

# The Milk of Paradise: A Novel of Avebury

Two dreamers, 85 years apart in time, together will solve one of archaeology's greatest mysteries...

John Grigsby

For Phil 'Wolf' Jones - friend and brother

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## List of Principal Characters

1937

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, 45, *Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University*  
Clive Staples Lewis, 39, *Professor of English Literature, Oxford University*  
Own Barfield, 39, *Solicitor and writer, London*  
Alexander Keiller, *Archaeologist*  
Stuart Piggot, *Archaeologist*  
Sir Matthew Flinders-Petrie *Archaeologist*  
Margaret Murray, *Egyptologist*  
George Mac Govan Crow (Ipisowaasi) *Blackfoot Indian; Keiller's gardener*  
Shona mac Govan, *George's wife*  
Alfred mac Govan Crow, *their son, grandfather to Shenandoah Mac Govan*  
Mary Violet Evans, nee Firth (Dion Fortune) *author and occultist*  
Dr Thomas Penry Evans, *husband to Mary Violet Evans*

2012

Conall Astor, 39,  
Melissa Astor, 38, *his twin sister (deceased)*  
William 'Wolf' Jones, 47,  
'Ananda' Coombe, 44, *barmaid at the Red Lion*  
Shenandoah Mac Govan Crow, 33  
Hayden Marks, 37  
Tristan De Montfort, *Chairman of English Heritage*

## Prologue: On Silbury Hill

Sunset, 2nd July 2012

Conall Astor knew he was probably breaking some law or other. Possibly several. He just wasn't sure which, nor what might happen should he be caught. With every car that passed he flattened himself against the slope of the hill into the waist-high grass and thorny scrub until the rumble of engines faded. To a casual onlooker his actions would more probably be considered odd than illegal: how many of those driving past that curiously shaped hill on the north side of this B-road in Wiltshire, now silhouetted black against the sunset, would, even had they been able to see him, have cared to question why someone was scaling its steep sides after 9pm on a clear summer's evening?

The mound towered above him, blocking out half the twilit sky. *It's just a hill*, he told himself, but this was no ordinary hill. It seemed insurmountable for a start – the steep sides of the huge pudding-bowl shaped rise presented a natural defence against climbing, and that was after one had ignored the 'Strictly No Admittance' signs, clambered over the barbed wire fence and navigated the open, thorn filled moat in which the 40m high mound sat and which this evening, as was frequently the case, was waterlogged from the recent rains.

What's more, the hill exuded what Conall could only describe as *personality*; the last time he had felt something akin to this was looking up at the Great Pyramid of Giza many years before – and the similarity seemed apt – like the pyramid this hill was not natural but had been artificially raised, and at roughly the same time in history, some four and a half thousand years previously. The many thousands of tonnes of chalk that made up the dome had been laboriously scooped up from the surrounding ditch by Stone Age farmers and fashioned into a great conical mound for reasons known only to them and long forgotten. Once it had stood out a stark white against the surrounding green hills, but the green had encroached upon the chalk over the intervening centuries so that its too-perfect shape alone betrayed its artificial origins.

Many had argued that this feature, Silbury Hill, now sitting vast and mute beside the Marlborough to Bath road, had been built to be seen from one or several of the various vistas afforded by the surrounding landscape. Conall, however, had never been wholly convinced by that. Why build a hill when all around one was surrounded by hills? Besides, archaeologists

investigating the mound had discovered traces of a spiral pathway to its summit and so it seemed logical that it was meant to be climbed. The threat of damage posed by thousands of tourists re-enacting this feat meant that the monument had been off-limits to the general public for some 40 years, but tonight for reasons he would have found hard to explain to any apprehending police officer or National Trust custodian, Conall Astor had chosen to ignore this prohibition. But it wasn't so much the possibility of being caught trespassing that bothered Conall, but how, if challenged, he would explain what it was he was carrying in his left hand, bundled up in his crumpled jacket...

He had already nearly fallen twice, slipping in the sodden moat, before he had got anywhere near the hill. He was taking a route straight up the north-east side, avoiding an older well-worn winding path to the south-west that was in more direct view of the traffic on the Bath road. With his jacket with its burden in one hand he began his ascent, using tufts of long coarse grass to pull himself up with the other, stopping only to flatten himself to the hill when the headlights of approaching traffic from over Overton hill to the east scoured the hillside.

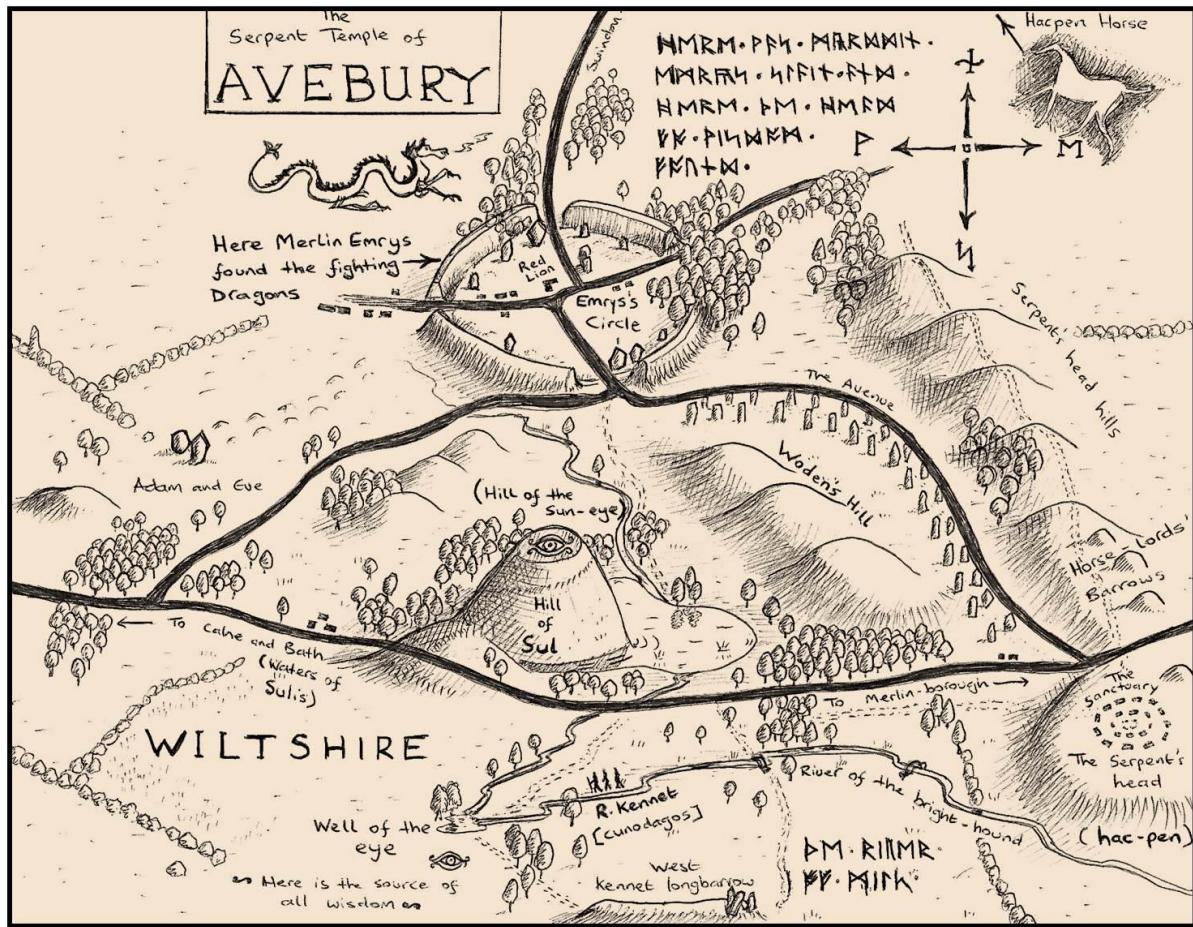
After a few minutes he reached the flattened summit, dizzy and breathless, nearly falling backwards down the steep slope when one of the dark shapes he had taken as bushes rose up and fled, bleating. He didn't know who was more shocked, the sheep or him. The top of the hill was wide and covered in undergrowth, save for a central circular scar where in 2001 the land had fallen away to reveal a deep shaft of an earlier excavation. For hundreds of years men had dug into this mysterious hill in search of treasure – local legend had it that the hill contained the body of a King clad in golden armour, buried seated upon his horse; but now thoroughly internally dissected and scanned, and its cavernous holes filled, Silbury had been proven to be empty. Whatever it was it was not a tomb, nor a treasure chest; no Stone Age Pharaoh lay here in state.

Conall sat himself just back from the southernmost lip of the summit, so as to be invisible from the road, and waited until his breathing had calmed; he was thirsty, nauseous and more tired than he ever remembered being; every muscle seemed to ache; he had run most of the way here – but had he been followed? He didn't know. Anyway – he guessed such apprehensions were unwarranted; events in the village, events that had singularly conspired to put him in this very position, were, he judged, currently occupying the attention of anyone who might previously have stopped him; a lone figure climbing a hill was small fry to the situation within Avebury

village itself, and totally unconnected; or so it would appear, though Conall was unable to shake the feeling that the object he carried was more than instrumental in the pandemonium happening to the north. He turned so he could observe the thick column of smoke rising from the village; blue flashing lights blinked at its foot, but there was no trace of the earlier flames, and the sirens, for now, had ceased.

Only now, turning back to the south, did he take from out of the confines of his bundled jacket the object he'd so carefully carried up the hill; it lay within another cloth, charred and reeking of smoke: despite its fragility, though, the contents remained intact: the yellowed bone shell of a human skull, polished with age. Cautiously, respectfully, he turned it in his hands then held it up before him, its empty eye sockets facing his own. Liberated from its hiding place the skull eerily echoed both in shape and hue the newly risen moon that hung low above the hillside opposite, near to full. For a moment there was no sound save the last hum of a car engine disappearing out of earshot in the direction of Beckhampton to the west and the *chink chink chink* of blackbirds in the bushes at the foot of the hill.

'So, what the fuck am I supposed to do now?!" Con asked.



# Tolkien's map of Avebury

## PART ONE: The Well of Knowledge

*Handsome is the yellow horse,  
But a hundred times better  
Is my cream-coloured one,  
Swift as the sea mew*

Taliesin, Cad Goddeu (The Battle of the Trees)

*Accursed be the damsel,  
Who, after the wailing,  
Let loose the fountain of Venus, the raging deep*

*Accursed be the maiden,  
Who, after the conflict,  
Let loose the fountain of Venus, the raging sea*

Taliesin, Seithenin

## **Chapter One: The White Horse**

(Wed 14th April 1937)

On a warm mid-April morning in 1937 three gentlemen, two Oxford dons and a solicitor, were beginning their customary annual walking tour that this year was to be a 'literary pilgrimage' from the pretty market town of Marlborough in Wiltshire to Porlock in the Quantock Hills of Somerset where in 1797 the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, intoxicated with opium, had written the famously obscure and unfinished verse 'Kubla Khan'. Their plan was to walk the nearly 100 miles to Porlock over a leisurely eight or nine days, taking in the ancient sites of Wiltshire, before crossing into Somerset and reaching their goal via the Cathedral of Wells and the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey.

Having left Marlborough at nine in the morning, the three friends had taken the path westwards across the Downs, climbing slowly for about a mile and then turning northwest at the hamlet of Rockley, to the Hakpen horse – one of Wessex's famous white-horses carved into the chalk hills of the Downs. Here they had decided to stop for a few minutes to enjoy the view before turning south and taking the prehistoric track-way known as the Ridgeway to Overton down, where they would join the Marlborough to Bath road close to their first proper stop, the village of Avebury, a small unassuming village that stood within the bounds of what was the largest prehistoric stone circle in the world. The intention of the three hikers was to take lunch in the Red Lion, the pub that lay at the centre of the circle, before walking the last few miles to Calne, where Coleridge had stayed in 1814-16, and where they aimed to spend that night. From then on they would take a bus to Wells and walk the rest of the way to Porlock, all going well.

Clive Staples Lewis, who his friends knew as 'Jack', dark, balding and thickset, was presently leading the other two men down the gentle slope of the hill on which the Hakpen horse had been carved a century before. Behind him strode Owen Barfield, lean, tall and well-built with a full head of dark hair, above a handsome, elfin face – who was struggling to keep up a conversation with his friend who kept striding forward out of earshot. Their physical differences had always amused the third member of the party, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, who, like Lewis, was a fellow of the school of English at the University of Oxford. This kind, if serious-faced man, the shortest and the eldest of the three by 6 years being now in his mid-forties, and who seemed to wear a perpetual frown as if always chewing over some deep problem, watched the ill-matched pair walk ahead and disappear over the brow of the hill vanishing out of sight.

Damn their route-march! Tolkien thought. This was a supposed to be a leisurely hike, not a military exercise! Well... let them march on! He thought, letting his heavy pack fall from his shoulders.

The April sun was pleasing; Tolkien, who had already removed his tweed jacket on the climb out of Marlborough, now rolled up his shirtsleeves and took off his hat, wiping his now-greying dark fringe where it had stuck to his brow. Then, fishing into the pocket of his plain brown waistcoat for his pipe and tin of Navy Cut tobacco, he began to fill his pipe, tamping the tobacco down with a thumb and then scrabbled about in his trouser pocket for a box of matches.

As he smoked Tolkien felt himself relax for the first time in what seemed months. The spring term at Oxford had not been any busier than normal, but all his spare time had been taken up since before Christmas correcting the proofs of his book. He had tried, not wholly successfully, to remain unruffled at the errors the type-setters had made, but at least correcting their mistakes had allowed him the opportunity to add some new material and to iron out some minor inconsistencies he had discovered in his tale. *You think a book is done and dusted, but writing it is only the beginning!* He had said in frustration to Lewis over a half a glass of beer in Lewis's rooms in Magdalen college two days before. He had just returned from the Post Office having sent his publisher, Stanley Unwin, an illustration for the dust-jacket, showing the dragon Smaug flying out of the Lonely Mountain; it was, to Tolkien's eye, a little amateurish, but preferable to what some professional artist with no real idea of the story might dream up. Jack had raised his glass to the success of the book, but Tolkien had shrugged. 'I'm happier celebrating that the bloody thing is finally out of my hands, Jack. It had become, alas, like a guest who outstays his welcome. No

doubt in time I will miss his company, but for now I'm happy to be free once more.' 'Freedom, Tollers, is one of those invisible qualities one fails to appreciate until it is taken from oneself. Like a fish only appreciates water when dangling from the angler's hook...'.

'When I was in Flanders...' Tolkien said, 'I thought a simple glass of beer, in a quiet country pub, would be a joy forever. And so it was, for a time; but then came the time I just downed the drink and thought no more of it; the tragedy of mankind is his ability to forget...'

'Then may we ever be sent...' said Lewis, raising his glass, 'adversity, so that we may never tire of freedom.'

...

Now distanced from the demands of not only book, but also family and work, Tolkien let out a happy sigh. After Mass that morning he had left his stack of papers on his desk at Northmoor Road and had left for the station determined not to even think of Hobbits or dragons until he returned home late the following week. He hoped, now, that this was the end of the matter; and standing here looking out over the valley he felt a sudden sense of freedom welling up within him, that escaped as a chuckle; this was a new start – no longer constrained by 'The Hobbit' he could return to his languages and mythology.

Above him skylarks were singing, invisible against the pale sky; he stood in the long grass, watching as industrious bees flitted from cowslip to cowslip. Below him, out of sight, he could hear Jack laughing, and so he walked on to join his companions who were now sat on the sloping ground close to the carved horse's head.

On first sight the Hakpen horse was a strange looking beast, more reminiscent of a dog than a horse, Tolkien thought, thin legged and barrel bodied, though he conceded one was meant to see it from a distance away not upside down from above its back.

'You'll know, Tollers... Why do you imagine these horses were carved?' Lewis turned and asked Tolkien as the latter approached the seated pair.

'This one is a century old, as I recall – and I believe was cut to commemorate the coronation of Queen Victoria; but as for the others - why do people ever feel the need to mark the landscape?' he replied, seating himself beside his companions, and refilling his pipe.

Lewis looked down over the valley for an answer – the only marks he could

see were the lines of hedges and field boundaries; a small road ran north to south at the bottom of the valley, with a single motorcar heading along it.

'To show land ownership: "This land is mine!" I suppose?' He suggested, his slight Belfast accent adding a tuneful lilt to the words.

'Spot on, I would say.' Tolkien replied. 'They were originally, I would think, a stamp of ownership of the local landowner; it's like hanging a Stubbs above your fireplace – the Uffington horse, for instance, was undoubtedly a territorial marker for the tribe that lived in the hill-fort above it.' His own words tumbled out quickly and slightly incoherently, somewhat staccato and punctuated with quick flashes of a smile.

The Uffington horse, to which Tolkien referred, was the most striking, as well as being the oldest, of all the Wessex horses. It's sinuous, streamlined form had graced the Berkshire Downs from time immemorial; once believed to have been carved by Alfred the Great to celebrate a victory over the Vikings at Ethandune in 878 AD, its curved, abstract, and almost skeletal shape, three times the size of the Hakpen horse, had always suggested to Tolkien an origin much further back in prehistory.

'But why a horse? What has a horse to do with territory *per se*?' Lewis continued, lighting a cigarette.

'Everything – to a prehistoric tribesman. Think, Jack! As a tribesman, how do you defend your land?'

'Earthworks; arrows; swords.' He said, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke that drifted lazily away.

'Now how large is your territory going to be?' Tolkien prodded.

Lewis shrugged. 'As large as you can defend, I suppose, within a few hours walk from your camp.' Their view over the edge of the Wiltshire Downs presented such a territory – it would take them a good few hours to reach the distant slopes above Cherhill, to their west; it was a rich land; worth defending; worth planting and settling on; worth fighting for.

'Well think how much more territory you could defend on horseback than on foot. The first tribes to ride horses possessed a marked superiority over their contemporaries: they could not only possess more land, and defend it, but also embark on taking that of others – taking their land and their

resources – their herds of cattle...'

Tolkien looked down at the carved face, dulled with age; overgrown with grasses and moss.

'This one may be relatively new, but the white horse of Uffington... well, it's still galloping possibly thousands of years after it was carved, still claiming that land for a tribe who have long since journeyed beyond that vale to another...' he drew on his pipe and peered out over the valley.

'So you agree with Chesterton that it's old?' Lewis said, meaning the Uffington Horse.

Tolkien nodded. Chesterton's poetry rose in his mind and he gave voice to his words over the crudely cut body of the chalk steed below:

*Before the gods that made the gods  
Had seen their sunrise pass,  
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale  
Was cut out of the grass.*

*Before the gods that made the gods  
Had drunk at dawn their fill,  
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale  
Was hoary on the hill.*

*Age beyond age on British land,  
Aeons on aeons gone,  
Was peace and war in western hills,  
And the White Horse looked on.'*

He flashed a quick smile at his companions; although on the surface he often appeared shy, there was something of the bard about this man, and, when encouraged, enjoyed such recitations.

Lewis let out a sigh. 'I must read the ballad again, Tollers. It has some beautiful parts – how does that verse go?:

*For the end of the world was long ago,  
When the ends of the world waxed free,  
When Rome was sunk in a waste of slaves,  
And the sun drowned in the sea.'*

Lewis turned to the hitherto silent Barfield, who had been consulting his map.

'Listen, Owen. Did I tell you? Tollers, Warnie and I walked to Uffington last summer and we were at the pub in the village, discussing why the hill beside the horse had been named Dragon Hill. Well, Warnie and Tollers were talking about dragons in general, sadly commenting on how they were all dead and gone when some local workman pipes up 'They are not! I seen 'em myself!!'

Lewis roared with laughter.

'So why *does* it bear the name of Dragon Hill?' Barfield asked, smiling at his friend's jollity.

'Local legend says it's where St George slew the Dragon.' Tolkien answered. 'But I wonder just how old the name is - the Dragon-slaying myth is really very ancient indeed, so I doubt Good Old Saint George had much a part to play in it! One only has to think of Apollo slaying the Python at Delphi to see that it's really a myth about new cults and new gods overcoming the old, and in many cases taking over their holy sites.'

'Ah, so you think the older British cults, like the Greek, were represented by the dragon or the serpent?' Barfield asked. 'That is interesting; I'm not overly familiar with ancient British beliefs but wait until we get to Avebury: I'll show you something that I think might interest you.'

Lewis yawned.

'Yes, Avebury... Delightful as this view is, I can't help feeling we're wasting precious drinking time at the Red Lion by being here. Horses and dragons aren't really part of the *Coleridgean* theme of this holiday, after all...'

'No?' Barfield said, an eyebrow raised on his boyish face, 'You may have a point about dragons, but not horses: think of Kubla Khan... is it not said that he owned ten thousand white horses? And was not the milk of these beasts only to be drunk by the Khan himself? Perhaps this milk was even the Milk of Paradise of Coleridge's poem? I would say the white horse is extremely *Coleridgean*!!'

Lewis conceded the point to his friend and rose, shouldering his pack and waving his walking stick in the air with a cry of 'Onward! Ale

awaits!' Tolkien remained seated for a moment, looking out over the pale landscape, to where the distant downs fading to blue were crested by the spike of the Cherhill monument, marking the end of that day's proposed walk. He narrowed his eyes in the bright morning sun and muttered a few more lines of Chesterton before he rose to follow the others:

*And the great kings of Wessex  
Wearied and sank in gore,  
And even their ghosts in that great stress  
Grew greyer and greyer, less and less,  
With the lords that died in Lyonesse  
And the king that comes no more.*

This image of the white horse stayed with Tolkien for the hour it took to walk along Hakpen hill to the edge of the downs at Overton. Here, at the point where the path met the Marlborough to Bath road, the hillside was crowned with a line of large round hillocks: the burial mounds of long-forgotten prehistoric kings; Lewis slowed his pace momentarily to survey these grass-covered tombs, four thousand years in age, but did not stop. Tolkien, however, paused and then ambled across from the path into the meadow to the middle one of the three ancient and time-weathered graves, now strewn with grasses, dandelions and other meadow flowers.

Tolkien climbed atop the steep rise of the barrow, and took a deep breath of the warm, spring scented air. Before him stretched the Kennet valley; running east to west, the Downs rising on both sides, steeper to the north where he sat, more gentle to the south, rising in soft folds of palest green, interrupted here and there by a copse of trees or lines of hedgerow, before fading to a lilac wash against the sky.

Tolkien re-lit his pipe and let his mind sink into the deep past. How might this gently undulating valley have looked when the kings whose bones lay beneath these once chalk-white burial mounds had first climbed this rise thousands of years before? He could almost hear the thumping of their horses' hooves, see their pale hair blowing in the wind; hear their strange voices calling out even stranger names... their bronze spears glinting in the sun, striking fear into the small dark men with their flint blades who had lived in this place before them, and who stood cowering in the trees on seeing these tall mounted warriors arriving from the east. Did they see them, he wondered, as the Aztecs had seen the Spanish Conquistadors – as dreadful hybrid beasts, never having seen a horse and thinking man and steed were a single animal? What prehistoric Cortez or Pizarro rode this

ridge so long ago, and did he accept the peace of the painted tribesmen who prostrated themselves before him or did he like the Conquistadors turn these green hills into a sea of blood?

It was these newcomers, Tolkien mused, who having overcome the native cults were perhaps the first to carve the shape of their steeds into the green hillsides of Wessex... *a white horse on a field of green* as a sign of victory; (why did that phrase always arise in his mind, he wondered?). But the Uffington horse, at least, was a strangely emaciated beast of victory, with a beak-like muzzle. He shuddered at a memory: the half-rotted body of a horse he had marched past on the way to the trenches of the Somme twenty years before, left hanging, bloated and rotting on a barbed wire fence, its body moving with rats, its head eyeless and lipless – the bleached bones of the muzzle protruding from the flyblown jaw ... Tolkien blanched at the recollection. For four thousand years the horse and rider had dominated warfare but times had changed and no cavalry could match the artillery and machine gun fire of the modern battlefield.

The words of an Old English poem arose in his mind:

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?  
Hwær cwom mabþumgyfa?  
Hwær cwom symbla gesetu?  
Hwær sindon seledreamas?  
Eala beorht bune!  
Eala byrnwiga!  
Eala þeodnes þrym!  
Hu seo þrag gewat,  
genap under nihthelm,  
swa heo no wære....

*Where is the horse gone? Where the rider?  
Where the giver of treasure?  
Where are the seats at the feast?  
Where are the revels in the hall?  
Alas for the bright cup!  
Alas for the mailed warrior!  
Alas for the splendour of the prince!  
How that time has passed away, dark under the cover of night,  
As if it had never been.*

Gently he twisted a blade of grass around a finger. The memory of the

decaying horse had made him uncommonly anxious, but perhaps that was as much to do with what Barfield had been talking about over breakfast at Marlborough that morning after they had alighted from the Oxford bus: the damned war in Spain; and that ignoramus Hitler sending troops there to support the fascists; and France extending its defences along its border with Germany...

Tolkien drove the thought from his mind. Such speculation not only solved nothing, but also cast a cloud over what was a beautiful spring day. And it was beautiful - the sky cloudless; his book was finished and his time his own; the grass smelled sweet, and the peace of the day only disturbed by the sound of an automobile wending its lonely way along the road back to Marlborough; his eyes were becoming heavy... maybe, he thought, he should just rest a bit longer...

## **Chapter Two: Sanctuary**

(29th June 2012)

Eighty five years later, over the same stretch of hill on which the barrows of the prehistoric Kings ran like humps on the back of some giant half-submerged sea-creature, on a road now wider and heavy with speeding traffic, Conall Astor's campervan lurched to a sudden halt causing a number of unsecured objects to crash into the back of his seat. Behind his van the driver of a pristine black Audi that had been tailgating him all the way from Marlborough screeched to a stop, sounded his horn and gesticulated wildly. Conall put his arm out the window and stuck up his middle finger as the Audi veered around him.

'Fucking wanker!' the driver yelled, so Conall changed his gesture, lifting up a curled little finger in the sign for 'small dick'. To his immense relief the car carried on.

The cause of Conall's sudden halt seemed oblivious to the accident it had nearly produced: the hare in the centre of the road fixed Conall with a golden eye before lolloping nonchalantly towards the grass verge. It's angular, cat-like beauty was entrancing - like an emissary from an older world out of place on the burning tarmac – it's indifference seemed to suggest that it, and not the road and its dirty machines, had precedence; my kind were here before yours, it seemed to say.

'You take your time, lady!' Conall shouted, sarcastically. The hare reached the roadside grass sat for a few seconds then was gone, leaving some flattened grass-stems as the only witness to its presence.

Restarting his van, and lifting a hand to the queue of vehicles that had formed behind him, Conall drove onwards a few yards and then signalled and turned into a small open area on the right of the road where a number of cars and vans were parked; and having found a space, the camper shivered once more to a silent halt.

For a few moments Conall sat still, gazing ahead at the rolling landscape of pale wheat and sheep-dotted insipid grassland, relieved that the three hour drive had ended; then with a nervous glance he took off his sunglasses and turned to inspect the damage in the back of the camper. Coffee was splashed up the back of the seat and lay in a puddle on the floor in which a number of books, papers, empty tobacco packets and diet coke bottles were scattered. Shit. He'd forgotten about the coffee cup. He picked up a dripping black notebook, wiped it on the seat next to him, and leaned across and shoved it into the crowded glovebox, whose contents promptly tumbled out into the foot-well.

'Fuck it.'

A small cardboard packet had tumbled out, spilling its contents, a few blister packs of green and cream capsules, onto the floor. It was three weeks since he'd taken the last tablet, and already he had felt a sense of the old him returning; a sharpening of edges long dulled, slivers of happiness felt for the first time in many, many months; cold washes of grief, too – real grief, not the numb dumb-show the anti-depressants had afforded him for the last year. He didn't know why he'd bothered to bring them. Weakness, he supposed; a prop, in case it all went horribly wrong again. Wrong again? That implied things had got better, and they hadn't; it was time, that was all – not that one could put a time limit on grieving, no – but it was time to try to start living again, he supposed. At least he had the choice. She didn't; but she wouldn't have wanted him to give up.

I should just throw these into the first bin I find, he thought, leaving them where they had fallen.

The drive down from London had been uneventful; he had begun it with a vague sense of stress, and had been half tempted to turn around and head for home, but having reached Fleet services on the M3, he had sat on the bank of the car park with a coffee and a cigarette, and had felt that the old lightness of spirit might yet return if he relaxed and gave it a chance. Wasn't that the whole reason for coming here? To mark a new start by

returning to a place where in the past he had always been happy, but which had become slighted in his memory by those dark, tragic events of the previous year? He took a deep breath.

It had been over a year since he had last been here; and in that time his life had changed utterly and irrecoverably. Coming back here was an attempt to put it all in perspective; to draw a line under the past; not to forget it, but to try to move on from it, to lay a ghost to rest. This place had been somewhere where he had immediately felt at home, where he could just be. Might it now welcome him home like a prodigal son, past misdemeanours waiting, if he was fortunate, to be forgiven? But just now such a hope seemed a pipe-dream; all seemed flat to him, dull – the world was leaden, and he seemed to lack the means to shake off the veneer of greyness that seemed to coat everything like a fine ash. A walk should help, he mused; and a beer.

Conall leaned out of the window and looked at himself in the wing-mirror; a tired, unshaven, face looked back at him from beneath dark curls. He looked away. Still, a year on, he couldn't hold his own gaze for long. Conall was, in his own words, 'pushing forty', and for the first time in his life he felt his age. He was dreading the day itself; all his life there had been two cakes – two sets of presents; last year it hadn't mattered as they had all been too numb with the shock, but this year – with only a couple of months to go, and it being a 'biggy', as she had used to call such occasions, the idea of celebrating it alone, with her not there, was unthinkable.

Conall opened the door and stepped into the heat of the early July afternoon. The majority of the cars around him were empty; though muffled music was coming from a large converted minibus a little further up the path; it was painted black, with tinted windows, and howling wolves and a giant full-moon airbrushed on its side.

Though he was still a mile or so from the main village, he had decided to stop here knowing that on such a gorgeous day the main car parks that served Avebury village and the stone circle that surrounded it would already be full; besides, he reasoned, he wished to walk into the village the old way, from the Sanctuary and along the Avenue. And he wanted to walk after spending such a long time behind the wheel. Besides, he could leave the van here and return later in the evening and camp the night; the main car park shut at seven and he would only have to move the van again – and to do that he'd need to be sober; something he had no intention of being.

Behind him, beyond the fence, and reached by a path in the long grass, lay the Bronze Age barrows; for a moment he had the urge to go and climb them but his goal for the moment lay to the immediate south of the road he had just turned off, and so locking his camper (not that, he imagined, anyone in their right mind would attempt to steal it or any of its coffee-stained contents) he headed for the road.

The road, where it crossed the brow of the hill, was steep and curved so that Conall was more reliant on his hearing to gauge a gap in the traffic than his sight. After a minute or so of waiting as cars, lorries, coaches and motorcycles roared past Conall ran across the road, a few yards from where the hare had crossed minutes before. Something furred but flat and dry coated the road, maybe once a fox or a hare. He grimaced and felt a wave of sadness.

Despite the large number of cars that had been in the lay-by Conall found the meadow in which the Sanctuary lay bereft of tourists. The only signs of life were three jackdaws poking around the long grass looking for insects, seemingly unconcerned with the roar of the traffic a few feet away. As ancient monuments went the Sanctuary, Conall thought, was singularly unimpressive. Concentric rings of concrete markers now showed where the great posts of a prehistoric structure had once stood lending to this circular meadow the feel of a badly conceived modern art installation; but its view was serene: to the east in the distance lay the cragged teeth-like stones that marked the façade of a large prehistoric tomb known as West Kennet long-barrow; and to its right the strangely rounded form of Silbury hill could be seen over the shoulder of the intervening hilltop. All lay bathed in a haze that bleached the distant rises of Milk hill and Tan hill into a uniform ridge of cyan – bluer than the sky itself which was almost colourless and hurt Conall's eyes now he had taken his sunglasses off. The wheat field next to the long-barrow was marked with a huge crop circle, a vast circle of flattened wheat with radials of increasingly smaller circles spinning counter-clockwise from the centre. These crop glyphs still amazed him however many times he'd seen them; the work, he supposed, of guerrilla artists rather than extra-terrestrials they nevertheless still possessed a certain mystery, perhaps born of their anonymity, their perfection and their elusive meaning.

Conall walked to the central concrete ring, sat himself on one of the posts, and took a pack of American Spirit tobacco out of his shirt pocket. First taking a pinch, he crumbled the already powdery tobacco onto the earth before him. *Itsipaiitapio'pah, Great Spirit*, he mumbled under his breath, a

habit he had picked up on his last visit here from an old man who had since returned to the Ancestors - at least *he* was old, Conall thought, thinking of the old man; it's easier to deal with then – *a good innings* as they say, trite though it may be; no one could have said it of *her* though: a good innings. Thirty-eight years old. She'll always be thirty-eight... *they shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.* It's not just the years that condemn, Con thought; survivors guilt; or just plain guilt – there's a pretty fucking hefty dose of condemnation there.

He inhaled and breathed out the smoke in the direction of the swifts that were screaming and tumbling overhead beneath the criss-cross of vapour trails that divided up the sky. Not so long ago he would have looked up jealously, wishing he had been jetting off to somewhere other than where he was; somewhere where he couldn't be reminded of things. But today Conall Astor knew that he had to stop running away.

Alone, in the circle, he put a hand over his face. Then, straightening and wiping his eyes, he drew a deep breath on his cigarette. 'Well, I'm back!' he said.

## **Chapter Three: The Serpent's Head**

'Tollers?!"

Tolkien looked up from where he had lain down on the mound a few minutes earlier. Lewis had crossed back over the road and was leant over the fence to the barrow field.

'Come on, man. We're in need of tea! What are you doing?"

'You miss so much with your marching, Jack!' Tolkien muttered, standing up somewhat awkwardly and replacing his hat.

Lewis's already sunburned head turned away and he headed back over the road to the field opposite where Barfield was slowly walking in a wide circle, eyes to the ground. Tolkien reluctantly shouldered his pack, and descended from the barrow, turning back for a moment to bow to the bones of the unknown king whose tomb it had been, sweeping off his hat and uttering words of farewell.

A few yards from the road in the direction of another great barrow lay a flat circular expanse of ground, its short grass studded with a number of pristine concentric circles of short concrete posts of varying sizes.

'This place,' Barfield, who had been circling the posts, said as he approached the others 'is the Sanctuary – it was excavated a couple of years back – and it seems that it was originally some kind of circular wooden structure – these concrete posts mark where the wooden poles once stood - and it was probably roofed. And then at some

point it was all surrounded by a ring of sarsen stones... they've all gone now - destroyed by pious locals since the 1700's though the antiquarian Stukeley drew them in a sketch he made here in the 1720's.'

'What was it, *Baedeker* Barfield – a temple?' Lewis asked.

Barfield shrugged, digging around in his backpack. 'Possibly, or a mortuary-house, I think someone suggested – where the bodies of the dead were left to rot before they were put in the tombs, the long-barrows. But you know what Stukeley called it?! The *hakpen*, the snake's head. It's after this structure that the whole ridge from here to the horse seems to have been named. Now, with what you were saying earlier about the Old Religion, Tollers, and the defeat of the serpent cults...'

Lewis looked down at the rings of posts in un-characteristic silence; seemingly nonplussed. 'I suppose this was just an empty field when we were last here.' He said, looking at Barfield.

'I guess so. We must have walked past here, but I don't recall much about it – except the rain.'

'Ha! And the ride back, do you remember?!" Lewis laughed. 'Hitching a lift to Marlborough on that cart?"

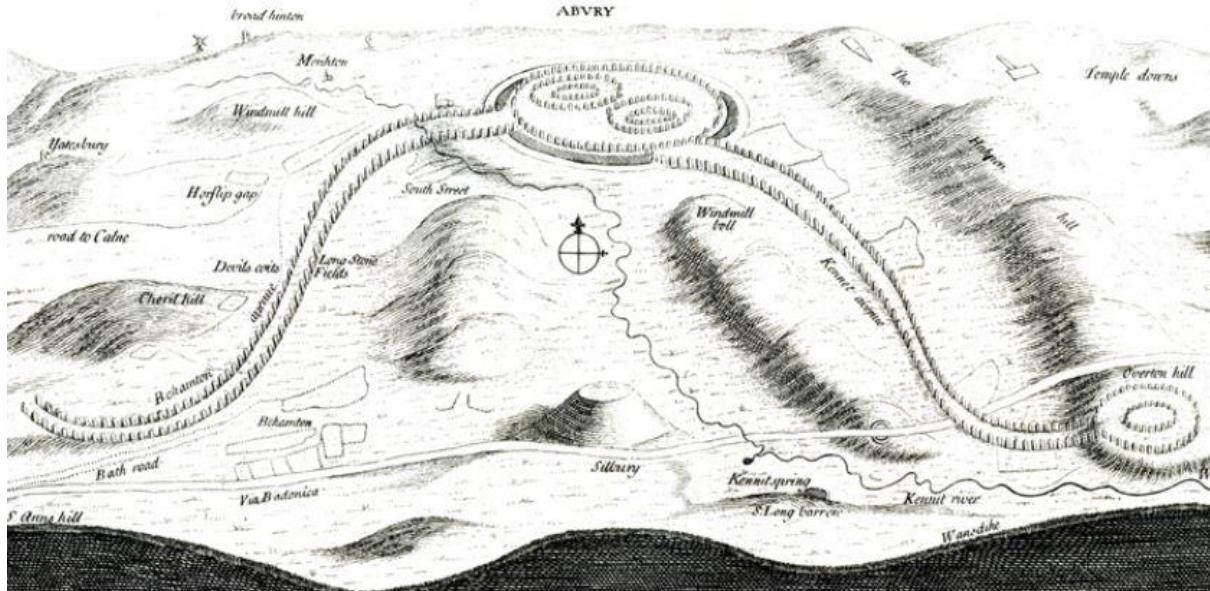
Barfield smiled with affection. 'Yes, in the dark and the rain, and Harwood singing!'

Tolkien felt oddly touchy at their reminiscing; he had hardly known Lewis back then. *I do hope this trip doesn't turn into a nostalgic reverie for those two*, he thought gruffly. He bristled at his own jealousy. Was it jealousy, though, he wondered? Yes, in part, but not for Lewis and his cronies; it was, perhaps, more sadness he had not been able to make such memories himself with those he should have been here with. But stoically he cast such thoughts from his mind.

'So, I guess the ridge is the back of the snake and this hill that marks the end of the ridge is its head?' Tolkien asked.

Barfield turned. 'No. It heads north-west from here; Stukeley believed the whole of the Avebury monument was the serpent... it's a serpent writ large in stone...' Having found the volume he had been searching

in his rucksack he opened it out on a folded-over page that showed an old black and white hand-drawn map; it was Stukeley's plan of the monuments.



'Look, here's the head, where we are now, at Overton Hill' he said, pointing at the right-hand side of the drawing to a circular feature, '...and then an avenue of stones, the beast's neck, snakes its way to the main circle at the centre, in which two smaller stone circles are to be found... though each of them was as big as Stonehenge, which gives one some idea of just how huge the main circle is! Then the tail, if you will, is another avenue leaving the circle on its western side and heading towards Beckhampton. You must admit it is rather snake-like. The naming of hakpen hill, then, is more than coincidental... it seems to support Stukeley's theory.'

Tolkien looked up from the page. From their current viewpoint the main stone circle and village within was still obscured by the rise of what Stukeley's plan called 'Windmill hill' to the northwest. *Hakpen*. But on what authority, Tolkien wondered, had it been so named, or just in Stukeley's imagination?

'And here's where we'll find the pub!' Lewis said, pointing to the centre of the circle. 'Fiendishly clever of them to build a pub right at the heart of the circle!' He joked. 'Obviously, the avenues were for guiding them home on dark nights when they were worse for wear with drink! How long until we get there? An hour? You know, I know it's ten years on, but I really don't recall much of this at all.'

'Three-quarters of an hour, I would think.' Barfield said. He looked at his pocket watch. 'It's eleven already, too early for lunch, really. But there is a tearoom down there beside the road near Silbury Hill' he said, pointing to a

flat-topped rise just visible above the trees, ‘and we could perhaps stop there for tea and then eat properly at the pub later. We have all day.’

‘Well, you have the map and we’ll trust your judgement.’ Lewis said, not looking up from the plan.

Tolkien paused and looked up at the skylarks, his own choice would have been, as they were already at the so-called ‘serpent’s head’, to skip tea and continue down its throat into its belly down the Avenue, the route the people of Avebury would have no doubt taken four and a half thousand years earlier.

Lewis, still looking at the plan – pointed a nicotine stained finger at the central feature - a great domed hill with a flattened top, so perfect in its shape that it was quite obviously man-made. Then peering up from the plan to the western horizon saw the same flat-topped mound in the flesh, peeking over the intervening hills.

‘Rather a fitting start to our Coleridge homage, wouldn’t you say?’ Barfield said, ‘the great hill of Silbury - the *stately pleasure dome* in the valley of the *sacred river* Kennet,’ lifting lines from Coleridge’s poem. ‘It’s old – the Romans had to curve their otherwise straight road to Bath around it in order to avoid it.’

‘It’s always struck me as looking like a huge steamed pudding,’ remarked Lewis; ‘All this walking has made me hungry. Do you think there might be steak and kidney pudding at the Red Lion?’

‘Shall we climb it?’ Barfield said, ignoring Lewis’s comment.

Lewis looked at the steep sides of the hill and scratched at his chin in thought.

‘I’m in two minds. It would possibly be better, if we are to attempt the feat, to climb it now before the day gets too warm; but my stomach is disagreeing with me. Still, we could have a pot of tea and then decide.’

‘I climbed it myself years ago, before our last visit!’ The solicitor’s face lit up with a puckish smile. ‘And we danced on the summit!’

‘Why did they build it, Owen? Is it a tomb, like the Pyramids?’ Lewis asked.

‘No – no burial has been found, despite the local legends...’

‘Don’t mention legends, Barfield... we’ll never get our tea...see how Toller’s

ears picked up like a hound?' Jack quipped.

Tolkien held a match to his pipe and puffed away, grinning. 'I already know them, Jack.' He said through pipe-clenched teeth, 'Despite crossing the county border this is still, you know, my neck of the woods *mythologically* speaking. A King Zel is supposed to be buried in the hill, on horseback, in golden armour...'

'Golden armour, indeed!' Jack mocked. 'There's the mark of a modern myth, surely; gold armour would be practically useless against a bronze or iron blade.'

'Unless the gold is a symbol for the sun?' Suggested Barfield.

'Perhaps.' Lewis conceded. 'What if Silbury were derived from the Roman Sol? The Hill of the Sun?'

He looked towards Tolkien, but the latter seemed deep in contemplation.

'Possibly; that argument has merit....' Tolkien answered, 'but *Sil* is closer to the Welsh word for the sun, *Sul*...' (he pronounced it, correctly, as 'seel')  
'...If, *if*, the Celtic place-name hakpen has survived here then why not *Sul*?'

It seemed strange in this beautiful English setting to hear the echoes of the old Celtic tongue now long driven from these Downs; it was almost as if such ancient places were reluctant to let them go, or perhaps the newcomers, bound by fear or superstition, had thought it unwise to change the names. It lent the place a feeling of timelessness; as if some relic of a dark pagan Celtic past had broken through the veneer of England, like a long buried celandine from an ancient forest floor pushing up through a lawn in spring, long after the trees of the forest had been cleared to make way for the garden. Words could be vehicles for such feelings; passports into a different reality, or worlds long passed, Tolkien had always thought.

As Tolkien looked across the landscape England faded as if into a mist; and an ancient place emerged; he stood no more on Overton hill, or Hakpen ridge facing towards Silbury – he stood on the head of the serpent temple gazing on the hill of the sun, in the heart of a land that bore other names, names now only remembered in legend: Ynys Prydein, the Isle of the Mighty; Clas Myrddin: Merlin's enclosure; Logres; Albion ...

The temple of the Dragon, he thought. Was it possible or just the over-ripe imaginings of that antiquarian Stukeley - a man who had later claimed to be

a druid and to have divined Biblical numbers in the measurements of Stonehenge? As he stood in thought the unsolicited image of a grinning dragon crossed, unwanted, into his consciousness. *Smaug! How am I meant to forget my book when all around I'm surrounded by dragons?!* He thought, suddenly annoyed at the obtrusion of work, of deadlines, of editorial queries into his reverie. *Be gone, foul slitherer and leave me be!* In his mind he saw the hero of old, his bow drawn back, shooting at the heart of the dragon; the incoming heroes on their white steeds, come to crush the serpent of gods of the older religion and their worshippers, and take from them their land and their women. A couple of verses from his beloved Genesis welled up in his mind:

*'And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust thou shalt eat all the days of thy life: And I shall put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise they head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.'*

He ground his heel into the ground of the Hakpen, banishing Smaug from his thoughts, determined that no more would his book intrude on his holiday; a resolution that would stand no chance of remaining kept.

## **Chapter Four: The Book and the Feather**

Conall had returned to the campervan, and was taking a few moments to mop the remnants of the spilled coffee from the floor with a dirty t-shirt, and to replace the rest of the fallen objects (and others that had already been on the floor) to their proper place – stuffed under the sofa-bed. Most of his stuff had, in fairness, been properly packed away, but the decision to come here had been last-minute and so he had thrown a number of items on to the sofa-bed wrapped in a duvet, hoping they would be ok. The coffee had been a mistake, though. He'd wedged the unfinished cup between a pile of fairly heavy books and a lever-arch file on the small kitchen worktop behind the driver's seat – and it would have been okay there, or so he told himself, if it hadn't been for the hare...

The file, marked PhD, with the words 'unfinished' scrawled on the label lay half-open, and he collected a number of hand-written pages, star-maps and photocopies of ancient artefacts, statues and inscriptions that had cascaded from out of it. A few of the sheets were wrinkled and brown with coffee, but he gathered them up all the same and pushed them carelessly into the pile – pages of sketches of little clay figurines copied from Marija Gimbutas' books on 'Old' Europe, with lozenge shapes and zig zags marked in black pen; carved cow-horns from Iberian tombs; print-outs of stellar alignments, some highlighted in red pen and exclamation marks. He didn't need them now anyway. He snorted at the memory: a conversation from a few months before and the words of his then-tutor: 'Astronomy is supposed to be science! Your original subject, on evidence for astronomy in prehistory was fine, if a little loose; but to start delving into these myths, well, Con, you're on very shaky ground. If it's not Indian myth, it's Red Indian myth... I know you've had a very, very difficult time of late. But these subjects are simply not tenable, and I really cannot support your continued study of them, I'm

sorry!'

'Red Indian? That's not very PC, is it?' Con had answered. His tutor had just blinked at him and waved it off with a motion of his hand as irrelevant. Behind the tutor's head was a large poster of stars being created in Orion's belt as imaged by the Hubble telescope, and above this a poster of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN near Geneva including an image of an atom with electrons flying about the nucleus like billiard balls; the great and the small; was this guy so focussed on these extremes that he couldn't see the everyday world, Con had thought? Surely what was interesting about stars and atoms was that *we* were made of both: the very substance of our being were atoms forged in those great stellar furnaces, matter that was, the closer you looked at it, just energy seeming to flit into being from out of some mysterious and timeless zero energy field... physics surely was supposed to allow one look at the world in wonder – not to ignore it.

Conall had often waxed-lyrical about this to anyone who would listen: on a quantum level space and time were illusory; changing the energy state of a single atom here changed every single other atom in the cosmos; alter the course of a pair of particles once joined and the other would move, too – *even if it was thousands of millions of miles away* – even though according to science nothing moved faster than light-speed – something between these particles carried that information in an instant. How could that be – that a pair of particles once joined were forever linked?! Modern physics was mystical, magical and it had returned the stuffy academic that Con had once been in danger of becoming into a would-be mystic, something closer to how he had been as a child; an image of Tao, the yin-yang symbol, now hung on a string around his neck, his hair, at least then, long. But his tutor remained unaware of any of this magic, un-awakened by its import – and had failed to see its importance to his student.

'You're a scientist Con. This research is NOT science.'

'You accepted my proposal. I clearly stated that I'd be investigating ancient myths...' Con retorted.

'Look – every PhD proposal needs tweaking – we had hoped you'd come to realise that this kind of research is currently frowned upon in the academic community and that perhaps other aspects of the subject might take precedence in your research. You're a physicist at heart; get this '*Tao of physics*' rubbish out of your system and grow up.'

'It's pronounced *' was all Con could muster in reply as he left the office.*

Con had driven home from this meeting fuming; by the time he had reached his house and sat down at his computer his anger had not abated. He had typed the shortest email of his life. 'I quit.' He had wanted it to be twice as long but decided to leave 'you wanker' unwritten. But in writing the email he had quit not just a PhD, but its associated lectureship in astrophysics; and he wasn't sorry. The fire he had once had for the subject had left him since she had gone, and lecturing without fire was a mere dumb-show; thirty pairs of eyes, open like the mouths of chicks screaming to be fed, and he not able to even feed himself. He would not miss that. Besides, he had been told to rein in too many times; to leave the 'new age' nonsense out of the class. He was fed up of being told what he should or should not believe. As if truth was something you could measure.

Two particles once joined, linked forever... but the truth was she had died, and he had carried on living; and he had not known, not at the time; not unless you counted that dream – but how could you count that dream? He daren't even go there, daren't even begin to think... The dream... *the river of milk, the horse on its banks....* No! He cast it from his mind. It was impossible; it was madness. It was okay for microscopic particles in the world of quantum reality to behave that way – to be entangled – *twinned* - but in the real world, the world of Newton, and television, and water bills? If it were true, if they had been linked and the dream had been some kind of warning, surely, he would have known; he would have felt her fear?

Without any real thought he put his folder to one side and reached for a book on the dresser shelf above the worktop. It had been hers and her name was scribbled inside the front page in a felt-tip pen: Melissa Astor; oldest and best of the Astor twins. It was an edition of the collected of poems of Coleridge, its cover faded by sunlight, its pages heavily thumbed, many turned down at the corner. It opened naturally at a well-worn page, the poem 'Kubla Khan', underlined and annotated in a small, hurried hand, the same as had written the name at the start. He half-read the notes, half-remembered them, so many times had he poured over them in the last year. He sat down on the sofa-bed with the book in his hands and read for a few moments more. The handwriting was legible, if rushed, little circles dotted the 'i's, and triple lines underlined words in the printed poem, often followed by a barrage of exclamation marks; the handwriting of someone excited, alive. But there they hid the truth.

Kubla Khan. Her favourite poem: *their* favourite – they'd learned it by heart

just for the fun of it. He looked out of the window at nothing in particular and recited the first verse.

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.*

A white barn-owl feather, edged with cream and smoky brown stripes, that had been placed in the back pages, fell onto the mattress of the sofa-bed; he picked it up gently, twisting it between his fingers; brushed it against his lips; and thought of the dark-haired girl who had given it to him, not the same girl who had once owned this book, but one now equally lost to him, it seemed. The feather brought back a memory of this other girl and of her grandfather; of a conversation a year earlier in a garden not two of miles from where Con now sat, with the frail white-haired man over the best soil for roses:

'I don't think he's that interested in roses, granddad,' the dark-haired girl had laughed.

'Well he should be! If he learns the patience to cultivate a rose, he'll have patience to cultivate a life with my beautiful grand-daughter' the old man had replied, with a slow wink that creased the whole of his already much-lined face. Both Conall and the girl had coloured at this. 'Granddad!' she had said, abashed, and had mouthed a silent 'sorry' to Con.

Conall would go and lay tobacco on this old man's grave tomorrow, at the Church in Avebury village, speaking the words the elder had taught him - *Itsipaiitapio'pah - Great Spirit*... he wondered if anyone laid flowers there now that his dark-haired granddaughter, his only surviving relative, would have returned home. Placing the book back on the shelf he continued with cleaning the van. A book from one girl, and a feather from another, he mused; it was a shame they had never met. It was tragic that they now never would. *If I hadn't been here*... he began to think, but angrily cast the thought from his mind.

When the tidying was done Conall stepped outside and wrung the spilled coffee from his t-shirt then threw it back inside. The van up the way with the howling wolves on its side, curtains closed, music blaring, was gently rocking rhythmically on its squeaky suspension. He stared for a moment then quickly looked away, suddenly understanding. Lucky bastard, he thought to himself. Then imagining a night of this music and squeaking

wheels he decided he would have to find another spot, closer to the circle, to camp.

## **Chapter Five: The River of Death**

The three friends, having left the Sanctuary at the top of the ridge behind them, had descended into the valley bottom down a path beside the road, edged with lush new grasses, to where the lazy river Kennet was beginning its meandering journey through Wiltshire on its way to joining the Thames at Reading.

Another half mile walk along the snaking river brought them to the farm cottages of West Kennet on the curve of the Bath road, where they crossed the stone bridge and continued through fields lined with early blossoming whitethorn bushes in which a cuckoo could be heard, a herald of summer's approach; ahead the companions could now see, unobscured by intervening hills for the first time, the majestic rise of Silbury Hill. At this point the Kennet turned to their left, to the south, to its source, as Barfield informed them, at the 'Kennet spring', as it was named on Stukeley's plan; while another small tributary, its origins further to the north, swung around and skirted past the bottom of the hill, which was casting a great shadow over the water-logged meadow in which it lay.

While Barfield and Lewis gazed in wonder at the mound Tolkien had idled a few paces away towards the sedge covered banks of the slow, clear, river, where he gazed a while on the sticklebacks flitting in and out of the rills of dark green weed swaying in the glassy shallows. Above him a pair of crows were cawing as they circled, then flew off to the south.

He crouched, gazing into its clear depths, its shallow bottom, in the dappled shade from the water weeds, flecked here and there with pieces of chalk. He removed his boots and socks, rolled up his trouser bottoms and dipped a tentative foot into the water; it was icy cold, but before long he had grown used to it, and he sat on the bank, moving his feet hither and thither,

stirring up a milky cloud of sediment that floated gently away downstream.

'Enlighten us Tollers' Lewis said, striding over to where Tolkien was seated, 'The river name, Kennet, means what?' he looked back and winked at Barfield.

'I know what you're getting at, Jack, and I happen to disagree with that particular vulgar etymology!' Tolkien leaned forward amongst the rushes and dipped his hand into the cool water.

'The earliest record is *Cunnit*, but we're not looking at a Saxon profanity – beyond Marlborough is a place named Mildenhall called *Cunetio* by the Romans, no doubt after the river. The name cannot therefore be Saxon if it was here centuries prior to the *Adventus...*'. The *adventus* Tolkien was referring to was the *Adventus Saxonum*, the coming of the Saxons, which tradition dated to AD 430, some 20 years after the last of the legions had left Britain for good. The conversations between these gentlemen were always peppered with such terms – Latin and Greek phrases, snippets of poetry from all ages, used not to impress, but as a kind of scholarly shorthand. A casual listener might be forgiven for wondering if they were often talking in code.

'Cut to the chase, Tollers – Kennet means...?' despite his seeming briskness Lewis was smiling. His shadow moved across the water, scattering the sticklebacks.

Tolkien nevertheless bristled at being cut short.

'The first part is from *Cuno* the old British word for dog...'

'The river Dog?' Lewis roared with laughter. 'What a strange name!'

'That's rich coming from you, *Jacksie!*' said Barfield, referring to the fact that since childhood Lewis had insisted he be called after the name of his favourite dog rather than his given name, Clive.

Tolkien ignored their quips.

'The second element stems from *dagos*,' Tolkien continued, 'linked to our word 'day', but it stems from an older word meaning bright; and so 'bright-hound' is my preferred translation. *Cunodagos*, *Cunetio*, Kennet – it's the same name. Shining dog. Bright hound.' He turned back to watch the waters

plashing over his milk-white feet. It was an odd name. Something to do with the chalk, perhaps? But why hound?

Lewis, still amused, nevertheless tried to suppress his mirth for the sake of Tolkien who could be touchy about his subjects.

'The river of the bright hound...That, I concede, makes some sense if we think in terms of this place as a funerary landscape; after all, the Greeks imagined the river Styx that separated the land of the living from that of the dead as guarded on its far bank by the three headed dog Cerberus... could he be the dog?'

Tolkien frowned, weighing up the possibility in his mind.

Barfield, looking across the valley, offered support for Lewis's observation, 'Actually, the idea of the river as a dividing line between the realm of the dead and of the living could work here - West Kennet Long Barrow... there,' he said, pointing to a rise on the crest of the hill to their south 'the burial place of the builders of Avebury, stands on that side of the river, and the stone circles lay on this. I've always thought of the circle as an expression of life...'

'So, like the Roman, you think they buried their dead away from the settlements? A river is as good a barrier as any...' Tolkien said.

'So luckily any hellhound guarding this river would be on *that* side!' Lewis observed, looking aslant at opposite bank of the bubbling waters, where in a nearby copse the cuckoo was still calling. Nothing could seem more incongruous on this beautiful spring day than the idea that this vale of green, spotted with the yellows and blues of meadow flowers and the creamy masses of whitethorn bushes fat with blossom could in any way be associated with death. All seemed alive, burgeoning with vitality and renewed growth.

Tolkien leant over the edge of the stream, where pieces of chalk and river rolled flints could be seen poking above the muddy depths of the clear water. He leant forward and plunged his hand into the cool depths, taking a stone from the bottom – a smooth river-rolled chalk pebble, and began to recite a few lines of verse:

*In the depths stood dazzling stones aheap  
As a glitter through glass that glowed with light,  
As streaming stars when on earth men sleep*

*Stare in the welkin in winter night'*

'That's beautiful,' said Barfield. 'It's from *The Pearl* is it not?'

Tolkien nodded. 'We have no recourse to rush to the Greeks to find mention of the River of Death, when our own poets express it so eloquently.' He said, holding the white pebble between his thumb and forefinger and examining it closely, before placing it in his waistcoat pocket.

Jack nodded, more serious now. 'I was always touched by that scene – one of the most haunting in any medieval lyric, I would say; and I suppose that poem is more fitting, for it is the garden of Paradise that lies over the river, not some dark hell inhabited by bat-like souls that one finds across the Styx in the Classical traditions.' He gazed out over the fields; his eyes narrowed against the sun. The poem, which told of the dream of a grieving father in which he spies his deceased daughter, the Pearl of the title, across the river of death, had been read aloud by Tolkien on one of their Thursday nights at Magdalen at the tail end of the previous year.

'But the river was wide, I durst not swim' Tolkien quoted, touching the chalk in his pocket.

'...I durst not swim...'

Tolkien's voice was tinged with melancholy, and Barfield wondered what his quiet friend was thinking as he gazed across the river to the ruinous tomb on the crest of the hill, what pallid ghost he was seeing in his mind's eye in place of the lost daughter of the poem, whose words continued to flow from his lips, but now in a whisper.

Barfield turned and once more took the path that headed westwards between the river and the road; and soon Jack was beside him, striding forward.

'Is Ronald okay?' Owen asked. 'He seems distant; preoccupied.'

'Oh don't mind Ronald; he's had his head in his books for so long he's just taking a while to remember how to relax.' He looked back to where Tolkien stood looking across the river.

'But there is always something of the melancholic in him;' Lewis continued 'I think he pines for something; if I could put it in a nutshell I'd say he was homesick – homesick for a place he's never been; nor perhaps ever could

have, save in his imagination.'

'The imagination is a powerful thing.' Barfield said.

'It is.' Jack said. 'But ultimately it is *fancy*, not blood and stone; not real.'

Barfield shook his head. 'What is real?' he asked.

'My grumbling stomach is real, Owen. Spare me your metaphysics until I at least have a cup of tea inside of me!'

### Chapter Six: The Avenue

Opening the side door of the camper van, now re-parked a few minutes' drive from the Sanctuary in a lay-by of the narrow road that ran alongside the Avenue, Conall took a enamel tin mug from its hook in the cupboard and piled a large spoonful of instant coffee into it, and then put his kettle on to boil.

While the kettle was heating he sat with his legs out of the side-door, enjoying the heat of the mid afternoon sun; then he stood and walked over to the wooden fence that divided the Avenue from the road. The stones of the Avenue stood pale and silent in the long grass that trembled slightly in the warm breeze; each stone stood taller and wider than a man – and were arranged in pairs, a few metres apart – as if a procession of giants, two by two, had, by some long-forgotten spell, been turned to stone while shuffling towards the circle that lay over the hill, out of sight. The Avenue snaked its way, in this fashion, to the southern entrance of the henge, a good quarter of an hour walk away from where Conall now stood, eyes closed, leaning against the fence, - the heat of the sun somehow melting the lead of his earlier sadness.

A steady rising whistle from the van alerted him to the fact the kettle was boiling, and so returned to the cool shade of the kitchenette and poured the steaming water into his cup. He blew on, and then took a sip of, the black liquid; coffee was perhaps too generous a description of this scorching, bitter, brew; a splash of cold water and a couple of sugars made it slightly more palatable.

He picked up an old and battered wide-brimmed straw hat from the seat and placed it on his head; then in a moment of inspiration took down the *Collected Coleridge*, removed the owl feather and stuck it into the rim of the hat. *In memory of you both*, he thought.

Setting the cup aside he rolled a cigarette, hung it from his lips and then, coffee in hand, pulled shut the camper door and walked over to the gate that lead into the avenue.

The grass in between the stones had been recently mowed, though the stones themselves stood in small islands of long grass where the mower had not been able to reach. Conall walked towards the centre of the Avenue – sipping his drink, and peering to where, some 500 yards distant, the stones disappeared over the brow of the slight hill. There, near the brow, a dog was sniffing about one of the stones, and he could hear the distant voice of its owner calling it back; it disappeared back over the hill, leaving Conall once more alone.

From this position at the centre of the Avenue it was plain to see that the stones had been arranged in some kind of order: those to his left were thin and pillar-like, while those to his right, bordering the road, were squatter, wider, almost diamond shaped. Male and female, others had reasoned; but archaeologists often lacked imagination, he thought, taking his lighter from his pocket and lighting his cigarette.

He idled over to the first of the ‘male’ stones and laid a palm on its side. These stones had, in the same way that old trees had, a kind of brooding physicality that gave them a sense of character; and this particular stone held special connotations for Conall – last spring when he had visited the Avebury circle for the first time, he had slept up against it, protected from the view of the road with its passing traffic by its width; a stone headrest against which he’d lain, gazing up at the night sky. Though he had a van to camp in, the desire to sleep here, under the stars, protected by this ancient sentinel, was stronger than the call of the sofa-bed.

‘Hello, old friend’ he muttered, breathing out a plume of smoke. ‘Do you remember me, stone?’ he whispered. Then removed his hat and he leant forward so that his forehead was pressed against the rough cool pillar, scabbed with lichen – beaming his thoughts into its heart. *So much has changed, stone. But I’m back.*

Just then voices in the distance alerted him to the approach of a group of walkers. Conall walked around the stone and sat down on the grass about its feet, on the sunlit southern facing side of the stone that hid him from the road and Avenue. The walkers came and went, and he settled back, the sun hot on his cheeks, and lighting up the inside of his closed eyelids with a

blood-red glow until he pulled the rim of the hat down to shade them. He could hear the distant ratcheting churring of a magpie, the *hoo-hoooo-hoo* of the doves, and the bleating of the sheep in the next field. These sounds relaxed him, and the crackle of his cigarette as he inhaled helped this feeling along. Time seemed to slow, became irrelevant; a quarter of an hour or so he sat here, drinking in the sounds and smells of this Wessex paradise. His mind began to drift...

Which sense, he had often been asked, would you lose if you had to? Sat here, the smell of the warm mowed grass, cigarette smoke, and sheep shit seemed as vital to the world as vision – more so, perhaps. Perhaps he would choose to lose his sight. No books though, part of him countered – but what good were books anyway? Homer, after all, was blind, so they said. Had he always been blind? Did he never actually see rosy-fingered dawn or the wine-dark sea? Imagine never having seen the sea, or a tree, or a blade of grass? Imagine never having seen the face of a beautiful woman; if I was blind – what would beauty be to me? Where would beauty reside if the eye of the beholder were blind? I mustn't fall asleep, he said to himself, shaking his head, aware his mind was beginning to wander – or I'll wake up sunburned.

Rising, he moved away from the stone, but fleetingly touched its side as he did so. See you later; he whispered.

Having made sure his van was locked Conall set off along the Avenue, intent on reaching the circle and grabbing something to eat in the pub that stood at its centre. The heat of the day was increasing rather than abating, and he removed his shirt and tied it about his waist; the heat of the sun on his skin felt good. As he crested the hill he saw, in the distance, a small group of people in bright yellow visi-vests huddled about a small area of stripped soil at the foot of one of the male stones besides which a small tent had been erected; he passed them with a 'hello' - not stopping to ask what these archaeologists scraping at the sun-baked soil were trying to uncover; he didn't envy them lying out in this heat, with their white hard-hats on. A few minutes later, having crested another rise, he stopped to take in the vista that now spread before him – a sight that never usually failed to stir him, though today its effect was bittersweet: the great circle of stones of Avebury; so vast one could not take it in from any single viewpoint – set within a staggeringly impressive circular bank and ditch, once some 40 feet deep. From his present viewpoint he could see only the southern half of the circle – the southern entrance lay before him, through which now passed the road to Swindon, cutting through its mighty banks. To the right these

same banks were crowned with great trees, but the section on the left was clear, giving one an unimpeded view of the massive sweep of stones around which visitors were treading, many picnicking in their shade, and the line of buildings beyond which were part of the village of Avebury. There, where the Swindon road met the village high street at a staggered cross-road, was the Red Lion, a large two-storey building under a heavy thatched roof, its forecourt that bordered the road spread with wooden tables, crammed full with people enjoying a drink in the sun. Conall suddenly felt very thirsty.

Leaving the avenue Conall entered the circle itself, passing between the huge stones that once marked the southern entrance; roughly angled, these stones dwarfed him as he stepped through them; but he did not stop to admire them, nor the smaller circle of stones, again, one of a pair, that he walked through. He would have time to admire the stones later, he reasoned.

The pub forecourt was busy and loud with laughter; an eclectic mix of new-age types with long hair and loose clothes, bikers in their leathers and families here for a day out crowded the tables. There, in one corner, sat a group of young people in visi-vests; more archaeologists, Conall assumed, probably university students on their summer dig; while on a table nearest the car-park a folk-group in white shirts decorated with coloured ribbons were taking musical instruments from out of their black cases. From all around the smell of fried food and cigarette smoke reached his nose. He hadn't expected it to be so busy, but he supposed last year he had been here in April, after the Easter holidays had finished, and although the place had not been quiet, it wasn't anything like as crowded as today.

No, he thought, turning away from the pub, I have something to do first.

He walked westwards past the pub and along a narrow road, past a small group of shops selling souvenirs, and a row of Bed & Breakfasts, until he had left the banks of the circle, and the street grew quieter; the street narrowed to a row of small brick cottages on the left, and on the right was the wall of the churchyard.

A cottage stood opposite the lych gate, a window box below the window thick with Nicotiana, its pendulous white flowers still closed; its doorway, newly painted, bore the name Church Cottage, and the small porch had been fixed-up by the new occupants; but the old occupant lay a few feet away across the road, as his granddaughter's letter had informed him; the

memorial plaque was simple:

In loving memory Alfred John Mac Govan-Crow 1935–2011

Con found it easily thanks to a posy of nicotiana placed on the grave; someone, then, in the village, still cared.

He knelt beside the plaque and removed the pouch of tobacco from his pocket. He took a pinch and crumbled it on the soft grass:

Itsipaiitapio'pah – he said.

Bless you, Old Man, he mumbled. May the Great Spirit protect you... and those you love.

The inside of the Red Lion was cool and dark after the glaring heat outside, and Conall suddenly remembered he was shirtless; putting the shirt back on and removing his hat he waited for a gap to appear at the bar; after a couple of minutes the pretty barmaid smiled at him and he asked for a pint of Green King bitter, and while he waited for it to be poured he grabbed a menu and hungrily poured over the choices. There was no chance of nabbing a table outside, he reasoned, but a small table stood free in the corner opposite the bar, so Conall told the barmaid he'd be sitting there. She gave him a table number scrawled in marker pen on a wooden spoon and he sat down with his pint.

A shaft of sunlight bisected the table like a wall of fire; and for a while Conall sat entranced at the dance of the particles of dust illuminated by it, while outside the folk-group were playing accompanied by claps from the crowd. Then he raised his pint, delighting in that first cool mouthful, the bitter tang of hops, and felt himself begin to relax. And now what? He thought.

What happened was not what he had expected.

## Chapter Seven: Orient and Immortal Wheat

The tea-rooms Barfield had mentioned were in a wooden bungalow with a veranda, one of a number of small wooden buildings beside an unsightly petrol station on the north side of the road, just past Silbury hill. Despite their inauspicious appearance the bungalow, at least, was welcoming, and it wasn't too long before the three friends found themselves ensconced in a sunny spot looking over the road and the green fields of newly sprouted wheat opposite, and enjoying a pot of tea.

A couple of farm labourers and another small group of walkers were the only other clientele on the veranda, though there were other workmen seated in the shaded part of the building, laughing and playing cards.

Barfield sipped his tea and looked longingly out over the forecourt.

'I used to stop here for tea on my trips down to Cornwall when still a student.' He said. 'Those were lovely times; if only I'd appreciated how lovely at the time; I'm sure I did, but I think it takes a period of hard work and drudgery to give these things perspective.' His face had dropped at the mention of drudgery.

'What took you to Cornwall?' Tolkien asked.

'Folk dancing...' Barfield smiled again, seeming to drift off in to some lovely memory, 'and unrequited love...'

'Ah,' Lewis said, with a wink; 'the one love I didn't dare mention in 'The Four Loves''

'Blissful torture, at the time, I can assure you. But I learned a great lesson from it, probably one of the greatest of my life!' Barfield said, stirring his tea.

'Being?' asked Tolkien.

'Well. When you have been in love, and given so much of yourself, and that love hasn't been returned you have two choices: you can pine after the girl forever, or you do something rather more pragmatic, like sublimate those feelings into something else... you see, looking back on it I can see that my love for the girl was, I suppose, a love of life, really – or at least the possibilities life had still to offer me. I was stricken for a good while – very low – not really able to move on – it was a great blow at the time - until I had this moment of realisation that I could fall in love again; and I did; with nature, with life – with the world!'

'With Maud?'

'Yes...' Owen said, haltingly, at the mention of his wife's name. He seemed to shift uncomfortably in his seat for a second, before he resumed:

'I do wonder whether anyone who's never been in love can really fully appreciate the ecstasy that comes from it. I'm talking of that sense of sheer awe one feels in the presence of the beloved. Love, I suppose, romantic love, is a force of nature that just sweeps all else away. It is a primordial, magical, experience!'

'But ultimately illusory.' Lewis said, dunking a biscuit into his cup.

'Why so?' Barfield countered.

'Because it is transient; I believe it almost a trick of nature to capture a man and fool him into marriage.'

'So says an unmarried man' observed Tolkien, wryly.

Barfield arched an eyebrow. 'Does Nature perform tricks, Jack? Your attitude is typical of modern man's distrust of *Dame Natura* which sees himself not only as separate from Her, but above Her, believing that She is some evil temptress!'

He took a hasty sip of tea and continued.

'To reduce Romantic love to a biological 'trick' is to demean one of the most liberating of emotions. Look at the art that love has produced: would we have 'The Divine Comedy' if Dante had never seen Beatrice? Are you dismissing *The Inferno* because it was founded on love?'

Lewis was frowning. 'Founded on love it may have been,' he said, swallowing his mouthful of biscuit, 'but not *Romantic* love. Romantic love, my dear Owen, cannot be separated from sex, and sexual desire is transitory...Beatrice Portinari was 9 years old when Dante first saw her, if you think this was based on romantic, which is sexual, love then we are on dangerous ground...'

A couple on a nearby table seemed to shift uncomfortably at Lewis's words.

'...Dante's work was not based on lust;' Lewis continued 'Beatrice for him was a spiritual ideal rather than a flesh and blood woman.'

'Absolute poppycock, Jack!' Barfield snorted, 'For one, Dante himself was the same age as her when they met - so let's not sully his love with any hints of paedophilia - and for another, Beatrice was precisely who she was and no other, not a symbol, nor an allegory for some 'higher' or 'purer' state

of caritas: she was simply a beautiful green-eyed Florentine girl who turned the head of an intelligent and sensitive young man, and thereby opened his eyes to the beauty of the world!'

'Are you talking about Beatrice or your green-eyed Cornish girl?' Jack said, playfully, seemingly amused by Barfield's fervour that had brought a flush to the taller man's smooth cheeks.

'Both! What is this delight of being in love but an experience of joy, of connection with the world? And what is poetry but the communication of such rapture?! One cannot read Dante, or any other great poet, without feeling it!' Barfield's eyes flashed with passion, seeming to drink in the landscape which no doubt was fuelling his ideas with nostalgic memories.

He paused to take another sip of tea, expecting a rebuff from Lewis that never came. The latter merely shook his head slowly, at a loss to even attempt to argue against what he thought as erroneous, and took another biscuit from the plate.

Just then a rumbling outside the veranda announced the arrival of a vehicle; the workmen in the shadows of the café looked and murmured to each-other as a strange machine, seeming half car and half tank, with caterpillar tracks for back wheels pulled up at the garage forecourt a little past the tea-house.

One of the workmen on the nearby table muttered to his colleague; and his companion guffawed at what must have been a private joke. A small, handsome man in a long and well-tailored pale overcoat and cap could be seen chatting animatedly to the petrol attendant.

Tolkien pushed his empty cup away from him and leaned across the table,

'I like your view, Owen, that the poet is one who sees the rapture of existence and seeks to tell of it to his blinkered fellow man.'

Barfield smiled appreciatively at Tolkien's attempts to steer the conversation back on line.

Tolkien carried on: '...that poetry is like some magical potion that allows you to see things differently, to see things shining with qualities otherwise hidden from us...'

'It's as I've said before,' Barfield replied, 'the poet sees the world as others do not, and he seeks to communicate his experience in the only way now

available to him: poetic metaphor.'

'Why won't prose suffice?' Lewis asked, his eyes flitting from the strange vehicle momentarily back to Barfield.

'You're being deliberately obstinate now, Jack – we've talked about this many times before! Prose is the language of the modern everyday world, a world at odds with the poetic vision. The use of poetic metaphor restores man to his original state of participation in nature. Think of Traherne's beautiful phrase 'orient and immortal wheat'...'

He waved his hand in the direction of the sun-drenched sloping hills on the opposite side of the road, green with freshly sprung blades of new-born wheat still not yet much more than a foot in height.

