built on one of those locations, so the longer the short-list, the more waste of time and money. Kevin did his best to guide the discussion towards some of the more promising sites, while trying to make it appear that other people – presumably more responsible people – were actually forming the decisions.

All this took an inordinate amount of time, not helped with the lengthy break for a decidedly luxurious lunch. Finally a plausible short-list of sites was agreed upon, and follow-up actions recorded to commission more detailed surveys. This would require specialist sub-contractors, and it was minuted that Peter would arrange for suitable experts to be hired. Why take minutes, Kevin wearily repeated the old joke to himself, when the meetings take hours?

After the meeting, Bret, Ricard and Kevin made their way outside to find the same horse, trap and driver waiting for them. They made their way back following the same route they had used in the morning, so that Kevin could return to the Mainland that evening. Kevin wondered vaguely what had happened to the horse and driver during the hours they had spent in the meeting. Presumably they had waited patiently, enjoying the sunshine. Nevertheless, they seemed to be very fresh, so perhaps there was somewhere nearby where they could have rested.

This last thought struck Kevin as strange, as he has not seen any stables or indeed any other horse-drawn transport on the trip. From everything he had heard, Lyndesfarne was a sophisticated culture and made extensive use of systems which he would have described as ‘high-tech’, had he come across them in his own world.

Clearly, horse-drawn transport was only used over the bridge, for obvious reasons. He had also observed those grey bubbles described as vehicles, but they had always been parked up and he had never seen any on the road. So how do most people get around, wondered Kevin, as the horse clip-clopped its way through the chill of the evening? And how are all those goods which come across the causeway transported once they get to Lyndesfarne? Perhaps portals, he concluded, are more important than I thought.

Chapter Seventeen

Car parking at the University of Newcastle, where NISSA was located, was always difficult, and even more so in term time, when there were students' cars parked everywhere. Kevin was forced to leave the Volvo some distance from the NISSA building, parked – illegally, of course, but just like several other vehicles – partially on the pavement.

The drive from Manchester had gone reasonably smoothly, with just a couple of short delays caused by the usual roadworks. During the trip, they talked over the predicament repeatedly, but without significant further conclusions. After that, the conversation had ranged over numerous other topics, giving Kevin the opportunity to try and entertain Tanji with what he liked to think of as his ironic sense of humour. Kevin began to recover something of the pleasure and calmness he had felt during the journey in the opposite direction only the day before.

From the point where Kevin had abandoned the Volvo, it was a walk of about ten minutes. By now, he knew his way around the University campus reasonably well, having got lost on at least one previous visit, and had therefore inadvertently explored much of the area. He was now confident that he could find the most direct route to the NISSA buildings, which seemed to involve a surprising number of alleyways and several shortcuts past loading bays.

Kevin guided Tanji into the NISSA building and up the stairs to the suite of offices occupied by Professor Alan Wilmington and his staff. He knocked on the outer door, which was closed. There was no response, so after a short wait Kevin tried the handle. The door opened easily and quietly. The capable young woman who was, as Kevin understood the situation, in administrative control of the organisation as well as the Professor's assistant, was evidently away from her desk just at the moment.

As on a previous visit, the inner door to the Professor's office was slightly ajar, and Kevin knocked gently and pushed it open a little further. The Professor looked up from his desk, then sat up straight, dropping the document he had been reading.

"Kevin!" he exclaimed, "I didn't realise that you were scheduled to be here today."

“Well, I’m not. But I was hoping you could spare me a few minutes.”

“Yes, of course. Come in, come in.”

Kevin stepped through the door as Alan moved around his desk to shake his hand, and then gestured towards the seating in front of his desk. The Professor’s gaze caught Tanji, who was calmly standing in the office doorway. The change in his expression clearly told Kevin that Alan had spotted Tanji’s typically Lyndesfarne appearance and recognised it for what it was.

“Alan, let me introduce Tanji. She’s my guide from the Guild of Directions – from Lyndesfarne, obviously.”

“Pleased to meet you, Madam,” the Professor responded, holding up his palm in greeting and, Kevin noted, making no attempt to shake her hand. Tanji raised her hand in response, then moved to sit in another of the comfy chairs while the Professor returned to the padded throne behind his desk.

“So how can I help you?” Alan enquired, glancing rapidly from Kevin to Tanji and back again.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” Kevin began, “But I’ve come across something inexplicable.”

The Professor leaned forward on his desk, steepling his hands in a pose conveying intense interest.

“Go on.”

“I’ve found an item, an artefact from Lyndesfarne, which quite definitely works here. Tanji tells me this requires some quite powerful, err, magic.”

At this statement, Alan leant back in his chair with an expression of annoyance on his face.

“This is nonsense,” he huffed, “You’re deluding yourself. Not to mention wasting my time.”

Both Tanji and Kevin were taken aback by this flat statement. The Professor must have noticed this, and continued.

“Look, we’ve tried importing all sorts of items from Lyndesfarne over the years and, frankly, none of them work. Indeed, anyone who claims to have bought a so-called magic item has been the victim of a fraud.”

“Well, that’s what I was told, too,” countered Kevin, “Which is why we were both confused when we discovered this.”

Kevin opened his rucksack and pulled out the paperweight, which he then unwrapped from its packaging and placed on the desk in front of him. Glancing at the Professor, he made the “make light” gesture with his hand, and the glass lit up from within.

“There!” he explained.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the desk. The Professor leant forward, then reached over and made a series of gestures, turning the light off and on repeatedly, just as Kevin had done earlier in the day.

Kevin pointed out that the weather prediction icons were still working. They now showed a slightly different prediction about the weather, presumably because of the passage of several hours and a lengthy car journey.

“Where in the world did you get this?” the Professor asked, picking up the paperweight and inspecting it closely.

“Well, I don’t think it was in this world,” Kevin responded.

Tanji giggled discretely behind her hand at this remark.

“I bought it in a shop, in Lyndesfarne, yesterday morning.” he continued, “But it’s the only magic we’ve found that’s working here. Tanji says she can’t shapeshift here, and the other items we happened to bring with us are completely inactive.”

The Professor was still fascinated by the paperweight, turning it this way and that in his hands.

“So how did you get it here?” he enquired, not taking his eyes from the magical glass artefact.

Kevin related the story about their unexpected journey across the straights caused by the storm, and sketched the trip down to Manchester and back.

“I see,” Professor Alan said finally, “Have you told anyone else about this?”

Both Kevin and Tanji shook their heads.

“No,” Kevin replied, “We couldn’t think of anyone else to talk to.”

The Professor nodded, looking up at them and returning the paperweight to the desktop.

“This is fascinating. I’d like to look into this some more. But I really need to visit the gents first. I won’t be long.”

He stood up, pushing his chair away from the desk and stepped out of the room, the door shutting behind him with a soft thud. In the silence that followed, there was a quiet but clearly audible click from the door. Kevin and Tanji both heard the noise, and looked at each other, suddenly alarmed. Kevin moved to try the door and found it to be locked from the outside.

“We’re locked in,” he said, “What’s going on?”

As he had noticed before, this old building had very solid wooden doors and stout locks, and besides, the office door opened inwards.

Kevin swiftly came to the conclusion that there would be little point in throwing his weight against it in an attempt to force it open.

He rushed back to Tanji, unsure of what to do. She had not moved, seemingly stunned by the turn of events. Kevin's eye ran over the array of phones on the Professor's desk and picked up one, with the unformed thought of trying to call someone for help. There was no dial tone. He frantically pressed various buttons without notable success, and had begun to suspect that the Professor had disabled the phone lines from the outer office.

Cursing, he realised that he had not brought his mobile phone with him. He had got out of the habit of carrying it around, since it would not work on the Island, and on this occasion he left it in the glove compartment of the Volvo.

As he was struggling to make the phones work, Kevin heard a sound he recognised. In the course of his professional life, he had attended numerous and usually interminable meetings where some of the participants were attending by telephone conference call. Every now and then, some idiot would leave their mobile phone close to their desk phone, so that the *chuff-chuff-rurrrr* noise of radio interference from an unexpected incoming call would disrupt the entire meeting.

Kevin could hear that familiar noise of a mobile phone operating close by, on the desk phone which appeared otherwise dead. Finally managing to concentrate closely on the telephone controls, he identified and pressed the button which activated the intercom between the inner and outer offices. He could faintly hear Professor Alan speaking aloud.

Seeing Kevin suddenly stop pressing buttons and start listening intently, Tanji wanted to know what was going on.

"It's the Professor. He's making a call. On his mobile, I think," Kevin said, "I can just make out what he's saying. Shhh."

He put a finger to his mouth to indicate silence, just in case the intercom was working in both directions, then pressed the loudspeaker button, so that Tanji could hear as well.

It seemed that Alan was making some kind of a report, and being repeatedly interrupted or overridden by the other party. Kevin got the distinct impression that the Professor was being told what to do.

"Yes, I'll keep them here," they hear him say, "I don't think they've told anyone else. That's what he said."

There was a pause.

"Yes, of course I understand. They can't be allowed to communicate with anyone."

There was another, longer pause. Kevin got the impression that the Professor was steeling himself to interrupt.

“But they’ll have to be silenced, permanently.”

Kevin looked up straight into Tanji’s face to see an open-mouthed look composed equally of horror and fright. He repeated the silence motion. Outside, the one-sided conversation was still continuing.

“How long before the Watchers get here?”

Pause.

“OK. Yes, right away.”

That appeared to be the end of the conversation. They heard nothing more, apart from a thud and a click which Kevin took to be the Professor closing and locking the outer door. He turned off the intercom and sat down, his mind whirling.

“We’ve got to get out of here.” he whispered urgently.

“Yes. But how?” she squeaked in response.

Kevin jumped up and went to the window, which overlooked the car parking at the front of the building and the grass-covered area beyond. There was no sign of anyone out there, no movement of people or vehicles that he could see. He turned his attention to the window itself, which ran nearly the full width and height of the room, and certainly contributed to the airy feel of the office.

“I think I might be able to open these,” he said to Tanji, “Perhaps we can get out this way.”

The windows did not look like they had been opened for years. However, the woodwork and fastenings seemed to be in good condition, having been given, Kevin suspected, the same gold standard refurbishment as the rest of the building.

While he was inspecting the window catches, Kevin found himself wondering why this potential escape route had been overlooked. So why, he mused, did the Professor not think of this? Kevin remembered that, on the Island, windows usually do not actually open; rather, they were just a one-way conduit for light and the view. So maybe, he wondered, perhaps Alan is actually from Lyndesfarne, perhaps even some kind of spy or agent?

The window fastener opened with a snap which made Tanji jump. She moved to stand next to Kevin as he pulled the window open.

Outside, there was a small balcony, less than two feet wide, with a low stone balustrade which would provide absolutely no restriction on one’s ability to fall. Leaning forward and looking carefully, Kevin could see that the balcony led to a flat area nearby, in the dip between two angled sections of the roof.

“We’ve got to get out this way,” he said, pointing out the way to Tanji, “Can you manage that?”

She looked out nervously, and then nodded.

“Come on, then.”

Kevin grabbed his rucksack and slung it over his shoulder, handing over Tanji’s bag so that she would not forget it. He then clambered out over the low sill, and moved extremely cautiously towards the flat roof. Looking over his shoulder, he could see Tanji following, appearing to be more confident than he felt. Once they had both reached the relative security of the flat roof and caught their breath, they made their way towards the back of the building. There, they were relieved to find it was straightforward to clamber down to a lower roof and, by hanging onto window ledge, drop the last couple of feet to ground level.

They set off at a run back to the Volvo, following the obscure route Kevin believed was the most direct. Kevin unlocked the car with the remote control and flung open the boot, dropping his rucksack inside and gesturing for Tanji to do the same.

“Get in,” he shouted, breathing heavily after the run.

She needed no further urging, and he slammed the boot shut before leaping inside and started the engine. He accelerated away, the car audibly complaining at the unaccustomed brutality of Kevin’s driving.

“Where are we going to go?” Tanji asked.

Kevin didn’t answer immediately. He considered talking to the police, but seriously doubted that attempting to explain their predicament to a friendly police sergeant would be in the least bit effective. He could practically hear the “stop wasting my time” response. The other possibility would be someone in his company. But who, he wondered. Besides, it was his company who had put him in touch with NISSA and the Professor in the first place. And what would his company be able to do anyway?

“I don’t know,” he answered resignedly.

“It’s best we head for Lyndesfarne,” Tanji almost shouted over the noise of the Volvo’s engine. “I have friends, family there.”

“Do they live near to the crossing?” Kevin asked, brightening up.

“No, we have to travel. I think there must be a portal somewhere near the bridge,” Tanji said, “but I don’t know where it is.”

Kevin had long suspected that any portal near the crossing would be inside the warehouses on the Island side of the bridge. In any case, he thought, portals close to the causeway were likely to be locked up, and probably closely guarded.

“Let’s avoid portals,” Kevin replied. “We can go to Bret’s family house. I’m pretty certain I can find my way there on foot. It’s a bit of a walk, but we could probably do it in an hour or two.”

“OK. Let’s go.”

It was only when they reached the exit from the University campus that Kevin realised that, in the rush to leave, he had left the paperweight behind.

Chapter Eighteen

After Kevin had attended several of the early NISSA briefings, he took it upon himself to think long and hard about exactly what information he really needed about the strange Island world. After careful deliberation, he concluded that he needed to know more about the basic rules – the physics, as it were – of Lyndesfarne. He also wanted to understand more about the geographical and topographical layout of the crossing. He felt like he really needed something to allay his fears that he had overlooked something that could damage, or perhaps even destroy, his beloved bridge.

Kevin had put his request to Professor Alan, and a further session had been set up. This morning, it was run by one Wendy Rossiter, another of Professor Alan's cohorts, whom Kevin had not come across before. She was a tiny woman – almost bird-like – with greying hair clipped very short and, Kevin imagined, kept deliberately spiky. She dressed uniformly in black clothing and sported aggressively large silver earrings. Ms Rossiter was apparently a leading authority on the physical nature of the other world, and lost no time in getting to the point.

“The good news, I would say, is that some very basic properties of the two worlds – two universes, really – are exactly the same,” she began. “Light, heat, gravity and inertia – all just as they are here. Similarly, most chemical reactions, especially biochemical reactions, appear identical.”

It rapidly became clear that Ms Rossiter naturally fell into a presentational style familiar to Kevin from his time at University, decades before. It was a prepared lecture, given in a style that would have been appropriate if there were twenty or thirty people in an auditorium. It seemed very strange with just the two of them in the room. It is just like Professor Alan and the others, he thought, they must all have presented this material many times before.

“However, it seems that a certain range of complex chemical behaviour, especially electrochemical behaviour, appears to be quite different in that world and our own. It is these differences which simultaneously give rise to the characteristics we call magic – rather inaccurately, in my view, but there doesn't appear to be a better word in our language – and the failure of almost all technology in the world of Lyndesfarne. It's responsible for metal alloys and steel behaving

differently, for example, and electrical and electronic equipment completely failing.”

Ms Rossiter had much more material on this topic, although this consisted mainly of restating and detailing at considerable length. It did not contain anything that Kevin did not already know, or at least had strong grounds for assuming.

At mid-morning, they took a short break, during which Kevin was offered coffee, and Ms Rossiter made herself a mug of some strong-smelling herbal infusion. Afterwards, the discussion moved onto a topic which was of much more interest to Kevin – a description of how the two worlds were effectively connected.

“We don’t know how the crossing came into existence,” Ms Rossiter continued, “Indeed, we are not absolutely sure it is not artificial – although anything else would be hard to believe – or whether it has always existed. Most likely it is some kind of freak of the universe.”

“Nevertheless, each world projects a kind of bubble into the other. There are all sorts of theories about fourth and fifth dimensions, which we don’t have time to go into right now. But think of it as a kind of space-time embolism which somehow simultaneously forces itself from our universe into the other, and vice versa.”

“So what is the shape of the bubble?” asked Kevin.

“That’s a good question,” she responded enthusiastically. “It’s a flattened hemisphere over the crossing, and we suspect it’s similar underground, too. Certainly, all the assessments we’ve done suggest it’s symmetrical. And it’s the same shape in the Lyndesfarne world, as well.”

As Ms Rossiter described it, it was actually quite a shallow envelope, reaching no more than a couple of thousand feet into the air, while being perhaps five miles in diameter. The enclosure was not so much a bubble, thought Kevin, more like a couple of saucers, one inverted on the top of the other, and with an entire universe in between.

Ms Rossiter was also able to shed some light on something which had been bothering Kevin for some time.

“As you will have noticed, what you see as you look across the straights is *always* blurred and hazy,” she expounded.

“We think this is because you’re actually looking at *two* universes simultaneously. They’re somehow overlaid on each other, so what you see is a combination of the other world, the Lyndesfarne world, and the landscape of this world which *would* be in that place, if the crossing did not exist.”

It seemed that the smudging came about because, over a short distance, the two different geographies were very similar. However, further from the crossing, the countryside became more different, and the result was an increasingly blurred and hazy visual appearance.

“Of course,” she concluded, “You can add a contribution to the persistent poor visibility caused simply by the weather.”

“So why are the weather conditions always so bad by the bridge?” Kevin asked, “Clearly, I’ve a professional interest in this, since I have to design something capable of withstanding the prevailing winds.”

“Well, it’s true that the weather conditions are highly unpredictable and sometimes violent,” she responded, “And actually the reason is fairly straightforward.”

Ms Rossiter explained that the global climactic patterns were not identical on either side of the crossing. This often led to large differences in atmospheric conditions, which in turn resulting in a hugely changeable microclimate.

“Are there also tidal differences?” Kevin inquired.

“Not significantly,” she replied shortly, “Although the effects of the local marine environment – mudflats and sandbanks, and the like – means that the area is notoriously treacherous and is generally avoided by seafarers.”

“So, they have a Moon in Lyndesfarne too?” Kevin asked.

“Oh, yes. As far as we know, their Moon is the same size and has the same orbit as our own. Almost, but not quite, the same appearance, I believe – just some minor differences in cratering and shading.”

At this point, Ms Rossiter returned to the main thread of her prepared presentation. Kevin thought he sensed a certain relief in her reactions.

“Let us just consider the impact of the Lyndesfarne crossing on our world. Generally, this is extremely small. Indeed,” she continued, “The configuration of the enclosure means that the impact on modern civilised society is tiny.”

“For example, what’s the impact on aircraft flying overhead?” she asked rhetorically.

Kevin shook his head slightly and waited for the inevitable answer.

“Clearly,” she answered her own question, “An aircraft would fail catastrophically when flying close to the crossing – but only if it was travelling at low levels, less than a few thousand feet. By the way, to reduce the risk of accidents, the region is now marked on air maps as an area to avoid.”

Kevin had already discovered this fact. On Ordinance Survey maps, the area was marked as a “Site of Special Scientific Interest”. In Kevin’s understanding, SSSI status was usually awarded when an area contained some unique combination of flora and fauna. This area was supposed to be frequented by some rare seabirds, and low-level over-flying was forbidden on the pretext that it disturbed the bird life.

“There is no impact on higher flights.” she concluded, “Commercial jet transport, orbital satellites, and so on are all unaffected.”

“What about satellite photography?” asked Kevin.

He had frequently used such images to assist in site surveys and other design work in the past, with useful effect. He knew that even non-military satellites were capable of rendering considerable details, showing, for example aircraft and motor vehicles on the ground with sufficient resolution to facilitate reliable identification of make and model.

Ms Rossiter stopped and looked slightly askance at Kevin. He got the impression that she was not used to being interrupted by questions, and would rather have preferred it if he had simply sat quietly and taken notes.

“It seems that satellite images fail to give much clarity,” she answered slowly, “The crossing looks indistinct when seen from above, just like it does from the shore.”

“Surely someone would have noticed the blurring, and investigated,” Kevin pressed.

It seemed he was wrong. Apparently, the barren appearance of the Island and the lack of anything of military or economic significance in the vicinity meant that no one had been bothered to investigate.

Ms Rossiter also discussed the impact of the Island on sea-borne traffic. Kevin had already understood that the barrier between the worlds was set well out to sea almost all the way around the Island. This was likely to make it very difficult to approach from the sea in any conventional vessel, and the local maritime charts were marked with many dangerous shoals and reefs. As a result, shipping tended to stay well out to sea.

As in the previous meetings, Kevin could not decide whether the contents were informative or confusing. He had a disquieting feeling that more information was being concealed, possibly in plain sight, or more likely by the time-honoured approach of obfuscating a nugget of vital information under a mountain of bullshit.

Even so, he concluded, if one wanted to make a crossing-point between the two universes, and intended it to be carefully controlled in such a way as to make unmonitored crossings virtually impossible, he could not have done a better job than had already been achieved. So the crossing was considered just a freak of nature, was it, Kevin wondered, I really don't think so.

Chapter Nineteen

“Are you sure you want to go to Lyndesfarne?” Kevin asked Tanji, as he fought the Volvo through the traffic.

Tanji was gripping the edges of her seat, looking terrified after several near-misses between fast-moving vehicles. Kevin had to repeat his question more loudly to gain her attention.

“Yes, yes,” she replied, “I’ve spent years working in an organisation dedicated to helping people from your world make their way in mine. Almost all of my friends know about the bridge. I’m sure we can track down someone who will help.”

“I hope you’re right. But they’ll almost certainly be watching the Old Bridge. The Professor will have warned the Guardians, surely?”

“But what’s the alternative?” Tanji asked. “The New Bridge isn’t finished yet, and I’m not sure I want to risk a boat after yesterday’s experience.”

Kevin smiled.

“Actually, I think we can use the New Bridge,” he said, slightly smugly. “Very few people know that they started putting up the scaffolding for the join between the two halves yesterday, and it probably possible to get across on foot.”

“Are you sure?”

“Reasonably sure. Besides, I know the building site pretty well now, and we should be able to evade anyone who might try to find us.”

Kevin thought for a few moments, then continued.

“But it has to be after dark. The construction teams will be at work on the bridge during the day.”

Kevin drove as fast as he dared out of the city and north along the main road, a journey which would usually have taken him rather more than an hour was completed in exactly forty-eight minutes. He thoroughly expected to be stopped by the police at any moment. Fortunately, the traffic on the main road was fairly light, and the journey was incident-free. They might have been flashed by a speed camera but, frankly, thought Kevin, that is the least of my problems right now.

As they reached the road leading to the Lyndesfarne crossing, Kevin realised that he would need to dump the Volvo somewhere where it would not easily be found, as well as find somewhere to hide

until it was safe to cross. From many previous trips, he recalled that there were several isolated houses along the road, usually set behind dense hedgerows and overgrown woodland. He slowed the car several times as they got closer to the crossing, looking for somewhere to stop. Finally, about a mile, Kevin judged, from the junction where the road to the New Bridge was under construction, he pulled into the driveway of a house that appeared unoccupied.

“Stay here,” he asked Tanji.

“What are you going to do?” she responded, but Kevin gently shushed her.

“I’ll be right back.”

He had been thinking about what to do if there was someone in the house. He had come to the conclusion that the best approach was to knock confidently and, if anyone answered, to appear confused. He was mentally rehearsing a spiel along the lines of “looking for my old friend, it must be another house along here somewhere, they all look the same to me” and so on.

In the event, none of this planning was necessary. He got out of the car, and knocked loudly and repeatedly on both the front and back doors, but with no response. He moved quickly back to the car, and restarted it.

“I think the house is empty,” he said to Tanji, as he drove the car to the back of the house, “So we can stay here for a while. We should be harder to find. In fact, why don’t we go inside the house?”

“You mean, break in?” Tanji sounded appalled.

“Yes. Why not?”

“Well, I suppose so. But how are we going to get in?”

When Kevin had moved into his flat, he had been warned that it was a rough area, and that he should take sensible precautions. He had employed a professional firm to fit a modern motion-sensitive burglar alarm and, when they had left, made a few small improvements himself. He had spent one weekend afternoon buying tools and fittings from a local DIY supermarket, which stocked a considerable selection of home security products. This reinforced Kevin’s view of the risks of the area. With a fair amount of effort, he had fitted the flat with window locks, fastenings on interior doors, and deadlocks and strong bolts on both entrances.

In doing all this, he had learned quite a bit about home security, burglar alarms and so on. It also had the side-effect that he also knew how to force open windows and doors, at least in principle. Of course, he had not actually tried it out in practice, but he felt that he

had to imagine how a burglar would try to enter his home, in order to do something to prevent it.

While Kevin was knocking on the doors, he had taken the precaution of having a good look around. He could not see any sign of an alarm, and had noticed a couple of windows which did not seem particularly secure. He stopped the car, turned off the engine and got out, again motioning Tanji to stay where she was.

He stood listening for a moment. It was very quiet, with no sounds coming from inside the house. There were no traffic noises, just the distant call of a pheasant, which always sounded to him like someone trying, but failing, to start a rather underpowered moped.

Taking his trusty Swiss Army penknife from his pocket, he applied one of the stronger attachments to a window just to the right of the back door. This had an old-fashioned fastening and ancient wooden frames. After a minute's work, he was able to get sufficient leverage to be able to pull on the frame, which opened with a creak of splintering wood. Well, thought Kevin, now I really am a member of the criminal fraternity.

With much effort, and rather inelegantly, he clambered through the open window, and looked around. He was in a small utility room, and he found he had just climbed over the washing machine on his way in. The only door led to the kitchen, where he found that the outside door had been fitted with a lock which could be opened from the inside without a key – something that Kevin would never have allowed in his own house.

He unlocked the door, and beckoned to Tanji, who slipped quietly out of the car and into the house.

“Is there anyone here?” she whispered.

“I don't think so, but I'll check around in a minute.”

The house turned out to be completely unoccupied, and appeared to have been that way for some time. The beds had not been made up, and there were no clothes in any of the drawers and cupboards that Kevin checked. It felt like one of those holiday cottages, rented out on a weekly basis during the season, but now empty and rather lonely.

He returned to the kitchen, where he found Tanji stretching, clearly grateful to be out of the confines of the car.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yes, more or less,” she replied. “How long do we need to stay here?”

“Just a few hours. Let's make ourselves as comfortable as possible for the time being.”

Kevin returned to the utility room, and closed the window that he had used for forced entry as best he could. As he was doing so, he looked out at the Volvo, and then past it to what looked like a garage.

Returning to the kitchen, he spoke to Tanji.

“I’m going to see if I can hide the car. I’ll bring our stuff in, too.”

“OK. Don’t be long.”

Kevin found the key for the garage hanging on a hook by the back door, and conveniently labelled – another security flaw that he would not have tolerated at home. He walked the few yards to the garage, and managed to open the rather stiff and heavy door with only a moderate amount of struggling. Inside, the garage was surprisingly large, and seemed to contain rather a lot of cardboard boxes. Even so, there was plenty of room for his car.

He drove the Volvo into the garage, and pulled out their bags and outdoor clothes. Having dumped their possessions in the kitchen, he made a return trip to close and lock the garage door. He did his best to minimise any signs of disturbance, and was pleased to see that the window he had forced open looked almost undisturbed, except under the closest inspection. Finally, he returned to the kitchen, then locked the door from the inside, and sighed deeply.

“Is there anything to eat in this situation?” he muttered, mostly to himself.

“What was that?” Tanji asked, looking at him from the other side of the room.

“Sorry. I was just saying that I’m hungry. Shall we add insult to injury by stealing food from the cupboards, do you think?”

There was nothing in the fridge when Kevin checked, which was well cleaned but switched off. When he tried the light switches, nothing happened, but he was able to track down the switchbox and turn on the electricity supply.

“No lights. We don’t want to advertise our presence here.” he advised Tanji. “But perhaps we can at least make a hot drink.”

A short rummage located mugs, instant coffee and powdered milk in a cupboard in the kitchen, as well of an unopened packet of biscuits. Kevin filled and boiled the electric kettle and made something to drink that was not particularly pleasant-tasting, he thought, but was at least brown, warm and wet.

Carrying their steaming mugs, the two fugitives made their way to the sitting room, and sat together on a sofa. Kevin had managed to make the rather feeble electric fire work, which at least kept the room

from getting too chilly. All they could do was to wait quietly in gathering gloom, holding onto each other for warmth and comfort.

Kevin woke suddenly to find Tanji already moving about, packing items into her bag. He felt stiff from sleeping in a rather awkward position, but at least felt somewhat refreshed and recovered after their escape.

“Feeling better?” Tanji asked him.

“Much, thanks. Time to go, you think?”

“Yes. Are you ready?”

“Just give me a few minutes to tidy up.”

Out of an ingrained sense of tidiness, Kevin took the coffee mugs back to the kitchen, rinsed them and put them away. He made an effort to return everything to its proper place, partially out of guilt about breaking and entering, and partially to obscure the fact that they had been here. Then he put on his jacket, shouldered his rucksack, and turned to Tanji.

“OK. I think we can go cross-country from here. It’s about a mile and half. Will you be all right?”

Tanji grinned widely.

“Oh, I’m sure I will survive.”