'When I think of those lines I see things differently; it's as if I'm no longer looking at a field of corn, a few weeks old; what was pleasant greenery newly sprung from the soil becomes something terrible and sublime: for those shoots grow from a buried seed, and those seeds in turn were the ears upon last year's shoots... where does one begin and the other end? The answer is that surely, they are somehow one. And if last year's corn sprouted from the ears of the previous years, and so on, *ad infinitum*, we are left with the startling truth that yon green field thither is not covered in fresh *new* life, but a life thousands upon thousands of years old, which each year takes on a new skin, as it were, and at the end of each year casts it off so that what the farmers fill their barns with at harvest is but the sloughed skin, really, of an organism far, far older than mankind himself. Those plants, there, are in reality the same plants that were brought here from the Near East by the first farmers thousands of years ago, whose form has remained constant, though the substance through which that form is expressed has changed: Orient and immortal indeed.'

Tolkien stared at the verdant hillside, baulking at Barfield's musings – and for a moment he saw, literally saw, a difference – what was a rolling peaceful green valley was suddenly transformed so that its sides were no longer inert, seeming dead compared to the skylarks that flew over them, but alive in a way he had never before perceived – the leaves of the wheat became upward-thrusting scales of a giant plumed serpent which covered the entire valley, scales that would be sloughed off at harvest, only to grow anew... a serpent that had wended its way to this valley some 6,000 years ago having travelled thousands of miles from its birthplace in the river valleys of the Near East... ancient, orient, immortal... dying each winter,

buried in the black earth then rising again in the spring...

Barfield lit his pipe and continued. ‘That is what Traherne’s poetic phrase suggests to me, and carries far more meaning than the single word ‘corn’ or ‘wheat’ could ever do – for in it we start to get a glimpse of what early man must have seen when he was still close to Nature, not alienated from Her as he is today.’

‘A sense of the true nature of things?’ Tolkien suggested.

‘A sense of the *divinity* of things!’ Barfield replied, ‘for ancient man the corn was the body of a god – not in a quaint symbolic way such as our folk image of ‘John Barleycorn’ but as something real and experienced; to the Egyptians the crops were the green-skinned Osiris, torn apart, buried and resurrected each year – later echoed in Jesus as the Bread of Life, dying and rising again...’

Lewis coughed. ‘No, Owen; those earlier vegetation gods were a *pre-figuration* of Christ; Christ’s life was the metaphor made fact, the earlier vegetation gods were the echo...’

Owen waved his hand dismissing his friend’s interruption. ‘We’re getting away from my point – what I’m saying is that to ancient man corn was an expression of a divinity immanent in all things, *man included*; if you think about it, the very idea of a vegetation god presents a view of reality worlds apart from our own: this wasn’t a world where the Creator was separate from his creation, and mankind created as a lord above all other animals – no – this was a world in which nature itself was the body of the god, and man, kin to all other creatures, was part of this divinity too. If we saw all as Holy we would be less prone to trivialise, exploit and destroy our world...’

He stopped for a moment while a waitress came and leaned over and refilled their tea-pot with boiling water, avoiding all eye contact with these strange university types, friends, perhaps, of the ‘Marmalade Man’, she thought, her eyes flitting to the dapper gentlemen at the petrol pump. She coloured, feeling suddenly awkward. Maybe these were some of *those* friends? The ones the Red Indian gardener had told her about, with their strange rituals and the women they shipped in for the night and packed off to London by taxi the next day...

‘Imagine a world where each and every word you uttered expressed the divinity inherent in all things...’ Barfield continued, adding a mouthed

a *thank you* to the waitress, who smiled back awkwardly and left the table; ‘how different would we look at that field if we called wheat ‘Osiris’ or ‘Persephone’ and saw, really saw, it as divine? Well this is exactly what the ancients saw; we dwell in a world where one says ‘the wheat is *like* Osiris’, but they would have said the equivalent of ‘the wheat *is* Osiris’: their language would seem to us as pure poetry; their experience of the world poetic, mystic. But it was not meant as a deceit. It expressed a truth.’

Tolkien nodded in agreement and poured each of the men more tea. How wonderful it was to hear this man talk. He was eloquent and intelligent – such a waste that he should have become a lawyer and not an academic! He has the best mind of all of us, Tolkien thought. Lewis’s attention, however, seemed to be on the man at the petrol pumps.

Barfield continued: ‘We no longer see that way because we have fallen from that original Edenic state – Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and becoming aware of their nakedness is a metaphor for mankind losing that state of participation with nature and realising his difference from the animals; his expulsion from Eden is brought about by the development of his sense of self-consciousness - which alienates us from nature – to use the image of the dismembered corn-god, our modern mind is like the evil brother Seth who divides and separates the divine world into disconnected objects, tearing it limb from limb: a world once experienced as divine is divided up, categorised, its former connectivity broken, the divinity killed; but the poet is one who can, like the goddess Isis, re-assemble the pieces of this dismembered god and bring him back to life: to literally re-member the god, the original state of pre-fall unity, where every object sang out with its participation in the divine; so that man is once more at one with the birds, beasts, fish and trees...’ Barfield’s voice had risen to a crescendo of excitement, his hands emphasising every word. ‘...for mankind still abides in Eden – indeed he never left it – for Eden is around us, *but we do not see it!*’ he brought his palm down hard on the table-top to emphasise each of the last six syllables, rattling the tea-set and causing the people on the nearby table to look round again, nervously.

Tolkien stared into Barfield’s ecstatic face – I’m sure you see it, Owen, he thought – as the latter gazed open eyed with rapture at the dance of the windblown corn. He had never seen Owen so animated, so energised; stirred up, no doubt by memories of youth and love. Tolkien cleared his throat, a little wary of breaking the spell his friend had fallen under.

‘You know, Owen, that one of my poetic creations, Tom Bombadil, whose

adventures I recall reading to you all at an Inklings a few years back now, I'd imagine – well, I didn't say it at the time but Bombadil, who is really the spirit of our fast disappearing Oxford and Berkshire countryside, a kind of *genius loci*, was in no small measure influenced by your theories. He speaks in verse, *for he exists before the fall of language*, before speech became prose; he is the Eldest; he speaks to the badgers and the trees and the barrow-wights; I imagine Bombadil to possess what today man can only glimpse in myth and poetry; he can talk to the birds, like Siegfried who gains that ability by drinking the blood of the dragon Fafnir...'.

Barfield nodded. 'When I try to picture that original state of unity, I always imagine Orpheus with his magical lyre that could tame the wild beasts and make the trees and even the stones dance about him in a circle.' Barfield suggested. 'Orpheus, like Osiris, is torn to pieces, yet his head goes on singing – you see, despite being rent apart the voice of the god can still be heard, singing of the unity of all things, remembering Eden before the Fall, if men but listen.... Poets hear it.... lovers hear it...'

'This mystic state of unity, you know - it all sounds rather like being drunk.' Lewis commented with a wink; suddenly back in the conversation now the vehicle and its dapper driver had pulled away.

Tolkien smiled.

'You have a point, Jack: think of all those Norse legends that tell of drinking the mead or ale of poetry; for in intoxication man achieves something akin to that sense of belonging, does he not, and forgets his alienation? Behind every alcoholic, I suspect, lays a poet!'

'Well, the reverse is certainly the case!' said Lewis.

'Yourself included?' asked Barfield.

Lewis didn't seem amused by Barfield's quip, instead his eyes seemed to pale a little.

'Sadly I think I gave up the urge to become a poet long ago. I now seek solace in my cups.' He smiled weakly. 'The blood of John Barleycorn gives me courage bold, not inspiration.'

Tolkien understood, now, why Lewis had seemed so uninterested in what Barfield had been saying; it was like rubbing salt into a wound – here was Lewis who in his youth had wished to be a poet above all things, but who

had not received the recognition he had really deserved, and who was now reduced to writing prose – while Barfield was extolling the virtues of the poetic vision; Lewis must have felt somehow unworthy.

‘In which case,’ Lewis was continuing, ‘let us hope the beer at the Red Lion isn’t varnish!'

‘Hear, hear!’ Barfield laughed, ‘Though if it’s too good the long road to Calne will begin to lose its appeal...’

‘Well,’ Lewis said, ‘if the stones of Avebury circle begin to dance about us like they’ve been enchanted by Orpheus’s lyre we’ll know it’s time to down our cups and move on...’

Tolkien was nodding. ‘It’s funny; I had this image in my head then, when Owen was speaking: I had initially thought it was the dismembered body of Orpheus on the banks of the river Hebrus and his severed head floating down the river - but instead of some Mediterranean stream all I could see was the Kennet and instead of Orpheus’s head bobbing amongst the sticklebacks it was the image of a woman – her hair spread out like Ophelia. It was so persistent that I’m sure my mind was trying to tell me something: I’m sure it has something to do with this landscape, though quite what I don’t yet know...’

‘Well let us pray the mead of poetry inspires an answer, Tollers!’ Lewis beamed, used to Tolkien’s ‘flights of fancy’. ‘For myself that tea has restored my vigour; I’m a little too full for climbing the hill, now, if I’m honest – but a constitutional to Orpheus’s dancing stones itself seems a fair prospect.’

## **Chapter Eight: Shenandoah**

With a second pint in hand Conall strode blinking out of the pub to the tables arranged on the flagstones fronting the road. The main lunchtime rush was over and there was now the odd spare seat here and there, though no totally empty tables. He raised his glass and took a large sip of beer, contemplating whether to squeeze in amongst the hippies gathered around the folk band, the archaeologists or the bikers, or whether to just cross the road and go and sit amongst the stones. Still a little sunblind and squinting he moved aside to let someone past him into the pub. But they stopped.

'Conall?'

He turned, confused at the mention of his name. A woman stood beaming up at him, dressed in a simple faded red t-shirt under a suede jacket, pale blue jeans and black boots, a bag slung over one shoulder - but it was only when she removed her sunglasses and hugged him and he found himself with his nose and mouth pressed against the top of her head, breathing the scent of her sun-warmed long dark hair, that it fully sunk in who this was.

'What the hell are you doing here?!" she said, grinning as she pulled away, her brows creased in a deep frown.

Conall stood speechless, his mind screaming with a car-crash of conflicting thoughts and emotions.

'Shen?!" he said aware of the colour draining from his face.

'Why are you here? Are you down here for long? You're not leaving yet?' Shenandoah asked, all at once.

Con shook his head. No words seemed to want to come.

'No. Good. Look - I'm just going to drop something off in here,' she said, motioning towards the door of the pub with her head, 'but - you got time - I mean can I join you for a drink? Quick, grab us those seats then we'll talk!' she said, and then was gone, but not before looking back and smiling again, shaking her head.

Some of the archaeologists had just got up, leaving a table free, to which Conall walked, seating himself facing the sun. It was only when he picked up his pint that he realised his hand was shaking. The chances that he should meet her again, here, and now, seemed to him so astronomically slim he could only lift his eyes skywards, questioning whatever power might have arranged such a bitter-sweet coincidence. When he had met her here last year she had only been here for a matter of days, to visit her granddad - for she had long since moved away from Wiltshire; but Her Granddad had died shortly after, and anyway, since then all contact between Conall and her had ceased... She had no reason to be here, he thought; and yet here she was. Why? Why did he have to see her now? Could I, he asked himself, just slip away? All this was going through Conall's mind, but behind it all was a more constant and more appealing image from their past: of her dark eyes looking up at him and closing as he leaned in to kiss her; and then a wave of sadness and guilt swept through him, and an image appeared in his mind's eye - a line of Coleridge's poetry savagely underlined in red biro:

*A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw...*

And beside those words others in a shaky, wild hand:

*I go to the river to die...*

Behind him, following a burst of applause, the folk band had begun another song, and a strong female voice had started to sing.

*There was three kings into the east,  
Three kings both great and high,  
And they hae sworn a solemn oath  
John Barleycorn should die.  
They took a plough and plough'd him down,  
Put clods upon his head,  
And they hae sworn a solemn oath*

*John Barleycorn was dead.*

Just then the woman's voice was joined by that of a man coming from the opposite side of the forecourt, deep, with a strong northern accent. Con turned – the man was shaven headed with a goatee beard, his wiry arms blue with tattoos – each forearm emblazoned with a spiralling serpent, the heads of which flicked their forked tongues across the back of his hands.

*They've let him lie for a very long time,  
'til the rains from heaven did fall  
And little Sir John sprung up his head  
and so amazed them all*

The man had risen and was making his way from his seat near the door of the pub, past the folk singers, towards the road.

*They've let him stand 'til Midsummer's Day  
'til he looked both pale and wan  
And little Sir John's grown a long, long beard  
and so become a man.*

He bowed to the group, grinning broadly and as he passed Con he winked at him mischievously before heading off across the road to the circle, his pint glass in his hand. Behind him the woman's voice continued, and Con turned back and drank some more beer.

*They've ta'en a weapon, long and sharp,  
And cut him by the knee;  
Then tied him fast upon a cart,  
Like a rogue for forgerie.*

'Wake up, John-a-dreams!'

Conall looked up and met Shen's dark-brown eyes, looking out from the curtain of her dark straight hair. She was holding a large glass of what looked to be coke, and a pint for him.

'How come you're here?' Conall asked, dry mouthed. Shen bit her lip. Her eyes glistened and she forced a smile. 'I've been here sorting Granddad's things out since March; he left me the house in his will. I couldn't sell it; just couldn't. Oh, and there's something he left for you, too. I meant to...'

'No matter.... I was sorry to hear about your Granddad. I've just left some tobacco on his grave.' Conall said, matter-of-factly. '... I don't know if it's a Blackfoot tradition or not, but it seemed kind of appropriate.'

'That's kind of you.' She said.

'I saw the flowers there, too – I didn't for a second think they would have been from you... So you're living here now?'

'Partly; it's taking a while to get the business off the ground here and I still have the house on Scilly, but I'm renting that out over the summer as a holiday cottage; I'm probably going to sell it. I was never comfortable there; the sea can be so oppressive...Anyway... what about you?! What are you up to?'. Her smile seemed genuine, if a little strained. 'How are you doing?'

Conall looked down, frowning, thinking of what to say, the words of the song distracting him.

*They laid him down upon his back,  
And cudgell'd him full sore;  
They hung him up before the storm,  
And turn'd him o'er and o'er.  
They filled up a darksome pit  
With water to the brim,  
They heav'd in John Barleycorn-  
There, let him sink or swim!*

Con shivered at the image of a pale body floating in dark water that had risen in his mind's eye.

'Con? Hello!? Earth to Con...'

He half-smiled and shrugged. 'Well I'm writing the odd article,' he said, speaking louder than usual to be heard over the singing, 'giving the odd lecture here and there...' he took another sip to buy himself time while he struggled to rein in his emotions.

'You know what I meant.'

Conall stared at his pint.

'Yeah, I'm okay. I'm doing better.' He smiled, gently, unconvincingly.

'I thought about you.' She suddenly said. Conall raised his eyes to hers in genuine surprise.

'Likewise' was all he could muster; he looked into her eyes, but she didn't hold his gaze for long, lowering her eyes and picking up her drink.

'I don't really know what to say.' Shen said, 'I would have written again... but you said not to...'

She looked across at him again, fleetingly, with a slight hint of awkwardness.

He felt like he should say something to explain, but the words weren't there. 'Look, I'm sorry. I was in a bit of a shit place...'

'It's okay, Con. I know. God, you don't need to apologise.'

'But thanks for letting me know about Alfred...' he mumbled.

She had been looking down at her small hands, fiddling with a jade and silver ring, but now she looked up.

'It's all so shit, isn't it? And I knew Granddad was ill... I had time to prepare... but you...'

Conall shrugged again and smiled weakly, not wanting her to go on.

It was strange for them both to be sitting here in silence, after all the laughter and incessant talking they had enjoyed the last time they had met. It seemed so long ago. When they had parted it had all been good between them; but to meet again now, like this, perhaps it might have been better had he not seen her. Con sipped his pint in silence, and turned his head to watch the folk band finish their song.

*They wasted, o'er a scorching flame,  
The marrow of his bones;  
But a miller us'd him worst of all,  
For he crush'd him between two stones.  
And they hae taen his very heart's blood,  
And drank it round and round;  
And still the more and more they drank,  
Their joy did more abound.*

*John Barleycorn was a hero bold,  
Of noble enterprise;  
For if you do but taste his blood,  
'Twill make your courage rise.  
'Twill make a man forget his woe;  
'Twill heighten all his joy;  
'Twill make the widow's heart to sing,  
Tho' the tear were in her eye.*

The crowds applauded and Con and Shen joined them, politely. When Con looked back at Shen, she was regarding him anxiously, feeling the same tension as him.

‘Well, this is awkward.’ She said. ‘God, Con, let’s not be off with each other, it’s not like we see each other every day...’. He nodded, smiling at her directness.

‘So did you ever work it out, your lost star myth – the dragon thing?’ she asked, seeming to relax a little.

He smiled. ‘I think so. It’s kind of changed a bit, not massively but a bit. It’s why I’m here,’ he half-lied, ‘the sky’s supposed to be clear for the next few days. You just can’t see any sky in London.’

‘It was always a bit beyond me, you know, your theorising.’ She shrugged. ‘But I loved the stories. Granddad did too. I loved it that night when you showed me which stars were which, and the tales behind them all.’

It had been on that night that he had first told her that he could really fall for her. Had that really happened? He felt himself redden. Was she remembering that too? But it had also been that night that the other thing had happened; not that Shen knew. Neither did he at the time; he had to wait a few more days for that news, and then everything had changed.

*...They filled up a darksome pit  
With water to the brim...*

He cast the unwanted image from his mind, clenching his hand into a fist. ‘It’s the stories that are the key Shenandoah... they hold all that information, I’m sure of it. But it’s like a code that needs cracking... it was an intuition, that’s all – but I never had time to follow it up. Not until recently. And now, well... it makes sense, but I just don’t know if I’m right or if I’m seeing things...’

'And you're still at the uni?' she asked.

'Not anymore; I quit.'

'Quit? Why?'

He shrugged. 'Long story.' He sipped his drink.

'How long's long?' she smiled.

'Too long for now; I don't want to bore you.'

'Well, you'd better quit now then; it is probably very boring.' She joked.

In the more companionable silence that followed he relaxed and was able to take her in; sitting with her back to the sun, her broad-high cheek-boned face in shadow, it was clear that she owed her looks to a more exotic ancestry than her hyphenated part-Irish surname, Mac Govan-Crow, suggested. Con recalled a scene from their previous meeting, when, sitting upon West Kennet Long-Barrow, he had stuck the owl feather she had given him in her hair and told her she now looked like her great-great grandmother whose photo she had showed him on her granddad's dresser... the same feather he had stuck in his hat not an hour before...

*'That's my granddad's dad, George, as a baby, and his parents, Kills Crow and Medicine Smoke Woman.' she had said, pointing at the sepia image.*

*'You look like her.' He had said, his eyes on her rather than the photo. A silence had passed between them then. The truth was that she looked almost more native than her grandfather had done; her long straight dark hair especially, and her cheekbones that seemed to push her eyes into heavily lidded crescents; their colour somewhere between chocolate and black, depending on the light.*

*'I guess Shenandoah is a Native name?' he had said then.*

*She had smiled, 'Well, it is, it's a native river name - but that's not why I'm called it - it's after the song, my granddad sang it to me just after I was born, he liked the Jimmy Stewart film, and it stuck - thank God - I think my parents had been toying with Derdriu.'*

*'Derdriu?' he'd laughed.*

*'Don't laugh – it's a family name, and it's still my middle name.'*

*'Ok, Deirdre.'*

*'Shenandoah Derdriu Mac Govan-Crow... fuck me, that's a mouthful!' he had laughed.*

A year and a world later Con took his tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette, offering Shen one. She looked about her guiltily, with a voiced indrawn breath. 'Oh god! Don't!'

'You given up?'

'Kind of. My boyfriend doesn't really like me smoking.'

Conall felt the smile freeze on his face. Boyfriend; of course: someone like Shen would never stay single for long, he reasoned. He felt a strange sense of deflation, but then she smiled at him and he felt somehow better; relieved even. Too much had changed.

'Go on, have one. Blame the smell on me.' Conall said with a wink, pushing the tobacco her way.

She hesitated, stared at the proffered tobacco, looked up at Con and then relented.

'Who's the lucky man?' Conall asked, handing her the papers and rolling himself another.

'He's from Swindon...'

'Oh I'm sorry...' Con joked.

Shen narrowed her eyes and continued '- he's called Hayden; been seeing him since last summer. He's a fireman,' she said, as he lit her cigarette.

'Has that got anything to do with the no smoking? If he catches you will he turn the hose on you out of habit?' Conall asked. She shook her head, smiling. 'Uh huh, he's a bit of a health nut. You need to be fit in that line of work.... God that's good' she said, exhaling and looking down at the

cigarette. 'I've got half an hour before I'm meeting him – time for some of the smell to fade, I hope. I can always get some gum.'

Conall eyed his two thirds full second pint and full third pint and wondered if he could down both in less than half an hour. But at least if he, what was his name? Hayden, turned up they wouldn't have to talk about what had happened since he'd last seen Shen. Again, the image of that manic handwriting beside the printed poem rose to consciousness: *I go to the river to die...* as if to punish him for this moment of levity.

'You'll have to see what I've done to the cottage. How long are you down for, again?'

'A few days, not sure really.'

'Well, unfortunately with the protest I've let my spare rooms out for the next few days, otherwise I'd have put you up.'

'What protest?' Conall asked.

'Over the bones in the museum.'

He shook his head.

'They're bringing some new bones here that had been stored away in Devizes museum, and putting them in this swanky new display here; the museum's been shut for a month or so while they've been renovating it; the Chairman of English Heritage is going to be here on Wednesday to visit the excavations and to open the new exhibit; there's going to be a group of protesters there to meet him, pagans, who don't think he should be on display. The head of them, Wolf, is lodging at Granddad's. Granddad's has kind of become unofficial protest HQ... if you're around tonight we'll be here in the pub – at half eight... you'll be most welcome. Oh, and...' she said, fumbling about in her bag; She took a card from out of her purse and handed it to him. *Shenandoah Mac Govan Crow - Tarot card readings - individuals and parties catered for*; followed by a mobile number and an email address.

'Spread the word. Business is picking up – I mean, there's loads of stuff like this down in Glastonbury, but not here.'

'So will you read my cards?' he asked. 'You promised to last time but didn't.'

She nodded. 'Yeah, course I will! I read Wolf's last night; it was fun.'

He felt a twinge of jealousy over this Wolf character...

'And did the cards say they would win the protest?'

Shen shrugged. 'Yes and no, strangely; they wouldn't win but would get what they wanted.'

'Hmm. Helpfully vague.' Con grinned.

A beeping noise sounded from her handbag and she dug around until she had found her phone. Mouthing *sorry* she pressed to answer the call.

'Hello? Hi! No, I'm at the pub...just dropped in some more cards...' *It's Hayden*, she mouthed at Conall. 'Why don't you come up?... No? Ok. Suit yourself...' she raised her eyes skywards as if to say 'whatever' '...I'll be down soon.' She put the phone back in her bag.

'He's already let himself in.' she explained, 'I'd better head off in a minute. He's been on nights... grumpy as hell!' She said. Suddenly her face dropped. 'Shit! Do you have any chewing gum or anything?' she asked, suddenly dropping the unfinished cigarette into the ashtray.

'Nope' said Conall, 'sorry'.

'Bugger. Oh well, he'll probably be too grumpy to kiss me for a while anyway.' She said, rising to her feet.

'One for the road?' Conall joked, offering her the packet of cigarette papers. She stuck out her tongue sarcastically.

She breathed into her hand and sniffed. 'Oh, that's not too bad.' She said. Then she looked down at Conall and smiled, putting out her hand as if she were about to ruffle his hair, and touching him on the cheek instead.

'I still can't believe you're here! I'm glad Con. I'm glad I got to see you again.'

'Didn't the cards tell you I would be here again?' he asked, to which she half smiled half snorted; 'not the cards, no' she said enigmatically.

'You'll be here tonight then? The meeting?' she asked.

'Half eight!' he said, nodding, and then she was gone.

After a few seconds there was only her mostly empty glass and her half-smoked cigarette smouldering in the ashtray to evidence she had been there at all. He lifted her glass and downed the coke, surprised at the taste of brandy in it, then finished her cigarette, but not before silently lifting it heavenwards, offering the first smoke to *Itsipaiitapio'pah*, the Great Spirit, as her grandfather had taught him.

'Fuck,' was all he could think to say. 'Fuck!'

## **Chapter Nine: The Marmalade Man**

Avebury village was small and picturesque in parts; its short high-street, half of which lay within the circle, was pretty enough, with stone cottages lining one side opposite the church; as one entered the earth embankments one passed the village shop, and here grander houses appeared on the other side of the road, behind which, secluded in trees, lay the Manor House – but as one reached the centre of the circle, passing the cross-roads on which stood the Red Lion, then followed the road east past more houses on each side of the narrow road, the village soon petered out in a few huddles of small cottages, a mess of wooden shacks, allotments, pig sties, chicken pens and overgrown copses of trees. Choked with refuse and abandoned farm machinery.

The small car park and forecourt of the pub was filled with an assortment of vehicles; the strange half-tank half-car that had stopped at the garage earlier, and a number of large trucks bearing the insignia ‘E H Bradley; building works, Swindon’ on their sides. Around these vehicles, strewn on the cobbles of the forecourt and sat upon muddy tyre tracks, were several crates and sacks, spades, ropes.

‘Hmm. Hardly the English idyll I remember’ grumbled Lewis.

‘I’m sure it’s fine inside, Jack,’ Owen said, ‘This will all be something to do with the excavations.’ He explained, waving his hand at the mess before them. Nevertheless, he felt a strong urge to draw their attention elsewhere to lighten his friend’s mood. ‘It’s not quite lunchtime, so let’s walk some of the circle.’ He suggested.

The men had approached Avebury from the west, the direction of Beckhampton and had entered the circle along the high street – so now Barfield led them back a few hundred yards and turned south off the street

through a wooden gate to where the banks and ditch of the great circle could be seen, curving far out of sight.

The remains of the circle itself still impressed: it would have taken one at least half an hour to have walked the circumference of the ditch with its towering external bank that marked the bounds of the monument. Even though in places it was choked with trees and scrubby bushes the great earthwork remained imposing, despite having been weathered by over four thousand years of Wiltshire winters.

The three friends strolled along the south-western quarter of the circle, which was divided into four segments by the roads that entered the village from each of the cardinal points, near enough, roads that respected the original entrances of the circle. The grass in the south-western quarter was being kept low by the numerous sheep that roamed here. Along this entire stretch there lay just one standing stone, though mounds along the inner edge of the ditch suggested where more lay beneath the surface, as if sleeping under grassy blankets.

The single remaining stone was larger than any of the men there present, gnarled, unworked and slightly twisted like the trunk of a storm blasted tree; and each took time to touch its rough, lichen-covered skin, warm to the touch at first, but soon yielding to a deep coolness, the heart of the stone yet to be warmed by the growing sun.

'I don't know why but I had imagined the stones like those at Stonehenge – taller and dressed; this is far more earthy, somehow, more wild...' Lewis said.

'I thought you had seen them before?' remarked Tolkien.

'No – we made a dash for the Red Lion in the rain and when we had emerged again it was quite dark.'

'Imagine how it would have looked when all the stones were standing...' Barfield said.

Lewis nodded. 'Where did the rest go?'

'Some were buried,' Barfield said, gesturing at the humps dotted about the inner edge of the ditch, 'others destroyed – heated by fires built around them and then dowsed in cold water so they broke apart.' Barfield added.

'Damn puritans!' Lewis said, winking at Tolkien.

'Were they pulled down by religious zealots or by farmers wanting decent material for their dry-stone walls, I wonder?' Tolkien mused. He ran his hand over the stone; it seemed so alone now that its fellows were gone or lying nearby under the turf. An image crossed his mind of the sleeping stones waking and casting off their green covers on some magical future dawn, rough faces creased against the light of the rising sun on the Day of Judgement. Would the rocks and stones themselves be held accountable for what ancient man had done in ignorance here at their feet, or would they shout hosanna and be exalted when the crooked was made straight and the rough places plain?

'This is one of the smaller of the remaining stones, however.' Barfield said, gesturing them onwards.

Crossing the road into the south-eastern quarter the friends arrived before two leviathans of stone that had once marked the southern entrance. 'I've lived in smaller houses than this!' Lewis said, walking around the first of the stones. It stood twice as tall as a man, and he guessed ten men could stand side by side along its width. It was angular rather than rounded, set aslant so that no side, save the front and back faces, seemed level. Halfway along its southern side lay a fissure with a ledge upon which a man could have easily sat.

'My word! It simply dwarfs any other stone circle I've ever seen!' Lewis exclaimed.

'Careful which way you walk, Jack...' Barfield scolded. 'This is the Devil's Chair: if you walk three times around it anti-clockwise the Devil appears.' Lewis tried it, to no avail.

'Maybe it has to be at midnight? These things usually are...' Tolkien suggested, as Lewis finished his final circumnavigation.

'Or at full moon, or midsummer.' Lewis proposed, slightly breathless. 'Is it full moon?'

'No – just past the new, we may be treated to a beautiful crescent later.' Tolkien said, secretly thinking how sad it was that most people had no idea what phase the Moon was at.

The three friends continued their stroll along the top of the ditch, which in this quarter was choked with bushes and trees – until they crossed into the north-east section, having passed a large number of mature trees on the outer bank, their roots entwined like thousands of serpents pouring down into the ditch below; as they continued they stopped at the few remaining stones until they had nearly completed the entire circuit of the monument. They had reached its northernmost point, where the road to Swindon cut through the banks, here another huge marker stone remained, on the opposite side of the circle from the Devil's chair they had seen earlier. They were admiring this massive diamond of rock from across the road when at that moment a great boom sounded, accompanied by shouts, from beyond the stone; a boom that made Tolkien wince in memory.

'What on earth was that?' Lewis asked.

They crossed the road and passed the stone in its cove of trees, approaching a large group of individuals who they could now see assembled in a far section of the quadrant, who were gazing up at the tree-lined banks ahead. One of the men turned, and, spotting the three friends, hastened towards them.

The man was stocky, with creased friendly eyes and gingery brown hair, greying at the temples, swept over his forehead, but from his long pale overcoat and cap he was recognisable as the gentleman who they had seen at the tea-rooms earlier, re-fuelling the strangely military-looking car.

'Afternoon gentlemen!' he beamed, in a clipped, upper class voice, with only slight traces of a Scots accent. 'A word of warning: we're blasting the tree roots from the banks, and so if you wouldn't mind keeping your distance from that part of the path, we wouldn't want you to be caught in the falling debris.' he smiled broadly. There was something of the schoolboy in his manner.

'Is this to do with the excavation?' Barfield asked.

'Excavation? Yes, yes! Are you interested in archaeology?' he asked, his eyes lit up with boyish enthusiasm.

'Well, yes...' Replied Barfield, but before he could qualify the statement the man had grinned and continued.

'Alexander Keiller,' he said, extending his hand, 'I'm heading the excavations here; please let me show you what we're up to!'

Introducing themselves to their excitable guide as they walked the three friends followed Keiller towards the assembled group, some smartly dressed, others clearly labourers in their shirtsleeves, dirty from their work, but before they reached the main group Keiller turned and beckoned to the three friends to join him at the edge of the ditch; here it had been excavated far below its present level – incredibly so – if the present ditch was the depths of two men, the excavated section, with its crisp straight sides in blazing white chalk, was another six men deep.

Young workmen in caps and waistcoats, their shirtsleeves rolled up, were digging the dirty chalk from the ditch; and shoring up the sides of the vast trench with wooden revetments noisily being hammered into place. In one place on the floor of the ditch a large bone stuck out of the soil, and beside it the unmistakeable smooth polished curve of a yellowed skull.

‘The original ditch, before time silted it up – was some forty feet in depth! And the bank, too, we suppose, much, much higher than it appears today. In short this feature would have been absolutely impenetrable!’

Lewis was shaking his head. ‘My word! That is truly astounding – one would never have guessed!’

‘No, quite! It shocked us, too – we kept on thinking we had reached the bottom, but no! This site is the most spectacular prehistoric circle in the world... and it’s my dream to restore it to its former glory... already we’ve located many of the stones that were buried, and we can erect them once more. The ditches and banks can be cleared of trees, which just leaves the...’ and he waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the edge of the village with its shanty building and animal pens.

Just then the group gathered to the south edged back from the ditch as a man further up the bank opposite shouted a warning, and ran back round along the top of the bank to a safe distance. A few seconds later another boom rang out and a fountain of earth and debris was thrown into the air, pattering down into the ditch and leaving a smoking crater from which the gnarled and blasted remnants of a tree root poked.

A cry rang out and a tall dark-haired young man clutched at his head then bent over to retrieve his glasses that had been knocked off by a piece of falling matter. A couple of those nearby rushed over to see if he was okay, and he nodded that he was fine.

Keiller whooped with delight. ‘Ha! Piggott!’ he shouted over ‘It’s good for you younger men to know how we felt in the trenches in 1916!’ He winked and laughed heartily.

Lewis rested his hand on Tolkien’s arm, seeing the latter pale at the explosion.

‘I’m okay, Jack.’ He said. Besides, he thought, I’m thinking of them, not me - and the bloody mess happening in Germany right now. What if these ditches they’re digging here are just practice? I’m thinking of my sons...

Keiller turned to the friends, gesturing them to follow him towards the main group. Piggott didn’t look impressed. He held out the piece of wood that had hit him towards Keiller- not a large piece but big enough for him to dab a handkerchief in his dark hair and examine it for any signs of blood. ‘You’ll live, my boy – I’d keep that as a souvenir! Look: it looks like they’ve found some more human remains in the ditch...’ he said, guiding Piggot away, but not before turning to the three friends.

‘I really must dash – very nice to have met you! Always nice to meet fellow enthusiasts... you’d be surprised at how many consider this the height of time-wasting and folly.’ Keiller beamed, before disappearing with the dazed and frowning Piggot towards the white chalk ditch.

‘Now there’s a man with vision.’ Remarked Lewis as they approached the car park of the Red Lion.

‘Let’s hope it’s the same one our ancestors had, if he’s hoping to rebuild what was here.’ Barfield said.

‘It’s easier to have a vision when you have the money to back it up.’ Tolkien said.

‘Yes, I suppose. Where do you think his money is coming from?’ Lewis asked.

‘It’s Keiller, Jack. As in Keiller’s Dundee marmalade,’ said Barfield.

‘Ah, yes! The marmalade millionaire!’ Lewis laughed. ‘I have a jar at the

Kilns! Warnie will be most impressed!’

He suddenly stopped and laughed again. ‘He certainly seemed to be possessed with a real ‘zest’ for his subject...’ Lewis proposed, grinning.

Tolkien chuckled. ‘Who better, then, to *preserve* the past?’

Barfield shook his head. ‘Do you think he’ll want to rename this place Scone-henge?’

‘For that appalling pun, Owen, you’re buying the first round’ Lewis said, opening the door to the Red Lion.

## **Chapter Ten: The Dream**

Conall's walk back to the camper had been a gloriously drunken affair; clutching a large bottle of water he'd bought at the Avebury post-office as he left the village, he had staggered back along the avenue, smiling at the stones and greeting the blackbirds and sheep with hellos; he had attained, so it seemed to him, a glimpse into the state of, if not Mankind before the Fall, at least himself before the events of the last year had overshadowed him; the words of Dylan Thomas's Fern Hill, his favourite poem, formed an internal soundtrack to his stumbling;

*And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold  
And the Sabbath rang slowly  
In the pebbles of the holy streams*

Conall stood in the Avenue, arms wide, and recited the poem to the sky.

It was all shining, It was Adam and Maiden.

Maiden... maiden. Just the mere word sent a primal and visceral quiver through his chest...Oh Shenandoah...

I long to see you! Away, you rolling river!

Such a state was a rare and precious occurrence in any man, let alone Conall for whom the last year had offered little respite from unhappiness. Three hours driving and three swift pints were no doubt part of the recipe on this occasion (though such recipes were doomed to failure if consciously repeated) but the role his meeting with Shenandoah Mac Govan-Crow had played in inducing this state would have been impossible for him to fathom; quite why his initial shock and disquiet had given way to this

unexpected upwelling of joy eluded him. And his reaction was not to question it too closely lest this flimsy shell of happiness cracked. It did not even seem to lie wholly in the unlikely possibility that last year's sentiments might once more be resurrected; subsequent events had put pay to that possibility, as had the presence of, what was his name again? Hayden. Perhaps then, after all, it was simply the peace of the place and the alcohol, and the memory of happiness reminding him that the emotion still lived, though sleeping deep, within him?

Alcohol; that wonderful poison! It numbed the brain from the outside in – and as the outermost part of this organ was the youngest evolutionary speaking, and which contained our so-called civilised side, our inhibitions and social niceties, these were the first qualities to vanish when the poison started working... Con remembered an image he's seen of a brain in a textbook, sliced in half and its different areas shaded; like the rings of a tree, the deeper you went in, the older the organ became; on the outer surface was the neo-mammalian brain, shared by us and other developed mammals – beneath that lay the palaeo-mammalian brain and within that, towards the core, lay the reptilian brain – a level of brain we shared with lizards and fish; indeed, as an embryo in the womb we had gills and a tail and went through the whole of evolution in nine months, from fish to hairless ape; he thought of his own mother's womb with the twin fish swimming aside each other, like Yin and Yang. Perhaps this was why when we drink we feel closer to the animals, Con reasoned, we're sloughing off our humanity, that thin, filmy outer surface of the brain, and we're thinking instead (if thinking was an apt word, which he doubted) with our deeper animal brains; and if we drank so much, or if we could perhaps somehow go all the way back, why... we'd be like snakes or fish - primal sea serpents – what kind of knowledge would we then possess – knowledge of our ancient selves – what kind of deep primeval memories might lie stirring in our deep serpentine brains? He wondered. If we could but think those thoughts and shut off all the noise of the later brains! An image arose in his mind from one of Wagner's operas he'd once been forced to watch (and had grown to enjoy) where Siegfried slew the dragon and drank his blood and could understand the language of the birds. The dragon's blood clearly gave access to that primal reptilian knowledge, older than man – locked within our psyches – usually never heard or heeded, save perhaps when we lie basking in the warmth of the sun; yet our most basic functions are controlled from this part of the brain – breathing, regulation of temperature... was this why wisdom was often depicted in serpentine form? The entwined snakes on the caduceus of Hermes or the staff of Asclepius?

The sun was still high above Waden Hill, the shadows of the stones short; the farthest stones visible of the southern end of the Avenue danced in the heat; all seemed still; no birds were flying. The archaeologists had ceased digging and were sat with their backs to the sun in the shadow of two stones. Con was pissed enough to wonder over to them.

'Found anything?' he asked, dumbly.

A middle-aged man with a short silver goatee beard ran his fingers through his hair and swallowed the mouthful of sandwich he had been eating, and looked up at Con, shielding his eyes from the sun with a hand.

'Well... we were looking to see if the stone was in the right place – the circle was partly rebuilt in the 30's; this one had been put back in place with concrete, and so we're looking to see if we can find traces of the original stone-hole... but we're also looking at the original ground-surface...'

He stood. 'See the compacted chalk, here?'

Con nodded, looking at a smooth and pristine square of exposed white earth, inches below the topsoil with its long pale grass.

'We're looking to see if it's more worn and compacted between the stones or outside of them...'

'So, you can gauge if people were processing along them or not?' Con asked.

'Precisely. It tells us just as much if we find out that they weren't...'

Con looked puzzled.

'This site is part of a henge,' the archaeologist said, 'basically a big circular ceremonial structure, and we know henges are ceremonial as they have a bank on the outside of the ditch...' he waved loosely in the direction of the huge henge bank over his shoulder that ringed the village, the trees that lined it still visible at this distance.

'That would be useless as a defensive feature – where you'd ideally put the bank on the inside...'

Con knew all of this but was nodding anyway, wondering where the archaeologist was heading, and suddenly needing to piss...

'But what if they were defensive, but from the inside? What if they were keeping something in?' He raised an eyebrow, grinning.

'What, like animals? Herds of cows?' Con asked. Or bulls? He wondered, suddenly seeing the henge as a great bullring, ringed with cheering crowds.

The man shrugged. 'We'll see. If you're here over the next couple of days, we may find out. We might find foot or hoofprints along the avenue... or we may find evidence of footfall outside of the Avenue... as it may have been it wasn't meant for mortals to walk on at all.'

'A kind of ghost road?' Con asked.

'Yes, something like that. Perhaps the stones represented ancestors or spirits.'

'Keep me posted.' Con said, wanting to stay and talk but increasingly needing to pee.

Once over the hill and out of view of the archaeologists he lent with an unsteady hand on a stone and pissed against its base - returning nitrogen to the soil, he reasoned, yet feeling slightly uneasy, remembering what the archaeologist had said about the stones; nevertheless, it was with a lighter step that he marched down the slope to where his camper lay parked beside the road.

The inside of the camper was like an oven; he closed the curtains, slid open the windows on the opposite side, and cleared the heap of clothes off the sofa-bed; Con took a large tepid draught from his water bottle and lay down, eyes closed. His plan was to re-hydrate himself and snooze for a while so that he wouldn't spend the night at the pub with a blinding headache sipping orange juice.

For a moment he swooned into a deep, dark, state of relaxation, but a few seconds later his feet seemed to be rising above his head sickeningly, and so he sat upright and drank a little more water until the van stopped moving skywards. I'm such a lightweight, he thought. Three pints and I'm pissed. His eyes began to close, and the room fell away again; he felt

nauseous. Fuck, fuck, fuck; the ancient reptile within was rebelling against the poison; the alcohol had changed the viscosity of the liquid in his inner ear, making him feel he was moving when he was still; the primal serpent, basically an alimentary canal on legs, was attempting to rid itself of the poison that was threatening its life. But Con was able to summon enough outer brain to fight this urge.

It took a further twenty minutes of attempting, and failing, to keep his eyes closed without feeling dizzy before the motion of passing cars rocking the camper lulled him into a half-doze. He dozed on and off, drinking some more water when he remembered, until finally the urge to sleep left him. Sitting up he felt the first dull twinges of headache. He searched the drawers above the hob and sink for an ibuprofen. He couldn't find the bloody things, and instead he reached higher and took the Collected Coleridge from the bookshelf; he didn't open it, just held it to his chest, lost in thought. He was thinking of a dream he had had some twenty years before whose meaning had eluded him at the time but which had somehow become connected to all of this... to this place, to her; he had shaken it from his mind earlier but now in his half-aware state he allowed himself to remember.

The dream was simple yet profound:

He was walking through a spring landscape, at some unspecified date long ago in the past – deep in prehistory - on the site, though no monument was yet present, of some future circular earthwork or henge. In the distance there was a mountainous expanse with a great chasm in its side. Continuing to walk he had found himself beside a gently meandering stream on the banks of which were three white cows with red ears, grazing, and beside them a stately woman, no, a goddess, in a long blue robe, her face hidden by a hood. She approached the stream and placed one end of the wand she was carrying into the water, whereupon the river turned milky white. Conall removed his clothes and walked into the water, then knelt and submerged himself in the cool depths three times... after the last submersion he turned to see a white horse with a shining crescent moon set between its brows standing on the river bank beside him. He walked out of the water and kissed it between her brows but instead of leaping on to its back, as it gestured him to do, Conall walked beside it, still naked...

The dream imagery had stuck with him far longer than any normal dream; it had had the clarity of a vision; it had seemed to suggest rebirth, a new start- but only now was he starting to understand it – images within it which had remained a mystery had started to make sense over the past

couple of years; clues within it had been instrumental – more than instrumental – vital – in his academic work investigating these ancient sites; and details that had meant nothing at the time had come to seem more than coincidental, as if the dream had been prophetic – and it's tied to this place, thought Con, I know it.

When he had been here last spring, he had returned to his camper one evening after seeing Shen at the cottage, feeling restless, uneasy, like he wanted to run or shout or smash something; it was a feeling of a joyous rage, of intoxication. It was as if a fire had been lit within him; like he wanted to roar with the life he felt. Remembering the dream, he had gone to the Kennet that night, wishing to act it out; it seemed madness at the time – what did he think he was doing? This, he had reasoned, is how rituals must start – with the physical acting out of a vision. He had felt compelled to go – the dream image kept rising in his mind, relentless, hypnotic in its quiet insistence; the thought of entering those cool waters promised not a dampening or cooling of his ardour, but a transformation of it. Maybe I'm ready, he had thought, to start anew; he remembered how he had felt in the dream, slick from the water, his hair plastered back from his forehead, like a new born; he'd felt like a young god, like the kouros of Poseidon rising from the some primal amniotic fluid – but he hadn't gone through with it. He had just stared into the inky waters feeling empty and suddenly wary and had returned to the camper, mute and deflated.

Why that night of all nights, he now wondered? Had he somehow known? Not that there was any way he could have – even if twin quantum particles could affect each other though separated millions of light years apart in space – how would it be remotely possible that he could somehow intuit what she had been doing at that very moment? Because it had been then, he knew in his heart of hearts. But he had felt a sense of renewal, not of fear. And surely, he should have felt her fear?

I go to the river to die...

But there had been no connection; it was coincidence, that's all; it was all in his head; it was a door into madness to think otherwise. And yet he would have rushed headlong through that door if it meant, for a single precious moment, that the connection had been there - a hint that the entanglement had been real; that somehow, beyond time and space, they had always been, and therefore always would be, together.

But he had not known her anguish. There was no quantum entanglement; no tie; no hope; just mute nothingness and an old book, bent out of shape and disfigured by the desperate scribblings of her pain, which now mercifully had ended. He was too shocked to close his eyes and try to sleep again; and too hurt to cry. He drew aside the curtain facing the Avenue; the field with its double line of stones lay empty. Likewise, out of sight, the tourists in the main circle to the north were slowly departing, leaving it to its ghosts. Long past its zenith the sun was gilding the edges of the stones and the trees that crested the hills, but Con was immune to its beauty. The fine shell of happiness had cracked.

## **Chapter Eleven: Mac Govan-Crow**

Tolkien and Barfield sat at the small table beside the window, relieved to have at last reached the Red Lion and un-shouldered their heavy packs. Lewis was at the bar, where he was talking to the barman as the latter poured beer from a jug into three pint mugs.

The room was busy and filled with smoke; in one corner two men in caps played at dominoes; in the other corner, far from the patch of sunlight in which Tolkien found himself sitting, sat a solitary figure, puffing on his pipe and eyeing Tolkien with dark heavy lidded eyes. Tolkien looked away hurriedly and smiled at Barfield.

'Jack's on top form.' he said, on hearing the barman laugh at one of Lewis's witticisms. Owen nodded, but his eyes suggested something different than the smile that briefly played over his lips.

'I find Jack somewhat, I don't know, flat of late.' he said.

'Flat?'

'His arguments lack conviction. It's as if some of that fire he once had has left him. I suppose it was the part of him that was searching... but now he has found God it's as if the search is over and that hunger has somewhat abated. His opinions have become fixed.'

It was clear from his expression that Barfield had found this change in his friend painful. 'I did so used to enjoy seeing him fired up.' He smiled sadly and blinked a few times. 'Did you see his face when he said about no longer being a poet? That's all that used to drive him. He seems lost, for having become found.'

Tolkien looked away, unsure of how to respond to his friend's observation, and found himself once more under the gaze of the swarthy man in the

corner. Having had his gaze met Tolkien decided he could not be rude and look away for a second time and so he touched his cap in greeting. Slowly, the man in the corner responded, touching his cap with stubby, dirty fingers, his eyes remaining still fixed on the pair at the window, midst the blue cloud of pipe smoke.

Unnerved, Tolkien fidgeted in his waistcoat pocket for his own pipe, filled the bowl and then laid it on the table, then changed his mind and put it in his mouth unlit, then took it out to speak.

'He seems little altered to me, Owen; but you have known him longer, I suppose. Perhaps what you're observing is the mellowing of a man in his middle years, as we all are, no doubt?'

Owen smiled. 'Perhaps you are right, Ronald.'

'Time ever marches on.' Tolkien said, striking a match and lifting to his pipe. 'Unlike us. I think it's a good decision to stay here tonight,' he said; they had reached this decision moments before. What had appeared during their planning a decent spot to pause had, in truth, appeared more attractive in the flesh, so to speak; Calne could wait.

Lewis returned to the table with the foaming mugs in his hands. He was frowning.

'No room at the Inn, I am sorry to say – nor, it seems, at the other place across the road... all been booked up by that archaeologist Keiller, but all is not lost...' He said enigmatically and he returned to the bar.

Tolkien sipped at the foam of the beer. 'I do hope so. I don't really fancy walking much further today. I thought the idea was to break us in slowly, not kill us off on day one.' A fleeting smile played across his lips. 'I dare say there should be room still at Calne if it should come to that...'

Just then the barman, with whom Lewis was talking, turned and raised his voice.

'George?'

At this, the dark-complexioned man in the corner who had been watching Barfield and Tolkien, set down his drink and headed for the bar, where he was seen to engage Lewis in conversation. Tolkien eyed the pair, noting the man's long-hair bound in a ponytail, like some tinker or gypsy, he thought. A moment later the two men were walking towards the table. Tolkien and

Barfield stood to greet the stranger.

'This is Mr Mac Govan-Crow,' Lewis said, 'and it seems he has a couple of rooms to rent in the village, which is excellent news.'

Mr Mac Govan-Crow once again touched his hand to his cap.

'He has invited us to see the rooms, but I've assured him that I am sure they will be more than suitable; shall we bring our packs along after our lunch?' he asked the newcomer.

Mr Mac Govan seemed to be eyeing the three gentlemen with veiled amusement, much to Tolkien's discomfort. "Tis no bother, sirs. I'll take your luggage now; if you come after you've eaten, I shall provide you with a key.' His accent was pure West Country, even if his swarthy, aquiline looks with their black eyes like crescents over high cheekbones, were not. He effortlessly shouldered Lewis's pack, despite his short stature, then picked up the other two in his hands and exited the pub.

'Good god he must be as strong as an ox!' exclaimed Tolkien. 'Mac Govan-Crow, eh? If he's a Celt, then I'm a Zulu!'

'Yes. I know. Listen to this. He's a full-blooded Red Indian by all accounts, so the barman told me! 'Hawkeye, Last of the Mohicans' the landlord called him.' Lewis said.

'Hawkeye?! People can be so uneducated!' Tolkien scowled.

Lewis nodded.

'Everyone knows that the last of the Mohicans was *Uncas*! Hawkeye was a white man!' Tolkien explained.

Lewis suddenly laughed. 'My dear Tollers! There was I agreeing over what I thought was your annoyance over a racial stereotype whereas your real annoyance was over the fact the barman didn't know his Fennimore-Cooper well enough!'

Tolkien smiled. 'Both rankle with me -ignorance is ignorance, I suppose. And if you're stupid enough to cast about racist nicknames you're also stupid enough not to know you've chosen a character of the wrong race to begin with! I was brought up reading the Leatherstocking tales; I used to fantasize about living in the forests, hunting with a bow...this is absolutely

marvellous! I wonder if he speaks any Native languages...?" Tolkien asked, his eyes lighting up. 'How on earth did he end up in Wiltshire?!" he continued. 'What tribe is he?"

'I don't care, as long as he can cook a good English breakfast.' Lewis quipped, and sipped his pint. But Tolkien wouldn't let the subject drop.

Owen had spread his ordnance survey map out across the table – and the friends spent a few minutes looking closely at the finer details, while thirstily emptying their glasses.

'So, the question is whether we take a walk back to Silbury now and climb it before dinner – or, seeing as we are now staying the night, we save that until tomorrow.'

Tolkien was looking at the map in silence.

'Just look at the number of ancient features – dozens more burial mounds than I suspected; and look at that...'

'What is it?' asked Lewis.

'That hill – Windmill hill on Stukeley's map – there's some kind of square enclosure on top and here the hill is called *Waden* hill.'

'Waden? And what do you deduce from that?' Lewis asked, downing his pint.

'And the spring...' he continued, not pausing to answer Lewis's question, 'the Kennet spring, is here named Swallowhead! Swallow. Well I never! *Suilo*. It seems my vision of that lady floating in the waters of the Kennet was probably correct...if I hadn't been so preoccupied with the book over the last few days I would've had time to do some research, I had no idea... the hill's named after the spring...not vice versa...'

'Explain!' Lewis said, annoyed at his friend's seemingly random muttering

'Only if you get in another jug, this is going to be thirsty work!! We need the ale of inspiration!'

## **Chapter Twelve: Adversity**

Once more seated at the table by the window of the Red Lion Conall was swirling his glass of diet coke so that the large effervescent paracetamol and codeine tablets he'd dropped into it would dissolve more quickly. The fizzing finally stopped, and he swallowed the resulting bittersweet liquid with a grimace. He had left his campervan dehydrated with his head threatening to burst with every heartbeat making the walk to the pub nauseatingly painful and arduous. Now faced with a veggie lasagne with onion rings he looked down at the plate and wanted to heave, but he dipped a ring into a large heap of mayonnaise and persevered. Then he ate like a starving dog.

At the bar sat the wiry, shaven-headed man who had joined in with the folk singers earlier that day; he had greeted Conall with 'y'alright?' as he'd ordered his meal and Conall had done his best to nod, noticing the piercing in the man's bottom lip above a greying goatee beard constrained in a leather thong, and the heavily tattooed arms. Now seated by the window Conall couldn't help but listen to the man, who was speaking in a thick Yorkshire accent, talking to the pretty barmaid who had taken his food order earlier. The man's words, like his accent, were strong – liberally peppered with swearing. He was showing the barmaid something he had on a lace about his neck that she was regarding with interest.

A little later the shaven-headed man left for a smoke and Conall took his now-empty plate to the bar; he ordered a Jack Daniels and coke and repaired to his seat. His headache had abated somewhat, but still hang

around his temples; perhaps the shot would help, he thought, optimistically. He suddenly realised he was rocking back and forth on his seat like a caged animal, and so made a conscious effort to stop, only to find his fingers rapping on the tabletop. It was through these physical expressions that Conall realised just how nervous he was about seeing Shen. There, at that very bar, he had first talked to her, all those months ago. He had been less nervous then. He couldn't imagine doing it now. My fire has left me, he thought bitterly.

The door creaked open and Conall's pulse shot up, but it was not Shen. It was a man in a biker's jacket, tall, well-built, with a shock of red-blond hair and short fiery beard and blue eyes; Con breathed a sigh of relief, but it caught in his throat as he spied Shen walking in after him; she leant up and said something to him, then glanced about for Conall.

Shen smiled and lifted a hand, but before she could walk over the shaven-headed man had walked back in and had greeted her with a bear hug; turning, he shook Hayden's hand and the two men headed for the bar.

'What would you like to drink?' Shen asked, walking over to Conall, her eyes smiling. 'A beer; Green King – same as earlier' he said. But rather than stay sitting waiting to be introduced to the others Conall rose and approached the bar with her.

'Conall, this is Wolf Jones, he's staying at the cottage, and this is Hayden...' Wolf's handshake was friendly and vigorous, and accompanied by the same 'Y' alright?' as earlier; Hayden's grip was firm and he glanced at Conall with a lack of scrutiny that suggested either Shen had said nothing about their past (not that there was much to tell, he thought), or Hayden was not the kind of bloke to be troubled by such things.

'A bitter drinker, eh?' he said, his voice deep with a strong West Country tang. 'That's what we like to see! You here for the protest?'

'I didn't know it was happening, to be honest – I just needed to get away from London.' Con stated.

'Where are you staying?' Hayden asked.

'In my campervan', he began, and when Wolf raised his eyebrows in interest he continued 'I'm parked down by the avenue.' Conall replied.

‘Silver fiat Scudo?’ Wolf said, ‘I think I saw it at the Sanctuary earlier. Nice little conversion – I’d love to have a poke around’ Wolf cut in. Conall tried to recall if he’d seen anyone there, ‘I was in my van just up from you – big black bastard with wolves on t’side.’ He chuckled.

‘Yeah, I saw your van.’ Conall said, trying not to think of the van rocking...

Shen and Wolf took their drinks over to the table while Conall waited for his own to be poured. He stood in silence next to Hayden who was tapping in his pin number into the card reader. Conall made an offer to pay for his pint but the other refused, and so Conall took both his and Hayden’s pints back to the table. Wolf had sat opposite Shen, leaving Conall to decide whether to sit next to Wolf or next to Shen; either way he’d have to sit opposite Hayden. He decided to sit beside Wolf – at least that way he’d be able to look Shen in the face.

‘Shen says you’re doing some research on the henges?’ Wolf asked.

‘Something like that...’ Con answered, dismissively.

‘It’s a cool place; the energy here is amazing. I was up at West Kennet this morning drumming...’ he closed his eyes and exhaled ‘...it was a beautiful sunrise.’

Hayden had arrived and nestled in beside Shen.

‘Did I hear you say *drumming*? Another fucking weirdo!’ He laughed.

‘I’ll pick you up at 5am tomorrow then, Hayden? I’ve got a spare drum...’

Hayden raised a sceptical eyebrow and smiled.

‘Such a shame, mate – I’ll be leaving for work before that... maybe next time.’ He said, winking. ‘You see it all here – drums, didgeridoos... croppies’ he swigged his pint.

‘Joking aside, you should try it.’ Wolf suggested, with sincerity.

‘Nah. Not my thing.’ He placed his hand over Shen’s, ‘I’m kind of a bit too practical for all that shit; but live and let live – it don’t bother me.’ Conall had so far remained silent, trying desperately hard to find something to say.

'What's a croppy?' he asked

Hayden nodded towards a group on a table by the fire – long haired for the most part and sporting various types of facial hair, but these were not the usual hippy types dressed in colourful loose clothes – these seemed more techno-nerds, in blacks and dark greens – close-fitting, camouflaging - who were currently sharing images on their mobile phones and laughing.

'Circlemakers.'

'What – crop circles? These guys make them?'

'Well, you can be sure little green men don't – this lot are behind most – though they'll not admit it; it's all part of the mystique, apparently.'

'I think I'd tell people – I'd be well proud.' Wolf laughed.

'They make a shit load of money, too – corporate branding etcetera – media and businesses pay these guys to stick advertising in fields – there was one a couple of years ago advertising Shredded Wheat – or film promos. If they let on they did them all they'd ruin the mystery and then no one would pay them to do it; it pays for them to keep quiet.'

Con continued to look over at them; they looked unassuming - perhaps, he thought, they derived some nerdish glee from pulling the wool over people's eyes - drinking beer then going and playing practical jokes in a Wiltshire cornfield on a balmy summer's night and gleefully listening to the speculation here the next day seemed a fairly innocuous hobby; it was all mercurial, childish fun. But perhaps he was doing them a disservice; perhaps they really were really faceless artists speaking up for the earth.

Another pint drunk, Conall was finding his tongue beginning to loosen.

'So do you let Shen read your cards?' he asked Hayden.

Hayden laughed and shot him a look that said '*are you serious?*'

'It's bollocks – I mean, a tarot card can no more tell my future than this beer mat; You know what I think? It's more to do with her reading the people and then making the cards fit, don't you think? She's bloody good at reading people.' He turned to Shen. 'I mean it – you should go into psychology, or something. Use your skills properly. Or even the police, CID or something.'

This stuff's okay, and people lap it up round here, but you could do something proper with it....'

Shenandoah looked up at him, her eyes wide. Conall couldn't read what she was thinking.

'I'm happy how it is, Hay. It's starting to pay its way. And I can fit it in around my painting...'

'Yeah, it is babe, but I just think you could be doing something better with it, that's all.' He stroked her cheek. 'You're wasted doing that.'

She looked up again and shrugged.

She met Con's gaze for an instant, smiled weakly and then sipped her brandy and coke. He remembered her laughter from last year. She looked different now, kind of beaten down, or maybe she was just biting her tongue for the sake of the group. Besides, he guessed she could say the same of him – he felt uncomfortable here, a ghost playing at living, a cartoon character amongst flesh and blood men. Why can I never think of anything to say?! He berated himself.

'So what do you do, Colin?'

'*Conall*. Well, up 'til recently I was a lecturer, in astrophysics.'

'At last, a scientist!' Hayden laughed and put out his hand for Con to shake. Conall shook his hand but felt like an idiot in doing so; Hayden's hands were large and calloused; his own felt like a child's in comparison.

'til recently, you say?'

'Yeah – I'm looking to lecture independently, and write – articles and stuff; I'm just fed up of London.'

'He who is tired of London is tired of life' – who said that?' Wolf asked.

'Samuel Johnson; well I guess I'm tired of life. I hate cities. I think mankind made a massive mistake in ever leaving the countryside.'

'You wouldn't say that if you lived here; it's fucking dead!' Hayden laughed.

Con shrugged. 'We're not adapted for city life – we evolved in the Savannah,

moving in small groups, close to nature; in a city we see more people in ten seconds than your average prehistoric man would have seen in a lifetime; I just don't think we're adapted for it – I think we miss it.'

Hayden snorted. 'How can we miss what we've never had?'

Con shrugged.

'I read once of an experiment where generations of finches were brought up in a secluded lab, yet despite never having been outside nor seen a predator, when a plastic hawk was passed overhead they all crouched and tried to hide... they'd never seen a hawk yet felt fear. It's instinct. The yearning for nature is an instinct, too. We can miss the world our ancestors knew.'

I miss it, he thought; that ancient sense of belonging, of living in harmony with Nature; not barricading her outside of the city gates. I don't feel at home among other people; I sleep better under the stars than in any bed...

'Yeah, I do get where you're coming from, but you can't turn back the clock.' Hayden said. 'Or stop the march of progress.'

'More's the pity,' said Wolf. 'I'm sure there's a correlation between stress and cruelty and the way cities depersonalize you... look at what happened when the Native Americans formed cities – human sacrifice on a mass scale.'

'You can't blame that on cities,' Hayden re-joined – that was just due to plain barbarism. 84,000 people sacrificed over 2 days, so the Spanish Chroniclers said.'

'Exactly, Spanish Chroniclers – sooo trustworthy and unbiased....' said Shen, chagrined.

'Well,' continued Hayden in what must have been a perennial argument between them, given the withering look on her face 'it just goes to show the Indians were just as brutal as the Europeans – this crap people spout nowadays about the poor tree-hugging natives is just bullshit – *Aho! It's a good day to die!!!* your ancestors were just as bloodthirsty as mine.'

Shen pouted. 'One - The Aztecs weren't my ancestors; you can't lump a whole continent of peoples together like that. There's a bit of a distance between Mexico and Canada, you know? And two - that's like me blaming

your Scottish ancestors for the Holocaust just because you're European.'

In the half hour or so of conversations that followed Conall found himself still silent and increasingly morose; that mercurial spark of drunken vision he had known earlier had vanished; his second beer that night was, like the first, tackled more out of duty than enjoyment, and he was remaining resolutely and unfortunately sober. Having lost its control momentarily earlier his outer brain was not willing to relinquish its command so easily again. His social niceties and insecurities had snapped back in force. Sitting opposite Hayden he found that his view of Shen was mostly blocked by both Wolf and Hayden, as it was these two who were doing most of the talking, and both kept leaning forward over their drinks. Wolf would now and again ask Conall a question, but Hayden seemed to ignore Conall and Shen as he alternately clashed swords with Wolf or joined the other in raucous laughter. Now and again Conall would catch her eye and she'd raise an eyebrow. Eventually out of frustration Conall stood up and went and sat between her and Wolf at the end of the table.

'You ok?' he asked.

She smiled too broadly and said she was.

'So what do you charge for a tarot reading?' he asked, deliberately choosing the topic Hayden had been so dismissive of.

'Well, if there's a group of four or five, and I get a lot of groups, I'll charge £100 for the evening.'

'And individually?'

'£25 to £30 I suppose. It's tiring, though.'

'I think it's good, what you're doing.' He said.

She smiled again but looked sad. She looked at him, but he couldn't read what was behind the look.

'And the painting?'

'So so. I've just got too much to do what with doing the house up, and the card readings; plus, it's hard to find the time – as in I need space, you know, when I'm doing it. And...' she hushed her voice 'certain people don't like me

spending all my time concentrating on it and not them; I get a fair few interruptions...'

They smiled conspiratorially.

She sipped at her brandy and coke.

'I really shouldn't have any more; I'm such a light-weight these days!'

She held his gaze and her eyes creased in a smile.

'I'm glad you're here. Avebury, I mean – not the pub – not just the pub; sorry. I wondered how you were doing.'

'Life goes on.' Con said.

'Yes, it does.'

Wolf, meanwhile, was explaining to Hayden about the protest, telling how when the archaeologist Stuart Piggott had excavated West Kennet Long-Barrow in the 1950's most of the bones found in the chambers had been taken to Devizes museum. But recently a researcher had re-discovered the most important of these remains – a full skeleton (rare, as most of the bones in the mound had been leg bones) in the bowels of the museum stores and these remains were being moved into a new display in the museum here at Avebury. Why, Wolf was arguing, could they not be repatriated?

'This man is one of our ancestors; why should he be put on display in a museum to be gawped at?' Wolf said.

Hayden had been listening to this preamble without saying a word, but now began to speak.

'Unless they do DNA testing on the bones he can't really be claimed as an ancestor; besides – the bones are of scientific interest. What's important is what the bones tell us about how people lived back then; their diet, their diseases.'

'Yeah, that's interesting – but what if it was your granddad being put on display?' Wolf said.

Conall tried not to look at Shen.

'He's not, though,' replied Hayden, 'nor is he anyone's granddad that's alive today. You're just being sentimental and giving the bones a value they don't possess.'

'What of the wishes of the man himself? He would want to be with his people, not in a glass case in a museum.'

'Well, to be frank, we can't ask him his wishes, can we? It just all seems a bit phoney.' Hayden continued.

'It would be different if he had been buried a Christian, though, wouldn't it?' Wolf countered, 'or these were some Saint's relics? People are so bloody careful about not treading on the toes of Christians, Muslims or anyone else that might take offence, but the rights of Pagans and our Pagan ancestors are completely overlooked.'

'Maybe that's because there's no continuity of tradition. You pagans are just using the bones to make a point; you're trying to find a link to the past to justify your own beliefs. If you have ancestors you can see and touch then you have roots you can boast of. It's possibly different if you're a Red Indian and you can show the White Man has dug up your ancestral burial ground and taken the bones of an individual you can possibly name – but that's not the case here.'

Con looked aside at Shen to see if she would react to the rather derogatory term 'Red Indian' but she seemed distant, as if not listening to the argument between the two men. Remembering his PhD tutor's comments Con bit his tongue and remained silent.

'But even though we don't know his name we can probably say that thousands of us are descended from him.'

'Which is why when he's on display in the museum it'll be interesting and informative. How can we learn from him when he's stuck back up in West Kennet or buried up on Windmill Hill, is it, as you're proposing?'

'It's not about learning, it's about respect.' Wolf said. 'And you tell me the principal reason for him being on display is scientific? Is it bollocks! It's entertainment. It's about numbers through the door and selling more fookin' guidebooks. It's getting kids to gawp at a skeleton for entertainment, not education. If it wasn't going to make money they

wouldn't bother.'

Hayden took a mouthful of beer.

'I know that's how you feel, but the protest just seems pointless. It's whimsical and would deprive us of any future attempts to use the bones for all types of analyses we've yet to discover, despite what you think about it not really being scientific. Right, Colin? You're a scientist; you understand the importance of this.' Con just looked at Hayden without changing his expression, not that Hayden seemed to notice, for he continued speaking without pause: 'Why should the greater part of mankind lose out just to satisfy the weird beliefs of a handful of hippies? Why should these few individuals lay claim to these bones when, as you say, thousands of us are descended from him?'

Con shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

'Anyway...' Hayden continued, 'I've never been a fan of ineffective protests – and this is a waste of yours and everyone's time; they've built the bloody display now – printed the new guidebooks, mugs, postcards, keyrings – and all manner of tat... what are they going to do? Say you've got a point and burn it all?'

Wolf paused, and instead of reacting he held his hand up and smiled; instantly any tension that had been building up around the table dissipated. 'Well, we'll agree to disagree on this.' He said, taking out a pouch of tobacco and rolling himself a cigarette. He offered the pouch to Shen, who refused, with a furtive look at Conall. Hayden shook his head, but Conall took the proffered pouch from Wolf and rolled himself one.

Outside the pub, under the thatched eaves strung with outdoor lights, Wolf lit Conall's fag, then his own.

'That was very noble of you to bite your tongue.' Conall offered.

Wolf blew out a long cloud of smoke, shaking his head.

'I've heard it all before – but when I was talking about respect, I meant it. We have to respect the wishes of the person we're putting on display... The way he was buried; the special treatment of his body as opposed to the others – he wasn't the same; he had a special role; and we need to honour that... Putting him on display just isn't right. It's disrespectful. and to argue that we might lose out on future scientific discovery is just bullshit! Is this

all he is – some science experiment? So, they cut up the bones and find out he ate 5% more wheat than a similar skeleton from France – so fucking what?’

Conall nodded. ‘It’s strange,’ he said. ‘What does it say about modern man that he puts science before humanity? Hayden talks about value, but fails to see that surely the greatest value the bones possess isn’t the abstract facts we can glean about his life from them but from the very fact they were part of a living human being – that surely is where their true value lies...’

‘So you’re with us? Hehe!’ Wolf said, grinning, and slapped him on the back. ‘You should’ve said that back in there... but I can tell you’re not much of a talker, are you? Besides, I’m not doing it because I’m a Pagan – I bloody hate most Pagans – you know, the weekend witch types; I know that it’s what the ancestors want.’ And he fixed Conall with a sidelong look.

‘I’m not interested in any religion that may or may not be made up, and a lot of modern paganism is, I’m talking about the spirits of the land, and those spirits are just as present today as they were thousands of years ago. You just have to have the humility to listen to them.’

He looked southwards over the stones, now cloaked in darkness.

‘You see, it’s not about the past – about turning back the clock, despite what Hayden thinks; it’s about remembering what we need NOW. That’s why I get fed up with people who moan on about the good old days - they have lost sight of the potential of the present... and we only have the present; we can change the direction our species is travelling in, but not backwards.’

Con nodded in agreement.

‘Do you know Whitman’s ‘Leaves of Grass’?’ he asked his shaven-headed companion;

“There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.”

Now. It has to be now. He thought; the past is no more sacred than the now... only I find it hard to see it, damaged as I am by guilt.

‘There’s no going back, but that doesn’t mean we can’t learn from the past;

all these progressives are so fucking dumb...' Wolf spat. 'I hate their self-serving greed- it's all *for the good of man*, this myth of progress... some Jetsons future where all disease is cured and we're all in flying cars; and what have we done to get there? Analysed all the bones, cut up all the animals; cut down all the trees... but it's ok because it was done in the service of man. It's bollocks. If you were walking in city and you realised you'd strayed into a shit neighbourhood you wouldn't blindly carry, you'd bloody well turn back round and choose another route. That's where we're at, Con, or should I say *Colin*?' he laughed 'as a species we've taken a wrong turn, and we need the humility to accept we need to change our path,'

Conall looked at this strange mixture of a man; his tattoos, piercings, wiry strong arms, wickedly glinting, predator-like pale eyes. There was no pretence about him, nothing done for effect; he was as he was.

'Civilization is not the be all and end all. Civilizations have come and gone and will do again; I just don't want to be part of the civilization that took the whole world with it when it fell...' Wolf said. Un-beckoned the image of a vast wave sweeping over towns and cities rose in Con's mind...of lightning in a blackened, churning sky, and the view of collapsing cliffs viewed from a violently lurching boat... where the hell did that come from? He wondered, bemused. I *know* that scene...

'The ancestors - they are saying *remember us*.' Wolf was saying. Con, roused from his disturbing yet weirdly familiar reverie glanced out to where Wolf was gesturing, towards the stones whose giant hunched silhouettes were slowly becoming visible against the pallid night sky as their eyes became used to the darkness; And can you hear their voices? Con wanted to ask. Is this some poetic metaphor or can you really hear the voices of the dead? Can you hear *her*?

'So, are you a pagan?' Wolf asked.

Con shrugged.

'I'm not a fan of labels; I sometimes think I'm close to a Taoist or a Buddhist – but a lot of their philosophy seems very life-negating – the universe is a veil of tears and delusion and we need to jump off it...'

Wolf nodded. 'You know, I'm the same – some of the basic tenets I love, but I agree – life is to be lived; it's not fucking easy – but it's not meant to be easy; it's certainly not meant to be thrown away.'

'It can be fucking cruel.' Con commented.

Wolf pulled a face.

'Depends on your perspective; what if it's not so much cruel as not making things easy?'

'That implies intention – you can't say that there's some great cosmic being who intends for the world to be this way – babies dying in Africa, kids with cancer; earthquakes, hurricanes, murder...'

'No, mate – I look at it on a smaller scale than that – what if there was a part of ourselves, not some great cosmic force, but something in us that somehow stage managed our lives? It could be part of that greater force, just not all of it. It's like when you dream – you're in the dream, talking to someone who isn't you – yet when you wake up it's all been in your own head, so that other person WAS you, you just couldn't see it from within the perspective of the dream. What if life is like that dream, and really, we're the stage manager *and* the actors – we just don't have the perspective right now...I'm not saying I believe this, but I do sometimes wonder. If there was a greater part of me controlling things beyond my reach, I wouldn't expect it to make things easy for me – for me to win the lottery or have a string of birds on my arm 24/7 – because if it was easy you wouldn't try, and it's through trying that you grow. Fortune favours the brave, and to be brave you need adversity.'

Adversity, thought Con. I've had my fair share...

'There's something that Krishna says in the Mahabaratha – love your enemies as they give you your destiny...' Wolf said, then, changing tack, turned and looked directly at Con. 'What do you think of Hayden?'

Conall shrugged, knowing any answer he gave wouldn't be without bias.

Wolf smiled; 'I don't agree with his views, but he's no fool. He's a brave fucker: He was telling me last night about a rescue he was involved in on the M4 last year; I suppose you have to be no-nonsense and practical to deal with that kind of stuff; and have a certain amount of emotional distance. No room for sentimentality.' Wolf grinned. 'Hmm. Did you hope I was going to say he was a twat?'

Conall laughed. 'Maybe. Maybe I wanted him to be one – I mean a fucking tall blond fireman. It's like sitting opposite Thor.'

Wolf laughed. 'What's the story, then, with you and the lovely Shenandoah?'

Conall inhaled then blew the smoke out his nose with a shrug.

'I met her down here last year. Spent a few days with her; we got on really well, but then something happened...'

Wolf gazed at him, unflinching. 'She told me, you know... about your twin sister's accident; I hope you don't mind. I suppose she didn't want me to put my foot in it or anything.'

Conall shook his head, both surprised she had mentioned it to Wolf, and that he didn't mind she had done so.

'Were you identical – you know, as I suppose a man and a woman can be?'

Con smiled. 'No – different sex twins come from two eggs, actually - fertilised at the same time; we didn't share an egg but we shared a womb – but yeah, she had the same hair as me – poor girl; but blue eyes.'

'Same beard...?' Wolf grinned. 'Well, if you ever need to talk...I know that sounds lame, but it's a genuine offer...'

Con paused as the laughing group of croppies exited the pub and walked into the dark.

'Thank you. I think it's all been said, though.' He took a final drag off the cigarette, looking out over the field of stones across the road from the pub. Wolf once more fixed him with his pale, predator's eyes.

'I very much doubt that. I get the feeling you've not even begun to talk about it. And you know that, too.'

'It won't bring her back.' Conall said, through a cloud of smoke.

Wolf was quiet for a moment before he spoke.

'No. But it might you.'

## **Chapter Thirteen: An Eye for an Eye**

'So are you going to enlighten us, now?' Lewis asked, returning to the table with a jug of beer.

Tolkien was smiling. He took a sip of beer and lit his pipe.

'Yes. That strange image I had of the lady floating down the Kennet like Ophelia... you see, I thought that had come about from our discussions of the dismembered vegetation god, or of Orpheus, but in fact I now see that it had its roots in what we had been discussing earlier, at Silbury. Remember I had argued that 'Sil' had come from the Welsh 'Sul', as in sun? Well, the word had been going round my head, clamouring for attention...' he took another sip of beer - 'but it was only just now when I saw the name of the spring, Swallowhead, that I understood what I was being shown...'

He scratched his chin, his eyes seeming to focus on a point far in the distance.

'You see, Silbury and Swallowhead must both be derived from the same root word, which can't be 'sol', Jack, as linguistically 'sol' could not become 'swall' - so we're not looking at a derivation from the Latin, but from something much earlier. They both, in fact, come from a very ancient word that predates both the Latin and the Welsh form, that was closer to 'sawol'; now in Irish this ancient word became 'suil' meaning 'eye'... the sun being the eye in the heavens, one supposes - the divine eye.'

'As in Ancient Egypt - where the eye of Ra, or of Horus, was the sun?' Lewis suggested.

'Exactly, Jack. This would make Silbury the 'bury', that is barrow, from the Anglo-Saxon '*bearw*' - so mound of the eye'; and the Swallowhead spring would be the spring of the eye. As Swallowhead preserves the older form of Sawol, I would suggest it, and not the hill, was named first, though I may be wrong...'

'If you don't mind me asking, Ronald, whether derived from sun or eye, or whether the name of the spring predated the hill, what is the connection to your Ophelia?' Barfield asked.

'If one follows the old Roman road that goes past Silbury,' Tolkien continued, 'which follows a much older track-way, you find yourself at Bath – which as you know was known as *Aquae Sulis* the 'waters of the goddess Sulis'; Sulis-Minerva was the goddess of the healing springs there, and her name shares the same etymology so it seems highly possible to me that she is also implicated here at Avebury.'

'Bravo!' exclaimed Lewis. 'It hadn't even entered my thoughts to link Silbury to Sulis.'

'Nor mine,' Tolkien conceded 'until I saw the name Swallowhead on this map – it was the connection of the word Sul to the waters of the spring rather than the hill that suggested it.'

'I now have a rather incongruous image of Minerva, half submerged in the Kennet in a Greek chiton dress, a spear in one hand and an owl perched on her shoulder...' Lewis said, laughing. 'But the image of the eye and the spring, and a goddess of the waters is, as you know, an old Celtic trope... it's found in the Irish legend of the origin of the river Boyne in Ireland.'

'Remind me.' Said Barfield.

He lit a cigarette and began;

'The Boyne, Owen, was named after the goddess Boann who was a princess of the *Tuatha De Danann*, the people of the Goddess Danu, that is the *Sidhe*, the fairy folk; and her abode was the fairy mound of Newgrange. Now Boann had a husband named Nechtan who owned a magical spring. The spring was surrounded by nine hazel trees and the hazel nuts would fall into the water and be eaten by the speckled salmon who lived therein – and as the nuts contained all knowledge whoever drank of the waters of that well or ate of the salmon would become knowledgeable of all there was to

know, had ever been known, and ever would be known...'

Jack's eyes glistened; he enjoyed the telling of tales immensely.

'...Only Nechtan and his three cupbearers could drink of the well; but out of curiosity Boann one day approached the well, wishing to drink for herself, and walked about it three times counter-clockwise... but the waters of the well rose up, creating a rushing river that pursued Boann to the coast, and it was said that the water erupted with such power that it ripped a leg, an arm and a single eye from her body, and that she drowned in the flood of waters that became the river which today bears her name.'

Tolkien nodded. 'Given the number of river names in Europe associated with ancient Goddesses,' he stated, 'we can assume that the river *was* the goddess; so I think we can suggest that a similar legend once existed here at Avebury concerning that same goddess of the eye and/or sun, named Sulis – who perhaps drowned at the Swallowhead, or at least transformed into those waters.'

'And the name Waden Hill...' Jack offered, 'comes from Woden? He, too lost an eye at a well...' he stubbed out his cigarette on the table and let the butt fall onto the floor.

'It's a similar myth, Jack, but the name is sheer coincidence - Waden means hill of the idol – *weoh-dun* – that square enclosure on the map may once have been a shrine housing a heathen image.' Tolkien said, 'But you're right about Woden and the eye. Wishing to gain knowledge of all things, he journeys to the well of Mimir in order to drink from it; but as we know, the price is high – for he has to forfeit one of his *eyes* to take a draught. – just as Boann loses an eye when she drinks of the well.'

'Aha! I see,' Lewis said, '.... pardon the pun. But what on earth does it mean? Why the loss of an eye in return for the gaining of wisdom?'  
Tolkien frowned for a moment.

'Well, that is the question! The losing of the eye is an act of sacrifice, to prove how much the gaining of knowledge meant, a kind of bartering: one gives up vision in this world to gain vision in another...an eye for an eye...but I'm not sure... After our talk earlier at the tea-rooms a very different answer springs to mind: Surely, to drink of the waters of knowledge should *increase* one's visionary faculties, not deplete them; so in what way could *losing* an eye been seen as a gain? Well it suddenly seems

blindingly obvious, pardon my pun, that what is gained through drinking from the spring is the *unified* mystic vision Owen was celebrating earlier - where all is seen as connected, no longer separate. What better way of depicting this than by making the wisdom seeker one-eyed? Two eyes suggest duality, division, normal everyday vision - but the one eye suggests the *undivided* vision of the poet!

'But I think this is all later metaphysical speculation and that the original myth of the losing and gaining of an eye is rooted in mankind's experience of the natural world - I think (and note, I'm not espousing some all-pervasive solar-theory *a la* Max Muller, when I say this) that it's probably solar. Forget the later metaphysics - it's a seasonal myth - it's about the loss and return of the sun at winter.'

Tolkien looked up from his drink to find the eager eyes of his friends willing him to continue; for a moment, motes of dust hung suspended in the golden light pouring in from the window.

'Think of the myth of Orion, the great hunter; he is blinded, but then he journeys across the sea bearing Kedalion, the servant of Hephaestus the Smith, on his shoulders, like St Christopher, and reaches the eastern horizon and regains his vision from Helios, the sun god.'

'Like Wade carrying Wayland the smith across the Groenasund?' Lewis suggested.

'Precisely... and Thunor carries Orvandel across the icy Elivogs river in a basket on his back...' Tolkien added; 'Obviously the mythical Orion is linked to the constellation; now, the sun rises near this constellation in the spring, but by the autumn Orion has moved to the other side of the sky at daybreak, so has 'lost' the sun; clearly all this marching to the east to regain his eyes from Helios is really an image of the constellation regaining of the sun, the solar eye, in the spring.'

'As for the icy river...'

'...it's the Milky Way?' Barfield suggested. 'So this Sulis, this goddess, was she also a constellation?' he asked.

Tolkien scratched his chin in thought.

'Did you know,' Lewis said, while Tolkien sat pondering, 'that in the Old

Irish stories Druids were known to cast spells standing on one leg and with one eye closed – it was seen as a magical stance – it's exactly the same symbolism as Boann in the river, deprived of an arm, leg and eye. That same one-eyed figure appears in other Celtic myths, you know – he is one who can summon the animals, a kind of wild man. The master of animals, they call him.' Lewis added.

'Like Orpheus.' Barfield said.

'Or Bombadil.' Tolkien re-joined.

'Are these, then, constellations, too?'

Tolkien cleared his throat, and took out his pipe, methodically packing it as he considered the questions that had been put to him.

'Oh, and can you also explain, while you're at it, given all this sun and eye symbolism, why the river Kennet is named after a *dog*?'

Tolkien seemed about to answer when the door of the pub opened and Mr Mac Govan-Crow strode in, heading straight for their table.

'Begging your pardon. My wife is wondering if you would like to eat with us at the house tonight. You would be most welcome.'

The three friends nodded in agreement.

'We shall eat around six, but feel free to return when you wish; I'll let you get back to your drinks.' he said, smiling and leaving as promptly as he had arrived.

'Excellent!' Lewis said, 'tonight we dine on venison!'

'Jack!' scolded Barfield.

'What? It's not me who called him *Hawkeye*!' referring to the latter's epithet of Deerslayer.

The three men laughed. 'Actually, it would be quite an adventure, being led off into the wilds with Hawkeye...through forests and waterfalls, sleeping under the stars...' Lewis said.

'Hunted by the Huron? Idyllic indeed!' Barfield said, sarcastically.

Tolkien smiled. ‘You know, Jack, for all your romanticism you would hate it! Mac Govan-Crow wouldn’t let you stop for a cup of tea, you know! With the Huron on our heels there wouldn’t be time for a decent pint of beer, either.’

Tolkien tuned to Barfield. ‘Imagine how he’d grumble, Owen!’ he said, nodding towards Lewis.

‘It would be unbearable.’ Barfield agreed ‘We could leave him for the Huron, but I doubt even they would want him...’

‘Why so?’ asked Jack, frowning.

‘–nothing to scalp!’ Barfield laughed, pointing at Jack’s bald crown.

## **Chapter Fourteen: Tarot**

It was strange to think only eleven hours had passed since Con had last been in this self-same spot, outside Church cottage opposite the lych-gate on the narrow high-street, a few minutes' walk west of the pub outside the circle; it already seemed like another day, far further back in time. The only difference from earlier, however, was the presence of Hayden's large motorbike parked outside on the road, and the scent of the large, almost luminous, white-petalled Nicotiana, their buds now open, tumbling from the window box. Then he had thought Shen to be long gone from this place, but here he was, a few hours later, following her into the cottage. Never presume you know where you're going, he thought to himself. Life often has different plans from those we envision...

While Conall followed Wolf into the kitchen to grab a drink Shen set about preparing the small living room for the reading; she lit a joss stick and a few tea lights on the coffee table in front of the cast-iron fireplace, and turned the overhead light off, though the small table lamp by the fireside was left on so that Hayden could sit and read the magazine he'd nonchalantly picked up.

'Get us a beer, Shen,' he said, not bothering to look up. 'And put some toast on.'

'Get it yourself, you lazy bugger, I'm setting up.' She smiled. Hayden muttered something about working all day and slumped into the kitchen.

'You having your cards read?' Conall asked, tongue in cheek, emboldened from drinking.

Hayden looked at him witheringly, took a beer from the fridge and walked back out.

'I take it that's a no!' whispered Wolf to Con, snorting.

Shen had moved the sofa forward for Conall and Wolf to sit on, but she herself sat cross-legged on the wooden floor opposite them in front of the fire place, over which hung a long Native American wooden flute with feathers and beads hanging off it on a cord; Alfred's flute. He'd heard him play it once in this very room; a room that had cluttered with photographs and the detritus of a long life -a room heady with the scent of pipe tobacco. She must really miss him, he thought, watching as Shen took a sip of her drink and handed the cards to Wolf.

'Shuffle them then give them back.' she said.

'Look at you being all professional!' Conall quipped; Shen stuck out her tongue at him and giggled.

Wolf shuffled the cards and handed them back to Shen, who spread them face down in a perfect arc on the coffee table. Wolf was instructed to take three cards. When he had chosen them, Shen took them from him and placed these cards face down, and then turned them one by one. For a moment she said nothing. Conall leaned forward and looked at the cards. The first depicted five youths in tunics and tights holding staffs in their hands, which they seemed to be either waving at each other or fighting with; the second was the knight of swords, boldly leaping forward on a pale horse; the final card showed, again, a figure on horseback, but crowned with a wreath, and holding a staff, similarly crowned -in the background seemed to be the same gaggle of youths from the first card, but now holding their staffs straight. Shen looked up at Wolf, who was leaning forward and tapping his knees with his hands excitedly;

'You wanted to know about the protest again. Well...five of wands; that's disorder -it means nuisances, bad luck -see how the men are at odds with each other? There's tension there, confusion -conflict even. A load of hassle.'

'But the Knight of swords -he's someone that is campaigning for what is right. He has strong values and will stand up for them. The last card, the six of wands sees order forming out of the disorder that preceded it; it has connotations of recognition; of praise for a job well done.'

Shen looked up nervously at Wolf. 'So, it's like I saw yesterday,' she

continued, ‘there’s bad luck, but somehow things will turn out well. I can’t see anything more than that. I can’t say I understand it.’

Wolf nodded and thanked her, but left unspoken any thoughts that were crossing his mind. Taking up his cards Shen placed them back in the pack and began to shuffle. Conall felt his pulse quicken...I wonder what she’ll see, he thought; but Shen did not hand him the cards, instead she seemed to be about to consult them herself. Again, she placed the cards in an arc, and picked her selection.

‘What are you asking?’ Conall asked. Shen shrugged;

‘Just looking.’ she said, but Conall had caught her giving a sideways glance towards Hayden as she spoke, so fleeting perhaps Shen herself was unaware that she had done it. The three cards she had selected were quickly placed back in the pack. Once more Shen sipped her drink, then took up the pack and handed them to Conall.

‘Your turn. Shuffle them, then take six cards.’

‘Six?’

‘Yeah, I’ll do your full reading.’

The cards were large and slightly unwieldy; Conall found it hard to shuffle them, and at one point nearly let them spill onto the floor; but persevering he shuffled them a few more times for good measure and gave them back. Shen smiled and nodded, spread the cards, and Conall took six cards from the table. As Shen turned the cards over Conall, just as Wolf had a few minutes before, leaned forward in expectation.

The first showed a tower being struck by lightning with people falling from it; the second showed the skeletal figure of Death astride a white horse; the third card was less grave –a robed woman with a strange white crown and the moon at her feet: the high Priestess; next, another woman, the queen of cups, enthroned and holding a strange elaborate vessel; the next card showed a row of vessels and a red-hooded figure holding one and offering it to a diminutive white haired woman. The last card was also in the suit of cups: ten cups shone radiantly against the arc of a rainbow, while below a dark haired man and woman stood arm in arm, while beside them children played.

'Those look cheery.' Conall said, glancing at the first two cards. Shen coloured and waved a hand over the cards, not looking up at Conall.

'Look, Conall – Death isn't normally literally...death;' she looked up apologetically, '...in fact the tower is more likely to foretell death or change than Death itself... You start off with some kind of ego crisis; could be a breakdown, or a sudden change...so in this context I would say that what is dying is some old and outmoded way of being; it's a rebirth, really.'

Con nodded. I bloody need it, he thought. 'Is that happening now?'

'Yes; or imminently.'

Con looked across at her –her eyes were black in this light; exotically slanting, serious; gone was the seeming awkwardness and weakness he'd thought he'd seen in the pub.

'The High priestess...and the queen of cups...hmm...these suggest someone in your life who is, um, a healer, or a psychic, and the priestess links her with knowledge or wisdom.'

Shen didn't look at Conall as she said this, but it seemed obvious to him from her muted reaction that she was referring to herself. Or was he just imagining that?

'Now the six of cups; that's to do with nostalgia, looking backwards –but in a positive way –it seems that something from the past is going to influence you –it will be of great benefit to your future –something forgotten will turn up and will change the way you look at things; because look –the ten of cups –that's contentment, achievement...' but her fingers, flitting across the card, seemed not to point at the cups in the sky but at the two dark-haired figures, arm in arm below them. Then the card was gone as Shen swiftly gathered them together.

'Did that make any sense?' she asked, not looking up.

'I'm not sure it did –I think maybe I'm tired.'

'Conall was nodding slowly, still trying to take it in.

'No –it all seemed fine - Breakdown; rebirth –a psychic and something from the past leading to happiness.' he summarised. She nodded and their eyes

met again for a moment. *What are you thinking?* He wondered. Something from the past...is that you, Shen? Something forgotten turning up? He felt suddenly drunk and he swallowed. *Can you read my thoughts?* He mused. *Do you know how lovely you are? Do you know about that night, what really happened?*‘

‘Are you going to do yours?’ he asked. Shen held his gaze. ‘I could do, maybe.’

But she didn’t, instead she put the cards away in a cloth, which she placed on the bookcase by the window; she paused for a second and then looked at Conall with a half-smile on her face.

‘I have something for you.’ she said, turning to the fireplace and taking down the wooden flute from its hook above the fireplace. She handed it to him without ceremony. He took it and turned it in his hands, not understanding.

‘My grandfather wanted you to have it.’ Conall was speechless; he held the instrument close, examining the faded feathers and beadwork, and the small carved owl that jutted out from above the finger-holes.

It was Wolf who broke the silence. ‘That is awesome!’

Con was frowning. ‘The flute? I –I can’t take this, Shen, it belonged to your Grandfather. It belongs to you! It should be yours, surely?’

She was smiling sadly and shook her head.

‘He wanted you to have it; he wrote it in his will –to give the flute to the young man who told him about the stars, *in thanks for reuniting brother and sister.* What did he mean by that, Con?’

‘Long story.’ Conall said, abashed at the attention from all three people in the room. ‘I can’t take this Shen.’ Con stammered.

Shen frowned. ‘It was his wish, Con.’

‘But he told me it had been in his family for generations!

‘I know. And it was his to give to whoever he chose; and he chose you.’

Conall didn't voice the question racing across his mind. Why me? I hardly knew him! A few times, we met, that was it –over those four fateful days.

'It'll save me dusting it.' Shen joked, trying to break the awkward silence.

'Oh my God, Shen. Thank you.' and then, looking into the fire, he said 'Thank you Alfred.'

Hayden yawned loudly from his chair in the corner, and announced he was off to bed.

'Laters' he said, his hand in the air, and disappeared from the room.

'I suppose I should be going, too' Con said, suddenly feeling the need to be away from here, to have space to think. 'Shall I leave it here for now?' Shen shook her head.

'No, I'd rather it was gone now.' she said sadly. 'If you're at a loose end tomorrow I'll be around; send me a text.'

She took the flute from his hands and, taking a cloth from the sideboard, wrapped the flute in the cloth and handed it back.

'Take care of it Con.' she said.

'This is the most precious gift I've ever been given; Of course I'll take care of it.' And he smiled back at her as she opened the door and he walked out into the clear, Nicotiana-scented, summer night.

## **Chapter Fifteen: Bear-Skin Woman**

'If you don't mind me asking, George, what brought you to England?' Tolkien asked.

They had just finished a meal prepared for them by George Mac Govan-Crow's wife, Shona, in the small kitchen of their house at Church Cottage and had moved through to the sitting room, where George was busy preparing a fire now the evening had grown cooler. Tolkien sat in a chair by the fire, nursing a whiskey, while Lewis and Barfield had retired to their rooms to unpack; on the couch against the wall Shona sat, her young son Alfred half sleeping in her arms, lulled by his mother's gentle rocking. George smiled.

'My parents,' he said, taking down a photo frame from the mantelpiece and handing it to Tolkien, 'were part of Buffalo Bill Cody's 'Wild West Show' and had been touring Europe, but my mother was pregnant with my brother and they 'jumped ship' here when the tour came to Swindon as she was very ill during the pregnancy. They didn't want to take a baby back on tour or risk the journey back to Canada with a babe in arms, and her health still poor; I was 4 at the time and had been travelling with them. My first memories are of the buffalo hunt, and of watching my father *Kills Crow* sing the victory song and shout the war whoop over the body of Custer!' He laughed. 'That was from the show. Had I been brought up on the reservation I'd have probably never seen a buffalo, never heard the victory songs. I understood that when I went back to visit my people one time. We were enacting a life that had already vanished. It was all show, but it was at least something.'

Tolkien looked at the photo – obviously staged, with the young George

strapped to his mother's back on a cradle-board, and his father in buckskins with feathers in his hair, against a poorly painted background showing wagons and cactuses and tall desolate flat-topped mesas. The eyes of the figures were sharp, lost. The man was very like George, but half of his face was picked out in a bright paint; the woman flat-faced, young, beautiful yet stern; earthy.

My father was Saul Fine Gun, of the Canadian Blackfoot, the Siksikawa; but he was given the name *Kills Crow* for the show; and in turn when he settled here he chose to keep Crow as a surname, and was known as Saul Crow. My parents reasoned their children might be better off here than if they had gone back to Canada; life had been hard for them on the reservation. It was never the same after the buffalo had gone...'

'Do you have a name in Blackfoot?' Tolkien asked.

George remained kneeling, placing more kindling on the fire, and then blowing at the embers until they roared into life. For a moment Tolkien thought he would not answer but staring into the fire he began to speak.

'*Ipisowaasi*. It's the name of the Morning Star.'

'Ipis...?'

'*Ipisowaasi*.'

'*Ipiso-wa-asi*.' Tolkien repeated.

'And you have had the fortune to visit your father's people, you said?'

'My people.' George corrected. 'Yes. After the War, my family took the boat to Canada and I spent many months with them. My brother and mother stayed. My father, you see, was killed in the war; he volunteered to fight; he was a cavalryman in the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars.'

For the second time that day Tolkien was reminded of the dead horses he'd seen scattered across no-man's-land in France. An incongruous image arose in his mind, of George's father, *Kills Crow*, astride his horse, charging through the machine-gun fire, raising the war whoop with his painted face and eagle feathers in his hair. The Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars... Queer Objects on Horseback the regular troops had laughingly called them...

'I am sorry to hear about your father. I was a signalling officer in the Royal Lancashire Fusiliers.' A brief expression of pain flashed across his features. George nodded slowly and held the other's gaze, then continued.

'I couldn't stay in Canada. I was 21 by that time. My home was here, and my Shona was here.' He looked over and smiled at his wife.

'Two exiles together!' she said, in her broad Irish accent, her cheeks flushed.

Tolkien lifted his glass and sipped at his whiskey. After what seemed an eternity of silence George spoke again. He stood up from before the fire, replaced the photograph and took down from where it hung above the mantelpiece a wooden instrument, handing it to Tolkien.

'This was my mother's flute, and she had it from her mother, and she had it from who knows where.'

Tolkien took the object, hung with beadwork and feathers; he turned it in his hands, admiring its craftsmanship.

'It's alder wood; and the feathers are of the owl.'

Tolkien handed it back to George with a smile. 'It's beautiful. Can you play it?'

George put it to his lips and played a short melody. This playing seemed to provide a musical prologue to what happened next.

'I said I would tell you one of our tales; listen, this is how it was told to me by my father.'

The room was silent save for the cracking and popping of the twigs on the fire. Shona's face was distracted, serene; George replaced the flute on the wall and took a seat in the other leather chair opposite Tolkien, his own face, in contrast, serious – severe even. For a moment, in the flickering copper firelight, it took on the proportions of a story-book Indian from Tolkien's childhood; that wild, untamed, frightening yet romantic form of the Red Man – the Noble Savage – a man of the ancient earth... and then it was gone, and he was George again, a west country gardener.

George picked up his pipe and pinched a clump of tobacco from his tin;

silently he threw a small part of this into the fire; mouthing words whose sense eluded Tolkien - *Itsipaitapio'pah* - and then filled his pipe and lit it.

'There was once a maiden named Bear-Skin-Woman who had many suitors but who would not marry. She had seven brothers and a younger sister, and because her mother had died the youngest sister would look after the smallest brother, because he was still a baby, and carry him on her back on a cradle-board.

'Each day the six eldest brothers would go out hunting, and the little sister with her baby brother would remain at home with their older sister. Every day, Bear-Skin-Woman would leave to collect wood – but she never returned with very much wood and the younger sister began to wonder if she was not really collecting wood in the forest, but meeting with a man.

'One day, when her sister had left to collect wood from the forest the little sister crept out of their lodge and followed her through the trees until she saw her go into the cave where the bear lived. She followed her and she saw that the bear and her sister were lovers.

'That night the younger sister told her father what she had seen; and her father said, 'So this is why my daughter refuses to marry!' He went into the village to let his people know that they had a bear as a relation, and that they should follow him into the forest and kill the bear. This the people did.

'Bear-Skin-Woman for a while hated her younger sister, but in time they were friends again. The young sister one day asked that they play at being bears, and the older sister agreed, saying 'I shall be the bear but you must promise not to touch me above the kidneys or there will be evil.' Her sister promised but, in their play, she forgot, and touched her elder sister above the kidneys and she turned into a real bear because she was a powerful medicine woman. Taking up her little brother, the younger sister ran back and hid in the lodge in fear. The older sister ran into the village and killed many, many people. The younger sister was relieved when her sister came home, transformed back into her human form. Still a-feared, the little sister ran to where her brothers were hunting and warned them of what their elder sister had done to their relatives in the village, and that she even now would be coming to kill her remaining siblings.

'Sure enough through the wood they spied their sister, Bear-Skin-Woman, in the shape of the bear hunting for them, and so they ran. As she was just about to snap them up one of the brothers cast down a handful of water

which became a vast lake, around which the bear had to run. As she came close once more another brother threw back a comb onto the ground and there a great thicket of bushes sprung up which delayed the bear for a little longer.

'Eventually Bear-Skin-Woman was at their heels and so they climbed a great tree; but the bear shook the tree and four brothers fell out and died.

'A bird flew about the tree and it sang to the eldest brother, telling him to shoot the bear in the head; and so he took his bow and he put an arrow through the bear's head and killed it.

'The remaining three brothers and the young sister were grieved on seeing their four dead brothers; but the youngest took the eldest of the dead brother's bow and shot an arrow into the air. When it landed one the dead brother stirred and came to life. This he did again until all the dead brothers were alive.

"Where shall we go?" they asked 'seeing as our relatives are all dead and we have no family to return to?'

"Let us go the sky' they said, and they closed their eyes and they rose up to the heavens as stars.

'The littlest brother became the North Star, and his six brothers and little sister became the Great Bear. And the young sister is the closest star to the North Star, as she looked after her baby brother on earth so she does in the sky.'

George stared into the fire and puffed a few times on his pipe.

'George...Ipisowaasi...' Tolkien began, 'Thank you.' His voice was measured, and polite, but his mind, below this calm exterior, was sparking and cracking like the fire that illuminated the both of them; so many questions... but Tolkien sensed that George was not a man who enjoyed being bothered by questions.

Nevertheless, he began again:

'It's fascinating that the Blackfoot have this image of the woman who becomes a bear; the image of the human becoming a bear is found in myths and legends from Europe, too...' George's seeming blank expression caused

Tolkien to halt and stammer. 'The Vikings had warriors named Berserkers who would change into bears during battle. Berserker means bear-shirt or *bear-skin*...' he paused, and then began to talk once more.

'Do you know about Callisto?' he ventured. George shook his head.

Tolkien cleared his throat.

'The Greek Goddess Artemis, the virgin huntress... she, it was said, expected her companions to be as chaste as she herself, but one day, noticing her companion, the nymph Callisto, was with child after being seduced by none other than the great God Zeus, Artemis turned Callisto into a bear – whereon she gave birth to a son, Arcas. Artemis sent her hounds to chase and to kill them. Eventually having hunted down the nymph and the boy, Artemis killed them with her bow and arrow; But Zeus, taking pity on Callisto and her boy, lifted them up to the heavens and placed them amongst the stars where she became Ursa Major – the Great Bear – and Arcas, Ursa Minor, the Little Bear.'

Tolkien picked up his glass and sipped a little more whiskey, then lit his pipe and sat smoking in seeming calm before, to George's evident surprise, Tolkien leapt up from the chair and began pacing in front of the fire, talking in great haste and using his pipe stem as a pointer to punctuate his remarks.

'...it's remarkable!' he stammered, 'on face value these are two very different tales; but underneath there are clear similarities: the transformation of a woman into a bear, and the killing of that self-same bear with a bow and arrow following a hunt; the placing of a young boy in the constellation of Ursa Minor...'

George was looking up at Tolkien in stunned silence. He looked over at Shona who had a half smile on her face. Tolkien, unaware of the effect of his performance on the two adults present, continued his lecture.

'Of course we then not only have the fact that both stories are about bears but pertain to be a foundation stories for Ursa Major – something we might put down to sheer coincidence were it not for the fact that the Great Bear looks nothing like a bear! Don't you find?'

It was George's turn to stammer and clear his throat. 'I suppose, so. It does look more like a saucepan, granted. As to whether it looks like a bear; not explicitly so, no.'

'Exactly!' Tolkien said, pointing at him with his pipe stem. 'The main feature of Ursa Major is the handle of the saucepan as you put it – or as it is drawn on star maps, the tail of the bear. *But bears do not have long tails!*' he flashed a grin.

'This means the figure of the bear that links these two stories is not suggested by the form, the shape, of the stars themselves - we are not, then, looking at independent invention based on the shape of the constellation... the earliest maps of the heavens drew on the myths of the bear already associated with those seven stars, and tried to make them *look* like a bear – rather badly! And, what's more, we can immediately discount direct borrowings from one culture to another – had the Blackfoot learned the tale from European settlers sometime after Columbus then the form of the story would be much closer to that of the original Greek; clearly the Blackfoot version, if it is related to the Greek tale – it is through a common, and very ancient ancestor!'

On the couch the toddler Alfred had begun to snivel and cry in his mother's arms at the staccato ramblings and eccentric gesturing of this odd little stranger who had invaded his home.

Tolkien hesitated and smiled apologetically.

'Do you see what I'm driving at Mr Mac Govan-Crow? Scholars believe that the American Indian reached the New World many thousands of years ago by crossing the Bering straits when they were iced over; the story you have just told could be very old indeed, for if both stories sprang from a common ancestor, as seems the case, that common ancestor would have to be at least 10,000 years old, the date the Americas separated from Eurasia after the Bering ice-bridge had melted! A tale from ancient Ice Age Europe now spread across the whole globe!'

In the silence that followed Tolkien finally allowed himself to sit down and slow his breathing.

'It is strange, Sir.' said George. 'Only my people, the *Siksikawa*, maintain that we didn't come from anywhere else except the 'New World' as you put it, which is not 'new' to us. Have you ever considered that perhaps the white man may have learned the story from the Red, those thousands of years ago?' he lifted an eyebrow in challenge.

If George Mac Govan-Crow had expected to see Tolkien chastened, or

defensive, he was to be disappointed; for Tolkien was staring intently into the flames of the fire, and when he turned to *Ipisowaasi* of the *Siksikawa* it was with utter humility and honesty that he spoke:

'My friend, nothing would surprise me less than to discover that. There are many truths that have been lost to us over the passage of time – who knows what tales were spread, and how, in past ages, when the very face of the earth as we know it was different; before fire and flood changed the shape of the coasts, and sent lands once proud of the sea into its depths..?'

As he spoke an image rose in his mind...a recurring nightmare of a great wave sweeping over green fields, destroying all in its path...

George nodded. And for the first time since they had met, Tolkien saw the wariness and mistrust fall from the man's eyes; George Mac Govan-Crow smiled.

## **Chapter Sixteen: On Waden Hill**

Conall Astor was still drunk; he had left Shen's and crossed the stone circle, passing close by the Devil's chair stone, to which he had bowed in greeting, before continuing along the Avenue for the fourth time that day, his path winding this way and that as he looked heavenwards at the constellations, so clear in the absence of street-lights. The night was warm and just the gentlest of breezes was present, carrying with it the scent of grasses and hedgerows.

Conall fumbled with the keys of the camper, entered, and gathered up the bedding from the couch; he proceeded to walk to his favourite stone and dumped the pile on the side facing away from the road. He retraced his steps and picked up the remnants of the bottle of water from earlier, then sat on the tailgate and brushed his teeth in the moonlight.

After he had rinsed his mouth, he lit the hurricane-lantern that hung from a hook on the van's ceiling and unrolled the alder-wood flute from the cloth Shen had wrapped it. The flute was beautifully carved, and the wood warm to the touch; just below the mouthpiece but above the finger-holes there was a carving of an owl, secured to the main body with twine, from which a couple of faded feathers and beads were hanging. Traces of stained patterns were visible along the instrument. A faint smell of wood smoke, incense and pipe tobacco rose from it. Conall held it up before him.

'Thank you, Alfred.'

He had no idea of the age or provenance of the flute; for all he knew it could have been many hundreds of years old... predating the arrival of the White Man. He felt both proud and abashed that such a precious item should have been entrusted to him; maybe he shouldn't have taken it; maybe he should have left it with Shen. But he supposed it was the old man's wish. He held it close, not daring to play it; not here, by the road, not without ceremony. He wasn't tired; he should walk somewhere, and do it honour...

Leaving his bedding in the care of the stone, Conall took the footpath that led away from the Avenue westwards up over the brow of Waden hill. The hill was steep but soon he had crested it, and he stood for a moment taking in the view. Behind him, the way he had come, Hakpen hill rose on the other side of the road, while to his south was the spread of the Kennet valley, and beyond the river the roll of the downs as they rose up to the soft peaks of Tan and Milk Hill. But from his vantage point atop Waden Hill, Conall could glance over at the bowl of Silbury to the south west as it stood majestically proud of the valley within its moat, now iridescent in the low, nearly full moonlight.

Conall dug into his jacket pocket and took out his tobacco; sitting on the long grass he took some from the packet, and as earlier crumbled some onto the ground. *Itsipaiitapio'pah*, he muttered, Great Spirit, as Alfred had taught him, and as his father George had taught him before.... He then rolled and placed a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, then lifted it to the sky, then to the ground, and exhaled upwards, repeating the Blackfoot phrase.

When he had finished, he unwrapped the flute from its cloth and held it up to the sky. Son of I pisowaasi, thank you. Great spirits, I am honoured to accept this gift, he said. Then nervously he put the wooden mouthpiece to his lips and breathed softly into it. A warm, hollow note sounded clearly, filling the still night. Conall felt anyone walking in the surrounding valleys or hills would have been able to hear it... nevertheless, emboldened by alcohol, he continued, moving his fingers slowly and inexpertly, but feeling almost as if the flute was playing itself. He played to the stars; he played to the memory of Alfred, he played to the memory of his sister; but mostly he played for Shen, wondering if from her room in Church cottage, she might hear the sound of her Grandfather's flute playing; it wasn't her fault, none of it; *but if I hadn't been here...no, it was surely too late by then anyway...*

When the urge to play had left him, he stood, gazing skywards again, north to the Great Bear, and he began to spin, his arms outstretched, and then sweeping back round like a swooping eagle, turning, turning, treading out a flat circle in the grass; and as he span the Bear span above him in turn around the still central point of the heavens; and he bowed his back, squared his shoulders, rhythmically turning, imagining himself the bear, mouthing silent meaningless words; and even though miles from the nearest human being his voice remained a whisper so that this guttural chanting that arose from some deep part of his psyche ended at his lips and went no further; yet still he danced under those seven burning brothers

and their sister who had escaped to the sky in the story Alfred had told him a year before...

...

...Conall had listened to the tale and they had both stood a while in thought looking up at the Great bear from the back-garden of Church cottage; he had considered not saying anything, but his curiosity compelled him to speak.

'Alfred?' he had begun. The old man had nodded for him to continue. 'You say four brothers were dragged out of the tree and killed?'

'Yes, that is how my father told it me.' The old man said, sucking on the stem of his pipe.

'Wouldn't it make sense if the four stars *there* were the brothers?' he had asked, pointing at the rectangular body of the Great Bear. Alfred had looked up quietly.

'I see why you might think that; but the sister needs to be one of them so she can be close to her young brother, who is the northern star, there.' He had pointed to the Little Bear.

Conall had smiled to himself.

'There are seven brothers and one sister, yes? Now what if there was a way that they could all be together in the Great Bear, and the little brother not all the way over there in the Little Bear?' he had asked. Alfred shrugged.

'That would be pleasing, I suppose. But there are only seven stars in the Great Bear' He had said, rubbing the back of his neck.

'Alfred – look at the second star from the end of the tail, closely.'

'What am I looking for?' he said, through a cloud of smoke.

'How many stars do you see?'

For a while there had been silence as the old man squinted at the stars, and then a low chuckle had escaped him.

Conall had laughed along with him.

'That's right. Most people don't notice it, but that second star is a double star – it has a smaller, fainter companion, riding on its back. So, there's your younger sister, and there, still riding on the cradleboard on her back as in life, her baby brother!'

'So the family is together again. Brother and sister united. That's good.' Alfred had said. And this is what he had meant in the will when he had gifted the flute to Con for re-uniting brother and sister...

...

On the hillside Conall looked up and held the sister star in his gaze and remembered his sister Melissa and himself, as children, her carrying him piggy-back across their garden, laughing, as he swished at her with a small twig 'Giddy up, horsey! Giddy up!' his hand gripping a great mass of her dark curly hair, identical to his own. Identical. Two particles once joined, linked forever...

And he imagined those same two particles spinning in space, once joined but now separate, shooting apart into the void... and one shining, spinning particle faltering, flickering, dying, yet the other carrying on unaffected...

And he thought of the dream of the horse on the riverbank – and how it was on such a night as this that he'd walked to the Kennet last year because the dream was burning in his head – and how one particle, spinning in space, had chosen not to go into that water, while the other had done so, never to rise again...

At last he cried out, finding his voice:

'I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry! Melissa! I'm sorry!!! I didn't know – why didn't I know?!'

## **Chapter Seventeen: The Lady of the Lake**

After a brief nightcap by the fire, Lewis and Barfield had retired to their rooms, but Tolkien was not yet sleepy; he had gone outside to the small garden of the cottage to take in the cool night air, and when Alfred had been lulled to sleep by her singing, Shona Mac Govan-Crow had stepped outside to join him.

‘If you don’t mind me saying,’ she said, ‘when you were talking over dinner about Boann and the well - I didn’t feel it was my place to say but it reminded me of something. And since you later mentioned the stars...’

‘No, please, tell me, Mrs Mac Govan-Crow.’ Tolkien insisted.

‘Shona, please’ she insisted. Shona pointed upwards at the sky to the pale band of stars that bisected the heavens.

‘It’s just that I always think of Boann when I see the Milky Way.’

‘Why so?’ Tolkien asked.

‘Bothar Bo Finne is the Gaelic name for it,’ Shona said, “Path of the White Cow” Boann means white cow.’

Tolkien lifted his brows in delight.

‘Thank you. I never knew that.’

Shona remained gazing upwards at the Milky Way. ‘Sometimes I come out here and look up at the stars and feel like I’m home. There’s my beloved

Boyne. I wonder which was named first, though, the river on earth or the one in the sky?’

Tolkien tapped his pipe-bowl against the low garden wall and sat on its top, touching a small pile of white rocks clustered on the wall top, beside which stood a couple of burned out snubs of old candles.

‘It’s her dog I feel most sorry for.’ Shona smiled, as she turned to go.

‘Her dog?’

‘Yes; Boann’s lapdog. Dabilla was its name; poor mite was washed out to sea and drowned with her. I had a dog named Dabilla as a child, I named it after Boann’s dog...’

Tolkien looked up at the stars, open mouthed and flushed – and then laughed out loud at his own ignorance.

‘Ha! You’re a dunce, Ronald!’ he chuckled. Shona looked a little taken aback.

‘If that’s the Boyne in the sky then there’s your lost dog, safe and sound!’

Tolkien gestured skywards to the pale celestial river and there on its banks he pointed out to Shona the constellation of Canis Major, the Great Dog, not hard to see for its brightest star, Sirius, the ‘dog-star’ as it was known, was the brightest star in the entire northern sky.

Why hadn’t he seen it earlier? All the clues were there! Where else should one look for a ‘bright dog’ but the star Sirius, the brightest star, the dog-star, pacing beside the river in the heavens? Tolkien berated himself. So many legends had been writ large upon the heavens in antiquity – just as the siblings in Mr Mac Govan-Crow’s bear story had been transferred to the heavens so too in the west – many heroes of myth had been afforded the same privilege; the sky was populated by heroes and gods – so why not the characters of British myth, too? Orion, the hunter, had been the subject of their discussion earlier – and they’d agreed the icy river he was crossing to regain, somehow, his solar eye, was the Milky Way, but Tolkien had not quite grasped the final part of the image - Orion’s hunting dog, following its master, trotting alongside the Milky Way, had in all probability inspired the name of the Kennet... ‘bright dog’ - meaning the Kennet, like the Boyne, was somehow the earthly equivalent of the river of stars in the sky. The presence of Dabilla in the Irish tale had made it a near-certainty that a

version of the Boann myth had existed here – there was the river of the dog, and the well-head of the eye, linked by name to the nearby goddess of the waters at Bath.

I should have known after all our talk earlier, he thought...It was there all along in 'Pearl' - under the nose of this dim-witted philologist for years and I never saw it! He softly intoned the verses of this medieval lyric, so close to his heart, the meaning of the stone-strewn river separating the poet from his deceased child suddenly clear:

In the depths stood dazzling stones aheap  
As a glitter through glass that glowed with light,  
As streaming stars when on earth men sleep  
Stare in the welkin in winter night

Like the river in the poem, the Kennet's depths were stippled with small pebbles of chalk that shone white like stars in the winter sky. And remembering the stone he had picked up earlier he put his hand in his waistcoat pocket and pulled out the small piece of chalk. The river of the poem was the river that divided Paradise from mortal realms – the same as the Greek Styx on whose banks the three-headed dog Cerberus roamed; the river and the dog; now of course its stones twinkled like stars, for they were stars! He wondered if the poet had drawn on some older tradition when he had written these lines, unbeknown of their meaning, or whether he had known all along of what he was writing, and Tolkien just hadn't seen it: The river of paradise was the heavenly river – the Milky Way, across which the souls of the dead might pass...

'I'm ever so sorry, Mrs Mac Govan-Crow, but would it be overly rude if I went for a short walk? I have some thinking to do...' he said, his voice shaking with repressed excitement.

...

Tolkien had retraced the route they had walked earlier back past where the road curved about Silbury, and along to a gate in the field below the hill on whose easternmost point West Kennet rose, and where Barfield had earlier pointed out a copse of trees at the far side of the field in which the Swallowhead spring was hidden. Taking the path towards the trees Tolkien continued until he reached a still pool, crossed by a handful of large sarsen steppingstones. Beyond the stones, in a hollow cradled by the hillside,

stood two willow trees, and from between them the waters of the Kennet bubbled from the earth. He strolled around the trees, noticing a small stone cut in the hillside beyond; here, he guessed, in the winter, the waters would rise, but already, in April, the flow had lessened to emerge from the earth closer to the pool.

Tolkien returned to the brook and sat on one of the large, flat stones that forded the stream; he sat gazing into its clear depths.

There, to the north, was the shadow of the domed Silbury hill against the pale starlight, and at his feet the chuckling water, one part silvered now by the light of the crescent-moon; all was quiet, save the lilting of the water, though in the distance an owl hooted, two, three times.

How long had men come here to worship or seek solace at the wisdom-giving waters of the eye, he wondered, here beneath the stars at this holy stream?

This flashing silver river that seemed to divide the world of the dead from the living; the river of the bright dog...

Tolkien knelt, and cupped a clear handful of the cool water, and let it flow back through his fingers. And as he did so he lifted his head, and lo! There above him on the rim of the south-western sky, as if summoned, the jewel-like Sirius still hung in the heavens, flashing a purplish blue, just on the point of sinking down below the hillside to follow its master Orion into the lands below the horizon, but it would rise again in the east as herald of the new dawn. And in the east at this late hour lay Vega, glinting blue in the Lyre, and to its left, Deneb, the tail of the swan - and rising to a gentle arch across the back of the swan in the northern sky was the milky waters of the heavenly river aping the flow of the Kennet on the ground.

Was this pool once ringed with hazel, he wondered? Did the salmon of wisdom swim here, silver beneath the moon?

The reflection of the crescent-moon, like a curved barque sailing between the horns of Taurus, seemed to traverse the waters before him, casting a bright shifting path across the water, that trembled then broke into many pieces before reconstituting; forming then dissolving, trembling and breaking, the crescent becoming a lidded white eye, a curved back of a silver salmon; it broke apart, re-forming, shivering, pulsing and morphing into wild patterns and shapes; a crescent, boat; a lidded eye again; a dancing cool white flame; a trail of flowers, of stars, of sparks, of fish; once more a sliver of moon ...

It was hypnotising, lulling, and Tolkien, tired from the day's walk and the whisky found himself drifting somewhere between thought and sleep. The waters of the river seemed to rise and swirl; churning to a white starry foam; lifting, breaching their banks; a dual stream of liquid shooting forth to land and sky; one flooding the land and creating a broad river on earth, the other rising to the sky and forming the milky river of stars... the primal waters divided into above and below.

Into these waters Tolkien stared entranced... and there, at the heart of the black mirror, the reflected flash of the moon like a pale severed head in the ripples of the stream lay as if suspended from the branches or caught in the roots of a shining tree that joined earth and heaven... But it shifted and flashed, became distorted into an eye, first a barely-open white eye, then the burning eye of the sun, yellow like a cat's; and it seemed to him that the eye looked across time and space from a place that knew neither, and that somehow the one eye was wise but possessive... wishing to hide its precious treasure from the unworthy, from those who would steal it... it became the eye of Fafnir the dragon, hiding the ring that would be stolen from him by Siegfried... the eye of Smaug guarding the cup that Bilbo Baggins would steal; and the eye of Nechtan jealously guarding the waters of knowledge from Boann... or the lamp-like pale eye of the creature Gollum...

Then, in the reflecting waters, it seemed he saw, in that eternal moment between two thoughts, the lady of the waters, the fairy princess, lady of the white cows; Sulis-Minerva, mistress of magic – the poet's daughter who in the Pearl poem lay across the river of death on the shores of Paradise - about her head a silvery-gold corona of stars; now rising from the waters and straddling the river. She bent over the waters, seeming to pour the glimmering flashes of moonlight into the pool; her pale beauteous face lifted high amid the stars, and she bridged the earth and the heavens like a pallid rainbow, the 'W' of Cassiopeia her nourishing breasts, a white-shadow arching over the sleeping men of earth; blessed; snow-white, queen of stars....

All in white she was, her hair loose about her shoulders, soft as the owl's feather; wise beyond years, and about her throat a pendant or phial of rock crystal, lit by an inner fire; the reflected light of the star shining from on the western horizon; and she seemed to peer down into the mirrored surface of the waters...no, she WAS the waters, and the stars combined, and one

flowed into the other... a face below and a face above, their gaze meeting; two but yet one.

There she arched above and below, this maid of the Sidhe, this Elven princess, this lady of the lake; her white track streaming behind her... a track of flowers, of stars, of chalk pebbles in the holy stream, of the shimmering ripples caused by the moonlight on the waters... and it seemed to him that she had come from a far distant land, a land that was beyond the reach of mortal man... from Paradise... But the water! Flooding over the low, green land! The terror of the approaching waves! The burning, baleful eye...blazing over the flood... ... and then there was a dark-haired girl floating in the water surrounded by flowers and shining stones and then flames and the sound of gunfire and shells exploding... the past, or shadows of what might yet come to pass?

Then at last this shifting reflection calmed and resolved once more into a mirrored form of distant figure standing on the far, green, shore; a kind, sad, face, and his heart leapt... Mother? ... his heart cried out... Mother?! Unthinking he reached forward, seeking to grasp her reflection, his hand plunging into the cool water so that the image atomised into fragments and disappeared.

When the void closed the sparkling water resolved to mirror the moon-ship sailing across the heavens above; the vision that had come unbidden left him as swiftly as it had arrived. The moon on the water, though, still shifted and trembled, but now through the prism of his tears; in the distance the owl once more called, once, twice, three times....

## PART TWO: THE DRAGON

## **Chapter 18: The Milk of Paradise**

Conall woke after a few hours' sleep, curled up under a couple of dew-covered blankets, at the base of the stone in the avenue. The sky was almost light with the last of the stars fading in the west, and a soft mist floated about the stones. A barn owl, silent as a spirit on its moth-like wings danced from stone to stone. Conall sat and watched the owl for a few minutes until it flitted out of sight down the avenue.

He stood and stretched, still wearing yesterday's clothes. He was thirsty, but not hungover, and he felt strangely at peace. Part of him felt as if yesterday had not happened; only the alder-wood flute, wrapped in its cloth beside the blankets at the base of the stone, suggested otherwise. The owl reappeared a hundred yards down the avenue, hovering then swooping into the grass beside one of the stones. Conall's mind turned to the camper, and its kettle. Something felt wrong, though. His hand went to his neck. The familiar weight of his yin-yang pendant hanging on his chest was missing. Searching around the foot of the stone where he had slept revealed nothing. Then he remembered spinning on Waden hill the night before while looking up at the stars.

Forgoing breakfast for a spell, he retraced his steps up the path through the meadow, and sure enough, there lay his pendant in an area of flattened grass atop the hill. Relieved Conall sat down once more in the same spot as his nocturnal visit, now able to discern the exact position of West Kennet long barrow on the opposite ridge where before there had been but rolling vistas of shadow.

He smiled to himself; there, further along the field, close to the road near the Swallowhead stood a new crop circle: a ring of 30 small circles with a

larger circle two toned and split in half at their centre. He remembered the croppies giggling into their mobile phones; he wondered if they'd been there in the dark while he played his flute, spinning in the wheat as he spun on the hill?

As he looked, he saw something that seemed to be a man walking briskly alongside the mound.

The dark shape was moving swiftly along the edge of the barrow, but it was only when it had passed the end, and not turned back to walk along the other side as he would have expected a visitor to do, that he realised something was amiss. For a start, the 'man' had traversed the length of the barrow, a good hundred and fifty feet in half a minute, about twice the speed of a walking man – but the shape wasn't moving like man does when running. Then there was its height: it was shorter than the mound itself, yet the mound was only 5ft high. As it sloped away from the mound, continuing westwards towards the bottom of the valley Conall could see that the creature was only 3 or four feet tall, and long rather than tall. From the cows in the neighbouring field he estimated its size as that of a calf, yet it was jet black and moved fast – too fast for a cow, and with no deviations from its course... walking a straight line as if heading towards the new circle beyond the Swallowhead spring.

Conall tried to look harder but his eyes began to water with the effort. If he had to guess he would have said the creature was some huge black cat, like a puma, or perhaps a dog... but huge, and walking briskly in the one direction as if following an old long trodden path, not stopping to sniff, as dogs do. He watched it for two or three minutes until it entered the trees that bordered the field edge beside the Swallowhead spring.

The dog, or puma, or whatever it was did not re-emerge from the trees.

Conall felt odd; unnerved. He was glad he had been on this side of the valley. Clutching his pendant to him, realised that if he hadn't dropped this, he would never have seen the animal, whatever it was.

Walking back over the hill a few minutes later Conall noticed a van now parked behind his own, and on closer inspection realised, from the airbrushed wolves on its side, that it was Wolf Jones's van. He looked at the clock on his phone – it wasn't yet half past seven. Wolf could be seen knocking on the windows of Con's camper. Con shouted and waved, and eventually Wolf heard him and looked his way, waving and smiling.

'Breakfast?' Wolf shouted.

Ten minutes later both men were sat in the avenue, using a large female stone to break the slight breeze, huddled over a small gas-stove on which a frying pan was set, in which butter was spitting. Wolf expertly cracked four eggs into the pan while Conall ripped open some rolls and buttered them. 'Thought you'd appreciate this after a night al fresco!' Wolf grinned.

Conall nodded. 'I'm just surprised you're up.' He said, sipping the coffee he'd just brewed in his van.

Wolf shrugged.

'I'm an early riser, me. Besides, Hayden was up for work early and I asked him to give me a shout – I wanted to get to the long-barrow early.' Con decided not to mention the animal he'd seen, wanting, for some reason, to cast it from his mind.

Wolf lifted the eggs, dripping in butter, into the rolls, then sprinkled them with salt; the two men ate in silence, save for grunts of appreciation from Wolf. Once finished they sat drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes.

'Damn fine way to start a day!' Wolf smiled. Con agreed. What would today bring, he wondered? The sighting of the animal seemed to suggest some kind of auspicious occurrence was in the offing, and already the day promised to be fine and hot. Of course, he had already resolved to text Shen and meet with her at some point, especially now he knew Hayden was off the scene; it might give him chance to talk, to explain.

'Did you want another coffee?' he asked. Wolf nodded.

'That would be grand. Mind if I have a poke around your van?' he added, grinning cheekily.

While Con set the kettle on to boil again Wolf sat on the sofa-bed, his head turned sideways looking at the books on the small shelf above the hob and sink.

'Do you mind?' he asked, taking down the PhD 'unfinished' file. Con shook his head, getting ready to try to explain exactly what he's been studying.

'You said you were a lecturer,' Wolf said. 'Is this the kind of stuff you taught?'

'Kind of. I did a physics degree, and then an MSc in astrophysics but ended up lecturing in the history of astronomy, you know, Kepler, Hipparchus, Galileo, that kind of thing...'

'What's all this, though?' Wolf asked, flicking through the loose pages of star-charts and plans of circular features.

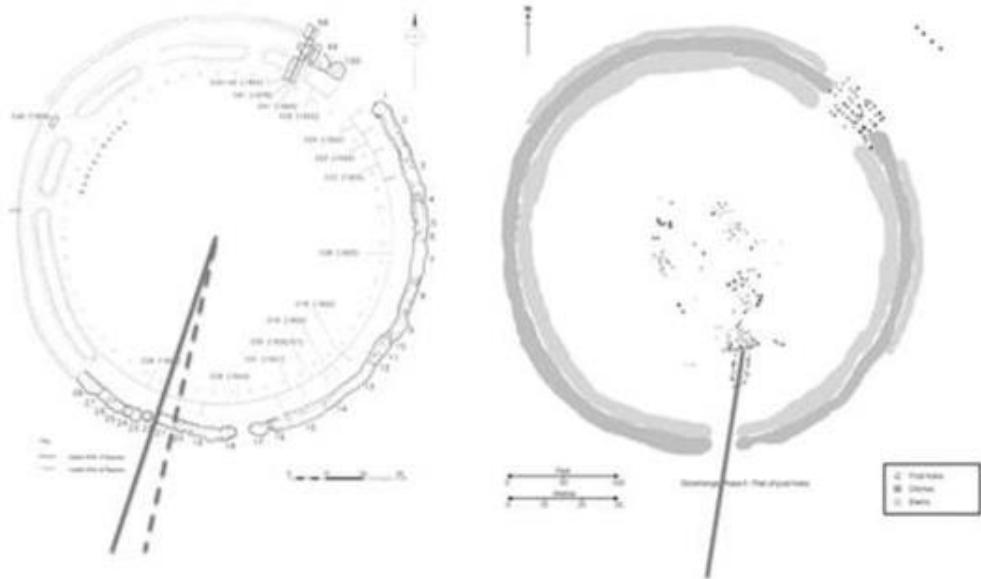
'I was looking at how far astronomy went back – I mean, my lectures went back to the Egyptians, but the more I looked into myths all around the world the more you got these shared images that suggested people knew about astronomy way, way back in prehistory...images that made no practical sense and were just bizarre until you interpreted them as astronomical images – constellations, eclipses, comets, stuff like that. Anyway – I did my Masters dissertation on Stonehenge – I was looking at the idea it was aligned on the summer solstice, and I wanted to see if it was true of the other henge sites, Avebury for instance...and it turns out it isn't – it's not even true for Stonehenge, I mean, there is evidence of an interest in the winter solstice – but not at all the sites; only a handful, really, so I started my PhD looking at what they were aligned on...'

'Cool, man, sounds awesome. Why didn't you finish it?'

'I quit. I think they thought I was losing the plot; you see I came up with a theory, but then I started to look for proof of it in myth, and they said that myth was out of fashion....'

Wolf raised his eyes at that. 'What was your theory?' he asked.

Con hesitated for a moment. It was never easy knowing where to start. He paused, recalling his dream – the river being magically transformed into milk at the touch of the goddess' wand, and the horse with the crescent moon between her brows appearing beside him on the bank – this was the real start... he wondered for a second whether he should tell Wolf, but decided against it. Instead, he fumbled through his notes and pulled out a plan; on it were two circles, each with a line drawn from the centre, out.



'That's Stonehenge...' Con said; 'you can see the entrance to the north-east – that's the one aligned on the solstice, except it's the winter, not the summer – they're on the same alignment, but archaeologists have shown people were gathering there in the winter, standing outside the circle looking in – but that's beside the point – look down here, here's another entrance to the south and one to the south-south-west, that's only on the first image, ok?' Wolf nodded.

'Now these entrances can't be aligned on either sun or moon like the north-east one as they're outside the rising and setting points of both; you never see the sun or moon rise exactly north or south, do you? So, I asked if the north-east entrance was astronomical, why not these others, too? Were they pointing, say, at a star or group of stars...?'

'Fair enough.' Said Wolf. 'So, were they?'

Con paused; 'Well...' he gave a nervous smile ' – the first plan shows the orientation of the south-south-west entrance at about 3,100 BC, but this entrance was deliberately blocked a few hundred years later; then you get this corridor of posts being built that points through the southern entrance at nearly the same angle as the old south-south-west entrance... nearly being the key word: I wondered whether these two entrances were being aligned on the same thing, but something that had moved slightly over those few hundred years...'

Wolf was nodding, which Con took to be a good sign.

'Now, there was a star, well, group of stars, that could be seen rising through the southern entrance, and setting through the south-south-west one, but which, after a few hundred years had moved so it could no longer be seen setting; that's why that entrance was blocked, it had ceased to 'work'. In its place the new avenue of posts was built pointing out of the south entrance towards the new setting point.'

'Why did they move?' Wolf asked.

'Ever heard of the Precession of the equinoxes?'

'Heard of it, but not looked into it.' he said.

'It's a bit complicated to go into now, but basically the rising and setting points of the stars change slowly over time – so, for instance, the constellation against which the spring equinox sun rises these days is Pisces, it's actually on the cusp of Aquarius, hence that song about the dawning of the age of Aquarius; but when Stonehenge was built it the spring equinox sun rose in Taurus, and before that Gemini... the position of the pole star changes too; it's basically a wobble in the earth's axis, and because of it the rising or setting point of a star changes by a degree every 72 years...so if you've aligned the entrance of your henge to a star, after a few hundred years it'll no longer work...'

'I'll take your word for it – but which fucking stars was Stonehenge pointing at? Get to the bloody point man!'

'It's not just Stonehenge...' Con was pulling A4 sheets from the folder and handing them to Wolf...

'Avebury... Dorchester, Arbor Low, Thornborough, Woodhenge, the ring of Brodgar, Woodhenge...and loads more – about 60% of all the sites I looked at, and I looked at about 50 henges in detail, had some kind of alignment on this exact part of the sky...'

Con hesitated and took a pen from the shelf and drew a group of four dots on the one of the sheets of paper that Wolf was holding; a rectangle on its edge, with the bottom corner further from the centre than the rest, like a kite.

'Join the dots' Con asked, offering the pen. Wolf took the pen and drew a diamond.

'Thank fuck for that.' Laughed Con. 'The stars are the Southern Cross – or Crux.' He took out another sheet of paper that showed the constellation as part of a star-map 'But as the name suggests, we tend to see the stars as a cross-pattern. But...' Another flurry of printed sheets came Wolf's way; all showing various diamond patterns inscribed on stones, on clay vessels; on carved and moulded figurines; pages and pages of the same... 'the lozenge is a really important symbol in Neolithic art, and I think they would have seen it as a diamond, not a cross...'

'I know 60% doesn't sound a lot,' he continued, 'but just 5 of the 50 sites had midsummer alignments, so we're looking six times as many with the Crux alignments, and that's not the end of it...they're part of a bigger pattern that increases the alignments to 85%...' he began rooting through the folder, but in his hurry dropped the folder on to the floor.

'Fuck's sake...' he muttered.

'You need to write this down Con. You shouldn't have stopped. Fook me – I can see why you were a lecturer; you're like a different person when you're explaining all that shit. It's cool.'

Con played down the compliment.

'But I don't think I was in the right place to continue; it was only a few months after my sister...' he said, dismissively, placing the roughly gathered sheets on to the sofa bed.

The kettle on the gas hob whistled and Con turned his attention to finishing the coffee.

'If you don't mind me asking – what happened? Shen just mentioned an accident...' Wolf asked.

'Did you ever hear of a band called Mellifluous? They were around in the nineties.' Conall asked.

Wolf nodded; 'Yeah, of course 'Damsel with a Dulcimer' and all that? Electronic Folk-rock; well kooky. I've got that track on my iPod in fact, and 'Milk of Paradise'.'

'Melissa Astor, the lead singer... she was my sister.' Con said simply.

'Fuck, man. God, I remember. She...'

'Drowned.' Con finished. 'Last May. She went swimming when drunk,' Con said blankly, pouring the contents of the cafetiere into their cups. 'It was around the last time I was here. Coming back here is a bit of an exorcism, really.'

Wolf was nodding, slowly.

'She was your sister? Fuck, man! Mellifluous; I see it now – the hair! God, she had mad hair! I man, I was gutted. I mean everyone was. God, that is crazy!'

Con took a sip of coffee, then his eyes became fixed as he looked out of the windows to the mist on the horizon.

'A damsel with a dulcimer, in a vision once I saw' ...

Wolf, too, was singing from her song.

'...For he on honeydew hath fed  
and drunk the milk of Paradise'

'Milk of Paradise was going to be the name of her next album...' Con said.

'She was a great singer, mate. I'm really sorry... I saw her at Glastonbury...when was that?'

'Yeah – I was there, too. '95... Want to see a bit of memorabilia?'

Wolf shrugged 'Course!'

"Damsel" and "Milk" were both based on Coleridge's Kubla Khan;" Con explained, rifling through the contents of the bookshelf, moving boxes of tea-bags, a phone-charger and cigarette-filters out of the way; 'she was always very deep and, as you say, kooky!' He tried to smile. He finally found, from where he had placed it the day before, the Collected Coleridge; he opened a particular page and handed it to Wolf. 'There you go – the lyrics to Damsel with a Dulcimer.'

Wolf ran a finger down the heavily annotated page. 'This is like music history, man!' He said. Con nodded and took back the book, fumbling through some pages before finding what he was looking for:

'This is where she was writing new lyrics,' he said, matter-of-factly. Scrawled down one side of an already overly annotated page were two verses under a scribbled heading 'Milk of Paradise':

*I seek for the Mother  
To cry no more  
to find where her cool white waters rise...*

*In the depths of the water  
To sigh no more  
Lie stones fallen from the skies*

Wolf read them aloud and then went to turn the page but Con took it from him and closed the book, putting back in the gap on the shelf. For a moment Wolf's eyes remained on the creased spine of the volume and then he turned to Con.

'Look – I'm meeting Ananda, you know, the barmaid from the Red Lion, up at West Kennet later to do some drumming. You're free to come along.' Con smiled. 'I may wonder up later, yes, thank you. I'm probably going to try to meet Shen for lunch.'

'Well, we'll be up there this afternoon, I'd imagine.' His eyes sparkled. 'She's a beauty, Ananda...' Wolf smiled but then his expression turned serious.

'I get a good vibe from you. I can see there's life in you, deep down. Spring always follows winter, you know.'

Con held his gaze for a moment but had to look away.

'When's the last time you laughed, properly?'

Con looked into space.

'I don't remember. Not since Melissa. I mean, I've laughed – but it's like I'm kind of trapped behind this glass screen. I'm here but I'm not, if that makes sense. I am trying. Maybe part of me died when she did.'

Wolf nodded. 'Courage, my friend – that's what you need; the courage to be angry, to feel again. When you hide your feelings to stop being hurt, you hide all of them – joy, love, not just the painful ones.'

'Like I said – I'm trying.' Con repeated, staring into his coffee. 'It's almost as if I've forgotten how. I want to open up again, but it feels like I've a bellyful of lead; the words are there but they just won't come out....'

Wolf put down his cup and placed a hand on Con's shoulder.

'Words can be overrated. We tend to try and verbalise what we think; but sometimes thinking itself is the problem. Come to the Long-Barrow later, promise me?'

Con nodded.

## **Chapter 19: Hey Diddle Diddle**

Tolkien was seated at the kitchen table, trying to write a letter to his wife Edith, but his mind was wandering; the smell of the sausages Mrs Mac Govan-Crow was frying was distracting him; he folded the letter and placed it to one side. Tolkien wasn't tired despite having returned to the cottage well after midnight; he was used to such hours: when his lecture preparation and marking were done and the children and Edith had repaired to bed, he would often adjourn to his room and work on his stories and languages until the early hours. He had always managed on little sleep and this morning he had woken sharp at six thirty, and on rising had opened the curtains a few inches to find the world wrapped in thick white mist.

'Morning Tollers!' Jack had entered the kitchen, his cheeks red and shiny from shaving, and he walked over to the stove and warmed his hands.

'Morning Mr Lewis' said Shona.

'Morning Jack. Did you sleep well?'

'Extremely well, for it seems I've slept through summer and here we are at winter again!' He frowned at the mist shrouded garden and shivered. 'What would you like for breakfast?' Shona asked. 'Those sausages smell delicious, Mrs Mac Govan-Crow! I'll have what the professor here is having! Where's Owen, Tollers?'

'He went into the village to get the morning paper with Mr Mac Govan-Crow; he said he'd not be long.'

'And how did you sleep?' Jack asked, pulling up the chair beside Tolkien, raising an eyebrow, and waving his fingers at Shona's baby, Alfred, who sat in a highchair at the table's end.

'Well. I hope I didn't disturb you; I went for a little walk after you had retired.'

Jack buttered some toast and raised an eyebrow again for Tolkien to continue.

'To the Swallowhead. I had rather a moment of inspiration on the matter of the question you posed yesterday.'

'Which question was that?' Lewis asked, chewing.

'Why in a landscape of dragons and one-eyed goddesses the river should be named after a dog. And it was Mrs Mac Govan-Crow here who helped provide the answer.'

Shona smiled as she approached the table and handed the men plates of sausages and fried mushrooms.

'Bravo!' said Lewis, grinning up at her. 'And how did you help the professor?' he asked her.

Shona smiled and shrugged. 'I just told him a few things about Boann.' She said, pouring Lewis a cup of tea.

'Mrs Mac Govan-Crow,' Tolkien explained, 'kindly informed me that Boann, 'white cow' is referenced in the name of the Milky Way – which is 'the path of the white cow' and so I suddenly saw there might be a connection between the river on earth and that river of stars in the heavens...'

Lewis turned, a mushroom-laden fork poised before his lips; 'You know, at college I had a rather splendid print of Tintoretto's 'Origin of the Milky Way' in my rooms – you know the one, with the babe Heracles being pulled away from Hera's breast and the milk from her bosom spurting up into the night sky; indeed a river of Milk!' Lewis lifted the jug of milk from the table and poured it slowly, from a height, into his tea.

Lewis frowned. '... but where is the dog?'

Shona laughed. 'Boann's dog drowns with her when the river is formed. Ach! And you call yourself an Irishman?!"

Lewis coloured, much to Tolkien's amusement.

'The mention of the dog piqued my interest;' Tolkien said, 'if the Milky Way

is an earthly reflection of the river Boyne, or vice versa, then Boann's dog, and the bright hound of the Kennet must all somehow relate to the dog-star, Sirius, which stands guarding the banks of the Milky Way.'

Lewis smiled mischievously and turned to the babe Alfred sat in his high-chair and began to sing.

*Hey diddle diddle the cat and the fiddle  
The cow jumped over the moon  
The little dog laughed to see such fun  
And the dish ran away with the spoon*

Alfred seemed mesmerised by the older man's puckish grin.

'Exactly, Jack! Exactly! How did we not see it?' Tolkien had begun laugh.

Shona looked between the two men, puzzled.

Lewis turned to Shona.

'You see, Mrs Mac Govan-Crow...'

'Shona, please!'

'Shona, it's a sort of running joke between us – we're interested, as you know, in the origins of things, words, legends, names – and one of the things we've often talked about are nursery rhymes: hey diddle diddle included, well, you see there was a scholar named Halliwell-Phillips who had the wool pulled over his eyes by some joker who convinced him that the rhyme was really Ancient Egyptian and that the cow was the cow-goddess Hathor and the little dog the star Sirius...' Lewis was grinning broadly.

'Well, Tollers and I were discussing this just last week in the Bird and Baby – the Eagle and Child, our local pub - we were talking of this very thing, the dog being the star! How did we miss it?!"

'But what does it really mean?' Shona asked.

Tolkien turned to her; 'No one is sure; it's probably just nonsense. The cat and the Fiddle has been said to come from Canton fidelis, who was an English official in Calais, or Catherine de fidelis, Catherine of Aragon – but

the astronomical interpretation is just wishful thinking – you see if the cow is the constellation of Taurus then it could never work - Taurus is always *below* the path of the moon.' He looked at Lewis and smiled broadly.

'Unless?' Jack said, winking.

Tolkien laughed.

'Unless – and this was my latest tongue in cheek interpretation – well, imagine a sailor on an early voyage to the Antipodes... once you reach the southern hemisphere the sky changes: the cow DOES jump over the moon, because Taurus is now viewed upside down, and the spoon, which could be the great bear, the 'big dipper' (and the dish if that is perhaps *crater*) due to the southern locality, disappear from their ever-circling position in the night sky... they flee below the horizon unlike the north - they run away...

'Given that diddle can mean to topple, and the first word of the rhyme was once high, not hey – might it mean:

*The sky is overturned  
Both Leo and Lyra  
Taurus jumped over the moon  
Sirius laughed to see such fun  
And Crater ran away with the Big Dipper.'*

'The rhyme is in reality nonsense, but it hasn't stopped people reconstructing it.... come, sing us your man in the moon poem!' Tolkien reddened. 'I won't inflict that on the child, Jack.'

'What if the cow isn't Taurus but *Boann* – if her road is the Milky Way does that go over the moon?' Lewis asked, suddenly serious, deep in thought. 'The path of the moon crosses it once a month... I imagine if Boann were to be walking that road she might have to leap over it at some point!'

The two men eyed each other for a few seconds then burst into laughter again.

'We'll continue this another time – Halliwell-Phillips redeemed, imagine!' Lewis said.

'Would you like more toast, Mr Lewis, Mr Tolkien?' she asked, bemused.

'Indeed we would, thank you!' He turned to Tolkien.

'I still like my own interpretation – that the cow is jumping over a reflection of the moon in a puddle, like Thomas Traherne's brother...

*As he went tripping o'er the King's high-way,  
A little pearly river lay  
O'er which, without a wing  
Or Oar, he dar'd to swim,  
Swim through the air  
On body fair;  
He would not use or trust Icarian wings  
Lest they should prove deceitful things;  
For had he fall'n, it had been wondrous high,  
Not from, but from above, the sky:  
He might have dropt through that thin element  
Into a fathomless descent;  
Unto the nether sky  
That did beneath him lie,  
And there might tell  
What wonders dwell  
On earth above. Yet doth he briskly run,  
And bold the danger overcome;  
Who, as he leapt, with joy related soon  
How happy he o'er-leapt the Moon.*

Tolkien laughed.

Just then the door opened and Owen Barfield entered the room, a newspaper under the crook of his arm, closely followed by George, in a collar-less shirt and cap.

'That's good timing, Owen! Did you smell the sausages?' Lewis teased.

Owen smiled. 'I think we'll need a cooked breakfast; there's little heat in the day; we were spoiled yesterday by the sun but I doubt if we'll see it today through that mist.'

'It may clear.' said Shona.

'If the wind changes.' remarked George.

'Well I hope it does – we aim to climb Silbury today; there seems little point if there's no view.' Lewis said. 'You've just missed Toller's solution to the Kennet question, by the way – it's called the bright dog because it refers to Sirius – the Avebury landscape seems to be a mirror of the heavens!'

Owen raised his eyebrows at Tolkien.

George Mac Govan-Crow walked to the stove and dipped a crust of bread into the sausage fat and began chewing.

'That's also in our beliefs,' he began. 'We Blackfeet call the Milky Way the 'Wolf Trail' – there's a tale that explains it, of course, but it's a three-pipe tale and for another night! Strange that both tales include dogs, well, a wolf and a dog... the Blackfoot name for Sirius is 'dog-face' and he guards the road of the souls. To join the ancestors one must give him food so one may travel the road.'

When he realised the three guests were regarding him in stunned silence he stammered:

'Did I say something amiss?'

Lewis had risen from the chair and was scratching his head.

'Not amiss, my good man; puzzling – no...amazing! You see, that's also what the Ancient Greeks believed, to cross the Styx one would have to bribe Cerberus with meat lest he should devour one's soul. My word! How can the same story pop up on two different Continents – Continents not linked culturally until Columbus?'

'Then they must have been linked before Columbus – but way back, before any of our recorded history.' Tolkien said.

'The same as the bear myths we talked of last night?' George asked.

'Precisely.'

'Either that' said George, 'or some Blackfoot must have got in his canoe a few thousand years ago and come over to teach the Greeks a thing or two!' he turned and winked at Tolkien, who smiled broadly in return.

## **Chapter 20: The Weave of Time**

The midday heat was oppressive, and the steady flow of visitors around the circle was annoying Conall; for him the evening, when the car park would close and the day-trippers return to their homes, couldn't come soon enough. He felt depressed; at a loss at what to do. He had sent a text to Shenandoah asking if she wanted to meet at the pub for lunch but had received no answer, and so had slept for a while in his van, only to awake and still find no reply on his phone. The thought of walking to Windmill Hill or up to West Kennet seemed foolhardy under this hot august sun. Perhaps, after all, a drink at the Red Lion was still in order, he decided, albeit alone.

He crossed the north-west quadrant of the circle, packed with picnickers and families kicking footballs, and muttered something under his breath about it being an archaeological site, not a fucking park. As he approached the towering stones of the cove across the road from the pub car park he was surprised to see Shenandoah sat on the grass against a stone with a book on her lap, her eyes shut.

‘Shen?’ she opened her eyes and smiled, wincing in the light.

‘Hello!’ she tapped the grass beside her. ‘I got your text – I ran out of credit though! Thought I’d just wait here, *et voila!*’

Con sat and took out his tobacco. He offered her a cigarette one and she accepted with no show of reluctance; she lay back against the stone, looking skywards with half open eyes, a contented smile on her face. Conall took the time to look at her; her shapely crow-black eyebrows arching above those dark creased eyes, that seemed to express such an innocent joy at being alive: an animal delight in the warm sun and the smoke.

‘Don’t tell Hayden.’ She said.

‘I wouldn’t.’ Con replied.

'I know. It's just he can be such a bore. Saving my life once isn't enough for him...'

'Saving your life?' Con asked.