The prospect of a lengthy walk did not particularly worry Kevin, even in the dark. These days, he worked out in a gym fairly frequently. This was an activity he had started in the dark days after splitting up with his ex-wife, really as something to do first thing in the morning that got him out of bed. He had found that he enjoyed it, in a perverse kind of way, and now he visited the gym at least once a week, and sometimes more frequently. Stomping the countryside on both sides of the straights while undertaking site surveys, not to mention the regular walks across the Old bBridge and causeways, had further improved his physical fitness. I’m not really much of an athlete, was Kevin’s usual assessment, but I am probably fitter now than I have ever been.

They left the house by the back door, carefully closing it behind them. They could neither see nor hear any traffic on the road, and they walked briskly in the direction of the Old Bridge. Without warning, Kevin grasped Tanji’s arm and guided her into a dark gap in the hedgerows.

“Where are we going?” Tanji asked in an urgent whisper.

“Relax,” Kevin replied, “There’s a footpath here, so we can stay off the road.”

During the early part of the project, Kevin had fairly extensively explored and surveyed the Mainland side of the straights in order to

determine the optimum site for the New Bridge. During one of these sojourns, he had come across a rather overgrown pathway which joined the old road not far from the house they had so recently ransacked. The start of the path was a stile so hidden in the hedgerow that it was almost impossible to spot unless you knew where to look. The track appeared infrequently used, and he had never seen another living soul walking that way. The footpath passed within a few hundred yards of the end of the New Bridge, and did not intersect the newly constructed road. More-or-less perfect, Kevin mused, for sneaking up on the site.

Now that his eyes had adjusted, Kevin had no problem finding his way along the track. The intermittent moonlight certainly helped, although clouds were moving in front of the moon with increasing frequency. Tanji appeared to be struggling, stumbling over obstructions that Kevin had spotted and avoided without conscious effort. He turned and took her hand, guiding her away from the smaller obstacles and irregularities that were slowing her down.

“How can you see so well in the dark?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It’s something I’ve always been good at. Just a knack, I suppose.”

The security fencing which surrounded the New Bridge site was not particularly robust, and it had now been in place for quite a long time. Since the site was so far from civilisation, there had been few problems with thieves, vandals and teenagers, and therefore there had been little incentive to maintain the fence. It was the work of just a few minutes to locate a weak section and to force their way inside.

They made their way through the tangle of the site until they reached the start of the bridge, giving the hut where the night security staff dozed away the evenings a wide berth. The site was quiet in the early evening, as Kevin had noted on previous occasions when he had worked late. The workforce preferred to depart early and together, as if something in the area made them uneasy. Indeed, daytime-only working was another one of the unusual requirements insisted upon in planning meetings, and Kevin had thought strange at the time.

As they started to make their way along the bridge proper, Kevin whispered to Tanji.

“Keep to the edge. The barrier will make it harder for us to be seen from the end of the bridge, and from the shore, too.”

Tanji nodded, and the two of them crept in single file, bent nearly double. Unfortunately, the design of the high barrier on both sides of the bridge (which Kevin had come up with himself) was such that only the bottom half provided any protection from being seen. The

top section was constructed from stout steel mesh fixed to poles at regular intervals, which he had specified in order to keep the overall weight down.

Kevin found that the bent-kneed half-run he had to use to keep low and move quickly simultaneously was incredibly uncomfortable. His lower back and thighs began to ache almost immediately. I must spend more time in the gym, Kevin thought grimly.

They arrived at the centre of the bridge with no sign of alarm or pursuit. But what they found when they got there made their hearts sink. The gap between the sections, although only ten feet or so, was hardly filled.

Only a tiny part of the wooden scaffolding had so far been constructed. It was little more than a plank set into a socket in the concrete, together with a matrix of thin battens, and it looked barely strong enough to support either of the fugitives. Worse, since this was in the cross-over zone between the two worlds, conventional fixings had not been used anywhere. When completed, this entire structure had to be built using old-fashioned carpentry joints, with no screws and nails.

Below the wooden framework, there was just a long, long drop in the dark to a certain death in the sea below.

“What are we going to do?” Tanji almost shouted, unable to keep an edge of tension out of her voice.

Kevin knelt, and felt the beam with his hands, then sat up on the concrete edge and kicked at the board with both feet.

“It seems strong enough. There’s no movement.” he replied, “If we go one at a time, it will be OK, I’m sure.”

He turned and held Tanji close.

“You can do this. Just straddle this board with your legs, and then shuffle across the gap on your bottom. It’s not far, just hang on tight.”

Tanji nodded, clearly steeling herself to do this. She sat on the edge as Kevin had done and, taking a deep breath, moved out over the drop.

“Don’t look down. Keep moving, but don’t rush.” Kevin instructed, trying to convey a sense of confidence.

Just at that moment, he suddenly felt a slight vibration on the bridge. He turned and saw torchlight approaching from the direction from which they had so recently arrived. Someone’s footsteps were moving rapidly along the bridge behind them.

Kevin swore under his breath, and started moving across the planking, even before Tanji had completed the crossing. She reached

the far side and pulled herself up, gasping with anxiety and tension. Kevin joined her a few seconds later.

“Here, take this,” he said, handing his rucksack to Tanji. “Get going, I’ll catch you up.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“See if I can pull out this beam. Now go!”

Kevin again sat on the edge of the bridge, bracing his feet on the lip of construction stone where the new layers of mixed materials would join, and reached down. He could just get his hands under the beam. Taking a firm grip, he tugged up; the beam moved from the socket in the stone, angling upwards and hinging in the socket on the Mainland side.

He changed his grip and pulled as hard as he could, and was rewarded by the sound of the far end scraping on the concrete. After a few moments struggling, the beam came free and went tumbling into the water below, with Kevin just managing to let go before it dragged him over the edge as well.

He straightened his shoulders after the effort, and set off as quickly as he could to catch up with Tanji. They made to the far end of the bridge without further incident, although the clouds had been getting darker and the wind stronger, beginning to howl and whine through the tower and supports of the bridge.

Both of them were fairly familiar with the layout of the Island side building site, which was similarly deserted, and it was the work of a few moments to locate a point to climb out over the fence. They had just clambered down as the rain started.

“We’ve got to find somewhere to shelter,” Tanji said, the wind whipping around her, “We can’t go very far in this weather.”

Kevin spun around, trying to think of what to do. He did not want to return to the building site. If there was any report that they had been seen on the bridge and there would be a thorough search of both sides, he thought.

“The castle,” he shouted, “We can shelter there. This way, it’s not very far.”

They set off, heading down towards the shore where Kevin thought there was a footpath which would take them around the headland and to the castle. To his considerable relief, they came across the track almost immediately, and Kevin vigorously gestured along it.

“We’ve got to follow the path,” he yelled to Tanji, trying to make himself heard over the noise of the wind and the rain, “We can’t

afford to stray off it in the dark. We'd get lost and risk falling onto the rocks."

Chapter Twenty

On his various trips to Lyndesfarne, while inspecting the old bridge and surveying the shores on either side, Kevin had often caught sight of the castle. It was the only man-made feature on the Island that was ever visible from the Mainland. Even so, the weather had to be unusually clear and fine; in the frequent foggy and overcast weather conditions, the castle was all but invisible.

From the Mainland side, the castle appeared completely ruined, with just the suggestion of crumbling walls and the stumps of towers visible. Even that much detail was difficult to make out, and Kevin had initially assumed that there was little of interest there.

From the Island side, however, a very different impression was to be had. The castle had been built on a vast outcropping of rock at the end of a long narrow promontory, with the fortifications themselves appearing to have been extruded from the stone underneath. The walls seemed tall and solid, pierced with arrow-slits and topped with crenulations. Kevin had repeatedly resolved to visit the site of the castle, but it had never quite reached the top of his personal priority stack.

At various times in the past, Kevin had done a fair amount of rambling and hill-walking. He rather enjoyed the sensation of pitting himself against the elements and, in his younger days, it was an excellent precursor to a steak and chips dinner in a country pub, of course washed down with a few pints of beer. Mostly, however, he relished the sense of peace and tranquillity he found when he was out in the countryside and miles from anywhere.

One morning in that first summer, while he was wandering about and surveying candidate sites for the new bridge, Kevin found himself standing on a rocky outcrop looking out over the straights. On his left, the old bridge was visible, with its usual traffic and attendant bustle. On the right, the castle on its headland, apparently completely deserted. There appeared to be a clear path all the way along the shore to the headland, which was no more than a couple of miles from the point where he now stood. The promontory itself was grassy, and populated by a small flock of sheep.

Mentally using a short, pithy, Anglo-Saxon derived four-letter word, and following it with some expression about entertainment activities for military servicemen, Kevin came to a decision. He

turned and waved at Ricard, who was as usual hanging around not far away. Predictably, Ricard smiled widely in response. Kevin beckoned him over.

“The castle’s just over there. It’s just too nice a day to pass up this opportunity. Is there any reason why I can’t take a couple of hours off, and walk up to the headland for lunch?”

Ricard looked startled for a moment and looked around wildly, but his perennial wide smile barely wavered.

“Yes, of course – I mean no, no reason at all. Let me guide you.”

“Fair enough. Just let me get my stuff together.”

Kevin picked up his rucksack, slipping his notebook into the front pocket. Glancing up at the sky, he shrugged out of his oiled leather jacket, and stuffed it into the rucksack as well.

As was his habit, the rucksack already contained a packed lunch, supplied by the hostel where he had stayed overnight. This consisted of his usual fare: sandwiches, made with a rather unusual and slightly sweet brown bread, filled with cheese and pickle. The sandwich wrapping had baffled Kevin on first acquaintance. It consisted of a transparent layer with no visible join, which resisted any attempt to rip or tear it. On using a simple gesture, the wrapping would rapidly unravel, then crumple up by itself and disappear. Kevin had learned the “open” gesture very rapidly, probably, he thought wryly, encouraged by hunger.

Kevin had learnt very quickly from personal experience that it was a bad idea to bring packaged food across the bridge. The plastic sandwich wrappings from his world would rapidly decay, forming a translucent sludge that stuck to the food which looked unappetising and tasted worse. Aluminium drinks cans were even less successful; parts of the metal would disintegrate into a grey powder, allowing the liquid to leak out and leaving the inside of his bag wet and sticky.

Ricard was waiting expectantly, with his own bag already slung over his shoulder. Kevin had remarked, in the privacy of his own head, that Ricard bore a striking resemblance to a well-trained but slightly over-enthusiastic puppy on occasions like this. They clambered down the outcrop, and set off, quickly joining the well-maintained pathway that Kevin had spotted earlier.

The path was surfaced with grey gravel, and was easily wide enough for Kevin and Ricard to walk abreast. It seemed to be quite heavily used, Kevin thought, judging by the footprints and worn grass on either side. Today, however, there was no-one else visible. The view over the straights was superb, the sea was blue, and the waves

crashing on the rocky shoreline a little way below added to the sense of isolation.

Ricard, as always, seemed content to walk in silence, and this suited Kevin while he was taking in the scenery. After a little time, and attempting to make conversation, Kevin asked Ricard about the castle.

“Well, I don’t know very much about it,” Ricard replied. “It’s been there for hundreds of years, obviously.”

“Obviously,” repeated Kevin, “Does anyone live there now?”

“No. It is looked after by, well, a translation would be the Cultural History Maintenance Board. Many ancient monuments and buildings are administered by the Cultural Board.”

“So anyone can visit?”

“Oh, yes. It is open to all.”

Kevin considered the similar roles of organisations at home like English Heritage and the National Trust. Enthusiasts and do-gooders, he thought, but better than letting these old places just rot away.

Before getting to the castle, the two men stopped for a short while for lunch, sitting on some convenient rocks sheltered by a couple of trees shaped into streamlines by the prevailing winds. Kevin pleased himself by managing to remove what he thought of as the “magic Clingfilm” at the first attempt. He ate his food quickly, watching the seagulls floating around on the light breeze and occasionally diving to grab the remnants of his sandwiches.

After lunch, the remaining distance seemed to pass in no time at all, and the two men found themselves standing at the top of the sloping path outside the castle. Kevin was struck again by the difference between its appearance when seen from the Mainland side and from Lyndesfarne. The high walls and towers were plainly intended to maintain the important distinction between the inside and outside of the fortifications. They had been carefully positioned to take advantage of a naturally easily-defensible location, which was difficult to approach from any direction save that taken by the rough road he had just traversed.

The walls were built from grey stones identical to those used in the construction of the old bridge. Here, the stones were etched by lichen and the weather, and seemed more worn than those forming the bridge. But the walls seemed largely intact, with no evidence of damage from overt military action. Kevin guessed that the castle and causeway had been built around the same era, although it was unclear whether this was before or after the construction of the bridge.

Probably overlapping, he thought, since projects of this scale would have taken decades, even centuries, to complete.

Kevin, who was no military strategist, wondered about the importance of this place. Why was the castle built, just here? He looked around, trying to understand the strengths of this considerable vantage-point.

His first reaction was that the castle was positioned as a stronghold to protect against invasion from the Mainland. Surely the site was chosen to protect against enemy forces crossing the causeway, using either the ferry or the bridge. After all, Bret had mentioned that the old bridge had itself been mined in the past, and that there had been failed attempts to invade in both directions. He also knew that there were castles on the Mainland, too; presumably they were built for the same reasons.

As he stood there, another and more insidious reason why the fortifications were needed occurred to him. They were there to prevent access to his home world by other powers in the world of Lyndesfarne. It was clear that there had always had been trade between the worlds, which must have been profitable to both sides. If not, there would never have been the money or political will to build the crossing. So, access to the other world, via the ferry or, in later years, by the bridge, was an asset to be guarded jealously. The castles on both sides were positioned to protect against invading armies and navies from other nations in their own worlds, and there must have been a formidable military presence in this region at various times in the past.

Kevin turned back to the castle, facing the gatehouse. Nodding to Ricard, he strode forward through the broad archway. The stonework here was in good condition, and any gates had evidently been removed many years ago. Inside the walls, the castle was mostly open space, with pathways alternately laid with gravel or flagged with stone slabs, separated by neatly-trimmed grass. In several places, steps allowed access to the ramparts. Kevin took a certain childish delight in trotting up and down these stairs trailed by Ricard, who seemed to be filling the role of indulgent parent.

In a few places, the stones were lit from within by the tell-tale sparkles of orange light that Kevin had learnt to recognise as the side-effect of magical reinforcements. The flecks were concentrated around a few of the larger archways and some of the foundations. He supposed that these were the places that the builders considered needing additional support.

Kevin was slightly annoyed that he was not able to go inside the castle. There were several closed doors that appeared to lead inside the towers, but were locked, or at least would not open with any of the gestures that he knew.

“Why can’t I go in?” he asked Ricard, sounding slightly peevish even to himself.

Ricard grinned widely, as always.

“I don’t know. Perhaps the towers are unsafe? I’m sure there must be some good reason.”

Kevin looked up. The towers seemed in particularly good condition to him, at least from the outside. He shrugged, and set off towards a low opening, not far from the gatehouse. Ricard caught up with him just as he got to the steps that lead down to an open doorway.

“Please be careful here,” Ricard said, now sounding like an over-protective father, “It’s very slippery on those steps.”

Kevin looked again at the steps. They did not look particularly treacherous, but he decided that it was not worth worrying Ricard unnecessarily. Ricard seemed to be acting like an old woman, and Kevin was getting the distinct impression that Ricard did not want him to spend too much longer here. Fine, he thought, I’ll come back and explore on my own another time.

“OK,” he replied, “Let’s stay out in the sunshine.”

Something had been nagging at Kevin’s subconscious for a little time, and two thoughts now emerged. Firstly, he was struck by the absence of any kind of signs or notices. If he had been visiting a similar historical site in his homeland, he felt sure that the place would be enthusiastically decorated with instructions, descriptions and pictures, all intended to direct the visitor or convey historical points of interest.

Secondly, there were no attendants or guides, no “gift shoppe”, nowhere to buy crisps and ice-cream, or guidebooks and maps. There was no-one else inside the castle and no sign that there ever was anyone stationed here to assist the visitor. I see so few people here, thought Kevin, it’s almost as if I was being kept away from the residents of Lyndesfarne.

Chapter Twenty One

The walk to the castle, which had felt so pleasant in the warm sunshine on Kevin's previous visit, seemed to go on for ever. As he and Tanji approached the castle, the rain appeared to get heavier, as if each drop itself contained more and harder water than before. There were disturbing noises just audible over the howl of the wind and the hiss of the rain on the grass, which made both Kevin and Tanji jump on several occasions. Kevin managed to convince himself that the sounds were just those of the waves on the rocks, or made by seabirds, or maybe just sheep.

In the dark, the castle loomed ahead of them suddenly, emerging from the rain-swept night like an oil-tanker from a fog-bank. Kevin could remember something of the layout of the place from his previous visit. He pulled Tanji closer, placing his mouth at the opening of her hood and speaking into her ear.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked.

"What did you say?"

Kevin repeated himself, speaking louder than he really wanted, in order to be heard above the noise of the rain.

"No," she admitted, almost shouting the word into Kevin's ear in return.

"Ok, well, I think it's this way to the gatehouse. There's a slope up here, if we follow the path."

They made their way into the castle, sensing the shelter from the elements provided by the lower archways and gatehouse. Gravel crunching underfoot, they cautiously made their way out of the rain. Mercifully there was no portcullis or drawbridge, thought Kevin, as last of the water ran down his face, completing the task of thoroughly soaking the sweater underneath his now-ineffective hi-tech jacket.

"This way," whispered Kevin, tugging Tanji's arm, "I think there's somewhere we can shelter down here."

They felt their way down worn stone steps made slippery with rain, and into a dark opening in the stonework. Kevin had spotted this entrance on his previous visit, but had been unable to explore it. He thought again about the uncharacteristic behaviour of old frog-face Ricard when he tried to come down this way. He really did not want me to look in here, he thought.

Anyone around would have heard them arrive, from the crunch of their footsteps on the gravel path and stone flags, if it was not for the downpour. But there had been no signs of pursuit, no shouts and no lights, nothing to indicate that they had been followed. I may be speaking too soon, thought Kevin, but we may just have given them the slip.

Tanji pulled back her hood and shook her head, and water started dripping onto the stone flags beneath their feet. She twitched her cloak with her left hand, and made a series of gestures with her right. The sudden increase in the drops falling to the floor told Kevin that the magic was working here. He sagged to the floor, the sense of relief momentarily overwhelming him. Tanji squatted beside him, leaning herself against him. He enjoyed the sensation, but he was unsure whether it was for support or companionship.

“I think we’ve lost them”, he whispered.

“I think you’re right. But what are we to do now?”

“Let’s catch our breath”, he suggested, adding, “I mean, let’s rest for a short while,” when he sensed, rather than saw, Tanji’s confusion.

“OK”, she replied, wearily, “But we will have to think of something really soon.”

Out of the wind and the rain, and already feeling much warmer, he wiped the water from his eyes. He could begin to make out the familiar orange lights in the stone forming the walls on either side. The magic sparkles did not emit very much light, but at least the sprites provided enough illumination to make out the boundaries of room they were in. In fact, he realised as he looked around, it was not so much a room as a short narrow corridor, with what looked like a junction ahead.

Tanji had pulled her magic slate from her bag, the surface of which glowed slightly in the dark, and was rapidly penning a short note. In English, Kevin noticed, and to her regular correspondent. She finished writing, then gestured rapidly and the words faded. She then started a second note, this time one which he could not understand. This was completed just as quickly, and was dispatched with, Kevin noted, a slightly different command.

He stood and, gripping Tanji lightly by the arm, he moved forward as quietly as he could. On reaching the T-junction, he peered cautiously in each direction, but could see nothing except empty hallways, although with no visible doors or openings. On a whim, he turned into the corridor on the left, and set off, moving as quickly and as quietly as he could.

Tanji, who was following closely behind him, pulled him up short.

“Where are we going?” she demanded in a whisper.

“I don’t know. But it must go somewhere, and it’s out of the weather.”

Tanji had noticed that the sound of the wind and rain was much more subdued here, even though the entrance was only a few paces behind them.

“It feels like we are underground,” she whispered.

“Yes,” replied Kevin, “It’s more like a tunnel than a corridor.”

The tunnel was not quite as dark as Kevin had expected, and he noticed a soft glow emanating from around the bend ahead. He squeezed Tanji’s hand to attract her attention, and gestured to her for silence. Moving extremely carefully, he edged his way towards the corner. He listened for a full minute, which always seems like an age when nothing is happening, standing completely motionless and breathing through his open mouth. He could hear nothing, except for the sound of his own heartbeat. Eventually, he slid along the wall to the corner, and looked around the doorframe.

The room inside was deserted, and brightly illuminated, but Kevin could not make out the source of the light. This source-less lighting was by now familiar to him, having seen it in operation almost everywhere on Lyndesfarne. He beckoned to Tanji, who joined him at the entrance. They looked around, blinking in the unaccustomed light. He could see nothing but rough stone walls, and a single archway which had clearly been walled up long ago.

“So why is this area lit up?” Kevin asked Tanji, in a whisper.

“I am not sure”, she responded, “but I have an idea.”

She moved to the side of the blocked arch, where she closely inspected something on the wall. Kevin thought he could make out a few of the Lyndesfarne symbols, which appeared almost invisible against the stonework. In fact, he thought, the writing looks like it’s floating just in front of the wall.

“What is it?” he asked softly.

“It’s a portal. It is dormant at the moment, though.”

“One of those travel things?” Kevin asked.

“Yes. You have heard of them?”

“Well, yes. Professor Alan said something about them, in one of my orientation briefings. He didn’t say much though, as if it wasn’t very important.”

“Portals, not important?” Tanji practically squeaked in indignation. Kevin flapped his hands at her urgently, to remind her to keep her voice down.

“They are used everywhere here,” she continued, more quietly, “But these level-five portals are infrequently needed, so let me try and awaken it.”

Standing back from the archway, she embarked on a complex sequence of gestures. Kevin thought he could make out the signs for ‘open’ and ‘alarm’, but could not follow the entire structure of the command.

Looking at the differences in the stonework inside the archway, Kevin suddenly realised he had seen this kind of thing before, in the garden of the hostel he had frequented in the past. With a flash of insight, he realised that the hostel courtyard did indeed contain a portal, and that people frequently travelled to and fro from inside the walled garden. Well, thought Kevin, that explained the number of people passing through the courtyard.

“Aha!” Tanji exclaimed.

Kevin became aware of a gentle ticking noise, quite slow and slightly irregular at first. The ticks speeded up, becoming more even, and began to sound rather like a louder version of the mechanism of the old pocket watch Kevin had been given by his Grandfather.

“Is it working?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so” she replied.

“How can you tell?”

“Here, let me show you.”

Tanji took his hand and pressed it on the stones of the wall. Kevin had not noticed any visible change to the wall in front of him, but his fingers encountered something very slightly warm, very soft and completely yielding. Just like, he thought, sliding my hand into a warm bubble-bath, inexplicably held vertically.

“But where does it go?” he asked, warily.

“I really don’t know. There are no signs anywhere, at least that I can see. But it’s probably a short hop to a local junction. We can get our bearings there.”

“I’ve not been through one of these before,” Kevin replied, unable to keep the nervousness out of his voice, “What’s it like?”

Tanji laughed. “It’s just a big step, really. You won’t feel a thing.”

She saw that Kevin was not entirely reassured by her explanation. She smiled, and reached out to him.

“Here, let me hold your hand. Come on, let’s go!”

Hand in hand, they stepped into the archway and were gone.

*

*My dearest Kithyn,
Excuse my haste, but I really do not know what is going on. It is so
confusing. No time to explain now.
Kevin and I are back in Lyndesfarne. I am not sure where we will
end up, but I would like to talk to you in person. I need some
advice, badly. You are the only person I feel I can trust.
I will write again soon, when I can. Your old friend, Tanji.*

Chapter Twenty Two

One of the more useful and (Kevin thought afterwards) interesting consultation sessions introduced him to the systems of measurement used in Lyndesfarne. Several times during the early days of the New Bridge project, Kevin had driven to Newcastle University for a briefing from Professor Alan or one of several of his colleagues at NISSA.

This particular session was presented by one Doctor Willis. The Doctor was a man in late middle age, rather short and painfully thin, clean-shaven and completely bald. Overall, the Doctor presented a (Kevin suspected) carefully cultivated “mad Professor” look, including a heavily-stained white lab coat with numerous pens in the breast pocket. The Doctor also had glasses with black plastic frames, which he wore most of the time, and took off to play with when he wanted to appear to be thinking. Kevin had noticed that the glass lenses did not appear to be particularly thick, and the Doctor seemed perfectly capable of seeing what was going on even without the spectacles.

Kevin assumed that this briefing had been suggested by some bright spark at his company, who had thought it necessary for him to gain an understanding of the weights and measures used in Lyndesfarne to support the civil engineering work. The meeting, or tutorial as Kevin thought of it, was held in a small office at the University. Kevin was introduced by Professor Alan, and then Kevin settled himself in a chair with his notebook and pen in hand.

“The system of units in common use in Lyndesfarne,” the Doctor started, once the initial introductions were completed, “is very similar to the old British or Imperial measures.”

Kevin, who’s modern engineering training had guided him almost entirely to the use of metric units, was astonished, and said so.

“It’s quite true, I assure you,” the Doctor replied.

He explained, at possibly unnecessary length, that the weights and measures used on the Island were, in some cases, expressed in units which were now obsolete – perhaps even archaic – on the Mainland.

“The same measurement systems might even have been used in Lyndesfarne and in Britain at one time,” the Doctor speculated, “But if so, they must have diverged hundreds of years ago.”

Kevin wondered about the coincidence. They build a bridge, making it much easier to communicate between the worlds and, at about the same time, we start using different measurements. Was it deliberate, he wondered, or was it just because of the complex history of our own world?

The good news, from Kevin's perspective, was that the clock and calendar was much the same in both worlds. The names of the days of the week and months of the year were of course different. Nevertheless, the calendar had the same number of months and number of days in each month, and there was a direct correspondence between the names used in the Lyndesfarne language and in English.

Similarly, timekeeping used the same measurements of hours, minutes and seconds, except that, on Lyndesfarne, a twelve-hour clock was always used. In an aside, the Doctor mentioned that the length of a second was thought to be identical in either world, as far as it has been possible to determine. It was difficult to be absolutely sure, since precise timepieces from the Mainland (using clockwork or electronics) failed immediately when brought to Lyndesfarne. Similarly, magical timepieces failed when they were transported the other way across the bridge. Nevertheless, as far as anyone knew, time appeared to pass at exactly the same rate on either side of the straights.

Doctor moved on measures of distance. He was really getting into his stride now, and Kevin was beginning to find it difficult to take notes fast enough to keep up.

Short distances were measured in inches and feet. As at home, a foot was defined as twelve inches, but there was a very slight difference between the inch, now internationally defined in Kevin's world as being exactly 25.4 millimetres, and the inch on Lyndesfarne. Kevin knew that, in the past, slightly different definitions of inches had given rise to compatibility problems even in his world. For example, at one time, ammunition manufactured in US did not fit into guns made in the UK. Or perhaps it was the other way around? Kevin could not quite remember.

The Doctor paused, to attract Kevin's attention, before continuing.

"There are a couple of other measures which are used frequently: fingers and hands."

"A finger is half an inch – a Lyndesfarne inch, to be precise. For example, people will describe snowfall as being 3 fingers deep, rather than an inch-and-a-half."

Kevin, whose previous experience of three-fingered measurements had been limited to the contents of a whisky glass, smiled wryly.

“Hands are 4 inches, and used more generally than just for the measurement of horses,” continued the Doctor.

“Indeed, this illustrates the fact that these measurements were originally defined in terms of the length of convenient parts of the human body. An inch, for example, is the length of the top joint of the thumb. And so the Lyndesfarne word for inch is the same as the word for thumb, as it is in some continental European languages.”

Kevin looked at his hands for confirmation, which the Doctor must have noticed but pointedly ignored it.

Longer distance was measured in chains and furlongs, which Kevin could just dimly remember from primary school. In both worlds, a chain was 66 feet, and a furlong was ten chains. In the nineteenth century, surveying work in Britain (and other parts of the world where the Colonial influence was felt) was based on chains, and it seemed that much the same process occurred in Lyndesfarne as well. In particular, the acre, being an area defined for ploughing and growing food crops, was defined as begin exactly one chain by one furlong. This was the unit used for almost all land area measurements in Lyndesfarne.

A big difference was that miles were not used as a measure of distance on the Island. Instead, long distances were measured in leagues, defined in Lyndesfarne as 250 chains. This meant that a league was a little over three miles. Kevin wondered idly about the seven league boots he recalled from children’s stories. That would mean that, on the Island, someone wearing such boots would take about 22 miles per step.

The Doctor spent a considerable amount of time dissecting the measurement of speed. Velocities were usually measured in leagues per hour.

“People on Lyndesfarne seem to distrust high-speed transportation”, the Doctor explained.

“Do we know why?” Kevin asked.

“We’re not entirely sure. Our best guess is that they think that fast travel is just too dangerous, and that they limit speeds on the grounds of public safety.”

Apparently, no transport was permitted which was capable of moving at more than ten leagues per hour, which would be a very good pace on a fast horse. Kevin was not convinced. He was very

unclear how a sophisticated and modern society could possibly function without some form of high-speed travel.

Kevin asked about magical means of determining speeds and distances. According to the Doctor, there were all sorts of devices used, but they had no very clear idea of exactly how they worked. Nevertheless, the land of Lyndesfarne was clearly very well mapped and measured, and they had no real problem in making measurements.

The Doctor's spiel moved on to the measurement of weight, which used the familiar units of pounds and ounces. It appeared that the Lyndesfarne pound was slightly lighter than the Imperial measure, but that the discrepancy was very small. A major difference was that the heavier unit of weights used was not a 'stone' or a 'hundredweight'. Instead, the measure was identified by a word which appeared to have no direct translation in English, but was usually transliterated as 'block'. A block was equal to thirty pounds, and a hundred blocks made up a Lyndesfarne ton. This meant that a ton on the Island, mused Kevin, was significantly heavier than it was here.

Liquid measures in Lyndesfarne used pints and gallons. However, as in the United States, a pint was defined to be the volume of a pound weight of water, and therefore less than the pints Kevin was used to in England. This particular observation was of considerable personal importance to Kevin, since it meant that the glasses of beer he drank in pubs on the Island were quite a bit smaller than those on the Mainland.

It also meant that the old expression "A pint's a pound, the world around" was actually true in Lyndesfarne, contrary to the opinions of some of Kevin's American colleagues. He recalled a drunken conversation in a hotel bar with an acquaintance from the US. Each of them had consumed several (British) pints of beer, and Kevin was trying to explain to the American that the pints served here really were larger than he was used to. He had finally got through by recalling the old ditty that went "A pint of fresh water weighs a pound and a quarter", which was true in England. His American colleague has retired to bed shortly after that, and was late in arriving at the business meeting the following morning, presumably since he had drunk more beer than he thought.

There was quite a lot more detail in the remainder of the presentation from the Doctor, and Kevin made copious notes which turned out to be largely unnecessary. The Doctor concluded the session by handing him a sheaf of notes, clearly recently produced on

a computer printer, giving conversion factors and several handy ready-reckoners.

Kevin left the session in a daze, clutching his notebook and the printed materials provide by NISSA. Although he felt sure that he could deal with the intellectual aspects of conversions between units, the insight that the other world's different history and engineering approach had given him a great deal to think about.

Chapter Twenty Three

The rest of the trip was uneventful, much to Kevin's surprise at the time, and even more so with the benefits of hindsight, when he finally got around to thinking about it later. He and Tanji arrived at what she assured him was a perfectly ordinary and everyday portal junction.

The junction building consisted of a large and rather bland roofed space at the conjunction of several corridors, with both terminus and corridors built from the light grey construction stone Kevin had seen deployed elsewhere in Lyndesfarne. Blocked-off archways lined the corridors at regular intervals. The functional starkness gave the place, Kevin thought, a passing resemblance to the poured-concrete and steel architecture of a Swiss railway terminus.

The walls and ceiling were stuck all over with illuminated signs and arrows, marked with numerous symbols that Kevin was even now only just beginning to be able to decipher. He could make out the marks for "North" and "South", and a few numerals. Arrowheads for directions seemed universally comprehensible, though.

Tanji quickly scanned the signs, and then guided Kevin by the arm down one of the long high-ceilinged corridors. The corridor was fairly busy, although not particularly crowded. Dozens of travellers were visible, all with the slightly elfin appearance that indicated a person of Lyndesfarne origin.

Few people paid any attention to either of them. Kevin was worried that his appearance would stand out, but he was so bundled up against the cold and wet that it was probably difficult to tell even what gender of person was inside the bulky clothing.

Numerous travellers were moving purposefully in various directions, generally carrying bags and rucksacks, or pulling containers that moved on wheels or, in some cases, floated on nothing at all. Kevin was fascinated with the floating luggage, and his head turned this way and that as he tried to watch the bags drifting past.

"Kevin!" whispered Tanji urgently, "Stop gagging at everything."

"I think you mean goggling," muttered Kevin, but he stopped staring at people, and kept his eyes on the ground.

Tanji dragged Kevin through the crowd, avoiding the inevitable confused traveller who had stopped dead in the middle of the throng, and was intently and alternatively studying the signs and a guidebook. It seems that tourists are the same everywhere, thought Kevin wryly.

“We will go to my Aunt’s house,” Tanji announced suddenly, “I’ve not seen her for a while, but she’s always been very fond of me. I’m sure she’d be able to offer us help and advice.”

“OK,” agreed Kevin, who was in a confused state himself, and allowed himself to be directed without much coherent thought on his part.

“Besides,” continued Tanji, “She’s a really good cook. Right now, I could eat a mountain.”

After a few minutes walking, Kevin began to wonder about the portals. It was becoming clear to him that there was a vast network of the things; it was not something where Professor Alan’s briefings had been particularly explicit. The Professor’s briefings had barely mentioned portals, and had given him the impression (without actually saying so) that they were rare and difficult to use. Kevin was now fairly certain that knowledge of the sophisticated nature of both the society and the magic (or technology, as he was beginning to think of it) had been suppressed deliberately at NISSA.

“Who pays for the portals?” he asked Tanji. He had not noticed anything that looked like ticket booths, or any obvious way of paying for passage.

“Well, basically, taxes. Portal travel is available to everyone, whenever they want it.”

Tanji caught sight of Kevin’s sceptical expression.

“There’s less importance attached to personal wealth here than in your homeland, I think, and almost everyone pays taxes – they are famously difficult to avoid. Most necessities and a great many amenities are provided by, well, I guess you would say, by various agencies of the government, but I think they are more, umm, separate...” Tanji hesitated.

“Autonomous?” suggested Kevin.

“Yes, that’s right. There’s great status to be gained by achieving senior positions in the Boards and Guilds. My Uncle is a Senior Convenor in the Guild of Transportation, and that earns him much respect.”

“Ah. And it is your Uncle we are going to visit. Perhaps he will be able to help?”

“Oh, yes, and my Aunt too, of course. And I am hoping that my old friend Kithyn will be able to meet us there as well.”

The walls of the corridor were lined with archways that formed the portals themselves. Every now and then, someone would walk into the arch and disappear, with a minimum of fuss, or appear from the blank greyness, with equal lack of excitement. Just an everyday magical instantaneous journey, mused Kevin, ironically.

Between the arches, there were stalls and cafes, as well as other emporia that Kevin could not easily identify. Some of the stalls floated in the air, in just the same way as the luggage which had distracted Kevin so much earlier.

The terminus corridors were relatively noisy, with footsteps and voices echoing from the ceiling. Nevertheless, Kevin noticed, just at the edge of hearing, a gentling ticking emanating from each of the portals, all at slightly different rates.

“Tanji, there’s something I don’t understand here,” Kevin said, “Portals provide rapid transport between two points, yes?”

“That’s right,” she replied, looking slightly puzzled.

“So, why are there cafés and stalls here? Surely no-one wants to wait in a place like this when they can travel to their destination immediately?”

Tanji laughed out loud, attracting the attention of a couple of passers-by. Kevin shushed her urgently.

“It’s really quite simple,” she answered, more quietly, “Portals connect two points, but not all the time. Each archway is connected to many different exits. It can be up to ten, but is more usually five or six. Every three minutes, the destination changes – so you have to check carefully on the signs above the arches.”

“Ah,” said Kevin, light dawning, “So you might have to wait ten or even twenty minutes before the correct destination can be reached?”

“Yes, although with luck and skill it can be much less. With practice, it’s possible to select a route where you do not have to wait very long for the destination.”

Both Kevin and Tanji were attempting to keep a lookout for anyone watching them, or trying to follow them. They walked up and down at least one section of corridor twice, trying to see if there was any reaction from the passers-by.

They ducked into a small café, where Tanji ordered hot chocolate and savoury pastries for them both. Kevin tried to offer to pay, but Tanji had already got the correct coins ready before he could work out the bill. They took the comestibles to a table at the back of the

café, in a dark corner where they felt it would be difficult for them to be seen. If there was anyone watching them, they could not be identified in the crowd.

While they were vigorously attacking their hot food and drink, Kevin shrugged out of his jacket. He felt himself warming up rapidly, both from the heat of the café, and the warmth of the chocolate. His sweater seemed to be drying out at last, and the dampness in his coat had receded to the cuffs and hem. He stretched out, letting himself relax for the first time in hours.

Once again, Tanji had got out her slate, and was writing in quick jerky movements. She gestured vigorously and, as Kevin watched, the words of a note written in the incomprehensible language of Lyndesfarne faded from the surface.

“I’ve sent a message to my family. They’ll be expecting us,” she explained. “I would just like to write a note to my friend Kithyn now.”

She started writing again, this time in English. Kevin was amused by the chatty nature of the note, although struck by the overtones of desperation. She completed and dispatched the message in the usual way, and then returned her slate to her bag.

“OK,” she said, finishing off the last piece of the hot pastry, “Let’s get going.”

Tanji lead Kevin to a particular portal, which he was sure they had walked past twice earlier. They joined the stream of people and traffic, and stepped through. They reappeared in another very similar terminus, and walked swiftly to a second portal very close to the one from which they had just emerged. They entered once again without incident, and arrived at a third portal junction, again almost identical in character to the previous two. Just like airports, thought Kevin, they could be anywhere in the world.

The last portal junction seemed particularly quiet, at least by comparison. Kevin looked around. There were a couple of stalls, all with wheels rather than floating, and a café exuding quiet music in a style he had never heard before. No one seemed to be paying them the slightest bit of attention.

Tanji pointed at a portal archway in a corner.

“That’s the last one. Less than a minute to wait.”

There was a short pause and then she said, “Let’s go home.”

They arrived in front of a stone archway in a building which could have been a particularly well-kept continental provincial railway station. There were a couple of other portal arches visible, decorated

with signs and directions, and a few Islanders were moving about purposefully.

“Where are we?” breathed Kevin. He felt disoriented by the rapid-fire transition through the portals, and imagined himself staring at the surroundings like a hick from the sticks.

Tanji took his arm.

“This is Rhythlen,” she said. Kevin repeated the word carefully.

“It’s the village where my Aunt and Uncle live.”

She led the way out of the building into a prosperous-looking village square, with shops and civic buildings on all sides.

“How far have we travelled?” Kevin asked her.

“I’m not sure how far the portal in the castle was from the first terminus,” she replied, “But the rest of the journey was...”

She paused, a look of concentration on her face. Kevin guessed she was converting the distance units in her head.

“Well, about sixty miles,” she concluded.

Sixty miles in a few minutes, and on foot, too, thought Kevin. No wonder I feel confused. Three big steps of about twenty miles each, so it really is like having seven-league boots.

Guided by Tanji, they made their way across the square and along a road that led up a slight hill. The solid buildings of the village centre soon gave way to more open habitation. On either side of the road, which was lit by lamps on poles at regular intervals, there were large houses, mostly painted white and with what looked like brightly-coloured doors and window frames. Each house was set in spacious gardens, often well-lit, and was surrounded by rustic stone walls and well-trimmed hedges with gates made of wood or what looked to Kevin like wrought iron. It was clear to him that people here enjoyed their privacy, although many of the gates were open and, even at this late hour, children could be heard playing beyond the hedges.

“It’s about ten minutes walking from here,” said Tanji, smiling at Kevin, “Do you think you can make it?”

Kevin smiled in return and took her hand. “Of course. A short evening stroll and it’s not even raining!”

*

My Dearest Kithyn,

I am on my way now to visit my Aunt and Uncle right now. You will remember them, I feel sure. They were my guests at the

Guild graduation ceremony. They pushed me forward when my name was called, otherwise I feel sure that I would never have got up onto that stage.

I should arrive at my family place this evening. Please, please meet me there as soon as you can. I should so like to talk.

I think I do need your help after all.

Your old friend, Tanji.

Chapter Twenty Four

Shortly after construction work on the new bridge had started in earnest, Kevin received a surprise invitation from Bret. The two men had been hard at work aligning the details of the construction schedule when Bret had suddenly stood up and stretched.

“Kevin, you remember that I said that I was brought up not so far from here?”

“Yes,” he replied, slightly disorientated by the sudden change of topic.

“Well, my parents still have the old place. They’ve been questioning me closely about our work on the bridge, and they would very much like to meet you. So, would you care to come for dinner one evening – say, tomorrow night?”

Kevin felt extremely flattered, and immediately agreed.

“Wonderful,” Bret enthused, “In fact, why don’t you bring your things and stay overnight?”

“Well, if it’s not too much trouble...” Kevin started.

“Not at all, really. If I know my parents, they will probably insist on plying you with far too much to eat and drink anyway, so why not relax and enjoy it all?”

“Well, OK, thanks very much.”

“Great. I’ll get Ricard to arrange for transport for us both.”

Later that day, as he walked back to the Mainland with Ricard plodding stoically along at his side, Kevin did his best to recall details of Lyndesfarne society from another of the numerous NISSA orientation lessons he had received. As far as he could remember, people on the Island exhibited a tendency towards a more social style of living than he was familiar with. Apparently, it was commonplace to find large groups sharing a single residence, and there was a very strong sense of extended family across the generations. He had also been told that there was less gender differentiation in role and behaviour in many situations, although Kevin was not entirely clear exactly what was meant by this statement.

He turned to Ricard.

“Did Bret talk to you about tomorrow evening?”

“He did,” Ricard replied promptly. “I’ve spoken to the transport people, and made arrangements for the two of you to be picked up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Just the two of us?” Kevin queried.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ricard confirmed.

“So, I’ll have an evening without you?”

At this remark, Ricard looked surprised, even shocked, but after catching sight of Kevin’s smile, he relaxed almost immediately.

“Please do not worry about me. I have other things I can do.”

The following afternoon, Bret encouraged Kevin to complete his work a little early, and leave while the sun was still high in the sky.

“It’s a fair distance,” explained Bret, “and I would like to be able to get there in good time. Perhaps half an hour’s travel time?”

This was another ride by horse and trap, with a taciturn driver Kevin did not recognise. Kevin had become familiar with this mode of transport over the past few months of working on the Island. It was very pleasant clip-clopping along in the late summer sunshine in companionable silence, following a well-surfaced road though a heavily wooded area. The road wended its way uphill, in and out of the shade of the trees and passing occasional rocky outcrops, with the horse obviously having to work quite hard to keep the trap moving.

The road emerged in a more open area of farmland, and they moved at a steady trot between well-tended fields separated by low hedges. Kevin could see that, in some fields, the crops had already been taken in, while others were waiting for harvesting. Even so, he could see no movement, no people. He wondered vaguely how farming was carried out here.

“Here’s our village,” announced Bret, suddenly breaking into Kevin’s thoughts.

The village gave a first impression of being a rural hamlet from several centuries ago, but this was misleading. Everywhere was scrupulously clean, tidy and well tended, with clear signs of wealth in the buildings’ size and construction. Closer to some prosperous part of Oxfordshire, thought Kevin, and quite definitely more Middle England than Middle Ages.

All of the houses had neatly cultivated gardens, usually surrounded by stone or brick-built walls. The walls were often adorned with a variety of climbing plants that Kevin, who was not a gardener and indeed thought of himself as having brown thumbs rather than green fingers, did not recognise. Some of these plants seemed very unusual, he thought, do they actually grow on the Mainland at all?

The garden walls also seemed to enclose large areas of lawn, and the smell of newly-mown grass-clippings came unbidden to Kevin’s nostrils. This was an aroma that took him back to his younger days:

the smell of grass in the sunshine while he was lazing around waiting for his innings at school cricket and, a little later in life, savouring warm beer, pork pies and guitar blues music at a summer picnic.

Kevin wondered how the grass was cut. He could make out a soft clipping sound which he took to be grass-cutting in progress, but there was no sound of motors or machinery. He turned to Bret with yet another question.

“How’s the grass cut?”

Bret swivelled around, and pointed at a low shape on a nearby lawn, in the shade of a mature and spreading tree. Now that Bret had pointed it out, Kevin could see that the dark shape was moving slowly over the grass.

“What is it?” he asked in astonishment.

“Well, I guess it translates as ‘lawn-bug’,” replied Bret, “Many people keep one to keep the grass down. It floats over the lawn, trimming off the tops and, um, digesting the results. Although it’s not really alive. I suppose you would call it a machine.”

The lawn-bug was tear-drop shape, if seen from above, and domed up to a height of perhaps four inches – a hand, Kevin remembered. It was coloured in mottled shades of brown and green. Kevin watched it, fascinated. It looks, he thought, just like a large insect decked out in military fatigues.

Kevin dragged his attention back to Bret, who pointed in the direction of a house approaching on their left.

“Home at last,” he said.

They turned in through open gates, the clip-clop of the hooves and the rumble of the wheels changing their sounds on the gravel drive. Bret’s home was a single-story building of relatively modest side, surrounded by a garden every bit as mature and well-kept as those of its neighbours.

As the trap drew up by the front door, it was flung open, and a tall and well-built woman wearing floor-length robes in deep blue, swept out of the door to greet them. She had silver-grey hair, worn long and tied back in a way that closely resembled Bret’s, and bright blue eyes. Kevin could see the resemblance between Bret and his mother immediately.

Bret waved and jumped down from the trap before it had stopped moving, and enthusiastically hugged his mother. Bret disengaged himself from the embrace and waved at Kevin.

“Come and meet my parents,” he called.

Bret’s mother was followed out of the house by a very large man with a bushy beard and a toothy grin, and wearing a well-used

butcher's apron. Kevin came forward to shake the man's hand; only then did he realise just how big Bret's father actually was. He towered over Kevin, his friendly grin widening into what Kevin would discover to be his usual hearty laugh. The parents ushered him into the house, Bret following behind carrying Kevin's rucksack.

At such short notice, Kevin had not had much of an opportunity to get a gift for his hosts. He was not sure just what would be socially acceptable, and wanted to make sure he found something that would not disintegrate when transferred to the Island. After some thought, he located a teddy bear mascot he had originally purchased in London, complete with Busby and union jack T-shirt, which had been sat in the glove compartment of the Volvo for a while. The bear was in a presentation bag of brightly-coloured paper. Better than nothing, mused Kevin, I hope they do not mind.

It turned out that both of Bret's parents spoke extremely good English. Kevin retrieved his rucksack and presented his gift from the Mainland. This was received with much ceremony and many thanks, and unwrapped, and then greeted with what Kevin felt was gratifying amusement.

It was almost certainly a well-practiced anecdote, judging by the way the storyline was passed deftly between them. Bret's parents explained that, before they had met, each of them used to travel to England, his father on foot and his mother in a horse-drawn cart. They had both been engaged in selling articles from the Island in Kevin's world, as well as trading them for items likely to be saleable in Lyndesfarne. They had actually met each other in a market in Berwick, not far from the old bridge, each trying to pass themselves off as a native of Kevin's world.

With introductions and reminiscences completed, Bret's father excused himself, explaining that the kitchen needed his immediate attentions.

"Let me show you around," Bret suggested, "Would you like the full guided tour?"

The house turned out to be much bigger than first appearances suggested. Most of the ground floor was a large open-plan area which doubled as a dining room and lounge, with exposed beams and windows that Kevin thought probably worked without the aid of magic. There was a seating area with several sofas and numerous slightly worn but very comfortable-looking armchairs, clustered around what appeared to be an open log fire, although Kevin would later notice that the logs never seemed to burn down or need replenishing.

The building had two lower floors, underground, where bedrooms and what Bret rather quaintly translated as “bathing-rooms” were located. There seemed to be an astonishing number of rooms in the lower levels, but all those that Kevin glanced into seemed to be snugly warm and comfortably lit.

A small but comfortable bedroom had been set aside for his use, right next door to a bathroom. Both rooms were equipped with the “magic windows” that Bret had introduced to Kevin a few months previously. Bret took great pains to ensure that Kevin was entirely familiar with the gestures required to operate the bathroom, the windows and the lighting.

As they returned upstairs, Bret’s mother unprompted poured the two of them large glasses of white wine, and handed them over. Bret’s father busied himself in the kitchen, as Kevin could see through the open door, preparing what seemed to him to be an immense quantity of food. Meanwhile, Bret’s mother chattered away brightly, while bustling around a large dining table set with ten places. It must be quite a party this evening, mused Kevin.

Seeing that he was getting on so well with his mother, Bret stood and announced, “I’m just going downstairs to change. I won’t be long.”

His mother smiled, and spoke in a fashion that Kevin suspected many mothers used with their children regardless of their age.

“Be quick. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Chapter Twenty Five

It was late at night by the time that Kevin and Tanji arrived at her family's home. By now, it was completely dark, and she guided him by the elbow through a gateway in a high wall and along a gravel path which was at slight risk of being overgrown by the shrubbery on either side. There were streetlights outside the gateway and lights ahead, which turned out to be either side of the door to a house Kevin could barely make out.

Tanji knocked on the door, which was answered after a few moments by an older woman who looked as if she had been dozing for a while, and had suddenly woken. She said something that Kevin did not understand, and flung the door wide. Tanji embraced the other woman affectionately, visibly going limp in her arms from what Kevin felt sure was a sense of relief. After a few seconds, the older woman turned her attention to him.

"You must be Kevin," she said in good English, "Tanji has told me so much about you."

"Kevin," Tanji said, surprisingly formally, "I would like to introduce you to my Aunt."

"Pleased to meet you," Kevin replied politely, even though he felt like he was sagging himself. He had not offered his hand, but the older woman took both his hands and drew him further into the house, while Tanji closed the door behind them.

"You must be so very tired and hungry. Come on through. I've put some food together for you."

By this time, both travellers were so exhausted they could hardly stand. Kevin was not really paying very much attention and allowed himself to be guided down the hallway and into a large, warm and homely kitchen.

"Your Uncle wanted to welcome you, but he is already in bed," Tanji's Aunt said. "His health's not all that strong. I don't want to wake him."

"Oh, that's OK. I can introduce him to Kevin in the morning," Tanji responded.

In what seemed like just a few moments, they had divested themselves of their boots, coats and outdoor clothing, which was whisked away. They had been seated in front of a fire, although the evening was not really particularly cold, and a large glasses of red

wine had been pressed into their hands. They were now being treated to a supper of fresh bread, a hard but strongly flavoured cheese and large mugs of a hot and tasty broth, although Kevin could not quite determine exactly what was in the soup.

It was all exceptionally delicious, and he found himself wolfing down the food, barely aware of where he was or who was around him. The stress and excitement, not to mention a considerable amount of physical exertion, as well as being outside rather more than was usual, had all contributed to a raging appetite. It really is true, he mused dopyly, hunger *is* the best sauce.

The food and wine was fast making Kevin drowsy, and he found himself nodding off in front of the fire. But before he fell completely asleep, Tanji nudged him and nearly dragged him downstairs. He was directed to a bedroom on the lower level, as well as firmly pointed at an adjacent shower room.

“Why don’t you slip in there for a few minutes?” Tanji suggested.

He needed no further urging and stepped into the bathroom. He dragged off the rest of his clothing, leaving them in a crumpled heap on the floor. He then took a rapid but very welcome shower, feeling rather pleased with himself that he had accurately remembered the gestures required to operate the facilities in a Lyndesfarne bathroom.

He staggered out, wrapped in a towel and carrying his clothes, to find Tanji waiting for him. By now in a near-somnambulant state, she guided him to his bedroom.

“I’ve been given this one tonight,” she said, indicating a room next door.

“Goodnight,” he murmured, as Tanji kissed him warmly on the lips, then ran her hand over the small of his back and then up over his buttocks under the towel. He felt himself tense instinctively with her touch, tightening in several exciting ways. Tanji gently pushed him towards his bedroom door, still managing to deliver one last delightful kiss.

Kevin stripped off his towel and literally fell into bed, dragging the covers over himself and almost immediately falling into a near-sleep state. He had dimly expected to sleep alone tonight, but he was suddenly (and utterly delightfully) aware of a slightly damp Tanji slipping under the covers next to him. Despite the combination of exhaustion and slight inebriation, Kevin found himself reacting to Tanji’s presence in his bed. He reached over and ran his hand over her stomach, delighted to find her to be quite naked under the bedclothes.

“Sleep now,” she giggled softly, “I’ll be here in the morning.”

Kevin could not remember a thing between that sentence and becoming wonderfully awake the following morning. The sun was streaming in through the window, and he felt Tanji stretching luxuriously beside him. To his utter delight, he was treated to a shorter but still incredibly exciting reprise of the previous morning, which seemed now to be such a long time ago. Smiling in an extremely naughty fashion, Tanji then slipped out of Kevin’s room.

“See you upstairs for breakfast. Twenty minutes?”

At breakfast, Kevin was properly introduced to Tanji’s aunt. At least, it seemed to him to be a proper introduction, since last night had passed in a daze. Her Aunt was a petite woman with silver-grey hair, and the family resemblance was very obvious.

“Where’s Uncle?” asked Tanji in English, presumably for Kevin’s benefit.

“He was required to go out a few moments ago,” her Aunt replied, “But I’m sure he’ll be back very soon.”

Breakfast was taken in the kitchen, which was quite small, but felt warm and cosy. In the centre of the room, a few chairs were set around what appeared to be a traditional wooden kitchen table. Kevin looked up at the noises of ceramic mugs and plates being placed on the table. The sound had the sharp click of crockery on stone. Looking more closely, the table surface seemed to have been treated in some way, to make it both much more hardwearing as well as impermeable to liquids.

The wooden chairs were also not quite what they seemed. Kevin had expected the seat to be hard and unyielding, but it was actually soft and surprisingly comfortable. There seemed to be some magic which added an unprecedented degree of elasticity to the wood of the seat itself.

After breakfast, Tanji retrieved her slate from her bag, and made a series of gestures. Kevin thought he recognised the symbol for “speak” but, as was so often the case, the meaning of the entire sequence evaded him. After a few minutes, she announced that her old friend Kithyn would be joining them later in the day.

After a splendid breakfast, a very good sleep, and an incredible awakening, Kevin felt on top of the world. For no reason he could articulate, he felt that he was safe here, that nothing could affect him, and that he had truly escaped from whatever dreadful fate had been threatened by Professor Alan.

Sensing his mood, Tanji suggested that he might care to have a look around, to stretch his legs. He accepted with alacrity. Taking his

arm, she directed him out of the kitchen through the back door, and along a path that skirted the lawn and led towards a cluster of outbuildings.

The house appeared to be more modest than Bret's family place, but nevertheless it had felt both spacious and comfortable to Kevin. It also had much larger grounds than Bret's establishment, with paddocks and stables for horses, which were evidently in regular use. Kevin had not noticed stables at Bret's place, and wondered again what had happened to the horse which had taken him and Bret there.

After a few minutes strolling, it rapidly became clear that the entire estate was a menagerie.

"My Aunt is an enthusiastic keeper of animals of all kinds," explained Tanji, as a large cat with striking golden-brown markings suddenly emerged from the bushes at their feet. She bent down and stroked the cat, speaking to it in the Lyndesfarne language. The cat condescended to being petted for a few moments, in the manner of cats everywhere, and then stalked off across the lawn in search of other entertainment.

Kevin watched the cat with mild amusement.

"You like animals?" she asked him.

"Oh yes," he replied, "Though I don't have much opportunity to keep any pets."

"Well, I thought you might be interested to see this."

They walked around a corner of the stable block and were confronted by a large cage of stout wire, within which perched the most amazing creature Kevin had ever seen.

"What is it?" he breathed.

"Its name is usually translated as 'Nightwing'," Tanji replied, also speaking quietly.

The animal looked like a large flying reptile, obviously a night hunter, judging by the large and mobile eyes like those of a bird of prey. It came equipped with a large beak, or perhaps it was a long snout, filled with vicious teeth that looked to Kevin like those of a small crocodile.

The creature spread its leathery wings, and he stepped backwards instinctively to keep out of its reach. His reaction was one of complete amazement.

"It's a dragon!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no," Tanji laughed, "Dragons are much bigger! No dragons hereabouts these days."

“So you’re sure there aren’t any around?” Kevin asked, feeling torn between a degree of nervousness about dangerous flying reptiles and a sense of curiosity making him want to see one.

“Not any more. Many years ago, there used to be quite a few in this area. In fact, this part of the world was once famous for its dragons.”

In an effort, he suspected, to put him at ease, Tanji clarified that nowadays such dangerous predators were more-or-less extinct. Dragons were now an officially endangered species, with just a few hundred living in distant parts of the world of Lyndesfarne, kept in reserves under strict preservation orders.

Kevin had a flash of insight at this moment.

“It’s not a squirrel’s nest,” he murmured softly, mostly to himself.

“What’s that?” Tanji asked.

“The pub,” he said, “Where we had dinner the other night. The sign over the door. That’s not a squirrel’s nest at all, is it?”

“No, you’re right,” Tanji replied, looking slightly sheepish. “I guess it was thought that translating it as ‘The Dragons Nest’ would have been unnecessarily unsettling for visitors like yourself. But it is a traditional name for an inn.”