'It's how we met – I was bitten by an adder last summer on the path near Silbury, and he was here with some mates – he drove me to Savernake hospital.'

'I don't think you can die from an adder bite.' Said Con, uncharitably.

Shen giggled. 'Bloody hurt, though! I felt so sick and shaky. So you see – he'd have a go for me for voluntarily putting this poison in my system,' she waved the cigarette, 'when my life had nearly been claimed by another!'

She smiled at him and her whole dark face lit up.

'What are you thinking?' she asked. 'you look irritated.'

He breathed the smoke out through his nose. 'Do you fancy a drink?'

The pub was busy, but they managed to find a free table in the large front dining room that bordered the road. Conall headed for the bar and bought a cold lager for himself and a half for Shen, who he had left to peruse the menu.

He brought the drinks back to the table.

'You know what you're having? I have to go back and order at the bar.' He said.

Shen looked up and smiled at him, and Con felt an odd tightening in his stomach.

'The fish; and garlic bread to start' she cooed. 'I fancy mussels and crusty bread, but they don't do that here anymore.'

'Since when did you eat fish?' he asked.

'I lapsed when I started seeing Hayden. Just seemed easier.'

'Not for the poor fish...'

She looked up at him and at his already half-empty pint-glass.

'It's thirsty work all this doing nothing, you know!' he grinned, by way of explanation.

'I wouldn't know, I was up at about four. Hayden wouldn't let me sleep, so I got up and made us breakfast; I was going to do some housework but it was so nice out I just picked up my book and sat out there –'

'Four?! Fuck that... So, fish for you and...chips and salad for me.'

'Still vegan, then? Puritan!' she asked.

'Ironically, yes.'

'Why ironically?'

He laughed – 'well it seems all the myths I'm studying are all about milk and cows and dairying...'

'I won't tell if you nick some of my salmon, you know...'

'Halloumi I might be tempted by, but not fish! You'll go back to it, you

know...Shen?"

'Hmm?'

'Seeing as this is your local - could you tell me why there's a well in the corner of the room?' he laughed.

She grinned.

'Apparently in the 1600's the landlord pushed his wife down it - and you can sometimes hear her screams.'

'Nice,' Conall said. 'Have you ever heard them?'

Shen shook her head and then looked at him, suddenly more serious.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' she asked.

'Maybe - can't be sure. You?'

'Kind of.'

'Well go on then, tell me!' Conall beamed.

'Will you think I'm nuts?'

'No more than I do already'. She pulled a face at him, then eyed him silently as if judging whether he could be trusted.

'I sense more than see things; sometimes it might be a smell or even a taste...'

'What kind of taste?'

'Flowers; a kind of perfume...'

'And do you sense anything now?' he asked.

She shook her head and lifted her glass. 'It's just I don't tell many people. People don't understand.' Con wondered if such people were tall and blond and fought fires.

'I don't blame you. Most people haven't got a fucking clue ...' he snorted.

'I'm convinced there's more to life than just flesh and bones.' he said.

'You think?' she said, brightening.

'I know. I mean - I look solid, yeah?' He said, and Shen nodded. '...But in reality, I'm more space than matter! The amount of matter in an atom is like a marble inside a football stadium - only it's moving so fast it seems to fill all the space... if you put all the actual matter in every person on the planet into one space do you know how big it would be?'

Shen shook her head.

Conall held out his fist. 'This big! - the rest is space! We're just energy, moving at such a fast speed we seem solid - but we're not. It's an illusion. All is energy, some of which we've evolved to be able to perceive; but some we can't. So why can't there be spirits or ghosts or fairies out there beyond our perception? Or other kinds of beings sharing this space with us that we just aren't tuned into? I mean, there's billions of microscopic life forms on and in us that we can't see unaided - there might be vast beings striding across space we can't see...or walking through the circle or through this pub.'

Shen looked at him open eyed.

'That's weird. That's how I kind of think of it. Think of all the phone and radio signals flying through the air at this moment. Can we hear them? No! But they're there! To hear them we need a proper receiver, and to be able to tune it to the right frequency.'

'Exactly,' Con said, 'and maybe when you say you sense things it's just that you can tune into frequencies that most people just can't - or have at least forgotten how to; maybe such abilities were bred out of us as we evolved, but they still exist in some of us.'

Shen smiled and briefly placed her hand over his. 'Are you calling me a genetic throwback, Conall Astor?' she teased. 'I think as children we have that ability - to see beyond, somehow, but we lose it. Or some of us do. Maybe in the childhood of the human species we could see and hear such things too; talk to the plants and animals; how lovely would that be? I've not told anyone this before...' she began., 'you'll think I'm mad...'

'I hope so; the most interesting people I know are mad.' He said.

'Do you think there could be moments when you could see... into other times?'

'Go on...'

She looked out of the window over the courtyard, as if something she had seen there had triggered a memory.

'When I was in my late teens I used to hang around with this group of girls, and 'cos I was the only one with a driving license I'd be the one who'd have to go to the shops and get booze for our nights in... but I'd always rope one of the others along to give me a hand...'

Shen looked at Conall, hesitantly.

'Well... this one time, me and this other friend had gone to the supermarket - this was in Marlborough - and were driving back... and I suddenly noticed the sky was this kind of strange purple colour, and I looked over the hills and they were covered in trees, whereas usually they were fields. This friend starts shouting at me that I'd got us lost, which was impossible, because I hadn't turned off the main road, but the road was now like a dirt track, with ruts in the side and the centre overgrown so it was scraping the bottom of the car...'

Shen looked at Conall again to check how he was reacting.

'And I wanted to stop and get out, because the hedge at the side of the road was like overgrown, really tall, too - much taller than it usually is, and the hills were just covered in fir trees. My friend was shouting at me to keep driving, but I was just amazed, and I wanted to stop. I wanted to get out the car and look around. I was slowing down the car but she was literally

screaming at me not to stop, to keep driving; but the weird thing was that it was like the car was see-through; I could see my hands gripping the steering wheel, but it was like the shadow of a wheel, transparent, and I could see the dirt track under the car.'

Conall was listening without comment.

'And then we started to go up the hill, where the turning should be, and there's a house on the corner of the turning, but it wasn't there... and then as we drove on it was there! And the trees were gone, and the road was normal again, with houses on one side and no fir trees. Well, we got in and told our friends, and we were like really in shock, but the funny thing is she later denied it – she said I'd made it up, even though she'd confirmed everything and told them what she'd seen, too.'

Shen looked at Con for a reaction.

Conall held her gaze.

'I can understand why she denied it. It didn't fit in with her view of reality; and rather than expand that view and challenge the beliefs of a lifetime she chose to shut it out.'

'So you believe me?'

'Yeah, course. Why wouldn't I? It sounds amazing – I'm just trying to think how far back you might have slipped... there was a road, at least, but it sounds like a cart-track...'

'That's what I thought. I've often thought I should try to find an old map and see if there was record of those hills being covered in trees and not farmed. I wish I'd stopped.'

'Do you? There are plenty of legends about people getting trapped in *faerie* you know, and never coming back. I wonder how many missing persons have done what you didn't – stopped and got trapped.'

'I wanted to pick a leaf off the hedgerow.'

'Maybe it would have turned to dust as you found yourself back in modern times...'

Just then their food arrived and they stopped talking until the waitress had left them.

'I heard this story once,' Shen continued 'about these boys who wondered into this Iron Age village, and they kind of assumed it was a re-enactment, but they picked up these axes and when later they were carbon-dated they were two thousand years old...'

Con smiled. 'That sounds dodgy, you can't carbon date stone or metal, for a start, and even if you could surely the dates would have revealed the axes had been made recently? Unless they aged as they were brought forward in time?'

Shen looked a bit crestfallen, as if having been unmasked as overly gullible. But Conall wasn't finished.

'Have you heard about the time slip at Versailles?' he asked. When she shook her head, he continued. 'It was in 1901, two Oxford women were visiting the Palace at Versailles and they saw what they thought were modern people dressed up in costumes from Marie-Antoinette's time; it was only when they returned years later and realised that they couldn't find the bit of the gardens where they'd seen this 'costume party', that they looked into it a bit more and found they'd seen the gardens as they were over a century before... It freaks me out; I don't get scared by horror stories or films, but stuff like that gives me the creeps – in a good way, though. I'm jealous of your experience.'

'But why would that happen – would it be some kind of worm-hole or a crack in time?' she asked, tearing off a piece of garlic bread, and offering some to Con, which he waved away.

Conall shrugged. 'I don't know. I don't see it like that; it's not a door you walk through, more an expansion of your perception so you see things you normally wouldn't. Tuning in, as I said, to another frequency – or widening your perception.' She was looking at him quizzically.

'We see time as flowing in one direction, but quantum physics suggests electrons can move back in time. Time, essentially, is an illusion – it seems to be moving forwards to us because we're in it – it seems to be a function of consciousness, not a quality inherent in the cosmos. But if you could somehow step outside time... it's as if *everything that could ever happen has happened*, as if you gain some kind of birds-eye view and you can see everything that not only was, but also could be.'

Shen shivered. 'I don't like that – it makes it sound like everything is fixed and we're like a needle on a record player following a groove that's already defined. It makes me feel like we have no free will.'

'But I don't mean it like that. If everything that has happened has been the result of free will, but you're just looking back on it after the event, the you would be unable to affect it – like looking at an album of photos from your life. If you have that 'birds-eye' view you can choose to look at any photo at any point in time; you can look at them backwards and see yourself grow younger – but that wouldn't affect the events of your life by doing that; you couldn't alter those events; now imagine, and it's hard because it goes against our 'x causes y' logic, that the photo-album exists not at the end of your life but in a timeless state outside of it. If you accessed it in a dream and it referred to an event that had already happened you'd just assume it was a memory... but if you dreamed of an event yet to happen, you'd not understand it as real as you'd not recognise it, and you'd just think it was a weird dream...but it might be it's no more weird than the 'memory' type dream.'

'So, you think people can see the future?'

'If time is subjective, I don't see why not.'

'I wonder if someone sitting in this pub in the future may catch a glimpse of us in our old fashioned clothes and think we're ghosts?' Shen asked. 'Or might be able to travel back and see exactly why Avebury was built? That would be quite a gift.'

'It would certainly be a gift to me and my research!' Con laughed. 'But just imagine it - if you could float above the whole of history, from beginning to end, and see and know everything that was and will be, like this massive complex tapestry - you'd perhaps see patterns in it that we, on the ground, completely miss. You'd be like a god; you'd know everything!'

'That's scary.' Shen said.

'Yep. And probably why it doesn't happen very often – or when it does, like your friend in the car, it's immediately repressed and forgotten because it doesn't fit in with their world view; but people like psychics and mystics who *do* see such thing always say the same thing: they see and know everything – but when they 'wake up' any specific knowledge, like who's going to win the Grand National, has faded. They just know that they *did* see everything – and that it was good, and I mean morally good, like there was some kind of order, benevolence, in the Universe; that everything is linked, and all our trials and tribulations here on earth make sense and are made right when seen from that god-like perspective out of time.'

*And will this be made right?* He wondered. *Will my trials and tribulations one day be made right when looked back on with the eye of divinity?* He thought of Wolf's testing god; the stage manager setting a road of trials for his apprentice...

'When you do your cards, surely you're seeing things from that perspective?' Con added; 'Catching a glimpse of the weave of the fabric of history? It's not really a conscious thing – it can only be apprehended when your conscious mind is off guard, such as in a trance, or in dreams.'

'Do you really think dreams can predict the future, then?' she asked.

'Yeah, or can tell you about things going on in the present you couldn't physically know.' He thought of his dream of the river of milk and the horse with the crescent between its brows; the mountains in the background with the gorge or valley cutting through the highest peaks, and quickly dismissed it from his mind. What was the point in such dreams if one could do nothing about the warning they gave?

'Have you ever had a dream like that?'

'No.' he lied, the image of the river of milk flashing across his mind. It's not as if the dream had told him she would drown, so it wasn't wholly a lie, for it was *him* in the dream; what haunted him was why he had remembered

the dream that specific night last year, at the same hour, so he believed, that she had gone into the water some 300 miles away from his own visit to the Kennet. Had she been calling out to him? But he had felt no fear – surely, he would have felt her despair and pain – but to feel nothing...

...But if that were all he might be able to just dismiss it as coincidence; but it didn't end there: there was the image of the gorge in the mountains, and what his research had uncovered concerning it – a verifiable fact involving the location of the dream, and its revelation as a real physical location, the location of her death, no less - something that pointed to a level of truth within the dream that couldn't just be brushed away...

'Sometimes...' he admitted, 'I've dreamed things and they've provided answers to certain questions, you know, about my work...'

'If time, as we know it,' he stuttered, 'is an illusion; that the 'flow' of time is just our experience of events that really exist out of time...' he was fighting for words, trying to explain... 'then just as events, past events, effect the future...'

He took a long drink and continued. 'What if an event was *so* important, so drastic and powerful, that like a stone dropped in a pond it sent ripples in every direction... and by that, I mean into the past...'

He could see Shen's brows knitted in concentration, trying to understand. He reiterated his point.

'...if time isn't real, as such, or can flow both forward and back, as quantum physics suggests is the case... then might a future event send ripples back in time...? Perhaps what we think of as precognition or prophecy is just a memory, but a memory of an event yet to occur?"

*Her death, sending out ripples into the past, into the mind of his dreaming self, 20 years before, warning him, preparing him...hence the fact that details within it were verifiable, scientifically...the mountain cleft, the placement of the river and the sacred site that would later be built there... facts he had discovered 20 years later, and then projected back in time...*

But before she could ask for specifics he continued,  
'I sometimes wonder if it's possible to dream other people's dreams – or to meet in dreams; or if in those 'time-slips' you actually see through some other person's eyes from the past.'

'So maybe I was picking up on someone who had walked, or been driving a wagon, down that road near Marlborough? Maybe it was me in some past life...'

'All I know is that the world we *think* we live in isn't half as strange as the world we *do* live in. We think we know everything, but we know nothing.'

But if there was a timeless part of us that did know everything... I wish it would appear to me and tell me that it'll all be okay.' he said, finishing his pint.

'Maybe it tries, but subtly. I mean, if the 'true' you suddenly appeared to yourself and informed you that you were really immortal you'd think you'd gone nuts.'

'It might be worth the risk.' he laughed. 'But if there is such a part of us, how would it explain itself to us? It would be like you trying to explain yourself to that bird.' He said, nodding towards a sparrow picking at crumbs under one of the outside tables.

'Well, maybe the universe uses other means to show us.' she suggested.

'Do you believe the universe is benevolent?' he asked.

'Yes. Yes, I do. And you?'

'Maybe once I did. And maybe I will again. Perhaps this is just a rough part of the weave of the tapestry I'm crossing right now.' He sighed. They sat for a while in silence. 'It's something Wolf said. The Universe isn't bad – it just isn't easy – that it makes us make an effort because it helps us grow.'

'I thought about you.' She suddenly said.

'Likewise' he toyed with his empty beer glass and said no more.

She looked at him, her face strained with a host of unasked questions.

'I'm sorry, Con. About Melissa.'

'I know. Everyone is.'

## **Chapter 21: The Font**

It was on George Mac Govan-Crow's suggestion that before heading for West Kennet Long-Barrow – their planned excursion that morning – his three houseguests should first visit the parish church that lay across the road from the cottage. It contained, he had told them, something that might interest them, or so he thought, after the conversations they had been having over breakfast that morning had veered from celestial dogs back to dragons and dragon-slayers.

Church Cottage, as the name suggested, lay directly across the narrow street from the lych-gate of St. James's Church; it was a small building with a square belfry, set amid a well-kept graveyard – George Mac Govan-Crow being the gardener who kept it in check, being parish sexton as well as the gardener at Avebury Manor, in the employ of no less a person than the millionaire archaeologist Keiller.

The path led between the gravestones to the porch, and to a wooden doorway topped with a semi-circular Norman arch with toothed edges.

The three friends took in the architectural detail and commented on the prettiness of the building; before opening the door and stepping into the cool shade. The interior of the church was dim, and rather truncated – more a chapel than village church. Tolkien walked to the altar rail, crossed himself and knelt in prayer. Lewis merely nodded to the altar; Barfield paid it little heed, walking to the font that stood at the end of the aisle.

‘Ah, I see what he means, though these are wyverns...’  
Barfield stood tracing the design carved on the side of the half-barrel shaped font with his fingers.

'The man's a gardener, Owen – to him a dragon is a dragon, you can't expect him to have your pedantic knowledge of medieval bestiaries...'

'I know that – I was just making a comment – definitely two legs and long tail, not a fish's, so land, not sea-wyverns, if you want me to be pedantic...'

The font was ornately carved in a primitive style; a faceless figure formed the centre, in a flounced skirt, a snarling wyvern flanking him on either side... all set amid curling tendrils and above a crudely asymmetrical pattern of vaulted columns, all seeming to bend as if in a stiff breeze.

'What is it, then? St Michael and the Devil, do you think?' Lewis asked, approaching the font, and kneeling to take in the detail. 'Or St. George and the dragon?'

'No.' Barfield reasoned. 'That's not a spear in his hand – it's a crozier. He must be a bishop.'

'What's that in his other hand?' Tolkien asked, having joined the others after finished his brief prayers.

'A book, maybe – or a cup?'

'Seems a little small for a book; a cup seems more likely.' Tolkien commented. The cup, or whatever it was, was being held close to the figure's chest, while his crozier, held out in his right hand, was being driven down onto the head of the wyvern on that side, who seemed to be biting the man's foot.

Tolkien, reminded of his thoughts the previous day at the Sanctuary, quoted the verse out loud:

"And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust thou shalt eat all the days of thy life: And I shall put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.'

He ran his fingers over the space where the face had once been – now flattened, with a metal hook protruding that once had fixed the carved features to the font.

'It's a shame the face has been lost.' He remarked.

'Indeed.' Said Lewis.

'It would have been interesting to see if originally he had but one eye...' Lewis chuckled. 'You think this is some pagan god in disguise?' he asked. Tolkien shrugged. 'Don't you find it odd that in this place, this serpent-temple as Stukeley imagined it, we find an image on this font of the subjugation of the mythical serpent? On one hand I can see this imagery as the church seeking to crush any signs of the old magic that might still have haunted these stones...using the Biblical imagery of the serpent; but

equally...' he continued, 'might this image be a veiled reference to that older pagan tale of the defeat of the dragon and the imbibing of his blood or mead of knowledge? After all, if that is a cup...'

Lewis was still smiling.

'You know there could be other explanations - more mundane.'

'Of course.'

'The two dragons, for instance - this could be a reference to the Great Schism of 1054 - since the Eastern Christian crosier is a staff with two dragons facing each other.'

Tolkien looked long at Lewis to see if he was being serious; the latter raised his eyebrows then winked, and walked off whistling.

Tolkien remained at the font, absentmindedly caressing the missing face with his thumb; it was hard to imagine in this placid setting, in the dim, cool sanctuary, with its scent of cold aged masonry blending with that of the flowers on the altar, that this font had possibly been attacked by some crazed puritan; and why not? The same fervour had seen most of the pagan stones of the circle burned and smashed to pieces; but this was different - this place was not some heathen temple.

The morning sun had moved so that a shaft of sunlight now blazed upon the altar cloths, and Tolkien felt a familiar sense of awe envelop him.

*'Bot Crystes mersy and Mary and John,  
'Thisen arn the grounde of alle my blisse.'*  
he muttered to himself, from the Pearl poem.

He felt a pang of compassion for those ancient men who had been born too early to know of the glory of Christ and the Saints... they must have had their signs, too - that salvation would come, like the light of the morning star presaging dawn...

'What's on your mind, Tollers?' It was Lewis's voice.

Tolkien smiled an apologetic smile and walked from the font, saying nothing. He had learned to keep his innermost religious feelings to himself, at least in the company of Jack.

Outside in the churchyard the sound of hedge-clippers could just be made out as George Mac Govan-Crow set about his task for the day, trimming back the yew tree hedge.

'You seem to be bonding rather well with our host.' Lewis remarked.

'He's an interesting man, Jack. He seems to be warming to us; at first I got the impression he was looking down at us, though I may have been wrong.'

'Not looking down,' Barfield suggested, 'wary.'

'Of strangers?' Tolkien asked.

'No. That we might be friends of Keiller.' Barfield replied.

'How so?'

'It's something he said when we were off to get my newspaper this morning. You see Keiller often has friends to stay at the manor – and something Mr Mac Govan-Crow said made me think that he doesn't really approve of some of the goings on.'

'Such as?'

'He didn't really say – except to explain that as a gardener one often is overlooked, and that people often talk about things in his earshot that they really should keep to themselves.'

Barfield cleared his throat.

'He said that he sometimes wondered if Keiller's vision of rebuilding Avebury was purely scientific... or whether he had some other purpose in mind.'

'Good Lord.' said Lewis. 'What kind of purpose?'

'He mentioned a statue of Pan in the grounds of the Manor, the plants about it trampled and dowsed in wine, he said.'

Tolkien stood looking down at the hacked-away face of the bishop or saint on the font; was Keiller somehow trying to overthrow the victory of the saintly serpent slayer? Was his vision one of restoring this heathen temple so that once more ancient rites might be performed here? He shivered at the thought. *It wouldn't be permitted. Couldn't be. Those times are past and will not come again. The Great God Pan, as Plutarch reported, is dead – and ever should remain so!*

## **Chapter 22: Letters**

*Pan, Herne, Osiris, Priapus  
Ba'al, Dionysus, Apollo, Lugh...*

The road to Church Cottage was busy with a throng of people in long robes, flowers and leaves in their hair, and singing and clapping to a beat from several drums as they walked towards the circle:

*Pan, Herne, Osiris, Priapus  
Ba'al, Dionysus, Apollo, Lugh...*  
the men chanted, and the women sang in reply:

*Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate,  
Demeter, Kali, Inanna...*

'I see the pagans are arriving' Shen said, 'Wolf will be pleased if they stay for the protest.'

'Why else would they be here?' Con asked.

'I don't know. It's not a full or new moon. A Hand-fasting, maybe?'

The stretch of road near the church, however, was deserted, and as the noise of the chanting faded Shen and Con entered the cottage.

'Was it a coffee or tea?' Shen asked.

'Coffee, please.'

'Well go through to the sitting room and I'll bring it through.'

A few minutes later Shen re-emerged from the kitchen.

'Have you always been nosy?'

Conall, who was standing with his head tilted to the side perusing the large wooden bookshelf, looked back to where Shen was leaning against the kitchen door, two mugs of coffee in her hands.

'I always look at people's bookshelves.' Conall said. '...says a lot about a person, what they read, and then what they choose to put on show.'

'And if they have no books?'

'I make my excuses and run.' Conall winked. Shit. He was slightly more drunk than he anticipated.

'And what do you mean by 'Put on a show'? Isn't a bookshelf just a bookshelf?' Shen laughed.

'God, no! You never done it? When you know someone you like is coming round... depends on the person... you know, if they're intellectual you make sure you have some weighty tome by your bed, like a John Cowper-Powys. Or poetry – Whitman or Coleridge I find works, maybe a bit of Gary Snyder to be a bit edgy and 'beat'; and something kind of quirky or humorous to show you're not dull...oh, and a kid's book to show you're not too dry and boring... Moomins, or Susan Cooper...'

Shen was shaking her head, though whether in mock horror or not, Conall couldn't tell.

'That's subterfuge. It's deceitful.' There was a twinkle in her eye as she said this. 'It's pretending to be something you're not to lure someone in.'

Conall snorted.

'Bullshit!' he said. 'Maybe if I'd not read the books, then yes – but it would be a pretty stupid thing to do if you hadn't! It would be so easy to be caught out!'

Shen bit her lip to hide a smile.

'You're being very bolshie.' She said. 'Someone spike your drink?'

'I don't know, did you? And anyway...' he continued, feeling spurred on at the challenge in her voice 'arranging books is no worse, and arguably a damn site more honest, than wearing make-up and push-up bras and hold-it-all-in-knickers' he said, and laughed out loud.  
She continued to shake her head, but still smiled.

'What is it Hamlet says?' he continued "God gives you one face and you paint yourselves another". At least I have read the books I'm placing about my room – they won't disappear with some cotton wool and make-up remover, or turn out to be an illusion of good corsetry.'

Though, if he was honest Shen was one of those women who did not require clothes or make-up to enhance her dark beauty; he remembered one evening the previous year, when he'd met her in the pub, and she'd come in a dark blouse and long-black coat, her hair straightened and her eyes lined; a black-ribbon about her throat; and he thought that he had never seen anyone more beautiful in his life; she had stunned him almost to silence.

'You've the devil in you today Conall Astor!'

And she was right. For a moment, it seemed, the clouds had retreated, but for how long, he wondered? He was on borrowed time. The ancient serpent within was being allowed a brief time in the sun before his liver had removed the alcohol from his system and his civilised outer cortex woke from its numb slumber.

'So what can you tell about granddad from his bookshelves then?' Shen challenged.

'Are these books his? I'd assumed they were yours.' He said, pulling out a gaudily coloured paperback on the tarot.

She smiled. 'Okay – mostly his!'

Conall turned his head to the side again and read the spines, stopping to pull out a couple without covers, only to return them.  
There were books on Blackfoot mythology, culture, and beside them a small section on other Native American tribes and beliefs, including some volumes on Mesoamerica – the Maya and the Aztecs.

'Were these your granddads?' he asked.

'Some – the early Blackfoot ones; the other ones are mine. Stop looking at the new ones!' she laughed.

He skipped over the gardening and cookbooks – then he stopped and pulled out a faded hardback. His face had changed from wry amusement to something that could almost be taken for concern. He slowly opened up the cover and then turned to Shen slowly.

'Your granddad was Alfred Mac Govan-Crow, wasn't he?'

'Yes.'

'Fuck me, Shen! This is a first edition copy of The Hobbit, with a dedication in the front by Tolkien himself! "To Alfred Mac Govan-Crow, on the occasion of your second Christmas, 1937. Best wishes J R R Tolkien"'

'Yeah, it's cool isn't it?' she said nonchalantly, sitting down at on the sofa with her coffee.

'Cool?' Christ! This is worth a fucking fortune, Shen!' He wasn't joking, either. First editions of the Hobbit passed hands for many thousands of pounds – but an inscribed one...

The cover showed the dragon Smaug flying over the mountains of Erebor; Con thought of the serpent brain within –guarding its primal memories like the dwarf-lords' gold – if one could only venture in and steal that knowledge for the conscious mind - if one could integrate the entire brain without resorting to booze...

She walked over and took the book from him. 'Look at this...'

She took the book out of his hand and turned to the inside back cover. Here, neatly enclosed within the fold of the dust jacket, were a number of yellowed handwritten pages.

'Letters by Tolkien, to my great-grandfather, George - Alfred's father.'

'About what?' he stammered, eyes open in shock.

Shen smiled, then laughed. 'No idea. I've never read them properly – always meant to; have you seen the handwriting?!"

Conall looked into her smiling eyes, holding her gaze a little longer than he

would normally have dared. She returned it, and it was Conall who looked away first, his pulse racing.

'How did he know Tolkien?' he asked, leafing through the thin handwritten sheets – there were, indeed, letters here addressed to George, but also one addressed to an Edith, and several sheets of what looked to be notes, with certain phrases underlined, including small diagrams which Con immediately recognised as sketches of some of the stones of the circle, and a swiftly drawn map of the entire site.

'Tolkien stayed here for a few days when my Granddad was still a baby; my great-grandfather put him up as a lodger here. And C S Lewis, and Owen Barfield.'

Con looked at her in disbelief.

'Here? At this house? Who's Owen Barfield?'

Shen picked up a copy of a book that sat alongside The Hobbit - 'He was one of the Inklings – Tolkien and Lewis's literary group; The Silver Trumpet' - he wrote this – this is inscribed to Alfred too.'

'I've not heard of Barfield. I can't believe this, though. Tolkien stayed *here*, seriously?!"

'Seriously. And to say thanks he sent this signed copy of The Hobbit – that first letter there came with the book – I've read that one. Some of the others are to Tolkien's wife, but there seems to be a few pages of notes; I don't know why they're there. Granddad couldn't really tell me much; obviously, he was too young to remember anything.'

Con was trying to read the neat, fussy handwriting, faded now. He began to read out loud.

*'My Dear George, it is with immense pleasure and gratitude that I am able to send with this letter a copy of my 'fairy-story' which I have inscribed for Alfred, which though he is too young to read, one day yourself or Mrs Mac Govan-Crow may do me the honour of reading to him, to make up for the occasions when this enthusiastic stranger reduced him to tears through my nonsensical prattling!'*

Con mumbled some more lines before turning the page.

*'The ideas I had surrounding the landscape at Avebury have taken, I am sad to say, somewhat of a back-seat for the time being, but I am trying to fit some of the insights I gained, thanks to you, concerning the great antiquity of these stories into something new I am working on, a time-travel book, which delves back into the distant past, and to the 'Atlantis' legend we talked of.'*

Con looked at Shen. 'What book is that?'

'None I know of. Maybe he never finished it.'

Con nodded. 'Yes, listen to this... "*although my publishers are already suggesting I begin another 'Hobbit' book, as the reception to the book, in some quarters, has been very good.*"

'The Lord of the Rings!' both Shen and Con said together.

Con skimmed a bit more, then stopped and began to read aloud again.

*'As I write I can just make out Sirius over the Oxford rooftops, and it takes me back, on what is a cold winter's night, to last spring in your wonderful county, and to the river of the 'bright-dog' of which I'll always be reminded when I look at its companion in the sky.'* He paused. 'What does he mean by *river of the bright-dog?*' Shen shook her head.

'You're welcome to borrow them.' She said. 'Just don't lose them or sell them.' She smiled.

'Thank you. Thank you!' but he was already reading again.

He looked at Shen, a shocked grin on his face. She was looking at him, her head on one side, smiling.

'Conall Astor wakes up again!' she said. 'Do you think one day you'll be able to be enthusiastic about real things again, like people?'

'Hmm?' he said, looking up again from the letter, but only briefly.

Shen shook her head. 'Don't forget your coffee – I'm going to chuck you out in a bit as I've got housework to do, and I hoover naked.'

'What?'

'Just checking you're listening! I mean it – take them with you. If there's anything interesting in there let me know, or maybe write them out in a readable script!'

'Okay. What are you up to later?' he asked. Shen shrugged. 'Hayden's working today so he's probably staying at his tonight – give me a call later.'

'Tell you what. Get some credit and send me a text if you're free.' He laughed. She leant over and closed the book, forcing him to look up.

'It's a deal, if you don't bring the book.'

## **Chapter 23: The Long-Barrow**

No birds were singing, the skylarks and swallows of the day before were silent; all was quiet, cool, muted, softened as if the three men were making their way up through the fields towards West Kennet Long-Barrow were treading through cotton wool.

The Kennet valley was so thick with spring mist that Silbury hill had appeared only momentarily as they passed, a flat grey featureless hump visible for a moment when the slight breeze parted the mist, but it was soon obscured and left behind as the friends crossed the road and took the path towards West Kennet.

The grass was cool and wet, soaking the men's shoes and trouser bottoms. Lewis was grumbling somewhere ahead; Tolkien was, as usual, lagging behind. He stopped for a moment to re-tie his sodden bootlace, squeezing the water from it, then while he was crouched down he paused to examine the flowers peeking through the grass: meadowsweet a speedwell.

He looked ahead to see the wraith-like shadowed forms of his friends merge into the whiteness and disappear; he felt suddenly alone...

Alone and palely loitering.... He thought to himself.

Tolkien felt no alarm; in fact he took a deep, slow breath, relieved to be alone for a spell; Lewis and Barfield had been in conversation since they had left the church, but Tolkien had been trying to think through the revelations of the night before; trying to organise his thoughts into some kind of order.

He stood upright and went to move onwards, suddenly not sure if he was facing in the same direction as he had been before he'd stopped to examine the flowers. Nevertheless, he knew he had been walking slowly uphill after

they had crossed the small bridge over the Kennet, whose waters he was sure he could just make out chuckling behind him... so he strode forward.

There didn't seem to be much of a path but nevertheless he continued through the thick grass and clover, knowing that the tomb that was their destination that morning, stood on the brow of the hill – but when he finally reached the crest the ground was flat; somehow he had misjudged his ascent – and so he called out to his friends; nothing was returned. The question now, he said to himself, is whether I am too far east or west of the tomb; he guessed west and so turned eastwards along the ridge.

The mist seemed to be moving slightly more up on the ridge; tearing past in odd eddies hardly strong enough to be called gusts; the grasses at his feet, a drab brown interspersed with fresh green shoots, gave no indication of a path, fading to wan a few metres each side. Tolkien's steps quickened as he became more and more disoriented.

He called again and heard nothing;

I could be walking these hills a thousand years ago or more, he said; a delicious thrill went through him at the thought; he imagined a rider on a pale horse emerging out of the white rolling fog, and confronting him in a long lost tongue... but how would I know if I had encountered a ghost or if I had slipped back in time? He asked himself.

He noticed a slight rise in the ground and so began to climb, and found himself walking along the back of what he presumed could have been the long-barrow – so named from the comet-like train of earth set at the rear of the burial chambers; the earth was lumpy and the grass more patchy, and a vague depression along the ridge suggested a path.

'Jack? Owen?' he shouted. His own voice seemed to return as if the mist about him were the walls of some organic shifting prison; he had lost all sense of space and distance.

'Where the devil are they?' he said to himself, crossly, feeling an ever so slight sense of panic.

It definitely seemed to be a path he was on – but if this was the barrow it was immense – he seemed to have been walking along this rise for a few hundred yards, or maybe that was his sense of distance being confused by the fog, now eddying and swirling about him in an eerily conscious fashion;

he baulked at what seemed to be a white shape, a figure, float past him on the left, but he turned and it dissolved into air.

Hurrying now he turned and strode forward, his heart hammering in his chest, his lips, almost against his will, starting to mouth the words of an ancient charm against enchantment, gripping his walking stick before him like a sword...

*wið þane sara stice, wið þane sara slege,  
wið þane grymma gryre,  
wið ðane micela egsa þe bið eghwam lað,  
and wið eal þæt lað þe in to land fare.  
Sygegealdor ic begale, sigegyrd ic me wege,  
wordsige and worcsige. Se me dege;*

I encircle myself with this rod and entrust myself to God's grace,  
against the sore stitch, against the sore bite,  
against the grim dread,  
against the great fear that is loathsome to everyone,  
and against all evil that enters the land.  
A victory charm I sing, a victory rod I bear,  
word-victory, work-victory. May they avail me;

And then he stopped in real alarm, gasping out loud as before him a huge grey form appeared in the mist, immense, wide, like a huge hooded figure towering over the back of the barrow... then another by its side... the vast blocking stones of the tomb along whose back he had, all this time, been walking.

He laughed to himself, glad he had found his goal; but where were his friends? He called again and it seemed far below him a weak strangled cry floated up through the earth from the depths of the tomb below. He walked forward and suddenly there beneath him was an open hole in the back of the barrow with a path leading down to one side... a large chamber of stones and a short dry-stone wall passage leading away from it towards the stones of the façade, and there, stood in the chamber, smoking a cigarette was Lewis; Barfield stood nearby running his hand over the lichen on the stones.

Lewis was leaning against the huge sarsen that made up the back of the chamber, but he flicked the butt away in disgust.

'I've been calling you.' Tolkien said.

'Didn't hear a thing.' Lewis said and cleared his throat.

'I'm cold and damp; this place is giving me the shivers; I almost thought you were some spirit when you peered over the edge then!' Lewis visibly shivered.

'I'm not happy here. The place seems somehow...' he struggled to think of the words. '...haunted; no - *lived in*, perhaps, as if some spirit dwells here that never went away... It makes no sense; the chamber has been long empty, yet I still feel there are bones about... shall we go?'

'We only just got here!' Tolkien protested, walking around the hollow to the path that lead into the chamber.

'It's like winter has returned; dame kind is playing with us, gentlemen!' he said, as a flurry of mist drifted over the chamber sending cool air downwards.

Barfield was investigating the eastern end of the passage;

'It seems to continue this way – no doubt to the façade; and I suppose it was all once roofed as Stukeley seems to show it... but some treasure-hunter has dug in from the top in the intervening years, not able to move the facing stones...'

'I wonder whether it was worth it? What ancient treasures were lurking here, do you think?' Lewis asked. 'Dragon-guarded gold?'

As if by some strange synchronicity at the mention of gold the pale disc of the sun suddenly appeared to the south, as the mist seemed to shift and change direction; it vanished again but a few moments later the disc appeared again, though now a pale silver, weak and powerless. The three friends looked round them as the chamber brightened, the creeping sense of dread having suddenly departed.

A few minutes later the friends were seated on the top of the barrow leaning against the facing stones as the mist thinned, borne away on an increasingly strong breeze; the sky was now blue above them and the sun too bright to directly look at; the grass around them had turned from a sickly acid green to a warm spring green, and, despite the breeze, the day was warming.

'Oh I say, look!' Barfield said, pointing to the north; above the mist the crest of Silbury stood proud in the sun, like a flat topped island in a sea of steaming milk; as they watched they noticed three figures emerge from the mist a few hundred yards down the path below the barrow. Heading the trio was Alexander Keiller, while behind him trod the young man with glasses and black hair who had received the blow on the head from the falling piece of tree root during the explosions in the henge ditch the day before; he was deep in conversation with a taller, heavily bearded man, who appeared to be in his seventies or eighties – his face heavily tanned, giving him the appearance of some Biblical patriarch – a sense compounded by the way the younger man, in his twenties, seemed to look up at him with a mixture of respect and awe.

'We meet again!' Keiller grinned as Tolkien, Barfield and Lewis clambered down from the mound to greet the new arrivals.

'May I introduce you to my assistant, Stuart Piggott...' the young man smiled broadly and proffered a hand to the friends.

'...and Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie.' The old man nodded, and shook their hands, peering under his heavy white brows, his face remaining stern.

'My word!' said Lewis. 'This is a lucky coincidence. I was only last week reading of your discovery of the Merneptah Stele.'

If Lewis had expected a friendly conversation amongst peers to ensue he was to be disappointed, as Flinders-Petrie merely nodded his head in what might have been taken as a gracious acceptance of some compliment. Instead he turned to Piggott and addressed him on some obscure question of Bronze Age axe typology, seemingly the topic they had been engaged in on the walk up.

Keiller flashed his schoolboy-grin. 'Sir Flinders-Petrie is taking time out of a series of talks in London specially to see the re-erection of the first stone in the north-west quadrant tomorrow; we're very honoured to have him here. He's been such an inspiration; I read his accounts of his excavations in Egypt and the Near East as a young man, and I can honestly say if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here today! Will you be here to see it?' he asked the friends.

Tolkien looked towards his companions not sure how to answer. They had kind of left the question of walking schedules up in the air when they had

left Church Cottage that morning, having decided that they hadn't yet exhausted Avebury's many attractions, and that The Red Lion served uncommonly good beer. Tolkien expected Lewis to answer, but the latter merely shrugged, cleared his throat, and announced it was a possibility.

The same high-colour lay on Lewis's cheeks as at breakfast – perhaps not a shaving rash after all, and not sunburn; he seemed quite flushed, and now Tolkien thought about it, he had seemed less talkative since they had left the church.

'Everything okay, Jack?' Tolkien asked.

Jack forced a smile. 'I think that last cigarette may have dried my throat a bit; I'm feeling a little hoarse; a bit off colour in general really, now I think of it. Perhaps we should stay another night.'

Barfield put a hand on his friend's arm.

'I'm sure a lunchtime beer would sort out that throat.'

'Yes, I'm sure you're right. I don't really feel like climbing Silbury Hill today. It's something about this place, it's put me out of sorts.' and he visibly shivered.

Tolkien turned and looked up at the massive facing-stones, that stood like a row of jagged teeth along the front of the barrow. He felt Piggot approach.

'These sarsen stones, used to seal the chamber are local, were dragged here from Marlborough, where there are great numbers of them still to be found.' Piggott stated. 'The chamber was excavated,' he continued 'at least partly, in the late 1800's – though because of the blocking stones the excavator had to come in from the top, removing the capstones. There's a single chamber at the western end of the passage, and the passage itself, made of drystone walling, is thought to continue up to the portal stones, which were put in position to block the passage when the grave fell out of use.'

'And was anything found here?' Tolkien asked.

'Bones – from a number of individuals – disarticulated, and possibly brought from elsewhere.'

Lewis shivered again. ‘And is there anything left to be found?’

Piggott nodded. ‘It’s possible that behind the blocking stones are more chambers – we intend to dig here at some point in the future.’

‘And how do they relate to the round barrows up near the Sanctuary? Are these the same people?’ Lewis asked.

‘These are earlier – the long barrows predate the round mounds. They’re Stone Age – the occupants of the round barrows were the people who brought metalworking with them.’

‘Invaders?’ Lewis asked.

‘Very possibly. They seem to be different in stature than the long-barrow builders; a different race, perhaps.’

Piggott seemed to be choosing his words carefully, and talking not just for Tolkien and Lewis’s benefit but also for Petrie, whose Biblical form was standing on the mound nearby, brooding over the landscape. And then the great man spoke, like a man used to being listened to.

‘Invaders – yes; culture-bringers. We see the same in Egypt: a basic stone-age civilization supplanted by a far superior race.’

Tolkien bristled at the mention of superior races, but he didn’t get chance to voice his opinion as Petrie continued:

‘This type of barrow is ten-a-penny; what interests me is *that*’ he said, pointing his walking stick back at the peak of Silbury, sailing like some green long ship on the sea of mist; ‘I am *convinced* there is still a burial to be found somewhere in that hill...maybe the overseer of the stone circle was buried there. After the war I excavated an area near its base, hoping, as I had in Egypt, to find some kind of subterranean passageway into the mound’s interior. When you’ve finished wasting your money on re-erecting stones, Keiller, I suggest you return to the mound.’

‘Maybe once the circle is finished.’ Keiller briskly replied, frowning.

‘The Stones themselves will tell you nothing; you’re merely undoing the work of previous generations who sought to destroy them; it’s not really archaeology at all; it’s a vanity project like Evan’s creations at Knossos... But

that hill – surely the nearest thing on these isles to a pyramid – that is *real* archaeology; imagine what might lie there... maybe some evidence of a link between this part of the world and the Near East? Hmm?’

Tolkien was amused to see a combination of bashfulness and annoyance flash across Keiller’s face.

‘Perhaps a re-excavation of the hill would be in order, too, hey, Piggott?’ Keiller said, drawing the younger man into the discussion.

‘Indeed. But here, too.’ Piggot stammered, waving a hand at the long-barrow, ‘The earlier excavation was hardly complete, and perhaps some of the fallen stones here could be put back in place.’

Petrie stood prodding the mound with his walking stick, chewing his bottom lip – before once more turning towards Silbury and pointing at the hill, twice, emphatically before striding off along the length of the barrow.

‘A great man. A great man.’ Keiller said, his eyes watering. Then his frown lifted as he turned to the three friends. ‘Oh, and we are to lunch in the Red Lion on our return, and I would be honoured if you would join us.’ Keiller said. Tolkien received the distinct impression they were being asked to swell the numbers so that Keiller wouldn’t be left alone to burden the bear-like Petrie’s ill-humour.

It was Barfield who responded in the affirmative, which surprised Tolkien, as normally it was Lewis who would leap forward, stomach first, to accept such an offer. But Jack remained quiet, eyeing the stones with something akin to mistrust or even alarm.

## **Chapter 24: Old Man**

Conall Astor was walking bare footed along the sun-baked dirt path that lead from the car park to the west of the village southwards to Silbury hill and on to the rise on which West Kennet Long-Barrow crouched.

The path was well trodden and wide, and he watched carefully to avoid stepping on the trails of ants that crossed it at various points; but he was also, after Shen's story of the adder, on the lookout for snakes. The path followed the curve of the river, bordered by reeds and willows, under which Con sheltered every few minutes when the burning sun got too much.

Just north of Silbury Hill a small bridge traversed the stream and Conall took this, and followed the path as it curved about the hill until he reached the small car-park beside the Bath road that served the viewing platform for the hill. Here, just a few hundred yards across the road, lay the newly made crop circle; Conall debated for a few moments whether to look more closely at it but decided not to, already fearing he may have missed his appointment with Wolf.

From here he walked up the brow of the hill where the road rose beside it, and crossed it, taking the path towards the Swallowhead spring.

He sat for a moment on the sarsen stones that forded the spring to cool his dusty hot feet in the cold water. Further towards the source of the spring a family was sitting having a picnic, and he said hello as he passed, taking the path that cut diagonally across from West Kennet – the very path he had seen the large dog or cat taking that morning. He stopped and looked across the valley towards Waden hill at the spot where he had been sitting when he had seen the creature. It looked so far away. The hard-baked earth was free of any tracks that might have helped him discern if this creature had been flesh and blood rather than some spirit conjured from this sacred earth. He shivered, suddenly eyeing the trees down the slope to his left,

wondering if some cool, dismissive canine eye was watching him. Then, like a punch in the gut he remembered what Tolkien in his letter had written – *river of the bright dog*...He stepped up his pace and headed for the barrow.

Having reached the summit of the hill, the breathless Con sat astride the back of this immense ancient tomb for a moment, lying flat on the grass and looking skywards to where the skylarks dipped and hovered; one of his arms cushioned his head like a pillow, while the other lay across his heaving chest, in his hand the owl's feather which he had just removed from his hat-band. It was here that Shen had given him this gift all those many months ago.

Just twenty-four hours earlier he had strode back from the pub, adamant that his lightened mood had had nothing to do with the reappearance of this girl in his life; but now, letting the feather tickle the side of his face he saw that this had been a laughably naïve conclusion; clearly *she* hadn't changed, and when he had left her a year ago he knew he was falling heavily for her. *He* had changed, though; and that wasn't her fault – it was a fault of timing and circumstance.

He sat up and put the feather from him; but then turned and picked it up again, holding it to his chest, suddenly feeling as if he might cry out, remembering her beside him on the barrow, her warm, sonorous voice telling him he could kiss her if he wanted... and now she was with another, and it was all too late; and even *if* she were free, how could he ever allow himself to be happy with her after what had happened, knowing it was because of her he had stayed here, a few hundred miles too distant to do what Hayden had for Shen – too far to save that precious life.

He turned his head and looked towards the massive entrance stones of the barrow, following the line of sight to the Sanctuary on the brow of the hill where he had been this time yesterday; the crop circle in the field between the two points was harder to see from this lower angle, just ellipses of shadow in the corn. I can't believe these are done with a rope and a plank of wood; he thought, the artists needed computer-precision to get such results; night-vision goggles, laptops, GPS devices - no doubt all were needed.

He thought of the group in the pub the night before: *Croppies*, Wolf had called them; it seemed hard to equate those boozed-up techno-hippies with this kind of art. But maybe that was the point; they relished their anonymity. It seemed strange, though – most young men would want to

boast about what they had done; he thought about what he'd read concerning the Ancient Greek mysteries of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, how the life-changing 'secret' revealed to the thousands of celebrants over the many centuries it had been celebrated had never been revealed – *never* – no single participant willing to spill the beans, not for fame nor fortune. Perhaps croppies were made of the same stuff – bearers of an awe-induced silence because of the nature of their work... mouthpieces for Gaia. No, he smiled. Mouthpieces for Demeter, the barley-goddess, known to the Romans as Ceres, goddess of the crops, from whom the word cereal was derived. And *cerveza*, he thought, once again wishing he'd not drunk as much over lunch. Perhaps, he continued musing, the croppies rejected the fame of modern artists because they rejected the ego, the 'I' that separated them from nature – the crop circles' designs seemed to speak in the language of mathematics, in Pythagorean numbers, of cosmic harmony – they were a symbolic of song of the summer earth, an echo of Eden, calling us back... that's *if* they were man-made, and not some strange exudation of mathematics into nature, or the work of elves or aliens...

'I saw a fairy once'... Melissa's sing-song voice.

He smiled at the memory. Of course, she would have...

Just then he felt a strange hollow quiver rising from the mound – then another; the distant beat of a drum – Wolf's drum, he reasoned, and so he stood and walked to the stones that flanked the entrance of the tomb.

The portal stones that fronted the entrance were huge, and Con entered the tomb by walking behind the largest of them, whereon he was presented with a dark chamber leading straight into the mound. This inner chamber was made of other great sarsen stones, and here, on each side of the passageway, stood smaller chambers, two each side and one at the end, the latter illuminated by a modern glass roof-light – five separate chambers in which the bones of the dead had once been placed – and it was in the chamber to the immediate right of the passage that Wolf Jones sat on a deerskin hide, eyes closed, drumming.

From the opposite chamber, to the left of the passage, came a voice. It was Ananda Coombe from the Red Lion; she smiled in greeting. Con went and sat beside her, exchanging pleasantries in a hushed tone as Wolf continued to drum, with short, deep guttural sounds coming now and again from his throat – and the odd snatch of words:

*Hen wyr y gwlad! Dewch!*

The earth beneath Con's hands was cold and dusty, with a coolness that made it feel damp; it was tight in the chamber, and he pressed his back against the stone that formed its back to give Ananda some space; her light hair was tied back in a ponytail and above her round glasses, between her brows, was the faded remnants of three white horizontal lines with a red dot at their centre; a slight hint of sandalwood masked some of the damp staleness exuded by the stones.

Presently the drumming stopped, and Con found himself fixed by cool predator eyes that suddenly creased with mischief.

'Welcome to my humble abode' Wolf grinned, waving a hand. 'You've met the lovely *Sat Chit Ananada*...'

'She's served me a fair few pints since I've been here.' Con blushed.

'Indeed – she's the amṛta-bearing Mohini... initatrix into the wisdom of the East...' he smiled.

Ananda raised her eyes to the sky, despairing. 'He's so full of shit, ignore him.' she said to Con, with a wink.

'It's good you're here, Con. I'm drumming to Old Man.'

Con must have looked blank as Wolf continued, with hardly a pause.

'This chamber – this is where the bones of the old man were found – the man whose bones are being relocated to the museum tomorrow. They should be here.'

Wolf explained how the bones had been removed some forty years ago, after Stuart Piggott had excavated the Long-Barrow in the 60's, had found the previously unknown side chambers hidden within the drystone walls between the facing stones and the previously excavated back chamber.

'They'd been filled with stone – literally packed solid with material,' Wolf explained, 'so it was just assumed there was nothing there – just wall.'

'It's usually assumed that newcomers that did this – they wanted this place shut. It had been here for a thousand years – the bones of the dead were

housed here and then removed for ceremonies in the circle or up on Windmill Hill - but the Bronze Age newcomers sealed it up and put those massive sarsen stones out the front, blocking the tomb, ending the communication between the living and the dead.'

'Like locking the doors of a church?' Con mused.

'Or to stop things getting out – the ancestral spirits of the people they had overrun. You don't want mardy ancestors on your hands, mate...For generations their nameless bones were put here – until the last burial. You see Old Man was buried whole – I think he was the last of his tribe – the last shaman of the stone-wielding people. He was killed and placed here and then the tomb was filled.'

He stopped and rolled himself a cigarette.

'Killed?'

'It's one theory; the newcomers didn't arrive peacefully – Old Man was killed before he was put here – an arrowhead was found buried in his neck bones – he'd been shot in the throat. And in the chamber over there, three females – a maiden, a mother and a crone; priestesses of the old religion, perhaps; no arrowheads there – I think they were probably drowned or strangled.'

Con blanched at the word drowned...

Ananda shifted and picked up a handful of dust.

'Of course, as Wolf knows, I don't wholly agree...' she said. 'I think we could look further than just the defeat of an old shaman by incoming metalworkers. It's too easy to fall into the trap of interpreting a mythical, ritual occurrence as history...'

Wolf slapped his own wrist in mock admonishment; 'Ananda has a habit of trying to fit our prehistory into a Hindu framework,' Wolf explained 'Don't you my dear?!'

Ananda shrugged. 'I started off as a Hindu but then discovered druidism... and I've been trying to unite the two ever since. The Celtic and Hindu world were parts, albeit separated geographically, of the same cultural complex, the Indo-European language group... and I see no reason why both didn't

spring from a single root culture, a Neolithic predecessor - so why not use Eastern parallels to illuminate western? I run a class at the Hindu temple in Swindon on the subject...'

'Tell him about the posset of milk.' Wolf prompted.

'Another time... I doubt he's interested...' she said, eyeing Con for signs of boredom.

'No, please...' Con prompted.

'Have you heard the folk tradition that Silbury was raised in the time it took a posset of milk to boil?'

Con nodded. 'I read it somewhere, yep.'

'There's a Hindu rite known as the *pravargya* rite, celebrated at dawn in which an earthenware pot filled with milk is heated over a fire, when then boils over it is supposed, through a kind of sympathetic magic, to bring about the dawn and sunrise. The milk, you see, is associated with the cow or cows of dawn in Hinduism, or a beautiful goddess named Uṣas; and the rite causes the cow or Uṣas to be released from her place of hiding or imprisonment under the horizon, or in the celestial river Rasā ...the boiling milk pushes off the lid of the pot, which is supposed to echo Indra destroying the monster Vṛtra 'the coverer', who has previously stolen the dawn.'

'We tried it this spring equinox. Fookin' disaster' Wolf cut in, 'sat atop Silbury in the dark and rain; I'm crouched down trying to keep the wind from blowing out the fire, and when it did light the milk took about half hour to boil and then boiled over and put out the fire.'

'Maybe next year' Con said; Wolf and Ananda looked at each other briefly, something passing between them that Con missed.

'So you think the Silbury folktale is a memory of a rite observed here that was similar to the Hindu one?' he asked.

Ananda nodded.

'A midwinter or spring rite, designed to release the sun imprisoned over winter.' She said.

'Like the Japanese Amaterasu myth?' Con said.

Ananda lifted a brow in surprise, 'indeed...'

'Christ, here we go... thought this might happen...', Wolf laughed...  
'welcome to University Challenge...and on our left we have Professor Astor,  
and on our right Guru Ananda Coombe'

Con laughed. 'I researched a ton of midwinter solar myths when I was doing the PhD – trying to find a rite that might fit Stonehenge... the Amaterasu myth has the sun-goddess hiding in a cave and tricked out by a dancing goddess who exposes herself, making the other gods laugh – so Amaterasu peeks out to see what they're laughing at and thereby the sun is released. That myth, as I recall, was probably derived from a Hindu original taken to Japan along with Buddhism.' Ananda was nodding, so he continued; 'But it misses the cave as serpent symbolism that you find in the Hindu and Indo-European myths... the cows stolen by the serpent which are then rescued by the hero – be that Indra or whoever, the forerunner of the whole dragon-slaying mythos.'

Ananda was still nodding. 'Where did you find this one, Wolf? Someone who knows his eastern myth!' she laughed.

'The serpent, Vrtra – the concealer, the coverer...' she continued, 'he represents the static condition that prevents new growth - be that night, or winter... anything that conceals or dims the sun, fertility, or anything creative. He's not evil, *per se*, he represents inertia...holding up the circle of creation.' Ananda remarked, her voice echoing within the chamber... *just like a stone cave*, Con thought.

'And he's beheaded, as I recall, to release what he has captured?' Con asked.

'Beheaded, dismembered... or his throat simply cut, as often he has swallowed the sun, or cows, or Uṣas, or *soma*...the magical drink...and the wounding releases a stream of magic words that can grant immortality.'

'And the man buried here...how does he fit into this?'

'I think might have been enacting a similar kind of rite – the release of soma, or the sun, from the throat – so not necessarily the victim of racial or cultural attack...' she said pointedly, looking at Wolf, who grinned in return.

'So, he was the serpent Vritra, and this is his cave?' Con asked, peering about him.

Ananda paused; 'It's not that simple...' she began; 'as I said, the serpent represents stasis, inertia; a state that needs to be ended, usually through violence; he's the dragon who hoards gold or virgins but has no use for either... hence the need of a hero to come and rescue what is imprisoned...'

Con thought of the letter of Tolkien's he'd read earlier after leaving Shen's:

*'What struck me was the font – and the cup in the hands of the headless figure; the cup I had Bilbo steal from Smaug; I, of course, got it from Beowulf... but it's a common motif – the stealing of the vessel of immortality, the Holy Grail... the mead of knowledge...from the dragon...'*

'– but it is a version of a much bigger theme,' Ananda continued; 'namely, the cosmogony, the creation. Now, there's plenty of Celtic legends that have a hero or a saint being decapitated, and springs or wells appearing where the head falls – like St Winifred - in these cases the beheaded figures aren't evil, as theirs is usually a willing sacrifice.'

Con was thinking deeply, drinking in what Ananda was saying; twisting it around in his mind in an attempt to understand why this man had been slain over five millennia earlier.

'You think he was killed in a re-enactment of a creation myth?'

'In some Hindu myths the universe comes about through the dismemberment of the primal man, Puruṣa; the force of creation is latent within him and he needs to be broken apart for it to be released; it's the same image as the release of the sun from the serpent, only he's not hoarding it negatively; he's akin to the vegetation god who must be dismembered and planted so that he can be reborn.'

Con thought of John Barleycorn, the sacrificed man, giving his lifeblood for the good of the people...snippets of the song he had heard at the pub with Shen the day before flashed through his mind:

*They took a plough and plough'd him down,  
Put clods upon his head,  
And they hae sworn a solemn oath*

*John Barleycorn was dead.  
They laid him down upon his back,  
And cudgell'd him full sore;  
They hung him up before the storm,  
And turn'd him o'er and o'er.  
And they hae taen his very heart's blood,  
And drank it round and round;  
And still the more and more they drank,  
Their joy did more abound.*

‘Basically...’ Ananda explained, ‘the cosmos is seen as stemming from an anthropomorphic being, be it the Puruṣa, the Cosmic man, of the Rigveda – or the Iranian Gayōmart, he holds the potential creation within him, locked away, so he is dismembered...and from him the world is formed.’

‘Like the giant Ymir in Norse mythology,’ Wolf chipped in, ‘who becomes the world –

*From Ymir's flesh the earth was formed,  
and from his bones the hills,  
the heaven from the skull of that ice-cold giant,  
and from his blood the sea...’*

‘Yes, it’s the same image,’ Ananda agreed, ‘he literally becomes the earth, the sky – he is creation itself, formed through a world-creating sacrifice. Like the corn he is buried and new life sprouts from him. It’s an image that probably stems from planting myths, I would think...death precedes life.’ she mused.

Con creased his brow in confusion.

‘And this man buried here...’

‘...died in a re-enactment of that first creation;’ she re-iterated, ‘he’s what they call a *foundation sacrifice*; he’s the original first man, the primal ancestor – the sacrificed god – and his wound in the throat, opening him up at the neck, releasing the forces of creation....’

‘And why him? Why was he special?’

She answered:

‘He was already marked as special; he was lame, disabled by spina bifida,

and he had a supernumerary toe... yet he'd lived until old age; he couldn't hunt, or farm, certainly couldn't fight. So, others in the community would have had to look after him; I think maybe he was a priest or shaman, as you suggested Wolf, he certainly had gifts that meant he was cared for, not left to die. Nature had already marked him out as different. That's why I don't think he was killed in a war between tribes. I don't think he would have been fighting, for a start. It's clearly a different death – a sacrifice, and when you look at all these old myths of throats being cut or beheading to release the powers of fertility, or the waters of rebirth, or the milk or mead of immortality... I think that explains the neck wound.'

'His burial here creates the land, forms it; makes it fertile;' Wolf said; 'so you can see why I don't want him stuck in a museum, divorced from the land he gave his life for.'

The chamber became suddenly cool and Con gazed about him at the drystone walls; the low ceiling formed from an immense capstone – feeling, for the first time, claustrophobic. Here, where he sat, the corpses of the dead had once been piled; reeking, flyblown, or perhaps browned sinewy limbs, desiccated from exposure elsewhere; and here, not in fiction or legend, but in truth, a poor man, lame and riddled with pain all his life, always an outsider, perhaps considered an oddity, a freak, perhaps feared, had been finally laid to rest, his throat gashed open by the killing arrow that had sailed so swiftly as to embed itself in his spine; he imagined the spill of crimson over the white curls of his chest, and the silent last gasps of his blood-flecked lips. For the first time he felt no sense of connection with those buried here – they had always been like himself, just older, in different clothes, like a costume drama... but now they seemed wholly alien; inhabiting world too far away to bridge, both temporally and culturally – like the ash-covered *Saddhus* he'd seen pictures of on the banks of the Ganges, with matted dreadlocks, sitting amongst the dead...

'He's the first man, the great ancestor;' Wolf said, 'the Old One; Eldest; stag and blackbird's brother. His body is the land; the land is his body. And we are formed from him, too, in turn – from the flow of his magical words... released by the arrow-wound.'

*In the beginning, thought Con, was the Word...*

Silence followed as each thought over what had been spoken of, the ancient sacrifice that had been enacted on this very spot; the pent-up forces of creation released by such a violent act, making him, Old Man, holy, a martyr, even...

The silence was ended by a soft, rhythmic pulse as Wolf began to drum again...

Con closed his eyes and lay back against the cool sarsen stone that formed the back of the chamber; part of him excited, part of him hoping no visitors would walk in and see him like this.

Dub-dub-dub-dub

And then Wolf Jones began to sing in a deep voice:

*Since the beginning  
Old Man is singing  
Through blood and bone  
And pelt and claw  
Come and follow me  
down to the ancient tree  
Penbleidd, Ulfhednar  
Wolf, Outlaw*

*Since the beginning  
Old Man is singing  
Through ice and fire  
And Thunders roar  
Sons leave your childhood lands  
Take your ash spears in your hands  
Penbleidd, Ulfhednar  
Wolf, Outlaw*

*Since the beginning  
Old Man is singing  
Through red cap, white spot  
Vision's Door  
Wolf-skin warrior  
Stag and blackbird's brother  
Penbleidd, Ulfhednar  
Wolf, Outlaw*

*Since the beginning  
Old Man is singing*

*Through voices of those  
Who have gone before  
Spirits of the land  
Dance with the warrior-band  
Penbleidd, Ulfhednar  
Wolf, Outlaw*

Darkness; for a long time; Con shifted to get more comfortable... but the drumming had begun to lull him, and spaces began to lengthen between his thoughts...

Had he slept? Time seemed to have passed, but he remained still, the drum reverberating around the chamber, almost sickening in its intensity, causing a palpitation deep within his chest.

Dum dum dum dum dum dum dum

Seconds? Ages? past.

He opened his eyes, or at least his inner eyes, and saw willow trees arched above him, but billowing and morphing strangely, and he suddenly realised he was watching them through water...it's only my imagination, he thought...

Beside the stream, above him, seen through the ripples, a wolf was pacing back and forth, with Wolf Jones' eyes...

Dub-dub-dub-dub

And then Con was himself crouched beside the stream; looking down at his reflection – at a face red with blood or some kind of paint, and over his own eyes the amber eyes of the wolf, whose skin he wore over his shoulders, and whose boneless front limbs were tied in front of his breastbone. His hair long and curled hung from his brow and touched the water... and those eyes, predator's eyes... his own... and something behind the eyes began to speak – a voice, again his own, but also Wolf's; and there was Wolf Jones sat opposite against a great fir-tree, the skull and antlers of a stag on the trunk above his head...

'If you do not make something of your life, little wolf...'

Then a long pause.

‘...I will take it from you...’

And then, he seemed to see, from afar, crouched in a dark cave formed from grey sarsen stones, set on the rise above the stream, a crooked man, grey bearded, and bent to one side; eyes glinting from a small fire over which sat a clay vessel, its contents frothing and boiling; and from his throat a golden light pouring down, like sunlight...on his brow antlers, no, the curled horns of a ram, no – just matted hair...

*...From the beginning, Old Man is singing...*

And he was grinning, strong white teeth under the matted hair, under antlers; face painted with red-earth, two meanders, serpents or rivers, down each cheek from temple to jaw; darkening as the stone above him seemed to lower, to crush down on him – yet still he smiled; *under stone; under hill...*

And the feeling of guilt welling up, repressed, of joy repressed threatening to burst... yet imprisoned within him; static, dead with inertia... and then a whistle and twang and the feeling of the flint blade of the arrow piercing his throat and lodging in his vertebrae, and the light bursting out of his wound, jolting him awake, his heart hammering, as fast as the drum...

Dub-dub-dub-dub   dub    dub      dub

The tempo of the drum had changed and somewhere miles distant, a voice from some other time, Wolf Jones's voice, was telling him to come back, to return.

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da

How long had they sat like this? His body was stiff as if he'd slept for a long time... minutes? Hours? Wolf's voice came again, closer this time, telling him to slowly stretch and to open his eyes when ready and to sit up slowly...

Con felt an odd sense of elation; and the need to tell Wolf what he had seen, but Wolf held up his hand.

‘What you saw is between you and Spirit’ he said. ‘Remember what you saw. It came to you from the ancestors, from Old Man who is within each of us – and behind him the animal powers all the way back to the first fish in

the first oceans...'

Con sat in silence. Of course, it's all imagination, he thought to himself; yet the stark warning remained in his mind; if you don't make something of your life, I will take it from you; and the sense of discomfort in his throat, sharp, deep, yet offering the painful promise of release of feelings long imprisoned...

## **Chapter 25: The White Cow**

The stone lay prone on the grass beside the hole that the next day would house it. It had been scrubbed clean of the dirt that had enclosed it for nearly half a millennia, buried by pious men seeking to undo the work of the devil; now, it had once more been brought to the light of day, and its original socket excavated. Beside it lay piles of large wooden poles and ropes with which it would be levered into place.

Sir Flinders Petrie cast a cold eye on the scene; crude stone and mud and damp; he shivered and pined for his home in Jerusalem. At least there's no sand, he thought – recalling his own excavations in Egypt; sand that covered everything, got into your eyes, your hair, the food you were eating; and the infernal heat – but the stuff they had dug up – finely carved stone, bearing hieroglyphs, so much more advanced than this primitive temple, here on the remotest edge of the civilised world. And that idiot Keiller jumping around like an excited puppy; how could he get so excited about such a barbarian edifice? All his hangers on, jumping at his every word simply because he is rich. This one, though, he thought, isn't impressed by him, this sallow-faced small man, Tolkien, I think he said his name was.

Tolkien too had approached the stone and laid a small hand on the brushed sarsen. He turned to Petrie, coughed, and began to mumble.

'If you'll excuse me, am I to understand that you excavated Silbury at some time in the past?'

Petrie nodded, and stroked his beard.

'Indeed. In the hope of finding a tomb or such-like inside, but all we chanced upon was dirt.'

Tolkien hesitated before answering.

'It's a strange thing; the hill, I mean. Strange they should build something so immense and yet, empty...'

'My thoughts exactly; I had, of course, dug many pyramids in Egypt before coming here, and crude though it was, I thought perhaps we might find that it was built in imitation of such colossal tombs... even that an emissary from the east had come and died here. But we are supposing a grandeur that simply was not present. The people who built these monuments were not civilized in the way you or I think of the Ancient Egyptians, for instance. No Cheops resides in Silbury Hill because, alas, these barbarians possessed no Cheops...'

Tolkien sniffed against the cooling late afternoon. And yet they possessed the wherewithal to build this immense circle, he thought, 'Maybe civilization is not to be rated by its physical works, but by its artistic achievements, its stories, its myths...'

'Yes, but where are the myths of the people that built this circle or the hill?' Petrie scoffed. 'Where is the artistry in these rude blocks of unworked stone, say, in comparison to the art of Egypt, to the temples of finely worked columns bearing inscriptions to the gods? No! Civilization was brought to such places at a later date... Egypt included – you think the height of pharaonic art the work of such primitives? No – they were brought in from outside.'

'Egyptian civilization was foreign, not indigenous?'

'Of course! Nothing of worth could have emerged from Black Africa; its peoples are lazy, primitive – no we are seeing the importation of civilization from further north, from Europe...what of worth ever came out of Africa?'

Tolkien reddened and bit his tongue. I came out of Africa, he thought, thinking of his first few years of life in Bloemfontein. Absolute poppycock! This was the sort of idea now breeding war in Europe, he thought angrily.

'There's a grandeur in Egyptian civilization that is absent from the primitive mind,' Petrie was continuing, 'and clearly has origins elsewhere. Do you imagine the shaven-headed priests watching for the rising of Sirius

over their sublime temples to be on par with tribesmen living in their mud-huts as they still do today?’

‘Sirius?’

‘Sirius, yes, Sopdet, in the Egyptian tongue – there is one fact that stands out above all else – their astronomical sophistication; their reckoning of the year based on an accurately observed event...where is the accuracy here?!’ he scoffed, waving his stick around him. ‘Yet in Egypt, pin-point precision...’

‘Pray, go on...’

‘The Egyptian year began with the helical rising of Sirius, that is its first appearance in the sky after disappearing from view for some 70 days. This event was of acute importance as it heralded the flooding of the Nile.’

Tolkien forgot Petrie’s racism for a moment as these facts sank in. Sirius...the dog star... and the flood.... He thought of Boann and the flood that created the Boyne...of her dog, Dabilla, who drowned with the goddess, whose path across the sky was obviously a reflection of the river on earth. Should I tell him, he wondered, that elements of his precious Egyptian myth are also found amongst such ‘primitives’ of prehistoric Britain?

‘And so, they built their temples oriented to the exact point of the rising of this star on that date...’ Petrie continued, ‘the herald of the Nile flood...which they saw represented in heaven as the Milky Way... beside which Sopdet majestically resides.’

‘And how was this Sop...?’

‘...Sopdet...’

‘Sopdet, depicted – a dog?’

Petrie chuckled. ‘A dog! No. Canis Major is the Roman name for the constellation. Sopdet, my good man, was depicted either as a female figure, usually interpreted as the goddess Isis, and otherwise a couchant white cow in a boat, such as depicted famously at Dendera.’

White cow... Boannd; Good Lord! Tolkien thought; as if the dog-star and flood wasn’t enough, here we find the Lady herself.

(author's note: it wasn't for another three decades after this event that archaeologists discovered Boann's 'dwelling', the passage-grave of Newgrange, known in Irish as Brú na Bóinne, 'womb of the white cow', was aligned on the winter solstice sunrise and the rising of Sirius – this would have been even more ammunition for Tolkien...as would the date - most of these British sites pre-dated the Pyramids; West Kennet predated them by 1100 years...)

'Interesting; white cow...' he said, trying to prod Petrie for more information. 'What would be the connection between the cow and the stars, then, I wonder?'

'The cow is a very important symbolic image in Egypt, and often associated with the sky; Isis, I have mentioned; the goddess Nut, who is the Goddess of the Milky Way, is also often depicted as a cow stretched out over the heavens with stars along her belly, or with each of her feet in the four corners of the sky... or there is the Goddess Hat-Hor, they are all related, Hat-hor appears with cow's ears and horns, and is probably the cow-goddess Ashtaroth or Ishtar of Asia; she swallows the sun each night and gives birth to it each morning at daw; her very name means 'house of Horus', that is House of the Sun, roughly speaking; what else is the sky but this, a house for the sun?' he said, the corner of his mouth curling, enjoying his own deduction.

At mention of the sun he turned his sun-brown face heavenwards, frowning at the pale disc that still offered little warmth through the mist that still clung to the circle and river valley.

'... and so,' Tolkien asked, trying to keep composed, 'as you had hoped to find evidence that Silbury had some connection to Egypt, how would you have felt if there had been survivals of myth here, and you had been able to link these sites here with, say, the flooding of a river, and a white cow, linked to the Milky Way and Sirius?'

'My good man, I would have felt justified in my assumptions, and it would have been of unprecedeted importance in my theory that culture had been spread wide by what I term the 'Dynastic race'! But there is no such link. No such myth. No Pharaoh, I fear, lies in state in Silbury awaiting discovery, for all the tales of gold-clad kings buried within – though I continue to hope. And for all Keiller's enthusiasm over this crude circle, this is a site of little importance in the history of western civilization... granted it is of local interest, but compared to Neqada, or Abydos or Tanis...' he grimly shook

his head. ‘They couldn’t even align it properly north!’ he laughed, ‘it is skewed, as one might expect of such primitive work.’

Tolkien did his best not to smile as he bade Petrie adieu and shuffled away to re-join Lewis and Barfield.

‘Tell me, Jack’ he said, ‘is it wrong to withhold what one believes to be a fact of great importance if one believes that fact will be misused by the recipient?’

Jack shrugged and coughed.

‘I don’t know, and I don’t feel well enough to really think about it either. It’s grown very cold and I think I may have to repair to bed; my throat is agony!’

Barfield looked over at Petrie and smiled.

‘I take it you mean your discoveries about the Kennet?’

‘Indeed. I fear they would be used in this instance to justify a rather racist and inaccurate interpretation of the site.’

‘Then I would say you are at liberty to remain silent.’ He clapped Tolkien on the back, but Tolkien’s frown remained.

Walking a few yards behind Lewis, Barfield turned to Tolkien with a look of concern on his face.

‘What is it, Ronald? Did what he say bother you that much?’

Tolkien shook his head. ‘No, foolish opinions don’t bother me; it’s just I was thinking of my work... you remember a little while ago when I read my Eärendil poem at the Inklings?’

Barfield nodded.

‘And how I said it was an explanation of the appearance of a certain star – and how he came as a herald of a new birth to come, of hope after the flood...’

‘Yes, I recall that...the flood that drowned Numenor.’

Tolkien didn't continue; he paused and prodded the ground before him with his walking stick

'Ronald?'

'It's...it's just... what when something you tell yourself is just a product of your imaginings.... rests on foundations...or seems to...' he cleared his throat.

'what if you were to invent a story only to discover it's been told before, long ago, and not just once, but many times... what does that say about the source of your creativity, of the story? I mean it's not exact – but the themes – the flood, the herald in the form of the star... even the star as a mariner...what if it's not so much invention as uncovering, or remembering? Somehow hearing the distant echo of some ancestral voice?'

And Barfield suddenly understood Tolkien's fraught expression was not so much that of concern but of bemused shock.

'And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far; Ancestral voices prophesying war! Barfield said.

'I think I need a pipe!' Tolkien said. 'And a beer.'

## **Chapter 26: The Hollow Hill**

The street was empty now of the tourist cars that had lined it earlier, and a sense of calm had descended within the circle. Conall stood for a moment at the junction of Church Street, fighting the urge to walk down to the cottage and see if Shen was in. He'd be seeing her later, he reasoned, and besides, what if Hayden had decided to come back after his shift? Despite telling himself he was okay with the situation, a wave of emptiness in his stomach showed him that this wasn't really the case.

The strange twisted feeling inside strengthened his resolve to continue, as planned, to the Red Lion.

Shenandoah! He hadn't been able to get her out of his thoughts this day. He had allowed himself to think of her more than he should have – it was like a good pain – like scratching an itch or a chilblain – pleasurable but painful at the same time.

He had gone back to his van and dozed for a while after visiting the Long-Barrow, but Shen had crowded into his thoughts and he had allowed himself the unimaginable – to remember in detail, despite having repressed the thought for so long, the events of that day the previous May when he'd walked with her to the Swallowhead spring and they'd sat on the stones in the stream and paddled their feet in the icy water.

...

The sight of her little white feet moving hither and thither in the brook had made him feel both strangely happy and weak at the same time; he'd longed for their feet to touch, but he hadn't dared move closer to her; she had turned her head to one side and looked at him with an expression of curiosity and amusement which he'd not been able to read. Still her feet,

small and delicate like a child's, moved slowly, stirring clouds of chalk from the bottom of the stream. She seemed to be waiting for him to do something but a few moments passed and others had come and crossed the stones, and so they had continued up towards West Kennet with a silence between them and a growing tension, fuelled by unspoken and un-acted upon desire. The ground was covered in clover, and he wished he hadn't put his boots back on - he longed to feel the earth under his bare feet, to feel connected to the being on which they trod, that fed them, and had ultimately brought them into being.

On the banks of the barrow they had sat, catching their breath under the warm sun; he had lain beside her in the long grass, the skylarks tumbling above them, as his heart beat wildly and his mouth became dry, and he wished he had the courage to do or say something - yet he lay there in a maddening state of torpor until she had smiled and said, simply, 'You can kiss me, you know.'

He had smiled and refused, saying if he kissed her now she'd never know whether he'd done it because she had asked or because he had wanted to, to which she laughed, agreeing - but she had given him the go ahead, and the nervousness he had felt, which had been founded on doubt that she felt anything like the same as him, dissolved. And so a few minutes later, as she lay with her eyes closed against the high afternoon sun he leant over her, and brushed her mouth with his, his chest pounding with anxiety and happiness; and with a trembling hand he stroked her soft cheek. He had kissed her again, her hair in the breeze ticking the side of his face - he pulled back to move it aside, and she had said that it was annoying; 'No, it's beautiful' he had replied.

After a while she had stroked his hair and then turned and lent on her elbows, and had pulled her bag towards her, telling Con she had something for him.

'I found this yesterday when I was walking back from Silbury. I thought I might give it to you.'

It was a cream coloured feather with smudges of chocolate brown along the edge of one side - an owl's feather. He took it in his hands and twirled it about, then had stroked her cheek with it and placed it in her hair, smiling.

'Thank you' he had said, 'you look like one of your ancestors.' and had held her gaze; different now that the tension had gone and he could look at her

fully, still scared a little, still nervous of this beautiful woman; how lovely it had been to look into those chocolate eyes, that sometimes seemed almost black, sometimes amber; but now in the sunlight were like pale autumn leaves; and the joy he felt when they closed as she had moved towards him and kissed him again; a gentle brushing of the lips, no more, and his hand holding her hair against her cheek.

...

Such joy and promise – that it should have come to nothing; that it should have been tainted by his folly. That he should lose her; and find her again but too late, as she was with another; another for whom she would close her lovely eyes when they kissed...

The knot in the stomach was like a knife.

The beer was cold, and he took a few large gulps then carried it to his usual chair beside the window. Taking his notebook from his jacket pocket he opened it on the notes he'd made earlier that afternoon from a letter of Tolkien's, now safely ensconced in his camper.

He'd not written out all of the letter – just the salient parts – the things he'd puzzled over; here, again, was a mention of the Kennet, but related to an old poem he'd not heard of before 'The Pearl' – but the imagery of which had sent shivers through him, with its talk of loss, and of the hope of finding again, in some future, those who had departed this world.

That image of stones glimmering like shining stars in the stream...

It had been the October before she died.

Melissa and her husband had bought an old cottage on the North Welsh hills above the River Ogwen, a few minutes' drive out of Bangor where Melissa had begun to study for a degree in Celtic. There had been room in the house to stay but Conall had chosen to stay in the caravan in the garden – partly so he didn't have to live under the same roof as that prick Anthony, but partly because here he could see the peaks of the Carneddau mountains; once, when they were turned copper by the setting sun he imagined they were peaks of a vast rising tidal wave, and felt a sudden thrill of panic.

Melissa had seemed happy then; dreamy, even. Anthony still argued and put her down, but she seemed not to rise to it; and one evening, when Anthony had got drunk and fallen asleep, Con and Melissa had driven to a destination she had teased would be something he would absolutely love... They had crossed Menai bridge and headed south, parallel to the Menai Straits; after ten minutes or so they had turned north-west and had parked in a small lane in flat farmland. The sun had nearly disappeared, but there was enough light to cross the field and take the path beside a small stream. Melissa had called Con to the stream's edge and taking off her shoes waded in and bent over, feeling the riverbed for something; smiling, she had come back to the bank with her treasure – a couple of quartz crystals.

'This river – it's the Afon Braint – named after a goddess! This is Holy Mother Brigantia, the High One, and look – here are her star-stones!' she beamed at him.

Con had raised his eyebrows and smiled, watching her wading out of the water, her massed dark curls flopped over her face.

'You seem happier.'

'I am. The muse has returned...' she said, her blue eyes flashing.

'You're writing songs again? No wonder Anthony is moody!'

'Anthony doesn't know.' She said, shooting him a serious look that told him that he should not mention any of this to the absent man, who had never encouraged her musical ambitions, though had always been happy to enjoy the money it brought.

She had put her boots back on and lead Con away from the stream towards what appeared to be a low hillock in a field of short grass in a neighbouring field, not far from a number of farm buildings; a herd of cattle eyed them as they approached, lowing nervously. Walking closer, however, Con had soon seen that the mound was ringed by grey stones, set within a perfectly circular bank – and to its north east a stone lined squat doorway, leading into the dark interior of the green belly-like rise of the earth:

'Bryn Celli Ddu – the mound in the dark grove – the womb of the mother...' Melissa whispered.

'Jesus, Mel! I wanted to find this place while I was up here!'

'You've heard of it?' she asked, surprised.

'Course. I am doing my PhD on these sites, you know, you twat!'

'Oh, I thought you were just doing henges...'

'Yeah...duh!', he said, pointing at an information board that stood near the perimeter fence. He gestured at a reconstruction of the building of the mound, with the first image clearly showing the site as a henge with a stone circle, before the later passage-grave, the mound, had been built.

'Might help if you read these things,' he said sarcastically, 'it started as a henge.'

She spun on the spot. 'I don't want other people's ideas crowding out my own,' she grinned; 'so, how old is it, Doctor?'

'Oh, about four thousand years. And it's aligned on midsummer sunrise.'

'The passage? How fucking cool! I didn't know that!'

'No, they cunningly hide such information in books and on information boards.' He mock-chided. 'It is cool, but a bit of a pisser for me...'

'Why?'

'Because I'm arguing that midwinter was more important date.' He explained. 'But it's a later site, the mound at least, than some of the other sites I've looked at, so I'll let the builders off... Newgrange, in Ireland, is just like Bryn Celli, but it points to the midwinter sunrise...'

Mel was twirling about pointing... 'So that's... south-east, yeah?'

Con nodded. 'Whereas this chamber...'

'Is north-east...' she finished. 'Does it still align? – I mean, I remember you mentioning the stars moving over time?'

'It still aligns; the stars move, but not the sun, which is why Stonehenge is still aligned on the solstices.'

'Fuck. Can you remember that solstice at Glasto?' she laughed. They'd been camping on site the year she'd played – having refused to be put-up elsewhere and flown or driven in. Con had delighted in the kudos of being seen in the company of Mellifluous... but Mel herself had found it increasingly uncomfortable, the constant recognition. They'd gone to the purpose-built stone circle away from the main stages, and got hideously drunk, dancing in the firelight with the crusties to the sound of numerous drums; then some travellers tore down one of the main fences and hundreds broke in before security could stop them, and Con and Mel had gone back to their tents to find they had been broken into and half his stuff nicked. Rock 'n' Fucking Roll... bastards...

...

'We'll have to come here at midsummer, Con!' she had cooed, approaching the twilit mound.

Bowing their heads they had gone inside the low passage, feeling their way in the dark, their hands either side on smooth, damp walls; crouching low they had reached an internal chamber, its back side was open to the sky where only half the mound had been reconstructed; originally they would have been at the heart of the mound, earth on all sides, but the modern rebuilding had left half open to lend light to the chamber. At its centre stood a stone the size of a grown man or woman, smooth, like a fossilised trunk of a tree; Melissa had placed her arms around the stone and kissed it.

'Holy Mother Brigantia!' she had said, and taking the quartz stones she had gathered from her pocket she had struck the two together – causing a spark – but no ordinary spark – a flash, like lightning within a storm cloud – but from inside the stones rather than outside. She did it again. A smell of acrid burning hit his nostrils.

'Mother stones... stones of light.... Stars in river of the night...' she had said. And all the while, the pillar, like Lot's wife, stood before her, just visible in the half-light of evening. Con looked up through the gap in the chamber; the star Altair shone in the south, below the cross of Cygnus, taking flight through the faint blush of the Milky Way that had just begun to become visible above him, and a paleness to the east heralded the rising of the moon, still hidden behind the trees.

'This is a palace of the Sidhe; a doorway to the fairy realm; the mother's blessing, the bendith y mamau dwell here – and have done for all time...I saw a fairy once...'

Con had looked at the ecstatic look on her face. Kooky as ever, he had thought.

'It wasn't like Tinkerbell...' she said, 'it was in a field near here; it was like the earth, and was dancing in the field, kind of jumping around...somersaulting.'

'Like the earth?'

'Earthy, kind of reddish-brown... like one of those bog bodies they've found...not small, not tiny, I mean... 4 foot high or so? There's an Irish folktale I read about, the tale of Selena Moor, where a woman is held captive by the fairies and explains to her human lover that the fairies were star-worshippers who lived long ago... I think they're the spirits of the people who built these mounds and still dwell here...'.

'As ghosts?' Con had asked.

Mel had shrugged. 'What is a ghost? I think it's all consciousness on some level... maybe when you die you can become fixed to some part of the land – a tree, or hill, stream, maybe. Maybe you just blend into the consciousness behind everything; so, there's no difference between ghost, human, spirit, fairy, whatever...'

She opened her blue eyes wide and stood, arms outstretched; the silver and blue dress she'd casually thrown on under a thick crochet cardigan hanging loose like the robe of some ancient priestess.

'I call thee, beautiful ones, Lordly Ones, that dwell in the hollow hills. Inspire me; give me voice!' and as she clashed the stones together above her head, causing them to flare, she began to chant, her voice high, ethereal, in words Con couldn't understand.

'Dewch Bendith y Mamau; dewch in mewn; I'r fryn yr hen bobl... ellyllon, ellyllon... dw'i'n eisiau bwyta... y pair dadeni...' she half-sang, in the broken Welsh she was beginning to learn...

He had lit a cigarette and she had frowned, continuing to sing, but ushering him towards the gap in the chamber, wrinkling her nose.

And then the chamber lit up as the lights in the yard of the farmhouse in the next field went on, and Con and Melissa had stifled laughter, suddenly quiet.

'That farmer's going to think he's heard the fairies!' Con grinned. Then he frowned - 'he's not going to come in here with a gun, is he?'

'This is Wales, you dick, not the Wild West!'

'Mel, I'm pleased you're happier.' Con had said, when the light had been extinguished and the farmer gone back to the safety of his cottage. Mel had looked at the floor, smiled and then raised her head.

'I'm in love, Con.'

He didn't have to ask if it was someone else – he knew it.

'But Anthony mustn't know, not yet. He'd do everything he could to ruin it and I can't have that. I'm happy, Con! I'll leave him in time, I just need more time.'

Time. One thing Melissa did not have. Six months later they'd found her face down in that same stream from which she'd plucked the quartz stones that night. Afon Braint. River of the Brigantia; the High One. Anthony had found out about her affair. He'd marched into the University and confronted the new man, a fellow in the Welsh Department – and put the fear of God into him, and threatened all kinds of stuff that had driven him to end it with Mel...

And she'd asked me to come up and help her sort it out and I hadn't, thought Con.

They had left the mound to find the night scattered with stars; Jupiter was burning low in the south-east, while the moon sailed above the eastern horizon, between the horns of Taurus, bright, on its way to being full; and the three belt-stars of Orion had just appeared above the trees below it.

Mel had stopped Con, and pointed directly overhead 'the Mother above, and below' she had said. 'The River in heaven, and river on earth – that's Llys Don, court of Danu, the Mother,' she said, pointing at the W-shaped stars of Cassiopeia; 'Do you think that's why they built the tomb here, beside her stream; they saw the stones in the water, the light-giving quartz shining in the dark, and thought they were fallen stars?'

In the depths stood dazzling stones aheap  
As a glitter through glass that glowed with light,  
As streaming stars when on earth men sleep  
Stare in the welkin in winter night'

And she had quietly sung to herself a new song...

*I seek for the Mother  
To cry no more  
to find where her cool white waters rise...*

*In the depths of the water  
To sigh no more  
Lie stones fallen from the skies*

'I think they believed that the heavenly river started here... it's heaven on earth. It's the crossing point.'

'It seems familiar, Mel' he had said; 'but I can't put my finger on it. Have we been here before?'

'I hadn't 'til I moved here; I can't see how you could have.' She said, as twins they had an almost perfect knowledge of both their shared past, and subsequent travels.

But it was a feeling he couldn't shake; and a few months later, after Christmas, he discovered, or so he thought, why.

He had been running ancient site alignments through his computer for his PhD. Having dispensed with the solsticial alignments of the main sites like Stonehenge and Avebury, and finding them rarer than he had imagined, he had started to look at other, less well-known sites. And he had begun, out of interest, with Bryn Celli, looking to model the summer solstice sunrise with new computer software he had at hand.

He had phoned her, shaken and excited.

'Can you remember I said Bryn Celli was familiar? I know why. That dream I had years ago, with the horse and the river, remember?' She had.

'That was Bryn Celli?'

'Yeah. Listen. Remember it as on a sort of henge site that hadn't been built yet, yeah? And there was a river, with three cows, and beyond the river mountains with a cleft in.'

'Yep, I do remember. But can you see the mountains from Bryn Celli? I can't remember...'

'Now you can't – but that's because there's trees on the hill, but take the trees away... I've got this program called Horizon, and I can create a model of any horizon in the UK so I can plot the rising and setting points of the heavenly bodies ... anyway – I put in Bryn Celli to find the summer solstice rising point, just to check it works, which it does – but then I looked at the horizon image and there was this massive cleft in the mountains! It's the bloody Llanberis pass. It's fucking identical Mel... I'll email you an image; remember I did that painting after the dream? It's identical.'

And it was. The vista of Snowdonia from Bryn Celli, with the river between the mound and the mountains, was precisely what he had painted all those years ago.

'Jesus. That's spooky, Con. And bloody cool... but what does it mean?!"

'Oh, it gets waaay cooler,' he said, laughing. 'I looked at the alignment of the Llanberis pass – and from the site of Bryn Celli it marks the exact rising point of the midwinter sunrise.'

Mel had gone quiet.

'I think,' Con continued, 'that they built the site there because it marked the point from which the midwinter sun could be seen rising from between the two highest peaks in Snowdonia; it can't be a coincidence... Why the fuck did I dream it? And what does the river turning to milk mean?"

Mel spoke up – 'if it's the Braint, then the goddess in your dream must have been Brigantia.'

'I suppose so, but why did I go into the water? What does it mean, ultimately?"

He didn't know. But he knew something about the sun...

His research had already uncovered many examples of the imagery of the sun rising or setting between two peaks – in a number of ritual sites such as in Orkney, where the Hills of Hoy framed the setting of the midwinter sun as seen from the Stones of Stenness; it was a common theme; the sun rising out of twin hills was even found in Egyptian and Minoan art. Or the cave from which Amaterasu, the Japanese sun-goddess had been released; the walls of the cave, broken out of the earth... and the silhouette of the mountains as seen from this point on Anglesey was as perfect a rendition of this ancient symbol as one could hope to see...

The night after he had rung her again...

'Mel, in the Bronze Age the sun was linked to the horse... there's a bronze chariot from Denmark called the Trundholm sun chariot, and it's pulling the sun along on, like, a small cart; it's in Norse myth, too, the sun that bears the sun and moon – and in my dream – I look up at the cleft, get out of the river, and there's a horse with a moon between its brows – it's like it's telling me to look at these old mythic images... it was there, 20 years ago, the cleft in the mountains of a site I'd never seen, being link to the astronomical or mythic imagery of the rising of the sun... and now I'm doing my doctorate on this stuff and the dream is coming true...what, Mel, is telling me these things, and why?"

'So, what about the milk in the river?' she had asked, 'if the rest is true, then that ought to be, too. Maybe that'll answer the question, or at least help.'

'That's what I need to look at next.' he had said.

'Speak to you tomorrow night!' she had joked, but she didn't have to wait that long; it was 7 the next morning when he rang her. He hadn't slept; he had been awake all night, trawling through books, articles and the internet...

And then he told her he'd found it; if not the 'why', he had at least found what seemed to be a stunning parallel to the milk in the river image...but now, sitting in the Red Lion a year and a bit later, he wished to god he hadn't ever looked at it; for what else had put the idea in her head about going back to the river and submerging herself in the water, than his insistence on the magical nature of the dream?

'I've got it, Mel, I've found a story that fits the river of milk... like really fits it...a Celtic tale, Irish...'

...

The image from the Pearl poem flashed once more again in his mind's eye: the gleaming stones in a river that separated this world from paradise; and on its other bank a girl -

*Bot the water was depe, I dorst not wade.*

But the water was deep, I dared not wade...

Not that deep, he thought, swallowing the last of his now lukewarm beer; mid-shin deep, he recalled; but deep enough to drown in if you have a belly-full of alcohol and a heart heavy with sorrow and a bag full of quartz stones to weigh you down.

## **Chapter 27: The Red Lion**

The interior of the Red Lion had grown dark now that the day had become unexpectedly overcast, the breeze that had blown away the mist having brought with it rain from the west. It was shortly after four, but already the gas-lamps had been lit. Lewis sat frowning beneath the window, nursing a brandy, and Barfield sat in silence beside him while Tolkien was at the bar ordering another pair of half-pints for the two well men of the party.

Tolkien returned to the table, glasses in hand.

‘Dynastic race! Why must it all be about race?’ Tolkien was muttering.

Barfield sipped his drink.

‘Race, *per se*, is not an issue. It’s the idea that certain races possess superiority.’ He said.

Tolkien nodded and lit his pipe.

‘It’s that same naivety I’ve been fighting against for years – the idea that the myths and literature of the Classical world are superior to those of the old pagan North... imagine what has been lost to us because of this!’

He glared down at his drink.

‘I’m thinking of our native bards silenced in their halls – first by their Norman lords who didn’t want to hear the hero tales of a people they had conquered... and then poets such as Chaucer deciding to tell of Troilus and Cressida rather than of Wade’s boat... and Shakespeare! What traditions was he heir to, yet spends his time on whimsical comedies and history plays, and does not tell us why Child Roland to the Dark tower came...and that’s why I...’

‘Why what, Ronald?’

Tolkien chuckled.

'It's a hard admission, Owen... you see in my naïve youth I imagined that perhaps I, that I could piece together the fragments we had – that I could rebuild what had been lost; that I could make a mythology for England!' he laughed again, but as he did so he looked deep into Barfield's eyes.

'But you see,' he continued 'I never felt like I was imagining... I always felt like I was uncovering something true, not historically true as such, not necessarily – but something valid on another level.'

Barfield smiled. 'Which is why...'

'Yes,' Tolkien continued, 'which is why the legends of this place, that tie in so well with my own, have made me wonder about the source of my stories. What exactly am I uncovering? I feel like Keiller, digging up stones and trying my best to restore them to their proper place...'

'You are, Ronald, an archaeologist of legends!' he raised his pint.

'Ha! A bungler, a treasure hunter, perhaps!'

Lewis, who had remained quiet through this exchange, was swilling his brandy around the glass in a cupped hand to warm it.

'No, it's no use. I shall have to retire.' He announced; 'This has done little to help my throat and only made me sleepier! I am off to Church Cottage to rest. I'm glad we decided to stay to watch the stone lifting tomorrow – I simply am in no fit state to walk any further today.' And he rose, put on his hat and left the pub.

'Poor Jack.' Owen said simply once the other figure had gone.

'Shall we?' Tolkien said, pointing at a newly vacated pair of seats away from the window in front of the open fire.

'Indeed!'

Their second half-pints had become a third when a windswept and wet George Mac Govan-Crow entered the bar and seeing the two men asked if he could join them.

'That's my jobs done for the day; I was only part way through trimming the hedge at the Manor but his lordship let me go early.'

'Very generous of him' said Owen, looking at the bedraggled figure.

'Perhaps not generous. It has nothing to do with the rain – more to do with wanting me out of the way.'

Tolkien raised his eyebrows. 'Why so?'

George drank deep and laughed.

'He has guests.'

'Aah,' said Barfield. 'Sir Petrie?'

George shook his head.

'No – Sir Petrie is not staying at the Manor – he's staying here. Mr Keiller's guests are the London friends...'

'The friends you originally mistook us for?'

'The same.' The two men shared a look and smiled.

Tolkien had the feeling he was missing out on some private joke.

'Let me explain,' said George, casting a discreet look about him to make sure he couldn't be overheard.

'The London friends come down every so often for what I might describe as some 'entertainment'! They are usually followed by, how shall I put it, a woman of a certain profession... who then leaves discreetly the following morning.'

Tolkien sat open eyed in shock. Mac Govan-Crow had, he was sure, no reason to fabricate such a story.

'No wonder you looked so amused on meeting us yesterday!' he said.

'I'm sorry,' laughed George, 'but initially I did wonder, even though you didn't quite seem the usual type.'

'I should hope not! Is there a type?!"

'Yes. Rich and rude, mainly.'

'Regrettably we are not the former, but I am glad not the latter.' Barfield said.

'They tend to arrive in motorcars, not by foot, and expect me to run around like a lackey or to take their coats and gloves, or clean the mud off their vehicles. And expect me to automatically know who they are and to use their proper titles...'

'The Dynastic race!' laughed Tolkien.

'So Petrie has been excluded?' he continued.

George shook his head.

'He chose not to stay at the Manor; he makes no bones about seeing Mr Keiller as some rich young upstart; and Mr Keiller is all too effusive about his honoured guest. I think he knows.'

'Yes, I got the impression earlier that Petrie wasn't overly enamoured – at Keiller or his reconstructions.'

George nodded.

'It's the same with the locals – though opinion is divided. To some he's a godsend; buying up their cold, damp houses and building them new ones outside the village; others don't want to be moved – but they will be – when they're given the right price... It's caused some resentment. Some on church lane, whose houses fall outside the circle are rather embittered that others are being paid handsomely to move, while they have to stay. And of course, publicity is bringing people like yourselves to the village; the pub and guest houses are doing a roaring trade!'

The barman arrived and stoked the fire, casting a few more logs upon it.

'And what do you think of Keiller's reconstructions?' Tolkien asked.

Mac Govan-Crow sipped his beer and then packed his pipe before answering; he took a pinch of tobacco and cast it on the fire, muttering

under his breath.

'A few years ago, before all of this, when the ditch was overgrown and littered, and the stones lay buried or cast aside... the place felt sad; neglected. I come from a tradition where the earth is sacred, and certain places put aside for that sanctity to be remembered. I believe this was once such a place, and to see the place gone to seed was not good for the soul. I've been to London and seen the rows upon rows of dirty houses; places that were once green and beautiful are now growing dirty; I think it no bad thing that this place should be kept, or rather, returned to how it was.'

'Hear, hear!' said Tolkien, raising a glass. 'Though I did not enjoy watching trees being cut down atop the circle banks.'

George nodded.

'True. He could have cleared out the mess that man had made and let nature remain where she had set her house. There was a yew tree in the Manor grounds that Mr Keiller told me to remove, but I did not. He said it was dead, but I told him that this was not the case, that this is how yews grew - and that it was hundreds of years old.'

'And how did he take that?'

'I told him if he wished it cut down he should ask another man to do it. He seemed annoyed for a while but then amused. *Io Saturnalia* was his response, which he had to tell me was an old Roman festival in which the servants became the masters.'

'Ah, so a learned man, despite appearances?' Barfield said.

'A very well read man, and educated. If he was not the son of rich parents he would no doubt have been a scholar; but money can spoil a man - and loosen his morals if one needs not work and can afford to play -.'

'A scholar of what?' Tolkien asked.

'He has an interest in old religions.' George said. 'Old cults.'

Tolkien looked surprised.

'I may have to review my opinion of the man...on some levels.' He said and

flashed a quick smile. ‘And does Keiller realise he gives so much away to you?’

George laughed.

‘Oh, I think Mr Keiller knows I am not as dumb as I make out. I learn more from those around him than from Mr Keiller himself. There’s an advantage in being thought dumb. I am the eyes and the ears of the village at the manor, and Mr Keiller knows this – and he plays on it as much as I do. I’m the go-between. But to his guests I’m invisible; “The Indian”, and they speak to me slowly thinking I can’t understand.’

He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

‘Where is Dr Lewis?’ he asked.

‘Not well. He has a cold and has retired.’

‘As should we shortly, if you would like to eat with us again this evening?’

‘That would be marvellous.’ Said Barfield.

Mac Govan-Crow took out his pocket watch and put it away with a smile.

‘I’m being confused by the low weather. It seems later than it is. I think we have time for another drink before we need head back. Same again gentlemen?’

Anyone passing the Red Lion that spring evening would have been entertained by what they would have seen and heard through its leaded windows; for emboldened by the brown ale a usually shy and easily flustered professor of Anglo-Saxon would have been seen standing beside the fire, a ring of clapping workmen around him, pipe in his mouth, his foot stamping in rhythm as he shouted out the words of a poem he’d written a number of years before, a poem himself and Lewis had been discussing that very morning.

*There is an Inn, a marry old Inn, beneath an old grey hill  
And there they brew a beer so brown  
the man in the moon himself came down  
one night to drink his fill...*

And with a whoop he leaped, and slipped into a laughing heap on the floor, where he was helped to his feet, smiling with embarrassment, by George Mac Govan.

...

Lewis was jolted awake from where he had been dozing in a chair by the fire by the sudden opening of the door and the intrusion of three laughing men.

‘Hey! Come derry-dol, merry-dol, Professor! How fares your throat and head in this inclement weather?’ Tolkien grinned, sweeping his hat from his head in a bow.

‘Good God man, are you drunk?’ Lewis croaked. ‘Have you been in the Lion all this time?’

Shona looked in from the kitchen and laughed. ‘Be sure not to disturb the patient!’ she mock scolded. ‘And I suppose you’ll all be wanting your supper?’ she said.

‘Yellow cream, honeycomb, white bread and butter!’ Tolkien said.

She laughed.

‘Then shall I discard the beef stew?’

Tolkien laughed and sat down beside Lewis, sobering slightly on seeing Jack’s red cheeks shining brow..

‘You look unwell, Jack.’

‘Hmm. I was okay until West Kennet; the walk must have been too much, though I can’t see why!’

‘Aah, the curse of the barrow-Wight – who knows what spirit you disturbed. *Poor ill CSL, pale and cold he’ll make you!*’

Lewis sniffed and glowered at Tolkien under clammy brows.

‘It’s no joking matter; I’m as fit as a fiddle all through term time, and I get a break and this happens! I can’t even enjoy a smoke, though I’ve tried!’

‘Then we must cast the spirit out!’ Tolkien smiled, his eyes twinkling.

'Go out, shut the door, and never come back after!

Take away your gleaming eyes, take your hollow laughter!

*Go back to grassy mound, on your stony pillow  
Lay down your bony head, like Old man willow  
Like young Goldberry, and badger folk in burrow  
Go back to buried gold and forgotten sorrow!*

Lewis smiled despite himself. He cleared his throat.

'Well let's see if your spells work, Tollers; Perhaps I will have a small amount of stew Mrs Mac Govan-Crow, too. Build up my strength.'  
'Good man. Starve a cold - feed a fever' She said, disappearing into the kitchen. 'I shall need to feed the child first; why don't you tell them a story, George, while you wait?'

'Yes!' said Tolkien, rising from his seat; 'sit here and tell us a Blackfoot story!'

'Yes,' said Mac Govan-Crow. 'But it is a very serious tale and so I need a respectful silence.'

Immediately Tolkien's expression changed, though his eyes continued to glint.

'It is a tale of Old man whom we call Na'api, and the bear.' George said.

He stood and took down the flute and began to play a brief air, then replaced it on the wall and sprinkled tobacco into the fire.

'Old man was walking through the forest when he spied bear digging amongst roots...' George stopped and looked at Tolkien, disapprovingly.

'You look like you might be laughing, friend.' He said.

Tolkien shook his head. 'No, no; carry on.'

'Okay. And Old Man called out to the bear - "Oi, no-tail! You dirty-arsed bear!"'

Tolkien's eyes opened wide and he hid a smile, badly. Then he laughed loudly. George returned his laughter and continued.

'And the bear chased Old Man round and round a tree until a deep circular path had been worn away, and a buffalo horn, long buried, exposed, which Old Man put on his forehead, turned around and started chasing the now-frightened bear. In his shock the bear turned and defecated all over Old Man.' George grinned. 'That was a favourite tale of mine when I was, oh, five or six years old! My father would tell me to keep a straight face, but I never could!'

Tolkien was chuckling. 'I love these types of tales; very grounded – not overly lofty like Greek and Roman myths! But in its own way, don't you think, it has some serious meaning behind it...'

All eyes were on him.

'The tree – that's the world tree, the centre of the cosmos, the pole... and the bear, forever circling it as do the stars of Ursa Major... pursued by Bootes...'

'Oh Tollers! Does your brain never stop!?' cried Lewis, putting his head dramatically into his hands.

## **Chapter 28: The Devil's Chair**

The stone had seemed immense by day, but at night, bereft of light, it seemed even more so: a giant diamond of blackness against the pale night sky. Conall touched it and was surprised to feel it warm, still harbouring the heat of the long summer's day. His hands stroked the smooth skin of the stone, lichens scratching against his fingers as they skimmed over depressions and holes; he felt his way around to its southerly facing front. Here, clear in the light of the full moon that hung above Waden Hill, was a natural fissure in the massive rock - a cove in which was set a natural seat - a great stone chair. He sat on this natural throne, four thousand years old.

He took the hipflask from his pocket and swallowed a mouthful of whiskey, with a grimace. Then he poured a little on the stone beside him. *Slainte*. He said.

The bells of the church rang out for half eleven; she would be here soon.

'So, have you tried it?' a voice from his right side asked. He jumped and turned to see Shen gesturing towards the Devil's chair.

'No. I was waiting for you. Do we walk clockwise or anti-clockwise?'

Shen shrugged. 'Let's try both – but I'd go for anti-clockwise first – it is the Devil we're summoning! God, what if he does appear?!" her eyes widened. Conall just shook his head.

The two figures traced a circuit around the great stone three times in silence – first one way and then the other.

Finally, their circuits complete, Shen turned to Conall and shrugged. ‘Any sign?’

Conall he raised his eyebrows. ‘Maybe he’s been here all along.’ He grinned.

‘Maybe she has’ countered Shen. She looked up at him, amused. ‘Have you got any tobacco? I’m gasping for a smoke.’

‘What have you done with Shen?! You want some whiskey, too?’ he asked. Shen pulled a face.

‘I’m never drinking again. I’ve still got a headache from lunch’ She said.

He lit her cigarette, then his own.

‘Sorry I couldn’t make it earlier; I don’t know why he came back to mine. He doesn’t usually when he’s worked an early.’

‘Did he mind you coming out?’ Con asked.

She took a long drag on the cigarette and shrugged; ‘He wasn’t awake.’

They stood against the stone, looking towards the moon.

‘Do you believe in past lives?’ she asked suddenly. Conall paused, taken aback.

‘I don’t know. I sometimes have feelings about certain times in history. Maybe they’re some kind of memory. Or I’ve had dreams that seem to suggest it.’

A flash in the sky captured his attention.

‘I just saw a shooting star’ he said.

‘Did you make a wish?’ she asked. ‘What was it?’

‘I can’t say – or it won’t come true!’

‘Give me a clue!’ she said, in a mock whine.

'No!' he laughed. 'What about you – past lives...?'

'Yeah. I think so'

'Like?'

She shrugged, but didn't offer any more to the conversation.

They walked to the rear of the stone – Shen moved forward and pressed herself against the stone, much as Conall had done minutes before.

'I speak to the stones. I hug them; sometimes it feels as if they're talking back, some kind of vibration or humming. Do you think I'm mad?'

'No, not at all.'

'I've never told anyone that before.'

'Why are you telling me?' Conall asked, flattered.

There was silence, but then Shen began,

'I don't know. I don't feel you'd judge me.'

'I don't judge you.'

They stood in silence for a while. Then Shen sat down with her back to the stone, while Conall traced another half-circuit and sat once more in the devil's chair.

'Can you hear me?' he asked.

There was no response, so he stood up and walked around.

'Did you hear me?' he asked.

'No, what did you say?'

'I was just asking if you could hear me.' He explained.

'No.' she repeated. 'This is weird! It's a lovely night – the plough is so clear!'

He looked up.

'People always say that looking at the stars makes them feel so insignificant, but I don't feel that.' Shen said.

'Me neither. Did you know 40% of those stars are younger than life on earth? Life here is a bloody miracle – and as far as we know it's the only life; this planet is ancient and its life is sacred, holy – we are far from insignificant – if the cosmos is about producing complex life as far as we know we're as complex as it gets and that makes us fucking important. Insignificant my arse! We're what it's all about.'

He felt a great swelling of emotion inside of him. 'And we are all made from stars. Everything around us is; we are stars, and older than the stars. What kind of miracle allows stardust to know it exists and to feel joy at being alive?'

They stood together eyes aloft; but their senses more open to the proximity of the other.

'Which one is the northern star, again?' she asked.

'Right – you see the Great Bear, the plough, saucepan, whatever – look at the two stars on the right – not the tail or handle but the 'saucepan' bit... now they point up to the Little Bear – it's like a mini plough...'

'Yeah, I can see it.'

'The north star is the end of its tail.'

'Oh – it's not very bright, is it? I always thought the north star was the brightest star in the sky.'

Conall smiled. 'No – and the north star, Polaris, only marks the north pole of the heavens now... when Avebury was built a completely different star marked the pole.'

'I don't get it.'

'The position of the pole moves over time. Too slow to really notice, unless you lived to be a thousand or so, then you might notice it.' He loved looking at the stars.

'Which one?' she asked.

'Which one what?'

'Was the pole star when the circle was built.'

'Oh, it's thuban in the constellation of Draco, the dragon – or serpent... but it's hard to explain where it is, it's not obvious. It's kind of in the gaps between more obvious constellations.'

'Show me.' She said, and he felt her hand slip into his.

Conall's reticence was overruled by the soft pressure of her little hand; adamant not to lose that precious connection he stood beside her and pointed upwards.

'Right – see that kind of diamond shape to the left of the plough? Well – to the left of the little bear, really.'

'That bright one?' Shen asked.

'No...look' and emboldened by her concentration he let go her hand and moved to stand behind her, extending his arm over her right shoulder and moved his face close to her own.

"There! Underneath that bright one... the diamond is its head...and you can see the rest of it going up, then to the right, and down and then back up – kind of separating the great and little bears, so the little bear is almost riding on its back...' While Shen frowned at the sky in concentration Conall was only aware of one thing, the warmth of her cheek and her hair tickling the side of his face.

'Why does it move? The Pole I mean.'

'It's because the earth isn't totally fixed like, say, a globe you get in a classroom – there's a kind of wobble in its axis. What it means is that the earth doesn't point to one exact point in the heavens but kind of moves in a small circle, over time - a long time – this corkscrewing actually is caused by the proximity of the moon and is very, very slow - 26,000 years for one full rotation actually. So, one day, in about 21,000 years the pole will be back near Thuban once more as it was 5000 years ago! Do you see?'

He felt her nod.

‘So what conclusion did you come to? With the PhD.’

‘You really want to know?’ he asked.

She nodded; her dark eyes open in anticipation.

‘It’s a bit boring.’ He said.

‘I’ll be the judge of that’.

He shrugged, turned and sat in the Devil’s Chair, and she sat cross-legged at his feet like a schoolchild.

‘You ever seen an Oliver Stone film?’ he said. ‘Like The Doors or JFK? There’s always a scene about halfway through that’s exposition heavy, to make sure the audience is on board with the import of what’s going on... it’s kind of lazy storytelling,’ he laughed; ‘You know, the bit where Kevin Costner is sitting on that bench near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and that bloke in a hat, Donald Sutherland, tells him about how the killing of JFK was an inside job by weapons manufacturers because he’d wanted to stop the Vietnam War; or the bit in The Doors when they’re walking along the beach and Ray Manzarak is telling Jim Morrison how people are ready for their kind of vision because, it’s the 60s, *man*, Vietnam’s out there...’

‘So you’re going to tell me how Avebury is linked to Vietnam, *man*?’ Shen quipped.

‘You’re Garrison – that’s Costner, and I’m the man in the hat, Mr X...’

‘Donald Sutherland.’ She said.

Con gave her the thumbs up.

‘So here we go...’

‘I mean in a nutshell – in a sentence...’ she joked.

Con flicked her his middle finger. ‘Ok then then, Mrs Soundbite – the sites were built to line up with the Milky Way.’

She looked above her, seeking the Milky Way above; but frowned at her

failure, the bright moonlight making it impossible to see any traces of it.

'How...?' she began.

'Ah, no more info – you just wanted the soundbite. Leave it at that.'

'Oh go on then, give me the lecture.'

And so Con told the story of his research:

...

Having dismissed the solstice, the summer solstice, at least, as the main object of orientation of the henges and passage-graves, Con had turned his attention to the direction of the entrances set in their high earthen banks, and had found that a large proportion were oriented north and south; close enough to north and south to lead many archaeologists to dismiss them as just badly aligned on the poles; yet far enough from them to suggest to Con that they can't have been *that* bad at orienting their structures. The off-set had to be intentional – part of the design.

As he had explained to Wolf the day before, he had discovered in many sites a preoccupation with an orientation south, which, given their impressiveness, seemed most likely to have been on the stars of Crux, no longer visible in the night sky above the British isles because of precession; these stars formed a diamond shape, one found reflected again and again on examples of megalithic art, stretching from the Balkans to Britain, everywhere the new 'invention' of farming had spread... and often associated with a female figure.

Here at Avebury, he now told Shen, the diamond shaped stones of the Devil's chair, forming the southern entrance, once aligned on the rising of Crux over Waden Hill; these same stars set, when viewed from the so-called obelisk, a large stone at the centre of the southern inner circle, where Silbury Hill lay.

'So Silbury is a marker for the stars?' Shen asked.

'It's a theory; another suggests it was put there after precession had led to the stars disappearance – as a kind of memory, a monument.'

The more he had looked, he continued, the more other sites were revealed

as aligning on Crux – either its setting or rising.

‘Why just not one or the other?’ Shen asked.

‘It depends,’ he said, ‘on the orientation of local rivers... the henge entrances tend to mirror the direction of local rivers – probably so the ‘river’ in the sky will align to that on earth.’

Shen looked confused.

‘River in the sky?’

‘Sorry – I’m getting ahead of myself. The question I should answer next is ‘why Crux’? That’ll bring us to the river...’

The answer to Shen’s question concerning the river was tied in with Con’s own obsessions... for he had been investigating all of this in the months after his conversations with Melissa following his trip to Wales, when he’d become obsessed with what his dream had seemed to reveal about the building of Bryn Celli Ddu in line with the winter solstice sun, an alignment suggested by the appearance of the white horse. He’d become equally, if not more, obsessed with the image of the river of milk in which he’d bathed, created by the wand of the goddess with the three cows... potentially the River Braint that Melissa had said was linked to the stars in the sky, especially the W-shaped constellation of Cassiopeia that she had called Llys Don, the ‘court of Don’, in Welsh.

‘Cassiopeia...’ he had said to her, in one of their conversations, of which over that winter there were many, ‘...is in the Milky Way... what if this Don, or

Danu in Irish, this Brigantia, was connected to the Milky Way? Might that be the river of milk in my dream?’

‘Jeez Con, I think it could be, couldn’t it?’

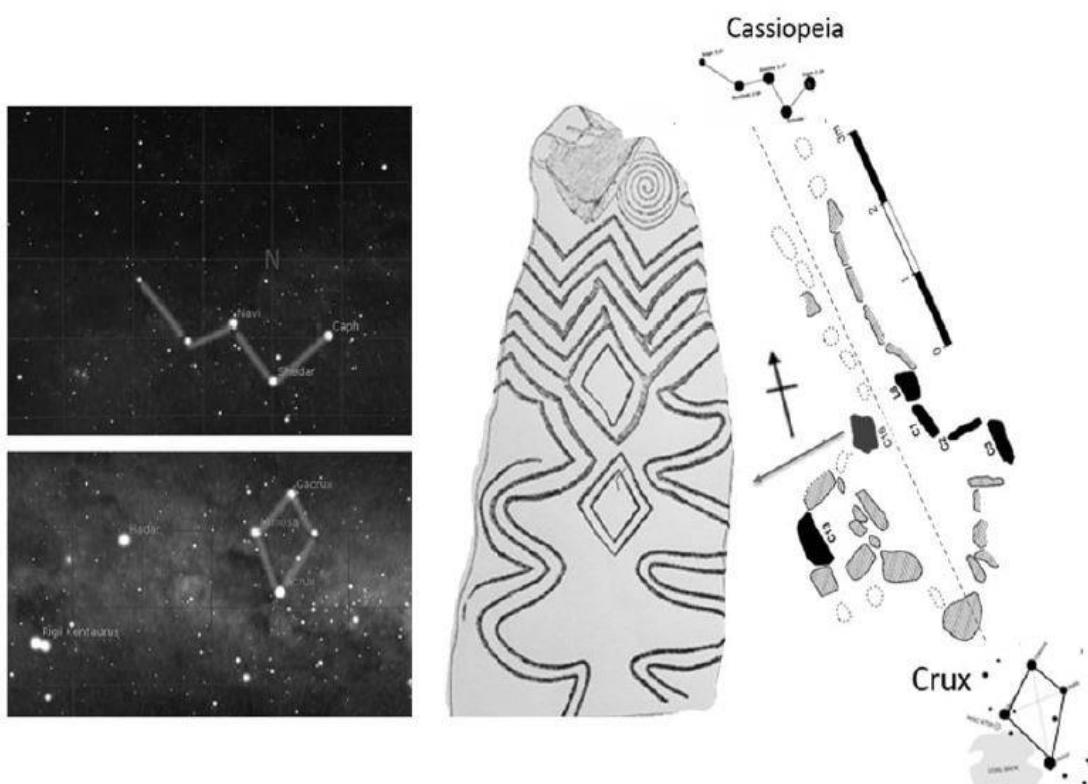
When the alignment of corridor of posts at Stonehenge turned out to be on Crux, a constellation also within the Milky Way he’d felt a giddy sense of inevitability; but it was also accompanied by panic – a sinking feeling he might be descending into magical thinking – into madness. But he was open-mouthed in wonder when he discovered that these two constellations, Cassiopeia and Crux, lay not only in the Milky Way but also at *exact* opposites of the sky – linked in a kind of see-saw motion that

meant one rose as the other set, and vice versa. And just as the stars lay opposed, so too did the entrances of most henges.

The realisation and the possibility hit him in a single, beautiful, horrific moment: if certain henge entrances aligned on Crux then, as most henges tended to have opposing entrances, the northern-oriented entrances of these sites ought to align exactly on Cassiopeia... at the same moment in time! A few mad, manic, hours on his computer confirmed his intuition: the northern entrances aligned on Cassiopeia, Llys Don, the court of Danu, the w-shaped constellation whose pattern paralleled that, he now saw, the other most prominent Neolithic art motif aside from the lozenge: the zig-zag. Zig-zag and lozenge, Cassiopeia and Crux, opposed, rising and setting, and both within the Milky Way... he remembered excitedly emailing a picture to Melissa – of a standing stone from within the chamber of Barcโลdiad Y Gawres on Anglesey, further west than Bryn Celli Ddu, but a similar type of monument.

'The chamber aligns on Cassiopeia, Mel, but looking in, from the outside, and you're looking at Crux rising... and this carved stone sits in the passage!'

There, seeming to embody all he had discovered, was this anthropomorphic stone, with 'W's above diamond shapes – both mirroring the constellations the passage seemed to be referencing, combined into a single image, with an eye-like spiral above.



'And in those days, before light pollution,' he explained, 'the Milky Way would have been brilliant; almost as bright as a full moon... like a great white path across the sky.'

'So why not at Bryn celli?' she had asked, puzzled as to why her favourite site didn't overly fit the pattern.

'But it does, the original henge, Mel – it's oriented on the setting of Crux and rising of Cassiopeia.' She had been delighted.

This sudden interest in the Milky Way had been further prompted by an Irish tale he'd stumbled upon, one that's seemed to correspond to his dream, revolving, as it did, around 3 magical cows and a female who made a river turn into milk.

It was, to his mind, the key myth in all of this – the key to the henges...

He had told it to Mel that night. It was a legend called *The Death of CuRoi*. The tale recounted how a gigantic man (actually a demigod) named Cu Roi mac Dairi had aided the men of Ulster in a raid, but because he was not paid for his services he seized the chief plunder, namely a woman named Blathnat, meaning 'flowers', the three cows of luchna (that could each produce the milk of 30 cows) and a magical cauldron; and Cu Roi had fled back to his home in Kerry bearing the spoils. The Ulster hero Cúchulainn, lover of Blathnat, had pursued Cu Roi. He secretly met with Blathnat and together they arranged a ruse by which Cu Roi could be killed and Blathnat, her cows and her cauldron rescued. Blathnat advised Cu Roi that he should build an enclosure for his stronghold of standing-stones, accordingly he sent his men away to fetch building materials leaving his stronghold undefended. Blathnat had agreed that when Cu Roi was at his most vulnerable she would send a signal to Cúchulainn who was in hiding, by pouring the milk of her magical cows, gathered in her magical cauldron, down the river, henceforward named "Finnglas" - 'White Flecked', that ran through the stronghold. Blathnat bathed Cu Roi and bound his hair to his bedpost, then poured the milk in the stream and opened the stronghold doors. Cúchulainn entered, cut off Cu Roi's head, and so regained the spoils lost to Cu Roi... the cauldron, the cows, and the flower-maiden...

'Cu Roi's fort is described in the tale 'Bricriu's Feast' as revolving *as swiftly as a mill-stone*. It moves in a manner suggestive of the sky revolving around the pole.' Con explained to her.

'By extension, if the fort is the turning sky, or a site associated with the sky, and the tale itself suggests it is constructed of standing stones, then what else is the river of milk running through it but the Milky Way?'

The same imagery, he told her, appeared in the Welsh myth of *Culhwch and Olwen*, that concerned the rescue of the heroine Olwen from her giant father Yspaddaden, who was, like Cu Roi, beheaded at her release. Her name meant 'white track', and this was said to be because white trefoils sprung up where she trod – 'But the white path is a visual trope,' Con enthused; 'it is arguably the same as the river of milk, an analogue of the Milky Way!'

But there was more, he said, his voice hoarse from talking... Amaterasu, the Japanese sun-goddess, she hid in a cave in the cosmic river to escape the insults of her brother, bringing about winter. The other gods assembled at the heavenly river to trick the sun-goddess out of hiding in hope of restoring life to the world: they began to dance and sing outside the cave until a goddess named Uzume exposed her genitals as she did so, causing other the gods to shake with laughter. Amaterasu, out of curiosity, peered round the door, whereon the gods held up a mirror, and seeing what she believed was a rival goddess outside, Amaterasu stepped out allowing her to be seized by one god, while another locked the cave door shut with string behind her.

Uzume's dance was performed over the river of heaven, in other words, over the Milky Way, which she was later offered as a gift of thanks for helping release the sun; it was, then, in an astronomically-derived myth. The name Uzume meant 'whirling heavenly woman', and it seemed possible to Con that she was derived from an image of a female-formed Milky Way turning about the earth's axis nightly, and so appearing to 'dance' in the heavens.

'Like your Brigantia, Mel... with her star-stones in the river... Brigantia! *The High One!* You said she was in the stars!'

Con had gone on to suggest an original myth in which the 'dance' of the Milky Way Goddess in the night sky presaged the release of the sun goddess, who emerged on the horizon from her underworld prison. Uzume's lewd dance, Con suggested, had an astronomical origin: it referred to the appearance of Crux, the diamond-shaped constellation that echoed the lozenge shape found on female images from the Near East to Britain, such as the stone from Barcadiodiad y Gawres, and always shown in relation

to the womb – was Crux seen as a great cosmic starry womb or vulva, a diamond in the sky...*Up above the world so high?*

His subsequent research had uncovered something that suggested this was indeed the case – and, in the circle of Avebury this summer night, he stood from the Devil's Chair before the cross-legged Shen, and began explaining it in his excitement.

...

'You see, I think this myth, the release of the sun-maiden, goes right back to the start of farming in the Near East – and if we look at the sky back then, around 7000 BC in Anatolia,' he said, his hand outstretched in the general direction of east, 'then we find that the midwinter sun rises on the *exact* point on the horizon that Crux rises in that era! The sun rises from out of the womb of the Milky Way goddess! It's the same image we find in Egypt where the sun is born every morning on the horizon from out of the womb of Nut or Hathor, the sky goddess who is both Milky Way and the river Nile!' he was grinning like a fool, caught up in his ideas.

'And Cassiopeia?' Shen asked, also intrigued by his ideas, but more amused at his fervour, 'what's that?'

'Her breasts.' He said, pointing out the w-shape in the air with his finger. 'Llys Don, the court of Danu... *Danu* comes from an old Indo-European word, it means 'she who gives milk'...*the whole of the Milky Way was a goddess*, just as in Egypt, Shen. And she dances her revealing dance prior to the rising of the sun – you see, for most of the year the nights are too short to see both the rising and setting of the Milky Way, but at midwinter this isn't the case – you can see the whole 'dance', and this acted as a signal that the solstice was near and the sun about to be reborn... the sun rises shortly after Crux sets. Hence the 'sign' given to Cuchulainn by Blathnat is of a milky river; it's the same image it's saying: *look for the turning of the Milky Way in the heavens and be ready for the release of the sun.*'

The river of milk... why had he dreamed this? What meaning did it have for him? Was something trying to communicate with him across time, and if so, then who or what? Or was it, as he had said to Shen earlier, a ripple caused from a future event... because of the tragedy he presumed the dream had caused?

'You said something before about the entrances aligning to rivers on earth?' Shen recalled.

He nodded. While some henge sites did, indeed, have rivers running through them (such as Marden), what the results of his research suggested was that what was being referred to in these tales was the ‘heavenly’ ‘milky’ river that ran ‘through’ the henges – in that the entrances align on the rising and setting points of this celestial feature – joining entrance to entrance in a shining band across the winter sky. A river running through the henge, albeit it a stellar river, like a starry rainbow, arching overhead. And in most cases the location of nearby earthly rivers seemed to influence the orientation of the entrances, choosing to orient on the rising or setting of the Milky Way to better align with the local rivers...one reflecting the other...

*As above, so below.*

‘Although it’s never that simple...’ he laughed;’ there’s more – there’s the fact that the situation was slightly different in sites in Orkney where Crux was no longer visible due to the latitude and where instead we see alignments on the star Sirius, which had taken on the former position of Crux at the rising point of the midwinter sun by 3000 BC. And there’s alignments on Orion; Orion is the hero Cuchulainn who saves the sun in the Blathnat myth; basically the myth refers to the fact that in the Neolithic period the spring sun rose on Orion’s shoulders, so he carried her from out of the underworld like St Christopher, carrying the sun, so it would have appeared, across the Milky Way, hence St Christopher carries Christ over a river...but I don’t want to bog you down in details,’ he said, unaware he’d already spent some 20 minutes babbling at her as if he’d mainlined twenty espressos.

‘But imagine...’ he said – arms spread wide... ‘on midwinter’s eve, just after sunset, the Milky Way rings the horizon, just as Crux rises and Cassiopeia sets... rings it in a circle, just as the chalk-white banks of the henge encircled the centre... probably where the whole idea of a circle came from... then later it rises, like the handle of a basket it joins entrance to entrance, like a rainbow... a river running through the henge... and to pass through the entrance is to enter the river in the sky! It’s a doorway to the stars – a star-gate, if you will! Like Jacob’s Ladder... perhaps...a place to ascend to the heavens or for the heavens to descend to the earth...’

All fell quiet within the circle. Con’s lecture was over, and he leant back against the Devil’s chair, spent.

‘Does it make sense?’ he asked Shen, suddenly tentative, vulnerable for

putting his ideas out to another; worried it all might be his twisted imaginings based on the misreading of a dream, given more worth than it should normally have had through its association with grief.

'I'm no archaeologist, Con, but it seems to make sense, to hold together. So why doesn't anyone else mention it? I mean, it seems obvious, so why hasn't anyone seen it before?'

Con shrugged. 'No one's interested, maybe – or never seen the Milky Way! Or not interested in myth, I don't know. I have wondered. Maybe after the whole summer solstice Stonehenge thing they just concentrated on the sun and moon, not expecting stars to have played a role in the sites.'

'It's basically, then, a calendar, then?' she said. 'To mark the return of fertility and the coming of Spring?' She sounded slightly disappointed.

'No! I don't think it's that simple.' he said. 'Most churches are supposed to orient on the spring equinox sunrise... and Easter is all about rebirth in the spring, but you wouldn't say Christianity is *basically calendrical* - there's always a spiritual component to such myths. You see in other cultures there were traditions known as the Mysteries – like those of Demeter and Persephone in which the rescue of the prisoner from underworld offered hope of rebirth to their followers – *Those who die before they die do not die when they die...* as the saying goes; and I mean offered a sense, an experience, of immortality. Imagine if Avebury had been the site of the British Mysteries – connected, at least somehow, to rebirth, be that experienced in life through some kind of mystery initiation, or in death...'

He paused. 'A site for the dead, perhaps – I've not discounted that – that these sites were connected to the afterlife or to the post-mortem world; like the pyramids; not a tomb as such... but maybe a place for spiritual transformation; or place for spirits to congregate, rather than the living... like I said, it's an interface between earth and sky – a crossing point; a star-gate... it's just a hunch at the moment... this research, you know, it's not finished... just started really; I've discovered what I believe they were aligned on – but not necessarily *why*... do you sometimes feel you're trespassing here? Especially at night – that you don't belong; that it belongs to the Dead?'

...

'Which reminds me...The past lives thing,' he said.

She nodded, encouraging him to go on.

'When I was a kid I had this dream; there was a load of us on a boat, a wooden boat, and we were escaping from this coastline and I remember looking up and seeing flames and the sky lit up orange – there was lava, I think, and the cliffs were collapsing around us into the sea- and the boat was being tossed by the waves; I don't know whether it was stormy or if it was just the collapse of the land around us; and then the next scene I was in a desert, I think – I was a man, a grown up, and there was a woman beside me and we were looking at a temple – like an Egyptian temple, rectangular with great columns - and I said to the woman we could rest now, now that we had preserved the knowledge that had been lost when the land in the sea had been destroyed...'

'Woah. Really?'

'Yeah – I mean it was a dream but it felt real – felt like a memory; the view of the destruction of the island was incredible; it was sublime; horrific.'  
'That's so weird – I've got something to say but you mustn't laugh...'

'Try me.'

'One of the reasons I was so happy to move here was because it's high up and away from the sea... all the time on the Scillies I was overwhelmed with a fear of tidal waves; I've always had it. Even as a child when I saw a bank of cloud on the horizon I'd imagine it was a wave and it would scare the hell out of me; even the banks here, sometimes they feel like a wall of water rushing towards me, like a massive flood... do you think I'm mad?'

'God no! There used to be this picture of a tidal wave in a book I had as a kid – there were people on the beach looking out, too late to run, and then this wall of water rushing towards them; it fascinated me and scared me and I linked it to this dream... I don't know, maybe it's a common fear; I would be worried if I lived in the Scillies – they're supposed to be the last vestiges of a once great kingdom called Lyonesse that was lost to the sea.'

'Is that true?'

'Yes – they were once part of the mainland; there are prehistoric tombs under the water there that used to be on dry land. It's said you can still hear the church bells ringing from beneath the ocean.'

Shen shuddered.

'Who was the woman in your dream?' She asked.

Con didn't know how to say it; didn't know if somehow recent events had laid some kind of pattern upon this ancient dream;  
'She was short, with long dark hair.' He said. *She was you*, he thought, he hoped.

And she was close and looking up at him; he could almost feel the warmth from her face against his cheeks; in the distance the bells of the church began to chime midnight.

'The bells of drowned Lyonesse.' He said. A slight breeze lifted her hair; tumbled across her forehead, curling in the wind – his sister's hair. He stepped back, smiling weakly; Shen looked distant all of a sudden.

'Are you happy, Shen?' He suddenly asked.

She shrugged. 'I'm not unhappy.' looking down at her feet. 'I don't know what I want. I don't know where I belong. I sometimes think I should move away; even go to Canada and find my relatives there.'

'What about Hayden?'

She shrugged. 'What about him? I don't love Hayden. Maybe I've never really loved anyone... I don't know why I'm telling you this.'  
'Because I listen?' he stammered, feeling her admission of never having loved as a personal, physical blow.

She looked as if she wanted to reply, but instead she looked away, frowning.

Then she returned to look up at him; and for a moment there seemed to be a connection, but he faltered, and his eyes flicked away, his feelings, like a ball of tension, a mixture of fear, hope, guilt, seemed to stick in his throat, stopping his breath; and he stepped back.

'Look. It's late. If Hayden wakes, he's going to wonder where I am. I have to go; she said, her voice terse.

'I'll see you at the protest?' he said as she walked away. She didn't answer.

‘Shen?’

She waved without looking round. ‘I’m tired Con, I’ll see you tomorrow.’

## **Chapter 29: Pan**

‘Poor Jack.’ Barfield sighed.

‘Poor us, he’s not the most patient of patients!’ Tolkien responded, and both men laughed.

Tolkien and Barfield had stepped outside for a last pipe before bed, and had decided to take a stroll down Church Lane to the stone circle; the rain showers that had dulled the afternoon had long gone, but the men wore their overcoats, the wind still being cool. Above them the clear spring air revealed a magnificent vista of stars.

They passed the pub, the gas-light still visible through the small leaded windows, and a few small voices still audible inside, and carried on past it, turning left at the crossroads, making for the elephantine Swindon stone that marked the old north entrance of the henge. They walked past the stone, touching its cool sides, and walked anticlockwise along the edge of the newly re-excavated ditch, the great bank beyond blotting out the stars on the horizon. Tomorrow this section would be teeming with men – workmen jostling the stone back in place, which now lay, bound in ropes, at the side of its hole – like a giant tooth waiting to be plugged back into a gaping hole in a jaw.

‘It seems so crude, these poles and pulleys...’ remarked Barfield. ‘I prefer the idea that some ancient sorcerer had them leap up and dance into place.’

Tolkien agreed. ‘Maybe the legends are closer to the truth.’

‘We both know they are. A more profound truth.’ Barfield said.

Tolkien looked at his friend with fondness. True, Owen had always been more Jack's friend than his own, and of late his business had kept him more often than not away from the weekly gathering of the Inklings – but the two men had always had a mutual understanding; indeed their viewpoints converged a lot more often than they had ever openly spoken about – but circumstances had made it so that they had never really developed as close a friendship as either of them would have liked, a fact not aided by Tolkien's more introverted, often shy, nature, and the presence of Jack, the organising principle behind the Inklings themselves, who though not consciously standing between the two men, was like the sun around whom the others revolved, their paths crossing infrequently.

Barfield's comment had been correct; they both knew that in its own way legend could be closer to truth than nuts and bolt facts could manage.  
‘I wonder what this place will be like when all the stones are back in place?’ Barfield mused.

Tolkien cleared his throat. ‘I can't say I wholly agree with the reasons behind it – but I am intrigued, all the same. I doubt Keiller's desire to recreate the past differs much from my own.’

‘Except yours is a literary endeavour, Ronald; a recreation of words, of splintered light, rather than solid stone.’

‘Words and splintered light. I like that.’ He refilled his pipe and continued.

‘Keiller has the easier job – he digs and finds a stone, and a socket, and matches them up. My stones are fragments, mostly lost – long shattered and disregarded.’

‘So you see your work as recreation rather than creation?’

‘Of course. And your own work has clarified this for me. I don't know if I've ever thanked you in person for what your ‘Poetic Diction’ did for my thinking. I'd been working alone, you see – and when I read your book, I saw that others, too, saw the value of such an endeavour.’

Barfield smiled meekly. ‘Yes,’ he said ‘words are indeed fragments, splinters of the light – once complete and shining and now in disparate sherds, from a time when a word was full of potent magic; as we have become divorced from that original unity with the world, so have our words.’

They continued to walk along the steep edge of the ditch, the spray of the Milky way above their heads.

'Not many people, Owen, would understand what I'm about to say...' he looked up at Barfield, nervously.

'You see, my languages, the *elven* languages – I started on them years ago, yet the more work I did on them the more I felt I was uncovering something true, something long lost – like Keiller's buried stones. You see, the words demanded a history from out of which they had sprung – yet I did not invent the history as much as deduce it from the language. It was like uncovering a vast mosaic, hidden for aeons, a mosaic bearing a pattern, an image, fully formed, beautiful, whole.' he lit his pipe and gazed upwards at where the Milky Way, rising out of the bank with its blasted trees, crossed the sky like a milky river.

'And all from that line from the poem Christ – *eala earendil, engla beorhest, ofan middelgeard monnum sended* – who, or what was Earendil? Why was this 'brightest of angels' bringing light to us dwellers in middle-earth? Was he a herald of the Light? I had to know, Owen, and so I began to seek an answer to those questions...'

He puffed on his pipe; his features narrowed with thought.

'The men who built this circle... what were these stones to them? Not dead matter to be shunted with ropes and levers; Keiller and his men are moving dead husks of rock; the builders of Avebury were not. What word did they use for these stones? A word, I would imagine, rich in meaning, that meant stone, and bone and ancestor and spirit... they didn't shift these into place with brute force – they sung them into place, danced them into a circle.'

Owen squinted at the stars. 'Just as the stars circle about the pole star – yes – these stones danced too in a circle, to be fossilised into solidity with the rising of the sun – like your trolls!'

'Yes. I simply had to put that in *The Hobbit* – I thought of the Merry Maidens, and of rings of stones said to be women caught dancing on the Sabbath; I wanted to express the idea that a stone wasn't just a stone, but a being, caught in the first rays of the sun and entombed, enchanted. Surely these stones were seen as such – spirits caught, tamed, trapped, perhaps. Or perhaps they danced when no living man was present; like the fairies dancing in their circles, away from the voyeuristic eyes of mortals.'

Owen grinned. ‘I can imagine the builders laughing at Keiller and his workmen, straining to lift these rocks – when in their day an enchanter stood at the centre and sang as the stones danced about him under the wheeling stars; formed a circle that aped the motion of the moon above... what is the name Geoffrey of Monmouth gives to Stonehenge? – Yes, the *Giants Dance*, it’s the same idea... and this after they are levitated across the Irish sea by Merlin the enchanter.’

Tolkien exhaled a smoke ring into the night air. ‘Merlin, yes, Owen. Indeed. Indeed. These rings remind me of Merlin’s observatory in the woods from the *Vita Merlini* with its 60 windows and doors; it’s the grove of dancing stones magicked into life by the lyre of Orpheus. I think our ancestors associated him with this place too.’

‘Merlin or Orpheus?’ asked Barfield.

‘Merlin. He supposedly built Stonehenge but I wonder about Avebury too – I mean, we are just a stone’s throw, pardon the pun, from Marlborough, and Marlborough means ‘Merlin’s mound’ after a similar mound to Silbury Hill that exists on the outskirts of the town. Strange that he should crop up here, so close to this circle, when we know he was associated with Stonehenge too.’

‘I didn’t know that.’ Barfield said.

‘I don’t know it, for sure; it is just a feeling, a hunch, but one I have only skimmed over and not had time to give my full attention.’

‘Time.’ Said Barfield, ruefully. ‘I wish I had time to think on such matters. Sometimes I hate my London life; I wish I had the opportunity to leave my career and just study and write. I feel split in two – the lawyer and the poet; but it’s necessary, I suppose – I simply would go mad were I not to divide myself thus – I’d forever be hankering to write, and so I force myself to forget it. The moment I walk into my office I am the lawyer, and I stoically bear it until I take my coat from the hat-stand at the door at the end of the day.’

‘I am luckier, I suppose, Owen. My daily work is at least on a topic that I love; but it’s the bureaucracy, the marking, the meetings – and then the demands of home life and the family; if I’m lucky I can sometimes start my work at eleven or midnight – and then I’ll write until 2 or 3 in the morning

'when tiredness overtakes me.' The mention of his family brought on a sudden pang of homesickness. 'I am lucky. Edith understands my writing.'

Owen looked down.

'Hmm. Maud does not understand mine – indeed she has taken quite violently against some of my beliefs.' His face contorted as he wrestled with some inner emotion. 'She, I believe,' and he paused, wondering if he was going too far, 'is somewhat jealous of my spiritual leanings towards anthroposophy, and so soured are things between us because of it that I dare not mention this in her presence.'

Tolkien felt odd hearing this revelation from a man with whom fate had decreed an acquaintance rather than a friendship. He wondered if it might not have been better for him to speak to Jack of such matters – and then he knew that quite obviously he had, and that Jack's own dislike of anthroposophy, the spiritual school headed by the Austrian mystic Steiner, had probably coloured his response. Who else did Barfield have to turn to?

'The wishes of a wife must be heeded, Owen, for the sake of the family – but I have found it always better, if one disagrees and is adamant in one's position, just to continue openly with that opposition than to hide one's doings.'

Barfield nodded.

'I shall not give up my beliefs, Ronald. They make me what I am. As I have said, I am sure Maud is more than a little jealous of my devotion to Steiner, and of the joy my beliefs bring me. What would she have me do – renounce them and be miserable? Would that make her happy, to limit me so she can say I am wholly her own?' he looked up, distraught.

'And Jack, of course, does not understand. How could he? He's not a husband – not in any conventional sense, loth he is, after all, to clarify that strange business with the Moore woman...'

Tolkien blanched at this subject, taboo amongst Jack's friends.

'...and,' Barfield continued, 'he thinks little enough of Steiner to perhaps use this disagreement with Maud as a lever to push me back onto the straight and narrow of Protestantism...'

The two met each other's gaze, momentarily, sharing an unspoken compliance in the face of Jack's newfound and dogmatic faith.

'Jack suffers, I would say, from a certain short-sightedness in that he does not seem, sometimes, to value the comfort that one's beliefs can bestow;' Tolkien said; 'he thinks nothing of making a remark that often is aimed at one's faith but lands on one's heart – where faith, after all, resides. I once told him of my special devotion to St. John the Evangelist, and he laughed at me and said he couldn't imagine a pair more unsuited than the saint and me. He took what was a dear thing to me and would have sullied it.'

Barfield stood at Tolkien's side, then raised his hand and placed it on the other's upper arm; an act of consolation, of comfort and of understanding. I know, it seemed to say, the pain of what you speak.

'He's a vast intellect that allowed, by grace, God to come in to his life,' Tolkien continued '– but ever since his Christianity is analysed and presented with the same intellectual vigour. But my own beliefs, Owen, these are not intellectual concepts; they are the ground of all my bliss.' At that moment, a shooting star fell above them, leaving a trail.

Owen chuckled.

'What is it?' Tolkien asked.

'I shouldn't laugh but it tickled me; before we left Mrs Mac Govan-Crow had left a jug of cold water for Jack to sip that she said was *special*. Well, I went into the kitchen and there was a milk pan on the stove with pebbles in it – quartz pebbles; well, I must have looked quizzical because Mrs Mac Govan-Crow came over and said to me that it is an old Irish folk remedy: you take nine crystals from a holy stream – she had these from back home, she said – and you boil them in water and then drink the water when cool! They're called shining stones, *cloch geala*, or something, or milk stones, and they are supposed to be a cure-all, but especially for the loss of voice... these are the stones of the fairy folk, the *Sidhe*...'

Tolkien laughed. 'How would Jack feel if he knew he was drinking pagan Holy Water?' Holy shining stones from the river that borders Paradise, Tolkien thought, thinking of the Pearl poem.

The two men stood a while in companionable silence, gazing heavenwards, when their reverie was ended by the distant sound of breaking glass

followed by raucous laughter.

'One too many ales, I expect' Barfield said with a wink.

'No – it didn't come from the pub...' Tolkien replied, beginning to walk along the bank to where a path led down to the western side of the circle. Barfield followed, intrigued. They took the path which set them on the gravel roadway just north of Church Road – a path that lead to the Manor. The laughter was heard again, closer now.

Ahead, flickering lights could be seen through the hedge that ran around the Manor House, and voices heard. There were male voices, sounding as if they were trying to be hushed, sometimes breaking out in laughter; and all the while the orange flicker of naked flames - a number being seeming to be being carried about.

'What on earth is going on?' Barfield whispered to Tolkien.

'I thought it might have been some local lads up to mischief, but I don't think so now.'

Just then a high-pitched squeal broke out – followed by a laugh. A woman's laugh.

'My word. I think its Keiller and his friends.' Barfield said. 'You don't suppose Mac Govan-Crow was right, do you?'

Tolkien raised a hand to silence his friend. 'Listen!'

And the name *Pan*, intoned in deep voices, was sent towards them on the light spring breeze.

*Pan! Pan! PAN!*

'Good God!' muttered Barfield.

'A god, yes' Tolkien whispered, 'but good?'.

### **Part Three: Ancestral voices**

## **Chapter 30: The Protest**

Conall's fitful sleep had been disturbed from just after dawn by the passing of vehicles on their way to the circle. Eventually he gave up trying to sleep and checked his phone for the time; it was just gone seven, and there was a text message from Wolf waiting for him: 'Main event at 10 – meet at the Devil's Chair at 9'

Con rolled over and turned the gas on under the coffee pot. Before long he heard another vehicle arriving, parking up next to his, and then music and voices. He threw on some clothes, poured a coffee and opened the side door to greet the day.

A camper van had pulled up beside his, and a young couple with a toddler sat on the grass nearby; the woman, with purple and pink highlighted dreadlocks greeted him and asked him if he knew anything about the protest.

'We're meeting at the Devil's Chair at nine, which gives us plenty of time to move down to the excavation on the avenue for when the Chairman arrives. Then Wolf's going to hand over the petition and we'll accompany the chairman to the museum.'

At that moment a large grey van bearing the BBC logo drove past.

The young woman frowned. 'I hope they're not expecting trouble. It's a peaceful protest.'

Con shook his head. 'No – that's not for our benefit – Wolf said the chairman's a media whore,' he chuckled 'and that the media were bound to be here for the opening of the museum. It's all word of mouth, you know –

the protest; they have no idea anything is going to happen.'

Conall offered them a coffee, but they were fine, and so returned to his camper. He checked his phone to find another message from Wolf.

'Put the kettle on' it read.

A few minutes later Wolf's Yorkshire tones could be discerned outside as he spoke to the couple in the newly arrived van.

'Well, I'm fookin' chuffed you've made it, Ian,' he was saying to the man

'Good to see you Wolf me old mate' the other replied. Wolf said 'I meant to catch up in the Spring when I was down in Glasto, but it means a lot you're here...'

'You too Wolf.'

He knocked on the window of Con's van.

'Come in. Coffee's done...Bloody Hell!'

Wolf, though it was impossible to see this was Wolf, was standing outside. He was wearing a hood of wolfskin – more properly an entire skin of a wolf, head and all, draped over his shoulders, over a brown woollen cloak, with the wolf's face leering above his own, which was hidden in shadow; he was bare chested, this, too, aside from its usual tattoos, painted in whorls and spirals of ochre, with the paws of the wolf crossed over it. Around his neck hung a leather circular pouch inscribed with a design of a man between two rearing wolves. In one hand Wolf was clasping a roughly crafted spear, decorated with feathers – the other hand, empty, pulled open the camper door.

'I think you may need to bring it out – don't think the wolfskin's gonna fit in there and I'm not taking it off.'

Con brought the cafetiere over to the stone against which Wolf had decided to sit.

'So is your intention to maul the chairman or just shit him up?' he asked.

'Hehe – didn't want to look like some sad hippy – think this'll get me

noticed?’

Con snorted. ‘Arrested, maybe.’

‘What were you two up to last night, anyway?’ Wolf said, blowing on his coffee to cool it. ‘Hayden was well pissed off.’

‘Oh well. She hoped he was asleep.’

‘He was awake at midnight chatting with me, and of course she rolls in saying she’d been to the circle with you.’

‘Well, nothing went on; he can fuck right off.’

‘Hehe – that’s what she said to him. They weren’t up when I left, so maybe they’re making it up...’ Wolf winked at Con.

Con shot him a look of distaste but bit his tongue. He thought of her words. ‘I don’t love Hayden. Maybe I’ve never really loved anyone.’

He changed the subject.

‘What time will we have to leave. I need a wash.’

‘Bollocks, man – just stick some ochre on – go as a berserker!’

‘I’d just look dirty. Look, give us five minutes...’

Wolf and Con reached the Devil’s Chair at quarter to nine. The Avenue had been empty, no sign at all that the chairman might be visiting that day, save for a cordon of hazard tape set around the excavation site. The sight that greeted them in the circle was different, however. A group of about twenty people, clearly Wolf’s friends, given their colourful get-up, were sat on and around the Devil’s Chair, while further on, in the carpark of the Red Lion, were several vehicles including the BBC van. In the adjoining section of road, individuals could be seen walking backwards and forwards, preparing for the visit – people in suits or visi-vests.

‘Is he here yet?’ Wolf asked a greying, bearded man in a tie-dye t-shirt and baggy shorts.

‘Yeah. They’ve gone to the tea rooms first, to get ready. The BBC guy said

they're filming him at the excavation site at ten.'

'Our man on the inside, hehe. The others got wind of anything?'

'Nah – we blend in with all the other weirdos!' the man laughed.

'You still think it's better to confront him near the excavation?'

The man nodded. 'The bones are in the museum, but you'll not get in there. But they can hardly stop you walking along the Avenue.'

For the first time to Con Wolf seemed a little unsure.

'Did he say if they'd be walking?'

The greybeard nodded. 'They'll be walking past us here so I guess we just follow them?'

'That's the idea.'

'Or,' Con suggested, 'you go up now and hide behind the stones...'

'Tempting,' Wolf said 'but I'm thinking if anymore turn up we're not going to be able to hide!' As he spoke another small group of people were arriving. Con scoured the crowd, looking for Shen. The thought of her lying beside Hayden in bed was making him feel sick. *Come on*, he thought, willing her to arrive.