Tanji explained that, historically, keeping domestic animals in this part of Lyndesfarne was difficult chiefly because of large predators like dragons.

“Of course, it wasn’t just the dragons. Wolves and bears were a constant problem, too.”

Further explanations from Tanji made it clear that these dangerous animals were the reason why people traditionally lived in larger groups, and why they preferred to sleep underground. It had also made it very difficult to keep livestock, since cows, sheep and particularly pigs tended to attract the dragons over great distances. Certainly, the import of leather to the Island from Kevin’s world had been an important trade in years past, as well as meat and other animal products.

Kevin turned his attention back to the Nightwing, which was now sitting peaceably on its perch.

“So why don’t we have creatures like this at home?” he asked, slightly plaintively.

“I don’t know,” she responded promptly. “Nightwings, or dragons for that matter, are not intrinsically magical. As far as I know, there’s nothing to prevent them from living in your world. Indeed, there are suggestions that these creatures have occasionally managed to travel between the worlds, in ages past.”

“Really!” Kevin exclaimed, “And I bet they have given rise to all those stories in my world.”

Tanji nodded.

“Very probably.”

During his travels around his own world, Kevin had come across numerous myths and legends. Many of these seemed to him to have been made up on the spot, quite possibly by a tired Grandfather in order to quieten an aggressively inquisitive child, and subsequently repeated as gospel down the generations. Before now, it had not occurred to him that some of these tales could well have had some basis in fact.

“But no dragons now?” he persisted.

“Very few here. And they never have, naturally, lived in your world. Over there, other animals occupy the same ecological niches.”

“Ecological niches? What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, there are no owls in Lyndesfarne.”

It turned out that she actually meant birds of prey, generally – birds which catch their prey by grasping it in their talons. There were no hawks or falcons in Lyndesfarne, as well as no owls. In Kevin’s world, these birds performed useful functions, like keeping down the population of rats and mice, and some of them could be trained to bring down game birds for the table.

On the Island, flying reptiles – relatives of the Nightwing – filled these spaces in the ecosystem. Kevin learned that, like some hawks, certain species of Nightwings could be trained to fly from the hand, to catch rabbits and bring down pigeons. There was a tradition in some families, Tanji explained, for keeping these animals mainly, it appeared, as a living link to the historical past.

Kevin was fascinated by the wildlife revelations. A discussion of the flora and fauna of Lyndesfarne had never featured in any NISSA briefing, and he had therefore tacitly assumed that plants and animals were the same in both worlds.

“So, are there other animals in Lyndesfarne which don’t exist at home?” he asked.

“Hardly any. Almost all animals are the same, just a very few which live in one world and not the other. Perhaps the best-known example, the one I was taught about at school, is that there are no whales here.”

“What? No hump-backs, no dolphins?”

Tanji shook her head slowly.

“Those niches are occupied by, well, Plesiosaurs and similar aquatic reptiles.”

“Wow!”

With exquisitely awful timing, Tanji’s aunt chose that moment to approach them and let them know that her Uncle had returned.

*

My dearest Kithyn,

Thank you for agreeing to travel to my Aunt’s house. I know how busy you are these days, how important your roles and I do understand that you cannot just drop anything and rush away. But, I would so much appreciate your sage wisdom. I hope you can leave very soon.

Looking forward to seeing you again.

Your old friend, Tanji.

Chapter Twenty Six

Bret's mother launched into another anecdote, this time about trading in a market in a North Yorkshire town. This was after she had married, and the two newlyweds had been working together. They had been in fierce competition with another stall, selling apparently similar items, which they had assumed also to be from Lyndesfarne. But they did not recognise either the stallholders or the artefacts, and it turned out that the competitors had come from some not-very-well defined part of Central Europe, and the goods were almost certainly complete fakes.

Kevin laughed out loud at the conclusion of this tale, which had appealed to his ironic sense of humour. He heard footsteps on the stairs behind him.

"I'm back," a husky but manifestly feminine voice said behind him.

Kevin turned, and then froze as he took in the sight before him. The woman approaching him was tall and broad shouldered, but quite definitely female, with a sporty appearance and the slight suggestion, Kevin could not help but think, of those Eastern European Olympic athletes from the 1970s.

"Bret!" he blurted out.

"Well, yes. Although, judging by the look on your face, I suspect I should have warned you beforehand about this."

Bret had adopted more of the high-cheekboned appearance typical of natives to the Island, and was wearing a robe best described as flowing, even by the standards of the loose-fitting robes widely used in Lyndesfarne. The face and hair, which had seemed boyish before, seem to have been subtly altered to give a much more womanly look, although the loosening of the ponytail into a much more fluid hairstyle probably helped as well. But, despite all the changes, the person smiling dryly at Kevin was still immediately recognisable as Bret.

Kevin was astonished, shocked, even flabbergasted. Through all of his confusion, just one question surfaced.

"Why?" he stuttered, "Why did you do it?"

Bret smiled in an amused fashion. This was a look that worked better on his, or rather her, face as a woman, in what would become Kevin's opinion when he regained his composure.

“Well, your world does have a reputation for sexist attitudes. When I was asked to work on the New Bridge, I was advised to make all the changes I could. So, I thought it best to appear male, since I have the ability.”

Sensing Kevin’s confusion, Bret’s mother chipped in.

“Our family has lived in this house for generations, and we have something of a tradition of trade and travel in your world. Almost all of the family have well-developed shapeshifting talents, and we certainly employ them whenever necessary.”

She snorted in what Kevin took to be wry amusement, then continued.

“I didn’t mention it earlier but, when I met Bret’s father in that marketplace, both of us appeared male.”

Kevin could well believe it. From what he had just seen, it did not take too much imagination to see Bret’s mother as a man. Furthermore, in Bret’s female form, there was clearly even more resemblance between her and her mother.

“Besides,” Bret said, “There are some products which enhance a shapeshifter’s ability. I use one to give my eyes a more masculine appearance – although it does tend to wear off after a while.”

With the aid of a few deep breaths, a gulp from the wine glass he had managed to avoid dropping and a fair amount of will-power, Kevin attempted to pull himself together. This world really does have the ability to surprise me, he thought, but even so, I could still tell it was Bret, despite all of the changes she made.

Just at that moment, the front door opened, and three people came in, removing their coats, shouting out greetings and generally behaving in that exuberant way that made it clear that they lived here.

“Aha,” exclaimed Bret, “Let me introduce you to my husband and children.”

The man who had just entered finished the task of hanging up his cape by the door, and strode over to where Bret and Kevin were standing. Kevin stuck out his hand and the newcomer grasped it with only the slightest sign of hesitation.

“Kevin, this is my husband Eosin,” said Bret, performing the introductions in an old-fashioned formal way that Kevin suspected had been learnt in a class somewhere.

“Hello. Pleased to meet you,” Eosin said, in accented but understandable English.

“The pleasure is entirely mine,” replied Kevin.

“My husband is the astonishingly successful and famous designer of ...” Bret began.

Eosin shook his head in what Kevin took to be an unassuming fashion, and then interrupted Bret in the Lyndesfarne language.

“He’s so modest.” Bret sighed. “I’ve just been told off for exaggerating his skills. But he really is very good at what he does.”

She turned and waved at the two girls which had arrived with Eosin, who were chasing each other around in the boisterous fashion of children everywhere. Equally typically, the children completely failed to see the summons from a parent until Bret raised her voice and shouted something Kevin did not understand. This time, the kids trotted over, both suddenly overcome with shyness at being confronted with a strange adult.

Bret put her hand gently on the head of the smaller girl, who had the long blond hair and blue eyes of her Mother.

“This is Myra. She’s eight. Say hello, Myra.”

“Hello,” the child responded in a barely audible voice, ducking her head in greeting.

“And this one’s Andhra,” Bret continued.

“Hello to you,” she said unprompted, with a barely noticeable bob of her head.

“Pleased to meet you both,” Kevin said, smiling.

Bret released the children with a few words of the form, he supposed, of “now run along and play, and don’t make too much noise. Dinner in fifteen minutes. And don’t forget to wash your hands.”

Kevin was struck by the difference between the two girls. He could see that they were sisters, but in almost every aspect they were as different as it was possible to imagine. The older girl had her hair cut short, and was a darker shade which was almost orange. Myra was wearing a pretty white summer dress, while Andhra wore a crimson sleeveless shirt and short trousers with many pockets, which looked to Kevin as if they were made of leather.

Kevin shook his head, and returned his attention to Bret and Eosin.

“So you live here all the time?” he asked.

Bret smiled again. “Oh yes. My children go to school nearby, the same school I went to all those years ago. I do think it’s wonderful for them to grow up where their forebears did.”

“Is that where they learn English?”

“Yes. It’s not very common to learn your language, but this school includes a couple of lessons. We encourage it at home, too.”

Kevin turned to Eosin, who was still politely standing nearby.

“Do you work locally as well?”

“I work here today,” he replied, looking to Bret, Kevin suspected, for help with the language.

“Eosin currently works part-time, so he spends more time that I do with the children at the moment,” Bret interjected. “And he does a lot of his work from home.”

Kevin wondered fleetingly how that could be done, but did not have an opportunity to follow up the thought. The front door opened again, and a couple entered, followed several seconds later by a rather strapping teenager. Kevin was introduced to the newcomers, who turned out to be Bret’s older sister and her husband, and their son. Kevin’s attention was caught by the teenager, to the point of entirely missing his parents’ names when they were spoken. The young person, who was called Gred, was already nearly as tall as Kevin, and apparently taking after his grandfather in both looks and build.

“Are you from the Other World?” Gred asked directly.

“Yes, yes I am. I’m helping Bret” – Kevin could not bring himself to say Aunt Bret – “with building the New Bridge.”

The teenager grunted, apparently satisfied with this answer, mooched off downstairs, ignoring, Kevin suspected, instructions from his parents to help with preparations for dinner.

“Does everyone live here?” Kevin asked Bret, who was clearly enjoying her role as guide and chaperone. Bret nodded, and then took a sip of her wine before answering.

“Yes. It can be a bit noisy sometimes, but there’s always someone around to help, or just to talk to.”

Kevin mentally compared this lively, even boisterous household, and being surrounded by friendly people, with his own rather lonely flat. He felt a distinct pang of jealousy, but also wondered how he would react what was effectively enforced company at all times.

Just at that moment, Bret’s father emerged from the kitchen and rang a bell which hung by the kitchen door, obviously for exactly this purpose. Children and adults started appearing almost immediately, and there was a bustle around the dining table, including imprecations to the children which Kevin interpreted as “now go and wash your hands”. After a few confused moments, Kevin was shepherded to sit between Bret and her mother at one end of the table, with the children being sensibly relegated to the far end.

While the family were settling at the table, Bret’s father started bringing steaming plates and dishes from the kitchen in what appeared to be a well-orchestrated manner. The food all looked and smelt delightful, and turned out to taste delicious, as Kevin was soon to discover. The dinner menu did seem slightly old-fashioned to him,

with no apparent concern over levels of fat and carbohydrate intake. Kevin usually tried to watch what he ate, to keep his weight and blood pressure down. Nevertheless, on this occasion he tucked in with gusto while someone topped up his wine glass. He had never seen anyone in Lyndesfarne who seemed to be particularly overweight. Perhaps people here undertake additional exercise, or perhaps more outdoors living, he considered, or maybe there are some magical abilities to control appetite or metabolism.

The younger children spent much of the meal asking questions of Kevin, to his considerable amusement. The kids spoke sometimes shyly and hesitantly in English, with occasional corrections and prompts from assorted parents. Kevin wondered if there were local schools in England where it was possible to learn the language of Lyndesfarne. Unsurprisingly, he had not heard of such a thing, but it seemed entirely likely given the centuries-old covert collaboration between the two worlds.

The adults too seemed keen to ask questions and, once it became clear that Kevin was willing to field almost any kind of enquiry, it was not long before queries and requests for clarification were flying around the table. Kevin answered the eclectic assortment of questions as best he could, doing his utmost to speak slowly and clearly. This seemed to be successful, as Bret and the others very rarely felt compelled to intercede or to translate his answers.

After dinner, a couple of the children were directed to help the adults tidy up based on, Kevin guessed, some kind of rota system. The other children disappeared downstairs, understandably keen to pursue their own interests and entertainments. The table-clearing was achieved with only an occasional reprimand from a parent which Kevin did not understand, although he was familiar with the “slightly aggravated parent” tone of voice invariably used under these circumstances.

Kevin’s offer to help with the clearing up was politely but firmly refused, and he was directed to the comfortable chairs by the fireside. Having been sitting down for a considerable time, he decided to stretch his legs, and instead stood by the fire, enjoying the combined warmth of the flames and the large quantity of food he had just enjoyed.

As he looked around, he could see that the walls of the living room were decorated with pictures, many of them striking abstract works of art in warm colours – russet, orange, chocolate brown. There were also a couple of images of a figure in a voluminous cape, with the hood up against the wind and weather clearly depicted in the

background. Although executed in a highly realistic way, it occurred to Kevin that they were probably the work of the same artist who had produced the abstract artworks, and certainly using the same palette of colours. He had vaguely expected animated pictures or something like that.

“They don’t move,” he observed to Bret, who had quietly returned to his side.

“Oh, no,” she replied at once, with a laugh. “Did you expect it? It would be possible to produce such a thing, of course, but it would be rather distracting, don’t you think? Besides, it would be regarded as being, well, in slightly vulgar taste.”

Bret explained that, for the most part, magic and art did not mix, at least according to the Islander’s artistic conventions. Art, and music and similar personally creative activities were regarded as the work of unaided physical labour, so that incorporating magic into the work, or using it in its creation, was regarded as a gross *faux pas* in arty circles. Kevin imagined that this purist attitude was analogous to his own preference for live theatre, rather than the less involving television. Even so, he considered that his own work had immense creative involvement, in spite of using technology and engineering approaches.

The room was also decorated with what Kevin initially assumed were photographs. When she spotted him inspecting them, Bret’s mother took great delight in showing pictures of Bret when she was a child, to her mild embarrassment. Kevin could not quite follow the gestures she used to manipulate the picture frames to swap the images displayed. However, it did give him some insight into Bret’s developing ability to appear male or female at will, a development which seemed to accompany puberty.

One of the strangest events of the evening happened after dinner. Eosin picked up the Busby-wearing teddy bear that Kevin had presented as a gift and started inspecting it closely. After a short conversation with his mother-in-law, he took the doll with him as he left the room. Kevin carried on chatting with Bret and the others, not giving Eosin’s actions a second thought, until he came back after about twenty minutes and placed the toy on the table. To Kevin’s astonishment, and to the amusement of everyone else, the bear immediately came to life, and marched around the tabletop in a superb parody of a guardsman.

Kevin was fascinated. He reached over and picked up the teddy, which instantly went dead in his hands, and examined it carefully. There were no external changes that he could see, but it seemed a

trifle firmer in the middle than before. He could not be sure, but it seemed a little heavier, too.

“How’s it done?” he asked Eosin, waving the bear in his direction.

“I put a sprite in it,” Eosin said hesitantly, again looking to Bret for help.

“Like the ones in the masonry of the old bridge?” Kevin asked, looking from Eosin to Bret and back again.

“It’s a different kind of sprite,” Eosin replied immediately.

“There are lots of kinds of sprites,” Bret continued, taking over from her spouse, “and new ones are being designed all the time. That’s what Eosin does – he’s a sprite designer.”

“But what exactly are these sprites?” Kevin persisted.

Bret and her husband looked at each other.

“Think of them as, umm, captured intent.” Bret replied. “A well-designed sprite does one thing, forever. Usually, it’s a fairly simple thing. The tricky part is getting exactly the right behaviour – and this takes time and skill.”

“Also, there are the controls,” Eosin interjected.

Kevin must have looked mystified, as Bret continued with the explanation.

“Controls select between multiple intents captured by the same sprite. Our gestures are interpreted to determine which intent to satisfy, including an intent to do nothing.”

This rationalization, limited though it was, seemed to make sense to Kevin. His computer simulations were consistent with the ability, in Lyndesfarne, to alter local physics in a deterministic and repeatable way, under controls which picked a capability from a set of options. But he was not sure he was going to make much headway into this thinking tonight.

As had been predicted, Kevin did indeed eat and drink rather too much, and stayed up only a little after his normal bedtime. He was already feeling quite a bit sleepy when he was directed to his bedroom. He slept soundly and woke early but refreshed by the morning sunlight, having forgotten to darken the windows before he clambered into bed.

He bathed and dressed quickly, shaving carefully with a naked blade as he usually did when he stayed over in Lyndesfarne. He made his way upstairs, where Bret’s mother was already present, but there was no sign of the children or other adults. Bret appeared shortly afterwards, looking fresh and relaxed. He had returned to his

male appearance, although Kevin was not entirely sure why Bret had bothered reverting, now that the secret was known to him.

After a modest but extremely tranquil breakfast, he and Bret collected their things and made ready to leave. Kevin offered his profuse and heartfelt thanks to Bret's mother for their hospitality, stressing to the best of his ability just how welcome he had felt during his brief stay. The older woman seemed genuinely touched, perhaps even slightly embarrassed by his gratitude, and Kevin was made to promise that he would return sometime. The two men then made their way outside, where the same driver, horse and trap was already waiting for them.

As they travelled back to the building site, two thoughts struck Kevin. Firstly, what had happened to the horse and trap, and the driver for that matter, during his overnight stay? There were no obvious stables or anywhere where a horse could have been accommodated overnight. Had the horse merely been tethered somewhere close by? Or had horse and master been provided with lodging elsewhere?

His second thought was that it was quite a distance from Bret's house to the site of the New Bridge. He wondered vaguely how Bret travelled from and from his home. Did he travel this way every time he came to work on the bridge? Or did he employ some other mode of transport?

Musing on these questions, Kevin remembered that, when they had been working together on the Island, he had observed Bret arriving on foot following the path from the Old Bridge. This was a quite different direction from the one from which they were now approaching, and he seriously doubted that Bret travelled every day by horse and cart.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Tanji led Kevin across the gardens to a small and exceedingly picturesque seating area which overlooked the paddocks where the horses grazed, and then out towards a range of low hills that seemed preternaturally green and rolling on the sunny morning. The patio was paved with rustic flagstones, and shaded by high hedges and a green-and-white striped parasol, under which were arranged several cane chairs and a low table. Kevin was tempted to use the term “romantic arbour” to describe it, despite his inherent tendency to avoid such overtly flowery expressions.

While they were walking, Tanji explained that she had already talked to her Uncle about the events of the last few days.

“He said he was very keen to speak to you directly,” she continued, “and he apologises again for not being here to see you earlier.”

“So we will meet him here?” Kevin asked, looking around the gardens.

“He’ll be along very soon, I’m sure. He’s famous for being punctual,” she replied, adding with a raised eyebrow, “Amongst other things.”

Kevin was just about to enquire further about her Uncle’s prominent characteristics when Tanji’s glance over his shoulder told him that the eminent man was on his way. He turned to look for himself. A stranger was walking across the well-trimmed lawns towards them, moved in a slow, even stately, but nevertheless distinctly grand fashion.

He was a portly man, slightly shorter than Kevin, with thinning grey hair cut very short. He was wearing the inevitable Lyndesfarne robes in crimson decorated with white insets. His face bore an expression that seemed to Kevin to be mid-way between avuncular good humour, and statesman-like astuteness and gravitas. Certainly, he had both the bearing and attitude that managed to make the brightly-coloured robes he wore look majestic rather than comical.

Tanji turned to her Uncle in greeting, who kissed her chastely on the cheek. He then nodded politely but wordlessly to Kevin, although made no move to offer his hand, and Kevin successfully resisted the temptation to extend his own in greeting. He also made no attempt to introduce himself, or to offer a name. Kevin rather got

the impression that he was a man who everyone, or at least anyone who *was* anyone, was expected to know by reputation.

Tanji's Uncle settled himself in one of the seats, taking care to arrange his clothing in a way that left Kevin in no doubt that this was a man entirely familiar with the practicalities of wearing voluminous robes. Once he had settled, Tanji sat down, with Kevin extending a hand for assistance in a kind of politeness autopilot. He then found his own seat, and focussed his awareness on the older man. Sensing his attention, her Uncle spoke several sentences that Kevin could not begin to follow. Tanji translated immediately.

"My uncle says that, while he does understand a little English, he is not easily able to speak the language. He has asked me to interpret for him. He hopes that this will not be too painful for you."

Kevin realised that he should have anticipated the need for language translating during this meeting. He spoke directly to Tanji.

"Are you OK with interpreting?"

"Oh, yes. I was trained for it. Though I might be a little bit rusty, is that the correct expression?"

Kevin suppressed an internal smile at Tanji's remark and then turned to her Uncle.

"Please reassure your Uncle that your interpretations will be more than adequate," he said formally, "And ask him if there is any advice he would like to give a poor fugitive from the other world."

Tanji smoothly translated his words. The older man grunted and nodded in a fashion that suggested to Kevin that he was more satisfied that he had expected to be. He then spoke several rapid sentences, and then waited for Tanji to translate.

"It seems that you have been causing a certain amount of consternation with your unexpected crossing. Perhaps a certain amount of explanation is in order," Tanji said, with a slightly sing-song inflection which sounded to Kevin amazingly similar to the intonation used by her Uncle.

"In particular, let me explain about how the communications between your world and ours is controlled."

With the aid of Tanji's interpretation, the older man explained that there were two factions in the world of Lyndesfarne concerned with exchanges with Kevin's world. Neither group were official government organisations, so that they operated at arms-length from the formal administration on the Island. Nevertheless, the government actively colluded with the misinformation campaigns that diverted public attention away from the existence of the Other World. Apparently, there were organisations with similar objectives

on the Mainland, although Kevin came to suspect that these groups operated collaboratively between the two worlds, with members on both sides.

The first of the two factions was exemplified by the Guardians. This organisation's publicly-stated aim was to actively facilitate travel and communications across the straights. Even so, the Guardians recognised that there had to be restrictions on the persons, as well as the goods, which were permitted to travel between the worlds. So, part of their role was visibly policing the crossing.

Kevin had been listening to Tanji's reproduction of her Uncle's words with polite but unfeigned interest. He had already observed the Guardians in action, and was anxious to ask a question, but did not feel at all confident about interrupting the grand old man in mid-spiel. His enthusiasm must have been noticed, since Tanji stopped speaking at this point, and her Uncle spoke directly to him in English for the first time.

"You have a question?" he said, in heavily accented but entirely understandable English.

"Yes, indeed," Kevin responded promptly. "I've seen the Guardians at the Old Bridge many times, but they never seemed to intercept anyone or stop any wagons from crossing. So, are they really that effective?"

Tanji's Uncle waited for her to translate Kevin's words, then grunted and nodded, apparently to himself. He then started speaking again, with Tanji picking up the translation after a short delay.

The Guardian's approach was essentially that of a visible deterrent. Anyone judged to be unsuitable to be allowed into the other world, and was attempting to cross the Old Bridge openly, would be immediately intercepted. However, after so many years, the reputation of the effectiveness of the Guardians was exceptionally – and mostly justifiably – very high, and so almost no-one even attempted to cross the Old Bridge with contraband goods.

Kevin nodded through this explanation, and the older man continued. The closest thing to formal control over trade between the two worlds is the Board for the Protection of Mutual Interests. Here, Tanji appeared to stop the translation, and interjected in her own tone of voice.

"The name of the Board is notoriously difficult to translate. The terms I just used are a fairly direct transliteration, but not particularly idiomatic. So it's often just referred to as the Board of Control."

Reverting to translation mode, she explained that the Board is in overall control of procedures and relationships with the Other World.

In particular, it limits by regulation the permitted travel and trade. It sets official policies on what is allowed to cross over, and it is responsible for maintaining the barriers preventing the movements of technology and magic between the two worlds.

Kevin was getting confused and agitated again. He had hitherto thought that the barriers separating his world from Lyndesfarne were entirely natural, and now he was being told that the effect was artificial. He could also see Tanji's eyes bulging slightly as she interpreted, as if her brain were only realising just what she had heard and translated. Kevin took it as read that this was new information to Tanji as well.

He took the liberty of interrupting the old man to ask for clarification. Tanji's translation seemed to take longer than he expected, and he got the distinct impression that she was adding her own comments and questions.

Tanji's Uncle considered the matter gravely for a long moment before answering. He explained that the interface between the worlds provided a natural conduit for magical properties, but the effect of disabling all but the most primitive technologies, and all but the weakest magics, is actually a deliberate result. Sprites designed to identify and disable advanced engineering and powerful magic were interjected into the interface; new sprites were added regularly as advances in technology were identified.

Kevin and Tanji sat silently for a few moments after the older man had delivered this bombshell.

"Wow," said Kevin eventually, speaking directly to Tanji, "So we've just stumbled on something which is supposed to be secret."

Tanji still seemed shell-shocked. Kevin reached over and shook her gently.

"Are you OK?"

She roused herself, clutching Kevin's hand for support.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, more-or-less. I just feel like a solid foundation for my world has been removed."

"Can you translate again?"

Tanji took a deep breath.

"Yes, no problem."

Tanji's Uncle returned to his main theme. He explained that the Watchers were agents for the Board of Control, and gave the distinct impression, in a roundabout way, that they were a kind of secret police. He explained that both the Guardians and the Watchers used magical means to keep track of travellers and their goods crossing the causeway. The Watchers also checked that the Guardians are doing

their job effectively, and were not accepting bribes, for example, from avaricious wagon drivers.

Relationships between the Guardians and the Board of Control was usually cordial, although sometimes it became somewhat strained. The system of mutual checks and balances, with the Guardians actively promoting cross-world trade and cultural exchanges, and the Watchers ensuring that the rules were obeyed, had been in existence for a long time, and was thought to be working well. Kevin was starting to understand the need for separation of roles in the management of the borders, and was beginning to wonder whether there was a similar split of responsibilities in the organisations in his own world.

“But what about the Guild of Directions?” asked Kevin, taking advantage of a pause in Tanji’s translation.

Again, her Uncle considered this question sagely before answering. His reply amplified Kevin’s previous understanding that the Guild existed for the provision of guides and interpreters to assist travellers, with the obvious intention of facilitating commerce and trade. The Guild was broadly aligned with the Guardians, although individual members sponsored by both persuasions could be found. Tanji added, using her own voice, that she and her Uncle, as well as her parents, were members of the Guild.

“Yes, well,” Kevin muttered, “All very interesting, I suppose, but what’s it got to do with me?”

To his slight consternation, Tanji rapidly translated his words, and her Uncle responded immediately. Purely by chance, he stated, the two of you managed to evade both the Watchers and the Guardians in your crossing. Apparently, his contacts amongst the Watchers were particularly put out, especially after your disappearance from the University.

“So are we safe here?” Kevin asked urgently. “Me and Tanji, I mean.”

At the translation, the older man laughed.

“Oh yes,” Tanji translated, “It’s all a bit of a misunderstanding.”

The Guardians had not yet been stationed at the New Bridge, since it had not been widely communicated that work had started on joining the two parts. Instead, they had been concentrating on the old bridge, following their conventional role. Only the night-watch guard at the Mainland construction site for the New Bridge raised the alarm, and even then they were not sure if anyone actually made it across. The stormy weather had made it more difficult for the Watchers to spot them, especially as they had travelled so far on foot. Privately,

Kevin was sure that this situation had now been corrected, and that it would now not be so easy to cross unobserved using the New Bridge.

“How did they manage to miss us?” he asked. “Did they not use any magical means of observation?”

Tanji translated this question, and her Uncle slowly shook his head. The problem, he explained, is that watching the borders to your world is an exceptionally intensive process, and requires a considerable amount of human effort. Use of magic helps only a little, since complex decisions can only be made by human minds. Close observation is really only effective because the crossing is fairly small, and everyone undertaking the crossing is funnelled through a relatively narrow area.

“But surely the magical barrier gives a blanket coverage preventing undesirable transfers?” Kevin asked. “Why does anyone have to watch the crossing at all?”

Tanji translated quickly. Her Uncle paused for another lengthy period. Tanji seemed unnaturally still and quiet, just waiting for him to continue.

The moment passed, and he began to explain to Kevin about the disruptive effect of steel. Historically, the full impact of the effect of the use of iron and steel in the Old Bridge was not appreciated until it was too late. The reinforcement in the bridge, even though it was mostly confined to the Mainland side, was enough to cause the effects of the barrier to be intermittent. So, there were some infrequent accidents, where technology or magic was allowed into the other world.

“So that’s why my paperweight still worked, while all the other stuff was useless?”

Tanji again translated the question, and her Uncle nodded in response.

“But why bother at all?” Kevin persisted. “What is the purpose of the Guardians and the Watchers? Why not just permit unlimited travel to everyone?”

Tanji’s uncle glanced over Kevin’s shoulder, and then said a few words which she did not translate, but did make her laugh out loud. Kevin was beginning to adore that uninhibited laugh and wide smile.

“What’s that?” Kevin exclaimed.

“My uncle just reminded me of something, and suggests that I tell you about it,” Tanji said, unsuccessfully attempting to hide the smile behind her hand.