After a short while the first of the archaeologists began to appear, making their way through the assembled crowd to the Avenue. A few of the younger ones, hard-hatted and wearing their luminous jackets, stopped to talk with Wolf, who they had talked to in the pub over the last few days. Then a larger group could be seen moving opposite the pub, joining the gaggle of yellow-jackets and suits, all now crowding around someone Con couldn't quite see. The assembled crowd of a two dozen or so people began to walk towards the stones where Wolf's band sat on the grass; they passed by without so much of a second look, though one of the two camera crews, a local news channel, halted to take some sweeping shots of the scene, a view improved by the sun breaking out of the light cloud that had been hanging around since dawn.

As they passed, Con caught sight of the man at the focus of the crowd – the chairman, in a smart black suit and hard hat, a small delicate man with the

look of a schoolboy in a new blazer, chatting animatedly to a heavily bearded archaeologist.

Con scanned the far reaches of the circle for any sign of Shen, but then Wolf was by his side and as if summoned by some silent command the protestors all stood and gathered around Wolf.

The main body of archaeologists, English Heritage officials and the press had left the circle and could be seen crossing the road that lead to the Avenue. Wolf turned to Con and pressed two fingers against Con's cheek, dragging them slowly down in a soft, cold, line. Wolf's fingers were red with ochre.

'You're a warrior now, Conall.' he smiled.

'It's time' he shouted to the gathering, whom Con reckoned to now be easily double that of the official party.

The greybeard from before began to beat a large wooden-framed drum, a beat taken up by others in the group – a slow, steady beat, increasing to a march. And as they walked, in a double line, the drumbeats seemed to echo and increase, joined by a soft chanting and the playing of native flutes.

Con felt ill at ease. He agreed in principal with the protest, but he wasn't a 'joiner', as he put it; happier to sit at the side-lines or to be up front, lecturing, guiding; he wasn't a follower, and so he felt awkward. And where was Shen?!

The procession moved from the Devil's Chair, and up the tree-lined bank behind it, from where the archaeologists could be seen gathered about their excavation area beside the stone in the Avenue – their heads now turning to see what the noise was coming over the bank. Con wondered how it looked to them – this raggle-taggle band approaching down the slope of the henge bank and across the road, to a steady, haunting rhythm, accompanied by the otherworldly sound of chanting voices, in words he did not understand.

By the time Wolf's group had entered the field all activity around the excavation had ceased and all eyes were turned their way – and cameras too. Con could see the chief archaeologist moving around amongst his fellows, red-faced, his interview with the Chairman having been brought to an unexpected and troublesome halt. The younger students seemed to be

smiling, amused at the interruption; others just sipped their take-away coffees nonchalantly. And the Chairman looked on with cool detachment, every now and again whispering something to an aide who would rush off in a flap and shout something into a phone.

Con strangely began to feel inconspicuous, as if the two lines of ochre on his cheek had rendered him invisible. The drums continued their rhythm as the protestors fanned out, forming a semi-circle around the official group, practically hemming them in against the fence that stood behind the stone. The beat seemed to increase in strength and speed, from a march to a heartbeat, and faster, until Wolf raised his spear and brought it down with a shout and the drums stopped. Protestors and archaeologists stood face to face in silence. Somewhere a crow cawed.

Wolf stepped forward.

The Chairman, to give him credit, stepped forward, too – a full head shorter than Wolf, he nevertheless looked up into that shadowed face with equanimity.

‘May I help?’ he asked, squinting – as Wolf, cunningly, had stood with the sun at his back.

‘We have come today,’ came the voice from under the wolf’s head, ‘to protest against the placement of the bones of our ancestor in the museum. I have a petition here signed by nearly a thousand neo-pagans, witches and druids, demanding that people of our faith, which hold these bones as sacred, be consulted over the new placement of these bones.’

He handed the chairman the print-out of signatures.

The chairman looked at the sheaves of paper, folded them in half and put them at his side.

The cameras, which had hitherto been on the red-painted man in the wolfskin now turned to the smaller man in his pristine tailoring.

‘English heritage,’ the Chairman began ‘is committed to the preservation of Britain’s past; we are dedicated to preserve the sites and artefacts in our custodianship for future generations, for their education and knowledge. I believe that the movement of the West Kennet bones from out of storage to a place where they can be seen and appreciated and studied not just by archaeologists but by the public and yourselves as pagans is a positive

step. I shall study your petition; we do have an advisory body that looks into the impact our work has on the beliefs of those who worship at sites such as these. If you wish I can put you in touch with the spokesperson for that body.'

Con watched as the chairman delivered these lines. They hadn't been rehearsed, like Wolf's – they seemed to flow from the Chairman naturally, effortlessly. He seemed neither fazed or angry at Wolf's disruption of his day – no – if anything, Con surmised, he seemed *pleased*... the cameras, after all, were rolling, and he'd been given the chance to put forward his policy in a suddenly more newsworthy piece of footage.

'You see these bones are not just those of an ancestor of those who follow your beliefs,' he went on to say, 'but of many of us here who follow a variety of them; it is with great respect that we are allowing many, many more people to come and see his remains in this brilliantly designed new exhibit...'

Before he could continue with his rhetoric Wolf interrupted him. 'Respect?' Wolf said, incredulously. 'have you any idea what this man believed, or what his wishes would have been, as an individual?'

'The beliefs of our ancestors have been lost in time,' the Chairman said, smooth, unflustered, 'do you think he would have minded knowing all the good that has already come and will continue to do so from this brilliant new display? Analysis of his bones will teach us a great deal about how his people lived; about their health, about his own condition and the society that supported him. How many people will come to the museum and be inspired by seeing him? How many future archaeologists will find their career looking at his bones? How many lecturers, pathologists...*pagans* will be inspired by visiting him here? And what should we have done – have the bones remain in storage, or buried again where no one could see them, or be inspired by them?'

'Yes. If that is what he wanted – as I believe it is; this was his land and he wished at last to go into that earth that had long been soaked with the blood of his people. You are taking him away from his family, his people. You are putting him on display like some circus freak. He was probably a priest, a prophet – would you condone digging up some early English Saint and putting his head on display as education? No. because you treat paganism as a second-class religion.'

'I can assure you that is not the case. We treat all religions with equal respect and all religious imagery and artefacts likewise. There is no evidence saying this man was what you say. We do respect that he was once an individual – and surely by bringing him back home and honouring him by placing him in the museum is better than leaving his remains in some box in a museum storeroom?'

Con was suddenly aware that a white car had pulled up in the Avenue and three police officers had approached.

'*Was* an individual?' Wolf asked, face to face with the Chairman. 'At which point does one lose that status? Could I dig up the grave of your grandparents and put their bones on display because they are no longer individuals? What makes us such? Is it when we can put a name to a bone? What about, then, the tomb of the Unknown Soldier – can we display his bones without worry, because he has no name? Do that. Put him in a case. Stick his skull on a lunch box or a key ring or a postcard; use him to fill your tills. There are double standards here.'

The first look of anger flashed across the Chairman's face, but it was momentary, and a politician's smile soon replaced it.

'No decisions on these matters will be decided today. As I have said I shall look at this petition and pass it on to the spokesperson for pagan affairs; I doubt very much if things will change but I promise you it will be investigated. We have no desire to isolate or insult any individual or group in our policies; however, in cases such as these it may be the benefits of our policy for future generations outweighs the perceived harm inflicted on a few individuals. But I will look into this seriously; had I been approached before now I would have had time to formulate an answer. But if you'd excuse me I have a busy day ahead and there are people here who have worked very hard on this site to share their knowledge with the public, and I wish to thank them and to celebrate today with them, for it is a great achievement and our knowledge of the past has been illuminated much by it, which I'm sure you appreciate.'

And with that he turned.

Con, who had been standing a few feet behind Wolf, looked at the floor uneasily.

As the Chairman turned away one of the Police Officers walked up to Con

and asked him to step down and disband the group.

'Is it illegal to gather here, at a public place?' Con asked, brows knitted.

'We don't want any trouble...' the officer said.

Wolf, removing the wolf-skin from his head, leaned in close 'We're a peaceful gathering; what are we doing wrong?'

'Just tell your friends to disband; any further gatherings or disruptions to the day will be judged as a disturbance of the peace and will be dealt with firmly.'

His eyes flashing Wolf leaned in close – eye to eye with the Officer.

*I am the land; that is all that I am* he sung loudly; the Officer winced but maintained eye contact.

*I am the land that is all that I am*

And then other voices joined in.

*I am the land, that is all that I am;  
I am the land that is all around me!*

Wolf smiled and turned away from the policemen and opened his arms wide to the crowd.

'Our views have been expressed; the petition handed over – thank you for your support, friends of the ancestors! Now if you'd like to join me in the Red Lion!'

Wolf was laughing, but Con felt subdued. Is this all he had wanted to achieve? The Chairman had been unmoved; like Hayden two nights before he had made a number of good points – but Wolf had been right - had this been a relic of any other religious group then perhaps the Chairman would have very much been treading on eggshells, wary of causing offence. Con could sense Wolf's frustration. Paganism was not given the same regard as other religions, despite the Chairman's lip-service. And what of the ancestors wish? Wolf, again, was right – he would have wanted to be with his people. Yet the Chairman had put over his argument well, perhaps too well; this would appear on the news as a colourful disturbance that might liven up a slightly prosaic report on the head of an organisation visiting a newly uncovered burial and a set of bones in a refurbished museum -

hardly stirring stuff. Wolf's protest had moved the story up a few items but not in such way as to help Wolf's cause. Having said that, as the group began to dissipate, the call for a morning pint being a strong lure, the local news team broke from the Chairman's group to halt Wolf in his tracks.

But Conall didn't hear what he was saying, for over the rise of the bank of the circle, walking in the opposite direction to those leaving the protest, he could see Shen - he raised a hand to get Wolf's attention but the latter was in full flow, and Con left, moving quickly between the protestors who were in no hurry. In a few moments he was within hailing distance, and he found himself suddenly dizzy with happiness. To think that just a few hours before they'd been in the circle, alone, and that he'd backed away from her - not knowing how she felt - and now, having been sick with worry all morning that she had been avoiding him, just see her approaching, to see her smile - an unchecked open smile - was wonderful.

'Con - God, I'm sorry - I fell back asleep - I... did I miss much?'

Con smiled.

'Hard to say - you'll probably see it on the local news later. I don't know. I don't know what I expected. He handed over the petition and the chairman said he'd look at it.'

'Well that's good then.'

'But he kind of said it was unlikely. I don't think the bones are going to be repatriated. I think Wolf will be disappointed.'

'Poor Wolf. But everything happens for a reason. I'm sure him being here has been for a reason. It'll be strange when he goes - I've quite liked having him around.'

I wonder if she'll think the same of me, Con thought.

'When's he going?'

'Tomorrow - so one last night at the pub with him, if you're up to it?'

'Yeah, of course.'

'I'll need a drink by then.' She said.

'Hayden?'

She looked at him sidelong.

'Oh yes.'

'Not going well?'

'No.'

*Good.* He thought.

## **Chapter 31 The Spiral castle**

A pale and dour faced C S Lewis was nursing his coffee cup in the corner of the Red Lion.

'I am so very sorry, chaps. I wanted to wake well; I am improving, granted, but I feel I have jinxed our trip.'

'Nonsense.' replied Barfield. 'Had we marched on yesterday we would have missed a great deal. Maybe once the stone is put up, you'll be feeling more chipper; I am counting on it. Tonight, I think, we should climb Silbury Hill and then tomorrow, after a good night's sleep, we can head to Calne and take the bus to Wells. We shall be in Glastonbury a day later than scheduled, that's all, and we shall have plenty of time to make it to Porlock.'

'I do hope so, Owen. I'm rather excited about climbing that hill; I do get the feeling that it wasn't built to be looked at, but to be climbed. Who is that fellow with Tollers?'

Barfield looked over his shoulder to where Tolkien stood at the bar with a short man in a white collar-less shirt and a cloth cap.

'I have no idea. I used to think Tollers aloof, but I now see I was wrong; distant, yes, often lost in his own thoughts, but not aloof.'

Barfield refilled Lewis's coffee cup.

'I do wish you lived in Oxford, Owen. I'll never understand why you didn't pursue an academic career.'

'Oh, I question it, too, Jack, believe me – I guess it wasn't meant to be. I didn't feel I had much choice – family pressures, as you know. But don't think of me as despairing – when I'm working I do often enjoy it; it's more a problem when I'm here – with you; then I wish I could write and spend my days on my ideas... but the grass is always greener! You are forever complaining about how little time you get to research, how you have too many tutorials, or essays to mark – of the faculty's bureaucracy. The picture you paint is at odds with my ideal Oxford, which is what I really yearn for, an ideal.'

Barfield sat in silence, his face shadowing a gamut of internal conflicts.

'And besides I can write; I have no less time than you or Tollers for that; and what I write no man can threaten to end my tenure if it wonders far from current academic thinking.'

Lewis smiled and nodded. 'Indeed, Owen. I must say I couldn't imagine quite what department we would have to shoe-horn you into – English? Philosophy? Religion? Each would be some procrustean bed that it would pain you to lie upon.'

Barfield smiled. 'Yes, I'm a Romantic in an age when that is frowned upon. Better, then, to weather the stormy seas of my ideas alone, far from the shore, than be smashed to pieces trying to find a safe haven.'

'Ha! I like that! I've never thought of academia as a haven; maybe some isolated cove, its watering places full of washed up old salts!'

'Speak for yourself' said Tolkien, sitting himself down beside Barfield. 'I've been speaking to one of the labourers; apparently the last stone took three days to erect, so don't be expecting to see anything finished today.'

'Three days?!' said Lewis. 'Where's Merlin when you need him?'

Tolkien and Barfield exchanged a look and laughed.

'We were saying the exact same thing yesterday,' Tolkien explained.

'Now there's an idea for a book,' Lewis began, 'what if Merlin were to reappear in our modern era... why does no-one write the kind of books I want to read?'

'Then maybe you should write them?' Tolkien stated.

Lewis nodded, slowly – his eyes focussed beyond his two friends. 'Maybe I should. Don't you find that books only go so far? One reads so many books these days that tease, that suggest they're going to supply something wholesome, fulfilling, but leave one empty! They don't have the meatiness of the old sagas.'

'But the old sagas have myth, they have that rich vein of gold on which to draw – most modern writing doesn't go down beneath the topsoil; it's surface; windblown, empty. Myth must be at the foundation of a good story – so it resonates, has a sense of depth – like this place...' Tolkien said, lifting his hand to the window, 'which is myth set in stone, rather than in letters and ink.'

'The Boann myth?' Lewis asked.

Tolkien shook his head.

'That's only part of it; that's a myth for the hill and the river, but I don't know about here, the circle itself. I don't yet presume to imagine what went on in the circles themselves, what kind of ritual may have been performed here, nor why.'

Not, he imagined, drunken and lewd rich city men capering to the chant of Pan...

'I think the medieval legends only help us so far: the Merlin myth may contain elements of older traditions but for the most-part it's your usual folkloric fare – petrified giants, fighting dragons... if there is deeper myth then it lies well-hidden.'

'And by deeper myth...?' Lewis asked.

'The perennial myth: of losing and finding – of the death and the eucatastrophe!' Tolkien said, eyes blazing for a moment. 'That, really, is the core of all great myths.'

'And true myths...' Lewis said, referring to a conversation years before when Tolkien and Dyson had persuaded him that the Christ story was exactly that – like the myths and legends he loved, but true.

'Would you see the myths performed here as being linked to the cycle of

the crops, orient and immortal?' Lewis asked. 'The circles themselves suggest so, I would say.'

'Indeed Jack; I can imagine a seasonal ritual held every year here when the April showers have swelled the apple blossom and the crops begun to grow, which, until that time have been held fast in winters embrace – imprisoned in the dark earth, the realm of the dead or of the giants or titans - a treasure held in the dragon's cave waiting for the killing of the guardian and the release.'

Lewis nodded.

'There's something in the return of the warmth and greenery that stirs one's soul; I imagine it was celebrated from time immemorial, with many different names given to the *dramatis personae*. One wonders what prefiguration of Christ was worshipped here – do you think a maiden like Persephone, or a youth like Adonis?'

'Your Sulis, Tollers...was it her? Celtic myth tells us little of dying and rising gods, it would seem – at least on my paltry readings.'

Barfield lent in 'Charles Williams would know, I'm sure; that's something you must remember to ask him.'

'Hmm. I'm sure you're right. He knows the old Cymric stories best... not that your own knowledge, Tollers, is any less.' he said on seeing Tolkien's face fall.

'Remember that poem by Taliesin he enthused about – the Spoils of the underworld - *that* told of the prisoner in the underworld, imprisoned in Caer Sidi, the spiral castle, and rescued by Arthur who sails his ship Prydwen through its seven gates.'

'Careful, you don't want Petrie to hear that...' Tolkien joked. 'Prydwen means 'white face' – it's the sun ship sailing the heavens, like the sun-ship sailing through the body of Nut, the night sky...and the seven gates could well be...'

'...the seven heavenly bodies that lend their names to the days of the week...' Lewis added.

'Precisely. Petrie would no doubt decide this was an old solar Egyptian

myth and that Taliesin was heir to the Priests of Amun-Re.'

'I guess the spiral castle that holds the prisoner is the turning night sky, if the whole enterprise is a celestial one.' Lewis considered.

'Or a place from where the night sky is seen turning, so that it feels like it is you who are spinning.'

'Which, in fact, we are – not that they knew that before Galileo.' Barfield added. 'So, the spiral castle might be the sacred temenos from which the turning of the heavens was observed.'

Tolkien nodded; 'But aside from using the circle as an observatory, it's hard to see how they might have been used in rites – it doesn't explain what went on here, any more than the orientation of a church does! I said to Owen last night, Jack, that these sites, especially Stonehenge, remind one of Merlin's observatory in the woods – where he was said to observe the stars through its 60 doors and windows. Strange that Merlin should also be associated with Marlborough. There must be a link between him, the stars, and these stones.'

Lewis thought a moment. '60 doors and windows; it sounds a draughty place.' Lewis sipped his coffee in thought. 'He was, of course, imprisoned in stone, wasn't he – by the fairy woman Vivienne? Or was it Nimue?'

'Yes, set under stone, or within a crystal cave or island of glass.' Tolkien said.

'A strange myth – but not unlike the prisoner in Caer Sidi – wasn't one of the 'caers' of the poem *Caer Wydr*, the fortress of glass? Was he, I wonder, a form of Merlin, or vice versa?'

'Remember that Merlin is to be sacrificed at the castle of Vortigern, as a foundation sacrifice, his blood cementing the stones and ensuring they wouldn't fall...that surely is the origin of his subterranean burial.'

'Whereon he finds two dragons fighting...like the image on the font here in Avebury Church.' Barfield reminded them.

'It's all so confusing and muddled,' grumbled Tolkien, who despite loving the unpicking of myths was feeling the lack of a good college library to

follow up his intuitions. ‘I’m sure there is a connection between this place and Merlin, but also, somehow, the Lady of the Waters ought to fit in... where is the Sulis or the Boann of the Merlin myth, the drowned river woman?’

Lewis shrugged. We need to interrogate Fraser at Jesus College on our return. I don’t recall such a figure.’

Tolkien nodded, sadly. ‘Me neither. Me neither. But it doesn’t mean she’s not just hiding in plain sight.’

‘And Merlin,’ Lewis asked, “where’s he hiding? In Silbury Hill?”

‘Not according to Petrie.’ Tolkien stated, ‘if the myth is true, he’s going to be under stone, not earth.’

Barfield chuckled ‘And today we’ll see those stones going back in place; let’s hope Keiller isn’t looking for some blood-sacrifice to keep them from falling again.’

## **Chapter 32: The Glass Prison**

There was a queue into the new museum annexe, but the clouds had parted and Con was happy just to be near Shen.

She stood just ahead of him; he looked down at her dark hair bound into a single, long braid; and perhaps she felt him looking for she turned round, and seeing him staring she smiled and frowned and the same time.

‘Are you looking at my hair? It’s a mess. I didn’t have time to wash it...’

‘It looks fine to me.’ He said, embarrassed to have been caught, yet secretly kicking himself for his usual under exaggeration. Her hair was beautiful. She was beautiful. There was something in her bearing, her spirit that enchanted him; rendered him speechless. He felt dull and silent compared to her.

I am so quiet now, he thought. He thought back to an image of himself laughing with Melissa – it seemed a different Conall – carefree, spontaneous, lit-up. Where was his fire now?

A rill of her soft hair rose in the breeze and Conall’s chest quivered.

I’m like that figure in that fairy tale – Faithful John – whose heart is bound in iron fetters, he thought. One day it’s just going to burst. I’ve bound it so that I can’t feel anything anymore – pain or happiness.

Shen turned again and smiled.

‘Finally!’ she said as the queue began to move.

But her words passed Conall by. Her smile that creased up her dark eyes was charming – like a child’s, almost – joyous; and for a tremulous moment

Conall's heart leaped and he was suffused with an emotion that had long deserted him: he was suddenly happy. And in that moment, he lifted his hand, reaching out with the intention of smoothing the hair where it tumbled in the breeze against the back of her head. The idea of running his hands through those locks was exquisite; of touching her lovely head. I could kiss her, he thought. But then the light seemed to fade at the thought of Hayden and of Melissa and of his guilt.

She looked back and frowned. 'Are you ok?' she asked.

He nodded. I'm such a fucking coward. I wish I could say fuck you to Hayden and to everything else that's holding me back. What must she think of me? All she must see is this silent pathetic man – no fire or get up and go – happy to coast along, withdrawn and distant; but inside I'm like a fucking whirlpool of emotion and thoughts... Don't you know, Shenandoah, that I adore you?

'You sure? You're very quiet.'

'Lots on my mind.'

'Ahh,...me too.'

'Anything you want to share?' he tried.

She looked at him right in the eyes, suddenly serious.

'No – it wouldn't be fair.'

'Try me, I'm a big boy now.'

'No. It really wouldn't be. Forget I said anything.'

'How am I supposed to do that?'

'You figure it out – you're a big boy now,' she replied. *Touché*.

And internally he was screaming out the question he so wished to ask – was it to do with me?

They remained in silence until they reached the new display, set back into the modern glass and steel annexe that had been built on to the side of the

old stone museum.

The walls were covered in dioramas showing the development of the Avebury landscape, inset with brightly lit cubes in which various artefacts were placed: stone axes, decorated pots, heads of corn of the type grown by the ancient farmers of the region.

Shen gazed at a large model that showed tiny people clearing a space in a vast wooded landscape where the henge would one day be.  
‘It all looks so pedestrian, so dull, doesn’t it. Scraggy farmers in rough skins. Last night when I imagined it, it was tattooed priests in white robes singing chants to the sky...’ She looked disappointed.

‘But who’s to say your image wasn’t closer to the truth than this?’ Con asked, gesturing to the diorama. ‘If this monument was in India or Meso-America you’d have no trouble finding such reconstructions involving colourful priests. British prehistory is seen as dull, muddy, boring – more Brown Age than Bronze Age...but that’s not how I see it – I think your image is more correct.’

‘There’s an image in one of my books of Mayan, or might be Aztec priests on a flat-topped pyramid; all colours, feathers, it’s just gob-smackingly vivid and beautiful; this lot look like medieval peasants....’ she added.

‘I know. Have you seen those prints of the natives of the Pacific Northwest? The ones who make totem poles and that really cool art – like the Kwakiutl, or the Haida? There are these photos of their feasts, and they’re all in these big wooden huts, well, halls, out in the forests – and they’re dressed as spirits, as animals – ravens, killer whales, bears... they’re fucking amazing. That’s what it would have been like here... not three or four peasants in brown wondering round in the mud – but people in masks, in costume; hundreds of them, dancing, in colour – with fire, and booze and singing...’

He looked wistful, and it made her smile.

‘The singing...’ he continued; ‘imagine what songs have been lost... the forgotten carols of the midwinter ceremonies... hymns of the henges.’ Shen lifted an eyebrow in curiosity.

‘You’re right; we don’t think of the music; that there may have been folksongs that these people knew – and sung for hundreds maybe

thousands of years...it's kind of haunting. And sad. Incredibly sad.'

'That said,' Con added, smiling, '*Hymns of the henges* sounds like a pretty cool debut album, don't you think?'

They had moved around the diorama to where they had a bird's eye view from West Kennet over Silbury towards the henge.

'It says here the area may have developed here originally because of the springs.' Shen said, running a finger down the information panel beside the diorama.

'I was reading some more of Tolkien's letters this morning before the protest;' Con said. 'He makes the connection between the Kennet and an Irish tale about a goddess who loses an eye drinking from the well of wisdom. He says eye in Irish is Suil; and that Silbury and Swallowhead come from that; and that Kennet means Bright dog after Sirius, and that it's the Milky Way; wish I'd read these a couple of years ago – might have save me a bit of research time! He'd not linked the Milky Way to the henge itself – but he didn't have astronomy programs like we now have; but he did link it to the Kennet, just as I did to the Braint. I've only read a few of the letters – they're a bit faded and the handwriting is rather small.'

The museum was crowded and Con and Shen found themselves jostled away from the diorama. Con, annoyed at being forced away from Shen beckoned her to follow him into a less busy corner, beneath a panel describing the many Long-Barrows in the area.

'Look at this, Shen... remember my dream with the three cows by the stream?'

He was pointing at a plan of Beckhampton Long-Barrow, a tomb that lay at the opposite side of the circle to the sanctuary, beyond the westernmost point of the west Avenue.

'The longstones cove, Shen, points to Beckhampton Long-Barrow – and guess what Beckhampton Long-Barrow had in it?'

'Three cows?' she said, half-serious.

'Yep. three ox skulls. It all fits – the milky river is the Kennet; the 3 magical cows are in Beckhampton; so, although my set in Wales on another level it

applies to a myth behind all these sites.'

'Jeez. That's a bit freaky. You should be happy; it's all corroborating your theory!'

Con smiled weakly. 'It all seems irrelevant now, somehow, now Mel's gone.'

'It wasn't your fault Con' she said. Con winced.

'You're right, though... it's a bit freaky. Three cows – I mean, it's either complete bollocks or it goes way above coincidence; and if so – what the hell does that mean?'

A space had opened up in front of the main display: a reconstruction of the chamber in West Kennet, dark, moody and lit by hidden lamps that cast an eerie glow onto the floor of the mock chamber. It had been done well; minus the incongruous modern glass-roof of the real Long-Barrow the reconstruction was, if anything, more atmospheric than the actual monument.

Here, crouched into one corner lay the skeleton of a man – the bones that Piggott had discovered and that had been hidden away in a museum storeroom until now.

He lay on his right side, his legs drawn up to his chest – the empty eye sockets in the dark shiny skull gazing towards the dull glass that separated him from the queue of visitors; he seemed small, fragile – Con looked hard but couldn't see any sign of the arrow that had been found in his throat, lodged into one of the bones of his neck, the skeleton was too far away and too shadowed.

'He seems sad.' Shen said, crouching to better see him.

Conall nodded in agreement. 'It's like a glass prison; I mean they've done it well, but it's a mockery, isn't it? A false tomb behind glass and he's just lying there, alone.'

Con knelt to get closer – but still the glass and some three feet of space separated them. He wished he could reach out and place his hand on the bones; connect in some way.

'He was originally one a mound of bones; and there was a whole goat

skeleton nearby, too. This is all a bit clean; sanitised.'

What do you want, Old Man? He thought. What can we do to help? He found himself saying the phrase Alfred Mac Govan-Crow had taught him: *Itsipaiitapio'pah*; Old Man would not have understood the words, but he would have recognised the sentiment; we are one in the Great Spirit, the Being behind all beings; we are part of the same dance, you and I. I know you; I understand you, Con thought. We are both imprisoned behind a wall of glass; both wanting to be back with those we have loved, to escape and be free again. Why are we here when those we love have died and left us? The image from the day before rose in his mind – soma, golden, streaming from the wound in the man's throat - the creative sacrifice; the power and the giving... the act of a god...a shaman....a priest...a wizard...

The empty eyes gazed back saying nothing. Conall stood and rubbed his neck; people were waiting for him to move so they could peer into the darkness as Con had; yet Con resented their intrusion – feeling it was done for macabre and ghoulish entertainment. But he chided himself for judging. I don't know their reasons or thoughts. Goodbye, Old Man, I wish I could help.

'Shall we go?' Shen said.

'Yes, I think we should – let's grab a coffee.'

They walked out of the museum and into the neighbouring café in silence; both sad and subdued.

In the queue for coffee, his pent-up thoughts began to tumble out again.

'When I had the dream I didn't know about the three cows in Beckhampton, or that the pouring of the milk into the waters was found in myth – nor the horse's relation to the sun in myth, nor of the alignment of Bryn Celli on the Llanberis pass...'

He suddenly stopped speaking. He had wanted to say he'd gone to enact that dream the night Melissa drowned. But something was stopping him; he remembered he had left Shen at the house with Alfred. He'd been telling Alfred about the constellations. And he'd kissed her goodnight; he had gone back to the van but hadn't slept, feeling anxious, unsettled, alive, jittery – on the verge of something. He'd felt excited, like a bubble of happiness was rising within him, so he'd walked and come to the river, realising the river had been calling him and in his mind's eye he'd been seeing the river of his

dreams – and there it was, milky with moonlight, but he had stood on the banks and shivered. He didn't know why he'd gone – the coincidences in the dream – that hinted he was seeing the myth enacted, *it had suggested to him he should enter the water*; but *she* had instead. Had some cruel god been asking for sacrifice? He didn't know; he remembered the sudden strange feeling of dread he'd felt when looking in, that made him shrink from the bank. No – it was coincidence, pure coincidence. But something strange had been going on, *was* going on; the walls between dream and reality were fading; his fragile grip on reality seeming to be altering; is it my mind that is collapsing or just the laws of time and space - melting into a quantum state of holographic unity? he wondered. Even such a question seemed mad. If someone is trying to tell me something, then who and what and why? Or had whatever it was, perhaps even he himself, sought to warn him years ago, to no avail – a cry from a future desperate to change the course of action that had led to disaster? Then why speak in riddles and myths? Why not just put it plain?

Shen was still waiting for him to finish talking.

'Oh, fuck this queue,' he said, frustrated. 'Let's catch up later, I think I need to go and lie down or something.' And it was his turn to walk away without looking back, raising a hand when she shouted out after him.

## **Chapter 33: The Fort of Emrys**

The low cloud that had cooled the morning had lifted, and as the three friends made their way to the north-west quadrant the sun cast crisp blue shadows on the long grass, freshly sprouted. There was a renewed heat to the day, promising to echo that of two days previously when the friends had arrived under unseasonably warm skies.

The circle was a hive of activity; groups of cap-wearing workmen gathered about the sides of the ditch, while a number of special guests, including Flinders-Petrie, and sight-seers, unconnected to the excavations or reconstructions had been attracted by the promise of some kind of show, and the general hub-bub of excitement. These included both local villagers from both Avebury and the Kennet villages south of the river, as well as walkers and those who had chosen to stop here on their way to more distant destinations, giving the goings-on an almost holiday-like feel, in which Keiller, strutting about manically, was the tweed-wearing master of ceremonies.

Rather than give a long speech, Keiller merely waved at the assembled crowd and advised they keep their distance, though thanking them for their interest. After twenty minutes of fixing ropes to the freshly cleaned stone lying on its side, the work of lifting began.

The stone, to the delight of the crowd, lifted a few inches on each of the first dozen attempts, but after a while the act of levering, though visually

impressive, with its large wooden levers, blocks, ropes and pulleys, seemed to lift the stone in smaller and smaller increments, and a few of the assembled crowd began to drift away and seek a more sheltered part of the circle.

Tolkien, Barfield and Lewis watched in silence, with the sense that they were witnessing an event the likes of hadn't been seen in this place for thousands of years.

Then there was a sound like a gun-shot and one of the ropes holding the stone flailed to one side, causing two of the workmen to be thrown to the ground; the stone, that had been raised but three or so feet twisted on its axis churning a deep cut out of the turf and fell back to the floor with a ground-shaking thud. The small crowd surged forward; Keiller strode forward to the stone, while Piggott went to the aid of the workmen, who were laughing but shaken. Flinders-Petrie stood to one side shaking his head and tapping his walking stick onto the ground impatiently. Beside him stood a small woman in, Tolkien guessed her sixties or seventies, her long grey hair tied back in a bun.

Petrie and Keiller exchanged a few words, and shook hands; the former then strode through the crowd with the lady following him, leaving Keiller seemingly torn between following the old man and returning to the re-adjustment of the ropes; Keiller was hopping from foot to foot, then throwing his hat on the grass he turned back to the stone, chagrined.

Lewis turned to Tolkien with raised brows; 'This looks as if it's going to take a while; shall we take a stroll?'

Tolkien nodded. 'It does indeed; the process is rather too mechanical for me, anyway – ropes and pulleys, concrete – the ancients didn't use concrete...' he bristled, eyeing the sacks of the stuff lined up ready by the empty hole ready to secure the stone in place.

'No..' came a low female voice behind them; '...the blood of a fatherless virgin was much more effective!'

Tolkien turned, surprised; there, standing a few paces behind, was a burly and commanding figure of a woman, stocky in a high collared fur coat and woollen bonnet; his first impression was of a head mistress, but there was a spark in her dark eyes that betrayed a wit and fire; she smiled.

'Violet Mary Evans, and this' ... she gestured to a tall man at her side, 'Dr

Thomas Penry Evans. I was of course referring to rites long forgotten.'

Tolkien introduced his party swiftly; 'I thought you were talking of Merlin.'

'Yes, he's part of the tradition. The old ones will demand a sacrifice if these stones are to stand.'

Tolkien ignored the wide-eyed look Lewis flashed him.

'Let us hope not Mrs Evans.'

She smiled. 'I see blood under the stones; perhaps this has already happened, so we are all safe from that fate today.'

The three friends shared uneasy looks, and Lewis fought hard not to betray a smile. All the while the grey eyes of Mrs Evans coolly observed them, creasing at the edges at the men's discomfiture.

The stalemate was broken by Owen Barfield, who took a step forward and introduced his party to the new arrivals.

'We are here by accident, it seems – we had meant to be already long gone.'

'Back to your dreaming spires?'

'Porlock; that is we intend to arrive in Porlock in a few days' time but we have been delayed; we should, by now, have been way past Calne – perhaps we may have even reached Wells by now. And we would have been in Glastonbury in the next day or two.'

Mrs Evans smiled.

'*Deo non fortuna...*' she quipped; '*God not luck*; you shall still be in Glastonbury – it is where we two are headed and we have room in our car for all three of you if you wish to take me up on the offer.'

'Why that would be most kind!' beamed Lewis. 'Only we must first let our host know – we had arranged to stay this night and all our belongings are in the boarding house...'

'Don't worry. There is no rush. We would have driven past but I was tiring and we had thought to stop a few hours and perhaps set off again after

tea...'

Barfield had stood silently since the offer had been made with a curious expression playing across his features as if he wished to say something but was holding back.

'A fatherless virgin you said...'

Mrs Penry Evans turned and smiled.

'Indeed.'

'It's just that Professor Tolkien here was asking some questions regarding the stones and Merlin just last night.'

Tolkien shifted uneasily from foot to foot; Owen was clearly wishing for Tolkien to take up his story, and he so hated being put on the spot.  
Tolkien coughed and mumbled;

'I was thinking of the name Marlborough and its derivation from Merlin's barrow; it refers to the smaller cousin of Silbury in the grounds of Marlborough school – however, it just struck me as odd that in Geoffrey of Monmouth Merlin is credited with the building of Stonehenge; I wondered if perhaps a similar tale was once told of this place, too. Perhaps the later enchanter's name has been inserted in a very ancient story that spoke of the origins of all such sites.'

'Merlin, I believe, was a title rather than a given name.' Mrs Penry Evans stated flatly. 'The one who built these monuments first bore that title, one that many men later claimed. You see it means 'man from the sea' and the first Merlin did indeed come from over the sea and brought the wisdom to build these sites with him.'

Man from the sea... Tolkien bit his tongue; he *half*-agreed – the name stemmed from the old name for Carmarthen, Moridunum, the fort by the sea – and probably meant 'the man from Moridunum', the equivalent of calling himself 'Bloemfontein' ...

Lewis, who was becoming more his old self as the day progressed, turned to Tolkien and raised an eyebrow. Tolkien ignored him.

'Geoffrey does say that Merlin brought the stones from Killaraus in Ireland, I'll give you that,' Tolkien relied; 'but I've been having a long think on the matter...' he paused, wondering whether to continue. Lewis gave Barfield a

look that said *here we go...* while the Penry-Evans' were looking at Tolkien with genuine interest.

'Geoffrey's name for Merlin is Merlin Ambrosius, or Myrddin Emrys, if we use the Welsh.' Tolkien cleared his throat again and looked at the floor, before raising his head and flashing a quick smile.

'Stonehenge is near Amesbury and that name is thought to derive from Ambrosius Aurelian, the 5th century war leader and victor at Mons Badonicus – but maybe the name is older...' he grinned again 'and belongs not to the town but to the Stones; Amesbury being simply the town closest to the *Fort of Ambrosius* – a rather poetic name for Stonehenge. Of course, it is no fort, but 'bury' often also means burial place of barrow, such as here at Silbury. And if Ambrosius is Merlin Ambrosius, or Myrddin Emrys, then the name Emrys'bury' is more than fitting for a site said to have been built by Merlin as a grave-marker for the Britons slain by the Saxons.'

Lewis, who had feigned disinterest, had found his interest suddenly piqued.  
'Bravo, Tollers! I'd never thought of that.'

'Oh it gets better, Jack! Due to the law of mutation in the Welsh language an *m* mutates into a *v* meaning that both Avebury and Amesbury could arguably derive from Emrys' burial place. The coincidence of that suggests we're not looking at a name based on a 5th century warlord, but an earlier derivation from a precursor to the Merlin Ambrosius of legend, who lent his name to both sites, way, way back in prehistory when both sites were built.'

'You're saying that Stonehenge and Avebury once bore the same name?' Lewis asked, seeking clarification for his friend's bold statement.

'Yes, I am. The burial place of Emrys.'

Mr Penry-Evans, who had taken a back seat throughout the discussion, now stepped forward, and said, in a sing-song South-Walian accent.  
'of course, you may wish to claim him for your own but Merlin, or as we should more properly cal, him Myrddin Emrys was a Welshman, as I'm sure you know. And he was taken to a place named Dinas Emrys in North Wales to be sacrificed so that the collapsing castle of King Vortigern would stand; but before his blood was shed he discovered the true cause – the red and white dragons fighting in a cave beneath the castle...'

Just then the stone which had been hauled up again a couple of feet fell back to the earth with a grinding thud.

'There's your collapsing castle, Mr Penry Evans!' Tolkien laughed. 'Such a tale is often used to explain the precarious condition of *standing stones*... and as for your Dinas Emrys – does not this also mean '*fort of Ambrosius*' as do Amesbury, and, as we have just concluded, Avebury? In reminding us of the story of Dinas Emrys, good Sir, you have demonstrated that this is yet another version of the same myth! Perhaps before being set in the fastness of Snowdonia the Emrys myth was set within a ring of collapsing stones in Wessex... a Bronze Age myth carried from here to the mountain refuges of the fleeing Cymru...'

'Except for one difference...' the jovial Welshman added, seemingly not chagrined at a national myth being so bowdlerized by the stocky *Sais*, 'according to the Welsh triads Emrys was said to be buried at Dinas Emrys; you see, before Geoffrey of Monmouth we are perhaps looking at an original tale where the youth *did not survive* – where, unlike Merlin, he was killed and the stones were indeed cemented by his blood. If this place is Dinas Emrys, perhaps Merlin lies waiting to be discovered here?'

'I say wouldn't that be marvellous!' It was Keiller – who had approached during Penry Evan's rejoinder. 'Apologies for interrupting but I am a sucker for old folklore and legends, and I'm afraid I only caught the tail end of this particular exposition!'

He grinned at them all, clutching his hat in his hands.

'Might I be so bold as to ask if you would all wish to resume this topic over a sherry and luncheon tonight at the Manor? I do so miss decent conversation! There is room at the Manor should any of you wish to stay.'

Before the logistics of possible leaving times and driving arrangements could be discussed Mrs Penry Evans fixed the school-boyish man with her matronly eyes, and strode forward and took his hand; she smiled slowly. 'Yes, that would be perfect.'

'Well this seems a bit of luck,' Lewis said as an aside to Tolkien. 'We don't have to pack; we get an invitation to a dinner, and a lift in the morning to our destination without having to break sweat.' The latter man nodded, but it was Barfield who answered. 'Not luck, God, as the lady said. *Deo non*

*fortuna.'*

'But which God?' Lewis asked, as the sprightly capricious Keiller hopped away back to where the workmen were seeking to re-attach the ropes to the stone;

'this place seems full of them.'

'Was Emrys a god, originally, do you think?' Barfield asked Tolkien.

The latter scratched his chin. 'One god or two.'

'Why so?' Lewis asked, frowning.

'You see, I don't see how the original Emrys would derive from Ambrosius...a Roman name, if the naming of these sites predates the Roman period. The original name, which later became Emrys, ought to be closer to the Ave or Ame remembered in the place names, and as far as I can see there's just one candidate...' he paused for effect.

'He does this on purpose, Owen.' Lewis said, irritated, poking Tolkien with his walking stick.

Tolkien laughed. 'Think – the killing of the youth to keep the stones from falling, it's clearly a foundation sacrifice, and such legends are usually old creation myths twisted out of shape or half-remembered. Like the Greek Titans who become the earth; Emrys's killing is a cosmogonic act – and the nearest we have in the Old North is the killing of Ymir, the giant.'

Lewis's ears pricked up at the mention of Nordic myths, his childhood favourite.

*'From Ymir's flesh the earth was formed,  
and from his bones the hills,  
the heaven from the skull of that ice-cold giant,  
and from his blood the sea...'* he intoned. 'Ymir's bury...Amesbury... Good God, man! It does seem to fit!'

'And Ymir means...?' Tolkien asked, as if testing his students back in Merton College.

Lewis shrugged. 'I ought to know, I'm sure it's been discussed.'

'Twin.' Tolkien said. 'It means Twin.'

## **Chapter 34: A serpent in Paradise**

Two days before at this hour Con had sat in the sanctuary on Overton hill; now he sat in the shade of a great sarsen stone, one of a pair that marked the opposite end of the Avebury complex; if the sanctuary was the serpent's head then Con now sat at its tail, beside Adam, a small distance from Eve, the last remaining stones of what had been called the Beckhampton Avenue.

He had left Shen outside the museum. The memories of Melissa had upset him; he needed time alone to think, and so he had made his excuses and left.

The sun was high, and there was little breeze. The cool of the early day had lifted, and as he walked along the newly mown cornfields swifts screeched overhead. The main circle had been busy; a few tourist coaches had arrived, and Wolf's pagan friends had continued their gathering – having eaten and drunk at the pub they had gathered in the southern half of the circle where the great obelisk had once stood and were drumming and singing. It was this that had driven Con to walk the opposite direction; the fields running along the former Avenue were deserted; save for Adam and Eve no single stone remained of this half of the avenue, hence its unpopularity with visitors; and to his shame Con in all his visits here had not made this particular trip.

Adam was the largest of the two stones, the last remaining of a four-strong rectangular cove of stones that had marked the end of the Avenue, while Eve, a smaller pillar, was part of the avenue – and ironically, thought Con, was of the male pillar type stone of which half the Avenue consisted, the other being the vulva-shaped diamond stones.

Man and woman, he thought - that divine pairing, the great opposites in the

perennial war, the battle of the sexes. It's that war which dominates most people's lives, he thought, nestling into the stone trying to get comfortable in its shade, not good and evil, life and death. Here, set in stone, walking, no, dancing along the avenue, it was celebrated: the great war of misunderstanding and the interplay of love and lust that drove the creation of the human species. Women on one side and men on the other.

He sat upright and rolled himself a cigarette.

Are the stones paired or opposites, he wondered. But how was he supposed to know how Neolithic man had thought? Were the great rows of stones humans or gods?

Con scrabbled round his pockets for his lighter – an ergonomic smooth silver one that had been a gift from his sister. He took a deep drag and exhaled. On the side of the lighter, engraved, was the word Puck.

'You still in there, Puck?'

Her voice.

A lifetime ago.

And his grumbling return: 'I told you not to call me that.'

Puck.

It had been a different Con. Yet here he was, walking the same places, seeing the same vistas, through the same eyes, yet not his. *Theirs*. Over twenty years before.

Stepping off the train at Bristol, with their rucksacks – his weighed down with their tent – hers with her mandolin strapped to the back; excitedly finding the bus that would take them to Glastonbury. Gods – it had been magical – that summer between their O and A level exams – 17 years old, and full of the promise that youth offered, and travelling – having picked out the sites that Melissa had identified as 'magical'; Glastonbury first, then they'd go to Stonehenge and then Avebury.

It came to him now in flashes of memory – the first enchanting view of Glastonbury Tor rising like a pyramid over the slate-grey levels, faded with morning mist; the shops, heady with incense, and tie-die clothes – a strange

aesthetic of east meets folk-soaked west, that Con found too rich for his tastes. Then to sit on the Tor, that castle of winds, back to the tower, watching the sun go down – long-haired hippies on each side, chanting, drumming; it felt almost laughable, like a joke – someone's idea of a 60's fancy-dress party...

'The drums...' one man had said to him, 'just belong here, you know?'.

No. He didn't know. He felt awkward; yet then the rhythmic thumping took him somewhere beyond thought, and he realised he *did* know. And the words of a poem Mel had taught him sang out in his head

*I am a stag of seven tines  
I am a flood across a plain  
I am a wind on a deep lake...*

The night before – having packed their gear, almost nauseous with excitement, she had spun on the spot, saying how they'd set up a shrine to Lord Frith (she'd been reading Watership Down) on the Tor... 'and to Lady Moonlight... and you'll be Puck and I'll be Titania!' she laughed.

'The drums, Puck!' she winked at him, just 24 hours later, gilded by the setting sun, 'they just belong here, Man!!!' and he could see she was in her element.

Puck and Titania. Two curly-haired teens, wide-eyed, one pair dark, the other blue, walking from sacred hill to sacred well; and ever, in her clutches, a copy of Robert Graves's 'The White Goddess' – her Bible, as she called it. Her magical tome; a book of enchantments – a grimoire, and for him too – a much longed-for desire, a muse like those that had inspired Graves; teenage desires pent-up through shyness and insularity and channelled into an image of ideal femininity, and given voice as he looked skywards, neck cricked back, taking in the stars

*Ceridwen; Inanna; Ishtar; Isis; Freyja; Danu*

That night, in Avalon, the Tor now invisible against the darkness, she had sat by the gas-lantern and played a song she'd written to the lyrics of Graves's translation of the Song of Amergin.

*I am a stag of Seven Tines...*

Three years later it was being played on Radio One. The White Goddess, her

first properly recorded studio album, while not top ten, had, nevertheless, become a minor cult classic. Con was in the final year of his University degree in astronomy; but things had changed. And to think there had been a time when he'd dreamed of a goddess and a river of milk and seen it as a sign from *Her*... Jesus! How fucking mad had that been?

When had it changed? There was the academic pressure, for a start. The prohibition against making a statement that couldn't be considered a proven fact. Also the sense that he had no idea who he was as an individual, so that now, separated from Mel for the first time in their lives, he felt a need to mark out his own territory and to proclaim his individuality. He had always been 'one of the twins' and now the very mention of that sickened him. But mostly it was a sudden sense he had had, one evening, walking in the woods near his digs – a sense of despair, of feeling he was born thousands of years too late... of hating modernity; of feeling he didn't fit – that everyone else was *in* life and he was just an observer. He felt a great yearning for a past he'd never lived. He felt such isolation, watching his contemporaries swagger about within life with no difficulty; talking about sport and music and films, and their conquests... and he felt mute; the poems he'd learned with his sister offered no currency in that world, offered no advantage in finding his own goddess of flesh and blood.

That awful night he thought about leaving – leaving university – perhaps even leaving life... but caught himself in the act; a cold sweat flooded his body and he suddenly saw himself as this pale, repressed nobody; as hovering on the edge of madness, and in an act of despair he threw his past from him as if it were a venomous snake. At the same time, he threw himself into life, into modern music and all the delights of materialism. Mel didn't like the change, calling him an 'angry young man' but he felt solid, suddenly, like he had become visible, real. His old books locked away, replaced by books on science.

One evening of the summer holidays when they were back home, their many rows reached a head.

'But it's bollocks, Graves made it all up.' Con was saying, wagging a finger at the booklet of notes that Melissa had had printed for the inside of her White Goddess CD.

'You don't know that.' She retorted, hurt.

'He did – it's all misinterpretation and bullshit; he's making his own myths. It doesn't mean it's not valid as a system... it's just not true.'

'What is truth?' she pouted.

'Not. This.' He said.

'Puck...'

'Don't fucking call me that.'

'Why are you being such an arsehole?' she shouted, hurt.

'I'm not. I just don't believe in all this poetic, mystic shit anymore. I'm not a kid. It's all airy-fairy bollocks. It's just not true. It's like all this goddess rubbish...'

'Have you forgotten your dream?' she said.

'It was just a dream, Mel. I read an article on the whole 60s goddess movement – Graves, Gimbutas, the works – it's all based on a phoney premise – there's no evidence for some Great Goddess. It's feminist propaganda.'

'Then what are all those Neolithic female figurines of?' she countered.

'They're not all female – and they could be anything... dolls...I don't know, prehistoric porn...' despite his fervour he felt odd hearing these academic statements pouring out from his own mouth – statements he'd baulked against when first he'd read them. And here he was, their words coming out of his mouth. But surely they were better than lies, than false evidence?

'Well maybe they're gods and goddesses...shared, like Adam and Eve...'

'Except Adam and Eve...'

'I bloody know Con!'

Con shrugged. 'It's just that you look at Indo-European myth and it's pretty much creator *gods*, all the way down.'

'Well it would be, wouldn't it? It's HIS-story Con, written by the victors...'

Con raised his eyes at her comment. 'Oh please, Mel...HIS-story, *really*?! So,

they just erased the goddess from the old myths? That's very convenient...'

Mel shot him a glare 'Yes, I think that's precisely what happened. And why not?! You've managed it...'

He baulked at that, remembering three postcards of goddesses he'd bought on holiday in Greece, and put above his bed – long since removed and shoved into a cupboard, where he'd flinch each time he'd chance upon them, a twinge of shame, a reminder of a naive and wasted time. She had lent forward and tried to touch his cheek, her own cheeks stained with her tears.

'You still in there, Puck?'

Those times passed, and Mel and Con learned to get along again, at first by knowing what not to discuss, but later through accepting that their differences didn't mean they didn't still have that shared sense of 'twinness' they had always shared; one thing remained changed, though – she never called him Puck again. As he grew older, he mellowed. That anger that had been his attempt to grasp life with both hands, a life that had threatened to slip away unlivéd, faded as he felt more at home with normal modern life; he had relationships, jobs, and felt the easy mediocrity of his peers consume him. He no longer felt estranged, nor on some manic trajectory that would have set him among the stars, probably on antipsychotics or living in a shed in the woods with a gaggle of stray dogs.

Then came their visit to Bryn Celli Ddu. No longer irritated by her kookiness, he had, for a moment under that October sky, felt a glimmer of their early years, and instead of flinging it away from him like poison, had enjoyed the feeling, like one might linger over an old cherished photograph. But in the days that followed he had felt a change occurring; his own research, his beloved science, had started to illuminate facts about the site and the possible lore associated with it that seemed to open wider that faintest of cracks in his façade that had first appeared the night in Bryn Celli. Like the secret enjoyment of a guilty pleasure, akin to re-reading a favourite childhood book, he had allowed waves of old feelings to wash over him; and it was all okay, he told himself, because this was science... his research was based in *fact* – and if it suggested, somehow, Mel's precious White Goddess may have been associated with these sites, then he was happy for her... though bemused for himself. For the first time in years he allowed himself to think of the dream – once a signpost of belief – now a signpost to provable fact – an alignment with the midwinter sun, the

archaeologically proven link between sun and horse in prehistoric iconography... and the image of the Milky Way, suggesting an alignment he could validate using plans and computer software.

Last spring he'd come back – back to Avebury, where, following their journey to Glastonbury as teenagers, they had arrived that glorious summer of '88, walking the Avenue to the circle, marvelling at its size, a site, prior to the internet, they had only seen in old books. There, aiming to sleep the night in the circle, they had walked and walked, until they found themselves on the north-east part of the great bank, looking out over the circle, under a spray of stars – the summer night warm and without even a breeze; the earth was hard and cracked under Con's fingers; the grass thin and parched.

'Somewhere out there some poor woman is destined for you, Puck.' Mel had said.

'Charming!' he'd scoffed, but inside he'd felt as if he'd inhaled a ball of pure happiness, that fizzed and sparked, and he'd lifted his eyes heavenwards and felt like crying with the joy of it.

*None more blessed than the triple goddess* He mouthed.

Coming back last year had been like a pilgrimage; an admission that something within him had altered; that the frosty, flint-hard Con had begun to thaw – and that somewhere, deep within, the wild-haired, open-eyed Puck might re-emerge, no longer afraid of not fitting in. For, he now reasoned, had not his disgust at modern life, his feeling of being at odds with his peers, originated in a genuine value judgement of western living that had reckoned it as lacking? Was not his baulking at the dull everyday life of his peers a visceral qualitative judgement – one he could not help but feel? As a teenager it had troubled him greatly, and he had thought the fault had lain within himself – but had not Melissa and himself, through their love of the old poems, just chanced on a better way of seeing the world – one that was animistic in character – almost mystic in its vision in which all was Holy, the trees, the birds, the rivers and streams. And to come back here, having resumed after over a decade's break, his old vegetarian lifestyle, willing to look about him at stone, stream and star and see reflected in it, no, present within it, some unseen pattern, the hand of not pure scientific chance, but the cool, white hand of that goddess who had been lost to him... and to find her, or so it had seemed, in Shen...brave enough, now, to follow the demands of his soul, and not to run scared from

an internal voice that demanded he be different...

Melissa had died. And Con had found himself cast from one extreme to another. Wishing, above all, to feel they might have been connected, that the old ways of thinking might be true – but being thrown again and again upon the spear of misery and doubt; of ‘truth’ that said, no, there was no connection, no meaning; she had died and he was implicated, if not directly, then indirectly in her death through acts not done rather than done. And the dream and the pursuit of its meaning had been but pipedream; a childish game, allowing his objectivity to slip out of some misguided sense of nostalgia. He hated himself. Hated all that seemed to remind him of these mistakes. He had lost a sister; he had lost his love and now, for the second time, he had lost himself, his true self: Puck; the wild-eyed boy who might dance under the stars. Lost, but not forever, he reasoned. Just trapped again, imprisoned, like the sun; trapped in the cave; crushed under the stone – and any sense of life and joy, trapped, gagging, in the throat, unable to be released, kept captive by circumstance and fear. Trapped in the coils of the flint-hard persona that Con had become.

I have forgotten how to just be me. And when I do feel him rising, I fight against it as one would fight down nausea; scared of what might emerge. I pull down the stones on my own head.

Suddenly he thought of the roughly clad men in the print in the restaurant, pulling ropes muddy with slimy dirt; sweating and cursing against the crude stones; it was an image at odds with the name of the two stones by which he sat – Adam and Eve; Eden, the place of creation, where the divine substance poured into the world – where the serpent bought wisdom, and where god walked in the cool of the day... paradise.

Con looked at Eve leaning in the afternoon haze. And I would have my Eve if ever she would want me; oh life! Sometimes the opposites were hard to bear; he imagined Shen dancing between himself and Hayden, in a long white robe, flowers in her long dark hair, flitting between the opposites; Hayden representing all that he previously had been, his words that night at the pub so easily could, just a couple of years ago, have been Con’s own. But which, amongst these opposites, Con asked, is the god, and which the demon? I see him as the bastard, the evil one – the serpent in paradise, but it is I who are static, whose life lies dead in me like a dried husk.

I, thought Con, am the serpent; I am Vrtra.

## **Chapter 35 The Wave**

‘I see your appetite is coming back’ Barfield quipped as Lewis began tucking in to his ham and eggs.

‘I have some catching up to do’ was Lewis’s reply as he lifted a laden fork to his mouth.

Tolkien and Barfield had ordered bread, cheese and pickles, along with most of Keiller’s labourers, who now filled the Red Lion to overflowing.

Mr and Mrs Penry-Evans had followed Lewis’ example, explaining they had left London at eight that morning and hadn’t stopped even for a cup of tea.

‘We were following the Great West Road had meant to stop at Stonehenge,’ Violet said, ‘even though I often think it an unwelcoming place, but we found it somewhat overrun with certain undesirable individuals and so we decided to carry on to Devizes and stop here – a rather *impromptu* decision, and hardly on our route, but worth, I think, the detour, don’t you, Tom?’ she added, petting the hand of her partner.

‘Undesirable?’ asked Lewis.

‘Yes; a group of fascists - they’d passed us after we had left London, they were on motorcycles, driving like devils and nearly forcing us off the road. They had armbands on, with the BUF logo on it – how dare they use the colours of our flag to create that damn abomination!’

Mr Penry-Evans continued the tale.

'Well, there must have been nearly a dozen of them, clambering over the stones; Violet wanted to tell them to leave but I didn't advise it. It is enough to have to deal with that sort of behaviour in London – though things have been better of late since their failed demonstration.'

Mrs Penry-Evans poured herself another strong cup of tea and returned to her ongoing conversation with Tolkien.

'So you think the serpentine shape of the temple here is what is really meant by the discovery of the fighting dragons in Merlin's story?' She asked.

'I think it has to be considered.' Tolkien said, shrugging. 'But I'm not as convinced as Stukeley was over the serpentine form...But what has to be fathomed is, if the pair of dragons, at least in later versions, represent the conflict between Welshman and Saxon, if we are forced to look beyond the Dark Age date when Geoffrey believed the tales to be set, and go further back in time – what might this conflict represent? Perhaps a clash between earlier cults? The Neolithic circle-makers vs the Bronze Age metalworkers on their steeds, for example?' his mind flashed back to two days prior, seated on the barrows of the horse-lords overlooking the Kennet valley; 'After all, who leads the attack in the medieval version but Hengist and Horsa, *stallion* and *horse* – might these pair have been attached at a later point upon an earlier prehistoric myth of the taking over of these sites by the horse-riders? And if, as your husband says, Emrys originally died, might we be seeing the death of a native priest or leader at the hands of the new arrivals? Might a prehistoric Merlin have really existed and been killed at such a site?'

'It's an interesting idea.' she said.

'And we see such conflicts in many myths –' Tolkien continued, 'the Aesir vs. the Vanir in Norse mythology, the gods vs. the titans in Greek. It's one set of gods taking over the role of an earlier – usually the earth and fertility gods being overcome by the new gods, the Olympians, the warriors. Now, the trouble with such an interpretation is that one might also define the struggle as a seasonal one – the gods of summer achieving victory over winter, and freeing the fertility the winter has imprisoned....'

'But cannot it be both?' Barfield suggested; 'a new cult using the old myth of seasonal victory to justify its subjugation of the old?'

Tolkien nodded. 'Yes, that is true – the question is how one might distinguish between them in such a case... it is tempting, here, where we know one cult overtook another, to read the myth in terms of history, and Merlin as the defeated priest of the circles.'

'I, too, see Merlin as a priest of a very old religion' Mrs Evans stated.

'How old is old?' Lewis asked.

She paused for a second before answering. 'Atlantean.'

'And on what evidence would you base such a wild statement?' Lewis asked, snorting, clearly incredulous of the idea.

Violet Penry-Evans smiled.

'Oh, nothing that would satisfy an academic such as yourself, Professor Lewis,' she said. 'I refer to a number of occult traditions, traditionally handed down in the West rather than to any historical source.'

'That is a given, I would say, seeing as the only historical source one could refer to is Plato's Timaeus, and that is an allegory. His Atlantis is a myth and I suppose will remain so until some deep-sea explorer finds temple ruins in the Atlantic, beyond the Pillars of Hercules.' Lewis answered.

'To those adepts of the occult tradition, what we call the Western Mystery Tradition, Atlantis is a given – not something to be confirmed by finding pillars on the sea bed, but through experience.'

'Such as?'

'Dreams and visions,' she looked wistful. 'I have dreamed of the destruction of the great temple of Cerne, and of a great wave sweeping over the land. And this was not something I had read, no! The dream of the wave engulfing the land I first had when I was four years old; and it has never left me.'

Tolkien blanched. Lewis snorted. Barfield took a sip of his beer then spoke.

'You'll have to forgive Professor Lewis, Mrs Evans; he has a great interest in occult tradition, but cannot bring himself to examine its claims with anything like the scientific open mind he possesses for other topics; he's a man standing on the shore of a great ocean, wishing to swim but daring not even put a toe in the water!' he winked at Lewis. 'Do not mistake his

attitude as snide cynicism; it is a defence against temptation...'

'Balderdash, Owen. All our discussions on occultism and your peculiar attraction to the theories of Steiner have not altered my opinion one jot,' Lewis countered, flustered at his friend's comments. 'I've said it before, and I'll say it again – Steiner is a great man to consult about manure but not about metaphysics!'

Barfield chuckled. 'Steiner's interest in organic farming stems from his thoughts on the Atlanteans, whom he saw as possessing what you would call a magical affinity with plants and the natural world as a whole.'

Lewis swallowed his beer and shook his head. 'Poppycock, Owen.'

Mrs Penry-Evans was regarding Barfield with interest.

'So you're an anthroposophist? I admit I find many of Steiner's ideas intriguing.'

Barfield nodded. 'I find his work challenging and stimulating; he does not, for example, seek to root Atlantis in conventional history; rather he offers an alternative view of the past; a different idea of creation altogether, with mankind eventually coalescing into solidity from a creature of mist and air, almost.'

'Yes,' Mrs Penry-Evans said 'he suggests we look at creation in another plane, and that gradually mankind entered the material plane from a higher spiritual one. And Atlantis belongs to that higher state, hence the futility of looking for underwater ruins...'

As Barfield and Mrs Penry-Evans delved deeper into anthroposophical metaphysics Lewis turned to Tolkien who had been listening intently to what the others had been saying.

'Creatures of mist and air, eh? I suppose as a myth it's as good as any, worthy of the pre-Socratics, hmm? But it certainly says nothing about the real foundations of this world.'

Tolkien looked at him sidelong.

'Do you really think that, Jack? Myth is not some arbitrary story plucked out of thin air; there is an undercurrent in myth that is rooted in a reality far more meaningful than mere history.'

Lewis nodded. 'Yes, I was being flippant, I suppose, Tollers; one has only to think of the myth of the dying and rising godman, a precursor of the life of Christ, to see that. So, Atlantis, you would say, was true - in a mythical sense?'

Tolkien nodded. 'Indeed. Is not the destruction of Atlantis also the Fall from Eden – the fall from a state of grace thanks to a deed that sought to acquire wisdom for the sake of power? The men of Atlantis were accused of hubris; of seeking to control the elements, with forging a science that upset the balance of the natural world and brought about disaster; these myths are complimentary, Atlantis and Eden.'

'But then, as I said, not *historical*.'

'Perhaps they were; how are we to know? Perhaps when one goes far enough back there is no difference – perhaps history, as we understand it, the hard world of facts, really is somehow new, coalesced out of something other...' Tolkien's eyes seemed to fog over. In his head he was seeing the dream he had had since childhood – a vast towering wave bearing down over green fields, destroying everything in its wake. And this lady, too, he was thinking, shares the dream. Are we dreaming the same myth, plucking the same fruit from the tree of the imagination, or are we seeing glimpses of something that really happened – and if so, how? A message sent from the past, or a memory from some past existence?

Tolkien's eyes refocused to find his gaze met by Mrs Penry-Evans.

'Professor Tolkien – tell me what you are thinking.' She said.

He hesitated, but then seemed to find his voice as he filled his pipe.

'The Atlantis myth has always...fascinated me; I have, I am embarrassed to say, have been haunted by a nightmare since childhood; a dream... *your* dream.'

Mrs Penry-Evans nodded. 'I sensed it, which is why I asked. Merlin was a priest who escaped that destruction, I believe. It's in his very name: he is Merlin, from an original Myrddin – 'he of the fortress in the sea'; and his companion was Morgan: 'born of the sea'. Her eyes seemed to be peering over distant shores; distant in both place and time.'

'And they came here, you say?' asked Lewis, sounding sincere, as if wanting

to atone from his earlier mocking stance.

'I think they brought their wisdom out of the drowned land and established it here; in the west; I believe they founded ancient Avalon, when it was still an island in the inland sea. We have our own Atlantis legends here in the west, you know – tales of Caer Ys and lost Lyonesse; tales of haunting beauty'

*And the great kings of Wessex  
Wearied and sank in gore,  
And even their ghosts in that great stress  
Grew greyer and greyer, less and less,  
With the lords that died in Lyonesse  
And the king that comes no more.*

Violet Penry-Evans recited – the very lines of Chesterton Tolkien had intoned above the Hakpen horse two days before.

'And you think this knowledge was placed in temples such as these?' asked Barfield, gesturing out of the window at the stones. 'Encoded, somehow?'

'As Professor Tolkien said earlier – these sites were built by Merlin, they bear his name - Emrys. So perhaps written into the stones themselves is a memory of the flood, and a record of the knowledge that was lost to it.'

An image floated up in Tolkien's imagination – that Irish myth of the flooding of the river Boyne after Boann had sought to obtain the wisdom from the well of Nechtan... that, surely, was another example of the hubristic search for knowledge that had led to disaster – a disaster taking the form of a *flood*. That myth had been writ large in the place names hereabouts, the name of Sulis, the goddess of the sun-eye, remembered in hill and well; but was this myth, the drowning of Boann, myth, pure myth, or a memory of some *historical* fall? Was it a myth of creation or some dimly recalled history? Or might it be both? Mrs Penry-Evan's description of Merlin bringing the knowledge of the drowned temple of Atlantis to these lands after the flood seemed on the one hand wishful thinking, an occult fiction, yet there was a connection here he couldn't quite fathom: Why, he asked himself, do I dream of that same flood? What is it that drives me? A need to rediscover what has been lost? My goal has ever been to recreate, to retell our lost mythical past; the lost myths of England that didn't survive the coming of Augustine or the Norman Conquest, and so I looked to see what I could uncover. And that's how it seems: recovery – not

invention; I've always felt as if I'm rediscovering some long-forgotten truth; an archaeologist of myth Owen called me. But my search isn't just a dry academic venture; strange though it sounds, I feel as if I'm trying to remember home; I'm trying to find a place I belong. *Hiraeth*, the Welsh call it, a kind of longing or homesickness; only this is a wish to return to a place I have never been – never could have been, for it was lost to the flood aeons ago, before the world was reshaped, and the straight road bent...

## **Chapter 36 Twinned**

‘Read this!’ Con said, pushing the yellowed paper along the table in front of Wolf. Wolf frowned, screwing his eyes up.

‘Can’t you read it out to me I’ve got a fucker of a headache.’ Wolf had been drinking most of the afternoon, and had ended up half dozing on one of the beer tables outside of the pub; his shaven head was a vicious shade of pink, the wolf skin, now by his side on the bench, had afforded some protection, but the late afternoon had proved too hot to wear it and Wolf had been too drunk to care.

‘Where the fook’s Ananda?’ he asked, scratching his stubbled cheeks. Con shrugged and sipped his beer while a fly lazily danced about Wolf’s half empty lager.

‘Go on, sorry mate. I shouldn’t have dropped off I feel like cack now. What is it?’

‘It’s one of Tolkien’s letters, the ones Shen had’ said Con, who felt odd reading aloud in this public place.

‘My dear Edith...’ he began...

*My Dear Edith,*

*My apologies for the delay in writing; indeed, I have yet to send your first letter and so it seems you shall receive these two together....*

‘Right,’ Con continued, deciding to paraphrase instead of reading the letter

verbatim, 'he's saying they were delayed as Jack, that's C S Lewis, was unwell – but they've got a lift to Glastonbury off a woman named Penry-Evans and her husband – and that they'll be heading there in the morning as the woman's staying at the Manor now... right...here we are, listen to this...'

Wolf was listening, albeit with his face hanging over his arm which was laid flat on the table, his eyes half open, but aware.

*'What has struck me as important is that this place, unbeknown to me before now, is the obvious original location of the myth of Merlin...'*

Wolf's puffy eyes opened a fraction more at the mention of the enchanter.

*'...Merlin was responsible for both the building of Stonehenge and for uttering prophecies on finding the fighting dragons beneath the hill of Dinas Emrys in Snowdonia – but I am now of the opinion that both tales refer to neither of these locations but Avebury – my proof? None really save my usual linguistic follies – but Dinas Emrys and Amesbury, the location of Stonehenge, both mean 'city or fort of Emrys' Emrys being an old name for Merlin. Now, Geoffrey of Monmouth says that Stonehenge was built near Mons Ambrius, but there is no such hill at Stonehenge, which is set upon a level plain, and so it seems probable, given that the names Amesbury and Avebury are the same, both stemming from an early form of Emrys, that Mons Ambrius is Silbury. If it is not Silbury it may be the similar hill near Marlborough because Marlborough is the hill of Merlin – Merlin's barrow. Surely Marlborough is Mons Ambrius, the hill of Emrys: Geoffrey of Monmouth may have known the tale referred to a stone circle in Wessex and chose the wrong one. The Merlin myth is based here, Edith. Initially I thought that this is why at Dinas Emrys he sees the vision of the fighting dragons, for as Stukeley pointed out Avebury resembles, to some extent, a giant serpent. But I'm not swayed by this; more indicative of the myth being set here is the font – with its two wyverns between a central figure. The font is early, probably contemporary with Geoffrey of Monmouth, and suggests the legend was known and associated with this place.'*

*In the Merlin story the fighting dragons represent the Saxons and the Welsh – the legend seems to tell of a conflict, but I do not have the knowledge to understand what this particular part means. I am racking my brains to think if I can find anything more about this Emrys. Mr Penry-Evans has said that welsh myth records that Dinas Emrys was the site where Emrys was buried so perhaps in the original myth Merlin was sacrificed – and where might he be?*

*'Under the stones, no doubt, as a foundation sacrifice...'*

'Hmm. Go on'

'That letter ends there, it wasn't finished. The rest is in notes. Don't you see what he's saying?' Con beamed, excitedly.

'Useful. Fuck this isn't helping my head, Con. Just give it to me in layman's terms, I can't work anything out at the moment.'

'Okay – I'll put it in terms a Yorkshireman will understand: the myth of Merlin, well, part of it – it's based on this place.'

'Yeah, I got that. That's cool.' If he really thought it was cool, he didn't show it; he yawned and belched.

'Remember yesterday in West Kennet? When Ananda was talking about foundation sacrifices and shit – you know, the giant Ymir whose sacrifice forms the world?'

Wolf nodded almost imperceptibly.

'Hang on.' Con said. He disappeared inside and re-emerged with a pint for himself and a coke and a packet of crisps for Wolf, who immediately set about stuffing his face and rehydrating.

'You're a fookin' legend, man. Go on... I was listening...'

"Right... we mentioned that Old Man may have been some kind of Ymir, enacting the creation, yeah? Well the Merlin legend is all about foundation sacrifices, killing the youth so the stones will stay in place – it's basically a folkloric retelling of the creation... from Ymir's flesh the earth was made, whatever the line is... well, from Merlin's flesh the stones, the henge, is made – in the form of the cosmos. And it's set here – this is Merlin's circle... listen..."

Con was excitedly flicking through the pages of notes, searching, while Wolf rolled a cigarette for himself and Con.

Con took the cigarette, and with it hanging from his mouth began to read from Tolkien's hurried notes:

*'The wyverns: separated, like Marduk and Tiamat – The Mesopotamian god*

*Marduk separates the serpentine primal gods, Apsu and Tiamat, and from them creates the world; sets Tiamat, salt-water, above as the Milky Way; Apsu, below as fresh water; the figure on the font with the crozier? Creation equals flood; Eärendil as the star presaging the flood; how did I stumble on this? What if the flood was in the heavens?"*

'Woah, woah...what?' Wolf asked, his face scrunched up in confusion.

'Umm...what bit?'

'Murdoch or whatever.'

'Marduk – it's the Mesopotamian creation story, Marduk splits the two primal gods apart, and forms the world from them – they're these monstrous kind of dragons, but he separates them, and they become the sky above and the abyss below. They're like the earth and sky separated by the sun at the moment of sunrise from primeval night. Tolkien equated them with the dragons on the font in the Church.'

Wolf still looked bemused. 'And that last bit – the star and flood?'

'Eärendil – he's one of Tolkien's heroes in *The Silmarillion*;' Con said, speaking not from the notes but from his own memory of reading the tales as a teenager; 'he is seen as a sign in the heavens as hope for men after the flood destroys Numenor and Beleriand –.'

'Forget all the Middle Earth shit for a minute...' Wolf said; '...go back to the Merlin stuff.'

'Well,' Con said, thumbing the notes again; '

*"The Flood presaged by the appearance of the star – just as Petrie noted in Egypt, where Sirius presages the flooding of the Nile; might the rising of a star act as a precursor for a flood here at Avebury – but then how? How might one mark a flood in stone? How might Merlin have recorded this?"*

'then, bear with me...the writing gets even worse here - ah, here we go:

*"Merlin: Emrys: What if Patriarch Petrie was right? I saw it clearly tonight at the Manor; despite his pomposity he is, at least, a font of knowledge. Marduk and Tiamat are linked to Nut. Obvious now I think about it; and the symbolism matches perfectly!!!"*

'Nut?' Wolf asked.

Con nodded, and tried to find the passage he'd seen earlier, that had shocked him awake.

'The Egyptian sky Goddess Nut – here we go:

*"Geb and Nut, divided at the start of time, like Apsu and Tiamat, one (Geb) falls to (become) the earth, the other, Nut, the sky...might Emrys fit this pattern – falling (becoming) stone and earth....?"*

this bit's a bit hard to read, as the handwriting goes a bit shit, but listen:

*"The earth, foundation, and, like Geb and Nut a twin... like Ymir, Merlin - Emrys is a twin. Ymir's-bury. But where, then, is his twin? Is she in the sky?"*

'Fuck me, Wolf – Merlin was a twin! Like me and Mel!'

Wolf looked at Con as if he was stupid.

'Yep, I know. Like Ymir. I thought you'd have known that.' Wolf said matter-of-factly, and with a slight smile that showed he was enjoying the fact he knew more than Con.

Ymir, *Twin* – yes, he'd come across that in his PhD studies... all these twins in Indo-European myths, representing the creation of duality from unity, or so he'd read, one being creates the dualistic world of opposites... but these were *all male* – all stemming from a proto-form '*\*Yemo*', from which the word Gemini originated, as well as Ymir. But Emrys? He'd never seen Merlin touted as one of their kind. Was it just a linguistic link or was there more to it? And why did Tolkien suggest his twin was female? Because Tiamat and Nut were female? Surely, he knew that the northern Twins were male. What was Con missing? He suddenly wished so hard he could just ring Mel and ask her. She would have known; Celtic was her thing. Con had never really read the books she carried around, relying on her readings and recitations of poetry. Had Graves mention Merlin was a twin? If he had Con didn't remember; if Mel had read it, she would have mentioned it, wouldn't she? If not in Graves, then where? And why was it suddenly vitally important that he should know?