“Well, OK. Whatever you like,” Kevin responded, finding himself unable to stop smiling in return.

Her uncle stood up, nodded politely to Kevin and then wandered off sedately in the direction of the house. They watched him go, then Kevin turned to Tanji in anticipation.

“Remember we were talking about Plesiosaurs earlier on?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Well, there’s a story that, many years back, someone – or some group, more likely – managed to smuggle an egg into your world, and to keep it warm enough to hatch.”

Tanji explained that hatching eggs from large seafaring reptiles was known to be fairly tricky, and required some specialist knowledge, a highly effective incubator, and a fair bit of luck. It was a complete mystery how the perpetrators got the egg past the Watchers in the first place.

Whoever it was, they kept the animal for several years, although how they managed to feed it and keep it hidden no one knows. Then, in the natural course of things, the animal grew too large, and it somehow escaped (or perhaps they just released it) into some lake up north somewhere. Apparently, the conspirators made several failed attempts to re-capture it, but their activities attracted the attention of the authorities and they were forced to abandon their prize.

Over the next few years, the creature was spotted by various locals, especially around dawn when it came to the surface to feed on plants at the lakeside.

“The poor creature,” concluded Tanji, “It didn’t really like the cold and fresh water, and died after not very many years. Or perhaps it was just lonely.” she added wistfully.

A degree of inevitability had been growing in Kevin’s mind while Tanji was relating this story.

“It was the Loch Ness Monster, wasn’t it?” he asked, more to keep the conversation going rather than for any real need for confirmation.

Tanji nodded.

“There’s always been some, well, I suppose leakage is the word, between your world and mine. It’s been happening for centuries and, in moderation, it’s not an issue. But if it ever got to be more than a trickle, then there would be a real problem. And that, of course, is exactly what the Watchers are worried about.”

Kevin thought he understood the point of the parable. It had become clear to him that at least some of the rumours, the strange and apparently unexplained stories in his world, had been caused by unauthorised (or perhaps just accidental) usage of magical artefacts or

other imports from the world of Lyndesfarne. He was beginning to understand the effects of any cross-over between the worlds and the troublesome effect it could have on society. Even so, he found himself wondering just what kind of things leak in the opposite direction. And, more directly, why had it provoked such an extreme reaction from Professor Alan and the mysterious person he was taking instructions from.

*

My dearest Kithyn,

I am so glad to hear that you are finally on your way. Thank you, thank you once again for agreeing to hurry off to meet me.

Looking forward to seeing you again.

Your old friend, Tanji.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Over the months when design work was going on, Kevin frequently found himself wondering just why the New Bridge was being built. He had not seen any kind of business plan or financial rationalization for the construction of the bridge, but had not sensed any unusually large concern over the budgeted costs. So, he concluded, there had to be some overwhelming justification to build the thing.

He felt it unlikely that the reason could be purely political, since the Old Bridge surely supported all of the inter-governmental communications that would be required. So, there had to be a sound economic reason, one where the expected increase in capacity added by the New Bridge would repay the outlay eventually. Of course, he knew that the expected lifespan of a bridge was usually measured in decades, if not centuries, so the economic justification would be very long-term. Just like the Channel Tunnel, he mused, likely to take a hundred years to pay back the investment.

Nevertheless, one boring evening he found himself considering just how much stuff could be moved across the old bridge, given that it had to be transported by horse-drawn wagons on the crossing itself. He set about roughly estimating this, in the back-of-a-used-envelope way he had been taught as an engineering student decades before.

Kevin could assume that the horse-drawn wagons could be loaded and unloaded close to the causeway ends, since he now knew where the depots were located on both sides. During his travels, he had seen that the same carts, horses and people were frequently on the bridge; he was even on nodding terms with some of the wagon drivers. He had spotted that the wagons, although superficially constructed in a traditional style, had slots in the sides and other fashionings that presumably made loading with fork-lift trucks and other machinery much more efficient on the Mainland. He could guess that there would also be magical assistance for loading and unloading, presumably inside the Lyndesfarne warehouses he had noted on various occasions.

He already knew that the length of the entire causeway and bridge was a little less than one mile in total. He reasoned it would take a horse-drawn wagon travelling at walking pace about fifteen minutes to cross the causeway. He also assumed that it would take fifteen

minutes to unload and load at each end, given the sophisticated assistance he had already postulated. So, Kevin concluded that each wagon could make just one trip each way in every hour.

As part of his musings, Kevin had undertaken a little research on the Internet concerning the practicalities of horse-drawn transport. From his reading, he could assume that each wagon could carry one ton of goods, or perhaps a little more, provided that they were not too bulky. A horse-drawn dray could make no more than half a dozen trips per day, depending on the season and weather conditions. So, any particular wagon could convey somewhere between five and ten tons of goods per day, into each world.

The limiting factor on the rate at which goods could be transmitted was probably the inevitable delays as queues built up, with wagons travelling in both directions trying to cross the old bridge itself. The entire length of the causeway was wide enough for wagons to pass provided, Kevin thought ruefully, that pedestrians kept out of the way. The problem was that the old bridge itself was only wide enough for a single cart at a time.

Given the number of wagons he had seen on the causeway, Kevin could imagine that several hundred tons of goods could be transported each way, each day. Really, this was not a huge amount of stuff – in Kevin’s world, competent logistics and a small fleet of modern Heavy Goods Vehicles would easily enable that amount of goods to be distributed to any part of Britain. But that certainly explained, Kevin considered, why he always seemed to meet on-coming HGVs when he drove to the causeway, and had occasionally spotted them turning into the fenced site marked “unexploded bombs”.

All this analysis still left several unanswered questions in Kevin’s mind. Firstly, what advantage would the New Bridge have over the existing crossing? There were certainly several areas where the specifications made it clear that there would be improvements. For example, he knew that the New Bridge would allow wagons to pass in each direction. This would result in fewer of those delays the wagon drivers found so frustrating, judging by the colourful and imaginative swearing that Kevin could not help but hear when making his way to and from the Island.

So, he mused, less delay meant that it was possible to deploy more wagons. He also knew that the New Bridge had slopes which were much less steep than on the original crossing, so that wagons could move faster – again, this was one of the features that he and Bret had been told to include in their design. So, for the new crossing

still under construction, all this led to transport capacity that was, perhaps, three or four times that of the Old Bridge. And of course the older crossing could still be used – Kevin was not aware of any plan to demolish the Old Bridge, and it certainly seemed in remarkably good condition, considering the amount of use it had seen over several centuries.

Of course, all this assumed that the same approach would be used in the future. Kevin began to wonder whether there was some alternative to horse-drawn transport that could be used on the New Bridge, but was impractical on the existing crossing. He could think of nothing else that could possibly work in both worlds which could transport large volumes of heavy goods, but perhaps there was some other way of transporting materials which was feasible.

Just for the sake of argument, he told himself, suppose the goods were loaded onto sleds or perhaps some kind of pallets on primitive wheels. These could be moved by some technical means on the Mainland side – perhaps as straightforward as a railway line – and some magical mechanism on the other side. Then there would be some simple, and presumably manually assisted, changeover from one transport system to another in the centre of the new bridge. Of course, it would be necessary to man-handle the pallets on their wheels or skids for a few yards, although one could even allow simple inertia to keep the pallets moving from one side to the other.

This would mean that the goods would have to be palletised; they would still need to be trans-shipped at either side of the crossing. Kevin strongly suspected that fork-lift trucks and other machinery were used in the warehouses hidden behind the fence on the Mainland side, and he imagined that magical means of loading and unloading would be used in the rather less well hidden warehouses on the Island side.

But he had seen no plan to install any such infrastructure and it would, he thought, be highly desirable if it had been part of the original specifications for the crossing. So, back to the drawing-board, he thought, or at least the horse and cart.

All this speculation about ways and means begged an important question: what's the economic value in the goods being moved between the worlds? If they kept up the rate he had calculated earlier for most of the year, they could move no more than 100,000 tons of goods in each direction per annum, and probably rather less. He had observed that the causeway and bridge was not always busy, so it was probably not even that much.

Say fifty thousand tons. Such a quantity was enough to make a considerable difference to the local economies on either side. So what could it be? Kevin briefly considered precious metals, gold, platinum, and so on, or even uranium, these days. But so much would have a huge effect on the local (and indeed world) economy – besides, gold and so on would likely be rare in the world of Lyndesfarne as well.

In any case, he had heard that importing precious metals did not help an economy in the long term. When the Spaniards brought back large quantities of gold from the Americas in centuries past, they thought they were importing wealth. Actually, they were just importing money, which led to rampant inflation.

So, both in the past, and currently, there had to be goods which were readily available in one world and more valuable in the other, and where the additional complexity and expense of the peculiar transport arrangements would be more than compensated. So, Kevin thought, perhaps I can find out what actually is in transit over this crossing.

During his next few journeys over the causeway, Kevin started making a few enquiries, in the subtlest way he knew how. He was already on nodding terms with several of the wagoners, and felt that his face was becoming well-known too. He had already fallen into the habit of meeting Ricard at the Island end of the causeway, deeming it unnecessary to make the other man walk twice as far as he had to. He suspected correctly that many of the people who crossed the bridge on a regular basis would have at least a reasonable grasp of both languages.

The drivers seemed happy enough to answer his innocuous questions about their health, families and the heavy loads they were carrying. Sometimes, the carters themselves did not know, or at least claimed not to – although Kevin did sometimes wonder if that was just because they were not sure of the correct words in English. The loads were usually completely covered by heavy tarpaulins although, given the variability of the weather Kevin had already experienced, this was perhaps not particularly surprising.

Even so, he did manage to amass a fair amount of information about the goods being imported. Items being moved from his own world to Lyndesfarne included paper in cut sheets, bolts of cloth and uncut leather hides. Also being moved in large quantities was cement in sacks, which was particularly unpopular with the wagoners, presumably because of the weight and the dust. Kevin did wonder

why cement was needed at all, given the magical construction stone he had already come across in Lyndesfarne.

Other items included cut stone: marble, slate and granite in fairly small pieces, such as might be used, Kevin thought, for tiles. In general, there were no finished goods, no foodstuffs, nothing that required a high level of technology to produce, although, these days, he knew that factories which produced these kinds of goods were both efficient and highly automated.

He was most surprised to find that a popular item imported into England was food. These were not dietary staples, but fresh foodstuffs; out-of-season fruit and unusual vegetables where there would presumably be a market demand from the increasingly picky consumers in the high street supermarkets.

He also came across one cart transporting timber, sawn to size and seasoned, but otherwise not finished in any way. Kevin could clearly smell the lumber, the rich odour reminding him of visiting a sawmill in South America during his peregrinations, and could also see the beams emerging from the tarpaulin covers. Emboldened, he asked the wagoner where this wood had come from. The answer, delivered in a strong accent, was that it came in from a place whose name Kevin – never at home with languages – failed to catch, but got the impression that it was somewhere exotically distant.

All this provided food for thought. To Kevin's mind, it was certainly cost-effective to transport materials for long distances – and presumably engage in dealing within the world of Lyndesfarne – simply to trade with his home world. And it also meant that there must be some effective rapid transport over very long distances on the Island, some kind of magical long-distance transport which he had not yet seen.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Kevin looked up and saw Tanji's Uncle returning across the lawn, walking as slowly and sedately as before. There were two other people following him, at least one of whom Tanji immediately recognised, judging by the way her face lit up.

"So that's why he left so suddenly," Kevin remarked to Tanji, "And how did your Uncle know that someone had arrived?"

"Oh, you silly. There's nothing mysterious there," she laughed aloud, "He saw them arriving at the front gate, looking over your shoulder. You didn't notice because you had your back turned."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kevin stood up and turned to face the newcomers. Tanji had already leapt to her feet and almost ran over the grass in her enthusiasm. Kevin followed her, watching her embrace a tall and rather well-built woman whose hair was a tangled mass of dark curls, and who was noticeably having to bend to hug Tanji's petite form.

As he drew near, Kevin was surprised to overhear Tanji speaking in English to the other woman, who was responding in the same way.

"Kevin," Tanji turned to him and said, "I'd like you to meet my very dear old friend Kithyn."

The dark-haired woman turned her smile in his direction. She was dressed in a style rather similar to Tanji's, with dark closely-fitted trousers, short boots and a pale green blouse, partially concealed by the inevitable Lyndesfarne cloak.

"I'm so pleased to meet you at last," she gushed, "Tanji has told me such a lot about you."

Kevin was always faintly worried when women said such things, being unable to avoid wondering exactly what had been said behind his back. He resisted the temptation to make some flippant remark along the lines of "nothing good, then", and smiled and nodded instead.

"Kithyn is an old and dear friend," Tanji explained, "We first met as students, a long time ago. We encountered each other again after a break, when I returned to the Guild of Directions, and we have been in correspondence ever since."

"Are you the one Tanji writes to in English?" Kevin asked, inspiration striking.

“Yes, I am,” she replied, looking faintly surprised by his sudden intuition.

“Well, I am very pleased to meet you. Tanji certainly seems to have put her trust in you.”

“We’re here to help you, if we can, my husband and I,” Kithyn said, indicating the man she had arrived with, “Tanji seems to think that you are in some kind of trouble, although I can’t for the life of me comprehend what trouble that might be. But I’m sure that Amiss will be able to sort it out.”

Kevin’s attention was caught by the man he took to be her husband. He was tall and slender, with a dark complexion and a shock of black hair, and looked as if he would need to shave frequently to avoid a five-o’clock shadow. He was chatting to Tanji’s Uncle in a fashion that seemed to radiate bonhomie, although Kevin noticed that his eyes never stopped moving, looking around continually as if concerned that he might be overheard.

Even though he could neither hear nor understand what the man was saying, he gave Kevin the slight feeling of watching a senior political figure on the television with the sound turned down – a certain unease that somehow his words did not ring quite true, that they were out of step with his body language. The kind of person, Kevin thought, who was skilled at the art of answering a question subtly different from the one which had been asked.

He also had the strangest feeling that he had met the man before, although he could not on his life remember when or where that might have been. Kevin had certainly experienced those strange context-dependent memory anomalies before. He remembered with considerable embarrassment being greeted warmly by an attractive young woman in a supermarket doing the weekend shopping, who he would have sworn he had never seen before in his life. It was only the following Monday he had realised that she was one of the secretarial assistants he had been working with for months.

Nevertheless, Amiss gave no indication that he had met Kevin before. It must be just one of those things, he mused, a false sense of recognition triggered by a slight resemblance to someone else.

Kithyn’s husband must have noticed that he was being spoken about, and came over at once. The man was also dressed in the familiar Lyndesfarne robes, his dark green outfit providing a startling contrast to the crimson-and-white combination worn by Tanji’s Uncle.

“This is my husband Amiss”, Kithyn said to Kevin.

“Pleased to meet you,” Kevin responded politely.

Amiss nodded formally in greeting, his eyes still darting to-and-fro. Kevin got the impression that he was something of a cold fish.

Tanji tugged on Kevin's arm, moving him just a little distance from the assembled company. Amiss did not seem to notice, and returned to his conversation with Tanji's Uncle, although Kithyn did give them a sharp look.

"I wasn't expecting Amiss," Tanji whispered to Kevin urgently, "Kithyn didn't mentioned that she was bringing him."

"Is there a problem?" Kevin enquired, also speaking in an undertone.

"No, I don't think so. It's just that I don't really get on with her husband very well."

Kevin was just about to enquire what the problem was, when he was interrupted. Tanji's Uncle clapped his hands twice, clearly expecting that this would attract the full attention of everyone within earshot.

"I think we've all met our guest from the Other World," he said in carefully precise English, indicating Kevin with one hand, "Perhaps we should pool our thoughts in order to help him in his current predicament. And not forgetting my dear niece Tanji, of course."

He indicated the seating in the arbour in a manner that made it clear that they should sit. There were just enough seats for everyone. Amiss settled himself in the chair immediately opposite Kevin, arranging his robes in just the same way that Tanji's Uncle had done earlier.

Kevin wondered about the faintly public announcement, which seemed rather overblown to him. He wondered if the formality of the statement was just the old man's normal style, or whether it was a reaction to Amiss's presence. He also noted that her Uncle's grasp of English was not quite as poor as he had been led to believe. He felt that some kind of formal response was in order.

"Well, I'm very glad to be here and thank you very much indeed," he said sincerely, "But, I've been meaning to ask: am I in real trouble?"

Amiss, who had been watching Kevin closely, shook his head slowly, smiling – although in what Kevin took to be a slightly insincere fashion.

"I understand that you've been frightened, badly," Amiss began, "And, on behalf of the Board of Control, I would like to apologise to you."

Kevin felt slightly taken aback. He glanced at Tanji, who was listening expressionless to the exchange.

“There really is nothing to be worried about,” Amiss continued, “A storm in a teacup, as I believe the expression is.”

Kevin nodded almost unconsciously in confirmation.

“Well, OK,” he said, “But what’s going on? If there’s no problem, why are you here?”

“Ah,” Amiss responded, now sounding distinctly shifty to Kevin’s ears, “Some of my colleagues in the Board are becoming progressively more worried about the effects of increased communications between the two worlds. These people, well, they need to be mollified. We need to find some way to help them understand the position.”

“What do you mean?”

“This phenomenon that you have stumbled upon, a secret you discovered accidentally, has made my colleagues nervous,” Amiss answered.

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” Kevin asserted, “I wouldn’t know who to tell, even if I wanted to. No-one in my world would understand or believe what I was saying, anyway, and almost everyone I know in Lyndesfarne is here right now.”

“Be that as it may,” Amiss assented, “Nevertheless, my colleagues need reassurance that this is not a serious problem, and one which will not reoccur.”

“So, I’m not out of the woods yet?” Kevin asked.

Amiss paused for a moment, probably not understanding the idiom. He spoke briefly to Kythin too quietly for Kevin to hear, and then continued.

“Not quite, I’m afraid. As I said, I’m here to help you. And in return, I need your help.”

“Well, anything I can do, just ask,” Kevin responded, “But I don’t understand what your colleagues are worried about.”

“Basically, it’s about cultural pollution. We cannot tolerate the risk.”

Both Tanji’s Uncle and Tanji herself nodded sagely at this point. Kythin too seemed unsurprised by this statement. Kevin must have looked perplexed, since Amiss immediately launched into an explanation.

“Look, it’s all about striking a balance between the economic advantages – making people rich, if you will – and the separation and independence of our world from yours. We expect a certain amount of travel for trade, of course. However, we don’t want our country to be flooded with visitors from your world and, equally, we don’t want too many of our people to be tourists.”

Kevin wondered if all this travelling for trade and tourism was in fact partially a cover for a certain amount of spying. It did occur to him that, as a child of the Cold War, perhaps this was just paranoid thinking. Nevertheless, he had come across several people on the Island who had clearly spent much time on the other world. The landlord at the “Dragon’s Nest” was a good example. He had clearly managed to acquire an identifiable local accent, which surely would have required spending a considerable amount of time in London. If he had come across him in a pub on the Mainland, Kevin thought, he would have assumed that the publican was a Londoner who had made his pile in some slightly shady business, and had decided to downshift his lifestyle to run a country inn.

Not that the landlord was the only example. Kevin brought Bret’s parents to mind, or even Bret himself. From the conversations during his visit to Bret’s family, he had formed the view that, in certain circles, it was quite the fashion for young people to travel around the other world, in much the same way that well-bred English gentlemen in centuries past had taken the Grand Tour of Europe as a mind-broadening cultural experience.

There were obviously other cases, too. Kevin doubted that Ricard could have acquired his idiomatic command of English without significant contact with native speakers over several years. It was also clear that he had met several people on the Mainland who must have frequently visited the Island. Professor Alan was one, not to mention Peter Brenner, the Project Manager. Kevin found himself wondering just how they had acquired their linguistic skills.

“The Board needs to be reassured that things are under control,” Amiss reiterated, “And we are sensing similar sentiments from our counterparts on the other side – from your world. Our contacts there are agitated too, and we need to placate them as well.”

“But why?” Kevin asked, looking confused, “Why are they worried?”

Amiss smiled somewhat cynically, the first genuine-looking reaction Kevin had seen him perform.

“In short, politics,” he said, “Politics driven by the clash of fear and greed.”

Chapter Thirty

“Games,” pronounced Professor Alan Wilmington in his characteristic pontificating style, “are a remarkable guide to the nature and inner workings of a civilization.”

If that is true, thought Kevin, then the Playstation generation has a lot to answer for.

Kevin was attending another of the NISSA briefing sessions. On this occasion, the theme was commonplace technology that he was likely to encounter on visiting the Island. The Professor actually used the word “technology” in this context, although Kevin had yet to comprehend any reasonably rational basis for the processes which underpinned the operation of such artefacts in Lyndesfarne.

Professor Alan was explaining about the Island equivalent of computer games. It appeared that automatically-mediated multi-player games had been a feature of Lyndesfarne society of a long time, Kevin was slightly dismayed to note. He did not really comprehend the Professor’s explanation of the behaviour, and got the impression that Alan was not entirely *au fait* either.

Despite his easy familiarity with computers in his professional life, Kevin was of a generation that did not really *get* the absorbing nature of immersive computer games. This was especially true for those games where several people could play together with the rules being enforced by the machines. He supposed this was a hangover from his university days, when the technology was in its infancy, and the few people interested in this kind of thing were unwashed, long-haired geeks of the first water, even by Kevin’s own standards as a swotty student.

Things were different in Lyndesfarne. On the Island, such entertainments were immensely popular, and not just with teenagers and young adults. Typically, these were role-playing games, based almost entirely on skill, rather than relying on pure chance.

Games were played “for real” in what the Professor could only describe as a light trance. For single-player games, one took what looked like a pair of smallish stones into each hand; they fitted neatly into each palm. For multiple players, the participants were seated together, and each took up a similar pair of stones. At an initialization gesture, the stones soften, allowing the manipulation of what Kevin thought of as a virtual environment.

“You enter a kind of dream-like state,” the Professor said in an attempt at explanation. “Immersive, entrancing, persuasive – an environment sometimes difficult to tell from reality. You need to experience it yourself to really understand.”

“But how do you get out? Suppose the house is on fire?” Kevin asked, curious as always as to the practicalities of the inexplicable. “Surely there has to be some way of contacting the player.”

He had had some very occasional experiences with trying to attract the attention of one of his younger colleagues when playing computer games. Needless to say, this had usually been during business hours, and when they should really have been doing something more closely related to the work at hand.

The Professor smiled.

“There’s a gesture which people in the, well, real world can use to break into your game. It’s considered bad manners to use it without reasonable justification, of course. And as for the player himself, he also gets unambiguous clues that the environment he perceives is synthetic.”

Kevin was intrigued. He wondered if the idea for computer games had been somehow suggested by the Lyndesfarne experience. The parallels were obvious, but he could not immediately see how the ideas could have been transferred from one society to the other. Perhaps, he mused, this was a genuine example of parallel development.

Kevin was being briefed about all this because the same kind of imitation magical environments had a more serious purpose. He had wanted to know how the detailed design for the Island side of the New Bridge was being handled. He knew that large numbers of extremely detailed specifications and calculations had to be made. It was becoming clear that a variant of these games had been used to represent the bridge’s construction. So it is quite possible, he considered privately, to build realistic models of things that really do not exist, and indeed could not *possibly* exist – even in the near-fantasy world of Lyndesfarne.

Another thing that struck Kevin as odd at the time, although he could not quite put his finger on exactly why, was that gambling games were not popular on the Island. Professor Alan explained that there were no games which relied heavily on chance and bluff: no card games like Poker or Gin Rummy; no dice games, even as innocuous as Ludo or Monopoly; no casinos or slot machines.

All kinds of sports and ball games were certainly well-liked. However, these were regarded as social activities, to be played with friends and family; something one did oneself at the weekend as a member of a club. On the Island, there was no culture of high-profile sport, nothing with the overt enthusiasm (mass hysteria was Kevin's view) and widespread support in the way that soccer, for example, was treated in Kevin's own world.

The Professor did not offer an explanation of why this should be so. Without saying as much, he gave the impression that this was all to do with the social fabric in the world of Lyndesfarne, with a nod towards the emphasis on family life. Kevin did not think to press the point further at the time. He had always thought that sports with huge followings appealed to some tribal sense of belonging, and he wondered if this was somehow absent in Lyndesfarne.

Later in the same session, Alan turned his expertise to the social effects of the Island approach to long-distance communications.

"There's another aspect of Lyndesfarne society I would like to mention to you," Alan began. "It's something you will almost certainly come up against, and I don't want it to be too much of a shock to you."

Kevin nodded politely. He had received so many cultural shocks over the last few months that he felt one more would not be a disaster. But let's not get too blasé about it all, he thought.

"As we do here, people in Lyndesfarne like to keep in touch when they are travelling. But, over there, they will use a form of long-distance writing using what we call 'slates'. Have you seen an old-fashioned writing slate – like a miniature blackboard in a wooden frame?"

Kevin shook his head.

"No? OK. Well, the best analogy is a portable blackboard, usually about the size of a large pad of paper," explained the Professor, forming the appropriate size in the air with his hands.

"One writes, or sketches or whatever, using ordinary chalk, and then one uses a series of gestures to indicate the intended recipient."

Kevin had not heard of such devices before, and was immediately fascinated.

"The similarity with our modern electronic mail is obvious," Alan continued, "Although it is worth observing that long distance written communication has been a feature of Lyndesfarne society for generations."

At this revelation, Kevin became extremely thoughtful. Several interesting implications had already occurred to him. According to

the Professor, there was nothing resembling telephones in widespread use. The only exceptions were the very short-range intercoms such as those he had come across in the hostel he occasionally used when visiting the construction sites. Kevin thought he could probably shout and make himself heard over that distance.

Another inference he drew was that Lyndesfarne people were used to writing, all the time. No doubt this was in a wide variety of styles, and often highly informal and chatty. Nevertheless, it was not quite a conversation. Messages written on the slates appeared to take a few minutes to arrive – it was not quite instantaneous – although why this should be so was not made clear to Kevin.

Also, it meant that there was nothing analogous to mobile phones in Lyndesfarne, and certainly nothing like the extreme miniaturization of sophisticated electronic function that had become such a ubiquitous feature of modern life in Kevin's world. It turned out that the writing slates used for letters were quite large – apparently there was no easy way to make them smaller – which implied that Island people were used to carrying around fairly large bags at all times.

The discourse on games and slates had lead Professor Wilmington onto a discursive exposition (or “ramble”, as Kevin defined it) on other aspects of entertainment on the Island. Kevin's attention had begun to wander by this time, and he was barely taking in the Professor's words.

Alan covered reading and writing at some length. As Kevin already knew, there was a written language with a different but otherwise conventional alphabet. Apparently, books and magazines were available in a huge variety, including many topics without analogues in Kevin's world. The name *Sprite Fancier's Monthly* drifted though Kevin's dazed consciousness at this point, for no readily discernable reason.

Most books and magazines were printed on conventional paper, although the magical means of doing this was not made clear. The equivalent of daily newspapers was handled quite differently. Some variant of the slates used for letters (never the same ones) would be updated several times a day with new articles and reports. Of course, you had to get a different slate to subscribe to a different newspaper-equivalent – so deliberate, commercially-driven technical incompatibility was a feature of the Island world as well, mused Kevin.

Recorded animations of plays of all kinds were very popular, including the equivalents of soap operas.

“And, before you ask, yes, there is an equivalent to *Coronation Street*.” The Professor laughed, jolting Kevin into a more attentive state.

Kevin was not a great fan of such entertainments, but he was mildly interested to learn that they were delivered through the medium of magical stones, like the games. In this case, both hands were placed on a single stone, and it was not necessary to move significantly. In this more passive mode, a viewer was not so much immersed in the soapy world as presented with a virtual environment allowing them to watch the action as if upon a stage. The stones updated themselves periodically (once a week, or more frequently), and could therefore be enjoyed at a time to suit the subscriber.

The downside to all this was that you had to get different stones for each play (or serial, or channel, or whatever) one wanted to watch. All this implied that the number of different choices an individual could actively experience was rather small, compared with the extreme choice and (in Kevin’s opinion) hugely variable quality of satellite or cable broadcast television in his world. So, less choice but hopefully better quality, he concluded, and wondered what effect that had on people’s social life.

Chapter Thirty One

Political reasons, thought Kevin, always seem to be bad news. Nevertheless, it was becoming clear that the political establishment in Lyndesfarne, or at least the part of it that was fully aware of the special properties of the crossing, were distinctly nervous about the effect of unlimited access to the Other World.

“But why don’t you want more visitors?” persisted Kevin, “Don’t you like us?”

Amiss shook his head, obviously disappointed with Kevin’s political ingenuousness.

“How much do you know about the history of your own country, your own world?” he asked.

“Well, a little, I suppose.”

“So how would you characterise the last few hundred years?”

Kevin thought about this. He supposed this era would incorporate both the Industrial Revolution and the Internet Revolution. So much had happened, so many changes, from huge improvements in health and well-being, to the invention and deployment of the atomic bomb.

“Well,” he answered slowly, “I would say that this was a period of rapid development, now spreading world-wide, and unfortunately punctuated by several large-scale wars.”

Amiss nodded slowly, like a teacher receiving an unexpectedly insightful answer from a normally recalcitrant child.

“Yes. And you need to understand that, here, the history is very different. We have a very stable society in this world, one that has not changed very much in millennia.”

Amiss leaned forward in his chair, presumably to emphasise his next remark.

“And we like it that way. We want no disruption to our social structure, our way of organising our lives. We demand stability from our partners in the Other World. So, an essential pre-requisite for any change to, well, for example, the way goods are transported between the worlds, is to identify and remove any risk of societal changes.”

Cultural stasis at all costs, Kevin mused. I bet that world-view leads to very conservative decision-making.

Both Tanji and her Uncle were following the conversation closely. Her Uncle seemed unsurprised by what he was hearing, and appeared to be able to follow the discussion reasonably well. Kevin

had noticed that he was occasionally whispering to Tanji, presumably to get a translation of some word or phrase. Kithyn, on the other hand, seemed slightly uneasy, and was watching her husband closely, and noticeably fidgeting in her seat.

“So,” Amiss said with a tone of finality, “The Board is politically opposed to extending communications with your world, simply because it is too socially dangerous.”

Kevin remained silent for a few moments, mulling over what he had just heard. He suspected that the Board’s position reflected other, more far-reaching political organisations.

“I think I am beginning to understand your concerns,” he said finally, “But why increase the risk by building a new bridge?”

Amiss looked at Kevin for a long moment, and then turned and spoke in a low voice to Kythin, holding his head close to her ear so that her dark curls partially obscured his mouth and chin. Kevin’s niggling feeling that he had encountered Amiss before was suddenly redoubled, although he could not work out why. He felt that the reason was in his head somewhere, hovering just below the level of consciousness.

As Kevin watched, Kithyn nodded in response to Amiss, and then turned to Kevin.

“Amiss has just suggested that I tell you a little about my role,” she said.

She settled herself more comfortably in her chair, shaking out her hair and arranging her cape about her knees.

“Tanji and I work for an organisation over here,” she began, “You’ll have heard it called the Guild of Directions. It’s dedicated to supporting trade between the worlds. I don’t know if you’ve ever wondered why the new bridge is vital, but it must be obvious to you that continuing trade is very important to us here in Lyndesfarne.”

Kevin had been extremely curious about this very question, and nodded vigorously.

“I’m sure it must be,” he said in response, “Otherwise no one would have bothered with the new bridge – or the old one, for that matter. But I’ve not been able to work out why the goods traffic is so important.”

Kithyn raised her eyebrows, apparently surprised that he had already given the matter some thought. Glancing sideways at her husband, she continued.

“It’s to do with the characteristics of what you refer to as magic. I’m sure it appears to you that, in many ways, magic has properties

which are little short of miraculous – powerful, long-lasting, even pollution-free.”

Kevin, listening intently, nodded.

“The aspect which is perhaps less apparent is that magic is expensive – very expensive. It takes lots of people-time, a great deal of skilled and careful effort to make anything work.”

Kevin thought about the spell – he could not think of it in any other way – which Bret’s husband Eosin had put on the teddy bear he had brought as a present during his visit. Even adding a few simple movements to the toy had taken several tens of minutes, and Kevin had taken as read that Eosin was a skilled practitioner. So, he could well believe that it took considerable effort to conjure even a simple sprite.

“It’s also not amenable to mass-production,” Kithyn continued, “So for every item, individual and often lengthy attention is always required.”

“Why is that?” Kevin asked, aware that, even to himself, he was beginning to sound like an over-inquisitive six-year-old.

“Well, that’s a little difficult to explain without going into a lot of technicalities,” Kithyn answered, sounding very slightly exasperated. “But generally, just making two things which are apparently identical still requires just as much effort. It’s simply because there will ultimately be very tiny, but undeniable differences between different items, differences which are amplified by the process of infusing the magic, and which require a certain amount of skill and training to sort out.”

Kevin nodded again, satisfied with the answer, at least for the time being.

“Anyway, magic is expensive. So, it turns out that many simple products would be cheaper if they were machine-made, or even made by hand in what you would regard as a conventional manner. So, traditionally, we’ve preferred to import large amounts of goods, and simply add the, well, magical enhancements we require.”

Kevin could understand this. He imagined that the increased pace of industrial developments in the recent past meant that it was even more desirable to import partially completed products, which were then completed or upgraded in Lyndesfarne. He was also beginning to suspect that the Island economy had become increasingly dependent on these imports. Which would certainly lead, he considered, to the desire to increase the efficiency of trade, and hence to the need for the New Bridge.

“Let me give you an example,” Kithyn continued, “Take the construction stone used in building the bridge. Do you know how it is made?”

Kevin shook his head.

“No, I don’t,” he said, “But it seems completely unlike anything we can get at home.”

Kithyn looked amused for a moment.

“Actually, it uses cement, ordinary cement imported from your world. I don’t know all of the details of the process but, as I understand it, the cement is used to make concrete, and then both the shaping and the additional properties are added magically.”

“So, the lightness, the reinforcements, and all that, are added to ordinary concrete?” Kevin asked.

“Yes, exactly,” Kithyn confirmed.

Kevin was determined to find out more, perhaps from Bret, as soon as could. But he also realised that, from an economic viewpoint, his country, even his entire world, was being regarded as a source of low-cost labour and cheaply-made goods (at least by comparison with the Island). And it still didn’t answer the question: what goods were traded the other way?

“Let me give you another example,” interjected Tanji, “We were talking about Dragons earlier, you remember?”

There was a sudden feeling of consternation, a frisson of nervousness, at the mention of Dragons, even amongst such apparently suave and sophisticated individuals as Amiss and Tanji’s Uncle. There must be, Kevin mused abstractedly, something about these creatures hidden deep in the Lyndesfarne collective psyche.

Tanji evidently caught the unconscious reaction, and paused for a few moments before continuing.

“Because of the Dragons, keeping domestic animals in this part of Lyndesfarne was often fraught with difficulties. The presence of the animals tended to attract the Dragons, so that even if one had constructed pens and buildings strong enough to keep the creatures out, they tended to loiter in the area, making it hazardous to venture outside.”

“So,” she continued, “It became popular to import animal products from England, particularly hides to make leather clothing. And these days, we import other kinds of cloth as well. All of the tailoring and closures, the waterproofing, the wear resistance, and the self-cleaning and self-repairing properties – they are all added here.”

Kevin made a mental note of the hint that magical methods used to ensure longevity of goods. This was, he thought, another aspect

which leads to cultural stability. Clothes which did not wear out, and which were expensive, would last for ever, meant a quite different dress culture than the ephemeral fashions of his own world.

Kithyn picked up the thread of the conversation.

“Lots of other goods are imported, too,” she said, “The tiles, used to make the writing slates you’ve seen, and paper and wood – all imported from your world.”

“Why not just allow machines across, and manufacture things here,” Kevin asked, once again feeling slightly as if he was nagging.

Amiss spoke up.

“It’s a cultural issue again. Machines are regarded as ‘dirty’ and disliked for that reason.”

Kevin had a momentary mental image of old-fashioned Victorian smoking chimneys and persistent coal-laden smog. He could imagine how this association could come about. Nevertheless, he wondered, perhaps the view that machines are somehow unclean was deliberately promulgated on the Island.

“Propaganda,” said Kevin, to himself.

“What was that?” Amiss asked.

“Oh, nothing really. I was just wondering if the perception that machines are dirty was officially encouraged.”

“No, not at all. It’s just a deep-seated feeling in most people.”

Amiss’s answer did not quite ring true. Kevin suspected that the official standpoint was based on the fear that machinery could swamp Lyndesfarne, and provoke radical changes in society, just as it had done during the Industrial Revolution in Kevin’s world, and was happening even more quickly now.

In any case, Kevin thought, they would have to turn off the sprites that were already active around the crossing. He was not sure if they actually could be disabled, even if one wanted to.

“There’s another factor to take into account,” Amiss said, giving the impression that he was trying to change the subject, “Which might be summarised as people trades.”

“You mean slavery?” Kevin asked, aghast at the thought.

“No, no, nothing like that,” the other man laughed, “It’s just that people move from your world to ours, or vice versa, for private reasons, to do things, or have things done which cannot be achieved so easily in the other world.”

“What kind of things?” Kevin asked, suddenly baffled.

“Well, a select few, those who have the right connections, and the money, travel to your world for surgery.”

“You mean, to have medical operations performed?”

“Yes. There are certain small private clinics and hospitals set up, in England and in other parts of your world, specifically to cater to this trade.”

Kevin was astonished. He had been forming the view that everything was more advanced in Lyndesfarne.

“You mean, our medicine is better than magic?”

“Well, sometimes,” Amiss assented, “You see, for certain directly-treatable diseases and medical conditions, the techniques in your world are much more advanced.”

This was a complete revelation to Kevin, although it made a certain kind of sense. For those in the know, of course, it would be an irresistible opportunity to get life-saving, or at least life-enhancing, medical treatments which were not available to everyone.

“What about the other way?” Kevin asked suspiciously, “Do people travel to Lyndesfarne for medical reasons as well?”

“They do. For reason I can’t explain right now, in this world we’re better at psychological disorders, as well as whole-body, systemic medical conditions.”

Kevin began to wonder about some of what he had heard of so-called “alternative medicine”. He had been assured by several medical professionals of his acquaintance that there was absolutely no basis in science for most of these techniques to work. But perhaps, he mused, they really do work in Lyndesfarne. They had certainly developed considerable psychological skills, and had some ways of directly working with memory and perception, he knew, which were used frequently, almost casually by many people.

Kevin shook his head.

“So, to summarise,” he said, “Lyndesfarne needs – or at least wants – goods and services from England more than my world wants goods from Lyndesfarne – or at least goods that Lyndesfarne is prepared to let us have. Is that about right?”

Amiss stared at Kevin for a long moment, with a strange look on his face: some admixture of shock and suspicion, with just an undertone of loathing.

Just at that moment, Kevin became aware of a variety of rustling noises in the bushes around him. The others had obviously heard it too, judging by the way the conversation stopped abruptly, and they all turned in their seats, trying to track down the source of the interruption.

Moments later, many dark figures started emerging from behind the hedgerows, and moved purposely over the lawns. Some of the strangers rapidly encircled the party with what Kevin could only

describe as military precision, while others ran in the direction of the house. Someone shouted something that Kevin did not understand, but everyone else clearly did, and Tanji and her Uncle stiffened immediately. Shortly afterwards, the same voice repeated in English.

“Everyone stay where they are!”

Chapter Thirty Two

Over the decades, Kevin had spent a great deal of time on his own. This had given him plenty of opportunity to think, perhaps even too much. He knew he was regarded by his work colleagues as something of a loner, although he thought this was more to do with intrinsic shyness than any antipathy towards his fellow man. As a child, he had been brought up to be polite and quiet in adult company, and he had always tended to be reserved, even withdrawn, in the company of his peers. As a youngster, he remembered, he preferred to hide himself away rather than join in the games in the playground; in later life, he would just immerse himself in his own cogitation and speculations.

In one of his more ruminative moments – only much later events would persuade him to revise his evaluation of his own thoughts to “moderately paranoid” – Kevin had wondered just how much he would be missed if he were to suddenly and permanently disappear.

There really was nobody in the world that would actually miss him. Kevin’s parents were by now quite elderly; not exactly infirm, but tended to keep themselves to themselves, living in their own circle of friends at the Rotary and golf clubs. He had never felt very close to his parents, even as a child, and as an adult he sought their company only occasionally, more out of a sense of duty and obligation, rather than any desire for emotional contact.

His now-ex wife had no interest whatsoever in maintaining any contact. She would not even take his phone calls on the extremely infrequent occasions where he had attempted to contact her in order to resolve occasional (and invariably trivial) aspects of their former life together. Their marriage had been childless, which now seemed to be fortuitous; children might have kept the marriage together, he considered, but he would probably have withdrawn his personality even more, quite possibly to the point of insanity.

Since the separation from his wife, he had felt too emotionally fragile to undertake any kind of new relationship. He had had no liaisons or even dates during this period; he had not really found himself attracted to anyone, despite one or two fairly clear come-ons from a couple of female acquaintances. At least, he thought, I imagined that they were come-one, although it could have been just wishful thinking on my part.

Even at work, his human contacts were very limited. This was forcibly demonstrated by events that occurred during the latter part of the construction work on the new bridge, when the main support towers had been completed and the first parts of the roadway itself were being manoeuvred into position.

At the firm's local headquarters in Manchester, Kevin still had a private office, which was in an obscure corner of the building and at the end of an infrequently-used corridor. Kevin had initially relished the peace and quiet of the office when he had first taken up residence, but now rarely visited it. He was spending a lot of time travelling and staying in hotels, thanks to the continuing pressures of on-site working on the Lyndesfarne Bridge. When he was not actively engaged on the site, he tended to work at home, mainly to avoid the tedious slog through the city traffic in the mornings and evenings.

On this occasion, Kevin had elected to visit his office on his way back from Lyndesfarne. He had managed to get away earlier than he had expected and this, combined with an unusually smooth road journey, allowed him to arrive at the office building by mid-afternoon. By good luck, he managed to find a space in the overcrowded car park; this involved pouncing on a spot being vacated by someone Kevin did not recognise, and rapidly reversing the Volvo into the vacated bay. Thank goodness, he mused wryly, for employees leaving early.

The office itself was tidy (thanks to Kevin himself) and clean (no doubt due to the attention of the firm's contract cleaners), but nonetheless there was a distinct sense of being unused. He could not easily have said just what had given him that impression; conceivably it was the smell of the closed room, or perhaps just the way that the sunlight was shut out by the partially-closed blinds. Or maybe, thought Kevin, it is the impression of robotic tidiness that leads to the absence of that lived-in look.

He set about one of the very few professional activities that was more easily completed while physically in the office, that of deleting the latest tranche of spam and other unwanted electronic mail. He was struck by just how little junk mail had actually accumulated since he had last performed this task, which he always mentally considered as analogous to mucking-out with the aid of a pitch-fork.

It appeared that the firm's email was still working, in that messages he sent seem to be delivered. He had confirmed this by sending an email to himself, which appeared in his inbox after only a few moments. Nevertheless, it emerged that he had been removed from the internal electronic mail and telephone directories, which

meant that anyone who did not already know his email address or phone number would find it difficult to contact him.

He also appeared to have been removed from most of the internal mailing lists, which meant that he was no longer getting all those professional circulars, administrative reminders and management guidance emails which seemed to be an essential part of modern office life. Under normal circumstances, the absence of what he thought of as “electronic administrivia” would truly have been a blessing, but now he found it slightly disturbing. Such distribution lists were almost never properly maintained and it was nearly impossible to get your name removed from them, in Kevin’s experience, but now there seemed to be a concerted effort to cut him off from the mainstream business of the company.

Of course, he was still being paid regularly; he was pretty certain he would have noticed before if this had not been true. Kevin was not particularly interested in money. He was naturally neither a spendthrift nor a miser, in his own evaluation; he found that he instinctively lived well within his means. Part of the reason behind this was that he was not really interested in acquisitions for their own sake, or even as a part of that game where ostentatious consumerism was used to advance one’s perception of one’s place in society. Just too boring for words, he thought.

Now that he had confirmed that he was indeed being paid monthly as always, Kevin began to wonder about other financial matters. He checked on his expense claims, which included the costs of travelling to Lyndesfarne, as well as hotel accommodation on both the Mainland and Island sides. He managed to confirm that he was quite definitely being reimbursed in the usual rather tardy fashion, but he could find no trace of the paperwork he had used to make the claims in the first place.

It was slowly occurring to Kevin that there were only a few people in his company with whom he now had contact, and that the paper trail of expenses claims or remuneration was exceptionally sparse. With so few records, it would be entirely possible to deny that he now worked for the company, he thought, and he really could just disappear overnight without anyone being the wiser.

Kevin was mulling over this insight on the way to the canteen to pick up a cup of coffee when he ran into Frank Boxtton, one of his few close professional acquaintances, in the corridor.

“Hi. Long time no see.” Frank exclaimed, raising his hand in a vague gesture of greeting. “You know, I didn’t realise you still worked for the company. I’m sure someone said you’d left.”

In spite of being one of the more experienced project managers, Frank was not particularly renowned for keeping his finger on the pulse of company. Even so, anyone with a responsible position in a modern organisation had to be at least somewhat aware of current goings-on, and to be plugged into a few of the more reliable rumours. In Kevin's company and, he strongly suspected, most other professional environments, rumours and gossip were an essential part of the system, lubricating the process of consensus-forming and decision-making without the necessity of anything as crass as a direct instruction being issued.

"Well, no," Kevin responded immediately in a probably doomed attempt to head off this particular strand of gossip, "I'm definitely still here, although I have been a little elusive recently."

"Nose to the grindstone stuff, I take it?" Frank enquired.

"Yes, something like that," Kevin agreed.

The same hyperactive company rumour mill had long ago informed him that Frank was thought to have a drinking problem. Kevin did not think this was a problem of the "I drink, I get drunk, I fall down, no problem" kind. It was just that too many employees in high-pressure jobs probably drank more than was good for them, to the despair of the company medical service. Frank was just an example, considered Kevin, and it did not seem to stop him from fulfilling his role highly successfully.

Frank was just sufficiently close an acquaintance for Kevin to suggest that they went for a quiet drink after work. It was not long before the two men found themselves in a bar Kevin had been to before, when undertaking what was euphemistically referred to as "an off-site long-term strategy meeting", meaning of course an all-night drinking session. During these binges, it was traditional to speak freely about all the problems with the firm and its customers, to discuss at length about which projects were in the mire and which ones were going really badly, to debate openly the short-comings and lack of vision of senior management, and generally put the world (or at least the company) to rights. And all before closing-time, too.

The bar was mostly empty at this early evening hour, although rapidly become more crowded as groups started arriving, presumably intent on getting in a quick one before the gruelling journey back to their loved ones. Kevin attracted the attention of one of the bar staff, and asked Frank what he wanted to drink.

"Do me a double Scotch and pint of bitter, would you," the other man replied.

Kevin ordered the beer and spirits, including a pint for himself, and then the two men ferried their drinks to an unoccupied table in a quiet corner. Kevin mused on Frank's order of the whiskey and beer chaser combination, which he had heard called a "boilermakers", and which caused him to re-assess the state of Frank's psyche, not to mention his liver.

Frank downed his Scotch in one, winced and then took a deep pull at his beer. Sighing deeply, he focussed his attention on Kevin.

"So, I thought you had taken early retirement."

"No, no," Kevin responded, "I'm still here, hard at work. I'm just doing a lot more on-site work. Makes quite a change from spending all day hunched over a computer in the office."

"Sounds all very mucky and hands-on. But what is it you are working on?"

Kevin wondered how much he should tell Frank about the New Bridge and the strange properties of the world of Lyndesfarne. He recalled the admonishments at the project kick-off briefing, and was beginning to understand the importance of a sensitive approach, or perhaps just plain evasion.

"Oh, it's another bridge," he replied vaguely, "Up in the North-East. It's got a few interesting technical problems, not to mention a couple of challenging environmental aspects. But nothing special really."

"Well, I hope you get it finished off quickly. There are all sorts of changes in the wind at the moment."

"Really?" Kevin contrived to sound surprised, although he had already begun to wonder. He took a sip of his beer while Frank went on.

"Ah, you know, I've heard that there's some mysterious venture going on. All very hush-hush, lots of closed-door meetings. It's got the Partners all very excited."

"So?"

"So, there are to be no more projects started that are based in our office. There's loads of coffee-machine talk of closing down the Manchester building altogether, once this wacko project is done. People are already being asked to move. I know some of the techies are being shipped off to Japan for some sea-level causeway proposals, lucky sods. While I'm being asked to move to Berkhamstead, of all places."

"Oh, there are worse parts of the world," Kevin sympathised, "But why is this strange project leading to the office being closed?"

“That’s the strangest part of the whole thing. It makes no sense, and there’s no suggestion of any even half-way sensible reason at all.”

On the way home, Kevin found himself wondering why he had not heard about the office closure. His first insight was that the same computer glitch that had removed him from the internal directories had prevented him from getting the management emails which would have undoubtedly preceded a change of this magnitude. On the other hand, he considered, perhaps it was because the New Bridge project was still many months away from completion, and so there was no immediate intent to move him and his small team; the building would remain open for as long as the New Bridge project continued. Still, he mused, there were only a few people working on the Lyndesfarne bridge, especially now that the design work was completed, and it all seemed very wasteful.

Chapter Thirty Three

There was a startled moment of silence around the group as everyone, now including Kevin, tried to get some kind of a mental handle on what was going on.

The new arrivals appeared to be formed from two completely disparate factions. The larger group were dressed in garments which Kevin thought would not be in the slightest out of place in his world. At a first glance, their garb could be mistaken for the everyday working clothing typical of those frequently employed out of doors. Nevertheless, the sameness of the blue windcheaters and the dark blue trousers, together with a certain undeniably military stance, made it clear to Kevin that they really were uniforms.

It was this paramilitary group who were acting to prevent any movement. Even with no one apparently giving orders, they moved with the competence and precision of the professionally-trained and well-briefed soldier.

The remainder of the newcomers were dressed in dark robes with their hoods pulled well up so that their faces were mostly obscured. These outfits appeared black when glimpsed at a distance, but on closer inspection a more complex colouring became apparent. It was a strange and shifting mixture of dark shades which Kevin was not entirely sure he could reliably identify, let alone describe to anyone else.

The three people in this second group noticeably walked more slowly than the others, with a certain suggestion of stealth about their careful movements. After a few moments observation, it seemed to Kevin that there was a suggestion of embedded magic in their garments, and he speculated that they included some property which allowed the wearer to be difficult to see, or perhaps even invisible.

Despite the instruction to stay where they were, everyone sitting in the arbour got to their feet, or at least made a move to do so. They moved at the same moment, instinctively and quite unconsciously. Later, when he had collected his thoughts, Kevin would have a clear, if slightly surreal, recollection of the synchronised scraping of the chair legs on the stone patio.

Several of the uniformed individuals were carrying items which at first glance looked like heavy cudgels. When Kevin had collected his wits sufficiently to start paying attention, he noted that they were

actually thick black sticks, with large bulges at each end and smaller ones elsewhere along their length. The smaller swellings sparkled busily, indicating the presence of magical sprites of some kind. He had not seen anything like the clubs before, but they were being wielded in a fashion that left Kevin in no doubt that they were some kind of weapon, and he had no wish to find out exactly how they were used.

When Kevin was finally able to drag his eyes away from the weapons and uniforms, he found to his considerable surprise that he recognised several members of the paramilitary group. He was sure that they were Guardians from the bridge, and from the Mainland side too, he thought. These were men and women he had at least nodded to politely on many occasions, or with whom he had even passed the occasional inconsequential pleasantries. At least a couple of the Guardians clearly recognised him, too, although they made no move to acknowledge the fact.

Several of the Guardians were standing close to both Tanji and Kevin, not touching or restraining them in any way, but making it clear in subtle ways that any attempt to run would be quite definitely futile and very probably painful.

Kevin looked around in time to catch Tanji's Aunt being escorted from the direction of the stables by a pair of Guardians. She was looking distinctly bemused, although not particularly frightened. Tanji's Uncle's reactions were more telling. He looked absolutely furious, but seemed intent to avoid saying or doing anything, although the effort made him look like he was going to explode at any moment. Kevin decided that this was good advice: to try and avoid being vocal, or drawing any attention to oneself, until the situation became clearer. Assuming, he thought, that it would become clearer, of course.

The same voice they had all heard earlier spoke again.

“On your feet, all of you.”

This was a largely pointless instruction, since all except Tanji's Uncle were already standing. Kevin was not at all sure where the voice was actually coming from. It certainly did not appear to be any of the people he could see, who were speaking. The others seemed to have noticed too, since several of them were looking around to try and locate the speaker.

The same voice then instructed them in no uncertain terms to move into the house. They were directed, politely but in a manner which made it clear that they had no choice in the matter, to the kitchen where Kevin and Tanji had enjoyed their breakfast only a few

hours before. As they walked, her Uncle moved closer to Tanji and said something to her which Kevin could not understand, but he took to be an enquiry that she was OK.

Kevin was feeling extremely anxious about Tanji's wellbeing, and was trying to find some opportunity to move closer to her. As they filed in through the kitchen door, watched carefully by the squad of Guardians, Kevin hurried to catch up with her. He attempted to move casually and naturally, and without looking at all surreptitious. This seemed to work, since no one prevented him from sitting down next to her at the kitchen table.

The Guardians appeared to be waiting for something, or someone. A contingent stood guard, stationing themselves at the doorways to the large open room. The remainder left quickly, and it was not at all clear to Kevin where they might be going, or what they might be doing. The black robes had congregated in a group, and now stood silently, their faces still concealed in their hoods.

After a few moments silence, the prisoners – Kevin could not think of themselves as anything else – started whispering amongst themselves.

Kevin leant over to Tanji, and spoke softly into her ear.

“What's going on?”

“I wish I knew.”

“The people in the blue outfits, they're Guardians, aren't they?”

“Yes,” she replied softly.

“So who are the people in the black robes?”

“Watchers, I think. But I've never seen so many together, or even heard of such a gathering. I've never seen one up close, and I've always understood that they were solitary individuals. They're not supposed to reveal their identity to anyone, not even other Watchers. There are stories that say that you could live with a Watcher for years and never know!”

Before Kevin could enquire further, a group of the Guardians re-entered the kitchen, escorting two newcomers. He was surprised to recognise the new arrivals, who were Ricard and Professor Alan Wilmington. Ricard looked distinctly nervous, even more so than when he had “rescued” Kevin from his nocturnal ramblings all those months ago. He was visibly looking to Alan for guidance, and seemed to Kevin to be entirely unable to make a decision on his own.

Alan, on the other hand, looked like he was in control of things. The Guardians appeared to be deferring to him, taking his instructions. Kevin found himself wondering whether it was Alan's

voice he had heard earlier, perhaps projected over a distance though some magical means.

The two men rapidly became the centre of attention in the room. Their arrival had provoked an outburst of what Kevin took to be questions or complaints, with almost everyone speaking at once. The Professor appeared to be unfazed by the barrage of questions, and raised both his hands for silence. The torrent of voices abated, with the Professor seemingly willing to wait indefinitely for silence.

Kevin noticed that Amiss did not seem in the slightest bit surprised or concerned by the turn of events. He was now standing to one side of the room, looking calm and very sure of himself. Amiss caught Kevin watching him, and smiled in return, a look which Kevin thought appeared faintly menacing rather than reassuring.

There seemed to be some unspoken communication between the Professor and Amiss. Kevin had noticed the glances flying across the room, which seemed to be both acknowledging each others presence, as well as communicating something else that he could not fathom. Kithyn, by contrast, looked distinctly frightened, and seemed to be looking to Tanji for some kind of help or reassurance.

Once the noise in the room had died down, the Professor addressed Kevin and Tanji, very rudely ignoring everyone else.

“You too have caused me a lot of trouble,” he began, walking up and down the room in a fashion Kevin had seen before, “I really don’t like having to be dragged over here like this.”

“You seem to be a bit annoyed,” Kevin said, stating the obvious, with at least the subconscious objective of being as irritating as possible.

“Too right I’m annoyed,” he responded, fuming visibly.

“So what’s getting to you?”

“You’ve caused an almighty furore, both here and in the Other World,” the Professor ranted, “Why did you have to take a predictor with you? Can you imagine the impact of such a thing?”

“What do you mean?” Kevin said, genuinely confused.

Professor Alan sighed, his incandescent temper subsiding a little.

“There’s a certain class of sprite, we call them ‘predictors’, who can, in various ways, tell the future.”

“Yes, I know,” Kevin replied, “Tanji told me that the paperweight had some ability to predict the future weather. And it’s a light source as well.”

“Exactly. But it is the knowledge of the *existence* of ‘predictor magic’ that must be protected. It cannot be allowed to be known about in the Other World.”

“Why not?” Kevin persisted.

“Well, there are certain vested interests in the Other World,” the Professor said, suddenly sounding cagey to Kevin’s ears, and glancing at Amiss.

Their conversation was being followed with interest by everyone in the room, included the Guardians and, Kevin noticed to his surprise, the Watchers. There was a sudden silence, as if everyone was waiting to hear the Professor’s explanation.

“There are various established organisations and companies,” he said in a manner that suggested to Kevin that the words were being dragged from him, “Sports groups, team managers and so on – who do not want the results of matches yet un-played to be so predictable.”

The Professor did not make any mention of another obvious interested party. Nevertheless, it occurred to Kevin that there must be a considerable vested interest from some less respectable groups with formidable amounts of control in certain, legally rather grey areas. He suspected that organised crime groups would be extremely interested in this particular form of magic. Surely, he reasoned, there must be criminals who were making astronomical amounts of money from a huge range of gambling activities, both legally sanctioned or otherwise, not to mention the use of betting as a way of facilitating money-laundering.