'Where's it written?' he asked Wolf.

Wolf chuckled, picking up his phone, and signalled Con to be quiet; after a few moments he began to speak to the person on the other end; ‘Hey... yeah.... well, no, actually – feel like a pig’s shat in my head. You in the van? Yeah, can you get me an ibuprofen from the glove box? No – actually, sod it, I’m going to come back and kip – see ya....

‘I’m sorry Con,’ he said, putting down the phone, ‘I can’t concentrate, I’m going to have a snooze.’

‘What about Merlin and the twin thing?’ Con asked again.

‘Ask me later, Professor...patience is a virtue, you know.’ Wolf said, waving him off. Con started to speak again but held his tongue, despite his mind burning with unasked questions.

He thought of Old Man in his glass prison, just a short walk away from where they sat – a man who yesterday they had argued may have been enacting the myth of Ymir, *Twin*, a creative sacrifice, and here was Tolkien arguing that Merlin may have been playing the same role. Merlin *and* his twin...but who was she, if indeed she was a she? He had a sudden memory of his conversation with Mel all those years before - *the whole 60s goddess movement – Graves, Gimbutas, the works – it’s all based on a phoney premise – there’s no evidence for some Great Goddess. It’s feminist propaganda...* and her response that her eradication had been the result of male-dominated societies; his own work had begun to suggest she had been correct; these ancient sites had seemingly been aligned on a sky identified in the past as a celestial goddess, and now Tolkien was suggesting something similar... *where is his twin, is she in the sky?* That was the question; and what’s more, where was she in myth? Had we in the west only been given half the story of our past, he wondered? Like being told of Adam but not Eve...

Wolf downed his coke and stood.

‘Where are you parked?’ Con asked.

‘Oh, down outside Shen’s. You coming down?’

Con nodded and finished his pint. ‘Will Hayden be there?’ he asked.

‘How the fuck should I know? I think he was working today, probably won’t

be back.' Despite his apparent bad mood Wolf managed a grin.

'Why don't you just tell her you like her?'

'It's not as easy as that. I feel bad.' Con answered.

'Bad? Because of Hayden? Look, mate – he's a charmer, but underneath he's a bit ordinary really – I don't think they're well suited; she needs more, I think.'

'You think I can give her more?' Con asked.

'Honestly? Not at the moment.'

Con felt as if he had been stung.

'Why?'

'Because you're still dealing with all that shit. You can't really look after yourself, mate - how you gonna look after her? At least Hayden's managing that. He can support her; she just needs someone with a bit more imagination; you have that, but you have no fire in your belly.'

As Wolf said these words Con felt a flash of anger. I do have fire, it's just been a glowing coal hidden by cinders, he thought.

'Look, I can see you're fuming but you're just locked inside. Get angry – let it out or it's gonna chew you up and destroy you. Get some balls – I don't know, get pissed, do some mushrooms, get in a fight – go and try to fuck someone – just not Shen; you're not ready for her.'

Con's heart was drumming and he felt as if he were blinkered, looking down through a tunnel.

'I can't – I'm stuck, I just keep thinking the same things over and over – I can't escape from my thoughts... how can I do that? It's more complicated than you know! You don't see it all. I think I fucking love her but it's ruined' he blurted out.

'Then tell me what I don't know.'

'I can't - I've not told anyone; it just keeps going round in my head; I just

can't stop thinking about it.'

'Just don't think – act! And don't ask yourself *how* as that's just fucking thinking again!'

They had reached the edge of Church Street and Hayden's bike was parked outside Church Cottage.

'For fuck's sake why can't he just fuck off?' Con spat and turned on his heels.

'Where are you going now?' asked Wolf.

'Back to my van' he shouted over his shoulder.

'Ok – whatever you need to do – come along to the pub tonight, though – it's my last night here. I'll tell you about Merlin...maybe.'

Con raised a hand in acknowledgement, his middle finger extended.

He had only walked a few metres on when he almost walked into Hayden, who was exiting the post office with a loaf of bread and some milk.

The two men looked at each other and halted; Con would have walked by with a nod but he felt somehow he should stop. Hayden didn't look overly enthused by the encounter either.

'What's up?' Hayden said, removing one of his earphones. 'I heard the chairman didn't hand back the bones.'

Con shook his head, smiling at Hayden's understatement.

'No. Wolf said his bit but I don't think there's much more that can be done really.' He shifted around awkwardly.

'Anyway...' Hayden said, motioning to leave, and starting to put his earphones back in 'can't keep *She Who Must Be Obeyed* waiting... probably catch you in the pub later, mate.' And he raised his hand in a half-wave and set off towards Church Cottage. Con turned and watched him go.

*Fuuuuuck!* Con felt he wanted to scream – and it wasn't all to do with Hayden and Shen; it was the whole Merlin thing that Tolkien's letter had sparked in his brain. Twin? Why a twin?! And who was the other – the lost twin? He felt a horrible sense of becoming hemmed in, of the world twisting

and becoming smaller, of disparate themes becoming enmeshed and tangled, closing him in... a tightening net or web of ideas and coincidences, connections and images – bordering on magical thinking, a feeling it was all linked – him, Shen, Mel, Tolkien, Merlin, the Old Man in the museum... the stones themselves somehow linked to the stars and a flood – the flood of the milky river in the heavens presaged by the rising of the stars; a sister, a lost sister, the forgotten twin – but not by me, he thought. And he picked up speed and began to run through the circle towards the Avenue, the circle and its many tourists becoming a blur, the fire in his head a burning madness he could not outrun, a converging point of echoes from before and after, from outside and inside time, spiralling inwards towards, towards, towards...what?

## **Chapter 37 The Manor**

The bells of the nearby church chimed for eight o'clock at the exact moment Lewis rang the bell on the large wooden door of the Manor.

'Impeccable timing, gentlemen' Lewis beamed. There was a noise in the hallway the door was opened by a tall, thin man in a dark suit.

They were beckoned into the hall, but as the night had a slight chill they kept their jackets on and were lead into the library on the side of the house overlooking the gardens. The library was spacious, and new – dating from the start of the century, unlike the rest of the house which was Tudor.

Keiller had only been in the house just over a year but already the place was stacked with his belongings. The library was full to overflowing with leather-bound volumes, and here and there small pieces of interest lay on cupboards and tables: small Egyptian artefacts, flints, a prehistoric bronze axe.

Keiller had been sitting in a leather wing backed chair beside the fireplace, looking out over the garden where the moon was grazing the top of the fir-tree hedge. As his guests entered he turned and rose with a genuine smile, putting down the tumbler of whiskey he was holding and approaching each man with a hand-shake.

'So good of you to come; one tires a little of the same company – archaeologists are a rather single minded lot and the conversation over dinner can be a little... predictable.' He smoothed back his short grey-flecked hair and asked if the friends would like a sherry, or something stronger?

The butler returned with three glasses of whiskey.

‘Thank you Frazer’ he said. Frazer nodded and left.

‘While we’re waiting for our other guests, I’ll show you the house,’ Keiller said. He gestured for them to precede him into a room leading off the library: a room stocked with utilitarian cabinets looking almost medical in their spartan nature; angled wooden worktops were laid over some, and a large table at the centre also in the same dark wood.

‘The map room’ Keiller declared, walking over to a half-finished map on the drawing board closest to the window. He beckoned the men over.

‘Here you can see the north-west sector; here’s the trees we have cleared so far... and if you look here’ he lifted the map to expose another beneath full of other markings, ‘you’ll see what a job we’ve had to clear the site of trees. We started in early March so you see what you’ve been seeing is very much the tail end of the clean-up process.

‘This stone here is the one we’re raising at the moment – it was only buried under a couple of feet of soil; but you can see from the space here that we’ve not even begun to survey the rest of this sector yet. The lifting of this stone was very much a showpiece for both press and our eminent guest Sir Flinders Petrie.’

Keiller scowled momentarily and was about to go on but Lewis interrupted him.

‘How long is it going to take you to finish the circle?’ he asked.

‘Twelve years we think – that’s what we have budgeted for anyway. This season we’ll be dealing just with this sector – but there is so much more to do, and I don’t just mean digging and reconstruction; there’s cataloguing and publishing the finds; we have, of course, to find a permanent location for the museum...’

Just then the doorbell rang.

‘Ah, good... more guests – shall we?’ Keiller said, gesturing out of the map room.

They soon found themselves once more in the library; Tom and Violet Penry-Evans stood sipping their sherry looking over Keiller’s vast collection of books. Tolkien was looking with curiosity at a reconstructed clay vessel with a narrow waist and a wide mouth, like a small vase, but

incised with regular bars of pattern.

'Ah. Yes, this was found beside one of the stones in the avenue. It's what we call a beaker, probably dates to 2000 BC. The beaker culture were the people who brought in metalwork from the continent: bronze wielding invaders with long skulls, riding horses, we think.'

Tolkien held the cup carefully. Had one of his horse lords from under the round mounds by the sanctuary once drunk from such a cup?

'Before this,' Keiller was saying 'we find this type of pottery on site – Grimston-Lyles we call it, heavier, cruder perhaps, but with lozenge and spiral patterns – most entrancing...' but was interrupted as the doorbell rang again. Frazer left his standing position at the side of the door and disappeared out of sight.

'Who else is invited, I wonder?' Barfield whispered to Tolkien. It was with a mixture of pleasant surprise and worry that the new guests were seen to enter.

First came the young archaeologist Piggott, smiling widely. Behind him, first revealed by a gruff voice in the hallway, was Petrie and with him the woman who had been at his side earlier that day at the stones.

'Full house! Splendid!' laughed Keiller. 'Dinner will begin at half past eight.' Tolkien glanced at his pocket watch: quarter past.

Until dinner was called Keiller worked the room, spending the majority of the time showing his Egyptian antiques to Petrie and his companion, who had been introduced as Margaret Murray.

'My word,' Lewis had said to Tolkien. 'That's THE Margaret Murray; an Egyptologist of some repute, recently retired, I believe from the University of London – but she wrote a book on witchcraft which I read and must say found rather hard to swallow.'

Tolkien glanced over at her; she had a long, kind face, her heavy eyelids and downward sloping eyebrows made her look sympathetic. She certainly seemed to be having a positive effect on the usually dour Petrie, who was laughing, his beard wagging.

Lewis chuckled, turning conspiratorially towards his two fellows.

'This is marvellous; we have a pan-worshipping host, a guest who writes

about witches and another who is an occultist who believes she once escaped from Atlantis. I foresee stormy waters ahead before the soup course is finished.'

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Lewis was wrong; the cream of mushroom soup had been ladled from the terrine, eaten and the plates removed without so much a fractious word being spoken by any of the guests. But that was about to change.

The three friends had grown used to fine dining at Oxford, though Barfield found it more nostalgic, enjoying it far less often than he had; only Tom and Violet Penry-Evans seemed awkward. They had been placed beside each other facing the window of the large Georgian-style dining room, opposite Petrie, Miss Murray and Barfield; Tolkien sat beside Violet, opposite Barfield, while at the ends of the table sat Lewis, between Tolkien and Barfield, and Keiller and Piggot, rather tightly packed between Tom Penry-Evans and Flinders Petrie.

Frazer stood near the door, beside a polished wooden cabinet bearing a selection of bottles, walking to the table to refill the guests' wineglasses when necessary.

They had talked so far about the excavation and of the state of British prehistory in general. Tolkien had eaten in silence, red faced when Petrie had begun again to mention the superiority of certain races of men, and the paucity of North-west European civilization compared with, say, Egypt. He had tried to steer the conversation away from such subjects and towards myth, wishing to question the assembled experts on certain aspects of creation myths.

'It's the symbolism of twins which fascinates me,' Tolkien said, 'in relation to creation legends. You mentioned the sky goddess Nut or Hathor yesterday, Sir, and I seem to recall from my reading that this goddess is a twin?'

'Indeed, she is the sister of the earth-god Geb, who is serpent-headed, and depicted as falling from her embrace; he becomes the earth and she the sky.'

'This particular Creation myth,' Murray added; 'the Heliopolitan myth, has a number of brother/sister pairings; each generation arises from the former, like a flower opening, having first risen from Atum.'

'It's just I was thinking of the symbolism of the creation in other Near Eastern myths, such as the separation of Apsu and Tiamat by the sun-god Marduk – the imagery seems linked.' Tolkien explained.

Petrie leaned forward, slowly nodding – 'A staple image from the ancient world, and no stranger to our own modern ears: "*And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.*" Genesis 1:7.' Lewis eyed Tolkien, wondering what exactly lay behind his questions, but Tolkien gave nothing away.

'Does one find many such correspondences between Biblical and Egyptian myth?' Tolkien asked; '...such as the Flood?'

Petrie considered while sipping his wine.

'The Nile flood, of course, dominates Egyptian tradition, but that is strictly seasonal. As for a sea-flood, the only reference I am aware of, and one cannot escape the possibility of higher, Classical influence, is the building texts at Edfu... These texts purport to tell the story of the Primeval Ones who predated the Egyptians, who inhabited an Island of the Gods, but which was tragically engulfed by the sea forcing the Primeval Ones to come to Egypt bringing their knowledge with them and establishing the original temple, long destroyed and rebuilt, at Edfu.'

'And Classical influence is likely, because...?'

'Because of the date of the temple – it is Ptolemaic – *Hellenistic* – in date, increasing the possibility of influence from, say, Plato's *Timaeus*. Had the myth been found elsewhere in Egypt, at an earlier site, we might give more credence to it as an Egyptian myth...'

Tolkien merely nodded, reasoning, silently, that Petrie would never easily have credited such a myth to an aboriginal civilization... of course he'd rather see it as an import from a 'higher' cultures...yet his answer had fuelled Tolkien's thinking – *here, too, a flood – but is it history or myth?*

Presuming, rightly, given Tolkien's questions, that the assembled guests would be interested in their work, Petrie and Murray continued to speak at length of the many excavations they had headed in Egypt, such as the labyrinth at Neqada that the Romans had reduced to dust.

'Such sites get little recognition amongst the public, I am afraid, who are more interested in that second-rate tomb of Tutankhamun and ridiculous ideas of the mummy's curse than in real archaeology.'

'So, what do you think of the curse?' asked Violet.

'It is pure bunkum. I am surprised you had to ask. You think I'm the sort to give credence to such beliefs?' he said.

'Not at all;' she replied, with a slight smile. 'But the ancient Egyptians certainly believed in magic.'

'Many ancient civilizations laboured under the delusion of superstition; it does not mean that *we* should.'

'So, you admit your highly advanced Egyptians were superstitious? Does that not make them un-civilized, and if not, how do you tally their belief in magic with their supposedly high level of culture?' It was clear to all assembled that Mrs Penry-Evans was baiting this bear of a man.

Petrie grimaced. 'Their belief in magic is, one must admit, a hangover from a more primitive time, but that does not negate the splendour and complexity of their art or architecture, for instance.'

'Well, let us not immediately dismiss their beliefs.' Violet said. 'We cannot say for sure whether some human faculties, such as psychic abilities, may have atrophied over time, so their disappearance could be due to other factors than having 'outgrown' them in the sense of, say, outgrowing childish behaviour. You merely dismiss them as *uncivilized* because our modern western civilization, in its narrow-minded hubris, assumes it to be so simply because we no longer possess them; I believe the phrase is 'sour grapes'. Perhaps an Egyptian curse might be effective today – even more so when acting upon us moderns who lack the appropriate knowledge of psychic self-defence.'

'Psychic self-defence? My word. What absolute poppycock!' He glared at Keiller, as if holding him solely responsible for his guests' ridiculous questions.

Tolkien looked across at Barfield who was clearing his throat; he had the advantage of being on the same side of the table as Petrie and so was able

to address his point to Violet Penry-Evans.

'You have a very good point there Mrs Penry-Evans,' he began. 'We have a very narrow view of what our ancestors may or may not have experienced. We read The Iliad and interpret the appearances of the gods as poetic metaphors, or we read of the sightings of fauns or elves and take them as whimsy – but the sources from which we take these instances do not suggest anything but they are reporting actual experiences. Perhaps man's consciousness was different, closer to that of the animals, perhaps in a semi-mystical state, more open to spiritual realities; a state we might well describe today as magical?'

'Hear, hear!' said Tom Penry-Evans in his sing song accent. 'Exactly right, my man. When my Celtic ancestors talked of the fairy-folk they weren't some Victorian winged fancy but beings of great power, and sometimes great size; the tales talk of interactions between them and mankind; are we right to dismiss this as fiction just because the majority of us are no longer as able to experience such events?'

Petrie was shaking his head. 'Of course, we are right to dismiss them! Where is the evidence, the *one shred* of evidence that man once truly knew or experienced magic as a reality? Huh?' he looked around the table and was just about to grunt as if to say 'exactly' when a voice challenged him.

'Language.'

'Eh, what was that?' Petrie asked, cupping his hand to his ear.

'Language' Tolkien repeated.

'Pray, go on...' Petrie said, smugly.

'The study of language,' Tolkien stuttered, aware of all eyes on him, 'reveals that from the earliest times it dealt not in abstractions but in such a way as to suggest the world it described was thought of as somehow more poetic and mystical than we now credit. It reveals our ancestors conceived of a world where everything was connected – magically connected, but that in time we have become severed from that older state of awareness and find ourselves alone in the world, cut off from nature.'

'Give me an example. And for god's sake speak more clearly'

It was Barfield who answered. 'If I may, Tollers? The Latin word Pneuma: it

means both spirit and breath and wind; one can posit a time when the speaker of that word did not have to identify which particular meaning he was referring to, as they were all one and the same; in other words, his world was connected, mystical – the very breath in his body *was* the spirit that animated him; the wind *was* the breath of God. Or the word Cereal which contains the name Ceres, harking back to a time when the wheat itself was the body of a god, orient and immortal' he winked at Tolkien.

Petrie was shaking his head again. 'Language proves nothing; just because old words had several meanings does not prove magic ever existed – or that man ever perceived the universe as different as we see it today.'

'I'm afraid you're mistaken. It does exactly that. How we perceive the world is *directly* based on our language,' Barfield continued.

'There is a world of difference between, say, 'a tree' and 'a dryad': one seems to be a label, dismissive, the other gives soul to the object, and who is to say that is wrong? Just the use of that word adds an extra dimension, and who are we to say it is not a true perception? Its reductionist to say *we* give it a soul by using such words – surely, *we take away* its soul when we fail to use the word.

'And as our language today is fragmented, so is our view of the world. This is why we need to use metaphor to express spiritual or mystical concepts – we're having to use it to reconstruct what was once inherent in the first words uttered by mankind, but which are now corrupt, fallen. The Egyptian mind with its hieroglyphic writing suggests a very different mind-set and worldview than ours – not just an interpretation of the world, mind you, but an *experience* of it! Coleridge talks of imagination as the basis of perception; for it is imagination – the image-creating faculty – that defines what we see. The Ancient Egyptians *literally* saw a different world from you or I. Theirs was a world of dryads, not trees, where the growing corn was Osiris and the flooding of the Nile a divine, rather than a physical, event.'

Petrie had suffered this paean to words as nobly as such a man could; hands folded in front of him, waiting patiently for a chance to brush aside the folly being spoken.

'My dear sir, you are, I recall from our introductions, a *solicitor*, no? And we two...' he gestured towards himself and Margaret Murray, 'are amongst the most eminent Egyptologists in the world today. I rather think we may know a little more about the Egyptians than you.' The edge of his mouth curved

up in a crisp expression of superiority.

Lewis put down his wine glass.

'My dear sir, these two...' he said, gesturing to Tolkien and Barfield 'are two of the most eminent *linguists* in the world today. I rather think they know a little bit more about *language* than you.'

Keiller let out a peal of laughter of the same volume and glee as the one he had let out the day before when the fragment of wood had crowned Piggott, and clapped his hands.

'Bravo!' he said. 'Bravo! Touché, my good man!' evidently he was beginning to become drunk, and less worried about appeasing the Olympian Petrie. Tolkien was amused to see the austere butler Frazer also betray a smile, though he was quick to turn to the dresser and begin polishing the silverware in an attempt at distraction.

At that moment the door opened, and two maids entered bearing large serving plates of vegetables and slices of meat.

'From our own garden.' Keiller remarked; so, this was George's handiwork, Tolkien thought, helping himself to a modest portion of vegetables.

With usual British politeness the meat was served, and more wine poured. Piggott, drinking water, remarked on the quality of the food, and all agreed with polite noises of approval.

Pleasantries were exchanged between the guests during this lull in combat; but before the main course was ended Violet had turned to Keiller with a smile and asked him about his interest in witchcraft.

'Ah, how observant of you! Yes, I do have a keen interest as you picked up from my library; I am lucky enough to have in my possession a great number of the best books on the subject – some dating back to as early as 1452; I have, however, of late had to curtail my researches given my absorption in prehistoric archaeology!'

'I would be most interested in having a better look later, if that wouldn't be a problem.' She said.

'By all means, by all means! And your own interest?' he asked, wiping his

mouth with a napkin

She looked about her. 'I am very interested in the occult – and in the practice of...magic.' she looked at Petrie when she said the latter, relishing the word.

'Splendid!; laughed Keiller, red-faced from the whiskey and wine, and looking directly at Mrs Murray.

Mrs Murray regarded him with a look that betrayed neither contempt or acceptance; she just looked at him then shifted her gaze to Violet Penry-Evans and then back to Keiller. Her drooping eyes sparkled as she spoke.

'Of course the study of witchcraft does lead on to the study of ancient religions and therefore ancient sites, by consequence, Mr Keiller. The subjects are linked.' She said.

Keiller shrugged. 'I suppose that depends whether one believes witchcraft to be a derivative of such ancient cults.' He said matter-of-factly.

'Which I do, as you know.' Mrs Murray said. He bowed his head in affirmation.

'I regret to say,' Keiller said 'that I have not had the time to study your latest volume with as much rigour as I had hoped.'

'So you have written on witchcraft?' Tom Penry-Evans asked.

'I have.' She replied. 'And as Mr Keiller rightly says my theory is that witchcraft was part of a pagan fertility cult that persisted into Christian times.'

'Under the eye of the Church?' Lewis, from the end of the table opposite Keiller, asked. 'I find that hard to believe.' His own glass had been emptied and filled nearly as much as Keiller's, and the high colour in his cheeks was no longer due to fever.

'Oh yes; under the eye, and even with the blessing of, the church in some cases.' She said.

Lewis pulled a face. 'Pagan elements, yes, I can believe that – look at all the green man images you find in medieval stonemasonry; but a still-practising pagan cult I'm afraid is *very* unlikely. What would you say, Mrs Penry-

Evans?’

Violet thought for a while before answering. ‘I see no reason, like yourself, why elements may have survived; in the case of witchcraft we are looking not at survivals of pagan religion *per se* but of age old magical practises, some of which might have been passed down for generations without them being thought of as necessarily pagan.’

‘Like the Acerbot...’ Tolkien suggested; ‘it means ‘acre-remedy’, it’s a late Anglo-Saxon charm that calls for a number of prayers and Christian symbols, but the whole process is magical and pagan to the core, a fact that was probably lost on those who enacted it, who would probably have been horrified to think they were taking part in some pagan rite.’ He suddenly chuckled to himself remembering Owen’s description of the quartz stones, the *cloch geala*, that Mrs Mac Govan-Crow had boiled in the water she had given to Jack to soothe his throat.

‘Are you a pagan, Mrs Penry-Evans?’ Lewis asked.

‘I consider myself a believer in Christ but do not deny the older gods their due.’

Tolkien glanced up at Barfield and raised his brows. *Quite how does one balance such beliefs*, he wondered to himself. *To believe in Christ is, surely, to deny the older gods. Still, I cannot deny the attraction these older gods might have, though by that I mean an aesthetic attraction, a literary one...*

He may have been preparing to speak but Mrs Murray had started to address Mrs Penry-Evans.

‘I think it is a mistake to look at witchcraft as a magical tradition; it was religious, through and through – a religion based on the worship of a nature god, like Pan, one whose details can be gleaned by a careful reading of witchcraft trials; again and again we see the coven of 13, the leader of which is no spirit or god but a flesh and blood man – the leader of the coven, whose horns and cloven feet are but ritual costumes of a pagan priest.’

‘A god like Pan?’ Lewis asked.

‘Yes; although to the Celts he was Cernunnos, whom we see depicted on the famous Gundestrup cauldron with the antlers of a deer, stood beside a wolf

and a deer, and serpents in his hands.'

'The master of animals...' Lewis said.

'Myrddin Wyllt' Mrs Penry-Evans agreed, her eyes flicking to the side to meet Tolkien's.

'A careful reading indeed, Ms Murray.' Keiller said. 'But erroneous. I point you, with all due modesty, to my publication of 1922: *The Personnel of Aberdeenshire Witchcraft Covens in the Years 1596-7...*'

Lewis, Barfield and Tolkien exchanged surprised glances – Keiller was a dark horse; the man, as George had rightly said, was clearly a scholar.

'...in which I cover the same sources as your book 'The Witch cult in Western Europe' but reach, shall we say, different conclusions; the majority of women accused of witchcraft during that period were solitary individuals – the number 13 is hardly present; and what's more their accounts of visitations by supernatural beings cannot just be explained away by costumed priests. These are either the visions of madness, that is delusions of a sick mind, or hallucinations, or else fictions foisted upon these poor women, or forced out of them by torture at the hands of their accusers.'

Keiller's usual boyish animation had become a steely and controlled delivery of opinion.

'I just do not find a shred of evidence that such a demonic being was worshipped by these poor witches; these people lived in real fear of Hell – to them such worship would be anathema; we can't make the mistake of foisting our modern concepts of such acts on the past; oh I've been known to wind ivy round my head and pour wine at the foot of the statue of Pan in the garden here – but it's all play; For myself, in this age of reason the god Pan, I would say, represents something natural and capricious in our character – and can be seen as an embodiment of Nature, as something to celebrate not repress; I risk nothing by doing it, as I have little in the way of Faith; but these people would have believed that by so acting they were risking their eternal souls.'

'Perhaps these are all the old Gods were and are, Mr Keiller.' Mrs Penry-Evans said, 'something close to nature within our own souls that we can allow to open up to and celebrate – a celebration of our unity with the living world. But even so, these images are living realities; Pan is very real; be careful lest you wake something you cannot then control.'

Keiller laughed. 'I appreciate your warning; drunken play is all it is, I have no more sinister intentions. At heart I'm a traditionalist and besides, as I grow older, I find my youthful follies less and less attractive. It is hard when one has enough money to not worry about a single thing; I see myself as saved by archaeology – I have a passion now that I can share, and the money to guarantee beautiful places like Avebury are not lost to future generations. I feel worthy, now, not some rich playboy with no aims or goals.'

Mrs Murray had kept quiet during this exchange, though she had glowered for a while at Keiller's dismissal of her ideas; he was an amateur, a rich kid with too much time on his hands; if he had studied the subject as she had, spent his life in academia, he might be less reactionary and better able to judge the value of her work. She was not about to lose her temper with a jumped-up son of a marmalade-maker. Places such as Avebury had once thronged with people proclaiming the life and sacrificial death of the divine king; and if she was right, such a ritual had continued to be enacted throughout so-called Christian history under the very nose of organised religion. Madwomen having visions – how did that explain the similarities between the accounts of witches from all over Europe? This *had* to be a cult that had continued in secret; it couldn't just be coincidence; what other option was there? Not Mrs Penry-Evans' theory, that was certain; to argue that that the many similarities in the Witch trials occurred because they were drawing on the same magical realities, the same invisible gods and spirits - Heaven's above! To even begin to entertain such a thought would be to undo the progress of hundreds of years of critical thinking!

Two events in quick succession brought the meal to a premature close. Petrie had remained relatively silent and glowering after Keiller's outburst of laughter; but now his plate was cleared he turned to his host and announced he had an early train to catch back to London the next day and called on Frazer to fetch his overcoat. Mrs Murray, evidently, was also about to leave, as she called out after Frazer with the same request. The guests around the table stood to say their goodbyes to the departing pair; but before she left Mrs Murray turned to Mrs Penry-Evans and said that given the latter's interest in witchcraft she could do no better than to write to her secretary and have copies of her two books on the subject sent to her, *gratis*.

Mrs Penry-Evans smiled warmly, aware the gesture was meant as much for Keiller's ears as her own, and was an attempt to help guide these poor

misguided individuals back into the truth as she saw it.

'Thank you, I certainly shall. And by way of thanks I shall send you in return two of my books.'

'I didn't realise you were a writer' Mrs Murray said, surprised.

'I go under the pen name Dion Fortune; I will send a copy of my novel, *The Goat-foot God* and a non-fiction work on the Mystical Qabalah.' She beamed. Keiller snorted at the look on Mrs Murray's face as she responded with a polite thank you, her eyes wide in what he took to be some kind of horror.

Barfield's eyes were no less wide.

'Deo non Fortuna!' he said, laughing. 'Of course!'

'I shall see you to the door.' Keiller shouted after the two departing guests.

'We shall see ourselves out!' came the gruff reply.

Keiller looked back towards the remaining guests, twisting on the spot as if trying to decide whether out of politeness he should ignore Petrie's remark and show them out anyway; but evidently something inside him realised the pointlessness of buttering up the old man any further and he stood where he was and laughed heartily.

'Well I think that went swimmingly, wouldn't you agree?!" he said.

And at that very moment Piggott who had been sipping water rather too frequently slid to the floor in a dead faint.

'Frazer!' Keiller called out. 'Smelling salts! Man down!'

'Is he okay?' Mrs Penry-Evans asked, walking to where Barfield and Lewis now crouched propping up the prone waxy figure.

'I'm okay,' Piggott mumbled; 'Would someone mind awfully helping me back to the Red Lion? It's devilishly hot in here.'

## **Chapter 38 And the Meek...**

By the time Con had reached his camper beside the avenue his anger with Wolf had faded to a morose self-pity. It was obvious that he had little chance with Shen - not only because of the charisma and bearing of Hayden, but also because of Con's own inability to get over the events of the previous year. And why should I? I lost my sister. One does not simply walk away from that. He remembered the weeks following Melissa's death - how he felt he was walking in a different world, a horrid dream-world that he begged some higher power to wake him from; how different things would be if she was still here - he would have his sister, and maybe he would have Shen. Fate had denied him both. Fate was a cruel power. The universe sucked; it was a horrible mistake that should never have happened. He cursed whatever had caused that original static nothing to open into this nightmare of forms, where every good thing was shadowed by bad. His sister's soul was with the demons - not free as it should be.

The camper was sweltering; he opened the side door and the windows; the sun was at least on its downward path so the day would not be long to cool, he reasoned. He opened a cupboard and fished around for something to eat; a pack of noodles fell to the floor and he took this as a sign; filled the kettle and rolled a cigarette while the kettle boiled. He threw it on the road after two or three puffs in disgust.

After the meal Con had lain on the sofa bed listening to the doves cooing; he had slept on and off and then awoke with the orange orb of the sun shining through the windscreen. It was about eight o'clock. He cleaned his teeth and left the van for the pub.

The village was quiet and bathed in a warm sepia tinge from the dying sun it resembled a publicity shot for English tourism; the white pub with its thatched roof and black beams seemed cottage-box twee - the English

village idyll – something only shattered on crossing the road towards the beer garden when it became apparent to Con that some kind of heated argument was taking place inside; and it was Wolf's voice that rang loudest.

'I'm one of the most practical people I know, mate – don't you accuse me of not living in the real world.'

The other voice, softer and condescending, replied, but Con couldn't make out the words.

'Look, I practically built my van from scratch, mate – see these wristbands – I tanned the fucking leather myself, from raw fat covered deer-skin; I'm a fuck sight more adapted to life in this world than you are, mate'

Conall peered round the door nervously; Wolf was standing at the bar, turned to face a small group of men, one in a visi-vest with 'Wessex archaeology' on its back, and another man, in a polo-shirt and thick black glasses, his hair hidden under a black baseball cap with an English Heritage logo above the peak. This man was speaking.

'Yeah, because dressing up in skins and making leather jewellery is so bloody useful. Why don't you just get a real job like the rest of us have to?'

'because I played that particular mug's game for 20 years; I was a builder, and I gave up a two grand a month job to do what I do now.'

'More fool you.'

'It was my fookin choice, mate; I'm happier now than I was then. Look at you with your smug fucking grin and EH hat; you're an unthinking selfish fucking twat; I'm taking responsibility for my life – trying to live as close to nature as I can; I'm not a fucking parasite like you; if society collapsed today you'd be dead in a week; I'd be fine – I can hunt, fish, live in the woods. You'd be robbing Tesco's like all the other sad fucks and dying of food poisoning cos you couldn't find a way to cook yer fuckin' chicken nuggets without a microwave!' He laughed. 'Western civilization is a fucking cancer and you know what we 'useless hippies' are?' Wolf walked over to the man, speaking steadily and slowly, and glaring into the other's wide eyes '...We're the fucking antibodies – we're the bloody cure, Gaia's own immune system kicking in to save her from her immanent death at the hands of a rogue fucking disease... so you'd better... bloody.... Watch.... out.' He said, jabbing his finger in the man's face as he spoke.

It was obvious that despite his bravado the other man had no wish for this to escalate into a brawl. Wolf, his chest still stained with ochre, looked like some madman. The seated man shifted uncomfortably and then stood and left, casting a barely audible 'fucking twat' in Wolf's direction as he left the pub.

'Aah – missed all the fun!' Wolf grinned as he saw Con by the door.

'What was all that about?' he asked.

'Oh, I think some of them got a bollocking for not dealing with the protest effectively, he he – and thought they'd take it out on me – "don't you have anything better to do" he mimicked "why don't you have a shave and get a real job you hippy layabout" and that kind of shit. Normally I'd have ignored them or twatted them but still got a thumping bastard of a headache, so they got off lucky.'

Con smiled and was about to offer Wolf a drink when Ananda appeared behind the bar holding two pints. 'On the house' she whispered, winking.

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An hour and a half later Con and Wolf were drunk; there had been a number of goodbyes from those who had come to protest and had to head off – most of whom wished to buy Wolf a drink; and a number of others had stayed and sat in small groups around the pub. Then Shen and Hayden had arrived; in the general hubbub Con and Shen hardly had the opportunity to share any words, and so he hadn't been able to explain his earlier departure, nor smooth over the general air of tension that now lingered between them. To make matters worse Hayden had sat himself between them, squashing himself where there wasn't really room for another, so Con couldn't even turn and talk to her, being forced into the corner by Hayden's large frame. In his inebriated state Con wasn't in the mood to just sit and stew, either. He was angry, frustrated, upset and spoiling for confrontation.

Hayden wasn't helping matters by launching into a diatribe against the protestors and their lack of 'reality', and the uselessness of any kind of beliefs, pagan or otherwise.

'Right. Look, science is science...' he was saying; '– it keeps the bullshit at bay; last week we had to cut a 19 year old girl out of a car, and she died by

the roadside; she was beautiful. Where was God when she was dying? Would she have been helped by a power animal, or drumming? That's all crap. It's all done out of fear – a defence against the dark; it protects people from the nuts and bolts reality that this is all there is and one day, probably sooner than they think – they'll be on a fucking slab. Where was God or the ancestors when she was dying, or the two old people who died of smoke inhalation on Christmas Day last year thanks to faulty tree lights, eh? Or my own cousin who died when he was eleven, hit by a fucking lorry? I remember my parents and my aunt and uncle going to church after that and all I could think was 'why would you pray to a God that had taken your son away?' Fucking ludicrous.'

Hayden's usual glibness had been replaced with an intense seriousness, but then his swagger returned as he downed his pint.

'It's all pretence – look at you with your red paint and your bangles and shit – it's playground stuff,' Hayden said. 'I'm sorry but it's bullshit – dressing-up like cavemen.'

Wolf looked him squarely in the eyes.

I'm not playing at anything my friend; ochre is one of the oldest body paints used by man; it's the blood of Mother Earth.

Hayden held Wolf's gaze, his eyes swimming and his face wearing an expression that looked as if he was wondering if he were brave enough to openly laugh. Con, even though he sided with Wolf, for a moment could hear Wolf's statement from Hayden's perspective. Using phrases like 'the blood of Mother Earth' wasn't going to score any points with Hayden.

'Okay – that's up to you –' Hayden managed to say, straight-faced, 'but it's when the place is full of hippies all trying to be like Red Indians, it's just laughable.'

Con had tried to see Shen's reaction to the phrase Red Indian; from his limited view he thought he had seen her blanch and sink back into her seat from where she had been leaning forward, nursing her brandy; he couldn't tell if it was embarrassment or withheld anger. Whatever its cause, his own response was angry.

'You can't use that phrase' he said, his voice shaking.

'What phrase?'

'Red Indian; you should say Native American or Canadian or First Nation...' he corrected.

'Oh it's only a figure of speech, man, Christ!'

'Maybe to you.' Con answered, looking towards Shen.

'Oh Shen doesn't mind, do you?' Shen just looked at him sternly.

'Don't you tell me what I do or don't mind.'

'Oh for fucks sake - lighten up you lot. It's all the same - fucking whingeing on about the past and righting wrongs - but the past is past - we can't change it; I don't expect every bloody German I meet to apologise for the war; I'm not gonna fucking apologise for something white people did to the Indians a couple of hundred years ago. I wasn't there - I didn't call them those names originally or take their homelands.'

There was a silence. Hayden swallowed a mouthful of beer.

'It's like those bones - they ain't gonna move them 'cos its irrelevant; you can't have them back as those days have gone - it's like the Indians wanting their lands back - that ain't gonna happen either. Most of those Indians took those same lands from other tribes in the past, and they lost them in turn to superior forces and better fighters - that's the way of life. Deal with it.'

'It's not as simple as 'might is right'... it was overtly racist; the Indians weren't seen as human - it was as ideologically based as the holocaust - the only good Indian is a dead Indian.'

Hayden shrugged. 'Well, obviously you can't condone it - but what I'm saying is that we're primed as a species to do this stuff, survival of the fittest, yeah? They didn't survive. They fumbled the ball... nature judged them by eradicating them...the meek are never gonna inherit the earth, mate.'

Con shook his head. 'Nature didn't eradicate the Natives. *Man* did. Man working against nature, which as a conscious being he can easily do.'

'How's it against nature? It's fucking evolution, man! It IS nature!'

Con tried to think of an example; ‘Nature makes us crave sweet and fat stuff, right? Because there’s not enough in the natural world to really fuck you up. You’d have to eat about 12 feet of sugar cane to get as much sugar as in a can of coke. So... let’s say you’re diabetic... do you just eat all the fucking sugar because ‘nature makes us want it?’ or do you see that man, in a can of coke, has created something unnatural and so you have to rein in the desire, in order not to ultimately kill yourself?

‘Where are you going with this?’

‘Small scale tribes can do what they want basically as there’s not enough of them to harm the environment – but when you get large numbers of people, technologically advanced, changing the planet, inventing coke, and factory farming, and motorways, then you, like the diabetic, have to rein in the desires that would, given the unnatural nature of modern society, cause death – and I also mean planetary death. So, you choose not to drink the coke, not to drive a car, not to fuck people over for a short-term fix that going to fuck everything up in the long-term.

‘What I’m saying is that the westerners killing off the Indians might seem to be ‘survival of the fittest’ in terms of *short-term human goals*, for a few generations, but in terms of planetary goals, the Indian, or the modern hippy, is the fittest – the most use for the planet, as he’s the one not burning his own home, the planet; therefore he’s the one most likely to survive, long-term...

‘And maybe the planet knows that. Which is why it’s producing antibodies’ he looked at Wolf who smiled back, ‘whose job is to kill off those after a short-term fix and re-establish a new kind of person who is fittest by their sense of harmony with nature.’

‘But they’ll lose.’ Hayden said; ‘The normal, greedy, car-driving person is always going to win – just like your bronze age horse-riders killed all the fucking stone age hippies here like you were saying earlier – the only way change will happen is by law, and no politician is going to vote for the changes you suggest because no one will vote for them – give up your cars, phones, air-travel... yeah sure! No one wants that because at the end of the day we’re all selfish.’

‘Then nature will wipe them out. Somehow.’ Wolf said.

'Well it'll have to, because despite putting limits on temperature rise and all that stuff, planes are gonna keep flying, cars will only increase in numbers; it'll take a plague or a comet to knock us back to the Dark Ages – that would work, granted; but not by choice; people are too selfish.'

'Not everyone; the people here today, that's a start.'

'It's a drop in the ocean, mate. You could go as green as you like, it won't make one iota of difference.'

Despite feeling anger at what he was saying Con knew Hayden was just stating the facts. People didn't want to change. They didn't want climate change, yet they also didn't want to stop eating burgers or driving to work, or any other labour-saving device that saved labour at the expense of the planet. So how will things change? The myths told how. The wave; the flood; mans' hubris punished by disaster; he wished there might be another way – but until the majority of people turned round and decided, willingly, to forego comfort and pleasure for long-term goals, it was the only way... and they would only change through pressure, not by choice, or, somehow, by a change of mind – maybe like Wolf's antibodies, upping resistance bit by bit, until a new kind of person existed, one who actively turned back against the myth of progress and decided to walk another, older path; but it wasn't really an older path – but a wholly new one; one of sacrifice and humility; and it wouldn't be easy. It wasn't that long before, two millennia roundabouts, that they'd crucified someone for saying exactly that.

'Anyway – what you're saying is shit.' Hayden continued. 'How can the earth create these new people? Evolution has always been about eat or be eaten; it's an inherent system, a drive – how can the planet create a new type of man? That's bollocks. The earth isn't some conscious being that decides what to create; it has no concept of future, or how to remedy this; if something does happen it's an accident, a random mutation... that's all this is, random. The earth isn't sitting there thinking, ooh, I'm a bit hot, better make sure the next generation of humans are yoghurt-weaving fucking stoners who will destroy the motorways and plant trees on them.'

Once more, Con found himself trying not to laugh at Hayden's observations. He sounded like the voice of reason; his was the sarcastic and amusing mockery that the modern western worldview enjoyed baiting any alternatives with; and Con, having been brought up in that culture was torn between alternatives. He, too, could have laughed at this 'bollocks', at Wolf, with his red-painted chest and necklaces, talking about Gaia; it was risible.

Yet, at the same time, the humour was only skin-deep – a defence, an all-too clever attempt to deny an alternate point of view through what amounted to insults. Con knew that everything Wolf defended was important – not only important, necessary. Necessity demanded, as a species, that we forego our sarcastic modern superior mindset, or we would find ourselves undone by the *nemesis* brought on by this *hubris*. He had never experienced, so clearly, how the modern mindset had been so efficiently established in his psyche, from moment to moment, in school and in the media, changing, altering, establishing his thinking, his very perception of the universe, so that he, too, might look on someone as sincere as Wolf and feel like sniggering at his childish and unscientific posing. *What a load of bollocks.* It would be so easy to say those words, clap Hayden on the back, and breathe easily having fallen back into the dominant culture, normal, safe (for a couple of generations, anyway); he could then laugh at himself, at his childish superstitions – see his unfolding and re-emerging sense of connection to that White Goddess of his youth, as an amusing reversion to an earlier state. He could dismiss it as magical thinking, as the delusion of youth and grief; feel solid again; fit in; breathe...

...except...except....

Except Hayden was simply wrong. The dominant culture, in its hubris, was crumbling; and Wolf, and others like him, Con included, had felt another call – the beat of a different drum – and from where? Con had always felt some sense of connection to nature – and his dreams had presented him with alternative ways of thinking and being; dreams, visions, intuition... this is how the earth would speak...

Whether it was a throwback to earlier times or not, this growing sense among people of a need to return to what were older, archaic values was an attempt, Con saw, to step back to a point in time where man had taken a path towards planetary destruction, and to turn and take another path.

And even if I am a drop in the ocean, he thought, I cannot but act from what I feel to be right; even if I was the only one doing it, and it seemed to make not a jot of difference on a global scale... I, as a natural man, a child of this earth, choose, here and now, to cast off the snide, cynical attitude that I have been indoctrinated with all my life – that has led me to dismiss any sense of connection I ever felt – that made me think I was becoming mad for feeling ‘different’, so that I cast those feelings from me; but you can’t cast nature out; it rises in you like a sap, building and building; and for too long it’s been welling within me, and I’ve been scared of it, scared of my

very nature... Con felt a bubbling rage and joy churning within him; and I've tried to dam its flow; like someone trying to block a spring with rock and concrete... but it can't hold; I won't let it hold any more.

Con, eyes swimming with tears of some emotion he couldn't name – didn't dare name – not wanting to further categorise, name, define, catalogue and dismiss what was but a flow of life – leaned forward and took from where it sat on the edge of the table, the small clay pot of greasy red-ochre and oil from Wolf's tote bag, dipped his fingers in and ran two parallel lines across his face from one cheek to another, across his nose.

Wolf beamed at him.

'I am the land, that is all that I am.' Con said, the room suddenly lurching; he was aware, all of a sudden, that he'd drunk a lot more than he'd intended. But fuck it. Fuck it!

'Jesus!' Hayden muttered. 'Here we go...'

'Oh, just fuck off'

The two men, unbeknown to either, not fully consciously, were tied together in a state of conflict that neither could have, at this moment defined; what seemed on the surface an ideological spat was a much deeper conflict: on the exterior it was a reaction against unwanted aspects of their own personalities seen in the other – Hayden's sneaking admiration for these 'hippies', their sheer enthusiasm and drive, their nobility, which the cynical Hayden wished he might express – and Con's hard-headed scientific rationalistic side, a product of the west, that threatened the existence of his soul, newly born again in this glorious inebriated moment; but underneath, a deeper current ran that involved jealously on both sides for what they thought were Shen's affections for the other; for what else had they been arguing over? What was this but that perennial battle for the hand of the sun-maiden? Who else was the earth each wanted to inherit but the dark-haired embodiment of life-to-be-lived, vivacity and promise, that was this girl, and no other, Shenandoah Derdriu Mac Govan-Crow, whose thunderous looks betrayed a discomfort at the prehistoric chest-beating going on to her right.

Hayden looked at him open mouthed.

‘Go get me another pint and I may overlook that comment.’

Conall stayed in his seat, feeling a drip of ochre running down his cheek.

‘Get your own fucking pint.’ Con hissed, aware this was an attempt for Hayden to assert alpha-status and drunk enough not to let it go unchallenged.

‘Now don’t take the piss, mate... Get me a fucking drink and we’ll let this lie...’ and then, out of the blue, ‘– I’ve seen the way you look at Shen. You’re another fucking dreamer with no idea of the real world...’ he leaned over, pulled Shen towards him; ‘survival of the fucking fittest mate, survival of the fittest’ and he kissed her on the mouth.

Con was not a brawler; wits before fists was his way, yet in his drunken frustration, with all that had built up within him over the last couple of days, he acted before thinking, pulling Hayden back from his embrace with the clearly uncomfortable Shen, whose hands were up trying to push Hayden away.

‘What the fuck, Hayden?’ she spat, angrily.

And then Con was slammed into the table, glasses knocked aside – one shattering on the floor; he’d been elbowed rather than punched; and he struggled to get up feeling dizzy and mortified, his t-shirt soaked with beer – everything seemed far away as if seen down the wrong end of a telescope; Wolf had reached over the table, helping Con to his feet, and mouthing words but Con wasn’t understanding; he could see Shen and Hayden snarling at each other but as he found his feet he lunged at Hayden and swung his fist at the latter’s face, and missed – Hayden pushed forward and grabbed Con by the upper arm and seemed ready to punch him in return, but Shen was pulling him one way and Wolf had slowly extended his hand to hold Hayden’s arm back.

‘Calm it mate. Calm it,’ he was saying; Shen glanced across at Conall with what could have been a look of disdain or pity, and Con turned, pushed through the assembled bodies, and walked from the pub, still reeling.

## **Chapter 39: On Silbury Hill**

The colour was back in Piggott's cheeks and he was smiling and sipping on his brandy.

'Oh, I feel so much better; I'd not slept well the last couple of nights, and I just kept getting waves of heat during dinner; it felt so stuffy and the atmosphere didn't help...'

Lewis guffawed. 'That was potentially one of the most socially awkward meals of my life. I couldn't believe the audacity of the man, presuming all knowledge began and ended with him; I've never seen you look like you might explode, Tollers.'

'I was literally dumbstruck at points.' Tolkien admitted; 'I am glad you came to my rescue, Owen.'

'Poor Alexander!' said Piggott. 'He's been treading on eggshells for the past two days trying to keep Petrie sweet; I fear Petrie's going to return to his society friends in London with a less than glowing report on the work here...'

'Does he hold much sway?' Lewis asked.

'Yes, with the Old Guard; but Alexander was never in their favour. I, too, have been told I have sabotaged my future career as an archaeologist because I've chosen to work under Keiller. But this is where my passion lies – and if it weren't for Keiller I'd still be some office junior.'

He finished his drink and smiled.

'Well thank you gentlemen for escorting me back. I'm dead tired; I can hardly keep my eyes open, so I think it's time I retired.'

Once Piggott had gone back to his room in the pub, the three friends sat nursing their emptying beer mugs. At that moment the crowd parted, and George Mac Gowan-Crow appeared beside them.

After receiving compliments for the quality of his vegetables, which he waved off as early spring trifles, thanks to the glasshouses at the Manor, he became more serious. 'You missed some trouble earlier tonight, my friends. George said, drawing on his pipe.

'A group of black-shirts arrived on motorcycles looking for room to stay the night but there was no room, and besides, they wouldn't have been welcome.'

Tolkien exchanged glances with his friends. 'Sounds like the same group that the Penry-Evans's saw earlier.' He suggested.

'What happened?' Asked Lewis.

'They got a bit loud – there was some shouting, but we managed to persuade them to leave. They didn't take too kindly to being manhandled by a 'gypsy' as they put it, but hopefully they'll not be back. Us Wiltshire folk know how to deal with outsiders.' He looked at the men and winked.

'Do you realise it's not yet ten o'clock?' Lewis said. 'I had told your good lady wife not to expect us back until much later. I feel we might disturb her peace if we returned now. Should we have another drink?'

Tolkien shook his head. 'I've had more than enough; anymore and I'll be in a stupor. I suggest we go for a stroll and walk it off.'

'Splendid idea.' Lewis replied. 'Do you have anywhere in mind?'

'Yes. We're leaving tomorrow and we've yet to climb Silbury Hill. It would be quite an adventure in the dark, what?'

Lewis, who had regained all his lost enthusiasm drummed on the table with both hands. 'A better idea, I simply couldn't imagine, Tollers! Drink up, Owen! We're going on an adventure!'

...

The three friends were following a path through the long grass, ahead of them George Mac Govan-Crow lead the way, every now and again looking back to make sure his wards were following.

'It isn't a difficult path, sirs, but I know the best place to begin the climb, is all.' He said. He walked almost silently through the fields, unlike the noisy trampling feet of the others, who were hindered by a large supper and copious drinks.

The path up Silbury wound anticlockwise from the bank of the moat to the summit; it was not steep but the three men were still breathless when they stopped; not a word was spoken as they gathered together on the broad flat expanse that topped the mound and gazed in unison westwards to where the half-moon lay beside the Twins directly above the flickering blue of Sirius, about to set below the distant hills. The valley below was coal-black, with a thin rill of mist marking the meanderings of the river, slowly curling and undulating in the sheltered lowland, far below the summit, which was being clipped by a fresh breeze.

'Orion is nearly gone, now summer is arriving.' Tolkien said. 'I shall miss him over Oxford, but am always heartened when he returns with the frost near to Christmas.'

'Surely they built this here to look at the sky' Barfield said, 'Just look!'

'That would make sense.' Replied Lewis, 'you could probably get a hundred people or so up here at a push, maybe it was like mayday morning at Magdalen, some great pagan *Hymnus Eucharisticus* being sung from the this Great Tower – or do you think it was reserved for a single star-gazer? An astronomer king?'

'Perhaps if it was originally higher, then,' Barfield suggested, 'any tomb or burial may have been destroyed all those years ago, when, I believe, the Normans re-used this as a motte. Perhaps Merlin really once lay here – only to find himself smashed and discarded by the spade of a Norman soldier.'

'Well, if we are to believe the legend he was enchanted into a tower of air or beneath a great stone by the enchantress Vivien, the lady of the lake.' Lewis countered. 'Tower of air this may be, but certainly not under stone – West Kennet, yonder,' he said, pointing to the southern horizon, where the great tomb lay, 'might have been more suitable for that.'

'Of course, you old fool!' Tolkien suddenly chuckled, 'Thank you Jack! I hadn't even begun to put two and two together... Boann, she of the fairy mound at Newgrange, and Vivien are related, etymologically – they both derive from Bovinda – white cow – *they're the same woman*, though why I hadn't made this connection before I don't know! The woman Vivien has the guile to cheat the magical secrets from the old enchanter, just as Boann tries to steal knowledge from her husband Nechtan's well!'

He clapped his hands together in glee, then rubbed them together for warmth; his pipe stuck between his grinning teeth.

'Nut the white cow of Egypt becomes the sky after separating from Geb, the earth god, who becomes the land itself; Boann becomes the river Boyne and the Milky Way – and like Geb, Merlin becomes trapped 'in the earth' under the stone; he's part of creation – and therefore, if the myth stands, he needs a twin, a Nut, a Boann – a Vivien – and surely, as the Milky Way, she ought to be in the sky... but is there any indication he was a twin save his name? I'm sure, *sure* there is, if only I could remember it! Darn the lack of a library on this cursed walk!' he stuttered, only half joking.

The cool wind changed direction and they turned their collars up against the cold.

'Woman and knowledge...' Lewis mused; 'Why is it Eve who eats the apple, and Boann and Vivien that seek the wisdom of magic? And why does it always lead to catastrophe?'

'I don't know;' Barfield answered; 'it has always seemed to me that knowledge, of whatever form, bears better fruit in the female mind than the male; perhaps the myth is somewhat chauvinistic and twisted from its origins.'

Lewis nodded, silently. 'There may be truth in that, granted; Christ, after all, appeared first to the Magdalene after he had escaped the tomb. He trusted her with his message rather than that rag-tag gaggle of male disciples...'

'While Merlin still lies in his tomb, wherever that might be.' Tolkien said, his mind still on the enchanter.

'And what tales he would tell were he to rise!' Lewis beamed.

'Perhaps the Normans didn't level this site;' Tolkien was musing, 'perhaps a tower stood here before, long, long ago...'

'The Hill of Winds' he thought to himself. Built high above the flood plains, a tower from the old country, long drowned under the sea...

He looked to where George sat perched on his haunches at the edge of the mound, peering out over the valley below. Perhaps men in the past had squatted there, too – their eyes keenly surveying the horizon for the newcomers on their steeds. So George's more recent ancestors had crouched on hills and mesas, scouting the approach of the riders from the east who sought gold, land, and game – and destroying all in their path - eyes and lips narrow with greed.

Lewis looked down over the valley of the Kennet.

'We've come a long way, it feels, since we walked beside the river of the bright dog;' he mused. 'From dragons to dogs to the enchanter Merlin... are they connected do you think?'

Tolkien smiled to himself and began to recite an old anonymous Celtic verse:

*Merlin! Merlin! Where are you going  
So early in the day, with your black dog?  
I have come here to search the way,  
To find the red egg;  
The red egg of the marine serpent,  
By the sea-side in the hollow of the stone.  
I am going to seek in the valley  
The green water-cress and the golden grass,  
And the top branch of the oak,  
In the wood by the side of the fountain.*

*Merlin! Merlin! Retrace your steps;  
Leave the branch on the oak,  
And the green water-cress in the valley,  
As well as the golden grass;  
And leave the red egg of the marine serpent,  
In the foam by the hollow of the stone.  
Merlin! Merlin! Retrace your steps,  
There is no diviner but God.*

And then he began to talk, though whether to the others or just to himself wasn't clear...

'Merlin, like Ymir is dismembered to form the world, he is sacrificed so that the circle can be built – for the circle is symbolic of the whole of the world, of the cosmos. He dies, and yet somewhere he remains, asleep, in a dream, ready to pass on its knowledge of the state of things before the fall, before the flood...' he looked up at the milky river in the heavens,

'and the woman who took that knowledge, freed it from his grasp, bears its light – as Boann, as Sopdet the white cow, as Isis, as the star Sirius who heralds the flood, but who brings the light to man, the light of rebirth, of renewal. So Vivien learns wisdom from the mouth of the old prophet and steals his power from him; imprisoning him with his own enchantments - drinks from the cup of knowledge, the milk of paradise, the draught of poetic inspiration, which returns us to that blissful unity of Eden when man and god walked in the garden in the cool of the day.'

Barfield and Lewis looked at Tolkien, not wishing to disturb his reverie.

'And here we stand on his hill, the hill of the sun-eye, the hill of Sulis, she of the winding waterways, both above and below; this,' he said, holding his arms up to the sky and turning about him as if taking in the whole of the blessed Wiltshire landscape, so magical under the crescent moon; 'this is the place of the primal unity; this is the land formed by the rending apart of the twins... this is Ymir's-bury; it is Emrys's spinning castle; Merlin's magical circle... the place where creation began...'

'You see,' he said, louder now, turning to his friends, 'it isn't a case of whether it actually happened or not, I've been a fool. That is a *modern* distinction brought about by our paucity of language: myth or history? There is no 'or'! The two are one – only our feeble modern worldview seeks to prise them apart. To try to ask if my dream of Atlantis or my visions of Eärendil and the fall of Numenor was *literally* true is like trying to measure love... the whole premise is wrong! History, time, reality – what if these are but modern measuring systems that would seek to divide the world into a machine of parts, no more... and say nothing of the underlying nature of the world as it is... like your poetic language, Owen, that sees the world as full of meaning; I've been guilty of thinking too prosaically rather than poetically; seeking rigid, measurable confirmation for something that is, at heart, poetic, and no less real for it – a thousand times more real, in fact!'

And he stared down over the dark plain where the mist now cleared from the stream, so that it lay silvered like a serpent under the moon.

'One day the horse lords came here and they made the myth history; just as Christ had been prefigured by those ancient corn gods, so when the new people came and met the old ones and their priest, they seized their land and women and cows, just as the myth told them had always been done; just as the sun had to be rescued from the serpent of winter, so they wrestled with the Old One and cast him down...' Tolkien was looking out to the horizon, his words coming from a place outside of him...

'he was Emrys, Ymir, and they brought him to the stones and like the old serpent god they destroyed him and threw him down; made of him the earth - buried him under a stone and claimed the place for their own; they took the cup of the mysteries and drank it; but still he sleeps, this ancient one, bearer of knowledge of before the fall, before the flood, from a time when bird and beast and fish were one with man... and one day he will return...one day he will be released from his prison of glass...'

Below them a barn owl wheeled silently across the valley; stopping to hover for a moment before wheeling off again towards the copse of trees where the Swallowhead spring lay.

Barfield softly spoke a verse of Coleridge to the winds:

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.*

'I wish we could drink that milk and see these myths as they had.' Tolkien said, having broken from his vision; 'The flood... Nile or Boyne or Milky Way, or the flood that swamped Atlantis or the metaphysical flood that ended man's state of unity with the divine... to see it united, as poetry, rather than fragmented, either, or...? What then can we do? How can we restore it, give it voice?' his voice trembled.

'We must sing the myth forward,' said Lewis. 'We can be the mouthpiece for Merlin – sing the old stories forward. We can be the voice. We must tell the stories.'

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After a few minutes of sitting silently a number of pin-points of light appeared from the eastern horizon near the Sanctuary and drifted westwards; soon they were accompanied by the deep rumble of engines; the peace of the evenings was disturbed as the motorcycles approached and stopped near the foot of the hill on which the friends were sitting. Here the land was higher where the road rose over the hill and it formed a kind of land-bridge across the moat to the hill, and the men parked their bikes and their loud voices and laughter could be heard; then the smashing of a bottle and more laughter.

George turned to the friends; 'I fear it's the blackshirts from earlier.' he said.

'What do we do?' Lewis asked, peering around for an alternative route down. 'I don't want to be sat here all-night listening to that – and if they decide to come up here...'

Tolkien nodded. 'Then we best just go down and leave them to it. Better we leave now than surprise them if they decide to climb the hill. Besides, if we go down, we're closer to the road and we can just leave.'

Whistling and talking so they didn't arrive suddenly and by surprise, the four men made their way down to the foot of the hill where the bike gang had parked and were starting to build a fire.

'Christ! Nearly gave me a fuckin' 'heart attack mate' one laughed as Tolkien reached the level ground and appeared in the firelight. Lewis and Barfield arrived next, and then George.

'Hang on,' another biker barked; 'it's that fucking gypsy from the pub!'

A weasel-faced young man who had eventually managed to get the fire lit, stood, still holding a smoking stick. 'You little shit!' he began saying, striding towards George. But Tolkien barred his way.

'Out of the way, old man.' He sneered. 'We owe that gypsy fellow a beating.'

'You'll take not a single step forward, my lad, or it's a beating you'll get.'

'Is that a threat? Hear that lads, granddad is going to rough us up!' he

laughed, leering close.

Tolkien lifted his walking stick high above his head, his eyes sparkling.

'Do not mistake me for some weak old fool! I did not fight through fire and mud in the trenches of Flanders so selfish fools like you could play with our liberty! Go back whence you came. *Ne Paseran!* You shall not pass!' and he waved his walking stick at him in defiance.

Perhaps because of his mention of having fought for his country, but a tall man who had been hitherto standing near the fence away from the small fire moved forward at those words and spoke.

'Come on, leave him be Mitch – it's not worth the trouble.' The tall man was older, Tolkien's age; a look passed between them that suggested this man, too, had fought, and was not about to see a fellow veteran beaten for the sake of revenge on some gypso.

'But Campbell...'

'Leave him!' the man named Campbell shouted; and in silence the four friends left the hill and walked calmly on to the road.

## **Chapter 40: The River of Milk**

He walked and walked, his mind ablaze; his mouth set firm and his eyes fixed ahead, shedding lines of tears that he never stopped to wipe away. Inside he was in conflict, a sickening spiralling of anger and fear – half of him wanting to go back and apologise and for Shen to look on him kindly, the other wanting to go back and pummel Hayden's smug face into a bloody mess. But what would that achieve? He had already bloody won; Shen was his, not Con's. A great tug of war was taking place in his soul; and he swung from one extreme to the other.

He had crossed the Silbury road before he realised why he was heading for the river, the deed he had gone there to do: the same deed he had failed that day the previous April on the night Melissa had died. But he did not know if he sought rebirth or dissolution. And in the moment of that realisation, with nothing left to lose or fight for, he felt as if the earth had crumbled beneath him and that he were falling further into the abyss... caring no more to protect himself from his own grief and anger a deeper darkness took him than any he had ever known and engulfed him, save for one small ember of anger that glowed deep down; so standing on the edge of the road, looking up at the stars he shouted, venting his rage....

'Am I to be judged by THAT?!!' he shouted at the sky. 'Christ I am GLAD I'm not like that! I'm glad I'm a fucking dreamer! I'd rather be poor and free every day of my life than, than THAT!' he spat.

He tasted salt; and then in the blurry darkness beyond he thought he saw the shape of something dark against the lesser darkness of the fields; something coal-black sloping away towards the river; and he followed, no longer afraid; willing the dark hound to take him. And he followed where it

had seemed to lead, towards the stream.

A faint breeze ruffled the surface of the river...

'I am what I fucking am!' He repeated. And in the void that punctuated this angry cry, which was nothing less than an affirmation of his true character and the taking of responsibility for every single one of his past actions, in the twinkling of an eye, all was changed... a realisation he had passed a point of no return; that he would no longer return to how he had been, scared to be who he was...

...and in the swirling, stinging veil of his tears he saw on the opposite bank not the dark crouched apparition he had glimpsed moments before, but, below the white of the moon, a smudge, a white phantom, a dream; a dark-haired girl on the banks of the river of Paradise; her hand waving, not beckoning, but sending him back; warning him...

Then it was gone, and a silent cry welled up from his throat, gasping.

'Mel..?' he whispered. There was no reply save the wind in the grasses; hissing like snakes; they seemed to say he could not join her, only by entering the river, and to enter the river, was to die.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand; salty wetness smeared with red-ochre...

He took off his shoes and began to strip, walking resolutely into the gurgling cold waters; until shaking uncontrollably, he knelt in the holy water, he did not lay down and drink deep as his sister had done, no – he remained upright and splashed three great handfuls of the chill water over his face and shoulders, gasping.

'Release me, Mother... May all that was hindering me, begone!' he shouted. 'I am what I am; no man nor woman will ever change that. Fuck them all. Because you know what? I choose me! *I choose me!* I admire the person I am; I've fucked up in the past, but only as I worried what others thought. I don't act for them anymore... I stand naked before you!' he addressed the crescent moon, floating above the brows of Pegasus, near the gushing waters of Aquarius...; 'see me for who I am!!!' and he stood up in the water, his arms outstretched, his eyes seemed to roll up into his head... as it seemed wave upon wave of grace flowed up through his entire body...

'I. AM. PUCK!!!'

And then he slipped; the slimy rock under his foot seemed to shift in the water and he twisted and fell, his foot caught between the rock and the roots of a strong Elder sapling on the bankside; and he teetered and fell to the side, catching his side on a half-submerged branch that tore a hole in his shirt and scraped at the skin; he felt his side hit the water and then all was black and freezing cold and muffled; he kicked out but his foot was held fast; he shouted and it burst out of him as bubbles; his ankle and side screaming with pain, he was encased in a shroud of black ice and he pushed out with his arms, ineffectually, trying to lift himself out of the water, but only managed to scrape great clouds of chalky debris up from the floor of the stream.

No thoughts came – just a wave of terror like he had never felt before; he was going to drown here; and then a surge of energy burst through him as he struggled for his life, a berserker rage that saw his limbs flailing in all directions – not knowing which way was up – and he involuntarily drew in a breath – a mouthful of the brackish blackness; his eyes wide in horror seeing nothing but flashing stars... his neck seeming to snap back, the bones feeling like they were breaking, and then a silence deeper than he had ever known, a void on the edge of eternity...

Then suddenly something was around him – pulling him backwards – arms around his chest, wrenching him backwards from the watery abyss back into time - turning him, dragging him half up the reed covered bank.

'Fookin' breathe man!'

With a rasping inrush of slimy water and air Con's lungs which had closed off to protect themselves finally opened – a great glut of choking stuff lodged halfway down his throat and then was expelled.

Con lent forward, eyes streaming as he coughed and retched violently; mud, water, then sickly sour beer ejected with a splash into the water below; twice again he heaved and emptied his throat and stomach; he was nothing but a void, emptying, emptying, until he lay shaking violently, tears streaming from his eyes, on the bank, and wiped the snot and puke from his mouth.

Wolf was speaking, but Con understood nothing, he was weeping uncontrollably; Wolf was there directly before him;

'Get up, come on – just get onto the grass – you're in shock.'

Numb and vacant he took Wolf's proffered arm and dragged himself on legs made of jelly onto the grass; a wave of nausea hit him and he retched again, and then he lay on the grass, on his side, eyes now wide open and his body shaking, uncontrollably weeping.

'What were you doing, man?' Wolf was asking.

'I slipped. Accident... thank you.' Con managed between deep breaths.

He looked skywards and felt a shaking deep inside, and then a sensed light; for that ember of anger, that tiny pin-prick of light in the dark of the abyss, had in the moment it was vocalised relit in his being a fire long smothered; Conall was free, as free as the moment he had emerged from his mother's womb – naked, shivering, wet with the waters of the Kennet – he had crossed from one state to another; the old him - what had really been but a shell of phobias, an armoured mask defending itself from the threat of change, of death, of his own reality that so sacred him, had itself died, drowned in those waters of despair, and as he had crumbled he had been reconstituted, and he cried out with joy like a new-born hearing the sound for the first time.

His mind was a blossoming of new emotions – unfettered joy and deep, deep sorrow. Understanding.

'I'm not afraid anymore, Mel! I'm not afraid!!!' he shouted, and the tears that mixed with the river water on his cheeks were tears of joy. He looked up at the stars and saw them for what they were, not thermonuclear furnaces creating matter but great beings of immeasurable age, singing the cosmos into being... and at that moment he knew, *just knew*, that he had existed in one form or another since the beginning of time and that he and they would always exist; he had stepped out of time and the scales had fallen from his eyes; what was time? It had ceased to have meaning - he felt in an instant the genetic history of his entire being... from man to ape to mammal back to the first fish swimming in the primal oceans, whose origins were still remembered in the sea-like saltiness of his blood; millions upon millions of years and millions upon millions of lives rising into being and annihilation; and they were not separate from him, they *were* him and in that transformative moment he did not know whether Conall Astor was a creature of flesh or fish... or where the stars ended and where he began, for there was no difference - all was one; all had always been one; and all would always be one.

A few minutes later they were walking back from the river, Wolf's arm supporting Con, who was walking in a kind of trance.

'There's something you should know about Melissa,' he said. 'She killed herself, Wolf. We told everyone that she'd drowned by accident – but she didn't.'

'Shit, man. Shit. I'm so sorry.'

'We didn't want any copycat deaths – fans aping what she did; so, we said it was an accident; but the death certificate and the coroner ruled she had killed herself. She had three times the legal limit of alcohol in her blood; she'd written a short note – in her book, the one I showed you the other morning – and she'd left it open on the riverbank on that page.'

*I'm going to the river to die; to die, Wolf – that's what she'd said:  
No more to drink the milk of paradise'*

'I was here, Wolf. I got a phone-call from her husband to say that she'd gone missing and I just assumed she'd run away with someone else. Tony was a wanker – and she'd gone and so I was happy, I didn't think twice. I didn't know she was in this state. I was here – I didn't go and look for her. I was too besotted with Shen; I should have gone but I didn't – I was here laughing and kissing and happy and my twin sister was already dead...the night before Tony's text...'

Oh my poor Melissa. Poor Titania.

'She'd put stones in her bag to weigh her down.'

'It's not your fault, Con. What could you have done?"

'I could have listened. She seemed happy but maybe she had just become resolute at what she wanted to do. She told me she'd been writing lyrics about death, for fuck's sake and I didn't see what she was trying to say.'

'The day I kissed Shen on West Kennet was the day I got the message. I ignored it, Wolf – I thought deal with it Anthony, she's left you. And by then she was already dead. And I didn't know.' His breath had calmed slightly. He paused then turned to look Wolf in the eyes.

'Aren't twins supposed to know? Shouldn't I have felt it? But that night, the night before his text, I had come here, I'd had a dream, years before – of submerging myself in a river, and that night I just had this urge to come here and enact it; but when I was standing on that bank there, deciding not to wade in, *she was actually doing it*. I didn't put the two together until a few days later when my Mum rang to tell me they'd found her body. When she rang, I just left. I didn't tell Shen why I had gone. I didn't say goodbye I just left.'

'Even if you'd gone after you got Anthony's message it would have been too late, Con.' Wolf said.

Con shrugged. 'But I still ignored it – I can't believe I stayed and just dismissed it. I can't believe I ignored the warning signs from her; she must have been trying to tell me those last few times we met. I was selfish.'

'You can't save her Con, you couldn't have saved her then, either. In this shitty world you can only save yourself.'

Con stared at the sky.

'And you know what?' Wolf said.

'Hmm?'

'It's not Shen's fault either.'

'I never said it was.'

'You were happy here and you think you should have been fucking miserable or you should have been there and stopped it; but you carried on. I think you think your intoxication with Shen blinded you to something you should have been feeling. That somehow being here with her was wrong; and so, for you Shen somehow represents that wrong. But it's not her fault.'

'I know it's not'

'But you act like it is. You keep her at arm's length. You're distant – she says you're distant; that you're not who you were. You need to do two things: forgive yourself and forgive her; you were happy, you deserve that. You can't change what happened; all you can do is change how you react to it.'

‘Have I fucked it up?’ Con asked, shaken.

‘No mate; not at all. Life goes on. You have to go on. Start again.’

## **Chapter 41 Belonging**

A lone figure was walking the high banks of the circle along the path that lead from the southern entrance to the copse of tall trees at the eastern entrance; the roots of the trees sprawled and twisted down the bank like a river of entwined serpents, and it was over these roots the figure stepped, making her way up to the mighty trees. She stopped and lay her arms about the trunk of one, and gently rested her forehead against its smooth moon-pale bark.

Her lips moved in what may have been a silent prayer, but any passer-by would not have understood the words of those breathed syllables had they been close enough to hear, for they were in a language never spoken in this land, a language hundreds, maybe thousands of years old, born of a land of forest, mountain and prairie an ocean away.

She lifted her head and watched the tangled web of branches creak and shift before the moon; her unbound hair ran down her back like a shadow, and down her small dark face glistened two lines of tears.

Shenandoah felt very alone; perhaps she had always felt this way. In a way she envied these trees, rooted in this ancient earth; she, too, was of this land, but a large part of her didn't belong; and yet neither did she feel she belonged anywhere else – if she returned to Canada to be amongst her great-grandfather's people would she feel any more rooted there? She doubted it; that's why it's not about blood and bone, she mused, my connection to *Itsipaiitapio'pah* isn't through blood, but through spirit. She felt like some windblown seed of some exotic flower that had taken root in foreign climes, but one still drawing sustenance from this earth; whether such a flower 'belonged' or not it still drew nourishment from the earth and blossomed in the light of the same sun; belonging wasn't to do with how long your ancestors had been in a certain place; belonging was about *now*,

about people alive today, she thought; it was about friendship and acceptance. Shenandoah's sense of belonging was not about being Irish or Native Canadian, these were her people only in the loosest sense; no, it was about finding others who shared her beliefs and values, her passions and hopes; her sense of the mystery of the cosmos, of the sanctity of nature and life, of consciousness of the natural order of things; of belonging not to this or that tribe, but to the Earth. And this is why Shenandoah was weeping; for she had thought she had found such a friend, but he had walked away.

She turned and sat against the trunk, and took her purse from her bag; there, folded amongst receipts and her business cards was a sheet of paper. It was a letter; and she read it through her tears.

*2nd June 2011*

*Shenandoah,*

*There's no easy way to say this; it was my sister Melissa's funeral today; she died in a tragic accident. I apologise for the handwriting but I'm drunk. I wish you all the happiness you deserve but it's probably for the best if we don't contact each other again.*

*Conall*

Two emotions were tearing at her heart; such sadness for Conall; he had been so happy and full of life and this just sounded so sad; and anger, for which she felt a horrible guilt, feeling so selfish for even allowing it to surface. June 2nd. But he had left Avebury some three weeks earlier, way before the accident, without so much as a goodbye. What had been his excuse then, *before* his sister had died?