Assuming the existence of gambling organisations operating beyond the law, then the use of predictors would be a considerable threat to their incomes if the ability fell into someone’s hands, someone who might use the capability to make huge sums of money by laying bets on races and matches when already knowing the outcome.

Only later would it occur to him that he might have got that analysis quite wrong. He would realise that the criminals themselves would have wanted such a device. What an advantage it would be, he reasoned belatedly, for crooked bookmakers to be absolutely sure of the results of a race or match before it had actually happened.

“It’s too dangerous,” Alan continued, “We’re going to have to take some extreme measures.”

Kevin was suddenly apprehensive.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been worried about the New Bridge project for some time,” the Professor said, “It’s just too dangerous to allow it to be completed.”

“But why?” Kevin demanded, “Surely it’s exactly what was asked for by the Board of Construction?”

“Perhaps it was. But the Board do not seem to be able to learn from the past, despite the prompting from the Board of Control. Our analysis tells us that the amount of steel used in the construction of the bridge was almost guaranteed to allow some magic to leak through to your world. We’ve got to shut down the New Bridge project.”

Kevin had been wondering about the use of “we” in the last few utterances. He supposed that the Professor was speaking on behalf of some powerful group or groups in Lyndesfarne. His suspicions were more-or-less confirmed when Amiss spoke up at this point.

“We have been trying to prevent or at least delay its completion for ages,” he said, “But now, we will be forced to destroy the New Bridge.”

Chapter Thirty Four

In Kevin's professional experience, there always comes a moment in every large project where the delays caused by errors, unpredicted additional work and logistical failures reaches a critical stage. At this point in time, the fact that the project will be seriously delayed can no longer be ignored, even by the project managers whose job it was to ensure on-time delivery.

At times like these, Kevin saw that a crucial part of his job was to put pressure on the management team to ensure that cold reality was stared in the face, rather than flatly denied. He had to guarantee that the now-impossible schedule was ditched, and to make sure that the plans were adjusted to correspond with reality, rather than attempting (and inevitably failing) to force reality to fit the plans.

In general, Kevin concluded, almost everything about civil engineering took longer to achieve than even the most pessimistic plans, an observation he knew as Hofstadter's Law. This was defined as "Everything takes longer than you think, even when you take into account Hofstadter's law" – a notion that Kevin found neatly recursive.

Kevin was attending a particularly stormy project progress meeting, and feeling increasingly fed up with the whole event. He was firmly of the view that "progress meetings" were gathering where everyone sat around and talked, instead of actually making any progress. Certainly, this specific event seemed to be generating much heat and smoke, but with precious little clarity and illumination as a result.

The breaking-point in this case was the revelation that the foundation work was going to take much longer than suggested by the original plans. During the initial excavations on the Mainland side, the contractors had discovered that the bedrock was more splintered than the surveys had suggested, and consequently there would need to be more drilling and blasting, as well as quite a lot more reinforced concrete to support the bridge.

Kevin was the bearer of this particular piece of bad news. He had recently visited the excavations, made numerous notes, and written them up into a lengthy professional report, which of course no one seemed to have actually read. The reaction around the table, as the realisation of the implications began to sink in, was a combination of

surprise and fury. Voices were raised, heated outbursts were almost immediately interrupted by someone else, and fingers were pointed – all standard behaviour which Kevin mentally categorised as “throwing the toys out of the pram”.

Tweedledum acted as if meeting thought that the surveying errors were entirely his fault, as the representative of the Mainland contracting firm. Acting entirely in character, he mounted a robust defence, trying to shift the blame on to the surveying work, which had commissioned by Kevin’s company and at least partially by Kevin himself.

Having been put on the spot, Kevin tried to explain calmly and rationally that, even with modern techniques, underground surveying was an imprecise science. He knew that core drilling was always a sampling process and could easily lead to misleading conclusions, while echo-soundings required a considerable degree of human interpretation, which of itself implied the possibility of human error.

This particular rationalization was not well-received. Various parties around the table seemed determined to make certain it would not be seen as their fault, and the blame would be firmly attached to someone else. Terrific, thought Kevin, as he watched the arguments rattle to and fro, I can see that getting caught in the cross-fire was in fact going to shoot the messenger.

“Wasn’t there also those problems with the surveying equipment?” asked Tweedledum, prompted inaudibly by one of his ever-present coterie of underlings, presumably in an effort to undermine Kevin’s explanation.

“What’s that?” Kevin responded. “I’ve heard nothing about any problems.”

“Oh yes, I was chatting to someone the other week – I forget who. Said they had endless problems with the machinery,” Tweedledum blathered on. “Iffy things, those scanners. Too many microchips in them for my taste. Never can trust them.”

Kevin was taken aback. He had not heard of any such failures, and had thought that he was on sufficiently good terms with his team that he would have got wind of anything like this. On the other hand, he mused, much of the surveying work had been subcontracted, and to a company he had not heard of before. During the work, he had met some of the individuals, who all seemed quietly confident, and the report they had produced all that time ago was a model of capable professionalism.

There was nothing in the survey report about any instrumentation problems, which he would certainly have expected from any

competent company. Any problems which might affect the accuracy of the report would, as a matter of course, be included in the text, in order to frame any limitations in the work carried out, not to mention that essential facet of professional life known as “covering your arse”. There is something strange about this whole situation, Kevin pondered distractedly.

Peter Brenner, the design team Project Manager – always a bit of a worrier, even at the best of times, Kevin thought – was alternately acerbic and apoplectic.

“Nothing in the survey anywhere?” he spluttered. “No risks register entry? Nothing at all?”

Kevin confirmed that there was no report of scanner problems anywhere, provoking a reaction from Peter best characterised as “spitting his dummy out”.

David Macmillan, the Partner in overall charge of the New Bridge project, confirmed Kevin’s statements in a much calmer tone of voice, evidently trying to get the meeting back on some form of even keel. As if he actually read the reports closely enough to tell, Kevin thought resentfully.

Regardless, David downplayed the scanner problems, suggesting that it was a minor oversight, and hinting that the technical problems might be explained by proximity to the straights and whatever it was that prevented technology from working on the Island.

Peter was evidently not to be so easily pacified. He resorted to using the Lyndesfarne language, speaking directly to the smaller Lyndesfarne team sitting (almost huddling, Kevin thought) on the far side of the table.

Panit, whose apparently permanent paranoid views appeared to have been ratified by the recent exchanges, looked smug, and even Bret was looking a little bit relieved at Peter’s words,

“Eh? What’s he saying?” interjected Tweedledum, glancing around the table. In doing so, he simultaneously confirmed Kevin’s guess that Tweedledum did not speak the language, as well as voicing his own view that deliberately speaking a language not everyone at the meeting understood was both rude and unprofessional.

“I was just explaining that the schedule for the New Bridge will have slipped by months, not days, thanks to this cock-up,” explained Peter, in a tone of voice that suggested not an ounce, not a smidgeon of remorse or apology.

Panit seemed to be making side remarks to Bret. Kevin could not hear what was being said, and he suspected that he would not have understood even if he could have heard.

After rather too much further discussion, and far too much bitching and backbiting, the meeting came to a decision. There would be an immediate re-plan cycle. Peter Brenner would produce a revised plan, based on the increased effort estimates from Kevin, and present it to the next progress meeting in a week's time.

"It's not the end of the world," was David's parting shot, completing his self-appointed role as meeting pacifier.

Kevin wondered if he was witnessing a game of "management chicken" being played out between the project managers on the Mainland and Island sides. This intransigent behaviour, by turns, obdurate, uncompromising and unyielding, suggested that there was some kind of power struggle going on. Both sides knew that some delay was inevitable; neither side wanted to be the first to admit it, presumably because of the loss of face that this would entail. Kevin's news had forced their play, by making it clear that the Mainland side would be badly delayed, and allowing for a certain amount of gleeful finger-pointing

The later part of the meeting was characterised by a sudden emergence of what was – to Kevin's mind – a completely unnecessary interest in the minutia of the expenses and the details of the day-to-day expenditure. Even the most trivial, and the most essential, outgoings were scrutinised minutely, as if numerous employees were trying to deliberately defraud the company. These pressures on costs seemed, at the time, to be rather odd, especially given the lack of emphasis during the kick-off meetings on the price for delivery. This seemed to be a complete about-face from the bean counters, who had seemed so acquiescent in the early meetings. Kevin wondered just what was going on behind the scenes.

He came away feeling immensely depressed, as he often did after such meetings. There had been some ill-informed decisions, much miscommunications and a truly astonishing amount of unprofessional bitching.

Kevin tended to follow a dictum he had originally heard from his Grandmother: "never ascribe to malice that which can adequately be explained by incompetence". Since he had come across an amazing amount of ineptitude and stupidity amongst his supposedly experienced professional colleagues, he had no difficulty in putting the whole experience down just as Granny would have liked.

Later that evening, while relaxing in the quiet comfort of his Manchester flat, Kevin was curious about the follow-up to the day's get-together. He seemed to have picked up a lot of "action points" from the meeting, mostly to resolve issues not caused by him in the

first place. He wondered if somehow the management were particularly anxious about the progress of the work. This was such an unusual project, he mused, conjecturing if there were extra concerns above and beyond those he would have recognised in a normal job. Unsure what else to do, he resolved to seek out Bret at the earliest opportunity, and learn more about the history of the construction of the Old Bridge.

The opportunity to talk to Bret occurred a week or so later, during one of their scheduled inspection trips to view the progress of the construction work. It was a wet and windy day, forcing the two men to take shelter in the lee of several pallets of construction stone blocks destined for the tower on the Island side.

They were accompanied by the ever-present Ricard. Fortuitously, Kevin had left his rucksack behind, entirely accidentally as it happened, and he asked Ricard to return and fetch it.

“I’ll stay here with Bret,” Kevin suggested, “We can complete our notes for the weekly progress report.”

As if another week with a complete lack of progress was something he particularly wanted to report on. There had been no discernable improvement on the delays so recently identified on the work on the Mainland side. He had, however, picked up a few not-so-subtle signs that progress was not all that had been expected on the Island side as well.

After Ricard had moved off through the rain, Kevin sat down heavily.

“Why do we have all these setbacks?” he huffed, venting his pent-up frustration, and thereby visibly startling Bret, “Did they have these kinds of planning and execution problems when the Old Bridge was built?”

Bret looked thoughtful for a few moments before replying.

“Hmmm. Well, as it happens, I have studied the history here. And that’s a very interesting question.”

Kevin looked curiously at Bret and raised an eyebrow in a way he liked think was quizzical. Bret took the hint and continued.

“I once told you that I was fascinated by the bridge as a child. Now, you should understand that not many large bridges are built in this world these days. Most normal transport does not require such things.”

“Portals,” murmured Kevin.

“Well, yes indeed,” Bret replied, looking slightly surprised at Kevin’s remark.

Bret stared into the distance for a few moments. Kevin got the impression that he was weighing up just how much he could, or perhaps should, tell. He appeared to come to some kind of internal conclusion, and returned his attention to Kevin.

“So, where to begin? The tale of the making of the bridge is not all that well-known, since not many people are really aware of the true situation. I heard some chronicles as a child, from my parents and other relatives. They all seemed a little disjointed and sometimes inconsistent with one another, and altogether impossibly heroic. Although they did make wonderful bedtime stories.”

Bret smiled for a moment and then continued.

“More recently, I’ve looked into the history, using some contacts I have within the Guild of Directions. And I have to say, what I discovered is just a bit worrying.”

Bret’s normally smiling features were suddenly replaced by a sombre look.

“There were an alarming number of accidents, especially in the earlier phases of construction,” Bret explained, “Even more than would have been expected in those days. People died, all too often. The workers, from both sides, came to believe that the bridge was somehow jinxed or cursed, and it became increasingly difficult to recruit men to work on the project.”

“The catalogue of problems culminated in the collapse of the central arch while it was still being constructed.”

Kevin knew that stone arches were built by first constructing what must have been a huge and complex wooden framework. On this base, the workers would carefully lay the pre-cut masonry blocks. This had to be done as evenly as possible to minimise the stress on the scaffolding, as well as ensuring that the arch would stand up under its own weight when the woodwork was removed.

“That must have delayed the construction!” Kevin exclaimed.

“Well, yes. There was a riot that – quite literally – went on for days. Intense paranoia everywhere, practically a witch-hunt. There seems to have been some suspicion of sabotage at the time, although nothing was ever proven.”

Bret grimaced, then continued.

“This incident also provoked financial turmoil, and backers from both sides very nearly pulled out. It seemed for quite a time that work on the bridge would be abandoned.”

“But, after a fair bit of skilful footwork by the management, a few backroom deals to raise more money, some impressive oratory and,

probably most importantly, an agreement to make a huge increase in the danger money paid to the workforce, the project was restarted.”

“The number of incidents was considerably reduced after that, and obviously the bridge was finished – although the cost was considerably higher than originally budgeted.”

Bret stood and shook his head.

“Anyway, the rain seems to be easing off. I’d better go and check on those delivery schedules.”

After Bret left, Kevin thought about what he had just been told. He knew he was engaged in an inherently dangerous occupation. It was a sad but inescapable fact that large-scale civil engineering projects almost always cost someone’s life.

The New Bridge had so far had perhaps less than its fair share of such incidents. Of course there had been several near-misses, with falling materials narrowly missing workers on a couple of occasions, as well as the usual collection of the kinds of injuries – crushed arms, broken legs – that building work so often engendered.

Even so, Bret’s history lesson had forced Kevin to consider seriously for the first time that the surveying equipment was sabotaged, or that the report on the foundation analysis work had been tampered with in some way. But, if it was sabotage, he wondered, what did they hope to achieve? Maybe Granny was wrong, and malice is the correct interpretation after all.

Chapter Thirty Five

“Destroy the Bridge?” Kevin practically screamed, “Are you insane?”

Kevin’s mind reeled at the prospect of all that effort going to waste, not to mention all of the personal commitment he had invested in its design.

“I’m afraid so,” Amiss replied, looking irredeemably smug. Kevin resisted the sudden urge to resort to violence, which would have been completely out of character, and probably not very effective anyway.

It occurred to Kevin that there had been forces trying to delay or prevent the completion of the bridge for quite some time now. With the benefit of hindsight, there seemed to have been several incidents during the design and construction which had appeared at the time to be merely accidents, or coincidences, or perhaps just Acts of God, but which he could now interpret as an attempt to disrupt the project. Some of these occurrences could very easily have resulted in serious injury, conceivably even death. Miraculously, those involved had all survived, in most cases without even a scratch. While of course such “near misses” were the subject of an investigation, these examinations were much less lengthy and disruptive than the enquiries that would have ensued if someone had actually died.

Even so, there had been no obvious attempt at direct sabotage of the fabric of the bridge itself, at least as far as he could tell. Presumably this was because it would have been very difficult to conceal, given the sophistication of modern design and construction. Kevin could not think of a way that a straightforward attack could have gone undetected. Any attempt to alter the design so that the bridge would collapse “accidentally” would be very difficult, because of the cross-checking and multiple computer simulations which had to be performed. Besides, it occurred to Kevin, some of those simulations were undertaken on my own laptop computer, and I keep that very close to me almost all the time.

The most severe risk to the delivery of the New Bridge project, especially in the early days, was the erratic intervention of the various strands of management. At the time, Kevin had put it down to the usual executive intransigence, not to mention inconsistency, but

perhaps it was actually an attempt by some faction to disrupt the completion of the bridge.

Now, it seemed, there was to be no attempt at subterfuge, no subtle pressures brought to bear to delay the project, or even to increase the anticipated costs to a point where the backers decided to cut their losses. They were simply going to destroy the bridge, with no appeal.

Kevin sagged, both physically and mentally. He could think of no way to prevent the destruction of what he had long thought of as “his baby”, or indeed to influence the course of events at all.

“How?” he croaked, “How are you going to do it?”

“Oh, it’s simple enough,” Amiss replied, gloating, “We’ll just blow up the towers.”

Kevin felt like a bomb had gone off inside him. He had long suspected that there were concealed explosives in the bridge, emplaced in the chambers he had been specifically requested to include in the design. Like in the Old Bridge, these charges had been planted to guarantee destruction in the event of some kind of invasion or other direct threat. Now, because of political concerns triggered by an accidental discovery, they were going to detonate the explosives that had presumably already been concealed in the towers.

Kevin looked around at the rest of the group, suddenly wondering what the others were making of all this. He could see that Tanji appeared to be very frightened, shaking visibly and looking imploringly at him. Kevin grasped her hand, trying to impart some kind of reassurance. She clung to his arm, seemingly grateful for the touch.

Kithyn seemed to be shocked at her husband’s stance. Discovering that Amiss was so closely aligned with this separatist view was clearly news to her. Seeing Kevin looking at her, and aware of Tanji’s distress, Kithyn seemed moved to offer some condolences.

“This wasn’t what I expected. I’m sorry,” she said to Tanji, still speaking in English.

Tanji nodded dumbly in response. She did not look capable of any other reaction.

Kevin knew that Tanji had been writing to her friend, telling her all about him, and keeping her informed of their movements. She had quite reasonably expected her old friend to keep her confidences. However, Kithyn, in all innocence, had been relating these tales to her husband. Perhaps Amiss had even encouraged Kithyn to suggest to Tanji that they should write regularly. Kevin supposed that the use

of not one, but two, naïve parties was a subtle way of keeping track of his whereabouts, and even his state of mind. It was almost certainly better than the intrusive presence of Ricard which had been employed earlier.

Tanji's Uncle, and her Aunt as well, looked upset at the revelations but did not look quite so frightened. Her Uncle was still striving to keep his temper under control, and had not yet felt compelled to get involved. Being aligned with the Guild of Directions, presumably her Uncle thought that his seniority and position would protect both of them from any serious consequences.

"What's going to happen to me? And to Tanji? Am I going to be blown up too?" Kevin asked Amiss, making a feeble attempt at irony.

Amiss looked genuinely, sincerely shocked at the thought.

"Oh, no, not at all. We've no desire to kill you."

Professor Alan spoke up, prompted by a glance from Amiss.

"You've definitely got the wrong end of the stick," he said, "I'm not sure what made you think that anyone has any intent to harm you."

"It was you," Kevin responded flatly.

The Professor was taken aback.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I overheard you talking on the telephone, I suppose to Amiss, when we were locked in your office, saying that I – we, Tanji and I, well, you said we would have to be permanently silenced."

The Professor laughed, a little uncertainly, given the sharp looks he was getting from the rest of the group. Kevin wondered if it had not been properly understood that Alan had tried to make prisoners of himself and Tanji, or that such a threat had been made.

Amiss spoke quickly, to fill the silence.

"It's very clear-cut. We have a working knowledge of psychology that's rather better than in your world," he said, "And we have recognised procedures for, well, to put it simply, we can make you forget."

"You mean, some kind of mind-wipe?" Kevin gasped.

"Well, if you like," Amiss responded affably, "You won't know anything about it, afterwards. We've had much practice, you know. And of course we ensure that any reminders, any physical evidence is removed."

"So this was always to have been my fate?" Kevin demanded. "I mean, even if you weren't planning on destroying my bridge, I would have still had my memory modified, my past changed?"

“Well, yes, I’m afraid so,” Amiss responded, not sounding the slightest bit contrite, “It’s a standard approach for dealing with people from your world who discover, or have to be told, too much about us.”

Kevin mentally repeated that old expression about paranoia, the one that went, just because you are paranoid, does not mean that people are not out to get you. It seemed entirely clear to him that a clean-up operation had been long planned. This would have destroyed the physical evidence of the bridge’s construction, arranged that his company closed the Manchester office, and split up or transferred anyone who might know even a little about it. It would certainly have removed his existence from the company records, or at least made it look as if he had left the organisation some time ago.

“Did you know about this?” Kevin demanded of Tanji.

Her expression was answer enough.

“No! Absolutely not,” she answered indignantly.

Kevin had not really believed that she had, but nevertheless he felt he had to be sure.

“So what’s going to happen to Tanji?” he asked Amiss.

“Oh, nothing. She’s a professional Guide. She must know where her loyalties lie.”

This statement provoked a certain amount of muttering from Tanji’s Aunt, directed at her Uncle.

Kevin twisted in his seat to look at Tanji.

“I don’t want this to happen to you,” she said emphatically, “I didn’t want any of this.”

Suddenly she pulled him close and kissed him full on the lips, as if there was no one else in the room.

“I want you to stay with me,” she whispered, her eyes alight, “I love you.”

Kevin felt his heart suddenly leap, despite the dire situation he found himself in.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured in response, “I love you too.”

A sharp intake of breath from Tanji’s Aunt caused Kevin to look up. Tanji’s eyes too were drawn to something in the corner of the room. Changes were occurring in the appearance of the Watchers, who had hitherto stood impassively throughout the exchanges. The black robes, with their mysterious aura of magic, had simultaneously transformed. They now had the dull brown appearance of oiled waterproof leather capes, whose worn patina gave the impression of having seen considerable service in all weathers.

Kevin was immediately struck by the similarity of the figures to the images of the Ferryman he had seen before, both at Bret's home and in the pub only a few days before.

"The Ferryman," Tanji breathed, as if in confirmation.

Chapter Thirty Six

“You know, it’s not exactly correct to say ‘the world of Lyndesfarne’,” said Bret deliberately.

Bret and Kevin were undertaking another inspection trip, this time checking the alignment of the roadbed from the Island side. Ricard had declined to join them on this occasion, seemingly content to deliver Kevin into Bret’s care for the morning. The two halves of the bridge were beginning to approach each other across the straights as the construction work continued, and they were reassuring themselves that the configuration of the pre-fabricated sections was as close to perfect as possible.

At least, that was what they were supposed to be doing. In fact, right now, they were sheltering from the rain, which was particularly heavy and penetrating, accompanied by a wind strong enough to risk not only blowing them off their feet, but over the edge of the low cliffs and into the surf below.

The two men were sheltered from the worst of the weather by a yawning rocky overhang, and warmly wrapped in their waterproof capes and hoods. Bret had produced a flask of the hot chocolate which Kevin had begun to appreciate so much all those months ago. Kevin had sipped the warming drink, and then made some remark about his first visit to the world of Lyndesfarne.

“Ah,” Kevin responded in a non-committal fashion, cupping his hands around the drink Bret had just handed him. “So what should I be saying, then?”

Bret smiled.

“Well, firstly, it’s not quite the correct pronunciation. I know it’s the way it’s said in your world, but the derivation is from our name.”

Bret then said a word which could, perhaps, be understood as Lyndesfarne although it seemed, Kevin thought privately, to have more spitting in the pronunciation than he was comfortable with.

“I can see the evolution,” he responded, “But changes in intonation for the same name in different languages are not exactly uncommon, I’m told.”

Bret snorted and nodded, at least as far as Kevin could see under the voluminous clothing.

“The other thing I wanted to mention is that Lyndesfarne is not a world at all.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin demanded.

“It’s actually only one rather small country, just one part of an entire world.”

Kevin already knew this. Briefing sessions at NISSA had made it clear that the other world was almost exactly the same size and shape as his own. Naturally enough, he had also seen many paper maps of the surrounding areas, as part of the design and planning work, which had all indicated a geography broadly similar to the area around the Island as seen from his own world.

“I’m sure that’s true,” he said, “But I’ve never heard the world referred to as anything else. Does it have a proper name?”

According to Bret, the world had a name which Kevin, confirmed non-linguist that he was, again failed to catch, and came with a slight suggestion that Bret was clearing his throat.

“I suppose it’s too much to ask for a translation?” Kevin asked.

Bret chuckled.

“Hah! This is one of those linguistic points which make things difficult for the Guild of Directions.”

Bret went on to explain that there was no word in common usage in English that refers to his world in its entirety. Apparently, any plausible words in English were either archaic or mired in mythology, and would certainly be disapproved of, Kevin imagined, by Professor Call-me-Alan. The best translation was, of course “Earth”, but this hardly helped to distinguish the two worlds.

Bret put the flask of chocolate back into his bag, and produced what Kevin recognised as a magic slate. He unfolded it rapidly, and then made a complex series of gestures, stopping several times, presumably to ponder what was required next. Finally, he turned the face of the slate to Kevin. The surface was covered with a map, apparently drawn in white, green and blue chalk.

“We are here,” jabbing a finger to indicate a tiny smudge on a coastline.

The map showed a wide peninsula, attached at the northern end to a continent that filled half the map and apparently extended off the eastern side. The isthmus enclosed a long narrow sea on its eastern side, while the map showed an ocean stretching to the west. To the south, a broader sea was evident, with a coastline at the very edge of the displayed map, except for one large promontory. It looked, though Kevin, a bit like Italy, but without the boot effect.

“This area here,” Bret said, indicating the peninsula, “Is Lyndesfarne proper.”

According to Bret, the country of Lyndesfarne comprised the entire neck of land, almost up to the northernmost point of the enclosed sea, and included numerous islands on the eastern side. It was one of these islands which represented the crossing to Kevin's world. As far as he could judge, that little island was at the same latitude as the island of Lyndesfarne in Kevin's own world.

"So what's your name for that island?" Kevin enquired.

Bret grinned again.

"We call it England," he said.

It was Kevin's turn to chuckle.

Bret took back the slate.

"Look at this."

Bret started gesturing again, concentrating for a few moments on his actions, and then showing the surface to Kevin. The image was now of a globe, once again rendered in chalky shades, and moving slowly on the surface of the slate. The representation was of a world which, if one looked very quickly indeed, could initially be mistaken for the Earth, but appears increasingly different as one looked closer.

Kevin was fascinated. He stared at the moving map for several minutes, lost in wonder at the complexity – and assured reality – of this other world. Finally, he dragged his attention back to Bret, who was looking on patiently.

"So why is the crossing just there?" he asked, "Surely it could be anywhere in the world?"

Bret paused, looking thoughtful for a while.

"I probably shouldn't tell you about this, but I want to explain something to you, something about my personal motivation. And, to do that, I need to tell you a little about the history of my world."

"A long time ago," Bret continued, "By which I mean several thousand years, some people discovered how to construct a trans-world portal. It took a huge amount of effort, with scores of skilled, well, magical technicians might be the phrase, working for decades, but finally a crossing between your world and mine was constructed."

"You know, I felt sure that the crossing must be artificial," breathed Kevin quietly, not wanting to interrupt the flow of Bret's exposition.

"Oh, this crossing here was not the only one, and certainly it was not the first to be constructed. Indeed, it is believed to be almost the last one to be completed. But it is widely believed the only one left now."

“Wow,” thought Kevin, only later realising that the word had actually come out of his mouth. “So how were such crossings made?”

“Frankly,” Bret responded, “I don’t really understand the process in its entirety and, in any case, I doubt I could translate the concepts required.”

Kevin nodded. His lack of knowledge of the magic of Lyndesfarne, and his inability to talk about it, had once again proven to be an obstacle.

“Still, once the process had been proven,” Bret continued, folding up the slate while he spoke, “Various groups of people did so, in widely different parts of our world, often in secret, and for a variety of motives, some of them less good than others.”

“What sort of purposes?” Kevin asked.

“Oh, the usual kind of thing. Trade, conquest, and a whole variety of political and religious reasons. Initially, it was thought that these crossings were linked to many different worlds. It was only later discovered that all of them when to the same world – yours, of course.”

“Why is that?”

“There appears to be some kind of exclusion principle in effect. As I understand the theory, a crossing could be established to any world, any of an infinity of universes but, once one crossing had been established, no other world could be linked to ours.”

“So there were other crossings to my world?” Kevin cried out, “Where?”

“Well, all over the place, at one time.” Bret replied.

He explained that some crossings had been established in places where the differences in geography or climate made them far too obvious or, more usually, almost impossible to navigate safely. Originally, many different groups controlled the crossings, and some were extremely cavalier in ensuring reasonable compatibility on both sides.

“Some crossings allowed entire lakes to drain into deserts, or seas to flood farmland,” he observed. “One reason that our crossing is still here is that it was carefully chosen to have approximately the same geography, climate and average weather conditions on either side. By that time, the portal constructors had learned from their mistakes, and were much more cautious in choosing their placements.”

“There were so many, well, environmental disasters over the centuries that there was a need for more control. Eventually, the

really dangerous crossings were shut down, with governments and other controlling organisations sometimes using extreme measures to ensure that this happened.”

Kevin enquired what was meant by “extreme measures”, and learnt that this included what Bret described, with obvious irony, as “explosive decommissioning”, as well as what sounded very much like direct military action.

“So, now we have a continuous process of risk assessment, with the threat of political action to quash any threat.” Bret explained, “And it’s effective. Crossings have been permanently closed in recent times – inside the last hundred years or so. Even this crossing was at severe risk of closure itself not so long ago.”

“Why?” Kevin demanded.

Bret’s explanation was lengthy, but it seemed that the global wars of the twentieth century had been monitored very closely. It was apparent to Kevin that the Lyndesfarne authorities had a huge craving for political stability, and any risk to that stability would provoke them to take drastic steps.

“Could you make new crossings?” Kevin persisted.

“Technically, perhaps,” Bret answered, “Although the time and effort, not to mention the cost, would be huge – it would make the budget for our bridge pale into insignificance. It would be a brave or foolish person to attempt such a thing without obtaining permission. And just negotiating that permission could take half a lifetime!”

Bret made it clear that some extremists maintained that it would be best to close this last crossing. Some sects wanted to set up an entirely new set of crossings to some more tranquil world, while others wanted an enforced isolation. However, there was no majority backing for either of these approaches, mainly, as Kevin understood it, on the basis of “better the devil you know”.

“And as for my own position,” continued Bret, “I’m personally completely convinced that this crossing – *the* crossing – is a very precious thing. Setting aside the economic advantages, which are valuable but not ultimately essential for my world, or for yours, I think that a limited knowledge of your world, and some access to it, is actually vital to maintaining the long-term stability in my country, my world.”

“So, the reason I want our project to succeed, our bridge to be completed on time, is to maintain a degree of communication between our worlds, with the right balance of control and commerce. That’s where my interests are.”

Chapter Thirty Seven

“Who is the Ferryman?” Kevin asked Tanji.

“I told you about him once, remember?” she hissed in response.

There was a long pause, while Kevin wondered what to do next. He was almost certain that he was missing something important, but his instincts and intellect seemed to have gone their separate ways. Everyone seemed to be surprised, even astounded, as if by the sudden appearance of a mythical figure – several mythical figures, in fact. Everyone, that is, except Tanji’s Uncle, who looked unsurprised and, curiously, distinctly relieved.

The old man stood up, bowed formally and said a few words which Kevin took to be a greeting, which was acknowledged by bows returned by the Ferrymen. He then said something else, the meaning of which Kevin could not begin to guess at.

“What did he say?” Kevin whispered to Tanji.

“He said, I wondered when you’d get here.” she replied, sounding as flabbergasted as Kevin.

As if at a silent instruction, all three figures removed their hoods. Kevin was dumbfounded to recognise all three of them. The evident leader of the group was Bret’s mother, whose name he had never learned. She was supported by Bret himself, as well as Peter Brenner, the Project Manager from Kevin’s company. Bret had shape-shifted to his male form, and Peter looked the same as ever. By contrast, Bret’s mother had eschewed the option of masculine appearance. She looked stern and imposing, and Kevin could not help but think that she would give Tanji’s Uncle a run for his money in the statesman-like gravitas stakes.

“Bret’s mother is the Ferryman!” whispered Kevin to Tanji.

“You know these people?” she gasped.

Kevin recalled that Tanji had never met Bret. For some reason, he and Bret had not been had any direct contact over the last few weeks, indeed since Tanji had replaced Ricard as his Guide. This was not of itself particularly unusual, although Kevin did entertain a fleeting suspicion that perhaps this was not entirely accidental.

Amis and the Professor seemed to draw together, perhaps unconsciously, as they realised just who it was under the hoods and robes. Ricard, never an imposing presence at the best of times, was doing everything he could to become even more inconspicuous.

Bret's mother surveyed the scene, seemingly able to look all of them in the eye simultaneously. Finally, she addressed Alan Wilmington.

"I think I need a little more explanation," she said, using English presumably for Kevin's benefit, "What's so important about this damn paperweight?"

"But, but you've already heard about the predictor magic working in the Other World," the Professor stammered, "Surely you must understand that we cannot permit any such object to have free circulation over there."

Bret's mother said nothing. Her eye fell on Amiss, who clearly felt compelled to make a contribution of some kind.

"We must recover it," he asserted, "at any cost."

Alan glared at Amiss, their previously seamless non-verbal communication abruptly failing.

Suddenly enraged, Kevin jumped to his feet, much to everyone's surprise. Tanji's Uncle looked at him as if he had gone mad. Amiss jumped, and then moved as if to try and silence Kevin. Only Tanji herself seemed to understand, and she too stood up, blocking the path between Amiss and Kevin.

"But you must already have the bloody paperweight," he shouted angrily at the Professor, "I left it on your desk, completely by accident, I might add, when we did a runner from your office!"

The Ferryman remained calm in the face of Kevin's outburst, although she undoubtedly understood the importance of what he had just said, and the unexpected reaction from Amiss.

She addressed Tanji.

"Is this true?"

"Yes," she replied emphatically, "We were so rushed, so frightened, that we completely forgot about it until it was too late to go back."

Bret's mother's gimlet eyes fell on Alan. It seemed that everyone in the room was aware of the sudden tension between the Professor and the Ferryman.

"Do you have the object?" she demanded of Professor Alan.

"No," he squeaked.

"Do you know where it is now?" she asked again, sounding suddenly dangerous.

"No, no I don't."

"When did you last see the paperweight?"

The Professor wilted perceptibly under the piercing lance of the Ferryman's gaze.

“It was on my desk, in my office at NISSA,” he said in a barely audible voice.

“After your guests had left so, shall we say, unexpectedly?”

“Yes.”

“So, our Visitor here” – she indicated Kevin with one hand – “quite definitely did not remove it from your office?”

“No.”

“And who therefore cannot possibly be attempting to use it in a fashion I would disapprove of?”

“Yes.”

“So what happened to the paperweight? I presume it is no longer on your desk?”

“No it’s not. Amiss told me to leave it there, and go home, when I called him to say that Kevin and Tanji had escaped through the window,” Amiss responded meekly, “He was furious. When I returned to the office the next day, it had gone.”

“You used the telephone to speak to Amiss?”

“Yes.”

“So he was already in the Other World at that time?”

“Oh, yes. He must have been.”

Amiss had been following the exchange of question and answer with visibly increasing concern. His nerve must have snapped at that point, since he made a sudden dash for the door.

“Hold that man!” commanded the Ferryman.

There was never any serious possibility that Amiss could have got very far, Kevin thought. The Guardians were still stationed in the doorways, and had clearly been following events closely. Two of them had grabbed Amiss before he had got more than three steps, and he put up no more than a token struggle before being dragged back to face the Ferryman. She glared at Amiss, unmistakably angered at this challenge to her authority.

“I will get to the bottom of this matter,” she thundered.

She waved a hand to summon one of the Guardians, and spoke privately at length with him. He then nodded deferentially in confirmation and left quickly accompanied by one of his companions.

She then looked directly at Kevin.

“I’ve just asked for a thorough search to be undertaken,” she said, “in a number of places in your world. I have every confidence that the Guardians will track down and retrieve that retched paperweight of yours.”

“And as for you two,” she rounded on Amiss and Alan, who quailed at her expression, “I have every reason to believe that you

have both been acting against the interests of Lyndesfarne. I am not at all impressed.”

She signalled again to the Guardians.

“Take them away!” she commanded.

The two men were rapidly bundled out of the room. She then focussed her distinctly scary attention to Ricard, who had been trying, but now evidently failing, to hide himself from her gaze below the edge of the kitchen table.

“And as for you,” she began, pointing at the cowering man, “I suspect you have more involvement in all this than you are letting on.”

Ricard squeaked something unintelligible in an exquisitely pitiable manner.

“I think you will be able to tell us rather a lot,” the Ferryman continued, “And I should encourage you to tell us everything that you know. If you don’t, things will go very badly for you, I expect.”

Ricard’s response was inaudible, but he meekly allowed himself to be led away by one of the Guardians. Kevin had noted that the Guardians all seemed to be deferring to Bret’s Mother, and she seemed very much in control of the situation. In any case, it occurred to him, that the commanding, if disembodied, voice they had all heard earlier was very probably hers.

The Ferryman looked around at the remaining people in the room. Kevin followed her gaze. Tanji’s Uncle was looking rather self-satisfied. Kevin had an inkling that it was through some intervention of his that the Ferryman and her cohort had been tipped off. Tanji’s Aunt seemed extremely relieved, and was being supported by her husband.

Kithyn had collapsed in tears, apparently on the verge of catatonic shock. Tanji seemed to have got over her terror, and appeared to now be more worried about her friend. She moved across the room to comfort her. Kevin followed, sensing that, despite her compassion for her friend, Tanji too needed much emotional support.

“I don’t think we need the services of the Guardians any further,” the Ferryman said to the room at large.

She waved over another one of the Guardians and, after briefly conferring, signalled to the remnants of the group, who left swiftly and in near silence. Once the Guardians had left, the Ferryman conferred at some length with Bret. She then came over to where Tanji was attempting to comfort Kithyn, and Kevin was standing nearby, feeling slightly helpless.

Kevin saw her approach, and turned and stood up straight.

“I’m really sorry to have caused all this trouble,” he said rather formally.

The Ferryman’s expression softened into a faint smile.

“I really don’t think it’s actually your fault,” she replied, “I am quite convinced that you have been doing your best to complete the New Bridge. You should know that this is something which I am generally in favour of. In my view, we owe you both an apology and a debt of gratitude for unmasking a plot and several self-serving villains.”

Kevin was uncertain how to react, and eventually opted for a neutral response.

“Thank you, Madam,” he said.

“Oh, no, thank you. And rest assured that you will be very welcome in my house again.”

On this note, she gathered up her robe and swept out of the room, trailed by Peter Brenner.

Tanji swung around to face Kevin, looking astounded.

“I hadn’t realised that you were quite so well-connected,” she gushed, obviously hugely relieved after the unexpected reprieve.

“Frankly,” Kevin replied, shaking his head, “I hadn’t realised that I was either.”

Bret then approached Kevin and Tanji.

“I guess I have managed to surprise you again,” he said, smiling.

“Too right,” Kevin countered flippantly, nevertheless feeling very relieved to discover that Bret appeared to be on his side, “You seem to be getting quite good at it.”

Bret smiled more broadly.

“You know, I’ve been concerned about Amiss’s position for some time. Ever since I discovered that he was on the management team for the New Bridge project.”

Kevin was confused, and not for the first time.

“Amiss?”

“Did you not recognise him?” Bret asked.

Kevin shook his head.

“He was calling himself Panit. And he changed his appearance somewhat. But, at the time, he was officially speaking for the Board of Control.”

As soon as Bret had uttered the words, the reality came crashing in on Kevin. Of course Amiss was also Panit! How could he have been so stupid as to not have seen it?

“Of course,” he answered, doing his best to cover up his confusion, “But won’t the Board of Control still have their concerns,

even more so now that we know that there really was a deliberate attempt to transfer a powerful magical item to my world?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Bret said, "It must be clear to us all that Amiss and Alan wanted to keep the artefact for their own objectives. It was probably just personal gain, most likely in collusion with some organised group in your world, and almost certainly illegal. They just wanted to make a great deal of money."

Bret thought for a moment, and continued.

"So, I believe that any credibility in Amiss's political position will have been swept away by the revelation that that he was a common criminal, and the rest of the Board of Control will bend over backwards to avoid being seen to be associated with him."

Kevin nodded, happy to accept Bret's political savvy on this point.

"Look, I need to send a few messages," he said, "Would you excuse me for a few minutes?"

"Sure."

Bret took a slate from under his robe, and withdrew to the far end of the kitchen table.

Kevin returned his attention to Tanji. It appeared that Kithyn had finally reverted to speaking the Lyndesfarne language. She was still being comforted by Tanji, although it was not clear to Kevin how effective this was being. Finally Kithyn left, still weeping, and refusing any offer of help.

Tanji turned to Kevin and grasped his hand in a way that left him feeling suddenly hot inside.

"What's she going to do?" Kevin asked her solicitously.

"I don't know, and quite honestly I don't think she does either," she replied. "She feels that she has to support Amiss, whatever he's done, but she's also understandably upset by the way he's treated me. And you too, of course."

"Will you keep in touch?" he asked.

"I think I should," she replied, "I have a feeling that she will find it very difficult for a while yet."

"You're probably right. But, who are the Ferryman? And why did they turn up here?"

"So many questions, as always," Tanji laughed, "Why don't we ask my Uncle for an explanation?"

She had evidently also noticed that her Uncle seemed unsurprised by the appearance of the Ferryman. He had evidently explained to his wife what had been going on, and both of them were quietly sitting side-by-side at the kitchen table. Kevin and Tanji drew up

chairs beside them, and Tanji said something to him that Kevin did not follow.

The old man nodded, and also spoke in the Lyndesfarne language.

“You will have heard of the legend of the Ferryman?” Tanji translated.

Kevin nodded, and the other man continued.

“Some stories tell us that the Ferryman’s role changed when the bridge – the Old Bridge, I should say – was constructed. This is all shrouded in myth and secrecy, but it seems that the Ferryman remained the final arbiter of truth when it comes to the crossing. But the Ferryman himself became a reclusive figure, independent and distant.”

“When I heard Tanji’s story,” he continued, accompanied by Tanji’s sing-song interpretation, “About your discovery and your crossing from the Other World, I made some enquiries amongst my contacts. Over the years, I have built up quite a network, and I think I can say that I am rather well-connected with the governance bodies, including the Board of Control.”

Kevin nodded in agreement, since it appeared this was expected of him at this juncture.

“Anyway, when I found that the information I was getting from my contacts was contradictory, and in particular quite different from the tale as related by Tanji, I felt there was a lack of clarity about motivations. I had heard of some ways of contacting the Ferryman, which I used, speaking of my concerns and requesting that he intervene. I hadn’t quite expected the manner of his appearance!”

Tanji laughed politely after completing the translation, and Kevin joined in.

Bret seemed to have completed his writing, and rejoined them, pulling up another chair on the opposite side of the table. There was one question still worrying Kevin, and he rapidly concluded that Bret was as good a person as any to answer it.

“Am I still going to get mind-wiped?” he asked.

Bret smiled, evidently amused at the sight of Tanji and Kevin sitting so closely together, almost unconsciously touching each other.

“Oh, no,” he said, “I think we can find something much more useful for you to do.”

Chapter Thirty Eight

Kevin carefully peeled the metal foil from the top of a bottle of a very fine Islay scotch whisky, and poured a small measure into a rather nice cut-glass tumbler. In fact, he remembered, this glass was the only one of the set that he now had left, the rest either having been chipped in the dishwasher, broken during a party, or just abandoned when he left (or at least had been thrown out by) his ex-wife all those years ago.

He stood up and quietly toasted himself in the mirror, sipping at the peaty spirit and then wincing slightly at the unaccustomed strong taste. He was at home, in the lounge of the Manchester flat. Earlier that evening, he had dug the bottle out of the back of a kitchen cupboard, where he had stashed it ages ago waiting for a special occasion. Well, he thought, flopping on the sofa, this was as close as I can expect to get to such a circumstance.

The occasion in question was the final sign-off of the design of the New Bridge, meaning that everyone concerned was officially happy to start actually building the thing. He did feel a certain sense of satisfaction, he admitted to himself, of a job well done. This was not the rush of energy experienced when his ideas first start to happen, when the bare bones of the solution begin to emerge, and kick starts the drive, the determination, to make the whole project an actuality.

No, this was altogether a much drier experience. The completion criteria for the New Bridge design were described in huge detail, and every last point had to be addressed. So, ahead of the formal sign-off and go-ahead to start, there were many weeks dedicated to the production of documents and reports, each of which was subjected to a formal and excruciatingly comprehensive review.

This mind-numbing process was amplified by the document tracking process, which seemed to be in place entirely and only to allow the project management (who were not actually producing anything) to nag incessantly when a complex document was delivered even a half-day late. This process also insisted upon equally detailed tracking of the document author's responses to a reviewer's criticisms, leading to the effect known to Kevin as "document ping-pong".

The sign-off meeting itself had been immensely tedious. It had taken place in the uninspiring surrounds of the Manchester office, and lasted all day, with the usual breaks for dry sandwiches, stewed coffee and the resulting inevitable comfort breaks. The meeting room had been stuffy and overheated, since the windows did not open and the air-conditioning seemed to be entirely ineffective. Good air conditioning is undetectable, though Kevin, so that the environment is so conducive to effective working that you do not notice the machinery working.

Tweedledum's company, who would be constructing the Mainland side of the bridge, eventually accepted the recommendation to proceed, with Tweedledum himself delaying the proceedings with his usual mixture of bluff and bluster. Peter Brenner, professional old woman and Project Manager, had fretted over details so minor and so open to interpretation as to be almost entirely vacuous.

There had been a similar approach to acceptance from the Lyndesfarne side. Panit also seemed determined to find fault with everything. Kevin had his work cut out to come up with answers to the objections, but his characteristic approach of common-sense answers and occasional brilliance dealt with these issues. The project manager from the Board of Construction, whose name Kevin never had managed to discover, seemed to be engaged in a nit-picking war of attrition with Peter. At least Craze, the Overseer, seemed to be relaxed about the whole thing, being able to give the impression, at least subliminally, that he could build *anything*.

All-in-all, the meeting had been unparalleled in its tedium and occasional idiocy, and Kevin was hoping to forget it as soon as possible. The whisky might actually help with this, he considered hopefully.

As far as Kevin was concerned, the real design completion – the one which met his own personal satisfaction – had happened quite some time before. This was when he had completed the computer simulations of the bridge's movement under extreme weather conditions.

It was not known widely enough, in Kevin's view, that bridges are mobile structures designed to bend and flex with the wind and weather. It was conventional, these days, to construct elaborate computer-aided design simulations of the behaviour of engineering structures, based on a mathematical model of the forces between each section. This was particularly true of modern bridge designs, which have significant portions stressed in tension, so that the elasticity of

the construction materials (especially the high-grade steels frequently used for cables) was a significant factor in the architecture.

So, extreme conditions, for example, storms with heavy rain (adding to the weight) and strong cross-winds (distorting the bridge a long way from its resting state), all contributed to a complex movement which could, if badly designed, lead to the collapse of the entire structure.

The computer model were not always as extreme as that part-floating bridge in New Zealand, where the effect of tides augmented the impact of both rain and winds in causing extremes of movement.

Even so, the graphical images of the bridge flexing under this abnormal load, displayed on the screen of his powerful laptop computer, were entirely compelling. These pictures were slightly specious, since these animated simulations were grossly simplified from the true model, and really little more than computer-generated cartoons. The amount of computer power to perform real simulations was considerable, and required the resources of one of his firm's server farms. Nevertheless, the animations were impressive to watch, and gave Kevin a certain sense of security knowing that his metaphorical baby would stand up to anything that the world – *either* world – could throw at it.

He had taken special care of the additional complications of the crossing, and different physical rules encountered in the two worlds. He was as confident as he could be that the simulation work would correctly predict the behaviour of the real construction in the cross-over zone, even under extreme stresses. Part of the complex design interplay with Bret was to ensure that the movements of the each half of the bridge would be similar to the other, so that the strain on the central section, where neither set of physical rules could be entirely depended upon, could be designed with precision.

The trouble, Kevin mused, was that these kinds of achievements were difficult to communicate to anyone. It was really rather a lonely position to be in. It was far easier for someone – a layman – to comprehend an actual construction than even the most compelling graphical simulation. However, the real bridge was, in many ways, merely the physical instantiation of something whose existence, in some metaphysical sense, had occurred a long time before.

Still, he considered, I know that the new Lyndesfarne bridge can be built, and that it will stand up for a hundred years, if constructed correctly. In any case, he chuckled to himself, it will be an impressive sight for anyone who can be bothered to stop and look at it

properly. Surely, he concluded, after all that work, the actual construction must be plain sailing.

Kevin treated himself to a spot more of the Scotch, then carefully closed the bottle and went to bed.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Kevin and Tanji were standing on a slight rise on the shore, looking out towards the coastline of England, and somewhat sheltered from the pleasant late summer breeze by the dunes behind them. From their vantage point, they could see both the old and the new bridges, now lit by the dying light of a colourful sunset.

The weather in the area was so variable, thanks to the unpredictable effects of the crossing, that dramatic sunsets like this were rare. It was overcast and even gloomy more often than not, exacerbated by the haze that made geographical features on the other side so difficult to make out. Tonight, however, the colours of the clouds were so vivid and unlikely, Kevin thought, that a painting using the same shades would be derided as obviously exaggerated.

The new bridge was now carrying traffic, and the residual work – largely cosmetic – was rapidly nearing completion. This had not required any significant input from him, and he had effectively handed over all responsibilities for the completion to Craz and Tweedledum, and their respective construction organisations.

Many of the finishing touches involved the landscaping of the surrounding areas. By now, the bulk of the earthworks have been done, and good progress was being made on the planting of many trees and shrubs on both sides. The varieties had been carefully chosen to be resistant to high winds and salt spray, as well as being quick-growing even in the poor soils around the coastlines. Kevin was not sure whether the planting was intended to enhance the attractiveness of the setting or to disguise the towers and cables. It still all looked a bit stark at the moment, he thought, but give it a few years and it will seem like the New Bridge had been there forever.

There was also further construction work, building the new warehouses and trans-shipment facilities needed at either end of the new crossing. He had heard from Bret that there had been much celebration when the new portal (once again, concealed within the main warehouse building) had been commissioned. Kevin had got the impression that portals were not fabricated very often, and had attempted to clarify the point with Tanji.

“Oh yes,” she had replied, “Portals are very difficult to make – lots of very time-consuming skilled work is always required. These days, only one or two new ones are opened each year.”

Even though the newer crossing was the most efficient link from Lyndesfarne to England, the Old Bridge was still being used, although Kevin was not entirely sure why this might be. For certain routes, he speculated, it would be slightly shorter to take the old bridge, and with the traffic being shared, the time taken to cross would be similar. Additionally, the existing warehouses at each end were still in use; not all operations had moved to the new sites. Perhaps it just made a change to be able to choose between the two crossings, he mused; or maybe it was just a sense of tradition amongst the wagoners.

Kevin had made quite a few changes in his own life over the last few months. He had resigned from the company who had employed him since he had left University, and become an independent consultant. This particular breed of professional had, in Kevin's experience, a rather mixed standing, being imbued with a range of faults and frequently made the butt of much wry humour.

Nevertheless, he was slightly surprised to find that he had a considerable, if understated, personal reputation in the industry. Once it had become known that he was available, he found that he had no problem whatsoever in getting offers of interesting, not to mention remunerative work; indeed more work than he could possibly undertake.

Kevin was even more taken aback when he found that his combined knowledge of the worlds on both sides of the sea crossing was also in considerable demand. His thoughtful insights, mostly ideas which had occurred to him in bored evenings during the long years of the bridge's inception, and based on his very technical background, now seemed to be bearing fruit. I really did think that no one was interested, he mused, but wrong again.

One consulting activity he had already found time for was recommendations for security improvements, usually working closely with the Guardian organisations on both sides of the straights.

On a couple of recent occasions, he had visited a Guardians training centre not far from the crossing, and on the England side. It was located in a rather grand Edwardian country house set in its own grounds. In some hard-to-define way, and much like the crossing to Lyndesfarne itself, the Cliviger Grange Centre was rather hard to find unless you were specifically looking for it. Only a small and distinctly overgrown sign had indicated its presence. Even so, considered Kevin, the feeling of remoteness made for a secluded and rather peaceful setting for the discussions.

The purpose of his visits was to attend a series of workshops on improving security and logistical efficiency. Kevin had thought that these were likely to be conflicting aims, but he had managed to make a variety of suggestions for improvements, very diffidently at first, but then with growing confidence.

One simple idea which had received a surprising amount of interest was adding more surveillance cameras. Naturally enough, there were already many very well-hidden cameras on the England side of the crossing, monitored by Guardians in that control centre disguised as a Tourist Information office. The wrinkle suggested by Kevin was to use number-plate recognition, a technology already widely available in Kevin's world for a variety of road traffic monitoring, charging and enforcement purposes. If one ignored the incongruity of adding number-plates to horse-drawn wagons, this approach meant that there could be fewer checks on registered vehicles, so that the staff on the ground could concentrate on unexpected vehicles.

Another area where he appeared to be regarded as uniquely qualified to offer advice was on plans for further logistical improvements, optimising the flow of materials between the two worlds. At the second of the meetings, he found himself reprising his thoughts about rail-based haulage on the England part of the bridge, and asking for suggestions for more efficient transportation on the other side.

To his surprise, Bret, who had attended this meeting as a large-minute filler, immediately piped up with the idea of floaters – the same magical technology that had been used to deliver blocks of construction stone to the construction site.

After some positive and exceptionally fruitful brainstorming, Kevin and Bret were commissioned to work together on a design, together with a business case and an outline plan, for an improved transport system.

It seemed that it might be possible to retro-fit the New Bridge with railway tracks on one side and guided floaters on the other, so that goods could be rapidly moved half-way across. Of course, there were some complexities: there would have to be some means of rapid trans-shipment, manually executed, in the very centre of the bridge. Additionally, the Old Bridge would need to be used for all foot travellers, and to allow for the continued use of horse-drawn transport for some purposes, since it would be too dangerous to allow people or horses close to rapidly moving railway carriages.

Yet another idea Kevin found himself explaining to the workshop was the use of passive Radio Frequency Identity tags. These so-called RFID tags were already widely used in his own world to discourage theft of high-value items from shops, as well as tracking the movement of goods (usually on pallets or in crates) as they moved from vehicle to warehouse. To make the tracking effective, various scanners and computers were required, which were beyond his own competence to specify, but this was an area where he anticipated that specialist skills could be easily brought in.

Nevertheless, through the agency of the Guardians, Kevin had commissioned some experiments, and the early results were very promising. It seemed that the tags were sufficiently simple and robust that, although the electronics were disabled on the crossing to Lyndesfarne by the sprites irremovably placed in the gap between the worlds, the tags always seemed to work perfectly when returned to his home world.

Kevin had explained this concept at some length to Bret, during one of their frequent informal discussions. Bret had a certain amount of difficulty with the concept at first but, once the idea had got through, she had made a few suggestions to her husband. Eosin had taken to the idea with enthusiasm, requiring just a few days of intense effort to create some marker sprites, and then embed them in some magic tokens which could be permanently attached to goods or at least to the packaging and pallets crossing the new bridge.

Eosin's real vocation was in the construction of new sprites to be released into the interstices of the crossing, to recognise and counteract the effects of the new magical items that were being created all the time. This was a task that required both real talents and dedication to duty, and Kevin had been given to understand that Bret's husband had a real talent for this work.

Eosin was confident that the sprites in the tokens would be "pacified" – this was apparently the best translation of the effect – when crossing to Kevin's world, but would reliably be activated on their return. The upshot of all this toil was that the logistical capacity of the New Bridge could be increased many times, but at the same time with an increased level of tracking and security.

Kevin found that it was a pleasure to be working closely with Bret again. The two of them got on very well, and Kevin was eternally grateful for Bret's timely intercession on his behalf.

Apart from being enormously personally satisfying, all this consultancy work had led to a considerable improvement in Kevin's personal wealth. Money had never been particularly important to

him, and he was not entirely sure what to do with his new-found prosperity. He toyed with the idea with getting a better, or at least newer, car, but had not yet bothered. He was still regularly driving to and fro to Manchester, although this was necessary less frequently just at the moment. In reality, he was practically living in Lyndesfarne with Tanji, the two of them having taken over a small suite of rooms at her Aunt and Uncle's place. The Manchester flat, mused Kevin, was rapidly becoming somewhere where he kept his possessions, especially those which would be pacified if he were to take them with him.

He felt some much more secure in the knowledge that the two worlds were not really that dissimilar, that the physical rules actually the same, and it was people who had deliberately made the worlds different. The magic of Lyndesfarne was genuinely comprehensible, and he was now beginning to think of as just another kind of engineering, based on a further set of physical principles which just happened to be manipulated in a different way.

Kevin knew that machinery could be made to work in Lyndesfarne and magic could be made to work in England, although he was not quite sure how the deliberately inhibiting effects of the barrier could be reliably avoided. Something to be investigated, he considered, when I get the time.

He had even stopped thinking of the two sides as the Island and the Mainland, in his own mind. Kevin had finally realised that there were just two countries, small parts of two worlds, so very similar in many ways and separated by as little as a couple of bridges. There was so much more to be discovered, wonderful and exciting possibilities to be explored, ideas to be taken forward to implementation. Belatedly, he realised that life would never be quite the same again, and that he really did like it that way.

Kevin turned and looked at Tanji, who was standing just a few feet away, also admiring the sunset. It was beginning to get a little chilly, and he drew his cape closer around him, automatically making the simple gestures which would keep it in place. He moved to stand behind her, putting his arms around her, and feeling her turn her head and press her cheek against his chest.

As the sun set completely, the lights from the bridges began to stand out. The traditional oil lamps on the causeway and old bridge were being lit in the time-honoured way. On the new bridge, magical lighting had been installed on the Lyndesfarne side, with electric illumination on the other section. Even so, the lights had been designed to be fairly dim – not as bright as conventional street

lighting at home – and constructed to mimic the oil lamps that had lit the causeway for centuries.

On both bridges, the hurricane lanterns that hung on the swaying wagons making their journeys made for a quietly changing glow, which looked so very romantic in the twilight.

“You know,” he said softly to Tanji, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was all magical.”

She glanced up at him, grinning, and then dug him sharply in the ribs.

“Ow! Oh well, I guess I deserved that,” he said, grinning widely in his turn.

She reached up and kissed him firmly on his lips.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

The End

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