She remembered the day he left. She had texted him and got no reply and had walked down the avenue to find his camper gone. Had she meant so little to him that he should leave without seeing her? What had she been, some kind of holiday fling? She couldn't reconcile this with how he had been with her. She had felt that they had so much in common; a shared way of looking at the world; she had felt this was someone she could trust; dare she say it she had thought this someone she could grow to love. He had understood her; her quirks; her love of the stars and her fear of great waves.

The first week she was shocked and worried; then she felt a fool and the

worry turned to anger. When the letter came, she just felt dead inside. She cried for him and his loss; cried for her loss too. How could she help him if he just wanted to cut her off? Was he just using what had happened as a conveniently arising excuse to cut her out of his life? She had texted and written him several emails, the last had begged him just to be civil and let her know if she should just forget him and move on. It was an appalling thought and she felt guilty for having it, but surely, he hadn't used Mel's death to such ends? But at least he had written, and in the circumstances, she didn't know whether to write back and console him; she didn't want to be an added problem at such a time.

She had never told her Granddad. He had asked about Con, but she had said she hoped one day he'd be back, but he had suffered a great loss and was taking time to grieve. A few weeks later Alfred's health had declined severely, and he had died of pneumonia in his bed at the cottage. On that last day he had squeezed her hand and told her to be happy at all costs. And he had said that Con would come back; that's what she meant when she had said to him in the pub two days before today she had kind of known she would see him again; he had asked if she'd seen it in the cards and she said no.

When she saw her Grandfather's will leaving Con his flute it grieved her; she felt the old man had had some kind of naïve trust in the man that it seems was unwarranted. She had not meant that much to him, and she would in all likelihood never see him again. It was ridiculous anyway – she had only spent 4 days with him; it was no time at all to gauge another; all that sense of a shared worldview was probably illusory.

A couple of weeks after Alfred's funeral she had made a decision that it was time to move on; she had let Con know about Alfred by letter, giving him the chance, if he wished, to reply, but none was forthcoming. She had resolved to walk to West Kennet and to return to the Swallowhead spring the piece of chalk he had given her there – but she never got that far; just beyond the Beckhampton to Avebury road, where the path meets the river on its way towards Silbury hill she had felt a pain in her ankle and looked down in horror to see an adder slide away into the long grass; panicking she had fled back to the road and burst into tears asking the first person she saw for help; it had been Hayden. The great spirit, she thought, had sent her a saviour, someone to replace Con. But the chalk pebble was still in her handbag.

Hayden was a good man; loyal, charming, good-looking, intelligent. A darn

sight more practical than the dreamer Con would have been, she had consoled herself by thinking; and what did it matter if Hayden wasn't as entranced by her ancestry and her mystical flights of fancy? None of her previous boyfriends had been, and she had learned to keep that side hidden. Maybe it was meant to be hidden; maybe she really was alone, and Con hadn't really thought the same way; he'd just played along with her. But he had seemed different - a world away from the men she'd usually dated; full of bravado, all mouth - Con had been somewhat shy, quiet, yet fired up when he wanted to be; he was a dark horse, a lot more simmered under that calm surface than he let on; yes, she liked the attention of those jack the lads; but underneath they bored her; she liked the attention but when she had it she found she didn't want what they really had to offer once the charm began to wear thin;

It wouldn't be true to say that she hadn't thought about Con when she had moved back here in the early spring; but she loved, she thought, Hayden, and she wanted to be nearer to him; Scilly was too far away, and the idea of coming back to her granddad's house was so appealing. She'd soon stopped looking for Con's dark tousled locks amongst the crowds in the village. Until a few days ago.

It had been lovely to see him; but he had been cool, distant - still sweet, still full of the same ideas; and they had talked, but he didn't seem he wanted anything more. She had so wanted to ask him why he hadn't written, but she didn't have the courage. He seemed too fragile for a start, and did she really need him to say, again, that he just didn't have those feelings for her?

But at the Devil's chair - when he'd told her his dream of the waves and the building of the temple - she was sure he had meant that she had been the woman in the dream - but when she had got close he had backed off. The thought sickened her.

Tonight she should have followed him; she was proud of what he had done, standing up to Hayden; Hayden hadn't meant any harm he just hadn't thought as usual; no - it was more than that - he *knew*; knew she had feelings for Con; poor Hayden - and he'd been angry and defensive; but what he had done to Con was unforgiveable; Shen hadn't known what to do; as Con had left she had got up to follow but Hayden had grabbed her arm. 'You dare!' he had said. 'It's okay' Wolf had said, 'I'll go', but he had come back in after a couple of minutes; Con had vanished; Wolf had headed for the cove, following someone he thought was Con but it hadn't been him. 'Maybe he's gone back to his van.' Wolf had said, but Shen had had another

thought. She didn't know why – she had no reason to suppose he'd go there, a place that had been special to them as it was.

'Try the Swallowhead.' She said.

A few minutes later she had left the pub herself, alone. She had told Hayden it wasn't working; she wasn't happy; 'Do you still have feelings for Con?' he had asked. She hadn't lied; Hayden stood up and walked out, turning as he left to simply say he wasn't a fucking mug and there were no second chances; it was her loss. Putting on a tough exterior to the end, Shen thought. She could see he was hurt. Part of her had wanted to put her arms round him so that those tears she had seen welling up in his angry eyes might not be shed, like she had when he'd first told her about his cousin dying when they were children and how he'd rowed with his mother and father, telling them he'd never go to church again as God wasn't kind, but a bastard... But she simply couldn't do it. All it would have taken was to walk a few steps forward, and she couldn't do it.

And now she was here; she'd blown it with Hayden and the man she had feelings for had shown her little sign he might feel the same; all his actions could be interpreted as friendship, nothing more. Shen was steeling herself; he walked away once and could so easily do it again. I don't think he's a bastard, she thought; I had to believe he was before to get through this; the fact is I don't know why he did what he did, I just know we get on so well; I just wish I had the chance to speak my mind – but it sounds so selfish demanding why he hadn't been in touch after all he's been through; it sounds petty; the answer is obvious: he doesn't feel the same.; perhaps he never did. But her hand went to the chalk pebble in her purse. You can't base a relationship on a single day, she reasoned – but that day, when we sat by the spring and he gave me the pebble, and we kissed on West Kennet, I know he could have loved me; loved me, understood me, treasured me. Rescued me, even, from this wasteland of un-belonging.

## **Part Four: The Twin**

## **Chapter 42 A friend and Brother**

Lewis was looking ruefully at his rucksack; their sojourn in Avebury had supposed to have been for just one afternoon, but he had grown used to this place and it seemed strange now to be all packed and ready to move on to the next stage of their adventure.

Besides, it wasn't as if they had to begin walking straight away; Mr Penry-Evans had arranged to pick them up from the Red Lion car park at ten o'clock. It was now quarter to the hour, and the men were enjoying a last smoke in the sitting room of Church Cottage before they would have to go. George and Tolkien were sitting in the armchairs in front of the empty firegrate, both bathed in blue pipe smoke and sharing last minute observations on Native American language. The smell of sausages and bacon still hung in the air.

Barfield was standing by the open window, watching the early bees flitting from flower to flower in the bay; Lewis could hear Shona Mac Govan-Crow singing to the babe Alfred in the kitchen:

*Hey diddle diddle  
The cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon...*

Lewis bent over his pack and took out the Ordnance Survey map; they had stayed here three nights, three more than intended; he traced the route they should have been taking; Calne they had missed, and Trowbridge and Wells, but all was not lost; today, according to the original plan (if the a loosely sketched itinerary they penned could be called a plan) they would have been walking from Wells to Glastonbury, no doubt aiming to arrive at the latter some time mid-afternoon. As it was, they would arrive in

Glastonbury in time for lunch, earlier than planned.

Mrs Penry-Evans had said that they were welcome to stay at her house beside the Tor, in a large wooden hut she had acquired some time before and had planted on the lower slopes of the hill; so at least they didn't have to rush about finding accommodation for the night. Or the next.

Glastonbury was to be a two-day stop, given its importance in the Arthurian tradition, and its splendid Abbey ruins. We shall leave Merlin's grave and find Arthur's, Lewis smiled to himself. *Rex Quandam Rexque Futurus...*

Shona, little Alfred in her arms, entered the room.

'Well it has been a pleasure having you gentlemen here these last few nights.'

'Oh, I assure you the pleasure has been all ours.' smiled Jack.

'And do make sure if you're ever in the area again that you drop by and see us all!' she said.

Tolkien and George stood up from the fireplace and shook hands warmly.

'It has been most illuminating talking with you Mr Mac Govan-Crow; I only regret we have not had time to talk more.'

George smiled warmly and bowed in appreciation. Then he turned and took the alder wood pipe from the wall above the fire.

'My mother told me that one day this pipe would be given in friendship to a man who knew about the stars... I am wondering if you are that man, Mr Tolkien. Would you take the pipe in remembrance of the last few days here?'

Tolkien coloured deeply.

'Mr Mac Govan-Crow...George that is very generous of you; but I can't take this from you; young Alfred should be brought up with the sound of the flute in his ears; I should only deafen my children with my poor attempts; regrettably I cannot take it, though I am honoured and astonished that you considered it.'

George smiled and nodded in appreciation. 'Perhaps then another will

come who knows of the stars.'

'Perhaps, I'm sure it will be so.' Tolkien said. 'But for my appreciation of your generosity as hosts I should very much like to send you a copy of my book, for young Alfred when it is printed later this year. A meagre gift but not without feeling.'

Shona smiled. 'That is most generous of you.'

'Well in that case,' Barfield said, still at the window, 'I shall also send a copy of my own children's book, *The Silver trumpet*'

Shona laughed. 'And you Mr Lewis? Have you nothing for Alfred here?' she winked.

'Oh, I'm afraid nothing suitable just yet – but one never knows, one never knows...'

The three friends shook hands with Shona, and said goodbyes to the shy Alfred who hid his face in his mother's shoulder, and then stepped into the warm morning sun, followed by George who had insisted he walk them to the car park.

'George,' Tolkien said, walking a few paces behind his friends; 'I hope you didn't think my refusal rude; it's just too much of a precious thing to give away.'

'In my culture we store great esteem by what is given rather than what is owned,' George said, 'but I understand; you wonder why I offered you such a precious thing when I don't really know you, and you feel you haven't earned it.'

Tolkien cleared his throat and nodded gently 'Yes, I suppose it seems too great a gift when I have offered nothing in return.'

George put his hand on Tolkien's arm so that he slowed and faced him.

'You listened.' His dark eyes were earnest. 'Our people have been shamed; they have been taken from lands that once belonged to them, their traditions destroyed; I could never go back because although of Siksika blood I do not feel I belong there; I belong here where my son will grow and flourish – but at heart, though I live amongst Englishmen, I think different, because my mother and father brought me up different from

others; I was taught the sacredness of our stories; how a story was more important than anything else as it defines a people and offers hope; a story connects us with the Great Spirit, it puts us in accord with nature.'

He paused and looked up at the sky.

'You think like a poet.' Tolkien said, and George smiled.

'Shona knows stories, too, she understands in a way, but not as I do. I will tell my son these stories so they will not be forgotten; he will tell them to his own children and grandchildren and so they will not be forgotten; I feel the power of them when I speak. But I had always felt alone in this. But you, my friend, you listened. You cared about my story and you understood, and you felt it in here, felt their truth.' he pointed to his chest.

'You have the same fire in you that I have;' he continued, 'we understand things the same way; and you not only know the ancient tales but you make them afresh; you are a creator of stories; and your stories come not from your head but from the Great Spirit, as a gift, am I not correct?'

Tolkien nodded. 'Yes; yes, I do feel that.'

'You are my friend and you are my brother;' George said, 'that is why I would have entrusted the flute to you; but maybe it will be for Alfred to pass it on to another storyteller when you and I are just figures in someone else's story!'.

The car was waiting, its engine already rumbling with life, and Lewis and Barfield were loading their packs into the small boot. They then said their goodbyes to George and took their seats.

George took Tolkien's pack and fitted it in the boot.

'Goodbye,' he said, shaking Tolkien's hand once more.

'Goodbye, George.'

## **Chapter 43: Morning**

Conall was outside the Red Lion when it opened at half-eleven, and having got himself a pint he sat at one of the outside tables and began to read.

*My Dearest Edith,*

*This morning we are to drive to Glastonbury, having kindly been offered transport so we can get back on schedule. Last night we climbed the hill at Silbury and sat for a while and smoked and talked on the flat top where once some kind of fortress had been built, possibly a Norman motte, though the mound itself is far, far older. The night sky was very clear, and Orion was setting in the west. If only one could travel back in time and see how it all looked when this hill was first raised; perhaps, though, Wells' Time Machine is not necessary for such a venture, as we have the power of the imagination, with which the past is really no distance away at all, nor other places. For in my mind's eye the hill seemed as if once it were crested by trees, and it brought to mind Cerin Amroth, and the glade in Roos where you danced for me among the flowers. It all seems so long ago; especially here, in these places built by the old men of the west. They haunt me, Edith; their stories demand telling, and I have neglected them for too long. Over the last two days, however, I have come to realise that my own 'imaginings' are far closer to the truth than one might have believed! The star rising over the sea, and the great wave that swamped the coasts - part of that legend survives here, and maybe, now that Unwin is off my back and the Hobbit proofs finally corrected I can return and tell this tale properly, strange as it is; but I shall explain it to you in person, for it would take too long to write... Suffice to say, I spent far too long these past few days wrangling over what all*

*this might mean, and tying myself into all kinds of knots over whether the story was an historic memory – in which case how was it passed on to me – in the blood, some kind of racial memory, perhaps? Or was it plucked or gifted from some other mind? But the dream always seems so personal, a memory. And I am loath to consider it a memory from a previous existence, though I may have to one day consider that possibility.*

*Here, at Avebury, I have been reminded of the flood that drowned Boann in the River Boyne; and how she was behind the Vivien of the Merlin legend; and how Merlin may have been remembered here as both Ymir, twin, and in the name of Marlborough.*

*Today we shall be driven to Arthur's Avalon, but my mind is still on Merlin. It occurred to me today, on waking, that Merlin Emrys, the sacrificed youth, holds the key to all of this.*

*I have, however, cut through the Gordian knot of all this thought, with the sword of poesy – by which I mean that I came to realise, thanks to Barfield, that all these mental gymnastics over myth and history are irrelevant; if our ancestors lived in a world where they spoke in poetry and not prose, and the very world was thereby a mythically-infused place, then there was no distinction between myth and history, and for me to ask the question over which was correct was a symptom of modern western divisive thought. You see, the flood could be both historic and mythic – if we redefine what we mean by both terms. In the worldview painted by Barfield the past was an Eden, where man and God really did walk in the garden in the cool of the day; and elves walked under the stars. And still do if we open our hearts to poetic thinking. How I would love to walk in that world, under the starlit trees with them again. But why do I write 'again'?*

*Love to the children.*

*Your*

*Ronald*

'Con, are you okay?' Shen rushed towards him and held him closely.

'I am.'

'Really?'

Con smiled.

'Wolf said you nearly drowned.... It was an accident, right?'

'Yes. Don't worry; I'm not that sensitive to what your boyfriend does!'

'He's not my boyfriend anymore'

Con made no effort to hide his smile.

'Thank fuck for that. Can I say for the record that I thought he was a total cock? Well, he wasn't, but he wasn't good enough for you.'

Shen laughed.

'Where is he?' Con asked, looking behind her, expecting to see him rushing towards him.

'He's at his. He'll have to come and get his stuff some other time.'

'I'm sorry, though Shen – I didn't mean to' he paused, not really knowing what to say.

'It's ok. We weren't really suited; it was only a matter of time...Anyway – you seem different. Lighter.' She said.

Con smiled and stared over at the banks of the henge. 'I'd been living in fear, Shen. And guilt – the fact I was here, and she wasn't – that there might have been something I could have done. but there wasn't, there really wasn't.'

'I know that. You're a good man, Con.'

'I'd been scared to feel anything anymore; but that was daft; protecting oneself against feeling – why? Because life hurts; well, yes – it does – but to be alive, to feel, to be, is the most important thing in the world; I saw that when I was seconds away from losing it; everything dropped away, Shen – the defensive stance I'd taken, protecting me, it just shattered, and I saw things – I really saw them, like seeing for the first time...'

And he looked at her now, as if he had never seen her before, and unafraid he raised his hand to her cheek and stroked it.

'Are you sure you're okay?' She asked again. 'You seem kind of in shock...'

He laughed. 'I'm just taking it all in, Shen. I may not have been here today if it hadn't been for Wolf. I'd have never seen the sun again, these stones... never tasted this beer... never seen you again; I feel like I've been given a reprieve. Something must want me alive; I felt before as if I had affronted the universe by surviving when she had died – but the universe had its chance – it could have taken me last night; but it chose not to.'

He remembered Wolf's theory – that the universe never made things easy; he had been tested to the very limited and had survived; reborn, shining, renewed out of that milky river as his dream of all those years ago had suggested.

'We go through life just not living; we protect ourselves against truly living because to really open up is to feel things too keenly – but what else is there?'.

He held her gaze, properly, for the first time since the previous year.

'How's the deciphering going?' she asked, looking down at the sheaf of notes in his hand.

Con smiled – 'Listen, I didn't get to tell you this yesterday, but Tolkien thinks the Merlin myth happened here – which reminds me, I need to get some information from Wolf.'

'How do you mean, the myth happened here?'

'That Merlin is connected to the stones in some strange way; that Marlborough is named after him -and perhaps more....' An image of Old Man in his glass case rose in his mind.

'And...' he took the latest letter and showed it to Shen.

'Merlin is a twin... and Tolkien links him to Boann, an Irish Goddess – I knew something about her – connected her to Nut and the Milky Way in my research – but he says about her drowning. I don't remember that – I knew the Boyne was named after her, but not that she'd drowned...' He looked into Shen's dark eyes for some kind of answer.

'I dream about the river of milk, and the three cows, and of walking into the water, and then twenty years later Mel drowns in the river Braint that she

associated with the same dream; it's like she was enacting the myth, Shen. It's like she's Boann.'

Shen placed her hand on his.

'Did she go there because of my dream, or did I dream it because of what she would later do?' Con asked, a question neither he nor Shen was able to answer.

Shen shrugged. 'I don't know Con; it's all too sad and strange.'

Strange. Yes. But the sadness, Con's habitual sadness, seemed more bearable somehow; before it would have paralysed him with its ferocity, but today he could see beyond it the joy of Melissa's existence rather than just its tragic end; as if she were finally emerging from behind her own shadow.

'Shit...' Con said, suddenly sitting upright 'is Wolf gone?'

'Not yet; he'd planned to go today but after last night, he's asked if he can stay a couple more days.'

'Bless him. I wasn't really in a state to thank him last night.'

'No, and I'm surprised you're drinking today!' Shen said.

'I threw most of last night's up in the river.' Con replied.

'Nice. I had a go at Wolf for not bringing you back here.'

'I wanted to go back to my van.'

'You should have gone to hospital!'

'I was okay.' Con said, though his neck was still sore, and the graze in his side where the cut-off branch had scraped him when he fell was bruising.

'Anyway... something weird happened.'

'Like what?'

'I woke up about four with the van shaking.... No, behave!' he said seeing

Shen lift an eyebrow and smirking. ‘Really, it was shaking, and the lanterns and cups were swinging...’ he sipped his pint.

‘Anyway, I open my eyes and I can see the cups moving on their hooks and I know, and I mean I know, that hundreds of people are walking past, down the Avenue towards the circle. And I can sense two of them, at the end, kind of rounding off the procession – like chiefs or something. Well, I suddenly come to a bit and I realise I can’t hear voices, just feel their footfalls which are shaking the van – and I’m totally awake but I’m too scared to look outside, as I don’t want to open the door and find hundreds of walkers staring at me in my boxer shorts...but I do decide to peak through the window...’

He drank some more.

‘And?!’ Shen was staring.

‘No one there. Nothing. And the cups and lanterns were still moving, but they stopped shortly after. And I’m there trying to make them move by rocking on the bed, by breathing hard, by jumping up and down and I can’t – nothing I could do in the van would make the stuff move like it had been.’ ‘What the fuck?’ Shen said, open mouthed. ‘What do you think it was? A dream?’

‘Dreams don’t make lanterns swing on their hooks, especially not if you’re wide awake and looking at them swinging! I think it was old ones. I think they were walking the Avenue, and that’s what it was for... not for us, but for them, the spirits.’

## **Chapter 44: Cherhill**

'I do apologise for being awkward,' Lewis was explaining as they climbed out of the car onto the grass verge, 'but we had intended to stop at the horse when we arrived three days ago...'

They had not been driving ten minutes, but Mrs Penry-Evans was amenable to the men's wishes.

'By all means – besides, we shall take the road south from Calne once you have found Coleridge's house and join back up to the Glastonbury road in no time.'

All five people exited the car and stood at the bottom of the hill gazing up at the chalk carved horse that stood on its crest, flanked, half a mile to the right, by the Cherhill monument.

'You know we've always driven past on the other side of the hill and so missed this, haven't we Tom?'

Tom Penry-Evans, squinting against the sun, agreed. 'We've seen the monument, though – had no idea there was a horse here.'

'It's rather a grander beast than the hakpen horse, eh?' Lewis said to Tolkien.

'Indeed; I seem to recall it was carved by a friend of Stubbs which might explain it – perhaps he had Stubbs do the original drawing, what?' he

smiled.

'And look – can you see the eye?' he said. Instead of being a darker patch on the white face the eye seemed if anything brighter, glinting.

'Glass bottles, wrong-way up – that's what the eye is made from – rather clever, eh? It catches the light most beautifully in the setting sun I would imagine.'

'What are they doing up there?' Barfield asked.

Several figures could be seen working above the horse, laying what looked like lines of cables down on the green hillside.

'I was about to ask the very same question.' said Lewis, who decided he didn't want to waste time on conjecture and clambered over a nearby gate and began striding towards the hill figure.

Barfield eyed Tolkien wondering how Mrs Penry-Evans might take a further delay, but to his surprise the latter lifted her skirts and followed Lewis's example.

When the party reached the carving, Lewis was already in conversation with one of the workmen, who raised his cap at the approach of the others.

'This gentleman has told me, and from here you can see it more clearly, that they're spelling out G E ready for the coronation on the 12th of next month; these are red lamps which will spell out the initials of our goodly sovereign and his wife, and below there'll be a floodlight that will be trained on the horse.'

'Every few seconds, you see,' the workman explained 'the floodlight will go on and then when it goes off the red lamps will go on, see? We're testing them this evening as the weather is fine, and we'll be able to get an idea of how it'll look on the night – if there are any problems to iron out.'

'I'm sure it will look splendid my dear man, I only regret we won't be here to see either the test or the final result, but I wish you luck with it.'

Back in the car they drove slowly through the hamlet of Cherhill which in less than a month, Lewis informed the rest, a great street party would be happening for George VI

'And no doubt in every town throughout the land – perhaps baked meats from last year's coronation will coldly furnish forth the tables of this one.' he jested.'

'No doubt you think Edward a fool to have given up his throne for the love of a woman?' Owen said to Lewis.

'I wonder merely that he had to go fishing across the Atlantic for such a mistress. I've never seen the attraction in the American drawl...'

'I remember George V's coronation party, though it had an unpleasant end,' said Barfield; 'I ate rather too much and was quite sick, as children are wont to do at such functions.' Nevertheless he was smiling at happier memories of the time.

'These are austere times, though – then we were on the brink of war and knew it not; the war to end all wars; and here we find ourselves again in a similar strait; let us hope history does not repeat itself.'

'At least we are too old to fight' shouted Tom Penry-Evans from the front, above the noise of the engine.

'Indeed; but that is no relief for our children.' said Tolkien, frowning. 'Still, it may not come to that. I pray.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Penry-Evans 'indeed we do pray for that. Did you know that in Welsh legend the head of Bran was buried in the white hill in London to repel all invaders? It was Arthur that dug it up – and thus the Saxon race were allowed to enter... would that we could find his head again and plant it in the White Hill, then Britain would be safe.'

'Protected by magic...' Lewis smiled.

'As it will be if ever our shores are threatened; there will be more than a war with weapons going on, I assure you; we humble occultists will fight our own war with words and with the mind...'

'Like the white robed druids and black robed women shrieking on Anglesey who nearly scared off the Romans?' Lewis asked.  
Mrs Penry-Evans laughed heartily.

'I am sure we should cut such dashing figures, yes. But the Romans did cross the Menai straits and destroy the groves, but they had generals at their backs who would kill their own men at any sign of cowardice...'

'And what makes you think Herr Hitler wouldn't do the same?' Lewis asked, serious now.

They were coming in to Calne.

'I have no reason to think he would be any different; but the English Channel is a better barrier than the Menai Straits...'

'Exactly. When Coleridge was here,' Lewis said, looking out at the village of Calne as they drove through, 'trying to wean himself off opium in 1815, the Battle of Waterloo had been fought and the threat of invasion, feared for many years, had abated; so however much we fear, we must also remember such times; those 25 miles of sea between us and France are the best defence this island has. And that still holds true today; he who owns the channel owns England.'

'Albion' said Barfield

'Ynys Prydein – The island of the mighty' sang out the Welshman. 'And you know what else my people called it? Clas Myrddin: Merlin's precinct.'

'Well, maybe if Bran can no longer protect us, Merlin will, wherever he lies now' Tolkien said.

## **Chapter 45 The Other One**

Con was talking animatedly as they crossed the road to the sanctuary.

Wolf had driven them both here after they'd lunched at the pub; Shen had had to go and do a tarot reading for a couple of Wolf's friends who had come for the protest, and so Con had been able to ask Wolf all about the questions he'd been mulling over concerning Merlin as twin. Wolf had been more concerned about Con's state of mind, but he found him animated and relaxed. And between them they had come to a number of realisations about the man in the tomb and the circumstances that had seen his internment therein ... and had gone to walk the site to get their thoughts in order...

'Robert Graves,' Con was saying, 'from what I remember - was convinced it was about an actual battle fought here, at Avebury, between the local tribesmen and the incoming Belgae in the centuries before Christ – it was a battle for dominance over the national holy places, but also about language – a change in the alphabet.'

Con was wringing this detail from his memories, from second-hand readings via conversations with Mel, her being reluctant to relinquish her grip on *The White Goddess*, Graves' masterwork... details concerning Graves' interpretation of a mysterious Medieval poem called *Cad Goddeu* – 'The Battle of the Trees'.

'But what seems more likely, and we know more about the date of language

changes since Graves' day – is that that the new languages arrived way before that and so the battle he envisaged took place earlier...’

‘Yep – ‘Wolf said, ‘the new languages came with the arrival of the Bronze Age horse riders; they brought in Indo-European languages – the ancestor of Celtic, in fact; and so the battle for language was between the indigenous Neolithic tribes with their pre-Indo-European tongue and the proto-Celtic speakers...’

‘A battle for language...yes, I remember the warriors in the battle are said to have been trees – and each tree, so Graves said, represented a letter of the alphabet; so there’s a clash of armies but in some sense it’s a clash of letters, of language.’

‘Yeah, that’s right. It was said that the battle could only be won if one side could guess the name of the opposing side – Gwydion wins because he guesses the name of Bran from the alder twigs Bran was holding – names were powerful things in the ancient world; if you knew something’s true name you could have power over it. The druids were said to be able to raise welts on a man’s face just with words. This was an age when a spell was exactly that – to write a word was to have power over it.’

‘We’ve lost all that,’ Con said, ‘ – words have become watered down, splintered, devoid of power... but you think that battle happened here?’ he asked, surveying the concrete posts of the Sanctuary where he had first stopped three days before but which now seemed weeks and weeks ago. Wolf shrugged ‘Graves did – he didn’t really say why – he just said he thought it was Avebury. The poem states:

*A battle was fought  
On the root of its tongue  
And another fight fought on the back of its head.  
It was a black toad  
Stalking on a hundred claws,  
A spotted serpent ridged with a crest.*

‘And you think that means it was fought here? At the hakpen, the serpent’s head?’ Con asked.

Wolf nodded.

‘And Old Man. I’ve always thought of him as Bran, defeated by the horse-

riders headed by Gwydion; I don't mean he was literally Bran; I mean he was playing that ritual role. I know Ananda argued he died in a re-enactment of the creation myth, with Old Man being a kind of Ymir or Purusha... but I don't know, the arrow in the throat... I feel it's a point where that myth becomes enacted in history... that those opposing armies really did meet here, and that Old Man was defeated, and a new language overtook the old one. He was buried and the old tomb closed forever...nearly forever'

Con looked out over the Kennet valley towards the tomb, eyes narrow against the sun.

'But might it go deeper than that? he asked; 'This change in language, *the battle at the root of the tongue and back of the head*... what if it is about a change in *consciousness*? After this point men are buried individually in round-barrows like those on the hill there, where before they'd been buried together, as a tribe – nameless. It seems to be a change from a more communal state to one that is dominated by individuals; it's the birth of the selfish ego – the ending of an older way of seeing things...of experiencing things.'

Just then a figure strode over the hill, waving – it was Shen. Con smiled and continued talking.

'The battle signifies the defeat of the old language. These older tribes were at one with nature in a way the newcomers weren't – the latter stole their land but didn't possess the knowledge of unity with it. The old language, you see, enabled one to speak the language of the land, the animals and birds... It's all in here...' he said, fumbling in his rucksack, trying to find Tolkien's letters and notes... Failing to find the exact sheet what he was looking for, he put his rucksack down on the grass and continued speaking off the cuff.

'It wasn't just a battle for territory, you see; it's nothing short of a battle for reality, the victory of the new language made the world solid and concrete, and destroyed the old world described by the old poetic language - before this there was no poetry because *all* was poetry – all voice was a song; this is why Tolkien's Tom Bombadil speaks in verse, because he is the oldest - he was around at the start of things, before the Fall of language. Do you see?'

Shen half nodded, but Con knew he was rambling and was losing her attention.

'Have you never noticed how everything Tom Bombadil says is in verse – not necessarily rhyming but it has a poetic metre? I didn't think about it until I read it in these letters. You read his words as prose because that's what you're used to seeing on a printed page...but when read without preconceived ideas you'll see it's poetry!'

'Who's Tom Bumble-what?' Shen asked.

'Haven't you read Lord of the Rings?' Con asked, surprised.

'I saw the films, but they didn't make me want to read the books...'

'Oh, the books are better.' Con said. 'But Bombadil wasn't in the films. Basically, he speaks in verse and lives in this kind of harmonic state with nature – inspired by Barfield's ideas on language, actually – the fall of language – language once being poetic and full of meaning, and describing a world where myth and magic exist as a natural state; but later language becoming more literal, and describing a very different world; the one we live in – disenchanted, narrow.'

Shen put her head on its side, chewing all of this over in her mind.

'So, what does this have to do with Merlin? Did I miss that bit, or am I being thick?'

'This was the place of creation where twin was murdered.' Con said

'Twin?'

'Yes – Ymir. Old Man,' Wolf said, 'The old man in the Long-Barrow – probably the last priest of Avebury killed and put away by the newcomers; he is the land, he becomes the earth in the original creation myth.'

'And twin is Merlin.' Con added.

'What? What the hell did you two have for lunch? Any weird little grey mushrooms or anything?!"

'Tolkien mentioned that Emrys and Ymir are related, both meaning twin-remember? And Amesbury and Avebury come from the same word? Well, as Wolf explained to me over lunch, the early sources talk of a figure in the

north of Britain named Llallogan or Lailoken, whose story ties in with that of Merlin. Geoffrey of Monmouth drew on this Llallogan to write a book called the *Life of Merlin*, which isn't about Stonehenge or Arthur or anything like that at all, but tells of Merlin going mad after a battle and living with his sister, Gwendydd in the forest.'

Wolf continued; 'Lailoken means twin. *Llallogan* – literally *the other one*, as in 'one of a pair' - Gwendydd is his twin... He lives as a wild man, a kind of shaman, and dies in a mysterious triple death, drowned in a river after falling from a height, catching his foot in an overhanging branch and impaling himself on a fish-spear...'

Con's scratch in his side suddenly seared in pain...the foot caught in the branch, drowning in the river... he looked at Wolf but Wolf was continuing his exposition – not linking what he was saying to the events of the previous night – and why should he? *It was an accident, and my foot was free before he came along...* Con thought...

'He builds a grove or temple in the woods, where he becomes a prophet...' Wolf was saying, but Con's mind was racing...

*Gwendydd* – brightness of day - *the morning star or dawn... Merlin, her twin, who becomes imprisoned under the stone: they're Nut and Geb... starry heavens and the earth below, separated... it's the creation myth... she is his twin, this Gwendydd... and clearly, as her name suggests, she was associated with the sky... Tolkien's words ... where is his twin, is she in the sky?*

*Yes Tolkien*, Con thought. *That's exactly where she is.*

'But it really happened,' Wolf was saying, 'it happened here. The old gods were defeated - the old shaman priest of the old cult will have faced the newcomers – and been killed – Merlin was imprisoned under a stone, in a castle of glass or air, in the earth, entombed... it was a re-envisioning of the creation, the rescuing of the sun through the defeat of the old winter serpent...but they did it here to claim the land, claim ownership – claim their crops, their cows and their wives and daughters...'

'Old Man in West Kennet – he was the last one buried there – with an arrow through his throat. Buried in the chamber which was then sealed so communication with the ancestors would cease and men in individual graves would rule the day.'

*This is what they were doing when they shot him in the throat – Con*

thought, *freeing the soma, the sun, from the mouth of the stone serpent. This soma*, Con recalled Ananda saying, *was often a magic spell or word, the secret of immortality... its extraction from the serpent was the same image as the magic won from Merlin by the enchantress Vivien... or the contents of the well of Nechtan, desired by Boann... and the image came to mind of Old Man, his throat bleeding, lying prone, grey-bearded, the old enchanter...Merlin... his wisdom tricked from him...*

Shen was a lot less wordy in her synthesis, and direct in her observations. ‘So, by extension, the bones in the museum... they’re Merlin?’

Con and Wolf looked at each other and shrugged. ‘Well, in a manner of speaking, yes.’ Wolf said.

‘Then he’s still imprisoned in a house of glass...’ Shen muttered, sadly.

## **Chapter 46: The Abbey**

They had not stopped after leaving Calne but had driven for a couple of hours in glorious April sunshine through the pretty villages of Wiltshire and Somerset, glimpsing the Somerset levels bathed in a thin mist from the slopes of the Mendips; there, just visible and rising like a pyramidal island at its centre the tor of Glastonbury; they drove past the cathedral at Wells down into the levels and approached the rise of the town, clustered about the feet of the tor and its surrounding group of hills. It was a lush landscape, green and fat.

‘It’s a shame you won’t be here in a week or two, when the apple blossom comes.’ Violet said; ‘Avalon means apple trees, you know – the isle of apples to which the dying Arthur was taken by his sister Morgan le fay when this was still an island and the monks had yet to drain the levels and establish the water courses or rhines as they are known hereabouts.’

They drove past the ruins of the abbey along the street that would take them to the house on the slopes of the tor that would be their home for the next two days, and resolved to visit the ruins the moment they had unpacked.

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The ruins lay in the bright afternoon sun, cream and grey against the green lawns at their feet; here ruined archways stood toppled, or reaching, but never to meet again, from opposite sides of the nave.

The men walked solemnly up the ruined nave to where an oblong of concrete lay, and a sign saying this was where the bones of Arthur and his queen had been placed before the altar in the time of Henry II.

'The tomb of Arthur – an impossible thought, so the Welsh would have us believe,' Tolkien said. 'To think the bones of Arthur lay here. Where are they now, I wonder?'

'Do you think it was all pretence? A money-making scheme dreamed up by greedy abbots trying to gain pilgrims and a king's favour?' Lewis asked.

Barfield shrugged. 'Something was found here, I suspect – they did dig down and find a tomb, I think that is clear from the sources, but whether this was Arthur's or not I don't know. Follow me...'

He lead them through the Lady Chapel to a bench that stood a few metres from a sign that said this was the spot where Arthur's tomb had originally been found.

'They dug down some 12 or 14 feet as I recall, and found a hollowed out oak bole with the bones of a huge man with wounds to the head, and a woman with golden hair at his feet. Now I've seen pictures of similar coffins and skeletons with hair preserved in Denmark from the Bronze Age – maybe this place had been sacred for a long time and they had dug up the grave of a bronze age king.'

'But they knew where to look – and there was the clearly phoney lead cross...' Lewis interjected.

'Yes, but I think they knew where to dig because the coffin had already been moved when they had built the cloister – they had already found the coffin, known the legends of Arthur in Avalon and had put two and two together, as they thought this was the place – then when Henry wanted to see the grave they dug it up...'

Barfield looked sad.

'What is it Owen?' Lewis asked.

'I was here once before,' he said, smiling wanly. 'On this very bench. It's where I met with my Cornish girl, the unrequited love I told you about.'

'We had been corresponding since the previous summer, I full of hope and she, well, I misread, perhaps, the nature of the friendship. And when I next had chance to come down, she was staying with relatives near here and so we said we would meet. I was here early and she took an age to show, and we picnicked here on the lawns on bread and cheese, and little else I recall, for she had been running late and had only time to rush into the bakers and dairy.

'I was a shy boy, you know, and she was a vivacious young thing and I'm afraid I sat in stunned silence most of the time, like Parsifal before the Grail.' He laughed.

'Well, I said I would write, and I did, but she sent a very short letter in reply saying I was sweet and shy and would I come down and see her again if I was passing; and I said yes, but I only got one letter more, saying she didn't think it was the right time for us.'

He looked over at the fallen arches and sighed.

'But you fell in love again, Owen?' Lewis said.

He smiled. 'Many times. And as I said I think I had an idea of the girl which perhaps wasn't overly realistic; I put her on a pedestal, you see; I wish she had given me the chance to find out who she really was; it's easy to idolize a goddess, but I think you can only truly love a woman when you see her warts and all; I think you need to sympathise and want to protect; no man ever wished to protect an Aphrodite or an Athene.'

'Perhaps it is best to leave such women as muses, Owen' said Lewis.

'Possibly, Jack; I wonder what would happen if you were to marry one's muse?'

Tolkien coughed. 'It would not be such a disaster, I would think,' he said, colouring, thinking of his beloved Edith; 'one must always remember what one saw and that the eternal feminine shines through, however used one may be to her particular habits and behaviours. Did you ever consider finding her again?'.

Owen shook his head.

'I don't imagine it would have been fair on either of us. Would Goethe wish to chance upon Lotte again? It was not meant to be. Had it meant to be then fate would have arranged another meeting. I could have gone looking, but I

didn't. Part of me knew it was futile. There are perhaps stronger souls who do not give up and who persevere; and if fate looks kindly on them then the first meeting and parting is but the overture in a much longer symphony...' Tolkien sighed; fate had decreed he should lose his Edith aged 17, and he had waited for 3 years for her, only to find her now engaged; but he had won her back; was there such a symphony as Owen spoke of? The hum-drum everyday life would often make one forget, but he would remember their early years and her dancing for him in the glade of hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire; *Oh, my Luthien!* He thought – and then suddenly he realised he'd left his letters in his bedside drawer at Church Cottage! Damnation! He would have to write to George for them when he got back to Oxford.

'Your talk of Cheese has piqued my hunger, Owen.' Lewis said. 'It must be nearing tea-time and I warrant the George and Pilgrim on the High Street serves good fair. Cheese pickles and ale sound marvellous.'

'One day, Jack I hope your heart dictates your life as much as your stomach!' Owen said.

## **Chapter 47 Release**

They could tell something was amiss from the shouting outside; but it was only on exiting the pub that they saw the smoke. It seemed to be coming from the direction of the manor, a heavy low black mist drifting across the road into the circle and bringing with it an unpleasant acrid smell.

Earlier in the day Con had retired to his van, having driven it to the village and parked it down the road from Shen's house, and next to Wolf. They had visited the museum, and then afterwards made for the church to look at the font, only to find it roped off with workmen repairing some of the flagstones at its base. Con had returned to his van and had slept. He was woken by a rapping on the windows – it was Wolf, asking him if he wanted to eat. They had eaten at Shen's before deciding to head to the Red Lion, for a hopefully more relaxed evening than the previous one. But they weren't to get their wish.

'Did you hear that? Someone said it was the museum.' Wolf said, starting to pick up his pace, the smell of smoke getting stronger.

In the gardens in front of the museum a small crowd had gathered, while others were trying to get near to the stone building that was belching smoke through its broken-down doorway; the new extension was on fire, its pretty beechwood shingles smouldering like an old smoke-house; though there was more smoke than flames; the setting sun shining blood

red through the dark haze.

'Has anyone called the fire brigade?' Con shouted. He turned and could see Shen was on her mobile – she was nodding.

'It'll be automatic – from the alarm in the museum...' Wolf shouted back at them.

Con only now noticed the alarm.

*I wonder how long it's been burning*, he thought; *it's gone eight o'clock, hardly anyone would have been here to see when it started*. A couple of individuals in National Trust uniforms were running backwards and forwards with items from the museum, leaving green plastic crates full of objects clear of the smoking building.

'Fuck – we've got to get him out...' Con shouted back at Shen

'Con, be careful – the fire brigade will be here soon – '

How soon, Con wondered. He and Wolf approached the building together – a wall of heat made them wince and cower back, but they could see within the museum, against a dull orange glow, the cabinets of axes and pots, already opened by the curators.

'What's happened?' Wolf shouted at one of the National Trust team.

'It's something in the new wing; electrical fault or something – look...' he thrust a plastic folder into Wolf's hands, 'if you want to help, it's the Disaster Plan – these...' he said pointing, 'are the priority items...' he looked up 'I know we've been told to wait – the fire brigade are on their way – but I can't just sit here and watch it burn...'

Wolf took the folder –

'Con – straight ahead – those pots in the case there, they need bringing out...'

Con ran into the building, glancing to his left to where the new wing was aflame; a thick dense fog of black swirled below the ceiling like an upside-down stormy sea, searing hot. On the floor lay three empty fire extinguishers, useless against this size of fire. The museum itself, despite

the smoke, seemed safe, its stone walls protection against the flames that were engulfing the wooden frame of the new wing. Con moved forward and took a pot in one hand and a bronze axe head in the other.

Others now had arrived, spurred on by Con and Wolf a chain of people had begun passing objects out of the museum. Con turned and handed the objects to a figure behind him, then turned back to rescue more.

Then in the distance the sirens of a fire engine could be heard.

'Thank fuck' shouted Wolf from the doorway.

'Wolf – what about Merlin?' Con shouted, trying to be heard above the bellowing of the flames.

Wolf entered the building momentarily.

'Fuck it's too dangerous, Con. I think it's too late. It's time to get out.'

Con glanced towards the new wing, shielding his face with his arm; showers of sparks were raining down across the doorway that separated the two areas.

'I must try.' He shouted and grabbed a crate from the floor and ran in.

He was in a cube of fire, filling from the top with a smoke that was viscous, a dark scum. He threw himself on his knees where the heat was less and the smoke had not yet reached, and there, before him, in the mock stone chamber that was now dripping with liquid fire, lay the bones, grinning against the conflagration above it; mock-stone warped and dripped in the heat, false drystone walling blistering and bulging just inches from the bones – the glass front of the display shattered and empty, a kerb of crystal shards cast before it.

Con edged forward, as low as he could manage crunching his way over the mosaic of broken glass– trying to breathe through his nose so as not to sear his throat. He was in there seconds – he tried to reach out to the bones and pull them to him, but it was too hot. He edged backwards into the main museum, gasping. Then he felt a figure push past him in breathing equipment.

The mask was lifted for a moment 'Get the fuck out!'

It was Hayden.

'The bones' – Con shouted – 'I've got to rescue the bones'

Hayden pushed him back.

'Don't be so fucking stupid, Con – get out – you'll get yourself killed'

Two more figures arrived and pulled Con back to the door.

'I'm okay' he said, pulling himself away.

Then, somehow, he was outside in the cool air.

He lay breathing heavily, dizzy and shaken, a blanket from who knows where about him, and all around him was chaos: shouts, orders, hoses being dragged around - fire-fighters against the flames. People taking boxes of rescued artefacts away from the fire; silhouettes against the flames; noise; the flash of blue lights...

Con moved further away from the building against the low wall of the Manor garden – then Shen, who had been desperately trying to find him, rushed over and held him close.

'I couldn't get them, Shen' Con said, sat on the grass, his back to the flint wall.

Shen held him close, too close – he pushed her away to breathe. 'Where's Wolf? Can you get me some water? Fuck, I feel weird.'

As she left to find him a drink another figure bent over him;

'Wolf?'

No. It was a firefighter. And he was holding a plastic crate.

Con looked down at the contents of the box; staring up at him was a single skull and the fragment of antler. He looked at Hayden shocked.

'Thank you.'

'Another ten seconds and it would have been gone; and you too, you idiot.'

Hayden looked down at him and then knelt by his side.

'Are you okay? Did you breathe in any smoke?' Con shook his head. 'A bit, probably. Not much.'

'There's fuck all left in there now,' Hayden continued '- everything in that display is destroyed; it's all ash; they'll never be able to rescue any of it. If this had still been in there it'd be ash...and so would you! You're fucking mad. It's just bones.'

'Maybe to most people. But not to us.'

Hayden's face creased up with conflicting emotions.

'You could have died, Con!'

Con shrugged. 'I just wanted to save him.'

Hayden lent against the wall and laid his hands over his face.

'Look. They won't know - if you take it.' he glanced over his shoulder at the chaos '- they won't know that it wasn't just destroyed with the rest of the stuff - I couldn't grab it all - just the head - so there'll be fragments still in there for them to find' as he spoke he was taking the objects out of the box and wrapping them in Con's jacket.

'I don't care what you fucking do with it, but this isn't happening, okay? I never did this - you got to swear on this; don't you dare let this come back on me... just take it and go...'

And he stood and turned and then was gone.

Con couldn't see Shen but could make out Ananada, arrived from the pub, helping Wolf with boxes; the National Trust men were starting to organise the piles of artefacts, looking around at the scatter of boxes, at the crate near Con.

By the time they saw the box was empty Con had disappeared. He was walking south out of the gardens, down the side path to the car park, where he could see the great hill of Silbury low on the horizon in the dusk, his

jacket with its contents in one hand. He stopped and took out his phone:

*I'm taking Merlin to Silbury*, said the text, and he sent it to Shen.

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Coughing, spitting, dizzy from the smoke, tired with running, he kept looking back - was she following? Don't look back a voice seemed to say, *trust*: don't look back.

His head reeled and as he ran he seemed to see images flashing before him, great snakes, entwined, their scales slipping past each other with a smooth hiss; faces, water, images of conflict; a man in feathers with antlers on his brow standing on the hill...

*I must get this away, must take it to the white hill, the head of Bran, head of Bran, player of the alder flute pipe... I must take this away...*

Behind the hill the first edge of the lunar disk had emerged above the horizon.

Con somehow made it to the foot of Silbury, despite the darkness swimming about his head, and the hoarseness of his breathing. His burden in one hand he began to climb, hiding in the grass when another fire engine passed by; and no longer stopping to look to see if Shen were following him.

At the summit, sick and breathless, he slumped on the grass, an awful dizziness threatening to overcome him; and he drifted in and out of dream; words... he could hear words...

*The singing of the ravens at the dawning of the world tell me that there shall be a great battle today. I shall put on my hood of speckled-calfskin, and my cloak of crow's feathers, on my breast the amber pendant, the high twigs of alder in my hand. I shall dress my hair with the paste of the milkstone from the riverside, draw it back from my forehead; my cheeks I shall redden with the blood of the blackberry. At my side, the smooth axe from the Mother's mountains shall hang, at the other my shield of alder. And unless they guess my name they shall leave un-victorious.*

*I have long awaited this day; since my mother's mother's day they have been among us; with their broad pale faces and the tamed beasts they ride; they*

*first brought us gifts; knives of the sun-metal created from the fire; then the drink that makes men mad.*

*They shall ask for the land, these sons of the frenzied one, as if a man can own the land; it is the land on which our ancestors walked, within which they still dwell. But they do not see them. They see just the surface of things; they see the grass but not the blood in the soil; they see the rough skin of the trees but not the golden fire within; they hear not the language of the birds for to them it is just noise.*

*We knew they were coming. The gods above foretold it. The heavens shifted; we built the circle to anchor the Heavenly Mother to her husband the Earth; we built first hill beside the mother-stream to anchor the sky so that once again we could see the starry womb pregnant with the light on the favoured day; but still it changed. The sky has fallen. The axle of the world has broken; the straight path made crooked and the wise serpent's treasure shall be robbed.*

*Our young men wear their hair now like the newcomers: braided and held by gold; their eyes have become hard like them; they covet their bows and their man-killing arrows; they dishonour the spirits; they are angry like the bear and the wolf; our daughters look upon the newcomers with hunger; they learn their words; they drink from their cups but not from the cup of their own ancestors.*

*But I, who am the first and the last, shall drink from the cup of the Old Ones; I shall imbibe the milk of the three kine, of the plant of vision, the plant of dreaming, and the grey serpent's plant, and shall await them in the ring of dancing trees, at the serpent's eye. The high twigs of alder will be in my hand, and the bones of my people about me. I, who am oldest and youngest, longest of days, shall rest tonight with my ancestors.*

*Thrice have I bathed in the waters. Lo, now, do I purify myself in the smoke of the sacred herbs; I pass it over me with the ghost owl's wing. Ancestors, I bid thee welcome. See how the smoke curls; Lo, do I anoint my face and head with smoke; Lo do I purify my chest, my arms, my navel; Lo, do I step over the embers so that there is no part of me that is not purified.*

*Brides of the Bee attend to me; eldest, crone, comb my hair and whiten what time has already made white with the milkstone from the river; daughter, bloody my cheeks with the berry juice, mark my forehead with the sacred sign, the eye of the sun; daughter's daughter, most beautiful, blacken my eye*

*sockets with the ash of charred herbs, sing over me your songs.*

*I sing to you, Ancestors, Old Ones. Make me your mouthpiece; may my limbs be your limbs; live again through me. There is not part of me that is not sacred. I am a seven-tined stag; I am the land – that is all that I am. I go down to the earth and become the bones of the land.*

*Oh the land is sacred; the waters of the mother are sacred; oh, shall I drink from the waters of the breast of the mother; oh, shall I drink from the waters of the eye; oh shall I drink of the water in which the star-stones have been placed, thrice three in number. Oh, shall I drink of the bitter herbs, and the seeing herb; of the grey-serpents plant, of the plant of vision; of the wheaten brew mixed with the milk of the un-ridden mare, sweet with meadowsweet and honey. Lo shall it give me a powerful voice! Lo it shall revive within me the voice of my ancestors.*

*I lift to my lips the cup of my people; see where it is formed in the shape of the vision, adorned with the spiralling powers, with the lozenge, with the wave it is made holy. Lo do I drink. Aah! See how the fire now burns within me. I drink again. Pure am I, empty for the milk of the mother; purged through fast. It burns within me with the heat of the nine maidens who prepared it, to my mouth from their mouths. Fire in my belly; soon it shall warm my limbs; soon the fire will be in my head and then shall I see with the Eye of the Old Ones.*

*Light the fire, old woman, mother and maid, from the embers of the sacred herbs. Light the fire and cast open the doors.*

*I see within me that they come. Open the doors to the sun! Open them so that they may see me waiting here within the eye of the snake where since the start of things the Holy Ones have dwelt.*

*See! They come. Place in my hands the alder; place around my shoulders the crow-feather cloak; place around my throat the adder; on my head the horns of the white deer, the white roebuck; the wings of the lapwing flutter about me; lo do I hear the baying of the whelp of the underworld, bright by the river that I ready myself to cross...*

*Come, sons of the Frenzied One. Do you not see that I am ready? I, who am Twin, brother to her who stretches above us; our goal and consolation.*

## **Chapter 48 The Wager**

Barfield, Tolkien and Lewis were sitting on the pyramidal rise of Glastonbury Tor, their backs against the great ruined tower of St Michael's church facing west to where the sun was sinking into the distant Bristol channel; below them a few lamps were being lit in the town, and lines of pale blue peat smoke rose from the chimneys of the houses. The abbey lay mostly obscured by the rise of Chalice Hill, and the half-moon lay high in the southern sky.

'It's just ... I was thinking.'

'Oh yes? What about Trollers?' Jack asked.

'Arthur: his name means the bear; and he is the son of Uther Pendragon, that is *terrible head dragon*. Now, I don't know if you were aware, but the pole star used to be in Draco, the constellation of the dragon, and now, after some time, it has moved in Ursa Minor, the little bear. The pole has left the dragon for the bear. Might it be possible, I wonder, if the accession of Arthur to the throne after Uther is somehow symbolic of the move of pole star from Draco to Ursa Minor?'

Lewis looked Tolkien directly in the eyes.

'Seriously, Trollers? Is this all we have to look forward to this trip? Give it a

rest man and enjoy the view. As soon as the sun is set we'll walk into town and get some decent beer, not like that varnish they sold at the Red Lion.'

'That was perfectly good ale, Jack, you were too grumpy to appreciate it.' Barfield said.

'I know a good beer when I taste one.'

'You couldn't have tasted if even it was dishwater – my word, were you feeling sorry for yourself!'

'Utter rubbish. Anyway – I am now as fit as a fiddle. And already my mind is racing with ideas for our wager.'

The idea for the wager had occurred to Lewis after leaving the Abbey earlier in the day. Once more grumbling over the paucity of 'the sort of books one likes to read' Lewis had decided that the simple answer was to write them oneself, and had decided that two interesting subjects, or subjects that at least might provide scope for an interesting premise, were space travel and time travel. They should all, Lewis had suggested, decide to write a book on one of those very subjects, and see what kind of book resulted.

'So what is it to be – space or time travel?' Tolkien asked.

'Well, we shall have to draw straws.' Lewis answered.

'Better than that let's let nature decide – that crow on the tree down there – if it flies to the left you do space travel, to the right time travel.'

'Done.'

They sat a few minutes watching the crow bouncing on the branch, wondering if it had, in fact, found its resting spot for the night, when the crow cawed and lifted itself skywards and turned to the left.

'A space story it is, then – my word – that's rather challenging. Space provides undreamed of vistas and creatures with which to play.' Lewis beamed. Tolkien smiled to himself; he had wanted the crow to fly left, for he already had ideas on his time-travel story.

'What about you, Owen? Can we tempt you to write?' Lewis asked.

Barfield smiled sadly and shook his head.

'I tried once but I don't believe fiction to be my forte.'

'From what I read, Owen, it was a splendid piece of work.'

'Nice of you to say so, Jack – but you're alone in that opinion; I think to write fiction you need a flair for storytelling that I just don't have; my writing was a mixture of veiled autobiography and a vehicle for my ideas and I'm not sure whether that makes for a good read...'

Tolkien was already formulating his tale. *It'll be about the wave – the dream of the wave, and of knowledge from the past being passed down in memory... flashes of past times through imagination.* He thought. He looked skywards where the clouds in the west had shaped themselves like a great eagle, set on fire with burning wings by the setting sun.

*The eagles have come from the west... he thought. The eagles of the lord of the west come to Numenor...*

He lit his pipe, content.

## **Chapter 49: The Re-Uniting**

When Shen crested the hill she could make out the lone figure of Conall sat on his haunches at the southern rim of the flattened top, a blanket round his shoulders, and his hands clasping the skull to his chest; his face was pale under the sooty marks from the fire and he smelled of smoke.

'Hayden got him for us.' he said

'I know. It was kind of him.'

She sat beside him and took the skull in her hands;

'It's light – I expected it to be heavier,' she said. 'Do you really think this was Merlin?'

'Merlin's a figure made up of many strands of legend – but the part of it that relates to his foundation sacrifice – well, this man embodied that myth, acted it out in the flesh; he's as much Merlin as any might claim to be.'

Con gazed over the valley of the Kennet; the last light of the dying sun was casting a deep orange glow over the fields, striking against the deep blue of the sky where the first stars were pricking through the gloom; there on the rise opposite was West Kennet Long-Barrow, a sliver of earth on the horizon like a low lying crouching beast; and there behind it, huge against the horizon, the full moon had risen; here were the dark groves of trees around the Swallowhead, and dark against the evenings fire amongst the ripe corn, stiff and upright on this breezeless eve, a crop circle

To the south west two bright points had begun to shine in the sky. Shen asked what they were –

'Planets – that's Saturn and Mars – in a month they'll pass close to each other over in the same part of the sky, just above Spica, that's the ear of corn in the hand of Virgo... at the moment they're trailing Leo.'

'It's all so beautiful, Con. What was it all about, Con, this place?

He looked out over the Kennet valley, where the waters of the mother were sending their cool breath skywards as vapour. He was still slightly befuddled from the smoke, and when he started talking, it was as if another voice were speaking through him, and he was listening as much as talking:

'I don't know for sure, but I imagine it started in the north; I think when the first farmers reached as far as they could go north, to Orkney, they looked up and saw the sky had changed; the diamond of Crux, the womb of the mother, could no longer be seen over the southern horizon; and her breasts, Cassiopeia, which formerly had set, now remained in the northern sky... yet they would have been in trade contact with tribes to the south, where the womb still rose. In the north Sirius had replaced Crux as marking the point of the rising of the midwinter sun – but perhaps for the first time people realised that the world was changing; the old stars were not fixed, and were slipping away.

'I imagine some visionary, some Orcadian priest or priestess, having a dream; in the dream she sees the moment of creation, when the sky mother, as the Milky Way ringing the horizon, lies joined to the Earth – Nut and Geb before their separation – and she imagines creating a monument in that image, to cement in time that moment of creative union; perhaps it might keep the stars in place, stop time, reverse the change that threatens to end the world as they know it. But it also celebrates the creation – it marks where the Lady rises from her lover, the entrances of the henge marking where she rises and sets, and celebrates the new sun that is born from the union of earth father and sky mother, the creative twins.'

'I think it was a time machine, a way of returning to the point of creation, to the union of mother and father – to Eden; it was literally heaven on earth, for to enter the henge was to enter the body of the mother for rebirth; the entrances were star-gates that would allow passage into the body of the stars.'

Shen was looking up at him, but he seemed unaware, deep as he was in his reverie.

'They were for the dead, these places. The bodies of the dead in Neolithic times, those that were not placed in the Long-Barrows, we think were placed in rivers and streams... but their souls – in Egypt the souls of the dead would enter the sky mother, the Milky Way, whose image was painted on the lids of their coffins; they'd pass through her body, the night sky, to be reborn with the sun in the eastern horizon, or to become stars themselves in the sky.'

'And when the living came here, it was to return to that state of paradise before the fall... perhaps in that state, with mother sky and father earth joined they stood out of time, and were united with those that they had lost to time and were dear to them; just as earth and sky united, so the dead might return as in the beginning and walk amongst the living...' he thought of the footsteps he had heard that very morning, heading towards the circle from the direction of dawn; an invisible gathering under the fading stars...

'This was the place where brother and sister were re-united...' he said, wistfully.

'But it was seasonal - each year the sun would be born anew, and the twins rent apart, only to return and reunite again the next year as creation was renewed. But the newcomers arrived, and they sealed the tombs; they killed the embodiment of Twin and buried him forever.'

Then silence; the sun had set yet the sky retained its milky glow; far below blackbirds called in the dusk, and the odd car rumbled past the hill. After a while Con turned, his eyes more focussed and present.

'Shen, I've been thinking. I need to apologise to you.'

'What for?'

'For shutting you out.'

She didn't speak; it would have been easy to deny it, to tell him not to be so stupid; but he was right; he had held her at arm's length.

'It's about Mel, Shen. I didn't tell you the truth; it wasn't an accident. Shen, she killed herself; she drowned herself. And I was here. I got a phone call from Anthony saying she was missing, and I was just relieved – I thought

she'd run off with the other guy from uni who he'd scared off a few weeks before. But I was here with you and I didn't give it a second thought – not until I got a phone-call from Mum saying they'd found her body. That's why I left without saying bye.'

He was staring at the floor, unable to meet her gaze, but had he done so he would have been met with a look of shock and bemusement.

'I – I thought she died at the end of May?' she said

'No – why would you think that?'

'Your letter – it was written the day of the funeral, and I got it in early June, I presumed she'd died just before that...'

'No. There had to be an inquest and all that sort of stuff. They didn't release her body for 3 weeks.'

'Oh Con.'

'It's okay – it was hard at the time, but...'

'No,' she interrupted. 'I'm so sorry I misjudged you. I thought when you left it was because you didn't like me – and that's why you didn't write. I didn't realise that she had already...'

'God Shen, of course I liked you – I just was in shock and couldn't think straight – and when I did write I was drunk and I blamed myself for not listening to the text, for being here, for being happy with you... that's why I wrote that.'

'I thought you were just pushing me away – that you'd decided, before Mel, that you didn't want to be in contact...'

'No, no – that's not the case, Shen. God – have you been thinking that all this time? No!'

Their eyes met, both brimming with tears.

'I felt bad because I'd ignored the signs – she had been writing lyrics again, talking about singing, but a lot of the lyrics seemed to be about death, but I never put two and two together. I think when Anthony scared off her new

man, she was distraught – that's why she did it.'

Shen said nothing, just letting him talk – but she couldn't help but see him in a new light – casting off that perception that he had played her; she wanted to hold him.

'She was drunk, Shen. She'd had a bottle of wine at least they reckoned – I just wish she had called me. I don't understand why she didn't call me. She'd left a note, of sorts, and she'd filled her bag with quartz from the riverbed. She was naked but her bag was slung across her chest.'

'Did the note explain why?' she asked.

Con shook his head. 'No. It was written in her Collected Coleridge, on Kubla Khan – she'd written the words to Damsel with a Dulcimer in the margins, and I guess she'd looked at it, her biggest hit, before she walked into the water. She'd written a line across the top.

*I'm going to the river to die;  
No more to drink the milk of paradise*

She wrote it before she went in – the pen was still in the book –'

He rummaged in his rucksack and took out the book he was referring to, opening it and showing the page to Shen with a shaking hand. The handwriting was wild, large, filling the entirety of the top of the two open pages - a manic hand; a drunken hand.

*I'm going to the river to die no more to drink the milk of paradise*

Shen traced the words with her small index finger; she then turned back a page and read some of the notes and lyrics Melissa had written there. Then she turned back to Kubla Khan and then back a page; twice.

She was frowning.

'Are you sure she meant to die, Con? I don't mean to be insensitive, but I'm not sure...'

'Why?' Con asked.

'Think of Bumbledore or whatever his name is...'

'Bombadil.' Con said and frowned.

'Think what you were saying about him earlier... I may not be right but...'

'I said that Tolkien made him talk in verse...'

'Yes, and that you didn't realise it was in verse as you were expecting prose... look – on the page before her note, down one of the margins – it's not in the same pen but it's a verse, right?

*I seek for the Mother  
To cry no more  
to find where her cool white waters rise...*

*In the depths of the water  
To sigh no more  
Lie stones fallen from the skies*

Is that from one of her songs?

'No – it's some of the new stuff she was working on. *Milk of Paradise* was to be her new album.'

'Con, the suicide note... read the two together, these verses and the note...'

Con took the book and read aloud:

*I seek for the Mother  
To cry no more  
to find where her cool white waters rise...*

*In the depths of the water  
To sigh no more  
Lie stones fallen from the skies*

*I'm going to the river To die  
no more To drink the milk of paradise*

I don't get it; they do sort of rhyme, but it doesn't mean they're connected, and it doesn't change the meaning...

'Yes it does, you div! It's a verse – it's like Bomble-dil, whatever, she's been speaking in rhyme all along, but you've missed it! You've separated 'die' and 'no more' because she's written 'no more' slightly lower and closer to 'to'; but follow the metre of the first verse!

*I seek for the Mother  
To cry no more  
To find where her cool white waters rise...*

*In the depths of the water  
To sigh no more  
Lie stones fallen from the skies*

*I'm going to the river  
To die no more  
To drink the milk of paradise*

'*To die no more*, Con – it's a verse about rebirth, about overcoming death, not going to one's end!! It's about rising again and not ever dying – like an initiation into the mysteries.'

Con stared at the words on the page, mouthing them again and again.

He looked up at Shen.

'Mel was always fucking crap at punctuation! But - but what about the stones in her bag?'

'How many were there?'

'Nine.'

'How big?'

He held up a hand and indicated an inch and a half.

'That's not that heavy Con... and nine? Nine? What sort of stones?'

'Quartz.'

Quartz stones? God, Con! *Clocha Geala!* Shining stones! It's an old Irish folk remedy – putting nine pieces of quartz in a pan of water and bringing it to

the boil – you'd then let it cool and drink it over nine hours or days... my granddad used to do that for a sore throat! She was studying Celtic, right? She would know about that! Here's this river with quartz in it, with which she's obsessed – she's going to be reading up on the Celtic use of quartz isn't she? Now she's not put hundreds of these things in to weigh her down, has she – she's got *nine*. I think she went into the water to get the stones and slipped when drunk...'

'the water with its milkstones...' he stuttered, 'she was trying to make a magical drink to revive her voice – to revive within her the song, like in Coleridge's poem!

*Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,*

'The Milk of Paradise, Shen, that's what she was doing, she was collecting stones...to drink a draught of wisdom from the starry waters; she was like Boann, seeking wisdom from Nechtan's well but like Boann she was overwhelmed... She was going to start again, wasn't she – start singing again...she didn't commit suicide, did she?'

'No Con, I really don't think she did.'

And then he began to cry; he cried because she should have been here today, and that she had not meant to die; that in those last moments, like him, she would have fought for her life but no Wolf had been there to save her; but he cried happy that she had been writing again, that she hadn't been walking around in a fog of misery and despair – he was happy that he hadn't missed any signs – she simply had gone there to enact some kooky rite in the water, to gather stones. Some kooky rite... just as he had! But the myth that possessed her was stronger than she knew.

On that last evening, a year earlier, they had both gone to the water for rebirth, he to re-enact a dream, and she to gather stones. He *had* been connected to her at the end – there was no mistake; the two particles apart in space *were* connected, but she had slipped in the water and he had stayed on the bank; he had felt no anger and despair as there was none to feel – he had felt joy, the joy she had been feeling – the elation of starting again; at that moment they had been together; and he thought of Alfred and

of the stars of the bear, and the gift of the alder-wood flute, and it's message '*thank you for reuniting brother and sister*' and now he lent forward and cupped Shen's cheek in his hand, his tears flowing freely, and said the same thank you to Alfred's granddaughter.

'Uniting brother and sister, Shen, that's what he said. As if he knew.'

'Don't just thank me and Grandad, Con, thank Tolkien; if it hadn't been him we'd have continued to read that poetry as prose.'

'Thank you, John Ronald!' He said, laughing. And he looked up at the great bear, at the double star, fizzing and dancing through his tears.

'There they are, united. We are all united...Just think, men and women have stood here on this hill for thousands of years looking up at these same stars. And today – today it's our turn. The stars are shining for us, Shenandoah.'

The mention of her full name caused her to catch her breath. She looked up at him and he returned her gaze without fear. Her brows were arched as if asking a question, imploring him for an answer; and he saw that she was trembling.

And it seemed to him that they were a bridge between the energies of the world below and the spinning firmament above – and when he held the side of her face with his hand, she leant into it.

'Oh Shenandoah...' and as he spoke her name water welled in his eyes so the stars seemed to spin again about her beautiful head like a nimbus of pale light; and she was crowned by Cassiopeia and the Milky way seemed to flow out of her shoulders upwards into the sky. At last they kissed, and he was surprised to feel her trembling still. Long they kissed, then he held her close to him, and he spread his coat beneath them so they could lie upon the dewy grass.

Later, they walked down the hill along the gently spiralling path in the bright moonlight, not caring now who saw them; carefully treading this age old path, happy and carefree; the western sky tinged with the palest golden green, the last pale glow of the dying of the sun.

## **Epilogue The Burial**

Shen and Wolf were sitting by the window of Church Cottage, coffee in hand, while Con paced backwards and forwards in front of the empty fire grate.

‘I can’t think of anywhere more appropriate – or anywhere less obvious. Like you said, Wolf, we can’t very much bury him atop Silbury; archaeologists will dig him up in a few weeks, or sooner if they see there’s been a disturbance.’

‘I still like the idea of the well in the pub’ Shen grinned. ‘Rhian would be up for that.’

Wolf smiled. ‘She would, but it’s too public; and when the pub is sold on, who knows what will happen. Basically, it’s a nightmare as the whole bloody complex is an archaeologists’ wet dream, so wherever we put him he’s going to be found sooner or later.’

‘Which is why there is the best idea’ Con said, pointing straight out the window towards the church.

‘Excellent thinking on your part, Con, I must say.’

Con smiled. ‘Well, it’s in a state from the building work, and once that’s finished they’re not going to want to be digging up the floor for a while... and when they do – they’ll presume it’s some Christian relic, and he’ll be allowed to stay in the earth, not shoved in a museum again – we all saw how that ended!’

Con walked to the window.

'Can't be long now.'

Shen glanced at her watch. 'It's gone one so... here they are...'

From the doorway of the church two men emerged in white overalls, bearing a holdall full of tools; they walked to their van, locked the tools inside and headed down the street towards the pub. Once they were out of sight the three friends exited the cottage and crossed the road, a bundle under Con's arm.

'I kind of would have preferred the stream – but what about when it dried up?' Con said.

The interior of the church was empty; as before the area around the font was roped off with hazard tape, and a number of flagstones lay on end against the wall, waiting to be put back in place; the ground, though, was better covered than yesterday; a number of stones had been put back in place, including those immediately in front of the font; in front of these the sand underneath had been levelled, ready for the last stones to go down.

'Well you'd better start' said Con, nervously to Wolf, eyeing the door.  
'They'll be a while but what if someone else walks in?'

Wolf walked over to a pew and picked up a hard-hat and put it on.

'They'll presume I'm one of them.' He grinned.

He lifted the hazard tape and walked over, kneeling before the font.

'What I need to do is lift this bastard out the way and we'll dig under that, level the sand again and replace it; bet the fuckers didn't leave a spade...' As Wolf worked Shen stood at Conall's side at the doorway, on lookout.

She looked up at him and smiled shyly, taking hold of his hand; Con lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it;

'I'm so glad I came back.' He said, simply. She smiled. 'Yeah, you've nearly drowned, been burned to death – stolen a precious artefact and are now involved in criminal damage... it's been a fun few days for you.'

He laughed. 'I think they call this the honeymoon period.' And winked.

'What will you do now?' she asked him, suddenly serious.

He frowned.

'I mean will you stay for a few days...'

He smiled. 'Yes; I've nothing really to go back for in a hurry.'

She smiled but it seemed tinged with sadness.

'It's just when I think of you going away before...' she said. He hugged her close. 'This may seem premature, Shen, but that flute kind of belongs above the cottage fireplace... and as it's now mine the only way I think we can resolve this is if I start to spend more time here...'

She smiled at him and he kissed her smile.

'Besides, I think people will want to know the truth about this place – Tolkien has helped solve a great many mysteries, and I think I should stick around and tell people about it all – maybe set up tours or something, or write a book...maybe finish the PhD.'

Wolf called over and asked them to bring the bones; a pile of sand lay beside the font and a hole was now present at the rear of the space where a slab had been, edging back towards the font where it disappeared in darkness.

'There's a gap here under the font itself – the sand had been put in front of it and a stone put there to stop it going into the gap, but I managed to move it...'

He held his hand out and took the skull.

For a few moments he held it in his hand; this man who had all his life been fascinated by the figure of Merlin, face to face with the ancestor of that figure. He closed his eyes and planted a kiss on the forehead of the skull and muttered silent words.

'Is there anything you want to say, Con, Shen?'

Shen shook her head and Con just leant forward and touched the skull, running his fingers around the eye socket. *Itsipaiitapio'pah*, he whispered.

The skull just fitted in the gap, and Wolf brought out his now empty hand and began to refill the hole, first placing the blocking stone in place. Con stood and walked to the door. Luckily, the path was empty; a few swallows were swooping about the churchyard, and beyond the wall he could see the nicotiana blooming under the windows of Church cottage. There, to the left of the path, beside the myrtle bush, was Alfred's grave; and Con felt comforted that Alfred lay no more alone in his grave; now the skull was back in the ground, in the earth of the ancestors, as it had always meant to be.

He felt a hand on his arm and he turned. 'It's done' Shen said. Con looked down at her and kissed her gently before they walked into the church hand in hand.

The three friends stood in silence before the font – the stone was back in place, perfectly flat again – no one would have known it had been tampered with; but their eyes were drawn to the font itself, to the image it showed of the man, his face now hacked away, holding cup and crozier above the two wyverns; before he had been a priest condemning the old religion, or St George killing the dragon, or the horse-lord seizing the cup of wisdom from the serpent priest – but now, to the three gathered there, it showed Merlin, Twin, now back in his sacred space, and the two dragons were those of his vision, the duality of forms dancing to his song; he was their master, not their destroyer. Emrys, Ymir, Yemo was back in the soil of Avebury. The headless carving had arguably regained its head.

'The head of Ymir in its magic well, dispensing wisdom...' Con laughed; 'where better to put him but beneath this holy water?'

Wolf chuckled 'think of all those babies who'll be baptised here by water blessed by the head of the ancient one!'

'Do you think he's happy now?' Shen asked.

Wolf nodded. 'he's in his sacred earth, with the waters above; and we know he is here – and he's not in that bloody glass case anymore.'

'It's weird, isn't it – about the fire?' Shen said.

'Yes. Very odd. I went past the museum today; the old part, the stone bit, is going to be okay – the new bit is a wreck, though. Most of the artefacts were

okay, except for those put in those new display boxes; it's one of those that caught fire, they think.'

'I can imagine the headlines – curse of the ancient bones destroys new museum.' Con said.

'I bet the chairman of English Heritage is well gutted.' Wolf said, smiling.

'He probably thinks you did it – some kind of druid curse.'

A few minutes later Con hid his face trying not to laugh as they passed the workmen returning to the church; the day was gloriously hot and Church cottage seemed too dark to enjoy on this lovely day.

'What time is it?' asked Wolf. Shen replied it was nearly two.

'Then I make it time for a pint,' he laughed. 'I'm fookin' parched.'

The End

### *Postscript*

Tolkien's *The Hobbit* went on to be one of the most popular children's books ever written; his time-travel book, *The Lost Road*, was never published, but is to be found in his son Christopher's 12 volume History of Middle Earth. His *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was voted Waterstones Best Book of the 20th century.

Lewis's space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, was published to critical acclaim; the figure of Merlin appears in the trilogy. His later Narnia books would make him a much-loved children's author in his own right.

Barfield remained a solicitor, but on retirement published several books on myth and language, including *Saving the Appearances*, one of the best books on language and myth ever penned. He died in 1997 aged 99.

Violet Penry-Evans, Dion Fortune, died in 1946 of Leukaemia, having defended Britain with magic during World War 2.

Stuart Piggot went on to become one of this country's most respected and loved archaeologists.